



# SUE as in SUICIDE

by C. S. MONTANYE

Len Royal learns a brunette's boudoir can be a murder room!

**T**HE MINUTE the little guy in the brown suit and the hand crocheted tie checked in at the Raleigh-Plaza, Len Royal, the house dick, became interested in him.

The little man registered as Merrill T. Wagstaff from Frankfort, Kentucky. To Royal he looked, and sounded, as much like a native of the Blue Grass State as a citizen of Flatbush. Wagstaff was in Room 603. He didn't spend much time around the rococo lobby of the big hotel. He came and went with all the fanfare of a mouse.

Merrill T. Wagstaff got his key from George Bixby, the night clerk, one Wednesday evening a week after he checked into the hotel. Royal, tall, redheaded and sardonic was staked out in his cubicle back of the manager's office.

The door was open and he had a diagonal view of the clerk's desk. He saw Wagstaff thanking the fastidious Bixby, before the guest picked up his key and disappeared toward the elevator.

Royal uncoiled himself from his tilted-back chair and rested a shoulder against the

connecting doorway.

"I'm stepping out for a change of breath, Georgie," he said to Bixby. "I'll be downstairs if you want me."

The Blue Bar was down one flight of wide, marble stairs. It was a popular rendezvous from the time it opened in the morning until closing. Royal smiled faintly to himself as he went down the steps. Albert Kenyon, the stuffed shirt manager of the Raleigh-Plaza Hotel, had a strict rule against any of the hotel employees stopping in at the bar at any time of day or night.

Royal didn't like Kenyon. He often wondered why the pompous director-in-charge didn't fire him. He had been house detecting for two years at the big Park Avenue caravansary. He had obeyed few of Kenyan's rules and regulations during his berth there.

**I**N THE crowded, hazy, semi-purple glow of the Blue Bar, Royal propped himself up at the end of the damp mahogany and looked around for a girl with dark, polished hair and thickly lashed eyes.

He saw her after a minute's search. She was in one of the leather-tufted compartments on the far side of the room. Two men were with her, one beside her, the other across the narrow table. Steve, Royal's favorite barman, bobbed up.

"What's your poison, pardner?"

"Vat Thirty—as if you didn't know. No chaser, Steve." Royal smiled thinly. "Clever idea—putting the water right in the liquor."

His gaze went back to the compartment. One of the two men with Sue Conway was recognizable, the one seated beside her. He was Harry Powell, who until recently had been the owner and operator of a 53rd Street night spot known as the Club Coronet.

The girl with the sleek dark hair and the widely-spaced, heavily lashed eyes had done a piano specialty as part of the Coronet's entertainment. She had sung sophisticated,

slightly risqué songs in a fascinatingly husky voice while accompanying herself on a gleaming white piano.

Powell was a sloppy looking guy. His blue serge needed pressing, his shoes could have done with a polish and the stringy tie he wore was no asset. He had a square, empty kind of face, dead panned and yellowish in the purple light.

The other man, the one across the table, made Len Royal's brows draw quizzically together. He was also big all over, but he didn't have any of Powell's untidiness about him. He was a strong-jawed, youngish man, sandy-haired and alert. Royal couldn't place him, but there was something about him that held the detective's attention—something that made the Raleigh-Plaza's house dick thoughtful.

Royal had finished his first gargle and was pouring a second when Harry Powell got up and shuffled toward the double doors that led out to the marble steps. A few minutes later the other man in the compartment nodded to the girl and went out. Royal, small glass in hand, detached himself from the bar and dropped down into the seat across from Sue Conway.

"Mind if I drop anchor here?" He made it sound casual.

"Why not?" The dark eyes were indifferent.

"Thought there might be a cable crossing." Royal set his glass in front of him.

For the past six months the girl had been a guest of the hostelry. She had a single room on the eleventh floor. Royal wondered if she were going to stay on now that the Club Coronet had folded like an Arabian tent.

He looked her over with interest and admiration. Her hair, black as the nine of spades, accented the creamy white of her oval face, the startling red of her curved lips and the satiny sheen of her throat. Her eyes, despite their indifference, were made for

dreaming. There was a charm to her that Royal had known and felt from the first time he had spoken to her, weeks before.

"Off duty?" Sue Conway's speaking voice had the same husky quality of her singing register.

Royal shook his head and said, "No, I'm just breaking a couple of Al Kenyon's iron-clad rules. No tipling or mingling by the hired help."

"Then your visit is strictly social." She rattled the ice in her tall glass. Her nails were long and a deeper red than her mouth.

"I'm a curious so-and-so. Something interests me and I peg away at it until I learn what I'm after. In this case it answers to the name of Merrill T. Wagstaff."

The dark eyes held his own steadily. "And?"

"Who is the little guy? He's supposed to come from Kentucky. What's his grind?"

"Why ask me?" Sue Conway's vivid lips parted in a faint smile. "I don't know him. Or do I?"

"You were down here with him Sunday night, lifting a few," Royal said in the same carelessly conversational tone. "Over there, compartment two. Remember?"

"Oh, the little man with the hand crocheted tie. He bought me a drink," she said, just as carelessly.

ROYAL looked at her, frowning. "Just a drink? He didn't give you any background material?"

"Why should he?" Her arched brows lifted slightly. "What's he done—that you're checking?"

Royal shrugged. "Put it down to curiosity."

"Sorry, I'm fresh out of answers."

She looked at the tiny, jeweled octagon ticking on her left wrist and got up. Royal, remembering his manners, stood. She gave him the ghost of a smile and stepped past him.

Royal shrugged again and let her go.

But he wasn't satisfied. He had the feeling that what he had seen in compartment two on Sunday night was more than a stranger in town buying a pretty girl a companionable drink. Royal took his whiskey glass back to the bar. He didn't like mysteries when they weren't printed on paper or flashed on sound screens. And he had a deep rooted conviction that Sue Conway had known Merrill T. Wagstaff before their Sunday night meeting.

Upstairs, the Raleigh-Plaza's gilded lobby had assumed the quiet of the late hour. A few expensively gowned women with well groomed escorts waited at the elevators or were moving toward the revolving doors.

Bixby, at the circular, black onyx desk, was polishing his horn-rimmed spectacles with a delicately scented handkerchief when Royal, glancing at the clock over the elevators, stopped.

"Time for all sleuths to knock off, Georgie. Anything you want to say before I reach for the innerspring?"

Bixby coughed. "Possibly, one. You've been so interested in Mr. Wagstaff, six-o-three. Well, a little while ago a man came up from the Blue Bar. He wanted to know what time Mr. Wagstaff left in the morning and if he had his breakfast here. It struck me as peculiar—such personal inquiries."

"What did he look like?"

Bixby coughed again, and adjusted his glasses and furnished a description. Len Royal didn't interrupt, but his mouth tightened. The night clerk was supplying a word picture of the other man who had been with Harry Powell and Sue Conway in the Blue Bar compartment.

"What did you tell him, Georgie?"

"I informed him," Bixby answered stiffly, "that it's against the rules for me to give out any information concerning our guests. And don't call me 'Georgie'. You know I abhor familiarity."

"Sorry, a slip of the lip." Royal grinned. "Goodnight—Bixby."

His own small room was on the twentieth floor. In bed, the light out, Royal had a time getting to sleep. Merrill T. Wagstaff kept sliding in and out between the sheep he counted. And when the little man with the hand crocheted tie wasn't there, the glamorous Miss Conway replaced him.

Royal pulled the sheet up to his chin. What annoyed him was not being able to put a finger on the cause of his speculations. He had a deep, intuitive hunch that the man who had registered from Frankfort was a phony. Royal couldn't help feeling that Wagstaff wasn't what he pretended to be—a quiet, unassuming, harmless person.

And there was someone else interested in him, Royal thought. A big, strong-jawed character who packed something that Royal had noticed and puzzled over in the Blue Bar. . . .

He must have dozed off. The ring of the telephone on the table beside his bed jarred him to a sitting position. Royal reached for the telephone, still in a hazy, half awake condition. George Bixby's voice sounded agitated:

"Len! Get dressed as quickly as you can and go to six-o-three! Something terrible's happened!"

The wire clicked and went dead. Royal turned on the light and got out of bed. Ten minutes later he was on the sixth floor.

AT THE far end of the corridor he saw 'Shorty' Harrigan, one of the bellhop brigade, several of the Raleigh-Plaza's guests and the portly figure of Albert Kenyon. The manager seemed to be trying to get the guests back to their rooms. Harrigan, when Royal approached, looked pale and slightly green around the gills.

"What's the complaint?" Royal saw that the door to 603 was open on a crack. The soft glow of shaded light slanted across its

sill.

"In there!" Shorty pointed with a not too steady finger. "A guy's been shot up! And me—I walk right in on him—with his carafe of ice water and the oranges he ordered every night."

Kenyon, successful in getting the last of the hotel's clientele out of the way, came quickly toward Royal. His usually smug, pompous superiority was conspicuous by its absence. Kenyon's jowly face was troubled. Even his closely clipped gray mustache had lost some of its dignity.

"About time you showed up," he said to Royal. "Mr. Wagstaff's had an accident. You'd better go in and see what it's all about. I'll wait out here for your report."

Royal shouldered the door wider and went into 603. The soft light came from the lamp on the night table beside the desk. Royal, with narrowing eyes, centered his gaze on the bed. He felt the slow crawl of his nerves, a sudden emptiness in the pit of his stomach, a cold, clammy chill that started somewhere at the end of his spine and moved stealthily to the top of his scalp.

He didn't mind the sight of blood, or a man who was definitely and thoroughly dead. But he did object to being peered at with glazed, staring eyes which resembled two holes in a mask made of a red ooze.

The blood came from a head wound over the right temple. The blood had run down into the hollow at the base of the dead man's neck. Royal's gaze moved over the pajama-coated figure to the floor and the gun that lay half under the dust-ruffle on the four-poster bed.

He whipped out a handkerchief and picked the weapon up. Holding it to the light he saw it was a Smith and Wesson .32 caliber revolver, the kind known as a hand ejector. Royal saw that it was a new gun. Its nickel finish was bright, unscratched. Its checkered walnut stock was unmarred, highly polished. It had a four and a quarter

inch barrel, weighed about eighteen or nineteen ounces and had one empty cartridge in its chamber.

He laid the gun on the blotter pad of the desk on the other side of the room and let his eyes move around in a slow arc. There was nothing revealing. The room was orderly, the adjoining bath still steamy, the shower curtain still wet. Royal looked at the neat pile of Merrill T. Wagstaff's clothing on a chair in a corner. The shoes were placed under it, the hand crocheted tie folded on the bureau's glass top. Next to that was a pigskin wallet.

Royal used his handkerchief again to examine the wallet. He went through it quickly, counted the money it contained and riffled through the memoranda in its divisions. He found an auto driver's license, stared at it thoughtfully and slipped that into his pocket. Then dropping the wallet back where he had found it, Royal walked to the door and stepped out into the corridor.

"Is he—" Albert Kenyon broke the question off. Royal nodded.

"Yeah. You'd better call the police."

"Police?" The fat hotel manager took a backward step. "But—but think of the publicity. Murder in the Raleigh-Plaza! We can't have it!"

"You've got it," Royal said without humor.

Kenyon rubbed his chins with a pudgy, not too steady hand. A foppish dresser, he went in for jewelry. A wristwatch with a gold bracelet strap, an old fashioned stickpin, a jeweled tie pin and two rings. One was on the third finger of his left hand, the other on the fourth. His pinkie ring was a reddish, oval stone with an intaglio bird. The setting was antique gold.

Len Royal looked at the two rings while Kenyon patted his double chins.

"I'll telephone." He sucked in a wheezy voice. "The management isn't going to like this. They're not going to like it at all.

*Murder!"*

He shuddered and waddled away.

Royal watched him go. Harrigan, the bellhop, had been ordered back to the lobby. Except for two or three doors opened just a crack so those behind them might hear what was going on, the long, wide corridor was quiet and deserted.

ROYAL walked as far as the stairs. The light was better there. He sat down on the third step and took out the driver's license he had removed from the wallet. A frown creased his forehead.

The license had been made out to Arthur Parrish. The address on it was 29 Walnut Street, Center City, N.Y. The date of birth and the height tallied with the little man who had named Frankfort, Kentucky, as his home town. Royal slipped the license back in his pocket and took an elevator down to the lobby.

In a public telephone booth near the south entrance to the hotel, he laid a stack of change on the counter, got a long distance operator and told her:

"I want to get Center City, New York. I want to talk to the Chief of Police there. I'll hang on." . . .

Ten minutes later he left the booth, the wail of an arriving squad car in his ears. A moment later Royal saw men coming into the lobby.

He went back to Room 603. Homicide with all its props had taken over. The room was full of cigar and cigarette smoke, burned flash bulbs, conversation and movement.

A man Royal recognized as Lieutenant Hartley gave him a curt nod. Hartley said, "You're the house detective. You were in here—after the bellhop discovered the body. What have you got?"

"Not a thing." Royal shook his head. "I took one quick look and told Mr. Kenyon to call you. This isn't my department."

"No suggestions or opinions?"

"None." Royal backed away.

Nobody stopped him. He went back to the elevators, pressed the up button and got off at the eleventh floor. At the end of the corridor he knocked on a door. A pencil of light along its crack told him that Sue Conway was still awake.

She opened the door after a minute. She had changed to a quilted housecoat with a broad cerise sash. Her small bare feet were in fuzzy white scuffs. She had removed her makeup but her lips still glowed, warm and red against her creamy skin.

"I want to talk to you." Royal elbowed the door open and pushed it shut with a foot when he was on its other side. The room he was in was smaller than six-o-three. The bed hadn't been turned down and there was a bottle of bourbon and two glasses on a tray on the night table. He switched his glance from the tray to her pretty face. "Heard the news?"

"What news?"

"Wagstaff's dead. Hole in his head. Thirty-two caliber. I thought you might want to know."

He watched her closely. She seemed to freeze, but her face remained expressionless. The lashes were down, screening her dark eyes so Royal couldn't see what they hid. But he did notice her tapering fingers close tightly.

"Why tell me about it?" The husky voice was level and steady.

"Look." Royal spoke impatiently. "The cops are down in six-o-three now. They want to scrape up every scrap of information they can get hold of. You know more about the little guy than you're letting on. Maybe I'd better tell the law to ask you a few questions."

She drew a deep breath. She walked across to the dresser and shook a cigarette out of an open pack. She lighted it, inhaled and turned to Royal.

"What do you want to know? What's

your angle?"

"Curiosity—to answer your last question first. I figured Wagstaff wasn't right from the minute I saw him. You had more than a chance drink with him. You knew him. And you knew his real name wasn't Wagstaff."

Sue Conway sat down on the edge of the bed. "He asked me not to air our friendship. I figured maybe he had a wife. Maybe that was why he used the name of Wagstaff instead—"

"Of Arthur Parrish," Royal said abruptly. "What else did he tell you?"

"That he was a banker up-state."

"He was a cashier until a couple of weeks ago. I got it from the Chief of Police there, via the Bell System. At that time Parrish walked out—with thirty grand of the bank's coin."

THE girl leaned to mash her cigarette out in a dish. Royal was treated to a delightfully distracting view.

"I heard about that tonight—downstairs in the bar," she said. "You saw me with Powell and that other man. He was a detective from Center City with a warrant for Arthur's arrest. He was going to pick him up later to-night."

"How long did you know Parrish?"

"Since around Christmas. Harry Powell met him at the Coronet. Arthur said he was a small town banker, that he was in New York on a mid-winter vacation. He spent most of his time at the Coronet. Harry said Arthur had tumbled for me, that I was to kid him along. That sometime he might come in handy—for financing."

Royal began to get it. "Business dwindled, the Coronet needed dough to keep going. So you brought Parrish back—with his thirty G's?"

Sue Conway nodded apathetically.

"I wrote him a letter. That—that detective must have found it."

"What about the thirty thousand?"

"I don't know. Harry and Arthur have been hashing it over. Arthur wanted me to star in a big revue at the Coronet when it was reopened. They expected to come to terms this week."

"Then no money changed hands?"

"That's what the detective asked. Not a dime."

"Parrish must have stashed the lifted dough. Not in the hotel safe—according to Bixby." Royal spoke, half to himself. "There was seventy dollars in his leather. He might have had the coin cached out in his room."

"He—he wasn't a bad little guy." Sue Conway's voice had a catch in it. "He did the caper for me! Because he was in love with me! Even if he was a crook I—"

Royal nodded toward the bottle and the two glasses on the tray.

"You expected him up to-night?"

"No—"

"Then who did you expect?"

Her dark eyes fluttered up to meet his. A full minute ticked away before she answered.

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The police were still in 603. Royal didn't stop there. He went on down to the lobby. A disturbed and apprehensive Bixby shook his head when Royal opened the door that led to his own retreat. "Murder!" Bixby bleated. "It'll be all over the front pages. As if this hotel were a Bowery flophouse!"

Royal didn't say anything. There was a light in the row of offices to the left of where he stood. After a minute he saw Lieutenant Hartley come out of Kenyon's private sanctum.

Royal watched him go, his eyes narrowed and his face shadowed. He waited until Bixby turned back to his work, went down the short passage and up to the frosted glass door with Kenyon's name gold-leafed on it. He pushed that open and looked in.

Kenyon saw him and called out, "Come in, Royal. Got news for you."

He sat at his long, flat-topped desk. The

worry had gone out of his jeweled face. The close-clipped mustache seemed to have regained its lost jauntiness. He pointed to a chair with a spatulate finger. Royal shut the door, but didn't sit down.

"What news?"

"About Wagstaff—or Arthur Parrish, to give him his right name. It wasn't murder. It was suicide."

"Suicide?" Royal didn't move.

Kenyon nodded. "Doesn't take the police long to find these things out. Right in the middle of their investigation a detective from upstate walked in. This Wagstaff—or Parrish—had embezzled funds from a bank where he worked. He knew the law was on his heels. He took the easy way out, the quick way. He shot himself!"

Still Len Royal didn't move. He said, "So that's what happened?"

"They found his prints on the gun. Faint, but his without question."

"But they didn't find thirty thousand bucks?" Royal said.

ALBERT KENYON looked surprised. "So you knew the amount?" He tipped back in his chair. "No, they haven't found that as yet. But they will. Parrish probably has it in a bank under another phony name. They'll dig it up in time. They never miss."

"They missed to-night." A faint, sardonic smile twisted Royal's mouth. "Parrish didn't do the job on himself. He was murdered for the cash. The killer planted Parrish's prints on the gun and left it on the floor beside his bed, making it look as if it had slipped out of a dead hand."

Kenyon's chair clicked as he straightened up in it. His double chins shook with emotion. "What do you mean by making an absurd statement like that?"

"Not so absurd." Royal moved a step forward. "I'm interested in that ring you're wearing. The one on your pinkie, with the red stone and the bird engraved on it. That

ring belonged to Parrish.”

Kenyon’s mouth opened. His eyes widened as he swallowed. But his expression remained unchanged.

“That’s right. I love jewelry. I admired the ring when I first saw it. I bought it from Parrish, the second night he was here.”

Royal shook his head. “No good, Kenyon. You didn’t buy anything from him. You helped yourself. You’ve got the thirty G’s. You were going to use them to do something for Miss Conway—out on the West Coast. You’ve had a yen for her for a long time. You’ve been letting her have a room here and you’ve been footing the bills. You’ve—”

Kenyon’s hand came away from the top desk drawer. His fat fingers were clamped about an automatic. In one move he had the gun up and was out of the chair.

“Smart dick! I didn’t give you credit for it, Royal. I thought you were just a lazy, redheaded, imitation gumheel who took this job because you didn’t have enough ambition, brains or guts to get with a private agency. Looks like I made a mistake, doesn’t it?”

“Miss Conway gave me the tipoff,” Royal said quietly. “It was easy figuring after I had the word—and had seen the ring. By the way, did Bixby tell you I was in here a few minutes ago—tampering with that gun? I never take chances and—”

Kenyon turned the automatic, his thumb on its safety, giving Royal the split-second

he needed. He was across the desk and on the fat man before Kenyon could get the gun back in a firing line.

Royal wrenched the rod out of Kenyon’s sausage-like fingers with one hand and smashed his free fist into the man’s soft face. It was like sitting on a box of marshmallows. But Royal wasn’t finished. He brought the gun down in a vicious butt-whip across Albert Kenyon’s skull. The man staggered back, over the swivel chair and into a steel filing cabinet. He clawed at it, his legs turning rubbery, his expression suddenly one of imbecilic blankness.

Royal laughed as he grabbed him by the lapels and jerked him across to the flat-topped desk. He raised his voice, calling for Bixby. When the frosted glass door burst open, Royal said;

“Buzz six-o-three, Georgie. Have a cop sent down. Tell him I’ve got a killer—on ice and ready for frying!”

The glass door stayed open while Bixby disappeared. Kenyon panted like a porpoise out of water. He made sounds deep in his throat. Prodding him with the automatic, Royal said;

“It was the red ring with the bird, Kenyon. You said you bought it the second evening Parrish was here. But I saw it last night on his finger, when he stopped for his key! Too bad you couldn’t resist wearing it. That ring tolls your death knell, Kenyon!”