

The Holladay Case

A Mystery Of Two Continents

By BURTON E. STEVENSON
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CHAPTER V.

THE coroner dismissed the jury and came down and shook hands with us.

"I'm going to reward you for your clever work, Mr. Royce," he said. "Will you take the good news to Miss Holladay?"

My chief could not repress the swift flush of pleasure which reddened his cheeks, but he managed to speak unconcernedly.

"Why, yes, certainly. I'll be glad to, if you wish it," he said.

"I do wish it," Goldberg assured him, with a tact and penetration I thought admirable. "You may dismiss the policeman who is with her."

Our junior looked inquiringly at the district attorney.

"Before I go," he said, "may I ask what you intend doing, sir?"

"I intend finding the writer of that note," answered Singleton, smiling.

"But, about Miss Holladay?"

Singleton tapped his lips thoughtfully with his pencil.

"Before I answer," he said at last, "I should like to go with you and ask her one question."

"Very well," assented Mr. Royce instantly and led the way to the room where Miss Holladay awaited us.

She rose with flushing face as we entered and stood looking at us without speaking; but, despite her admirable composure, I could guess how she was racked with anxiety.

"Miss Holladay," began my chief, "this is Mr. Singleton, the district attorney, who wishes to ask you a few questions."

"One question only," corrected Singleton, bowing. "Were you at your father's office yesterday afternoon, Miss Holladay?"

"No, sir," she answered instantly and emphatically. "I have not been near my father's office for more than a week."

I saw him study her for a moment, then he bowed again.

"That is all," he said. "I don't think the evidence justifies me in holding her, Mr. Royce," and he left the room. I followed him, for I knew that I had no further part in our junior's errand. I went back to our table and bustled myself gathering together our belongings. The room had gradually cleared and at the end of ten minutes only the coroner and his clerk remained.

They had another case, it seemed, to open in the morning—another case which perhaps involved just as great heartache and anguish as ours had. Five minutes later my chief came hurrying back to me and a glance at his beaming eyes told me how he had been welcomed.

"Miss Holladay has started home with her maid," he said. "She asked me to thank you for her for the great work you did this afternoon, Lester. I told her it was really you who had done everything. Yes, it was," he added, answering my gesture of denial.

"While I was groping helplessly around in the dark you found the way to the light. But come; we must get back to the office."

We found a cab at the curb and in a moment were rolling back over the route we had traveled that morning—some ago, as it seemed to me! It was only a few minutes after 3 o'clock, and I reflected that I should yet have time to complete the papers in the Hurd case before leaving for the night.

Mr. Graham was still at his desk, and he at once demanded an account of the hearing. I went back to my work, and so caught only a word here and there—enough, however, to show me that our senior was deeply interested in this extraordinary affair. As for me, I put all thought of it resolutely from me and devoted myself to the work in hand. It was done at last, and I locked my desk with a sigh of relief.

Mr. Graham nodded to me kindly as I passed out, and I left the office with the comfortable feeling that I had done a good day's work for myself as well as for my employers.

A man who had apparently been loitering in the hall followed me into the elevator.

"This is Mr. Lester, isn't it?" he asked as the car started to descend.

"Yes," I said, looking at him in surprise. He was well dressed, with alert eyes and strong, pleasing face. I had never seen him before.

"And you're going to dinner, aren't you, Mr. Lester?" he continued.

"Yes—to dinner," I assented, more and more surprised.

"Now, don't think me impertinent," he said, smiling at my look of amazement, "but I want you to dine with me this evening. I can promise you as good a meal as you will get at most places in New York."

"But I'm not dressed," I protested.

"That doesn't matter in the least—neither am I, you see. We will dine without others."

"Where?" I questioned.

"Well, how would the Studio suit?"

The car had reached the ground floor, and we left it together. I was completely in the dark as to my companion's purpose, and yet it could have been explained—yet it must be connected in some way with the Holladay case.

"Unless—and I glanced at him again. No, certainly, he was not a confidence man—even if he was, I would not

welcome the adventure. My curiosity won the battle.

"Very well," I said. "I'll be glad to accept your invitation, Mr.—"

He nodded approvingly.

"There spoke the man of sense. Well, you shall not go unrewarded. Godfrey is my name—no, you don't know me, but I'll soon explain myself. Here's my cab."

I mounted into it, he after me. It seemed to me that there was an unusual number of loiterers about the door of the building, but we were off in a moment, and I did not give them a second thought. We rattled out into Broadway and turned northward for the three mile straightaway run to Union square. I noticed in a moment that we were going at a rate of speed rather exceptional for a cab, and it steadily increased as the driver found a clear road before him. My companion threw up the trap in the roof of the cab as we swung around into Thirtieth street.

"All right, Sam?" he called.

The driver grinned down at us through the hole.

"All right, sir," he answered. "They couldn't stand the pace a little bit. They're distanced."

The trap snapped down again. We turned into Sixth avenue and stopped in a moment before the Studio, gray and forbidding without, but a dream within. My companion led the way upstairs to a private room, where a table stood, ready set for us. The oysters appeared before we were fairly seated.

"You see," he smiled, "I made bold to believe that you'd come with me, and so had the dinner already ordered."

I looked at him without replying. I was completely in the dark. Could this be the writer of the mysterious

note?

"Of course you're puzzled," he said.

note? But what could his object be? Above all, why should he so expose himself? He smiled again as he caught my glance.

"Of course you're puzzled," he said.

"Well, I'll make a clean breast of the matter at once. I wanted to talk with you about this Holladay case, and I decided that a dinner at the Studio would be just the ticket."

I nodded. The soup was a thing to marvel at.

"You were right," I assented. "The idea was a stroke of genius."

"I knew you'd think so. You see, since this morning I've been making rather a study of you. That coup of yours at the coroner's court this afternoon was admirable, one of the best things I ever saw."

I bowed my acknowledgments.

"You never are, then?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I couldn't afford to be late."

"The color blind theory was a simple one."

"So simple that it never occurred to any one else. I think we're too apt to overlook the simple explanation, which, after all, nearly always is the true one. It's only in books that we meet the reverse. You remember the Gaborina who advises one always to distrust the probable?"

"Yes, I don't agree with him."

"Nor I. Now take this case, for instance. I think it's safe to say that the murder, where it's not a result of a sudden passion, is always committed for one of two motives—revenge or gain. But Mr. Holladay's past life has been pretty thoroughly exposed by the reporter, and nothing has been found to indicate that he had ever made a deadly enemy, at least among the class of people who resort to murder, so the does away with revenge. On the other hand, no one will gain by his death—many will lose by it—in fact, the whole circle of his associates will lose by it. It might seem, at first glance, that his daughter would gain, but I think she loses most of all. She already had all the money she could possibly need, and she's lost her father, whom, it's quite certain, she loved dearly. So what remains?"

"Only one thing," I said, deeply interested in this exposition. "Sudden pas-

sion."

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, then he said:

"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. "I ought to have explained 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 safe on 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 question 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 added.

"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 stairs.

Long before I reached my rooms I heard the clatter of voices and caught the odor of various qualities of tobacco. They were loitering 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's 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

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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?"

He stared at me in astonishment.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Lester," he questioned, "that you haven't been spending the evening with Jim Godfrey of the Record?"

Then, in a flash, I understood, and as I looked at the rueful faces of the men gathered about me I laughed until the tears came.

"So it was you," I gasped, "who chased us up Broadway?"

He nodded.

"Yes, but our horses weren't good enough. Where did he take you?"

"To the Studio—Sixth avenue."

"Of course!" he cried, slapping his leg. "We might have known. Boys, we'd better go back to Podunk."

"Well, at least, Mr. Lester," spoke up another, "you oughtn't to give Godfrey a scoop."