

## A Questionable Death

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Quaker midwife Rose Carroll and her friend Bertie Winslow unravel a tale of deceit and possible murder in 1888; this story first appeared in *History and Mystery, Oh My!* (Mystery and Horror, LLC, January 2015)

Helen and I sat on a cloth under a maple tree by the banks of Lake Gardner, the tree's wide leaf-lined branches providing welcome respite from the July midday heat. I loosened the collar of my shirtwaist and fanned myself with my book, one of A.M. Barnard's scandalous tales, which I had only recently learned were actually penned by Miss Alcott herself.

"Bertie should be along soon with our picnic," I said.

Helen lay back on the cloth, one arm across her eyes, her pregnant belly pushing her dress up.

"Another dizzy spell?" I asked my client, who was also becoming a friend.

"Yes. They plague me. And my head aches, as well."

"Thy pregnancy is going along normally, though," I reassured her. "And thy baby's heartbeat is strong."

"I suppose you should know, being my midwife." She leaned her head toward me and gave me a faint smile. "Will this all pass once the baby is born?"

"I hope so. Thee has two months to go." In truth I wasn't certain if her symptoms would go away. I wanted my friend David Dodge to examine Helen, but her ill-tempered husband Rupert would not agree.

"Tell me again why you use that old-fashioned manner of speech, with your thees and thys," Helen said.

I laughed. "In earlier times people used *thee* for familiars, and *you* to address those of a higher rank. Quakers honor the testimony of equality and made a point to address all in the same way. Now, though, the use of *thee* in the common parlance has given way to *you*, yet the Society of Friends maintains the old way."

I heard a clop-clop-clop on the pavement behind us and turned to see Bertie Winslow ride up on her horse. She was postmistress of our town of Amesbury, and as unconventional a spirit as I'd ever met.

"Whoa up, Grover," she called, pulling on the reins. She carried a basket on her lap.

Only Bertie would name a horse "Grover." I always smiled to hear her refer to a large animal by the name of our country's president. It was delightfully subversive. And only Bertie had the nerve to ride astride instead of sidesaddle. She slid a leg clad in a long bloomer over Grover's back and hopped off the animal. As she tied him to the tree, the hem of her skirt fell down over her pants. The bloomers, made from a cloth that matched the skirt, always showed when she rode. Bertie didn't care what people thought.

"I bring sustenance," she announced, and plopped down on the cloth with us. "How is my favorite Quaker midwife? And the bearer of the new human?"

"I am well," I said. "But Helen is ailing a bit, I'm afraid."

Bertie frowned. "Come and eat, then. My picnics can cure anything." She set to drawing paper-wrapped packets and two bottles out of the basket. "See here? Cold meat pies, dilly beans, berry tarts, even a bottle of ale." She glanced at me. "And lemonade for our teetotaler Rose."

Helen hoisted herself up onto her elbows and then to sitting, her knees to one side. "My stomach is unsettled, as well."

"Did thee eat this morning?" I asked.

"Oh, yes." Helen smiled. "Rupert always fixes my breakfast. But I'll take a little ale to settle myself."

Bertie poured a metal cup of ale for Helen and herself, and handed me a portion of tangy lemonade. "I saw your husband in the post office this morning," she said to Helen, raising her perfectly arched eyebrows as she unpinned her hat and threw it on the cloth.

When Helen reached for her cup, her loose sleeve fell back, revealing a dark patch on her forearm. She pulled her sleeve down and her smile turned nervous. "Rupert told me he had a parcel to send. I don't know what it was."

Bertie pressed her lips together and didn't comment. I bit into a meat pie, thinking that patch on Helen's arm looked a lot like a bruise.

"Mmm, perfect crust, delicious filling," I said once I swallowed. "Thank thee, Bertie."

We ate and chatted for most of an hour, although Helen nibbled more than ate. A family picnicked a little ways down and we watched as the children splashed in the water. A song sparrow entertained us from a nearby bush while a breeze brought a semblance of water-scented coolness off the lake, which was really just the Powow River backed up behind the Salisbury Mills dam.

Bertie rose with a sigh. "Back to work with me. My employees always come up with some trouble for me to solve when I'm away for too long."

After I tidied the food and repacked Bertie's basket, I handed it up to her on Grover and waved farewell.

"And we have your antenatal appointment, Helen." I tied my bonnet back on, then gave Helen a hand up to standing. We strolled the few blocks to my office in the front parlor of the house I share with my brother-in-law and his five children. I still suffer a pang of longing every time I approach the house, despite my pride in seeing the shingle announcing Rose Carroll, Midwife hanging out front. The pain of missing my late sister has not lessened in the two years since her death.

I made Helen comfortable on my examination chaise, then brought each of us a glass of water. We went through the arrangements for when her time came.

"Who will thee have to help thee at home?"

"My mother will come for as long as I need her. My family is in Newbury, so it's not far."

"Excellent. Next time I'll come and see thee at home to make sure all will be ready, in case the child decides to come early." After I took her pulse, I said, "I'll need to palpate the baby today, Helen. Is thee ready?"

She nodded. She lifted her skirts, holding them up under her armpits, and pulled her drawers down below her belly. Her ribs on one side bore a yellowing bruise. I touched it gently.

"What happened here?"

She didn't meet my eyes as she said, "I was clumsy. I ran into the corner of the bureau."

"Is that what happened to your arm, as well?" I pulled her sleeve back.

This time she looked straight at me. “Yes.” Her voice was defiant but she blinked away a tear.

I busied myself with measuring the length from her pubic bone to the top of the womb. With the listening tube pressed against her belly, I tracked the baby’s heartbeat. Manipulating gently with my hands, I felt the baby’s head and bottom to assess his size. I checked Helen’s ankles. While not overly swollen, they showed a yellow cast to the skin.

“Thee can restore thy coverings now,” I said, turning to my desk to jot down my findings. I faced her again. “Thee can feel safe with me, Helen. Is thy husband beating thee?” If he was, there was nothing I could do except hope to keep her and her baby safe. Our local police took the position that what happened in a marriage was the business of the man and his wife, not the authorities.

She gazed at me with dark eyes. “Sometimes he gets carried away. But he loves me. He tells me so. And he watches out for me, truly. I told you he makes me breakfast every day.”

I sighed inwardly. How many times had I heard that? Once it was from a client who ended up dead at the hands of the man whom she declared loved her.

“Has he always made the morning meal?”

“No, just for the last month.” Helen squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced.

As she did, I noticed that her face also bore a faint yellowish tint. “Thee is having another headache.”

She nodded. “I think I’d better go see your doctor, after all. What was his name?”

“Good. His name is David Dodge. Let us go across the river.” I checked the mantel clock that had been my grandmother’s, which read two-thirty. “David holds office hours at the new Anna Jaques Hospital in Newburyport all afternoon. I’ll have thee home in time to make supper. Put thy hat on and come along.” I was glad I was free to accompany her. She was my only antenatal appointment for the afternoon, the children were spending the summer on my parents’ farm in Lawrence, and my brother-in-law had told me he was dining with friends that evening.

I hustled us both out of the house and we went looking for a conveyance for hire on High Street.

“I’ll need a small lock of your hair,” David told Helen when he was finished examining her. It had taken us twenty minutes to find a hack, we’d had to wait a bit to see David, and he had taken care with his examination, so it was now getting on for five o’clock.

“Why?” Helen asked, taken aback.

“Just to aid in assessing your health,” David said, slipping me a look behind Helen’s back. He handed her a small pair of scissors.

Helen shrugged, but handed the scissors to me. I clipped off a small bit from near her neckline and handed the deep brown lock to David, along with the scissors.

“Thank you for coming in,” he said. “I’ll have an answer for you within a day’s time. And Rose, thanks for bringing her. I’ll summon my carriage and driver to take you both back to Amesbury.”

“That’s very kind of thee,” I said.

“I’ll need to use the outhouse before we leave.” Helen blushed a little.

“Oh, we have the new chain-pull toilets,” David said with a note of pride in his voice. “The lavatory is just down the hall to the right. It’s labeled Ladies.” He pointed the way.

After the door closed behind Helen, I gave him a quizzical glance.

“My teacher in medical school would call it gastric fever.” He gazed at me. “I suspect poison.”

“Poison?” I whispered, moving to his side.

“Arsenic. I’ll tell you for certain after I’ve analyzed the hair.” His brows knit, he went on, “Don’t let on to her. Yet.”

After David’s driver dropped Helen at her home, I had him leave me at Bertie’s house. She would be closing up at the post office about now and I wanted to talk this business through with her. We’d been friends for several years. She was ten years older than I, but although she was nearing forty, her energy for both fun and justice never flagged. We were neither of us married and she felt like a kindred spirit. Some in town muttered about her being in a so-called Boston Marriage with her friend Sophie, with whom she shared the cheerful cottage I now stood in front of. I knew she had strong feelings for Sophie, who traveled so much for her work that Bertie and I had time for our friendship. That was their business, not mine.

I wandered through the riot of color that was her front garden, a tangle of flowers and greenery in a controlled chaos of all hues and shapes. I found a full watering can and gave a drink to several pots of pansies that had wilted from the heat.

Sure enough, up Bertie clattered on Grover not five minutes later. She jumped down. “What, blessed with another Rosetta visit so soon? Come with me while I put this man in his quarters.”

I followed her back to the shed that doubled as stable. I lounged on a bench under an enormous elm tree to watch as she wiped Grover down and gave him fresh water along with his portion of oats. Her small back garden was shady and welcoming, and smelled deliciously of the sweet peas gracefully clinging to strings trained up the shed wall. When she was done, Bertie sank onto the bench next to me.

“I fear for Helen’s life,” I said. I told her of the bruises, and of David’s guess as to the cause of her symptoms. “She acknowledged her husband gets a little carried away, as she put it, but says he loves her. But if he is adding a small dose of arsenic to her breakfast each day, he’s killing her. Likely her child, as well. What kind of monster would do that?”

“A bigot and a philanderer, that’s who,” Bertie exclaimed. “Rupert Stillwell is rotten through and through. He mailed a package this morning, all right. The box was from Adelia’s Fine Clothing and it was addressed to a Miss Chartreuse LeVesque.”

I whistled. “I’d guess she’s not his little sister.”

“I’d agree. Yet you should see the looks he gives me. I hear him sniggering to his friends about Sophie and me. You know I don’t care what people say, but for a miserable rat like him to think he’s better than we are, that gets my goat.”

“Rat.” I stared at her. “Rat poison contains arsenic. What shall we do to make him stop?”

Bertie sighed. “What we *should* do is tell Amesbury’s finest. This is a job for the police, not for us.”

“Thee knows they don’t care if men beat their wives. And they’d have to prove he is giving Helen poison.”

“Unlikely to happen.” She shook her head. “I think it’s going to be up to you and me, Miss Carroll.”

I was called to a birth the next morning. It was blessedly uncomplicated, being the third baby born to a well-nourished mother who lived in a house with clean running water. As I

arrived home, the afternoon post brought a note from David. His tests confirmed his hypothesis. I freshened up and headed for the post office. It was time to put the plan Bertie and I had hatched into motion.

Detective Kevin Donovan knocked at my door the next morning at nine o'clock exactly. I greeted him and invited him into the parlor.

"Miss Carroll, I understand that Helen Stillwell was under your care." The robust police officer stood with hat in his hands.

"She still is, Kevin." I cocked my head. "Won't thee sit down?"

He cringed a little at my use of his first name. We'd had prior contact, however, and he knew that Friends did not believe in using titles for anyone, not even for the authorities.

"No, I'll stay on my feet, thank you."

"I examined her only two days ago," I went on. "Her baby is due in approximately two months."

"Was she despondent? Anxious, perhaps?"

"A bit, but at that stage most first-time mothers are. The act of giving birth is dangerous for mothers and babies alike. She was having some other health problems, though. Headaches, dizzy spells, some stomach distress."

He waved that off. "You don't think she would harm herself?"

"Why does thee ask?" I folded my hands in my lap.

"She left her husband a note. Said she couldn't stand it any more, and was going for a swim in the lake. Forever, as she put it."

I gasped and put a hand to my mouth. "Does thee mean she drowned herself?"

"I'm afraid so. She is nowhere to be found, and we located her hat and handkerchief near the bluff overlooking the lake. There is the note, too."

"I heard the emergency bell tolling last evening." I shook my head in sorrow.

"Yes, Rupert Stillwell came to us just after dark with the note. He's distraught, as you can imagine."

"If only I had detected the signs." I shook my head. "Will thee be dragging the lake?"

"Likely not. It looks to be a pretty clear case. And bodies usually surface in a few days, unless they are weighted down," Kevin said. "Such a pity, a young thing like that, and their baby dead, too."

"Is there a possibility that the note is a forgery? Perhaps someone, even her husband, wanted Helen dead."

"What an imagination you have, Rose Carroll," he scoffed. "You think a pregnant woman was murdered? In Amesbury?"

I shrugged. "One wishes it not to be so, but people are murdered. Thee knows that better than I."

"This is no murder." He placed his hat on his head. "I'll be going now."

"I shall stop by and see if I can be of assistance to Rupert," I called as Kevin made his way down the front steps.

An hour later I knocked on Rupert's door. The apartment occupied the upper floor of a house down by Clark's Pond. He flung it open with a hopeful look on his face, which fell immediately upon seeing me.

“Rupert,” I said, taking his hand in both of mine. “I am so sorry to hear about poor Helen’s disappearance. What a sorrow for thee.”

He stared. “You’re the midwife,” he finally said. His hair was neatly combed back and he wore a clean collar, but his tie was askew and his shirt misbuttoned.

I nodded. “I am Rose Carroll. May I come in?”

“Of course.” He hesitated for a moment, then stood back and let me pass.

The door opened onto a kitchen in great disarray. The sink overflowed with dirty dishes. On the table the open newspaper vied with a plate of dried eggs, a tipped-over salt shaker, and a cup holding coffee mixed with flecks of curdled cream. Crumbs filled the cracks in the wide pine floor. No wonder he gave pause to letting me enter.

“I was just about to go out,” he said. “Those police say they ain’t going to drag Lake Gardner for my Helen. They have to!” He wrung his hands.

“May I offer to help thee? I can at least clean up the kitchen here, while thee is out.”

“Oh, would you, Miss Carroll? Helen wasn’t the best of housekeepers, and I’m hopeless, myself.” Rupert jammed his hat on his head. “How can I hold a funeral without her body?” He walked through the still open doorway and clattered down the stairs.

I shut the door and got to work.

By the time the noon whistle pierced the air, Rupert had a spotless kitchen and I was walking into CL & JW Allen’s Hardware on Market Square. JW himself greeted me.

“Friend Carroll, what can we do for you today?” He beamed from behind the counter.

I drew the slip of paper I’d found in Helen’s apartment out of my bag. “My client Helen Stillwell bought this rat poison from thee in May. I was thinking of getting some of the same brand, in case rats come around our place.”

He peered at the receipt through his reading glasses. “Oh, no,” he said, looking at me over the top of the spectacles. “That was Rupert himself who purchased the arsenic. Said his wife told him they had quite the infestation.”

“I see. Arsenic is pretty toxic, isn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed. You’ll want to be very careful with it.”

I pursed my lips. “I think I’ll wait, then, since we’re not having a rodent problem at present. Wouldn’t want the children getting into a poison.”

He nodded gravely.

“I thank thee,” I said, retrieving the receipt, and walked back into the busy square. Carriages and drays vied with the people of the town walking up Friend Street, down Main Street, coming in from Elm, heading out on Market, running for the train on Water. I made my way carefully up Main to the police station.

Inside, I asked for the detective and perched on a waiting bench, my toe tapping the marble floor. Kevin emerged into the lobby and stood with legs splayed, arms crossed. He didn’t look happy.

“Miss Carroll, what is it now?”

I stood. “Kevin, I request a moment of thy time. I have evidence to show that not only was Rupert Stillwell beating his wife, he was also slowly killing her with poison. Thee must arrest him.”

His eyes bugged open. “But his wife is dead by her own hands. And her mother showed up here wailing and nearly rending her garments.”

“I don’t believe that Helen killed herself. Must I show thee what I have here in the lobby for all to see?” In fact, a gentleman looking down on his luck watched us with great interest from the facing bench.

Grumbling, the detective led the way into his office. Unbidden, I sat in the only chair not burdened with books or papers. Kevin leaned against his desk. I drew several items out of my bag and began.

“First, at my last examination of Helen Stillwell on Monday, I noticed bruises on her arm and her ribs. She admitted that her husband beats her.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Haven’t we been through the legal status on this? My hands are tied.”

“Second, she was complaining of physical symptoms not related to pregnancy. Doctor David Dodge of Newburyport gave her a thorough examination, also on Monday. He sampled her hair. The results were positive for arsenic poisoning in the last month.” I waved the note from David as he opened his mouth. “It’s here in writing. Third, she told me her husband has been making her breakfast every day for a month.”

“Isn’t that nice of him?”

I’d never heard Kevin so sarcastic. “Fourth, JW Allen himself examined this receipt and said that Rupert bought this rat poison – arsenic – in May.” I laid the receipt on the desk. “Fifth, Rupert was seen mailing a package from a ladies’ fine clothing store to a woman not his wife. And finally, thee will find in this packet the remains of cooked eggs and other breakfast foods from the Stillwell kitchen. I fully expect that they contain a portion of arsenic. Thee must find Rupert Stillwell and arrest him. I am convinced he wanted to get rid of his pregnant wife so he could marry his mistress.”

He gave a grudging nod. “You seem to have a case. But what about the matter of the missing Helen? If he was poisoning her, why should she kill herself?” He rubbed his forehead. “Her body has not come to the surface of the lake. Should be appearing soon, maybe tomorrow.”

“Rupert could have drowned her, and weighted her down. Or perhaps she didn’t drown at all. She could have just wanted to get away, especially since he was hitting her. Maybe she went to a friend.”

“It’s true, without a body, we have no proof of her death. Either way, I will have the food tested, and Mr. Allen’s story confirmed. I guess I should thank you for doing my work for me.” He smiled. “Now get on with you and leave me to it.”

The last post the next afternoon brought the news I awaited. I walked through Bertie’s front gate at close to six o’clock just as she rode up. I waited while she tied the horse to an iron ring in the hitching post. As we entered the kitchen, Helen glanced up from the bread she was kneading. Flour dusted the apron she wore loosely tied around her girth and a white smudge decorated her forehead.

“Any news?” she asked with a hopeful look.

I glanced at Bertie. “Yes,” I said, smiling. “Rupert has been arrested for poisoning. The detective found the arsenic in the remains of thy breakfast and in the salt shaker. Thee is safe now, Helen, both from the poison and from his abuse.”

“And his philandering, don’t forget. I’m so grateful to you both,” Helen said with a sigh. “And I already feel much better, going a couple of days without it.”

“Good. Ale to celebrate?” Bertie asked as she flopped down in a chair.

“Thank you, but I should probably be getting home,” Helen said. “My mother must be worried sick.”

“What will thee tell the townsfolk?” I removed my bonnet and wiped sweat from my brow. The heat had not relented.

“That I needed to get away for a bit. That I was only kidding him in that note.” She rolled the lump of dough under the heels of her hands and then slapped the top of it. “I am grateful to you both for rescuing me when you did. Even though I framed him, of course.”

Bertie and I exchanged a glance. “What do you mean, frame him?” Bertie asked.

“I arranged for the arsenic to go in my own breakfast. Told Rupert it was a special pregnancy salt he had to shake onto my eggs. Didn’t touch the shaker, myself, once I’d filled it and wiped it clean. I couldn’t think of any other way to get clear of him, with his mistresses and his beating me. Don’t worry, I’d read up on the dose. I was never going to kill myself.” She removed the apron, dusted off her hands, and grabbed her hat from the tree. “Thank you again. I’ll see you around town.”

The door closed behind her. Bertie and I stared at each other in horror. Helen poisoning herself was one thing. Putting a near-term baby at risk was quite another.

“I’m heading directly to the police station,” I said, anger making my voice shake. “And thee?”

“I’ll take you on Grover.” Bertie’s eyes flashed as she strode out the door. “Nobody dupes Bertie Winslow.”