

TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES

The Curious Case of Percy Bunce

From a Reporter's Recollections

BY CHARLES SOMERVILLE

REGARDED from all sides the case of Percy Bunce was not only curious in the extreme, but was, at first, wholly mysterious, wholly inexplicable.

There came a night finally when the mystery disappeared; when everything that had been so strange was explained. Yet in all my memory of newspaper adventure the case will always retain its characteristic of being curious in the extreme.

Percy Bunce was only a boy. To be exact, he was just eighteen years old. According to general standards he was a good boy, and was so esteemed at Cold Spring Harbor, L. I., where he lived with his parents. His father was the town baker, and Percy gave him zealous assistance, both in the shop and by driving the delivery wagon. He did not frequent the town pool parlor; did not smoke or drink. He was a regular attendant at church and Sunday school, and in this manner held the very good opinion of his elders. The while his prowess as a swimmer, boxer, baseball player, wrestler and runner held him above condemnation as a prig by the youngsters.

Percy was also a very good looking boy, in a ruddy cheeked, sturdy fashion, and had a gallant though wholly respectful eye for pretty girls. With them he had been clearly the town favorite, and it is readily to be supposed that dismay filled the long lashed eyes of many a Cold Spring Harbor damsel with tears when the news went out that a slender, little young person of Huntington, ten miles away, had possessed herself of the affection and absolute devotion of Percy Bunce.

It was at a picnic given jointly by churches of Cold Spring Harbor and Huntington that Percy and the pretty girl had met. Immediately that happened they had fallen in love. Whatever else is curious about the case of Percy Bunce, it was no wonder at all that Percy should have fallen in love with her. On the authority of having afterward seen her, I can say that she was very pretty indeed; trim of figure, graceful, had soft, golden hair and big, candid, clear blue eyes and a most sweetly turned, rose tinted mouth. And there was Percy with his sturdy shoulders, ruddy cheeks, chestnut curls and large, honest looking brown eyes. A pretty pair they were surely in their complete symbolization of freshness and youth.

Shadow of Tragedy.

But suddenly the black and baleful shadow of tragedy fell across the sunny path of this tender Long Island romance. Percy Bunce became the victim of queer and shocking outrages. His life was repeatedly threatened. He seemed not only to be the chosen victim of a desperate band of conspirators, but to be altogether at their mercy.

News of the amazing and perilous adventures of Percy Bunce not only startled and shocked Cold Spring Harbor and Huntington, but attracted the attention of the metropolitan press. I have not at hand the clippings of the despatches sent out by the local correspondents at the time, but my recollection of them is quite clear. The first read about as follows:—

COLD SPRING HARBOR, May —, 1902.—Percy Bunce, the son of one of the best known citizens of this place, was attacked by White Caps last night. They waylaid him while he was driving from Huntington, where he had been to call on his sweetheart.

The drive between Huntington and Cold Spring Harbor is all of ten miles, and the road is very lonely after dark. There are not many farms along the road, and at a point about three miles from Cold Spring Harbor it passes through dense woods.

Young Bunce has been in the habit of driving over to see his sweetheart about twice a week, using his father's horse and wagon for the purpose. At the point of the road where it traverses the woods the White Caps to the number of six at least, according to the account that young Bunce could give in his dazed condition last night, attacked him. It was midnight, and the young man as soon as he fell into the hands of his assailants says he realized very well the uselessness of crying out for help. He fought, however, as long as he was able. He says he was punched and choked and beaten and finally dragged to a tree and tied there. One of the assailants gave the patient horse a slap on the flank that started the frightened animal galloping toward Cold Spring Harbor. Mrs. Bunce, the mother of the young man, was unable to sleep through worry when her son had not returned home at one o'clock in the morning. Her husband laughed at her fears, but she decided to wait till the boy got home. At half-past one o'clock the horse and wagon appeared back of the house. Mrs. Bunce called to her son that he would find the lantern in the kitchen shed, but when she got no reply became alarmed anew and awakened her husband. He found the wagon empty. He called two neighbors and they all got into the wagon and drove back along the Huntington road. As they approached the woods they heard moans and weak calls for help. They got out and found young Bunce tied to a tree not far from the road. He was half hysterical, but managed to tell something of the attack that had been made on him. When he was brought home, it was found that he had a bruised eye and several contusions on his body. A skull and crossbones in red had been painted on his forehead, and a note was found pinned to his coat. The young man had struggled valiantly against his bonds and had managed to free one hand, but was too exhausted to continue the work of self-liberation. The note pinned to his coat read:—

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This is only a warning, Percy Bunce.  
If you don't look out death will be your portion.  
You know why! THE WHITE CAPS.  
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When the authorities took up the investigation to-day Percy Bunce said he was entirely at a loss to explain the meaning of the dangerously worded note. He said he knew of no rival in the matter of his love affair in Huntington, and could think of no other way in which he had been attacked. Young Bunce is well known and popular in Cold Spring Harbor, and the whole town is stirred up over the strange affair.

Scarcely a week had passed when a second despatch was printed in New York newspapers which read in this manner:—

COLD SPRING HARBOR, May —, 1902.—An attempt was made last night to murder Percy Bunce. Only a few days ago the young man was held up, assaulted and tied to a tree by White Caps, who left a note pinned to the breast of his coat threatening him with death.

The attack last night was made in the same lonely part of the road between Huntington and Cold Spring Harbor where the first attack occurred.

Young Bunce had driven to Huntington to visit a girl friend, using his father's horse and wagon. The wagon has openings on the sides, such wagons are so familiarly used by bakers and milkmen. It was the first trip he had made to Huntington since the night of his former mysterious and unfortunate experience.

As he drove through the same clump of woodland, he says he suddenly heard a smothered oath, which was instantly followed by a singing sound. This proved to come from a long bladed knife—a meat cleaver—that was hurled at him out of the darkness. The thing narrowly missed imbedding itself in his neck. It just barely flashed past his chin and struck in the side of the wagon. Thoroughly alarmed, the young man whipped up his horse to top speed and drove frantically into town. He alarmed Deputy Sheriff Robinson, who, in corroboration of the young man's strange story, found the big knife sticking into the side of the wagon. A note was tied to the handle. Its contents read as follows:—

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Percy Bunce.—If this don't get you, something else will before long. You are a marked man. You will travel these roads on peril of your life.  
THE WHITE CAPS.  
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Deputy Sheriff Robinson did not lose a minute in starting the organization of a posse to beat the woods in the hope of capturing the would-be assassin or assassins. He also telephoned to Huntington and a similar posse started from that place. The two searching forces came together in the woods later, but the hunt was wholly without results.

Searching for the Miscreants.

Percy Bunce, when seen regarding his remarkable adventure, made the same statement that he had on the occasion of the first attack. He said he could in no way account for the plots against his life, and declared that if any rival for the hand of the Huntington maiden existed he had still to hear about it. He expressed himself as being as mystified as anybody regarding the sources of the deadly assaults attempted against him.

Ten days later a Cold Spring Harbor despatch told

written on scented paper. This has given rise to the opinion that some girl, jilted by young Bunce, has enlisted a band of champions to wreak vengeance on the youth. But young Bunce himself will give no countenance to this explanation. He says that there never has been another girl in his life.

Not long after this remarkable happening had been recorded in the newspapers Cold Spring Harbor again interested the newspaper editorial rooms. A

tion of the road through the woods. Robinson ordered a team hitched to a light road wagon and said he would be glad of my company.

Pete Smith arrived at this juncture with the hat dangling in his fingers. A bullet had raked it from back to front. I said nothing of the deductions that I made just then regarding the hat, but got into the carriage with the official and we drove toward Huntington.

In the lonely wood-shrouded section of the road where the hat had been found and where the other three attacks were declared to have been made on young Bunce we halted the horses, took the lanterns off the carriage and began a hunt of the woods for

through it the top of your skull is not now shot off?"

"What?" he demanded.

I put my fingers in the two bullet holes. Owing to the snugly fitting character of the hat the bullet's course with the hat on Percy's head must have travelled through his brain.

Percy glowered, but, of course, had no explanation and attempted none.

"Percy," I said, gently, "it is very plain to me that you are a liar."

"Don't you call me no such name as that?" said he, preening his muscles.

But Deputy Sheriff Robinson, who had listened, said coldly:—

"It certainly looks like you air lyin', Percy."

"It's a misdemeanor punishable by one year's imprisonment to deliberately give false information to the newspapers," I said rather loftily, looking Percy squarely in the eye.

"Is that right?" he asked, with sudden mildness.

"That's absolutely right," I said. "And I mean to investigate this business from beginning to end. All these hold-ups—everything."

Unexpected Revelation.

Percy tried to smile, but his lips looked pale.

"You needn't," he said. "There warn't no hold-ups."

"What?" demanded Deputy Sheriff Robinson. "No White Caps?"

"No."

"No throwin' a knife at yew—no tryin' to lynch yew—no tryin' yew to a tree?"

"No," said Percy steadily.

"Well," shouted the official, "what?"

"I did it all myself," said the boy.

"You must be crazy," declared Robinson in denunciation.

"No, I ain't crazy," maintained young Bunce stoutly. "I just thought it was the best way."

"The best way—for what?" I asked him.

"Well," said Percy. "You see, I'm in love with that little girl in Huntington, but she's only sixteen and I'm only eighteen, and my father wouldn't listen to me marryin' her till I was twenty-one, and her folks wouldn't hear of it neither. But we knew we were old enough and that our love ain't never gon' to change. So," said Percy, smiling blandly into the angry eyes of the outraged deputy, "we thought it out that if I was always gettin' held up and threatened and shot at, an' things like that, maybe my mother and father and her folks'd let us get married right away, rather than have me riskin' my life drivin' over to see her. See? That's the way we schemed it out. She wrote the notes and I did the other things—tied myself to the tree and stuck the knife in the wagon and put the rope around my neck—and—shot this hole through my hat."

Deputy Sheriff Robinson mounted his carriage with a determined step, and I got in with him.

"Gimme a lift into town?" asked Percy.

"No, by gosh!" said Deputy Sheriff Robinson. "Yew walk in. The cool air'll do yew good. And yew're a pretty big boy, but if your dad don't take yew into the barn and hand out a good dose of strap oil, by gosh, I'll do it myself—yew yew innocent faced young scoundwag—yew, Percy Bunce!"

Trial Marriages a Fact

ONE marriage in twelve in the United States ends in the divorce courts. The number of divorces has increased so astonishingly of late years that at the present rate of increase within ten years one marriage in every six will ultimately be annulled. The much discussed trial marriage, it would seem, is about to be realized. Incidentally the proportion of divorces is far higher in America than in any foreign country sufficiently civilized to record such statistics. The divorce rate per 100,000 of population in the United States, which was 29 in 1870, had risen to 82 in 1895, or, in other words, it has practically been trebled in thirty-six years.

The divorce rate varies widely in various sections of the United States. The laws governing divorce not only differ widely in the several States, but frequently contradict one another. In the West and South the rate is considerably higher than in the East and North. Since a great proportion of the divorces granted in the Western States are sought by people from the East, who temporarily take up residence for the purpose, it is unfair to say that any one section offends more than any other.

In New England, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania there were, for example, 73,393 divorces between 1867 and 1898, while between 1887 and 1906 the number had jumped to 142,920. In the Middle West, in the district bounded by Ohio on the east and the Dakotas on the west, the number increased from 162,893 in the earlier period to 434,476 in the later. Almost one-half of the total number of divorces for the entire Union were issued in this section. The most rapid rate of increase in the number of divorces is to be found in the South. In Texas, for instance, the increase in the two periods was from 11,472 to 62,655.

The number of divorces for the entire country is astounding. In twenty years there have been practically 1,000,000 divorces granted in America. The total number of marriages for the same period in America was a trifle more than 12,000,000. It is interesting to note in this connection that but three per cent of the population marry in the average year. Of all the divorces granted some thirty-eight per cent were granted on the plea of desertion. One of the most remarkable phases of these statistics is that eighty-five per cent of all the divorces were not contested. In other words, in the great majority of cases both parties to the divorce consent in advance to the separation, and the only difficulty encountered is in satisfying the law. In the cases in which notice was served personally upon the defendant twenty per cent were contested, while in the cases where the notice was published in the newspapers only three per cent were contested.

More than one-fourth of all the divorces are granted to the wife. For every divorce for cruelty granted to the wife there are three granted to the husband. Only in eighteen per cent of all the divorces granted was alimony demanded. Three wives in every sixteen asked for alimony and two out of sixteen obtained it. The proportion of husbands asking for alimony was but 2.5 per cent, and but two per cent received it. It will be a surprise to most people to know that forty per cent of the couples seeking divorce had children. The average duration of marriage terminated by divorce is just ten years. Fully two-thirds of all these marriages last less than ten years. At the present rate of increase it will be possible in a few years to calculate the probable length of marriages from these tables with reasonable certainty.



THEY FOUND YOUNG BUNCE TIED TO A TREE.

of still another effort directed against the lad's life. It read to this effect:—

COLD SPRING HARBOR, May —, 1902.—The secret enemies of Percy Bunce known as "The White Caps" tried to lynch him last night, this making the third outrage committed against the young man within the month. A searching party arrived just in time to save young Bunce. With his arms and legs bound with ropes the young man stood under a tree with the noose around his neck and the other end of the rope slung over the limb above his head. The would-be assassins were frightened away in the nick of time by the sound of the approach of the salubrious team which bore the boy's father, a well known merchant of Cold Spring Harbor, and Deputy Sheriff Robinson to the scene. Young Bunce's cries were heard for some time before the two men, who urged the horses to their utmost speed and so defeated the fiendish purpose of the boy's assailants.

Young Bunce declared them to have been six in number. They all wore white masks, and he says as they never uttered a word during the whole time when they attacked and bound him and stood him under the tree to hang him, he is wholly unable to make any identifications or even suggest who his assailants may be.

As before they had pinned a note to his coat. It read:—

Percy Bunce will travel this road no more. He would not heed our warnings and this is his fate.

THE WHITE CAPS.

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When young Bunce announced his intention of driving over to Huntington to visit his sweetheart last night both his parents tried to dissuade him from making the trip. They recalled the dangers of his last two journeys, and he was beaten and tied to a tree on the first occasion, and on the second narrowly escaped death from a knife hurled at him out of the darkness. But love called the boy too strongly, and in spite of the danger he made the trip to Huntington. As before, nothing happened to him till he was driving back late at night. He was armed, and declares that when the attack was made as he was driving through the pitch black portion of the road that traverses the woodlands, he opened fire, but none of the bullets took effect. He was quickly overpowered and dragged out of the wagon. He says he shouted to the men to know the reason for their assault upon him, but they would make no reply to his questions. They silently and methodically bound his arms and legs and carried him off the road under the tree, when one of the men made signals to him that, if he cared to do so, he might pray. And just as giving up all hope, he knelt down upon the damp turf, the sound of galloping horses frightened the lynchmen party away. Young Bunce's father had made the boy promise to be sure to return at midnight, and as soon as the clock's hands went a minute over that time the anxious parent aroused Deputy Sheriff Robinson and the two rode out toward Huntington, luckily coming upon young Bunce in time to avert a tragedy.

As before, a search of the woods and roads for miles around yielded no trace of the White Caps, and young Bunce asserts that he is as mystified as ever to know why he is being made the subject of these outrageous attacks, or how he could possibly have given anybody such serious offence that they should demand his life as forfeit. There is talk of a special meeting of the trustees, when an appropriation will be made to hire New York detectives in an effort to unravel the mystery.

A remarkable feature of the case is that all the letters used by the White Caps are penned in a feminine hand and

tip came from the Long Island town to the effect that the post office had been robbed, its safe being blown open with dynamite. It was especially in regard to this affair that I was sent there. But as I left the office the city editor handed me the Bunce clippings.

## A Possible Clue.

"Perhaps the same gang of White Caps did this trick," he said. "At any rate, it may put you on the right track."

This seemed the more likely after I had arrived at Cold Spring Harbor and had viewed the scene of the robbery. No experienced yegmen had done the "job." Very clumsy amateurs had committed the crime. They must have started the fuse and then ran out of the post office, else they would have been killed, for they used so much dynamite that they not only blew the safe apart but blew down half the post office besides.

"How much did they get?" I asked the postmaster.

"Well," he said, rubbing his stubby chin, "they didn't get nothin'. All there was in the safe was a can of condensed milk and ten ten cent stamps, and they have been found in the ruins."

Aside from his humor, it wasn't much of a "story." But, such as it was, I wrote it at the little telegraph office and then went to the local hotel. It was after nine o'clock, but Deputy Sheriff Robinson, who owned the hotel, had promised to have dinner prepared for me. He sat with me in the dining room while I ate. I brought up in conversation the matter of Percy Bunce. The good man shook his head.

"Darndest case that ever happened around here," he said. "Can't make head nor tail of it. Looks like, spite of everything we can do, they'll git that boy an' kill him yet."

Suddenly there sounded cries outside the room.

"Pap! Pap! Where are yer, pap?"

"In here, son," the old man called.

Master Robinson dashed into the room, his pale blue eyes wide with excitement. He was breathless.

"Pap—pap," he finally spluttered, "they got Percy Bunce again. He's been shot."

"Shot?" the deputy sheriff demanded, instinctively adjusting the badge of office that shone on his waist-coat.

## Awful News.

"Yep; and they took his body away, too," panted the boy. "His hat's been found with a bullet hole clean through it. Pete Smith found the hat in the road. He's bringin' it to you, soon as he takes Mr. Bunce's horse and wagon home—found the horse standin' in the road."

While Deputy Sheriff Robinson put on his hat and coat in the doorway the boy told us that Percy Bunce's hat had been found in about the same spot where the other attacks had occurred—the lonely sec-

tion of the road through the woods. I flashed the lantern up and down the road for some distance, but could find no signs of a struggle, and, queerly enough, no stains in the road that would indicate that a man had been shot to death there.

And while we searched Percy Bunce in the life appeared. Pete Smith had telephoned to the Huntington police, and they had immediately started, and we had, for the place. On the way they met Percy Bunce. He was wandering in the road, chattering, highly excited, and seemingly somewhat dazed. But he had calmed considerably and said that he could now tell his story.

## Percy's Thrilling Story.

"I was driving along on my way to Huntington—this is the first time they ever got after me on my way over; and just when I got to the woods I got out my revolver, like I always do nowadays. Then somebody yelled, 'Halt!' But you bet I didn't. I whipped up the horse instead. I couldn't see nobody then, it was so dark; but then there came a bang, and a flash, and I seen a big man with red whiskers holding a pistol pointing right at me, and I felt something whizz awful close over my head. Then I guess I fainted and fell out of the wagon, because when I came to—you know, got my senses back—I was just walkin' around like a fool. Guess when I fell out of the wagon he thought he'd killed me and ran away. It's gettin' to be awful, ain't it, Mr. Robinson, the way I'm bein' hounded? And I don't know why, neither." The young fellow sadly shook his head.

After all it was the hat with the bullet hole in it that was to clear the mystery of the curious case of Percy Bunce. When Percy had finished talking I went over to the carriage and got his hat off the seat.

"Percy," I said, "the holes in this hat show that the bullet entered from the back, almost in the centre of the hat and came out in front, almost in the centre."

"Yes," he said.

"Well, that wagon you drive has a closed back and open sides. How is it the bullet didn't go through the sides of the hat?"

"Don't know," said Percy, frowning. "Must have had my head turned away from him when he shot—must have been looking out of the other side thinkin' he was over there."

"But if you were looking that way, how could you see his face when the pistol flashed?"

"Don't know," snapped Percy. "Say, I can't remember everything exactly. I seen him—that's all I know."

"Well, here's your hat," I said.

Percy clipped the cap on his head. It was what is ordinarily described as a bicycle hat. It fitted snugly over his scalp.

"Percy Bunce," I said, as solemnly as I could, "how is it that if you had that hat on when the bullet went