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DOAN'S PILLS

Murder in Plain Sight

by GERALD BROWN

W.N.U. FEATURES

Duke McCale, private detective, is investigating the murder of Curt Vallaincourt, who was about to marry Veronica Bigelow, heiress to thirty million dollars. She is the principal suspect. McCale learns of a deep plot to keep control of the great fortune in the family through a deal with Vallaincourt. Shari Lynn, Vallaincourt's former wife, is shot to death, apparently to silence her. Someone fires at McCale, wounding him in the shoulder. Then Veronica calls, telling him that the police have arrested Christopher Storm, noted architect, and former suitor of Veronica's. McCale phones police lieutenant Donlevy, in charge of the case, and asks him to hurry over.

CHAPTER XV

The case was beginning to irk him badly. Not only was he not making progress, he almost seemed to be going backwards.

"We gathered in Christopher Storm," he began.

"I told you to tail him, not arrest him," McCale interrupted sourly. His arm was giving him pain, and besides that, his thoughts were not encouraging.

"He swears he didn't shoot at you last night."

"I didn't think he did. Did you let him go?"

"Had to. No real evidence. And the lad's too damned honest to suit me."

"He came right out and admitted he was the one who was following Vallaincourt around the last few days, however. Said he had the itch either to get his hands on him and tear him to pieces, or to get something on him that would influence Veronica."

"True to type, don't you think?"

"Hahvahd, Hahvahd, rah-rah-rah." This from Rocky.

The officer gave him a cold stare before he continued. "Oh, quite. Darned if he didn't meet up with the glamour boy and have a heart to heart talk with him, though. Vallaincourt convinced him that he was going to do right by our gal, so Storm took himself off to his lawyer's and like a boy scout signed over the 'Love Nest' or whatever he calls it."

"Very civilized. I knew all that."

"Then why in the name of the Father and the Son did you give me that cryptic message just before you were blitzkrieged last night? Why did you want me to put a tail on him?"

"Because, my good friend, I began to suspect that the lad thinks a lot, that he has more than a glimmer as to what this mess is all about. I was sure that eventually his elephantine mind would hit on something important. Would he come to me with it? Oh, no. As you say, the naive honesty of the lad is amazing. I was almost sure he'd start digging around by himself. A dangerous game." He patted his bandage. "I wanted to avoid another catastrophe."

Donlevy muttered to himself glumly.

"Instead of that," Rocky put in, "they had the mark on you for the next victim, boss."

"It won't happen again," the lieutenant said. "I've put a man on this house."

"Oh, Lord," said Duke, ill humor coloring his voice.

"All right. You may not like it, but he stays just the same." He got up to go.

"Anything new besides that?" McCale inquired.

"Not a thing, unless you think Karen is the girl we're after. I've got a man on every last one of them now. She drew \$800 from the bank this morning."

"She did?"

"Yes. Looks more like she was going to pay blackmail again, what?" He studied McCale's expression closely, but got no visible reaction. He shrugged. "Well," he looked his chagrin, "glad to see you're breathing. If you think of anything—"

"Yes," McCale's eyes were far away.

He finally persuaded Ann to go home. She wouldn't admit how fatigued she was until he callously called attention to the droop of her shoulders and the dark circles under her eyes.

Someone Strikes Down Sybil

At six o'clock Rocky came in from the bedroom where he had been getting some sleep. He pulled the curtains over the dark windows. McCale sat wrapped in thought, staring moodily into the fire. His face clouded and grew bright again and again, as if his mind had reached out and just missed a very elusive memory.

"You've got to go out for me, Rock," he said, his voice packed with excitement. "Somehow, you have got to get into the Lynn girl's suite at the Baysreuth. Bribe the officer if there's one on guard, or the desk clerk, if there isn't. If the rooms are sealed up, get in some other way."

"What do you want there, boss?"

"A list of the pictures over the desk in the living room. Just a description. There's one missing."

"Where'll I look for that one?"

"I don't want it. I want the others. If you can't get them out, make a list. Get back here as soon as you can."

"Right you are."

McCale was alone when the call came an hour later. He lifted the receiver with his good hand to hear the frightened voice of Adelaide Bigelow.

"Mr. McCale's residence?" In spite of the feverish anxiety in her tone, she clung to the formalities.

"Right here, Miss Bigelow."

"Oh, I'm so glad you're up and about. I heard you had been injured."

"Yes, but I'm quite all right. What is it?" He was urgent.

"It's Sybil. She's been attacked. Right here in the house. I am frightened. What can it mean? I thought—"

"Yes, yes. Is she—?"

"Alive? Yes, but unconscious. A doctor's here."

"Tell me, is it a bullet wound?"

"No."

McCale was surprised to hear this. "How was she hurt?"

"She was—was struck on the back of the head. Oh, it's so horrible. I suppose I shouldn't bother you, but—"

"Not at all. Keep calm. I'm coming right over."

As he stood on the sidewalk, waiting, a shadow detached itself from

the cold, dark February night and walked toward him.

"That you, Mr. McCale?"

"Yes, officer—or—hello, Humphrey. If I'd known it was you, I'd have invited you inside long ago."

"Hell, so you knew the office had a tail on you. And me thinking it was a real mysterious job I was given. That Donlevy! Tells me I wasn't to bother you, but to stick to your door like it was me mother's."

A taxicab slid up to the curb and McCale got in. He held the door open.

"Come on, Humph. You'll get a dusting from the lieutenant if you lose your quarry."

McCale gave the Beacon street number as Humphrey clambered in. The big red-faced officer settled himself with a sigh.

"We going for a long ride, McCale?"

"No. Just over the hill, and I can't take you in. Too bad. The house is full of beautiful women."

"You'd better let me come in," Humphrey gibed. "You can't do your best work with that arm in a sling."



McCale unfolded a large black silk handkerchief.

The Murderer Must Be in the House!

"You don't know me. Besides, the lady I'm going to see is in a worse condition than yours truly. Someone tried to bump her off."

"My God. Who is it, Mata Hari?"

McCale laughed and lapsed into silence for the rest of the ride.

Adelaide Bigelow seemed changed. Like the house, she was enveloped in tragedy. To be sure, tragedy had touched her life more than once in the last hours, had crouched on her own doorstep. But now it had entered the very house, the room. It was this fact that seemed to have shattered the last remnants of her courage. She sat huddled in an armchair like a paralyzed person, powerless, watching death like a slow-burning flame creep toward her across the floor.

"Oh," she said, seeing him standing before her, noticing his arm in its hammock. "Your arm. I knew, of course, you were hurt, but—oh, I shouldn't have called you." Her voice was dull, hopeless.

"I'm sorry I had to come in my dressing gown, but I had no one to help me dress. I didn't want to waste the time it would have taken me to do it by myself. I hope you'll excuse it."

"Of course."

"When did it happen?" His tone was more like a doctor's than a detective's.

"About five o'clock. She must have lain there a good hour."

"Where?"

"In the attic."

An eyebrow shot up. "The attic?"

What was she doing up there?"

"I—I don't know. Putting some things away or—"

"Looking for something perhaps?"

"I couldn't guess."

"Who found her?" It flashed through his mind that someone must have known where she was, would have had subtly to reveal her hiding place.

"She recovered her senses after—goodness knows how long. She walked downstairs by herself. Veronica found her pacing up and down the hall on the third floor, in a daze. She—she couldn't find her own room."

That was logical. Many people, after being struck over the head, regain enough of their senses to walk about automatically seeking help, though still in a semi-conscious condition.

"She collapsed again?"

"Yes, as soon as we got her to bed and had sent for the doctor."

"What prognosis does the doctor give?"

"She will probably recover, but she may not remember things—who hit her—how it happened—for a long time. The police were quite nasty about it, Mr. McCale. They have insisted on a police nurse so that she may be questioned the moment she regains consciousness. Oh, it's awful—awful!"

She reached out an old blue-veined hand toward him, like a distressed child. Her voice was empty, drained.

"What can we do, Mr. McCale?"

He shrugged away the pity that flooded his mind. No time for sympathy. His business was not commiseration. His mouth was grim; his voice held no clemency, no hope. He turned with a violent movement, striding toward the door.

"I want to see the attic."

She rose obediently, mechanically. In the hall, she led the way, some of the granite in her taking possession again. She preceded him up the stairway, dead eyes straight, her fine-drawn lips set in a firm line.

Up the dark, heavily carpeted stairways of the brooding house they went, past the double doors of the drawing room where Karen still played her macabre music, up to the third floor, where a policeman sat dozing before the closed portal of Sybil's room where death was hovering, up the last flight, darker and narrower than the others, to the attic where murder had been—perhaps only delayed.

Miss Bigelow pressed a switch and two yellow bulbs came into view, dimly lighting the place. A well-kept attic came into focus, shadowy, but unlike most attics, orderly. No dust there, no dark corners, no cobwebs or broken furniture. There were a few chests of drawers, any number of trunks and antique baggage.

An old trunk had been pulled out under one of the lights for easier perusal. It stood open. There was a damp red stain on the bare boards where the blood had spilled from Sybil's wound.

McCale dropped down beside the trunk, asking curtly, "The weapon?"

"The police took it away—a chimney brick wrapped in a towel. The towel was from the third floor bathroom." Miss Adelaide's eyes avoided the blood on the floor.

Miss Bigelow's voice came hollowly, futility dulling it. "Then it must have been—oh, if it were not true—but it must—"

"Yes," he said quietly. "It could only have been the murderer of Curt Vallaincourt and Shari Lynn—the villain who attempted to remove me from the world last night—here in this house. Surely you have known, have suspected, Miss Bigelow, that the murderer is either one of your family, or someone who goes and comes at will to and from this house."

A Black Handkerchief Intrigues McCale

She looked at him bleakly.

He began to go through the contents of the trunk, swiftly, urgently. It was apparent that Sybil had stored her keepsakes there. Written labels were pinned to a number of articles. There was a girl's white dress with a card that read: "Victoria's graduation." Sybil's own wedding gown. Two envelopes contained locks of Stephen's and Victoria's childhood curls. There were several schoolbooks.

As he removed other souvenirs from the depths of their hiding place, a brand-new picture of Sybil flashed across his mind. She was revealed, not so much as the woman who clung so desperately to her fading youth, who made vapid, silly conversation, who bolstered her empty middle-age with sherry, but more as a doting mother secretly keeping alive the brighter moments of a not too easy life.

McCale unfolded a large black silk handkerchief, the last thing in the trunk.

"This?"

A puzzled look came over her face. She struggled with memory. "I don't know. I can't place that. I hardly think so."

"Could it have been my brother's?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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