

BELLE, THE FEMALE BLUEBEARD

By STEWART H. HOLBROOK

BELLA BRYNHILDE POULSATTER SORENSON GUNNESS was an extremely retiring and uncommunicative person, and until fire destroyed her farm home near LaPorte, Indiana, on April 28, 1908, she was practically unknown except to a circle of what one shudders to call her intimates. The fire revealed as interesting a chain of events as one could well imagine, and by the time its embers had thoroughly cooled, Belle Gunness was as famous in her line as James Whitcomb Riley, a fellow Hoosier, was in his.

Belle first appeared in LaPorte in 1901 as the Widow Sorenson, with two children of her own and another youngster, Jennie Olson, for whom she said she was caring. She purchased a forty-eight-acre farm about a mile out of town, and stocked it with dairy cows, pigs, and poultry. At this time she was forty-two years old. Neighbors describe her as "rugged," but that would hardly seem adequate. She was 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 200 pounds, mostly pure brawn.

When her household effects arrived at the farm, the truckers were amazed at the ease with which she handled heavy trunks, boxes and furniture. One of the truckers, who may have been drinking that day, swore that he saw the woman pick the big upright piano off the floor of the porch, lug it into the front room and set it down as gently as a basket of eggs. "Ay like music in home," Belle had beamed. "Weigh three hunnert pound, easy," the trucker said later with awe, referring to the piano.

In spite of her retiring disposition, neighbors came to learn that Belle was adept at butchering her own hogs and calves and preparing the meat for market. Occasional callers found her in the cellar, which was fitted out with a heavy butcher's table, a large scalding vat, and several cleavers and other sharp tools, her sleeves rolled up, whaling into the work with the gusto and technique of the best man Swift or Armour could produce. She had a hired man to do the milking and haying.

Mrs. Sorenson wasn't a widow long. In April of 1902 she married Peter Gunness, a Norwegian, who wasn't long for this world. In December, after only seven months of wedded bliss, he was killed when, as Mrs. Gunness explained the tragic matter, he was struck on the head by a large sausage grinder which fell from a shelf. The La-Porte coroner later admitted that the affair "looked a little queer" to him, but he officially found that Peter Gunness, and rest his soul, had been the victim of an accident.

The Widow Gunness was no doubt glad of the \$4000 life insurance policy which the oddly animated sausage grinder had liquidated, but she continued to live modestly, even frugally. In spite of her forty-three years it soon became apparent that she was in an interesting condition. A son she named Philip was born in 1903.

Although it wasn't known until later — tragically later — Belle Gunness was addicted to matrimonial journals. That is, she advertised in them, and what she wanted, it seemed, was a man of Scandinavian birth, preferably a Norwegian like herself, who was kind and honest and who would help a lovable and hard-working widow woman to raise the mortgage on her farm.

A photograph of Belle at this period shows a squat, powerfully built woman with an exceedingly dull and heavy face. Either this picture is a libel on Belle, or her charm was such that no photograph could catch and hold it.

Life continued quietly on the forty-eight acres. In 1906 Mr. John Moo arrived there from Elbow Lake, Minnesota. A husky chap of about fifty, a native of Norway, he had been fetched by an ad in the matrimonial journal. With him John Moo brought \$1000 to "pay off the mortgage" on his intended bride's farm.

About a week after his arrival, John Moo disappeared. That was thirty-five years ago and he hasn't been seen since.

Hard on the heels of Moo came George Anderson, a native of Norway and a resident of Tarkio, Missouri, long enough to have acquired some of the skepticism for which that state is celebrated; he did not bring any money with him. And he was glad he hadn't. Long afterward he related what happened to make him glad:

On his second day at Belle's place he suddenly awoke in the middle of the night. "All in a cold sweat," he recalled. Bending over him and peering intently into his face was Belle herself, a lighted

candle in her hand. What Belle intended to do, if anything, George Anderson never found out. He was so startled by the strange expression in the eyes and on the usually phlegmatic face of his intended bride that he shouted long and loud. Belle ran from the room. So did George. He put on his pants and "got the hell out of there" as fast as he could, and he didn't stop until he was back in Tarkio, Missouri.

After Anderson's escape there seemed to come a certain lull in the arrivals of men with matrimonial intentions. But, in view of later revelations, there probably was no lull, no hiatus, at all. And at about this time Belle got a new hired man, one Ray Lamphere, a rather dim-witted French-Canadian. At about this time, too, young Jennie Olson, for whom Belle was caring, disappeared. "Gone to California," Belle explained to neighbors. That was in midsummer of 1906, or thirty-five years ago, and Jennie Olson hasn't been seen since.

In the merry month of April, 1907, Mr. Ole Budsberg, a native of Norway but long a citizen of Iola, Wisconsin, packed his extension suitcase, got a fresh roll of snuff, and took a train of steam cars for LaPorte. He was a middle-

aged man, the father of several grown sons. With him to the farm he brought \$2000. This, as one might have guessed, was for the purpose of paying off the apparently immutable mortgage on the forty-eight acres of Mrs. Gunness. Mr. Budsberg arrived at the farm thirty-four years ago and he hasn't been seen since.

Well, as Belle probably said, that was that. The year 1908 opened very auspiciously indeed when Mr. Andrew K. Helgelein, who had probably never heard of Mr. Budsberg and Mr. Anderson and Mr. Moo, or even of Mr. Gunness, arrived at the farm and was made welcome by the able chatelaine of what was soon to be known as Abattoir Acres. Mr. Helgelein was a native of Norway, but for years past he had been a successful wheat grower near Aberdeen, South Dakota. With him to Belle's place he brought his big wallet in which was \$3000 in cash for the purpose of — but never mind. What had fetched him was a series of letters, the last one of which survives because Mr. Helgelein left it in another coat at his South Dakota home. This letter closes with some mighty fine prose:

... I think of you constantly [wrote Belle in a fair hand]. When I hear your name mentioned, and this is when one

of the dear children speaks of you or when I hear myself humming it with the words of an old love song, it is beautiful music to my ears. My heart beats in wild rapture for you. My Andrew, I love you. Come prepared to stay forever.

And, by God, he did. He came there thirty-three years ago and he hasn't been seen since.

II

Affairs at the farm now departed from their usual humdrum quiet. Ray Lamphere, the hired man, had a frightful quarrel with Belle. He, like many another poor man, had fallen in love with her; and he was jealous of the latest star boarder, Mr. Helgelein. In a terrible temper Lamphere picked up his belongings and left. In LaPorte he told friends that Belle owed him back wages. He said he knew enough about her to get the wages. "She'll pay me to keep my mouth shut, too," he said.

Lamphere must have done a deal of talking. Belle heard of it and had him arrested on a charge of being insane and a menace to the public. A sort of sanity hearing found him sane. He called on Belle at the farm. She had him arrested for trespass. He paid his fine and remained in the neighborhood, making various veiled threats about

his former employer. Once he mentioned to Farmer William Slater that "Helgelein won't bother me no more. We fixed him for keeps."

Trouble also assailed Belle from another quarter. It came in a letter from Mr. Asle Helgelein, a substantial citizen of Mansfield, South Dakota, who wanted to know what had become of his brother Andrew. Belle replied promptly that Andrew had "gone away," doubtless on a visit to his native Norway. To this whimsy Asle answered that he was positive Andrew had done no such thing. Belle sat right down and wrote Asle again. She wished, she said, he would come to LaPorte to help her look for brother Andrew. If Asle replied to this invitation it is not on record.

For once in her life Belle Gunness was worried, or so she seemed to M. E. Leliter, prominent attorney of LaPorte, to whom the woman came on April 27, 1908. She told him she was in mortal fear of Lamphere, who had threatened to kill her, she said. He had promised to burn her house. It may be significant that she did not ask for police protection. All she wanted was a will drawn up. This was done. Leaving Mr. Leliter's office, she went to the LaPorte bank where she paid off a \$500 note, then returned to her farm.

Early next morning neighbors saw the Gunness home in flames. It burned to the ground. Only Joe Maxon, the hired man, escaped, and he said he had barely made it. He had been awakened by fire in his room. He shouted a warning to Mrs. Gunness and the children, then leaped out the window.

When the embers had cooled, searchers found four bodies. Three were readily identified as those of Myrtle and Lucy Sorenson, Belle's daughters, and of Philip Gunness, her son. The other corpse was the headless body of a woman. All four were found together on a mattress in the cellar. On top of them were the charred remains of the pride of Belle's parlor, the fine upright piano.

Ray Lamphere, the ex-hired man, was arrested on suspicion. He denied any knowledge of the murder and fire, but was identified by John Solyam, a farm boy, as the man he had seen running from the Gunness home just before the flames were apparent. Lamphere was indicted for murder, and a charge of arson left hanging over him, just in case. The victim named in the murder charge, of course, was Mrs. Gunness. But — and the doubts began piling one on top of the other — *was* the headless body that of Mrs. Gunness?

Swan Nicholson, nearby farmer who had known Mrs. Gunness for six years, viewed the remains and said no, the body was certainly not that of the buxom widow. Not tall enough, not big enough. C. Christofferson, another neighbor, was just as positive as Nicholson had been. So were Mrs. Austin Cutler, Mrs. Nellie Olander, Sigurd Olson, all old acquaintances. All agreed that the headless body was not that of Mrs. Gunness.

Physicians measured the remains. Making generous allowances for the missing head and neck they concluded that the corpse was that of a woman not more than 5 feet 3 inches tall and weighing around 150 pounds. Belle, all who knew her agreed, was not a hair under 5 feet 7 inches, not an ounce under 200 pounds. Clerks in LaPorte stores who had sold Mrs. Gunness articles of wearing apparel were interviewed for knowledge of her clothing sizes, and these figures were compared with estimates of persons who knew the woman. These calculations and the actual measurements of the corpse were at so great a variance that doubt increased as to identity.

Now, as in all such cases of doubt before or since, there came forward those witnesses who apparently are always present in swarming num-

bers when skulduggery has come to light. Half a dozen persons of undoubted veracity volunteered the information that they had seen Mrs. Gunness driving a woman to the farm on the night before the fire. Descriptions of this mystery woman varied from "slim" to "fairly heavy" build.

What the harassed authorities needed, of course, was a head, or at least a skull, for the corpse. They couldn't find one, and the sheriff was prepared to call it a day and to go ahead anyway with prosecuting Lamphere for the murder of Mrs. Gunness. That is probably what would have happened had it not been for the appearance on the scene of Mr. Asle Helgelein of South Dakota. This brother of the lost Andrew had not heard of the fire; he had come simply to look for his brother. The sheriff didn't seem very interested, but Mr. Helgelein was persistent. He wanted the premises investigated very thoroughly. In a high-fenced yard near the house, the gate to which Mrs. Gunness had always kept carefully locked, were several depressions in the ground. Joe Maxon, Belle's last hired man, said that Belle had once had him wheel dirt into the yard to fill the partly filled holes, which Belle said contained rubbish. At the urging of

Asle Helgelein deputies took shovels and dug.

The first layers were indeed rubbish — old cans, bottles and so forth — but soon a digger came up with a gunnysack. In it was a body, well hacked but in fair condition. Helgelein looked at the remains. "That's Andy," he said.

Before sundown that day, which was May 3, the officers had uncovered the remains of four more bodies. One was that of the missing Jennie Olson. Another was of a tall man with a black moustache. The two others were of children.

Excavations the next day brought up four more bodies, and many other stray human bones. On the third day only one body was recovered, making ten in the yard. When the four charred bodies were added, the grand total was fourteen, which is impressive for one small farm.

Positive identification was made of the bodies of Jennie Olson, Andrew Helgelein, John Moo, and Ole Budsberg. For reasons that need not be gone into here, three other bodies were presumed to be those of one Olaf Lindblom and one Eric Gerhalt — Norwegians who had come, separately, from Minnesota to see Belle — and that of a hired man whose name was never known.

The remains of several bodies, as

indicated, were obviously incomplete and amounted to being mere fragments—fingers and other small bones for which corresponding skulls and trunks were missing. As physicians attempted to sort the many spare parts, the heavy table and the vat in the Guinness cellar took on a possible new meaning that made strong men shudder.

III

With Belle's private boneyard apparently exhausted, police felt that the investigation was completed. They hadn't reckoned with the growing rumor about that headless corpse and its possible connection with the mystery woman seen with Belle the night before the fire. Joe Maxon, Belle's farm hand, had seen no strange woman at the house that night, but he admitted one could have been there without his knowledge. "It sure was a queer place," he allowed, in what was a fair attempt at an understatement.

Dr. Ira P. Norton, LaPorte dentist, came to police. He had done some work for the Widow Guinness, and he knew he could identify her head if found. Police replied that fire hot enough to consume a head would also consume gold and porcelain work. Dr. Norton said no, that both gold and

porcelain would survive any heat from a burning house.

But how to sift the ashes and debris of a large house to find a few small teeth? Louis Schultz of LaPorte heard of the quandary and went to the officers with a suggestion. He was an old sourdough, he said, recently returned from the Yukon, and if he had a little lumber and some encouragement, he would build a regular sluicibox right there on the ground. With plenty of running water handy he would sluice the claim and if there was any gold to be found, he damned well would find it.

This Louis Schultz was plainly God-given. The sluice was built in Belle's front yard, and old Klondike Louis, the 'Ninety-Eighter, went to work on the strangest mining job of his career, while thousands cheered.

The thousands came from LaPorte and other nearby towns and cities, and from Chicago, where the daily papers were enjoying the biggest sensation in a long time. It was an epic event. With his sluicibox roped off and dozens of extra deputies needed to handle the huge crowds, Louis Schultz shoveled tons of debris and washed it down over the riffles before the largest audience a sourdough ever had.

Bets were made on the outcome.

Chicago bookies came and formed pools on the day and hour Louis would strike pay dirt in the Belle Gunness Mine. Vendors of tonic and popcorn circulated in the crowd which on its peak day was estimated to be 5000 persons. On May 19, after four days of hard work, Klondike Louis struck the vein. Washed out from the muck of the house was a piece of dental bridgework containing two lower bicuspid caps capped with gold and four porcelain teeth between them. "My work, positively," said Dr. Norton. "I made those for Mrs. Gunness."

IV

In November of 1908 Ray Lamphere, the ex-farm hand, was acquitted on a charge of murder, and convicted of arson. Obviously the jury did not believe Mrs. Gunness was dead. Lamphere was sent to prison at Michigan City, where he died in 1909.

Before his death Lamphere told a long, disconnected story to Harry Myers, a trusty at the pen, and after Lamphere's death Myers retold it to prison officials. It painted a horrible picture of a female monster on the prowl that night. After Belle had killed the mystery woman, who had been imported

for a stand-in, she went methodically to work on her own children, killing them one after the other with practiced hand. She beheaded the woman to preclude identification, and dressed the body in her own clothes. Then Belle went away.

In all, Lamphere said, Belle had lured forty-two men to her house. Only one had escaped. The children's bodies represented kids put in her care. From her male dupes Belle, Lamphere said, had got amounts varying from \$1000 to \$32,000 each. Usually she first drugged their coffee, then bashed in their heads. She dissected the bodies on the big table in the cellar, tied the parts into sacks, then buried them in the locked yard. On occasion she varied the monotony by using quicklime in the big vat.

Lamphere told Myers he had helped Belle to bury "several bodies" but denied he ever had a hand in the killings. Jennie Olson had been killed because "she knew too much," and so had Belle's own children. As for Peter Gunness, alleged victim of the bounding sausage grinder, Belle had killed him with an axe.

Not all of the dying Lamphere's story made sense. No doubt it was exaggerated. And he was oddly reticent regarding his own rela-

tions with Mrs. Gunness. But on the subject of the headless corpse he was positive: it was not Belle's. She was safely away. Which is the opinion today of many oldsters of the neighborhood. Belle, indeed, lives on much as does Ambrose Bierce, the old journalist, who was probably killed in Mexico in 1916. As recently as 1931, Belle was reported seen in Mississippi. Again in California. For more than twenty years the sheriff's office at LaPorte received an average of two queries a month about Belle, Belle the Monster of LaPorte, the Queen of the Abattoir, the Female Bluebeard. During the last decade the

queries have continued, though fewer. But Belle seems assured of an enduring place in Hoosier folklore, for she is celebrated in a ballad which begins:

Belle Gunness lived in In-dian;
She always, always had a man;
Ten, at least, went in her door,
And were never, never seen no more.

If Belle still lives, as many believe, she is eighty-two years old in 1941. That's getting on. But if you happen on a farm house in some back-country place and the proprietor is a husky old woman who kills her own hogs, you might better be on your way, no matter the road or the weather.



TYMPANI IN FEE SIMPLE

QUEER how the quibbling quail
And the Dingo do go dumb,
While we, with a weary, wanton wail,
Cry ho! for the cryptic crumb.

So lavish the lawyer's lurch;
So sparing the spurned spittoon,
We burnish the burbling Berber's birch
For the boon of a bored baboon.

Then cheer when the chimpanzee
And the chattering cheetah chide,
For many a sloop will slip to sea
With a slug and a slum inside.

MARIAN PATTEE