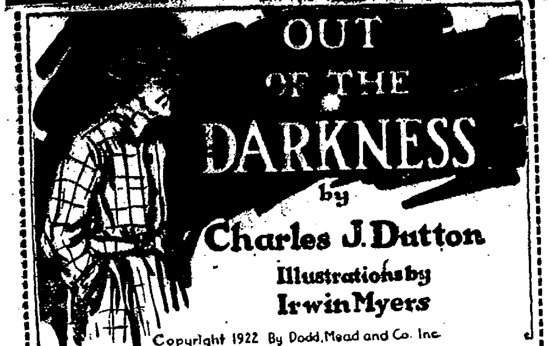

SYNOPSIS

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 Pelt, 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 Pottar, 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.

CHAPTER IV.—A boy working in the garage asserts he heard a shot during the night, apparently "in the air," of course really on the tower.

CHAPTER V.—Pelt starts out to interview the members of the card party. He finds to his surprise that Slyke, apparently wealthy broker, had offered to sell his friends whisky. He finds evidence that the men in jail for attempted robbery of Slyke were "framed."

CHAPTER VI.—Returning from a visit to Saratoga, Bartley, Pelt and Currie come upon a large motor truck, without lights and off the road. They are discovered endeavoring to ascertain the license number, and fired on. The truck gets away. The three come upon a long-disused burial vault. Apparently the lock is new, and Bartley picks it. They find the vault stored with whisky, and also the revolver which had been found in Slyke's hand. A man, seemingly well acquainted with the place, arrives, and they detain him. It is Slyke's missing chauffeur. A detective, working for the revenue department, arrives and takes charge of the vault.

CHAPTER VII.—After considering all the mysterious angles of the case, Bartley apparently reaches no conclusion as to the murderer. He is satisfied that deals in whisky had something to do with it. Miss Potter's firm belief in the "ouija board," and spiritualism also seems to interest him.

CHAPTER VIII

The Inquest Opens.

It was only natural, after the lateness of the hour at which I went to bed, that I should oversleep the next morning. It was well after nine before I entered the breakfast room; I found no one there but a servant who told me that the others had eaten some time before. When I had finished my breakfast I went in search of Bartley, and found him in the sun parlor surrounded by a mass of newspapers. He waved to me and went on reading.

The inquest was not to be held until one o'clock; and I wondered what Bartley wanted me to do with my morning. As if in answer to my thought, he looked up and said he was going into Saratoga on some errands, and suggested that I go with him and interview the girl friend with whom Ruth had intended to spend the night.

The first place we stopped on our arrival in town was at a large drug store, where Bartley asked to see the proprietor. When he appeared, Bartley placed a small object on the counter before him.

"Can you give me any idea," he asked, "what sort of a bottle that cork came from?"

The object was the little stopper with the red wax which he had showed me the night before. Picking it up, the druggist looked at it very carefully. He turned it over in his hand, scratched the wax with a knife, and took so long in replying that I thought he never would speak.

"I think I can," he said at last. "The little cork not only had its top covered with red wax, but the wax ran down the sides of the bottle. In order to get it open, it was necessary to cut the wax away. It looks to me as if it came from a Park Graham bottle."

"You mean the drug firm?" Bartley asked.

"Yes. I will show you."

He went behind the screen and returned in a second with a little bottle in his hand. It was but a few inches long, and the cork stopper was covered in the same manner with red wax, and part of it had run down the sides of the bottle. It was the mate to the stopper that Bartley had found. Bartley examined the bottle carefully, noted the label, and returned it to the druggist.

When we were again in the automobile, Bartley said, "I wish I were as sure what that stopper was doing in that room as the druggist is of the kind of a bottle it came out of."

Bartley's real object in coming to town was, however, to visit the jail and find out from Roche whether the chauffeur had told what he knew or not. I left him at the jail door, promising to return within an hour, and went in search of [illegible] with whom Slyke's [illegible] expected to [illegible] When I found [illegible] here not all [illegible]

the way she had happened to go home the night of the murder. They had been to a dance together, and on the way back the car had broken down near the entrance to the Slyke estate. Ruth said, as she was so near, she might as well go home. One of the young men had gone with her to the little cottage where her uncle lived. He had waited until the old man had come downstairs, and had then rejoined his party. Ruth's story had been true, and I saw how very foolish my suggestion to Bartley had been that she might have committed the murder.

When I returned to the jail, about an hour later, I found that Bartley had gone to Doctor King's office, and I followed him there at once. It was the usual physician's office, with cases of instruments along the walls and a flat-top desk in the center of the room. Bartley and the doctor were bending over a small pad when I entered, and Bartley told me that the doctor had been drawing for him a little map of the roads around the Slyke estate. The doctor looked older than when I had seen him first, far more tired and nervous. It took several years to get over shell shock, from which he suffered, he told us, and he had been very foolish to start to practice again so soon after his return from the front. He recounted a few of his war experiences, and they were enough to have broken any man. He said that, as soon as his duties in regard to the Slyke case were over, he was going to take a rest. All the time he talked to us he played with a pencil or tapped the desk in front of him.

We spoke of the inquest, and he told us that he did not need to call a coroner's jury unless he wished. The facts were so complex or so simple—

He Suggested That, If It Were Murder, Someone From Saratoga Might Have Committed the Crime.

it was hard to say which—that a jury would be confused by them. He admitted that there was no doubt that Slyke had been murdered, but doubted if any jury would bring in a verdict of murder on such slight evidence as we had. He suggested that, if it were murder, some one from Saratoga might have committed the crime. It was not a bad suggestion, and to my surprise Bartley seemed to regard it favorably. The doctor mentioned the chauffeur's arrest, and said that he had only known the man by sight. We talked for an hour or more, then returned home.

Bartley was in his room changing his suit for luncheon, when a telephone call came for him. When he returned he told me that the call had been from Mr. Slyke's lawyer. He had 'phoned him, Bartley said, that among the papers in the safe was an envelope with ten thousand dollars in bills in it, and that the bank had informed him that, on the day of our arrival Slyke had deposited thirteen thousand dollars with them.

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.

[illegible]uncheon over, Currie, Bartley and I [illegible] for the inquest. The newspapers had evidently received a tip [illegible] was more in Slyke's death [illegible] for when we ar[illegible] ed to run a gaunt[illegible] the recognized Bart[illegible]

ley 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 [illegible]

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 me. "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 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-

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