

Water Devil Crittenden Marriot

AUTHOR OF "ISLE OF DEAD SHIPS," "WITHIN THE LINES," ETC.

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(Continued From Last Sunday)

IV (Continued)

"Neither of the servants slept in the house. The maid came every morning about 8 o'clock, got breakfast, straightened up the house, got lunch and went home about 1 o'clock. She did not come back; Mrs. Ford got her dinner at a restaurant. The coachman lived over a stable in the rear of the premises. According to the maid, he had no key to the house and came to it only in the forenoons, when the maid was present. If Mrs. Ford wanted him later she called him up on a private phone. That's the maid's story, you know. Of course, she can't be certain that Carroll didn't have a key to the house. The chances are that he had."

"Matilda came this morning as usual, entered with the passkey, went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Later she went to call her mistress and found her stabbed to death. She had been dead some time; just how long the doctors haven't decided yet; there were evidences of a desperate struggle. The house had been literally torn to pieces; all the bureau and closet drawers had been pulled out and their contents dumped down the floor; trunks and boxes had been unlocked or burst open and ransacked; the beds and pillows had been ripped open, and the very pictures on the walls were torn down and cut to pieces. Evidently the murderer, whoever he was, was searching for something that he supposed was hidden in the house, and in view of this letter of yours, it's hard to guess what it was. Whether he found it or not nobody can tell. The maid says that nothing seems to be missing, but for a paper or something like that he might have got it without her knowing anything about it."

"Do you think he got it?" Miss Maynard leaned forward with clasped hands. "Oh!" she cried, "I don't want to be unchristian and think only of the money when that poor woman is lying dead. But it's hard to think that father and I have lost our chance to get back our fortune."

Wadsworth shrugged his shoulders. "As for the woman, she sat slowly, 'I don't think that you need waste any sympathy on her. She was a self-confessed thief, who appealed to your father only because she feared that without his aid she would lose her booty. I take it that the danger she feared was from her husband's accomplices; the chances are the scoundrel robbed his fellow scoundrels, and they were after him. Altogether, she seems to have been part of a bunch that the world can very well do without."

Miss Maynard's face showed her distress, but she evidently found no argument to offer in opposition to the reporter's words. "Wadsworth went on: 'As for the treasure,' he said, 'regrettably, I'm afraid that the chance of ever finding it is slim. I hate to say so—in truth, Wadsworth's head idly searched for a cooked-up story, a pretty, disappointed face before him—I hate to say so, but I'm afraid it's true. Not that I think the murderer got the clue. I don't think he did.'"

Miss Maynard clasped her hands. "Then—"

"No, I don't think he did. Interupted the reporter. 'The extraordinary way in which he ransacked the house shows that he had no idea where to look for it. If he found it at all, he did so only after absolutely tremendous exertions. You can't imagine how he tore things to pieces. Of course, he might have forced the old woman to tell him where it was, but to have done so, it's hardly probable that he could have held her prisoner while he ransacked the house and then made her tell him where it was. As she says in her letter that she herself is uncertain. Perhaps that assertion isn't worth much, but, taken with the rest of the circumstances, it counts for something.'"

The reporter had been sitting on the edge of his chair as he spoke. He knew, none better, that he would be asked about his business, and that every moment he delayed in getting to work on the case made it that much harder to solve. But he found it impossible to sit and talk it over with this bright-eyed girl, and he saved his conscience with the reflection that after all there was nothing comparatively little to do until the coachman was caught.

But now he rose. "I must go," he declared, regretfully. "That letter has given me the basis of an extraordinary story, and I must get to work on it. I'll call later with the news, if you'll permit me."

Miss Maynard rose uncertainly. "Please do," she faltered. "But—but—has my name got to be in the papers?"

Wadsworth did not hesitate. "Not if I can help it," he declared, positively. "Certainly it won't be in them at present, and probably will be in them without your full and specific consent anyway. At the same time, this thing is serious. It's murder, you know. Circumstances may come up that will make it necessary for you to tell your story. In that case—"

"In that case, of course, I shall do what is right. But until then—"

"Until then you may rest easy. If Carroll is caught soon, the whole thing may be explained without reference to you or the treasure. By the way, if he was eating her dinner at her regular restaurant, he identifies her as perfect and absolutely incontestable."

"But—but doesn't he offer any explanation?"

Wadsworth laughed. "Nobody's been able to ask him yet," he replied. "You see, he was let go before it was known that he was eating her dinner at her regular restaurant. He identifies her as perfect and absolutely incontestable."

cheeks. "Are you? Well, don't you know that I'm rather glad, too." He laughed happily, but after a moment's hesitation Miss Maynard chimed in. "They seemed to find life wonderfully interesting and amusing, those two."

V

Fred Carroll, the missing coachman, did not return to the Ford house. He did not return anywhere. When he paid his fine and walked out of the police courtroom he vanished. A newsboy swore later that he had sold an evening paper, an extra, with an account of the Ford case, to a man answering his description who came out of the courtroom about 11 o'clock on the day of the murder, but after this, however, no one had noticed him.

In view of his perfect alibi, no one except Wadsworth was much concerned about him, though some wonder was expressed that he should have wanted to disappear or that he could have disappeared if he wanted to, for the afternoon papers were filled with descriptions of his peculiar personality. But as it seemed obvious that he could know nothing of the murder, interest in his case waned. Wadsworth alone endeavored to trace him down.

The task, however, was difficult. According to the maid, he had been in Mrs. Ford's stable for only about three months, during which time he had attended strictly to his own business. He seemed to have had no associates and to have been by himself. He had behaved in a peculiar way, and the maid supposed that he drank. The disorderly conduct for which he had been arrested had consisted, it appeared, in his participating in a street fight. The policeman who arrested him had gotten to the scene just in time to see the other man running away, and Wadsworth had been searching for him in court the coachman had offered no excuse and had paid his fine without protest. The officer described the other man as a "dago" of some sort—whether Spanish, Italian, Greek, or of some other nationality, he could not say. Wadsworth was somewhat at least possible that this other man might have been one of Mrs. Ford's "enemies" and that Carroll might have been an accomplice. But he could not prove it.

Wadsworth passed two days in running down clues as to the whereabouts of the coachman; then on the morning of the third day, he went out to the Ford house to make a fresh search of the premises.

The policeman at the door welcomed him with a grin. "Sure, it's just late you are, Mr. Wadsworth, sir," he said. "The young lady's gone."

Wadsworth frowned. Could Bessie Maynard have gone to the house after all. He hoped not. "What young lady, Mullian?" he asked.

"A very pretty young lady, indeed, Miss Arabella Ford, her name is. She's nice to Mrs. Ford. She was here for half an hour and more. If you had been on the job, it's the fine soap you'd have used on her. I misbought the other boys will get it."

"Mrs. Ford's niece?" Wadsworth stared. This was the first time he had heard of a niece or any other relative of Mrs. Ford. Perhaps this was the beginning of important developments. At any rate, her appearance was distinctly gratifying.

"Who came with her?" he asked. "Nobody at all. She just drove up by herself."

"Oh!" Wadsworth stared. "Didn't she bring a note from the chief or anybody?"

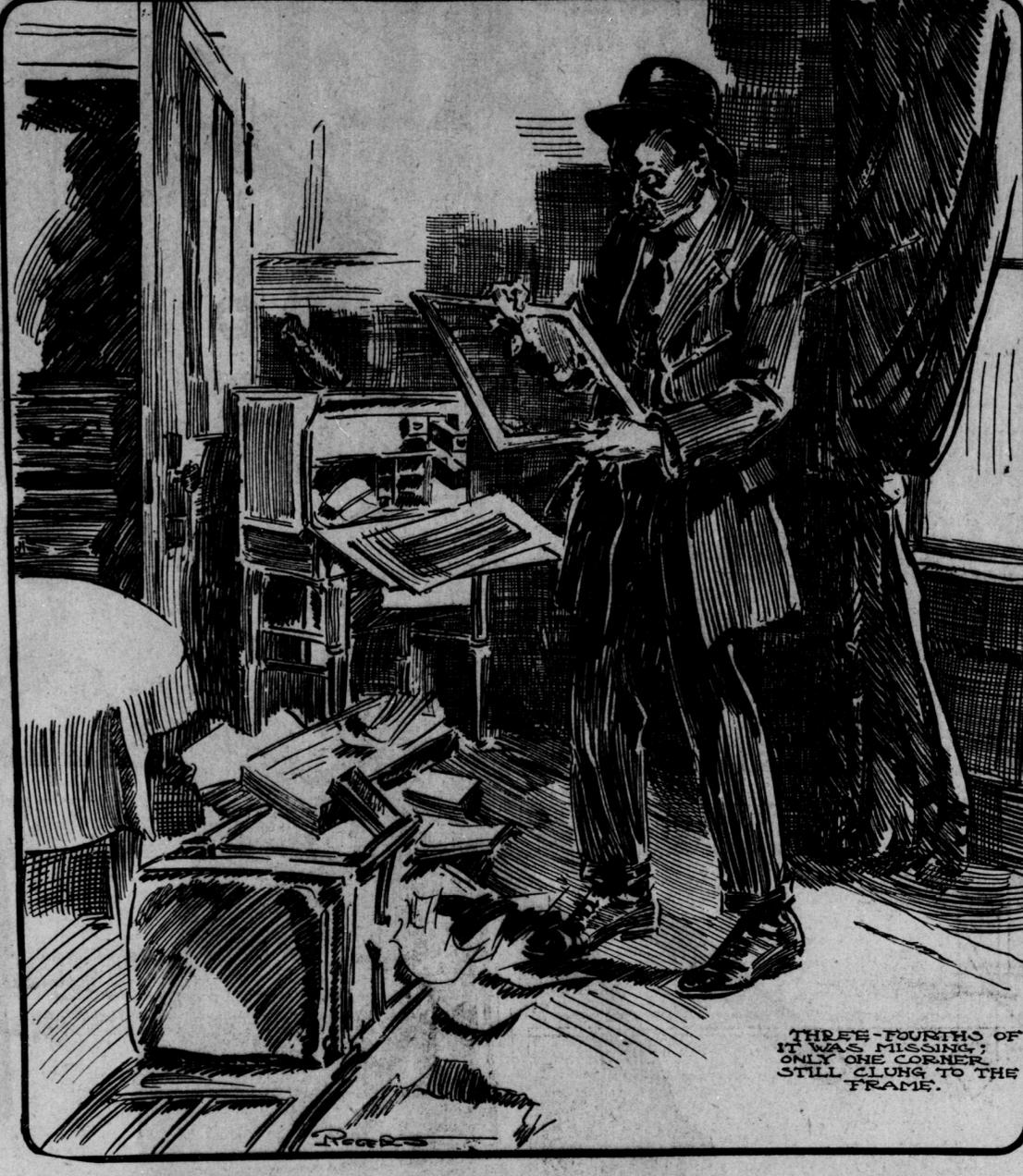
Mullian shook his head. "Sure! She'd no time," he protested. "It's just come from Boston, she had, and taken rooms at the Plaza hotel, and came around quick in a taxicab."

"Oh!" Wadsworth concealed his dawning suspicion. "And you let her in?"

"Sure and I did. And why not?"

"No reason at all. You went with her, of course?"

"Humph!" Where did you say she was staying?"



THREE-FOURTHS OF IT WAS MISSING; ONLY ONE CORNER STILL CLUNG TO THE FRAME.

to the Gazette office and to police headquarters. It was just possible that he might be caught at one of the ferries or railway stations in attempting to leave the city. Arrived at the house, the reporter hurried from room to room, trying to remember exactly how things had looked when he had been there before, and to decide what change, if any, had been made in them. Gifted with a photographic eye and a retentive brain, he felt that the attempt was not entirely hopeless. Yet it was long before he found anything that looked suspicious.

At last he reached the large front room which Mrs. Ford had used as a sitting room. Nothing in this room seemed to have escaped the hands of the marauders; not a closet, bureau or desk but had been torn out; not a picture but had been thrown down and shattered; the very carpet had been torn up and sliced into fragments by keen knives. The floor was heaped with debris piled in amazing confusion.

The coroner's jury had rendered an open verdict the afternoon before, and a man was just beginning to straighten the room, untouched until then. Wadsworth watched her as she worked. Suddenly his eyes focused themselves on a torn blue picture, half ripped from a trumpery frame and apparently doubled beneath it.

Wadsworth remembered that picture. He had noted it on his first visit to the house. It was a landscape, and different then. He bent to pick it up and found that instead of being merely loosened from the frame and doubled under itself, as he was sure it had been three days before, it had been torn into two pieces. Three-fourths of it was missing; only one corner still clung to the frame.

Hurriedly Wadsworth searched through the pile. The missing part of the picture was not there, nor could the maid enlighten him as to its whereabouts. Somebody had carried it away since the murder—had done so hurriedly, too. Could it have been the girl who let in the intruder? Carefully Wadsworth loosened the remaining corner of the picture from the frame, folded it up and put it into his pocket. The next moment the maid gathered up the rest of the debris and dumped it into the large basket for removal.

He went down stairs and cross-questioned Mullian, and learned that that officer had accompanied the girl in her trip through the house. At first Mullian was positive that he had not left her side for a moment; but, shrewdly, he admitted that he had left her alone for a minute only, in the sitting room, while he had gone down to get a handkerchief that she had left in the taxicab.

This settled the thing for Wadsworth. The girl, he decided, was in some way associated with the murder. At great personal risk, she had examined the house and had gone through it. She had got rid of Mullian by a pretext and had improved the opportunity to rip loose from his grasp a daub worth perhaps a cent or two intrinsically. She had done it so hurriedly that she had left part of the picture behind. To Wadsworth's mind, it followed beyond doubt that the picture was in some way a clue to the treasure.

But how was it a clue? Carefully he examined the fragment that he had captured. It was a water color, painted wholly in shades of blue. The paper on which it was painted was ordinary drawing paper, such as was sold in 100 sheets, the painting, so far as he could distinguish it, was a landscape, carelessly

executed, but by a rather clever hand. In great patches of blue that hid nearly all the original white surface of the paper. A leaf of some sort of palm, probably a palmetto, suggested that the scene was southern. Beyond that it suggested nothing. And later tests with heat, with chemicals, with magnifying glasses, with everything and anything that ingenuity could suggest, added nothing. So far as any clew to the treasure was concerned, the paper apparently might as well have been blank.

VI

The next two weeks were busy ones for Wadsworth. Scarcely taking time to eat and sleep, he raced through the city, running down clew after clew as to the whereabouts of the coachman. The niece, and the rest of the picture, no suggestion was too slight to be considered; no chance too small to be followed up. Tirelessly he worked, and recklessly he used the vast machinery of the great paper to which he belonged.

But all in vain. Every clew ended blindly. Every hope flickered faulty. Coachman, niece and picture had all disappeared, utterly and absolutely. At the end of two weeks he found himself exactly where he had been at the beginning. About the only relaxation he had taken in those two weeks was that which he spent in talking the case over with Miss Maynard. He said and doubtless believed that these talks helped to clarify his thoughts. Certainly they did not clear up the case. An outsider might have guessed that they tended more in the direction of making him believe that the solution of the mystery, at least, had made up his mind that they should eventually end at the church door, though naturally he was cautious in making his intentions in that direction plain. He guessed very readily that Bessie Maynard was not one to be taken by storm.

Cautious as he was, however, he feared he had not been cautious enough when Miss Maynard at last informed him that she must leave the city immediately. "I don't want to go," she said, frankly. "But I must. Father has written me to join him in Florida as soon as I can. He writes that he has discovered some surprising fossil bones down there, something like the wonder-ful bed he found in Wyoming, and he expects to stay there for two or three months investigating them. He wants me with him. He really needs me. Father never could take care of himself, you know. Besides, to be entirely frank, Mr. Wadsworth, New York hotel prices are rather steep for the daughter of a government scientist, who has lost a million dollars' worth of gold. I really can't afford to stay any longer. I'm afraid there isn't any use in staying, anyway. So far as I can see, the situation is hopeless and I guess the best thing I can do is to forget the treasure as quickly as I can."

Wadsworth nodded gloomily. "If anything does come up, it probably won't be for a long time. The police have given the case up. That is, they have decided that it's a simple case of burglary. Of course, they don't know as much as we do. As you know, I haven't told them about the treasure or the blue picture. They wouldn't take any stock in either of them anyway,

and the thing would get out sure and spoil what little chance we have left. But they know everything else and they can't find either the girl or the coachman. So—"

"So I must go!"

"I'm afraid there's little use in staying. I wish there were, but I've got to tell you the truth. Of course, I'll stick to the case and do what I can, you know. I'd do anything to help you."

"Yes, I know it." Bessie Maynard spoke very softly. "But you mustn't do too much. We can't let you neglect your regular work for our wild goose chase. By the way, father and I will probably be back in Washington in a few months, and if you happen to be down there—"

"Oh, I'll happen to be there, all right," returned Wadsworth emphatically. "I'll happen to be there. Be sure of that."

The girl had gone Wadsworth worked on alone, but without result, till Drake, news editor of the Gazette, called a halt. Drake had been accustomed to giving Wadsworth all the rope he wanted, and for a time he had made no protest at the reporter's failure to bring in a story. After a month, however, he grew restive and demanded developments, or, at least, some prospect of developments. When Wadsworth explained the situation he shook his head.

"I'll give you one more week, Waddy," he decided, "and then we'll drop the case. We're too darned busy to spare you. Next week things probably will taper off and you can have another try, but not now."

In all newspaper offices it is a pleasant fact that "this is a rush week and that next week will be easier. The queer thing about it is that newspaper actually seem to believe it. "In my opinion," went on Drake, the police are right and the Ford case was just a plain burglary. I believe it all the more because you haven't been able to prove it anything else, and I'm afraid that you would have done so before this if there had been anything else to prove. This treasure yarn of yours does look queer, but I believe the murder happened when it did was a mere coincidence. As for the pretended niece, she was just some curiosity-seeker who got frightened at the halibut her visit raised and has been afraid to 'ess' up. Your blue picture isn't a clew at all, except in your superheated imagination. No, Waddy! One week more, and then—skidoo for the Ford case!"

The week passed without developments, and at its close Wadsworth went back to police reporting, pending the appearance of another mystery. But he was not satisfied. Every free moment, including his "day-off," he spent in the Ford case—without results. So hard did he work, so persistently did he dog his brain into conjectures in regard to this, the first case that had ever beaten him, that his health began to give way, and the close of the summer saw him on the edge of a breakdown. Drake noticed his condition before Wadsworth himself did, and called him into his office.

"Easy, this, Waddy," he ordered, tossing a typewriter "dispatch" across the desk. Wadsworth took it and read: Peninsula City, Fla., April 5.—For a week or more negroes have been coming into town on a panic from the western part of the country. They claim that the water devil, which is said to have been active down here about 10

years ago, has again taken up his abode in Lake Okkechoke and that he is raiding the nearby region, devouring both stock and men. No hog seems to have seen the devil, but a good many have seen his tracks, which resemble those of an elephant. They always lead down to the water and disappear. Reports are conflicting and no doubt exaggerated, but it seems certain that half a dozen hogs and at least two negroes have disappeared. Possibly the negroes, expenses if you but the refugees contend that the water devil got them all. Wire him, and he'll be here in a week. I want me to go in and investigate. SIMPSON.

Wadsworth nodded slowly as he finished. "I guess that's it," he remarked. Drake had gone back to his work. As Wadsworth spoke he gathered up the sheets he had just read and tossed them into a wire basket from which a boy snatched them a moment later. Then he stared.

"What did you say?" he demanded. "Wadsworth was still studying the dispatch. "Professor Maynard," he announced. "Bone sharp! Smithsonian! Discovered dinosaur bones in Wyoming. Working down near Okkechoke for six months. I've had letters from him—hinting at something curious. Guess he's been investigating this water devil."

Drake's eyes twinkled. "That's the same Maynard who lost the treasure in that time novel Ford case, isn't it?" he questioned. "Umph! Seems to me he had a daughter who was up here, hadn't he?"

Wadsworth blushed. "Yes, he had," he admitted. "Is she with him in the—water devil country?"

"Um! Um!" Drake ran his hand through his hair distractedly. "Sounds better even than I thought. 'How'd you like to run down there and look the thing up? Take your time. We can spare you for two weeks. Simpson's our local man there, you know. Get in touch with him. Send us a corking Sunday special if you can. If you can't, why, it doesn't matter.'"

Wadsworth straightened up. "I'd be delighted," he answered. "But I'm awfully busy just now on some private business, and don't want to leave town."

"Yes, I know you are busy," retorted the other, grimly. "And I know what you're busy about, too. That's why I'm sending you away before you kill yourself. The Gazette can't spare you permanently, but it's got to spare you temporarily. You're half crazy on the Ford case, and will be until you get out of New York. When you do, you'll realize that there never was any mystery in the Ford case outside of your brain. Honest, now, I've had letters from you away before you kill yourself. The Gazette can't spare you permanently, but it's got to spare you temporarily. You're half crazy on the Ford case, and will be until you get out of New York. When you do, you'll realize that there never was any mystery in the Ford case outside of your brain. Honest, now, I've had letters from you away before you kill yourself. The Gazette can't spare you permanently, but it's got to spare you temporarily. You're half crazy on the Ford case, and will be until you get out of New York. 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