

## The Case of the Missing Clue

by David F. Duncan

Inspector Horace "Hod" Ogden and his Chief Constable, Colonel Robert Russell stood side by side looking down at Mohanda Singh. Mr. Singh did not look back nor did he object to the impoliteness of their stares. The popular mystic and New Age guru who had promised long life to his followers had not fulfilled that promise for himself. He was quite dead.

His body was seated behind a pillar table, its torso slumped forward onto the table, resting on part of the pile of weapons which littered the table top. There were spread out on the table an assortment of knives, arrows, several spears, a medieval huntsman's ax, and South American bolo. Glass-fronted cases lining the walls of the room displayed more of the same, along with a great many rifles, shotguns, bows and crossbows some of them quite ancient in appearance.

Behind the table, Dr. Carlyon, the police surgeon, bent over the corpse. He had little difficulty in determining the cause of Singh's death. A deep gash in the right side of Singh's head passed just above his ear from his forehead to the back of his head. Surprisingly little blood seemed to have seeped from the wound, suggesting that Singh's death must have been almost instantaneous.

The Chief Constable was just lighting his pipe, when the door to the room opened.

"There's a lady here, wishes to see you, Colonel Russel," announced Constable McCowen from the doorway.

"What ... who ..."

"Who else?" responded Inspector Ogden. "Her!"

"I do so hope I'm not intruding. I just happened to be in the neighborhood," said the diminutive, white-haired lady who stood in the doorway, tightly clutching an old fashioned knitting bag to her breast. While she stood erect, as if at attention, in the doorway, her China blue eyes darted about, seeming to take in every detail of the room and its occupants, not least of all the silent occupant seated at the table.

"Not at all, Miss Mason, it's always a pleasure to see you. You've heard of our little problem here, I take it," replied the Chief Constable.

"Oh yes, quite sad, yet really not at all surprising. He had made a great many enemies since coming here to Lawrence's Green."

"You're right enough about that," said Dr. Carlyon as he finished his examination of the corpse. "Him and his practical jokes. New Age seer my foot! He was nothing but a punning fraud."

"Why, yes Doctor, you and Singh did have your problems didn't you," she remarked, her blue eyes flashing in his direction.

"I've done all I can here, Colonel. You can call in your science boys to go over the scene now. Have the body sent over to the hospital and I'll do the PM this afternoon," the doctor said, gathering up his bag, and departing.

"We'd all best clear out while the scene-of-crime men do their job," suggested the Inspector. 

"Quite right. Will you join us in the kitchen for some tea, Miss Mason."

"No, no. Thank you Robert, but I've seen all I need to see," she replied, stepping up to the desk and leaning forward to peer closely at the wound on Singh's head. "I really must get on to the rectory for our Altar Guild meeting. Perhaps you and the Inspector would care to stop by my cottage for tea this afternoon. I have some lovely gooseberries and Devonshire cream."

"Perhaps we'll have the case solved by then," suggested the inspector.

"Perhaps. And if you have, you can tell me all the details over tea and fish paste sandwiches."

\* \* \*

That afternoon, the Chief Constable and the Inspector sat in the parlor of Miss Mason's cottage sipping tea and nibbling at finger sandwiches as they shared with Miss Mason the results of the morning's investigations.

"It's quite like a mystery fiction -- a locked room story," murmured Miss Mason.

"The room was locked alright," said Ogden, "and the key was in the lock on the inside. A deadbolt lock too, because of Singh's valuable collection of hunting weapons being kept in the room. So this isn't a case of any trickery with strings or long-nosed pliers to turn the key. The local constable had to break down the door when he was called to the scene this morning."

"And the windows?" asked Miss Mason.

"One was locked; the other was open to its fullest, but that is less than two inches. The windows in that room are hinged at the side and open like doors but because of the valuable collection in the room Singh had a bar welded on to each window to limit how far it could be opened."

"No way anyone could get in or out of those windows," interrupted the Chief Constable.

"Quite, sir. Nevertheless, someone did get in, caved in Mohanda Singh's head and got out again afterward."

"If the murderer was inside the room when he dealt poor Mr. Singh the blow," murmured Miss Mason.

"You've got some sort of long-handled weapon in mind haven't you?" chuckled Ogden. "But it won't work. The chair he was seated in was all of eleven feet from the window and it was at such an angle away from the window that the long handle of your imaginary weapon would have to be curved in an arc to get past the display case and hit Singh's head at the angle it did."

"I have heard of pikes that long or even longer, I believe, but I'm quite sure they weren't designed to bend in even a slight arc," responded Miss Mason. "I'm sure you are quite right that no long-handled weapon was involved in this case. I rather think, you know, that the weapon was thrown through the open window.

"Thrown?" asked the Chief Constable. "What sort of weapon could you throw at a man that would cause a wound like that."

"I believe that the aboriginal tribes of Australia use a sort of flattened, curved stick called a boomerang to hunt game," replied Miss Mason. "It would, I believe, cause just such a wound as that on Mr. Singh's head."

"By Jove, a boomerang," exclaimed Col. Russell.

"I'd thought of that," said Ogden. "In fact, there are several boomerangs in Singh's collection. There was even one in the pile of new purchases on the table in front of him. But it wasn't the murder weapon. There wasn't a trace of blood or hair on it or on any other of the weapons in the room."

"But doesn't a boomerang return to the thrower?" asked Col. Russell.

"Only if it misses its mark, I'm afraid," said Ogden. "If it was a boomerang that did for Singh, the boomerang would have been there in the room next to him."

"And you needn't suggest," he continued, "some business of a string tied to the boomerang. I don't know if that would interfere with the flight of a boomerang or not, but I won't believe that a bloodied boomerang could be drug with a string across the carpet, up the wall and out the window without leaving a trace of blood anywhere along its path."

"Oh, yes, I quite agree," said Miss Mason. "The boomerang must have fallen to the table after killing poor Mr. Singh. It must have been part of the clutter of weapons there on the table."

"Balderdash!" exclaimed Ogden. "The scene-of-crime officers went over every weapon on that table. Not a one of them could possibly be the murder weapon. You may have a low opinion of our force, but we don't make mistakes on matters of that sort."

"Quite. Quite, true," responded Miss Mason softly. "The fatal boomerang must have been removed from the room before your scientific detectives went over the scene searching for traces of blood and hair."

"But that's impossible too. That room was under police guard continuously from the time the local constable broke in until the scene-of-crime officers had finished their work and sealed the premises."

"Yes, and the fact that it was missing when they conducted their examinations, is quite the most important clue in this case."

"But how could it be missing then?"

"It quite reminds me, don't you know, of a little problem they had back during the big war at the manor house in Bedworth Major. Their kitchen maid, Sally would collect the eggs each morning from the henhouse. Suddenly, there started being fewer and finally no eggs. They took a variety of measures to stop the pilfering -- a padlock on the door, a new fence, even hiring young Dale Ritzel to guard the henhouse after dark. In the end, of course, it turned out it was Sally, herself, who was stealing the eggs and selling them on the black market. She had simply concealed the eggs, each morning, in a pouch sewn to the underside of her apron.

"I'm afraid I don't follow what you are suggesting, my dear lady," said Col. Russell. "We haven't allowed Singh's maid into the room.

"Well, I do," responded Inspector Ogden, "and I don't like it a bit! Are you actually suggesting that it was one of our officers who removed the murder weapon from the room?"

"Oh, dear me, no! Not one of your officers."

"I should think not," rumbled the Chief Constable.

"After all," she continued calmly, "they would have no place to hide it. A boomerang can't very well be hidden under a constable's helmet or inside his tunic. Even Inspector Ogden's macintosh would be a poor hiding place for such an implement."

"Well, I thank you for putting me in the clear, anyway!"

"Not at all. This is much too clever a crime for you. You would be more direct in your approach to homicide I'm certain."

"Then what are you suggesting, Miss Mason," interrupted the Chief Constable.

"There was one person, don't you know, who carried quite a large bag out of that room right before our eyes, before your photographers and scene-of-crime officers began their work."

"You mean Dr. Carlyon!" exclaimed Ogden.

"Well, he was the one person with an opportunity to remove the weapon from the scene and we all know how he feels about this New Age business, and particularly about Mohanda Singh and his philosophizing."

"I'm afraid she's right again, Col. Russell. It had to be Dr. Carlyon," admitted Inspector Ogden.

"I do believe, that Dr. Carlyon once told me that he spent part of his youth in Australia," murmured Miss Mason. "He very likely learned to throw a boomerang at that time."

After a few necessary politenesses, the two officers hurried off to obtain a warrant for Dr. Carlyon's arrest. As they left Miss Mason's cottage, the Inspector thought to himself, "Any crime or scandal in forty miles around and that old pussy will have her nose in it. And come out of it as self-satisfied as the cat that's got cream on its whiskers."

Col. Russell expressed his thoughts aloud, saying, "Nature's compensations are strange aren't they. This little village has had more than its share of homicides in recent years and at the same time it just happens to be the home of one of the finest natural sleuths I've ever heard of. We've been damned fortunate to have her aid over these past years."

"Yes, sir. I suppose fortunate is the word for it," replied Ogden.

As she straightened away the tea things, Miss Mason muttered to herself, "More than a dozen murders in a village the size of Lawrence's Green, with me smack in the middle of every one of them! It's truly amazing the coincidences some people will accept without question! Ah, but then they lack the benefits of a village up-bringing. After nearly three-quarters of a century of gossip, one learns that those found often at the scene of mischief are apt to be mischief-makers."

Picking up her knitting bag, Miss Mason drew out the boomerang and thrust it into the fireplace. Prodding the fire with a poker to make sure the missing clue would be thoroughly consumed, she mused on who should be next, now that the community was rid of those irritants Singh and Carlyon.