

# OUT OF THE DARKNESS

(Continued from Last Week)

While this was interesting news, I could not see that it was of any importance to us, and said as much to Bartley. He half smiled as he reminded me that ten thousand dollars was a lot of money to keep in the house, and added that it was strange that Slyke should deposit thirteen and retain another ten in his house. He wondered if his keeping the money had any relation to the visitor that he was expecting. At any rate, the man had not gotten the money, if that had been what he was after.

Luncheon over, Currie, Bartley and I started for the inquest. The newspapers had evidently received a tip that there was more in Slyke's death than had appeared, for when we arrived we were forced to run a gauntlet of reporters, who recognized Bartley at once and crowded around him. They realized that, if he were interested in the case, it was of more importance than they had suspected, and wanted to know if he did not have some information to give them. With a laugh at their insistence, he replied that he did not; but, when he had, he would see that they were the ones to get it.

There were a number of cars in front of the house and a small crowd of men standing about in twos and threes. Just as we turned to mount the steps, Lawrence drove up and greeted us with a rather forced smile.

The inquest was to be held in the large living room in which the burglars had been found. Though it was not a public hearing open to every one, there were a goodly number of people present.

Doctor King and the other officials had not yet arrived; and Black, who was talking to a group of men, left them and came to greet us. He told us that the chauffeur, Briffeur, was to be brought from the jail by Roche, and that he thought his testimony would make a sensation. Bartley seemed to understand what he meant,

though I did not. The chauffeur had refused to talk and had answered all questions by saying that he would tell what he knew at the inquest. All attempts to find out what that might be had failed.

Bartley asked Black if he still thought that the chauffeur was guilty of the murder. Black countered by stating that he did not believe that anyone else knew as much about the affair as he did. It was his opinion that, if the chauffeur had not killed him, he at least knew something about the crime. One thing the man had admitted when questioned, and that was that, when he testified, he would ruin several reputations. Bartley was much interested, and told Black that he wished he would ask Roche not to bring Briffeur into the courtroom until it was time for him to give his testimony.

"Want to spring him?" asked the detective with a grin.

Bartley nodded, and Black went away to arrange the matter. I could see what Bartley was after. Only the police and ourselves knew that the man was to be placed on the stand, and Bartley wanted to see what effect his sudden introduction might have on those present. There might be someone so surprised by it that he would give himself away.

In a row of chairs, directly in front of the coroner's desk and about six feet away, were seated the members of Slyke's household. Slyke's stepdaughter Ruth, dressed in dark blue, was between Miss Potter and an old man, who, I decided, was the minister uncle who had brought her home the night of the murder. I could not see Miss Potter's face, but her hands showed a great nervous strain; they were never still, picking incessantly at the folds of her dress. On her right were two empty chairs for the chauffeur and Roche, and beyond them the butler and the other servants.

We had to wait some time for the doctor, who had been delayed by a case. When he arrived, he pushed his way hurriedly through the people at the far end of the room, pausing only for a moment to speak to the district attorney. He took his place back of the desk, and, after removing some papers from his bag, stood for a moment looking over the crowd. He seemed almost too worn and nervous to preside.

A silence fell on the room, the curious, expectant silence that I have so often noticed at inquests. To most of the people present, the doctor had ceased to be their familiar friend and had become an impersonal officer of the law, the instrument for unraveling a mysterious death. Perhaps some were thinking of the man in whose house they were and whose dead body lay above awaiting burial. The silence was suddenly broken by a heavy peal of thunder.

To my surprise, the doctor called as his first witness Slyke's sister-in-law. As a rule, the first person called at an inquest is the one who discovered the body, but for some reason the doctor had decided to keep the butler for a later moment.

The first questions, after Miss Potter had taken the oath, were the usual ones. They related to her name and her relationship to Slyke. She said her name was Alice Potter, and that she was the sister of his dead wife. Slyke had asked her to come and run his house for him, and for the last ten years she had done so. In response to a question as to whether she had been paid for her services

she flushed deeply and explained that while no real salary had been paid, whenever she had needed money she had asked Slyke for it and he had given it to her. The sum varied, though she doubted if she had ever received more than a thousand in any one year. He always had been willing to give her as much as she asked for, and had not questioned the amounts. There had never been any trouble over money matters between them.

This was all evidence that I knew; and, while she was giving it, I glanced about the room, then watched the doctor. He was finding his position a very difficult one, as he was the family physician as well as the coroner. He put his questions with as much delicacy as possible. The whole affair seemed to be very distasteful to him. It was particularly trying for a man who was still feeling the effects of a nervous breakdown. Miss Potter, fortunately, became more at ease as the questioning proceeded. She kept her eyes down and gave her answers in such a low voice that at times it was hard to hear them at all.

All through the early part of Miss Potter's evidence there were rumbles of distant thunder. Leaning back in my chair, I pushed aside the heavy draperies that hid the window, and looked out. It was almost like night. A big storm was close at hand. The thunder was still some miles away, and I could see distant, almost continuous flashes of lightning. After a quick glance I let the curtain fall back into place.

When I turned my attention again to the evidence, Doctor King was questioning Miss Potter about the finding of the body. She testified that she was at breakfast when the butler rushed into the room, crying that something was wrong with Mr. Slyke. She knew her brother-in-law had intended to go fishing that morning, and was surprised to learn that he was not yet up. The butler had told her that he had called him, and receiving no reply had entered his room and found Mr. Slyke still in bed. When he did not answer when spoken to again, he (the butler) had come at once to her.

She stated that she had gone up at once to his room, the door of which had been left open by the butler when he rushed out. She had crossed to the bed and called him by name. When he did not answer, she looked closer and saw that he was dead. Her voice broke a little on this last statement, but she soon recovered and continued. The next thing she had done, she said, was to call the doctor.

For the first time, the district attorney took a hand in the proceedings.

"Tell us how you found him."

She answered that he was lying on his back, the bedclothes pulled up around his chin, and his hands by his side. She had not pulled the bedclothes down from the body, nor disturbed them in any way. It was not until she had noticed the wound in his head that she realized he had been shot.

"Did you disturb the body?" was the next question.

There was a long silence, then haltingly, "I—well, that is—I did close his eyes. Their expression frightened me, so—I—closed them."

She received a rather disgusted look from the district attorney, who asked, "Did you not know that the body should have been left as you found it?"

"I—" she made an appealing gesture: "I never thought of that. Only of his eyes! They frightened me, they—stared so. I simply closed them. But I did nothing else."

King then asked a question that surprised Mr. "You thought he had committed suicide?"

She hesitated, started to speak, stopped and at last found her voice. "Why, yes. That—that is—I did at the time. But I don't know what to think now."

"Why did you think he killed himself?"

This seemed a harder question to answer than the other.

"Why, I don't know. You see, he was shot; and I knew of no one who would want to kill him. As far as

—ill health or money troubles? Had he quarreled with anyone lately? She seemed to have more difficulty with these last questions than with any of the previous ones. She was so long in answering that some of them had to be repeated several times. She was so careful of what she said that she gave me the impression that she was trying to keep something back.

In response to the first question, she repeated that she knew no reason why Slyke should want to commit suicide. She had heard of no money troubles, and his health was good. No, she had never heard of his having quarreled with anyone. It was this last answer that she had hesitated longer over than over any of the others, and it was the one which caused me to feel sure she was hiding something.

The question regarding the revolver that had been found in Slyke's hand she answered readily enough. He had kept it in his room, just where, she did not know; it was one that he had bought a year before.

When questioned as to her own doings on the night of his death, she could tell us nothing of value. There had been a card party, but she had gone to bed about ten o'clock and had not even heard the men go out. During the night she had heard no sound. As this was all she had to tell she left the stand. Though her testimony had thrown no light on what had taken place, I felt more strongly than ever that she could have done so had she wished. I glanced at Bartley, and the queer smile he gave me hinted that he, too, thought as I did.

The next witness was a Doctor Webster. I knew that a second physician had been called in on the morning of the crime, but had not met him. Doctor King's position was a peculiar one, as he was not only the physician who had first seen the body, but also the coroner. In order to have the testimony of a second medical man, he had sent Doctor Webster to examine the body and testify as to its condition. As the doctor took the seat near the coroner, I examined him closely. He was a man of at least sixty, rather stout, with a beaming, kindly face, and white beard that gave him the appearance of a practitioner of the old school.

In response to questions, he told how Doctor King had requested him to go to the house and examine the body, because, as coroner, King himself could not testify at the inquest. In terms more scientific than plain, he described how Slyke met his death, a death which, he said, must have been instantaneous, as the bullet had lodged in the brain.

"Doctor, do you think the wound could have been self-inflicted?" came the question.

The doctor paused, then answered thoughtfully, "That is very hard to answer. So far as the wound itself is concerned, it could have been self-inflicted. But other things that were brought to my attention cause me to believe that it could not have been so inflicted."

The room stiffened into attention. It was the first hint they had had that Slyke might have been murdered. "Explain your answer. What do you mean by 'other things' were brought to your attention?"

The doctor replied slowly, "The facts I will mention were brought to my attention by Mr. John Bartley, the famous criminal investigator, whom I found at the house when I arrived."

At the mention of Bartley's name a little murmur of surprise went over the room. Half way down the room the reporters, for the first time, were writing hurriedly, and in a minute a telegraph boy went out with a mass of telegrams. Within an hour the fact that Bartley was working on the case would be in all the newspapers' offices in New York.

The doctor continued: "Mr. Bartley aided me in making my examination of the body. The wound, as I have said, one that a man could have easily inflicted upon himself, but such a wound causes death within a few seconds after it is made. I thought at first sight that it was suicide, but Mr. Bartley pointed out that the hands of the dead man, one of which held the revolver, were under the bedclothes and that they were pulled up smoothly around his neck. It would have been impossible for Mr. Slyke himself to have done that. I mean he could not have killed himself and then placed his arms under the clothes, after first pulling them up around his chin. He would not have had time before he died, had he fired the shot. As Mr. Bartley pointed out—and as I should have thought of for myself—in cases of violent death the eyes are open. Mr. Slyke's eyes were almost closed. How they were closed after death, Miss Potter has just told us."

Again there came a murmur of astonishment. The doctor's statement had been entirely unexpected by most of the audience. For the first time it was suggested that, instead of Slyke's having killed himself, he had been murdered. All awaited eagerly further developments.

"Then you would say that Mr. Slyke was murdered?" came the question.

The doctor's answer was a long time in coming.

"I hardly know what to say. What Mr. Bartley pointed out to me causes me to believe that Mr. Slyke was killed. Of course, there is a possibility that the wound might have been self-inflicted, and someone else arranged the bedclothes around his neck after he was dead."

(To Be Continued)



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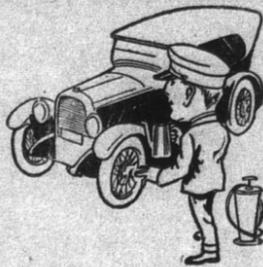
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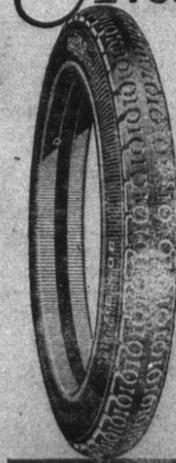


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"Why Did You Think He Killed Himself?"

that goes, I know of no reason why he should have wanted to take his own life."

The next questions were along the line she had suggested by her answers. Could she not think of some reason why he might have committed sui-