

The Riddle of the Riderless Horse

By JEAN & CYRIL CASALIS

CHAPTER XVII DRINK AND A DOCTOR

They rushed forward to where the huddled figure lay. "Dr. Kerrival, is he dead too?"

"No," said Malcolm, "only drunk. The figure sat up wearily, and waved a fat hand deprecatingly. "Drunk?" he said, "which he were take that light away."

Malcolm laughed.

"That's all right, old boy," he said. "Sorry to disturb you like this, but the fact is, a poor native cove has been and got killed just down the river here. We're just going to collect the police, and I'm sure they'd like you to help them."

Leaving Malcolm to entertain the still somnolent doctor, Cornelle hurried onto the police post, now only a few hundred yards away. When he returned he brought with him the arm of the law looking somewhat unimpacted in their night attire of rough blankets, despite the handcuffs that they both carried. They found the dead boy lying as Cornelle and Malcolm had left him.

"Been dead for about half an hour," Kerrival announced quite soberly now. "Killed by a heavy blow at the back of the neck—dislocated vertebral column."

The native police, meanwhile, made a cursory examination of the innumerable blurred tracks in the soft sand; and after deferential warning Malcolm and Cornelle that they would be required to give evidence at the inquest, they proceeded to remove the murdered boy to the police post. Dr. Kerrival, most courteous goodnight departed, carrying the police lantern.

Malcolm led the way through the river, and as they emerged on the opposite bank, Cornelle caught up with him.

"How drunk would you say Kerrival was, in actual fact?" he inquired. "and what the Hades was he doing on the river bank at that hour?"

"Fine bit of acting if he wasn't tight," replied Malcolm.

"Yes, I thought so too, until we got to that dead boy; but he seemed well, anyway, and better go and run; out Chan, and tell him about his boy. I'd like to know what Sam was doing there at that time. By the way," Cornelle went on, struck by another thought; "he was killed jolly near the path through the spruce that the chief has closed. I wonder whether the poor blighter knew about it—he'd only been back about a week, from the Rand mines. That makes it still more odd. It makes that place de serried enough during the day time, and still more deserted at night."

There was no answer when, having at length reached Campsie, Cornelle knocked on Channing's bedroom window. Wet and chilled as he and Malcolm were, he was in no mood to wait for Channing to rouse himself from his usual heavy sleep, so he turned and strode towards the door.

"That chap sleeps like a log," he said. "Well, just go in."

Channing was still asleep when, by the light of Malcolm's torch, they unceremoniously entered his

bedroom. For a moment he blinked at them, uncomprehending and half awake, and at first hardly recognizing them. But when they explained to him the fact, sleep vanished, and he broke into a torrent of mingled wrath and regret for the death of his valued servant. But after a while his thoughts turned characteristically towards the practical issues at stake.

"Man, Cornelle," he said, "that's the third in three weeks. I've got to put a stop to this bad luck. Hang, man, all our natives will say our farms are bewitched, and they'll go; my boys are saying that already. And, mind, I mean a good boy. When he came to me last week, and said he wanted work and was going to get married, man, I was glad; I thought I'd got him for good. And he had, if this hadn't come along."

"But who could have done him in, Chan?" said Cornelle. "We was near that closed path, but that can't have anything to do with it, chief would rather eat a boy's cattle for disobeying him."

"Ach, man, you can't tell what will happen in Basutoland. Those natives will do anything. Perhaps another native was after Sam's girl and wanted to get Sam out of the way. But anyway there's a sight more murdering here than the Government hears about, or the police find out. But," he exclaimed, apparently noticing for the first time the state of Cornelle's and Malcolm's garments, "you're soaked! Were you over there?"

"We went across when we heard the poor blighter scream."

"Signalling!" said Cornelle. "Didn't you see anything?"

"Nothing to see," Cornelle replied, "except for Sam—and he was dead when we got to him."

"But, man Cornelle, what were you doing down there? What time is it? Three o'clock! What were you doing there in the middle of the night?"

"Oh," Cornelle replied a little lamely, "that's a long story. As a matter of fact, Chan, somebody got some signalling over in Basutoland, and we've been trying to find out what it's all about. Did you know about it?"

"Signalling!" Channing said incredulously. "What sort of signalling? And who told you about it?"

"They look like torch signals. Poor old Japle told Malcolm about them, before he was done in."

"Yes," put in Malcolm, "but from the look of them I'm not sure they're signals after all; they could so easily be caused by the jerks a man gives a torch when he's walking along with it. Anyway the bloke who carries the torch never stands still, and he don't waste much time over the signals. And then you know," he added, turning to Cornelle; "they seem to lead to nothing. I'm afraid, Cornelle, I've been making you lose sleep for nothing at all. That's the trouble about being a greenhorn. You mustn't take me too seriously. You see, everything is new to me, and I haven't ooped looking for the exciting bits."

"Man, I'd like to see those signals what about me coming with you next time?"

"Yes, rather," answered Malcolm; "but not to-morrow night—or rather, to-night; I'm perished, and half dead with sleep."

"Man, you must be," said Channing suddenly jumping out of bed.

And before they could protest he had walked out of the room with his candle, to return in a few minutes carrying a bottle of brandy, some tumbler, and a jug of water. He served them with generous pegs, and as they drank, they plied them with questions about Sam's death and their investigations; but by this time Cornelle had realized that unwelcome point of view, however intelligent or educated he may be, is necessarily different to that of a European—a fact which Malcolm had already grasped; and Maraka's presence was chief due to a private desire on Malcolm's part to obtain an entirely unprejudiced, and possibly, original opinion on Sam's death, particularly since native superstition seemed to have some bearing on it.

The inquest was a purely formal affair, as most inquests on natives are. Malcolm, Cornelle and Channing were summoned to give evidence, and they all rode over together with Maraka. A native's point of view, however intelligent or educated he may be, is necessarily different to that of a European—a fact which Malcolm had already grasped; and Maraka's presence was chief due to a private desire on Malcolm's part to obtain an entirely unprejudiced, and possibly, original opinion on Sam's death, particularly since native superstition seemed to have some bearing on it.

The inquest was held at the nearest magistracy in Basutoland, and when they arrived almost the first person they saw was Dr. Kerrival, somewhat less expensive than at their former meeting, but quite unashamed.

"You're a fine set of young fellows," he said, "roaming along that cold river at all hours of the night, and stirring up a trouble. You take my advice and get a full eight hours' sleep every night, and you'll keep out of mischief and save quiet people, like myself, the bother of attending useless inquests."

"What about yourself, Doc?" retorted Malcolm. "We deserve a more kindly word from you. We saved you a rotten cold at the very last."

"Freak air never hurt anyone," said the doctor disarmingly, "and I need it badly."

He gave Malcolm an expressive wink as they entered the court room.

After the usual evidence of identification, the coroner in charge of the party he had played on the night of the crime.

Native Constable Thithiboya corroborated the coroner's evidence in every detail, but gave the impression of having exerted rather more initiative than was implied by his superior.

Malcolm and Cornelle, who were called next, corroborated each others' evidence with a brief account of their share in the matter; omitting, however, the real reason for their presence at the river, which they explained by saying that they had been out for a walk, and while sitting talking on the bank, had lost count of the time.

Dr. Kerrival, in his evidence, estimated that the boy had been dead for under an hour when he examined him. Death, in his opinion, had been caused by a blow on the neck, which had dislocated the vertebral column. In his opinion death must have been instantaneous.

The Government doctor deposed to having examined the body. He agreed entirely with his colleague's conclusions, and added that there were no injuries, either external or

internal, beyond that already described. Questioned by the Bench, he agreed that a blow from a heavy stick, such as a knobkerrie, would inflict such an injury.

The finding under the circumstances could hardly be other than a verdict of "murder against some person or persons unknown."

As they left the court the magistracy, who was an old friend of the Recouille family, overtook them and insisted on their all lunching with him.

"Kerrival," he said, as they walked to his house, "you'll have to stop this fresh-air cult of yours. Sleeping in the open doesn't suit people of your build. Why don't you join the service and reform?"

He turned to Cornelle. "You

haven't been having too good a time your way lately, Cornelle. Your father must have felt wretched over poor young Mortimer. I was sorry to hear of his death—and young Van Steelen's."

"Yes, a rotten business and father has felt it terribly."

After that, as if by common consent, all talk of sudden death was dropped, and luncheon was a cheerful meal, greatly enlivened by the sallies between the doctor on the one hand and the magistrate and Malcolm on the other.

Channing, Cornelle, Malcolm and Maraka rode back quietly in the heat of that drowsy afternoon, talking so many of the short-cuts the bridle-paths of Basutoland provide, that they hardly ever followed the main road. Maraka rode well in

the rear, as a good servant does, but after Channing had turned in at the Campsie gate, and they themselves were almost home, he rode up to them, and without preamble, said:

"What the Baas think him boy strangeness of Maraka's question made Malcolm and Cornelle rein in. "Saw?" exclaimed Cornelle. "What him see before him die, Baas?"

"Why was there anything that he did see?" Malcolm asked.

"Yes, Baas. The Baas him say to-day, Sam him scream plenty bad. "Well, wouldn't anyone scream if he was being killed?"

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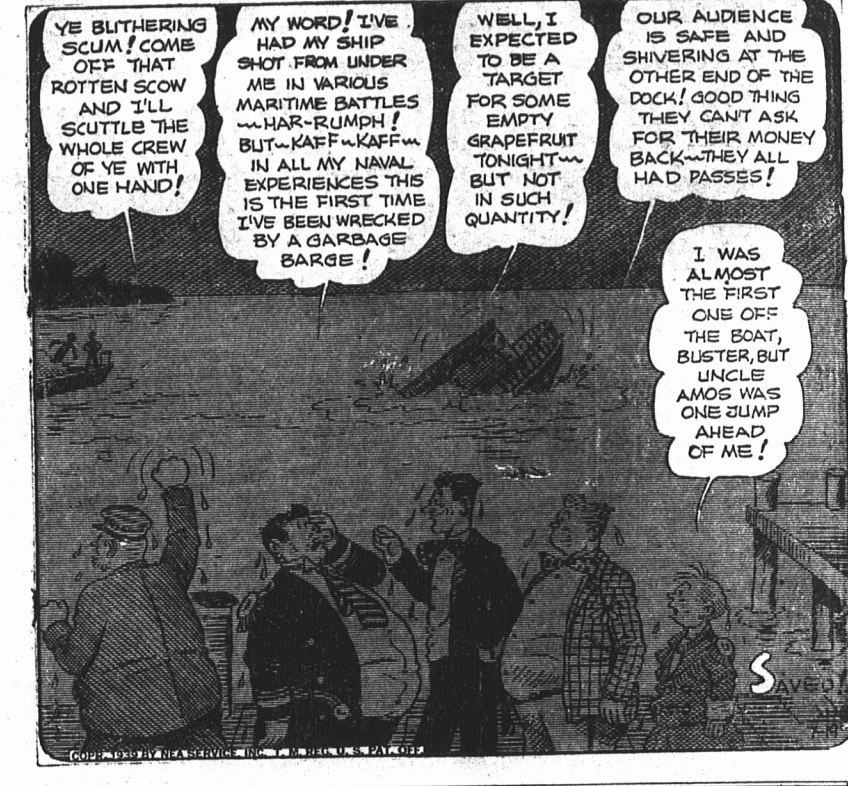
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