THE PARADISE MYSTERY

By J. S. Fletcher

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THIS STARTS THE STORY

Mary Bewery and her brother Dick are wards of Doctor Ransford. A strange man asks for him and later is found dead. The theory is that he was slain. Collishaw, a laborer, who said he could throw light on the Brake murder, is found dead. Detectives surmise Ransford is the murderer. Harker, a detective, sees Bryce and admits he has learned that Braden was in truth Brake, father of Mary and Dick. Harker tells Bryce of Glassdale, a convict he saw in the city before Braden's death. At the inquest over Collishaw's body, Doctor Ransford, in an outburst, denies any part in the deaths of either Braden or the mason. Bryce finds a party has searched the cemetery and found a box containing jewels stolen from the Duke of Saxonsteade. The police inspector and a Scotland Yard man call on Doctor Ransford and ask his help. He tells them of his suspicions of Bryce and Harker. The officers go to question Bryce. He admits loving Mary Bewery and leads them to most new suspicions on Ransford. The detectives learn Bryce paid Collishaw fifty pounds two days before his murder. They are astounded by a wire from Ransford stating the mystery has been cleared and the guilty men are known. Bryce questions Glassdale and learns the slain man had two enemies he had traced to England. Later he meets a friend who tells him he suspects Glassdale. Bryce goes to tell Mary she must marry him or he will send Ransford to his death as slayer of the two murdered men. She upbraids him and orders him from the estate. Glassdale goes to see Folliot to claim the reward he has offered for information regarding the murder of Braden. After he leaves Bryce sees Folliot and accuses him of being Falkiner Wraye, bitter enemy of Braden, and asks him what part he had in the murder. He admits knowing the details of the killing but denies being the slayer.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"YOU'D have a job to get it," retorted Folliot. "Supposing that all you say is true about—about past matters? Nothing can prove—nothing! That I ever met Braden that morning. On the other hand, I can prove, easily, that I never did meet him; I can account for every minute of my time that day. As to the other affair—not an ounce of direct evidence!"

"Then—it was the other man," exclaimed Bryce. "Now then, who is he?"

Folliot replied with a shrewd glance. "A man who by giving away another man gave himself away would be a damned fool!" he answered. "If there is another man——"

"As there must be," interrupted Bryce. "—Then, he's safe!" concluded Folliot. "You'll get nothing from me about him!"

"And nobody can get at you except through him?" asked Bryce.

"That's about it," assented Folliot laconically.

Bryce laughed cynically.

"A pretty coil!" he said with a sneer. "Here! You talked about my price. I'm quite content to hold my tongue if you'd tell me something, about what happened seventeen years ago."

"What?" asked Folliot.

"You knew Brake, you must have known his family affairs," said Bryce. "What became of Brake's wife and children when he went to prison?"

Folliot shook his head, and it was plain to Bryce that his gesture of dissent was genuine.

"You're wrong," he answered. "I never at any time knew anything of Brake's family affairs. So little indeed that I never even knew he was married."

Bryce rose to his feet and stood staring.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You mean to tell me that, even now, you don't know that Brake had two children, and that—that—oh, it's incredible!"

"What's incredible?" asked Folliot. "What are you talking about?"

Bryce in his eagerness and surprise grasped Folliot's arm and shook it.

"Good heavens, man!" he said. "Those two wards of Ransford's are Brake's girl and boy! Didn't you know that, didn't you?"

"Never!" answered Folliot. "Never! And who's Ransford, then? I never heard Brake speak of any Ransford! What game is all this? What——"

Before Bryce could reply, Folliot suddenly started, thrust his companion aside and went to one of the windows. A sharp exclamation from him took Bryce to his side. Folliot lifted a shaking hand and pointed into the garden.

"There!" he whispered. "Hell and—— What's this mean?"

Bryce looked in the direction pointed out. Behind the pergola of rambler rose the figures of men were coming toward the old well-house led by one of Folliot's gardeners. Suddenly they emerged into full view, and in front of the rest was Mitchington and close behind him the detective, and behind him Glassdale!

It was close on 5 o'clock when Glassdale, leaving Folliot at his garden door, turned the corner into the quietness of the precincts. He walked about there for a while, staring at the queer old houses with eyes which saw neither fantastic gables nor twisted chimneys. Glassdale was thinking. And the result of his reflections was that he suddenly exchanged his idle sauntering for brisker steps and walked sharply round to the police station, where he asked to see Mitchington.

Mitchington and the detective were just about to walk down to the railway station to meet Ransford, in accordance with his telegram. At sight of Glassdale they went back into the inspector's office. Glassdale closed the door and favored them with a knowing smile.

"Something else for you, Inspector!" he said. "Mixed up a bit with last night's affair, too. About these mysteries—Braden and Collishaw—I can tell you one man who's in them."

"Who, then?" demanded Mitchington. Glassdale went a step nearer to the two officials and lowered his voice.

"The man who's known here as Stephen Folliot," he answered. "That's a fact!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mitchington. Then he laughed incredulously. "Can't believe it!" he continued. "Mr. Folliot! Must be some mistake!"

Mitchington glanced at the clock.

"Come with us down to the station," he said. "Doctor Ransford's coming in on this express from town; he's got news for us. We'd better hear that first. Folliot!—good Lord! — who'd have believed or even dreamed it!"

"You'll see," said Glassdale as they went out. "Maybe Doctor Ransford's got the same information."

Ransford was out of the train as soon as it ran in, and hurried to where Mitchington and his companions were standing. And behind him, to Mitchington's surprise, came old Simpson Harker, who had evidently traveled with him. With a silent gesture Mitchington beckoned the whole party into an empty waiting room and closed its door on them.

"Now, then, inspector," said Ransford without preface or ceremony, "you've got to act quickly! You got my wire—a few words will explain it. I went up to town this morning in answer to a message from the bank where Braden lodged his money when he returned to England. To tell you the truth, the managers there and myself have, since Braden's death, been carrying to a conclusion an investigation which I began on Braden's behalf—though he never knew of it—years ago. At the bank I met Mr. Harker here, who had called to find something out for himself. Now I'll sum things up in a nutshell: for years Braden, or Brake, had been wanting to find two men who cheated him. The name of one is Wraye, of the other, Flood. I've been trying to trace them, too. At last we've got them. They're in this town, and without doubt the deaths of both Braden and Collishaw are at their door! You know both of them—enough. Wraye is——"

"Mr. Folliot!" interrupted Mitchington, pointing to Glassdale. "So he's just told us; he's identified him as Wraye. But the other—who's he, Doctor?"

Ransford glanced at Glassdale as if he wished to question him, but instead he answered Mitchington's question.

"The other man," he said, "the man Flood, is also a well-known man to you, Fladgate."

Mitchington started, evidently more astonished than by the first news.

"What!" he exclaimed. "The verger! You don't say!"

He led the whole party out of the station and down the High street until they came to a narrow lane of little houses which ran toward the close. At its entrance a policeman was walking his beat. Mitchington stopped to exchange a few words with him.

"This man Fladgate," he said, rejoining the others, "lives alone—fifth cottage down here. He'll be about having his tea; we shall take him by surprise."

Presently the group stood around a door at which Mitchington knocked gently, and it was on their grave and watchful faces that a tall, clean-shaven, very solemn-looking man gazed in astonishment as he opened the door, and started back. He went white to the lips and his hand fell trembling from the latch as Mitchington strode in and the rest crowded behind.

"Now then, Fladgate!" said Mitchington, going straight to the point and watching his man narrowly, while the detective approached him closely on the other side. "I want you and a word with you at once. Your real name is Flood! What have you to say to that? And—it's no use beating about the bush—what have you to say about this Braden affair, and your share with Folliot in it, whose real name is Wraye. It's all come out about the two of you. If you've anything to say, you'd better say it."

The verger, whose black gown lay thrown across the back of a chair, looked from one face to another with frightened eyes. It was very evident that the suddenness of the descent had completely unnerved him. Ransford's practiced eyes saw that he was on the verge of a collapse.

"Give him time, Mitchington," he said. "Pull yourself together," he added, turning to the man. "Don't be frightened; answer these questions!"

"For God's sake, gentlemen!" gasped the verger. "What—what is it? What am I to answer? Before God, I'm as innocent as—as any of you—about Mr. Brake's death! Upon my soul and honor I am!"

"You know all about it," insisted Mitchington. "Come, now, isn't it true that you're Flood, and that Folliot's Wraye, the two men whose trick on him got Brake convicted years ago? Answer that!"

"Yes, that's true," he said at last. "But in that affair I—I wasn't the principal. I was only—only Wraye's agent, as it were. I wasn't responsible. And when Mr. Brake came here, when I met him that morning——"

He paused, still looking from one to another of his audience as if entreating their belief.

"As sure as I'm a living man, gentlemen!" he suddenly burst out, "I'd no willing hand in Mr. Brake's death! I'll tell you the exact truth; I'll take my oath of it whenever you like. I'd have been thankful to tell, many a time, but for—for Wraye. He wouldn't let me at first, and afterward it got complicated. It was this way. That morning—when Mr. Brake was found dead—I had occasion to go up into that gallery under the clerestory. I suddenly came on him face to face. He recognized me. And—I'm telling you the solemn, absolute truth, gentlemen!—he'd no sooner recognized me than he attacked me, seizing me by the arm. I hadn't recognized him at first. I did when he laid hold of me. I tried to shake him off, tried to quiet him; he struggled—I don't know what he wanted to do—he began to cry out—it was a wonder he wasn't heard in the church below, and he would have, been only the organ was being played rather loudly. And in the struggle he slipped—it was just by that open doorway—and before I could do more than grasp at him, he shot through the opening and fell! It was sheer, pure accident, gentlemen! Upon my soul, I hadn't the least intention of harming him."

"And after that?" asked Mitchington, at the end of a brief silence.

"I saw Mr. Folliot—Wraye," continued Flood. "Just afterward, that was. I told him; he bade me keep silence unt I we saw how things went. Later he forced me to be silent. What could I do? As things were, Wraye could have disclaimed me—I shouldn't have had a chance. So I held my tongue."

"Now, then, Collishaw?" demanded Mitchington. "Give us the truth about that. Whatever the other was, that was murder!"

"Before God, gentlemen!" he answered. "I know no more—at least, little more—about that man than you do! I'll tell you all I do know. Wraye and I, of course, met now and then and talked about this. It got to our ears at last that Collishaw knew something. My own impression is that he saw what occurred between me and Mr. Brake—he was working somewhere up there. I wanted to speak to Collishaw. Wraye wouldn't let me, he bade me leave it to him. A bit later, he told me he'd squared Collishaw with fifty pounds——"

Mitchington and the detective exchanged looks.

"Wraye—that's Folliot—paid Collishaw fifty pounds, did he?" asked the detective.

"He told me so," replied Flood. "To hold his tongue. But I'd scarcely heard that when I heard of Collishaw's sudden death. And as to how that happened, or who—who brought it about—upon my soul, gentlemen, I know nothing! Whatever I may have thought, I never mentidned it to Wraye—never! I—I daren't! You don't know what a man Wraye is! I've been under his thumb most of my life and—and what are you going to do with me, gentlemen?"

Mitchington exchanged a word or two with the detective, and then, putting his head out of the door beckoned to two policemen.

"Get your tea," he said sharply to the verger. "These men will stop with you—you're not to leave this room!" He gave some instructions to the two policemen in an undertone and motioned Ransford and the others to follow him.

Mrs. Folliot was out, Sackville Bonham was still where bryce had left him at the golf-links, when the pursuers reached Folliot's. Folliot and Bryce saw them coming and looked at each other.

"Glassdale!" exclaimed Bryce. "By heaven, man!—he's told on you!"

Folliot was still staring through the window. He saw Ransford and Harker following the leading figures. And suddenly he turned to Bryce.

"You've no hand in this?" he demanded.

"I!" exclaimed Bryce. "I never knew till just now!"

Folliot pointed to the door.

"Go down!" he said. "Let 'em in, bid 'em come up! I'll—I'll settle with 'em. Go!"

Bryce hurried down to the lower apartment. He was filled with excitement—an unusual thing for him—but in the midst of it, as he made for the outer door, it suddenly struck him that all his schemings and plottings were going for nothing. The truth was at hand, and it was not going to benefit him in the slightest degree. He was beaten.

But that was no time for philosophic reflection; already those outside were beating at the door. He flung it open, and the foremost men started in surprise at the sight of him. But Bryce bent forward to Mitchington—anxious to play a part to the last.

"He's upstairs!" he whispered. "Up there! He'll bluff it out if he can, but he's just admitted to me——"

Mitchington thrust Bryce aside, almost roughly.

"We know all about that!" he said. "I shall have a word or two for you later! Come on, now——"

The men crowded up the stairway into Folliot's snuggery. Bryce, wondering at the inspector's words and manner, following closely behind him and the detective and Glassdale, who led the way. Folliot was standing in the middle of the room, one hand behind his back, the other in his pocket.

And as the leading three entered the place he brought his concealed hand sharply round and presenting a revolver at Glassdale fired point-blank at him.

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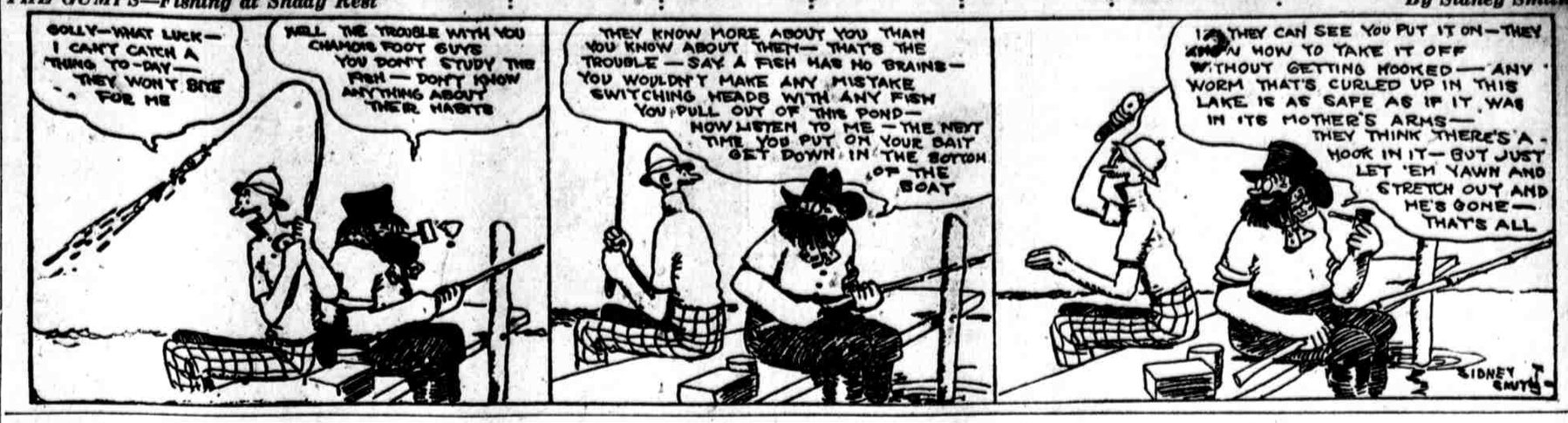

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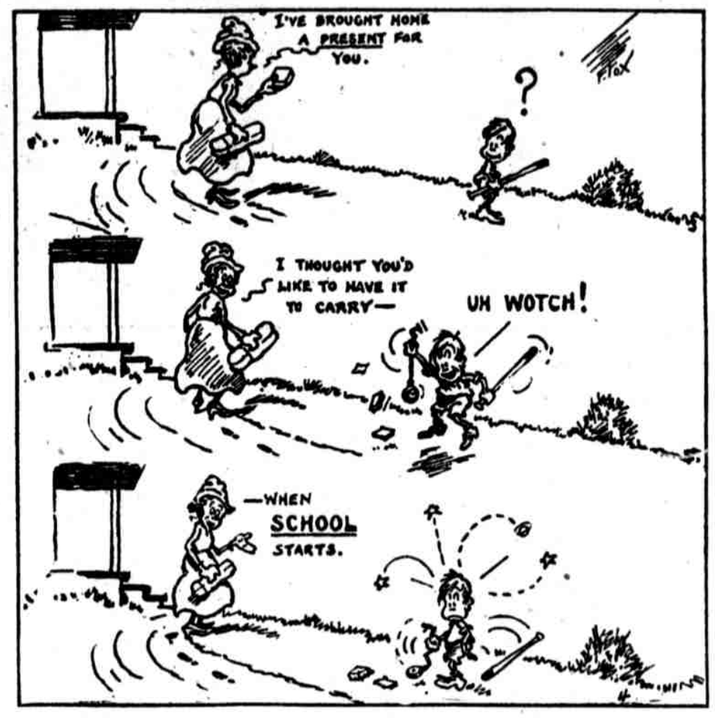

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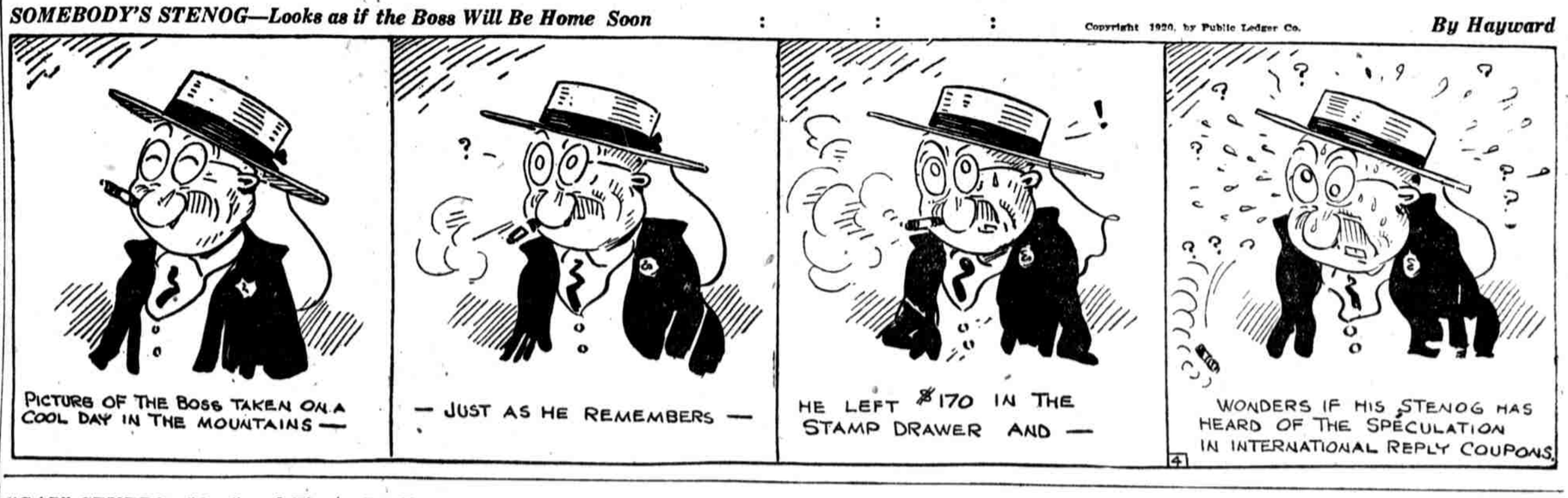

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