



TROUBLE BACKSTAGE

By JOHN L. BENTON

Everything was make-believe—except the corpse!

IT SURE felt good to be on the bill in a theater where vaudeville was trying to make a come-back, and doing very nicely, thank you. My act had the important spot next to shut. “Dan Lyon And His Music of Yesterday And Tomorrow” —that was us. With a sixteen piece band and four of us doing specialties, we worked full stage, and it was a flashy act if I do say it myself.

We went over big in the Monday afternoon opener, and I was expecting a repeat on tonight’s performance. The theater was a two a day house, all class and no grind, like some of them we had played while working the act into shape.

During the afternoon show I hadn’t paid much attention to the four other acts on the bill. I knew the opener was an acrobatic act, “Wallace Stoll and Company,” that did a lot of balancing stuff. They were followed by James Milburn, a fat comedian who did a single and worked in one. Nan Conway was the

third act. She was a pretty blond singer who worked with a piano accompanist on stage with her. As I said before, we had the spot next to shut, and Forrest McCoy and Dotty closed the show with a trick roller skating act.

I was standing in the wings watching Stoll do a balancing act on a high pole when James Milburn joined me. The comedian was the fattest man I had ever seen. He must have weighed at least four hundred pounds and he was wearing a panama hat and a linen suit that must have been specially constructed by Omar the Tent Maker.

“Caught your act this afternoon, Lyon,” he said in a low tone that reminded me of a five gallon jug trying to whisper. “Good stuff. That band of yours sure is hot.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You’ve got a great little act, Milburn.”

“It will do,” he said. “Though I wasn’t getting the laughs I usually do from the

bunch out front this afternoon. Coldest audience I ever worked with. Hope they are better tonight.” He stared at me, a strange sort of look, as though he knew where the body was buried and wanted me to help with the digging. “I’ve got a feeling we’re going to have trouble backstage before the week is over.”

HE MADE it sound ominous. “What do you mean?” I asked anxiously.

“Wallace Stoll is already making a play for Nan Conway,” Milburn said, “And I caught Forrest McCoy making sheep eyes at her, too. McCoy better watch his step.”

“Why?” I asked. “Is Stoll likely to put poison in his soup?”

“No, but Dotty, the girl who works with McCoy in the act, is his wife, and she doesn’t stand for any fooling around. I’ve been on the bill with them before. McCoy always has an eye for a pretty girl and when he takes too long a look, Dotty slaps him down, but good.”

“Sounds like the makings of a jolly week,” I said drily.

“You’ll be in it when trouble starts,” the fat man said. “I saw Nan watching your act this afternoon, and she was raving about the tall, dark and handsome band leader.”

“These women,” I said in a bored tone. “Always trailing me around. They are such a bother.”

I didn’t mean a word of it, but I wanted to see how Milburn would take it. In my estimation, the fat man was a male gossip who would be right in his element digging up tasty tidbits for a meeting of the ladies sewing circle.

He blinked and looked at me like a petulant whale. Apparently he expected dancing in the street upon my part when he told me that Nan Conway was interested in me. Not that I objected to the

idea. After all, I am thirty-two—unmarried—and willing to walk around the block if romance waits just around the corner.

The three men and the woman who made up Stoll’s act went into a pyramid stand with Stoll balancing the two other men and the woman on his shoulders. The pit orchestra stopped playing and the drummer started a long roll.

“You’re on next, Mr. Milburn,” the stage manager said from behind us.

The acrobats held the pose, and then the woman who was standing on the shoulders of the third man of the pyramid slid to the stage floor. The third man did a back flip and landed on his feet on the stage. The second man came down, and then the orchestra was playing their exit music, and the acrobats were taking their bows.

The drop came down for an act in one and the orchestra swung into James Milburn’s opening music. The fat man stepped out on stage and went through the motions of singing, though he didn’t utter a word. Finally he gave up in pretended disgust and motioned to the orchestra leader to stop playing.

“Who switched off that microphone?” Milburn asked. “I couldn’t hear a word I was singing—and with my voice, too.”

I stepped back from the wings. I had heard the fat man’s act that afternoon and I found I wasn’t in the mood to listen again now.

“Mr. Lyon,” a low voice said as I moved away, and a hand caught the sleeve of the evening clothes I wear when I lead the band in my own act. “I’m frightened.”

It was Nan Conway who stood beside me, her hand on my arm. She wore her blond hair in a long bob, and she was dressed in a low cut evening gown.

“What’s wrong, Miss Conway?” I asked.

“We can’t talk here,” she said glancing about her in the semi-darkness. “But I just have to tell someone.”

Behind the drop, the stage hands were silently clearing away the stuff that Wallace Stoll and Company used in their act. Stoll and his troupe had gone to their dressing rooms.

“You follow Milburn,” I said, conscious of a roar of laughter that came from out front. “But he just went on. His act runs about fifteen minutes. Come on, there’s time for us to talk.”

WE WENT back through the passageway leading to the stage door. The old stage doorkeeper was sitting in a chair reading an evening paper. He lowered it and glanced at us, then went on reading. We stepped out through the stage door. The night was fairly cool for mid-August.

The alley at the side of the theater was dark and shadowy. I stood close to the girl, feeling as protective as all get out.

“Someone wants to see me dead,” Nan said. “Someone who must hate me terribly, and I don’t know who it is that a feels that way.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

She stepped closer to the stage door. It was open and light came from inside. Nan held up her left hand. She was holding a tiny blond doll dressed in a white dress like the one Nan herself wore. There was a pin stuck in the doll’s body just over the heart.

“I found this lying on my dressing table when I reached the theater tonight,” she said. “Voodoo stuff. Someone wants me to be found with a weapon sticking in my heart—just like the doll.”

“You think of the nicest things,” I said. “Somebody is probably just playing a joke on you, though I don’t think much of their sense of humor.”

“Neither do I,” said Nan. “I’d better get back on stage. It must be nearly time for my act.” She handed me the doll. “Won’t you please help me? Find out who left that doll in my dressing room and why, Mr. Lyon.”

I glanced in through the door. Mike Carter, the stage doorkeeper, had lowered his paper and was watching us, his face expressionless. I stepped back into the shadows and dropped the doll into a pocket of my evening trousers. My swallow-tailed coat had no outside pockets.

Nan hurried in through the door and I followed close behind her. I went with her to the wings. Milburn was just finishing his act. I left Nan and hurried down to my dressing room, I wanted to make sure that I looked all right before I appeared on stage in front of the band. We open with me leading the boys with a baton just to be fancy. On the next number I take over the piano and lead from there. I play piano, sax and drums, but I’m best on the eighty-eight.

When I reached my dressing room the door was closed just the way I had left it. I opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind me. Then I just stood there—staring at the figure lying in front of the dressing table.

It was Wallace Stoll, lying there on his back, still in his acrobat costume, and I had an awful feeling that he was very dead. My first impulse was to scream murder at the top of my lungs and go away from there fast. I had a feeling that the police would be morbidly curious about finding a dead man in my dressing room. I didn’t like the idea at all myself.

I went to the body and examined it. As far as I could tell, Stoll was dead, all right. Just how he had died, I didn’t know. There wasn’t any sign of a wound, as far as I could see. No knives sticking out of his

chest, or bullet holes in his head. For all I knew, he had died of a heart attack, but why had he picked my dressing room in which to do it?

I thought of reporting what had happened to Wallace Stoll right away and then decided it wouldn't do any harm to wait a little while longer. I was suddenly filled with "the show must go on" spirit. After all, I hadn't known Stoll in life, and didn't know him a bit better in death.

I noticed there was what looked like a piece of paper lying beneath the dead man's right hand, as though Stoll had dropped it as he fell. I reached down and picked it up. It was dated a year ago, and was an I. O. U. for five thousand dollars—and merely signed with the initial M, and nothing more.

"Which could stand for Milburn or McCoy or a man named Murphy," I muttered, staring at the initial. "All the same, I've got a hunch this is murder—though if it was, then Stoll must have been smothered to death." I was startled by my own words. "Maybe I've got something there!"

I looked around the dressing room. My wardrobe trunk was closed and stood near the body. Not far from it, a chair had been overturned, and a heavy cushion was lying on the floor. I left everything right where it was. My trunk had been open back against the wall when I had left the dressing room and watched the show from the wings. The chair hadn't been overturned either.

AFTER looking at myself in the mirror and not caring much for the pale face that stared back at me, I combed my hair and then went to the door; I stepped out and locked the door behind me. If the murderer expected me to yell for the police right now he was in for a disappointment.

I went up and stepped out onto the stage, just as the boys in the band began to play and our act started. I was jittery, but I tried not to show it. The act went smoothly enough. Johnny Lake, the drummer, sang the chorus of a popular number. Eddie Lang, the guitar player, put down his instrument and did his tap dance routine.

We moved a small, combo—piano, trumpet, trombone, drums and clarinet—out front and gave an imitation of the Dixieland Jazz Band that went over big. We finished up with the full band playing "Tiger Rag" and practically everybody taking a crack at the rides.

We got a big hand and had to take some bows, but all the same I was glad when the act was over. I headed for my dressing room and found James Milburn and Nan standing in front of the locked door. The fat man looked worried, and he had a lot of face for it.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We were waiting for you," Milburn said. "Miss Conway told me about the doll. Sounds strange. Did you learn any more about it?"

"Plenty," I said, taking the key out of my pocket and unlocking the dressing room door. "Come in, and I'll show you."

I stepped into the room, Milburn followed me with Nan close behind him. Nan gasped, but she did not scream as she saw the body.

"It's Stoll!" Milburn muttered. "And he's dead."

"You ought to know/" I told the fat man. "Since you killed him."

"I killed him," snapped Milburn. "What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. You killed him," I repeated. "But if we keep on saying it, it will get a bit monotonous. The way I've figured this out, you've owed Stoll five thousand dollars ever since last year." I

drew the I. O. U. out of my pocket. "I found this beside the body."

"You can't prove I wrote that," Milburn snarled. "It is only signed with an M."

"Strange you should know that without even looking at the paper," I said. "You owed Stoll five thousand dollars—probably borrowed it last year when you weren't working. You told me that there was going to be trouble backstage. Tried to build it up that Stoll and Forrest McCoy were both interested in Nan and there might be trouble over that."

"Why neither one of these men even noticed me," Nan said as she listened.

"Here's another of them little dolls you asked my wife to make for you, Mr. Milburn," Mike Carter said from the doorway. The old stage doorkeeper stood there with a small package in his hand. "She used part of an old black coat of mine to make the dress suit for this one."

"So that's it," I said. "You had Carter's wife make the blond doll that looks like Nan. Then you stuck a pin in the doll and left it on Nan's dressing table. You wanted to frighten her—make her think someone planned to murder her. You were going to build it up so we all would think Wallace Stoll was some sort of a crazy killer. You probably intended to leave clues pointing to him."

"I heard Milburn and Stoll quarreling out here in the corridor," Carter said. "From what they said I got the idea that

the fat man had stolen some money from the acrobat's dressing room and Stoll threatened to tell the manager if Milburn didn't give it back. Then they came in this dressing room and closed the door."

"And then Milburn killed Stoll," I said.

"How did I do that?" Milburn asked.

"You must have knocked him out," I said. "Then you put the cushion over his face, placed the wardrobe trunk on top of it and smothered him to death. Maybe you even sat on top of the trunk." I turned to Carter. "You better phone the police, Carter."

"I did a few minutes ago," the stage doorkeeper said. "I knew that Stoll had been murdered, but I waited."

"Why?" I asked.

"For the same reason you waited, Mr. Lyon," Carter said. "We didn't want the police breaking up the show in the middle of a performance."

There were voices coming from the direction of the stage door and I knew the police had arrived. James Milburn just stood there trembling and I knew he would talk and admit everything. I was right about that—that big tub of lard's nerve broke completely.

I talked Nan out of doing her single and got her to become a featured soloist with the band. I've got an idea that I may also persuade her to become Mrs. Dan Lyon. She says I'm a very convincing talker.