

THE BORDEN MURDERS

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& THE TRIAL OF
CENTURY THE

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*Honor and shame from no condition rise.
Act well your part: there all the honor lies.*

—ALEXANDER POPE

*Is the legend true?
I question not
But seek its proof.*

—EDITH MATILDA THOMAS

LIZZIE BORDEN TOOK AN AXE . . .

It happened every spring in Fall River, Massachusetts. Behind the curtained windows of the stately house she shared with her sister on French Street, Miss Lizbeth Borden heard the children skipping rope on the sidewalk, chanting a rhyme to the once-popular tune of “Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay”:

*Lizzie Borden took an axe,
Gave her mother forty whacks.
When she saw what she had done,
She gave her father forty-one.*

Year after year, she listened to them butcher her family’s tragic past. A new century had dawned since the brutal hatchet murders of Miss Lizbeth’s father and stepmother captured the nation’s attention. She had altered her name from Lizzie to Lizbeth and left the family home on Second Street, where the terrible deed was done, and still the ditty followed her.

Most of Miss Lizbeth’s well-bred neighbors up on Fall River’s posh “Hill” refused to speak about the Borden slayings, let alone the fact that the Bordens’ own daughter, Miss Lizbeth herself, had been accused of them. And yet their children never failed to learn the rhyme. The youngsters singing it now had not even been alive on August 4, 1892, but that didn’t stop them from contributing new verses:

*Andrew Borden now is dead.
Lizzie hit him on the head.
Up in heaven he will sing.
On the gallows she will swing.*

Miss Lizbeth's sensational murder trial, the jury's momentous decision, the time she spent behind bars, none of that mattered. In the decades that followed, the citizens of Fall River—young and old—enacted their own sentence upon her.

The members of the Central Congregational Church, where Miss Lizbeth had been a member of the Christian Endeavor Society and taught immigrants at the Central Mission Sunday School, publicly shunned her. Friends, even those who had testified to her innocence, quietly broke away.

Over the years mischievous children trampled her lawn and lobbed rotting eggs at the clapboards of her home. Handfuls of sand and gravel rained upon her windowpanes. They tied her doorknobs and stuck pins in her doorbell to make it ring non-stop. At least they did not chant their jump-rope rhyme to her face when she answered the bell. Instead, they called her vile names before dashing from the porch.

Gawkers in Oak Grove Cemetery—adults, no less—rubbernecked at the sight of Miss Lizbeth Borden, come to tend the graves of her supposed victims. “Miss Borden, don't pay any attention to them,” Terrance Lomax, the grounds foreman, often told her as he accompanied her to the plot where her parents lay alongside the baby sister she had never known. Certainly Miss Lizbeth was grateful for Terrance and the discreet handful of others who were kind and respectful to her in spite of her past. Everyone had heard the rumors about her beheading troublesome kittens and baby birds, but only a few knew of the tender notes and thoughtful gifts she dispensed—people like the coal delivery man who always found a slice of chocolate cake waiting inside Miss Lizbeth's basement, or the sick little girl who received a pretty painted bowl full of gumdrops with a five-dollar bill hidden at the bottom from “Auntie Borden.” There was little that Miss Lizbeth treasured above loyalty, and contrary to her public

image, she delighted in doting upon those, like Terrance, who graced her later years with their companionship.

But did Miss Lizbeth realize that even Terrance, the sympathetic groundskeeper who made sure the paths to the Borden family plot were cleared in winter and was too polite to accept her persistent attempts to tip him, had gone to witness the spectacle of her trial as a young man?

In the same way the children chanting outside her windows marked the arrival of spring for Miss Lizbeth, the newspaper headlines heralded summer's peak. Every August, the *Fall River Daily Globe* observed the anniversary of Andrew and Abby Borden's deaths by printing another front-page tirade against the "incarnate fiend in human form [who] rained cruel, vengeful, bloody blow after blow upon Andrew J. Borden's venerable head." Always, the *Globe* was at pains to remind the citizenry that the man—or *woman*—who had committed the crime still wandered among them. There was no need to print a name. Every man, woman, and child in Fall River knew perfectly well who the *Globe's* pointing finger accused.

*Lizzie Borden took an axe,
Gave her mother forty whacks.
When she saw what she had done,
She gave her father forty-one.*

Today, everything most people know of Lizzie Andrew Borden is contained in those four singsong lines of doggerel. And nearly everything in those four lines is wrong.

MURDER!

“SOMEBODY HAS KILLED FATHER”

Thursday, August 4, 1892

Lizzie could hardly look past the blood, there was so much of it. Blood soaked Mr. Borden's neatly folded Prince Albert coat. It dripped from the slick horsehair cushions to the flowered carpet below. It arced in a fine spatter across the wall and picture frame above. In the midst of it all, her father lay stretched out on the couch with his face so carved and bloodied that she did not know whether he was alive or dead. “I did not notice anything else, I was so frightened and horrified. I ran to the foot of the stairs and called Maggie.”

Bridget Sullivan—nicknamed Maggie by Lizzie and her sister—had barely managed to drift to sleep when the shouting woke her. Bridget did not dally an instant. A housemaid had no business stealing a few winks at eleven in the morning, and besides, that scream was too loud, too strident for any ordinary reprimand.

“What is the matter?” Bridget shouted back.

“Come down quick!”

Down three flights of stairs Bridget came pounding to find Miss Lizzie Borden in a state such as she'd never seen before—backed up against the screen door as though she were about to flee the house entirely.

“Go for Dr. Bowen as soon as you can,” Lizzie commanded. “I think Father is hurt.”

Instinctively Bridget moved toward the sitting room to see what was the matter with her employer, Mr. Andrew Borden. “Oh, Maggie, don't go in,” Lizzie cried. “I have got to have a doctor quick. Go over. I have got to have the doctor,” she insisted.

Bridget dashed across Second Street and “rang violently” at Dr. Bowen's door, only to have Mrs. Bowen inform her that the

doctor was out making house calls. Back Bridget hurried with the bad news. Lizzie had not budged from the doorway.

"Miss Lizzie, where was you?" Bridget ventured to ask. "Didn't I leave the screen door hooked?"

"I was out in the backyard and heard a groan, and came in and the screen door was wide open."

But Lizzie Borden did not want to answer questions. She wanted help. If she could not have the doctor, she wanted her friend, Miss Alice Russell. "Go and get her," she begged. "I can't be alone in the house."

Bridget yanked her hat and shawl from their hook and took off toward Borden Street.

Lizzie Borden waited, alone—as far as anyone knew. There were three locks on the front door. No one intent on harming her father could have gotten in that way. And anyone who might still be lurking inside could not possibly escape without her notice now.

"Lizzie, what is the matter?" said a voice from behind her. But it was only Mrs. Adelaide Churchill, the young widow next door. On her way home from her marketing she'd noticed Bridget crossing the street from Dr. Bowen's house, "running, and she looked as if she was scared." Mrs. Churchill went straight home and laid her groceries on a bench in the kitchen. Through her kitchen window she caught a glimpse of Miss Lizzie leaning against the doorway of the back screen, rubbing her face "as if she was in great distress." The young woman looked so much out of sorts, Mrs. Churchill had opened her window and called across the fence.

"O, Mrs. Churchill," Lizzie answered, "do come over, somebody has killed Father."

By the time Mrs. Churchill hurried across the yard, Lizzie had sunk down onto the second step, "pale and frightened."

“O Lizzie, where is your father?” she asked, laying a hand on Lizzie’s arm.

“In the sitting room.”

Mrs. Churchill did not go in. Instead, she asked, “Where was you when it happened?”

“I went to the barn to get a piece of iron.”

“Where is your mother?”

“I don’t know,” Lizzie said, her words spilling out now, “she had a note to go and see someone that was sick this morning, but I don’t know but they have killed her too. Father must have had an enemy, for we have all been sick, and we think the milk has been poisoned. Dr. Bowen is not at home, but I must have a doctor.”

“Shall I go, Lizzie, and try to find someone to go and get a doctor?” Mrs. Churchill asked.

She answered yes, and Mrs. Churchill ran across the street to L. L. Hall’s Stable for help.

Lizzie Borden did not want to be alone in that house. She had told Bridget so, and still Bridget had brought her neither the doctor nor Miss Russell. Where could that girl be?

“I DON’T KNOW BUT WHAT MR. BORDEN IS DEAD”

It was no more than quarter past eleven when Alice Russell saw the Bordens’ maid hurrying up her front steps. Right then Alice knew there was trouble. Only last evening her friend Lizzie had come calling with worrisome news. She and her father and step-mother, Lizzie said, had all been taken sick Tuesday night—very sick indeed.

Alice laid aside her work at once and met Bridget at the door.

“What is it, Bridget? Are they worse?” Alice asked.

Bridget did not take time to explain. She hardly knew herself

just what had happened. "Yes," the young Irishwoman said. "I don't know but what Mr. Borden is dead." She paused only long enough to hear Alice say she would come before taking off again. To Bridget's relief, Dr. Bowen was just stepping from his carriage as she ran back up Second Street.

"What is the matter, Lizzie?" Dr. Bowen asked as he entered the house.

Under any other circumstances, the sight of his familiar face with its graying mustache and side-whiskers might have calmed Lizzie. After all, he had lived across the street from the Borden's for twenty years; she had known him since she was a girl of twelve.

Lizzie answered that she was afraid her father had been stabbed or hurt.

That one word—*stabbed*—took him aback. He expected sickness, possibly bad, judging from the way his wife had called out *They want you quick over to Mr. Borden's!* before he stepped from his carriage. Even poisoning would not have completely surprised him. The previous day, Mrs. Borden had arrived at his office before eight o'clock in the morning, nearly hysterical with fear that her family's bread had been tainted. But stabbing?

"Has there been anybody here?" Dr. Bowen asked.

Not as she knew of, Lizzie answered.

"Where is he?" the doctor asked.

Lizzie led him through the dining room and motioned toward the sitting room door. Not a sound came from the other side.

Steeled for the worst, Dr. Bowen went in.

Nothing in all his twenty-five years as a medical man had prepared Dr. Bowen for the sight that assaulted him as he stepped into the Borden's sitting room. Before him on the sofa, Lizzie's father lay keeled sideways, the left side of his face so smashed that Dr. Bowen did not, could not, recognize him. The elderly gentle-

man's features were a pulp of chipped bone and razored flesh, his left eye cleaved in two.

The wounds were so violent, so obviously criminal, that they completely derailed Bowen's instincts as a doctor. Instead, his first thought was that of a policeman. Something in that room—something besides the obvious horror on the sofa—felt wrong. "Like a flash," it struck him to check the room to see if anything else was disturbed. Nothing. Not one thing was out of place, not even a speck of blood on the side table. It was not a particularly reassuring observation.

Only then did the doctor do what he had been called upon to do, and lifted one of Mr. Borden's hands from his lap to feel for a pulse. Still warm, but that was all.

"WILL SOMEBODY FIND MRS. BORDEN?"

Alice Russell had taken just enough time to change her dress before hurrying over the three blocks that separated her home from the Borden's. There, she found Bridget, Mrs. Churchill, and a "dazed" Lizzie. "Sit right down here Lizzie in the kitchen," Alice told her friend, and led her to a rocking chair.

While Mrs. Churchill fanned Lizzie, Alice rubbed Lizzie's hands and bathed her forehead with wet cloths. No one informed Alice what was wrong with Mr. Borden, but seeing her friend in such a state must have told her that it was something dreadful. The Lizzie she knew was simply not the sort of person who came easily unhinged.

At this moment, however, Lizzie Borden was not herself at all. She seemed so much in need of comfort that Alice could not content herself with holding Lizzie's hand. Within minutes of her

arrival, Alice Russell climbed into the chair beside Lizzie as though she were a child, and Lizzie laid her head on Alice's shoulder.

Then Lizzie's voice, drifting up from beneath the waving newspapers and cool compresses, stopped them all with one simple question:

"Will somebody find Mrs. Borden?"

Amidst all the frantic coming and going, the women realized, not one of them had seen Abby Borden.

Lizzie was insistent that her stepmother had received a note that morning. Somebody was sick, Mrs. Borden had told her, and she intended to call on the invalid when she went out to pick up the meat for that afternoon's dinner.

"Oh, Lizzie," Bridget said, "if I knew where [Mrs. Borden's sister] was I would go and see if Mrs. Borden was there and tell her that Mr. Borden was very sick."

"No," Lizzie replied, "I think I heard her come in."

But if Mrs. Borden had already returned from her errand, why didn't she come running herself when Lizzie screamed for Bridget? Mrs. Borden's second-floor bedroom was directly below Bridget's—the maid had rushed right by it on her way down. Wouldn't the repeated slamming of the screen door or the drumming of excited footsteps have attracted Mrs. Borden's attention as the neighbors arrived on the scene?

As the pitch of excitement rose, Lizzie's conviction wavered. "I don't know where Mrs. Borden is," she said to Mrs. Churchill. "I think she is out, but I wish you would look."

Someone must search the house for Mrs. Borden, the women decided, and it would not be Lizzie. She was plainly in no condition to do any such thing.

At that moment, Dr. Bowen came out of the sitting room, shaking his head as though he hoped to dislodge the image of what he had just seen from his mind. "That is awful," he said.