

A Complete
Novelet



Deputy Sheriff Anderson
almost goes haywire on
the trail of a disappearing
dead lady!

Somebody Stole My Corpse

By TED COUGHLAN

CHAPTER I

MORTUARY BODYGUARD

IT WAS already Sunday afternoon. I was sitting hunched over a desk in my office, rewriting the resignation I would have to sign on Tuesday, if my boss, Sheriff Donaldson, lost his fight for reelection. Donaldson himself was in the inner office. I suspected, he was writing two speeches—one he would make if he won the vote, the other in case he lost.

Crimes in Miami were as scarce as gasoline. All the crooks must have received "A" cards or didn't have good enough rubber to get around on. If things kept up like that,

I'd probably be laid off, even if Donaldson got the nod for a third term in the closest election in years.

Pausing over the final draft, I started dreaming about a fishing trip I'd take on Monday, my day off. About the time I had hooked my first "sail," the telephone in the inner office shrilled. I heard the sheriff answer it, then his voice boomed: "Hey, Anderson! Wake up, and come in here."

I snuffed out my cigarette and walked into his office. Donaldson's iron-gray hair was ruffled, his ever-present cigar was chewed to a pulp, but there was a smile on his pleasant, ruddy face. He took the cigar from his mouth, examined it critically, then threw it into the waste-paper basket. Shoving

his swivel chair back, he placed both large hands on top of his desk and, half rising, asked:

“You know where Mahoney’s Mortuary is?”

I nodded. “Sure, that swanky slab up in Golden Beach. Don’t tell me they finally have a stiff up there?”

Donaldson reached for a new cigar, broke it in half, returned one end to his breast pocket and stuck the other in his mouth.

“Old lady Witherbee died yesterday. She was a pillar of society in Miami Beach. She’s lying in state up at Mahoney’s. Her husband insists that we send somebody up there to stand watch over the corpse tonight. The funeral’s tomorrow.”

“Why the bodyguard?” I asked, surprised.

“He says it was her last wish, and I can’t very well refuse him today. He’s too influential. You haven’t anything else to do. Run along up there. The old man will probably make it worth your while.”

“But I’m off tomorrow—” I started to protest.

“So what? You’ll be through early in the morning. Take an extra half-day to make up for working tonight.” Donaldson dismissed me with a snicker. “Don’t forget to vote for me on Tuesday,” were his parting words.

THE outside of Mahoney’s Mortuary was ornate. The building was faced with shining black marble. A canopied marquee reached to the street. It looked like the entrance to a movie theater, except that there were no glaring lights. Not even a lettered sign announced the business.

Mahoney, a tall, slim, hook-nosed man dressed in an expensive black suit, introduced me to Jason Witherbee. The oldish widower shook hands and waved toward the silver casket.

“It’s a nuisance, I know,” he said

apologetically. “But we didn’t want to leave the room unguarded. This casket is valuable and there are too many prowlers about in the blackout. I hope you won’t mind being alone here all night? If you do, perhaps I could get a private detective.”

I shook my head.

“I’m used to stiffs . . . Pardon me.”

Witherbee laughed pleasantly.

“Never mind. Well, I’ll be getting along.” Then he inquired in a friendly tone, “Does coffee keep you awake?”

“It usually helps some.”

I looked around the room with its heavy furniture and dark, thick drapes.

“I’ll have my man bring you over some. Good-night, and thanks. Goodnight, Mr. Mahoney.” Witherbee shook hands with both of us and left.

Mahoney didn’t look much like an undertaker, except that he was so tall and thin. His voice was pleasantly low, but not the mournful tone most of his tribe affected. He didn’t look to be over thirty-five.

“Do you live here?” I asked him.

“Heavens, no!” He laughed deprecatingly. “I have enough of it during business hours. In case you need me, I have a suite at the Carlton Towers. Good-night. I’ll be here around eight in the morning.”

He left, and I was alone in the stuffy parlor. The thick drapes shut out all light from the outside. They were drawn close across the windows, so I could burn all the electricity I felt like without violating the blackout regulations.

I was walking around, trying windows and doors, to make certain they were locked, when the bell pealed. I jumped at the sudden sound in the dark, then opened the massive oaken door.

A sourpuss in a butler’s uniform handed me a tray, saying in tones of habitual complaint:

“Mr. Witherbee sent this over for you.”

I laid the tray on the end table in the hall,

next to the urn with artificial flowers. Without another word, he turned and walked out. I kicked the door closed, hooked the night chain, and sprung the Yale lock.

Back in the funeral parlor, I stretched out full length on a purple plush sofa, and opened the magazine I had picked at random from the sectional bookcase. I glanced at the contents. It was the current issue of *Mortician's Guide*.

Wondering what kind of guidance they needed, I glanced at the contents. The leading article was entitled, "The Romance of Embalming." Intrigued by this novel subject, I started reading. At the end of the second paragraph, I sat up straight. Lord knows, I thought I was callous, but the way those guys raved on about stiffs made me shudder. Right there and then I decided that, when my turn came, I wanted to be cremated.

The tone of the article softened slightly, going into practical details, and I eased back on the sofa, one hand hanging limp over the side. I began to nod, and presently the book fell from my hand. I was dozing off when something cold and wet touched my left hand.

LETTING out a yell which was probably heard all the way to Headquarters, I jumped up and yanked my revolver out of its shoulder holster.

"Who's there?" I shouted.

"Meow," was the plaintive answer.

Shame-facedly, I looked at the rug near the sofa. A thin, yellow kitten stared at me with unblinking eyes. I bent down and picked it up. Its nose was cold and wet. A trace of milk still showed on its abortive whiskers. It cuddled against my coat and started purring brokenly.

"Where the heck did you come from?" I asked, but it didn't say.

I kept the kitten in my arms for company, and made another round of the ground floor.

All the doors and windows were closed. I decided the yellow kitten must be the house cat. I opened the back door and gave kitty her marching orders for the night.

On the way back to the parlor, I stopped and picked up the coffee Sourpuss had left for me. I looked over the bookcases, for some lighter reading matter, but found only trade magazines. The coffins and grave markers displayed on their covers discouraged my desire to read any more that night.

After drinking three cups of the coffee, I began to yawn lustily. Apparently, I had unconsciously lied to Mr. Witherbee. Coffee wasn't helping keep me awake.

I stretched out on the sofa, trying unsuccessfully to keep my eyes open. A stealthy scratching at the window irritated me momentarily, but I put it down to the cat trying to get back in. In a short time I gave up the uneven struggle with drowsiness, and relaxed. My last conscious thought was that I had to wake up before Mahoney came back and caught me napping.

CHAPTER II

DISAPPEARING DEAD LADY

ISPENT the night trying to break out of a dozen jails. Their cells had peculiar, narrow shapes, they were about six by three, and had depressingly low ceilings.

They were, in fact, torture chambers, for I could not stand up in any of them.

Once during the night, I woke up for a second—just long enough to assure myself that I was only dreaming—then I was escaping again from the narrow cells, and the chase through some darkened tunnels and caverns started all over again.

Finally, I really woke up. It was daylight. I started to stretch and get off the sofa, but could not raise my arms above my head. I tried again. My elbows bumped against

something soft, but firm.

I was lying flat on my back. The ceiling of the parlor was dim in the early morning light, but the sight of it assured me that I was really awake.

Once more I tried to sit up. My forehead struck against a hard obstruction. It was not enough to stun me, but it made me lie back on the cushions.

I was still groggy, and the air tasted stale. I shook myself then, turning my head from side to side, looked around. Suddenly I was wide awake and scared out of ten-year's growth.

No wonder I couldn't stretch or get up! I was in a coffin! The lid was down, but I could see through its transparent plastic top. I tried frantically to kick it off with my heavy shoe; but every time I started to raise my foot, my knee bumped against the lid of my prison.

I yelled, then swore, and frantically tried to get loose again, but my efforts only wore me out. Soon I was wringing wet with sweat.

At last I got sensible, and lay back to think it out. I spied a slight crack between the lid and the coffin. That was what had kept me from suffocating. I now reasoned with myself that all I had to do was to keep quiet. Mahoney would be coming to work at eight o'clock. Chances were that he might look into the coffin, and when he found me—well, he'd raise Cain because I'd unwittingly usurped Mrs. Witherbee's place, but he would also turn me loose.

The casket was shallow. My face pressed against the lid. I tried to turn over. I couldn't make it, but I could put my hand underneath me and feel around. Hesitatingly, I probed the bottom of the casket. With a loud sigh of relief, I decided that, at least, I was alone.

Then, when I settled back once more, another thought struck me. Since I had locked all the doors and windows, even to putting the night chain on the front and back doors, Mahoney's keys wouldn't admit him!

What if he . . . Heck, no! He had to get in, and soon!

I gasped for breath, and was getting hotter and weaker by the second. There just wasn't enough air coming in. I lay back, panting, my tongue hanging out like that of a thirsty dog.

I was falling into a coma, or was it an oncoming faint? A sharp ringing roused me. I listened. Was it my own death knell in my ears? No, it was the doorbell! It rang and rang for an interminable time, then stopped. I lost consciousness. . . .

When I came to, a distorted face was leering at me through the plastic top of my prison. I blinked, and the vision cleared. I have never before seen anything so beautiful as the coldly furious face of Mahoney that morning. He glared at me, then started to open the loosely screwed casket.

AS SOON as he swung the lid up, I drew in a deep lungful of air. I sat up and bounced over the side of the coffin quicker than I ever remember moving. Mahoney gaped at me like a shark out of water. It seemed that it took him an hour to calm down enough to bellow at me:

"What were you doing in there? Where is the body?"

I looked at the casket. It was the same one which had held the remains of Mrs. Witherbee the night before. There wasn't another in the room. Bewildered, I shook my head.

"Somebody doped that coffee I had. They took the body out and put me in there. A gag, I guess," I ended lamely.

A thorough search of the house showed it was no gag. In the whole place, I was the nearest approach to a stiff.

At one window, the drape was pulled aside, and half torn from its rod. I looked behind it. The sash was raised. Across the sill, there were deep scratches on the new paint. I pointed them out to the mortician.

“Did you come in this way?” I asked.

Mahoney gave me a withering glance.

“No. I unlocked the basement and came up that way.”

“Then somebody took her out through here, after they doped my coffee.”

“Too bad they didn’t take you, too,” he snorted and hurried to the telephone.

Frantically he called Witherbee.

In a few minutes, the three of us stood by the empty casket. Witherbee was raving. His gray mustache bristled. His pale blue eyes were watering from anger. He threatened me with everything from dismissal to life imprisonment. I wanted to call my boss, but he objected.

“No! This has to be kept out of the papers. The dignity of the deceased. . . It’s probably the work of some imbecile pranksters. You get busy and find the body before two o’clock. Try the medical college. Try the morgue. Try everywhere, but find her! The funeral must take place as planned.”

I scratched my aching head. What I needed, and bad, was a drink. No, not coffee. A stiff jolt of Scotch would help, but a pint would probably do more good.

I had to get busy. I could almost read the headlines, in case I failed to find the corpse. The final, pre-election editions would certainly cook Donaldson’s goose if they featured something like:

CORPSE STOLEN FROM UNDER SHERIFF’S NOSE

It was up to me to prevent such a calamity, but I didn’t know where to start.

I walked outside, to examine the window from the alleyway alongside the building. After futilely searching the ground under the casement window, I walked back into the house.

“How about the burial permit?” I asked Mahoney. “Did you take it out yet?”

“Why certainly.” He opened a drawer in his carved, imitation antique desk, and searched it.

“That’s gone, too!” he yelled at me. “Get out of here and do something.”

I hesitated a second, then asked:

“What was the cause of her death? I suppose you have the certificate?”

“Certainly. It was made out by her personal physician. She died from gastroenteritis.”

“Inflammation of the stomach,” I translated for my own benefit. “Had she been sick long, Mr. Witherbee?”

“Off and on for years. She was somewhat of a hypochondriac, but Dr. Knight knew that she was subject to stomach ills. Who would ever perpetrate such a sacrilege?”

WITHERBEE started to get pompous. I changed the subject.

“How many people in your home, Mr. Witherbee?”

“My adopted son and my niece, besides the servants. I hope you don’t think any of them would play such a trick as this.”

“Thanks.” I evaded answering him and hurried out.

Defying Witherbee’s desire to keep the gruesome theft out of the papers, I called Donaldson and told him what had happened. He was as furious as I expected him to be. He almost burnt out the insides of the telephone, yelling at me.

“How do you think that’s going to look in tonight’s papers?”

“My resignation is on my desk,” I admitted meekly.

He calmed down somewhat.

“Try and keep it quiet until after tomorrow,” he said. “If you solve this crazy case, we can use it to swing a few votes.”

Swearing at politicians and their stooges, I hung up. At election time, they didn’t care for anything but publicity affecting their

jobs.

Where to start? Why would anybody steal a corpse? Who had done it? I was mulling it all over as I smoked a chain of cigarettes.

After calling the medical college, and the morgue, and satisfying myself that the body had not been brought to either place, I looked in the telephone book for the address of Dr. Knight, Witherbee's family physician. He lived just around the corner. I went to see him.

The front door of his imitation Spanish castle was open. The foyer had been made over into a reception room, with comfortable-looking chairs, old magazines, and cheerful pictures. There was no one at the ornate receptionist's desk. I pressed the bell labeled "Nurse."

A middle-aged, cross-looking woman in a starched white uniform emerged from the inner office. She glared at me, probably because I had forgotten to take off my hat. With one hand clenched tightly on the outside knob of the office door, she asked:

"Whom do you wish to see?"

"Dr. Knight. Tell him it's urgent, please."

"Have you an appointment?"

"Yes, but not the kind you mean." I flashed my badge at her. She shrank back. I wondered, was she guilty, or just rattled because it was the law.

"I'll inform him that you are here," she told me with trembling lips. "Please have a seat."

I sank into a deep armchair. Yes, it was as comfortable as it looked. I had just lit a cigarette when the door opened again. This time the nurse was more composed. She waved me in.

"The doctor will see you now," she murmured.

I dropped my cigarette into a fish bowl, and walked in. The doctor, an elderly, bald-headed man, crouched over his desk. He had

deep-set eyes, obscured by long, bushy eyebrows. He pointed to a chair in front of his desk. It faced the east windows. I did not sit down. I hate the light shining in my eyes.

"What can I do for you, Mr.—"

"Anderson," I finished for him, and gave him a detailed account of the night's happenings.

"Why tell me all this?" he demanded.

"Did it ever occur to you, Doctor, that Mrs. Witherbee may not have died from gastroenteritis?"

"What are you trying to suggest, Mr. Anderson?"

"Did you consider performing an autopsy?"

KNIGHT'S age-wrinkled hand passed over his bald head, then he stroked his freshly shaven chin. He cupped his jaw in one hand, leaning his elbow on the desk.

"Why?" he asked me. "Nobody asked me to perform one, and I didn't see any reason for it."

"Look here, Doctor! I don't mean to offend you, but isn't it perfectly possible that you took the cause of her death for granted? You've been treating her so long for stomach trouble, it was a natural conclusion to come to. The symptoms of arsenic poisoning and gastroenteritis are pretty much the same, aren't they?"

"They are the same, but it's preposterous!"

"So is stealing a corpse. But when anybody goes to the trouble to snatch one, right from under my nose, then I smell a rat. Would you have any objection to the coroner confirming your diagnosis when I find the body?"

"Naturally not. After all, I'm only human. I could have made a mistake."

I thanked him and left. The next thing I had to do was to find out who had doped that coffee. I had a strong suspicion that the person who had killed Mrs. Witherbee had

stolen the body to cover up the crime.

Before going to the Witherbee home, I took a chance and called the cemeteries in the county. The only one which had a crematory advised me: "Mrs. Witherbee's body was delivered here this morning."

"Hold it!" I shouted excitedly. "Don't do anything until I get there. This is the sheriff's office."

The mournful voice at the other end of the wire agreed.

"Well, we have the permit," the voice said anyhow, "and are only waiting for final instructions to go ahead with the cremation. But we will hold it for you."

"If you light that fire before I get put there, I'll throw you into it!" I shouted, and slammed down the receiver.

The description of the man who had delivered the body, the one I got at the crematory, was sketchy. The undertaker had accepted the hundred-dollar fee and the burial permit, without paying much attention to the driver.

He thought there had been a woman in the car, also. He vaguely remembered that the man had been about five feet eight, medium build, dark hair, and dressed in a business suit. That was a big help. It described about half of the male population of Dade County, including Witherbee's son and myself.

CHAPTER III

DOPED COFFEE

THE mortician at the crematory helped me stuff the body of Mrs. Witherbee into the big luggage compartment of my coupe. With the siren wailing, I rushed back to Mahoney's. Witherbee and Mahoney were so glad to see me that they carried the corpse inside without any help.

While they were laying it back into the casket, I called Donaldson again and told

him I'd located the stiff. I asked him to come out and bring the coroner with him. He was surprised.

"Why the coroner?" he demanded. "You told me yourself that Dr. Knight issued the death certificate. He's got too good a reputation to pull anything phony."

"Sure," I agreed. "But he admits he could be mistaken."

While I was waiting for the sheriff and coroner to arrive, I asked Witherbee:

"Who uses sleeping pills in your house?"

"Why, I'm sure I don't know. I don't think any of the family ever used them."

"How about Mrs. Witherbee? Didn't she suffer from insomnia?"

"No. Besides Dr. Knight wouldn't prescribe them for her. Her heart, you know."

"Who was her lawyer?"

I pointed to the body, again occupying the heavy casket in the center of the room. Mahoney had rearranged the wreaths of lilies and wilting tuberose.

"Alexander Hughes. Why?"

"Never mind."

I waved him aside and thumbed through the telephone book. Finding the lawyer's number, I called him and asked him to come out to the funeral parlor. He sounded stuffy, but when I told him that the sheriff wanted to talk with him, he finally agreed.

Disregarding Mahoney's disapproving look, I lit a cigarette and restlessly paced the room.

"We are going ahead with the funeral this morning instead of two o'clock as we originally planned," Witherbee announced.

"Why the sudden change?" I stamped my cigarette out on the thick rug.

"I have decided on cremation. Mr. Mahoney advises me that it is far cheaper than a formal funeral."

Knowing the family standing in the community, this desire to save a few dollars surprised me, but I only said:

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to change your mind again, at least until the sheriff gets here."

I had no intention of letting that body out of my sight again until I confirmed my suspicions.

I turned away as the doorbell rang. Mahoney started to answer it, but I was ahead of him.

I opened the door. Donaldson, wiping the perspiration from his cheeks, came in. The coroner, Doc Stapley, a short, paunchy, good-natured frog-faced man followed him, his rusty black bag in his hand.

I had started to close the door when another car pulled up at the curb. A medium-tall man in a spotless Palm Beach suit, got out. He was carrying a small brief-case. I guessed he must be the lawyer, Hughes, so I held the door open for him. He nodded curtly.

"Why am I needed here?" he asked in clipped tones. "I intended to attend the funeral this afternoon, anyway."

"Come in, Mr. Hughes!" I invited, without answering his question.

WE WERE all in the funeral parlor. Donaldson looked decidedly uncomfortable. His suit was wet from perspiration, and he chewed viciously on the stub of his cigar. When everybody was seated, he barked at me:

"What's the idea of dragging all these people up here? Did you catch the guys who snatched the body?"

"I want Doc Stapley to examine the corpse," I said. "I'm not satisfied with that death certificate."

"I can't find out anything without an autopsy," Stapley grumbled, but got up and walked toward the coffin.

"How do the symptoms of gastroenteritis and arsenic poisoning compare, Doc?" I asked as quietly as I could.

"They're almost the same. Easy enough

to mistake one for the other. Do you mean to insinuate that she might have been murdered?"

I nodded.

"Who gets Mrs. Witherbee's estate?" I asked Hughes. "I understand it's a big one."

"She's worth nearly a million," Hughes stated. "All in cash or bonds."

Donaldson perked up. He threw away his cigar, and jumped up from his chair.

"Who gets it?" he demanded of the lawyer.

"She didn't leave any will," Hughes answered, fingering the zinnia in his buttonhole.

"Why? Didn't you ever advise her to make one?" Donaldson wiped his forehead.

"I advised her many a time to do so, but she was stubborn and superstitious about it. However, a few days ago, she made an appointment with me for tomorrow afternoon. I understand she intended to have me draw one up at last."

"Do you have any idea what she was going to do with all her money?"

"More or less. She gave my secretary a tentative list of bequests and legacies she wanted incorporated."

"Where is the list?" Donaldson asked.

"In my office. I can telephone for it, if you wish."

Doc Stapley straightened up from the corpse. I could swear he was rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Well, do you want me to carve her up?" he grumbled at Donaldson.

Witherbee started to say something, but the sheriff silenced him with a look.

"How long will it take to confirm Dr. Knight's diagnosis?" he asked Doc Stapley.

"A couple of hours, but it's probably a waste of time. Dr. Knight wouldn't likely make such a mistake."

"Was Dr. Knight with your wife when she died?" I asked Witherbee.

"No. He had left her earlier in the day.

She had an attack after dinner. I called him, but she was gone before he reached the house."

"Who was at home besides yourself?"

"My son and my niece, besides the servants," Witherbee informed me. "We rarely dined out."

"Call the wagon, Anderson," Donaldson decided. "We'll have them take the body down where Doc can work on it. While he's busy, I want Anderson to talk with your family and the servants." He frowned at Witherbee.

"May I go now?" Hughes stood up and straightened the crease in his trousers.

"Yes," Donaldson agreed grudgingly. "I'll call you later and have you bring that list over to my office."

AFTER the body had been taken away, I wanted the sheriff to go to Witherbee's mansion with me. He wasn't very anxious.

"You run along and question them," he told me. "I've a dozen things to do today. If you need any help, call me at the office."

Well, what else could I expect? It was the day before the elections.

"Are you going home from here?" I asked Witherbee.

He looked at me coldly and nodded.

"Yes. I suppose you want to come along?"

On the way to their mansion, I questioned him about the coffee. He readily admitted that his niece had made it. She had brought it to him in a silex and he had poured it into the thermos bottle which Sourpuss had brought me.

Jason Witherbee's mansion was a would-be Moroccan palace. A dozen rooms and many baths, set in a jungle of tropical shrubbery. It backed on a wide canal, running to the bay.

Sourpuss opened the door. He gave me a dirty look, but grudgingly admitted me. I don't believe he would have, if I had been

alone. I followed Witherbee into a vast, vaulted room. The heavy drapes were drawn, excluding sunlight. My host pointed to a chair.

"Shall I send for Frederick and Miss Delaney?" he asked.

"Thanks. Ask them to hurry, will you?"

He left me alone. By the time I was halfway through a cigarette, the door opened again. A young, stoop-shouldered, pale man came in. He looked at me through half-closed eyes, nervously combing his longish black hair with his narrow, tapering fingers. He sat down heavily in an easy chair opposite me and stared without speaking. I stared back.

This exchange of dirty looks kept up until Sourpuss came into the room. He carried a tray loaded with a silver coffee pot, several cups and saucers, cream pitcher, and a stack of toast. He was followed by a slim, blond girl of about nineteen. Her eyes were reddened, possibly from crying. She sat next to Freddy, and held his hand. He gave her a moon-calf look, and a strained smile.

I waited until Sourpuss poured coffee for both of them, before speaking. He ignored me. I was just as glad. I'd had enough of the Witherbee brand of coffee. When he straightened up to leave the room, I asked him: "Who made that coffee you brought me last night?"

He looked from Freddy to the girl, then started for the door again without answering me. I stood up and faced him.

"Answer me!" I held his arm.

He brushed off my hand, as if it were an obnoxious fly, and walked past me.

"Tell him, Peters," the girl spoke up. "I don't mind."

"Very good, miss, since you say so." He looked me over from head to foot before giving me the information. "Miss Delaney made it."

He walked out of the room without another word. The door closed.

“Why did you dope that coffee?” I asked the girl.

“I did nothing of the sort,” she denied hotly. “I didn’t even know it was for you. Uncle asked me to have it made. I thought he wanted it for himself.”

“If it was for him why the thermos bottle?”

“I didn’t pour it into the thermos. Uncle did that after I brought it to him. That was when I learned it was for you.”

I let her alone for a while, and turned to Freddy. He looked less pasty now that he’d had a stimulant.

“Where were you last night, after midnight?” I shot the question at him.

“In bed, of course, I went to the movies with Miss Delaney. We came home about eleven and I went straight to my room.”

“Tell me another. You haven’t had any nine hours sleep. Just look at yourself in the mirror.” His eyes were bloodshot and heavy.

“I tell you I was in bed before midnight!” he insisted.

“That’s the truth,” the girl put in tremulously. “He went to his room as soon as we came home.”

She had laid down her cup, and was sitting upright, her hands folded on her lap. I caught a glimpse of the ring on her left hand.

“You two engaged?” I asked in a gentler tone.

She nodded.

CHAPTER IV

SELF-ACCUSATION

FREDDY got up and started pacing the room. The girl put out her hand and stopped him. He sat down again.

“Mother was murdered,” he said bitterly. “I’m sure of it. She didn’t die of any stomach trouble. She never had it bad enough to kill her. She was a hypochondriac,

and most of the pills Knight gave her were only placebos.”

“Why should anybody want to kill her?” I leaned forward in my chair.

“Please, Freddy, you’re just imagining things. Don’t go and get all upset again.” The girl stroked the back of his hand.

“I’m not upset. Mother had plenty of enemies, and you know it. She wanted to boss everything and everybody she came in contact with. Some people wanted to see her out of the way.”

He began fidgeting again. I offered him a cigarette. He refused it.

“Did you try to get any other doctor to confirm your suspicions?” I asked.

“Yes—I mean, no. Oh!” He wiped his wide, sloping forehead with the back of his long, thin hand.

“Why don’t you leave him alone? I tell you he was in bed at midnight last night.” The girl stamped her high heels on the hardwood floor.

“I will, as soon as he tells me the truth,” I assured her. “How about you?” And I asked her again: “Why did you put that dope in my coffee?”

“I didn’t!” she cried, her eyes ablaze.

She walked over to me, and slapped my face with her open palm, so hard that it stung. I drew back my arm to sock her, but remembered in time that no Southern gentleman ever strikes a lady—that is, until she becomes his wife.

“Who uses sleeping pills in this house?” I asked Freddy, instead.

“Mother used to. She complained of insomnia.”

I was exasperated.

“Look here, if you’ll tell me the truth, I’ll leave you alone. Why did you steal your mother’s corpse and lock me up in that coffin? If I had stayed in there much longer, you’d probably have to face a murder charge.”

Freddy jumped out of his chair. His movements were much faster than I would expect. He lunged at me, with his fist swinging. I caught at his wrist, and stopped the blow.

He struggled, and I was amazed at his strength. I had difficulty pushing him back into the chair. When his outburst of rage subsided, I started to leave the room. With one hand on the knob, I had the final word.

"I'll be back soon," I said, "then I'll tell you which one of you is lying. Don't either of you leave the house until I get here."

I slammed the door of the big room behind me. Sourpuss was waiting in the hall. He handed me my hat and opened the front door. I repeated my instructions to him, warning him not to let Freddy or the girl leave the place. I threatened to hold him responsible if they were not at home when I came back.

I went back to the funeral parlor. Mahoney was there, alone. He told me that the chief had called. I rang his office and Donaldson confirmed what I already suspected. He sounded mad, swearing loudly over the wire.

"I don't know where you got your brain storm, Anderson," he admitted, "but Mrs. Witherbee was murdered. Arsenic. Get busy and do something before the papers get hold of it. I can't keep it quiet much longer."

WHEN he stopped sputtering, I had my say.

"Call their family lawyer and tell him to bring the memo about the will over to your office this afternoon," I told him. "I'll be in about five, in time for the final edition."

"Do you mean you know who did it?" the chief roared over the wire.

"No, but I will by then."

I hung up and added to myself, "I hope."

I was about to leave the room, when the phone rang again. I answered it. It was the

crematorium calling for me. The same crepe hanger I'd spoken to earlier was on the wire.

"My assistant recognized the man who brought Mrs. Witherbee's body to us this morning," he informed me, in low, mournful tones.

"Well, for heaven's sake, who was it?" I barked at him.

"It was Mr. Witherbee."

"Which one of them? Freddy or Jason?"

"The young gentleman. He said his father would call later and give us full instructions."

"Is your man sure?" I shouted. "He'll have to swear to it later on."

"Of course," came the offended answer. "All our employees are most trustworthy."

I banged the receiver on the cradle, and started to turn toward the door. Somebody pressed what felt like the muzzle of a revolver into the middle of my back.

"Don't turn, Copper," a deep voice ordered. "Get your hands over your head."

I could feel that the gun was being held in an unsteady hand. It was massaging the small of my back. Raising my arms slowly upward, I lashed out backward with the heel of my shoe, and whirled around.

My assailant let out a yell and dropped the gun. Before I could grab him, he dived for my legs and caught me around the knees. It was a good tackle. I went down like a log.

We fought silently in the darkened room. I couldn't make out his face, but he sure could hit. A couple of well-directed uppercuts caught me on the jaw. I tried rolling with the blows, and getting in a few of my own. I caught him off guard and landed two sharp hooks to his stomach. With a sigh, he relaxed to the floor.

I looked at his face. It was Sourpuss.

I picked up the gun. No wonder he had been jittery. It was a kid's water pistol. I put it in my pocket, and waited for him to come to.

He was only out for a few seconds. Then he got up and shook his head groggily. His expression was bland again.

"What's the big idea?" I demanded.

"You are trying to pin Mrs. Witherbee's murder on Mr. Freddy and Miss Delaney. I won't stand for it."

"If I hadn't taken the precaution of slipping the handcuffs on him, he would have jumped me again.

"Who told you the old lady was murdered?"

"The coroner telephoned Dr. Knight and advised him. He passed the information along to Mr. Witherbee. I took the message."

"How would you like to be locked up for assault with intent to kill?" I rubbed my sore jaw. "Come along. We're going back to the house. I've got to see Mr. Freddy again."

I TOOK the cuffs off him, and we left the mortuary together. He had evidently decided to be good. He let me into the Witherbee house willingly enough, and I went back to the big living room.

Freddy and the girl were still there. .

I started off on a different track with them this time. Sending the girl out of the room, I sat in front of young Witherbee.

"How did you and Mrs. Witherbee get along?" I asked him.

"Why—why, all right, of course. Why do you ask that?"

"Be explicit, please. Were you on good terms?"

"We were on excellent terms." Young Witherbee squirmed in his chair.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I compose music. But of course, I don't make much out of it yet. Experimental art, you know."

"So you were dependent on her for a living? Is that it?"

"To a certain extent," Frederick admitted, embarrassedly.

"Was she free with her cash?" I took a

cigarette out of my pocket and lit it.

"She was very generous."

"I see. All right, call Miss Delaney in here."

Miss Delaney walked in, her high heels tapping a rapid tattoo on the polished floor. She must have been anticipating my questions, or eavesdropping, for she informed me in a monotonous voice:

"Mrs. Witherbee was very kind to me. I adored her. She treated me like her own daughter."

"How did you and Mr. Witherbee get along?"

The girl threw me a wondering look.

"We have always been friendly."

"Who supplied you with your spending money?"

"Mrs. Witherbee made me an ample allowance."

"How about your uncle? Did he ever give you any?"

"No. He was dependent on Mrs. Witherbee also. Ever since the stock market crash back in 'Twenty-nine. He lost his entire fortune then, but Mrs. Witherbee held on to hers."

"I see. Thanks. Where is Mr. Witherbee?"

"Upstairs. He's resting. Do you have to see him?"

"No, but the three of you are wanted down at the sheriff's office right away. It'll look better if you go willingly."

I expected an explosion, but it didn't come.

"I'll see to it that Mr. Witherbee and Freddy go down right away," the girl meekly agreed instead.

I called Donaldson and told him to expect company, and that I would be there inside an hour. He demanded to know what I'd found out, but I put him off. . . .

A few hours later, I staggered wearily into the sheriff's office. I had Sourpuss with me. Stapley, Hughes, Witherbee Senior and

Junior, and the girl were all there, waiting. They looked up as I entered, and began to fidget in their chairs.

I walked over to Donaldson's desk and laid a typewritten report in front of him. He read it over slowly, then nodded his head and smiled like a cat that had caught a canary. I walked back and leaned against the closed door as Donaldson straightened up.

"Doc, please tell these people what you found," he said.

Doc Stapley cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Witherbee died from an overdose of arsenic. Somebody had been feeding it to her for a long time. She was given a large dose shortly before she died."

DONALDSON nodded. "You don't have to hang around any longer. Thanks, Doc."

He now turned to Hughes.

"Do you have the outline of the will Mrs. Witherbee was to draw up?"

"Yes. But you must understand, it isn't official. Just a typewritten list. It wouldn't stand up in court." Hughes was still condescending.

"Hadn't she signed it?"

"No. It's just a memorandum she had my secretary draw up."

Hughes handed the sheriff a sheet of paper. Donaldson scanned it, shoved it under a paperweight, and thanked Hughes.

"Perhaps you'd like to hang around for a few minutes," he suggested. "One of those people might want to retain you." He waved at the others.

"I do not handle criminal cases, if that is what you mean!" Hughes arched his fine eyebrows, deliberately closed his brief-case, and walked toward the door.

I looked at Donaldson. He nodded. I opened the door and let Hughes out.

The sheriff questioned young Witherbee next.

"Do you know what Mrs. Witherbee

intended to put in her will?"

Frederick's voice was low.

"No—that is—" he stammered, then looked defiantly at Donaldson. "She told me that she intended to leave me a trust fund."

"And you were in a hurry to get it, so you killed her?" Donaldson's voice grew suddenly loud and booming.

"I did not!" Freddy stood up.

"You thought she had already made the will, and you were tired of asking her for every penny, so you fed her arsenic. Isn't that the truth?"

"It's a lie! I knew that she had not drawn up her will." The young man spoke steadily.

"Then, why did you steal the body last night?" Donaldson shot the question at him. "We know it was you who delivered it to the crematory."

Young Witherbee's defiance broke down.

"Yes, I doped that coffee with a sleeping powder," he admitted. "I wanted to have an autopsy performed. I didn't believe that she had died a natural death."

Miss Delaney jumped up suddenly. She faced the sheriff, her eyes blazing defiantly.

"He's lying to protect me! I won't stand for it. I was the one who put that sleeping pill in your detective's coffee. I planned the whole thing!"

CHAPTER V

TOO MANY CONFESSIONS

DONALDSON looked bewildered. It was time for me to have my say again. I pointed my finger at the girl.

"Look here, Miss Delaney, it's nice of you to try and protect Freddy, but you can't get away with it. You aren't strong enough to have lifted that body out of the casket and put me in its place. You forget that I weigh a hundred and seventy pounds."

She stamped her feet again.

"I don't care how much you weigh! I did it!"

"She did nothing of the sort, Sheriff," Freddy broke in again. "I was all alone."

Before Donaldson had any opportunity to ask another question, there was another interruption. This time it came from the Sourpuss. In his most dignified manner, he faced the sheriff.

"They are both telling untruths, Sheriff," he intoned. "Each one thinks the other may have some guilty knowledge. The truth of the whole matter is that I stole Mrs. Witherbee's body. I doped that coffee. I put Mr. Anderson in that coffin. I screwed the lid down lightly, so that he would not suffocate. If you want any proof or it, the mere fact that I later tried to hold him up should be sufficient."

"Why would you steal the body?" I asked. "You don't stand to gain anything by Mrs. Witherbee's death?" I was surprised at his confession.

"I knew that she had been murdered," said Sourpuss. "Mr. Frederick and Miss Delaney were acting suspiciously. I was afraid that one or the other of them might have committed the crime. In order to cover up for them, I stole the body and delivered it to the crematory. I impersonated Mr. Frederick, and—"

"How did you expect to cover them up by doing that?" I demanded.

"I had intended to call the crematory later in the morning and order them to go ahead with the cremation. I knew that there could be no autopsy after that had been done. Then Dr. Knight's diagnosis could no longer be disputed."

Sourpuss never for a moment forgot that he was a butler. His whole tone was courteously correct.

"Thank you, Peters," Miss Delaney said softly.

"No thanks due. I'll never forget how you nursed my mother." Sourpuss now

looked positively human.

"It's no use, Peters!" Freddy blazed up. "I drugged the detective and took Mother's corpse from the funeral parlor. I can't let you take the blame for me."

The girl walked over to him and took his hand. She turned to me. "Can't you see that they are both trying to protect me?" she asked. "I tell you, I planned the whole thing. Neither of them had anything to do with it."

I shook my head. "It won't do, Miss Delaney. It was a man who delivered the body to the crematory."

"Yes, I hired him to help me." She flushed lightly and hung her head. Any fool could see that she was lying.

"Who helped you?" I persisted.

"I'd rather not say."

ALL this time, while the three of them were trying to shoulder the blame, Jason Witherbee sat quietly on the edge of his chair, hands clasped on his knees. Occasionally, he started to get up, then sat back again. Donaldson looked from the three confessed criminals to me, then back again, with a puzzled frown.

"Lock the three of them up!" he finally exploded. "It's too much for me. We'll let the grand jury decide which one of them did it."

I felt it was timed sufficiently.

"Sheriff," I said, "there is no use keeping up this farce. They are all innocent."

Donaldson tried to speak. He was visibly perplexed by all those unexpected confessions. Evidently, even with so many interruptions, he had been able to read my report carefully. He sputtered. I grinned at him, and waved him back into his chair.

"Calm yourself, Chief. I'll explain."

"But—but—" Donaldson tried to get hold of himself. "You say yourself that Freddy was the one who stole the corpse."

"Sure, that's right, too. Freddy suspected murder. He swiped the corpse, then got

scared. His attempt to have an autopsy performed was only a stall. He knew that no doctor would do it for him. He meant all along to deliver the body to the crematory for cremation. You see, he suspected his fiancée might have poisoned the old lady. He wanted to cover her up, and at the same time be in the clear himself. Isn't that so, Freddy?"

Freddy nodded dumbly.

There was a sudden rapping at the door. I opened it a crack. A bunch of reporters were in the hall, pencils poised.

"When do we get the story?" one of them yelled at me.

I closed the door and looked at Donaldson. He had regained his equilibrium. He nodded to me.

I swung the door wide open, and they swarmed inside. For a while, the room was lit with the flares of flashlight bulbs. When the newshawks quieted down, Donaldson told them the whole story, leaving out the fact that I had been on watch when the corpse had been stolen. The reporters got the idea that it had been taken from an unguarded room.

I nodded my thanks to the chief, but grinned wryly as he pompously analyzed the case, consulting my report from time to time, like a politician with his ghost written speech.

Of course, I had relinquished the credit to him, so he would be re-elected. Still, it rankled me.

"As soon as I discovered that Mrs. Witherbee had been murdered, I started a quiet, but thorough investigation," his voice boomed on. "I learned that she died without leaving a will. Her adopted son might have killed her, thinking she had already drawn it up, and he would inherit. The same might be true about her niece. They would have been financially independent for life. But if she actually made the will, her husband would have been left penniless. According to this

memorandum, she intended to cut him off with the proverbial dollar."

"But she couldn't do that," one of the reporters argued. "How about dower rights?"

"You'd better read up on that again, son." Donaldson was smiling a self-satisfied smile. "In Florida a wife may disinherit her husband, but he can't cut her off."

WITHERBEE stood up. His moustache seemed to bristle more than ever, but his haggard face had a resigned look.

"If she had made that will I would have been left out entirely," he admitted bitterly. "The only way I could inherit her fortune was to prevent her from filing it."

Donaldson pointed at him with his sturdy accusing finger.

"So you murdered her!"

The old man nodded. He seemed to age suddenly under the blow of direct accusation.

Donaldson rubbed his palms. At last he had his real confession.

"According to Florida state law, when a person dies without leaving a will, estate goes to the surviving spouse, and the lineal descendants," triumphantly he rubbed it in. "They had no children, so Witherbee would have inherited it all. Did you get it straight, gentlemen?"

The reporters stopped scribbling, folded their paraphernalia, and noisily left the room.

I turned to Jason Witherbee. He had already regained his composure. With mocking politeness, he held his wrists up. I slipped the bracelets on.

After I locked him up, I came back for a final word with the chief. "I turned Freddy and Sourpuss loose," he said. "No sense in prosecuting them."

He pumped my hand.

"How did you manage to get him so fast?" he asked. "Just in time for the final edition."

"I nearly didn't get him at all, the way

those two lovesick kids kept on lying,” I admitted. “They were trying so hard to cover one another up. She knew he’d swiped the body, but didn’t know why. He suspected that she might have been the one who gave the old lady the arsenic. Between them, they almost messed up the whole case, but fortunately old Witherbee gave himself away twice.

“First—his excuse for having an officer to watch the body. That was too phony. He wasn’t concerned about that silver casket. He was afraid either the boy or Sourpuss suspected the real cause of his wife’s death and would try to have an autopsy performed. Then there was his sudden change in burial plans after I recovered the corpse. Why should he be suddenly so anxious for a cremation? Because he knew that would do away with any possibility of a coroner’s examination.”

“Good work, Anderson!” applauded the chief. “Sometimes I think you have the right to be so blamed conceited.”

I ignored his dirty crack.

“Say, I thought I was supposed to be off today,” I said. “How about it?”

“Oh, get out! Vote tomorrow, then take the rest of the week off.”

He handed me a smoke. I smelled at it, and tossed it back on his desk. It was one of his political cigars.

Tuesday I went fishing. On the way home I stopped at the corner store, bought a quart of cold beer, and a magazine. Then at home, after taking a shower, I put on a pair of shorts, opened the beer, threw away the magazine, turned on the radio and settled down to listen to the election returns.

Yes, Donaldson was reelected.