

## *Miss Armstrong's Homicide*

A few weeks ago some workmen engaged in removing an old mansion on the corner of California and Mason Streets were considerably puzzled at finding a number of copper wires connecting the bath-room with a room above. The owners of the property were equally puzzled, having never before known of their existence. The wires were removed, and nothing more thought of the matter. This recalls to my mind an incident which many will now remember:

On the 14th of July, 1865, a Professor Croftly was found dead in the bathroom I have just mentioned. Croftly was well known among scientific men as a professor of chemistry, and, besides, had a large circle of acquaintances in this city. He was supposed at the time to have committed suicide, and his death furnished a three day's sensation for the press. The accounts in four leading newspapers materially conflicted, which made the matter all the more interesting to the public. All agreed, however, with a singular unanimity of opinion, that he was dead. Even the *Call*, while not positively admitting his demise in the article, virtually conceded in the headlines.

Croftly, when found, was lying in the bath, covered with wounds of so curious a nature that no one could explain how they came to be inflicted. They were deep, ragged, and gapping, and there was no instrument found in the room with which they might have been made. Even the detectives, who visited the scene of Croftly's death, shook their heads and were at sea. Those who discovered the body found the door securely fastened from the inside, and were obliged to burst it open. The room had no other means of egress or ingress.

"Suicide," remarked one of the reporters.

"How came those wounds on the back?" asked a detective.

"Who else was here?" responded the journalist. And neither man had anything more to say.

A *post mortem* revealed nothing new, except that the physicians found a state of the blood which they could not satisfactorily account for.

"He was frozen," said a young physician, whose opinion seemed to have its foundation only in surmise.

"You seem to have forgotten that this is July," remarked an elderly gentleman connected with a University.

The newspapers vied with each other building up ingenious theories accounting for the affair, the Coroner's jury found a verdict of suicide, for want of anything better, and the remains were buried.

The reader who desires to get a more detailed account of the affair—as related at the time—can do so by referring to the files of any of the city papers of that date. In fact, I would produce them here did space permit. The main thing, however, is to clear up the mystery of Croftly's remarkable death.

He came to the coast in 1860, and was reputed to be a man of sufficient means to live handsomely on the interest of his money. He stopped a while at the Oriental Hotel, and there met Edward Dean, a young man, who, like himself, was a gentleman of leisure. The two became intimate, and finally, tired of hotel life, they determined to seek quarters which would be more congenial and homelike. They found these quarters at the residence of Richard Armstrong, a casual acquaintance, who lived in very desirable quarters on the corner of Mason and California streets. Before the costly habitations of Stanford, Crocker, and other millionaires sprang into existence, Armstrong's house came very near being called a mansion. Armstrong rented Croftly and Dean three elegant rooms, partly because he liked the men personally, and partly because he was running on a pretty close margin financially. The two found their new quarters as attractive as men of taste could wish. Armstrong was a widower, and the three men had some rare old times together evenings. His cellar was stocked with excellent wines, and his library with books of the very rarest vintage of literature.

One evening a hack drove up to the door, and a woman clad in wraps, bounded up the steps with astonishing vigor and agility, like most Western girls who are blessed with good health and animal spirits. She dashed into the hall in a style that sent a perceptible tremor throughout the house, and fell into old Armstrong's arms. A fusillade of kisses followed.

It was his daughter, Alice.

Next morning the usual formalities of introduction were gone through, and Miss Armstrong became one of the fixtures of the place. A few days before her arrival Professor Croftly had suggested the idea of living somewhere nearer the centre of the city. After Miss Armstrong entered the house, however, no further allusion was made to the proposed removal. The Professor began to pay Miss Armstrong the most devout attentions, and, as a matter of course, she fell madly in love with young Dean who paid her none. It is generally conceded that one of the most effective ways of wooing a woman is to let some other man do it. The woman tires of the indefatigable lover, and the man who treats her with indifference is soon preferred. Some men learn this by experience; Dean discovered it by accident.

He presently began to turn his knowledge to excellent account, and a bitter rivalry sprang up between the two men. Croftly soon realized that he was not the favorite, and never for the life of him could ascertain how a woman could form an attachment for a man who hadn't the remotest idea of chemistry. He forgot that he was somewhat old, and that *some* women dislike to cast their bridal wreaths upon the snow. He finally determined to put his rival out of the way, and set about laying his plans.

After a couple of week's deliberation, he concluded to murder Dean, and do it so neatly and scientifically that discovery would be next to impossible.

One day I was in his room—being an occasional visitor—and observed that he was busily engaged in chemical experiments. Said he: "Did you ever realize that the conditions which result in congelation might be produced chemically?"

I confessed that I had never given the subject much thought.

“Of course, you understand that sudden evaporation causes cold.”

I knew nothing of the kind at the time, but nodded assent rather than acknowledge my ignorance.

“I can produce ice instantaneously,” he continued. “This is my assistant,” pointing to an electric battery. “With a current of say one hundred omes of electricity, I can accelerate enough evaporation to freeze instantly one hundred gallons of water.”

Here the Professor took a basin of water and poured in a small quantity of colorless liquid. “This is ammonia,” said he. “But *this*” —here he added about as much of some other liquid— “is something else.”

“What is it?”

“No one knows but myself.”

I deemed it impertinent to question him further. He then attached the wires of his battery to the water.

“When I make the connecting current the water will become ice.”

I watched, much interested, and he laid his hand on a piece of metal which was part of the apparatus, and the turning of which caused the currents to connect. He turned the brass piece, and instantly a cloud of vapor rose from the water. Crystals shot from the sides of the basin with astonishing rapidity, and there was a sharp, crackling sound as the water expanding in it caused a strain upon the basin, which pressed out the sides.

“With five hundred omes,” continued the Professor, “I can freeze five hundred cubic feet of water.”

I left the house, much impressed with the discovery made by the Professor, and a few days afterward learned of his death. The public considered it a case of suicide. I made a careful examination of the premises, and came to a different conclusion. It was the hand of Alice Armstrong that killed Professor Croftly.

Let us go back a little. After the Professor realized what could be done with his new appliance of electricity, he determined to utilize it in the murder of Dean. He hit upon the grand idea of freezing him in the bath.

“She will not love him cold,” he said, and began to arrange his plans. Dean was fond of the bath. He retired at midnight, and always took a bath just before. The bathroom of Armstrong’s house was an exceptionally good one. It was situated but a short distance from the suite occupied by the Professor and Dean. The tank was of marble, eight feet wide, ten feet-long, and six feet deep, capable of holding four hundred and eighty cubic feet of water. Croftly connected the bath with his own room by means of wires. One entered the bath by the waste-pipe. He reached this by digging in the garden under the pretext of planting flowers. The wire ran down the side of the

house and into the ground. It was concealed from observation by a lilac bush. The other was connected with the pipe which furnished water. He bored a hole in the wall and found the pipe, as he expected, running in the rear of the room close to the floor. He then increased the jars of his battery, and raised its strength to five hundred omes.

No suspicion was excited by this, as he had been for months before making electrical experiments. His apparatus was fixed on a stand near the wall, and the wires from it connected with those leading to the bath. When the apparatus was removed its wires would be pulled away from the others, and no trace would be left of previous connection.

On the night of the 3d of July all was in readiness. Croftly laid his plans with nicety and deliberation. Dean always took a bath before retiring, which was about midnight. In the morning Croftly had purchased two seats at the Metropolitan Theatre and given them to Armstrong who took his daughter to the play. By eight o'clock everything was quiet in the house. Croftly knew that he was safe from interruption until eleven o'clock, and perhaps later.

He now began to work in earnest. He filled the tank with water, and then tested his wires over and over again. Everything was in splendid working order. He calculated that he could embed his rival in ice about midnight, and then turn on hot water. In the morning there would be no trace left of the freezing. He rubbed his hands with delight, and then poured in the chemical proportions, wherein lay the secret of his discovery. Having done this, he went back to his room and laid the two connecting wires of his apparatus side by side upon the instrument. It was now nine o'clock. He turned the gas up to a full blaze to disperse the shadows, took an easy chair, and determined to read until Dean's return. The silence of the house became unbearable, and the sultriness of the apartment more and more oppressive. His excitement began to tell upon him, and he was no longer cool. The man who is about to kill, suffers more pangs than he who knows he is about to die. Croftly paced up and down the apartment, and then a strange fascination drew him toward the bath. He entered the room again and stood gazing into the motionless water in the tank and murmured to himself: "Four hundred and eighty cubic feet, five hundred omes.

There was a gas jet above the tank, and its faint glow was reflected in the water. To Croftly the atmosphere seemed to have been generated in a blast-furnace. The water looked cool and refreshing. There was yet more than an hour. Croftly turned the catch of the door from force of habit, and, throwing off his clothes, plunged in. He could discover no disagreeable trace of the chemicals, and once more he felt the delightful sensation of being cool. It was so agreeable that he began to reflect in his mind whether he would not continue to enjoy the bath and postpone the murder.

Suddenly the hall door was slammed, and he heard the voice of Miss Armstrong talking with her father. The pair had indeed returned, having left the theatre because they did not care to be bored with Mrs. Bowers' hackneyed rendering of "Queen Elizabeth." Passing along the hall, they saw the Professor's door open, and the gas in full blast. Armstrong hated to see anything go to waste, and told his daughter to go in and lower the gas, as the room was unoccupied. Miss Armstrong went in, as directed, and her father passed up-stairs. While alone the girl could not resist the temptation to pull a little note from her bosom and read it again. She had received it that morning, and had already perused it about twenty times. It read:

DEAR ALICE:—Will you be my wife? Yours,

EDWARD DEAN.

Dean was a young man who, when he had anything to say, said it at once, and stopped on reaching the point.

She pored over the letter about five minutes, and then returning it to its place, looked about her. Her eye presently fell on the instrument connected with Croftly's battery. She took up one of the wires, and she dropped it across its mate. A spark flashed out, which startled her. She drew back, lowered the gas, and went to bed.

At the instant the wires were connected, Croftly was in the centre of the bath. A shock and terrible chill passed through his frame, and he felt a cloud of vapor rising from the surface of the water and sweeping into his face. Myriads of spear-like crystals shot out from the edge of the tank, and converged toward him like so many shafts of death. He realized his situation, and dashed to reach the steps; as he did so, he threw himself against the jagged edge of a sheet of ice half an inch thick. There was a frightful gash in his side, from which blood was streaming. He struggled madly amid the ice, and every throe brought fresh wounds. His limbs moved no longer in water; they were enveloped in slush. The ice closed about him like a vice.

After the evaporation of the chemicals the electricity no longer had any effect, and the heat of the room began to tell upon the ice. The mass melted, and by four o'clock in the morning the corpse of Croftly was floating upon the surface of the bath. He was not missed until nine o'clock next morning, when Dean burst open the door and found him as described.

The rest is known. The jury gave a verdict of suicide and Miss Armstrong and Edward Dean were married on the 22d of the same month.

Sam Post Davis, *Short Stories*, San Francisco: Golden Era, 1886