

The Harmonica Mystery

By F. G. WOODHOUSE

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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.

CHAPTER II.—Paul Snyder, veteran head of a highly successful detective agency, is appointed by Mrs. Pickett to endeavor to solve the mystery. On his staff Snyder has a young man, Elliott 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 fail 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 Snyder admits "making little headway, though he has formed many theories."

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 baffled.

CHAPTER V.—Oakes vastly surprises Snyder by announcing that he has solved the mystery and is returning Snyder awaits his coming with considerable interest, imagining that he must have been mistaken in his estimation of the ability of his subordinate.

CHAPTER VI.—After Oakes' departure Snyder is visited by Mrs. Pickett, who is more than outspoken in her opinion of Oakes' ability, and laughs at his "solution" of the mystery. She urges Snyder to swear out a warrant for the arrest of a certain man, promising that before it is served she will convince him the person named in the warrant. Snyder finally has the warrant prepared, stipulating that it shall not be served until he is convinced there is sufficient evidence to warrant the arrest. Mrs. Pickett agrees and invites Snyder to dinner that night, promising at that time to produce the evidence.

CHAPTER VII.

The Solution.

When Mr. Snyder arrived at the Excelsior, and was shown into the little private sitting-room where the proprietress held her court on the rare occasions when she entertained, he found Oakes already there. Oakes was surprised.

"What—are you invited, too? Say I guess this is her idea of winding up the case formally. A sort of old-home-week celebration for all concerned."

Oakes laughed.

"Well, all I can say is that I hope there won't be another case of poisoning at the Excelsior in the papers tomorrow. A woman like our hostess is certain to provide some special home-made wine for an occasion. We ought to have had the doctor wait outside with antidotes."

Mr. Snyder did not reply.

It struck Oakes that his employer was preoccupied and nervous. He would have inquired into this unusual frame of mind, but at that moment the third guest of the evening entered.

Mr. Snyder looked curiously at the newcomer. The big German had a morbid interest for him. Many years in the exercise of a profession which tends to rob its votaries of sentiment had toughened Mr. Snyder, but there was something unusual about the present circumstances which struck home to his imagination.

He was not used to this furtive work. Till now he had met his man in the open as an enemy, and it struck him as an unpleasantly gruesome touch that he must presently sit at meat with one whom it might be his task to send to the electric chair.

He wished Mrs. Pickett could have arranged things otherwise; but she was his employer, and when on duty in the service of an employer Mr. Snyder was wont to sink his personal feelings.

Captain Muller, the German, was an interesting study to one in the detective's peculiar position.

It was not Mr. Snyder's habit to trust overmuch to appearances, but he could not help admitting that there was something about this man's aspect which brought Mrs. Pickett's charges out of the realm of the fantastic into that of the possible.

Here, to a student of men like Mr. Snyder, was obviously a man with something on his mind. That that something need not necessarily be murder, or any crime whatsoever, the detective admitted.

But under the circumstances the fact that Captain Muller was in a highly nervous condition was worthy of notice if nothing more.

There was something odd—an unnatural gloom—about the man. He bore himself like one carrying a heavy burden. His eyes were dull, his face haggard.

The next moment the detective was reproaching himself with allowing his imagination to run away with his calmer judgment. It mortified him to think that he was permitting himself to be carried away by a train of thought precisely as Oakes would have been.

Nevertheless, whether it was a real oddness or whether Mrs. Pickett's words had overstimulated his fancy, there certainly did seem something odd about the German.

Mr. Snyder disposed himself to watch events.

At this moment Oakes gave evidence that he, too, had been struck by the expression of the other's face.

"You're not looking well, captain," he said.

The German raised his heavy eyes.

"I do not sleep good." The door opened and Mrs. Pickett came in.

To Mr. Snyder one of the most remarkable points about the meal, which for the rest of his life had a place of its own in his memory, was the peculiar metamorphosis of Mrs. Pickett from the brooding, silent woman he had known to the polished hostess.

Oakes, who had dealt with her in her official capacity of owner and manager of the boarding house, was patently struck by the change. Mr. Snyder found himself speculating as to the early history of this curious old woman who was so very much at ease at the head of her own table.

Oakes, that buoyant soul, was unable to keep his surprise to himself. He had come prepared to steel his stomach against home-made wine, absorbed in grim silence, and he found himself opposite a bottle of champagne of a brand and year which commanded his utmost respect; and a pleasant old lady whose only aim seemed to be to make him feel at home.

Beside each of the guests' plates was a neat paper parcel. He picked his up.

"Why, ma'am, this is princely! Souvenirs! I call this very handsome of you, Mrs. Pickett!"

"Yes, that is a souvenir, Mr. Burton. I am glad you are pleased."

"Pleased? I am overwhelmed, ma'am!"

"You must not think of me simply as the keeper of a boarding house, Mr. Burton. I am an ambitious hostess. I do not often give these little parties, but when I do I like to do my best to make them a success. I want each of you to remember this dinner of mine."

"I'm sure I shall."

Mrs. Pickett smiled.

"I think you all will. You, Mr. Snyder." She paused. "And you, Captain Muller."

To Mr. Snyder there was so much meaning in her voice as she said this that he was amazed that it conveyed no warning to the German.

Captain Muller, however, was already drinking heavily. He looked up when addressed and uttered a sound which might have been taken for an expression of polite acquiescence. Then he filled his glass again.

Mr. Snyder, eyeing his hostess with a tense watchfulness which told him that his nerves were strung to their utmost, fancied that her eyes gleamed for an instant with sinister light.

It faded next moment, as she turned to speak to Oakes, who was still fingering his parcel with the restless curiosity of a boy.

"Do we open these, ma'am?"

"Not yet, Mr. Burton."

"I'm wondering what mine is."

"I hope it will not be a disappointment to you."

A sense of the strangeness of the situation came over Mr. Snyder with renewed force as the meal progressed. He looked round the table and wondered if an odder quartet had ever been assembled.

Oakes, his fears that the dullness of this dinner-party would eclipse the dullness of all other dinner parties in his experience, miraculously relieved, was at peace with all men. He was in high spirits and waxed garrulous over his wine.

Mr. Snyder could read his mind easily enough. It was when he attempted to guess at the thoughts of his hostess and the German that he was baffled.

What was that heavy man with the dull eyes thinking of as he drained and refilled his glass? And the old woman? She had slipped back, once the party had begun to progress smoothly, into something of her former grim manner, and conversation at table had practically developed into a monologue on the part of the unconscious Oakes.

As for Mr. Snyder himself, he felt mysteriously deprived of his usual hearty appetite and simultaneously of the easy geniality which distinguished him. He sat and crumbled bread, nervously watchful.

Oakes picked up his souvenir again. He had been fiddling with it at intervals for the past quarter of an hour.

"Surely now, ma'am?" he said plaintively.

"I did not want them opened till after dinner," said Mrs. Pickett. "But just as you please."

Oakes tore the wrapper eagerly. He produced a little silver match-box.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he said. "Just what I have always wanted."

old woman's expression as she watched the German slowly tearing the paper that sent a thrill of excitement through Mr. Snyder.

Something seemed to warn him of the approach of the psychological moment. He bent forward eagerly. Under the table his hands were clenching his knees in a bruising grip.

There was a strangled gasp, a clatter, and onto the table from the German's hands there fell a little harmonica.

In the silence which followed all the suspicion which Mr. Snyder had been so sedulously keeping in check burst its bounds.

There was no mistaking the look on the German's face now. His cheeks were like wax, and his eyes, so dull till then, blazed with a panic and horror which he could not repress. The glasses on the table rocked as he clutched at the cloth.

Mrs. Pickett spoke.

"Why, Captain Muller, has it upset you? I thought that, as his best friend, the man who shared his room, you would value a memento of Captain Gunner. How fond you must have been of him for the sight of his harmonica to be such a shock."

The German did not speak. He was staring fascinated at the thing on the table.

Mrs. Pickett turned to Mr. Snyder. Her eyes, as they met his, were the eyes of a fanatic. They held him.

"Mr. Snyder, as a detective, you will be interested in a curious affair which happened in this house a few days ago. One of my boarders, Captain Gunner, was found dead in his room—the room which he shared with Captain Muller."

"I am very proud of the reputation of my house, Mr. Snyder, and it was a blow to me that this should have happened."

"I applied to an agency for a detective, and they sent me a stupid boy, with nothing to recommend him except his belief in himself. He said that Captain Gunner had died by accident, killed by a snake which had come out of a crate of bananas. I knew better."

"I knew that Captain Gunner had been murdered."

"Are you listening, Captain Muller? This will interest you, as you were such a friend of his."

The German did not answer. He was staring straight before him, as if he saw something invisible to other eyes.

"Yesterday we found the body of a dog. It had been killed, as Captain Gunner had been, by the poison of a snake."

"The boy from the detective agency said that this was conclusive—that the snake had escaped from the room after killing Captain Gunner and killed the dog. I knew that was impossible, for, if there had been a snake in that room it could not have got out."

"It was not a snake that killed Captain Gunner; it was a cat."

"Captain Gunner had a friend. This man hated him. One day, in opening a crate of bananas, the friend found a snake and killed it. He took out the poison."

"He knew Captain Gunner's habits; he knew that he played a harmonica. This man had a cat. He knew that cats hated the sound of the harmonica. He had often seen this particular cat fly at Captain Gunner and scratch him when he played."

"He took the cat and covered its claws with the poison. And then he left it in the room with Captain Gunner. He knew what would happen."

Oakes and Mr. Snyder were on their feet. The German had not moved. He sat there, his fingers gripping the cloth.

Mrs. Pickett rose and went to a closet. She unlocked the door.

"Kitty!" she called. "Kitty! Kitty!" A black cat ran swiftly out into the room.

With a clatter of crockery and a ringing of glass the table heaved, rocked, and overturned as the German staggered to his feet. He threw up his hands as if to ward something off. A choking cry came from his lips.

"Gott! Gott!"

Mrs. Pickett's voice rang through the room, cold and biting:

"Captain Muller, you murdered Captain Gunner!"

The German shuddered. Then mechanically he replied:

"Gott! Yes, I killed him."

"You heard, Mr. Snyder," said Mrs. Pickett. "He has confessed before witnesses. Take him away."

The German allowed himself to be moved toward the door. His arm in Mr. Snyder's grip felt limp and lifeless.

FARMER'S INCOME SUBJECT TO TAX

Gains for 1919 Must Be Figured Under U. S. Law—Returns Due March 15.

LAND SALE PROFITS TAXABLE.

Necessary Farm Expenses May Be Deducted—Special Form for Farm Income—Cash or Accrual Basis for Computing.

A farmer, shopkeeper, or tradesman must figure up his net income for 1919; and if the farm or business income plus his other income was sufficient to require an income tax return a complete return must be filed with the collector of internal revenue by March 15.

A farmer should ascertain the gross income of his farm by computing all gains derived from the sale or exchange of his products, whether produced on the farm or purchased and resold.

Farm Expenses. From his gross income a farmer is allowed to charge off all of his necessary expenses in the conduct of the farm during the year. These include costs of planting, cultivating, harvesting and marketing. In addition to these costs he may deduct money spent for ordinary farm tools of short life bought during the year, such as shovels, rakes, etc. Also, the cost of feed purchased for his live stock may be treated as an expense in so far as this cost represents actual outlay, but the value of his own products fed to animals is not a deductible item.

Other farm expenses allowable are the cost of minor repairs on buildings (but not the dwelling house), on fences, wagons and farm machinery; also bills paid for horseshoeing, stock powders, rock salt, services of veterinary, insurance (except on dwelling house), gasoline for operating power and sundry other expenses which were paid for in cash.

As to hired help, all the productive labor is a deductible expense; but the wages of household servants, or help hired to improve the farm, as in tree planting, ditching, etc., cannot be claimed against earnings. A farmer is not allowed to claim a salary for himself or members of his family who work on the farm.

Wear and Tear. Purchase of farm machinery, wagons, work animals, etc., also the cost of construction or extension of buildings, silos, fencing, etc., should be considered additional investments in the farm and are not proper deductions against income.

A reasonable allowance may be claimed for wear and tear on farm buildings (except the farmhouse), fences, machinery, work animals, wagons, tanks, windmills and other farm equipment which is used in the conduct of the farm.

As to autos and tractors, the cost of these is not an expense, although the cost of their upkeep is an allowable deduction, if the machines are used exclusively for farm purposes and not for pleasure. Also, in such cases, a deduction for wear and tear is allowed.

Farm Losses. The loss of a growing crop is not a proper deduction from income, inasmuch as the value of the crop had not been taken into gross income. The loss of a building or of machinery through storm, lightning, flood, etc., is an allowable deduction, but care should be used to ascertain the correct loss sustained, as restricted by income tax regulations.

No deduction is allowed in the case of loss of animals raised on the farm, but a loss is deductible from gross income if the animals had been purchased for draft or breeding purposes.

Shrinkage in weight or value of farm products held for favorable market prices cannot be deducted as a loss, for the reason that when such products are sold the shrinkage will be reflected in the selling price.

Sale of Farms and Land. The value of agricultural lands has been jumping during the past few years, and during 1919 many owners sold out part or all of their lands at big profits. All such gains constitute income and must be taken into the net income for the year.

Any person who sold part of a farm or ranch, or part of a parcel of land, must also show any gains realized by the sale.

The method of figuring gains and losses on such transactions is prescribed in the Income Tax regulations, copies of which may be secured from Internal Revenue Collectors.

Forms for Returns. The Internal Revenue Bureau has issued an improved Form 1040F for the use of farmers. This form, together with Form 1040A or 1040, will give the farmer explicit information as to how to properly figure his net income for 1919.

There are two methods of figuring a farmer's income tax return this year. He may make his return on the basis of the difference between the money and goods received for his products and the cash paid out for actual allowable farm expenses within the year, or he may make his return on the accrual basis, which means computing the receipts and expenses that pertain to the taxable year, excluding income earned and expenses incurred in previous or succeeding years.

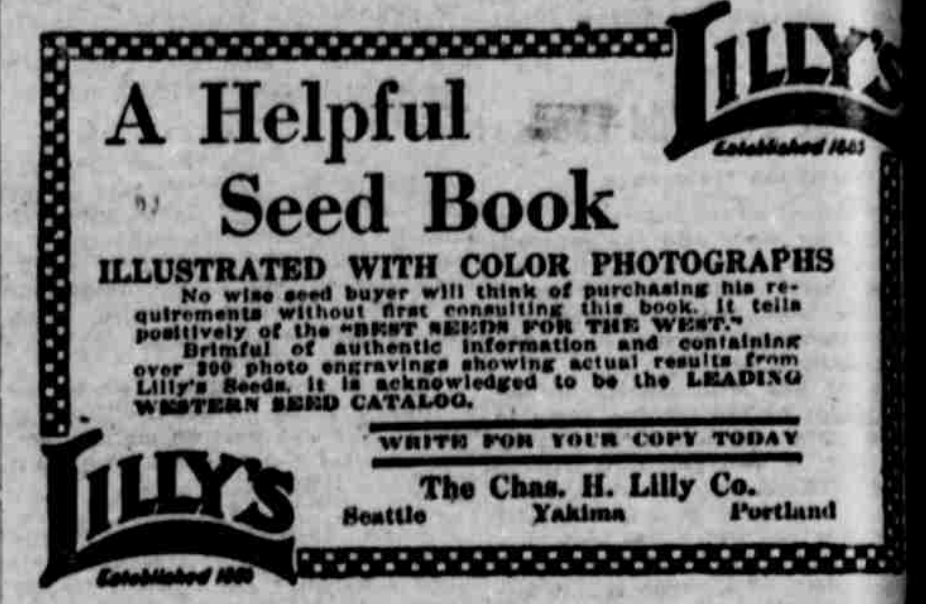
Use Manure on Garden Land

American gardeners could well afford to learn a lesson from the French gardeners regarding the use of manure on their land. In some cases where French gardeners are working on rented land, a clause in the lease provides that should the gardener be required to vacate the land he is permitted to remove the top soil to a specified depth. It is customary to apply anywhere from 4 to 8 inches of manure a year on French gardens. This is composted and mixed with the soil and in the course of a few weeks becomes a part of the soil itself. It is needless to state that some enormous crops are grown on this land.

While it would not be possible for American gardeners to secure sufficient quantities of manure to apply it at the rate that it is used by the French gardeners, yet an effort should be made to secure as much of this material as possible and put it directly upon the land where inten-

sive crops are to be grown. A plan of having a compost heap in corner of the garden where anything in the nature of manure is piled and composted together is a good one. Into this pile should all weeds that do not bear objectionable seeds, pieces of sod, clippings from the lawn, leaves and manure. By turning the pile at intervals rich, mellow material is produced which is suitable for top dressing garden soil. Owing to the limited quantity of manure available at present its use should be restricted to those crops that make a quick growth and require plenty of fertility in soil.

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