

From Killer to Post

By Rex Whitechurch



Strainer had spotted sinister Old Lady Cooley as the killer of her pretty niece. But the city's dicks wouldn't make a pinch. And it seemed that the only way to get action was to catch her red-handed in a second crime—the murder of Detective Strainer.

THE coroner had performed the post on the little blonde victim of the hit-and-run driver. He'd said for everyone's benefit:

"There's a place on the skull that couldn't possibly have resulted from wheels of the car or jarring on the pavement. I can't understand. I'd say, off hand, it looks like the kid met up with foul play."

My latest employer, the young Marine officer who'd been engaged to marry Clare Altridge, followed me out into the hallway of the city morgue, "Do you know what her aunt said when she was here?" he asked.

I nodded, "Of course. That's one of the first things I found out."

It wasn't right he should be shocked now, again. But there was no way around the issue. "I was going to say," I stalled,

"it's not quite time—er—"

"Go ahead and spill it," Captain Parker Hopfield said. "She gave the coroner a load of background stuff concerning me. She said my father jilted her when she was a young woman, after practically leading her to the altar. She said I was no good. She objected to our marriage, said she'd drive Clare out if she insisted on going ahead with it. And she did drive her out. For three weeks she worked in a sheet music store, playing the piano. She never would give me her address."

"Did the old lady tell the truth?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. My father did jilt her. But he found out she was after his money, The Cooleys never had a dime. Bonita bragged she was going to kick him out as soon as she'd obtained a hold on his fortune. Now old Bonita is trying to make

it appear that she objected to me because I'm not stable. But there's something else, Strainer."

Leading him out to my blue convertible, I got him in and drove him over to his hotel. He had an elaborate apartment.

It seemed strange that Clare Altridge had sought lodging at the run-down Edmond Street Hotel, where she'd lived three weeks. Under a bogus name, she'd worn glasses and dressed simply, going and coming from work in plain print dresses.

Hopfield waved me to a chair; he was badly shaken. His blue eyes reflected the mental anguish he was experiencing at the moment. I sat down, watched him pace the floor. Sweat moistened his face despite that it was a bitter cold day.

"She was coldly and deliberately murdered," he said. "The coroner confirmed my worst suspicions. Bonita Cooley's a scheming old witch. Clare's parents are dead. Her aunt raised her. She had a hard time of it, even then. The old woman was always short of funds.

"I don't know how she lived unless the money came from an insurance policy. She married late in life. The man died rather suddenly, five years ago. Clare was very fond of him. He was a Spanish-American War veteran."

"What about this chauffeur who worked for the old lady so long?" I asked.

"He's driving a taxi now. When Bonita Cooley wants him, she rides in the cab. She said it was a way to help the war manpower shortage. Something funny about that, too."

I was willing to admit that myself. Only this morning the girl had been found in Lover's Lane, south of town. Evidently she'd been walking when struck by a car. She had been dead several hours. The fact that Lover's Lane was far from the

residential district had caused my client's doubt, and he'd come straight to me. We'd gone to the morgue, where he'd again identified the body.

"Clare Altridge was insured for ten thousand dollars," I said. "The amount doubles in case of accidental death. The beneficiary is none other than Bonita Cooley."

The Marine captain stared at me dumbfounded. His eyes darkened. Firm lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. He turned pale even as I gazed at him.

"When did you learn this?" he asked.

"On the phone, from the morgue," I said. "You've hired me to run down the hit-and-run driver. But I'm not looking for a stranger, Captain. I mean a stranger to the girl. She knew the killer; she was riding with him. She wouldn't have been that far out in the country alone, just walking. The weather's extremely bad. The snow's deep, and it's still falling. It was falling last night and the temperature dropped. Nope, I'm hitting this case from the angle of murder, if you must know."

I left him there, went downstairs, and loafed around the lobby. There was no hurry. You couldn't crack this case in a minute. It had been carefully planned. It would take careful work to break it.

A WOMAN came tottering across the tile floor, stopped, leaned on a blackthorn cane and glowered at me through the thick lenses of her nose glasses.

"I saw you at the morgue," she said, "with that good-for-nothing Parker Hopfield. You're a private detective. Well, let me tell you something. You'd better get your money in advance."

"Madame," I said gravely, "I don't need your advice. I know Hopfield. He's a gentleman and a soldier. He has rendered valuable service to his country."

“You don’t know it all, do you?” She sneered. Then she walked away and left me standing there, wondering what had ever possessed her to make a statement like that. In my own mind I was sure she knew more about the murder than she cared to let on. She was doing a swell job of stalling.

By night I’d made a few more discoveries. I returned to Hopfield’s apartment. The monkey-faced chauffeur who’d worked for Bonita Cooley so long, who’d been in the family before her husband died, drove Cab 47. He’d been fond of Clare Altridge, and had often driven her in the family car.

But the man had a police record. He had been picked up several times for speeding and had served a hitch in federal prison for bootlegging. All this was a long time before he’d entered Bonita Cooley’s employ.

I’d caught him watching me furtively. And there was a cop who walked a beat near the hotel who frequently stopped at his cab to talk to him. It was obvious that the cop didn’t like me.

I wondered if the old woman had set her driver to keeping an eye on me. No doubt she’d go that far, having been reckless enough to stop me in the hotel lobby and make a fuss over nothing.

At least to me it was nothing. I was sure she was stalling, to get into conversation with me. I’d turned her away in a manner calculated to disgruntle her. No doubt she was suspicious. If she were the culprit in the case, she was having me shadowed. I’d heard she was going to engage a private detective to investigate her niece’s death.

Hopfield listened, pacing the floor while I unloaded my information. I didn’t have much, but I had the key to Clare Altridge’s hotel room. I meant to go over there at once, to see if anything could be

found to give us a better lead in the case. I walked to the street window, stared down at the swirling snow. I could see the top of the line of cabs in front of the hotel.

“If you take a taxi,” I warned, “be sure it’s not 47. I’m going over to the hotel where Clare lived. Be careful.”

I PAUSED under the marquee. A figure sat hunched over the wheel of 47. The starter’s shrill whistle moved one cab away and 47 closer. He was four cabs back. I didn’t think he could break through the line to follow me. I signaled the starter, who whistled number 44 up for me. I knew I was being watched by the monkey-man, but what could he do about it. The whistle tore through the silent snow again, and my cab rolled away.

“The Edmond Street Hotel,” I said.

The driver clicked the flag. I heard the clack-clack of the meter. Lolling in the tonneau, I analyzed the situation. This was a funny case. Since accepting it I’d hardly taken time to eat. The police had been working on it, too. I wondered what discoveries they’d made. It wasn’t reasonable to believe they’d been standing still. Would they delve into the old woman’s past? I was sure there was enough in her background to reward them, at least in part.

The ten grand insurance was another thing. Old Bonita needed funds. Twenty thousand dollars would be sufficient compensation for one of her type, if she’d murdered Clare Altridge.

I needed only one thing to clinch the case against her. I felt sure I’d get it, sooner or later. What about the sudden death of her husband—the Spanish-American War veteran? He’d been insured, too. Was it possible—I didn’t want to think about that now. If it were worth while I’d come back to it.

The snowfall was heavier now. The

white ribbons scintillated in the orange glow of the street lamps. It was a dull grey haze, like a fog descending on the street. Then we reached the Edmond Street Hotel. My breath curled into frost as I paid the driver and instructed him to come back in thirty minutes. The temperature was steadily dropping.

I clumped up the wooden steps to the lamplit entrance. Maybe I was letting myself in for something. I wondered.

Straight through the cluttered smeary lobby I strolled, without regard to the few loafers who occupied chairs. One man stood at the desk, but he wasn't interested in me. Nobody was paying any attention, and for this I was grateful. The creaking lift carried me to the second floor.

I found Room 227. The key on the tag rattled in the lock. I pictured the little blonde living here, alone. Avoiding companionship, seeking to hide her real identity, because she wished to spare her sweetheart the pain of knowing she'd been cast off because of him. It was a cinch she'd been guided by that intense desire. There was no other motive for the disguise she'd worn.

The windows of the apartment were closed. The room had a musty smell and needed an airing. The wallpaper was cracked, dirty, peeled off in places. The red carpet was threadbare. I rummaged through the drawers of a dressing table. Nothing but flimsy underthings came to light, a few cosmetics, a pair of stockings.

I found several business cards, one bearing a phone number in purple ink. Other specimens of the girl's script turned up. It seemed she'd used the same fountain pen. I made a mental note of the purple ink and estimated the light touch of the pen on paper. The girl's particular touch.

A moment later I discovered an unfinished letter to Captain Hopfield, but it contained nothing of importance to the

investigation. I stuck the letter in my pocket.

Replacing everything as I'd found it in the bureau drawers, I glanced into the dressing-table mirror. I saw in this a small metal phone-box on the wall behind me. It was about shoulder high and near the door.

I crossed to this and scrutinized the wallpaper carefully. Several queer little designs were sketched on the wall, a duck, an apple, a comic face. Then I gasped and bent forward eagerly. I was staring at the number 47, the name of the cab company, and the phone number. Here at last was something I could get my teeth into. I meant to hang on.

A connecting link! Definitely. It couldn't be disputed. At some time or other the girl had called her aunt's chauffeur and been driven by him. 47 in purple ink. I knew Clare Altridge had set the number down. Well, now he'd have some tall explaining to do.

AS I SKEWED around from the phone, the hall door came slowly open. I could see the swinging door in the looking-glass. A man was gingerly stepping across the threshold. Old Bonita, with her glasses gleaming, leaning on her blackthorn, loitered in the hall behind him.

I saw her skeletal finger pointing at me. She wore a heavy black yarn shawl around her shoulders. Powder adhered to her thin face like a coating of streaked flour.

The man's eyes were sharp, beady. There was nothing surprised in his expression. There was nothing surprised in the old woman's expression. It was quite obvious they'd known of my presence in the apartment.

"What're you doing here?" he asked. His voice had a cryptic note.

"Just looking," I said.

"You have no right in there," Bonita

Cooley said.

"Why not?" I stalled.

"This apartment was occupied by my late niece. Her things are still here. The rent's paid in advance for another week. She left it that way. What right do you have to enter the apartment?"

"As much as you have," I bit out savagely. "Who you think you are, the Queen of Sheba?"

"I am the poor child's aunt, and I'm protecting her interests."

"You should've done that in life," I snapped.

Sizing the man up the first time didn't give me anything. I never banked much on first impressions. In the shamus business you just don't. Once I met a guy who looked like a tramp, but he turned out to be the greatest doctor of surgery in the world.

This man before me was short, wide, with an aggressive chin—and a chip on his shoulder. He was what I'd always imagined an old Pinkerton detective looked like. He wore a stout bowler, a plaid suit, a bright red four-in-hand.

The black-clad old lady slid silently into the room. "What've you found?" she asked bitterly. "You can't leave here until you've been searched."

This amazed and amused me. "By whom?" I sneered.

"You come across now," the dick said. "I'm not wasting time with a down-at-heel shamus. If you wanta play rough, I like to play that way. You do what she says, turn your pockets wrongside out."

"Try and make me," I said, coldly impudent. I didn't like him, I didn't like the old woman, and I was ready for anything. But I wasn't as brave as I sounded. That big gorilla was no push over.

"Take him apart, Gabe," the old woman directed icily.

Gabe grinned. He began to shed his coat.

"You want that cigar rammed down your throat?" I sneered. "Maybe you like to play rough, but you don't know the ropes. I've had a gun on you ever since you entered this room. Believe me, pal, I know how to shoot through the pocket. Put your coat back on before you take cold."

He glared at me dubiously. The old woman's eyes flamed through those thick lenses. Her mouth fell open. Bloodless as her face was, there was suddenly a tinge of color. Gabe began to slip his arms back into the sleeves of his plaid coat.

"Get out of my way," I said, now revealing the automatic clasped in my hand. "I have an appointment with the police. I don't think you're going to relish this, Grandmother Bonita," I said.

"I'm not your grandmother," she said, "And if you think you can scare me—"

But she was scared. One look at her would've have told a novice that. I slowly edged around her, grabbed the tagged key out of the door and raised my hat. "You and your gumshoe come around and see me sometime, when I'm at home," I invited cordially. "You're such delightful company. Never a dull moment."

"We'll see who laughs last," Bonita Cooley rasped at me.

I chuckled, eased down the dim-lit corridor. Gabe came to the door and watched me take my departure. His eyes burned a hole in my back.

I dropped in at Central Police, talked to Wilson Peabody of Homicide. That guy could come up with more clues in a single dive than anyone in the department.

Peabody was short and fat, five-by-five. But I didn't have anything against guys five-by-five. But Peabody didn't have anything for me save contempt. He didn't always feel that way toward me; it was only in this case.

“Quit playing for keeps,” he warned. “Keep an open mind. Lay off the old lady. If you don’t, you’ll wake up holding the sack—an empty one. She has too much on the ball, fella. Leave her to the department. We know how to deal with her kind.

“This guy you call Gabe is a shamus imported on four hours’ notice, a good one. Of course it’s a gesture on Bonita Cooley’s part. She wants to fool somebody. It’s because Hopfield’s got you working on the case.

“The only one Gabe Brown’s interested in is you. Maybe he’ll keep you busy long enough to let us break this case without you spoiling everything for us.”

He was rushing from his modernistic office as he spoke. He refused to comment on his plans, didn’t give me an inkling of where he was going in such haste. I was dismissed on the sidewalk and took a cab back to the hotel to see my client. The only thing I’d learned was that homicide regarded the death of Clare Altridge as a definite case of first degree murder.

HOPFIELD was in. I could see the lights burning in his front apartment as I unloaded in the snow before the hotel’s ornate facade. For a moment I loafed under the marquee, trying to spot Bonita Cooley’s monkey-man. Cab 47 wasn’t in the line.

I went up on one of the lifts, got off on the seventh floor. Twice I rang the bell without getting an answer. If Hopfield was in, he was asleep.

I was about to turn away when I heard the radio. It was softly on, a program of music. I turned back, rang the bell again. Still he didn’t come to the door. Suddenly I decided to go in and wait. I twisted the knob. It turned. There was nobody in the sumptuous, spacious room.

I sat down in a jade green chair, dropped my hat on the floor. A strange,

uneasy feeling came over me. I tried to think, to sum up the evidence I’d procured at the Edmond Street Hotel, the purple ink clue, the visit of the old woman and her shamus to the dead girl’s apartment. I sought to make myself believe I’d obtained damning proof of the old battle-ax’s guilt. But nothing clicked. There was something missing. I was gradually sinking into a deep fog.

The door opened slowly; I heard someone enter the living room. He came cautiously from the vestibule, smoking a cigarette. I got up, skewed around. Hopfield smiled at me.

There was something in his smile reassuring to my jaded nerves. “I think I have something,” I said. “The police are working on the case. It won’t be long now till we’ll know. I’ve proof that the chauffeur contacted the girl at the Edmond Street Hotel.”

I explained. He nodded his understanding, seemed nervous. He put on a blue robe, hung his coat in a closet, and offered me a cigarette. I declined. He fixed up a couple of drinks. This I accepted. A slug of rye, the very thing I needed.

Grief had certainly done a lot to that guy. He looked like he’d just emerged from an overdone Turkish bath. He crossed to the window and stared down. Snow swirled against the panes. I could hear the wind rattling the storm shutters at the other windows. It was warm, cozy in the room. I produced the unfinished letter from my pocket, spread it out on my knee. I said:

“She was writing you a letter. I didn’t read it. Maybe there’s something in it, if we study it. Apparently it seems to be just an ordinary missive. I—”

He jerked the letter from my hand. “Damn,” he said. “Where did you get this?”

Startled, I scanned his sweaty face. He

was so nervous he was clammy. I told him I'd found the letter among the things in her apartment.

"You didn't leave anything; you didn't miss anything we might need?" he asked.

"No." I shook my head several times. I paced the floor. I reached down, helped myself to a cigarette from the teakwood chest. I strolled to the bathroom. I peered in. The lamps dazzled on the bright green tile. I heard the crinkle of paper. When I looked back at him, he was stuffing it in his pocket.

"I'm glad you found this, Strainer," he said. "It means nothing to the investigation, but it means a lot to me. I'm nervous. I feel as if the devil had hold of me. Something's closing in on us. I'll have to get out for air, to relieve myself of this awful sense of tension. You come back as soon as you learn anything."

He went quickly to the closet, changed his blue robe for the heavy blue tunic he'd worn. He wanted me to leave, but, he was being polite about it.

I walked to the door, slued around. "You keep an eye open, Captain," I said. "The old lady's hired a shamus to watch me. She figures it's a swell way to keep checked up on our progress. She's no fool, and she hates you. If she thinks you're too much of a threat, she might try to liquidate you."

"I feel so, myself," he admitted. "I'll be careful, Strainer."

I closed the door behind me and uttered a deep sigh.

Downstairs in the cocktail lounge, I suddenly felt an arm tighten around me. It was my old friend, Detective Sergeant Peabody.

"You stay away from the old woman," he said. He laughed.

"What're you talking about?" I demanded, aroused now since I felt he was making light of me.

"You're a great shamus," he said, amused. "You might track an elephant in a deep snow or a bull moose—but there'd have to be snow."

"Will you explain?" I said, nettled. "I don't like to have anyone make fun of me to my face and not do anything about it."

"I have nothing to add to what I've already said." He offered me a cigar. I accepted, thinking hard. It wasn't his nature to kid with a guy. What was behind it?

"Sure, the old woman draws down twenty grand for the girl's murder," he said. "We can't get around it. Already she's having a good time in anticipation. Look, over at that reserved table. She's getting drunker than a fool."

He nodded his head and I stared in the direction he indicated. There sat old Bonita Cooley, her spectacles gleaming, a cocktail glass to her lips. But her face was as bloodless as ever, white with the powder she used. She was alone. If she saw me, she didn't make the fact known.

"I don't get it," I admitted. "I must be dense. Why don't you arrest her, Sergeant? I can hand you a few little items that'll help stick her, if you wish."

Peabody smiled up at me. He looked solid, substantial in his plain blue serge, his pinkish face aglow. He was more of a family doctor type than a hard-boiled homicide man. The soft throb and hammer of music from the white-jacketed orchestra came to me.

"You can't hand me anything, pal, to clinch the case against her," he said flatly.

I stepped back, regarded him quizzically. "Maybe you don't know—"

"I know what you know and more," he rejoined. "Still we haven't the grounds to arrest her." He suddenly turned and left me standing there looking like a fool.

IT WAS eight-thirty and I decided to report to Hopfield. New developments in the case had sent my efforts tumbling into a cocked hat. I was so eager to break the news to the Marine captain that, after ringing the bell, I didn't wait for him to open the door. I barged in, stopped in the vestibule, and kicked off my rubbers.

Something struck my nostrils. Cordite. You don't have to hit me with an ax when I smell cordite. I went scurrying into the living room, with one rubber on and one off. Then I stopped, gasped, and cursed. I was too late. Somebody had already beaten me to Hopfield, only the news they'd dished out to him had been the last he'd ever hear.

He was lying huddled up on the floor, his knees bent, his arms outflung. There was an automatic pistol near his right hand. Blood curled into a little sparkling stream from a bullet hole in his head.

I dropped on my knees beside him, scared, my heart drumming. The room was turned upside down, chairs tipped over, the teakwood chest had been kicked spinning against the wall, one floor lamp was down and still burning against the red pile rug. Papers were scattered everywhere. The drawers of his commode were pulled out, ties, shirts and underwear were arranged in a neat pile beside a straight chair. On the chair was an open suitcase.

A sound in the bathroom disturbed me. I got up, dusted my knees, felt for the gun in my shoulder holster. The sound came again, someone came walking in the door. I gasped as the old woman stepped calmly out, her glasses gleaming ominously. Behind her was her boy stooge, Gabe Brown.

I calculated the distance to the phone. But the presence of an ugly-looking automatic in Gabe's right hand detained me. He thrust it out and stepped forward.

"Go on, shamus," he said, "use the phone. You might as well call the cops as me do it."

"You're pretty cold to be a killer with a fresh job still kicking behind him," I snarled. I moved toward the phone. He jiggled the gun, smiled, showed gold teeth. The old lady stepped around him, came to the phone and took it out of my hand.

"Police Headquarters?" she asked, a second later. "Come at once to Room 707, Astor Hotel. There's been a shooting. This is Bonita Cooley speaking, and I shan't budge until you get here."

Amazed, I glowered at her. I was trying to find words. Gabe pushed me out of the way, placed an arm around the old woman's shoulders.

"You dumb shamus," he said. "If it hadn't been for you, this case would've been busted hours ago."

"Says you," I growled. "Now I suppose you'll try to stall out of this one. Wait till Detective Sergeant Peabody gets here. He just finished telling me downstairs a while ago he couldn't get enough on you to warrant arresting you, but when he sees this, your latest, I guess he'll change his mind."

Gabe pawed me again. This time I swung at him. I caught him a short one behind the right ear and he spun away from me. He struck the wall, cascaded its full length, trying to stand up. He finally went down. I grabbed my pistol, swung it so it covered them, and backed off toward the bed. I was fed up with this penny-ante stuff.

"Make a move," I said to Gabe, "and I'll blast you full of holes, fella."

"Oh, you mustn't," the old woman hissed. To me her hissing was like that of a coiled rattler. "You don't understand. You—"

"I simply understand I'm playing with killers," I rapped. "I'm going to use killer

methods. Kindly stay as you are till the law gets here. And you, Mr. Brown, drop that automatic." He let the gun slide from his hand.

Just then rushing footfalls came from the corridor. Sergeant Wilson Peabody thrust his short solid frame through the vestibule. His face was pink, impassive. Behind him was a man I judged to be the house detective.

"Start talking," he said to Gabe, who was pawing his face, on the floor with his back to the wall.

"Oke," Gabe said, "We came up here just as the shot was fired that killed Hopfield. I had to horn in. Hopfield is the culprit in the hit-and-run case. He was using this monkey here to destroy evidence, figuring he'd fetch it in and he could get rid of it. This afternoon we caught Rube Strainer, a nice, quiet-spoken little shamus, going through the girl's room over at the Edmond Street Hotel.

"One man knew who killed Clare Altridge and told Mrs. Cooley, That man was devoted to the girl."

"Yeah," I sneered, "talk's cheap. How About some substantiation?"

"Shut up," Peabody rasped. "Go on, Gabe."

"You want the reason Hopfield killed her? Sure, I'll give it to you. She wouldn't tell him where she was living, because she wasn't going to marry him, She'd done a little checking on her own and found out what her aunt told her about the man was true. He was a drinker and unstable. He was like his father who jilted her aunt practically at the church.

"He hired a drive-it-yourself. There's proof of that in his pocket, a ticket dated the very day the girl was slain.

Furthermore, this chump turned a letter over to him found in the girl's room. She hadn't finished writing it. In the missive she said she'd changed her mind. That's all, but it's enough when you couple it all together."

He got up, dusted his knees and waddled over to the bathroom door. "Come here, Sergeant Peabody," he said.

I almost beat Peabody to the door. Lying on the green tile, shot in the chest, his shirt covered with blood, was old lady Cooley's chauffeur.

"There's the little fellow that stopped Hopfield's clock. They shot it out. He came up here to kill Hopfield to square accounts for Clare Altridge." He paused, then added, smiling at me, "I found the drive-it-yourself when he rented the car; found blood on the wheels and the bumper, and blood on the front cushion. Hopfield's the guy that rented the car under a bogus name, but the dealer identified him from a picture I took over there."

Well, can you beat that? You know what Barnum said! But wait a minute. I'd known about the rented car angle, that's what took me to Hopfield's apartment when I found his body. It was the new development I'd learned at police headquarters.

But that guy, Gabe Brown, was a real shamus, no fooling. Old Bonita had been playing for keeps. She'd got the best available. Gabe had learned something else, too. Funny how this turned out.

My client wasn't a Marine captain. He was a four-flusher, an impostor. He'd been wearing the uniform to impress the girl he knew he was going to lose.

Well, Barnum, I salute thee!