

The Red Inn

Written for *The New York Clipper*
by Nathan D. Urner

Towards the close of a cold, bleak day in the early Winter of 1873 I found myself waiting anxiously and impatiently in a lonely and picturesque spot on the banks of the Ottawa River, about twelve miles from the little town of St. Eustache, whence I had ridden that afternoon, and thirty or more from Montreal.

I belonged to a private-detective agency, and was here in this lonely place by appointment, with six thousand dollars upon my person, in exchange for which it had been agreed—by what secret and complicated negotiations it is hardly necessary to acquaint the reader with—to restore to me certain stolen property in the shape of bonds, certificates and bills of exchange to a great amount.

The place, as I have said, was wild and romantic, with a ruined sawmill at the river's edge, just below the steep and rocky bluff, as the only vestige of artificiality in view. The sky was overcast, and the wind moaning dismally through the overhanging firs and hemlocks; the broad, partly frozen river, with the rugged mountains looming forbiddingly on the farther bank, and a few seagulls screaming and swooping weirdly in the gusts between the low clouds and the running foam, looked inexpressibly mournful and desolate, and the appointed hour had long since passed me by without affording the faintest indication that the rendezvous was to be kept.

Years of experience in my peculiar vocation with criminals and desperate classes had inured me to disappointment and fortuity; but I must acknowledge that upon this occasion I felt my patience sorely tried. I had every reason to believe that the compromise had been effected in good faith (notwithstanding the wily and unenviable reputation of the go-between, who had arranged for my meeting with "Crank Dudley," the head thief concerned in the robbery, at this particular hour and place), and my ride thither from St. Eustache had been slowly and wearily pursued over an unfrequented and most villainous trail, which it would be an abuse of language to denominate a road, and over which I anticipated considerable difficulty in retracing my steps should I chance to be belated.

At length, however, I concluded that Crank had either met with some delaying accident or deemed it unsafe to keep his appointment—he was an old and shrewd offender, whom any detective would have cheerfully lost a finger to capture—and, remounting my horse, spurred up the bank to regain the road. I had hardly done so before an indistinct but unmistakable warning prompted me to unwonted haste.

It was the touch of a snowflake melting upon my cheek.

Fully alive to the terrors of the first great snowfall of a Canadian Winter, I pushed rapidly forward in the hope of reaching St. Eustache before the ground should be covered. But I had not proceeded a mile before the track was hopelessly obliterated, and the air so thick with the silent sittings of the snow, which came down almost as fine as meal, as to render the landscape

invisible, save for a few yards around; added to which the temperature was rapidly falling, and the wind rising in a manner suggestive of breast deep drifts and dangerous pitfalls.

There was no place to turn back to, and to push forward involved a certainty of being both benighted and lost in the woods. In this predicament, I recalled a half-ruinous, little red-washed hostelry, rejoicing in the name of the Red Inn, which I had noticed at some distance from the roadside shortly before reaching the river, and which had afforded so little signs of life as I rode by it as to give me the impression that it had long since been abandoned. But “any port in a storm” was now my motto, and, swerving a little to the left of the track, or what had been the track, I spurred forward in a direction that I thought would lead me to its vicinity. I was not only soon apprised of my proximity to it by the bark of a dog, but, upon catching sight of the house itself—a rambling, two-story, frame affair, whose sides had long before lost most of the dull, red color that gave it a name as a public-house—I was overjoyed to see the lower windows glowing with firelight.

To obtain admittance, give my horse in charge of the proprietor, who seemed to be the only man about the place, and secure a capital thawing spot before the great fireplace in the common room within, at which the housewife was also busying herself with some cooking, was the work of but a few moments. She was a tall, bony, muscular woman, in middle life, with a restless, sullen expression of the eye that augured badly of her husband’s peace of mind, and a general gloom and taciturnity of bearing. But I have a way of speedily making myself at ease with folks of various sorts, and drew from her in a few minutes that she was Scotch and her husband a French Canadian; that they lived there all alone since the building of the nearest railway had altogether distracted travel from what had once been the decent highway near at hand; and that they were so poor as to be eager to sell out at the first opportunity, though still able to accommodate any unfastidious guest who might chance along, as I had done.

The landlord’s name was Bourchois, and he presently came back to the house, announcing that my horse had been comfortably housed and fed, and venturing to predict that, of course, I would remain overnight.

“I could return to St. Eustache in a couple of hours, if I only had a guide,” said I, looking anxiously out at the gathering twilight, through which the snowstorm was still whirling its sifted burthen with fierce persistency. “Besides, I fear that I’ve barely enough money with me to meet even my expenses in your inn.”

As I threw out this false scent as to my circumstances, I noticed the man and woman exchange a swift glance of mingled cunning and incredulity, and the man also spoke a few words in French, which I pretended to overhear in a puzzled way, as though I did not understand.

“It isn’t likely you’ll find anyone to guide you through such a tempest, even the half-breeds having deserted this miserable wilderness with the building of that cursed iron road that has impoverished us all,” said the landlord of the Red Inn in a gruff voice; “and a dollar will pay for monsieur’s accommodations overnight. Supper will be ready presently.”

I then concluded to remain, and began to rid myself of my overshoes and other superfluous coverings, while taking in everything about me with the swiftness and astuteness of vision that long habit had almost converted into second nature.

It was evident that my entertainers were miserably poor. The large room in which we then were was probably the only one in use on the lower story, and it seemed to answer all purposes of reception, cooking, dining, and lounging combined. The furniture had seen better days, but was now so broken, battered and infirm as to be scarcely fit for use, while a long rifle suspended, with hunting accoutrements, over the chimney-piece, and a pair of snowshoes leaning in one corner of the room were evidences that the unprofitableness of inn-keeping was eked out by the fortunes of the chase in the wild forest round about.

My host himself was of even less attractive appearance than his wife. He was much older than she, short and thick-set, and with some sort of defect in his left leg that caused him to limp a little in walking; but he had an immense depth of chest and disproportionately long, sinewy arms which augured the possession of vast muscular capacity; while his movements, in spite of his lameness, were singularly alert and active for one of his age. Indeed, this swiftness and celerity of movement was also a characteristic of the woman, though, with her longer and more youthful frame, she contrasted him in this respect much as the stealthy, undulating movement of a panther would set off the spry, sturdy activity of a terrier-dog. The man's long, hatchet-face was nearly covered with grizzly beard of straggling growth, and from underneath his bushy eyebrows, which were nearly as heavy as his moustache, his steel-gray eyes glinted with a dull, discontented glow that might have proceeded from brooding misery or vicious instinct, it was hard to tell which.

I was also not long in discovering—from the frequent little scoldings that were interchanged, though always in the Canadian *patois*, which I persisted in appearing ignorant of—that the pair were far from living happily together, and came to the conclusion that theirs was certainly not an example, so lauded by poets, of the marriage-tie being only the closer and more lovingly renewed by adversity and distress.

I made these mental notes in far less time than it has taken me to express them here; and when I resumed my seat by the fire with an air of all the carelessness and trustfulness that I could assume, Bourchois placed some glasses and a bottle of brandy upon the table, and gruffly invited me to join him in *une petite verre*. But I made a point of never drinking out of strange bottles under suspicious circumstances, and, excusing myself on the plea of being under medical treatment for a painful complaint, I produced my own brandy flask, which I pretended to have been especially prepared for me by my physician, and, pouring out a small quantity, touched his glass merrily, at the same time wishing him and his consort better luck in the future.

He seemed a little taken aback by this maneuver, and only replied to my well-wishes by first a grunt, and then a short, bitter laugh, as in derision at the preposterousness of their purport; after which he arose, and, opening the door through which a column of snow came suddenly bustling, like an angry ghost—whistled in the dog—a rough, savage-looking brute, of the stunted Newfoundland stock, which, after sniffing of my legs suspiciously, shook the snow from his shaggy coat, and stowed himself away in a corner.

The supper, which was soon afterwards served us by the woman, made up in quantity what it lacked in quality—consisting of bacon and venison, with hot griddle-cakes and excellent coffee; and as I was both hungry and tired I enjoyed it very much.

There was nothing to read when it was over, and, as neither my host nor hostess appeared to desire sociability in the way of conversation, I was soon dozing comfortably in my chair, though after an old habit of mine which enables me to enjoy the recuperation of semi-slumber without altogether shutting out a consciousness of what is going on in the waking world around me.

However, as I heard them speaking together in low voices, and in French, I paid little attention to what they were saying until a reference on the part of the man to “Monsieur La Crank” at once aroused me to livelier attention, and to a recollection of my recreant rendezvous-maker of the river-bank at the same time; but the woman only said in response: “Yes, this is unmistakably the man,” and then their conversation drifted upon topics of a personal nature, which soon developed into a conjugal wrangle, and might have proceeded to blows had I not just then stretched myself with a yawn, and expressed a desire to be shown to my room.

Before obeying me, the landlord again opened the door, and kicked the dog out into the storm after which he lighted a candle, and led the way up a narrow, rickety staircase that ascended from a little corridor just off the side of the room occupied by the fireplace, and, proceeding along a hallway to what must have been the remotest extremity of the lonely house, ushered me into a large, bare-walled chamber, devoid of furniture except a bedstead, a small table, and a three-legged stool, but somewhat redeemed from absolute cheerlessness by a bright wood-fire that had been built upon the hearth, and whose leaping flame-tongues went up the chimney with a roar as the fierce storm shook the one window as if with a giant’s grasp.

Altogether, the accommodation was better than I had anticipated, and, after assuring myself that the door was provided with both lock and bolt of substantial quality, I bade my host good-night, locked myself in, and prepared to make myself comfortable for the night. After a brief examination of the walls, to make sure there was no other entrance, I took off everything but my undergarments, heaped the fire with all the spare wood that had been provided, blew out the candle, and leaping into the luxurious undulations of an old fashioned feather-bed—after putting my revolver under my pillow—was soon sound asleep.

I was suddenly awakened from profound dreamless slumber by I don’t know what: not by any noise, or vibration, or stealthy movement but by a certain indefinable consciousness that someone else was in the room; and at once sat bolt upright in bed, with my hand upon the weapon beneath the pillow. The storm had subsided, and everything was as still as the tomb: and the fire having sunken away to scarcely perceptible embers, the room was almost pitch-dark, but none the less was I instinctively certain that a stealthy intruder was in there, and that a terrible danger was impending over me.

I have the vision of a cat in an emergency, and in a moment, as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I perceived what I knew to be the short, thick-set form of Bourchois, crouched upon his hands and knees, and creeping noiselessly toward the couch from the opposite side of the

room, with a knife between his teeth, though, not being so sharp-sighted as I, he was not aware of my being awake and on my guard. A yawning trapdoor in the floor close beside him, and almost directly under the window, betrayed the manner of his having effected an entrance. The truth flashed across me in an instant. Crank Dudley had not intended to meet me at the rendezvous, but it was probably decided that I should be belated and stop at this very place, this remote and obscure hostelry, to be murdered by his accomplices, the landlord and his wife, for the sake of the booty known to be upon my person, without a return of the equivalent agreed upon.

I had never been in such a desperate position before, but had often imagined to myself what I would do under similar circumstances—as I suppose we all of us do at times—and now did not feel any diminution of my usual nerve and presence of mind. Without a moment's hesitation, I cocked my revolver under the pillow, in order to deaden the slight clicking sound of the lock, and then, leveling it silently at the bushy head of the advancing assassin, pulled the trigger with no more compunction than if I had been facing a wolf or a snake.

But the pistol had doubtless been tampered with during my siesta below—for it had been in my overcoat pocket, on another chair—and the hammer fell harmlessly upon the nipple. But the noise of the attempt aroused the intruder to the fact of my being awake and alert, and, with a single bound, he was upon his feet, and at my side with uplifted knife.

I now pursued another plan, which I had often thought I would do under like peril.

“I caught up a pillow with my left hand, and let the descending blade bury itself in its pliant depths; at the same time I clubbed the revolver, and, leaping to my feet on the top of the bed, I dealt my assailant a tremendous blow in the face. He staggered a little to one side, and then, with a muttered oath, he struck out again so quickly with his murderous weapon that it would have been all over with me if the point had not this time come in contact with my buckskin money-bolt, which was lined with broad gold pieces, as well as bank-notes. As it was, the shock nearly knocked the breath out of my body, and he groped savagely over the bed after me. But, besides having the advantage of him in seeing far better in the darkness than he, I knew that I would be done for, strong as I was, if I once got in the clutch of those long, massive, gorilla-like arms of his; so I vaulted lightly over the foot of the couch, and, reaching around to the side, struck him again with the pistol-butt on the knee of his lame leg.

He gave a howl of anguish, slouched down upon one side, and almost lost his balance. Before he could thoroughly recover I struck him again, this time upon his right wrist, and the knife went flying out of his hand, striking me broadside in the breast. I caught it by the haft, and, springing behind him, plunged it again and again into his side until he sank with a hollow groan upon the floor, and all was still.

Though unwounded, I was bathed in sweat and quivering like a leaf as I sought the candlestick and struck a light with one of the matches that lay beside it, and then held it over my head to survey the scene, with a thrill of horror that had not possessed me while the tragedy itself was enacting.

Bourchois lay quite dead in a pool of his lifeblood that was slowly making its way across the uneven floor in lines and streaks. At the foot of the rough steps that led down from the open trapdoor I could hear suppressed breathing, and knew that the woman was there waiting and listening.

“Est il accompli?” she presently called up in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes,” I replied in French, and imitating the guttural with which the dead man had been wont to speak to the best of my ability. “Remain where you are till I tell you to come up.”

Then, with a nervous rapidity which I have never since been able even to approximate, I entirely dressed myself, even to the putting-on of my fur cap, overcoat and overshoes—which I had not neglected to fetch up with me upon retiring. I was possessed with a wild, mad desire to get out of that house of horror, and place miles between it and me, even if I lost myself in the snowy waste.

But I even went to the trouble of reloading my revolver with fresh cartridges. Then, with the cocked pistol in my hand, and still pitching my voice in an imitation of the dead man’s, I bade the woman come up.

With a long, gleaming knife in her hand—with which she had doubtless stood prepared to assist in the contemplated murder, if called upon—she bounded up the ladder, her eyes glowing, and her whole face and demeanor expressive of a triumphant ferocity that, thank Heaven! I had never before and have never since witnessed in any woman.

But, as soon as she saw how completely the tables had been turned, a striking change came over her. She recoiled into a corner, and seemed to contract within herself, much after the manner of a cat that is brought to bay by an unexpected encounter. But there was no pity or compunction with which she surveyed the bleeding remains of her consort in wickedness, after the first shock of astonishment had passed, and I was inexpressibly horrified to remark that she was gradually regarding me with a sort of fascinated admiration.

Presently she slipped out of her retreat with a soft, feline movement, and, extending her hands towards me with a passionate, appealing gesture, she exclaimed in the broad dialect of her native Scotland:

“Ah, but you’re a bonny an’ a bra’ laddie, an’ it’s a weel that the auld mon ha’ foun’ his richteous doom at last. He was unco griff and garly. Stay wi’ me, an be my gude mon, dearie; there be muckle o’ money hidden in the hoose; we gang tegither to a far countree.”

Overcome with horror and loathing, I forget my prudence so far as to slip my pistol in my pocket, and wave her off. I had no sooner done so than the savage, furious fit returned to her, and, with a hoarse cry like that of a wild beast, she leaped towards me, knife in hand. I was somewhat taken by surprise, and, had her strength equaled her agility, it would probably have gone hard with me; as it was, I evaded her attack with the utmost difficulty, and finally disposed of her by knocking her senseless with my fist—the only time I ever struck a woman in my life—and, under the circumstances, I think the reader will grant that it was excusable.

Then, without staying another moment—possessed by simply a wild, haunting desire to get away, to leave that accursed tavern far behind—I threw up the window, and leaped out into the darkness. The height from the ground was greater than I had anticipated, but, as I fell into a soft snowdrift, I escaped injury. The dog came howling around the side of the house as I scrambled out of the drift, but a lucky shot from my revolver quieted him, and, as I made my way to the stable, I saw the eastern sky brightening with the coming of a new dawn with a feeling of thankfulness that I had never known before.

I was soon in the saddle, less snow had fallen than had been threatened, and, trusting to the instinct of my horse in finding the road, I reached St. Eustache in time for breakfast. My story was soon the talk of the town. Several brother detectives chanced to be on hand, upon other business, and, with them and several others, I set out at once to return to the inn, and effect the capture of its wicked mistress, if possible.

We found it burned to the ground!

A subsequent search of the ruins revealed the bones of Bourchois, but there were no other remains ever found, and what became of his guilty partner in life and crime is a mystery that has never been cleared up.

Crank Dudley had been deterred from keeping his appointment by an arrest in Montreal upon an old charge, and always stoutly maintained his utter ignorance of the Red Inn and its inmates; with how much veracity I have been unable to determine. But I am happy to say that a fortunate after-circumstance enabled us to recover our stolen property, without compromise or any expenditure whatever, and that I came in for the lion's share of the reward.

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