

A CASE OF MURDER UNDER A COMMERCIAL CLOAK



EVERYBODY about the establishment was interested keenly in what the general manager was doing. There had been a change of control in the corporation. A new president had come in. What his plans were nobody seemed to know but there were fears of a shakeup. Little was known of the new man beyond what everybody knew of his successful career in the west. The few heads of department who had been introduced to him said he had remarkably fine deep eyes, a strong chin and that he asked questions but preferred little information. Of his mental attitude they knew nothing. Then when it became known that he had directed the general manager to draw up a report as to the length of service, the characteristics, the salary and the general qualifications of the various departmental chiefs and sub-chiefs, interest suddenly centered in the general manager. Dodge, the general manager, lived, breathed and dreamed of business. The company and its affairs were everything to him. He had been with the concern 14 years and had visions of the day when he would be taken into the directory. He thought, too, of the possibility of the presidency.

There never was a more faithful manager than Percival Dodge. The interests of the company were his first consideration. A good balance sheet was the noblest product of a year's work. He judged men by what they were worth to the company. No one could accuse him of unfairness or partiality in this respect. Over the factory floor and over the office force he kept a sharp supervision. He knew the details of the factory superintendent as well as he did that of the general sales manager and he knew the ins and outs of the auditing department as well as he did that of the supply bureau. He never knew what it was to shirk work or be idle. Regularity, precision and orderliness were religion to him. In all his years with the company he never had been late. Dozens of times he had discharged high salaried men—men of considerable value to the company—because they would not conform to his rules. He believed in molding his whole force into one smooth business machine. It was a machine himself and the slightest departure from the set movement of the big machine he directed was so much friction to him, and friction was what he hated.

The advent of a new president was friction, too, but that was beyond the general manager's control. Having been directed to draw up a report as

to the capabilities of the various chiefs and sub-chiefs, he went about it with all the care and fidelity characteristic of him. Each man he weighed with his most delicate scale and put the result on paper for the president's information. Nothing was omitted. He was exact to the finest degree.

When the report was finished he took it to the president and watched him as he read it over. Then, without knowing any more about what the president's plans were than did those about whom he had delivered judgment, he went out, for the president told him it probably would be several days before he would be ready to consult him further about the subject.

The days that intervened between the delivery of the report and the summoning of the general manager to the office of the executive were spent by Dodge in the west had tried out and found unusually successful. The general sales manager he outlined some selling campaigns his sales department in the west had tried out and found unusually successful. The general sales manager was honest enough to acknowledge that they were far better than any he had undertaken. The supply man was shown how by the introduction of a by no means complicated system he could know every day the exact number of each of the thousand and one parts of things the company manufactured there were on hand, under contract, and in the various stages of making.

While the president studied each department with care he studied each head of department none the less carefully. Possibly he gave as much time to the man as to his work but he did this in such a manner that not one of the officials realized he had been under the scrutiny to which he was subjected.

It was nearly a week before the president called the general manager in again. Dodge said he, "I have given to this report of yours as careful and earnest attention as I have given to anything that has come before me in many years. I wanted to find how well you had judged the business merits and general qualities of each and every man on our staff. There is one omission, however. You have no report of yourself."

The general manager smiled and there was a suspicion of a blush.

"I hardly would be seemly for me to report regarding myself," he said.

"I wanted it," replied the president.



"For a particular reason, I desired to know how accurately you gaged yourself. Let me explain something first. I have come here as president for a year only. It is just to ascertain what is wrong with this magnificent plant and organization and set it right. This is one of the finest plants in America and by its advantages of location, it should dominate the whole field, east of the Mississippi. The company makes money, but nothing compared with its possibilities. My concern in the west makes three times as much profit as we have heavy hand loads and serious freight disadvantages overcome. The trouble here is with you, Mr. Dodge."

"With me!" exclaimed the general manager.

"Yes," replied the president dryly: "you are an excellent type of the most unprofitable men in the business world. In your zeal you destroy. You do not build. You tear down. You wreck. And the sorrowful part of it is that you never know it. You think you are acting for the best. You never spare yourself. You are a blight, an incubus to business."

"Dodge, were it not that some men, under the cloak of business, commit murder."

The general manager, trembling and his face flushed, rose in anger.

"You are going too far, Mr. Leonard," he said. "I did not come in here to be insulted."

"Pray be seated," said the president, "and if after I tell you the story I have in mind you think my language unwarranted I will beg your forgiveness."

The president motioned to the chair twice before the general manager decided to resume his seat and then the president began his story.

"Mr. Dodge," said he, "I'll call the man in this story Smith. That wasn't his name, but it will serve. He was in a business like ours and he had been in it a quarter of a century. He was about my age but not so strong and active. He was not of high ability but he had an excellent position, his salary was equal to his needs and he was as-

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sure of retaining his job as long as he lived.

"One day the head of a competing concern, worrying because his company was not doing the business it should, conceived the idea that Smith would be a useful man. He only knew Smith by general reputation but he was aware of the Great Eastern railroad and that Smith through family connections and old time associations controlled a fair amount of trade. So this man—let us call him Jones—sought Smith and courted him as earnestly as any youth courts a maid. He flattered Smith on his salesmanship, on his friendships, on his mentality, on his taste in clothes, even. You understand in Smith that his old firm never had been a good salesman. He was fair, only fair. Understand, too, he was vain and that Jones knew it. But Jones thought he saw possibilities in Smith that his old firm never had discovered, so one day he put it up to Smith that if Smith would leave his employers Jones would give him a handsome increase in pay. Smith declined. He hated to do so and he almost apologized to Jones in doing so. He put it up to his long service with the firm, and how it would be like breaking up his old home and giving up an old friendship to leave the people with whom he had been associated all his business life. But Jones was insistent. He would not listen to Smith's protest that he was 25 years old and was on the down grade. He laughed at Smith's idea that it was not wise for him to swap horses at his time of life. He offered Smith just twice as much as he was getting and Smith at last accepted.

"Smith had an invalid wife. I think it was on her account and because he thought he could provide better for his mother and father who spent most of their time in a sanitarium, that he consented to go with Jones.

"It was in 1907 that Smith went with Jones. For a few weeks Smith was happy. It was good to feel that at his time of life he was of so much value that he was sought after and urged to

accept a salary twice as large as he had received before. He went after orders gaily and buoyantly. And he got them. But suddenly there came a change. There were symptoms of storm and disaster approaching in the business world and prudent men began to shorten sail and seek places of refuge. No one would buy goods.

"When Smith returned from trip after trip with empty orderbook Jones's manner changed. He no longer found pleasure in Smith's company. He became critical, captious. When Smith arrived at the office at 9 a.m. Jones wanted to know why he was not there at 8. It was idle for Smith to explain he could do no business by getting around at the earlier hour and that he had been accustomed to arrive at 9 o'clock at his business life. Jones was a stickler for punctuality. The hour in his office was 8. He had waived the rule that the first few months of Smith's employment but now he insisted that he conform to the rules of the establishment. He nagged Smith constantly on the order question. Why did he not get business? Why did he not go to his brother-in-law and get him in line? It was poppycock, he declared, to say nothing was being ordered. If Smith was not so stupidly slow he could do something to earn a portion of his salary at least.

"Jones was worrying deeply about Smith's salary. It became a nightmare to him. As months passed and the business situation got worse and worse, he got to hating Smith. He found fault with him on every score, insulted him time after time and almost drove him to distraction. Smith, a gentleman always, would have resigned in a minute and never looked upon him again but his wife was getting worse steadily and to be out of work would bring her to the old folks. Smith never had saved and now when he gladly would have returned to his old employment there was no chance to get back. He was not only a prisoner but was fettered heavily.

"What that poor man suffered during that period no one knows. No doubt Jones suffered, too, for no more devoted man to his business could be found than he. That was why, having made a mistake in enlisting Smith, he visited on Smith all the wrath due to that error.

"Smith, egged on by Jones, haunt-

ed the offices of the railroads, begging for orders for supplies. To his brother-in-law he made a confession of his desperation, and pleaded for anything he could give in the way of an order to appease Jones. The brother-in-law could only promise that just as soon as the skies brightened and the railroad loosened his purse strings he would give everything possible to help Smith out, but until then there was not a penny being spent.

"It was useless for Smith to report. Jones knew it was true, but that only added to his wrath. It was Smith and the money being wasted through him that Jones had before him all the time. Nothing that Smith could do or endeavor to do could please him. And when Smith, tramping through a railroad yard one day in a vain effort to get some business by overhauling the general manager of the road, got his shoe caught in a switch and wrenched his heel so badly that he limped painfully, Jones laughed at him. The idea that a man should go lame hunting business when he had not brought in a dollar's worth of business in six months had a sardonic touch of humor that appealed to him particularly.

"He smiled every time he saw Smith limp about the office. He even walked to the window to keep Smith longer in view when Smith started away from the building. To Jones that limp was retribution—slight to be sure, but a form of retribution nevertheless—to Smith for the way he had imposed on Jones's concern. By this time Jones had come to consider that Smith had imposed on him shamefully in getting engaged by Jones.

"One day Smith, suffering torture from his foot, was huddled by his bed. He went to Jones and told him he was ill and broken down. He was afraid he was going to have serious trouble with his foot but had been two weeks at the hospital to have an examination because Jones had insisted on his steady attendance at the office from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. despite the absolute lack of business. He asked Jones to permit him to remain away two weeks. Maybe his foot would be better by that time. Anyway he had been with Jones nearly a year and the two weeks could go as a sort of a vacation.

"Jones looked at him and laughed. Then he told the suffering man to get along on the vacation and make it not two weeks but two centuries or longer if he could for he never was wanted around the place again.

"Do you realize what that meant to Smith? He was at the hospital where he was useful in only one line, for he could learn no other. He had burned his bridges behind him and had gone to disaster. And he had three helpless beings dependent upon him.

"He went from his last interview with Jones to an hospital and there his foot was examined. It took little time for the surgeons to decide. The injury was not serious in the beginning, they said, and had it received proper treatment there would have been little trouble but without attention and aggravated by weeks of walking the foot had begun to rot and Smith would be a cripple.

"Smith went home and brooded over all that had happened in the time since Jones had come to the office. And that night Smith put a bullet in his brain."

Dodge had risen long before the president had reached this point in his narration. The president had risen, too. Dodge's face was ashen.

"God knows I had no idea of his condition, Mr. Leonard," the general manager cried.

"It is his own fault," the president replied, "or you'd be criminal indeed. The case of Smith is a sad but a very appropriate illustration of what is wrong in this concern. The heart element is lacking.

Business never can be wholly heartless and be successful. You have become a slave to the machine. In your rigid ideas of business you have made your men slaves to the machine. Individuality has been suppressed. Men never could only promise that just as soon as the skies brightened and the railroad loosened his purse strings he would give everything possible to help Smith out, but until then there was not a penny being spent.

And the general manager went out realizing for the first time one of the great fundamental truths of commercial life.

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