

Mystery of the Murder of the Tattooed Chorus Girl



"There Lying on the Snow Was a Girl. There was a Stain of Blood Beside Her Uprturned Face. Clasped in One Outstretched Hand Was a Purse, Its Golden Chain Broken!"

A Problem in Real Life for a Real Sherlock Holmes---

Were the Finger Marks on Her Throat Her Own?

What Was the Scratched Off Name on One Tattooed Arm?

Who Was the Unknown Man Who Ran Into the Morgue, Looked at Her, Wept and Fled?

Why Did Her Companions Shun Her? What Killed Her?

ON the afternoon of Sunday, February second, two boys climbing over the high fence of a vacant yard in Cleveland, saw lying on the snow on the opposite side the figure of a girl.

"She must have fallen down and hurt herself," said one. "Let's go help."

They dropped down and ran over. The girl was dead. There was a stain of blood beside her upturned face. Close by one outstretched hand was a lavender silk purse with its golden chain broken.

The boys ran away and found a policeman. The body was taken to the Cleveland morgue. There it was seen to be that of a young woman of about twenty-three years and of unusual good looks.

There was a bruise upon the right temple, caused evidently by a heavy blow from some blunt object. It would have been enough to cause unconsciousness but not death! There were the marks of fingers about her throat as though strong hands had clutched her. But she had not died of strangulation!

There were no other wounds. And she had not died of exposure!

On the white skin of the right arm was most skillfully tattooed—"I love—". Then came letters, half erased, but which seemed to read "W. B. Stockwell." Upon the left arm was a similar legend but with the letters of the name following entirely indistinguishable. Above a dimpled right knee in almost microscopic lettering was tattooed the name—"Frances F. Altman."

Under the finger nails of the right hand were blood stains and some wisps of soft, brown hair.

Further medical examination showed traces of a poison, but still not enough to have caused her death.

Nor was there any evidence of any struggle whatever about where the body had lain.

Thus was opened up one of the most unusual mysteries of crime in the annals of the police; a case so filled with fantastic factors and contradictions as to make it, in real life, one of the ideal problems with which Sherlock Holmes of fiction loved to battle.

"Your inference, my dear Watson," one can imagine Sherlock Holmes saying, "that the young woman lay down where she was found and died, is the obvious one but is not tenable. Consider that the bruise upon the forehead, the marks on the throat and the poison were none of them enough to have killed her. The wound upon the head could not have been self-inflicted. Furthermore, after careful search, there was nothing found by which such a blow could have been given. It is possible for the marks on her throat to have been self-inflicted—I mean that if the poison had caused acute pain she might have in her dying spasms

torn at her neck. But as against this we have the fact that the inconsiderable quantities of poison found do not produce such pain. Nor is there in the snow about the finding place of the body any sign of death agonies. There is again the evidence of the dried blood and hair under the finger nails—both of which clearly show that before death somewhere there was a struggle of some kind. All this being so, my dear Watson, the only justifiable inference is that the young woman was carried to where she was found when either dead or dying."

"What I would suggest is that her early life be looked into, and in doing this I would also suggest that the search be confined to sailors or seafaring men."

"But why seafaring men, my dear Holmes?" Watson might be expected to ask.

"Because the tattooing upon the arms and upon the knee indicate that at one time in her life she was deeply in love with a sailor," would have been his answer.

"Tattooing is a practice almost totally confined to seafaring men, and nothing but the greatest love would have prompted this girl to have had these marks put upon her arms. She might be called a beautiful woman. The dress of beautiful women usually takes a show of arms and shoulders into consideration. Unless she had been greatly in love she would not have allowed her skin to be marked in such a way that decoletage would be practically impossible."

"Furthermore, we see that determined effort has been made to obliterate these marks. This means that her love had waned—or, perhaps, that she had found that they interfered too seriously with her life occupation. From the character of her garments, the long hands and the general well-kept appearance I would deduce that she was a professional woman—probably an actress."

And largely so far. Sherlock Holmes would have been right! Following the clues presented the Cleveland police soon found that she was Frances Altman Stockwell, a dancer, and one of the chorus of a New York theatrical organization, "The French Frolics," then playing in Cleveland.

It was further determined that she had been married to a sea-faring man attached to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and that she had been looking forward to rejoining him after a long estrangement. It was his name that was upon one of her arms.

The body lay for a time at the morgue while identification was in progress. Promptly came another mystery. It seems that on Monday morning there were an unusual number of visitors to the place of death. They formed a little knot

around the slab on which lay the body of the chorus girl. Suddenly through them a man pressed his way. He was much agitated and so drew the attention of others besides those he jostled aside. He was of medium height, light complexion, light blue eyes and rather shaggy light brown hair. He wore no overcoat. He leaned over the body of the actress for a moment, broke into tears, and before any one had presence of mind enough to stop him, slipped away.

When observers did try to follow he had disappeared.

There was something about him, the observers said, that, although he wore no uniform, made them believe him to be a sailor.

Who could the weeping man have been? And why, if he were the murderer, did he risk going to where his victim had been taken? And why the tears, the evident agitation? If he were not the murderer, then how did he know Frances Stockwell lay there in the morgue? For know the girl he had plainly shown he did.

Were they tears of remorse or of pity? "My dear Watson," Holmes may be taken as saying, "the mysterious, irresistible fascination which leads a mur-

derer back to the scene of his crime or urges him to look again upon the face of his victim is a commonplace of criminology. You remember it was upon that singular fact that I solved the mystery of the Musgrave Ritual And that the spectators thought the weeping man was a sailor is profoundly significant."

"I will admit that your deductions regarding the tattooing and the subsequent discovery that her first great love was for Stockwell, the sailor husband, is marvelous," Watson may be thought as saying. "But I do not see why you continue to harp upon the tattooing when this seems to be as far as it leads; for it is indisputable that the husband had nothing whatever to do with the tragedy—indeed, that he was waiting to take her back."

"It is well proven by psychology," Holmes might answer, "that a woman's first great love affair exercises a tremendous power over all following. Here was a girl with undeniably good looks, living in the atmosphere of the stage, full of life and health. She had been estranged for a long time from her husband. Yet I will venture to assert that any love affairs she might have had during that estrangement have been with seafaring men."

"The mind, my dear Watson, is a curious thing, and it holds fast to the symbol

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Frances Altman Stockwell, the Tattooed Chorus Girl, Whose Death Has Become One of the Great Mysteries of Crime.



The Desolate Yard, Where the Body of Frances Stockwell Was Found.

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long after what we might call the original occupant of that symbol has disappeared. My judgment is to pursue the quest for a sailor."

This is exactly what the police did. They found some very extraordinary facts. Sailors and sailor ways, it appeared, had always had a curious fascination for the girl. They discovered that on the Saturday night before her death she had been dining in a restaurant when a man dressed in the uniform of a sub-officer of the merchant marine service beckoned to her. Shortly afterwards she had left the restaurant. A newsboy testified that he had heard a woman and a sailor quarrelling outside the Hotel Moreland, where Miss Stockwell had visited another member of the company. This member of the company, a Miss Billie Lamont, known in burlesque as the double of Elsie Janis and in the same company as Frances, saw her with a sailor just before midnight on Saturday.

At that time the murdered girl had only an hour to catch the train which was taking the company out of town.

A sailor was arrested, but was released when Miss Lamont failed to identify him. "I spent quite a lot of time with Frances last week," she said. "She had a bad cold and I doctored her to ward off influenza. She told me about the girls shunning her and talked a good deal about her baby girl but little about her husband."

"The sailor now at the police station was in a box at the Empire last Friday afternoon and Frances and he flirted a little during the performance. He was at the stage door after the show and they went to the Miles Theatre together. He took her to the Empire for the evening performance and after the show took her to Hotel Moreland."

"He didn't go into the hotel with her and, to the best of my belief, he never saw her again."

"I was leaving a store near Hotel Winston, on Prospect avenue, about 11 o'clock Saturday night, when I saw Frances with the other sailor. He was a man fully thirty-two years old, short but thick set. I could pick him out of a thousand sailors in uniform. He was about 5 feet 5 inches tall."

It is more than possible that she wanted to conceal her whereabouts from some one," said the coroner. "This would lead to the belief she was followed or watched."

The autopsy, conducted by Dr. P. A. Jacobs at county morgue Monday morning, established that she had eaten just before her death.

It is known that had Frances Stockwell gone to the train with other members of the company immediately after the Saturday night performance she still would be alive. Her original plan was to go with them to the train, for she so hurriedly removed her makeup that some of the grease paint still was upon her face. There were traces of the powder upon her shoulders when the body was found in the snow.

The yard where the body was found is large and through it runs a path used by many people as a short cut.

On the right of the yard looking in from the street stands the yard of a wrecking company, which is filled with broken-down vehicles, a lonely and deserted place at night. A confectionery shop stands at the right-hand corner of the yard.

At the left of the premises stands a large rooming house. In the rear of the yard stands a large shed, sometimes used as a garage and automobile wrecking shop. The path runs along the right of the premises. Just in the rear of the rooming house there is a branch of the path which leads to his back door.

It was near this branch path, not fifteen feet from the back door of the house, that the body lay. It was on an unbroken patch of snow and the snow revealed no footprints or other clues which might help solve the mystery.

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Then into the case, as though there had not been enough of fantastic mystery, came a shell-shocked soldier. He roomed in the house behind which the murdered girl was found. Suspicion was attracted to him because after being taken to the City Hospital while suffering from a relapse he babbled in delirium alone "a girl murdered in my back yard." The authorities soon found that this was but a delirious echo of the gossip he had naturally heard.

Both sailor and soldier were released. And "The slayer is gone," said Inspector Sterling. "Unless he betrays himself he will never be caught."

The mystery of the tattooed chorus girl is indeed one for a Sherlock Holmes of fact, not fiction.

It also leaked out that a year ago, in Cincinnati, Mrs. Stockwell had attempted suicide by poisoning "to escape my trouble."

It appeared that Frances Stockwell had no close friends among those with whom she worked. Although there was no reason for it, the others seemed to shun her. Often she bewailed this.

The girl had spoken to other members of the company and to a hotel clerk of being in fear of some one. She left word, after receiving two telephone calls and a special delivery letter, that should a man call her to the telephone he was to be told that she was out.

After each call she appeared nervous. In the second conversation she said:

"How did you know I was with the 'Frolics'?"

The Cleveland coroner saw some significance in this remark. It is known that for some reason she quit the "Broadway Belles" company at Wilkes-Barre, Pa., four weeks ago, and joined the "Frolics."

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