

*Horrible Was the Fate Destined for Mol Craig!*

# Vial of Murder

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HENRY CRAIG'S face was white and drawn. His hand trembled as he passed the letter across the desk to Bill Dawson. "It's Molly's handwriting, there is no doubt of that. I'd know it anywhere," said Craig, his voice hoarse. "They've got her—it must be the Hogan gang,—and they're not holding her for money." The elderly judge mopped his brow with an immaculate white handkerchief. "They want me to give them certain documents I have in my possession—documents which they know will send them to jail. But I can't give them up! You've got to save her somehow, Dawson!"

"I'm doing all in my power, Judge." There was a frown on the lean face of the Federal investigator as he spoke. "But there's no lead, nothing, except what you tell me about those papers, to give even a hint as to where they have taken her." Dawson was studying the note as he spoke. He glanced hastily through it a second time.

Pop dear, (he read). I have been kidnapped and am being held a prisoner. Please don't tell the police if you value my life. You are to get certain papers in your possession ready within twenty-four hours. They will contact you later and tell you where to leave them. Don't do anything foolish. These men are desperate and I am terribly afraid. You know which papers.

Your loving daughter,

Mol.

"Mol?" Dawson glanced up as he finished reading the note. "Does your daughter usually sign her letters with just part of her name?"

"No, she doesn't," said Craig. "She hates the name used that way." He smiled wanly. "And her calling me Pop—that's a word she never used before!"

"That's what she's trying to tell us!" Dawson exclaimed. "Pops' Mollison is mixed up in this!"

"Who's Pops Mollison?" demanded Craig.

"Mollison used to be a doctor, but he became insane. He was locked up in an asylum for a time, but finally declared harmless. He lives in an old house out in Greenfields. Maybe the Hogan gang are using him." Dawson got to his feet. "I'm going out to his place tonight and have a look around."

"Dangerous work," said Craig. "One man—alone."

"The gang would know something was wrong if we made a raid of it," said Dawson. "I'd better work alone on this for the time being." He frowned. "That might be safer—for your daughter!"

Henry Craig shuddered. His eyes were frightened as Dawson left the office, closing the door quietly behind him.

Half an hour later the Federal man found himself in the little village of Greenfields. He had learned the exact location of the Mollison place from the ticket agent at the railroad station. It was only a short distance, and Dawson decided to make it on foot.

As he walked along the dark country road he was suddenly aware of being followed. He darted swiftly to the shelter of a rock at the side of the road. Just as he did so, a gun roared behind him and flame lanced the night. Dawson fell flat and rolled until he found himself in some brush by the roadside. He got to his knees, fingers dragging at the gun in his shoulder holster.

His automatic barked as he caught sight of a shadowy figure out on the road. The man uttered a howl of pain and began a hasty retreat. Dawson fired a second time, but his unknown foe was pounding back down the road toward the railroad station.

"That's bad," murmured Dawson. "They'll

be looking for me now. I've got to work fast!"

A few minutes wait, and then he hurried on along the road. He reached the grounds of the Mollison place without encountering anyone. The house was an old stone dwelling a good distance back from the road, and was completely surrounded by trees.

Dawson, shielded by the darkness, crept closer to the house. A light burned in a window on the lower floor. He peered in but saw no one. Cautiously he climbed the steps of the porch. As he searched the shadows with his eyes he saw that the front door was standing half open.

From inside the house came a shrill, hysterical scream. Dawson stood motionless, listening tensely. Again came the scream—lingering in the still night air.

Dawson stepped into the hall, his gun in his hand. There was a closed door at the far end of the lower hallway and he realized that the scream had come from there as he heard it for the third time. He moved silently toward the door. When he reached it he pushed it open and peered in.

The small room beyond was apparently a laboratory. There were test tubes and various bottles and jars on a table. Nearby stood a tall, shaggy-haired man in a blue smock. He was facing a beautiful blond girl in a yellow evening gown. The girl was tied to a straight-backed chair. There was a look of horror on her face as she gazed at the vial of acid which the tall man was holding in his left hand.

"No, no!" she pleaded. "Please, Doctor Mollison. That acid will disfigure me for life!"

"Exactly," Doctor Mollison's voice was harsh and guttural. "That is just what I intend it to do. That single drop that I let fall on your arm has convinced you that it will sear and burn."

"But I've told you that I don't know where Father hid those documents," protested Molly. "Besides, didn't you have me write that note, telling Father to turn the papers over to you and the rest?"

"Yes, I know," said Mollison. "That was Hogan's idea—but I'm not taking any chances. I still believe you know the location of your father's hidden safe. When this acid starts eating into your face—you'll talk!"

In the doorway Dawson's gun roared as the doctor raised the vial and started to let some of the

acid drop on the girl's face. Mollison reeled back as the bullet caught him in the arm. He whirled in time to see Dawson as the Federal man leaped into the room.

The vial in Mollison's hand went flying through space. Dawson jumped to one side as the glass shattered against the wall, spattering the acid all about. Dawson fired again as he saw Mollison reach into his pocket for a gun. The doctor went down, shot through the heart.

**D**AWSON reached the girl. He grabbed up a scalpel from the table and cut the ropes that bound her. As she stood up weakly, Dawson turned toward the door. From the hall had come the sound of excited voices and running feet. The rest of the Hogan gang were coming!

"Climb out the window!" ordered Dawson, turning to the girl.

Molly did not hesitate. She reached the ground floor window and drew it open, then slid over the sill. Dawson leaped to the door of the laboratory and slammed it shut. To his relief there was a heavy bolt on the inside. He shot the bolt into the socket.

Bullets rained against the door as Dawson hastily retreated. He glanced around the room. There was a pile of old newspapers in one corner. He struck a match and lighted the papers. As they started to blaze, he climbed out the window. He could hear the gang pounding against the door. They would break it open in a few moments.

Molly was waiting for him in the shadows at the back of the house.

"Come on!" he said, grabbing her by the arm. "We've got to run for it!"

With the girl beside him Dawson started hastily toward the road. From the house came the deafening roar of an explosion.

"I thought that would happen when the heat got to all those chemicals," said Dawson. "And I hope the whole gang were in the laboratory when it did."

They paused.

The stone house was silent.

"They don't seem to be following us," said Molly. "Do you think—"

"That they were all killed? Lord knows. You stay here. I'm going back to find out."

He glanced toward the road. Excited citizens

of Greenfield were hurrying to the scene, attracted by the sound of the explosion. He knew that the local police would be with them.

Dawson returned to the house. He peered into what had been the laboratory. There were four men there—three of them were dead and badly mangled. The third was moaning and

holding onto a broken arm. Dawson recognized Hogan, the hard-faced gang leader.

“You got us,” snarled Hogan. “Jest one Fed—”

“Right,” said Dawson. “One of us is enough for a bunch of rats!”