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Murder Could Not Kill

"There's no harm in telling you that it was Miss van Buren's portrait you went down to paint, wasn't it? I telephoned to her cottage at Wingham; learned you had gone to a place called 'The Three Coughs', at Clobham; telephoned there and learned from Miss van Buren herself that you were on your way back to Town. I concluded you'd come to your own place, so waited for you."

"I see. Quite simple when it's explained. It still isn't explained, though, how come you came to learn I'd gone to Wingham to stay with Miss van Buren. You don't—er—mind my asking?"

"Certainly not. You had a telephone call when you were at her place?"

"I had. A damned mystifying affair altogether. A voice unknown to me—a man's—informed me he was speaking in my own interest. 'Don't,' he said—then he was out off."

"You didn't know what he meant?"

"Hanged if I did!"

"So you went off to 'The Three Coughs'?"

Robin realised it would be foolish to try to hide anything. If Inspector West knew so much as he had already disclosed, he probably knew a great deal more. He told him what had happened.

"Wouldn't you call that rather amazing?" the detective queried.

"Wouldn't you?" countered Robin smiling.

"Do you know a man named Gideon Trevor?"

"Yes; that is, I met him once. Last night, Friday night, I mean in Miss van Buren's dressing-room at the Pyrrhic Theater. He seemed to be a friend of hers. That's the only time I've met him."

"I see. It was he who telephoned to you, Mr. Foster?"

"Gideon Trevor. Good lord! What on earth was he playing at? Have you seen him—do you know?"

"We don't know exactly. Gideon Trevor was found murdered in a telephone kiosk near Berkeley Square just before midnight."

"Murdered! Heavens!" His eyes fixed on the inspector, Robin laid down his glass on the floor beside him and leaned breathlessly forward.

"Shot through the heart?" the detective continued. "Of his murderer no trace."

"What motive, you think?" asked Robin, tensely.

"The motive would seem to have been to prevent him getting his message, whatever it was, through to you."

With a faint whistle of horrified wonder Robin sank back in his chair. His brain was in a tumult.

Not for an instant had the detective deflected his steady stare.

"Mr. Foster," he said, "there's something in all this business that makes me think there's someone keeping us in the dark. Should that be found to be the case, it will go hard with the culprit. This murder of Gideon Trevor has given me an inkling. Can you guess why I have moved quickly? Let me make it clear. Trevor's body was found by a police officer going his rounds. It could only have been a few minutes after the actual murder. The case was instantly taken in hand by the Division. They got in touch with the telephone exchange, and there was no difficulty in establishing when the last call had been made from that box—and to whom it was made. A servant in Miss van Buren's cottage told them you had got the call all right. It was your name that brought me in. As you know I'm busy on the Baywater case, with which your name has been intimately associated. The superintendent dealing with the Trevor case rang me up and told me of the coincidence. I at once got out of bed, came along and waited for you here. Now, what have you to tell me?"

"Quite a lot, Inspector," replied Robin, now more at ease. "Thanks for putting the full facts before me. I appreciate it. Just what is it that's puzzling you most?"

"Why there should be this arrangement to kill you?"

"Before I give you all my own impression and suspicions, there's one thing I would like to ask you. Do you think this is possible? You will recall that the night Sherwood Dexter was shot I was shoved off the running board of the other car? All I saw was the hand and arm that thrust at me and eventually shoved me off. Beyond the fact itself, I could recollect nothing about it that was unusual."

"Quite, that was your story," the detective remarked.

"Well, do you think it is possible that, seeing the same gesture repeated, I should then recollect something strange about the arm that I'd forgotten before?"

"You hit the ground, didn't you, when you fell? But you said you weren't stunned."

"Not quite, but I certainly was very nearly knocked out."

"Seems to me quite possible, then," the detective observed cautiously.

"Medical records do show, I believe that a sudden blow, even a very slight concussion, will produce a blank in relation to the events that have preceded the shock for anything from a few seconds to weeks or months."

"Admirably put, Mr. West," said Robin with a grin. "Well, a few days ago I was again threatened with an outstretched arm—on that arm I saw an odd twisty scar. And by the Lord Harry! rightly or wrongly, I suddenly recollected that on the arm that shoved me from the car there was precisely the same scar."

"Is that so?" said the inspector.

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making a not-too-successful effort to disguise his keenly-aroused interest. "Whose arm?"

"Mr. Peter Lessing's"

"What? But it's almost unbelievable. Why didn't you let me know this at the time?"

To be continued

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