

MURDER ON THE BLUFF

OPSIS: A mysterious shot kills attractive Jude Blinshop on a wild, stormy night at Farrington Bluff, home of Michael's aunts. Then a series of strange attacks makes everyone in the marooned household jittery: Mike; the Skipper, his tall, tweedy younger aunt; Aunt Martha, stout and prudish; Gay Palmer, Mike's red-headed sweetheart; Higgins, the old butler; William, the chauffeur; Cook; Annie, the maid; even myself. As the second nerve-racking day dawns, the Skipper and I find the body of a gray-haired man, half-way down the bluff.

Chapter 24

An Insane Ghost

THERE was a tinkle of glass, and I caught M. Farrington as she escaped. Neither of the others moved. "Oh, began Gay, repentant eyes on Michael's face; "oh—" But we had no time for the sex motif just then. "Come on, Mike!" I said curly. "Gay, look after Aunt Martha, will you?"

Armed with a long coil of tow rope, the servants were waiting in the hall. From the side door, we made our way to the bluff. The body lay just as we had left it, the surf mounting steadily higher. There was no time to lose. "Higgins, you're the lightest. Tie this rope around your waist. Can you tie a decent knot?"

"I don't know, sir." The old man's lips were gray.

I seized the rope and tied it around him. "We're going to love you down," I said. "Then you untie the rope and put it around him this way. There's no danger. Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir."

We lowered him slowly. The roar of the water was loud in our ears as we waited for his signal. It came, and we hauled. The ground was wet and slippery. There seemed considerable danger of all three of us tumbling to our own destruction before we could bring our gruesome burden within arm's reach. Between us, William and I managed the last stage of the job. In another two minutes, Higgins was back beside us, wet and trembling but uninjured.

He was staring as if hypnotized at the body, which he had rolled over on its back. Slowly my eyes followed his. Except for the heavy white hair, the man lying at our feet actually had been Michael Farrington! William knelt down beside the sodden heap.

"Dead, all right. Who is he?"

Whatever his name, that man was a Farrington. He had Michael's black brows, passionate mouth and chin—Mike's slim hips and broad shoulders. The dark eyes were the same, just horrible, but they were like Michael's—and the Skipper's. With two servants in the midst of it, we had certainly uncovered a family skeleton. I was obliged to shove Mike violently to move him.

During that short journey back across the soggy lawn, a dozen wild thoughts were teeming in my head. Who? That was uppermost. Michael's brother? A cousin? An uncle? Who? Had Mike known him—his whereabouts—his motives? Mike had been shielding someone from me. I had no doubt of that. But I would have sworn that the look he bent on that pathetic figure had been one of blank amazement.

Had the Skipper known? She had been hiding something, too. She had suspected something. She had rushed from the house as if she knew just where to go. She—Great God! Was this bundle in our arms the reason for the sudden change in the Skipper? Had this man's hand moved Jude's body? Had he been lying, alert, waiting, under that sheet until—

Family Scene Coming Up

"WHERE to, sir?" We were at the side entrance.

I looked at Michael, but his back offered no suggestions.

"The game room, William," I said.

We deposited our burden on the billiard table. Michael gave us no assistance. His mute vacant stare only intensified an already unbearable situation. To send the servants away would be to insure the rapid spreading of the news in all directions, but it was unthinkable to keep them there. William's eyes were glowing with excitement, his cheeks flushed. Relieved, I thought, relieved that it's over. But he'll talk—Lord how he'll talk!

"I'll get a cover for him, sir."

I turned to Higgins. The old man's lips were twitching so badly that I had grave misgivings for the fate of his false teeth. Higgins knew, then, whatever it was that Mike and I did not know, and the story was safe with him. In all the terrors of the last two nights he had not revealed it. I remembered the coffee cups rattling in his hand that first night, and Michael chirping, "Higgins, you don't look up to scratch."

"Will that be all, sir?" William, I could see was in a hurry to get out to the kitchen with news.

"Not quite, William. Keep your

mouth shut. Understand? It will only get the women excited."

"Very good, sir."

It probably wouldn't work, but in any event there was nothing more I could do.

"All right," I said. And Michael and I were alone.

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I DID mind very much. But I did as I was told, closing the door carefully after me. Mike came toward her but she ignored him and stepped to the table where she stood a long time staring at the dead face. I turned to the window blindly. The silence was beastly. I counted broken branches and small sticks scattered on the lawn, dully noted several pieces of brick missing on the terrace, observed that the surf was already washing above the bluff in a fine gray mist.

"Skipper," said Michael's voice. "It was—this Norman Farrington?"

Michael's father! But he had died when Michael was a baby!

"Yes."

Silence, a thick blanket of it. Was the hammering of surf actually in the room, or was all that noise in my own head?

"He was insane?"

"Yes."

I thought, "I could open this window and get out of here! Out of here—"

That queer, flat voice again, "How long?"

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I slipped the spring lock on the French window and started to step onto the terrace. A deep cry stopped me.

"Michael! Stop! You must listen to me!"

My eyes were dragged back to that room, to Michael wrenching himself from her grasp.

Automatically I closed the window as the door slammed behind him.

"Get him back here. I must talk to him."

I put an arm around her. "Better wait, Skipper," I said.

We both whirled at the opening of the door. It was only Higgins, bearing a covering for the body on the table without a word he slipped to the table and performed his errand. Turning, he walked over to the Skipper.

"Don't fret, miss," he said. "It's better so," and was gone.

After a while I shook the Skipper gently. "What do you want me to do?" I said. "Shall I tell the others?"

Her sudden grip on my arm made me wince. "No! No; wait until this rotten storm is over and—and help comes."

"But won't they wonder?" I objected. "I told them—"

She was almost shouting. "I know what I'm doing! Her voice fell. "Sorry, you see, I particularly want to keep Martha from knowing this until—things are more normal. She was—very fond of Norman. Tell Gay anything you like, but keep the servants quiet, and leave Martha to me."

I opened my mouth to say that I would be pretty hard on M. Farrington after my announcement in the dining room, but something in the Skipper's face made me close it again. After all, it was none of my business. I could only hope that William would keep his word, and I could keep my eyes on Mike.

"Lock both these doors, Jimmie," said the Skipper, "and then we'll—we'll eat breakfast."

Breakfast! The word set my teeth on edge; and yet, crossing the room to do as I was told, I was aware of a hollow feeling in the region of my belt.

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mouth shut. Understand? It will only get the women excited."

"Very good, sir."

It probably wouldn't work, but in any event there was nothing more I could do.

"All right," I said. And Michael and I were alone.

I have never in my life so heartily wished myself elsewhere. The fust and fury were over and I was uncomfortably aware of the fact that I was stranded in another man's house where a terrific family scene was impending. Worse than that, my nose was irrevocably thrust into the middle of it.

"Well, Mike," I said clumsily, laying an awkward hand on his shoulder. "What can I do?"

For a moment I thought that he wasn't going to answer. Then, "Get the Skipper. Never mind the rest of them. I've got to talk to the Skipper."

I left him standing there, staring into space. If the Skipper had joined the others, how could I possibly get her without bringing the whole horrenous nest down on his ears? But the Skipper had not joined the others. She was sitting in the very spot where I had left her, her head in her hands, and she didn't seem to hear me come in. It took an effort to cross the room.

"Skipper," I said as gently as I could, "will you come into the game room?"

She raised her head and looked at me. I would have given something for a poker face.

"Yes," she said at length very slowly. "Yes, of course."

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