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THE LAUGH
How They Solved the Mystery
By CLARISSA MACKIE

Harley and Rogers, investigating lawyers, faced each other in some dismay.

"A murder case," remarked Harley at last. "That's rather out of our line, isn't it?"

"Just because no one has brought one to our doors. We've taken everything in sight so far," grinned Rogers. "Then we won't let this one get by, eh? Good thing it's vacation time. Now tell me what Dr. Hibbert had to say about the matter."

"I found him waiting in the office when I arrived this morning. He said that he had a curious story to tell me. It seems he has been attending a patient, Emery Armstrong, who lives in a dilapidated house on the Freeman road. Armstrong was a middle aged man of eccentric habits and lived alone with a hired man, a Swede of the name of Lindquist.

"Armstrong had money or was reputed to be a miser, but his house appeared poverty stricken. He always paid the doctor with grumbling reluctance.

"Armstrong had been sick for some time, nothing dangerous apparently, merely a low malarial fever. He was so much improved that Hibbert decided he need not come any more.

"When he went to pay his last visit last night the man Lindquist met him at the door and said that his employer was unconscious. The doctor found Armstrong had been dead for several hours. Investigation showed that the man had been shot through the heart as he lay in bed.

"The shot had penetrated bedclothing and all, and yet there were no powder marks from a gun pressed against the bedding.

"Lindquist appeared stupefied when told that his employer was dead. He admitted that he had been away all night and had just returned. Hibbert came directly to us and has now gone to notify the police authorities."

"Where is Lindquist?" asked Harley.

"Oh, Hibbert left the man alone there. Rather an odd thing to do under the circumstances."

"Of course Hibbert's reputation is impeccable," remarked Harley, reaching for his hat. "Coming with me?"

"Yes, I'd like to beat the police to it. My car is below."

The young lawyers went down to the street and entered Rogers' low swung racing car. In fifteen minutes they were turning into the neglected grounds surrounding the Armstrong house. They were quite extensive, and the masses of shrubbery furnished excellent hiding places for any one prowling around bent on mischief.

The house itself, once a lofty colonial mansion with pillared porticoes and many wings, was in a tumbledown condition.

There was no sign of life around the place, and Rogers could not help a sudden tightening of heartstrings when he recollected that the murderer might be concealed where he could pick them off one at a time as they entered the house.

The same thought occurred to Harley, and he was glad they were both armed with automatic weapons.

Rogers lifted the ancient brass knocker and rapped gently.

If Lindquist was on guard he would answer at once.

The knock reverberated as though through empty rooms.

"What was that sound?" asked Rogers. "It sounded like a laugh!"

Harley had heard it too.

"Perhaps the Swede has gone insane," he suggested and turned the doorknob.

The door opened halfway and then stopped.

The two men entered and almost fell over the squat form of a man huddled on the floor in a pool of blood.

"It is Lindquist—shot in the back!" muttered Rogers as he got up from his knees.

"It has just happened," Harley touched his companion's arm. "The murderer may still be here," he breathed.

Weapons in hand, they searched the lower rooms, finding only dust and decay, except in the kitchen, which bore evidence of being in daily use.

On the second floor only one room was habitable. This was the one in which the dead man lay.

This was a lofty chamber furnished in the black walnut "period" of forty years ago. There was every evidence of comfort here, the bookcases running over with volumes. The well equipped writing desk, with its scattered papers and fine reading lamp, denoted that Emery Armstrong had spent much of his time in his own apartment.

But the quiet occupant of the room! The two young men turned back the sheet and looked upon a noble countenance.

A hasty examination of the room showed nothing to indicate there had been a struggle.

The big bed stood almost in the center of the room, and it had been made up with the pillows at the foot, under a hanging lamp.

"So he could read in bed," explained Rogers. "There was a book near his hand when the doctor found him."

At that instant there was a confusion below stairs. The coroner and his associates had arrived. Dr. Hibbert was with them.

The two young men went downstairs and found them crowded around Lindquist's body.

"Well?" asked Hibbert eagerly.

Rogers shook his head. "We've only just come," he explained.

"It's a clear case," said the coroner. "This man killed his employer and has committed suicide."

"Shot himself in the back?" asked Rogers. "We found no weapon either."

Harley and Rogers met a battery of unpleasant glances.

Dr. Hibbert hastened to explain their presence on the scene, but the young investigators were given to understand that their presence was both untimely and quite unofficial.

The coroner and his associates were eager to have the investigation to themselves and felt jealous of the interference of the two young lawyers.

They scorned the theory of a third person being involved, though Rogers told them about the uncanny laugh which had followed their first knock upon the door.

"You find the laugh, young fellow," grinned the police detective, "and I'll get the chief to appoint you on the detective bureau."

"Done!" exclaimed Rogers confidently, and he withdrew with his partner, while the others went on upstairs.

"How about the laugh?" queried Harley as they stood in the kitchen.

"We must find the woman," said Rogers.

"The woman?"

"Yes. There's a woman somewhere around the place. Why? She has been down and made some tea. The pot is still warm. There are the drugs in a cup. Armstrong is dead, and Lindquist probably did not make the tea. Men fly to strong liquors in times of stress. This tea was being made when we entered the house."

"Where is she?" asked Harley. "All the doors are bolted on the inside, even the door leading to the cellar."

"We might try the attic. These back stairs will take us up there."

Rogers led the way up a narrow, dusty flight of stairs. Once he paused and searched the treads with his flashlight.

Faintly visible in the dust were the imprints of a small stockinged foot.

"We are on the right track," said Harley.

The stairs ended in a small hall on the second floor, and opening another door, they discovered a dusty flight winding upward.

Now they walked cautiously, guns in hand. Under the low roof the attic divided into several rooms.

Harley and his companions had not taken ten steps before they heard once more that wild laugh.

They peered through a half open door.

The room was directly over Armstrong's sleeping apartment.

In the middle of the floor a board had been removed, and beside the hole knelt a woman. She was a small creature, bent with years and illness. Gray hair hung in tangled locks about her wrinkled face, and her large, dark eyes were wild and glittering as she lifted her head and regarded the two men.

Then, without comment on their intrusion, she bent over the hole and appeared to look down.

Rogers silently placed himself where he could lean over and look down also.

He saw the lath and plaster of the bedroom ceiling and a white point of light that streamed up through a small hole.

Below that hole was the bed where the body of Armstrong was found with a bullet in his heart, and the hole in the ceiling was right above his heart!

Suddenly the hole was obscured, and to Rogers' horror, he saw that the woman had covered it with the muzzle of a revolver.

With a signal to Harley, they both leaped for her and tore her away from the hole.

She fought like a tigress, and again and again her wild, insane laughter echoed through the house.

The men below came tearing upstairs and secured the raving woman. It was Dr. Hibbert who identified her.

"It is Armstrong's maniac wife," said the physician. "For years she has been confined in the Leets asylum. I did not know she had escaped, and I did not connect her with the crime."

"It is plain to be seen now how she accomplished her deed. She concealed herself here and made a small hole in the ceiling close to the book in the middle of the plaster centerpiece. From this hook the lamp was suspended.

"As for Lindquist, she probably surprised him and killed him as he tried to escape. If our friends, Harley and Rogers, had not traced the laugh it is very likely that she would have got one or more of us."

As the mad woman was led screaming to the patrol wagon in which the officers had arrived Dr. Hibbert turned to the detective in charge.

"How about your promise, Smith?" he asked. "My friends here traced the laugh."

The detective shook hands with Harley and Rogers.

"The next case you have, my friends," he said, "will have the backing of the detective bureau."

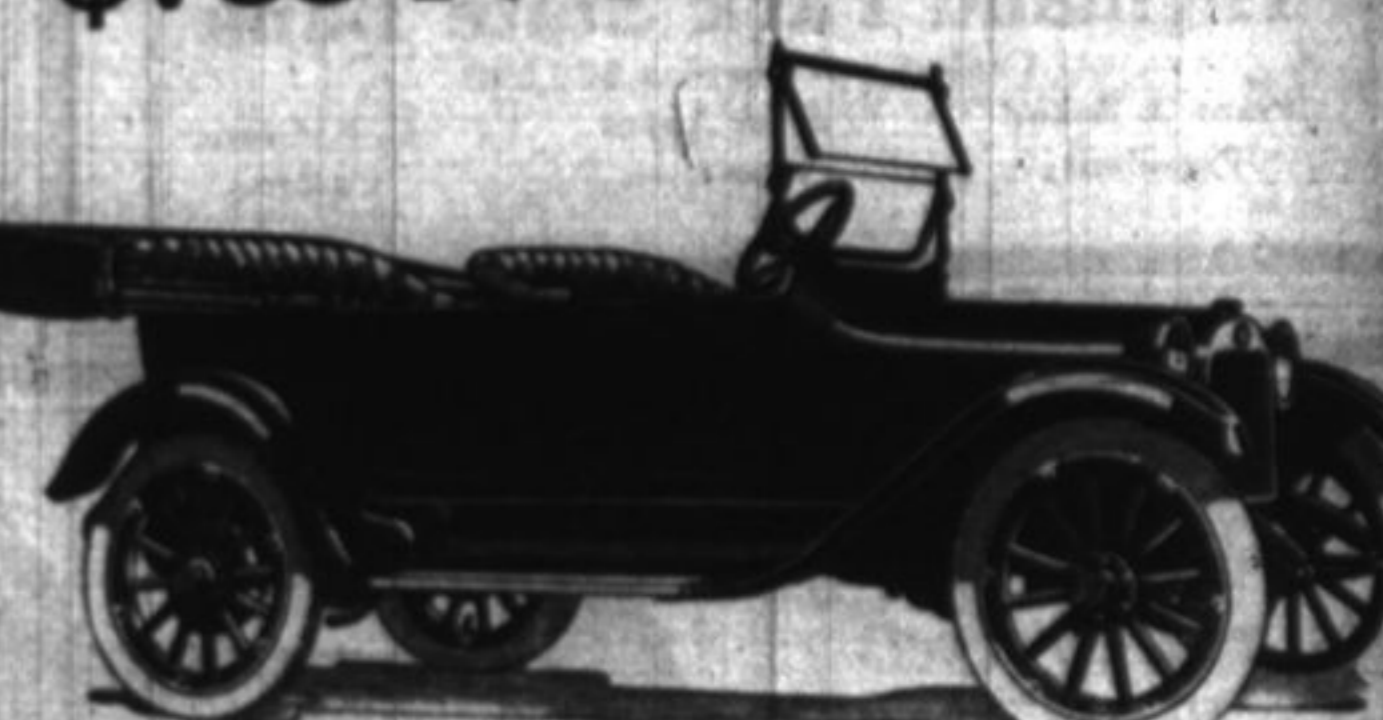
"Not if I know it," grinned Rogers as they left the house. "But I'll tell you one thing—I don't want another murder case."

"We'll turn down the next one," agreed Harley as the car sped toward the city.

But it was to happen that the next case they handled touched them so intimately that they could not help being involved in the most mysterious crime of the decade.

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