

### The Unlatched Door

By Frank Price

The night was dark but clear. Fortunately the pavement was dry, so there would be no tell-tale marks on her satin shoes. She would soon be back now after—how many hours was it since she had slipped out of the restaurant? There was a big clock projecting over the corner she was making for and now she could see its face. Hands pointed to five minutes past 11—but that couldn't be right! She glanced at her wrist watch. It said the same. But it had been a quarter to 11 when she passed that clock

on her way to Borden's flat. Impossible that all she had been through since had happened in 20 minutes! If it had, perhaps Roy Hemersley had not even missed her! Anyway, she would be back in one more minute and safe—safe!

Her hastening steps were suddenly checked and she felt again that impulse to turn and look back which she had resisted when leaving the room where Roger Borden lay. This time she submitted to it and some instinct which had caused the movement was justified. There was a man following her. As if seeing her pause and look back he, too, checked his pace and seemed to try to conceal himself in the shadows of the wall beside him. Panic seized her and she ran blindly forward, round the corner into the light, up the steps to the lobby of the Boldovins, and into the ladies' cloak-room.

CHAPTER IV

There were several women in the cloakroom, but all were busy at the mirrors with lipstick, cosmetics and powder puffs, save one who, uttering lamentations, was having a long rant in her lace skirt mended by the attendant. Thanks to their preoccupations Barbara's tempestuous entrance was not noticed, and the fact of finding herself among so many others was enough to suggest the advisability of behaving with at least outward calm. She paused just inside the door, breathing hard, and made an effort to pull herself together.

She was surprised to feel herself trembling in every limb. A moment ago she had been running as she had never run before in her life; now she was limp and powerless and feeling that if she did not immediately get support she would faint. There was a cushioned seat along one wall of the room. Swaying and stumbling, she managed to reach it and sank down into a corner where, for a couple of minutes, she lay back with closed eyes, fighting desperately to master her weakness.

It passed off presently, and she began to be more aware of her surroundings. There was a babel of chatter which came to her in fragments:

"He's a pet, darling. No brains, of course, but dances like an angel and so good at loving..."

"I gave seven-eleven-three a pair because they were guaranteed hole proof, and the first time I put them on one went into a ladder right from my instep to the suspender clip!"

"It all depends what you mean by love. Of course, if it's marriage and a home, and stuffy things like that you're thinking of..."

"...walked straight into his sitting-room, my dear, took an automatic pistol from her hand-bag and shot him through the heart!"

"Oh! But, of course, that was in Paris. It couldn't happen here!"

"Oh! But, of course, that was in Paris. It couldn't happen here!"

Barbara had half risen with a great start. She sank back at the last words, telling herself that she must be careful. An awful fear that those two were speaking of her had nearly driven her flying from the room. They were not; they could not be! No one but herself knew what had happened in that room where she had left Roger Borden.

No one knew—yet! But it would be known sometime—in a few hours at most; and in the meantime she must do nothing that could draw the faintest suspicion on her of having done anything she would not wish to be known.

Collecting all her energies she made a supreme effort to behave with ordinary composure. She surveyed the backs, mostly bare, of the chattering women before her. To her overwrought mind they suggested a convocation of magpies, gabbling emptily of nothings. Her glance, wandering round, came to rest on a small, square table at her elbow beside the end of the seat.

A glass, half full of liquor, stood on it and she recognized it as that in which the attendant had brought the brandy ordered for Nancy. She was sitting where she and her friend had sat not more than half an hour ago—and what worlds of time that was away from her now! She had seen death, sudden and awful—had unwittingly caused it, for all she could say! And what had been happening to Nancy? How were things between her and her husband?

Abruptly she thought of the letters. It was to get them she had gone to Borden's flat. Not only had she failed in that but he had told her that they were already on their way to Martin Winterton. She believed she had seen them go—the packet the manservant slipped into his overcoat pocket as he came to the flat door. If they were to be posted they would arrive with the morning's mail, but she had the impression that Borden intended them to be delivered by hand. If that were the case, the man would still be on his way. Something must be done to prevent those letters from reaching Martin.

She made an effort to rise but sank back again. Her limbs still trembled so that she could not trust them. The attendant, having finished her darning, was coming towards her with something to say: "That brandy I brought for your friend wasn't paid for, miss."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'll do it now." Barbara opened her bag and

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searched for a suitable coin. "She didn't take much. Seems a pity to waste good stuff," said the woman, eyeing the glass.

"You're right. I won't waste it," Barbara replied. She took the glass and drank the contents with a defiant toss of her head. It was the first time in her life she had taken such a drink and it nearly choked

her but almost at once she began to feel the better for it.

"There was a gentleman asking for you," the woman said.

"A gentleman—asking for me?" Barbara stared at her in alarm.

"Yes. Tall, fair, good-looking young gentleman—wavy hair—natural wave—about five minutes after you went out the second time.

Asked me if you were still here."

"Why did he ask that? What did you say?" Barbara demanded quickly.

"Why should Roy Hemersley suspect that she was not there?"

"Told him you were, of course. I could see he wouldn't like it if I said anything else and I was never one to make trouble." There was a knowing, leery smile on the wom-

an's face which revolted Barbara though she could not help being thankful that her absence had not been betrayed.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll see if I can find him now." She handed the woman half a crown and went out of the room.

There were steps on her left leading down to the counter of the gen-

lemen's cloak-room and the first thing she saw was Roy Hemersley ascending three stairs at a time with every appearance of haste. He checked as he saw her and came on more slowly.

(To Be Continued)

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