

Week-end MURDER

GABRIELLE FORBUSH

CHAPTER XXIX

NO one would have guessed from Linda's tone that she was thinking of a cold-blooded old ruffian. She said sympathetically, "I'm sure Tom—if you'd spoken to him—couldn't attract his attention."

"He wouldn't," Linda objected. "He spoke as though he had a real grievance. Why, I wonder, should that thwarted creep creep into his voice?"

"Just what was it about the accident?" Linda asked. "If he had suspected, this might draw him."

"I wished to find out whether they put the fall down on my poor old aunt's business or," she added with what seemed to Linda a darkening emphasis, "to some other cause."

"Some other—surely you do not suspect?" Her voice trailed away sadly. Would he catch the suggestion? He did, and turned upon her with unexpected savagery.

"That it was an accident? Certainly, Mrs. Averill, it was an accident! There could be no other possible explanation. I would swear it was an accident!" His voice rose, urgently emphatic.

"Now why should he get so excited? I'm not disputing him!" thought Linda. As though he read her mind, his voice dropped and he went on with his usual heavy, rather indifferent manner.

"You can take it for granted, Mrs. Averill, that Mr. Peabody went out on the balcony for air. The night was oppressively sultry. I only meant that he must have been actually leaning against the railing when he lost his balance. It was sound enough before he fell."

"Why, Mr. Statlander!" cried Linda in honest astonishment. "When were you on the balcony?"

"Why—why—" He mopped a brow, suddenly wet. "Appallingly hot, isn't it?" Now he was more concerned that she did not like the lurking gleam in his eyes. Suddenly she shivered. If Tom were right—if one of their pasts were a homicidal maniac—after all, nothing infuriated such a man more than an affront to his pride. He had been so comfortably self-satisfied over his superior medical knowledge, his criticism of the behavior of others. Now he was on the defensive and knew that she knew it. For the first time she was actually afraid, alone there in her peaceful garden, with this dark, strange, angry man who spoke politely enough but looked at her as though he could willingly kill her.

"No wonder you ask, Mrs. Averill. I must confess to having made myself rather too much at home last night." How he hated it, this need for apology! "It was, as we said, hot. Very hot. It occurred to me that there might be more breeze on the other side of the house. I would not for a moment have thought I was displeased with my quarters—after all, I understand that Mr. Peabody was the older man and a relative—" ("But you're furious that he had the better room—that's interesting!" thought Linda.) "After returning from the house I found sleep impossible. I had heard you say the room opposite me was empty."

"Yes, you asked me and I told you during our drive back from the Club," Linda was disposed to give no quarter.

"Ah, yes—quite so! I ventured to cross, without waking any one I hope, and found the room, as you said, empty and the door to the balcony closed. I thought if I opened it and left that room door and mine open the current through might stir the air a little."

"That's so," said Linda, honestly sorry. "I never thought of suggesting it."

He went on more smoothly. "It was growing light and I stepped out on the balcony to admire the view and get the fresh morning air."

"Now that," thought Linda, "is just your old Cousin Amos' rhapsodies. But you must know where and are you unconsciously repeating what he said to you? The story weakens!"

Aloud she inquired placidly, "The railing?"

"Well—I simply laid my hands on it. Again the gleam in his eyes. He certainly disliked being called to account. His habit of authority was so firmly entrenched that he probably believed he should never be put on the defensive.

"And you say it seemed quite sound and firm?" She flashed a confident smile at him and sensed that he imperceptibly relaxed.

"Why, yes—entirely so." Gradually he became again the informative, condescending man of affairs talking to a pretty, but rather stupid little woman. "Naturally, I did not give it any violent treatment."

"How did it seem later?" Linda inquired blandly.

"Well, of course the upper rail was broken through the center but otherwise—"

"Oh—then you went there after Cousin Amos fell?"

"How quickly that ugly color came up! Linda, feeling literally in danger of having those dark, square fingers go around her neck (again?) noted dispassionately and entirely without fear the rush of dark red that changed his whole aspect so markedly. Her shot in the dark had told!

"Yes—yes, Mrs. Averill. I did not know it was forbidden—"

He studied her face narrowly and then seemed to absorb her of any ulterior motive.

"Well," he said gruffly, "I was interested in the scene of the accident." Was it true or did Linda imagine a hesitation like her own? "I stayed behind the others and looked about a little."

"Was it you who so thoughtfully put back the upper railing?" she felt the form of her question should disarm him but again he studied her closely.

"Was the railing put back?" he countered.

She nodded.

"Perhaps I did it. I really do not remember. I went out the balcony and might have abscondingly straightened anything that was amiss."

Why was he suddenly so eager, Linda reflected. Either he did or he didn't, and if it happened as he suggested, then there was surely no reason to evade the question. She continued her attack.

"Did you find anything else of interest?"

"Nothing!"

The answer came promptly. No hedging, none of the annoyances he had shown previously. It was almost as if he expected the question and was prepared with a flat negative. "Trippingly on the tongue," thought Linda. "Now why were you so ready with that? 'Nothing!' Why not look surprised and ask what I expected he might find?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you could find! Cousin Amos was a tidy sort of person, anyhow—and if you think he just stepped out for air—" "I'm sure of it, Mrs. Averill," he interrupted earnestly.

"And sort of leaped, or fell, against the railing?"

"As if you'd been there," she finished, still with that vaguely indefinite air. Before he could speak—she went on with every nerve tense and watchful. "Just think, Mr. Statlander, if you'd been—oh, half an hour later (you said it was getting light when you opened the nursery door and this must have happened soon after—you'd have seen Cousin Amos and perhaps could have saved him!"

She lifted clear, unclouded eyes to his face and saw that again a quick perspiration had broken out and was being hastily wiped away.

"Yes—yes—I might—" he gasped and turned with more open pleasure than she would have thought he could express to greet his host, coming with long strides across the soft carpet of the lawn.

(To Be Continued)

— THIS CURIOUS WORLD —

IN 1816, IN THE EASTERN AND NEW ENGLAND STATES, THERE WAS SNOW AND ICE IN EVERY MONTH OF THE YEAR.

The ROMANS STARTED THE CUSTOM OF FORCIBLY FEEDING GEESSE TO ENLARGE THE LIVERS. A GOOSE THAT IS FED BY FORCE EVERY FEW HOURS SOON DEVELOPS A LIVER OF SEVERAL POUNDS WEIGHT.

MAGNOLIAS ONCE BLOOMED WITHIN THE ARCTIC CIRCLE.

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

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