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183

'Fresh from the gardens'

The Bishop Murder Case

A PHILO VANCE STORY

BY S. S. VAN DINE

SYNOPSIS.

An insane genius in New York commits hideous crimes based on nursery rhymes. A man known as Cock Robin is found with an arrow in his heart, and one, John Sprigg is shot through the head with a bullet. District Attorney Markham calls in Philo Vance to help solve the crimes.

The following people are associated with the case: Prof. Dillard, his niece Belle, and his protege, Sigurd Arnesson, a professor of mathematics; John Pardee, a neighbor with a passion for chess; Mrs. Drukker and her son Adolph. Mrs. Drukker is mentally unbalanced and her son is a cripple with a super-brain. Mrs. Drukker tells how the murderer paid her a visit the previous night and left a chess bishop as a memento. Vance learns that Adolph Drukker has lied as to his whereabouts on the morning of Cock Robin's death.

CHAPTER XXII.

As we walked slowly toward the Dillard house it was decided that immediate inquiries should be made regarding the whereabout the night before of every person connected in any way with this gruesome drama.

"We must be careful, however, to drop no hint of what befell Mrs. Drukker," warned Vance. "Our midnight bishop-bearer did not intend that we should learn of his call. He believed that the poor lady would be too frightened to tell us."

"I'm inclined to think," objected Markham, "that you're attaching too much importance to the episode."

"Oh, my dear fellow!" Vance stopped short and put both hands on the other's shoulders. "You're much too effete—that's your great shortcomin'. You don't feel—you are no child of nature. The poetry of your soul has run to prose. Now I, on the other hand, give my imagination full sway; and I tell you that the leaving of that bishop at Mrs. Drukker's door was no Hallowe'en prank, but the desperate act of a desperate man. It was meant as a warning."

"You think she knows something?"

"I think she saw Robin's body placed on the range. And I think she saw something else—something she would give her life not to have seen."

In silence we moved on. It was our intention to pass through the wall gate into 75th Street and present ourselves at the Dillards' front door; but as we passed the archery-room the basement door opened, and Belle Dillard confronted us anxiously.

"I saw you coming down the range," she said, with troubled eagerness, addressing her words to Markham. "For over an hour I've been waiting to get in touch with you—phoning your office. . . . Her manner became agitated. "Something strange has happened. Oh, it may not mean anything . . . but when I came through the archeryroom here this morning, intending to call on Lady Mae, some impulse made me go to the tool-chest again and look in the drawer—it seemed so queer that the little revolver should have been stolen. . . . And there it lay—in plain sight—beside the other pistol!" She caught her breath. "Mr. Markham, some one returned it to the drawer last night!"

This information acted electrically on Heath.

"Did you touch it?" he asked excitedly.

"Why—no. . . ."

He brushed past her unceremoniously and, going to the tool-chest, yanked open the drawer. There, beside the larger automatic that we had seen the day before, lay a small pearl-handled .32. The Sergeant's eyes glistened as he ran his pencil through the trigger-guard and lifted it gingerly. He held it to the light and sniffed at the end of the barrel.

"One empty chamber," he announced, with satisfaction. "And it's been shot off recently. . . . This oughta get us somewhere." He wrapped the revolver tenderly in a handkerchief and placed it in his coat pocket. "I'll get Dubois busy on this for fingerprints; and I'll have Cap Hagedorn check up on the bullets."

"Really now, Sergeant," said Vance banteringly; "do you imagine that the gentleman we're looking for would wipe a bow and arrow clean and then leave his digital monogram on a revolver?"

"I haven't got your imagination Mr. Vance," returned Heath surlily. "So I'm going ahead doing the things that oughta be done."

"You're quite right.' Vance smiled with good-natured admiration at the other's dogged thoroughness. "Forgive me for trying to damp your zeal."

He turned to Belle Dillard.

"We came here primarily to see the professor and Mr. Arnesson. But there's also a matter we'd like to speak about to you. We understand you have a key to the rear door of the Drukker house."

She gave him a puzzled nod.

"Yes; I've had one for years. I run back and forth so much; and it saves Lady Mae a lot of bother. . . ."

"Our only interest in the key is that it might have been used by some one who had no right to it."

"But that's impossible. I've never lent it to any one. And I always keep it in my handbag."

"Is it generally known you have a key to the Drukkers'?"

"Why—I suppose so." She was obviously perplexed. "I've never made a secret of it. The family certainly know about it."

"And you may perhaps have mentioned or revealed the fact when there were outsiders present?"

"Yes—though I can't recall any specific instance."

"Are you sure you have the key now?"

She gave Vance a startled look, and without a word picked up a small lizard-skin hand-bag which lay on the wicker table. Opening it she felt swiftly in one of its inner compartments.

"Yes!" she announced, with relief. "It's where I always keep it. . . Why do you ask me about it?"

"It's very important that we know who had access to the Drukker house," Vance told her. Then, before she could question him further, he asked: "Could the key possibly have left your possession last night—that is, could it have been extracted from your bag without your knowledge?"

A look of fright came into her face.

"Oh, what has happened—?" she began; but Vance interrupted her.

"Please, Miss Dillard! There's nothing for you to worry about. We're merely striving to eliminate certain remote possibilities in connection with our investigation. Tell me: could any one have taken your key last night?"

"No one," she answered uneasily. "I went to the theatre at eight o'clock and had my bag with me the entire time."

"When did you last make use of the key?"

"After dinner last night. I ran over to see how Lady Mae was and to say good-night."

Vance frowned slightly. I could see that this information did not square with some theory he had formed.

"You made use of the key after dinner," he recapitulated, "and kept it with you in your hand-bag the rest of the evening, without letting it once go out of your sight. Is that right, Miss Dillard?"

The girl nodded.

"I even held the bag in my lap during the play," she amplified.

Vance regarded the hand-bag thoughtfully.

"Well," he said lightly, "so ends the romance of the key. And now we're going to bother your uncle again. Do you think you'd better act as our *avant-courier;* or shall we storm the citadel unannounced?"

"Uncle is out," she informed us. "He went for a walk along the Drive."

"And Mr. Arnesson, I suppose, has not yet returned from the university."

"No; but he'll be here for lunch. He has no classes Tuesday afternoons."

"In the meantime, then, we'll confer with Beedle and the admirable Pyne. And I might suggest that it would do Mrs. Drukker no end of good if you'd pay her a visit."

With a troubled smile and a little nod the girl passed out through the basement door.

Heath at once went in search of Beedle and Pyne and brought them to the drawing-room, where Vance questioned them about the preceding night. No information, however, was obtained from them. They had both gone to bed at ten o'clock. Their rooms were on the fourth floor at the side of the house; and they had not even heard Miss Dillard when she returned from the theatre. Vance asked them about noises on the range, and intimated that the screen-porch door of the Drukkers might have slammed shut at about midnight. But apparently both of them had been asleep at that hour. Finally they were dismissed with a warning not to mention to any one the questions that had just been asked them.

Five minutes later Professor Dillard came in. Though surprised to see us, he greeted us amiably.

"For once, Markham, you've chosen an hour for your visit when I am not absorbed in work. More questions, I suppose. Well, come along to the library for the inquisition. It'll be more comfortable there." He led the way upstairs, and when we were seated he insisted that we join him in a glass of port which he himself served from the sideboard.

"Drukker should be here," he remarked. "He has a fondness for my 'Ninety-six,' though he'll drink it only on rare occasions. I tell him he should take more port; but he imagines it's bad for him, and points to my gout. But there's no connection between gout and port—the notion is sheer superstition. Sound port is the most wholesome of wines. Gout is unknown in Oporto. A little physical stimulation of the right kind would be good for Drukker. If he had sufficient bodily energy to keep pace with his brain, he'd be one of the world's great physicists."

(To be continued.)

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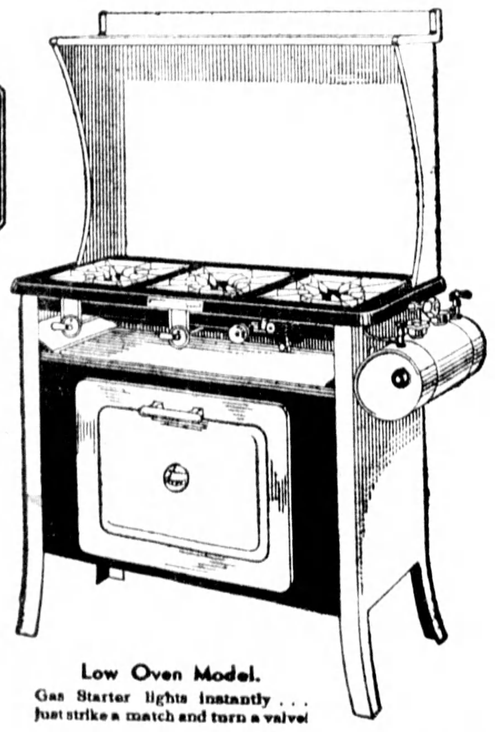

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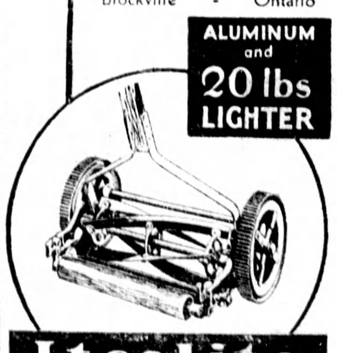

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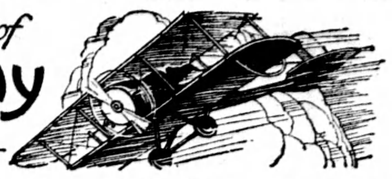

What came before: After many adventures flying over the war zone in China, Captain Jimmy and Scottie get lost in the dark and land in enemy territory. A freight train leaves supplies at a siding, and they are cautiously approaching, when interrupted.

Quietly we approached the freight train. The food and gasoline which we needed so badly would soon be ours. Then, right out of the ground leaped a dark form. A heavy blow landed on my head, and I knew no more.

Gradually I became conscious. Jolt — jolt — jolt! I tried to put my hands to my head but they were securely bound. Someone had tied me on the back of a burro, and just ahead the Colonel and Fu Hsu were securely bound on two more. Numberless other donkeys loaded with bundles and boxes moved in single file along a narrow rocky path, and leading each, strode a wicked looking ruffian, armed to the teeth. Chinese bandits had captured us.

Jolt—jolt—jolt! Through the hills we went, while a great blazing sun scorched us with stifling heat. The bandits had plenty of water, but for us, never a drop. Between drinks they would grin at us, and pat their stomachs, seeming to enjoy our misery. Of Scottie I knew nothing, and became very anxious as to his fate.

Everything must end sometime. Toward nightfall we came in sight of a rift in the mountains, where the sheer cliffs rose for hundreds of feet into the air. Here, indeed, was an ideal spot for a bandit camp. A few men could hold the defile against an army. Below stretched a beautiful valley, green and fresh as a mountain paradise.

The burros, scenting the sweet grass, rushed down toward the bandit camp in a regular stampede. As we approached, a miserable looking mob of men, women and children, swarmed out of the tents.

They were a hard-bitten crowd, every one of them. They jeered at us, and the children pelted us with soft mud. But finally my turn came. Suddenly I dug my toes into that burro and charged the mob. He bowled several over, and in a moment the camp was in an uproar. One fat fellow stood in my way, but that donkey just butted him in the belt, and he landed kerplunk on the side of a tent. After that we galloped off into the night before anyone could saddle a horse.

Up the valley, I found a cliff with sharp edged rocks. Working close to it, I began to rub the ropes which bound my wrists, on the rough surface. Then lights began to twinkle here and there in the valley, as the bandits set out to hunt for me with torches. Five minutes, ten, fifteen, I rubbed those tough ropes, while the lights came nearer, then, just as I had given up hope—they snapped and I was free!

My arms were so numb that I was almost as helpless as a baby. Up and down the valley bobbed the torches—and each torch was carried by a man-hunter. I edged close into the cliff, while the feeling gradually came back into my hands.

Fortunately for me, no one came near my hiding place. Whenever a bandit's torch went out, he would make a dash for camp, so as not to be left alone in the darkness. Probably he was afraid of a dragon jumping on his back, and flying away with him to its den. Anyhow, the torches went out one by one, and the search ended for the time. Soon the camp quieted down. Sentries paced to and fro, but as the night wore on, even these huddled close to the dying camp fires, and dozed in the fitful light.

Just the idea, time for a raid! No one would ever expect a prisoner to suddenly attack a camp full of armed men. Cautiously I set out toward the tents.

(To be continued.)

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