



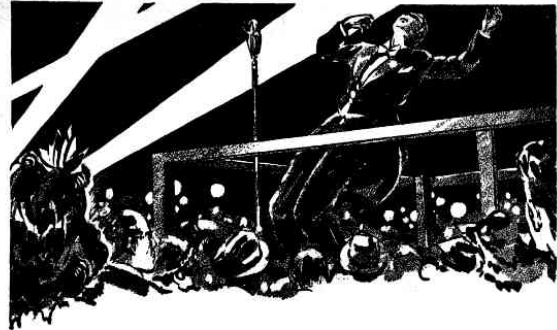
Diana Bruce screamed. "He's been shot!"

*This murder smelled of peppermint, and it was a sweet trail to a sour mystery*

**B**UT, Steve," said Diana Bruce, making with the peaches-and-cream voice, "we're engaged."

"Sure," I said, "and already you're acting as if we were married. The point is that you're a movie star and I'm just a publicity agent. So it would be much better if you entered the theater with Van Edwards. He's your co-star in *Lovers Adrift*, and the public would eat it up."

Diana and I were sitting in her long hunk of chauffeur-driven car, which was traveling rapidly towards the Star Theater, where the world premiere of *Lovers Adrift* was to be held. Diana looked like a blonde Hedy Lamarr, and she wore enough expensive ice



## *Mystery of the* **CRUSHED PEPPERMINTS**

By LEONARD RAPHAEL

**This murder smelled of peppermint, and it was a sweet trail to a sour mystery**

about her throat to give her double pneumonia. In fact, she looked almost as good as I did.

The car finally stopped, and Diana dragged me out. The spotlights that accompany every major Hollywood preview were lancing the evening sky in bright columns. The eager movie fans pressed against the ropes that kept them back from the path that led to the theater entrance.

Just by the entrance, a slick-haired announcer was interviewing all the celebrities over the public address system.

"Oh, that's Diana Bruce," said one excited voice loudly.

"Who's that guy with her?" asked another voice.

"Maybe it's Gene Autry."

I smiled modestly.

"Or his horse," said a wise guy.

I kept the smile on my kisser as if I hadn't heard. I didn't want to embarrass Diana. And at that moment, Van Edwards, the new matinee idol who had been a truck driver named Edwarski until a year ago, came up towards the microphone. Two women fainted as he passed them.

Louella Parsons jotted this item down in her little notebook. That fainting gag was costing my studio, Perfection Pictures, fifty bucks a head, but it was worth every cent.

“Hello, my dear friends,” Van Edwards said.

From the applause that followed this statement, you would have thought he had just delivered the Gettysburg Address. Edwards seemed a little nervous. He raised his hands for silence, and opened his mouth to say something—but nothing came out.

He stood there, a surprised expression on his face, his lips twitching; and as I saw the blackish hole in his shirt-front spout blood, I jumped forward and grabbed him!

“Is there a doctor present?” yelled the slick-haired announcer.

I ignored him as I deposited the late Mr. Edwards on the sidewalk. I spotted Sergeant Hansen, head of the police detail which kept the public from getting too close to the movie stars.

“Hansen,” I rasped into the microphone, “this is in your department.”

Sergeant Hansen came tearing up to the microphone as fast as that much beef could.

“Murder,” I told him briefly.

“Now, listen,” Hansen roared into the microphone with his usual lack of brains, “there’s been a murder! Nobody leaves this place until I give the word.”

Since there were a couple of thousand people packed around the theater, and only about thirty cops, this matter presented some difficulties. However, I was too busy comforting Diana Bruce to worry about that.

A couple of women in the crowd began to scream, a cop shoved a husky man too hard, and the free-for-all was going full blast inside of a minute more. Hansen dispatched a man to phone for reinforcements, and stood angrily by the body, glaring at the milling throng.

“Come on, Diana,” I said, “we’re getting out of this. There’ll be no preview tonight.”

“Now, wait a minute,” said Hansen, “how do I know you didn’t knock off Van Edwards? You were here when the murder took place.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and so were you.”

**B**Y now the police had what was left of the crowd under control. But the crowd had melted down to less than a hundred people, and it was a safe bet that a man smart enough to use a gun with a silencer would be smart enough to have escaped.

I got Diana back into the car, and told the chauffeur to take her home. Then I went back to brave the beefy Hansen. But he no longer desired my company.

“You go on home,” said Hansen. “Ever since the Gilteen case, you’ve been walking around like William Powell.”

“Okay,” I said, “but Van Edwards was under contract to Perfection Pictures, and that gives me a right to demand that you solve this case in a hurry.”

“All right, you’ve demanded it,” said Hansen. “Now go chase a blonde.”

Then he began to curse everybody in the vicinity in language that even a cop should be arrested for using. Being a bright boy for my age, I hurriedly took a taxi out to Diana Bruce’s junior palace.

“Miss Bruce in?” I asked the butler.

He seemed puzzled.

“No sir. I thought she was still with you. But there is this message for you, sir.”

I tore open the envelope he handed me. Inside was a slip of paper with a roughly penciled message.

“Miss Bruce is on an enforced vacation. If you take a vacation from snooping, she will be allowed to return in a short time. If not, she will be returned to you.”

The writer of the note had a very

gruesome sense of humor.

“Who delivered this?” I asked.

“I don’t know, sir. I found it in the letter box a few moments ago.”

My beautiful brain swung into high gear. If I told the police about this, the kidnaper would undoubtedly consider that snooping. Diana’s disappearance had to be kept quiet.

“Listen,” I said to the butler, “if anyone wants to know, Miss Bruce is confined to her room under doctor’s orders.”

“I understand, sir.”

The phone rang. It turned out to be Hansen, who had concluded that I had taken his advice about chasing that blonde.

“Somebody here who claims he’s Diana Bruce’s chauffeur,” rasped Hansen’s voice. Says his car has been stolen. What about it?”

“Just a gag I thought up,” I lied. “Tell the chauffeur to come on home and forget it.”

“Okay,” said Hansen, and added as if it hurt him to do so, “Would you like to give me a hand with this case?”

“Sorry,” I said, “but I’m not touching it. And you might let it get around that I refuse to cooperate with you.”

“Am I old enough to know why?” he asked.

“You may be in about two weeks,” I told him. “But for now, all you’ll get from me is silence.”

I hung up.

I kicked myself mentally in the pants for not having taken a closer look at the chauffeur in the car Diana entered. That murderer had planned everything in advance. Then I began to do my brilliant best to think of a reason for killing Van Edwards. Women had loved Edwards. Which was why most men had hated him. Despite a few phony studio romances with various female stars, I knew that Edwards had only one real flame. She was Brenda Hayworth, a Beverly Hills

society dame whose blood was so blue that some people claimed that ink came out when she cut herself.

SO I put on a clean handkerchief, and went to the Hayworth residence. I stood in the darkened doorway, and shoved a Perfection Pictures pass badge at the butler who answered the door.

“Sergeant Hansen,” I barked, thrusting him aside officiously, and keeping my hat on as I entered.

Since that was the way all cops acted in the movies, the butler was convinced.

“I ... uh ...” he stammered.

I frowned at him with my good eyebrow.

“Miss Hayworth, is she here,” I snapped.

He looked too frightened to answer. Brenda Hayworth saved him the trouble by floating into the room herself.

“Miss Hayworth,” I said, “I’m from the police department, and I’m here about the Van Edwards murder.”

“Van . . . dead?”

She gave a little moan, and flopped onto a convenient couch. I wanted to get her to talk before she recovered enough from her surprise to start cooking up any lies.

Before I had a chance to do anything, in stalked her old man, J. J. Hayworth. He had more green stuff than a Texas ranch, so I had to be careful to behave.

“Young man, what do you mean by bursting into my house this way?”

“I’m an officer of the law,” I said.

“And where is your search warrant?” he asked, his gray eyes boring coldly into mine.

I fumbled weakly in my pocket. The gesture was futile.

“And your badge?” he demanded.

I didn’t know whether to feel relieved or not when Sergeant Hansen came in at that

moment. He had a young guy with him. Very young. When the stranger saw Brenda Hayworth staring frightenedly at me, he was young and dumb enough to try to take a poke at me.

A few seconds later, while they were using smelling salts on both Brenda and the young guy, I ducked out. I had a feeling I was going to be pretty unpopular in the next few minutes.

I walked along, worrying about my Diana Bruce, the young actress who had made the men of America thank God for the invention of the sweater. And until I had come along, she had been the sort of dame who might try to have paint arrested for being fresh.

**I** WAS concentrating so much on her, that I didn't notice the black car which had come rolling slowly up the street. But I snapped out of it in a hurry and broke into a frantic run as the rear door of the car swung open. I had a hasty glimpse of a guy pointing a tommy-gun at me.

He cut loose just as I dived into the open doorway of a store. The chatteringly sinister machine-gun sent a blast of lead whining over my head, missing me by very short inches.

I began to think that that guy with the tommy-gun didn't like me. I scrambled shakily to my feet as the car zipped away at top speed. Max Goldklein, the candy store proprietor, peeked cautiously up from behind a jar of lemon drops.

"Stevie, it's over, yes?"

"Yeah," I said.

Goldklein looked at me with a worried expression on his fat face. Aside from being tighter than two Scotsmen in an undersized girdle, he wasn't a bad guy.

"Steve Sanders, you'll get yourself killed playing around with those tough gun-machiners."

"Machine-gunners," I corrected him, "and that guy was very definitely not playing."

"You want I should call the police?" he asked.

"Nope. This is strictly a private bridge-party. But you know this district, Max. If a guy wanted to hide out with a long, black car, and maybe a pal or two, where would he do it?"

"About a mile down, there's an old house," said Goldklein. "Tramps sleep in it during cold days, when they have to find a warm place."

"What's wrong with it during the summer?" I asked.

"Well, it's the kind of a house that you don't like to live in, or even visit, unless you have to," said Goldklein.

"Me, I have to," I told him. "Got a gun?"

Goldklein got his gun from the cash register drawer.

"Be careful, Steve," he said. And I was deeply touched until he added: "That gun cost me thirty bucks only a month ago."

I shoved the gun in my pocket, and walked down toward where he said the deserted house would be. This time I kept my eyes open for passing cars.

There weren't many cars out this late in this part of town, and the few that did pass me weren't equipped with built-in gunmen. I approached the big, dark house, and as I put my hand on the creaky gate I knew I was being watched.

Now listen! I know that there isn't any "sixth sense," and I quit believing in ghosts and Santa Claus at the same time . . . but as I stood in the lonely darkness before the old house, I felt hidden eyes staring at me, and no amount of reasoning could make me believe I was wrong. So I walked up the worn path slowly, with my hand on the gun in my pocket and my heart setting a new speed record.

I put a hand on the door—and stopped. I had a feeling that there was someone waiting for me on the other side of that door, someone who felt very strongly that it was about time I got something out of my life insurance policy. So I stepped lightly around to a window, and crawled inside.

**I**T WAS darker than a coal mine during a blackout. I drew my gun. This house was equipped with everything but ghosts, and I was preparing to give it one or two of those. At that moment, my future ghost coughed slightly and I took a pot shot at him and threw myself to the floor. There was a very comforting yowl of pain, and an answering blast of gun-fire that hit the thick wooden wall and nothing else.

I took one more shot, but I apparently missed this time. I tried another, and there was a groan and a dull thud. I crept cautiously forward, and, reaching out, felt a man's body. Then something struck me a glancing blow on the side of the head, and then once again . . . and a police whistle blew shrilly . . . and somebody lifted a man's body from beside me . . . and there was a peculiar smell of mint . . . and . . .

“**S**ANDERS!” bellowed a foghorn, and I managed to force my eyelids open, and realized that the foghorn was really Sergeant Hansen trying to sound gentle.

“Get um?” I mumbled thickly.

“No, they both got away. That store owner got worried and phoned us to hurry out here. I thought you were steering clear of this case.”

“That's what you were supposed to think.”

I told him about Diana being kidnaped.

“Then we'll have to work fast,” said Hansen. “Now the kidnaper knows you didn't take his advice. Got any clues?”

“None,” I admitted, “except for the

fact that one of those guys had a strong mint odor about him.”

“Fine,” Hansen said with heavy sarcasm, “now all we have to do is go around smelling people.”

“What about going back and asking Brenda Hayworth a few questions?”

“After that beautiful start you made, I wouldn't advise it,” said Hansen. “That young guy, Tommy Vale, is still out for your scalp.”

“Well, suppose you start going after his. He may be our man.”

“I don't think so,” said Hansen. “He seems too much of a kid.”

“Could be an act,” I told Hansen.

An officer appeared at the door, half-dragging the subject of our conversation along.

Tommy Vale looked very frightened.

“I found him snooping around outside,” said the cop.

“I was just passing by,” protested Tommy Vale.

“Do you usually go for long walks in the middle of the night?” I asked. “And what do you happen to be doing in the slum district?”

Vale said nothing.

“Got a gun?” asked Hansen.

“I already searched him,” said the cop. “He's clean.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You didn't by any chance find any peppermint candy on him, did you?”

“Yeah,” said the cop, “a big bag of chocolate peppermints.”

“So what?” asked Hansen. “You can't expect me to arrest a guy for eating candy peppermints.”

“No,” I said, “but I can expect you to get suspicious when a guy who was very jealous of Van Edwards turns up a couple of minutes after I've been slugged by the Edwards killer. And to top it all off, he just happens to be carrying some peppermint

candy, and the guy who slugged me smelled strongly of mint.”

“That’s only circumstantial evidence,” said Vale.

“It’s enough to land you behind bars until we can get more,” said Hansen.

“And things will be a lot easier all around, if you’ll tell us where you’ve hidden Diana Bruce,” I snapped.

“You mean she’s been kidnaped?” asked Vale.

“You’d know more about that than we would,” I said.

**V**ALE began to look very worried. He was in a spot, and he knew it.

“I’ll make a bargain with you. You promise not to arrest me, and I’ll do my best to see that Diana Bruce isn’t hurt.”

“So you admit you’ve kidnaped her?”

“I do not,” said Vale quickly. “But I may be able to prevent the person who did from injuring her.”

“Suppose you give us the person’s name, and let us do the preventing,” said Hansen.

Vale shook his head.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” I said.

With Diana’s safety at stake, I couldn’t afford to say no.

“Wait a minute,” said Hansen. “I’m running this case, and I say that he’s under arrest.”

“Sarge,” I said, “do you want me to help you on this case, or do you want it to remain unsolved?”

Hansen looked thoughtfully at me for a moment.

“Okay, Sanders, he can go.”

Tony Vale slipped hastily out.

“Don’t have him followed,” I told Hansen. “I have a hunch he was telling the truth, and I don’t want to take any chances when Diana is involved.”

“And what is the police department of

this city supposed to do while you’re worrying about your sweetheart?”

“You might try looking for a stray corpse. I think I finished that guy in the dark.”

A breathless cop suddenly appeared to confirm what I had just said.

“Sarge, they found a dead guy in a black car about two miles from here, and they think the dead guy is Frankie DiGonello.”

Hansen whistled in surprise. DiGonello was almost as famous a gangster as Edward G. Robinson. Only DiGonello never acted on the screen.

“That would be the boy who took a few blasts at me,” I said. “He was in very bad form tonight.”

“Now if we can just find out who hired him,” said Hansen.

“Sure,” I cracked, “all we have to do is third degree his corpse.”

“Don’t be funny. All this points to little Tommy Vale again. He could afford to pay the kind of money DiGonello would ask for.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and after driving a corpse two miles away, he hurried back so the police could catch him near this house.”

“Maybe he forgot something,” said Hansen.

“If he had, he wouldn’t have been dumb enough to choose a time like this to pick it up. I suggest we go back to the Hayworth dump.”

“Why?” asked Hansen.

“Well,” I said, not wanting to give the real reason, “if we don’t get anywhere there, we can at least have a good time staring at Brenda.”

**A**ND after having been in the Hayworth place for almost an hour, that was about all we were doing. Brenda, however, wasn’t looking as pretty as usual. Her eyes were red-rimmed. J. J. Hayworth wasn’t in a happy mood either. He kept gnawing his moustache,

and gave you a feeling that only his gentlemanly training kept him from telling you to go to hell.

“Miss Hayworth,” said Hansen for the seventh time, “we’re only trying to help you. Don’t you want us to find the man who killed Van Edwards?”

She looked wildly at Hansen.

“No, I don’t. I loved Van, but I don’t care whether they find the man who killed him or not. Punishing the killer wouldn’t bring Van back, and it might . . .”

She stopped as though afraid she had already said too much.

“And it might get Tommy Vale the electric chair,” Hansen finished for her.

“I didn’t say that,” she blurted.

“But it’s what you were about to say,” Hansen rasped.

“See here,” interrupted J. J. Hayworth, “I think my daughter’s had about enough for the night.”

“Just a parting thought,” said Hansen as we rose to go. “We have enough evidence on Tommy Vale now to put him behind bars; and if you won’t cooperate with us, Miss Hayworth, that’s exactly what we’ll have to do.”

“You can’t arrest Vale,” I protested as we walked outside. “That’ll endanger Diana’s life.”

“I’m through being a kind Boy Scout,” barked Hansen. “This is a murder case, not a sewing circle. I’ll have Vale behind bars inside of twenty-four hours.”

Just then a detective came up and whispered something in Hansen’s clean ear. Hansen looked a little sick.

“Tommy Vale’s just committed suicide.”

I whistled.

“Don’t tell me you’re falling for that, Sarge.”

“They found him with a gun in his hand,” snapped Hansen. “What do you expect

me to believe.”

“Look,” I said, “he was going after the murderer to stop him from injuring Diana Bruce. Maybe he threatened to expose the murderer. So what happens? He gets killed, and the real killer frames it to look like a suicide. Besides, where does that leave Diana Bruce?”

“Miss Bruce is safe,” spoke up the detective who had brought the news. “She was returned to her place about an hour ago. She’s a little shaken up, but otherwise okay.”

“Why doesn’t someone tell me these things?” roared Hansen. “Want to see the dame, Sanders?”

I thought fast, and decided to play a hunch.

“Nope,” I said, “I want to see the corpse.”

The corpse looked almost as repulsive as Hansen. A guy with his brains blown out looks very messy.

“Perfect solution,” said Hansen. “Conscience troubled him, so he decided to end it all.”

“It’s too perfect,” I said.

I reached gingerly into the dead man’s pocket and came out with a bag of crushed peppermints.

“He even got some of that candy on his coat,” said Hansen.

I saw a whitish, sticky smear on Vale’s coat shoulder. I poked my finger into it.

“Satisfied?” asked Hansen, eyeing me scornfully.

“Just about,” I said, starting to walk away.

“Where’re you going?” asked Hansen.

“Me?” I said. “I’ve got a date with a murderer!”

AS I waited there for him in the silence of the old house, I began to get nervous. I could be wrong. After all it was only a hunch. Maybe Tommy Vale had committed suicide.

After leaving Hansen, I had made a little phone call, inviting the murderer down to this house. He would come, I knew because I was the only one who even guessed his identity. I didn't have enough on him to send him to the chair, but I doubted if he realized that. A man who has committed murder doesn't remain coldly logical very long. My gun was out, and I crouched beside the door in the darkness. Then suddenly I went cold all over. For directly behind me was a strong smell of mint. And even as I started to move, a cold, hard circle of metal pressed against the back of my neck, and a hand gently took my gun. In a spot like this, I knew enough to be good.

The man with the gun chuckled.

"Good evening," he said politely.

"Good evening, Mr. Hayworth," I said, "I didn't expect you quite so soon. Or from behind."

Hayworth only laughed.

"You're a very clever young man. And in a few moments you're going to be a very dead young man. Just as a matter of curiosity, I'd like to know how I gave myself away."

"Your toupee," I explained.

He didn't get it.

"I admit I wear a wig, but that wouldn't give me away."

"It wouldn't have, except for the fact that you use theatrical spirit gum to keep the toupee on. That spirit gum has a very strong mint odor. Even so, it isn't noticeable enough to attract attention unless you're standing very close to a person. And as you bent over to pick DiGonello up, after slugging me, you were very close. Then, when I returned to your house for the second time, I was very careful to get close enough to see if you were wearing a wig."

"Why didn't you have me arrested there?" asked Hayworth.

"There wasn't enough evidence. Second, you still had Diana—or at least I

thought you still had her, and I didn't want to endanger her further. The fact that Tommy Vale happened to be fond of peppermint candy threw me off the track for a little while. But I found a smear of spirit gum on his coat, and things began to make sense. I remembered that that car with DiGonello had come along a short time after I left your house. And you and your daughter were the only ones who knew what I had come to your home for. Vale wouldn't have had time to recover from my punch and then have sent DiGonello after me."

"And did you also discover how I killed Tommy Vale?" asked Hayworth.

"That was fairly simple. He came on you while you were adjusting your toupee. That accounts for the smear of spirit gum on his coat. You shot him, and then took the body to a vacant lot and left it there. The lot wasn't far from your home, so you had time to return Diana Bruce, and get back to be at your home when Sergeant Hansen and I arrived."

"Which accounts for Sergeant Hansen obligingly concluding that Tommy Vale returned Miss Bruce—who, incidentally, was blindfolded during her period of captivity and so never caught a glimpse of me—and then killed himself in a fit of remorse. You seem," said Hayworth, "to have accounted for everything but the original killing of Van Edwards. What motive could I possibly have for disposing of him?"

"Simple. You didn't want him to marry your daughter Brenda, because he was only an ex-truck driver, and not good enough for one of the Beverly Hills Hayworths. You tried to get Tommy Vale to do the shooting for you, but he didn't have the nerve. You wanted Brenda to marry Tommy, so you knew he would keep quiet about the murder in order to keep from injuring the father of the woman he loved. But you went too far when you threatened to kill Diana. You had hired DiGonello to kill me, because you didn't want



to risk a fight with me yourself. You even let DiGonello get a couple of slugs of lead before stepping in yourself. Then you had to in order to keep the police from finding you here.”

“So you know everything,” said Hayworth. “Well, if it will give you any satisfaction, I admit you’ve been right. I did kill Vale and Edwards. I even finished off Frankie DiGonello in order to eliminate the risk of taking him to a doctor. So everything is yours, Mr., Sanders, everything but the final hand, and that is the one that counts.”

“Will I be another suicide?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” said Hayworth. “Merely an auto accident. I shall simply knock you unconscious, and then run over you with a stolen car. Hit-and-run driving, an accident which could easily happen on a night like this.”

“You forget that I have already told Sergeant Hansen you are the killer,” I bluffed.

Hayworth chuckled.

“I can’t blame you for trying, but the sergeant was kind enough to phone and tell me the case was closed. His call came a moment before yours. He did say that you claimed Tommy Vale had not committed suicide, but I don’t believe the sergeant has enough imagination to tie that up with your death from an auto accident.”

“You know,” drawled a familiar voice,

“you shouldn’t talk about people behind their backs. It’s impolite.

As Hayworth started in surprise, I let loose a right that sent him floating into Sergeant Hansen’s waiting arms.

“I had a hunch too,” said Hansen as they put the handcuffs on the unconscious Hayworth. “Thought you might come along here, and I had a few ideas about Hayworth myself. I phoned him that the case was closed in order to put him off guard. And don’t worry about evidence. The boys rigged up a dictaphone before either you or Hayworth got here.”

Hayworth had recovered consciousness by now, and was listening to Hansen with a very sickly expression on his face. He didn’t look at all dignified. But when Diana Bruce came charging in, he rose and managed a very neat bow.

She ignored him, and draped herself around my willing neck.

“Darling, are you all right?” I was about to tell her not to be such a ham, when she kissed me. And after that I could only manage a weak nod.

“Sanders,” said Sergeant Hansen, grinning at us, “would you like to come down to that station and help me wind things up?”

But at the moment I was much too busy to let him know.