The Clew of the Forgotten Murder

By CARLETON KENDRAKE ©1934 NEA Service, Inc.

CHAPTER XVII.

"I have," said the criminologist, "discussed certain phases of the case with your attorney, Mr. Charles Fish. He tells me that a hurried settlement was completed with The Blade because your husband was taken seriously ill, and you both attributed that illness to mental anxiety caused by the article which had been published."

"Not because of the article," said Mrs. Cathay. "Not because of that case but because of the tactics of the newspaper people. They were going to blacken Frank's reputation by every means in their power and Frank's reputation was all that he had to live for. Money meant but little to him. That which he prized more than all was his reputation and standing in the community."

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Her voice was weak and toneless, without animus, without enthusiasm, without vigor. She spoke as one would speak of a thunder shower which had passed after doing damage in some prize bed of flowers.

"Did you," asked Griff, "let your husband know that you were going to the city to negotiate a settlement?"

She stared at him steadily.

"Why do you want me to answer that question?" she asked.

"Let it go," he told her, his eyes now focused upon her pale lips. "It is perhaps, of no matter. But would you mind telling me why you and your husband became so greatly concerned over the fact that a reporter was making an investigation for the purpose of determining facts about Mr. Cathay's reputation?"

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"Was there," he asked, "some specific fact that you were afraid the reporter would uncover?"

"Certainly not. My husband's life has been an open book."

"Then why were you so afraid of what the reporter might uncover?"

"It wasn't what he might uncover," she said. "It was the idea of the thing; the loss of prestige; the loss of dignity; the certain knowledge that some shrewd attorney would twist and distort the little incidents, the minor matters, so as to make them seem big and important."

"What little incident? What minor matter?" pressed Griff.

She said nothing. The corners of her lips quivered.

"Please," she said. "You didn't come here to bait me, but to ask me something or to tell me something. Please get it over with and go."

Griff's voice was low-pitched and confidential.

"I want to ask you," he said, "if you knew that the reporter who had been sent by the newspaper to investigate your husband's reputation was murdered, and his body was found yesterday afternoon?"

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Had some electric current galvanized her to sudden activity, she could hardly have reacted more quickly or violently to his words. She sat bolt upright. The filmy negligee fell open in front and away from one shoulder. The dark panic of her eyes was now unmistakable. Her bloodless lips quivered before they managed to mouth the one word—"Murdered!"

"Yes," he said. "You hadn't heard about it?"

"Murdered!" she said. "Oh my God!"

She dropped back against the chair and lay very still and very motionless.

Griff went to her side, felt of her pulse, went to the door of the room and jerked it open. A maid was standing within a few feet of the door, her face flushed.

"Your mistress," said Griff, "has fainted. See what you can do for her."

The maid stared at him accusingly.

"I think," said Griff, "you had better telephone for a physician."

He raised his voice slightly as he made the suggestion, and then turned to regard the still form which remained in the overstuffed chair. That form stirred. A weak voice said, "No, I don't want a physician. Get me some brandy, Marie."

Griff faced the maid once more.

"Under the circumstances," he said, "I will not make any farewells to your mistress. Please tell her that I have gone and that I am grateful for the interview."

The maid said nothing but stared at him with hostile, sullen eyes as Griff found his way out of the house. The butler reached the front door just as Griff had stepped to the porch. The butler extended a liveried arm, grasped the knob of the door and slammed it shut.

Griff walked rapidly down the cement to the place where his taxicab was waiting.

"Get me," he said to the driver, "to a public telephone where I can put in a long distance call. Don't lose any time."

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THE cab driver drove at high speed down the winding road which led from the big Cathay home to the nearest through boulevard. He pulled in before a drug store and held the door of the car open.

Sidney Griff entered the drug store, put through a long distance call to Dan Bleeker of The Blade.

"The woman in the case," he said, "has employed Carl Racine of the Racine Detective Bureau. She ordered up her car for him, to take him to the city. She is obviously very much frightened. It would probably be advisable for you to have two of your best men waiting along the boulevard. I believe that you are familiar with her car and can give the men a description of it. Doubtless some of your reporters know Racine personally. When he passes have them drop in behind and see if they can follow him. I think he has been sent upon a mission of the greatest importance—a mission which requires some skill and daring to handle. Racine was hostile when I met him."

Bleeker's reply was directly to the point.

"When did they leave?" he asked.

"Approximately 15 minutes ago."

"The road will be covered," Bleeker said. "We have just received assurances from the authorities at Riverview that an autopsy will be ordered."

Griff gave a low whistle.

"You must," he said, "have exerted considerable pressure."

"We did," said Bleeker, "but we received unexpected reinforcements from a confidential communication made to the authorities by one of the physicians in the case. It represented a complete change of attitude on his part since an earlier interview. I was wondering if, perhaps, your presence in Riverview had been responsible for the physician's change in attitude."

Sidney Griff laughed.

"My presence in Riverview," he said, "has been responsible for a lot of things. I'm playing human checkers. I'll see you this evening."

Smiling, he slid the receiver gently back on the hook. His face was alert, the eyes narrowed, wary and watchful.

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There were two parchment-shaded lamps burning in the room but the glow they gave was subdued. Sidney Griff, attired in lounging suit and long woolen bathrobe, stared into the spiraling smoke from his cigaret. Across from him, Dan Bleeker seemed very much excited.

"Anything about Decker?" he asked. "Any news for us?"

Griff's face froze into rigid impassivity.

"No," he said.

Bleeker spoke rapidly. "Remember," he said, "you're going to give us the breaks when the time comes. You know, Griff, there's something uncanny about you, at that."

Griff stared through the cigaret smoke and said, "I presume you're about to tell me that you've found the woman in the case."

"We know who she is," Bleeker said. "We haven't found her. That hunch of yours was one of the most remarkable things I've ever encountered."

"Go ahead," Griff said, "tell me about it."

"We got the lead not over half an hour after I was talking with you on the long distance telephone from Riverview," Bleeker said. "Bill Osborne, one of our reporters, made a check on the disappearance case which had been reported by a Miss Alice Lorton, 24, residing at the Elite apartments, 819 Robinson street. She had reported the disappearance of Esther Ordway, 22, who shared her apartment."

The intense nervousness which had characterized the criminologist the night before seemed to have left him now. He stretched out, physically relaxed, the only sign of nervousness being the quick, vigorous puffs on the cigaret which indicated an inner tension.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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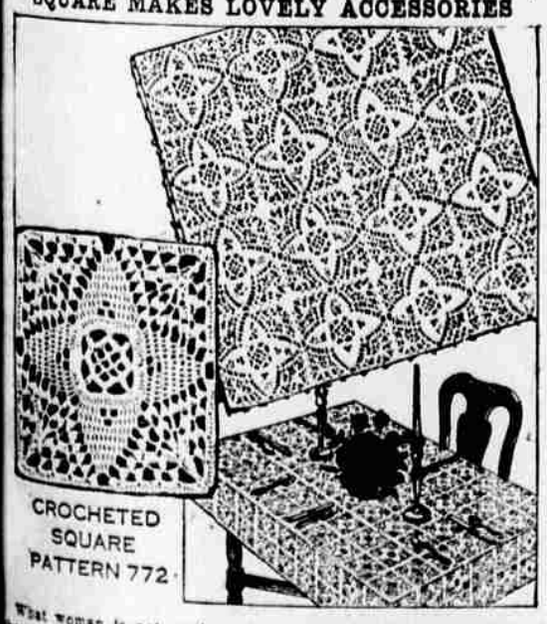

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