

Deaths on Pleasant Street

Without doubt, the public generally refuses to believe, in the absence of positive proof, that a murder has been committed. It is too awful to be credible. If murder there was, it rivals the most grewsome [*sic*] tales of French fiction in its diabolical conception and boldness of execution. Every feature of the veiled hypothesis is a ghastly enigma of human depravity.

—*The Kansas City Journal*, Jan. 21, 1910

What a Gaborieau or a Conan Doyle might have done with such material may be left to the imagination. Here was a plot, the elaboration of which, in fictional form, might have produced the world's greatest detective story, though it would have taken a Poe to do full justice to a mind that could conceive the use of germ cultures to commit murder.

—*The New York World*, May 16, 1910

DEATHS ON PLEASANT STREET

The Ghastly Enigma
of Colonel Swope
and Doctor Hyde

Giles Fowler



Truman State University Press

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Contents and Illustrations

Preface	ix
Chapter One	1
The Swope home, 406 South Pleasant Street	6
Portrait of Mrs. Logan O. (Margaret) Swope.	7
Portrait of Colonel Thomas Swope	8
Chapter Two	10
Portrait of Doctor Bennett Clark Hyde	11
Portrait of Frances Swope Hyde	12
The Hyde home, 3516 Forest Avenue	17
Swope mansion dining room	20
Chapter Three	25
Chapter Four	35
Portrait of Tom Swope.	37
Chapter Five	45
Swope mansion left parlor	47
Facsimile of Colonel Swope's handwritten epitaph	49
Chapter Six	55
Portrait of Margaret Swope	61
Chapter Seven	64
William Chrisman Swope	66
Chapter Eight	75
Chapter Nine	84
Chapter Ten	93
Portrait of Lucy Lee Swope.	95
Chapter Eleven	104
Doctor George T. Twyman in court	105
Swope mansion right parlor	107
Chapter Twelve	117
Doctor Edward L. Stewart in court.	121

Chapter Thirteen	129
Chapter Fourteen	138
Col. Thomas H. Swope	139
“A Home of Fatalities”	139
John Paxton at the coroner’s inquest	141
Doctor B. Clark Hyde and Frances Hyde	149
Chapter Fifteen	152
Chasing Hatred Chase Jordan	153
Portrait of Frank P. Walsh	157
Portrait of James A. Reed	157
Chapter Sixteen	162
Nurse Pearl Kellar on the witness stand	169
Chapter Seventeen	175
Doctor Ludvig Hektoen, pathologist, and Doctor Walter S. Haines, chemist, outside the courtroom	179
Doctor Victor C. Vaughan arriving at court	179
Mrs. Logan O. Swope on the witness stand	181
Chapter Eighteen	189
The Criminal Court Building and County Jail	190
The Criminal Courtroom	191
Plan of courtroom	191
The Rev. George W. Hyde and Mrs. Hyde in court	194
The jury	197
Chapter Nineteen	200
Nurse Anna Houlehan on the witness stand	201
Margaret Swope on the witness stand	202
Doctor Ludvig Hektoen on the witness stand	208
Doctor Walter C. Haines on the witness stand	210
Chapter Twenty	212
Doctor Hyde on the witness stand	216
A facsimile of the verdict	225
Chapter Twenty-one	227
Chapter Twenty-two	239
Sources	247
About the Author	251

Preface

There is probably a useful history to be done on the legal controversies of the century-old Hyde-Swope murder case, especially the question of whether justice was served in the long, grueling prosecution of the accused doctor. Such a project would require the labors of a historian or a law scholar, neither of which I am. Certainly my book is no such ambitious work. Its aim is simply to recount the story, as fully and accurately as I can, of one of the darkest, most baffling mysteries of the last century in the place where I grew up. Until now, the tale has never been the subject of a full-length book, although it has produced innumerable articles and other writings since 1909, the year it all began. Like every account before it, this one will raise more questions than it answers, and perhaps for that reason it will dissatisfy. But the object, really, wasn't to solve the mystery but to reproduce it, concretely, in scenes that would have the textures and immediacy of real experience.

I wish I could say every word of the book is true. But it is only true insofar as the source materials and my interpretations are true. And as every reporter knows, there are many "truths," too many of them pocked with errors, memory failures, lies, contradictions, and self-serving hype. However, I can say that nothing on these pages was made up out of whole cloth. When it was necessary to fall back on conjecture, I tried to make sure the assumptions were justified logically by the documented facts. Where the facts were unknown or blurred by conflicting versions, I tried to make that clear.

What amazed me at first, and then delighted me, was how rich in humanizing details the old records were. Again and again I came upon patches of action, interaction, high emotion, and dialogue that gave voice and personality to these beings from another

time. Suddenly they were sentient, fallible, free-willed people. One such moment of discovery—out of hundreds—came while reading the statement of a young doctor, who feared he might inadvertently have aided in a horrible crime. Home from his office, he takes his small son sledding, undresses the child for bed, struggles to focus on his evening paper, and at last rouses his sleepy wife to share with her his anxieties.

From the first, I planned to use reconstructed scenes as the main building blocks of the narrative. Here again, the individual statements and court testimony were amazing treasuries of detailed information. Equally so were the memoirs and other non-official accounts by the players, not to mention the lavish files of contemporary newspapers. But the reliability of all these sources, even the sternest court documents, obviously varied in degree. Trial transcripts tell us what a witness said, not whether a word of it was true.

Newspaper accounts were approached with caution, with allowances for the general quality of the paper's coverage. Overall, the *Star's* reporting was more complete, sober, and responsible than that of the flamboyant *Post*. At the same time, certain *Post* writers showed impressive gifts for colorful observation and narrative where a *Star* or *Times* reporter might offer only workaday accounts.

With all the pitfalls regarding accuracy, it fell to this writer to cross-check and double-check as much as possible, down to the floor plan of the mansion (never fully established), the placement of a telephone on the wall, and the final score of a college football game. One depiction of a shocking medical crisis in the Swope home had to be assembled from the memories of seven individuals drawn to the scene from various parts of the house. Fortunately they were able to validate each other's accounts.

Then there was the matter of what characters said. Every quotation in the book, direct or indirect, was taken from official documents, memoirs, letters, and newspaper stories. The challenge was to sort out the more accurate spoken passages from the

less convincing and the obviously false. Direct witness testimony in court or in sworn statements was safe to quote, of course. Most quotations in the press were considered fairly reliable, especially if two or more papers agreed on what was said. But any speech recalled secondhand or allegedly overheard by chance or circulated as rumor had to be handled with care, if not extreme skepticism. Which quotes made their way into the book, and which didn't, sometimes depended on this reporter's ear for the clunk of a bogus comment. For this I make no apologies. Instinct, when all else fails, may serve the truth, too.

And still, it would take a naïve leap of faith to assume that this book is accurate in all respects. Factual errors and false assumptions will get through—they always do. The experienced journalist knows that the complete truth can be as elusive as fairy dust, but that doesn't excuse him from looking for it.

The research would not have been remotely possible without the help of skilled, knowledgeable professionals who took an interest in the project. For their generous sharing of time and expertise, I am deeply grateful to David Boutros of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City (holder of the James A. Reed papers); David W. Jackson of the Jackson County Historical Society (whose archives include the full transcript of the first trial); Mary Beveridge of the Missouri Valley Special Collections department of the Kansas City Public Library; and Derek Donovan and Janelle Hopkins of the *Kansas City Star* Library. Together, they provided access to the most essential information at the roots of my research.

If this project had a spiritual parent, so to say, it was the late Patrick D. Kelly, Dean Emeritus of the University of Missouri—Kansas City School of Law and a devoted student of the case. Besides sharing key legal insights, Dean Kelly donated useful documents and supported the author as a mentor and friend. Wherever he resides, I pray that he reads the book and approves of my handling of it.

I am equally indebted to Doctor Edward M. Bottei, Medical Director of the Iowa Statewide Poison Control Center, for a most

unusual contribution. A toxicologist whose knowledge of poisons is nothing short of alarming, Doctor Bottei came up with a new and fascinating hypothesis of how Doctor Hyde may have . . . well, read it for yourself.

Other bits of the narrative puzzle were furnished by assistant archivist Barbara Bernauer of the Community of Christ World Headquarters; Peggy Glover of Ozark National Life Insurance, headquartered in the former library where Colonel Swope lay in state; Ann McFerrin, archivist for Kansas City Parks; landscape architect Mike Ashley, who welcomed me into Colonel Swope's former office; Helen West, secretary of the First Presbyterian Church of Independence; and Bill Crick, former carpenter in the Swope mansion.

For guiding me to gravesites—the final settings of this somber tale—I am much obliged to T. J. Cochran of Mount Washington Cemetery; John Weilert, Bruce Mathews, and Richard Stewart of Elmwood Cemetery; and Kenneth Payne of Machpelah Cemetery in Lexington, Missouri.

Although most of the fact-gathering involved slogging through archival stacks, I was aided, too, by recently published works. Excellent books by Harry Haskell and Richard P. Coleman (see Sources) filled in social and physical details of the old Kansas City I attempted to sketch.

I must likewise salute former newsroom colleagues Charles Gusewelle, Steve Paul, and Brian Burnes for their advice and encouragements; my editor, Barbara Smith-Mandell, who nurtured the project with skill and care; and my family, who forgave me my many absences while I was off mining for the facts.

Finally, a nod of appreciation to another old *Kansas City Star* hand, Joseph A. Lastelic. It was he, forty-nine years ago, who wrote the fine article about the Hyde-Swope case that fired my interest in the misanthropic millionaire, the shadowy doctor, and the great, doomed house on the hill.

About the Author

Born in Kansas City in 1934, Giles Fowler joined the city's prominent newspaper, the *Kansas City Star*, after graduating from Westminster College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. During his twenty-four years at the *Star*, Fowler worked as a reporter, film and theater critic, and editor of the paper's Sunday magazine, and also spent a year writing for *The Times* of London. He transferred this considerable background in journalism to teaching in 1981 and held positions at Kansas State University and Iowa State University's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, from which he retired in 2002. While at Iowa State, Fowler pursued his interest in factual writing as a literary form, creating two courses in that area. He has lectured for national and state writing seminars and became a Teaching Fellow at the Poynter Institute, which offers resources to journalism students, teachers, and practitioners. Fowler has contributed academic articles to *Journalism History*, *Journalism Educator*, and *Journalism Quarterly* and a chapter on John Steinbeck to *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism*, as well as short fiction to the *Sewanee Review*. He currently resides in Ames, Iowa.