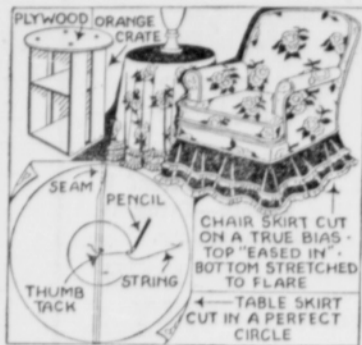


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OVERNIGHT GUEST By BEN AMES WILLIAMS W.N.U. FEATURES

THE STORY THUS FAR: Adam Bruce, FBI operator, Inspector Tope and Mrs. Tope met in the Maine woods. Tope found a man murdered, who was at first identified as Ledforge, head of New England utilities.

CHAPTER XV

He spoke so simply that his accusation lacked reality. Ledforge cried: "I can't believe you're serious?" "Why, yes," Tope assured him, "I'm serious."

The door from the hall opened, and they all looked that way; saw Bee Dewain. For a moment no one spoke; and Bee said: "Go on, please. May I listen?"

Tope answered her. "We're just trying to make Mr. Ledforge admit that he was the man in Little Bear last Friday night," he explained, and turned to Ledforge again.

"Come, Tope," he said with a mocking kindness. "I guess you've gone as far as you can, haven't you? Maybe you've got at the truth, all right; but Tope, it isn't enough for me to know the truth. I have to be able to prove it. I have to get something that will pass as evidence in court."

Tope looked at him thoughtfully. "That's so, son," he agreed. "You do have to try the case, don't you?" Joe nodded. "So while you've been reading dream-books, and telling fortunes by the cards," he derisively explained, "I've been collecting a few facts—just plain facts. And, of course, one particular fact! One good fact that can't be shaken is all we need, isn't it?"

Adam Bruce demanded: "Joe, do you have to be a fool twice in one day?" But Tope touched Adam's arm, hushed him. "Now, Adam," he protested, "you let Joe set off his fireworks! It wouldn't surprise me a bit if he had something. Joe's a smart young man."

"Then he ought to know better—" Joe said resentfully. "Now, wait a minute, Bruce! After all, this case is my job. This old man hasn't an ounce of evidence, but I have. I can prove that Rufus Ledforge, here, was in Little Bear that night, Friday night," he said exultantly.

"Rufus was, all right," Tope assented. "I know that too." "But you can't prove it?" "Why, that depends! Maybe not!" "Well, I can," said Joe proudly. "While you've been chasing will-o'-the-wisps, I've found a witness. I've got a man who heard Mrs. Kell, in the cottage that night, call Ledforge here by name."

Tope exclaimed: "Well, if you have, that's something, sure!" Dane laughed exultantly. "You bet it is!" he cried. "It's worth all your guess work." "Called him by name, did she?" Tope reflected.

Joe cried in a hot triumph: "Yes, she did!" And he explained carefully: "I think she was begging him not to leave poor Christopher there to die. But at any rate she said: 'Oh, no, please don't, Rufus! Don't, Rufus, please!'"

"Rufus, eh?" Tope echoed. "Sure, Rufus. Rufus Ledforge! And that's proof enough to convince any jury—with the rest of what we've got—that Rufus Ledforge was in Little Bear that night."

"Who was your dentist?" Tope inquired. "Doctor Loud?" Ledforge smiled. "No, Doctor Loud was Christopher's. I went to a New York man. There was a mocking triumph in him. 'Oh, I assure you we covered all points, Inspector.'"

"Just the same," Tope insisted. "You're bound to be Christopher. Rufus wouldn't have any good reason to kill Christopher; but Christopher—figuring he could step into his brother's shoes, take over the money and the power that his brother had accumulated—he'd have plenty of reason to kill Rufus. Yes, you're Christopher. It don't make sense any other way."

Ledforge started to speak; but Tope said implacably: "That's why you tried to drown Mr. Eberly. Because he told you that you didn't look like Rufus. I figured you'd try to kill him, if he did suspect; and when you invited him to go fishing, and I found out he couldn't swim, I guessed how you'd do it. You had tried to find out, two weeks ago, whether he'd notice anything—tried to see him, but he was away. You were checking up ahead of time, with him and Mrs. Kell, to see if they'd realize you weren't Rufus. Must have had this idea in mind before Rufus got sick and gave you the chance to pull it off. You fooled her, then; so you took a chance on being able to fool Eberly."

And he explained: "So I told him to pretend to see a difference in you today; and he did; and you tried to drown him!" "Ridiculous! He imagined that!" "And Mrs. Kell," Tope added relentlessly, "in Little Bear the other night, finally realized you weren't Rufus. That was why you killed her."

Ledforge said harshly: "Man, you're—" Tope cut in: "Well, if you weren't there, how did you happen to think of Kell's shoes with the heel-plates on them? I mentioned footprints, but not Kell nor his heel-plates." Ledforge licked dry lips. "Just a guess! It would be natural for Holdom to put on some one else's shoes; and Kell's were available."

"Mr. Ledforge," he confessed, "I laid some traps for you awhile ago, when I was telling you the story. I didn't tell you that the sweater was gray. You stepped into that one. I didn't say the wires were ignition wires, or that it was electricians' tape, or that it was the dog's blanket. You dodged the wires and the tape, but you stepped right into the dog one. I didn't mention that your brother was drugged, but you did. I didn't say anything about Kell's shoes, but you did. I didn't say your brother's body was in the rumble, but you did."

He added calmly: "And there was one more, the worst of all. You put your neck right into that one, Ledforge. You knew it the minute you did it!" "You're crazy!" Ledforge cried hoarsely. "I mean," Tope explained, "that I didn't tell you Mrs. Kell was strangled. Oh, she was, all right! But how did you know?"

Tope as he spoke turned toward the door. Now, before Ledforge, terribly shaken, could reply, the old man said: "Oh, hello, ma'am!" They all swung that way. Here were Mrs. Tope and Bee, and between them they supported Miss Ledforge. The little old woman, white as a wraith, came uncertainly into the room. She looked from one to another till her eyes fastened on her brother's face; and then she spoke.

(THE END)



TURNING POINT By Mary Imlay Taylor

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BEGINNING NEXT ISSUE

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