

MEMPHIS BLUES

By Frank Johnson

A corpse, a hand grenade and a blood-stained rose!

JOHN NELSON hesitated at the door of his hotel room, key in hand, and frowned. He was sure he had closed and locked the door less than an hour earlier before going down to dinner. But now it stood ajar. Of course, there could be a dozen legitimate reasons for the door being open, but Nelson knew there was no maid service at this hour and he didn't believe in any other possible explanation. Not with his set-up.



He stepped warily into the room and looked around sharply. Nobody there. He closed and locked the door from the inside intending hastily to search the place. As he turned something slipped from under the edge of his sole and rolled across the rug. He stared down. Then his eyes widened incredulously.

Reaching down, he picked up the object. It was a black pearl. Which was ridiculous, of course. So he slipped a jeweler's eyeglass from his pocket, fitted it to his eye and examined the lustrous pebble. It was a genuine black pearl, all right—one of the largest and most perfect he had ever seen.

"So my room is somebody's oyster, eh?" he reflected grimly. "And I don't know a soul in Memphis, Tennessee. Thorne will be interested in this."

Pocketing both pearl and eyeglass, Nelson proceeded to examine the room. As he went to open the door of a closet he noticed a foot protruding from under the bed. Instantly Nelson's hand snatched out an automatic from his shoulder holster. At that moment John Nelson looked like a well-dressed, dark-haired and very dangerous man.

"All right, guy," he said in a hard, flat voice. "You can come out now. Your street car is waiting at the corner."

There was no reaction from the man under the bed. Nelson promptly reached out with one muscular leg and gave the side of the bed a vigorous thrust. The piece of furniture rolled away, revealing the supine body of a man. That empurpled, congested face and a slightly protruding tongue told a grim story. He was dead.

The corpse wasn't a pretty object. A thin silver wire had been used to garrote him. Sunk almost to invisibility below the skin surface, enough of it showed at the side where it was wrapped and twisted around a satiny cylinder of black wood to apprise Nelson that the wire was a string

from a musical instrument. It looked like a string from a tenor banjo.

But that wasn't the crowning horror and shock of the discovery for Nelson. John Nelson had said he didn't know anybody in Memphis. He had been wrong about that, for he recognized the dead man. It was Harold Thorne, the jewel collector. Thorne was supposed to be in St. Louis. And he was never going to be interested in anything on earth again.

"Everything happens to me," muttered Nelson as he reholstered his gun. "Even if Thorne didn't like me, getting himself killed in my room was overdoing it."

NELSON knelt down. He felt the corpse's forehead and found the flesh was just beginning to cool. So Thorne had been neatly dispatched here in this Memphis hotel room within the last hour. Which brought on a whale of a lot of complications that placed John Nelson in a very nasty situation.

He walked over and sat down in an easy chair near the open window. It was a warm, balmy night but Nelson wasn't paying any attention to the weather. He had to do some quick and heavy thinking.

First, there was his connection with Thorne. Next, there was the handle used on the garroting wire. While he couldn't be sure without a thorough examination, Nelson was almost positive it was the ebony case which had contained the Black Dragon pearls he was supposed to get from Jacques. And finally there was the item of the black pearl he had found on the floor.

A rapid knocking sounded on the corridor door. Nelson listened, thought of the police, then looked at the corpse and felt quite unhappy about the whole thing. While he was debating whether or not to lie doggo, the knock was repeated, and a

lovely feminine voice spoke from outside the door.

"Mr. Nelson!" it called. "Please let me in. I've got to see you. It's terribly important!"

Rolling the bed back over the gruesome object on the floor, Nelson walked over and opened the door. A decidedly pretty girl, with neatly coiffeured black hair, stood there. In her hand she held a dark red rose. Nelson decided that evidently he was all kinds of a liar. He knew a lot of people in Memphis—at least, they knew him. For the girl's eyes lighted up with recognition, and she stepped quickly into the room. She was dressed in a white evening gown that revealed she had a nice figure.

"Mr. Nelson," she said, her anxious brown eyes fastened on his rugged features, "you've simply got to help me."

"No doubt you want a vase for your American Beauty," he said ironically, as he glanced at the rose in her hand.

"This is not an American Beauty," she said slowly. "It is a Marechal Niel."

"Most Marechal Niels are yellow, I thought," Nelson said.

"This one is yellow. It's—it's covered with blood!" she whispered.

She shuddered violently and simply wilted where she stood. If Nelson hadn't reached out and caught her, she would have crumpled to the floor. He lifted her in his strong arms, saw that she had honestly fainted and placed her gently on the bed. The rose she still held made a dark smear on the counterpane.

"Nice going, Mr. Nelson," he said softly. "Your dead employer under the bed and a strange girl with a blood-stained rose on top of it. A black pearl in your pocket, and you without the slightest idea what it's all about. All you need to complete the nightmare is a Molotov cocktail."

Then he started violently. For in her other hand, the unconscious girl gripped a Russian hand grenade! And that often had been ironically called a Molotov cocktail.

"So she came looking for you, Nelson," said a suave voice from the open door of the room. "I wondered where she had gone."

Nelson whirled, hand reaching for the gun in his holster. Despite its smoothness, there had been a nasty note in that voice. He relaxed as he recognized the man who stepped into the room. The visitor closed the door quietly behind him.

It was Henri Jacques, amateur musician, and owner of the Black Dragon pearls. He was a small man with bright dark eyes and a neatly trimmed goatee. He walked over and seated himself in a chair not far from the bed.

"Who is she?" Nelson nodded to the unconscious girl. "Where did she get the rose and the hand grenade?"

"A Miss Peggy Morton," said Jacques. "I saw her come rushing out of her room a few minutes ago with the rose and the hand grenade." He glanced at the pineapple-shaped object in the girl's left hand. "For our sake I hope that thing is a dud."

"Good gosh! I never thought of that."

Nelson leaped to the bed and picked up the hand grenade. It was surprisingly light and apparently unloaded. Nelson took it to the table lamp and examined it carefully.

"This is harmless," he said.

"I feel much better." Jacques was staring at the floor. "Does the gentleman under the bed happen to be dead?"

Nelson nodded. Just then the girl moaned and opened her eyes. Henri Jacques raised his eyebrows.

"Why did you kill him?" Jacques asked.

"I didn't," said Nelson. "And I'm no oil painting waiting to be framed either."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Peggy Morton sat up and looked at the two men. "I must have fainted." She glanced at the rose that she still held in her hand, shuddered and dropped it. "I found the rose lying on the floor of my room covered with blood."

"So you grabbed it and the grenade and came looking for me," said Nelson. "Why, Miss Morton?"

THE girl looked at him in surprise. "Someone told me you were a detective. I thought the bloodstained rose and the hand grenade in my room were mysterious. It struck me you might be able to help me, Mr. Nelson."

"Who told you I was a detective?" asked Nelson. He did not look at the girl. He was staring at what appeared to be chicken feathers on one of Jacques's neatly pressed trousers legs. "Do you remember?"

"Why, yes." The girl nodded. "It was this gentleman here, Mr. Jacques."

"I see," John Nelson smiled. "Suppose we talk things over and find out just what this is all about, Jacques. Why are you here now?"

"As I understand it you are here in Memphis as Harold Thorne's representative," said Jacques. "Thorne hired you to come to this city because he was going to be busy in St. Louis. Am I right?"

"You are so far," Nelson said. "I was to see you and offer you fifty thousand dollars for the Black Dragon pearls. Mr. Thorne wanted them for his jewel collection. I phoned you before dinner tonight and told you why I was here. You agreed to see me in the morning."

"That's true," said Jacques. "But when I discovered that the pearls were missing—"

"Missing!" interrupted Nelson. "You mean someone stole them?"

"Someone did," said Henri Jacques. "And even though they are insured for fun value I dislike having them stolen. So I came to see you."

"That's interesting," Nelson frowned. "You mean you suspect me of stealing the pearls?"

"I haven't said so—yet." Henri Jacques' expression was not nice. "But since you murdered Thorne I wouldn't put it past you, Nelson."

"Murder!" exclaimed Peggy who had been, listening tensely. "Who was murdered?"

"The man lying under the bed," said Jacques coldly.

Peggy barely managed to suppress a scream. She leaped to her feet and hastily moved away from the bed.

"Thorne didn't like me," said Nelson. "I was surprised when he hired me to try and buy the pearls from you, Jacques."

"Which was why he must have come here himself," Jacques said. "Evidently he decided he preferred to deal with me direct. He came to your room here in the hotel. Perhaps he fired you. Or he may have discovered that you stole the pearls from me and accused you of it."

"And then?" asked Nelson quietly as Jacques paused.

"Then you murdered him," said Jacques. "It seems to me it is time we sent for the police."

"You're right," Nelson looked at the girl. "Would you mind going to your room, Miss Morton and phoning the police from there? I want Mr. Jacques to have a look at the body before the police arrive and it will not be a pleasant sight."

"Of course," said Peggy as she walked to the door. "I'll call the police at once."

She left the room, closing the door behind her. Nelson pulled the bed aside, revealing the body. Henri Jacques sat staring at the corpse. Nelson spent some

time searching around the room, but did not find what he was looking for, so he stopped and spoke.

"You are quite right, Jacques," said Nelson. "Obviously Thorne came here to the hotel tonight looking for me. When he discovered I was not in my room, he must have had a bellboy bring him up here and let him in with a pass key. Then he probably phoned you and had you come to see him here."

"Go on," said Jacques. "I'm interested in your alibi, Nelson."

"You brought the Black Dragon pearls along with you," went on Nelson. "But Thorne was smarter than you'd thought he would be. He discovered that the pearls were artificial, with the possible exception of one or two which were real."

"Pure guesswork," said Jacques coldly. "Your alibi sounds rather weak."

"When Thorne discovered you were trying to trick him, the two of you got into a fight. You found a chance to slip a banjo string around his throat and strangle him. Then you tied the empty case that had contained the pearls to the end of the wire. In the struggle with Thorne you dropped one of the real pearls on the floor. I found that one."

"You're very clever, Nelson." A gun suddenly appeared in Jacques' hand covering the other man. "In fact, you've guessed too closely to the truth! But what about the girl and the blood-stained rose?"

"That was pure hokum on your part." Nelson grinned ironically. "You told her I was a detective. Later you planted the blood-stained rose and the hand grenade in her room hoping she would ask me to investigate—just as she did. You wanted her to come barging in here and find me alone with Thorne's body."

"Nonsense," said Jacques. "Thorne didn't bleed. Where did I get the blood?"

"Evidently from a chicken you killed,"

said Nelson: "The feathers are still on your trousers leg."

"You've been too smart, Nelson." Henri Jacques got to his feet. "I killed Thorne. The whole thing happened just as you have said. But I am the only one who will ever know it. When the police arrive you will be dead!"

NELSON was still holding the hand grenade in his fingers. He suddenly flung it. The missile caught the little man squarely in the face and knocked him flat. Jacques' gun roared harmlessly; the bullet plowing into a wall.

John Nelson had his automatic out and was covering Jacques with the gun as the door opened and the police walked in.

"There are times when you can learn a lot by listening outside of a door," said the police lieutenant in charge. "We have been out in the hall for quite a few minutes and we heard Jacques admit he was the murderer."

"Good!" said Nelson. "Jacques evidently had already sold most of the Black Dragon pearl collection and had substitute imitations made. He planned to

claim that I killed Thorne and stole the real pearls. He hoped to collect the insurance on them that way."

"And you didn't let him get away with it," said the lieutenant as two of his men grabbed Jacques. "Is that it, Mr. Nelson?"

"That's right," Nelson nodded. "You see Jacques was right when he told the girl that I am a detective. I'm the investigator for the company that insured the pearls. Thorne hired me to buy the pearls for him and I came here to do that."

He reached down and picked up the hand grenade. The lieutenant frowned.

"What's the idea of that thing?" asked the police official.

"You'll find the imitation pearls in this," said Nelson, as he unfastened the top and shook out a bag containing the black pebbles. "Jacques had to have some place to hide them after he showed them to Thorne. So he placed them in the grenade, which he'd probably been using for a paperweight. He didn't think they would be found there." Nelson smiled. "If he had succeeded in framing me I sure would have had the Memphis Blues!"