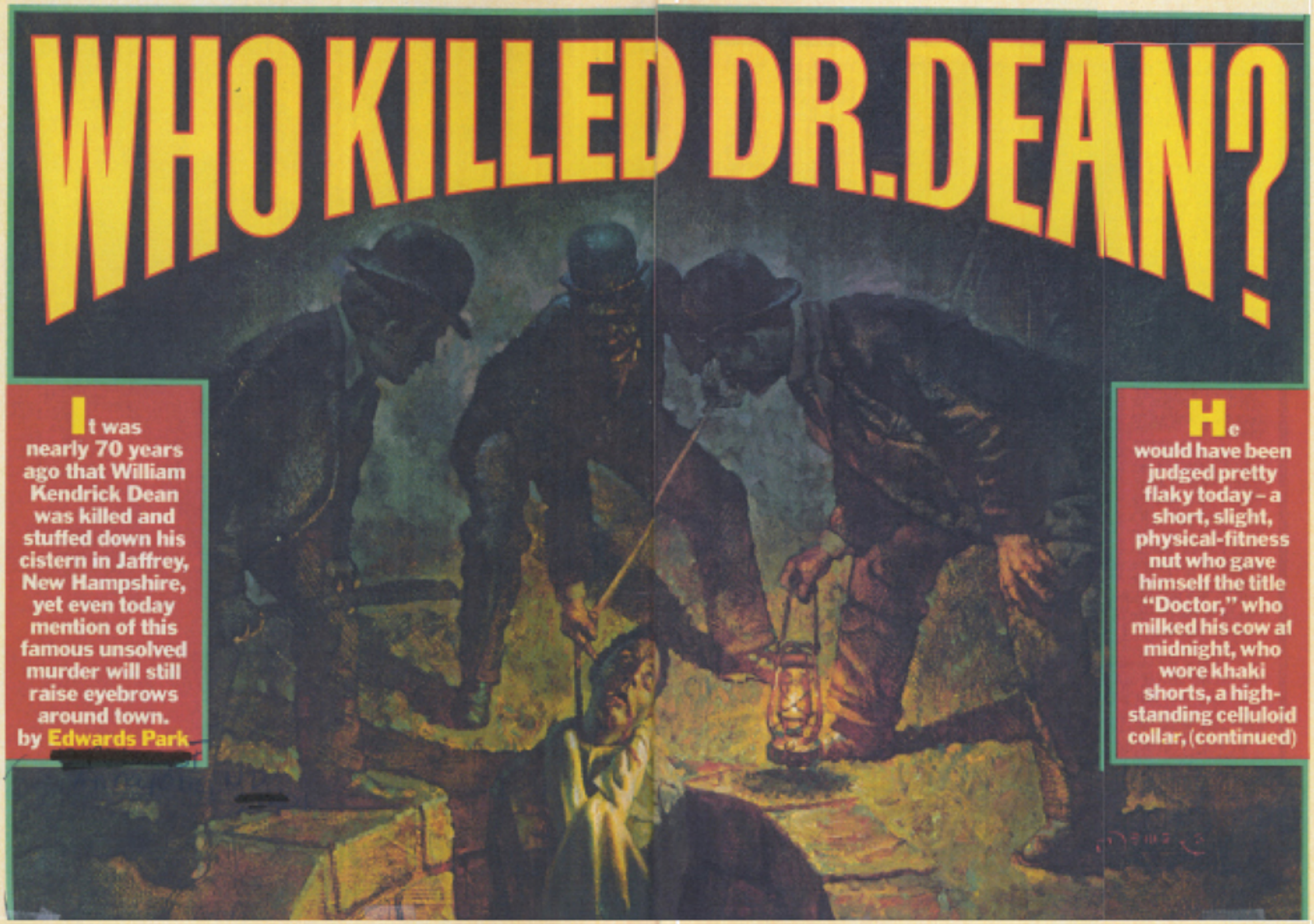
# WHO KILLED DR. DEAN?



It was nearly 70 years ago that William Kendrick Dean was killed and stuffed down his cistern in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, yet even today mention of this famous unsolved murder will still raise eyebrows around town.

by Edwards Park

He would have been judged pretty flaky today – a short, slight, physical-fitness nut who gave himself the title "Doctor," who milked his cow at midnight, who wore khaki shorts, a high-standing celluloid collar, (continued)

and a pink necktie. But New Hampshire suffers eccentrics — from presidential hopefuls to "summer complaints" — with wary tolerance. And back in 1918, a pink necktie might have been perfectly okay. Anyway, William Kendrick Dean was generally popular with his Jaffrey neighbors.

There were, however, notable exceptions. For on August 14, 1918, Dr. Dean was found stuffed down his cistern, murdered by a person or persons unknown to this day.

Until economic demands wrenched me from New Hampshire, I lived near the old Dean property. It's on a back road that hasn't been blacktopped for too long: a large house, a small house, a fine big meadow with a chunk of granite in the middle of it and a barn to one side, and near it a cistern. The place was sometimes rented, but generally vacant. When my contemporaries and I reached the driving age we would sometimes turn into that gravel drive late at night and try to scare ourselves by reliving, with much drama, the unsolved mystery.

We weren't old enough to remember the Dean murder, but it was local folklore, and we all thought we knew the story. Recently, digging into the case, I found how little I really did know and how much real drama I'd missed in my ignorance. Here, about five miles from my home, a Gothic romance had been enacted, a tragedy as hopeless and frustrating as *Ethan Frome*.

**Mary Dean suffered from "softening of the brain."**

William Dean wasn't a Yankee, but a Yorker, born before the Civil War in Rochester. His father was a missionary to the Orient, and the lad was mostly brought up by an uncle, a Rochester physician. Lured by the profession, Dean graduated from the University of Rochester and then entered Columbia Medical School to study.

Then he fell in love with his cousin. She reciprocated heartily, but all her young life she'd coped with "doctor's hours," and she refused to marry "Billy" unless he gave up medicine. And so, after two years at Columbia, he agreed to quit. They were married in 1880.

They had no children — a good thing, for she was an odd one. She developed what was then euphemistically called "softening of the brain." Her mind reeled with terrors about the health of her Billy and also, it was rumored, with jealousy. He was a vigorous and attractive young man with a little money, and his wife might indeed have worried about competition.

That, and Dean's own dread of tuberculosis, may explain why the couple, nine years after their marriage, suddenly moved to the salubrious Monadnock region of New Hampshire. They bought the Jaffrey farm and lived there for a quarter of a century in semiseclusion. He remodeled the small bungalow and put up a larger house some distance away. They kept chickens, turkeys, and a cow. They also kept city hours. Any dairy cow that belonged to the Deans soon had to get used to being milked around midnight.

Over the years, Mary Dean (he called her "my Polly") slipped gently into invalidism. Her mental illness affected her physical health, and she became fully dependent on her Billy. He accepted all chores cheerfully, from milking to waiting upon Polly's restless whims, for he basked in good health. Physical exercise, in fact, was his fetish. When he wasn't working in the barn, he was apt to be hoisting dumbbells and whaling away at a punching bag. He only weighed 135, but it was all solid muscle. He liked to use it out on his own meadow.

That field commanded a fine view: to the west, Monadnock — a splendid, sprawling, artistically composed mountain that by now must be splashed on about a million canvases — and to the east its smaller counterparts, Pack Monadnock (locally called "East Mountain") and North Pack. It was a rare view then and rarer still today, since hay meadows have grown into scraggly woods and sometimes housing developments. But in 1918 both Monadnock and East Mountain would have looked down on the Dean place.

That's important to the story. In the fall of 1916, while the Battle of the Somme was raging in France and German U-boats were sinking about 300,000 tons of shipping a month, people in southern New Hampshire began noticing lights flashing from summits and hillsides. Sometimes the flashes were by mirror during the day, more often they came at night — bright beams blinking from the bald dome of East Mountain and sometimes the granite peak of Monadnock. If these were signals, what did they mean?

**William Dean quit medical school to marry Mary.**

The much publicized German submarine raids along our East Coast suggested an answer, and the growing war hysteria made it credible. Spies were invading our homeland! Secret messages were sealing the fate of our ships! The hand of the Kaiser had reached out and touched our beloved mountains!

It was in this emotional year, 1916, that Laurence Maens Colfelt from Harrison, New York, arrived in East Jaffrey and inquired about renting a house. He went to Charles L. Rich, a former state senator who was cashier at the Monadnock National Bank and generally considered a leading citizen. Judge Rich (he supervised the local police court) introduced him to Dr. Dean. The meeting was apparently a success, for though the Colfelts moved into another farm that year, they arranged to rent the Deans' big house for $40 a month beginning in the fall of 1917. By the time they moved in, the United States had been at war with Germany for six months.

The Colfelts, like the Deans, were a bit odd in their habits. Mrs. Colfelt stayed up all hours. Her daughter by a former marriage (it was whispered that Mrs. C. was a divorcée!) wore long, braided hair and very short skirts and used to go horseback riding at night. Laurence Colfelt seemed

a big spender: two cars. He sold them both, added some loose change, and bought a new one, a powerful Marmon. You might expect such peculiarities from summer people, but the Colfelts had already wintered over, and they moved into the Dean place when most summer folk were closing their houses and heading back to Boston.

Dean quickly regretted his rental. A neighbor on the Old Jaffrey Road, Mrs. Horace Morison, called to see him around Thanksgiving that year and found him acting very strangely. He led her out to the granite rock in the center of his meadow. Here, where no one could overhear, Dean lowered his voice. "I'm too good an American to have a man of that kind on my place," he said to her.

Arria Morison stared at him, wide-eyed, waiting for more. But he shook his head. "You are a woman," he said, gallantly, "and what I know would be too dangerous for a woman to know."

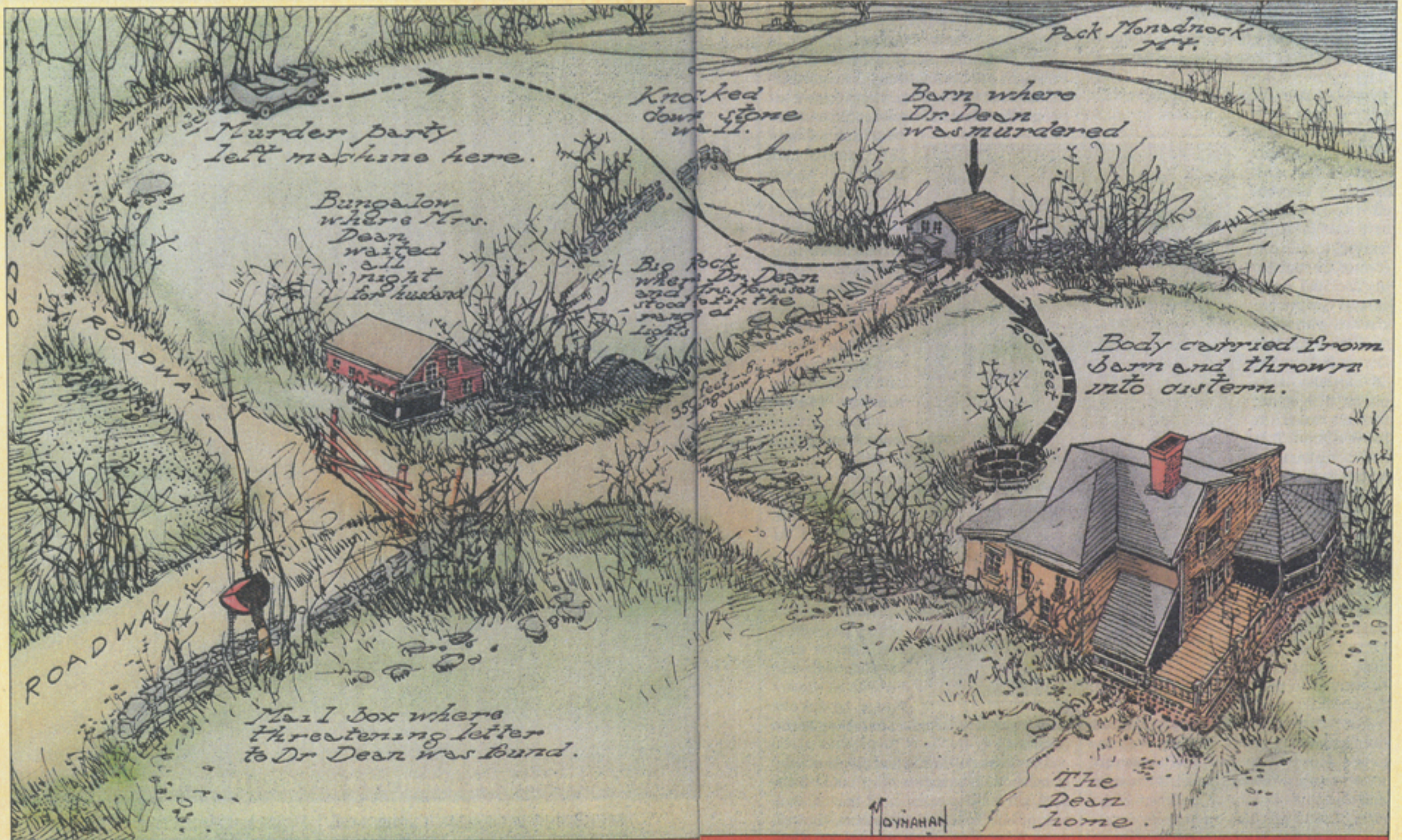
He agreed to telephone her at midnight when no one would be watching him, but no call came. Reportedly she returned to the meadow three days later and talked this time with the Dean's hired man, and they saw a figure rise from behind the stone wall at the edge of the field and run off through the woods.

The year 1917 passed. The American Expeditionary Force finally began to ship out for France. From Monadnock and East Mountain, the lights continued to flash and mystify. As the great troop convoys sailed from eastern ports and the U-boats still struck, more and more stories circulated about the lights. It's easy to call them mere rumors, but New Hampshire people tend to keep things pretty much to themselves until you tap the barrel — and then long-fermenting fact and fancy pour out in an intoxicating mixture.

People suddenly remembered that in 1916, Count Johann Heinrich Bernstorff, the Kaiser's ambassador to the United States, had visited both Dublin and Jaffrey. And a photographer recalled that two Germans had hired him, back then, to take pictures of the rock formations near the summit of Monadnock.

All strangers met with suspicion, and around Jaffrey the Colfelts drew their full share of it. Folks noted Laurence's stiff, military bearing, his defensiveness about

**When Dr. Dean headed for home at 10:30, folks said he was followed by a car with three men in it.**




**This map, from a privately printed book, shows the scene of the crime and notes important clues.**

the origin of his name (presumably someone was xenophobic enough to ask him about it). The suspicion lingered that it really was "Kohlfeldt."

Then there was that big new Marmon of his, painted battleship gray. It was always roaring over the dirt roads, often with three or four strange men in it. Arria Morison remembered — even noted in her diary — nights when the lights had been flashing and when, later, she had been awakened by the sound of a car approaching. She had gone to a window, overlooking Old Jaffrey Road, and watched it cut off its headlights as it neared her house. At the same time, its driver would step on the clutch pedal to mute the thundering engine, and the car would coast by her, a dark shape in the night, its

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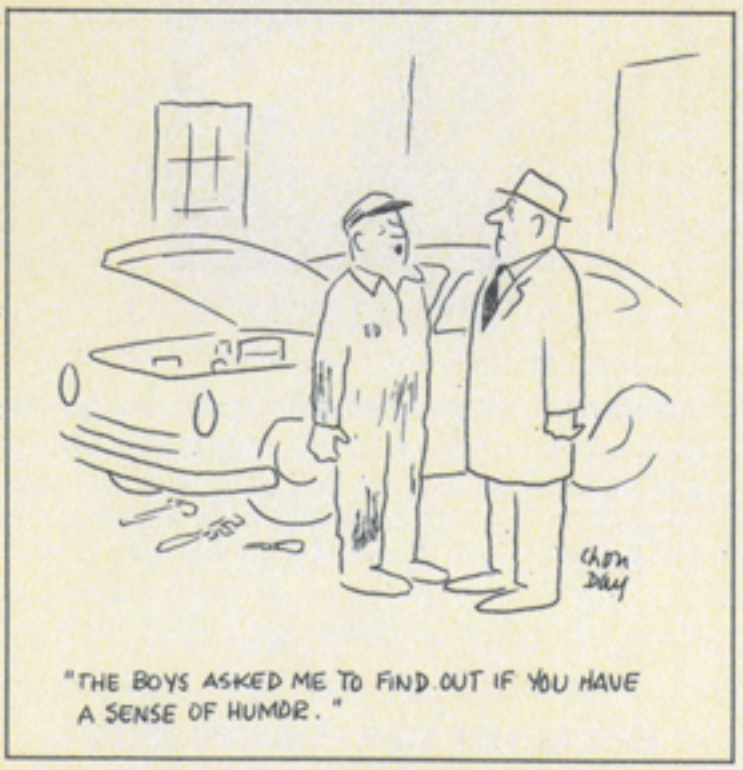
tires rumbling on the gravel.

The Deans, of course, were right in the middle of the Colfelt affair. The comings and goings of the big Marmon with the Colfelts and their guests were all in their own back yard; the flashing signal lights showed up splendidly on their hillside acres. All the talk about the Colfelts was certainly infectious, and William Dean badly wanted to get rid of them.

He and Laurence Colfelt had argued about the Dean poultry. The hens insisted on roosting atop that beautiful gray Marmon and making a mess of it. Couldn't Dean keep them out of the barn? No, Dean couldn't. Then Colfelt asked if Dean would sell him the whole property. No, Dean wouldn't. Instead, he asked Colfelt to vacate.

On June 5, 1918, according to penciled notes in Dean's diary, the Colfelts left the farm and moved into a house they had rented in Greenville, east of Jaffrey. Their hired help later reported that Colfelt was generally out late at night, that his wife carried a revolver, and that there were indications that the family was being watched by soldiers.

In early August Dean wrote Colfelt asking him to repay a debt incurred during the earlier rental. Colfelt apparently did so, with no hard feelings.




On August 13 Arria Morison called on Dean to ask for a contribution for a war benefit. Again, they talked out by the rock in the meadow. Mrs. Morison said she was off to Boston the next day, and Dean asked her to call upon the Secret Service and get them to send their "best man" up to Jaffrey. He said he couldn't go himself because he had to take care of his Polly.

That evening, a Tuesday, the Jaffrey stores stayed open until nine. Dr. Dean washed up, put on a clean shirt with high celluloid collar and a pink tie. He slipped into a dark coat but didn't bother to change out of his khaki shorts — knee-length in the British army style.

He hitched his horse to his buggy and clopped into Jaffrey Center where he chatted with some friends. Then he drove to East Jaffrey (a considerably larger town about two miles away) and shopped at Goodnow's store before it closed. He saw many people he knew, for it was a warm night and several of the merchants were cooling off outside. Apparently he called on Judge Rich. It was generally agreed that Dr. Dean headed for home at about 10:30. Folks said that a car headed in the same direction not long after. Not a Ford. Cars weren't all that usual in New Hampshire in 1918, so people took note. Another car — or the same one — reportedly returned to Jaffrey at about midnight with three men in it and one headlight "turned off."

Once he got home, Dean's actions become pretty vague. The only account of them comes from his wife, her mind whirling with her own dreads and visions, her body nearly crippled. Here is what was gleaned from her and from bits of evidence at the Dean place:

Dr. Dean arrived home, stabled the horse, went to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of milk, and produced some currant buns he'd bought in town. He supped and smoked a hand-rolled cigarette. Dousing it, he put on an old coat, took a kerosene lantern and a milk pail, and headed for the barn about 500 feet away to milk the cow. He told his wife he'd be back about midnight.

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She prepared a bowl of hot soup for him and waited for his return. She waited all night long.

At daybreak, her mind in a fever, she painfully made her way to the barn, looking for him. She found his lantern, out but still half full of kerosene. No sign of the milk pail. No sign of her Billy.

At about eight on the morning of the 14th, Mrs. Dean called her neighbors. One came immediately, a farmer who first of all checked the udder and teats of the cow. She'd been milked. The milk pail was never found.

According to this neighbor, Mrs. Dean offered him all the farm's turkeys because "Dr. Dean is dead, and I want to give you these." He didn't pay much attention because everyone knew the poor woman was sort of odd. She rambled on about her marriage to "my baby" while he searched. Another neighbor showed up with a small boy to help.

They found Dean in his cistern, not far from the barn. They called the coroner and hauled the victim out. His head had been wrapped in a light horse blanket. He had been cracked on the skull and apparently garroted by a hitching rope. A grain sack with a 27-pound rock in it had been pulled over his shoulders and lashed to the belt loops of his shorts. He had been tied at the ankles, knees, and wrists with square knots before being dropped into the water. His face was blue-black.


It had been a dry summer, and the 12-foot-deep cistern was down to a six-foot depth. It was enough to drown him if the blow on the head and the garroting didn't kill him first.

Telephones rang around town, and a number of Jaffrey people showed up at the Dean place. When Judge Rich arrived at the bungalow, Mrs. Dean told him, so he reported, that Dean was dead "over by the deep water." Yet apparently no one had told her that her husband's body had been found in the cistern. Rich sported a black eye, detrimental to his dignity. He said he'd been kicked by his horse. He said Dean had twitted him about it only last night, suggesting that alcohol would be good for it and then agreeing with Rich that maybe it would be better on the inside of the body.

The neighbors found blood on the barn porch, on a doorhandle, on the grass. They found a bone hairpin. They found a footprint. And, tucked into a stone wall near the cistern, they found a hand weeder smeared with blood.

A much-needed thundershower rumbled over the countryside that afternoon and obliterated a lot of possible clues. The game warden, George Wellington, was still able to track a good deal of movement, however: signs of a car that had pulled into a wood road and parked; signs of at least three men who had cut through the woods from the car to the Dean barn; signs of someone hiding in the hay. The trouble was, Judge Rich cleaned up the barn before anyone could stop him. He said he was sorry, he just wanted to help.

A few days later, men pumped the cistern dry and found a silver cigarette case in it. "German silver," folks said and nodded wisely to each other.

Naturally the Colfelts and their friends — and the whole German Empire — were prime suspects. Those signal lights, folks said, must have been tipping off the U-boats about convoys from Halifax and northern New England. Dean must have spotted Colfelt as an enemy agent. His final plea for Mrs. Morison to get in touch with the Secret Service must have been overheard. Dean became a local martyr, killed saving democracy.

At the inquiry Colfelt handled himself well, answering questions with steady-eyed candor. A letter from an American diplomat testified to his unswerving devotion to the flag. And his own testimony planted doubts about Dean's wife. She and Dean fought a lot, Colfelt said. Dean was selfish and stubborn, and his wife was wildly jealous, and though her brain may have been soft, her tongue certainly wasn't. She could give as good as she got.

Judge Rich threw in that rambling statement of Mrs. Dean's about her husband being dead by the deep water. How do you explain that, when no one had told her? And what about that bone hairpin? Mrs. Dean used bone hairpins, didn't she?

The authorities got excited enough to try to get Mrs. Dean to tie a square knot like those that had bound her husband. She couldn't do it for the life of her. As for the hairpin, it wasn't like the ones she wore, after all. Then a letter came from the wife of a Harvard professor attesting to Mary Dean's impeccable virtue. And all you had to do was look at her and you couldn't seriously imagine that she could even get all the way to the barn, much less deal a heavy blow with a blunt instrument to a man in good physical shape.

So what about Judge Rich? A kicking horse was a pretty wild excuse for that shiner, wasn't it? And it was mighty convenient for him to clean the barn so fast. But unquestionably he had always been a fine man. And what possible motive could he have had other than a chance to get Dean's money, which, on assessment, didn't add up to much? In fact, the checking account was overdrawn.

A Boston reporter, Bert Ford, wrote a fast little book about the Dean murder. The Rich family and friends felt that the Judge didn't look too good in it, and the Jaffrey librarian bought up all available

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copies to get them off the shelves. Rich sued Ford and got a $5,000 settlement out of court.

The case was kicked back and forth by town, county, state, and federal government. Jaffrey split down the middle over it. A "psychologist" wrote the town fathers saying he'd had a vision of Dean and his murderer. Somehow he managed to wangle an invitation from these hard-headed Yankees to come to Jaffrey and do his stuff. He cost the town more than $1,000 in expenses. Mark Twain would have loved it.

Mrs. Dean went off to live with a relative and get treatment at a couple of institutions. She died 13 months after her husband. Picturing her as a murderess began to get harder and harder. And yet, who really knew much about the Deans? The poor man never even had an autopsy until it was too late to disclose much.

Three months after the murder the war ended, and so did all that excitement about signal lights. The government found evidence that the lights had been signaling, all right, but the spy scare was over. Now there was a Bolshevik scare, a Ku Klux Klan scare, and lots of stories of bootleggers lurching down New Hampshire back roads at dark of night with cargoes of illicit Canadian booze.

In my youth we at first tended to pin the crime on Colfelt and the Germans. Doing so removed the awkwardness of the murder being only coincidental with the lights. We used to go out to that rock in the middle of the Dean meadow and say a few words in a low voice to see if someone at the edge of the field could hear us. We swore that every word echoed clearly off the barn.

As we grew older and more sophisticated, we came up with an appealingly cynical notion that the United States government had been deliberately sending false signals out to sea to put the U-boats off the track. Dean got too nosy. When our own agents overheard him asking for the Secret Service that August afternoon, they obliged him. They parked in the wood road, hid in the barn, and bumped him off.

We wondered about Mrs. Dean. No one seemed to know much about her. How deep did those roiled waters run? Could she have faked her invalidism, secretly gathering the strength to spend on one insane — and terribly clumsy — venture that wiped out years of stifled jealousy and frustration?

Like everyone else, we had ideas, but no answers. And even today, 69 years after this brutal slaying, no one knows who done in Dr. Dean.

In an early article about the Dean murder, this magazine suggested that "young toughs" from Jaffrey had visited the Dean barn that bloody night for no good purpose. Dean surprised them. The savagery of the killing could be explained by the panic of teenagers trying to subdue a strong 63-year-old man who fought like a tiger. The theory is one of the best of many.

And yet I *hope* it isn't true. It's too pat, and it leaves too many puzzles unanswered. Also, it gets in the way of my own theory. For I, too, have a private idea about what happened that night. The only trouble is, I lived a lot of my life right nearby, and I like to go back when I can. And there are still people around who remember the principals involved. And if you think I'm going to get into trouble with everyone by solving the Dean murder for you, you're crazy. □□