

The Holladay Case

A Mystery Of Two Continents

By BURTON E. STEVENSON
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He nodded exultantly. "That's it. Now, who was the woman? From the first I was certain it could not be his daughter—the very thought was preposterous. It seems almost equally absurd, however, to suppose that Holladay could be mixed up with any other woman. He certainly has not been for the last quarter of a century—but before that—well, it's not so certain. And there's one striking point which seems to indicate his guilt."

"Yes—you mean, of course, her resemblance to his daughter?"

"Precisely. Such a resemblance must exist—a resemblance unusual, even striking—or it would not for a moment have deceived Rogers. We must remember, however, that Rogers' office was not brilliantly lighted and that he merely glanced at her. Still, whatever minor differences there may have been, she had the air, the general appearance, the look, of Miss Holladay. Mere facial resemblance may happen in a hundred ways by chance, but the air, the look, the 'altogether,' is very different—it indicates a blood relationship. My theory is that she is an illegitimate child, perhaps four or five years older than Miss Holladay."

I paused to consider. The theory was reasonable, and yet it had its faults.

"Now, let's see where this leads us," he continued. "Let us assume that Holladay has been providing for this illegitimate daughter for years. At last, for some reason, he is induced to withdraw this support, or, perhaps, the girl thinks her allowance insufficient. At any rate, after, let us suppose, ineffectual appeals by letter, she does the desperate thing of calling at his office to protest in person. She finds him inexorable—we know his reputation for obstinacy when he had once made up his mind. She reproaches him—she is already desperate, remember—and he answers with that stinging sarcasm for which he was noted. In an ecstasy of anger she snatches up the knife and stabs him; then, in an agony of remorse, endeavors to check the blood. She sees at last that it is useless, that she cannot save him, and leaves the office. All this is plausible, isn't it?"

"Very plausible," I assented, looking at him in some astonishment. "You forget one thing, however. Rogers testified that he was intimately acquainted with the affairs of his employer and that he would inevitably have known of any intrigue such as you suggest."

My companion paused for a moment's thought.

"I don't believe that Rogers would so inevitably have known of it," he said at last. "But, admit that—then there is another theory. Holladay has not been supporting his illegitimate child, who learns of her parentage and goes to him to demand her rights. That fits the case, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted. "It also is plausible."

"It is more than plausible," he said, quietly. "Whatever the details may be, the body of the theory itself is unimpeachable—it's the only one which fits the facts. I believe it capable of proof. Don't you see how the note helps to prove it?"

"The note?"

I started at the word, and my suspicions sprang into life again. I looked at him quickly, but his eyes were on the cloth and he was rolling up innumerable little pellets of bread.

"That note," he added, "proved two things. One was that the writer was deeply interested in Miss Holladay's welfare; the other was that he or she knew Rogers, the clerk, intimately—more than intimately; almost as well as a physician knows an old patient."

"I admit the first," I said. "You'll have to explain the second."

"The second is self evident. How did the writer of the note know of Rogers' infirmity?"

"His infirmity?"

"Certainly—his color blindness. I confess I'm puzzled. How could any one else know it when Rogers himself didn't know it? That's what I should like to have explained. Perhaps there's only one man or woman in the world who could know. Well, that's the one who wrote the note. Now, who is it?"

"But," I began quickly, then stopped. Should I set him right, or was this a trap he had prepared for me?"

His eyes were not on the cloth now, but on me. There was a light in them I did not quite understand. I felt that I must be sure of my ground before I went forward.

"It should be very easy to trace the writer of the note," I said.

"The police have not found it so?"

"No?"

"No. It was given to the doorkeeper by a boy—just an ordinary boy of from twelve to fourteen years. The man didn't notice him especially. He said there was no answer and went away. How are the police to find that boy? Suppose they do find him. Probably all he could tell them would be that a man stopped him at the corner and gave him a quarter to take the note to the coroner's office."

"He might give a description of the man," I ventured.

"What would a boy's description be

worth? It would be at the best vague and indefinite. Besides, they've not even found the boy. Now, to return to the note."

We had come to the coffee and cigars, and I felt it time to protest.

"Before we return to the note, Mr. Godfrey," I said, "I'd like to ask you two direct questions. What interest have you in the matter?"

"The interest of every investigator of crime," he answered, smiling.

"You belong to the detective force, then?"

"I have belonged to it. At present I'm in other employ."

"And what was your object in bringing me here this evening?"

"One portion of my object has been accomplished. The other was to ask you to write out for me a copy of the note."

"But who was it pursued us up Broadway?"

"Oh, I have rivals!" he chuckled. "I flatter myself that was rather neatly done. Will you give me a copy of the note, Mr. Lester?"

"No," I answered squarely. "You'll have to go to the police for that. I'm out of the case."

He bowed across the table to me with a little laugh. As I looked at him his imperturbable good humor touched me.

"I'll tell you one thing, though," I added; "the writer of the note knew nothing of Rogers' color blindness. You're off the scent there."

"I am?" he asked amazedly. "Then how did you know it, Mr. Lester?"

"I suppose you detectives would call it deduction. I deduced it."

He took a contemplative puff or two as he looked at me.

"Well," he exclaimed at last, "I must say that beats me! Deduced it! That was mighty clever."

Again I bowed my acknowledgments.

"And that's all you can tell me?" he asked.

"I'm afraid that's all."

"Very well. Thank you for that much," and he flicked the ashes from his cigar. "Now, I fear that I must leave you. I've a good deal of work to do, and you've opened up a very interesting line of speculation. I assure you that I've passed a very pleasant evening. I hope you've not found it tiresome?"

"Quite the contrary," I said heartily. "I've enjoyed myself immensely."

"Then I'll ask you one last favor. My cab is at the door. I've no further use for it, and I beg you'll drive home in it."

I saw that he really wished it.

"Why, yes, certainly," I assented.

"Thank you," he said.

He took me down to the door, called the cab and shook hands with me warmly.

"Goodby, Mr. Lester," he said. "I'm glad of the chance to have met you. I'm not really such a mysterious individual. It's merely a trick of the trade. I hope we'll meet again some time."

"So do I," I said, and meant it.

I saw him stand for a moment on the curb looking after us as we drove away, then he turned and ran rapidly up the steps of the elevated.

The driver seemed in no hurry to get me home, and I had plenty of time to think over the events of the evening, but I could make nothing of them. What result he had achieved I could not imagine. And yet he had seemed satisfied. As to his theory, I could not but admit that it was an adroit one; even a masterly one—a better one, certainly, than I should have evolved unaided.

The cab drew up at my lodging and I sprang out, tipped the driver and ran up the steps to the door. My landlady met me on the threshold.

"Oh, Mr. Lester!" she cried. "Such a time as I've had this night! Every five minutes there's been somebody here looking for you, and there's a crowd of them up in your room now. I tried to put them out, but they wouldn't go!"

CHAPTER VI.

I WAS quite dazed for the moment. "A crowd of them in my room?"

"I repeated. 'A crowd of whom, Mrs. Fitch?'"

"A crowd of reporters! They've been worrying my life out. They seemed to think I had you hid somewhere. I hope you're not in trouble, Mr. Lester?"

"Not the least in the world, my dear madam," I laughed. And I breathed a long sigh of relief, for I had feared I knew not what disaster. "I'll soon finish with the reporters." And I went on up the stair.

Long before I reached my rooms I heard the clatter of voices and caught the odor of various qualities of tobacco. They were lolling about over the furniture, telling stories, I suppose, and they greeted me with a cheer when I entered. They were such jovial fellows that it was quite impossible to feel angry with them. And, besides, I knew that they were gentlemen; that they labored early and late at meager salaries for the pure love of the work; that they were quick to scent fraud or trickery or unworthiness and inexorable in exposing it; that they loved to do good anonymously, remaining utterly unknown save to the appreciative

few behind the scenes. So I returned their greeting smilingly and sat me down in a chair which one of them obligingly vacated for me.

"Well?" I began, looking about at them.

"My dear Mr. Lester," said the one who had given me the chair, "permit me to introduce myself as Rankin of the Planet. These gentlemen"—and he included them in a wide gesture—"are my colleagues of the press. We've been anxiously awaiting you here in order that we may propound to you certain questions."

"All right; fire away," I said.

"First, we'd like to have your theory of the crime. Your work this afternoon convinced us that you know how to put two and two together, which is more than can be said for the ordinary mortal. The public will want to know your theory—the great public."

"Oh, but I haven't any theory," I protested. "Besides, I don't think the great public is especially interested in me. You see, gentlemen, I'm quite out of the case. When we cleared Miss Holladay our connection with it ended."

"But is Miss Holladay cleared?" he persisted. "Is it not quite conceivable that in those two hours she was absent

from her carriage she may have changed her gown, gone to her father's office, and then changed back again? In that case, would she not naturally have chosen a green gown, since she never wore green?"

"Oh, nonsense!" I cried. "That's puerile. Either she would disguise herself effectually or not at all. I suppose if you were going to commit a capital crime you would merely put on a high hat because you never wear one! I'll tell you this much: I'm morally certain that Miss Holladay is quite innocent; so, I believe, is the district attorney."

"But how about the note, Mr. Lester? What did it contain?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that, you know. It's none of my business."

"But you ought to treat us all alike," he protested.

"I do treat you all alike."

"But didn't Godfrey get it out of you?"

"Godfrey?" I repeated. "Get it out of me?"

(To be Continued.)

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