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WHAT HAS HAPPENED

The Strangling of Virginia McPherson, A Tragedy That Threw the Spotlight on Bungling Methods of Washington Police

JUSTICE in the national capital! Here, surely, must be a story of Justice as it should function. The very words "Justice in the national capital" would probably conjure up in an idealistic mind a picture of judicial integrity and efficiency. Certainly it is reasonable to expect that in Washington, D. C., at the very fountain-head of our law, Justice must be exemplary in the extreme, a shining example to the nation.

Alas for our ideals! If the reader has any such noble picture in his mind, he is doomed to be disillusioned. As it happens, we are about to relate the story of as sloppy a piece of work as ever rated inclusion in this series. It is the story of young Virginia McPherson, who was strangled with a pajama belt and whose death, after the most cursory sort of inquiry, was called a suicide.

The opening chapter of what might be called, in imitation of the mystery writers, "The Riddle of the Knot," occurred on Sept. 14, 1929. On that day young Robert A. McPherson, bank clerk, son of Mrs. Robert A. McPherson sr., confidential secretary of the secretary of war, informed Manager W. C. Ruff of the Park Lane apartments in Washington, D. C., that he had just found his wife dead in her apartment—strangled, in fact, with her own pajama cord. He had quarreled with his wife and parted from her, but had come back for a visit and found her cold in death.

That the couple had quarreled there was no denying. Mrs. McPherson, a former nurse, had married Bob McPherson, former member of the University of North Carolina football team, after what had been described as a whirlwind courtship. Recently she had written letters to her father, A. A. Hurley, a mill superintendent in Chester, S. C., and former mayor of China Grove, N. C., to the effect that McPherson had beaten her several times and had repeatedly taken her wages from her. The trouble culminated a few days before her death in a very bitter quarrel, and McPherson had left to live with his mother, saying he was "through for good."

Ex-Patrolman Robert Allen

Pajama Belt Twisted Five Times Around Throat.

According to his story, he had called on her the evening preceding her death (she died early on the morning of the 12th) to discuss some personal property and found her, he said, nervous and depressed. After he left her he attended the meeting of a basketball team, of which he was a member, and had not returned until the next afternoon, when he found her dead.

She lay just inside the bedroom door, clothed only in the upper part of her pajamas. Her pajama belt had been twisted five times around her throat and tied in the back with a surgical knot.

McPherson was reported as saying that after he discovered the body he had thrown a dress over her legs. On the other hand, Manager Ruff was quoted as saying that as he opened the door he felt the body against it and had to push it aside before he could enter the room. McPherson was also reported as saying that his wife had made several attempts to commit suicide, once with gas and once by tying a piece of cloth around her neck.

Exhuming Mrs. McPherson's body at China Grove, S. C.

(Photos by Pacific & Atlantic)

His alibi was announced to be airtight. He had been asleep in his mother's home. It was said, at the time of the tragedy.

The coroner's inquest was a rather remarkable proceeding in that practically none of the important witnesses was called to testify. Mrs. McPherson's father and sisters were present, but were not called. Dr. Edward de Kerchove, house physician of the Park Lane, where the young woman died, was present but was not called. Manager Ruff, the first one to see the body after the husband, was present but was not called.

Dr. Thomas Ballard, who had been McPherson's rival for the hand of the former Virginia Hurley and whom McPherson admitted striking in anger during a dance, was not called. Dr. Ballard was subsequently questioned at his hotel in New York. He denied that he had ever been engaged to the girl, but professed the highest regard for her. He said he was completely ignorant as to how she might have died.

Another person who cut no figure at the inquest, but who was destined to set the capital buzzing with horror and curiosity, as well as to cause the police chiefs of Washington the most acute embarrassment, was Patrolman Robert Allen, former Cornell student, who had become a thorn in the side of the department on numerous previous occasions. He happened in this instance to be a policeman on beat in the neighborhood of the Park Lane.

He stood in a corner with a friend during the inquest and when he saw the way it was proceeding he remarked to his companion, "This is going to be a whitewash."

The verdict of the coroner was that Virginia McPherson had come to her death by her own hand. She herself had wound the pajama cord around her throat, drawn it so tight as to stop her breathing, and then tied that surgical knot to keep it tightly in place. Truly a rare method of suicide, so rare that no similar instance can be recalled to mind.

Naturally, there were comments. In answer to questions, the detective bureau stated that while this method of suicide was rare it was not unknown. Besides, hadn't it been a surgical knot? And hadn't Virginia been a nurse? Q. E. D. She simply must have done it herself.

But Officer Allen wasn't at all satisfied, among others in the national capital. Here was exactly the sort of business he had been specializing in since he joined the force. Officer Allen seemed to have a constitutional distaste for whitewash. Besides, he seemed to know a few things about this case that had not yet been given the light of publicity. He proceeded, to the intense rage of his superiors, to make these facts known.

His first move after the inquest was to conduct a party of newspapermen to the Park Lane, where he pointed out things and asked questions. He said Mrs. McPherson had apparently interrupted her bath to commit suicide and he wanted to know if that was reasonable. He said there had been bloodstains in the bathroom and he wanted to know if, after strangling herself, she could have walked into the bedroom to die. He said that people in the Park Lane had heard screams and he wanted to know why their testimony hadn't been heard.

The late Mrs. Virginia McPherson

"Here's another point," he continued. "She was found half naked, clothed only in the upper part of her pajamas. Is it reasonable to assume that a girl of her refinement would have no thought about being found that way?"

And finally, he asked the question whether or not this affair was not being whitewashed because of the connections of McPherson's mother. He asserted that there was every evidence to hush up the case, added to the alleged fact that the police heads had an interest averse to involved murders against their records.

Allen Suspended For Insubordination.

Strong words from a mere patrolman. They got a lot of publicity in the newspapers, and they also got Allen suspended for insubordination.

How dared he investigate this case on his own hook after it had been officially closed? Hell, said Allen in effect, he'd investigate the district attorney if he thought the district attorney warranted it. Allen, indeed, had a way of saying things that placed apoplectic officials in grave danger of sudden death. There had never been any one quite like him in the department before.

When, after the new disclosures, nothing was done, Allen took it up with Senator Lee S. Overman of North Carolina. Overman insisted that the whole case be reopened. He asserted it was just another instance of flagrant inefficiency in the capital's police department. Still the investigation, save by Allen, lagged, awaiting the proper pressure to be applied to get it under way again.

Allen dropped a new bombshell at this point by asserting that a man had been seen to step out of a window from the McPherson apartment at about the time of the murder and had disappeared over the roof. This was his most sensational revelation. He said that two witnesses had seen the man himself and his partner, Policeman

Photos by Pacific & Atlantic

Robert A. McPherson jr.

Lawrence Botts. Botts, however, refused to testify to this.

"I don't blame him," remarked Allen. "He has a wife and children."

Officer Allen had not reported seeing this suspicious - appearing stranger.

The reader has probably been wondering about the screams that Allen said had been heard at the time of the murder. We come to that now.

Mrs. Roy Heavrin, a resident of the apartment house, came to the fore with a statement that on the night of the tragedy she had been awakened by a scream. "For God's sake, don't do that!" followed by groans. She said she had reported this to Lieut. E. J. Kelly and he had told her to "forget it." James Lane, janitor of the adjoining apartment, and Mrs. Ethel Schut-

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jerriwilliamsauthor
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