

RUBY RANSOM

There was a butler who looked like Frankenstein, but wasn't; there were a couple of old maids who wore funny-smelling perfume and who had odd dispositions; there was an assortment of other odd characters. And most of all there was a comely corpse who was present and a set of valuable ruby rocks that were missing—and before Dan Turner reached the peak with this mob, he was missing part of his health!



By
**ROBERT
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I started to slug him on the puss and he gave me his knee, smack in the shly-bar. So I started to fold like a punctured tire, feeling very sick..



THE INSTANT I parked my jalopy in front of the old-fashioned but palatial Dahlgren wigwam I had a hunch I was going to regret it. There were signs and portents warning me I was stepping into more than I'd bargained for; telling me I'd have been better off if I had stayed home in bed. Portents should be respected.

It was after midnight, and I tabbed a cluster of cars in the driveway: cop cars. There was a somber black morgue wagon, too—and it was about to get a passenger. From the wide front portico of the stash, two white-jacketed characters were lugging a narrow wicker basket the general dimensions of a coffin—and the strain on their arms told you the basket was loaded with a corpse.

In my racket, which is private snooping, corpses always spell trouble; particularly when you find the gendarmes on the job. For a brief moment I debated whether to roll away from there or stick around and see what cooked. I flipped a mental coin and curiosity

called the turn—curiosity plus the possibility of earning a fee for my professional services.

I latched my anchors, barged out of my bucket and approached the morgue-wagon orderlies. "Who got bumped, buster?" I asked the guy in front.

"Blow, pal," he growled. "I'm just a hired hand. We ain't supposed to talk to reporters. Besides, how'd you know it's a bump?" he added suspiciously.

I fell into step with him. "Found together, cadavers and coppers usually indicate homicide—or anyhow death by violence. And I'm not a reporter, I'm a gumshoe; Dan Turner is the handle. Maybe you've heard of me."

"In Hollywood, who hasn't?" He softened his manner. "Excuse me, it's so dark out here I didn't recognize you." He cleared his throat and said: "Servant."

"A she or a him?"

"Female. Young. Kinda pretty, too. Or was."

"Was?"

He nodded. "A strange caper. You know how *that* is."

"Yeah," I said, remembering others I'd lamped in my time: suffused map, glassy glims, protruding tongue, collapsed windpipe with purplish bruises marking where the throttler's fingers had wrapped around the throat and squeezed. "Nasty, eh?"

"She won't never win no beauty prizes. Not now she won't." He and his helper shoved their burden into the hearse. "You goin' to help hunt the heel which done it to her?"

"Not while I'm in my right mind. I never butt into police business," I said piously. Then I headed for the house before he handed me the horse laugh.

Halfway to the porch I met Tim Killane.

KILLANE was a tall, bald bozo with a cynical twist to his kisser and a beak like a vulture's. Until a couple of years ago he had been a dick on the D.A.'s special staff, scribbling detective stories on the side; then the movies had signed him as a scenarist for bang-bang B pix, the kind where gore flows in gallon lots and you can't hear the dialogue for the gunfire—which nine times out of seven is a blessing in disguise. Back in his sleuthing days Killane had sent me many a fat case and never asked for a split of the retainer, the way most bulls do when they steer jobs to a private man. This made him a good guy in my book, although I'd never mixed with him socially; the league he liked to travel in socially was too swift for my bankroll.

Now, in the gloom, he spotted me and said fervently: "Hi, Sherlock. Thanks for coming in such a rush. Hell's to pay."

"So I just gathered from the morgue minions," I said. I couldn't quite keep a timbre of resentment out of my voice as I tacked on: "But when you phoned me at my flat a while ago you didn't say it was a bumpy mess."

"The murder part of it isn't what you're wanted for," he said placatingly. "Let the law handle that. Speaking of the law—"

"Yeah?"

"Before you go in and see the Dahlgren girls, your friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad wants a word with you."

"What about?" I said, not astonished that Donaldson should be on deck. When killery comes to Hollywood, Dave is usually the flatfoot who wins the assignment; he's unlucky that way.

Killane shrugged as we gained the front portal of the massive igloo. "What about? Oh, he probably wants to warn you." We ankled inside. "You'll find him in the parlor over there on the right. I have to go to Laura now." And he left me; went toward the rear of the stash.

I paused long enough to set fire to a gasper, then drifted into a parlor that looked like a museum of the Gay Nineties. Sofas and chairs of horsehair and gilded wood ranged stiffly around the forbiddingly papered walls; an ormolu clock ticked ridiculously on a marble mantelpiece flanked by large inverted glass bells covering stuffed and mounted birds, and in one corner there was an ornately carved foot-pump organ such as I haven't gandered since I was a brat visiting my grandmother in Philadelphia. Age rested on the room like a dusty cloak. You could feel it and see it; you could damned near smell it and taste it.

THIS sour mustiness seemed to have disturbed Dave Donaldson's digestion; he stood in the center of the faded carpet and favored me with a ferocious scowl as I sauntered toward him. "So here you are, hot shot," he rumbled.

I smiled innocently into his beefy features. "I *am*?" I raised an eyebrow. "Jeeze, pal, thanks for telling me. Information like that is valuable to a man."

"Don't get funny," he snarled. "I'm in no mood for corn, see! And another thing—you watch your step around here or you'll be minus your license. This is one time I intend

to stand for no condemned shenanigans.”

“Is that you talking, or your peptic ulcer?” I inquired mildly. “Why this big bellyache routine?”

He thrust his inflamed complexion close to my mush. “Rubies!” he rasped.

The cryptic remark baffled me. I contemplated him through an exhaled cloud of smoke and said: “Are you nuts?”

“All cops are nuts.” He made a bitter mouth. “We must be nuts or we’d go into some other line of work, something pleasant like munching mushrooms to see if they’re toadstools. And stop splitting hairs, dammit. You know what I mean by rubies.”

“Only academically. Make it plainer.”

“All right, I will,” he grated. “A matched set of ruby earrings worth eight thousand bucks got glommed out of this house tonight. Pigeonblood rubies, the most valuable kind.”

“Ah?”

“And a maid-servant got knocked off because she evidently tabbed the thief working in the bedroom.”

“What’s that got to do with me?” I said.

His glimmers narrowed to infuriated slits and his voice lowered grimly. “It’s got plenty to do with you, wise guy. I know the Dahlgren sisters called you in on the case; they want their rubies back. I also happen to savvy the way you generally handle jewelry heist jobs.”

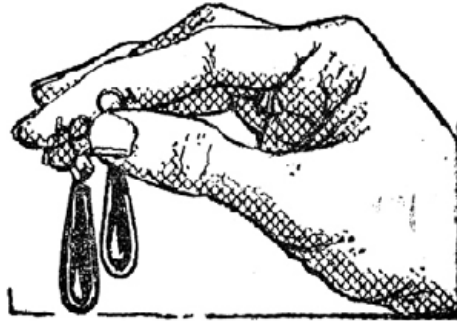
“Oh come now. Can’t I have any trade secrets?”

“You’ve got connections,” he ignored the interruption. “Dirty ones. You contact the thief and slip him about a tenth of the value of the swag; you recover the loot and let him lam. That fixes it so he doesn’t have to fence the junk—”

“—And the owner gets his property back at very low cost,” I said. “I understand even some of the best insurance outfits do it occasionally.”

Dave snorted: “That’s a lie. No ethical company is going to compound a felony. And you’re not going to, either; I won’t stand for it,

get me? This time there’s a murder mixed up in the mess—and I aim to pinch the killer; to hell with the stolen rocks. Do I make myself clear?”



Those earrings were worth eight thousand bucks.

“You do indeed,” I said, and hauled hips out of the parlor before I blew my top. I’ve got a stubborn streak in me that dislikes being needled—even when it’s an old friend like Donaldson doing the needling. I might have played ball with him and bowed out of the clambake if he’d been diplomatic; but when he began throwing his weight around I decided to get obstinate.

Having made this decision as I barged to the front hallway, I started hunting for Tim Killane. Instead, I came face to face with Frankenstein’s monster.

IF THE guy wasn’t Frankenstein’s monster he was at least what you’d call a reasonable facsimile. He was garbed in funereal black threads that made his long, horsey puss seem all the pastier by contrast, and his yap was curved in a permanent leer that belonged in an idiot’s nightmare. Moreover, he had a cold that had turned his trumpet the color of a spoiled beefsteak. He greeted me with: “Beg pardon, sir, are you Mr. Tur-shew! A-kachuff! Sorry, sir. I mean to say are you . . . ka-ka-ka—” I waited for the third explosion to rattle the rafters but he suppressed it, and a look of triumph came into his watery peepers. “Fooled it that time, by gad!” All of a sudden he twitched violently. “Kee-chow!”

“Feel better?” I inquired.

"Much, thank you. If you are Mr. Turner—"

"I am."

"Very good sir. I am the butler, sir. And I would appreciate it very much indeed, sir, if you'd omit mentioning that I resemble Boris Karloff." He leered apologetically. "Unfortunately, I know it all too well." Then he bristled. "And I get damned sick and tired of hearing itch-atch-artch-*harrtcheef!*"

"That was a dilly," I said admiringly. "*Gesundheit.*"

"Thank you, sir. If you please follow me—"

"Why should I, Jeeves?"

"The name, sir, is Flannigan." His tone was full of dignified reproach. "Mr. Killane requested me to conduct you into the dining-room, sir. He wished to see . . . yook-yak-akka-ch-ch—aw, nuts. Go on and find it for yourself; I feel territch . . . *atch-chow!*"

I watched him take a powder, then ambled toward where I figured the dining-room ought to be. Sure enough it was there. Tim Killane was there too, and he had a jane in his arms.

The cookie he embraced was a thin, faded blonde who looked to be in her late thirties, give or take a few years; a wren who had probably been attractive in her early girlhood but now was rapidly going to seed. Even so, she might have rated a second gander if she'd worn decent duds and a spot of makeup; but as it was she seemed downright dowdy.

She lamped me coming through the beaded doorway portieres and broke out of Killane's clinch; blushed to the roots of her washed-out yellow coiffure. Somehow the blush made her look younger. She said: "Oh-h-h—!" and turned away, embarrassed.

Killane patted her shoulder. "It's okay, Laura. This is just Dan Turner, an old pal of mine; the private snoop I called on the phone. He doesn't mind love scenes; he's used to them." Then, to me: "Hawkshaw, meet my fiancée, Miss Dahlgren."

"Hi, toots," I said amicably, although I felt slightly sandbagged when I heard Killane was

engaged to get hitched. Back in the old days he'd always played the field; but what the hell—he was older now and probably ready to settle down. I smiled at the faded cupcake, gave her a casual but complete scrutiny and concluded that Killane hadn't been too far off the beam when he picked her; he could have done worse.

Besides when they were married he could insist on a different hair-do and some stylish threads instead of the brown-velvet sack with the high lace collar that currently embellished her. He could also fatten out her hollow places with the proper diet, and maybe even persuade her to switch her old-fashioned lavender scent for a more alluring perfume, like Night of Passion or something. I knew she could afford it.

She regarded me timidly, then squared her shoulders as if confronting an unpleasant ordeal. "My sister won't like you, Mr. Turner," she said. "I'm afraid she'll consider you a little too . . . well, breezy. Besides, Tim overrode her objections when he sent for you; she didn't like the idea of a private detective. She read a murder novel one time that had a private detective in it, and he was perpetually drunk. She thinks you're all like that."

"Absurd!" I said righteously. "I'm the soberest snoop you can find in a month of Mondays." Then I braced myself in case heaven should strike me paralyzed. Nothing happened, though, so I decided heaven hadn't been listening. "Tim can tell you I never take anything stronger than Scotch broth."

"Yeah," Killane went deadpan. "Vat 69 Scotch broth. Full of vitamins." He looked tenderly at Laura Dahlgren. "Hadn't we best send for Agatha now, darling?"

She nodded, reached for an antique silk ribbon-cord hanging from a nearby wall and yanked it. Somewhere in the depths of the tepee a bell tinkled; then, presently, Frankenstein's monster appeared. "Yes, Miss Laura?"

"Go and ask my sister to come down here,

Flannigan."

"Yes, Miss Lauratch-atch-ker—ker—" Just before the sneeze exploded he whipped a white plastic benzedrine inhaler from his pistol pocket, rammed it to his nostrils and inhaled a mighty slug of the pungent fumes. Peace and placid satisfaction spread across his horrible mush. "I've got it licked," he announced arrogantly; whereupon he quivered like a stricken oak and gave vent to a thunderous "Ker-kergh-atchoo!"

He scrambled, mumbling to himself.

CHAPTER II

Double-Cross Daniel

AGATHA DAHLGREN swept into the dining-room five minutes later, gave me the frigid focus and sniffed audibly; her expression was that of a dame who has just encountered a case of leprosy. "I presume you are the confidential investigator?"

"Not me, sis," I said. "That's too pompous. I'm a private pry. It's less refined."

The stare she dished me would have curdled a quart of milk at ten paces. In fact, she could have curdled the milk without bothering to stare at it. If you could judge from appearances she was a good fifteen years older than the faded Laura, which would put her pretty close to fifty; and her narrow map had six more wrinkles than a prune. She wore her iron-grey tresses pulled tightly back in a prim bun, her glims were as bright and shiny as marbles and she had a mouth like a downward-curving fissure in a block of granite except it looked harder. Her black applique dress might have been modish in 1909, but I wouldn't make book on it; I could be wrong by as much as four years.

"This is a house of death," she snapped. "Your levity is very bad taste, young man."

When she called me a young man I forgave her for her hauteur; I even forgave the strong aura of lilac toilet water that invisibly

draped her. At my age you begin to appreciate that kind of flattery. "Okay," I said. "No levity. No liquor. No frivolous cracks from the hired help."



Tim Killane was in the dining-room, with a jane in his arms.

"You have not yet been hired, Mr. Turner," she informed me in refrigerated accents. "My sister, here, persuaded me to allow Mr. Killane to telephone you; but it was much against my better judgment."

"Meaning you won't be needing me after all?"

"I did not say that." She put a spinsterish rasp into her voice. "Now that you're here you may possibly be of some service. That remains to be determined."

I fired a coffin nail. "All right; you'll probably engage me, but you don't like me. Correct? That's fine. Where do we go from there?"

"We talk. Privately." She turned to the younger Dahlgren tomato. "Go away, Laura."

"But. . . but Agatha—"

"Leave, I said," she snapped the words like a whiplash, fast and flicking.

Laura cringed visibly and turned to Killane. "Tim, don't you think we ought to be permitted to—"

"Not if Agatha prefers otherwise, darling," he said tenderly. "Come along. We'll hear all

about it later, no doubt.” He tipped me a wry quick grin; scrambled with the dowdy blond jane, thereby proving he knew which side his bread was buttered on. It so happened that the studio where he scribbled thrillers had been established years ago by old Derek Dahlgren, one of the movie industry’s genuine pioneers; and upon Dahlgren’s death the controlling interest had been inherited by his two daughters, his only heirs. Naturally Killane wasn’t going to indulge in a beef with Agatha Dahlgren when one word from her could get him bounced out of his berth with a dropped option.

AS SOON as Tim and Laura were out of listening distance Agatha came close to me; she dropped her voice to a stage whisper. “You’re a friend of Killane’s, aren’t you, Mr. Turner?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever allow friendship to sway your professional deportment?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Are you discreet? Can you keep a confidence?”

“That depends,” I hedged.

“It depends on what, Mr. Turner?”

“On who’s paying me and how much geetus.”

“Geetus?”

“Money. Fee. Retainer.”

She smiled thinly and there was a glint of approval in her optics. “Mercenary, eh? That’s good. I like mercenary people. As a rule you can trust them.”

“Unless the other side bids higher and you get sold out.”

“You don’t look like a man who would sell out to a higher bidder, Mr. Turner. It might not be healthy for you if you tried it,” she said steadily. Then she snapped open an old-fashioned reticule of shabby black leather which was fastened by a gold chain to her broad velvet belt. From the reticule she dredged a roll of greasy lettuce, not the crisp

new greenery you get from banks but the limber kind you find hoarded in an old sock. “How much would it cost for me to ask you a question and not have that question repeated to anyone else?” she demanded.

“I clam up for as little as a yard,” I said.

“Yard? Clam? Translate that, please.”

I grinned. “I can keep quiet for a hundred hermans.”

“I suppose you mean dollars. Very well.” She counted a century from her stack, handed it to me and clicked the reticule shut. An odd, cunning flicker quirked her kisser. “Now I’ll ask my question. Do you think your friend Killane is capable of murder?”

For an instant I was too flabbergasted to speak. Then I choked: “Tim? Hell’s hinges, of course not! He used to be a lawman himself; a D.A.’s dick. Just because he writes gory stories is no reason to—”

“Having seen my sister, would you consider her a potential murderess?”

“Now wait,” I said, “If this is a rib—”

“I’m quite serious, Mr. Turner. You see, I have a suspicion *I* was the one who was scheduled to be killed tonight instead of my maid.”

I ALMOST swallowed my gasper, fire and all. It suddenly dawned on me that maybe I was dealing with a she-male crackpot, a madwoman with delusions of persecution. That kind of paranoia can be plenty dangerous if it goes past a certain point; sometimes they blow a gasket and stick a shiv in your tripe before you know what gives. Furtively I patted the .32 roscoe I always tote in a shoulder holster under my coat; if Agatha Dahlgren started any monkey business I would blast first and squirm out of it later. Just being near a screwball gives me the jimjams.

“Hey, look,” I complained. “I understood I was to work on the glommed rubies. Nothing was mentioned about bodyguarding—”

She interrupted me for the third time in succession. “I have not asked you to

bodyguard me, young man. However, I do think you might have the common courtesy to hear what I wish to say; or is that asking too much for my hundred dollars?"

"Okay," I caved in. "Make with the monologue."

"Thank you," her sarcasm dripped vinegar. "In the first place, I am not what you'd call a modern person. I like old things, substantial things," she indicated the dining-room's furnishings—a quartered oak table and its matching chairs, the huge sideboard flanked by a glass-doored china cabinet, the low-hanging electrolier over the center of the table all gaudy with its mosaic patterns of varicolored leaded glass. "When my father came to California years ago he brought all this from our home in the East. I have never changed them; I despise streamlined gimcracks. Laura, at times, has seen fit to disagree; to challenge my taste. But I have always had the final word."

"So it seems."

"And why not?" she said levelly. "The money, the studio holdings, the investments and the real estate are all in my name; I control her income trust. Frankly, I have never considered her capable of managing her own funds; if she had half a chance I'm inclined to believe she would be a spendthrift—"

I cut in with: "So you dole the dimes to her one at a time, hunh? Well, that's one way of holding her under your thumb." And I conjured up a mental montage of the life Laura Dahlgren must have been living these past fifteen years, dominated and cowed by this tyrannical old bag, kept in subjection while her youthful freshness faded and she slowly dried up into the makings of an apathetic nobody. The picture wasn't pleasant.

AGATHA ignored my crack about the Adoling of dimes. "You must not let Laura's seeming meekness fool you. Actually she's a headstrong woman, difficult to discipline. The idea, thinking herself in love

with that Killane person! It's nonsense. I disapprove of him thoroughly."

"I gathered that."

"Why shouldn't you? I make no effort to conceal it. In return, I realize he cordially hates me. And lately Laura has shown signs of hating me, too. She has even remarked in anger that she wished I were dead so that she would be free—and have the estate all to herself."

I lifted a shoulder. "Wishes can't kill."

"It's gone beyond wishing, Mr. Turner. I'm saying to you what I am reluctant to say to the police without evidence: I think tonight's murder was committed either by Laura or by Killane."

"How do you figure?"

"Around eleven o'clock something awakened me from a sound sleep. It was a noise downstairs. I arose and summoned my maid, whose room is next to my own. I called her quietly, without making any lights, and told her to stand by my bed while I went downstairs to investigate the sound I had heard. I told her to keep the room dark and to call out if an intruder entered."

"And?"

"I searched the lower floor and found nobody. But when I went back to my bedroom and spoke to my maid, she didn't answer. She'd been killed, strangled. And my pigeonblood ruby earrings had been stolen from my jewel box on the bureau. I discovered all that the moment I turned the light on."

"Then what happened?"

"I called Laura, naturally."

"She came out of her own room?"

"Yes; but how do I know she had been there the whole time? It could have been easily possible for her to sneak into my bedroom while I was downstairs, and to—"

I said: "Hell, she doesn't look strong enough to croak a doll with her bare mitts."

"She plays the parlor organ, Mr. Turner. I insist upon her practicing an hour a day, including finger exercises. Oh yes, her hands

are capable of it. And then, of course, there's Killane. *He* might have broken into the house and done it. Either of them could be guilty. Either of them could have choked the maid, thinking in the darkened room that I was the victim. And the rubies could have been stolen as a . . . a stratagem, a subterfuge, to make the police believe it was a burglary murder."

"And the motive?"

"To remove me, of course. So that I would no longer stand in the way of their marriage; so they could gain control of the money. That's obvious."

"If you think it's so damned obvious, why not let Lieutenant Donaldson in on it?" I said roughly.

"Because I have no proof. There is always the possibility of error; I might be wrong. It would not look well for me to accuse my own sister unjustly."

"You're accusing her to me."

"But you aren't a policeman; you won't make it public." Then she eyed me sharply. "Well, are you willing?"

"Willing to do what?"

"To investigate my charges. When you obtain evidence showing Laura's guilt, or Killane's, I shall be ready to talk to the homicide men."

I shook my head firmly. "No dice, lady. If you'll pardon my warty exterior, I think you're as nutty as an almond grove. This caper was strictly a robbery bump by some prowler, the way I see it. That's how the cops see it, too."

"They're not infallible. I think it was an . . . an inside job, I believe they call it."

"Okay; suppose it was. That doesn't pin it on your sister or Tim. Hell, maybe it was your Frankenstein flunky; had you thought of that?"

The instant the words dripped out of my kisser, Flannigan himself barged into the dining-room. "I resent that remark, sir," he said. "I resent it very much indeesh . . . eesh-attishyoo!"

EAVESDROPPERS always irk my giblets. **E**I whirled, hung the furious focus on the flunky and then pounced on him; grabbed his coat lapels and shook the bejoseph out of him. "Who the hell asked you to poke your beak in this?" I snarled. "It's a damned good way to get it fractured, junior."

"Really, sir." He looked offended. "You must be completely ignorant of . . . *trattish-akkish*—!" Out came the benzedrine inhaler; he breathed gustily through it and killed the explosion. "What I mean, sir, butlers always listen. It's traditional."

Agatha Dahlgren said: "Let him alone, Mr. Turner. I trust Flannigan implicitly. He knows more about my affairs than my sister." Then she added: "Now that you're here, Flannigan, you may as well stay. Now then, young man," she turned to me. "Are you willing to undertake this investigation?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think there's anything to investigate except a simple case of housebreaking complicated by the fact that your maid caught the heist guy in the act, and he had to render her defunct so he could make a getaway. Period."

"I should be only too happy if you could prove that," she rejoined. "Say by finding the burglar. If it *was* a burglar."

"Nabbing burglars is a cop job," I said. "It gives them something to do when they're not writing traffic tickets."

She frowned. "Don't be tiresome, young man. Mr. Killane told me you have certain . . . er . . . contacts which the police haven't."

"Could be," I admitted. "So what?"

"So I want you to go about the task of recovering the rubies just as if it were a plain, ordinary theft. Offer the usual cash inducements, or whatever the procedure may be. Then, if you are successful in effecting the return of the earrings, I shall know it really was an unknown intruder who broke in and

killed my maid. Laura and Killane will be absolved of suspicion.”

I made a peevish gesture. “That’s a negative stunt. In other words, if I fail to get the rocks back then you’ll take it for granted Tim and your sister are guilty. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Ix-nay,” I said. “Remember there’s a croaking involved. And no burglar in his right mind is going to slip me those rubies regardless of how big a reward I might offer. Because possession of the gems will be proof of the homicide guilt. The guy would be inviting himself to a seat in the gas chamber.”

“Not if you promised him immunity,” she suggested.

I ankled toward the door. “Now you’re spouting rubbish. I may be a heel, but I don’t promise immunity to killers.”

“Come back here,” she called briskly. “You misunderstood me. I said you could promise the thief immunity. I didn’t say you had to *keep* that promise when you make contact with him.”

“Oho. You want me to lure him with a cash offer, then put the finger on him.”

“Exactly.” She peered at me craftily. “It’s what they term a double-cross, I think. Do you object to double-crossing a murderer?”

“Not a damned bit. In fact, maybe you’ve got something there,” I grunted.

“You mean you’ll try?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Mainly to prove how wrong you are about Tim and your sister.”

CHAPTER III

Lavender Lowdown

IT COST me five minutes’ worth of breath to talk my way past Dave Donaldson at the front of the stash. Finally, I convinced him I wasn’t scheming to pull any illegal rough stuff; whereupon he told me I could scam. He dished me the rancid gander when he said it, though, and I knew he figured I was up to

something. But what the hell; Dave would distrust his own grandfather.

I powdered outdoors; piled into my jalopy and lit a shuck for downtown Los Angeles; kept a glim peeled warily at my rear-view mirror to see if I had a tail. Presently I noticed yellow lights a block behind me, weaker than modern sealed-beam headlamps and a good deal smaller; but they stayed with me when I made a right turn. I had a hunch I was being shadowed.



The maid had been quite satisfactorily strangled, all right.

That was a typical Donaldson trick, I reflected; pretending to trust me, he stuck one of his headquarters heroes on my back. Just to make sure I swerved left at the next intersection, not too fast. Sure enough the weak yellowish headlights made the same turn; and it happened again the next time I tried it.

By now I was sorer than a picked blister. I kicked some speed out of my heap, reached the middle of a wide block and gave my rudder a vicious twist; blammed in a sudden U-turn that reversed my direction. Then I sailed toward the other chariot; aimed straight at its radiator and slammed on my brakes at the last instant to avoid a head-on crash.

My shadow tossed out his own squealing anchors; lurched to a stop. I bounced my brogans to the pavement, ready for a showdown; and then I stiffened in flabbergasted surprise. This second bucket looked like a square glass cage on four wheels, a top-heavy antique that belonged to the Smithsonian Institute. It wasn’t an automobile at all; it was a 1912 Baker Electric!

I yanked its door open and said: "Well for crying brine in a barrel. Flannigan, bejeest!"

"Yes, sir," he replied. "*Atchoo!*"

IN THE private snooping racket you learn to expect the unexpected; but this was too damned much. Being tailed by a cop would be bad enough; having a butler on your heels is worse. And a butler in an electric coupe was more of an insult than I could take without blowing my cork. I glared at his hideous mush and yodeled: "What the hell's the idea?"

"Miss Agathatchee! Miss Agatha's orders, sir. She told me to follow yoothatch-tish—" With a superhuman effort, he crammed an overworked benzedrine gadget into his trumpet and inhaled noisily. "Beg pardon, sir. Sinus trouble."

"Damn your sinuses," I snarled. "Why did Agatha tell you to follow me?"

A puzzled expression crossed his puss. "Come to think of it, sir, she didn't say."

"She didn't say what?"

"Anything; sir, except that I was to watch your movements and report to her later. But frankly, sir, I'll be damned if I know what I'm to report."

"I do," I said grimly.

He looked hopeful. "Do you really, sir? Can you give me just a hint?"

"Yeah. You can go home and tell her I shook you off."

"But you haven't, sir."

"That's what you think," I growled, and blipped back to my own coupe; got in and went roaring off in a cloud of peanut brittle before Flannigan could guess my intention. I was gone before he got started in my wake, and I skinned through so many side streets I almost met myself coming back. After ten minutes of these maniac maneuvers I settled down to ordinary driving; resumed my journey downtown.

The skidrow district around First and Main was my destination. I made it with no sign of a follow-up, which proved I had frustrated

Flannigan and misjudged Dave Donaldson, who hadn't fastened a tail on me after all. I was free to make my contacts.

I made them.

There are characters along skidrow who'd whittle chunks from your gullet if you called them stool-pigeons. As a matter of fact they aren't stoolies; they wouldn't do business with a cop if you paid them a fortune. Sometimes they'll listen to a private sneak, though. For a judicious sawbuck here and there you can pick up a lot of assorted information if you work it right.

I spread about thirty-five clams around the neighborhood, together with some careful hints regarding rubies. I was in the market for rubies, especially earrings. I liked pigeonblood rubies so much I was willing to buy some without asking where they came from. A guy with a couple of rubies for sale might do well to get in touch with Dan Turner at his apartment stash. Better phone me first, though; you never knew when the bulls would be around. But bulls or no bulls, I was interested in rubies.

That started the word spreading. By morning it would probably be all over town—the wrong part of town, at least. So now all I could do was go home and wait to see if any rats nibbled at the bait. I went home.

BEFORE berthing my bucket in the basement garage of my apartment building I drove once around the block to scout the precinct. Just beyond the corner I spotted something that gave me a sardonic chuckle. It was a parked Baker Electric, its lights doused and its steering rod swiveled straight up toward the roof in out-of-service position. Frankenstein's monster wasn't in the glass box, though.

He didn't have to be. The presence of the antique chariot indicated that he was somewhere in the neighborhood; after I'd got away from him he must have driven here to post himself near the entrance to my stash,

figuring I'd show up sooner or later so he could resume his silly surveillance of my movements. The joke was on him; I'd finished moving around. If he craved to stay up all night on a damned fool job of useless shadowing, that was his hard luck. From now on my plans included nothing more drastic than a nightcap of Scotch varnish remover and a nice long session in the feathers.

I put my coupe in its subterranean stall, rode the automatic elevator up to my floor and ankled along the dim hallway; started to key my portal open. And then, just as I turned the latch, somebody sneaked up behind me; poked a hard object against one of my favorite kidneys.

"Don't look around, shamus," came a whispered warning. "Go on in and let it stay dark." A hand reached under my elbow, burrowed beneath my coat and glommed my shoulder-holstered rod.

"Hey—!" I started to protest.

"In, I said," the whisper hissed. It was thin and threadlike; you couldn't identify its owner, couldn't even tell whether it was masculine or feminine. And when I tried to lean slightly backward to brush against my captor, hoping the contact would give me some information, the gun-muzzle prodded me away. "None of that. I'll blast if I have to. Go in."

I crossed my threshold, stiffly and not daring to look around behind me. The whisperer followed and closed the door, putting us in complete darkness. "Now what happens?" I said.

"You'll find out. Can you locate your phone without a light?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Move toward it. I'm right on your neck, remember. Walk slowly and don't try any tricks unless you want your spine shot plumb through your belly."

I GROPED cautiously across my living-room, unable to see anything and moving

by instinct. Who the hell was the character with the roscoe? Had some anonymous gungsel risen to the lure I'd planted down along skid row—the burglar who'd prowled the Dahlgren igloo, lifted Agatha's rubies and bumped her maid? Had my carefully contrived trap backfired?

My left shin barked itself on a table leg; the table where my phone was. I growled: "Here we are. Your move next." Then I seemed to detect a faint scent, not overpoweringly pungent but mildly pervading. I couldn't quite decide whether it was the odor of lilacs or the aroma of lavender; it was one or the other.

"Call the Dahlgren house," the whisperer said.

"Oh-oh. The rubies, hunh?"

"The rubies. Do your dialing."

I drew a deep silent breath, trying to tab that flower smell; spurred my grey matter in an effort to remember where I'd recently encountered it. I knew I ought to recognize it, but it eluded me like a tantalizing wraith. I said: "Dial hell. Not without a light; I have to look in the book for the number."

"Very clever. Not clever enough, however. You won't need light. The number is Gladwyn four-two-seven-seven. I'm sure your finger can find the right holes. They'd better."

I started fumbling. The dial's clicks were loud in the blackness. Lilacs or lavender, I wondered? And who used those scents. It had to be somebody connected with the Dahlgren setup; familiarity with the Dahlgren phone number proved that.

Or did it? A burglar could memorize the number from the directory before whispering it to me, I realized. And yet the perfume was a factor you couldn't ignore.

I kept dialing. Lavender; lilacs. Laura Dahlgren; her older sister Agatha. Sure, that was it; both dames went for those two fragrances. But which used which?

I groped for the last dial digit. "When I jingle the wigwam, what then?"

"You ask for Miss Agatha."

"Will she be there?"

"You'd better hope so."

"And when I get her?"

"Tell her you've contacted her earrings," the whisper was directly at the back of my neck, close enough to make my hackles prick. "Tell her to come here to your apartment at once—with five thousand dollars."

I choked: "Five grand? You must have a screw loose! Those red sparklers aren't worth more than eight thousand, according to a cop named Donaldson, who ought to know. He got it straight from Agatha herself. And the usual clip is ten percent, which would be eight yards in this case. Not over a grand at the outside. Be sensible."

"The price is five thousand."

"Suppose Aggie isn't packing that much in her reticule?"

"She is. Make the call."

I finished dialing and heard the ringing signal. Lilacs and lavender, Laura and Agatha . . . suddenly I remembered. Agatha used lilac toilet water; she'd reeked of it when we'd had our confab in the dining-room of her antique tepee. But it was lavender, not lilacs, that I was smelling now.

And lavender was Laura's scent. The younger sister's scent.

THERE was a click in my receiver and the ringing signal broke off. A prim spinsterish voice said: "Hello?"

"Agatha Dahlgren, please. This is Dan Turner calling."

"What do you want, young man?" Agatha said.

"I've made that contact."

"You *have*?" she sounded puzzled. "You mean the burglar?"

"Yeah. The price is five thousand."

She drew an audible breath. "For . . . for the rubies?"

"Right."

"I don't understand. Our agreement was for you to locate this person and then call in the police—"

With a cannon at my back I didn't dare tell her the score; it might win me a ticket to the pearly gates. "Listen," I said, feeling sweat forming on my forehead. "I'm in no position to quibble; either you want your earrings or you don't. If you want them, the figure is five grand cash."

"You know I'm not interested in those rubies for themselves alone; I want the murderer of my maid captured and punished."

I said ambiguously: "Five grand gets you what you want. Shall I expect you?"

"I think you must be drunk, Mr. Turner. You're not talking sensibly—oh-o!" Her tone sharpened. "Someone's with you."

"Yeah."

"The thief?"

"Yeah."

"You've caught him!"

"On the contrary," I snarled bitterly.

Then she caught hep. "My g-goodness! You're in t-trouble!"

"I won't argue that with you," I said with double meaning. "I won't argue price with you either," I added for the benefit of my unseen captor, making the dialogue sound as normal as possible under the circumstances. "Bring five G's in a hurry."

"You're telling me to bring the police, aren't you?"

"Any denomination bills, yeah."

"I understand. You may expect us at once." She rang off and I heard the dial tone in my ear where her voice had been. Then as I pronged my own receiver I heard the whisperer.

"She's coming?"

"Yeah," I said. "Lavender."

"What do you mean, lavender?"

"Laura uses it. And Laura would fall into a fortune if Agatha got bumped."

"You're being obscure."

I said: "Benzedrine inhalers have an oil-

of-lavender base.”

“Indeed?”

“Yeah. I know a butler who looks like Boris Karloff and uses a benzedrine inhaler.”

“You don’t say.”

“He smells faintly of lavender when he uses it,” I said. “Maybe he’ll inherit a stack of cabbage when Agatha kicks off.”

“And?”

“And it would be easy for you to drill her when she ankles into this dark room,” I said. “You’ve got my roscoe; you could plug her with that. You could then croak me with your own heater. That would make the frame complete. You’d tell the cops you and Agatha came here together because I’d phoned that I had the rubies; that I asked five grand for them. You’d claim I attempted to rob her of the ransom cash without delivering her sparklers, and that during the fracas I shot her—whereupon you, in turn, shot me. I’d be too defunct to deny it, of course. It would look as if I had been the original burglar, the guy who cooled the maid and pilfered the earrings. The case would be closed and Agatha would be dead with me; nobody could contradict your lies.”

“You seem to have it all figured out.”

“Yeah.”

“And my motive?”

“Inheritance,” I said.

“What makes you suspect all this stuff?”

“The odor of lavender all around you.”

The whisper became almost inaudible. “You’ve guessed who I am, have you?”

“The lavender narrowed it down,” I said disparagingly. “It was a simple process of elimination.” Then, with all the suddenness I could summon, I collapsed as if I’d been bashed with a polo mallet; dropped to the floor at the whisperer’s feet. This took me out of bullet range for a brief instant; and before the gat could be lowered to seek me in the blackness I rolled desperately against a pair of knobby knees. I clutched them. I yanked. The whisperer fell on top of me and somebody

sneezed and I caterwauled: “Okay, Flannigan—if you’re listening at the door, as I think you are, *come on and help me hang Tim Killane on the hook!*”

THE PORTAL opened and Frankenstein’s monster surged in, washed by a weak wave of light from the corridor bulbs. If the glow had been any stronger it would have blinded me, but it was just dim enough to let me lamp the guy I was battling. He was Killane, all right. His bald dome shone and his hawk’s beak jutted and his glims were slits of fury as he tried to bring his fowling-piece into firing position.

I gave his wrist a dose of knuckle medicine. The rod went out of his clutch. I started to slug him on the puss and he gave me his knee, smack in my elly-bay.

Flannigan said: “That was foulash-atsh-tishyoo! Foul.” Then he strode forward and kicked Killane’s hairless conk dead center. This rendered Killane very unconscious indeed; but for a while I was too sick to give a damn.

I recovered around the time Agatha Dahlgren arrived with the cops, including Dave Donaldson. Dave hung the flabbergasted focus on me and sputtered: “Wh-what . . . who . . . how—” while Agatha just stared, speechless.

“We can thank Flannigan for this,” I said. “I knew he was in the neighborhood and I figured he might be eavesdropping, which he was. So when the chips were down I yelled for help and he came in; booted Killane for a goal.”

The butler leered politely. “It was nothing, sir. Nothing at alltch-tch-ka-ka—!” He rammed his benzedrine inhaler to his horn and took a deep sniff.

“*Gesundheit*,” Donaldson said absently. Then he recovered himself and looked stupefied. “You mean Killane—”

I leaned over the fallen scenarist, frisked his pockets, dragged out a pair of ruby

earrings. “Yep. Here’s your proof. Killane was the burglar. He bumped the maid.”

“I thought so all along,” Agatha Dahlgren said primly.

Killane chose that moment to wake up. He cast a bleary gander at me and mumbled: “Hi, Sherlock. Looks like you win.”

“Yeah.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I told you,” I said. “It was a process of elimination—and the scent of lavender.”

“How so?”

“Well, Laura uses heavy lavender. This odor was fainter, which eliminated her. Flannigan’s inhaler contains lavender, too; but he couldn’t have stayed behind me with a roscoe for fifteen minutes or longer without letting off some sneezes. So that left you.”

“I don’t get it. I never use lavender perfume.”

I said: “No, but you held Laura in your arms tonight. Some of it stuck to you. Of a sudden then I realized how it all meshed. You had wanted to marry Laura; Agatha stood in

your way, so you tried to pull a fake burglary bump; but you chilled the wrong chick. To rectify the error you dreamed up this plot of luring Agatha here, hoping to plug her and blame me for it—meanwhile creaming me so I’d be a deceased fall guy.”

“Everybody makes mistakes.” He sighed. “That’s why they have rubber doilies under spittoons.” He stood up. “Well, Lieutenant Donaldson, I’m ready to go if you are.”

Agatha stopped him. “Just a moment. Is my sister . . . involved in this?”

“Don’t be a fool, you damned old witch. Of course she isn’t.”

Then he let Dave put the nippers on him and take him away.

“Satisfied?” I said to the Dahlgren dame.

“Quite satisfied, young man. You may send me a bill for your services. Come along, Flannigan, we must go home now and get what sleep we can. I have to be up early, you know, to make sure Laura takes her music lesson.”

Poor Laura.