

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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RICHARD E. DECKER
Editor and Publisher

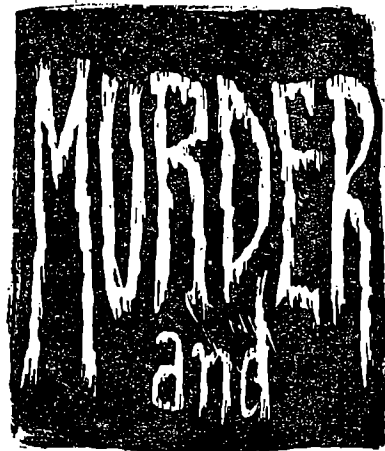
VICTORIA S. BENHAM, Associate Editor
G. F. FOSTER, Managing Editor

PAT HITCHCOCK, Associate Editor
NED BENHAM, Associate Editor

MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, Art Director

PARKSFIELD was a small town on the outskirts of a large Eastern city. Small and quiet, with some light industry and a scattering of old two-family houses and one or two new housing projects and a large modern shopping center, it did not look like anything out of the ordinary, was not out of the ordinary, but Danny South had driven clear across the continent, all the way from his beloved Hollywood, to come here. Before that, he had spent six months in research and in correspondence with various people around the country before he knew he would have to come to this place. Anonymity was often a difficult screen to pierce, yet it was still not easy for a person to disappear completely, evading persistent search and diligent inquiry.

Danny motored slowly in his convertible down the main street which burned bright and hot in the midday sun, glancing right and left with a vague, abstract curiosity. For the first time in six months he felt the luxury of a relaxed and unquesting mind, even though what was still to come was going to be the most difficult part of the whole plan. But at least he knew he had found her, that he was finally in the same town with her, that one of these obscure women who were moving in and out of the shopping center and along the



streets might even be she, the one.

Darla McVey would not be easy to pick out of a crowd anymore. Danny had not seen her since she had left Hollywood at the height of a storybook screen career fifteen years ago, without explanation to anyone. She had, in fact, walked out in the middle of a picture, leaving the sound stage one evening and never coming back, and the company had been obliged to scrap an expensive production. There had been explosive headlines, of course, in newspapers all over the country. Theory and speculation ran rampant. There were those who said it was all a publicity stunt. From the first moment Danny had known it was more than that. Then, after a few weeks, people began wondering whether her

Have you ever tried to disappear . . . to resign from the human race for even a brief time? Or, for that matter, to avoid a creditor? If so, you know how incredibly difficult it is, even though one may be innocent of any wrongdoing, to avoid one's inquisitive fellow man.

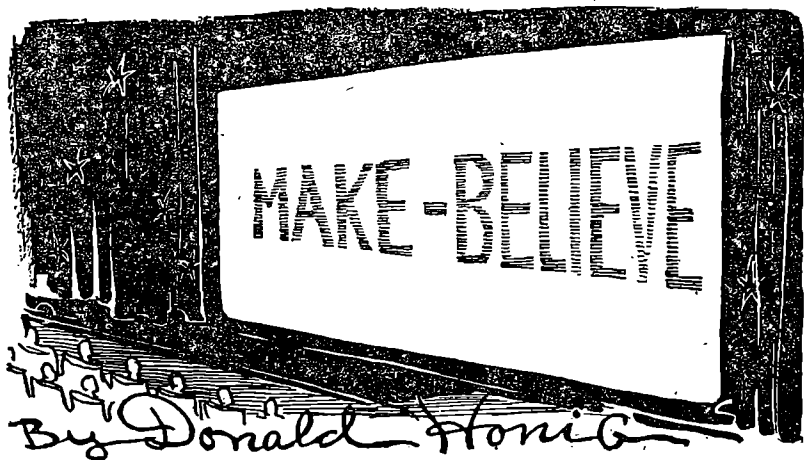


disappearance was due to foul play. It was at this point that Darla McVey came forward in what was to be her last public appearance, and gave her public statement.

She appeared quite abruptly and unannounced in a Los Angeles police station to say that she had left public life by her own decision, was doing it for personal reasons, had not been threatened or coerced by anyone, but merely wanted to retire and be left alone. Before studio officials could descend upon the police station she had disappeared once more. The studio delegation, led by the production head, J. J.

Millerman himself, demanded that the police tell them where Miss McVey had gone. But the police could give no information . . . she had given them none. There had been no reason for holding her, the captain explained, and she had walked out, leaving the police quite satisfied with her explanation. Incensed, J. J. created a stormy scene, accused the police of withholding information, and then left, his followers at his heels. That was the last time Darla McVey, the actress, was ever seen, as far as the general public knew.

But Danny South was going to



see her soon. She was here, in Parkersfield. It was the seventh home she had established since leaving Hollywood. He had tracked her (through friends, relatives, private detectives) from Hollywood to Denver to Chicago to New York and then through the small towns to, finally, Parkersfield. No one knew her as Darla McVey, of course. She was Mrs. Starbuck now, though not married; she had never married, as far as Danny knew. 'Starbuck', Danny thought moodily as he parked his car in the shopping center's lot. He wondered if there was a Freudian significance in the name: Star. Possibly. Darla had always been an odd, rather introspective girl, a cut above the average in sensitivity.

'I wonder if she'll remember me,' Danny thought. He had been doing publicity for the studio at the time of the great runout. He had met Darla several times at those riotous parties which she hated but had to attend. In fact they had both been there that night when that dipsy young starlet Audrey Elliott had somehow gone out of an eighth story window of a Los Angeles hotel to her screaming death on the pavements. Quite a night, that. Danny could still remember J. J. rushing from that bedroom, feverish and disheveled (the way you just *never* saw J. J.)

and running flush into him and J. J. blurting, "I wasn't in there. You didn't see me coming out," and hurrying away. Going into the room from which Audrey had swan-dived, Danny found Darla standing in a state of shock. "Save the emotion for the camera," Danny said. Then Darla had fainted.

He had been a brash young fellow then. Now he was a brash older one. Once upon a time he was going to write an exposé novel about Hollywood, but now he could smirk at his own naïveté and ambition, since he was now one of those loathsome people he once wanted to write about. The hacks who ground out B-pictures talked about writing novels, while they starved on their occasional pay checks and choked on their serious ideas . . . while Danny was earning a high five-figure yearly income writing "inside" stories for the slick magazines about Hollywood and the screen set. (But despite his yearly five figures Danny had less in the bank than most of those B-writers, thanks to tardy racehorses and the hellish proximity of Vegas).

Leaving the car in the shopping center lot, he found a bar and went in and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. The place was empty except for himself and the bartender.

"Say, bud," Danny said, inclining

his head to draw the bartender. "Where can a fellow find accommodations in this average American town?"

"There's a hotel about six blocks down," the bartender said. "Planning to stay long?"

"It depends," Danny said. "It depends."

"Salesman?"

"Writer," Danny said. "Big shot writer from Hollywood. I know all the secrets and all the scandals. But don't ask me if it's true about so-and-so because I won't tell. I get paid big money for telling."

The bartender looked dubiously at him.

"Everybody is a big shot," the bartender said wearily, walking away.

Wrong place to ask for information anyway, Danny thought. Darla would not be known to bartenders. She hated to drink, hated public places. He would probably find her feeding squirrels in the park or reading old novels in the library.

Danny took a room in the Parksfeld Hotel. There he set up his portable typewriter, unpacked his bags and then showered and shaved and went out to dinner. After dinner he strolled about Parksfeld, inspecting the town with condescension. It was a Saturday night movie or square dance

town, Sunday church and Monday work. Plodding Americana. As a stranger, he was cautiously appraised. He nodded at a few attractive young ladies and was coolly ignored.

The following morning (after spending the night with a bottle of bourbon and falling asleep in a smiling stupor) he set out to find Darla. The Parksfeld telephone directory listed no Mrs. Starbuck, nor had he expected it to; that would have been too easy. How did you find somebody who was living nearby without asking too many questions? Doubtless one of the B-writers could have worked it out quite easily (on the typewriter). But this was no movie script, this was serious business. There was money involved, a lot of money.

He went to the post office and asked where he might locate a friend he knew was living in Parksfeld. They directed him to the City Hall. 'Should have thought of that myself,' Danny said as he walked across the town square to the stern gray Doric-columned City Hall. There, after making several inquiries, he obtained the address of Mrs. E. Starbuck.

Danny asked for directions, and left the building. He walked through a fine residential neigh-

borhood, into one where the houses were clustered together and were less elegant. The street dipped and he went down-hill into an industrial neighborhood. He stopped there and wondered if he was going in the right direction. A garage attendant assured him he was, and he went on, wishing he had taken his car.

Finally he came to several shabby buildings huddled together. A *Rooms* sign hung out from one of them. The number on this house was the number that had been given to him. As he stepped into the musty malodorous doorway under the number he could not help remembering Darla's Hollywood house, a beautiful white mansion on a hill, shaded with palm trees, with white stucco guest houses and an immense green lawn.

He shuddered as he looked at the names on the bells. There it was: E. Starbuck. 'I don't believe it,' he thought. 'But it must be true.' He went up the staircase to the first floor landing. He had no idea in which room she lived, so he tapped on the first door he saw. It was opened by an agitated looking little man who peered up at him with distrustful eyes.

"Excuse me, brother," Danny said, "but I'm looking for Mrs. Starbuck's room. Could you point me in the right direction?"

"Mrs. Starbuck you say?" the little man said.

"That's what I said."

"You don't mean Mrs. Starbuck, you mean Darla McVey."

"Who?" Danny asked, unable to disguise his astonishment. Her identity was supposed to be such a secret, and here even the village idiot knew who she was.

The little man smiled benignly.

"She denies it, of course," he said. "But the resemblance . . . of course everyone laughs at me . . . the resemblance is striking. She never grew old. Still beautiful, like in the pictures. People laugh at me and say what does Darla McVey want to be living here for? Come in and I'll show you something," the man said opening the door wide.

Danny sighed and went in. Inside, he was astonished again. The room was a veritable shrine to the glory of Darla McVey. The wall was covered with pictures of the young beauty. It gave Danny a twinge of nostalgia to see the lovely young face with the wistful smile, all around him. Some of the pictures were glossy still shots which the little man had evidently badgered out of the studio, others had been clipped from old fan magazines and Sunday supplements. Some of the glossy shots stood in gilt-edged frames on the

bureau, arranged symmetrically.

"Isn't she lovely," the little man said quietly, proudly.

"Lovely indeed," Danny said.

"This one," the little man said going up to one of the pictures on the wall, "is from my favorite picture, though I was upset with the ending. Do you remember *Empty Arms*? That's the one where in the end that fellow takes her into the woods and strangles her just as her lover rushes up to save her, but is two seconds late. But he kills the murderer with a jack-knife, stabs him three times," the little man said grimly, "then kneels and kisses his dead love. I've seen it twelve times. Do you remember that one?"

"Sure," Danny said. In fact, he had written the publicity releases on that one. "But I want to see Mrs. Starbuck, Jack."

"My name is not Jack. My name is Sam Jaspers," the little man said, a trifle offended. "I was once a great lover on the silver screen, but you've probably never heard of me."

A kook, Danny said to himself. A genuine flake.

"We'll talk about it some other time. But right now I want to see Mrs. Starbuck," Danny said.

"Why do you want to see her?"

"Family affair."

"Who are you?"

"Her cousin. Cousin Danny from Hot Springs."

"She's really Darla McVey, isn't she?"

"Not a chance. She's Mrs. Starbuck. Sorry, Sam."

"I don't believe you. One star can always recognize another."

"Your prerogative. Now, could you just tell me where I can find her?"

"She lives in the room opposite mine. I'll tell her . . ." Sam said starting toward the door, but Danny interrupted him.

"No thanks. I'm old enough to introduce myself. Stay with it, boy," Danny said and left.

Old movie stars never die, Danny thought wryly as he stepped across the hall, even if they have to live in old photos on ratty walls in shabby boarding houses in the wrong end of town. He tapped on the door. A moment later it opened.

No, he thought, looking at her, if he had passed her on the street he would never have known her. Looking straight at her, knowing it was she, yes. But where had it all gone? The winsome look, the quiet blue eyes, the fresh buoyant personality that her brooding nature could never hide . . . all dim, like something passed behind a cloud. The blonde hair had been allowed to turn back to its original

drab brown. The inexorable advance of age had been allowed to creep unresisted into her eyes, around her mouth. A badly tarnished golden girl. Gone, too, were the showy and elegant Hollywood trappings, replaced by a cheap brown dress, flat shoes.

She recognized him immediately. He saw that, and was flattered by it.

"What do you want?" she asked sullenly.

"May I?"

She demurred for a moment, then let him in and closed the door behind him. He took a long, close look at everything: the brass bedstead, the shabby furniture, the flaking walls, the bare floor.

He said, "If I were a poet, Darla, I would cry, 'O!'"

"But you're not a poet."

"No," he said shaking his head with the memory of some regret.

"What do you want, Danny?"

"A story."

"I've been reading your stories for years," she said. "You seem to be doing well for yourself."

"Thank you, Darla," he said with mock sincerity. "I'm glad to see you've kept in touch with the old country, however vicariously."

"But there's no story here. No interviews. You're not going to drag me up out of the past to give your readers a sob-sister human

interest yarn. It's not what I want."

"It's not what I want either, Darla. I want something more than that. May I sit down?"

She said nothing and he sat himself comfortably in a patched easy chair. He sighed.

"I've come a long way, Darla," he said. "But it's a big story. For both of us. My editor authorized me to mention large sums of money. Could you use money?"

"Don't make bad jokes, Danny."

"I'm trying not to be funny."

"My story isn't that important. Someone's been deluding you."

"Oh, it's important all right. I'll tell you what it's all about. Do you remember a little actress named Audrey Elliott? Of course you do. You were there that night . . . when she went out the window. We were all there . . . you and me . . . and J. J. It was certainly a tragic thing. Suicide, the papers called it."

"Wasn't it?"

"Was it? How do you know?"

"What else could it have been?"

Darla said quietly. She stood by the window and stared pensively through the sun-whitened curtains.

"I don't know. Maybe you can tell me. You were there. Don't tell me you weren't. I came into the room a moment after it happened. J. J. was rushing out and you were standing there. I'll tell you how

you happened to be standing there. You went into the bathroom to powder your nose, and that bathroom adjoined two rooms and when you came out you stepped into the wrong one. So you were standing there when it happened."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's how it happened. I worked it out. I think I knew immediately. But then you faded out. You saw something that either shocked or frightened the hell out of you, enough to make you leave Hollywood and a golden career to run away and hide . . . to lose yourself in dumps like this. What did you see, Darla?"

"What do you want, Danny?" she asked listlessly. "Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I'll tell you what I want. J. J. is a big, big man. Always was. But now he's going to be bigger than ever. He's getting an appointment from the President as some sort of cultural emissary overseas. Real big stuff. But my editor wants him, wants him real bad. 'I can get him for you,' I said. But it would cost. He gave me a blank check."

"Yes, I read about J. J.," she said.

"You're going to help us get him, Darla. There'll be enough money in it for you to last you the rest of your life. And there will be satisfaction, personal and moral."

"What do you want from me?"

"I want to know what you saw that night," Danny said, watching her figure keenly, shrewdly.

She closed her eyes for a moment and shook her head.

"Go away, Danny."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. After it's over you can go right on back to obscurity if you choose . . . but a more luxurious kind. You'll have a hundred thousand dollars to live with, Darla . . . as well as the satisfaction of knowing that girl will be sleeping easier in her grave."

"J. J. is too big."

"That's the whole point. He's been stepping on people for years. Little people and big people. He stepped on you. Your fear of him drove you out of Hollywood. Didn't it, Darla?"

She folded her arms and stared stonily out the window.

"Didn't it, Darla?"

"Come back tomorrow, Danny."

"You're not going to run out on me?"

"That's your problem. Come back tomorrow."

When he left the house Danny found himself being followed by Sam Jaspers. He waited and let the little man catch up to him.

"What do you want?" Danny asked.

"What did she say? You're not

taking her away, are you?" the little man asked anxiously.

"Of course not. She wants to leave but I'm trying to talk her out of it. As a matter of fact you can do me a favor, little man," Danny said putting his arm around Sam's shoulders and assuming his most confidential manner. "Look, you don't want her to leave Parkfield and neither do I. I want her to stay here. She's happy here. She likes you."

"Likes me?" Sam asked incredulously, excitedly.

"Of course. She really *is* Darla McVey, of course, but she asked me to beg you not to say anything to anybody about it, ever."

"Of course not," Sam said stoutly.

"It's sort of a lover's secret, you know?"

"A *lover's* secret?"

"That's it exactly. Now, here's what I want you to do. Keep an eye on her, follow her if she leaves the house. Don't let her see you, of course."

"Like in that movie," Sam said eagerly, "where her lover follows them to . . ."

"That's the one," Danny said patting Sam on the chest. "You've got it now. If she goes anywhere out of the ordinary you call me at the hotel. Ask for room 212. Got it?"

"Yes," Sam said. "I'll do it."

Danny left the little man there and began the hike back to the hotel. There, he lay down on the bed in his room and lighted a cigarette and blew smoke rings at the ceiling with deep and smug satisfaction.

But there was no need for Sam Jaspers' watchfulness, vigilant though it was. Darla did not leave her room that day. She sat by her window and thought over and over about Danny South's offer, and gradually her mind drifted back into the past, that gaudy tinsel past which had not even seemed real when it was occurring and now in retrospect seemed not only unreal but incredible.

From the night Audrey Elliott had gone out of that hotel window Darla's life had been different. That night had halved her life with a brutal incision and it had seemed she would have to live the second half forever in this obscure and lonely room.

It had been a gay party in the upper floor suite of the hotel. The rooms had been crowded with people. She remembered streamers fluttering and balloons popping and trays of drinks being balanced on poised fingertips floating over heads. People had been talking to her from all directions. As the place continued to fill up she be-

gan feeling a headache and went to the bathroom to throw cold water on her face. Pushing her way through the noisy crowd she passed through a bedroom and closed the bathroom door. There she washed her face. After towel-ing herself she inadvertently went out the other door. That was when she saw it. She had begun to hear it even as she opened the door and stepped quietly and unnoticed into the room. The girl's voice was pleading, the man's angry and surly. What she saw was J. J. Miller-man moving menacingly upon the frightened, retreating Audrey El-liott whose dress was torn, one sleeve hanging in shreds. She was whimpering in a scared, plaintive voice,

"No, Mr. Millerman. Please no!"

J. J. raised his right arm and drew his hand back and muttered something in that growling unap-peasable voice of his and as he struck at her Audrey Elliott leaped back, lost her balance and fell over the low window sill and through the open window. A scream shot up, and it was over. Darla gasped. J. J. wheeled and glared at her, then turned and rushed from the room. A moment later Danny South ran in. Then everything be-came chaotic. Then Darla fainted. So that was what they wanted her to say now. That Audrey El-

liott had not jumped from the window in drunken suicide (as everyone believed). They wanted her to say that J. J. had driven the girl to it, had all but thrown Au-drey Elliott out the window. Darla remembered that terrifying four A.M. phone call she received that same night, the voice unmistak-ably that of J. J., dark and domi-neering, saying to her sleep befud-dled senses, "You saw nothing. Nothing. Nothing," and then hanging up. That was when she had decided to leave, to run away and hide forever, not only in fear of her life but because she had to get away from the rottenness, the horror.

But now. She was tired of it, the poverty, the privation, as well as the gnawing of her conscience. What money she had saved was gradually running out. She would have no choice but to take some kind of work soon, and that en-tailed the threat of recognition and all the old stories and the old questions starting up again. But one hundred thousand dollars could, by the economics she had learned during the past fifteen years, carry her comfortably for the rest of her life. She would be able to buy herself new clothes, eat bet-ter food, live in better surround-ings . . . and perhaps even help her gain back some of the self-re-

spect she had lost when fleeing.

She spent a sleepless night. Over and over the question ran in remorseless refrain through her mind: 'Why should I continue to make this sacrifice? Why?' Over and over she could hear the last scream of Audrey Elliott.

The following morning Danny South, to his surprise and pleasure, received a visitor.

"Well, Darla," he said, "what have you decided?"

"I've decided to do the right thing, finally."

"Money does talk the loudest after all, eh? Well, I don't blame you. A hundred thousand, maybe even a little extra."

"I'll tell you the whole story," Darla said wearily. "I'm tired of it. I'm just tired of living with it."

"You'll tell me everything?"

"Everything," she said with bitterness.

"Enough to finish off J. J.?"

"More than enough. I don't know what they'll call it, murder or manslaughter or whatever . . . but it will be enough."

Danny clapped his hands. "The story of the century," he said buoyantly. "Let's get out of here and talk about it."

Leaving the hotel they began walking. Led on by Danny, Darla

began recounting what she had seen that night in the hotel bedroom, remembering details she thought she had forgotten. Talking about it began bringing it all back to her, even the last words uttered by the frightened girl. Danny made her tell it over and over. It was as he had suspected all these years, he had always known this truth, and now it was being confirmed by the one person who had seen it happen.

They wandered away from the town, through a park and into a rather heavily wooded area, discussing the story, the details, the probable consequences.

"You're not afraid?" Danny asked.

"Let him be afraid now," she said.

"You won't recant at the last minute?"

"No," she said firmly. "Telling it has taken a great burden from my mind. You don't know how it's been all these years. You don't know how much cleaner and easier I'm beginning to feel."

They were now in quite a lonely, unfrequented area. It was very quiet except for a scattering of melodious bird trills high in the stately trees.

"It's ironic, too," Danny said. "I saw J. J. just before I left Hollywood. We were talking about this

big presidential appointment he was getting. It means an awful lot to him. Do you know what he offered me? His job as studio head as long as he was on leave. That's an awfully big job."

"I'm sure it was a temptation," Darla said.

"Quite," Danny said quietly. "But there were strings attached."

"I don't doubt, knowing him."

"He said, 'Danny, you know something about me. And so does somebody else.'" There was a certain peculiar flatness in Danny's voice now. Darla stopped and looked at him, first curiously, then with growing mistrust.

"You've been on his mind for all these years, Darla," he said. "He's never been quite sure about you, and now he can no longer afford to be unsure. Find her, he said. Find out if she'll talk, if there's anything that can possibly induce her to talk: not if she'll keep silent, but if she'll talk. Settle it, he said, and you can name your price."

They faced each other, Darla's face filling with alarm.

"I'm sure you understand, Darla," Danny said, a smile on his lips. Suddenly his hands sprang to Darla's throat before she had a chance to cry out. He threw her to the ground, his face suddenly wild

and maniacal. "Understand, Darla," he gasped, his fingers working into her throat, his knees pinning her struggling body. "*Head of the studio, Darla. Think what that means. You can't blame me. Don't worry about my covering it up . . . I've seen enough B-movies . . . I've got it all worked out . . .*"

Then she stopped struggling and her head fell to one side. Danny withdrew his hands. He stood up and backed away, gazing down.

Suddenly Sam Jaspers came bursting through the brush, raising a jackknife high in his hand. As Danny whirled Sam chopped the knife into his neck and cried out:

"And he struck him once . . . then twice . . . then again . . . and the villain fell!"

Danny collapsed, the three savage wounds in his neck pumping out blood, his face a mask of pain and shock and utter astonishment. He rolled over in the leaves, kicking and twitching in agony.

"And then the villain died," Sam Jaspers said mournfully, dropping the knife. "And then the grieving lover knelt to his slain love and put his face close to hers and softly touched her beautiful but lifeless lips with his own."

Sam Jaspers knelt and bent towards Darla.