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# INQUEST

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## "IT WAS HARD TO BE WATCHED SO CLOSELY"

*Tuesday, August 9, 1892*

By now it was not unusual for Bridget Sullivan to find a policeman at the Bordens' door. She was not, however, accustomed to them asking for her. She must come down to the police station, Inspector Doherty informed her, either by foot or by carriage.

Bridget began to cry. Just the day before, she had tried to pack up her things and get out for good, but the police would not let her go. Her tearful pleading, her begging that she couldn't sleep nights, that she was afraid to remain in the house any longer, made no difference. She had broken down so utterly that Marshal Hilliard himself had come to reason with her. What was a poor Irish girl of twenty-five to do but obey the marshal's orders and pass another night in that house? And now Inspector Doherty had come to arrest her.

But Bridget was wrong. It was only an inquest, Inspector Doherty explained. The police wanted nothing more than to ask her questions. In that case, Bridget told Doherty, she was willing to have the police or anyone else examine her every action since she arose Thursday morning.

Bridget had no way of knowing it, but convening an inquest was an odd choice on the part of the authorities. Inquests are most commonly held in the event of a suspicious death to determine whether there is evidence of foul play. In the Borden case, that was the single fact that had been completely clear from the instant the bodies were discovered. What, then, were the police hoping to uncover?

By law the police were permitted—even encouraged—to conduct inquest proceedings in absolute secrecy to prevent pre-trial publicity from tainting potential jurors' opinions. But Fall River, as the *New Bedford Evening Standard* remarked, was a "leaky

place," and it could be no secret that something important was going on within the closely guarded doors of the central station. The papers had already noted the arrival of the district attorney, Mr. Hosea M. Knowlton. A few lucky reporters had also spotted Medical Examiner Dolan pulling up to the back door of the police station to unload a box from his carriage. When the lap robe covering the box slipped, the newspapermen were treated to a glimpse of a dress and hatchet and something else they could not quite make out.

It did not take much sleuthing to deduce what the authorities might be discussing, and once again, an eager crowd gathered in Second Street Tuesday afternoon in anticipation of a spectacle.

They were not disappointed. Following Bridget's examination, Marshal Hilliard and Inspector Doherty arrived at the Borden house at 1:40 with a subpoena—a summons for Lizzie to appear as a witness at the inquest upon the deaths of Andrew and Abby Borden. Immediately. Instead of Lizzie, Mary Ella Brigham, Lizzie's childhood friend, emerged from Number 92 and crossed the street to Dr. Bowen's house. The crowd rippled with excitement—had one of the Bordens fainted from the shock of the summons? But Mrs. Brigham returned without the doctor, and within a few minutes, the marshal and Inspector Doherty escorted Mrs. Brigham and Miss Lizzie into the waiting carriage.

Since the funeral, the strain on Lizzie had begun to crack through her famously rigid exterior. "In the past few days Lizzie has terribly aged," the *Fall River Herald* reported. "The full round cheeks that friends of her former days remember have entirely disappeared, although the bright eyes and haughty expression are still retained. There was not a falter in the step as she came down the stairs." Again the public noted that although she dressed in black, she still was not wearing deep mourning.

As the carriage set off north up Second Street, the news that

Miss Lizzie Borden was headed toward the police station outran the horses. Hundreds of spectators swarmed the entrance, grinding business in the center of town to a near standstill. Pale-faced and biting her lower lip, Lizzie made her way through the crowd and into the station.

The doors locked behind her.

### **"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO ANSWER IT"**

Lizzie Borden stepped up to the witness stand. The second-floor courtroom was all but empty. The doors had been shut, an officer stationed on the landing to keep onlookers out of earshot. Beside her, Judge Josiah Blaisdell sat presiding. District Attorney Knowlton stood before her—a bearded man with a “disinterested expression” and a colossal build. His credentials were as formidable as his stature. A former Massachusetts state congressman and senator, Knowlton would one day become the state attorney general. The table alongside his, customarily occupied by the defense, was empty. Lawyer Jennings’s petition to be present during Lizzie’s questioning had been refused. No one but Marshal Hilliard, Medical Examiner Dolan, State Detective Seaver, and the district attorney’s stenographer, Miss Annie White, had been permitted to enter the courtroom. None of them advised Lizzie that she was not obligated to testify regarding anything that might incriminate herself. Presumably, Lawyer Jennings had already gone over the particulars of the procedure during the brief private conference the authorities granted them before Lizzie took the stand. No one mentioned the warrant for her arrest held by Marshal Hilliard, which allowed him to take her into custody at any moment. Even Lawyer Jennings did not know about that.

Bridget Sullivan had already testified for two and a half hours and, despite her repeated requests to go home, was now sequestered in the matron's room. What Bridget said, what she might have divulged, Lizzie had no way of knowing. Whatever it was had been interesting enough to delay Judge Blaisdell's habitually prompt noon dinnertime by a full thirty minutes.

"Give me your full name," Knowlton began.

One startling fact must be acknowledged: the first volume of the original inquest transcript has been lost. The official record of the one and only time Lizzie Andrew Borden was ever directly questioned in court—gone. What remains is a copy printed in the *New Bedford Evening Standard* on June 12, 1893. District Attorney Knowlton himself provided the transcript, which is believed to have been reprinted verbatim. It is impossible to know if the *Evening Standard* made any significant changes to Lizzie's words; other newspapers certainly did. At any rate, it is the most complete and accurate version known to exist.

### **THE EVENING STANDARD VS. THE DAILY JOURNAL**

Another frequently quoted source for Lizzie Borden's inquest testimony is the *Providence Daily Journal*. Since the 1920s, prominent Borden scholars have asserted that the *Daily Journal's* version "does not differ widely" from the *New Bedford Evening Standard's*, claiming that "the two vary only in slight detail."

In reality, anyone can see at a glance just how different they are. The *Daily Journal* printed less than 5 percent of Lizzie's testimony, reducing the number

of words from 15,535 to 651. Nearly one hundred of District Attorney Knowlton's questions are missing, and Lizzie's answers have been condensed into long paragraphs full of disjointed sentences that ricochet from one subject to another. As a result, Knowlton's wording is often attributed to Lizzie, such as when she states, seemingly out of the blue, "I made no effort to find my mother at all." The *Evening Standard's* version reveals that it was actually Knowlton who asked, at the end of a series of questions regarding Mrs. Borden's whereabouts, "You made no effort to find your mother at all?" Lizzie answered simply, "No, sir."

Despite its alterations to the inquest text, the *Daily Journal* made only a handful of factual errors. Nevertheless, the *Daily Journal's* version of Lizzie's testimony created a distorted view of Lizzie Borden's voice and state of mind that has spanned three centuries.

Whether she was guilty or innocent, Lizzie Borden's inquest testimony was nothing short of catastrophic. Her answers appear so evasive, contradictory, and obstinate, it's hard to imagine anyone attempting to prove his or her innocence more ineffectively.

And yet Knowlton had his work cut out for him. Lizzie was astonishingly ignorant of her own family's affairs. She was not certain of her stepmother's age or how much real estate her father owned. She could give no useful information about Andrew Borden's financial worth or say whether he had a will.

"Not that I know of," she said more than once, and "I cannot locate the time exactly." "I think, I am not sure, but I think . . ."

It was chore enough to extract plain facts from her. Trying to get an idea of more abstract notions, such as the feelings between

her and her stepmother, proved a daunting task. Lizzie testified that she had never had trouble with her stepmother in her life. There was "simply a difference of opinion," she said, regarding Andrew Borden's purchase of Bertie Whitehead's house.

"You have been on pleasant terms with your stepmother since then?" Knowlton asked.

"Yes sir," Lizzie said.

"Cordial?" Knowlton pressed.

"It depends upon one's idea of cordiality, perhaps."

"According to your idea of cordiality?"

"We were friendly, very friendly."

"Cordial, according to your idea of cordiality?"

"Quite so."

"What do you mean by 'quite so'?"

"Quite cordial. I do not mean the dearest of friends in the world, but very kindly feelings, and pleasant. I do not know how to answer you any better than that."

Knowlton was not satisfied. Round and round they went, Lizzie conceding a bare minimum of information to each question, forcing Knowlton to prompt and pry for more.

"You did not regard her as your mother?"

"Not exactly, no; although she came there when I was very young."

"Were your relations towards her that of daughter and mother?"

"In some ways it was, and in some it was not."

"In what ways was it?"

"I decline to answer."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know how to answer it."

"In what ways was it not?"

"I did not call her mother."

"What name did she go by?"

"Mrs. Borden."

"When did you begin to call her Mrs. Borden?"

"I should think five or six years ago."

"Before that time you had called her mother?"

"Yes sir."

"What led to the change?"

"The affair with her stepsister." (Mrs. Borden had no stepsister. Lizzie of course meant Bertie Whitehead, Abby Borden's half sister.)

"So that the affair was serious enough to have you change from calling her mother, do you mean?"

"I did not choose to call her mother."

"Have you ever called her mother since?"

"Yes, occasionally."

"To her face, I mean?"

"Yes."

"Often?"

"No, sir."

"Seldom?"

"Seldom."

Knowlton prodded a while longer, then abruptly changed his line of questioning to Lizzie's whereabouts the morning of the murders. Just as suddenly, Lizzie began answering more freely, even volunteering information.

Lizzie had been the last to rise that Thursday morning. Everyone had eaten, and Uncle Morse had gone to call on another relative in Fall River. Mr. Borden sat in his large chair, reading the *Providence Daily Journal*, while Mrs. Borden dusted in the dining room. Bridget was just bringing in the brush and bucket to wash windows. Lizzie had been ill most of the day before and did not care much about breakfast. She might have eaten half a banana, perhaps a molasses cookie—she did not remember. Her father



went into town while the women continued their various chores. Lizzie set up a little ironing board on the dining room table, laid out eight or ten of her best handkerchiefs, and put the flatirons on the stove to heat.

Knowlton worded his next questions very carefully, for he knew that Medical Examiner Dolan believed Mrs. Borden had been dead for an hour to an hour and a half when he first saw her body at 11:45. That meant whoever murdered Abby Borden had done so while her husband was out on his morning errands—exactly the time Lizzie was about to describe.

How long had she spent ironing her handkerchiefs? Knowlton wanted to know.

“I did not finish them,” Lizzie said, “my flats were not hot enough.”

“How long a job would it have been if the flats had been right?”  
Twenty minutes, Lizzie guessed.

“How long did you work on the job?” Knowlton asked again.

“I don’t know, sir.”

What Knowlton had really asked was *Where were you when your stepmother was killed?*

Lizzie Borden had given no alibi.

### **“I AM SO CONFUSED I DON’T KNOW ONE THING FROM ANOTHER”**

“Where were you when [your father] returned?” Knowlton continued.

With that one question, Lizzie Borden’s testimony fell apart.

“I was down in the kitchen,” she said. “Reading an old magazine that had been left in the cupboard, an old *Harper’s Magazine*.”

Even if the original inquest transcript were available, it would

not convey the atmosphere in that room at that moment. Everyone but Lizzie must have understood the significance of what she had just said. Whether the authorities reacted, whether Lizzie sensed any astonishment or suspicion, is impossible to know.

Her answer had flatly contradicted the version of Mr. Borden's arrival Bridget Sullivan had given only a few hours before.

What exactly had Bridget said? No one knows for sure. Once again, the answer is in that missing volume of inquest testimony, and in Bridget's case, there are no newspapers to resurrect it from. The nearest approximation is her preliminary hearing testimony, given two weeks later. District Attorney Knowlton himself considered it "almost identical" to what she said at the inquest, so what is known of Andrew Borden's return home is taken from Bridget's earliest surviving testimony, given August 26 and 27.

According to that testimony, when Mr. Borden turned his key in the front door's spring lock, it did not open. Bridget, washing windows in the sitting room, heard him trying to unlock the door and went to open it for him. The interior key and bolt, which normally were unlocked each morning, were still fastened. Puzzled and fumbling, Bridget cursed the door. From upstairs came the familiar sound of a laugh—Lizzie's.

That information alone had been remarkable. If Dr. Dolan was right about the time of Mrs. Borden's death, then Bridget Sullivan's testimony meant Lizzie Borden was not the only one on the second floor at that moment. Abby Borden was up there, too, probably still bleeding onto the Brussels carpet. If Lizzie had not done the killing, then the murderer might have been lurking upstairs as well.

And now Lizzie Borden stood at the witness stand, swearing under oath that she had been in the opposite end of the house entirely. One of the women must be wrong—or lying. District Attorney Knowlton had to find out which.

"Are you sure you were in the kitchen when your father returned?" he asked, leaving her an opening to change her mind.

"I am not sure whether I was there or in the dining room," Lizzie said.

Knowlton began to nudge his questions toward Bridget's testimony. "Did you go back to your room before your father returned?"

Yes, Lizzie remembered carrying up some clean clothes, staying only long enough to make a quick repair to one of the garments.

"Was that the time when your father came home?"

"He came home after I came down stairs."

"You were not up stairs when he came home?" Knowlton asked outright.

"I was not up stairs when he came home; no, sir."

Bridget Sullivan had not given Knowlton one reason to doubt her. Bridget's responses had been so clear and consistent, so forthright, that she'd been dismissed as a suspect almost immediately. Lizzie, with her terse, vague answers, had not inspired the same confidence. Anyone standing in Knowlton's shoes would have been skeptical of Lizzie's claim. He diverted her with a few questions about the locks, then returned to the upstairs-downstairs issue from a different angle:

"Where were you when the bell rang?"

"I think in my room up stairs," Lizzie said, contradicting herself as plainly as she'd contradicted Bridget's testimony only moments before.

"Then you were up stairs when your father came home?" Knowlton asked.

"I don't know sure, but I think I was."

"What were you doing?"

"As I say, I took up these clean clothes, and stopped and basted a little piece of tape on a garment."

"Did you come down before your father was let in?"

"I was on the stairs coming down when she let him in."

"Then you were up stairs when your father came to the house on his return?"

"I think I was."

Lizzie Borden's credibility evaporated. First one story, then another, as though Knowlton's questions were not connected to each other. She did not seem to be thinking at all.

Since Friday night, Lizzie had been taking morphine, a highly addictive sedative and painkiller made from opium, capable of causing troublesome side effects such as confusion and hallucinations, for "mental distress and nervous excitement." Saturday, the day of the funeral and the search, the day Lizzie learned she was a suspect, Dr. Bowen had doubled the dose. By today's standards the prescription was unremarkable; Lizzie had been taking approximately 16 milligrams of morphine a day since Saturday, August 6.

Of course, there is no way to prove whether the inconsistencies in Lizzie Borden's inquest testimony were caused by morphine. It is a fact, however, that today, testimony given by a witness under the influence of any narcotic would be questionable, if not inadmissible.

Knowlton in all probability knew nothing of this, so it is hard to tell whether his tone was sarcastic or patient when he asked, "You remember, Miss Borden, I will call your attention to it so as to see if I have any misunderstanding, not for the purpose of confusing you; you remember that you told me several times that you were down stairs, and not up stairs, when your father came home? You have forgotten, perhaps?"

Lizzie finally seemed to realize the bind she was in. "I don't know what I have said," she admitted. "I have answered so many questions and I am so confused I don't know one thing from another."

Knowlton reminded her what she had said, then asked again: downstairs?

"I think I was down stairs in the kitchen."

"And then you were not up stairs?"

"I think I was not," Lizzie decided. She had carried the clothes up right after using the water closet, then had come down and stayed down. It must have been a different day that she'd been on the steps when the doorbell rang.

"I now call your attention to the fact that you had specifically told me you had gone upstairs," Knowlton said, "and had been there about five minutes when the bell rang, and were on your way down, and were on the stairs when Maggie let your father in that day—"

"Yes, I said that, and then I said I did not know whether I was on the stairs or in the kitchen."

"Now how will you have it?"

"I think, as nearly as I know, I think I was in the kitchen."

Knowlton had given Lizzie one more chance, and she had failed. That was the worst of it, but it was not the end. Lizzie could also not account for how she and Mrs. Borden could have spent the two hours from nine to eleven o'clock in the house together without crossing each other's paths, or for why she had not noticed that Mrs. Borden never came downstairs after going up to put fresh pillow slips on the guest bed—an errand that should have occupied no more than two minutes. Aside from Lizzie's brief trip to the water closet and then upstairs to put her clean clothes away, it was almost impossible for Abby Borden to have left the spare room or the house itself without Lizzie seeing or

hearing her. Yet Lizzie supposed Mrs. Borden had gone up the back stairs to make up her own bed, or out marketing as she usually did—perhaps visiting her sick friend along the way—even though she would have walked right past Lizzie to do so. Nothing added up.

### **“YOU DID NOT ANSWER MY QUESTION, AND YOU WILL, IF I HAVE TO PUT IT ALL DAY”**

On August 10, Lizzie returned to the stand for the second day in a row. Knowlton tried to begin afresh, asking her to relate Thursday morning's events once again.

Lizzie obliged. She had come downstairs, saw her father reading the paper, spoken briefly with her stepmother in the dining room about the day's marketing, and gone down cellar to the water closet for about five minutes. When she came back, Mrs. Borden was nowhere in sight, and Lizzie assumed she had gone out. That, at least, seemed feasible.

Then Lizzie began to confound him once more. Knowlton could get almost nothing useful from her regarding the critical minutes between 9:15 and 11:00, when Mrs. Borden was murdered. Her father, Lizzie thought, had left the house around 10:00, but Knowlton knew from police witness statements that Mr. Borden had been seen on his usual rounds downstreet as early as 9:30 that morning.

Again and again, Lizzie's answers were infuriatingly terse and matter-of-fact. She answered questions literally to the letter and no further, even when giving more information would have been in her best interest. She would not even commit to having seen Bridget washing the windows, driving Knowlton to the very brink of exasperation.

"Do you think she might have gone to work and washed all the windows in the dining room and sitting room and you not know it?" he asked.

"I don't know, I am sure, whether I should or not. I might have seen her, and not know it."

Knowlton gave up and began to prod at her whereabouts during the second murder. Without too much trouble, they established that her father had come home and settled down on the couch. Lizzie asked Mr. Borden if he wanted the window left open, then left him to his nap. The flatiron was still not hot enough for her handkerchiefs, so out she went to the barn to look for some lead to make sinkers.

Knowlton clearly could not fathom how Lizzie, who had not been inside the barn in three months and had not used her fishing lines in five years, just happened to choose the very hour of her father's murder to suddenly leave the house and go hunting for lead sinkers. Lizzie freely admitted that nothing in particular had prompted her: "I said to myself 'I will go and try and find that sinker; perhaps by the time I get back the flats will be hot.' That is the only reason." And why, an incredulous Knowlton wanted to know, did she begin preparing for Monday's fishing trip by looking for old sinkers when she admitted she had not even bought new lines yet?

"I thought I would find out whether there were any sinkers before I bought the lines," Lizzie explained with the frugal logic she'd learned at her father's knee, "and if there was, I should not have to buy any sinkers."

Knowlton dropped the subject and moved on to how Lizzie occupied herself in the loft of the barn while her father was being butchered in the house. Twenty minutes seemed an awfully long time to pick over the workbench for a handful of scrap metal.

It took longer, Lizzie explained, because she had eaten her

pears first. Knowlton balked at that, and once more they sparred, arguing almost like brother and sister, as though deliberately trying to irritate each other.

"You were feeling better than you were in the morning?" Knowlton asked, calling her upset stomach into question.

"I felt better in the morning than I did the night before."

"That is not what I asked you. You were then, when you were in that hot loft, looking out of the window and eating three pears, feeling better, were you not, than you were in the morning when you could not eat any breakfast?"

"I never eat any breakfast."

"You did not answer my question, and you will, if I have to put it all day. Were you then, when you were eating those three pears in that hot loft, looking out of that closed window, feeling better than you were in the morning when you ate no breakfast?"

"I was feeling well enough to eat the pears."

Lizzie's evasive manner had returned—splitting hairs and offering not one particle more information than Knowlton explicitly requested. Sometimes she gave him none at all. Asked why she had chosen to eat her pears in the one place where she could not see the house, Lizzie answered, "I cannot tell you any reason," though she did inform Knowlton that she could see the house from the barn window. It was after she finished the pears and turned to the workbench at the other end of the barn that someone might have gone in unnoticed. Then could she explain why she had spent a full ten minutes at the workbench with her back to that window? "No," Lizzie replied, "only that I can't do anything in a minute."

Regardless of whether her answers pointed toward guilt or innocence, District Attorney Knowlton had to ask and re-ask his questions to wrench the most trifling details from his witness. Even when his restraint gave way to badgering, Lizzie



relinquished the barest minimum of information. Only when it came time to recount the discovery of her father's body did her composure falter.

"I opened the door and rushed back," she said.

"Saw his face?"

"No, I did not see his face, because he was all covered with blood." She'd seen nothing else—not the blood pooling on the floor, the gashes that laid her father's face open, his sliced and dangling eyeball.

"Nothing of that kind?"

"No sir," Lizzie Borden said, and covered her face with her hand. The court waited. It was nearly two minutes before she could go on.

### **"BEING ENTIRELY DECOMPOSED"**

As the third and final day of inquest testimony was commencing on August 11, Medical Examiner Dolan and Dr. Frank Draper, medical examiner of Suffolk County, met at Oak Grove Cemetery. The time had come to perform full and official autopsies on Andrew and Abby Borden.

Once more the Bordens' bodies were stripped, laid out for examination, and reopened from chin to groin. They had not been embalmed, and so there had been nothing but the thick stone walls of the receiving vault to stave off the inevitable decay. After five days, their bodies were no longer stiff with rigor mortis, due to their "far advanced" state of decomposition. Mrs. Borden's brain, Dolan noted, "evacuated in a fluid condition, being entirely decomposed." Mr. Borden's brain had also liquefied but apparently remained inside his skull for the duration of the autopsy. The skin around the wounds had deteriorated enough that the

doctors could no longer determine how sharply the edges had been cut. The residue of the couple's week-old breakfasts still remained in their bowels.

Painstakingly, Dolan and Draper measured, numbered, and assessed each wound. In Mr. Borden's case, the doctors determined, the half-dozen disfiguring blows to the face had not been fatal—it was the four to the temple that crushed his skull into his brain and killed him.

On Mrs. Borden they discovered a wound no one had seen before—a slice two and a half inches long and two and a half inches deep into the flesh of her back, just below the neck.

They shaved the back half of Mrs. Borden's head, exposing the severity of the trauma she'd suffered more clearly than ever before: at the crown of her skull, the skin and bone was slashed into a broad gap shaped like the number seven. And this was not the worst of it. Fourteen parallel blows to the right side of her skull had obliterated the bone behind Abby Borden's right ear, leaving a hole measuring four and a half by five and a quarter inches.

The doctors also noted a few internal idiosyncrasies of little consequence: Mr. Borden had a hernia in his groin, Mrs. Borden a small fibroid tumor on her womb. Both Bordens had worn false teeth in the upper jaw. Mr. Borden's right lung was glued to his front ribs, while Mrs. Borden's were "bound down behind but normal." Nothing out of the ordinary for an aged couple a full week postmortem.

But what Dr. Dolan did last of all was quite thoroughly out of the ordinary: he decapitated Andrew and Abby Borden and took their severed heads away with him.

## "I DON'T KNOW AS I COULD PUT ENOUGH OF IT TOGETHER NOW"

On Granite Street, the throngs outside the police station were growing restless. "[A]t 3 o'clock the bulletin boards announced that no action had been taken and no verdict had been rendered, and the crowds muttered and grumbled," the *Evening Standard* reported. Twenty minutes later, yet another carriage pulled onto Granite Street. It was becoming a too-familiar sight: Emma and Lizzie Borden, accompanied by Mrs. Brigham. After two days of questions, District Attorney Knowlton still had a few more things to ask Lizzie.

"Miss Borden," Knowlton said inside the courtroom as he neared conclusion, "of course you appreciate the anxiety that everybody has to find the author of this tragedy, and the questions that I put to you have been in that direction; I now ask you if you can furnish any other fact, or give any other, even suspicion, that will assist the officers in any way in this matter?"

All Lizzie offered was the story she'd told Alice Russell about a man she'd seen creeping around the side door of the house when she returned from a visit one night.

"Is there anything else that you can suggest that even amounts to anything whatever?" Knowlton asked.

There was nothing. And with that, Knowlton was finished with her.

This time, Inspector Doherty and Marshal Hilliard did not escort Lizzie past the fretful crowds and into a carriage bound for Second Street. Instead, she was conducted across the hall to the matron's room, where she threw herself down on the lounge, visibly frazzled by the three-day ordeal.

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Knowlton and Hilliard considered the evidence before them. Three days' questioning had provided little more than they already knew.

Those who had arrived first on the scene—Mrs. Churchill, Dr. Bowen, Alice Russell—were still shaken by the experience a week after the murder. By their own admission, their recollections were jumbled and confused, and all three ran into details they could not, or would not, swear to on the stand: *I am only guessing*, said Dr. Bowen; *I don't know, because I was so shocked*, said Mrs. Churchill. Both Alice Russell and Mrs. Churchill acknowledged that they were not very observant, but the gaps in Alice's memory are startling. Alice, who had tried to loosen Lizzie's dress to keep her from fainting, could not remember a thing about that dress—whether it was light or dark, one piece or two, all the same material or a combination.

Emma Borden had not been feeling well the day she took the stand, and after less than 150 questions (in contrast to the nearly 850 he asked Lizzie), Knowlton allowed her to step down. "I have omitted a good many questions I should have asked you on that account," he acknowledged for the record.

Uncle Morse answered everything asked of him as freely and confidently as Bridget Sullivan, incriminating no one. His alibi was watertight: the owner of Number 4 Weybosset Street confirmed that he'd been visiting relatives there from about 9:40 until 11:20 that morning.

### **UNCLE MORSE'S ALIBI**

The rumor that John Morse's alibi was too tight to believe continues to circulate in Fall River and beyond—not only was he visiting relatives a mile across town

who vouched for him, Borden enthusiasts say, but he remembered the number of the streetcar wagon he rode back to Second Street, the number on the conductor's hat, *and* the names of the six priests he spoke to while on board.

Although Morse's visit to Number 4 Weybosset Street was confirmed by police, the details about the streetcar and the priests really are too good to be entirely true. According to a *Fall River Evening News* story, a conductor on an eastbound wagon did recall passing a westbound wagon full of priests around 11:22 Thursday morning, but Morse never recited the litany of their names in any of his statements to police, or in his court testimony. The numbers on the wagon and the conductor's hat are also nowhere to be found in the official record.

Bertie Whitehead claimed not to know anything about the friction her house had caused within the Borden family. The girls, she thought, had simply never liked her.

Lizzie's uncle Hiram Harrington, whose newspaper interview had been downright vicious, became reluctant to speak so unkindly of his niece while under oath. Although he had "cut [Mr. Borden's] acquaintance" and the two men no longer spoke, Harrington explained, he remained on good terms with Abby, Emma, and Lizzie. When asked what he'd heard from Lizzie about the trouble over Bertie Whitehead's house, Harrington had nothing specific to say. "I don't know as I could put anything together now to tell you, any more than to tell you there was some difficulty some way." Yes, she sometimes spoke "sneeringly" about Mrs. Borden, but he could not recall Lizzie bringing the matter

up since the previous winter. None of them spoke much of it, Harrington said, but the difficulties were sometimes “mentioned in a joking way.” He even went so far as to point out that things had not always been disagreeable in the Borden household. “For several years, I guess, of his early marriage with her, everything was very, very pleasant, uncommonly so for a step mother.”

The testimony of Augusta Tripp, a longtime friend of Lizzie’s, also turned out to be a disappointment. Officer Medley’s notes from August 7 recorded Mrs. Tripp’s statement as follows: “Lizzie told me she thought her stepmother was deceitful, being one thing to her face and another to her back. Lizzie told me her stepmother claimed not to have any influence with her father. But she must have influence with my father, or he never would have given my stepmother’s half sister such a very large sum of money. She said, I do not know that my sister or I would get anything in the event of my father’s death.”

But on the stand Mrs. Tripp disagreed with the officer’s version. She did indeed believe those were Lizzie’s feelings about Abby Borden, but Mrs. Tripp had never heard Lizzie actually say so outright—especially not the part about the Borden girls being left penniless upon their father’s demise. Mrs. Tripp had heard that juicy tidbit from her invalid sister, a Miss Poole of New Bedford.

Only Mrs. Hannah Gifford, a cloakmaker, was willing to go on record and quote Lizzie’s distaste for her stepmother directly. Mrs. Borden, Lizzie had once told her, was “a mean old thing.”

“She said that?” Knowlton asked.

“She said that, yes.”

“Anything more?”

“Well, she says, ‘We stay up stairs most of the time; we stay in our room most of the time.’ I says, ‘You do, don’t you go to your meals?’ Yes, we go to our meals, but we don’t always eat with the

family, with them; sometimes we wait until they are through," she says."

And of course there was the druggist Eli Bence, with his story of the young Borden woman who wanted to buy prussic acid the day before the murders. He had not known it at the time, but he was as sure now as he'd been when Officer Harrington brought him into the Borden house—that lady with the "peculiar expression around the eyes" had been none other than Andrew Borden's daughter.

In the end, no one's testimony was of as much consequence as Lizzie's and Bridget's. Bridget had laid out a clear framework of the hours leading up to the murder, and little that Lizzie Borden said fit well within it. Lizzie's words did not betray guilt, but they did almost nothing to suggest innocence. Her account of the morning of August 4 was, at the very least, worthy of suspicion.

It was not much for Knowlton and Hilliard to go on, but it was all they had.