

Powertalk speech contest 2017, speech V11

Subject: Tying the Knot

Category: Research speech, from primary sources

Title: An account of the first murder on British Railways

Thomas Briggs, who was bashed over the head, robbed, thrown out of a train and left for dead in the first murder on British Rail, was my great-great grandfather. Even worse, the attack happened in a first-class carriage, a place where the public felt, “at least, they should have been safe.” The murder of Briggsy, as the family called him, and the pursuit of the perpetrator, obsessed the nation and created ripples in Germany. The largest crowd London had ever seen later watched the public hanging of the killer.

In the evening of July 9, 1864, 70-year old Thomas Briggs climbed into the Hackney-bound train and into history. A few minutes later, two bank clerks entered the compartment. They noticed blood pooled on the seats, smeared over the floor and windows of the carriage, and a bloody handprint on the door.

But the only sign of Briggsy, my great-great-grandfather, was his walking stick, and a hat, that strangely, did not belong to him. Note, people: a clue!

A short while later, his body was discovered, with terrible head wounds, lying between the up and down tracks of the North London Railway. He never regained consciousness. His watch and gold chain were missing. Another clue: the motive.

A new class of police, called detectives, had been established a few years earlier to investigate crime. Scotland Yard appointed the brilliant Detective Inspector Richard Tanner to head the case.

Investigative methods were being developed. Posters circulated around London. A jeweller by the name of Death, spelled as in death, described a man with a foreign accent who’d pawned a gold chain in his shop. The Briggs family

identified the chain as Briggsy's. The posters were updated with a huge reward offered.

Five days later, a cabdriver came forward, saying that a friend had recently visited before leaving for America. He'd shown off his new gold chain and given the box it came in to his daughter. The box bore the name of Death. The cabby even had a photograph of his friend, Franz Muller, a German tailor.

The jeweller, Death, identified the man in the photograph as the same one who'd pawned Mr Briggs' gold chain. They soon found he'd already left on the 'Victoria', a wooden sailing ship.

Scotland Yard ordered Inspector Tanner and an aide, the jeweller and the cabby to leave London within the hour, to catch a steamship departing from Liverpool, and prevent Muller from setting foot on American soil, or else he'd be free.

The slower 'Victoria' was delayed in bad weather. Meanwhile, the New York press gave the gripping Muller story equal prominence with the long list of casualties from the American civil war.

When detectives boarded the 'Victoria', they found in Muller's trunk a top hat and a watch inscribed with the name Briggs. They arrested Muller, who declared, "he was innocent of the crime."

Now Muller had to be extradited from America, a tense hearing almost lost because Britain was supporting the South in the civil war.

Back in London, the trial was held without delay. The prosecution established that Muller had picked up the wrong hat in the carriage, leaving his own distinctive hat behind, part of the 'Chain of Evidence' connecting Muller at the scene.

Thomas Briggs' hat, found in Muller's trunk, had been 'cut down' an inch and the crown stitched back, not glued. The defence presented an alibi, but the jury did not believe it, returning in only 15 minutes with a verdict of '*Guilty*.'

Now, thirteen weeks after violently robbing my great-great grandfather, to pay for his passage to America, Muller had to face his own public death.

The gallows had been erected during the small hours outside the Old Bailey, where thousands waited throughout the wet night. Well before dawn, people were streaming in for the entertainment of one of the last public hangings. It was Monday, November 14, 1864.

By quarter to eight, the waiting multitude had risen to fifty thousand. With the prison bell tolling faster, William Calcraft, London's long-serving executioner, said *follow me*, and the group of chaplains, the convict and the executioner walked to the scaffold. Muller, arms pinioned, mounted the steps, accompanied by Dr Cappel from the German Legal Protection Society.

Calcraft strapped Muller's ankles and placed the rope around his neck. Dr Cappel held an urgent conversation with Muller. Calcraft fitted a hood over Muller's face and shuffled off to pull the lever.

Muller's body fell. The bells were still. The multitude momentarily fell silent before erupting in a deafening roar, accompanied by robbery and violence.

Muller's body was left to hang for an hour.

Dr Cappel reported his conversation with Muller. Only in the last minute of his life had Muller confessed his guilt – 'Yes, I did it.'

Muller's capture was facilitated by technological advances: steam travel, photography and the telegraph. Railway carriages were eventually re-designed. The trial became a famous case and the cut-down hat became fashionable, worn by Winston Churchill in the second world war, but execution was not abolished in Britain until 1964, one hundred years later.

The noose was officially out of use.

856 words taking about 7 minutes, 40 seconds