

Murder at MOCKING HOUSE

BY WALTER C. BROWN

SYNOPSIS: The gun that killed one of the two men found murdered in Pierre Dufresne's house is still about the place, although Sergeant Harper has not been able to find it. He has found a wet piece of straw, however, which seems to have a connection with the mystery. Now he has located the customer who sold a disguise to one of the murdered men, so that he might resemble Dufresne.

Chapter 25

CRANK LETTERS

"THIS man came in with a picture," Pagliotti added, "a clipping from a newspaper, showing a man with a beard. He said it was a friend of his and that he wanted to make himself up like him as a joke. We studied over the picture and I myself trimmed the beard and mustache to match as so wished."

"Was there a name printed under the clipping? Would you recognize the picture again?"

Pagliotti shrugged his regrets. "I do not remember. I would have forgotten all, except for the clipping."

Harper pondered a moment. "Can you recall anything else about this man? Was he well-dressed? Did he come in an automobile? Was his manner nervous or secretive?"

"There was nothing out of the way about his manner. The other questions I cannot answer."

The detective took a long pull on his pipe. "One more question, Mr. Pagliotti. You know the man who bought that disguise from you has been killed. It has been suggested that he was crazy—a dangerous man. What do you say to that?"

Pagliotti's answer was immediate, explosive. "Oh, no, no, I do not believe it. Not that man."

Harper smiled. "I'm inclined to agree with you. Thank you very much. Your information should be helpful to us."

The Italian bowed politely, shook hands, and departed with the alert Mr. Harris, leaving Harper with a new and puzzling addition to his collection of data concerning this mysterious affair. The detective began to look through the packet of crank letters which Dufresne had turned over to the police.

There were eight of them in all, the earliest postmarked November 9th, a little more than five weeks after the purchase of the disguise. What had the masquerader been doing those five weeks? Why had such a long interval elapsed before his alleged letters began bombarding his intended victim? Dufresne had not even been back in the city from his summer vacation when this man had appeared at Pagliotti's.

If this nameless man had really intended to kill Dufresne, why had he not done so without all this fanfare of threats and hard language? His course had certainly been that of the cowardly "crank," not that of the determined killer.

The butler appeared. "Mrs. Croyden thought you might like a bite of lunch, sir. It can be served in here, so that it will not interrupt your work. Is there anything special you would like?"

"That's fine, Andrews. Anything you happen to be serving will be quite all right. Thank Mrs. Croyden for me, please."

"It will be ready in half an hour, sir."

"Fine. In the meantime, will you ask Mrs. Whitmore to come here?"

MRS. WHITMORE took at least ten minutes to make her appearance. The detective wondered what the servants were saying about the murders, for he knew that in the sanctity of their own quarters every tongue would be wagging unrestrainedly. A great deal of the talk would be mere idle gossip and conjecture, but mixed with this must necessarily be many items of first-hand knowledge that would be invaluable to him, could he but hear them.

When Mrs. Whitmore did make her appearance, her attitude and the expression of her face left no doubt as to her personal stand. The beligerent gleam in her eye, the twist of her tightly shut lips promised little aid and no sustenance for the police processes.

"Mrs. Whitmore, I have some questions to ask. As all of you now know, there was a double murder here last night. To withhold information of any kind is a serious matter. In a case like this it can mean—prison. I want you and all the others to understand that clearly."

Harper paused, feeling that this prologue was wasted on the determined woman. Mrs. Whitmore nodded curtly. "I understand that, but I didn't have anything to do with it and I don't know anything about it," she answered haughtily.

"Of course not. Don't misunderstand my purpose in sending for you. Let us start a little way back.

"As I understand it, you and Mr. Whitmore were left in sole charge of this house while Mr. and Mrs. Dufresne went to their summer home at Moose Head Lodge?"

"Yes, sir."

"The Dufresnes left early in July and did not return until late October?"

"That's right."

"During all the time of their absence, there were no disturbances, no attempted burglaries, no prowlers at night, nor suspicious characters seen in the grounds?"

"No."

"Did you have any visitors of your own, relatives, or friends?"

"We did not."

"The house was never left unoccupied, then, even for a day?"

"Never." The housekeeper was rapping out her staccato replies as quickly as the detective fired his questions.

"Which rooms did you occupy?"

"Our usual ones—the double bedroom on the third floor, front."

"Oh, I thought your quarters were over the garage?"

"Those are only temporary."

HARPER struck off on a new line. "Did you know Officer Hamill, the policeman who was killed?"

"Only by sight. I remember seeing him about the neighborhood. I didn't know his name."

"Did he ever stop to talk?"

"John, my husband, talked to him several times over the fence in the evenings. He never came into the grounds, that I saw."

"How did you know when the house was to be opened again?"

"Mr. Dufresne sent me a telegram the day they started home. All the preparation needed was to replenish the food supply and notify the maid."

"Oh, there was a maid? What became of her?"

"She left."

"Discharged?"

"No, she left of her own accord."

"What reason did she give? Had she been with the Dufresnes long?"

"About a year and a half. I didn't ask her reasons for leaving. She gave Mrs. Dufresne the usual two weeks' notice." Mrs. Whitmore's tone made it plain that she had not been overly friendly with the maid.

"What was her name?"

"Ellen Decker."

"Do you have her present address?"

"I do not. I believe she has relatives somewhere in the city, but I'm not sure. Mrs. Dufresne would know."

"Surely you have some idea as to why she left, Mrs. Whitmore? It seems very unusual that she should wait all summer to resume her duties here in the fall and then leave after a few weeks. Surely she had some explanation to make?"

"Ellen was always close-mouthed and stand-offish," the housekeeper replied. "She never made friends with any one."

"Why wasn't she replaced?"

"By that time the re-decorating had been decided upon and started. Mr. and Mrs. Dufresne went to the Austerlitz. There was no need for a maid until the house was opened again."

"I understand Mrs. Dufresne directed the changes. I suppose she was here a great deal while the work was going on?"

"Oh, yes, she was in and out all the time, consulting about this and that. But Mrs. Croyden helped a lot with it, too."

"Did Mr. Dufresne come out often?"

"Perhaps twice a week, to see how things were going. He left all the decisions to Mrs. Dufresne, though."

"Well, that gives me a pretty clear idea of how things stood over the summer but I need a few more details about this re-decorating. It seems to have been a thorough undertaking. Was the whole thing handled by one firm or were the various jobs given out to different firms?"

"No. Johnson & Carew handled everything, the painting, papering, upholstery, even the outside painting."

"Then the only workmen who were in this house were in their employ?"

"Yes. There was quite a lot of them, working at various times. Perhaps a dozen altogether."

"They were under supervision all the time?"

"Yes, indeed. A Mr. Holliday had charge of the whole job. He was up here every day."

"What were the working hours?"

"From half-past eight to four o'clock."

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Tomorrow, Harper gives Mrs. Whitmore some startling information.

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