

Murder At Bridge

By ANNE ALSTIN author of "THE BLACK PIGEON"

CHAPTER XIX

Although Bonnie Dundee had taken Captain Strawn's gentle parting gift with good grace, it was a very thoughtful young detective who set about locking himself in the house in which Nita Selim had been murdered, and which he had promised to guard until midnight.

Captain Strawn had beaten him to the job that evening by at least 20 minutes. Had the old detective stumbled upon something which Dundee, for all his spectacular thoroughness, had overlooked, or had been unable to turn up because Strawn had suppressed it? Only his optimistic faith in the old detective's willingness to co-operate with him, now that he was no longer a member of Strawn's homicide squad, had kept him from asking Strawn point-blank if the "death chamber," as the newspapers would be calling it, had yielded up some tangible, unmistakable clue.

What if Strawn's parting boast was not an idle one, and he really had "the goods" on Ralph Hammond? Had the old chief been laughing up his sleeve during the lapse of time, out of the "death chamber," and during the merciless quizzing of old Judge Marshall?

But his native common sense quickly routed his gloom. Captain Strawn was too direct in his methods, too afraid of antagonizing the rich and influential to have permitted even a "special investigator" from the district attorney's office to torment those 12 people needlessly. Probably Strawn, feeling a little hurt at having played second fiddle all evening, had simply wanted to get him fussed, was even now chuckling over the effect of his parting boast.

Much cheered, Dundee lingered in the dining room whose windows he had made fast against any intrusion, so that his task of guarding the house alone might be minimized. As he glanced at the table, with its silver plates heaped with tiny sandwiches of eclair and anchovy paste, their silver bowls of olives and sweet pickles, he discovered that he was very hungry indeed.

As he munched the drying sandwiches and sipped charged water—the various liquors for cocktails on the sideboard offered a temptation which he sternly resisted—Dundee's thoughts boiled and churned, throwing up picture after picture of Nita Selim, alive and then dead; of Penny Grant—blonde hair—hiding all at the expense of her loyalty to lifelong friends; of Flora Miles, lying desperately and then confessing to a shameful theft; of Karen Marshall gleefully playing the "death hand"; of Karen's stricken, childish face when she learned that her elderly husband had met and at least flirted with Nita Selim at a chorus girl party.

Ruefully reflecting that appetizers do not make a satisfactory meal he looked himself to the dead woman's bedroom. . . . Yes, his memory had served him well. Here was her desk—small, feminine affair of rosewood, set in the corner of the room nearest the porch door.

The desk was not locked. As Dundee let down the slanting lid, whose polish was marked with many fingerprints, he saw that its contents were in a hopeless jumble. So Strawn had beaten him to this, too! Had he found an all-important clue in one of the many little pigeon-holes and drawers, stuffing it into his pocket just before a bumptious young "special investigator" arrived?

But Dundee's returning gloom was instantly dispelled. Here was Nita's checkbook, a flutter of filled-in stubs attached to only one remaining blank check. So Nita had banked with the Hamilton National Bank, of which John C. Drake—who apparently hated his father's busy wife—was a vice president! Another tiny fact to be tucked away. . . . She had opened her account, apparently, on April 21, the day of her arrival in Hamilton—the day the employer of Mrs. Peter Dunlap, probably John Dunlap, had advanced her the \$200 as first payment for her prospective work in organizing a Little Theatre movement in Hamilton.

Turning rapidly through stubs, Dundee stopped twice, whistling softly with amazement each time. For on April 28, and again on May 5, Nita Selim had deposited \$5000! Where had she got the money? Were the sums, possibly, transfers from accounts in New York banks? Hardly likely that a little Broadway hanger-on had had so much hard cash on deposit. Then where had she got it—\$5000 at a time, here in Hamilton?

Blackmail? . . . Hastily but thor-

oughly Dundee ran through the remaining check stubs. . . . No record at all of a check for rent made out to Judge Hugo Marshall!

But there was a stub that interested him. Check No. 17—Nita had spent her money lavishly—was filled in as follows, in Nita's pretty back-hand:

No. 17—\$5000.
May 9, 1939.
To Trust Dept.
For Investment.

Had John C. Drake, who as vice president in charge of trusts and investments had doubtless handled the check, wondered at all where the \$5000 had come from?

One other revelation came out of the 23 filled-in stubs. On every Monday Nita Selim had drawn a check for \$40, to her maid, Lydia Carr.

Again Dundee whistled. Forty dollars a week was, he wagered to himself, more money than any other maid in Hamilton was lucky enough to receive! Nita in a new light—an over-generous Nita! Or was Nita herself paying blackmail on a small scale?

He reached into a pigeon-hole whose contents—a thick packet of unused envelopes—had not been disturbed by Strawn, and was about to remove an envelope which to place the all-important checkbook, when he noticed something slightly peculiar. An envelope in the middle of the packet looked rather thicker than an empty one should be. But it was not empty. And across the face of the expensive, cream-colored linen paper was written, in that same pretty, very legible back-hand:

TO BE OPENED IN CASE OF MY DEATH

—Juanita Leigh Selim.

His heart hammering, and his fingers trembling, Dundee drew out two close-written sheets of creamy notepaper. After all, who had better right than he to open it? Was he not the representative of the district attorney? . . . And he hadn't damaged the envelope, it had opened very easily indeed—its flap had yielded instantly to his thumbnail.

Wait! It had been too easy. Before unfolding the letter or whatever it was, Dundee examined the flap of the envelope. Yes! He was not the first to open it since its original sealing. God grant he hadn't destroyed any tell-tale fingerprints in his criminal haste to learn any secret that Nita Selim had recorded here! . . . Perhaps Nita herself had unsealed the letter to make an addition or a correction?

Well, whatever damage had been done was done now, and he might as well read.

Five minutes later Bonnie Dundee was racing through the dining room, pushing open the swinging door that led into the butler's pantry. Where the devil were the ropes that led down into the basement? A precious minute was lost before he discovered that a door in the dark hall opened upon the steep stairs.

An unshaded light, dangling from the ceiling, revealed the furnace in one corner of the big basement, laundry equipment in another. He plunged on. . . . That must be the maid's room, behind that closed door. . . . God! What if she had escaped, while he had been munching eclair and anchovy sandwiches? A fine guard he'd been, and it wasn't as if he hadn't had a dim suspicion of the truth.

The knob turned easily. He flung upon the door. And then his knees nearly gave away, so tremendous was his relief. For there, on the thin mattress of a white-enameled iron bed, lay the woman he so ardently desired to see.

She had been asleep, and the noise he had made startled her into panic wakefulness. Instinctively her hand flew to the ruined left side of her face.

"Who?—Who?" Lydia Carr gasped, struggling to a sitting position, only to fall back as nausea swept over her.

"You remember me?" Dundee panted. Dundee of the district attorney's office. I questioned you this afternoon—"

The woman closed the single eye that had escaped the accident which had mangled her face so hideously. "I—remember," she said.

"I told you all I know—"

"Lydia, why didn't you tell me that it was your mistress, Mrs. Selim, who did—that?" Dundee demanded sternly, pointing to the woman's sightless left eye and ruined cheek.

(To Be Continued)

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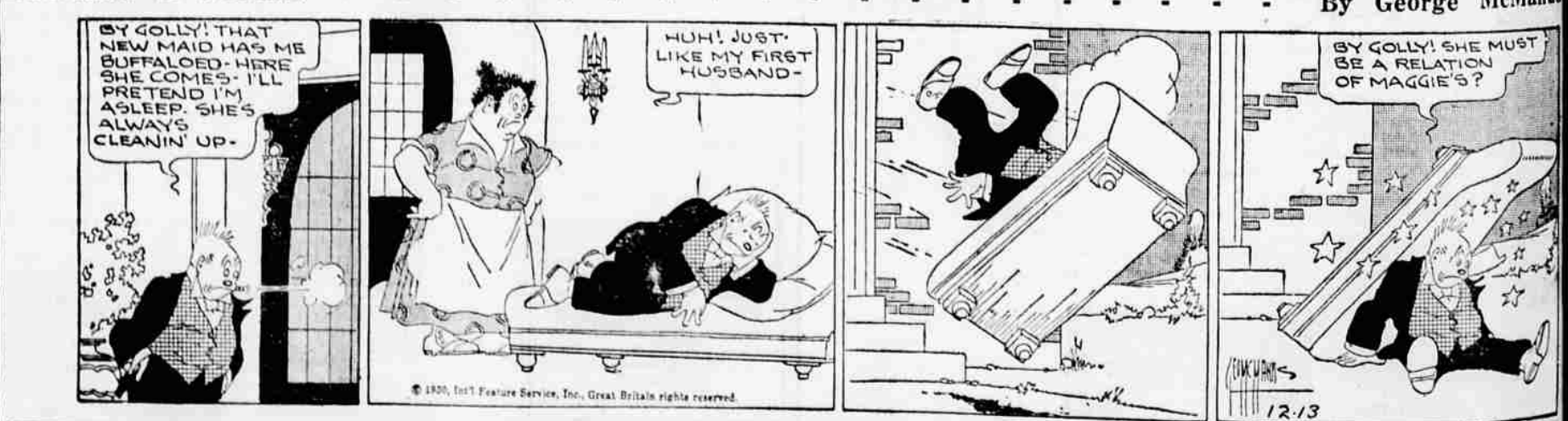
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