Week-end MURDER

GABRIELLE E. FORBUSH

CHAPTER XI

TOM AVERILL frowned. "Oh, gosh, there we go again talking about the—what did you call them? —'potential murderers'?"

"I wish I never had to see any one of them again," Linda said dejectedly. "Oh, come, Binks! It isn't as bad as that. A few hours of sleep—"

"A few hours? How you do exaggerate! It's almost daylight and we've got to get Cousin Amos off early, early for him—that's even worse!"

"How soon? It's after 5 now."

"In about an hour. He gets up about half-past six or seven anyhow and he wants to take a 7-something train. That means 6 today."

Tom whistled silently. Then he began undressing. "Binks," he said, "go to bed. I'll see the old fellow off and tell him you're all in."

"Thanks, but that wouldn't do. It's my job and I'll send him away with a smile. I wouldn't sleep anyhow, Tom. I'd have him on my mind."

"Say—here's an idea! Get out of those things and into your bathing suit. This room's an oven and a cool dip'll do you more good than lying down. If you'll fling on a few clothes and see that he gets breakfast I'll run him to the the station and you can go to bed then. I doubt if anyone else shows his face before noon."

She was already scrambling into the pert little red jersey suit that made her look so boyish and slim.

"I'm with you, Tommy! It's a grand idea. Think any of the others—"

"Leave 'em out. Two's company this time and they're all asleep by now, anyhow. Come on!"

"Wait—I can't find my cap! You go on—it's here somewhere. I'll be right behind you!"

But in the hall, she relented. Cousin Amos hadn't had much pleasure from his stay and he had so enjoyed the winter yesterday! Since no one else was coming, why not at least ask him? At his room door she stopped in surprise—it was about a foot ajar. She remembered that he had not left it open during the night. Then she thought of the step she had heard in the hall. Curious he should go outside his room so early! He had his own lavatory and could have done without a tub for once in his life. If he had gone across the hall she hoped fervently he hadn't either met or disturbed Marvin or DeVos, both tired, sleepy and hot and therefore edgy after the Country Club affair.

But, she wondered, had he gone back to bed or was he actually up and dressed so early? Hesitating whether to knock or not, she unintentionally pushed the door a little more widely open and could not help seeing the bed—empty, rumpled, the covers thrown back. Feeling very apologetic, she opened her lips to call him softly. Then, to her astonishment, she heard voices inside the room.

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Who could it be? Tom, probably, smitten with the same idea and having stopped to invite Cousin Amos to join them, called in by the indignant old man to account for the noise and wing of the door. Cousin Amos, of course, would forget entirely his insistence on opening it, in spite of her express request that he should not. Well—let Tom bear the brunt of displeasure! Perhaps he could brace it somehow to stop it for the moment.

A sudden appalling squeak filled her with renewed alarm lest the sound disturb Marvin Pratt or DeVos. Both of them, she knew, had had all they wanted of Cousin Amos! In fact she had promised that the Belgian, at least, should not even see again the man who had so affronted him. She pulled the room door gently to until it all but latched and made her escape unheard, running downstairs rather amused than otherwise at Tom's fright.

But the door on the terrace was open and as she came out into the early sun, she saw a white-backed jersey rising and falling in rhythmic strokes as a familiar figure headed out from shore. Tom, no doubt of it—tired of waiting for her and apparently striking out for distant Connecticut. She prepared to emit the piercing yodel with which she was wont to signal him and checked herself just in time as she remembered the hour. But if not Tom, who was upstairs with Cousin Amos? Had he been taken ill in the night and did he need help? Should she go back?

A slight scuffle of feet over her head on the little balcony startled her. Could the old man have had a fainting spell—a stroke perhaps? There was something strange about that subdued, shuffling sound! If only Tom, swimming away from her so unconcernedly, would turn so that she could wave him back!

Over her head there was a quick jumble of steps, an exclamation, and suddenly a cracking, rending, tearing sound. From above came hurtling a figure—headfirst—turning in the air, not two feet from where she stood, rooted and horrified, under the projecting balcony—to crumple in sickening distortion at her very feet. A white head moved feebly, a face turned toward her. Cousin Amos! A step forward, and she was kneeling beside him, tremblingly smoothing that drawn, white face, breathlessly gasping his name. The eyelids quivered and the blue, childlike eyes looked up at her at first blindly, then with dazed recognition.

"Linda!" She bent down for the painful whisper. "Over—over—"

"Yes, darling—you fell over—"

"No. He . . . . thr-threw—"

"He . . . who?"

There was no answer, nor could Cousin Amos ever tell her more.

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Horror-stricken as she was over the old man's death, Linda grasped the significance of those few broken words. He was trying to tell her something. He had told her—a little. "Over—" "No—he threw—" She was sure she had caught that last faint gasp. Someone had been there—he had not fallen—!

Instantly she was on her feet. Grief and fury banished any thought of fear. She mustn't stay here—she couldn't help Cousin Amos now—or ever—except by finding who was up there. She was flashing through the central hall, a quick streak of crimson jersey and tanned flesh. Up the stairs—no attempt now to hide her flying steps. His door was exactly as she had left it, barely ajar. No one had come out! She pushed it open and went in.

A silent, empty room. Straight through Linda went, her mind on one thing only, toward the open casement. She glimpsed the green lawn and beyond the blue water of the Sound. She even noticed, subconsciously, that Tom had turned back and was almost to the float. But nearest of all she saw a broken, torn railing, the top bar wrenched apart, the narrow, graceful spindles careening drunkenly in every direction. She did not know whom she expected to see but there was no one on the balcony. The shock of it brought her to a rigid stop. She came to herself—she must go back, call Tom—

She started to turn and in that second caught a dark blur moving behind her. A cloth thrown around her neck from behind prevented sound and, twisted tightly, prevented also her turning head or body to see her assailant. She swayed, unconscious, on her feet and pitched heavily forward into abyssmal blackness.

(To Be Continued)

California is spending $150,000 a year to rid the state of a vine that is a costly pest to motorists. It is the "puncture vine," a creeping plant, which, when crossing a road, sends its sharp spines through an automobile tire.

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