

THE KIDNAP MURDER Case

by S.S. Van Dine

A PHILLO VANCE STORY

AUTOCASER

SEVENTH INSTALMENT SYNOPSIS

During the night Kaspar Kenting was kidnapped, Phillo Vance, with District Attorney Markham go to the Kenting home there to meet Sergeant Heath of the homicide Bureau, Kenyon Kenting and Mrs. Kenting, the brother and wife of the kidnapped man. Present also is Eddridge Fleel, the Kenting family attorney. The first evidence casts some doubt as to the genuineness of the crime. Vance examines Weems the Kenting butler. Further search shows that Kaspar probably did not go down the ladder found outside the house. Vance re-examines Kenyon Kenting first, then Mrs. Kenting's mother, Mrs. Falloway and her son Fream. He learns little but notes an undercurrent of hostility among these members of the strange inhabitants of the Purple House. Vance decides to question Porter Quaggy, last known companion of the missing Kenyon. Quaggy, defensive, reveals nothing but Vance notes a pair of black opals on his desk. Two similar jewels were missing from Kenting's room.

When we were back in the car and headed downtown, Vance said: "By the by, Markham, there were two rather amazing black opals on the desk in Quaggy's apartment. Noticed them as I was going out." "You think they came from the Kenting collection?" "It's possible," Vance nodded slowly. "The collection was quite deficient in black opals when I gazed upon it. The few remaining specimens were quite inferior."

The next morning, shortly before ten o'clock, Markham telephoned Vance at his apartment, and I answered. "Tell Vance," came the District Attorney's peremptory voice, "I think he'd better come down to my office at once. Fleel is here, and I'll keep him engaged till Vance gets here."

We arrived at Markham's office a half-hour later. After casual greetings Markham announced: "The instructions promised in the ransom note have been received. A note came in Mr. Fleel's mail this morning and he brought it directly to me."

He picked up the small sheet of paper before him and held it out to Vance. It was a piece of ruled note-paper, folded twice. The quality was of a very cheap, coarse nature. The writing on it was in pencil, in an obviously disguised handwriting. "I say, let's see the envelope," Vance requested.

The postmark showed that the note had passed through the post-office the previous afternoon at five o'clock from the Westchester Station. "And where might the Westchester Station be?" asked Vance. "I had it looked up as soon as Mr. Fleel showed me the note," responded Markham. "It's in the upper Bronx."

"As a matter of fact, it's in the toughest district in New York in which to trace any one by a postmark." Vance adjusted his monocle and read the pencil-scrawled communication carefully. It ran: "Sir: I no you and family have money and unless 50 thousand \$ is placed in hole of oak tree 200 foot west of Southeast corner of old reservoir in central park thursday at seven o'clock at nite we will kill Casper Kenton. This is final. If you tell police deal is off and we will no it. We are watching every move you make."

The ominous message was signed with interlocking squares made with brush strokes. "No more original than the first communication," commented Vance dryly. "And it strikes me, off-hand, that the person who worded this threatening epistle is not as unschooled as he would have us believe."

He looked up at the lawyer, who was watching him intently. "Just what are your ideas on the situation, Mr. Fleel?" "Personally," the man said, "I am willing to leave the whole matter to Mr. Markham here, and his advisors. I—I don't know exactly what to say—I'd rather not offer any suggestions. The ransom demands can't possibly be met out of the estate, as what

funds were entrusted to me are largely in long-term bonds. However, I feel sure that Mr. Kenyon Kenting will be able to get the necessary amount together and take care of the situation—if that is his wish."

"Does he know of this note?" "Not yet," Fleel said, "unless he, too, received a copy. I brought this one immediately to Mr. Markham. But my opinion is that Kenyon should know about it, and it was my intention to go to the Kenting house from here and inform Kenyon of this new development. I'll do nothing, however, without the consent of Mr. Markham."

"Mr. Fleel," Markham said slowly, "I think you should go to Kenyon Kenting at once, and tell him the exact circumstances."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. Markham," the lawyer said. "I quite agree with you both," murmured Vance. "Only, I would ask you, Mr. Fleel, to remain at the Kenting house until Mr. Markham and I arrive there. We will be joining you very soon."

"I'll wait," mumbled Fleel as he passed through the swinging leather door out to the reception-room. "Well, Vance, what do you think?" Markham asked.

"So many things," Vance told him, "that I couldn't begin to enumerate them. All probably frivolous and worthless." "Well, to be more specific, what do you think of that note you have there?" "Quite authentic—oh, quite," Vance returned without hesitation. "Hasty business is afoot. A bit too precipitate for my liking, however. But there's no overlooking the earnestness of the request."

"The instructions seem somewhat vague." "No, Oh, no, Markham. On the contrary. Quite explicit. I know the tree well. Romantic lovers leave billets-doux there. No difficulties in that quarter. Quiet spot. However, it could be adequately covered by the police. I wonder." "This situation upsets me," Markham rumbled at length. "The newspapers were full of it this morning as you may have noticed."

"I must get some action. This new note changes the whole complexion of things." "Tut, tut," Vance's admonition was almost frivolous. "Really you know, it changes nothing. It was precisely what I was waiting for."

"Well," snapped Markham, "now that you have it, what do you intend to do?" "Why, I intend to go to the Purple House," Vance said calmly. "I'm not psychic, but something tells me we shall find a hand pointing to our future activities when we arrive there."

"Well, if that's your idea," demanded Markham, "why didn't you go with Fleel?" "Merely wished to give him sufficient time to break the news to the others and to discuss the matter with brother Kenyon. Nothing like letting every one know the details of the case. We'll get forward that way."

At the Kenting residence we found Kenyon Kenting, Fleel, young Falloway, and Porter Quaggy assembled in the drawing room.

"Did you bring the note with you, gentlemen?" Kenting asked immediately, with frightened eagerness. "Fleel told me just what's in it, but I'd like to see the message itself."

Vance nodded and took the note from his pocket, placing it on the small desk near him. Kenting, without a word, took the folded piece of paper from its envelope, and read it carefully.

"What do you think should be done about it?" Markham asked him. "Personally, I'm not inclined to have you meet that demand just yet."

Kenting shook his head in perturbed silence. At last he said: "I'd always feel guilty and selfish if I did anything else. If I didn't comply with this request and anything should really happen to Kaspar—"

"But I've no idea exactly how I'm going to raise that much money—and at such short notice. It'll pretty well break me, even if I can manage to get it together."

"I can help contribute to the fund," offered Quaggy, in a hard tone. "And I'd like to do something, too," put in Fleel, "but, as you know, my personal funds are pretty well depleted at this time. As a trustee of the Kenting estate I couldn't use that money for such a purpose without a court order. And I couldn't get one in such a limited time."

Fream Falloway stood back against the wall, listening intently. "Why don't you let it go?" he suggested with malicious querulousness. "Kaspar's not worth that much money to any one, if you ask me. And how do you know you're going to save his life anyway?"

"Shut up Fream!" snapped Kenting. Young Falloway shrugged indifferently.

"I say, Mr. Fleel," put in Vance, "just what would be the financial standing of Mrs. Kenting in the hypothetical case that Kaspar

Kenting should die? Would she benefit by his demise—that is, to whom would Kaspar Kenting's share in the estate go?"

"To his wife," answered Fleel. "Sure," said Fream Falloway sulkily. "my sister gets everything and there are no strings attached to it. Kaspar has never done the right thing by Sis, anyway, and it's about time she was coming in for something. That's why I say it's rank nonsense to give up all this money to get Kaspar back. Nobody here thinks he's worth fifty cents, if they'll be frank."

"A sweet and lovable point of view," murmured Vance. "I suppose your sister is very lenient with you whenever possible?" It was Kenyon Kenting who answered.

"That's it exactly, Mr. Vance. She's the kind that would sacrifice everything for her brother and her mother. That's natural, perhaps. But, after all, Kaspar is my brother and I think something ought to be done about it, even on the mere chance it may save him, if it does take practically every cent I've got in the world. But I'm willing to go through with it, if you gentlemen and the police will agree to keep entirely out of it, until I have found out what I can do without any official assistance which might frighten off the kidnapers."

"You see, I discussed the point with Mr. Fleel just before you gentlemen arrived. We are agreed that the police should allow me a clear field in handling this matter in exact accordance with the instructions in the note."

"I can understand your attitude in the matter, Mr. Kenting," he said reassuringly. "And therefore,"—he made a suave gesture—"the decision on that point must rest solely with you. The police will turn their backs, as it were, for the time being, if that is what you wish."

Fleel nodded his approval of Markham's words.

"I think," Vance began, "both of you gentlemen are in error, and I am definitely opposed to the withdrawal of the authorities, even temporarily, at this time in such a vital situation. It would amount to the compounding of a felony. Moreover, the reference in the note regarding the police is, I believe, merely an attempt at intimidation. I can see no valid reason why the police should not be permitted a certain discreet activity in the matter."

"You may be right, Mr. Vance."

Kenting admitted finally in a hesitant tone. "On second thought I am inclined to follow your suggestion."


"You're all stupid," mumbled Falloway. Then he leaned forward. His eyes opened wide, his jaws sagged and he burst forth

hysterically: "It's Kaspar, Kaspar, Kaspar! He's no good anyway, and he's the only one that gets a break around here. Nobody thinks of any one else but Kaspar . . ." His voice was high-pitched and ended in a scream. "Shut up, you ninny," ordered

Kenting. "What are you doing down here, anyway? Go on up to your room." "Well, what's the decision, gentlemen?" asked Markham, in a calm, quiet tone. "Are we to go ahead on the basis of your paying the ransom alone, or shall I turn

the case over to the Police Department to handle as they see fit?" Kenting stood up and took a deep breath. Continued Next Issue Patronize Tribune advertisers.

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