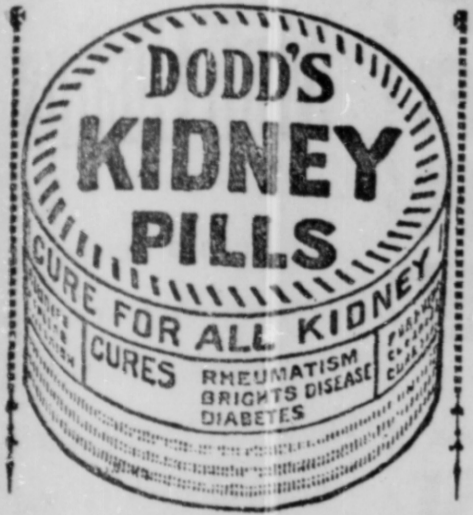


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"Having thus rejected the idea of Chapin being the criminal. I began to consider by what other means Burke might have met his death. Were the suspicions of foul play, after all, warranted? Might not the death of Burke have resulted from an accident? The more I considered this the more reasonable it seemed. Burke's money and other valuables were not missing. This seemed to prove conclusively that if he had been murdered the motive was not robbery. The idea that his death was attributable to an accident having once entered my mind, I was unable to dislodge it."

At this point Professor Gilman coughed a little dryly, but no one appeared to notice him, and the detective continued: "Being possessed of this idea, it remained for me to discover through what kind of accident his death occurred. I think I have made the discovery, and, gentlemen, when I have finished I believe you will agree with me that my theory is correct."

Again the professor coughed a little, and this time the detective looked at him curiously. But Professor Gilman was gazing out of the window with a faraway look, and his interest in the detective's story seemed to waver.

CHAPTER VII

THE DETECTIVE UNFOLDS HIS THEORY. After a moment Fosdick resumed: "I went over the ground that Burke had passed over on his way home that night. I noticed the place where a search for some missing article apparently had been made and agreed with the sheriff that Burke, probably having dropped one of the little steel rods that he had with him, had spent a few moments searching for it. Then I crossed the river to the east pier and examined the boat, with its padlock and chain which had not been disturbed since the body of Burke was discovered. If Burke's death had resulted from an accident, as I now firmly believed, it must have occurred near the river. That was a fact admitting of no dispute. This being true, it was almost certain to have occurred either at the pier after the boat was secured or between the pier and the top of the path passing over the rocky ridge near it, for just beyond that point the path to the observatory turns eastward and does not again approach very near to the river. This little stretch of path, then, was evidently the proper place for pursuing my investigations. My early examinations there were in a measure disappointing. I found that the path passing over the ridge had on one side a precipice descending to the water. A stranger passing in the dark might easily make a misstep and plunge down into the river. That was conceivable enough. But with Burke it was different. He was as familiar with the path as with the geography of his own room. If he



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had been intoxicated, he might have walked off into the water, but so far as we know Burke was perfectly sober. Indeed a man who could row across the river and secure his boat properly could hardly have been too intoxicated to walk straight.

"In ascending the path Burke might have suddenly grown dizzy and fallen over. I considered this, but the more I considered it the more improbable did it seem. It would be most difficult, if not wholly impossible, for a wound in the position and of the description of that on Burke's skull to be made by the simple act of his falling off the cliff. The descent is so sheer that a man losing his balance and falling would, in all probability, strike nothing in his passage to the water below. At this time I could think of no better solution to the mystery than that, in a sudden fit of dementia, Burke, insanely dashing his head against the rocks above the path, had made the wound in his head and then toppled over into the water and drowned. I did not believe this to be a true solution, of course, though I did propose to inquire if Burke was subject to attacks of mental derangement. Happily I did not have to.

"Having examined the ground in the locality of the east pier, I went up to the observatory and talked for an hour or two with Professor Gilman and others. Among other things I learned that at half past 10 on the night of Burke's death a brilliant meteor was seen in the sky, and that so eminent an astronomer as Professor Gilman here shrewdly suspected that a meteorite had fallen in the vicinity of the river, not far from the pier. I returned to my hotel and chewed gum that afternoon. The next day I made another examination of the rocks near the pier which proved entirely satisfactory. I went to the city that afternoon, and the following morning I had a submarine diver at work under the cliff over which the path from the pier passes. The diver brought up several things of interest. This is one of them."

The detective took the slender steel rod in his hand, and holding it up to view said: "This is one of the rods that were sold to Burke the evening of his death, or, if not, it is exactly like it in every respect. There is no reason to suppose that it is not one of the very same. The presence of the steel at that spot in the river convinced me, beyond all question, that that was the point where Burke fell into the water. This dark piece of rock or mineral—the detective lifted the larger of the two pieces as he spoke—"is, I am told by Professor Gilman, a meteorite. I was reasonably certain of it before, but his statement is all the confirmation that is needed. It is one of the things that the diver brought up from the river bed under the path on the cliff."

"Now, then, let me review some of the facts known to us. Burke said good-by to Mr. Dobson at the hotel at almost exactly 10 o'clock that evening. There is no doubt about the time, for Mr. Dobson remembers setting his watch by Burke's just before the latter left. He recalls the time with great distinctness because, he tells me, the town clock struck 10 just then, and he remarked to Burke that it was a minute fast. So we know that at almost precisely 10 Burke left the hotel. The distance from it to the west pier is about a mile. An ordinary man would walk it in 15 minutes. Burke, being something of an athlete, may have walked it in a little less time. We know he stopped to hunt for something. The evidences of this, however, would indicate that it was no very protracted search. Probably it consumed not over two minutes, or at the most not more than five. Suppose we say it took 18 minutes for him to reach the west pier, ten minutes would be about the time required for rowing across the river and two more for securing the boat at the pier and starting to ascend the path to the observatory. That would bring us to half past 10. That night Professor Gilman and Mr. Arnold and also two other observers at the observatory saw a brilliant meteor flash across the sky. The professor and Mr. Arnold, noting its course, thought it probable that a meteorite fell into or near the river not far from the east pier. Now at what time was this? Fortunately we know almost to the second. Just after the meteor disappeared Mr. Ingraham of the Urania university was thinking of going out with Mr. Arnold to search for the meteorite that they suspected had fallen, but, upon consulting his watch, found that he had only nine minutes in which to catch the 10:40 train for the city. Thus we know that the meteorite fell at almost exactly half past 10. The spot in the river where this meteorite was found is approximately the spot where it fell, but not exactly. My examination of the rocks on the ridge, however, showed me exactly where it struck.

This spot is almost directly in the path of a person coming up from the pier. We have figured out that a person was coming up at the very moment the meteorite fell. Is it unreasonable to suppose that this strange visitant from outer space struck poor Burke on the head at the instant he was passing that dangerous point in the path and that the blow knocked him off into the river?"

Professor Gilman uttered a little exclamation, but no one noticed him, for the sheriff had sprung up excitedly.

"Yes, sir," he cried, "it is unreasonable. If that thing fell out of the sky, as you assume, it could never have made the wound on Burke's skull. The wound is in the wrong place for that. In order to have it occur, Burke's left ear must have been turned toward the sky in a most unnatural manner. No, sir; that theory is knocked in the head at the start!"

"But suppose," said the detective, quite undisturbed, "that the meteorite struck the cliff first, and then, rebounding at an angle, struck Burke on the side of the head. Surely you will not deny that that could happen. Now, as a matter of fact, the cliff shows that the

meteorite did strike it at a point about as high as a man's head, for a piece of the rock there was broken off. This is it," touching lightly the smaller piece on the desk, "and it was picked up off the river bed by the diver, along with the other things. Now this corner of the meteorite might have made a wound almost exactly like that in Burke's skull. At least, such is my judgment, after a very close examination of the wound and of this portion of the meteorite."

The sheriff interrupted the detective again and this time in even greater excitement than before: "There is one thing you seem to have forgotten. That meteorite must have been intensely hot when it fell, hot enough to burn human flesh and bone. But did the flesh and bone around the wound show any indications of having been burned? Certainly not. No, sir. Mr. Fosdick, you'll have to get a new theory. You can't hold that meteorite responsible for Burke's death." The sheriff paused with a flushed and triumphant look on his face.

(To be Continued.)

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