

## CHAPTER ONE

MRS. SARAH RECKON had no thought of sudden death as she stood in the darkened hall of her own home, peering into Poldrate Street on this particular night. As for thinking anyone might want to murder *her*, such a preposterous idea had never occurred to her and never would — until it was forever too late.

Before we venture with Mrs. Reckon on her nightly foray into neighbours' gardens for the flowers she was too lazy to cultivate, it might be of interest to know something about the street in which, if you persevere, you are going to spend the next three days, and where you will meet some very odd people.

Poldrate was scarcely a block long and a blind end at that. It opened off Happen Street, itself an unimportant avenue of middle-class houses. Less than a hundred yards away, along Happen, was Washington Street where the traffic of a great city flowed with tireless insentience. But Poldrate, with its five tall, old-fashioned houses, surrounded by surprisingly large gardens, was a stagnant backwater, almost unknown to the gaudy life which whirled beyond it. Forty years ago, when every roof had an attic and every gable was ornate with scrolls, the five were the centre of fashion at its architectural flossiest.

The five houses, with their walled-in gardens, were on the north side. Across from them was a high, windowless brick wall belonging to a brewery yard. The people of the street rather liked the privacy the blank wall afforded their little community.

The gardens of the five houses had grown far beyond the discouraged efforts of Tim Gordon, the street's odd-job and general handyman, who did little more than explore their depths from time to time with an unused pruning knife as a sort of gardener's token visit. Flowers seeded themselves year after year, producing beds of riotous colour. Vines matted the ground, climbing walls and the trunks of palms and acacias. There were fountains whose pools had not been cleaned for years.

Mrs. Reckon's house was the smallest of the five. Of the same architecture as the others, it had been erected as a dovecote for newlyweds, fledged from families in the larger houses. Newlyweds and parents had long since vanished from the scene, gone with the brief aristocracy which hovered over this section before nameless thousands came from the middle west and spread Los Angeles over half the county. Mafia Breene, the undertaker who occupied the house at the blind end of Poldrate Street, might have told Mrs. Reckon the fates of some of the former occupants. Not that Breene had been in business then, but the books taken over from his predecessor no doubt contained these small, depressing histories.

The street in Mrs. Reckon's time cared little for its past. Certainly the Gordons, who occupied the next house, were much more interested in the problem of scraping together the month's rent of forty dollars. Just what the Pallings on the other side of the Gordons were interested in, Mrs. Reckon hadn't the remotest notion. Doctor

Palling and his wife, Violet, were in the society group of the street. So, too, were Joseph Sleep, the elderly bachelor, and Mafia Breene, the undertaker. Sarah Reckon and the Gordons were not.

Tonight, there was something going on in Joseph Sleep's ornate house. Mrs. Reckon hadn't been able to learn a great deal about it, but she knew the Pallings and Mafia Breene were there. It was a sort of introduction for the red-headed girl who had come from the east to live with Joseph Sleep, who was her guardian. Mrs. Reckon hadn't had a chance to see the girl yet, but Mrs. Gordon said she was pretty.

Standing in her hallway, she spied impatiently upon the street. As a rule, her nightly raid was over and done with by this time, but the activity in Sleep's house, with its attendant comings and goings, rendered Poldrate a little hazardous for her.

Considering her very real love of flowers and the fact she had so much ground at her disposal, one would have thought Sarah Reckon would grow her own blooms. But although capable of considerable energy and ingenuity upon occasion, she was anything but industrious. Besides, to her way of thinking, there was no thrill in simply going into her own garden and picking flowers, careless of who saw her. Raids under cover of dark, *they* were exciting.

Tonight's expedition was something special. The letter which inspired it crackled in the pocket of her dark house-dress. Her nephew, Jimmie Lane, was coming home.

Jimmie was a fighter. He went from one small town to another, picking up what change he could when promoters offered him a little work with the gloves. Mining camps, dude ranches, jerk-line cattle centres, it was all the same to Jimmie. Usually, his fights brought him fifty dollars, minus whatever commission the promoter thought fit to collect for his own services. Once in a while, he got a main event and earned a hundred. On the dark side were the intervals between fights, when capital melted away in gasoline and repairs for the battered roadster in which he travelled, food, lodgings and other necessities. It was rarely that he sent anything to Mrs. Reckon. Not that she needed it, of course. She did very well with occasional nursing jobs. But she did wish Jimmie would settle down in Los Angeles and really go to work. He had promised he would, sometime.

All the rooms must be gay with flowers for Jimmie's homecoming. Arranging them would take time, and because there were other tasks requiring attention before she retired, Sarah was anxious to get on with her raid. Realizing that for quite five minutes there had been no foot-fall in the street, she decided to risk a start.

With the wicker basket on her arm, she stepped on to the porch, closing the door noiselessly. The basket, painted black, contained a pair of black gloves and scissors. She stood for a moment, listening. Satisfied, she went down the winding path to the front gate, keeping on the grass because gravel grated noisily no matter how carefully one walked. She had watered earlier and the ground was still wet, but she didn't mind.

At the gate, she leaned over the top rail, peering the brief length of the street.

Carefully, she computed the flowers needed to decorate her rooms. More than usual, of course. Bouquets for the hall, living-room and dining-room. Three for Jimmie's room, and as many, she supposed, for the spare room. The other man would have to go into the spare room, she thought resentfully. She didn't know why she should go to all that trouble for a tramp, and there was no other way to describe him, the stranger Jimmie was bringing. He didn't call him that in the letter, but Sarah Reckon could find no other way to think of a person who spent his days wandering the public highways. A man who didn't work for a living and had no fixed address was a hobo, and that was all there was to it. Playing a fiddle for his meals and bed wasn't work.

She regretted the incident which placed Jimmie under obligation to the tramp. Apparently he had got into some kind of a scrape and the tramp had pulled him out of it. The letter wasn't very clear on the matter. It seemed Jimmie had disregarded a tip given him by a very tough individual just before his last fight. The tip had advised him it would be wiser to let himself be knocked out when he met a terrible creature known locally as the "Gila Monster." Disregarding the suggestion, Jimmie had knocked out the Gila Monster in the third round. Feeling resentment, several members of the betting fraternity waylaid Jimmie at midnight, as he was rattling away from the camp in his old car. Four to one, they gave him a bad mauling and left the victim unconscious in a ditch. There the tramp had found him. He had carried the boy to his camp, dressed his wounds and cared for him.

Evidently the tramp had been kindness itself during the three or four days it had taken his patient to get on his feet again. Then, nursing a black-eye, various bruises and a bad gash in his head, the two had started west in Jimmie's car, travelling slowly as befitted a semi-invalid. There was no doubt, she admitted, they owed the tramp a debt of gratitude, but she was loath to see it paid with board and lodging under her own roof.

Idly, she wondered how long the fellow would stay. Jimmie usually remained at home for two or three weeks. When he tired of hearing "no" from local managers and "yes" from Los Angeles girls, he borrowed fifty dollars from Sarah and steered the old car back to Arizona and New Mexico. If his attachment to the tramp was strong, as the letter suggested, she might have the hobo's company for the entire period of Jimmie's visit.

Apart from Jimmie, whom she had raised since he was three, no other man had polluted the interior of her house. At least, since the unexplained disappearance of Mr. Reckon twenty years ago. At that time the gentleman in question had borrowed fifty dollars and gone out, ostensibly to buy a new spring outfit. He had never returned.

The gate hinges were well oiled. She opened it without misgiving, the reward of careful forethought. Between the sidewalk and garden walls was a strip of grass. She always used it because it gave her noiseless passage. Seventy feet along the wall she

approached the break where the Gordon gate opened. Habitual caution stopped her there, and she stood listening. There was no sound but the frog chorus with an underlying monotone of traffic from Washington. The gate was ajar. She stepped into the open space, glancing into the garden. Through the trees and shrubbery, she saw a faint light in the old-fashioned coloured glasses which framed the Gordon front door. As she turned to continue, the beam from an electric torch shone full in her eyes. She put out her hand and shrank back, an exclamation of annoyance on her lips. In the protection afforded by the outflung hand, she could see the small form of young "Face" Gordon behind the torch. She snapped at him, "Put that thing out!" Obliging, he turned the torch downward, washing the sidewalk with white light.

"It's a prize for selling magazines," he said, and added proudly, "It focuses."

The white beam danced a hundred feet along the pavement and came back. Sarah remembered this was the night he got his supply of the weekly magazines he delivered to something over a hundred customers. She blamed herself for being stupid. If only she had waited another five minutes the boy would have been out of the street on his rounds, leaving her a clear hour. Now she would have to go back and start again.

"Sold twenty more magazines last week than usual," he explained, falling into step beside her as she retreated. She tried to keep the black basket concealed by her person, hoping he was too much engrossed in the torch and the heavy magazine bag to notice. He was a nice boy, she admitted, although he could be a bit inconvenient at times. Now, for instance. Sarah never had any serious trouble with him such as she had with other young pests who sometimes invaded the street. She liked his mother, too, a serious, hard-working person who minded her own business. The father wasn't much, but then, you didn't expect it of a man. At least, Sarah didn't, and was always a little incredulous when one of them turned out well. "Face" was one of the few who looked promising. Long ago, when the Gordons first came into the street and before people knew their name, they began calling the lad "the boy with the face," because he had such an engaging, infectious, freckled grin. Out of that grew the nickname "Face" Gordon. He babbled on now about his magazines, the money and the prizes he earned selling them.

"You learn a lot about people, Mrs. Reckon," he said. "Some folks'll cheat you for a nickel an' some'll go out of their way to see you get your money. An' you'd be surprised the way some'll only buy when they've looked through it to see if they like the cross-word puzzle. The magazine business is funny, just like folks."

Sarah Reckon ventured the information that her nephew was coming home. She thought it might keep his mind off the rather embarrassing question as to what she was doing creeping along the street with a basket. "Face" was pleased at the news.

"Jimmie always takes my magazine," he said. "Do you want it now, Mrs. Reckon?"

She took the copy he thrust at her and dropped it in the basket. "Come in tomorrow for the money," she said.

"I sure will, Mrs. Reckon. What time do you expect Jimmie?"

Sarah Reckon wasn't certain. She thought it might be in the forenoon, some time. At her gate she paused. "Good night, 'Face'."

"Night, Mrs. Reckon. You haven't seen my dog around anywhere, have you?"

"I didn't know he was lost, 'Face'."

"Well, he ain't lost exactly, Mrs. Reckon. He just don't seem to be around for the last few days. He'll turn up sometime, I guess."

Whistling, he went down Poldrate. Sarah stood watching until he turned into Happen Street. Then she hurried up the path, making as much noise as possible on the decomposed granite. If anyone should be listening, she wanted her passage heard. On the front steps, she stamped her feet and when she dropped the magazine inside, slammed the door loudly. That, to any possible listener, indicated Sarah Reckon was in her house and about her own affairs. But, standing silent on the front porch, she felt herself once more secretive and unseen, a night creature. A little harried by time, perhaps.

"Face" would be back in an hour. There was no danger from him. Joseph Sleep's party, however, was another matter. One couldn't tell about such things in Poldrate Street. Sometimes they broke up early. Some slight unpleasantness and the guests departed, annoyed and dignified. It was now or never for the flowers. Using the wet grass, she hurried to her own front gate.

The moonlight on the brewery wall had moved up, leaving a broad band of shadow at the base. Sarah walked along the strip of sward. She knew just what she intended, for she had spied upon her neighbours' gardens during a casual afternoon stroll. She had noticed some unusually beautiful roses in Mafia Breene's place at the end of Poldrate. She intended to cut them first. Returning, she would gather Joseph Sleep's carnations. He had whole beds of red, white and cream blooms. After the carnations, she would help herself to French marigolds from the beds in Dr. Palling's garden.

The Palling gateway was massive as befitted the size of the mansion it guarded. There were no lights visible in the house whose bulk loomed blackly against the dimly luminous sky. The Pallings had no servants at the moment, she remembered, and both the Doctor and his wife were at Joseph Sleep's party.

Joseph Sleep's house stood farther back in its garden than the others. She did not expect to see any lights as she passed its gate, but she was a little surprised not to hear any sounds. They must be having one of their dignified nights. It hurried her steps, because, if the party was too stuffy, the guests might depart at any time.

Mafia Breene's roses grew over a tumble-down arbour constructed along the drive. They were very dark in colour, which made it difficult for Sarah to find them. In her haste, she neglected to pull on the dark gloves. After she had torn her hands several times on invisible thorns, she was forced to stop. She had just drawn the gloves into place and picked up her scissors when she heard the footsteps.

Men's footsteps, coming along Poldrate Street. Sarah had begun her clipping at the end of the arbour nearest the house, intending to work towards the gate. She stood

motionless in the dark, hoping the steps would turn into one of the other gardens. But they were coming on. In fact, they must have been already past Joseph Sleep's gateway when she first heard them. Sarah realized, with a sense of uneasiness, they were coming straight on to the Breene gateway. In fact, she thought she recognized the little scraping sound of shoe leather with which Mafia Breene walked. There was no escape by the front path. She would have to go around by the side where she could wait in the heavy shadows until the men were gone.

They were almost at the gate, so there was no time to waste. She turned and ran, keeping to the tips of her toes with something of an effort, and hoping her passage on the gravel would not be heard. In her haste she passed the entrance to the side path, and almost stumbled over the front veranda steps before she realized her mistake. It was too late to go back, and progress around the side of the house was barred by a holly hedge. Sarah found herself on the veranda, cowering against the front door, hearing the steps drawing closer over the decomposed granite with appalling speed.

She was going to be caught, and that was all there was to it. She was invisible in the dark, but the steps were so close that a few more seconds must bring the men on to the veranda. She felt the door handle boring into her back and, at the last moment, in desperation, she reached behind, seized it, and turned. The door opened into the darkened hall.

Only a moment before, Sarah Reckon had been a poor creature, trembling in the dark. She was still in the dark, but she was no longer trembling. The change was due to the presence of a stout door between herself and discovery. With sure fingers, she pressed the catch on the Yale lock and slid into place a stout bolt. Her breath came a little unevenly as she leaned against the door frame, listening to the steps of the men on the veranda. But Sarah wasn't afraid any more. On the contrary, she felt clever again and mistress of the situation. She was safe in lingering a moment while Breene impatiently shook the handle and tried his key. She heard him swear and, mingled with his grumbling, the voice of his companion. She recognized it. Dr. Palling. Why, she wondered, had both of them run away from Joseph Sleep's party?

Sarah felt she had plenty of time. Breene couldn't get in while the bolt was shot. She was a little curious to know just what a man would do, thus mysteriously barred from his own house. She hadn't any intention of remaining too long, of course. But as long as her retreat along the hallway into the kitchen and through the kitchen door into the garden lay open, she felt quite confident. She was unprepared, therefore, to hear the scraping sound of a rusty wire overhead in the dark, followed by the harsh jangling of a bell somewhere in the depths of the house. Mafia Breene had yanked the old-fashioned bell-pull.

Sarah experienced a panicky feeling that once again she had blundered. Unaccustomed to the presence of servants in her own house, she had quite forgotten Cora Blessington, the ponderous Negress who was Breene's housekeeper. Even as she turned to make her escape, she realized she was cut off from the kitchen. Far down

the dark hallway, she heard the heavy tread of the Negress and saw a glimmer of light as the servant's bedroom door was opened. To reach the kitchen, Sarah would have to pass that door, would, in fact, come face to face with the Negress herself. Behind her, she heard Breene give another savage yank at the rusty wire with its accompanying jangle of the kitchen bell. Cora's voice, hoarse and petulant, was heard shouting in her bedroom. "I'se coming, Mistuh Breene. I'se coming." Sarah realized the Negress had thrown open the door and then, fortunately, gone back for a dressing-gown. Desperately, she looked about for a hiding-place.

The opening of Cora's bedroom door, although far down the hall, permitted some light to reach the place where Sarah stood. She saw the entrance to a little sitting-room in the opposite wall. Without hesitation, she crossed, hoping to conceal herself until a chance for escape presented itself. It was dark in there, and she hesitated, afraid to move lest she stumble against a piece of furniture. She was beginning to tremble again. In all her nocturnal excursions, this was the first time she had ever been so clumsy.

She heard Cora coming down the hall. Then there was the click of a light switch and a dim light shone inside a pendant lantern. Sarah saw a screen behind a couch. By the time Cora reached the front door. Sarah was crouched behind the screen. Once again she felt safe. Surely, she thought, no one will think to pull the couch aside.

Breene's voice was audible, finding fault with Cora for bolting the door. Cora's voice, heavy like a man's, denied that she had even been near the door since Breene went out. "I'se been with Him, Mistuh Breene. I ain't never been away from Him." That would be her invalid boy she's talking about, Sarah thought. The poor creature that never gets out of bed and can't even talk. Breene petulantly demanded to know how the devil the bolt got into place if Cora hadn't put it there. Palling interrupted the argument brusquely.

"Come along, Breene. We've got to get back to Sleep's, you know."

The two men came into the room where Sarah crouched, and closed the door. There was the click of a switch as the lights came on. She heard a key turned, and wondered why they were locking themselves in.

"You're a fool, Breene, leaving this door unlocked. That Negress will get on to us if you're not careful. The smell is enough to knock you down."

It wasn't dust she had been smelling, Sarah noticed. More like an animal. She realized it was dog. For some reason, that made her remember "Face" Gordon's missing pet. She heard another door unlocked and the men go through into a second room. There was a rumble of words which she couldn't quite make out. All she cared for now was to get away, and that appeared quite easy. She had only to remain where she was until the men took their departure.

It was just then she heard something which roused her curiosity. Palling's voice, lifted a little in excitement, spoke plainly. "Perfect, Mafia," he said. "Substitute Kitty for the dog and we've got something, my friend. We have, indeed."



Breene answered, but his voice was muffled. Sarah sat on her heels, wondering what on earth they meant by substituting Kitty for the dog. Kitty? That was the name of the red-headed girl who had come to live with Joseph Sleep. How very odd, she thought. Her curiosity, held in check by danger, now asserted itself when she believed herself safe. Cautiously, she raised her head and peered over the back of the couch.

The door into the other room stood ajar. The two men bent over a small wheeled table examining something illuminated by a shaded overhead light. Sarah realized it was "Face" Gordon's dog they had stretched out on the table, apparently unconscious. A curious tangle of rubber pipes dropped from the animal into the shadows below the table. She saw Dr. Palling lift the dog's right paw and drop it. The limb fell lifelessly.

"Perfect," Palling said. "Simply perfect."

Breene grumbled. "I wish I was sure as you seem to be."

At that moment Sarah felt the screen going. In her eagerness to see, she had pressed against it. Frantically, she tried to stop its fall, but succeeded only in sending it crashing to the floor. The two men in the next room whirled. She saw their mouths fall open and was conscious that, whereas Palling was angry, Breene's face betrayed absolute terror. She shoved the couch aside and plunged towards the door. Even as she ran, she remembered with a feeling of hopeless panic that it was locked.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A WARM NIGHT, but Joseph Sleep was cold inside his white shirt and black dinner-coat. He was always cold inside, even on the hottest day, for his blood count was below normal and the years had not been kind to him. He was no full-blooded, well-fed jolly man, but a thin, acidulous person suffering from a ruined digestion, ruined ambition, ruined hopes and the ever-sharpening certainty that soon, very soon, he must go the way of all men. Of late, Mafia Breene had taken to looking at him appraisingly when they met, or so it seemed to Sleep's imagination. Breene and Palling together, he thought, they were always looking at him in that odd way. They hoped he would go. He knew that because things would be easier for both of them with him out of the way. It wasn't only the money they owed him. Not that it was very much, really. Only five hundred each, but with the interest, which was unpaid, it mounted up. He knew it weighed upon them because they had other bills.

No, it wasn't only the money. At least, not in Palling's case. There were things he knew about another life Palling had lived before he came to Poldrate Street. The fellow didn't earn much, five or six thousand perhaps. But, such as it was, he worked for it, and it kept him going with that wife of his, Violet. He looked across the room. She was sitting against the high, old-fashioned windows with the dingy curtains. The