

# The Murderers Confessed

## A True Story

*The disappearance of Russel Colvin was something more than an ordinary mystery—and when dreams entered into the case, murder was not far behind*

**T**HE seven-year mystery of the disappearance of Russel Colvin more than a hundred years ago made the village of Manchester, in the stony hills of Vermont, a place of whispered horror and harsh tragedy.

Russel Colvin disappeared from Manchester on May 10, 1812. His absence attracted no attention at the time, and when questions began to be asked, the date could be fixed only by recalling that his last meal in the home of Barney Boorn was when the family had dined on a woodchuck.

Stephen, one of Russel's brothers-in-law, had killed the woodchuck that same day.

Colvin was of less than no importance to either his family or his community. He had come to Manchester with his parents thirty years before—a tow-headed youngster recognized as "simple," though not an idiot.

He had grown up to be a short, fair-haired, vacant-faced young man, good-natured as a rule, ignorant, and capable of unskilled labor if somebody told him what to do.

He had none of the hard shrewdness that characterizes Vermonters.

Yet he needed food, and a roof, and love, like other men. While his father lived, he could be sure of food and a roof—of a poor sort.

For love, he went courting like the rest, and his eye fell on Sally Boorn.

Sally was one of the five children of Barney Boorn. His three sons, Stephen,

Jesse and John, were married, and they and their wives and children all lived with the elder Boorns.

They were "poor folks" even in a poor community. The boys hired out by the day when they could, and when they could not they helped their father earn a scanty living from the farm.

"Sall" was later described by her brother Stephen as "one of the devil's unaccountables." Perhaps that explains why she married Russel Colvin.

Russel, incapable of supporting even himself, soon found himself with a rapidly increasing family to support. And just at this juncture his father died, and the town authorities, deciding that Russel could not be trusted to administer sensibly his small estate, took possession of it for the benefit of the aged mother.

Russel was left with no resources and no one to fall back on. It soon became evident that his mind had given way under the strain. He had intervals of unmistakable derangement.

And shortly Russel Colvin and his family were added to the hungry brood that bulged the sides of Barney Boorn's little house.

The Boorns made no secret of their resentment. Stephen and Jesse, in particular, were bitter at having to share with their irresponsible brother-in-law and his family the already insufficient yield of the poor farm.

And their particular grievance was that Russel's family continued to increase. It

by  
**Mabel  
Abbott**

was bitter bread that poor Sall ate in her father's house, and as for Russel, he would have had to be much simpler than he was not to feel the taunts that were daily hurled at him.

**I**T IS not strange that sometimes he fled from bickering relatives and squalling children, and disappeared for days at a time. Where he went during these absences nobody knew, or cared.

Hang-dog and silent, he always returned to sit humbly at the table where he was not wanted, and endure the contempt of his wife's family. Once he was gone for nine months. He was in Rhode Island. By and by he came back, as usual.

That is why the date of the killing of the woodchuck, and the resulting savory and ample meal, meant more to the Boorns than the date on which Russel Colvin failed again to come home at night.

For some time the neighborhood took no notice of his absence. War had broken out with England; Vermont boys were in the battles; the Capitol at Washington had been burned, and there had even been one small engagement in the State itself.

There was plenty to think of without keeping track of Russel's goings and comings. It was perhaps a year or a year and a half before the neighbors began to comment.

"Looks like Russel Colvin ain't comin' hum this time. Mebbe somethin's happened to him. Guess Stephen an' Jesse wun't cry ther eyes out!"

It was at once remembered that Colvin had been unwelcome in the Boorns' home. Thomas Johnson, who lived on the farm adjoining Barney Boorn's, had heard and seen Colvin, Stephen and Jesse quarreling on the day of his disappearance.

William Wyman recalled that Stephen had come to him one day and asked if Barney was obliged to support "Colvin's young 'uns." Wyman had said he was.

"Ain't thet hard?" Stephen had asked.

Then he had inquired if there were not some way Russel and Sall could be prevented from living as man and wife. Wy-

man replied he knew of none, as they were lawfully married.

"If ther ain't no other way to put a stop to't," Stephen had declared with an oath, "I'll put a stop to't myself."

Many such stories were remembered and repeated as time went on and Colvin did not return.

Meanwhile, poor Sall was justifying her brother's description of her. Three years after Colvin's disappearance she found there was shortly to be still another mouth to feed. And if "Colvin's young 'uns" had been unwelcome, what would a nameless baby be?

An unmarried mother could "swear her child" to its father and make claim for its support. But Sall was married. Still, she apparently had no husband. In a situation too complicated for her, she sought advice from a Mr. Hitchcock, and asked him if she could "swear the child on somebody."

"Not if your husband is living," replied Hitchcock.

Sall slunk back to face her family with the answer. Stephen's face darkened. "You can swear it," he said harshly. "Russel's dead, an' I know it."

Jesse confirmed him. "You can swear it," he said. "He's dead—but nobody needn't to go lookin' fer his bones, cuz he went away."

They were standing on Barney Boorn's stoop, and Amos Lawrence and Squire Pratt heard the words.

About this time Thomas Johnson bought Barney's farm. One night when Johnson's children came in they brought a moldy, tattered old hat they had found. Johnson knew the hat.

"Thet ther's the hat Russel Colvin had on the day he disappeared," he said. "He was diggin' stones, and they were quarrelin'. What ye s'pose he went off 'thout his hat fer?"

Johnson kept the hat.

**B**Y THIS time suspicion was aroused. Neighbors felt something ought to be done, but hardly knew what. When Russel

Colvin was walking the streets of Manchester he was of so little importance that nobody noticed when he vanished; but now, gone, he was becoming the most important and discussed person in the community.

Strange whispers began to run through the village. It was said Stephen Boorn was tormented by terrible dreams. He had been repeatedly awakened at midnight by a sound like stones thundering on his roof. He had seen a specter which beckoned him to follow.

Nobody knew how these tales started. They were symptoms of a hysteria that was gripping the town. A contemporary chronicler has recorded that Manchester seemed "seized with an infatuation; it was as if the age of ghosts and hobgoblins had revived, and the ghost of Russel Colvin haunted every house."

The eyes that were turned on the Boorns were sharp and hard. The weight of suspicion was like a physical pressure. The Boorns writhed under it, and the more prosperous connections of the family, to clear themselves, were among the most zealous in pointing fingers at Barney's sons.

William Boorn, an uncle, told all who would listen that Stephen had said he wished Russel and Sall were both dead, and that he would kick them into hell if he burned his legs off doing it.

Stephen and Jesse went from neighbor to neighbor, defending themselves against unuttered accusations, and making their case constantly worse. Sometimes they said they had been working with Russel when he went away. Sometimes they said they had been working at a distance. Sometimes they said they were not even living at home at the time.

Stephen moved to Dorset, a town near by. Heads nodded. He was fleeing from Colvin's avenging ghost. Finally he moved to Denmark, New York, 198 miles away. But before he went, he visited Manchester again and told Daniel Baldwin the story of the disappearance.

"Several of us seen Russel go off into

the woods in a strange way," he said. "Jesse and me and Russel and Lewis—that's one of Russel's young 'uns—was to work pickin' up stones.

"We all seen him go—except Lewis. He had went fer a drink. That was the last anybody ever seen of Russel Colvin, and I dunno but some thinks I killed him. But look here; when Lewis come back and asks where his father was, I say, 'Gone to hell!' and Jesse, he says, 'We put him where potatoes wun't freeze.' Now would we been likely to say that if we'd killed him?"

Early in 1819, Stephen, on another visit, was at the house of Johnson Marsh, and Marsh's hired girl spoke up and said: "They're goin' to dig up Colvin for you, ain't they?"

Stephen broke into curses. "Damn Wyman!" he shouted. "I'll thump him!" Marsh quieted him, but Stephen continued to protest that Colvin was crazy when he went off, and that he himself didn't know what had become of him, because he had been at Sandgate that day.

He also went to the house of William Wyman, and said he had heard that Wyman had been telling around that he had killed Colvin, and he wanted him to clear it up; that he didn't know what had become of Colvin, and never had worked with him so much as one hour.

It was very shortly after this, early in April, 1819, that an uncle of Stephen and Jesse had a dream. He had it "three times running," which, of course, proved that it was true.

**T**HIS uncle, whose name is not preserved in the records, but who is referred to as "a gentleman of respectability, whose character is unimpeachable," dreamed that Russel Colvin came to his bedside and told him he had been murdered, and that he must follow and would be shown the spot where he was buried.

The third time the uncle obeyed the ghost, and was led to an old "potato hole" on Barney Boorn's former farm.

The uncle told this dream, and in-

stantly Jesse's words to Lewis Colvin, as quoted by Stephen himself, were recalled:

"We put him where potatoes wun't freeze!"

Half-credulous, half-skeptical and wholly excited, the neighbors dug like hounds in the old potato hole, long since filled up with dirt and rubbish. In it were found a knife, a smaller penknife, and a button. The button, when cleared of crusted earth had a peculiar flower on it that made it easy to identify.

The diggers visited Sally Colvin, and without showing her the articles asked her to describe the knife her husband had carried, and the buttons on his clothing. She described accurately the larger of the knives and the buttons. On being shown them, she positively identified them.

All the uncertainties of the past seven years crystallized into action. Jesse Boorn was arrested—Stephen being no longer in Manchester.

At this juncture a boy, walking along an old path on the former Boorn place, was puzzled by the actions of his dog. The animal had been digging at the base of an old birch stump, and suddenly began to bark and whine and run back and forth. The boy investigated and found he had scratched up some crumbling scraps of bone.

The story flew like wildfire. Colvin's bones had been found!

Jesse's examination began on Tuesday, April 27, before a court of inquiry in the village meeting house. Physicians examined the bones. Some professed to recognize the fragments of a human skull; others declared they did not.

There was general agreement, however, that at least a human toenail and a fragment of another were present. The place where they were found did not coincide with the uncle's dream, which added to the mystery.

Search for the body was carried on vigorously for three days, without further result; and Jesse asserted his innocence and his ignorance of Colvin's fate so stoutly that he impressed even the stampeded vil-

lagers. By Saturday it seemed likely he would be released.

But on Saturday morning the knives and the button found at the potato pit, and the hat found by Johnson's children were brought into the little meeting house and shown to Jesse. He was observed to change color, then he began to tremble, and finally he shook so he had to grasp the back of a pew.

"What's the matter?" asked Captain Truman Hill, a grand jurymen.

"Matter enough!" gulped Jesse. And in a shaking voice, he faltered out the story that justified Manchester's long suspicions."

"I never had no idee Stephen might 'a murdered Russel Colvin; till the last time he was here on a visit. Then he told me he an' Russel was hoein' in the Glazier lot an' they quarreled an' Colvin started to run an' Stephen hit him with a club or a stone on the back part of his neck or his head and fractured his skull. Stephen said he s'posed Russel was dead."

This was enough. It was no longer a question of ghosts or dreams. However strangely the revelation had been reached, it was now a matter for the authorities.

**A** WARRANT was issued for Stephen Captain Hill and two others set out for Denmark, New York, and brought him back in irons.

Stephen denied Jesse's story hotly. For a few days the brothers were kept in separate cells, during which time each persisted in his own story. Then they were put together. And after an interview, Jesse told the inquisitors that his confession had been entirely false.

His repudiation came too late. The authorities now had a mass of evidence that corresponded so well with the confession that they had no hesitation in calling a grand jury, which promptly indicted Stephen and Jesse on the charge of murdering Russel Colvin "with a certain beech club of the value of ten cents."

The trial did not take place until October. Meanwhile neighbors and relatives

saw both men often, questioned them, and urged them to tell the truth. And on August 17, 1819, Stephen sent for Captain Hill, Squire Joel Pratt and the State's attorney. When they came to the jail he asked for paper, ink and pen.

The three men then left the room. Josiah Burton, who had come with them, remained. Stephen sat down at a table and wrote for some time. Then he rose, leaving the paper on the table. The others came in and signed the paper on the back, so that it could be afterward identified, and Squire Pratt put it in his pocket.

This is what Stephen wrote:

May 10, 1812, I, about nine or ten o'clock went down to David Glazier's bridge and fished down below Uncle Nathaniel Boorn's, and then went up across over the farms where Russel and Lewis was by the highest way and sat down and began to talk.

And Russel told me how many dollars benefit he had been to father, and I told him he was a damned fool, and he was mad and jumped up, and we sat close together, and I told him to set down, you little tory.

And there was a piece of beech club about two feet long, and he caught it up and struck at my head as I sat down, and I jumped up and it struck me on one shoulder and I caught it out of his hand and struck him a back-handed blow, I being on the north side of him, and there was a knot on it about one inch long.

As I struck him I did think I hit him on his back and he stooped down and that knot was broken off sharp and it hit him on the back of the neck, close in his hair, and it went in about a half of an inch on that great cord and he fell down.

And then I told the boy to go down and come up with his Uncle John, and he asked me if I had killed Russel and I told him no, but he must not tell that we struck one another.

And I told him when he got away down, Russel was gone away, and I went back and he was dead, and then I went and took him and put him in the corner of the fence by the cellar hole and put briers over him, and went home, and went down to the barn and got some boards.

And when it was dark I went down and took a hoe and boards and dug a grave as well as I could and took out of his pocket a little barlow knife with about a

half of a blade, and cut some bushes and put on his face and boards and put in the grave and put him in, four boards on the bottom and on the top and tother two on the sides, and covered him up and went home crying along, but I wa'n't afraid as know on.

And when I lived to William Boorn's I planted some potatoes, and when I dug them I went there and something I thought had been there and I took up his bones and put them in a basket and took the boards and put in my potato hole.

And then it was night, took the basket and my hoe and went down and pulled a plank in the stable floor and then dug a hole and then covered him up and I went in the house and told them I had done with the basket and took back the shovel and covered up my potatoes that evening.

And when I lived under the west mountain Lewis came and told me that father's barn was burned up, the next day, or the next day, but one, I came down and went to the barn and there was a few bones, and when they was to dinner I told them I didn't want my dinner and went and took them and there wa'n't only a few of the biggest of the bones and throwed them in the river above Wyman's and went back, and it was done quick, too, and then was hungry by that time.

And then went home, and the next Sunday I came down after money to pay the boot that I gave to boot between oxens, and went out there and scraped up them little things that was under the stump there and told them I was going fishing and went and there was a hole and I dropped them in and kicked over the stuff.

And that is the first anybody knew it, either friends or foes, even my wife. All this I acknowledge before the world.

Stephen Boorn.

The mystery seemed solved. But when the day of trial came, both Stephen and Jesse pleaded "Not guilty!"

No sensation like the trial of the Boorns had ever been known in that region. People poured into Manchester from all the country round. Six hundred persons managed to crowd into the court room every day. It was almost impossible to get a jury, because there was hardly a man in that part of the State who had not formed an opinion—and that opinion invariably was, the prisoners were guilty.

Fifty witnesses were called. No mention of dreams or ghosts was allowed to creep into the trial, but as the neighbors of Stephen and Jesse, one after another, gave their damning testimony, it must have seemed to the crowd who knew whence the first clue had come, that poor, simple Russel Colvin's ghost was forging, blow on blow, the chain of evidence that was to bring his murderers at last to justice.

NEITHER Stephen nor Jesse denied that the larger knife and the button found in the potato pit were Colvin's. Jesse said he had often seen old Mrs. Colvin cut herself a chew of tobacco with that knife. They did not try to explain its presence in the pit. They persisted that they were not guilty, and that they had no idea what had become of Colvin.

Thomas Johnson told of the quarrel.

"I was in plain sight of the lot where Jesse an' Stephen an' Russel Colvin an' Russel's boy Lewis was pickin' up stones," he said. "I listened, but couldn't make out what the quarrel was about.

"I went on hum, an' pretty soon I come to my door an' heard them still a-quarrelin'. I went up on the rise of land 'bout twenty-five or thirty rod from them, where I could see good, but I kep' out o' sight. Seemed like the quarrel was 'batin' a little, so I come back hum.

"That was the last time I ever see Russel Colvin."

Stephen told him afterward, Johnson said, that on that day he had been working for Mr. Hicks in the morning, and in the afternoon he had mended a fence for Mr. Hammond.

"He said it was whilst he was mendin' the fence that he killed that woodchuck they et fer dinner," Johnson recalled.

And in a dead bush, he told also how there had been a "thrifty apple tree" about three feet high, growing in the old potato hole, and later the tree had been gone, and there had been boards tossed around, and signs of digging in the hole.

Lewis Colvin, now a gangling, stupid youth of seventeen, didn't know how long

ago his father disappeared, nor what time of year, but he remembered the last time he saw him.

They and Stephen and Jesse were in the field next Johnson's, picking up stones. There was a quarrel. His father hit his Uncle Stephen first with a small stick. His uncle then struck his father on his neck with a club and knocked him down. His father got up and struck Stephen again, and then Stephen hit him the second time with the club and he fell again.

"I was skeered an' I run off to the house," Lewis admitted. "Uncle Stephen said he'd kill me if I told."

Sally Colvin said she had been "over the mountain" at the time, and on her return, had asked Lewis where his father was, and the child had replied, "Gone to hell" She insisted no one at her father's house had told her anything about what had become of her husband.

But the story that appeared to have the greatest weight with the jury was that of Silas Merrill, a prisoner on the charge of forgery, who had occupied the same cell with Jesse. Merrill said that one day Jesse's father had visited him, and afterward Jesse had seemed very depressed. That night he had been awakened by Jesse's shaking him.

"He wanted I should wake up because he was frightened about something that had come in the window and was on the bed behind him," Merrill explained.

Jesse had then described the fight much as in Stephen's later confession, but had also said that Barney Boorn had come three times and asked if Colvin was dead yet, and on being told "No," had said, "Damn him!"

The three men had then carried Colvin to the cellar-hole, and there Barney had cut his throat with Stephen's penknife, and "buried him in the hole between daylight and dark, while Jesse stood out one side and kept watch."

Merrill said Jesse had told of taking the bones from the hole and putting them under the stable floor, and of taking them when the barn burned, and throwing them

in the river. Barney Boorn had scraped up some burned and crumbled portions of skull and put them in a hollow birch stump near the road, he said.

Later, Merrill said, he had had a chance to talk with Stephen, and Stephen had told him he had agreed with Jesse to take the whole business upon himself, and had made a confession which would only make manslaughter of it.

"I told him what Jesse had confessed," Merrill added, "and he said it was true."

Further corroboration of the repudiated confessions was had from William Farnsworth, a neighbor, who had been told by Stephen two weeks after the written confession, that he did kill Colvin in a quarrel.

Farnsworth reminded him that his parents had sworn he was not at home at the time, and Stephen had said his parents had sworn themselves to the devil and were in a worse fix than he was, and that it made no difference what they swore to, Johnson's story was true. He had also recounted the various removals of the bones.

"I told him the case looked dark," said Farnsworth. "He replied that if Jesse had kept his guts they should have done well enough. He said he wished he had back that paper he wrote."

In behalf of the prisoners Sally Colvin testified that when her husband had eaten his share of the memorable woodchuck, he had told her it was the last meal he'd ever eat in that house.

But efforts to establish alibis, and to show that Colvin had been seen elsewhere after his disappearance, resulted in discrepancies in dates that discredited them.

More important was the testimony of several persons that the brothers had been repeatedly urged to confess, "if guilty," told that every soul in the village believed them so, that their case was desperate if they didn't confess, and that if they did there was a chance of leniency.

It was also shown that Merrill had been relieved of his chains and shown other favors since his story.

But it took the jury just one hour to bring in a verdict of guilty; and within another hour they were sentenced to be hanged by the neck "until they were dead," on January 28 next.

**B**OTH men collapsed. Stephen had to be almost carried to his cell.

Probably in pursuance of implied promises made to get confessions, a petition was sent to the legislature asking commutation of the sentences. There were a number of signatures on Jesse's behalf, but very few for Stephen.

The strangeness of the case had attracted State-wide attention. The assembly gave several days to it and finally commuted Jesse's sentence to life imprisonment, but refused to commute Stephen's.

Jesse was taken to State's prison and began serving his sentence, and Stephen, loaded with chains on arms and legs and chained to the floor in the inhuman fashion of the time, remained in jail awaiting execution.

His attorneys now caused to be widely printed a notice asking any one who might have knowledge of the whereabouts of Russel Colvin to communicate with them at once. Manchester regarded this as purely a move on which to base a request for a reprieve, on the ground that time must be given for a response.

Shortly afterward, a letter was published in the *New York Evening Post*, signed by Taber Chadwick, of Shrewsbury, Monmouth County, New Jersey, saying he believed that a stranger who had come to that county some five or ten years before was Russel Colvin. This letter was forwarded to Manchester, but was regarded with skepticism and preparations for the execution went on.

Soon, however, rumors less easily dismissed began to arrive. James Whelpley, of New York City, who had formerly lived in Manchester and knew Colvin well, had seen the Chadwick letter and had gone to New Jersey to investigate.

On the heels of this came a letter from

Whelpy saying, "I have Russel Colvin with me," and one from another former resident of Manchester saying, "Russel Colvin is before me as I write."

The village now was of two minds. The majority still believed the whole thing was a ruse to gain time, but a minority began to talk about "the dead coming to life." Large bets were made, the odds being against Colvin's having been found.

This was the situation on the 22nd of December, when the stage coach rumbled into Manchester. As it came, the cry ran ahead of it, "Colvin has come!" And as it drew up at Captain Black's inn out stepped Russel Colvin in the flesh, seven years older and decidedly crazier than they had last seen him, but sound and well.

Half pushed, half carried by a swaying, gasping, shouting crowd, he was whirled to the jail, and Stephen, the chains hastily stricken from his arms, but his legs still loaded with iron, shuffled forward and confronted him. Of the two, it was Stephen and not Russel who would have been taken for a man risen from the dead.

Colvin's vague blue eyes peered from Stephen's ghastly face to the fetters with childlike bewilderment.

"What's that fer?" he asked.

"They say I murdered you," answered Stephen hollowly.

"Ye never hurt me!" protested Colvin in mild surprise.

Many things connected with the case

never were cleared up, and there were some who, though they admitted Russel Colvin had not been murdered, continued to believe that somebody had been.

A chagrined magistrate wrote that a lesson should be learned concerning confessions made before conviction and under pressure. He added that Merrill's story "now appears to be wholly false, but he has gained his end, as he has got bail by the means and got away."

But nobody knows how Stephen's pen-knife and Russel Colvin's knife and button got into the potato pit, nor what did happen on the day he disappeared. Nor could his movements between that time and his arrival in New Jersey be traced. When found, he had been living for some years as a laborer and servant on the farm of a Mr. Polhemus, in Dover. He was happy there, and presently went back.

His progress from New Jersey to Manchester brought out great crowds en route to see the "dead alive." The City of New York advanced the funds to pay his expenses and those of an attendant.

Manchester had the biggest celebration in its history. The Rev. Lemuel Haynes preached a powerful sermon and no less than fifty cannon were fired as a salute to justice.

But nothing on earth could have induced anybody in the village, for at least a generation thereafter, to admit that he believed in dreams.

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# "I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 48 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the in-

visible God-Law, under any and all circumstances. You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 151, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 151, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.