

THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

15¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

NOVEMBER ISSUE OUT SEPT. 4th

Volume 33

September, 1946

Number 4

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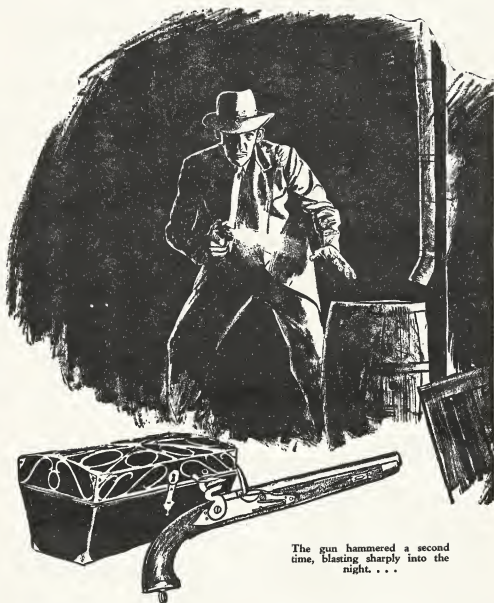
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Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., at 2296 Grove Street, Chicago, 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 305 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 14, 1944, at the Post Office, at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1946, by Popular Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under the International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 15c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$3.00; other countries 25c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 296 East 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character, appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.

DIG YOUR OWN



The gun hammered a second time, blasting sharply into the night. . . .

Who wouldn't help out a lovely gal like Sue Pedarre, when she wanted a strong arm to dig up a fortune in buried gold? I never knew that each spadeful of earth I dug in the dark of the moon was coming from my own grave!

MURDER!

By

W. T. BALLARD



Mystery Novel of the Year!

CHAPTER ONE

Home of the Dead

DID you ever go on a treasure hunt? I don't mean the game which is something like a paper chase. I mean the real thing.

I did. I thought I was too smart for anything like that, but everyone has a weak point. I guess mine was a blonde. I can't explain ever getting mixed up in the foolishness any other way.

It all started when Malcom Ramus sent for me. Ramus didn't look like a professor. He looked like a snow bird. He was a little guy with a pointed nose and brown eyes which stood out from his face like two half-buried marbles.

His office was one flight up in an old ramshackle building on Rampart a couple of blocks off Canal. The black letters on the glass panel of the door read, *Information on Anything, M. Ramus*. A very modest guy, the professor.

He always gave me a laugh. Maybe that's why I kept up a contact with him. He knew

the town like the back of his hand, and all about the people in it, both living and dead.

What he didn't know he could find in his books. The books occupied the room at the rear and they nearly filled it, piled in huge stacks which reached almost to the dirty ceiling. There must have been six or seven thousand, but Ramus could find the one he wanted within a couple of minutes. He must have had a card index in his head.

His income wasn't very good or very certain. The library called him occasionally, the university asked him questions, and he lectured once in awhile. Sometimes he borrowed money from me. I suspected that he wished to borrow some on the afternoon he phoned but I was wrong. He wanted me to meet a girl.

The girl gave me butterflies. She was so blonde that her hair looked almost white in the ray of afternoon sun which crept in through Ramus' dusty windows. Her eyes were blue and very dark. Her lashes dark too and it made a startling effect.

She wore a shark-skin suit and she was the kind of person who could wear tailored clothes and still look very, very like a woman.

I caught my breath. I like pretty women. Who doesn't?

Ramus said, "This is Van Kerby, the best detective in North America."

"The world," I told her, playing it straight.

"This is Sue Pedarre." The little professor looked at her as if she'd been made of rare porcelain, "and this is her attorney, Boyd Henderson."

Henderson shook hands. He was big, fifty perhaps, a well conditioned fifty which spoke of plenty of golf or maybe hand ball.

"I've heard of you," he said.

I let that pass. A lot of people had heard of Kerby and Smith. We pride ourselves that we have the biggest agency in the south.

"What gives?" I was watching the girl. I liked watching her. I thought I could sit there for a long, long time, just looking.

Ramus said, "Miss Pedarre belongs to one of the old families. However she wasn't born here but in California."

I looked at the girl. The name was certainly French, but that blondness, "They raise them nice in California," I said.

Ramus ignored me. The girl tried to. The lawyer cleared his throat.

"One of her ancestors," said Ramus, "was a smuggler, or a trader—a pirate perhaps. His name was Henri, Henri Pedarre. He is supposed to have financed some of the Lafitte operations, although I've never been able to connect him directly with the brothers."

I waded this aside. I wasn't concerned with history. "Well?"

"At any rate, he was killed in the battle of

New Orleans. Before he died, he told his wife that he'd buried a fortune. She never found it although she spent her life looking. Her sons never found it. The story of the treasure became a legend in the family."

"So now Miss Pedarre is hunting the treasure?" I started to reach for my hat which I'd placed on the floor beside my chair. "Well, I wish her luck."

"Wait," said Ramus, and there was an urgency in his voice. "She found a chart. It was in an old trunk lid. It's evidently been there since Henri Pedarre hid it after burying his gold." He reached into his desk, drew out a piece of parchment and handed it to me.

I took it unwillingly. Almost every old property in the state has its own story of buried treasure. Some of them may be true. The fact remains that not many have been found.

I looked at the chart. It seemed to be the plan of a house, or of a number of plantation buildings. Below the plan were three columns of numbers and to the right was a silly jingle.

Start at the center and turn to the right.

From Y to A and V to D,

The bishop's longest move you see.

Dropping squares at bottom and right,

And using only those which are white,

You have no place for the letter Z.

I READ it over twice. Then shook my head, passing it back. "Sorry, I'm not good at puzzles."

Ramus said, "You don't understand. I didn't send for you to solve this. I've already solved it."

"You have?" I looked at him completely startled.

"And a very simple matter." He wasn't bragging, merely stating a fact. "It only took me two hours. You see, anyone familiar with chess would spot it at once."

"What's chess got to do with it?"

"The bishop," he explained, "is one of the pieces used in a chess game. He moves diagonally across the board. Therefore the bishop's longest move would be from the upper left hand corner of the board perhaps to the right lower."

He opened his desk again and produced a chess board. "You see." He drew a line with his finger.

"Go on." I didn't see, but I was listening.

"All right. Now, half the board squares are white, half black. The rhyme says to use only the white squares, and also to ignore the bottom row and the row to the right."

"Now, when a chess board is correctly placed, so," he turned the board, "A is in the upper white corner, Y at the other end of the diagonal if we ignore the row at the bot-

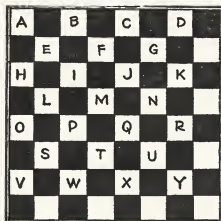
tom and right, thus," He arranged the letters hurriedly.

"You see?"

I stared at the board. "Okay, if you say so. What now?"

"These columns of numbers." He explained.

"Take the first number 23335. You notice that in no place does a one appear. Therefore I figured that they began counting with one. Now your rhyme. The first line is, *Start from the center and turn to your right*. I started in the center of the board first. It didn't work. I then started in the center of the first



line. Try it, counting the square between B and C as one. It will come out D. I won't bore you with working out each number. The cipher reads:

"Dig ten paces from the post
Where the whip is used the most."

I stared doubtfully at the columns of figures. "All right, if you say so. But if you've solved the cipher, what do you need with me?"

The lawyer interrupted. "Frankly, Mr. Kerby, we're scared."

I turned to look at him. He didn't seem scared, nor was he the type of guy who I'd expect to scare easily. "Scared of what?"

He shook his head. "We don't know. Miss Pedarre's luggage has been searched twice since her arrival, and she's been followed."

I grinned at the girl. "I can think of several reasons why she should be followed that have nothing to do with buried treasure."

She flushed, the color coming up into her face. The lawyer made a noise in his throat. It was obvious that he did not appreciate my little joke.

Ramus said, hurriedly, "It's simple, Van. Miss Pedarre wants to hire you. She's afraid that if she goes out to dig up the treasure, someone will hi-jack it before she gets back."

I shrugged. "I'll send an operative. It will cost you twenty-five dollars and expenses."

The girl spoke up, almost for the first time. Her voice was low, yet warm and throaty. "Wouldn't you go yourself? I'd feel much safer."

I looked at her. "When does this digging take place?"

"Tonight."

"You and his nibs?" I nodded toward the lawyer.

"I can't go," he said. "I've got an important meeting. If I could, I wouldn't need you."

Our eyes measured each other. I thought, I'm pretty much in my own line, but to this bird, I'm just another hired man. He's not going to like me with his blonde girl, but he can't help himself.

"Okay," I said. "You're hired yourself a digging man, but just where do we dig. That rhyme isn't very clear."

"In the old slave quarters," said Ramus. "Where else do you think they used a whip around there?"

We drove out the old river road. I know that country pretty well and I'm familiar with the old plantations. Once it was a place of beauty, of life, but that was some time back. Most of the old houses have boards at their windows now, and the land has gone back, neglected and uncared for.

It wasn't really worried about the girl being followed. I've found that treasure seekers are usually given to screwy ideas.

But I didn't say that as we drove along the sweeping road. "How long since you've seen the place?" I asked.

SUE PEDARRE shook her head. "I've never seen it. I inherited it from an uncle a couple of years ago. Mr. Henderson came down once to look at it. We've been trying to sell, but we haven't found a buyer."

A lot of the old places are for sale, and a lot of them have failed to find buyers. The country isn't what it once was. It's kind of empty now, a little desolate, its productivity mostly gone.

"How'd you happen to find the cipher?"

She smiled. "That was an accident. When Mr. Henderson was down here he sold the old furniture, but he shipped several old trunks up San Francisco. I didn't want them so we decided the best thing to do was to burn them. The cipher was hidden in one of the lids."

"Henderson there when you found it?"

She nodded.

"He seems to be around most of the time?"

"He's an old family friend," she said.

I tried to make something of that. I had directions from Ramus how to find the place. He'd even told me how to park. "There's an

old lane," he said. "You can pull into that and walk across the field to the slave quarters. That way, anyone following you won't see the car."

I'd laughed. The idea of anyone actually following us had struck me as funny. But I did watch the rear view mirror all the way from town. I was certain we hadn't been followed.

I parked the car in the lane and took up the pick and shovel I'd brought. The whole setup made me feel ridiculous, but the blonde being with me made it fun. We started across the field toward where the old house made a dark outline against the sky.

Nothing bothers me usually, but as we walked across the rough ground I had the sensation of ants crawling up and down my back. Maybe it was the girl's excitement, for she was nervous.

The hand resting on my arm pressed hard enough so that they should have been able to take her finger prints off my hide.

"Relax," I said. "I'm going to have to use that arm to dig with."

Instead of relaxing, her grip tightened and her voice had the breathless dry quality which can be put there only by fear.

"Look."

I turned to look. At first I saw nothing to cause her excitement, then I saw the dark outline of a car parked in the shadow of the trees.

"Someone's here," she whispered. "Someone is after the treasure."

"Probably neckers."

I placed the shovel and pick on the ground. "Just some kids making woo. Wait here until I see."

I moved forward then, loosening the gun under my arm. I was nervous, and getting more so for as I crossed the drive, leading back to the old house, I realized that it had been used recently, used quite a lot for a supposedly deserted place.

I had the gun free. I felt better with its solidness in my hand, a nice gun, a thirty-eight on a forty-five frame with the grip specially built to fit my hand. Then I edged onward, listening for voices. There were none. The car was empty.

I looked it over with care, nothing remarkable, a cheap sedan, five years old. On second thought I jotted down the license number, then I moved back to the girl.

"No one there," I was whispering, "but the car hasn't been parked long. The ground's damp and the mud on the tires still fresh."

"Someone's after the treasure."

"Look, kitten," I said. "Let's pretend we're grown up, huh. This treasure business is okay for kids, and I didn't mind driving out here with you to look for it, but how could

anyone else know about it, or your silly cipher or anything unless you talked?"

"But the car's here."

It was there all right. I couldn't deny that. "All right," I said. "Someone's trespassing. You stay here and I'll look around." I turned and moved toward the dark outline of the deserted house. I didn't know she was following until I felt her breath against the side of my face. I almost shot her. I was that jumpy.

"Hey," I said. "Don't you ever do what you're told."

"I was scared," she whispered. "I didn't want to be left alone."

I hesitated. The smart thing was to take her back to my car. But nothing moved in the dark overgrown yard ahead. I was probably being silly.

"Come on then, but keep quiet."

I moved around to one side of the old house. It was in pretty sorry shape. Once it had been quite a place, but now the windows were covered with rough boards, the white lead of the paint was peeling away from the walls.

I was busy looking at the house, but the girl hadn't forgotten the rhyme.

"Dig ten paces from the post
Where the whip is used the most."

That could only mean the old slave quarters. Again she caught my arm with fingers which dug into the flesh. "Look."

CHAPTER TWO

Dollars for the Dame

I LOOKED toward the row of old buildings at the rear and suddenly I stiffened. It was faint, but very distinct in the darkness. The finger of light which crept out through the chink in the old walls.

I started to tell her to remain where she was. Then I knew it was no use so I merely whispered. "Quiet now," and moved ahead, my gun held ready.

The buildings didn't seem to be in as bad shape as the main house. I guessed they had been used to quarter some of the field hands and therefore had been kept in repair.

The light was coming through a crack in the old stone foundation and I got down on my knees to peer through. I had a restricted look at a stone paved room, lighted by a flickering candle. I guessed that the room had once served as the plantation prison for I could see two pair of rusty chains hanging from the far wall.

This then would be the place where unruly slaves had felt the biting lash of the whip. I

own that I was suddenly quite tense. The rhyme was working out. Ten paces from where those chains hung was the place to dig, only, someone was there before us. Someone must have dug, or be planning to dig.

There were two men in the room. I couldn't see their faces, but I heard one say, "All right then, that's the deal. You handle that much and come back Tuesday."

The second man was uneasy. You could feel it. "I... well..."

"You'll come back," his companion laughed. "You're in this now, brother. How would you like a tip to the bank examiners?"

I didn't catch the muttered answer. He turned and moved to the ladder-like stairs. The last I saw was his legs, climbing upward... I heard him step outside. I heard his feet move across the stone entrance. I thought he muttered to someone, but I couldn't be sure. He might have been talking to himself. I waited, listening for other sound. It came finally, the roar as he started the car.

I told the girl to wait and moved around to the building entrance, keeping well in the shadow of the wall, just in case there was an outside guard. I saw no one, and the girl was right behind me.

DO YOU KISS
AND TELL?

ONLY THAT STAR
SHAVES KEEP ME
SMOOTHER!

FOR DOUBLE EDGE RAZORS

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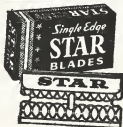
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I stepped into the building, guided by the light which came up the stairway, and moved down them cautiously, one hand on the rough cut stone of the wall, the other holding the gun. Moisture came through the wall making the stone wet and a little slippery.

The man was busy in a far corner. He'd raised one of the floor stones and pulled out a metal box. In spite of myself my pulse leaped.

As I watched, he raised the box lid, seemed to place something inside and started to close the lid.

"Hold it," I said, and gained the floor level in three quick steps.

He swung around. It was the first knowledge he had that he was not alone. His hair showing beneath the edge of the low drawn hat was very black. His eyes matched the hair, glittering a little in the candle light. His hand moved as if by reflex toward the gun clip beneath his arm.

"Hold it," I jerked my gun a little and he stopped, standing half crouched.

"What is this, a hi-jack? You'll get killed for this, Mac."

"If anyone gets killed, it will be you. Get away from that box, over by the wall, on the double."

He obeyed sullenly, and I ordered him to turn around, facing the wall.

Again he obeyed and I was just reaching for the gun in his shoulder clip when he kicked backwards.

I was ready for that too. My gun was high, I stepped sideways and slashed it against his head. He crumpled without a sound. I stooped, got his gun and slid it into my pocket. He was out, cold.

The girl uttered a little half smothered gasp. She stood for a long moment staring down at the man. "Is he . . . dead?"

I shook my head. "Take a look at your treasure, kitten," I indicated the metal box with a jerk of my gun.

She stared for an instant longer, then moved over to the box and looked down at its contents.

"It's . . . it's full of money . . . there was a treasure . . . I didn't really believe it." She had dropped to her knees beside the small box and was hauling forth bank notes.

I moved over to her side. There was a treasure all right. But no pirate had buried it. The box had told me that. It was new, of light metal like a dispatch box. I reached down and looked at the bills. They were signed by Henry Morgenthau.

It hurt me to tell her. She was like a kid with a new toy. She hadn't really looked at the money. It didn't dawn on her that they hadn't printed bills like that in eighteen-twelve.

I said, "It's money all right, kitten, but I'm afraid that you won't get to keep it."

SHE looked up and her eyes fastened on the gun which I still held loosely. Her blue eyes seemed to crystallize into chips of ice, and her shoulders stiffened. "You . . . you mean you're going to take it, to rob me?"

I shrugged. After all, you couldn't blame her. It was a natural reaction. She'd seen me club the punk and it must have seemed pretty ruthless. Who was I? A private detective, out for what I could get.

I grinned. "Look, sweet. Those are nice, thousand dollar bills. It's hard to spend thousand dollar bills right now. The banks make you register when you bring one in. The FBI asks strange questions."

"But why?"

"Don't you read the papers? Didn't you ever hear of black market money?"

I could see she had. She looked down at the bundles of money she'd gathered up, and gradually she let them slide back into the box. "Then . . . then, there isn't any treasure?"

I shrugged. "If there is, this isn't the time to hunt for it. Sonny boy over there," I indicated the unconscious man, "may have some friends around. I can't imagine them being this careless. We've got to move easy, we've got to be certain we take no more chances than we need to. Here, you pick up the box. It isn't heavy. You can have the fun of carrying it back to the car."

She closed the box slowly. "What about him?"

I hesitated, then I went over and went through his pockets. There was nothing at all in the way of identity. I thought of tying him up until the authorities could get there. A sound from outside decided me against it. The sound had been a step.

I covered the distance to the candle in two jumps and blew it out, then I whispered to the girl. "Over this way."

Her soles scraped on the stone floor in the darkness. I didn't like it. That cellar was a trap. Whoever was outside would notice the light off in a minute. If he were a guard, he'd be suspicious.

I guessed now that he'd walked to the car with the other man and was just coming back. "Up the stairs," I whispered, grasping her arm.

She almost dropped the box. Yes, she had it. You could trust that gal to freeze onto money.

We moved quickly up the stairs. I hoped we could slip through the door unseen, but our luck was running thin. We had no more reached the open until a voice called,

"Charley."

Maybe we should have stayed inside, but I don't like sweating things out. I'd rather have action than that. "Yeah," I grunted and stepped into the open.

"Hey," said the voice, sounding surprised. "You're not Charley. A gun lanced flame in the darkness and the bullet struck the wall close to my head.

I swung the girl around the corner. The gun hammered a second time, blasting sharply into the night. I knew the guard couldn't see us because of the angle from which his shots came. If the girl hadn't been with me, I might have circled back and tried to get him. As it was, we ran. There was a ditch a hundred feet behind the buildings. We dived for it.

I thought of snakes, but at the moment I was worried more about hot lead than about venom. We made the ditch and worked our way along it. The man back by the house was still jumpy. Every couple of minutes he'd blast at something. I'm not certain what he thought he was shooting at. Maybe he was just exercising his trigger finger.

But he wasn't following and I slowed the pace. The girl was panting and I took the box from her. "Relax, kitten, we're out of trouble now."

She gave a little gasping laugh. "I'm afraid I'm not up to treasure hunting, Kerby. I almost died when those bullets started flying."

"We both almost died," I said soberly. "For shooting in the dark, that bozo was coming close."

She squeezed my arm. "You're nice," she said. "Somehow, I feel pretty safe when I'm with you."

She was very close, and very nice. I had the sudden impulse to kiss her. Instead I squeezed her arm. "Let's get back to the car. The sooner I get this mud off, the better I'll feel."

We came out of the ditch, cutting across the field. It was rough going and she almost fell twice. I was trying to help her. I was careless I guess. I never saw them until they jumped us.

We were close to the car then. They came out of the hedge to the right. The girl was jerked away from me and someone swung at my head.

I ducked, rolling with the blow and went down to one knee. There was a culvert to the right and I tossed the box into the ditch.

The man standing over me swung again at my head. I grabbed his knees and jerked his feet out from under him. He went down and a second man swung at my head. I rolled away, coming up to my feet, jerking my gun free.

I couldn't see the girl. She seemed to have vanished. I heard a car's motor somewhere on the road. Everyone was running and shout-

ing. I ran to the right and suddenly stepped off into a hole.

The water was up to my neck. The brush along the edge was so heavily matted that I couldn't drag myself out. I heard them calling to each other. I saw the wink of a flash light and knew they were searching for me.

I crowded close into the brush, my nose just above water. They must have hunted for ten minutes, but they were worried about something. Finally the car lights cut on. They pulled up beside my coupe, raised the hood and did something to the motor. Then they drove away.

I WAS just about to haul myself out when someone came running up the road. I saw a man move to my coupe, examine it and call something unintelligible. A voice answered. They stayed there for perhaps five minutes, then they too disappeared.

I dragged myself out of the water. I was almost drowned. I didn't know where the girl was. I didn't seem to know much of anything. Somewhere in the mess I'd lost my gun. I went over to the culvert and found the box. It was awkward to carry. I took out the money and stuffed it into my pockets. It would get wet, but that didn't bother me. Then I went over to the car and tried to start it. It wouldn't run.

* * *

I must have walked five miles. There were blisters on my heels from the wet shoes. I finally found a farmer who would take me to town. All he had was an old truck. It was four o'clock when I got back to the apartment. The phone was ringing when I came in through the door. I had the feeling that it had been ringing steadily for a long time. I answered it and a man's voice said,

"We've got the girl. We'll trade her for the money."

Just like that, no hello, no introduction. I took a long breath and told him. "You've got the wrong number, baby. I don't know what you're talking about."

The laugh was nasty and had no mirth. "You'll know when the cops fish the blonde out of the river."

I hung up. In a minute the phone rang and I answered it. "Look, Kerby," said the voice. "We traced the license plate of your car. Even if the blonde hadn't talked, we'd still know that you'd been out at the Pedarre plantation tonight. Don't go to the FBI with that dough, not if you think anything of the little girl's life."

"Okay," I said, "but you've got it wrong, Mac. I lost that dough in the fight. I couldn't find it, so, do what you like." I hung up then.

I was bluffing, but I figured that the girl had a better chance to live if they figured I had nothing to trade for her.

I was so tired that I hardly knew what my name was. I had to do something, but what to do was the question. Then I thought of the man whose car had been parked in the plantation yard. I didn't know what he looked like, or what his name was, but I did know his license number. I reached for the phone and called a friend in the motor vehicle department.

The man's name was Morse. I got his address, on one of the side streets off Canal, a couple of blocks short of Louisiana. He was listed as a teller at one of the smaller banks.

I grinned at the information. Things seemed to be making a little sense. I cleaned up a bit, went down and took a cab over to the address. Light was just beginning to show in the eastern sky. It would soon be morning.

The house was old like its neighbors, set back in a little square yard. I had the cab park at the corner and walked forward. There was no sign of life as I climbed to the porch and rang the bell. I rang it hard, holding the button down a long time. Finally an upper window came open and a man's voice said irritably,

"What's the matter?"

"Telegram," I said, knowing he couldn't see me for the porch roof.

There was a mumble of conversation from above, then the window slammed and the hall light came on. I heard his feet on the stairs, heard him fumbling with the lock, then the door came open and he was staring at me.

"You're not a messenger. . ." he sensed something wrong and tried to shut the door but my foot was in the way and a second later my gun was in my hand.

He was a small man, with thin, sandy hair and tired, squinty blue eyes. The eyes got wide at sight of the gun, then filled with fear. "What do you want?"

I used the gun to back him into the hall. "I want to talk to you, Morse."

He didn't like my use of his name. He didn't like anything about the setup. He was a little rat, caught in a trap and looking desperately for a way out.

I fished out a card case with my free hand. I found a card which said that I represented the Bankers' Protective Association, which was true enough since our office did some work for them.

He stared at the card with dilated eyes. His lips were suddenly dry and he circled them with his tongue. "What do you want?"

"You made a trip tonight," I said. "You saw a man about some thousand dollar bills."

"That's a lie!"

"Don't get excited Mac." My voice was hard. "I was there, I saw you."

"You can't prove anything."

I grinned sourly. "That's what you think. That plantation yard was muddy. Your tires left tracks. Maybe you don't know it, but the police can check those tracks against your tires almost as easily as they can check a set of finger prints."

The long skinny hands hanging out of his pajama sleeves worked. I could see him thinking, wondering if he somehow could grab my throat.

"Don't try it," I said. "I'd have five bullets in you before you touched me."

CHAPTER THREE

Too Hot to Handle

HE COLLAPSED then. He quit. You can tell when a man quits, when he's no longer dangerous, and it isn't pretty to watch. But I had no feeling of mercy for him. I was thinking of the blonde girl.

He let his head hang and his voice was no longer turbulent. "What are you going to do with me?"

"That depends," I said. "I'm not after you. Oh, sure, I know the story, you were short in your accounts, you saw a chance to buy up enough black market thousand dollar bills for maybe seven-fifty a bill, to cover your shortage. I'm still not interested. I want the men you dealt with, and if you help, I'll try and put in a good word for you."

He groaned. "I was short in my accounts. I didn't know what to do. I got a letter through the mail. It seemed like a form letter. It said that a company would make personal loans up to twenty thousand dollars on character only and that my name had been suggested as eligible for such a loan. I knew there was some catch. There had to be, but I was desperate. I didn't know which way to turn, so, I called them up."

"Finally I met a man in a restaurant. He said frankly that it was black market money. He said he knew I was short in my accounts or I wouldn't have answered the letter. He threatened to report me to the bank examiners if I refused to deal."

"What did this man look like?"

Morse hesitated, but he was thoroughly whipped. "The man was big," he said in a cracked voice. "He had black hair, and a scar on one side of his face. The scar wasn't so noticeable except it lifted one side of his face as if he were always smiling."

"How big?"

Morse hesitated. "Well over six feet, six-four or five perhaps."

I nodded. It certainly wasn't the man I'd

struck down at the old plantation. "Do you know how to get in touch with any of them?"

He didn't. He denied any further knowledge and I believed him. It seemed I'd accomplished absolutely nothing by my visit and I said so as I walked to the door.

He stood there, nervously. "You won't turn me in?"

I shrugged. "This will have to be straightened out, but . . ." I never finished the sentence. A gun made a sharp, sudden sound on the still morning air.

It still wasn't light enough to see anything. I couldn't even be certain from which direction the shot had come. I heard Morse give a kind of grunt, then his body fell sideways, almost knocking me from my feet.

It probably saved my life for I went staggering across the porch as the gun sounded again, the bullet striking the house wall, close to the door jam.

I vaulted the porch rail and found shelter behind a tree. I heard the slap slap of feet on the turf. I heard the sound of my cab's motor flare suddenly, heard the gears clash. Evidently the driver was gun shy. I turned and looked back at the house. A woman was in the house doorway kneeling beside the fallen Morse. I heard her dry sobs. Then she started to scream. That was all. I should have stopped to call the cops, I didn't. I turned and ran.

I had the feeling I was followed. I couldn't be sure. I didn't actually see anyone. I made my way to the carline and rode back to my apartment.

From there I called Sue Pedarre's lawyer. He sounded sleepy but the sleep went out of his voice at the news. He started to swear. He kept swearing. "Have you called the cops?"

I told him that I hadn't, that I had no intention of calling them until I knew more than I did. "They've got the girl," I added. "As long as they think there's any hope of trading her for their black market money there's some

hope that she won't be harmed. The best way to sign her death warrant is to call copper."

He agreed. "I'm sorry I ever let her into this," he said. "I never was too sold on the treasure idea, but it's certainly unlucky that this gang chose the old house to hide their hot money in."

I agreed.

"I'll help in any way I can. I feel terrible. Why, Sue is almost like my own daughter. I love that girl."

"Anybody could love her," I said and rang off. I didn't go directly to my office. I went to see Ramus first.

I found the little professor behind his big desk pouring over an old manuscript. He looked up eagerly as I came in. "You found it? I was right?" He jumped up from behind the desk.

"We found something," I said, and told him what had happened.

His dark eyes got very wide. His voice dropped to an excited whisper. "This is terrible. A girl kidnapped, a man dead. Where will it end?"

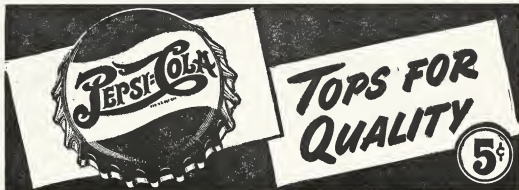
I shrugged. "Look, Ramus, there's something screwy about this deal. It might be an accident that these black market boys chose the old house as a distribution headquarters where they could sell their hot dough at reduced rates, but the fact that it should be in the same old prison room where the Pedarre treasure is supposed to be buried is really something."

"The treasure is still there," he was excited. "I'll bet you the treasure is still there. You didn't follow the cipher, did you, you didn't do any digging?"

"There was too much happening to do any digging," I said shortly. "I was too busy worrying about getting out of there."

"Then it's still there."

"And as far as I'm concerned, it can stay there until I get the rest of this straightened up. Tell me, what do you know about this lawyer Henderson and the girl?"



HE LOOKED surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. What do you know about him, and the blonde?"

"Well," Ramus settled back into his chair. "Not too much, really. He's an important attorney in San Francisco. He has some local connections and from time to time I've done some research jobs for him. Why?"

I shrugged. "I like to know who I'm doing business with."

"He's all right," said Ramus. "Certainly you don't think he's mixed up with the black marketeers, do you? Why, if he was, the last thing in the world he could want would be to direct you to the old Pedar place."

"That makes sense."

"And the girl, did you ever see such a sweet chick?"

I looked at Ramus hard. I had no idea that he had ever heard such a word. The little guy might have unknown possibilities.

"Well, what about her?"

"You're going to get her back? Certainly she's worth more than all that hot money?"

"In my book yes."

He relaxed. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Van. I never dreamed. . ."

"Forget it," I told him. "Everything always happens to me. This is no exception." I turned and left, going back to my office.

The switchboard girl gave me some calls. Most of them were from regular clients, but one was from a man named Shawn.

I went into the office and looked up the Shawn in the phone book. There were a lot of them listed, none with a number like the one my man had left.

I tried the criss-cross with no better luck. I always like to know who a man is before I talk to him, but in this case, no luck. Finally I called Mr. Shawn.

A man's voice answered and there was a few minutes wait, then another voice said, "Good afternoon Mr. Kerby."

It was hardly noon, but I let that pass. "Thank you very much for calling."

He had a nice polite sort of voice, the kind I associate with grey haired men, tweedy coats, and briar pipes.

"What's on your mind?" I wasn't impressed by the voice. I've been fooled too often.

"I understand you're a discreet man," he said and his tone turned buttery. "I'd like to talk to you tonight about some money which you have in your possession which does not belong to you."

"I'm a busy man," I said. "My partner is out of town, and I haven't much time to talk."

"This won't take time," he assured me. "I think we can work out a deal."

"About the blonde?"

He ignored this. "Just a deal," he said. "You meet me tonight at eight, and it would be wiser if you did not mention the meeting to the police. I have ways of learning things."

I wet my lips. "I haven't talked to the cops yet."

"Fine," he said. "Fine. I think you and I can do business, big business." He gave me an address on Royal. "You come alone," he added, "and I'll be there. Otherwise, you will find nothing, nothing at all."

I'd hardly hung up the phone when the secretary buzzed the squawk box. "Lieutenant LeMay wants to see you."

I told her to send him in. I thought fast during the couple of minutes it took him to walk from the reception room. LeMay was assigned to homicide.

He came in, small and dapper as always in his double breasted blue suit with the ever fresh flower in his button hole.

"How are you, Van?" He had black eyes and black hair. He looked a lot more like a gambler than a police officer.

I said I was fine and motioned him to a chair. He sat down on the edge and laced his fingers over the head of the cane he always carried. The fingers were encased in pearl grey gloves. Quite a dresser, LeMay and from all accounts, quite a lady's man.

"What gives?"

"Have you read the noon papers?"

I hadn't, and said so.

"But you might know that a man named Morse was shot to death about dawn this morning, a nice little harmless bank clerk."

"What make you think I'd know anything about it?"

He sighed. He carefully removed one glove, produced a beaten silver case and extracted a long Russian cigarette with a false tip. "Your card was clutched in his hand," LeMay said. "Very careless, Van, very careless indeed."

"There might have been a dozen reasons why the guy could have my card."

He admitted this by inclining his head. "But also, we found a cab driver, a man who hauled you from your apartment to Morse's street. When the shots came, he took off."

"Go on."

"Isn't that enough?"

"I know you," I said. "You always hold something back to club a man with. I'd rather have it now."

HE SIGHED again, then he blew smoke at me in a perfect ring. "We found some money in Morse's pockets, thousand dollar bills. The wife broke down and talked. Her husband was short in his accounts at the bank. He'd been dealing with some gentlemen who had thousand dollar bills for sale at reduced rates, black market money."

"So now I'm tied in with the black market?"

He shrugged. "I'm merely asking you what you are tied up in. We found a farmer who drove a man to town this morning. We also located your car, broken down on the old river road."

"Thanks for telling me. I've wondered where it was. I thought some of reporting it stolen."

His black eyes gleamed. "What kind of fire are you playing with now, Kerby?"

I shrugged. "Look, LeMay. There's no need telling you that I won't talk. At the moment I can't. You've known me for some time. You know that this office has always played it straight across the board with the cops."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, I know, but the boys down at the hall don't all feel that way. I think you'd better come down and talk to them."

I went down and I talked. They even brought in the FBI because of the thousand dollar bills. I've sweated it out before, when a case of mine ran afoul of the cops, but I'd never gone through anything like that. It was after six before they finally turned me loose. I was surprised that they did. They could have held me as a material witness and I'd have been forced to give bail. I guess they figured I had too much at stake. Our office was the biggest of its kind in the south.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man Who Knew Everything

THE address on Royal which Mr. Shawn had given me was an old house. It differed not at all from the houses which flanked it on either side. I'd spent the better part of an hour making certain that the cops weren't following me. They'd tried, but I still knew a couple of tricks for getting rid of unwanted trailers.

I judged that the house was at least a hundred years old, probably more, and guessed there was a court yard beyond the wall. Most of the older houses had been built around court yards.

I searched for the bell and found none. An old fashioned iron knocker made a heavy, hollow sound as I dropped it.

Somewhere in the neighborhood a dog howled, a cat was singing at the distant moon and the rumble of traffic was a faint but steady sound from the direction of Canal.

Nothing passed along the street, no sound came from within. I had about decided that Mr. Shawn was playing games with me when the door came open suddenly and the beam of a hand torch was squirted directly into my eyes.

"What do you want?" The woman was very old. Her voice was cracked and high and accusing.

"To see Mr. Shawn. I have an appointment. The name is Kerby."

"Whydidn'tyusayso." She ran the words together until it was a single mumbled syllable. She backed up, taking the light out of my eyes and I followed her, stepping sideways so that she could close and chain the heavy door.

She turned, throwing the light's beam on the stone-paved covered passageway which led along one side of the courtyard.

I had a confused glimpse of a little pool, of heavy uncared for jungle like growth, then we reached the iron stairs which led upward to the balcony.

The balcony served as an upper hall and it was not in good repair. It sagged and groaned under our weight as we moved along it to the door at the end.

The old woman was an uncertain shawl-covered shape, sinister in her silence, like some hooded spectre out of the middle ages. I had a feeling of unreality and the weight of the gun beneath my arm gave little comfort.

She paused and knocked on the closed door, then turned and creaked her way back along the way we had come, taking the light with her.

For a full minute the door remained closed. I almost called after my departing guide, then the strap hinges creaked and the door swung back, letting out light and the musty, dusty smell of age and damp and carelessness.

The man standing there was nothing like the voice on the phone. He was big. He wore chocolate slacks and a tan sport coat.

I raised my eyes and looked at his face. I'm tall, but I had to look up to Mr. Shawn. He was a good six feet four.

His face was as big as his body, his hair black, rather thin and curly, and he would have been good looking save for the scar which perpetually lifted the corner of his mouth.

"Thank you for coming," he said, and I jumped for it was the voice on the phone. Also, from Morse's description it was the man of the black market money.

But the voice was no longer soft and friendly. It had a mocking hardness which rode the words like a haunting overtone.

"That's all right," I said, again conscious of the bulk of the .38 beneath my arm. It felt good and reassuring.

"COME in," he backed away and I had a look at the bare room. There were two chairs, nothing more. Evidently this room was being used for this meeting only. Mr. Shawn was apparently a cautious man.

I shut the door and moved toward one of the chairs. Mr. Shawn took the other. He reversed it, straddled the seat with his thick legs and rested his big chin on knotted forearms.

"You don't look tough," was what he said.

I chuckled, but not from amusement. "Have you been hearing rumors?"

"I made inquiries," he admitted. "I like to know what I'm up against when I sit in a game. It gives me some advantage."

"I can see your point. I know nothing about you."

"You knew enough to hi-jack my money. How many men have you buried, Kerby?"

"I never bury them. I toss the bodies in the river. What else did you learn?"

"That you're wise, and smart, that you and your partner have a nice business here, solid accounts and connections which you wouldn't care to lose."

"That's right, we get along."

"Then why monkey into my game?" His tone had turned hard. "We want that money back. We're willing to pay a reasonable amount, but no more than reason. If you don't deal, we'll see that you are taken care of. Frankly, we don't like hi-jackers."

"What about the girl?"

"What girl, you mean the one who was with you? We aren't going to pay her off separately if that's what you're getting at. You take care of her yourself."

I started to say something, then changed my mind. Instead I asked, "If I decide to deal, what's my cut?"

"Ten thousand, or if you want to throw in with us, use your connections to move some of the hot money, we'll pay you ten and a percentage on everything you handle."

"That might be a possibility." I appeared to think it over.

Shawn said, "We'd rather do business with you than fight you."

I nodded. "It's always easier that way but I don't want the same thing to happen to me that happened to Morse."

His eyes tightened a little at the corners. "That would be unfortunate. Too bad that Morse got killed. I didn't order that done. The boys were acting on their own. They figured Morse had led you out to the old house and that you went there to take over his cut. Did he?"

I passed over that one. "When do we make the deal?"

He was eager. "Tonight."

I nodded. "Okay, tonight then." I gave him an address. "Be there in two hours."

"No crossing?"

I shrugged. "How could I cross you without losing out myself?" I rose. "And if you try to cross me. . ."

He said, "We won't. We can use a man like you, Kerby. We need a local connection."

* * *

When I got back to my apartment it was a wreck. Someone had searched it thoroughly, and they hadn't been careful to put things back where they belonged. I stood in the doorway for a long time, looking at it, then I went over to the phone and called Henderson's hotel.

His voice had an eager, nervous note. "What's happened?"

I told him about the cops, and then I told him about Mr. Shawn. I said, "I've made a deal. I turn over the money and Shawn turns over the girl."

He was silent for a long moment. "You're certain he has her?"

"Who else? Someone surely does unless she's hiding herself."

He agreed with that. "Where are you meeting Shawn?"

"At Ramus' office," I said. "I couldn't think of any other place. I didn't want to bring them here or to my office."

"Are you going to tell the police?"

"And have them maybe kill the girl, that's foolish."

"Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, if anything slips you can tell the cops I was on the level, trying." I rang off, hurried down stairs and caught a cab to the station. I'd checked a package at the check-room that morning, the package held the hot money. Then I caught another cab to Ramus' office.

The little professor met me on the sidewalk. He was almost hopping up and down. "Henderson called me," he said. "He told me what you were going to do. You have no right to use my office, to get me mixed up in this thing."

"You got me mixed up in it," I reminded him.

He stared at me with round, reproachful eyes. "But that's your business. I'm just a quiet man."

"Gimme the keys," I told him, "and go on home. If there's trouble, blame me. Tell the police you knew nothing about it."

He hesitated not knowing quite what to do. Late evening traffic rolled by us in never ending waves. No one paid any attention.

"Make up your mind," I said. "You can call the police if you like, but then, if anything happens to the blonde, why then it's all your fault."

He made a little helpless gesture with his hands. "Here are the keys. But don't let them go into the library. Don't let them disturb my books."

I PROMISED. I went up the dirty stairs and unlocked the door. Then I put the package of money on the desk. I was just headed for the library when a noise behind me made me turn. Mr. Shawn slipped into the room.

Slipped is a strange word to use in connection with such a big man, but it's the only one which explains his movements. I never saw anyone else so light-footed. There was a gun in his big hand. It looked small by comparison, the hand almost smothered it.

I stared at the man, at the gun. "What's the idea, a double-cross?"

"I haven't made up my mind. His eyes took in the package of money on the desk and glowed for an instant. "You brought that, anyway."

"What do you mean, anyway," I sounded angry.

He said, "You were talking to some little jerk down on the street. He hurried away."

"It's his office," I said. "He didn't like me using it."

"Maybe," said Mr. Shawn, "he didn't like it so much that he was going for the police." I didn't answer. I wasn't surprised when a man appeared, shoving Ramus' small figure before him.

"We just don't take chances," said Shawn.

I shrugged. "Okay, you don't take chances. There's your money. Let's deal."

"You know," he said, giving me a slow grin. "There really isn't any reason why we should deal with you. As you say, there's the money. All we have to do is to take it and leave."

I nodded. "That's right, unless you want me to use my connections to help you change those thousand dollar bills into smaller money, money which won't be questioned."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I fooled you on that one, now, didn't I? You fell for it. I sized you up. I thought you would. The question is now, what is wisest to do."

"Meaning?" I was watching him closely.

He laughed again, the rumbling sound which seemed to come from deep down in his big chest. "What was it you said earlier about throwing bodies into the river. It's a thought, Kerby. Do you realize that you and this little jerk," he indicated Ramus with a movement of his big thumb, "are the only ones who can tie me to this business?"

"Sure," I said, "that's what you think, but wait a moment. How do you think I happened to be at the plantation last night? It wasn't an accident, I assure you."

The other corner of his mouth lifted to match the one puckered by the scar. "You tell me, Mac."

I said, "Ever hear of an attorney named Henderson?"

His eyes came alive at the name. "What about him?"

"You have heard of him, I see. Was he, by any chance the reason you decided to use that plantation for your payoff point?"

Shawn was definitely interested now. "Go on?"

I said, "Henderson sent me out there. He sent me out on a trumped-up story of a treasure hunt. I wasn't sold on it, but there was a blonde involved and I was sold on the blonde. A lot of smart men have done dumb things because of a girl."

"Why do you think I know Henderson?"


I shrugged. "I'm guessing, but look at it this way. I go out on a treasure hunt and find a box of hot money. I don't believe in coincidences. They happen sometimes, but not often."

"But why would Henderson . . . ?"

I said, "I don't know what your deal with him was but I do know that he was in control of the plantation as Miss Pedarre's agent. He probably suggested it as a nice, lonely place from which to operate."

"You're warm," said Shawn. "Go on."

"And then he wanted the money for himself. He was afraid to tackle your men, so he picked a nice pigeon to do it. He picked me because I



NEXT TIME SAY

BRIGHT STAR

for a better

FLASHLIGHT

and better

BATTERIES

was supposed to be a tough guy. He framed up a cipher which sent me to the old slave prison. He even told me where to park my car. Like a fool, I played right into his hands. I got the dough, just as he hoped, I made a run for the car, taking the girl with me and he was waiting there to jump me, to grab the dough."

"Well . . ."

"But he didn't get the dough. I managed to slip out of his fingers. So he held the girl. He called and offered to trade her for the money. When I talked with you on the phone, I thought you had kidnapped her, but when I talked to you tonight, I realized that you hadn't, that you knew nothing about her being gone."

"That meant there was someone else in the game, someone I hadn't been counting on. It must be Henderson. He was the only one who knew I was connected with this thing, except for your men who apparently spotted me at Morse's and followed when I left there."

His face was tight, the scar standing out very white against his skin. "Yes," he said. "I know Henderson. He was my lawyer in San Francisco. He did suggest that we use that plantation. If I could get my fingers . . ."

"YOU can," said Henderson. He had pushed open the door of Ramus' library and was standing to Shawn's right, his gun covering the room.

"Drop it."

Shawn dropped it. Surprise came up in his big face, and then hate to wash it away. "When I get my hands . . ."

"You won't," said Henderson. He was very pleasant about it, and very business-like, and very deadly. "I'm going to kill you," he added, almost as an after thought. "I've intended to for some time."

The words rocked Shawn, but if Henderson noticed he gave no sign. "Pick up the gun, Ramus, and get the one from the jerk who's guarding you."

Ramus obeyed.

Henderson smiled thinly. "You were very handy to have around, Kerby. And you're a fool. We did fake that cipher to start the treasure hunt. Ramus worked it out and I planted it in Sue Pedarre's trunk lid. I thought it was clever. Old plantations, treasure, the two naturally go together."

My lips were a little dry, but I managed to smile. "Wouldn't it have been simpler merely to hi-jack the money yourself?"

He shook his head. "It wouldn't. I wasn't certain how well it was guarded, or what might happen. If there was a slip, and the cops came in, I would be involved. If you found it, and got as far as your car, I thought we could take it away from you."

"And I suppose I die too?"

He nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. I have nothing against you, but you have no more usefulness."

"And the girl . . . is she in the library?"

He chuckled. "You are smart. What better concealment than stacks of Ramus' books?"

Shawn made a noise in his throat. He took a step toward Henderson. The lawyer's gun steadied. "Stay where you are."

Shawn took another step. "Go ahead and shoot." His tone was mocking. "You made a mistake, Henderson. You've let me get too close. You'll shoot me, yes, but all six bullets won't stop me, and once I have your throat" . . . he jumped. The gun roared. The last shots were muffled by Shawn's vest. Every bullet took effect, but he was right. The power of his big body carried him to Henderson, his powerful hands seized the lawyer. Between the shots there was a little snapping noise and they went down together. Henderson's neck was broken.

* * *

Sue Pedarre shuddered. "I never want to hear the word treasure again as long as I live. It was terrible, in that room, just listening."

"It wasn't pretty to watch," I told her.

"And when the cops came in. It was lucky . . ."

"Not so much luck," I told her. "Every cop in town knows me by sight. They tried to follow me earlier. I stood out on the sidewalk for awhile talking to Ramus. The station is only a few blocks away. I knew someone would spot me, and that the law would show up. I thought they would come earlier."

"But if you suspected Mr. Henderson . . ."

"I had no proof. I set a trap by calling him and telling him I was going to deal with Shawn at Ramus' office. By that time I figured they had you. I thought you might be at the office. Shawn lived at a hotel, Ramus in a furnished room. The library with its stacks of books would be a good place . . ."

She sighed. "You're kind of smart. I'm surprised that you ever got mixed up in this thing."

"Blue eyes have effect," I grinned down at her. "You'd be surprised what a pair of blue eyes would make me do."

She looked away, but she didn't seem to be angry. She didn't seem to be mad at all. "What will they do with Ramus?" she was trying to change the subject.

"Send him up, probably. Best thing that could happen. He'd like the prison library."

"You're hard."

"You think so?"

She didn't really. Her eyes showed that when she turned back to face me. They were smiling, and very, very blue.

THE END