

The Black Tarn

Mysterious Disappearance of an Innkeeper's Daughter—A Discarded Lover's Vengeance

Five or six miles to the north of the small town of Brompton, in Cumberland, England, there is a mountain lake known as Black Tarn. In the neighborhood are sheep farms, and a few insignificant hamlets lie here and there around. In one of these, known as Hayton, a murder was recently perpetrated, accompanied by cruel outrage. At the east end of the village there resided one John Coulter, who kept a beer shop, and cultivated a small farm. He was a rough, uncouth man, addicted to drink, and when he was incapable of attending to his customers who came of a night for beer, his daughter, a comely girl of seventeen, waited upon them. He had a son, also, but he was in Carlisle, learning a trade, and seldom visited his native village.

Coulter was reported to be worth a few hundred pounds, and consequently passed in the neighborhood for a man of means. A young man named Armstrong had been courting his daughter, but he had been driven off by Coulter, for assaulting a farmer who was the latter's friend. Armstrong had quitted the neighborhood, having, as was supposed, enlisted. At that time now referred to, Kate, Coulter's daughter, was receiving as attentions from one George Routledge, the son of a grocer in Brompton.

On the morning of the 10th of last February, Coulter arose late, having been drunk as usual the night before. Hearing no sounds below that would indicate his daughter's being around, he went to the top of the stairs and called her by name. No answer came, and he hastily donned his clothes and descended. The stairs led down into the back kitchen, and when he reached the bottom he saw the door leading into the yard open. Thinking that his daughter might be in the byer, he again called her name, but to no purpose. Then he passed into the bar, which was a small room with a window opening in the main room. The glasses stood around unwashed, there was no fire in the grate, and the disorder showed plainly that Kate had not been at work that morning.

Coulter searched around, but could see nothing of his daughter. The bed in her chamber had not been slept in, and her cloak and bonnet were missing. He summoned one of the neighbors, and when the news got around that Kate Coulter had suddenly disappeared from home a crowd of sympathizers gathered round the father and offered assistance and counsel.

David Redd, a blacksmith, testified that he was the last to quit the inn the night before, and that Kate bade him good night, and drew the bolt in the door. It was then ten o'clock. Peter Steele, the village constable, confirmed Redd's statement, as they were in company, Steele leaving the house only a few minutes before Redd, who remained to get a light for his pipe. Beyond this there was absolutely no testimony.

Coulter, accompanied by his friends, searched the neighborhood for the missing girl, but with no success, George Routledge, her lover, who had been notified, reached the village in the afternoon and joined in the search. Mounted police from Brompton, and then officers from Carlisle, were

speedily on the spot, and the whole country-side was scoured. No traces, however of the lost one were met with.

Days and weeks went by, and the mystery remained unsolved. One day, about a week after the girl's disappearance, Armstrong's old mother put her head in at Coulter's door, and said, in a bitter tone:

“Ah, Mr. Coulter, so you've lost your pretty miss. Now we're even. You drove away my boy, and now the devil has drove away your daughter.”

Then she gave a malignant laugh, and departed.

Toward the middle of March two country lads, amusing themselves around Black Tarn, saw something white among the rushes. On closely examining the object they discovered it to be a human arm. With a branch of a tree they pushed aside the rushes and water-plants, and the body of a female was disclosed. They were at first disposed to run away, but finally resolved to haul out the body. This they did with some difficulty, and laid it on the grass. It was in an excellent state of preservation, owing to the ice, which had just broken up, and the features were perfect. Both the lads identified the corpse as that of the missing girl, Kate Coulter. Covering it with rushes and leaves, they started for the village and informed the grief-stricken father of their discovery. The body was carefully removed to Coulter's house, and a coroner's inquest was held. A surgical examination showed that the girl had been outraged and marks of strangulation were distinctly visible on her throat. The body, when found, was entirely naked, and search was made for the unfortunate girl's clothing. They were found under a pile of stones about two hundred yards from where the corpse was discovered. They were torn and mud-stained, and traces of blood were observable on them. What the object of the murderer was in removing the clothing was beyond comprehension; but that he had an object was evident. A verdict of willful murder against some person or persons unknown was returned by the coroner's jury, and the corpse was interred with becoming solemnity.

A large reward was offered for any information which might lead to the apprehension of the guilty person, and the Lord Lieutenant of the county specially interested himself in the matter, and caused expert detectives to be sent from London to investigate the matter thoroughly. It will be remembered that Kate Coulter disappeared on the night of February 9. The detectives accidentally came across one Robert Johnstone, a shoemaker, who said that on the day mentioned, about 7 o'clock, he was at work in his shop in Brompton, which was on the direct road to Coulter's, when a young man, a stranger, put his head in at the door and asked for a light. It was a very cold night, and the shoemaker asked the man to come in and shut the door. He did so and stood with his back to the shoemaker while he got a light. Johnstone asked him whether he had come by the train from Carlisle, and he said that he had. Johnstone remarked that it was going to be a sharp night, and the young man replied that he judged so, and abruptly quitted the shop.

“What did he light his pipe with?” the officer asked after a pause.

“That’s more than I can say,” Johnstone replied, “though it may be he took a bit of paper from his pocket.”

“How often do you sweep your shop?” the detective asked.

The shoemaker laughed and said:

“Once a year, maybe.”

Then the detective, very much to the surprise of the shoemaker, went to work examining the floor carefully all over. Then he began in one corner and lifted everything from the floor, replacing it where he found it. After he had been at work over ten minutes he came across a fragment of an envelope, burnt at one end. This he carefully scrutinized, and putting it in his pocket, departed.

The same night a consultation was held, and the detective exhibited his scrap of paper. As before said, it was part of an envelope, and on it was writing. The writing was blurred and almost illegible, but the words “private John” could be deciphered.

Whether the writing was a man’s or woman’s it was hard to say, but the general impression was that it was a woman’s. Coulter instinctively associated the latter with young Armstrong, Kate’s former lover, who, as before stated, had been driven from the house by her father, and had, as was supposed, enlisted. The jeering words of Armstrong’s mother came up fresh to Coulter’s memory: “Ah, Mr. Coulter, so you’ve lost your pretty miss! Now we’re even. You drove away my boy and the devil has driven away your girl.”

The officers resolved to search Mrs. Armstrong’s cottage, as there might have been some indication of her son’s having been recently there. They went down at once and aroused the old woman, who was dozing by the fire.

“What d’ye want with me and mine?” she asked, querulously; “this is no time o’ night to disturb a body.”

On being informed that officers of the law demanded admission, she opened the door and boldly confronted them.

“Take what you can find,” she said, “that belongs to other than me.”

The officers began a careful search of the place, and were rewarded by finding a pair of boots stowed away under the floor, bearing on them traces of the peculiar black mud found on the borders of the black Tarn, from which, and the singularly dark hue of its waters, it derived its name.

“Whose boots are these?” the officer asked.

“They were my son’s” replied the old woman, “before they drove him away from home.”

“When did he leave home?” the detective inquired.

“In November, ’74,” the old woman answered quickly.

“Did he put the boots under the floor?” the officer asked.

“Deed did he the very day he left home,” Mrs. Armstrong replied.

“You saw him do it?” the detective inquired.

“Saw him with my own eyes,” was the reply.

“And that was when?” the officer asked.

“The very day he left home, November 5, ’74,” Mrs. Armstrong answered.

“And he wrapped up the boots then as they were when I found them, and put them under the floor?” the officer said.

“So help me God, that’s what he did, sir,” the old woman answered.

“This is a Carlisle newspaper in which the boots were wrapped, and it bears the date February 9, 1875—the very day on the night of which Kate Coulter was murdered.”

Before the officer had finished the sentence, Mrs. Armstrong dropped to the ground in a swoon. A neighbor was called to attend her and the officers left. There was no doubt on their minds that Armstrong was the man who visited the shoemaker’s in Brompton, that he was the “Private John” whose name had been on the half-burnt envelope, and that he was outrager and murderer of Kate Coulter.

But how had he communicated with his victim, as he must have done? And how had she been enticed to the Black Tarn?

These were questions to which the officers sought an answer in vain. They went to work, however, immediately to hunt down the perpetrator of the abominable crime.

Mrs. Armstrong refused stubbornly to answer any questions, although it was judged proper to arrest her as accessory after the crime. All that could be got out of her were those bitter words:

“He drove away my son, and the devil drove away his daughter!”

It was easily ascertained that one Private John Armstrong had deserted from the 45th Regiment of Infantry stationed at Manchester, in February, and that nothing had been heard of him since. His description answered to the person of young Armstrong, Kate’s former lover, in every particular. What puzzled the detectives most was that nobody had seen Armstrong on the road or

in the village before the murder, and that although he had evidently been home to his mother's after the crime was perpetrated, he had been seen by no one. Descriptions of the man had been sent by telegraph all over England, and the officers awaited in Carlisle some information that would give them a clew to his whereabouts. That information came in an unexpected manner.

Mrs. Armstrong, who was confined in Carlisle jail, asked that her brother, who was a shipwright at Cockermouth, a seaport not far distant, might be informed of her condition. This was done, and a letter was sent by the jailers to his address. The same day the officers were informed of the fact, and they resolved to go down to Cockermouth, entertaining a faint hope that the man for whom they were looking might be there. They found Mrs. Armstrong's brother, whose name was Reuben, at his work, and represented themselves as two lawyers who had undertaken his sister's case, without mentioning what her trouble was.

"I expected it would get her into trouble," was Reuben's remark, which showed that he knew about the crime. This information he might have got from the newspapers, but still it struck the detective of a knowledge acquired from another source. As they were conversing with Reuben, they observed a man watching them from the adjoining smithy.

"You had better come with us and see your sister," one of the officers said: "Go and ask the foreman's leave, and refer him to us, if necessary, for an explanation."

Reuben said he would do so and turned toward the officer at the gate.

"Now let us see what is in that smithy," one of the detectives said, and grasping their revolvers in the pockets of their overcoats, they moved in the direction indicated. As they reached the door they heard a crash, and saw the figure of a man passing through the roof near the chimney.

"Round there and watch the outside," said one of the officers as he sprang into the smithy. But the man had disappeared, and rushing forth the officer was just in time to see the fugitive spring from the roof. As he reached the ground he fell, and before he could rise the grip of both detectives was upon him.

He was secured in a moment, and proved to be the man they wanted.

He was tried at the Carlisle Assizes in April last, and convicted by overwhelming evidence. Before the time for his execution arrived, he wrenched apart one of the bars of his cell door, and with jagged edge inflicted a terrible wound on his throat, from the effect of which he died in a few hours.

By what means he induced Kate Coulter to quit the house with him on the fatal night and accompany him to the Black Tarn remains a mystery. It is probable, however, that the girl had some lingering regard for her former lover, and was led out of pure goodness of heart to grant him an interview. Why he removed her clothing can only be guessed. The Tarn was frozen over, and here and there holes had been made for the fish. Through one of these holes the murderer must have forced the body, and finding that the clothes, which were woollen, stuck to the ice and

prevented the body from going under, the supposition is that he stripped the corpse and concealed the apparel where it was subsequently found.

The Jackson [OH] Standard, November 18, 1875

The Toledo Chronicle [IA], November 18, 1875

Wood County Reporter [WI], November 18, 1875

Crawford County Bulletin [IA], November 25, 1875

The Lake County Star [MI], November 25, 1875

Fair Play [MO], December 2, 1875

The Andrew County Republican [MO], December 3, 1875