

A New Jersey Mystery

A Remarkable Story Told by the Late
James Leonard, Police Inspector, Jersey City

[From the *Galaxy* for March]

One Spring morning, during the first year of the war, 1861, a barrel of pitch was found to have disappeared from a Jersey City Pier, and the Porter in charge, when reporting the fact to his employers, took occasion to speak of the river thieves in no very complimentary terms.

On the same day, Ada Ricard, a woman of nomadic habits, and dubious status, but of marvelous beauty, suddenly left her hotel in New York without taking the trouble to announce her departure or state her destination. The clerks of the house only remarked that some women had queer ways.

A few days after these simultaneous events the same porter who had mourned the lost pitch, happened to look down from the end of his pier when the tide was out, saw a small and shapely human foot protruding above the waters of the North river. It was a singular circumstance, for the bodies of the drowned never float in such a fashion; but the porter, not stopping to speculate upon it, procured the necessary assistance, and proceeded to land the body. It came up unusually heavy, and when at last brought to the surface, was found to be made fast by a rope round the waist to the missing barrel of pitch. There was a gag securely fastened in the mouth, and these two circumstances were positive evidence that murder had been done.

When the body was landed on the pier, it was found to be in a tolerable state of preservation, although there were conclusive signs that it had been in the water for some time. It was the body of a female, entirely nude, with the exception of an embroidered linen chemise and one lisle thread stocking, two sizes larger than the foot, yet exactly fitting the full rounded limb. The face and contour of the form were, therefore, fully exposed to examination, and proved to be those of a woman who must have been very handsome. There was the cicatrice of an old wound on a lower limb, but otherwise there was no spot or blemish on the whole body.

In due time the body was buried; but the head was removed, and preserved in the office of the city physician, with the hope that it might be the means of establishing the identity of the dead, and leading to the detection of the murderer.

The police on both sides of the river were intently interested in the case; but they found themselves impotent before the head of a woman, who seemed to have never been seen upon earth in life. They could do nothing, therefore, but wait patiently for whatever developments time might bring.

Chance finally led to the desired information. A gentleman who had known her intimately for two years, happening to see the head, at once declared it to be that of Ada Ricard. The detectives eagerly clutched at this thread, and were soon in possession of the coincidence in time of her disappearance and that of the barrel of pitch to which the body was lashed. They further found that, since that time, she had not been seen in the city, nor could any trace of her be discovered in

other sections of the country through correspondence with the police authorities of distant cities. They had thus a woman lost and a body found, and the case was considered to be in a most promising condition.

The next step was to establish the identity, by the testimony of those who had known the missing woman most intimately. The detectives, therefore, instituted a search, which was finally successful, for Charles Ricard, her putative husband. He had not lived with her for some time, and had not even seen or heard from her for months; but his recollection was perfect, and he gave a very minute statement of her distinguishing marks. He remembered that she had persisted on wearing a pair of very heavy ear-rings, until their weight had slit one of her ears entirely, and the other nearly so, and that, as a consequence, both had been pierced a second time, and unusually high up. He regretted that her splendid array of teeth had been marred by the loss of one upon the left side of the mouth, and told how a wound had been received, whose cicatrice appeared upon one of her limbs, stating exactly its location. He dwelt with some pride upon the fact that she had been forced by the unusual development to wear stockings too large for her feet, and gave a general description of her hair, cast of face and height and weight, that was valuable, because minute.

When he gave this statement he was not aware of the death of his wife, or of the finding of her body, and without being informed of either fact he was taken to Jersey City, and suddenly confronted with the head. The instant he saw it he sank into a chair in horror.

His statement having been compared with the head and record of the body, the similitude was found to be exact, except as to the teeth. The head had one tooth missing on each side of the mouth, and this fact having been called to his attention, Ricard insisted that she had lost but one when he last saw her, but it was highly probable the other had been forced out in the struggle which robbed her of her life, and the physicians, for the first time making a minute examination, found that the tooth on the right side had been forced from its place, but was still adhering to the gum. He easily pushed it back to its proper position, and there was the head without a discrepancy between it and the description of Ada Ricard.

The detectives found other witnesses, and also the hairdresser who acted in that capacity for Ada Ricard during many months, who, in common with all others, fully confirmed the evidence of Charles Ricard. The identity of the murdered woman was therefore established beyond question.

Naturally the next step was to solve the mystery of her death. The detectives went to work with their usual caution, but persisted in the task they had assigned themselves, and were slowly gathering the shreds of her life, to weave from them the thread that would lead to the author of her tragical death, when they were suddenly "floored," to use their energetic expression. Ada Ricard herself appeared at a down-town New York hotel, in perfect health and unscathed person.

The explanation was simple. The whim had suddenly seized her to go to New Orleans, and she had gone without leave-taking or warning. It was no usual thing in her wandering life, and her speedy return was due only to the fact that she found the Southern city only a military camp under the iron rule of Gen. Butler, and therefore an unprofitable field for her.

The ghastly head became more of a mystery than ever before. The baffled detectives could only look at it helplessly, and send descriptions of it over the country. At last it was seen by a woman named Callahan, living in Boston, who was in search of a daughter who had gone astray. She instantly pronounced it to be that of her child, and she was corroborated by all the members of her family and several of her neighbors. The identification was no less specific than before, and the perplexed authorities, glad at last to know something certain, gave Mr. Callahan an order for the body. Before, however, he had completed the arrangements for its transfer to Boston, a message reached them that her daughter was lying sick at Bellevue hospital, and so the head once more became a mystery. And such it always has remained. The body told that it was a female who had been delicately reared, who had fared sumptuously, and had been arrayed in costly fabrics, had been foully done to death, just as she was stepping into the dawn of womanhood—and that is all that is known. Her name, her station, her history, her virtues, or it may be frailties, all went down with her life, and were irrevocably lost. There is every probability that her case will be classed as unfinished business.

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