

The Avenging Parrot

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By Anne Austin, author of "The Black Pigeon," "Rival Wives," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVII
"Ready, boy!" Police Commissioner O'Brien warned, as his white-faced nephew opened the door to him and Sergeant Turner ten minutes later, then stood clinging to the knob, his body away from the door. "Can't have you keeling over before Dr. Price gets here. He's on the way. This is tough on you, I know—but all in a day's work for a detective."

"I know," Dundee wiped a new string of icy sweat beads from his forehead and stood aside, to let the newcomers see the ghastly sight upon which his own eyes had rested when he forced his way into Cora Barker's room.

"Have you touched the body?" Sergeant Turner demanded briskly.

"No." Dundee pressed his knuckles against his mouth to still the quivering of his lips. "I wanted to lift her back into her bed, but—Payne reminded me. She's—just as we found her."

"Good!" Turner, followed by O'Brien, stepped to the east window of the room and knelt beside the huddled body on the floor. "Good Lord! Strangled with her own braids! That's a new one on me. . . . Pretty clever! There'll be no fingerprints on her throat. Sevier's a handy bird, isn't he? Doesn't take the trouble to provide a weapon in advance; just uses anything that will serve the purpose. . . . Poor old girl!"

Sergeant Turner's casual sympathy made Bonnie Dundee clench his fists in boyish rage. Poor old girl, indeed! Why, that was Cora Barker there on the floor! Cora whom he had eaten with, to whose playing he had danced; Cora, whose face a few hours before he had seen light up with the glory of triumphant love. Poor, passionate, love-greedy Cora. And poor Bert Magnus! A new wave of nausea swept over Dundee when he thought of Bert's being told. The one beautiful thing that had come out of the Hogarth tragedy—the drawing together of Bert and Cora in a love founded on sympathy and faith—was murdered now, too.

Sergeant Turner rose and stepped aside, and again Dundee's eyes took in the whole horrible picture before he could wrench them away. Cora had gone to the window—and to her death—clad only in a thin yellow silk nightgown. Undoubtedly her murderer had called her to the window, and she had sprung from her bed—which had been slept in—without taking time to drape herself in the kimono which hung on a chair. Had gone to that window with her long braids of black hair swinging over her shoulders. Had her murderer counted on that very thing? Had he known that Cora would come to him, unconsciously offering a perfect means of strangulation? Or had the murder been unpremeditated?

At any event the long braids had been crossed in the back, drawn around and tied beneath her chin in a single knot. The wiriness of the hair had loosened the knot now, but the ends of the braids until life had been extinguished.

Dundee drew a shuddering breath. He was glad the poor, discolored face was bowed down upon the grotesquely sprawled knees, so that he could not see it in all its horror.

"She's been dead for hours," he heard Sergeant O'Brien. "Rigor mortis has already set in. I think it will be better for us to get the body to the morgue before we rouse the whole house, don't you, Commissioner?"

"Yes, by all means. Warn the boys to keep a sharp watch over the boarders' rooms, but not to answer any questions. You've got three men on the grounds, haven't you?"

"Four," Turner answered, "routine precaution. They won't find anything unless it's another Cu-

han elegant stub. We've got our man already. I guess Patrolman Callahan will rate a promotion out of this night's work, Commissioner."

He left the room, carefully and noiselessly closing the door behind him, to give the necessary instructions to the silent men posted in the downstairs and upstairs halls. In the brief moment while the door was open there was no sound of any disturbance. Apparently none of the sleeping boarders had been aroused by the quiet entry of the police upon the scene of the new tragedy.

When he returned Dr. Price, the coroner was with him.

"Nobody's awake yet but Mrs. Rhodes, and I aroused her myself to break the news," Sergeant Turner announced in a low voice. "You came on the ambulance, didn't you, Doctor?"

"Yes. You want to get the body away as soon as possible, I suppose," the coroner answered, as he knelt beside the body of Cora Barker.

As if through a deafening fog Dundee heard the doctor's examination as he made his examination:

"Death due to strangulation. . . . No fingerprints on the throat. . . . Marks where the braids cut into the skin. . . . It was no weakling that tied this knot, Commissioner."

"How long has she been dead?"

"Hmm. A little hard to tell. Rigor mortis has set in, but in some cases that happens more quickly than in others. But—at least three or four hours, I should say. I'll try to give you a more exact answer after I perform the autopsy—condition of stomach contents, etc. . . . I'll call the boys now. I've arranged a signal to keep things as quiet as possible," and he went to the front window, stepped out upon the porch and waved his handkerchief to the waiting ambulance below.

"This seems to be a pretty decent bunch of people, and since it's your home, temporarily, at least, I want to spare the house as much of the horror as I can," O'Brien explained to his nephew. "That's decent of you, Uncle Pat." Bonnie Dundee thanked him.

As silently as if they were paying tribute to the dead, the ambulance attendants came up the stairs and entered the room, carrying the stretcher on which Cora's body would be born away. Sergeant Turner listened anxiously at the door, but the house was still sleeping apparently.

"Let me help!" Dundee begged as the white-jacketed men bent over the dead woman. For suddenly he could not bear the thought that only uncaring, alien hands should touch her. He sprang to the chair across which her kimono hung, then rejected the garment when he saw that it was an old, slightly soiled one. Cora would have a better one, he knew—and he found it in her closet.

There were tears in his eyes as he draped the pretty negligee of orchid chiffon and ostrich feathers about the poor, rigid shoulders. And regardless of onlookers he stooped and laid his lips lightly against the stiffening, thin, dry-skinned hand which had aroused his compassion when Cora Barker was alive. He stood aside then as the body was lifted to the stretcher, and was about to turn his face away when his eyes telegraphed an amazing message to his brain.

"Look, Dr. Price!" he called urgently. "Did you notice this? Her mouth is bruised. . . . Please, may I?" and he gently lifted the discolored upper lip, turned it back till it touched the nose. "Dr. Price, her lips have been pressed so hard against her teeth that the print shows plainly. See?"

"You're right," Dr. Price said slowly, as he bent to examine both lips. "But I don't quite understand—"

"Yes, by all means. Warn the boys to keep a sharp watch over the boarders' rooms, but not to answer any questions. You've got three men on the grounds, haven't you?"

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"I do!" Dundee cried in a choking voice. "Don't you see—Uncle Pat, Sergeant Turner? Cora Barker was killed with a kiss!"

"What do you mean?" Sergeant Turner demanded incredulously. "Oh, can't you see? I thought it was odd that she could be strangled to death without making sufficient outcry to awaken anyone. Bert Magnus' room is the nearest, and yet he evidently heard nothing, or he would have investigated, and—found her like this. I'm glad he didn't. Thank God for that, at least. He was in love with her—was going to marry her, I think, when the Hogarth case was settled."

"Steady, boy!" O'Brien warned. "You're getting as hysterical as a woman. Tell us quietly just what you mean."

"I mean," Dundee forced himself to speak in a calmer, lower voice, "that whoever murdered Cora Barker strangled her while she was being kissed. The man pressed his mouth so tightly against hers that she could not cry out when he tied the braids of her hair. . . . Can't you see it all? He was so well known to Cora that when he called to her from the porch in a low voice she came instantly, recognizing him, of course."

"Maybe they talked a bit at first—I don't know, but he certainly made love to her, played with her hair. Maybe he remarked how long the braids were. I can hear him saying: 'Why, they come clear to your waist, even when they're crossed in the back,' and he crossed them in the back to prove it. Crossed them to make strangulation possible. Then he brought the crossed braids over her shoulder, and, while kissing her, suddenly tied them and drew the ends so tightly that she was strangled—his lips still on hers."

"My God!" Commissioner O'Brien breathed, and turned sharply away.

"What a newspaper story this is going to make!" Sergeant Turner commented with morbid satisfaction. "Emil Sevier will sure go down in history as the most cold-blooded murderer this state has ever had. . . . Still want him to have plenty of ice water and an electric fan, Dundee—instead of the bad old third degree?" he added tauntingly.

The boy whitened to the lips, then he flung up his head. "I suppose you're right, and I was a

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credulous fool, Sergeant Turner. But if Sevier did this I'd like to put the thumb screws on him myself."

"God boy!" Turner applauded heartily. "Run along and do it. I'll handle the case from this end—nothing much to do anyway, I suppose, but listen to how sound asleep everybody was when Cora was being strangled. . . . What a fiend that fiddler turned out to be. Croaked her because he thought she'd told us a lot more than she had."

"Or possibly because he got cold feet and beat it before the money was found. Maybe she'd promised to send him a share to him—"

Commissioner O'Brien began to speculate, then shrugged. "Get the truth out of him this time, Bonnie lad. You've got plenty to work on, for the woman has been dead three or four hours, which means that Sevier probably killed her just before he was picked up. He was nabbed between here and police headquarters, you know, a few minutes after 2."

"I know," Dundee agreed grimly.

So this was the solution of the Hogarth case. "And Cora had to die to convince me that I was on the wrong trail," he told himself, bitterly. "Me and my 'bad penny.' . . . Well, Sevier is certainly a bad enough penny. . . . But why did Mrs. Hogarth greet a fiend like Emil Sevier in that joking way? Why didn't she scream? She wasn't killed with a kiss."

He preceded the slow-moving stretcher through the door and was halfway down the stairs when

he heard a door open, then Bert Magnus' voice:

"Is anything wrong? . . . What is that? Not—oh, my God! Not Cora! Wait! For God's sake tell me—let me see her!"

Almost in a frenzy himself Bonnie Dundee tore on down the stairs, jerked open the door and plunged out into the grey of the dawn.

(To Be Continued)

VALUABLE ELEGY
LONDON—An old copy of Gray's "Elegy" sold at Sotheby's recently for \$4700. It was published in 1751, and at that time sold for a very small amount. Gray made practically nothing out of this work, for he gave away his copyright to his publishers.

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Mr. Nord will continue as head of his organization and all work and plans will receive his personal attention. He will be in Klamath Falls as often as possible during the year.

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