

Evidence ... of What?

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A light buggy and horse were found tied up in a grassy area on the bluff near the approach to the old bridge. Near the middle of the bridge directly above the deepest part of the river was found a small handbag. Part of a torn ladies scarf was snagged on a protruding nail and the rail of the bridge had been forced outward. The constable guessed that there had been a struggle. The handbag contained the basic cosmetics, the dime store kind, and nothing else. It was not until later that day that the body was found snagged on a sunken tree branch about two miles downstream. It was not until the next day that she was identified as Beatrice Sumner.

Of course it was big news in town. Nobody remembered anything like this ever happening and no murder since the "book shelf murder" back in 1900 at the old Mt Greenwood College. Belle Fenton remembered that very well. She also knew Beatrice Sumner and was shocked at the news. Beatrice was a regular visitor to the new University library and the two women, who were about the same age, talked often.

Belle was trying to concentrate on the list of books to be ordered but her mind kept going back to poor Beatrice when a knock on the door to her office pulled her attention away from both subjects, at least for the moment. It was her best friend Jennie Royce who didn't wait for a invitation, but burst into the room ... "Did you hear about Bea?" and not waiting for a reply, "Isn't it just awful!" She sat down, not needing an invitation, nor caring if one was offered, and the two proceeded to recount what had transpired, or at least what they knew about it.

It wasn't all that long ago that Bea had been in the newspapers. She had tried to get to see her ex husband and when he refused to let her into the house, she had consumed five or six ounces of chloroform and collapsed on the front walk. She was taken to the hospital in critical condition and was eventually nursed back to health. Physical health, that is. Neither Belle nor Jennie were sure of her mental condition. Previously Bea had done the same thing during the separation. On that occasion, the amount she drank must

have been much less because Bill, her husband, took her into the house where she stayed until she was able to be sent away.

But after those episodes Bea had come into the library several times, she said, to do research and Belle surmised, just to have someone to listen to her. Belle, as always and with everyone, was a good listener. What she heard were complaints from Bea that her husband was insensitive to her as was almost everyone else. She dubiously claimed to have been descended from British royalty and deserved to be treated better. She apparently was not aware that in this country we don't put much, if any, stock in hereditary titles or privileges. On several of her most recent visits to the library she asked and was given permission to use the typewriter to record some information she had found. Her typing skills were limited to the hunt and peck system but Belle noted that her work consisted of less than a single page at any one time.

The curiosity of the two ladies was insatiable and when they left together they decided to stop in at Constable Wagner's office. If the truth were known, and it was by most who knew him, Albert Wagner had a sweet spot in his heart for Belle and welcomed any excuse to spend time with her and impress her with his abilities in police work. Belle, as discretely as she could, tried to avoid him but in this case would condescend to see him if the ladies could satisfy their curiosity. And so it was that Belle and Jennie were welcomed into Albert Wagner's office. After pleasantries were exchanged, Belle came right to the point of their visit, "How terrible about Bea Sumner!" Albert replied, "Yes, but we will soon arrest her murderer." "You know who the murderer is?" asked Jennie. "Almost certainly." was Albert's response. To Belle's query of the identity of the culprit and how they knew, Albert informed them, "Strictly off the record", that it was her ex husband and that he had written incriminating letters which were found in Miss Sumner's flat. He showed them the typewritten letters lying on his desk. Belle asked if she could see them. Eager to display his abilities as a detective, Albert handed them to her.

There were three of them. The first two were tirades saying how much he hated her and for her never to darken his door again or she would not need to take chloroform because he would kill her. The third was completely different saying he was sorry for his treatment of her and that if she would meet him at the old bridge (on the night she died) they would talk and maybe they could be reconciled. All three bore the typewritten signature of her ex husband.

As she handed the letters back to Albert, Bell said, "These are very strong evidence, but not that she had been murdered by her ex husband. In fact they are evidence that she had not been murdered at all!" Albert was aghast and asked how she could come to that conclusion. Bell explained: The "a" in everyplace it is found on those letters is slightly misaligned. The letters were written on the library typewriter and Belle recognized the faulty character. To her knowledge, Bea's husband had never been to the library and certainly never used that machine. However, Bea had on several recent occasions. No, Bea had not been murdered but had jumped off the bridge, leaving the torn scarf, purse and the letters in her flat. All this was obviously an effort, not only to end her life but to place the blame and punishment on her ex husband.

Poor Bea had failed to get the attention and respect she thought she deserved all her life and that condition followed her into death. She was discredited again. Even her "evidence" turned on her.