

The Linden Murder Case Mystery

Henry Drake

A “Terrapin” Story

“I sell locked room mystery stories but I never expected to be inside one myself.”

The woman who said this to Cole Porter Palmer was Christine Kumara Penn. The wife of Thomas Jefferson Penn, Cole’s business partner, Christine was tall and lithe, with lustrous chocolate skin. That spring day she was wearing a colorful African print dress and matching head scarf. The two friends were strolling the streets of north Ann Arbor, not far from Christine’s bookstore.

“You know how to get my attention”, Cole said, eagerly. “What happened?” He relished these mental puzzles, because when it got quiet on the outside, it also got quiet on the inside; too quiet; so quiet that the ghosts of his dead wife and daughter haunted the quietness, and Christine knew this better than anyone except Cole himself.

“S. S. Van Dine: have you ever heard of him?” Christine asked, jerking Cole back to attention.

“Golden Age mystery writer. Read one of his books...Bishop something or other.”

“*The Bishop Murder Case*. I have a signed first edition under lock and key in the store. Van Dine was popular in his day. Films starring William Powell were made of his stories.”

“William *Horatio* Powell, who starred in *The Thin Man* movies with Myrna Loy”, Cole added. “Let me guess. Someone stole your first edition.”

“If only it were that simple”, Christine anxiously responded. “Here, watch that car. How people drive in this town. Worse than Kampala, and I never thought I’d say that.”

Composing herself, she went on. “Those still interested—seriously interested in Golden Age mystery stories—are a small clan, and everyone is acquainted with everyone else. Several weeks ago, I received an email from a man who claimed to have discovered an unpublished Van Dine story. I don’t know Daniel Fleel well. He practices law in Ann Arbor and I’ve met him on a few occasions. Fleel invited me to view the manuscript, along with Karin Clos, the president of the Mystery Writers of America, and Edgar Parks, the publisher of *Classic Mysteries*.”

“I’m having a case of *déjà vu*”, Cole said to her. “Remember that business with Albert Sneer and his Civil War bullet (*Author’s note: see The Yellow Tavern Mystery, 2013*)? Did someone make off with Fleel’s manuscript?”

“Not so fast”, Christine said in her most commanding voice, a voice Cole had heard often enough with her children.

“How well do you know Parks and Clos?” Cole inquired, as they crossed Division Street.

“I have met them, but I can’t say they are more than acquaintances. Both are celebrities of a sort in the mystery story business.”

Coming to a small park on the corner, Cole said, “Let’s sit down, and tell me what happened.”

They sat side by side on a bench, with Christine assuming that serious mien Cole knew so well. “I have heard you and Thomas describe the crimes you have investigated, but I’ve always wondered if they weren’t...embellished a little to make them seem more...”

“Amazing, astounding?”

She nodded her head, giving Cole an impish grin. “I don’t think any of your investigations were more amazing than this. I made detailed notes later that evening, so even if my recollections aren’t exact quotes, they are close to what was said. When we arrived at Fleel’s house, he showed us into the dining room. The only furniture in the room was a bare mahogany table, eight wooden chairs, and a sideboard against the wall. I say bare table because there was no tablecloth. Framed paintings were on two of the four walls.

“The manuscript had been placed in the center of the table. I recall that the paper looked old, yellowed. *The Linden Murder Case*, by S. S. Van Dine had been typed on the cover page.”

Christine removed a small notepad from her purse and opened it. “Fleel didn’t invite us to sit. Instead, he picked up the manuscript and slowly...carefully flipped through the pages. I recognized a few words and names: Philo Vance, Markham, Heath, along with the footnotes Van Dine was fond of including in his stories. I thought Fleel was going to pass the manuscript around, but he said...let’s see...‘We will examine the manuscript in a few minutes, but, first, a glass of celebrational burgundy’.

“Placing the manuscript back on the table, Fleel invited us to exit, saying, ‘Can’t risk spilled wine here’.”

“Wait”, Cole said to her. “If this thing is about to vanish, you must describe the room.”

“A large table, eight chairs, a sideboard, pictures on two walls, one window, and one door.”

“Wood floor?”

She nodded.

“Any other openings in the room?”

“Small vents in the floor and on the wall that a squirrel couldn't have squeezed into. I didn't even notice them the first time we were in the room, only later when—well, I'll come to that.

“As we left the room, Edgar said, in a mischievous tone of voice, ‘Shouldn't we see to that window? After all, locked rooms are our specialty?’

“Fleel said...where is that note? Here... ‘I always keep this window locked, but see for yourself, Edgar. Perhaps there is a Moriarty or a Havoc in the neighborhood. Make sure there is no jiggery-pokery’—that was a favorite expression of John Dickson Carr's”, Christine observed. “Parks grinned and made for the window. We had all succumbed to the spirit of those old stories.

“Parks informed us that the window was as tight as a drum.

“We went through the door into the kitchen, drank Fleel's wine, and talked about Van Dine's stories. Edgar is a big fan; Karin, not so much, though she admitted that Van Dine was an important influence on Golden Age mysteries. We were standing near the door all the time, and I can assure you that no one went in or out that door.”

“Did anyone leave the kitchen during that time?”

“Let me think. Karin used the restroom down the hall. No one else left the kitchen. Edgar told us the story of how he had come from Kilkenney as a young man and put every penny he had into his publishing company...”

“Just one minute”, Cole said, closing his eyes and moving his lips. When his eyes popped open again, he said:

There once was a man from Kilkenney

He was broke and had nary a penny

He stole a small treasure

So to live at his leisure

Got caught, now he doesn't have any"

"Where do you get these crazy rhymes?" Christine asked him.

"It's *me own*, don't ye know."

"Is this your way of suggesting that Edgar was up to no good?"

"Hardly. I don't know enough to suggest anything, much less make accusations. Tell me what happened next."

"When we reentered the dining room, the manuscript was gone", Christine said, glaring at Cole, who was watching a young couple in a passionate embrace three benches away. "Pay attention!"

"I am paying attention. I think best when I'm preoccupied with something else, like young love...or limericks. What was the first thing that happened when you reentered the room?"

"Fleel cursed loudly when we saw that the manuscript was gone. He told us to check the sideboard drawers. As Karin and Edgar turned to the sideboard, I looked under the table; nothing there, of course. As Karin and Edgar were finishing with the sideboard, Fleel confirmed that the window was still locked. Without prompting, Parks got down on his hands and knees to examine the floor vent."

"Did anyone look behind the paintings?"

"Fleel took the pictures down. The wall behind the pictures was no different than the rest of the room."

"Could the manuscript have been hidden between a painting and its backing?"

"I don't see how that would have been possible. Who could have done something that complicated in so short a period of time?"

“How sure are you that the manuscript was on the table when you left the room?” Cole asked earnestly.

Christine didn't answer right away. The traffic light on the corner changed from red to green to red again before she said, “I am as certain as I can be that the manuscript was on the table when we left the room, but I'm not sure it was the manuscript that Fleel had paged through. Maybe something was substituted, but if that's what happened, where did the substituted manuscript go?”

“Let's walk again”, Cole said, taking her arm and leading her down the street. Cole trusted Christine as he trusted no one else. When he glanced at her, she looked grim and intense.

“Let's say someone substituted a...an object, let's call it, for the manuscript”, Cole suggested. “Something that would quickly dissolve, or perhaps a disguised receiver for a holographic image.”

Christine replied immediately with, “Don't you think we would have recognized a...hologram, or that if something dissolved it would have left residue on the table? There was no stain, no film, no ash, when we came back into the room. What's more, if one of these things happened, only Fleel could have been behind it. Who else could have set the stage for something like this?”

“Someone who knew more than the two other guests and who had found a way to get into the house prior to the presentation. What did Fleel have to say?”

“He was distraught, as you can imagine. He told us that he had been robbed of a fortune...and before he could insure the manuscript.”

“Stop. Did he tell you how much insurance he was seeking?”

She pondered the question before saying, “I don’t remember him mentioning an amount.”

“What happened when the police arrived?”

“He didn't call the police. He said he wouldn't allow us to be humiliated.”

Cole shook his head. “Knowing—I should say, suspecting—that one of you was a thief? Hard to believe.”

“That is what Daniel told us, and he seemed to be sincere. He also said that since many in the mystery story community already knew about the manuscript, publishing the story would be out of the question. I had the sense at the time that he was providing the thief—one of us—with reasons for returning the manuscript, if not immediately, then afterwards.”

Cole released Christine’s arm and said, “What do you want me to do?”

She wasted no time in answering him. “I want you to find out what happened, I want you to remove any suspicion that I am the guilty party, and I want you to come to dinner tonight.”

“I ought to go home. I have work to do”, he said, wondering why he resisted her invitation when he knew being home by himself brought out the ghosts.

“Come to dinner. We will sing African songs. You can put the kids to bed. Sleep over, if it gets late. For me.”

Maybe Olivia had sent Christine to him, Cole told himself. Christine seemed to be able to see inside him, to tell when he was battling despondency.

“I’ll come”, he said.

While he was with the Penns that night, Christine arranged for Cole to meet Fleel at his Ann Arbor home the following day. Since he was already in Ann Arbor, Cole spent the night with the Penns. He'd made sure the meeting time was in the afternoon when there was likely to be plenty of light in Fleel's dining room, and he was gratified to see a clear sky when the new day dawned.

"I googled you", Fleel told Cole upon his arrival at the house. "Are you another Poirot, as they say?" Sporting a closely cropped moustache and goatee, Fleel was a dark-eyed, short, wiry man in his late thirties or early forties. "Ask your questions", he said, as if this were a legal proceeding.

"How much insurance did you intend to purchase?"

Cole could tell that the lawyer was surprised by this question. Fleel shrugged and said, "One hundred thousand."

"But you weren't able to secure the policy."

"Sadly, the manuscript had yet to be appraised when it was stolen."

"How did you acquire the manuscript?"

Fleel wagged a finger at Cole and said, "That would be telling. I acquired the manuscript through the agency of a family member of Wright's. That's all I'm willing to reveal."

This sounded like legalese to Cole. "Who is Wright?"

"Van Dine was a pen name for Wilbur Huntington Wright, who happened to be a literary critic, journalist, and commentator on art and culture before he took up mystery story writing."

"Why do you think the manuscript was kept hidden for...ah...seventy-eight years?"

“Any number of reasons, I suppose”, Fleel answered. “I read the story, and it wasn't one of Van Dine’s best, but an undiscovered Philo Vance mystery was still a triumph.”

“What convinced you that the story was composed by Van Dine...Wright?”

“In the first edition of *The Kidnap Murder Case*, published in 1936, there is a note below the Van Dine canon of novels: In preparation, THE LINDEN MURDER CASE. That’s the reason my interest was piqued when I first learned about the manuscript. After I read the story, I was convinced it was an authentic Van Dine. This was corroborated by the type and the age of the paper.”

“But the manuscript was never appraised”, Cole remarked.

“Correct”, Fleel responded, “but I wasn't relying exclusively on the type and paper. The content of the manuscript was the primary evidence. By the way, you’re more Marlowe than Poirot.”

Cole grinned. “Can I see the room?”

“You *may* see the room. Follow me.”

On their way to Fleel’s dining room, Cole said, “I was told that you didn't call the police.”

Halting, Fleel turned to Cole and said, “I didn't bother, having no confidence that Ann Arbor’s version of Lestrade or Japp could accomplish anything, except for pockmarking my floor with his hobnailed boots and scarring my walls, and, as the manuscript wasn't insured, what would have been the point?”

The lawyer opened the door and motioned for Cole to enter first. “If I thought the police could recover the manuscript it would be another matter entirely.”

Cole had already noted that Fleel was a fastidious housekeeper, and the dining room reinforced this conclusion. He could well imagine that police scouring the room would be unwelcome. The oak floor had been polished to almost mirror-like luster; table and chairs too. The pale green walls displayed no blemishes.

Cole said, “Parks made sure the window was locked before the group left the room. Could he have *unlocked* the window instead?”

“Not possible. I was standing next to him. He never touched the lock, just pushed up to make sure it was fastened tight. Christine must have told you that Parks’ window checking—at that time—was mere drama. Listen Palmer. I agreed to let you come as a courtesy to Christine, but I have a busy day, so can we get on with it?”

Cole looked Fleel in the eye and said, “You realize that even though the police weren’t called, it is known in the mystery community that the manuscript was stolen, and that Christine was present at the time. That makes her a suspect...and me a bulldog. Are there any hidden panels in this room?”

“You have eyes, man”, Fleel said, resentfully. “We removed the paintings, and moved the sideboard away from the wall. This is a perfectly ordinary room with no way in or out except for this door.”

“And window...”

“...that was locked tight. You may check the bolt yourself if you care to.”

Cole had read about—though he had never seen for himself—window assemblies, including the frame, that could be removed in one piece, making the lock useless, but there was nothing on this window frame to suggest that it was so equipped.

Cole got down on his knees and examined the floor vent cover, saying, “Has this cover been recently removed?”

“For purpose of re-painting the cover. In case you haven’t noticed, I am meticulous about such things.”

Cole was back on his feet and standing beneath the wall vent, which had been painted the same color as the floor vent.

“Both covers were painted at the same time...last month, so both were removed at that time.”

After examining the surface of the table for any shadow of a physical or chemical blemish—there was none, Cole moved a chair, reclined on his back, and slid himself underneath the table. The mechanism for the leaf, now installed, was visible, as were a number of screw holes.”

Still under the table, Cole asked, “What are these holes?”

“I purchased the table at an estate sale for an attractive price. Yes, I am fussy, but as the holes are invisible from above, I accepted this defect.”

Not a speck of dust on his trousers when Cole extracted himself from the underside of the table. Next, he opened the sideboard drawers where he found nothing out of the ordinary, though they were of ample size to have hidden the manuscript and other paraphernalia.

“This is a perfectly ordinary room, as you can see”, said Fleel.

“Then how do you explain what happened?” Cole inquired.

Fleel hesitated a moment before saying, “The obvious explanation, I’m afraid. One of my guests spirited the manuscript out of the room when we retired for our glass of wine.”

“That is the *obvious* explanation. So, whom do you suspect?”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“But knowing that one of your guests stole the manuscript, you didn't call the police and have them searched.”

“I have an...equivocal, shall we say, public reputation, but deep down I am not that sort of man. The police search you describe would have humiliated the two who were not guilty. I am a better man than that, despite what others think. I decided to bear the consequences of the theft myself.”

“So one of the three has the manuscript and you are left empty-handed.”

“Not exactly. Whenever this manuscript surfaces, it will be recognized as my property.”

“How will you be able to prove it is *your* manuscript?”

“I made a copy”, announced Fleel, smugly.

“Is the mystery community aware of this?”

“Not yet, but I intend to publish.”

“Beat the thief to the punch?”

“Exactly. Furthermore, the book's forward will relate the story of how the manuscript was discovered, as well as its theft from a locked room.”

Cole glanced at, and out, the window, which faced the rear of the house and was fifty feet or so from a forest. “Whom do you think took the manuscript?”

“You already asked that question. I have an idea, but I have no intention of identifying this person.”

“Not in the forward to the book?”

“Surely not. You know that I'm a lawyer. Such a public accusation would be libelous...madness.” Looking at the Rolex on his wrist, he asked, “Do you have any more questions?”

“How long were you in the kitchen before returning to this room?”

“It was a fine old burgundy, suitable to the occasion. We lingered; a half-hour...forty minutes, perhaps.”

“May I see the copy of the manuscript?”

Fleel furrowed his brow. After a moment's reflection, he stepped out of the room and returned with the copy, placing the stapled document on the table and turning the pages. Cole wasn't an expert, but the type looked old and the few phrases he could read reminded him of other stories he had read from the 1920s and 30s.

Fleel stopped turning pages before he came to the end, saying, “Wouldn't want to reveal the solution. I will send you a copy when the story is published.”

Before he left Fleel's property, Cole examined the outside of the dining room window to assure himself this was a normal frame, that there hadn't been any hocus pocus involving this window.

Next, Cole consulted his sometime collaborator, Detective Handlebar with the Ann Arbor police, who had been reticent to provide him with the information he sought until Cole revealed that Fleel had relegated Ann Arbor detectives to the Lestrade-Japp category. The information Cole had requested came in a terse email several days later.

Two weeks had passed when Cole picked up Christine Kumara Penn at her Ann Arbor bookstore on their way to the Fleel home. Most of the flowering trees had given up their blossoms and the lilacs were just getting started. Cole had the back windows halfway down as he wound in and out of the busy downtown area.

“Have you spoken to Karin and Edgar?” Christine asked Cole, who just shook his head.

“That means I must be your prime suspect”, she said to him. “Should I be flattered...or concerned?”

“You *should* be”, Cole answered, cryptically.

Fleel met them at the door, taking Christine’s hand in both of his. “I would not have let Palmer into the house if you hadn’t requested it. When we last met, I told him the matter was closed. No police inquisition. I have written off the insurance money.”

“May we talk in the dining room?” Cole asked, as if he hadn’t heard Fleel’s attempt to paint him as a cad.

Fleel shrugged and led them into the room, taking the seat at the head of the table with Cole on his left and Christine on his right. “I suppose you intend to inform me that either Edgar or Karin stole the manuscript.”

“What if I were to tell you that Christine is the thief?” Cole replied.

Christine’s eyes were boring into the tabletop. Fleel’s face reddened. He said, “I would be shocked. And I’m not accustomed to hearing a friend publicly accused of a crime, especially when it isn’t a police matter. Even Marlowe and Sam Spade were more tactful than that.”

“They have their methods, and I have mine.”

“Apparently so, but yours are less than honorable.”

Cole tried to stifle a grin. “Let’s talk about how the crime—let’s call it a scheme—was accomplished.”

“Cole is very good at this sort of thing”, Christine deadpanned. “I am afraid my Alopochen is cooked.”

“What?” Fleel asked.

“A Ugandan goose”, she shot back.

“Let’s get this over with”, Fleel said. “As I recall, Christine was wearing a pantsuit that day. Where did she stow the manuscript? More to the

point, how did she get it out of the dining room without anyone observing her?”

Cole said, “All of the mystery and drama obscured the fact that there was only one way for the manuscript to leave the room; that is, by the window.”

“You know that the window was locked when we left the room, and it was still locked when we discovered that the manuscript had been stolen. You yourself have examined the window and know that it is perfectly ordinary...and secure.”

“Shall I tell you what you already know?” Cole asked Fleel. “I admit that I was baffled when I left your house so I started by formulating questions about *you*. I learned that Daniel Fleel has a good reputation in the legal community, and within the Golden Age mystery community he is known to be a serious collector of artifacts. Oh yes, I learned that he has a younger sister who is an accomplished gymnast, nearly qualifying for two Olympic teams.”

“Intrusive, and perhaps illegal”, Fleel fumed.

“Your sister’s name is Christine, isn’t it?”

Fleel’s eyes darted to the woman next to him.

“Your sister lives in San Diego and has visited Michigan only once in the last three years. That brief visit just happened to coincide with the disappearance of your manuscript.

“You couldn’t have asked for more than when Parks suggested that the window be checked, and when he himself confirmed it was locked. After the door was closed, your sister emerged from beneath the table and conveyed the manuscript out the window. Brackets had been screwed to the underside of the table for each hand and foot and for a strap that supported

your sister's midsection. She was in this position when the group entered the room, but impossible to see, even with no tablecloth, unless someone got down on their knees, put their head under the table, and looked up at the underside of the table. Why would any of your guests do such a thing when no one had an inkling that the theft would occur? Your sister had only to assume this position for fifteen minutes or so, from the time your guests were admitted to the house until you served the wine. Perfectly safe, as there was no reason for anyone to look under the table until the manuscript was found to be missing, and by then Christine had removed the brackets and strap, and had exited through the window, which she unlocked."

"But the window was locked when we returned to the room", Christine observed.

"So you thought. Pretending to *confirm* that the window remained locked, Fleel locked the window while you were busy with the sideboard, probably using his body as a screen. As Houdini said, tricks don't impress once you learn how they are done."

"Kindly explain why I would steal an uninsured manuscript from myself", Fleel demanded.

"Gladly. There never was an original Van Dine manuscript. The note in the 1936 Van Dine novel about *The Linden Murder Case* being in progress, and knowing that the story was never completed, gave you the idea for reaping a lot of publicity and money. You composed the story yourself based on your familiarity with Van Dine's stories, and other stories from that era. You then re-typed the story using a 1930s typewriter and artificially aged paper. No, hold on...let me finish. You knew this would never deceive an experienced appraiser, but you only needed the fraudulent manuscript to deceive your guests, undergoing a cursory inspection at that. You never

intended to insure the so-called original because you knew this fake wouldn't appraise and wasn't insurable. After the theft, the so-called original would be gone forever. The copy you showed me, however, could still be marketed to a publisher, whose interest would be enhanced by the fictitious story of how you discovered the manuscript, and its disappearance from a locked room.”

“How much of this can you *prove*?” Fleel asked in his best lawyerly voice.

“The screw holes in the table, that your sister is a gymnast and an acrobat, that she was in town when the theft occurred; that’s all.”

“Skimpy evidence, don’t you think? A case of slander might be made out of this.”

“And risk the deal you made with your publisher? By the way, how *honorable* was it to besmirch the reputations of Christine, Parks, and Clos to enrich yourself? You tipped your hand when you insisted that you didn't go to the police out of concern for your guests’ reputations but then told me you intended to relate the story of the manuscript’s disappearance in the book’s forward.”

At this point, Fleel invited them to leave.

“Now that I know how he did it”, Christine said in the car, “I feel like an idiot. The solution seems obvious.”

“So Houdini was wont to say”, Cole replied.

“Houdini be damned...sorry. Thank you for defending my honor.”

“I’m your son’s godfather. I can’t be associated with a criminal lot.”

“I guess not. Thomas will say he could have solved it in half the time.”

“That has been known to happen.”

“Little Leander would like to hear the story of the disappearing manuscript, and how his mother was saved from disgrace.”

“Someday he shall. That’s what godfathers are for.”

“Let’s have lunch at Argiero’s”, Christine said. “My treat. That’s what friends are for.”