

🔍 EVA RABLEN

Date: 1929

Location: Tuttletown, California

Significance: A combination of brilliant reasoning and meticulous forensic analysis produced headlines all across the United States.

By any stretch of the imagination, Carroll Rablen was a considerate husband. Unable to appreciate music himself—a war wound had left him deaf—he willingly ferried his fun-loving young wife Eva to the local square dances in Tuttletown, California, so that she might enjoy herself. For the wounded veteran, this meant silently watching as Eva, attractive and outgoing, reveled in the attentions of her numerous dance partners.

April 29, 1929, was just such an occasion. Rablen remained outside in the car while Eva danced the night away inside the town's schoolhouse. Later on, as promised, Eva took Carroll a tray of coffee and sandwiches, weaving her way cautiously across the tumultuous floor. Near the door, she accidentally bumped into another woman. The dancer laughingly shrugged off Eva's apologies, saying that it was nothing, and the moment was forgotten. Outside, Carroll took the refreshments from his wife. He and Eva exchanged a few words as he ate and drank; then she returned to the hoedown. A few minutes later, the bluegrass fiddles were drowned out by a howling scream. Puzzled dancers ran outside to find Carroll writhing in agony on the floor of his car. Between convulsions he gasped that the coffee had a bitter taste. Before medical help could arrive, Carroll Rablen was dead.

A tearful Eva could offer little in the way of illumination to investigators probing the strange death, other than to dismiss suggestions that her notoriously moody husband might have committed suicide. Most residents of Tuttletown, as well as the medical examiner, believed that Rablen had died from natural causes. His autopsy revealed nothing untoward, and analysis of the organs was also negative. But there was one person who refused to accept these findings.

It was no secret that Steve Rablen had always regarded his daughter-in-law as a gold digger, only after Carroll's money, although some felt that it was more a case of the old man resenting Eva's influence over his boy, a sense that she had stolen him away. Whatever the reason, Rablen continually pestered the police with his suspicions that Eva had poisoned Carroll for a three-thousand-dollar insurance payout. More to get the cantankerous old man off his back than anything else, Sheriff Dampacher reluctantly agreed to once again search the schoolhouse.

Poison Found

After an hour's fruitless rummaging, Dampacher noticed that beneath the steps was a dark space made accessible by a broken plank. He thrust in a speculative arm and a few seconds later withdrew a small bottle. On the label, in bold type, was written "STRYCHNINE." Dampacher read on and saw that it had been prepared by the Bigelow Drug Store in Tuolumne, half a dozen miles away.

When Dampacher called at Bigelow's, drugstore clerk Warren Sahey produced the poison register. There was only one recent transaction involving strychnine, a bottle sold just three days before Rablen's death to a woman calling herself Mrs. Joe Williams. She needed the poison to kill gophers, or so she had said. When Sahey later identified Eva Rablen as "Mrs. Williams," it was enough for Dampacher to arrest the widow and charge her with murder. Eva, screaming that she had been set up by her father-in-law, insisted that she was innocent.

In arresting Eva Rablen, Dampacher was taking a bold step; after all, the medical examiner had not found any poison in the victim's body. Aware that their entire case hinged on this single purchase, the authorities ordered a reexamination of the bodily organs. The original analyst had been a person of little experience; this time prosecutors enlisted the aid of California's premier forensic scientist, Dr. Edward O. Heinrich.

Prosecutors, not wanting to tip their hand, decided to keep Heinrich's intervention under wraps. At this point in his career, the "Wizard of Berkeley," as Heinrich was sometimes called, had achieved the kind of celebrity that gave defense lawyers fits. And Eva's team was already hard at work, rounding up witnesses who would testify to Rablen's manic depressive state and repeated suicide threats. And they had also uncovered a woman ready to provide Eva with an alibi at the time the poison was purchased in Tuolumne.

Besides the stomach contents, Heinrich analyzed the poison bottle, some of Rablen's clothing, and other items, including the dead man's car. After days in the laboratory, he was able to isolate strychnine in the dead man's stomach. Also, there were traces of poison on the car's upholstery and in the cup that Rablen had drunk from. Employing yet another tal-

ent—that of a handwriting expert—Heinrich studied the poison register signed in the name “Mrs. Joe Williams” and compared it with known examples of Eva Rablen’s handwriting. A week’s worth of painstaking comparison convinced him that Eva had penned the false signature.

And then Heinrich produced his masterstroke.

Brilliant Inspiration

He had heard about the crowded dance floor and Eva’s circuitous journey across it. The thought struck him that she might have collided with someone and possibly have spilled coffee upon them. Sheriff Dampacher respected Heinrich’s reputation enough to realize that it was an avenue of inquiry worth pursuing. Everyone who attended the dance was asked to search their memories. One young woman, Alice Shea, distinctly remembered Eva bumping into her, because the collision had resulted in a few drops of coffee being spilled on her dress. Furthermore, she had not yet washed the dress. Would they like to see it? Immediately, the dress was dispatched to Heinrich for examination. The coffee stains showed clear traces of strychnine, irrefutably linking Eva Rablen to the poison.

At a pretrial hearing, local interest ran so high that the judge decided to hold the proceedings in an open-air dance pavilion. Hundreds of spectators craned to hear Eva Rablen plead not guilty. The trial was set for June 10, 1929, and promised to be a spellbinder. From all accounts, Eva’s lawyers were mounting a creditable defense. They had found Carroll Rablen’s first



So many people wanted to attend the trial of Eva Rablen, whom the arrow points to, that it was held outdoors.

wife, and she was ready to confirm her ex-husband's suicidal tendencies. Once, she claimed, he had spoken of throwing himself into the machinery at the lumber mill where he worked.

Just before the trial, news of Heinrich's intervention leaked out, and the word was that the master had solved the case. So pervasive was this rumor that Eva's defense team requested a special court session at which they announced that their client now wished to plead guilty. By this means, Eva Rablen avoided the death penalty and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Conclusion

In a career spanning five decades, Edward Heinrich solved literally hundreds of cases. Today, many of his pronouncements, although often brilliant, would be deemed inadmissible in court, but that is to take nothing away from his triumphs. In stature, he assumed a role somewhat akin to that of Sir Bernard Spilsbury, his transatlantic contemporary. Both were held in awe by the public, and both repeatedly demonstrated their ability to sway juries. In 1953, while still in harness, Heinrich died suddenly at the age of seventy-two.