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Legally Dead

Peter Sharp Legal Adventure #12

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INTRODUCTION

The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 affected me, because even though I hadn't been born yet, I lost a good friend... someone I respected, admired, and wanted to be just like in some ways.

His name was Jacques Futrelle, and at the age of 37, he was travelling with his wife in the Titanic's first-class cabin number C-123.

When the boat sank, Mr. Futrelle managed to get his wife into one of the lifeboats. She survived... he didn't.

Other than the fact that he was a human being and didn't deserve the fate that befell him, he was also a talented author, and wrote the story that influenced my life from the day in high school that I first read it: one of the most famous locked-room mysteries of all time, ***The Problem in Cell 13.***

If you're a fan of locked-room mysteries, then I strongly suggest that you read Futrelle's Cell 13 story as well as John Dickson Carr's ***The Hollow Man***, which was the main inspiration for one of the other Peter Sharp Legal Mysteries in this series.

The above-mentioned stories of Futrelle and Carr, along with E.A. Poe's ***the Gold Bug*** and all the *Sherlock Holmes*, *Nero Wolfe* and other detectives, got me hooked on mysteries - and to my delight there is no known cure for this addiction.

All of the locked-room mysteries I've encountered have involved a victim who either died in a room that was allegedly inaccessible, unescapable from, or with a misinterpreted timeline. That's why I decided to eliminate all the excuses: in this story, the crime was actually witnessed by observers... and then the both murderer and the victim disappeared into thin air.

Got you hooked? Good! Start reading now, and see if you can figure out the solution to this baffling locked-room Peter Sharp Legal mystery before little Suzi does.

1

Local news sucks. I hate the way they always make it look like a crime report, with the worst things that people do to each other always being the lead stories.

Strangely enough though, today they finally opened with an item that didn't depress me. It was about a killer who killed another killer... and got caught in the act.

The news producers realize that nothing's as boring as a talking head in a studio, so they always try to include some stock footage or place their reporter outside of an empty building where something in the story took place. They also like to do interviews of anyone who they feel can add some irrelevant information to the story, like neighbors of a serial killer who are shocked to learn about their living in such close proximity to the lunatic, but thought

that he was always a ‘nice, quiet person, who always kept to himself.’

Today’s news about the killer gives the reporter a chance to pose on the steps of the downtown Criminal Courts Building, and whenever there’s a news camera crew there, my ex-wife Myra, the District Attorney usually makes sure to appear on the scene just in time to be interviewed... and today is no different. This popular event brings her two biggest fans out of the forward stateroom to watch the big screen in our boat’s main salon.

The dog barks hello as Myra is introduced while Suzi sits on the floor watching. Myra is in her usual good public form as she saves the reporter any inconvenience caused by actually being required to ask questions. Myra likes to maintain control of any relationship she’s in, even if it’s only a brief one with a reporter. Her statement is a brief one:

“Earlier today, or office filed charges against John ‘the bat’ Zellini, for one count of violating section 187 of the California Penal Code... murder in the first degree.

“The defendant was not aware of the fact that at the time of the crime, his victim was under surveillance by a special police unit in our organized crime task force, and the entire event was captured on videotape.”

The reporters start shouting out questions to Myra. She pretends to listen to a few of them and then continues, feeling confident that whatever she says will surely answer any questions they might have – even if they’re not smart enough to ask them.

“In answer to your questions, the victim was a reputed member of a criminal organization that was trying to establish itself locally in the garbage collection business. We have information that leads us to believe that there seems to have been a ‘turf’ war starting up, concerning certain apartment-building areas of the city that require commercial trash vehicles to empty their dumpsters daily.

“These garbage disposal contracts are quite profitable, and it appears that less-than legitimate groups fight over them like the crack dealers fight over which street corner to deal from.

“Another issue to be considered is if this was a murder-for-hire and if so, would we be seeking the death penalty for the special circumstances involved in a crime of this nature. We are still investigating that aspect of the incident and the punishment sought will depend a great deal on whether or not we get any cooperation from the defendant.

“He has been taken to a special location for his own protection, and will be brought to court for arraignment next week. At that time, we will make a further statement to update you.”

That being said, the interview ends, the reporter wraps up her piece with the courthouse appearing in the background, and the dynamic duo exits my salon – and I’ve learned that Myra actually put into place that special top-secret police unit she always told me they should have. The way she used to talk about it, the unit would keep their eye on the most suspicious criminals in the jurisdiction – the ones with extensive criminal records who could be depended upon to continue their criminal enterprises.

Myra has combined her crime-fighting instincts with her business skills, because by using utilizing the RICO laws that apply only to those **R**acketeer **I**nfluenced **C**orrupt **O**rganizations, her department is allowed to legally seize assets of criminals that were purchased with funds illegally gained... and I believe that in most cases the seizing departments are permitted to keep a large percentage of the take, to be used in furtherance of fighting crime. I'm sure any matter that can be a RICO case takes a high priority in her office, and I wouldn't be surprised if that's why her special surveillance unit was concentrating on this particular victim.

Now that I've seen what will probably be the only non-depressing local news item of this year, I switch the channel over to cable, where I can alternately surf between Keith Olbermann on MSNBC and Bill O'Reilly on Fox News. In our neighborhood both of those satellite shows are on during the same time period from five to six PM. They've been having a bitter feud for the past few years that has been giving them both quite a bit of coverage, especially in the blogosphere, and I have a hunch that

they cooked it up between them as a publicity stunt.

The cable shows don't mention our local murder, but I'm sure that the killer-kills-killer angle is too good a 'hook' for the networks to ignore, so it'll surely pop up here and there on the small screen and the internet.

Suzi's mother used to be the manager at a Szechwan restaurant around the corner on Washington Boulevard, and four of their busboy/waiters have formed a crew that takes on varnishing and other minor maintenance jobs for the boat owners in our marina. They've acquired the nickname of the 'Asian Boys,' and because their leader appears to be none other than my office-manager/boatmate Suzi, the boys will be bringing a gourmet dinner to the boat this evening, where the dynamic duo and I will be joined by my friend and client Stuart Schwartzman, plus whatever other guests Suzi has invited tonight for our usual seven PM seating.

Our anchorage rents out some small houseboats for liveaboards, and one of them is on our dock. It's occupied by an approximately 40-ish redheaded female who I have had an opportunity to *know*, in

a biblical sense. I have no idea what she does for a living, but a husky man picks her up every morning and brings her home every evening. I guess it's just some guy at work she car-pools with, but I never really cared enough to inquire about it.

Tonight's dinner will be an anniversary of our buying this 50-foot trawler yacht we operate on, so Suzi's invited some extra guests to dinner. Laverne will be here, as will Victor, Jack B., and Stuart. Myra was invited too, but she declined, due to an excessive caseload she's burdened with due to some recent spate of bad guys getting arrested for various crimes.

When Suzi learned that Myra wouldn't be coming she allowed me to invite Laverne. Suzi doesn't want the two of them around me at the same time because she's still working on her master plan to get me back together with Myra, so that she can have a complete set of parents.

Now that Laverne will be coming, Suzi has instructed the Asian Boys to stop at the liquor store to pick up a box of Laverne's favorite wine.

Stuart usually arrives a little early so that he can tell me about whatever new business venture he's involved in this week. He's gotta be the most entrepreneurial guy I've ever met. But to my surprise, he hasn't started anything new this month, instead, he's brought a friend of his along for dinner – Maury, a gentleman who Stuart introduced me to several years ago.

Maury was a professional musician for many years and accepted an invitation to join the symphony orchestra in Bogotá, Colombia. He's now back in our country making his annual visit to friends and family, so Suzi asked Stuart to bring him along for dinner this evening.

In between courses, Maury tells us some interesting stories about life in Colombia, and how the drug traffic affects his community. From what he explains, the drug kingpins are revered in the community. Notwithstanding the fact that they wouldn't hesitate one second to have you killed if you interfered in any way with their business, they are very generous, contributing to local charities and being involved as supporters of the arts, which

includes the symphony orchestra Maury performs with.

When Maury flies between Colombia and California he changes planes in Florida and manages to pick up some Cuban cigars. Suzi doesn't allow smoking in the boat, which is okay, because I'm not a smoker – but once in a while I like to enjoy a good Cuban cigar on the aft deck, and tonight is the perfect opportunity for that, so the three of us guys make our way out to the chaise lounges waiting for us, where we'll be spending the next hour puffing away and watching the summer sun set over the Pacific Ocean.

After a few of Maury's interesting tidbits, Stuart tells us about an idea he's been tinkering with for the past few years that now might be a distinct possibility. Unlike his other numerous enterprises, this one will be devoted to raising significant amounts of money for various charities. It involves the use of a recently-closed restaurant to host dinners where large round tables will be used to seat one major celebrity guest plus eleven wealthy donors who are willing to pay twenty-five-hundred-dollars per seat to have dinner with the celeb.

As Stuart continues with his business idea, I see that the kid is in the main salon watching some news show on our big flat plasma screen. The thing that really catches my eye is an interview being conducted, because once again my ex-wife District Attorney Myra Scot Sharp is being interviewed. We put our Havanas down and go inside to see what else Myra has to say this evening. This additional appearance was brought about by the naming of an attorney to represent the killer that Myra talked about in her earlier interview.

By the time we all get into place by the television screen, Myra's part of the interview is over, but we hear the reporter summing up her interview: "As the District Attorney has just stated, the defendant John Zellini, now formally charged with first-degree murder, has requested that the court replace his public defender with a respected member of the local criminal defense bar, a private attorney.

"The District Attorney voiced no objection to this request, and the court has agreed to the defendant's wishes. The reason that we've made this interruption of your normal evening programming is

because that private criminal defense attorney's office has been notified and has agreed to the court appointment, and it happens to be none other than District Attorney Myra Scot Sharp's former husband – attorney Peter Sharp!”

About the Author

Gene Grossman worked his way through high school, college, and law school as a shoe salesman, welder, process server, bail bondsman, tire changer, saloon piano player and 'extra,' appearing in seven motion pictures. He then spent 20 years as a trial lawyer, during which time he served as Dean of a small local law school, where he also taught several classes.

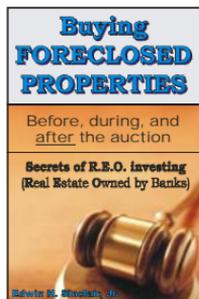
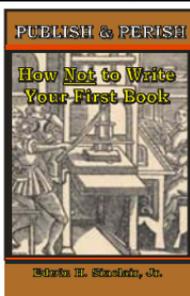
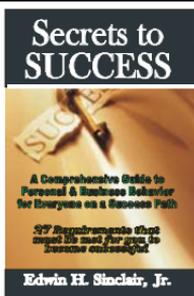
His film & video company produced over fifty special interest DVD titles on everything from boating, to bankruptcy. Now retired from the practice of law, Gene writes aboard his yacht in Marina del Rey.

You can see pictures of Peter Sharp's boats, yellow Hummer, Suzi's e-cart, and Laverne's houseboat at

www.PeterSharpBooks.com

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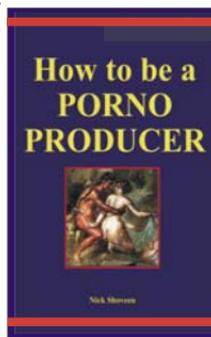
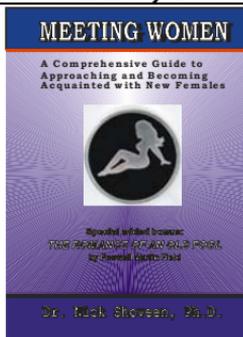
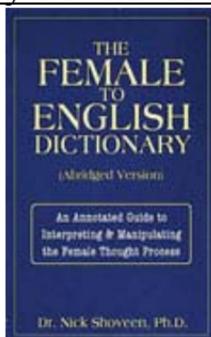


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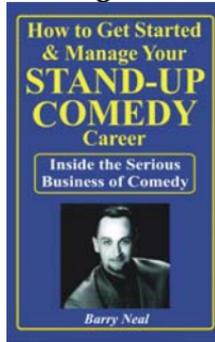
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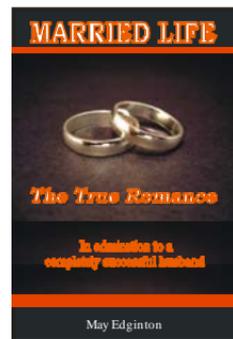
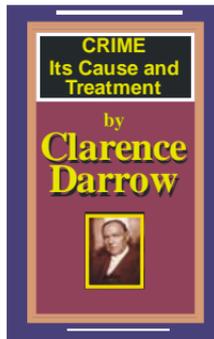
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Pictures on the next page are of the author working on another book – in his Marina del Rey dinghy, and in Avalon, on Catalina Island.

