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MURDERER'S CHAIN

by
WENZELL
BROWN

IF MAUDIE had only given me the ten thousand dollars to invest in the Martian Development Company there would have been no reason to kill her. The money would have been more than tripled and my financial troubles would have been over. But Maudie has always been so unreasonable. Even though she grudgingly admitted that I had been right in the Martian venture, she still had no faith in my business judgment. She was as adamant as ever about parting with the smallest fraction of her vast fortune when I had the opportunity to step in on the ground floor of the Balsavius Six Mining Corporation.

Balsavius Six, in case you don't know, is the newest planet which Earth's space ships have touched. Everything about Balsavius has been kept strictly hush-hush. Only a handful of people have the slightest concept of the value of the new planet's mineral deposits. It just happened that one of the men in on the top secret was my friend Sylvester, and he was willing to cut me in on a slice of the corporation he was forming for as

little as five thousand dollars on the line.

The problem was how to get my hands on that much folding stuff. The answer should have been easy. Maudie (Mrs. Maude Terrain) was one of Earth's wealthiest women and, after all, Maudie was my mother-in-law. The trouble with Maudie was that she was narrow-minded, prejudiced, I might say bigoted. She liked to boast that her family have come from good, solid Earth stock from the beginning of time and, while she mingled with the socially elite from Venus, she considered Martians crude, and refused to entertain guests from what she described as "the minor planets."

Maudie's second trouble was that she was mean. Although her daughter, Isabelle, and I have been married for eight years, Maudie never did more than to provide us with a modest allowance. She always felt that I should work which, after all, is pretty nonsensical when there are so many ways for a man with a little capital to get rich quick.

Isabelle isn't like Maudie. She's

easy-going, pliant, susceptible to flattery and, on Maudie's death, Isabelle would inherit her full fortune. So with a deal like this in the offing, it didn't take any great brain to see that Maudie's rapid demise would remove the single obstacle that stood between myself and untold wealth.

The thought of killing Maudie had come often to my mind since my talk with Sylvester but the available weapons all seemed too crude. I'm a fastidious person and the idea of shooting or stabbing Maudie was just too vulgar. One of the more subtle poisons might have turned the trick, but certainly nothing as obvious as cyanide or arsenic. As for curare or beleston, to be frank, I hadn't the foggiest notion where to lay my hands on them.

That's the way things stood when I just happened to stop in front of the window of Melvin Rosy's House of Fantastic Jewelry in Greenwich Village. I'd passed by the shop many times but I'd never paused to look in. Of recent years, the Village has filled up with all sorts of peculiar people, Martians, Venusians and the little green men from outer space. One thing I'll have to hand to Maudie, she was right about calling some of these people uncouth. Some of the Galaxians really are riff-raff.

Out in front of the store were some long pink fliers advertising the jewelry within. I picked one up idly, for it had just occurred to me that Maudie's birthday was the next day and that it might not be a bad idea to soften her up with a gift. I looked at the monstrous chunks of jewelry in the display window—rings, bracelets and whatnots, decorated with staring eyes, floating amoebas and gilded kidneys. Maudie was a pushover for spectacular accoutrements but this stuff exceeded even her flamboyant taste.

Probably I would have walked on by if a couple of lines at the top of the flier hadn't caught my attention. They were written by some old time humorist called S. J. Perelman and he

described the jewelry as being like, "an egg balanced on a cone, an egg balanced on a bone, a hag balanced on a roan."

That last part seemed a perfect description of Maudie—"a hag balanced on a roan." Almost by instinct I started to climb the crooked stone steps to the shop. The door was open and the proprietor was standing behind the counter. Other than that the place was empty.

I'd seen Melvin Rosy around before. He was a big brute of a man with a shaggy red beard who sported a dangling jade earring in his left ear. I'd always suspected that Rosy had Martian blood but I'd never been sure until I glimpsed the little purple flecks in the lines of his palms that are a dead giveaway.

Rosy looked up and his gaze seemed to go right through me. Some of these Martian chaps have an uncanny skill at reading your mind. Rosy's voice was clear and soft but it had the timbre of some stringed instrument. He said, "A gift perhaps. For a woman?"

I nodded but I almost jumped out of my skin when he added, "For your mother-in-law, I should imagine. I'm sure I have just the thing."

He showed me a half dozen pendants and bracelets but I could see his heart wasn't in it. He was sizing me up, wanting to make sure of me before he offered the *piece de resistance*. I could feel excitement surging up inside of me, even though I had no notion of what he would bring forth.

Finally he went to the rear of the shop and disappeared behind a batik curtain. When he returned he held in his hand a heart-shaped box of deep-napped velvet, royal purple in color. He laid the box on the glass counter but his wide palm nearly covered it.

His eyes held mine and his thick lips quirked in a smile that was almost a grimace. He said, "I take it you want an extra-special gift. I might say a gift for the departing, even a fatal gift."

I gulped and nodded.

He raised the box and slipped the catch. The lid rose slowly on coiled hinges and I was staring at the most delicately wrought necklace I had ever seen. It was long and thin, no wider than a shoestring, and the clasp was a beautifully constructed replica of a snake's head. I looked at the intricate design of the narrow chain with wonder. Certainly it was not a product of Earth, I thought. Nowhere on this planet do we have craftsmen capable of such elaboration of minutiae.

Even more striking than the workmanship of the chain was its coloration. It was not gold, as I had first thought, but a metal unknown to me with a flame-like orange glow. My gaze was drawn away from the necklace by Rosy's soft chuckle.

"It is magnificent, is it not?"

"Yes," I said, "but far beyond my means. I had in mind some trifle—"

Rosy lifted a hand for silence and again I noticed the purple flecks in the palm. He said, "Nothing is too expensive for the woman you hate."

I began to stutter a protest but something in Rosy's expression stopped me. He spoke gently, as though humoring a child. "We do not need to discuss price. The necklace will make you a wealthy man. We can settle upon terms then."

"I don't understand."

"Ah, but you will," he said smiling. "You do not recognize the metal. There is nothing strange about that. Probably no man of Earth has ever seen it and lived. In Mars it has been given the name of Malutrex and, even there, it is both rare and extremely expensive because of its peculiar properties. In all, I doubt if more than a dozen such necklaces were made up. They are called,"—he stopped to underscore his point, "Murderer's Chains."

I think he expected me to ask why. But for some reason my throat was so

dry that I couldn't trust myself to speak.

"You will recall," he continued slowly, "that way back in the twentieth century when the Martians first came to Earth, they were not made exactly welcome. Our first space ships were fired upon and many of our people were killed. Our next step was secret infiltration. We landed our ships in deserts and other isolated spots and unloaded select groups to intermingle with the Earth people and, because we are a superior race, soon many of our representatives held important posts among the governments of the Earth, especially that of the United States. To these Martians fell the task of breaking down ancient prejudices so that Earth could be opened to unrestricted trade and immigration. This was not easy. The men of Earth still remained hostile to us and, when we were unmasked as Martians, many of us were imprisoned and some were beaten to death, even executed. The people of Earth were, as a whole, complacent but they were whipped up to a frenzy by scare-mongers and demagogues whose voices it became necessary to silence.

"Open retaliation would have done more harm than good and it was then that the Martians found the perfect weapon—Malutrex. This is a metal quite harmless to Martians for, as you know, our blood has a quite different composition than yours. We can handle Malutrex without the slightest danger. Look—" He reached down, coiled the slender chain about his wrist, caught the hook in the tongue-like catch of the delicate clasp then unloosened it again.

He smiled and was silent for a minute, studying my face. When he spoke again it was with slow deliberation. "Maybe, you remember hearing tales long ago of 'the silent death'. Certain isolationist Congressmen and Senators who spear-headed the opposition to interplanetary development died mysteriously and without visible

cause. Malutrex was the cause of their deaths."

I was culling out half-forgotten bits of information that I had learned as a schoolboy. "But how—"

Again the purple-fleeced palm raised to interrupt me. "Earth men are hot-blooded. The chemical analysis of their bodies—but I won't bother you with the technicalities. In plain language, once a chain of Malutrex circles human flesh, it begins to shrink, slowly, almost invisibly. It grows tighter and tighter until it becomes a strangler's noose. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that the Earth man can do about it. Once the clasp is fastened, no matter how he tries, he cannot undo it nor, after a few minutes, can he loosen the chain from his skin. In most cases the victim is taken completely unaware by the death creeping upon him. Malutrex constricts gradually and painlessly except for the last spluttering moment of life."

My knees felt a little weak and my stomach queezy. "Why tell me? Why should you let me in on this secret?"

Rosy's smile became more intimate. "Mrs. Terrain is not exactly popular among Martians," he said softly. "If I remember correctly, she is the Chairman of the League to Oppose Interplanetary Marriage, and has financed the Earth Citizens Council to name only a few of the discriminatory organizations with which she has linked herself. Perhaps you, as her heir, could put her fortune to a better use."

"There's no doubt of that," I said.

"Well, then—"

"But I've no desire to be dissolved in the death ray chamber for murder."

"Nor is there any need to do so. Look, was a single one of our assassins caught?"

"But the necklace would be found embedded in her flesh."

He shook his head. "Perhaps I've not made the situation clear. The pumping of the heart, the warmth of the blood cause Malutrex to contract.

As soon as death sets in the necklace resumes its normal proportions. The clasp can be unfastened, the necklace removed, and as long as the ends do not meet it remains completely harmless."

I gulped again. Murder in the abstract is one thing; planned, cold-blooded murder is something else again. But Maudie dead, and all that money in my hands! Suddenly I laughed as I saw where my thoughts were leading me. The whole thing was a hoax of some kind.

As before, Rosy seemed to read my mind. He reached for my wrist and twisted the necklace about it. I stared at the delicate chain in fascination. As I watched, I could see the metal shrink, barely perceptibly, but certainly for all that. I clawed at the clasp and tried to unfasten it. It was utterly hopeless and swift panic swept over me. I grasped the slender chain and tried to wrench it free. It was tougher than finely tempered steel. Sweat popped out on my forehead and I could hardly repress a scream.

With a knowing nod of his head, Rosy leaned forward and lifted my wrist. He opened the catch with a lazy flick of his fingers. I was breathing hard and scared half out of my wits but I was caught in the trap that Rosy had set for me. Maudie dead, myself a millionaire, and no chance of being caught. This was too good to pass up. I knew it and so did Rosy. All we had to do was agree on terms. Half an hour later when I left the House of Fantastic Jewelry, the royal purple box with the Murderer's Chain lay in my pocket, beautifully gift-wrapped.

I had to lay my plans carefully but unwittingly Maudie and Isabelle conspired to make it easy. A dinner had been arranged at Maudie's apartment as a birthday celebration. The only other guests would be Sylvester and his wife. Maudie had been complaining of bad headaches of late and never liked to go out after dinner, but she

had purchased four tickets for the most popular play of the season, "The Fairest of Ladies", and insisted that the four of us should see it. She would rest while we were gone but would keep her light on so that Isabelle could come in to kiss her good-night.

Everything went like clockwork. I bought a little gift for Maudie and presented it to her early in the evening. The dinner was very gay and, just as we were about to leave, I announced that I had another gift. Maudie was delighted with the chain. I didn't even have to fasten it around her neck as I had planned. She snapped the clasp herself and went to the mirror in the foyer, preening and admiring herself and the necklace that winked and glittered in the light. I was the last one out of the door and Maudie clung to me for a minute, drawing my head down to kiss me. Maybe she'd softened up enough to lend me a few thousand, I thought, but even if she had, it was too late. I couldn't very well snatch the necklace back even if it were possible to re-lease it from about her throat.

I don't remember much about the play. I was thinking of Maudie all the time and I was torn between all sorts of doubts and fears. One minute I'd be way down in the dumps and the next I'd be floating up in the clouds planning all the good times Isabelle and I could have with Maudie's millions. In my mind I'd see a picture of Maudie lying dead and then I'd decide that Rosy had conned me and Maudie would be as spry as ever when we got home. Sometimes I'd want it one way and sometimes the other. I was really mixed up and on edge.

The play seemed to last for about ten light years but actually it wasn't quite midnight when we caught a taxi outside the theatre. As soon as we rounded the corner and were in sight of the marquee of the apartment house, I knew something had gone wrong. Two red and white police cars blocked off the entrance of the house

and a curious throng of people had gathered around.

I'd expected to have a chance to retrieve the necklace before the police were called. In the confusion of discovering her body no one would notice or, even if some one did, it wouldn't appear particularly odd for me to unfasten the necklace and slip it in my pocket. After all, it would have been my last gift to her.

With the police already on the scene that part of the plan was out. Nothing was left except to play it by ear. We pushed our way through the curious idlers and the neighbors who'd come out into the halls. A cop was at the front door but as soon as we'd identified ourselves he ushered us into Maudie's big front room. Only two cops were there. I didn't get the smaller one's name but the towering man in plain clothes introduced himself as Lieutenant Onsett, of Central Homicide.

Just the mention of homicide was enough to give me the jitters bad but fortunately Isabelle stole the scene with a fit of hysterics that nearly blew the roof of the place. She distracted everyone with her screaming jag long enough for me to slip into the bedroom for a look at Maudie. She lay straight on the bed, her arms flung out, her face contorted and blue but not a mark on her throat.

What I wanted most was to get my hands on the necklace but when I drew close to her I could see that it was gone. I stood still, breathing hard, trying to collect my wits. Could the necklace have slipped off after death? I scanned the bed-clothes, the carpet beside the bed, the medicine table. No sign of it.

I hadn't heard anyone enter the room but when I looked up, I found myself staring into the pale gray eyes of Lieutenant Onsett. His face wore an official mask of blankness but it was belied by the quirk of his lips. He knew something, I thought, or at least he was suspicious. I had to take a firm

grip on myself not to make a break for it and try to rush past him to the freedom of the hall.

Onsett motioned me back to the front room. Isabelle had quieted down although she was still sobbing. Sylvester and his wife were sitting on the divan holding hands and looking distraught. I went to Isabelle and slid my arms around her and waited to see what would come next.

The questioning was all very polite, in perfect order. The details of the birthday dinner and the theatre party came out. We learned, in turn, that a friend of Maudie's who had a key to the apartment had dropped in to surprise her with a birthday gift and had discovered the body. There was some mention of the necklace but neither Onsett nor his partner pursued the matter. I was beginning to feel cocky again, sure that Maudie's death would be put down to accidental strangulation or a heart attack.

In about an hour we were all told that we could leave but just as we got to the door, Onsett called me back and asked me to wait. Sylvester offered to take Isabelle home and I didn't dare to protest too much. I stood in the middle of the room, listening to their footsteps die away in the hall and then I turned to face Onsett. His partner had disappeared and the two of us were alone in the room.

He sat down in an easy chair and crossed his legs. There wasn't anything for me to do but try to appear as much at ease as he. We sat there in silence for long minutes. Finally Onsett dug out a cigarette and offered me one. I took it and lit up. The smoke burned my throat but having something to do with my hands helped.

I was scared but I reckoned that the best thing to do was put on a show of indignation. "What is this?" I blustered. "I've told you everything I know."

He gave a thin smile. "I don't think so, Mr. Duff."

"I don't care what you think, I've nothing more to say."

He snuffed out his cigarette very carefully in one of Maudie's little mosaic ashtrays and slowly his hand dipped into his pocket. When it came out, the necklace dangled from his fingers.

I could feel my heart lurch but I still tried to bluff it out, complaining about being separated from Isabelle. Onsett didn't say a word, just dangled the chain so that the light from the lamp rippled along its slender surface.

In a few minutes I ran out of words. Onsett gave a deep sigh and rose from his chair.

"Do you want to tell me about this little gift to your mother-in-law?"

I clamped my lips shut. "I'm through. Finished. I'll not say another word."

The quirk of his lips reminded me of Melvin Rosy. He raised the chain over my head and the next thing I knew it was about my throat. My fingers scrambled for it but I couldn't pry it loose. I gave up and stared at Onsett in stunned silence. His hands were still outstretched and as I looked up at them, I could see the tiny purple flecks in his palms. I couldn't believe it. Not at first. Who ever heard of a Martian making the New York Police force? But when he spoke, his voice had dropped its growl. It was soft and musical, a Martian voice.

He said, "I think you're going to tell me everything I want to know. You'll write it all down too."

Like I said before, it's really uncanny the way some of these Martian chaps can read your mind. He was right, straight down the line. I told him everything. I wrote it all down and didn't waste any time about it because every second the necklace was growing smaller and smaller.

When I finished, I signed it and pushed it over to him.

Here it is.