

The White Cockatoo

by Mignon G. Eberhart

SYNOPSIS: Exploring the eerie old French hotel that has been the scene of two ghastly murders, Jim Sundeen and Sue Tully discover a third body, crumpled under the lid of a huge old piano. Sundeen fears for Sue's safety, since he and David Lorn, the detective, believe the murders are connected with an attempt to secure a token, by means of which Sue must prove her right to her father's millions. And there had been a ghastly high before Sundeen lifted the piano lid.

Chapter 34

FATHER ROBERT'S END

IT WAS quite naturally the priest's death that brought things to their climax, that was in itself the beginning of that protracted dénouement.

For it was, of course, the body of the erstwhile priest that we found that morning, huddled and crowded in its black robes in the depth of the coffin-like piano. It was the priest, and he had been poisoned, and the poison, said the commissaire, wiser now, was again nicotine.

There was a small puncture in the skin of his right arm, and the poison, it appeared, and Lorn agreed with the police when he told me of it, had been administered quickly and deftly with a needle. It was, added Lorn more dryly than usual, a very quick-action poison. The priest would have had practically no time to call for help.

It was to be expected, too, that the murder of the priest would sharply deny my previous calculations. Everything, to my mind, had pointed toward the priest's guilt. But now he himself was a victim to the insensate plan that reckoned murder, and murder by poison, only a counter.

The first murder had been that of an unknown and, till very lately, unidentifiable man. The second murder had been that of a waiter—shocking enough as a crime, it's true, but still Marcel had been in the eyes of the world a person of little importance. And his death had been considered, and rightly, I thought, to have been induced by, and a result of, the first murder.

But the murder of a priest—that was different—even though he might prove to be only a masqueraded priest.

It was not only the fact of a third murder in a few days that roused the town and the police to a higher pitch of excitement and energy. There was also the fact that it proved that the murderer had escaped all efforts of the police to discover his identity, and that he felt so secure in his safety that he dared another brutal murder under their very noses.

If there had been few clues about the first murder and only my own evidence, which was little enough to go on in the case of Marcel's death, there were no clues at all for the third. The priest was dead by poison and had been dead for from seven to eighteen hours, and that was all they knew.

The police sent promptly to far-away Paris for assistance; from something Lorn said, I believe there had been in the town one of those subterranean political wars brewing which had previously intervened and determined the commissaire to settle the matter if it was possible without help.

BUT the third murder proved too much for his faith in himself and his wish to inspire his political opponents with a sense of his own ability. Or perhaps it was the pressure of public opinion that grew too great for him.

He also temporarily increased his force, so that instead of our being simply clapped into jail we were, to all practical purposes, held prisoners by the numerous guards which surrounded the hotel and overflowed into the courtyard and rambled uneasily through the corridors and went to the kitchen. There Paul supplied them with such frequent drinks that there were several occasions, I'm sure, when, if the murderer had popped up under their noses like a rabbit and declared his identity, they might as readily have welcomed him as a comrade as have given chase.

It is perhaps not strange, under the circumstances, that while this guard might have been supposed to act as protectors as well as jailers they were not wholly successful in either rôle, as you will see.

And by the time the detectives from Paris arrived the thing had already marched to its swift and violent ending.

The intervening time seems long in retrospect, but was very swift in experience, for we were so caught in the rapid, dangerous swirl of events that everything beyond our immediate peril was crowded out of our consciousness.

After the first dazed moment following my ghastly discovery in the White Salon, I realized that if Sue had been in danger before, that danger must now be immeasurably greater.

So in the end Sue and I both went to call the police and tell them of what was there in the White Salon. We went together, for I could not bear to let her out of my sight in that menacing place.

I don't remember that I told her what lay in that black coffin, but somehow she knew. I do remember our calling from the very landing where I had stumbled upon the dead man whose murder had ushered in the dreadful business, to the policeman in the court below.

And I remember how he sprang to his feet and stared up at us, and how his jaw dropped, and the blank astonishment in his face when he comprehended Sue's rapid French.

And that he had visibly to try several times before he could pucker his open mouth to give the shrill whistle that brought two other policemen tumbling into the court and eventually up the little winding stairway to bring in their wake turmoil and search and inquiry again.

The whole thing couldn't have taken more than four minutes, but it seemed at least ten.

BUT the thing that stands out sharply in my memory is the thing that happened on the very second preceding their entrance into the White Salon.

I had left Sue under their eyes on the landing and had myself turned back into the corridor and then into the room. I suppose I had approached the great piano merely in order to show them where the body lay, for I could hear their hurried feet on the stairway.

It was only chance that I stood in such a position near the piano that a wisp of white on the carpet caught my eyes. I bent involuntarily and took in my hand a small handkerchief. It had been concealed from my eyes until then by a massive carved leg of the piano.

It was a woman's handkerchief, but it was the faint scent clinging to it that brought it upward nearer my face. I was a familiar scent; a faint delicate whiff of a fragrance that swiftly brought Sue to my mind. Then I recognized it: it was faintly like gardenias.

There was no time to think, for the steps were at the open door of the White Salon. But I knew that during our moment together in the ghostly room Sue had not been near that end of the piano.

And I slipped the thing into my pocket as three blue-caped figures burst into the room, and the air began to crackle with excitement and furious questions and spitting exclamations.

The whole thing was like a repeated nightmare with the results that I have mentioned. It was noon before I had a quiet word in the lounge with Lorn and Sue.

Lorn had, of course, turned up hot-foot at the first news of the new tragedy. And he felt, as did I, that the thing of supreme importance was to remove Sue at once from that death-ridden place. And Sue at last agreed.

"I can't stand it any longer," said Sue. She was white and frightened and taut-lipped. "If the murders are, as you believe, actually the result of a scheme to rob me of my inheritance, let's make an end to it. Heaven knows, I'd rather lose every cent of the money than be even remotely the cause of such—"

She shuddered and said in a breathless way: "It's as if I caused it all."

"Nonsense," I said brusquely, not liking the look in her face or the way her little hands twisted themselves together. "You aren't the cause of this. The cause is the scoundrel who's back of it. Don't look like that."

"We can't even know with certainty," interposed Lorn dryly, "that this last murder has anything to do with your inheritance."

"Don't put me off like that," flashed Sue. "You know what you think, no matter what you can prove."

"Yes," agreed Lorn, imperturbably. "I know what I think. There is a plot against you. The peculiarity of the terms of your identifying yourself and receiving your money practically invites such a thing. And I'm willing to admit that this—priest's surreptitious visit to your room links him with you and your five millions."

"Why do you think the priest was killed?" asked Sue.

Sue determines, tomorrow, upon a course of action.

Butte Falls

BUTTE FALLS, May 15.—(Sp.)—At the last smoker held at Prospect, Butte Falls won all events but three, and of these, two were draws.

Ira Tungate is still in the hospital but is reported to be improving rapidly.

He is feeling better now. Mrs. "Moose" Driskell's mother, Mrs. Denham of Talent, spent several days with Mrs. Driskell.

Pollyanna Girls and their mothers enjoyed a social time at the church May 9. Because of unfavorable weather they could not have a picnic as was planned.

Hustlers club met at the church May 11 for sewing. At the last regular meeting of the club, four new members joined the club. They were Mrs. Ted Jones, Mrs. Wright, Mrs. Oliver Hickey and Mrs. Winn.

Wilma Ellis is visiting relatives in Medford.

Mrs. Ernest Smith received a photograph of her mother and father, taken on their 60th wedding anniversary. They now live in Cottage Grove, but lived in Butte Falls for several years.

There will be a big dance at the Woodman hall May 18.

Mr. and Mrs. John Reed returned to Long Beach after a visit to their homestead.

Roy Maxwell is visiting Art Alquist and Keith McCauley.

Mr. and Mrs. W. E. McDowell returned from Kansas City, Mo., where they have been for several months. Delegates to the home economics extension meeting in Medford reported an interesting time. Mrs. Joe Hibbard gave the report for the Butte Falls unit of the home extension work.

At their party, the Pollyanna Girls presented the mothers with a lovely orchid corsage and gave a splendid program and refreshments.

There will be special Mother's day music at the church Sunday morning.

Baccalaureate services of the Butte Falls high school will be in the church Sunday evening.

Mrs. Ira Tungate was up from Medford to see her children Tuesday.

Mrs. Tungate's aunt from Portland is visiting relatives in Medford and vicinity, and spent Tuesday in Butte Falls with relatives.

S'MATTER POP—

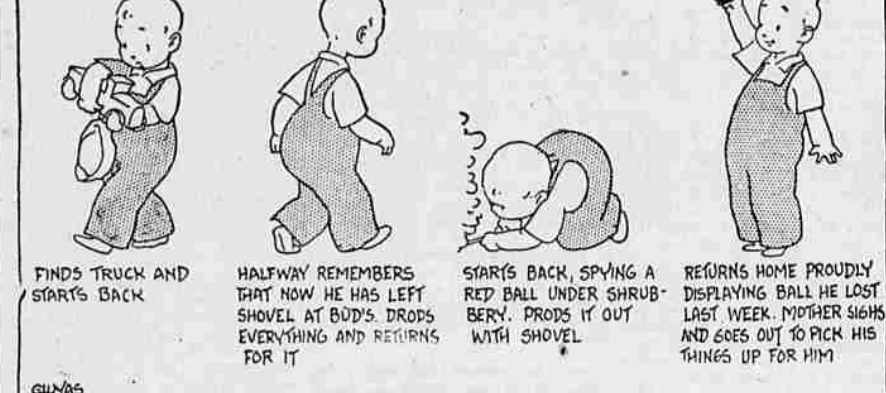
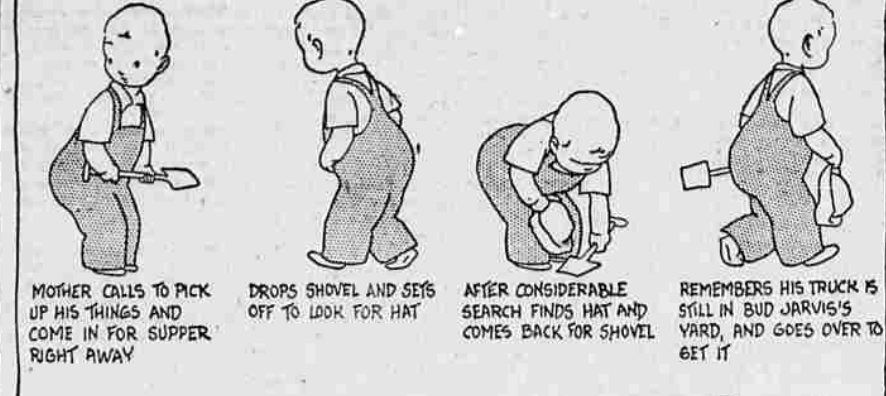
By C. M. PAYNE



(Copyright, 1933, by The Bell Syndicate, Inc.)

PICKING UP

By GLUYAS WILLIAMS



GLUYAS WILLIAMS 5-15

(Copyright, 1933, by The Bell Syndicate, Inc.)

TAILSPIN TOMMY—If Pirates Run True To Form--?

By GLENN CHAFFIN and HAL FORREST



BOUND TO WIN—Suspicion Aroused

By EDWIN ALGER



THE NEBBS—His Responsibility

By SOL HESS



BRINGING UP FATHER

By George McManus



ARRESTS AND SEIZURES FOR LIQUOR DECLINING

WASHINGTON, May 15.—(AP)—

pointment of John S. Hurley, of New Hampshire, as assistant director of prohibition, effective Tuesday, was announced today by Attorney General Cummings.

Meanwhile, the prohibition bureau made public its first statistics on activities since the legalization of beer, revealing a sharp decline in both arrests and seizures.

There's No Guesswork in Tribune A. B. C. Circulation