OVERNIGHT GUEST

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

THE STORY THUS FAR: Miss Bruce, pen convict, Inspector Tope and Mrs. Tope and in the Metro study. Tope found a man murdered, who was at first identified as Ledbrige, head of the Ledbrige advertising agency. Mrs. Bruce had been found in Ledbrige's car, and had committed suicide. Joe Dunn, architect, D.A., accused Tope of tampering the coin, of that charge. Tope arranged for Dunn to keep a hidden gun with the man who was said to be Ledbrige. While they were in the room, Ledbrige spent the money. Tope and Dunn, in a motor boat, went out and brought the man to shore. Ledbrige told Mrs. Bruce Dunn had been the murderer.

CHAPTER XV

He spoke so simply that his accusation lacked reality. Ledbrige cried: "I don't believe you're serious!"

"Why, yes," Tope assured him. "It's obvious."

The door from the hall opened, and they all looked that way; saw Bee Dewain. For a moment no one spoke; and then said: "Go on, please. Why I hate?"

Tope answered her. "We're just trying to make Mr. Ledbrige admit that he was the man in Little Bear last Friday night," he explained, and turned to Ledbrige again. "If you weren't," he challenged, "how did you know it was a dog kicked that fire wrapped him up in? I said 'blanket,' but I never mentioned a dog."

"Why, I've been in Holden's garage right there. When you said 'blanket,' I thought of the police dog sleeping on its blanket in the corner there."

"Well, maybe," Tope agreed; but before he could speak again, Joe Dunn took a hand. Here was, it seemed to him, not only the clue, but Bee Dewain for an audience to witness his triumph over Tope. He strode a little forward, and spoke crisply.

"Come, Tope," he said with a mocking kindness, "I guess you've gone as far as you can, haven't you? Maybe you've got at the truth, all right; but Tope, it isn't enough for me to know the truth. I have to be able to prove it. I have to get convicting that will pass as evidence in court."

Tope looked at him thoughtfully. "That's so, too," he agreed. "You do, have to try the case, don't you?"

Joe smiled. "So while you've been reading dream books, and telling fortunes by the cards," he derisively explained, "I've been collecting a few facts—just plain facts. And, of course, one particular fact. One good fact that can't be shaken is all we need, isn't it?"

Miss Bruce demanded: "Joe, do you have to be a fool brute in one day?"

But Tope ruffled Adam's arm, flashed him. "Now, Adam," he protested, "you let Joe set off his fireworks. It never does anyone on a bit if he has something, you're a smart young man."

"There he ought to leave better—"

"—and respectable," Tope said a minute, Bruce! After all, this case is my job. This old man hasn't got much of evidence, but I have. I can prove that Dallas Ledbrige, here, was in Little Bear that night, Friday night," he said emphatically.

"Dallas was, all right," Tope assented. "I know that for—"

"But you can't prove it!"

"Why, that depends! Maybe not!"

"Well, I can," said Joe proudly. "While you've been chasing will-o'-the-wisps, I've found a witness. I've got a lady who heard Mrs. Ledbrige the outrage that night, and Ledbrige here's by name."

Tope pondered. "Well, if you have, that's something, sure—"

Dana laughed exultantly. "You bet it is!" he cried. "It's worth all your guess work."

"Called him by name, did she?" Tope inflected.

Joe cried in a hot triumph: "Yes, she did!" And he explained carefully: "I mean she was hugging him not to have poor Christopher burn to die. But at any rate, she said: 'Oh, no, please don't, Rufe! Don't, Rufe, please!'"

"Rufe, eh?" Tope echoed.

"Sure. Rufus. Rufus Ledbrige! And that's proof enough to convince any jury—with the rest of what we've got—that Rufus Ledbrige was in Little Bear that night."

Tope rubbed his mouth with his hand; he wagged his head. "Why, Joe," he said, "Rufus Ledbrige was in Little Bear that night, all right. Or right handy. But the woman, Mrs. Rufe, she wasn't talking to him; and if she had been, he wouldn't have heard her. Rufus was out in the car, under the ramide seat, sick and unconscious, with the drugs in him. No, Rufus couldn't hear her."

Joe stammered: "What are you talking about?"

"This man here isn't Rufus Ledbrige, son," said Tope. "This—this was his brother's name?—this here is Christopher."

And while they were all for a moment silent, Bee Dewain—as though she had heard what she came to hear—quietly slipped away.

Bee had departed; but no other moved. Only Ledbrige laughed, sparing to young Joe Dana, to big Mr. Cumberland.

"Who is this—aged lecturer?" he protested. "Our best friends mustn't distinguish between us, so you may have to take my word for it; yet I assure you I am Rufus, and poor Christopher."

"Who was your dentist?" Tope inquired. "Doctor Lund?"

Ledbrige smiled. "No, Doctor Lund was Christopher's. I went to a New York man." There was a mocking triumph in him. "Oh, I assure you we covered all points, inspector."

"Just the same," Tope insisted, "you've found to be Christopher. Rufus wouldn't have any gold reason to kill Christopher; but Christopher—figuring he could step into his brother's shoes, take over the money and the power that his brother had accumulated—he'd have plenty of reason to kill Rufus. Yes, you're Christopher. It don't make sense any other way."

Ledbrige started to speak; but Tope said impressively: "That's why you tried to divert Mr. Hardy. Because he told you that you didn't look like Rufus. I figured you'd try to kill him, if he did suspect; and when you invited him to go fishing, and I found out he couldn't swim, I guessed how you'd do it. You had tried to find out, two weeks ago, whether he'd confide anything—tried to see him, but he was away. You were checking up ahead of time, with Mrs. and Mrs. Kell, to see if they'd realize you weren't Rufus. Mrs. have had his idea in mind before Rufus got sick and gave you the chance to pull it off. You fooled her, then; so you took a chance on being able to fool Hardy."

And he explained: "So I told him to pretend to see a difference in you today; and he did; and you tried to drown him."

"Ridiculous! He imagined that!"

"And Mrs. Kell," Tope added relentlessly, "in Little Bear the other night, finally realized you weren't Rufus. That was why you killed her."

Ledbrige said heavily: "Man, you're—"

Tope cut in: "Wait. If you weren't done, how did you happen to think of Kell's shoes with the heel-plates on them? I mentioned footprints, but not Kell nor his heel-plates."

Ledbrige licked dry lips. "Just a guess! It would be natural for Rufus to put on some one of Kell's shoes; and Kell's were available."

"Mr. Ledbrige," he confessed, "I told white lies to you awhile ago, when I was telling you the truth! I didn't tell you that the sweater was gone, and you stepped into the rest. I didn't say the shoes were ignition wires, or that it was electrical tape, or that it was the dog's blanket. You dodged the wires and the tape, but you stepped right into the wrong one. I didn't mention that your brother's body was in the car, and you didn't say anything about Rufus's shoes, but you did. I didn't say your brother's body was in the manhole, but you did."

He added calmly: "And there was other evidence, the worst of all. You put your neck right into that one, Ledbrige. You knew at the minute you did it!"

"You're crazy!" Ledbrige cried hoarsely.

"Oh, sure," Tope explained, "that I didn't tell you Mrs. Kell was dead, girl. Oh, she was, all right! But how did you know?"

Tope let his spoke tutted toward the door. Now, before Ledbrige, swiftly shaken, could reply, the old man said:

"Oh, hello, ma'am!"

They all swung that way. There were Mrs. Tope and Bee, and between them, they supported Miss Ledbrige. The little old woman, white as a wraith, came uncertainly into the room. She looked from one to another till her eyes fastened on her brother's face; and then she spoke.

"Christopher!" she whispered. "Christopher!"

She tottered weakly. Ledbrige took one step toward her; and she seemed to collapse upon a great divan there beside her. Mrs. Tope eased her as she fell; the old woman lay with eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Ledbrige strode frankly toward her. "Christ, gentlemen," he said warningly. "My sister's heart cannot withstand a heavy shock!" He came to where she lay, and his hand caught up her wrist, his fingers pressed the pulse; he stood intent and listening.

Then without a word he took from his vest pocket a small vial, poured half a dozen pellets into the hand, selected one, replaced the others.

"Some one get water," he whispered. "Here, Alice, swallow this."

His hand touched her cheek. Her lips opened, received the small pellet. She seemed to swallow. And Tope said softly, behind Ledbrige:

"Doctor, will she die?"

"Oh, no," Ledbrige assured him; and then he stirred to face the others at once, and his cheek was ashen. "You are a doctor?" he cried desperately.

"You took her pulse like one," said Tope. He added: "And you assumed to be the doctor of one. And your sister is the one. She thinks you're Christopher. And Christopher's a doctor!"

Ledbrige said rapidly: "No, listen! I must explain, gentlemen, my sister has hallucinations. Her hand for years a little disturbed, and she's frightfully upset now. She always worshipped Rufus!"

Tope tested past Ledbrige at the woman on the couch. "She's not Rufus's dead, not Christopher!"

Ledbrige discovered: "No, no! I mean Christopher—"

But Miss Ledbrige spoke, behind him. Her voice was faint, yet strong. "If Rufus is dead, you killed him, Christopher."

Ledbrige whirled on her in incredulous horror; he appealed to them all. "How can she hear? Without her ear-phone! She is deaf as a post!"

"I can read your lips, Christopher," said Miss Ledbrige. "I have done for years, have from hearing many secret ugly things about me."

"You wouldn't talk, Alice!" Ledbrige cried. "Your—"

But Tope said calmly: "Oh, she won't do, Doctor Christopher. She didn't swallow the pill you gave her! If you could have killed Hardy and your sister, you might have killed your brother's clerk with no one to suspect you; you couldn't Rufus. But Hardy's alive, and so is she."

And he spoke to Mrs. Tope. "Give Mr. Cumberland that pill Miss Ledbrige didn't swallow, my dear. He'll wish to have it analyzed, to see if it's the right medicine to give a weak old woman when she has a heart attack."

Mrs. Tope obediently dropped the white pellet into Mr. Cumberland's great hand. But Ledbrige laughed; he said briskly:

"Of course it is." He tilted that small bottle from his pocket again, poured the pills out into his palm, took a supply always ready," he said. "They're helpful for certain Drug'ys all the same. Like this one."

And he selected one, and suddenly he lifted it toward his mouth. But Adam Bruce, long silent forewarned, was ready. His crushing blow practically Ledbrige arm and hand; the pills went flying all across the floor.

(THE END)



IMPROVED UNIFORM INTERNATIONAL

SUNDAY SCHOOL Lesson

Lesson for March 10

A PEOPLE IN CONFUSION

LESSON TEXT: Judges 6:7-10, 25-32; Hebrews 11:32. GOLDEN TEXT: "The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear."—Hebrews 13:6

Confusion is a word well suited to describe the world today. With the end of the war we had hoped for peace and goodwill, and what have we? We may learn from the experiences of Israel the reasons for such confusion. They, too, had come into their land and should have had only peace and prosperity. Instead there were turmoil and disorder. Why?

The success or failure of both nations and individuals is ultimately determined by their attitude toward the law of God. He is always right and true. The consistent life is a world order that swings wildly from one extreme to another is the lawless, which is perfect and eternal.

God is no respecter of persons. Even Israel, his own chosen nation, found that observing God's law meant blessing, and failure to do so brought judgment and sorrow. His rule is great and powerful enough to ignore His rule, and none is exempt from its operation.

I. The Cause—Forgetting God (vv. 7, 10).

The Lord had promised the land to them as they went in and possessed it by faith in him. He fully kept that promise in the measure that they believed him. They never did take the whole land, but that was because of their failure, not God's.

As the people of Israel took possession of the land, they went forward in the way of blessing as long as Joshua, and the elders who remembered God, kept them steadily and true. We have here an excellent illustration of the power of a godly example. It is far stronger than words.

The fact that a nation has been highly privileged and has been exalted to a place of power and honor will not save it in the day when God is forgotten. Israel no longer had God-fearing men to bring it back to the Lord, and so began its sorrowful drifting.

We Americans are rightly proud of our great land, its mighty resources, and the part we have played in the past and present days are ahead! They may be, but only if we, like old Israelites who established this nation, recognize God. If we do not, America will go the way of the forgotten empires of centuries past, and that in spite of all its past achievements and its present promises.

It is a significant thing that our holidays and national events often pass from Christian customs, why not in and that they themselves are so frequently not Christmas. Their lives are shaped by the worship and influence of godly parents, but what will their children do if they are not brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord?

II. The Condition—National and Spiritual Confusion (vv. 25-32).

The history of the period of the judges in Israel is incomplete, but what we have shows the awful confusion of the nation. Not only were they in opposite to God, but the people as a whole were divided into three groups—north, and south, of Jehovah, and part of the Jordan.

The moral and spiritual decay were evident in their turning to the immoral practices of Baal-worship (v. 25).

One would have thought that God would give up a people so set on their own way, but he did not. He provided deliverance for Israel. That grew so strongly, for we know that he has not given us up, but has provided in Christ a sure deliverance, if America will turn to him.

It is interesting to note that God works through men. Some of these judges were great men; others were just ordinary men. But each in his appointed place, as the appointed him, was God's man.

Confusion, sin and disobedience cannot be tolerated indefinitely. So Israel gradually went on to

III. The Conclusion — Judgment from God (vv. 30-32).

The end not only will not hold a backsliding nation guiltless, but will bring judgment upon it. So has it been over his people to a despairing nation. He has instruments of individual and national chastisement, and he is ready to use them.

Notice that whenever they went the Lord's hand was against them. There is no place to flee from the presence of God. Anyone who thinks he can do it should read Psalm 139:7-12. It can't be done. That is a comfort to the believer, but it is very displeasing to the unbeliever.

They compromised with evil, and lost not only their testimony but their very spiritual life. They forsook God and took into their friendship the enemies of God, only to find that they were their very enemies.

We are in danger now of compromise with evil, both in our personal and in our national lives. So we do—and if we do—we may expect only disaster and judgment.

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The Questions

1. How long is the Panama Canal?
2. What philosopher said: "I think, therefore I am"?
3. Death Valley is how many feet below sea level?
4. What man was "Father of the Atlantic Cable"?
5. Hollingsworth is London's what?
6. How many books has the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C.?
7. For whom is the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C., named?
8. There is a lake 8 miles long, 4 miles wide in the center of a volcano. It is 6,000 feet above sea level, yet never freezes. What is it called?
9. How often would a bimonthly booklet be issued?
10. What is the difference between a rule of railroad and a rule of road?

The Answers

1. It is 40.6 miles long.
2. Descartes.
3. It is 276 feet below sea level.
4. Cyrus W. Field.
5. Fish, market. Billingsgate is the fish market in London.
6. More than 6,000,000.
7. James Smithson, British chemist, who left $500,000 to establish the institution.
8. Crater lake in Oregon.
9. Every two months.
10. A rule of track is just that; but a rule of railroad may embrace two or more parallel tracks and may include sidings, spur tracks and yard tracks.



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