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Mystery of the Poisoned Bottle

by William T. Brannon

Art by Elmer Smith

CHIEF DEPUTY SHERIFF George Fields stared down at the body of the beautiful, dark-haired girl sprawled grotesquely on the floor of the hotel room in Orlando, Fla. Then he glanced at the three silent men standing beside the body.

He recognized Edward Asher, the hotel manager, and Dr. McEwan, a local physician. The third man, tall and slender, with a shocked expression on his clean-cut features, said his name was Arthur Walker.

"What happened?" Fields inquired.

Dr. McEwan said he had been in the hotel lobby when Walker called down and said the girl, who was registered as Dolores Myerly, was very sick. Asher and the physician had hurried to the room to find Walker holding the limp form of the girl in his arms. Dr. McEwan, sniffing an odor like bitter almonds, said she had died of cyanide poisoning.

Walker told this story: He had met Dolores earlier that day and they had become friendly. She had invited him to drop by her room for a visit. He had brought along a bottle of bourbon.

She took it, broke the seal and poured out a small drink. She had only one glass, and Walker suggested that she drink first. She did—and almost immediately toppled over, writhing in agony.

It was a strange story, but Walker stuck to it. He said the bottle had been given to him by a man he had met at a local bar. He knew the man only casually and didn't know his name. Walker's story seemed pretty thin and he was held.

Dolores Myerly was 19 and had come from Jacksonville only two weeks before. She had planned to get a job in Orlando and stay there, according to her sister, Miss Lulu Myerly of Jacksonville. The sister had never heard of Walker. A thorough investigation of Dolores Myerly's background failed to reveal any motive.

Similarly, no motive could be established on Walker's part. He was 41 years old and had a good reputation. No amount of questioning could shake his story.

A post-mortem revealed that Miss Myerly had died of cyanide poisoning. Analysis of the bottle found in the hotel room showed enough potassium cyanide to kill seven people!

Questioning of the porter and bartender at the tavern where Walker said he had been given the bottle partially confirmed his story. He had been at the bar that day, drinking beer with a man named Donald Long. But nobody had seen Long hand him a bottle.

Walker himself had been unable to explain why Long had given him the bottle, since they were only casual acquaintances, except that Long had said, "You might as well have this. I never drink anything but beer."

Long was found at home and taken to headquarters. He denied knowing Walker or giving him the bottle of bourbon. He was held as

a material witness, after both the bartender and the porter identified him as the man who had been drinking beer with Walker. "All right," said Long. "I want to see George Coston."

George Coston, a muscular six-footer, had been Orlando's chief of police, but had resigned to open his own private detective agency; his business had prospered. Now he came to the jail to see Long. After a short conference, he told Deputy Fields that he was convinced Long was telling the truth and that he knew nothing of the poisoned whiskey. But Fields wasn't sure and Long was held.

A quick check of the records revealed that Long had had several brushes with the law. But this didn't prove he had poisoned the whiskey. A motive was still lacking.

FIELDS SET OUT to find who had purchased potassium cyanide. He checked all the drug stores in Orlando and only one had a record of a recent sale of the poison. A quarter of a pound had been purchased by a local physician.

The physician confirmed this; he said he had bought the cyanide at the request of George Coston, but that it was for Donald Long, who was making an insecticide which Coston planned to market.

Coston was arrested. He readily admitted that he and Long planned to put an insecticide on the market, but scoffed at the idea of killing the girl. "I never even saw this Myerly girl," he said. "Why should I want to kill her?"

Fields didn't know. Why would anybody kill her?

He went back to the records and pored over them for days. Finally, he came up with the name of Edward Mosely, 17, who lived in Jacksonville. On a hunch, Mosely was picked up and brought to Orlando. Frightened, he began to talk. Then he was confronted with Long, who talked more. Long admitted Mosely was his cousin. The two told a strange story:

They first got acquainted with George Coston when he was police chief and they were arrested for a car theft. Later, they went to work for Coston in his detective agency. Still wielding a lot of power in Orlando, Coston had signed contracts with numerous large firms to protect them against burglary.

But, said Long, the detective agency was a blind. Coston had visions of a crime syndicate with himself as the master mind. He had plotted many thefts, based on his knowledge of local stores.

Coston had counted on Long and Mosely to be the nucleus of his criminal organization. Because they feared him, they at first promised to go along. But they stalled him and, finally, he revealed his full plan: Deputy Fields and the sheriff must be murdered. Long balked at this and young Mosely returned to Jacksonville.

It was an amazing story, but it still didn't account for the murder of Dolores Myerly.

"Did you give Walker that bottle of bourbon?" Fields asked.

"Yes," Long replied. "But I had no idea it was poisoned. I've since figured it out, though."

He said that, following the quarrel, Coston's attitude had suddenly changed. He had proposed that they forget about the criminal syndicate and go ahead with their plans for the insecticide. Long was relieved and quite willing to do this. Coston, who had been drinking heavily, suggested they celebrate the new relationship with a toast. Coston tossed off the contents of one bottle and reached for another, which he handed to Long. But Long refused, telling Coston he had been drinking beer and didn't like to mix it with whiskey. "Okay," said Coston, "take the bottle along for later."

Long had put the bottle in his pocket. Then he met Walker, whom he knew casually and who seemed a congenial fellow. As a gesture of friendliness, he had given the bottle to Walker.

There was a horrified expression on his face as Long finished his story. "That poisoned liquor was really meant for me," he said. "Coston wanted me out of the way so I wouldn't talk!"

The girl had become an innocent victim of Coston's plot.

Coston was convicted of second-degree murder and in 1940 was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Mosely and Long were freed, and Walker was exonerated.

Questioned as to why he had brought Mosely into the case, Deputy Fields said: "Long had been an auto thief, and usually car thieves don't work alone. I discovered from the records that Mosely had been charged with the same offense. Then I made discreet inquiry and learned that Mosely was Long's cousin. I had a hunch he could tell something, though I had no idea what it would be. But I was convinced that Walker was telling the truth, and I didn't want to see an innocent man convicted."