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# WHO KILLED JACK ROBBINS

BY ROBERT LEE HEISER



"Surely, she thought, this must be a knight-errant of the olden days, and the fat gentleman is his squire."

**I**T IS a supernatural, exciting, aye, an almost unbelievable tale (though I vouch for its truth) that pretty little Kittie Robbins told from her heap of silken cushions amidst the reek of smoldering punk, tinkling of chimes, clang of cymbals, and the soft pattering of slippared feet in Yen Mott Lee's establishment hard by the waterfront.

Because I know (from newspaper accounts) that relatives, officials of a well-known insane asylum, and the police of many cities have been making a world-wide search for Kittie, who disappeared a few days after the death of her husband, I wish to inform them of the girl's whereabouts. I desire, also, to add that I am not at all interested in the reward they have

offered. I do feel, though, that what I am about to tell will shed some light on the mystery connected with Jack Robbins' death. It might also enlighten you as to what you can expect to find when you pass beyond the grave.

Neither would I have my readers conclude that I might have been under the influence of drugs or strong drink. I was perfectly sober. I will admit, though—for fear that I might have been seen there—that I stopped in Joe Dugan's place at Shipway and Highland streets, took one drink as a matter of respect for the bartender (I know the bartender; it's beastly stuff he hands out in Dugan's near-beer saloon—nothing at all like the brew he sold before the days of prohibition)

and then went down to Yen Mott Lee's place.

When I entered Yen's establishment I found him burning red-paper prayers at the feet of his ugly tin joss. He gave me no heed. The crowd in the fan-tan room were rolling their wealth away with dice on top of the kettledrums. I did not stop to play, because I had left my last penny with the companionable Joe Dugan. Instead I proceeded back, through the shimmering folds of heavy silk portières, lured by the unearthly music of a stringed instrument.

I found the player. She was a beauty—such a beautiful creature as I would imagine the angels of heaven to be. She was curled up on a heap of silken cushions, and strumming, lazily, at the strings of a mandolin.

"Good evening," she said, looking up drowsily, and without a smile.

That smile should have been there. I do not know why, but I felt like screaming to her that she must smile, even though it were just enough to bring the dimple to her cheek—the dimple that I knew belonged there, once, anyway.

"Good evening," I replied, seating myself on a low teakwood stool, locking my fingers about one knee, and allowing my eyes to feast on this pretty creature—it may be true, as some have said, that she hypnotized me.

"Fan-tan break you?" she asked shortly, nodding her head slowly in the direction from which came the sound of rolling dice and clinking coins on top of the drums.

"No, Miss," I told her, "I am always broke. It is natural. I am a writer of tales. To know this is to know that I have no coins to roll away on top of Yen Mott's drums. I was lured to the waterfront by the desire to see, hear or experience something which would make material for a story—by the way, do you never smile?"

I could not resist the temptation to ask her this. The question had a surprising result. It was like dropping a match into a can of gasoline. I was not a little startled.

"Smile?" Her drowsiness fell away from her like a cloak. She spat the words out as a snake would dart out its fangs. "Me, smile?" She leaned forward a bit. "What of happiness is my portion that I should smile? Have I not been banished by society as a thing unclean? Am I not an outcast from among my relatives and friends? I came to this"—she waved her bracelet-encircled arm—"because of their pointing fingers, their whisperings behind my back. Me, Kittie Robbins, who knows that 'if a man dies he shall live again.' You ask me to smile when I am approaching insanity—and know it?"

She covered her face with her pretty fingers, threw her head forward in a manner which caused a mass of brown hair to tumble over her face to hide, like a veil, the tears. Her shoulders heaved with deep-throated sobs, and, in compassion, I placed my hand on her head.

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed, drawing back. "Listen, O writer of tales, I'll tell you who killed Jack Robbins. How the souls of men who have been dead for centuries came to my assistance when my need was great.

**I**F YOU have read the newspapers you know that Jack Robbins, my husband, was found sprawled on the floor of his study, his fingers clutching deep in the soft velvet carpet, a knife—his knife—on the floor near by. He was dead. There was nothing to show what caused his death—unless it was the bruised spot on his forehead. Medical men, experts at their trade, said that this injury, in itself, could not have killed him. They pointed out that the spot was barely notice-

able. Just a discoloration of the skin. They found a small ball of iron—a paperweight—on the floor. They (the doctors) agreed that had this weight been thrown with enough force it could have caused the bruise, but never his death. He might have died from disease of the heart? Aye, but the examination proved my husband to have been in perfect health.

“I alone know how he died. They found me in an adjoining room behind locked doors. Friends, relatives and the police listened to my tale—‘babblings of a disordered brain’ they called it—of how I had killed Jack Robbins with an enchanted bolt. They smiled, shook their heads, and walked away. Because I have read much that has been written about spiritualism, and all that has been written about the knights of old, and believe in both, they—the fools!—insist that I am insane.

“I married Jack less than a year ago. He was cashier in—well, let that go, it is enough to say that his salary was thirty dollars a week. In spite of this small income we lived in a beautiful mansion on the drive amid luxuries which could be commanded only by the wealthy. My clothing was of the most costly materials. New gowns were produced for the asking. Me, a bit of a child who still played with dolls, how was I to know that the money was not gained honestly?

“But within a few months I discovered that others were sharing Jack Robbins’ wealth and love. There were other women. I became beastly jealous—aye, so jealous that I came to hate the sight of Jack. Especially when he came home reeling in drunkenness and mouthing curses upon me.

“Then came a night—oh, I shall never, never forget it!—when he brought one of those women—his woman—to the very door with him. Nay, he brought her into his study and introduced her as a friend.

“He threw a bulging handbag on

the table. I heard something jangle, inside the bag, like clanking metal. His collar was wilted and his tie hung outside his vest. There was a smear of white plaster on his coat sleeve. He peeled off his topcoat, removed his gloves, and stood for a long while glaring at me through squinted, cruel eyes—they had never seemed so cruel before. The whites were streaked with red. His breath came hot and panting as though he had been running. I do not know why he should have been in such disarray, because I had seen a taxi deliver him at the door—him and his woman.

“The woman (I do not know who she was; I had never seen her before) was painted of face. Her yellow, bobbed hair showed a tendency to return to its natural red through the fading of dyes. There was a worried expression on her face. She seemed extremely nervous and was continually glancing toward the door. Once she went to the window, pulled back the draperies, and looked into the street below.

“‘Jack, is this your wife?’ she nodded her head in my direction. My eyes grew wide with astonishment as she continued. ‘Robbins, you fool, she’s not what I expected to find, why, this—this—’

“‘Yes,’ answered Jack, somewhat angrily, ‘I know what you expected to find. One of your kind. One of my kind. Instead, you find that I have grown mushy and have fallen for a doll. I have taken a wife who is a pretty baby without backbone or brains. Not much of a helpmate for a man who is engaged in the dangerous business which I follow. Nevertheless, I want you two to be friends. It is high time that my wife became useful as well as ornamental.’

“Friends? Friends! Me, Kittie Robbins, entertain friendly feelings for this painted-faced she-devil who seemed to know my husband’s affairs better than I did! My better judg-

ment, and an entirely peaceful nature, kept telling me to bespeak this woman kindly, gather up my cloak and hat, say good-bye, and walk out of a lot of trouble unmolested. But what is good judgment to a jealous heart? The green-eyed monster of jealousy kept screaming to me, 'Scratch her eyes out!' 'Tear her yellow hair from her head!' 'Use your claws!' and, quite truly, I would have done so had not my husband—who had the strength of two ordinary men—caught me by my hair and thrown me, unceremoniously, upon a couch. All of which only served to enrage me further.

"'Listen, Kittie, don't be a fool!' I heard him shouting near my ear; 'you will have to act the part of my wife. I need your help. This woman is nothing to me other than a business associate. You have never asked me where I found the money with which to dress and feed you. Do you think that money grows on trees? I am a thief! A burglar! A safe-opener supreme! I am known—the thief, not Jack Robbins—from Scotland Yard to the American Headquarters as a killer! In that bag is the loot of my last haul. We—this woman who is my helper and myself—were hard pressed by the police. It was necessary that we slip in here for cover until the bounds of the law lose the scent. Now, it is up to you as my wife to use your brains, realize that I am your husband, that I am in danger—help me!'

"'Help you, Jack?' I heard myself saying, as I glared back into his terrible eyes. 'I'd do anything in the world for you, providing it be honest, but I am no thief—nor can I be a thief's wife. I can not even associate with thieves. I shall inform the police immediately. You, in your turn, forget who I am. You will have to act the part of my husband. Do you think that good women grow on companion trees to your money trees?'

"All in all, I believe I answered him rather coolly, under the circumstances. I do not remember that I was—at least not then—frightened. I only know that I was being consumed by the fires of jealousy.

"'Look you, Jack Robbins,' said the yellow-haired woman through clenched teeth, 'what a terrible mess you have brought us into through marrying this woman. There is no use in beating about the bush. She will inform the police. All they need is a hint as to who you are and the whole gang will dance out of this world on the end of a rope. There is only one way out—kill her! Dead men tell no tales. It is even so with dead ladies. I'll take the gold. Come to me when the job is done.'

"With this, the woman snatched at the bag. I saw the lids of Jack's eyes come more closely together. I saw his white, strong teeth—like a wolf's—unbared. I saw the woman withdraw her hand and back, stumblingly, toward the door.

"'No you don't, old-timer,' rasped Jack, 'I'll bring the gold when I come.'

"THE woman was gone. Jack Robbins was standing before me, licking his tongue over dry lips, and glaring into my very soul with those dreadful eyes.

"'Kittie, I have no choice. You know me. I had hoped to bring you to my level, that you would stand by me in my hour of trouble. That is all over. Even though you were to promise to forego your intentions of informing the police, I could not trust you. I must kill you!'

"I saw his hand go to his hip pocket. I saw the glint of light on the naked knife-blade as he moved toward me, rolling up his sleeves—aye, rolling up his sleeves like a butcher!

"I glanced about frantically for something with which to protect my-

self. There was nothing—unless it was the small ball of iron which we used as a paperweight. This bit of iron might have weighed three ounces. A sorry thing to use as a weapon of protection against a big brute of a man like Jack Robbins. But I snatched it up with a scream in my throat and leaped beneath his upraised arm. He was just about to strike—aye, I heard the ‘swush!’ of the knife arm as I passed under the stroke.

“Before he could right himself and turn to come after me a second time, I had leaped through the doorway to the adjoining room and slammed the door. I hurriedly turned the key in the lock and flung myself on a couch, so terribly frightened that I could not even scream again. My flesh trembled—quivered like jelly. Sweat streamed down from the ends of my eyebrows to mingle with the tears on my cheeks. My heart thumped madly. It would only be a few moments before Jack Robbins would have the door open. I could hear him cursing and threatening.

“‘You may as well open the door and have it over with,’ came his voice in a cold, hard tone, ‘there is no escape for you. It is either your life or mine. There are no windows in that room. The only means of exit is by this door, and you will find me here when you come out. You can have your choice—starvation or the knife.’

“I did not reply. I had been staring at a candle which flickered in its gilded holder on a table several feet away from the couch upon which I had fallen. I do not know why I should have become so interested in that candle. It seemed to hypnotize me as a snake’s eyes fascinate a bird. I was so interested in the candle that I hardly heard Jack Robbins’ terrible threats—I remember, though, that I still held the small ball of iron in the hot palm of my hand.

“Suddenly I felt my mind grow weary. I seemed to have a great desire to sleep. This thing—this terrible power of the candle’s flickering flame—frightened me worse than Jack Robbins’ threats! My very soul—that something within all of us which we can not place our fingers on and say ‘that is it’ but which we know exists—was leaving my body. I seemed to be floating in space, away from the couch, until I found myself looking directly down upon the candle-flame as though I were hovering above it. Eventually I found myself on the other side of the table, near the floor, and looking back—through the flickering, shimmering, nervous flare of flame—I saw—

“Don’t laugh at me! I tell you I saw my own body, itself, crouched among the cushions, there on the couch I had just quitted. Objects in the room began to grow dim. Everything seemed to grow confused. I only knew that I floated, quietly, rapidly away into the great beyond where no human has ever visited and returned to tell the tale—except me, Kittie Robbins, and for that they say I am insane.

“While my body of clay, on the couch, trembled in terror, my soul—the thing which looked back—wanted to laugh, wanted to shout: ‘Oh ho, of what would it avail you, Jack Robbins, to kill that body? Break the door in and kill it! You can never kill *me!*’ I felt elated. It was a great joke on Jack Robbins.

“Suddenly I discovered that I was not in the room. I looked about to find myself in a field surrounded by a great forest of trees. The sun was shining, birds were singing, and a soft breeze tossed the weeds at my feet.

“I WAS rather at a loss to place myself. Where was I? Who was this approaching from the opposite

side of the field? Could it be Jack Robbins? Surely it was he. His knife was in his right hand. His sleeves were rolled up—like a butcher's—and there was an evil leer on his face.

“‘Oh, I'm coming! You can't escape me, you little devil-cat!’ he shouted as he approached. ‘You thought you did something wonderful when you slipped under my arm that time. I was not expecting that. You will never be able to repeat it—I've driven this knife into more slippery eels than you. I've got you right where I want you this time! You forgot that I, too, might follow you into the great beyond. This thing we call life does not start at birth and end with death. Why should it? Why should everything in creation move in circles—without end—and humanity be the one exception? When you pass out, in what you term death, you simply find yourself reborn into this existence. In the same manner you will pass out of this existence to be reborn into the earth's family——’

“‘Help! Help!’ I screamed, looking about me wildly.

“‘Yell your head off, no one can hear you——’

“‘For some reason I did not hear what he would have continued to say, for at that moment my attention was attracted by something else. Who was this who was coming out of the forest on the other side? Two men. Certainly they were queer-looking characters. One rode a bony horse. The other rode a mule. It seemed to me that I had met this pair before, but I could not immediately place them. The man on the horse was partly dressed in armor—but, look you, his helmet was nothing more nor less than a barber's brass basin—such a basin as the Spanish barber used in the Sixteenth Century—he dug his heels into his bag-of-bones of a mare furiously, but that

good beast simply wagged his ears and carried his master, in answer to my frantic call for help, at an ambling walk. This man was tall, gaunt, deep-set of eyes, and none too cleanly of person.

“‘The other man—the one who rode the mule—was not near so tall as his companion. He was heavily bearded. His beard would have been none the worse off for a good combing. He looked weary and bedraggled. There was a bandage about his head.

“‘Surely, I thought, this must be a knight-errant of the olden days, and the bearded gentleman is his squire. My heart was filled with hope. Perhaps this knight would save me from the terrible butcher.

“‘He was near me now. He was speaking. With a great sweep of his arm and a bowing of his body, which, while none too graceful, was well meant: ‘Ah, Madam, you can be none other than the fair Kittie Robbins, heart of my heart, and I would have you to know that he who addresses you is none other than a famous knight of the olden days. You have, no doubt, read of my wonderful exploits on earth—I am continuing my calling here. I mistake not that my further adventures would make good reading—were it not for the fact that biographers and knights-errant go to widely separated places after death, I make no doubt that those further adventures would be recounted.

“‘Be that as it may, I have come to rescue you from this perilous situation in which you now find yourself, that you might return to the world to refute the base slander that knights are all fictitious characters, and to inform humanity that there is a life hereafter—how, I ask you, sir,’ turning to the man on the mule, ‘do you now believe in enchantment?’



“‘I’ faith, sir,’ answered the squire, ‘how you can be such an adleplate as to mistake this wench for your lady Kittie Robbins is more than I can understand. Well, be it as you say—a doubter of masters is equal to a quitter. There is no fool like an old fool. Squires are made to obey and not to command their masters. If you say this is your lady Kittie Robbins whom the enchanters have banned to sixty years of life in Yen Mott Lee’s establishment in the world from which we progressed during the Sixteenth Century—be it so. Others can say the moon is green but I can think as I choose. Barnum said there was one born every minute and—’

“‘Go on, friend, string your proverbs, though they have as little filling as a bladder of wind. What do you know of Barnum? Barnum was of the days immediately prior to automobiles and airships, your day was that of mule and horseback. Would you suggest that I, your master, am a fool?’

“‘I’ troth, sir, I know not, I only know that you promised to show me heaven after death, and this world is much after the fashion of the one we left—everything, even to fools, seems to be reproduced here—’

“‘Ingrate! Hand me that enchanted bolt from your saddle-pack. And you, dear lady, take the bolt, heave it with all your strength against the forehead of the approaching giant. Fie on thee—thou imitation of a squire who has not guts enough to fare forth to do battle with you approaching giant. This is little enough which we can do to protect my lady during her enchantment.’

“‘Good sir, I’ faith, I see no giant—’

“‘Why, my good sir,’ I was forced to interrupt. I was somewhat displeased that this squire did not recognize me. ‘Why, my good squire,

can you not see Jack Robbins approaching with his knife?’

“‘I found the enchanted bolt in my hand. I do not remember taking it from the knight’s hand. It was there—a small bit of iron in the hot palm of my hand. I looked toward Jack Robbins. I was rather surprised and a bit puzzled that my husband had not arrived closer during the lengthy conversation between the knight and his squire. But enchanters have a way of making things seem what they are not. It seemed to me like a long time since I first found myself in the field; nevertheless the man with the knife was still approaching, and a tremor of fear engulfed me.

“‘Whine, whine! You——!’

“‘It was Jack Robbins who spoke.

“‘Did you think you could escape me?’ he continued.

“‘I drew back my arm, closed my eyes, and threw the ball of iron as hard as I could. The approaching fiend stopped dead in his tracks, threw his knife away from him, raised to his tiptoes, whirled completely about in a circle, then went crashing on his face to claw among the weeds and—be still.

“**I** LOOKED about to see what had become of the knight and his squire. I could not see them. Instead I saw the flickering candle-flame. I heard the splintering crash of the door as it was broken by heavy shoulders. I had probably swooned and dreamed all this. I had no time to dwell on the strangeness of it all, for the breaking door told me that Jack Robbins was coming and there was no knight to assist me—even the ball of iron was gone from my hand, as poor a weapon as it was.

“‘I screamed in terror. I leaped to my feet just as the door fell in, and there—and there stood—not Jack Robbins, as I had expected, but

a big, broad-shouldered man in the blue uniform of a policeman.

“‘Come, lady,’ he said, in a kindly, although deep-toned voice, ‘I feared you had come to harm. My pounding on the door brought no answer from you, and I had to make entrance by force. Who killed Jack Robbins—and how? What has happened here?’

“‘I did not answer him. I could not find voice to reply. Leaning on his arm I was led out of the room and through the study. As I passed through I saw my husband on the floor. A doctor was bending over him. As I passed close I heard the man of medicines saying, ‘Dead, dead as a door-knob, but for the life of me I can’t determine what killed him.’

“‘I know, I know!’ I had found my voice: ‘I killed him with an enchanted bolt from beyond the grave.’ Then I told my story.

“‘The doctor looked at me for a moment, his mouth dropped open, he scratched his head, then smiled sadly.

“‘Poor soul, she’s insane; something terrible has happened here. Here is the enchanted bolt of which she speaks. It weighs less than three ounces. As for the bag of gold, if it ever existed—where is it now? You gentlemen, who knew Jack Robbins, respectable cashier in the Mauginsville Bank, will hardly consider the incident of the yellow-haired woman and the bag of gold. Take her away, we will look after her later.’

“‘They did look after me. I fooled them. I escaped and came to this place! And now, you writer of tales, you have your story. Go make fun of me—and if you do, and if you come back here to the waterfront in search of yarns, I’ll scratch your eyes out!’”

**A**S I have said, I only tell what Kittie told. She may have been “stringing” me. She may be crazy. I’m going back some of these times to see if she’s still there. I may ask her what became of the bag of gold. I imagine Kittie knows a lot of interesting yarns.