

The GOOSE WOMAN

by REX BEACH

TENTH 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 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 Marie 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 theatre where Hazel Woods plays, has appointed himself her guardian and lives in a room over her garage.

"I—I only told what I saw," Mrs. Holmes declared, uncertainly. "I swore to it and you know what it means when you swear to a thing. Why—they'd arrest me, for all I know."

"But there's a terrible mistake somewhere," the girl earnestly asserted. "I can't explain the car with one headlight—the car that passed you after the shooting—and yet Jerry declares he left your house an hour before the murder and drove straight to town. He's telling the truth: I know he is."

"They claim he laid in wait," "But they couldn't prove it without you! It's your evidence that contradicts him. You didn't actually recognize him—you said so! And if it had been Jerry you'd have known him. Of course you would! You'd know your own boy anywhere—"

"I—was too far away." Hazel protested breathlessly: "No, no! Think! Oh, God, think of something to show it wasn't he! Some action, some gesture, some peculiarity! Maybe there were two headlights on that last car and you were mistaken. It's so easy to be mistaken and just that one point might save him. Think! If it were me I'd—think of something, I'd—But they've discredited me; there's nothing I can do. I'm utterly helpless." She broke down now and, hiding her face in her hands, she sobbed wretchedly; the tears came through her fingers. There was a poignant quality to her grief.

She was very young and very frail. Mrs. Holmes realized that this tragedy had broken her like a butterfly. A curse on men like Amos Ethridge! Yes, and on men like Vogel!

After a while the mother said, roughly: "Go away! Give me a chance to think. Mind you, I don't believe it's any use but—" "Oh, why does everything I do turn out wrong? It's his fault as much as mine. It's easy for you to tell me to lie, to perjure myself—"

"I don't. I merely say what I'd—be willing—to do!"

"All right! All right! Go along now. I'll let you know if I can think of anything, but I'm sick. That's my luck. Sick! That's how things go with me. I—I wish I were dead!"

That afternoon Vogel called at the hotel in accordance with a request from Mrs. Holmes, and after she had beat about the bush for a while she told him haltingly that she wished to make a new affidavit. There were certain points in her first one that she realized, upon careful thought, needed explanation, modification. Vogel listened until she had finished, then he said:

"I've been expecting this. Save it for the trial."

"But—the trouble is Jerry's being tried now, in the newspapers. The verdict will be in before the jury goes out."

"Don't you believe he's guilty?" The woman averted her eyes. "There are some people who couldn't commit a murder, and he's one. There's nothing vicious about him. He liked Mr. Ethridge and he knew nothing whatever about the Woods affair."

"Nothing vicious, eh? Nothing vicious about his mother, either, I suppose?" Vogel grinned derisively. "Tell that to the reporter you shot at."

Mrs. Holmes argued feebly until he broke in: "I understand you perfectly, and your feelings do you credit. But I am a servant of the people and the law must be upheld. I sincerely regret that in doing your duty you placed your son in jeopardy, but it's not the first time such a thing has happened. Justice must be served and murder will out. Truth is more sacred than a mother's love. It's my task to discover the truth."

"But you haven't. I was—mistaken," the woman protested. "I'm not going to let an innocent person suffer for my mistake."

"Mistake!"

"Well, call it whatever you want to. I gave wrong testimony. I—lied!"

"Indeed? It's too bad you're so late confessing it. Now see here"—the speaker's tone changed—"we'll end this foolishness right now. I'm not going to let you make a monkey out of me, whatever your natural impulse may be. I dare say you'll testify that I deceived or coerced you; put words into your mouth; induced you to sign something you didn't read. We'll see! Are you going to play straight, do your duty as a citizen and stick to what you said, or—?"

"No. I can't. I'm going to tell the truth."

Vogel rose. "Thanks for letting me know. If you choose to discredit yourself in any such manner I'll make a good job of it. You see, I've looked up your whole history and I'll make you tell it to the jury; with your own lips. It won't help the defendant any, believe me."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Holmes faintly demanded. "You understand plain English. You'll hear a lot of it if you maintain this attitude." There was a pause. "You must have some affection for this—this 'son' of yours. That's nothing more than animal nature! But the more lies you tell, the more the jury will believe in the story you told me and swore to; the more firmly you will convince them that you are swearing falsely to save your illegitimate child."

"I see. If I don't do what you say you'll tell all about—Jerry?" "And you! Exactly. I'd like to spare you both, but—" the speaker shrugged. "Better grit your teeth and go through with it. You can't save him, no matter what you do." With these words Vogel left.

Hazel Woods was surprised late that night to receive a telephone request to come at once to the hotel where Mrs. Holmes was stopping. On account of the hour, she took old Jacob Riggs with her. She had taken Jacob about with her a good deal this past week, not merely as an escort, but also because he displayed such pathetic eagerness to comfort and to protect her. In these troubled circumstances she was grateful for sympathy and faith from whatever source, and of all her friends he alone remained loyal; he was indeed a father. He was, if possible, "queerer" than ever, more given to melancholy quotations from the Bible; nevertheless she had a tender feeling for him and her misfortune had drawn them close together.

Hazel found a number of reporters waiting in the hotel lobby and was surprised to learn that Mrs. Holmes had likewise sent for them. Her surprise deepened, hope stirred, when the two attorneys she had hired for Jerry hurried in, explaining that they, too, had

been summoned. It was quite a group that finally rode upstairs and filed into the sick woman's room.

Mrs. Holmes was up and dressed, but she looked desperately ill. As soon as her visitors had disposed of themselves she began, in a voice harsh and purposeful:

"Get out your pencils, boys. There's another 'big' story coming. I had a talk with Mr. Vogel today and told him I had made a false affidavit. I told him my account of the Ethridge murder was a pure invention."

The correspondents exchanged glances, the attorneys leaned forward eagerly. Hazel felt old Jacob's bony fingers upon her arm and heard him mutter some scriptural phrase of thanksgiving.

"I'm going to tell you the whole truth and I want you to print it. I sent for Jerry's lawyers so they can have it put down in proper form and I can swear to it. I don't know how such things ought to be done, but—"

"Never mind. Go ahead," one of the attorneys urged.

"I'll start at the beginning and go along in my own way. Please don't interrupt me—you can straighten it out later. Well, then, I did see an automobile with one headlight pass my house that night—I was waiting for Jerry—and it stopped in the pine grove up by the lane. But that's all I actually saw. I didn't see the murder; I didn't see the car come back. I don't know when it came back, for I never stepped outside my door after Jerry told me good night. After he left I went to bed. I heard some shots, but I didn't know Amos Ethridge had been killed until the next morning. As

soon as I heard about it I hurried up there and hung around all day. That's the truth, so help me God!"

A question or two was voiced, but the woman did not answer.

"I talked to some of you boys that morning and told you all I knew, but you went out of your way to treat me contemptuously—make fun of me. I was furious when I saw your stories. . . . When I was on the stage I used to get a thrill out of interviews; I was crazy for publicity. People in my profession frequently get that way. I loved to see my name in print. I saved every notice, every criticism; I collected thousands of clippings and preserved them. It's a mild form of disease and lots of actors have it, for they're always playing to an audience. . . . I've been acting all my life, on the stage, at home, before my friends, to myself. When you're in print, you're acting in a way, only to a different audience. When I lost my voice I lost my audience. That was the hardest thing to bear. I used to think I was the most tragic figure in the world, but"—the speaker smiled bitterly—"I guess it was largely because I never saw my name in print, never heard it mentioned anymore. What is a career except—applause? What does a person get out of it except food for his vanity? I'm telling you this to explain what happened next, for if you don't understand the sort of person I am—the theatrical temperament—you won't be able to understand what I did."

"Well, after I got over my first resentment at being ridiculed, the old disease came back. It pleased me to be written about and to have

my words quoted, even though you called me the 'goose woman,' 'a bedraggled old hag,' 'a drunken harridan.' When I realized how far I'd gone back a lot of dead hopes and ambitions came to life. Embers I thought were cold. . . . The 'goose woman'! It's a good name for me."

"All at once I dropped out of the papers entirely. I got no more thrills; had nothing to think about, nothing to occupy me; I had to quit acting. I was awfully lonely. I'd had a taste of the drug; the habit was back on me fiercer than ever, if you know what I mean. . . . I dare say after this you can follow my motives. I pieced out a story to fit my theory of the killing, studied the ground so as not to contradict myself, planted an old glove—It was very simple; it looked perfectly easy; I didn't think I was doing harm to anybody for I felt sure the murder would never be solved and I was merely bringing Maria di Nardi back to life—laying roses on a forgotten shrine. I don't know and I don't care who killed Amos Ethridge. Whoever did it had a good reason no doubt, for he was a bad man."

"Mr. Vogel believed me. He brought me here, put me up, dressed me up, and I got so I believed my own story. It was wonderful to 'come back,' to creep out of my shell and become Maria di Nardi again, even though it was all make-believe. There's a crab—the hermit crab—that does something like that. He's an ugly, soft, misshapen thing, but he crawls into empty shells, beautiful shells, the owners of which have died, and he lives there. . . . I had a glorious time in my new, beautiful shell until I realized

that I had put a noose around my boy's neck."

Mary Holmes fell silent. Nobody spoke for a moment; then somebody inquired:

"What did Vogel say when you told him this?"

"He said I was lying to save Jerry and he had expected something of the sort. Then he threatened me—"

"Threatened you?" It was one of the lawyers speaking.

"Yes, He's holding something over me. Now that I've defied him, I've got to tell you what it is—that means telling the world—and it isn't easy even for a 'bedraggled old harridan' like me. You see—I was never married! . . . Well gentlemen, there you have the whole story. Mr. Vogel doesn't believe it, but you do, don't you? And the public will believe it. Why, you must know I'm telling the truth."

The speaker stared eagerly at first one then another of her hearers. One of the older men answered her:

"It makes no difference, Mrs. Holmes, what we fellows think. We're trained not to think, but to get the news. We'll send out this story, if you say so, but are you sure you want us to? Will it do any good?"

"Then you—don't believe me?" "Let's put it this way: we don't think the public will believe you. The circumstantial evidence is too strong and you haven't really destroyed any part of it. Am I right, boys?"

(Concluded next issue)

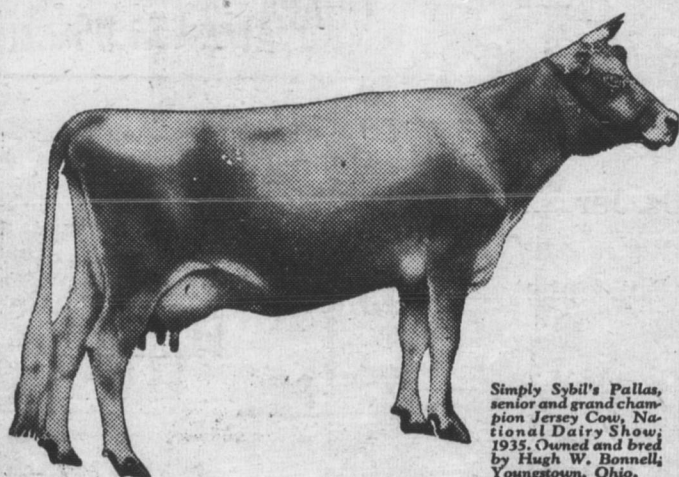
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