

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty

Rogues on the Riverbank

A confluence of tight deadlines and a family summer vacation prevents me from presenting Part 6 of "Blood on the Blackstone" this time around. We'll pick up the story again next issue. In the meantime, here's a tale of old Blackstone from a file I call "Rogues on the Riverbank." The following dramatization is based on a news item published in the Woonsocket Patriot, December 23, 1853, back in the days when Monument Square was still known as Block Square.

With a whistle blast and a bellow of smoke, the noonday train rumbled out of the Blackstone railway depot on December 13, 1853, leaving two peculiar visitors behind.

Husband and wife (or so they would tell anyone who asked), the strangers left the depot and followed Canal Street to Block Square. She led the way, while her companion, a tall, spare stick of a man, lagged several yards behind, struggling with a large black Saratoga trunk.

"Just a bit further," she urged.

"Where?" he demanded.

She pointed to a three-story, stone building on the east side of the square. A tavern sign hung out front, swinging in the crackling winter wind: UNION HOUSE, Est. 1853, A. Wheelock, Prop.

"It'll do," he grunted.

Few hotels on the Providence-to-Worcester line compared to the Union House. Owned by Austin Wheelock and managed by Darius Bennett (formerly of the Uxbridge Central House), the Union had already earned a fine reputation in the three short months since opening. All of the guest rooms were well appointed, and those facing south enjoyed a panoramic overlook of the Blackstone River and Waterford village. The hotel's dining room regularly drew praise from local gourmands, who returned time and again, often arriving by train to sample the chef's latest creations.

The hotel's proximity to the rail depot made it a popular stop for all manner of travelers. But even Darius Bennett, who liked to remind the public that hospitality was the order of the day *every* day at the Union House, had to admit that Madame C. Harris was one of a kind.

The Madame and her husband had arrived shortly after midday, inquiring about rooms. Bennett made no pretense of checking for vacancies; he determined in an instant that this lady *must* stay at his hotel. Proclaiming his happiness at being able to accommodate them, Bennett produced the hotel register and invited her to sign. Later (when he could think clearly), he would wonder why Mister Harris hadn't made the arrangements, as was customary. The husband, a spidery fellow, stood well to the rearm dividing his gaze between the front door and the front desk. He had declined all offers of assistance with his trunk.

The Madame informed Bennett that they would be needing a room for several days at least, depending on business. Bennett mumbled something about a room deposit but forgot it almost instantly, so fascinated was he by the creature before him. Madame had

an ageless face, round and pale but for dabs of rouge on her cheeks and lips. She wore her hair pinned back and tucked under her hat, but a few ringlets hung loose, each as black and glossy as a Morgan colt.

The hat itself was a milliner's miracle, trimmed and brimmed with the plumage of no less than eight exotic birds. And the jeweled brooch at her neck! Bennett knew nothing about gemstones, but he had little doubt that the rubies and diamonds were real. No glass bauble ever exuded such fire, no matter how skillfully cut.

Only after the Harrises had repaired to their third floor quarters did Bennett remember the omitted room deposit. He shrugged, assuring himself that it was all right. Obviously the Union's newest guests were wealthy, not unlike some of the rascals who hopped off the trains. Were they relations of Edward Harris, the Woonsocket millionaire, perhaps? He would have to ask. In the meantime, he had yesterday's receipts to tabulate.

He opened the hotel ledger but found it impossible to concentrate on business. Hadn't the Harris woman said something about business? Her husband's business? Bennett struggled to recall the exact words, but they remained as faint and elusive as the Madame's cachet, which still lingered about the foyer.

An hour or two later, Mr. Harris slipped past the front desk, so quietly that Bennett would have missed him had he not felt a blast of cold air from the door. The hotel keeper glanced up from his calculations just in time to see the tall man duck outside. As the door closed behind him, a phrase popped into Bennett's mind: *Will-o'-the-wisp*.

But surely Mr. Harris was not trying to be stealthy, Bennett decided. It's simply his nature – like a cat. Would that all the Union's lodgers were as fleet and light of foot. It'd go easier on the carpets, that's a fact. Why, if people treated the property of others half as decently as they did their own ...

Darius Bennett closed the books. A sliver of good daylight remained, time enough to light the hallway lamps and be off to the kitchen in preparation for the dinner hour. He collected the cash box and started upstairs, where already shadows had begun to gather ...

Shortly after midnight, in the midst of an early snowfall, a shingle was hung outside the Union House. The wooden placard was the type used by traveling physicians, photographers and other professionals, but with a marked difference: this one was adorned with an array of exotic symbols and calligraphy.

Three inches of wet snow fell before the storm moved farther east, a fact which invited slight comment the following morn. Certainly it was not a topic among those who crowded the hotel verandah, chattering and laughing over the strange shingle.

"Christmas is a time for gifts," chortled town physician Dr. William Kimball, who had paused en route to his office. "But the gift of prophecy? Ha!"

The only unsmiling face belonged to Darius Bennett. He stood apart from the rest, but near enough to read and read again the words gleaming in the sharp December sunlight:

Sees All! Hears All! Tells All!
MADAME C. HARRIS
INDEPENDENT CLAIRVOYANT
Inquire Within

And Bennett had inquired, oh yes indeed – the instant the morning cook called the shingle to his attention. He bounded up the stairs – no easy task for a man who liked a little tobacco at night – and though sorely winded proceeded along the hall till he reached the Madame’s door.

He trembled with indignation. He felt deceived. How dare they turn his – that is, Mr. Wheelock’s – fine new hotel into a gypsy camp.

He rapped loudly, hoping to catch them asleep. Experience had taught him that guests were most vulnerable when jolted awake. But it was Bennett’s turn to be caught off guard, for the door swung open and there she was, Madame Harris, dressed to the nines and smiling. Bennett noticed the bed was neatly made and a copy of the *Woonsocket Patriot* lay folded on the small bedside table.

“May I help you, Mr. Bennett?”

“I sincerely hope so, Madame.”

He requested an interview with Mister Harris, indicating that the woman’s husband should join him in the hall. The Madame gently apologized, explaining that her husband had embarked on an early morning business call. Might she be of help in his stead?

The hotel keeper hesitated. He preferred not to be brusque with a woman. “It’s about your ... practice,” he began.

She smiled. “I know.”

“You do? Oh yes, of course,” he said drolly. “Your ‘second sight’ alerted you, I suppose?”

“No,” she said. “The look on your face.”

“Then I won’t mince words,” Bennett snapped. “The Union House is a first rate establishment. I cannot stand by while you sully our good name with your irreligious hoo-doo.”

“Do you mean my clairvoyance?”

“Indeed.”

“You misjudge me,” she said, lowering her eyes as though wounded. “My ‘talents’ are an innocent diversion. A parlor game, really.”

“For which you accept money,” said Bennett.

She shrugged. “A token sum.”

“But money nonetheless.”

“Yes, Mr. Bennett,” she said coolly. “I accept contributions. It’s part of the mystique. If my patrons wanted free advice, they would seek out family members, friends ... In coming to me, they are allowing themselves a personal indulgence – a guilty pleasure, if you will. Paying for the experience confirms that it is special.”

“It’s ungodly is what it is! And during the Christmas season!”

“Mr. Bennett,” she sighed. “We live in enlightened times. No one truly believes I can predict the future. Do you believe I possess that power?”

“No,” he said staunchly. “I do not.”

“Then I am harmless,” she laughed, “to both you and God.”

Bennett squirmed. Something had gone woefully awry, for he couldn’t refute her logic. His resolve fled, and every instinct urged him to follow. The battle was lost; time to retreat. He backed away, stammering a garbled excuse about the front desk being unattended.

Downstairs, he burst onto the verandah, shocked to find a crowd milling about and making sport of the fortune teller's sign. The hypocrites! Bennett knew he see the same faces later on, queued up outside the Madame's door, money in hand.

And there wasn't a thing he could do about it!

"Really, Darius," said Dr. Kimball, tapping the bowl of his pipe on the Union House's front desk. "I don't understand why this Madame So-and-So makes you so upset. She's a humbug. She told you so herself."

"Not to them," Bennett replied, gesturing at the people lined up like acolytes in the hotel stairwell. "They think she's Fate's own messenger. 'How long will I live, Madame?' 'Will I find a husband, Madame?' 'Will I become rich?' 'Will I regain my health?' It's pitiful, Doc. Some wait better than an hour for an audience with her. Bridey Johnson's up there right now."

The physician lit his pipe and puffed contentedly. The fragrant smoke wafted across the hotel foyer. "Soothsayers are as old as the Bible, Darius. Did not Saul entreat the Witch of Endor to raise the ghost of Samuel, so that he might seek advice?"

"Aye," said Bennett. "Saul did. But he also ran all mediums and fortune tellers out of the land."

"I have oft wondered," said the doctor, "why they are not called fortune *sellers*. It seems more to the point, don't you think? Your guest, the Madame, must be turning a hefty profit."

"Oh yes," Bennett exclaimed. "And her stock in trade is false assurances! Fantasies! Lies!"

Dr. Kimball glanced at the expectant faces across the foyer, then leaned forward so that his words were restricted to the hotel manager's ears.

"Lower your voice, my friend. You can't deny that the Madame is drawing people to the Union House, many of whom might pass it by otherwise; certainly she's more popular than that itinerant dentist who was here some weeks ago."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Only that you look to your own future. Surely your employer must be pleased by the free publicity his new hotel is receiving."

"Mr. Wheelock is in Hartford these few weeks," Bennett admitted, with a note of gratitude in his voice. "The Harrises will be just a memory by the time he returns."

"He's bound to hear."

"Yes, but from my lips first."

The doctor tried to suppress a grin.

"Oh no!" Bennett gasped, horror dawning on his face. "You can't! We are friends. Doc, please –"

"I have a civic obligation, Darius," Kimball said. "You know that."

For some time now, Dr. Kimball had been moonlighting as the Blackstone correspondent for the Woonsocket Patriot. His dispatches appeared each week in the newspaper, reporting on matters from serious to sundry.

"Yes, yes, your sacred duty. But if word of this is published in *The Patriot*, what's to prevent newspapers in Providence, Boston or Hartford from copying it? What's to stop Mr. Wheelock from seeing it?"

“Nothing, I suppose. But if it’s any consolation, in my brief tenure with *The Patriot*, I’ve yet to have a single item of mine copied by an editor outside the Blackstone Valley.”

“Yet,” Bennett grumbled.

“Oh come now,” Dr. Kimball reassured him. “My mentioning Madame Harris won’t amount to a hill of beans. From what you’ve told me, her predictions are of an innocent character. She hasn’t forecast death or ruin for anyone, has she?”

“Thus far, no,” said Bennett, “unless, of course, she has tried to divine my fate, in which case both outcomes must have figured prominently.”

Dr. Kimball laughed so spiritedly he began to cough. “Oh, Darius,” he gasped, “you haven’t lost your sense of humor. Thank the stars for that.”

Friday afternoon found Darius Bennett back at the Union House desk, daydreaming. He had just closed and folded the weekly edition of the *Woonsocket Patriot*. It contained not a single reference to Madame Harris.

Bennett felt elated. At last, good news all around. The previous evening, before dinner, Madame Harris had descended from her chambers to inform him that she and her husband would be taking their leave on Saturday, or Sunday at the latest. She clasped Bennett’s hands in hers, thanking him profusely for his patience. Only after she retreated did he realize that she had pressed \$50 into his palm.

It was the largest gratuity he had ever received. Later, alone and with the aid of some Old Jamaica, Bennett had drunk a health (actually several healths) to the Madame’s patrons.

To Emily Thornton – may you find the kettle of silver coins Madame says is buried on your 37 acres. To poor, sad Philip Inman – may you receive a letter from your long-lost son, as the Madame predicts. To Maggie MacNeil – may your days of spinsterhood finally draw to a close ...

And that’s when he’d had a revelation – an insight, even. It was so blessedly simple. And it silenced all of his qualms about the doings in Madame’s room.

She sells hope.

“Why didn’t I see it before?” Bennett murmured, repeating a question he’d asked himself several times in the hours since. From his seat behind the hotel desk he regarded the ever-present people on the stairwell. They would have told me, he thought. If only I had asked.

Outside, Block Square was bustling, people traveling to and fro, visiting the post office, the cobbler shop, the stores. It was Bennett’s habit to watch through the front windows, trying to pick out faces he knew.

He noticed two burly men in overcoats making a beeline for the hotel. One wore eyeglasses. They stamped their feet on the wooden porch and opened the front door.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said Bennett, rising. “May I help you?”

“Yes, thank you,” said the bespectacled one. “I’m looking for a Mister Harris. Is he a guest here?”

“Harris? Have you come for a fortune?”

The man smiled grimly. “In a manner of speaking. I’m Inspector Holcomb. This is Constable Morse. We’re from the Boston Fifth Precinct. We need to see this Harris fellow immediately. Is he here?”

“Y-yes,” said Bennett. “I mean, I think so. He comes and goes so suddenly.”

Images flooded Bennett’s mind, images of Mr. Harris clutching his black trunk at check-in, his eyes darting between the front desk and front door, front desk, front door. Mr. Harris slipping in and out of the hotel, so quickly, so quietly ...

“Room 3C,” Bennett stammered, growing faint.

“Are you all right, sir?”

“Yes, I’ll just sit down,” said Bennett.

Half an hour later, the Boston policemen led Mister Harris through the foyer and across Block Square in manacles. Bennett was nearly apoplectic, but not so indisposed that he failed to spot his friend, Dr. Kimball, physician and part-time news stringer, chasing across the square after them.

From the *Woonsocket Patriot*, December 23, 1853:

“*Blackstone*. – An affair of quite a merry character occurred here on Friday last. A few days since a lady fortune teller, calling herself Madame C. Harris, with one whom she represented to be her husband, took up quarters at the ‘Union.’

“Madame H. hung out her shingle as ‘Independent Clairvoyant,’ giving the people to understand that she would not only tell them all the important events of their past lives; what they had eaten for dinner, &c., but would reveal to them their future destiny; would tell young ladies the thing of all others under the sun they most desire to know; how long they must wait for the happy hour, and what they might do to hasten it.

“More than this, she gave intimations that she could go down into their stomachs, and lower even, and prescribe remedies. Her revelations were altogether of a benevolent character, intended for the good of others. Had it been otherwise, she might have seen with her keen spiritual eye, two police officers on their way from Boston, bearing no welcome message to her lord.

“The officers called at their room, and requested an interview with Mons. Harris, alias Welch, alias Harrington. They also made another modest request that they might search his trunks, with a view of finding certain fancy goods, jewelry, &c., which they suspected him of having stolen from jewelers’ shops in Boston and Providence. Some of the stolen property having been found in his possession, he was hurried off to Boston and safely juggled.

“On the following morning, the poor, disconsolate forsaken Madame Harris rushed in a fit to the [Blackstone] river and threw – not herself – but a portion of the stolen goods to the bottom, and then prepared to decamp. She was detained at the hotel until the return of the officers, and then taken to Boston to share the glory of her husband.”

AFTERWORD: This story was a dramatization; that is, a fictional treatment of factual events. However, the news clipping above is 100% authentic and reliable. The events described therein did happen.

The Union House continued to attract colorful characters over the years. Around 1860, a “thieving clock-mender” escaped from the second story of the hotel “on a clock line under cover of night.” Two years later, “a buxom Irish woman” was arrested for drunkenness and confined to the third story of the hotel to await trial. A short time after, she was spotted hanging from the windowsill outside her room. She plummeted to the ground, receiving a broken arm, dislocated shoulder and many bruises.

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