

A DAGGER THROUGH THE HEART

How a New York Artist Nearly Killed His Wife's Love in Solving the Mystery of His Brother's Murder.

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"Oh, Bertie, she shrieked, 'why have you put me there?'"

By John Campbell Haywood.

AT 11 o'clock on the morning of July 24, 1903, the body of a man was found in the apartments of Reginald De Peyson, on the upper West Side of New York City. He had been murdered. His body lay on a bed and was covered up to the neck with a sheet. Over the face was a handkerchief, bearing the monogram of Reginald De Peyson. It was dented into his forehead, as from a blow of some blunt instrument. This, however, was not the cause of death. Through the sheet, and deep into the chest of the man, a dagger, with a long handle of curious workmanship, had been driven. The sheet was stained with blood, and there was a large splash of blood on the carpet under the bed. There was no sign of a struggle.

The blinds of the two windows that looked out on the street were drawn up to their fullest height. A suit case, opened, but in no disorder, lay on the floor. Between the windows was a bureau, with silver-mounted toilet articles, and beside the bed was a table on which stood a reading lamp. There was also on this table the dead man's watch and chain, a diamond-studded cigarette case and a roll of bills fastened with a rubber band. The money in the roll amounted to \$722.

It was evident, therefore, that robbery was not the object of the murderer. In fact, a careful examination of the room and its contents failed to reveal anything that would suggest a possible motive. The body had not been mutilated, and this fact, together with the lack of any sign of a struggle, seemed to indicate that the deed had not been committed in a fit of anger or passion. And yet the fact that the murderer had used a weapon belonging to the victim, having apparently entered the room unarmed, seemed to indicate that the murder had not been planned.

The room was well furnished and contained much of a sporting character. Over the mantelpiece was a gun rack, and around the apartment were many odds and ends picked up by Reginald De Peyson in foreign travel. Of these, the most noticeable was a fringe of daggers, French, Italian and Indian, which lined one corner of the room. One sheath was empty. It was that belonging to the weapon in the dead man's hand.

There was only one clue to the murderer. At the edge of the bureau some face powder, of which the box had been evidently at first full, had spilled on the mat, where it had been trampled on and scattered. The floor of the room was covered with a dark green rug. From the bureau, clearly outlined in white powder, the footprints of a man's heavy boots led to the bed, then to the hall entrance, where all trace of them was lost.

The most minute examination of the carpet in the hall failed to show a speck of the tell-tale powder, and this was to be regretted, for the tracks in the room were so plain as to give hopes that the murderer could be traced, provided he lived in the house. The abrupt ending of the tracks indicated shrewdness on the murderer's part, for he had apparently removed his shoes on perceiving the tracks they were leaving behind. On reaching

the outer door he could replace the shoes with impunity, as no sign of the powder could be seen anyway on the gravel walk outside.

Some idea of the size of the shoe could be gained from the tracks, but that was absolutely the only clue to be found.

Albert Heath, an artist, discovered the body. It was that of his brother, Gerald, a mining engineer, who had returned from Mexico the day before. The two brothers had been at college with Reginald De Peyson and had kept up their college friendship. At midday the three had lunched together, after which the brothers went to the steamer on which De Peyson sailed for Europe. Before going he had given the key of his apartment to Gerald, telling him to use the rooms as his own during his stay in New York. When the steamer sailed, the Heaths drove to the rooms, after which Gerald went with his brother to the Grand Central Station, where Albert took a train for Albany, in which city he had an important engagement.

It was the last time Gerald was seen alive. On his return from Albany the next day, Albert Heath went at once to the apartments, found the door unlocked, entered, and discovered the body.

All this developed at the Coroner's inquest. The apartment was on the second floor. The first floor was occupied by a doctor, who returned from a serious case at 4 that morning. The rooms just above De Peyson's were rented by a Mrs. Eldridge, who had not been seen for several weeks, and who was said by the janitor to have gone to Europe. The tenants still higher up, including the janitor himself, proved, conclusively, that they could have had nothing to do with the murder. No one had heard any noise; no one had seen any stranger, even the murdered man, enter the building. The janitor had gone to his rooms at midnight.

Albert Heath at once offered a large reward, hired the best detective talent and stimulated the Police Department. Nothing came of it. He wrote to Reginald De Peyson, who, after a long interval, replied that he was as much in the dark as any one in reference to the crime. He said that he did not expect to return to the United States for several years.

Albert Heath was then thirty-five years old. Until the murder he had enjoyed mingling in the society of the artistic set. But his brother's death left him a hard-working, unsocial man. There was one friend he still occasionally visited; Colonel Peyton, a Southerner and a retired cotton merchant, who lived in Summit.

Milliecent Peyton, a girl of eighteen, was made the excuse for bright social gatherings, to which Heath was always invited. It was at a garden party given by the Peytons that he met Lucy Conway. He had taken a late train to Summit, expecting to spend a little time there, but

the insistence of Milliecent, whom he really liked, that he should give his opinion of an English garden recently inaugurated on the place, altered his unsocial designs.

"You must see it! You positively must!" she told him, "It is just the dearest place you ever saw."

She led him away from the tea tables. On one of the broad pathways winding among the flower beds, they came face to face with a woman with whom Albert was instantly impressed.

Dark almost to swarthiness, her face, rich in color as she raised large violet eyes to his, was fringed by a mass of golden-bronze hair that waved naturally. There was a passionate vitality in her looks, a brilliancy of form and feature with which the artist was involuntarily thrilled. After a few words, she passed on.

"Now," said Milliecent, when they reached the little arbor, trellised with roses and honeysuckle, at the entrance to the English garden, "what has your lordship to say to that?" She waved her parasol toward the massed hollyhocks, roses and perennials that flanked on all sides a sun dial.

He looked it over critically. "What is that for?" he asked, pointing to a heap of rough stones, which lay, half hidden by ferns and creepers in one corner.

"That? Oh, that is Lucy's idea. She"—

"Well, she is wrong, whoever Lucy may be," interrupted Heath, ungraciously. "Its effect is too dead, too dark; it is out of place there."

"But, Uncle Bertie, Lucy is an authority."

she kissed him, promising the picture a long life in incompleteness.

Since their marriage, all their hopes of happiness had been realized to the full. His belief that she could fill his life, brighten it, and instill him with ambition and new hopes, was well founded, and he, in turn, had led her along paths of happiness which she had never dreamed had existed.

In March, 1907, less than a year after their marriage, she left him to go to lunch with Milliecent Peyton. He had a painting finished which he intended to pack and take to the city with him. When she returned to the bungalow he was still there. His face was white; there was a wildness in his manner that terrified her. He had told her of his brother, Gerald—that he had died suddenly in New York, but nothing of the manner of it. Now he said brokenly that he had been murdered, and that a clue to the assassin had been found. The news had come to him in a letter. He had waited to tell her. Now, he must go at once; he would return that night. But he did not.

Although he wrote to her daily and found out from her over the telephone that she was well and waiting, it was a week before he reached the bungalow. He appeared shrunken and old. Although she clung to him passionately, he put her aside and went straight to his studio. For hours he worked feverishly, or tramped up and down. She could hear his footfalls, but he would not answer when she called to him. At last, she heard the key turn in the

lock. He was in my room. I was living as Mrs. Eldridge in the apartments above my husband's, waiting for him to acknowledge me as his wife. He wouldn't do it, Bertie! for—some family reasons he told me. He kept putting it off. Then, one day, my brother came. He said he had killed a man for something he had said about me. The police were hunting for him. Then—my husband found him in my room. I dared not tell him who he was then—I came to later. He—he cursed and left me. Oh! Bertie. You believe me! You must believe me. He is dead now; we mustn't speak ill of the dead, must we, Bertie?" She whimpered like a child, stretching out her arms toward him as though for comfort.

"And then?"

The coldness of his voice cut her like a knife.

"Then, I went to a hotel. I was there some weeks. One day a man came and gave me some papers from him. He had been a divorcee. He charged me—oh, it was too horrible! I tore them up. Then—yes, it was some weeks after—he came himself and said he had divorced me. He—Bertie," she wailed, "I cannot go on! I cannot!" Her head fell on the arm of the chair. Her golden-bronze hair loosened and wrapped itself about her shoulders.

"You must!"

Heath was still half hidden behind the canvas. He was still painting with feverish haste. She raised her head, shaking the hair from her face.

"He said he was going away—for years. Would you wait for him? He gave me money—he was good in that at least—and then he went. For a week I was ill, mad with fever in the hotel."

Her voice stopped. There was silence in the room unbroken except for the woman's heavy sobs. The artist came from behind the canvas and stood over her.

Touching her lightly with his mahlstick, he said gently, "Did you go back to your apartments?"

The woman did not answer.

"Shall I tell you the rest?" he went on. "You did—you went back at 6 o'clock one day, when the janitor was at supper. At 11 o'clock you heard a man come into the rooms below."

"You thought it was De Peyson, that he had not gone away, that he had lied to you. It was natural that you should. You meant to make a last appeal, perhaps to tell him the truth, but you waited. It may have been an hour or two, before you went down. Am I right in this, Lucy?"

"No, Bertie! No—it would have been useless. You are mad, mad."

"But you went down. The door was unlocked—it had a broken catch. By the broad beams of moonlight which came through the front windows—the blinds were up—you saw him sleeping heavily, a tired, but you imagined, a thoughtless man's sleep."

"I didn't, Bertie! Don't go on. You are mad," she wailed hoarsely again, but he continued remorselessly:

"He had a handkerchief over his face, to shield it from the light, and you stole in and—"

The artist held out his hand, which she grasped eagerly in both of hers.

"Come," he said, and he led her in front of the great canvas.

She looked at it closely, curiously.

"It is Reginald's room," she said breathlessly.

"Yes."

"I—I don't understand it!"

But she saw the horror of it. She saw the windows agleam with a light that fell full on a bed. On the bed a figure lay under a sheet, which shimmered in the moonbeams. The curiously wrought handle of a dagger stood upright over the dead man's head, about it were dark stains of blood. But worst of all, she saw another form, that of a woman, holding her skirts high, revealing the man's boots she wore, creeping toward the door. On the edge of a bureau, between the windows, where the shadows were not too thick, was a box of face powder, its contents spilled on the floor. Behind the woman, footprints in powder left a trail. The face of the woman was her face, wide-eyed and terrified. He had painted her as she sat facing him.

"Oh! Bertie," she shrieked, "Why have you put me there?"

She clung to him, but he repulsed her.

"That," he said, pointing to the figure on the bed, "is not De Peyson. He will be in New York to-morrow."

"Who is it?" she asked hoarsely, it seemed to him almost hopefully.

"You murdered my brother!"

"I did not," she screamed at him. "You—"

"You believe that?" She drew away from him. "And I have loved you!" Her voice grew calm, even tender. "I have loved you," she repeated, "and you—you paint that thing, as me?"

She turned from him with a scorn that he knew was not assumed. He had been sure of his ground.

the janitor had told him that the boots had been found hidden in Mrs. Eldridge's rooms. He had learned she was the woman whose name was linked with De Peyson's—the woman who was now his wife. But he was sure now, with her wonderful dark eyes, alight with grief and hurt, before him, that he had wronged her—possibly beyond forgiveness. Before she left him he must know all she knew.

During the past few days he had been in misery because of the discoveries that he had made. Whichever way he looked he could see his year of happiness brought to an abrupt end, but now came an added and more grievous conviction that he had wrongfully accused the woman he loved. He must learn all, and try to avert the sad condition that seemed inevitable.

"Who did?" he asked, "do you know?"

"I know who killed the man there," she pointed to the picture, "but he thought it was De Peyson—he did it because he—he loved me." Heath knew it was of her brother she spoke.



"It was at a garden party that he met Lucy Conway."

"I have a right to know the truth," he said.

"He is beyond your reach." The soft cadence of her voice told him he was dead. "I went to my rooms, I went openly—it is not my fault if no one saw me—I was going away, there were some things I wanted. I was packing them, meaning to send for them next day when my brother came. I looked ill, and it maddened him. Shortly after 11 he left me, but he returned with—his boots in his hand, and told me he had killed De Peyson. He did it because he loved me—you must not forget that, and at the time I loved him for it!" Her voice broke with sobs.

"We hid the boots under a loose board near the fireplace. He said they were stained and he would not wear them—then we left—he carried the bag I had packed—I went to the hotel in a cab, and he—"

She stopped speaking and threw herself upon the settee. The golden-bronze hair, loosened in her abandonment to grief, gleamed in the flood of sunlight that came through the broad window of the studio.

The fulfillment of the artist's wish to know the murderer of his brother was his now, but at what a cost, if he should lose her! He took a broad brush and splashed it across the face upon the canvas. Then he went and leaned over her, took one of the bronze tresses, and raised it gently to his lips.

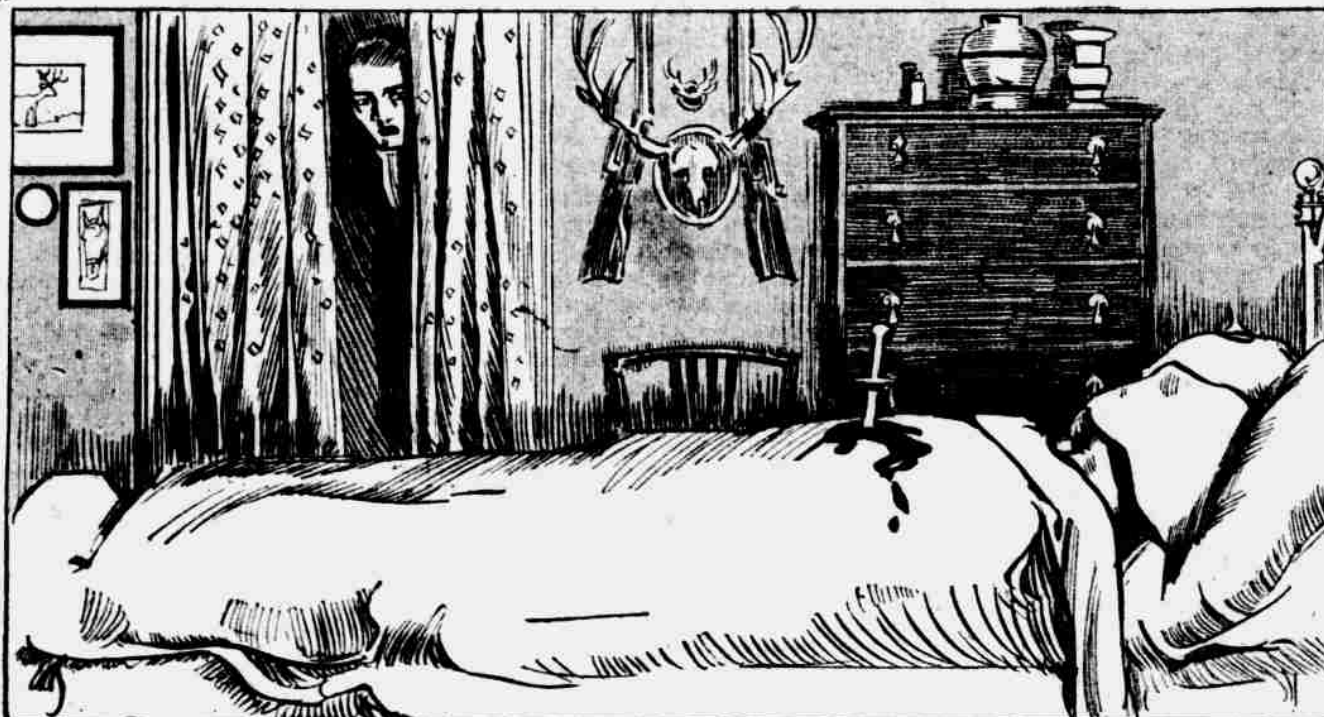
"Can you," he murmured, "ever forgive me?"

She reached up and put her arms about his neck.

The picture came into the market anonymously, and now hangs in one of the large private galleries in New York. Its history has not been told before, nor would it be now, were it not that the principals, in the happiness of their own lives, have buried in forgetfulness the tragedy of its birth.

It is a moonlit scene, wonderful in its coloring, extraordinary in its conception. It is unsigned and follows the tenets of no particular school, consequently it has defied leading critics even beyond the mystery of its gruesome subject.

It has been said to be the work of the artist to whom we have given the name of Albert Heath. This, however, is believed, as he has never been known to reach such mastery of execution. The picture is also remarkable for a splash of color which sweeps across the face of the woman and adds to its mystery.



"Through the sheet, and deep into the chest of the man, a dagger had been driven."

She planned the whole show. She is just the most adorable landscape artist we ever had. You saw her just now. Lucy! Oh! Lucy, Co—ee."

Heath turned. The woman with the golden-bronze hair was stooping over a rose bush. At Milliecent's call, she came slowly toward them. Somewhat to the artist's embarrassment, Milliecent at once told her of his criticism, and all three discussed the artistic features of the rockery. As they walked back to the house, Mrs. Conway, for it was she, pointed to the roof of a bungalow just visible over a rise in the ground.

"That is where 'live,' she said, 'I built it after my own designs. Will you come some day with Milliecent and criticise it as honestly as you have my rockery?' For an instant her large, dark eyes rested on his.

This was the beginning. When love enters the breast of a man after he has lived loveless for half his lifetime, it ripens quickly. It riots and surges in sweeps of unspent passion, incautious and unreasoning. It was so in Albert Heath's case. He saw in Lucy Conway only a woman who filled all the empty spaces in his heart. He asked neither who she was nor what she was. He had met her at his friends', who told him she was a widow, and that was enough for him. He wanted her for his wife.

Each meeting revealed to him a new quality which but added to her attractiveness and which proved to him that she was the one woman who could dispel the gloom that had overshadowed his life during the past few years. In three months he had proposed and been accepted. Their marriage quickly followed. There was one picture in his studio

lock.

"You can come in now. I—I want you."

She found him standing before the great canvas. Its back was toward the door, the draperies had been torn away. He motioned her to a seat, facing him as he stood, palette in hand, before the painting. She began to speak, but her throat was dry; she could not.

"Can you tell me anything about those?" he asked suddenly, pointing to a pair of heavy boots, which lay almost at her feet.

As she glanced down at them, a death-like pallor spread over her face. Her eyes filled with horror and loathing as she quickly drew her skirts away from them. Her mouth opened. She tried to speak, but there was no sound.

"I asked you," he said gently, "about those—those boots. Whose are they?"

She drew her tongue over her dry lips. He waited patiently.

"My—my brother's. He left them in my—"

"Don't lie to me," his voice was cruelly cold.

"Don't lie to me. That would be useless now."

"Bertie, are you mad?" she spoke hoarsely to him, leaning forward in the chair, wide-eyed and terrified.

He glanced at her, then, painted with feverish haste. In a few moments, he spoke again.

"I know much, not all. I want the truth to piece with what I know."

She kept her eyes fixed on him as though to read his thoughts. She seemed to wish a lead in what she was to say.

"You were married to De Peyson." It was what she had waited for.

"And he divorced you. Why?"

"Because of my brother." She spoke eagerly, her face flushing with passion.

"My brother had killed a man—a man in—"

in Richmond. He fled to me, and I shel-