

The Twisted Bullet

A Balbane Story

by Lewen Hewitt

“AND now,” the medium said, “if I may have the doors locked and the lights turned out, perhaps we shall have further manifestations.”

“You mean you want absolute darkness?” The worry of the host showed itself in his voice.

“If you please. The phenomena of materialization is practically impossible with even a ray of light.” The medium walked to the curtained windows and made certain that all the shades had been drawn tight.

Mr. Trautman nodded an uneasy agreement. “Very well. I’m familiar with the lay of the room, so I’ll turn off the switch and find my place again.” Deliberately he locked the folding doors leading from the library to the hall and the smaller door opening upon the veranda. For a moment he hesitated before snapping off the electric current.

“Anybody object to this darkness?”

“Not a bit!” It was a whole-hearted chorus from the seven persons, other than the medium and the host, about the table. Trautman caught the glint of a smile on the face of Balbane. In fact, with the possible exception of the medium and himself, there was no visible tension nor strain. The seemingly miraculous slate-writing and the reading from sealed envelopes had been accepted as merely

clever tricks.

“How about you, Jim? Will your blood pressure stand this spirit stuff?”

“Bring on your ghosts!” Across the table Jim Hargrove, red-faced, gray-haired, girthy from twenty years of good living, roared his challenge.

“Any other directions, Mr. Finley?”

Once more the medium took charge. “All ready. Breathe in unison. So! Remember, all of us keep our hands on the table, little finger to neighbor’s little finger, and remain absolutely quiet. I am tied to the chair, as you see, with Mr. Trautman on one side of me and Miss English on the other, so that I am powerless to act. But no matter what happens, we must all remain still, else I cannot answer for the consequences.”

The switch clicked. The room, which had been dressed with the soft white glow of the overhead bowls, thickened into utter blackness. In the chair beside him Trautman could feel the uneasy muscular spasms of the medium, whose hands twitched and trembled. Except for the breathing of the nine people about the table, there was no sound.

Trautman devoutly wished the whole nonsense were at an end. All this talk about spirits was a joke, of course, and yet the medium surrounded it with so much ridiculous solemnity that the “joke” seemed a bit thin. Hargrove was taking it

well enough, but it was hardly the sort of entertainment to which to invite a man from whom one had been long estranged. Trautman was glad that he had secured Balbane, the great magician, to sit in the circle.

Still, even his presence failed wholly to reassure the host. He felt vaguely distressed; he could not define the premonition; he seemed to himself like some dumb animal that restlessly foresees the coming of a storm.

The medium groaned. A convulsion shook his body.

“Oh!”

Trautman identified the gasp as coming from his wife at the end of the table. There was no doubt as to the cause.

For in the very center of the table a glow of red light appeared, that gradually assumed the shape of a fiery ball. Slowly it rose through the air, seemed to linger a moment over the head of Hargrove, and then faded into the pall of blackness.

“We shall show you”—the voice came frankly from the medium, but it was not his own; instead, it was a choked, strained utterance that might well belong to the spirits it represented—“we shall show you that our power extends to your world as well as our own. At our will the substances of your world may be dissolved and restored.”

Trautman heard Hargrove expel his breath in a tremendous “huh!” A scent was filling the air, elusive yet penetrating. It was the odor of dewy violets.

From the middle of the table came a rustling and the faint impacts of soft bodies falling upon the heavy mahogany.

“Lights!” commanded the medium. “Lights!” It was almost a scream.

Jerking violently backward, Trautman reached the switch. The room flooded white.

Pale and groaning sat the medium, fast in his bonds, hands still stretched before him. Upon the center of the table lay a great heap of purple violets.

“Oh, Uncle Jim!” Miss English cried delightedly. “Uncle Jim! Isn’t it wonderful?”

Hargrove chuckled. “If the séance doesn’t get any worse than this, my blood pressure will stand it. What do you say, Doctor Van Ness?”

The young physician nodded. “Very pleasant, indeed, but I hope the materialization doesn’t end here. How about it, Mr. Bane?”

Answering his assumed name without the flicker of an eyelash, the magician agreed readily. “Yes, I should like to see something a little more solid, a little less ethereal, than violets materialized. Do you think you can manage it, Mr. Finley?”

Still breathing heavily, the medium shook his head. “I—I cannot predict. I do not know what the spirits will. But we may try once more.”

Trautman brought his palm down hard on the table. “I’m satisfied,” he urged. “We’ve come out of these—phenomena very well. We’ve witnessed some wonderful manifestations, and Mr. Finley here is exhausted. I move we adjourn.”

But his hope that the other seekers of the uncanny might follow his lead was doomed to failure. From Jim Hargrove to Mrs. Trautman herself, there rose a chorus of protest.

“It’s just getting interesting,” grumbled Weed. “Besides, I never before saw Mr. Hargrove surrounded by this kind of spirits. I want to see how he acts.”

Hargrove chuckled. The dark-haired youngster, introduced as Chandler, also put in a word. “We’ve barely started; let’s have more while the spirits are good-natured.”

"I promise nothing," the medium said gravely. "But if you like we can try again."

"And this time," Balbane interrupted, "strive for a more convincing test; something more substantial, please, than violets."

Trautman wavered. The urge in his mind against continuing the séance had risen with each passing second; yet he could not help feeling that his uneasiness was without sound basis. What *could* happen?

Here was Finley, a young man of the neighborhood, who, in the modern craze for ouija boards and planchettes, had seemingly developed even more wonderful powers. To the dinner that marked the reconciliation of Jim Hargrove and Trautman, the latter had invited Finley, "to show his ghosts," and then, as an afterthought, had prevailed upon the great Balbane to attend. He had warned the magician that in case of fraud there was to be no melodramatic exposure; later in the evening, if he liked, he might discuss the trickery with Jim Hargrove and Mrs. Trautman and himself. It was simply a diversion from the ordinary dinner party. Nothing could happen. He had been unduly fearful.

"All right, then, Finley; start your second act."

Exerting his will power, Trautman put the dread from him; and, with the circle once more in place, turned out the lights.

Again the sitters breathed in rhythm, while the medium jerked and struggled convulsively. Abruptly Hargrove gasped, "What's that?"

"Something—something touched my forehead," whispered Weed.

It was all a fake, of course; it must be a fake. Yet Trautman felt the sweat starting on his face. He wanted to turn on the lights.

His hair—had it risen upon his head? Perhaps it had. At any rate, a light touch had swept across it, forward and back, first ruffling and then smoothing.

Over in the corner the phonograph, hitherto silent, scratched faintly and of its own accord began playing a solemn hymn.

The ball of fire again appeared. Now it was bobbing about the room in the most incomprehensible manner.

The choked voice spoke. "We shall give you one more demonstration of our powers."

The ball of fire floated upward, till it seemed to come in contact with the ceiling. As the lifted eyes watched, it disappeared.

Stabbed by a venomous tongue of red flame, the blackness was cut as by a knife thrust. An explosion stunned and shattered. Then while his ears were still ringing, Trautman heard the clatter of metal on wood. Something had dropped on the table.

The two men were screaming. The whole atmosphere pulsated with the stir of men held in leash by the darkness. A pungent odor caught at Trautman's nostrils. A voice he scarcely recognized as his own called for lights.

As his hand fumbled for the switch, other and quicker fingers snapped it before his own could make the connection. It was Balbane who had forestalled him.

"Good heavens!" The words burst unbidden from Trautman's throat.

Eyes staring, but still bound to his chair, the medium pointed across the table with a hand that jerked in jagged, tremulous gashes.

"Look!" he cried hoarsely. "Look!"

In the very middle of the table, with a tiny wisp of smoke curling from its barrel, lay a squat revolver. On a line with its pointing barrel, leaning back in his chair, lips parted, chin sunken on chest, huddled

Hargrove. A lock of his gray hair straggled over a blue-rimmed bullet hole in his forehead.

II.

With the flare-up of light, the screaming stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Only the medium persisted in a clamorous monologue.

"I didn't do it, Mr. Trautman! That wasn't part of it! Mr. Trautman, I swear I didn't know anything about this! I—"

"Be quiet!" ordered Trautman. "Doctor Van Ness, will you—"

But already the physician had reached Hargrove's side. He gave a quick glance at the wound, shook his head, and then bent over the heart.

"Mr. Hargrove is dead," he announced. "He was killed instantly." With professional skill, he wiped away the dark-red stain with a handkerchief.

"I tell you, I didn't do it!" The medium had found tongue once more. "There was no reason for me to do it! I never saw him before! I—I didn't even materialize the revolver! I don't know where it came from!"

"Don't you think, Mr. Trautman," suggested Van Ness, straightening after his final examination, "that we had better send for the police?"

The dread in Trautman's mind had passed. For that matter there was no longer anything to fear, because the worst had happened. His mind had apparently grown crystal clear. With photographic precision he observed the others in the room, as they stood or sat with eyes fixed upon the dead man. Weed's left hand was clapped over his mouth; he seemed not quite prepared to admit the truth of what he saw. Mrs. Trautman, breathing heavily, clutched the back of her chair. Arms out-stretched toward her uncle, Miss English stood

statuelike, as though imploring him to return to life. Of them all, only Balbane maintained his self-possession.

But though Trautman's mind was clear, yet it was the clarity of despair. The thing had happened. It was black murder. Nothing remained save to accept the doctor's advice, call in the police, and submit to a common arrest and inquiry. And what questions might not be asked.

He turned helpless eyes toward Balbane. The magician had slipped a ring from a finger of his right hand, and, without glancing at the maneuver, placed it on the left third finger. He closed the hand; he opened it slowly. To Trautman's surprise, the ring was gone. It was neither on the finger nor concealed between the fingers, nor was it anywhere on the front or the back of the hand. Even in absent-minded practice Balbane was still the master.

"One minute, Doctor Van Ness." There was new determination in Trautman's voice as he turned and beckoned to the magician.

"Mr. Balbane!" They were in a far corner of the room, but Trautman whispered the words. "I—I can't have everyone here—my wife—examined for this terrible thing. There are—reasons. I am trespassing upon our acquaintance, I know, but I am going to ask you to try to find the man—the person who fired that shot."

Again the cynical smile flitted across the magician's face. "You're aware, Mr. Trautman, that I'm not a detective; I'm simply a performer, a sleight-of-hand expert, with no claim to mysterious powers. There may even be objections to allowing me to take charge of this—inquiry."

"There will be none, Mr. Balbane; I'll answer for that." Trautman was pleading feverishly. "If you'll only try, I'll make it

worth—”

The magician regarded him shrewdly.

“I’ll take you at your word, Mr. Trautman; we won’t discuss rewards. Yes, I’ll try.” He pointed a long, muscular finger at the table. “As host and house owner, you may legally permit me to examine that revolver while you are explaining to the others.”

“Try! Try! Only try!” whispered Trautman.

The flesh that had been James Hargrove lumped in the arm chair. The mouth was open in a ghastly, scornful smile; from the forehead, through the handkerchief bandage, two thin, scarlet threads angled toward the cheeks. The hands slipped from the table; the head had drooped farther on the chest. But aside from these changes, the body sat as the living man had sat. It seemed to be waiting—waiting for the séance to go on or to end definitely.

Revolver in hand, Balbane seated himself at the desk. Trautman cleared his throat.

“I have a proposal to make; a proposal that concerns—all of us.”

Miss English caught herself in the middle of a hysterical sob.

“To-night I took the liberty of inviting to this séance a professional magician, Mr. Balbane. He is sitting there at the desk.”

Finley stared at the figure in the corner; then, with sudden energy, began to rip at the ropes that tied him. “I don’t want anything to do with him. I—”

“You are not being consulted,” interrupted Trautman. “The point is this: Mr. Balbane has offered to spare us the humiliation of being examined by the police. He says he will undertake to discover which one of us fired the shot.”

“Mr. Trautman! *Mr. Trautman!* I object.” It was the medium again, no longer the occultist, but very human now

and more than a little frightened. “I didn’t know you had Balbane here. If I’d known it was Balbane, I wouldn’t have come. He’s down on mediums. He’ll say I did it, Mr. Trautman.” Finley was shaking the arm of his host. “I didn’t do it—it was all faking—I was just faking—I’ll tell you how I did every trick to-night. But I don’t know anything about the revolver—I never saw the revolver before—I—”

With a firmness not noticeably gentle, Trautman pushed the self-confessed cheat into his chair.

“You will do well to hold your tongue, Finley. No one has accused you of anything—yet.” He turned to the others. “Have any of you objections to Balbane’s taking charge? Or would you prefer that I notify the police at once?”

Plainly perplexed, Weed answered first. “I don’t know anything about Balbane, but I’m not partial to thickheaded policemen. I’ll tell you frankly that my position is a peculiar one. Tonight is the first time I’ve seen Jim—Mr. Hargrove—for fifteen years. We had a business quarrel in Chicago long ago, and we parted bad friends. I did not know he was to be present when I accepted Mr. Trautman’s invitation. Now—”

Trautman broke in quickly. “Your case is not unique, Weed. I am nearly in the same boat myself. Some dozen years ago Mr. Hargrove and I had a—difficulty, and to-night I was making a first attempt to restore the old friendship.” He looked hastily at the others. “Aside from us two, there may be others here who—Miss English, it’s ridiculous to suspect you, of course, but—aren’t you the chief beneficiary under your uncle’s will?”

“Yes, he left everything to me.” The voice was so low that it barely carried across the room.

Trautman bit his lips. He wished he might recall the words. If the niece were

open to suspicion, what about Mrs. Trautman? The quarrel of a dozen years before had been, not about money, but about the woman they had both wanted to marry, and Trautman had won. Was it possible that since then Hargrove had threatened her, or made advances to her? He put the sickening thought from him.

"All of us are subject to suspicion, except perhaps this gentleman here, Mr.—"

"Chandler," prompted the man addressed.

"You came with Mr. Hargrove? A friend of his, I take it."

Chandler stared frankly back at his questioner. "No, I can't say I am a friend of Mr. Hargrove. I know—knew—him. I came into the house with him, and he introduced me. I told him I hadn't met you."

"Then what are you doing here? I didn't invite you."

Chandler flung back his head. "I came here to see a spiritualistic séance. I've seen it. Under the circumstances, I fail to understand what else you can do than allow me to stay through to the end. I'll meet any suspicions directed at me."

Trautman frowned. "I'm afraid, young man, you must stay." He threw a quick glance toward Balbane, who was standing beside the desk. "There are no objections to my proposal, Mr. Balbane; we are agreed that you may try your powers."

Without speaking, the magician approached and laid the revolver in the middle of the table. Standing beside the dead man, he faced the little group. A quick intake of breath from the medium was the only sound.

It was not the everyday, unobtrusive "Mr. Bane" who stood before them; rather, it was Balbane, Man of Mystery. Like one who covers himself with a cloak, he had donned his stage presence: calm and superior, gifted with unfathomable depths

of knowledge. It was the presence which had brought the conjurer to the peak of his profession. When Balbane did so simple a trick as a card manipulation, you were never sure whether it had been achieved by his gifted fingers, or whether he had not summoned some friendly, familiar spirit to do his bidding.

"We shall have another séance," he said quietly.

"Mr. Balbane, I—I can't stand it!" It was Miss English pleading. "My nerves are all on edge. Not now, Mr. Balbane; not with *that*—" She pointed at Hargrove's body.

But there was persuasiveness in his voice that could not be brooked. "You may sit beside Mrs. Trautman, Miss English. No one shall touch you. There will be nothing to make you afraid. As for you—" He turned to the medium, who cowered in his chair.

"I didn't do it, Mr. Balbane. I tell you—"

The magician's voice was as hard and sharp as a steel blade. "Whatever you have or have not done, Mr. Finley, this time you will remain perfectly quiet. I know all about your fake rope-tie. I do not want you moving about the room again, patting people on the head and starting up the phonograph. And I do not want to see that phosphorescent balloon of yours, either. Do you understand?" He glared at the unfortunate medium.

"Y-yes, sir."

"Very well. Seat yourself, ladies and gentlemen."

Hesitatingly they found chairs about the table, shrinking away from the huddled figure of Hargrove.

With his long, sinewy fingers, the magician twirled the revolver on the table till the barrel pointed directly toward the dead man. "Here," he began, speaking slowly and distinctly, "is the gun that was

fired. It is still loaded.” He glanced at the cartridge rim in the exposed chambers. “Now, I ask your closest attention to what I say. We shall all place our hands on the table again—thus. Very good. But before the lights are turned out, let me tell you something. Already I know who committed this crime. I know absolutely. I *know*.”

The medium gasped.

“How I know is my own affair. It is enough to tell you that I do know.”

There was an unconscious stiffening of the sitters about the table. To Trautman it seemed that the blood left his hands, revealing them a telltale white. An instinctive fear of the supernatural rose in him. Compared to the unknown powers of Balbane, Finley was no more than a blundering trickster. He began to wish he had called in the police, rather than face this new and trying ordeal.

“If I chose,” Balbane’s voice went on accusingly, “I could tell you at once who the guilty person is—but you would not believe me. I shall leave the proof to those better able to give it than I.” He paused, glancing upward for a brief instant, and then extended a rigid pointing finger at the revolver. “You observe that it is aimed toward the man it killed. Mr. Trautman will turn out the lights. When they flare on again, you will see that revolver aimed, not toward the dead man, but toward—his murderer.”

The sitters stole quick, frightened glances at the drawn faces about them.

“Quiet! Breathe together, as before! Good! And now, Mr. Trautman, the lights!”

They were breathing in unison. Yet as Trautman stumbled to his place in the darkness, he wondered that he could breathe at all. It was the tension of waiting that hammered at his nerves. Suppose Balbane made a mistake! Suppose, by

some freak of the revolver, instead of indicating the guilty man or woman, it should be discovered pointing at himself, Trautman! His fingers itched to reach out and see; to grasp it, and if necessary whirl it in another direction—whirl it till it pointed at some one else—anybody else.

Involuntarily his right hand moved noiselessly toward the center of the table.

Spat!

It was not an explosion; rather, it was the crackle of a squib. As before, a streamer of fire clove the darkness; as before, metal clattered against wood.

“Sit still!” Balbane gave the command, but strangely enough it came from directly behind Trautman. “Don’t move your hands!”

The full light of the electrics once more bathed the room. Head thrown back triumphantly, Balbane stood with fingers still clasping the switch.

On the table lay the revolver. It pointed directly toward the chair which the magician had occupied.

III.

“Keep your hands still—absolutely still, *everybody!*”

No longer was it Balbane the inscrutable wizard directing a feat of magic; a new Balbane was revealing himself. As easily as he had donned his stage air, he doffed it. Instead of an actor, he seemed a great, healthy, self-confident boy. In his voice rang an unmistakable elation that approached gayety.

“Mr. Trautman, I am now ready to point out the criminal.”

“I didn’t do it,” Finley was whimpering again. “I didn’t do it, Mr. Balbane. Besides, it—it’s pointing to where you sat. You said yourself—”

Without paying the least heed to the medium, the magician swept his keen

glance from one face to another.

“Do you all see? Do you understand what I meant when I said I knew the guilty person and then placed the loaded revolver on the table? Simply this, my friends: I had every reason to suppose that anyone desperate enough to murder a man like Mr. Hargrove would not balk at putting me out of the way. He might even have succeeded in accomplishing this second murder, except for the fact that I had twisted the bullet and wad from the next cartridge before placing the gun on the table.”

Weed spoke up. “What does that prove, Mr. Magician? It may be all true enough, but how does that bring us out of the woods? Let’s admit, for the sake of argument, that the guilty person shot at you as well as at Mr. Hargrove. You were the one obstacle between him and freedom from suspicion. But how does this identify him?”

Smilingly Balbane opened his hands, as though to suggest that he had nothing concealed. “You’re altogether right. So far I have proved nothing. But granted I find the hand that fired this second shot, the shot aimed at me—”

“Prove it!” cried Weed. “Prove it, and I’ll admit that you have the best circumstantial evidence in the world. The hand that pulled the trigger the second time was the hand that pulled the trigger the first time.”

From the other sitters about the table a came a murmur of assent.

Balbane fixed his eyes on the weapon. “It is the simplest thing in the world, ladies and gentlemen. I think I am safe in assuming that at the beginning of the evening your hands were clean. It occurred to me to moisten the butt of that revolver in red ink while I had it at the desk yonder. Now, turn—”

White faced and trembling Doctor Van

Ness bolted to his feet. “You’re nothing but a faker! It’s a trick. I—”

“Sit down!” thundered Balbane. “Mr. Trautman and Mr. Weed, stand at the doors. Mr. Chandler and you” —he pointed at the medium—“watch those windows. Now, Doctor Van Ness, be kind enough to show me the palms of your two hands. Don’t wait too long, doctor, because my handcuff tricks keep my muscles in excellent shape; I am quite able to force you, should such an unpleasant necessity arise.”

“Paul!” The cry came from Miss English and was a curious mixture of appeal and concern. “Paul, show him your hands are—clean.”

“I refuse to be ordered about in this way. I—”

Darting from his post at the door, Weed seized the physician’s right hand at the wrist, and by a sudden wrench lifted the palm from the table till the forearm stood parallel with the body.

On each finger, on the ball of the thumb, on the palm itself, were accusing stains of red.

“Paul!”

“I refuse to be subjected to this foolery of a cheap theatrical trickster!” exclaimed Doctor Van Ness. “This is an outrage. What motive could I possibly have for murdering Mr. Hargrove?”

“Motive! You want a motive named? Perhaps Doctor Van Ness fired the second shot to protect the person who fired the first. A revolver in a hip pocket is bulky. On the contrary, who would suspect the folds of a woman’s skirt? It’s simple enough to get a hand free at a séance. Anyone of us can do it with a little twitching and the substitution of the forefinger of one hand for the little finger of another. You had something to gain, Miss English, by your uncle’s death.”

“Paul!” There was unmistakable

innocence, not only in her voice, but in the facial expression of the poor girl. "Paul!" She was on her feet now, leaning across the table toward Doctor Van Ness. "You—you—"

She wavered and dropped fainting into the arms of Mrs. Trautman.

Balbane was staring at the physician. "Let us have the rest of the story, doctor. Why is Miss English so interested in you? It isn't possible that you two expect to marry; it isn't possible that you were a bit tired of waiting for her uncle to die, that she might inherit his fortune; it isn't possible that—"

"Confound you, yes!" shouted the man with the red-blotched hand angrily. "You've got me. And now leave her out of it. We're engaged. I wasn't making enough to marry. But I did it all myself. She never even suspected. If she had—" He stood up abruptly, knocking over his chair. "Never mind; I'm the one you're after. I took a chance and lost. Well, bring on your police, but leave her out of it." He looked wearily at the fainting girl whom Mrs. Trautman was helping from the room, and faced away from his guards.

"Mr. Trautman," it was Chandler speaking, "I owe you an apology, sir. I am a reporter from the *Dawn*, and after trying a good many times to see this man Finley at his tricks, I was forced to butt into your party. I'll handle this affair as decently as I can in my paper. And, Mr. Balbane, if ever you want a press agent, I—I'd like mighty well to have a chance at the job."

The magician smiled. "What's happened to-night, I'm afraid, is more in your line than it is in mine. But there is

one favor you can do me. While we telephone to the station, perhaps you will be kind enough to pick up the first policeman you see and bring him here. And now, Mr. Trautman," the magician shuddered his disgust, "can't we get away from this nastiness?"

Leaving Weed and the medium with the prisoner, Trautman led the way to his den.

"If you please, a cigarette," begged Balbane. His hand was not quite steady as he touched its tip with the match. "I'm cool enough while the performance is going on, but afterward—" Dropping his hand, he laughed to himself.

"Mr. Balbane," Trautman said gratefully, "this has all worked out wonderfully well. I'm not going to attempt now to tell you how much I'm indebted to your skill. But I do want to ask you a question. In case Van Ness had not fired that second shot, what would you have done?"

For the first time since the murder the magician laughed easily.

"Mr. Trautman, ever since I reached the age of fifteen I've been averaging at least one magical performance a day the year round. And during each performance I've had to meet some emergency that wasn't foreseen, that couldn't have been foreseen. But I've never been stumped yet." The magician blew a cloud of smoke which curled to the ceiling lazily. "There are tricks in every trade, Mr. Trautman, but mine is a trade of tricks."

From the hall sounded the sharp alarm of the door-bell. It was the police.