

Third Mystery Announced in the Portia of the Pacific Series

The Stockton Insane Asylum Murder A Portia of the Pacific Historical Mystery

Volume 3

“Madness can be seen as an intuitive probing into true reality.”—R. D. Laing

Women were, among others, misdiagnosed as insane by alienists in the 1800s. My plot will involve a female child who has been institutionalized in 1887, but the aunt of this child comes to Clara Foltz to say she believes the child was admitted to the Stockton State Insane Asylum (the first such institution in California) because she knew about a murder that was committed on her wealthy parent’s estate.

Clara solicits the help of Nelly Bly, the crusading (real) journalist who exposed the deplorable conditions at Blackwell’s Island, New York, in 1887. Together with Ah Toy, they contrive a way to go undercover to gain admittance into the Women’s Building at Stockton to find the child and determine what happened to have her institutionalized. Children were regularly institutionalized, as were the elderly and the feeble-minded.

Here is the first chapter in this new historical mystery:

Chapter 1: Undercover



The Women's Section, Stockton State Insane Asylum, April 22, 1887.

There she was. Polly Bedford, age 12, stooped-over in the shadows behind a row of bunk beds. Seated at a scarred wooden school desk, Polly was concentrating on her pencil drawing. She wore the patient's navy-blue frock pull-over with her initials "P.B." stitched on the arm sleeve. Polly appeared to be drawing her residence inside the Women's Ward at the State Insane Asylum at Stockton. Her tongue was protruding from the corner of her mouth, and she kept pushing a strand of black hair back from her forehead, as she looked up from her tablet to view the interior of the ward.

As seventeen-year-old Bertha May Foltz walked up behind her, she could clearly see the bunk beds in the girl's drawing, the wash room, the dining room, and the windows, through which patients could observe their rural surroundings. Except, instead of creating people shapes--patients, doctors, nurses and visitors--Polly had colonised

her mental ward with walking and talking medicine capsules. Each capsule, whether it was a patient or not, had stick arms and legs, and every face was drawn onto the top half of its pill torso.

Bertha, after reading the biography of Civil War Superintendent of Union Nurses, Dorothea Dix, became very interested in medicine. She would beg to go with her mother, Attorney and Detective Clara Foltz, every time one of her cases required that she visit the hospital or the coroner's office. When the murder of ten-year-old Winnifred Cotton took place this week, just three doors down from where Bertha and her family lived in the mansion at One Nob Hill, Bertha decided she wanted to help her mother with the case. Not only was Polly Bedford a friend of Bertha's, she was also a member of the same choir that sang at Bertha's grandfather, Reverend Elias Shortridge's tent revivals at the sand lots on the Market Street side of San Francisco City Hall.

However, the secret reason Bertha wanted to help her mother was because her older sister, Trella Evelyn, and older brother, Samuel Cortland, had played important parts in the mystery the year before concerning the spiritualist murders. Bertha had watched them both as they pranced around the bedroom, claiming to have discovered this or that clue to contribute in the search for the killer. Samuel eventually broke the case wide open and was able to rescue their mother, Trella, and Samuel's future girlfriend, Adeline Quantrill, at the strange Winchester House in San Jose.

Bertha May realized that Polly Bedford's art was a probable reflection of the drugs she was being given to alleviate her high anxiety, such as potassium bromide, and to get her moving when she was in the valley of her melancholic despair, Strychnine. Of course, there was some wisdom in the girl's portrayal of characters, as many of the staff could be seen, every night, slipping into the private suites on the top floor to sell cocaine, opioids, and even morphine to the wealthy female patients.

These rich women never worked in the garden or on the farm. Instead, they stayed on the top floor, playing the piano, babbling incoherently about their paranoid suspicions, and grazing like lowing cattle at the ever-present collection of hors d'oeuvres placed all around on tables inside their main dining room. They didn't have to sit at the main table downstairs with the poor patients.

In their drugged state, Bertha saw them to be the privileged insane, and every poor patient below, who was required to be shackled when not working outside, gave them envious looks when they spotted these women dancing, like ghosts, back and forth along the carpeted stairwells. They wore fashionable dresses with full bustles and ornate embroidery, and yet they acted like lunatics.

Bertha May was being supervised from San Francisco by her mother, Clara Shortridge Foltz, Private Detective and Attorney-at-Law. Bertha was to infiltrate the Stockton Asylum, while pretending to be insane, with the sole purpose of

questioning Miss Polly Bedford. Bertha was told by Clara that Miss Bedford had been committed by her parents because she had witnessed a murder which had taken place inside their residence, a stately mansion in the Nob Hill section of San Francisco. Clara also told Bertha that the Bedfords did not want Polly involved, and so they were willing to declare their daughter insane to keep her safe and legally out of the way. It was going to be Bertha's important job to discover who or what Polly saw on that night and to report back to her mother.

However, this case was much more complicated than the spiritualist murders. First of all, Bertha knew the murder witness, Polly Bedford. Bertha had played dolls and done homework with Polly, and Bertha had never found the younger girl to be belligerent or mentally strange. Therefore, Bertha was chosen by Clara to find out the identity of the person Miss Bedford allegedly saw commit this murder of Miss Winnifred Cotton, age 10, on January 3, 1887. If she discovered that Polly was not really insane, then she was going to explore how the institution was able to get so many people committed. However, Clara had explained to Bertha, at some length, she was not to steal or commit any crimes during her snooping adventure.

Bertha was going to see if she could determine what made this entire state asylum business run, and even though she knew her mother was looking out for her safety, Bertha was going to take all the risks she needed to accomplish her goal. If her

brother, Samuel, could join the Tong Gang and spy on a spiritualist, then Bertha could be just as adventurous—perhaps even more so. Her mother and the Cottons believed that mental illness was being sold as an easy way to get rid of troublesome wives and children and to secretly formulate a scheme whereby immigrants could be tricked out of their property and wealth by being committed. No money could come from the State of California to the State asylums at Stockton and Napa, unless the patients were ruled indigent.

Therefore, the same panel of doctors and state clerks was employed each year to do this nefarious business of separating the profitable wheat from the insane chaff, resulting in an incredible government statistic that said, “in 1886, alone, one out of every 435 Californians had been declared insane by the State.” As this was an important women’s and human rights issue, Clara and her team were motivated to uncover any illegal activities that might surface during their murder investigation. Bertha was overjoyed at being part of her mother’s team at long last.

All Bertha knew before she was committed by her mother to the asylum was that Mr. Charles Cotton, President and Owner of the Cotton Gin Liquor Imports on Market Street, had deposited five hundred dollars into Bertha’s personal bank account. Bertha was going to help her mother do what the City of San Francisco’s Police Department could not do: find the killer of Charles Cotton’s daughter.

“I have a new game we can play,” Bertha spoke to Polly, sitting beside her chair, down on the lower bed of a nearby bunk ensemble.

Bertha watched the girl place her pencil down on the desk’s top. She turned in her school chair and faced her older inquisitor. “Can we play Mental Metamorphosis again?”

It was as if an invisible force had sucked all the air out of the room. After the name of this game was released, the priority was now to breathe and to survive. Nothing else mattered. Bertha also understood what she must do. Using the girl’s superior imagination and sensitivities to access her mind was a stroke of genius.

“Of course, we can,” said Bertha, reaching out to capture the girl’s hands in her own. “Instruction happens so much faster when the message can be implanted directly inside the brain. When you think, you are thinking for the collective good. Unless you control the actors, anything could happen, and that is the path toward chaos.”

Polly moved out of her school chair and walked over to where Bertha was seated on the lower bed. Bertha knew this might be the only chance she got to obtain the information she needed. The staff was out supervising the farm and garden work of the others. Only kind old Mrs. Betterman, the baker, was left to mind the asylum, and she was almost deaf. Bertha set the stage immediately.

“What is the kernel of fear? We all have it, do we not?”

Polly stared straight ahead. “Not all. Some

have no fear. They get trampled saving children and the elderly. Burnt to a cinder fighting Hell itself. Lost on the battlefields of the wars. I know one person who is the incarnation of Lucifer, the Fallen Star. I saw him murder an innocent. All the murderers are rejoicing. They at last have a hero on Earth to guide them.”

Bertha spread out her dress with her palms smoothing the material against her thin body. She was proud to be thin, and she thought her mother’s weighty torso was unbecoming an active Suffragette for international women’s rights. Back to her immediate concern, Bertha knew she needed more specific details about this Lucifer. “What did this demon look like? Certainly, he wasn’t an apparition. You can’t believe in ghosts.”

A breathtakingly chilly vacuum devoured the space around them. Polly shivered, the first human reflex exhibited by her.

“You would pray there were ghosts, because no human could stop him. When he turned toward me, I saw his face was a continually changing compendium of different people’s faces. I fantasized under stress about the possible reasons for this to occur. I may have eaten something horrid or poisonous. Or, supernaturally, I may have been put under a curse of some kind. Could I be an enemy of the government, who needs to be disposed of?” Polly’s face became a bit animated, as she spoke, but her body remained rigid.

“What were you forced to do?” Bertha strained forward to take the girl’s hands. “It’s time to use

your mental metamorphosis. If you become his mind, as he is in the act of killing a girl, tell me what you would be thinking and how you could change the reality of murder into something worthwhile and even redeeming.”

The four times previously, when Bertha attempted to access Polly’s mind, events kept occurring to interrupt the proceedings. Once it was an earthquake, once a fire alarm, and twice other patients had gone off the deep end and caused a ruckus. This was the moment Bertha had been long awaiting.

“I must stop the energy in this poor damsel. If she is allowed to grow older and breed, then the entire society is endangered. One small incision ...”

Bertha watched Polly’s right hand. It was in the posture of holding a pen or perhaps a cutting utensil. She held it over an invisible cadaver, her eyes focused upon the cutting motion being made by her empty but purposeful fingers.

“Polly, dearest. You may now metamorphose your brain and take control of his. What can you do to correct the immoral tide of sludge creeping onto the land at this point?”

The eager smile on the girl’s face demonstrated to Bertha that there were conflicting psychological forces at work. Polly, by all academic and social standards, was a genius child, a prodigy, but this turn of events had thrown the social welfare officials into an increasingly pessimistic state of conjecture. The idea that a girl’s mind, especially

a mind that came from such noble breeding, could be declared broken was inconceivable.

As a result of this public reflection, Polly's existential reality was the daily emotional fodder for the masses. This or that doctor or professional (whose efficacy was open to bidding) would say how the girl's parents were to blame and that no child can become insane without a direct influence from the parent figures. Others would speculate that the government was behind a huge cover-up, and so many citizens were being adjudicated insane to keep them quiet. These inmates knew something, and they had to be kept silent.

Bertha could hear the commotion at the asylum's front entrance. The girls had returned from their labors in the garden and on the farm. She took hold of her chain and dragged the ten-pound steel cube across the room to her bunk. Bertha knew that the moment the workers came into the ward they, too, would affix the shackles to their legs.

One must always make it profitable for the state-run institution, even if it means a little discomfort during enforcement. A recent statistical survey had uncovered the fact that more patient accidents occurred because of there being no restraints, and the screaming dashes made by manic lunatics were not to be allowed. It was Bertha's goal, however, to lift the rock of societal homage in order to explore the stark reality of life and death, squirming in the filthy excrement below.