

The Somerton Beach Body Mystery

By Dorothy Pyatt

Adelaide 30 November 1948. Time of the Bobbt Soxers. The hit tune of the day was "Slow Boat to China". For one man it was a day of deep significance.

We first learn of this man during the morning of that day, when he lodged a suitcase in the Cloakroom of the Adelaide Railway Station. He then bought a 2nd Class ticket to Henley Beach, but for some reason did not use it; perhaps he missed the train.

He put the ticket in his pocket and crossed North Terrace to a bus stop outside the Strathmore Hotel at about quarter past eleven, and instead caught a bus to Glenelg. That evening at about 7 pm a man named Lyons and his wife were strolling along the beach at Somerton, enjoying the pleasant evening air.

They were about opposite the old Crippled Children's Home, when Mr Lyons looked up and noticed a man lying on the sand with his head against the seawall and with his feet pointing towards the sea. He was within about a yard of the steps up the seawall. As Lyons looked at him the man made a movement with his right hand, as though he was trying to smoke a cigarette.

Mr Lyons said to his wife, "Look at the way that man is slumped".

They both formed the opinion that the man was drunk and passed on. Half an hour later a young girl named O'Neill and her boyfriend named Strapps were walking along the promenade, on the top of the seawall at Somerton. They stopped for a while on a seat near the steps going down to the beach. Miss O'Neill could see a man's left hand lying beside his body. From the position of the hand she had a thought that perhaps there was something wrong with him. She said to her companion, "I'll have a look at him."

Strapps replied, "Oh, don't be a stickybeak."

She said, jokingly, "Perhaps he's dead."

They remained there for about half an hour and during that time the man did not move. They thought perhaps he was sleeping as he did not appear to be worried by the mosquitoes.

The following morning Mr Lyons went to the beach again at about 6.30 am to have a swim with some friends. After his swim he again saw the same man in the same position beside the seawall.

He became suspicious and went to have a closer look. He decided that the man was dead and hurried to his home nearby to ring the Brighton Police Station. Lyons returned to the body and Constable Moss, Officer in Charge of Brighton arrived

shortly after and examined the body. He looked for signs of disturbance around the body, but there were none. He found the body fully clothed with no marks of violence. The left arm was lying beside the body and the right arm was bent double. A half-smoked cigarette was lying on the right collar of his coat.

The body was conveyed by Police Ambulance to the R.A.H., where life was pronounced extinct. An opinion was given that death had occurred at about 2 am. The body was taken to the morgue and Police enquiries commenced.

There was nothing unusual about a man dying in a public place. It was assumed that someone would soon come forward to claim him.

Two days later a post mortem was conducted. Up to now it had been thought that the man had died from natural causes, but now a mystery began to develop, because, despite all the tests which were conducted, no cause of death could be discovered.

The body was found to be that of a man of about 45 years of age, tall and in excellent physical condition, that of a man who had taken care of himself. He was thought to be of European appearance. His clothing was of good quality. Certain organs were sent to be examined. The stomach had been highly congested with blood, as though by poisoning and the heart had failed.

Tests were conducted to try to find possible poisons which could have caused death, but still no answer could be found. It seemed that death had been brought about by someone with a sophisticated knowledge of poisons.

There was not one single identifying mark upon the body. No scars or vaccination mark.

It was now time for the Police to commence wide enquiries to establish the identity of this man. Photographs and finger-prints were taken and circulated within Australia and New Zealand and also overseas in all English speaking countries, but no record of the man could be found.

When the clothing worn by the deceased was first searched by Police they found an unused rail ticket to Henley Beach, a used bus ticket to Glenelg, cigarettes and matches, but no money. The clothing had had all the identification marks removed. The mystery began to deepen and the Press began to take a great interest.

In January 1949, Police enquiries found an unclaimed suitcase in the Cloakroom at the Adelaide Railways Station. It was the suitcase which had been lodged there on the 30th November. The suitcase was in fairly new condition and a luggage label had been removed from it. Clothing in the case matched that worn by the deceased and most of it had all identification marks removed. In the case was found a brush which was of the type used for stenciling, a knife with a sharpened point and a pair of

scissors also with a sharpened point. They were of the type used by Third Officer on Merchant ships responsible for the stenciling of cargo.

A dry-cleaning mark was circulated Australia wide but without success. One name of T. Keane was found on three items, but even this did not lead to any success. An examination of the coat found on the deceased showed that it was of American origin. It seemed that painstaking efforts had been made to conceal the identity of this man.

And so the mystery deepened. Numerous people went to view the embalmed body, claiming that he was someone known to them, but still the identity was not established.

In April, a Professor Cleland made a further examination of the clothing found on the body and discovered another cryptic clue. Deep down in a rather obscure fob pocket of the trousers he found, rolled up, a tiny piece of paper. When unrolled the paper showed two printed words "Taman Shud". The enquiring Police tried to make sense of this, but it was a reporter from the *Advertiser* who directed them to the old Persian poet, Omar Kyam and his poem 'The Rubaiyat', written some 900 years ago. The philosophy of his poem was that we should live life to the utmost and have no regrets when it ends. Translated, the words Taman Shud mean *The End* or *The Finish*. The words occur at the very end of the book of poems.

This strange find opened up new lines of enquiries for the Police. They commenced a search for a copy of 'The Rubaiyat' which may have the last page missing.

In June, Mr Paul Lawson, the taxidermist at the Adelaide Museum was asked to make a plaster cast of the man's head and shoulders. He found the body to be tall and beautifully formed, with wide shoulders and narrow waist. A strong and robust man, with well cared for hands and nails with no signs of hard work. The feet he found curious with the big and little toes meeting close together in a wedge shape, as though the man had been a dancer. The calf muscle was formed high up in the leg, like that of a woman who habitually wears high heeled shoes.

This lead Police to other lines of enquiries, as to whether the man had been a dancer or a stockman. Still the enquiries proved fruitless.

Shortly afterward in 1949 the body was buried in the West Terrace Cemetery. Police kept the arrangements secret to keep sightseers away. The South Australian Grandstand Bookmakers Association paid for the burial service to save the man from a paupers burial. The Salvation Army conducted the burial service.

An inquest had been opened shortly after the body had been found and was adjourned. Three days after the burial, the inquest was resumed. The Coroner was unable to make any finding on the identification of the man, or the cause of death. The matter was further adjourned without coming to any conclusion. Indeed, the Coroner said

that there was no absolute certainty that the man seen alive was the man found on the beach next morning, as nobody had seen his face during life.

The wide publicity given to all this brought some result. Soon after this, a doctor who lived at Glenelg came forward with a copy of the book 'Rubaiyat of Omar Kyam' and the last page of this book a piece had been torn out. Although the scrap of paper

bearing the words 'Tam Shud', which was found on the deceased, had been neatly cut around the edges, scientific tests proved that the scrap of paper did, in fact, come from the same book as that produced by the doctor. The Doctor told Police that he had found the book tossed on the front seat of his car when it was parked in front of his house on the 30th November. He had previously attached no importance to the finding of the book.

On examining the book Detectives found faint pencil markings on the back of the book. These appeared to be four cryptic lines of capital letters. Police thought that this may hold some clues, but although the letters were submitted to cypher and code experts, they could not find any solution.

There were also what appeared to be telephone numbers in the back of the book, but enquiries along these lines brought no clues as to the identity of the man.

The last stanza in the book before the words 'Taman Shud' reads,

"And when yourself with silver foot shall pass
Among the Guests Star-scattered on the grass,
And in your joyous errand reach the spot
Where I made One - turn down an empty glass!"

A number of questions remain intriguing and unsolved.

1. Who was this man and how did he die?
2. Why did he appear to make such efforts to remain anonymous?
3. Did he die by his own hand and how?
4. Was he murdered and matters arranged as to make it appear that he had died by his own hand?
5. What manner of death was it that no clue remained?
6. Was a poison used which cunningly dissipated so that no trace of it remained?
7. Why should a man in top physical condition want to die, if it should have been by his own hand? Was it an affair of the heart, or some other desperate problem that beset him?

It was the time of the Cold War and the Berlin Blockade. The Rocket Range was being established at Woomera. At that time one of world's top physicists was in

Adelaide. It had been suggested that the man may have been involved in espionage, and may have been killed because of what he knew.

Was he an agent for a foreign power, a spy or an intelligence officer?

The circumstances surrounding this death were very usual, but it seems likely that he suicided.

Did he inject himself with some obscure poison, or did he swallow it?

If that is so, we can only speculate and conjecture as to the state of his mind as he lodged that suitcase in the Adelaide Railway Station, and caught the bus to Glenelg, perhaps reading again that last stanza in the old Persian book of poems before he tossed it away.

“And when Yourself with silver Foot shall pass
Among the Guests Star-scattered on the Grass,
And in your joyous errand reach the spot
Where I made one - turn down an empty Glass!”

Will the mystery ever be unravelled, I wonder? Perhaps you and I as we pass this spot at Somerton may give him a thought, wonder again who he was, this man of mystery, this man with no past and “turn down an empty glass”.

Footnote:

This address was given by Dorothy Pyatt at the SA Police Historical Society's meeting on 1 August 1997. Especially present was retired Chief Superintendent Len Brown, who with Lionel Leane (now deceased), were the two detectives assigned to investigate the mystery of the Somerton Beach body.

Len congratulated Dorothy for such an accurate account of the events and went on to add his own thoughts and comments.

It is Len's belief that the man may have been destitute, the reason for not finding any money on the body. At that time he explained there were no Social Security benefits and the labels missing from some of the clothing may have been because they could have been from a charity store. It was most probable that the deceased had intended to travel to Henley Beach, but on presumably missing the train, he placed the unused ticket in his pocket and then caught a bus to Glenelg, where he walked to Somerton and committed suicide by swallowing an unknown poison which dissipated in the body before the autopsy was conducted. In those days Len explained the procedures were not as they are today and the autopsy was not held until several days after the deceased had been found.

Len also explained that he believed that the man may have come from a country in the Communist Eastern Block. At that time there were no communications between such countries and the western world and therefore a thorough check of the man's identity could not be made.

There is no doubt however, that the deceased did make every effort to conceal his identity, which along with the cause of his death, still remains a mystery. The police file is still maintained at Major Crime Task Force in the 'open files', and the bust of the deceased remains in the safe keeping of the Police Historical Society. Perhaps modern technology and DNA testing of the hair which is still embedded in the plaster cast may one day lead to his identity, or will he remain a mystery forever?