DASHIELL HAMMETT

THE SECOND-STORY ANGEL

Carter Brigham — Carter Webright Brigham in the tables of contents of various popular magazines — woke with a start, passing from unconsciousness into full awareness too suddenly to doubt that his sleep had been disturbed by something external.

The moon was not up and his apartment was on the opposite side of the building from the street—lights; the blackness about him was complete — he could not see so far as the foot of his bed.

Holding his breath, not moving after that first awakening start, he lay with straining eyes and ears. Almost at once a sound — perhaps a repetition of the one that had aroused him — came from the adjoining room: the furtive shuffling of feet across the wooden floor. A moment of silence, and a chair grated on the floor, as if dislodged by a careless shin. Then silence again, and a faint rustling as of a body scraping against the rough paper of the wall.

Now Carter Brigham was neither a hero nor a coward, and he was not armed. There was nothing in his rooms more deadly than a pair of candlesticks, and they — not despicable weapons in an emergency — were on the far side of the room from which the sounds came.

If he had been awakened to hear very faint and not often repeated noises in the other room — such rustlings as even the most adept burglar might not avoid — the probabilities are that Carter would have been content to remain in his bed and try to frighten the burglar away by yelling at him. He would not have disregarded the fact that in an encounter at close quarters under these conditions every advantage would lie on the side of the prowler.

But this particular prowler had made quite a lot of noise, had even stumbled against a chair, had shown himself a poor hand at stealthiness. That an inexpert burglar might easily be as dangerous as an adept did not occur to the man in the bed.

Perhaps it was that in the many crook stories he had written, deadliness had always been wedded to skill and the bunglers had always been comparatively harmless and easily overcome, and that he had come to accept this theory as a truth. After all, if a man says a thing often enough, he is very likely to acquire some sort of faith in it sooner or later.

Anyhow, Carter Brigham slid his not unmuscular body gently out from between the sheets and crept on silent bare feet toward the open doorway of the room from which the sounds had come. He passed from his bed to a position inside the next room, his back against the wall beside the door during an interlude of silence on the intruder's part.

The room in which Carter now stood was every bit as black as the one he had left; so he stood motionless, waiting for the prowler to betray his position.

His patience was not taxed. Very soon the burglar moved again, audibly; and then against the rectangle of a window — scarcely lighter than the rest of the room —Carter discerned a man-shaped shadow just a shade darker coming toward him. The shadow passed the window and was lost in the enveloping darkness.

Carter, his body tensed, did not move until he thought the burglar had had time to reach a spot where no furniture intervened. Then, with clutching hands thrown out on wide—spread arms, Carter hurled himself forward.

His shoulder struck the intruder and they both crashed to the floor. A forearm came up across Carter's throat, pressing into it. He tore it away and felt a blow on his cheek. He wound one arm around the burglar's body, and with the other fist struck back. They rolled over and over across the floor until they were stopped by the legs of a massive table, the burglar uppermost.

With savage exultance in his own strength, which the struggle thus far had shown to be easily superior to the other's, Carter twisted his body, smashing his adversary into the heavy table. Then he drove a fist into the body he had just shaken off and scrambled to his knees, feeling for a grip on the burglar's throat. When he had secured it he found that the prowler was lying motionless, unresisting. Laughing triumphantly, Carter got to his feet and switched on the lights.

The girl on the floor did not move.

Half lying, half hunched against the table where he had hurled her, she was inanimate. A still, twisted figure in an austerely tailored black suit — one sleeve of which had been torn from the shoulder — with an unended confusion of short chestnut hair above a face that was linen-white except where blows had reddened it. Her eyes were closed. One arm was outflung across the floor, the other lay limply at her side; one silken leg was extended, the other folded under her.

Into a corner of the room her hat, a small black toque, had rolled; not far from the hat lay a very small pinch-bar, the jimmy with which she had forced an entrance.

The window over the fire escape — always locked at night — was wide-open. Its catch

hung crookedly.

Mechanically, methodically — because he had been until recently a reporter on a morning paper, and the lessons of years are not unlearned in a few weeks—Carter's eyes picked up these details and communicated them to his brain while he strove to conquer his bewilderment.

After a while his wits resumed their functions and he went over to kneel beside the girl. Her pulse was regular, but she gave no other indications of life. He lifted her from the floor and carried her to the leather couch on the other side of the room. Then he brought cold water from the bathroom and brandy from the bookcase. Generous applications of the former to her temples and face and of the latter between her lips finally brought a tremor to her mouth and a quiver to her eyelids.

Presently she opened her eyes, looked confusedly around the room, and endeavored to sit up. He pressed her head gently down on the couch.

“Lie still a moment longer — until you feel all right.”

She seemed to see him then for the first time, and to remember where she was. She shook her head clear of his restraining hand and sat up, swinging her feet down to the floor.

“So I lose again,” she said, with an attempt at nonchalance that was only faintly tinged with bitterness, her eyes meeting his.

They were green eyes and very long, and they illuminated her face which, without their soft light, had seemed of too sullen a cast for beauty, despite the smooth regularity of the features.

Carter's glance dropped to her discolored cheek, where his knuckles had left livid marks.

“I'm sorry I struck you,” he apologized. “In the dark I naturally thought you were a man. I wouldn't have —”

“Forget it,” she commanded coolly. “It's all in the game.”

“But I—“

“Aw, stop it!” Impatiently. “It doesn't amount to anything. I'm all right.”

“I'm glad of that.”

His bare toes came into the range of his vision, and he went into his bedroom for slippers and a robe. The girl watched him silently when he returned to her, her face calmly defiant.

“Now,” he suggested, drawing up a chair, “suppose you tell me all about it.”

She laughed briefly. “It's a long story, and the bulls ought to be here any minute now. There wouldn't be time to tell it.”

“The police?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I didn't send for them! Why should I?”

“God knows!” She looked around the room and then abruptly straight into his eyes. “If you think I'm going to buy my liberty, brother”—her voice was icy insolent — “you're way off!”

He denied the thought. Then: “Suppose you tell me about it.”

“All primed to listen to a sob story?” she mocked. “Well, here goes: I got some bad breaks on the last couple of jobs I pulled and had to lay low — so low that I didn't even get anything to eat for a day or two. I figured I'd have to pull another job for getaway money — so I could blow town for a while. And this was it! I was sort of giddy from not eating and I made too much noise; but even at that” — with a scornful laugh — “you'd never have nailed me if I'd had a gun on me!”

Carter was on his feet.

“There's food of some sort in the icebox. We'll eat before we do any more talking.”

A grunt came from the open window by which the girl had entered. Both of them wheeled toward it. Framed in it was a burly, red-faced man who wore a shiny blue serge suit and a black derby hat. He threw one thick leg over the sill and came into the room with heavy, bearlike agility. —“Well, well” — the words came complacently from his thick-lipped mouth, under a close-clipped gray moustache — “if it ain't my old friend Angel Grace!”

“Cassidy!” the girl exclaimed weakly, and then relapsed into sullen stoicism.

Carter took a step forward.

“What—”

“'S all right!” the newcomer assured him, displaying a bright badge. “Detective-Sergeant Cassidy. I was passin' and sported somebody makin' your fire escape. Decided to wait until they left and nab 'em with the goods. Got tired of waitin' and came up for a look-see.”

He turned jovially to the girl.

“And here it turns out to be the Angel herself! Come on, kid, let's take a ride.”

Carter put out a detaining hand as she started submissively toward the detective.

“Wait a minute! Can't we fix this thing up? I don't want to prosecute the lady.”

Cassidy leered from the girl to Carter and back, and then shook his head.

“Can't be done! The Angel is wanted for half a dozen jobs. Don't make no difference whether you make charges against her or not — she'll go over for plenty anyways.”

The girl nodded concurrence.

“Thanks, old dear,” she told Carter, with an only partially successful attempt at nonchalance, “but they want me pretty bad.”

But Carter would not submit without a struggle. The gods do not send a real flesh-and-blood feminine crook into a writer's rooms every evening in the week. The retention of such a gift was worth contending for. The girl must have within her, he thought, material for thousands, tens of thousands, of words of fiction. Was that a boon to be lightly surrendered? And then her attractiveness was in itself something; and a still more potent claim on his assistance — though not perhaps so clearly explainable — was the mottled area his fists had left on the smooth flesh of her cheek.

“Can't we arrange it somehow?” he asked. “Couldn't we fix it so that the charges might be — er — unofficially disregarded for the present?”

Cassidy's heavy brows came down and the red of his face darkened.

“Are you tryin' to —“

He stopped, and his small blue eyes narrowed almost to the point of vanishing completely.

“Go ahead! You're doin' the talkin'.”

Bribery, Carter knew, was a serious matter, and especially so when directed toward an officer of the law. The law is not to be lightly set aside, perverted, by an individual. To fling to this gigantic utensil a few bits of green-engraved paper, expecting thus to turn it from its course, was, to say the least, a foolhardy proceeding.

Yet the law as represented by this fat Cassidy in baggy, not too immaculate garments, while indubitably the very same law, seemed certainly less awe-inspiring, less unapproachable. Almost it took on a human aspect — the aspect of a man who was not entirely without his faults. The law just now, in fact, looked out through little blue eyes that were manifestly greedy, for all their setting in a poker face.

Carter hesitated, trying to find the words in which his offer would be most attractively dressed; but the detective relieved him of the necessity of broaching the subject.

“Listen, mister,” he said candidly. “I get you all right! But on the level, I don't think it'd be worth what it'd cost you.”

“What would it cost?”

“Well, there's four hundred in rewards offered for her that I know of — maybe more.”

Four hundred dollars! That was considerably more than Carter had expected to pay. Still, he could get several times four hundred dollars' worth of material from her.

“Done!” he said. “Four hundred it is!”

“Woah!” Cassidy rumbled. “That don't get me nothin'! What kind of chump do you think I am? If I turn her in I get that much, besides credits for promotion. Then what the hell's the sense of me turnin' her loose for that same figure and runnin' the risk of bein' sent over myself if it leaks out?” Carter recognised the justice of the detective's stand. “Five hundred,” he bid. Cassidy shook his head emphatically.

“On the level, I wouldn't touch it for less'n a thousan' — and you'd be a sucker to pay that much! She's a keen kid all right, but the world's full of just as keen ones that'll come a lot cheaper.”

“I can't pay a thousand,” Carter said slowly; he had only a few dollars more than that in his bank.

His common sense warned him not to impoverish himself for the girl's sake, warned him that the payment of even five hundred dollars for her liberty would be a step beyond the limits of rational conduct. He raised his head to acknowledge his defeat, and to tell Cassidy that he might take the girl away; then his eyes focused on the girl. Though she still struggled to maintain her attitude of ironic indifference to her fate,

and did attain a reckless smile, her chin quivered and her shoulders were no longer jauntily squared.

The dictates of reason went for nothing in the face of these signs of distress.

Without conscious volition, Carter found himself saying, “The best I can do is seven hundred and fifty.”

Cassidy shook his head briskly, but he caught one corner of his lower lip between his teeth, robbing the rejecting gesture of its finality.

The girl, stirred into action by the detective-sergeant's indecision, put an impulsive hand on his arm and added the weight of her personality to the temptation of the money.

“Come on, Cassidy,” she pleaded. “Be a good guy — give me a break! Take the seven fifty! You got rep enough without turning me in!”

Cassidy turned abruptly to Carter. “I'm makin' a sap o” myself, but give me the dough!”

At the sight of the check book that Carter took from a desk drawer, Cassidy balked again, demanding cash. Finally they persuaded him to accept a check made payable to 'Cash.'

At the door he turned and wagged a fat finger at Carter.

“Now remember,” he threatened, “if you try any funny business on this check I'm going to nail you if I have to frame you to do it!”

“There'll be no funny business,” Carter assured him.

There was no doubt of the girl's hunger; she ate ravenously of the cold beef, salad, rolls, pastry, and coffee that Carter put before her. Neither of them talked much while she ate. The food held her undivided attention, while Carter's mind was busy planning how his opportunity might be utilised to the utmost.

Over their cigarettes the girl mellowed somewhat, and he persuaded her to talk of herself. But clearly she had not accepted him without many reservations, and she made no pretence of lowering her guard.

She told him her story briefly, without going into any details.

“My old man was named John Cardigan, but he was a lot better known as Taper-Box

John,' from his trick of carrying his tools around in an unsuspicious-looking shoebox. If I do say it myself, he was as slick a burglar as there was in the grift! I don't remember Ma very well. She died or left or something when I was a little kid and the old man didn't like to talk about her.

“But I had as good a bringing up, criminally speaking, as you ever heard of. There was the old man, a wizard in his line; and my older brother Frank — he's doing a one-to-fourteen-year stretch in Deer Lodge now — who wasn't a dub by any means with a can opener — safe-ripping, you know. Between them and the mobs they ran with, I got a pretty good education along certain lines.

“Everything went along fine, with me keeping house for the old man and Frank, and them giving me everything I wanted, until the old man got wiped out by a night watchman in Philly one night. Then, a couple weeks later, Frank got picked up in some burg out in Montana — Great Falls. That put me up against it. We hadn't saved much money — easy come, easy go — and what we had I sent out to Frank's mouthpiece — a lawyer — to try to spring him. But it was no go—they had him cold, and they sent him over.

“After that I had to shift for myself. It was a case of either cashing in on what the old man and Frank had taught me or going on the streets. Of course, I wouldn't have had to go on the streets actually — there were plenty of guys who were willing to take me in — it's just that it's a rotten way of making a living. I don't want to be owned!

“Maybe you think I could have got a job somewhere in a store or factory or something. But in the first place, a girl with no experience has a hard time knocking down enough jack to live on; and then again, half the dicks in town know me as the old man's daughter, and they wouldn't keep it a secret if they found me working any place — they'd think I was getting a job lined up for some mob.

“So, after thinking it all over, I decided to try the old man's racket. It went easy from the first. I knew all the tricks and it wasn't hard to put them into practice. Being a girl helped, too. A couple times, when I was caught cold, people took my word for it that I had got into the wrong place by mistake.

“But being a girl had its drawbacks, too. As the only she-burglar in action, my work was sort of conspicuous, and it wasn't long before the bulls had a line on me. I was picked up a couple times, but I had a good lawyer, and they couldn't make anything stick, so they turned me loose; but they didn't forget me.

“Then I got some bad breaks, and pulled some jobs that they knew they could tie on me; and they started looking for me proper. To make things worse, I had hurt the feelings of quite a few guys who had tried to get mushy with me at one time or another, and they had been knocking me — saying I was up-stage and so on — to

everybody, and that hadn't helped me any with the people who might have helped me when I was up against it.

“So besides hiding from the dicks I had to dodge half the guns in the burg for fear they'd put the finger on me — turn me up to the bulls. This honour among thieves stuff doesn't go very big in New York!

“Finally it got so bad that I couldn't even get to my room, where my clothes and what money I had were. I was cooped up in a hang-out I had across town, peeping out at dicks who were watching the joint, and knowing that if I showed myself I was a goner.

“I couldn't keep that up, especially as I had no food there and couldn't get hold of anybody I could trust; so I took a chance tonight and went over the roof, intending to knock over the first likely-looking dump I came to for the price of some food and a ducat out of town.

“And this was the place I picked, and that brings my tale up to date.”

They were silent for a moment, she watching Carter out of the corners of her eyes, as if trying to read what was going on in his mind, and he turning her story around in his head, admiring its literary potentialities.

She was speaking again, and now her voice held the slightly metallic quality that it had before she had forgotten some of her wariness in her preoccupation with her story.

“Now, old top, I don't know what your game is; but I warned you right off the reel that I wasn't buying anything.”

Carter laughed. “Angel Grace, your name suits you — heaven must have sent you here,” he said, and then added, a little self-consciously, “My name is Brigham—Carter Webright Brigham.”

He paused, half expectantly, and not in vain.

“Not the writer?”

Her instantaneous recognition caused him to beam on her — he had not reached the stage of success when he might expect everyone to be familiar with his name.

“You've read some of my stuff?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! Poison for One and The Settlement in Warner's Magazine, Nemesis, Incorporated in the National, and all your stories in Cody's!”

Her voice, even without the added testimony of the admiration that had replaced the calculation in her eyes, left no doubt in his mind that she had indeed liked his stories.

“Well, that's the answer,” he told her. “That money I gave Cassidy was an investment in a gold mine. The things you can tell me will fairly write themselves and the magazines will eat 'em up!”

Oddly enough, the information that his interest had been purely professional did not seem to bring her pleasure; on the contrary, little shadows appeared in the clear green field of her eyes.

Seeing them, Carter, out of some intuitive apprehension, hastened to add: “But I suppose I'd have done the same even if you hadn't promised stories — I couldn't very well let him carry you off to jail.”

She gave him a sceptical smile at that, but her eyes cleared.

“That's all very fine,” she observed, “as far as it goes. But you mustn't forget that Cassidy isn't the only sleuth in the city that's hunting for me. And don't forget that you're likely to get yourself in a fine hole by helping me.”

Carter came back to earth.

“That's right! We'll have to figure out what is the best thing to do.”

Then the girl spoke: “It's a cinch I'll have to get out of town! Too many of them are looking for me, and I'm too well-known. Another thing: you can trust Cassidy as long as he hasn't spent that money, but that won't be long. Most likely he's letting it go over a card table right now. As soon as he's flat he'll be back to see you again. You'll be safe enough so far as he's concerned — he can't prove anything on you without giving himself away — but if I'm where he can find me he'll pinch me unless you put up more coin; and he'll try to find me through you. There's nothing to it but for me to blow town.”

“That's just what we'll do,” Carter cried. “We'll pick out some safe place not far away, where you can go today. Then I'll meet you there tomorrow and we can make some permanent arrangements.”

It was late in the morning before their plans were completed.

Carter went to his bank as soon as it was open and withdrew all but sufficient money to cover the checks he had out, including the one he had given the detective-sergeant. The girl would need money for food and fare, and even clothing, for her room, she was confident, was still watched by the police.

She left Carter's apartment in a taxicab, and was to buy clothes of a different colour and style from those she was wearing and whose description the police had. Then she was to dismiss the taxicab and engage another to drive her to a railroad station some distance from the city — they were afraid that the detectives on duty at the railroad stations in the city, and at the ferries, would recognise her in spite of the new clothes. At the distant station she would board a train for the upstate town they had selected for their rendezvous.

Carter was to join her there the following day.

He did not go down to the street door with her when she left, but said goodbye in his rooms. At the leave-taking she shed her coating of worldly Cynicism and tried to express her gratitude.

But he cut her short with an embarrassed mockery of her own earlier admonition: “Aw, stop it!”

Carter Brigham did not work that day. The story on which he had been engaged now seemed stiff and lifeless and altogether without relation to actuality. The day and the night dragged along, but no matter how slowly, they did pass in the end, and he was stepping down from a dirty local train in the town where she was to wait for him.

Registering at the hotel they had selected, he scanned the page of the book given over to the previous day's business. “Mrs. H. H. Moore,” the name she was to have used, did not appear thereon. Discreet inquiries revealed that she had not arrived.

Sending his baggage up to his room, Carter went out and called at the two other hotels in the town. She was at neither. At a newsstand he bought an armful of New York papers. Nothing about her arrest was in them. She had not been picked up before leaving the city, or the newspapers would have made much news of her.

For three days he clung obstinately to the belief that she had not run away from him. He spent the three days in his New York rooms, his ears alert for the ringing of the telephone bell, examining his mail frantically, constantly expecting the messenger, who didn't come. Occasionally he sent telegrams to the hotel in the upstate town — futile telegrams.

Then he accepted the inescapable truth: she had decided — perhaps had so intended all along — not to run the risk incidental to a meeting with him, but had picked out a hiding place of her own; she did not mean to fulfil her obligations to him, but had taken his assistance and gone.

Another day passed in idleness while he accustomed himself to the bitterness of this

knowledge. Then he set to work to salvage what he could. Fortunately, it seemed to be much. The bare story that the girl had told him over the remains of her meal could with little effort be woven into a novelette that should be easily marketed. Crook stories were always in demand, especially one with an authentic girl-burglar drawn from life.

As he bent over his typewriter, concentrating on his craft, his disappointment began to fade. The girl was gone. She had treated him shabbily, but perhaps it was better that way. The money she had cost him would come back with interest from the sale of the serial rights of this story. As for the personal equation: she had been beautiful, fascinating enough — and friendly — but still she was a crook...

For days he hardly left his desk except to eat and sleep, neither of which did he do excessively.

Finally the manuscript was completed and sent out in the mail. For the next two days he rested as fully as he had toiled, lying abed to all hours, idling through his waking hours, replacing the nervous energy his work always cost him.

On the third day a note came from the editor of the magazine to which he had sent the story, asking if it would be convenient for him to call at two-thirty the next afternoon.

Four men were with the editor when Carter was ushered into his office. Two of them he knew: Gerald Gulton and Harry Mack, writers like himself. He was introduced to the others: John Deitch and Walton Dohlman. He was familiar with their work, though he had not met them before; they contributed to some of the same magazines that bought his stories.

When the group had been comfortably seated and cigars and cigarettes were burning, the editor smiled into the frankly curious faces turned toward him.

“Now we'll get down to business,” he said. “You'll think it a queer business at first, but I'll try to mystify you no longer than necessary.”

He turned to Carter. “You wouldn't mind telling us, Mr. Brigham, just how you got hold of the idea for your story 'The Second-Story Angel,' would you?”

“Of course not,” Carter said. “It was rather peculiar. I was roused one night by the sound of a burglar in my rooms and got up to investigate. I tackled him and we fought in the dark for a while. Then I turned on the lights and —”

“And it was a woman — a girl!” Gerald Fulton prompted hoarsely.

Carter jumped.

“How did you know?” he demanded.

Then he saw that Fulton, Mack, Deitch, and Dohlman were all sitting stiffly in their chairs and that their dissimilar faces held for the time identical expressions of bewilderment.

“And after a while a detective came in?”

It was Mack's voice, but husky and muffled.

“His name was Cassidy!”

“And for a price things could be fixed,” Deitch took up the thread.

After that there was a long silence, while the editor pretended to be intrigued by the contours of a hemispherical glass paperweight on his desk, and the four professional writers, their faces beet-red and sheepish, all stared intently at nothing.

The editor opened a drawer and took out a stack of manuscripts.

“Here they are,” he said. “I knew there was something wrong when within ten days I got five stories that were, in spite of the differences in treatment, unmistakably all about the same girl!”

“Chuck mine in the wastebasket,” Mack instructed softly, and the others nodded their endorsement of that disposition. All but Dohlman, who seemed to be struggling with an idea. Finally he addressed the editor.

“It's a pretty good story, at that, isn't it, all five versions?”

The editor nodded.

“Yes, I'd have bought one, but five —”

“Why not buy one? We'll match coins —”

“Sure, that's fair enough,” said the editor.

It was done. Mack won.

Gerald Fulton's round blue eyes were wider than ever with a look of astonishment. At last he found words.

“My God! I wonder how many other men are writing that same story right now!”

But in Garter's mind an entirely different problem was buzzing around.

Lord! I wonder if she kissed this whole bunch, too!