The Golden Hoard

By Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie

SYNOPSIS

Fear for the safety of his gold brings Horace Denslow, New York financier, to his death in a Georgia hunting lodge, where he has flown with Pilot Davy Allen to cache the precious metal. Meanwhile, Prescott, Denslow's attorney, warned by a mysterious woman's voice over the phone that Denslow is flying to certain death, phones Linda Telfair by long distance to hurry to the Denslow lodge, which adjoins her plantation. There Linda finds the financier's body and near it scattered bits of paper which form a note incriminating to Gregory, the murdered man's son. She hides the scraps. Linda tells Gregory and his mother of the note. Mrs. Denslow has divorced the millionaire because of another woman in his life and that woman's son, who was Davy Allen, the pilot. One night, walking late, Linda spies the lifeless body of a man perched in a tree—it is Allen. Old Lucius, family retainer, makes another discovery, a "conjure stone," which Prescott cracks open, revealing to Linda bars of gold. At the inquest, beginning to the accompaniment of radio announcers, movie sound machines, reporters and a swarm of curiosity seekers, a mysterious veiled woman makes a scene; she is the "other woman" in Denslow's career. Linda hears Davy Allen's widow murmur words from the psalms . . . words which Linda saw on a printed page before Denslow when she found him dead . . . "for, lo, the wicked bend their bow." . . . Suddenly the mysterious woman disappears, leaving her mourning garb behind.

INSTALLMENT VIII.

CLEM CLAY was the first official to respond with action. He made for the stairs, up which a couple of newspaper men already were leaping. Prescott, the coroner, and half a dozen others followed Clay.

Gregg stood beside his mother, but for the moment forgot her as he watched the rush up the stairs and listened to the scurry overhead as the searchers rushed from room to room.

It was evident that they found nothing. They could be heard calling to each other, and some one—probably Mr. Prescott, Linda thought—retained the presence of mind to post a couple of men to stop the flow of volunteer helpers up the stairs.

Clay's deputies at the doors on the ground floor prevented further crowding in from the pack of the curious outside, but word spread of what had happened.

Linda took her place beside Gregg and his mother. Nearly everybody in the big room was standing and talking.

The same two newspaper men who had first run upstairs were the first to satisfy themselves that their quarry actually had disappeared—or departed. They jumped down the stairs and pushed through the groups that gathered about them and went out to their cars, which they started immediately and drove away. Again they showed the way to Clem Clay, for he reappeared with his deputies trailing him and they took to autos also.

Milton Rowley descended with more dignity and set to the difficult business of restoring the room to order.

He was intelligent enough to recognize that the quickest way to do this was to make some explanation of what had happened; so he announced, addressing his jury:

"The lady in black, who passed through this room and went upstairs, identified herself to us as Mrs. Charlotte Berteau. She did not, herself, describe her connection with the case. It was already known to us that the name customarily used by David Allen's mother was Mrs. Charlotte Berteau. This is correct, is it not?" he asked Mabel Allen, informally.

"Yes," said Davy Allen's widow.

"That was Mrs. Berteau?"

"I thought it was," the little widow answered. And Linda, recollecting her through the confusion of last minutes, realized that she had sat in her chair hardly changing her position.

"WE, OF course, had been seeking her," the coroner continued, "but we had not found her. She did not come here as the result of any summons that had been served upon her. She appeared, I must say, quite unexpectedly and of her own volition. She asked the right to attend this inquest—which, of course, was certainly her right; she asked, also, that it be arranged that she sit by herself and not be subjected to questioning, except by Mr. Clay or myself.

"As Mrs. Denslow has observed, she seemed entitled to any special consideration, particularly as to her privacy, which could be arranged for her. So she was allowed to sit upstairs with Mr. Yerkes accompanying her.

"We have all heard how she took our proceedings . . . A few minutes ago she indicated to Mr. Yerkes that she was going into one of the bedrooms to lie down. He did not accompany her, but later, as he told you, he knocked on the door. Receiving no response, he entered and found her heavy veil and black hat and black dress upon the bed. She had vanished.

"It turns out that the room, which she had chosen, communicates through a bathroom to another bedroom which has a door opening upon an angle of the upper hall not in line of vision from the position upstairs which Yerkes occupied, and at the end of this extension of the hallway is the door to the rear stairs to the kitchen.

"We had a man at the kitchen door to prevent people crowding in that way, but he had no orders to stop any one who left the lodge by that door. Some of the newspaper men and women had been passing back and forth, therefore, he did not challenge a lady who went out quietly some minutes ago and went to a car.

"She was not in black and she was without a veil.

"It seems probable that Mrs. Berteau, wishing to attend this hearing, but also wishing to avoid later questioning by any one, had planned the action she took. She seems to have worn another and an ordinary dress under her black dress and she had with her an inconspicuous toque. Leaving her mourning garments, which would have identified her, she went out the rear way and she went to a small roadster in which was a man who apparently was awaiting her. They immediately drove off.

"The man with the large closed car, who drove her here from Baltimore, is still outside. He says he was awaiting her. He was hired in Baltimore and says he knows nothing about Mrs. Berteau, except what he had 'heard,' and her arrangement with him was to drive her to this place and back again to Baltimore.

"Mr. Clay and some others are now trying to trace the movements of the small car."

A couple of the pursuit cars returned.

"She got away—for the present," said Clem Clay; and he directed the resumption of the inquest.

The people, who had left their places, returned to them, but kept looking out the windows expectantly; but the conversations, through the windows, with those outside the lodge, were stopped. The reporters, who had had to dispatch news of the disappearance of Mrs. Berteau, again repassed the door. Rowley's efforts to restore order at last prevailed, and when he found the witness chair vacated, he consulted once more with Clem Clay.

They decided, between them, not to continue now with Mrs. Denslow, whom Gregg had brought back to her seat in the row with Linda and himself. It was to Gregg that the coroner nodded.

He pressed his mother's hand and then released his own from hers.

Now Gregg sat in the chair that had been so unhappily occupied by his mother. His lips were compressed, his chin was lifted. His hair was disheveled, and even as he sat there, he ran his fingers through it again for the thousandth time that day.

MILTON ROWLEY allowed a brief time to elapse while he regarded Gregg tentatively and an awful hush fell over the whole room. Linda felt her nails sharp in the palms of her hands.

Rowley put the first formal routine questions, which were necessary, but almost meaningless. Again he stopped. The room was still as a cave.

"Will you please tell us in detail your movements on the day your father was killed?"

Gregory Denslow had his own style of testifying. His mother had been perfectly controlled until her nerves gave away. Clem Clay had played a part; Prescott had been expert. Now Gregory was direct, monosyllabic and rapid. He gave an impression of forthrightness and frankness.

Only Linda and his mother—and possibly one other person in that room—knew that he was not telling the truth. But how could he? Was he not—Linda cried to herself—serving the real purpose of truth by these quick, curt successive untruths which he related?

She and his mother would agree on that, but how about a third person who knew?

His words were machine gun fire. "I left my mother at 3. We had been talking about father, and two or three days before Niles Evans and I had talked about father. There was a time when I loved and admired my father. That came to an end. When I had to choose between my mother and my father, I chose her. I knew she was taking no money from him. I did not care. Of course, I knew how much he had . . .

"His name was constantly in the newspapers. It always was. I used to be proud of the things told about him that he did. Then, when they spoke of him, it was a different tone. He was going to pieces; he was letting his affairs go to pieces. He was pulling out and doing nothing new with his money. I guessed the explanation. He was hoarding. I guessed also the explanation back of that. He was no longer inspired by my mother; he was under the influence of some one else . . . I need not name her."

HE threw a defiant glance toward the staircase, on which the woman had last been seen by those in the room.

"I never met her. I never had anything to do with her. She merely—altered and changed every single thing in my life which had to do with my father, which came to me from my father or went from me to him . . . I had little chance to know Davy Allen, but it was different between me and him. He was not to blame; he never had taken a lead in the matter. He was as much—he was more a victim of his mother and my father, than I was myself. On the occasions when I saw him I liked him and respected him. I knew that he had detached himself from his mother. I could not blame him for liking to be with my father—and his father. I used to like that myself.

"I knew he was constantly with father. I knew they were flying about, and I knew why."

Here the coroner interrupted. "Explain that, please."

"I mean, I knew that they were hoarding money and gold."

"How did you know this?"

"My father, himself, hinted at it."

"In what words?"

"I can't remember, exactly, but the meaning was plain. He said something like he was seeing to it that, no matter what happened to banks or business, he would 'stand.' I remember that expression. He would 'stand'! You will not misconstrue me, I hope, if I say that he told me this—I think—with the idea that it would make me more friendly with him."

"Thank you," said Rowley. "Now did you know, in particular, of this last visit here of your father?"

"I did."

"How did you learn of it?"

"From him. He wrote me, as he frequently—or always—did when he was going to be anywhere near where I was. He would not directly ask me to visit him, but he would give me the chance to."

"You heard from him by letter then. When did you receive it?"

"The morning of the day he arrived here."

"So you knew it when you last were talking with Niles Evans?"

"Yes, but I did not mention it to Mr. Evans."

"You are sure of that?"

"I am sure."

"But you mentioned it your mother?"

"Of course."

"And she later talked with Niles Evans?"

"Yes."

"Now what did you do after you had this letter from your father? Where is it, by the way?"

"I destroyed it. It was mailed in New York, I remember. Air mail. It was written in his own hand and so was the envelope . . . I did nothing about the letter but destroy it."

"You mean you didn't answer it?"

"No."

"And you didn't come here to see your father?"

"No."

"Linda, when you were testifying I wanted to grab you and carry you away! I wanted to hold you"—his arms were about her—"like this. You were wonderful — wonderful!"

"You did not, you say," Rowley repeated, "come here to see your father?"

"No."

"Then why did you leave your mother? What did you do?"

"I went away by myself, as I often do, to think things over. I have told you the sort of thing that was on my mind. I left the hotel at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the day on which, as I learned later, my father was murdered. When the time comes, if it is necessary, I can produce witnesses to show that I have a habit of going away by myself for long rides, day or night, alone in my car. I did it at college. I did it that day. I drove south. Between Palm Beach and Miami there are a few resort towns. There are also long stretches of empty beach. At one of those I stopped. It might have been 4 or 5 o'clock. I lay down in the sand. The sun set. Just before it was dark I gathered some driftwood and made a fire. I was chilly. You will remember that there was a moon. I sat in the moonlight and the firelight turning my life over in my mind for a long time. Hours. I was surprised when at last I looked at my watch and found it was after midnight. I kicked sand on the fire, got in my car and started home. On the way I realized that I had had no supper. I stopped in a gasoline and sandwich station and had a meal. I didn't hurry. There wasn't any hurry. I drove along and passed Palm Beach and went on. I didn't feel yet like going back to the hotel—and people that I'd have to talk to. I went on until I came to a roadside camp and I put in there and finally went to bed. It might have been 3 o'clock. I didn't notice."

He stopped talking and looked straightforwardly from the jury, which he had addressed, to the coroner. Rowley drummed on his table with his fingertips and then said, "Do you remember at what station you had your last meal before you reached the camp where you slept?"

"No. There are so many on the highway that I don't. I might be able to find it again, if I drove down there."

"In which case your account would be corroborated. How many of those stations do you think are open and serving sandwiches after 12 o'clock?"

"Several," Gregg replied.

"Can you remember any details of the place where you stopped?"

GREGORY still answered rapidly. "Just sketchy ones. The kind anybody would remember. It had gasoline pumps out in front painted red. There was oilcloth on the counter and a glass showcase full of candy. There was a picture of an ice cream girl, or some other kind of a girl, on the wall."

Rowley nodded. "The night was especially warm. You were a good many miles farther south than Albemarle where it was presumably warmer still. Why did you build a fire?"

"It wasn't warm on the beach. It was also damp. But I built a fire because I felt like it. I wanted to sit by one and think. I suppose that the gentlemen in the jury will find it difficult to conceive of any one so idle as myself on that evening, as I doubt if any of them drive cars at night and build fires by themselves. However, that happens to be what I did."

Without changing his tone of voice the coroner pointed toward the grate in the living room and said, "Was there a fire in here at the time?"

Gregg's reply was instantaneous. "I don't know, Mr. Coroner."

The audience gasped with excitement. Rowley's ruse to trick Gregory into an admission that he had been in the lodge was the nearest to a direct accusation of him which had been officially made. It was very near indeed; but Gregg's direct response had turned it away. Rowley might have found a better reply to his question if he had looked in the palms of Linda's hands at that instant and seen the red half moons where her nails had been pressed.

She well understood why the coroner continued to press his attack upon Gregg's story of making the fire on the beach and the road station where he had supper and why, in comparison, he neglected the account of the road camp. Undoubtedly Rowley or Clay had checked up Gregg's story of the camp where he had spent the night and found he had spent the night there. He had—after he had visited his father.

There was no check on the beach incident and the sandwich station; and Linda knew that Gregg had lied about them. But the coroner could not shake him; so he proceeded to re-examine the story of the camp where Gregg had slept.

Regarding that, Gregg had only to tell the truth; and, listening, Linda relaxed a little.

"There, in the morning," said Gregg, "I heard on the radio that my father had been murdered . . . I started for this place . . . I met Linda Telfair . . ." He could stick to the truth now about his movements and what he had done. . . .

They waited for the verdict at the Telfair home—Gregg and his mother and Linda and Dan and their mother, of course.

The taking of testimony at the inquest was concluded; and the jury, which had remained at the lodge, was deliberating what verdict they should pronounce.

"It's going to be hours," Gregg said. "Hours." He was alone with Linda and darkness again was coming on.

THEY dared not speak half what they felt. They were alone in the little room where Mr. Prescott had broken Lucia's conjure stone and where the little gold slabs had tumbled out. The door was closed and no strangers were in the house; but it was no day for risks.

"Linda, when you were testifying, I wanted to grab you and carry you away! I wanted to hold you"—his arms were about her—"like this. You were wonderful—wonderful!"

"When he turned on you, Gregg; when he began asking you over and over about the beach and the fire; and you . . ."

"I know." He kissed her slowly and long.

It was after 9 in the evening when the jury reached the compromise sufficiently accepted by all its members to permit it to "report."

This did not go instantly upon the radio; for the running comment on the Denslow murders had terminated with the announcement that any important newsflash would be broadcast on the half hour between programs. It went first on newspaper wires and on local telephones.

But no one immediately rang up the Telfair home. The reporters, who had remained at the lodge drove to town; they knew they would pass the Telfair place and they raced to be first at the house.

Thus it was that from half a dozen young men together Gregg and Linda—in the background—and Mrs. Denslow learned what the coroner's jury had done.

It neither accused nor "cleared" any one. It found that Horace Denslow and David Allen had been murdered at the hands of "persons not yet identified." With this the jury declined to close its consideration of the case; instead, it deemed the inquest merely adjourned pending investigation, by the proper officers, of certain statements made under oath before the jury; pending accurate information of contents of the will of Horace Denslow—which might shed light upon motives for the murders; and pending, especially, a search for Mr. Niles Evans and his appearance for questioning.

Prescott appeared before the reporters were gone; and Clem Clay came a few moments later. Prescott announced himself as pleased with the action of the jury. By all means, Mr. Denslow's will should be studied at the earliest possible opportunity. It undoubtedly was in one of Mr. Denslow's personal safe deposit boxes in New York City. Prescott would proceed to New York and obtain an order from the surrogate which would allow him access to the vaults for search for the will. He further would make whatever arrangements Mrs. Denslow desired for the funeral of Mr. Denslow.

"I will do that," Gregg said; and he drove to Albemarle with his mother.

HE was aware that the headlights which danced blindingly in through the rear window and reflected upon his windshield shone from the car of Sheriff Clem Clay; he was aware that, though he had not been formally "held" by the coroner's jury, he must continue under an undeclared surveillance as long as he stayed in the county; and probably even if he left the state. He drove straight to the hotel and went in with his mother.

The mail clerk produced a great heap of letters and telegrams. The latter came from all over the country—salutations, condemnations, advice and exhortation from cranks, notoriety seekers, the weak witted. The letters were more local, as yet, but of like character.

"Sheriff Clay is getting more than this, I hear," the clerk volunteered, and gazed at the missives with envious curiosity.

Gregg borrowed a basket-tray and carried the heap up to his mother's suite. He locked the door and she sank into a deep chair; but he saw that she could not relax even yet.

"All right, mother," he patted and kissed her.

She shook her head, but admitted, "I think we chose rightly today."

He knew to what she referred—their decision to deny his visit to his father, in spite of the fact that her letter, that proved he made the visit, had fallen into unknown hands.

"Yes," he said, "we got away with it today. It must be that he, who has it, daren't show it; so perhaps he daren't tomorrow, either."

"Perhaps . . . Is there anything in all these, Gregory?"

These were heaped up envelopes from everywhere. "I'll look 'em over," Gregg offered, and slit them swiftly.

Now and then he read aloud a line or two.

"Here's something different," he said, flattening a page displaying, at first glance, only three rows of pencil figures. Then he saw at the bottom edge of the paper, below a brown blotch, a typewritten line:

"This was before H. D. when they shot him."

That was all it said and probably, in that mad mail, it was the irresponsible invention of a crank; but it made Gregg stare at the figures and something about them startled him.

They read, meaninglessly, in this manner:

10	97	6	98	16	55	47	43	69
49	58	17	84	77	92	59	8	51
81	101	102	7	46	1	83	28	
88	11	78	72	44	99	79	55	

"This was before H. D. when they shot him."

Gregg folded over that single typed line and, governing the sudden excitement that had seized him, he showed the penciled figures to his mother.

"Who, would you say, wrote those?"

"Who?" She started up as her eyes followed the figures, firmly penciled with definite, peculiar curls of the 9's and heavily crossed, emphatic 5's. "Your father, Gregory! What is it? Where did you get that?"

"It seemed father to me, mother—but I'd read that line." Now he showed it to her.

"Where did you get it, Gregory?"

"In the mail—this envelope. I just opened it." And they stared together at a plain, "postoffice" stamped envelope without any distinguishing mark whatever except the postmark, which was Macon, Georgia, with the date of the morning of that day.

"What is it, Gregory?"

"Why not believe this, mother? Some one says it was before H. D.—that must be father—when they shot him. Father certainly wrote those figures. And—blood dries brown, mother. That's a blood mark on the paper. It was before father when they shot him! That's what he was doing—writing those figures, when they came in and shot him."

"Why?"

"Why did they shoot him and why was he writing those figures? . . . Mother, this begins to fit in. I can't even guess yet what it means, but I feel it begins to fit in."

"But who sent it to me? And how did he get it from before your father, after 'they' killed him? Gregory, my son, how could that be?"

"I don't know; but we've got something to go on—a page father penciled—just before—they murdered him."

(To be continued)