

CRIMINAL



Episode 38: Jolly Jane **Air date: March 4, 2016**

Copyright © 2016 Criminal Productions. All rights reserved. This text may not be published online or distributed without written permission. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Diane Ranney: We are at the Jonathan Bourne Public Library in Bourne, Massachusetts, which is on Cape Cod, and I am Diane Ranney. I am the assistant director here at the library.

Phoebe Judge: Everyone must know you because you've been here for so long.

Diane Ranney: Pretty much, yes.

Phoebe Judge: Diane Ranney has been here at this library for 43 years, and she's spent a lot of her career studying one very odd piece of local history.

Diane Ranney: When we were in the old library, which is now the archives, there was a vault, and the vault was opened for the first time after years and years of being closed up. And these death certificates were found.

Phoebe Judge: The death certificates were from 1901. Diane started to look at the certificates more closely and realized that the dead were all related to one another.

Diane Ranney: Well, when someone, when four people die very suddenly in the course of approximately six weeks and they're all in the same family and the same doctor has signed the death certificate, my first inkling was the doctor did it.

Phoebe Judge: The doctor's name was Leonard Latter, and he listed the causes of death as diabetes, heart disease, cerebral apoplexy, and exhaustion. And while he was the doctor in charge of the family, he wasn't the only one there.

Diane Ranney: And then I started reading that at all times, the nurse who was in attendance at all of these deaths was Jolly Jane.

Phoebe Judge: For the last 20 years, Diane Ranney has collected whatever she can find about this nurse, nicknamed "Jolly Jane," a funny, cheerful woman loved all over the state of Massachusetts — who would later be called the "most notorious woman poisoner of modern times."

I'm Phoebe Judge, this is Criminal.

[Music.]

Jolly Jane was the nickname of Jane Toppan. But even that wasn't her real name; she was born Honora Kelley in 1857. Her mother died of tuberculosis, leaving her young kids in the hands of her husband, a tailor who was an alcoholic and, as the story goes, attempted to sew his own eyelids shut.

Diane Ranney: Basically, the father went insane and he was committed. So she lived with her grandmother, she and her two sisters, lived with her grandmother for a while, and then the grandmother basically could not take care of them. She became impoverished, as they say in those days, and eventually she was placed in a home for children who were destitute. But then she was adopted, but not formally, they never signed the formal adoption papers. She was given the name Jane, supposedly after a favorite aunt of the Toppans, and, of course, she took their last name. And she was a very very well liked child. She had friends, she was smart, she got along well with people in school, and seemed to have a really good childhood after the first couple of years.

Phoebe Judge: She graduated from high school in Lowell, Massachusetts, and went on to nursing school.

Diane Ranney: So she went to very prestigious, the Cambridge Nursing School in Boston. She again, was extremely smart. Her professors said, "Wow, this woman really knows what she is doing." But she had an unfortunate habit that she liked to experiment. She felt that she needed to know how her patients would react if they were giving certain dosages of morphine and atropine.

Phoebe Judge: Morphine basically slows you down, makes your pain go away, makes you tired. Atropine does the exact opposite, it wakes you up. They give it to people in cardiac arrest to get their hearts going again.

Diane Ranney: Now, obviously, these people were very ill to begin with, and her conscience, such as it was, probably said, “Well, they are going to die, why don’t I just make it easier?” To my way of thinking, if I were reconstructing how she did it, she would have gone into the room and very carefully and compassionately told the person who may or may not have been conscious, “I am going to help you,” and then given them an injection, and then maybe watched, and said, “Oh, I’m not quite ready to have this happen.” So she would give them an injection of the atropine, bring them back a little, and then say, “Hm, well it’s time,” give them another injection of morphine, and then they would die. And then she would either report it or have someone else discover the death.

Phoebe Judge: Some accounts from the time say that Jane later confessed to enjoying the back and forth between the two drugs, watching someone slip into a near-coma and then suddenly waking them back up. And it wasn’t always injections. She also dissolved the drugs in mineral water and offered them to her patients as health tonics.

Diane Ranney: On the day before graduation, she left the school, so she was never given her formal certificate. So technically she really wasn’t a nurse, as a professional nurse, because she didn’t have the certificate. I mean she had all the training and she was considered an outstanding nurse. She was considered compassionate, she could cheer people up, she could tell stories, and she had a great deal of humor, which is where she got her nickname of Jolly Jane, because if people were very sad she would come to nurse them and they would cheer up. And she was quite, I don’t know, a real dichotomy between what she was doing and how she presented herself.

Phoebe Judge: Will you describe what she looked like?

Diane Ranney: She actually looked like her name. She was very plain, hence Plain Jane. She had a very round face. A little kind of a pockmarks, some pockmarks, probably from acne when she was a child. She wore her hair at the time, it was a style that was not flattering to her. It was pulled up in a big bun kind of on the top of her head toward the back. She always wore black. She was just a very plain person. Very — not very attractive.

Phoebe Judge: Jane began working as a nurse at Mass General in Boston, where she quickly developed such a good reputation that she was able to move into private nursing. This was a step up, more money. And while she was secretly murdering her patients, she didn’t murder all of them.

Diane Ranney: I mean it wasn’t as if every single person that she touched — you know, kind of like Typhoid Mary, she was not that kind. Some people recovered. Now whether it was because

they didn't do anything to her initially to incite her wrath or whether it was because they had stronger constitutions, I don't know.

Phoebe Judge: There are some creepy theories about what exactly she was doing. Was she playing God? Was she experimenting? Did she really believe that her victim was in terrible pain and that she was helping them not suffer? And here's where it gets really wild. By some accounts, she would crawl into bed with her victims as they died and comfort them, kiss them. Some say it gave her a sexual thrill.

Did anyone ever — I mean, is there any record of anyone waking up and saying, "What the hell is going on?" And not being killed, but having the experience of Jane in the bed, or anything like that?

Diane Ranney: There was one recorded incident of that where the person actually awoke, and she said that she was just comforting them. And then quickly got out of the bed, evidently, and said, "Oh we'll just go about our business." So that person was saved, more or less, by waking up. Probably she didn't use enough morphine.

Phoebe Judge: So she wakes up, the victim wakes up and Jane is right there laying next to her.

Diane Ranney: Odd, very odd I imagine.

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: It's so hard to imagine that no one was catching onto her. But the more she worked, the more people loved her. They moved her into their homes to care for their sick relatives.

Diane Ranney: Even if there had been a death in the family, they felt that, oh, she had done the best she possibly could and, you know, when they were so overcome by grief after whoever died — but Jane was there, and she took charge, and she kept things going, and so we'd highly recommend her. There was a woman in Watertown, her name escapes me at the moment, but her family was so thrilled that she was able to be with this woman "until the very bitter end," as the quote says. And I thought, "Yes, it certainly was the bitter end." But she was highly recommended, so she had a lot of people that she was able to bamboozle.

Phoebe Judge: She was able to bamboozle people into hiring her, but she was broke and constantly taking loans from her patients. Some of her money went to rent a vacation house on Cape Cod, just down the road from Diane's library.

Diane Ranney: Yes, that was the Davis house. And she would come every year. So she was paying quite a bit.

Phoebe Judge: The Davis house was owned by Alden Davis and his wife Maddie, who were both in their 70s. Their daughters and grandchildren were often at the house. Jolly Jane fit right in.

Diane Ranney: And they loved her, they absolutely loved her. They thought she was the most wonderful person in the world. She made up games, she would take them to the beach, she would have parties at her little cottage that she rented. So she became a fixture in Cataumet.

Phoebe Judge: The Davis family was used to Jane owing them money, but when she hadn't paid them for an entire year's rent and was prepared to come back again for another summer, Maddie Davis decided to make the trip from Cataumet to Boston to settle up.

Diane Ranney: She owed approximately 500 dollars to Alden Davis. And he was a very strict Cape Codder. He was a businessman. He had not amassed his fortune by letting people not pay their debt. But he was also in his 70s and he was not really in good health. And neither was Mrs. Davis, but she decided that she would go up to Boston and sort of track down Jane before she came to the cottage or requested the cottage for the year. The day before, she actually had a fall. People reported that she was fine. She was also diabetic. They attributed her fall to possibly the diabetes.

She got up, according to witnesses, went to Boston, tracked down Jane, and stayed at her apartment, and developed severe pain. And so Jane called the doctor, he came to the apartment, and the doctor said, "Oh, she needs to have bed rest." So Jane said, "Well, I'll stay with her." And so she stayed with her. Unfortunately, she died the next day.

So when she died, Captain Davis as he was called — captain was simply a title, it wasn't — he wasn't really captain. But he went up to Boston with his daughter, Genevieve, and they were going to bring the body back and Jane said, "Oh, don't worry, I'll make sure I take care of it." So she actually took the seat that had been paid for as the return trip for Maddie Davis, while the body was in the baggage car.

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: Jane managed the body and then organized the funeral. And then she would have left to return to Boston — except one of the Davis daughters, Genevieve, suddenly got sick.

Diane Ranney: So she's taking care of Genevieve, who has always been listed as doing poorly. She had a dyspeptic disposition, is the way they put it. Which, to me, indicates something wrong with her stomach. She suddenly took ill, and of course Jane was asked to stay on, because Jane could take care of things. And then she died.

Phoebe Judge: The cause of death was listed as heart disease. Mr. Davis was so distraught by the sudden deaths of both his wife and daughter that his doctor ordered him to go on bedrest.

Diane Ranney: A mistake. Yes, I will grant you that's definitely a mistake. But in those days, you were ordered to bed when you were distraught. He dies of what is termed apoplexy, which, of course, would be understandable, because if you are overcome with grief and you're 70ish, apoplexy seems to be a good cause. Today we would call it a stroke. And again they had no reason to believe that anything bad was happening. People just said, "Oh my goodness, the poor Davises. They have all that money, they have all that property, and what is it coming to? They have nothing now." So here we are with one daughter left, and that's Mary. Mary Gibbs. Her husband is a sea captain, Captain Paul Gibbs. He is out to sea. He is expecting a big homecoming, a welcome from all the family. Instead, after she lingers for a little while — about a week or maybe a little bit more — she dies.

[Music fades out.]

Phoebe Judge: Mary Gibbs was 30, and the stated cause of her death was "exhaustion." And while Mary's husband may have been away at sea, *his* father was right there in Cataumet, and had been checking in on his daughter-in-law. So when she died — the fourth and final member of the Davis family to die of seemingly natural causes in 6 weeks — he spoke up.

Diane Ranney: He meets his son at the dock when the ship comes in and says, "I think there is something really wrong with the way Mary died." Because he had asked the doctor — this is the father-in-law — he's asked the doctor, "Well, what about the injection that you ordered for Mary? Why did she have to have it?" And the doctor says, "I didn't order any injection, what do you mean injection?" And he said, "I was right there when Jane, Nurse Jane, told me that she was going to give Mary an injection." And the doctor said, "Oh no, I wouldn't have ordered any injection. She was simply, she had had heart trouble, but she was recovering." And, this is the odd part, is that Jane thought she could get away with one more.

Phoebe Judge: Yeah, so the father-in-law says, something is going on here. He asks about the injection. And then what is the next step? Who starts looking into this?

Diane Ranney: The doctor actually started looking into it, because after all, these, all four of these people were his patients. And as I had said before, I would have been very suspicious of the doctor. I guess he was well loved enough that nobody thought anything of it. But the father-in-law and the son had decided that they would ask the state police, a Sergeant Whitney, to come and investigate.

So they had to exhume the body. And when they did, they found the morphine and atropine in her body. And they found a record that she had actually purchased morphine from a Falmouth pharmacy. The person who was asked about it remembered her as being quite genial.

Obviously, it was Jolly Jane. The pharmacist in Wareham said that the order was called in through the telephone, and he couldn't recognize the voice but it definitely was sent to that

address. So she made two purchases of morphine and atropine from two different places within the space of six weeks.

Phoebe Judge: Jane knew that there was going to be an autopsy and left Cape Cod. Instead of going home to Boston, she went to New Hampshire and stayed with friends. The detectives found her and brought her back to Boston, where she met with a shrink — it was called an alienist at the time — and then, Jane confessed.

Diane Ranney: She finally said, “Yes, I did kill all of them, but it was only because I felt so sorry for Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Davis.” And, you know, Mrs. Gibbs had lost her whole family, which is highly ironic because she is the one who had made them lose their whole family. But she said, “You know, the two Davises were, they were older and they were getting on and they were in pain all the time.” Which may or may not have been true, but you still don’t have the right to decide whether or not their pain should end.

Phoebe Judge: The detectives were hoping she would confess to the murder of Mary Gibbs, so they didn’t know what to think when Jane Toppan just kept confessing. She confessed to 31 murders with names and details, even confessing to taking her foster sister out for a picnic of corn beef and salt water taffy and poisoning her with strychnine.

Diane Ranney: So she was actually put on trial at the Barnstable County courthouse. But only for the one murder. That was the murder of Mary Gibbs, her final victim. There weren’t autopsies for anyone else. The trial lasted nine days, and Jane was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and sent to what was then called the Taunton Lunatic Asylum.

[Music.]

And then we have... memories of Jane. We have several newspaper articles. And these are some of the originals. This is a picture of her. It says, “This is Jolly Jane. She wasn’t much fun.” Very interesting. This is a copy which has a picture of her, a sketch actually, that was done while she was on trial. And it’s entitled, “Angel of Death.”

Phoebe Judge: So what do you like about Jane, what attracts you to her? Because she sounds like just a nut job to me. What is it that — why spend all this time thinking about this woman?

Diane Ranney: I don’t really spend all this time thinking about her, I think it comes and goes. When we get questions about her, it sort of reignites my theories of, was she really insane or did she actually — was she a great con-artist?

And I do feel very, very sorry for her victims, obviously. But at the same time I think that if children are not treated right when they’re very young, that this is the kind of thing that can happen. And I try to hold everyone in compassion, so that’s probably — my background is just trying to be compassionate about everything.

And it is also really intriguing. Every time I read another article, there is some little detail that I didn't see before, or there is something that contradicts one of the other articles. And so I like to go back and look at things, like the clerk's report, and see exactly what was listed and when they died and how they died and, so... It is a little strange.

Phoebe Judge: It's a little strange, your compassion for this woman?

Diane Ranney: That, yes, people have told me that. But I also did a reenactment for a series of programs we were doing here in Bourne, at the library. And someone said to me once, "You really have an uncanny ability to get into that woman's skin." And I said, "Trust me, I'm no murder. I'm not a serial killer."

Phoebe Judge: When you say do a reenactment, what did that entail? You did it here, right? What does that entail?

Diane Ranney: It was more like a monologue. I dressed up as Jane and did a monologue about how she felt jilted and why she actually killed people. So I sort of channeled her I guess you might say.

Phoebe Judge: What does that look like, channeling Jane?

Diane Ranney: It is kind of, well let's see if I can do it again.

[As Jane.] You know dear, I really don't understand why everyone is so interested in me. I mean after all I am just a nurse. You know, I had some very dear friends, but well, I had to help them to their reward. You know, it's a little fun sometimes, to see how people react when they have that morphine in them. Not — not really fun of course, I wouldn't want anyone to get the wrong idea, but I don't know why I am here. I don't know why they put me away. I mean after all, it was only 31 people. But it is nice to come and visit me today. You know, sometimes my mind wanders a little, and it might have been more than that. I am not really sure.

Phoebe Judge: That's wonderful, you – that's great. You've embodied Jane. We'll look for your syringes.

Jane Toppan was institutionalized at Taunton State for almost 40 years, and over the course of her hospitalization, she continued to confess to even more murders, telling her doctor, "It would be safe to say that I killed at least 100 from the time I became a nurse until I ended the lives of the Davis family."

She died there at 81 years old, and hospital officials remembered her as a "quiet old lady." In 1902, her case was written up in the journal of the American Medical Association. The piece reads: "It is not flattering to the medical profession that such an individual could have passed so long undetected. It is proof that the most dangerous, morbid tendencies and an absence of moral control can exist with apparent perfect sanity."

[Music.]

Criminal is produced by Lauren Spohrer, and me. Audio mix by Rob Byers. Special thanks to Alice Wilder and Chelsea Korynta.

Julienne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com, where we'll also have a picture of Jolly Jane and the Davis House.

Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collective of the thirteen best podcasts around. Shows like Radio Diaries, 99% Invisible, and Strangers, hosted by Lea Thau. In her latest series, she follows the story of a woman who decided to give a kidney to a complete stranger.

Speaker: I see it more as almost like an obligation. I've been describing it like jury duty. There's 100,000 people out there waiting for kidneys and people dying every day, where if it was just like jury duty, when your number came up you would either get approved or not approved and you would either do it or you wouldn't and it would just be like expected, you know? And when you start talking that way people kind of get defensive and, you know, "Well jury duty, that's way different than kidneys."

Phoebe Judge: Go listen.

Radiotopia from PRX is supported by the Knight Foundation and MailChimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork.

I'm Phoebe Judge, this is Criminal.

Jingle: Radiotopia, from PRX.