

Out of the Darkness

By CHARLES J. DUTTON

Illustrated by Lewis Meyers

CHAPTER XIV

The Murderer Speaks.

Who turned on the lights I do not know. As soon as they flashed on, we looked at each other inquiringly, our eyes filled with fear. Who had cried out in terror and broken the circle?

Bartley motioned to us to sit down again, and took his stand back of the table. He seemed to me to be very weary, and his eyes rested on us sadly, as if he were reluctant to proceed further. It was not until we moved restlessly under his intent gaze that he said, "I am not going to make any comment on what we have just seen." He paused for a second, then added impressively, "But I think I ought to tell you that I know who killed both Slyke and Briffeur."

There was a murmur of astonishment. Currie looked at me appealingly, but I knew no more than he. Roche whispered to Black, and they exchanged looks of bewilderment.

Bartley still hesitated, as if he were very reluctant to continue.

"I know that some of you doubt if we can prove that Mr. Slyke was murdered. You say there are no clues, and I admit that I have never seen a case in which there were so few. There is no doubt, however, that he was murdered, though it is difficult to say what the motive was. In the case of Briffeur, it was very simple."

"Simple?" Roche gasped.

"Yes, simple. There was but one reason and one way, and even one person, that could have killed him."

This statement was too much for Roche; he shook his head in disbelief.

"Let's consider Mr. Slyke's death for a moment," Bartley continued. "After the party was over, Slyke asked Mr. Lawrence to stay behind and offered to sell him some whisky. They had a drink, then Lawrence went home. But we found three glasses, showing that someone besides Lawrence had drunk with Slyke. Let us say this third person killed Slyke. Understand me: I do not believe that, when he came, he had any intention of killing him—that came later. We will assume that Slyke and this third person went upon the balcony, for what reason I cannot say, but I am sure that Slyke was the one that suggested going there. No murderer would have selected it, voluntarily, as a place in which to kill his victim."

He paused for a second, then continued: "After Slyke had been killed, the thought occurred to the murderer that it was possible to make his death look like suicide. He undressed the body in the room above the bedroom, and later carried his clothing downstairs, placing it on a chair beside the bed. But he overlooked a stocking that had fallen on the floor behind the door of the room above. Criminals, no matter how shrewd, always make some mistake that betrays them; this person drew the bedclothes up around Slyke's neck. If he had not done that, I doubt if we would ever have suspected that Slyke was murdered. The shot took effect at once. It would have been impossible for him to have drawn the bedclothes up around his own neck, and placed his hands by his side before he died."

The doctor's voice sounded perplexed as he said, "But, Mr. Bartley, this is all a rather fine-spun theory."

"I expected that someone would say that," Bartley smiled. "It is more than an unsupported theory. However, let us proceed. The murderer went down to the living room and brought back with him two cards, which he threw on the floor of the room where the glasses were. If his being suicide was questioned, then the finding of the cards would throw suspicion on the members of the card party."

"He was a pretty cool hand," Black interrupted.

"Yes, he was cool enough. He went downstairs into the room where the dog was—"

"But—" Roche commenced.

Bartley did not let him finish. "Yes, I know. The dog should have barked. The reason he did not was because the man was no stranger to him."

The doctor spoke once more, "But you have not proved any of these things are so; you are just supposing."

"No," came the answer, "I have not, but let us consider some of the points that have been proved. Slyke tried to telephone several times during the evening and failed to get his party each time."

Roche and Black were astonished. "This was the first time they had heard anything about the telephone calls."

"When he failed again and again to get the person he wanted," Bartley continued, "he asked central to try

and locate him for him. All calls from here go through the Saratoga exchange, and it was very easy to find out whom he wanted. But that is not all. On a magazine found on the table beside the whisky glasses were a number of little circles drawn with a pencil, circles that ran into each other."

"What has that to do with it?" asked Black, voicing his wonder.

"A great deal. Those same circles were on the handle of the knife with which Briffeur was killed. I have also a little piece of paper with similar circles drawn on it, and I know the person who drew them. It has been proved scientifically that if a person is playing with a pencil and begins to make figures unthinkingly on anything, his subconscious mind will trick him into always drawing the same design. I found the circles on the magazine in Slyke's room, on the knife that killed Briffeur, and again on the piece of paper. I know to whom Slyke telephoned, and I know also a person who saw the murderer enter the house to call on Slyke the night he was killed."

We leaned forward breathlessly to catch his words, which came with a cold, cutting edge, as he added crisply, "Now, knowing all this, don't you think the person that drew the circles, that was telephoned to, that was seen going into Slyke's, has something to explain? Don't you think so, Doctor King?"

There was no answer, and Bartley demanded sternly, "Doctor King, you are not going to deny, are you, that you killed those two men?"

The question was so unexpected that I sat stunned. He was the last man I should have suspected. Currie cried, "My G—d, John," and fell silent. The doctor's face had gone a dead white, and he sank limply back in his chair. Without raising his eyes, he stammered, scarcely above a whisper, the words drawn from him against his will, "No—no—I killed them both."

The next instant he realized what he had said and half rose from his chair, then fell back, clasping his head in his hands. I could not believe my ears. That Bartley should suspect the doctor of the murders seemed incredible enough; but that the doctor himself should admit that it was true was beyond belief. Roche looked first at the doctor, then at Bartley, his eyes bulging with astonishment. Black alone seemed to realize that the doctor's admission entailed. Currie was still too dazed to understand, for King had been a good friend of his.

Bartley broke the silence with, "We have proved that the doctor is the guilty party. He himself has admitted it. I have suspected him for some time, but when he gave that cry as Slyke's figure appeared, I knew that I was right."

The doctor was still sitting with his head in his hands, and Bartley glanced down at him pityingly before he continued to the rest of us, "From the first, I suspected that whoever had killed Slyke had some knowledge of medicine. The average layman would not have known how to place the revolver in Slyke's hand in such a way that it would appear to be suicide. The point that puzzled me was that the eyes were almost closed. If the guilty person knew enough to place the revolver in Slyke's hand before it stiffened, he should have known that the eyes ought to be open. Miss Potter explained this discrepancy by saying that she had closed the eyes herself, frightened by their stare. Then I was baffled. True, there were the circles on the magazine, but I did not know who made them and there seemed no way of finding out. Then one day, while I was in the doctor's office, he kept drawing little figures on a pad before him as he talked. When he was called to the phone, I took out the piece of paper on which he had been drawing and had carelessly thrown it into a waste-paper basket as he passed. On it were the same figures that I had found on the magazine cover. Even then I was slow to believe he could be the murderer, though science had proved that a person always draws the same design. I found the same symbols on the knife handle. There was but one way he could have been killed."

"My G—d, how?" Roche gasped out.

"The knife blow came from the front. You who sat next to the chauffeur heard nothing. No one could have crept up on him without making some sound. Therefore the knife had to be thrown."

"Thrown?" we gasped.

"Yes. That was the only way it could have reached him. The blow came from directly in front of Briffeur. It could only be thrown. Upon

the knife handle were the circles such as I had found elsewhere. Someone had scratched them on it in a moment of idleness. It was a treacherous knife. Doctor King had been to the front; he was the only one directly in front of Briffeur, and the only one who could have thrown it. We had all agreed that Briffeur was killed because he knew who had murdered Slyke, and that the same man murdered them both. There is another proof, also. The only person, outside of the family, that the dog liked was Doctor King. The day we found Slyke dead the dog came in, growled at the rest of us but let King pat him."

The doctor raised his head, his face white save for two red spots in either cheek. His eyes were pools of black.



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ing light. He looked at us wildly for a second, then threw out his hands and in a voice, low at first but growing louder as he continued, he admitted, "Yes, I killed them. I never intended to do so, God knows! It all goes back some time—"

Bartley interrupted him. "To the time when you got mixed up with Slyke and Briffeur, selling whisky?"

"Yes—yes, that was it. It goes back to that." His voice faltered, then he recovered. "I came back from the war, broke. Slyke suggested that I go in with him on running whisky. I had a camp and fast motorboat on Lake Champlain; it was all I did have. He suggested we run the whisky down the lake from Canada to my camp, then bring it on here and hide it in the vault. He never played fair with us; he cheated us again and again. That's why Briffeur suggested we break into the house and see if he had told the truth about the amount of money he said he got for it. He kept the records of all our sales in his safe. We tried to—you know the rest about the robbery."

His voice trailed off into a whisper. I recalled that he had been shell-shocked, and wondered if he could stand the strain he was undergoing.

"The night I was at Currie's to dinner and met Mr. Bartley it was Slyke who called me up on the phone."

His voice was shrill now, and I thought he would break down at any moment.

"He said he wished to see me, and I started over here. I ran into Briffeur, who told me that Slyke had sold the rest of the whisky for \$23,000. Well—where was I? He stopped, confused, and passed his hand over his face."

"Oh, yes—the whisky. I went up to the tower, and he suggested we go out on the balcony—why, I don't know. I asked him what he got for the whisky, and he said \$10,000. I knew he lied, and I told him so. We quarreled, quarreled—All at once, he flashed a revolver on me and said he had a good mind to kill me—he had been drinking—"

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He paused; his head sank again into his hands. I saw that Bartley pitied him deeply and his voice was soft and his face grave as he asked, "And Briffeur?"

With an effort the doctor raised his head.

"I was always afraid of that man. He was cruel and treacherous. When I saw him at the inquest I knew that all was over; that he would give me away. And when the lights went out,