



## House and Holmes: A Guide to Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

Student Handout #3: **Salon 5-Minute Mystery, “The Menagerie Murder”**

*By Dick Lochte*

**ON A PLEASANT NIGHT** in May 1967, in Le Theatre Dauphine, a jewel-box theater in the heart of New Orleans' French Quarter, one drama was drawing to a close while another was about to begin. As Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie" neared its end, a young actor named Lars Mitchell stood stage right, staring through a scrim as the play's two leads, the world-famous Vanessa Taylor and New Orleans' own Jeanine Chenovet, pantomimed a protective mother comforting her heartbroken daughter. Mitchell, in his role as son and brother, was telling the packed audience that no matter how far he'd wandered from home, his sister had remained a part of him.

Taylor drew back from her make-believe daughter, paused to stare at a prop portrait of her character's husband and, with great dignity, made her exit. Chenovet, looking particularly wan and wistful, leaned close to a pair of flickering candles and Mitchell ended his long monologue with "... for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura -- and so good-bye."

Jeanine Chenovet blew out the candles.

And Le Theatre Dauphine went dark until the applause from the opening night audience brought the house lights up.

The cast of four assembled for their curtain calls. After considerable applause, Mitchell and Jimmy DuPre, who had appeared as the Gentleman Caller, left the stage and another round of "bravos" was heard. Then Chenovet turned over the stage to theatrical grande dame Taylor, who accepted an armful of roses and bowed gracefully.

J.J. Legendre, chief investigator for District Attorney Jim Garrison, was sitting near the rear of the medium-sized theater with his fiancée, Madeleine DuBois. They were there as the guests of Madeleine's closest friend, Laura LeBlanc, who, for the past year, had been living in Manhattan attending to the needs and whims of Taylor. It had been Laura who had convinced the famous actress to travel to New Orleans to appear in the revival of Williams' play.

Onstage, Taylor used her unencumbered arm to urge her cast mates to join her. "Come, children. Come," her bell-like voice rang out, quieting the hubbub of the audience. Lars Mitchell was the first to return. The elderly actress clutched his hand and said, "You were splendid ..." She seemed to have forgotten his name.

"Lars," the actor said. "Lars Mitchell."

"Of course you are," the actress said, and then went on to struggle with the names of the remaining cast members. Finally, she said, "You were all so wonderful, I just wish you could be with me when we open this play in New York."

There was another round of applause, but, to J.J.'s somewhat jaded eyes it appeared as if the other members of the cast were having trouble with their professional grins. He was having trouble with his own professional grin. Much to his dismay, Laura had invited them to the cast party after the show. He didn't mind sitting through a play now and then but he had little tolerance for what he called "show biz types." Still, he went without a peep of protest. Because of the demands of his job, he rarely had the chance to accede to Madeleine's plans for a night out.

The party was being held in a penthouse suite in the Pontchartrain Hotel on St. Charles Avenue. J.J. and Madeleine shared an elevator with a somewhat depressed Jimmy DuPre, wearing what looked like his dark blue confirmation suit, and his date, a very young blonde named Erlene. Erlene, in a pink dress, was bubbling over with good cheer. "Don't worry, honey," she told Jimmy. "So you won't be going to New York. You'll get another break and now we can be together until I finish school."

"Great," Jimmy said sourly. "I can just keep cleanin' bedpans at Charity Hospital for another year."

They were greeted at the suite by a florid man in a tuxedo, Herman Sinclair, owner of Le Theatre Dauphine and producer of the play, and his fluttery, red-haired wife, Helene. Patrick Broyles, the play's director, a glum, rail-thin fellow with a bald head and mutton chops, rattled the ice cubes in his cocktail glass at them before staggering to an overstuffed chair. Lars Mitchell, in sport coat and Levis, nodded to them. Then he and Jimmy DuPre fell into a quiet, apparently downbeat discussion at the portable bar. Erlene stood at the window and looked out at the lights along the Mississippi.

Helene Sinclair chatted with Madeleine about plays in general and Tennessee Williams in particular, while her husband, Herman, bent J.J.'s ear with stories about his early years working for his father's chemical company. The detective, whose empty stomach had been rumbling through most of the play, finally edged both of them toward a table filled with delicacies from the hotel's Caribbean Room.

J.J. was a quarter of the way through an obscene slab of red snapper when Jeanine Chenovet and her husband, Gerald, arrived. The fish was gone entirely by the time

Vanessa Taylor and Laura LeBlanc joined the party. If the celebration had been subdued before, it grew absolutely frigid with Taylor in attendance.

Almost immediately, she withdrew to the bedroom. Laura joined Madeleine and J.J. She didn't look happy. "I guess getting Vanessa to come to New Orleans wasn't the best idea I've ever had," she said.

"I thought the play was fine," J.J. said.

"It is, isn't it?" Laura said.

"Then what's the problem?" Madeleine asked.

"Herman Sinclair financed the show with the idea of taking it to Broadway," Laura said. "It's been a lifelong wish of his to produce a show in New York. And Vanessa promised him and the others that, if things went well, she'd arrange for the production to move to New York. But she got a call earlier tonight from Cheryl Crawford expressing interest in producing the Broadway revival and Herman was suddenly out of the picture. Ditto the director and the other cast members."

"Why?" Madeleine asked.

Laura rolled her eyes. "Because, according to the old biddy, one does not appear on Broadway with amateurs from the hinterlands." She looked around the room and bit her lip and said. "I helped get all these people involved, got their hopes up."

"They're pretty good," J.J. said. "If they want it enough, they'll eventually get there."

"Try telling that to Jeanine, who was so confident she'd be moving to Manhattan she gave up her job. And there isn't that much work in New Orleans for a commercial artist. Lars Mitchell dropped out of med school. And Patrick, poor Patrick, turned down the chance to stage a musical at the Saenger, which is as close to Broadway as New Orleans gets."

"Any chance of her changing her mind?" Madeleine asked.

"None. I tried on the drive here from the theater. She became so enraged, she fired me."

"Oh, Laura," Madeleine said. "That's terrible."

"It's just as well. It hasn't been easy putting up with her moods. And her temper ..."

Laura's attention was drawn to the spindly director who rose from his chair and stumbled toward the closed door through which Vanessa Taylor had rushed. "Come out of there, you deceitful hag! You cut-rate Mary Tyrone!"

Suddenly, the door was thrown open and the elderly actress staggered into the room, gasping for air and reaching out for support. A startled Patrick Broyles took a backward step. The others stared at the actress as her body was wracked by a series of spasms.

Before J.J. could get to her, she crumpled and fell to the carpet. She looked up at him and croaked, "Laura did this ..." Apparently annoyed with herself, she shook her head and mumbled something else. It was then that J.J. realized that a hypodermic needle was dangling from her arm.

"Miss Taylor," he began, but stopped when she emitted a final rasp. He felt for a pulse and found none.

Herman Sinclair was right behind the detective. "My God. Vanessa ..."

"What did she whisper to you?" Lars asked J.J.

The detective stared at the needle and replied, "She said, 'It's the heroin.'"

"Good Lord, was she on heroin?" Sinclair asked.

J.J. stood up and stared at Laura LeBlanc. "Was she?" he asked.

Laura was a mixture of puzzlement and sorrow. "Heroin? I can't believe it." She stared at her late employer lying on the floor. "The needle ... She was ... she kept it a secret, I don't know why ... She was a diabetic."

"Why don't we all move back away from the body?" J.J. said politely, but firmly. Then, ignoring their questions, he headed for a telephone.

Officer Joe Bordelon, one of the NOPD's brighter members, answered the call with his dour partner, Officer Marvin Tibbett. During the next two hours, while a young doctor named Ganuchau from the coroner's office and various other minions went about their tasks, the two policemen interviewed those in attendance.

Finally, Bordelon gestured for J.J. to join him in the hotel corridor.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm going to have to arrest your friend Laura LeBlanc. Not only did the victim identify her as the murderer, but, according to Miss LeBlanc herself, only she knew that Vanessa Taylor had diabetes. So it follows that only she would have known to substitute a toxic substance for the lady's insulin."

"Toxic substance?" J.J. asked. "You mean heroin?"

"The Taylor woman might have thought it was heroin," Bordelon said. "But in fact, Dr. Ganuchau says it smells like some sort of petroleum derivative." He consulted his notepad, "Probably benzene."

That rang a bell with J.J., who, previous to becoming a lawman had had a variety of occupations, not all of them legal. "That's a glue remover," he said. Then he smiled. "You familiar with the play 'The Glass Menagerie,' officer?"

"Actually, I played The Gentleman Caller in a high school production at Jesuit."

"Good man," J.J. said and suggested that Bordelon follow him back into the room, where the members of the ill-fated party were still assembled.

J.J. approached the director, Patrick Broyles, who was slumped in an overstuffed chair that emphasized his thinness. "Just before Miss Taylor came in here for her farewell appearance," J.J. said, "you called her a name. What was it?"

Broyles waved a skeletal hand as if to dismiss the event. "Please. I was angry and drunk."

"Sure you were. But what was the name you used?"

The director frowned, as if trying to recall.

Lars Mitchell answered for him. "You called her a cut-rate Mary Tyrone. Not bad referencing, Patrick, not bad at all."

"Who's Mary Tyrone?" J.J. asked.

Lars answered that one, too. "She's the mother in the O'Neill play 'Long Day's Journey Into Night.' The drug-addict mother."

"Then you thought Miss Taylor was a drug addict?" J.J. asked the director.

Patrick Broyles sighed.

"I'm afraid that's my doing," Jeanine Chenovet said. "I told them she was on drugs." She was seated on the sofa next to her husband, looking considerably more glamorous than she had in the play, even after two long hours of questioning. "Vanessa and I shared a dressing room. I ... I saw the hypodermic needle resting in her open purse."

"And this led you to believe she had an addiction?" J.J. asked.

"I just assumed it was drugs," Jeanine said. "It didn't occur to me that she might have had a health problem. And I thought the rest of us should know. I mean, we were all in this thing together."

"It helped to explain why she kept forgetting things," Lars Mitchell said with a scowl. "Like my name on opening goddamn night."

"Did everybody in the cast know Miss Taylor used a needle?" J.J. asked.

All of them except for the Sinclairs admitted they knew.

"And when did she tell all of you that you weren't going with her to Broadway?" J.J. asked.

"About three and a half hours ago," Jimmy DuPre said, looking at his watch.

This time even the Sinclairs agreed -- Vanessa Taylor's announcement at the theater was the first any of them knew that they wouldn't be involved in the Broadway production.

J.J. turned to Bordelon. "It's all yours," he said.

The young officer looked at him, puzzled.

"You're a bright boy," J.J. whispered to him. "Use your imagination a bit and consider everything you've been told before you make your move."

Bordelon nodded and began to mentally sift through the facts as they'd been presented. Finally, he called J.J. aside and mentioned a name.

"Like I said, a bright boy," J.J. told him. "Now do your duty."