

Hair of the Cat

By Robert Turner

Somewhere, Lee Parker knew, in this fantastic set-up was a clue to prove that his wife, Janie, had not committed murder—a clue which would soon be disposed of by the real killer. But what was it?

HE STOOD there in the small town police station, feeling scared and hot and awkwardly big. He tried to think, but all that kept biting into his mind was that this was wrong and crazy; it couldn't happen like this.

Some of it was familiar, though; some of it was right out of his own mystery novels. Or maybe his play now running on Broadway. The dented spittoons and dirty, cracked walls, papered with Wanted posters, were familiar and the naked light bulbs cutting a fog of smoke.

But the rest was wrong. There was no third degree, no brutality. Police Chief Karlin was only a stodgy, gray-haired man in shiny serge. The town's three policemen were just tired, middle aged men. Even he, Lee Parker, didn't fit. He was no hard bitten character in a crime story. He was just the average small town Joe.

Janie, his wife, had been miscast, too. She was not beautiful; she was not crying. Her eyes were hot with unshed tears but that was all. Her quiet little face was pale and she perched primly on a chair, clenching a wadded handkerchief. She looked at the center of the floor and talked in a dull monotone.

She told how she and this Dade McCreery had gone together out west, before she was married to Parker. She told how McCreery came to see her tonight, first time in seven years. He had been drinking and she tried, but couldn't get rid of him.

"Then," she went on, "Dade grabbed me, tried to kiss me. I hit him in the face and tried to get away. I gave one yell before he got hold of my throat, I—everything went dark.... When I came to—well—Mr. Jerome, our next door neighbor, was there. He had heard my screams, came running over. And Dade—Dade McCreery, was on the floor. He was very still and his eyes and mouth were open.... Mr. Jerome, he was calling the police."

Chief Karlin poked out his lip, closed his eyes. He said, tiredly: "You didn't kill him, Mrs.

Parker? I wish you'd tell us. You had reason, Lord knows!"

The balled handkerchief changed hands. She pushed at her hair. "No," she whispered. "I told you, no." She kept saying that.

Karlin insisted: "Think. You were terrified. You grabbed your husband's golf trophy off the mantle. You didn't know what you were doing. You hit McCreery—"

"Stop it!" Lee Parker said.

Karlin opened his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. He looked at the service button in Parker's lapel, apologetically. "I have to do this, son. It happened. She ought to tell us."

Parker moved toward his wife. He was shaking and his throat was choked up. Janie stood up, walked into his arms and the weeping that had been too long held back came upon her. He held her tightly while Karlin and his men looked away, fidgeting.

WAITING for her to quiet, Parker remembered, irrationally, that about now, across the Hudson River, in New York, people were coming out of the theatre, talking about his play.

"The biggest mystery thing to hit The Stem, since *The Cat and The Canary*," Gilman, his agent, called it. It was making Parker a fortune. Hollywood had just paid seventy five thousand dollars for picture rights. All the years he and Janie had struggled along on small book royalties, and now....

Janie pulled away from him, dabbed at her eyes. "I—I'm sorry, Lee." She tried to smile. "How about the lawyer—Crimmins, was it? Did you get him?"

He nodded. "He couldn't make it here, tonight. He'll come first thing tomorrow."

"Yes," she said. She turned away quickly.

Chief Karlin sighed. "That'll have to be all tonight."

Parker touched Janie's shoulder, but she



didn't turn. "I'll be here first thing tomorrow, baby," he said. "Crimmins will get you out of this."

"Yes," she said "All right, Lee. I'll be all right."

He went into the hall. A half dozen city reporters swarmed around. "This on the level, Mr. Parker?" a tall, lean faced newsman demanded. "It's a little hard to take—mystery writer's wife mixed up in real-life murder. This isn't just a press gag for your play?"

"I wish it was," Parker said, and pushed toward the door. He knocked the hands from his arm and walked out of the jail building. Green doorway lights tinted his big boned face, a weird and sickly hue.

The street, as he crossed toward a cab, was shiny black with summer night rain that had come and gone in the past hour. He tumbled into the hack, murmuring his home address.

As the car lurched away, the lean-faced reporter jumped onto the running board. "Give us a statement, sir. Do *you* think she's guilty? You going to stick by her?"

The cab driver shoved the reporter off the running board and Parker was glad of that. He wouldn't have known; he really wouldn't have known what to say.

He laced his fingers between his knees, tried to force order into his mind. He wondered why Janie had never told him about this Dade McCreery and the old days before she was married. She'd told him little of anything about her past, he realized now. She had been in town, working at the library, but a short time when he'd met her.

The cab passed through quiet, shadowed streets, lined with dripping trees. The tires on the wet pavement, made an hypnotic whine of sound and some of the events of the past couple of hours came back to Parker's mind.

He had come from a Dramatist's Guild meeting in New York, about ten-thirty. He'd begun to run when he saw the blinking red lights of the town's only police car in front of his house. He saw his neighbors gathered in groups on the lawn, gasping, whispering. He'd never forget the way they'd looked at him. Inside, he ran, yelling Janie's name, sick and weak in the middle. But Janie wasn't there.

A policeman was there, dusting fingerprint powder around. Henry Jerome, the old gent who

lived next door, was there, watching the cop and absently brushing at the cuffs of his tweed slacks, as though he'd just spilled something on them.

The furniture was tumbled out of place and an antique chair that Janie prized was broken. There was a great, dark stain on the blue rug he had bought the week before. The bronze statuette of a golfer was lying on the floor, its base discolored and sticky, the rest of it covered with fingerprint powder.

Unaware that Parker had come in, the policeman said to Henry Jerome, conversationally: "Her prints are all over that there bronze doohickey. Looks bad."

Parker said: "What *is* this? Where's my wife?"

WHILE they told him, Parker stared at Spooky, his wife's jet black cat, sprawled near the club chair. Spooky had been kicked or trampled to death. Queerly, Parker remembered how he had complained to Janie about the cat clawing up furniture, shedding its long black hairs. He felt small and mean that he had ever quarreled with Janie about keeping the pet.

Parker's thoughts returned to the present as the cab halted in front of his house. He paid the fare and turned through the hedges, up the short path to the house. He went up onto the porch, banged open the screen-door and swung into the living room. He stopped cold, just inside the doorway.

The girl stood by the fireplace, hands flat on his hips. Her eyes, staring at him, were black as jet. She was pretty except for her mouth, which was too small and spoiled looking, turned down at the corners, bitterly.

Parker turned his gaze from her and sent it around the room. The room had been upset before; it was worse now. Sofa and chair pillows were strewn around the floor. Books were pulled from their cases. A trash basket had been emptied out, its contents poured through.

"What are you doing here?" he said. "Who are you?"

She didn't speak. She took several steps toward him, stopped. Her hands kept clenching and opening. She moistened her lips, tossed a bang of black hair away from her eyes.

In a tight, brassy voice, she said: "You hid the letters damned well, didn't you? Or did the police get them?"

He shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

She tried to run past him toward the door. He grabbed her wrist, flung her into a chair. He stood there looking down at her, breathing stertorously. "What letters?" he said. "Where do you fit into this?"

Her long white fingers clutched the chair arms. "All right," she said. "I came here to get the letters, but I didn't find them. I was going to use them to make you pay plenty. Just like Dade McCreery was going to make your wife pay, in the first place."

He took a deep breath. "Suppose you start at the beginning. I don't know what you're talking about."

She didn't look at him. Through her teeth, she said: "Maybe I don't *need* the letters. Maybe just knowing what I know will be enough."

She twisted her wrist from his grip, but didn't attempt to get up. She went on: "It's going to cost you plenty, Lee Parker, your wife killing my man. With some of that money, maybe I can give Dade the biggest, best funeral a guy ever had." Her eyes got dull. "That will be something, won't it?"

"Don't you understand," Parker told her. "I don't know any of this. You've got to tell me the whole thing."

She looked at him, suspiciously. Finally, she said: "Maybe you don't at that. Maybe she would have kept that from you."

SHE TOLD HIM, then. Unknown to Janie, Dade McCreery had been a small town bad man when she met him. One night after he robbed a filling station, police picked him up while Janie was with him. Dade claimed he'd been with her at the time of the crime. Foolishly, she'd tried to help him, reaffirmed the lie. She took a jail sentence as his confederate.

For a short while she believed that they had both been framed, wrote to Dade from prison. But soon after, other inmates made her see the truth. She finished her sentence, left that part of the country, never saw Dade McCreery again.

"Until tonight," the girl finished up. "Last week, Dade saw pictures of you and your wife in the paper, about you getting all the money from the movies. He still had Janie's letters. He came out here tonight to blackmail her."

Lee Parker didn't answer right away. He knew what the police would think about this. It

looked like Janie had killed McCreery to stop his blackmail, get the letters. She could have faked her faint when she heard Henry Jerome enter, cooked up the other story so that the police would believe that there had been a third, unknown party, who had been the killer, or that Janie had killed McCreery in self defense. If the blackmail letters were brought into it, it might become premeditated murder. It would go hard with Janie, then.

"I see," Parker said, finally. "So now you are going to blackmail me?" The girl's lids half closed over her black pin-pointed eyes. Spots of color came into her cheeks. "Listen, mister! I was waiting outside in the car. I heard your wife scream. I saw a neighbor come running over. I waited a few minutes and then I went around to a side window and peeked in. Dade was—Dade was lying on the floor..." She shook her head as though to clear the sight from her mind. Her voice rose and she went on:

"Then I heard Janie tell the neighbor her story and I turned and ran to the car, drove away. I didn't want to get mixed up in it. Half way back to New York, I realized that your wife must've just cooked up that story. So I came back. I—"

Lee Parker didn't hear the rest. He was looking around the room. Every once in awhile he sculled his foot at the black hairs on the rug, shed by the dead Spooky. He got to thinking about the blackmail letters. The police hadn't mentioned them, so they had not got hold of them. This girl here had been searching for them, obviously had not found them. She had covered the room pretty well, so they could not have been hidden here.

He remembered that he had not talked with Henry Jerome, the next door neighbor who had been in on the thing. Perhaps Jerome had seen the letters, could tell him something about them.

"Look," he said to the girl. "I'm going next door for a few minutes. Stay here. Don't try to run away, I'd only call the police and they'd pick you up in nothing flat."

She just stared at him with her dark, wild looking eyes. She didn't say anything. He turned away from her and went out of the house, cut across the lawn to Jerome's property. Lights were still on in Jerome's house. He moved around some shrubbery, passed the window of a lighted room.

Inside, Parker got a glimpse of Jerome, a tall reedy old bachelor, in his pajamas, ready for bed. Jerome was holding a pair of tweed slacks under a

living room lamp, brushing industriously at the cuffs with a whisk broom.

SOMETHING clicked then, in Parker's mind. Cat hairs! Earlier tonight, when he had come in and found out about the murder, Henry Jerome had been there, brushing at the cuffs of his slacks. He was doing the same thing again, now. Jerome must have got Spooky's hairs all over his trousers? That meant something now.

Thoughts whirled through Parker's brain. He remembered the sweet gentleness of his wife, Janie, and knew that she had not lied. She *couldn't* have done the murder. Yet somebody had. He remembered the missing letters—and that Janie had never mentioned them. The little pieces began falling into place like the pattern of a jigsaw puzzle, almost complete, so that you can visualize how the whole will look.

Parker moved away from the window, ran around to the front of the house, leaped up the steps onto Henry Jerome's front porch. He tiptoed in, without knocking or ringing, entered the living room as Jerome was placing his carefully folded slacks over the back of a chair under a lamp.

From the doorway, Lee Parker said: "I've come for the letters."

Henry Jerome turned, blinking, his gaunt face drained gray. Pussy-willow like tufts of eyebrows raised over his deep set blue eyes. His small mouth pursed. "Oh," he said. "It's you, Parker. You gave me a fright."

Parker said, stolidly: "You found the letters on the floor, while you were waiting for Janie to come to. You read one of them. You knew what they would mean to Janie's case. You were going to blackmail me for them."

A vein stood out at the side of Henry Jerome's high forehead. His Adam's apple moved in his long neck. "Well," he said, "why don't you sit down. Maybe we can talk it over right now."

Parker's eyes moved to the tweed slacks on the chair, then back to Jerome. "Those letters don't mean a damn anymore," he said. "They won't make a case against Jane for McCreery's murder, because she didn't kill him."

Jerome glanced at the tweed slacks now, too. "Look," he said, softly. "Maybe I've changed my mind, Parker. Maybe I've decided to play square with you. After all, I don't want to—" He stopped abruptly.

LEE PARKER'S face was dark with anger. His fists began to open and close. A choking was in his throat so that he could hardly talk, but he made it.

"Tonight," he said, "you heard Janie scream. You rushed over, but Dade McCreery wasn't dead when you entered like you said. He was still choking Janie. He turned on you and in the fight that followed, you grabbed the bronze statuette, Jerome. *You* hit McCreery with it, not Janie."

Outside, night wind rustled the trees, flung rain against a window.

"You got scared, then," Parker went on. "But Janie was still out, didn't know what had happened. You put the murder weapon in her hand after wiping your own prints off. You saw the letters, over which Janie and McCreery had been fighting and got that bright idea."

Jerome said, hoarsely: "How do you know all—"

Parker cut in. "The cat gave you away, Jerome. In your fight with McCreery, you kicked Spooky out of the way, killed him. Long haired cats shed this time of year. You got black cat hairs all over your trousers, Jerome. You've been brushing them off all night. But there'll be a few left for the police microscopes to find."

He stopped talking, suddenly. Henry Jerome was staring over his shoulder. Parker turned, saw Dade McCreery's girl standing in the doorway, watching them.

"So you're the one who murdered Dade," she said to Jerome. "I can see it, now. What Parker said is true."

She took two steps into the room. "I'm glad I followed Parker over here, now. The other business is all out, I guess. But I've got *something* left."

There was a rush of movement behind Parker. He turned just as Henry Jerome reached a nearby desk, yanked open a drawer and whipped out a Colt .38. He covered Parker and the girl.

"You—you're McCreery's girl?" Jerome said.

"Yes."

Henry Jerome fell back. His head swerved from the girl to Parker like a man watching a ping-pong game.

"Stay away from me!" He cried.

But she kept moving toward Jerome, obsessed. Parker watched her, and the old man, with that gun jerking in his fist. He had to do

something to stop this. His eyes searched the room, came to rest on a nearby table. He reached for a package of cigarettes and matches there, casually.

Parker struck a match, but didn't take the cigarette from the package. He put the flame to the cellophane around the cigarettes. He hurled the sudden puff of white flame across the room at Jerome.

JEROME screamed as the fiery package hit his chest. He knocked it away in a shower of sparks. Parker hit him around the knees in a headlong dive. They crashed back to the floor and the .38 went off with a sharp clap of sound.

Parker's ears rang but he held down Jerome's squirming figure. It took several seconds for his hands to find Jerome's skinny neck. Jerome's

head thumping the floor took all the fight out of him.

Lee Parker stood up, slowly, flexed his fingers. He turned toward the girl. She was standing in the same place, posed, almost. She was looking into space.

Parker felt suddenly all let out—he walked toward the phone....

Dawn was bright-hot in the sky when he and Janie left Police Headquarters. On the way home, she explained that she had never told Lee about McCreery and her prison record because she was afraid of how he might react.

They didn't talk about it after that and Lee Parker knew that he would never write another murder novel. There were other things a man could write about.

THE END