

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Gary Barton

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She was right there when it happened, so close that it was hard to see why she, too, hadn't been hit. She had screamed, someone had said though she would have screamed anyway when the guns opened up from the sedan so perhaps a wild slug or a ricocheting bullet had caught her. But if it had, it hadn't killed her they were certain of that else the men in the sedan wouldn't have stopped to grab her and take her with them.

Ken Arnold learned these things from passers-by who were crowding close beneath the hotel's canopy.

A little newsboy said, "Yeah, I saw it. I was sellin' papers down there on the corner, down near the street light, when I heard the babe scream. Some guys were shooting from the sedan a lot of them. But it was over so fast, I don't know how it happened."

The hotel doorman said, "They were just walking past, this fellow and the girl. I noticed them as I went to the curb to open a cab door. I heard the lady scream and heard the guns. Then I turned and saw some men shoving her into the sedan. The fellow with her" he looked over at the man lying dead on the sidewalk "was like that."

A cab driver told Ken Arnold, "I was pulling up in front of the hotel and had to jam on my brake when the sedan cut in front of me. Then there were two or three guns firing, I think, and one guy jumped out and grabbed the girl and hauled her into the car. They drove away fast."

But it all had been over so quickly that no one was quite sure what really happened. There were no descriptions of the gunmen. No one had taken the license number of the big sedan. There wasn't much to work on.

Ken Arnold moved back to the body.

The fellow was very young; he couldn't have been more than twenty-five. His hair was blond and curly, and you could imagine that his eyes, though they were closed now, were blue. The light-tan coat he wore didn't quite cover the welter of crimson that was-already growing dark on the sidewalk.

A plain-clothes man was bending over the body.

"Any identification, Mac?" Ken Arnold asked him.

"Billfold. Driver's license," the cop answered. "Roger Higgins. Address: 3145 Buena Vista Drive. That's ail." He handed the license to Arnold. "Looks like a gang job ' he said.

Arnold put the license in his wallet and looked down at the body again. He shook his head slowly. "There's more to it than that, Mac. The kid doesn't look the type."

"Well, the guys that rubbed him out weren't exactly friends," the cop said. "What about the girl, Ken?"

"That's where my job starts. Any pictures in the billfold?"

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The plain-clothes man took the billfold from his pocket again. "Yeah." He fingered three snapshots and handed them to Arnold. "The kid was quite a boy, Ken."

Arnold went back to where the cab driver was standing, asked him, "Are any of these like the girl?" and motioned over the hotel doorman.

The driver studied the snapshots in the light that sifted from the entranceway. "They aren't exactly friends," the cop said. "What about the girl, Ken?"

"That's where my job starts. Any pictures in the billfold?"

The plain-clothes man took the billfold from his pocket again. "Yeah." He fingered three snapshots and handed them to Arnold. "The kid was quite a boy, Ken."

Arnold went back to where the cab driver was standing, asked him, "Are any of these like the girl?" and motioned over the hotel doorman.

The driver studied the snapshots in the light that sifted from the entranceway. You could tell he was a cab driver by the way he whistled. Then he said slowly. "No. No, I don't think so. She was tall, kinda—and pretty. She had black hair—"

"Black hair down to her shoulders," the doorman said. "I saw that much. She didn't have a hat on."

"Yeah. She didn't have a hat on. And she had on a gray fur jacket. Squirrel, it was, I guess. I know because—"

"Thanks," Arnold said crisply, and turned back to the plain-clothes man. "These D.O.A.'s are worse than a sealed-room mystery," he growled. "Why the hell can't a guy leave a few clues when he gets himself murdered?"

"How about the pix?" the cop asked him.

Arnold shook his head as he flamed a match to a cigarette. "All we know is that she's tall and pretty. She has long black hair and was wearing a gray squirrel jacket. It would be just as easy to look up the pedigrees of the squirrels that went into the jacket."

"Maybe you've got something there," Mac said sardonically. "The squirrels are dead, too."

"No, I don't think they'll kill the girl, though everything points to the fact that they should. She was probably kidnaped because she got a good look at the guys that gunned down her boy friend. Maybe she knew who was after him. Anyway, she was grabbed to keep her from identifying the killers."

"That's screwy!" Mac snapped.

"What's screwy about it?"

"Well, hell, why should they go to all that trouble to grab her? They wasted time and risked getting caught. If she could identify them, why didn't they just knock her off, too?"

"That's what I want to find out," Ken Arnold said.

The night manager of the remodeled apartments on Buena Vista Drive let Ken Arnold into Roger Higgins's studio room with a passkey. It was a cheap room, and shabby, and it told volumes about the kid's life that Higgins, alive, would never have revealed.

A formal-dress suit hung over the back of a chair and a stiff-bosom shirt was draped over the doorknob of a closet. The closet, itself, was empty, save for an odd pair of slacks and some ties and two soiled shirts on the floor.

On the bureau were ticket stubs to the opening, two nights ago, of one of the hit shows on Broadway, and an engraved invitation to a wealthy society girl's debut was propped against the mirror. There were swizzle sticks and match pads from the most exclusive clubs, places where the guests are somebody because everybody can't get by the front door.

And on the other side of the room, on a narrow table with a chair pulled up to it, were a ten-cent box of cheese crackers and an empty container of coffee. A small box, with three cigarette butts, carefully pinched and straightened, to be smoked some other time, lay nearby.

Ken Arnold knew the type. He knew Roger Higginses all over town. Not this Roger Higgins, of course, but fellows like him.

Society scavengers, they were called. Wolves. Chiselers. Party crashers. Kids who were somehow able to get into the best places, the wealthy homes; who lived on other people's dinners and loaded up on free liquor; who took everything they could get their hands on but the check and most times didn't have enough themselves to pay

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their room rent or buy a meal.

And sometimes they got into trouble!

The little studio on Buena Vista told Arnold that Roger Higgins was one of these. It wasn't much, but it was a lead.

Ken Arnold heard a sound at the door and whirled. But the door must have been all the way open before he was aware that he was not alone in the room. Even as he turned, something hard smashed down on his head, catching him just above the temple. He felt his knees and legs go lifeless beneath him, and he groped wildly through the swirling blur of motion that swept around him. But already his arms were growing numb, and he knew he was falling. Then another blow came down, and he went on down to the floor on his face. And he was unconscious.

It didn't seem that he had been out very long; and when he came to, his head was throbbing madly. His body was drenched, and, at first, he thought it was blood that was coming from where he had been hit on the head and that it was running into his eyes. Then he knew that it was water, because his hair was wet and his shirt and coat and pants were wet.

For a long moment, he lay there, and he remembered the door opening as he had been searching the room. He remembered how he had turned, but not quickly enough, and that he had caught only a vague glimpse of his attacker just before that hard weight fell.

Arnold remembered that she had been very pretty, with black hair down to her shoulders, and that she had been wearing a gray fur jacket!

Cursing disgustedly to himself, he pushed slowly to his feet. He stood in the center of the room, staring, then wiped the back of his hand across his eyes and shook his head and stared some more.

"I thought you'd never come out of it," the girl said nervously.

She was sitting on the studio couch, twisting a small white handkerchief in her fingers. The handkerchief was wet.

She was very pretty; but now her face was white and stained with tears. Her dark eyes were frightened, and her red lips were trembling.

"I didn't know you were a detective," she explained, "till after I hit you. I got some water and tried to bring you out of it—"

"You hit awfully hard, lady," Arnold told her. "What do you carry in that bag—a tank?"

"No," she said naively, and reached into the large handbag that lay on her lap. "It's a gun!"

Ken Arnold stepped over quickly and took a small automatic from her hand.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Bette Jamison."

Arnold whistled. The name shouted Cafe Society, "Blue Book," the Five Hundred, "Who's Who."

"How did you get away from those gunmen who grabbed you after they rubbed out Higgins?" he said.

The girl started worrying the handkerchief in her fingers again. Then her eyes moved to the automatic in Arnold's hand, and her face lighted up. "I...I shot them!" she said proudly.

Arnold sniffed the muzzle of the gun; then he snapped the clip of bullets from the magazine. It was full.

"Well, anyway," the girl admitted, dropping her eyes and pouting, "I would have, but there were too many of them. There were three of them. They kept me in some cheap hotel room for a while then a fourth man came in and told me to beat it."

"Where was this hotel?" Arnold asked.

"I...I don't remember exactly." She shuddered. "It was an awful dirty place. I just jumped into a cab and got away from there. But maybe I could find it if—"

"Never mind," Arnold said. "They would have cleared out before this."

The girl said, "I have a license for that gun. May I have it, please?"

Arnold handed her the gun.

"Did you find what you came here after?" he said.

"Wh—what do you mean?"

Ken Arnold looked at the girl disgustedly, watching her unconsciously clasping her handbag. When he spoke, his voice was incisive.

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"Roger Higgins was killed tonight. You were with him when he was killed. Then the killers let you get away—so you claim—and you came directly here. Now, lady, don't tell me you were looking for a lipstick you left here the other night. What did Roger Higgins have on you?"

The girl put the handkerchief to her lips. She started to open the handbag, then changed her mind and tucked the handkerchief into her pocket.

"Roger Higgins made what little money he had to live on," she told Arnold, "by selling tips to newspaper columnists. Society chatter, scandal, stuff he picked up on the inside." She dropped her eyes, evading Arnold's cold stare. "He...found something out about me, and he said he wanted to help me.

"I gave him some letters that I had received—he wanted them for evidence—and then he started blackmailing me. He said he would spread my name all over the newspapers if I didn't pay him. He would have done it, too. He could have sold it to some columnist."

She started to cry and took out the handkerchief and wiped her eyes. Then she went on:

"I gave him some money. Then tonight I was to give him some more."

"Did you give it to him?" Arnold interrupted her. He was remembering Roger Higgins' billfold. There had been no money in it.

"No," she said. "I met him, and he was to bring me here to give me the letters." She was crying again. "Then, on the way, they...shot him!"

"Who were 'they'?"

"I don't know, I don't know who they were."

"O.K.," Arnold said. "So you came here for the letters."

"I was afraid that if the police investigated Roger Higgins' murder and searched this room"—she waved her hand toward the bureau—"they'd find them, and the whole thing would get out."

"So you have the letters and your money."

The girl nodded.

"Let's see them!" Arnold snapped.

"What? "

"The letters! Let's see them!"

Bette Jamison jumped to her feet, clutching her handbag. "I will not!" she said bitterly.

"Either give me those letters," Arnold snapped, "or I'll take you down to headquarters as a witness to Roger Higgins' murder. And I'll have you searched."

The girl's eyes were flaring. "You Cops can think of the dumbest things," she said, and pointed the automatic at Arnold's head. "Make one move, mister, and you'll look like something the Nazis left behind at Smolensk!"

Then, laughing, she backed slowly out the door. But her laugh was strained, and there were tears in her voice.

Ken Arnold stood in the center of the little room, his hands raised to his shoulders, till she was out of sight in the inner hallway. He heard her running and heard the door to the elevator corridor open. Then he dropped his arms.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a clip of cartridges, the clip he had taken from the girl's gun. And he was grinning, but the grin wasn't very nice to look at. Then, suddenly, he was through the doorway, moving fast.

As Arnold reached the elevators, one opened and the operator called, "Down." The door to the fire stairway was still closing slowly, the air wheezing from the pneumatic hinge. Arnold could hear the girl's heels tapping on the slate stairs, a floor or so below. He figured she must have pressed the button for the elevator, then impatiently taken the stairs, expecting him to be fast on her tail.

He jumped into the waiting elevator, rode to the lobby, then raced through it to the street, knowing the girl must still be at least a floor above. A taxi was parked in front of the building entrance, and a short distance behind, at the curb of an apartment hotel, was another. Arnold skidded to a stop as he hit the sidewalk; then he pressed his big body into the shadows against the building wall.

The girl came running breathlessly through the entranceway and dashed to the cab parked in front. She called through the open front window to the driver, "Dragon Club—fast!" and climbed into the rear seat. The cab pulled away.

Ken Arnold left his hiding place and hopped into the second cab.

"O.K.," he snapped. "Follow that baby ahead."

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As he rode uptown, he tried hard to dismiss the girl from this mystery. But he couldn't. He was certain—even excepting the fact that she was a witness to Roger Higgins' murder, which should be most important—that she was in and in deep. He also tried not to build a case on what little he now had but, theoretically, the pieces started falling together and he was using experience and a lot of guesswork to make them fit.

If, as Bette Jamison had claimed, the men who had kidnaped her had released her after holding her in a hotel room, that meant that they had probably gotten the word from someone higher up. Someone to whom the girl, alive, was most valuable. And this someone had undoubtedly had his boys knock off Roger Higgins, then grab the girl for a while so she wouldn't be left at the scene of the crime and be investigated by the police.

The Dragon Club, Arnold recalled, was a wide-open gambling dive. Wide open to the right people, that is. Exclusive. The tables didn't sell four-bit chips. Arnold remembered that a racketeer, Chips Maroni, ran the place. He had run other places in town, too; and when the police closed up one, Maroni would open some place else. The Dragon Club was his latest.

Bette Jamison—young, foolish kid—could have lost a lot of money to Maroni's crooked roulette wheels and crap tables. Lost it and owed it. And perhaps Maroni had somehow found that Higgins was blackmailing her. The letters Bette had were probably from Maroni, threatening her for the debt.

To get his name linked to a gambling scandal would cause Maroni plenty of trouble, especially now when he'd put a small fortune into a new club. It would be well worth his while to put Higgins out of the way.

Arnold's cab driver suddenly cut into his thoughts, saying, "Cap, I think maybe we lost them. Probably at the red light back there, when another car cut me off."

"Then head for the Dragon Club," Arnold yelled, and gave the address. "And forget the red lights!"

There was a cab pulling away from the canopy in front of Chips Maroni's club as Arnold's taxi braked to a stop across the street. He noted that it was possibly the same that Bette Jamison had taken from Roger Higgins' apartment. But the girl was not in sight, and he figured that she must be already inside.

He paid off his cab and hurried across the street and down a dark, musty alley to a side fire exit. There was a big black sedan in the alley.

Arnold went through the steel door and down a dark hall, toward the rear of the club. He had been in these places before. This club, too. He'd been here when it was the Wax Slipper and, later, Eddie Koye's place. He knew where the office was.

He moved soundlessly, but trying to get back there fast. He didn't yet know just how the girl fitted into this, but he had a hunch that she had stepped into a dangerous set-up. And the fact that she might try to use her gun, and that he had removed the bullets from it, made the sweat run icy down his back.

He heard footsteps near the end of the hall, and he flattened hard against the black wall. Then he saw a door open, and the light from behind it outlined the two men who stepped into the room. The door closed.

And he heard a girl scream!

Arnold covered the remaining distance to the door and smashed it in with his shoulder. His gun was in his fist, and it seemed as if he were firing even as he went through, as the lock splintered from the wooden frame.

Fleeting his eyes swept the three men: Chips Maroni, a short, swarthy man in dinner jacket and black felt hat, standing behind a huge walnut desk; another man trying to hold the girl, who was screaming and struggling frantically in his grasp; a third, at the far side of the room, his hand snaking for a gun beneath his coat.

The man at the far side of the room stopped Arnold's first bullet! He caught it in his chest, just below the throat, and he must have been dead before his body hit the floor.

As he fired, Arnold swung to Maroni, and he saw the flashes of red from the big automatic in the gambler's fist. He felt a slug tear high into his shoulder, his left shoulder, and suddenly his arm was numb. But he snapped a fast shot at those flashes and heard Maroni scream, then saw him grasp his wrist and drop behind the desk. Maroni's gun slid away from his fingers.

There were sounds of gunshots behind Arnold, too. He whirled as a bullet kicked into the floor, close to his feet, and ricocheted into Maroni's desk. He saw Bette Jamison, hanging tight to the gunman who had grasped her. Her hands were locked on his gun arm, forcing the slugs away from Arnold and into the floor. Arnold stepped quickly around them and smashed the butt of his revolver across the man's head, then turned as the hood was slumping to the floor. He went over near the desk and picked up Maroni's gun.

Arnold moved across the room and locked the door; then he went back to the girl.

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Her breath was very ragged and fast, her face white. She swayed uncertainly and held on to Arnold's coat for a moment to keep from falling. He put his right arm about her shoulders.

"You got yourself into quite a mess," he told her. "You almost dug yourself a grave."

She put her face against the shoulder of his coat, nodding her head. "I didn't know," she cried softly. She looked up at him. "After Roger was shot, I was scared. I didn't think much about Roger I was too frightened of what Maroni might do if he found out that I had tried to have Roger help me. At first, I didn't think I should pay, because his gambling wheels were crooked. But then I figured that I'd better take the money I had brought for Roger and pay off Maroni with it."

"And Maroni figured that you were wise that he'd murdered Higgins. So after he got your money, he decided to play safe and have you put out of the way."

The girl was shaking and, at first, she couldn't speak. Then she said, "But I really didn't know. I didn't know until he called those two men to take me home. I was scared by the way he said that; then I saw that those men were two of the ones who had been in the car. The ones who killed Roger."

"I thought Maroni would have been smart enough to get them out of town after that kill," Arnold said. "But now, luckily, we can probably match their guns with the slugs that burned Higgins."

He stopped as the sound of a police siren came from out on the street, drawn by the sound of the gunfire, or called by someone in the club.

Then Bette Jamison said, "But how did you know I would come here?"

Arnold laughed.

"Oh, we cops can think of the dumbest things," he said.

THE END.