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THE PEARL DOCTOR

Arthur B. Reeve, in the New York Sun.

The telephone tinkled insistently.

"Hello!" came a voice over the wire. "This is Mr. Baum of the Prince Henry Hotel. I suppose you have read about the peculiar death of Louise De Voe, the actress, in her suite, here?"

"Only what the papers have said," was the brief reply.

"Well, you know we hotel men don't like such mysteries. It's bad for business. Could you come up here right away? I

have an idea that a woman could unravel the case much better than a man."

Twenty minutes later, the proprietor and his regular house detective, Dan Callahan, met Miss Kendall in the lobby of the hotel.

"You may go right up," greeted the anxious host. "Callahan will show you Miss De Voe's rooms. The Coroner is up there now."

"The papers said it was a

suicide," commented Clare quizzically, as the elevator ascended with them. She had been much relieved to see that the house man had shown no professional jealousy, but rather a sort of gallantry toward a woman in the profession. "I recall thinking that there was no motive for it. She had just signed a long contract with a good manager."

"Exactly," agreed Callahan brightening with approval. "You have hit on just the thing that has been puzzling us."

"How was she discovered?"

"The reports of the case in the papers are substantially correct. It was Miss Violet Le Compte, another actress with whom she

lived, who found her last night, or rather early this morning. Miss De Voe had retired, and her friend came in very late from an after-theatre supper. Guests on the same floor were roused by a cry from Miss Le Compte. She had opened the door, evidently called to her friend, received no answer, gone into her room and found her dead."

The Coroner had already completed his investigation by the time Callahan and Clare reached the room. Things in the apartment of the two actresses had been left pretty much as they were when Louise De Voe had been discovered dead. There lay the now cold and marble figure of the beautiful little actress who had enchanted thousands in life—petite, blonde, vivacious. In death her delicately chiseled features were terribly contorted and her fair complexion mottled.

Miss Le Compte, who had occupied another room since the tragedy, was sobbing in the sitting-room after telling her story to the Coroner. She was a tall striking brunette, not at all a figure in her dainty house dress of charmeuse, to be associated with tragedy.

"Apparently a case of suicide by poisoning," announced the Coroner, "although it is not clear to me just how or by what means it was done."

Clare had decided to go over the case in an endeavor to reconstruct the scene with the aid of Violet Le Compte.

"The outside door was not locked?" she questioned as Miss Le Compte told of her surprise at receiving no answer when she entered.

"No, we used to leave it open for each other. You see, all our valuables were in the safe downstairs, except those which we happened to be wearing at the time, and at night we had a little wall safe for them."

"You saw nothing suspicious—the room was not disordered?" Miss Le Compte thought a moment. "No," she replied slowly. "I can't recollect that there was anything suspicious about the room."

To Clare as she examined the body there was every evidence that the poor girl had been asphyxiated. Moreover, her pupils were dilated and staring. Had it been by a deft touch on a muscle that constricted the throat and stopped the breath? There was not the slightest mark of fingers or of pressure of any kind on the soft, fair skin. The Coroner had evidently considered asphyxiation due to a poison that had paralyzed the chest muscles.

"No evidence of a struggle?" repeated Clare.

"No, none whatever."

"No peculiar odor, no receptacle of a kind near her that might have held poison?"

"No, nothing that could have been used to hold poison?"

Clare had been examining the bed on which the once beautiful actress lay. Her back was to the rest of those in the room who did not see the detective's next move. She dropped her handkerchief on the bedclothes then recovered it slowly, carefully placing it in her handbag. A sudden movement in the hall followed and the door opened

quickly. A man entered, a youngish fellow of fine physique and attractive face. It was Walker Wheaton. His usually debonair manner was visibly subdued by the presence of death, the death, too, of a woman who had been on very intimate terms with him. On a moment did he pause to look at the drawn face on the pillow, then, turning as if to hide his emotion, he walked to a window in the sitting-room and gazed out silently, while his fingers played nervously with the ace of spades.

A moment later he turned and mentioned to Clare.

"Miss Kendall?" he inquired in a husky undertone. "They told me you were investigating this—this awful affair. If there is anything I can do to help you, I hope you will command me. In fact," he added as if voicing a sudden thought, "you must know that I was a very close friend of Lou—Miss De Voe. I hope you'll get at the truth, and if you need any financial assistance—er—we'll, just consider I am your client and I'll meet any bill for expenses or services. Oh, y' here he lowered his voice even more, "for Heaven's sake, if you can, keep my name out of it. I—I can't meet a scandal just now. This would just about put the last touch on the—ah—difference already existing between Mrs. Wheaton and myself. I wish," he sighed, "I had learned of this sooner."

"I can promise nothing except that I will arrive at the truth as soon and as quickly as I can," answered Clare, studying keenly the man before her. Unconsciously she distrusted him. There was a lack of sincerity back of his nonchalance that made her feel just for a moment an instinctive sympathy for Mrs. Wheaton, who apparently had known nothing of this "other woman." It was rather with the thought of her than of the man that Clare repeated, "As quickly as I can. Of course, you know Mr. Wheaton. I can't work for two clients and Mr. Baum has recently engaged me. Still, as far as his interests and yours coincide, you need fear nothing from me."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "Remember call on me for anything you need."

"Walker Wheaton," pondered Clare, when he had left, then added to Callahan: "He was the man who lost the Valdoreme pearls last summer, wasn't he? This Miss De Voe was mentioned in the case, too. Do you know anything about it?"

"Well," began Callahan, "I personally think that she had nothing to do with them. She met Wheaton on the steamer coming over, La Montaigne it was. I think it was shown in the case that she knew of the pearls, all right, and had even had them on. But she didn't wear them in the Ritz-Carlton restaurant of the boat, as some people said. You know the reason? Why, they were valuable, of course, but they were antique, historic. Wheaton bought them in Paris at a good sum, but really very cheaply, considering their number and size. For, the pearls were decaying. You are aware, I suppose, that pearls, if they are not worn for a long time, sometimes decay, and that the Valdoreme pearls had not been worn for years previous to the forced sale?"

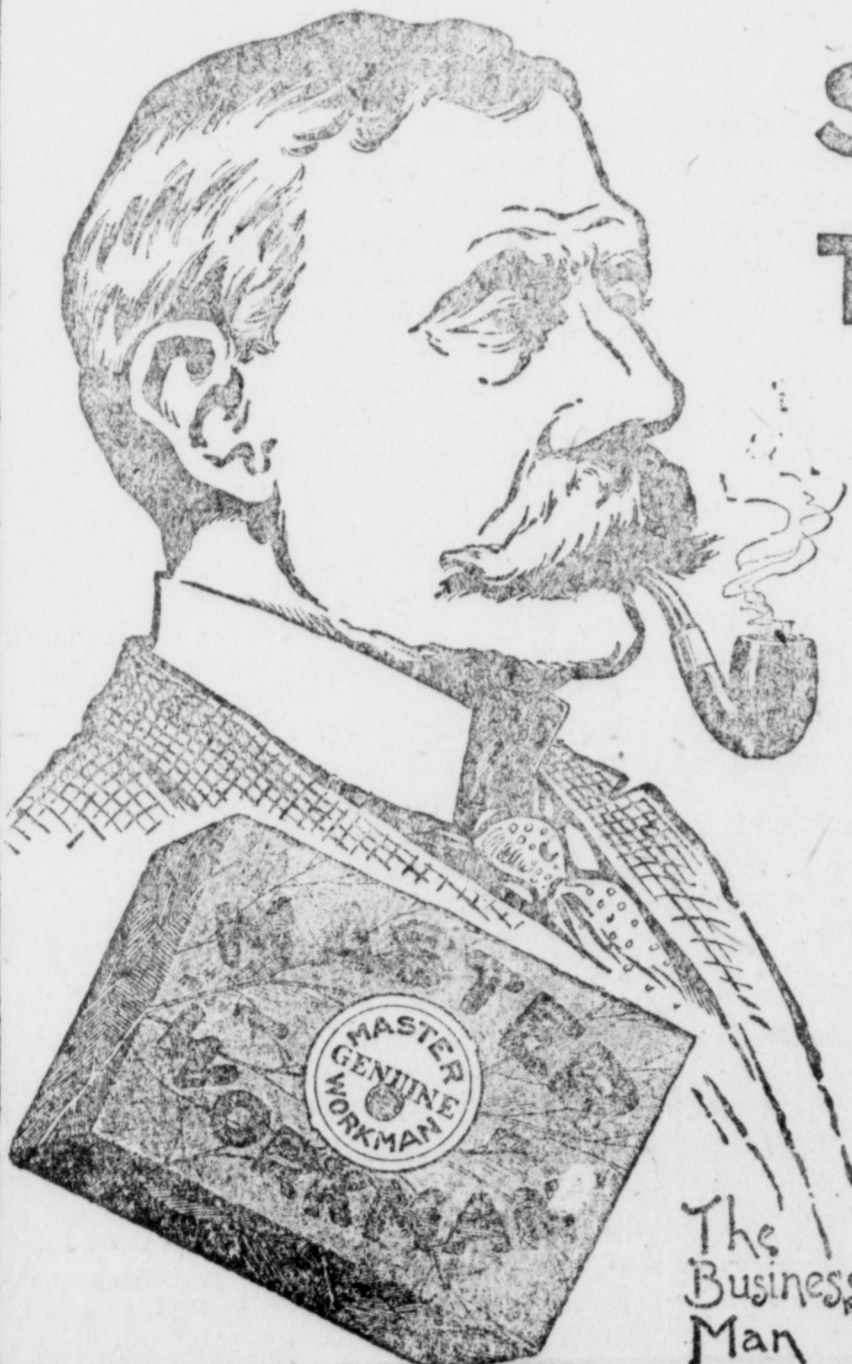
Again Clare nodded. She was absorbing the facts and drawing them to a conclusion.

"At any rate," he resumed, "though they were decaying they were still immensely valuable. When they disappeared from Wheaton's stateroom a thorough search was made. Some suspected a passenger; others an employee of the ship. Wireless messages were sent ahead and city detectives met the boat at the pier. The customs inspector made a more than usually thorough search, also, but without success and without finding any sort of clew to the thief."

"After she landed and was settled in her regular suite at the Prince Henry with her friend, Miss Le Compte, who had accompanied her abroad, the talk about the pearls gradually died away. Wheaton, apparently never seemed to suspect her. At least he kept up his intimacy, for I've seen him at the hotel

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