

DID ASHTABULA HAVE A LUCRETIA BORGIA?



From left to right the graves of Abigail, Walter, Luther, Arthur, Julia A., Mrs. Rebecca, Alexander M. and Mrs. Eliza McAdams in East Ashtabula cemetery. The first six died mysterious deaths. Alexander was Jeanette McAdams' father; Rebecca her mother, and Eliza her father's second wife, whom he married after Jeanette's flight.

with Mystery of
Deaths That
Years Ago When
Adams Ran Off
Gypsy Band.

ASHTABULA had her controversial homecoming. There were many old residents who returned, and not a few of them who wandered over to Edgewood cemetery, the burying ground at East Ashtabula.

Six graves in a row. There were many who remembered it. They remembered vaguely the tale of old Alexander McAdams. It is all but forgotten by the present generation, but the older ones who returned—they well knew the legend. Once more these older ones wandered to the cemetery, as they used to go arm in arm with their sweethearts, of a Sunday afternoon, and they looked once more upon the McAdams burial lot, with its six graves that they knew the story of, and its two newer ones.

Ashtabula was only a little settlement then, a group of farm houses, a church, blacksmith shops, factories and some stores. There are only a few left now who remember it. They were children playing about the streets then. But they have heard their parents tell the strange story of the McAdams family; they remember how old Alexander McAdams with his wife and nine children came to Ashtabula and cleared away a patch in the pine woods, and built a house with a big fireplace in it, and how he lived much to himself and worked quietly at his patch of land.

One day one of their playmates died; the youngest McAdams child. But they played on after a few days just the same. Then a few years later there were two more deaths in the McAdams family; sudden and horrible for the agony of the victims.

Some relentless fate, no one knew nor could imagine what was hanging over the McAdams family. Soon another was struck down, and terror

was on the whole village. Alexander McAdams, who had come to the new country to hew out a humble existence, his wife who had seen four of her children die as she stood helplessly by, and the little children who stood round and watched the lamps by the sick bed, and then the funeral—they all passed their days in fear and trembling. From sunrise until evening, none knew when his turn would come; nor whether mother, brother, father or sister would be the next to join his kindred in

the silent row of graves over in Edgewood cemetery.

The Daughter Who Wandered Away

There was some hushed gossip that Jeanette McAdams had done away with her brothers and sisters. After the death of her mother she disappeared. It was said that the day before she left she had given her father a letter to post. Out of curiosity, it is said, he opened the letter and found that it outlined plans for doing away with him. Shortly after this she left home.

None knew much of the girl. She had worked in Cleveland and, strangely enough, whenever she visited her parents there was a call for doctors in the night, excited running about and shouting, the neighbor women would rush in to lend their aid, and there would be another funeral. After Jeanette's disappearance the stories of the alleged poisoning were quieted, and children huddled before the fire listened to their elders' telling of the strange deaths of the McAdams children.

There were rumors that at intervals Jeanette had revisited her home. Once it was whispered that she came as a tramp, dressed in men's clothing, wandering about the face of the earth. Another time it was reported that he father had seen her in a gypsy camp. Again came the rumor that Jeanette was a school teacher during the war, and it was late that she had married, and lived in some far away city. The war was over, and on one occasion she had visited her father, and was ordered away.

But the old graves in a row tell the story. They

have been there a long time, one of them since 1848. There are eight in all, though, five children, a father, mother and stepmother. It is in a corner of the East Ashtabula cemetery; one of the oldest corners, in fact, in the cemetery. Around it are quaint old marble headstones, with names on them that are thought old fashioned now.

A gray fungus has overspread the bases of these monuments, but the inscriptions are clear on the white marble slabs. The graves are not sunken, nor grass grown; the grounds are too well groomed for that. Their outlines are but faintly defined; over the graves the grass grows a trifle greener than

elsewhere. The shadows of the tombstones protect that part of the soil from the burning afternoon sun; the rest of the McAdams lot is dull, dead gray. There have been no flowers on these graves for years. Around the tombstones a few shoots of "sheep sorrel" have sprung up; that is all.

In these narrow coils lie the McAdams family. The story of their death is mostly tradition now; all the written record of the story is an old publication, the Lake Shore Magazine, long since out of print. There are the death notices, also, with poetry, in the yellow files of the current newspapers, and more recently part of the story was printed in the local paper, signed by one of the old residents of the village.

Julia Was the First to Die

Jeanette was the oldest of the children. After the family had lived in East Ashtabula nine years she went to Cleveland to work. None remember where she worked, and recollections of the girl herself are vague as they are scarce. It is said that she was wild, and unlike the others. She was engaged to be married to a Cleveland man, according to gossip.

One day she came home for a visit. Julia, a younger sister, was making ready to go to school in the village, where she was to board with a family named Holdridge. That night the family sat around the fireplace. Julia was hemming a handkerchief. The family retired that night as usual, and a few hours later Jeanette called to her mother that "Julia was very sick." Father and mother hurried down stairs, but the girl died before morning, almost before a doctor could be called.

JULIA A.
Daughter of A. and R. McAdams,
Died Feb. 27, 1848,
Aged 14 years.

This is the story told by the first of the graves.

Two years later Jeanette came home to spend the holidays. On New Year's eve the family was once more gathered before the fireplace. Arthur, cutting apples, was lying on a buffalo robe in front of the fire, his dog beside him. Suddenly he became ill, and in an instant was writhing about the floor in convulsions. A physician was called, but the boy died as suddenly as had his older sister.

At that time Abigail was away from home. Walter, one of the younger sons, hitched up the team and brought his sister for the funeral. The white hearse made another trip, and the second chapter in the McAdams story was written in cold marble: "Arthur, son of A. and R. McAdams, died Jan. 1, 1850. Aged 8 years."

The day after the funeral Abigail was helping her mother with the housework, making beds.

"Mother, did you know that Jeanette has a man's suit of clothes in her room," she called. The reference to the suit of clothes is obscure, but it is supposed that Jeanette was in the habit of clothing herself in them and leaving the house by her bedroom window, returning before daybreak unknown to the family. What strange errand she was bent on no one can conjecture.

"Mother, I wish I had not eaten that piece of candy that Jeanette gave me," she exclaimed a few hours later.

There is an uncanny tale that as she said this, she put her hand on the mantel, and that the family saw white blotches on it—a symptom of arsenic poisoning. These were her last words. Before physicians and neighbors could reach the little home back in the pine woods the oldest daughter had died. They dug a third grave, while the earth on the adjoining one was yet fresh. And the third chapter of the story was carved in the simple inscription. And after the funeral Jeanette returned to Cleveland.

The Mysterious Death Comes to Walter

She did not make another visit until about the 10th of August, of the same year. Walter, the fourteen-year-old son, and his father were hauling staves to the dock at the harbor, when, returning home at night, the boy complained of feeling ill. He went upstairs, his sister Jeanette following him. The boy rapidly became worse and crawled down stairs to his mother's room. She was hastily summoned from the bedside of a neighbor of whom

she was taking care, and doctors and neighbors were called.

"He died in great agony," writes Lucy M. Cook, in the Ashtabula Beacon. "My husband helped hold him on the bed. By this time the sight of the gray team speeding toward town brought terror to all the neighborhood, for there were no telephones, and each time a member of the McAdams family was stricken someone would with all speed for Dr. Coleman of East Ashtabula."

Another marble slab was added to the row in the corner of the cemetery.

Jeanette returned to Cleveland, and exactly a month later paid another visit to her parents. This time Luther, who had been playing in the street with some boys, came into the house and complained of not feeling well. His sister cared for him also, but he was seized with convulsions, and the team made another trip, and returned too late.

A few days after this death the whole family went to church, and Jeanette remained at home, preparing the noonday meal. All were taken violently ill after dinner, but none died this time.

About the first of February of the next year, 1851, Jeanette again came home from Cleveland. Her mother was in bed, suffering from a severe cold. The evening after her arrival Jeanette brought her a white powder, telling her that it was some medicine that the doctor had left for her. The mother took the powder, Jeanette went to bed, and the husband, Alexander McAdams, sat by the fire. He soon heard the woman groaning, and hurried to her side, to find her dying. It later appeared that there had been no powder left, according to the story of the doctor.

By this time there was talk of wholesale poisoning. Neighbors were terrified; nothing of the kind had ever fallen upon the community. Five of the children had died, and the mother; only three remained, with the father. They dwelt in terror, each expecting that he would be the next.

A few months later, the exact time is not known, the daughter returned home again. The night of her arrival she gave her father a letter to post. The story as told now is that out of curiosity he opened it, and found to his horror that his doom had been sealed. He was to be the next, the letter told him. Plans for doing away with him were set forth. He returned to the house, terror stricken and, it is said, ordered the girl from home.

The Father Drives Jeanette Away

At this point Jeanette disappeared, save for three glimpses, most of them, however, being no more than merest rumors now.

It is said that she went away, and that the only time her father ever saw her again was with a band of gypsies, which camped along a creek. Seeing that she was recognized she disappeared from the camp.

Another story is that during the civil war the girl, dressed in man's clothes, was a rebel spy in the union camps and hospitals.

Others say that one night a tramp came to the house and begged food. The father, setting out a lunch, is said to have recognized the daughter Jeanette, but what his attitude was no one knows. Some say he again ordered her away.

Again there are those who say that, after many years, the girl returned for a visit, saying that she was married, and lived in a distant state.

With these brief glimpses Jeanette drops out of sight. And there are only a few now who remember these strange happenings back in the pine woods.