

A Scrap of Paper
How it Convicted a Man of Murder —
A Remarkable, True Story

Stockton [Cal.] Independent

“Speaking of circumstantial evidence,” said a gentleman from Contra Costa county, yesterday, to a reporter of The Independent, with whom he had been talking about the murder trial, “calls to my mind the conviction of Robert Lyle in my county, last January, of the murder of Patrick Sullivan, and I consider it the strangest case, and one on which was the best detective work done that was ever my fortune to meet with. It is a famous case, and has occupied the courts since the year 1881, and gave the officers more trouble to secure a conviction than a dozen ordinary murder cases. They had hardly anything to work on at first, but stuck to it with the persistence of bloodhounds on the track of a victim, finally securing a conviction almost wholly on the finding of a small piece of newspaper.”

The reporter became interested, and suggested that the gentleman give an account of the affair, which he did in the following language:

THE CRIME.

“Sullivan was a prosperous farmer and stock raiser, living on Wildcat creek, in the southern part of Contra Costa county, and Lyle was a near neighbor. The latter was always getting into trouble with his neighbors and going to law, particularly with Sullivan. In these suits he was generally on the wrong side of the question, and, of course, got worsted, which enraged him to such a degree that he was injudicious enough to make threats against Sullivan’s life, at one time telling the latter’s son that his father would fail to come home some night. On the morning of the day of the murder Sullivan left his home with his team and went to town, where he had a trifling lawsuit with Lyle, before a justice of the peace, in which he was beaten. The prophecy of Lyle was fulfilled, for Sullivan never returned to his home alive. The next morning he was found dead, with his team in a field not far from his home, his arm hanging over the whiffletree and his body lying upon the ground. The first conclusion was that the team had run away with him, thrown him out, dragged him and broken his neck. This theory was strengthened by the fact there was a plainly marked trail for 250 yards, evidently made by his body. No marks of blood were on his clothes, and no evidence that crime had been committed. At the inquest, when the clothes of the dead man were removed, it was found that he had been murdered by some one who had

SHOT HIM IN THE BACK.

Several of the shots had entered his body, one of them penetrating the heart and two of them embedding themselves in the back of the wagon seat. I attended the trial and took a great interest in it. He was heard to pass the house of man named Davis about nine o’clock on the night of the murder. The road passed near the house of Lyle, so that if the latter so desired he could lie in ambush and kill him.

“When the officers examined the spot where the murder was committed, they found the

footprints of a man leading to and from Lyle's house over the ploughed ground to the place where Sullivan had fallen out of his wagon. They at once suspected that Lyle had something to do with the crime, and went to his house, where he was found eating his dinner. They told him he was suspected of the murder, and they were there to make an investigation. 'I have expected this,' said he, 'because I have had so much difficulty with Sullivan.' He then told the officers to go ahead and make their search, and that they could not find anything criminating about his place. On two pegs on the wall the officers found a double-barreled shot-gun, one of the barrels of which was moist on the inside, and had evidently been recently discharged. Some buck-shot were found, although Lyle denied having any, and on the shelf by the buckshot was found a crumpled piece of *The San Francisco Call*, a part of which had been torn off. Lyle was arrested and lodged in jail at Martinez, after which one of the officers took the prisoner's boots and went to the scene of the supposed ambush, where he found in the brush alongside the road the imprints of a man's knees. The boots were found

TO FIT THE TRACKS

in the soft ground perfectly, and at this stage of the investigation the Alameda officers offered to hand over the case to the Contra Costa officers, but were detailed by the district attorney to work it up.

The officer continued the weaving of the chain of circumstantial evidence, and again returned to the scene of the murder. He went to the place where the tracks of the man's knees had been found and about thirty feet from that spot found a small piece of paper that had evidently been used as wadding for a gun. It was a bit of newspaper, crumpled and powder-burned, but not so much so that the print could not be plainly read. At the trial the business manager of *The Call* identified the piece of paper as a part of an advertisement that had been printed in the paper on the same day and date as the paper found in Lyle's house. The little innocent looking piece of paper was what completed the chain of circumstantial evidence, and consigned Lyle to San Quentin. It was further shown that on the night of the murder, between the hours of 8 and 9 o'clock, a woman's screams and entreaties had been heard issuing from Lyle's house. It is supposed that it was Mrs. Lyle, who knew that her husband was starting out to kill Sullivan, and tried to prevent his going. Notwithstanding the plain evidence in the case it took three trials to convict the cold-blooded murderer, and the last jury found him guilty of murder in the first degree, a verdict that caused the greatest dissatisfaction. I don't generally believe in hanging a man on circumstantial evidence, but that chain was so strong that no doubt could be entertained of his guilt. As a strange case it beats anything in California's circumstantial history."

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