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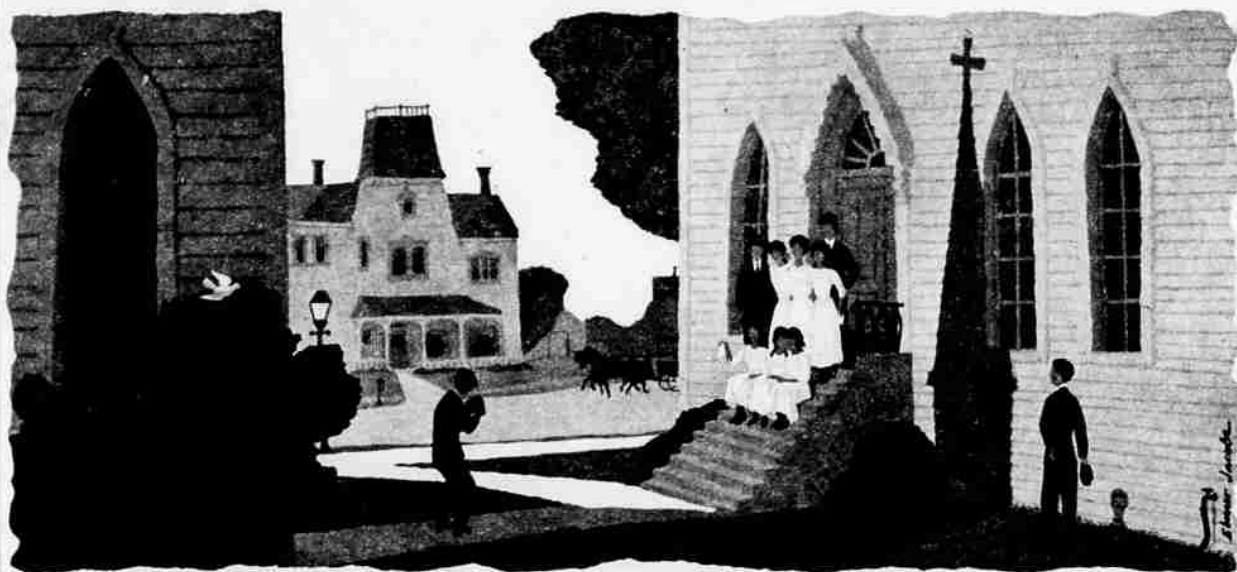
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Case of the Telltale Shadow



As they left the church, a youth took their picture. They thought it was 2:15 p.m., but the photo proved they were wrong.

by William T. Brannon

Art by Elmer Jacobs

A MAN we'll call Tom Koren was the most powerful political figure in Omaha, Neb., and when he called the police on the afternoon of May 23, 1910, a squad of detectives rushed to his home. He pointed to a suitcase he said he had found on his porch. Trailing from it was a length of white cord.

The police took the suitcase to a vacant lot and carefully cut it open. It contained a revolver set to fire if a string were pulled and enough dynamite to destroy Koren's home and anyone near it. The police knew Koren had made enemies and the attempt on his life wasn't surprising.

Suspicion immediately focused on Frank Erdman, a lesser political figure best known for his bitter opposition to Koren. He was arrested and charged with the crime.

Attorney John O. Yeiser was convinced of Erdman's innocence. He believed the whole thing had been rigged by Koren's political supporters who wanted to get Erdman out of the way. Yeiser volunteered to defend Erdman, and the case went to early trial.

Seven witnesses testified they had seen Erdman near the Koren home shortly before the suitcase was found. Five were Koren supporters, and Yeiser was able to discredit them as prejudiced. But the testimony of two witnesses—two young

sisters—was not so easily dismissed.

They said they had been to church that day. As they came out with four other girls and three boys, another youth snapped a picture of them. They said it was 2:15 p.m. They left immediately afterward and, a short distance away, they saw a man in a checked suit near the Koren home.

Erdman, who still wore the checked suit, was identified in court by the two sisters. He took the stand and admitted he had been in the vicinity, but insisted it had been after 3 o'clock. By that time the suitcase had been found and the police were on the scene.

The sisters insisted they were right about the time, and Yeiser was unable to shake their testimony. As the trial was recessed for lunch, he obtained a copy of the picture they mentioned. The lawyer studied it for a long time before he discovered that it might help.

Yeiser asked that court be recessed so he could look into new evidence. Then he hurried to the church and stood on the steps. Satisfied, he hailed a cab and drove to Creighton University. There he talked to a professor and left the picture with him.

When court convened the next day, the defense called a new witness, Father William Rigge, a Jesuit priest who identified himself as professor of astronomy at Creighton. Yeiser asked him if it was possible, from the photograph, to determine what time it had been taken.

"Yes," Father Rigge replied. "I can tell you within one minute."

"You can? How?"

"By the angle cast by the shadow of the church steeple in the picture."

The priest then fixed the time at 3:12 p.m.—almost an hour later than the time given by the sisters.

Frank Erdman agreed this was about the time he was in the vicinity of the Koren home; and by that time the booby trap had been taken away by the police.

The astronomer's testimony couldn't be refuted, and the prosecution couldn't prove that Erdman had been there before the suitcase was found. He was acquitted.

Nevertheless, there were doubters. Many people questioned the accuracy of the astronomical calculations, and some said it couldn't be done at all. Father Rigge, the chief of detectives, and others interested in the case agreed on an experiment.

One year later, they stood on the church steps and were photographed. The following year they again posed for a picture on the church steps. In both instances the photographer snapped the picture when the shadow was in the exact position shown on the original snapshot of the girls.

The result convinced the skeptics that it was possible to pinpoint the time from the shadow on a picture. In both cases, the pictures had been snapped at exactly 3:12 p.m. and the angle of the shadow on both was identical with the original picture.