

## *Will Murder Out?*

---

In the year 1851 Captain John Buckson lived, with his wife Nancy, in a handsome cottage in the village of Seakonk, near Providence, Rhode Island, in the enjoyment of a competence acquired by many years of frugal industry. He was however often absent from home, as he still pursued his vocation, and was master of the sloop "Oregon," plying between Providence and Norfolk, Virginia.

He had then reached his fiftieth year, and his hard, seafaring life had not made him look younger than he was. He was tall, gaunt and angular, weather-stained and storm beaten. His short, stiff hair was grizzled, and his long, narrow face furrowed by deep lines, but his physical powers appeared to be still untouched, and he seemed assured of a long continuance of active life.

His temperament was favorable to a lusty longevity. He was patient, and apparently so passionless that he stared at the cares and troubles of life as at strangers with whom he could not possibly have dealings. He avoided quarrels and all unseemliness with scrupulous care, and was known on his vessel and in his village only as a sedate, Godfearing man, kind hearted and even tempered.

But he had positive points in his character, and the requisite friction would produce the natural glow. As in all equable men, his anger burned with dim light but intense heat, and hence, with him, a knitting of the brows or twitching of the hands meant more than the wildest signs of passion in other men, and his word of wrath was weightier than the brawler's blow. But he so loved peace, and so sedulously courted it, that his most intimate associates remembered as memorable epochs the rare occasions when his temper had given way.

The only trouble of his life brooded upon his own hearthstone. Mrs. Nancy Buckson was many years his junior in age, and in important respects his opposite in character. To her youth she added comeliness of person. Though a thoroughly good woman at heart, she yet embittered her life and his by constant efforts to do more than her duty. Nervous and irritable, she became fretfully voluble in her assertions of her own merits and his shortcomings. So, in the Summer of 1851, the neighbors began to pity poor Captain John as a henpecked husband, and the inroads of the wife upon the domestic quietude were noticed as of constantly-increasing frequency and bitterness. Captain John, however, bore the infliction with his accustomed patience.

But the end was at hand. One evening, in the last week in July, a neighbor, James Pauls, in passing the house, heard Nancy's tongue going at an unusual rate, and glancing through the windows, saw Buckson standing before her. He seemed roused at last, and although Pauls could not hear his words, he saw the knitted brows and twitching hands, in one of which a stout whipcord was convulsively grasped. The scene was indelibly stamped by after events upon the memory of the accidental witness, and he could always see, even to the most minute details, the enraged woman, confronted by that quiet, concentrated man, struggling with his passion and fidgeting with a whipcord. At the time, however, Pauls gave no especial weight to the circumstance, and stopping at the village inn on his way home, only casually remarked to the inevitable loungers that he "reckoned Nancy would keep on a-naggin' of Captain John until she riled him." The next morning the cottage was closed and deserted, but the circumstance did not

excite remark . Buckson, it was presumed had gone to Providence to prepare his sloop for sea, and Nancy had a habit of making sudden [pilgrimages] to the neighboring towns. The event, then, was so far from being suspicious that it was not even unusual.

In those days a magnificent forest stretched to the northward from the little town, interspersed with patches of open land where the blackberry grew in great abundance. This wonder and delight of the American glades had fully ripened under the hot July sun, and the children of the village were busily employed in gathering the fruit. That afternoon the patches were unusually crowded. One group of children started home just before sundown, taking their way direct through the wood, without regard to beaten paths. They had gone but a short distance when the little dog that was with them stopped and began to sniff eagerly at a spot of ground which appeared to have been recently disturbed. Giving a long, mournful howl, the dog scratched furiously with his paws in the sand, and in a moment had uncovered a human hand. Howling more mournfully than before, he bounded off a couple of feet and tore at the ground with redoubled energy. He soon completed his task, and the children saw a woman's face, pale and rigid, imbedded in the moist, clayey earth. With but one glance at the horror, they dropped their pails and fled to the village. The dog detective remained yelping over the crime he had unearthed.

Every village, probably, has its sensation at some time, and that of Seakonk came with the story of the children. As the tidings spread from house to house, the people gathered at the inn and eagerly discussed what should be done and who should do it. At last all the male inhabitants, headed by the Squire, bearing a lantern, and piloted by the children, started out to investigate the matter. But the pilots were not needed, as the dog still maintained his watch; and with his mournful howlings echoing through the dim woods, the party could not go astray. Reaching the spot, they gathered around it, and the Squire advanced and, kneeling down, wiped the dirt from the face of the dead woman with the skirt of his coat. Then he held the lantern over it.

“It's Nancy Buckson!”

He fell back a few paces with the exclamation, and his companions turned to imitate the conduct of the children shortly before. They rallied, however, at his summons, and fell vigorously to work to exhume the body. A few shovelful of earth, and the body of a woman, without shroud or coffin, but fully dressed in the ordinary garments of life, was exposed. About the body a white substance was plentifully sprinkled, and was found to be chloride of lime, doubtless placed there to insure speedy decomposition.

Every one recognized poor Nancy Buckson, and saw the ridged and livid mark on the neck, pointed out by the Squire. It was plain that she had been murdered by strangulation, and tossed, dressed as she was at the moment of her violent death, into the rude grave where the dog had found her.

The neighbor, Pauls, now recalled the quarrel of the preceding day, and told how Captain John had stood before the angry woman, playing with the whipcord. The cottage was searched, and a cord was found lying on the floor of the room, which, when tried upon the woman's neck, fitted exactly the ridged and livid circle. In the cellar was a quantity of a white substance precisely

similar so that found in the grave, and those articles belonging to Mrs. Buckson, found upon the corpse, were missing from the house. There could be no more doubt as to the criminal than the crime.

Captain John Buckson was not found in the village nor in Providence; but it was ascertained that he had sailed with his sloop, and the presumption was raised that he intended to touch at New York, and there, leaving the vessel, seek to elude the officers of the law in the labyrinth of the great city. A messenger was, therefore, dispatched in great haste to reach the city before him, with a requisition for his arrest.

His authority was placed in the hands of Police Captain Leonard—who searched diligently among the shipping until he found the sloop “Oregon,” moored at an East-river pier. Going on board, Captain Leonard greeted Buckson, who was seated on the deck.

“Good day, sir.”

The sailor scarcely looked up as he mechanically returned the salutation.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, but I’ve a warrant for your arrest.”

“Arrest! For what?”

The exclamation and succeeding question were those of a phlegmatic man slightly astonished.

“For the murder of your wife.”

“Murder of my wife! Squire, that can’t be. Nancy isn’t dead.”

“Yes, she is—strangled with a cord.”

Buckson rose to his feet and, looking the officer steadily in the face, said slowly and solemnly:

“Squire, if Nancy’s dead I don’t know it. I had a quarrel with her the night I left, and gave her a piece of my mind; but God is my witness that I didn’t put a hand upon her!”

The officer looked with some interest upon a man who could thus deny a crime with which he was so clearly linked by circumstantial evidence, but without further parley took him from the sloop and placed him in a cell of the station-house. He made no resistance, and did not trouble himself to again volunteer any protestation of his innocence. While in the station-house, and during the journey to Providence, whenever the question was directly put to him, he always denied his guilt in the same emphatic terms, but he was never the first to broach the subject, and it was especially noticed that he never made any inquiry for the details of the murder.

When the officer and his charge arrived at Seakonk, the latter seemed amazed to find himself the object of universal execration. When he reached the village, and while he walked beside his captor through the street toward the jail, he was surrounded by a hooting mob that pelted him

with opprobrious epithets, and with difficulty was restrained from doing violence to his person. He bore himself bravely and undismayed through it all. But his conduct was noted only to his discredit, and the citizens could not remember any hardened wretch who had ever so flaunted his crime in the face of an outraged people.

In due time the grand jury was convened and his case was considered. There was no more doubt of his guilt in that official body than in the community at large, and he was finally indicted for the murder of Nancy Buckson.

When the news was taken to him in his cell, he only said: "God's will be done!"

His perfect resignation had, by this time, won slightly on the jailer's heart, and he inquired if he did not wish to engage counsel to defend him at the approaching trial. Buckson's face brightened with this first faint sign of sympathy, but he answered:

"I thank you, friend, but I don't need a lawyer. God knows I am innocent of this crime, and He will prove it in His own good time."

The day appointed for the trial of the prisoner was close at hand, when the quiet village was startled by a new terror. One pleasant September morning a ghost descended from the Eastern coach and walked leisurely, with every semblance of life, up the street, toward the long-deserted cottage. It was a horrible ghost, for it nodded familiar greetings to several persons it met upon the way, and, once tried to pat a shrinking child. It almost seemed endowed with human passions, for many were ready to make oath that they saw its cheek flush with anger when it found the entire town avoiding it in unconcealed terror. But it was a persistent ghost, for it walked steadily on until it reached the gate of the garden, which it found nailed up; and it became a talkative ghost when it discovered the pigs running riot in the garden. In the very voice of the dead Nancy Buckson it said, in a peevish tone:

"That John Buckson 'll be the death of me yet! Just see how he lets these pesky hogs root up things!"

It was, indeed, Nancy Buckson herself.

It is needless to prolong the story. On the night of the quarrel Captain John had left, as usual, to take out his sloop, and Nancy, smarting under the severe censure he had, for the first time, expressed, had gone off on foot during the night to a neighboring town, where she was unknown, and had there taken a coach to begin a journey to Maine, to visit a sister. Her absence from the cottage was not known until after the finding of the body, and its identification was so absolute that of course no search was made for a woman known to be dead. On the other hand, she had heard nothing, in a retired spot of a distant State, of her supposed death and the subsequent events, and her return, timely as it was, had been purely accidental. She was horrified when confronted with the results of her thoughtless freak, and, although she made no noisy demonstrations of regret, and was not profuse in promises of amendment in the future, it is pleasant to know that this terrible experience was not without fruit. Buckson was, of course, immediately released from prison, the legal proceedings against him at once dismissed, and

thereafter he found in his home a haven of rest that was a recompense for the suffering by which it had been purchased.

But a mystery has always brooded over the cottage, and the murder always remained an insoluble enigma. Eighteen years have elapsed without a second identification of the body unearthed by the little dog, and, as a consequence, without any detection of the murderer. The clothes in which the body was dressed, and the ear-rings and articles of jewelry upon it, were, undoubtedly, the property of Mrs. Buckson, for, upon her return, she found those articles missing from the house. A close scrutiny of the cottage showed that the woman had not only been there, but had probably been murdered there during the night, after Buckson and his wife had left. The cord found in the room had fitted the neck, and the chloride of lime in the cellar had evidently been disturbed. Many articles of value, too, were gone, and the house generally disarranged. Upon these circumstances a theory was founded that the woman was one of a party of burglars that had entered the cottage, and finding it deserted, had leisurely ransacked it. The woman had arrayed herself in the property of the absent mistress, and afterward some quarrel had arisen and she had been murdered by the other members of the party. Subsequently this theory was, in part, thoroughly established, when a complete female outfit, of coarse material, was accidentally fished out of an old and unused well in the cottage garden.

Detectives are apt to attach the names of noted criminals to extraordinary crimes, and, many years after the events narrated, a rumor was prevalent among the police of Providence that the murdered woman had been the wife of an English burglar named Collins, then living in Providence, and celebrated all over the Union for his success and recklessness. The rumor had no better foundation than that Collins and his wife disappeared at about the time of the murder, and it only lived because theories always thrive when facts are impossible to obtain.

The case yet remains among unfinished police business. No human effort has ever learned more than was discovered by the brute instincts of the dog when he pawed the secret of the murder from the shallow grave in the dark forest.—*The Galaxy*.

*The Western Rural* [Chicago, IL], May 13, 1869