

CHAPTER ONE



THE DEATH OF EVELINA BLISS

The summer of 1895 was drawing to a close. Friday, August 30, was the eve of Labor Day weekend, and Manhattan stores were advertising back-to-school sales. Theatres were promoting the following week's launch of their fall seasons, and unions and community groups were preparing for their Labor Day parades, picnics, and excursions. Also on the holiday schedule were several bicycle races, which were very popular at the time, and the Scottish Games, to be held at Manhattan Field at West 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, adjacent to the Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants. John Philip Sousa's band was scheduled to play afternoon and evening concerts at Brooklyn's Manhattan Beach. In that Friday morning's newspapers, Evelina Bliss read about the many and varied activities planned for the Labor Day weekend and for the following week in New York City, unaware that this would be the last day of her life.

At about two o'clock that Friday afternoon, after completing her day's errands, Evelina returned to her home at 397 St. Nicholas Avenue, an apartment building in upper Manhattan near West 130th Street, across from the southern end of St. Nicholas Park. After exchanging a few words with her downstairs neighbor, she climbed the stairs to her modest rooms on the south side of the fifth and top floor of the building. Evelina had turned fifty-three that January, and her hair had turned white so that she looked even older. She had put on weight in recent years, and the stairs had become a challenge to her. She mounted them slowly. Evelina shared her small apartment with her younger daughter Florence and her son Henry. But that day they

were both still away on summer vacation, Florence in New Jersey and Henry in Massachusetts. Thus Evelina Bliss was atypically home alone in her St. Nicholas Avenue apartment that fateful Friday afternoon.

Evelina Matilda Davis was born in 1842 in her father's residence on East Broadway and educated at the Academy of the Sacred Heart on West Seventeenth Street. Although Evelina and her family were not Catholic, such schools at the time were considered some of the best available for the education of young women. In her teens, Evelina also took lessons in piano and voice and became an accomplished singer of opera and popular songs for friends and family but never professionally. At the age of eighteen, she married Robert Swift Livingston, the elderly owner of Almont, a large estate on the Hudson River in Dutchess County. With him she gave birth to a daughter in 1861, but Evelina was widowed six years later. Her second marriage in 1868 was to Henry Hale Bliss, a Manhattan businessman with whom she had two more children before she and her husband became separated in the 1880s. After living for several years in a comfortable home in Toms River, New Jersey, Evelina had returned to the city of her birth. Although she had received a substantial inheritance from her first husband, her finances had become much diminished through overspending and from risky investments that lost considerable value in the Panic of 1893, the worst economic crisis to hit the country since its formation. Thus Evelina's accommodations in 1895 were far more modest than she had been accustomed to in her earlier years.

Most avenues and streets of Manhattan conform to the rigid rectangular grid developed by a state-appointed Streets Commission back in 1811, at a time when most of the island was still woods and farms. St. Nicholas Avenue, bearing the name of the patron saint of the Dutch settlement of Nieuw Amsterdam, was an exception, angling irregularly across the grid. At West 130th Street, location of Evelina's home, St. Nicholas ran slightly west of Eighth Avenue. By walking one block east along 130th and then south along Eighth Avenue for five blocks, Evelina could reach the Colonial Hotel, current home of her husband Henry Bliss, with whom she was still on friendly terms, and also the recent home, in separate rooms, of her daughter from her first marriage, Mary Alice Almont Livingston. Mary Alice had presented Evelina with three grandchildren, and Evelina often walked to the

Colonial Hotel to see them, as well as to dine with her husband and her daughter Mary Alice.

Mary Alice, the central figure of our narrative, had recently moved into this four-story, 200-room hotel at the busy corner of Eighth and 125th, and had taken adjacent apartments 71 and 73 on the third floor overlooking 125th Street, the main business street of Harlem. In 1658, Peter Stuyvesant had named this part of upper Manhattan Nieuw Haarlem after the city of Haarlem in his home country, and in the 1890s, Harlem was largely a middle class neighborhood of mixed ethnicity. Among the near neighbors of the hotel was the Harlem Opera House, the first of many Manhattan theatres developed by Oscar Hammerstein. Mary Alice's rooms on 125th were preferable to the rooms around the corner, because those looked out on the elevated railroad that ran up Eighth Avenue. The structure supporting the tracks of the "el" extended from sidewalk to sidewalk, while underneath at street level ran horse-drawn streetcars and carriages. This line of Manhattan's elevated railroad system was called the "Ninth Avenue El" because it ran for many blocks up Ninth Avenue to 110th Street before jogging eastward to Eighth Avenue and resuming its northward run. It was the first of New York's elevated railroad lines, and in fact the world's first successful elevated railway. Its introduction in 1868 had done much to stimulate Manhattan's northward growth. The el was later electrified, but in 1895 it used coal-burning steam locomotives, and their noise, soot and cinders made the railroad a very unpleasant neighbor. However, the station at 125th Street made the hotel's location convenient for rapid travel to and from downtown Manhattan. Many community events were held at the Colonial Hotel, including the annual banquet of the Knights of St. Patrick.

Mary Alice's stepfather Henry H. Bliss had lived in this hotel for some time. When she was forced early that summer to leave her rooms on nearby Manhattan Avenue, he arranged for her to stay at the Colonial and agreed to be temporarily responsible for her bills, including the rental fee of five dollars per week for her rooms. In August 1895, she was living in those rooms with her teenage son, her ten-year-old daughter, and her third child, a son then only fourteen months old. And a fourth child was on the way; Mary Alice was six months pregnant. She had never married, but had begun using the

family name of the father of her first child, Fleming. As one newspaper later put it, "Everyone is kind enough to give her the name and the title of marriage, although she never had a husband. A woman with four children does not like to be called Miss."

Mary Alice Almont Livingston Fleming was a very small woman, both short and slender, but her pregnancy had begun to show. Evelina had visited Mary Alice's apartment that Wednesday and angrily chastised her daughter for her relationship with her current male friend, the presumed father of her youngest child and of the child she was carrying. Evelina had felt for some time that her daughter should cease having children until she had a husband to support them. Mary Alice was emotional and high-strung, and responded angrily to her mother's complaints. Mary Alice, at the time, had little money of her own. Her stepfather had been covering most of her expenses at the hotel, but indicated to her that he did not wish to continue doing so for much longer. With so many children to support, Mary Alice was in a desperate financial situation. A very substantial inheritance awaited her from the estate of her late father, Robert Swift Livingston; it exceeded eighty thousand dollars, an amount far in excess of a million in today's dollars. Mary Alice had taken legal action to obtain it, but the state courts ruled that she would not have access to these funds until after her mother's death.

August 30 was the last Friday of the summer school vacation for Mary Alice's ten-year-old daughter Gracie and her friend Florence King, also ten. Florence came to the Colonial Hotel that morning to play with Gracie, and around midday the two girls walked to the Kings' home on Manhattan Avenue for lunch, taking Gracie's little brother Averill along with them. Averill was then fourteen months old, only a tiny toddler, and to let him traverse Manhattan's busy streets under Gracie's care suggests that Mary Alice felt that her daughter was a very responsible young girl. The children stayed at the Kings' home for several hours. Mary Alice's teenage son Walter was downtown with friends, and her stepfather, who lived in a room just across the hall, was at his real-estate office. For some time in the early afternoon that August 30, Mary Alice was alone in her apartments. She ordered clam chowder and a piece of lemon meringue pie from the Colonial Hotel Restaurant, and the chowder and pie were delivered to her room. The

bill for the food, later reproduced in the *Herald* and signed by “M Fleming,” showed a total charge of forty-five cents—twenty cents for the chowder, ten cents for the pie, and fifteen cents for service—fairly expensive by the standards of the time, as would be expected for hotel room service. The state later claimed that Mary Alice then made some fatal additions of her own to the hotel’s clam chowder.

When the three young children returned to the hotel, Mary Alice reportedly asked Gracie and Florence to take the chowder, in a small tin pail, and the pie, carefully wrapped in paper, to Gracie’s grandmother. Tiny Averill stayed home with his mother while the two girls went on that fateful trip. Carrying the chowder and pie, Gracie and Florence walked the five blocks north and one block west to 397 St. Nicholas Avenue and climbed the stairs to Evelina’s apartment. Gracie’s grandmother was very pleased to welcome them. She unwrapped the pie and put it on a plate, and poured the chowder from the tin pail into a pitcher that was standing on a chair in her kitchen. After a very brief visit, the children returned to the Colonial Hotel to give the pail back to Mary Alice. “I hope you didn’t eat any of it,” said Mary Alice. “No, Ma,” replied Gracie. (One snide author later opined, “I think she told the truth. Surreptitious tipping, from a pail of cold clam chowder, was not a vice of children in the nineties.”) Mary Alice then served dinner, also ordered from the hotel restaurant, and after the meal the two little girls left with Averill to play in nearby Mount Morris Park. They played there until after dark, and Gracie and Florence, with year-old Averill in tow, walked the several blocks home along streets illuminated by gaslight. It would be some time before the electrification of Manhattan’s streetlights reached all the way uptown to Harlem. Florence parted from Gracie and Averill at the Colonial Hotel, and proceeded to her own home on Manhattan Avenue.

Augustus Teubner of Connecticut, an old friend of the Bliss family, was in New York City that day and stopped by 397 St. Nicholas Avenue to visit Evelina Bliss at five o’clock. On reaching her apartment, he found Evelina very ill. She complained of intense abdominal pains and was vomiting violently. After alerting the downstairs neighbor, Teubner ran off to locate a doctor. At first he had no success, but he finally contacted Dr. William Bullman, whose office was at 135th Street. Bullman arrived by bicycle at 6:30 and found Evelina

in great pain and desperately attempting to regurgitate the contents of her stomach. She was sitting on the edge of her bed in her nightgown, and he got her into bed and examined her heart, lungs, and abdomen. Between her exertions, she said to the doctor, "I am going to die. I have been poisoned by my relatives who are trying to get my money." She blamed the clam chowder she had eaten late that afternoon. Dr. Bullman gave her an injection of morphine to relieve her pain, and returned later with a nurse and further medication. On his second visit, he found Evelina's skin growing cold and damp, her heart weak.

Her condition continued to deteriorate during the evening. The nurse found it difficult to give her medication by mouth because Evelina's teeth remained clenched. The outlook appeared increasingly grim, and Teubner went off again for Dr. Bullman. By the time the doctor made his third visit at eleven, Evelina Bliss was dead. Bullman considered the death suspicious. The pitcher that had held the clam chowder was found to have white residue at the bottom, and Dr. Bullman ordered the pitcher to be saved. (Since the residue was white, the chowder was apparently of the milk-based variety known today as New England clam chowder, not the tomato-based type bearing the name of Manhattan.) Portions of vomit were also saved for analysis and an autopsy was ordered. The doctor reported to the Harlem police station that Mrs. Bliss might have been poisoned.

If August Teubner had not dropped by to see Evelina that Friday afternoon, she might have died alone in her apartment that evening. Dr. Bullman would not have been summoned, and no one would have heard Evelina's suspicions that she had been poisoned. Her body would have been found the following day, a stout fifty-three-year-old woman who had had several illnesses in recent years. Her death probably would not have been seen as very surprising or suspicious, and it is likely that no autopsy would have been ordered. But Teubner did drop by, he did summon Dr. Bullman, the doctor did hear Evelina's suspicions of poisoning, and a murder investigation was soon under way.

On Saturday morning, a policeman came to the Colonial Hotel to inform Henry H. Bliss of his wife's death and that an autopsy was being performed on her body. Henry then crossed the hall to inform his stepdaughter Mary Alice of what he had learned, at least some of

which might have been an unpleasant surprise to her. They went to Evelina's apartment and found it busy with physicians and detectives. Evelina's daughter Florence Bliss and her son Henry E. Bliss learned the news that afternoon when they returned from their out-of-town vacations. A *Herald* reporter noted with surprise how unemotional Florence appeared to be about her mother's death. "I don't know why the newspapers want to make such a scandal of my mother's death," said Florence, "She has had heart failure for some time, and her death was natural." But it hadn't seemed all that natural to Dr. Bullman.

Several police inspectors, Dr. Bullman, the coroner's physician who performed the autopsy, and an expert chemical analyst called in by the coroner were very busy for the next several days. So were reporters for the New York newspapers. The *World* headline on Sunday morning asked "WAS SHE POISONED?" and announced "Mrs. Evelina Bliss Died in Agony after Eating Chowder Sent to Her." The *Tribune* headline was similar, and went on to report that, since the autopsy revealed evidence of poison, the stomach and its contents were being submitted for chemical analysis. Headlines in the *Sun*, *Herald*, and *Times* were less uncertain and omitted the question mark, e.g., the *Times*: "MRS. H. H. BLISS POISONED: She Dies After Eating Clam Chowder and Pie—Said to Have Accused Relatives."

Evelina's funeral and burial were scheduled for Tuesday morning. Early that morning, Captain Thompson of the Thirtieth Precinct arrived at the Colonial Hotel for a brief interview with Mary Alice Fleming. "You read the newspapers," Thompson said to Mary Alice, "and must know that on account of the strange way your mother died, suspicion attaches to you." "I cannot help gossip or newspaper stories," she responded, "I am entirely innocent. My mother was the best friend I had." "Do you propose, Mrs. Fleming, going to the funeral today?" "That is my intention," said Mary Alice. "Then I must inform you that a policeman will accompany you." Outside the hotel, two detectives in plain clothes helped her into a carriage for the short ride to 397 St. Nicholas Avenue.

The funeral service was held at Evelina's home, read by the Reverend John Patey of St. Luke's Episcopal Church. In attendance were Evelina's husband, her son Henry, her daughters Florence and Mary Alice, a few friends, and two policemen. The early newspaper

accounts and the presence of police detectives in the closed quarters of Evelina's apartment intensified and complicated the emotions of family members during the brief service. Evelina's body lay in a black coffin mounted with a silver plate with the simple inscription: "Evelina M. Bliss. Died August 30, 1895." After the service, the pallbearers carefully carried the coffin down the many flights of stairs to the waiting hearse. Newspaper coverage had aroused considerable interest in the neighborhood, and St. Nicholas Avenue was crowded with hundreds of people trying to catch a glimpse of the arrivals for the service and, later, watching the horse-drawn hearse and carriages departing for the burial.

Representatives of various newspapers were among the crowd, and a reporter from the *World* approached Evelina's son Henry Evelyn Bliss on the street after the service. Asked if he thought his half-sister Mary Alice had killed his mother, he replied, "I cannot believe that she could do such a thing. I have asked her if she sent that clam broth to my mother and she said that she did not. The truth will come out though." That evening, the same reporter interviewed Evelina's husband, Henry Hale Bliss, at the Colonial Hotel, and asked him, "Do you know whether or not she sent the clam broth to your wife?" He responded, "I asked her, and she denied that she did." Mary Alice's lawyer John C. Shaw later quoted her to the *Times* as saying, "I did not send any clam chowder to my mother, nor was any clam chowder taken to her by my daughter Gracie." She claimed that she and Gracie and her year-old son had spent the afternoon at Mount Morris Park. Despite Mary Alice's denials, the police believed they had already identified her as the source of the clam chowder.

The funeral cortege traveled to downtown Manhattan and across the East River, on the twelve-year-old Brooklyn Bridge, to Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery. Green-Wood was the largest cemetery in the vicinity of New York, one of the most fashionable, and the burial place of many well-known people, including Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of the telegraph, Horace Greeley, newspaper editor and presidential candidate, and Henry Ward Beecher, prominent liberal preacher whose 1874 adultery trial was the scandal of its day. Evelina was buried in the Davis family plot where both her parents had been buried. Mary Alice shuddered noticeably when the first shovelfuls of earth hit her mother's

coffin, but she quickly retained her composure and stood calmly by her mother's grave until it was filled in. Then she and her police escort returned to the Colonial Hotel, where she was formally taken into custody. Dressed in deep mourning, she was asked to lift her veil during booking at the Harlem Police Court on 121st St. near Third Avenue. There the magistrate read to her the warrant for her arrest:

Upon the information and belief of Captain Thompson of the West 125th street station, Mary Alice A. Fleming is charged with having, on Aug. 30, 1895, sent certain food containing poison to her mother, Evelina M. Bliss, of 397 St. Nicholas Ave., from the eating of which food the said Evelina M. Bliss died on the same day the food was sent to her.

Mary Alice and a police escort took a short carriage ride eastward to Third Avenue, and then the Third Avenue elevated train downtown. They got off at Canal Street and walked to the coroner's office in the Criminal Courts Building on Centre Street. Because she was accused of a capital crime, bail was not a possibility, and Mary Alice was committed to the Tombs, the city's famed and feared prison. She gave her age as twenty-nine, five years less than her actual age. This inaccuracy was duly noted in several newspaper reports. It was also reported that throughout her interview with the police captain, the funeral and burial, her booking at the police court, her appearance before the coroner, and her delivery to her cell in the Tombs, Mary Alice remained outwardly calm, betraying no emotional response to this extraordinary sequence of events.

With an arrest in the case, newspaper coverage intensified. The *Times* (Sept. 4): "MRS FLEMING ARRESTED: Taken into Custody on Returning from Mrs. Bliss's Funeral." The *Tribune*: "MRS. FLEMING IN THE TOMBS: Dr. Bullman Says No Doubt She is Guilty." The *World*: "Mrs. Bliss Was Murdered and Her Daughter Is Charged with the Crime; Mrs. Fleming Attends Her Mother's Funeral Under Police Escort and Is Now in Jail." Evelina's husband seemed to believe that the arrest was justified, telling the *Herald*, "I deeply regret that I am compelled to suspect that my stepdaughter, Mrs. Fleming, sent

the chowder to her mother, and I am forced to believe if any poison was put into it Mrs. Fleming was guilty of it.”

By the time of Evelina’s funeral and burial and Mary Alice’s arrest, the initial chemical analysis by Walter T. Scheele, the chemical expert assigned to the case by the coroner, was not yet complete. However, incomplete information had leaked to the press, and POISONED BY ANTIMONY was the top headline in the *World* of September 4. A few days later, Scheele completed his preliminary analysis and submitted his official report to the coroner, who released it to the press. In the contents of Evelina’s stomach and in the dregs of the clam chowder found in the pitcher, Scheele had indeed found some antimony, number fifty-one in the periodic table of the chemical elements and well known to be poisonous if consumed in sufficiently large quantities. However, he had found more substantial amounts of a chemically-similar element with an even more deadly reputation, element number thirty-three. ARSENIC THAT KILLED announced the *Times* on September 7. More complete reports filed later by Scheele and another analytical chemist hired by the coroner made it clear that the most likely cause of Evelina’s death was not antimony, but arsenic, “the king of poisons.”

Many reporters had clearly done their research in their papers’ archives, because their accounts also included detailed accounts of earlier occasions when Mary Alice had been in the news. These included two breach-of-promise trials that Mary Alice had initiated in the 1880s following the births of her first two illegitimate children. The recounting of all the sensational details of her first breach-of-promise trial was especially extensive in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the leading paper of New York’s neighbor city, since that case had been tried in a Brooklyn court. “THE BLISS POISONING CASE: Accused Alice Fleming Once Made a Sensation in Brooklyn in a Breach of Promise Case” was their headline. An investigative reporter for the *Herald* consulted the New York marriage records, and announced, “I could find no record of the prisoner’s marriage to any person named Fleming.”

The case attracted interest well beyond New York. In the nation’s capital, headlines on page one of the *Washington Post* read, “DETECTIVES AT A FUNERAL: The Chief Mourner Was Arrested at Its Conclusion. Mrs. Alice Fleming Accused of Having Poisoned

Her Mother, Mrs. Bliss, in Order to Secure the Income from the Latter's Estate." Later that month the same paper announced, "New York at the present time has a poison case on its hands which will go down in criminal history. The case has attracted attention in all parts of the country, and is so well known that no extended reference to it is required here." Instead, under the headline "BORGHIAS OF ALL AGES," the *Post* reporter noted, "Poison has been the favorite weapon of the murderess for as many centuries as the world is old," and devoted most of the article to tales of female poisoners of the past. Legends told of the poisoned rose leaves Cleopatra reportedly used against her enemies, and of Lucrezia Borgia's hollow ring from which she deposited poison into the drinks of her guests. Historians doubt these legends, particularly those about Lucrezia, daughter of a pope and a central figure of the notorious Borgia family of Renaissance Italy. They suggest that such stories unfairly tar her by association with her ruthless brother Cesare Borgia, model for Machiavelli's famous book, *The Prince*. However, legends have staying power, and Lucrezia Borgia still remains today a symbol of a female poisoner regardless of her probable innocence of the charge.

The *Washington Post* article also mentioned the notorious Marquise de Brinvilliers of seventeenth-century France. She was accused of poisoning her father and siblings to inherit their estates, as well as attempting to poison her husband. Under torture, she confessed to her crimes, and in 1676 she was beheaded in Paris. During her interrogation, she had claimed that poisoning was common in the upper levels of Parisian society, and her allegations led to the "Affair of the Poisons," in which thirty-six people were sentenced to death for poisoning and hundreds of others were arrested on that charge, including one of the mistresses of King Louis XIV. This article on female poisoners of the past was illustrated with a profile sketch of the newest alleged member of this infamous group, Mary Alice Fleming.

Mary Alice appeared very calm and composed during her arrest and subsequent commitment to the Tombs, but inwardly her thoughts and emotions must have been far from serene. And her stay in New York's infamous prison would give her much time to consider the trajectory of her life that had brought her here. Born into wealth, her early life had been one of privilege, and included an education more

extensive than those received by most young women of her time. By the time she reached maturity, she was an attractive, intelligent, and spirited young woman with a promising future. However, her early adventures with men had put her on a downward social path that now found her in her early thirties, an unmarried mother of three young children and six months pregnant with her fourth. She faced the likelihood, while in prison, of childbirth and prolonged separation from her three small children. On top of all this, she had been arrested for murder, and seemed likely to be put on trial for her life. Whether she would live or die would depend on the actions and decisions of strangers—lawyers, judges, and jurymen. And all aspects of her former life, including the most unflattering, would become fodder for the voracious appetite of the New York press.

Matricide is a particularly heinous crime, and the arrest of Mary Alice in mourning clothes immediately after attending her mother's burial drew special notice from the press. That the allegedly poisonous chowder was delivered to the victim by her ten-year-old granddaughter added extra interest; experience had shown that stories involving children always drew considerable attention, particularly among women readers. There was also a substantial inheritance involved, and Mary Alice was a member of the prominent and socially prestigious Livingston family. Money and New York society were reliable attention getters. On top of all this, Mary Alice was the mother of three illegitimate children and pregnant with a fourth. Scandal piled upon scandal. Although this was not the first time that Mary Alice had drawn the attention of the New York newspapers, her 1896 trial for the murder of her mother was to dominate the news for many weeks in the era of "yellow journalism" when papers focused even more attention than usual on sensational stories. Hundreds of thousands of readers in New York and well beyond would become very familiar with the story of Mary Alice, the clam chowder she sent to her mother, and the death of Evelina Bliss.