



SINCE 1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



A Deathbed Confession

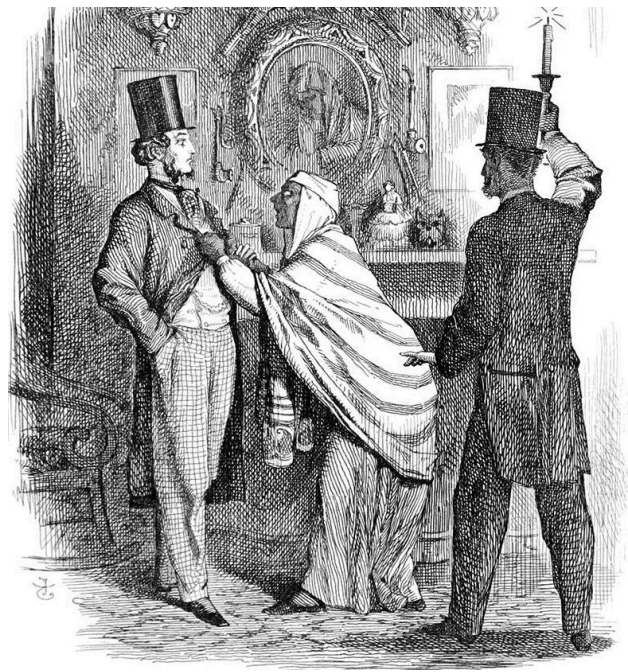
It had been 17 long years since Christine Kett's body had been discovered on the kitchen floor of her family home. When Christine's brother had gone running for help that January evening, two doctors, the town Marshall, and a small crowd of curious onlookers had gathered around the Kett home to see what was going on.

As the doctors examined Christine's body, her mother—Mrs. Kett (also named Christine) returned home:

“Noting the crowd congregated about the front door and in the yard, she instantly became hysterical, and roughly elbowed her way forward, apparently ignoring all attempts of her neighbors to extend sympathy and

comfort. She reached the kitchen, saw the mangled body of her daughter in a pool of blood—and her grief was pitiful.¹

Once she had been calmed down, Mrs. Kett told police that Christine had left the house early that morning, and Mrs. Kett hadn't seen her since. After having lunch, Mrs. Kett had gone into town to do some shopping, expecting that Christine would return home in time to make dinner.



Above: This is NOT Mrs. Kett, but an illustration ca. 1860 by John Tenniel for [The Gordian Knot](#), titled "Where is Virginia?" courtesy of [Old Book Illustrations](#).

¹ *Dayton Daily News*, 6/17/1934

Based on the evidence in front of them, police dismissed her as a suspect. Instead, at Mrs. Kett's urging, police focused their efforts on Christine's brother, Christine's boyfriend, a local troublemaking tough guy, and searching for a suspicious stranger who had been seen in the neighborhood that morning. Each man had been able to provide a solid alibi, excluding them from the pool of potential murderers.

Eventually, the investigation had circled back to Mrs. Kett, who was taken into custody and re-interviewed at police headquarters. Her story did not deviate from the one she had given the day of the murder, and in the absence of any further proof, she was released.

Neighbors were not so easily convinced of Mrs. Kett's innocence; they pointed out that arguments between mother and daughter had been frequent—some had even heard Mrs. Kett directly threaten Christine—and that Mrs. Kett, though nearly 50 years old at the time of the murder, had "a violent temper and was physically capable of committing such a deed²".

The problem was proving it. In the absence of any more hard evidence, Marshall Isaac Hale concluded that Christine's death had likely been due to a terrible accident. After that, the case went cold.

Seeking comfort in a change of scenery, Mrs. Kett left her house on Oak street, married and subsequently divorced a man named Louis Eisenstein, moved out west, then returned to Dayton, where she found a home next door to her youngest son on Nassau street. But she was still plagued by nightmares, and known to have an "uneasy and wakeful disposition."³

² *Dayton Daily News*, 6/17/1934

³ *The Dayton Herald*, 3/17/1884

By 1884, Mrs. Kett's health was beginning to fail. Shortly before her death, on an evening in early March, she summoned her son Frederick to her bedside and swore him to secrecy. Then, she revealed the truth: she had been the one to kill Christine all those years ago.

On the morning of January 11th, 1867, a friend of Christine's had stopped by their home and asked if Christine would come to town with her. At first, Mrs. Kett had refused, but ultimately relented, on the condition that Christine would return home soon, because Mrs. Kett had already asked her to oversee the family's dinner that evening. For whatever reason,



Above: Illustration by [Odell Dean](#) for Howard Burba's article; "A Death-Bed Murder Confession", published by the *Dayton Daily News*, 6/17/1934.

As it turned out, Adam Kett had been wrong about one very important fact—his sister wasn't the only other person who knew where he kept his gun & powder.

Retrieving these, Mrs. Kett sprinkled some gunpowder over the wounds in Christine's skull, then "put the revolver in her hand and then put her hand to her head, setting fire to the powder, the hand was then thrown down and the weapon dropped upon the floor."⁴ She then left the house, returning some time after the crime had been discovered:

"I pretended that my grief was on account of the death of my daughter, and indeed it was, but it was increased tenfold from the fact that I was the murderer..."

I thought they all knew who did it, but tried to compose myself and do just as a mother would under the circumstances of the news of a daughter's murder being broken to her. I must have acted my part well, and thought so at the time, though a fierce look from Marshal Hale convinced me that he suspected me. Whether he did or not I don't know, for he never intimated any such suspicions. To more completely cover my tracks, I had a number of persons arrested, among them Buck Hughes and Anthony Goetz, the latter a young man who had been showing her much attention, and I told my oldest son, who had found your sister dead, that people thought he was connected with the crime, and so I had him arrested. The image of my daughter appeared before me no matter in what direction I turned, and from that hour I have lived in terror. I try to flee from a terrible wrath that is always hovering about me, and life has been a burden. I have sought relief in every way, and always hoped and thought that time would efface the memory. I have escaped the law, but punishment has overtaken me, and seventeen years of anguish, a hell on earth, has been my sentence. And now, on my deathbed, I clear up the terrible mystery and relieve my haunted mind."⁵

Christine did not return until 4 o'clock that afternoon. It isn't difficult to imagine the resulting argument; Mrs. Kett, already furious that her daughter had so flagrantly disobeyed her, scolded Christine. When Christine, like many teenagers, talked back, Mrs. Kett had snatched up a short-handled axe lying close at hand and took a swing at her daughter's head. Trying to escape, Christine ran for the cellar. As she opened the cellar door, Mrs. Kett had struck her again; killing Christine instantly.

Upon realizing what she had done, Mrs. Kett's first concern was covering her own tracks.



Above: "[Annie, seated with her grief](#)" illustration by Edmund H. Garrett ca. 1893.



On March 11th, Mrs. Kett was buried in section 100, lot 2179 at Woodland Cemetery.

Though he had sworn to keep his mother's secret until he was himself on his deathbed, Frederick Kett could not bear to hide the truth for long.

Little more than two weeks later, he confirmed the rumors that Mrs. Kett had confessed her role in Christine's death to a local newspaper, the Daily Empire.

The story soon became national news—by disobeying his mother's wishes, Frederick Kett had unburdened both of their souls; perhaps allowing the entire Kett family to rest a little easier.

⁴ *The Dayton Herald*, 3/17/1884

⁵ *The Dayton Herald*, 3/17/1884

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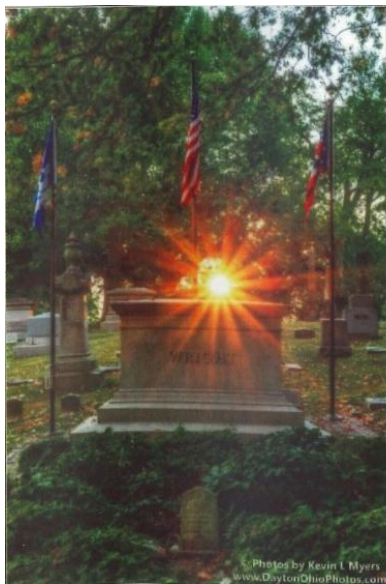
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