

KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

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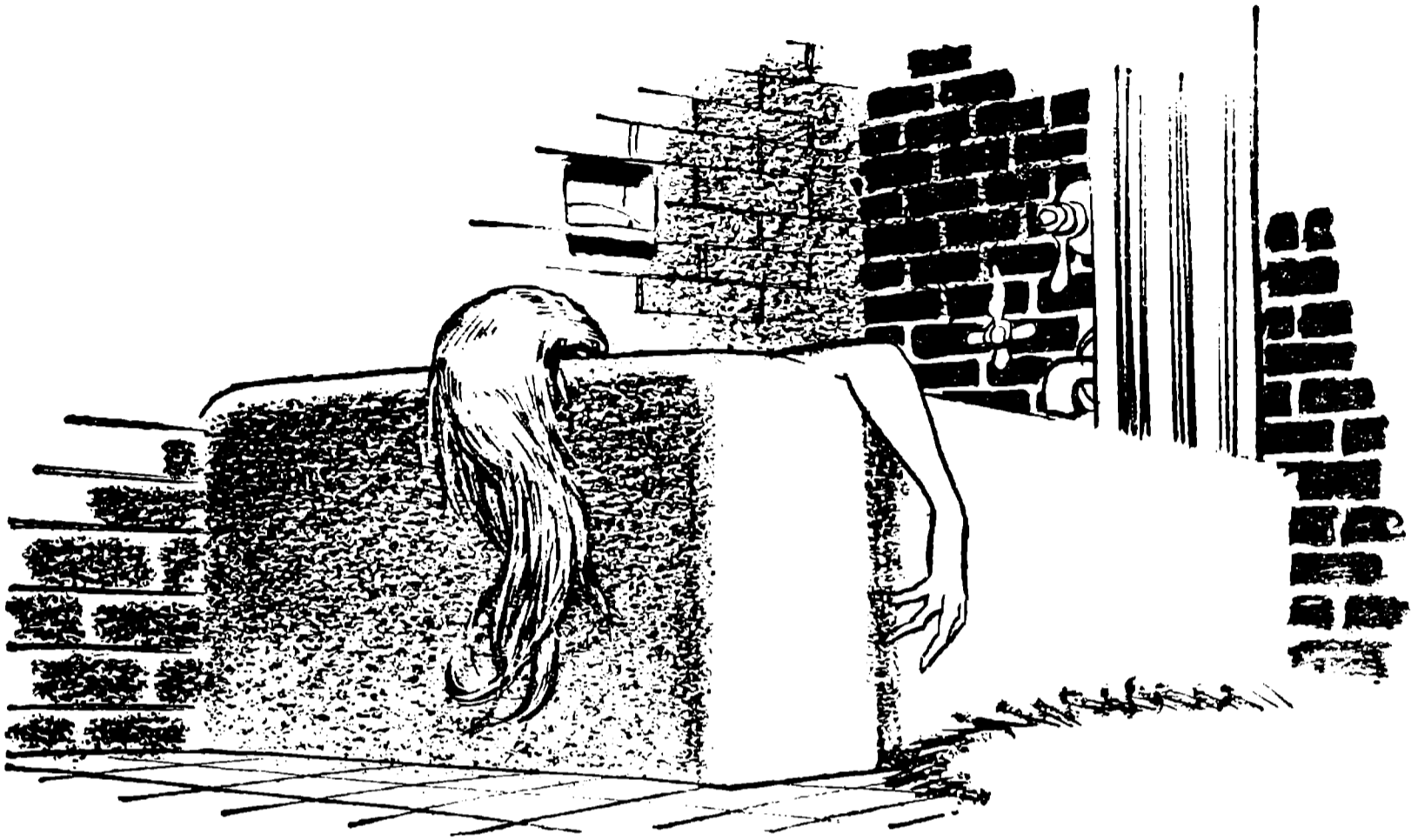
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Belinda was blonde and beautiful and kissable, too. But unfortunately someone gave her a kiss—of death!



A KISS FOR BELINDA

by LAURENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THE WOMAN IN SUITE 232 OF THE Southside Apartment Hotel was certainly young, probably on the exuberant side of twenty-five. She was tall and blonde and, if not breath-taking, at least striking in

appearance. Although she had lived at the Southside only ten days, both day and night clerks remembered the exact color of her eyes, the fact that she was always well dressed, and the names and

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descriptions of the three persons who had visited her after her arrival. They also suspected that she was well built, a suspicion that was confirmed by the night clerk who found her lying in her bathtub, dead.

The woman in Suite 232 was registered at the Southside as Belinda Ford Holliday. The night clerk who found her dead in her tub had been trying to raise her for an hour on the house phone to announce the arrival of a telegram. He knew she had not gone out, and when she failed to respond to the bell-hop's repeated knocking, the night clerk had let himself in with a pass key. As a radio was playing in the bathroom, the clerk investigated, took one good look, gasped, and immediately called the police.

The Northbank police department arrived in three successive waves. The shock troops came within a few minutes, with the sirens of the prowl cars screaming bloody murder. The squad cars drove up with a low growl of authority. The two carloads of technical men deployed in comparative silence, followed by the solitary, slow-gaited dignity of the final link in the chain of command: Lieutenant of Detectives Max Ritter.

Slim, dark, sad-eyed Lieutenant Ritter made his way to Suite 232 without a word. When he entered the bathroom, and instinctively

took off his soft felt hat, his big ears gave him the silhouette of a pogo stick. As he gave the body in the tub his professional attention, he noted the pungent, sweetish aroma that permeated the white-tiled brilliance of the bathroom. He observed that the peach-colored silk undies, neatly folded beside the portable radio on the clothes hamper, were hand embroidered. He also noted that an ash tray on the flat rim of the bathtub contained three cigarette stubs smoked to within half an inch of the straw tips. On the cerise bath mat, a mystery novel lay face-down on its open pages.

Ritter took another look at the late Belinda Ford Holliday. His long nose wrinkled as he sniffed pensively at the scented atmosphere. Then, as required by law, he telephoned the Coroner. However, since the Coroner was prone to regard all unexplained deaths as due to heart failure, apoplexy, or accident—unless of course the head was missing or a knife protruded from the back—Ritter also telephoned his friend Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, pathologist at Northbank's Pasteur Hospital, who had a great and useful scientific curiosity.

Dr. Coffee was dining on a sandwich in his laboratory when Max Ritter phoned. An emergency operation was in progress and

the surgeon had asked for a biopsy. It was an hour before Dr. Coffee had made a frozen section of the tissue from the operating room, and given his microscopic diagnosis.

"The Coroner just left, Doc," Ritter said, as the tall, sandy-haired pathologist walked into Suite 232.

"Then you won't need me after all," Dr. Coffee said.

The detective blew an irreverent bubble of sound through his lips. "You know the Coroner better than that, Doc," he said. "In an election year, the Coroner's got no time for autopsies or inquests. So he says this is a case of accidental drowning. He thinks the bath was too hot or the gal got in too soon after eating. He says she fainted, got her face under water and drowned. Only there wasn't any water in the tub when I found her."

"Her hair's wet," the pathologist said. "She could have kicked the plug out after she was unconscious, by a reflex action in a completely automatic struggle to survive."

"That's what the Coroner says." The detective pursed his lips around another pneumatic punctuation mark. "He also says that funny color in her face is a sign of drowning. Cyanosis, he says. I tell him I got it on good authority that cyanosis can also come from cyanide poisoning, and that

cyanide smells like bitter almonds. Did you catch a whiff of that almond smell when you came in, Doc?"

Dr. Coffee nodded. The fragrant ghost of bitter almonds still haunted the room.

"But the Coroner says the smell comes from the almond bath-oil the dame's been using," the detective continued. "That's the bottle on that glass shelf, there. You can touch it, Doc. The boys dusted it and there's no prints on it."

Dr. Coffee picked up a bottle labeled: "KISS OF KANDAHAR—Almond-scented Aromatic Bath Oil." There was a small amount of oily yellow liquid at the bottom of the bottle. Dr. Coffee withdrew the cork and raised it cautiously to his nostrils. The fragrance matched the scent of almonds which clung to the air. The pathologist again examined the dead woman's face.

"I don't think it was cyanide, Max," he said. "The lividity of the face isn't the right color. It's not right for drowning either. It's a brownish gray, rather than a purple shade. Of course I can't be sure of anything without an autopsy. Is the Coroner going to do a post-mortem?"

"He is not," Ritter said. "But he authorizes me to hire you to do one if I find suspicious circumstances. And that's what I find, all right."

"What are they, Max?"

"Well, this Belinda dame is divorced in Florida just a few weeks ago. I find the divorce papers in the other room. Her ex-husband in a guy named Warren Holliday from Boone Point—a jobber in spices and stuff he sells to the food canneries around here. Seems like Belinda had a date with her Ex tonight, and he stood her up. Or he wants us to believe he stood her up. Just before the body was found, this telegram came for Belinda."

Ritter produced a yellow telegraph blank from his pocket and read aloud: "'Sorry can't see you tonight but will try to make it tomorrow. Love. Warren.'" The wire was filed at Boone Point late this afternoon. I just had the local police chief on the phone, and he can't locate Warren Holliday anywhere in Boone Point. So maybe Belinda's Ex did come to Northbank after all; maybe he sent this wire to build himself a little alibi in advance. Maybe—. What's up, Brody?"

The plainclothesman in the doorway said: "There's a bird outside, Lieutenant, says he has a date with Mrs. Holliday. Want to see him?"

Ritter winked knowingly with half his face and motioned to Dr. Coffee with his head.

"Sure, Brody. I'll see him." Ritter took Dr. Coffee's arm and closed the bathroom door behind them.

Brody ushered in a slim, homespun young man. The young man, apparently still in his twenties, seemed not quite at home in the alert, executive manner he was wearing. Neither was he at home in his double-breasted gabardine, which, although obviously expensive, hung from his shoulders with a Sundayfied, ready-to-wear character. Somehow his big, well-muscled hands seemed to call for blue denims and precision tools, instead of the green wax-paper cornucopia of flowers they were holding awkwardly.

"Are you Warren Holliday?" Ritter asked.

"No." The young man smiled nervously. "My name is Roy Manson. Isn't Mrs. Holliday here? I thought—"

"Sit down, Manson," Ritter said. "You live in Northbank?"

"Yes." Manson remained standing. "I'm general manager of the Bosworth Shoe Factory."

Of course, Dr. Coffee thought. General manager. Country boy makes good on big job. The good old American phenomenon: the self-made man, the quick rise from the production line to the front office. Dr. Coffee, who had a weakness for Horatio Alger heroes, decided he liked Roy Manson, a feeling obviously not shared by Max Ritter.

"Are you in love with Belinda Holliday?" Ritter asked bluntly.

"Oh, no." Manson's smile was

patient. "Belinda and I are very old friends. We went to school together in Missouri as kids. But I'm engaged to marry Esther Bosworth."

"The boss' daughter?" Ritter asked.

"Esther owns the factory now. Mr. Bosworth died six months ago. Would you please tell me what's happened to Belinda? I know something is wrong. I saw all those police cars downstairs, and now all you people here in the apartment. Did she—?"

"She's dead," Ritter declared.

"Oh my God!" Manson sat down clumsily. He stared at Ritter with stunned, unseeing eyes. "I was afraid of something like this," he said numbly. "Was she—? Did she do something to herself?"

"The Coroner says it was an accident," Ritter said. "Tell me about your date with Belinda tonight."

"I'd invited Belinda to have dinner with me and my fiancée tonight," Manson said. "Esther has been visiting relatives in California, but I'd expected her back. Then she decided to stay on the Coast a few days longer, so this morning I called Belinda to tell her the dinner was postponed.

"Belinda sounded awfully blue on the phone. I'd noticed she'd been pretty dejected since she came back from the South, and it worried me. I've always been fond of Belinda. She's been terribly nice

to me. When I first came to Northbank, when I was just a kid factory hand, not even a foreman then—why Belinda used to invite me over to Boone Point for Sunday dinner and things. She'd just been married to a man with quite a bit of money, but she didn't try to snoot me. So when I saw how blue she was feeling, I thought I'd come over tonight anyhow, to try to cheer her up."

"What was she blue about?" Ritter asked.

"I can only guess." Manson shook his head. "I think the man she got a divorce to marry may have walked out on her, but it's only a guess."

"What was the man's name?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. He was married, too, and was supposed to get a divorce himself. So maybe" Manson paused.

"Okay, go on home," Ritter said. "I'll call you tomorrow if I want you."

"I'd better be getting home myself, Max," Dr. Coffee said, "before my wife locks me out. I'll do the autopsy in the morning."

Roy Manson started for the door, hesitated, came back and placed the bouquet of flowers on a table.

"I'd like to leave these," he said, "for Belinda."

Dr. Coffee stirred restlessly in his bed when he heard the doorbell

ring. His wife nudged him.

"Please go down, darling, so whoever it is will take their thumb off the bell. You can sleep through plays and pandemonium but bells keep me awake. Please."

Dan Coffee rolled out of bed and groped for his dressing gown. He stumbled somnolently down the stairs. The door was scarcely open before the woman slipped in.

"I apologize for waking you in the middle of the night, Doctor," she said hurriedly. "But it's terribly important. It's about Belinda Holliday."

Dan Coffee blinked sleepily. The name did not register at first.

"Oh yes," he said, after the third blink. "That's the woman at the Southside. Why do you come to me?"

The pathologist was beginning to wake up. He looked curiously at his visitor. She was a dark, demure little woman, past the first bloom of youth but attractive in a virginal, wholesome way. At second glance he decided she would be attractive in many ways if she gave a little thought to the art of adornment. It was not the lack of make-up, for her skin was of a healthy, golden tint. Her hair-do was wrong—much too prim to go with her flashing black eyes. Her eyes were alive, positive, passionate

"I was listening to the midnight news on the radio," the woman said. "I heard that Belinda had

been found dead and that you, Dr. Coffee, were going to perform an autopsy. Was Belinda murdered?"

"I can't say at this point," Dr. Coffee replied. "Are you related to Belinda Holliday?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm Anne Devoto, Warren Holliday's secretary. The radio said the police are looking for Mr. Holliday."

"Yes. I understand Mr. Holliday has disappeared."

"He hasn't disappeared. He—he's outside in my car."

So that's it, Dr. Coffee thought. The secretary's in love with her boss. She's hiding him because she's afraid he killed Belinda.

"Did Mr. Holliday kill his ex-wife?" Dan Coffee asked.

"He should have killed her years ago," said the mousy little Anne Devoto with surprising fervor. "But he didn't."

"Then why doesn't he tell the Northbank police he's not in hiding?"

"It's a strange story," Miss Devoto replied. "He's afraid nobody will believe it. But we've read about you in the papers, Dr. Coffee. When Winifred West was shot, I remember. So we thought—"

There was a pause. *They think I'm a pushover for a likely story,* Dan Coffee mused. *Well, maybe I am. Still . . .*

"Bring Mr. Holliday in," he said.

Warren Holliday was a shaggy, gray-haired man in his late forties. He had tired gray eyes and a hesitant smile. His walk was slow and lumbering, but his handclasp was firm. He sat down wearily at Dr. Coffee's invitation.

"Did you see your ex-wife today?" the pathologist asked.

"No," Holliday answered. "I had a tentative date with her, but something came up and I wired her I couldn't see her until tomorrow."

"But you came to Northbank anyhow?"

Holliday's lips moved silently for a few seconds before he said: "Yes. How did you know?"

"Pure conjecture," Dr. Coffee said. "Why did you cancel your date with the former Mrs. Holliday?"

"Because of a business appointment. I'm a broker in spices and soluble seasonings. Late this afternoon I got a call from a spice importer from New Orleans who said he was in Northbank and wanted to see me. I had no idea how long my meeting would last, so I wired Belinda, calling off our date. Then I drove over from Boone Point to meet my New Orleans man in the lobby of the Northbank Hotel, as he suggested. I waited for more than an hour, but he didn't show up. I tried to call Miss Devoto in Boone Point, thinking perhaps he had changed his plans and tried to

reach me, but I couldn't make contact with my secretary. So I got back into my car and started home for Boone Point. Then I—I had an accident."

"Mr. Holliday suffers from periodic migraine headaches," his secretary explained quickly. "Often his headaches are preceded by periods during which he—well, loses track of time. That's possible, isn't it?"

Yes, it's possible, Dr. Coffee thought. Migraine is sometimes preceded by an aura which included a lapse of memory. But it was an unusual coincidence that Holliday's migraine should begin at approximately the same hour as his ex-wife's death.

"What is the last thing you remember, Mr. Holliday?" the pathologist asked.

"Well, I remember vaguely running off the road, as it winds over the hill just this side of Boone Point. I remember trees—or a tree. Then I drew a blank."

"Are your headaches hemicranial, Mr. Holliday?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Migraine usually affects only one side of the head. Do you feel the pain behind one eye, or at the back of one side of your head, usually?"

"Behind the left eye, always," Holliday said.

"Do you mind?" Dr. Coffee said. He pressed his thumbs gently against Holliday's eyeballs. His

fingers explored the top and base of his skull. Holliday did not flinch. *He's lying, Dr. Coffee thought. If he had those prodromal signs when he said he did, he would be in such excruciating pain now that he could not hold his head up.*

"Where did you find him, Miss Devoto?" the pathologist asked.

"He wandered into my apartment," Miss Devoto replied. "He was in a daze and shaking all over. I guess he walked from wherever he wrecked his car. I made him lie down and wrapped him in a blanket. I fixed him a hot drink and he slept for a little while. Then I heard the midnight news on the radio"

"Why did you and your wife break up, Mr. Holliday?"

"It was inevitable. I'm more than twenty years older than Belinda was. I knew when I married her, nearly five years ago, that ultimately she would fall in love with someone her own age."

"And she did?"

"Yes."

"Belinda never really loved Mr. Holliday," Anne Devoto said. Her eyes did not leave Warren Holliday's face. They seemed to say silently, Nobody could possibly love you the way I do. Her whole being radiated a protective warmth meant for him alone, enveloping him with an armor of protective loyalty that was his even if he thought he was still in love with a

dead woman, that would wait lovingly and patiently

"Did Mrs. Holliday get a divorce to marry a man named Roy Manson?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"Oh, no." Holliday smiled sadly. "Manson is a friend of the family. He's an old friend of Belinda's. I believe he's engaged to marry someone else."

"He's engaged to marry a shoe factory," Miss Devoto said.

Then who was Belinda going to marry? Holliday didn't know. Belinda had never told him, and he had never asked. She had told him she wanted her freedom and that was enough. That was the bargain they had made when they were married, and he had kept his part. He had not tried to hold her.

The purpose of his broken date with Belinda that evening? Holliday didn't know, really

"Nonsense." Miss Devoto volunteered. "Mr. Holliday is much too gallant. He knows perfectly well what Belinda wanted. She's been calling him up practically every day this past week. I think something went wrong with her romance and she was laying plans to get Mr. Holliday to take her back. She would have gone on making a fool of him for the rest of his days—if she'd lived."

Dr. Coffee lit a cigarette. As he smoked in silence, he reflected on the fact that both Holliday and Manson had seemed to have dates with Belinda on the same night.

True, Manson said he had phoned in the morning to cancel his. That would have given Belinda time to try to get Holliday to come over. After a moment, the pathologist said:

"Mr. Holliday, I think you had better tell your story to the police as soon as possible."

Miss Devoto's black eyes narrowed and her back stiffened visibly. "Do you believe that Mr. Holliday had anything to do with his wife's death?"

"Why, no," Dr. Coffee said. "But if your story is true, and if, as the Coroner believes, Mrs. Holliday's death was accidental, you will do well to get through the unpleasantness of a routine investigation as quickly as you can."

"I believe the doctor is right, Anne," Holliday said.

Dr. Coffee went to the telephone to call Max Ritter.

When the pathologist returned to his laboratory at Pasteur Hospital shortly before noon, he was carrying three small flasks of brownish liquid and a Mason jar containing specimens of tissue in formalin. He gave the Mason jar to his technician with the remark:

"The usual sections, Doris."

He placed the three flasks on his desk, took off his hat and coat, and called: "Dr. Mookerji."

Dr. Motilal Mookerji, Pasteur's resident pathologist, materialized

from somewhere behind the freezing microtome and set his course for Dr. Coffee's desk. Navigation was no simple problem for Calcutta's gift to Northbank. Not only was the little Hindu broad of beam, but his fore-and-aft dimensions precluded side-slipping through the narrow channels that separated the autoclave, centrifuge, and other pieces of standing gear which cluttered the laboratory. Furthermore, he had to take particular care that the long tail of his pink turban did not become entangled in a beaker, a microscope, or a rack of test tubes. After tacking and coming about several times, Dr. Mookerji managed to warp alongside Dan Coffee's desk.

"Greetings, Doctor Sahib," he said. "Five times greetings. You have no doubt concluded pleasant autopsy?"

"Concluded?" echoed Dr. Coffee. "We've barely started. Have you ever run a Gettler test for drowning?"

"Am familiar with theoretical hypothesis of Gettler test," the Hindu resident replied, "although have never performed same on submerged cadavers. Are not samples of blood from right and left heart analysed separately for chloride level?"

"Exactly," said Dr. Coffee. "Normally the salt content of the blood is the same on both sides of the heart. However, if the person

died of drowning, the lungs would take in water which would dilute the blood in the left heart. Therefore, if the salt content of the blood is higher in the right heart than the left, the person was drowned—in fresh water.”

“Am observing surplus blood sample,” Dr. Mookerji said. “Am also remarking that blood exhibits brownish tint somewhat resembling chocolate without flogged cream or marshmallows. What is purpose of third sample, Doctor Sahib?”

“We’ll try to identify methemoglobin with the spectroscope,” Dan Coffee said. “The color is characteristic.”

“Quite,” the Hindu agreed. “Have observed similar color in native Bengal, in victims of black-water fever.”

“We don’t have much black-water fever in Northbank, but we do see an occasional case of potassium chlorate poisoning, which does the same thing to the blood. I’ve another rather delicate task for you, Doctor—a qualitative analysis from less than a thimbleful of liquid.” Dr. Coffee carefully unwrapped a bottle which he gingerly passed to his Hindu assistant.

“Ha! Kiss of Kandahar!” exclaimed Dr. Mookerji, reading the label. “Kandahar is quite famous place in India, although currently in Afghanistan. You are no doubt familiar with frolics of Great

Alexander among almond groves of Kandahar. Or perhaps verses by lady poetess Laurence Hope regarding almond blooms of—”

“Never mind the almond blooms,” Dan Coffee said. “Just handle that bottle carefully. It may be deadly. And start with the assumption that you’re looking for an aromatic benzene compound.”

“Have no fears, Doctor Sahib. Analysis will be completed in twinkling of an eyebrow or shortly thereafter.”

When Lieutenant Max Ritter dropped in that afternoon, Dr. Coffee’s laboratory was redolent with reagents, standard solutions, and general toxicological activity.

“Is it murder, Doc?” the detective asked, as he parked one thigh on the edge of the pathologist’s desk. “I can’t hold my material witnesses much longer. They all got shysters waving law books at me, yelling ‘Witnesses to what?’ Do I book ’em, Doc?”

“I can’t exclude drowning until tomorrow, Max,” Dr. Coffee said. “The blood has to stand with picric acid overnight. And our toxicology tests won’t be finished much before then.”

“I think it’s murder,” Ritter declared. “That Devoto dame, first of all, is lying her head off. She says she never saw the inside of Suite 232, but I find her prints all over the place. So I bring in the night clerk of the Southside and

he identifies her as a dame who went up in the elevator about half an hour before the telegram came for Belinda, and came back down five minutes later. So the Devoto dame changes her story. She says a New York phone call came for Holliday in Boone Point, and it had to be answered right away because it involved a big deal in white pepper. She didn't know Holliday had sent the wire, so she thinks she'll find him with Belinda. The door to Belinda's apartment is open so she walks in, she says, and finds Belinda dead. So naturally she didn't want to talk about her visit."

"She's protecting Holliday, Max," Dr. Coffee said. "I think if we find that Belinda was murdered, and that Holliday may have killed her, Anne Devoto will confess that she did it herself. Why else would she leave her finger prints in Belinda's apartment?"

"Could be," Ritter said. "She's been Holliday's secretary for fifteen years, and I guess she's been in love with him for fourteen. But Holliday is lying, too. That black-out story of his is just horse-feathers. I find his car, all right, against a tree about a quarter-mile this side of Boone Point. But it was going about three miles an hour when it hit the tree. There's just a little dent in one fender. And it backs right away when we get in and step on the starter.

"So I start looking for this spice importer. No trace of him—not in Northbank, not in Boone Point. I call New Orleans. His home don't answer. His office ain't seen him in two days. Then I bring that night clerk from the Southside down to the station again and let him look at Holliday. 'That guy,' the clerk says, 'came into the lobby just as Miss Devoto stepped out of the elevator, coming down. I remember she grabbed his arm and they went out together.' So maybe she murdered Belinda to keep Holliday from taking her back, and talked him into inventing these cockeyed stories to protect *her*."

"If Belinda was murdered," Dr. Coffee said. "What about Manson?"

"I been holding him, too, while we checked his movements," the detective said, "but I can't keep him much longer. All his stories tally. He's going to marry that Bosworth babe who owns the shoe factory, all right. And she's out in California visiting relatives, like he says."

"And the young man Belinda was in love with?"

"Holliday and Manson back each other up on that one," Ritter replied. "They both think he was walking out on Belinda, and they both seem to think he was married, but nobody knows his name."

"Is the spice importer from New

Orleans married, Max?"

"He is. And I'm still trying to find him," the detective said. "Flash me when you know something, Doc."

Dr. Coffee flashed Lieutenant Ritter at ten o'clock next morning. "It's murder, Max," he said. "Belinda wasn't drowned. She was poisoned—by someone who knew her intimate habits.... No, it wasn't cyanide. I'll tell you all about it later. Can you bring all your suspects up here late this afternoon, after I've finished my hospital routine? About five o'clock.... Sure, bring the spice importer, too, if you find him. Meanwhile, don't book anybody and don't mention the word 'murder'."

"Another thing, Max. Since practically everybody in this case has been making free with the truth, I'd like you to do a little second-degree fibbing yourself. First, that bath-oil bottle is still in the apartment, as far as you know. Second, you're positively going to be out of town tonight. You have to leave in a hurry right after our conference. Okay, Max. See you at five."

Ritter had not turned up his spice importer by five o'clock, but he appeared at Dr. Coffee's laboratory with Warren Holliday, Roy Manson, and Anne Devoto. The

two men had undergone marked transformation during their brief police custody. Holliday had aged ten years. His gray eyes were no longer just tired; they were frightened. And Manson had shed not only his acquired executive manner, but his homespun shyness as well. He was edgy, harassed, with a badgered, almost haunted look. Only Miss Devoto was her own calm self, demure and maidenly despite her vital, dark eyes. Those incongruous eyes, Dan Coffee reflected, burned with deep, suppressed emotions which might well find an outlet in murder.

"You no doubt know," Dr. Coffee began, "that Lieutenant Ritter suspected foul play in the death of Mrs. Holliday. I'll put your minds at ease by telling you at once that we have found no evidence of murder. We did find methemoglobin, a pathological factor produced in the blood by some diseases and certain poisons. Does anyone of you know if Mrs. Holliday has had a recent attack of... say, malaria?"

Nobody remembered any serious illness.

"Then there is the possibility of anaphylaxis—a fatal allergy," the pathologist continued. "She may have been hypersensitive to some drug or cosmetic product. Mr. Holliday, did your ex-wife habitually use any particular brand of bath oil?"

"Belinda was crazy about any-

thing that had the scent of almonds," Holliday said. "Her favorite was something called 'Kiss of Kandahar.' She's used it for years."

Dr. Coffee turned to Max Ritter. "Max, are any of your men still on duty at the Southside?"

"Nope," the detective said. "I pulled Brody off at noon today."

"When you get a chance, I wish you'd go back to Mrs. Holliday's apartment and get me that bottle of bath-oil I noticed the other day. It was empty, but I may be able to squeeze out a drop or two and make an analysis."

"Is tomorrow okay?" Ritter asked. "I won't be in town tonight. I got to leave in half an hour for a quick trip upstate to pick up a prisoner."

"Tomorrow's fine," Dr. Coffee said. "There's no hurry. Meanwhile you'd better release these good people. There seems to be no valid reason for holding them further."

"You mean . . . ?" Warren Holliday rose from his chair. The mask of fear slipped from his face as he turned to Miss Devoto, seeking confirmation. She smiled, and he smiled back at her, wonderingly, as though seeing her for the first time. "You mean we can go?"

"If the Doc says you can go, you better high-tail it out of here quick," Ritter said, "with the thanks and apologies of the police department and three bucks a day

material-witness fees."

The trio had hardly left the laboratory when Max Ritter said: "I guess we can cut the double-talk now, Doc. Do you and the Swami here know what was in that bottle?"

"Quite," Dr. Mookerji replied. "Analysed contents with own hands. Same contained mononitrobenzene, alias oil of mirbane, which is noisome protoplasmic poison of high-octane potency."

"Then why do we let these characters go, Doc?"

"Because if one of those three killed Belinda, the guilty person knows there was mononitrobenzene in the bath-oil bottle, and that I may be able to identify the poison if I can get my hands on it. Therefore I am convinced that the murderer will sneak back to Belinda's apartment tonight to get the bottle. You and I will be waiting there."

"Okay, Doc. Let's go, then. Swami, take any messages that come here for me."

"Doris!" The pathologist called his technician. "Will you—?"

"Yes, Doctor. I'll call Mrs. Coffee and tell her you'll be home late."

En route to the Southside Apartment Hotel, Ritter said: "Tell me more about this oil of whoosis, Doc."

"Mononitrobenzene," Dr. Cof-

fee said, "is called oil of mirbane in commerce. It used to serve as artificial bitter-almond flavoring in the days before federal food-and-drug laws. It's still used in perfumery, among other things. It decomposes the blood and acts on the central nervous system. It can be absorbed through the skin, causing death—sometimes within the hour—by paralysing the respiratory centers.

"Belinda's habit of reading in the bathtub would allow plenty of time for absorption of the pleasant-smelling poison. Therefore the murderer was well acquainted with her intimate habits."

"Like that spice importer I can't locate," Ritter said.

"Or any of the three persons you've just released. I think I know which one it is—for reasons you'll understand if I'm right."

Ritter parked his car behind the Southside. The two men entered through the basement and walked to the second floor by the fire stairs. Ritter opened Suite 232 with a pass key.

They had been sitting in the dark for more than an hour when there was a knock at the door, followed by a violent, persistent ringing of the bell.

"This upsets my theory," Dr. Coffee whispered.

"I'll upset that Swiss bell-ringer," Ritter growled. He flung open the door. "The Swami! Get inside here quick! What's the idea of—?"

"Have no fears, Lieutenant," Dr. Mookerji said. The door closed again and he continued talking in the dark. "Took every precaution to conceal present destination, making surreptitious entrance via devious routes. However, two telegraphic messages arrived for you from police station, Lieutenant, so decided to deliver same in person to maintain secrecy of present whereabouts. Herewith."

Paper crackled as the Hindu pressed something into the detective's hand. Ritter shoved two envelopes into his pocket. "I'll read 'em later," he said. "No lights now."

A series of thumps, followed by suppressed exclamations marked the progress of the Hindu in the darkness. The creak of sofa springs and a sigh announced the success of his search for a seat.

Another hour passed in silence before Dr. Coffee heard the sound he had been waiting for: the scrape of a key in a lock.

The door opened slowly. The narrow ribbon of light widened into a pale oblong silhouetting briefly a human figure which disappeared instantly as the door clicked shut. Dan Coffee held his breath. So apparently did Ritter and Dr. Mookerji. Only the breathing of the newcomer was audible in the darkness.

A flashlight beam speared the

gloom, and a luminous disc rippled across the rug. Then Max Ritter touched a switch and the living room was flooded with brightness.

"Hello, Mr. Manson," Dr. Coffee said. "I've been expecting you."

Roy Manson stood in the center of the room, blinking at the gun in Ritter's hand.

"I thought you'd have a key," Dr. Coffee continued, "to be able to substitute mononitrobenzene for Belinda's bath oil during her absence. And a man familiar with Belinda's intimate bathing habits *would* have a key. You were Belinda's lover, weren't you, Manson, for some time before she went South for a divorce?"

Manson turned on his frozen white smile. "We were just old friends," he said.

"Such close friends," Dr. Coffee said, "that Belinda got rid of her husband and came to Northbank to be near you—the man she expected to marry. But she wasn't going to sit by quietly, was she, just because you changed your mind while she was away and decided to marry the shoe heiress instead. When does your fiancée, Miss Bosworth, get back from California, Manson?"

Manson did not reply.

"Answer to said conundrum now reposing in Lieutenant Ritter's pocket, perhaps," Dr. Mookerji volunteered.

"That's right. I wired the po-

lice chief at Beverly Hills today." Ritter fished the crumpled yellow envelopes from his pocket. He chuckled grimly as he tore them open. "Esther Bosworth is due back in Northbank tomorrow by air. So I guess Belinda got killed because she was going to spill her story to Miss Bosworth—about how she got a divorce to marry her lover, and how Manson was going to ditch her to marry a shoe factory instead."

"It was the shoe factory that first made me suspect Manson," Dr. Coffee said. "Since mononitrobenzene is used in dyeing leather for black shoes, Manson must be well acquainted with its deadly qualities. I'm sure you'll find drums of it at the factory to prove his access to the poison. And with the key to this apartment in his possession—"

The pathologist was interrupted by a childish whimper. Manson sank into a chair, tried to speak, then buried his dead-white face in his big hands.

"Hey, look!" Ritter said. "This other wire is from New Orleans. The spice importer ain't been near Northbank in months. He just got back from a three-day fishing trip in the Gulf." Ritter frowned. "Then who got Holliday over to Northbank on a wild-goose chase?"

"Roy Manson, of course," Dr. Coffee explained. "He knew that Holliday was still in love with

Belinda and was sure to go and see her once he was in Northbank and at loose ends. A visit from Holliday to his ex-wife on the day of her death would misdirect suspicion in case the subject of murder was brought up. Even Miss Devoto, who also knew that Holliday would gravitate to Belinda's apartment, suspected Holliday when she found Belinda dead. That's why she not only dreamed up that elaborate story about migraine and the phony auto accident, but even went all out to leave her own fingerprints here."

"A swell guy, this Manson." Ritter lit a cigarette and blew a contemptuous cloud of smoke at the man whimpering in the chair. "He even brought flowers for Belinda. I'd like him to meet my

sister some time."

"Shoemakers," commented Dr. Mookerji, "should remain stuck to last."

"We're going to stick this shoemaker, all right," Ritter agreed. "And believe me, it's going to last."

"You know, Max," Dr. Coffee said, "when Holliday left my lab this afternoon, I think he realized for the first time that his secretary actually believed he had killed Belinda, and was ready to do anything to save his neck, even to taking the rap herself. I believe I'll ask Miss Devoto to come by the lab some day next week. Maybe Doris can give her a few pointers on fixing her hair. She's really quite a good-looking gal, and Holliday may not be aware of it."

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