

Death Among The Dunes

Introducing Dr. Mordacai Wescott, investigator, who solves the problem at Dune House, down among the sand-dunes on the coast of North Carolina.

By WILBORNE HARRELL

★ A Chowan Herald Fiction Story.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED.

Dr. Mordacai Wescott is an eccentric detective who is very often extremely unconventional and unorthodox in his methods of deduction. He relies more on character analysis and the psychological aspects of a case, of which he was a master and which had brought him fame, than on the varied police techniques of modern scientific deduction that have been developed. (But Wescott could, and often did, employ scientific methods when necessary.) His police associates were very often disgusted with his methods, and his closest friend, Jimmy Maguire, newspaperman, was often embarrassed with Wescott's seemingly slipshod procedure. But both his enemies and his friends conceded one point: Wescott never failed to "get his man."

So when Josiah Fentress, wealthy sportsman, was murdered and his wife, Octavia Fentress, was accused of the crime, Wescott, with his uncanny perspicacity, instantly perceives that she was not guilty; henceforth he acted on the assumption of her innocence. And to add a bizarre and definitely a Wescottian touch to the crime, Wescott sees in a woman's dimple a possible "clue" to the murderer and proceeds to solve the mystery.

Chapter Five (Conclusion)

"You'll pardon me, gentlemen," greeted Captain Wayne, "if I go about my duties; night is approaching and the routine of a lighthouse, you know, is inexorable. You may accompany me if you wish—interesting sight. You wish to talk over the ghastly tragedy, I presume?"

"Thank you, Captain, we shall accept your kind invitation. We climb these stairs, I suppose, around and around up into the tower? You lead, Jimmy, and I will follow . . . This is going to be quite a climb."

"Yes Captain, we wish to talk over the crime with you. You evinced a lively interest in it this afternoon, coming over on the boat, and I rather hoped that between the two of us, or rather three counting in Jimmy here—he's with me, you understand—we might clarify a few dark spots and throw a little light on the case. You seem to be very well acquainted with Josiah Fentress; you knew him before you came here? Yes, you mentioned that this afternoon. And you have not held this post very long; you took charge at the recent death of the former keeper? . . . Whew! This is some climb." And Wescott interpolated his rambling talk with dabs at his perspiring forehead.

Up . . . Up . . . Landing . . . Around . . . Up . . . Up . . . Landing . . .

I looked down as we approached the top, and the foreshortened perspective presented a distorted, futuristic view of the tower's interior. I caught myself comparing its crazy appearance to the affair at Dune House, which was surely a muddled, crazy patchwork tangle.

"You can get an excellent view of the sea and the beach from the balcony out there, gentlemen," said Captain Wayne motioning to a small door that gave onto a balcony that circled the light. We had reached the final landing, and while Captain Wayne proceeded about the mysteries of his task, Wescott and I stepped out of the little door. "I'll join you shortly," the Captain called out to us.

It was dusk, but there was still

light enough to discern objects on the ground below and to make out vessels far out to sea. The beach stretched out before us like a gigantic carpet, and Dune House stood dwarfed to doll-house dimensions. Lights twinkled cheerily from its windows, but I knew there was no happiness there tonight. "A peaceful scene, Jimmy, a peaceful scene," sighed Wescott.

I glanced sharply around; it was uncanny at times how Wescott could parallel my thoughts with an appropriate remark. "Yeah?" I said. "It looks peaceful enough. I just wish it was as peaceful as it looks."

Wescott applied a match to a stogy. "It will be; make no mistake about that, Jimmy." Taking my cue from Wescott, I lit a cigarette, and inhaling deeply glanced moodily about me. "I am beginning to have my doubts about that," I said. "If something doesn't break pretty soon it's curtains for Octavia Fentress. If Crosby ever gets his bracelets on her, it'll be a devil of a job getting them off."

Spoke a suave voice at my elbow, "I agree with you heartily, my friend. But there'll be no handcuffs on Octavia Fentress." It was Captain Wayne speaking, and as I started in my surprise I saw an ugly little automatic in his hand, pointed unwaveringly at Wescott and me. "Don't move," he went on smoothly, "You see, I have you covered." Then throwing back his head he laughed. With a quick twist of his hand he reversed the gun and holding it out, butt forward, bowed deeply.

"Allow me, Dr. Wescott," he said, "to present you with the gun that killed Josiah Fentress. Your stupid police were not even efficient enough to check up on that fact. They found a recently fired gun in the immediate vicinity of the crime, and as the bullet taken from the body of the murdered man was of the same calibre, they jumped to conclusions; the murder gun! Ah, such efficiency."

He bowed again, sweepingly, gracefully. "At your service, the benefactor of mankind, the man who in infinite wisdom removed from this aile of tears the obnoxious person of Josiah Fentress, Captain Ross Wayne."

Wescott coolly returned the bow and in the faintly sardonic tone affected by Captain Wayne, said, "It is indeed a pleasure to make the acquaintance of the esteemed Captain Ross Wayne. Also accept my profound gratitude for the graciousness with which you accept the situation. I thought Jimmy and I would have a little trouble with you."

I don't know what I thought; in fact for a moment I didn't think anything. The swiftness of it all had left my mind a blank.

"Dr. Wescott, I am not going to ask you how you suspected me; my confession is sufficient recognition of your

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ability." Wayne's tone had changed; the sardonic overtones had been supplanted by a serious earnestness that lent sincerity to his words. I really began liking the man. "And now the time has come for me to give you the truth. I'll try to tell it in as few words as possible . . . It is getting rather chilly—but it must be finished here." Had I realized the significance of Wayne's last words and foreseen their outcome . . .

In the intermittent flashes from the powerful lamp within the lighthouse, Captain Wayne began speaking. "Octavia Fentress and I are brother and sister, a younger sister, I'm the older. Our parents are dead, and I rather looked upon myself as her protector. She has always looked up to me; even as a little child she would obey me in preference of her parents. I loved her; she loved me."

"She grew up and she was no longer a little girl. Then Fentress came into her life. They fell in love and eventually they were married." Here Wayne's voice lowered and took on a steely, brittle quality. "I have already, this afternoon in the boat, touched upon what a scoundrel he proved to be. He literally brought hell into her life. There was no happiness for her. The love, the romance, the glamour that she had a right to expect in marriage became as gall and wormwood to her sensitive girlish soul."

"Her love for Fentress died. Then Crane came. Fentress saw, and knew how things stood between them. That infuriated him. I think he would have eventually killed Crane and Octavia. I did not become fully aware of all this, you understand, until a few weeks ago."

"It reached a crisis yesterday. My little Octavia tried to take her own life. Do you understand how intolerable things had become, Dr. Wescott? But that fiend incarnate, Fentress, got the gun away from her and

CHRISTIAN CHURCH SERVICES

Services at the First Christian Church have been announced as follows by the pastor, the Rev. E. C. Alexander:

Bible School, Sunday morning at 10 o'clock; morning service at 11 o'clock; evening service at 7:30 o'clock. Wednesday Evening Bible Class meets at 7:30 o'clock. Everyone is welcome to young people's meeting at 6:30 P. M.; all services.

hid it. He acted on the principal that the best way to hide an object is not to hide it at all. That was the gun the police found plastered with Octavia's fingerprints, and as it had recently been fired—ergo! the murder weapon.

"I committed a grave error in not securing and permanently disposing of that gun. But you can't expect an amateur murderer to think of everything." He flashed a smile that brought his dimple into prominence. "You see, I have had very little practice. I acted on impulse. I shot Fentress without counting the cost—I mean to Octavia," he hastily amended. "I wasn't thinking of myself."

"I shot Fentress from one of these tower windows. His window was open, the rest of the party had gone down the beach on a moonlight picnic, and he was sitting there in his shirt-sleeves, working. God, it was too easy."

"I counted on the fact that it was not known around here that I was Mrs. Fentress's brother, to keep me in the background. A lighthouse keeper can't hobnob with millionaires, can he? Octavia tried to get me over to her parties, but I refused."

"But Octavia, with a woman's intuition, jumped to the truth. She knew I had shot Fentress, and loyal little girl that she is, she clammed up. Of course, that made it look bad for her. And when she confessed to the crime, I knew then I would have to give myself up." He looked earnestly at Wescott. "You don't believe I would let her suffer for what I had done; do you?"

"No," said Wescott, simply. "And let me tell you, Captain Ross Wayne, I consider it an honor to have known you. Although what you have done is outside the laws of organized society, and as its agent I am not to condone such, if I had been in your place and Octavia Fentress had been my sister, I would have shot Josiah Fentress with little compunction."

"God bless you," said Wayne, and he and Wescott grasped hands silently. It was an eerie tableau, those two standing there, the half-light bringing them out in strong relief like deeply etched copper.

So engrossed was I in the scene that I was not prepared for what followed.

Captain Wayne quickly placed his

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hand in his pocket and drew forth a pendent object from which the light struck sparks of fire, and held it out to Wescott. I caught a quick glimpse of it as it passed hands. It was a Croix de Guerre, the medal of bravery issued by the French government. I jumped to a hasty conclusion that Captain Wayne had served with the French Foreign Legion—hence the "Captain".

"Take this," said the Captain. "Give it to Octavia—it's something to remember me by. Tell her I hope she and Crane find much happiness together." And quickly he sprang to the rail, poised an instant, and was over. Down . . . down . . . down . . . a twisting, turning, tangled mass of humanity, hurtling downward to its death. Came a dull thud . . . a silence so pregnant that for a full minute Wescott and I stood transfixed to the rail.

Wescott slowly brought up the hand that held the symbol of courage, twinkling in tiny points of darting brilliance. He gazed at it, steadily, fixedly, then turning to me, he said softly, almost reverently, "Jimmy, there dies a brave man." Then briskly, "Come, Jimmy, the affair of Dune House is finished. There is other work in the world that needs to be done—

let's be away and about it." THE END.

Watch for another Dr. Wescott murder mystery soon, when the eccentric detective solves the crime of the pirate's treasure. . .

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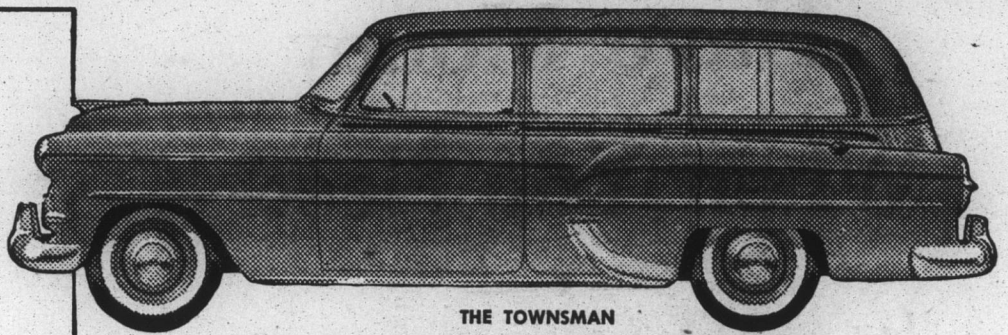
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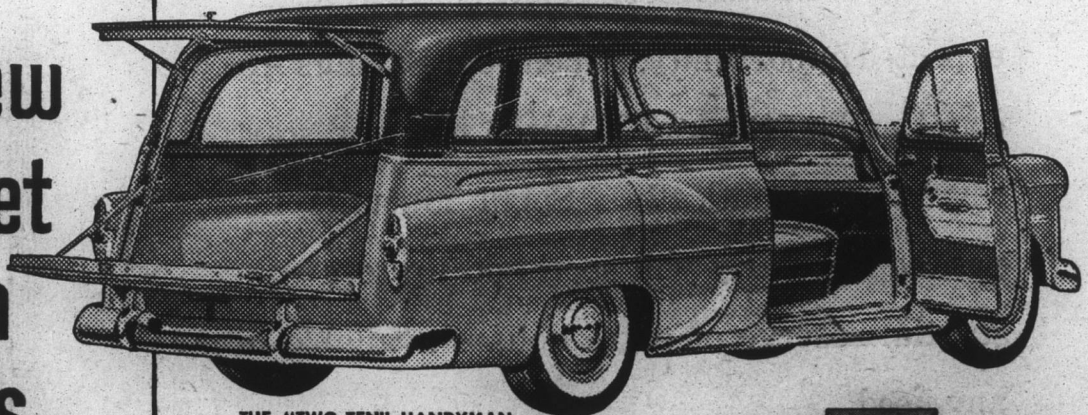
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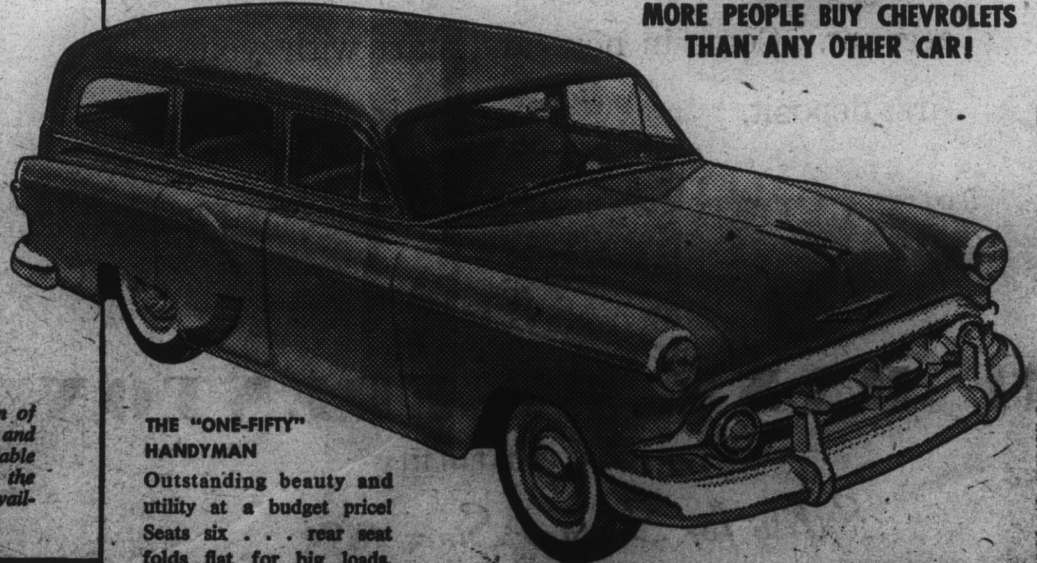


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