The Avenging Parrot

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

CHAPTER XL.

Coroner Price's first half dozen questions brought out Bert Magnus' story of Saturday night. As Dundee listened to the familiar tale he averted his eyes from the sight of Bert's suddenly old and ravaged face. The amateur scenario writer looked as if he had passed through some terrible and blighting illness during the few hours since he had stood beside Cora Barker, singing in his surprisingly good tenor, "Drink to me only with thine eyes!" Occasionally, as he answered the coroner's questions, his voice wavered, and he pressed the fingers of his uncrippled left hand into his temples as if trying desperately to remember things which had now, in comparison with the terrible tragedy of the night before, lost much of their meaning and importance.

When he told how he had become so absorbed in the revision of his scenario, "More to Be Pitied," that he had neglected to keep his appointment with Cora Barker, his voice broke, and trembingly he took off his glasses to wipe them, holding them awkwardly in his right hand between the withered fingers and the thumb which had escaped injury.

"I realize," he said unsteadily, "that if I had kept my appointment to meet Miss Barker at the theatre last Saturday night, to take her to supper after the last show, she would not have had occasion to go into Mrs. Hogarth's room and would not have become involved in the case as a material witness."

There was a rising murmur of excitement, punctuated by sharp exclamations from reporters, witnesses, and the audience of morbidly curious. For this was the first news the public had had that Cora Barker had been in the murdered woman's room after the crime was committed.

Dr. Price looked somewhat nonplussed at the unsolicited revelation, but asked his next question quietly:

"Did Miss Barker confide in you concerning her visit to Mrs. Hogarth's room after the murder?"

"She did—as we were walk'ng together to the Little Queen theatre on Monday night," Magnus answered, huskily. "I believe she told me the whole truth about her connection with Emil Sevier. It was a relationship of which I believe she was unnecessarily ashamed."

"Please tell the jury as nearly as you can remember just what Miss Barker told you," Dr. Price directed, after pounding with his gavel for order in the excited audiecne.

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Bert Magnus restored his pince nez to his nose, touched his little reddish mustache with his trembling fingers, then answered in a low voice that was frequently shaken with emotion:

"Cora—Miss Barker—told me she wanted me to know exactly why she had been held as a material witness. She said she had been engaged, in May, to Emil Sevier, and that she had broken the engagement when Sevier had importuned her to help him rob Mrs. Hogarth. She had once been a trained nurse and Sevier wanted her to administer a small dose of chloroform to Mrs. Hogarth, to insure her being deeply asleep while the two of them searched her room for the hidden money. As I said, Cora refused, and broke the engagement, but, she admitted frankly, Mrs. Hogarth had seen Sevier leaving Cora's room by the window on the night of May 18—or rather at 2 o'clock in the morning of May 19. When I failed to meet her late Saturday night, she became obsessed with the fear that I had met Mrs. Hogarth, and that she had told me this bit of scandal against Cora."

"And had you met Mrs. Hogarth?" Dr. Price interrupted.

"I have already told you that I never met or spoke to Mrs. Hogarth in my life," Bert answered with quiet emphasis.

"Very well, Mr. Magnus. Now, why was Miss Barker so concerned over the possibility of your having heard this scandal from Mrs. Hogarth?"

Magnus flushed, but raised his head proudly. "She—valued my good opinion of her."

"Go on!" Price directed curtly, but not unkindly.

"As I said, it was fear that Mrs. Hogarth had gossipped against her to me which made Cora decide to question Mrs. Hogarth when she returned from the theatre at 10 minutes after 12 Saturday night. She told me that she knocked on Mrs. Hogarth's door, after having seen that the light was still on, and that when she received no answer she tried the knob and found the door unlocked. She entered and found Mrs. Hogarth dead. Knowing that Mrs. Hogarth kept a diary and feeling sure the diary would contain an account of Sevier's visit to her room on the night of May 18, Cora, as she told me, tore the page from the diary before leaving the room. Fear of being implicated caused her not to give the alarm, she said, and I quite understood and sympathized with her decision."

"Did Miss Barker tell you, in confidence, anything to implicate Sevier or anyone else, beyond the fact that Sevier had asked her help in robbing Mrs. Hogarth?"

"No, except that he again asked her that Saturday night, and she again refused."

"She did not tell you that she saw Sevier in the room or at the window on the porch?"

"She did not. I feel sure she did not know any more than she told me," Magnus answered, with a note of pride and faith in his shaken voice.

Now, Mr. Magnus, you were in private conversation with Miss Barker again on Tuesday evening," Dr. Price continued, and the audience held its breath. "Will you tell the jury the gist of that conversation?"

"I—it was of an extremely private nature," Magnus protested.

"I am afraid it can be private no longer, and I must ask you to answer the question fully and frankly," Dr. Price replied, with firm but kindly emphasis.

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Dundee, who had been an eavesdropping and unsuspected witness to part of that conversation, leaned forward and listened intently as Magnus answered, unhesitatingly:

"Cora played the piano, we were all in the Rhodes House parlor—and I sang, and—and then we talked, Cora and I. She told me she had been very unhappy—"

He was floundering hopelessly, and Dundee sympathized with his dilemma. How could any man be expected to repeat the tender intimacies which he had overheard between Cora and Bert—, the shy, half promises, made more by eyes than by lips?

The coroner cleared his throat harshly, and took off his own spectacles to wipe the moisture from the lenses. "I will ask you, Mr. Magnus, if you and Miss Barker became engaged to be married during that conversation yesterday evening?"

A dull red spread over Bert Magnus' chubby, plain face, but his eyes were steady and his voice unfaltering as he answered:

"Not exactly, in so many words, but I intimated very plainly to Cora that when this bad business—meaning the Hogarth case, of course—was cleared up, and she was free to go where she pleased, I would have something to ask her. As a matter of fact, I believe I did not even complete the sentence, but Cora understood, and—and we were very happy, looking forward to a future of which we could not even talk until—until—"

"I understand," the coroner cut in hastily. "Now' Mr. Magnus, did Miss Barker tell you why she had been so unhappy?"

Dundee leaned forward tensely. Was Magnus going to introduce Jewel Briggs' name? He remembered very clearly that Cora had cried: "Then you didn't mean what you said to Jewel?"

Then he settled back in his chair, undecided whether to be disappointed that the small mystery concerning Jewel was not to be cleared up, or to admire Bert's chivalry in leaving the girl's name out of the record. For Bert was saying, haltingly:

"I think it was—well, obvious that Cora was sad and humiliated over her arrest as a material witness, and over the gossip connecting her with Emil Sevier."

"Did she mention Sevier's name that evening?" the coroner prodded.

"Yes!" and Bert's voice rang with sorrowing rage. "She said she would sleep more easily if she knew Emil Sevier was safe behind bars—that her dreams were haunted by fears of his coming to avenge himself upon her for the little she had told the police against him."

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The close-packed audience was suddenly as still as if the wings of death had swept over it. Dundee, sitting between Norma Paige and Daisy Shepherd, saw both girls shiver and huddle lower into their seats.

"Did she definitely say that she had cause to believe Sevier would kill her?" Dr. Price asked at last.

"Not in so many words. I have repeated what she said as nearly as I can remember," Bert answered, his voice breaking. Then, "I begged her to tell her fears to the police, to ask for protection until Sevier was caught. But she refused. She said the police might think she had good cause to fear Sevier—believe that she had helped him kill and rob Mrs Hogarth."

"Did Miss Barker tell you that she believed Sevier to be guilty?"

"She did not express such a belief, but I know she was afraid it was true. She was a—loyal friend, even to a man like Sevier," Bert answered huskily.

After a few questions concerning Magnus' movements after the breaking up of the impromptu party the night before, Dr. Price said:

"I understand, then, Mr. Magnus, that you heard nothing, saw nothing, until you opened your door about half past four this morning and saw the stretcher being carried out of Miss Barker's room?"

"That is correct," Magnus answered.

"Will you tell the jury what you said then—the words you addressed to the dead woman when you knew it was her body on the stretcher?"

"I—" Magnus began, then bowed his head in his hands, his shoulders heaving.

"I will ask if these are the words you spoke, Mr. Magnus," and the coroner selected a sheet of young Brede's notes and read aloud: "My poor darling! If you had only let me watch outside you windows, as I wanted to—' "

"Yes, that is what I said," Magnus spoke from behind his shielded hands. "I had told Cora, as we came upstairs together, that if she were really afraid of Sevier, I would stand guard over her. She refused, said there must be no more scandal against her in that house."

"Now Mr. Magnus, can you tell what awakened you at half-past four this morning?"

"No—I—I really have no idea," Bert stammered. "I dislike the word 'premonition,' but I woke, terrified, sure that something dreadful had happened. It is possible, of course, that I was subconsciously aware of the entry of the police and of the low-spoken conversation of the officers. But I can now recall no definite noise that awakened me. As I have told you, I went to sleep about midnight, and did not awaken at all until half-past four."

"That is all Mr. Magnus—and may I extend to you the sympathy of myself and this jury? . . . Bring in Emil Sevier," Dr. Price directed, turning brusquely to a patrolman stationed at a door leading into another room of the morgue.

(To Be Continued)

Library Club To Have Kensington

A Christmas Kensington party will be held at the regular Library Club meeting on Friday afternoon, December 13. Because of the illness of Mrs. Claude Davis, and others who were to have charge of the program, the afternoon will be under the supervision of the Library Board.

The idea of the Christmas Kensington is to have everyone bring a piece of needle work, or some Christmas gift upon which they are working. The clubrooms will be arranged in an attractive and homelike manner, and decorated in the Christmas spirit.

A program will be given during the afternoon, and Christmas stories will be told and Christmas Carols sung.

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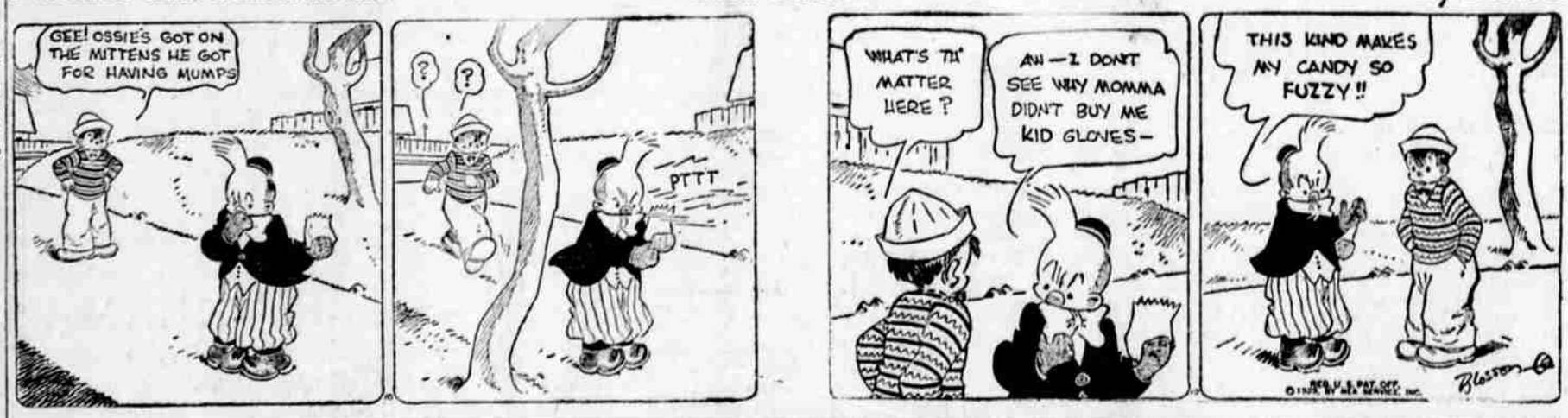

Mom'n Pop — Something to Worry About — By Gowan