

My First Case

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE MURDER IN THE GLEN ROSS."

[Rebecca Harding Davis]

LET me tell you the story of my first case, or stroke of business, as I used to call it. For many reasons I recall it with a more pungent, piquant flavor than any that ever came after. No great, lumbering cause that weighed my table down, after name and fame were fought for, and won, ever gave me the thrill of eager zest that accompanied that boyish venture. Alas! if *ce n'est que le premier qui coute*, it is only the first step that pays; the others, high though they be, are vapid, tame. Yesterday, opening an old book, I found a diary, kept in the beginning of this century; and there, in a big, boyish hand, with clerkly neatness, and numerous admiration points and moral deductions, was set down this—my first adventure and first case.

Here is the history of it, minus the neatness and moral deductions.

We were at home—my chum, Joe Lee, and I—from the university, for the winter vacation: collegiate seniors, full-blown in whiskers and Aristophanes, and incipient lawyers, affecting calf-skin books before my sisters, and reading Dumas *pere* slyly in our den. You all know what a Virginia homestead is about Christmas time? How a steady stream of relations, rich and poor, near-blooded and far-off, sets in, from the beginning of December, through the always open gates; how the fires glow, and the faces brighten every day; how every white face is heavy with mystery, until the culminating day, and every black one keeps a close look-out for the ponderous packages in yellow paper, which will disgorge innumerable turbans and jackets on Christmas morning. Well, Christmas was over; New-Year's, Twelfth-day was over; the fun, plum-puddings, dances, were done away with; and, though some half-dozen lingering guests tried to warm the evenings with a remnant of the old glow, it was spiritless work.

Joe and I pronounced it such in our own rooms, yawning with a would-be *blase* air. Wasn't Sophy Marshall gone, about whom we nearly had come to an affair of honor? And wasn't that insufferable brother Dick of hers left—to make fools of the women's eyes with his captain's epaulets? Joe and I were vanquished—on our own ground, too. Discretion was assuredly the better part of valor. We resolved to retreat before the captain with dignity and good order.

"By George! John," said Joe, "let's be off to Kentucky. We've a month before us yet."

I welcomed the suggestion with applause. Kentucky was yet the dark, if not the bloody ground; its bears and Boones contented the youthful mind with adventure and mystery—the Fans and gorillas of Du Chaillu being yet unknown. "Beside," I said spitefully, "that will be an end of contra-dances for the young ladies. Their pet-captain can hardly be partner and *vis-a-vis!*"

So we prepared for our journey with freshened vigor. I think the young ladies were a little repentant of their neglect, and my mother spent one or two sleepless nights about it, I know; but Joe and I were inexorable. Capt. Dick should not condemn us as "unlicked cubs," which Tom Frost had told us was his opinion, though unexpressed. He knew better than to express it! Two weeks' active employment—moulding bullets, polishing flint-locks, studying Kuhn's latest

map—made us all right; and, one cold, snowy January morning, we set off, in the full sight of the assembled household, on the gray and the chestnut mares, followed by the redoubtable Chess, my father's favorite body servant. My mother kissed us inside, with her blue eyes wet; the girls were gathered on the portico, quizzing and half-sorry; every one of the plantation people had swarmed up to see "Chess and the young mars' goin' to Kaintuck"; even that puppy, Capt. Dick, had brought me his pistol, and begged me to borrow it—if I would not keep it—in a very gentlemanly way. Joe said I ought not to have tolerated his assumption. But he had not offered the weapon to Joe; so I strapped it about my waist, and thought even Capt. Dick might have a redeeming point. My father and Dr. Howell walked down to the gate of the avenue to see the last of us.

"God bless you, boys,[""] said my father. "If you should meet an Indian, or a bear, keep a cool eye, and trust first to my old uncle Sam."

"I say, you chaps," said the doctor, hurrying closer, "never play cards in a Kentucky barroom! Mind that; I know the ropes!"

We were off at last. I am not going to tell you of our progress: how we stopped in Stanton, in Wheeling, in Louisville, hunting out pretty girls with more success than Indians; how, after we left the Old Dominion, a new *vis inertise* got into our veins; how we looked, with affable pity, on the strangers that fell in our way. Poor wretches! It was not their fault, we reflected, that they were born out of Virginia! How we stood, with our backs to the fire, and gave Chess a handful of change to distribute among the poorer Kentucky darkeys. We were snobbish, I grant; but so are the young, alas! too often!

One blustering night in early February we reached a little hamlet some forty miles below Louisville. No better ground for hunting could be found in northern Kentucky, the landlord assured us; and Chess brought us confirmation of the same from innumerable blacks, with whom he had scraped acquaintance. There was something cozy and inviting in the broad, stone-paved kitchen, with its roaring wood fire and the little taproom beyond, where two or three gray-haired old codgers nodded over their pipes. On court days, doubtless, the "Lafayette Hotel" was muddy and drunken enough; now it was clean, and glowing, and quiet: the very hot niche in the world where two hungry hunters could bring their spoils, with due applause, and see them famously cooked, and eaten with appreciation.

"I think," said Joe, gravely, "this is the place for us, John Page," looking out of the window at the drifting field of snow and white-capped mountains beyond.

The landlord came in with the supper.

"Ther's your Johnny-cakes!" he said, slapping down one dish after another. "Yer grouse, yer wild turkey, yer venison! Hunting! Lord help ye, genelman! old Virginny can't never tech this hyer country, when yer talks o' hunting!"

"It seems a quiet a place, Joe," I said, importantly, as we drew up our chairs to the table. "I think we'll stay."

“There’s only the blacksmith’s and one or two smaller fry, an Squire Pitt, and Squire ——” the sound of the stage-horn cut short the landlord and called him off. There was a clatter of horses’ hoofs in the snow outside, a “hi’ing!” and “whoaing!” and cursing between hostlers, and guard, and driver. Finally the coach lumbered off, and the landlord flung open the door, admitting himself, red and blowzy, a gust of keen air, and, last of all, a thin, little, peaked-faced old man, wrapped in a summer surtout.

“Come in, Lord save us! sir, come in,” cried the landlord, shoving the starved-looking traveler before him. “It’s a savage night to be abroad.”

The man, who was old and lame, came close to the fire, holding his frozen fingers over the blaze. “Begarr!” he muttered, “it is one cold night!”

“Supper, sire?” said the landlord, taking an inventory of the stranger’s bony body, patched trousers, and hungry, lean-jawed visage. “Supper, of course?”

The little Frenchman glanced over at the smoking dishes before Joe and me. I caught the wistful look, and caught, too, the glitter of a gilt-band under the linen surtout.

I was a boy then. The Revolution was only a field of heroes to me. I jumped up before he could speak, saying, in my school French, and so fast that I stuttered, “Monsieur is a soldier? He served in the Revolution? Pardon! but I must ask this one question!”

The old man’s face reddened, as he drew himself up, proudly lifting his finger to his forehead. “*Sous* Washington!”

Well, that brought Joe to his feet; but I was spokesman, as usual.

“My father too—Col. Page! Did you know him?” And when I found he did not, and had come to a dead certainty, somehow, by instinct, that the old man was without a dollar, I assured him, gravely, that Joe and I had uncles and grandfathers both in his old regiment, and begged him to do us the honor of supping with us.

We were honest enough in calling it an honor. I looked across the table, with a sort of awe, at the lean little body that had been so blessed by fate as to strike a blow for freedom—my freedom! I owed him a debt! Nor was the man’s face unheroic—starved if it were. The lips were cut sharp by pride and bravery, the eyes fresh and genial, childlike. How Joe piled up his plate, looking daggers at the landlord’s coarse jokes about the “the young Virginnyans hev’in’ their fun!” “Plenty o’ them Revolutionary riff-raff comin’ round!” he growled. Pah! the old man was a brute! What need to be angry with him!

When supper was over we carried the little Frenchman off to our room, heaped up the fire, put him in the cushioned seat, and mixed his punch according to Dr. Howell’s best receipt. The old man’s heart opened and glowed under the unwonted warmth. I never saw a more simple, guileless soul, with all his queer, quizzical talk, and vanity of his knowledge of life. He had

served under Lafayette, under Washington. He fought over half a dozen battles with us, drawing the plan on the table with punch, while Joe and I listened intent. His name was La Fonte.

“The La Fonte of Lyons?” said Joe, who had been in France. The old man colored.

“*C’est ma famille,*” he muttered.

A poor relation, we concluded; but the blood was good.

He lived now in Alabama, with one child—“little Gertrude.” Of her he said very little, though his eyes flashed. We were young men, you see; she was a French demoiselle. He was making his way to Washington, with papers to secure his pension.

“It is all I have,” he said; “when I succeed not, so had I better die. Gertrude has friends, who find me but a burden.” His lip unsteady.

We found his pension, if secured, would be a handsome income for himself and his daughter. Was he sure of obtaining it? He was confident of success: had letters from Alabama Congressmen. Joe and I, who, as the old doctor would say, “knew the ropes,” were uneasy as to the effect of these same Alabamian recommendations; but the old man was not troubled with the shadow of a doubt. Yet, if he succeeded not, it was evident that life would be heavy to drag through. He was lame; one arm—the right—he had lost at Brandywine. “Just an old trunk, monsieur, is Pierre La Fonte!” with a pitiful smile.

The old man had a chamber next to mine. I saw him, through the half-open door, kneel down to pray, in a manly fashion, before going to bed. I took heart of grace, and did the same, to Joe’s secret amazement: boys grow careless and cowardly at college.

The old man was to go on to Louisville the next day by the mail; the stagecoach which had brought him returned the night it came. We knew he would not go until the afternoon, so arranged a hunt for the next morning, eager to test our prowess, and, to be honest, to show it to our new friend. The poor old fellow tumbled out of bed, I remember, that night, with all a Frenchman’s vivacity, to show me a trick with the rifle, “to make sure with one bear”; then stowed away his sole baggage—which was a bundle tied up in a blue cotton handkerchief—under his pillow, and was soon snoring soundly.

Joe, Chess, and I were off before the first streak of dawn. I hardly remember the story of our luck, so completely did the incidents that followed efface it. I only recollect that we came in, half-frozen, about the middle of the day, meeting the fat landlord, all greasy suavity, at the door.

“Where is Monsieur La Fonte?” demanded Joe.

“He has gone, genelmen. Went early this mornin’. Come to open his blue bundle, yer know, un fund some papers he’d calkilated on was gone out-er. Was in a terrible kippage, fumed and tore his hair; calkilated he’d dropped ’em in the th’ bottom o’ the stage, yesterday, ’mong th’ straw. Money in the bankbills was rolled in th’ papers. Gone ’long.”

“What did you do?” I asked, sharply; for I suspected the landlord had shuffled off the old man as a doubtful customer.

“What could I do, sir? Did I know where they was? Wanted me to send a messenger after the stage. Lord help you! sir, that stagecoach's one hundred miles gone now! Likely them papers ull ever turn out o' that straw? Heh? Likely?” turning off with a contemptuous laugh.

“Where did he go?” demanded Joe again.

“Went toward Louisville,” replied the landlord, after a moment's hesitation. “'Spose the stage'll take him up.”

We sat down, Joe and I, to consult. Joe suspected the worst: the landlord had stolen the papers, murdered La Fonte; I, more cool, saw the man was only coarse and selfish, not malignant. We guessed very near what proved afterward to be the fact: that the papers had been dropped in the coach, and that La Fonte, driven to desperation by their loss and the landlord's jeers, had started off on foot. But whither?

We set about the search for the missing man and the missing documents like a couple of Don Quixotes. The landlord, seeing that the Frenchman had such obstinate friends, dropped a word or two of annoyance at having been so “sharp with the poor devil!” “Fact is,” he said, at last, “I told him the papers was gone fur good, an' that the sooner he made his way home the better. I'm a poor man, an can't afford to keep hotel fur nothing.”

Our search for the man was useless. He had not, we found, been taken up by the coach for Louisville, nor could we hear any account of him on the other road by which he came. Our fear was that, bewildered by the snow, he had lost his way in some mountain track.

The papers were more easily traced. Leaving Joe to keep guard at the tavern, I took Chess, and, going across the country, reached the little village of C——. To be brief with my story, I found, in the inn yard, the coach in which La Fonte had traveled, and aided by the hostler and a lantern, finally dragged out from under the straw a brown paper package—the poor Frenchman's title deed to life.

It was late when I reached the hamlet that evening. A heavy snow had fallen, blocking up the roads, making them almost impassable. The landlord met me, as I dismounted, with a face of woe. “No news of th' poor Frenchy yit? Ef he he'd thought I cared.”

I brushed past him, looking for Joe.

“In the bar. Stranger there—stopped by the snow. Won't go on till mornin'. Farmer, I guess. More on; 'em lodgin' at the Bull.”

I found Joe sitting moodily over the fire, and, sitting down to take off my leggings, began a history of my success in finding the papers, and a hundredth speculation as to La Fonte's fate.

The truth was, Joe and I, by dint of being young, in search of adventure, and alone in this dismal hamlet, had worked ourselves into a belief that some mystery lay under our hero's disappearance, and that it was our mission to make it plain. While we talked, the landlord shouldered the mantleshelf, and Chess, crouching by the fire, threw in notes of explanation to elucidate my story.

"Tink," he wound up, "Providence sent dis nigger heah, um Mars' John, to see to dat pore furriner."

The farmer, of whom the landlord spoke, sat at the opposite side of the fire, hidden by the shadow. A small man, stooping slightly, wrapped in a coarse overcoat that concealed his face. He seemed to be sleeping. Only once when Joe and I grew unusually vigorous in our talk, I caught a flash of a pair of dark eyes that startled me with their strange, soft brilliance. They were shut when I looked, and the man was breathing heavily again. The clock in the taproom struck ten.

"The wind has made me drowsy," I said. "Go out, Chess, and see that the horses are all right, and then make ready for bed."

It was a long time before the negro returned; lounging, I supposed as usual about the stables; we sat meanwhile half-dozing about the fire.

The farmer stood up suddenly.

"There is some disturbance outside," he said, in a singularly low, even sweet voice. I noticed that he put his hand quietly to his breast as if to grasp a pistol.

"I dunnot hear none," said the landlord, yawning.

I, myself, heard nothing but the slow sigh of the wind over the snow; but in a few moments footsteps and muffled voices approached rapidly.

"You've a keen ear, stranger," said the landlord.

The door burst open and Chess rushed in, his knees knocking together with horror, and the delight of being the first to communicate horror.

"He's found, Mars' John! Lord, Mars' Joe, he's done starved! dead as um doornail!"

The farmer sat down again, going off into a doze. Two or three men came in, white with snow, carrying something on a board. It was the body of poor Pierre La Fonte, in his linen surtout, stiff! Dead, I thought, as Joe and I knelt over it.

"We found him," said one of the men, "in an old barn about two mile off. He wor warm enough in the straw. It's hunger ails him, I'm thinkin'."

“He was starving himself to death!” I exclaimed, the truth flashing on me. The farmer came to us at the words. Even the brutal landlord was stung into remorse, chafed his hands, muttering to himself as he did it, “Lord! to think it ud come to this! I’d never ha done it. I’d spoke the critter fair!”

In the hurry and hurly-burly about the man, the farmer only was quiet and silent. Yet, somehow, it was he who held the head steadiest and poured the whiskey into his mouth, getting it down his throat when we all failed; looking critically at the Frenchman’s face and head all the time.

“Starvation is a slow suicide,” he said, looking at me across the body. “Yet there’s something in the man’s face that could will it.”

La Fonte, when reason returned enough to give him consciousness, pushed back the spirits.

“Let me go,” he whispered. “This is cruel.”

I brought the papers and held them close to his eyes. He looked at them dully with a faint smile flickering at last in his yellow face. “*C’est bien fait,*” he said, “*mais je ne crains pas le mort.*”

“Pierre La Fonte!” exclaimed the farmer, with a quick gesture of recognition, stooping and whispering something in the man’s ear.

It acted like an electric shock. La Fonte raised his finger instantly, as in salutation to a superior officer, and struggled to sit up and speak. The other held him down.

“Put him to bed,” said he to the landlord. “It is an old acquaintance of mine—I am responsible for all charges.”

“M. La Fonte is our guest,” I interrupted, rudely.

The man turned with a smile to Joe and me. A peculiar smile; under the rough, muddy clothes, and felt hat, it suddenly invested the man with power. I am an old man now, but I never have been conscious of a more impressive *presence* than that of this little countryman.

“As you will, gentlemen,” he said. “I will not deprive you of a pleasure.”

He stood near until La Fonte had slowly recovered strength enough to be carried to his room. Once, when the Frenchman, who watched him closely, despite his deathly weakness, made an effort to speak to him, he put his finger to his lip with a sudden look of caution, and shortly after, being assured that all danger was past, went up to the loft where he was to sleep.

Joe and I watched La Fonte that night. Fever set in; but, half-delirious, he told us the story of his wanderings since the morning when he missed the papers. It was the last blow of a succession of disasters, or the brave heart would not have yielded so readily.

“Ah! *mes camarades*,” he said, with a smile very pitiful to see, “it was the thought of the little girl at home! Better for her I went not back at all, than went to be a burden to her. But I was mad. It was cowardly,” he added, with a nervous laugh. “I had fasted for two days until the night before. I guarded my money until I reached Washington.”

Before daybreak, the landlord tapped at the door beckoning me out.

I went down to the front door, and found, as soon as I could see through the cold fog, the farmer preparing to mount. Some two or three other men on horseback waited for him. He came to me still muffled in his greatcoat and shawl.

“Mr. Page, of Randolph county, in Virginia, the landlord tells me?” touching his hat slightly. “A son of Col. Page?”

I bowed proudly.

“Very well,” abruptly, yet with the curiously winning voice I had noticed the night before. “Something in your eyes tells me you are ready for a brave or a kind act. Can you find nothing better to do with your vacation than to slaughter the deers of Bullit county? See, my friend,” more earnestly, “I want you to go on to Washington and procure the pension for this old man. What do you say?”

“I thought of that,” I said, eagerly. “I never was there; but my father had friends——” I hesitated.

“Yes. Pierre La Fonte is a child. He would be swindled in a day. You will go, then?” with a quick, decisive nod, mounting his horse, and then drawing out a pocketbook and scribbling a few words on a leaf. “Do not embarrass yourself with applications to a dozen officials. Take the old man’s papers and this note, and send them, with your address, to——,” naming a cabinet minister. “Tell La Fonte some day soon I hope to do better for him.”

He handed me the open paper. There was only a line in a cipher on it. “Good-by, my boy,” drawing the rein and holding out his hand. An odd hand for a farmer, small, soft as a woman’s, with a grasp of iron. “Good-by.”

I took off my hat involuntarily, and stood with it in my hand as he rode away.

I went in, and, when La Fonte had wakened, told him of my plan. He made no opposition, being generous enough to accept a kindness, only held my hand in his for a moment. I showed him the papers.

“I understand it not,” he said, looking at it. “Monsieur ——, *mon capitaine*, gave it to you? It is right.”

He did not name the stranger; and though Joe and I were burning up with curiosity, of course we asked no questions. Yet I did not wonder at the quiet reliance the Frenchman placed in this man; the few words I had heard him speak gave me a glimpse of a firm magnetism of power.

I left the hamlet the next morning, Joe and Chess remaining in charge of La Fonte. What if I did enter Washington, a few weeks after, my head agog with expected triumph? How many thousands of office-seekers do the same? Something in the atmosphere dazes a man, as my old uncle Tim used to say. Besides it was my first cause to plead, though not in court, and, in short, I was young.

Before I reached the capital, I had persuaded myself that my personal and family recommendations were enough to gain my end, without resort to the mysterious cipher-note. Did you ever try your strength in Washington? Did you ever go there, mighty in provincial fame, and be shuffled, and jostled, and hustled through anterooms and clerk's offices, until you began to suspect yourself to be, what everybody thought before, a very powerless person indeed.

Such was the record of my first week experience. In vain I haunted the bureau of my father's friends, who spent summer after summer with us. It was always, "Eh! Jack, my boy, come down to dinner, the girls will be delighted! Pension—old man—um—ah—certainly—hand it to the clerk. I'll see to 't."

I became disgusted with human nature generally. If ever I should be a statesman, or diplomat, with what open ears and liberal hand I would mete out justice! Afterward, when I held my appointment in Spain, bluffing off troublesome American travelers, I thought about it.

One Saturday morning I resolved to try the magic of the stranger's note. I had but little confidence in it by that time; however, I determined to follow his instructions to the letter. Folding up the old man's papers, with my address, I laid the note on top, and took my seat in the reception room of ——, early in the day. I was lucky; my turn came soon. I was ushered into the presence of the great man, who sat stooping on a high office stool over a daybook, rapping impatiently with his pen on the desk. I named myself, and handed him the package.

"Ah—ha!" he said, studying out the cipher, glancing keenly at me. "Do you know who gave you this? Where did you see him?"

"In a country tavern in Kentucky. I do *not* know."

"Very well," scrawling some words on the paper. "Go home now to your friend, Monsieur—what is it?—La Fonte. It is all right, His pension will be granted. The first remittance will reach Alabama before he does. Good morning."

I went back to Kentucky. Joe and Chess had been faithful nurses. La Fonte and they had already ventured on one or two rabbit hunts, and come home more hungry than successful.

I need not tell you of the old man's enthusiasm and gratitude, how we all sat round the fire, while I recounted my adventures, to the infinite delight of the whole party. The old soldier had set his

heart on carrying the trio back with him to Alabama, to enjoy his new-found wealth. But our vacation was over. I confess I thought of parting with the old man with a sorer heart than I chose to acknowledge; but made him promise that when my mother had written to his daughter, he would bring her to make us a visit at Linn Valley. I knew he was a man after my father's own heart.

On the morning of our departure, however, while Chess and I were in the high tide of preparation, I found Joe loitering over the taproom fire.

"The truth is, John Page," said he, "I'm going to cut the university for another month, and go home with Monsieur La Fonte. More can be learned from such a narrator as he of our national struggle——"

"Joe Lee," I said, solemnly, "had the old captain been showing you his daughter's likeness?"

Joe colored.

"The La Fontes," he stammered, "are of as good blood——"

"Whew!" I remarked. "Have you got to that?" and so set off for Virginia.

Joe Lee is living now in Accomac—Judge Lee, I mean—with a goodly troop of children and grandchildren. They are marked by their olive complexion, sparking eyes, and a certain picturesque air that sets them apart, from pure Americans, as of foreign extraction. Madam Lee, than whom no more gracious lady lives in Virginia, with her snow-white hair, and her dainty, courtly way, was French, as we all know. Her husband, even now, watches her graceful gesture, and tries to make little Gertrude catch her musical idiom, telling us that she was known in Virginia, when a bride, as *la belle Lyonnaise*.

Her father lived with them for many years, a favorite and hero in all the country circles. But of all after-dinner stories, the one he liked best to dwell on was the time when Joe and I met him in the Kentucky hamlet. The secret of the stranger's name he always guarded inviolate, however. I asked him once to tell it to me, curiosity overcoming courtesy. The old man's face grew pale, and his eye filled. "It is a great name," he said; "but it has gone down in shadow. I love it, John Page, though you curse it often!" and said no more.

In 1827 I was in New York, standing on Broadway, near the dusk of the evening, with a group of friends. I noticed a slight stir among them, as a man approached, and, naturally, turned to look at him, perceiving that they scrupulously kept their heads the other way. The man might have been a leper, so open were the glances of contempt and hate that followed him on every side, a sort of lane being opened for him to pass through. One woman, I observed especially, drew her skirts aside, as from something unclean.

"Bah!" muttered one of my friends, seeing the action. "It was not always so with the gentle creature! Their king is dethroned now, that's all!"

Meanwhile the man passed down the *pave* quietly, his head bent on his breast, apparently unconscious of notice. As he came near, he glanced up; and, under the white hair that hung down over his forehead, I recognized the same unforgotten eyes, keen and brilliant. He turned into an obscure alley, and the street seemed to breathe freer.

“Who is it?” I demanded, impatiently.

“Aaron Burr!” was the answer.

I followed him eagerly; but he was out of sight.

Going down the street, I hope I judged him with the summer charity, which, whatever may have been his crimes, made part of his own strange nature, muttering to myself his favorite lines:

“One point must still be greatly dark—
The moving why they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark
How much, perhaps they rue it!”

5,097 words

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