

The GOOSE WOMAN

by REX BEACH

SECOND INSTALMENT

SYNOPSIS: Amos Ethridge is found murdered in a country lane with a crude cross of twigs on his breast and a scented sheet of note paper in his pocket. He was the richest man in the state with power and influence enough to make himself a candidate for Governor. With death came hints of an unsavory private life, of wronged women and betrayed husbands and fathers who had reason to wish him dead. There was also a powerful secret political organization opposed to him. . . . Mary Holmes, called the "goose woman" by newspaper reporters, lives nearest the scene of the crime on a small chicken farm. . . . Gerald Holmes, her talented young artist son, has been befriended by the murdered Ethridge.

The mystery of the murder, by the way, still remained unsolved. The clues left by the slayer of Amos Ethridge were so slender that no progress had been made in piecing them together, and, naturally, theories of various sorts began to be advanced. Several of the Chicago papers declared that the cross of twigs on the dead man's breast proved it to be a Klan outrage, and this explanation was generally accepted, for Westland was a stronghold of the secret order and Ethridge was a bitter enemy of the organization. What is more, an impressive demonstration had recently occurred here. There had been a parade and a midnight conclave at which scores of new members had been initiated. Special trains had been run from distant points, hundreds of automobiles had assembled, thousands of robed men had gathered in the light of a tremendous fiery cross erected on a hill just outside the city limits.

Out of this occurrence had sprung a bitter political quarrel, for Amos Ethridge had boldly proclaimed through the press that the Governor was an avowed member and that the conclave had been planned with his knowledge and consent. Ethridge had gone further; he had charged that the entire machinery of law enforcement had been betrayed, delivered over to the Invisible Empire. He had promised to adduce irrefutable evidence, proof positive, when the time came. His accusations had met with a tremendous popular response and, as a matter of fact, it was largely as a result of this outspoken support that he announced his intention to run for Governor at the coming election, pledging himself, if successful, to wage relentless war upon the hooded order and to restore the government to the people.

Threats against life had followed. He had received warnings, forecasting much the same end as had actually overtaken him. His murder upon the very eve of the campaign convinced most people that the charges voiced by the Chicago newspapers were indeed sound.

But those charges were not so readily accepted by the citizens of Westland. Amos Ethridge had been a great man locally and during his lifetime his power had been such that few of his neighbors dared speak a word against him, but, now that he was dead, tongues began to wag. From various quarters there arose a hissing of scandal. People voiced openly what they had never ventured to more than whisper—viz., that Ethridge's private life had not been above reproach, that there were chapters in it which would not bear the light of day, and that the authorities would have to look further than the secret order in order to find his slayer. What about that "Thursday" note that had been found in his pocket? There was more than one husband or lover, yes, even more than one father, in Westland who smarted under a sense of outrage and who had reason to thank God the millionaire was dead. Let the police discover what woman's fingers had penned that note, then perhaps the mystery could be solved. It was even whispered that out of the solving there might result a scandal more painful to the community than its present sense of loss, and that under the circumstances it might be the part of wisdom to let sleeping dogs lie. Such came to be the general feeling in Westland.

As the days crept by and no arrests were made, certain citizens began to nod and to speak guardedly of "influence." The out-of-town correspondents heard these whispers and promptly wired them in. As a result a special prosecutor was appointed by the state and he came on to take charge of the investigation.

On Thursday evening, a week after the crime, Gerald Holmes drove his new car out the road towards his mother's farm. It was early, nevertheless it was quite dark. As he crossed the bridge at the Italian settlement he noticed that his right headlight suddenly went out, just as it had gone out a week previously at this precise point. Tonight he did what he had done on that other occasion; he stopped, got out, and went around to the front of the car to investigate. Gerald did not pretend to much knowledge of automobiles, but this coincidence, it seemed to him, proved precisely what he had told the dealer; to wit, there was a loose electric connection somewhere and a certain sort of jar destroyed the contact, dislocated something or other. The dealer had

promised to have it fixed but—well, this was a sample of his work. Fine way to turn out a brand-new car, even a cheap one!

Gerald shook the lamp gently, but it appeared to be rigidly attached to its support and the bulb did not relight. He was afraid to shake it too hard, for fear of pulling it off—this was no rugged, hand-made, foreign car. Then he fingered aimlessly at the wire beneath the lamp, but that, too, was disappointingly secure. He reasoned that the wire must run in under the hood of the machine and somewhere attach itself to a battery or a dynamo or a generator or something, so he stepped back, lifted the bonnet, and peered inside. He could make out very little indeed, even with the aid of a match, and recognized nothing that could by any possibility be considered a dynamo or an electric lighting plan. The vital organs of an automobile, it seemed to him, were unnecessarily complicated; he would have considered many of them utterly useless except for the fact that here and there "things" were revolting. He quickly discovered several wires, any one of which might be the cause of his trouble, so, striking a second, then a third match, he gingerly tested them. He had not gone far when he uttered a grunt and jerked his hand away, incidentally bumping his elbow against something sharp and hard. Automobiles are full of painful corners. He dropped the match and swore, whereupon he heard subdued laughter and through the gloom discovered a couple of figures near by.

"Do you fellows know anything about automobiles?" he inquired.

There came an answer in Italian, so he confessed, ruefully: "Well, neither do I. I can drive 'em, but I can't fix 'em."

He closed the bonnet, passed back through the glare of his good headlight, and, stepping into the car, drove on. It was a relief to note that the car ran as well with one light as with two. Some car! This little buggy might have her faults, but he loved her, just the same. It was the first automobile he had ever possessed and his pride of ownership was inordinate, for it represented a terrible extravagance. It was a lovely shade of blue, too, the particular shade he adored, and he would have immensely enjoyed showing it to his mother. That, however, was impossible. He could never make her understand. Involuntarily, he fetched a deep sigh and shook his head.

Instead of proceeding on past the poultry farm and parking his machine in the grove near the entrance to the Ethridge lane, as he had done a week previously, he turned in a break in the fence before reaching the farm and killed his motor under a wide-spreading tree. It was barely possible that the police might be watching the scene of the tragedy, and in any event it was not a nice place to be on a dark night. Gerald hated dark colors, dark nights, dark deeds, and the thought of what had occurred a week ago tonight in that lane, half a mile ahead, gave him a sick feeling. He felt jumpy as he set out across the open pasture road towards the lights of his mother's cottage, and more than once he cast apprehensive glances back of him or stopped to listen.

Soon the familiar outlines of chicken houses and runs appeared, then a dog barked. It was Jack, the old Airdale. The dog recognized Gerald's voice and greeted him with extravagant affection when the young man dropped down inside the fence. Mrs. Holmes had heard the disturbance; she opened the kitchen door and peered out, inquiring guardedly:

"Is that you, Jerry?"

"Hello, mother!" Gerald entered and closed the door behind him, then stooped to kiss the woman's upturned lips. When his face was within a hand's breadth of hers he checked the movement and cried, reproachfully, "Oh, mother!"

Mrs. Holmes answered petulantly: "Very well! Don't kiss me if you don't want to. But for Heaven's sake don't start in with a temperance lecture! There was a moment of silence, then: "You don't understand what it is to live all alone, in a place like this. You're never lonesome. You have people to talk to. You see things and hear things—"

"All right, mother. I won't lecture. But you know how I feel about—drinking." The young man bent his head and pressed his lips to the woman's cheek.

"When did you get back from Chicago?"

"Today. This afternoon."

"Have a good trip?"

"Yes. They liked my drawings and gave me some more work. I got a new story to illustrate, too. But—I was all broken up over the murder, of course! I left here the next morning, you remember? I didn't hear of it until that afternoon—then just the bare account. Gee! It was a shock. I felt as if I ought to get on the train and come right back. I wanted to be here for the funeral, too, but—I couldn't get my money in time and I didn't dare try to borrow from that editor."

Mrs. Holmes smiled faintly, almost sneeringly. "The funeral went off all right without you."

"You don't understand how I felt towards Mr. Ethridge. You never liked him, after what he did for me, but I did, for he gave me my start;

made it possible for me to have a interest themselves in a ragged, obscure young—"

"In the son of a 'goose woman'!" Mrs. Holmes broke in. "Of course you read the papers and saw what they called me?"

Gerald flushed. "Yes. Yes. I read—everything."

"The rotters! Well, you're not ragged now, are you?" Mrs. Holmes stared at her son, and in her gaze, oddly enough, there were both pride and resentment. As an artist she hated Gerald, as a man she—well, he was her son, blood of her blood. What she beheld was a handsome youth—a boy of sufficient good looks and charm of manner to warm any mother's heart. Gerald's face was frank and sunny; it was unusually expressive, too, but curtailed with that veil of conscious repression common to supersensitive people; it was the eager, dreamy face of an artist, a writer, a musician. The boy's faults and his weaknesses, Mary Holmes well knew, were the faults and the weaknesses of most dreamers.

She had never dared to analyze very closely her feelings for this child of hers—it is doubtful if she would have succeeded very well had she tried—for ever since she had nursed him at her breast she had housed within her emotions that violently clashed. They were times when he filled her with a great satisfaction, a sublime contentment, then again times when she hated him fiercely—yes, hated him! There were occasions when she lavished upon him a sort of savage affection—these occasions were rare, by the way—and again occasions when she treated him with a cruelty that was positively feline. Nearly always, however, her feelings were mixed and he excited that distressing warfare within her bosom. He was at once her comfort and her torture, her blessing and her bane.

"Gee! It gave me a fright to realize that I hadn't been gone from here for half an hour—an hour at most—when it happened." Gerald went on. "Why, I might have been involved in it!"

"You? Nonsense! Whoever killed Ethridge drove up in an automobile and left it standing in that pine grove across from the lane. I saw the tracks the next morning." Young Holmes started; he eyed his mother apprehensively. "By the way, you must have met Mr. Ethridge on your way back to town?"

"N-no!"

"You must have met him. You couldn't have had time to walk to the end of the street-car line before he came along. It didn't seem to me you'd been gone ten minutes when I heard his car pass and then the shots. Of course, it was longer than that—"

"Have you talked to the police?" "Certainly! They questioned me the morning of the murder and

couldn't miss them—they were as plain as the nose on your face."

"Have they formed any suspicions?"

(Continued Next Issue)

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