

THE MYSTERY GIRL

By CAROLYN WELLS

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SYNOPSIS.

John Waring, gentleman and scholar, has just won the coveted election to the presidency of Corinth college, a venerable New England seat of learning. Before his inauguration he plans to marry Emily Bates, a charming and cultured widow. With this life's ambition achieved and a rosy future assured, there is yet an instant's hesitation before he answers in the affirmative her question, "Are you entirely happy?"

Into this quiet college town comes "Miss Mystery." Through her uncanny ability to compel others to do her bidding, she succeeds in establishing herself at Corinth's most exclusive boardinghouse, kept by Mrs. Adams and her husband, "Old Salt." Further than giving her name as Anita Austin, the "Mystery Girl" refuses to divulge any information regarding herself or her business in Corinth. This piques the curiosity of the other boarders.

After hearing Dr. Waring deliver a lecture, she invites her to his home for tea. Upon meeting Miss Austin the doctor appears greatly disturbed and after dropping a cup of tea to the floor he awkwardly excuses himself from the room. Before he returns the "Mystery Girl" departs. That night Dr. Waring is left alone in his study, and the door which is to be delivered the following night. In the morning the doctor, upon arising, finds his study door which is undisturbed and goes to his study where he finds the door and the windows locked from the inside. Becoming suspicious, he informs the housekeeper of the mysterious disappearance of Lockwood, Dr. Waring's private secretary. The latter forces an entrance to the study and finds the doctor dead from a stab wound. Nico, Jap servant, has mysteriously disappeared. A large amount of scarlet and blue currency also are listed among the missing.

The scarf and collar of bills later are found in Miss Austin's room and this together with other circumstantial evidence lead to the unshakable belief that she either killed Dr. Waring or hired someone else to commit the crime. During the next several days she is subjected to a severe grilling by the police authorities. The one person who is innocent of any crime and who is ever willing to rush to her aid is Gordon Lockwood.

Maurice Trask, distant relative and only heir to Dr. Waring's fortune, arrives on the scene and takes charge of the investigation. After hearing the evidence gathered by the authorities, he thinks Miss Austin guilty of the crime, but at first sight of her falls in love with her. He promises to marry her, but she consents to marry him, he will clear her for her. In the meantime Lockwood and "Miss Mystery" discover that they are deeply in love. Trask repeats his threat, she asks for a week's time to consider his proposition. He consents, but she delays the day may prove detrimental to her.

(Continued from Yesterday.)

"Fibey, you're a fool!"

"No, sir. I don't admit it. See here, sir, if they're so afraid of me, they will turn to me for help. If they don't, as you can guess, if she didn't do it, they want her skirts entirely cleared."

"Pretty good deduction so far. But we can't judge rationally until we know the facts."

The facts were told them, when, some hours later, they sat, alone with Maurice Trask, in the study where John Waring breathed his last.

"I'm a plain man," Trask said, "for he didn't care to pose unduly before an astute detective. I've come into this estate of my cousin's—my second cousin, he was, and I started out with a determination to find the villain who killed him. But, there is some cause for suspicion of the young lady I expect to marry. And here's the situation. If you can solve the mystery of Dr. Waring's death, and free that girl from any taint of blame, go ahead. But if your investigation leads to her—stop it. I want to marry her just the same, whether she killed anybody or not. But if she didn't do it, I want to know it."

"Can't you learn the truth from the young lady herself—if she is your fiancée?" asked Stone.

"Oh, she says she didn't do it, of course. But there's such an overwhelming mass of evidence—or, as you would say, a mystery—that it's the deepest sort of a mystery."

"Main facts first. Where was the body found?"

"In that desk chair, seated at his desk, as he often sits in the evening. Reading in a Latin book, so you see, he wasn't looking for trouble."

"Found dead in the morning? Been dead all night?"

"Yes to both those questions. And locked in his room. Had to break in."

"And no weapon about?"

"Not a sign of any—"

"Then that cuts out all suicide idea?"

"It does and it doesn't. You may as well say the locked room cuts out all idea of a murder."

"But it must be one or the other. And isn't it more plausible to look for some way that the murderer could have gone away and left the room locked, than to think up a way that the suicide could have disposed of this weapon?"

"Yes, that's so, but I want you to investigate both possibilities. You see, if you could prove a suicide, that would free Miss Austin at once."

"And if things go against her—I want you to—oh, hang it, it's hard to put into words—"

"I'll do that," said Frisby. "If things go against Miss Austin, you want Mr. Stone to frame up suicide, and declare it the truth."

"Exactly that," and Trask looked relieved at the thought all his cards were on the table. "I don't want Miss Austin suspected, but I do want to know if she's innocent."

"Any other suspects?" asked Stone.

"Not definite ones. There's the janitor who absconded that same night, and of course, there's the secretary, Gordon Lockwood. I'd like to suspect him, all right, and he has a round silver penholder that just fits the wound that killed Waring. But it doesn't look like he did it; he never would have left the penholder in evidence, and he would have arranged matters to look more like a suicide. Then, too, how could he lock the door behind him?"

"That question must be answered first of all," said Stone. "I'll examine the room, of course, but after the local police and detectives have done that, I doubt if I find anything enlightening. So far as I can see, this whole affair is unique, and I think we will have some surprising evidence and soon. Tell me more of this Miss Austin. Who is she?"

"Nobody knows. In fact, they call her Miss Mystery, because so little is known of her. She appeared here in Corinth from nowhere. She knew no one, and as she began to make acquaintances somebody brought her over here. She met Dr. Waring, and inside of twenty-four hours had so bewitched him that it would seem he had her visiting him in his study late at night. She said at first, she wasn't here, and as she left the impress of her dress trimmings on that chair back, and as she has a ruby pin and a lot of money that were in the doctor's possession, it looks, one might say, a bit queer."

"Where's the valuable planted on her?" put in Frisby.

"That's what she says—or rather, that's one of the things she said. The girl contradicts herself continually. She says one thing one day and another the next."

"Is she pretty?" This from Frisby.

"Pretty as the devil! And that's not so bad as a description. She has great big dark eyes, with straight black brows that almost meet."

"She has a jaunty little face, that can be rough or scornful or merry or pathetic as the little rascal chooses. She has completely bewitched me over, and I'm glad to have her on any terms and whatever her past history. But, there it is. If she has a clean

state in this murder business I want to know it."

"And if she hasn't?"

"Then I don't want anybody else to know it. If you find, Mr. Stone, real evidence that Anita Austin killed John Waring, or if she confesses to the deed, then you whip around and prove a suicide, and I'll double your charge. You needn't do anything wrong, you know. Just sum up that all indications point to a suicide, and let it go at that. Nobody will arrest Miss Austin if you say that."

"You must be crazy, Mr. Trask," returned Stone, coldly. "I don't conduct my business on any such principles as those. I can't perjure myself to save your lady love from a just condemnation."

"You haven't seen her yet," Trask added his sagacious head. "Wait till you do."

"Give me all the points against her," the detective suggested.

"I will. I'd rather you knew them from me. Not that I'll color them—they're facts that speak for themselves, but other people might exaggerate them. Well, to begin with, this girl, a day or so after she arrived here was seen kissing the picture of Dr. Waring which she had cut from a newspaper. I tell you this, 'cause you'll hear it anyway, and the gossips think it shows a previous acquaintance between the two. But I tell that as girls have matinee idols and movie heroes, this girl might easily have adored the scholarly man, though she had never seen him."

"It is possible," Stone agreed, "but not very probable. She denies they were acquainted?"

"Yes. Vows she never saw him until one night she went to his lecture, soon after her arrival here."

"What is she in Corinth for?"

"To sketch—she's an artist."

"Well, as I said, she must have come here that Sunday night, for one of the boarders at the house she lives in saw her cross the snowy field. Also, the footprints just fitted her shoes. Also, the tracks led right up to the side porch here to that long French window. And led right back again to the Adams house."

"Was she ever seen since?"

"Well, that's what they tell me—Trask asserted, doggedly, "and I want you to know it all, Mr. Stone, before the other people tell you a garbled version."

"Go on."

"Then, they say, the girl left marks of her driving on the man's plan, and Lockwood, the secretary, rubbed them off next morning, as soon as the body was discovered. We have the word of two witnesses for this episode."

"Who are the witnesses?"

"To, the Japanese butler, and Miss Peaton, who lives in this house."

"Well, then, ever since the tragedy, Miss Austin has acted queer. Queer in all sorts of ways. She is sad and desolate one minute, and saucy and independent the next. I can't make her out at all. And she is more than half in love with this Lockwood. I have to cut him out, you see. And I figure, if you prove the case against Miss Austin, and if I agree to marry her and hush up the whole matter, and make it seem suicide—"

"You figure that she'll throw over the secretary for you," cried Frisby, his eyes aglitter at the man's plan.

"Exactly that. You see, Mr. Stone, I don't try to deceive you. While I have a natural sorrow at my cousin's death, yet remember that I never knew him in life, and that, while I want to avenge his death in any case, but one, I do not want to do it if it implicates Anita Austin."

"I understand," said Stone, seemingly not so shocked at the conversation as his assistant was.

"There's another queer thing," said

Trask. "They tell me that when the body was found there was the impress of a ring on the forehead."

"A seal ring?"

"Oh, no. Not a finger ring, but a circle, about two inches across, a red mark, as if it had been made as a sign or symbol of some sort."

"It remained on the flesh?"

"Until the embalming process took place. That removed it. I didn't see it, but I'm told it was a clearly defined circle, quite evidently impressed with some intent."

"Sounds like a sign of a secret society," Frisby suggested, but Stone paid no heed.

"Let's reconstruct the case," he said. "Waring sat at his desk, his secretary outside in that hall?"

"Yes, the Japanese, the other one, the one that disappeared, brought in water, and then Dr. Waring closed the door and locked it."

"Immediately?"

"I don't know that, but anyway, no one that we know of saw him again alive. Nogi is under no suspicion, for after he came out of the room, the doctor rose and locked the door. Lockwood can't be suspected, as he heard the door locked, and couldn't get in. He is more or less suspected because of his penholder, but much as I should like to think him the criminal, I know he isn't."

"You're very honest, Mr. Trask."

"Yes, because I want the truth. Can you get it?"

"I think so."

"You still eliminate suicide?"

"I can't see how I can think it, with no weapon. You say that death was instantaneous—"

"Yes, the doctors agree that it was. Positively he had no chance to hide or dispose of the instrument of death."

"And why should he? Suicides never make their death seem a murder, though often a murderer tries to simulate suicide."

"Yet that wasn't done in this case, or the murderer would have left the weapon."

"That may be the very point he neglected. Now, how did the murderer get out? Get busy, Fibey."

For nearly half an hour, the three men searched the room. Had there been any secret exit, or any concealed passage, it must have been found. Fleming Stone's knowledge of architecture would not let him overlook anything of the sort, and Frisby's alert eyes and quick wit would have found anything out of the ordinary.

"No way out," Stone concluded, finally, "and no way of locking a door or a window after departure from the room. Looks as if the murder theory was as untenable as the other. No chance of a natural death?"

"With a round hole in his jugular vein? No, sir. The doctors here won't stand for that. Try again."

"I shall. I don't know when I've had such a baffling, intriguing case as this appears to be at first sight. It may resolve itself into a simple problem, but I can't think so now. Even if it were the work of your Miss Austin—how did she get in or out?"

"Oh, she got in, all right. Waring let her in, at the French window. Probably that's where he locked his door. But—say she killed him—how did she get out and lock the room behind her?"

"She couldn't. The window locks are bolts, and could not be shot from outside. For the moment I see no explanation. It is blank, utter mystery. When can I see Miss Austin?"

"Too late tonight, tomorrow morning will have to do. But she won't run away. The police won't let her."

"Yet, they can't hold her."

"They are doing so. They claim she was the last one to see the victim alive."

"Does she admit that?"

"Not she! She admits nothing. You'll get nothing out of that little Sphinx."

"All right, then, Mr. Trask, if you've finished your tale, suppose you leave me here to ruminate over this thing, and I'll go up to my room when I wish."

(To Be Continued Tomorrow.)

Wheat Production of World Placed Above Last Year

Estimate Gives Entire Crop as 3,049,372,000 Bushels—Bumper Yield in United States.

Washington, Jan. 8.—World wheat production for the present season is placed at 3,049,372,000 bushels, compared with 3,049,372,000 for last season, by the Department of Agriculture in its revised estimates just issued. The northern hemisphere 1922 crops, grown in 36 countries, totals 2,219,667,000 bushels, compared with 2,219,306,000 in the 1921 crop, and the southern hemisphere 1922 crop, produced in three countries, totals 327,705,000 bushels, compared with 321,612,000 in the 1921 crop.

Canada, the United States and Mexico all had larger crops than the previous years. Four countries in Northern Africa showed a reduction of 31,000,000 bushels, while Asiatic countries had an increase of 120,000,000 bushels.

The new crops in the southern hemisphere are about 6,900,000 bushels larger than the previous year. Argentina, with the largest crop ever grown there, has about 35,000,000 bushels more than a year ago. Australia about 25,000,000 bushels less and the Union of South Africa about 1,200,000,000 bushels less.

Germany's wheat production, according to the final estimate, is 71,507,000 bushels, compared with 107,758,000 the previous year and 143,556,600 produced in the same territory in 1913.

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Checked taffeta, black peau de soie, black satin, colored crepe de chine, taffeta, kimono silk, navy satin, black poplin, plain colored georgette crepe.

Three Other Groups at Special Prices \$1.45 - \$1.95 - \$2.45

Wool Goods—95c, \$1.45, \$1.95

This lot includes French serge, storm serge, Poirer twill, tricotine, striped and plaid skirtings, broadcloth, velour, plain and novelty coatings.

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All of Our Men's Shoes in Four Lots. Our Entire Stock of Children's Shoes at 20% Discount.

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Gossard Corsets	\$1.75 to \$15.00	Mme. Minner Corsets	\$3.75 to \$15.00
R. & G. Corsets	\$2.00 to \$ 5.00	Mme. Irene Corsets	\$1.50 to \$10.00
H. and W. Corsets	\$1.00 to \$ 3.00	Bien Jolie Corsets	\$2.50 to \$15.00
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Burgess-Nash Corset Shop—Second Floor

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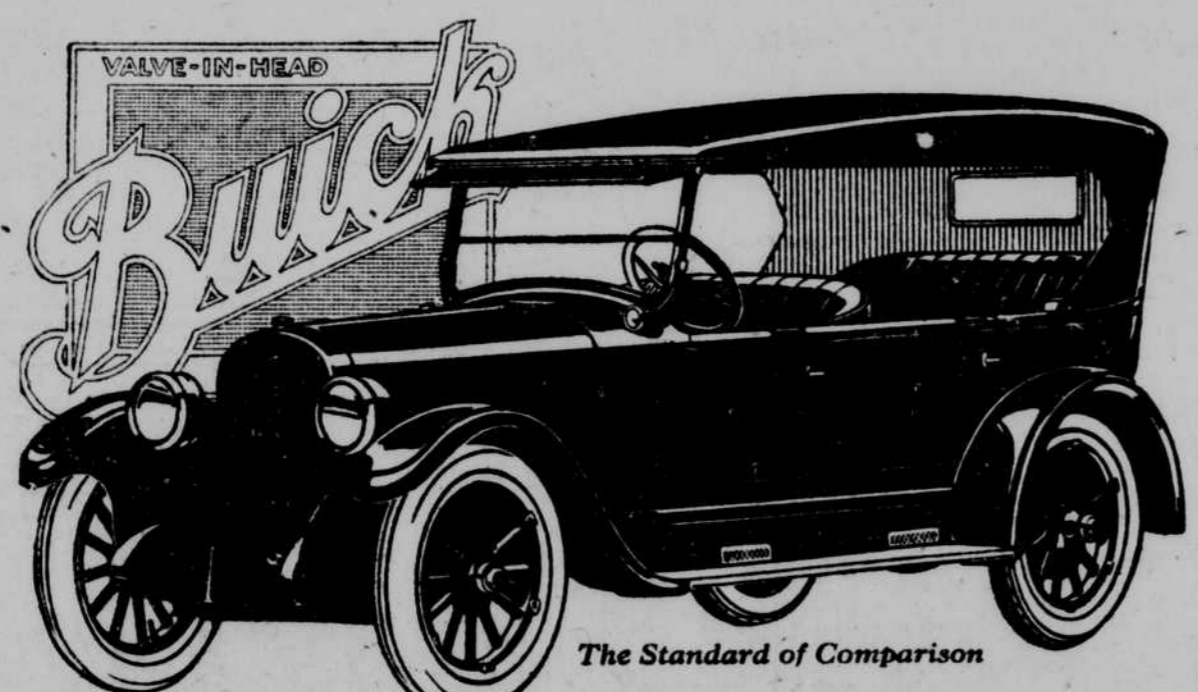
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