

THE RIDDLE OF THE SPINNING WHEEL

Being An Exploit in the Career of Hamilton Cleek, Detective
By MARY E. AND THOMAS W. HANSHEW

(Continued from yesterday)

"Then I take it," he said, "that the stiletto is the property of Lady Paula, but that it was last used by Mr. Duggan, who returned it to Lady Paula in the presence of a witness, and she put it back into her drawer. That is correct, is it not?"

"A lie—an absolute lie!"

"Perfectly correct, Mr. Deland."

"Thank you, Mr. Duggan. At any rate, the ownership of the thing is established, which, by the way, Lady Paula, makes no assertion whatever as to incriminating you in this disastrous affair."

Miss Debenham, would you mind coming over here for a moment? I would like to look at your dress."

"My dress, Mr. Deland?"

He smiled at her with disarming frankness.

"No wonder you think I am mad, but—ah, yes! see, right here on this panel—I thought I was not mistaken. If you wouldn't mind turning round a little more toward the middle of the room, Miss Debenham—thank you—right here; those dark stains," he



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CHAPTER XIII

Mr. Narkom Voices An Opinion

Three pairs of feminine lips voiced this sinister word simultaneously: Lady Paula's, Cynthia's, and Maud Duggan's.

"But how, Mr. Deland?—But why?—And upon Cynthia's dress, too?"

"Well, I'll swear I never had anything to do with it, anyhow!" threw in Cynthia emphatically and in a voice of astonishment. "How could they be bloodstained, Mr. Deland? and how could they possibly get on my frock? Solve that question, if you please, first of all."

"Quite a simple one, Miss Debenham. Just this: The murderer—or one of them, as the case may be—entered this room by that middle window, stabbed Sir Andrew with the stiletto, stolen for the purpose, of course—then, in a frenzy lest he be discovered, caught hold of the nearest thing and wiped the bloodstained tunic upon it, and then made off as quickly as possible. You happened to be the nearest, no doubt. So you were the person chosen. Did you not feel anything at all of the action?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing that I remember. We were all so astonished when the light failed that I don't remember anything at all about it. If it was done, it was done gently—and my skirt is wide."

"And you think the murderer, the perpetrator of this wicked crime, was a man, then, Mr. Deland?" put in the voice of Lady Paula at this juncture.

Cleek spun around toward her, nodding emphatically.

"I do, indeed. No woman could have arranged the thing like this, Lady Paula. The electricity would have been too difficult a problem for her, in the first place, and then the shooting."

"And how do you account for that, Mr. Deland?"

"Ah, that is a more difficult matter. How? By whose hand? We will get back to our stage rehearsal for that, I think. Mr. Narkom, would you sit down again in the chair? Thanks very much. It's only just for a moment. Now, if you ladies would take up your positions again as they were, I'd be very much obliged. Let me see. The shot entered the temple here—on the left eye and passed clean through the head into the wall of the room beyond. An acute angle of fifty degrees. That would bring it to about over there and to a level with the top of that wood-paneled. Then the bullet must be located somewhere in the vicinity, from all logical reasoning. But where? Come, Mr. Narkom, just a moment. Lend me your keen eyes, will you? And we'll have a look together. I'll want careful looking, I'll warrant. But the panning in fine condition and shows every mark. I—Gadland, here it is, too."

His finger pointed upon a slight, dark puncture in the darkness of the wood, and he whirled round and faced them all, eyes alight, face aglow, together marking the spot with his finger-nail. "Here, lend me your knife, my friend, and we'll dig it out. That will establish a pretty good clue. I can promise you. And a soundless pistol-shot—an air-gun. It ought to be easy to trace the owner of that, in desolate parts like this. Well, here goes."

A moment's careful prodding with the point of the knife, and the thing was done. The bullet—an infinitesimal thing—fell out into the palm of his hand. Then, of a sudden, he swung around in his tracks toward them. His face was grim.

"Look here," he said, in the sharp staccato of excitement, "what I want to know is, who of this company possesses an air-gun? For that someone does. I am certain. That shot must have been fired at close range—by the depth to which it was embedded in this wood. Mr. Duggan, do you happen to own an air-pistol?"

The last remnant of colour drained itself out of Ross Duggan's already pale cheeks. His eyes narrowed down to pin-points in the frame of his face. Then his chin went up.

"I do, Mr. D. Land."

"H'm. I thought as much. And if you were standing there, opposite your father, and with no one at the right side of you, and only the space of the bow-window between you and the outside world—taking into consideration the enormous amount of misguided reason which you might have to commit such a terrible crime—as I said before, if you moved quickly over there, side stepping, so that the shot might miss any of the ladies opposite after passing through Sir Andrew's brain, and—if the lights failed at a given and arranged moment, and you whipped out your revolver and fired, it might bring about just this identical result."

"I... my God! man, you're not accusing me of murdering my own father, are you? You're daft—insane—idiot!"

Cleek held up a silencing hand.

"I'm not accusing anybody, Mr. Duggan; simply reconstructing matters for the purpose of finding out the true assassin. And, as I told you last night, every one, according to English law, may be considered guilty until he be proved innocent. Suspicious seem to point heavily to you, I must say. But we've got to have more facts, of course."

"He didn't do it, Mr. Deland! Of course he didn't do it!"

Cynthia shrieked out these words sud-



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son, at least none that could be at present discovered. One would have to go deeper than that for motive.

"Well, Mr. Narkom?"

The Superintendent was looking frankly uncomfortable. Cleek's direct action in front of them all had somewhat winded him. He was not used to such out-and-out tactics, even in the methods of a man who was the most amazing beggar he had ever struck.

"I—I—well, hardly that, my dear chap," he responded awkwardly. "We've got to have more proof than that, you know. A judge won't hang a man upon the evidence of his possible position in a room when the light went out. It isn't feasible!"

(To be continued)

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