



by S.S. Van Dine
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WNU SERVICE

SYNOPSIS

Philo Vance, expert in solving crime mysteries, is called in to investigate the supposed suicide of Archer Coe, District Attorney Markham and Vance go to Coe's house. They find Wrede, a friend of Coe's, there; also a Signor Grassi, a guest. The door of the death chamber is bolted from the inside. They force it. Coe is clothed in a dressing gown, but wears street shoes. Heath says it is suicide. Vance says it is murder.

CHAPTER II—Continued

She turned and contemplated the inert figure in the armchair.

"Well, what do you think has happened?" She put the question in a hard, even tone.

"There is every appearance of suicide."

"Suicide?" She turned back to Markham coldly. "I wouldn't call it that."

Vance, who had been standing at the rear of the room near the bed, came forward.

"Neither would I, Miss Lake," he said.

She moved her head slightly and lifted her eyebrows.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Vance. In the excitement of the moment I didn't see you. . . . You are quite right—it's not suicide." Her eyes narrowed.

"Why do you repudiate the suicide theory?" Vance asked with pronounced courtesy.

"Very simple," she replied. "Uncle was too great an egotist to deprive the world of his presence."

"But egotism," Vance submitted, "is often the cause of suicide. Boredom, don't you know—the inability to find a responsive appreciation. Suicide gives the egotist his one supreme moment of triumph." Vance spoke with academic aloofness.

"Uncle Archer needed no supreme moments," Hilda Lake returned contemptuously. "He had such moments every time he acquired a Chinese knickknack. An utterly worthless piece of soft Chun porcelain in a silk nest, which was of no use to any human being, gave him a greater thrill than I would get out of beating Bobby Jones. I don't think uncle killed himself."

"Forgive me," Vance bowed. "You are unquestionably right. But neither Mr. Markham nor Sergeant Heath agrees with us. They are quite ready to dismiss the case as suicide."

She looked from Markham to Heath with a hard, cold smile.

"And why not?" she asked. "It would be so easy—and would save a lot of bally scandal."

Markham was piqued by the woman's attitude.

"Who, Miss Lake," he asked in his typical courtroom manner, "would have any reason for desiring your uncle's death?"

"I for one," she answered unhesitatingly, looking Markham straight in the eye. "He irritated me beyond words. He stood in the way of everything I wanted to do; and he was able to make life pretty miserable for me because he held the purse-strings. A nice cold arctic day it was for me when he was appointed my guardian and I was dependent on him. His death at any time these past ten years would have been a godsend to me. Now that he's out of the way I'll get my patrimony and be able to do what I want to do without interference."

Markham and Heath regarded her in amazed indignation. There was something icily venomous in her manner—a calculating hatred more potent and devastating even than her words. It was Vance's languid and indifferent voice that broke the monotony that followed her tirade.

"My word! Really, you know, Miss Lake, you're dashed refreshin' in your frankness. . . . Are we to accept your comments as a confession of murder?"

"Not at present," was the even reply. "But if the authorities are set on calling it suicide, I may come forward later and claim the credit for his demise—by the way of upholding the honor of the family. You see, I regard a good healthy justifiable murder in higher esteem than a paltry suicide."

The blood was mounting to Markham's cheeks; he was becoming angry at Hilda Lake's apparent flippancy.

"Who besides yourself," he asked, trying to control his feelings, "would have had reason to murder your uncle?"

The woman looked up at the ceiling with meditative shrewdness and sat down on the edge of the desk.

"Any number of persons," she

spoke indifferently. "De mortuis—and all that kind of rot—but, after all, the fact that Uncle Archer is dead doesn't make him any more admirable. And there are several people who would prefer him dead to alive."

Markham stepped forward. "You're a brutally unfeeling woman, Miss Lake," he said through set jaws.

Vance proffered her his cigarette case.

"No, thanks." She was now looking down at Archer Coe's body. "I rarely smoke. Bad for the wind—upsets the nerves. . . . Yes," she mused, as if reverting to her conversation with Markham, "there won't be any great mourning at dear uncle's passing."

Markham returned to the point. "Would you care to name anyone in particular who might be pleased with Mr. Coe's death?"

"That wouldn't be cricket," she returned. "But I'll say this much: there are several Chinese gentlemen whom uncle has swindled and tricked out of rare treasures, who will be delighted to learn that his collecting days are over. And you probably know yourself, Mr. Markham, that there were many unpleasant rumors after uncle's return from China last year—gossip about his desecrating graveyards and removing funerary urns and figures. He received several threatening letters."

Markham nodded.

"Yes, I remember. He showed me one or two of them. . . . Do you seriously believe an outraged Oriental killed him?"

"Certainly not. The Chinese have more sense than to kill anyone for a piece of bric-a-brac."

Vance yawned and strolled between Hilda Lake and Markham. Again he held out his cigarette case.

"Oh, do have a cigarette," he pleaded. "Sometimes they quiet the nerves, don't you know?"

The woman looked up at him and gave a hard, questioning smile. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she took one, and he lit it for her.

"What do you think of this affair, Mr. Vance?" she asked casually.

"Dashed if I know," he spoke lightly. "Your suggestion of a Chinaman is most fascinatin'. I wonder if there are any objects d'art missing from the house."

"I wouldn't be surprised," she blew a long ribbon of smoke toward the ceiling. "Personally, I hope they're all gone. I'd infinitely prefer Wedgwood and Willow ware."

Markham again took the floor.

"I'm afraid we're all talking a bit dramatically. . . . If your uncle's death was not suicide, Miss Lake, how do you account for the fact that the door of this room was bolted on the inside?"

Hilda Lake rose to her feet, a puzzled look on her face.

"Bolted on the inside?" she repeated, turning toward the door. "Ah! So you had to break in!"

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Before she went out she turned. "But please send Gamble up with my tea and muffins. I'm positively starving."

A minute later Dr. Emanuel Doremus was ushered into the room. He was a wiry, nervous man, cynical, hard-bitten, and with a jaunty manner. He resembled a stock salesman far more than he did a doctor.

He greeted us with a wave of the hand, and glanced about the room. Then he teetered back and forth on his toes, and pinned a baleful eye on Heath.

"More shenanigan," he complained. "I was in the midst of hot cakes and sausages when I got your message. You always pick on me at meal time, Sergeant. . . . Well, what have you got for me now?"

Heath grinned and jerked his thumb toward Coe's body. He was used to the medical examiner's grousing.

Doremus turned his head and let his indifferent eyes rest on the dead man for several moments.

"The door was bolted on the inside, doctor," Markham volunteered. "We had to break it in."

Doremus drew a deep sigh and turned back to Heath with a grunt of disgust.

"Well, what about it?" he asked impatiently. "Couldn't you have let me finish my breakfast? All you needed was an order to remove the body." He reached in his pocket and drew out a small pad of printed blanks.

"Mr. Markham told me to call you personally, doc," Heath explained. "It ain't my funeral."

Doremus, holding his fountain pen poised, cocked an eye at Markham.

"Straight case of suicide," he announced breezily. "Nothing to worry about. I'll give you the approximate time of death, if you want it. And the routine autopsy. . . ."

"I say, Doctor," Vance asked languidly; "would it be unprofessional if you look at the body?"

Doremus spun around.

"I'm going to look at the body," he snapped. "I'm going to dissect it—I'm going to give it a post mortem. What more do you want?"

"Just why, Doctor," pursued Vance, "do you jump at the conclusion that it's suicide?"

Doremus sighed impatiently.

"The gun's in his hand; the bullet wound is in the right place; and I know a dead man when I see one. Furthermore, the door—"

"Was bolted on the inside," Vance finished. "Oh, quite. But what about the body?"

"Well, what about it?" Doremus began filling in the order. "There's the body—look at it yourself."

"I have looked at it, don't you know."

"You see, Doc," Heath explained, with a grin of satisfaction. "Mr. Vance and I made a bet. I said you'd say suicide; and he said you'd say murder."

"I'm a doctor, not a detective," Doremus returned acidly. "The guy's dead, with a bullet hole in his right temple. He's holding a gun in his right hand. It's the kind of wound that could have been self-inflicted. His position is natural—and the door was locked on the inside. The rest of it is up to you fellows in the homicide bureau. If the bullet from the gun don't fit, the autopsy'll show it. You'll get all the data tomorrow. Then you can draw your own conclusion."

Vance had sat down in a chair near the west wall and was smoking placidly.

"Would you mind, Doctor, taking a close look at that bullet hole before you return to your hot cakes and sausages? And you might also scrutinize the dead man's mouth."

Doremus stared at Vance a moment; then he approached Archer Coe's body and bent over it. He inspected the wound carefully, and I saw his eyebrows go up. He lifted the hair from the left temple, and there was visible to all of us a dark bruised indentation on the scalp along the hair line. Then he lifted Coe's upper lip slightly, and seemed to inspect his teeth, which appeared bloodstained from where I stood. After a close inspection of the dead man's mouth, he again focused his attention on the bullet wound in the right temple.

Presently, he stood up straight and fixed a calculating gaze on Vance.

"What's in your mind?" he asked truculently.

"Nothing at all—the brain's a mere vacuum." Vance took his cigarette from his lips and yawned. "Did you find anything illuminatin'?"

Doremus nodded, his eyes still on Vance.

"Yeah. Plenty!"

"Oh, really, now?" Vance smiled ingratiatingly. "And you still think it's suicide?"

Doremus crammed his hands into his pockets and made a wry face.

"H—I, no! . . . There's something queer here—something d-d queer." His eyes shifted to Coe's body. "There's blood in his mouth, and he's got a slight fracture of the skull on the left frontal. He's had a dirty blow by a blunt instrument of some kind. . . . D-d queer!"

Markham, his eyes mere slits, came forward.

"What about that bullet wound in his right temple?"

Doremus looked up, took one hand from his pocket, and pointed toward the dead man's head.

"Mr. Markham," he said with precise solemnity, "that baby had been

dead for hours when that bullet entered his head!"

The only person in the room who was not staggered by this unexpected announcement was Vance. Heath stood staring at the corpse as if he almost expected it to rise. Markham slowly took his cigar from his mouth and looked vaguely back and forth between Doremus and Vance. As for myself, I must admit that a cold chill ran up my spine. The sight of a dead man sitting with a revolver in his hand and a bullet wound in his temple, coupled with the knowledge that the bullet had been fired into him after death, affected me like a piece of African sorcery.

Vance, as I say, was unaffected. He merely nodded his head slightly and lighted another cigarette with steady fingers.

"Interestin' situation—eh, what?" he murmured. "Really, Markham, a man doesn't ordinarily shoot him-



"Men Have Been Known to Do Queer Things After Death."

self after death. . . . I fear you simply must eliminate the suicide theory."

Markham frowned deeply.

"But the bolted door—"

"A dead man doesn't ordinarily bolt doors, either," Vance returned. Markham turned, with slightly dazed eyes, to Doremus.

"Can you determine what killed him, Doctor?"

"If given time," Doremus had become sullen; he did not like the turn of events.

"I say, Doctor," drawled Vance, "what's the state of rigor mortis in our victim?"

"It's well advanced. Dead eight to twelve hours. Lend me a hand, Sergeant, and we'll put him on the bed. . . ."

"Just a moment, Doctor," Vance spoke peremptorily. "Take a look at the hand on the desk. Is it clutching the revolver tightly?"

"He's clutching the gun tight, all right." With difficulty Doremus bent Coe's fingers and removed the revolver, taking great care not to make fingerprints on it.

Heath came forward and gingerly inspected the weapon. Then he dropped it in a large pocket handkerchief, and placed it on the blotter.

"And, Doctor," pursued Vance, "was Coe's finger pressed directly against the trigger?"

"Yep," was Doremus' curt answer.

"Then we may assume that the revolver was placed in Coe's hand before rigor mortis set in, what?"

"Well, I'll tell you. He—pointing to Coe's body—"may have had the gun in his hand when he died. I wasn't present, you understand. And if the gun was already in his hand, then nobody put it there later."

"In that case how could it have been fired?"

"It couldn't. But how do you know it was fired? There's no way of telling until the post mortem whether the bullet in his head came from the gun he was holding."

"Do the caliber of the revolver and the wound correspond?"

"Yes, I'll say so. The gun's a .38, and the wound looks the same size."

"And," put in Heath, "one chamber of the gun's been fired."

Markham nodded, and looked at the medical examiner.

"If it should prove to be true, Doctor, that the revolver in Coe's hand fired the shot in his head, then we could assume, could we not, as Mr. Vance suggested, that the revolver had been placed in the dead man's hand before rigor mortis set in?"

"Sure you could." Doremus' tone was greatly mollified. "Nobody could have forced the gun into his hands and made it appear natural after rigor mortis had set in."

Though Vance's eyes were moving idly about the room, he was listening closely to this conversation.

"There is," he remarked, in a low voice, "another possibility. Far-fetched, I'll admit, but tenable. . . . Men have been known to do queer things after death. There are recorded instances of suicides who have shot themselves and then thrown the weapon thirty feet away. Dr. Hans Gross in his 'Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter—"

"But that hardly applies here."

"No-o." Vance drew deeply on his cigarette. "Quite so. Just a fleeting thought."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Eyes That Tell Tale of Tragedy

Not Infrequently Seen in Faces of Wives of "Good Fellows."

"Charming man!" said the daughter. "But I might have known he'd be married; they always are when they're real fun!"

"Real fun?" mused her mother—"I wonder. By the way did you notice his wife's eyes? It may seem funny to you, but I've found a pretty good way to judge a man is by his wife's eyes."

His wife's eyes had a look of tiredness that was strange for one living, as she did in the lap of luxury. Her husband it seemed, gave her everything. With but one child, a son of fourteen, she had no work, no worry, no trouble as far as anyone could see. She was handsome, too—"must have been a beautiful woman," is the way people put it.

Yet her eyes had that look. It was not precisely tiredness; there was in it something of sadness, something a bit haunted, something of fear. But that was not for all who rose to read. It was only the observing eye of my friend's mother that found it—then it was easy enough for us all to be wise and see it too. By most of the casual she would have been accepted as the once beautiful, somewhat faded, indulged wife of a brilliant and delightful man—a jolly fellow, mind you, who would have spelled good luck for any woman.

It turned out that that was a good hunch though, looking at his wife's eyes. For who should come along but some one who had known them for years. And it turned out that it was not for nothing this woman was prematurely faded. Her eyes were tired—from trying to look bright and happy—when she was disillusioned and heartsick. That haunted look was doubtless remembrance of a long cherished ideal and hope of happi-



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ness. The fearful look—concern that the world would learn of the struggle of her tired pride. Money—? Yes, she had every comfort, that is, they lived in fine style. But she had no independence of purse, no money in her pocket—Faithfulness—? As far as had come to her knowledge. But she had the humiliation of the petty flirtations of a conceited man. He loved to be a good fellow with the girls, and his wife was always kept conscious of the fact that she was neither so young nor so good looking as she used to be. But what contributed most, doubtless, to the curtailed misery in these eyes was the difficulty of pleasing him—a surlyness of temper, an irritability at home that matched in extent the jolliness and good-fellowship he showed to the world.

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