

THE IRON ROOM

Another Paul Pry Story

By FRANCIS D. GRIERSON

PAUL PRY had just finished breakfast when Colonel Fairbody arrived.

"Good morning, Colonel," said Paul cheerfully; "have you fed?"

"An hour ago," replied his friend. "Do you want to look into a queer case with me?"

"My dear Colonel," replied Paul, who was accustomed to the other's brusque manner, "you know I consider it a privilege when you allow me to share your confidence—"

"No soft soap," interrupted the Colonel, chuckling; "you've been damned useful to us more than once, as you know quite well. I owe you a good turn, or two. But if you're coming you'll have to hurry. I've got a car waiting. Tell your man to pack a small bag; we may have to stay a night or two."

Paul rang the bell, and in ten minutes the Colonel and he were driving rapidly through the streets.

Colonel Fairbody, the Assistant Commissioner in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, knew Paul Pry as an eccentric young millionaire who devoted his time to the science of criminology. Why he had adopted the suggestive name of "Paul Pry" the Colonel—like his colleagues in the police forces of half a dozen other countries—would have been interested to learn, but that was a

secret known only to Paul himself. The amateur had acquired the confidence of the professional, however, by the services he had rendered to the Yard on several occasions, and the Colonel had a sincere respect for the reasoning powers which had led Paul to the solution of certain singular problems in which they had both been engaged.

"Would it be indiscreet to inquire where we are going?" asked Paul, in his quiet way, as they began to leave the suburbs behind and to plunge into pleasant country lanes.

"Not at all; we are bound for a little place called Stonebridge, in Hertfordshire."



"The Carfax Chemical Company, no doubt," suggested Paul.

The Colonel was an old hand.

"I am not going to shout 'Marvelous!'" he replied. "You are probably quite aware that the only important place in that neighborhood is the Carfax Chemical Works."

"Where they make agreeable experiments in the art of blowing up people."

"Precisely. Mr. Gerald Carfax, the famous chemist, has his laboratories there. He does a good deal of work for the Government."

"And I suppose some valuable secret formula has been stolen?"

"Not at all; at least, not so far as I am aware at present. To tell you the truth, I know very little about the matter myself."

"But you consider it sufficiently important—"

"To come down at once? I do. Carfax is an old friend of mine, and I am satisfied that he would not have telephoned to me, as he did this morning, unless he had good grounds for doing so. But I think it will be as well to let him tell his own story; the few facts I already know would be of little use to you."

Paul acquiesced, and the two men chatted desultorily until the car, passing by a row of irregular buildings, turned into a tree-bordered drive and drew up before the door of a comfortable stone house, where Carfax, a pleasant, elderly man with keen grey eyes, welcomed them heartily.

PAUL, at his own desire, was introduced as an unofficial assistant to the Colonel, and Carfax led the way to his library.

"I am greatly obliged to you, Fairbody," he said, as they seated themselves, "for coming down so promptly. I would not have asked you to do so if I had not thought the matter one of considerable importance."

"Of course not," said the Colonel, in his crisp way. "Please tell us the whole story; Mr. Pry knows nothing of it as yet."

"It is a queer business," replied the chemist, meditatively. "Of course, there may be some simple explanation, but I confess it baffles me. I will be as brief as possible—"

"Don't," interrupted the Colonel. "Just tell us everything you can think of; you may leave out something important if you don't."

Mr. Carfax bowed.

"Well," he replied, "I will assume that you know nothing about our work here. We are engaged in the manufac-

ture of various chemical compounds, most of them of a secret nature. In addition, we are constantly engaged in experiments with the object of discovering new methods of using the information we obtain. So much for that; I need not go into details unless some point arises on which you may desire fuller information. I have a fairly large staff, all of whom are persons of good character, as you will naturally expect. But only a few of them know more than the actual work on which they are engaged.

"I have, however, two assistants who are aware of almost all my secrets, and it is of these I particularly desire to speak—or, rather, of one of them. They are John Martin, my chief assistant, and Roland Vayne, a distant relation, who looks after all the electrical and mechanical side of the place. Vayne has suddenly disappeared."

"When?" asked Paul.

"The day before yesterday."

"Why on earth did you not let me know before?"

"I ought to have done so, I suppose," replied Mr. Carfax; "But you know how one dislikes making mountains out of molehills. The circumstances were so unusual that at first I thought he would turn up in a day or so and apologize."

"Apologize for what?"

"Well, this is what happened: Martin and Vayne have rooms in an iron building a short distance from this house. I am going to build a specially equipped addition to the existing works, and I had this iron building put up to accommodate certain special men until the new place is ready. Two days ago, in the afternoon, I asked my daughter Stella to go over to the works with a message for John Martin. She will confirm what I am telling you, presently, but she is a good deal upset, and I thought it would save her some distress if I told you the facts first."

"Certainly," said Paul. "Pray go on."

"According to what she tells me," resumed Carfax, "she went across to the iron building and entered Martin's room, which is half sitting-room and half laboratory, for some of his experiments occupy many hours, and he reads or writes, or amuses himself with his gramophone while they are in progress. She entered the room, as I say, but found that Martin was not there. Supposing—as was, in fact, the case—that he was somewhere about the other buildings, she waited for his return.

"While doing so, she noticed on his gramophone a new record, and set the instrument working. She had been

listening to the music for some minutes when the door was flung open and Roland Vayne rushed in. He was in an extraordinary state of excitement and was shouting something which she did not catch clearly. He ran to her and gave her a violent push, and she fell, striking her head against the iron floor. She was stunned for a few moments, and when she recovered Vayne had gone. From that moment I have seen nothing of him. None of his clothes or other effects have been touched, as far as we know. That, really, is all I know about the matter."

"I think," said Paul, after a short silence, "that it would be well—if Colonel Fairbody agrees—to see Miss Carfax. I need not assure you, Mr. Carfax, that we fully realize how painfully such an occurrence must have affected her."

"I will send for her at once," Carfax answered, and in a few moments Stella entered the room.

Tall and beautifully proportioned, she was a splendid specimen of the fairest type of English womanhood. She moved with the easy grace of a girl who knew how to handle gun and rod with no inconsiderable skill, and her broad brow and the firm, though delicate line of her chin hinted at a well-balanced mind.

She was pale, but otherwise showed little sign of the shock she had received, and she greeted the newcomers with a pleasant cordiality.

"Miss Carfax," began Paul, after a whispered word with Colonel Fairbody, "your father has told us of the strange behavior of Mr. Vayne, and we are anxious to help him to clear up the mystery. If you will allow me, there are one or two questions I should like to ask you; I am sure you will understand that I intend no impertinence—"

"Certainly," replied the girl composedly.

"You were unable, Mr. Carfax has told us, to understand what Mr. Vayne was saying as he attacked you?"

"He was so excited that he was mixing up his words. He seemed to be saying something about going away, or it might have been that he was telling me to go away."

Paul considered this for a few moments.

"Miss Carfax," he resumed, "I am compelled to ask you this: was Mr. Vayne in love with you?"

Stella colored, but she answered steadily:

"I am afraid he was, or had been."

"Had been?"

Mr. Carfax broke in.

"I should tell you," he said, "that Vayne proposed to Stella some time ago, but she did not care for him. I believed that he had taken his refusal in a manly way, until his extraordinary behavior two days ago. Of course, that may have had nothing to do with it."

"And is Miss Carfax engaged?"

"She is engaged to John Martin."

"Ah!" said Paul softly. "The engagement is no secret?" he added.

"Oh, no; it was announced a month ago. Martin is an excellent fellow and marked out for promotion. He will be a big man in the chemical world one of these days, and from a personal point of view I could not wish for a better son-in-law."

Paul rose.

"Thank you," he said. "If you approve, Colonel, I think we might walk across now and have a look at Vayne's room and the room in which he behaved so strangely."

THE three men—for Stella did not accompany them—made their way to the works. Originally, Mr. Carfax explained, the place had been a monastery; after many years of emptiness, during which it had fallen into ruins, it had been acquired by a firm of brewers. After passing through various hands, the property had been acquired by the Carfax Chemical Company, some of the buildings converted to their needs, and a number of temporary erections made. It was the company's purpose gradually to clear the ground bit by bit, and to build new and commodious laboratories and workshops specially designed for chemical work.

The quarters occupied by Roland Vayne were in a long iron building, one story high, which was divided into a number of rooms of varying sizes. It was made of plates of iron bolted together, being at once quickly put up and proof against fire. A corridor ran from end to end of the building, at one side, each room opening off this corridor.

The room allotted to Vayne was large and comfortable enough. It was carpeted, and plainly but sufficiently furnished. Behind a curtain was his bed and dressing-table and so forth; the rest of the room served as sitting-room and study. One side of the room was filled with bookshelves, and under the window a long table held various electrical and mechanical appliances. An easy-chair, a couch, some other chairs, a pipe-rack—the sort of things one would expect to see in a bachelor's room. Vayne and Martin both took their meals at Carfax's house *en famille*

and it was Carfax's intention to provide them with snug quarters in the new works which was already in course of erection.

From Vayne's room they went to that of John Martin, which adjoined it, and there they found the young man himself. Martin was a burly, cheerful fellow between twenty-five and thirty, Paul judged. The writing-table from which he rose as they entered was covered with papers and memoranda. The room was the same size as that of Vayne, and arranged somewhat similarly. Tastes and pursuits, however, accounted for some minor differences. One end of the room, for instance, was left uncarpeted, and here stood a zinc-covered bench and a small sink. There were a couple of shelves of glass jars and retorts, a Bunsen burner or two, and other devices used by the experimental chemist. The gramophone on a stand near the bench struck an oddly incongruous note, the effect of which was enhanced by a picture or two on the walls, some old china and a large vase on a wooden pedestal.

There being no fireplaces or stoves in the building, heat was supplied by means of hot water-pipes from a boiler in a small shed some distance away.

After some general conversation, Carfax proposed that they complete their tour of the works and return to his house for lunch, after which they could consider what should be done. Colonel Fairbody agreed, but Paul asked permission to remain in Vayne's room for a further examination, promising to rejoin them at the house a little later.

"Your colleague seems to have formed some theory," ventured Mr. Carfax, as the others left the temporary building.

Colonel Fairbody shrugged his shoulders.

"Pry is a strange fellow," he said. "There are few men whose theories I respect more, and I am quite sure that he has a reason for what he is doing."

"Certainly," responded Mr. Carfax, with vague politeness.

LUNCH was nearly over, but Paul had not appeared. Mr. Carfax had hospitably desired to go and fetch his guest to the house by main force, but Colonel Fairbody chuckled and forbade him.

"Leave him alone," he said. "He is an obstinate little man, and he won't thank you for disturbing him. He will come when he is ready and make you a thousand polite apologies and explanations—quite untrue—for his absence."

"You seem to allow him a good deal of freedom in his proceedings," remarked Martin.

"I do," replied the Colonel briefly, and Stella tactfully changed the conversation.

Coffee had just made its appearance when the servant entered and whispered to his master, after which he handed a note to Colonel Fairbody.

"One of the men from the works brought it, sir," he explained. "He was given it by the other gentleman, who told him to fetch it here and have it given to you at once, sir."

The Colonel, with a word of apology to Stella, tore open the envelope, which Martin, from his seat, recognized as having been taken from the writing-table in his room. Silently, the Assistant Commissioner read the following message, hastily scrawled on half a sheet of paper:

"Come at once to Martin's room. Bring long light ladder, or rope-ladder if possible. Also electric torch and flask brandy. Bring Carfax, and Martin; not Stella.—PRY."

The Colonel handed the paper to Mr. Carfax, and rose.

"I am sure you will forgive us, Miss Carfax," he said, "if we run away now. Time is getting on, and—"

"And you have had a message from Mr. Pry which you don't want to tell me about yet," cut in the girl, smiling.

"Well—" began the Colonel in some embarrassment, but she laughed a little, waved her hand, and left the room.

"Now that," remarked the Colonel, "is what I call a sensible girl. She must be wild with curiosity, but she doesn't show it."

"She's a good girl," said Mr. Carfax. "But Fairbody, this looks important. As it happens, I know where to lay my hands on the ladder and a torch without attracting attention, and we can take that small decanter of brandy with us."

It was but a few minutes' work to procure a long rope-ladder from a small store not far off. The storeman had gone to his dinner, but Martin had a master key which gained them admittance. A torch was also procured, and the three men hurried to Martin's room.

They found Paul sitting in Martin's big chair, deep in thought. He sprang up as they entered, however, and spoke quickly.

"Ah," he said; "you have got the ladder. Good. Forgive me, Colonel, for sending you such a peremptory mes-

sage, but if I am right, we ought not to delay. If I am wrong—but that can wait. First, I want to ask Mr. Martin some questions."

He turned to the young man.

"When did you last see Vayne?" he asked. "I know you have told us that already, but I want to arrive at a certain point, so forgive me if I seem to waste time."

"I saw him about an hour before the incident with Stella—Miss Carfax," replied Martin readily.

"Can you remember what took place between you?"

"Easily, for it was only a few words. He told me he had got hold of a new gramophone record—that is, one I had not already got, and would put it in my room for me. I thanked him and said I would try it when I returned. I was going to make an inspection of the works."

"That was a lengthy job?"

"About two hours, roughly."

"He was friendly to you?"

"Of course; we were on excellent terms."

"Now, another point: where did you get that large vase that stands on the pedestal over there?"

"Vayne gave it to me. He found it in the ruins. He was very fond of pottering about in the bowels of the earth—there are huge old cellars here, you know, some of which we use for storing dangerous chemicals. I am rather fond of china, and he laughingly told me to add it to my collection, thinking it was rubbish. But, oddly enough, he happened to describe the thing to some friend who is an expert, and the friend told him it was probably a rather good piece of antique stuff. Of course, I asked him to take it back when he told me, but he refused, and we had the pedestal made by one of the carpenters here, so that it would not be within reach of the cleaners, and get broken accidentally."

Paul Pry's eyes gleamed.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I am going to test a theory. If it is correct, we shall solve the mystery of Roland Vayne's disappearance. Please stay where you—"

Crossing the room, he approached the gramophone, adjusted the needle and started the clockwork. In a moment the strains of that beautiful selection from Puccini's *Madam Butterfly*, "One Fine Day," flooded the room with exquisite melody. The audience waited eagerly for the next step in this strange drama. As the last notes rang out three of them gave a cry of surprise.

Directly in front of the gramophone, where Paul had been standing a moment before, a square section of the iron floor swung silently downward, disclosing a dark hole. A few seconds later, as the music ended, the iron plate rose again, but before it could close Paul had sprung forward and thrust it downward again with a stout stick, which he wedged against the next iron plate in such a manner as to prevent the swinging plate from closing again.

"The ladder, Colonel, please," he said. "I think we are going to find Roland Vayne."

THE rope-ladder, some fifty feet long, was lowered into the opening, the top being secured by a strong iron bar, and Paul, taking the torch in his hand, descended slowly. In a few seconds his voice was heard, calling the others to descend. One by one, they entered the square hole and climbed down some thirty rungs of the ladder.

They found themselves in a stone-floored cellar, from which a passage led away into the darkness. Near the foot of the ladder stood Paul Pry, beside a shapeless object. As he turned in its direction, the light of the torch which he had held upward to guide their descent, the three men saw a huddled body lying on the stones.

It was the body of Roland Vayne.

There, in that silent cell, in the solemn presence of Death, Paul Pry told, in words that were the more moving for their modest simplicity, how he had reconstructed the tragedy in which the young electrician had played so terrible a part.

"When you left me in Vayne's room," he said, "I had already formed a shadowy theory. It is now impossible to say whether I am right or wrong in all my conclusions, but the body beside which we are standing is the final piece of evidence which seems to support what must be a partly speculative line of deduction. I looked through Vayne's papers, and was not surprised to find a plan of the old priory on which, as I had already learned, these works were built up.

"I knew that Vayne had been an unsuccessful suitor for Miss Carfax's hand; that Martin had won the prize that Vayne had not been able to secure; and that Vayne was aware of the fact. I knew, also, that Vayne was a skilled electrician, had a sound knowledge of mechanics, and had access to any part of the works when he chose.

"Colonel Fairbody will tell you that many crimes which seem bizarre are not in reality in the least extraordi-

nary; it is not that local circumstances combine to assist the criminal, but the criminal who naturally makes use of local circumstances to assist him in the commission of his crime.

"So in this case. I fear there is not much doubt that Vayne attempted to commit a crime, but in the end Providence frustrated his efforts.

"Vayne was confronted with two problems: first, to get rid of a man who stood in the way of his love and who, it is not unlikely, he considered a dangerous professional rival, for I have reason to suspect that he himself had ambitions apart from his immediate work, and was deeply engaged in studying chemistry."

"That is so," murmured Mr. Carfax.

Paul bowed.

"Vayne's second problem," he continued, "was to get rid of John Martin in such a way that no suspicion would rest on himself. His plan was certainly an ingenious one, but some whimsical streak in the man made him elaborate it so curiously that its very ingenuity made me suspect the truth.

"This is not a fitting time or place to detail at length the steps I took: I prefer, rather, to mention only such points as are material to the story. Vayne was aware, as most people are, that certain articles vibrate in varying degrees in sympathy with certain notes of music. He obtained, probably after a careful search, the large vase which stands in Martin's room, and which he had found to vibrate very considerably in response to the note of B flat.

"When the vase had been installed for a sufficient time to be half forgotten, he attached to it two tiny wires so arranged as to form a make-and-break contact, if I describe it correctly, on the vibration of the vase. That vibration was considerably more than the mere thousandth part of an inch which is actually sufficient to make an electrical connection. These wires led through the wooden pedestal and through the floor. Now, we have heard that Vayne was very fond of exploring the cellars of this place, and had pretended to find the vase in one of them. I hope to show you that in his explorations he discovered that the whole of this building has been erected directly over a long excavation which communicated by a narrow passage with cellars quite a long way off.

"The scheme now becomes clear: Vayne during Martin's absence, easily removed a plate from the iron floor in Martin's room, immediately in front of the gramophone—the spot at which a person would naturally stand while ad-

justing the needle or removing the record. He was certainly an ingenious craftsman, for he fitted a strong hinge to one end of the iron plate, and a spring lock to the other end, with a powerful spring underneath the plate. These he connected with a small electric battery which he concealed in his own room. Briefly, the effect of these arrangements was that Vayne could turn a switch in his room and electrify the wires in the vase, which released, when they made a contact through the vibration of the vase, the lock holding the iron floor plate in position.

"When the music ceased the vibration subsided, and the spring then replaced the iron plate, which was held in position by the spring lock. Meanwhile, the person standing on the plate at the time was thrown down to this stone floor. If death was not immediate—as in Vayne's case, for he has broken his neck—it was almost certain that severe injuries would result, and the victim would, unable to move, die of hunger and thirst.

"So far I have shown you Vayne as a clever and cold-blooded scoundrel;

let me now show you a redeeming feature in his character.

"When he knew that Martin was about to go out for some considerable time, he told him of the record he had got. Knowing Martin's fondness for music, he foresaw that when his colleague returned to his room he would probably try the record at once. If not, he would certainly do so after dinner, when he came back. He slipped into Martin's room and placed the record on the gramophone, and returned to his own room, where he turned the switch controlling the current.

"All was now prepared. The record was an excellent one, as you heard, and had the peculiarity Vayne needed: it concluded with a fortissimo B flat. That note was the note which produced the greatest vibration in the vase.

"Vayne probably intended to leave his room and go to a distant part of the works in order to have a convincing alibi in the unlikely event of his being suspected of complicity in Martin's disappearance, but before he could do so he was amazed to hear the sound of the

gramophone in Martin's room. After hesitating for some moments, as I calculate, he stole along the corridor and peeped in. To his horror, he saw Miss Carfax standing in front of the instrument, ready to lift the needle as soon as the piece of music concluded. In a flash he saw what had happened, and at the same time he realized that there was no time for explanations. I think he must have known that he could not himself escape a terrible death if he were to save the girl, and perhaps in that moment the awfulness of the crime he had contemplated came home to him.

"Without hesitation, he sprang across the room and hurled Miss Carfax away from the fatal spot; when she recovered, he had met the fate he had designed for her lover."

He paused, and for some moments there was a dead silence.

Then John Martin took the torch from Paul's hand and threw its beam on the white face of the dead man.

"God forgive him!" he said huskily.

The four men silently climbed the ladder and went out into the sunshine of a living world.

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