

Murder Most Fowl

By

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Based on the true story of the 1853 murder of John Secor that took place on the Port Kent-Hopkinton Turnpike between Duane and Loon Lake and the mysterious killing of one of the perpetrators forty years later.

1. It started with an ale.

If I was you, I wouldn't believe a word of this story. Not that I'm a liar – I lie about as often as a squirrel farts in the wind. Well, okay, maybe I add a point or three to the buck I shoot, but who doesn't right? But when it comes to important matters, the things a man stakes his life on -- when it comes to *murder* – yeah, you heard me – I would never lie. But here I am stuck on the gall darn stagecoach. Again. So let me tell you the story, and after I'm done, well, you tell me if you think I ain't speakin' the truth.

It started about a month ago when I was on my way to Merrillsville to see my sister, coming up the turnpike by way of Hopkinton. It was rainin' something fierce and my stomach was churning enough acid to strip the rust off a locomotive. Coulda been somethin' I ate but just as likely not. So I'm chattin' up the fellow sitting across from me on the stage to take my mind off things and he tells me they're taking on hands for that hotel they're expanding up there on the hill, in... what's that place called? Oh yeah, the Loon Lake House. Stupid name if you ask me. Nobody's ever heard of Loon Lake and who wants to come to a house after grinding through the mud and stones on the turnpike for hours on end. It's supposed to be some kinda hoity-toity hotel, with hundreds of rooms. So why not call it that? A hotel, I mean.

But I'm getting off the thread of this yarn. Like I was sayin', I heard they was hirin' so I thought I'd, you know, enquire about it, proper like. I got off the stage at the Lovering Tavern and could see from there all the construction going on across the way. Never seen so many cottages going up at one time, scores of workmen running about, horse tandems pulling lumber every which way. Looked like chaos to me. It was nigh on three, still lots of light, so what the heck, I thought I'd get a rest and a shave, and maybe ask around who I needed to see about a job. So I went into the tavern and ordered a pint at the bar.

A couple of stools away these two older gents, neatly dressed, nice waistcoats, ties – probably hopeless with an axe -- were talkin' pretty loud. Then after a bit one fellow leaves and the other moves over and sits next to me. Sticks out a hand, Pickett, he says his name is. Offers to buy me a drink. Just like that. So I shake his hand, and

sure, I says, be glad to have a drink with you, mister. Name's John, John Collins. Pickett pulls a clean white handkerchief out of his breast pocket, wipes the sweat off his slippery palms and then he starts talkin'.

- From Hopkinton, are you? Well, I wonder if you know the Bickfords, they're from Dickenson. Without waiting for an answer, Pickett continues.

- Anyway, the junior Bickford, name of James, was at Sunday services at Dickinson Center -- you know the place? Well, he was at the service when, according to some folks that was there, he sees two men riding past, each on horseback with two horses each in abeyance. Bickford leaves the service, but not before talking Thomas Cook -- a youth no more'n sixteen -- into coming with him. Story goes that Bickford and the Cook boy start off in pursuit of the horse traders, travelling east along the turnpike, learning along the way that two men each pulling a string of horses had put up for the night at Ladd's in Duane. Those two men were John Secor and Wright Van Tassel. Bickford and Cook stop for the night with friends, setting out at dawn the next day. About halfway between Duane and Loon Lake the two of them find just the right spot to hide, at a sharp turn in the road -- you know the one -- or you would if you travelled this highway often enough. Funny thing about this old turnpike is that the trees are so dense along it that that a man could stay well hid just by standing still! Why, it's so dark on that road that you'd swear it's time for supper even when the sun's at high noon.

Pickett stops for a moment to take a gulp, then continues with his story.

- Bickford and Cook stay quiet as church mice, just waiting, barely breathing. Eventually they hear horses approaching and as soon as Secor and Van Tassel appear Bickford jumps out in front them, pulls a pistol and shoots Secor right between the eyes! And he had a damn good aim, I'm sure. Why the road stones are still stained with the man's blood. Anyway, before Bickford could reload Van Tassel turns around and flees back to Duane to raise the alarm. Bickford grabs Secor's money purse and watch and then he and the Cook boy ride off, leaving the body with only the horses to guard it. But they only get as far as Burke, where they were nabbed the next day.

- When did all this happen I ask Pickett, looking around casually, seeing only people busy with their own affairs.

- Back in '53, he says.

- Forty year ago, I says, thinkin' this guy must be a bit cracked. So what's the fuss about this now, I ask him.

- Wait, he says, there's more. By this time I'm on my second ale and he's on his, I don't know what number. But he could still talk and I could still listen so on he goes with his story.

- A year later a trial is held at the county courthouse in Malone and at the trial Van Tassel identified Bickford and the money purse he stole, and, well, that was that. A scaffold was built and James Bickford was hung in front of the whole town that came out to see it. And quite a spectacle it was. I was just a lad at the time but I'll never forget it. The men that built the hanging yoke did such a poor job of it that it partly collapsed when the lever was pulled. Poor Bickford's feet grazed the ground as he thrashed around in the noose. Why if that man was an inch taller he might of stood on his toes and survived the noose! But alas, he didn't. Bickford senior was there protesting his son's innocence, denouncing the execution as murder, plain and simple. But nobody took him seriously. And with regards to Bickford's accomplice, young Mr. Cook, well he wanted to plead guilty and take his chances, but the good folks of the town of Franklin insisted on a trial. I mean, it's not every day there's a murder in these parts -- they wanted to make the most of it! So Cook was tried and also found guilty and sentenced to hang, but lucky for him, Governor Seymour commuted his sentence to life in prison. Lucky too since the Town of Franklin hangman was fired for incompetence. A few years later Cook was pardoned, because according to the judge who granted it, Cook couldn't know what Bickford was planning. Some say even Bickford didn't plan to murder Secor until it was actually happening.

Pickett hesitates at this point and stares into his drink. Then he looks up at me and asks, how much does anyone really know in the moment that a murder's about to take place -- you ever wonder about that?

I don't say anything, just ponder how this story's gonna end.

- Anyways, Pickett continues, Cook is freed from prison, goes back to his family in Dickinson, and eventually takes a bride and starts a family.

Pickett swirls his pint and takes a few gulps. I just sit there waiting for him to start talking again. Then he belches and goes on.

- And then, just last night, you'll never believe what happened. Cook and his wife were fast asleep in their bed. Apparently someone had snuck into Cook's place and placed a small keg of gunpowder under the bed. In the middle of the night, a single shot is fired -- all the neighbours heard it -- and it must have hit the keg like a bullseye because half the house explodes into flames, Cook and his wife along with it! Why, the embers are still smoldering and it'll be days before enough body parts can be picked away from the debris to make up two corpses for proper burial.

I tried to make sense of what this fellow had just told me. But before I could say a word, Pickett stands up to pay his tab, and as he pulls out his wallet there's his badge plain as day.

- So did you catch the guy, I ask, looking down and fingering my glass, wonderin' to myself just what the heck he was doing up here at Loon Lake when Cook and his wife met their maker way over in Dickenson.

Pickett gives me this half smile and downs the last of his beer. We're still looking, he says, but he won't get far. And then he pulls something out of the pocket of his trousers wrapped in a bit of canvas.

- We recovered this from the scene of the crime, he says, carefully unfolding the cloth.

Pickett shows me a scrap of charred cedar, couldn't be more than three inches across. It looks like there's a label on it, pretty burned up, but you could just make out some sort of mark, like a crest or something.

- What's this, I ask him.

- Looks like two ducks, don't it, he says, tracing the blackened drawing with his stubby finger. Or maybe loons? In any case, it's a clue. Then Pickett points to a large billpost on the other side of the bar advertising rooms available at the Loon Lake House. On the top of the billpost was the same crest -- two ducks facing each other.

- What -- you think the powder keg came from here? I ask him.

- So you're here to join a work crew, isn't that what you said, Pickett says back to me.

I don't recall that I ever said, but I probably looked the part, so yeah, I says to him, lookin' for work.

Pickett pays for his beer and mine too and says, well, you got great timing, kid. I just happen to have a job for you.

And then Pickett made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

2. The one that got away.

Next day, crack of a workman's dawn I present myself to the crew chief, name of Ferd, Ferd Chase. Mr. Chase was no young man and he had more hair on his pointy chin than his shiny head, but I could barely keep up with him as he sprang from one work site to the next. He hardly had time to ask but a question or two before signing me on for forty dollar a month! Between that money and what the constable offered, I'd be flush in no time.

By evening word had spread all over the work camp about the murder of Thomas Cook, even though it was over in Dickenson. Between the stage bringing in the dailies from Malone and Pickett mouthin' off in the pub, nobody was talkin' about anything else. The older hands didn't seem to have a lot to say about the Cook murder, but they sure as heck did about the murder of John Secor. After all, it happened less than a day's ride down this very road. A lot of these men weren't even born yet and the Chateauguay Railroad hadn't yet laid a single mile of track. But they remembered their older kin talkin' about it - it was the biggest thing to ever happen in these parts.

Over the next week I got to work, mostly trimming, my carpentry skills were pretty good. Mainly I just kept my head down and listened, like Pickett told me to do. Just listen and report back, he said. Any detail, no matter how small, might be useful.

Well there's small, and then there's small. These guys? When not talking about the murders old and new, gabbed mainly about their women, the gauge of their

shotguns or what kinds of lures they favoured. Then after about a week on the job, this one fella asks me to join him fishing that evening, and did I know any good spots. Well after hearing this guy bragging all day about the size of his catches and how nobody was better, I thought maybe I'd show him up a little. I mean, I knew something about fishing, been doin' it all my life. So I take him not far, just down the hill past Hunter's Home and the old mill there to the north branch of the Saranac where the brook trout are fat and lazy. The both of us are standing in the river casting, having a smoke too, getting our good share of fish. I tell ya, there's no greater feeling on this earth than to stand in a brook, your legs solidly planted, watching the stream rushing past you taking your cares away to some better place.

So Petie -- that's what this guy likes to be called -- asks me how I know about this spot. He's a tall muscular sort, looks to be about forty or so, missing several of his front teeth with the ones left sharp enough to add a notch to the leather belt holding up his worn trousers. Clearly he's seen a thing or two. Not really wanting to chat, I just shrug, heard some fellas talkin' about it, I say.

I don't see Petie for the next couple of days, then he shows up to where I'm working, says he needs a hand with something. Sure, I say, and start to wrap up my tools to take them with me. A carpenter never leaves his tools lying around a job site with so many men drifting in and out. Especially when there may be a murderer among them.

- Where we heading to, I ask him. He just points down a path, and says to follow him. We turn the corner away from the main hotel building and just keep walking and walking probably quarter of a mile and then we come to a row of low sheds, all bound up with heavy chains and padlocks and the like. I had heard this was where they stored the raw materials -- the expensive kind. I look around and nary a soul is in sight. It's just me and Petie.

- Need some blasting power, Petie says, there's a boulder needs to be cleared.

- Well, I don't know anything about blasting, I say to him. Maybe you should get one of the nitro guys -- I mean that's their job, right?

But Petie says naw, they're all busy and he knows what he's doing. But it don't sit right with me and I start to turn around to go back. Then Petie grabs my arm above the elbow, and asks, do you ever wonder why they keep the blasting powder so far away from the main house.

- No, not really, I say, starting to feel like a trout who took a bite only to find a hook in his mouth.

- I mean no one can see you here, he says, we're so far from the rest of the crews. Did you ever wonder about that?

Now I'm thinkin' maybe he wants to steal some powder for some reason other than blasting a boulder. But before I can say or do anything, Petie grabs me with his other hand real tight, and I'm trying to get loose. He's got both his gigantic mitts gripping my arms digging his fingers into my flesh. He looks me dead in the eye and says... it's so nobody can get hurt!

He gives me the queerest look, lets go of my arms and I start running back to the job site at a good clip with Petie just standing there laughing his head off.

3. The loons are calling.

I don't see any sign of Petie the next day or the one after that but I'll be darned if some of the guys on the crew ain't giving me some strange looks. Like they're laughing behind my back or something. So now instead of hanging around the guys, listenin' and sayin' not much, I'm just avoiding them. I'm just wanting to do my work, collect my pay at the end of the month and haul my sorry ass outa there.

That evening I head over to the Lovering and wait till closing time like Pickett had told me. After the bar served its last pint for the night and the guests had all gone up to their rooms or over to the hotel, Pickett finally shows up.

- So what've you got for me, he asks.

- Nothin' really, I say.

- Nothin' or nothin' really? There's a difference, he says. Like I told you, any detail, no matter how small.

So I tell him about goin' fishing with Petie and what he done to me a couple of days later. Only when I tell it, Petie don't sound so strong, and I don't sound so weak. And after telling that whole story, you know what Pickett thinks to ask me? Not about Petie's interest in gunpowder or blasting, or how threatening he was. No, what Pickett wanted to know was this – how did I know about the fishing spot! Well for Chrissake, I thought he was looking for a murderer, but maybe he's just looking for a good place to set a reel!

- I dunno, I says to him, someone must have told me about it. Then Pickett tells me he's almost ready to make an arrest and if I can just wait another week or two he'll have my money. But only if I bring him something useful.

Next day I go back to my crew and luckily see no sign of Petie. So I start chatting with whoever was workin' next to me. At first real general like, like what did they think about the Cook murder.

I could tell nobody had any real clue about who might of done it though they sure had their theories. Some thought it a revenge killing plain and simple, for the murder of John Secor, but other fellows thought way too much time had passed for that. Some were sure Cook had cheated a man in business, or his wife had a jealous lover, or Cook was holding the wrong kind of debt. Why some were so superstitious they believed John Secor himself had risen from the dead and haunted Cook and his wife until they were so crazed they killed themselves! Just all kinds of foolish stories. Strange thing was, despite all the talk, no one seemed to know anything about the gunpowder that came from right here at the Loon Lake House. Pickett has quite the mouth on him so I found it hard to believe that he didn't talk about it or show that charred piece of powder keg to anybody else. Or maybe he did and they just weren't saying. That kind of made sense to me -- that the ones doing the most jawin' probably knew the least while the ones not saying much had something to hide.

So I start to take note of who wasn't doing any talking and what it was they did at the House. Like whether they worked with powder or even had anything to do with the supply depot. I knew I had to be careful because eyes were already on me, thanks

to Petie. Funny thing about Petie -- he was completely unskilled, was not a nitro man and had nothing to do with the powder supplies. He just went wherever the boss needed some muscle, seeing as how he was so much bigger than the other fellas.

So between what wasn't being said and who was not looking at who, I begin to piece together a thing or two. Turns out things have been going missing from the supply depot for a long time. With the "things" always being a custom tool or part brought special from New York, like them drill bits that everybody always needs but can never get their hands on. Now I've been working enough crews to know that supplies always go missing on a job site. Usually it's at the end when a hand decides to give himself a tip for a job well done. Heck even I've been known to help myself to some flatheads a time or two. But seeing how this Loon Lake House just keeps growin' and growin' with new cottages and outbuildings going up every year, well, the construction never ends. So many supplies and materials are comin' in every day, it's not surprising that some get a little sidetracked, if you know what I mean. Now who's doing the sidetracking, I can't hardly tell. But there's no question in my mind that along with them fancy drill bits, some small powder kegs have gone missing too. Don't ask me how I know, I just know.

So end of the week I'm back at the Lovering Tavern around closing time to rendezvous with Pickett. He hasn't made an arrest yet so maybe this'll help, and maybe he'll loosen up that grip he's got on the money he owes me. I've a mind to up and quit this place in any case, the pay is hardly worth it. But in walks Pickett and sits down at my booth. The place has completely emptied out save for a gal wiping down the tables.

- Any news, he says.

So I tell him about how things have been goin' missing and about how some of the boys may be peddling stolen building materials and tools. And that no doubt that's how the powder keg got into the hands of the murderer of Thomas Cook.

Pickett takes a long slow drag on his hand-rolled cigarette and gives me a squinty look. No doubt he says to me, no doubt. And then he looks over at the bar and the large bill hanging overhead advertising the place, the one he showed me that first

afternoon we met. Look at those two loons he says, the ones in the coat of arms, facing each other.

Now I'm thinkin' that Pickett is nuttier than a rooster trying to fly off a split rail fence. Hasn't he heard a word I been tellin' him? Why's he so fixated on the goddam loons.

- Why do you think they drew them like that, facing each other, he asks, staring at the poster bill.

- Haven't a clue, I say.

- Did you know, he says, that loons are very territorial. Each mating couple has their own lake and they won't share it with anybody. So when another male loon happens to come by and starts feeding, you know what happens?

Pickett stops like he's waiting for an answer, so I just go along and say, I don't know, maybe he gets scared off or something. Truth is, the loons have been calling most every night in this place and it's got to be the eeriest sound you ever heard. Gets right into your blood, so to speak. And even deeper, like the voice of some long dead kin trying to warn you 'bout something and you really want to know what it is but you can't make out what they're sayin' and then you wake up in a sweat, your heart pounding out of your chest.

So then Pickett says, no, not scared off exactly. At first nothing happens. The couple keeps on with their nesting and the intruder keeps on with his feeding, with the couple ignoring the intruder like they haven't even noticed him there. Just biding their time, real patient-like, everybody keeping to themselves. They may even call to one another, kind of checking on where everybody's at. Now this can go on for days, or weeks or even years, with the same three loons sharing a lake without any obvious conflict. But then one day, the first male will come face to face with the other male and then you know that's it. The males will peck and fight and bite and thrash each other until one of them is a bloodied corpse. Fiercest thing you ever saw.

Pickett takes another drag on his cigarette and gives me his squinty look. Yep, real patient. For years nothing happens.... And then suddenly out of nowhere, it's all

over. Pickett pauses for a moment and then says, kind of like humans, don't you think?

4. Kind of like humans.

Well, the longest goddamn month of my pitiful life has finally ended and I'm itching to get out of here. I reckon Loon Lake has been about the strangest place I ever done worked and I'll be glad to never see the likes of it again. So I gather up my tools and belongings and there's just one last thing I need to do before I can pick up my wages and head over to the depot at Inman to catch the daily train to Plattsburgh. I figure from there I can board a northbound train -- I hear they're looking for skilled tradesmen up in Canada for all sorts of work. My visit to my sister will just have to wait. Always wanted to go to Canada, hear the fishin' is fine so I figure now's the time to do it.

I head over to the Lovering one last time to see Pickett only this time I'm gonna demand he pays me and not start telling me some crazy story about a loon or nothin'. I enter the tavern and see him in a corner booth in the back facing toward me. He waves me over, sit down, he says, let me buy you an ale.

- Nothin' doin', I say, I'm just here to collect my money and head off. Month's over and it's time for me to move on.

Well Pickett will have none of it. Sit down he says again, insisting, practically pulling me down, then waves over to the barmaid to bring over two pints. What the heck I think, an ale to celebrate the end of my time here isn't the worst idea I ever heard, so I take a seat. The barmaid brings us our pints and I start drinkin' and look over at Pickett across the table and he's just settin' there starin' at me, not a word coming out of his mouth, not even drinking. Strange for Pickett to have nothing to say for himself, but thought I would enjoy the quiet for a change.

I drink for a bit, put my pint down and finally Pickett says to me, it's all over, John.

- What, did you catch the killer, I ask him, feeling a bit hot under the collar, thinking that maybe now I won't get my money.

- As a matter of fact, he says, we just did. At that moment I feel a hand grip my shoulder. I twist around and there's the sheriff and his deputy with truncheons hovering over me, the deputy grabbing me, pulling me up. I manage to yank away and run toward the tavern door, but who steps in front to block my path, but Petie! He just stands there like a giant with his huge arms folded, grinning at me.

I look desperately around the bar to see if there's another way out but now Pickett's on his feet and the two lawmen are coming at me with their clubs. Feeling like a hare in a snare I just put my hands up and say, okay, okay!

- Do you confess, Pickett asks me. You may as well, son, we got more than enough evidence to convict you. We know you did it. We know you murdered Thomas Cook and his wife as they lay asleep in their bed on the 12th of August. It'd go easier for you if you just confess.

- How, I ask him, not really able to get the whole sentence out, too stunned by what's just happened.

- Well, I suppose you got a right to know, Pickett says. First of all, we know who you are, John Collins, son of Mary and William Collins. That is, Mary Secor Collins. You're named for your grandfather John Secor, your mother's father, a man you never got to meet but probably heard about all your life. No doubt you wanted revenge on the surviving member of the murdering duo. But killing both Cook and his wife -- well that was a mistake, because now you're up for double homicide.

- You'll be hanged! Petie shouts at me.

- Now that's enough, Pickett says to him. The man deserves an explanation. Well, your other mistake of course was using marked gunpowder. Pickett pulls the little piece of keg out of his pocket and carefully unwraps it. We were able to identify this powder keg as coming from the Loon Lake House within hours of the murder and I was on the first stage over here. And then I got lucky. You showed up a few hours later. I reckon you thought the label on the powder keg would get blown up, otherwise why would you show up back here. That was your biggest mistake, John. Coming

back here to Loon Lake, where you knew there'd be lots of work. Maybe you thought it'd be a good place to hide, blending in with all the other workmen. Or maybe it gave you a bit of comfort to be so close to home, to Merrillsville where you grew up, just a couple of miles down the road, and all the familiar places, like your favourite fishing spot. But the clincher was the actual evidence I collected the day I met you.

At that point Pickett pulls a white handkerchief out of his breast pocket and waves it at me. We got a way of testing for powder burns now, he says, like from a recently fired weapon. The test takes a few weeks and we had just enough on this handkerchief after you shook my hand to prove you fired a weapon -- a weapon like the one that was used to blow up Thomas Cook and his wife.

I couldn't hear what Pickett was sayin' no more. He kept talkin' and talkin' but I stopped listening. And now here I am back on the stage this time heading to Malone, the sheriff and his deputy on either side of me, keeping a close grip.

So that's it, that's my whole story and now having heard it, you must agree that every word Pickett said was a lie, nothing but a goddam lie. I wouldn't hurt a flea! If you knew me, well then you'd know that to be true. About as true as a loon calling to you from the deep of an Adirondack night.

Sources:

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