THREE SHUTTERED HOUSES

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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SYNOPSIS

Driving home through a torrential rain, young, well-to-do Clint Jervies picks up a girl, scantily clad, running in terror-stricken flight down the road. She rides a short ways, leaves the car and runs into the woods. He decides to talk to his dear friends, Inspector Tope and Miss Moss, about his adventure. Clint still thinks of her as Miss Moss, his former guardian, though she and the Inspector are married. Clint, having settled down, now manages the Jervies estate himself. In three shuttered houses, all gloomy and forbidding, on Kenesaw Hill, near where Clint picked up the frightened girl, lived three families. In one house lived old Denman Hurder, his wife, who had been Ella Kenesaw, and his daughter, Kitty Leaford, and her daughter June. Living in a second house was Aunt Evie Taine, Uncle Justus and brothers Rab and Asa. The third held old Matthew Bowdon and his wife. Living on the estate was a man known only to June as "Uncle Jim." Following their usual custom the three families gathered in the Hurder home Saturday night. Kitty, June's mother, retired early with a headache. She was given warm milk, and insisted on taking two sleeping tablets, one more than usual. Strangely upset, June slept fitfully, and in the middle of the night went in to see her mother. Her uncomfortable position warned June that her mother was not sleeping. She was dead. Panic stricken, June ran from the room, out the unlocked door, and into the storm to get Doctor Cabler. It was here that Clint Jervies picked her up. Clint tells his story to the Inspector and Mrs. Tope. They communicate with the police, who are told by the family doctor that Kitty Leaford died of an overdose of sleeping powders. Clint and the Inspector are not satisfied and feel further investigation is necessary. When Clint and Tope drive back to Kenesaw Hill they find Inspector Heale.

CHAPTER V—Continued

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Someone knocked on the door, and he called an invitation. "Hello, Doc!" he exclaimed then, rising to make introductions. "Tope, this is Doctor Derrie, our medical examiner out here. And this is Mr. Jervies, Doc. He gave Miss Leaford a lift, on her way to get Doctor Cabler, last night."

Doctor Derrie looked at Clint with a sidelong eye. "I've just been talking to Miss Leaford," he remarked. He was not much older than Clint.

"Where?" Clint asked, on his feet instantly.

"At the house," the Medical Examiner explained. "I went up with Doctor Cabler. She was the last one to see her mother alive, and she was the one to find Mrs. Leaford dead. So I had to talk to her."

The others nodded, and Inspector Heale asked: "Find out anything, Doc? What do you think?"

Doctor Derrie replied, a little pompously. "Mrs. Leaford had a headache when she went to bed, and took some tablets," he explained. "One of the barbituric acids," he added, like one who must be discreet to protect his hearers. "Doctor Cabler had furnished them to her for a number of years. Once before she took three, and was very ill. Last night she took two. Miss Leaford prepared them for her. Mrs. Leaford was afraid of thunder, and Doctor Cabler thinks that when she didn't go to sleep as quickly as she expected, even with a double dose, she got up and took the rest of her store of the tablets. Certainly the bottle they were in is gone."

They listened soberly; and Inspector Heale asked: "Then you say it was an accident; her own doing?"

Doctor Derrie hesitated, and he lowered his eyelid wisely. "Accident, yes," he said then. "I shall agree with Doctor Cabler that it was an accidental overdose." He added: "She had been dead for some time before her daughter found her."

"Miss Leaford?" Clint prompted; and Doctor Derrie explained:

"Yes." He smiled condescendingly. "When the storm broke, she went in to make sure her mother was asleep, and found her dead. She tried to telephone and couldn't raise anyone, and then the lights went off and she lost her head, ran down the road to get Cabler. That was foolish, and unnecessary, of course, as long as her mother was already dead, but she claims she didn't stop to think of that."

"Maybe she didn't know Mrs. Leaford was dead," Tope suggested; but Derrie confidently shook his head.

"She knew, all right," he explained. "That was the first thing she said to Doctor Cabler, that her mother was dead. He and Mrs. Cabler got some clothes on her, gave her some whisky, took her home in the car." He snapped his fingers in a sort of amazement. "Mr. and Mrs. Hurder hadn't even waked up," he explained. "When Cabler got there, the front door was open, the hall flooded with rain."

"I saw the light in the hall as I passed," Clint remembered.

Doctor Derrie assented. "Miss Leaford said the front door blew open, and the light went out, while she was trying to telephone. The light must have come on again after she left the house." He rose. "I'll give them an accident verdict," he said, a little complacently. "Even if she meant it, an accident verdict will be easier on Mr. and Mrs. Hurder."

Clint came to his feet impatiently. "I'd like to see Miss Leaford," he said. "Is she up there now?"

Doctor Derrie shook his head. "She went out before I left," he told them. "Not a bad-looking girl. I saw her walking off through the woods behind the house, as I came away."

Inspector Heale volunteered: "She does a lot of that, walking around alone. Then there's a man lives in there by the pond, and she's pretty friendly with him."

Tope asked quickly: "Where? By what pond? Who is this man?"

"Why, there's a good-sized pond on the Kenesaw land," Heale explained. "It's pretty, in there. There was some talk awhile back of opening it up for house lots, but they won't sell the land. This fellow—name's Glovere—has built himself a cabin in there."

"How do we get to his place?" Tope asked.

Heale explained: "You go back toward town till you come to Thayer's garage, about two miles from here. There's a path just this side of the garage goes right into the pond. Thayer will show it to you." He moved with them toward the

"Mother's dead," she said simply.

door: and he asked uneasily: "What are you after, Tope? It all looks plain enough to me."

Tope answered mildly: "Well, I don't like questions unless I know the answers to them. For instance, did something happen to the telephone circuit over the hill last night? Did something happen to the electric current? Did the Hurders most generally bolt their front door when they went to bed? And why do folks like those people on the hill let some one squat on their land the way you say this Glovere does? And how does it happen he's so friendly with Miss Leaford when she hasn't got any other friends? And where did that bottle go?"

Heale grinned and scratched his head; and Doctor Derrie said, in a sardonic anger:

"If you're trying to make a murder out of this, I can tell you where to start. Miss Leaford put her mother to bed, gave her the dose. She was the last one to see Mrs. Leaford alive and the first to see her dead. Begin with the girl! That's the place to begin!"

CHAPTER VI

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June Leaford loved her mother, patiently and tenderly; but there was something more, an intangible. Kitty Leaford, whose latter days were such sad and dreary ones, had once been gay; once she had known romance; once for the sake of love she had dared greatly. Even June had seen sometimes the glint of shining armor in her eyes. A single valorous action, though it may fail, and be punished endlessly, does nevertheless in degree ennoble the soul; and Kitty Leaford had once done valiantly.

But now Kitty Leaford was dead, and June moved like a person in a nightmare. Doctor Cabler had brought her home, wrapped in his greatcoat but drenched and shivering still; and they found the door open, the hall half-flooded. They crept up the stairs like conspirators, and so came into the room where the pitiless illumination of an unshaded electric bulb revealed this upon the bed. Dr. Cabler made his brief examination.

"She is dead, yes," he said. "But I don't think we'll wake the old people just now. The middle of the night is a cruel time for bad news. I'll go next door and get Rab or Asa to help me—"

But June said in a cool voice: "Mother wouldn't like that."

And without weakness or wavering, she helped Doctor Cabler do what was required; not till this was done would she permit him to summon anyone.

She did not know how long it was before Asa came to her.

"Go to bed, June," he said. "There's nothing to do here. I can do that nothing as well as you."

"I won't sleep," she told him.

"Go along," he insisted. "To bed."

And she obeyed in a silent submission. In her own room she realized that she was still drenched, wet, cold. She changed into a dry nightgown and lay down. She expected to stay sleepless till dawn; and in fact she did lie long enough awake to hear the Doctor return, and hear Aunt Evie in the hall.

Then she fell asleep; and when she woke, the sun was shining. She opened her door and saw a strange man in a black coat go quietly into her mother's room and shut the door behind him.

Below-stairs, when she descended, all these kin of hers were gathered together. Grandma Hurder was crying quietly, tears glistening on her gray cheeks. She sat erectly in her chair. June as she came downstairs heard Grandma Bowdon say in a heavy anger: "Utterly inconsiderate. No other word describes it." And as June entered the room, Aunt Evie remarked, in her gentle, whispering voice:

"I was concerned about Kitty last night. You remember, she had a headache. I know what it is to have headaches. I have suffered myself; and Kitty was sick with them, really sick sometimes."

She continued, in her pitiless soft tones: "Kitty resented life so deeply. And there was always a rebel in her. She would never be happy. I am not surprised."

June stopped in the doorway, incredulous and bewildered, trying to understand the implication in their words. Rab and Asa were in the room, but they did not see June. Grandpa Hurder was here in the hall, walking ceaselessly up and down. Then Uncle Justus came in through the kitchen, and said something about breakfast, in the hollow voice of the deaf; and Grandpa Hurder shouted into his ear:

"Kitty's dead!"

"Eh?" said Uncle Justus.

Aunt Evie came swiftly past June and went to silence him; and Grandma Bowdon repeated in a grim anger:

"She was always selfish. No consideration."

June cried in passionate stifled anger: "Oh!" she strode swiftly into the room. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "What do you mean?"

"June," said Grandma Bowdon severely. "Mind how you speak to me."

But Grandpa Hurder said sternly in the doorway: "Kitty was crucified!" There was the dignity of anger in him in this moment. "Crucified," he said. "Long ago."

June pressed her hands to her lips, understanding what it was they thought. "She didn't! She didn't!" she cried. She turned to escape; she went out through the front door.

But there was a garland of ribbons on the doorknob, so she returned indoors again. Later she slipped out of the house, this time by the side door so as not to see that garland; she moved directly away from the house, into the tract of wooded land behind. Here she could be alone.

There was a sound at some distance; and she raised her head, without other movement, to see what it was. She saw Asa go quietly past, a little way off among the trees, and without seeing her, along a path that led to the bluff above the pond, where Uncle Jim Glovere had his cabin; it passed beyond, down to the highway near Thayer's filling-station. And of course this was the way she took when she went to see Uncle Jim.

He would know how to comfort her. She was deeply fond of Uncle Jim. He was a big, chuckling man, with an amusing eye. He lived alone in the cabin by the pond, stayed there sometimes for months on end, disappeared sometimes for as long. He wrote, absurdly, poems.

When she came to the top of the knoll, he was still asleep. His cabin door was open; and he woke when she darkened the doorway—woke and looked up and said: "Hullo, there, youngster!"

"Hello, Uncle Jim," she said.

He sat up, in yellow pajamas, and rubbed his eyes. "You caught me napping," he chuckled. "I was awake till dawn. Writing a poem about a thunder-storm."

She stood beside the cabin door, her back against the logs, looking down toward the pond while he dressed hurriedly in the cabin behind her. He talked steadily, cheerfully; but she spoke not at all, until Uncle Jim, remarking her long silence, said behind her:

"Tongue-tied this morning, June. What's the matter?"

"Mother's dead," she said simply.

Something dropped to the floor, in the cabin, and silence trembled there. Then Uncle Jim cleared his throat. "Dead?" he whispered.

"Yes," she told him.

He came close to her shoulder. "Kitty Leaford dead?" he repeated, in an incredulous tone.

She turned her head alertly. There was a sound in the wood; the sound of voices, then footsteps.

"Someone's coming," she said.

He started to speak, then stood silently beside her in the doorway; and thus they faced the two men who climbed the trail.

A young man came in front; and now the color flowed across June's cheek and burned there, for she knew him. She looked past him quickly, at his companion. This was a plump, white-haired old man who walked with a surprisingly alert step, his hands swinging at his sides. Uncle Jim passed her and interposed himself between her and these newcomers; and he said casually:

"Hullo!"

The young man extended his hand. "I'm Clint Jervies," he explained. "This is Mr. Tope." He turned to the girl. "You're Miss Leaford, aren't you?"

She nodded slowly, without words. She was trembling.

Uncle Jim asked with narrowing eyes: "All right. What of it?"

And Clint said, in swift, friendly fashion: "Why, you see, I happened to be passing, last night, in time to give Miss Leaford a lift. And I wanted to—to make sure she was all right this morning . . . I heard about your mother," he added, turning toward June. "I'm awfully sorry."

June felt the strength go out of her. There was a bench built against the cabin front, and she sat down as though her knees gave way.

Uncle Jim turned to her with a quick solicitude. "June! Are you ill?" he whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Quite," she said, and tried to smile. "Let me rest a minute."

Her cheeks were drained white; she seemed to droop forward. He held her; and Tope said:

"She's fainting, Mr. Glovere. Put her head down—"

But the girl recovered, straightened up again; and Glovere said: "Wait a minute. I can do better." He disappeared, came out with a flask and tumbler. She choked and gasped and sputtered, but her color did return.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Monument Absolves Indians of 'Guilt' Once Attributed to Prank of Youth

Grandsons of the first settlers near Hudson, Mich., have paid, as best they can, a debt to the Pottawatomie Indians incurred because of what apparently was merely a prank of a Pottawatomie stripling.

For three years, residents at Lickley Corners have worked on a monument near the land once called Squawfield, last Michigan camping place of the Pottawatomies. The monument recently has been dedicated.

The history has been handed down from one generation to the next. More than a century ago, the accounts relate, a Pottawatomie boy, playing with white boys, brandished his knife around the head of a white playmate.

The whites were incensed at what they thought was an attempted scalping. But Bawbeese, chief of the tribe, explained that the boy was merely joking.

Most of the whites apparently took Bawbeese's explanation at face value; a few others, covetous of land held by the Indians, used the incident as an excuse to have them moved to a western reservation as dangerous and not to be trusted.

R. M. Lickley, spokesman for the group which built the monument to the Pottawatomies and Bawbeese, first such honor for the tribe, asserts:

"We have yet to find a historical record where Bawbeese or any of his tribe ever committed an atrocity. We have thought for some time that the Pottawatomies should be publicly exonerated and should have recognition for their many kindnesses to our forefathers."

Lickley's grandfather was one of Bawbeese's white friends in the early settlement.

The Twelve Caesars

The twelve Caesars were Julius Caesar and the eleven emperors following him, most of whom were from his family. Nerva was chosen by the senate, and was the first to select a successor without regard to family. Following are the names and dates of the reigns of the twelve: Julius Caesar, 44 B. C.; Augustus, 31 B. C. to 14 A. D.; Tiberius, 14-37; Caius, 37-41; Claudius, 41-54; Nero, 54-68; Galba, 68-69; Otho, 69; Vitellius, 69; Vespasian, 69-79; Titus, 79-81; Domitian, 81-96. The title Caesar was given to all of the Roman emperors, until the time of Hadrian, after whom Caesar was the title of the heir of the throne, and the title of the emperor was Augustus.

WRONG STOP

The chief engineer and the master mechanic had spent the evening together. For obvious reasons, the master mechanic was a little hesitant about going home.

"I'll tell you what to do if you don't want to disturb your wife," said the chief. "When you get in the house, undress at the foot of the stairs, fold your clothes neatly, then creep quietly up the steps to your own room."

They met the next morning at the plant. "How did you get on?" asked the chief.

"Rotten," replied the master mechanic. "I did just as you told me. I folded my clothes neatly. I crept quietly up the stairs. But when I reached the top—it was the elevated station!"

SHE'S ALL THE REST

"It is said there are a thousand evils in the world—and one of them is man."

"Pray what are the others?"

"Woman."

Take His Chances!

The Browns were standing on the balcony of the seaside hotel, and couldn't help hearing what the young couple in the garden below were saying.

Mrs. Brown turned to her husband. "I think he's going to propose and we shouldn't be listening. Just whistle to warn him."

"Why should I?" asked Mr. Brown. "Nobody whistled to warn me."

Best Man

An Irishman obtained leave from work to attend a wedding. He returned with two black eyes.

The foreman asked him what had happened.

"When I got there," replied the Irishman, "I saw a fellow all dressed up like a peacock. 'An' who are you?,' says I. 'I'm the best man,' he says, an' begorra, he was, too!"

New Fish Story

Game Warden—Hey, you! Don't you know that the bass season isn't open yet? What are you doing with that big one on your string?

Angler—Why, you see he's been taking my bait all morning and I just tied him up until I get ready to go home.

HOPED HE WOULD

"If I ever catch you with my girl again I'll knock your block off!"

"I hope you will."

Long Distance Calls

He held her in his arms and gazed into her sweet blue eyes.

"What would you do if I tried to kiss you?" he asked.

"Yell for father," she replied.

He sprang away from her nervously.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "I thought he was in Paris!"

"That's right, he is!"

Agreed!

"Get ready to die," said the footpad, presenting his revolver. "I'm going to shoot you."

"Why?" asked his victim.

"I've always said I'd shoot anyone who looked like me."

"Do I look like you?"

"Yes."

"Then shoot!"

Old Query

At a recent "hill-climbing" contest, amid the dust and heat and the roar of the motorcycle, a vendor called:

"Don't forget, we have pop on ice."

"Were's mom?" yelled some wag in the crowd.

Settled for Life

"I'll never ask another woman to marry me as long as I live."

"What, refused again?"

"No—accepted!"

Ask Me Another

A General Quiz

1. What is polyandry?
2. How does a whale feed its young?
3. What shapes the destinies of a people?
4. How does a patriotic American woman salute the flag?
5. What political figure was known as the "Plumed Knight"?
6. What is the most abundant metal contained in the earth?
7. What is meant by referring to a diamond as being so many carats?
8. Which is the country of origin of the word (A) candy, (B) muslin, (C) millinery?

The Answers

1. The possession by a woman of more than one husband at a time.
2. The whale, a viviparous mammal, suckles its young.
3. Their modes of thought.
4. By placing her right hand over her heart.
5. James G. Blaine was known as the "Plumed Knight."
6. Aluminum.
7. When we refer to a diamond as being so many carats, we refer to its weight.
8. (A) Candia, old name for Crete, (B) Mosul (Iraq), (C) Milan; milliners being originally sellers of Milan goods.

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