

SHE was standing near the mailbox in the shade of the big tree when the postman drove up on the rural route south of Fairfield, Ill., in Wayne County. Appreciatively he took in the pert picture of long dark hair and crisp gingham.

"Howdy, Mrs. Hoffee." He picked up several envelopes and a rolled newspaper from the seat beside him. "Glad I got something for you, seeing as you're out here."

Alva Hoffee took the mail, smiling her thanks before the postman chugged down the road. Her slender fingers shuffled the envelopes and then she stared long and earnestly at one which was postmarked "Fairfield."

It was addressed to "Mr. Harvey Hoffee" with his RFD route number but the writing was an odd combination of script and awkward block letters such as a child might use.

Alva Hoffee walked up to the farmhouse and dropped the letters on the table—all except the strangely written one which she propped up on the mantel. When lunch was ready and her husband, Harvey, came in from the fields, she nodded toward it.

"Another one of those letters came." Hoffee frowned and gave an exclamation of annoyance. This sort of thing was foreign to his sensible and settled way of life. Now, in July of 1931, he was a prosperous, 42-year-old farmer with valuable, well-kept holdings. Ten years before, when she was 21, he had married pretty Alva Schuster and they had worked together to improve their position in the community.

That he should receive unsigned threats irritated rather than frightened him. He

until she, too, became ill.

They were a frightened pair for two days. Then they felt better. But Harvey Hoffee took the grape juice to a doctor and asked him to have it analyzed. The report was that it contained no harmful substance.

"Something must have got in that glass, then," Hoffee said. "We'd better be careful."

There were no more notes, but in December of that year of 1931 Harvey Hoffee cut his hand while butchering a hog. The wound did not heal properly and he went to bed with a slight fever. On December 16 he died. The doctor signed a death certificate saying that he had succumbed to tetanus.

The community was stunned. Hoffee had been in the prime of life and had been an unusually healthy and vigorous man. That a tiny cut should kill him was unthinkable.

How about those notes which had said that he was going to die? Was there some connection? But there was the certificate saying that death was due to natural causes. You couldn't go against that.

The countryside turned out for the funeral and the traveling evangelist gave a stirring talk at the grave. When the burial service was over he touched the arm of Emmett Hoffee, brother of the deceased. "Your brother was a good friend of mine," the clergyman said. "I don't think that he died a natural death."

Emmett Hoffee had heard of the notes. "Do you have any reason for saying so?"

"He seemed to have a premonition of death. He asked me months ago to speak at his funeral. Yet he was in good health."

The clergyman could offer nothing more substantial, however. The death certificate

place. The others admitted the obvious truth of his contention and turned to Flynn for settlement.

Flynn not only refused to discuss the matter but meeting Spencer on a road one day pressed a .45 automatic pistol against the latter's chest. "Keep out of my way," he said.

Though Harvey Hoffee had been dead for four years, Spencer made up his mind to investigate every angle of the case.

He got together all that was known, suspected and gossiped about Hoffee's death. While he was about it something quite unknown was transpiring to help him.

Alva and Charlie Flynn made a trip into another state and while they were gone Andrew Merritt, Flynn's son-in-law, came to live at the farm to look after the stock. He was there for several months, leaving when the Flynns returned.

And though he was a young man, Andrew Merritt lived only a few more months. He became ill of what was diagnosed as diphtheria and he died in delirium at his Wayne County farm home. Relatives at his bedside listened in bewilderment to his final murmurings about some mysterious letters.

"Alva letters. . . Charlie," Merritt gasped. "Buried letters. . . murder. . . Alva. . ."

The mutterings of the dying man were no clearer than that but added to the previous stories about threatening letters to Harvey Hoffee they were sufficient to stir up all the old conjecture.

Paul Spencer made numerous guarded inquiries, talking particularly with Merritt's former confidantes. When he felt that he was on a definite trail, he went to Sheriff Ernest Burkett and State's Attorney Charles W.



Gun in Hand, Flynn Warned Spencer to Keep Out of His Way.

tore open the envelope and as Alva looked over his shoulder read the message:

"You will die soon if you do not get out of this place this is a warning."

It all ran together, crudely blocked letters alternating with script in an attempt to disguise the handwriting. "Foolishness," Hoffee said. "If they try anything with me they'll find a shotgun waiting. Let's eat."

Alva Hoffee, however, did not seem to take the notes as lightly as did her husband. She showed them to neighbors and tradesmen and they speculated on their authorship and degree of actual danger.

"We're watching out," she said. "We keep our dog Sailor in the house at night."

Besides the dog, there was always the loaded shotgun. The authorities were not appealed to, for in the manner of country folk the Hoffees tended to look after themselves.

Hoffee stubbornly refused to take the notes seriously until the incident of the grape juice. This was sent to him by his mother. Alva poured some into a glass for him and after he drank it he became deathly ill.

As Hoffee lay groaning on the bed, Alva appeared terribly distraught, hovering over him, until at length she slumped unconscious to the floor. Hoffee dragged himself from his sickbed, snatching up the glass which had contained the grape juice and filling it with water, which he forced between his wife's lips. Alva came to, drank the rest of the water and appeared to be recovering rapidly

# THE CASE OF THE BURIED

## The Mystery of Harvey Hoffee's Death Might Never Have Been Solved—Except for an Argument Over a Foxhound

was on file. Harvey Hoffee's funeral over, the next important matter of business was the settling of his estate.

The farm was sold and the proceeds divided among various heirs. Alva Hoffee received the \$1,000 life insurance policy. She mourned her late husband with extraordinary restraint and three months after he was laid to rest she became the bride of Charles Flynn.

Flynn had been a widower a few years older than Hoffee and had lived on a neighboring farm. But he was a dashing sort of farmer and had been in more than one scrape. He had, for instance, once dropped a loaded .45 on the floor of a speakeasy and it had gone off, sending a bullet into the ceiling.

Neighbors recalled now that Alva had bailed him out in that mishap and they had considered it a neighborly gesture. Someone else remembered the day a year before when Flynn had stood in the street talking with Alva as she sat at the wheel of her car.

Alva had driven off and Flynn had walked into a garage to be kidded by lounging observers. "Like your neighbor, Charlie?"

"Either Harvey or me's got to die," Flynn had said. "We both love the same woman."

That obviously hilarious observation had been laughed off properly. Now the remembrance of it provoked no smiles. Flynn could not have meant it seriously but there were those strange, threatening notes, and Hoffee did die and Alva married Charlie. Beyond that there was certainly no reason to suspect Charlie.

The threatening notes had disappeared. Nobody knew where they were. Only Emmett Hoffee really cared. He thought of what he had heard and he watched his former sister-in-law laughing and walking with her new husband on the streets of Fairfield and neighboring towns. Finally he made up his mind.

"I'll pay anybody who can help me prove my brother didn't die a natural death," he said.

Gossip flew even more swiftly after that but it remained just gossip. The months and the years flew, too. Alva and Charles Flynn were a devoted couple. Then Flynn made the mistake of his life and a mortal enemy at the same time.

It was over a dog—a foxhound. Paul W. Spencer, a resident of Fairfield, purchased a foxhound from a man who said that he had obtained it from Charlie Flynn. Spencer had the dog only two days when it ran away, going to the farm of a fourth man who claimed it as an animal stolen from his

Creighton and was made a deputy investigator.

What Spencer learned added a new twist to a bizarre situation. Andrew Merritt, he was told, having no great affection for his father-in-law, had searched the place while he was there for anything which might give him an advantage over Flynn. He had found some compromising letters and had taken and hidden them in a new spot on the farm.

"Where did he hide them?" Spencer asked.

Money from the funds pledged by Emmett Hoffee changed hands and the intimates of the late Andy Merritt tried to recall his hints about where he had buried the letters. He had been far from specific about it.

Spencer made several attempts to find the cache on the Flynn farm. It was nerve-racking work, digging in promising spots while the owner of a .45 pistol slumbered near by. And he realized that it was doubly dangerous when he saw evidence that Flynn, himself, was desperately digging in scattered places for the precious papers.

The macabre race went on for weeks and then Spencer got a new and promising hint from a close friend of Merritt. It sounded authentic and it was certainly perilous. Merritt, it was said, had buried the letters outside a corner of the barn not more than 50 feet from the house.

It might have been possible to obtain a search warrant but it would have been difficult and time-consuming. In the meanwhile, Flynn might find and destroy the letters. Spencer determined to act that night.

At 2:45 a. m., with a shovel and a lantern, he crept to the spot which had been described to him. It was reasonable to assume that Flynn was asleep but there was no way to be sure. If he were awakened by any suspicious sound, he could come shooting on his own property and be well within his rights.

Voicing a silent prayer, Spencer paced off the distance from the corner of the barn. He adjusted the lantern to shed the feeblest ray of light where he had to work. Then he pressed his shovel into the earth, not daring to make a thrust which might strike a rock with a telltale sound.

He was down a foot, then 18 inches and the shovel squeaked on a hard surface so that Spencer caught his breath and stood motionless, looking toward the house. Nothing happened. He stooped, using his hands and soon he held a closed glass jar in which he could see folded papers.

Spencer kicked the earth back into the