

The Facts in the Ratcliff Case

By Edward Page Mitchell

I

I first met Miss Borgier at a tea party in the town of R—, where I was attending medical lectures. She was a tall girl, not pretty; her face would have been insipid but for the peculiar restlessness of her eyes. They were neither bright nor expressive, yet she kept them so constantly in motion that they seemed to catch and reflect light from a thousand sources. Whenever, as rarely happened, she fixed them even for a few seconds upon one object, the factitious brilliancy disappeared, and they became dull and somnolent. I am unable to say what was the color of Miss Borgier's eyes.

After tea, I was one of a group of people whom our host, the Reverend Mr. Tinker, sought to entertain with a portfolio of photographs of places in the Holy Land. While endeavoring to appear interested in his descriptions and explanations, all of which I had heard before, I became aware that Miss Borgier was honoring me with steady regard. My gaze encountered hers and I found that I could not, for the life of me, withdraw my own eyes from the encounter. Then I had a singular experience, the phenomena of which I noted with professional accuracy. I felt the slight constriction of the muscles of my face, the numbness of the nerves that precedes physical stupor induced by narcotic agency. Although I was obliged to struggle against the physical sense of drowsiness, my mental faculties were more than ordinarily active. Her eyes seemed to torpify my body while they stimulated my mind, as opium does. Entirely conscious of my present surroundings, and particularly alert to the Reverend Mr. Tinker's narrative of the ride from Joppa, I accompanied him on that journey, not as one who listens to a traveler's tale, but as one who himself travels the road. When, finally, we reached the point where the Reverend Mr. Tinker's donkey makes the last sharp turn around the rock that has been cuffing off the view ahead, and the Reverend Mr. Tinker beholds with amazement and joy the glorious panorama of Jerusalem spread out before him, I saw it all with remarkable vividness. I saw Jerusalem in Miss Borgier's eyes.

I tacitly thanked fortune when her eyes resumed their habitual dance around the room, releasing me from what had become a rather humiliating captivity. Once free from their strange influence, I laughed at my weakness. "Pshaw!" I said to myself. "You are a fine subject for a young woman of mesmeric talents to practice upon.

"Who is Miss Borgier?" I demanded of the Reverend Mr. Tinker's wife, at the first opportunity.

"Why, she is Deacon Borgier's daughter," replied that good person, with some surprise.

"And who is Deacon Borgier?"

"A most excellent man; one of the pillars of my husband's congregation. The young people laugh at what they call his torpidity, and say that he has been walking about town in his sleep for twenty years; but I assure you that there is not a sincerer, more fervent Chris—"

I turned abruptly around, leaving Mrs. Tinker more astonished than ever, for I knew that the subject of my inquiries was looking at me again. She sat in one corner of the room, apart from the rest of the company. I straightway went and seated myself at her side.

"That is right," she said. "I wished you to come. Did you enjoy your journey to Jerusalem?"

“Yes, thanks to you.

“Perhaps. But you can repay the obligation. I am told that you are Dr. Mack’s assistant in surgery at the college. There is a clinic tomorrow. I want to attend it.”

“As a patient?” I inquired.

She laughed. “No, as a spectator. You must find a way to gratify my curiosity.”

I expressed, as politely as possible, my astonishment at so extraordinary a fancy on the part of a young lady, and hinted at the scandal which her appearance in the amphitheater would create. She immediately offered to disguise herself in male attire. I explained that the nature of the relations between the medical college and the patients who consented to submit to surgical treatment before the class were such that it would be a dishonorable thing for me to connive at the admission of any outsider, male or female. That argument made no impression upon her mind. I was forced to decline peremptorily to serve her in the off air. “Very well,” she said. “I must find some other way.”

At the clinic the next day I took pains to satisfy myself that Miss Borgier had not surreptitiously intruded. The students of the class came in at the hour, noisy and careless as usual, and seated themselves in the lower tiers of chairs around the operating table. They produced their notebooks and began to sharpen lead pencils. Miss Borgier was certainly not among them. Every face in the lecture room was familiar to me. I locked the door that opened into the hallway, and then searched the anteroom on the other side of the amphitheater. There were a dozen or more patients, nervous and dejected, waiting for treatment and attended by friends hardly less frightened than themselves. But neither Miss Borgier nor anybody resembling Miss Borgier was of the number.

Dr. Mack now briskly entered by his private door. He glanced sharply at the table on which his instruments were arranged, ready for use, and, having assured himself that everything was in its place, began the clinical lecture. There were the usual minor operations—two or three for strabismus, one for cataract, the excision of several cysts and tumors, large and small, the amputation of a railway brakeman’s crushed thumb. As the cases were disposed of, I attended the patients back to the anteroom and placed them in the care of their friends.

Last came a poor old lady named Wilson, whose leg had been drawn up for years by a rheumatic affection, so that the joint of the knee had ossified. It was one of those cases where the necessary treatment is almost brutal in its simplicity. The limb had to be straightened by the application of main force. Mrs. Wilson obstinately refused to take advantage of anesthesia. She was placed on her back upon the operating table, with a pillow beneath her head. The geniculated limb showed a deflection of twenty or twenty-five degrees from a right line. As already remarked, this deflection had to be corrected by direct, forcible pressure downward upon the knee.

With the assistance of a young surgeon of great physical strength, Dr. Mack proceeded to apply this pressure. The operation is one of the most excruciating that can be imagined. I was stationed at the head of the patient, in order to hold her shoulders should she struggle. But I observed that a marked change had come over her since we established her upon the table. Very much agitated at first, she had become perfectly calm. As she passively lay there, her eyes directed upward with a fixed gaze, the eyelids heavy as if with approaching slumber, the face tranquil, it was hard to realize that this woman had already crossed the threshold of an experience of cruel pain.

I had no time, however, to give more than a thought to her wonderful courage. The harsh operation had begun. The surgeon and his assistant were steadily and with increasing force bearing down upon the rigid knee. Perhaps the Spanish Inquisition never devised a method of

inflicting physical torture more intense than that which this woman was now undergoing, yet not a muscle of her face quivered. She breathed easily and regularly, her features retained their placid expression, and, at the moment when her sufferings must have been the most agonizing, I saw her eyes close, as if in peaceful sleep.

At the same instant the tremendous force exerted upon the knee produced its natural effect. The ossified joint yielded, and, with a sickening noise—the indescribable sound of the crunching and gritting of the bones of a living person, a sound so frightful that I have seen old surgeons, with sensibilities hardened by long experience, turn pale at hearing it—the crooked limb became as straight as its mate.

Closely following this horrible sound, I heard a ringing peal of laughter.

The operating table, in the middle of the pit of the amphitheater, was lighted from overhead. Directly above the table, a shaft, five or six feet square, and closely boarded on its four sides, led up through the attic story of the building to a skylight in the roof. The shaft was so deep and so narrow that its upper orifice was visible from no part of the room except a limited space immediately around the table. The laughter which startled me seemed to come from overhead. If heard by any other person present, it was probably ascribed to a hysterical utterance on the part of the patient. I was in a position to know better. Instinctively I glanced upward, in the direction in which the eyes of Mrs. Wilson had been so fixedly bent.

There, framed in a quadrangle of blue sky, I saw the head and neck of Miss Borgier. The sash of the skylight had been removed, to afford ventilation. The young woman was evidently lying at full length upon the flat roof. She commanded a perfect view of all that was done upon the operating table. Her face was flushed with eager interest and wore an expression of innocent wonder, not unmingled with delight. She nodded merrily to me when I looked up and laid a finger against her lips, as if to warn me to silence. Disgusted, I withdrew my eyes hastily from hers. Indeed, after my experience of the previous evening, I did not care to trust my self-control under the influence of her gaze.

As Dr. Mack with his sharp scissors cut the end of a linen bandage, he whispered to me: “This is without a parallel. Not a sign of syncope, no trace of functional disorder. She has dropped quietly into healthy sleep during an infliction of pain that would drive a strong man mad.”

As soon as released from my duties in the lecture room, I made my way to the roof of the building. As I emerged through the scuffle-way, Miss Borgier scrambled to her feet and advanced to meet me without manifesting the slightest discomposure. Her face fairly beamed with pleasure.

“Wasn’t it beautiful?” she asked with a smile, extending her hand. “I heard the bones slowly grinding and crushing!”

I did not take her hand. “How came you here?” I demanded, avoiding her glance.

“Oh!” said she, with a silvery laugh. “I came early, about sunrise. The janitor left the door ajar and I slipped in while he was in the cellar. All the morning I spent in the place where they dissect; and when the students began to come in downstairs I escaped here to the roof.”

“Are you aware, Miss Borgier,” I asked, very gravely. “that you have committed a serious indiscretion, and must be gotten out of the building as quickly and privately as possible?”

She did not appear to understand. “Very well,” she said. “I suppose there is nothing more to see. I may as well go.”

I led her down through the garret, cumbered with boxes and barrels of unarticulated human bones; through the medical library, unoccupied at that hour; by a back stairway into and across the great vacant chemical lecture room; through the anatomical cabinet, full of objects appalling

to the imagination of her sex. I was silent and she said nothing; but her eyes were everywhere, drinking in the strange surroundings with an avidity which I could feel without once looking at her. Finally we came to a basement corridor, at the end of which a door, not often used, gave egress by an alleyway to the street. It was through this door that subjects for dissection were brought into the building. I took a bunch of keys from my pocket and turned the lock. "Your way is clear now," I said.

To my immense astonishment, Miss Borgier, as we stood together at the end of the dark corridor, threw both arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Good-by," she said, as she disappeared through the half-opened door.

When I awoke the next morning, after sleeping for more than fifteen hours, I found that I could not raise my head from the pillow without nausea. The symptoms were exactly like those which mark the effects of an overdose of laudanum.

II

I have thought it due to myself and to my professional reputation to recount these facts before briefly speaking of my recent testimony as an expert, in the Ratcliff murder trial, the character of my relations with the accused having been persistently misrepresented.

The circumstances of that celebrated case are no doubt still fresh in the recollection of the public. Mr. John L. Ratcliff, a wealthy, middle-aged merchant of Boston, came to St. Louis with his young bride, on their wedding journey. His sudden death at the Planters' Hotel, followed by the arrest of his wife, who was entirely without friends or acquaintances in the city, her indictment for murder by poisoning, the conflict of medical testimony at the trial, and the purely circumstantial nature of the evidence against the prisoner, attracted general attention and excited public interest to a degree that was quite extraordinary.

It will be remembered that the state proved that the relations of Mr. and Mrs. Ratcliff, as observed by the guests and servants of the hotel, were not felicitous; that he rarely spoke to her at table, habitually averting his face in her presence; that he wandered aimlessly about the hotel for several days previous to his illness, apparently half stupefied, as if by the oppression of some heavy mental burden, and that when accosted by anyone connected with the house he started as if from a dream, and answered incoherently if at all.

It was also shown that, by her husband's death, Mrs. Ratcliff became the sole mistress of a large fortune.

The evidence bearing directly upon the circumstances of Mr. Ratcliff's death was very clear. For twenty-four hours before a physician was summoned, no one had access to him save his wife. At dinner that day, in response to the polite inquiry of a lady neighbor at table, Mrs. Ratcliff announced, with great self-possession, that her husband was seriously indisposed. Soon after eleven o'clock at night, Mrs. Ratcliff rang her bell, and, without the least agitation of manner, remarked that her husband appeared to be dying, and that it might be well to send for a physician. Dr. Culbert, who arrived within a very few minutes, found Mr. Ratcliff in a profound stupor, breathing stertorously. He swore at the trial that when he first entered the room the prisoner, pointing to the bed, coolly said, "I suppose that I have killed him."

Dr. Culbert's testimony seemed to point unmistakably to poisoning by laudanum or morphine. The unconscious man's pulse was full but slow; his skin cold and pallid; the expression of his countenance placid, yet ghastly pale; lips livid. Coma had already supervened, and it was impossible to rouse him. The ordinary expedients were tried in vain. Flagellation of the palms of

his hands and the soles of his feet, electricity applied to the head and spine, failed to make any impression on his lethargy. The eyelids being forcibly opened, the pupils were seen to be contracted to the size of pinheads, and violently turned inward. Later, the stertorous breathing developed into the ominously loud rattle of mucous in the trachea; there were convulsions, attended by copious frothings at the mouth; the under jaw fell upon the breast; and paralysis and death followed, four hours after Dr. Culbert's arrival.

Several of the most eminent practitioners of the city, put upon the stand by the prosecution, swore that, in their opinion, the symptoms noted by Dr. Culbert not only indicated opium poisoning, but could have resulted from no other cause.

On the other hand, the state absolutely failed to show either that opium in any form had been purchased by Mrs. Ratcliff in St. Louis, or that traces of opium in any form were found in the room after the event. It is true that the prosecuting attorney, in his closing argument, sought to make the latter circumstance tell against the prisoner. He argued that the disappearance of any vessel containing or having contained laudanum, in view of the positive evidence that laudanum had been employed, served to establish a deliberate intention of murder and to demolish any theory of accidental poisoning that the defense might attempt to build; and he propounded half a dozen hypothetical methods by which Mrs. Ratcliff might have disposed, in advance, of this evidence of her crime. The court, of course, in summing up, cautioned the jury against attaching weight to these hypotheses of the prosecuting attorney.

The court, however, put much emphasis on the medical testimony for the prosecution, and on the calm declaration of Mrs. Ratcliff to Dr. Culbert, "I suppose that I have killed him."

Having conducted the autopsy, and afterward made a qualitative analysis of the contents of the dead man's stomach, I was put upon the stand as a witness for the defense.

Then I saw the prisoner for the first time in more than five years. When I had taken the oath and answered the preliminary questions, Mrs. Ratcliff raised the veil which she had worn since the trial began, and looked me in the face with the well-remembered eyes of Miss Borgier.

I confess that my behavior during the first few moments of surprise afforded some ground for the reports that were afterward current concerning my relations with the prisoner. Her eyes chained not only mine, but my tongue also. I saw Jerusalem again, and the face framed in blue sky peering down into the amphitheater of the old medical college. It was only after a struggle which attracted the attention of judge, jury, bar, and spectators that I was able to proceed with my testimony.

That testimony was strong for the accused. My knowledge of the case was wholly post-mortem. It began with the autopsy. Nothing had been found that indicated poisoning by laudanum or by any other agent. There was no morbid appearance of the intestinal canal; no fullness of the cerebral vessels, no serous effusion. Every appearance that would have resulted from death by poison was wanting in the subject. That, of course, was merely negative evidence. But, furthermore, my chemical analysis had proved the absence of the poison in the system. The opium odor could not be detected. I had tested for morphine with nitric acid, permuriate of iron, chromate of potash, and, most important of all, iodic acid. I had tested again for meconic acid with the permuriate of iron. I had tested by Lassaigne's process, by Dublane's, and by Flandin's. As far as the resources of organic chemistry could avail, I had proved that, notwithstanding the symptoms of Mr. Ratcliff's case before death, death had not resulted from laudanum or any other poison known to science.

The questions by the prosecuting counsel as to my previous acquaintance with the prisoner, I was able to answer truthfully in a manner that did not shake the force of my medical testimony.

And it was chiefly on the strength of this testimony that the jury, after a short deliberation, returned a verdict of not guilty.

Did I swear falsely? No; for science bore me out in every assertion. I knew that not a drop of laudanum or a grain of morphine had passed Ratcliff's lips. Ought I to have declared my belief regarding the true cause of the man's death, and told the story of my previous observations of Miss Borgier's case? No; for no court of justice would have listened to that story for a single moment. I knew that the woman did not murder her husband. Yet I believed and knew—as surely as we can know anything where the basis of ascertained fact is slender and the laws obscure—that she poisoned him, *poisoned him to death with her eyes*.

I think that it will be generally conceded by the profession that I am neither a sensationalist nor prone to lose my self-command in the mazes of physico-psychologic speculation. I make the foregoing assertion deliberately, fully conscious of all that it implies.

What was the mystery of the noxious influence which this woman exerted through her eyes? What was the record of her ancestry, the secret of predisposition in her case? By what occult process of evolution did her glance derive the toxical effect of the *papaver somniferum*? How did she come to be a Woman-Poppy? I cannot yet answer these questions. Perhaps I shall never be able to answer them.

But if there is need of further proof of the sincerity of my denial of any sentiment on my part which might have led me to shield Mrs. Ratcliff by perjury, I may say that I have now in my possession a letter from her, written after her acquittal, proposing to endow me with her fortune and herself; as well as a copy of my reply, respectfully declining the offer.