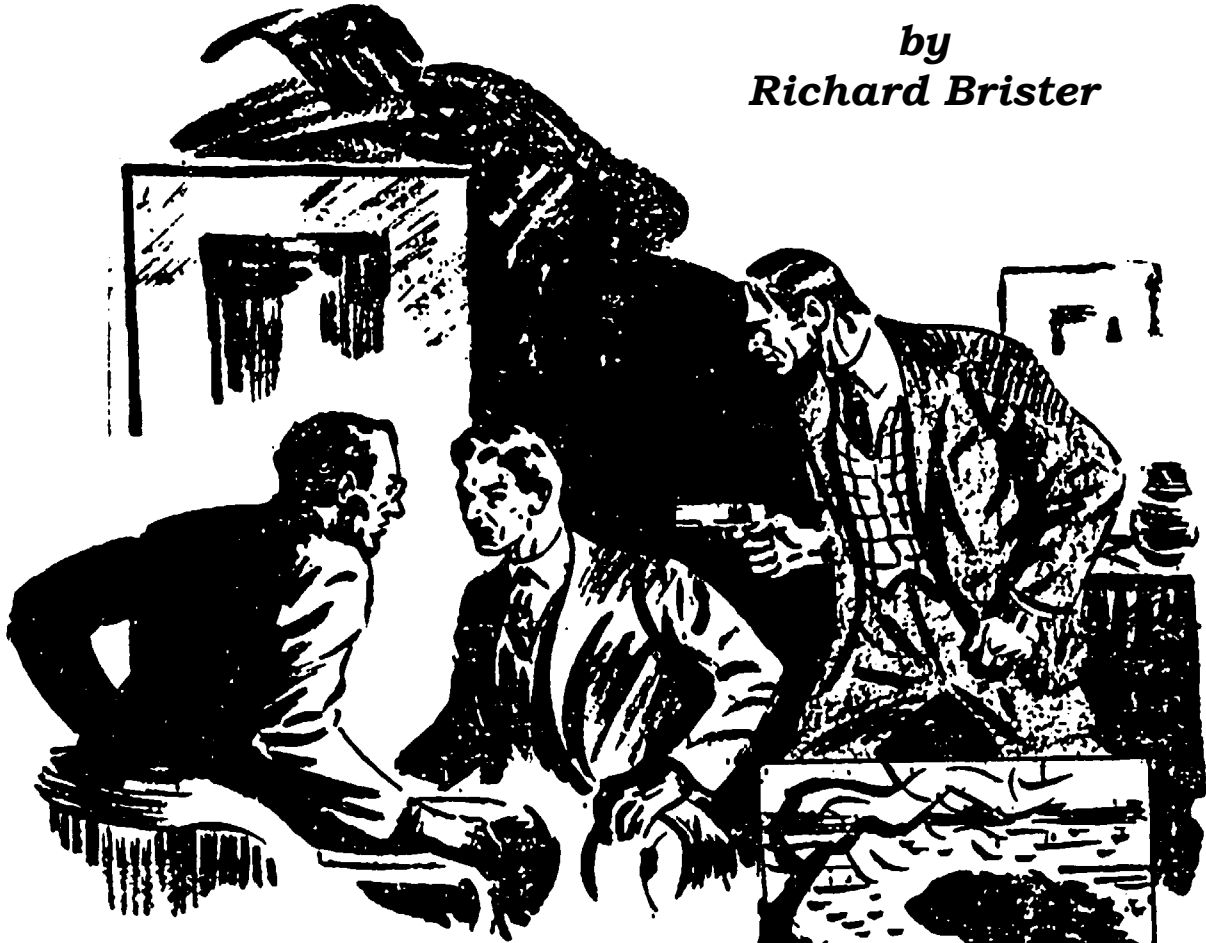


Rock-a-Bye Booby

by
Richard Brister



When Carmody sought to find the secret of that old man's second childhood, he learned how quickly the cradle can lead to the grave.

THE old geezer's dancing was definitely dated. The blonde in his arms was anything but; she had all that it takes and the effect on him who looked was most pleasant.

Carmody watched from the zoot-suited stag line and at first sight of the blonde, gave an involuntary whistle.

"Holy Hannah! How's the old buck rate *that*?"

One thing you had to hand the old boy—he had pepper. Carmody had all he could do to follow the old man's swift gyrations. The blonde had a fixed smile nailed on her tubular lips as she struggled to keep up with her energetic partner.

Carmody thought, *The lady wants out*. He walked out quickly and rapped the old boy on the shoulder.

"Cut, Pop?"

He didn't wait. He grabbed the girl's elbow. Standing close to, he saw now that her lips were trembling from the excessive exertion. She was panting like a spent race horse, although there was no further resemblance. And the old boy was wheezing like an antique bellows; there was a dangerous glaze in his eyes, and Carmody would bet Pop's heart was pumping out a fast tempo in fox-trot time.

The blonde said, "Sorry. We're not cutting."

She pulled her elbow away somewhat harder than Carmody thought necessary. He said:

"Aw, be a sport, lady. Pop's gonna cave in, you keep up this—"

The orchestra was cutting loose with a brassy rendition of *Mr. Five-By-Five*. The old buck said petulantly, "My name's not Pop. Who is this man, Linda? You know him?"

She had to shout to make herself heard above the music and the jitterbugs' stomping. "No. I don't know him, Tom."

Tom! That struck Carmody funny, her calling an old coot like Pop, Tom. He grinned. Then his jaw fell down in real amazement as the old boy pushed against him, his face working with anger.

"Get along, bud!"

"Huh?" Carmody blinked.

"I said move along!"

Carmody would have laughed out loud if Pop hadn't been wearing an absolute deadpan. He was dead serious about it. He was gallantly shielding his lady from the unruly stranger. It didn't occur to him, apparently, that Carmody could pick him up and deposit him in the nearest ashcan without ruffling a hair, if he took the notion.

He said, grinning, "Act your age, Pop. I just wanted a dance with the lady."

The old boy reached out and grabbed at his lapels with bony fingers. "My name's not Pop, I told you. Don't get funny with me, bud. If it wasn't for the lady present—"

"Oh, come on, Tom," the girl said. "Ignore him."

Carmody had leaned forward a bit when the old boy grabbed him, and caught a whiff of Tom's breath. There was no trace of liquor about him, so that didn't explain his goofy actions. Nothing did; Carmody was now more curious than ever.

The girl tugged Pop's sleeve, slipped a

luscious arm behind him, and together they slid into the music's fast tempo. The old boy was good, if you liked your dancing styled 1918. In his way, he put the kids, with their hopping, pirouetting, and stomping, to shame.

Before long, the younger generation realized there was a better show on the floor than there was on the bandstand. They formed a circle around Pop, clapping their hands in time with the music.

Pop grinned at this display of attention. He put on a good show for them. But Carmody couldn't escape the feeling that there was something phony about the exhibition. He had an eerie sensation of being transported in time to a bygone era, the way you'd feel watching a twenty-year-old movie.

It wasn't the blonde. She was strictly 1943 and a perfect package. She matched the old buck's steps with the natural ease and grace of an experienced dancer. But her heart wasn't in it. She kept darting worried glances in Carmody's direction. Finally she whispered something in the old guy's ear. He nodded and they walked toward the cloakroom.

CARMODY waited until they'd collected their coats and hats. He'd half intended to investigate them from the very beginning. The blonde's suspicious fear of attracting too much attention clinched it.

There was a terrace out front, right above the entrance. He stood against the parapet, looking down on the street. Leaning out slightly, he saw the old boy and his date or his wife or his daughter—whoever she was—come out and wave for a taxi.

Carmody cupped both ears, straining hard, when Pop gave the hackman the address he wanted.

"Two-thirteen Walnut Drive."

Carmody whistled. If Pop lived there, he was in the chips plenty. Which made things even more crazy. People who live on Walnut Drive spend their Saturday nights at the Ritz, not joints like this Moonlight Garden; they think of the word "bud" as something that comes on a flower, not a name to call strangers; and they're not given to dancing exhibitions for the general public.

Carmody picked up his hat and coat and

made a beeline for his coupe. He was behind the wheel, kicking the starter button, when the two men came out of the darkness behind him.

The fat one opened the door and stuck a .45 automatic in at him. "Keep yer trap shut an' you won't get hurt, buddy." He nodded across at the thin one, who had the other door open. "Frisk him, Charlie."

Carmody said, "He won't find anything. What is this? Can't a guy go to a dance without—"

Charlie's hands moved over him swiftly. "Nothin' on him, Wally."

Wally said, "Move over, fella. Get in, Charlie."

"Listen, what the—"

"Shut up," Wally said.

"Yeah," Charlie repeated. "Shut up."

"I'm no copper. And if it's money you're after, you got your signals mixed," Carmody said. "I'm clean as a whistle."

Wally had the car moving easily through the mid-city traffic. "You talk a lot, buddy. Can it."

"Yeah, can it," Charlie echoed.

Carmody buttoned up until they'd slipped out of the central part of the city. Wally headed out No. 319, toward the Chestnut Hill section. Walnut Drive, Carmody thought. So he had been on the track of something!

He said, "Come on. What gives? If it was the car you wanted—"

"It ain't the car, buddy."

Charlie grinned. "It ain't the car. Not by a long shot." He bared his teeth at Carmody. "You look like a pretty nice fella. Bet you had a happy childhood."

"Shut up," Wally said.

"What of it?" Carmody said. "What about my childhood?"

Wally was chuckling as he wheeled the car over into a winding dirt lane. "Nothin' much, bud. Only—you better hope it was happy."

He stopped the car in front of a rambling stone building.

"All right. Get goin'. Watch him, Charlie."

WALLY got out, waving the gun openly now. Carmody went up the six stone steps, hesitating. The door opened at once and a tall, white-haired man wearing tweeds stood looking at them.

"What is it, Wally?"

Wally kept prodding Carmody with one hand, carefully holding the gun away from him. "Inside, bud. We picked this guy up at the Garden, Doc. His ears are too big."

"How much does he know?"

"Not much. He tried to cut in on Tom and Linda. When she flagged him, he looked pretty suspicious about it. He was going to follow them when we picked him up."

The white-haired man said, "You think perhaps a slight treatment—"

Charlie was grinning from ear to ear. "The works, Doc. Go ahead. He says his childhood was happy."

Carmody said, "What kind of a damn nuthouse is this? Treatment for what? Listen, Doc, you pull any damn—"

"Pipe down," Wally said. He pushed Carmody into a dimly lit room whose four walls were lined with books. Carmody strained his eyes, trying to make out the titles, but the doc had trained a bright lamp on him. The man kept staring at him with a queer light in his eyes, until Carmody blinked and glanced away, spluttering:

"Holy Hannah, you're all screwy!" The white-haired man frowned. He poured a tumbler half full of liquid from a decanter beside him. "Here, you, drink this," he ordered.

Carmody didn't move. "Do I look crazy?"

Wally's gun waved at him. "You heard the doctor."

"Yeah, you heard what he said," Charlie, the thin one, added.

"How do I know it's not poison or something?" Carmody stalled. If Wally had started pulling trigger on him, he could hardly have been more frightened. The whole crew was nuts, he'd decided.

"I give you my word it isn't," the doctor said calmly.

Carmody looked at the gun. Wally made a hard face and waved it jerkily at him. He picked up the glass, tipped his head back, and drained it.

His heart pumped a quick tattoo against his ribs. He was waiting for something drastic to happen. Nothing did. He felt nothing at all, except the doc's shining eyes boring into his own again.

There was a peculiar quality about those eyes; they seemed almost self-illuminated.

Carmody felt at once repelled and attracted by them. His fright gave way by slow degrees to a strange feeling of nonchalance, a devil-may-care attitude toward the whole screwball setup.

The doc had a nice voice, gentle, almost caressing. Carmody felt a strange sense of confidence in him. This man would do nothing to hurt him, he decided.

"What's your name?" the quiet voice prodded.

"Carmody. Steve Carmody."

"Well, Steve, nobody's going to hurt you here. I want you to believe that. We'll just talk along, us two, and have ourselves a bit of a party. Here, I'll take a drink too."

He did, but from another decanter.

"How do you like city life, Steve?"

"I dunno. So-so, I guess. But you can't beat the country."

"No," the lulling voice said. "You can't, at that. You grew up in the country?"

"Sort of. A suburb. Out in Montgomery County. But it was real countryside then. Before the real estate men—"

"Built it up. I know. And ruined everything. I suppose you played baseball and football, went camping and—"

"I mostly went trapping."

"Oh. Muskrats?"

"That's right. And skunks. Plenty of skunks out that way. And possums and weasels. Used to get fifty cents bounty on weasels. You cut off their ears and—"

"Well, Steve," the voice rolled on lulling, distant, "those were great days. Great days. I often think what fun it'd be to go back and follow the trap line again. Up bright and early first thing in the morning, gun and a dog, dozen or so traps on the shoulder—"

"Two dozen, Doc. I had two dozen."

"Why, sure, I'd forgotten. You had two dozen. Well, suppose we go back . . . go back and make certain . . . I mean . . ."

The voice rolled away into meaningless distance. Stove lay back limply in the chair he had taken while the doctor talked. His head flopped down on his shoulder. His eyes closed and a boyish smile came over his features.

Wally said, "Traps. Muskrats. You kill me, Dec. Where'll we put him?"

"Take him back where you found him," the white-haired man ordered.

THE morning sun, glinting in through the coupe's windshield, awoke him. He was cold and stiff in his arms and legs. When the policeman passed by and yelled, "Hi-yuh, Steve," he didn't answer, because he felt bad and, besides, the policeman didn't really know him.

The policeman came back and stuck his head in the window. "You musta got a real load on last night. Slept in the car, huh? What's the idea givin' me the high hat?"

He looked straight out through the windshield. "Where can I get a train out to Lansdale?"

"Lansdale? What for? And why don't you drive it?"

"I have to hurry and look at my traps. By now, all the muskrats have chewed off their legs and gotten loose, darn it."

The policeman thought that was funny. He kept rocking back and forth on his heels, laughing and laughing. "You're killin' me, Stevie. You're killin' me."

"I am not. I just asked you a question."

"Huh?"

"How can I get the train to Lansdale?"

"Why—damn you—you mean—you ain't kiddin'?"

The policeman had a funny look in his eyes. He came closer. "Steve. You ain't still drunk?"

"I've never been drunk in my life."

The policeman opened the door and climbed in back of the wheel. "Move over," he said.

"Gee, that's swell. Will you drive me to Lansdale?"

"I'll drive you somewhere," the policeman said. "We'll have a nice ride, sonny."

The room had a cloudlike haze hanging over everything in it. There were a lot of people standing in a circle around him, looking down curiously at him. He couldn't make out their faces, nor did he know the voice of the stoop-shouldered man in the waiter's apron who was saying:

"He's coming out of it now, Captain."

Coming out of what? Steve wondered. He sat up quickly and things came clearer. He was on a table of some kind in the middle of a big white-

walled room. He saw Rafferty and said:

"What goes on here, Mike?"

Rafferty grinned and said, "How about them muskrats? They chewed their legs off yet, Stevie?"

"What muskrats? What the—"

The man in the white clothes said, "Easy, now. Take it easy," and Rafferty clammed.

Steve said irritably, "Come on, come on, let's have it."

"Somebody hypnotized you, Stevie." His face twitched. "No kiddin'. Boy, you killed me. 'Lemme go,' you was yellin'. 'I wanna go look at my traps'!"

The man in white frowned. "Better keep his mind off that awhile yet, Captain. I—"

"Patrolman," Mike said. "Not cap rain, doctor."

Steve said suddenly, "Two-thirteen Walnut Drive. By damn, I've still got it!"

Mike Rafferty said, "What?"

"A promotion for you, you thick-headed flatfoot. Come on. Let's get going."

The doctor said, "Er—I wouldn't recommend any—"

"That's all right, Doc," Steve said. "And thanks for bringing me out of it. Send me a bill. I'm in the phone book." He grabbed Mike's arm. "Come on."

"Come on where?" Mike still hesitated.

"Chestnut Hill. We're gonna blow the lid off something. Something important."

"Maybe I'd oughta phone for a squad car. I ain't supposed to—"

"You want to pound pavements the rest of your life?" Steve said irritably.

"No. Of course not."

"Come on, then."

TWO-THIRTEEN Walnut Drive was one of those mansions you either dream about or see in the movies, but seldom actually come across in real life. There were about six acres of lawn, all smooth and well-groomed as a typical golf green, and a winding lane of hard-packed sandstone.

Steve parked the coupe a half block away, approached the gate stealthily on foot. Mike took one look at the place and shied off.

"You're still off your track, Stevie. I know a legitimate joint when I see one. You'll get us in

trouble."

"So maybe we're selling brushes," Steve said. "If it's all on the up and up, there's no need to worry, is there? Come on."

Mike followed, grumbling, "Selling brushes in a cop's uniform. Ain't you subtle?"

Steve knocked on the big oaken door. There was a long moment's waiting. The door opened. Steve had to look twice to recognize last night's aging jitterbug when he wasn't whirling around a dance floor. But it was the same man who stood there glaring at him. And the nifty blonde was right behind him.

The old boy said in an acid tone, "Not much good at taking a hint, bud are you? What do you want? And why the policeman?"

Steve started in. "Just a social call Pop." He tried to push past the old man. That was when the old be: swung on him. There was plenty of ambition behind the punch; Pop was sore enough to kill him, but hadn't the strength to back up his intention.

At it was, caught by surprise, Stew stumbled against the blonde. She tripped and they fell in a heap on the carpet.

Behind Steve, Mike said, "Wow! Tough old bugger, ain't he?" He made a grab for Pop. The old man jumped to one side quickly.

"Wally! Charlie!"

Steve spotted the door through which the summons was aimed. He waited till the sound of running feet had almost reached them, then picked up a chair and hurled it along the floor blocking that path.

No All-American ever threw a prettier block. Wally came storming in with one side of his face lather-coated, a safety razor in one hand, his gun in the other. The chair took him in the knees and he did a beautiful header. The gun tumbled over the carpet. Steve dove on it, yelling:

"Watch out for the other one, Mike!"

The tragedy of Charlie's life was that he always seemed destined to follow Wally's example. He didn't fall over the chair. He fell over Wally. But he came in prepared for trouble and as he fell, his gun was blazing.

Steve heard one of the slugs plop into the hardwood floor in back of his head. He pulled trigger just once, but at that distance he couldn't miss. It hit Charlie's shoulder and he dropped his

gun with a groan of anguish.

Steve went over and picked up that gun, too. He looked around at them with a pleased expression.

"All right, boys and girls, let's have it. You, Pop, what's this dame to you?"

"My wife," the old man grunted. "And don't call me Pop, dammit."

"Why not?"

"You seem to have some idea I'm an old man, I'm not. I was thirty-three last August."

"You're kidding yourself. You've been hypnotized, Pop. Your wife's been dragging you out all hours and dancing your feet off, trying to kill you. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts she stands to inherit your last nickel."

"You—" The old man looked dazed. "Sorenson—Dr. Sorenson—maybe—"

"Yeah. And we'll look him up in the phone book. It was a very nice plan, boys and girls. But it didn't work, did it?" He leered at the girl. "Should've let me cut in last night, sister. Things might've been different. What was the matter? Couldn't you wait for the old boy's money?"

He went to the phone and put in a call for a squad car. Wally said in a thick, frightened voice, "Wha-what're ya doin'?"

Steve grinned at Mike. "I'm puttin' a call through to my kid brother," he said. "Up at Lansdale. I want to find out did I catch any muskrats."

"Nuts," Wally grunted sourly.

"What's the matter?" Steve said. "Don't look so sour. Some one'll think you had an unhappy childhood."