



NEW DETECTIVE

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Emeline's distrust showed again as she urged she needed no one to stay the night with her. . . .



ASK A BODY

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Most terrifying Christmas story ever told is that of the lovely little slaybelle—whom a jury convinced that there was no reason she couldn't get away with murder!

●

By
H. Hassell Gross

POLLY Houseman Bodine—"Pretty Polly," agitated journalists of the last century called her—was simply a gal who saw no reason not to commit murder. She came close to proving her point, too. "An attractive woman," she announced at the conclusion of her third trial, "is usually the object of a jury's sympathy."

The remark merited the tallest headlines ever used on the old *Police Gazette*. "This twice-convicted murderess," edi-

torials shrieked, "has the effrontery, the unparalleled shamelessness, to boast the most shameful reasons for her acquittal!" Long after Polly disappeared from the shops and bars of lower Manhattan, and when even Staten Island, the scene of her double murder, had almost forgotten her, indignant reporters continued to refer to her as "this undoubted murderess," "the Sister Slayer," and "the Christmas Eve Killer." Libel laws were less stringent in those days.

On Christmas Eve of 1844, the lights in the windows of Polly Bodine's sister-in-law, Emeline Houseman, went dark at ten-thirty. All that night snow thickened in the walks and on the door ledges in the little village of Granite City on Staten Island, across the bay from New York. When daylight of the 25th came, no smoke showed from Emeline's chimney. Nor was any sign of life noticed from the house during the whole of Christmas Day. Neighbors, and especially the elder Mrs. Houseman, Polly's mother, simply thought that Emeline must be visiting for the day. Then, at nine-thirty in the evening, a couple of late home-comers spotted a tongue of fire behind the closed shutters of Emeline's bedroom window. Their outcries brought almost the whole community to the house.

The bed was situated so that only the lower half of the wooden portion could be seen, but the entire mattress seemed to be aflame. The front door was locked and the back door resisted entrance. Finally a log was brought from the wood-yard to serve as a battering arm. The concerted rush of four men carried it through the door and propelled them into the hall. Smoke and the smell of kerosene filled the place, but the fire itself was confined to the bed on which Emeline and her little daughter lay. The mattress from the spare bed in the opposite corner was used to smother the flames; and then the men stood back.

The stiffened bodies of the woman and child would have spoken of murder even if there had been no cord sunk into the flesh of Emeline's neck, no gaping wound in the little girl's head. Parts of a black silk handkerchief, charred away to the knot, bound the dead woman's wrists and knees.

The newspapers made much of that handkerchief. It was a woman's, of sheer chiffon, a delicate handmade edging crocheted into the rolled hem. To a later judge and jury it announced that Polly Bodine set the death scene. No other woman of Emeline's modest acquaintance possessed such a handkerchief. But in spite of all the references to an object so clearly pointing to her, no mention of Pretty Polly appeared in the news columns on the first day. On the next, however, a discreet reporter hinted that the victim's sister-in-law was separated from her husband, Andrew Bodine, and with reason.

Anybody who studies Polly's career never fails to wonder why she chose not to kill Andrew. He gave her motive and opportunity to spare. The bottle kept him semi-conscious from the date of their marriage on Polly's fifteenth birthday to her thirtieth year—at which time he suddenly roused enough to charge his wife with misconduct and disappear. Students of her character, so full of the will to slay, suggest that only motherly love for their son, Albert, preserved Andrew's life. If so, it was a pity, for Albert was a truth-telling lad and as such did his level best to get his mother convicted by New York state and hanged.

When Albert was seventeen and Papa Andrew had been three years in the void, Polly tenderly placed the boy as clerk in Apothecary John Waite's Canal Street shop in New York City. His salary included bed and board for himself and Polly in the living quarters behind the store. Polly's residence there was some-

what irregular but the proven fact is that she stayed at Waite's on the night of Saturday, December 23rd.

The next afternoon, Christmas Eve, she togged herself out in a voluminous coat and three red shawls, highly becoming to her brunette complexion, and left the place. Waite first testified that she meant to spend the night at her mother's house in Granite City on Staten Island; then he stated that she was bound for Mrs. Strang's on Eighth Street in New York. Albert was not so truthful. He swore, and stuck to it in the face of two murder convictions and a third trial, that Polly's destination on Christmas Eve was Emeline Houseman's in Granite City to spend the night.

A neighbor of Emeline, Miss Matilda Rourke, also placed Polly at the former's house on Christmas Eve. "She came in at five o'clock," Matilda testified, "just as I was leaving and a full half-hour before she was expected. For Mrs. Houseman had not finished hiding the silver spoons and her gold watch and the little girl was still wearing the coral beads and clasp."

The hint of motive is here and more than a suggestion that neither Emeline nor Matilda welcomed the guest in a trusty spirit.

Emeline locked away the trinkets before Matilda left, but: "Polly saw through the door where she put them and said, 'Brother George had no business to go to Virginia for the oyster business and leave Emeline alone for a month with valuables in the house.'" Emeline's distrust showed itself again as she urged that she needed nobody to stay the night with her.

POLLY ignored the hint and proceeded with a rather garrulous discussion of George's absence and the financial arrangements incidental to it. Suddenly, turning to Miss Rourke, she pronounced these words: "He sold the schooner before he left and realized over

a thousand. Emmy, no doubt, has the sum in safekeeping."

The remark was greeted with silence. "Mrs. Houseman said nothing," Matilda Rourke afterward testified, "and I said nothing either; for her to have spoken would only have meant another's death instead of her own!" Matilda was reading after the event; on that Sunday, she took her leave like a good but non-interfering neighbor and walked home, noticing at three doors down the Christmas wreath on the elder Mrs. Houseman's door. She wondered a little that Polly was spending the holiday eve with Emeline instead of her own mother. . . .

Less than fifteen hours later, the bodies were discovered. A neighbor who had helped break into the house and had seen the death-freighted bed, walked up to Emeline's mother-in-law where she stood with some other women at the edge of the frightened crowd.

"Where's your daughter Polly?" he asked.

The old woman stared. "Are they hurt? Why don't they bring them out?" she asked.

He led her back in the direction of her own house. "You must notify George at once—"

"He's on his way; he wrote he'd be here the 27th or 28th."

"And Polly—is Polly at home to help you?"

Again the mother was silent in answer to a question about Polly. She began to cry. "The fire smothered them!" Her neighbor corrected her in gentle tones: "No; but they are dead—murdered in their sleep."

"In their sleep?" she cried wonderingly. "But they would not be abed so early."

And then old Mrs. Houseman remembered—the thing that would finally convince her that her own daughter was a murderess. She was back in the morning

of that day, suddenly awakening in the chill before dawn.

A series of low knockings on her window, a whispered call repeated: "Mother! Let me in! Mother! Open the door!" She scurried on bare feet to the front room; paused an instant with her hand on the wooden draw-bar. "Polly?" The whisper came at her through the keyhole: "Let me in!"

She flung open the shutter. The figure rushed past her out of the moonlight shining on fallen snow into the covering darkness of the room. *Angry, she thought. Probably another quarrel with Emeline. Rushing in here before daybreak. . . . Well, the girl has had a miserable life.*

She was an old woman, her toes curling from the cold, and she wanted her warm bed more than a scene with Polly. She dropped the bar back in place, turned and plodded to her bed.

When the old woman woke again at half-past seven there was no sign of Polly in the house except the kitchen fire and some ashes, like burned cloth, on the hearth. Nor did Polly appear again that day nor the next, though a neighbor carried the news of the shocking double murder to Waite's shop in New York. In answer to her mother's summons, Polly replied that she would come to help with the funeral arrangements when she could.

On Wednesday, the 27th, George Houseman arrived in New York on the Norfolk packet, *The Cheatah*, and went at once to the ferry slip in downtown New York. A neighbor from Granite City had come to meet him and break the news. The two men went aboard the Staten Island ferry at 1:30 P.M., and seated themselves in a corner of the upstairs cabin. In a few moments, a woman's laughter was heard on the stairs; George looked up and saw Polly come into the cabin with a stout gentleman who kept his arm about her waist while they walked up and down. On coming face to face with George

and his companion, the stout gentleman slunk downstairs; and then, with tears brimming over the full lower lids of her brown eyes, Polly fell upon Brother George's neck.

"Oh, how terrible, how dreadful," she wept, as loudly as she had laughed. "Dreadful—and for it to happen on Christmas Eve, too!"

Certain suspicions as to the holiday had already gotten abroad. George and his neighbor exchanged a look. Suddenly, George got up and hurried outside to the deck. Polly made to follow him but, slowly turning, discovered an expression on the face of his friend that must have put a chill down her back.

Worse chills were to come. Truthful Albert, who had made the crossing on the same boat but on the lower deck, spoke up the minute George mentioned Polly's strange assumption that the murders had occurred on Christmas Eve. "Well, that's impossible," he said, "as mother ought to know, for she spent that night with Aunt Emeline."

There was a silence, during which Mrs. Houseman turned her gaze fully on Polly. The younger woman flushed. Then, Mrs. Houseman rose and walked from the kitchen to the front room where the flower-banked coffins rested side by side in front of the hearth.

George followed her. Mrs. Houseman hid her face against the mantelpiece. "I let her into this house at six o'clock Monday morning. George, the trinkets are missing. . . ." She lifted her head and forced the words out: "The money you left with Emeline has been in this house for safekeeping for the last three weeks."

He started. "Did Polly know that?"

"No." She fell against George as she fainted.

Those four, Albert, George, Polly and the terrified old woman, spent the night without sleeping. The next day, Thursday, they attended the inquest.

GEORGE stated that nothing was missing from the house except eight silver spoons, a silver sugar tongs, his wife's gold watch and a set of corals strung for beads. The thousand dollars he had left with his wife, and which no doubt had furnished the motive for the slaying, he had secretly handed to his mother for safekeeping.

Policeman Starret swore that no stranger could have entered the house. The front door was locked on the inside and a wooden bar and iron bolt protected the back door.

Pretty Polly denied visiting her sister-in-law on Christmas Eve. "Mother and Miss Rourke are mistaken. I stayed at Mrs. Strang's in New York." Albert leaned forward and seemed about to speak, but Mrs. Houseman restrained him.

"I do not think my brother remembers the trinkets very well. A man cannot be expected to take much notice of such trifles. The beads were not coral but glass, and the sugar tongs were made of brass."

The coroner's verdict of willful murder strengthened Mrs. Houseman's fear and George's suspicions. The family spent the afternoon behind closed doors, while neighbors kept watch in the front room. At about two o'clock, George remarked that he meant to post the thousand dollars as a reward for the capture of the killer. He asked his mother to fetch it from under her mattress.

Polly sprang up and ran ahead of the old woman into the bedroom. A look of terror on her face, Mrs. Houseman fled backward from the door. It was George who faced Polly with the roll of bills in her hand. She was babbling hysterically. "So much money . . . and in this house! Don't let it out of the family, George!"

Mrs. Houseman fainted again. She lay on the floor while George took the money away from his sister. "Why did you lie about the trinkets, Polly?"

She laughed then. "Poor George! Who'd believe you could remember!"

"Mother remembers if I don't," he told her stolidly. She turned away, biting her lip. Perhaps she saw herself rushing in through the dark door, past her sleepy mother. And all the time that money had been here . . .

An hour later, she sent Albert back to New York. In his pocket was a letter addressed to Waite.

The next day, immediately after the double funeral, George visited the station house to post the reward. He returned to his mother's accompanied by police.

"Mrs. Bodine," a policeman said, "you say you spent the night of the 24th at Mrs. Strang's house. Mrs. Strang denies this. You were seen at Mrs. Emeline Houseman's by Miss Rourke at five on the afternoon of the 24th. Your mother let you in the house here at six on Christmas morning. Between seven and eight o'clock you were seen boarding the ferry for New York."

"A mistake has been made," Polly kept repeating. "People are confused."

The relentless questions continued. "Where were you on the night of the 25th when Mrs. Emeline Houseman's bedroom was fired with intent to destroy the dead bodies? At Mrs. Strang's again? Mrs. Strang does not remember that visit either."

Until Polly suddenly asked, "Was I seen on the ferry the morning of the twenty-sixth too?"

"You were, madam. You boarded it bound for New York between six and seven, although the boat does not start until eight."

She must have been surprised when they left her at last. She was alone in the front room where the two coffins had rested.

They missed her at suppertime and searched the house, finding her coat hanging in the closet of her room. It per-

sueded them that she had not gone far. At bedtime, she was still missing; but it was not unusual for her to go away for the whole night without a word. They locked the house and went to bed and to sleep.

Waite roused them at nine the next morning, and George Houseman accompanied him to the police station to report Polly's disappearance. Waite kept babbling that Polly was at Mrs. Strang's and knew nothing of the trinkets. He was arrested and searched that afternoon. Polly's letter, dated on the Thursday, was found in his pocket.

"I now find I must admit what I was frightened to tell," she began. "Help me by saying that Albert met me at the ferry on Christmas morning and that I visited with him all day; and started out Tuesday to visit Emeline, but met George on the ferry, when he told me of the accident." Her postscript, "Hide the things I left where they cannot be found," sent officers hurrying to Manhattan.

The ferry captain informed them that this morning, as on the 25th and 26th, Polly had come aboard at seven o'clock. It was therefore certain that she had

spend the night on the island. But where—without a coat or even a shawl to protect her from the winter wind?

Between six and seven in the evening they arrived at the apothecary's shop. Only Albert was present. His mother, he said, had stayed in the back rooms all day, and had only just left. One of the officers put his hand inside the covers of Waite's bed. The sheets were still warm.

BY NOON of the following day, Albert had told all he knew. Far from remaining on Waite's premises all during Christmas Day, Polly had left the shop three separate times for periods extending over an hour each; then, at four o'clock, five and one-half hours before the fire was discovered, she went out again and did not return until the morning of the 26th.

Meanwhile, a Mr. Coddington from Granite City happened to see a feverish, exhausted woman walking up and down on Spring Street near Hudson, in downtown New York. He persuaded her to accompany him into a warm restaurant. She was wearing one of Waite's extra coats, but was blue from cold. She had

not eaten or slept since the afternoon of the preceding day, she said. "I have walked all over the city, from Harlem and back." She began to cry. "Do they want me to go to jail? I'll do whatever you say." Mr. Coddington drove her to the Tombs and stood by while she handed herself over to the authorities.

The next day the police unearthed all of poor Emeline's trinkets but the coral beads the little girl was wearing when Aunt Polly appeared so unexpectedly on Christmas Eve. A woman answering to Polly's description and giving her name as Henderson had pawned Emeline's gold watch on December 25th for \$25 at A. Adolphus' shop, 332 Williams Street, New York City. On the same date a woman using the same name pawned the remainder of the trinkets at John Levy's, 32 East Broadway, and at Davis' and Hart's in Chatham Street.

When Polly went to trial in Richmond County, June 24th, 1844, her lawyers asked for a change of venue on the ground of local prejudice. The request was denied and the trial continued, with Albert as the star witness for the prosecution. The question was: when had Emeline and her little daughter died, on Christmas Eve or early morning of Christmas Day; or after eight A.M. of the 25th or during the evening of the same date, shortly before the fires started? If the latter, then Polly had a chance to prove her innocence. She tried hard, swearing that she had slept at Waite's on the night of the 25th and had only been prevented from saying so at first because she didn't want Albert to know it. Albert promptly took the stand to testify that he slept in Waite's bed on Christmas night and that Polly was certainly somewhere else.

The jury retired for thirteen hours, then sent word that they were eleven to one for conviction and could not reach a decision. An impatient judge sent back a message that they were to hurry; the

result was a twelve man vote for Polly's guilt. The judge sentenced her to hang.

When her attorneys briefed the Supreme Court on their earlier request for a change of venue, Polly got a new trial—this time in New York City in the summer of 1845. The hardened city jury brought in an unanimous vote of guilty.

Again the defendant's attorney protested to the Supreme Court, and the second conviction was rendered void. Polly was moving farther north; the third trial opened in Poughkeepsie, New York, in April of 1846. Polly was probably getting a little tiresome by the time, in addition to costing the state a lot of money. At any rate, when defense suddenly produced three new witnesses who somewhat vaguely remembered seeing glimpses of a woman they took to be Emeline Houseman on her porch during the afternoon of Christmas Day, the state threw in its hand. It remained for a reporter to wonder why, if Emeline was alive on Christmas Day, she had not missed the trinkets which Polly was even then pawning. The point was, that Pretty Polly was free to boast that a jury had found no reason why she shouldn't kill.

She soon learned, though, that neighbors and relatives are guided by a different logic. Apothecary Waite suddenly found a reason for closing his premises to her. Albert went to live with his uncle George on Staten Island. The death of the elder Mrs. Houseman during the last trial stuck in Albert's mind and he was fond of repeating that "Mother killed her as sure as if she'd done it when she opened the door for her and she'd known she had the thousand dollars." Involved as the grammar is, Albert's meaning is as clear as his honesty.

Polly herself faded into limbo. Her record from soon after the final trial is as mysterious as the secret of where she spent the two famous nights of December 25th and 29th.