

The Fatal Potato

“One of the queerest cases I ever had,” said the old detective, “occurred something over twenty years ago. Then I still had much to learn in my business, and, fortunately for me, knew that I had. It was memorable as an illustration of the importance of small things, and I have pigeon holed it in my memory as the ‘affair of the fatal potato.’

“A red headed servant girl, so scared that her eyes stood out like lobster’s, rushed into the station house early one morning, howling that all the police were wanted around at Mr. Morton’s. The sergeant at the desk, supposing there was probably just some row among the servants, grinned at the sight of her and asked what was the matter.

“She gave a whoop of ‘murder’ that raised his hair and startled everyone in the station. The idea of murder in the aristocratic mansion of Mr. Samuel Morton, on Fifth avenue, within five blocks of the station, naturally rather excited us. Two detailed men and myself—I was then ward detective—ran around there as quickly as we could.

“Sure enough, there had been a murder. The cook, a sturdy built, middle aged Englishwoman named Harriet Wardrop, lay on the kitchen floor, in the back basement, with a dirty cotton handkerchief twisted and knotted about her neck, stone dead and quite cold. When she had not sent up her employer’s coffee, which he was accustomed to taking in bed, or answered the bell, the red headed girl came down to see what was the matter, and that was the plight she found her in.

“The last seen of Harriet alive was at near 10 o’clock the night before, when the two upstairs girls left to go to their room in the attic. Her room was in the basement, and she said that she was going to bed in a few minutes. She had had no visitor, never, indeed, had any, was perfectly sober, and seemed to be always a woman of perfectly correct habits. Really, however, not much was known about her, further than that she had come there from Philadelphia seven or eight months before with good references, had behaved herself well and made no confidantes. But she must have admitted to the house the man who choked her.

“There were no signs of any struggle and there had been no robbery. Her gold watch was on the kitchen table, two months wages in her pocket and no attempt seemed to have been made at plunder in the still richer field upstairs. Why had she been killed? It was mysterious. One of the ‘cops’ with me was so puzzled that he declared it must be a case of suicide.

“I saw that she had been strangled, and I wondered what a strong fellow the murderer must have been to have twisted, with fatal effect, so soft a band as a handkerchief about so big and solid a neck and to do it so deftly and powerfully as to prevent an outcry or even a struggle. It takes a good deal of pressure to squeeze in a whole neck so tightly as to cause death.

“But when I came to examine more closely I found that a novel and ingenious device had been employed to make the job easier. Folded into the handkerchief and placed so that it would press directly upon the windpipe, was a potato about the size of a hen’s egg. While turning the tuber over in my hand, I noticed that there were two deep curving cuts in its smooth, creamy skin, such as would be made by finger nails scratching it, and each showed a thin line of blue color. At first I thought nothing of that, for I knew that some potatoes, such as the Neshannocks, have a delicate skin of violet tint under the white outside. But when I looked more carefully I saw that this potato was not a Neshannock, but an Early Rose which—as I soon proved by scratching it—had no such colored second skin, and I observed that the blue color seemed to go deeper than merely the surface.

“Who, I asked myself, would be likely to habitually carry under his finger nails such an abundance of color as would leave deposits like these? Well, a dyer, for one. Yes, of course, a dyer; but there were more dyers in the city, for ought I knew, than one could shake a stick at, and it would be ridiculous to seek a blue handed dyer, since hands that were blue one day might be red or green the next.

“The newspapers, the next day, in their sensational treatment of the incident, characterized it as a profound mystery, and said that the police had ‘absolutely no clew to the murderer.’

“As I had hoped, that encouraged some person who had known Harriet Wardrop to come forward. A small, neatly dressed, respectable looking, middle aged man, with keen, furtive eyes and [a] habitually deprecatory manner, presented himself at the inquest. He came to see if the woman, whose death he had read of in the morning paper, was his wife, from whom he had separated in Philadelphia a year before, and had not seen or heard from since. His name? John Wardrop. His occupation? Dyer. Where did he work? With Henri Detaille & Co., Parisian dyers, on Bleecker street. Yes, the dead woman was his wife. He recognized her perfectly, and the sight made him weep. Poor woman, she was hard to get along with, but she had a good heart.

“I made an excuse of his signing a formal recognition to get him to take off his gloves. His hand was of a brilliant orange tint. While the coroner kept him in attendance at the inquest I hurried to Detaille & Co.’s dye house to ask some questions.

“Yes, John Wardrop worked there. He was a quiet, steady man and an excellent workman. They had employed him about ten months. Did they know anything more about him? No, except that they fancied there was likely to be a match between him and Jane Blair, a good looking, plump woman about 30 years old, who had been their cashier for several years. Had they done any dark blue dyeing lately? Yes, only the day before yesterday. Who did the work? John Wardrop.

“I saw Jane Blair. With a good deal of hesitancy she admitted that she and John Wardrop were engaged to be married as soon as he got a divorce from a bad wife who had left him, and expected that he would soon be free. Was she well informed as to his habits? Perfectly. They boarded in the same house, on West Washington place, and he very

seldom went out in the evening. Did he go out the night before last? No; they parted on the stairs going to their respective rooms at twenty minutes before 10 o'clock, their usual hour for retiring. He could have gone out afterward without her knowing it? Yes, but of course he didn't.

“When I got back to the inquest the coroner's jury had just returned a verdict that the deceased had come to her death by violence at the hand or hands of some person unknown. I had made up my mind to arrest John Wardrop on suspicion, but was in no hurry about it. As I had not been on the stand I did not have to tell anything of my suspicions and the potato could not give anything away, for I had it safely in my pocket, wrapped in tissue paper. The reporters went away to write the case up as a profounder mystery than before. John Wardrop went to borrow some money from his employers to give his poor wife decent burial. And I, having taken time to get a warrant for his arrest, I followed him.

“He paled slightly and showed some embarrassment when I entered the dye-room, where he was doing some work that had to be done by him and could not wait until the morrow. Still he controlled himself, and sought to cover his nervousness by talking. I said little and let him talk on which was the worst thing he could have done, for thinking up so many words led him away, now and then, from the straight story he had made up. At last, when I deemed the time ripe for it, I slipped the potato out of my pocket and, suddenly holding it up before him, said:

“‘You should have washed your hands before you grabbed this potato out of the dishpan on the table.’

“He threw up his hands with a shriek and sank down on a bench, all limp and broken up. Before he could recover himself he confessed. He and Harriet had quarreled for years and finally separated. Then after a time she had made up her mind to get possession of him again, found where he was and sent him word that he must visit her late at night, when she would be alone, to discuss the situation. He went, but the sight of her and thoughts of Jane Blair, with whom he had fallen in love in the meantime, since parting with his wife, made him desperate.

“I asked him how he had managed to strangle her so quietly and without any struggle, when she seemed to have double his strength. He explained that he possessed sufficient mesmeric force to render her passive, and had employed it on that occasion.

“Having rendered her completely unconscious by mesmerizing her, the rest was easy. I could not help feeling some sympathy for him when he said she was a ‘tartar,’ still business was business, and when I had heard him through I told him:

“‘Now, John, get your coat on and come along.’

“‘In a moment, sir. Let me wash off some of this dye first.’

“I assented. He washed, pouring some stuff over his hands from a bottle, to take the color out, as I supposed. Suddenly he turned the bottle up to his lips and took a big swallow of its contents before I could jump to him and grab him. As I seized him the bottle dropped to the floor and smashed, while he dropped into my arms as dead as a maul. Cyanide of potassium, as I subsequently learned, was his final nip, but it was the fatal potato that killed him.—*Cincinnati Post*.

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