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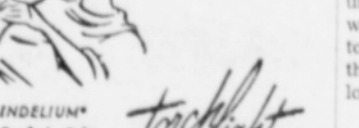


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Murder in Plain Sight

by GERALD BROWN W.N.U. FEATURES



Duke McCale, private detective, is guarding the wedding presents at the Bigelow mansion. He senses that old Miss Adelaide Bigelow is afraid of something more serious than theft. He meets the bride and groom-to-be, Veronica and Curt Vallaincourt, and Veronica's mother, Sybil, and her brother and sister, Stephen and Victoria. While at a night club McCale spots Vallaincourt in company of the club's singer, Shari Lynn. He talks to Jerry Tate, a newspaper man, and learns that Vallaincourt is a big spender and gambler, and that he is the heart interest of Mrs. Stephen Bigelow for a short time, according to rumor. As soon as he met Veronica, he concentrated on her.

CHAPTER VI

"For almost nothing, but thanks anyway." He left the Club and trudged through the midnight city, a sullen gloom curtaining his thoughts.

The lights of an all-night lunchroom winked through the murk drew Duke inside. It was a dismal enough place, peopled with a few down-at-heels stragglers.

The restaurant door banged and a tall, wasted figure in a bedraggled coat and hat slouched to the counter. There was something familiar about that back. Instinctively, McCale half rose to his feet to see, but his movement was too late. Joe Leach saw him as he turned, tray in hand. He shuffled over and sat down.

"Hi, shamus," he said. "Well, all turned out in tails, I see. Excuse me, but you look as though you'd just been thrown out of the Ritz. What are you disguised as—a magician?"

McCale grunted noncommittally. "Won't talk, huh? It just happens I'm a bit of a dick myself, bud, so I'll dig down in my bag of tricks and pull out the fact that you've been hobnobbing with the elite—the Bigelow tribe to be exact. What have they been having—a soiree?"

"Good God. Have you had a tail on me?" "Deduction, shamus. No. To be honest, every agency in town knows you've knocked off the Bigelow job. How'd you do it? What's it all about?"

"What'd you give to know?" "Oh, Lord. I'm just curious." "It might be worth your while."

"Look. I won't argue with you. Either you tell me or tell it to the marines. I'm indifferent now. What does it matter?" He made a slight movement as if he were about to get up and go.

"All right, all right. I just thought I might soak you for a five. I lost my pants in a game tonight. The truth is, Stephen Bigelow called our office to get the low-down on you, late this afternoon."

"Called your office? To get dope on me?" Duke gave a raucous, derisive howl. "That's too darned funny. What's the connection—between your outfit and Stephen Bigelow, I mean?"

"We did some work for him once." "You did?" "Uh, uh." "What kind of work—the usual?" "Sure." "Who was the dame?" "His wife."

McCale's spine began to prickle. He hoped his sudden interest did not show too much on his face. He not show too much on his face.

Five Dollars' Worth Of Information

"You may not think it's worth the five, but here it is. About six months ago this Stephen Bigelow came in to see Watkins. Wanted a tail put on his wife. He didn't say much, but the boss figured it was the old divorce routine. I got the night job—following her around to the nightclubs. She went out a lot alone. I trailed along for a couple of weeks. She'd stop in at a lounge bar now and then, always met people she knew, but never seemed to gather in anyone particular. Then one night I followed her as far as a studio building in Copley Square. A dumb elevator boy couldn't place her or tell me where in the building he took her. I'd wait and in a few hours she'd come out—alone. This happened two or three times a week until one night, late, she came out with a middle-aged guy. They went to a quiet little restaurant around the corner. I tagged along. It looked like the old, old story to me."

"You found out who the man was?" "Sure. Well, here's where the drama falls apart. Hmm, I see where I don't get paid off. He was a piano teacher, name of Parecini. Not an old foxy grandpa with a weakness for blondes, after all. We turned the news over to Stevie boy, and damned if he didn't seem relieved. He came in a week or so afterwards to pay his bill. He told us his wife had once shown great talent for the piano, but had lost the use of an arm from nervous shock or arthritis or something. She was getting back her old wallop again, slowly. She'd been going to the old bird for lessons, keeping it from the family for a surprise, or so he said. Now, how do you like that?" "I like it." "You think it was the truth? Now, see here, in spite of the fact that it looked on the level, I think it was

fishy. I wasn't pulled right off the tail, see? It was over a week before Stevie came in to pay up. We hadn't heard from him to the contrary, so I kept on the job. But the blonde bombshell never went near Parecini's studio again. She must have backed down somewhere along the line."

"They probably had a nice old-fashioned heart-to-heart talk and patched it up. My guess would be that she wanted to continue her studies with the idea of going on the stage, or something of the sort, but Stephen put his foot down. The family probably wouldn't stand for it."

"Yeah. Funny, isn't it? Not that either of them seem socially conscious."

"Your insight is amazing. They are both good family, but not quite—as you say."

"Well, whether you know it or not, Stevie was quite a gay dog once. Used to do a bit of chasing in the old days."

"I don't doubt that, but I think he's in love with his wife."

"Umm. Better to have loved, et cetera. He sure seems nuts about her."

"Decidedly."



One night late she came out with a middle-aged guy.

"That's all of my little offering. Do I get the five?" "Oh, sure. . . . Take it."

He slid the money over to the big man. He had the exasperating feeling that he'd been cheated. He shrugged it away.

McCale had set his alarm for seven-thirty the next morning. It had shrilled in vain. A feeble ray of sunlight flickered across his face as someone shook him by the shoulder. Shrugging out from under the none too gentle pressure, he blinked, yawned, and saw by the clock that it was much later.

McCale began to dress as Rocky headed for the inner sanctum. It didn't take him long. His toilet completed, he went directly to the office windows to pull back the curtains on another dreary morning. He took the cup of coffee his assistant handed him and waited until they sat facing each other across the desk, before beginning conversation.

"Well," he said, between sips of the hot black liquid, "let's have your birds-eye or keyhole view of the goings on of last night."

A Jittery Family, Thinks Rocky

"Nothing sensational to report, boss, outside of a lot of nervous running in and out till about one a. m. I had a look-see at about everyone but the dame called Victoria. She'd gone out someplace to dinner when I got there and must have slipped in without my lamping her, if she came home at all."

"No trouble with the servants?" "I only saw the butler. Very superior guy. He kept looking in the dining room where I was sitting with an eye on the door. I don't know whether he thought I was going to snatch some of the fingerbowls or sample the family bourbon. Anyhow, he kept popping up at odd moments until around ten-thirty. Say, what a parade of junk they've accumulated."

"Yeah. What do you think of the set-up? In general, I mean. Atmosphere—that kind of thing."

"I may be wrong, but outside of the little old lady, they're a bunch of screwballs. She's okay. A little jumpy, but for that matter, the whole caboodle ain't my idea of what I've been led to think of as calm, quiet, untroubled bluebloods. They're all as jittery as a hang-over."

"Definitely." "Well, here's five to you one that there's something cooking that's going to smell to heaven." "You've no taker in me." McCale grinned and lit a cigarette. "Smart, as usual. The old dame acts as though she was walking through a bad dream but doesn't dare wake up." "Very aptly put."

"She meets me last night, shows me around, sort of impersonal-like. So far as she was concerned, I might have been the plumber's helper come to repair a leak. Very cool and calm; but burning up with something inside her. Acts all the time as if she's scared stupid but won't admit it if it kills her."

Rocky poured himself a second cup of coffee and took a deep breath before he continued.

"She went to her room early, about nine. I didn't see her after that. Veronica, the bride and joy," he looked at McCale to see whether he was amused by the play on words, "of the old lady—she is that, isn't she?—it sticks out all over—stayed home all evening, too. She was in the back library most of the time."

"Did she look good to you?" "Oh, yeah, if you like the placid type. She had two visitors. Guess?"

"I'll buy it. Don't play guessing games with me so early in the morning."

"Well, the present and the past Glamour Boy Number One, and good old dog-like, ever lovin' Chris."

"Oh. He impressed you that way? Christopher Storm, I mean?"

"Remember, I only got a short gander at the past and present crown princes, as they entered and left. He was the second one, by the way. Mr. Big came first."

"Go on."

"Well, I'd just got settled in the silver and crockery department, when Johnny Weismuller comes swinging from tree to tree calling for his mate. Such a flutter they get into over him, don't they? The butler scuttled around after him as if he'd just brought the fatted calf. Then the bride-to-be comes down the stairs in a flurry. But a flurry, I said. And he just tells her he's off to dinner with some friends. She looks at him with the trust of a bird fascinated by a python. You know—'What enormous eyes you have, Grandmother.' And off they go to the library."

"I take it you didn't warm to Romeo."

"Not me. Obvious as heck, don't you think?"

"I don't know. The boy's got something. Just what is it?"

"It's as old as the world, chief. The Vallaincourt can just make his eyelashes go boo."

"Take that needle out of your arm. He's in love with the girl."

"All right. So he's in love with her."

"What's your impression of the girl? You didn't show a great deal of enthusiasm."

"I guess I don't like 'em quite so wide-eyed, chief. She's nice. You know what I mean—nice—and when you've said that, you've said everything. Right out of a Mignon Eberhart novel, if you get what I mean. Just beautiful and wippy and too dumb to take off her rose-colored glasses."

Rocky had already settled for himself the fact that Veronica Bigelow was both beautiful and dumb. McCale leaned back in his chair and smiled, for Rocky was a good guy, mostly amusing.

Searching for the coffee pot, Duke's eyes slanted up quizzically at Rocky as he said, "Well, boy, what's the word on Christopher Storm, now that you've dusted everyone else off?"

Odd Goings On In the Mansion

"J. P. Marquand has done him to a turn, on both sides and in the middle. More than once. That guy was born to the Yankee purple, has gone to the best schools, and never stepped out of line in his life. He may be a little shocked at the Bigelows, but they are Bigelows, aren't they? So they couldn't be wrong. Veronica has tossed him overboard, but would he say a word about it? Would he ride up in his Stanley Steamer and rush her off to the nearest Justice of the Peace before she makes a fool of herself? No sirree. It just isn't done by people in our set, doncha know?"

"He did come to see her."

"Oh, yes. Had a short confab with her in the library. I didn't get a chance to eavesdrop, of course, but I did see them when they said goodnight at the door. He had the most miserable little-boy-who-has-been-kicked expression on his puss when he kissed her good-by."

"He kissed her?"

"Don't let it throw you. It was just the old I'll-be-a-sister-to-you act. She sort of put her head up and he gave her a solemn brotherly kiss on the forehead before he went into the night like the last act of an old melodrama. I could have spit in his eye, the dope!"

"My, my. You are taking this to heart."

"Not so you'd notice it. Well, do I go on in the order of their appearance?" he asked, a sour smile on his lips.

"Oh, of course. No offense, pal."

Rocky waited a moment, looking at McCale skeptically, not quite sure he wasn't being made fun of. Then he resumed.

"Let's see. First there is Mr. Stephen. Now there's a jumpy guy. Surly, wedded to the bottle, too."

"(TO BE CONTINUED)"

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