

Taxi-driver Button Brown thought he'd seen the worst after the truck smash-up, but that was before his cab was flagged by . . .

The Perfumed Peril

By Emil Petaja



IT ALL started from me trying to do a dame a favor. Never again!

They call me Button Brown. I drive my own hack.

The night I met Diane Silver, both me and my jalopy was just out of the hospital after having tangled with a two-ton truck.

"Do me a favor, Charlie?" she smiled, waving her big black peepers around. She was wearing a dress like a circus signboard under a mink coat, and carrying a black bag big enough to hide a baby kangaroo in. She stunk like seven million dollars.

"The name's Button," I grinned.

"Okay, Button. I think you're cute!"

Diane was a night club singer out at Tag Coyne's Full Moon. I ain't got much use for Tag Coyne.

She sidled closer.

"Please?" she cooed.

"Sure," I grinned. "Who do you want bumped?"

She laughed. It was like silver bells.

"You're sweet!" she said, tweaking my nose. Then she got serious. "Listen, you drive Salvo Lambert home from his Club Moderne every night, don't you? Around twelve?"

"Sure."

Lambert's a big splash around this man's town. He controlled many night spots, and a dozen other legitimate rackets. Maybe some not so legit. Anyhow, the ten-spot he tossed me every night wasn't hard to take. I needed money bad, what with the accident, and my wife having a baby next week.

"Here's the angle, Button," Diane went on. "I want to stay in your cab when you pick Lambert up, and—"

"But he wouldn't—"

"Please, Button. All I want is to have a private talk with him. I'm fed up with the Full Moon—and Tag Coyne. A girl's got a right to better herself, hasn't she? You understand, Button?"

"Sure, but—"

So I'm a sucker for a beautiful dame.

It worked easy. Nowadays even big shots expect to share taxis, so when Diane murmured she was going his way and was in a desperate rush, and would he mind horribly, Lambert smiled a fat, oily smile and said, "A pleasure."

I swung off the bright boulevard toward the peaceful valley, grinning. Diane's sugary smile already had him roped in. Now she was getting down to the business of getting herself a contract.

"You're a clever minx!" Lambert chuckled. "I might find you a spot at the Moderne."

"Oh, Mister Lambert! But first you've got to hear me sing. Tonight, at the Full Moon! Now!"

"But—"

"Please. . ."

Salvo Lambert chuckled. "All right, Button, drive us to the Full Moon!"

"Yes, sir." As if I hadn't already turned that way.

A wide open stretch of eucalyptus-lined road lay ahead. I let the hack out a little. I was anxious to see if the accident had left any

internal scars. But it purred like a contented cat.

Ahead was a long viaduct over the green floor of the valley. I was getting set to swing onto it. Just then a big black limousine leaped out of the dark shadows. It roared alongside.

I heard Salvo Lambert give out a shaky hiss.

“Hurry, Button!” he screamed.

The long limousine kept right next to us. When I stepped on the gas, so did they. When I slowed down, they did, too. I just couldn’t shake them.

The road was empty, lonely. And now that black hearse was edging us toward the low railing!

I gave a wild yell, and tried to press ahead of her. It didn’t work. That long nose slid ahead, blocking me off. I braked, cussing.

As I whirled on them I caught just a glimpse of a mean hawk-nose, in silhouette. There came the angry bark of a revolver someplace. Diane screamed. Then I heard the crash of breaking glass. The powerful black limousine was off like a streak of greased lightning.

It all happened plenty fast. I turned, dazed.

Salvo Lambert was crumpled up over the seat. His clean white shirt front was wet with his own blood. His eyes were glazing. And Diane had picked up the hot pistol from the seat, and was whimpering like a lost puppy.

FOR ten seconds I only stared. Diane’s wide eyes turned to me bewilderedly.

“I didn’t do it,” she said helplessly.

“I know you didn’t!” I snapped rawly. “But why’d you go and smear your fingerprints all over that rod?”

Dames can sure be dumb!

She blinked, staring horrifiedly down at the gun, then she dropped it.

“They threw it in the window,” she said.

I knew Lambert was dead. I started my motor, and began to turn the car back to town.

“W-where you going?” Diane gasped.

“To the police station,” I said grimly, “to deliver a nice fresh corpse!”

“No!” she whispered. “They’ll say *I* did it!”

“I’ll explain to ‘em.”

“They won’t believe you!” she wailed, clutching my shoulder. “We can’t prove there even *was* another car!”

I scowled at her through the rearview mirror.

“What do you suggest?”

“Couldn’t we just”—she wrung her hands—“just dump him over the railing?” she finished tensely. She looked scared to the gills. “Nobody’d ever know!”

I had a pretty picture of the cops finding out I always drove Lambert home, then finding bloodstains on my cushions.

“No!” I snapped. “We couldn’t!”

Her dark eyes became wild, pleading. “Of course not. I was insane to suggest it. But—I—I think I know who did it!”

I grinned wryly. So did I! That hawknose profile. . .

“If only we could find some way to prove—”

I chewed my lip. “Yeah.”

“He’s sure to go back to the Full Moon, Button!”

“Maybe.”

“Button—help me. *Please*. . .”

She leaned real close. Her wavy black hair was tickling my ear. As for that perfume, it was enough to put a guy under.

“What’s that stinky stuff, Diane?”

She laughed shakily.

“This perfume? It’s heliotrope, Button. They call it *Dangerous Night*.”

I grinned.

“They ain’t kidding! So, you want me to play detective, eh? Pin the rap on Coyne before his trail gets cold, and clear you?”

In the mirror her black eyes looked humble, melting.

“Oh, Button!” she whispered. “It might mean my life!”

I FOUND a nice dark parking place near the Full Moon and tossed a rug over the corpse. I didn't touch the gun.

As we stepped up to the entrance of the swanky club, I called myself seven kinds of a damn fool. I'm a small guy. The doctor says, "Take it easy for six months," after my accident. And here I was about to get all mixed up with a mess of slick racketeers!

I had to hand it to Diane, as an actress. She held her head high, and joshed the joe at the door about me being a "special" friend. I wasn't dressed to go to no party.

The joint was jammed, it being Saturday. The orchestra was going to town. Diane murmured something to the waiter, and he led us to a corner table under a fake palm.

"I'll have to go put my face on," Diane said. "I'm due to sing in a few minutes."

"Okay."

"Keep your eyes open!" she whispered, and was gone.

My palms was sweating. Coyne's mob is plenty tough. I was beginning to wish I'd never seen Diane Silver, nor smelled that Dangerous Night perfume!

The boogie-woogie slid into a soft blues number, and Diane came slithering into the spotlight.

She was slick stuff, all right. She carried a big fan, and leaned on a pillar while she sang about this here guy she loved and couldn't help it no matter what.

It seemed like she looked at me kind of sadly, while she was singing. I thought, "She's a plucky girl. I'll clear her of Lambert's murder if it's the last thing I do!"

"Your name Button?"

I choked over my glass of beer when somebody took hold of my shoulder from behind.

"Yeah," I gulped.

He pulled a chair up beside me and I saw it was Tag Coyne. No mistaking that hard-looking mouth, those deep-sunk eyes, and that

hawk's nose. Coyne had that snakelike fascination dames go for. So they tell me.

"Listen, hack," he said in an icy whisper, "we don't cater to cab drivers here. It ain't healthy for you to stick around. Better swallow them suds, then blow!"

I licked my lips. They felt dry.

"Maybe I don't want to."

His eyes slitted.

"You better want to, pint-size! And, remember, you ain't even been here. You ain't seen me nowheres. See?"

I sipped my beer and tried to outstare him.

"Listen, squirt, I'll give you just five minutes! Take that thing you got in the back of your cab, and—"

"Now, now, Coyne, is that any way to talk to a customer?" somebody broke in.

Coyne's head snapped up. I looked, and saw Police Lieutenant Mike Brandt standing there. He was in plainclothes, taking the night off, maybe.

Brandt was a big guy, big as Coyne. He was rocking on his heels and grinning cheerfully, but there was a wary flintiness lurking in his grey eyes.

I was glad to see him. Everybody knew Mike Brandt was strictly on the level. I might need his help.

"You still around, copper?"

"Looks that way. Say, is this a private argument, or can—"

Coyne got up quickly and took his arm.

"Came on over to the bar and have a drink, copper." He turned back at me and said:

"Like I was saying, Button, our beer's kind of expensive for a hack. Better take it on the lam!"

THEY talked for maybe ten minutes at the bar, then Brandt walked swiftly out the front door. There was a dirty smile on Coyne's puss as he slipped through a little archway leading to some back hallway.

I decided to follow.

Flattening against the wall, I watched Coyne talk in whispers to somebody at one of the doorways, then move ahead and step into an open doorway which I could see must be his private office.

I pussyfooted up, and eased it open gently, I peeked in. Coyne was washing his hands at a small sink in back.

His back was toward me. My eyes hit on a gun lying on his desk.

Suddenly he said, "Come in, Button—I've been waiting for you!"

I gasped. He turned, grinning contemptuously.

I wanted to take a powder, but my feet were glued to the floor. I just stood there while Coyne wiped his hands, then tossed the towel in a corner.

"Shut the door," he said.

I did.

"Now," Coyne said, "what's on your mind!"

My eyes were glued to that gun. I eased toward it. Coyne didn't seem to notice.

"You killed Salvo Lambert!" I blurted out.

Coyne started to laugh. "That's funny. Very funny."

"I saw you, Coyne," I told him, recklessly. "You were in that black limousine!"

Coyne shrugged. "Could be."

That was enough for me. I made a rash grab for that gun. So did he. I beat him.

Drawing back toward the door, I waved it at him and said, "Keep your hands out of your pockets, Coyne. I'm going to—"

"To drop that gun!" a crisp voice behind me said.

I groaned. I ought to have known Coyne had rod-men handy! My gun hit the carpet as I turned. But it wasn't one of Coyne's men, it was Mike Brandt! "You're just in time, Lieutenant!" I grinned. "Tag Coyne just confessed—"

Lieutenant Brandt wasn't grinning now. His mouth was a set line. His eyes were steel.

"It's no good, Brown," he said frigidly. "I know you killed Salvo Lambert!"

My cheerful grin faded. I choked for breath. "No," I moaned. "You got this all wrong!"

He scooped up the gun and pocketed it.

"I don't think so," he said grimly. "You needed money and you needed it bad. You know Coyne hated Salvo Lambert's guts. It was you who drove Lambert home from his club every night. You planned it out very carefully.

"You'd plug Lambert out on some lonely road, take his dough, then try to get Coyne to pay you for having bumped him off! Quite a clever double-play, Brown!"

Coyne grinned wolfishly.

"Clever, yeah, but he figured wrong! I ain't buying any corpses. Sure I hated Lambert, but I got better sense than to get myself mixed up in an amateur bump job like this one!

Everything started whirling around. I moaned, fumbling for a chair so I wouldn't pass out. Coyne had known I'd tell Lieutenant Brandt about the corpse in my hack. He'd jumped the gun by telling him first! He had even convinced him that I had come to him to try to collect on rubbing Lambert out!

This *was* a nightmare!

I SAT there sweating, trying to figure a way to prove I'd nothing to do with all this. I was only an innocent bystander, so to speak. There was something yammering at the back of my noggin.

"B-but he was killed from *outside!*" I screamed. "The window was smashed when Coyne tossed the gun in, after plugging Lambert from that black limousine!"

"Sorry to disagree, Brown, but I examined your cab. Sure the window was smashed, but it was done from *inside!* And I found this fancy wallet hid under your front seat. It's got Lambert's name on it."

I groaned.

Coyne poured himself a drink at his desk. “Funny what a hack-driver will dream up when he needs money. You’d think he’d realize—”

The door opened. Diane stepped in. My eyes was screwed shut, trying to blot out this nightmare, but I could smell that heliotrope. *Dangerous Night.*

I leaped up. “Tell ‘em, Diane!” I yelled. “Tell ‘em who killed Lambert!”

Her big black eyes stared at me with fascinated horror.

“Yes,” mocked Coyne, laughing. “Tell us, Diane!”

She ran over and clutched at his arm. But her eyes stared at me fearfully. “He did it, Lieutenant!” she cried, pointing a red-tipped finger at me. “He killed Lambert!”

This was the pay-off! This was what I got for trying to play boy scout with a she-devil who was also a terrific actress! She was shielding Coyne. They had planned it all before hand—the phony “favor”—the mush to get me softened up—the appeal for me to save her! I had a pretty picture of me being strapped in that high-voltage chair.

“It’s a filthy frameup!” I screamed, grabbing Brandt’s arm.

He shook me off gently.

“Get him out of here!” Coyne growled.

“He’s caused enough trouble already. I handed him over to you, copper. I’ve done my duty. Now, get—”

“Just a minute,” Brandt said firmly. “Miss Silver, I want to ask you a few questions, just for the books.”

She nodded, wide-eyed.

“Brown hangs around here quite a lot,” she offered. “He knew Coyne is really my husband—”

I blinked. “It’s a lie!” I said. “I—”

“Shut up!” Brandt snapped. “So for that reason Brown thought you would play ball in this murder scheme, er?”

Diane shuddered, covering her face with her hands. “Oh, it was awful! He shot him in

front of my eyes, then threatened to k-kill me if I—” She burst into wild sobs.

“You pretended to string along with him, Miss Silver,” Brandt went on, “You convinced him that Coyne would pay him for rubbing out Lambert, but the first chance you had, you told your husband everything. He, in turn, told me. Is that right?”

Diane nodded eagerly.

“One more question,” Brandt said, pulling a revolver out of his coat pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief. “Look at this gun carefully. Is this the gun Brown shot Lambert with?”

Diane looked; then said, “Yes!”

“Sure?”

“Positive!”

“Hey,” I put in, feebly. “How about powder marks? If Lambert had been shot from inside, there’d be—”

Brandt eyed me somberly.

“There were powder marks on the body— plenty!” he said. “And since you’re positive that this was the gun that killed Salvo Lambert, I’m afraid I’ll have to arrest you for his murder—Diane Silver!”

COYNE was first to move. Snarling, he whipped a gun from his coat and started blasting.

My first instinct was to dive for the floor. I lay flat on my face, while Diane screamed bad words, and two guns blazed.

Pretty soon there were empty clicks, and I knew my pal Lieutenant Brandt didn’t have a chance.

I felt him lunge across me. Now fists were smacking against flesh.

“Diane!” I heard Coyne pant. “In the desk. Another rod!”

She must have gotten it, all right. Coyne muttered, “Thanks. Atta girl; now, copper”—his voice was a triumphant snarl—“one false move and Diane will drill you. Okay, sweets, I’ll take it.”

“Better go easy, Coyne,” Brandt warned.

Coyne laughed nastily.

“Brains, that’s what it takes, copper! Here’s what it’s going to look like! You are going to be found with a bullet in your craw, and this yellow rat”—his foot smacked my ribs painfully—“will be dying. You got the goods on him about Lambert, we’ll say to your buddies, and he pulled a gun on you. Get the idea, copper?”

Silence.

It was that “yellow rat” and the kick, in the slats that woke me up. I blinked my peepers, and caught sight of a wall plug only a couple feet away. It ran to the big lamp, the office’s only light.

“You won’t get away with it, Coyne,” Brandt said coldly. “I’ve already telephoned headquarters. That was after I’d had a look in that big black bag I saw Diane carry in with her. You’ll never guess what I found.”

I edged toward that cord, inch by inch.

“Found what?” Diane cried.

“Oil stains,” Brandt said. “Where you’d hid this gun, the gun you knew killed Lambert. I also found something else. I found—”

My outstretched fingers nabbed the rubber cord. I yanked hard.

The room went pitch black. Diane shrieked. Coyne’s rod spit hot death. It flamed

at the floor toward me. Only I’d rolled over, and was scrambling to my feet, clawing for the door.

I found it. But just then it burst inwards and burly figures streamed in. Without even waiting to be introduced, one of them swung a haymaker on my jaw. Everything went very black.

When I woke up I saw Mike Brandt grinning down at me. “Thanks, chum.” he said.

“What hit me?”

“One of my boys. They weren’t taking any chances!”

I looked around, and saw the room full of coppers. They were dragging Coyne and Diane out.

“Say,” I asked, caressing my tortured jaw. “I heard what you said about finding oil stains in Diane’s big black bag, where she hid the gun. You were saying you found something else, too—that cinched it. What—”

Lieutenant Brandt smiled.

“Just a broken perfume bottle!” He stuck the murder rod up to my nose. “Smell!”

I sniffed. Then I understood.

That cold steel stunk to high heaven of heliotrope perfume. They call it *Dangerous Night!*

