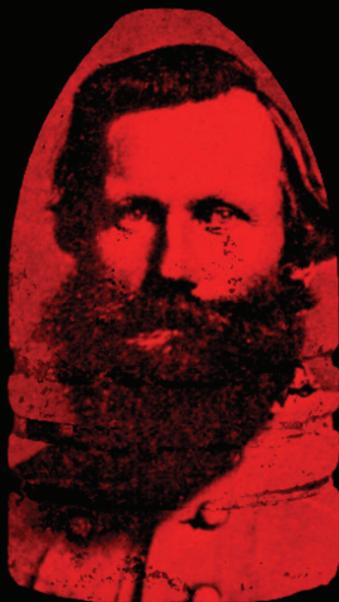


Henry Drake



THE YELLOW TAVERN Mystery

a TERRAPIN story

A NOTE ABOUT THIS STORY

Those who have read T. M. Doran's *Terrapin* know that the main character, Dennis Cole, is an engineering professor *and* a mystery story writer (using the alias, Henry Drake). *The Yellow Tavern Mystery* is an original short mystery story by Cole/Drake featuring characters who appeared in *The Deadly Dart Mystery* and *A Legendary Mystery*.

If you haven't read *Terrapin*, you can buy a copy at **www.TerrapinMystery.com**, where you can also find a free download of *A Legendary Mystery*.

The Yellow Tavern Mystery

By Henry Drake (aka T. M. Doran)

“DID YOU EVER HAVE a day when everything went wrong?”

The man who asked this question was seated across the table from Cole Porter Palmer at Edison’s Restaurant in Dearborn, Michigan. This man might have been sixty, or slightly younger, ruddy-faced with chocolate brown eyes and a bushy beard and eyebrows. He was wearing a pale yellow shirt, brown tweed jacket, and a red bowtie.

The invitation to dine with this odd character had been conveyed to Cole by Portia Kendall, who taught mathematics at the University of Michigan. That’s where she had met Albert Sneer, a historian who had been invited by her department to teach a seminar on applications for numerical modeling in history.

Thus, on a warm and sunny afternoon, Cole sat opposite Sneer at a small table near a cheering window.

Cole didn’t think his lunchtime companion was expecting an answer to this question about the vicissitudes of life, and he was right, since the man proceeded to ask another question.

“Have you ever heard of James Ewell Brown Stuart?”

This time Cole ventured a reply. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, but you have. I’m sure of it.” The man’s eyes bored into Cole. “James Ewell Brown – Jeb – Stuart was the most celebrated cavalry commander of the Civil War, absolutely essential to Lee and the Confederacy. Stuart was killed at the Battle of Yellow Tavern as Grant pushed toward Richmond.”

Cole just nodded. He was concentrating on spreading salmon pâté on a cracker.

“No doubt, you are wondering what this has to do with me... and you.”

Cole couldn't have said it better, but the salmon was good.

“I had read about your investigation at the Ichtheater¹ in the Ann Arbor News, and when I learned that Portia Kendall was a friend of yours, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. I will never forget that disastrous day. I thought a day with so much misfortune could only occur in books and films.”

Cole was already contemplating what he would say to Portia for connecting him with this odd duck. Putting the cracker down, he said, “I wonder if you're talking to the right man.”

The bearded man ignored him, saying, “Let me start with this fact: until April 22nd, two months ago this very day, I was in possession of the bullet that killed Jeb Stuart near the Yellow Tavern Inn on May 12th, 1864. In the period of a few minutes, it vanished... utterly and permanently.

“I see I have captured your interest, so let me provide details.”

Cole had seen pictures of Jeb Stuart, not to mention the film *Gettysburg*, and now it occurred to him that this man was something of an aged replica of that daring cavalry commander, in appearance at least.

“As painful as it is, let me re-visit that day for your benefit. Bear with me; we historians are fastidious about detail. I de-camped at six-thirty, as is my custom, and promptly blackened my eye going to the shower; blood everywhere...a mess. After an unsatisfactory shower, I went to the kitchen to discover my canary sprawled on

1 See *A Legendary Mystery* (Ignatius Press)

the paper in the bottom of its cage. I had that little bird for seven years, a gift from my mother before she died.

“Only the thought of the event later that morning kept me from returning to bed.”

Sneer seemed to lose energy remembering the canary, so Cole encouraged him to continue.

Sneer sipped his wine before saying, “I was expecting five guests: Andrew Stuart, my colleague in the history department; Mary Ann Smith, a professor of history at Michigan State University; Hilary Stoops, who is a history teacher at Renaissance High School in Detroit; Bertram Boone, a Civil War curio dealer with whom I’ve had a long correspondence; and Maven Fine, my graduate student.”

“Describe this event,” Cole said.

“Be patient, my good man. I reside in old Ann Arbor, west of downtown. I escorted my guests, applejack and rum punch in hand, to the library, displaying a placard I had prepared for the occasion reading, *Yellow Tavern Inn*. Inside this room is a four-foot pedestal with glass dome to house my most valuable possession: the Stuart bullet. The artifact rests, or rather rested, on a green velvet cushion. The glass dome is secured to the pedestal by a tongue and groove assembly with a lock. I like to display the artifact with panache. Stuart’s death had a significant impact on the duration, if not the outcome, of the war.”

“Someone stole your bullet,” Cole observed.

“What else, but there is absolutely no proof that the object was *stolen*, not one shred of evidence, nor a preferred suspect.”

Cole was interested, but not so interested that he ignored the pâté.

“After unlocking the collar and removing the dome, I passed the bullet around for inspection. Everyone examined the artifact;

everyone held it. That tiny object had taken the life of one of the most fearsome warriors in American history. I distinctly remember Dr. Stuart returning the bullet to its cushion, but we weren't in a hurry to leave. As historians are apt to do, we debated the last year of the war, the effect of Stuart's death, Grant's relentless pressure, Lee's strategic retreat. I suppose we continued for another half-hour. I remember Professor Smith and Boone retrieving the bullet for another look; the others might have inspected it again too. What did I care? I knew that bullet in every particular, and I would not permit anyone to leave the library before verifying that my treasure was secure. I am not a distrustful man, Palmer, but business is business; this tiny object is history...the stuff of legend."

"How much is the bullet worth?" Cole inquired.

"It is priceless to me. Acquiring that bullet was the culmination of my life's work."

By no means satisfied, Cole asked, "How much did you pay for it?"

"I gave the woman nine hundred for it. She needed the money and I wanted the bullet."

Cole didn't like that answer, though it was apparent that Sneer was proud he had purchased a valuable artifact for a pittance.

"When did you begin to get suspicious?"

"When I went to replace the dome, the bullet was missing. Thinking nothing of it...yet, I asked the bearer to replace it. But no one produced the artifact."

"That must have been an anxious moment," Cole remarked.

"You cannot imagine. With the exception of Maven, each of my guests has a national reputation. I asked again, but received the same response or, I should say, lack of response."

The waiter placed their food in front of them: a large Caesar salad and another glass of red wine for Sneer, pork chops and carrots for Cole.

“Bon appétit,” Sneer said. “Let us enjoy our meal before we continue with this disagreeable business.”

‘Disagreeable business’ might describe Cole’s own feelings about this matter, and Sneer himself. Then, it occurred to him that Portia and Thomas Jefferson Penn knew him better than he knew himself. Sneer might be the oddest of ducks, but Cole needed constant mental stimulation...distractions. He saw a younger and more animated version of himself in the old house on Pine Street, watching a lovely young woman and a little girl dance and play together, but that man was a ghost, someone who used to be, and would never be again.

Work, investigations, preoccupation; if not a remedy then respite from the memories.

Setting down his napkin, Sneer said, “Thank God Stoops suggested I call the police, and that everyone submit to a search before leaving the room. The bullet was not insured, and if I allowed them to leave the room I knew I would never see my treasure again.

“I contacted the Ann Arbor police. No one left the room, I assure you, including Boone, who wanted to use the bathroom.”

“Whom did you suspect?” Cole asked him.

“That is an indelicate question,” Sneer answered. “I had no reason to suspect anyone in particular.”

“But your intuition pointed in a certain direction.”

“I cannot say that it did.”

“Of course it did. I can’t help you if you won’t cooperate. This isn’t a court of law. Impressions are admissible here. Whom did you immediately suspect?”

“Maven, I suppose. She could use the money more than the rest. I don’t know Boone very well; just via correspondence, and he is a dealer, not a degreed historian,” Sneer said disparagingly.

Cole shook his head. “Unless you’re privy to the finances of these people, you can’t know who needs money. Go on.”

“The detective had a helper, a young woman. She came in handy when it was time to search Mary Ann, Stoops, and Maven. I watched the police walk them out of the room one by one to be searched and scanned with metal detectors tuned to detect lead. Can you guess the result of these searches?”

“They didn’t find anything,” Cole said, “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

“As you say. Nothing was found. Any object that looked like it might contain the bullet was confiscated until it could be thoroughly examined. Next, they were loaded into a police van and driven to the University Hospital where they were given full body MRIs to determine if someone had ingested the bullet.”

“They agreed to this?” Cole asked incredulously.

“All of them. They were mortified to be suspected of such a brazen act. The MRIs were negative. The van returned them to the house later that day.”

“Then what?”

“The police had cordoned off the room so that a more thorough search could be performed on the following day. I’ll satisfy your curiosity. The police found nothing. The bullet had disappeared.” Sneer shook his head mournfully.

“Did your guests depart for home when they returned to the house?”

“Just the opposite. Mary Ann suggested they take me to dinner, as if she refused to believe there was a thief in that group. She wasn’t

the only one who suggested the bullet had been misplaced. I don't remember who suggested I would find it in a vacuum cleaner bag. I could see that Boone and Stoops would rather have gone home but everyone, except for me, seemed cheerier now that the MRIs had proven negative.

"Needless to say, a most unsatisfying supper. Mary Ann's heart was in the right place but this was an ill-conceived idea, and I should have resisted it. Maven had excused herself. As she is only a student, no one objected. Boone kept up a constant patter about Patrick Cleburne and how he should have replaced that fool Bragg after Chattanooga; words for the sake of words. Hilary had a panic attack; no other explanation...deep breaths and moans. Stuart, normally a congenial fellow, was sullen, speaking rarely and directing verbal barbs at Boone. I consumed an entire bottle of Burgundy. I was still hoping that one of them would dramatically produce the bullet.

"I remember Stuart telling an off-color joke. Nowadays, you have to be careful what you say in the presence of women. He had too much to drink; not surprising considering what he'd been through. As for the MRI, Boone said he didn't know about the bullet that killed Stuart, but he knew how the General felt when he was dropped into his coffin. Mary Ann upset a glass of wine and soaked my coat, this jacket as a matter of fact. By the time she finished with her napkin, the coat was worse than if she had left it alone.

"I went home, brought in the mail, dressed for bed, and went into the library one more time to convince myself that the Stuart bullet was gone."

"And..." Cole said, expectantly.

“Gone...forever,” Sneer said dejectedly. “And speaking of gone forever, there was a letter from Holland informing me that my Aunt Elsa had died. Imagine that.”

“A bad day,” Cole agreed.

Sneer took a large gulp of wine and sat back resignedly. “My bullet,” he whispered.

“I don’t mind saying, Palmer, that when I went to bed I pulled up the covers and prayed, something I haven’t contemplated for thirty years. Just who I was praying to I cannot say with any certainty, but I was fervent about it.”

Cole stared at the last carrot on his plate, speared and consumed it. “What would you say if I told you I will recover the artifact within one week?”

“I would say you are a magician...or delusional.”

“I want to see your library...”

“Now?”

“And within the week, I want you to assemble your guests in the library, along with that detective.”

“Can’t be done,” Sneer said. “Boone is in North Carolina, and I doubt if Professor Smith can get away from East Lansing.”

“How badly do you want to recover the bullet?”

“Be reasonable,” Sneer pleaded. “I’ll have to pay for Boone’s ticket.”

“Pay,” Cole said.

Sneer’s house was like many wood-frame, two-story structures on Ann Arbor’s west side. Most of these dated from the early nineteenth hundreds, with some nineteenth century structures sprinkled in. The trees were big and sturdy and the neighborhood respectably Bohemian. Occasionally, a hooker, or Shaky Jake, wandered in,

adding color and noise, but most of the time the neighborhood was the haven of professors and lifelong Ann Arborites.

The library was smaller than Cole expected. It would take some doing to squeeze six people into this room. The bell jar that once contained Stuart's bane was closed tight, as if the bullet still resided on the green velvet pillow. On three walls were dissimilar bookcases; on the fourth wall, with a window in the middle, books were stacked on the floor.

"All these books belong to you?" Cole asked.

"Yes," and Sneer made it sound like everyone should be so enlightened.

"Who's to say the bullet wasn't hidden inside one of these books?" Cole asked. "How would anyone know?"

"I told you the police swept the room with a metal detector, and searched by hand," Sneer retorted. "And what would anyone gain by leaving the bullet behind?"

"Have any of your guests returned to this room since the bullet was lost?"

"Stolen," Sneer said, adjusting his bowtie. "None of them have been back to this house since that infamous day."

"Have any of them asked to return?"

"No, nary a one."

Cole paced the room, opened books, peered into nooks and crannies. This north-facing room with one small window would always be dark, a place where one retrieved a book and carried it away for reading.

"Is Maven a good student?"

"She is diligent," Sneer replied, "but not inspired."

Cole replaced David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln* to an eye level shelf.

“Do you know anything about her private life, family, friends?”

“Maven’s family resides in New York. Other than that, I can’t tell you much. She keeps her private life to herself.”

“Open the display case,” Cole directed him.

Sneer produced a key and removed the glass cover. As Cole lifted the cushion he asked Sneer, “How long have you known Mary Ann Smith?”

“Over twenty years; she is an accomplished historian.”

“Married? Family?”

“She has never married and is an only child. I don’t know if her parents are alive.”

“Is she a collector?”

“We are all collectors, in our fashion. Mary Ann favors Union officers’ uniforms, high quality apparel.”

“Do any of them moonlight as magicians, clowns?”

“Of course not,” Sneer answered. Then, he said, “How should I know? Mary Ann, for one, wouldn’t be caught dead in a clown costume.”

Cole shook the cushion and returned it to the case.

“How about Hilary Stoops?”

“I’ve known her for over a decade. She works in Detroit; not an easy life.”

“Then, she can probably use the money,” Cole observed. “How much did you say the bullet was worth?”

“I didn’t,” Sneer answered evasively.

“That’s right, you didn’t. You said you paid nine hundred for it.”

“Cash,” the professor said defensively.

“Hilary Stoops could use the money, couldn’t she?”

“A lot of people could use fifty thousand...” then, Sneer added, “but that doesn’t make them thieves.”

“What else do you know about Hilary Stoops?”

“Divorced, two daughters at home.”

“Is there a market for the bullet? The thief doesn’t have a certificate of authenticity. Without that, isn’t it just a lump of lead?”

“Hardly. The markings on this bullet are well documented: a round lead ball fired from a 44-caliber Colt army revolver. All a collector need do is match the description in the literature to the bullet.”

“Who knows that?”

“All of my esteemed guests, I suppose.”

“Even Maven?”

“Even Maven.”

“How did you acquire this notorious artifact so cheaply?”

Sneer’s eyes narrowed. He wanted to smile but resisted. “The grandfather died, then the father. The woman was in a hurry to liquidate the estate.”

“You never advised her of the value of the bullet?”

“I wasn’t her lawyer, or her financial advisor.”

“Stuart: an academic, or a family interest in the bullet?”

Sneer shrugged. “Andrew claims to be a descendant. Who knows?”

“How well do you know Stuart?”

“We are acquaintances. We work together. I am a full professor and he’s an associate.”

“And Boone?”

“A hearty fellow; amateur, of course. We have corresponded over the years. He is one of those who cannot make up his mind if he is in it for love or money.”

“What do you mean?” Cole asked. He had climbed to the top of a three step stool and was inspecting volumes on the top shelf... Catton, Murfin, Symonds.

“I mean that Bertram pursues artifacts with the love of a collector, and then sells them if he can get a good price. Told me he once purchased Longstreet’s camp chair for twelve hundred and sold it for twelve thousand. After I’d congratulated him on his business acumen, he gave me a basset hound look and said, ‘Now I don’t have the chair or the money.’”

“Could someone have pitched the bullet up here?” Cole mused aloud. “Did the police search this top shelf?”

“They were on a tall stool with their wands, if that answers your question, and they were here for the better part of three hours.”

“You insisted that no one left the library prior to the arrival of the police,” Cole stated.

“No one; I wouldn’t allow it. They were scanned with the wand before they left the library for the hospital.”

“Is there a market for the bullet?” Cole queried.

“There are plenty of collectors of Civil War artifacts, and not all of them are above trading in stolen merchandise,” the professor replied dourly. “It will be a miracle if I ever see that bullet again.”



CHAIRS WERE LINED up against bookcases as if this were a camp gathering, with the display case taking the place of the fire pit. There were five chairs on two bookcase walls, two on the window wall and one in front of the door; Cole Porter Palmer inhabited that seat, the company’s picket.

To Cole’s left, against that bookcase, were Sneer, Maven Fine, and Mary Ann Smith. To his right were Andrew Stuart and Hilary Stoops. Flanking the window were Bertram Boone and Cole’s friend, the Ann Arbor detective known as “Handlebar”, or “Handy”, for his distinctive moustache.

Sneer was wearing his trademark tweed jacket, but had dispensed with the bowtie. Maven Fine, a mousy woman with coarse hair secured by an elastic band, scanned the room nervously. Mary Ann Smith, fair skinned and possessing severe features, affected a Victorian look, complete with cameo. Andrew Stuart was a large, fair-haired man with a beard like a bird's nest and hair tumbling over his shoulders. He directed attention to the beard by stroking it, as one might caress a pet. Cole observed to himself that Stuart and Sneer would have given Jeb Stuart and Longstreet a run for their money in the beard department. Hilary Stoops was a prematurely aged black woman of above-average height but well below average weight, a female Jack Spratt. She smiled at Cole, the only one in the room to acknowledge him. Bertram Boone wore a Civil War cap of indeterminate affiliation. Otherwise, he might have been an insurance salesman. Next to the window sat Cole's friend and occasional antagonist, detective "Handlebar".

"We're waiting, Palmer," Handlebar said, smirking at Cole. "This is your show, or so I've been told."

"Maven, how many times did you handle the bullet?" Cole asked the student.

"Just once, when the bullet was passed the first time," the woman answered.

"What is your opinion of Jeb Stuart?"

"I dislike him, and what he stood for," she answered defiantly.

Andrew Stuart frowned, while Hilary Stoops nodded enthusiastically.

"Then why were you invited to this...event?" Cole asked the student.

"Professor Sneer requested that I attend."

"Had you ever seen the bullet before?"

“I’d never been to Professor Sneer’s house,” she replied. Then, she added, “No, I hadn’t seen the bullet.”

“How many times did you handle the bullet?” Cole asked Mary Ann Smith.

“Several times,” the professor replied. “I never miss an opportunity to inspect an important historical artifact.”

“Were you the last person to inspect the bullet before it was returned to its case?”

“No.”

“Sure?”

“Yes.”

“Who was?”

“I couldn’t say. The bullet went from one hand to another.”

“Are you an admirer of General Stuart?”

“I certainly am. Those were different times. He was a gentleman and a patriot. In those days, a man’s state trumped the United States. Stuart was a Virginian first.”

“Those sentiments were not universal in the south,” Maven Fine said, provoking sharp looks from Mary Ann Smith and Stuart. “Virginians and other southerners stayed loyal to the Union.”

“Had you been in this house prior to that day?” Cole asked Mary Ann Smith.

“Never,” she answered.

“I’m Bertram Boone,” the man on the opposite side of the room interjected. “I handled the bullet twice. I wasn’t the last to inspect it; don’t think so anyway. That would make me the guilty party, wouldn’t it? I am not especially devoted to General Stuart, but I have occasionally traded in his paraphernalia. I had never been to Professor Sneer’s home before that day. And I have a plane to catch in two hours.”

“Could you sell the bullet?” Cole inquired.

“Sure,” Boone replied frankly. “It would be easy to verify its authenticity, and there would be no shortage of parties interested in acquiring the Stuart bullet.”

“Professor Stuart.”

Stuart bowed.

“You held the bullet.”

“With reverence.”

“Were you the person who returned it to the case?”

“I was not.”

“Are you an ancestor of Jeb Stuart?”

“I am.”

“Had you been in the house before this event?”

“One time. Professor Sneer and I watched a documentary together, and we imbibed some excellent cognac. That was several years ago, before my colleague acquired the Stuart bullet.”

“Were you in this library on that occasion?”

“Briefly, to inspect some reference books prior to screening the documentary. I remembered next to nothing about the room,” Stuart added nervously.

“Had you tried to acquire the bullet before Professor Sneer, or did you try to purchase it afterwards?”

Stuart glanced at Sneer and took a deep breath. “If I had known who possessed the bullet, I would have made an effort to obtain it.” He was pulling at his beard so hard that Cole expected a tuft to come out. “I asked Professor Sneer on one occasion if the Stuart bullet might be purchased, but he dismissed the idea immediately.”

“You would have liked to have acquired it...”

“It has meaning to me as a Stuart and as an historian.”

“Professor Stoops.”

“Hilary. I’m not a professor, just a teacher.”

“Did you examine the bullet?”

“With reverence,” she said, though it was apparent that her meaning was different than Stuart’s.

“Did you return it to the case?”

“No, I did not,” she said forcefully. “I thought the bullet had been returned to Professor Sneer.”

“Had you been in the house prior to that day?”

“No, I had not.”

“Would you have known where to sell such an artifact?”

Her answer was delayed. First, she looked at the desiccated hands in her lap, then at Boone. “I guess so, but I’m not a thief.”

“How sure are you that the bullet wasn’t carried out of the room?” Cole asked the detective.

“Conveying it out of this room could only have been accomplished if the bullet had been swallowed, and we ruled that out with the MRIs,” the detective replied. “We used the wand on all the guests and we did a thorough hand search.”

“What about the library?”

“I’d be surprised if the bullet was in the room. Would have to be a damned good hiding place, and how could that have been accomplished with everyone standing shoulder to shoulder?”

Cole turned toward Sneer. “Was the bullet insured?” He knew the answer but he wanted the others to hear it.

“It was not.”

“What was the name of the woman from whom you purchased the bullet?”

“I don’t see the relevance...” Sneer objected.

“Let me worry about relevance,” Handlebar snapped. He had once told Cole that working next to the University of Michigan

and its corps of academics had reduced his tolerance for pomposity, though the actual language he had used was more colorful.

“Cornelia Hays,” Sneer said sulkily.

“Have any of you ever met this woman?” Cole asked the group.

No one admitted knowing her.

“I’m finished here,” Cole announced.

“Finished?” Sneer exclaimed. “You haven’t learned a damned thing.”

“I came a long way to see a firefight,” Boone said, “and witnessed nothing but a spark. Where’s my carriage to the airport?”



“YOU KNOW WHO carried off my bullet?” Sneer asked incredulously.

“I had a suspicion the day we met.”

They were back at Edison’s, and Thomas Jefferson Penn, Cole’s colleague, sat in the third chair with a napkin tucked into his collar and a plate of oysters in front of him.

“So tell me, man. Who’s the guilty party?”

“You are,” Cole rejoined.

Sneer coughed and propelled a shallot from his mouth. He tried to speak but only sputtered. Finally, he sat back, dabbed his mouth with a napkin, and glared at Cole.

“You are,” Cole repeated.

“Hours, days wasted,” Sneer wailed. “You, sir, are a charlatan. I steal my own bullet, an uninsured bullet? You are wrong, sir, and you have wronged me.”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Penn muttered, winking at Cole.

“You asked me who carried off the bullet. I never said you *stole* the bullet,” Cole observed.

Sneer's eyes rolled. "Are you mad? First, you say I am guilty, then you state that I did not steal the bullet. Make up your mind!"

Cole hadn't touched his food. "Like many crimes that pretend to be impossible, this one is a simple business, once you recognize one fact."

"I am an historian, Palmer. Facts are not lost on me," Sneer sneered (*author's note: I restrained myself as long as possible!*).

"Then here is your fact," Cole replied with equal vigor. "You were not searched, you were not subjected to an MRI, you were never a suspect."

"That makes me guilty?"

"It makes you an accessory after the fact. Based on the interviews and my belief that the police search was thorough, the only possible conveyor of the artifact was you. The fact that you were not searched by the police and were not subjected to an MRI is conclusive."

"It was *my* bullet," Sneer interjected. "It was uninsured."

"You might have resorted to such a ruse if you discovered the bullet wasn't authentic," Cole answered.

"I have already informed you that the attributes of the Stuart bullet are well documented. Furthermore, my guests were familiar with these attributes, and they inspected the bullet. How do you account for that?"

"By asking myself this question: was it coincidence that you were plagued with five events of bad fortune on the same day? What if I were to tell you that three were coincidental, while the other two were carefully planned?"

"Who was the damned villain that killed my bird?" Sneer blustered. "I loved that bird."

Cole didn't have time or the inclination to ponder the priorities of a man whose prize possessions were a bird and a bullet. "No one killed your canary. Once you've heard the solution, you will feel that my fee is excessive."

"I've heard your solution, and I'm not paying anything for that fantasy."

Penn bit down on an oyster shell, producing a sound like a firecracker.

Cole winced and said, "We love complicated answers: bullets concealed in detective-proof books, invisible panels, accomplices wearing police badges. This crime is a simpler business."

"Then make it *simple*," Sneer urged him.

"One of your guests is a pickpocket..."

Sneer aimed his right forefinger at Cole's face and said, "The bullet was not in anyone's pocket to be picked."

"A good pickpocket is as adept at inserting an object in someone else's pocket as removing it. I said you were the guilty party, if guilty means the bullet left the library in your possession. All along the bullet was in your jacket pocket, placed there by the thief. The tight confines of the library, six people shoulder to shoulder, facilitated the crime."

"Impossible," Sneer sputtered. "I always check my pockets before I hang up my clothes at night."

"Another bad luck event, or so you supposed...the spilled wine. Who suggested that the group dine together that night? Who spilled the wine on your jacket and tried to clean it, or so she pretended, with her napkin? That was when the bullet was retrieved."

Sneer lunged forward. "Mary Ann? I have known her for twenty years."

“Once she deposited the bullet in your pocket, she was safe. If she was able to retrieve the bullet, then her scheme succeeds. If she wasn’t able to retrieve the bullet, you would eventually find it and blame yourself. If the police searched you, they would find the bullet and attribute it to absent-mindedness, or conclude you were engaging in fraud.”

“Mary Ann, a pickpocket, a thief?”

“Audacious too,” Cole added, “like her cavalry hero.”

Cole had a good payday from the recovery of the battered bullet. Sneer let Cole hold the bullet before restoring the artifact to its velvet throne. After all, history is a contact sport.