



OUT OF THE DARKNESS

by Charles J. Dutton

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—John Bartley, noted criminal investigator, recently returned from Secret Service work during the war, is asked by the governor of New York to investigate a mysterious attempted robbery of the Robert Slyke home at Circle Lake, near Saratoga. Peculiar circumstances of the case interest Bartley, and he accepts.

CHAPTER II.—With his friend Pat, Bartley goes to Circle Lake, the pair becoming the guests of Bob Currie, an old friend. The three visit the Slyke home. Slyke apparently resents Bartley's coming, saying he is satisfied the two men in prison for the attempted robbery were guilty. Bartley is not. Next morning Slyke is found dead in bed, apparently having shot himself.

CHAPTER III.—Miss Potter, the dead man's sister-in-law, the village police chief, Roche, and the family physician, Doctor King, all agree Slyke killed himself, but Bartley insists he was murdered. Investigating, Bartley finds evidence that Slyke, after a card party he had given, was shot on the tower of the house, undressed, and placed in bed. During his absence from the room someone removes the revolver from Slyke's hand.

Both men grinned at this, and, still smiling, Roche led the way from the room. From the top of the stairs we could see Miss Potter in the living room below, pacing nervously back and forth. When she heard us descending, with Roche in the lead, she stopped at the desk and began to arrange its contents in an effort to cover her nervousness and confusion. She did not look up even when we were at her side.

After waiting for her to speak, Bartley said in a grave tone, "Miss Potter, I understand that you told Officer Roche that you refused to call the servants."

She raised her face, crimson with anger, and tried to answer, but though her lips formed the words not a sound came from them. At last, in a voice broken with passion and with words stumbling one over the other, she said, "I—yes—it's so. I—told Mr. Roche not to call the servants. No one asked you to come here. You have no business in this house—looking into things that do not concern you. Mr. Slyke is dead, and every one will believe that he killed himself in spite of anything you can say. Anything that has to be done Mr. Roche can do. It's none of your business, anyway."

Standing in front of us with her figure straight and her shoulders thrown back defiantly, she almost shrieked the last words at us. She was so angry that she did not seem to know what she was saying. I wondered why she should be in such a rage. So far as I could see, there was no reason for it. We stood silent and embarrassed. Bartley's eyes never left her face. Under his grave scrutiny she flushed and her eyes dropped. "Miss Potter," he said suddenly, "you don't want me to believe that you know who killed your brother-in-law, do you?"

His question seemed the last straw. She turned on him like a fury, and her eyes roved over the desk as if she were looking for something to throw at him. She shrieked, "You

take some of the gentlemen home that were at the card party. When the chauffeur got back I washed the car."

The chauffeur? We started inquiringly at each other, and Bartley said sharply to Roche, "Where is he?"

Roche looked confused and ashamed, then hurried from the room, and Bartley resumed his examination of the boy.

"You said you were washing the car. What then?"

"Yes, sir. I was washing the car. It was after twelve o'clock and I took some time. Then I smoked a cigar a man had given me and went to bed. Just after I crawled in, about half-past one, I guess, I heard a shot. Not very loud, but it was a shot, all right."

"Where did it seem to come from?" Bartley asked.

The boy scratched his head for a moment and looked a bit foolish as he replied, "It's funny, but it seemed to be up in the air near the house."

Bartley threw me a quick glance. This fitted in with his theory that Slyke had been killed on the balcony of the tower. If that theory was right and the shot that the boy had heard was the one that had killed Slyke, he would naturally think that the sound came from the air. I wondered if the boy could tell us anything else of value.

"Did you get out of bed to see if you could discover where the shot came from?"

"No, sir, I did not; but, if I had known that Mr. Slyke had killed himself, you bet your life I would."

From his answer I judged that the servants did not yet know that their employer had been murdered. At least, this boy did not know. He had told us all he knew about the crime, and was soon sent from the room. Only Miss Potter and the butler now remained to be examined.

Roche returned, looking more ashamed than ever. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bartley, but I can't find him. No one has seen the chauffeur, and he doesn't seem to be anywhere about the place."

Bartley accepted his statement with a shrug of disappointment, and turned his attention to the butler.

He was a man of about fifty-five, tall, with a rather thin face of the unemotional kind common to butlers. Though he refused to meet Bartley's eyes, he did not seem to be in the least nervous. What had taken place that night he evidently accepted as something he could not help and need not worry over.

Bartley asked him, first, about the men that were at the card party. To my surprise the butler said he was unable to give the names of all the men, though he knew most of them.

Bartley took down in a little red notebook the names of such men as he could remember. Then he asked suddenly, "And what was the name of the man that stayed after the others left?"

The question seemed to surprise the butler, but he answered, "Mr. Lawrence, sir, the lawyer from Saratoga. Mr. Slyke asked him himself to remain after the others had gone. He went with him up to Mr. Slyke's room and stayed there a few moments. I myself waited here in a chair to let him out and lock up. I did not have to wait long; not more than ten minutes or so."

Bartley glanced at the stairs. "Did Mr. Slyke come down with Mr. Lawrence?" he asked.

"No, sir. I never saw Mr. Slyke again." He paused, then added slowly, "That is, alive."

"And you did not hear the revolver shot, the one the boy heard?"

"No, sir, I did not."

I felt that he was carefully choosing his words and was not giving any more information than he had to. I wondered what it was that he was holding back. Bartley's next question and the answer that it brought proved that I was right.

"Did you see or hear anything last night out of the way?"

The butler was so long in answering that the question had to be asked a second time.

"We were getting impatient before he said, 'I heard nothing suspicious, but I saw—'"

He paused, and Bartley urged, "You saw what?"

The butler glanced from Bartley to the woman in the chair. Miss Potter was looking at him with a curious expression on her face, one not of fear but of wonder, as if she were curious to know what his statement meant.

After glancing at her, he turned to Bartley and said apologetically, "Why, sir, I don't know if what I saw was anything out of the way. I would not have thought of it again if Mr. Slyke had not been found dead. When I got to bed, I began to wonder if I had locked the windows. We were rather fussy about them since the robbery. The more I thought of it the less sure I was; so I got up and was starting to go down into the living room when I saw Miss Ruth, dressed in a long coat, going into her room."

Miss Potter gasped and asked the butler in great astonishment, "But, Robert, how can you say that? You know Miss Ruth was not at home last evening. She spent the night at Saratoga. She has not returned yet."

For a second no one spoke. Bartley's eyes went from the butler to the woman and back again. We all wondered what his next question would be, but we never found out. Suddenly, from above us, a girlish voice called, "Who is talking about me?"

Astonished, we all turned and looked in the direction from which the voice had come. On the top of the stairway a young girl of nineteen years stood looking down at us.

For several seconds Miss Potter seemed unable to believe her eyes, then she half gasped, "Why, Ruth—"

The girl, surprised at the effect her simple question had made, clutched her blue silk dressing gown closer about her and started down the stairs. It was plain that she had just gotten out of bed and had not yet had time to dress. Her eyes went from one person to another questioningly. Who were we, and what were we doing here?

As she came slowly down the steps we watched her in silence. She was

nothing of the tragedy that had taken place, evidently, or she would not have been so carefree. She waited, and as her aunt did not seem able to tell her what had happened she turned again to Roche. After swallowing hard for a moment or two the chief stammered out, "Why, Miss Ruth, you see, we—that is—well, Mr. Slyke has been killed."

The laughing look in her eyes faded and one of surprise, blended with horror, took its place. For a second, that to me seemed an hour, she waited, steadying herself by her hand on the table. Then she asked slowly, almost spelling out each word, "Dead—dead—why—how?"

Again a silence. No one wanted to tell her what had taken place. Her eyes sought each one of us in turn and then rested on Bartley, as if she recognized that he was in charge. A glance passed between the two, then he told her what we had found.

Though the girl had been startled, I noticed that she was not overwhelmed with grief. Neither had the older woman been. In fact we had yet to hear any word of regret that Slyke was dead. That the girl's astonishment at Bartley's story had been genuine there was no doubt; still the butler's assertion that he had seen

her go into her room when she was supposed to have been away from the house had to be explained. Her unexpected presence here this morning seemed to add color to the statement. A glance at her dressing gown with her nightdress peeping beneath it showed that she had just come from her bed. Yet her aunt's surprise at her appearance had also seemed genuine.

"Your aunt told us" Bartley said to her that you were away spending the night with a friend but the butler says he saw you early this morning going into your own room."

The girl flushed as if she realized the gravity of her position, and sank into a chair before she answered, "I did intend to spend the night with a friend in Saratoga. On our way home from a dance at the lake our machine lost a tire and it took so long to replace it that as we were near the house I decided to come home. Not wishing to go through the woods alone at that hour I got Uncle Richard to come with me."

Seeing that we were puzzled by the mention of her uncle, she explained that he was really a cousin of her

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She Was a Handsome Girl, With Beautiful Red Hair and the Creamy White Skin That Goes With It.

a handsome girl with beautiful red hair and the creamy white skin that goes with it. When she reached her aunt's side, Miss Potter was still too astonished to speak and the girl gave Roche an appealing look. She was beginning to realize that something was wrong.

"Have the burglars been here again?" she asked.

Not trusting herself to speak, Miss Potter shook her head. The girl knew

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MAIN AT CHURCH

HORNELL, N. Y.



She Shrieked, "You Say I Know Who Killed Him—I Know!"

say I know who killed him—I—I know? Why, I don't even believe that he was murdered. How dare you say that—how can you stand there and say it to my face?"

Bartley shrugged his shoulders. "I don't say that you know, but if you keep on acting like this whenever you are asked a question some one else will. If it should come out at the inquest, for instance, that you refused to allow us to question the servants, people may not only think you know, but they may go even further. If you don't aid us, Roche can arrest you for obstructing an officer in the performance of his duty."

She was silent for a moment. Then she

place to fear, and she looked at us helplessly. Bartley realized that, overcome by what she had been through, she was not herself, and added kindly, "I know this death must have shocked you terribly, Miss Potter. I am trying my best to make it easier for you. I did not force myself into the house. Doctor King himself asked me to come this morning. What you do not seem to comprehend is that a serious crime has been committed. Your brother-in-law has been murdered, and the law will demand to know if you did everything in your power to help us to discover the murderer."

For a moment she said nothing, then she turned and faced Bartley, her eyes searching his, and in the tone of one weary and broken she said, "I will do what I can to help you."

She hesitated and brushed the unkempt hair again and again from her eyes, as if hardly knowing what she was doing.

"It's driving me wild. I am half crazy," she cried suddenly, and taking an uncertain step forward stumbled almost to her knees.

Bartley placed his arm around her and led her to a chair. Then turning to Roche, he asked him to call the servants.

As soon as Roche had gone, Bartley began to examine the room. A few feet away from him were three card tables, their surfaces littered with playing cards, just as they had been thrown down when the last game was over; so, too, the chairs were in the same position into which they had been pushed when the players rose for the last time. Bartley picked up the cards on the nearest table and counted them. He did the same thing with those on the second table and on the third. At the last table he paused longer than he had at the other two. Finally he took from his pocket the two cards we had found in the tower and motioned to me to join him.

As I reached Bartley's side, he asked me to count the cards on the table. I did so and found the pack was two cards short. As I finished, he handed me the two cards that we had found upstairs saying, "Look at these."

I scanned the two cards he gave me and then those on the table. The pack was an ordinary one, such as is sold for a dollar. Not only the signs on the backs were the same, but the texture of the cardboards as well.

"Do you realize what that shows?" asked Bartley.

"That the cards we found in the tower are from the pack on this table."

"Yes! They may have been dropped up there by the murderer, or they may have been placed there to make us believe that someone in the poker party had committed the crime."

"Why couldn't it have been done," I suggested, "by someone in the party?"

"He was thoughtful for a second or two, then slowly shook his head. "Of course, it might have been, but I think that the odds are against it. This is no ordinary crime, though some one wanted us to think it was a commonplace suicide. The criminal was afraid, however, that we might discover it to be murder and prepared for that emergency."

"How do you make that out?" I asked, astonished.

"An ordinary criminal," Bartley spoke so softly that Miss Potter could not hear—"would never have taken all the trouble involved in undressing Slyke and placing him in bed. That was intended to give the idea of suicide; but, as the murderer knew there was a chance of some one suspecting that it was murder, he took the cards from the table and placed them where we could find them. He knew that the finding of cards in the tower would throw suspicion upon everyone present at the game. It is to me only an additional link in evidence that proves it was not suicide."

Roche returned, bringing with him the butler, three women and a boy. None of them could give us any information of value. Bartley soon dismissed them.

After they had gone, Bartley turned to the boy who, from the excited way he was wriggling, evidently wanted to say something. It came out with an eagerness that was almost laughable.

"I heard a gun last night," he cried. "You did?" asked Bartley, started for a second.

The boy nodded eagerly.

"Yes, sir. Last night, sir."

Bartley placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Where were you when you heard the shot? What time was it?"

"Well, sir," the boy began, "you see, I work out in the garage, wash the cars and such things. I sleep over in the kitchen. Last night, you know, we had the big car out to