



The Corpse From Reno

By John L. Benton

Reporter Dave Bruce Meets the Deadline for Solving a Mystery of Blackmail and Murder!

CHAPTER I

EXIT A BLACKMAILER

DAVE BRUCE settled back in his swivel chair and cocked both legs on the corner of the desk. He regarded the man on the other side of the desk with a dour expression, then threw the several sheets of paper on the blotter pad before him.

"Yes, I'm a newspaper reporter," he said, "and newspapers like to print news. I said news, not dirt. Our sources of information are many and varied. We tell the truth and are proud of it. But when it comes to dealing with scoundrels, we draw the line. Take your written evidence, Mr. Quigg, and on your way across the street, drop it into the sewer and jump in yourself. You ought to get along fine with the bacteria down there. That's all. Get the devil out of here."

The man across the desk jumped to his

feet and grabbed the papers as if they were a million dollars in cold cash. He hugged them against his chest.

"Newspapers are supposed to print news, good and bad!" he said defiantly. "Anything that will interest the public is news. Lots of papers began by printing sensational stories and this story I have is one of the most sensational any paper ever laid their hands on."

Dave Bruce grimaced. "Look here, Mr. Quigg, you're a blackmailer. A sadly frustrated blackmailer without the amount of brains your intended victim has. You're the type of person who drives people to suicide, to mental depression. You break up families and cause sorrow that can never be cured. You seize a man's heart and soul and squeeze them until they bleed money. But this time you're licked, and I don't know why I'm not calling the police to make a pinch."

Quigg, short, slim and thin-faced, gave

him a nasty smile. A peculiar sort of humor, for his mouth wasn't built to smile. It was nothing more than a thin slit across his face.

"You admit that Andrew Dutton is news," Quigg said. "That anything Andrew Dutton does or has happen to him is news."

"Of course I admit that," Dave Bruce retorted angrily. "But you're asking me to print a story to the effect that Andrew Dutton is bigamously married, that his first wife still lives, that she has married again too. That isn't news. It's an unfortunate occurrence in a man's private life and I'll have nothing to do with it. You demanded that he pay for your silence and he refused. He'd have nothing to do with you. So you came here, to make him pay by suffering unwholesome publicity. Are you getting out, or do I throw you out?"

"I'll go," Quigg snapped. "Sure I'll go—to every other newspaper in town. Somebody will print it. I ain't asking money."

"And before you leave this building, I'll telephone every editor and have them sick the dogs on you," growled Bruce. "In one minute I'll lose my temper completely."

QUIGG seemed to think that might happen, because he made a hasty retreat, still clutching those papers against his chest. Bruce arose and opened two windows. He had an idea the office was contaminated. Then he started telephoning other editors and reporters. Quigg wasn't going to get that story published. Not about Andrew Dutton.

Dave Bruce didn't even know Dutton. But he did know that Dutton had built a charity wing to the local hospital, that he donated his time and money to all worthy causes, and that his life was exemplary. He was successful to an astonishing degree, and just as honest. If he had been married before and had married again without benefit of divorce, that was his affair to straighten out. But no frustrated blackmailer was going to peddle that story. Not to any newspaper Dave Bruce worked on.

A half-hour passed, which Bruce spent writing an obit on a man who wasn't dead yet, but his chances of living were slim. There was an invitation on Bruce's desk from the prison warden inviting him to attend the execution. Dave Bruce had never seen one and he had no desire now to attend any of them.

He looked up from his typewriter to see bulky Sergeant Connelly of Homicide approaching his glass-enclosed office. Connelly knew everyone and waved to the reporters who hailed him, but the detective's face was grim.

"Hi," Bruce said, and grinned. "Park and give me the lowdown on the latest murder, Sarge. Things have been kind of slow lately. You fellows falling down on the job?"

Connelly laughed as he sat down.

"Well, you see, Dave," he said, "we're handicapped. We've got to wait until somebody is knocked off. Sometimes that happens so fast we can't keep up, and then again we can take it easy. You had a visitor a little while ago. Little guy who looked like a combination of Uriah Heep and Herr Goebbels?"

"You describe him rather well," Dave Bruce said, as he nodded. "Yes, he was here. Don't tell me he took those papers to the police and wanted the certain gentleman they concerned locked up?"

"Well no, not exactly," Connelly said. "The police came to him, but he didn't tell us much. A bit of trouble with his throat. Somebody slit it about twenty minutes ago—in the alley right behind this building."

Bruce sat bolt upright. "No! You're kidding."

"You can take a run over to the morgue and see for yourself if you like," Connelly grunted. "I'm assigned to the job of finding out who slit him. One of your copy boys happened by and remarked that the guy had been visiting you a short time ago. That's why I came. Now suppose you tell me what he

wanted and what's all this talk about his going to the police concerning a certain gentleman."

Bruce slowly tapped a cigarette on the edge of his desk.

"Sarge," he said after a moment, "I don't know that I should tell you, even though I also realize I must. That man's name was Quigg. Jeremy Quigg, I think he said. He came here and wanted me to print a story about someone. A particularly nasty story about this person's past life wherein he seems to have made a mistake or something. I gathered that Quigg had tried to blackmail this person, been told to go to the devil, and he was trying to get the story printed. Just to show the man he couldn't tell Quigg off. Do you follow me, Sarge?"

Connelly nodded heavily. "Yes, sure I do. Quigg was murdered. It happened mighty fast. He was seen leaving this building. Then he disappeared all of a sudden. Somebody had grabbed him, yanked his carcass down that alley and into a deep delivery doorway. One slice of the knife and Quigg was a goner. Now suppose you tell me who this gent was that Quigg tried to blackmail."

"I shouldn't," Bruce warned.

"Don't get stubborn," Connelly said pleasantly. "This is murder, and murder always has a reason. This man he tried to blackmail has an excellent motive. Give, Davie."

Dave Bruce shrugged. "You're right, of course. I'll trade. For his identity I want the low-down. So I can write a story. I know you'll come through. And so—the man is Andrew Dutton. THE Andrew Dutton."

Connelly gulped. "No kidding! That's going to make it tough. Especially on me. Why, Dutton paid all my wife's expenses a couple of years ago when I wasn't too well off and she needed a lot of hospital care. Dave, are you sure?"

"Positive. Didn't Quigg have papers on him pertaining to Dutton's past?"

"He was stripped of everything," said Connelly. "Not even a match in his pockets.

Dave, I've got to see Dutton. Suppose he gives me a big yarn about this, saying that he knows nothing concerning it? What'll I do? Browbeat a guy like him?"

"If Dutton tells you he didn't kill Quigg, I think you can believe him," Bruce said.

"Can I, though? That's the big question, Dave. You see, when I pulled up in the squad car I saw Andrew Dutton walking fast down the street. I had a good look at him. There was no mistake."

Dave Bruce whistled. "It's your headache, Sarge. I'll probably see Dutton myself as soon as possible. This is going to make an awful mess and he doesn't deserve it. Thanks for coming. Now I've got a story to write. How about those details?"

BRUCE made notes as Connelly talked, Then he transcribed them into an interesting story, but left out all reference to Quigg's visit to the office and his motives for that visit. Dave Bruce wanted to talk with Dutton before he went any further.

He slipped out of the office before his city editor could spot him. By now the news of Quigg's visit must have gone all over the place. Bruce would have to tell all soon, but until he knew where Dutton stood, he wanted to keep what he did know to himself.

He climbed aboard his somewhat rickety coupe and drove to Dutton's home. It was on the East Side. One of those four-story private dwellings that don't look like much from the outside, but which are veritable palaces within.

A butler, not stony-faced or terribly formal let him in. The butler asked him to wait, and a moment later returned to escort him into the living room where Andrew Dutton sat alone, rotating a highball glass between his fingers. Bruce noticed that the glass contained a healthy hooker of straight whisky.

"I've been expecting you." Dutton shook hands without arising. "I know he went to your office. I followed him there. I know he is

dead, that he has been murdered, and that I will probably be at the very top of any list of suspects. In fact, I've been wondering what has been keeping the police."

Bruce sat down. "They'll be here soon, sir," he said. "I want you to know this. Quigg told me the whole story, showed me the evidence he had, and I told him to go to the devil. I didn't know he would take me up on it quite so literally. He's dead, with a sliced throat. That means this whole mess is going to become public. If he hadn't been killed, I'd have forgotten the incident."

Dutton took a sip of his drink. "I didn't think a newspaper would print that stuff," he said thoughtfully. "Oh—mind you, it's perfectly true. I'm at fault, in a way. Naturally I'd like to present my side. Quigg came here, showed me the proof and demanded money. The alternative was publicity. I'd never pay blackmail. Wouldn't even consider it."

"You're a wise man," the reporter commended. "You were married before then?"

"Yes. To a woman named Mary. That was twenty-three years ago. We were happy enough. I wasn't wealthy then, but I was getting started. My work entailed a great deal of travel. This particular night we were caught between cities and we lodged at a small frame hotel. It burned down during the night. I awoke. Mary wasn't in the room.

"I looked for her until the flames threatened to sear me. Then I jumped from a second-story window. Mary was nowhere about. In the morning when the ashes cooled, they found evidence that a woman had been burned to death. Mary was the only woman unaccounted for. I buried that woman, grieved over her. I honestly was certain Mary was dead."

"And she isn't." Dave Bruce sighed. "But it was a natural mistake. How did Quigg hope that would make you pay up?"

Dutton looked into the bottom of his glass "There was some talk that I'd set the building

on fire purposely," he said slowly. "To kill her. We hadn't been getting along. Mary was—well, to put it mildly, she liked fun. She spent money faster than I could make it, got into scrapes. I suppose I hated her. Quigg had no evidence as to that, but he knew the whole story."

From where he sat, Bruce could look out onto the street. He saw that a detective cruiser had pulled up and that Sergeant Connelly was getting out.

"The police are here," he said. "Before they butt in, tell me where your first wife is. If you know. Frankly, Mr. Dutton, they're going to make an arrest. The whole thing will come out. I want to reach your first wife before anyone else does. She may have the answer to this."

"You're going to help me?" Dutton seemed amazed.

"Why not?" Bruce asked. "You've spent the last five or six years helping everyone else. Sure I'm a reporter. I'll publish the whole story of this, but I want it to be the truth and told from both angles. I don't think you murdered Quigg, even though you were seen in the vicinity where the murder was committed."

Dutton closed his eyes, as if he had been slapped hard across the face.

"Do they know that already?" he asked. "Yes, I was there. I told you I followed Quigg. I wanted to see what he'd really do, so I could prepare my defense. I waited outside the building. When he emerged, I could tell by the expression on his face that he hadn't had much luck. I left almost immediately."

"That wasn't soon enough," Dave Bruce said. The door buzzer was sounding. "Tell me how to get out of here without the police seeing me. I need a head start."

CHAPTER II

BLOODY EVIDENCE

ANDREW DUTTON gave Bruce directions, adding the address of his first wife. The reporter was passing through the kitchen as the butler admitted Connelly and another detective.

Bruce went directly to his car, studied the address Dutton had given him and drove there at once. It was across the river, in a quiet suburban section. The house was modest, neat and tidy-looking. Dave Bruce rang the bell.

A woman with gray hair opened the door. She wore gold-rimmed glasses, seemed to be quite intelligent, and gave an excellent impression.

"Is your name Mary?" Bruce asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Mary Marley. I don't seem to know you."

"My name is Dave Bruce. I'm a reporter. May I come in, Mrs. Marley? It's very important. About—your first husband."

One hand flew to her throat. "You mean—Andrew?" she gasped.

Dave Bruce nodded. "Nobody else."

He followed her into a neat little living room. There was a man about her age playing solitaire near the further window. He removed shell-rimmed glasses and arose. He was about six feet tall, angular and thin.

"This is my husband," Mrs. Marley said. "Sig, this man is a reporter and he's here about Andrew. I've been—afraid of this for a long time. Terribly afraid."

Sig Marley scowled. "Before you speak your piece, Mr. Bruce, and ask a lot of questions, let me say this. My wife and I were married fifteen years ago. She told me all about Andrew Dutton, but she assumed he was dead, that he had been trapped in a hotel fire. She, herself, nearly succumbed. In fact, she forgot who she was from the shock. They found her, several days later, wandering around a city three hundred miles from the scene of the fire."

"But you certainly tried to find your husband when you recovered your memory?" Bruce asked the woman.

"Oh yes," she said. "Of course I did. I went back to the town. They told me a body had been found in the ashes. At first, they thought it was that of a woman but a further examination proved it was a man. No one seemed to know Andrew, so I assumed it was his body. There had been a ring on the dead man's finger. The stone had come out of it, but I was sure I recognized the ring as Andrew's.

"I went away. The body had already been buried. I married Sig some time later. Two years ago we moved here. Sig's business required that he live close to New York. I often saw the name of Andrew Dutton, but never any photographs of him. I didn't even suspect he was the Andrew Dutton who had been my husband."

The reporter shook his head slowly.

"Dutton thought that body in the ruins was yours," he said. "He also married again and has become a wealthy man. Mrs. Marley, today Dutton is an important person. He is noted for his philanthropies and his goodness. His wife is a woman of considerable standing. Now it seems both you and he are bigamously married."

"Yes," she said. "I know. That's why I kept quiet about it. Very quiet. I wanted nothing of Andrew's. Not a penny. Sig has enough, and I love him more than I ever loved Andrew. I wanted to keep things as they are now. Andrew never harmed me. We were both honestly mistaken, that's all. I'm glad he isn't dead, but it certainly complicates things."

"It a mess," Sig Marley agreed. "I don't see any way out of it now that the newspapers have hold of the story. Look here, Mr. Bruce, do you think the public of this great nation would miss a great deal if they never knew?"

Bruce drew a long breath. "The public is going to hear all about it," he said, a little grimly. "Unfortunately, someone else knew the story and went to the trouble of getting certified copies of the marriage certificate and statements from people who knew you and

Andrew, Mrs. Marley. This man Quigg tried to blackmail Andrew, and was thrown out of Dutton's place. He came to the newspaper where I work and tried to peddle the story. He got thrown out again."

"But if you wouldn't print the story, will any other paper?" Marley asked.

"Quigg is dead," Bruce explained. "He was murdered two minutes after leaving our office. The incriminating papers were stolen from his body and Andrew Dutton is going to be arrested for the murder."

Mary Marley stood up quickly.

"Sig, I've got to go to him!" she exclaimed. He may need help. I must go!"

"I'll go with you," Sig Marley said.

DAVE BRUCE left quietly, but, as he drove away, he was overtaken by a car with Marley at the wheel and Mary Marley beside him, pale and worried-looking. The reporter sighed. Two happy families were going to be broken up by this.

It could so easily have been solved by cooperation, too. There could have been a divorce, then Dutton could have remarried his present wife and Mary Marley could have remarried the man she married fifteen years before.

Bruce drove back to Dutton's place. Perhaps the present Mrs. Dutton could be of some help. But when Bruce got there, reporters were having a field day. Mrs. Dutton seemed either to have thrown the house open to them or they had forced their way in. Photographers were snapping shots of her and of her twenty-four or twenty-five-year-old son by a former marriage.

With Dutton's arrest he had ceased to be an important and charitable man who commanded respect. He was just an accused murderer now.

Dave Bruce avoided the excited group, slipped quietly down the hallway and went upstairs without being seen. He turned once and looked down at Mrs. Dutton. She was

white-haired and answered perfectly to the one-word description of "patrician." She was slim, a handsome woman, and in the face of the barrage of questions, she conducted herself coolly.

Bruce entered one of the upstairs rooms at random. It appeared to be Dutton's stepson's quarters for there were college banners, slightly faded, on the walls. The reporter wanted to know something about this young man. He hadn't been especially attracted to the fellow who seemed to be sullen and overbearing.

Dave Bruce excused his curiosity and his present somewhat burglarious activities with the mental reservation that he was trying to help Dutton. He opened several bureau drawers. In one he found six pairs of dice. They were cleverly made and as crooked as a pig's tail. There were cards, too, with tiny indentations so that anyone in the know could use his fingers to read them. Arthur Dutton—the young man had taken his step-father's name—it seemed, was a cheat.

Bruce put everything back carefully, passed into another room which he decided was Dutton's upstairs study. It was equipped with a large desk and some worn furniture. He strolled into the bathroom, adjoining it. There was a crumpled towel in the basket. He picked it up. The towel was slightly pink in spots, but there was one definitely blood-red mark on the edge of it. The soap had been used recently, for it was still damp.

Frowning, the reporter went back to the study. He saw the fireplace and noticed ashes in the grate. Ashes—and a bit of charred, half-burned cloth. It seemed to be the cuff of a man's shirt. It was almost buried under the other ashes.

He didn't touch that, but knelt to examine it more carefully. He noticed that one side of the fireplace grate was covered with soot.

Lighting a match, he held it into the chimney and peered up it. He reached behind the damper he saw there and removed a short-

handled, thin-bladed knife. It was bloodstained and sharp as a razor.

Dave Bruce's eyes widened in surprise. All this looked as if Dutton had killed Quigg, had tried to hide the evidences of his crime, and not done any too well at it. Undoubtedly his hands and shirt cuff had become bloody. Slicing a man's throat is a bloody business.

Something about that fireplace, though, made the reporter pause in his first impulse to consider Dutton guilty. He pursed his lips, frowned in deep thought, and had unconsciously stowed the knife in an inner pocket when a voice behind him demanded irately:

"What the devil are you doing here? Does trouble in a home mean that reporters can snoop as they like?"

Bruce turned quickly. Arthur Dutton had slipped quietly into that room. The reporter wondered how long he'd been there.

"I'm sorry," Bruce apologized. "Believe me, I was only trying to help your stepfather. I'm the reporter that blackmailer visited just before he was killed. I talked to your stepfather before he was arrested. I don't think he killed Quigg, and I want to prove it."

"We have police for that purpose," Arthur snapped. "Personally, I'm under the impression you'd like nothing better than to pin the crime on my father. It would make sensational stories for days on end. Get out of here! If you come back, I'll see that you are arrested."

"Okay," Dave Bruce snapped. "I know I'm wrong, and you can believe what you like. But I'll add one thing. It's plain to see that Dutton is only your step-father. If an ounce of his blood ran in your veins, you'd at least have a tendency toward being a gentleman."

YOUNG DUTTON doubled up his fists and advanced a pace or two. Then he came to a slow halt. Something told him this lean grim-faced reporter could not only take it,

but could hand it out in generous quantities. He turned sharply and walked away.

Dave Bruce left the house, sat in his car for fully half an hour, and tried to puzzle it so all out. Dutton certainly had had a motive for killing Quigg. He had had the opportunity as well, and now there was the bloody towel, the burned shirt sleeve and the concealed knife.

The only thing that kept Bruce from jumping at the inevitable and apparent conclusion were two items. The ashes in the fireplace—and the fact that Dutton was a smart man. Much too smart to dispose of incriminating evidence in such a slipshod fashion.

The reporter realized that the only man who could explain these things, or deny them, was Dutton himself. He drove to Police Headquarters where he encountered a little trouble in gaining admittance to Dutton's cell. But he wangled it by sending in his name through a genial turnkey and getting Dutton's permission.

Dutton sat on the edge of the wooden pallet, looking none too comfortable. He puffed on an expensive Havana and greeted Bruce with a half-hearted smile.

"Odd place to find me, isn't it?" he asked. "Have you discovered anything? I felt sure you wouldn't believe me guilty."

"I discovered a great deal," Dave Bruce said slowly. "I talked to Mary, your first wife. She's happily married, and believed you had died in that hotel fire. She wants to help you. Did she come here?"

"No." Dutton shrugged. "What could she do anyway? I expect, being a woman, she'll go to my wife and try to comfort her. How did Mary look?"

"Fine," Bruce told him. "She's slender still, and must have been very pretty when she was younger. She wears gold-rimmed glasses now. She lives in a neat little house just outside of Windhurst. Her husband appears to be a quiet, home-loving type of man."

"She was pretty," Dutton said musingly. "And she always had trouble with her eyes. I'm not surprised at the glasses. I tried to get her to wear them, but she was a bit sensitive. Thanks for breaking the news to her. I know you did it tactfully."

Bruce winced. "Perhaps I did, but I can't be tactful with you, Mr. Dutton. I prowled through your house. Your step-son is—well, mildly, a cheat."

"You discovered that, eh?" Dutton frowned darkly. "Do me a favor and say nothing to my wife. The boy is headstrong, a spendthrift and he refuses to work, but she thinks he is an ideal young man. Like all mothers she will be the last person to learn that her son isn't exactly what he appears to be. I've known for some time."

"That isn't all," Bruce went on. "In the bathroom off your study I found evidence that someone had washed up there. Washed blood off his hands. I discovered the ashes of a man's shirt in the fireplace grate and, hidden in the chimney, I found this."

Bruce extended the blade. Dutton looked at it for a full minute, then his shoulders sagged. He eyed the tip of his cigar for another full minute before he spoke.

"How much can I trust you, young man?" he finally said. "I mean, how far would you go for me? On the basis of what I have tried to do for people? I can't be all bad, you see."

"Right now," Dave Bruce said, "I think I'd go the limit, sir. That evidence could have been planted."

"No," Dutton said. "I put the knife in the chimney myself. I killed Quigg. I had to. He was on his way to ruin my life. But I don't want this known yet. I must get out of here for a little while. It can be managed. My attorney is working on it now. Just keep my secret, and when I'm ready to give myself up, I shall make certain you get the exclusive story. Will you do this for me?"

Dave Bruce looked at Dutton hard, sizing the man up once more after this amazing

confession. Dutton looked back at him, candidly, straight in the eyes. In a moment Bruce nodded.

"Sure I'll do that, sir," he agreed. "Especially now, since I know very well you're lying to protect someone. My guess is that it's Arthur. He isn't worth it, but that's your business. I'll see you later, Mr. Dutton, and you can trust me. Just don't do anything rash."

Dutton did not reply.

CHAPTER III

PARK BENCH MURDER

DAVE BRUCE banged on the cell door, was released, and in a short time he was back in his office writing the story of Jeremy Quigg's murder. Or that part of it which he chose to write. For the first time in his reportorial career, he held something back—Dutton's confession, because he didn't believe it. Not a single word of it.

Bruce passed his story over to the city desk, lit a cigarette and leaned back to contemplate all the angles. He eliminated Dutton entirely. The man was not a killer. Nothing would have made him take a human life.

The reporter considered Mary Marley and her husband, Sig, for a moment or two, but decided they could hardly be involved. If Mary Marley had wanted to she could have simply gone to Dutton, announced that she claimed a share of his money and got it. What could she have hoped to gain by having Quigg murdered?

Arthur Dutton was a headache. To Bruce it was painfully clear that the elder Dutton had confessed to the murder solely to keep the blame from being pinned on the shoulders of his step-son. Not so much for Arthur's sake as for his mother's. By this ruse, Dutton had probably hoped to prevent Dave Bruce from delving any deeper into the mess.

Jeremy Quigg, however, was the chief puzzle. Who was he, really? Where had he obtained his information and those incriminating documents? Was he a professional blackmailer, or had he stumbled on the evidence and tried his hand at living without working? Dave Bruce felt he had to know more about Quigg.

He telephoned Sergeant Connelly who told him that Quigg had lived in a rooming house on Ellis Place. Number 27.

"We went through his room," Connelly said, "but there was nothing there. By the way, Dave, Dutton just got out. He hadn't been indicted by the grand jury, so his lawyers produced a habeas corpus. With anyone except Dutton it wouldn't have worked, but influence and Dutton's reputation did the trick. We had nothing too definite on him, anyway, of course. No eye witnesses. Purely circumstantial, and the fact that he had a motive."

"Do you still believe in his innocence, Sarge?" Bruce queried.

"I'm not so sure now," Connelly replied slowly. "Not sure at all. You learn anything else?"

"Nothing," Dave Bruce lied. "I hunted up Dutton's first wife and broke the news to her."

"Yes, I know. She went to Dutton's house and talked to his present wife. Seems like a nice person—his first wife—anxious to straighten things out. She could make a lot of trouble for Dutton, you know. Keep me posted if you find anything, Dave."

The reporter hung up and thought of the knife in his pocket. He had wrapped it in a handkerchief to preserve fingerprints, but he realized that the chances of there being any were slim. He put it far back in a drawer of his desk, and ripped the page off his note pad, on which he had written the late Quigg's address. Half an hour later he was bribing the landlady to let him inspect Quigg's quarters.

She preceded the reporter up the narrow staircase, jabbering as she climbed.

"He wasn't so much," she declared. "Came here five months ago and got behind in his rent right away. I was ready to put him out when he must have made a killing of some kind because he paid up and also gave me three months' rent in advance. Never worked. Slept most of the day and stayed out until all hours."

"Not the kind of a man I like rooming in my house, but you can't be too choosy, I say. Never had any visitors I know of. No phone calls either, and no mail. I don't think he had any friends at all. Anybody who would have been friendly with him would have been of the same stripe. I'm glad he's out of here. Don't mean nothing to me long as he's paid up. This is his room."

"Thank you," Dave Bruce said gravely. "In all my years as a reporter you're the most ideal subject I ever interviewed. Without my asking a single question you have told me a great deal about Mr. Quigg."

"I keep my eyes open and my mouth shut," she said curtly. "Stay out of trouble that way. You can leave when you're ready."

Bruce closed the door and turned on the lights. It was a shabby room, fitted with second-hand furniture which had seen much better days.

The place already had been searched. So much was quite plain, but the reporter sensed that Quigg had been a crafty, sly individual who would know how to hide things. Most of all, Bruce wanted to find out if Quigg's blackmail attempt had been his first one, or if he had been a professional.

HE PULLED bureau drawers completely out and looked into the recesses they fitted. He pulled the window shade off its roller, and even examined the roller. He removed bed coverings and prodded the mattress thoroughly. There was nothing.

He checked through the drawers. In one he found a screw-driver. It seemed to be brand new. Hefting this, Bruce looked around for

something that was screwed down. The window!

He went over to it. The frame was held in place by screws and two of them were freshly scratched. Applying the screw-driver he found that the old frame did not have to be pried away. It loosened as he removed the screws. As the frame fell away, Bruce saw an envelope, folded and jammed behind the pulley ropes. He reached for it, in a moment of triumph—and disaster.

The blow was hard. Sufficient to knock Dave Bruce senseless in an instant, and to bring on an enveloping darkness that lasted for what seemed to be years and years. . . .

When Bruce awoke, he was alone in the room and the possessor of a brand-new headache that reached down from his head to his toes. He slapped cold water over his face, felt a little better, and looked around.

The envelope that had been concealed in the window was, of course, gone. The room door was ajar. Apparently the intruder had been in the room before the reporter had arrived, had heard him coming and taken refuge somewhere else. Then he had waited for an opportune moment to take action.

Dave Bruce patted his pockets. They had been searched, and he was glad that he had left the knife in his office. But why had he been searched? For the knife? Only Dutton knew he had it, although Arthur may have suspected, could even have seen him remove it from the fireplace, Dave reflected. Arthur Dutton was looming more and more as the brains behind all of this.

A glance at his watch told the reporter that he had been unconscious for some time. His office would be wondering what had happened.

He went downstairs. There he met the landlady who seemed surprised he had remained this long and denied that she had let anyone else in.

Bruce asked permission to use the phone and called his paper.

“Come, come,” the city editor chided when he answered. “Why the delay, Dave? Let’s have all the details. This is big stuff and we don’t want to get beat on it.”

“Just what are you talking about?” Bruce asked with a rising note of apprehension.

“Do you mean to tell me you’re not down at Oliver Park?” the city editor barked. “Where Dutton just blew his brains out? Dave, what’s wrong? I gave orders to get you on the job. Where have you been?”

“Sleeping,” Dave Bruce grunted. “I’ll call back as soon as I can.”

His car was still out in front of the rooming house and he drove it to the small public park not far from the slum area where Quigg had lived. There were police cars around, a crowd of curious people, and the morgue wagon was drawn up. Dave saw Sergeant Connelly and hurried over to him.

“Well, I always said you never could tell what a man would do if pressed,” Connelly said. “Whether he is rich or poor. That’s Dutton on the park bench.”

Dave Bruce approached the figure. It was Dutton all right, dressed in old, seedy-looking clothes, and incongruously wearing gloves that must have cost twenty dollars. He had been shot through the left temple. The bench on which he sat was pushed back against some thick and tall bushes. Connelly stepped over to the reporter’s side.

“He was your baby, Dave,” the sergeant rumbled. “You had a lot of confidence in him. So did I, but it’s all pretty clear now. He killed Quigg, knew we’d eventually get the goods on him, and chose this way out of his troubles.”

“I’ll believe that when it’s proved,” Bruce snapped. “Not before.”

“Okay.” Connelly shrugged. “Come over here and I’ll prove it. We’ve got witnesses.”

For Bruce’s benefit three people made practically the same statements they had already made to the police. They had been strolling through the park. They had seen Dutton seated on the bench, had watched him

raise his hand and fire a bullet through his own head. They had seen his arm drop, and heard the gun clatter to the sidewalk.

Three pair of eyes had seen it done. There was a street light not too far away, throwing enough light on the scene so that no one could accuse those witnesses of using too active imaginations.

"Looks like the old boy went a trifle berserk," Connelly went on. "He stopped at a used clothing store and swapped in his expensive clothes for that old bum's suit, the gray shirt and battered hat. He kept only the gloves he had been wearing."

"But he went home after he got out of jail?" Dave Bruce queried.

"Sure he did. Why?"

"Because that's the only place his murderer could have got in touch with him. Sarge, you're all wrong about this."

CONNELLY heaved a deep sigh of despair. "Dave, he was your baby, like I said. Naturally you want to clear him, but how? The evidence is right here. Even men in serious trouble like Dutton was wouldn't commit suicide unless they were guilty. And don't tell me it wasn't suicide."

Dave Bruce walked back to the bench on which the body still sat. He saw that the bench had been moved back against the shrubs. He turned to Connelly.

"I'll prove those people only thought they saw him commit suicide," he said firmly. "First, have those witnesses stand exactly where they were when they saw it. Then give me your service pistol. Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to plug anybody."

Connelly handed over his gun with some doubt written on his broad face. He ordered everyone away from the bench, told the witnesses to take the places where they had been when the shot had been fired. Then Connelly looked for the reporter and couldn't find him.

Suddenly one of the witnesses yelled.

Connelly looked at the body on the bench. It seemed to be moving. One hand was slowly rising, and it held a gun. Connelly's gun. The weapon rose until it was pointed at the lolling head.

"Okay!" Connelly called. "You can come out of those bushes now, Dave. I'm convinced, and I think the witnesses are too."

Bruce broke through the shrubs and handed Connelly his gun.

"Dutton was lured to this particular bench," he said. "He was told to don those old clothes, but to keep his gloves so the person he was to meet would recognize him. Why old clothes? Why, to make it seem as though Dutton wanted to disguise himself, commit suicide, and hope he would never be recognized. That would go with the character of a proud and wealthy man, in great trouble bent on suicide. Just a little touch, but highly effective."

"Who did it?" Connelly asked quickly.

"I don't know yet."

Dave Bruce called the witnesses over.

"I want you to think back hard," he told them. "You saw the dead man's arm raise. But despite the fair amount of light in this spot, it would be difficult to see an arm, darkly clothed, and a hand with dark gloves move much. Maybe you saw a white shirt cuff?"

"Yes!" one of them said. "Yes, I did see a white shirt cuff. But he isn't wearing a white shirt."

"He crossed up the killer by buying an old gray workshirt," Bruce said. "The murderer got him here, as I said. Perhaps he slugged him. At any rate, he waited until some people were fairly close by, then he reached through the shrubs, raised his arm in a position that could look as if it were the victim who moved. He fired the shot, let his arm fall slowly, and dropped the gun. Then he got out of here. He told Dutton to wear gloves because he had to wear them so no fingerprints would be on the gun."

"But who?" Connelly asked again.

"Maybe I'll answer that before long, Sarge. Right now I can't. You might help, though. See if any detectives on your anti-gambling squad can identify Quigg."

CHAPTER IV

OUT OF THE PAST

GOING back to his car, Dave Bruce drove away. He proceeded directly to Mrs. Dutton's home and was instantly admitted. Mrs. Dutton, her son, Arthur, and Mrs. Marley were in the living room.

Mary Marley was crying softly, but Mrs. Dutton was holding up amazingly well. They had already learned the news of Dutton's death. Arthur dispelled any doubts about that.

"It's all your fault!" he stormed at the reporter. "You as good as killed my father. If you and the rest of your kind had let us alone, this could have been settled."

"Arthur," his mother said in a tired voice, "you're wrong, and you know it. This man was trying his best to help. Mr. Bruce, is there anything I can do?"

"Tell me what happened when Mr. Dutton returned home from Police Headquarters," Bruce said.

"Why—he didn't seem overjoyed. It was the first time he ever came in without kissing me, but he had so much on his mind. He went into the study. There was a telephone call for him."

"Ah," Dave Bruce broke in. "Who from? Did he say?"

"No. He only told me he had to go out again, in a hurry, and that I wasn't to worry at all. That everything would come out all right."

"I want you to show me the study where he got the call," Bruce said, and took Mrs. Dutton by the elbow. "Dutton," he said to Arthur, "stay here and keep Mrs. Marley company."

Upstairs, Bruce helped Mrs. Dutton into a chair.

"I just wanted to talk to you alone for a moment," he told her. "How is Mrs. Marley taking all this?"

"She's terribly upset, poor thing," Mrs. Dutton answered. "Andrew, of course, told me about his married life with her. It wasn't very happy, but perhaps they were both at fault."

"And what do you think of her present husband?" Bruce queried casually.

"Why—I haven't met him. She has been here twice, but Mr. Marley simply drove her here and then called for her later. I imagine he feels a bit odd about the way things have turned out."

"I should imagine so," the reporter grunted. "Thanks, Mrs. Dutton."

Before he left the room, he walked over to the fireplace. The ashes and the piece of shirt cuff were still in the grate. He said nothing about them.

Downstairs, he indicated there was little left for him to do.

"Death puts an end to all things," he said slowly. "There will be, of necessity, some unpleasant publicity, but it will blow over soon. I'll tone down the story I have to write now as much as possible. And if I can help either of you ladies, in any way, call on me, please."

But Dave Bruce didn't go to his office. He proceeded straight to the little suburban cottage where Mr. and Mrs. Marley lived. The house was locked and nobody answered his ring. Bruce smashed a low window with his foot, raised the sash, and crawled through. He spent about twenty minutes in the house and emerged with a grim look and a single bit of paper which he had found in a trunk in the attic.

He stopped at a drug store and telephoned Sergeant Connelly, asking him to be at Mrs. Dutton's home as soon as possible, and to make sure everyone stayed there.

Half an hour later, Dave Bruce was admitted to the house. Mrs. Dutton, Mrs.

Marley, and Arthur Dutton all looked at him with considerable worry.

Connelly had some news.

"I had several men assigned to the Vice Squad look over Quigg's body," he said. "They recognized him all right. He was a combination dishwasher and errand boy at a joint called the Cody Club."

"Ever been there, Arthur?" Dave Bruce whirled on the young man.

"Me?" Arthur Dutton colored slightly. "No. No, of course not. I don't frequent dives."

"I see," Bruce said shortly. "Maybe you will tell the truth before we're finished. Mrs. Marley, I don't want to rush you, but when do you expect your husband to call?"

Mrs. Marley looked at her watch. "Why, he should be here soon now. I'd better get ready."

"Wait just one moment," Bruce begged. "I want to ask you a question. Just a single, simple question. You married Mr. Marley at Las Vegas, fifteen years ago. He is the only husband you've had since you believed Mr. Dutton had died?"

"But of course," Mrs. Marley said.

"Then who is the man your marriage license says you divorced? I have that license and you filled it in as a divorced woman. Now isn't it possible that you didn't believe Dutton was dead, and that you went through a legal Nevada divorce which he never even heard about?"

SLOWLY Mrs. Marley got to her feet. "I don't know what you're driving at, young man," she said coldly. "I really don't."

"Then I'll tell you bluntly," Dave Bruce said. "I think you knew Dutton was alive, but you didn't know where, and you didn't care. Fifteen years ago Dutton was practically unknown. He made his fortune over a short period of time, after your marriage to Marley. Do you intend to claim any part of his estate?"

"I do not," Mrs. Marley declared hotly.

"I'd never even given it a thought."

"I'll bet," Dave Bruce said. "But then, you didn't have to think about it. So long as no one knew you'd divorced him, and believed you were his legal spouse, Dutton's estate would go to you automatically. You wouldn't even have to claim it."

Mrs. Marley was crimson. "Do you mean to tell me I had anything to do with this?"

"Everything," the reporter declared flatly. "Helped by Mr. Marley, of course. Here is just how it came about. Not realizing that Andrew Dutton would some day become a rich man, Mrs. Marley divorced him and married Marley. She hasn't the slightest claim to any portion of this estate. But Dutton didn't know he'd been divorced. If she went to him and made a formal demand for money, as his wife, Dutton would have investigated. Perhaps he'd have discovered she divorced him and such chances couldn't be taken.

"Therefore, Jeremy Quigg was turned into a potential blackmailer, and he broke the news to Dutton. Quigg was then murdered. By Mr. Marley or someone he hired for that purpose. Quigg tried to bleed Dutton, found it was impossible, just as Mr. Marley knew it would be. Then he was sent to a newspaper, and was killed as he left.

"It worked better than the Marleys hoped, because Dutton actually followed Quigg and was seen near the scene of the crime. Quigg did, however, leave a letter about the affair. He didn't trust Marley. I almost got that letter, but Marley was just a bit smarter than I was."

"Are you positive of all this, Mr. Bruce?" Mrs. Dutton asked. "It's a dreadful accusation."

"It most certainly is," he agreed. "I first became suspicious when Dutton told me that it had been impossible for him to get along with his wife, Mary. He said she spent too much money. How come she changed so? Now she is a quiet, home-loving woman living in a pretty little bungalow with a devoted husband—who, by the way, doesn't care to

show his face around here. I doubted that Mrs. Marley could have changed so completely. And I also discovered she had been living in that pretty little cottage for only five months.”

“I don’t get it,” Connelly broke in. “If she was divorced, why should she murder Dutton to get his estate?”

“Because it was the only way she could. If Dutton’s death could be properly motivated, with resultant publicity, she could come forward and claim she was his legal heir. Dutton told me that Quigg knew all the details of his first marriage, even to the fact that Dutton was half suspected of killing her by burning down the hotel. Now that happened twenty-three years ago. How would Quigg have found out? I doubt he ever left New York in his life, or had the cash to take a trip further than Jersey City.

“So Quigg must have been told by someone who knew the complete details of the story. Remember that Dutton and Mary were constantly traveling in those days. They would have had few friends, no one close enough to tell their troubles to. Therefore it probably was Mary who told Quigg.

“Now Dutton, if he had known she was alive, could have divorced her quietly. That meant no money, so he had to die. Without suspicion on anyone for his murder. Marley took care of that.

“Mrs. Marley told me that after the hotel fire she suffered from amnesia, came back to the town some days later and was told the body in the ruins might have been that of a man. Maybe Dutton. And he was told they had definitely established the fact that the body was that of a woman. Now even twenty-three years ago medical science was advanced sufficiently so there could be no mistake in the sex. Someone lied, and it wasn’t Dutton. When you encounter one lie, you know there are more.”

“But have you any concrete evidence?” Connelly demanded.

“Yes,” Bruce said. “In the first place,

Dutton acted under a misapprehension. I found evidence that someone had washed blood off his hands in Dutton’s bathroom off the study up stairs. I found the remnants of a shirt cuff that probably had been blood-soaked, in the fireplace.

“But that shirt cuff was half buried in ashes away from the rest of the shirt. Why would it have been if the shirt had merely been thrown into the grate and set afire? It never had burned there. Marley burned it somewhere else, carried the ashes here and dumped them into the grate so that the ashes were on top of the unburned shirt cuff. In the chimney I discovered a knife. I told Dutton this, and he confessed to killing Quigg. Shall I tell you why?”

MRS. MARLEY was getting restless, and her eyes flashed angrily.

“If he confessed, why all this nonsense?” she asked.

“I said Dutton acted under a misapprehension,” Bruce reminded her coldly. “He thought his step-son had killed Quigg. Why? Because Arthur loves money and luxury. So much that he’d have killed Quigg to stop him from taking steps which might mean Arthur would automatically be out of the picture as Dutton’s step-son—and have to go to work. I don’t blame Dutton. Arthur is exactly the type.

“But it wasn’t Arthur. If he had killed Quigg, he’d have destroyed the evidence that was in the fireplace. He saw me looking at it, yet the ashes are still there, so he must not have known they had any significance. What I believe happened was that Marley did a little successful second-story work, got in the house and planted those clues. He hoped to kill Dutton before Dutton was arrested, but he couldn’t get to him. So, after Dutton was released, Marley probably told him he had to pay up or he would tell how Arthur had killed Quigg.

“He ordered Dutton to put on old clothes

and meet him at this certain park bench. Dutton went there, and met death.”

There was a car horn honking in front. Connelly needed no command. He knew what to do. In a moment he returned, holding onto Sig Marley. Arthur Dutton took one look at him.

“He runs that gambling place—the Cody Club!” he exploded.

“I thought so,” Bruce said. “That’s why he didn’t dare show his face here where you could get a look at him. I think you can take them both away, Sarge. One or the other will talk. If they don’t, we have evidence enough anyway. It’s the chair for you, Marley. Oh yes—when you want to give the impression that you are a home-loving peaceful person, don’t play solitaire and deal the cards as only a professional gambler does. I watched you at the house.”

Dave Bruce went into a bit more detail with Mrs. Dutton after the Marleys were removed. Then he took her arm and led her out of the room.

“Your son, Arthur, and I have something to talk about,” he told her.

She smiled nervously. Bruce went back, closed the door and walked over to Arthur Dutton. Without a word he doubled his fist and hit the young man squarely in the stomach.

When he folded, Bruce let him have it on the jaw.

In the hallway, Mrs. Dutton went to the door with the reporter.

“Did you hit him good and hard?” she asked. “Hard enough so he’ll perhaps realize what he’s been when he wakes up?”

“If I didn’t”—Dave Bruce grinned—“send for me and I’ll give him another lesson.”