

The White Cockatoo

by Mignon G. Eberhart

SYNOPSIS: Sue Tally, Jim Sundeen and the Detective David Lorn have gone thoroughly into the tragedy. They believe that the murderer of the woman in the corridor of the hotel, the one who shot Fred at Sundeen in the court, and Sue's abduction are related to an attempt to secure the token by means of which Sue will claim her share of her father's estate. But none knows how. Lorn and Sue at last leave Sundeen groaning in his room. The sound of a movement close by tokens him.

Chapter 22

THE SILENT PRIEST

I GOT up on my elbow and peered toward the door, and finally rose silently and went to it. The table which I had again placed before it was undisturbed.

"Mica," I told myself, "in the walls. The place is full of them, probably." And went back to bed. But not this time to sleep. Among several other things I determined to get a few quiet words with Marcel in the morning.

I should also remember to ask Lovschlem for a key to my room. After all, keys existed, and I myself intended to make no casual matter of it.

There was something decidedly unpleasant about that deserted wing and now that the wind had gone down I particularly disliked the way various creaks and small mysterious rustles came to life.

With dawn I fell asleep again and woke late to a gray and troublous day.

When Marcel brought my coffee and some very hard rolls I began: "Marcel, you know, of course, that I'm in rather a bad fix about this murder?"

"Oh, yes, he knew."

"Well, it develops that it is of the utmost importance to both Miss Tally and me to discover everything possible about the murder. I myself am in some danger of being hanged for it—or guillotined or whatever they do—and Miss Tally—"

"Miss Tally is in danger, also," finished Marcel quickly, his eyes snapping. "Me, I know that."

"Well, then," I said slowly, "I won't press you, Marcel, but I want you to think it over. Miss Tally says you have been very kind to her—perhaps when you consider the matter for a time you may—"

recall something you've seen or heard that will help us discover the real murderer."

"He nodded soberly."

"You know, then, that I didn't do it?"

"I had gone too far."

"Monsieur is not a criminal," said Marcel. "I cannot say more—but I will think it is possible—perhaps, Monsieur would like his bath now?"

And after running the tub full of almost lukewarm water he left abruptly. There was about his departure a suggestion of escape, and I could only hope that his liking for Sue Tally would work in our favor. I wanted to help Sue, of course, but at the same time there's no use denying that I wanted quite as much to help myself.

The hotel had been deserted when I first came down in the morning; only Puel cocked a suspicious eye toward me as I went through the lobby. But when I returned from my walk Madame Grethe was at the desk—her eyes looked very green and knowing, and she smiled secretively as she spoke to me—and Mrs. Byng and the priest were sitting in the lounge. Mrs. Byng was knitting furiously on some enormous garment.

The place was silent except for the priest's newspaper rustling now and then and Mrs. Byng's needles clicking. I looked up; the skylight was gray and the encircling galleries were empty and bare and the doors blank. It was not, to say the least, a cheerful spot, and it was rather appalling to think that we'd all got to stay there until the police gave us permission to leave.

I sat down fairly near the priest. I got out my cigarettes; Puel transferred his attention to the watch on my wrist.

"I'm sorry," I said, across the obvious barrier of the newspaper. "But—may I have a match?"

Mrs. Byng's needles clicked, and she gave me a sharp look, and her equine nose lifted a little as if it sniffed battle. The priest's newspaper rustled reluctantly as he shifted it to one hand. The flaming radiance of his beard came into view, he reached for the box of matches lying before him on the small table and passed it over to me.

"Thanks," I murmured, lit my cigarette, and as he immersed himself in the newspaper at once, I perlated: "You speak English, then?"

He gave me a morose look from the edge of the newspaper.

"Yes," he said flatly, and disappeared again. Mrs. Byng's needles clicked violently.

"Traveling!" I remarked in a touristy approach.

"No." This time he did not even glance around the newspaper.

"English, are you?"

He looked at me fully this time. His face was not old, but it was lined; his eyes were a light yellow-gray, and around his mouth the hairs of his red beard grew thin, and you felt a sort of distaste looking at it.

"No," he said sharply. "French."

He stared at me a moment and then added: "If you must know, I've spent two years in America and I'm here for my health. I also speak French and Italian. And I can read Latin."

I said blandly: "Funny place to come to for your health. Have you been here long?"

The newspaper quivered for a moment, then his light eyes and flaming soft beard reappeared.

"It," he said coldly, "you want my full history, go to the police. They've just acquired it, owing to the very strange affair which accompanied your arrival here. There was," he added, driving the point further home, "no murder before you arrived." He continued to stare coldly and blandly at me.

It was unfortunate that Puel, who had been exploring silently in the vicinity of my pocket, drew forth at that moment a box of matches, laid it carefully upon my knee, and uttered a triumphant cluck. The priest looked at it, and Mrs. Byng looked at it, and the cockatoo looked at it, and preened himself and clucked again happily.

The second cluck was too much for Father Robart, who himself uttered a sound not too faintly resembling it, shoved his paper together with an angry motion, rose, and stalked toward the lift. The little iron gate banged, the two narrow doors dipped together, and the small lift, looking not unlike a very tall coffin, murmured dully and started to crawl upward.

"Puel," I said softly, "some day someone's going to wring your neck."

Mrs. Byng sniffed again.

"If there ever was a bird in league with a devil, it is that one." She eyed the bird with asperity, and Puel, eyeing her brightly, uttered a kind of squawky gurgle which certainly suggested a hoarsely diabolic laugh.

Mrs. Byng's thick eyebrows flew upward in a startled manner, and the needles paused for just an instant; then, recovering herself nobly, she nodded to me in an "I-told-you-so" way and resumed her knitting. Puel returned to the matches quite as if sulphur had a natural attraction for him, and I said to Mrs. Byng:

"I'm glad to see you've recovered from the shock of the other night."

"I may look better," she said, knitting rapidly. "But I still feel the shock. I feel anything for a long time, Mr. Sundeen, and feel it deeply. I have temperament. I have temperament. And I might say right here—I have good eyes, Mr. Sundeen. And temperament."

"No doubt," I said warmly under the compulsion of her waiting gaze, and just then the gong for lunch sounded.

The meal over, I returned to the lounge and settled in a corner at the far end with coffee and a cigarette and an old "Punch," hoping either Sue or Lorn would find me there. But Lorn slipped quietly out again and Sue had disappeared.

Gradually the faint clatter from regions back of the dining room died away.

The day had grown darker, and the well of the lounge, lighted only by the gray and sullen skylight, was shadowy and dim and very silent. The whole place in fact had sunk into a kind of sentient, brooding silence which reminded you that, beyond those twisting dark corridors and blank doors, there was, the same small circle that had been in the hotel that wind-ridden night when a man was murdered.

I felt uneasy and restless, and was oddly relieved to hear quick light footsteps cross the dining room back of me.

It was Marcel. He came closer to me. His eyes darted quickly about the lounge.

"I have decided myself. I will tell you," he said then, soberly and in a low voice. "It is at best only three things that I know. One is about the towels. And one is about Father Robart. And the third one—may mean a life."

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A sudden terrible shift in the situation comes tomorrow.

FIVE IN HOSPITAL FOLLOWING CRASH

SALEM, May 2.—(AP)—Five Portland persons were in a hospital here today with injuries of undetermined seriousness following an automobile crash this afternoon a mile north of Salem on the Pacific highway.

ATHLETE LOSES LEG IN SMASHUP

SANTA MONICA, Calif., May 2.—(AP)—The athletic hopes of Robert Norene, university of Southern California half-miler, were at an end today. The youth's right leg was amputated yesterday as the result of an automobile accident on the coast highway.

WATCHING A SAXOPHONE AND A SET OF TRAPS MOVE INTO THE APARTMENT UPSTAIRS

By C. M. PAYNE

S'MATTER POP—



THE WORLD AT ITS WORST



TAILSPIN TOMMY—Skeeter's Not Nervous—Just Practical!



BOUND TO WIN—A Few Specifications



THE NEBBS—It's Up To Penny



BRINGING UP FATHER



Belligerent Brazil State Quiet.
SAO PAULO, Brazil.—(AP)—The state of Sao Paulo, which last summer staged a three-months rebellion, has quieted down to such an extent that two prisoners have been closed. Post-war liberation of political prisoners left the two jails almost empty and the police paroled the other inmates.

Persians Say Soviet Won't Buy.
BASTRAK, Iraq.—(AP)—A report reaching here says trade relations between the soviet union and Persia are threatened by Persian merchants demanding a boycott of soviet goods. They claim Russia is violating the trade treaty by selling too much and buying too little.

REFRESHING ZAS SPRING
WRIGLEY'S SPEARMINT
THE PERFECT GUM

There's No Guesswork in Tribune A. B. C. Circulation