

“Death of the Dancer”

A shocking mystery grabbed the attention of newspaper readers on Tuesday morning, January 16, 1923. “YOUNG WOMAN’S BODY FOUND ON BEACH,” the *San Diego Union* headlined. “BODY OF PRETTY YOUNG WOMAN CAST UP ON THE WAVES” was the *San Diego Sun*’s lurid story.

A family picnicking on the beach at Torrey Pines had stumbled across a body as it lay partially covered in the sand. Clothed only in silk undergarments, the woman lay parallel to the water’s edge and appeared to have drowned. Several yards down the beach a small suitcase was found with odd clothes. Had this been an accident? Was it possibly suicide, or even murder?



San Diego Union, January 17, 1923.

Police detectives identified the victim as 20-year-old Frieda Mann, a dancer, who had moved to San Diego two years before with her mother, brother and sister. The attractive “butterfly dancer” had performed solo in Los Angeles and locally, and was reportedly under contract with the motion picture company Famous Players.

Mrs. Amelia Mann told police that her daughter, known as “Fritzie,” had left home on Sunday afternoon. Carrying a suitcase, she had last been seen boarding a streetcar on her way to a house party in Del Mar. One hour later, Fritzie called her mother to tell her the party would actually be at a house in La Jolla.

A post mortem examination revealed that Fritzie had indeed drowned. Her lungs were full of water but no sand, which an ocean accident might have indicated. Autopsy surgeon Dr. John J. Shea noted two other significant details. The victim bore a severe bruise above her right eye, which had been inflicted before her death. Shea also noted that the dancer “was in a delicate condition.” The police would follow up the latter revelation by questioning “men who had been friendly with her” in recent months.

One apparently friendly contact was thirty-year-old physician, Dr. Louis L. Jacobs, an Army Captain stationed at Camp Kearny. Upon hearing of Fritzie’s death, Dr. Jacobs voluntarily approached the police and said he knew the girl well. Jacobs claimed Fritzie had been secretly married to a “motion-picture man” and he had tried to help her get an abortion in Los Angeles. Fritzie had backed out of the procedure. The police thanked the doctor for his information, and then arrested him.

That Friday, January 19, San Diego newspapers announced the discovery of a “Love Cottage” in La Jolla. A girl answering the description of Fritzie Mann had been seen in the company of a man believed to be a Hollywood movie director named Rogers Clark. The couple had registered as “Alvin Johnson and wife, L.A.” at the Blue Sea Cottages at the foot of Bon Air Ave. When shown a photograph of Clark, the motel’s manager, Albert E. Kern, told police the image bore “a remarkable resemblance” to the man he had rented a cottage to on Sunday night.

Clark was arrested in Los Angeles and hurriedly brought to San Diego by train. The director admitted knowing Fritzie Mann but claimed he had not seen her for many weeks. After questioning, the police released Clark and announced he had fully accounted for his whereabouts on Sunday, January 14.

With the release of Clark, suspicion returned to Dr. Jacobs, still in custody after his arrest earlier in the week. The police brought Jacobs to the Blue Sea Cottages to confront Albert Kern. The proprietor nervously acknowledged a “resemblance” to the man he had seen accompanying Fritzie Mann.

Jacobs was released on writ of habeas corpus but an indictment soon followed from the County Grand Jury. Held without bail in the county jail, Dr. Jacobs would now stand trial for the alleged murder of Fritzie Mann.

The sensational case drew national attention with newspaper coverage in Chicago and New York City. The *Los Angeles Times* noted that spectators waited for hours to claim a seat in the courtroom. Others carted their own chairs to the courtroom or stood in the aisles jammed with people.



Jacobs and the dancer. *San Diego Union*, Feb.18, 1923

thanked the jurors for their service and then dismissed them. Louis Jacobs folded his hands across his chest and grinned at his attorneys. The smile faded when District Attorney Chester Kempley immediately requested a new trial.

Two months later, it began again. Familiar evidence was displayed and testimony was recounted. But the prosecution “uncorked a sensation” when a nurse who once worked with Dr. Jacobs at Camp Kearny testified that she had seen the doctor driving from La Jolla to the hospital late on the fateful Sunday night. But another prosecution witness backfired badly; Blue Sea Cottages manager Albert Kern declared he was now certain that Dr. Jacobs was *not* the man he had seen with Fritzie Mann.

On Monday morning, July 21, with one day of deliberation, the jury announced a verdict of “not guilty.” After nearly six months in jail, Louis Jacobs, “wearing a smile of relief and elation,” walked from the courtroom a free man. “I want to forget all this terrible business,” the doctor told reporters. “I like to think it has been only a dream.”

Originally published as “1923 Death of Butterfly Dancer Becomes Shocking Mystery,” by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 23, 2011.