



Murder in Plain Sight

by GERALD BROWN
W.N.U. FEATURES



Duke McCale, private detective, has established an enviable reputation in Boston in a short time by solving some difficult cases. He is consequently surprised and chagrined when Miss Adelaide Bigelow, extremely wealthy and aristocratic old lady, engages him to guard the presents during the festivities surrounding her niece's wedding. McCale accepts the commission only because he senses that Miss Bigelow is afraid of something, and that she wants a competent detective around the house in case of some outbreak. "If something were stolen, if something did happen, you'd have to investigate, wouldn't you?" inquires Miss Bigelow, meaningfully. McCale grasps the obvious hint.

CHAPTER II

A nursemaid's job to a lot of iced-tea spoons. "Phooey!" The big young man hitched his long legs over an arm of the chair and snorted in irritation. "Holy Mike! What are we broke? I thought we were definitely out for the big stuff—no more small time. I run my legs off getting dope on this Vallaincourt guy—and what for? What has the bridegroom got to do with seeing that the friends of the family don't snitch all the silver plate? I suppose you expect him to run around the corner to the hock shop with the punchbowl between the ceremony and the reception."

Ann Marriot came in on the last part of the harangue. She set a coffee percolator on the desk, and busied herself with cups and saucers.

"Keep your shirt on, Tiny," she said to the big fellow. "Duke has a hunch. Why not let him do the talking? We only work here."

Rocky made appropriate noises, adding, "So this is a conference?"

"What did you think it was—the wedding breakfast?"

"All right, all right," So Duke has a hunch. Go ahead, master-mind. Go into your trance and tell us all."

McCale helped himself to a sandwich. "There isn't anything definite, Rocky. The old lady Bigelow, aunt of the bride, comes in here to hire special service—that of guarding the wedding gifts. That's her story. But look here. She doesn't want half a dozen men planted here. She's after only one inconspicuous man; not for the day of the wedding, but starting now—for the duration. That in itself is screwy. Besides that, she doesn't want the police and she's turned down operators from all the big agencies. To top it off, she acts as though the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were tracking her down."

Rocky's eyes narrowed. "Skipping the mythology, maestro, I think I do see a glimmer of light. In other words, she doesn't give a hang if the wedding feast is lousy with kleptomaniacs. She's got other troubles."

"Exactly."

"Go to the head of the class," said Ann.

"Well, where do we come in?"

McCale accepted coffee from Ann and lit a cigarette. He spoke into the first puff of smoke.

"You've got me there. I'm not sure the lady knows herself, but it's certain she wants someone around. We're elected, anyway. So my first move is a file on the family and the dashing bridegroom, just in case. What did you get on Curt Vallaincourt?"

Mystery Surrounds Vallaincourt

"Not much, I'm afraid," Rocky flipped open a notebook. "Showed up around these parts about a year ago. He's from New York City, or so he says. Definitely not Harvard nor Blue Book. Seems to have plenty of dough. Lives in a swank apartment on the Riverway. Doesn't work. Goes everywhere with the society crowd. The gals all do cartwheels whenever he shows up anywhere. Anyway, he's marrying twenty million dollars next week. Make anything mysterious out of that?"

McCale shrugged. "Plenty if I wanted to let it run away with me." He turned to Ann. "Did you line up the Bigelows for me?"

"Well," she began, "the Perkins and the Bigelows go right back—long before the Tea Party—if that's the sort of thing you want."

"Skip that. Bring us up to date."

"Okay. The money all comes from cotton mills in Lowell, and clipper ships and the Oriental trade before that. The Perkins and the Bigelows intermarried, and so on. Adelaide Bigelow, our client, and her brother, Joel, are and were, respectively, the last of the line. Adelaide never married. Joel married twice. His first wife is dead. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Joel's second wife, Sybil, is apparently not of the royal purple. Her family only seems to go back a generation or two. Probably she was considered fast or nouveau riche or something, as she was a widow when he married her. She's a lot younger than he, too."

"Where did you get the nouveau riche stuff?"

"Oh, I didn't. Just surmise. In fact, I don't know whether she has any money of her own, or not. He was seventy when he died, five years ago, and she was forty-three then. She had two children by her first marriage, a son, Stephen, and

a daughter, Victoria. Their name was Bennett, but he adopted them, and they changed to the Bigelow surname."

"Then Veronica, the bride, is a daughter of this second marriage?"

"No. The first Mrs. Bigelow died in childbirth—that is, in giving birth to Veronica. The old gentleman married Sybil Bennett three years after. Am I bawling this up?"

"No, indeed. It's very clear. Go on."

"There's not much more. Stephen was married two years ago. He didn't go to Harvard or Groton, like the rest of the Bigelows. M.I.T., I believe. He's an airplane designer at present. He married a girl from St. Louis—Swedish descent, but social and all that, A Karen Cristofen. Not much fuss around here about it."

"What's that?" He picked up a folded square of paper that had fluttered from her lap to the floor.

"Oh, I nearly forgot that. It's a rotogravure cut of Veronica Bigelow from the Sunday Herald of a few weeks ago."

McCale unfolded it and spread it flat on the top of the desk. The likeness of a very pretty girl looked up at him. It was a carefully light-



She held up a long legal envelope that had been lying beside the model.

ed study of the photographer's conception of how a well-groomed, quiet, aristocratic young woman should pose.

"That really doesn't do her justice, I should say," mused Ann. "I understand she has gorgeous red hair and a beautiful figure."

"Well, we shall see," said Duke, handing it back to her. "Tuck it away with the rest of the data and transcribe Rocky's notes for a file on Vallaincourt. I'm due at the ancestral mansion for tea with Miss Adelaide at five—or thereabouts."

"Wheel!" It was Rocky. "No-blesse oblige and old pewter mugs."

"Quiet, stooge. You and Ann hold the fort here. I don't even know whether our client expects me to take over twenty-four hours duty or not. I'm darn sure she's not really worried about the wedding presents. If by any chance she is, you may have to put on crepe soles and pussyfoot around there through the wee small hours. I'll call you."

McCale Senses That Something's Amiss

The Bigelow house was on that mound of Beacon street that slopes gently to Charles street and the Gardens. It was almost in the shadow of the State House dome and you could have thrown a pebble easily from the front stoop onto the paths of the old Common. Four stories high, its narrow dusty brick facade gave the lie to the roominess and depth within.

Adelaide Bigelow was waiting for McCale in the drawing room on the second floor. A butler, old and quiet and unobtrusive, had answered his knock and led him through a dim hallway, preceding him up dark, thickly carpeted stairs.

The room was at the front of the house. Heavy red draperies at the wide high windows were already drawn. Fraill Miss Bigelow stood in its exact center, small and patrician, against the background of a huge black marble mantel.

He bowed slightly, and as she sank onto a Victorian sofa, he made a half-hearted gesture of fumbling for a cigarette. A clock on the mantel ticked a long minute as he hesitated to light it.

"Please do smoke," Miss Adelaide said in her soft, troubled voice. "This room is rather overpowering, isn't it? It has never been changed since the days of my grandparents. It takes the children to cheer it up. They should be along soon. There was a rehearsal at the church this afternoon." She sighed.

McCale struck a match, thinking that there was something wicked about hereditary possession and what it could do to people's lives.

"If you'd like to mix yourself a drink, Mr. McCale, there's a vari-

ety of liquor on that table." He shook his head.

"I'll wait, I think."

He was obsessed with the thought that although her voice was calm, unhurried, there was something empty and trembling in her. She seemed to be watching, too, watching the way the frelight flickered across his lean, hard jaw, and reaching out to him in some uncertain way for strength.

Letting the smoke out of his lungs, he said slowly, his voice low, "Perhaps you have something to tell me before the others arrive."

She looked up quickly, one fist tightly clenched in her lap. "Oh, no."

"Damnation," thought McCale. "What is the matter with this woman? Or is it me? Am I getting out of practice? I can usually catch something significant in my own subtle way, but this baffles me. I'll stake my life that there is something seriously wrong in this room, in this house. Something is going to happen. The Irish in me tells me so. It's crawling up the very small of my back. I've got to have something to go on."

She rose and walked past him to the door, her dress rustling like dry leaves. "I want you to see the wedding gifts," was all she said, closing the door of her mind sharply in his face.

A quick black anger flared up in him. His impulse was to stalk from the house, but reason held him, reason and the disturbing unrest that had remained in his brain and nerves ever since her visit to his office that morning. He followed her downstairs.

Heavy double doors intricately carved in designs of fruit opened off the lower hall into an immense dining room. There was faded scintilla paper on the walls and huge sideboards against opposite sides of the room. Two exquisite crystal chandeliers, wired now for electricity, hung over a long narrow table. Along the dado which outlined the room, a dozen or more Adam chairs arched their dignified backs. Table and sideboards were loaded with silver, lamps, expensive glassware; rare, beautiful, odd, pretentious gifts for the bride and groom.

McCale walked around the display slowly, nodding at Miss Bigelow's remarks: "Very valuable; an heirloom; priceless," and so on. He marveled at the value placed on some simple piece, shuddering at the ostentatiousness of others. He was ready to grant the necessity of protection for this collection, was beginning to push away the odd hunch he had been playing all day, when he felt, rather than saw, a sudden change in his client.

A quiver rippled over her frail shoulders. Her hands fluttered helplessly as she came to a sudden frozen stop. They had reached the far end of the table. He heard her gasp and looked down to see the strangest gift of all.

It was a model, to scale, of a small modernistic house, set in miniature landscaped grounds. Complete with casement windows, sun deck, glass-walled patio, it was an architect's dream of the plus ultra in a civilized dwelling place. There was even a tiny roadster on the curved highway, a swimming pool in the rear, a statue in the small, geometrically plotted garden. The model had evidently been on display somewhere, for an engraved card attached to one corner of the base read:

Model of 1942 House—The Nest
Crystal Cove, Nahant
Architect—Christopher Storm

Beside McCale, Miss Bigelow swayed. Her face blanched. With eyes half-closed, she reached for and held up in her trembling fingers a long legal envelope that had been lying beside the model. From it, she took a folded document, opened it slowly. Over her shoulder, Duke saw it was a deed, ceding the property and buildings of Christopher Storm at Crystal Cove, Nahant, Massachusetts, to Curt Vallaincourt.

Beautiful Blonde Enters the Scene

Wordlessly, as McCale bit his lip to keep silent, Adelaide Bigelow replaced the deed in its envelope. She turned slowly, motioning him to leave the room with her.

The bright brilliance of "The Firebird" rippled through the gloom of the upper hall on a shaft of yellow light from the open drawing room door. Someone was playing the Stravinsky and playing it well. McCale, following Miss Bigelow inside, saw that the room was now occupied by three women and a man.

As his client drew him forward, to the woman at the piano. She was exceedingly beautiful in a almost cinematic way. Her body was long and thin and exquisitely draped in a white jersey tea-gown, the wide sleeves of which swung rhythmically as she played. The high cheekbones of her face shadowed the faintest of hollows. You could have swept the floor with her lashes, behind which glowed humorous blue eyes. Her mouth was sensuous, and thick with vermilion lipstick. As if all this were not enough, hair the color of flax hung in a long bob to her shoulders.

"The influences of the movies on child life is getting pretty terrifying. We heard a nine-year-old child decline an offer to go to a picture the other night because, 'I'm sick of murders with just guns and hatchets; I wanna wait for a good poison story.'"

The time seems at hand when we shall hear of a peace conference delegate being decommissioned for somebody with more modern armaments.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



THE REVOLT

President Truman is a President among Presidents! He has just come out openly with a statement that he considers fishing a waste of time!

He caught some fish on the Bermuda trip without posing for photographs. This supplemented a similar thumbs down on newsreel pictures of him holding a fish in Puget Sound last year. What's the Presidency of this country coming to, anyhow?

We think Harry Truman lost the fishermen's vote by this attitude. But he more than offset it by gaining the vote of their wives.

It has been an inviolable custom for Presidents to act as if they liked fishing, no matter how they really felt. Tradition has required that any White House occupant get himself into fishing regalia, go fishing and invite the photographers.

No President ever looked as sad in fishing clothes as Cal Coolidge, but we loved him for it. Herb Hoover never seemed the type in a trout brook, but it helped with the votes.

Roosevelt was a great one for photographic angling. Grover Cleveland is better known as a fisherman than as a ruler. Even Harding fished in response to the public demand. But now comes a President who says: "I say it is spinach and the heck with it!"

Personally, we think Harry is an old fresh-water, Missouri type fisherman who can go for bullheads and catfish, but thinks nothing else counts. But we welcome his position. It may be that nothing would do America more good today than less fishing. It certainly must interfere with reconversion.

Truman might make a tremendous hit by a White House statement declaring that fishing takes too much time, that it is far too unproductive, that it encourages deceit, causes pneumonia, breeds alcoholism and, furthermore, that most fishermen go fishing to avoid necessary work around the house.

The fisherman never lived who was 100 per cent honest and reliable. Fishing makes liars of the best of us. It is a racket conducted for the benefit of bait salesmen, tackle stores and rowboat renters. Long live Harry Truman. (H.I. Phillips has wasted most of August trying to catch one striped bass.—Editorial explanation.)

Desire

Let me build me a house by the side of the road—
(If those race tracks are complete);
A house unpretentious but still a home
That won't balk some racing meet;
I crave a home of the modest type,
With fireplace quite new—
(If the builders of some new grandstand
Can spare a plank or two!)

Oh, I yearn for my home by the side of the road,
With four walls, even three—
(If the boys who are building the paddock sheds
Will waive their priority)—
A little house where the sun comes in
And contentment seldom fails—
(If the lads who are rushing the clubhouse plant
Can spare me a couple of nails!)

Oh I care not for any handsome manse—
Just a plain four walls will do—
(If the contemplated amusement park
Doesn't need stuff P. D. Q.)
All I want's a place fit to hang my hat,
And I've got an outside chance—
(If the football parks and the new fight clubs
Plan no superdooper plants!)

Oh, give me a shack by the side of the road
(If the play world has enough) —
A little place for the wife and me
(If no night club needs the stuff);
Just a simple hut with a chimney there
Which need not be extra thick—
(If the race tracks, parks and the honky-tonks
Will just give a guy a brick!)

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