

SATAN DANCED AT MIDNIGHT

GARY BARTON

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LARRY LIEGH MURDERED

Penny Haines tossed the newspaper on my desk and the headlines lay there, screaming in the biggest type the editor of the Clarion could find.

"They got him, Jerry." she said. Penny's the Clarion's sob sister here at headquar- ters. Her pretty face was pale and wan, and she caught her glistening red lower lip hard between her teeth to stop its trembling. She said: "What do you think, Jerry?"

I tried to say something. I couldn't: the words wouldn't come, and there was some- thing deep in my throat that coughing wouldn't clear. I thought: "They got Larry. Larry was the best friend I ever had. And somebody's filled him all up with lead!" I said: "Who did it, Penny?"

"I don't know, Jerry." She shook her brown head sadly. "Larry had more enemies than one man can handle. A cheap gunman on the Bowery, a big-shot racketeer on Broadway, a showgirl in the village—anyone might have done it."

I knew that, but it didn't help much. Larry Liegh was a crime columnist. The best. He's the one who tipped me off about the mob that pulled that Standard Trust Co. job last fall. He knew every racketeer and small-time crook in New York, and their histories were in his typewriter. More often he wrote their obituaries, then sent us after them. Larry Liegh made lots of enemies.

I was trying to get my mind to click—even a homicide detective can let his heart swirl his thought sometimes—when the phone rang. I picked it up and the voice that came over was anything but friendly. It was cold and brittle.

"Kane?" it said. "I know the guy that got Larry Liegh!"

"Who?" The phone froze in my fist and my breath was scorching my throat.

"I can't tell you now. Come out to the Spinning Wheel tonight. We can talk—"

"Who are you?" I cut in.

"My name's Jaegar. But don't tell no one I called. I'll be waiting for you."

He hung up.

I didn't bother to trace the call. I took the guy's word that his office was straight. I was grabbing at straws.

"Come on!" I snapped at Penny. I hustled her through the office to the door as she slapped a dime-sized hat over her brown curls. "I'll tell you about it on the way," I said.

We flagged a cab outside headquarters and headed uptown to the Spinning Wheel. On the way, I asked Penny about this guy, Jaegar. She told me he owned the club; it used to be one of the spots on Larry's beat. But she didn't know of any connection between Larry and Jaegar. We didn't tire ourselves trying to find the answer. Larry had lots of friends.

He had lots of enemies.

The Spinning Wheel was an exclusive club on the East Side, up in the Fifties. It was dark when Penny and I went in. The orchestra was playing deep and smooth, and the pale yellow circle of a spotlight followed a young girl and a Latin-looking fellow, doing an adagio specialty on the floor.

The waiter told us that Jaegar would be out shortly; so we took a small table in the darkness beyond the floor and ordered a drink. I watched the dancers and tried to enjoy it. I couldn't. I was too nervous. There was something in the atmosphere that crawled icily along my spine. I didn't know what it was. I could feel it. Maybe it was the frightened look on the blond girl's face as her partner tossed her about the room with practiced carelessness. Maybe it was the way he held that knife between his teeth. I didn't know.

Jaegar came up to the table then. He was a paunchy guy with a long cigar in his mouth that made him look a

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little foolish. A little guy trying to be tough.

I didn't give him the chance to ask questions. I said: "Who got Larry Liegh? And you better be straight, Jaegar, or you'll wish you were with him."

"Larry was a friend of mine," he said. He took the cigar from his mouth, and his lips tightened till the words grated through his teeth. "I'd get the rat that killed him myself, only I don't know where he is. That's why I called you."

"What's his name?"

"Nevins. Grog Nevins. A smalltime chiseler."

"Where'd you get your line?" I asked him. But the band was loud now; there was a trombone in his ear, and he had to lean across the table to hear me. I looked up and saw the girl who had done the adagio. She was singing "Imagination." I said to Jaegar: "Where'd you find out about this Nevins?"

"I can't tell you that," he yelled above the noise. "I got a tip."

I wondered about that. I wasn't going out all the way with this guy. Maybe I was jittery. I wouldn't trust anybody on this case.

The blonde finished her number, then, and Penny turned to Jaegar.

"New singer?" she said. "She looks nervous."

"No. That's June Eiden—she's been here awhile." He squinted through the haze of smoke and his lips twisted a little. "Poor kid's broken up tonight. She used to be Larry Liegh's girl friend. She's taking it pretty hard." He puffed heavily on the cigar and started to say something else. He didn't.

The shot from the rear of the club cut him short!

I was away from the table before the echo died, Penny alongside of me. A woman screamed and somebody was yelling about a shot. I heard glass shatter across the floor in back of me, and someone smashed a table over trying to get to the exit. We started down a long hall. Jaegar was on my heels.

Then I met the blond dancer, June Eiden. I met her and went right over her. She screamed and started to scramble to her feet. I helped her, but my grip on her arm wasn't friendly.

"You in a hurry, sister?" I said.

The look on her face was a new high in fear. Her full red lips trembled and her breasts strained the thin silk bodice of her jacket as she spoke.

"I...I heard a shot!"

"No!"

"Yes! It came from that room." She pointed a quivering finger at a dressing-room door.

I twirled her around by the arm and headed for the room. I didn't bother to knock. I kicked the door open.

I wished then that the little blonde and Penny hadn't been there. It wasn't a pretty sight. The man lay spread across the floor like a royal flush on a showdown. Gore matted what was left of his head and had splashed across the rug. I didn't have to look close to tell that a slug had almost taken the back of his head off! I felt sick.

"Who is he?" I asked Jaegar.

The paunchy club owner almost choked on his words. "He...he's Grog Nevins." He gulped and talked around the cigar. "I guess somebody saved me the trouble."

I said: "Yeah. I guess so."

I swung on June Eiden. "What'd you do it for, kid?"

She was sobbing hysterically; then she buried her face in her hands, muffling her cries.

"I...I—" She didn't say any more than that. She crumpled in a heap on the floor in a dead faint. I didn't think she was acting. I knew damn well she wasn't.

Jaegar picked her up in his arms and headed for a rest room down the hall. Penny went with them.

Lieutenant Haley from homicide was there, then. He's my chief. Besides the ballistics, photogs and fingerprint men, he had his stooge, Ryan, in tow. They took over. Maybe I was in the way; anyway, I don't rate with those counterparts of Holmes and Watson. I decided to wait till they were through.

I stood outside and dragged on a cigarette.

I don't know how long I stood out there. I was thinking of a dozen angles to this case. Nobody bothered me; so I had plenty of time to think. Jaegar, Penny and the little blonde were still in the room down the hall, I remembered that June Eiden had been Larry Liegh's girl friend. That would have given her a beautiful motive for

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killing Nevins. The way I looked at it: June found out that Nevins had blasted Larry. She was still in love with Larry. She sees Nevins in the club—maybe she got him to come here. Then she knocks him off, just like that. Sweet revenge. Ah!

It clicked. Or did it? I wondered.

There was a sarcastic smile on Haley's homely face when he came out of the room. I tried to get ready for what was coming. I knew it wouldn't be good.

"It's all over, Kane," he said. "You can go home, now."

My mouth dropped and I looked at Ryan. He must have fathomed what was in my mind.

He said: "We found the gun under the couch, just beyond the dead man's outstretched hand. It had only one set of prints—the dead man's. It was suicide, Kane!"

Suicide? It sounded too easy. Killer commits suicide. Then that would mean the murder of Larry Liegh was a closed case. It was perfect.

It was too perfect!

My mind was racing as I watched Haley and his stooge stride down the hall. I decided to have a look around the room myself. I went in and completed the job of turning the place upside down that Haley's boys had started.

I went over everything. I looked at the body. It was difficult to tell from the condition of Nevin's head just how much powder was in the wound. I checked as closely as I could, then prowled the place to substantiate my theory.

I found it buried on the top shelf of the closet. A pillow!

There was a hole clean through it, and its satin covering was a blotch of charred cloth and cotton around the hole. Suicide, Ryan had said. Weren't Haley and Ryan going to be surprised. I wondered what Haley would say when—

I stopped wondering. A footstep in back of me made me swing my head around. I shouldn't have done that; it smashed into something that wasn't soft! A red curtain blazed in front of my eyes and my knees didn't seem to be there any more. I went for the .38 in my shoulder sling. I didn't reach it. The sap came down again; it parted my hair and almost parted my scalp! I made a grab for the blur moving above me; then the red curtain went up and left a black one hanging there.

I sailed out of this world with no more care than that.

There was something cold against my face, and there was an acrid odor in my nostrils. For a time I wondered where I was. Then I opened my eyes and the first thing I thought of was the pillow. I looked about the room. I wasn't surprised. It was gone!

The acrid stench persisted in my nostrils, and I found that I was leaning over the grating of a hot-air system. The grating covers the conduit that brings the heat from the furnace in the cellar.

I took a knife from my pocket and pried the metal grating from the floor. Then I rayed the light of my pencil flash down the pipe.

Suddenly, I had the answers to a lot of questions that were pounding in my head.

I raced out of the room and down the hall toward where Penny was keeping the little blonde. On the way, I stepped into a tiny office and used the phone. I called Haley at headquarters. He had just reached there. I talked low; there were people around this club who wouldn't have liked me to talk too much. If they heard me, I knew I wouldn't be around long enough to repeat what I had to say.

I got a kick out of telling Haley that his suicide had turned into a sweet case of murder. After I told him what I'd found, he was probably on his way up here before I could hang up the receiver.

Back in the rest room at the end of the hall, I found Penny—but not the blonde. Penny was smoking a cigarette and scribbling in her note book. Probably some sob stuff on June Eiden, I thought.

I said: "Where's the blonde?"

"She's out doing her act," Penny said. "She was feeling better and Jaegar made her go on." She kept writing in her note book. "I got a good lead on the babe."

"What did she spill?" I asked her. I thought maybe Penny had pulled some fresh angles from the blonde. If anyone can pump answers, Penny can.

"Not a thing," Penny said. "The kid wouldn't open her mouth with Jaegar and that import from Cuba hanging

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around."

"Then what's the lead for?"

"I think June Eiden blasted Nevins. Don't you think she did, Jerry?"

I didn't speak for a minute and fumbled for a cigarette. Then I said: "Yeah. I think she did."

I went out.

June Eiden wasn't on the floor. I couldn't see her any place. One of the waiters told me that I'd probably find her in her dressing room. I went there.

I did find her in her dressing room. I wished I hadn't. But June wasn't going to answer any questions, and I was certain that she hadn't killed Grog Nevins. I don't know why, but I was thinking about that lead to Penny's story. Penny would have to change it.

June Eiden was dead!

She lay down on the floor, and her slim, young body was twisted crazily so that you could tell she was dead even if it hadn't been for the knife. The short, thin blade was buried deep in her back, over the heart. The blood pooled around its hilt, spreading over her silk housecoat to the rug, I followed the ribbon of blood across the room to the dressing table.

A bottle of deep-red nail polish had spilled across the vanity bench and another bottle lay on the floor near a welter of blood, now sticky and crusting. The room was heavy with the sickening smell of nailpolish remover. June Eiden had evidently been retouching her nails when she was murdered.

But why had she dragged herself across the room?

I went back to the body and found why. A picture lay beyond her outstretched hand—she had apparently knocked it from the table above—and her index finger seemed to be pointing at the photograph, which lay face down.

I picked it up. It was that of a dark, Latin-looking fellow with a thin, black mustache and long sideburns. It was June Eiden's adagio partner!

I'd forgotten about him. It was another piece to my puzzle. I fitted it. Larry Liegh and June, a duo. June and her partner, a duo. Partner, June and Larry make three, and three make a poor combination in a love affair.

It might even add up to murder.

It just might—and it looked as if it had.

I quit June Eiden's dressing room and headed for the ballroom. Lieutenant Haley and Ryan had just come in and were talking to Jaegar, over near the orchestra platform. I wasn't interested in them, not just yet. I spotted Penny, moving toward me from the hallway.

"Have you seen that Spanish-looking dancer around?" I asked her.

"Yes. He was out here a while ago." Penny's eyes moved over the room, "He was looking for June Eiden."

"Yeah?" I let a drag of smoke hiss through my teeth. I said, "Well, he found her." Then, "Get him and bring him to the room where Nevins was blasted. Use a couple of husky waiters if you have to."

"Why, Jerry?" Penny asked; her eyes were wide and excited. "Have you got something?"

"Enough to blow this thing to hell!"

I strode over to Haley.

Back in the dressing room where Grog Nevins had been killed, I stooped over the hot-air register. I looked up at Lieutenant Haley. There was a scornful smile on his face; if my theories didn't blow up, Haley was going to be a very disappointed guy.

"The murderer of Nevins was quite probably the killer of Larry Liegh," I said. "He rumored that Nevins had killed Larry, so that when Nevins was found an apparent suicide, the investigation of Larry's murder would be closed." I paused. There was a sickening odor that seemed to become stronger in the small room. I went over and closed the window. "Larry Liegh probably had something on this man—I can think of blackmail for one possibility—that made silencing him imperative."

As I talked, I kept moving about the room, slowly walking as close to the Latin dancer and Jaegar as I could. And I kept thinking: "June Eiden left a clue," I tried to think what it might have been. I thought I knew.

"But one person knew about the murder of Larry Liegh ' I went on. "The killer also silenced her—"

The Latin dancer jumped to his feet and a vicious growl gurgled deep in his throat. I slapped him hard across the mouth and he slumped back against the couch.

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"You haven't heard anything—yet," I snapped.

He lay quiet, his eyes moving restlessly about the room and his fingers twitching nervously near his coat. I kept my eyes on him.

"But why did he kill Larry Liegh?" Lieutenant Haley turned burning eyes on the dancer.

"I wondered about that myself," I said, "till a moment ago. But—he didn't kill Larry or Nevins!"

"B—but who did?"

"Jaegar!"

Haley whirled on the paunchy club owner. Jaegar's face slowly became a greenish white and his thick lips trembled violently. "B—but," he stammered, "you know that isn't possible " He shredded his cigar in nervous fingers. "Why, I was outside with you when Nevins was shot—"

"No, Jaegar," I said. "You mean you were with me when we heard a shot. You had killed Nevins before you came outside and had mumed the shot with a pillow. The shot we hear was this—" I went over to the air register and lifted the metal grating. Then I pulled out some bits of red paper and a small piece of chewing gum that had been sticking to the pipe. I said: "You set a fire cracker down here and attached a long fuse. When the cracker exploded, you had already established your alibi outside."

Jaegar's pale features turned suddenly red and twisted in maniacal rage. His hand snaked beneath his coat to his shoulder. But I was ready for the play. I didn't take time to go for my gun. I drove my fist straight into his pudgy face! It felt good all the way up my arm, and I let go another for Larry Liegh Jaegar buckled in the middle then a stiff uppercut stiffened him to almost twice his normal height. I heard him fall with a crash that shook the room as I turned and walked away. No one could have stood up under that dynamite; so I hadn't bothered waiting for him to fall.

"That was nice work, Jerry," Haley said. I could see it hurt like hell for him to say it.

"Thanks, lieutenant, but I can't take the credit. Jaegar planted a frame on June Eiden's partner"—I nodded to the Latin—"by dragging her across the room and placing his picture near her hand, as if she were pointing out the identity of her killer. It even had me fooled till I was in this room awhile."

"But June was coloring her nails when she was attacked, and she left a clue that perfectly fingered Jaegar. She splashed some polish remover on him where it would do the most good." I strode across to Jaegar's inert body. and pulled out his white rayon pocket handkerchief. There were holes burned in the handkerchief. "I noticed this after I came in here. Apparently, Jaegar didn't notice it. Nail-polish remover contains acetone, and this is what happened when June dashed some liquid on his pocket. Ask your wife what happens, lieutenant, when she spills some remover on a rayon blouse. Acetone burns holes in the cloth—not like cigarette burns, though; it eats away the fabric."

"I still say you did a fine job, Jerry," Haley said, and he was really smiling. "We'll check the slug in Nevins ballistically with those taken from Liegh's body." He looked at Jaegar. "This rat is going to find out what fireworks really are. He'll be sitting on them."

I turned and walked out of the room with Penny. Penny really had her story.

THE END.