

*The Boldero Murder*  
by Frederic Beecher Perkins

We had dined, and were sitting comfortably about under the half-ruined shanty on the top of the mountain.

“Come, Bradley,” said Colonel Throop, the story-loving, “tell us some moral, entertaining, and instructive story, before we return to Sachern's Head.”

“I will,” said the young lawyer, absently, and stared away to seaward, as if expecting to find his story in the summer haze that veiled all the further half of the Sound, and obscured even the nearer angular outlines of Falkner's Island.

“There's a singularly commanding view,” at last he added, “from this spot, in clear weather.”

“Go on with your story,” said Throop.

“That's what I was considering,” said Bradley; “in fact, my observation in part led me to it.” And he proceeded:

“You all remember the horrid murder here in North Guilford some years ago? No? It was of two singular old English people, Mr. and Mrs. Boldero: I remember the name, because I fancied he might be the senior partner of the firm of Boldero, Merryweather, Bosanquet, and Lacy, whom Charles Lamb thanks in 'The Superannuated Man.' They lived alone with a niece, on a small, solitary farm in the woods, just over here on the east side of Quinebaug Pond; keeping house in a strange, melancholy way, being known to have and use a considerable quantity of heavy, old-fashioned, English silver plate, but dressing and eating otherwise on a scale parsimonious almost to misery. Their silver, their reserved and almost sour demeanor, and even the slightly greater expense of the dress of their handsome niece, as well as the lady-like manners of that young person, made the neighbors all believe that they had been people of importance at home, and, in spite of all their frugality here, were immensely rich still, having hoards in the cellar or under the hearthstone, perhaps.

“There was also an indistinct rumor of a son or nephew of the old man, whom nobody had seen, and indeed nobody knew where the rumor came from, who was said to be a desperate brutal sort of fellow.”

“He's the murderer,” said Throop.

“Very true,” said the lawyer; “but the point is, how he was found out.”

“Go on,” said Throop.

“Well, all that was known at the time of the murder was that the poor old couple had disappeared. The house was found uninhabited, one pleasant summer morning, by a neighbor, who came on some small country errand of barter or borrowing. Not finding the old lady at any of her

usual avocations under the 'back stoop,' or in the kitchen, he knocked, then walked in, searched all the rooms, entering their bedroom, on the ground-floor, last. Here he found the bed-clothes turned down, and the only, but sufficient, signs of the crime—namely, the bed clothes and bed all saturated with blood. The niece, Miss Selden, was known to have departed on a visit. Searching all over the house and premises, he found elsewhere not so much as a drop of blood nor any traces of the dead, and nothing whatever to notice, except that all the silver was gone.

“This was all, also, that the authorities could ascertain; and, notwithstanding the rigid and persevering search kept up by the people of the neighborhood for some days, these facts remained the sum total of information in the matter.

“It was about two years after this, while I was practicing in New Haven, that the State's Attorney for New Haven County, a leading lawyer there, sent for me to assist him in trying the case of the State vs. Yensen; selecting me simply because he knew I needed even the small fees which would be forthcoming, and because he knew my father and myself. His brief business note said nothing of the details; and I was surprised and interested, upon entering his office, to hear that he supposed the murderer of Mr. and Mrs. Boldero was this Yensen, as he called himself, and that he had been seized on the premises in North Guilford in the act of digging up the lost silver; having been captured by a North Guilford constable and—to my great surprise—by a certain Charley King. Now King was a classmate of mine at college; had become a lieutenant in the navy; and had, as I knew, just returned from a long voyage in a United States steamer to the Pacific, having been ordered to her from the Coast Survey on account of his skill in hydrography and drawing.

“Yensen had been bound over before a country justice, one of Mr. Boldero's nearest neighbors, on the strength of the presumption from the occupation in which he was seized. I inquired of the attorney how the two men came to find him there.

“You knew that King was engaged to Miss Selden, didn't you?’

“No, indeed, I never heard of it.’

“He was, however, the lawyer said, and had been, as it would appear, lingering about the house, probably in hopes of seeing her; for old Boldero was so queer that he might have been displeased if he had come in. The old gentleman, however, excused himself from giving details, being full of business; and remarking that he should let me manage the case, and that King would undoubtedly communicate with me upon it, he seized some papers and hurried off, telling me that King was at the Tontine, and Yensen at 'the other public house just above;' namely, the jail, which is a few doors north of the old tavern, and also on Church Street, fronting the green.

“Upon inquiring at the Tontine office I found that King had gone to New York, and had left a note for me. This contained a cordial reference to our old friendship, and informed me that he should be in Court on the day appointed for the trial, which would be in ample season. An official order occasioned his departure.

“This was rather puzzling treatment, I thought, for the managing attorney of an important criminal case. How was I to prepare my testimony and to make up my brief? Further consultation with the State's Attorney did not clear up matters; for the old gentleman, I thought, rather put me off, avoiding to give me any information on the plea of urgent employment, and telling me that King was right; for that so far as he (the attorney) understood, the argument could be made extempore, and immediately upon the rendering of the testimony, as well as at six months' notice. With this I was perforce content, and waited as well as I could, though little confident in my powers of extemporization.

“The morning of the trial came, however, and I entered the court-room, having been put in communication with the justice who bound over the prisoner, and the constable who helped seize him; having received from my senior the proper formal papers from the justice's court, and being supplied with certain other documents and witnesses to collateral facts; but, to my further surprise, King was not visible. On my saying so to the State's Attorney, he remarked that he supposed not, the morning New York train not arriving quite yet. At ten o'clock the Court entered, and the session was opened with the usual absurd shout by Mr. Sheriff.

“The case was called on and the prisoner arraigned. He looked sufficiently likely to be guilty. A stout-built, bullet-headed, hard-featured, sailorly person, with light hair and eyes, an evil visage, showing signs of much dissipation, and a down look. Upon being put to plead he was arraigned by the name of John Jagger, at which he started perceptibly, and hesitated a moment, but recovering himself, plead 'Not Guilty' stoutly enough, and in a strong, coarse voice. I was prepared to show, had he disputed it, by witnesses and authenticated copies, that he had, some time before, proved himself, to the satisfaction of the Probate Court of Guilford district, to be John Jagger, the nephew of John Boldero, the deceased; that by that name he had taken out letters of administration with will annexed, over Boldero's estate, alleging that said will (which he presented, all in due form) had been placed by Boldero in the custody of himself as intended heir (which was, no doubt, true); and had in course of law received possession of all the property of Boldero, which he had sold, and had with the proceeds bought a small sea-side farm near New London, where he had since lived; but had there passed himself off as Hans Yensen, a German by birth, who had earned his money in whaling.

“I now introduced the constable, who proved merely the facts of the arrest—viz., that King had come to his house and advised him that he had good cause to suspect a certain man of having murdered Mr. and Mrs. Boldero, and that he would be about the place that night to dig up some of his booty, and could be taken. As a good reward was offered the officer readily undertook the job; they lay in wait near one corner of the wood-yard at a place selected by King, and seized the prisoner after he had come, as they were expecting, had dug a deep hole close to one of the fence-posts, and had taken from it a large quantity of silver, which was present in Court, as the justice had sealed it up. Upon their seizing him he was at first frightened, then fought furiously, and only submitted at sight of a revolver which King presented to him. He had not either then or afterward made any statement whatever, relative to himself or the silver, so far as the officer knew.

“Upon opening the trunk of plate, a large quantity of pieces, of old-fashioned pattern and heavy make, were shown to the Court and jury; very black with their exposure, but having on each piece the name at length of John Boldero and a coat of arms.

“While the silver was under inspection, King not having made his appearance, I rose, and, with some embarrassment of feelings if not in appearance, requested of the Court a short stay of proceedings, on the ground that an important witness was absent.

“What witness, Mr. Bradley?’ blandly inquired the gray-haired Judge.

“Lieutenant Charles King,’ I answered, ‘who assisted in apprehending the prisoner’

“What do you expect to prove, Mr. Bradley,’ rejoined the Judge, ‘by Mr. King, further than the testimony of the arresting officer?’

“I really could not tell, and was somewhat puzzled; which fact was observed by the attorney for the defense—a sharp, unscrupulous old fellow, renowned for defending ‘horse cases’ and criminal prosecutions, for jokes and vulgar stories to the jury, quirks and quibbles, and any thing else except convincing logic, fair practice, or moral power—and he at once sprung up and commenced an impassioned appeal to the Court against the slightest delay; stating that the defense were ready and anxious to go on, and that not a moment’s delay should be granted for a fellow who, it could be probably shown, was seeking the blood of an innocent fellow-being for the sake of gain.

“Incensed at this dirty aspersion upon King, I was, not very wisely, about threatening Counselor Yapman—such was his name—with a little slander suit, when my senior interrupted me with, ‘Hold up, William; here’s your man!’

“He came, dusty with his ride, and with a large parcel or two under his arm, having driven straight from the cars to the court-room. I beckoned to him, and nodded to the sheriff; the officer vociferated, ‘Charles King!’ and the tardy witness, a well-made, strong-built, straight young man, with a close, dark auburn beard and mustache which he had cultivated since I had seen him, took his place on the stand, one side of the space before the Judge’s chair, and not very far from either that dignitary, the jury, or the dock where the sullen prisoner sat ironed, for he had been obstinately and dangerously violent, close under the wing of the burly sheriff.

“Now, Mr. King,’ I said, ‘will you be good enough to tell the Court what you know of the prisoner, and of the transactions in which he is implicated?’

“What he said, in answer to my request, was very nearly as follows:

“I returned from a long cruise about six weeks ago, having heard nothing from home for a long time. Upon my return I went at once to Mr. Boldero’s house, and then for the first time heard of the murder of himself and wife, and of Jagger’s succession to the property and transfer of it. The occupants could tell me nothing of Miss Selden; and I therefore made inquiries of a Mr. Bulpin, an old justice of the peace, Mr. Boldero’s nearest neighbor, and perhaps his most intimate

acquaintance, Justice Bulpin informed me of Miss Selden's whereabouts; and also placed in my hands a will, of which the prosecution have an authenticated copy, and which is of later date than that under which Jagger claimed. This will revoked all former wills, and left all the real and personal property, subject to Mrs. Boldero's life interest, to Miss Selden. I was shortly afterward married to her, having been engaged to her some time; and at once brought a suit against Jagger for the value of the property which is still pending. I had occasion to meet him in New London on business connected with this suit, and on that occasion it was that a circumstance occurred which caused me to recognize the prisoner as guilty of the murder—'

“‘What was that circumstance?’ sharply asked Mr. Yapman, as King paused and looked keenly at the prisoner. Jagger looked up sullenly and defiantly, yet with a certain expression of curiosity, at him for a moment, and then down again, in silence.

“‘The witness will be in your hands immediately, brother Yapman,’ interrupted the State's Attorney, 'let him tell his own story.'

“Yapman would have insisted, but the Judge silenced him, and King resumed:

“We came to no agreement about the suit; but my suspicions were much excited by Jagger's behavior, and I employed an officer to watch him, who soon brought me word that he had overheard Jagger making certain arrangements with a companion, and upon a given night was intending to dig up certain silver to sell it, and to leave the country, for the reason that he believed he should lose the suit against him. A certain other circumstance, which I will mention immediately, caused me to believe that I knew where this silver would be dug, and by lying in wait at the place accordingly I secured him with it in his possession.

“I now proceed,' continued King, 'to narrate the circumstances of which I was an eyewitness, which will explain the references which I have twice made thus far to circumstances which caused me to recognize the prisoner.'

“As he said this, the witness, who had hitherto been addressing himself to the Judge, turned himself so as to look directly toward the prisoner; and his voice changed, and he spoke with a deliberate solemnity and a tone of pity and sorrow which showed that he felt himself to be breathing away the life of a man. I unconsciously turned in like manner from the speaker to the prisoner, and so, I think, did every person in the court-room.

“On this 30th of June,' said King, 'in the year 184—, between the hours of half past four and five, John Jagger—'

“King stopped a moment, struck by the fearful sudden look toward him of the prisoner; and the pale, sickened terror of his face, as his jaw dropped and he stared at the witness, appalled at this quiet fixing almost of the very moment of his crime, did not, I think, leave either juryman or spectator a shadow of doubt that the murderer was before him: and a smothered sound that was almost a groan arose from all of us. The gray-haired Judge, his kindly voice trembling with emotion, said,

“Mr. King, the Court is not in doubt of your sense of your responsibility; yet it thinks it its duty to admonish you that you are now to say what may dispose of the present and the future of a human soul.’

“I am not sure that those words should have been said: yet so profoundly awake were we all to the unconscious silent confession, I might almost call it, of the criminal, as if it had made the very air of the quiet old court-room suddenly heavy with revelations of guilt and death, that no sense of impropriety occurred to us; and King, merely bowing silently, but turning again to the prisoner, proceeded; and Jagger, at the bar, still gazed with that horrible fear upon his face, as if within the sphere of a fatal magnetism.

“Between the hours of half past four and five, John Jagger came from the back door of Mr. Boldero's house, went a dozen steps into the back-yard, turned about, and shook his right hand at the house with a peculiar and characteristic gesture of angry passion. After a moment or two he deliberately took two sacks from a repository under the shed, and entered the house with them. He shortly came out again, having upon his shoulder the body of Mr. Boldero in one of the sacks, and this he carried through the yard, through the woods between the house and the pond, and placed it in Mr. Boldero's skiff, which was made fast to a tree. Then he returned, and in like manner disposed of the body of Mrs. Boldero. Then he cast off the boat, took one of the oars, and, standing up, sculled out into the pond to a point about a third of the way across, where he sank the bodies, and then returned. As he stood up in the boat to return, he made use of the same gesture of anger or excited passion. He made the boat fast at the tree, returned to the house, entered it, shortly came out with the silver in his hand, proceeded to a corner of the wood-yard, dug a deep hole close to and under one of the posts, and there concealed the silver, smoothing the ground over, and leaving it covered with rubbish, as it was before. And then he passed round the house, and went away down the road.

“Mr. Boldero had two prominent front teeth, fellows, and with a gold filling on the inside of each, corresponding with that in the other. He had once fractured his collar-bone, and, having been unskillfully set, the portions had grown together so as to leave a large projection at the point of juncture. And he had lost all but half of the lowest joint of his right middle finger.’

“Hastily breaking the string from a parcel, King took from it a human skull, a radius and ulna with the bones of the hand attached, and a collar-bone, and held them up. Then handing them from the witness-box to the foreman of the jury, he continued:

“These are the bones of Mr. Boldero. I recovered them myself from Quinebaug Pond, still in the strong linen sacks, which were of English make, such as he always used. The rest of his remains, and those of his wife, are decently buried.’

“This strange and sudden display of the mortal remains of his relative and victim had an effect upon the coarse, materialized mind of the murderer which, perhaps, no circumstantiality of parole testimony could have produced. He stared upon the worn and fleshless bones for a moment, still with the same horrible, white, terror-stricken face. All at once he caught for breath, and groaned aloud; and then, dropping his head upon the rail before him, he cried out, 'Lord have

mercy upon me!' And so he remained, bent down, trembling, and silent, until the adjournment of the court.

“When the jurymen had each inspected the relics of mortality which King had given them, he handed them up to the Judge, and continued:

“It was the gesture which I had twice seen Jagger make use of on the morning of the murder which caused me to recognize him as the criminal. When I saw him at New London he flew into a passion, and at our parting made use of the same. This, in connection with the general strangeness of his manner, caused me to have him watched, and my taking him with the silver completed my conviction.

“I shall now describe the means by which I became an eye-witness of the facts I have mentioned: At the time of the murder I had been a frequent visitor at the house of Mr. Boldero, where my present wife was living. A day or two before that time I had received orders to join the steamer with which I have lately returned, and had left Miss Selden, who was also on the point of leaving home for a visit of some length to some friends at the eastward. Being uncertain whether she was yet gone, and being too much employed in completing some computations and drawings connected with the United States Coast Survey to go to the house again, I was that morning watching it, to see her again, knowing her departure would be at a very early hour.

“One of the main points in the triangulation of the coast of Connecticut was upon the summit of the steep and bold mountain called Toket, and sometimes Bluff Head, which rises immediately from the western edge of Quinebaug Pond. I had been encamped there for some time, and—as I had often done before was looking across the pond with a telescope at Mr. Boldero's house. It was by means of this instrument that I observed all the movements of Jagger. At the time I took him to be Mr. Boldero himself, for his figure is much the same, although he wore a red shirt, which I had never seen Mr. Boldero do. For this reason my suspicions were not then excited; and though I thought his proceeding a little uncommon, my mind was much preoccupied with my work, the cruise upon which I was ordered, and the lady whom I was wishing to see—and I knew him to be a singular man. I therefore supposed that he was merely adjusting the fence in the corner; and as I knew that Mr. Boldero was in the habit of carrying corn in his skiff to the mill at the outlet of the pond, I at first supposed that to be his errand, and afterward took it for granted that he had chosen to dispose of some waste material or other by sinking it in the pond.'

“Such was the testimony of King; and here the prosecution rested. Mr. Yapman cross-examined him with no effect; and after a mere brief summary of the proof on my part, and a singularly feeble answer from him, the case went to the jury, who, after fifteen minutes' deliberation, brought in their verdict, as every one expected, of 'Guilty of murder in the first degree.'

“I ought to give you a collateral item or two, to fill out some details. The old justice, Bulpin, had retained Boldero's will, without even mentioning its existence, during all Jagger's proceedings under the previous one, in accordance with a strict construction of the old gentleman's instructions to him at placing it in his charge.

“The neighbors, in their search for the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Boldero, would have found them had they dragged the pond. But this does not seem to have occurred to them, as there is an

ancient and received tradition in the vicinity that a certain large area of it, lying opposite the mountain, is unfathomable—an account, by-the-way, which is almost invariably current, and religiously believed, near any rustic lakelet. They say the same of the Black pond, in Middlefield; of the little lake on the summit of Talcott Mountain, west of Hartford.

“It appeared afterward that quite an elaborate scheme of defense had been concocted by Jagger or his counsel, which, however, was rendered useless by the unexpected and overwhelming directness of King's testimony, and by the effect of it and of the bones so suddenly exhibited upon the prisoner. This defense was to have consisted mainly in the testimony of a fellow who was to have sworn to having been informed of the place where the silver was buried, while at sea, by a sailor, who died, and who was to have been made out the murderer.”

Thus ended the lawyer's story. “Now,” said he, rising, “come this way, and see how plainly we can see the farm.” We followed him to a point at the eastern brow of the mountain, where it falls, in one steep slope, down to the very water's edge of the deep pond, and looked where he pointed. The farm lay apparently within a stone's-throw—a lonely, square clearing; a faint smoke rising from one chimney; and all around it the thick woods, dark green with the latter summer, spread silently out for miles. Not another house was in sight all along that side of the long, silent sheet of deep, black water.

“The place is very lonely,” he added. “On any ordinary computation of chances it was perfectly safe to go and murder two old people there early in the morning. Jagger had come in from sea, and only waited about until he found that the old couple were alone. He knew nothing of the Coast Survey operations there. He was justified, mathematically speaking, in believing himself quite unseen. This side of the pond is still more lonely than that. No human being could have reckoned upon the presence of a detective hidden at this distance, and upon this lofty, solitary spot, and armed with such an effectual auxiliary.”

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