



THE QUEEN OF DIAMONDS MURDER

by
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I'm just a private dick, who goes about recovering stolen jewels for insurance companies but always turns out to be the number one suspect for murder.

THE maid, her eyes wide with terror, plummeted into the hallway and came straight at me, her mouth set in the round O of a silent scream. Behind her the door of 311 still was swinging open on its hinges.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and twisted her around. Only then did the round O in her ebony face cut loose like an air-raid siren. The shrillness of it sliced like a knife against my eardrums, so I slapped her abruptly, closing and silencing the O.

"What's the matter?" I asked. When she didn't answer I shook her and repeated the question. Gradually the shiny horror in her eyes abated. Suddenly she blurted:

"She's daid—daider than a doornail!"

"Who's dead?" I felt a prickle of apprehension course up my spine. I'm always getting involved in murders not of my own making. The cops don't like me even a little bit and for years have been trying to tie me up to a good luscious killing so that they could bundle me in bars and take me out of circulation. That would give them great peace of mind.

I've got a private dick's license myself, but that don't cut no ice. They simply don't like me and I can't say that I blame them much. It's because of the way I operate, deftly juggling legality with illegality, in the recovery of stolen jewelry. I'm personally sure that I'm on the up-and-up, but the cops—for lack of a prettier name—bluntly call me a crook. It all depends on your viewpoint.

"Mrs. Pheister," the maid said, and started to shake like an Amazon doing the boogie-woogie

without music.

I let loose a long sigh. Somehow I'd known it would be a person like Mrs. Pheister, "The Queen of Diamonds." It was just my hard luck that it couldn't be somebody plain, like a Mrs. Smith or a Mrs. Jones, who maybe owned only a single rock—and that in their engagement ring.

No—it had to be Mrs. Pheister, the middle-aged wife of the aged multi-millionaire brewer. She had once been a much-publicized stage beauty, accustomed to attention and the limelight. Of recent years she had attracted notice to herself by harebrained stunts that always were flamboyant. The backdrop to these stunts and her waning beauty were diamonds, an abundance of them scattered all the way up from her toes to her hennaed hair.

I turned the maid around and pushed her reluctant body up the hallway again and through the open door of suite 311. She struggled a bit and blubbered a lot, but I wasn't turning her loose yet until I knew all the facts.

Nobody had to tell me that when the "Queen of Diamonds" caught a bump while I was in the vicinity the cops—naturally—would be unduly interested in me.

The body lay sprawled in almost dead-center of the spacious living room. The head had been twisted until the bloodied face and the sightless eyes faced the ceiling although the torso had fallen forward. The flabby and sagging chin seemed to rest between the shoulder blades.

I'd seen people with broken necks before, but nevertheless was startled . . . and I'm a tough guy

to startle. Death, to me, is but an incident. But when a jewel-laden doll gets the works and still continues, in death, to wear more rocks than Tiffany's has on exhibition—well, that is a revelation—and damned startling.

I turned to the wide-eyed maid and asked:

"What did you see?"

"An ape," she cracks, "a real honest-to-goodness ape punched the Queen of Diamonds right in the face. Yowsah, I seed ut put its hairy fist right through her face, and reach down her throat and up into her brain.

"What!" I yelped. "You saw it reach down her throat and then up into her brain."

"Yowsah—right up and down and all around."

I grabbed her and made her face the body on the floor.

"Whadda handin' me?" I snapped. "She took a shellacking before her neck was broken—but there ain't no holes in her head for an—an ape to grab a handful of brains. Now tell it all over again—and straight this time, or I'll turn you over to the cops."

"That won't be necessary," a voice said from the doorway. "I think you'll both be doing a lot of talking to the cops."

I spun around, and there was the natty and mustached house dick, Holmes, standing in the doorway. He looked more like a gigolo than a detective. He'd come up to see me soon as I had checked in and asked a lot of damn fool questions until I'd booted his fanny out.

Now he had a tight little smile on his smug face and seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Great work, Starr," he said tonelessly at me. "You're in Miami Beach less than an hour, in the hotel even less time, and a walking jewel case dies. You work fast—fast." He reached a nonchalant hand for the telephone.

"Go ahead, call the cops," I urged. "I was going to do so myself."

"Yeah," he said sardonically, and his lips made the mustache twitch in what possibly was doubt, but probably glee. He had me over the barrel and he knew it.

"Get me police headquarters," he told the switchboard operator. "It's murder—big murder—an' tell 'em Johnny Starr's mixed up in it—and to hurry."

HE CRADLED the phone and strolled across the room after heeling shut the open door.

"This is going to be bad for the reputation of this hotel," he spoke aloud, ignoring me. "We shouldn't have let you in anyway—knowing your rep."

He was standing above the body, looking down, and you would have thought he was addressing the corpse. But I knew better, and was starting a slow burn.

"Funny," he mused, "the rings are still on her fingers and about a couple of dozen of them are still being used for hairpins. And those buckles on her shoes look like the real McCoy too. Funny . . . yeah . . . very funny, eh, Starr?"

"Say what you're thinking," I said softly.

"I was just thinking," he lazed, "that whoever did it didn't have time to frisk her. Maybe the maid caught him doing it, huh Mandy?"

"Mah name ain't Mandy," the maid said. "It's Mirandy—Mirandy Stonewall Jackson. An' used right. The ape was punching the Queen in the face and—"

"This ape?" Holmes jerked a mocking thumb at me.

That was too much and I knew I had an alibi if the maid wasn't altogether nuts and prone to forget where she met me, so I let some venom course through my shoulders and hooked a left.

It was a beauty, flush on the chin, making the mustache flatten and broaden out as he grimaced. Holmes went down but bounced right up again. I heard Mirandy scream as Holmes charged wildly at me, swinging a wide right hand. I went under it, chopped with a left and crossed a right. Holmes came right up on tiptoe, tottered briefly, then pitched face downward. I felt better—much better. These amateur excuses for house dicks, especially the very dapper kind, always are trouble to me.

"Now about that ape and the punching of the Queen's face—" I started to say, turning around. Then: "Hey, Mirandy, where are you?"

"Heah, sir, heah," Mirandy's choked voice sounded from behind the davenport and soon the large whites of her eyes shone over the top.

"Come out of there. What are you hiding from?"

"Dunno. Maybe that ape. Maybe fum you. Youse sho an impatient man!"

"Where did you see this ape?"

"I opens the door and I sees Mrs. Pheister's body on the floor, and right behind her near that big mirror the ape was punching the Queen."

"What Queen?"

“The Queen of Diamonds. Who was it you thought I meant?”

I drew a deep, patient breath. “Now, look here . . . who is this Queen of Diamonds?”

“Pshaw,” Mirandy snorted. “And all the time I thought you was a sporting mans. Don’t you never gamble?”

I got it then. “You mean he was punching a playing card?”

“Yawsah. The old red Queen of Diamonds, the playin’ card.”

I sat down weakly. “Go on.” I was getting to the point where I would listen to anything—and believe nothing. First the ape—now a playing card that he was punching in the face. It came to me suddenly that my alibi was nuts. And that wasn’t very nice to think about. I could already hear the jail doors clanging behind me.

“An’ when de ape hit dat playing card, de whole face just broke into little pieces and he put his hand through and reached up inside the brain an’ then down into the throat. When I screamed he turned around. There was long hair hanging down over his face and he had short legs and long arms. He opened his mouth at me an’ his teeth were all black. Then I runned away—runned right into you. That’s all. Now can I go, mister?”

I shook my head wearily. “No, you’d better stay until the police arrive. They’ll be interested in this—very interested.”

PRIVATELY, I was telling myself that within a few short hours Mirandy would be in a nice ward surrounded by many other lamebrains.

She damned near made it, too—and I the brig.

When Inspector Donovan hove his bulk onto the scene, flanked by a bevy of cops, Holmes had regained his feet.

Holmes started right in on me.

“You know this man, Inspector? It’s Johnny Starr—THE Johnny Starr, who recovers stolen jewels for insurance companies. He pays the reward money to the thieves and takes a cut of it himself for his fee and—”

“I know—I know,” Donovan grumbled. “It’s outside of the law, provided he’s caught doing it. He hasn’t been caught yet, so he’s clean as far as I’m concerned.”

“But this is murder. And this Mrs. Pheister has more diamonds than any woman on earth. I found Starr and the dinge standing over the body. When I

started to question them, Starr socked me.”

“Tut-tut, that’s sure too bad,” Donovan snorted. “And for the questioning that’s to be done here . . . I’ll do it, understand!”

“Oh—all right.” Holmes looked disappointed.

Donovan turned to me. “Got your foot into it this time, didn’t you, Johnny?”

“Nope. Just got the toe wet a bit.”

Donovan regarded me levelly. His eyes weren’t friendly. I’d had a run-in with him two seasons back when the Simpson pearls disappeared, and I “miraculously” recovered them just before Donovan swooped down to make a pinch that would have held water two hours before. He’d vowed that he’d get me someday. Given half a chance, that day would be now.

Thinking of this, I felt hot and uncomfortable, and wished fervently that my dusky alibi wasn’t a lunatic.

“Give, Johnny, give,” Donovan said. So I told him about meeting the maid in the hallway, coming in the room, and cuffing Holmes when his smug mouth had started to drool. And that was all.

Then Donovan started on Mirandy. You can just imagine his reaction. He was fit to be tied and got around to threatening her with the bughouse.

But she made it stick. She couldn’t be cajoled or threatened or frightened into admitting that any part of the ape and the playing card story wasn’t the God’s awful truth. She was adamant, and that was the only thing that saved herself—and me—from looking out barred windows.

All the while as she repeated over and over again her fantastic yarn, Donovan’s steely eyes bored into me.

Once he interrupted to say: “Did you put her up to this, Johnny?”

“I couldn’t think up one as good as that,” I replied in all honesty.

“Maybe not—maybe not, Johnny. But if it turns out that you are in this in any way—the back room downtown is going to be mussed up when they carry you out of there.”

“I never lie, save to protect a client,” I pointed out. “And I’m telling you I know nothing about this.”

Donovan nodded. “That’s your rep,” he agreed grudgingly. “Trusted by crooks and victims alike, they say you’ve never double-crossed a cop.”

“I play ‘em on the up-and-up when the deal is square.”

“Okay. I’ll take your word for it this time—for a short time until something breaks. What’s your idea on the case?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Murder for revenge, murder by a maniac—who can say? But not—apparently—murder during a jewel theft.” I pointed down at the twisted body, and the fierce fire of many diamonds seared upward at me.

Donovan started on Mirandy again—and got nowhere. Finally he sent her home, mopped his beaded forehead and muttered, “These nutty dinges. Fine description to go on—an ape. An ape, no less, who punches through the face of the Queen of Diamonds. I wonder what kind of whiskey those dinges drink so that they get around to seeing things like that?”

Donovan’s cops had been prowling the place. When Mirandy thankfully fled, I stayed with the inspector as he toured the suite. From all indications the battle had started in the bathroom. A window was open there, leading onto a fire escape. The fire escape, however, was in full view of the beach. Donovan’s men determined by a canvass of the beach that no person had been seen on the iron latticework all afternoon. Undisturbed dust also upheld this theory.

The suite, however, was a maze of miniature playing cards—all the Queen of Diamonds. The upholstery carried the special design, and the two-headed queen had been carved into the furniture, some with ivory inlays. The Queen was everywhere—but in miniature.

AND no Queen in the entire suite had had her face punched in. In fact all the miniatures were so tiny that the entire surface could be covered by the tip of your little finger.

They were everywhere, even embroidered on the towels in the bathroom. The blood started in there, weaved its way into the bedroom and then into the center of the living room, where Mrs. Pheister had lost the decision.

Furniture had been overturned and it seemed apparent that the silly old gal had put up one helluva fight before her spinal cord had been snapped. It takes brute strength to snap a neck in such a manner, but neither Donovan nor myself could stomach Mirandy’s wild notion that an ape was on the loose.

Donovan opened Mrs. Pheister’s purse on the dressing table. When I saw the roll of bills inside I

gave an involuntary whistle. Grands—plenty of them—pin money for Mrs. Pheister.

“It don’t make sense,” Donovan said, scratching his short-cropped head. “Whatever the motive was that caused this, it sure couldn’t have been robbery.”

“I wonder,” I said, half aloud. “I wonder.”

Mirandy’s story kept tiptoeing across my brain, begging for attention.

IT was nightfall before I got around to giving it the attention it deserved. The more I thought of it the more convinced I became that Mirandy actually had seen a hole punched in the face of the Queen of Diamonds. That could only mean one thing—that somewhere in that suite there was a huge Queen of Diamonds that we had missed.

Mrs. Pheister’s nature was such that in her spectacular fashion her ego never would have been completely satisfied with miniatures. Somewhere, where she could see it constantly, and glory in the title that it implied, was a tremendous Queen of Diamonds—with a hole in its face.

It was risky going back to the apartment. Cops were on guard in the corridor and above and below the fire escape. By using a pass key, I entered the adjoining suite, then—after much lock manipulation—opened the locked doors that connected the two suites.

I took a position just inside the front entrance, where Mirandy had stood and looked intently at the huge mirror on the far wall. Nothing occurred for several long moments, then there was the brief flickering of red and blue neon.

That was puzzling. There was no neon outside the room, and even if there had been the position of the mirror could not have reflected it. I grunted in satisfaction and entered the bedroom.

The triple-mirrored dressing table was catching the hotel’s sign on the side of the building. The mirrors were so placed that they in turn were aligned directly with the mirror in the living room.

I had it now. I was sure of it. And it was just like Mrs. Pheister to have planned it in such a manner that no matter which room she was in she would always be reminded that she was the “Queen of Diamonds.”

I smiled to myself when I noticed the center mirror had been shattered in the upper right-hand corner. That smart Donovan hadn’t figured it out—and I had—brought a great amount of self

satisfaction.

Feeling along beneath the dresser, I found the light switch and snapped it on.

With subdued light rays striking at an angle, the costly outline of the Queen of Diamonds, greatly enlarged, glowed from behind each mirror. But the face of the Queen in the center was gone—and behind it was solid steel. That was puzzling.

Stepping back, I looked out into the living room. The reflected image of the Queen now showed in the big mirror—but the Queen on the top had had her face punched in.

Behind that face and beyond the steel was the motive for the robbery, the object for which an “ape” had committed murder.

I snapped out the lights for fear of attracting attention, then felt along the edges of the dresser, the drawers and the sides. I drew a blank until I moved a heavy perfume bottle to one side. Almost immediately the broken center mirror swung open like the door to a vault. High up in the right-hand corner was a crevice about twelve inches in diameter and lined with purple plush.

I used my pocket flash—and gasped. Glowing there, against the plush, like an alive thing full of fire and brilliance was the famous Pheister diamond necklace—worth a half-million dollars—a gaudy, little bauble that one of my companies, The Pan-American Assurance, had insured for a tidy little sum of two-hundred grand.

Well, I thought, straightening up and holding the necklace in my hand, this will be something to show Inspector Donovan. The murderer was after this—a fortune and no ape is interested in a fortune—save in bananas. Now all Donovan had to do was to find the “ape” and—

That was as far as my mind got on this dizzy merry-go-round.

For the building fell on the back of my skull as I pitched face forward into impenetrable darkness.

I’ll never know how long I lay unconscious in Mrs. Pheister’s suite. Certainly it must have been many hours, for when I finally did succeed in prying my eyes open and staggering to my feet the neon lights outside had been extinguished.

The door that I’d unlocked leading to the adjoining suite was ajar, left so by my assailant. The cop in the corridor was asleep. I weaved to my own room and collapsed in a heap on the bed.

Now, driving slowly up Flagler Street, I considered the spot in which I’d placed myself. I’d

helped rob my own client—the Pan-Am—of two hundred gees—and I was now definitely prey for Inspector Donovan. I cursed myself for a sap, which was being overly polite to myself. The smart Johnny Starr had been taken over the bumps like a babe in arms—then deposited among the boulders.

However, one thought was in my mind. Whoever had slain the wacky woman had entered her suite through the same means as I had and had deliberately disguised himself with the upper part of an ape’s costume as is used in those nutty masked balls.

How did I know that? I had found the false skin and the false head beneath the bed of the adjoining suite, which suite, according to the floor clerk, supposedly was untenanted.

Such a disguise could mean but one thing. The murderer was known to the victim, sufficiently well known that he was familiar with the location of Mrs. Pheister’s novel safe. My hunch was that robbery only had been planned, but that the “Queen of Diamonds” had resented the loss of her precious stones. Mirandy had frightened him away before he could obtain the necklace. He had returned at night to get it—and got me also.

Well, there’s one advantage about being the handler of hot gems. The heisters usually come to you to get their dough for returning them.

Regaining possession of that necklace was a job of magnitude now. As for the murder itself—that was up to Donovan. I didn’t care about that, but I did want to lay an egg on some lug’s skull.

WHEN I reached Second I turned north until I came to a place called Smitty’s. It was a cheap dump, without a liquor license, and served only beer and wine at a stained and short bar made of plain pine. In short it looked like a hole-in-the-wall groggery.

But I knew better, being familiar with New York Broadway and its heels and where they congregate when on winter “vacations.”

I went right past Fuzzy, the bartender, then through the gents’ room to another door. This opened upon a large room filled with card tables, a roulette wheel and a couple of dice layouts, all now somnolent under their black coverings.

Near the door two croupiers and four dealers were having an early breakfast, and at a nearby table six suckers were fiddling around with a deck of cards, doing tricks, and impatiently waiting for

the joint to start the afternoon's play. From upstairs a muted loudspeaker was giving an early rundown of odds and scratches at Hialeah.

One of the croupiers pushed his ham and eggs aside and came up to me.

"Hello, Johnny," he said. "You're earlier than we expected."

I looked him over carefully. He was new to me, and I thought I knew every big time jewel thief in the nation. He looked like a hard-working gambler—nothing else.

"Why should anyone expect me?" I hedged. This Inspector Donovan is smart and I'm accustomed to plunge into deep waters blindly.

"It's alright," he said throatedly. "Irma Gaby wants to see you. Here's her address." He placed a small sheet of paper in my hand. "And she said it was urgent and to bring fifty grand."

I knew Irma. She was as trustworthy as crooks come. But I still played coy.

"What does she want me for?"

He looked levelly at me, reached into his pocket and brought forth a deck of cards.

"You think of a card, and I'll bring it out of the deck for you."

"Okay."

"Is this it," he asked. He was holding up the Queen of Diamonds.

"I'll see Irma right away," I said, and left the dump.

Irma had a cottage on the Tamiami Trail about six miles out. It was neat and white and respectable looking.

I parked my rented car out front and went cautiously up the boardwalk. Pan-Am had wired the bank to advance the fifty grand. It was in the left pocket of my Palm Beach suit. A snub-nosed .38 automatic was in the right-hand pocket. Both were heavy and hot with trouble.

Before I stepped on the porch Irma opened the screen door and said: "Come in, Johnny. It's nice seeing you again."

I winced. The last time I'd seen her I'd paid out twelve gees to she and her husband, Fred, who—

Recalling Fred, I stopped in midstride. To the regulars along the stem he was known as Monk. Calling him just that was giving him the benefit of the doubt. In build, manner and looks he actually did resemble an ape. He had once been billed as the "Wrestling Gorilla." His strength was such that he could easily break a neck.

"Good morning, Irma," I said cautiously. "I understand we're to play some cards with a one-card deck."

"That's right," she smiled, "with just the beautiful Queen of Diamonds."

"Huh-h. You're working fast on this. Where's Fred?"

"Poor boy," she pouted, "the nasty police picked him up downtown this morning about some murder yesterday. He'll probably be in jail for a long time. It's too bad. I'm quite sure he didn't murder anyone."

"I wish I was that sure about poor Fred. I think it would be better for me to wait until poor Fred gets out before playing Queen with you. I respect the brutality he represents and would much rather retain him as a friend than make an enemy of him."

She stiffened suddenly and her smiling mouth became a thin crimson slash. From beneath her housewifey apron she drew an ugly-looking .45 automatic.

"Put the dough on the table and get out."

"There's a little matter of a necklace."

"Oh that!" she said carelessly. Her left hand went into the pocket of her apron and she threw a half million bucks of rocks at me like they were just so many jelly beans.

I caught them, placed the money on the table, pocketed the jewels and strolled to the front door.

"You're selling out awfully cheap, Irma, and in one helluva hurry," I said. "It couldn't be now that you framed Fred and were getting away while the getting was good, could it?"

"Get out," she screamed. "Get out!" I got out.

BACK in my hotel room I phoned Inspector Donovan.

"I'll have your murderer for you in an hour or so," I said.

"I've already got him," Donovan snorted.

"The only thing that you've got is a guy that is simply guilty of having a two-timing wife and—"

A sharp knock sounded at the door.

"They're at the door now," I said to Donovan. "Listen in, you'll learn something. I placed the phone on the desk without cradling it, then crossed the room and seated myself in a chair facing the door.

"Come in." The door swung inward and Holmes came through it, gun in hand. Irma trailed him and swiftly closed the door.

"I've been expecting you, Holmes," I said loudly. "If Irma hadn't been in love with you she wouldn't have permitted you to do this."

"Give me that necklace—quick!"

I looked into his eyes and knew fear. An amateur crook on his first big job, he was a bundle of nerves and his finger was quivering on the trigger.

"I couldn't stop him, Johnny," Irma said apologetically. "Since we had the dough he figured we ought to take the necklace with us to South America. Said we could live on it and the cash for the rest of our lives."

"You know better than that."

"Sure I do, but you couldn't tell him that. He's an amateur and doesn't know the rules. He said he wouldn't trust you."

"I got by for a lot of years on trust. In my racket you have to have trust."

"Give me that necklace!" Holmes repeated.

"I took another look at him and knew that I was to die, whether or not he obtained the necklace.

"I don't carry it around on me," I shrugged. "I'll get it for you, Holmes, but you won't get away with it."

"Get it—quick."

"Take it easy, Holmsey," Irma cautioned. "This Johnny Starr is greased lightning when you cross him."

"Not this time, Irma," I said. "I'm not carrying a rod." And that was the truth. I'd expected Holmes to frisk me, but—an amateur—he was contradicting all the laws of the game—and tripping himself up. Vaguely I hoped Donovan was taking in all of this over the phone. Maybe after Holmes got me he would get around to laying an egg on Holmes' skull, my own pet ambition. Holmes had that coming to him.

I crossed the room with Holmes right on my heels and Irma trailing.

I backed into a corner and raised the rug. I handed the necklace to Holmes who was standing before me.

He reached for it with his left hand.

I yanked on the rug and Holmes crashed flat on his back as I leaped upon him. The intent was to twist the gun from his hand, but I never would have been able to do that without Irma's help. This Holmes really had a strong pair of hands—a pair that could easily snap a woman's neck.

Irma cursed as she tugged open her pocketbook and brought forth a gun. She aimed it at me, but I twisted under Holmes as the gun went off. He gasped in pain and his automatic fell from his bleeding hand. I snatched it up as Irma fired again, and missed.

I fired once and sent the gun spinning from her hand, then I reversed the gun—and with great and soul-satisfying vengeance—had it lay an egg on Holmes' skull.

He collapsed and lay still. I felt inside his breast pocket and recovered fifty grand he could have retained if he hadn't been an amateur hog.

Irma was gripping her hand and sobbing.

I crossed to the telephone and said:

"Did you hear it, Donovan?"

"Yes, dammit. Listen, Johnny Starr, someday you're going to get into trouble."

I rubbed the patch on the back at my head and murmured: "Trouble. Hell! I couldn't live without it. Now I'm going to do you a favor. . . ."

"A favor. . . . What the—"

"Yes. I'm going to save your jail for you."

"Save it. How?"

"Well, before you send the boys around for this pair I want you to get poor Freddie on the outside. Just a precaution, see, for if all three of them meet inside at the same time your cute bastille is going to be wrecked." I turned to Irma. "Isn't that right, Irma."