THREE SHUTTERED HOUSES

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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CHAPTER X—Continued

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Miss Moss asked: "Why didn't Mr. and Mrs. Hurder wake up, I wonder?"

Clint suggested: "Smoke got them, maybe."

But June said: "They slept pretty soundly, usually. And Aunt Evie gave them some warm milk when she put them to bed." Her voice for a moment was dry, as though it might crack. She repeated: "They slept soundly."

Tope looked at Miss Moss; and then he asked awkwardly: "About Mr. and Mrs. Hurder. How—what do you think?"

"They were unconscious," Clint explained. "The firemen got a pulmotor. Doctor Cabler was there. I didn't wait to hear. I brought June away."

Miss Moss said: "I'm glad you did, Clint. Miss Leaford, I'm going to put you to bed in our spare room. Clint, you will stay here tonight?"

June protested: "Oh, I don't want to go to bed."

And Tope reflected: "Funny that the fire department took so long to answer." He asked Clint: "Mrs. Taine or any of them surprised to see you there? Surprised to see June up and dressed?"

Clint nodded, with a smile at June. "Matter of fact, we had quite a row," he admitted. "June and I had Mr. and Mrs. Hurder out of the house when Mrs. Taine got there. She asked if they were dead, and I didn't know. So she knelt down to feel them, and then Asa came along, and she told us to carry them into the Bowdon house. We did, and about that time the firemen got there, and I went outside again and took June with me."

The others were listening intently, and Miss Moss watched the girl and liked her. "But Mrs. Taine came out after us," he explained. "June had on a new dress that Asa had given her, and Mrs. Taine didn't approve of that. She wanted to know why June wasn't in bed and asleep, and who I was, and about this dress . . . She had burned her hand, and maybe that upset her, but she was pretty unpleasant, and I got good and mad.

"Finally she told June to go into the Bowdon house and take off that dress and go to bed, and I got up on my ear. I told her June was coming home with me."

June lifted her head; and Clint held her close. "Mrs. Taine thought I was crazy," he said. "But June stood up for herself."

"I told her I never would live there again," the girl cried, in a sudden passion of grief and woe. "Oh, I can't go back. Ever! It was terrible, always, there."

Miss Moss came quickly to her side. "Now that's enough for tonight," she decided. "I'm going to put you to bed, child. Come."

"No, no," June protested. "I can't. I don't want to be alone."

The Inspector said soberly: "The fire chief figures the fire was set. Gas exploded in the cellar." Miss Moss nodded; and Tope exploded in a grim wrath: "I told Heale, days ago, that when a man starts killing, he may go on."

She touched his hand, comforting him; and he asked: "What do you think?"

She hesitated. "If Rab Taine was in Providence, and Asa and Mrs. Taine and Mrs. Bowdon were together, then only Mr. Taine was alone."

"They found Taine asleep in a chair in the kitchen of his house," he said. "I asked Heale. But Glovere's still missing."

She looked at him curiously. "Asleep?" she repeated. "But Miss Leaford said they saw Mr. Taine turn out the light!"

"She said they saw the light go out," Tope corrected. "Mrs. Taine said the lights went out in the Bowdon house, too. But anyway, Taine was asleep in the chair when they found him. Or pretended to be."

Miss Moss considered. "I should like to know," she reflected, "why his light went out?"

"Heale told me once that the three houses were all on one meter," Tope recalled. "Wired from the Hurder cellar. The fire might have shorted the wires, or melted them."

"Then why did the current go off in the Taine house before the fire started?" she insisted. "And what started the fire? And why did it spread so fast? And why was the department so slow in answering the alarm? And how did Mrs. Taine burn her hand?"

Inspector Tope made a gesture of amused surrender. "I don't know Mrs. Tope," he protested. "Wish I did."

She nodded, smiling faintly. "I'll take care of Miss Leaford," she promised. "While you find out the answers!"

CHAPTER XI

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Tope and Clint arrived at Kenesaw Hill toward four in the morning, to find the house all collapsed into a mass of timbers through which like rats the little flames still played. And all about, in a thin circle, curious folk were standing by. Clint pulled up beside the road, and Inspector Heale saw their arrival and came across to meet them.

"That you, Tope?" he asked "Young Jervies with you? Where's the girl?" He was peering into the car.

Inspector Tope said: "Mrs. Tope put her to bed. She was tired out. Clint here can tell you all there is to tell."

Heale nodded. "You spotted the fire, didn't you, Jervies?" he asked.

So Clint told his story, briefly, the Inspector listening without interruption till the young man was done. Then Inspector Heale began to question him; and Tope left them together and walked over toward the fire. There were two or three scores of people here, roused by the alarm or wakened by the glare of the flames against the rainy sky, and come to watch the conflagration to its end. Tope moved among them quietly, listening to the fragmentary conversations here and there.

Then he saw Asa Taine, in the shadows by the old barn, talking to someone—Lissa Thayer.

Her countenance was in darkness, since Asa stood between her and the fire, so Tope could not see her expression; but he saw Asa bend nearer her, his arms encircling her in a swift embrace, his face close to hers.

Then someone called Tope's name, and the old man saw Lissa slip away into the darkness as Heale and Clint came to his side. At the same time Asa recognized Clint, and he approached them.

"Hullo, Jervies," he said, in a friendly tone. "What have you done with June?" Heale and Tope were a little to one side.

"I took her home," Clint explained. "I thought she ought to get away from here."

Asa nodded approvingly. "It's been hard on her here, even before

"This was a spare this woman."

tonight," he assented. "But if you don't bring her back, you'll have a hornets' nest around your head. They won't let her get away." He grinned encouragingly. "Stick to her, Jervies. Hang on to her. Don't let them scare you."

"I'm keeping June," Clint told him stoutly. He spoke to Tope, uneasily. "I'm pretty tired," he said. "I'll go home, if you don't mind. Be with them there."

Tope nodded; and Asa turned and saw the Inspector. "Hullo!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Inspector Tope, eh?" He looked past Tope at Heale, a swift conjecture in his eyes.

Clint departed, and a fireman joined them. Water dripped from the rim of his white helmet, and his rubber coat was glistening. He said to Inspector Heale: "We can't do a thing for hours yet. Too hot."

Asa demanded: "Do what? What do you mean?"

Inspector Heale hesitated. "This is Chief Mason, Tope," he explained; and then to Asa: "Why, Mr. Taine, we think this fire was set."

"Set?" Asa was rigid. Tope, watching him, thought the man used an effort to control his voice. "Why?"

"To kill Mr. and Mrs. Hurder," said Inspector Heale harshly.

For a long moment there was silence. Chief Mason moved away, back to the fire. Asa stood thoughtful, with bowed head. Then his eyes shifted, and he looked past Inspector Heale, and called in a low tone: "Rab!"

Inspector Tope swung around in time to see Rab Taine coming toward them from the direction of the old barn.

"Hullo," he said in a level monotone. "What's the matter, Asa?"

And Asa told his brother: "This is Inspector Heale. He thinks the fire was set, to kill Grandma and Grandpa Hurder."

Tope watched Rab intently. "Set?" the young man exclaimed. "Kill? For heaven's sake, why should anyone—" He stared from one to another. "Why should anyone do that?" he demanded.

"Same reason someone killed Mrs. Leaford," said Heale implacably; and Rab cried:

"Aunt Kitty? Why, she took an overdose—"

But Heale said grimly: "Oh, she was killed, all right." There was something like a harsh triumphant relish in his words. "Murdered, Taine! And so were these old folks tonight. Or Mrs. Hurder, anyway. Mr. Hurder may get well."

"For heaven's sake," Rab protested, "if you thought that about Aunt Kitty, why haven't you done something before now? Why haven't you said so before? You might have prevented this tonight!"

Inspector Heale confessed: "I figured there'd be a better chance of finding out—"

"Blast it!" Rab cried. "You've fiddled around with your figuring; and now— You're as bad as—"

But Asa interposed reasonably: "Steady, Rab. I guess Inspector Heale used his best judgment. After all, he couldn't be sure Kitty was poisoned. Maybe her heart cracked, let go."

He added: "And this tonight may have been an accident. You can't tell."

Inspector Heale asked Asa: "Where were you, tonight?"

Asa looked at him slowly, then grinned. "You cross-examined me once before, Inspector," he remarked, in a dry amusement. "Tonight? I was asleep on the couch in the dining-room next door." He nodded toward the Bowdon house.

"Asleep, eh?"

"Till Mother woke me, yes."

"Where was she?"

"With Grandma Bowdon."

"Dressed, were you?"

"Shoes off, and coat," Asa answered.

Rab interrupted: "Asa, you said they questioned you before? You knew what they thought about Aunt Kitty?"

"They told me, yes," Asa explained.

Rab cried: "Then why didn't you tell us?"

But Tope, in the background, suggested mildly:

"I hear you were in Providence tonight, Mr. Taine."

Rab stared at him almost truculently. "What of it?" he demanded and turned away.

"Do you mind my questions, Asa?," Tope asked.

"No," Asa assured him. "Anything you like."

"Mrs. Leaford leave a will?"

"No."

"Mr. Bowdon? Mr. Hurder?"

"Yes, of course."

"What were the terms?"

Asa looked at him thoughtfully; and he glanced at Inspector Heale. He said: "I'll tell you anything I can, but I can't help you on that. My father drew the wills. You'll have to ask him."

"Where is he?" Inspector Heale demanded. "Where was he tonight?"

Asa smiled faintly. "He went to sleep in a kitchen chair after supper," he explained. "Mother found him still asleep there when she went to telephone Rab."

"Asleep through all this hullabaloo?"

"He's stone deaf, you know."

Tope asked gently: "Taine, if one of the connections didn't do this, who did? Anyone live around here who might? Jim Glovere, or the Thayers?"

He saw Asa taut and stiff, like a fencer on guard; but before he could reply, Rab spoke at Tope's elbow. The young man had returned unseen, and he said in the tone of one conveying an order that must be obeyed:

"My mother wants a word with you gentlemen. Please follow me."

Without the slightest hesitation, Tope moved briskly after Rab. Heale almost reluctantly followed him, but Asa stayed behind.

When Tope and Inspector Heale followed Rab into the house where lamps were burning to replace the now useless electric lights, there was stir and movement behind the closed doors of the dining-room in which Denman Hurder still lay unconscious and near death; and the parlor doors likewise were closed. But Mrs. Bowdon and Mrs. Taine waited for them in the sitting-room; and Mrs. Bowdon was in a chair that faced the door by which they entered. Tope had an impression of mass, of a white mass that would not easily be moved. Her hair was white; so was her cheek; so was the shapeless dressing gown she wore. She sat in a ponderous immobility which had nevertheless a suggestion of power held in restraint; and her eyes were alive and hard and cold.

Mrs. Taine, on the other hand, met them at the door. This was a spare, thin woman; her thin hair was black; her cheek was sallow; her lips were thin. She spoke in a soft sibilance, in keen syllables that suggested the slicing stroke of razor-blades.

"I sent for you gentlemen," she told them simply. "My son tells me you are circulating the suggestion that Mrs. Leaford's death, and the tragedy tonight, were not accident but design. I will not permit such nonsense. If such rumors become current, I shall know whom to blame, and I will hold you both responsible. Let the talk end here and now. I bid you good day."

Inspector Tope waited for Inspector Heale to speak. Rab exclaimed, in a restrained anger: "You heard her, gentlemen. That is all."

And when Heale still was silent, Mrs. Bowdon said, without moving her lips: "Outrageous. Impudent audacity. Clowns."

"One thing more," Mrs. Taine remembered. "Mr. Clinton Jervies took June Leaford away with him, against my express wish. She must be back here in the morning. We take care of our own, we Kenesaws; we ask no favors anywhere. See to it that this is done, or I shall know what steps to take."

Heale remained mute; but Tope suggested gently: "How old is Miss Leaford, ma'am?"

Mrs. Taine looked at him. Most people were somewhat melted by Tope's mild kindliness, but she was not. "She is of age, yes," she said calmly. "But that is immaterial. She is an inexperienced child, quite incompetent to decide things for herself. Kitty Leaford was no fit mother for her, but I have done my duty by June, and will continue to."

But Inspector Heale found his tongue at last, forgetting his awe of these two women in remembrance of his duty and his rights. "Now, wait a minute," he insisted. "You folks on the Hill have gone your own gait in a lot of things; but this looks like murder to me, and it's my duty to check up on it. Some questions I want to ask you. I know you're feeling pretty bad right now, so if you want to wait till morning—"

Mrs. Bowdon said heavily: "There is nothing I can tell you. My husband lies dead in the house. I wish to be alone."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Borrow From Victorian Era For Quaint Summer Frocks

By CHERIE NICHOLAS

"LITTLE WOMEN" of today are borrowing from the Victorian era for their summertime frocks. Ingenue silk taffetas are being shown in neat little checks such as were worn by the fashionable miss of the polite and decorous yesteryears. These taffetas vie with taffetized crepes, gaily sprigged with flowers in a coy and cunning manner. Also to be seen this season are many supple silk crepes in both plain versions and in printed stylized florals and geometrics.

With these naive silks go winsome leghorn bonnets, velvet bound and with a nosegay on top, the quaintness added unto with petticoat ruffles peeping from beneath full, graceful and animated skirts. Guimpes and fitted bodices do much toward transforming the modern school girl, in appearance at least, into her Nineteenth century counterpart who was "seen and not heard" in the presence of her elders.

Speaking of present day styling details, necklines go high or low, sleeves more often than not are puffed, and bodices are softly fulled with shirrings and smockings or else are quaintly basquelike. Interest continues in the skating silhouette rejuvenated by lingerie touches and petticoat ruffles.

The basque bodice, full skirted silhouette so important these days in the style picture, gives youthful charm to a neat silk print as shown to the left in the picture. The print is in the new golden beige coloring which together with its neat small motifs introduced in its silk crepon fabric, dates this dress unmistakably of 1939 vintage. Thrilling news from Paris cited a revival of the lingerie fichu worn with silk prints. The crisp white organdy fichu and pearl-encircled cameo mounted on black velvet dangling from a cunningly devised organdy "necklace" are flattering accents to this pretty gown for a young lady of "teen" age.

Polka dots flourish in the print realm this season both for adults and the younger generation. The dirndl influence in the skirt, the square neckline, the yoke treatment are details that combine to make the dress of polka-dot silk crepe centered in the picture, a very smart affair for the growing girl. Very practical too, for the silk washes perfectly.

Interest continues in the skating silhouette in skirts rejuvenated by spic and span lingerie touches and petticoat ruffles. For the pretty little-girl frock to the right in the picture the designer selects a china blue silk crepe with a stylized floral print. Fine eyelet batiste makes its petticoat ruffle and it also edges the square scalloped neckline. The Victorial bonnet that tops this quaint dress is a newly accepted fashion this season for young girls.

Now a word in regard to party dresses for sweet sixteen and thereabout. For dancing daughters, the graduate girl, birthday party or little flower girls who grace the wedding scene, silk sheers take the limelight. There are silk georgettes, mousseline de soie, silk marquisette and both plain and printed starched silk chiffon, and if not selecting a sheer then let classic silk chiffon in ankle or short length versions be your choice. These are in such pastel shades as peach, pink, aqua, delphinium blue and of course white.

Skirts are always full whether through smocking or ruffles of preschool simplicity or through flares and circular cuts for older girls. Necklines ape those of their elders with many heart-shaped and square types being favored.

(Released by Western Newspaper Union.)

Splurge of Color

Vividly colorful and no-end exciting is a stunning new bag, belt and glove set designed by Herbert Bienen, in soft white leather embroidered in multi-colored threads to form an intricate all-over pattern that is fascinating to look upon. Note in the picture the smooth tailored lines of the flat bottomed bag, the side insertions of the gay embroidery of the white kid gloves and the matching belt. Just the right splurge of color for any costume and simply stunning worn with a white Mexican sombrero hat bound in red as illustrated.

Slacks Popular

Slacks this year are women's slacks. Predictions are made that 10 will be seen this summer to one pair last summer.

Dressy Ideas Are Given New Shoes

Time was when a shoe was just a shoe, but with every year they become a more important part of your wardrobe, and this season they adopt details which once belonged only to dresses. Some of them have tiny jutting wings, suggesting collars, posed just above the toe, and inlays and applications through the body of the shoe take the shape of brief boleros. Folded down collars around the tops of shoes suggest revers on coats, and military button details through the vamp evidently are inspired by the same treatment on dress and coat fronts.

Cotton Is Leader In Summer Styles

High fashion summer wardrobes this year are in color and of cotton. Cotton daytime dresses for town are especially designed for defying the heat. Country clothes shrieking with bright color are made for tennis and golf. Garden frocks are really picturesque affairs and so are party clothes for country club dances.

Office togs of cotton are the direct answer to the prayer of appreciative career girls, being neat, slim twosomes, usually a smart dark, short-sleeved dress combined with a bright print jacket and a dark top for alternate use.

Gypsy Time Is Here

With no end of gay colors, bright scarfs and long full skirts with ruffles, one can let the gypsy in her soul have free rein this season.

Gray for Travel, Too

Aside from being one of the season's more important shades, gray is a splendid traveling color.

What Women Want to Know About Fashions

There are style tricks for every age.

Striped jackets and plain colored skirts are so popular this season.

Like all other works of art, clothes must have becoming backgrounds.

There's no danger of losing a handbag if you have it fastened to a glove.

Short kid evening gloves which reach barely to the wrist are smart in Paris.

A white pique bolero will be a useful addition to any wardrobe.

Straight coats on boxy lines and reefers are the two favorite silhouettes.

An innovation in footwear that has caught on remarkably fast is the mesh shoe.

In keeping with the Victorian theme of some of the current fashions are dainty lockets and pendants of leather.

Floyd Gibbons' ADVENTURERS' CLUB

HEADLINES FROM THE LIVES OF PEOPLE LIKE YOURSELF!

"Her Husband's Funeral Pyre"

HELLO EVERYBODY:

India! Land of mystery and—"Suttee!" Suttee, as you know, is the quaint little Indian custom of burning the widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. It is a Hindu practice of long standing and from this gruesome sacrifice the soul of the immolated widow is supposed to receive a special blessing and follow her husband's spirit into that land of greater mystery—the hereafter!

The British government has prohibited Suttee for many years but it is suspected that many secret cremations still claim their living victims.

Mrs. Miriam Richardson of Caldwell, N. J., makes the page today with a tale of Suttee and she knows her stuff.

Miriam's parents were missionaries in India for a great many years. Their grass and mud bungalow was situated in a no-man's-land of trees, underbrush and jungle grass in the Central Provinces, which was in the heart of a vast jungle district. The jungles were infested with wild animals. For 20 years of her life she was lulled to sleep by the gruff, coughing roars of man-eating tigers, the weird yowling of cowardly jackals and the insane laughs of hyenas!

Late one night, Miriam says, there came a frantic knocking on the bungalow door with calls of "Memsahib, Memsahib!" Her mother hastily opened the door, thinking that perhaps one of the Christian natives had

His hand was to light the fire! The fire that would consume his living mother and dead father!

been fatally mauled by a tiger. An old native woman stood there wringing her hands. Her daughter—whose husband had just died—was about to commit Suttee and the woman wanted the help of Miriam's father and mother to save her.

Miriam's Mother Starts on Mercy Errand.

They started at once, a chokadar—night watchman—being left to guard over Miriam. Her father grabbed a lantern and the distracted native woman led the way through a wild jungle path. Soon the beating of tom-toms throbbed all around them and they came to a clearing lit by hand torches.

In the center of the clearing, Miriam says, was a funeral pyre—a prepared bonfire of dried wood on which reposed the body of the dead man. Around it, at respectful distances, thronged the native crowd. Through the crowd and near the pyre wandered Hindu priests, their faces bearing the painted ghastly gray ashen marks of their calling.

"The native woman pulled my mother to the women's quarters," Miriam writes, "here no man was allowed. My father remained with the men in an effort to dissuade them. In the center of a wailing group of women sat the young widow. She swayed to and fro, moaning and beating her breast with her fists. From the dull gleam of her eyes, mother knew that she had been drugged and hardly realized the frightful fate that was in store for her.

"Mother went straight to her and putting an arm around the girl started a fight against time. She wanted to delay matters long enough for the effects of the drug to wear off so that she could reason with the distracted girl. Once a little boy—his naked body covered with ashes and paint—interrupted her. The boy was the widow's son. He carried a lighted torch in his little hands and he had been sent, he said, by the priests to get his mother. His hand was to light the fire!—the fire that would consume his living mother and dead father!"

Can you imagine how that kind of a proposition would appeal to an American mother? An innocent youngster being hoodwinked into thinking he was performing a holy act by actually burning his mother alive! WITH HIS OWN HAND!

Responsibility Shifted to a Child.

It looks to me as if the Hindu priests wished to shift the responsibility of the whole fanatical sacrifice to a child.

Well, anyway, the sight of the little child with the torch made Miriam's mother redouble her efforts to stop the whole thing. She switched the conversation to the mystical side of Christianity. She sang hymns translated into the native tongue and the widow showed some signs of losing the effects of the drug. A painted priest appeared in the doorway. His eyes flashed in fanatical anger. "Come, it is time," he said.

But the determined American mother drove him away, too. She knew that priests are forbidden the sanctity of the women's quarters. He left muttering threats as she spoke to his victim of the God he hated. The widow was crying quietly now and listening.

Meanwhile, Miriam's father was doing his part. He was going from group to group—pleading with some—threatening others. A few native Christians appeared and helped him. The priests raged but all feared the heavy hand of British law and soon the missionary had his way. The torch was applied to the funeral pyre WITHOUT ITS LIVING VICTIM.

Body of Husband Burned Alone.

The fire crackled and roared, Miriam says. Scorched human flesh smelt heavy on the oppressive jungle air—priests sulked—but the body burned alone.

It was not until the last ember had fallen and the last tom-tom had ceased its savage strain that her mother and father started back through the jungle over which the first signs of dawn were creeping. The native mother and daughter went with them and cried out their gratitude at every step. They promised to become converts to a faith that could win against the power of the Hindu priests.

"But," Mrs. Richardson ends, "the arm of the Hindu priests in that superstition-ridden land, is long. Thwarted once, it clutched at its victims again. The women were spirited away later and when last heard of were living as 'temple women' in the power of the priest whom they feared more than the God of the Christians!"

Mrs. Richardson lives in New Jersey now—far from the sounds of the jungle of India—but I'll bet she still hears in her sleep the mysterious throbbing of the Hindu tom-toms. Don't you?

(Released by Western Newspaper Union.)

Postponed Marriages Are Dangerous to Society

Working wives are a menace to society, but postponed marriages are an even greater danger, according to real life observations by pastors of 166 churches in 160 American cities. Two out of three pastors consulted feel, from observation, that marital happiness and stability are doubtful when the wife works. The same proportion—106 out of the 166 ministers—agree that the accumulation of postponed marriages in recent years offers one of the gravest social problems today. Of the 166 pastors, 76 advised early marriage even though the bride must help with her earnings. Another 37 qualified their answers, advising against postponement if the girl is over 26, or for longer than 18 months, or warned that the bride's employment should not be continued for more than a year after marriage. But 52 ministers definitely advised waiting until the husband can fully support the household; among these the most emphatic were the outspoken opponents of birth control practices.

Country God Forgot

Death valley is 150 miles long. It varies greatly in breadth, being in few places less than 10 miles wide and in some places having twice that breadth, while the distance from summit to summit of the bordering ranges is 20 to 30 miles.

Oleomargarine Tax

The federal oleomargarine tax is one-fourth of a cent a pound on the uncolored and 10 cents a pound on the colored.

Butcher Bill

The average person in the United States eats $15.38 worth of meat a year, according to a grocers' bulletin, which shows that 1,100 separate meat packing plants throughout the nation have a total annual production of almost $2,000,000,000.

Automatic Timer

So that telephone operators will no longer have to watch the clock, an instrument which automatically times telephone calls has been constructed.