

## Mysterical-e - Winter 2011-12

This story, "All's Well" first appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* in March 1961, along with stories by Dashiell Hammett, Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie and Sinclair Lewis. Mr. Haught offered Mysterical-E the opportunity to republish this classic.

### ALL'S WELL

By James A. Haught

If you ask me, them mystery magazines and detective stories are the biggest nuisance around, because they give folks the wrong notion about things. You know how they are, full of secret clues and mysterious codes and beautiful women and all that stuff. You'd think every murder case that comes along is some sort of glamorous puzzle that nobody but a mastermind detective could get to the bottom of.

Well, I've been sheriff of Buckalew County for 14 years now, and I'm here to say it just isn't that way. Nosiree.

I've seen better than two dozen murders, I guess, and there's never been a one of them that wasn't just a simple case of somebody getting drunk, or mad, or scared, or crazy, and dropping the Samson post on somebody else. Almost every time, they either give themselves up or kill themselves, so there's never any mystery at all.

Folks around here don't even call them murders, usually - they just call them killings. You recall the time that Burvil Midkiff stuffed his brother down the privy over the preacher's wife? Well, there wasn't no glamorous mystery there, because he walked in and told us about it before we even heard of it. And it was the same way when Denzil Hicks knocked Bad-Eye Skeens in the head with a nine-ball during a pool game.

But still all them magazines and movies keep people so full of Sherlock Holmes ideas that they pester the ticking out of me and my deputy with a bunch of wild "deductions" every time there's a killing.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. You recall the time that old Winehead Koontz killed Stancil Sydenstricker and robbed him, then when he sobered up and saw what he had done, he drowned himself in the creek?

That was about seven years ago, I guess. Handsome Snell was my deputy then. They called him that, or usually just Hanse, because he was a bachelor and sort of a ladies' man, but he was as smart a deputy as ever I had work with me. I always thought there wasn't any case that the two of us together couldn't break in one day.

Well, Hanse dropped in at the jail that night, and we were just sitting down to a hand of set-back when Harv Estep called up and said he had found Stance Sydenstricker stretched out beside Turkey Run Road, shot between the eyes, with his pockets turned inside-out.

We jumped in the cruiser and lit out. The cruiser was Hanse's old station wagon with a red light on top. He took the light off when he went home at night.

When we got there, there was Stance dead, sure enough. He had been shot twice, right between the eyes, and his billfold and pocket watch were gone.

To show you how quick Hanse was, we hadn't been there more than five minutes before he said, "This looks like the work of Winehead Koontz." I asked how he figured that, and he said he had heard Winehead and Stance quarreling the day before. Stance was deacon and temperance chairman at the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Church on Turkey Run, and it was a known fact that he sometimes cornered Winehead and other town toppers and gave them a hellfire lecture about their sinning.

Well, it wasn't ten minutes after that until two of the Casto girls came rattling up in their dad's pickup and started shouting both at once about old Winehead being found floating dead in Mud Creek not two miles away. I looked at Hanse and nodded, and we lit out again.

By the time we got there, they had fished Winehead out onto the bank and Hud Syhawk was giving him artificial respiration, but it wasn't any use. We could see that he was dead, and there was a big knot on the side of his head where he must have hit a rock when he jumped in. After a while, we rolled him over and went through his pockets and, sure enough, there were Stance's watch and wallet.

Well, that just about settled the case. Anybody could see that Winehead had got on a good one and had laid out for Stance - then when he came out of it enough to see what he had done, it was too much for him. Winehead always was sort of a timid man when he wasn't drinking, but that wasn't often.

The next thing to do was send somebody to break the news to Mrs. Sydenstricker. I remembered that Hanse had always been good friends with her and Stance, so I asked him if he'd do it and he said he would. She was a pretty little thing a lot younger than Stance, but I still didn't envy Hanse his chore. Even though they didn't have any children, it would be hard news for her to take.

After Hanse left, I let the two undertakers in town have one body apiece. I didn't figure it would be right to have the killer and the victim resting in the same place, and, besides, both undertakers were standing by with their ambulances. They both wanted Stance, so they flipped a coin. End-of-the-Trail got Stance and Holy Peace Chapel got Winehead.

Then there wasn't anything more to do but go home and wait for the inquest.

Next morning, I got up early and drove out to the Sydenstricker place to pick up the widow and bring her into town for the inquest. Hanse was there when I arrived. I guess he came back again in the morning to comfort the poor young

woman, who looked mighty pretty in spite of her suffering. I could see that he had been holding her while she cried, because there was lipstick on his shirt.

When we started into town for the inquest, Hanse looked so tired and rumped that I told him to go on home for the day, and I would repeat his testimony for him, about hearing Stance and Winehead quarreling.

Well, as you can imagine, the inquest was pretty routine, and Doc McGraw ruled it murder and suicide, and the case was closed. But here's the part I was telling you about: the big detective ideas that people are always getting from the mystery magazines. In the week that followed, there must have been a half a dozen people come to me with "deductions" they had figured out.

Holly Spoon, the barber, asked how a shaky old drunk like Winehead could shoot well enough to hit Stance twice between the eyes, but I reassured him that Winehead probably had stood real close.

Then Mrs. Wells, the school principal's wife, said that if Winehead had killed himself in remorse, wouldn't he have thrown away the watch and billfold first? But I said he probably didn't even remember them as he sobered up.

All their detective-playing didn't amount to a hill of beans, though, and most of the town went on talking about what a terrible thing it was, and the preachers preached that it showed that liquor is the work of the devil.

The only other news that happened after that was when it was learned how much insurance Stance had left his wife. Everybody felt real good about it, saying it was wonderful that he thought so much of her that he took out a \$50,000 policy just four months before. Dorsel Fluharty, the insurance agent, told me that it was Hanse himself who talked Stance into taking the policy, and I felt mighty proud of my deputy.

It was only a couple of months after the killing that Mrs. Sydenstricker sold her place and moved away. She said she didn't want to live anymore where Stance had been killed.

And not long after, Hanse left too. He said he had gotten a good job in St. Louis. I hated to see him go, and I was sorry to lose the cruiser, but you can't stand in the way of a man's progress.

Well, nobody heard anything about either him or Mrs. Sydenstricker for a long time, and I don't suppose we ever would have if it wasn't for the Kincaid boy who's in the Navy. He wrote back to his folks last fall that his ship had gone to Hawaii clear out in the Pacific Ocean, and he had run across Hanse and Mrs. Sydenstricker there on a beach in front of a big hotel, only she wasn't Mrs. Sydenstricker any more. She and Hanse had chanced to meet again and they had got married.

It's strange how things work out sometimes. Who'd have thought that the two of them, leaving here like they did after the trouble, would run into each other again someplace and fall for each other?

**It's sort of inspiring, and most everybody around here feels warm inside that everything turned out so well for them.**