

shook his head.

"Been dead for hours. When did you find him?"

"Twenty minutes back," said the old woman. "I guess he died last night. He never would be called in the morning. Said he liked to sleep on. Well, he's got his wish."

"What did he die of, doc?" asked the policeman.

"Impossible to say without an examination. It looks like apoplexy, but it isn't. It might be heart disease, but I happen to know the poor fellow's heart was as sound as a bell. He called in to see me only a week ago, and I tested him thoroughly. Lord knows what it is! The coroner's inquest will tell us."

He eyed the body almost resentfully.

"It beats me," he said. "The man had no right to drop dead like this. He was a tough old sailor, who ought to have been good for another twenty years. If you ask me, though I can't possibly be certain till after the inquest, I should say he had been poisoned."

"For the love of Pete!" exclaimed Officer Grogan.

"How would he be poisoned?" asked Mrs. Pickett.

"That's more than I can tell you. There's no glass about that he could have drunk it from. He might have got it in capsule form. But why should he have done it? He was always a pretty cheerful sort of old man, wasn't he?"

"Sure!" said Officer Grogan. "He had the name of being a champion joshier in these parts. I've had guys come to me all raw from being mixed up in arguments with him. He had a way with him. Kind of sarcastic, though he never tried it on me."

"This man must have died quite early last night," said the doctor. "What's become of Captain Muller? If he shares this room he ought to be able to tell us something about it."

"Captain Muller spent the night with some friends at Brooklyn," said Mrs. Pickett.

"He wasn't here from after supper."

The doctor looked round the room, frowning.

"I don't like it. I can't understand it. If this had happened in India I should have said the man had died from some form of snake-bite. I was out there two years, and I've seen a hundred cases of it. They all looked just like this. The thing's ridiculous. How could a man be bitten by a snake in a water-front boarding house? The whole thing's mad. Was the door locked when you found him, Mrs. Pickett?"

Mrs. Pickett nodded.

"I opened it with my own key. I had been calling to him, and he didn't answer, so I guessed something was wrong."

The policeman spoke:

"You ain't touched anything, ma'am? They're always mighty particular about that. If doc's right, and there's been any funny work here, that's the first thing they'll ask."

"Everything is just as I found it."

"What's that on the floor beside him?"

"That's his harmonica. He liked to play it on an evening in his room. I've had complaints about it from some of the gentlemen; but I never saw any harm, so as he didn't play too late."

"Seems as if he was playing it when it happened. That don't look much like suicide, doc."

"I didn't say it was suicide."

Officer Grogan whistled.

"You don't think—"

"I don't think anything—till after the inquest. All I say is that it's queer."

Another aspect of the matter seemed to strike the policeman.

"I guess this ain't going to help the Excelsior any, ma'am," he said sympathetically.

Mrs. Pickett shrugged her shoulders. Silence fell upon the room.

"I suppose I had better telephone to the coroner," said the doctor.

He went out, and after a momentary pause the policeman followed him.

Officer Grogan was not greatly troubled with nerves, but he felt a decided desire to be somewhere where he could not see those staring eyes.

Mrs. Pickett remained where she was, looking down at the dead man. Her face was still expressionless, but inwardly she was in a ferment. This was the first time such a thing as this had happened at the Excelsior, and as Officer Grogan had hinted, it was not likely to increase the attractiveness of the house in the eyes of possible boarders.

However well established the reputation of a house may be for comfort and the excellence of its cuisine, if it is a house of tragedy, people, for a time at any rate, will look askance at it.

It was not the possible pecuniary loss which was troubling Mrs. Pickett. As far as money was concerned, she could have retired from business years before and lived comfortably on her savings. She was richer than those who knew her supposed.

It was the blot on the escutcheon of the Excelsior—the stain on the Excelsior's reputation—which was troubling her.

The Excelsior was her life. Starting many years before, beyond the memory of the oldest boarder, she had built up this model establishment, the fame of which had been carried to every corner of the world.

In saloons and places where sailors gathered together from Liverpool to Yokohama, from Cape Town to Marseilles, the reputation of Pickett's was of pure gold. Men spoke of it as a place where you were well fed, cleanly housed, and where petty robbery was unknown.

Such was the chorus of praise from end to end of the world that it is not likely that much harm could come to Pickett's from a single mysterious death; but Mother Pickett was not consoling herself with such reflections.

She was wounded sore. Pickett's had had a clean slate; now it had not. That was the sum of her thoughts.

She looked at the dead man with pale, grim eyes. From down the passage came the doctor's voice as he spoke on the telephone.

## CHAPTER II.

### Detective Oakes.

The office of the Paul J. Snyder Detective Agency had grown in the course of half a dozen years from a single room to a palatial suite full of polished wood, clicking typewriters, and other evidences of success. Where once Mr. Snyder had sat and waited for clients and attended to those clients on the rare occasions when they arrived in person, he now sat in his private office and directed a corps of assistants.

His cap was no longer in his hand, and his time at the disposal of any who would pay a modest fee. He was an autocrat who accepted or refused cases at his pleasure.

He had just accepted a case. It seemed to him a case that might be nothing at all or something exceeding big; and on the latter possibility he had gambled.

The fee offered was, judged by his present standards of prosperity, small; but the bizarre facts, coupled with something in the personality of the client, had won him over; and he touched the bell and desired that Mr. Oakes should be sent in to him.

Elliott Oakes was a young man who amused and interested Mr. Snyder. He was so intensely confident. He had only recently joined the staff, but he made very little secret of his intention of electrifying and revolutionizing the methods of the agency.

Mr. Snyder himself, in common with most of his assistants, relied for results on hard work and plenty of common sense. He had never been a devotee of the showy type. Results had justified his methods, but he was perfectly aware that young Mr. Oakes looked on him as a dull old man who had been miraculously favored by luck.

Mr. Snyder had selected Oakes for the case in hand principally because

he was one whose inexperience could do no harm, and where the brilliant guesswork which the latter called his inductive reasoning might achieve an unexpected success.

It was one of those bizarre cases which call for the dashing amateur rather than the dogged rule-of-thumb professional.

Mr. Snyder had, moreover, a kind of superstitious faith in the luck of the beginner.

Another motive actuated Mr. Snyder in his choice. He had a strong suspicion that the conduct of this case was going to have the beneficial result of lowering Oakes' self-esteem.

If failure achieved this end, Mr. Snyder felt that failure, though it would not help the agency, would not be an unmixed ill.

The door opened and Oakes entered tensely. He did everything tensely, partly from a natural nervous energy, and partly as a pose. He was a lean young man, with dark eyes and a thin-lipped mouth, and looked as like a typical detective as Mr. Snyder looked like a comfortably prosperous stock broker.

Mr. Snyder had never bothered himself about the externals of his profession. One could imagine Mr. Snyder in his moments of leisure watching a ball game or bowling. Oakes gave the impression of having no moments of leisure.

"Sit down, Oakes," said Mr. Snyder. "I've got a job for you."

Oakes sank into a chair like a crouching leopard and placed the tips of his fingers together. He nodded curtly. It was part of his pose to be keen and silent.

"I want you to go to this address"—he handed him an envelope—"and look around. Whether you will find out anything, or whether there's anything to find out, is more than I can say. When the old lady was telling me the story I own I was carried away. She made it convincing. She thinks it was murder. I don't know what to think."

"The facts?" said Oakes briefly.

Mr. Snyder smiled quietly to himself.

"The address on that envelope is of a boarding house on the water front, down in Long Island. You know the sort of place—retired sea-captains and so on."

"All most respectable. Don't run away with the idea that I'm sending you to some melodramatic hell's-kitchen where the guests are drugged and shanghaied on the day of their arrival."

"As far as I can gather, this place is a sort of male Martha Washington. In all its history nothing more sensational has happened than a case of suspected cheating at pinochle. Well, a man has died there."

"Murdered?"

"I don't know. That's for you to find out. The coroner left it open. I don't see how it could have been murder. The door was locked; nobody could have got in."

"The window?"

"The window was open. But the room is on the first floor. And, anyway, you may dismiss the window. I remember the old lady saying there was a bar across it, and that nobody could have squeezed through."

Oakes' eyes glistened. He was interested.

"What was the cause of death?"

Mr. Snyder coughed.

"Snake-bite," he said.

Oakes' careful calm deserted him. He uttered a cry of astonishment.

"What?"

"It's the literal truth. The medical examination proved that the fellow had been killed by snake poison. To be exact, the poison of a snake known as the krait. In this Long Island boarding house, in a room with a locked door, this man was stung by a krait. It's a small snake, found principally in India."

"To add a little mystification to the limpid simplicity of the affair, when the door was opened there was no sign of any snake."

"It couldn't have got out through the door, because the door was locked. It couldn't have got up the chimney, because there was no chimney. And it couldn't have got out of the window, because the window was too high up, and snakes can't jump. So there you have it."

He looked at Oakes with a certain quiet satisfaction. It had come to his ears that Oakes had been heard to complain of the infantile simplicity, unworthy of a man of his attainments, of the last two cases to which he had been assigned, and had said that he hoped some day to be given a problem which should be beyond the reasoning powers of a child of six.

It seemed to Mr. Snyder that he had got what he wanted.

"I should like further details," said Oakes a little breathlessly.

"You had better apply to Mrs. Pickett, who owns the boarding-house. It was she who put the case in my hands. She convinced me that it is murder. But, excluding ghosts, I don't see how any third party could have taken a hand in the thing at all. However, she wanted a man from this agency, and was prepared to pay for him, so I said I would send one. It's not for me to turn business away."

"So, as I said, I want you to go and out up at Mrs. Pickett's Excelsior."

Boarding-house and do your best to put things straight. I would suggest that you pose as a ship's chandler or something of that sort. You will have to do something maritime or they'll get on to you."

"And if your visit produces no other results, it will at least enable you to make the acquaintance of a very remarkable woman. I commend Mrs. Pickett to your notice. By the way, she says she will help you in your investigations."

Oakes laughed shortly. The idea amused him.

"Don't you see? At amateur assistance, my boy," said Mr. Snyder in the fatherly manner which had made a score of criminals refuse to believe him a detective until the moment when the handcuffs snapped on their wrists. "Detection isn't an exact science. It's a question of using common sense and having a great deal of special information. Mrs. Pickett probably knows a great deal which neither you nor I know, and it's just possible that she may have some trivial piece of knowledge which will prove the key to this mystery."

Oakes laughed again.

"It is very kind of Mrs. Pickett, but I think I prefer to trust to my own powers of deduction."

"Do just what you please, but recollect that a detective is only a man, not an encyclopedia. He doesn't know everything and it may be just some small thing which he does not know which turns out to be the missing letter in the combination."

Oakes rose. His face was keen and purposeful.

"I had better be starting at once, he said. 'I will mail you reports from time to time.'"

"I shall be interested to read them," said Mr. Snyder genially. "I hope your visit to the Excelsior will be pleasant. If you run across a man with a broken nose, who used to rejoice in the name of Horse-Face Simmons, give him my best. I had the pleasure of sending him up the road some years ago for highway robbery, and I understand that he has settled in those parts. And cultivate Mrs. Pickett; she is worth while."

The door closed, and Mr. Snyder lit a fresh cigar.

"I—a young fool," he murmured and turned his mind to other matters.

## CHAPTER III.

### Flat Up Against It.

A day later Mr. Snyder sat in his office reading a typewritten manuscript. It appeared to be of a humorous nature, for as he read chuckles escaped him. Finishing the last sheet, he threw back his head and laughed heartily.

The manuscript had not been intended by its author for a humorous effort. What Mr. Snyder had been reading was the first of Elliott Oakes' reports from the Excelsior. It was as follows:

"I am sorry to be unable to report any real progress. I have formed several theories, which I will put forward later, but up to the present I cannot say that I am hopeful."

"Directly I arrived here I sought out Mrs. Pickett, explained who I was, and requested her to furnish me with any further information which might be of service to me."

"She is a strange, silent woman, who impressed me as having very little intelligence. Your suggestion that I should avail myself of her assistance in unraveling this mystery seems more curious than ever now that I have seen her."

"She is a hard-working woman, who certainly conducts this boarding house with remarkable efficiency, but I should not credit her with brains. She never speaks except when spoken to and even then is curt to the point of unintelligibility."

"However, I managed to extract from her a good deal of information which may or may not prove useful."

"The whole affair seems to me at the moment of writing quite inexplicable. Assuming that this Captain Gunner was murdered, there appears to have been no motive for the crime whatsoever."

"I have made careful inquiries about him, and find that he was a man of fifty-five; had spent nearly forty years of his life at sea, the last dozen in command of his own ship; was of somewhat overbearing and tyrannous disposition, though with a fund of rough humor; had traveled all over the world; and had been an inmate of the Excelsior for about ten months."

"He had a small annuity, and no other money at all, which disposes of money as the motive of the crime."

"In my character of James Burton, a retired ship's chandler, I have mixed with the other boarders, and have heard all they have to say about the affair."

"I gather that the deceased was by no means popular. He appears to have had a bitter tongue, and was not sparing in its use, and I have not met one man who seems to regret his death."

"On the other hand, I have heard nothing which would suggest that he had any active and violent enemy. He was simply the unpopular boarder—there is always one in every boarding house—but nothing more."

"I have seen a good deal of the man who shared his room. He, too, is a sea-captain, by name Muller. He is a big, silent German, and it is not easy to get him to talk on any subject."

"As regards the death of Captain Gunner, he can tell me nothing. It seems that on the night of the tragedy he was away at Brooklyn with some friends. All I have got from him is some information as to Captain Gunner, when he would take some whisky. His head was not strong, and a little of the spirit was enough to make him semi-intoxicated, when he would be hilarious and often insulting."

"I gather that Muller found him a difficult roommate, but he is one of those placid Germans who can put up with anything. He and Gunner were in the habit of playing checkers together every night in their room, and Gunner had a harmonica which he played frequently."

"Apparently, he was playing it very soon before he died, which is significant, as seeming to dispose of the idea of suicide."

"But if Captain Gunner did not kill himself, I cannot at present imagine who did kill him, or why he was killed, or how."

"As I say, I have one or two theories, but they are in a very nebulous state. The most plausible is that on one of his visits to India—I have ascertained that he made several voyages there—Captain Gunner may in some way have fallen foul of the natives."

"Kipling's story 'The Mark of the Beast' is suggestive. Is it not possible that Captain Gunner, a rough, overbearing man, easily intoxicated, may in a drunken frolic have offered some insult to an Indian god?"

"The fact that he certainly died of the poison of the krait, an Indian snake, supports this theory."

"I am making inquiries as to the movements of several Indian sailors who were here in their ships at the time of the tragedy."

"I have another theory. Does Mrs. Pickett know more about this affair than she appears to?"

"I may be wrong in my estimate of her mental qualities. Her apparent stupidity may be cunning."

"But here again the absence of motive brings me up against a dead wall. I must confess that at present I do not see my way clearly. However, I will write again shortly."

Mr. Snyder derived the utmost enjoyment from the report. He liked the matter of it, and he liked Oakes' literary style.

Above all, he was tickled by the obvious querulousness of it. Oakes was baffled, and his knowledge of Oakes told him that the sensation of being baffled was gall and wormwood to that high-spirited young gentleman.

Whatever might be the result of this investigation, it would at least have the effect of showing Oakes that there was more in the art of detection than he had supposed. It would teach him the virtue of patience.

He wrote his assistant a short note:

"Dear Oakes:

"Your report received. You certainly seem to have got the hard case which, I hear, you were pining for. I wish you luck."

"Don't build too much on plausible motives in a case of this sort. Fauntleroy, the London murderer, killed a woman for no other reason than that she had thick ankles. Many years ago I myself was on a case where a man murdered an intimate friend because of a dispute about a ball-game."

"My experience is that five murderers out of ten act on the whim of the moment, without anything which, properly speaking, you could call a motive at all."

"Yours,

"Paul Snyder."

"P. S.—I don't think much of your Pickett theory. However, it's up to you. Enjoy yourself."

## CHAPTER IV.

### Baffling Clues.

Young Mr. Oakes, however, did not enjoy himself.

For the first time in his life he was beginning to be conscious of the possession of nerves. He had gone into this investigation with the self-confident alertness which characterized all his actions. He believed in himself thoroughly.

The fact that the case had the appearance of presenting unusual difficulties had merely stimulated him. He was tired of being assigned to investigations which offered no scope for the inductive genius which he considered that he possessed.

Hitherto he had been a razor cutting wood. Now, however, he told himself, he could really show Mr. Snyder the difference between modern methods and the stupid rule-of-thumb which seemed to be the agency's only form of mental expression.

This mood had lasted for some hours. Then doubts had begun to creep in. The problem began to appear insoluble.

True, he had only just taken it up, but something told him that, for all the progress he was likely to make, he might just as well have been working in it for a month. He was baffled.

And every moment which he spent in the Excelsior boarding house made it clearer to him that that infernal old woman with the pale eyes thought him an innocent fool.

It was this, more than anything, which had brought to Elliott Oakes' notice the fact that he had nerves. Those nerves were being sorely troubled by the quiet scorn of Mrs. Pickett's gaze.

He began to think that perhaps he had been a shade too self-confident and brusque in the short interview which he had had with her on his arrival.

She had struck him as a thoroughly stupid old woman, and his manner had shown it.

He had been keen and abrupt during that interview. He had cut in on her remarks. He had examined her with regard to the facts which he needed to supplement those which he had had from Mr. Snyder with a curt superciliousness which now he was beginning to regret.

Such an attitude as he had assumed could only be justified by results, and the fear was creeping over him that he could not produce those results. Failure was staring him in the face. Since his arrival he had not ceased to brood over this problem, but he could see no light.

Mrs. Pickett's pale eyes somehow made him feel very young.

Elliott Oakes' first act after his brief interview with the proprietress had been to examine the room where the tragedy had taken place. The body had gone, but, with that exception, nothing had been moved.

Oakes belonged to the magnifying-glass school of detection. The first thing he did on entering the room was to make a careful examination of the floor, the walls, the furniture, and the window-sill.

He would have hotly denied the assertion that he did this because it looked well, but he would have been hard put to it to advance any other reason.

(To be continued.)