

The Head in the Jar: The Chilling Story of Diogo Alves

If you were to visit the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Lisbon in Portugal today, you would find something that belongs in a horror movie. Sitting on a shelf, preserved in a glass jar filled with a yellowing liquid, is a human head. It is not a model or a fake prop. It is the actual head of a man who died over 180 years ago. His eyes are open, staring blankly through the glass, and his expression is frozen in time. This head belonged to Diogo Alves, a man known as Portugal's first and most deadly serial killer. His story is one of poverty, greed, brutality, and a scientific curiosity that has kept his face visible to the world long after his death. This is the true story of the man behind the face in the jar.

Early Life: A Beginning in Poverty

The story of Diogo Alves begins not in Portugal, but in Spain. He was born in 1810 in a small town in Galicia. His family was very poor, and life was a constant struggle for survival. Like many young boys from poor families during that era, Diogo was expected to work from a young age to support himself.

When he was around 13 or 14 years old, his parents sent him away to Lisbon, the capital city of Portugal. Lisbon was a bustling city, a place where people believed they could find work and make a fortune. It was the land of opportunity for a young boy with nothing in his pockets. However, the reality of the big city was far harsher than Diogo had imagined.

Upon arriving in Lisbon, Diogo tried to find honest work. He was young and uneducated, which meant his options were limited. He worked various low-paying jobs, serving as a servant and doing heavy labor. Despite his efforts, he could barely make enough money to feed himself. He lived hand-to-mouth, watching others in the city live lives of luxury while he scrapped for crumbs.

It was during this difficult time that Diogo began to associate with the wrong crowd. He met people who did not work hard for their money but instead took it from others. He saw that these small-time criminals, thieves, and con artists lived much more comfortable lives than he did. They didn't toil under the hot sun for pennies; they stole what they wanted and lived freely.

Diogo looked at them and thought, "Why should I work so hard for nothing when I can take what I need?" This thought marked the beginning of his descent into darkness. He started small, engaging in petty theft and robbery. If he found someone walking alone, he would intimidate them and take their money. For a while, this was enough. He would steal, spend the money on a comfortable life for a few days, and then steal again when the money ran out. But soon, simple robbery wasn't enough. The greed in his heart grew, and he began to crave bigger scores.

The Aqueduct of Death

In the 19th century, Lisbon was dominated by a massive structure known as the Aqueduto das Águas Livres (Aqueduct of the Free Waters). This architectural marvel was built to transport water into the city. It was a gigantic bridge, stretching about one kilometer in length and standing at a terrifying height of 213 feet (approximately 65 meters). To put that in perspective, it is only slightly shorter than the famous Qutub Minar in India.

The aqueduct wasn't just a water channel; it also served as a bridge for people entering and leaving the city. It was a popular route for local farmers. Every day, farmers from the surrounding countryside would walk across the aqueduct into Lisbon to sell their fruits, vegetables, and grains. By evening, they would return home across the same bridge, their pockets full of the money they had earned from their sales.

Diogo Alves, with his criminal mind now fully developed, saw a unique opportunity in this bridge. He realized that these farmers were perfect targets. They were carrying cash, they were tired from a long day's work, and most importantly, they had to cross the high, narrow bridge to get home.

Diogo began to stalk the aqueduct. He observed the patterns of the people crossing it. He noticed that while farmers often walked in groups during the day, the numbers dwindled as the sun went down. Late at night, stragglers would cross the bridge alone, eager to get home to their families. These lonely figures became Diogo's prey. His method was brutal and simple. He would hide in the shadows of the aqueduct, waiting patiently for a solitary farmer to pass. When the victim was close enough, Diogo would strike. He would jump out, threaten or attack the farmer, and rob them of every coin they had earned that day.

But Diogo didn't just rob them. He knew that if he let them go, they would go to the police. They would describe his face, and he would be caught. To ensure his silence, Diogo did something unthinkable. After taking their money, he would push his victims off the edge of the aqueduct.

Falling from a height of 213 feet into the valley below meant certain death. There was no chance of survival. Diogo would watch them fall, and then simply walk away, his pockets full of blood money.

The "Suicide" Epidemic

For months, bodies began to appear in the valley beneath the Aqueduct of the Free Waters. The local police were baffled, but they came to a tragic conclusion. At that time, Portugal was going through an economic crisis. Many people were struggling to make ends meet, and poverty was widespread.

When the police found the broken bodies of farmers at the bottom of the bridge, they assumed that these poor souls had committed suicide. They believed that the farmers, overwhelmed by debt and the hardships of life, had chosen to end their lives by jumping off the famous bridge.

Because the police labeled these deaths as suicides, they did not investigate further. They didn't look for a killer. They didn't look for knife wounds or signs of struggle. They simply saw a body and closed the case. This lack of investigation gave Diogo Alves the ultimate cover. He was literally getting away with murder, over and over again.

It is estimated that Diogo Alves killed approximately 70 people on that aqueduct. For three years, he operated in the shadows, turning the bridge into a graveyard. He would kill, spend the money in the city on fine clothes, food, and entertainment, and when his funds ran dry, he would return to the bridge for another victim.

However, as the number of bodies grew, the public began to get scared. Families of the missing farmers knew that their loved ones were not suicidal. They were hardworking men returning home with money. Why would a man with a pocket full of earnings jump off a bridge? The logic didn't hold up. The families went to the police, pleading for an investigation, but their cries fell on deaf ears—initially. Eventually, the sheer number of deaths became too high to ignore. The "suicides" were happening too frequently. Pressure mounted on the authorities. In response,

the government decided to close the aqueduct bridge to pedestrian traffic. They set up barriers and guards, effectively cutting off Diogo's hunting ground.

The Gang Leader

With the aqueduct closed, Diogo's easy source of income vanished. But he was not ready to give up his criminal lifestyle. He had tasted the easy life, and he wasn't going back to hard labor. Diogo realized that he could no longer work alone. To target bigger prizes, he needed help.

He began to recruit a gang. He found other low-level criminals, men who were desperate and devoid of morals. He gathered them together and formed a crew. Diogo was the undisputed leader; he was the brains, and they were the muscle. He provided them with weapons and a plan.

Diogo shifted his focus from poor farmers to the wealthy elite of Lisbon. He began targeting the grand houses of the rich. His new strategy was methodical and ruthless. He would spend days scouting a target house. He would learn the routines of the family, find out when the men were away, and identify the best entry points. Once he had all the information, his gang would strike. They would break into the house, terrorize the occupants, and steal everything of value—jewelry, silver, cash, and expensive goods.

But the most terrifying part of Diogo's new strategy remained the same: no witnesses. Just as he had thrown farmers off the bridge to silence them, he now murdered entire families in their homes. He believed that a dead witness could tell no tales. After looting a house, Diogo and his gang would brutally kill everyone inside, ensuring that no one was left alive to call the police or identify them.

For years, this gang terrorized Lisbon. The police were helpless. They would arrive at a crime scene to find a house stripped of valuables and filled with bodies. By the time the bodies were discovered, Diogo and his gang were long gone, often hiding out in safe houses outside the city or blending into the chaotic streets of Lisbon.

The Final Mistake

Diogo Alves seemed unstoppable, but like many criminals, he eventually made a mistake. His downfall came when he targeted the home of a prominent doctor named Dr. Pedro Andrade.

Dr. Andrade was a well-known and wealthy figure in Lisbon. Diogo decided that the doctor's house would be their next target. He performed his usual reconnaissance

and waited for the right moment. One day, he learned that Dr. Andrade was out of town. However, the house was not empty. Inside were the doctor's sister-in-law (his brother's widow), her two daughters, and the doctor's young son.

Diogo and his gang broke into the house, expecting an easy robbery. They rounded up the terrified family members and began to loot the property. The family tried to resist or escape, but they were brutally beaten. True to his nature, Diogo decided that they all had to die. He and his gang murdered the four people inside the house with knives.

However, this time, luck was not on Diogo's side. The doctor was a very popular man, and his house was in a busy area. People were constantly coming and going. Shortly after the gang had killed the family and was preparing to leave, a neighbor stopped by the house for a visit.

The neighbor realized something was wrong. Perhaps they heard a scream, or saw a suspicious figure. They immediately alerted the police. Unlike the aqueduct murders, which happened in isolated darkness, this crime happened in the heart of the city.

The police response was swift.

Authorities locked down the area. They set up checkpoints and surrounded the neighborhood. Diogo and his gang tried to slip away, but the net was too tight. They were intercepted by the police.

When they were caught, the gang members were found with stolen goods and weapons. Under intense interrogation, the loyalty of the gang crumbled. They confessed to their crimes and pointed the finger at their leader, Diogo Alves.

The Confession and Trial

Diogo Alves was arrested and brought to justice. The police began to dig into his past. They connected the dots between the current gang robberies and the unsolved "suicides" at the aqueduct from years prior.

Initially, Diogo tried to deny the charges. But as the evidence mounted and his own gang testified against him, he realized the game was over. In a shocking turn of events, he confessed. He admitted to the murders in the doctor's house, and then, he began to talk about the bridge.

He told the police that he had lost count of how many people he had killed. He estimated the number to be around 70. The revelation shocked the city of Lisbon.

The people realized that the "suicide epidemic" had actually been the work of a single monster.

The trial was a sensation. The public was outraged and terrified. They demanded the harshest punishment possible. In February 1841, the court reached its verdict. Diogo Alves was sentenced to death by hanging.

The Execution and the Request

On February 19, 1841, Diogo Alves was led to the gallows. A massive crowd gathered to watch the execution. People wanted to see the end of the man who had terrorized their city for so long. Diogo was hanged, ending his reign of terror.

But the story did not end with his death.

At the time, the scientific community in Portugal was fascinated by a field of study called Phrenology. Phrenologists believed that the shape of a person's skull could determine their character and mental traits. They thought that by studying the bumps and shape of a criminal's head, they could understand why they committed evil acts. They wanted to know what made a serial killer's brain different from a normal person's.

A group of doctors and scientists from the Medical School of Lisbon made a strange request to the court. They asked for permission to take Diogo Alves's head after his execution. They wanted to dissect it, study his brain, and preserve his skull for research.

The court agreed.

The Head That Still Watches

Immediately after Diogo was hanged, his head was surgically removed from his body. The scientists took it to their laboratory. However, instead of just keeping the skull, they decided to preserve the entire head.

They placed the head in a glass jar filled with a solution of formaldehyde and other preserving chemicals. This process was remarkably successful. It didn't just keep the bone; it preserved the skin, the hair, the facial features, and even the eyes.

The scientists studied the head, looking for the physical signs of "evil" in his skull shape. Whether they found any answers is unknown, and phrenology was later debunked as a pseudoscience. But the head remained.

Over the decades, the jar sat on the shelf. The liquid turned yellow with age, but the face of Diogo Alves remained intact. His hair is still dark, his lips are pressed together, and his eyes are wide open, staring out at the world with a chilling calmness.

Conclusion

Today, almost two centuries later, Diogo Alves is still in Lisbon. He resides in the anatomical theater of the University of Lisbon's Faculty of Medicine. He has become one of the most macabre tourist attractions in the world. Students passing by the jar can look directly into the face of a man who murdered 70 people.

The story of Diogo Alves serves as a dark chapter in Portugal's history. It is a reminder of a time when poverty drove men to madness, and when a lack of forensic science allowed a monster to hide in plain sight.

While his body is long gone, buried and forgotten, his head remains a prisoner in a glass cell. It stands as a silent witness to his crimes, a gruesome trophy of justice, and a haunting reminder of the darkness that can exist within the human mind. For Diogo Alves, there was no rest in peace—only a permanent, silent stare from behind the glass, watching the world go by for eternity.