Out of the Darkness

By CHARLES J. DUTTON

Illustrations by Irwin Meyers

CHAPTER XII

In Which the Robbery Is Solved.

I had intended to spend the next morning in either fishing or playing golf. Bartley had left in such a hurry that he had given me no instructions as to what I was to do in his absence. But when I came down to breakfast, by my plate was a telegram from him, reminding me to see the boy in the garage and learn from him what he knew of the robbery. I had entirely forgotten the chauffeur's dying statement.

After a late breakfast, I took the car and drove once more to the Slyke house.

Leaving the car in the driveway in front of the house, I went around it the rear. The house appeared deserted, although it was the day of Slyke's funeral.

The garage was some yards from the house, half hidden among the trees. It was two stories high, built of stone, the upper story being used as living quarters for the men employed in it. The door stood open and I entered. Coming from the bright sunlight into the darkened room, it was several moments before I could see clearly enough to make out that it was occupied by a large touring car, two small runabouts and a large truck. There was no one in sight, and after waiting a moment, I called loudly. The boy I wished to see slouched out from a back room.

He was about eighteen, with heavy figure, red face and unbrushed hair. His suit was dirty with oil from the cars. If he wondered what I wanted, he gave no sign of it. His eyes met mine clearly and honestly, as if he had no secrets to hide.

At first he stoutly denied that he knew anything at all about the robbery. He seemed to have the idea that I thought he was implicated in it. All he admitted knowing was a bit of gossip that he had picked up around the house at the time it was committed. The more I questioned him the more he insisted that he knew nothing about it, and I almost believed him. But the chauffeur, at the point of death, had said, "Ask the boy." It stood to reason then that he must know something of importance. At last I told him that the chauffeur had insisted that he knew, and asked if anyone had ever told him anything about the crime. A startled look came into his face; and he turned to me excitedly, his words tumbling over each other.

The Boy I Wished to See Slouched Out From a Back Room.

"Maybe that's what he meant. But, good Lord, I thought it was a joke, darned if I didn't. I thought he was kidding me; he was drunk, you know."

"Who was drunk?" I asked.

"Briffeur. He was very drunk, sir. You see, you asked me did I know anything about those men breaking into Slyke's, and I didn't; but Briffeur told me one night—"

He paused.

"Go on," I commanded.

"It was one night soon after the trial. Briffeur came drifting in here, pretty well lighted up. When he was that way, he used to talk a lot; but he never told the truth at such times, as I'd often found out. He never knew afterward what he had been saying. He would tell awful yarns about women, and the like. No one ever believed him."

I brought the boy to the point by asking what it was the chauffeur had told him. He hesitated, then in a voice that showed that he thought what he was going to say was almost too foolish to mention, he added, "He got to talking about that robbery, and said it was to laugh, the way the trial had gone, that no one knew that he had committed the robbery—so the lawyer himself and one other. I thought, of course, it was one of his wild yarns, and laughed at him. When I asked him why he did it, he said Slyke owed him lots of money, and that he was after it."

It was natural that the boy should have thought this conversation of no more importance than many others of the chauffeur, when he was drunk and boasting about things that had never happened.

The chauffeur, he said, had come into the garage, "lit up like a battleship." The talk had veered around to the robbery, and he had boasted that the two men were in jail for the robbery that he himself had committed. Who had helped him, he did not say. He claimed that Slyke owed him "lots of money." It seemed absurd that a wealthy man like Slyke should owe his chauffeur money and not pay it. He had even boasted that the evidence against the men in prison was arranged by himself.

It seems that the morning after the robbery he had gone to the post office for the mail, and a copy of the Boston Evening Times, a paper to which Slyke did not subscribe, had been handed to him by mistake. He had been reading a book only a few days before, "filled with murders and the like," and he remembered the account of a robbery in it and how the evidence was manufactured. On his way home he stopped at the police station for information, and offered to drive the police out to the home of the men who had been arrested. It seems that the state police had taken them to their own homes and allowed one of the men to change his coat before taking him to jail. The local police wanted to search the coat which had been left behind. It was here that the chauffeur had his first idea of planting the evidence. He tore the corner off the paper, and at the man's house managed to slip the newspaper into the pocket of the coat before the police examined it. Later, at Slyke's, he threw the little torn piece of paper on the floor so that they could find that, too.

When he had finished, I wondered if the boy had not been right when he thought that the man had been simply fooling him. But if it were true, his story, taken with the dying words of the chauffeur, would be enough to free the men in prison. I decided to take him with me to the police station and let him tell his story to Roche.

On our arrival in Saratoga we were lucky enough to find both Roche and Black together. Without any comment on my part, I had the boy repeat his story to the two officers. They listened with a good deal of interest. Roche, of course, had handled the robbery, and knew more about it than Black; but Black, I knew, believed that Briffeur was the murderer of Slyke, and the boy's story confirmed his belief.

We debated the story for an hour, Roche taking the view that the chauffeur might have been fooling the boy, and Black that the chauffeur had told the truth and was too drunk to realize what he had said.

Roche clinched his argument by demanding, "Why, under heaven, should Slyke owe Briffeur a large sum of money?"

That was, we all agreed, the weak point in the story.

"My Lord," Roche exclaimed as a thought occurred to him, "do you realize that it was Briffeur that found the torn pieces of cloth on the rose bush, the piece that fitted into the man't pants?"

In astonishment I asked, "It was?"

"It sure was. He came into the police station a few days later with it and told us where he had discovered it, and asked if we knew what it was. We found later that it fitted into a hole in the pants one of the fellows was wearing."

"Was he ever in the cell with those men?" Black asked, with a glance at me.

"Yes, several times. Slyke asked that we let him go in and talk to them."

Black threw out his hands in disgust. "My G—, Roche, one would think you kept a hotel. You let anyone go in and out that wanted to."

Roche flushed, and replied angrily, "Well, Slyke had lots of pull here, and I don't think it did any harm to let his chauffeur see those men."

"Why Under Heaven Should Slyke Owe Briffeur a Large Sum of Money?"

"Humph," said Black dryly. "It only gave him a chance to whip a piece from one of the men's trousers."

"That's foolish," Roche laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," was Black's answer. "You can't prove he did not. You never saw the piece of cloth until he brought it in to you. He was in the cell alone with them, and had the chance to cut out the piece of cloth. You can't prove that the chauffeur's story is not true. It fits in better with facts than the evidence that sent those men to jail. But, oh boy, the easy way you run this jail!"

Roche scowled at us, and was about to retort when he was called from the room. Black and I lighted cigars and smoked in silence.

"Mr. Pelt," he asked at last, "what do you think of my theory that Briffeur murdered Slyke?"

I had given little thought to the matter, and said as much. Black surprised me by adding, "You know that Doctor King and the district attorney think that the only verdict that can be brought in in the Slyke case is suicide?"

Black's remarks astonished me. True, I realized that it was almost impossible to present convincing legal proof that Slyke had been murdered, but there was still the chauffeur's death to be explained. If he had been killed, as Bartley thought, because he knew too much about Slyke's death, then it seemed to me that to bring in a verdict of suicide would be impossible. I told Black of this objection, and he agreed with me.

Then he reiterated his belief in Briffeur's guilt. According to him, the story the chauffeur told the boy fitted in well with his own theory. True, there was little to base it on, so far as evidence went; but, assuming that Slyke and the chauffeur had quarreled about money, his strongest bit of evidence was Briffeur's coming to the vault where the missing revolver was hidden. No one else, so far as we knew, had quarreled with Slyke, or had any reason for wanting to kill him. Black explained the chauffeur's death by saying Miss Potter had killed him. I told him this last disproved his first theory, that whoever had killed the chauffeur had done so because he knew too much about Slyke's death.

I found that it was nearly four o'clock, and as I had had no luncheon I decided to get something to eat before Bartley's train came in. Just as I reached the door Black called after me, "Say, Pelt, what does your chief want us all over for, to Slyke's tonight?"

This was the first time that I had heard we were expected to go there; and, seeing my astonishment, he added that Bartley had sent word for Roche and himself to be at Slyke's promptly at eight o'clock. I was forced to admit that I did not know as much about it as he did.

I went to a little tea room on the main street, and had almost finished my meal when someone called my name, and a reporter from the Record, whom I knew, rose and joined me. He mentioned the Slyke case and said that everyone was waiting for Bartley to "spring something." He complained that there was little enough information to be gotten about it. All he had been able to do had been to interview the men that had been at Slyke's home the night of his death. One of them told him, however, that three or four times during the evening Slyke had tried to reach someone on the 'phone—just who, he did not know.

I had now barely time to reach the station before Bartley's train pulled in, and I bade him a hurried farewell.

As Bartley and I drove down the main street of Saratoga, he said, "By the way, Pelt, stop at a store and get me five slates."

"Five what?" I asked.

He grinned. "Five slates. The kind used years ago in school. I want them all the same size."

He threw back his head and laughed. "They are usually used to write on, Pelt, but you will find out tonight what I want them for."

I stopped at a little stationery store, and returned in a moment with five slates. As I was getting back into the car, I remembered what the reporter had told me about Slyke's trying to get someone on the telephone, and I repeated his story to Bartley. He said nothing for a moment, then asked me to drive to the telephone exchange. He spent ten minutes in the building; and, when he came out, he seemed well pleased with his visit but did not mention its result.

As we drove along I told him the boy's story. When I had finished he smiled. "I believe the chauffeur told the boy the truth. He had been drinking, but that is when a man often speaks the truth."

I glanced at him to see if he were in earnest, and he nodded. "Yes, I am serious. Briffeur had broken into Slyke's house. He never spoke of this crime, but he thought a good deal about it. When he got drunk, his subconscious mind told the secret that he was trying to hide. I believe that what Briffeur said was the truth about the robbery."

"But why should he try to rob Slyke?" I asked.

"I am not sure. My theories are beginning to make a more or less connected whole, but there are still some gaps to be bridged."

Currie heard the car as it stopped before the house and came out to greet Bartley. As Mrs. Currie was in town, we did not change for dinner. During the meal the murder was not mentioned. Bartley went to his room immediately afterward. I sat with Currie for a while, smoking; then I excused myself. I was eager to learn what Bartley had discovered in New York. I found him in his room, stretched out in a big armchair, one leg thrown over its arm, his pipe in his mouth. As I watched him I thought how little one would suppose that he was engaged in solving two mystifying murders. He looked up as I entered, smiled, and went back to his reading.

"How did your trip come off?" I asked.

"Well, Pelt," he drawled, as he placed his long yellow-covered book on the floor, "Arentino certainly knew the criminal life of his day."

His remark had, of course, to do with the book that he had been reading, and nothing with my question. Seeing my disappointment, he laughed. "The trip wasn't of much importance. The man did buy the whisky from Slyke. He had bought all that was in the vault, but had only removed one truck load when he was caught. He paid $23,000 for it that afternoon, and left on the seven o'clock train for New York. His alibi is perfect; he knows nothing about the murder. The alibi of the men on the truck also is perfect. They did not reach Saratoga until noon on the day after Slyke's death. They dealt only with one man."

"One man?" I echoed. "Who?"

He watched my face for a moment, then replied simply, "Briffeur!"

I had half expected that answer. It made the chauffeur's story that Slyke owed him money seem reasonable. It even hinted that the chauffeur had tried to blackmail Slyke, and made Black's theory that Briffeur had killed Slyke seem not unreasonable.

"The men on the truck," Bartley continued, "did not know Briffeur's name; but their description of the man who unlocked the door of the vault for them fitted Briffeur."

"But—" I ventured.

"But what?" he countered.

"That connects Slyke and Briffeur."

He was silent for a moment, his face grave. Then he said slowly, "Yes, Pelt, it does. If the chauffeur had not been killed himself, he would be suspected of causing Slyke's death But there is one thing—"

"And what is that?' I asked eagerly.

"Briffeur said some one else was implicated in that robbery. What I want to know is, who was that other man." He paused, then added: "There is no doubt, Pelt, that Slyke had been selling whisky for some time. Where he got it, and who was in on it with him, we don't know. Maybe tonight we can find out."

Currie's voice called from below that the car was waiting to take us to Slyke's house, and we rose. As I started for the door, Bartley handed me a package and gave me a playful shove.

"Don't drop them," he laughed.

I gave him a disgusted look. "But these are the slates."

"So they are, but they may talk for us tonight."

And with that absurd suggestion in my ears, I went down the stairs to join Currie.

(To be continued)

How well have you advertised your property for sale?

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

Pursuant to an order of Hon. Bernard B. Ackerman, Surrogate of Allegany County, notice is hereby given to all persons having claims against Roxana B. Burrows, late of Andover, in the County of Allegany, deceased, that they are required to present the same with the vouches thereof, to Frank W. Burrows, the executor of the last will and testament of the said deceased, at the Burrows National Bank in the Village of Andover, N. Y., on or before the fifteenth day of July, 1923.

FRANK W. BURROWS,
Executor.

Robbins, Phillips & Robbins,
Attorneys for Executor,
Hornell, N. Y. 26

NOTICE!

My wife, Martha M. Coats, having left home without just cause or provocation, all persons are hereby forbidden to harbor or trust her on my account.

ELMER COATS.

Dated March 28, 1923. 16