History on Trial
Episode 20
The Poison Precedent, Part One: *New York v. Roland Molineux*
Researched and written by Mira Hayward

PROLOGUE

Katherine Adams woke up on the morning of December 28th, 1898, with a pounding headache. It was the wine, she thought. The night before, Katherine, a fifty-two year old widow, her adult daughter, Florence, and their tenant, a distant relative of theirs named Harry Cornish, had gone to the theater and then to a late dinner, at which they'd enjoyed, Katherine now thought, maybe a little too much wine. Well, nothing to be done about it. She got out of bed and began tidying their apartment, a cozy, second-floor space only a block west of Central Park on New York's Upper West Side.[1]

But an hour later, the headache had only gotten worse. Katherine was holding a moist washcloth to her head when her daughter Florence emerged from her bedroom, around 9:00 AM. Florence, seeing her mother's suffering, suggested that she take some bromo-seltzer, a popular hangover remedy. Harry had brought a bottle home only the day before. He'd received it in the mail, along with a charming silver bottle holder, earlier that week. The package, addressed to Harry at his office at the Knickerbocker Athletic Club, had had no return address. Harry and his coworkers had assumed it was a practical joke; a gag gift reminding him not to drink too much over the holidays. Katherine and Florence teased Harry that it had come from a secret admirer. But whoever the sender, Katherine was grateful to them now.[2]

Following the instructions on the bottle, Katherine mixed a heaping teaspoonful of the powder into a small glass of water, and drank. It tasted awful, so bitter that she couldn't finish her water, leaving a mouthful at the bottom of the glass. "Awful," she said. Harry teasingly took the glass and swallowed the remnants, saying, "Tastes all right to me. It's supposed to be bitter–it's medicine."[3]

But this medicine wasn't just bitter. There was something wrong with it. Within minutes, Katherine was seized by a wave of nausea. She pushed her way into the bathroom, where Florence was washing up, and began vomiting profusely, groaning in agony. At first, Florence thought Katherine had just had a reaction to the foul tasting medicine. But then she saw her mother's face. It was a terrible blue color. Katherine,

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[1] Harold Schechter, *The Devil's Gentleman: Privilege, Poison, and the Trial That Ushered In The Twentieth Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), 160, 161, and "Death in a Christmas Box," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1898, page 1.
[2] Schechter, 158-162.
[3] Schechter, 162.

bent over the toilet, raised her hands to her daughter – and then collapsed. Florence screamed for Harry.[4]

In his bedroom, Harry himself wasn't feeling so good. He was a strong, healthy man, but he was suddenly feeling weak and queasy. When he got to the bathroom, he found he couldn't lift Katherine – something he should have been able to easily do.[5]

With the help of their house guest, Fred Hovey, Harry and Florence maneuvered Katherine onto the couch and sent for a doctor. By the time Dr. Edwin Hitchcock arrived, only a few minutes later, Katherine's breathing was labored, her pulse was faint, and her skin was clammy. Hitchcock administered stimulants and gave Katherine artificial respiration.[6]

Harry Cornish's condition had worsened; now *he* was throwing up in the bathroom. Florence explained to Dr. Hitchcock that both Harry and her mother had taken some bromo-seltzer right before falling ill. The doctor examined the bottle then dipped a pinky finger into the powder. Wiping all but a single speck off, Hitchcock placed his fingertip to his tongue– and recoiled.[7]

He had tasted bitter almonds. This was not medicine. It was cyanide.[8]

Harry Cornish, after several days of suffering, managed to pull through. Katherine Adams was not so lucky; she died shortly after Dr. Hitchcock arrived.[9]

Newspapers quickly jumped on the story: an anonymous poisoner delivering death through the mail made for good copy for the city's tabloid-style yellow papers. And soon enough, the story got even wilder. Because it turned out that Katherine Adams was not the only person to die from cyanide disguised as medicine in 1898. A month earlier, a man named Henry Crossman Barnet had died after taking a dose of Kutnow's Improved Effervescent Powder, another supposed hangover cure. Though Barnet's doctor had attributed his death to diphtheria, he'd had the powder tested just in case – and found cyanide. And that wasn't the only connection between the two cases. Henry Barnet had died in his room at the Knickerbocker Athletic Club, the very club that Harry Cornish worked at.[10]

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[4] Schechter, 163-64.
[5] Schechter, 164.
[6] Schechter, 164-166.
[7] Schechter, 166-167.
[8] Schechter, 167.
[9] Schechter, 167-182.
[10] Schechter, 131-142.

Terror gripped New Yorkers. Was there a serial poisoner in their midst? The police would soon zero in on a surprising suspect. But proving their case was easier said than done – and their investigation would lead to a series of dramatic courtroom confrontations whose outcomes still echo today.

Welcome to History on Trial. I'm your host, Mira Hayward. This week, *New York v. Roland Molineux*, part one.

ACT I

Before the nightmare began, Edward Molineux was living the American dream. Born in England in 1833, Edward came to New York as a small child. Those early years were not easy, but Edward was disciplined and determined. Soon enough, his hard work saw him rise through the ranks of both the paint-manufacturing industry *and* the New York National Guard. His bravery and compassionate leadership during the Civil War made him a hero and earned him the rank of general. After the war, he joined a new company, C.T. Raynolds, and helped turn it into the largest paint-manufacturer in the country, earning a fortune in the process. He and his beloved wife, Hattie, had three handsome, intelligent sons. From the outside, everything seemed perfect.[11]

But inside the Molineux brownstone on Fort Greene Place, something dark was festering. The trouble was Roland, the Molineux's middle son, born in 1866. There was nothing outwardly wrong with Roland: he was clever, well-mannered, and exceptionally athletic, a national champion in amateur gymnastics. He dressed beautifully and was fastidious about his grooming.[12]

Roland was a talented chemist. He worked first for his father's company and then was recruited away by Morriss Herrmann & Co., another manufacturer, who made him the superintendent and chief chemist of their Newark paint factory. Roland was dedicated to his work, literally living at his job – Herrmann & Co., gave him an apartment on the second floor of the factory, which Roland filled with luxurious furnishings and stocked with dry paints and chemicals so he could continue working after hours.[13]

Okay, so Roland was athletic, clever, and industrious. These are all good things. What's less appealing is constantly talking about how athletic, clever, and industrious you are – which seemed to be Roland's favorite activity. Plus, Roland was a snob. He had a way of tilting his head back and literally looking down his nose at people, a chilly, superior way

[11] Schechter, 16-28.
[12] Schechter, 30-33.
[13] Schechter, 34, 38-39.

of speaking. He liked to be the smartest person in the room, the strongest, the most powerful. He didn't like people who got more attention than him.[14]

So in a way, it's not surprising that Roland didn't like Harry Cornish. The two men first met in early 1896, when Harry became athletic director of the Knickerbocker Athletic Club. The newly-opened Knickerbocker was a gym and social club, where New York's elite could play squash and smoke cigars. To help boost the club's reputation, its owner J. Herbert Ballantine had recruited some of the city's best athletes, including his friend Roland Molineux. Roland liked the club so much that he'd taken an apartment on its second-floor and joined several of its management committees.[15]

Ballantine also recruited a top-notch staff, hiring Harry Cornish to be athletic director. In 1896, Harry Cornish was one of the most famous sportsmen in America. He'd been the athletic director of the Boston and Chicago Athletic Clubs, written a book on physical training for Spalding, and organized the athletic games at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. His appearance fit his reputation – at thirty-two, Harry looked like an ideal Victorian athlete, muscular and hyper-masculine, with a luxuriant handlebar mustache.[16]

His arrival at the Knickerbocker made the news, with the *New York Times* writing, quote, "As a mentor and promoter of athletics, Mr. Cornish is without a peer."[17] Soon enough, people started calling the Knickerbocker's athletes "Cornish's men." That rubbed Roland Molineux the wrong way – in his mind, *he* should have been the star of the Knickerbocker. After all, he was a national champion – Harry Cornish was just an *employee*. Roland didn't like Harry on a personal level, either: he thought Harry was vulgar and coarse, and alleged that he neglected the club's facilities.[18]

Throughout 1896 and 1897, hostilities between the two men escalated. Roland got some of Harry's powers removed; Harry spread rumors that Roland owned a brothel.[19] Tensions finally reached a crescendo in December 1897, when a squabble between Roland and Harry got escalated to the club's board. Roland issued the board an ultimatum: fire Harry Cornish or he would resign from the club.[20] Alas, Roland had overestimated his importance. Sure, Harry was just an employee, but Roland was just a *member*; there were plenty of young, rich athletes to take his place. The board told Roland they were keeping Harry. Roland immediately resigned his membership and

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[14] Schechter, 33, 46-47.
[15] Schechter, 46.
[16] Schechter, 41-49.
[17] "Harry Cornish Coming Here," *The New York Times,* December 18, 1895, page 15.
[18] Schechter, 47,
[19] Schechter, 48-50, 52-53.
[20] Schechter, 92.

moved out of his apartment. Harry Cornish, delighted, taunted Roland, saying, "You son of a bitch. You thought you'd get me out, and I got you out instead."[21] Roland simply smiled at Harry, waved his hand, and said, "You win."[22] But inside, he was seething, and wrote letters to friends detailing all of Harry's flaws.[23]

Roland's departure from the Knickerbocker wasn't the only blow he faced in late 1897; he had also been bested in love. That August, on a yacht in Rhode Island, Roland had met a twenty-three year-old aspiring singer named Blanche Chesebrough.[24] Blanche was a newcomer to Roland's elite set. She'd had an unstable childhood, dragged around the country by her father, a dreamer with an insatiable appetite for get-rich-quick schemes. Blanche's siblings had all settled down. Two of her sisters had married wealthy men, which is how Blanche ended up on the yacht that summer. Her sisters wanted her to meet a successful man, too, but Blanche had different dreams. A gifted singer, she wanted to pursue a career on the stage. She'd had some success already, performing at Carnegie Hall and working as a featured soloist in a prestigious Brooklyn church choir, but she wanted more. She wanted to see the world, have adventures. When she met the thirty-one-year old Roland that summer, she found he shared the same passion for music and traveling. Roland, immediately besotted with the charismatic, stylish Blanche, fed her fantasies, describing trips they could take to see the symphony in Paris or the opera in Milan.[25]

That autumn, Blanche and Roland saw each other regularly in New York. Roland showered Blanche with gifts and experiences: shows on Broadway, jewelry from Tiffany's, dinner at Delmonico's. He was devoted. But Blanche was uneasy. She enjoyed Roland's company, but something was missing.[26] "I wanted passion and love in my life," she would write years later, "I wanted my existence to be fervid and glowing!"[27] With Roland, that passion was lacking, especially physically.[28]

In early November, Blanche and Roland were at the Metropolitan Opera when they ran into a friend of Roland's, Henry Crossman Barnet. "Barney," as he was known, also lived at the Knickerbocker; he and Roland had bonded over their mutual dislike of Harry Cornish, although Barney – who was not an athlete – was more annoyed by Harry's lackluster supervision of the janitorial staff than he was by the man's athletic prowess. Thirty-one years old, Barney projected joviality. He had a round face, a plump build, and

[21] Schechter, 96.
[22] Schechter, 96.
[23] Schechter, 98.
[24] Schechter, 74.
[25] Schechter, 53-70, 74-80.
[26] Schechter, 84-86.
[27] Schechter, 68.
[28] Schechter, 85-86.

twinkling blue-eyes. He was a social butterfly with a charming, confident attitude that won over men and women alike.[29] Blanche was instantly taken by him, writing later, quote, "I sensed a hidden strength and a brute force in him, and it was as natural as breathing that I should capitulate to that!"[30]

Her fascination with Barney was so strong that, when Roland got down on one knee that Thanksgiving, Blanche said no.[31] She told Roland that she might change her mind in the future, but that hardly softened the blow – especially once rumors spread that she had been seen, unchaperoned, in Barney's apartment at the Knickerbocker.[32]

Roland was distraught. But again, he maintained his outward composure. When Blanche again rejected him in January 1898, he repeated the same phrase he had used with Harry Cornish the month before, saying, quote: 'Tell Barnet the coast is clear–he wins."[33]

And for a while, the coast did seem clear. Blanche and Barney kept seeing each other. Roland drowned his sorrows in the seedy bars of lower Manhattan. He spent time in Europe. He grew a handlebar mustache and then shaved it off.[34] Typical break up activities.

Then, in September, Blanche had a sudden change of heart. She ended her relationship with Barney, and told Roland she would marry him. What motivated this reversal is unknown, but Roland was thrilled.[35]

Unfortunately Barney proved a hard habit to quit; soon after she agreed to marry Roland, Blanche started reaching out to Barney again. He put her off, but eventually agreed to see her in late September. The meeting didn't go as Blanche had hoped – Barney told her that they were finished. Any hope of even a friendship between them had disappeared when she'd agreed to marry Roland.[36]

A month later, on October 28th, 1898, Barney summoned the Knickerbocker's night watchman, Joseph Moore, and asked him to get a doctor. Barney told Moore that he'd woken up with a hangover and taken a dose from a sample tin of Kutnow's Improved Effervescent Powder that he'd received a few months earlier. But the medicine wasn't

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[29] Schechter, 87-88.
[30] Schechter, 89.
[31] Schechter, 91.
[32] Schechter, 481.
[33] Schechter, 108-109.
[34] Schechter, 114, 116, 125.
[35] Schechter, 127-128.
[36] Schechter, 129-130.

sitting well; he was throwing up and had diarrhea. Dr. Wendell Phillips, a fellow club member, came to check on Barney; after procuring him some medicines to calm his stomach, Phillips told Barney to get some rest. By the next day, Barney's gastrointestinal symptoms had subsided, but his mouth and throat were extremely sore. Another doctor, Henry Douglass, examined him and diagnosed him with a mild case of diphtheria. Douglass, hearing about Barney's fears that his Kutnow's powder had been poisoned, sent the powder in for testing.[37]

The medicine tested positive for cyanide. But that actually didn't concern Douglass, at least not then. Cyanide was, at this time, a common ingredient in medicine, albeit in small doses. Douglass was sure that Barney's symptoms were just caused by diphtheria. Barney took the diphtheria medicine Douglass prescribed, but a week later, he was still feeling terrible. He was so weak that he required round-the-clock supervision from nurses. Early on the morning of November 10th, one of the nurses called Dr. Douglass – Barney was getting worse. Douglass arrived and knew at once that Barney's heart was failing. This could happen with diphtheria. Later that afternoon, Barney died, aged 32.[38] His funeral was held on Saturday, November 12th; Blanche attended. One week later, Blanche and Roland got married. One month after that, Harry Cornish received a bottle of bromo-seltzer in the mail.[39]

ACT II

Newspapers started covering Katherine Adams's death the very day she died.[40] It took only another 24 hours for reporters at Joseph Pulitzer's paper the *New York World* to draw a connection between Adams's death and Barnet's.[41] Newspapers like the *World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* thrived off publishing sensational crime stories, and a poisoning case was especially appealing. In historian Harold Schechter's book on the Molineux case, titled *The Devil's Gentleman*, Schechter writes that the public's fascination with certain crimes often mirror their larger societal concerns. "At a time when people could never be certain of what they were putting into their bodies," Schechter says, "when medicines were made of strychnine and arsenic, bakers preserved their dough with sulfur of copper, babies consumed "swill milk" from cows fed on distillery waste, and soldiers received rations of "embalmed beef"--[the poisoner] haunted the imagination of the American public."[42]

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[37] Schechter, 131-136.
[38] Barnet's exact birth day is unknown, but from this June 1894 record, which lists him as 28 years old, I extrapolated that his birthday is before June 27th, 1866, making him 32 at his time of death. Entry for Henry C. Barnet, 1894 in "New York Passenger Arrival Lists (Ellis Island)," *FamilySearch*.
[39] Schechter, 136-143, 158.
[40] Schechter, 173.
[41] Schechter, 174.
[42] Schechter, 153.

Reporters did more than just cover the "Great Poison Mystery," as the case came to be known. They also investigated it. Journalists ran parallel investigations with the police, racing to break the case before the authorities did.[43] On December 29th, the day after Katherine Adams died, Hearst's *Evening Journal* front page featured a blown-up copy of the handwritten label from the package Harry Cornish had received, with the headline "WHO KNOWS THIS WRITING?"[44]

It was fortunate that this label had even survived. When Harry received the package, he'd thrown the wrapping in the trash. But his assistant, Patrick Fineran, had told him to keep the paper – Harry might be able to identify the anonymous sender through the handwriting. At this point, they'd all thought the package was a practical joke – no one had realized how high the stakes of this identification would turn out to be.[45]

A day after the *Journal* published the label, John Adams, another Knickerbocker employee - with no relation to Katherine Adams – recognized the handwriting. As the Knickerbocker's secretary, Adams conducted the club's correspondence and was thus familiar with many of the members' handwriting. To confirm his suspicions, he pulled a number of letters from the club's files. When he was certain that the handwriting matched, Adams went to Harry Cornish's office. The handwriting on the label, Adams showed Harry, looked just like the handwriting in a resignation letter written on December 20th, 1897. A letter written by Roland Molineux. [46]

Harry Cornish shared Adams' findings with Captain George McCluskey, chief of the New York Police Department's Detective's Bureau. In a long conversation on December 31st, the men discussed Harry's fraught history with Roland, as well as Roland's relationships with Barney and Blanche.[47] This would not be the last time that McCluskey heard Roland Molineux's name. Though the police denied that they were pursuing Roland after papers published his name in January, in truth, more and more clues were pointing his way.[48]

Addie Bates, one of the nurses who cared for Barney during his final days, told police about a peculiar gift her patient had received.[49] A popular man, Barney had been sent dozens of well wishes and presents from friends. But only one had seemed to really

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[43] For moments in which reporters undertook their own investigations, see Schechter, 188, 201, 234, 246, 249, 279, and 281.
[44] Schechter, 180-181.
[45] Schechter, 159.
[46] Schechter, 194-195.
[47] Schechter, 204.
[48] Schechter, 212-221.
[49] Schechter, 253-254.

affect him, Bates remembered, a bouquet of chrysanthemums accompanied by a note of what Bates called, quote "[an] affectionate nature."[50] The note had been signed "Yours, Blanche."[51] It wasn't hard for detectives to draw a line between this note and Blanche Molineux. But this note didn't prove anything. It just gave the police a hint at Roland's potential motive. They'd have to find something more concrete.

Using the remnants of a partially-removed price tag on the silver bottle holder, detectives tracked the item first to its manufacturer, and then to a retail jewelry shop called Hartdegen & Co. in Newark. Hartdegen's was very close to the paint factory where Roland lived and worked. On the day Hartdegen's sold the bottle holder, December 21st, Newark police detective Joseph Farrell, who knew Roland well, had seen Roland walking near the Hartdegen's store. Roland told Farrell that he had just been dining with his boss, Morris Hermann, but Herrmann denied this to police. However, the clerk who made the sale at Hartdegen's, Emma Miller, could not identify the buyer – and claimed that he had a red beard, which Roland did not.[52]

This pattern – of tracing a lead *almost* back to Roland, but failing to conclusively tie it to the man – continuously frustrated the detectives. It happened again with the bromo-seltzer bottle. The police had arranged for Dr. Rudolph Witthaus, a prominent toxicologist and forensic medicine expert, to examine the bottle. Though the dark blue glass bottle looked like an authentic Emerson's Bromo-Seltzer bottle, Witthaus discovered it was a forgery. The bottle didn't have the company's name embossed on it, and was slightly smaller than the real thing. Witthaus discovered a manufacturer's mark on the bottle that detectives traced to a chemical firm called Powers & Weightman in Newark. Powers & Weightman had sold ten bottles containing cyanide of mercury – the poison that Witthaus identified in the bottle – to another Newark business, the pharmaceutical supplier C.B. Smith & Co., in July, 1898. After a laborious search through thousands of their sales slips - detectives found that two of those bottles had ended up at Balbach & Co., a metal smelting company – based only two blocks away from the Herrmann & Co. paint factory. But again, detectives couldn't link these bottles to Roland Molineux; the chemist at Balbach claimed he had used up all the cyanide in experiments.[53]

The next swing and a miss came from trying to trace the poison Henry Barnet had taken. The tin, which Barney had received in the fall of 1898, purported to be a sample of Kutnow's Improved Effervescent Powder. The tin turned out to be legitimate, though the contents had likely been tampered with, so the police turned to Kutnow's to try to

[50] Schechter, 140-141, 254.
[51] Schechter, 140.
[52] Schechter, 223-225.
[53] Schechter, 241-248.

identify sample recipients. The company sent samples to customers who wrote in requests, owner Gustav Kutnow explained. These request letters were saved for future marketing, Kutnow continued, and detectives were welcome to look through them. Fortunately, Kutnow could narrow down the window the tin had been sent in to a six month period, thanks to a specific sticker. Unfortunately, during these six months, the company had received more than 100,000 letters. People have always loved free samples! Three detectives, with the assistance of Kutnow's bookkeeper, Elsie Gray, began the tedious, laborious search.[54]

Seven days later, Elsie Gray struck gold. She found a letter, one written on robin's egg blue stationery emblazoned with interlocking silver crescents, with handwriting that looked much like the handwriting on the poison package addressed to Harry Cornish. There were just two problems: first, the letter had come in on December 23rd, six weeks after Barney had died. And secondly, the signature at the bottom of the letter read not R. Molineux, or even H. Barnet, but, confusingly, H. Cornish.[55]

What could this mean? Following the return address on the letter, detectives found a private letter box company owned by a man named Joseph Koch. Koch told detectives he'd rented Box Number 10 to a man named Harry Cornish in early December. But when detectives brought Harry Cornish to Koch's offices, Koch didn't think this was the man who'd rented the letter box.[56] Captain McCluskey wasn't surprised – he would later say that the use of Harry Cornish's name only further convinced him of Roland Molineux's guilt: in McCluskey's words, quote, "the next best thing to killing an enemy is to have him accused of murder."[57]

The post office box gave detectives another lead to go on. By following up on a package that arrived at the box shortly after they discovered it, police found that the box's owner had - using the same robin's egg blue stationery as in the Kutnow's letter – written to multiple medical companies to request samples of their cures for male impotence.[58] One of these companies found a letter whose handwriting and stationery matched, but had a different return address, and purported, this time, to come from an H. Barnet. Detectives followed this information to another private letter box. Maybe this time they could find a real connection to Molineux.[59]

Examining the mail left in this second mailbox, the police found correspondence with Marston's Remedy Company. When they contacted Marston's, the owner handed them a

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[54] Schechter, 269-271.
[55] Schechter, 271-273.
[56] Schechter, 273-275.
[57] Schechter, 275-276.
[58] Schechter, 276, 278.
[59] Schechter, 278-282.

diagnosis form that a customer had filled out using the name Barnet. But the descriptions in the diagnosis form – the patient's age, height, measurements, and medical history – didn't match Henry Barnet. They matched Roland Molineux.[60]

Unfortunately, this lead, too, fizzled, when the box's owner, Nicholas Heckmann, said he wanted payment to make an ID of the box's renter, and refused to cooperate with police. Joseph Koch, owner of the other private box, also stopped cooperating, saying he was too frightened to get involved.[61]

The police were getting frustrated – and they weren't the only ones. Throughout January, the newspapers' coverage of the investigation had become more and more critical. In an editorial in early February, William Randolph Hearst claimed that the Molineux family's wealth was protecting Roland. A little rich coming from the guy who inspired Citizen Kane, but anyways. "If this had happened among people without influence, every person suspected of knowing anything about it would have been locked up before morning," Hearst wrote. "But when two deliberate, premeditated murders have been committed by persons with financial and political pull, the whole machinery of justice has been paralyzed."[62] Was there any way to set this machinery back in motion?

ACT III

On February 9th, 1899, a coroner's inquest into Katherine Adams' death began. Coroner's inquests are rare these days, but at the time, they were called when sudden deaths occurred in order to determine if the death was natural or not. Coroners and their juries did not typically investigate crimes, but they did have the power to subpoena witnesses.[63] In the Adams case, the press reported, the district attorney's office had gotten fed up with the police's failures and decided to use the coroner's inquest to conduct their own investigation.[64] Some people were skeptical of the process's efficacy, especially since the District Attorney, Asa Bird Gardiner, happened to be an old friend of General Edward Molineux.[65]

These suspicions were quickly confirmed by the conduct of ADA James Osborne. Osborne had a reputation as a bulldog in the courtroom, and he quickly dug his teeth into the inquest's first witness: not Roland Molineux, but Harry Cornish.[66] In a ferocious

[60] Schechter, 284.
[61] Schechter, 285-287.
[62] Schechter, 291.
[63] Schechter, 292.
[64] Schechter, 292.
[65] Schechter, 267.
[66] Schechter, 303.

examination, Osborne all but accused Harry of being the poisoner. Osborne brought up Harry's playboy reputation and his arguments with Henry Barnet and Roland Molineux.[67] Cornish, DA Gardiner reminded the press, was the one who had actually given Katherine Adams the poison.[68]

In contrast, when Roland Molineux appeared on the stand, Osborne treated him with gentle politeness, often apologizing for the uncomfortable questions duty just required him to ask. Roland, unlike Harry, who had been angry and flustered in court, was cool, calm, and collected.

The press took Osborne's approach as proof of the justice system's favoritism. A cartoon in the *Evening Journal* depicted Osborne strangling Harry Cornish in one panel, and cuddling a child-size Roland Molineux in the other.[69] But as Osborne continued to tear Harry apart on the stand, and brought more witnesses in to cast suspicion, even the skeptical press began to question Harry.[70] Harry published a highly defensive public statement, hilariously titled, quote: "Cornish says some things look bad, but he can explain."[71] Perhaps, people thought, they had been too quick to jump on Roland Molineux as a suspect – and, thinking on it, wasn't Harry Cornish the first one to point the police at Roland? Had it all been a frame?

The Molineuxs were delighted by this turn of events. The past two months had been a nightmare for the respectability-obsessed General. He had ordered the whole family, including Blanche, to retreat into the Fort Greene brownstone, where the curtains were always kept drawn to keep the press from looking in.[72] The lawyers he hired had vigorously protected Roland, refusing any requests from the police, such as submitting a handwriting sample.[73]

But with the focus turning away from Roland and onto Harry, Roland's lawyers thought it might be best to change tactics and begin cooperating. On February 14th, Roland produced a handwriting sample under observation in ADA Osborne's office.[74]

The inquest ran for nearly two more weeks, with the evidence against Harry mounting and Roland's delight growing. Even the testimony of Nicholas Heckmann, the letter box owner, couldn't shake Roland's assurance. On Monday February, 27th, the inquest's

[67] Schechter, 304-309.
[68] Schechter, 309.
[69] Schechter, 349.
[70] Schechter, 334.
[71] Schechter, 334-335.
[72] Schechter, 256.
[73] Schechter, 328.
[74] Schechter, 328.

final day, Heckmann appeared and claimed that Roland had rented a letter box from him. Roland called Heckmann a liar, but seemed to laugh the whole thing off.[75] But then something happened that shook Roland deeply: when his lawyer, Bartow Weeks, objected to Heckmann's further testimony, DA Gardiner turned on Weeks and harshly told him to sit down. Up until this point, Gardiner had been unfailingly polite – even deferential – to Roland's lawyers.[76]

In that instant, Roland Molineux heard the trap spring shut. "From being the shielded, protected, coddled, and stroked friend of the prosecuting officer," reporter Charles Michelson wrote, "Molineux suddenly found himself exposed to the full broadside of that officer's artillery. The manhunters came from behind their cover of soft words and apologies and attacked their quarry."[77] Lulled into a false sense of safety, Roland had lowered his defenses – a fatal mistake of overconfidence. The next witness, William Kinsley, showed him just how badly he had erred. Kinsley was a nationally recognized handwriting expert, and he testified that the handwriting in the sample Roland had provided the ADA matched the handwriting on the poison package sent to Harry Cornish, as well as the letters sent to the various medical companies from the two private letter boxers. Then, to drive the point home, ADA Osborne introduced a further *six* handwriting experts, all of whom agreed with Kinsley's conclusions.[78]

The final blow was delivered by District Attorney Gardiner himself, who presented a closing summation, unusual for a coroner's inquest. Gardiner revealed that the entire inquest had been a carefully plotted trap, on which the DA's office and the police had collaborated. It had been Captain McCluskey's idea, Gardiner explained, to use an inquest to get Roland – the only suspect who had refused to provide a handwriting sample – to drop his guard. The DA's office had made Harry Cornish their scapegoat, but had never truly believed him guilty. It had been Roland all along; Roland who had the motive, who had the opportunity, and whose handwriting matched all of the incriminating mail. At the end of his summation, Gardiner asked the coroner's jury to assign responsibility for Katherine Adams' death to Roland Molineux.[79]

The jury did not take long to do just that. After less than two hours of deliberation, they announced that they believed Roland had sent the poison that killed Adams.[80] Roland was quickly arrested and sent to the Tombs, New York's infamous jail.[81] Four days later, a grand jury formally indicted him on a charge of first degree murder for the death of

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[75] Schechter, 353-354.
[76] Schechter, 355.
[77] Schechter, 355-356.
[78] Schechter, 356-358.
[79] Schechter, 359-364.
[80] Schechter, 365-366.
[81] Schechter, 367-368.

Katherine J. Adams.[82] General Molineux vowed to fight his son's case til the end. But would his good name and his wealth be enough to overcome the case being built against Roland?

ACT IV

Roland Molineux's journey to trial was long and winding. In late March, 1899, his attorneys managed to get the first indictment against him quashed, on the grounds that it had been improper for the DA's office to discuss Henry Barnet's death at the grand jury hearing.[83] On May 3rd, a new grand jury was convened – and this time, they didn't bring an indictment. The press and the DA's office thought they knew why: six members of the jury, including the foreman, were members of the same veterans' organization as General Edward Molineux.[84]

Down but not out, the police immediately arrested Roland on the charge of assaulting Harry Cornish. When Roland got out on bail for that charge, the police arrested him again for Katherine Adams's murder.[85] In mid-July, a *third* grand jury was convened. These jurors, who had no connections to the Molineuxs, returned an indictment after three days.[86] ADA James Osborne was so delighted that he telegraphed his wife the news, writing, quote, "The people won."[87]

Inside his jail cell, Roland Molineux seemed just as confident as Osborne. Over the past five months, he'd maintained his exercise regimen and his grooming routine, used his spending money to buy upgraded meals, and continuously projected an aura of cool certainty.[88] He had faith in his father and in his lawyers, Bartow Weeks and George Gordon Battle, both longtime friends of the family and skilled attorneys.[89]

When Roland's trial finally began on November 14th, 1899, Weeks and Battle were both by his side, as was his father. They weren't his only supporters; dozens of besotted women, who'd fallen in love with Roland via newspaper coverage, were gathered outside the courtroom, begging the guards to let them in. The guards refused: the room was already packed.[90]

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[82] Schechter, 370.
[83] Schechter, 397-398.
[84] Schechter, 405, 408.
[85] Schechter, 406-407, 409-410.
[86] Schechter, 410.
[87] Schechter, 411.
[88] Schechter, 391-393.
[89] Schechter, 421-422.
[90] Schechter, 420.

At 10:30AM, Judge John Goff called the court to order. The 51 year old Goff had made a name for himself rooting out corruption in the New York police department. As a judge, he was short-tempered and action-oriented, regularly cutting lawyers off to ask witnesses questions of his own. Unconcerned with appearing impartial, Goff's rulings often revealed his personal beliefs on a given case.[91]

People had predicted that this would be a long trial, but no one imagined quite how long. Jury selection alone took more than two weeks.[92] Both Bartow Weeks and ADA Osborne claimed they wanted, quote, "men of a high order of intelligence to be secured as jurors in this case."[93] Their method of getting such men was to ask bafflingly phrased questions full of legalese and arcane vocabulary - such as this one, posed by Osborne to a cab drive named Hugh Dougherty, quote, "Do you understand that, in order to justify legal guilt from circumstantial evidence, the inculpatory facts must be absolutely incompatible with the innocence of the accused?" Dougherty, astounded, replied: "I never heard that while driving my cab."[94] Despite multiple reprimands from Goff and ridicule in the press, the attorneys kept this up until finally, on November 29th, they managed to pull a jury together.[95]

James Osborne presented the prosecution's opening statement on Monday, December 4th. He set the stakes for the trial high, telling the jurors that the country was currently embroiled in, quote, "[a] fight between society and poisoners."[96] Then he walked through the case against Roland Molineux. When he got to Roland's connection with Henry Barnet, Bartow Weeks objected, saying that the Barnet case was separate. Judge Goff disagreed, ruling, quote "if it is apparent that circumstances of one crime are relevant to the other they are admissible."[97]

As Osborne spoke, reporters kept a close watch on Roland. Milking every last drop of drama out of the story, several papers had assigned their *theater* critics to cover the trial.[98] One of these critics, the *Herald*'s Clement Scott, found Roland fascinating. The man he saw, Scott wrote, quote, "is not Roland B. Molineux. It is a false, unnatural man...Behind this actor's mask, I can see the mind of the wretched man working...He is for the moment two men–the man as he is, and the man in the mask!"[99] Throughout the

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[91] Maureen Murphy, "Goff, John W." *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, October 2009, and Schechter, 420.
[92] Schechter, 428.
[93] Schechter, 424-425.
[94] Schechter, 423.
[95] Schechter, 422-429.
[96] Schechter, 439.
[97] Schechter, 443-444.
[98] Schechter, 434, 462.
[99] Schechter, 447.

trial, this mask would sometimes slip; Roland would burst out in laughter at inappropriate times or even be seen playing tic-tac-toe in the middle of testimony.[100]

Roland's manner wasn't the only strange aspect of the trial: observers were baffled by the way that the prosecution presented their case. The order in which Osborne called his witnesses - and he would call more than a hundred of them–seemed random.[101] Notably, Osborne wouldn't actually establish that a murder had occurred until January 2nd, when coroner's physician Albert T. Weston testified that Katherine Adams had been poisoned with cyanide of mercury.[102] By this point, Roland Molineux's case had become the longest, most expensive murder trial in New York history.[103]

In the first weeks of the trial, Osborne mainly focused on handwriting analysis, bringing in multiple experts to testify that Roland's writing sample matched the writing on the medicine request letters and on the poison package. This testimony had been so dry and repetitive that even Osborne had gotten sick of it, saying aloud "How long, O Lord, how long," at one point.[104] There wasn't much the defense could do to undermine these witnesses, although Bartow Weeks did his best, attacking the handwriting men on unrelated matters – Daniel Ames's atheism, for example, or William Kinsley's passion for raising chickens – the latter of which made the whole courtroom laugh.[105]

There were several other interesting moments interspersed throughout. The first came on Monday, December 11th, when a young woman named Mamie Melando took the stand. Melando was described in the press as Roland's former housekeeper, and that was true, but maybe not the full story.[106] Roland had first met Melando in 1887 when she was a thirteen year old working in his father's New Jersey paint factory. When Roland moved to Herrmann & Co., he took Melando with him, hiring her as a factory foreman and as housekeeper for his factory living quarters. Harold Schechter believes that the two may have had a sexual relationship.[107]

Melando did not want to testify. To avoid the stand, she'd refused to leave New Jersey, where the New York police could not get to her. She was only here now thanks to some highly dubious maneuvering by the NYPD, who had sent two undercover officers to take Melando and a friend of hers out on a date. After getting the two women drunk, the officers suggested a trip to Paterson, New Jersey, by train. On the train trip, Melando

[100] Schechter, 437-438, 452.
[101] Schechter, 447.
[102] Schechter, 482-483.
[103] Schechter, 473-474.
[104] Schechter, 468.
[105] Schechter, 451, 469.
[106] Schechter, 452.
[107] Schechter, 37-39.

fell asleep. When she awoke and disembarked the train, the lead detectives on Roland's case were there to greet her - and reveal that she was actually now in New York. Mamie tried to fight the detectives off but could not.[108]

Now, on the stand and looking deeply uncomfortable, Melando explained that once, while visiting Roland at his apartment at the Hermann & Co factory, she'd seen some paper that she liked. She'd liked it so much that she'd taken three of the sheets and three matching envelopes home with her. She was therefore intimately familiar with this stationery – a distinctive set tinted robin's egg blue, with interlocking silver crescents at the top.[109] This was the same stationery used to write the forged medicine requests – stationery that Roland Molineux had denied ever seeing at the inquest.[110] Melando's clear reluctance to testify – at one point, when asked if she was still friendly with Roland, she started to sob–only made her testimony more believable to onlookers.[111]

After the brief excitement of Melando's appearance, the tedious parade of handwriting experts resumed. Eventually, Osborne got around to introducing the other circumstantial evidence that connected Roland to the crime: Dr. Roland Witthaus, the forensic chemist, confirmed that the powder in the bromo-seltzer bottle was cyanide of mercury, while Carl Trommer, a chemical salesman, confirmed that Roland had the raw materials to make cyanide of mercury in his lab at the paint factory. Joseph Koch and Nicholas Heckmann identified Roland as the man they'd rented private letter boxes to. The case's lead detectives explained how they'd traced the silver bottle holder to Hartdegen's; Newark Detective Joseph Farrell testified to having seen Roland near Hartdegen's on the day the bottle holder was sold.[112] The prosecution submitted the diagnosis form sent to Marston's Remedy Company, signed as Barnet but filled out with details that matched Roland, into evidence.[113]

This was all important information, but for most observers, it was also boring. They had read about all of these things in the papers months ago.[114] By mid-January, though coverage of the trial was still robust, interest in the trial was fading. But on January 15th, testimony from two new witnesses woke the tired public right back up.

The first new witness was named Rachel Greene. For several months in late 1897 and 1898, Greene had worked as a maid in a boarding house on the Upper West Side. While

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[108] Schechter, 453-454.
[109] Schechter, 456.
[110] Schechter, 327.
[111] "Mamie Melando Weeps When Examined By Goff," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 11, 1899, pages 1-2, and Schechter, 458.
[112] Schechter, 466, 483-484.
[113] "Weeks' Eloquent Plea," *Rockland County Journal*, February 10, 1900, page 8.
[114] Schechter, 484.

working there, Osborne asked her, did you know the defendant? “I knew Mr. and Mrs. Chesebrough,” Greene responded. Chesebrough was Blanche Molineux’s maiden name. “Do you see this Mr. Chesebrough in the courtroom?” Osborne asked. Rachel Greene rose from the witness stand and pointed at Roland Molineux: “That’s the gentleman,” she said.[115] Roland, for the first time in the trial, seemed angry and concerned. Greene went on to explain how she believed Roland and Blanche to be married during this time, because Roland regularly spent the night in Blanche’s room.[116] In truth, the couple wouldn’t marry for nearly another year. This testimony was certainly scandalous, but what did it mean for Roland’s guilt?

The next witness, Minnie Betts, connected the dots. Betts was also a maid; she worked for Alice Bellinger. Bellinger was Blanche’s good friend, and Blanche had moved in with her after moving out of her boarding house. Unlike Greene, Minnie Betts had never seen Roland Molineux visit Blanche at home. She had, however, seen Henry Barnet visit regularly.[117]

Judge Goff paused Betts’ testimony here to ask Osborne about the relevance. Osborne explained that he was establishing Roland Molineux’s motive for killing Henry Barnet: jealousy. “But the defendant is not on trial for the murder of Barnet,” Goff reminded the prosecutor. “No,” Osborne acknowledged, “But I want to show that the man who hated Barnet also hated Cornish. We find letters for certain remedies in Barnet’s name. We also find letters in Cornish’s name. This shows the workings of the defendant’s mind. Barnet died of cyanide of mercury, just as Cornish was to have died. It’s the same sort of plot, and as such should be allowed in evidence.” Goff mulled over this argument, then told Osborne, “You may continue.”[118] So Osborne did, getting more information from Minnie Betts about Henry Barnet’s frequent visits and overnight stays.

This testimony directly contradicted Blanche’s testimony at the coroner’s inquest. On the stand there, she had insisted that her relationship with Barnet had been purely platonic. The flowers she’d sent him while he was dying had been a simple gesture of friendship, she claimed. Roland and Barney had never fought over her.[119]

Despite Betts’s evidence to the contrary, Blanche would always publicly maintain that she and Barnet were not romantically involved – she would only admit that they were sexually involved in her private memoir, written decades later.[120] Throughout the trial, the defense lawyers made a point of bringing Blanche in to see her husband; the

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[115] Schechter, 485-486.
[116] Schechter, 487-488.
[117] Schechter, 489-490.
[118] Schechter, 490-491.
[119] Schechter, 339-344.
[120] Schechter, 99-106.

apparently adoring couple would exchange emotional words and kiss and embrace for the world to see.[121]

Betts's testimony undermined this romantic image. And it bolstered James Osborne's case, by establishing motive. By the time Osborne finally rested his case, observers felt that the prosecutor had made a strong circumstantial case against Roland, but he had failed to answer a critical question: why would Roland want Harry Cornish dead?[122] Osborne had brought in some Knickerbocker members to describe the two men's feud, but it all seemed so petty. Certainly not enough reason to kill. So Osborne had injected the Barnet murder into the trial. This strategy played to the strengths and weaknesses of each case. In the Barnet case, the motive was obvious, but the evidence was weaker; Barnet's death had originally been thought to be from natural causes, so the police were a month behind in investigating it. In the Adams case, on the other hand, the motive was murkier, but the evidence was clearer. However, Roland Molineux hadn't been charged with Henry Barnet's murder, and some newspapers commented on this. Would this strategy come back to bite the prosecution? James Osborne would have to wait and see. On February 5th, nearly 3 months after the trial began, he rested the state's case.[123]

People eagerly anticipated the presentation of the defense case. What witnesses would the defense call? Would Roland Molineux testify in his own defense? What about his glamorous wife, Blanche?

On February 6th, defense lawyer Bartow Weeks stood to speak. He looked strangely uneasy – pale and strained. He had good reason. Because Bartow Weeks was about to say something shocking…something that would change the course of the trial…and Roland Molineux's life.[124]

Just what did Bartow Weeks say? Well, you'll have to come back next week to find out, in part two of New York v. Roland Molineux. But before you go – stay with me after the break for a surprising connection between this trial and a famous political scandal.

EPILOGUE

Although Bartow Weeks was the lead defense attorney in Roland Molineux's trial, he did not work alone: Weeks was assisted throughout by his law partner, George Gordon Battle. Battle, then thirty, was in the early years of what would become a distinguished law career. Born in North Carolina, Battle had come to New York to attend Columbia

[121] Schechter, 429-431, 466-467, 499, 511.
[122] Schechter, 491, 493-494.
[123] Schechter, 497.
[124] Schechter, 501.

Law School. After graduating, he joined the District Attorney's office, where he worked for five years before going into private practice with Bartow Weeks. A brilliant lawyer, Battle would win a number of major cases, both civil and criminal.[125]

Battle was also known for his civic leadership. He chaired numerous committees, including the National Committee on Prison Labor Reform and New York City's Parks and Playgrounds Association. A devout Episcopal, Battle fought for religious freedom; his work against anti-Semitism was so important that the prominent Jewish newspaper, *The American Hebrew*, awarded him a medal for, quote, "[keeping] the flame of religious hatred from searing American Democracy."[126] He raised money for a variety of causes, including the Salvation Army and the 150th Anniversary Celebration of the American Revolution.[127]

Battle's generosity extended to those around him. In 1917 or 18, he hired a high school student named Seymour as a law clerk. Seymour had had a difficult childhood. His hot-tempered father had trouble keeping a job, particularly after he fell ill with cancer, leaving young Seymour to support his parents and older sister. Seymour got a job loading freight for a railroad; hard, dangerous work for a fifteen year-old. His coworkers at the loading docks, recognizing Seymour's intelligence, encouraged him to apply for scholarships; soon enough, Seymour won a place at a preparatory school in Newark. He kept working on the loading docks while at school, continuing the job even after he was hired as a law clerk by George Gordon Battle.[128]

Battle was so impressed by Seymour's intellect and work ethic that he increased his pay, allowing Seymour to finally quit the railroad job. Not long after, Battle offered to pay for Seymour's college education. Seymour graduated from Fordham and then from Fordham Law. Soon enough, just like his mentor, Seymour was a prominent and successful lawyer.[129]

When Seymour's first child was born, he saw an opportunity to honor all that Battle had done for him. So he named his son George Gordon Battle.[130] Battle's namesake would go by Gordon, and he would one day become more famous than his father and his namesake combined – although not necessarily for the right reasons, for this little baby would grow up to be none other than G. Gordon Liddy, best known today for his role in

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[125] Dorothy B. Wilkinson, "Battle, George Gordon," in *Dictionary of North Carolina*, ed. William S. Powell (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), via *NCpedia*.
[126] Wilkinson, "Battle, George Gordon."
[127] Wilkinson, "Battle, George Gordon."
[128] G. Gordon Liddy, *Will: The Autobiography of G. Gordon Liddy* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 7-8.
[129] Liddy, *Will*, 8.
[130] Liddy, *Will*, 9.

organizing the 1972 burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Office Building.

Thank you for listening to History on Trial. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a rating or review – it can help new listeners find the show! My main sources for this episode were Harold Schechter's book *The Devil's Gentleman: Privilege, Poison, and the Trial That Ushered in the Twentieth Century* as well as newspaper coverage of the trial. For a complete bibliography as well as a transcript of the episode with citations, please visit our website historyontrialpodcast.com.