

The Fourth Corpse

By Norman A. Daniels



Three names had been crossed off that crimson-smear'd memo. And now a fourth man was about to die. But just when reporter Ted Sullivan neared the mystery solution, he discovered a new name on the death list . . . His own!



CHAPTER I

Cross Off the Dead

TED SULLIVAN tilted his hat down over his eyes, propped the straight-backed chair against the wall and wished he had some place to put his legs. He swore at the life of a newspaperman. Especially of a young reporter who dreams of interviewing celebrities or accompanying officials on world tours. And who gets assignments to the City Morgue or—like in his case—to the largest hospital in the city,

where the emergency ward does as much business as an entire small-town hospital.

Ambulances backed to the platform and patients were unloaded. At these times Ted Sullivan raised one eyelid, glanced at the stretcher and at the ambulance doctors and then closed the eyelid again. He'd developed an unerring knack for knowing when important stuff was hauled in.

One of that kind was coming now. Sullivan's other eye opened wide. The young doctor was slightly breathless, as if he'd worked hard. The orderlies were extremely solicitous—the girl who lay on the stretcher

was quite beautiful.

She was unconscious, her clothes torn and dirt-covered. She was pale and drawn and Sullivan wondered if he'd ever seen a more beautiful creature. He slid off the chair and walked over to the stretcher. The young interne was talking fast for Sullivan's benefit.

"Knocked down by a hit-and-run driver on Wilmont Place. Can't tell how bad she is yet. Pulse and respiration okay. Must have got a hard rap on the head. Maybe skull fracture."

Sullivan picked up the grey, trim suit coat which lay across the stretcher. It wasn't a new garment, but one glance at the label told him this girl represented money.

Another ambulance pulled up to the loading platform. Business was suddenly very good and everyone rushed around. Sullivan had no trouble at all in picking up the purse which also lay beside the girl. He retreated to his chair and opened the purse quickly.

There was a little money—less than ten dollars. There were two lipsticks, rouge, a sterling silver compact and a gold cigarette case with what looked like genuine diamonds set in it. There was a leather wallet containing an identification card. The girl's name, Sullivan learned, was Ann Shaw. This, in conjunction with the address, indicated a great deal to the reporter.

He poked further, investigated a small red notebook which contained nothing of interest. There were some old bills, a wedding announcement from some friend. The usual loose hair pins, a handkerchief and some tissues. And a folded square of crisp paper.

SULLIVAN opened this. There were four names and addresses on it. Through the first two, lines had been drawn with lipstick the same shade as one of those in the purse. Four names that meant nothing to Sullivan. He sighed, started to put the paper back into the purse and then the lightning struck.

He opened that paper again. He read the names and gasped.

BIFF CARRIGAN
ROGER TUTTLE
DR. GEORGE DOWNING
PAUL HABER

An innocent looking list except for one thing. Biff Carrigan and Roger Tuttle were both dead. They had died by violence. And—Ann Shaw had crossed their names off her list.

Sullivan tucked the paper into his pocket, watched for an opportunity and placed the purse on the floor near the desk where it would seem to have fallen from the stretcher. Then he hurried to the emergency room, but the door was closed and a nurse told him he couldn't go in under any circumstances.

Sullivan didn't mind. He felt he was wasting time anyhow. He hurried to the street, found his car and worried it from between two other cars that sandwiched him in tightly. He headed for the neighborhood where the third man in that list resided.

While he was driving, his mind went back to the first two names. Biff Carrigan had been an ex-fighter. Never anything more than a palooka, he'd lately become a punching bag for pugilists in training to pop at. Roger Tuttle had been connected with some bank as an assistant cashier. A nice guy, intelligent and certainly far above Biff Carrigan's mentality and class. Both had died by what was so far termed accidents.

Dr. George Downing was an unknown quantity, as was the last name on the list. Sullivan had never heard of either. Dr. Downing apparently wasn't in practice. At least not at the address given, for he lived on the fifteenth floor of this expensive apartment house.

Sullivan used the house phone in the lobby but received no answer. Just on a hunch he took the elevator to the fifteenth floor. The operator was noncommunicative, but made no attempt to stop the reporter.

After the car had dropped again, Sullivan found Dr. Downing's apartment. He pressed

the buzzer, heard it sounding off; but nobody came to answer it. Sullivan turned away in disappointment, took half a dozen steps and recalled that list and the significance attached to the crossing off of the first two names.

Dr. Downing was the third. Was he dead too? Should his name also be crossed off? The reporter suddenly recalled that Ann Shaw had been hit on Wilmont Place and—this was Wilmont Place.

Sullivan wheeled and went back to the door. He turned the knob and found the door giving way. He stepped in quickly, closed the door behind him and stood there, apprehensive as to what he might find and a little nervous about what would happen to him if Dr. Downing should walk in.

There were eight rooms in this apartment and each one was empty. A Venetian blind flapped in the main bedroom and expensive drapes were being blown about like billowing sails. Sullivan went into the room, snapped on the lights and studied the depression in the bedcovers. Someone had been lying in this bed, on top of the spread.

HE FELT of the pillow but it gave off no warmth at all. The drapes and the Venetian blinds were slapping away again. He paid little attention to them until he saw the scratch on the bare floor in front of the window. It was deep and fresh.

Sullivan bent down, let his fingers rove over it, then he stepped up to the window. That scratch seemed to have been made by something dragged across the floor. Sullivan raised the blinds, leaned over the sill and peered down into nothing but a lot of darkness.

Hoping that there was a flashlight around, he hunted for one, being very careful not to leave any fingerprints nor to upset anything. He found a three-cell flash in the kitchen. Armed with this, he returned to the window, leaned out again and sent the flashlight ray straight down.

Sullivan had to restrain himself to keep from calling aloud. There was a terrace six or seven floors down. Spread-eagled on it was a man. Even at this distance, and in the ray of nothing but a flashlight, Sullivan could see that the man was dead.

The third name had been crossed off that list!

Sullivan rushed for the telephone and then hesitated. If he called the police, the whole story would break and he might be left out in the cold so far as an exclusive went. The cops would listen to his tale, glance at the list of names and round up the fourth and last man on it. Whoever Paul Haber might be—if he still lived—he might be temporarily unavailable for comment to the press.

Yet, scoop, or no scoop, he had to notify the police.

But the chances were, Sullivan wryly reflected on second thought, that the cops would laugh at him. Too romantic, they had called him once, after he had sent them on a wild goose chase. When it happened a second time, they openly sneered at him. Too much imagination, one of them said; he'd been seeing too many movies or listened to too many radio chillers. They wanted no part of him, the cops intimated, and that was why Sullivan had been removed from the Headquarters beat and sent down to cover the hospital.

If his imagination and his impulsiveness led the police on another wild, fruitless hunt, Sullivan realized, he'd be removed from his job altogether.

Sullivan made a hurried pact with himself. Discretion, he decided, was the better part of valor. He'd lay it in the lap of the city editor.

That worthy listened with low grunts to Sullivan's wild tale, but when the reporter finished, the editor's orders were crisp and decisive.

"You have until morning," the editor said. "Try to get the complete story but if you can't, phone in as much of it as possible."

“But not reporting a murder . . .” Sullivan protested.

“You reported it to me, didn’t you?” the editor growled. “Leave it to me—I’ll notify them.”

Sullivan put the phone down, wiped prints off it and then searched the desk on which it stood. From letters and documents he knew that Dr. Downing had practiced medicine in Chicago, was now retired and had come to New York a little over seven years ago.

Sullivan put everything back, quietly left the apartment and walked down several flights of stairs. He was tempted to go to the terrace and make certain of the dead man’s identity, but he refused to succumb to this urge. He might attract attention.

One thing Sullivan did know very well indeed. Dr. Downing had not died as the result of an accident—nor had he committed suicide. Because the Venetian blinds had been all the way down and closed. Downing certainly hadn’t closed them after he fell out.

Sullivan drove as fast as he dared to the address of Paul Haber, the fourth man. It wasn’t an especially attractive neighborhood, being given over to rows of cheap rooming houses. He reflected that the four men on that list were certainly different types and of different social stations. Biff Carrigan, ex-pug. Roger Tuttle, minor bank official. Dr. Downing, retired and apparently wealthy physician. Now there was Paul Haber—and Sullivan wondered what he’d be like.

THE landlady was totally indifferent as to whether or not Paul Haber had a visitor. She merely jerked a grimy thumb in the direction of the stairs.

“Third floor. Number thirty-seven. He’s home.”

Sullivan climbed the stairs, found the room and knocked. The door was opened by a man in his early thirties. He was in shirtsleeves, and his collar was open. A coat hung on the back of a chair with a cheap tie

draped over it. Haber was brown-eyed and black-haired, but there was nothing about him that seemed dangerous or even intriguing.

Sullivan said, “I’ve got to see you on an urgent matter, Mr. Haber. My name is Sullivan and I’m a reporter on the *Globe*.”

“A reporter—to see me?” Haber gaped. “I don’t understand.”

“You will.” Sullivan moved in and closed the door. “I’m going to ask you a few questions, Mr. Haber. They may not make sense and then again they may. Everything depends on getting honest answers. Maybe even your life. Do you know a girl named Ann Shaw?”

“Ann Shaw?” Haber frowned. “I—don’t think so. The name isn’t familiar. I don’t get around very much lately. I’ve been studying pretty hard.”

Sullivan appraised him again and decided he looked honest. “How about a man named Biff Carrigan?”

Haber shook his head. “A name like that I’d be bound to remember. I never heard of him.”

“Roger Tuttle?” Sullivan queried.

“Nor him,” Haber replied. “Say, what’s this all about?”

“Maybe the name of Dr. George Downing would be familiar.”

“Downing? Why . . . yes. I’ve heard of him. He used to be attached to the Willard Memorial Hospital. I did some pathology work there. That’s what I’m studying. But I never knew Dr. Downing. Never even saw him to my knowledge. Now will you explain, please.”

Sullivan sat down heavily. “Mr. Haber, a list of names fell into my hands tonight. The three men I named were the first three names on that list. All of them are dead—under circumstances that look suspicious, to say the least. You, being the fourth man on that roster, may be slated for a violent death too. That’s why I thought you might know the answers.”

Haber swallowed hard, sat down very

slowly and reached for a cigarette. He forgot to light it and the white cylinder bobbed up and down between his lips as he talked.

"I'm on a list of dead men? Really, I don't know what this is all about. I haven't the faintest idea, but I do think we ought to go to the police about it. I'm fourth? Do you mean it looks as if I'm slated to be murdered?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Sullivan said dryly. "And a man on a murder list usually knows why he is included. Mr. Haber, I am going to the police with this, but unless I get more facts they'll think I'm nuts. But I hoped I might be able to help you."

"And get a story as well." Haber managed a weak grin. "Mr. Sullivan, I wish I could help. For your sake and for mine. Mostly for mine. But I swear I haven't the faintest idea what this is all about."

Sullivan handed Haber a book of matches and watched him light the cigarette. His hands didn't shake at all. This utter lack of nerves sold Sullivan the idea that Haber was telling the truth, otherwise this news would have upset him severely. Unless he was a very cold-blooded type and he didn't look it.

"I'll be back," Sullivan promised. "Maybe with some cops. Meanwhile, if I were you, I wouldn't budge."

"I promise you I won't," Haber declared. "Of course I'll expect to see you again in two or three hours. Otherwise I may get so scared I'll have to go to the police."

"It's a deal," Sullivan said, getting up and going to the door.

He was thoroughly mystified by all this and sought the nearest telephone. Only Ann Shaw would be able to supply all the answers. A call to the hospital, however, informed him that while she had recovered consciousness and was not regarded as seriously injured, she was still too groggy to be interviewed.

Sullivan hung up, got into his car and turned it in the direction of Ann Shaw's home.

CHAPTER II

Vanishing Lady

THE address he had written down showed her home to be one of those big places, slightly decayed, but nevertheless reeking of grim respectability. He walked up onto a porch that squeaked underfoot.

The woman who opened the door was hanging on tightly to the late fifties. She wore too much make-up and dressed too youthfully. Her housecoat was of good quality but below its hem peeped a pair of very worn shoes. They didn't go with the rest of her.

Sullivan introduced himself. "As you must know, Miss Ann has been injured and my editor wants a story. Miss Ann hasn't been in the news lately."

"Oh, the poor child," Mrs. Shaw said. "But I'm so glad she isn't badly hurt. Please come in and tell me all you know about the accident. Wally is wandering about somewhere and he'll want to know too."

"Wally?" Sullivan asked blankly.

"Wally Bancroft. She is to marry him very soon now. Poor boy, he's been in a dreadful stew ever since we learned the news. He told me the hospital said he couldn't see Ann for a while. So he's been waiting here with me until they rescind that silly ruling."

Sullivan took off his hat and walked in. Instantly he recognized the symptoms. Here was all the evidence of wealth which no longer existed. Of people trying to live up to the past and not doing a very good job of it. The furniture was worn; some of it needed a cleaning. The spick-and-span appearance which comes of careful servants was quite noticeable by its absence.

Sullivan said, "That's odd, the hospital not letting Mr. Bancroft in to see Miss Ann. Biff Carrigan, Roger Tuttle and Dr. Downing were all there. Oh yes—Paul Haber, too."

Mrs. Shaw's eyes went bleak. "Roger Tuttle was there? Are you certain?"

“Of course,” Sullivan lied. “You know the others I named too, naturally.”

“No! No, I’ve never heard of them, but Roger Tuttle—is he connected with a bank?”

“That’s right, Mrs. Shaw.” Sullivan wondered if he were hitting pay dirt.

Mrs. Shaw turned and walked quickly to the living room door. “Please make yourself comfortable,” she said. “I must find Wally. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Sullivan took the time to inspect the room and confirm his first theory that the Shaws were broke but trying their best to hide the fact.

There was an oil painting of Ann on the further wall, done when she was about sixteen which couldn’t have been more than eight years ago. Even at that age she was extremely attractive and the artist had included a devil-may-care look in her startlingly blue eyes. Sullivan was just beginning to appreciate the painting when the interruption came.

“Stand right where you are and raise your arms,” a male voice said curtly.

Sullivan wheeled. A man of about thirty-five, with a heavy gun in his fist, stood directly in front of Mrs. Shaw. The gun was very steady and the man handled it as if he knew how to use such a weapon.

“Put that gun down,” Sullivan said quietly.

“Turn around,” the man snapped. “Keep those arms way up. You may be a reporter and you may not. I’m only certain that you’re a liar.”

Sullivan studied those dark, slightly narrowed eyes and thought it advisable to obey. He turned slowly, kept his hands up and didn’t resist when he was searched.

The man went on talking. “I’m Wally Bancroft. Ann and I are to be married. I wouldn’t be surprised if you had something to do with her accident—though it probably was not an accident at all.”

WALLY BANCROFT knew how to frisk a man, and that weird list of murder

victims was taken from Sullivan. The reporter was getting fed up with the whole thing. He dropped his arms, turned and walked over to a chair. He sat down.

“Go ahead and shoot,” he invited. “Otherwise put the cannon away and get some sense. You have my credentials. You know I told Mrs. Shaw the truth.”

“About your identity—yes,” Bancroft slowly lowered the gun. “But when you said that Roger Tuttle was at Aim’s bedside, you lied. Tuttle has been dead for three days.”

“That I also know,” Sullivan said wearily. “He isn’t the only dead man mixed up in this either. I’m here for a story. I can start it off saying that Ann Shaw, daughter of the once wealthy but now almost impoverished Mrs. Richard Shaw, was injured by a car . . .”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Mrs. Shaw’s voice was almost a screech. “That would be libel.”

“The truth cannot be libel, Mrs. Shaw,” Sullivan countered. He felt he was master of this situation now. He knew Mrs. Shaw’s weakness. “But I won’t write those things if you cooperate a little.”

Bancroft glared at him but stuffed the gun under his belt and sat down. “What do you want?” he demanded. “And who are these other people you mentioned as being at the hospital to see Ann?”

“That was a slight misrepresentation,” Sullivan admitted. “Besides Tuttle, two other of those four men are dead. Paul Haber is alive—but in this kind of set-up who knows what can happen?”

Bancroft looked puzzled. Sullivan decided to holding nothing back. He told the entire story while Bancroft became more and more amazed and Mrs. Shaw slowly wilted until she showed her age in every wrinkle.

“What I want to find out,” Sullivan went on, “is why Ann had this list. Why the first two names were crossed off, and what she was doing in the vicinity of Dr. Downing’s home just before or just after he was killed.”

“I’m sorry,” Bancroft said. “I don’t know.”

I haven't the faintest idea."

Mrs. Shaw shook her head mutely, as if the whole thing were completely too beyond her understanding. Sullivan gave up. They were either wholly innocent of any part in this weird business or were well trained to exhibit no worry. He promised to return as soon as he had news. Bancroft silently returned his possessions, including the murder list.

Mrs. Shaw said, "Please don't phone. You see the—ah—phone is out of order."

Sullivan nodded, put on his hat and hurried out. On his way to the door he saw a telegram lying open on the foyer table. The message notified Mrs. Shaw of her daughter's accident. So maybe, Sullivan decided, the phone had been disconnected for non-payment of the bill. He'd wondered how they had heard of Ann's injury without a telephone.

There seemed to be nothing more to do except go back to the hospital and wait until Ann could be questioned. At the hospital he was told that Ann had been merely knocked out, had recovered quickly and could leave whenever she wished. But they'd suggested to her she remain for a while because of shock.

Sullivan hurried to the second floor, pushed open the hospital room door and came to an abrupt stop.

The bed was empty, the window wide open and the closet bare of Ann's clothes. The hospital nightie lay on the floor beside the bed. Ann Shaw had taken a powder. Or she'd been snatched, though Sullivan hardly believed the latter theory.

He felt of the bed. It was still warm. She couldn't have been gone very long. He peered out of the window. There was a two-foot ledge there and this would take any agile person quite safely to a sun porch from which there was an easy descent to the hospital courtyard.

Sullivan sat down on the windowsill and did some thinking. He was still as confused as he'd been in the beginning. He tried to determine Ann's next move. She had, apparently, gone to see the first three men

named on the list. There seemed to have been some specific urgency to these visits. Perhaps then, she'd go to Paul Haber. Perhaps that was why she'd run away from the hospital rather than risk the usual departure.

Sullivan practically fled from the hospital. Within twenty minutes he had pulled up near Paul Haber's rooming house, and estimated that even with the start Ann had, the chances were he'd reached here first.

HE HAD only five minutes to wait. A cab pulled up and Ann Shaw got out. Sullivan was prepared for that. Ann had never seen him. She'd been unconscious the only time he'd seen her, so it was impossible that she would recognize him.

He simply climbed the outer steps to the rooming house porch and when she finished paying the driver and turned around, Sullivan was slowly ambling down the steps. She looked at him keenly, seemed to hesitate. Sullivan politely raised his hat.

"Looking for someone, Miss?" he asked.

"Yes. A man named Paul Haber lives here."

Her voice was cultured, but had a metallic ring to it. Sullivan decided he didn't like her voice at all. He put on an expression of surprise.

"Why—I'm Paul Haber. But I don't seem to recall you."

"Do you work—" she began and then stopped short before resuming. "Will you tell me where you work? So I can be certain I have the right man."

"I'm a pathology student," Sullivan lied baldly.

"Yes," she exclaimed. "You are the Paul Haber I want. We can't stand here talking. It may be very dangerous. Is there somewhere..."

"My car is over there," Sullivan suggested.

"Good. Hurry—your life is in danger. In great danger."

Sullivan didn't comment. He quickly

piloted her to the car, helped her in and then ran around the car to get behind the wheel. He snapped off the dash light. Her warning might not be one to ignore. The killer was apt to mistake him for Paul Haber also.

“Now suppose you tell me what this is all about,” Sullivan suggested. “Who in the world would want to kill me?”

“I can’t tell you—except to say that others have died. You are next. Very soon now. I can tell you the whole story . . . but right now I can’t. You’ve got to have faith in me. Believe in me because what I’m telling is the truth.”

“It sounds awfully phony to me.” Sullivan said, setting out the bait. “I doubt I’d hide anywhere merely on your say-so, Miss. Can’t you give me a hint?”

“No,” she said decisively. “If you don’t do as I say, I swear you will be killed. We can’t bring the police into this. Not until we’re very sure. And don’t ask me what about because I won’t tell you. Please drive me to a busier section where I can get a taxi. Then—please listen to me and go somewhere to hide. Some hotel, perhaps. Tell me the name of it and register under a false name which I must also know.”

“Suppose I contact you later, after I’m all set,” Sullivan suggested. “That means, of course, I must know 1 who you are.”

“I can’t tell you that either. My—my own life is in danger too. I can’t take chances, but you will do as I ask?”

Sullivan nodded. “Okay. I’ll register under the name of Ted Sullivan at the Dayton Hotel, but I warn you I’m not holing up indefinitely. I swear I have nothing to fear from anyone. Still, as you said, there’s no use taking chances.”

He dropped her at a busy corner and then set out for her suburban house, traveling as fast as he dared. His hunch that she might tell the truth to the man she thought was Paul Haber, hadn’t materialized. It was still up to him to find out what this was all about.

He parked some distance from her home, hurried there and slipped through a hedge that badly needed trimming and attention. He took up a post overlooking the entrance to the big house. Ann arrived three minutes later. She paid off the cab driver, practically ran up the walk to the house but slowed as she neared it.

SHE was fishing in her purse for keys when the door opened. Wally Bancroft stood there. She didn’t go into his arms. He made no move toward her. It was an odd reception from a man whose fiancée had just come home from the hospital after an accident.

The door closed and Sullivan swore softly. He was getting nowhere at a prodigious rate. He wondered what the police had turned up, if anything, after they received the call from his city editor.

But he lost little time in speculation. He made his way to the rear of the house, tried the back door and had his first break. It wasn’t locked. He stepped into the kitchen and spent a moment peering into cabinets. What he found confirmed his former opinion that Ann Shaw and her mother lived a bluff. Posing as people of wealth, they were barely keeping the wolf from the door.

He heard voices, crept through the dining room and was glad the door wasn’t in line with the living room where Ann, Wally Bancroft and Mrs. Shaw were talking over Ann’s accident. What Ann was saying indicated the others were not part of this game. Ann’s story insisted the whole thing had been a clear accident.

Sullivan made his way upstairs. The first room he came upon had two expensive suitcases in it and the toiletries adorning the dressers were those of a man. Wally seemed to be a guest in the house. Sullivan tiptoed across the floor and opened a couple of bureau drawers as softly as he could. There was nothing to show that Wally wasn’t what he seemed to be. Just an average guy—maybe

with money—who happened to be in love with Ann.

Then Sullivan's eyes fell upon a pair of military brushes. Strands of Wally's blond hair clung to them and the light was exactly right for him to see that the roots were much darker than the rest of the hair. Wally, it seemed, was using a hair dye.

Sullivan stored away that bit of information in his mental file and then left the room to hunt some more. He found Ann's suite next. Her vanity table, backed by a landscaped mirror, had rows of perfume bottles on it, but after he sniffed a couple he knew she was using the old dodge. The bottles contained nothing but weak tea or colored water. Everyone in this house—even the house itself—operated on a bluff.

There was something else that drew his attention. Several small bars of hotel soap were in a drawer, along with a few unused books of matches. They all bore the name of the Hotel Eldore of a small town in Maryland. Sullivan appropriated one pack of matches so he wouldn't forget the name of the hotel.

He had no time to investigate any more drawers. High-heeled shoes were beating a tattoo along the corridor. Sullivan quickly moved over to a comfortable chair in the middle of the room and sat down.

CHAPTER III

Death at Her Heels

ANN came through the door fast, skidded to a stop and her beautiful face acquired some harsh lines. "What—are you doing here?" she demanded. "Mr. Haber, you're just putting both of us in added peril."

Sullivan grinned. "Think so? I'm sorry, but I made up my mind not to be shunted off to some third-rate hotel and hide there like a criminal just on your say-so. So I followed you here. All you have to do is convince me that what you say makes sense and I'll do

exactly as you wish. Otherwise—well, I'll be looking up a policeman."

Ann ran a pointed tongue around her lips. She walked over and leaned against the tall chest of drawers. "I suppose," she said, "you are entitled to some sort of an explanation and yet—it's so difficult. The others wouldn't listen to me either. You're the only one left so I must see that you are safe."

Sullivan hardly dared draw a breath. She was going to talk. In a moment he'd have, at least, some measure of the truth. Something which would form a trail to the eventual truth.

He felt he was expected to say something. "Others? What others?"

"It has to do with something that happened a long time ago," she began.

And then the bedroom door opened and her mother walked in. Sullivan didn't even try to stifle the groan that crossed his lips.

Mrs. Shaw stared at him for a moment. "Why, Mr. Sullivan, how in the world did you get in here?"

"Sullivan?" Ann half shouted. "Mother, do you know this man?"

"Why of course, Ann. He's a reporter who came here to get a story on the accident."

Ann's features were strained and harsher than ever. She was no longer a beautiful girl. She walked over, took her mother's arm and hurried her to the door.

"I'll take care of Mr. Sullivan," she said. "But I can't convince him we need the right sort of publicity with you here. Please, Mother . . ."

Mrs. Shaw didn't like the idea but she obeyed her daughter. Ann closed the door and turned the key. Then, with one murderous glance at Sullivan, she crossed the room and yanked open a dresser drawer; one of the several drawers Sullivan hadn't found time to inspect. When Ann turned, there was a nickel-plated revolver in her hand. Sullivan could see the slugs in their chambers glint dully.

"Where is Paul Haber?" Ann asked. "Talk fast because I'm in more of a mood to shoot

you than listen to your excuses. Where is he?"

Sullivan started to get up but he sat down again slowly. The gun was too steady, too level, and the eyes sighting it were too hard and cold.

"Home, I suppose," he said. "You know, I've already got a headline for you, Miss Shaw. The Femme Fatale. The girl who visits people and when she leaves, they die."

"You fool!" she cried. "You impossible idiot!"

Sullivan managed a smile. "That's a familiar nickname for me, but you're the greater fool if you don't tell me what this is all about."

Her lips curled. "I suppose you want money."

"I want a story, Miss Shaw. A yarn which involves the murder of three men. I'm going to get it."

"Even if you have to drag me into a gutter during the process?"

Sullivan said nothing. He was tense, waiting for a chance to go at that gun.

She said, "I know you reporters. You're all rotten. You'd sell your souls for a story. Especially one which would include a girl like me or a woman like my mother. All right, I'll give you the story—the whole thing from start to finish. But while I talk, this gun will be pointed at you."

"Agreed," Sullivan said calmly.

"But not here, you fool. Get up. Go into the sitting room. There's a door which leads to the attic. We can have privacy there. Mother is always snooping. . ."

"Whatever you say." Sullivan arose. He turned to walk to the next room and instantly he was jabbed in the small of the back by the revolver. He moved slowly. A dizzy girl might forget that squeezing a trigger could make a gun go off.

HE CROSSED the sitting room to the further door which Ann had indicated. Another jab of the gun told him silently to

open the door. He did. Instantly he knew he'd fallen into a trap. The door led into a fairly large clothes closet.

He started to turn. The gun slashed against the back of his head. No puny blow, but one with enough force behind it to stun him. He grabbed at the doorway. The gun hit him again and at the same time he was pushed hard into the closet. The door closed and he heard a key turn.

Sullivan propped himself up against the wall, brushing the hanging clothes aside so he could breathe. He waited there until the pounding in his head stopped. There wasn't time to think things over. Ann Shaw was undoubtedly going to visit Paul Haber and wherever Ann Shaw went, death followed at her heels.

The first thing to do was get out of here. Sullivan stood up, swayed a little and then leaned against the door. It was stout, the lock held it in place without the slightest play. This wasn't going to be easy. He drew back as far as the limited confines of the clothes closet would permit, hunched his right shoulder and got set to attack the panels.

He paused. Someone was approaching the door. Someone who moved softly. It could be Ann returning. Perhaps after undergoing a change of heart. The steps were too faint to identify.

Sullivan called, "Open this door. Let me out of here."

His answer came in the form of a shot. The bullet smashed through the panels, whizzed by his ear and hit the wall behind him. Another bullet ripped through the door but Sullivan had made himself flat against the side, and this one missed him too.

But you can't count on luck indefinitely, so Sullivan decided to play possum. He emitted a groan, let himself fall heavily and moved his feet a little, as a man in agony might.

Outside, the footsteps moved away and then there was nothing but a lot of grim

silence. Sullivan waited three or four minutes before he dared move a muscle. Then he pressed an ear against the door. The silence continued just as complete.

He quickly took down a wire hanger, inspected the bullet holes in the door and found one which had caused a large splinter of wood to come loose. He pried this away, inserted the hanger and used it as a lever. It wasn't much, but the dry wood cracked a little.

The wire bent so he hunted for something else and compromised on a screw hook which he removed from the wall. This was strong but thin enough to wedge through the splintered bullet hole. Prying again, he ripped out a whole section of panel. He worked fast now, until he was able to squeeze his hand through and reach the key. He turned it, opened the door carefully and stepped into the sitting room. It was acrid with gun smoke.

He walked softly, keeping close to the wall where the floor was less apt to squeak under his weight. He went downstairs. The house appeared to be unoccupied. Sullivan got out of there fast.

His car was still where he'd parked it and he drove to the nearest drugstore. There he changed some bills into silver, entered a phone booth and put through a long distance call to the Hotel Eldore in Maryland.

"This," he said, "is the *New York Globe*. I want some information about a Miss Ann Shaw who was registered at your hotel recently."

"Shaw?" a voice came back. "Ann Shaw? I'm certain we had no such guest here. It's out of season and I can recall all check-ins for the last month . . ."

"See if you can remember a girl with brown hair—almost red. With blue eyes. Big blue eyes. About five feet six, a hundred and ten or fifteen. Polished as an apple a school kid gives to his teacher."

THE clerk at the hotel laughed. "We've had only one guest who answers that description. I'm sorry, but we aren't allowed to give out any information."

Sullivan said, "Listen to me. Something has happened as a result of her visit to your hotel. It will make wonderful front-page reading matter and if you don't want the name of your hotel smeared all over—"

The clerk didn't need any prompting after that. "The girl you have in mind came here as a bride," he interrupted. "She had been married in town that afternoon. She checked in with her husband under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Bancroft. Now will you take it easy when you mention this hotel? I don't want any trouble with a newspaper. Many of our guests come from New York. . ."

Sullivan hung up and smiled. Being a reporter had its points. He liked the power of the press. So Ann had married Wally and kept it a secret. Even from her mother. That tied Wally into the affair, but Sullivan knew he was still at a loss.

He dropped another nickel into the phone slot, dialed his office and asked for the society editor.

She was fifty, easy-going and a good friend. Sullivan said, "Tell me what you know about Ann Shaw and her mother. Maybe they haven't been prominent in society circles lately, but you must know them."

"I do Sully. The father died about five years ago and left practically nothing. Seems Mrs. Shaw and her lovely daughter lived so far beyond their means that anything the old boy had was squandered. Since then they've been putting up what is known as a brave front. Personally, I think it's stupid to pretend you have what you don't have."

"Ann Shaw has plenty," Sullivan chuckled. "And I don't mean money. What about boy friends?"

"Droves of them, naturally, Sully. Don't tell me you're interested."

“Only as a dutiful reporter. Who, for instance, has she had on her leash?”

“Well, there are two who seem to lead the field. Young Marty Thayer, a lawyer on the D.A.’s staff dropped out of the running a few weeks ago and then got back in again—very prominently. But a chap named Wally Bancroft came along and I think Ann’s fair heart surrendered.”

“This Bancroft—what do you know about him?” Sullivan asked.

“Nothing,” came the prompt answer. “He’s an enigma, Sully. Just cropped up a few weeks ago, from where nobody knows. Never talks about himself and balks at press photographers. Sully, are you horning in on my racket by any chance?”

“Nix. This is strictly crime stuff but if it pops the way I expect it to, you’ll get a couple of lines out of it too. Thanks—and keep all this quiet for a while.”

Sullivan then drove to Paul Haber’s rooming house. The landlady told him that Haber had gone out—with a lady. They’d driven off in a taxi. Sullivan had half an idea that Ann convinced Haber by saying she was also a member of the press. At least Haber had gone willingly enough.

SULLIVAN smoked a cigarette in fast, mouth-burning puffs, snapped the butt through the car window and drove back to the Shaw house. Some of the lights had been put out, indicating at least one member of the family had come home. He rang the bell and Mrs. Shaw let him in.

“Why—why, you’re not beat up at all,” she said in a puzzled voice. “Wally swore he’d beat you within an inch of your life because of the way you treated my daughter.”

Sullivan said, “Maybe. Wally did try to beat me, but not with his fists. Tell me just what happened?”

“Why—I was waiting downstairs in the living room when Ann hurried out of the house. Then Wally came in and said he saw

her running away. I told him about you. He asked me to go out and hurry after Ann. To bring her back and tell that whatever you had told her you’d print in the newspaper, simply wouldn’t be printed.”

“And then?” Sullivan prodded while a clear picture was forming in his mind.

“Well—I couldn’t find Ann. As I returned, I saw Wally drive his car out. I waited near the corner, wondering what I might do, but I decided that Wally knew what he was doing.”

“Wally sure does,” Sullivan said. “Now listen carefully. I think that Ann is in grave danger. She’s gone off somewhere to hide. Some safe place which possibly only she knows of. If I get there in time, I may save her life. So if you know of such a place, tell me now.”

“But there is no such place. I don’t know what you’re talking about, young man. Hiding place? What would my daughter be hiding from?”

“A murderer, Mrs. Shaw. And the chances are he’ll find her. Think hard. She must have had a certain destination in mind. What about the home of some friend who might have given Ann the key?”

“Ann has no friends that close,” Mrs. Shaw said. “If this had happened last week, I’d say she went to our old summer cottage at Lake Pleasant, up-state. But we—ah—sold it a few days ago.”

Sullivan said, “Tell me exactly where that lake is. Try to understand that I’m helping Ann. I’ve got to reach her quickly.”

“But Ann wouldn’t go to the cottage. I asked her for her key to it only the other day. The—new owners wanted all the keys. I put them in the desk drawer.”

“Go see if they are still there,” Sullivan urged. “Look, you help me and I’ll see that you’re treated like a queen in our society pages. Is that fair enough?”

“Well, I’m not exactly a queen.” Mrs. Shaw primped a little. “But I do like good publicity. Yes, I’ll go see.”

She was gone only a moment. "The keys are no longer there," she said in a puzzled voice. "But Ann understands that the bank which foreclosed, insisted we stay away from the cottage . . ." She stopped short, suddenly realizing just what she had admitted.

Sullivan paid no attention. He got her to describe in detail exactly where the cottage was located. He hurried back to his car, swore a trifle because he had to waste four minutes gassing up for the long trip and then he settled down to some fast driving. He tucked a press card in the windshield just in case some cop tried to stop him. He almost wished one would.

CHAPTER IV

Murder Man

IT WAS thirty-eight miles to that lake but over good highways. He made time until he reached the cutoff. There the road was dirt, rutted and not often used. There was still just a little dust in the air, indicating at least one other car had travelled fast over this lane and not long ago.

Sullivan wished then that he carried a gun. Until now only a pencil had been his weapon of defense, but it wouldn't be a very lethal weapon to use against a three-time murderer.

He saw the silvery sheen of the lake moments later. He slowed up and began looking for signs of automobiles. It was pitch dark and Sullivan grunted in surprise when he glanced at his watch and discovered it was after three in the morning.

Then he noticed lights gleaming through the trees which bordered the lake. It was long past the lake season. They'd probably be no one here except Ann Shaw and Paul Haber, if she'd convinced him to accompany her here. Sullivan turned off his lights, pulled over and got out of the car. He left the door open so as to avoid the noise entailed in closing it.

He moved toward the cottage, saw an R.F.D. box with the name of Shaw on it and knew he was on the right trail. He crept closer, crouched and crossed the cleared lawn until he was beneath one of the lighted windows. He raised his head and looked into a dining room. No one was there.

Carefully now, he proceeded to another window. Through this one he saw Ann Shaw, seated on a divan. Her handbag lay beside her. Paul Haber was slumped in a wicker chair and Wally Bancroft stood between them. Wally had a gun in his hand.

Sullivan knew there wasn't time to go for help. Wally's expression was savage enough to indicate he was ready for the kill. Sullivan could hear nothing through the closed window, but swift action was called for. At any moment Wally might start shooting. It was risky, but he had to move in on the scene.

Sullivan went around to the front of the cottage, walked up on the porch and knocked on the door. For long moments there was no sound from within. Then he heard Ann approach slowly. The door opened. At sight of him she gasped in astonishment.

Sullivan said, "Good evening. Tell your fond husband to come around from behind the door. I know he's there and I know he has a gun. I haven't one so he doesn't need to be afraid of me."

Wally Bancroft stepped into view. "Put 'em up, Sullivan. Turn around and don't think you can get to me before a bullet from my gun perforates you. Ann—stand against the wall. Remember, I'd as soon shoot you as I would this stupid reporter."

Sullivan was roughly searched and then poked with the gun. So prodded, he walked into the small living room. Paul Haber was still slumped in the wicker chair, but in a slightly different sort of slump. He'd been belted with the gun and blood ran down his forehead, between his eyes and along one side of his nose. He was moaning softly.

Sullivan walked over and sat down on the divan. He looked up at Bancroft and shook his head. "What a way to get a story!" he said. "I have to walk in on the killer."

"Get up," Bancroft ordered. "I'll tell you a story, but you'll never print it. Get off that divan or I'll put a slug in you now."

Sullivan placed both hands against the divan and raised himself. His right hand brushed against Ann's purse. He walked over to the wall, stood against it and said nothing while Ann sat down on the divan he had abandoned. She picked up her purse and put it in her lap.

BANCROFT stepped back to cover his three prisoners. "Well," he said, "you saved me a lot of trouble, Sullivan. Though I'll admit I thought you were dead."

Sullivan looked at Ann. "Your husband heard me in your clothes closet and made a sieve out of the door. He hoped I was made a sieve out of too, but that time my luck held."

"So you know we're married," Bancroft mused. "I suppose you know everything else too."

"Well, no," Sullivan admitted. "Putting a few things together makes me realize you must have committed some sort of a crime which four men could convict you of. I also think Ann led you a merry chase and that you had no idea she was broke until after you married her. You were looking for a substantial spot in society—maybe to hide in. She was looking for a man with plenty of money. I guess you were both fooled, eh?"

"Only I," Bancroft winced a little as he spoke. "I happen to have all the money she hoped I'd have and little Ann was determined to get it. But that's all ancient history . . ." His eyes narrowed. "Naturally I have to kill you three. There is no other out for me."

Sullivan whistled softly. "It's tough to die, but it'll be tougher when you try explaining three bodies. Every last one of them strongly tied up with you. Ann—your wife. Oh yes,

that news will come out. Me—who broke the story, and Mr. Paul Haber . . . By the way, why did you want to kill Haber?"

Bancroft shook his head. "You really don't expect me to talk."

"Frankly, no," Sullivan said.

He'd never stalled for time so hard in his life. He glanced at Ann but she sat rigid, eyes staring in horror, fingers fumbling with the clasp of her purse. Apparently the sheer terror which filled her had numbed her brain.

Bancroft was shifting his feet nervously. He was primed for the kill, but a trifle confused too. He had three people he felt he had to shoot for his own safety, and that's a tough project for the most calloused of men. Sullivan lowered his hands slightly and bent his knees.

He said, "Bancroft, I've been playing for time and I got enough of it. Paul Haber is practically normal now. The effects of the gun whipping seems to have passed off. Ann is scared stiff, but once your gun goes boom, she'll lose that terror. It will be replaced by desperation."

Bancroft laughed. "Are you trying to frighten me, Sullivan? Me—with a gun in my hand facing three people who are completely unarmed?"

"One of us will take you," Sullivan said slowly. "You won't be able to stop all of us. Even Ann, if she gets at you, will claw your face to ribbons. She'll be fighting for her life. Just when you don't expect it she'll pull a surprise."

Bancroft glanced at Ann but hardly long enough to even see her. As his head moved, Sullivan's arms came down an inch and Bancroft looked back quickly. Paul Haber was wriggling closer to the edge of his chair, face drained of blood, but lips set in a determined grimace.

"This has gone far enough," Bancroft yelled in sudden alarm.

As he spoke, Sullivan leaped. Haber came out of his chair as if propelled from it.

Bancroft fired. Sullivan was half spun around by the slug that smashed into his shoulder. Haber didn't stop. He made a wild pass at Bancroft's gun hand, missed and stumbled. The impetus of his charge was so great that he fell heavily and slid forward a foot.

Bancroft began to laugh. A weird laugh. He waved his gun between Sullivan and Haber. Both men were at his mercy now. But he'd forgotten Ann in the melee.

SULLIVAN didn't dare look at her. If Bancroft even glanced in that direction and saw what Sullivan prayed was taking place, the whole game would be over. Bancroft aimed his gun at Haber. Unwounded, he was the more dangerous of the pair. Bancroft's lips tightened, he seemed to steel himself to pull the trigger—and that was when Ann shot him high in the back.

Bancroft started to spin around and Sullivan hit him a glancing blow with his sound shoulder. Bancroft went off balance. Haber grabbed at his legs, but it wasn't necessary to pull the killer down. He was on his way, a froth of blood bubbling from between his lips.

Sullivan slowly collapsed into a chair. Haber was talking fast. He said, "I get it now. I didn't realize who Bancroft was even after he pointed a gun at me. Only when he was ready to kill me and he grimaced that way. Then I knew. He's changed since he snatched the payroll messenger from the Atlas Bank and Trust Company."

Sullivan groaned. "So that's it. You were one of the witnesses who saw the bandit. There were four. Biff Carrigan, Tuttle and Dr. Downing were the others. Their identities were never made public because the D.A.'s office evidently was afraid Bancroft might kill them."

"We didn't even know one another," Haber exclaimed. "That's why I couldn't associate the names of those murdered men when you told them to me, Sullivan. And it

happened so long ago that I thought the whole thing was over with."

Sullivan pressed a clean handkerchief against his shoulder. "It was," he said, "until Ann brought it back to life. The whole thing is pretty clear now. She roped Bancroft, but when he found it out—discovered all Ann wanted was his money to bolster the sagging Shaw fortunes, he was through with her. But somehow—you can't always hide them forever—Ann discovered he was the wanted bandit.

"Bancroft probably pulled other jobs successfully, accumulated enough cash to stop his looting and tried to turn himself into a respectable man. He thought there'd be no better hiding place than as Ann's husband."

Haber looked at Bancroft who lay very still. He said, "We'd better do something about him, Sullivan."

"Let him die," Ann said quickly, her face white. "Just stay right where you are. Let him die. I'm getting that money and, as his widow, it won't be hard."

The gun she held was pointed at Sullivan. He didn't move. Haber went over to his chair and sat down.

Sullivan said, "You'll never get a dime, Ann. Bancroft's fortune was made up of stolen money. It will be claimed by his victims. Once the dye is removed from his hair and that trick mustache shaved off, he'll be easily recognized."

Ann's gun was still steady. "I saved your lives. You owe me plenty. You can start by forgetting that Bancroft was a robber."

Sullivan sighed. "You were doggone slow in taking the gun out of your handbag, Ann. I knew you'd brought the gun with you and I managed to sit down on the divan and feel the outlines of the gun in the bag. I kept Bancroft so busy he forgot about you. Don't talk about saving our lives. In my opinion you wanted Bancroft to kill both of us before you plugged him."

"I can still shoot you both and say he did

it,” Ann reminded them. “Who’d question me? I’m Ann Shaw. I’m important. My whole family has always been important.”

“No go, Ann,” Sullivan said quietly. “Right now the whole story about Bancroft is running off the presses.”

HE AROSE slowly and walked toward her. The gun she held began to wobble. Sullivan kept on going. He said, “It’s no use, Ann. Things are bad enough now. If you kill us, you’ll go to the chair. What’ll happen to the famous Shaw name then? And you never can tell, Bancroft might have made an honest dollar which you will inherit. He isn’t going to live. You shot to kill. Hand me the gun and stop being silly.”

For a moment he thought she’d go hysterical. He sighed with relief when she let go of the revolver, covered her face and began to sob. Sullivan breathed for the first time in a full minute. His throat was constricted. Each word he’d spoken had been agony. He picked up the gun and then went over to Bancroft. Haber joined him.

Sullivan said, “He won’t die of this wound. He’ll wait for the chair. Three times a killer that I know of. That’s enough to insure a death sentence.”

Haber shuddered. “He killed those other three men?”

“Of course he did. This is the way I figure it now. Ann discovered, somehow, that he was the wanted robber. To make absolutely certain, she managed to get a list of the four identification witnesses. She probably kidded a young lawyer on the D.A.’s staff along until he gave her the list—or she managed

somehow to swipe it at the D.A.’s office. Then she set out to talk with those witnesses.

“Later, she intended to tell Bancroft how she could have him arrested. Bancroft knew what she was up to and followed her. He was satisfied with the arrangements because he wanted to kill off those men anyway and he never did know who they were.”

“But—but why didn’t the police get wise?” Haber asked. “After all they could associate the four names.”

“Sure—if all four were dead and had been plainly murdered. The first two died, apparently by accident. Dr. Downing, the third, was shoved out of a window—but that happened only this evening. But Bancroft must have got suspicious that Ann had some sort of a list. He tried to kill her by running her down. He intended to snatch her purse and the list, but too many people showed up so he had to run for it.”

Haber wagged his head. “I doubt any of us would have identified this man as the robber. He’d have gotten away with it, Sullivan.”

“He came so close, I shiver when I think of it. Take this gun, just in case Bancroft wakes up. I’m going to drive to the nearest house and call the newspaper.”

Haber nodded. “I’ll handle this end of it. But don’t you think you’d better call the police too?”

“Oh sure,” Sullivan chuckled. “But after I phone my own story in. Be back soon.”

Haber waved the gun at Ann, who was huddled in one corner of the divan. “What about her?”

Sullivan walked slowly to the door. There he turned. “I don’t know, Haber. I really don’t care very much. See you soon.”