

THE CASE
OF THE
INVISIBLE CIRCLE

Erle Stanley Gardner

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THE CASE OF THE INVISIBLE CIRCLE

by Erle Stanley Gardner

A beautiful coed is raped and murdered. Only one clue is found, and that so small that it is invisible to the naked eye. Here, Erle Stanley Gardner recounts how one tiny lead enabled the police to bring a murderer to justice.

Any veteran investigator will tell you that it's very easy to overlook the most significant clue in a murder case.

I remember one such case where the most significant clue was a circle on the naked right hip of a beautiful young coed. This girl had been murdered in a sex crime.

The significant thing about that circle on her hip was that no one ever saw it.

That is literally true. The body was found lying on the snowy ground. It was naked from the waist down. Expert police officers and a skillful pathologist inspected the scene of the crime and the body. The body was later removed to a morgue where a careful autopsy was performed.

Yet no one of these trained observers saw that telltale circle. The reason they failed to see it was that it was invisible.

The question of how an invisible circle could become the most valuable clue in an entire case is a story in itself.

On November 11th, 1948, I was in New York City. I had just completed one of Captain Frances G. Lee's seminars on homicide investigation. These seminars are held in the Harvard Medical School in Boston, and immediately after the close of the seminar I had dashed to New York for a conference with my publisher.

It was just getting dark and I was about to go out to keep a dinner engagement when the phone rang. The City Editor of the Denver Post was on the line. He wanted me to fly out to Denver immediately so I could be there before daylight to work on the case of a murdered coed. After a brief talk I accepted the assignment and dashed out to catch the first available plane.

The Denver Post also secured the services of Dr. LeMoyne Snyder, the famous medicolegal specialist, and the author of the book "Homicide Investigation."

As it turned out that murder case had all of the weird, bizarre facets one could well imagine. There were clues so utterly perplexing, there was a mystery so completely baffling that it would make the wildest fiction tale seem tame in comparison.

Dr. Snyder and I were commissioned by the newspaper to help the authorities. We looked up Hatfield Chilson, the district attorney, who was in charge of the case. We found him to be a shrewd lawyer, a competent investigator and, above all, a fair man. He wanted to prosecute the guilty party—but he wanted to be very, very certain that he didn't prosecute anyone who was innocent.

The facts were grim and stark. There were no real clues. On the evening of November 9th, the young coed had left a religious social gathering and started walking down the wind-swept street. She had never reached home.

Early the next morning a cattleman had found evidences of a terrific struggle in the snow at the border of his cattle ranch. There were strands of hair; there was a lot of bloodstained, trampled snow; there was a flashlight; there was a part which had been broken from a .45 automatic which had apparently been used as a club.

The cattleman had been suffering from the depredations of cattle rustlers and he naturally assumed that here was where someone had killed a calf and had dragged it into the automobile. The tracks unmistakably showed the dragging of a body and the tracks of a car which had driven away.

The next day the body of the missing coed was found some eleven miles away, down at the bottom of a snow-covered barranca where she had been dropped from a wooden bridge.

How had the body been transported to that place? Had it been in a truck, in a touring car, or in the trunk of a car? Had it been a one-man job, or had the body been held between two men in an upright position until it had been dumped from the bridge?

On the speedy answering of those questions a great deal depended. Were we looking for one man or two or more? What kind of a car had they been driving?

Photographs of the body had been taken and we asked to see those photographs.

I have said that Hatfield Chilson was a careful man and a thorough man. When we asked him for those photographs he studied them carefully before presenting them to us, and when he studied them he noticed for the first time this peculiar circle on the girl's hip.

I remember that we were at lunch when Chilson produced the photographs and said, "Now, gentlemen, there's something here which puzzles me. This photograph shows a circle on the girl's naked hip, yet every officer who saw that body knows there was no circle there."

It was Dr. Snyder who pointed out the significance of that circle. The camera film had been sensitive to certain rays of

light which hadn't registered with the naked eye. That circle represented the beginning of a phenomena similar to that which investigators call "post-mortem lividity," It meant that the body of the coed must have been transported to that place in the trunk of an automobile, that the automobile had contained a spare tire on the floor of the automobile and the body had been dumped in on top of that spare tire. The rim around the hub had left that circle.

It is a privilege to work with a prosecutor of Chilson's fairness, intelligence and thoroughness. Slowly, bit by bit, he worked with the authorities and with us, piecing together the bits of evidence, listening to the technical advice that Dr. Snyder could give him and, above all, never once yielding to the clamor of public pressure, never once striking a pose or seeking publicity.

It is unfortunate that so few people realize the high character of lawyers generally. I doubt if more than a handful of people in Chilson's county had any real concept of the combination of ability and intellectual integrity which comprised Chilson's character.

Yet he is not at all unusual. Today there are thousands of district attorneys who can measure up to the highest standards.

Here was a country district attorney suddenly plunged into a challenging mystery, with the spotlight of publicity focused sharply on him. And he measured up to the responsibility.

As a citizen I only wish the bulk of the public could know more of the true character of the men who comprise the lawyers of this country of ours.

The publicity given the case was terrific.

Gene Lowall, at that time City Editor of the Denver Post, moved temporary headquarters out to a hotel at Boulder, Colorado. He had some fifteen trained reporters with him and he kept those reporters busy on assignments, co-ordinating their activities so they could be fitted into a pattern. We were, of course, all of us working at hectic speed and under the most trying conditions.

The authorities were forced to admit that they had run out of clues. After a week a move developed to try and curtail the front page publicity, but Hatfield Chilson sat tight. He felt sure that the assailant had received some injuries in the fight and he felt that by continually exerting pressure through the channels of publicity someone would come forward with a key clue.

The reason the district attorney knew the man had probably been injured was because of Dr. Snyder's deductions in connection with that invisible circle on the dead girl's hip. Chilson felt reasonably certain that only one man had been involved in the crime. The evidences of a prolonged struggle indicated that the girl had put up a terrific battle for her life and her honor.

She was at the time wearing a class ring. Friends of hers said that the ring was so tight on her finger that she couldn't

get it off. Yet when her assailant had tried to imprison her hands under her body on the cold frosty ground she had struggled so hard she had literally scraped the ring off and scraped ribbons of flesh from her fingers along with the ring.

The modern car usually carries the spare tire standing upright at one side of the trunk. Dr. Snyder felt that the murderer had used a car which had a big turtleback with the spare tire on the floor of the car.

Clues came in by the dozen—only they turned out not to be clues. There were numerous perplexing coincidences which can so easily throw an investigator off the track.

I personally became convinced the wounded murderer must have gone up a certain barranca to hide some of the girl's school books and personal belongings. I suggested to the district attorney that if this assumption was correct we would find drops of blood on the rocks, probably about every twenty feet apart.

Searchers were dispatched to that dry stream bed. Sure enough they found the drops of blood, a whole trail of drops, about twenty-two feet apart.

Dr. Snyder tested the bloodstains. They had been made by a wounded rabbit.

And then finally the steady, relentless pressure of publicity paid off. The wife of a man who lived only a few miles from where the body had been discovered came to the authorities

in an almost hysterical state. She knew that her husband had committed the murder.

Neighbors told a very peculiar story. The day after the crime the suspect had washed his car inside and out. Then he had raised the turtleback of the car and had given that a good scrubbing. After that he had left the hose running in the car for hours and hours, washing it out thoroughly. Then he had dried the car, and when the interior of the turtleback was completely dry he had given it a good thick coating of red lead. Afterwards he had put on a second coating of red lead.

The gravel guard of chrome steel had been taken into the kitchen and scrubbed and scrubbed with a polisher until it shone like a mirror.

Yet Dr. Snyder had the answer to all that. He knew of certain scientific tests for the detection of bloodstains, tests so delicate that a cotton shirt stained with blood could be sent to a commercial laundry for seven successive times and the stain still be detected.

Officers who worked on the case told me they had never seen a car inspected for evidence the way Dr. Snyder inspected that car. He scraped away the red lead from around the bolts of the automobile, then with a wrench he carefully loosened those bolts and underneath the heads of the bolts he was able to find faint traces of blood.

He dug up the soil under the place where the automobile had been standing all the time the water was running out from the turtleback. In that soil he was able to find traces of

blood. He was even able to find the telltale blood reaction on the car's polished gravel guard.

During the course of that investigation there were half a dozen false leads. There was one individual who could have been taken into custody and perhaps his entire life ruined. There were bizarre coincidences.

It was a pleasure to work with the district attorney who realized so thoroughly the responsibilities of his office, who marshalled such a deadly array of facts that the murderer was convicted despite the fact that his wife could not be called as a witness under the law of Colorado.

Yet the most important clue in the case was invisible to all human eyes. Only the lens of the camera and the super-sensitive panchromatic film picked up that circle on the girl's hip and enabled the authorities to deduce that the girl had been attacked by but one man. Knowing that fact, authorities deduced that in the terrific struggle which had ensued this man had probably been injured.

That invisible circle was really the key clue in the case.

[The end of *The Case of the Invisible Circle* by Erle Stanley Gardner]