



A DERRICK MILES MYSTERY



THE BLUE TOPAZ

👉 A HOLIDAY TALE 📖 OF FOWL PLAY

WILL BRANDON

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THE BLUE TOPAZ

*{Being an extract from the journal of
FRANKLIN C. HOOPER, M.D., A.F.&A.M.}*

IT WAS WITH CONSIDERABLE RELIEF IN MY HEART that I mounted the seventeen steps to the familiar landing of 221B Houston Street and inserted my key into the lock. And it was not simply due to the fact of its being Christmas Eve after I'd spent a fortnight away in Galveston on a task of some importance to the Texas Medical Association—but that the mercury had dropped to twenty degrees by the time I stepped off the northbound train, and I'd been forced to wait nearly an hour amid a worsening snowfall for an empty hack heading uptown. Fort Worth might have grown in both size and sophistication in the five years since we'd taken up residence here, but the city's amenities circa 1881 had hardly blunted its frontier rowdiness.

I set my valise on the floor, shook the melting flakes from my hat and overcoat before hanging them on the rack, and emitted a weary sigh.

The scent of pipe tobacco wafted my way from the direction of the hearth, where a bright fire blazed.

"Your committee met with success, Hooper, but your train met with the norther?" said Derrick Miles in what generally passed for his tone of welcome.

"Indeed, the flurries started about Midlothian and the wind whipped down like a blast from the Arctic. But that wasn't the real cause of the delay, I take it. Some sort of fracas was up with the eastbound T&P. The police were hustling about, searching everyone before they were allowed to debark. Departures were held up as well—I am guessing after this, some travelers may not make their destinations in time for the holiday. A fresh haul of

livestock was coming in, too. The noise and the aroma were enough to make one lose all appetite except the desire for a quiet roof and a crackling fire!”

“And a nip of port to calm your nerves?” he inquired. “On these short winter days one may surely be excused for considering four p.m. a reputable enough hour for indulgence.”

I took my seat opposite him, pulled off my leather gloves, and poured us each a glass from the crystal decanter on the side table.

Miles was lounging in his favorite leather slippers and purple dressing-gown this Saturday afternoon, apparently free of any pressing investigation. The week’s newspapers were strewn about, and a smattering of envelopes—addressed to me, it appeared—were anchored into the wooden mantelpiece by way of an old Bowie knife. I stood to free them as Miles leaned over and picked up the copy of the *Daily Gazette* nearest him. He spoke from behind the outstretched page.

“You say some sort of inspection was under way at the depot. Did you catch sight of our friend Courtright?”

“I did not . . . but both of the marshal’s deputies were there, and it seemed the constabulary had also been called in to ensure no one slipped through the net. Though how anyone could hope to control such a mob is beyond me. Impatient swells, mothers towing toddlers, officious railmen, nannies with squalling babies, insurance salesmen, stinking drovers, the minister trying to get through in time for his vespers, a troupe of actors headed for the opera house, a schoolteacher on holiday, an old veteran in a wheelchair, and, let’s see—a betrothed couple late for their vows. I was hemmed in on every side and could not ascertain the matter. I myself had to submit to a pat-down and an inspection of my bag!”

“Hm. As for me, during the entire length of your sojourn I have had not a single criminal case cross our threshold,” said Miles. “But I predict that is soon to change.” He quarter-folded the *Democrat* and passed it over to me.

I scanned the screamer headlines. ‘Cause of Fatal Vienna Blaze Still Uncertain,’ ‘Tombstone Publisher Receives Death Threat,’ and even ‘Abilene Population Doubles Since Rail Arrival’ bore no immediate local import to me, as Miles followed my gaze.

“Farther down,” he said.

I let my finger rest on a regional item and read the type aloud. “‘Smithsonian to Receive Rare Texas Gem,’” I said. Miles nodded to indicate

I should continue. "Mason County Topaz Selected for Museum." I read the full story in silence but for the crackling in the hearth and the whistling of the wind around the big bay window. "You think . . . this bears on today's events? However do you draw that conclusion?"

"A simple inference, really. If a valuable rock from the hinterlands of the Lone Star State is to help form the nucleus of a collection to replace the late Mr. Smithson's own—lost in an 1865 fire, as you see there in the small type—it must make its way to Washington somehow, and you may be sure it isn't via carrier pigeon." I rolled my eyes at his jest, but he continued. "The stone is said to be a stunning ice-blue jewel of more than four hundred carats, and cut locally in a distinctive pattern to reveal a star within its center."

"Remarkable, to be sure, though Mason is quite a trek from Fort Worth . . . aren't we a bit out of the way for such a journey?"

"Think, man! How did you yourself arrive? I tell you, our little cowtown outpost has taken up an unprecedented place in transcontinental commerce of all sorts since the Texas & Pacific reached Sierra Blanca this month—while Mason County is situated out in hill country a hundred miles from any railhead. The gemstone's journey is entirely calculable from start to finish."

"Then why—"

I had no time to proceed with my question, as the sound of boots on wooden stair treads grew from faint to loud and an urgent knock registered at our door.

"Come in, Courtright," Miles called out. "It's unlocked."

I pursed my lips in chagrin that Miles had noted my negligence with the lock. Or was it that he had predicted the identity of our visitor with such confidence?

It was indeed the marshal, a fixture within Fort Worth—and within these walls—since his own arrival in the city in '76.

"Bloody hell," our visitor swore, not bothering to remove his coat and hat. "First a blizzard and now this."

"The business of the blue topaz, you mean," said Miles.

"You and everybody else must know about it," said Courtright, pulling up a chair and pouring himself a drink without waiting for an invitation. "I thought this mission was supposed to be kept quiet."

Miles launched into his take on the matter. "It is rather predictable that an item of such value would be transported to the water stop at Cisco under

cover of an ordinary cattle drive while a decoy detachment was dispatched toward San Antonio,” he said. “At Cisco its true security detail—Pinkerton men undercover—would plan to meet the eastbound Texas & Pacific via Fort Worth, where the train would add a special express car and change lines at Marshall en route to New Orleans, Jackson, Atlanta, and Raleigh before arriving in the nation’s capital two days later, there to be delivered by protected mounts to the museum in time for a New Year’s Eve exhibition, which has been noted in the *Post*.”

Courtright coughed, loosing a few drops of the red wine onto his doeskin jacket. He swore again and regained his composure. “You must have a spy.”

“Simple deduction, Marshal. Though we couldn’t have counted on a snowstorm of such severity, now, could we? It set the schedule behind by more than a day. I wager the event has somehow played into a heist—or possibly a more innocent loss—that you and your deputies are eager to unearth.”

“Last thing I need is a black mark on my watch. Things are dicey enough as it is. I tell you, heavy lies the breast that bears the badge.” He dabbed at the spots on his soiled coat with a handkerchief as though to underscore the point.

“Mm,” mused Miles. “And heavy must be the hand that shakes the spear. So—how may my colleague and I be of service?”

Before Courtright could reply, another hand rapped at the door.

I stood, strode over, and admitted a distressed Mr. Whissell, the telegraph operator, followed closely by his young daughter and assistant Penny.

“I’m so happy you’re here, Captain Miles, and not out on some mission!” blurted the man. “We have been set upon three blocks from here by a crew of rowdies who have—who have stolen our Christmas turkey!”

“Heavens!” I cried. “Alive or dead?”

“Oh, they were very much alive, I assure you.”

“The turkey, sir, not the mob. Was it already cooked?”

“No, that’s just the thing—Penny and I, we were just returning from the meat market by the depot—you know I don’t like venturing down past the Acre so late in the day, especially on a holy eve,” he said, his breath coming in spurts, “but my wife was bent on having a turkey for our feast, and the poultry vendors have been plum out ever since the snowstorm blew in yesterday.”

“That and other provisions, surely,” said Miles.

“But we got word over the wire about noon that the train was coming in after being stalled at the Thurber Hill grade, and it was carrying a full carload

of beef, one of sheep, and one of pigs, plus a flock of hill country turkeys that had been laid on at Cisco.”

At this, I saw Miles’s eyebrow lift slightly, a gesture likely lost on the others. He had already risen and was turning toward to his bedroom, I presumed, to dress.

“Well,” said the marshal, also standing, “any of you who are up for a jaunt back downtown, I’ve commandeered the wagon to get here, so there’s plenty of room.”

“Oh, yes, and there’s this, Marshal,” said Mr. Whissell. He withdrew from under his cloak a much-used cowboy-style hat of black felt. “One of the bunch lost it in the scuffle. Is there anything you can glean from it?”

Marshal Courtright took possession of the evidence and turned it over in his hands. I stood for a closer look. It was a sorry specimen, to be sure, stained and misshapen, with holes to indicate where a leather string might formerly have been attached. Other than a slightly moist patch where it must have landed in the snow, I could draw no inference from it.

We all bundled up against the cold, and the five of us piled into Courtright’s closed wagon. The space around us quickly warmed as the driver hiked his mules into a fast clip. He whoaed them to a stop in front of the meat market, where the vendor was in the process of closing up for the day, as dark was fast falling. The marshal headed for the depot to check on his deputies, while Miles and I went to help the Whissells search out a replacement turkey and a clue.

“Why, you’re a shade too late,” the vendor told Mr. Whissell as he rolled down his canvas awnings and prepared to tie them shut at the corners. “Sold the lot of ’em an hour ago, right after you departed with that fine specimen. Why, did you find yourselves with even more mouths to feed?”

The teenaged Penny spoke up in the take-charge manner we’d long come to expect from her. “We found ourselves on the bad end of a robbery, sir, and Marshal Courtright is helping us look into it. You’d best tell us anything you know.”

“Well,” said the man, “it’s a curious thing you’re not the first latecomer! There was a fellow here not ten minutes ago. He was frantic to find one tom in particular—a fine feathered fellow with a leather string tied on its leg. Such a curious thing . . .”

“Do you have any idea where the man went?”

"You think I had time to pay attention? I've got my own wife and young'uns to get home to."

Miss Whissell wasn't giving up so easily. "You said you'd sold the rest an hour ago." She held him by the arm. "It would mean so much to my mother . . . can you tell us who bought the turkeys?"

"All right, all right, if it'll satisfy you to know, but it won't do you a lick of good. The chef from the Knights of Pythias purchased the rest of the flock for the lodge's Christmas Day banquet. Take it up with him."

"The Knights of Pythias . . . up on Main, at Third? The building with the tin soldier statue?"

"That's the one."

"Oh, Pops, that's nearly back where we came from!" Penny exclaimed in exasperation, turning to tears and wringing her hands. "We'll *never* have a Christmas dinner at this rate!"

The embattled merchant, ready to secure the last lock on his stall, popped back under the canvas and in ten seconds returned with a clucking fowl tied expertly by the feet. He shoved it into her gloved hands and shut the awning.

"There! Chicken's on the house. At least you won't starve. Now be gone with you, all of you! And—have a merry Christmas!" With that he was off into the twilight, not waiting for Mr. Whissell's word of thanks or chuckle of laughter at his daughter's ploy.

Without the benefit of Courtright's wagon, and with the added burden of the hen, our quartet made tedious progress northward, into the wind. The snow was coming down more slowly, but as the dusk deepened to dark we had only the dim glow of just-lighted gas lamps to guide our progress.

I counted off the blocks as we passed familiar buildings along Main, our footfalls crunching in the crusted snow with the rhythm of an army on the march. On this holiday eve, the bars and brothels were closing early—or had the chill simply kept their patrons away? I wondered.

When we'd passed the tall pediment of the Nat I knew we were getting close. Reaching the Knights hall—a hulking three-story affair that faced on Main but extended half a block eastward to an open courtyard—I could make out golden pools of light pouring out onto the whitened sidewalk of

Third Street from the kitchen windows. We turned that way, glad for the shelter provided by the building. There in the snowy courtyard, by the illumination of a hanging lantern, an energetic cook in a bloodied uniform was engaged in an animated argument with a young hireling.

“*Sacré bleu!*” shouted the chef, throwing up his hands in despair, the butcher knife glinting in the lantern light as he did so. “*You Americans!*” he shouted to the beleaguered boy, who was apparently in charge of feathering and cleaning the slaughtered birds in a tub of heated water.

The cook sent him back to his duty and continued his harangue to no one in particular. “Bad enough in a city where the noble goose, *il n’y a pas du tout, mais beaucoup* de boeuf! *Pourquoi* they must serve the stupid *dinde?*”

“It’s tradition, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas,” said Miles, stepping into the pool of light as our group approached the red-faced chef.

“*Pardone, Monsieur,*” ventured Mr. Whissell in fractured French. “*Je suis—* je voudrais—I am hoping to buy a turkey from you?”

“Non! I will not sell for any price! We have a hundred guests tomorrow.”

“Just let me check the ones you have left,” Mr. Whissell wheedled. “I’ll make it worth your trouble.”

“*Mon Dieu!* Back there then. In the coop.” He brandished the knife again, pointing the way. “*Allez!* Before I change my mind!”

Together we chased the turkeys around the coop, as the poor creatures struggled to take flight in the covered space. I suffered an ignominious flap to the face before capturing the offender and thrusting it out the door to meet its doom at the hands of the irascible chef. Mr. Whissell managed to run down a good-sized bird and offered a decent price for it, but the chef insisted still that he could not part with that one.

“Surely the storm will prevent some of your guests from arriving?” I suggested, thinking reason might appeal. “And we can offer a chicken in trade.”

“*Mais peut-être* there will be others stuck in the city and we still have more patrons than provisions!” the chef shouted back, yanking the proffered bird from Mr. Whissell’s hand, slapping it down on the block and giving its neck an expert whack with the knife.

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Whissell, “I might swap for one of my wife’s excellent pound cakes? You could slice it thin enough to feed dozens.”

“Pound cake, hmpf. The Knights of Pythias Hall will be serving *crème brûlée avec marrons glacés.*”

About that time the sous-chef strode over with another turkey, a smallish one, and reminded his boss that the chestnuts had in fact not arrived. For his trouble he got a snarl and another clutch of headless birds to clean.

"Perhaps then," offered the determined Mr. Whissell, "you might try my wife's honey-roasted pecans instead. Here, I have a few in my pocket."

The chef paused in his rant but accepted one, then another—and then another.

"Bien sûr, mon ami," the Frenchman said, reaching for the last nibble. "How many pounds can you provide me tout de suite? We dine promptly at noon, right after church."

Having struck his bargain at last, Whissell went to the coop and captured the largest tom turkey he could find. He took it—along with his daughter—and departed for home.



"Now that business is done," said Miles to the chef, "would you mind telling me and my partner here just how your turkeys are delivered uptown?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does a drover bring them by for you to select? Does the market vendor deliver them to you?"

"Non, monsieur," he said as he dispatched the next fowl to the great bird-beyond. "We send a boy to fetch them from the market. With the wagon so they don't ezz-scape. He should be around the corner cleaning it out right now. Mais, why do you care?"

Miles and I ran down to the end of the street, where the Knights' livery was located, and indeed found a boy there—doubled over and nursing a knot on his head.

"Who hit you?" demanded Miles. "Where did he go?"

"Out the back way, sir—toward the dining hall!"

After taking a moment to make sure the boy would be all right, we swiftly retraced our route around to the courtyard. There, a decrepit-looking figure was threatening the chef with a heavy wooden staff and demanding to know where the birds were being held. Miles and I slipped into the shadow of the kitchen doorway.

"The turkeys are right over there, *mon Dieu!* Do not let them loose, as I

am preparing them for the oven! Why does tout le monde want tomorrow's meal before it is even cooked?!"

"I just need—I just need one of 'em to take home to my family," barked the man. "I've got a kid who's starving."

"I am happy to provide you some—how do you say—handouts if you will just put down the stick!" the chef said as he retreated toward the kitchen door.

"No, man! I need a *turkey!*"

I was poised for Miles to spring out of the doorway and catch the assailant off guard, but at that moment yet another man appeared—with a gun. The newcomer collared the first man and motioned him toward the poultry coop, where the final half dozen birds still awaited their turn at the chopping block.

"Check those, Bud," he said. "And you—into the kitchen," he said to the chef, who had no choice but to comply. "Drop the knife."

Miles and I backed inside unnoticed. With a finger to his lips he led us past the kitchen and into the lodge's dimly lit dining hall, where he removed a large object from a wall display.

As the trio pushed their way past us toward the kitchen, my companion surprised the armed strongman from behind, interrupting his progress with a mighty thwack across the shoulder blade with the Knights' ceremonial sword. The pistol, loosed from its bearer's hand, skittered across the floor. I leapt for it and turned it on the would-be thieves.

"Tell us what you're up to," said Miles, pointing the tip of the sword in their direction.

"Like I said," the subdued man growled. "My family's hungry."

I was concentrating on covering the pair with a single gun when the back door squeaked open again.

"Miles?" came a familiar voice. "Hooper?"

Jim Courtright, his own pistol at the ready, was followed immediately by Garrigan and a third man, a stranger. Courtright took charge, barking orders. "You there, in the white coat. You the boss here?"

"C'est moi, le chef Jean-Michel, Monsieur! I have served you in this very hall, if you may remember. These men—are all trying to relieve me of my turkeys!"

The tall stranger bringing up the rear wore a dove-gray peaked cowboy

hat on his head and the silver badge of a Texas Ranger affixed to a worn woolen coat. "We've trailed this one"—the marshal indicated the disarmed assailant—"up here from the stockyards. We had a tip regarding a person of his description fleeing from the Depot. We think he was aboard the train, but he slipped through the search somehow."

Garrigan handcuffed the man as the marshal proceeded to question him. "Where did you board the Texas & Pacific eastbound train?" he demanded.

"At Cisco. Same time as Bud here."

"And your name?"

"Carson Pritchard. My brother runs a saloon here in the city."

"Why don't you take it from the top, Mr. Pritchard?" he suggested.

"That I'll do," he snarled. "But I must say up front, I already know why that damned turkey matters so much to the lot of you. And why it matters so much to the Texas Rangers."

The Ranger himself answered, "Let's keep that as quiet as we can for now."

The man called Bud spoke up. "Tell me," he said to the Ranger. "You ain't really a sheepherder, are ya? Just comin' along for a nice week-long hike through the shin-oak?"

The Ranger acknowledged this with a nod and waited for Pritchard to continue.

"Have it your way then," said Pritchard, as he chafed against the cuffs. "I boarded the train at Colorado City—that's where I been working with a freighting outfit. The weather looked to turn rough before we got to Fort Worth, but the train sure seemed a better bet than my wagon to get home and pay a visit to my mother. I slept most of the way, till we stopped at Cisco to take on water and load up livestock. I got off for a bite and to, ah, check the plumbing. It was quite a circus, with all those birds in one car, and the sheep in another. There was maybe a makeup of seven or eight cars, the two front ones for passengers. I got back on the second car, wrapped up in my coat, and watched while they finished loading the turkeys. This drover who I later learned was Bud got in to tend to 'em, I guessed. This other gent"—he pointed at the Ranger—"boarded the front car."

"Were you previously acquainted with either of these men?" asked the Marshal.

"Not in the slightest. I was just mindin' my own bidness. Then, there was

also a lady—travelin' by herself, which *did* catch my interest. She boarded the first car too. Pretty soon the train got under way again and I nodded off for a nap."

"Did you sleep all the way to your destination?"

"No, things started to get a bit dicey a couple of hours later or so—maybe about midafternoon—when the train started to slow down and the wheels felt like they were slippin.' I figured us for about Thurber, where there's this long, steep grade. The conductor came down the aisles to advise us to get warm as we could, 'cause it looked like we were in for spendin' the night. Well, sir, that's exactly what we did, and some of the menfolk got off and helped build fires beside the track to help keep the livestock warm. As for me, I fell to wonderin' about that pretty lady and was curious how *she* planned to keep warm."

"What did you do then?"

"What any red-blooded male would do, of course—I left my coach, and went and boarded the first one. But seems I wasn't the first passenger to take an interest. There was this tall, dark-haired fellow here, who nobody knew was a Ranger, and he was already heated up in conversation with her. I nodded hello and took a seat across the aisle from them. The fellow was in the middle of showing the lady something in his hand that I couldn't quite see, but she sure was was oohing and aahing over it. Next thing I know, hoghead comes along bangin' on the outside of the car with a stick and asking all the men to assist with building more fires. I went to lend aid, and so did this other guy. Eventually we all came back inside the coach to get some shuteye.

"That was last night, before the train was able to resume travel into Fort Worth?"

"Righto. Well, along about daybreak I woke up, just opened one eye out of a deep slumber sitting up in the corner, in time to spy Miss Pretty-face reaching over into Mr. Tall-man's inside coat pocket and slipping a box into her reticule. Just as slick as you please! Now that *really* got my curiosity going. I kept on playin' possum but watched her get up and tiptoe out to the back and into the next car. Tall-man never did wake up. I eased out and followed her. You'll never imagine what it was she was holding in the palm of her hand, staring at it, there in that empty second car where she thought no one was looking! But I had something in my hand too." He cocked his head to indicate his pistol, which I was still holding at the ready. "I can be rather persuasive when I must. She pouted but handed the item over."

“Am I to guess—” Miles began, but he had no chance to finish the phrase, as a great clatter of footsteps erupted at the kitchen door. The light of a lantern shone down the hallway. Mr. Whissell quickly appeared in our midst, followed by a woman and three stair-step children, among whom was the same eldest daughter who’d accompanied him earlier. She carried a large sack of pecans, while her father held out a small object knotted tightly in a handkerchief.

“That turkey we just purchased from you?” said Mr. Whissell. “You won’t believe what we found in its crop.”

“Try us,” said Miles wryly.

He pulled at the corners of the handkerchief as he spoke. “My wife—Hilda, here—went to slaughter the creature and this—*this!*—popped out. Now, I’m an honest man,” he said as he folded back the piece of cloth, “and I have no idea why it was inside the bird, but we turned right back around to return it where it came from.”

He held out his palm and pulled back the kerchief to reveal a blue gem the size of a shooter marble. As he raised his lantern high, the stone caught its light and reflected it back a hundredfold onto the plastered walls of the dining hall. Everyone stepped closer. From my vantage point there appeared to be hundreds of complex facets, including those on the underside that formed the illusion of a five-pointed star embedded inside.

“Do you recognize this item?” Courtright asked. “Do you know what it is you have here?”

Whissell, wide-eyed, merely shook his head.

The light of perception sparked instantly in one face among the group, however: that of the disarmed gunman, Pritchard. All traces of malice and arrogance had drained from his countenance as he appeared to weigh the consequences of his actions that had preceded the moment.

“May I?” asked Miles, as he lifted the gem and held it briefly to the light, then rubbed it vigorously on his woolen cloak. The action drew tiny sparks from the cloth. He reached the stone over toward Penny Whissell’s red hair—strands of which it attracted as iron filings might fly to a magnet. “It’s the real McCoy, all right.”

The Ranger looked as though he might collapse from relief. He reached as though to seize it, but the marshal prevented him. “I believe you are the one man present who knows precisely what this is and why it was on its way

from Cisco to Fort Worth.”

“You are correct, sir. I am mortified that a moment of weakness almost resulted in its loss.”

Courtright shook his head in disbelief as Mr. Whissell handed over the gem. “When you telegraphed ahead from Weatherford, Shelby, I wondered how on earth any lawman entrusted with such an irreplaceable treasure could let it slip out of his possession. Now I know—you let a *woman* turn your head!”

“For just that short moment,” Ranger Shelby admitted.

“What I can’t figure is why the museum didn’t provide a larger security escort to start with.”

“The four Pinkerton men were sent out overland by wagon as a decoy,” he said, as though he expected the fact to be reassuring. “No one would have suspected the actual jewel was being transported by a scraggly stock drover.”

“Just you alone? Really?”

“Well, one rock, one Ranger, right?”

Courtright shook his head in exasperation, then clasped the jewel tightly in its bundle, underscoring the necessity of returning it to a strongbox post-haste. He turned again to the handcuffed Prtichard. “There’s just one loop we haven’t closed, I assume. What happened to the blue topaz after you took it from the female passenger?”

The suspect laughed ruefully. “The train was slowing down, about to pull into Weatherford. I made a run for it toward the back but instead of a caboose or some such, the next car was the one full of turkeys! I looked back—the girl hadn’t followed me. I opened my hand to get a better idea just what it was I had lucked into, but the train lurched to a stop, and the thing went flying. The birds began squawking and flapping everywhere. It was chaos. Over runs this guy from the other end of the car with a stick to try and calm them down. I spotted the jewel again and was just reaching over for it when damned if one of the biggest toms didn’t stretch out his beak and scarf it right up! I slipped in the mess of droppings but I didn’t let him out of my sight. I tried to come up with some way to mark that one bird before they could all git mixed up again. I ripped off the loop from my hat and chased down old Tom to tie it around his leg.”

“I take it,” said Miles, “that your Tom must’ve had a twin in the flock. You flagged the wrong bird?”

“It would seem so now. I figured it would be a simple matter after we unloaded to follow the flock to the market and claim the right one. But as we pulled in, it looked like every lawman in the county was waiting, and here I was packing a pistol, with a witness who’d seen everything.”

Bud the drover piped up. “As soon as they opened the doors I got on along to the market. I gathered none of the constables wanted to fool with the turkeys, so I drove ’em over straightway. The grocer had a customer already waiting for one bird, and another wagon for the rest. He paid me off, and I didn’t have reason to stick around. I was countin’ my money and about to leave when I felt this man’s gun between my shoulder blades. It wasn’t my cash he wanted, mind you—he forced me to help him trail the customer who bought his bird. I’m afraid we gave you a solid roughing up,” he admitted to Mr. Whissell.

“I won’t hold you accountable now that we’ve heard your side,” the victim said. “But now I think we really *should* get back and start that fellow roasting, if it’s all the same to you.”

The elder Whissell whisked his family away into the chill, leaving six turkeys still in the coop, three officers of the law, two suspects of questionable guilt, one consulting detective, and one doctor plus the thoroughly chagrined chef and his assistant to determine the next course of action.

Courtright turned back to Ranger Shelby. “Seems you might’ve been derelict in your duty, showing off like that—but I’ll leave that between you and whoever hired you. We’ll send them the bill for the city’s services and let them decide how much of it to take out of your pay. Now, lock this up properly before my better judgement sets in,” he said as he wrapped the cloth back around the precious stone, its icy sparkle extinguished once more.

The Ranger scowled, took it, and fastened it deep inside his coat.

Pritchett saw an opening for his own liberation. “I’m just a drifter,” he said to the marshal. “No malice intended. The opportunity presented itself. After all, what would *you* have done?”

Miles stepped in to offer up a solution. “It was the unidentified woman, if I understand, from whom he purloined the jewel, yes?” he asked the marshal. He looked around as though genuinely searching her out. “But she is nowhere to be found.”

“Not at the moment . . .” Pritchard agreed, then caught his meaning. “Right. What woman? I don’t see no woman.”

I resisted the urge to correct his double negative. That, too, could be forgiven tonight.

"We may presume, may we not, that she is long melted into the shadows," Miles continued. "Ranger Shelby has his treasure back in hand. The public does not yet know what property was missing, if any at all, or how. The Ranger here could press charges against the man who pulled a gun on him a few minutes ago, but it wouldn't look good for him if he had to admit in court to his earlier dereliction of duty, now would it? As for Bud the drover, he never was aware what a formidable treasure his bird had in its brief possession, nor did he know that the jewel didn't actually belong to Pritchard. Now Pritchard, having no idea of the true worth of the stone, might be held on some lesser charge of petty theft, but perhaps he has helped the Ranger learn a valuable lesson. Send him to jail now, and you make him a jailbird for life; let him off the hook and you've made an ally. And finally Chef Jean-Michel, who has a legitimate complaint, might rather get on with his meal preparation than take time out to testify, *n'est-ce pas?*"

One by one the parties to the drama nodded in agreement and shrugged their shoulders.

"Let's just agree," Miles suggested in summary, "that Mr. Whissell's wayward bird did the final deed, and it has by now paid the ultimate price for its crime."

Marshal Courtright turned his palms upward. "So who am I to insist on the letter of the law tonight? And I most certainly wasn't looking forward to taking in this infernal flock as evidence." He pulled his hat down around his blond curls and motioned for Deputy Garrigan to unlock Pritchard's handcuffs. "Go, every one of you, before I think better of it!"

"Oh, saints be praised," sighed the sous-chef. "We were about to have to serve that stringy beef again."

Derrick Miles and I were the last to depart. We wished the cooks a happy Christmas, pulled our collars up around our ears, and made our short way home to our waiting hearth, beneath the million sparkling stars.

A NOTE ON THE STORY

FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION IN 2021 OF *The Wolf Hunt: A Tale of the Texas Badlands*, I never imagined Will Brandon would create more. But there were chapters of Texas history, especially those involving railroads, that seemed to beg retelling.

The Texas & Pacific Railway, which first pushed its way into Fort Worth, Texas, in July 1876, provides a fitting backdrop for the adventures of Dr. Frank Hooper and consulting detective Derrick Miles—whose origin story is told in *A Study in Crimson, or, The Tale of the Red Man*, out this year. Half a decade after the T&P's earliest track was laid, it forged a connecting link as part of America's transcontinental rail network, and is a crux of the foregoing short story. In the works for 2024 is *The Castle of Fear*, which involves the 1892 construction of the Pecos High Bridge on the Southern Pacific, as well as true crimes in a burgeoning Panther City circa 1893.

But back to 1881, when the world's first Knights of Pythias Castle Hall was constructed in Fort Worth, at Third and Main. Though the original lodge burned, it was rebuilt in 1901. Today it's a familiar landmark of Sundance Square, housing Haltom's Jewelers—and a metal knight in a third-story niche.

While the city ordinances of Fort Worth in the 1880s stipulated that "It shall be the duty of the Marshal and policemen to forthwith take up and drive to the pound any hog, shoat or pig found running at large" (B.A. O. 162, Sec. 4), the laws are silent with regard to turkeys. By the late 1800s roast turkey had become such a coveted holiday dish in America that additional rail cars were needed November through December to transport live birds for sale; before then, turkeys were commonly driven in flocks from farms to city markets. In the 1880s Fort Worth's bustling stockyards for cattle and other animals were located south of the city, along the T&P route; the facilities were later relocated north of the Trinity River, to the site most tourists know today for its rodeo, restaurants, and other entertainments.

Farther south, Texas's remote Mason County in the 19th century was rich in minerals but poor in industry; by 1923 its county seat was still the

largest town in Texas unserved by any railroad. The largest known light blue topaz ever discovered in North America was a 6,480-carat stone found in the county in 1904 by Albert McGehee and sold to the Smithsonian Institution for \$75. It's still possible to hunt for topaz in the area by arrangement with private ranches—and to buy jewelry featuring the distinctive, glittering Lone Star cut.

As the Texas state gem since 1969, the blue topaz seemed a fitting festoon for this riff on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle"—a story of forgiveness during the Christmas season—from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). I hope you find an ample measure of that sentiment, as well a dash of mystery and a soupçon of holiday mirth, within these pages.

BARBARA BRANNON • DECEMBER 2023

MORE SEASON'S READING



A STUDY IN CRIMSON
December 2023



Will Brandon gives a new twist to the most iconic of Sherlock Holmes' cases. A Study in Crimson is an intriguing and beguiling tale that will satisfy fans of both Arthur Conan Doyle and Louis L'Amour alike.

– LIESE SHERWOOD-FABRE, author of
The Early Case Files of Sherlock Holmes series

Praise for Will Brandon's *THE WOLF HUNT*



THE WOLF HUNT runs at the head of the pack as a great read.
—MIKE COX, author of *Gunsights and Sites in Texas Ranger History*



An amazing blend of mystery mixed with Western culture. Drama and action compel the reader to turn the pages until the final satisfying end. —HISTORICAL NOVELS REVIEW



When reverence for classic literature combines with excellent writing and a knack for atmospheric description, the inevitable result is great reading. Holmes and Watson themselves would approve—and so will you. —JEFF GUINN, 2018 Western Writers of America Spur Award winner for Best Traditional Novel



With The Wolf Hunt, Will Brandon brings fresh characters and a new landscape to a beloved genre. I hope that Capt. Derrick Miles's Houston Street office address becomes as famous as Sherlock Holmes's 221B Baker Street. —HENRY CHAPPELL, author of *Silent We Stood*, 2014 winner of the Western Writers of America Spur Award for best historical novel



In this strikingly original mystery, a detective very, very much in the Sherlock Holmes mold works suavely through the clues of an eerie apparent murder.
—DONALD MACE WILLIAMS,
author of *Wolfe and Other Poems*



A terrific reimagining of a classic tale . . . Brandon captures the rugged beauty of the Caprock country the way Wyman Meinzer captures it in photography. —MILES ARCENEUX, author of *Thin Slice of Life* and other Gulf Coast mystery novels

Best wishes for the season, December 2023

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