

THE "CANARY" MURDER CASE

by S. S. VAN DINE AUTHOR OF THE BENSON MURDER CASE © Charles Scribner's Sons

THE STORY THUS FAR

Margaret O'Neil is found strangled. Skel's fingerprints are found in the apartment, but Vance believes Skel had been hiding in a closet, while the stranger did his work. The thing that baffles police is the side door to the alley, which had been bolted on the inside the night before and was found the same way in the morning. Markham, the landlady and Cleo and all the about their whereabouts the night of the murder. Spotswood, who had called on the girl, had rushed to her door at the sound of a scream, but had been reassured that everything was all right. Then Skel is found strangled, after promising to tell who murdered the girl. Heath arrests Jessup, believing him the only one able to make the side door bolt, but Vance demonstrates how Skel could have done it.

CHAPTER XLV
(Monday, Sept. 17, noon)

WHEN Vance finished speaking, there was several minutes silence. Markham sat deep in his chair glaring into space. Heath, however, was watching Vance with a kind of grudging admiration.

The corner stone in the foundation of his case against Jessup had been knocked out and the structure he had built was tottering precariously. Markham realized this, and the fact played havoc with his hopes.

"I wish your inspirations were more helpful," he grumbled, turning his gaze upon Vance.

"This latest revelation of yours

puts us back almost to where we started from."

"Oh, don't be pessimistic. Let us face the future with a bright eye. Want to hear my theory?"

It's fairly bulging with possibilities. He arranged himself comfortably in his chair. "Skel needed money—no doubt his silk shirts were running low—and after his unsuccessful attempt to extort it from the lady a week before Monday night, he came here last Monday night."

"He had learned she would be out, and he intended to wait for her; for she had probably refused to receive him in the customary social way."

"He knew the side door was bolted at night and, as he didn't want to be seen entering the apartment, he devised the little scheme of unbolting the door for himself under cover of a futile call at half-past nine."

"The unbolting accomplished, he returned via the alleyway, and let himself into the apartment at some time before 11."

"When the lady returned with an escort, he quickly hid in the clothes closet, and remained there until the escort had departed."

"Then he came forth, and the lady, startled by his sudden appearance, screamed."

"But, on recognizing him, she told Spotswood, who was now hammering at the door, that it was all a mistake."

"So Spotswood ran along and played poker. A financial discussion between Skel and the lady—probably a highly acrimonious tiff—ensued."

"In the midst of it the telephone rang, and Skel snatched off the receiver and said the Canary was out."

"The tiff was resumed; but presently another suitor appeared on the scene."

"Whether he rang the bell or let himself in with a key I can't say—probably the latter, for the phone operator was unaware of his visit."

"Skel hid himself a second time in the closet, and luckily took the precaution of locking himself in. Also, he quite naturally put his eye to the keyhole to see who the second intruder was."

Vance pointed to the closet door. "The keyhole, you will observe, is on a line with the davenport, and as Skel peered out into the room he saw a sight that froze his blood."

"The new arrival—in the midst, perhaps, of some endearing sentence—seized the lady by the throat and proceeded to throttle her..."

"Imagine Skel's emotions, my dear Markham. There he was, crouching in a dark closet, and a

few feet from him stood a murderer in the act of strangling a lady!"

"I don't wonder he was petrified and speechless. He saw what he imagined to be maniacal fury in the stranger's eyes; and the stranger must have been a fairly powerful creature, whereas Skel was slender and almost undersized."

"No, merci. Skel wasn't having any. He lay doggo. And I can't say that I blame the beggar, what?"

He made a gesture of interrogation.

"What did the stranger do next? Well, well; we'll probably never know, now that Skel, the horrified witness, has gone to his Maker."

"But I rather imagine he got out that black document box, opened it with a key he had taken from the lady's handbag and extracted a goodly number of incriminating documents."

"Then, I fancy, the fireworks began. The gentleman proceeded to wreck the apartment in order to give the effect of a professional burglar."

"He tore the lace on the lady's gown and severed the shoulder-strap; snatched her orchid corsage and threw it in her lap; stripped off her rings and bracelets, and tore the pendant from its chain."

"After that he upset the lamp, rifled the escritoire, ransacked the Boule cabinet, broke the mirror, overturned the chairs, tore the draperies."

"And all the time Skel kept his eye glued to the keyhole with fascinated horror, afraid to move, terrified lest he be discovered and sent to join his erstwhile inamorata, for by now he was, no doubt, thoroughly convinced that the man outside was a raving lunatic—I can't say that I envy Skel his predicament; it was ticklish, y'know. Rather!—And the devastation went on."

"He could hear it even when the operations had passed from his radius of vision. And he himself was caught like a rat in a trap, with no means of escape. A harrowing situation—my word!"

Vance smoked a moment, and then shifted his position slightly.

"Y'know, Markham, I imagine that the worst moment in the whole of Skel's checkered career came when that mysterious wrecker tried to open the closet door behind which he was crouching."

"Fancy! There he was cornered, and not two inches from him stood, apparently, a homicidal maniac trying to get to him, rattling that thin barricade of white paint."

"Can you picture the blighter's relief when the murderer finally released the knob and turned away? It's a wonder he didn't collapse from the reaction."

"But he didn't. He listened and watched in a sort of hypnotic panic, until he heard the invader leave the apartment. Then, weak-kneed and in a cold sweat, he came forth and surveyed the battlefield."

Vance glanced about him.

"Not a pretty sight—eh, what? And there on the davenport reclined the lady's strangled body. Here he was alone with a murdered person. He was known to have been intimate with the lady; and he was a burglar with a record."

"Who would believe that he was innocent? And through he had probably recognized the man who had negotiated the business, he was in no position to tell his story."

"Everything was against him—his sneaking in, his presence in the house at half-past nine, his relations with the girl, his profession, his reputation. He hadn't a chance in the world. I say, Markham, would you have credited his tale?"

"Never mind that," retorted Markham. "Go on with your theory." He and Heath had been listening with rapt interest.

"My theory from this point on," resumed Vance, "is what you might term self-developing."

"It proceeds on its own inertia, so to speak. Skel was confronted by the urgent problem of getting away and covering up his tracks."

"His mind in this emergency became keen and highly active: his life was forfeit if he didn't succeed. He began to think furiously."

"He could have left by the side door at once without being seen; but then, the door would have been found unbolted. And this fact, taken in connection with his earlier visit that night, would have suggested his manner of unbolting the door.... No, that method of escape wouldn't do—decidedly it wouldn't do."

"He knew he was likely, in any event, to be suspected of the murder, in view of his shady association with the lady and his general character."

"Active, place, opportunity, time, means, conduct, and his own record—all were against him. Either he must cover up his tracks, don't y'know, or else his career as a Lothario was at an end."

"A sweet dilemma! He realized, of course, that if he could get out and leave that side door bolted on the inside, he'd be comparatively safe."

"No one could then explain how he had come in or gone out. It would establish his only possible alibi—a negative one, to be sure; with a good lawyer, he could probably make it hold."

"Doubtless he searched for other means of escape, but found himself confronted with obstacles on every hand. The side door was his only hope. How could it be worked?"

Vance rose and yawned.

"That's my theory. Skel was

caught in a trap, and with his shrewd, tricky brain he figured his way out."

"He may have roamed up and down these two rooms for hours before he hit on his plan; and it's not unlikely that he appealed to the Deity with an occasional 'Oh, my God!'"

"As for his using the tweezers, I'm inclined to think the mechanism of the idea came to him almost immediately.—Y'know, Sergeant, this locking of a door on the inside is an old trick."

"There are any number of recorded cases of it in the criminal literature of Europe. Indeed, in Professor Hans Gross's handbook of criminology there's a whole chapter on the devices used by burglars for illegal entries and exits."

"But all such devices have had to do with the locking—not the bolting—of doors."

"The principle, of course, is the same, but the technic is different. To lock a door on the inside, a needle, or stronger slender pin, is inserted through the bow of the key, and pulled downward with a string. But on the side door of this house there is no lock and key; nor is there a bow in the bolt-handle."

"Now, the resourceful Skel, while pacing nervously about, looking for something that might offer a suggestion, probably espied the tweezers on the lady's dressing table—no lady nowadays is without these little eyebrow-pluckers, don't y'know—and immediately his problem was solved."

"It remained only to test the device. Before departing, however, he chiseled open the jewel case which the other chap had merely dented, and found the solitary diamond ring

that he later attempted to pawn. "Then he erased, as he thought, all his fingerprints, forgetting to wipe off the inside door knob of the closet, and overlooking the hand-mark on the table."

"After that he let himself out quietly and rebolted the side door the same as I did, stuffing the tweezers in his waistcoat pocket and forgetting them."

(To Be Continued)

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"There was not a day that I did not suffer awful pains across my back from my kidneys. Sometimes they were so intense I would be unable to move about the house. Then when I needed my rest most of all, I would have to rise numerous times during the night. That broke up my sleep and I was always completely tired out in the day. My stomach was in such a bad condition that I had to be very careful what I ate, even then the little food I did eat would cause terrible suffering. After each meal the food would form in the pit of my stomach and feel like a heavy lump. Gas and bloating spells would come over me and often I would be so dizzy I would have to hold on to something to keep from falling. This gas would press against my heart, making it flutter and palpitate so hard that I thought it would stop beating. My blood pressure was way above normal and I was afraid it would have very serious results on me. All these miseries worried me so much that I was getting worse and worse every day, and I could not find anything to help me."

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Gas Pains Gone; Kidneys Now Fine

Engineer Says He Now Knows Right Road to Good Health.

Performing important duties while handicapped by stomach and kidney trouble was the lot of Mr. C. G. Hungerford, well-known Illinois Central engineer, who lives at 805 So. State St., Freeport, Ill. He tells about it as follows:

"Nobody knows what I suffered for ten years, from stomach and kidney trouble. Every attempt to get recovery from the moment I suffered intensely. My back ached, day and night, and sleep was almost impossible. I felt weak and tired all the time, and kept getting worse. Finally they said I had only forty-eight hours to live. But I am alive and feeling wonderful. I date my recovery from the moment I started using Viuna. The first few doses proved that I had found the right remedy at last, and now all the old gas trouble and stomach pains have gone. My kidneys ceased troubling me and the backache faded away. I sleep soundly and arise feeling rested and ready for the day's work. I want to give credit where credit is due and Viuna gets all the credit."

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