



WINGS FOR AN ANGEL

By C. S. MONTANYE

The sports writer and dilettante detective battles with fists, wits and guns when the backer of a Broadway show is killed—and a lovely chorine may be handed the rap!

CHAPTER I

LIKE A SNAKE BITE

I DOZED next to Libby Hart in one of the upholstered stage boxes.

Lib was at her polished best, sleek as a yard of silk, gorgeous as the dames you meet in dreams. I decided I wouldn't trade her for any of the starry-eyed babes romping around the stage of the St. Regis Theater, even with the glamorous Swan Millard thrown in.

It was a full dress rehearsal of a limb-and-look opera tagged, "Let's Have Music!" which was to open that night. Libby had had a fling at designing the costumes. Mrs. Hart's favorite daughter had more jobs than an employment agency. Every time I looked around she was doing something else to pay her room rent.

This latest grind was right up her side street. I had only to glance in Lib's direction to see the shine in her dark eyes and the

excitement that parted curved lips roses could have learned something from.

She was loving every minute of it!

The *opus* was being produced by a party entitled Lee Brand. With my inside connections, I knew that Brand didn't have a hot dime of his own on the line. The entire production had been bankrolled by no less than Augustus Gusman, a little guy with a pointed head who, among other things, was a member of the bar, with a law office on lower Broadway.

GUS had a reputation that needed fumigation. His law practise made shysters look like reputable citizens. Gusman specialized in second-story-down clients—those a floor lower than the underworld. Crooks, bigamists, murderers, extortionists and others of the same mixed breed, paid through the nasal appendage for an Augustus Gusman defense.

But he didn't always win. Now and then

he found a jury waterproofed to his tears. Several of Gus's most important customers had been ticketed for the death house up the shining Hudson.

Now, Libby had informed me, Gusman's principal interest, outside of that which the bank wrote in his book, was Swan Millard. Because of a combustible admiration for the honey-haired Miss Millard, Gusman, according to my heartbeat, had upped an even hundred grand to present Swan to the public in a swoon of elegant costumes, scenery and melody.

THE thought was running through my head when the Millard chick, wrapped in an ermine bathrobe, seated herself on a platinum-plated chaise to tonsil something about those early Monday a morning blues.

A whistle shrilled and the director stopped the proceedings.

"Just a minute. You'll have to move that settee down stage. The lighting's wrong. Cut that purple spot and give us a clear amber. The folks who pay six-sixty want to see what the star looks like. Let's try it again."

I looked at Libby. She looked at me.

"Isn't she lovely, Johnny?"

"So is a beef stew. I missed lunch. How about tearing across the thoroughfare and dipping into a trough?"

"Food?" Libby wrinkled her nose. "How can you be so unaesthetic? Your mind should be full of beauty at a time like this."

"It isn't my mind," I told her. "It's my stomach."

I could have added that spending a sunny afternoon in a Broadway playhouse wasn't part of my contract with the *Orbit*. That sheet paid the general overhead for sports reporting. Instead of the St. Regis, I should have been over at Pompton Lakes watching "Silent Sammy" Smith get ready for his slam festival at Madison Square the following Friday eve.

The quiet socker was in the feature event there, a so far three-to-five favorite over his

opponent.

But Libby had cooed in my good ear. She had said something about wanting me to see what clever costumes she had dreamed up. Accordingly, instead of Sammy's training camp, I was staked out at the music temple, having passed up the noon hour feed bag to be on hand for the rehearsal.

"It will be a hit, won't it, Johnny?" Libby whispered, while Swan reached high for a cadenza.

"I wouldn't bet any of my dough," I told her. "Ask Louie Springer."

"Who's he?"

"The paper's first string dramatic critic. Louie," I explained, "bats a thousand in the theater league. He can pick 'em out of a hat—yours or mine."

"It's got to click," Libby breathed. "With all of Mr. Gusman's money at stake—"

"Let's order one, with mushrooms!" I began to drool. "Look honey. I've seen an act and a half, and it's strictly high class. But after all an appetite's an appetite and—"

The lights went on and I broke off. The whistle shrilled again. This time the director didn't like the way the orchestra handled the reprise on Swan's melancholia set to music. He gave the company a ten-minute breather and went into a huddle with the band leader.

I had just about talked Libby into a quick pastrami when I got a flash of a little chorine breaking out of the ranks and bobbing and weaving in the direction of our box.

Her name was Bunny Dunlap. Before she had gone in for uplifting the American stage, Bunny, oddly enough, had manipulated plugs in one of the *Orbit*'s switchboards. Louie Springer had noticed her one day dealing out wrong numbers and decided she should have another line.

So here she was in the new musical and steering straight for me.

"Mr. Castle! I thought it was you from the time I first saw you!"

Bunny dropped anchor. I could feel Libby

stiffen, but I didn't pay much attention. Bunny had a letter in her hand and the kid seemed as nervous and excited as a two-dollar race track bettor with a ticket on a hundred-to-one shot.

Bunny's lips twitched, her blue eyes had a funny, strained look in them and she seemed to be making an effort to keep from shaking off the half-yard of tulle she wore.

I noticed she looked back over her shoulder before she leaned confidentially over the plush edge of the box.

"Mr. Castle! Would you do me a big favor—for old time's sake? Would you keep this letter for me, until later on?"

Before I could say yes or say no she had shoved the envelope she carried into my hand and was sliding apprehensively away.

"Well," I heard Libby exclaim, "I like that! 'For old time's sake.' How old, and what kind of time?"

The envelope was blank. It had been recently sealed. There was still some moisture on the edge of the gummed flap. I put it in my side pocket, wondering what it was all about.

"Johnny!" Libby opened up again. "You're not listening. You said something about a sandwich."

"Come on."

I STARTED to get up, but sat down suddenly as the lobby doors in the back of the playhouse burst open and in walked the local police force.

At least, from the box, it looked like the entire Department. As a matter of fact it was mostly Captain Fred Mullin of Homicide, flanked on one side by Detective Larry Hartley and on the other by Ed Wheeler, who recently had been made a lieutenant!

I stared, for I had not realized that Mullin and his pals were patrons of the arts. The way they busted in and the march down to the footlights, however, had a strange but familiar significance.

More than once in the past I had come to grips with Captain Mullin. Mostly in matters

of murder. The head of Homicide's opinion of me wouldn't have made family reading. My opinion of him couldn't have been broadcast, either. In fact it had always been a case of hate at first glimpse. For both of us.

I gripped the edge of the box, looking and listening. I heard Libby Hart's sigh. I knew what was going through her mind. She was saying to herself, "Here it is again!"

Mullin stopped at the orchestra pit and lifted a hand that looked like a boiled ham.

"Who's the head man around here?" he bellowed, in a voice any actor would have envied. Before he was answered, he continued, "Nobody leaves this here theater! I've got men at all the exits! Nobody moves until I say so—understand?"

In the silence that followed you could have heard a penny drop from a Scotchman's pocket.

Swan Millard broke the quiet. The honey-locked soprano walked down to the footlights, shaded her eyes with a graceful hand and made Mullin the target for her look.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Mullin's jaws sagged. Evidently the full majesty of his position hadn't registered with the charm number peering at him.

He glanced at Hartley. He glanced at Lieutenant Wheeler. Then he began to bristle.

"What's the meaning of it, she says?" he roared. "Murder in one of the dressing rooms and she asks questions!"

I bobbed up like a cork. Libby made a grab to hold me. I slipped past her Fatal Apple nail polish and slid out of the box like a quarter horse leaving the stall gate.

"Johnny!" Libby demanded. "Come back!"

But it was an unfulfilled request, one of the few she ever made, too.

The word "murder" always had a curious effect on me.

Something like being bitten by a snake!

CHAPTER II

EMPTY POCKET

CAPTAIN MULLIN might have had the exits at the St. Regis blocked. But there wasn't a cop at the baize door that led from the dark aisle outside the box directly to the stage.

That door swung shut behind me. I almost collided with a stack of scenery piled twenty feet high. I went around the painted canvas, reaching the backdrop without interference.

The entire company of "Let's Have Music!" had congregated downstage. Even the scene shifters were listening to what Mullin was dealing out. Which left the way clear for me to go up the fireproof stairs leading to the tiers of dressing rooms.

But if there were no members of the law to check me on stage, there were plenty at the first landing. Harrigan, six feet of authority with a badge to back it up, met me at the top of the stairs.

"Just a minute, sonny. Where do you think you're going?"

I knew Harrigan, not well, but too well. A former member of the Riot Squad, he had gone from there to the Bomb Detail and finally into the sheltering arms of Homicide. A couple of times I had steered him on the proper way to lay bets on ice hockey tournaments. So that he could collect.

Harrigan recognized me the next minute. Some of his scorch fizzed out. The big mitt he was about to shove in my face dropped to waist level.

"Hello, Johnny," he grunted.

"One side, pal. Where's the corpse?" I tried to make it sound light and entertaining.

Harrigan looked doubtful. Then he must have remembered the sticks and blades would soon be back at the Garden. He nodded surreptitiously at a dressing room a little way down the tier. It had a gold star on the door.

That meant it was Swan Millard's dugout.

"In there. Make it fast. Mullin'll be around here any minute."

I didn't need a second invitation.

Two other plainclothes men gave me dubious glances, but didn't throw in a stop. I opened the door of the dressing room and walked in on—death!

The victim lay up against the north wall of the room. He was draped out along the surbase. He still wore his hat and a pained expression. There might have been a reason for that. A large circle of gore had welled out on the canary yellow of the room's rug, dyeing it a deep and sullen red.

For a minute the hat kept me from getting a good look. I moved in closer, not touching anything but letting the lights around the triple mirrors of a make-up table supply an unobstructed view.

My second glance brought identification. It hit me all at once, fast and hard. I knew the party pushed up against the wall. So did a lot of other people—characters like Nick Rowen, "Sandy," The Finger, Clifford, Harry Clark Shaffer, bad men Gus Gusman had wept for in the past.

But Gusman was a dead fox now!

I stared briefly at his thin, pinched, sallow face. It was clay gray. I looked at his prominent Adam's apple, jutting out from his pipestem neck like a hot leather in a pickpocket's coat. I let my eyes roam down over his slight, narrow figure and end up at his forty dollar English brogues.

They must have been size 5A and were shined up like a drunk's nose. I took it all in, Harrigan a foot behind me, breathing through his mouth.

"You know this gent, Johnny?"

"Don't you?"

Harrigan scratched his head. "He looks kind of familiar. But the skimmer throws me. I dasn't touch until Doc Brunner steps in. But the expression on your pan says something."

"I'll swap you." I turned around. "Tell me what you know and I'll furnish the

identification.”

Harrigan nodded. He said that about forty minutes before some anonymous somebody had telephoned Headquarters with the tip-off. It sounded authentic, and the main building had radioed one of the district's prowler cars. They took a look and then Mullin summoned his flock and trekked north.

ALL that while I had dozed beside the Aluscious Libby, listening to music and the rumble of my unfed stomach!

“He used to be Augustus Gusman,” I told Harrigan, and the other's ears bent in my direction. “Fond memories of jumped bail bonds, damp handkerchiefs, loopholes and phony alibis.”

Harrigan's mouth opened. “Yeah? I knew I'd seen him somewhere! Well, I'll be—”

He didn't finish. Out on the tier I heard Mullin coming along, flat feet and voice. He bustled in, squinted at me and went as red as a Times Square traffic light.

“Who let *you* in?” Mullin barked.

“It's okay, Captain,” Harrigan hastened to interpose. “We just got an identification from him.”

Mullin glared. His cold, granite-gray eyes, full of dislike and venom, stabbed me like a couple of stilettos. He stuck out his hand-hewn jaw, trying to think up something nasty enough to say. Then what Harrigan had mentioned began to penetrate.

“Who is he?”

The Captain asked it grudgingly. When I tossed off the name and business, Mullin narrowed his eyes and screwed his mouth into a twisted leer.

“Gus Gusman, eh? I never saw him with his hat on before. And without teardrops on that thing he called a face. What did you kill him for, Castle?”

“Strictly for laughs.” I wanted to make it sound humorous. “You know me—a murder a day. Anything for a gag.”

“Yeah?” Mullin uncorked the bottle. “I'm sick and tired of finding you every time somebody gets dumped! You know something. Being a comic won't help you any. I've a good mind to take you downtown and lay a hunk of hose on you!”

“Unfortunately,” I told him, “I've got an atomic alibi. I came here with a lady and I've been sitting in full view of a hundred people since I arrived, in a stage box out front. Put your hose away, Captain. Remember, I represent the power of the press. I might add that I'm here in my official reportorial capacity.”

That should have stopped him, but didn't.

“Yeah?” Mullin encored. “Since when does murder come under the heading of athletic amusements?”

I didn't have to answer that one. The next minute Brunner, bag in hand, blew in and went to work. I retired to the tier outside for a cigarette and the medical examiner's findings.

It wasn't hard to hear the conversation in the dressing room from where I stood.

“Dead about an hour,” Doc Brunner announced, after awhile. “Probably a thirty-eight. Through the jugular. Death was instantaneous. Or should have been. The lead's still in there. I'll have to go fishing later.”

He added something about sending the basket up and left. I still stuck around. Gusman was good for a front page spread. But before I tuned in on the office, and Bill Jamison who took care of the Violence Department for the *Orbit*, I was anxious to pick up some side lights that might help Bill.

Not much developed, however.

What I did learn was that Mitzi, Swan Millard's maid, opening the dressing room door had stumbled in on Gusman and promptly fainted. A scene shifter had seen her and was administering first aid when the two cops in the prowler car had barged in. But, according to my information, neither the scene

shifter nor anyone else at the St. Regis had supplied the tip-off to Headquarters!

I brooded over that. Maybe the murderer? Possibly the killer, after leaving the playhouse? Some gun with a warped sense of sardonic humor, handing the cops the place?

Captain Mullin went into his act. It was all routine. The patter never changed. A quiz program that consumed valuable time and usually turned up little or nothing of any importance. But that was the way he operated and nobody could alter his stereotyped methods.

Yet, oddly enough, Mullin usually bulled his way through to a successful case break. It took time, a lot of ponderous thought and a maximum of luck, but I had to give him his due. In his old-fashioned club-swinging, beat-'em down, bludgeoning manner Mullin crashed through eventually.

His Department had a pretty fair average of solutions to its credit. Though how they were arrived at, the fishy-eyed head man couldn't have told you himself.

MY EARS were still hanging out when the Captain happened to catch a glimpse of me. He broke off his interview to come out on the tier.

"You still around, Castle?" He pulled out a watch some brass works had spent days putting together. He held it up and pointed a stubby finger at it. "You've got three minutes to get the heck outta here—unless you want to be taken in for obstructing justice. What'll it be?"

"Watch your blood pressure, Captain," I murmured, and headed for the stairs.

Down on the stage I remembered Libby. I went through the baize door, but the box we'd sat in was empty. Mullin's men had herded the principals and chorus of "Let's Have Music!" over to one side of the theater, where they could be taken up and interviewed in turn.

I looked over there for a sign of Lib, didn't get one, and steered for the lobby doors.

Five minutes later I was in a corner drug store's telephone booth with Jamison on the other end of the line.

Then I started for the office, walking slowly and thoughtfully. Who had exterminated Gus Gusman? Maybe the Millard rib? She had had plenty of chance, in between costume changes. Undoubtedly she had plenty of reasons, too, even though the shyster had played angel and thousand-granded the show for her.

If the glamorous Swan was innocent, then *who* had done it?

Something hit me like a safe dropped out of a top floor window. I'd completely forgotten the cute little Bunny Dunlap, her shakes, and the letter she had given me to keep for her. All of a sudden I came out of a coma. Bunny's agitation, the way she had looked back over her shoulder, the speed with which she had eased the envelope to me.

From where I stood it began to smell like the little Dunlap babe had been meddling with murder—Gusman's order for a pair of feathery wings!

Quickly I slid a hand down toward my side coat pocket where I had stuck the chorine's envelope for safe-keeping. My cigarettes were there, so were my keys. And three books of matches. But no envelope.

That was gone—definitely and completely—like Gusman's last breath!

Yes, the envelope was gone, but—*where*?

It wasn't likely it had fallen out of my pocket. Had one of the cops lifted it in the dressing room of death? That wasn't much good, either. But if it hadn't dropped out, and if the law hadn't helped themselves to it, how had it gone?

It came like a zigzag of lightning.

I remembered my dream girl stiffening beside me when Bunny had approached the box. I recalled the way Libby had fastened her inquisitive, dark eyes on the envelope. I remembered how she had watched me pocket it, in the right side pocket, the one next to her

chair.

Libby! That, I told myself, must be it. She had done the light-finger work!

At the *Orbit*, I found Jamison had already left for the St. Regis. There was a lot of stuff on my desk marked "urgent." I swept it into a top drawer I and did some hard, fast thinking. That envelope, with whatever it contained, was important. Perhaps Miss Hart didn't realize how much so. Perhaps Libby, in a touch of jealousy, had torn it up and thrown it to the winds. The thought was horrible.

I reached for the desk telephone. That brought the dulcet tones of Beth Wheaton, the Sarah Bernhardt of the Bell System, gurgling in my ear.

"Yes?"

"Beth, do you remember Bunny Dunlap? The gal who used to sit out there beside you, making the same kind of mistakes you do?"

"Wolf!" Beth said.

"You wouldn't happen to know where she lives?"

"*Wolf!*" she repeated.

"Because," I went on, "Miss Dunlap's in a jam, or the reasonable facsimile of one. I've got to see her—and soon—or maybe the police will arrive first."

"Oh, it's that way." There was a minute's delay. "Why don't you try Personnel. They'll have her address on file."

"This is lame brain day." I said. "Thanks for the cue."

CHAPTER III

CALLERS

UPON the third floor, I got what I wanted. That came out as "Bonita Dunlap, Telephone Operator," with an address in the West Seventies. I took a copy of it, tried Libby at her boarding house, found she wasn't there, and decided to make a personal call on the Dunlap chick, after a fast sandwich.

The address tallied with the number on the

double glass front doors of a narrow, mediocre apartment house not too far from Central Park. I supposed that Bunny lived there with her parents, probably supporting them in a style to which they had become accustomed. And there wasn't much chance that she had moved since she had exchanged telephone numbers for song numbers. In rural Manhattan people didn't move, because there was no place to move to.

I found her name easily enough and rode a self-service elevator to the sixth floor. I rang the bell of Apartment 6F. I got immediate service. The door was opened—not by Bunny's wrinkled mother. Nor by a snowy-haired father.

Instead, I looked into a pair of long-lashed, violet eyes. They belonged to a cute little trick with corn-yellow hair, a streamlined figure and a pair of stems made to order for climbing bus steps.

"Miss Dunlap home yet?"

The violet eyes gave me quite a play. A lipsticked mouth went into a turned-up-at-the corners smile.

"No, she isn't. Friend of hers?"

"For years. She used to work on the same paper with me."

"Oh, the *Orbit*." The cute trick registered interest. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. If you'll let me come in and wait for Bunny, I'll give you a copy of my autobiography."

"Sure." She held the door wide. "Any friend of Bunny's is a friend of mine. We share this rathole together. My name's Della Roberts."

I followed her into a cheaply furnished living room that looked as if it I hadn't been dusted since the Great Flood. Articles of intimate apparel were strewn carelessly about. A pair of nylons were drying, pinned to the lower slat of a Venetian blind. Della Roberts pushed some lingerie aside and made room for me on a sofa that sagged in the middle.

"I don't know what time Bunny'll be in,"

she said. "She's rehearsing with the new show at the St. Regis."

"Yes, I know."

"Sometimes she meets her boy friend when she gets through. You know, Joey Andra. He dances at the Silver Drum. Personally, I can't figure what Bunny sees in him. I know when he was running around with me—"

She went on, and on. About Joey Andra. About the uneven course of true love. About the two-timing proclivities of the Broadway male. I listened, thinking.

I had more than a deep-seated hunch that Bunny Dunlap knew something about Gus Gusman's murder. And I had a feeling that the letter she had so hastily asked me to safeguard for her had something to do with the shyster's pass-out. What? The more I thought of it, the more confused and complex it became.

But one thing was sure. I had to see Bunny and before too long.

Della suddenly remembered her manners and went to open a couple of cans of beer. She found an old box of pretzels somewhere, blew the dust off and got real chummy.

We were toasting each other in foam when the doorbell hummed. The yellow-top pursed her red lipsticked mouth.

"That isn't Bunny—unless she's lost her key. Wait'll I go see."

Her heels clicked on the hall floor boards. The lock snapped back and from where I sat on the disconsolate couch I had a triangular view of two callers at the door. Both men.

"No, she hasn't got in yet," Della Roberts was saying. "You friends of hers?"

"Known her for years," one of the pair said. "Mind if we come in and take a look around?"

He followed that up with a push past Della. I set my tankard down as they drifted in. They didn't look good, either of them.

The one who had spoken was a lanky, red-haired man. He puffed on a pipe, curved like a bathing beauty. He had a blank, composed

face, deep-set eyes without warmth or light and a creased, protruding chin.

HE WORE a pale tan gabardine suit that fit without a wrinkle. He looked at me and at about that time I began to register. I'd seen him somewhere before. I had a feeling that he was familiar. I couldn't rest a finger on it, but intuition told me he was somebody who had been in the public eye at a time not too far distant.

His companion was slim and dark, a young man slight as a girl. I noticed his small, delicate hands, velvety eyes and hard little mouth. His black hair was brushed up in a series of tight waves and he smelled of lilac. He was in blue, a red carnation in his lapel.

He looked unhealthy, stealthy and sinister despite his build and smallness.

"My name's Fain," the red-haired man said. "My pal's Eddie Beam. We had a date with Miss Dunlap that she didn't keep. We thought maybe she'd come home."

"Isn't that funny?" Della said it to them but kept looking at me. "This gentleman's waiting for her, too. I wonder where she went."

"Who's 'this gentleman?'" Fain cut in.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you." Della laughed, a trifle nervously. There was something in Fain's voice like a sudden frostbite. "This is Mr. Castle. He's a newspaper man. He's on the *Orbit*."

Fain's cold eyes rested on me. "A reporter?" He turned his head and spoke to the little guy. "Coincidence, Eddie."

"Yeah," Eddie said, out of his hard little mouth.

Fain frowned. He took the pipe from between his teeth, stirred its hot ashes with a toothpick and focused his gaze on Della.

It was obvious he had thought she might have been stalling about Bunny not being home. Finding me there, waiting, had apparently reassured him. But not with any degree of pleasure. The frown bit deeper into

his forehead and mouth.

“Where can we locate her?”

“Well,” Della said, “as I was telling Mr. Castle, she probably met Joey Andra somewhere. She didn’t say anything to me.”

“Andra?” Eddie Beam interrupted softly. “Isn’t he the luggie who hoofs at the Silver Drum?”

“Yes, but—”

“Okay, Len,” Beam interrupted again. “Let’s shove. I know where Andra stops off. Let’s talk to him.”

The red-headed man hesitated. For a couple of seconds I didn’t think he was going to take Beam’s advice. I had an idea he was going to sit down and wait, too. He puffed on his pipe, stared at Della, then at me.

“All right,” he said then, abruptly. The door closed behind them. Somehow I felt quick relief. Their type was familiar. The kind that gunned without asking too many questions.

What did they want with Bunny Dunlap? And where had I seen the one who called himself Fain? The two inquiries merged into one large interrogation point when Della came back from the front door.

“Say,” she said, a bit huskily, “how did you like that pair? The way the big one looked at me gave me shivers. Where does Bunny pick up these characters?”

“I think,” I told her, “I’ll be running along.”

Della’s lipsticked mouth opened. “You’re not powdering, Mr. Castle? Just when we’re getting acquainted. There’s plenty more beer and, like I said, I haven’t a thing to do tonight.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “I have. When Bunny comes in tell her to call me at the office. This is important.”

Downstairs I grabbed a taxi and headed for the paper. All the way along Broadway my brain buzzed. I couldn’t get Fain’s face out of my mind. The cab was almost even with the Winter Garden when recollection hit me—

suddenly and all at once.

I felt my nerves crawl. For a minute I wondered if I were wrong. I hoped I was wrong—but I wasn’t.

Fifteen minutes after I was in the *Orbit’s* morgue, and had the file I wanted open before me, I began to understand why Augustus Gusman had been permanently removed from the Rialto scene. Fain’s true identity came up with that understanding. Two and two made a perfect four, but it ended there.

WHAT Bunny Dunlap had to do with the late Mr. Gusman’s demise and why the red-haired, lanky man and his miniature companion were so anxious to see her, were still matters for a crystal ball gazer to angle out. Either way, Fain’s interest in the little chorine wasn’t good.

I put the file away and got back to my desk in time to hear the phone on it ringing.

“For you, Mr. Castle,” Beth Wheaton said. “A lady. At least she sounds like one.”

“Put her on.”

For an instant I thought it might be Libby Hart. Libby boiling because I had walked out on her at the theater. Libby in flames because I was messing around with murder again.

Instead, the somewhat strained voice of Bunny Dunlap came over the wire: “Mr. Castle? Della says you were up here and that you want to see me. I want to see you, too, as soon as possible. Can you come right up?”

“Wait a minute.” I thought I’d play it smart. “How about you meeting me—at Chester Ward’s place, on the Square? In twenty minutes.”

She said she would and rang off.

The idea of Captain Mullin flashed through my mind. I toyed with it, then shrugged it aside. Mullin would fit in later, after I heard what Bunny had to say.

At least, that was the way I figured it.

Ward’s place was a block and half north of the Capitol on Longacre Square.

Ostensibly an eatery specializing in sea-

food, the second floor of the place was laid out in a series of private rooms. Folks with lost-week-end ideas could coax any number of bottles along up there in the strictest privacy. People who wanted to stage dice games or revel in romance had a green light and no interference. Business deals were often consummated in the little tuckaways.

The last time I'd been on the second floor was to sit in on a session where the manager of a certain promising welterweight haggled with the promoter of a Newark auditorium concerning the gate cut he'd receive if his boy went to war with some local set-up. The thing had finally been arranged to everyone's satisfaction except that of the socker himself. Sitting there, the leather pusher had watched his profits go down like the mercury in a Minnesota winter.

There was no sign of Bunny Dunlap in the big square foyer-waiting room. The clock told me I was five minutes early. I got hold of Chester, a hard-bitten man with a tight, worried face. He needed his usual shave and listened.

"Private room? Meeting a doll? I should send her right up when she comes?" Ward grinned crookedly. "You're leaving yourself wide open, kid."

"You mean Miss Hart?"

"What else?"

"It isn't what you think," I told him. "This concerns the law."

"Sure, sure." Ward winked and turned me over to one of his plug-ugly waiters. "Fix Mr. Castle up with some privacy and tell me the number of the room."

Both private supper rooms on either side of the cubicle I was ushered into were as empty as a beggar's palm. The waiter turned on lights.

"Scotch or rye?" he asked, and eased himself a way.

I lighted a cigarette and sat down.

The information I had dug up at the office made headlines in my mind. But I couldn't

turn a wheel until I talked to Bunny. I tried to fit her into the murder picture. I couldn't get her in focus. And yet—

Just about then there was a light tap on the door.

I opened it and the little chorine slithered in. Behind her followed the waiter with a bottle, and a carbonated water set-up. He left his tray on the table and departed after a look at Bunny's ankles.

She took off a not-too-bad reefer, fuzzed her hair up with her fingers, took the drink I put together as if she needed it badly, and slumped down in the other chair.

CHAPTER IV

BLUE STEEL

SECOND floor business was picking up. I heard the door of the room on the left side of us open and close, a murmur of voices, but I didn't pay any attention. I stared hard at Bunny's piquant face, at her frightened eyes, and noticed the way she clutched her glass. As if it might get away from her.

"It's your cue, honey," I said to her. "What's it all about?"

I said it quietly. She made her gaze level with mine. Instead of answering she asked her own question.

"Where's the envelope I gave you at the theater, Mr. Castle?"

"Let's hear about it before we go into that." I lit a cigarette for her. "Tell me about Gusman. What happened in Swan Millard's dressing room during your costume changes?"

She shuddered, took a long drag out of the glass and hunched herself together in the chair. I knew that under her make-up she was as white as plaster.

"It was terrible! I—I'm afraid! He saw me coming out of Swan's room. The little guy, the one that smelled of lilacs!"

"Start from the beginning. You were in the star's dressing room?"

She nodded. "Right after the New Orleans number. Swan stayed on for the scene that followed. She asked me if I'd get her shawl and bring it down. It was on the back of a chair. I said I would."

She stopped and her mouth trembled. There was only ice in her glass. I poured, saying:

"So you went to her dressing room to get the shawl. Gusman was there—on the floor—dead?"

"No, he was walking around. He seemed awfully sore about something. He asked me what I wanted. I had just started to tell him when there was a knock on the door. Gusman pushed me into a closet and shut the door. At least, he tried to shut it. But it didn't close entirely. One of Swan's costumes was in the way. There was a crack about three inches wide that I could look through."

She got a grip on herself, or maybe what I had put in her glass bolstered her, and went on.

"Two men came in. One was tall. He had red hair. He was smoking a pipe. The other"—Bunny's eyes widened—"was little. He wore a blue suit and he stood near the closet. That's when I smelled the lilacs. He—he—"

I gave her a minute before I said, "What happened?"

"The red-headed man pulled a gun out from under his coat. Gusman started to talk to him. I heard him say 'Now, let's act sensible about this, Nick,' and the red-headed man said, 'Sensible? Don't make me laugh, you crooked rat!'" Gusman went on talking. He was all excited and I couldn't hear everything he said. But it didn't make any difference. The red-headed man just stood there, pointing the gun at him and I saw it had a silencer on it. The little one kept saying, 'Don't let him box you in, Nick. Wind it up and let's blow.' "

"So Nick let Gusman have it?"

Bunny gulped and nodded. "It was terrible! I saw the whole thing! Right before my eyes! I'll never be able to forget it! It's

haunted me ever since. I know I won't get a wink of sleep tonight!"

"What about the envelope? What's that got to do with it?"

She gave me a wild look. "They both went out of the dressing room after they killed Mr. Gusman. I thought I was going to faint. But I didn't. I guess I was too scared. I waited—it seemed like a hundred years but it must have been only a couple of minutes. Then I grabbed Swan's shawl and went out on the corridor. The little one who had been in the room was at the head of the stairs. He was standing there, half in the shadows, looking back. He saw me. He took a good look before he ran down the stairs."

She broke off again. I started a refill, but she shook her head.

"And that envelope?"

"I thought sure they'd mow me down, too. The minute I reached the stage. I—I didn't know what to do. Then I got an idea. I hurried up to my own dressing room. I got a sheet of paper and an envelope. I wrote down 'A red-haired man named Nick just killed Gusman. I saw it through a crack in the closet door of Swan Millard's dressing room.' I put that in the envelope and sealed it. I figured they might knock me off with the silenced gun, but they wouldn't get away with it. I figured that when I didn't come back and ask you for the envelope, you'd open it and read it."

SHE added more details, but I hardly heard them. So *that* was what was in the envelope! That was what Miss Hart must have lifted from my right side pocket.

"What'll I do?" Bunny asked, her voice tight and unnatural.

I looked at my watch.

"I think we'll both take a ride down to Headquarters. This is a problem for better minds than ours. Captain Mullin can grapple with it. Let's go."

It sounded all right, and the timing was good, but it wasn't to be as easy as all that.

While I was talking I heard the door of the adjoining room open and close. Then the knob turned on our door and that opened.

I swung around. In time to see we had visitors.

A red-haired man and a small guy in a blue suit who brought in a breath of lilac time.

Somehow, the little runt didn't seem very important. Not a quarter as much as the hooded, blue steel gun that shone dully against Nick's light suit.

"Shut the door, Eddie," he said, from a mouth that hardly moved. "I don't want anybody to hear what goes on! Or," he added, "off!"

The noise Bunny made in her throat sounded like water running down a stopped-up drain. I saw her crouch back in her chair, but it was only an impression. Because I couldn't take my eyes from the sudden death in the red-haired man's hand.

A chill began to pack my spine in ice. My scalp tingled. Cold sweat dampened my hands and forehead. I felt an emptiness crawling around the pit of my stomach. And it didn't come from a lack of food this time.

At that moment I realized how right Libby had always been. Murder and sports reporting didn't mix. In the past I'd been lucky. Now, from general appearances, I'd stuck my neck out once too often, and too far!

If I needed any proof of that, I got it the next instant. "Len," as Beam called him, or "Nick" as the late Augustus Gusman had labeled him, walked over and planted himself in front of me.

"Where's the envelope the babe gave you, Castle?"

It took another second for the light to filter in. I got it. The pair had tailed Bunny Dunlap down to Ward's. Then they had walked upstairs, following her and tabbing the room she had gone into. They had ducked into the one adjoining—I remembered hearing the door close—and laid ears against the thin partition.

As easy as that!

The nose of Nick's shooter began to press into me. The chill got chillier. He said it again, the quiet note in his voice making it sound doubly menacing:

"Hand it over!"

"I haven't got it."

My voice had a tremolo in it that put it an octave higher than usual. Nick's colorless eyes flickered in Beam's direction.

"Give him a frisk, Eddie."

The small, delicate hands went over me with expert precision. Eddie didn't miss an inch. But, as he dumped my personal belongings on the table, and didn't come across what he was sent after, the velvety eyes narrowed.

"No envelope, Len."

"What did you do with it, Castle?" The gun jarred harder. "Talk!"

"I lost it."

Nick probably expected something better than that. The blunt statement stopped him for a minute. He looked from me to Bunny and over to his partner. Then he laughed.

"He lost it, Eddie. Just like that! He lost the letter that can put me on sparks! It's floating around loose."

Eddie stood off and took time out to light a cigarette. "Let me hold this lighter under his chin and I'll get the truth out of him!"

Nick turned the idea over in his mind. I winked away some sweat. Finally Nick shook his head.

"I've got a better plan. Look, the car's around the side street. We'll take these two across town and work 'em out privately. Too many people around here, no elbow room. Besides," he added. "I've got a date in a half-hour."

The little lug with the small, hard mouth and the wavy hair, looked disappointed. He shrugged, and exhaled smoke.

"Down the back way?" he asked.

"Yes. You handle the dame. I'll take charge of this party." Nick addressed his next

remark to me. “We’re going downstairs, Castle. Don’t get notions. I’ll be right behind you and this lead spreader works just as good from a pocket.”

EDDIE went over to Bunny. He moved with a sinuous grace. She got up. In the terrified glance she gave me was a lot of regret for the box she had put me in.

I tried to smile reassuringly. It must have been a ghoulisn grimace, the kind of facial contortion featured by one on the way to the gallows.

Eddie took a look up and down the corridor. He gave Nick the nod and we started out and down the rear stairs. They had been put there during the festive prohibition era for the convenience of patrons who didn’t want to meet the local police force socially. They were just as good now as they had been then—for Nick’s purpose.

He escorted me across several feet of pavement and into a snappy sedan parked at the curb. People were passing. They didn’t pay any attention to me or I to them. I had Nick’s pocket on my mind and what was in it.

I sat down between Bunny and Nick. There was a third man at the wheel. A quiet, efficient character who seemed to know exactly what was wanted. The minute Nick pulled the door shut the car started.

We crossed Broadway. Hoodlum Avenue was a riot of lights, noise and traffic. I caught a glimpse of the Astor, the Globe, the *Times* Building. They never looked better. Like illustrations for a fantastic tale that would never be told again.

“So you lost the letter?” Nick murmured, musingly. “I suppose it fell out of your pocket—right into a copper’s big paw.”

“I don’t know where I lost it.”

Eddie Beam, silently meditative on one of the pulled-down rear seats, jerked his head up.

“Say,” he exclaimed. “I got a flash of Castle at the rehearsal, before we went up to

the dressing room. He was in a box with a dame. Maybe he passed the letter to her!”

“What dame?” Nick asked sarcastically. “There’s a lot of ‘em in this town.”

Beam leaned forward. “That’s not too tough. I know a hundred people who know Castle. Any of them can tell us who he chases around with regularly.”

The empty feeling spread. Things seemed to be going from worse to much worse. Now, if the little gunman had his way, Libby would be dragged in to add to the merriment. And Libby, all unknowingly, would probably spill at Beam’s first question!

The girl was smart at everything but murder.

The car went as far as Lexington, up that avenue for a dozen blocks and then so east again. It delved into a neighborhood where poverty and riches rubbed elbows. Cheap tenements stood a sneer away from lofty layouts crowned with penthouses.

Finally the sedan, slowing, stopped before a three-story, remodeled job that had a modernistic facade and a neat areaway filled with rows of geraniums.

From the exterior the place might have been a high-class club. But it wasn’t.

The driver got out of the car. He went up the front stairs and rang the bell. I saw the door open. The conversation didn’t last long.

The driver came back. Nick said, “Okay?” and the other said, “Okay.”

The gun came out of Nick’s pocket.

“All right, Castle. Step down. We’re calling on a lady. Don’t forget your manners. After you, friend.”

Bunny, who had sat frozen all the way over from Ward’s place, went up the stairs after us, Beam bringing up the rear.

A small girl in a maid’s outfit stood at the door. We filed past her, Nick pushing the gun under his coat so she wouldn’t see it. We went on back to a rear room, the maid hurrying forward to switch on the lights.

"I'll tell her you're here," she said, and slid on past.

CHAPTER V

GLASS FOR ASHES

THE room we went into was the type they picture in half-buck magazines devoted to the decorating trade. It was done in Napoleonic blue and red. Pickled pine had been tossed around with a prodigal hand. Over the mantel of an unused fireplace a pair of expensive Chinese vases caught and reflected the indirect lighting.

The cream-colored rug underfoot was moss-soft and ankle deep. The furniture, modernistic as the outside of the house, was upholstered in coffee-colored leather. Brass nail studding glinted. So did a lot of crystal ornaments on some picture window shelves.

Likewise the gun Nick kept trained on me.

"Sit down, Miss Dunlap. You too, Castle." Nick played a host with sardonic graciousness. "Help yourself to some furniture and relax."

Bunny stole a look at me. Her eyes were like jewels, bright and feverish. I dropped into a chromium-armed chair, trying to think and getting more muddled by the minute.

Whose place was this? Who had the maid gone to get?

I didn't have to wait long to find out. Steps sounded on the stairs, in the hall, on the cream-colored rug.

Steps made by bright red backless slippers strapped around curved white ankles.

Swan Millard entered the room and pulled the door shut behind her!

She stood there, one hand on the ornamental knob, her crimson housecoat accenting every curve and contour of her slim, perfect figure, while her gaze, questioning and puzzled, swept over Bunny and me.

"I don't think I understand." Her voice was low and quiet.

I thought that I did. But I was wrong

again.

Nick spoke without moving from the spot opposite me.

"This is clean-up night, honey. We're rubbing the chalk off the blackboard. We've got one name erased. There's a couple of others to follow."

Swan Millard's hand dropped from the knob. Her expression changed swiftly. The lids went down over her eyes. Her curved red lips tightened to a scarlet streak.

"What are you talking about? You must be drunk!"

Nick chuckled. "I haven't touched a drop in years. Pass that. Who was at the rehearsal this afternoon with Castle?"

"Don't answer that, Miss Millard," I said, and got the heel of Nick's left hand in the side of my face.

Bunny choked out a muffled cry. Swan walked further into the room. I could see her begin to stiffen, to draw into herself.

"I don't know any of Mr. Castle's friends or who he was with at the theater." She made it sound disinterested and I could see she was a better actress than I had thought she was.

"See what you can do, Eddie," Nick directed, casually.

The little runt smiled and reached. His small hand went around Swan's wrist. He bent it back and then sideward. He did it smoothly, effortlessly, and nothing ever worked better. The red lips opened, but Eddie's other hand, clamping over them, muffled the scream that would have emerged.

"Her name is Hart—Libby Hart!" The words came when Eddie pulled his hand away.

"Where does she live?"

I sat and listened while Swan Millard went the rest of the way.

Nick dealt out some instructions. She sat down at a table beside a telephone. Numbly I watched her dial a number. Usually, when I called Libby, she was never home. But the honey-haired beauty hit the jackpot at the first

try.

“Miss Hart? . . . This is Swan Millard. Could you come up to my house tonight, now? . . . Yes, there’s something important I want to talk over with you . . . Fine. . . Thank you.”

She pronged the telephone. Nick nodded.

“Much obliged.” His tone turned velvety smooth. “Now, baby, before she gets here we’ll take care of something else—*you!*”

The blue-steel gun moved from me toward her. Nick’s hand rose a few inches, his finger closing over the trigger.

BUNNY’S gasped exclamation sounded like paper tearing. Eddie Beam did a repeat, grabbing her wrist and clapping his left hand over her mouth.

Swan, the gun on her, promptly fainted.

At least, from where I sat it was a perfect imitation of a faint. Maybe she was acting again. I didn’t know, and I didn’t wait to find out.

I was gun-clear. Beam was busy with Bunny and on a pickled pine stand beside the chromium-armed chair was a wedge of crystal used as an ashtray. I caught it up and let it go—straight at Nick!

No big league pitcher ever put more on the ball. It had to be good, and it had to be a third strike!

It was.

The point of the big hunk of glass caromed off the back of Nick’s skull with a bone-cracking thud. He dropped the gun and staggered forward, half falling over the slumped figure of Swan. Eddie let Bunny go and drew.

The two shots he angled at me would have made a perfect score if I hadn’t ducked down to snatch for the hooded gun that had done the job on Gusman. The quick leanover saved my life. Temporarily, at least, I thought. Twin lead slugs hissed past, inches above me. I got Nick’s cannon. It was off safety and ready for use. I squeezed the trigger, blazing away at Eddie Beam as if he were the side of a barn.

I missed as completely as he had!

Bunny was screaming at the top of her lungs. I saw Nick was coming out of it. I had the fantastic idea he was wiping blood away from the back of his red head while he stood shaking it like a horse, trying to clear it.

The little gunman had dived in behind a tall secretary for cover. My next shot splintered its grilled bulge front. Glass broke in a tinkling shower. I heard Beam yelp like a run-over dog. I banged away again in the same general direction, dropping down behind a leather-lined sofa.

No more shots came from the direction of the secretary, but something else dropped over the top of the sofa and fell on me like a load of coal.

Nick!

His arm got a throat-hold. It shut my breath off like the turn of a faucet. His other hand ripped down my arm and fastened over the gun. Groggy though he must have been, Gusman’s killer still had enough power to make it child’s play. He wrenched the rod out of my fingers. The nose of it dug into my side. All the fleeting thoughts commonly attributed to those about to sink for the third time rushed chronologically through my brain.

Thoughts of the Orbit, the pretty pieces I dreamed up about competitive sports. Thoughts of Libby. How lovely she was, how nice she always smelled, how soft and warm her lips were. Thoughts that included Captain Fred Mullin. Mullin, fishy-eyed and ice cold, saying, “Served him right! I told him it was only a question of time, the nosy such-and-such!”

Other thoughts, clear-cut and distinct. Principally, one of a darkly robed gentleman who carried a large scythe and shook an admonishing finger at me. I tried to remember a quick prayer to murmur on the way out.

Then, before Nick could squeeze the trigger, he let the gun and my neck go the same moment.

Air, piped down to my lungs, sent a

roaring noise into my ears. I remember sitting down on the cream-colored carpet and pushing Nick's legs off. I remember staring at him, wondering if he'd had a stroke or something, trying to figure why his eyes were shut and why he was lying with his face pressed to the rug.

It took another minute or two to get Bunny into the proper perspective. Bunny standing a little way off, the crystal ashtray in her good right hand, a fresh smear of Nick's claret on one of its other points.

"I—I guess I've killed him!" she said, her teeth chattering like the castanets in a Latin band.

I began to get up. Then, as I was on one knee, the door with the ornamental knob opened and the dulcet tones of Lieutenant Ed Wheeler zephyred in:

"Get your hands up! This house is surrounded!"

He stalked in, gun in hand, followed by Hartley and several gentlemen in civilian garb, all armed and prepared for any eventuality.

WHHEELER pulled himself up short. He looked at the unconscious Swan. At Eddie Beam, whose legs were protruding from behind the shattered secretary. At the recumbent figure of the red-headed Nick, at the paralyzed Bunny, and then at me.

"A one-man army, Castle! What do we need your gal friend's call for? We tail you all evening, you shake us and then she throws in a set of directions. But why—when you can knock 'em over with your bare hands?"

I got all the way up.

"There's the one who liquidated Gusman in the dressing room at the St. Regis." I pointed a shaky finger at Nick. "There's his helper, behind the cabinet. You'd better find the smelling salts for Mrs. Gusman. I think she needs them. The faint's on the level. . . ."

I rode Bunny home in a taxi about an hour later and turned her over to the gilt-top Della in 6F. Then I got hold of Libby and shared a

table with her at the Silver Drum, just as Joey Andra sprang out to tie the patrons up with his Ray Bolger imitations.

Outside of being a little pale, Libby was enchanting in something new and something blue she had designed for herself in between costume plates for "Let's Have Music!"

"Mrs. Gusman?" she led off with.

"Part of the production price, no doubt." The double Scotch was good, even if it wasn't Scotch. "The only trouble was she used to be Nick's heart in the sweet long ago. Nick Rowen, that is, to give him his baptismal monicker."

"Rowen?" Lib wrinkled her tip-tilted nose. "Isn't he the character who handled that Wall Street stock swindle some years back?"

"A hundred grand caper. Correct. The same one Mr. Gusman wept for, but dried his eyes after the jury sent Rowen away for a long stretch. Why not? He was keeping the hundred G's safe for his red-headed client—also the client's heart interest. A real daily double that paid off in round numbers."

"Or round holes!" Libby put in. "You knew Rowen?"

"Even under the blanket of the Len Fain he's been using since he got out of stir. Enough to send me to the morgue at the office to hunt up some old pictures of him and refresh my mind about his going away party. It just goes to show you that when you're in the penitentiary you brood and brood. Then when you come out you're all set to do something to put you back—in the death house this time. Funny world, isn't it?"

"A scream." Libby shuddered discreetly. "What happens to the hundred grand now?"

I looked at her quizzically. Surely, she couldn't be as naive as that.

"That dough, darling," I said, "helped pay your fee for designing those handsome costumes. That was the angel money that bought Gusman's wings. He took the money—and the gal!"

She nodded. Joey Andra was doing a

whirlwind finish. I waited until he was off and the lights were up.

“Just for your information,” I went on, “Eddie Beam, the small punk Rowen got friendly with behind, not in front of the bars, will recover from my not-so-good target practise. So that’s about all except I should really do something to show my appreciation for our splendid Police Department.”

LIBBY laughed. There wasn’t any amusement in it.

“What do you mean, splendid, Johnny? It’s terrible. Your friend Mullin ought to be impeached or something. I opened that note the girl gave you, read what she had written and telephoned Captain Mullin at five minutes

after four. And look at all the time it took before they caught up with you!”

The band was playing a tune that reminded me of something I’d heard before. Or was it that all tunes are more or less alike? This one reminded me of a tune Broadway hadn’t heard yet. Something about Monday morning blues. Something Swan Millard had sung in an ermine robe, in a purple spot, on a platinum-plated chaise.

“Serves you right for opening my mail!” I said. “That’s one thing I didn’t think you were—jealous.”

Libby’s dark eyes flashed.

“Get another letter from a cute little blonde and see how I perform, Johnny!” she warned.