

It's Death, My Darling!

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG
(AP Newsfeature)

Chapter 31
We had barely finished locking up the house for the night—insulating, this time, the outside opening to the woodbox, which I attended to myself—when Uncle Bountiful rushed up upon the gallery shouting that the stables were burning!

Cousin Jeff and Lewis Haye rushed out of the house at once, while Bobby and Pick and I followed more slowly.

For the next fifteen minutes or so we just stood there with that desperately helpless feeling you get when you're forced to look on at wanton destruction, knowing that you can do nothing about it.

All of a sudden a thought exploded in my head with violence. The fire had drawn all of us away from the house—all, that is, except Aunt Delphine. And Aunt Delphine had just announced that evening that she knew something about the murders, and wanted to tell it to the sheriff!

"Oh, Heaven! It's all been a trick to get us away!" I cried. "Aunt Delphine! She's back there alone!" I flung over my shoulder as I turned and started racing back toward the house.

I found the front door standing half open when I reached it, and I couldn't remember whether we had left it that way or not.

"Aunt Delphine!" I called, then held my breath.

To my infinite relief, her voice answered me.

"Peter! It's you cherie? Come and stay with me."

Then I felt her reach up and tug at my sleeve for me to bend closer.

"Here's where she whispered quickly. 'He's hiding over there in the closet.'"

"Who, Aunt Delphine?" I asked. She breathed a single word.

Only her poor, misguided imagination again! I started to draw a sigh of relief, only to have it turn into a gasp midway. She hadn't said what we had all thought she had been saying ever since Lee's death; she had said...

Too late I heard the creak of a board directly behind me. I gripped the wrist of the hand about my throat and pulled downward and outward with all my strength.

That gave me just enough room for a nice, backward kick. My lungs were beginning to feel as though objects were being my eyes, and while objects swam before my eyes, two Aunt Delphines sprang out of

two beds and flung themselves at my assailant. But he flung them both aside with one sweep of his arm; and they crumpled back upon the bed, where they merged and became one again.

But to do it, he had been obliged to remove his hand for an instant from my mouth. That was all I needed. I let the breath out of my tortured lungs in a yell that would have done credit to an air raid siren during the war.

"You little hellion!" the man snarled, and tried to clasp the hand back over my mouth. But I managed to catch it side on, and I brought my teeth together with a force that made my jaws ache. The man let out a yell that ran a good second to my own, and let go of my throat. Then his clinched fist struck the side of my head with a force that made me see stars, but I hung on. I closed my eyes and prepared to go down fighting—or biting, to be more exact. And then at the final second, help arrived.

"Put up your hands," Pick's voice commanded from the doorway. "I've closed my eyes and prepared to go down fighting—or biting, to be more exact. And then at the final second, help arrived."

"Don't be a fool Pick," he said sharply. "There's been a mistake. If you'll put that gun down, I'll explain."

"You're right," Pick said grimly. "There has been a mistake, and you're right the way it is, and you can do your explaining to the sheriff. Bobby's downstairs phoning for him now."

Pick stepped inside the room and keeping well out of his reach, motioned for him to precede her back into the hall.

As we reached the head of the stairs, Bobby came out of the room that had been Colonel Dumont's office and into the lower hall.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Not—not—"

For one split second, Pick's attention was diverted to Bobby. Our prisoner realized it. With what seemed to be a single leap, he was down the stairs and disappearing through the open door of the smaller drawing room.

"Where did he get to?" Bobby demanded blankly.

"He got away," Pick answered. Her voice sounded bitter with regret.

"No, he didn't!" I cried, and leaped upon the top of the woodbox, perching there feet and all. "He tried to get out this way the same as he did last night after he'd killed Lee. But I snapped the padlock on the other side when we locked up. We've got him."

As if in confirmation, the lid of the woodbox gave a convulsive heave beneath me, but I managed to stay put. A look of grim satisfaction leaped into Pick's eyes. She turned to Bobby.

"Run down to the stables and call some of the boys," she directed. "Peter and I will hold him here till you get back."

Suddenly the front door was thrown violently open, and we heard Beau's voice in the hall.

"What's going on here? When I reached New Orleans and found that Dede and Henri hadn't sent for me—"

"Oh, Beau!" Pick broke in. Her voice was tremulous with relief. "He tried to kill Aunt Delphine and Peter tonight, and—"

"Mille tonnerres!" That was Amedee.

"Peter!" he exclaimed in amazement. "What are you doing there?"

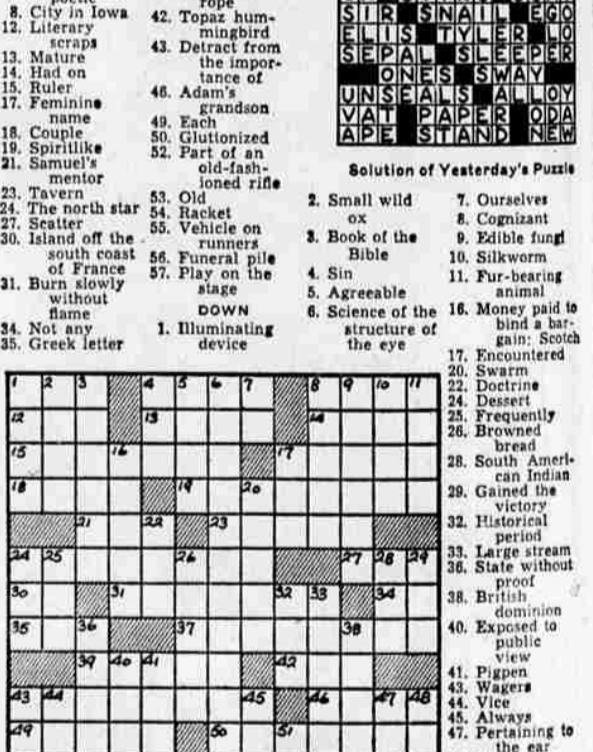
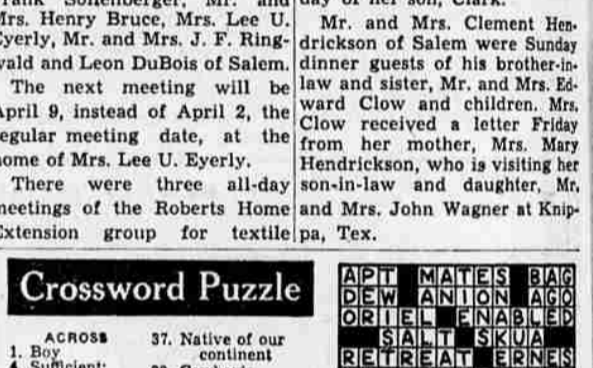
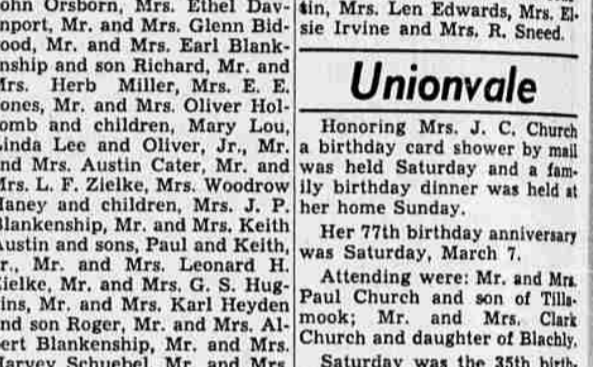
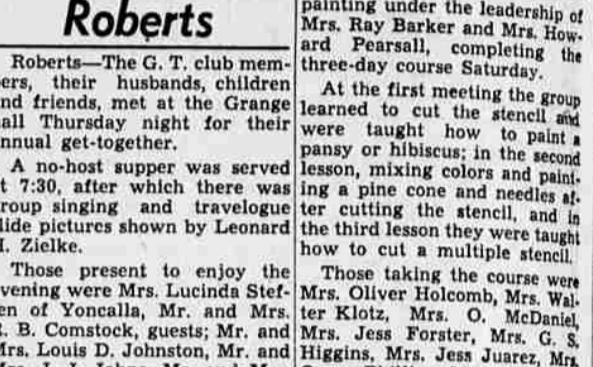
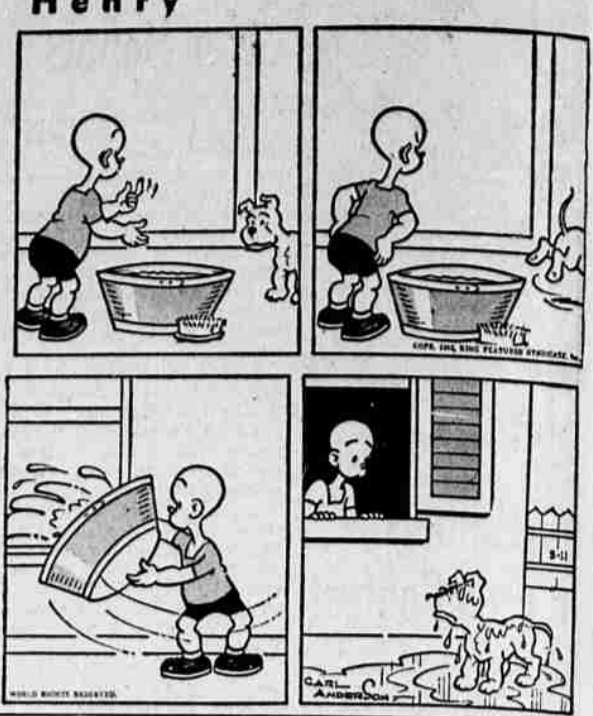
"Keeping the lid on things," I answered. "Literally."

He understood at once. "You can come out now Haye," he said.

(To Be Continued)



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