

The GOOSE WOMAN

by REX BEACH

FOURTH 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 candidate for Governor. With his 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 where she ekes out a poor living and tries to find in drink the forgetfulness of past glories when she was Maria di Nardi, world-renowned opera singer. . . . Gerald Holmes, a talented young artist, is hated and loved by his mother who is embittered because his birth caused the loss of her voice and wrecked her operatic career. He has been befriended by the murdered Ethridge, and is engaged to another of Amos Ethridge's proteges. . . . Hazel Woods, lovely and brilliant young actress, has been helped to success by Ethridge. She lives in a small cottage owned by Ethridge. . . . Jacob Riggs, eccentric old-time actor, now a doorman at the theater where Hazel Woods plays, has appointed himself her guardian and lives in a room over her garage.

The likeness almost-wrenched a cry from her lips. "She's very beautiful, mother, very talented and very fine." The boy's eyes were fixed and shining; a breathless, reverent quality had crept into his voice, and it was plain that when he mentioned this girl his soul bowed in worship and his heart paid homage. "She is infinitely superior to me, of course. That's what makes it so wonderful, so incomprehensible. I want you to—well, to make yourself over into what you were so that she can meet you and know you."

There was a moment of silence. Mrs. Holmes broke it by exclaiming harshly, "Forget it!"

Gerald had hurt her bitterly tonight. He had rubbed salt into her wounds. She had fallen low; she had become ugly and old and contemptible. Had she? Instead of sympathy he gave her a sort of supercilious pity and implied that she was unfit to meet his sweetheart until she regenerated herself. Instead of shar-

ing her sorrow he went out and made his own life, made for himself a career such as he had robbed her of. The injustice of it! Well, this would be their hour of reckoning, the hour when she would compel him to take up and share the burden that had bowed her shoulders. Those alcoholic demons in the back of her head were dancing dizzily and it gave her a prodigious, wicked satisfaction to realize that she had the power now to humble his spirit as he had humbled hers.

"Forget it, Jerry," she repeated. "You can't get a girl like that to marry you."

"I can if we stop right here, mother, and if you'll let me help you—er, get back on your feet."

"She wouldn't have you—not the kind of a girl you've been talking about." Mrs. Holmes giggled malevolently. "You see, my boy, you haven't any name to give her."

"Not much of a name, of course, but I'll make one. I'll make it something to be proud of."

Mrs. Holmes rose, walked to the cupboard, opened its door, and took out a thick drinking glass and a square-faced bottle. Slowly she poured the tumbler half full of gin, then drank it; her eyes as they met those of her son were hostile, there was malignity in her gaze. It was an act of deliberate, calculated defiance, for never before had she taken liquor in his presence. Gerald looked on incredulously.

"You don't understand English," she said harshly. "If you're old enough to run around with women and think about getting married, I guess you're old enough to stand some plain talk. You give me enough, God knows. A little of your own medicine won't hurt you. What I mean to say is this—your father and I were never married."

Gerald gasped; his face whitened; a look of fright, of abject misery, crept over it. "I—should have known better than to talk to you when you've—when you're like this," he groaned. "You're not serious, mother!"

"Oh, yes I am! I mean exactly what I say. You're forever telling me unpleasant things about myself; now I'll tell you some, I'll have to go back and explain, so you'll understand. . . . Opera singers, in my time, were about what they are now, and the profession was about the same. A girl had to exercise every means at her disposal to get to the top. It was the price. Success in

any art must be paid for; every great artist has to make some sort of sacrifice. I made mine, but the reward was worth it. It was worth any price. Art is so much bigger, so much more important than other things—everything else is so small, so trivial, so false and so fleeting. I was young, I had sex appeal, and I had a voice, I used them all to get ahead. I had temperament, too. I lived every role I played; I put vitality and fire into them. When I was on the stage they used to say I was a flaming genius. Flaming!"

Mrs. Holmes tramped about the room as she talked; beneath her feet the bare floor boards creaked.

"I've told you how my big success came abroad. You know all that and how I was anticipating the day when I could come home and achieve my supreme triumph, here in America. How I met your father—in Paris, it wasn't his first affair, nor mine, but it was the first time I had ever been genuinely, madly in love. I didn't know I had it in me. I was a perfect fool. Most women are, by the way, at one time or another. He hadn't a thing—money, I mean—so I gave him what I had earned and what had been given to me. I showered him with gifts, spoiled him, turned his head. He took it all and we lived wildly, extravagantly, drunk with each other's love. That temperament again!"

"I suppose it had begun to pall on him even before we learned that you were coming, but he didn't show it. When we discovered that I was going to have a baby I supposed we talked about marriage—people usually do. Probably that helped to spoil things. Perfect love, perfect romance, was one thing; marriage, squalling children, milk bottles, dirty dishes—that was another. He was an artist. You came between us even before you were born."

"He couldn't bear to see the change in me. My appearance got more and more on his nerves. He quit finally—went away. That was a terrible shock to me; it was enough to kill most of the affection I might have felt for you. Oh, I know it sounds unnatural, incredible! That's because you can't understand how some people are constituted. You're full of story-book sentiment: this was real life. Neither of us was domestic. You won't understand either, when I tell you that his desertion wouldn't have left any serious results on me; they said, as a matter of fact, that it would make me even a great artist—having suffered. But at least you can understand how it turned me back to my work with a more passionate devotion than ever, since it was all I had left, all that was real and substantial and satisfying. My voice had never been so splendid as it was during that period. My friends told me that a miracle had occurred and that I possessed the most beautiful voice in the world. They worshiped it. They, and I, blessed you as the cause of it."

"Then you were born. . . . Again Mrs. Holmes turned her eyes upon her son, and now they were brilliant, feverish; her face was working. "You know what happened! For a while, the doctor encouraged me to believe that my voice would come back,

That was to keep me from killing myself. But it didn't come back. It was gone, lost to the world! There were artists in the company who would have strangled you, gladly, and hung for it, if it would have brought back Mary Holmes's voice. That's how much they thought of it. That's what a truly great voice means."

"You wonder why I've never been a real mother to you. God! You've been a living reproach to me; every day of your life you have tortured me, stuck knives in me. As if that weren't enough, you've grown into the very image of your father—you're like him, inside and out. I suppose this girl feels towards you the way I felt towards him—so far as she's capable. But I'll bet she won't marry you. Not now she won't." For a second time the speaker giggled.

Gerald flinched at the sound, but he did not raise his head. "It seems to give you an unholy satisfaction," he said, wretchedly. "I wonder why?"

"Why? Why not," Mrs. Holmes allowed a hiccup to escape her lips. "Turn about is fair play, isn't it. Maybe you'll shed some of your fine airs, now. Maybe you'll quit nagging me, quit this 'holier-than-thou' business. Why shouldn't you help me carry my load? . . . Well, why don't you answer? What have you got to say?"

"Not much," Gerald rose wearily and took his hat—"except to curse the day you tasted liquor for the first time. If you were in your right sense you would never have told me this. You wouldn't—couldn't take such devilish joy in causing me pain. You would have carried this secret to your grave. I dare say you expect sympathy, but what about me, the fellow who has always cherished an old-fashioned reverence for motherhood and who believes in pure women and such things? You mentioned the hand of God is on you, mother; it's on both of us. I—I'm afraid it will destroy us both." Without another word Gerald walked to the door, opened it, and stumbled out into the night.

The time was when Westland had been a first class theatrical town and most of the good road shows had played it. But conditions had changed. Chicago was only a few hours away, picture palaces had been built, and now the old West Theatre, the city's leading playhouse, ran a stock company. It was a good stock company, however; Amos Ethridge, the owner of the property, had prided himself upon being a patron of the drama and he had seen to that; in consequence a number of well-known artists were usually featured upon the West's billing. This season the most prominent, member of the Ethridge players was Hazel Woods, the youthful leading woman. Mr. Ethridge had hired her out of a New York dramatic success and Westland considered itself fortunate in having a real Broadway favorite to worship.

Stock engagements in small cities like Westland are often both profitable and pleasant, for salaries are good, they enjoy an agreeable social life, and receive numerous courtesies and advantages not infrequently denied them in larger cities. In Miss Wood's case, for instance, Ethridge had put a charming little house at her disposal, rent free, there being no really first-class residential hotel in Westland; and there she reveled in the unfamiliar joys of housekeeping and entertained as much as her arduous duties permitted. Being a very pretty, very sprightly young woman, she had quickly made herself popular.

Through Amos Ethridge she had met Gerald Holmes. She and Gerald were about the same age, but in experience he was much younger than she, and this fact, perhaps, as much as his shyness, his modesty, and his undeniable genius had engendered in her a desire to "mother" him and to help him along. Some men awaken in women an impulse to hover them, and Jerry was one. But not many emotional young women with abundant personal charm can successfully maintain a maternal attitude towards an attractive and magnetic young fellow, no matter how humble and how reverent may be his regard at the beginning. There was only one possible outcome to this affair. Gerald fell head over heels in love and, having nothing, he magnificently offered to share it all with her. Hazel had astonished him by accepting. Eagerly, and yet with caution, she became engaged to him; she promised to marry him—some time.

Tonight as Gerald parked his car near the stage entrance of the theater a few minutes after eleven he experienced his first genuine regret at having permitted himself to fall in love. What his mother had so brutally told him an hour before left him dismayed, sick. All the way in from her farm he had asked himself whether he should tell Hazel and risk—nay invite her to break the engagement, or whether he should deceive her. His duty seemed plain, but the mere possibility of losing her was unbearable. He was in turmoil.

Members of the cast and some of the stage hands were leaving as he entered the stage door and spoke to Jacob Riggs, the doorman. He and Jacob were great friends and the old fellow welcomed him with a smile.

"She's dressing, but she'll be out in a few minutes," the latter announced. "Have a good time in Chicago?"

"Not exactly a 'good time'," Gerald said, with an effort to speak naturally. "I was too much upset by the news of Mr. Ethridge's death. It must have been a terrible shock to Miss Woods and to all of you."

"Yeah!" Jacob nodded. "It caused quite a stir all over town. 'All Judah (and Hezekiah) honor at his death.' You think they'll ever find out who done it?"

"I hope so. I can't bear to think—you see, he did a great deal for me. He was a real friend."

"He treated me all right, too, but—" Jacob shook his white head. "A lot of things about him we don't know, Jerry. A lot nobody knows. The Lord works in a mysterious way and the wicked is doomed to destruction."

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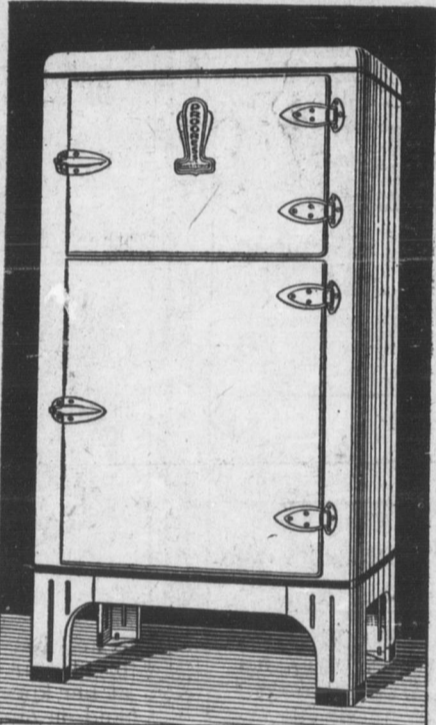
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