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PLACE

MARK COONEY

# THE MANISTEE RIVER INCIDENT

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From the Desk of Thomas A. Brooks, Esq.

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To Whom It May Concern:

Appended to the last will and testament of Mr. J. M. Evans, Esq., was a curious document appointing me “literary executor charged with the duty of publicizing the attached manuscript of a remarkable yet true account.” The attached writing, Mr. Evans posthumously explained, was “a true and amazing tale” that he “dared not share” during his lifetime because he had learned the material facts through privileged conversations with a client.

These words would naturally pique any reader’s rapt attention. Yet no manuscript was attached. And Mr. Evans’s survivors and I failed utterly, for many years, to locate this “remarkable” and “amazing” story. We picked through Mr. Evans’s papers with a Siamese cat’s fastidiousness. We searched every inch of his home and office. Our efforts yielded only frustration. There were no odd or unique papers—no writings with a title or label hinting at the fantastic or the peculiar. It is only now, more than a decade since, that the missing manuscript finds itself in my hands.

Mr. Evans was for years an attorney in Crawford (now Grayling), Michigan, where his social popularity didn't necessarily translate into financial boon. In truth, Mr. Evans made just enough on his legal matters to give him a life of relative comfort that never quite reached true leisure. But that suited him well enough. He was good to me—a benevolent mentor. And Mr. Evans's brand of success was measured only in part by the bank ledger. It was measured in equal part by whether he had time to share a dram of whiskey with the boys at Spike's saloon on his way home and, on reaching home, by whether his wife had been lucky enough at market to find tart cherries in good season and a generous breast of duck.

Anyway, upon his unfortunate passing, I became a fledgling lawyer now sadly lacking a mentor. I continued to rent Mr. Evans's old office. Some many years later, I was fiddling with the office mantel clock, which had started to confound me with its increasingly sluggish timekeeping—a significant frustration to any lawyer billing by the tenth of an hour. The clock had been a fixture, in the figurative if not literal sense, during Mr. Evans's 30-year tenure in the office. What Mr. Evans's survivors and I did not know was that the clock's cavity contained quite more than the typical machinations of timekeeping. The clock's cavity had for years secreted the elusive answer to our longstanding riddle. Yes, when I performed my autopsy of the broken timepiece, I found a small, dusty notebook within it.

I know not whether I still hold the official standing of literary executor; Mr. Evans's estate was discharged almost two decades back. Nevertheless, in the spirit of my esteemed mentor's wishes, I now offer Mr. Evans's account to you and to posterity, in Mr. Evans's own words.

Yours very truly,

/s/

Thomas A. Brooks, Esq.

#### The Manistee River Incident

By J. M. Evans (1861–1919)

I'd never lightly forsake my professional oath, yet I will not let the privilege muzzle me in the grave. After all, my posthumous disclosure will hardly harm my client's standing. His public stature couldn't be lower, for he will forever bear the brand of a monster. So it's for his and his family's sake that I record his story here, to be read once I've gone.

The Manistee River and its surrounding communities are no strangers to tales of the supernatural. But most reports of restless spirits describe amiable encounters, like sightings of the recently departed Chief Shoppenagen, who was a beloved figure among the white settlers. And many a fisherman has happened upon the apparition of young Fred Kinkade, whose lust for the new German brown trout overtook his will to abide his father's cautions against fishing the deep stretches after nightfall. Still, the lad's mischievous spirit has never given cause for alarm.

But the lumberjack is different. Folks who've encountered his spirit give no smiles in the telling, and only a belt of good Scotch calms them enough to offer details. The reports are all remarkably similar, lending credence to what might otherwise be dismissed as fanciful campfire yarns.

The restless soul that tests these witnesses' nerves has long been thought to be a lumberjack killed in 1896 under suspicious circumstances. His name was Crenshaw. He was an ordinary laborer, but his zest for life was extraordinary. Folks say that his big personality brought him many quick admirers—and one mortal enemy.

Crenshaw's boss was a lumber baron who'd achieved his gilded status by the fortuity of inheritance rather than by sweat or ingenuity. The baron lorded over half the county, and he was engaged to be married. But his fiancée, an uncommonly fair young lady from a respectable but modest family, broke it off at about the same time she'd begun enjoying spirited conversations and languid riverside strolls with Crenshaw. Nobody failed to notice how the lumberjack's easy way suited the young lady.

A week or so later, some of the boys from the mill overheard the baron inviting Crenshaw up to the mansion for a drink of "the finest bourbon you'll ever wet your lips with." The mansion staff later reported that the baron had been all ease and jocularity with Crenshaw until Crenshaw's initial suspicions finally melted off. Crenshaw was in good spirits as the night wore on, and the conversation was unflinchingly cordial.

That's the last time anybody saw Crenshaw alive.





The next morning, mill workers arrived to find Crenshaw—or what was left of him—on the wrong side of the up-and-down saw in the mill. Nobody knew how or why Crenshaw was in the mill in the middle of the night or why the saw had been activated at such an hour. The local sheriff—the baron's cousin, as it happened—ruled the death accidental. But folks talked in hushed whispers about its being the baron's doing. Then the baron married that sweet fiancée just as he'd planned, though they say she never smiled again, not even at her own wedding.

Soon after Crenshaw's death, folks reported seeing his ghostly figure in and around the mill. When witnesses made out a face, it bore the torture of a wronged soul. And this spirit was a restless, destructive force. Workers saw tools and pieces of lumber knocked about with no logical explanation. Indeed, the baron himself stopped going into the mill—his own mill. When he wished to exert his command over the mill workers, he barked orders to his foreman from a good distance away. By all accounts, the baron's nerves frayed raw as time passed, and he took to the drink at all hours.

And this is where my part of the story comes in, I suppose. But don't forget about poor Crenshaw as I tell it.

Back in '08, I got a new case, a sensational one that kept newsroom typewriters rattling from here to Detroit for much of the autumn. I got the call after the sheriff arrested my client for murdering none other than the baron himself—and in a most brutal fashion.

My client owned the cider mill a few miles downstream from the baron's mill. The cider mill was sturdy and profitable, and stands of white pine surrounded it for miles. The baron coveted that land—the mill and the timber. Virgin pine forests were by then a rarity, and those precious trees tantalized the baron. And once he'd squeezed the last cord of wood from the land, he could take up the cider business.

The baron wasn't above some underhanded artifice to gain advantage, and one of his favorite tricks cut to the very heart of my client's affairs. When the baron's spies gave word that my client's cider mill had received a delivery of fresh apples, the baron would halt my client's production by holding the water upstream in his mill pond for days on end, claiming a gate malfunction. He'd do it even if it held up his own lumber production. With no flowing water from upstream, the cider mill's grand wheel stood as still as a British sentinel, leaving the mill useless. Meanwhile, my client's fruit would quickly fall rotten. Full deliveries, bought and paid for, were lost. It pushed my client's patience the full measure. The baron did it time and again, until my client's business teetered on the brink. The baron would follow with veiled overtures toward buying the cider mill and thus “rescuing” my client from “the caprice of a fickle market.”

Finally, by my client's open admission, he'd had enough of the baron's sabotage.

Let me say right off that my client's version of what transpired next has never wavered—not a whit. He rode his best horse up to the baron's mansion, angry as a hornet. He battered his fist against the baron's great door, and when the baron opened it, my client boiled over with language that surely brought blush to the maids' cheeks. But the baron, ever the cool strategist, eased my client into the foyer with a compassionate expression and a reassuring charm. It was all “just a misunderstanding,” the baron told my client. He said that he would show my client the gates that had been malfunctioning—and even the invoices for past repairs. The baron even commiserated with my client, airing his own frustrations over the constant malfunctions, which, he reminded my client, also stopped production at the lumber mill.

My client slipped bit by bit under the baron's spell. After all, my client was a reasonable man. He knew himself fallible. And he knew that, like all men, he could succumb to an occasional rushed judgment. So my client softened his manner, and at the baron's bidding, my client agreed to accompany the baron out to the baron's mill. The baron grabbed a lantern, and they started down the groomed path. Dusk had fallen to dark by then, and the last of the laborers had long since departed. The two men's steady gait soon took them beyond the view of any curious eyes within the mansion. After some minutes, a flicker of moonbeam on a windowpane announced that the mill was imminent, and they were soon to the entrance.

Now, the baron knew the lay of this site, so the advantage was all his. And my client by now had completely relaxed his guard, hypnotized by the scheming snake charmer. Inside the mill they went. The baron set down the lantern, which offered only a dim respite from the black.

My client, regaining a bit of healthy skepticism, wondered aloud how they'd get a good view of the defective dam gates from inside the mill and in the dark. The baron gave my client a friendly pat on the shoulder and reminded him that they'd be looking at the repair invoices first. Then my client wondered aloud why the baron would keep invoices in the mill rather than in the mansion office. And how could they make out the fine print in such poor lighting?

All the while, they moved nearer to the up-and-down saw as the baron laughed off my client's inquiries with a casual air. Then, without warning, the baron pulled the lever that opened the watergates and started up the saw, urging my client to "behold the great, ravenous beast of the river!" My client took this as nothing more than playful braggadocio, probably brought on by the bottle. And while put off by the noisy distraction from their intended purpose, my client nevertheless turned to admire the large blade, which bore the teeth of a dragon and churned up and down without compromise.

And this was the moment.

The baron clenched his hands around my client's throat from behind and wrung my client's neck as if it were a waterlogged rag. As he did, he began pushing my client toward the hungry saw blade. Now, my client is not a big man, and he'd normally be no match for the formidable baron, who, had he not fallen into a life of fortune, could have wielded an axe with the best of woodsmen. But the looming teeth of a raging up-and-down saw will muster untapped strength in any man, and my client pushed back with a strength that belied his modest stature. He turned his body desperately to gain some leverage. If he could go face to face with the baron, he thought, he might brace himself more stoutly. Still he pushed, as only a man whose life depends on it can push.

And still the baron pushed, as only a man who has just crossed the threshold to murder can push.

And then the baron gave a start and pulled up. My client nearly fell forward from the sudden lack of resistance. The baron's eyes and mouth were agape, his face washed of any thoughts of my client, who remained just a foot away. The baron's back stiffened, and then he loosed the wail of a banshee until silenced by an axe blade plunging into his head with the force of a falling boulder—and then down again, and then once more, this time into his neck, while the last echoes of the baron's cries died there with him.

The baron crumpled to the planks below. My client turned to face the silent attacker, bracing for the axe that was now surely destined for his own head. But it did not fall on him. Instead, it dropped harmlessly to the floor. And there before my client, little more than an arm's length away, was a man. A man's form, at least. The contours of a face hovered for time's shortest instant—and then, gone. The figure drifted away and disintegrated like the last lingers of smoke from a doused campfire. Gone, yet my client sensed eyes upon him even after the figure was no longer visible.

And there my client stood, looking down over his enemy's butchered corpse, wearing his enemy's blood, and looking the perfect partner to the killing axe resting on the floor below. And there my client remained, frozen, until the mansion staff arrived to see him standing there, a picture of murderous guilt.

My client went back to the mansion without protest. Seems the baron hadn't been popular enough in his own house for any of my client's captors to lash out in rage. Despite my client's heinous deed, they simply summoned the sheriff, and the sheriff took my client away to jail without any fuss.





I sat across the jailhouse table from my client while he told me this story. And I ask you, whether a man of the law or a man of the cloth or any man of ordinary sense, I ask you, am I to believe it? And if I do, what am I to do with it? Am I to stand before judge and jury and assert that the long-dead lumberjack Tom Crenshaw killed the baron? Whether for some sense of delayed revenge or to save my client from the same fate Crenshaw himself had suffered at the baron's devilish hands? That this apparition had felled the mighty baron in the mill that night while my client stood by innocently?

Am I to say all this?

That my client did not kill the man found lying dead on the floor below him? That my client did not use the bloody axe found at his foot? That my client had not lashed out at the baron with this axe after blustering onto the baron's property that night in a murderous rage? That my client, found there with the baron's blood on his hands and bearing the bruises of a violent skirmish, had actually stood idly by while someone—something—else killed the baron? And what of my client's truthful admission that no other living soul had been in the mill that night, save the mansion staff that arrived after the grisly deed was already done?

On my oath as a lawyer, am I to make this case?

No, sir, I say. No. To do so would have been to turn the key locking my client behind bars for an unpardonable life term, for any seasoned lawyer will tell you that the truth is no match for the facts. And that's just what I told my client.

Alas, I could secure only a mild compromise for him. He told his story, privately, to the sheriff and the prosecutor, and then he told it again to Dr. Ruggier. And on this, they agreed that my client was insane. So rather than toiling away in prison for his remaining days, my client went to the sanitarium where, I later learned, doctors performed a surgery designed to suppress the

violent tendencies that lurked beneath his amiable veneer. It left him an empty shell.

Now, before you condemn me, I ask you whether my client will better spend his life in a sanitarium, incapable of appreciating the injustice of his captivity, or as a sane captive knowing he's done nothing to deserve his hopeless, joyless life within prison walls? And if you think my client ill-used, have I not suffered for being asked by fate to determine the lesser tragedy in this drama? And have I not been tortured in believing, deep in my conscience, that my client's fantastic story was true?

If this is not penance enough for you, mind you that my Maker will have already adjudged this lawyer's deeds long before your eyes meet this page. ■



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