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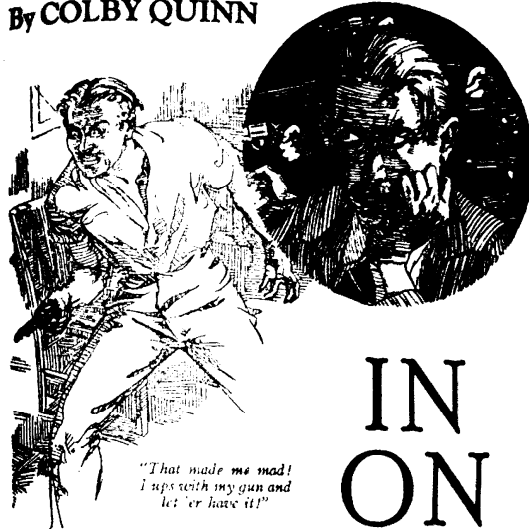


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forefinger at the suddenly white-faced sergeant.

By COLBY QUINN



IN ON THE KILL

"Bang!" he croaked. "Bang! Bang!"

Out of the corners of calculating eyes, Gilly watched the effect. Two constables shook their heads. Sergeant Hinkley took a deep breath. The muscles in his jaws writhed. Then he said grimly.

"Lock him up. Call the coroner and the doctor and beat it over to his house."

Gilly's high-pitched laugh explored in the room. "Ya-a!" he jeered "Doctor! Why, hell! Two of the bullets went right through 'er head!"

He was still laughing when they clanged shut the door of his cell. He had heard Hinkley say:

"They should have jugged him long ago; all they can do now is put him in the nut house."

AND Gilbert Brandt realized, in a new

WHEN Gilly Brandt hobbled into the town police station one morning and described, between gurgles of insane merriment, how he had just riddled his young wife with .45 slugs, he was conscious of having rounded out a long year's plan for vengeance.

"Hee-hee!" piped Gilly, prancing to favor his lame foot. "I walked in and I says, 'Where's my dinner?' And she just kept a-rocking in that chair. She says, 'There ain't none.' So that made me mad; I ups with my gun—" Here Gilly went through the motions of a lightning draw. "... and I let 'er have it. Like this!" He thrust a gnarled

surge of exaltation, that that was exactly all they could do. Hadn't he planned it for a whole year? Hadn't he made sure, for many months, that the whole town knew he was crazy; that they regarded him as irresponsible, though, they thought, harmless! Hadn't he even had himself sent to a mental hospital for six weeks and then released in the custody of his family, though everyone knew he wasn't cured? Yes! With such a careful build-up to establish his insanity, how could they do anything to him for murdering his wife?

From the very moment he had caught her with Walter Logan that night, Brandt had wanted to kill her; had sworn her death to himself. But the resolve had shrunk coldly in the bitter shell of his heart, cringing before the shadows of the law and punishment. They might hang him; and Brandt had always feared death with such a fierce fear that it almost amounted to hysteria when he thought about it.

But *kill! Kill her!* He wanted her to die, and he wanted to be in on the kill. He would have liked to murder Walter Logan, too, but he dared not kill both of them for fear that such a double death might point suspicions toward something other than insanity.

How well he remembered that night last summer! How sweet had been the taste of that last suspicion-free kiss from Jane's lips; and how rancid had that taste turned in his mouth this last year!

"I'm going over to St. Francis," he told her carelessly after supper.

"See if I can collect what old Bigsbee owes me for that last job—overhauling those tractors."

Across the table, Jane had rested her pert little cleft chin on her hand, elbow on the table, and drawled casually: "Be gone late?"

Her voice was smooth, her hazel eyes round and innocent.

"No," said Brandt. "Not very. Be back by twelve." Had ever any man such a wife, he wondered? Was there ever a face so delicately oval, so perfectly featured, so flawlessly smooth? Had any woman but Jane a mouth so young and soft, with lips the satin-petaled texture and color of a dark, dark rose?

He stepped around the table and she rose to meet him; wound her warm arms around his neck and gave herself to his thirsty kiss, surrendering herself to his hungry embrace. Brandt hugged her close, his arms recognizing the well remembered roundnesses of her body. Against his chest, the touch of her young curves was a hungry pressure. Jane was so young—like a bud not yet flowered into summery fullness.

"I'll be back early," he whispered, speaking to her also with his eyes; "early, my sweet. Stay awake for me, will you!"

She laughed, her face suddenly rosy. . . . Yet even then hadn't he recognized an impatient, faraway nuance in her loving embrace! At any rate, he had gone then: had returned within an hour because he had suddenly remembered that Old Bigsbee wouldn't be home tonight: These were the three days of the county fair.

HAD it been premonition, or a husband's desire to see his wife unawares, that caused him to limp silently across the yard and peep beneath the nearly-drawn shade of her boudoir window! The window was slightly open and he could hear her murmuring honeyedly to her lover—not half a dozen feet from him.

"... be back by twelve, darling," he said. "We've got plenty of time Kiss me once more, Walter; many times more..."

And young Walter Logan had kissed

her many times more, while Brandt watched, gripping the window sill fiercely, shifting often to his stronger leg.

Logan, the young simp! Because he had a doctor's degree and a pretty-boy mug, thinking he could fool with another man's wife. Brandt's throat was congested and choked as he watched them; hating his wife as she spent her kisses on the young man's willing lips, as she clung to him, giving him the melting pressure of her soft body, the nearness of her slim, perfect figure....

Finally Brandt sprang back from the window, hurried around to the front of the house; pounded noisily up on the porch and rattled the door as he opened it.

He took his time turning on the light in the parlor; he whistled. He wanted to give her time to hide him, but not enough time for him to leave the room. In a few seconds he called: "Jane?"

She opened the door of her boudoir; "Gilbert!" her voice was unruffled; only a little breathless. Brandt hated her composure. "Back so early!" she yawned. "I was just about ready to turn in."

Brandt laughed. He stepped close and kissed her. "Well, why not?" He pushed his way into the room. Immediately he fixed on the clothes closet as Logan's hiding place. The door was not quite closed, and he knew that the man concealed there would be able to hear and see all that occurred ... would he be able to relish to the bitter full any love scene that transpired presently.

Brandt's eyes gleamed. He suddenly became intensely affectionate.

"Jane! Jane!" He pulled the tense, slender body of his wife into his arms, kissed the frozen smile from her lips.

"I've been thinking of you," he murmured ardently. "I couldn't take my mind off you. That's why I came back. Anyway, Old Bigsbee won't be home

tonight"

She kissed him, but then she held herself away from him. "I— I don't feel well, tonight," she whispered. She carefully did not look at the closet door, but Brandt stole glances in that direction. He saw nothing, but he imagined much; how these two would feel, suddenly separated while she most suffer the caresses of another man.

"But surely, my sweet," he said, "surely you feel well enough to kiss me as"—he restrained himself from saying, 'as you just kissed another man'— "as you always do."

She took a deep breath, kissed him unwillingly. And Brandt grinned inwardly with fierce hate. He pushed his hand through the curls of her auburn hair; he looked at her as she stood before him clad in the blue negligee. (God! that any other man should have seen her so!)

In the low light of the boudoir lamp, she was a dream of pink and white flesh, with alluring blue shadows suggested where the cobalt lace underthings clung to her.

"Don't—please, darling!" she protested as he kissed her once more. But he gave her no heed; he was rough now, and cruel in his hate and jealousy. He wanted this other man to see that *he*, her husband, was the owner and possessor of this lovely morsel.

"Oh, God!" she moaned at last. "I hate you for this!"

AND Brandt knew she did; and from that moment he despised her thoroughly; swore that she would die—and that he would live to relish his revenge. He left her and went out and drove the car a few blocks, to give Logan a chance to escape. They weren't to know—yet—that he knew....

About this time, Gilly Brandt gloated, prancing awkwardly around his

cell, they will be finding her body; they'll be saying it's too bad that those ugly holes in her head spoil her beauty. Too bad! isn't it? But the killer is insane; you can't do a thing to him, gentlemen, except commit him to a nice, pleasant hospital for the mentally unbalanced.

An asylum, of course, but if you have a little money—and I have more than a little—it can be a very pleasant sojourn. And after a little while, perhaps they'll let you go. Perhaps, he thought, they might even send him to a private hospital—the same one he'd gone to last fall, in Lakeview.

That was after he'd mulled it over, found it foolproof—this plan for murdering his wife with impunity. A man could suddenly plead insanity *after* a murder, and the jury would scoff; but if there was ample evidence that he'd been crazy for, say a year before, then they'd have to acquit him. It was more than probable, he had told himself; it was certain. It had to be, because Brandt didn't want to hang. ... It was worth waiting a full year to murder an unfaithful woman.

Clever how he'd thwarted them those six weeks while he was in the hospital, by pleading with Jane until she came along with him to Lakeview. Faithful, devoted wife, the doctors had thought; to stick to a man who thinks he's Wild Bill Hickock one day and Billy The Kid the next.

“Patience, have patience, Walter, darling! It's only a matter of time till they put him away for good, or till he dies on us. Then you and I'll go away where he can't spy on.... I wonder if he really suspects anything?”

“And I wonder if he's really crazy, Jane. He'd kill you—and me too, I'll bet—if he knew I was with you out here in town all

this time, while you visit him in the hospital....”

YES, it was clever, damned clever, how Gilbert Brandt had picked famous gunmen for his delusions; so that when he eventually used a gun it would be even more convincing.

Gradually he had let his trade as a machinist die; he didn't need it anyway, with his money. He thereafter spent much of his time in the village store and the post office, wherever loafers congregated, wherever townspeople came and could see him.

“Bang! Bang!” he would shout suddenly, after muttering a while to himself. Whipping out an imaginary six-shooter, he would slay half the men in sight.

“Poor old Gilly!” Men would tap their heads. *“Used to be sound as a nut up here. Now he's just a nut.”*

And, *“Poor Jane!”* women would whisper. *“How does she stand that!”*

And Jane was beginning to wonder that herself. She had just carefully let Walter Logan out the back door on that summer morning when Brandt came in with a cold and deadly gleam in his eye, to find her lounging nonchalantly in an easy chair, undressed fit to kill, in a pale peach pajama suit

The phrase struck him. Fit to kill. This was the day. Weeks ago, he had carefully dug an old army forty-five from the bottom of his trunk, hidden it in his desk drawer.

“They can't do a thing to me,” Brandt reassured himself.

CONSTABLE HIGGINS re-entered the police station whistling. Sergeant Hinkley looked at him.

“All right,” he growled. *“Out with it.*

What did the coroner say? No doubt she was dead, of course.”

“The hell you say,” retorted Higgins. “She made us some coffee. We told her she was supposed to be dead—that her husband just gave himself up for killing her. She just laughed.

“She said, ‘Do you think I haven’t expected that little scene for months? Do you think I haven’t made sure twice a day that the gun he keeps loaded in the house was full of blanks? But—I didn’t play dead; nothing like that. You mean, he really thinks he’s killed me?’

“That’s all,” Higgins finished “I’m afraid the poor fellow is really gone this time, he’s nuts—and dangerous.”

Sergeant Hinkley whistled low.

In his cell, Gilly Brandt chuckled in a very pleased reminiscence. For a whole year he had played crazy—*lived* himself crazy. Suddenly he stopped short in his limping stride.

“All right,” he snapped at the bars in front of him, “I’ve got you now—and they can’t do a thing to me!” His right hand flashed to his hip, came up sharply.

“*Bang!*” he croaked. “*Bang! Bang!*”