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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 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. McCale learns that Vallaincourt is a free spender and gambler. He also finds out there was a curious episode in the lives of Stephen Bigelow and his wife. There is a strange tension at the mansion. Christopher Storm, who had once been rejected by Veronica, seems particularly ill at ease. Stephen is also notably jumpy. Karen goes out, and returns in an hour.

CHAPTER VII

Comes in all decked out for the night life. Soup and fish. Gave me the once-over and had a few quick straight ones without more than a glance at me sitting there with my tongue hanging out. When the butler stuck his snoot in the door, he spat out, "Tell my mother I'm going out this evening." Not his wife, mind you—his mother.

"Mama's big boy."
"Oh, sure. He and his wife don't get along, I take it?"
"Your surmise is a good one, I think."

"Well, while he was having his snort, the wife comes in. I'd been wondering who'd been playing chopsticks all night until she stood there in the doorway, looking daggers at him. 'Going out, Steve?' she says, and he walks by her without a glance. She put her hand out, but he brushed her off."

"Then King, the major-domo, calls her to the phone and she goes out."

"She had a phone call?"
"Yep. After which she banged heck out of the piano for another half hour."

"She went out, you say?"
"Yes, she did. She wasn't gone long. About an hour. When she came home, she messed around the ivory until hubby rolled in, about twelve o'clock. Then the place quieted down for the night."

"Stephen came home late?"
"Yes. He must have heard her going in, 'cause a door opened upstairs. The piano stopped. He shouted something or other at her that I didn't get. Then a couple more doors slammed."

"That the story?"
"All but mamma." She stopped King in the hall and asked for Stephen. She almost dropped when he told her sonny boy was doing the town. Then she yelled for Karen. While King went looking for her, she went through a gamut of facial expressions worthy of any one of the old silent movie gals. When the butler reported that Karen had gone out too, she made a beeline for the upstairs. In about twenty minutes, she came down looking like the Merry Widow—and just as worn out. She called a cab and made her exit."

"When did she get home?"
"Just before Stevey-boy. She came in, or floated in, would be more like it. She had just got the shock of her life. No act this time. I actually had to help her upstairs, though I'll bet she won't remember it."

McCale nodded thoughtfully and they fell silent for a few minutes. The figment of his imagination was jumping about wildly. He was sure that ever that tragedy stalked the Bigelows. Finally with a gesture—half disdain, half despair—he launched into a description of the events witnessed by Ann and himself at the Abbey.

Rocky listened avidly. McCale never kept any information from his assistants when they were working together on a case. He felt that to withhold developments made an operator less interested in the outcome, made him feel less like an integral part of the investigation. Besides that, everyone's opinion was valuable. A word here, an idea there—

Miss Adelaide Quits The Pretense

When he had finished, he cocked an eyebrow, looking interrogatively at his friend and employee. Rocky said at last slowly, "The thing that sticks out farthest, chief, at least as I see it—"

"Is what?"
"Is what Mr. Curt Vallaincourt, bridegroom-to-be, seems to be as busy as a bee, painting himself right into a corner."

At four-thirty that afternoon, Duke McCale stood before the fireplace in the upstairs drawing room of the Beacon street house. He was facing Adelaide Bigelow, who was huddled in the corner of a Victorian sofa. There was something held back in her, a studied remoteness. McCale had been talking quietly, in a voice which surprised himself at its own compassion.

"You'll have to pardon me if I say you have been—shall I say—extremely British about this situation. You have made a concession here, an appeasement there, until it is quite futile to take any action. You have called me in months too late."

"Mr. McCale," there was a light touch of hauteur in her tone in spite of herself, "you are presuming too much. I called you in to

look after the house during the week of the wedding."

"I'm sorry, but that is not the truth. Never once have I believed you came to my office with that in mind. I knew you were in trouble even though you withheld your confidence. Even now you will not admit it, even to yourself. I have gone on that premise from the first—that you wanted me to find out things without even the responsibility on your part of telling me what."

"I wish to withdraw from the case, Miss Bigelow. There's nothing I can do for you."

"Oh, no!" The words, half muffled in the heavy atmosphere, magnified themselves in the vastness of the room.

The fire crackled fiercely for a long minute, while the essence of fear hung in the air like a strong accent.

"It is necessary for me, since you will not confide in me, to tell you exactly what it is that is bothering you—what it is that you fear. You see, I know. What is it?"

Miss Bigelow turned once more to the room and McCale saw into her mind quite easily.

The house was quiet and the room seemed just as it should be—a chamber of solid, Victorian fastness, cozy, warm, intimate. Her fingers caressed the sheen of old wood, the back of a chair. She looked at him.

"So many things are not as we



He stood behind her looking over her shoulder while he talked.

want them to be, nor as we believed them to be," she said.

He nodded. "There was, for instance," he answered, drawing a parallel, "the case of France, with its vigor, its impregnable defenses, its immortal and imperturbable morale. But the enemy bored from within, sabotaging that morale, and when the battle came, the heart was as rotten as an overripe cheese."

Her eyes clouded. "What do you know?"

A Strange Will Complicates Things

"I know that a certain young man of undeniable physical attraction is marrying thirty million dollars next week. I know that in your subconscious mind, you believe him to be an adventurer. I know that you should have investigated him months ago—that you are also bothered by the fact that your entire family seems jealous of his marriage to your niece. Not jealous, mind, of his perhaps having the benefits of a great fortune, but jealous in a more personal way, as if secretly they were all in love with him and wanted him for themselves."

"You are so—right," she faltered. Her eyes lit up in admiration. "How in the world—"

"I am a trained observer. It is my job to see what others miss. Then, too, I have sources of information."

She crossed to the windows again, searching the outside hastily. What in the world is she looking for there? he pondered. Is she anxious to have this over with before the others get back? The family was having another of the interminable wedding rehearsals. Or was it some other thing she sought in the darkening afternoon? She had glanced at the clock more than once, he noted.

He crushed his cigarette in an ashtray, going over to her again. He stood behind her, looking over her shoulder while he talked. There was nothing to see. The sailor still slumped against the gateway, trying to read a paper in the unsteady glow of a street light. A woman passed in a shiny silk raincoat, a red scarf whipping out from her neck in a sudden gust of wind. Far off, near the bandstand, hoboos had started to burn rubbish in an iron basket, as was their custom on these cold evenings. The red glow of it flickered fitfully in the fog.

"I know," he went on, his voice low and impatient now, "that you must have another reason, for surely you are not caught in the trap this fellow sets for the unwary. Are you afraid Veronica will lavish too much of the Bigelow money on him, forgetting the others? You see, I have heard that she inherits the bulk of it upon her marriage."

She sought his eyes again, and the queer secret duel that they had all the while been fighting underneath the smooth surface was ended suddenly and completely.

Adelaide Bigelow was giving in. McCale could tell. It was in her eyes, all the pent-up gnawing worry of something horrible and unpleasant. She wasn't going to hold out on him any more, and now maybe he could help.

"I will tell you," she said simply. "Veronica's father, my brother," she began, motioning him to sit, "was a hard man, I suppose, but not unusual for his time. I think. He believed that women have no heads for business—cannot handle money. He was heir to my father's business and fortune of about twelve million dollars. With real estate and clever investing, he more than doubled that fortune. There was no male heir to whom he could leave it, you see."

"There was his adopted son, Stephen," McCale put in quickly. "Yes," she hesitated, "but not his own flesh and blood. But there was certainly Stephen." She edged over to the window again.

She faced him from the recess of the window's bay, the high red velvet draperies dwarfing her in the elongated shadows. Her eyes, for a moment, seemed to play hide-and-seek with a memory.

"At one time, I think he intended for Stephen to inherit. But Stephen, in his eyes at least, proved himself unworthy. Sybil always spoiled him. He grew up precocious, extravagant. He ran away once and joined the navy. A bitter experience for him. The more so when he found that Joel could no doubt have procured an appointment to Annapolis for him. He did manage M.I.T. by the skin of his teeth. Marriage to Karen has straightened him out somewhat."

"So the Bigelow fortune is held in trust?"

"Yes and no." Miss Adelaide rushed on now as though pressed for time. "My brother did not believe in having money standing idle for always. He wrote a most peculiar will."

She steadied herself, as if giving information on so private a matter required a supreme effort.

"I think he believed we would all benefit eventually. I—I believed he counted on Veronica's marrying someone whose background we all knew. You see, Sybil and I have to agree on Veronica's choice."

"Rather hard on Veronica, I should say."

"Oh, yes." She was trying hard to explain it as she saw it. "But he thought—"

The old voice rose now, an hysterical note in it. "He wished a man to have control of it. Veronica's husband gains control of it to do with as he will."

"God!" McCale exploded. The spool of his brain turned swiftly in a convulsive unreeling. The plot it brought to mind left him numb—by its malevolence.

It was his turn to go to the window. He stood looking into the blanket of fog, seeing nothing for a moment. He felt lost in the stunned silence of his own thoughts. Behind him, he heard Miss Bigelow sigh.

"Why didn't you come to me before?" was all he could say. And his voice sounded so loud in the stillness that it seemed almost to penetrate the outside. As if he had heard, the loitering sailor across the way actually looked up once at the windows. McCale laughed harshly.

"Now you are caught in a really diabolical web. Too late to extricate yourselves without a scandal."

Light fled from her old eyes as inwardly she contemplated such a thing. He felt cruel and vicious and hard, but at least rational, and was not quite able to comprehend her attitude.

Tragedy Strikes Suddenly

"We can still expose this fellow-me-lod. It's quite possible that I can dig up something in a few days. She joined him in the bay window, shaking her head in a quick gesture of distaste.

"Impossible," she murmured. "Then why, in all justice to yourself, did you call me in at all?" he wanted to know.

"I think I wanted to be sure."

He left her staring out into the rain and went back to the fire.

"Who introduced Curt Vallaincourt into this house?" he asked, raising his eyes to the woman at the window.

But his query went unanswered. For on the instant of bringing his glance to focus on her, he saw her sway as if something outside had struck terror to her heart. He thought for a moment she would fall through the window.

A shot split the silence, forcing a cry from her lips. He believed for one awful moment that someone outside had shot Adelaide, half expected to hear the shattered glass of a windowpane fall to the floor. In one leap, he was at her side. She huddled against him, pointing out and down.

One quick glance and the scene below was forever photographed on the film of his mind. He saw a woman in green running along the by-path of the Common that bisected the hill.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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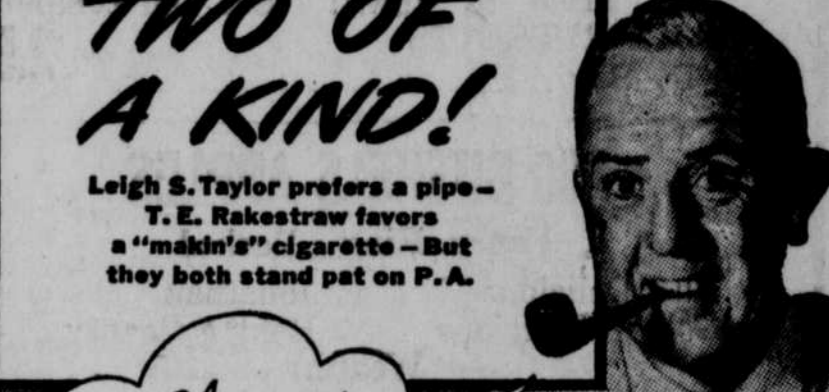


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