

Murder at MOCKING HOUSE

BY WALTER C. BROWN

SYNOPSIS: Sergeant Harper has found two bits of evidence to support his theory that the two men found shot to death in Pierre Dufresne's breakfast room did not shoot each other in spite of appearances. One is the fact that a certain bullet does not fit a certain bullet hole; the other is a drop of water in a glass. Now he has found where the murderer obtained the spent bullet he substituted for the one actually used.

Chapter 23 MISSING REVOLVER

It was a squat roll of old stair carpet. There was a scorched hole through the tough fabric and a further search showed a scar on the whitewashed boards where the spent bullet had hit.

"We're on the right road now," Harper exclaimed exultantly. "If we could only find that steel-jacket bullet, we'd have our proof complete."

"I'm afraid the killer would hold on to that," was Lafferty's surmise. "There's a natural urge to get rid of that sort of evidence," Harper countered, "and I'm counting on that."

They swung their flashlight about at random. "What's in that little cubby-hole over there?" Lafferty poked his head down. "Logs for the fireplace," he announced.

They moved those from one side of the narrow bin to the other but found nothing hidden beneath them. Harper flashed his light around the sides of the bin and the beam came to rest on a rough board barrier set flush into the wall.

The detective unfastened the rusty hooks and pulled it free, after a struggle. A dark space filled with rubble was revealed, greeting them with a damp, musty odor.

"That must be the space under the front steps," said Harper. Lafferty suddenly raised his hand. "Listen!" he whispered. "There's some one on the stairs. I heard a board creak!"

He tiptoed silently in that direction, while Harper snapped off the light and listened, waiting. In a little while Lafferty returned, disgruntled. "There wasn't a soul in sight," he growled, "but I'm sure somebody was listening in."

"I'm going to look in that hole," Harper declared. "Give me a boost up to the ledge." With his assistant's aid he scrambled on to the shoulder-high ledge. Thrusting the torch ahead, he crawled forward on his knees. Lafferty heard a grunt of disgust as he brushed aside a black thing that crawled out from under a dislodged lump of mortar.

There was a cry, a scramble backwards, and Harper slid down to the cellar floor in a shower of small stones and dirt. His clothes were soiled with lime and the soft, mossy dirt, and his hands were brushing at the thick cobwebs caught around his head and shoulders, but in his stained fingers he held a lump of metal.

"Carlin was right!" he exclaimed. It was a discharged .45 caliber steel-jacket bullet!

"BUT, Steve, I tell you I saw it—right there, buried under those handkerchiefs!" Lafferty pointed to the open drawer of the highboy in Pierre Dufresne's dressing-room. There was palpably nothing there now but the neatly stacked handkerchiefs.

"I couldn't be mistaken about anything as important as that. It was not an automatic, but a heavy caliber revolver. Andrews was looking for Dufresne's extra pair of glasses and they were in the drawer on the other side. The gun was not in a holster. I'd bet a month's pay the bullets would be .45's."

"I don't get it at all," Harper mused. "We went off by ourselves and made an important discovery that has to do with the gun used for this crime. No one knew anything about our suspicions, yet when we return to this room less than an hour later the revolver has been spirited away. That's more than a coincidence!"

Harper looked through the other drawers in the highboy. The contents were in meticulous order and it was apparent at a glance that nothing as bulky as the revolver Lafferty had described could be hidden there now.

To be doubly sure that Lafferty and he had overlooked nothing, Harper went through the drawers once more, and gave the pleasant room a hasty general search before either spoke again. There was nothing.

"Don't forget," Lafferty advised drily, "that there was a noise on the stairs while we were poking around the cellar. Some one in this house is trying to keep an eye on us. I think it's Andrews. That fellow can move around with less noise than a snake."

"If that was the revolver we're looking for," Harper went on, "I don't see why it would be left lying around all this time."

"But this gun was too big to be carried around easily. It really needed a holster. I think you'd better tackle Dufresne on the question."

"Not so fast. Let me think. If Dufresne did it and we tax him with it, he'll certainly deny there ever was such a gun. If Andrews did it, he'll lie, too. But if he didn't do it and doesn't know it's gone—do you stay here, Jack, and look through these two rooms for that gun?"

Harper went downstairs. He met Officer Albright, who had stood guard over Dufresne's room, standing in the hall, about to go off duty. "Has any one gone up or down these stairs in the last fifteen or twenty minutes?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"I want you to do something for me. I want to find out if any one left this house in the last hour, and if so, where they went. Can you manage that without arousing suspicion?"

Albright signified that he could. The officer at the front door informed Harper that no one had gone out by that way, whereupon the detective returned to the breakfast room. He pressed the servants' bell and signed to O'Connell to leave the field clear.

When Andrews entered he found the detective bent over the table, carefully examining under the lens the fingerprints the dead man had left on the twin decanters. Sergeant Harper looked around, as if surprised, then said, "Oh, yes. Sit down, Andrews. I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"ANDREWS, we are trying to trace the movements of this man who was killed here last night. We know that he changed into some of your master's clothing. We assume that he lit the fire in the hearth. By the way, was that always prepared for the next lighting?"

"Yes, sir. In the season it would be cleaned early every morning and freshly packed."

"We noticed that there was quite an accumulation of ashes in the pit in the cellar. Was this hearth in use while the re-decorating was going on?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I have not been in this house for some weeks."

"How long has Mr. Dufresne been at the Austerlitz, Andrews?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Dufresne spent the summer at Moose Head Lodge, sir. That's on a small island off the coast of Maine. We came back early in October, but we had only been here a week or two when we went to the Austerlitz."

"But Mrs. Dufresne has been staying at Mrs. Morlock's."

"Since the holidays, sir. The decorators have been very slow. Of course, I sometimes came up here with Mr. Dufresne to see how things were progressing. Donaghy was here much oftener to bring back things that were needed."

"Was the house closed up while the Dufresnes were at Moose Head Lodge?"

"Oh, no, sir. The Whitmores looked after it all summer."

"How many keys are there to this house and who has them?"

"Mrs. Whitmore has the only complete set of keys, I believe, but I suppose you are more interested in door keys. Mr. Dufresne has a set and so has Mrs. Dufresne. I have keys to the front door and back door. That is all, sir."

"The household keys seem to be fairly well scattered around," Harper remarked.

"Not usually so," Andrews replied, with some asperity.

"Oh, I'm not criticizing, Andrews," Harper replied easily. "This man who was killed showed a surprising familiarity with the place. He knew, for instance, how to get hold of those liquor bottles without turning the place inside out."

The butler looked at the twin decanters. "Then he must have found his way to the wine cellar. Those bottles were not kept filled. They were empty last time I saw them."

"But your wine cellar is kept under lock and key? When we searched down there we found the door securely locked."

"Yes, but the key hangs behind a beam, easy to reach, but out of sight. You would have to know where to look for it."

"That's what I thought. Now, Andrews, one more question. I must file a report of whatever firearms are kept on these premises. Mr. Dufresne reports that he keeps a revolver in the house, a .45 caliber. That is correct, isn't it?"

Harper glanced up covertly but the butler's face was as impassive as ever, nor did he hesitate over his reply. "Yes, sir."

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Harper turns up more puzzling information, tomorrow.

STUDENT BODY FEES REQUIRE STATUTE TO ENFORCE PAYMENTS

SALEM, Ore., May 29.—(AP)—Administration of a compulsory \$5 fee for student activities of extra-curricular classification in the state's higher institutions of learning are possible only by statute, Attorney General J. H. Van Winke held today in a second opinion on the matter of fee charges.

The opinion was given Chancellor W. J. Kerr following a report of a special committee of college authorities on a plan for the charging of the extra-curricula fees.

Van Winke held he was "unable to arrive at a conclusion that the creation of a fund for the establishment and maintenance of musical organizations, athletic contests, a daily newspaper, and other activities referred to as extra-curricular, is incidental to the curriculum of students in all departments of the university or college, and in view of the lack of direct connection . . . I am of the opinion that all such activities are not incidental to the education of all students."

Van Winke added that the only suggestion he could make would be the same as in the former opinion—"the enactment of a statute authorizing the collection of such fees."

WALLA WALLA, Wash.—(UP)—Police here faced the probability of wiping their hands on their handkerchiefs or blue uniforms following an "economic" action of the police department. No towels were provided in the washroom.

VAN DUZER UNABLE TAKE CHAIRMANSHIP

PORTLAND, Ore., May 29.—(AP)—H. B. Van Duzer, Portland lumberman, today advised Governor Meter of his inability, because of press of private affairs, to accept appointment as chairman of the state unemployment committee to succeed Raymond B. Wilcox, resigned.

Estes Snedecor, who was named to succeed Alex Barry, resigned, had previously declined to serve.

HITCH-HIKER KILLED WHEN LIGHTS HIDDEN

CENTRALIA, Wash.—(UP)—Joey King, 18, walked along a highway last night, attempting to hail a ride from passing motorists. Two cars approached him from opposite directions at the same time. Joey raised his right arm. The lights from the first car blinded the driver of the second. Joey was run down and killed.

SUBURBAN HEIGHTS

By GLUYAS WILLIAMS



FRED PERLEY IS SO FUSSY ABOUT PEOPLE WALKING ON HIS LAWN THAT THE NEIGHBORS THOROUGHLY ENJOYED WATCHING HIS MISERY WHEN HIS BOSS CAME OUT TO VISIT HIM RECENTLY AND TRAMPED ALL OVER THE PLACE, FRED NOT DARING TO SAY A WORD

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GIVE IT A WHIRL



'MATTER POP-



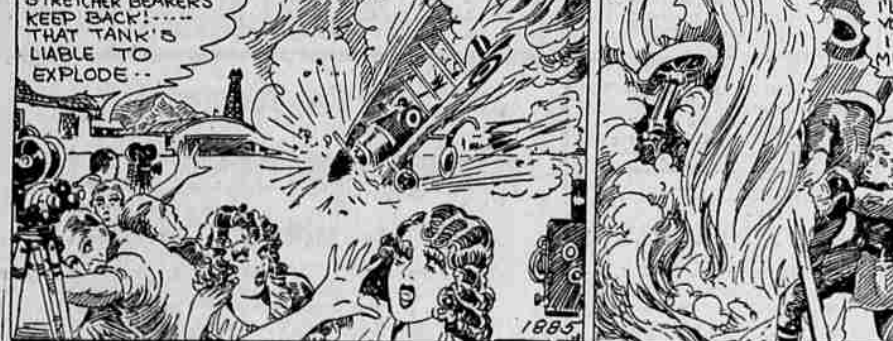
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TAILSPIN TOMMY—Wilkins "Washes Out"



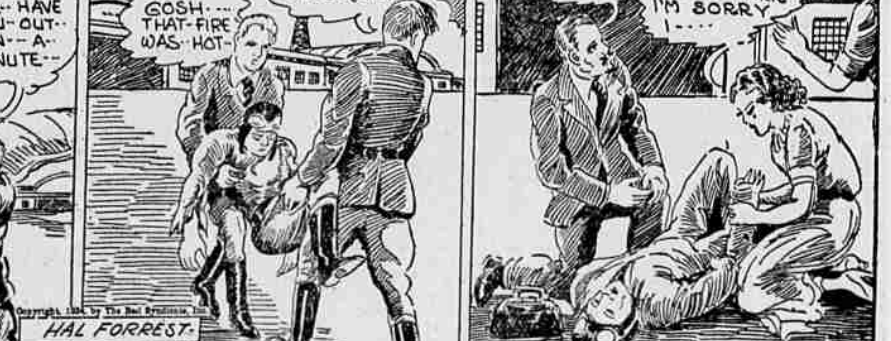
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BEN WEBSTER'S CAREER—A Doubt Or Two



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THE NEBBS—I'm Going Away



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BRINGING UP FATHER



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GOING TO THE DOCTOR



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