



DEAD MAN'S FEAST

by
Leslie McFarlane



CHAPTER III The Man at the Table

I dropped the telephone and leaped forward. I thought I had judged the location of the switch correctly but I missed it in the darkness and collided violently against the wall.

Someone moved swiftly past me. I wheeled and grasped blindly. My fingers closed on a sleeve and at the same time I was conscious of a delicate, feminine fragrance, a perfume that seemed vaguely familiar. This was entirely a flickering impression—I was not concerned with analysis just then. The sleeve was abruptly twitched away and when I lunged ahead, seeking to grapple with this invisible intruder, a hard little fist came out of the dark, smacking with a sharp impact beneath one eye. Off balance as I was, it sent me staggering sideways and before I could recover myself I heard swift running footsteps down the hall.

Instead of giving chase, I groped for the electric switch. It was, of course, elusive. Just as I found it, I heard the front door slam loudly. The hall was flooded with light; I raced toward the door, wrenched it open, and ran out onto the porch.

Rain still poured from the black skies and in the drenching darkness of the night I could see nothing beyond the front steps. I listened and heard someone running across the grass, away over to the left. I jumped down from the porch, sprawled ingloriously on the wet lawn, scrambling to my feet and gave chase.

The fugitive did not have a big lead, but in that torrential gloom it was quite sufficient. I heard a snapping and crackling of branches, the thrashing of leaves, and judged that my quarry had

blundered into a hedge. A moment later I blundered into it myself, and as twigs scratched my face and raindrops showered over me from the wet bushes, I heard footsteps scuffling away through the gravel beyond.

The hedge was high and deep. How the woman got through it so quickly, I could not imagine. Sheer luck, no doubt, or perhaps she had found an opening that I missed. The tough branches held me back, stung my face, and finally tripped me up so that I plunged forward on my face into a gravelled walk, my feet still kicking among those wretched bushes.

With scratched face, bleeding hands and bruised knees, not to mention a chastened spirit, I got to my feet. The running footsteps had died away. The fugitive had disappeared into the roaring obscurity of the storm.

Thoroughly drenched, and in a very bad humor, I returned to the house and went up the steps and into the hall, followed by a trail of water that dripped from my soaked clothes. The telephone lay on its side, with the receiver dangling below the table, emitting a hollow and insistent buzz. I picked it up:

"Yes?"
The Chief's voice:
"Oh, there y'are! What happened? You hung up on me—near took my ear off."

"Haven't you left yet?" I demanded. "That car will be halfway across the country before you get started."

"Don't worry. I'll be out in a jiffy."

"Keep your eyes open for a woman along the road."

"A what?"

"A woman. There was a woman in the house and she just got out. That's why I left the telephone. She's around the grounds somewhere."

"That's queer. I wonder who in kelly she can be. There ain't no womenfolk at Blenheim's place—"

"Never mind arguing about it. Hurry up. I'll wait here."

I slammed down the receiver on the maunderings of this dim-witted yokel. He should have been started on his way by now. Even yet it was ten to one that he would revert to his original suspicion that it was all a practical joke and decide to stay in the house. His stupidity increased the aggravation I felt in having let that mysterious woman slip through my hands.

Who was she? Where had she come from? She must have been in the house all the time, although I had not heard a sound. In hiding, doubtless. My noisy approach had alarmed her, she had remained in concealment as I went through the rooms, awaiting an opportunity of escape. Her exact knowledge of the location of the electric light switch seemed to indicate that she knew the run of the house.

She had emerged from the library. I went over to the door. She had taken a long chance on turning out the lights and evading me in the darkness. Why hadn't she gone out the back way while I was at the telephone?

I tried to identify that elusive fragrance. Lilacs—violets—roses? No. Apple blossoms! The perfume of apple blossoms. I remembered that from my boyhood, when there had been apple trees in the orchard on our farm. The scent was unmistakable. And the woman, whoever she was, had been young; she had fled from the house and across the lawn with amazing swiftness. Her footsteps had been light and quick.

Ruefully, I felt the bruise under my eye. In the vernacular, she packed a sweet wallop.

"What a beautiful sock that was!" I murmured. The hard vicious little fist was at strange variance with the tender fragrance of apple blossoms.

The whole affair grew more puzzling every minute. The masked man in the car, the two dead men in the house, one slain by a bullet and the other with no mark of violence—and now this mysterious girl. If she were innocent of any complicity in the crimes, why had she hidden herself? If not, why hadn't she left in the automobile? The Chief had said there were no womenfolk at the Blenheim place, so this disposed of the theory that she was a member of the family and had hidden herself on my arrival, believing the masked man had returned.

It was too much for me. I went into the library.

I sat down in a roomy, comfortable chair beside the table. The library was so cosy and peaceful that it was difficult to believe that the shadow of tragedy hung over the house. Gradually, under the soothing influence of a cigarette and the calm atmosphere of the room, my nerves became steadier. I did not look toward the dining room where the dead man sat at the table. My best course, I decided, was to sit tight and disturb nothing.

I wondered where the woman had gone? If she had made her way toward the village she would soon be picked up by the police. The fact that she had not headed toward the road in her flight meant nothing. She had fled from the house blindly, bent only on getting away. There was little doubt in my mind but that she would be eventually captured. A woman on foot, out alone at such an hour on such a night, could not long hope to escape discovery; she would have to seek refuge somewhere.

In a surprisingly short time I heard the clatter and a roar out on the driveway. The Chief, slow as he had been in getting started, had lost no time driving out from the village. I went to the door in time to see three men coming up the front steps. A prehistoric Ford stood disconsolately in the rain.

The leader of the trio was a short, bespectacled little man

with a scraggly gray mustache. He wore an official cap with the word "CHIEF" emblazoned in gilt letters and a voluminous black raincoat reached to his heels. Behind him came a long-legged, long-nosed, long-faced villager armed with a very long shotgun; and a pop-eyed youth with buck teeth and ears that stood out at right angles, brought up the rear.

"Well," piped the Chief, stamping up onto the porch, "what's been goin' on here tonight? Where do you come from, stranger, and what's your name?"

"My name is Allan Brook," I told him, "and I come from Toronto. I've been on a motor tour and my car is stranded back on the main road. I came on to this house just a little while ago."

"And you say there's two dead men here?"

I nodded. The Chief took off his cap and scratched his head; the long-faced villager regarded me mournfully; the pop-eyed youth gulped.

"Well, I guess we'd better go inside and see what's what. Been near twenty year since anything like this ever happened around these parts. I guess from what you told me, one of these chaps must be old man Blenheim himself."

"An old man with a white beard. He's in the dining room, sitting at the table. The other chap is lying in a room off the kitchen. He seems to be a servant."

"That must be the fellow Blenheim called his vally. He only kept but one man around the place. Furriner?"

"He looked like a foreigner to me."

"Guess that's him all right. Well, we'll go in and take a look around." They trooped into the hall. "Don't touch nothin', boys" said the Chief to his followers. "Don't want to lose no clues."

"I left everything just as I found it," I volunteered. The Chief advanced cautiously into the library, with the air of a hunter sneaking up on an unsuspecting rabbit. The lanky villager took a tighter grip on the shotgun and the pop-eyed youth made queer noises in his throat.

"In there?" asked the Chief, pointing to the closing doors. "Yes. In the dining room."

The Chief pushed the doors apart. We stood gazing into the dining room.

The dead man was no longer sitting bolt upright in his chair. He had fallen forward, his head and shoulders on the table, his face hidden.

"Why—he's moved!" I exclaimed.

But the others paid no attention. They were staring fearfully at that motionless figure under the blaze of light.

(To be continued)



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