

# OUT OF THE DARKNESS

(Continued from Last Week)

He paused again, then continued. "That might have been done, but the chances are that he did not kill himself. I cannot positively state, however, whether it was suicide or murder."

His hesitation started a long argument between him, the coroner, and the district attorney. If Slyke had killed himself, then someone else must have pulled up the bedclothes and arranged the body. What had been the person's reason for doing it? If, on the other hand, he had been murdered, then a very definite attempt had been made to make it look like suicide. The revolver in the dead man's hand came under discussion, and Doctor Webster said that, though it could be placed in a person's hand after death, any trained eye could detect the fact. His evidence, while it had for the first time suggested that a murder might have been committed, had yet done little to clear up the mystery. I could see by the doubt and bewilderment in their faces that his uncertainty as to whether it was murder or suicide had communicated itself to the audience. They looked eagerly about for the next witness, wondering what his testimony would disclose. There was little enough, as I knew too well, that any witness could tell that would throw light on Slyke's death.

The coroner glanced at a piece of paper and said: "Will Mr. John Bartley kindly take the stand?"

## CHAPTER IX

### The Cry in the Dark.

There was a little stir of excitement as Bartley, with easy grace, arose and took his seat in the witness chair. Every one was eager to see him, and he became at once the center of all eyes.

Doctor King did not trouble Bartley with questions, but allowed him to tell his story in his own way. He recounted our arrival at the house and our examination of the body. As he told of his reasons for thinking that Slyke had been murdered, the room became very still. He described our search for clues in the lower rooms, and what he had found on the balcony. Slowly the audience realized that Slyke had not been killed in any of the rooms of the house, but on a tower sixty feet in the air.

He pictured in short, concise words how the body had been carried

down two flights of stairs, undressed and put into bed. A gasp went around the room at his words, and I could see from the faces of the listeners that they could scarcely believe the story he was telling them. The sensation was increased when he spoke of the removal of the revolver from the dead man's hand while we were in the upper room of the tower. This was, without doubt, so far the most dramatic moment of the inquest.

While Bartley had been giving his testimony, the storm had come nearer. A thunderstorm is never a cheerful thing at the best, and this one was making every one very uneasy. At each clap of thunder, someone would give a start and glance nervously around.

The next witness, the photographer, was only on the stand a short time. He told of taking the pictures of the room in which the body lay and of the body itself, and stated that he had seen no revolver in the dead man's hand.

The testimony of the following witness was also brief. The boy who worked around the garage, although very much frightened, stuck to his story that he was getting into bed when he heard a shot, and that it sounded as if it were up in the air. The time, he thought, was somewhere between two and three in the morning.

When he had returned to his seat the step-daughter took his place. Her youthful face flushed under the many eyes that were turned upon her, and she never looked up. Her story was the one that she had told to Bartley and she added nothing new to it. In answer to a question as to whether she had glanced at her step-father's door when she passed it the night of the murder, she replied that she had and that it was closed. Catching the district attorney's eye at this point, Bartley motioned her for a moment, and they whispered together for a moment. The district attorney then asked the girl if she had seen the dog when she came in. Rather surprised at the question, she answered that the dog had met her at the front door, smelled of her dress, and followed her to the stairway before going back to his rug. When she left the stand, her testimony had not added anything to what we already knew.

I realized suddenly that we knew no more about the crime than we had when the inquest began. Though I was sure in my own mind that Slyke had been murdered, I had grave doubts if it could be proved satisfactorily to others. The almost entire absence of clues made it seem more mysterious than it had at first, if that were possible. Even the next witness, Mr. Lawrence, added nothing to our knowledge. He said that, at the close of the party, Mr. Slyke had asked him to stay behind for what he did not know at the time. After the others had left, Mr. Slyke had taken him up to his room in the tower, and had asked him if he would like to buy a little whisky, as he had more than he needed.

There was a ripple of laughter at this unexpected statement. Though it

was the first time that whisky had been introduced into the case, I doubt if anyone regarded its mention as important. The laughter made Lawrence more nervous than ever, and he talked faster and more indistinctly. He had stayed only a few moments, he said, though Slyke had urged him to remain longer. A moment after he had been released from the stand, I remembered that he had not mentioned the fact that Slyke had told him he was expecting another visitor. Whether Lawrence had forgotten it or did not wish to volunteer the information, I could not decide. It seemed to me to be a very important point for him to have omitted.

The butler, who came next, took his seat to the accompaniment of one of the worst claps of thunder that we had yet had, a clap that seemed almost in the room. Then a burst of rain swept against the windows. All through his testimony the thunder made it almost impossible to hear him, and he had to repeat many of his statements. He appeared to be a silent man, who seldom spoke of his own volition. He had little to tell us and disposed of the card party in a few words. After it had broken up and he had let Mr. Lawrence out, he had locked the windows but left the front door unfastened, as Mr. Slyke had told him that he, himself, would attend to it later. In answer to a question as to whether he had seen Slyke after Lawrence left, he replied that he had not. In fact, he had not seen him again alive. He had gone to his room, leaving the dog in the living room, as was the custom. His first knowledge that Slyke was dead came when he entered his room with Miss Potter.

So far, like all the other witnesses that had been heard, his testimony presented nothing that we had not already known. Then suddenly he added a new piece of information. So far as we had been able to discover, the relations that had existed between Slyke and the members of his household had been the usual ones. I mean by that, that while there had been no unusual show of affection nor any signs of deep grief at his death, there had been no evidence of any trouble between them. When the butler was asked if he had ever heard words between Slyke and any member of his family, he surprised us all by saying that he had twice heard Miss Potter and the broker quarreling.

Miss Potter gave an angry start and turned a flushed face on the servant, who refused to meet her eyes. The girl by her side looked around at her aunt, startled. I glanced quickly at Bartley and saw an amused smile on his lips.

"You say you heard Miss Potter and Mr. Slyke quarreling?" asked the coroner.

The butler began to speak, but his words were drowned out by a terrific clap of thunder that shook the house. When the sound had died away in the distance, he answered, "Why, yes, sir, I did, twice."

As he paused and did not continue, the coroner asked him to tell us where the quarrel had taken place and what it had been about. From the rather self-satisfied expression on the butler's face, I judged that he was not only willing, but glad, to tell all that he had heard.

"It was one evening in the dining room," he stated, "right after dinner, and only Miss Potter and Mr. Slyke were in the room. As I was about to enter from the butler's pantry, I heard Mr. Slyke say in a loud voice, 'You make me sick.' Then came Miss Potter's voice, very angry, 'I do, do I? Never mind. You will be a lot sicker before you get through. I tell you, there is lots of trouble ahead for you.' That's all I heard, for they left the room by another door."

"Do you know what they were talking about?"

The butler was silent a moment, then shook his head without speaking. "And when was the second occasion that you heard them quarreling?" he was asked.

"It was about a week later, I think. One morning, when I was passing Mr. Slyke's room, I heard them again. He seemed to be very angry about something, I don't know what. His voice was loud enough to be heard through a closed door, I wish you could keep your mouth shut. It's none of your business, anyhow." Then I heard Miss Potter; she was angry also. 'You wait and see. It will be my business if you are not careful. If you keep on, something will happen to you.'"

This was an astonishing piece of information. After all, things had not gone so smoothly in the household as we had supposed. What the last expression, "If you keep on, something will happen to you," might mean, I could not decide. It might have been a threat; and, in view of what had taken place, it would be necessary for Miss Potter to explain it. Glancing at her, I noticed that though angry and nervous she was not afraid. She seemed to regard what the butler had said as more annoying than accusing, which I looked at Bartley, he showed no surprise; but then I had scarcely expected that he would, for he made it a point never to be surprised at anything that might come up. The butler admitted that he did not know what the quarrel had been about, and that, with the exception of the two times he had mentioned, the relations that had existed between Slyke and his sister-in-law had always been very friendly.

The storm was now directly overhead. Claps of thunder were almost incessant, and vivid flashes of lightning penetrated the room in spite of the heavy curtains drawn over the windows.

As the butler left the stand, there

was a slight commotion in the room; and turning, I saw Roche pushing the chauffeur ahead of him. King gave the two men a puzzled glance, and then turned to the district attorney and whispered something to him. Miss Potter also turned to see what the noise was, and an expression of consternation and dread came over her face.

The two men passed within a foot of me, and the cruel lips and shifty eyes of the chauffeur made me wonder why Slyke should have kept such a man in his employ. When they



The Chauffeur Gave Her a Look Filled With Hatred, Blended With a Smile of Triumph.

reached the front of the room, Roche motioned the chauffeur to the empty chair next to Miss Potter, who drew as far away from him as she could, and then seated himself on the other side of his prisoner. The chauffeur gave her a look filled with hatred, blended with a smile of triumph. I could see that there was something wrong between these two.

A sharp peal of thunder seemed to split the air, causing the crowd to stir uneasily in their chairs. Again the lights flickered down for a moment, and again the thunder rolled. A violent wind lashed the rain against the windows behind me, and there was scarcely a pause between the flashes of lightning. The room was deathly still; we were petrified.

Doctor King was standing behind his desk, his face white, one hand playing nervously with the papers in front of him. He started at each vivid flash of lightning and the thunder seemed to daze him. Turning to the district attorney, and speaking half to him and half to the room, he said: "I think we should adjourn the inquest until tomorrow. The storm is so bad that I doubt if we can hear the testimony of the other witnesses."

His decision seemed to be very sensible. We had been unable to hear the close of the butler's evidence because of the thunder, and I doubted if any but those in the front seats would be able to hear the witnesses that were still to be called. The district attorney objected, however, to adjourning. He said that he could not be present the next day, and thought that we had better hear the remaining witnesses at once. Sinking back into his chair, King asked the attorney whom he wanted to call next.

The district attorney rose to his feet, saying slowly, "I am going to call Briffeur, who was chauffeur for Mr. Slyke. He will—"

But whatever he was going to add we never discovered. Just at that second there came a terrific flash of lightning that seemed to burn its way across the room, followed by a deafening clap of thunder. With a sizzle the lights went out and left the room as black as the inside of a coal mine. Low murmurs came from all sides. It was enough surely to try the nerves of the most stout-hearted.

As the rumble of thunder died away, I heard King demanding in a voice that shook a little, "Will somebody get a light—lamps or candles?" Someone pushed back a chair, and then suddenly, rising above all else and ringing through the room with a horror that seemed to glaze me to my seat, came a shriek of terror. It was sustained for a second, then died away in a long, sobbing moan.

## CHAPTER X

### Sudden Death.

For a moment after the cry had died away the only sound to be heard was the dashing of the rain against the windows and the lashing of the trees outside. Everyone was too startled and frightened to move. I felt Bartley's hand on my arm, his fingers sinking deep into my flesh. Then the spell was broken, and men asked each other in excited whispers what had happened.

The cry had seemed to come from the front of the room. It had been one of horror, dread and surprise, as if the person uttering it had met with some unexpected and awful experience. It had been a man's voice, and I wondered whose it could have been. "Come on, Pett."

(To be continued)

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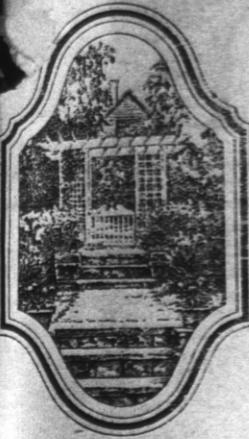
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