

With Banners

By Emilie Loring

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER IX—Continued

The back door opened softly. Brooke held her throat tight in one hand to stifle an exclamation.

The light flashed on. She closed her eyes. Opened them. Was that Henri, Henri standing in the middle of the floor, with the blinking green parrot making queer noises under his arm, or was this more nightmare? She was awake. Sam was real, as he stood with his finger on the switch. Jed Stewart was real, as he puffed his lips in time to the swing of the chair he clutched. Henri's ghastly face, distended eyes, and the savage invectives which gritted through his chattering teeth, were real.

"Cut that line!" Sam took a step toward the butler. "You should appreciate this little surprise party instead of acting as if you'd stepped into a nest of scorpions. It wasn't but a couple of hours ago I saw you in this very kitchen dressed—or undressed—for bed. Why did you go out?"

Henri made a desperate attempt to steady his quivering mouth. He looked like an innocent prisoner haled before an accusing judge; his expression was incredibly grieved as he huddled the parrot under his arm and twisted his soft hat in one hand. He appealed to Brooke.

"I don't know why your brother should speak to me as if I was a criminal, Miss. Haven't I the right to go out at night, even if I had started for bed?" He attempted to inject the virus of defiance into his uneven voice.

"Of course you have, Henri, but the papers are so full of burglaries and hold-ups that when we heard you stealing in we didn't know but what it was our turn. Where did you find Mr. Micawber?"

"That's why I went out, Miss. Couldn't go to sleep, had him on my mind. Queer where I found him. Everything's queer tonight." Henri shuddered. "Nothing strange has been happening in this house, has it?"

"Nothing at all, Henri, nothing at all," Sam assured quickly. "We sat up talking and got hungry again."

"I'm glad of that, Mr. Sam, that nothing strange happened, I mean, because I—I found things terrible wrong outside."

"Wrong!" Not until she felt Sam's foot on hers was Brooke conscious of her explosive exclamation. She noticed that the butler's long cruel fingers shook as he passed them over his slack mouth.

"I don't wonder you're upset, Miss; you'll be more so when you hear that the old madame's limousine is gone."

"Gone where?" Sam demanded. Henri shrugged thin sloping shoulders. "That's what I asked myself when I opened the garage door and the big car wasn't there."

"What did you do after you discovered that Mrs. Dane's car was missing?" asked Brooke.

"I ran to the Other House—you'll excuse me, Miss, for going to Mr. Mark first; I've always thought of him as being the heir, you see."

"Don't stop even to explain, Henri. Can't you see that we are frightfully excited? Perhaps something more than the car has been stolen. Did you find Mr. Trent?"

"No, Miss, and there's something queer there too. That Jap, Kowa, came rushing to the door when I kept my finger on the bell, and he shouts:

"Where's my boss? I been over house, one, two, t'ree time. Boss gone! He been kidnaped, I t'ink! Loud noise, Mr. Jed's room. I run there quick. Green parrot in bathtub, swearing fine."

"I ran upstairs for the parrot, thinking the Jap had a bad scare on and I'd see Mr. Mark somewhere. But I didn't. The Jap and I looked everywhere but he was not there."

Tense silence in the white and green kitchen. Chilled and exhaust-

ed by his foray into the outside world, the parrot huddled within the curve of Henri's arm making sounds in his throat like a tribal dialect. The faint scent of bacon lingered in the stillness, a stillness haunted by tragic conjectures and possibilities which turned Brooke's blood to ice. Sam laughed from sheer nervous tension. Jed Stewart lashed at him furiously:

"You would do that! It's all theater to you Reyburns, isn't it, and side-splitting theater at that. Where's Mark? That's the only thing I want to know. Where's Mark?"

"Present."

Mark Trent answered from the doorway. Brooke's heart stopped, raced on. What had made that deep welt across his forehead? His face was colorless.

Henri's thin quavery voice broke the spell.

"Have you been hunting for the parrot too, Mr. Mark?"

Mark Trent's hand was unsteady as he held a lighter to his cigarette. His eyes reflected the flame as he looked at the butler.

"Not for the parrot, Henri. I'm hunting now for the man who killed Mrs. Hunt."

CHAPTER X

Mark Trent flinched as he approached the white cottage. It seemed days since he had driven away from this very house in the limousine filled with his aunt's silver; days since the message had come to Cassidy's garage from the police that Mrs. Hunt was dead and he had left there in a flivver with Mike at the wheel. They had stopped at Lookout House to make sure that the Reyburns were safe before they had burned up the road to get here. But it hadn't been days, not much more than an hour had passed. No use waiting, he must go in.

As he entered a small living-room, Inspector Harrison was kneeling by the fireplace. His piercing eyes glittered as he looked up and nodded to Mark.

"They got her all right."

Mark Trent stepped forward, blindly for an instant. He sunk his teeth deep in his lips to steady them before he looked down.

Lola, the woman who had been his wife, lay on the floor. She was dressed for the street—had she been about to drive away the limousine full of silver? The question flashed through his mind only to be instantly submerged in a flood of pity. She looked so young, so shabby, so hapless. Her shabbiness hurt him most, she had been so exquisite. He was glad that he had made her that allowance. Her hat had fallen off. A current of air stirred a lock of her dark hair. Her hands were still now. One gripped an open bag, the fingers of the other were bruised. He dropped to his knee beside the inspector.

"Can't something be done? Can't we move her to a couch?"

"No! No, not until the coroner comes."

"What happened?"

"They got her rings. She had rings, hadn't she?"

"She had when I saw her—a few days ago. Valuable rings. Other jewels too."

"Then I guess we got the motive. Better come away, boy, you can't do anything," Inspector Harrison suggested in his persuasive voice.

"Life hasn't seemed as smooth as a trotting park to me to date, Bill, but tonight it seems a terrifying, horrible thing."

"I know, boy, I know. Bring her in, Tim." The inspector spoke to the policeman with ears like clinging bats, who appeared at the door.

"It's the Cassidy girl," he explained to Mark. "Kinder tough to bring her into this room, but there don't seem to be any other place. We've waited till her father got here before questioning her. Mike's a grand fella and me friend since

we were lads together. Here you are, Maggie!"

The hint of joviality in his soft voice missed its mark, for the sixteen-year-old girl, who entered the room as if dragged by unseen hands, regarded him with terrified Irish blue eyes.

The inspector placed a chair with its back to the still figure on the floor.

"Sit here, Maggie."

As she sat down, Mike Cassidy laid his heavy ham-bone hand on her shoulder. The inspector cleared his throat.

"Now, don't be frightened, Maggie. Ain't I just the same Bill Harrison who's been chumming round with your dad ever since you was a little girl, and ain't I got kids of my own? All you got to do is to tell me what happened in this house tonight."

"Course, I ain't afraid of you, Inspector," the girl replied, more at ease. "I'll tell what I know. I sleep in the attic, it's got a dormer back and front. I was dead beat when I went to bed, what with the housework an' havin' to run out to fill tanks. The boss was sick till afternoon an'—"

"Drunk, wasn't he? Tell it straight, Maggie."

"All right, Inspector, he was. I don't know what time it was when I woke up by a car stopping at the garage; sounded like a classy car. We don't have much late trade—an' the boss told me today that the crowned heads here, that's what he said, 'crowned heads,' had put him out of business—so I got up and looked out to see what 'twas all about. I can see into the garage from my back window."

"Check up on that, Tim."

"Yes, Inspector." The policeman with the ears vanished into the hall.

"Go on, Maggie. You looked down and then what?"

"I see a swell dressed fella talking to the boss. I couldn't see his face 'cause his hat was pulled low; you know, the kind you see in the classy ads."

"Could you hear what they were saying?"

"No. That window was closed. I open the front one in cold weather, an', gee, has it been cold in that attic!"

"What did you do next?"

"Went back to bed, Inspector."

The girl's voice had cleared. Rising excitement was driving out fear. "I must have gone to sleep again for the next thing I knew I was sittin' up straight in bed calling out: 'Who's shootin'?"

"I switched on the light and ran to the front window, and I saw a big car going lickety-split down the road."

The policeman appeared at the door.

"Okay 'bout the back window and garage, Inspector."

"All right, Tim. Stay where you are. What next, Maggie?"

"I stood looking out a minute, thinking that the big car must have back-fired an' what a hick I was to think the sound was shootin' when I'd grown up in a garage, an' then I had a kinder creepy feeling; you know, the kind when they say a rabbit's walkin' over your grave—"

"Don't shiver, Maggie, there won't be nothing walking over your grave for years yet; don't the papers say we're all going to live to be a hundred—barring accidents? Then what?"

"Then I began to wonder what that big car was doing out here in the middle of the night, and then I began to think of hi-jackers an' kidnapers an' bandits till I thought I'd scream, an' then I remembered Mrs. Hunt's rings an' jewelry—she had classy jewelry."

The girl's voice had risen till the last word was shrill with excitement.

Mike Cassidy patted his daughter's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Maggie. Tell the inspector the rest that happened; then I'll take you home to your Ma. Won't I, Bill?"

"Sure, Mike, sure. What did you do after you thought of Mrs. Hunt's diamonds, Maggie?"

"I stuck my feet in slippers an' pulled on my blanket wrapper. I beat it downstairs an' come into this room. It was lighted an' she—"

she was lying there—just like she is now an'—an'—oh, gee!"

"We're almost through, Maggie," the inspector encouraged. "What did you do when you came into this room and saw—"

"I guess I let out a yell first; then I just flopped to my knees beside her. I didn't touch nothing though; I learned that in the movies. When I saw she wasn't breathin' I beat it to the garage, an' I know I yelled then for the boss was on the floor face down, his hands behind him, an' his feet tied. I grabbed his shoulder an' turned him over. There was a big bump on his forehead and his eyes were closed. I shook him. When he didn't say nothing, I rushed to the phone and called Pop. I guess you know the rest." Her lips quivered, and for the first time her eyes filled with tears.

The inspector patted her shoulder. "Good girl, Maggie, just one more question and you can go. Did you hear any rowing between the boss and herself lately?"

"He was nice to her."

"Sure, Maggie, but even folks who think a lot of each other—take your Pa and Ma now—" he winked at Cassidy—"have a cat and parrot fight sometimes, don't they? You know they do. So Mr. and Mrs. had a quarrel, had they? What about?"

The girl twisted her print dress in unsteady fingers.

"It was last evening, late—it's tomorrow now, isn't it? An' she'd



"Now, Don't Be Frightened, Maggie."

been phoning—I was in the kitchen, you can hear plain in this house—an' I heard him say loud:

"What's this about a paper?"

"I couldn't hear what she said, but he kinder shouted:

"I didn't mind starting this joint to gouge money out of Trent, but what you're planning now is different. It'll be jail for us if we— The door closed hard an' I didn't hear any more."

"All right, Maggie. Make a cup of strong tea for her in the kitchen, Mike; then take her home." Mike Cassidy put his arm about his daughter as they left the room. Mark Trent watched them out of sight.

"My hat's off to you, Inspector. That girl told you everything she knew without being frightened into it."

The inspector's eagle eyes retreated into bony caverns.

"My boy, 'bout two thousand years ago a Man laid down a rule for living that I ain't never heard improved on. I've got a girl of my own, and all the time I was questioning Maggie I was thinking how I would feel if my daughter'd been mixed up in this mess. Has Hunt come to?" he demanded of an officer who entered. The steel was back in his voice.

"Yes, Inspector, but he's groggy."

"I'll go to the garage. Will you come along, Mark? Cripes, I never can remember to call you Mr. Trent."

"Why should you? Didn't you hand me my first and only summons

for speeding? I'll go with you, but you won't leave—" he glanced at the still figure on the floor.

"Tim will stay. The coroner ought to be here any minute now. Come on. I'd like to have you hear what Hunt has to say."

The garage was lighted by one glaring bulb, littered with tools and cans; the floor was patched with oil stains, and the air was strong of gas. On a pile of old tires, a man was braced upright against the rough cement wall. He was blond and must have been fine looking before life and dissipation had done cruel things to his face. He opened his eyes as the inspector spoke to him. He tried to smile.

"Another dick? Maggie sure called out the whole police force. 'Twasn't necessary. I'll be all right in a minute."

Didn't the man know what had happened in the house, or was he acting, Mark asked himself. The inspector rolled an empty gas can on its side and sat down.

"Course you'll be all right. As for Maggie calling out the force, she got an awful jolt coming out here an' finding you all tied up like a bundle of old clothes."

Hunt put an unsteady hand to his head.

"Why did the girl come out here at this time of night? She's never done it before." His eyes narrowed. He clenched his hand. "What are you doing here, Trent? You can't get Lola back!"

"Take it easy, Hunt, take it easy. Mr. Trent was with me in Cassidy's garage—I'm Inspector Harrison, in case you don't know—when his daughter phoned that you were hurt. He came along to help. What happened to you, Hunt?"

"Someone beat me up, you can see that, can't you? I was working late. I—I hadn't been feeling well all day and I was making up time, when a man drove up in a roadster and said he had a punctured tire and could I put on a spare. I said, 'Sure, I guess there's no law against my doing that if the old tabbies here won't let me sell gas.' I turned to get my tools, and that's the last I knew until I looked up to see an officer bending over me."

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know, Inspector."

"Ever see him before?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Go on," prodded the inspector. "Nothing to go on about. I was blackjacked. I thought the man took a crack at my head, but my feet feel as if they were in iron casts."

"Probably those ropes stopped the circulation. Were you—"

Mark didn't hear the rest of the inspector's question. His eyes were on Hunt's right foot. Between the upper and sole of the unlaced shoe was a faint line of red.

CHAPTER XI

From behind the tea-table in the living-room at Lookout House, Brooke Reyburn watched the sun fling the earth a spectacular good-night.

Mrs. Gregory, in a chair beside the crackling birth fire, set down her cup.

"Is it only two weeks since the tragedy at the filling station?" asked Brooke. "When, last October, I told Jerry Field that I was coming to Lookout House to live, he said:

"What will you do marooned on a rocky point of land in a place where the residents dig in and nothing ever happens?"

"He can't say that nothing ever happens here now. The days have flown and have left behind them hours smeared with police questioning; men swarming over this house for finger-prints; newspaper front pages shrieking clues which were corrected in the next issue; skating and lots of it; poinsettias in place of chrysanthemums in the conservatory in honor of Christmas. It was such a strange Christmas without Mother, and with Sam absorbed in the production of the play. Now New Year's has slipped into the limbo of yesterdays, and in 48 hours the curtain will ring up on 'Islands Arise.'"

(TO BE CONTINUED)