

Winter Murder Case

By S. S. VAN DINE

Pit your wits against the greatest mystery writer, in this third instalment of his last baffling murder case



THIRD INSTALMENT THE INQUEST

Friday, January 17, evening

THE coroner's inquest increased the tension of the situation. Ella Gunthar had spoken urgently to Vance as soon as she arrived at the Manor that morning. She was fully cognizant of the time and place of the inquest and determined to be there. Vance sought to dissuade her, but finally abandoned the effort. He realized there was some deeper reason than mere curiosity, and arranged to take her with us in O'Leary's car.

At the bend in the roadway where it joined the main highway O'Leary signalled sharply on his horn. The sound found a prolonged echo in the archaic mid-day siren reverberating over the estate and weirdly following us like a mechanical nemesis as we drove on. The lieutenant offered assurances to Vance's unvoiced concern.

"It won't take us more than 10 minutes to get there. Brander'll wait for us."

The small room in the town hall at Winewood was well filled with townspeople and workers from the Rexon estate; but there were no guests from the Manor itself.

At one end of the room on a low platform was a long table at which a heavy-set, red-faced man with blinking eyes presided. "That's John Brander," whispered O'Leary. "A reasonable man. Local real estate lawyer."

At the left of the table, partitioned off by a railing, sat the jury, simple and honest men of the conventional type one would expect to find in a country town. A constable, with an ineffectual air of importance, stood beside the witness stand.

Eric Gunthar was called first. He explained briefly how he had come upon Lief Wallen's body on his way to work, and had returned to the Gulch with Old Jed, Darrup and Vance. Under direct questioning, his trip to the summit of the cliff with Vance was brought out; but when Gunthar became too voluble regarding the blood spot, he was somewhat abruptly dismissed, and Darrup was called. He appeared cowed and had little to add to Gunthar's testimony. Old Jed proved a somewhat pathetic figure on the witness stand, and Brander wasted no time on him.

Vance was called next. Brander's questions elicited largely repetitions of the testimony already given; and despite the coroner's obvious attempt at caution, the blood stain by the scrub oak on the cliff was necessarily gone into at considerable length. Brander seemed to attach no particular importance to it and contrived a subtle suggestion that the blood might have been other than human blood. I myself was conscious of a fleeting mental picture of some boy or amateur huntsman shooting a rabbit scurrying over the snow.

"Were there footprints anywhere near the spot?" Brander asked.

"No. No footprints," Vance answered. "There were, however, vague impressions in the snow." "Anything definite?" "No." And Vance was permitted to step down.

A Shouted Interruption

DR. QUAYNE was then sworn in. His dignity and soft manner were impressive. The jury listened with patient respect. The doctor's testimony was perfunctory and technical. He told of the condition of the body when he first saw it; estimated the time of death; and hastened over the findings of the autopsy. He em-



Brander struck the table with his gavel. "If you have evidence to give," he said, "you should have stated it on the stand."

injury seemed strange in the circumstances, one hardly to be expected. "But still" — Brander leaned forward with marked courtesy — "you'll pardon me, doctor, if I insist on the point. Such an injury would have been inevitable in an accidental fall from the cliff?"

"Yes" — Dr. Quayne's tone showed annoyance — "it would have been possible."

"That will be all, doctor. Thank you for your clarity and help." O'Leary was then called. His testimony, brief and businesslike, served merely to corroborate that of preceding witnesses. As he stepped down there came an unexpected and dramatic interlude. Guy Darrup suddenly leaped to his feet.

"You ain't doin' fair to Lief Wallen, Mr. Brander," he shouted righteously. "You ain't askin' for the things where truth lies. I could tell you —"

Brander struck the table with his gavel. "If you have evidence to give," he said with acerbity, "you should have stated it when you were on the stand."

"You didn't ask me the right questions, you didn't, Mr. Brander. I know plenty about poor Lief."

"Swear him in again, constable."

"Not comfortin' for us," whispered Vance to O'Leary.

"Brander has no choice," O'Leary, too, was apprehensive. Darrup took the stand a second time.

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The Verdict

BRANDER'S patience gave out. His gavel smashed down.

"Did you come here to vent your hates, man? That's not evidence. That's old women's talk."

"Not evidence!" shrieked Darrup. "Then ask Mr. Gunthar's girl why she was runnin' down the slope from the cliff at 12 o'clock that night when Lief fell over!"

"What's that?"

"You heard me, you did, Mr. Brander. I was workin' late in the pavilion, fixin' things for the



squire's party. An' here she come runnin' down the slope an' turned right by the pavilion. An' she was cryin', too."

I looked at Ella Gunthar. Her face was white, her lips trembled. There was a subdued commotion in the room. Brander hesitated, looked uneasy. He rustled through some papers before him. Then he looked angrily at Darrup.

"Your statements are irrelevant," he paused. "Unless, perhaps"—there was jocularity in his tone—"you're accusing a mere girl of hurling a big fellow like Wallen over the cliff. Is that what you mean?"

"No, Mr. Brander," Darrup snapped angrily into silence. "It wasn't her. I could've sworn it. I'm only tellin' you—"

Again the gavel descended. "That's enough! This inquest is not for the purpose of injuring a young woman's reputation. It is merely to establish by what means Wallen came to his death, and, if by criminal means, at whose hands. Your speculations are, therefore, not helpful to this investigation. Step down, Darrup." Darrup obeyed, and Brander turned quickly to O'Leary.

"Any more witnesses, lieutenant?"

O'Leary shook his head. "That's all then," Brander spoke briefly to the jury. They filed out. In less than half an hour their verdict was announced.

"We find that Lief Wallen met his death by an accidental fall, under suspicious circumstances."

Brander was startled. He opened his mouth, was about to speak, but said nothing. The inquest was over.

"There's a verdict!" O'Leary scoffed to Vance as we drove back to the Manor. "No sense whatever. But Brander did his best."

"Yes—oh, yes. Not strictly legal, perhaps. Could have been worse. However..." Ella Gunthar sat in the corner of the back seat beside me, a handkerchief pressed to her mouth, staring, unseeing, over the quiet winter landscape.

Vance took her in hand tenderly when we arrived. "Was Darrup telling the truth, my dear?" he asked.

"I don't know what you mean..."

"Were you running down the slope that night?"

"—No. Of course not." She raised her chin defiantly. "I was at-home at midnight. I didn't hear anything..."

"Why are you fibbing?" he asked sternly. She compressed her lips and said nothing. Vance went on with tenderness. "Maybe I know. You're a brave little

soldier. But very foolish. Nothing's going to hurt you. I want you to trust me." He held out his hand. Her eyes searched his face a moment. A faint smile showed on her lips. Then she placed her hand confidently in his. "Now run along to Joan—and let that smile come all the way out."

Farewell Celebration

Friday, January 17, Noon

THAT evening, shortly after dinner, I stood with Vance on the veranda, looking out over the shadows on the skating rink. Echoes of music and gaiety drifted out to this secluded corner from the drawing-room. Vance was in a serious, contemplative

bar will be temporarily padlocked.

"That could help, y' know," Vance smiled.

"We're planning it quite seriously," she ran on. "We're even going to practise on the lower rink tomorrow. And we're going to Winewood in the morning to scout for costumes. . . . Sounds a bit horrible, doesn't it?"

"Oh, no!" Vance protested. "Sounds jolly. As I said. He looked at the girl searchingly. "Tell me, Miss Naesmith, why did you try to hurt Ella Gunthar yesterday?"

Miss Naesmith's mood changed. Her eyes narrowed. She shrugged non-committally. "It doesn't take both my eyes

Synopsis of Previous Instalments

Philo Vance is asked by District Attorney Markham of New York to go for a brief vacation to Rexon Manor, the magnificent estate of Carrington Rexon in the Berkshires. Rexon knows Vance and is anxious to have him as a guest because the house is to be filled with guests to welcome his son, Richard Rexon, just returned from Europe, where he has been studying medicine, and the millionaire is worrying about the safety of his famous collection of emeralds. The morning following Vance's arrival, the body of Lief Wallen, guard of the gem room, is found at the foot of a cliff by Eric Gunthar, overseer on the estate and father of Ella Gunthar, a clever skater, and companion of Joan Rexon, an invalid from a fall while skating. Vance finds blood at the top of the cliff and says that Wallen did not fall by accident. Gunthar points out that Old Jed, a hermit, knew just where the body was. Vance learns that Wallen had wanted to marry Ella.

mood and smoked a Regie in silence, with a far-away expression.

Before long, however, there was the sound of approaching footsteps behind us, and Vance turned to greet Carlotta Naesmith.

"Brooding over your sins, sir knight?" the girl asked as she came up. "It really doesn't help. I've tried it. . . . I sought you out to ask a most important question—tu-whit, tu-who: Do you skate gracefully?"

"At my time of life!" Vance pretended dejection. "But your query's flatterin'. I'm duly grateful."

"I was hoping you didn't skate. We do so need a master of ceremonies." She prodded him playfully. "You are hereby elected."

"It sounds interestin'. Explain at'r'y instructions in order."

"It's like this," Miss Naesmith readily complied. "All the inmates of the zoo, barring the decrepit, are throwing a party for Richard tomorrow night. A sort of farewell celebration. It's to be on the rink out there. . . . I'm hostess pro tem, you know. Originality expected from one so brilliant. Hence skates—that being the best idea the brain could conjure up."

"Sounds jolly," said Vance. "And my duties?"

"Oh, just to keep things going. Be officious—you can. Announce the animals. I'm sure you get it—every animal act has a ring-master."

"Must I supply liniment?"

"You wrong us, sir!" she chirped indignantly. "We all skate amazingly well. I understand the

to see that she and Dick are attracted to each other. They always were as kids."

"And Sally Alexander?" She laughed without mirth. "Dick didn't speak to her all day. But let Ella worry."

"And it doesn't take both my eyes"—Vance did not shift his gaze—"to see that you will never pine away if Richard is diverted."

She pondered that a moment. "Dick's a nice boy. It's Papa Rexon's idea, you know. And who am I to upset his fondest dream?"

"Is it nice to be bitter?" Vance brought out his cigarettes. Miss Naesmith accepted one, and he lighted one himself.

"Oh, it's done in the best circles," the girl said facetiously. "And anyway, it's not the man's place to walk out. That's my prerogative."

"I see. Mere technique of etiquette at fault. Well, well."

The girl blew Vance a kiss and went back to the noisy drawing-room.

"As I thought," he murmured, as if to himself. "Neither wants it. Richard makes the fact evident. Ergo, pique. Evincing by a display of cruelty. Ancient feminine sequence. However, nice girl at heart. It'll all arrange itself. Poor papa. Yes, the Rexon dynasty is crumbling. Some like Bruce predict." He looked out over the shadowy rink, drawing deeply on his cigarette. "Come, I've a wishful idea." He spoke irrelevantly as he turned suddenly and went inside.

We found Joan Rexon in her

(Continued on Page Six)

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