

MURDER AT MOCKING HOUSE

BY WALTER C. BROWN

STANBIS: Apparently the go-home man and the stranger found dead in Pierre Dufrene's breakfast room, have not each other, and apparently the stranger is he who has been writing threatening letters to Dufrene. But strange strands of suspicion attach to most of the persons in the house, and Sergeant Harper cannot believe in the obvious solution. He and Lafferty begin sorting out the strands.

Chapter 17 TRACKS IN SNOW

SERGEANT HARPER spread out a blank piece of paper and drew a hasty, but recognizable, plan of the ground floor of the Dufrene mansion, with the adjacent grounds. All windows and doors were designated. "Now, before we look at those reports, let's get this matter of the footprints in the snow firmly in our heads. I've made a complete circuit of the house. I'll mark in the tracks as I tell you about them, then you can go out yourself and check over my work before the sun gets busy and destroys them.

"First, here is the back of the house. There are two doors, both giving onto a porch. There are two sets of heavily-marked tracks, leading from the side door of the garage building to the back door of this house.

"They were made by Mr. and Mrs. Whitmore, coming over in response to Andrews' call. There are no other footprints at the back of the house and, naturally, there are none in the snow to either the right or the left side of the house.

"Secondly, there is a confusion of tracks from the pavement to the front door. There is one set, filled in and almost covered by the later snow. Mixed in with these are two sets of fresher tracks, partly filled in. The first set is the original trail left by Hamill, the second lot were made by Connally and Hilleary as they followed.

"Then there is a second group, fortunately to one side of the others. They were made by Clymer, Smith, Doyle and myself, the second group to arrive on the scene. After that I had Connally shove a path and had every one entering or leaving his way to use the path.

"Furthermore, it was Connally who actually traced Hamill's footprints from the call-box and he swears that when he and Hilleary arrived here there was one, and only one, set of prints leading up to the door.

"This gives us an accounting for every single person who entered this house before the path was cleared, except the unidentified man. He must have come in before the snow started, or before it was deep enough to retain the impression of a footprint.

"We know the snow started falling about half-past three yesterday afternoon, but it didn't really begin snowing heavily until an hour or so later. It is almost certain that this man was in this house before half-past five. Otherwise, shapeless, but noticeable, ridges would have been left in the snow. Officer Hamill must have been killed as soon as he entered this room. Miller puts the hour of his death as between seven and nine.

"As you see, that leaves the most important questions unanswered. When and why did the murdered man break in? What drew Hamill's attention to this house? We have the record of all who entered this house last night between, say, half-past five and half-past ten, always excepting our mysterious dead man. As far as I can see it's an unassailable record and it doesn't furnish much ground for the suspicion that all is not as it seems on the surface.

"Do you feel sure that these marks in the snow weren't tampered with?" asked Lafferty. "Can you rely on them entirely?"

"I can see no room for doubt," Harper replied. "You cannot walk through snow of any depth without leaving tracks. Try it, and see for yourself. The snow can go on for hours after a track has been made and it will still be visible. That original, unbroken surface of a fall of snow cannot be duplicated."

"Hold on a minute," Lafferty interjected. "couldn't some one tread in previously made tracks and get out that way?"

Harper shook his head. "One look at Hamill's marks will convince you that that wasn't done. I know that trick has been used, but I'll swear it didn't happen in this instance. I've looked at those marks very carefully and they are absolutely bona fide. Not even a cat walked across those grounds last night."

Lafferty thought it over. "Well, we went over every hole and corner of

light and there was no use in hiding, waiting for a chance to sneak out. So, if no one left the house after the shooting, and no one was in the house when we searched it, there's an end of the matter."

Harper smiled doggedly. "No, that's not the end of the matter. I already have hints of certain things that require explaining. We're going to sit down in this room and reconstruct this affair, movement by movement. If it really was an unforeseen and aimless business, then every single bit of evidence we have gathered will fit into place—if it does not, then something has been tampered with!"

"But who could have tampered with it? This room has been under guard every minute since Hilleary first looked in and saw the bodies."

"Exactly. But what about the interval between the shooting and Hilleary's arrival?" the detective asked, drily.

"Certainly, but you've just finished proving to me that no one could have left here after the shooting without leaving tracks in the snow and I know that no one was hidden in the house. What are you driving at?"

"Simply this—the visible evidence tends to show that these two men were absolutely alone in this house and that they killed each other. But if the evidence leads us to impossibilities, then the evidence must be wrong."

Lafferty gave his superior a knowing look. "Then you have got something up your sleeve," he accused.

"No, I haven't, except an instinctive feeling that we're going to run into some mighty queer things. Now, let's have a look at Jackson's surprise package. Perhaps we'll get some help from it."

HARPER began to open the sealed envelopes marked with his name. "While I get these sorted and arranged," he suggested, "suppose you step outside and check over my work on the footprints in the snow that I couldn't account for."

The detective put down a little X on his sketch. "There it is, a curved slash in the snow about twenty feet from the side of the house. Just the one solitary mark and not more than an inch below the top surface. It's the sort of mark that would be made by a bent twig, except that there is nothing buried there in the snow. It is about eight or ten inches long. I can't see any significance, but you'd better take a look and see if you can explain it. We may as well be thorough."

Lafferty took the sketch drawn by Harper and left, while the latter spread out on the table all the material that had come up from Headquarters. But, before he had a chance to delve into this, there was a discreet tapping at the door and Andrews' grave face appeared in response to the detective's invitation to enter.

"There is a Mr. Howard Doyle to see you, sir," the butler announced, "but the officer won't let him in unless you say so."

"That's all right, Andrews, let him come in."

The butler gave his stiff, jerky nod and withdrew, and shortly afterward the Daily Ledger's crime reporter entered. "How are tricks, Sergeant?" he asked in his usual breezy way. "For a minute I thought I was persona non grata around here."

"Pull over a chair, Doyle. I've been wanting to have a few words with you and I may as well get them off my chest right now."

The reporter brought a chair over to the table, and sat down, unbuttoning his overcoat. "Listen, Harper, before you start talking, answer me one question. Did you say anything about what I did last night? Just answer yes or no, and no hard feelings either way."

"I did not."

"How about Captain Macklin?" Harper shook his head. "I'm in full charge of this case, Doyle. Macklin wouldn't do anything like that without consulting me first. The chances are he doesn't even know about it."

Doyle lit a cigarette and took several puffs in silence, his eyes fixed on a corner of the ceiling. "Get this, Harper. I've been pulled out of the case. What does that sound like to you?"

"It sounds to me as if Dufrene has had something to say to your front office," Harper replied promptly, "and after that bonehead play of yours I'm not surprised."

"Bonehead play, you call it?" Doyle grinned implicitly. "Listen, Harper, you'll be plenty glad I made it before I leave here."

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Doyle contributes some important information, tomorrow.

JACKSON COUNTY DAY FEATURE AT NEW CAVES LODGE

Jackson County Day at Oregon Caves Chateau will be observed with a dinner-dance, Saturday, May twenty-sixth, according to word received from George Sabin, manager of Oregon Caves resort.

Through the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, it is planned to form a caravan which will leave Medford Saturday evening, journey to the Caves, and participate in the complete opening program.

A dinner-dance in the dining rooms of the beautiful new Oregon Caves Chateau has been arranged for the event, and special rates have been announced so that visitors might stay overnight and take breakfast Sunday morning, before returning to Medford. These rates are on file at the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce.

Oregon Caves Chateau, one of the beauty spots of the entire Pacific coast was completed less than a month ago and has been used for opening parties by the Grants Pass Cavemen, and a group of prominent Portland hotel men. So many people have an interest in the new resort that the management decided to conduct a series of opening days, Jackson County being assigned the week-end of May twenty-sixth.

Definite time for departure of the caravan from Medford will be announced later in the week.

Phone 542. We'll haul away your refuse. City Sanitary Service.

BUILDING TRADES HAS MANY IN JOBLESS LINE

WASHINGTON, May 21.—(AP)—More than a million of those on federal relief rolls are one-time workers in the building trades.

Harry L. Hopkins, the federal relief administrator, so told the senate banking committee today in rallying with Secretary Perkins, and Charles Edison, son of the inventor, to the support of the housing program recommended by President Roosevelt. Poised and self-assured, the secretary of labor called the proposal "one of the most essential features of the recovery program."

Collects Fee After 20 Years. NEBRASKA CITY, Neb.—(UP)—Time waits for no man, but John G. Miller, clerk of the district court here, took his time in collecting a witness fee for which he served 20 years ago. He received the customary fee recently.

For Garden Fertilizer Tel. 913-J.

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THE PASSER-BY

GLUYAS WILLIAMS

IS PLAYING HAPPILY WITH MUD

LARGE LADY PASSING BY ASKS IN SIRUPY VOICE IS HE HAVING A DEAR JOLLY TIME WITH HIS LITTLE MUD PIES

CONTINUES TO STARE, LADY BEGINNING TO GET A LITTLE FIDGETY UNDER THE SCRUTINY

GETS A LITTLE BORED WITH HER QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW OLD HE IS AND WHERE HE LIVES. RETURNS TO MUD PIES

FEELS THAT MAYBE HE HASN'T BEEN FRIENDLY ENOUGH AND THROWS MUD PIE AT HER AS GOOD WILL OFFERING

LARGE LADY FLEES HASTILY. GOES BACK TO HIS PIES REFLECTING THAT GROWN-UPS ACT VERY QUEER

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SMATTER POP

POP WHY DONT YA GET US A AIRPLANE TO RIDE IN?

OH, I'D LIKE THAT! BUT IT TAKES SOMETHING ELSE BESIDES AIR TO START FLYING

COULDN'T YA GET SOME ONE TO FURNISH THA MONEY AN' YA FURNISH THA AIR, POP?

SMATTER, POP?

THE YOUNG ONE JUST GAVE ME AN IDEA!

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