

GUILTY

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

Vol. 2 — No. 5

March, 1958

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W. W. Scott — Editor

GUILTY DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Feature Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 20, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts; and all such material must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1957 by Feature Publications, Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

DESPERATE KIDNAPPER

by SIDNEY ROBERTS

Kent had only one year to live. This made him frantic

HEY, Beautiful! That man's home!"

Johnny Burke tossed his hat on the hall table watching the kitchen door and when it didn't open he called out again but it was still negative. Going into the kitchen he found it empty and when he looked out the rear window he didn't

see Betty on the patio. The kitchen clock said quarter after five and when it said quarter to six he was in the living room with a drink and a problem generating rapidly into a gnawing worry.

Betty was not home and there was no scribbled note left propped against anything.



By phone he'd learned she was not over at Sue's or Helen's, and he'd even called Doctor Standish who told him Betty wasn't there but not to worry because pregnant women often did odd things at odd times. No doubt she had a sudden craving for a dill pickle or a strawberry sundae and took off to town. She would be back presently and with no idea of the time. Make a drink, Johnny, and relax. The drink he made, but the relaxing he could not do for Betty's Buick was out there in the garage and she hated busses.

By six o'clock he was toying with thoughts of the police when the front door bell rang. He answered it quickly but his hopes went into a tail-spin. It was Darwin Kent, a friend of the family and a real estate salesman long trying to interest them in one of the places in the new Valley Manor development out beyond Hill Top. He was a man in his forties not too ruggedly constructed with a pleasant enough looking face despite its slight sallow complexion. He

carried a brief case under his arm and his smile was engaging as usual.

"Evening, Johnny! May I come in?"

Burke pulled the door wide. "You bet, Darwin, but Betty's not home if it's another pitch."

Kent laughed and walked by him into the living room and sat in a chair and placed the brief case on his knees. Johnny returned to his own chair and was about to offer a drink when Kent spoke first.

"I know Betty's not home, Johnny, and this isn't another pitch."

Burke started. "Hey, you've seen Betty?"

The real estate man nodded and unzipped his brief case but did not put his hand inside.

"I left her a couple of hours ago quite well and comfortable," he said.

Johnny stared at him. "Left her *where*?"

"I won't tell you now," Kent said with a shake of his head. "You see, I've kidnapped Betty, but I will take you to her for twenty thousand dollars in cash."

The words made several circuits in Burke's head before he could regain control of his tongue.

"Kidnapped? Look, is this some kind of a lousy joke? I don't...!"

"It is not a joke!" Kent said sharply. "It is the truth! I came here about two this afternoon and told Betty you'd asked me to show her another place in Valley Manor I'd described to you. On the way out I said there was something else quite different I'd like to show her first. So we went there and that's where I've hidden her. She's quite safe but unable to leave, and for twenty thousand in cash I'll take you to her."

FOR several seconds Burke simply could not grasp the truth, and when he did a bomb went off in his head dropping a red curtain down over his eyes. He started to lunge from his chair for the other's throat, but ceased abruptly when Kent plunged his hand in the brief case and jerked out a gun.

"Don't be a fool!" he barked angrily. "Violence won't solve

anything. It certainly won't get Betty back because I'm quite willing to die before I'll tell you or any one where she is!"

Johnny Burke froze while the blood ran hot and cold through his veins and the inside of his head became a seething turmoil.

"You must be insane!" he whispered hoarsely. "Stark mad!"

"Perhaps!" Darwin Kent grimaced and shrugged. "Perhaps in a manner of speaking I am. Who knows what happens to a man's sense of mental balance when he suddenly learns he is going to die in a year and that no power on earth can prevent it? Does an insanity in the form of frantic desperation come to him? I don't know, do you?"

"What in God's name are you talking about?" Burke gasped.

"I am going to die in a year's time," Kent told him. "Of late I haven't been feeling well, so last week I went into the Stinson Clinic for a complete check. The answer is I

have Hodgkin's Disease. That is cancer of the glands and there is absolutely no cure for it now known to medical science. In my case it has progressed to where I have but one year left to live. Dr. Marc Blenheim, the famous cancer specialist, broke the news to me himself. I am going to die in a year!"

For an instant the nucleus of compassion formed in Burke, but quickly became a hard core of blazing anger.

"So you're going to die in a year but...!"

Darwin Kent stopped him with a movement of the gun and then placed the gun on his brief case but kept his hand on it.

"Let me finish, Johnny," he said quietly. "I don't expect you to understand, or even try, but I owe you at least some sort of an explanation. I am forty-four, never married, no living relatives that I know of, and I've been on my own since I was ten. It has been a long hard pull with little or no time out to have fun and go places and do things. A treadmill

grind ever since I was ten!"

He stopped and groaned bitterly.

"A forty-four year old nonentity!" he spoke again. "I've done nothing and seen nothing, and now I no longer even have hope. A year of life left to me. Just one! Do you know what that can mean to a man? To me? It can mean the end of everything but it can also mean a chance for the fulfillment of everything. All the things I've missed all my life. *I'm going to have that chance!* I have my one last year all planned out in detail from beginning to end. I'm going to do and see everything I've missed doing and seeing, and it will cost only twenty thousand dollars. No more and no less. I know you have that amount to give me, Johnny, and that is why I kidnapped Betty. Pay me twenty thousand dollars and I will take you to her."

AS the other stopped talking Burke closed his eyes and put his hands to his face and rubbed gently. Insane or not

Darwin Kent should be handled as such. One careless move or thoughtless word and God knew what might happen. He lowered his hands and looked at him.

"Why, Darwin?" he asked softly. "What makes you do this to us? We've been good friends a long time. You've often been here as a house guest, and we've had lots of laughs. And you knew of Betty's condition! In Heaven's name, *why?*"

"Johnny, believe me!" Kent said in a strained voice. "I swear if there were some other way I'd take it, but there isn't! I have nothing saved up. I have nothing to turn into quick cash. I have no way at all of getting a lot of money in a hurry. It just *has* to be you! I know you have that amount available. I even know you have more than twenty thousand but that's all I'll need. Twenty thousand, no more and no less."

Burke started to speak but gasped as sudden remembrance jolted him.

"What did you mean *Betty's*

unable to leave?" he cried wildly. "What did you do to her? If you've...!"

"She's *all right!*" Kent stopped him raising the gun. "She's sleeping comfortably. When we got there we were both thirsty as I knew we would be. So we had a drink of water but her's contained a harmless sleeping drug. She became drowsy and went to sleep almost immediately. She knows nothing of what's happening. Nothing! She's sleeping quite peacefully and won't wake up for hours. Believe me, I wouldn't harm Betty but I'm a desperate man. You can make another twenty thousand, but nothing on earth can make life longer for me. I have only one year to live! *Only one!*"

Johnny stared hard for a moment and nodded.

"All right, I'll give you twenty thousand," he said slowly. "But you don't think I keep that kind of money around the house, do you?"

A dull flush of anger crept into Kent's sallow cheeks.

"Don't take me for an in-

sane *fool*, Johnny!" he said harshly. "Of course I don't, but today is Friday and the banks re-open from five to nine on Fridays. We'll go to your bank and you can draw it out. I want ten one thousands and twenty five hundreds in one of those heavy bank envelopes."

The man paused to nod and gesture again with his gun.

"Before we leave let me make something *very clear* to you!" he said tight lipped. "I know where Betty is, but no one else on earth does. I said she is sleeping and she is, but even when she wakes up she cannot leave that place. It is locked and the windows boarded tight. Believe me, Johnny, if I handed you this gun you couldn't force me to tell you where Betty is. Nobody could! The stakes I'm playing for are too high. One worthwhile year of life for me. I swear that if I can't have this one last year as I've planned it I'll gladly take death now! I swear it again, Johnny, so if you want Betty back don't be a fool. Don't try anything! Just do as I say. Have I made myself

very clear? Very, very clear?"

Burke wet his lips and pushed the words off. "Very clear."

Darwin Kent nodded and put the gun in the brief case and zippered it shut and stood up.

"We'll go to the bank in your car and then to where Betty is," he said. "From there I'll use my own transportation."

A thought clicked in Burke's brain and it must have shown in his eyes for Kent quickly shook his head.

"Don't even hope," he said evenly. "I've worked this out in every detail. Nothing has been left to chance. When I leave you and Betty I become another person. The Darwin Kent you know will cease to exist and no one will ever find the new me, I assure you. I've planned for every possibility and it is all foolproof. Well, shall we start?"

Johnny hesitated and rose to his feet. "Let's go."

THE drive to town and finding a parking space by the

bank took some twenty minutes. When he got out Burke looked at Kent but the kidnapper shook his head.

"I'll wait here," he said. "It's all your show now."

Burke went into the bank and withdrew twenty thousand from his account in ten one thousand dollar bills and twenty five hundreds and put them in one of the bank's heavy envelopes and went outside and got into the car.

"There it is," he said and put the envelope on the seat between them. "Where to now?"

Darwin Kent looked at the envelope but made no effort to pick it up.

"Go out North Drive toward the Valley," he said. "Swing onto Route Nine when you come to it. I'll tell you more later. And drive carefully, Johnny! With twenty thousand here on the seat and a gun in my brief case there could be serious complications should we have an accident."

If the remark was spoken in levity it left Burke cold. He started the car and toolled it

out of the parking space into heavy early evening traffic. Half an hour later they were well out of town and rolling along North Drive toward its junction with Route 9. They had not spoken again after leaving the bank but when he swung onto Route 9 Burke broke the silence.

"How far from here?" he asked.

"A distance," Kent said in a flat voice. "Believe me, Johnny, you won't know we're there until we are, so why not just drive and not try to outsmart me?"

Burke opened his mouth but said nothing and returned all his attention to the road ahead. At the end of an hour's time he had driven miles and miles through totally unfamiliar countryside, turning off onto half a dozen different roads at Kent's direction, and now on a road leading toward the foothills of towering snow-capped mountains far away. A thousand times a thousand thoughts of Betty had flashed through his brain and each added to the terrific pressure

building up in him. Dark night was close to the earth but the top bit of a huge silver dollar moon was beginning to show above the rim of the horizon.

During the course of the hour's ride Darwin Kent had twisted around countless times to peer out the rear window, and when he did it once again growing suspicion became a certainty in Johnny.

"Damn your soul!" he blazed. "You've been taking us in circles to see if we're being followed!"

"That's right," Kent said calmly. "There was, you know, the slight risk you might have acted foolishly when you were in the bank. I apologize. I'm quite positive now that you didn't."

"Goddamn you!" Burke cried in a gagging voice. "Tell me which way to Betty *now* or so help me I'll...!"

"You won't, so shut up!" Kent shouted. "Take the next left. It goes out toward Indian Lake. Have you ever driven around there?"

"No."

"Then never mind," Kent

said. "I'll direct you as we go along."

ANOTHER hour of agonizing driving dragged by and the pressure in Johnny Burke had built up so it was a dull pain pushing against the roof of his head. The big moon was now well up the sky and washing the earth with a bright silver that almost made the car's headlight unnecessary. They were deep in the foothills of the far away mountains and as they reached the flat top of a long grade of a lonely dirt road Kent touched him on the arm.

"Stop and turn around."

Sudden panic hit Burke like a mule's hoof and icy sweat broke out all over him.

"We're *lost*?" he cried.
"Why you...!"

"No, you fool! Do as I say.
Stop and turn around!"

Burke clamped down hard on his jangling nerves and braked the car to a stop. It was not until then he saw Kent had the gun out of the brief case and pointed at him. His heart skipped a single beat but

that was all. Steeling himself he slowly worked the car around on the narrow road until they were pointed back the way they had come.

"This is where we say good-bye, Johnny," Darwin Kent then said quietly. "I know it's no use saying I'm sincerely sorry, so we'll skip it. If you look out your side you'll see a path leading up through those pines. About a hundred yards up it is a hunting lodge. A very nice one, by the way. Betty was delighted when she saw it, but we'll skip that, too. Here's a skeleton key to the place. It'll open the front door and also the door to the first room to the right where Betty is."

As he spoke the last the kidnapper held out a key with his left hand. Burke let go of the wheel just long enough to take it from him.

"How do I *know* she's there?" he asked tightly. "And..."

"You don't, but I assure you she's there," Kent interrupted him. "And stop worrying if I'm going to abandon you, too. I told you I had other trans-

portation available. However, I will have to leave this car down the road a ways where it will take you a little while to reach it. I don't need much of a head start, Johnny, but I do need some of course."

"Just how far down the road?" Burke asked grimly. "I may have to carry Betty."

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid you will have to," Darwin Kent said easily. "That shouldn't take you much longer, though. Well, go up and get her, Johnny. And good bye and thank you. I'll think of you often and hope that in time you'll get to think of me not too unkindly."

Burke acted as though he hadn't heard. Still gripping the wheel he turned his head as if to peer out the window at the path leading up to the hunting lodge, but out the corner of his eye he was watching Darwin Kent reaching down with his left hand to pick up the bank envelope. As the man's fingers touched it the pressure in Johnny exploded in furious action. He jammed his right foot down on the accelerator and

jerked his left off the clutch. He'd left the gear shift in reverse and as the car lunged backward he twisted around and slammed his right clenched fist down on Kent's gun as the violent movement of the car threw him against the dash.

The gun dropped to the floor and Kent screamed and wrenched open his door and dived out before Burke could grab him. He took two blind racing steps and collided with a sapling at the edge of the road and spun around and went toppling over and down out of sight. A brief instant later Burke scooped up the gun off the floor of the now stalled car and dived out the door himself.

He succeeded in halting his momentum in time and stared down over the lip of an abrupt rocky drop-off at Darwin Kent's crumpled figure showing clearly in the moonlight some thirty feet below. The man lay with both legs twisted grotesquely under his body and his eyes were closed and his mouth partly open as though a scream was in his

throat when he became unconscious.

BURKE hesitated and then shoving the gun in his pocket he turned and ran back across the road to the path leading up through the thick stand of pine. At the end of a hundred yards of lung-bursting uphill running he came out onto a flat clearing with a picturesque hunting lodge in a silver moon postcard setting. Its picturesqueness touched him not at all as he raced up to the front door and opened it with the skeleton key.

Inside was pitch darkness, but opening the door wide let in enough moonlight to show him the first door on the right. He opened that one, too, but no moonlight followed him into the room and he took out his cigarette lighter and snapped it into flame. A moment later he saw Betty stretched out on a couch and he leaped over to her with his heart in his throat, but she was sleeping peacefully and the bloom of perfect health was in her beautiful face.

Choking back the sobs of relief in his throat he gathered her up tenderly in his arms and carried her out of the lodge and back down to the car. He put her gently down on the rear seat and was closing the door when he heard Darwin Kent's agonized wail.

"Johnny, help me! Where are you, Johnny? Oh dear God, help me!"

Going over to the edge of the drop-off Burke stared down at the crumpled figure below. Kent had not moved, but the eyes in his dead-white face were wide open. The man saw him against the moonlight flooded sky and lifted up imploring hands.

"My legs, Johnny!" he screamed out. "They're broken. I can't move! Johnny, do something. Help me! The pain is terrible. I can't stand it! You've got to help me!"

All the rage in the world had Burke by the throat and he could only stand there trembling violently. Darwin Kent screamed again and clasped his hands together in frenzied beseeching.

"God in Heaven, help me, Johnny! Don't let me die. I swear I'm sorry for what I did. Forgive me, I was insane. But don't let me die now, Johnny. I want to live. I want to live if only for a little. Johnny, I'll do anything. Anything! Only help me! The pain's killing me. Johnny, in Christ's name, help me!"

Burke tried to speak, but the anger in his throat clogged it tight. Darwin Kent placed the palms of his hands on the ground beside him and tried to push himself up. His face was horribly twisted with pain and his voice was a ragged screech.

As the last trailed off in a gargled wail Burke drew the gun from his pocket and glared downward.

"Suffer to hell, you bastard!" he cried in a fury choked voice.

Reaching out his hand he dropped the gun down beside Darwin Kent's crumpled body and went over to the car and drove away.

THE END