

# The Murderer

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

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Jacob Stein stared at his client in bafflement. "Don't you *want* to be acquitted?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," the man said, smiling. "It's a relief, really, to have it over. And I did far more than I could ever have hoped. I never thought I'd be here this long." The smile faded slightly. "Though I can't say everything worked out the way I expected it to."

"You didn't expect to get caught?"

"No, no-- I was pretty sure I'd be caught eventually. I mean the rest of it." The smile was back-- a gentle, kind smile, directed entirely at Stein. "You don't understand what I'm talking about, of course," he said. "There's no way you could."

"Well, explain it to me, then." Stein tapped a No. 2 Ticonderoga on the tabletop.

"I honestly don't know if I can." The accused considered, then shook his head. "I don't think I even want to try."

"Well, how am I supposed to help you, if you won't explain anything?" Stein demanded.

"Oh, probably you'd best just plead me insane-- I think I'd prefer an asylum to prison."

"Don't forget Old Sparky, Mr. Jones-- if we don't show insanity or mitigating circumstances, you'll get the chair."

"You think so?" The smile was uncertain now. "That would be a bad way to go."

"Well, it's the way you'll go, if you don't help me."

"I'm an old man," Jones protested. "Would they really give me the chair?"

"You bet they would, if you don't give me something to work with, to keep you out of it. You killed a *kid*, Mr. Jones-- judges and juries don't like that."

"I killed a monster, Mr. Stein. In fact, I've killed a *lot* of monsters over the past seventy years."

"I saw the photos, Mr. Jones-- I didn't see the body, but I saw the photos. He looked like a kid to me."

Jones shook his head. "He was a monster. Most of them were. Some were just wrong-headed-- maybe I deserve to die for those, but not for him."

Stein tried to hide his reaction. He *had* seen the photos; young Ted had been a good-looking boy before Jones put a dose of buckshot through his face. If anyone involved in this case was a monster, Stein was very much afraid it was his client, not the victim.

"I think we'd better plead insanity," Stein said.

"If you like," Jones agreed. "In a way, maybe I *am* insane."

Stein snapped his pencil angrily. "You're not very convincing," he said. "Sitting there calmly agreeing isn't going to look very crazy to a jury."

"All right, then; what would you like me to say?"

Stein threw the eraser end of the pencil across the room. "Why don't we start with the *truth*, then?"

Jones nodded. "All right," he said. "All I have to do for a plea of insanity is tell the truth, I suppose. To begin at the beginning, I was born in 1998..." He paused, as if waiting for something.

Stein blinked. "You look a little older than that," he remarked.

Jones smiled again, that gentle, maddening smile. "No, no, Mr. Stein," he said. "*Nineteen* ninety-eight."

Stein threw the other half of the pencil. "What, you were born in the future? You're living backwards,

like T.H. White's Merlin?"

"Wrong author," Jones replied. "Try H.G. Wells."

"You're a Martian?"

Jones shook his head. "A time traveler."

"Oh, I see, you're from the future?" Stein made no attempt to hide his sarcasm.

"That's right."

"All right, get on with it, then," Stein said. "Let's hear the story."

"It's simple enough. In 2020 I was a first-year grad student at Berkeley, and someone in the physics department thought he'd invented a time machine. I don't know anything about how it worked-- he didn't want me to, because he was worried about how I might affect the past if I knew how to build a time machine once I got back there. He was afraid I'd tell someone, and change the history of science." Jones' mouth twisted wryly. "What a fool."

"So you were one of his students?"

"Me? Oh, hell, no-- I was a grad student in *history*, not physics! And this physics guy advertised for a volunteer, 'some knowledge of history useful,' and I was bored and could use the hundred bucks he was offering, so I checked it out, and next thing I knew I was in 1892."

"Seventy years ago," Stein said.

"That's right. Seventy years ago. I don't think he had the machine calibrated very well yet; I can't imagine why he'd pick 1892. But there I was-- still in Berkeley, I didn't move at all except in time. So I looked around, and then I went down across the bay to San Francisco-- I couldn't resist seeing San Francisco before the Quake of 1906! I was a historian, or I wanted to be, anyway, and the early twentieth century was my specialty-- I couldn't pass up a chance like that, and I don't care *how* worried the professor was about my interfering with the past. I had a gadget with me that was supposed to send me home again, and it would go off automatically after forty-eight hours, or I could hit a panic button any time before that, so I figured I was safe enough, even if I did look really weird there, dressed the way I was, talking the way I did. I had a bunch of old money we'd bought from a collectors' shop, so I could buy food and souvenirs, and I picked up a lovely old Colt revolver-- well, it's old now, it was brand-new then."

Stein shifted in his seat. "Do you expect me to take any of this seriously, Mr. Jones?"

Jones shrugged. "I don't much care."

Stein stared at him for a moment. "Go on, then," he said.

"Well, as I said, there I was in San Francisco, in 1892, and it was just so amazing that I was wandering the streets in a daze. I had the gun I'd bought, so no one was bothering me, and then it happened-- I saw William Randolph Hearst coming out of the Examiner building, I knew him from the old pictures, and I heard his name, so there wasn't any doubt, and I couldn't resist. It was such an incredible stroke of luck. I mean, it didn't all seem entirely real to me, any of it, if you see what I mean-- I couldn't *really* be in 1892, could I? I wasn't thinking about him as if he were a real person, or as if I could be in any danger. Instead I was thinking about the Spanish-American War, and all those scandals, all the lives he ruined, and I couldn't help it. It was such an opportunity, it was like a miracle. I pulled out the gun I'd just bought, and I shot him dead."

"Shot who?" Stein asked, shocked.

"Hearst," Jones answered. "William Randolph Hearst."

"Who's he?" Stein knew it was a stupid question, before the words were even out of his mouth, but he had been caught off-guard. He had known he was dealing with a murderer, with a crazy old man who had shot a kid without warning, for no reason, but he hadn't expected a confession of another murder, seventy years before.

Jones smiled a smile that the horrified Stein couldn't interpret as anything but pure joy.

"Nobody," Jones said. "Not any more. He was a millionaire's son who ran a newspaper. But now he's nobody."

"Because you shot him."

"That's right," Jones said. "Right there on the street. And when I saw the blood and saw him fall, all of

a sudden everything seemed real again, and I turned and ran, and I got away-- I'm not sure how. And I pushed the panic button, but nothing happened. I figured it was because I was in the wrong place, so I went back out to Berkeley, to the exact same place that the physics building would be in 2020, and I pushed the button again, and *still* nothing happened. So I waited for the two days to be up, and nothing happened, so I threw the gadget away. And I realized what had happened-- I'd changed the past, so the future I came from wasn't there any more. I couldn't go back to it, because it wasn't there."

Stein asked, "Then how could you have come from it?"

"Because it would have been there if I hadn't," Jones said.

"But... no, never mind. So you're telling me you shot this Hearst character back in 1892?" Stein tried to collect his scattered thoughts. "What does this have to do with the kid?"

"Nothing," Jones admitted, "Except that it explains why I'm here."

"Because if you hadn't shot him, you'd be back in the twenty-first century?"

"Right."

"I don't think the jury will buy that," Stein said.

Jones shrugged. "No. They'll think I'm nuts."

"Is that it? You're confessing to murdering this Hearst person so they'll think you're crazy? Do you think that's going to work?"

Jones shrugged again. "Would it help if there were other killings?" he asked. "I don't like to call them murders."

Stein stared at him for a long moment. "*Were* there others?" he asked, uneasily.

"Oh, yes," Jones said, smiling. "Lots of them. Adolf Hitler-- I'm proudest of that one, of course. I got Goering and Goebbels, too, just to be sure. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. Josef Dzhughashvili-- he wasn't even calling himself Stalin yet, but I found him. Rasputin-- he was hard to kill, just like the stories said. Gavrilo Princip, though all that did was put it off a few years. Mao Tse-tung, of course. Albert Fish-- that's a smaller scale, but I thought it was worth doing. I wish I'd got him sooner, but he was hard to find. I got H.H. Holmes as quickly as I could, but of course, he'd got a good start long before I got there-- he was the second one, I went after him almost as soon as I realized what I'd done. The last one I went after was Idi Amin, but I couldn't find him at all-- but maybe that's all right, the way things have turned out." He shrugged again.

"You know all their names," Stein said.

"Well, of course," Jones said, startled. "None of these were random, you know. I went to a lot of trouble to hunt down the right men."

"They were all men?"

Jones shrugged. "That's the way history is, I guess; yes, they were all men or boys. I suppose I could have gone after Jiang Qing, but without Mao, why bother?"

"You killed them all?"

Jones nodded proudly. "Every one."

Stein tried to think of a sane response to this ghastly boast. "A lot of foreign names there," he remarked weakly.

"All over the world," Jones agreed. "I've traveled a lot."

"I don't understand, Mr. Jones; why'd you kill them? Why these particular people?"

"Because I knew what they'd do if I didn't, Mr. Stein-- at least, at first I did."

"At first?"

"That's right," Jones said. "When the Spanish-American War didn't happen on schedule, I was so pleased-- I was living off a couple of patents I'd sold to Edison, you understand, they'd been a lot harder than I expected but I had plenty of money, and I'd been trying to discover penicillin but wasn't getting anywhere, I didn't know how to go about it. Anyway, when the war didn't happen, I figured I'd do better with that than in medicine or science; I knew history, I didn't know anything about bread mold or electronics. So I went to Europe after Princip and Lenin and Stalin and the rest, and everything went the way I expected it, but after 1914... after 1914, I didn't know what was happening. Everything was different, my knowledge of history didn't help me any more."

"I still don't understand. What's special about 1914?"

"That's when the Great War was supposed to start."

Stein sighed. "Mr. Jones, I was just a baby at the time, and you were a grown man, but even *I* know the Great War started in 1921."

Jones nodded. "That's right," he said. "I'd bought seven years. So I wasn't sure, any more, whether the rest were still dangerous. But I knew what they *could* do, if history allowed it, so I tracked down Hitler and the others. And the Second World War never happened."

"Second World War. You say these men you killed would have started it?"

"Some of them, yes."

"And that's the justification for killing them?"

Jones nodded.

"You really did this?" Stein asked, still trying to absorb it. The time travel part was nonsense, but the rest... "You really went all over the world killing people who would have started wars, people I never heard of?"

"Well," Jones explained, "You have to get them early, before they become famous, before they have bodyguards, or followers who will carry on for them."

"But then they haven't done anything yet," Stein objected.

"I'm not in the business of punishment," Jones said. "I'm in the business of prevention."

"You didn't prevent the Great War."

"I tried," Jones said, "But I'm just one man. And I don't know what's going to happen anymore, any more than you do. It's all changed too much."

"But you killed this kid anyway. With a shotgun."

"I'm an old man. My aim isn't what it used to be."

"And you didn't get away this time."

Jones shrugged.

"So was Ted Bundy going to start a Second World War?"

"No," Jones said. "He was just going to kill people."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes," Jones said, "I'm sure."

Stein stood up. "I'll plead insanity," he said. "If you give the jury this story and we play up your age, they may decide you're harmless. But you'll be spending the rest of your life locked up, Mr. Jones; that's the best we can hope for."

"Mr. Stein," Jones said, "It was worth it. Even if I get the chair, it was worth it."

Stein frowned. "If this is all true, if you killed these people, you'll go down as one of the greatest murderers of the twentieth century, Mr. Jones; how can *anything* be worth it?"

Jones burst out laughing and almost fell; the guard at the door turned, ready to intervene, but Stein waved him away.

A moment later Jones was in his chair again. "Mr. Stein," he said, more soberly, "If I can go down in history as one of the greatest killers of the twentieth century, with a mere dozen deaths to my name, that's why it was worth it!"

Stein stared at him, uncomprehending, as Jones laughed and laughed and laughed.