

Jonathan Wise Was Retired from Criminology—Until a Beautiful Girl Asked Him to Find Her Missing Suitor!



Mossman was running through the roses as Grant got his hands on Sherid's throat



SCARECROWS DON'T BLEED

By JOE ARCHIBALD

CHAPTER I

Vanishing American

JONATHAN WISE turned abruptly when someone called his name. Shock and irritation were in his eyes when he looked at the middle-aged man who stood there staring at him, a little uncertainly. He was certain he had met the man somewhere before.

"Well?" he asked.

"I was sure it was you," the man replied. "I used to be on the Herald-Record in Boston. Ed Mossman is the name. How have you been, Mr. Wise?"

"Fairly well. Mossman? I remember you now. One of the best police reporters I ever

knew. What are you doing down here?"

Jonathan Wise still betrayed his annoyance. He had come to the hotel at the Maine spa to get away from everyone he knew. He needed the mineral water for his arthritis, quiet and seclusion for his nerves. He was getting well past sixty, and that last book on criminology had taken a lot out of him. He was tall and gaunt and had the sombre face of a Church deacon. He wore tweed winter and summer, and it was always in need of a hot iron.

"**I**BOUGHT out a small paper here," Mossman said. "I am a country editor, Mr. Wise, but have the old nose for news. Now you wouldn't be here on account of a guy named Walter Nixon, would you?"

“Nixon? Nixon?” Wise sniffed. “I never heard of the man. Why did you ask me that, Mossman?”

“Why, the man’s name has been in the papers for the past three days,” Mossman said. “He’s disappeared, this young chap. Came down here about every week to see a girl, ward to the rich guy who has a big place not far from here, Marvin Brant.

“This Nixon was a nice guy, an architect. His boss wrote the Chief of Police here when he didn’t show up for work. Nixon started out, but never got here. We asked ‘em down at the station if they saw him get off the train that day, but during the summer season so many get off—”

“Save your breath,” Jonathan Wise snapped. “I’m not interested in missing persons anymore, Mossman. I’m retired and intend to remain so. Glad to have seen you.” He walked away as if the small amount of mineral water he had already consumed had taken all the twinges out of his joints.

“Thanks,” Ed Mossman grinned wryly. “For a minute I thought I might—well, that’s that.”

Jonathan Wise walked out of the hotel, his old stick held under his armpit. He took long pulls at the pine-scented air from the distant wooded slopes. The sun was beginning to sink low in the western sky. It was the time of day when Wise liked to take his long brisk walk.

He took a different road this time, one that was narrow and sandy. It was a winding road with a slight downgrade, and Jonathan Wise followed it until the dusk deepened, and insect night life began to hum.

He paused for a rest before his return to the hotel, leaned against a board fence and filled his brier. Then he saw the house. It was off the old road about a hundred yards. Ancient elms almost hid it from view.

No sound came from the house. The criminologist judged that it had been abandoned. There was little paint on its sides, what he could see of them. Old houses

fascinated him. He got through the boards of the fence and walked under the branches of old gnarled apple trees. He got a better view of the old house, saw that it was a big gabled structure with a porch running around the front and both ends. Wisteria vines in full bloom grew as high as the eaves.

He had started forward again when he heard the scream. It made his flesh crawl, for it was not altogether a scream of terror. There was laughter in it. It ended abruptly, almost as soon as it began. He turned away from the house and hurried toward the road. A voice made him turn his head.

“Were you looking for me, Mister?”

Wise saw a man of average height walking toward him. He was powerfully built, carried a bushel basket of apples like a bowl of eggs. His face was like those of other countrymen Wise had seen during his walks. A trifle weather-beaten it was in need of a razor.

“I thought the house was empty,” Jonathan Wise said. “Just about to look it over. Sorry if I’m trespassing.”

“You heard her, didn’t you?”

“You mean – that sound?” Wise asked casually.

“She screamed. She gets spells like that,” the man said. “My name’s Albert Shedd.”

“Mine is Wise. I’m staying at the hotel for awhile. Those apples look good, my friend.”

“Have one,” Shedd said. He put the basket down and selected a big one for Jonathan Wise. For a moment the tall gaunt man did not see it when it was held out to him. He apologized, accepted the apple and took a big bite out of it.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ll be going along.”

Jonathan Wise made his way along the tortuous country road at a loss for an explanation of what he had just seen. Shedd had been wearing old cotton gloves, and the finger of one of them was ripped, laying bare a heavy gold ring set with a diamond that Wise guessed approached two karats.

Common sense said that a Maine farmer did not go about his work wearing expensive jewelry, yet Jonathan Wise remembered the case of a ragged old woman who had been found dead in an old hutch on the outskirts of a big city. They had found one hundred thousand dollars worth of negotiable bonds sewed inside her filthy clothes.

"Interesting," Wise mumbled as he trudged along. "A man with a wife—shall we say demented? Wearing an expensive ring, a Maine farmer. Bless me, I'm getting curious again. I feel the fever coming on. A good hot bath will take it out of me."

JONATHAN WISE had had his bath. He was sitting near the window of his room, bundled up in an old flannel robe, when the phone rang and jerked his bony head up.

"Bother," he growled and walked stiffly to the writing desk. "Hello, hello. What in thunder—Mossman? I want you to understand I came here to be left alone, you hear me? What? You must see me and you've got a what?"

"A lady with you?"

"I don't like 'em, you know that, Mossman! I don't like 'em, to say nothing about letting one come to my room. Oh, very well. Come along."

Mossman knocked, came in with a girl that took the old criminologist's breath away. She was of medium height and stood straight as a reed in a white linen suit. Her eyes were brown, Wise thought, about the same color as her hair. She did not use much make-up, and he guessed that was why he did not feel antagonistic toward her. Her name was Margery, Mossman said—Margery Correll. She was Marvin Brant's ward.

"Oh, trying to rope me in on something, are you, Mossman?" Jonathan Wise snapped. "Sit down, both of you. Stop staring at me. You've been crying, young woman."

"Sorry," the girl said and sat down on the very edge of a chair. She gave Mossman a

beseeking glance, and Wise laughed.

"Not much to look at, am I?" he said. "But I don't eat people. Well, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Mossman told me about you," Miss Correll said in a voice that was not very steady. "About you being one of the most famous criminologists in the country. I made him bring me here to see you, sir. Please, I need your help terribly."

Jonathan Wise gave Mossman a withering glance.

"I'm getting to be an old man, Miss," he said to the girl. I came here for rest. I'm going to rest now until I die. I've had enough of criminals and corpses. You want me to help locate your boy friend, that it? You realize my fees have been high, or didn't Mossman tell you."

"I can pay," Margaret Correll said quickly. "I know my uncle will give me the money. He's my legal guardian, you see. My parents left me comfortably situated."

Wise tugged at the cords of his old robe.

"Don't think I'd charge you much. I'm not as spry as I used to be, young lady. I'll look around a bit if it will help you any. You loved this young man?"

"I'm not sure—I mean I *wasn't* sure," the girl said. "I might have fallen desperately in love with him in time."

"Difficult choosing the right tense when you speak of a person who might be either alive or dead, isn't it?" Jonathan Wise said. "Let me have some facts if you please."

MOSSMAN drew a sigh of relief, lit a cigarette.

"She was sure he got off the train," he said. "She—"

"I asked *her*," Wise snapped. He looked up at the ceiling, his hands folded in his lap. The fever had its grip on him. He was thinking of a woman's scream and a diamond ring and how different the Maine countryside looked at night.

“Walter generally arrived on the train that gets in at five-thirty on Friday. To get to our place, you take a bus. Then there is a walk of about three quarters of a mile to the big house itself. The bus driver claimed he wasn’t a passenger that night, so maybe he walked all the way. Altogether about four miles.”

“Just a good constitutional for a healthy young man,” Wise said. “I did almost that today. How long have you lived in Marvin Brant’s household?”

“Six years. My father was one of Uncle’s business associates. Dad left me quite a bit of money, but I cannot touch the bulk of the inheritance until I am twenty-two. I get an allowance.”

“You’ve been happy there?” Jonathan Wise asked. “And suppose you should want to get married before you are twenty-two?”

“Quite happy. And as for your second question, I am to get my inheritance the moment I marry a man who passes Uncle’s inspection,” the girl said. “I call him my uncle.”

“You have had suitors that did not pass judgment?”

“Two of them,” Margery smiled.

“And this Walter?”

“Apparently my uncle was satisfied with him,” Margery Correll said. “But I do not see where that should have any bearing on Walter’s—”

Jonathan Wise smiled.

“I have never known a case yet, young lady, when the smallest detail did not fit into the rest of the picture. I promise you I will look into the matter.”

“Thank you,” the girl said. “Please come up to Hillside and see us, Mr. Wise.”

“I should like to. Now, look here Mossman. No one is going to know I’m the least bit interested in this local mystery. Have you dared to publish that I am a guest at this hotel?”

“No, Mr. Wise.”

“Good. Call tomorrow evening and see

me, will you Mossman?”

CHAPTER II

A Scarecrow Does Bleed

JONATHAN WISE walked the roads the next morning. He came to a big stone fence and a sign attached to it said, HILLSIDE, Marvin Brant. He walked up the road marked private that led him through a dense woods for about eight hundred yards. Coming out into the sunlight, Wise saw Brant’s acres, and he guessed that half of them had been given over to field corn.

Down in the village they had told him that Brant raised prize livestock. Wise was about to continue on when he heard the horse blow air through his nostrils. He turned and saw the sorrel at the edge of the woods some distance away. A powerfully built man, clad in riding habit, stood close to the horse, his hands cupped over the bowl of his pipe.

Jonathan Wise walked toward the man, positive that he was the master of Hillside. Then he stopped in his tracks, for the horse had swung its head around quickly, had knocked its rider off balance. The big man, his pipe knocked out of his mouth, cursed and swung a fist against the animal’s nose.

“Look here!” Wise shouted. “That was a nasty thing to do. Whoever you are—” He dropped back a step and clipped his words short for as quickly as he had struck his horse, the big man put his arm around the sorrel’s neck and spoke softly to it.

“Good afternoon,” the man said, becoming aware of another presence. “Sorry you saw me do this, sir. I lost my temper. You must be Jonathan Wise. My ward told me to expect a visit from you. Glad to know you.” He held out a big hand, and Jonathan Wise’s long narrow one was lost in it. “I’m Brant.”

Jonathan Wise judged the man to be about six feet tall and built in proportion. Brant had the shoulders of a wrestler and a mammoth

head. His face was burned by the sun. On his left cheek there was a small purple scar. His eyes were those of a short tempered man, dark and piercing.

"Let's go up to the house, shall we?" Brant said. "I'll lead the horse. Sorry to have hit you, old timer," he said to the horse and laid his cheek against its muzzle. Jonathan Wise smelled whiskey. He never could tolerate the vile stuff. Tiny red veins on Brant's face told him that the owner of Hillside used more than his share of it.

Brant pointed out a rose garden as they neared the big fieldstone house. Brant took tremendous pride in the garden, and during the summer months, a garden club came up to see his Talismans.

"Not another rose in the state like it, Wise," Brant said. "By the way, Margery tells me you used to be quite a criminologist. You've heard all about the disappearance of this Walter Nixon, no doubt. Likable chap. The only one of my ward's male acquaintances I could stomach on this place."

"Odd," Jonathan Wise said. "There must be a trace of him somewhere. The neighborhood was thoroughly searched?"

"Every square yard, Wise," Brant said. "You'll have a bit of lunch with us of course. Sorry I have to go to Boston this afternoon, but I'm sure you will find Margery delightful company, sir."

"I have no doubt of it," Jonathan Wise said and looked back over the way he had come. His eyes brightened strangely, and little creases appeared in his bony forehead.

MARGERY admitted the two men. She smiled graciously at Jonathan Wise.

"Just in time," she said. "We're having cold cuts and potato salad and iced tea. I knew you would wrinkle up your big nose at that, Uncle," she said. "Have a good ride?"

"Fine," Brant said. "How about it, Wise? A highball before lunch?"

"Don't touch the stuff, Brant. Iced tea will

do me," the elderly man hastened to reply.

Conversation came to the point when the three sat down at the table in the sun porch.

"Had an odd experience yesterday," Jonathan Wise said. "Happened on an old rambling house with wisteria growing all over one side of it. Heard someone scream and then a man came up to me. Said his name was Shedd." As he spoke he watched the liquor in Brant's glass.

"Really?" Margery asked. "I've never spoken to that man. They say his wife is a little queer at times. Some folks claim *he* isn't entirely balanced. They came here about six months ago, and as far as we can make out, Shedd has no visible means of support. But they ask for no charity. Strange, isn't it?"

"Perhaps. Retired, no doubt, like myself," Wise said and jabbed at a bit of lettuce. "Shedd wears a very expensive diamond ring that could insure himself and his wife food and lodging for an entire year. You've met the man, Brant?"

"No. And I don't care to meet him, Wise."

"They say she does start screaming at times. I have never heard her, Mr. Wise," the girl said. "It must have startled you, being unprepared for it."

"Gave me a start," Jonathan Wise admitted. He frowned a little when Brant went into the next room and made himself another highball.

"He does take too much," Margery said. "Lately he's been so worried about business, he forgets how many he should have in a day. But he's a dear."

"Bad stuff," Wise said. "Makes bad nerves worse. I'll take some more iced tea if you don't mind."

Brant excused himself a half hour later. He went upstairs to pack.

"We only have as much help as we can possibly get by with out here," Margery explained. "A gate-keeper, four farm hands and a housekeeper. The laborers work by the day, have their own little places to go to at

night. We like privacy when we're not in the city."

"I noticed the scarecrow was down when I passed by the edge of the cornfield," Jonathan Wise said.

"Yes. I keep reminding uncle to have it set up, but he laughs at the idea that it will scare crows away. It was my idea. What is a cornfield without a scarecrow?"

"Quite right, young lady," Wise smiled. "It seems such a bulky thing."

"I think I put too many clothes on it in the first place," Margery laughed. "Uncle is a big man you know. They were his old gardening clothes."

BRANT came downstairs, called a hurried good-bye from the hall.

"Come again, Wise," he said just before the door slammed.

"He isn't really rude, Mr. Wise," Margery said when the motor of a big car began to race. "Always in a hurry and thinking of a million things at once."

"To get back to Walter Nixon," Wise said. "Mr. Brant assured me the whole area between this house and the main road was thoroughly scoured for a sign of him."

"Yes. We had a dozen people searching for him," Margery said, her face losing its animation. "It's horrible to think he might have been murdered."

"Shedds live about three miles in back of here, don't they?" Wise asked.

"Yes. You don't believe—"

"Just thinking out loud, my girl. When there is a crime, you think of the murderer as being slightly demented. Here we have a couple whose sanity is questionable, living in the vicinity. Perhaps we are inclined to believe the obvious too quickly, but we must take it into consideration.

"Fiction writers make murder a gory thing with a million clues and a dozen suspects littering the scene of the crime. The majority of murder cases I have worked on, young

woman, were far from being sensational. Here we have a missing person, not a corpse to be studied in a morgue. It is very vague and discouraging."

"You certainly are not like the detectives I've read about," Margery said.

There was a paper lying on a wicker chair within arm's reach of Jonathan Wise. A half-tone on the front page interested him.

"Oh, that's a picture of Uncle Marvin," the girl said proudly. "He made a speech for the Civic Club over in Rumford. I don't think it does him justice."

Wise scanned the print under the picture. Brant had been introduced to the Rumford civic leaders as one of Boston's leading financiers. He was director of Amalgamated Plastics and Chairman of the Board of General Drugs.

"A big man," Wise smiled, folded the paper and put it in his coat pocket. "You mind if I borrow it? I noticed that it subscribes to a certain Washington column I follow religiously. I shall be sure to return it to you very soon."

"Don't bother," Margery said. "I bought ten copies. You see how proud I am of my guardian?"

"It is obvious," Jonathan Wise admitted. "Purely elementary, young woman. Now I really must go. I have an appointment with Mossman in an hour."

"Let me get the roadster out and drive you to the hotel," the girl said quickly, but Wise gestured for her to remain where she was.

"I prefer to walk, young lady. It keeps my arthritis where it belongs. If I hear anything of importance I shall contact you immediately. Thanks very much for the lunch. You don't mind if I pick a rose on the way out?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Wise. Help yourself to a big bunch of them," Margery said.

She watched him until he was out of sight, then dropped into her chair, a rueful smile on her lips.

Not much help, she thought. A nice old

gentleman, who might once have been a really clever criminologist. Ed Mossman had really meant well.

Alone once more, Margery Correll fought off the urge to burst into tears. The dead silence tore at her nerves, and for the first time since Walter Nixon had disappeared, she knew she was afraid.

JONATHAN WISE paused near the fallen scarecrow, poked at the heap of old clothes and a big rotting burlap bag that had been stuffed with straw. He felt a tingling in his scalp when his ears caught the buzz of flies. They swarmed around the battered old hat.

"I was wrong," Wise said with a mirthless twist of his thin lips. "The corpse is not in these clothes. But—"

He lifted the old hat with the end of his cane and examined it closely. There was dried blood on the old sweatband. He put it back with the other old clothes, just where he had found it, then examined the ground. There was an ugly brown stain on the parched trampled grass. The flies kept buzzing around it.

Jonathan Wise stood there and looked about him, the old fire in his sharp eyes. The edge of the cornfield was about twenty feet from the woods. A stone wall ran along the rim of the trees, and Wise strolled along it for nearly fifty yards. The wall curved sharply, finally ended at an old foundation partially hidden by weeds and small growth. Once there had been a house here, Wise told himself. You could not see the big fieldstone house from where he stood.

Jonathan Wise went into the woods, cut through them and finally came to the winding road that connected Hillside with the main three-lane stretch of macadam. He walked toward the hotel, thoughts half-formed in his mind. He pieced together all the things he had heard and all he had observed. They made a hodge-podge of conjectures that would take a lot of unangling.

Dusk was moving in when the old

criminologist reached his room. He had no sooner divested himself of his old slouch hat and Congress boots when Mossman called him from downstairs. Wise asked him to come up, then started cramming his crooked-stem old brier with tobacco.

"Have a good walk today, Mr. Wise?" Mossman asked.

"Sit down over there," Wise said. "I certainly did. I also had a delightful visit with the Brants. Mossman, did you ever see a scarecrow that bled?"

"What?"

"I have," Jonathan Wise said. "I am quite sure there has been a murder, Mossman. Only we have to find the *corpus delicti*. I did not want to ask Miss Correll too many leading questions, so I'll ask you. On the night Walter Nixon was supposed to have been visiting with Margery, did anyone hear anything out of the way? Any sounds—voices or anything?"

"Let me think," Mossman said. "Why, Margery Correll told us one thing, Mr. Wise. During the night she heard a dog howling. Said it howled for almost two hours. Nothing in that, is there? I got a hound that treed a coon one night, and it yelped until I had to get out of bed and chase it."

"Anything might be of importance when a man has been murdered, Mossman," Wise said. "Who do you know around this township who has lived here most of his or her life? There's always one old settler who can be regarded as a bit of a historian.

"A person that has chronicled events around here for possibly thirty or forty years. One who knows when a certain man or woman was born and who can tell what kind of a night it was and which doctor brought the child into the world."

"I see what you mean," Mossman said. "That would be Tom Wooster. Old Tom lives in a little house about two miles from here on the Grisby road. Putters around with poultry. Wooster is past seventy."

"Fine," Jonathan Wise said. "I'll make it a

point to have a look at his place. By the way, one more thing. These young fellows who failed to cut much ice with Margery, before this Nixon came along—ever get a look at them?”

“Only one of them,” Mossman said. “A big powerful man—Arnold Statz. Has a dairy over by Tupper Lake. Young giant with some looks. The kind of small town sport you read about who thinks he is the answer to the prayer of every maiden.

“Yeah, Statz had a run-in with Nixon about a month ago. It was at the Church festival—a big event in these parts. Statz made some kind of a crack about the capitalists on the hill, and Nixon tried to get at him. Good thing they didn’t let him.”

“He took his medicine in a bad humor?” Wise wanted to know. “A big yokel with an inferiority complex can still put up a flashy front.”

“They said Brant drove him off with a riding crop,” Mossman grinned. “No wonder Statz is sore.”

“Yeah,” Wise said. “All this is interesting. I imagine the three-state teletype alarm won’t bring back Nixon. That is all for tonight.”

“Okay,” the country editor smiled. He knew Jonathan Wise’s bluntness, understood it. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Same time.”

“Yes. We might have unpleasant work to do.”

CHAPTER III

Body in the Tank

IT WAS nine o’clock when Jonathan Wise left the hotel. There was a hint of rain in the air. He took the winding sandy road that streaked toward the Shedd homestead. It was close to ten o’clock when he paused and surveyed the gloomy structure. There was a light burning in a window, and, as Jonathan Wise approached the house, rain began to fall.

He walked to the springy boards of the

porch, and they creaked under him. The door was opened quickly before he had a chance to knock. Shedd looked out at him, his eyes ugly. They changed quickly when he recognized Wise.

“Why, hello,” Shedd said.

“Evening,” Wise smiled. “It has started to rain, and I’d hate to get these old bones soaked. If I could wait for awhile here—”

“Come in,” Shedd said.

Jonathan Wise stepped into a gloomy dank-smelling hall and put his cane in an umbrella rack.

“Helen, this is the old gent I was telling you about the other day,” Shedd called.

“Tell him to come in by the fire,” Mrs. Shedd replied, and Jonathan Wise felt an electric shock run through him. The voice was sane enough. It was cheery and sincere. He went into the big living room, nodded to the little middle-aged lady who sat near a couch doing some needlework. She had a face that must have been very attractive at one time, Wise thought. But her eyes—there was something strange about them.

Jonathan Wise sat down near the fireplace and tried to make conversation despite the air of restraint in the room.

“Would you care for a little drink?” Shedd asked. “Have some nice Scotch, sir.”

“Never touch it,” Wise said. His eyes wandered, although they did not seem to move in their deep-sunken sockets. The door into the little dining room was open. The table had been cleared, and there was a vase in the middle of the table. There was a single flower in it that made Jonathan Wise shiver.

“We haven’t much to entertain you,” Mrs. Shedd said. “We were thinking of getting a radio.”

“They’re a blasted nuisance,” Wise sniffed. He took his newspaper out of his pocket and scanned the column that interested him. He let it fall into his hip and turned to Shedd.

“Retired, aren’t you? Like myself,

perhaps.”

“In a way, yes,” Shedd said and spilled a lot of the tobacco he was stuffing into the bowl of his pipe. “My good wife likes a bit of seclusion, Mr. Wise. Her nerves, you know.”

“You picked a nice place,” the criminologist smiled. He shifted his gaunt frame in the old wicker chair, and the newspaper fell to the floor.

Mrs. Shedd glanced at it as he knelt to pick it up. Her eyes struck swiftly toward her husband, and a terrible change came over her. She screamed, dropped her work and ran toward Shedd. She laughed and screamed as she clung to him. Jonathan Wise folded up the newspaper carefully and put it in his pocket.

“So sorry, sir,” the old gentleman said. “Was it my fault?”

“No,” Shedd snapped. “It comes quick—always like this. If you will excuse me, I’ll take her to her room. She’ll be all right in a moment.”

“I’ll go along,” Wise said. “I do hope she will be better right away. It isn’t raining much. I can weather it all right.”

“Yes, she’s getting all right again. Do come in again.”

Wise did not reply to the halfhearted invitation. He walked out of the house, a little shaken. A tragedy, long past, still smoldered in the woman’s eyes. It only took some little thing to fan the flame of it.

OLD Tom Wooster was candling eggs when Jonathan Wise visited him the next morning. He was a bent old fellow with no teeth left in his head. Tobacco had browned the wispy curtains of his heavy white mustache. Wise got him to talking, led him from one thing to another until he hit on the subject he wanted.

“Yep, that Hillside, where Brant lives now,” Wooster said, easing his old body down on a chopping block, “was called the Thatcher place for years. Me an’ Darius Thatcher went to school together. Was an old frame house

there, an’ I put the roof on it.”

“Any well near it?” Wise asked.

“Yep. But Brant had it filled in, what wasn’t caved in. Five years ago. The well went dry an’ wan’t much account. About fifteen year ago, some folks named Latzo moved into the old house. They didn’t fix it up none. It kept goin’ down an’ down, an’ Brant got it fer a song. Sure changed it, didn’t he?”

“No improvements at all?” Wise asked.

“Nope. Oh, well, the Polish feller did put in one of them tanks for drainage. What they call ‘em? Septic tanks? Figure it’s rusted out, though. He mended the well, too. And he did fix the chimbley some.”

Jonathan Wise started talking about poultry, and Wooster burned his ears with the lore for almost an hour.

“Glad to have seen you,” Wise said when he made ready to go. “I’ll stop in again sometime.”

That night, in his room, Wise talked to Mossman.

“We are going exploring, Ed. We’ll start about eleven o’clock. Maybe you’ll need a strong stomach.”

“You make me think of the old times,” Mossman said. “You’ve hit on something, you old fox. You never missed.”

“There’s always a first time, Mossman. But I am curious to find out why a scarecrow can bleed.”

Jonathan Wise and Mossman climbed the stone fence hemming in the acres of Hillside near twelve o’clock. They avoided the gatehouse and kept to the thick woods. When they had reached the tilled land, they paused and took stock of their surroundings, listening to the small sounds running through the night. Everything was as still as the grave.

“Don’t use a light until you have to,” Wise cautioned as they started on again. “There’s light enough in the sky to show us the way. The scarecrow is right over there, Ed. You can see the dark smudge near the edge of the corn.

“You follow me and step light. Our

business is near the old foundation. We'll look for an old rusty pipe that goes through the walls of that old cellar. It'll point the way. They put those tanks very close to the house."

MOSSMAN said nothing. The night was sultry, but he felt a chill go through him. A few minutes later, he jumped into the old cellar and skirted the crumbling walls. It did not take him long to find the pipe. He pointed out the location of it to Wise, and the old gentleman began to pace off distance.

He stopped at intervals to pound the ground with his foot, and his bony old head was cocked to the side as he tried to differentiate between the qualities of the sounds his boots made. Suddenly he stayed on one spot and motioned to Mossman.

"I'm sure it's right here. Only a thin layer of dirt goes over these covers. Look, the ground here has been loosened. This tank was near a woodpile, for the stuff we're standing in is old sawdust and woodchips. Grass don't grow through them. Let's start scraping dirt, Ed."

The two men labored for several minutes, and Mossman suddenly uttered a mild curse and shook his finger. "Hit some rusty metal," he said and sucked the blood out of the small wound.

"Let's have a look. Yes, by Jove, there's the handle. You're stronger than I am, Ed. Get hold of that and heave."

Mossman tugged at the metal handle, and a lot of the ground began to lift. Dirt fell away from a big round rusty metal cover, and Mossman tossed it aside and stared at the gaping hole in the ground. The smell coming out of it was hard to take.

Jonathan Wise knelt close to the hole and pointed his flash downward. He snapped the light on and Mossman saw the thing at the bottom of the old septic tank. It was a dead body, its legs drawn up.

"There's Walter Nixon," Jonathan Wise said.

Mossman was mute with horror for several seconds.

"Yeah," he said finally. "You know who put him in here?"

"Not positive," Wise said. "Put the cover back on and cover it up. Nobody is to know yet. Don't breathe a word of this to Margery, you understand? Nor to Brant. There's a lot more to this mystery than we realize, Mossman. Somebody waylaid Nixon on his way here."

"In broad daylight?" Mossman questioned.

"According to Miss Correll, he arrived at Hillside not long before dusk. Look around you, Ed. Who could see that scarecrow from the main house or from the gate house? Only someone working in the fields, and they had already left the fields to tend to the chores in the barns. The scarecrow? I think I know why it bled, Mossman. I'm keeping it to myself until I'm sure of it."

"What now?" Mossman said.

"How far is the summer house from the big one?" Wise said more to himself than to the country newspaper man. "I would say about three hundred yards if I remember distance correctly. At the lower end of the rose garden. Let's mooch over there. Glad Brant has no dogs about."

UNDER cover of the darkness and a mist that settled over Hillside, Jonathan Wise and Mossman visited the Brant summer house. It was a latticed structure, about ten feet square, with built-in seats. Wise risked some rapid stabs with the flashlight, knelt down once and gathered up seven burnt matches.

"There's the cold dottle of a pipe on the floor there, too," Wise said. "I'm satisfied, Mossman. Let's get out of here."

"I don't get it," Mossman said.

"Sorry I must keep a lot from you," Jonathan Wise said, "but the story isn't complete. It's only things I've heard and things I've seen, Ed. And a man's lie—well, I'll be leaving the hotel for a day or two.

"You might keep a sharp eye out for Margery. Make it a point to call at Hillside every night. You are a newspaper man. You can get an excuse. Frankly, I want you to watch the entrance to the place. You can park your car down the road there. You can see for fifty yards up and down the road.

"It won't do any harm, Ed. I'll call you as soon as I get back. One question you must ask Margery? Ask her if Nixon proposed to her and make her tell you what she told him."

"She'll slap me one," Mossman said.

"Take the chance," Wise said. "Here we are at the road, Ed. I'm sure nobody saw us."

JONATHAN WISE was gone for three days. Mossman got his chance to see Margery Correll and came out with the blunt question.

"You're impertinent," the girl said, little angry flushes coming to her cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't mean—you aren't like that, Mr. Mossman. You must have a reason for asking. Yes, he did ask me to marry him. I told him to give me a day or two to make up my mind. I am sure I would have said what he wanted to hear. Mr. Mossman, Jonathan Wise asked me that question—through you."

"I'll admit it," Mossman grinned.

"Why did he want to know? Then you really think he is coming back here?"

"I'm positive, Miss Correll. He's a genius in his profession. I don't believe he's lost a bit of his cunning. He seems even sharper than ever to me."

"Perhaps he has located Walter. Maybe he's gone to—"

MOSSMAN turned his face away. "Perhaps. Ah, those roses smell wonderful." He picked up his hat and got ready to leave. "But don't count on things too much. In a few days, maybe all this mystery will be an open book. We can only hope for the best."

He saw Brant come out of the house. The man lurched against a white column of the porch, came down the steps a little uncertainly. Mossman guessed he had a sweet load aboard. He would be ugly.

Forty-eight hours later, just after Mossman had put his weekly newspaper to bed, Jonathan Wise walked into his office. The criminologist seemed thinner than ever and showed weariness, but his sunken eyes betrayed a flicker of triumph.

"I had luck," Wise said. "In Boston and Portland. We start setting off the charges tonight, my friend. All out from now on. What luck at Hillside?"

"She told me she was just about ready to marry this Nixon," Mossman said. "She's going to get a terrible shock, Mr. Wise."

"Quite. Well, after I've had my dinner, I'll call you, Mossman," Wise said. "I imagine you will find things interesting from now on. You'll beat the big papers with this sheet of yours."

"You'd better arrange for an extra. Could get some nice gruesome pictures. The rusty septic tank cover! The bleeding scarecrow! It's sensational, Mossman."

It was a cloudy night. Mossman's car had to crawl along the sinuous, sandy road for a heavy fog settled over the countryside and thinned the beams of the headlights. They drove into Shedd's place and parked the car under the great dripping branches of a horse chestnut tree.

"They're up," Wise said with satisfaction. "You have your persuader handy, Ed? Possibly we will not need it, but an apparently mild-eyed animal will start to bite if it's cornered. I think I can handle this without any rough stuff."

Wise rapped his bony knuckles against the door.

Shedd let them in. His eyes became wary when he saw the editor. Jonathan Wise did not see Mrs. Shedd anywhere. He sat down and

watched Shedd burn up matches trying to keep his pipe going.

"I did not expect to see you again, Mr. Wise," Shedd said. "I heard you'd left the big hotel." His eyes were fixed on Mossman.

"You have been visiting Marvin Brant, Shedd. Late at night. You have been blackmailing him."

Shedd's face twitched, and he forgot a burning match he held between his fingers.

"That's a lie," Shedd choked out. The fire stung his fingers. He dropped the match.

"No, it isn't, Shedd. That tobacco you smoke is black and stringy. You're a wet smoker, and you can never keep your pipe going. You burn matches. They are up there in Brant's summer house. The dottle you knocked out of your pipe was black and stringy. There was the butt of an expensive cigar there, too.

"Where did you get that Talisman rose I saw on your table? There is only one place where you could get one that size and color. It's a temptation not to pluck those things when you pass by Brant's rose garden, Shedd."

"All right," Shedd said. "I've seen Brant a couple of times. None of your business, Wise!"

"Murder is my business, Shedd. Walter Nixon was slain up there on the hill. Maybe he was later than usual that night, and you met him on your way out from a little visit with Brant.

"You got scared because you wanted no one to know you had business with Brant. You killed him and hid his body."

CHAPTER IV

Family Scarecrow

SHEDD'S pipe dropped to the floor, and stark surprise made him look foolish.

"No, Mr. Wise! They can't blame that on me. I didn't commit no murder," Shedd said

and stumbled toward a chair. He sat down and dropped his head in his hands.

"I really believe you, Shedd," Jonathan Wise said quietly. "Now, tell me what I want to know. Your wife had one of her spells the night I dropped that newspaper. She screamed and ran to you, and I never saw anyone more terrified. She had seen the picture of Marvin Brant. She knew him somewhere else, Shedd. Where?"

"I'll tell you, Mr. Wise. It goes a long way back," Shedd said. "When a man named Harry Slade and his girl and I planned one of the biggest hold-ups that ever took place. We got away with it. Eighty thousand dollars in one pay-roll.

"It was out in Oregon, Mr. Wise. Only thing was the police picked up a clue that led to me. While I was waiting trial, Slade got word to me. He promised if I'd keep quiet and take the rap, he'd see to it I got my share when I got out."

"You couldn't have been that gullible," Jonathan Wise said dryly.

"He seemed to be a man to tie to then," Shedd droned on. "It was the girl I was thinking of. She was a criminal in a way of speaking, yes. But you could trust her with your life. I was as sure as the sun sets every day that she would see that Slade kept his promise.

"If I'd squealed, the three of us would have been given ten years. They would have asked us to turn over the money in exchange for a few years off the sentence. Then we would have been back where we started. Anyway, I couldn't stand thinking of the girl in prison. I figured I'd only do about six years. Then with forty thousand—"

"An old story," Wise nodded.

HE watched Shedd closely as the man went to the closet to get a bottle. Shedd drank some liquor and then came back to the chair.

"Slade was ready to marry that girl," Shedd said, his fingers curling and closing

into big fists.

"But he didn't," Wise cut in.

"The dirty rat!" Shedd exclaimed. "Six months after I went to prison she came to see me. I knew by the look of her that something had happened. She told me she had been in the hospital, Mr. Wise. Slade had left her after giving her a beating. She tried to keep him from lighting out with that money. She was thinking of his promise to me. In the prison, she started screaming."

"Marvin Brant was Harry Slade," Wise said.

Shedd nodded and banged his fists against his knees.

"I was out in seven years. I married Helen because I'd always loved her. The cops kept trailing me to see if I'd lead them to that dough. After awhile I gave them the slip, changed my appearance a little. I kept looking for Slade. We've had a hard time of it, Mr. Wise.

"Then one day, in Boston, I was walking along Milk Street. I saw a man coming out of a big building and stop to buy a paper. The newsboy spoke to him friendly-like. I asked the kid afterward who he was. He told me his name."

"You knew then," Wise said. "By the little purple scar on his cheek."

"Right," Shedd said. "Yes, I blackmailed him. For Helen. That's my only crime, gentlemen. I paid for the hold-up with seven years. I did not kill anyone."

"I know it," Jonathan Wise said, and Ed Mossman's brain got into more of a fog. "I'll try to help you, Shedd."

"I'm glad it's off my chest," Shedd said. "I'm glad I talked to a man like you, Wise."

Mossman jerked violently where he sat. From a room upstairs came a sudden fit of screaming.

"When did you make a demand on Brant last?" Jonathan Wise asked.

"A week ago. He's trying to raise the money. I have given him just two more days."

"It all starts to fit, Mossman," Wise smiled icily. "How much did you ask for, Shedd?"

"Fifteen thousand this time. I got the twenty-five thousand already, Mr. Wise. I figured I earned it," Shedd said.

"All right," the criminologist said. "I want you to arrange a meeting with Marvin Brant in the summerhouse tomorrow night. One o'clock in the morning, I should say. We'll finish this up there, Ed. I know some big men in Boston. I found out that Brant has been trying to get permission from his partners to sell a thousand shares of General Drug.

"Things have been going badly with him. His associates don't like certain methods he has been employing lately. A genius with finance, Marvin Brant. A man who could have made an honest living anytime he wanted to. With the eighty thousand, he built himself up as a power in the Boston financial district.

"But the little quirk in his brain that tells him of the thrill of putting over a shady deal has its way with him. In Portland, I found a man who knew that Hillside was mortgaged up to the hilt. Brant tried to raise that mortgage two days ago. He's in deep."

"Poor Margery," Mossman said, then suddenly snapped his fingers, looked at Jonathan Wise with a question in his eyes.

"You've guessed it," Wise said. "She's the key to it all. And Brant's quick, violent temper." He turned to Shedd. "Be there and do not fail me, understand?"

Shedd's eyes gleamed. A wicked grin bisected his rugged face. "Ten thousand men could not keep me away. I'll have him meet me there."

JONATHAN WISE and Mossman took their leave and neither spoke until they were halfway to the resort hotel.

"There is still no motive for the killing as far as I'm concerned," Mossman said.

"That's where you're wrong," Wise said. "I'll prove that to you tomorrow night, Ed. Think of that woman back there. Slade gave

her a terrific beating and left her the way she is. Why did Dr. Jekyll have to concoct that strange potion of his, Mossman, when he could have gone out and purchased a bottle of whiskey?"

"I seldom have an answer ready for you, Jonathan Wise," Mossman said. "I never did have. I'm beginning to see things more clearly though."

"Here we are, Ed," Wise said. "I'll let you know when we're to leave. Bless me, they'll think I'm a rake at this hotel very soon. Just look at the time."

They crouched in the rose garden near the summer house.

"So much beauty here," Wise whispered. "Incongruous that death and ugliness can be so near." It was a half hour after midnight, and down in the village a clock struck mournfully. Jonathan Wise clutched at Mossman's sleeve. "Be still. I hear someone coming. Down a little more."

It was Shedd. They knew because of the direction from which he came. He was walking slowly, and his face, a dim white blotch in the darkness, was turned their way. He went into the summerhouse twenty feet away from where they were hidden, sat down and pulled at a soggy pipe.

Shedd waited for nearly fifteen minutes, then got up and looked toward the big house. In a few minutes, the giant figure of Marvin Brant loomed up and Wise heard the big man talking desperately.

"You got to give me a couple more days, Shedd. A man can't raise that kind of money nowadays overnight."

"I'm tired waitin', Slade. I waited years for this," Shedd said. "I have no pity for you. I hate you more than a man should hate. Don't come nearer, and keep your hands where I can see them. I still have the gun, and I'm aching to use it."

"Wouldn't do you any good to kill me, anyway. There's a letter all sealed and addressed to the proper authorities in capable

hands. She isn't demented much of the time, you know. I'll give you until tomorrow night, Slade."

"Blast you!" Brant said, his voice banging against the ears of those hiding in the roses. "I'll kill you yet."

"Like you killed Nixon?" Shedd laughed hollowly.

Wise and Mossman heard Brant's quick intake of breath.

"What do you mean, Shedd?"

"Just that. It had to be you."

"You're crazy, Shedd."

"You're finished, Slade. You made yourself a big man with that eighty thousand the three of us got that time. Did you think I'd never catch up with you? You didn't realize how much we hated you. We'd have looked for you forever. You made yourself too big, that was the trouble. That was a mistake."

"Look, Shedd. When I pay you the rest of that money, will you promise to go away? It will be enough for you and Hel—your wife to live comfortably for the rest of your life. The slate will be clean then."

"You forget the interest on that money, Slade. For fifteen years, it would be a nice sum. I'll want that too."

IT happened quickly, before Shedd could get at his gun. Jonathan Wise and Mossman were running through the roses, trampling them, just as Brant got his hands on his enemy's throat.

"All right, Brant," Jonathan Wise yelled in his high-pitched voice. "Another murder won't help. Let that man go!"

Marvin Brant took his hands away from Shedd's throat and staggered backward. His big body pivoted clumsily like a wounded bear and his eyes were wide and staring. Mossman had his pistol in his hand.

"Wise! How did you—"

"I arranged it, Brant, or whatever your name is," Wise said. "You see, I know where the body of Walter Nixon is. In that old septic

tank, Brant. Where you put him.”

Brant’s voice betrayed him. It was edged and shaken with fear.

“You can’t prove I did it!”

“I’ll draw you a picture, Brant. First I will start with a scarecrow that bled. You hid Nixon under those clothes the afternoon you killed him. You lost your temper, that hair-trigger temper of yours that led you to smash a horse in the face. You were drinking too much for even a man of your size.

“You were desperate, Brant, and had trouble piled on you as Ossa was piled on Pelion. You met Nixon on his way here and knew that the man had asked Margery Correll to marry him. You knew she was about ready to accept him.”

“Of course,” Brant forced out. “That proves nothing.” He touched a match to a cigar, and Mossman noticed that the red tip of the smoke did not stand steady.

“There were two other suitors, Brant. You were pretty nasty to them, chased one of them off. When this Nixon came along, you thought you’d better change your tactics before someone, especially your ward, got suspicious. You were pleasant to him up to a certain point—up to the time he was ready to marry Margery.

“That meant that you would not have the stewardship of her money anymore, that you would have to make an accounting. You couldn’t stand that, Brant, because you had taken twenty-five thousand of it to pay Shedd.”

JONATHAN Wise waited for Brant to say something, but the big man just stood there, the red tip of his cigar dying out. The breathing of the four men rasped at the stillness that had gripped Hillside.

“You met Walter Nixon down there by the stone fence and refused to let him marry your niece. You were most likely loaded with whiskey, and your temper was hanging by a thin thread. Nixon told you off, the thread

snapped and you struck him. Maybe more than once and he hit his head against the stone wall when he fell.

“Before you could get him out of there, you heard someone coming, so you quickly dragged him to the scarecrow and piled the old clothes over him. A dog happened by, saw the body and began howling. Hours later, when it was dark and everybody was asleep, you went out and finished the job.

“Yes, Brant, if Margery had married Nixon, you would have been charged with embezzlement. They would have taken your fingerprints and maybe somewhere they are already on file. Did I miss it by much?”

Shedd laughed and Jonathan snapped at him.

“Cut it, will you! We don’t want her to hear. There’s a big footprint near the scarecrow, Brant. But I don’t believe that evidence will be necessary, will it? Henry Slade, I charge you with the murder of Walter Nixon.”

“This is worth losing the rest of the money for, Slade,” Shedd said. “You know when Helen hears of this, I wouldn’t be surprised if her brain becomes entirely normal. The slate is clean, Slade. I’ll be near the scaffold where they hang you.”

“The penalty in this state,” Jonathan Wise said, “is life imprisonment, Shedd.”

“That’s better. It’ll give him time to think, and his brain will rot away,” Shedd snapped. “I’ll be thinking of him every day. You see I know all about prison life, Slade.”

“I guess we had better be going, Mr. Brant,” Jonathan Wise said. “We will take you to Rumford and turn you over to the sheriff there. You had better not say anything further.

“Save it for the lawyer who will have the difficult task of defending a murderer and embezzler with a criminal record. Let’s be on our way. Shedd, you are going with us.”

“Let’s be on our way,” Brant said, his shoulders sagging and his big bulk seemingly shrinking in his expensive clothes.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to come along too, Shedd,” Jonathan Wise said. “If you will turn back the money that really belonged to Margery Correll, I’ll see that you get a—let’s call it a break. Your testimony against Brant—pardon me—Slade, should help you, anyway. Be a big day around here tomorrow. Coroner here, and the police and newspaper men of three states. You’ll be a sensation, Mossman.”

“There’ll be headlines everywhere,” the editor smiled grimly. ‘Jonathan Wise Does It Again.’ ”

“There’s your punch line, Ed,” Wise said as the four men trudged past the heap of old clothes at the edge of the cornfield. “The bleeding scarecrow. Weird things, scarecrows.”

“You’ll let Margery know,” Brant said to Wise. “I’d rather you took care of that. Don’t let her come to see me.”

Albert Shedd laughed scornfully, suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned his head to the wind. Jonathan Wise felt a chill. He wondered if Shedd could hear a woman scream.