

Bellefonte, Pa., March 23, 1928.

THE HILL STREET MURDER.

Through the silence outside of the brief hour before dawn, and the silence of the sleeping household, Gregory Dent sat at his desk and wrote. He wrote feverishly, with a spluttering pen, like a man who has burning matter in his brain of which he must rid himself. In his travel-stained clothes—he had motored without a stop from a northern town—he seemed a little out of place in a study which lacked no possible touch of elegance.

It was the study of a wealthy man, and a man of taste. The two simple bronzes which were the sole adornments of his writing table were perfect in outline and workmanship; the pen with which he wrote was of beaten gold—a gift from an Indian nabob; the blotter was bound in silver scroll-work which had once decorated the treasure box of a Burmese temple.

Grimly and forcefully the pen wrote out its devastating message. The man in whose strong blunt fingers it was gripped never hesitated for a word, never paused to reread what he had written.

Once powerful and proud commercial undertaking which he was pronouncing, but ruin which, on the hard facts, was fully deserved.

He pursued his task without faltering until its completion. Then, for a brief space of time, he leaned back in his chair with an air of relief. Presently he arose, opened a cupboard of lacquer work, brought out whisky and a siphon, helped himself to a drink, took the pen once more, and signed the sheets he had written. Afterwards he turned over the pages of the telephone directory, found the number he wanted, and raised the receiver from its stand.

"Number 890 Mayfair," he demanded. . . . "Sir Gregory Dent speaking from Number 17-A Hill Street. Is that Miss Fisher's All Night Typewriting Agency? . . . Good. Could you send me a stenographer round at once to Hill Street. She must bring a machine and do half an hour's typing on the premises. And wait a moment—she can take a taxi and keep it waiting, but stop at the corner of the street as I don't want to wake my people. . . . Right, then I'll expect her in a quarter of an hour."

He set down the receiver and for the first time read through what he had written. Apparently it met with his approval, for he made no change in any of the sheets. He lighted a cigarette and leaned back once more in his comfortable padded chair. Outside, the silence of the passing night was still unbroken.

He rose again to his feet, walked quietly to the door, opened it, and stood for a moment in the hall. He was a large man, clumsily but powerfully built, with harsh features, redeemed to some extent by the softer curves of his mouth. As he listened the faintest of smiles softened some of the hard lines. On the floor above Angela would be sleeping. Presently, when this self-imposed task was brought to a conclusion, he would steal up the stairs and listen from his dressing-room. If by any chance she were awake. . . .

He returned to his seat, and presently the sound for which he waited arrived—the sound of footsteps upon the pavement. He left his place and himself opened the front door. A plainly dressed young woman, in a long dark coat and dark turban, stood there. With a little gesture imposing silence he ushered her into the study and led her to the table.

"There are seven pages of very important reports," he explained. "I want them typed with two copies. Afterwards each copy is to be put into an envelope; the first addressed to Lord Eustace Martinhoe, chairman of the Dent Financial Trust, 32-B, Bishopsgate, E. C. 2; the second, to Walter Cranley, Baronet, 14-A, Scudamore Gardens, S. W. 1; and the third to Jacob Houlder, Esquire, Secretary to the Dent Financial Trust, also to 32-B Bishopsgate. Have you those addresses all right?"

"Thank you, yes."

He drew several Treasury notes from his pocket and laid them on the table.

"I don't know exactly what your charges are," he continued, "but work at this time of the night is worth paying well for. I am going to try to keep awake long enough to see you out, but I am very tired; if I should drop off to sleep, put the letters into the envelopes and deliver them for me. The meeting to which they refer is not held until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon, but I want them to be received several hours beforehand. Can you be sure of delivering them for me by ten o'clock?"

"Yes, I can do that."

"Good. Then, if by any chance I am asleep when you have finished, don't wake me to sign them. Just put Gregory Dent and sign them per pro, in your own name as typist. . . . Loosen your coat if you find the room warm. You had better put your typewriter upon this table. Allow me."

"Thank you, I can manage."

With quick and deft fingers, she slipped the machine from its case and laid a little roll of paper by its side. She unfastened her coat, but kept it on, and stretched out her hand for the copy which he offered her. She read the first sheet quickly; at the second she paused. Very deliberately she looked around.

Gregory Dent had gone back to the cabinet and was searching for another siphon of soda-water. Her eyes rested upon him for a moment. At the sound of a movement from him, she recovered herself with an effort. By the time he had found the siphon and turned around, she was reading page three with apparent absorption. When she had come to the end of the manuscript he noticed her trembling.

"You look too delicate for this night-work," he said, not unkindly. "I'm afraid I have nothing to offer you, except whisky and soda. I've

just motored up from the country, and if I wake the servants I shall disturb my wife."

"There is no necessity, thank you," she assured him. "I am not in need of anything. The room was a little warm after the street. I am quite all right."

"Used to this work?" he asked, looking at her keenly.

"I have been in my father's office for a year," she confided—"ever since I realized that it might some time be necessary for me to earn my own living. I have been at Miss Fisher's for a few months."

"What made you come to London?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to get away from home before the crash came. Couldn't help, and it worried me to see my father getting thinner and thinner from anxiety."

He nodded. "A business that is going the wrong way is a cruel thing," he observed. "Certain you can read this copy?"

"Easily."

He moved to the door to be sure that it was closed, and dragged a heavy screen in front of it in order to deaden the sound still more effectively. Presently the clicking of the machine commenced. Rapidly, expertly the typist proceeded with her task.

Gregory Dent, his labors over, sank into an easy chair and closed his eyes. There would be trouble tomorrow—trouble and plenty of it—not of his making, though. Besides, there would be the plaudits of all those whose money he had contrived to save. A happy day, on the whole, he decided. His great task accomplished, he would rest.

It had been a long winter, and it was time he had a holiday. Would Angela care for Monte Carlo? he wondered. An excellent idea, anyhow. Angela loved to gamble. Well, she should gamble to her heart's content. Or would she prefer Cannes, with its sunny skies and gaily crowded promenade? He suddenly pictured her up on the Croisette, strolling arm in arm with him. Yes, it must be Cannes, he thought drowsily. . . .

Presently he dozed for a few minutes. The click of typewriter ceased. He opened his eyes with a queer sense of disquietude and looked into the face of death.

Benskin, hardened though he was to the sight of tragedy, gave a little shiver of horror as he leaned down to make his examination of the man, who, an hour before, had been so full of life.

"Death," the doctor pointed out in a hushed whisper, "must have been almost instantaneous. You see, he was shot apparently at close range by a bullet which went straight through the heart. I doubt whether he had time even to realize what had happened."

Benskin glanced round the room. The sergeant, a policeman, and an awed and trembling butler in the background were its sole remaining occupants.

"Is the body exactly as you found it?" he asked the sergeant.

"The doctor was the first one to touch it, sir," the sergeant assured him.

"Any weapon?"

"Not a sign of one."

"Anyone here before you?"

"Only the maid who found the body and the butler. Neither of them came farther into the room than the corner of the screen. The butler telephoned at once from the hall, looking up the room. He handed me the key upon my arrival."

"Then he was probably shot from the corner of the screen," Benskin reflected, examining a slight cut in the dead man's head and a smear of blood upon the leg of an overturned chair. "You are sure that nothing else has been touched, sergeant?"

"Certain, sir" was the firm reply.

"According to the doctors, Sir Gregory must have been dead for a couple of hours at least, but no one seems to have heard the shot, or to have had any idea that anything happened. A maid came into the room as usual at about seven o'clock. She rushed away screaming and fetched the butler. It seems that Sir Gregory, who had been up in Manchester on business, was not expected home last night. He must have arrived some time after the household had gone to bed and let himself in with his latch-key."

"Do you know of whom the household consists?"

"Only Lady Dent, so far as I can find out. There are no children and no one staying in the house."

"Has Lady Dent been told yet?"

"Not to my knowledge." The doctor moved towards the door. "I shall have to prepare my report," he said.

"The body will have to be removed to the mortuary, too, as soon as you have finished your examination. There is nothing more I can do."

He took his leave, and Benskin turned towards the sergeant.

"Is there anyone else who sleeps in the front of the house?" he asked.

"Lady Dent's maid. She has been used to sleeping in the dressing-room apparently when Sir Gregory has a been away."

"Go and fetch her."

The sergeant obeyed, and presently ushered in a pale-faced, petite Frenchwoman, with fluffy hair and deep-set eyes. Benskin handed her a chair.

"You are Lady Dent's maid, I understand," he said. "Tell me your name."

"Celeste Vignolle, Monsieur," she replied, with a little break in her voice. "I have been her Ladyship's maid for two years. Oh, but what a tragedy!"

"Has anyone told her Ladyship what has happened?"

"Mon Dieu, no!" the girl exclaimed, wringing her hands. "Who would dare?"

"As the doctor has gone, I am afraid I must," Benskin decided. "There is a dressing-room, I understand, adjoining her Ladyship's bedroom?"

"Certainly, sir. I sleep there when Sir Gregory is away."

"You slept there last night?"

"Yes, sir. Sir Gregory was not expected home."

"You heard nothing?"

"Nothing, Monsieur."

"No shot, or the opening or closing of doors?"

"Nothing at all, sir. I was out myself till midnight. Her Ladyship had given me permission."

"Was her Ladyship out too?"

"No, sir. I put her to bed before I went out at ten o'clock."

"When you came back did you enter by the front door?"

"Yes, sir. Her Ladyship lent me her latch-key."

"Was there any light in the study then?"

"No, sir."

Benskin reflected for a moment. "Take me up-stairs," he directed. "Tell her Ladyship that someone is waiting to speak to her and ask her to see me for a moment in the dressing-room. And Mademoiselle, I wish to be the first one to tell her of what has happened. You understand. You do not mention the police."

The girl shuddered. "Is it I who would wish to speak of these things?" she cried. "Her Ladyship will be broken-hearted."

She hurried away, and Benskin followed her up-stairs. From the dressing-room into which she ushered him, he listened. She was apparently obeying orders, for scarcely a sentence was spoken. It was all the more of a shock to Benskin, therefore, when Lady Dent appeared. She was young—she seemed little more, indeed, than a child—with beautiful deep-set eyes and fragile complexion. She had the air, however, of one already in the throes of mortal terror. She was shivering in every limb and ghastly pale.

"What has happened?" she cried. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"How do you know that anything has happened Lady Dent?"

"How do I know—?" She stopped herself suddenly. "What do you do here? Who are you? What is all this mystery?"

"What time did you go to bed last night, Lady Dent?" Benskin inquired.

"At ten o'clock," she replied. "I had a headache."

"Did you hear any sounds in the night?"

"None."

"Did you expect your husband to come home?"

"Of course not. He is coming this afternoon, in time for a meeting at three o'clock. Tell me who you are and what you want."

"My name is Benskin, and I am very sorry to bring you bad news," was the sympathetic rejoinder. "Your husband returned last night and met with an accident. He appears to have been shot."

"A serious one, I fear."

"I mean that he is dead."

The woman threw up her arms, gazed at him for a moment with distended eyes, and sank sobbing upon the bed. In a moment, however, she was on her feet again.

"But this is horrible!" she cried. "Do you mean that he shot himself?"

"Either that," Benskin replied, "or he was murdered."

"Murdered! But who could have murdered him?"

"That is what I want to find out, and so, I am sure, do you," Benskin said. "Will you permit me, Lady Dent, to glance into your room?"

She sank upon the bed, waving him away. He rang the bell for her maid, and passed into the bedroom beyond. At the room itself, with its apple-green decorations, its French bedstead, its charming furniture he scarcely glanced. He stood for a moment at the window, drew aside the chintz curtains and looked down into the street. He was in the room for less than a minute altogether. Then he made his way down-stairs back into the jealously guarded study.

Benskin locked the door on the inside and commenced his search. First of all, he stood for several minutes at the writing table, examining the traces of its recent use. He removed the sheet of blotting-paper and placed it in his pocket, held the ink-pad up to the light, moved back to the dead man's side, and, turning his right hand over, found a smudge of ink upon the forefinger.

The tumbler with its dregs of whisky and soda, was still there, a half-burnt cigarette. The telephone book stood open, and Benskin made a note of the page. Then he went through the drawers and took possession of some loose pages of manuscript he found there, which he examined through a pocket microscope. Afterwards he searched the room meticulously, but in vain, for any trace of a weapon. Finally he rang for the butler.

"I understand that Sir Gregory was not expected home last night?" he asked.

"He certainly was not, sir," the man replied. "I should have received orders to have waited up, or to have left some things out for him."

"And no one in the house has any idea as to what hour he arrived?"

"No, sir. The servants' quarters lie rather far back, and we shouldn't hear anything that took place in the front of the house, or in the street."

Benskin nodded. "The room had better be kept locked up for another hour," he ordered. "The sergeant will stay with you in case anything is wanted, and the doctor will be here again to prepare my report."

"No, sir. The servants' quarters lie rather far back, and we shouldn't hear anything that took place in the front of the house, or in the street."

"Very good, sir."

He departed, and Benskin beckoned to the sergeant who had been waiting in the hall.

"It appears that you were quite right and that Sir Gregory was not expected home last night," he confessed. "He arrived unexpectedly, obviously for some special reason. He wrote letters immediately on his arrival, and telephoned. Disconnect the other telephone, sergeant, and answer every inquiry yourself from here until I see you again. All messages that come through to the house to be censored. You understand?"

"Quite well, sir," the sergeant assured him.

Benskin gave one last pitying glance at the crumpled figure upon the floor. Then he started out in search of the murderer.

The young woman who was presently shown into the waiting room of Miss Fisher's Typewriting Agency, in response to Benskin's inquiry some ten days later, impressed him from the first with her good looks, her composure and complete self-control. "You wish to see me?" she asked. "I am Miss Horton."

"I wished to see you," he admitted, handing her a card. "Forgive me for not sending in my name."

She glanced at it and looked across at him with no sign of alarm. "A detective," she observed. "What do you want with me?"

"I have come to you on somewhat serious business," he replied, "and I should tell you at once that although I should advise you to be frank with me, if you have nothing to conceal, you are not obliged to answer my questions."

"There is no reason why I should not."

"Then why didn't you come forward at the inquest on Sir Gregory Dent and give your evidence?"

"Why should I? I wasn't summoned. I could tell the police nothing. Sir Gregory was quite all right when I saw him last."

"Nevertheless you seem to have been the last person who saw him alive," Benskin reminded her. "I am quite sure that you have intelligence enough to know that that makes your evidence important."

She made no reply beyond the merest shrug of the shoulders. "Any other questions?"

"You typed three letters for Sir Gregory Dent that night, the delivery of which would practically have destroyed the chance of your father's firm being included in the Dent cotton amalgamation scheme," Benskin continued. "Not one of those communications reached its destination."

"This time her composure was disturbed. How can you possibly know what I typed?" she exclaimed, with a little start.

"I will set you a good example," he declared "by answering your question. I know because I found the original copy, which Sir Gregory had written with his own hand, in one of the drawers of the writing-table. I knew he had probably written it that night because his fingers were badly smudged with ink; there was a telephone book open upon his desk, from which I discovered quite easily that he had telephoned for a stenographer to this office and that you had answered the summons. There were other signs of a typewriter having been used. I discovered that those communications had never been delivered at their destinations, by inquiry in the usual course. The result was that your father's firm—which, if Sir Gregory Dent was not mistaken, formed during his visit north, was in a precarious financial condition—was included in the amalgamation and relieved of its responsibilities."

"You are quite clever," she admitted. "Any more questions?"

Benskin reflected for a moment. "Who let you in when you arrived at the house, and what time was it?"

"About half past three. Sir Gregory let me in himself. There seemed to be no one else up."

"You saw no one else all the time you were in the house?"

"Not a soul. If I had, I might have thought of coming and giving evidence. As it is, nothing I could say would have been of any use."

Benskin looked at her steadily. "I wonder," he suggested, "if it had occurred to you that without Sir Gregory's death it would have been less for you to have suppressed the delivery of those letters? In other words, Sir Gregory Dent's presence at the meeting the next afternoon would have meant your father's ruin."

"I am not so sure," she replied, after a moment's hesitation. "Sir Gregory was very unfair in his strictures, and the other directors might have taken a different view. Of course," she went on, "I can see what you're aiming at. You are suggesting that I murdered Sir Gregory Dent."

"You were, at any rate, the last person known to have been with him," Benskin reminded her, "and furthermore you had a motive."

"On the other hand," she objected, "how can you believe it possible that I went there with any such idea in my head? He rang up the typewriting office quite unexpectedly. I never heard of him before. I answered the call because I happened to be the girl on duty."

"A good point," Benskin admitted. "Besides," she added, "I never fired a pistol in my life. I shouldn't know what to do with one if I had it."

"Then what was this one doing in your room?" Benskin asked, producing a weapon suddenly from his pocket.

She stared at it transfixed. "In my room?" she repeated. "I never saw it before."

"Really!" he murmured. "Yet it was found in your apartment at Cranford Court, carefully wrapped up in brown paper and hidden in the bottom of one of your drawers. With it was this pocketbook, which, as you will see, contains a very considerable sum in bank-notes. I have ascertained that the pocketbook was the property of Sir Gregory Dent."

"I never saw either the pistol or the pocketbook before," she insisted. "He replaced them in his pocket. What were you doing at a typewriting agency in London?" he asked.

"Your father was in a very large way of business. There could have been no necessity for you to earn your own living."

"Perhaps there wasn't," she admitted, "but my father had taken us all into his confidence. We knew that the crash was likely to come. I preferred to be independent when it arrived."

He nodded. "A reasonable explanation," he admitted. "Now Miss Horton," he went on, "I am going to speak to you very seriously. I repeat that you were the last person known to have seen Sir Gregory Dent alive. You had a sufficient motive for the

crime, apart from the theft of the pocketbook. Sir Gregory was killed by a bullet from a weapon of some peculiar gauge. This weapon, which was found concealed in your room, is of the same gauge."

"No—don't speak for a moment, please. You must understand, as a young woman of common sense, that the situation is extremely serious. I should be perfectly justified in arresting you at this moment. Is there anything you can tell me, as the representative of the police, which would assist us in tracing the murderer of Sir Gregory? Think over that question, please. I shall ask you no other."

"Nothing," she answered stubbornly.

"Then I can only wish you good morning."

"You aren't going to arrest me then?"

"There is no charge against you at present. Stop! There is one more question I am going to ask. When you left the house, the taxi cab, I understand, was waiting for you at the corner of the street. You closed the door softly?"

"As softly as I could," she answered. "It made a certain amount of noise."

"Did you hesitate at all upon the pavement, or look back towards the house?"

She looked at him curiously. "I wonder why you ask me that," she said. "As a matter of fact, I was trying to get away quietly and I dropped my typewriter. I had to stop and pick it up, and I did look back at the house to see if I had disturbed anyone."

Benskin's smile of satisfaction was cryptic.

"One last word, Miss Horton," he concluded. "Don't attempt to leave your apartments or change your mode of living. You will be under surveillance for the present. Good morning."

Benskin had his first conference with the sub-commissioner that afternoon. When he had concluded his report, the latter looked across the desk at him in surprise.

"But my dear Benskin," he protested, "rely on that evidence you ought to apply for a warrant against the young woman?"

"I can get it at any moment," Benskin pointed out, "and she is, of course, under police surveillance. At the same time," he went on earnestly, "forgive me, Major Houlden, if I am even a little overanxious not to put a person on trial for her life until I am perfectly convinced in my own mind of her guilt. She probably did kill Sir Gregory, and if so she will have to answer for it. She can't escape. I promise you that—but I once made what I always felt was a moral mistake. I don't want to do that again. I want to be sure."

The sub-commissioner was not altogether sympathetic.

"I don't blame you for being careful, Benskin," he admitted, "but you can't bring the kid-glove business into a case of this sort. If there is any other person in the world against whom you can collect as much evidence as you have against this woman, bring him in. A day or two longer won't hurt us. However in the language of the Scots—I hae me doots."

"And I my fears," Benskin acknowledged.

Benskin, waiting in the lounge of a popular Dansant Restaurant, drew from his pocket the dossier for which he had applied a few mornings before, and read it through carefully.

"HERMYANAS. Of Greek parentage, born in the Argentine. Age, probably thirty-two. Professional dancer in Nice and Monte Carlo. Understood to have left the Riviera on account of money trouble. First engaged at Marabout's Cabaret Club for six months; afterwards opened small but fashionable night club called Lamb's Cabaret. Understood to be the sole proprietor. Financial reputation now excellent. Understood to have woman hater. Nothing against him in this country. Reputation on Riviera indifferent."

He folded up the report and placed it carefully in his pocket. Almost as he did so the young woman for whom he was waiting entered. In her very smart clothes and from her generally chic appearance, few people would have taken Celeste for a lady's-maid.

"Mademoiselle," Benskin murmured, rising to his feet and confronting her. She looked at him pleasantly, but with no sign of recognition.

"We met," he reminded her, "under somewhat unhappy circumstances."

All the gaiety seemed to fade from her face. "You are the detective!" she exclaimed.

"There is not the slightest need to be frightened of me," he reassured her. "I am not really very formidable. Are you alone? Might I have a few minutes with you?"

He spoke in French, and the sound of her own language seemed to soothe her.

"I am alone," she admitted, "but— you will not speak of that—I cannot bear it."

"I have ordered some tea," he said as he drew his chair confidentially towards her. "Mademoiselle," he continued, "it is not my wish to disturb you, yet I have a word or two to say about that night."

"But why should you speak of it again?"

"You forget," he reminded her, "that it has become my business to trace the murderer of Sir Gregory Dent."

"But how can I help? Why do you speak to me about it?"

He looked at her for a moment as though measuring her powers of resistance. She had, he decided, more nerve than he had at first given her credit for.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "fortunately you were not called at the inquest, so you have no statement upon oath, but your account of that night's proceedings was not true, and I am going to give you an opportunity of correcting it."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"You told me that you went out on the night of Sir Gregory Dent's death and returned about midnight."

"Well?"

"It was not you who went out. It was her Ladyship."

Celeste was silent.

"A serious affair like this," he explained gravely, "requires very careful investigation, and you know in the long run everything becomes known. Lady Dent, it appears, is passionately fond of dancing, and Sir Gregory, naturally, objected to her visiting night clubs and those places. Whenever there was an opportunity you changed identities. You are reasonably alike, and you wear the same clothes. This arrangement enabled Lady Dent to spend many evenings away from home, when even the servants believed that it was you who was out so late. On that particular night you remained in the dressing-room, and it was you who went to bed at ten o'clock. Her Ladyship went out. Where? At what time did she return?"