The Holladay Case

A Mystery Of Two Continents

By BURTON E. STEVENSON

(CONTINUED.)

"Since two months only. It is my intention to establish here a business in wines."

"Well," I explained, "you can take no steps toward naturalization for three years. Then you go before a court and make a declaration of your intentions. Two years later you will get your papers."

"You mean," he hesitated, "that it takes so many years"—

"Five years' actual residence—yes."

"But," and he hesitated again, "I had understood that—that"—

"That it was easier? There are illegal ways, of course, but you can scarcely expect me to advise you concerning them, Mr. Martigny."

"No. Of course, no!" he cried hastily, waving his hand in disclaimer. "I did not know—it makes nothing to me—I will wait—I wish to obey the laws."

He picked up a fresh cigarette, lit it from the other and tossed away the end.

"Will you not try one?" he asked, seeing that my pipe was finished, and I presently found myself enjoying the best cigarette I had ever smoked. "You comprehend French—no?"

"Not well enough to enjoy it," I said.

"I am sorry. I believe you would like this book which I am reading," and he pulled a somewhat tattered volume from his pocket. "I have read it, oh, ver' many times, as well as all the others, though this, of course, is the masterpiece."

He held it so that I could see the title. It was "Monsieur Lecoq."

"I have read it in English," I said.

"And did you not like it—yes? I am ver' fond of stories of detection. That is why I was so absorbed in that affair of Mees—Mees—ah, I have forgotten! Your names are so difficult for me."

"Miss Holladay," I said.

"Ah, yes. And has that mystery ever arrived at a solution?"

"No," I said. "Unfortunately we haven't any M. Lecoqs on our detective force."

"Ah, no," he smiled. "And the young lady—in her I conceived a great interest, even though I did not see her. How is she?"

"The shock was a little too much for her," I said. "She's gone out to her country place to rest. She'll soon be all right again, I hope."

He had taken a third cigarette and was lighting it carelessly with his face half turned away from me. I noticed how flushed his neck was.

"Oh, undoubtedly," he agreed after a moment; "at least I should be most sad to think otherwise. But it is late; I perceive that you are weary; I thank you for your kindness."

"Not at all," I protested. "I hope you'll come in whenever you feel lonely."

"A thousand thanks! I shall avail myself of your invitation. My apartment is just across the hall," he added as I opened the door. "I trust to see you there."

"You shall," I said heartily, and bade him good night.

"My name is Martigny—Jasper Martigny."

In the week that followed I saw a good deal of Martigny. I would meet him on the stairs or in the hall. He came again to see me, and I returned his visit two nights later, upon which occasion he produced two bottles of Chateau Yquem of a delicacy beyond all praise. And I grew more and more to like him. He told me many stories of Paris, which, it seemed, had always been his home, with a wit to which his slight accent and formal utterance gave new point; he displayed a kindly interest in my plans which was very pleasing; he was always tactful, courteous, good humored. He was plainly a boulevardier, a man of the world, with an outlook upon life a little startling in its materiality, but interesting in its freshness and often amusing in its frankness. And he seemed to return my liking—certainly it was he who sought me, not I who sought him. He was being delayed, he said, in establishing his business; he could not get just the quarters he desired, but in another week there would be a place vacant. He would ask me to draw up the lease. Meanwhile time hung rather heavily on his hands.

"Though I do not quarrel with that," he added, sitting in my room one evening; "it is necessary for me that I take life easily. I have a weakness of the heart, which has already given me much trouble. Besides, I have your companionship, which is most welcome, and for which I thank you. I trust Mees—Mees—what you call—Holladay is again well."

"We haven't heard from her," I said. "She is still at her place in the country."

"Oh, she is doubtless well—in her I take such an interest—you will pardon me if I weary you."

"Weary me? But you don't!"

"Then I will make bold to ask you—have you made any—what you call—theory of the crime?"

"No," I answered—"that is, none beyond what was in the newspapers—the illegitimate daughter theory. I suppose you saw it. That seems to fit the case."

He nodded meditatively. "Yet I like to imagine how M. Lecoq would approach it. Would he believe it was a murder simply because it so appeared? Has it occurred to you that Mees Holladay truly might have visited her father and that his death was not a murder at all, but an accident?"

"An accident?" I repeated. "How could it be an accident? How could a man be stabbed accidentally in the neck? Besides, even if it were an accident, how would that explain his daughter's rushing from the building without trying to save him, without giving the alarm? If it wasn't a murder, why should the woman, whoever she was, be frightened? How else can you explain her flight?"

He was looking at me thoughtfully. "All that you say is ver' true," he said. "It shows that you have given to the case much thought. I believe that you also have a fondness for crimes of mystery," and he smiled at me. "Is it not so, Mistair Lester?"

"I had never suspected it," I laughed, "until this case came up, but the microbe seems to have bitten me."

"Ah, yes," he said doubtfully, not quite understanding.

"And I've rather fancied at times," I admitted, "that I should like to take a hand at solving it—though, of course, I never shall. Our connection with the case is ended."

He shot me a quick glance, then lighted another cigarette.

"Suppose it were assigned to you to solve it," he asked, "how would you set about it?"

"I'd try to find the mysterious woman."

"But the police, so I understand, attempted that and failed," he objected. "How could you succeed?"

"Oh, I dare say I shouldn't succeed," I laughed, his air striking me as a little more earnest than the occasion demanded. "I should probably fail, just as the police did."

"In France," he remarked, "it is not in the least expected that men of the law should"—

"Nor is it here," I explained. "Only, of course, a lawyer can't help it sometimes. Some cases demand more or less detective work and are yet too delicate to be intrusted to the police."

"It is also the fault of our police that it is too fond of the newspapers, of posing before the public. It is a fault of human nature, is it not?"

"You speak English so well, Mr. Martigny," I said, "that I have wondered where you learned it."

"I was some years in England—the business of wine—and devoted myself seriously to the study of the language. But I still find it sometimes very difficult to understand you Americans—you speak so much more rapidly than the English and so much less distinctly. You have a way of running your words together, of dropping whole syllables"—

"Yes," I smiled, "and that is the very thing we complain of in the French."

"Oh, our elisions are governed by well defined laws which each one comprehends, while here"—

"Every man is a law unto himself. Remember it is the land of the free"—

"And the home of the license, is it not?" he added, unconscious of irony.

Yes, I decided, I was very fortunate in gaining Martigny's acquaintance. Of course after he opened his business he would have less time to devote to me, but nevertheless we should have many pleasant evenings together, and I looked forward to them with considerable anticipation. He was interesting in himself—entertaining, with that large tolerance and good humor which I have already mentioned and which was one of the most striking characteristics of the man. And then—shall I admit it?—I was lonely, too, sometimes, as I suppose every bachelor must be, and I welcomed a companion.

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It was Monday, the fourteenth day of April, and we had just opened the office, when a clerk hurried in with a message for Mr. Royce.

"There's a man out here who wants to see you at once, sir," he said. "He says his name's Thompson and that he's Miss Frances Holladay's butler."

Our junior half started from his chair in his excitement; then he controlled himself and sank back into it again.

"Show him in," he said, and sat with his eyes on the door, haggard in appearance, pitiful in his eagerness. Not until that moment had I noticed how the past week had aged him and worn him down. His work of course might account for part of it, but not for all. He seemed almost ill.

The door opened in a moment and a gray haired man of about sixty entered. He was fairly gasping for breath and plainly laboring under strong emotion.

"Well, Thompson," demanded Mr. Royce, "what's the trouble now?"

"Trouble enough, sir!" cried the other. "My mistress has been made away with, sir. She left town just ten days ago for Belair, where we were all waiting for her, and nobody has set eyes on her since, sir."

CHAPTER X

MR. ROYCE grasped the arms of his chair convulsively, and remained for a moment speechless under the shock. Then he swung around toward me.

"Come here, Lester," he said hoarsely. "I needed you once before, and I need you now. This touches me so closely I can't think consecutively. You will help, won't you?"

There was an appeal in his face which showed his sudden weakness—an appeal there was no resisting, even had I not myself been deeply interested in the case.

"Gladly," I answered from the depths of my heart, seeing how overwrought he was. "I'll help to the very limit of my power, Mr. Royce."

He sank back into his chair again and breathed a long sigh.

"I knew you would," he said. "Get the story from Thompson, will you?"

I brought a chair and sat down by the old butler.

"You have been in Mr. Holladay's family a great many years, haven't you, Mr. Thompson?" I asked to give him opportunity to compose himself.

"Yes, a great many years, sir—nearly forty, I should say."

"Before Miss Holladay's birth, then?"

"Oh, yes, sir; long before. Just before his marriage Mr. Holladay bought the Fifth avenue house he lived in ever since, and I was employed then, sir, as an underservant."

"Mr. Holladay and his wife were very happy together, weren't they?" I questioned.

"Very happy; yes, sir. They were just like lovers, sir, until her death. They seemed just made for each other, sir," and the trite old saying gathered a new dignity as he uttered it.

I paused a moment to consider. This, certainly, seemed to discredit the theory that Holladay had ever had a liaison with any other woman, and yet what other theory was tenable?

"There was nothing to mar their happiness that you know of? Of course," I added, "you understand, Thompson, that I'm not asking these questions from idle curiosity, but to get to the bottom of this mystery if possible."

"I understand, sir," he nodded. "No, there was nothing to mar their happiness—except one thing."

"And what was that?"

"Why, they had no children, sir, for fifteen years and more. After Miss Frances came, of course that was all changed."

"She was born abroad?"

"Yes, sir; in France. I don't just know the town."

"But you know the date of her birth?"

"Oh, yes, sir—the 10th of June, 1876. We always celebrated it."

"Mr. Holladay was with his wife at the time?"

"Yes, sir. He and his wife had been abroad nearly a year. His health had broken down, and the doctor made him take a long vacation. He came home a few months later, but Mrs. Holladay stayed on. She didn't get strong again, some way. She stayed nearly four years, and he went over every few months to spend a week with her, and at last she came home to die, bringing her child with her. That was the first time any of us ever saw Miss Frances."

"Mr. Holladay thought a great deal of her?"

"You may well say so, sir. She took his wife's place," said the old man simply.

"And she thought a great deal of him?"

"More than that, sir. She fairly worshiped him. She was always at the door to meet him; always dined with him; they almost always spent their evenings together. She didn't care much for society. I've often heard her tell him that she'd much rather just stay at home with him. It was he who rather insisted on her going out, for he was proud of her, as he'd a right to be."

"Yes," I said, for all this fitted in exactly with what I had always heard about the family. "There were no other relatives, were there?"

"None at all, sir. Both Mr. Holladay and his wife were only children. Their parents, of course, have been dead for years."

"Nor any intimate friends?"

"None I'd call intimate, sir. Miss Frances had some school friends, but she was always—well—reserved, sir."

"Yes," I nodded again. "And now," I added, "tell me, as fully as you can, what has happened within the last three weeks."

"Well, sir," he began slowly, "after her father's death she seemed quite distracted for awhile—wandered about the house, sat in the library of evenings, ate scarcely anything. Then Mr. Royce got to coming to the house, and she brightened up, and we all hoped she'd soon be all right again. Then she seemed to get worse of a sudden and sent us all away to get Belair ready. I got the place in order, sir, and telegraphed her that we were ready. She answered that she'd come in a few days. Ten days ago the rest of the servants came, and I looked for her every day, but she didn't come. I telegraphed her again, but she didn't answer, and finally I got so uneasy, sir, I couldn't rest, and came back to the city to see what was the matter. I got here early this morning and went right to the house. Thomas, the second butler, had been left in charge, and he told me that Miss Frances and her maid her started for Belair the same day the servants did. That's all I know."

"Then she's been gone ten days?" I questioned.

"Ten days; yes, sir."

Ten days! What might not have happened in that time! Dr. Jenkinson's theory of dementia recurred to me, and I was more than ever inclined to credit it. How else explain this flight? I could see from Mr. Royce's face how absolutely nonplused he was.

"Well," I said at last, for want of something better, "we'll go with you to the house and see the man in charge there. Perhaps he can tell us something more."

But he could tell us very little. Ten days before a carriage had driven up to the door. Miss Holladay and her maid had entered it and been driven away. The carriage had been called, he thought, from some neighboring stable, as the family coachman had been sent away with the other servants. They had driven down the avenue toward Thirty-fourth street, where he supposed they were going to the Long Island station. We looked through the house; it was in perfect order. Miss Holladay's rooms were just as she would naturally have left them. Her father's rooms, too, were evidently undisturbed.

"Here's one thing," I said, "that might help," and I picked up a photograph from the mantel. "You won't mind my using it?"

Mr. Royce took it with trembling hand and gazed at it for a moment—at the dark eyes, the earnest mouth. Then he handed it back to me.

"No," he answered, "not if it will really help. We must use every means we can. Only"—

"I won't use it unless I absolutely have to," I assured him. "And when I'm done with it I'll destroy it."

"Very well," he assented, and I put it in my pocket.

There was nothing more to be discovered there, and we went away, after warning the two men to say not a word to any one concerning their mistress' disappearance.

Plainly the first thing to be done was to find the coachman who had driven Miss Holladay and her maid away from the house, and with this end in view we visited all the stables in the neighborhood, but from none of them had a carriage been ordered by her. Had she ordered it herself from a stable in some distant portion of the city for the purpose of concealing her whereabouts, or had it been ordered for her by her maid, and was she really the victim of foul play? I put this question to Mr. Royce, but he seemed quite unable to reach a conclusion. As for myself, I was certain that she had gone away of her own accord and had deliberately planned her disappearance. Why? Well, I began to suspect that we had not yet really touched the bottom of the mystery.

(To be Continued)

Hay and feed at Plumb's.