



Violet Sharpe



## VIOLET

That same day, detectives from the Newark Police Department set about the routine interviewing of all twenty-nine domestic servants in Mrs. Morrow's employ at Next Day Hill. Betty Gow was an obvious potential suspect in Schwarzkopf's mind; she had both knowledge of the baby's whereabouts and direct access to him. She had also worked in Detroit, where a mobster called Scotty Gow operated, sometimes dabbling in kidnapping for profit. But no connection could be established between him and Betty, and all of her responses to investigators seemed genuine and appropriate.

The New Jersey State Police also had the Hartford, Connecticut, department pick up Gow's boyfriend Red Johnson for questioning. In addition to having knowledge of the child's whereabouts on March 1, he also drove a green Chrysler coupe, and one local resident had reported a green automobile in the vicinity of the Lindbergh house. Close to four hundred green cars had already been checked out, but when detectives examined Johnson's Chrysler, they found an empty milk bottle in the rumble seat. Johnson explained forthrightly that he drank a lot of milk and tossed the containers in the backseat while he was driving. Police held him for more than a week, but could never shake his story, and nothing in his background suggested he could be involved with the crime. Ulti-

mately, the investigation of Johnson led nowhere, and two weeks after the kidnapping, Schwarzkopf made a public statement exonerating Johnson. Unfortunately for him, however, he turned out to be an illegal alien, and Schwarzkopf was ultimately able to dispense with him completely by turning him over to the immigration service.

As a group, the Morrow and Lindbergh servants were cooperative and matter-of-fact in their responses, with one surprise exception.

Violet Sharpe, twenty-eight years of age, was a maid who had left her rural village in Bradfield, England, in 1929 for Toronto, where she worked for nine months before moving to New York City to look for a better position. Shortly after registering with an employment agency, she was hired to work for the Morrows. Her sister Emily worked for Constance Chilton, who was the partner of Anne Lindbergh's sister Elizabeth in a private school. Photographs show Violet to be plain but pleasant-looking, slightly on the heavy side with short dark hair and large brown eyes. From all accounts, she was friendly, a good worker, and liked by everyone on the staff. She was thought to be romantically involved with Septimus Banks, the butler and head of the Next Day Hill household staff. Banks had previously served as butler to British aristocracy and to industrialist Andrew Carnegie. The other servants believed that someday Violet and Septimus would get married. The only thing that might stand in their way was the butler's alcoholism, a problem that had gotten him fired several times, but each time Mrs. Morrow had relented and welcomed him back. Violet got him to promise to stay off the bottle for a year.

On the day of the kidnapping, Violet had been the one who had received Anne's telephone call to Next Day Hill asking for Betty Gow. Before Betty left, she told Violet the baby was sick, so instead of the Lindberghs coming back here, she'd be going there.

When they spoke to Violet, the detectives were expecting another routine interview, but it didn't go exactly that way. She seemed nervous and agitated, and in accounting for her whereabouts on March 1, she told a convoluted story that didn't seem to go anywhere. At around 8 P.M., she had gotten a call from a man she'd met the previous Sunday while she was walking with her sister Emily in Englewood. A man drove by and waved; she assumed she knew him so she waved back. He stopped and offered them a ride home. She didn't know him, as it turned out, but he seemed friendly and said he would call her to take her out—this despite the fact that she had an understanding with Septimus Banks.

Violet and this man went out together with another couple on the evening of March 1. The four of them went to a movie. After the movie,

he drove her back to Next Day Hill, walked her to the servants' entrance, and they said good-night. She agreed to see him again on March 6, but then broke the date.

So who was this man? What was his name? Violet didn't remember. What about the other couple? She couldn't recall their names, either.

What movie did they see? She didn't remember. Well, then, what was it about? Nothing came to her. What was the name of the theater? It was in Englewood, but she didn't know the name.

The detectives told her they knew this was trying and that she must be nervous. She snapped back that she wasn't nervous, but they had no business prying into her private life. They asked her to tell them *anything* else about her actions or whereabouts on the first of March, but she had nothing else to say.

While she was being interviewed, other officers went through Violet's room. While no clues or direct evidence of anything was found, a deposit book from a New York City bank indicated a balance of around \$1,600. Considering that this was in the midst of the Depression, that Violet's salary was \$100 a month, that she had been working for the Morricks less than two years, and that she was regularly sending money home to her family in England, this sum called attention to itself. As she had no room or board expenses, it was technically possible for her to have saved so much if she was extremely frugal. But together with the hostility and evasiveness of the interview, it made police look at her far more closely than they would have if she'd reacted to their inquiries as the other servants had.

On April 13, Harry Walsh, an inspector with the Jersey City Police Department on loan to the state police and a personal friend of Schwarzkopf's, went to interview Violet Sharpe at Next Day Hill. It was the first time police had questioned her since Newark police officers had conducted their routine questioning of all the servants on March 10. With full knowledge of her edginess and evasiveness during the previous interview, Walsh was careful to be cordial and nonthreatening. Still, Violet was no more relaxed or comfortable. This time she said she now remembered that she hadn't gone to the movies on March 1, which

would account for why she couldn't remember the name of the film, who was in it, anything about the story or the theater where it was showing. In fact, she said, she and her date and the other couple had gone to a roadside restaurant called the Peanut Grill, about an hour's drive from Englewood. Since the last interview, she had recalled that her date's name was Ernie, because he had called the Morrow house. Ernie was in his midtwenties, tall and thin with light hair. There was passing conversation regarding the Lindbergh baby, but nothing more than pleasantries. That was still all the information she could provide.

Walsh wasn't any more satisfied with Violet Sharpe's responses than the Newark police had been. He discussed the matter with Captain John Lamb of the state police. Violet's story just didn't ring true. She was practically engaged to Septimus Banks, she was very proper and grateful for her job in the midst of this crippling depression, and yet she would risk scandalizing her employer by going to a roadside hangout and probable speakeasy with a guy whose last name she didn't even know? Then there was another troubling detail: on April 6, Violet's sister Emily had left the country for home without informing the police. She had applied for her return visa to England on March 1, the day of the kidnapping.

### VIOLET REVISITED

On the investigative side, Inspector Harry Walsh believed the kidnapping must have been an inside job. Whoever took the child not only knew the precise location of the nursery, he also knew that the Lindberghs had not returned to Englewood after the weekend. The first piece of knowledge might be explained by publicity about the house, but the Lindberghs themselves didn't know they were staying on in Hopewell until essentially the last minute.

The most suspicious of those with established knowledge, Walsh felt, was Violet Sharpe, and Schwarzkopf was anxious to follow up with her. But on Monday, May 9, she had come down with acute tonsillitis and needed to be hospitalized. While she was in the hospital recovering from surgery, Charlie's remains were found. The day after Lindbergh identified his son and had the body cremated, Violet checked herself out of the hospital against doctor's advice. Schwarzkopf waited a week, then sent the state police surgeon, Dr. Leo Haggerty, to Next Day Hill to examine her and determine if she was up to renewed questioning. Haggerty and a local physician, Dr. Harry D. Williams, found her still weak and advised against proceeding. Nonetheless, Walsh came to interview her on the evening of Monday, May 23. He was accompanied by Schwarzkopf and Lieutenant Arthur Keaton. Lindbergh was there, too.

With her employer present, Sharpe was more docile and cooperative than she had been in previous encounters with the police, but her story was still full of holes and contradictions. For example, she couldn't explain why she had first mentioned a movie and then changed her story to a restaurant. She couldn't even explain why she'd agreed to go out with Ernie since she never went out with people she hardly knew. And it now came out that her mysterious date Ernie had called about an hour and a half *after* Violet learned that Betty Gow was going to Hopewell instead of Charlie and his parents returning to Next Day Hill.

Walsh returned for another round with Sharpe on Thursday, June 9. He had a theory that a cheap crook and former taxi company operator named Ernest Brinkert from White Plains, New York, may have been the Ernie whose last name she couldn't recall. When they'd searched her room back in March, they'd found six of Brinkert's business cards. Violet looked even weaker and more sickly than when she'd gotten out of the hospital.

Walsh showed her a mug shot of Brinkert and asked if he had been her date on March 1.

"That's the man," she confirmed.

Then how come she didn't know his last name since she'd had his cards in her room? She knew nothing about the cards.

She was growing hysterical. A doctor was called in. Walsh agreed to suspend the interview, but said he wanted to resume the following day at his office. Laura Hughes, Mrs. Morrow's secretary, was present to record the interview. When Violet left the room, she flashed Hughes what has been described as a sly smile, then gave her a wink. Walsh and the doctor were unaware of this.

That night, Sharpe again became hysterical, this time in the presence of Betty Gow and other servants, swearing the police would not take her away and that she would answer no more questions. The next morning, Walsh phoned the estate to let Violet know a state police car would be by to bring her in for another interview.

Before the car arrived, Violet Sharpe was dead. She had mixed cyanide chloride, a powdered silver polish, with water, drunk it, come downstairs, and collapsed in the pantry.

