

Who Milked the Cows?

by T. C. Harbaugh

The commission of the crime of murder never produced a profounder impression on any community than did the affair known as "The Hattie Robson Case," which startled a quiet neighborhood in the western part of Pennsylvania about thirty years ago.

And it is singular that the discovery of the perpetrator of the heinous crime should hinge upon the simple milking of several cows on the morning and night of the 27th of April, 1841.

Hattie Robson was the young widow of a farmer, who, after departing this life, left her a goodly sum in ready cash and a farm whose broad acres, noted for their fertility; trended to the banks of the Susquehanna. It was natural that some of Hattie's suitors, during the days of her boyhood, should resume their attentions at the expiration of her time of mourning, for now she was well situated, and could make life comfortable, even luxurious, for the second husband of her choice.

She dwelt several miles from the nearest town, in a neighborhood rather thickly settled. Occasionally she visited some neighbors, but, on the whole, she was not liked on account of certain reports which evil-disposed persons had circulated against her. Hattie Robson, despite her coquetry, was a good woman, and that she died such there is no doubt.

One afternoon, a youth passing the farmhouse noticed a peculiar and offensive odor, which seemed to emanate from the building. He stopped and proceeded to investigate, thinking that one of the widow's dogs lay dead somewhere on the premises, and resolved to inform her if his surmises were correct. But, as he approached the house, the odor became so disgusting and full of nausea that he believed it to arise from the decomposition of a human body.

It was a warm day in April, spring being very forward, and a swarm of flies started from the door, which stood ajar. The young man was now determined to proceed, and recollecting that he had not seen the widow for several days, though he passed the house frequently during that time, passed over the threshold. The front door opened into the widow's sitting-room, or parlor, adjoining which was her bedchamber.

It was from this latter apartment that the sickening smell emanated, as the boy soon discovered.

The sight that greeted him as he opened the door which led into the boudoir was enough to appall the stoutest heart.

On a bed, and half disrobed, lay the bloated form of Hattie Robson. A glance told the youth that she was dead, and the cleft skull also gave a startling aspect to the hideous sight.

The daring boy did not investigate further, but left the house in haste and spread the report that the widow had been murdered.

Now, in the community such a crime had never been known, and it is not surprising that the youth's excited description of his adventure should be taken with some allowance. But there were a few who proceeded to the farmhouse, and satisfied themselves of the boy's truthfulness. The excitement that followed the confirmation soon became intense, and the medical men who examined the corpse declared that Hattie Robson had been dead for at least three days.

This opinion immediately created remark, for there were people ready to swear that on the day prior to the boy's discovery they had seen the widow milking her cows in the barnyard. Her farmhand had left a week previous to visit relatives in an adjoining State, and the widow had taken care of the stock in person.

It needed no proof that a woman who had been dead for three days could not milk her cows thirty-six hours after the separation of soul and body. The physicians adhered to their opinion, and the particular neighbors would not retract one of their asseverations. Though they were not near the house at the time mentioned, they knew it was Hattie Robson, for the light-blue dress and the gray shawl were the distinguishing features of the habit of the woman who had milked the cows.

The wound in the widow's head had been made by a sharp-edged instrument, and a hatchet found under the front step was declared to be the murderous weapon. There was blood and hair upon its steel, and the marks of bloody fingers on the handle. It belonged to the widow, as was well-known. There were few signs of a struggle in the little bedchamber; but it was evident that the widow had been surprised at her hour of retiring. A broken chair and an overturned stand, with a rent in the widow's underclothes, were the only signs of a struggle left behind by the assassin.

An examination of the premises, made under the eye of the county magistrate, revealed the fact that no article of value was missing save the widow's jewels, of little worth, and inferior metal. This discovery seemed to say that the crime had not been perpetrated for the sake of robbery, for a large sum of money was of easy access. Revenge appeared to have been the motive, and the assassin in his sweep of crime had come across the jewelry, which he had appropriated, perhaps, to appease some recalcitrant mistress.

Hattie Robson was buried, and the reward offered by the county failed to throw any light upon the affair. The people who averred that they had seen Hattie milking her cows on the morning and night of the 27th of April still maintained their ground whenever the matter was brought up in their presence. No detective came to work up the case; the reward was so meager that no manhunter with a growing reputation could afford to dabble in it. It was pretty generally believed

that for once the medical fraternity were mistaken, and that the widow had milked her cows at the times referred to.

Among the doctors who held the postmortem over the widow's corpse was a late graduate named Bullock. He was a young man of strong proclivities, hard to convince in an argument, and chagrined when disputed. He fought the argument that the widow had attended to her stock on the 27th, and his earnestness soon drew upon him much dislike. His practice began to decline; but he proclaimed his expressed opinion the louder, even going so far as to declare that the person who had milked the cows was the murderer.

One morning the doctor found the following note on his table. It had been slipped into the office by the window during the night:

“DR. BULLOCK. You had better be careful how you talk about the milking of the cows. Are you trying to make out that a woman killed Hattie Robson? If you do not bridle your tongue you must leave the neighborhood, or take the consequences. This is from a friend who does not want to see you get into trouble.”

There was no signature to this communication.

“I do believe that a woman killed Hattie Robson!” the doctor said aloud, when he had finished the perusal of the note, “I am not going to leave this community until I find out, and then I may not go.”

The next moment Bullock was looking over a mass of papers which he kept in an office drawer[.] They were orders for medicine which his patrons had sent by their children and others. He was comparing the chirography of each with that of the mysterious note. At last he struck one which made his eyes glitter with triumph, and a comparison showed that the handwriting of both were the same.

The little order ran as follows[:]

DOCT. BULLOCK Send me another vial of the neuralgia medicine by Johnny

MRS. DAVIS

Having discovered to his satisfaction the author of the mysterious note, he put the papers in his memorandum.

Mrs. Davis was the wife of a farmer and one of the widow's neighbors. Her disposition was not of the best, and it was known that she had upon several occasions taken pains to circulate reports concerning Hattie Robson. Added to this a jealous disposition, a tyrannical motherhood, and dislike of herself because her beauty was fading, the farmer's spouse was not the paragon of her sex.

Dr. Bullock resolved to devote much of his time to the vexed question of the milking of the cows.

He suddenly stopped talking on the subject, preferring to be considered vanquished than to compromise the success of his plans, and it was not long before a second note in the chirography of the first found its way to his table. It was almost immediately seized, for the doctor had quietly moved his cot in the office, and a minute later he was hurrying through a wood at the edge of the town.

Emerging from the turn at the mouth of the lane that led up to the house of farmer Davis, the doctor-detective stationed himself in the shadows and waited. At the end of half an hour the sound of hoofs was heard, and, presently, the figure of a woman on horseback loomed up before him.

He saw her enter the lane, and as she leaned forward to open the gate, he stepped from his concealment and grasped the bridle.

An exclamation of surprise hailed his sudden action.

“Mrs. Davis!” he said, looking up into the rider’s face. “You need not attempt to escape, for the man who holds your bridle saw *you* milk Hattie Robson’s cows on the 27th of last April. You put on her clothes, and undertook to personate her, to disarm suspicion. I am Dr. Bullock, and to me your crime is known.”

There was a loud shriek, that echoed far across the country, and the falling figure was caught in the doctor’s arms.

Puzzled by his situation, the physician was debating the best course of procedure, when he heard a rapid footstep, and he beheld the husband at his side.

“Your wife has fainted, sir,” Bullock said.

“But why are you here?”

“Why? Ask her when she recovers!” and the fainting woman was thrust upon her startled husband’s charge.

Bullock started to return.

“Tell me the truth,” the farmer said, following him. “There is no love between this woman and I, though we are man and wife. Dr. Bullock, for God’s sake, I implore you to tell me!”

The doctor turned and told Isaac Davis all, and, when he had finished, the husband started back with an oath.

“I’ll hand the guilty woman over to the law! I’ll see her hang!” he cried. “She lied me into marriage, and I’ll push her up the gallows steps!”

The farmer was excited beyond control, and when he looked upon the white face upturned to his he uttered a cry of horror. There was something awful about it.

Bullock, attracted by the cry, sprung forward as Davis dropped his wife upon the ground.

He saw the cause of the farmer’s horror—the woman was dead.

Two white faced men went silently up the lane that night and entered the farmhouse. One laid a dead woman on the bed, and together the twain went over the house like specters.

In a secret place they found the missing jewels of Hattie Robson, and several articles of her late wearing apparel.

“She did it, doctor!” the farmer said. “I know it now. She was absent for four hours on the night of 25th of April. She said she was at Weddell’s, and from the evening of the 26th until the morning of the day of the finding of the widow’s body she was absent again. She thought I liked the widow, and I often heard her say that Hattie’s pretty face would get spoiled some of these times. My wife and Hattie were alike in build; their clothes would fit each other. What do you think, doctor?”

Bullock merely said:

“I think we know who milked the cows.”

Though the mystery was never positively settled, it was generally believed that Mrs. Davis in a fit of jealous rage had taken the life of Hattie Robson, and had even dwelt in the house with the corpse for several hours, impersonating her victim in order to create dissension and cover her own trail.

But her eagerness to shut Doctor Bullock’s mouth had led to her detection and sudden death. Isaac Davis sold his farm, and plunged into the wilds of the West, where he took unto himself another wife.

Bullock, proud of his bit of detective experience, relinquished the practice of medicine and took to hunting criminals with marked success; but he fell at last in the discharge of his duty—shot by a man whom he was attempting to arrest.

I have thus told the story of the Hattie Robson case, as I heard it from the lips of an old man in the little cemetery where repose the murderess and her victim.

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