The Harmonica Mystery

P. G. WODEHOUSE

- SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Captain Gunner resident of Mrs. Pickett's Excelsior boarding house, is found dead in his bedroom, under circumstances that point conclusively to suicide or murder.

head of a highly successful detective agency, is appealed to by Mrs. Pickett to endeavor to solve the mystery. On his staff Snyder has a young man, Elliett Oakes, for whom he sees a promising future if his abnormal self-confidence and egotism can be eliminated. He turns the case over to Oakes, secretly hoping the young man will fall in trying to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER III .- Oakes takes up his residence in the boarding house under the name of James Burton, and in a report to Shyder admits he is making little headway, though he has formed many "So

CHAPTER IV.—After following to the end a number of absurd theories, all of which of course come to nothing, Oakes has to admit he is battled.

CHAPTER V.

The Mystery Solved? Two days later Mr. Snyder sat in his office. There was a telegram before him.

It ran as follows:

"Have solved Gunner mystery. Re-"Oakes." turning.

Mr. Snyder rang the bell. "Send Mr. Oakes to me directly he arrives," he said.

He put his feet up on the desk, tilted his chair back, and frowned at the celling.

He was pained to find that the chief emotion with which the telegram from Onkes had affected him was annoyance. The swift solution of such an apparently insoluble problem would reflect the highest credit on the agency, and there were picturesque circumstances connected with the case which would make it popular with the newspapermen and lead to its being accorded a great deal of publicity,

On the whole, no case of recent years promised to give the agency a bigger advertisement than this one,

Yet, in spite of all this, Mr. Snyder was annoyed. It was ridiculous and unprocessional of him to be annoyed, but human nature was too strong for

He realized now how large a part the desire to reduce Oakes' self-esteem had played with him.

Looking at the thing honestly, he owned to himself that he had had no come within a mile of a reasonable solution of the mystery; and he had calculated that his failure would prove a valuable piece of education for him.

For the professional was mixed up with the unprofessional in Mr. Snyder's attitude toward his assistant. It was not only as a private individual that he had hoped to see Oakes reduced to humility by failure: he also believed that failure would make Oakes a more valuable asset to the agency.

Oakes had intelligence. That he had never denied. Mr. Snyder's grievance against him was that he had only about half the intelligence with which he credited himself. His aggressive belief in himself im-

paired bis utility as a detective. He needed breaking in, and Mr. Snyder had looked to this case to effect this

And here he was, within a ridiculously short space of time, returning to the fold, not humble and defeated, but with flying colors.

Mr. Snyder looked forward with apprehension to the young man's probble demeanor under the intoxicating influence of victory.

His apprehensions were well grounded. He had barely finished the second of the series of cigars which, like milestones, marked the progress of his afternoon, when the door opened and young Mr. Oakes entered, ram-

Mr. Snyder could not repress a faint mean at the sight of him. One glance was enough to tell him that his worst fears were realized.

Few people in the history of New York could have been so pleased with themselves as Oakes obviously was at that moment. He diffused self-satisfaction like a scent. In some mysterious way he seemed to have grown bigger.

He was still tense, but his tenseness now was that of the leopard returning from some important kill, announcing his magnificence to the rest of the

jungle. He sat down before Mr. Snyder had time to invite him, and the older man dooked with dismay at this significant sign of his increased importance.

"I got your telegram," said Mr. Snyder.

Oakes nodded. "It surprised you, eh?"

Mr. Snyder resented the patronizing tone of the question, but he had resigned himself to be patronized and gave no sign of resentment.

One of the old man's chief virtues, which had compensated him for a certain lack of genius in his minke-up. was his level-hendedness and his ability to allow nothing to disturb him seriously. His sense of humor had saved him in a hundred difficult situations, and it saved him now,

He realized that Oakes could no more help being patronizing at this say yourself that the window was high moment than a dog could help bark- up. ing after retrieving its master's walk-

ing-stick from a pond. "Yes," he replied, "I must say it did surprise me. I didn't gather from your report that you had even found a clue. Was it the Indian theory that won out, or did you catch Mrs. Pickett with the goods?"

Oakes laughed tolerantly.

"Oh, that was all moonshine, I never really believed that truck, I put it in fill up. I hadn't begun to think about the case then-not really think."

"No. I was just looking around it -giving it the once over."

"And having given it the once "Why, I took my coat off and waded

"You weren't long about it." Mr. Snyder extended his cigar-case.

"Light up and tell me all about it." "Well, I won't say I haven't earned his," said Onkes, puffing smoke Shall I begin at the beginning?" "Kure, But tell me first, who was t that did u? Was it one of the board

"No." "Somebody from outside, then?"

Oakes smiled quietty. "Yes, you might call it somebody from outside. But I had better trace

my reasoning from the start," "That's right. It spoils a story know ng the finish. Go to it."

Oakes let the ash of his eigar fall delicately to the floor, another action which seemed significant to his em ployer. As a rule, his assistants, unless particularly pleased with themselves, used the ash-tray.

"My first act on arriving," he said was to have a talk with Mrs. Pickett A very dull old woman." "Curious, She struck me as rather

intelligent." "Not on your life. She doesn't know

beans from buttermilk. She gave me no assistance whatsoever.

"I then examined the room where the death had taken place. It was much as you had described it. Locked door. Window high up. No chimney. I'm bound to say that, at first sight, it looked fairly unpromising. "Then I had a chat with some of

the other boarders. They had nothing to tell me that was of the least use. Most of them simply gibbered. "I then gave up trying to get help

from outside, and resolved to rely on my own intelligence." He smiled complacently,

"It is a theory of mine, Mr. Soyder, which I have found valuable, that in tilie cases out of ten, remarkable things don't happen." "I don't quite get that."

"I mean exactly what I say, I will put it another way if you like. What I mean is that the simplest explanation is nearly always the right one."

"Well, I don't-" "I have tested and proved it. Conder this case. Was there ever a case which was more entitled by rights to a bizarre solution? One was almost inclined to believe in the supernatural. It seemed impossible that there should have been any reasonable explanation of the man's death. Most men would have worn themselves out guessing at wild theories. If I had started to do that, I should have been guessing now,

my belief that nothing remarkable ever happens, and I won out," Mr. Snyder sighed softly. Oakes was

"As it is-here I am. I trusted to

entitled to a certain amount of gloating, but there was no doubt that his way of telling a story was a little trying.

"I believe in the logical sequence of events. I refuse to accept effects unless they are preceded by causes, In other words, with all due deference to you, Mr. Snyder, I simply decline to believe in a murder unless there is motive for it.

"The first thing I set myself to ascertain was-what was the motive for this murder of Captain Gunner? And, after thinking it over and making every possible inquiry, I decided that there was no motive. Therefore, there was no murder. It was like an elemen-

Mr. Snyder's mouth opened, and he apparently intended to speak, but he changed his mind and Oakes pro-

ceeded: "I then tested the suicide theory, What motive was there for suicide? There was no motive. Therefore, there was no suicide.'

This time Mr. Snyder spoke. "Say, my boy, you haven't been spending the last few days in the wrong house by any chance, have you? You will be telling me next time there wasn't any dead man."

Oakes smiled. "Not at all. Captain John Gunner was dead as mutton, and, as the medical evidence proved, he died of the

bite of a krait.' Mr. Snyder shrugged his shoulders. "Go on," he said, "It's your story.

I'm listening." "Well, I won't keep you long. Captain Gunner died from snake-bite for the very excellent reason that he was bitten by a snake."

"Bitten by a snake?" "By a krait. If you want further details, by a krait which came from Java.

Mr. Snyder stared at him.

"How do you know?" "I do know."

"Dal you see the snake?"

"Then how_o. "I have enough evidence to make Jury convict Mr. Snake without leave

ing the box." "How did the snake get out of the

"By the window."

"How do you make that out? You

"Nevertheless, it got out by the window. It's the logical sequence of events. That's proof enough that it was in the room. It killed Captain Gunner there. And that's proof enough that it got out of the room, because it left traces of its presence outside. Therefore, as the window was the only exit, it must have gone out that way. It may have climbed or it may have jumped, but it got out of the window,"

"What do you mean-proofs of its presence outside?" "It killed a dog."

"Hello! This is new. You didn't mention that before."

"How do you know it killed the dog?"

"Because analysis proved that it had died from snake-bite."

"Where was it?" "There by a sort of back-yard behind the house. The window of Captain Gunner's room looks out into it. It is full of boxes and litter of all sorts, and there are a few stunted shrubs scattered about, in fact, there is enough cover to hide any small object like the body of a cog, and that's

why it was not discovered at first. "Katic, the maid-of-all-work at the Excelsior, came on it the morning after I had sent you my report, while she was emptying a box of ashes in the yard. Nobody claimed the do,. It was just an ordinary mutt dog, don't suppose it belonged to anybouy.

"It was fortunate you happened to think of having the analysis made." "Not at all, it was the obvious thing to do. It constituted a coincidence. and I was on the lookout for that sort of coincidence. It supported my

It had no collar,"

"Well, as I say, the analyst examined the body, and found that the dog had died of the bite of a krait."

"But you didn't find the snake?" "No. We cleaned out that yard till you could have eaten your breakfast there, but the snake had gone,"

"Good Heavens! Is it wandering at large along the water-front?"

"We'll hope it has been killed. It is not a pleasant thing to have about the streets: It must have got out through the door of the yard, which was open. But it is a couple of days now since it escaped, and there has been no further tragedy, so I guess it's dead. The nights are pretty cold now, and it would probably have died of exposure. Anyway, let's hope ou.

"But, for goodness' sake, how did a krait get to Long Island, anyway?" "There is a very simple explanation of that. Can't you goess it? I told you it came from Java."

"How do you know that?" "Captain Muller told me. Not directly, I mean, I gathered it from what he said. It seems that Captain Muller had a friend, an old shipmate, living in Java. They corresponded, and occasionally this man sends the captain a present as a mark of his esteem.

The last present he sent him was our friend, the snake."

"He didn't know he was sending it. He imagined he was sending a crate of bananas, without any extras. Unfortunately, the snake must have got in unnoticed. These unsuspected additions to crates of bananas are quite common. You must have read about them in the papers. It was only the other day that a man found a tarantula inside one.

"Well, that's my case against Mr. Snake, and, short of catching him with the goods, I don't see how I could have made out a stronger one. Don't you agree with me?"

It went against the grain of Mr. Snyder to play the role of admiring friend to his assistant's Triumphant Detective, but he was a fair-minded man, and he was forced to admit that Oakes did certainly seem to have solved the insoluble.

"I congratulate you, my boy," he said as heartily as he could. "I'm bound to say when you started out I didn't think you could do it. It looked to me like one of those cases we fail on, and keep mighty quiet about when we are printing our reminiscences. You are a wonder."

"Not at all. I merely used what wits God has given me, and refused to be led down blind alleys. And you must admit, Mr. Snyder, that I won through without the ameteur assistance of Mrs. Pickett, which you recommended so strongly."

Mr. Snyder looked embarrassed. "That was just a little joke, my boy. How did you leave the old lady? I guess she was pleased?"

'She didn't show it. She's only half alive, that woman. She hasn't sense enough to be pleased at anything. However, she has invited me to dine tonight in her private room, which, I suppose, is an honor, It certainly will be a bore. Still, I accepted. She made such a point of it."

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Pickett Takes a Hand. For some time after Oakes had gone, Mr. Snyder sat smoking and thinking. His meditations were not altogether pleasant. Oakes, he felt, after this would be unbearable as a man, and, what was worse from a professional view-point, of greatly diminished value as a servant of the agency.

To a temperament like Oakes', a spectacular success at such an early stage in his career would be disas-

Oakes as a detective-and, perhaps, as a man, too-was in the schoolboy stage. He was being educated. What he most needed at this point in his education was a fallure which should keep his self-confidence in check,

That he should have succeeded so swiftly and brilliantly in this matter of the death of Captain Gunner was nothing less than a disaster.

To Mr. Snyder, meditating thus, there was brought the card of a caller. It would make me a laughing-stock." Mrs. Pickett would be glad if be could spare a few moments.

Mr. Snyder was glad to see Mrs. Pickett. He was a student of character, and she had interested him at their first meeting.

She fell into none of the groups into which he divided his fellow men and women. There was something about

her which had seemed to him unique. He welcomed his second chance of puzzled Mr. Snyder, and when any one or anything puzzled him, he liked to

She came in and sat down stiffly, balancing herself on the extreme edge of the chair in which a short while before young Mr. Oakes had lounged

so luxuriously. Her hands were folded on her lap, and her eyes had the penetrating stare which in the early periods of the investigation and disconcerted Elliott Oakes, She gave Mr. Snyder, an expert in the difficult art of weighing people up, a c..traordinary impression of reserved force.

"Sit down, 'Airs, Pickett," said Mr. Snyder kenially, "Very glad you looked in. Well, so it wasn't marder, after

"I've just been seeing Mr. Oakes." explained the detective, "He has told me oil about it."

"He of me all about it," said Mrs.

Pickee dr. ly. A.r. Snyder looked at her inquiringlv. . ler manner seemed more suggestive than her words.

"A concetted, headstrong young fool," said Mrs. Pickett.

It was no new picture of his assistant that she had drawn, Mr. Snyder had often drawn it himself, but at the present juncture it surprised him. Onkes, in his hour of triumph, surely did not deserve this sweeping condemnation.

"Did not Mr. Oakes' solution of the mystery satisfy you, Mrs. Pickett?"

"It struck me as logical and con-

"You may call it all the fancy names you please, Mr. Sayder; but it was not the right one," "Have you an alternative to of-

I should like to hear it." "At the proper time you shall."

"What makes you so certain that Mr. Oakes is wrong?"

"He takes for granted what isn't possible, and makes his whole case stand on it. There couldn't have been a snake in that room, because it couldn't have got out. The window

was too high." "But surely the evidence of the dead

Mrs. Pickett looked at him as if he had disappointed her. "I had always hear you spoken of as a man with common sense, Mr.

"I have always tried to use common sense," "Then why are you trying now to

make yourself believe that something happened which could not possibly have happened just because it fits in with something which isn't easy to explain?" You mean that there is another

explanation of the dead dog?" "Not another, Mr. Oakes' is not an explanation. But there is an explana-

tion, and if he had not been so headstrong and conceited he might have found it."

"You speak as if you had found

"I have." Mr. Snyder stared.

"You have!" "Yes."

"What is it?" "You shall hear when I am ready to tell you. In the meantime try and think if out for yourself. A great detective agency like yours, Mr. Snyder, ought to do something in return

for a fee." There was something so reminiscent of the school-teacher reprimanding a recalcitrant urchin that Mr. Snyder's sense of humor came to his res-

"Well, we do our best, Mrs. Pickett. We are only human, And, remember, we warantee nothing. The public

employs us at its own risk," Mrs. Pickett did not pursue the subject. She waited grimly till he had finished speaking, and then proceeded to astonish Mr. Snyder still further by asking him to swear out a warrant

for arrest on a charge of murder. Mr. Snyder's breath was not often taken away in his own office; as a rule, he received his clients' communications, strange as they often were,

But at her words he gasped. The thought crossed his mind that Mrs. Pickett was not quite sane.

The details of the case were fresh in his memory, and he distinctly recollected that the person she mentioned had been away from the boardinghouse on the night of Captain Gunner's death, and, he imagined, could, if necessary bring witnesses to prove

Mrs. Pickett was regarding him with an unfaltering stare. To all outward appearances she was sane.

"But you can't swear out warrants without evidence."

"I bave evidence."

"What is it?" "If I told you now, you would think that I was out of my mind,"

"But, my dear madam, do you realize what you are asking me to do? I cannot make this agency responsible for the casual arrest of people in this way, It might ruin me. At the least

"Mr. Snyder, listen to me. You shail use your own judgment whether or not to make the arrest on that warrant. You shall hear what I have to say, and you shall see for yourself how it is taken. If after that you feel that you cannot make the arrest you need do nothing."

Her voice rose, For the first time since they met she began to throw off the stony calm which served to studying her at close range. She mask all her thoughts and emotions.

"I know who killed Captain Gunner, I can prove it. I knew it from keep him, her, or it under observation. the beginning. It was like a vision. Something told me, But I had no proof, Now, things have come to light, and everything is clear,"

Against his judgment Mr. Snyder main street of your town?

was impressed. This woman congnetism which makes to:

siveness, He wavered. "It-it sounds incredible." Even as he spoke he remem

that it had long been a profess maxim of his that nothing was in

ble, and he weakened still turn "Mr. Snyder, I ask you to sweet that warrant."

The detective gave in. 'Very well,"

Mrs. Pickett rose. "If you will come and dine at house tonight, I think I can pro

you that it will be needed. Will come?" "I'll come," said Mr. Snyder.

(To be continued)

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