



and be my Love

By PEGGY DERN

WNU. RELEASE



THE STORY THUS FAR. "Alicia Stevenson has been murdered!" The story was all over Pleasant Grove in minutes. Late in the afternoon Tom stopped by to get milk, and they talked about Alicia's death. Meg was upset, and involuntarily Tom put his arms around her and called her "darling." That evening Meg and her father sat looking at each other, each remembering that the other was out late the night before. "Did you do it?" she finally asked. "No—did you?" She was stunned. Jim MacTavish suggested they make a bargain: "You forget that I was out of the house—I'll forget you were trying with Tom Fallon." A hot tide of crimson covered Meg.

CHAPTER XI

She caught her breath and could not believe she had spoken, though the words seemed to quiver in letters of fire between them. Her father stiffened with a little jerk. His face was white and hard and his eyes were veiled, so that she could not guess his thoughts.

For a moment that seemed a century long his eyes met hers, and then he said very softly, "No, my dear—did you?"

"Father!" It was a shocked, incredulous gasp that came scarcely above her breath. "How—how can you even—think—"

Her father lifted his shoulders in a gesture that was not quite a shrug and drawled coolly, "Why not? You seemed perfectly willing to believe I had!"

"Oh, no, Dad." In that breathless moment the endearing diminutive came easily from her tongue. "I didn't think you had—I couldn't ever believe you had—"

"Yet you put the question very easily," he reminded her dryly.

"It—it was only that I heard you come in last night—a little after one—"

"A few minutes after you came in, if I remember," said her father calmly, his eyes never leaving her white, ravaged face.

"Suppose we make a bargain, my dear Megan." Her father's voice came softly, low-pitched, scarcely above a whisper, in the tone of one conspirator to another.

"A—a bargain, Father?" she managed faintly.

He nodded. "You forget that I was out of the house—I'll forget that you were—er—trusting with Tom Fallon on the Ridge," he said in that gentle, yet somehow terrifying drawl.

A hot tide of crimson poured over her face and reached to the collar of her neat cotton print frock to the very roots of her hair.

"I wasn't—trusting with Tom Fallon!" Her mouth twisted with distaste at the thought, and the implication.

"But you did meet him there—"

"Purely by accident!" she flashed.

Her father smiled thinly. "I believe you, my dear—though I am a little doubtful as to whether other people would, if it ever became necessary for other people to know of that—er—accidental meeting."

She put her face in her hands for a moment and her father watched her with a curious tenseness.

"But, of course, I can see no reason why anyone save the two of us should know anything about it," he went on smoothly. "Surely if my daughter and I wish to go for a walk in the fresh night air, it is nobody's business but our own. Unfortunately, in a murder investigation a great many seemingly unrelated facts come out. Of course, there's no likelihood that we should be in any way connected with this terrible affair. Neither of us had any motive to want Alicia out of the way—that is, I had none. I hoped to marry her!"

She stared at him, caught by some odd note in his voice. And after a moment he answered the look in her eyes. "Of course if it should become known that you were violently opposed to me marrying her, that you resented the thought of having her here in the house, and had been unable to persuade me to give up my plans to marry her—well—"

Once again he lifted his shoulders in that gesture that was not quite a shrug, but that was an effective dismissal.

Megan drew a long, hard breath.

"You know I couldn't possibly have—"

She set her breath against the sob that clutched at her throat.

"Of course, my dear—I know that you are completely incapable of any such deed of violence!" her father assured her, and there was a warmth that was very close to tenderness in his voice. "But it won't be what I know that will count, Megan—it will be what we can prove—or disprove!"

He let her sit huddled in a heap for a moment as though to think that over. And then he said quietly, "That's why I say there is no reason why anyone should be told that you and I were out of the house—though, unfortunately, not together—for several hours last night!"

"Whom did you think I'd be likely to tell?" she asked him huskily, after a moment in which she fought to pull herself together so that speech was at all possible.

"There will be an inquest, of course," he reminded her. "Undoubtedly we, as her closest neighbors—and I suppose her closest acquaintances—will be called to testify. And if we simply say that we went to bed a little after ten—"

"But that's perjury," she whispered faintly.

Her father's face darkened angrily. "Don't be an idiot! You did not kill her. Neither did I. So what possible difference can it make—if nobody knows that we went for a walk? I'm absolutely positive that I wasn't seen; I feel equally sure you were not. So where's the harm if we protect ourselves in a situation that could easily become very unpleasant?"

She hesitated and he said quietly, "Because, Megan, if it becomes known that you and I were not in bed and asleep—that you were out on the Ridge with Fallon—it's not only going to be extremely unpleasant for you, but it's going to finish him, once and for all. He'll never be able to get another job as a teacher no matter how innocent and accidental your meeting was. People will remember Alicia's little thrust about your spending 'hours together on the Ridge,' and people are good at adding two and two and getting six or seven."

Megan said quietly, "Where were you, Father?"



"Scuse me, sub—but could I talk to yo'—fo' a few minutes?"

He sat very still for a moment, his eyes clinging to hers, and she thought he scarcely seemed to breathe. And then he said casually, "I went for a walk."

And as proof that he had had his say on the subject and no intention of speaking again, he got up and left the room.

She couldn't believe that her father had killed Alicia Stevenson. It was an incredible thought; but he had been out of the house, and he was very anxious that no one should know about that. And she thought of herself and Tom Fallon, on the Ridge.

And then she remembered his face tonight and the tone of his voice when that little word "darling" had slipped out—the look in his eyes, naked and poignant and unashamed, the warmth and tenderness in his shaken voice that had been like a shining garment wrapped about her chilled body.

"Oh, no—no—I won't have it like that! I won't be in love with him—I won't!" she wailed, deep in her frightened, stricken mind. But her heart went relentlessly on. "You can't help it! You can't stop it. You didn't ask for it—but you can never deny it! He knows it, too—he feels as you do—you saw it in his eyes, heard it in his voice tonight. You love him and he loves you—and he has a wife who has a greater claim on him than if there were children. Your love can never, never mean anything except heartbreak and self-denial! You know that—but you can't stop loving him! Any more than you can stop breathing!"

The inquest was held the following afternoon in the rickety, nondescript little frame building where the Draft Board met, and it seemed that, except for the few bedridden in the town, everybody was there.

Everybody, that is, except Megan and her father. For contrary to Jim's uneasy fear, neither he nor Megan had been called to appear. Little Betty Hendrix, Bill Logan, Mrs. Stuart, and a few of the others who had been first on the scene had been called. Megan did not quite know whether to be more relieved, or more frightened that neither she nor her father had received orders to appear. But she had firmly declined Mrs. Stuart's hearty invitation that she go, anyway.

Megan made herself keep busy throughout a day that seemed age-long. When Annie put midday dinner beside Megan and asked, a faint uneasiness in her voice, "Miss Meggie, is Mist' Larry comin' tomorrow night?"

"I suppose so, Annie," Megan answered, and quivered a little inside at the thought of facing Laurence

with the thing that was in her heart; the thing that had been there—who could say how long?—but whose presence she had not discovered until under the shock of Alicia's death.

"I like to talk to him, Miss Meggie—ef yo' think he ain' comin' anyhow, how 'bout yo' calling him up and askin' him to? So I could talk to him?" Annie was grave-eyed and portentous.

Megan, jerked out of her unhappy abstraction by Annie's tone, looked up at her curiously.

"Why, Annie, what's wrong? Why do you want to talk to Mr. Larry?" she asked, puzzled.

Annie drew herself up a little and there was a gentle, yet implacable dignity about her as she said firmly, "It's a private matter, Miss Meggie—but it's pow'ful important. Yo' call him fo' me?"

"Yes, of course, Annie," Megan answered and Annie thanked her and went out of the room, padding softly in the heelless felt slippers that she wore to "ease" her feet.

But Megan did not have to call Laurence, for at about four o'clock he came down the road and turned in at the gate grinning at her warmly and happily.

"I came over with the coroner and some of the county officers," he told her cheerfully, dropping down on the steps at her feet and baring his head to the soft wind. "Pleasant Grove's certainly getting her name in the papers. There was a newspaper correspondent for one of the Atlanta papers at the inquest."

Megan asked, after a moment, "What—what did the inquest find—"

"Death by means of a sharp instrument at the hands of a party or parties unknown," answered Laurence, looking up at her white, drawn face with surprise. "Oh look here, darling, I had no idea you were such a close friend of hers."

"I—wasn't, really," admitted Megan. "But—I knew her and—it's been a shock—"

"Of course," said Larry gently. He took her hand in his and held it closely. "We won't talk about it—"

"Yes!" said Megan so sharply that Laurence turned surprised eyes upon her. Megan managed a faint smile and said, "I—I really want to know—whatever they could learn—"

"Well, it wasn't much," said Laurence. "No trace of the weapon, a knife or a dagger of some sort. No trace of robbery or anything of that kind. The girl at the bank said she had cashed her usual monthly income check for fifty dollars, a few days ago, and her purse was found with more than thirty dollars in it. They feel sure that if she had surprised a burglar at work, he would not have left the purse. They believe that she was killed by someone she knew—or at least, someone she was not afraid of. There were no signs of a struggle in the place."

Megan sat very still, her hands locked tightly in her lap.

Killed by someone she knew! Someone she was not afraid of!

"There was one sensation," said Laurence after a moment, not looking at Megan. His eyes were on the garden, where, despite the fact that it was almost Christmas, a few late zinnias and marigolds were still in bloom and the chrysanthemums were great shaggy things of glowing beauty. "That was when the telegram from her husband arrived—"

"Her—husband?" she repeated incredulously.

Laurence nodded. "That seemed as much of a shock to everybody there as it is to you," he told her.

"But it seems that when the detectives were going through her papers yesterday they found that she had a husband and that he was the one who was sending her fifty dollars a month. They wired him and the answer was brought to the inquest this afternoon. The husband is somewhere in the west, but he's flying east to claim the body. Should be here tomorrow or next day, they thought."

"But she was a widow!" Megan protested, dazedly.

"Apparently not," said Laurence, looking up as Annie appeared behind the screen door that led into the hall. "Hello, Annie—how about putting another plate on the table and letting me stay for supper?"

"Yessuh, Mist' Larry—us sho' be glad to," she assured him, beaming, and then asked uneasily, "Scuse me, sub—but could I talk to yo'—fo' a few minutes?"

Laurence looked surprised, but got to his feet.

"Of course, Annie—don't tell me you want to divorce Amos, after all these years!" he laughed, excusing himself to Megan as he moved towards the screen door which Annie held open for him.

"I ain't suah, Mist' Larry, dat I ain't gwine git rid o' dat shifless, no-count nigger, sho' nuff!" she assured him darkly as she led the way to the kitchen.

Megan got up from the chair where she had been sitting for more than an hour. In the late afternoon, the sunlight had been warm and pleasant here, but with the coming of dusk, a chill little wind got up and tipped through the trees, and she went into the living room, where she built up the fire, making it brisk and cheerful.

NEWS BEHIND THE NEWS

By PAUL MALLON

Released by Western Newspaper Union. WAR CONTRACTS INQUIRY COULD GET OUT OF HAND

WASHINGTON. — The politicians are chuckling at the political implication behind the May scandal case.

The inside story is that Mr. May, chairman of the house military affairs committee, walked into the difficulties with the Mead investigating committee, and that the investigation was not inspired otherwise. As May is a conservative Democrat, and Senator Mead of New York has aspirations for the governorship, certain political authorities had circulated the report that the case against May was worked up for purposes of widening the split within Democratic ranks by the liberal side for the purposes of punishing a conservative Southerner. If it did not originate in such purposes, it certainly had that political effect.

However logical this report may sound to some, the inside story is that the Mead committee membership was making a routine check into the complicated financial set-up in the Garsson companies. Some suspicions about the May transaction were uncovered but not made public. Then May brought Dr. Henry Garsson to see Mead to complain about the companies being "persecuted" by a meddling investigation, which, they contended, was holding up reconversion to peacetime activities.

MEAD HAD TO ACT. The committeemen claim other efforts were made to get them to desist, but they will not identify these efforts beyond the point of saying these came from within the Democratic party.

Despite the imminence of the coming congressional election, the Republicans co-operated with the Democratic members in all ways. The Republican Sen. Homer Ferguson of Michigan (who does not run again until 1949) has been termed the "bird dog" of the committee. Ferguson and his Republican colleagues were in a position to force Mead to act if he tried to cover up. Perhaps they may have been gleeful at the prospect of roasting a Democrat on the eve of departure for home and election.

Another inner political sidelight is that the Garssons hired as their counsel for the inquiry Wayne Johnson, a well-known New York City Democrat.

The evidence carried odors reaching to high heaven, but did not prove conclusively that May ever received any money directly, although it produced testimony indicating money was sent. The committeemen have been authorized to look over the income tax returns of May to supply the missing links, and while these cannot be used as evidence or made public in any way, the committee may get some leads to the links. The law permits President Truman to authorize such looks at the returns.

All in all, the newsmen who sat at the press table throughout the inquiry thought the whole case could be put down as a scandal so plainly marked with evidence that no one could cover it on any side, Democratic, Republican, PAC, or any other.

REP. COFFEE INVOLVED.

But lo and behold, the case produced a political tail larger than the dog. The Coffee case, following immediately thereafter, concerned a left-leaning Democrat, Rep. John M. Coffee, who received \$2,500 from a war contractor for services. He votes mostly on the leftish side.

Thus the scandals came out even in Democratic ranks between the two conflicting factions, and the Republicans gained the most ground from the entire transaction. At least no one showed they claimed to have or were selling any influence. It was Senator Brewster, Republican of Maine, who told the committee of the Coffee matter, which first was mentioned in a mayoralty campaign in Tacoma, Wash., by Republicans.

I think the sum total of the scandal matter is this: If anyone started turning over every war contract, at this particular time of world crisis and difficult peace, even to gain ground in an election, the ultimate outcome would be difficult to foretell. At any rate, the Mead committee went to work on some presumably minor cases on the Pacific coast.

CAN'T GUARANTEE FREEDOMS

The Paris gathering of 21 nations to consider the Big Four peace deal started off under unique circumstances. The 170 mimeographed pages comprising the proposed texts are considered by experts to have been very poorly drafted from a technical standpoint of expression. This was charged to the difficulties of translation. As to the meanings of the agreements and guarantees, few thought them any stronger than the governments which would operate them.

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THE BITE IS OUT —

THE TASTE IS IN!

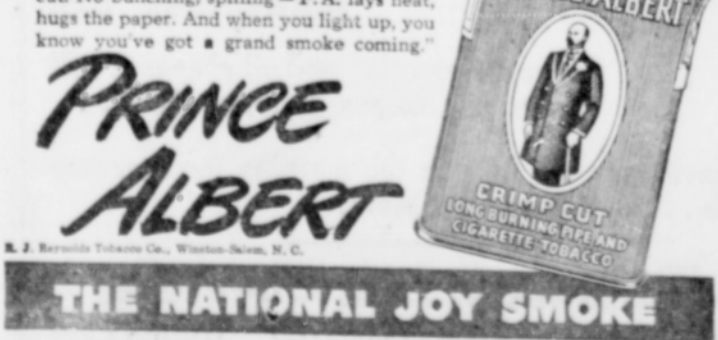
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