

ence of a doctor, Percy died.

Madame Cleo's prediction had come true, but fate had been given a helping hand: When pathologists analyzed the contents of Percy's stomach they found he had died of strychnine poisoning.

What followed was one of the most sensational murder trials in Ontario this century, and one of its most inconclusive: We'll probably never know what really happened to Percy Bell.

As Chief Justice J. C. McRuer expressed it so neatly in his charge to the jury: "There are only three people in that house — only three hands to administer that strychnine. It was either administered by Jenners or Bell or Mrs. Bell."

Through Percy Bell's dramatic demise, the Canadian public was also introduced to Mary Elizabeth Bell, 48 — an intriguing, unforgettable, attractive, chatty, sometimes vain woman whose idle talk got her into lots of trouble.

"She was a victim of vicious gossip," says Fred McClement, an author who covered the Bell case for The Star and who witnessed the frightful rumor-mongering that went on in this United Empire Loyalist town at the time. But it must be added that Mrs. Bell contributed no small part to the gossip.

Although Bell's symptoms were a little confusing, the attending physician, Dr. Reg Anderson noted down "cerebral hemorrhage" as cause of death and signed the death certificate.

Mary Bell, to use her own words, buried Percy "like a prince." She picked out a plot at the Riverside Cemetery at Napanee overlooking the water, bought a handsome marble stone and paid close to \$1,000 to put him away in style.

But the day of the funeral, without her knowing, her sister and brother-in-law, the Cairds, had informed police there was something suspicious about Percy's death.

Moving in utmost secrecy, the Ontario Provincial Police got an order from the attorney-general to exhume Bell without even his wife knowing. Their investigation would have gone ahead quietly and perhaps with different results if it hadn't been for a bit of bad luck.

On his way to Napanee for the exhumation, OPP Inspector Frank Kelly dropped in at a Scarborough police station, where a reporter from the now defunct Toronto Telegram, John MacLean, overheard him discussing the case.

Within hours Mrs. Bell answered her front door in the handsome Victorian section of Belleville, to find the boyish, engaging MacLean on her doorstep.

MacLean, who was a bit of a rascal, was soon nodding sympathetically as Mrs. Bell unburdened her anger with the police for going behind her back to dig up Percy's body.

There wouldn't even have been a body to dig up if she'd followed Percy's wishes that he be cremated, she said. "But that's inhumane. I wouldn't do that to a dog." So she buried him "because it's more dignified. I buried him respectfully."

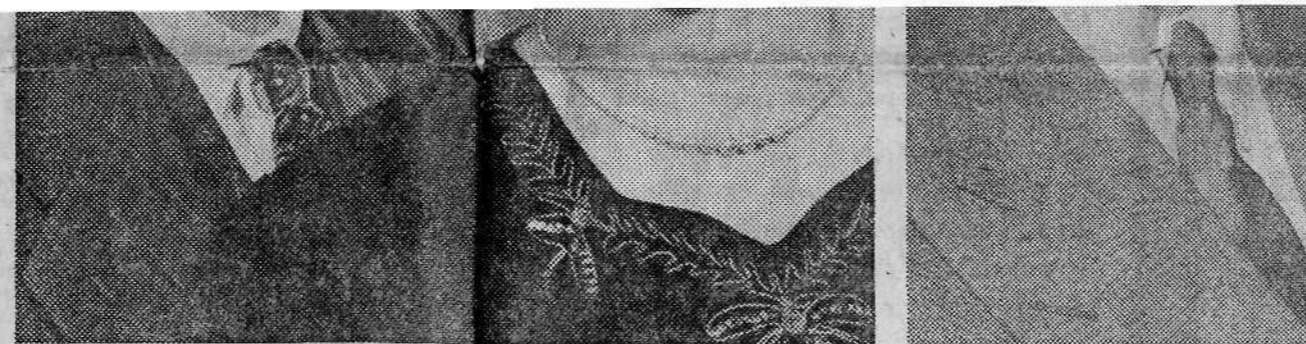
Meanwhile at Riverside Cemetery,

you lose everything. She told reporter MacLean they'd been married 21 years. She later explained to him that wasn't quite correct — it was 28 years — but Roscoe was present at the time she said 21. MacLean, who was seen around town drunk, was now an occasional supper guest at the Bell home, and photographer Madison Sale would sit down and watch TV and leaf through the family photo albums.

When he admired a picture of her, Mary Bell said with a smile, "I'm a pretty fair chunk of meat." She was always interested to see how her pictures had turned out in the papers, although her dark-rimmed glasses did her pleasant features less than credit.

At one point she told MacLean that Percy might have taken a heart tablet containing strychnine. Then, when the news broke that strychnine had been found in Percy's stomach, she blithely told him she had indeed purchased strychnine a couple of months ago from a local druggist, Archie Boyd, to kill rats who were eating apples in the cellar.

By the time police finally arrived on Mrs. Bell's doorstep two weeks after the exhumation, Mary Elizabeth Bell had been tried by headline to a dis-



Principals: Poison victim Percy Bell, seen in earlier times with wife Mary; boarder Roscoe Jenners.

turbing degree. MacLean, unknown to Mrs. Bell, had also been reporting everything she said to Inspector Kelly, and Chief Justice McRuer was to describe the use police made of reporters as "loathsome and disgusting."

Mrs. Bell was in curlers when Kelly and other police arrived at the door. A couple of hours later, when she walked to a police car through a crowd of photographers and reporters, there wasn't a hair out of place. "Would you like a good picture of me?" she asked, posing in front of the police car.

At the preliminary hearing and subsequent trial, a chastened Dr.

Anderson, who had never treated Percy Bell before the night of his death, admitted he had since gone back to the medical textbooks and found the symptoms were those of a classical case of strychnine poisoning.

When he arrived at the house that night, Mrs. Bell had told him she had been trying to get a doctor since midnight without avail. He found Percy in dire condition, with scratch marks on his chest as if he had been ripping himself with his nails, and a few minutes later he went into convulsions.

Significantly, Dr. Anderson noticed the breakfast table downstairs had been laid for three — suggesting Percy was expected down to breakfast when the table was set.

Roscoe Jenners, asked if he had given strychnine to Percy Bell, replied, "No, I certainly did not." But as a procession of friends and relatives testified, it became clear Mrs. Bell had been at least mildly infatuated with her lodger.

A guitar instructor and friend, Don "Danny Boy" Smith, quoted Percy as saying one night of Mary and Roscoe: "Them two have got my nanny and I am going to do something about it."

The court heard that when Percy went away on holiday on his own in September, 12 bottles of liquor had been purchased in a period of a week by Mrs. Bell. She had told her sister, Mrs. Caird, that she and Roscoe had drunk five of them in three days.

Reporter MacLean (who admitted in the witness box he had embroidered some of Mary Bell's words in his stories) related that at supper one night she'd said, "You know Rusty (Jenners) had another widow woman, don't you? She lives in Trenton and is much older than me. There was never anything between Rusty and me."

She had told photographer Madison Sale that if Percy was poisoned he took it himself, "for spite."

Mrs. Bell's daughter, Mrs. Earl Treverton, a farmer's wife, said that a few weeks before Percy died her mother told her Percy was in bad health, "and might die at any time like the snap of a finger." But she'd urged Mrs. Treverton to keep the fact quiet.

Insurance company evidence showed the Bells had taken out a policy on Percy's life for less than \$5,000 in 1953, but it was to cover the mortgage on their home. Police testified that when they searched the spotless Bell home they had found no trace of the container of strychnine — nor of any rats. How Percy had come by the strychnine was a mystery.

Then a surprise witness, finance

manager David R. Duffy, related that when he called on Mrs. Bell Jan. 5, just after the funeral, she'd told him Percy had complained of back pains the night of his death and she'd given him a drink of hot chocolate. He'd thought it odd when he'd read later that Percy had not had anything to eat or drink after returning home.

But again police had found no sign of cocoa in the Bell home.

A scientist's evidence that he had smelled cocoa or chocolate when examining Percy's remains became meaningless when others testified Bell had been eating chocolates all day at the home of the mother of their boarder, Rusty Jenners.

As the shabby courtroom filled every day with large crowds, many of them women of Mrs. Bell's generation who sometimes knitted as they listened, every incriminating piece of evidence somehow led down a blind alley.

In the audience there was a cynical assumption of Mary Bell's guilt, and laughter broke out when druggist Archie Boyd related that he had sold her the strychnine to kill rats. He sold her "enough to kill all the rats in Belleville."

And there were more smiles when reporter MacLean testified that when he offered her a drink, Mrs. Bell said "she hated men who drank and her husband would turn over in his grave if he thought she had taken a drink."

The crown had called more than 70 witnesses, including 19 doctors who said they hadn't received any call from Mary Bell the night of Percy's death, refuting her claim that she had called "every doctor in town."

Now the defence attorney, Ronald Cass, whom Chief Justice McRuer still remembers for his tough, no-nonsense undermining of the crown case, had a hard choice to make: Should he put Mary Bell on the stand? Realizing perhaps that the all-male jury, after hearing the many contradictory statements she'd made, would be unlikely to believe her, he took a gamble and called no evidence.

Crown attorney Alex Hall seemed to have lost faith in his own case, and his summing up was weak and unconvincing. Cass, in contrast, hammered away at the fact that the crown had established no motive for murder — if Mrs. Bell was having an affair with Roscoe Jenners, there was no evidence that Percy, whose sexual abilities had been affected in an earlier accident, was doing anything about it, said Cass. "You must not be ill-disposed to

in the back of her family bible. After a private talk with McRuer during the trial, Hall had decided to keep quiet about it, said McClement, in case it damaged Mrs. Bell's chances with the jury.

Finally, after four hours and three minutes, the jury returned. Their verdict: Not guilty. "Thank you," the freed woman told the jury, then cried as she embraced her daughter.

Officials close to the jury said later what swayed the jurors was that they were unwilling to send a woman to the gallows on that amount of circumstantial evidence. And, indeed, juries traditionally had been reluctant to have women hung when capital punishment was still in force in Canada.

Mrs. Bell left soon afterwards for western Canada and remarried. She subsequently returned with a new husband and a new name, and her daughter, Mrs. Treverton, says she lives somewhere in Ontario and has recently celebrated a very happy 25th wedding anniversary.

The house on Albert St. was torn down several years ago, and an apartment block stands there now. But locals still remember when the street was full of reporters, photographers and police cars.

Around the corner, druggist Archie Boyd is in happy retirement. "I don't even want to remember it," he said. "I'll tell you why. Afterwards she tried to sell me her house. I said, 'No way.'"

Across town, recently retired deputy police chief Harold Reid paused from cutting his lawn. "I helped search that house from top to bottom," he said. "We didn't find a thing. Terrible job it was, climbing under the eaves. But she kept that house neat as a pin."

In his law office, Ronald Cass, who hasn't done criminal work for years, remembered the case he defended as perhaps his greatest. "It was quite a mystery. It still is. Percy clearly died of strychnine, but there was no motive for anyone to do it."

During the two-week trial, Hurricane Hazel lashed the Belleville area, bringing down trees and powerlines. Now, as I drove towards Napanee, east of Belleville, it was just such a day again, with hurricane-force winds lashing the province, and sudden storms causing floods.

At the Riverside Cemetery a keeper consulted a plot map in his truck, then leaped out and dashed down the slope through the torrential rain. In a second we were both soaked to the skin as I jumped puddles in pursuit, but he'd found it, and stood pointing for a second before dashing back to his truck.

The rain streamed down my face, but I could just make out the lettering on the stone set there by Mary Elizabeth Bell 26 years ago:

"Bell," it said at the top. "Percy W. — 1902-1954. Mary E. — 1906 — 'Abide With Me.'"

Next week: Lust, greed and murder in one of Canada's most powerful families.



Druggist Archie Boyd, who testified he'd sold Mrs. Bell "enough strychnine to kill all the rats in Belleville."