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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Theodore Gatlin decided to adopt a baby in a last effort to solve his marital troubles. But all his love for his foster daughter could not shelter her childhood from the hatred of his wife, who had never wanted her. Their affairs ended in the divorce court but ten-year-old Penelope was given into the keeping of Mrs. Gatlin, except for two Sundays after every month. On their first day together they set out joyfully to a baseball game. A ball hit into the bleachers, struck Penelope on the nose and the neurotic Mrs. Gatlin removed her from the hospital to which her former husband had hurried her. Mrs. Gatlin spirited the child to Europe. Gatlin retired from business, willed Penelope all his money, and was about to begin a search for his daughter when a motor accident ended his life.

CHAPTER II.—Some ten years later, in San Francisco, Stephen Burt, a rising young psychiatrist, was presented by Dan McNamara, chief of police, with a new patient—Nance Belden, a girl whose terrible childhood had left her with a dual personality, for which her "saddle nose" was in part responsible. McNamara did not think she was a responsible criminal and obtained Burt's expert testimony in court. Even Lanny, the doctor's faithful office nurse, was won over to her cause despite Nance's hard-boiled exterior.

"You old sweetheart," Nance breathed, and kissed her—and at that moment a tall, handsome brunette who had repaid her lover's faithfulness by killing him, and who had been standing around in the hall near the entrance to the visitors' room, moved off down the corridor toward the recreation room. At once a shrill scream penetrated the visitors' room; then another and another—a woman cursed—and cried: "Stop them or they'll hurt each other."

The matron immediately left the visitors' room to quell the disturbance. Instantly Nance Belden drew a thick envelope from her bosom, unlocked Lanny's hand-bag and thrust the envelope in. She beamed proudly upon Lanny.

"I staged that ruckus," she confessed. "We have to play the game with each other here, you know—and two lifers obliged me. Good behavior doesn't mean time off for them, you know—and a hair-pulling match isn't taken too seriously here. Oh, by the way, what's your address—I mean your home address and telephone number?"

"It's in the telephone book," Lanny replied, and wondered why Nance had requested the information.

"Kiss me again, you dear thing," Nance commanded. Then she was out of the visitors' room, running for the scene of the excitement in the recreation room. She met the matron hurrying back to the visitors' room, after having quelled the fight by her mere appearance.

"You left me alone," Nance explained, "and that's against the rules. So I followed. I didn't want you to think I'd take advantage of you."

The matron smiled and pinched the girl's cheek. "You funny girl," she said. "You don't belong here and it's a shame you have to be here. You have a fine code of honor, Nance, even if they hung it on you for shoplifting."

She nodded to Lanny as the latter passed out of the building. The guard at the entrance took up her pass, looked her over with a pretense of suspicion, opened the gate and let her through. She climbed into her little car and had just started it when a good-looking but somewhat flashy young woman came to the side of the car and said:

"Are you driving to Greenbrae, madam?"

Lanny nodded. "I wonder if you'd give me a lift that far. The bus doesn't leave for an hour and I—"

"By all means," the generous Lanny agreed, and opened the door. The girl thanked her smilingly and climbed in. Half way down to Greenbrae, her guest said: "I think one of your rear tires is flat, madam."

"I was beginning to think so, too. It's bumpy, isn't it? Oh, dear, I loathe changing a tire."

Lanny pulled up to the side of the road and got out, leaving her hand-bag beside her on the seat. In-



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stantly her guest opened it, abstracted the letter Nance had given her and tucked it in her own hand-bag; then got out and with Lanny surveyed the flat tire.

"I'll help," she promised eagerly. "The least I can do to repay your hospitality."

Between them they shifted the wheels and resumed the journey. At Greenbrae the girl got out and thanked Lanny. No sooner had her little car disappeared behind a curve than the girl waved to a sedan parked in back of the little station and climbed in beside a young man who sat behind the wheel.

"Well?" he queried, apparently without interest.

"It worked," she replied. "Let's go."

CHAPTER IV

ARRIVED at the little bungalow she occupied in St. Francis Wood, Lanny put her car in the garage, entered her home, and sat down to read Nance Belden's letter. And when she failed to find it she did some of the logical thinking of which she was so eminently capable in situations where her emotions were not being preyed upon.

"Good work," she decided finally. "That girl I picked up on the road to Greenbrae stole it out of my hand-bag when I got out to look at the flat tire. She must have visited Nance before I got there. She was a flashy sort of damsel, too, now I think of it. An underworld buzzy, doubtless; doubtless, too, known to the police. So Nance had no opportunity to slip her the letter. The matron watched too closely. Nance feared that would be the case, so she had an alternative plan. What a shrewd judge of human nature that girl is! She knew she could work on me, and oh, what a fool I was to permit it! Why, I'm as lawless as she is, only I'm a responsible member of society and she isn't. Nance knew I wouldn't fail to visit her, so she described me to her confederate, who spotted me when I drove up to the main gate and parked my car."

"When the confederate saw me coming back she drove a nail about

an inch into my rear tire—simple as two and two are four. The nail was driven all the way in and the air was out before we'd gone a mile. Oh, dear, dear, dear, what a simpleton I am! I suppose I ought to do something about this, but then if I do, how can I explain my conduct to the prison officials?"

She realized thoroughly now the extent to which she had been an accessory before the fact. That ally mixer—telling her she could read the letter before mailing it; that if she did not approve of its contents she was free to destroy it. That was the point upon which the susceptible Lanny had impaled herself.

"Well, it can't be anything so very important," she decided finally. "It couldn't be part of a plan to escape, because escape from that place is impossible. Besides, no woman convict has ever succeeded in escaping from San Quentin. In all probability it was just a private message to one of her old underworld friends. That girl is too intelligent to dream of formulating plans for escape. Why, she couldn't get out of the front gate. She'd have to swim the bay to escape, even if she succeeded in getting through the exit from the woman's quarters and past that suspicious guard in the little house there."

So Lanny made herself a highball and resolved to dismiss all thought of the incident. She also resolved to give Nance Belden a piece of her mind if and when she decided to visit her again. And she was not at all certain she would make Nance another visit.

Two weeks later, while she was sitting before the fire, reading, her telephone rang and a man's voice said:

"Is this Miss Rebecca Lanning?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Never mind. You wouldn't know me if I told you who I am. I'm a friend of Nance Belden's. Are you going to be at home for an hour, Miss Lanning?" the voice pursued. It was a pleasant enough voice, Lanny reflected.

"I am, but what business is that of yours?"

"Oh, well, if you're going to be such a cutup," the voice rejoined, "I'll not bother to argue that with you over the phone. I'll come out, Good-by."

He hung up, leaving Lanny in a state of acute mental perturbation, which did not subside until she heard her doorbell ringing some ten minutes later. It subsided then. Her courage always mounted when there was an immediate situation to face. "Nance Belden's friend," she decided instantly.

For a moment she considered telephoning Dan McNamara, then decided the worthy fellow might prove an embarrassment. So she got a pistol from her bureau drawer—because she was a practical soul and dwelt alone. She had purchased the pistol as a precaution—and went to the door. She cocked the pistol and took a long breath, threw open the door suddenly and raised her weapon.

"Put 'em up," she commanded harshly.

"Don't be silly, Lanny, dear," a soft voice entreated her wearily.

"It's only me."

"Nance Belden—you little devil," Lanny almost shouted. "Come in here this instant."

Nance Belden reeled in and Lanny closed the door behind her, turned the bolt, switched on the hall light—and screamed.

"Pipe down," Nance commanded, in that queer, faint, weary voice. "I'm not a corpse, but I'll tell the world I came mighty close to being one just before lock-up time this afternoon. Lanny, dear, I crashed the gate."

"Well, you'll crash out of here in a split second, you little hellion," Lanny cried sharply. "Wet—as a dishrag and your hair like a witch's, and covered with blood. Where are you hurt?"

"Bullet through my left arm, high up near the shoulder. That guard could shoot, and he did! If my boy friend hadn't shot back at him and made him hunt his hole I'd be fishbait this minute."

"You've got to get out of here, Nance," Lanny was terrified. "How many visitors have you had since you've been in San Quentin?"

"Just you, Lanny."

"The authorities will look me up and they'll come here. Understand? They'll see here—there, they're on the telephone now. Oh, my good lord, what have I done to deserve this?"

She dashed into the kitchen and took down the telephone receiver. And again a masculine voice said:

"Miss Rebecca Lanning?"

Lanny controlled herself. "Yes," she said dimly. "Who's speaking?"

"Dan McNamara."

"Oh, hello, Dan. How are you?"

"Fine, Lanny. How's yourself?"

"Well, might be dead for all the interest you've taken in me since you swallowed that good highball you grafted off me the day you came to Doctor Burt's office with that Nance Belden girl." She added archly—on egg?

Dan McNamara laughed. "Can I come on now?"

"The very idea. Of course not. It's almost ten o'clock and I'm just about to retire!"

"This business, Lanny, I've got to see you at once."

"I didn't know the police were after me."

"The police aren't, but the chief is. Lanny, that Nance Belden escaped from San Quentin late this afternoon. She got to San Francisco all right. We know that because we found the speed-boat she crossed the bay tied up in the yacht harbor at Marina. There was blood all over the cockpit and bullet holes in the hull."

"All of which proves, Dan, that God's in his heaven, and all's well with the world. Are you seriously trying to recover the girl and send her back to the penitentiary?"

"I'm not. I'd give two of my big bucks to see her make a clean getaway. You know that. But the warden—naturally. It seems you visited Nance two weeks ago and smuggled a letter out for her and mailed it."

"Dan, I give you my word of honor I neither mailed a letter for her nor passed it to somebody else to mail. Nor did the girl discuss with me any plans for escape. If she had I would have told the warden, in order to prevent her escape. It wouldn't have been kind not to do so. The girl is mentally irresponsible and it would have occurred to me that, in any mad attempt to escape, a guard might shoot at her."

"Well, a guard did, and he hit her, too. But he didn't stop her. Her outside gang opened on him with a Tommy gun from a speed-boat off the point, and made him hunt his hole. Nance swam out to the boat under cover of their protective fire; they hauled her in and beat it forty-five miles an hour across San Quentin bay and headed up toward Carquinez straits, while daylight lasted. After dark they doused their lights and sneaked back. The warden telephoned Central office here and gave the alarm. I wasn't on hand, but of course the captain on duty had the water front covered at once. He had two men at the St. Francis Yacht club and they saw a speed-boat sneak in and across the little harbor to a vacant berth on the Marina side. Before the cops could hurry across the people in the boat jumped out and to a waiting car. The cops followed in a police car as soon as they could, but one of Nance's friends riddled their front tires with machine-gun bullets and the trail was lost."

"How exciting, Dan!"

"Yes, and it will be more exciting for you, Lanny. I got home about two minutes ago, and my phone was ringing. It was central office trying to report to me. They're just starting a couple of dicks out in a cruiser to watch and see if Nance tries to make your house. You're a trained nurse. The warden's found out that much—matter of looking you up in the San Francisco directory. So he thinks that she'll head for your house to receive medical attention. And you

must be a friend of hers—otherwise why did you call upon her?"

"Dan," said Lanny desperately, "she's here now!"

"Into your car with her, Lanny, and beat it out to my house with her." He gave his address. "That's the last place on earth the devil himself would hunt for an escaped convict."

"I've just heard a thump and a crash in my living room, Dan. I think she's fainted. Telephone Doctor Burt to come to your home—that he will have to probe a bullet wound and dress it. Tell him to bring some whiskey and two or three hot-water bags, and be on hand yourself to let me in. I can't leave here until I've mopped up any bloodstains she may have left on the sidewalk and my front steps. Good-by."

Lanny was right. Nance Belden lay on the floor of the living room in a faint. She picked the girl up in her strong arms and carried her down a short flight of stairs that led from her kitchen to the garage below. She heaved her into the car, ran back upstairs, got a wet mop, and by the light of the electric lamp over the front entrance searched for drops of blood. She found a few and followed them to the sidewalk, eradicating them with vigorous sweeps of the mop, then dashed back into the house, jammed on her hat and coat, ran outside again, threw open the garage door and backed her car out. She paused again, to shut it, then swung up the street as the half-red lamps of a police cruising car turned the corner. She swung wide to give it a clear berth, turned the first corner and spurred. She followed a zig-zag course until she felt sure she had thrown the police car off her trail—provided they had become suspicious and started to follow her; she turned up a residence street that she felt reasonably certain would not be patrolled by traffic officers at that hour of the night and speeded up.

Dan McNamara was standing on the sidewalk in front of his house when she drew up. He reached into her car, lifted Nance Belden out and ran with her down an alley alongside the house to the basement entrance, which he kicked open. Lanny followed. Up the stairs to the kitchen the big chief ran, through the kitchen and on to a rear bedroom. Lanny jerked a small rug off the floor and threw it on the bed. "Let her bleed on that for a while," she commanded. "No sense in mopping this nice clean bed all up. There must be blood in my car, Dan. Take a wet towel and go out and clean it thoroughly, please, while I'm undressing this poor lamb. Get me one of your wife's clean nightgowns."

"Ain't got no wife, Lanny. Use one of mine."

"Just as good as any. Get it. Who takes care of you here?"

"My mother."

"Can she be trusted?"

"I've sent her to the country for a month," he evaded. "I'm sleeping here and eating downtown."

"God bless our home, Dan. Clear out—and watch for Stevie and let him in."

She ran to the kitchen, turned on the hot water and set an enameled skillet under the faucet; then returned, undressed the girl. In an adjoining bathroom she found clean towels and placed a cold one on her head. When she returned to the kitchen, the enameled skillet was sitting in the midst of a cloud of steam, so she knew it had been thoroughly disinfected; she filled it with warm water, carried it into the room and with a wet towel mopped the two holes in Nance's arm and examined the wound.

"Missed the bone," she decided. "Bled like a stuck pig, of course, piece of her dress probably carried into the window."

In the medicine closet, Lanny discovered a small bottle of iodine. So she doused the wound with it, wrapped a cold towel around the girl's shoulder and tacked her into bed.

(Continued next week.)