

*Put Out
That Star*

HARRY CARMICHAEL



GOLLINS

fontana books

PUT OUT THAT STAR

Once, long ago, she must have been a young and attractive woman . . . but that had been long ago when her make-up had added glamour to her pretty face . . . before lipstick and powder and mascara had made her look like a painted wax model that had fallen off its stand. . . . Long ago, before she had been shot through the left temple. . . .

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Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air. . . .

The Tempest

ACT. iv. SCENE I

than

CHAPTER I

THE SLOW THAW that had begun the previous day brought thick mist to the southern half of England in the early hours of Monday, the twenty-seventh of February. Visibility was reduced to fifty yards, with a zero ceiling.

Shortly before seven a.m. a pale, shrouded sun struggled through the cloud-layer. By eight o'clock the mist was clearing rapidly and warm sunlight had taken most of the sting from the frosty air. When the ten o'clock plane from Prestwick came in, landing conditions were once more normal.

There were only half a dozen passengers from Scotland: an elderly man in a clerical collar, two coloured men in turbans and expensive clothes, a middle-aged woman escorting a schoolboy who called her Nanny, and a blonde girl in a mink coat. She was last to leave the plane.

Three or four press cameras awaited her as she emerged. She hesitated, but only for a moment. Then she came down the steps.

Quinn of the *Morning Post* said, "Say . . . any chance of getting a picture of you without that coat, Miss Grey?"

She looked at him coldly and her half-smile faded. "Why? What's wrong with my coat?"

"Nothing . . . nothing at all. I read the papers same as everybody else. But even a two-thousand-pound mink can spoil your kind of scenery." Quinn nodded to the photographer beside him and went on persuasively, "I've got a million readers who just love to prop you up on the breakfast table and compare you and your 38-24-36 with"—he coughed—"with the dimensions of the old woman. What about it, Miss Grey? Won't take a moment."

The blonde girl shook her head. "Sorry . . . no. It's too cold. And I'm in a hurry, anyway."

"Just one quick shot," Quinn said persuasively.

"No . . . really, I can't." She pushed her way through

the little group. Over her shoulder, she said, "Come and see me at my hotel if you want any more pictures. I'll be at the Chancellor for the next two or three days."

Somebody asked, "Is it true, Miss Grey, that you're thinking of doing a TV series?"

She glanced back again and smiled fleetingly. "That's what I've come all the way from Scotland to discuss. It's all in the air at the moment."

"Is your new picture finished or have you to go back on location?"

"Oh, I'm going back up North soon's I've finished my business here in London." She shrugged deeper into her collar and wrapped her coat more tightly around her. "Now you boys will have to excuse me. I really must go. . . ."

When she had gone, Quinn said to no one in particular, "If she goes on TV the viewers'll need a twenty-one-inch screen or they won't get all her chest in. You wouldn't think an outsize bust could be worth fifty thousand a year . . . would you?"

A young man with an old face said, "You're just jealous cock. Think how you'd live if you had what she's got."

"If I had what she's got," Quinn said, "I'd live in a freak show at Blackpool. . . . Wonder where's she's going in such a hurry. . . ."

He went on wondering now and again on his way back to the office. The impatience in her voice stayed with him for a long time.

The blonde girl still looked cold and vaguely worried when she inquired at the reception desk of the Chancellor Hotel.

"Miss Madeleine Grey . . . ? Why, yes, Miss Grey. We have a reservation for you . . . a suite on the third floor. We understood that would be suitable . . . according to what your secretary said on the phone?"

"That was my husband," the blonde girl said shortly.

She signed the register with a hasty scrawl and watched her four bags being carried into the lift. With every passing moment, anxiety was darkening the deep blue of her eyes.

Most of her worry seemed concentrated on her luggage. Afterwards, that was what both the porter and the lift attendant remembered. She specified very particularly that the largest suitcase should be placed in the sitting-room of her suite, the other three in her bedroom. For their trouble, the attendant and the porter each received a tip of half a crown.

At eleven-fifteen the hotel switchboard operator telephoned Madeleine Grey's suite to the porter. The operator obtained the telephone directory. She noted that the porter was a special agent with an address in Buckingham Street, on the Strand.

At eleven-twenty a telegram for Madeleine Grey was received at the Chancellor Hotel. The same porter took it up to suite No. 15. He said later that she was still wearing her mink coat when she opened the door. This time she gave him no tip: she barely thanked him before she closed the door in his face. Afterwards, when pressed for further details of the incident, he said he thought she had been crying.

Soon after eleven-thirty No. 15 on the third floor spoke to the reception desk and told the clerk that a Mr. John Piper would be calling shortly and would she see that he was sent up right away? The reception clerk entered the instruction in a book she kept for such messages.

Piper arrived at a quarter to twelve. Quinn was only a few seconds behind him. They met at the desk as Piper was being directed to go up to the third floor.

Quinn said, "Hello! Long time no see. What are you doing here?"

He was more tidily dressed than Piper would have expected from past experience. At some time during the months since their last meeting, he had discarded his stained and shapeless raincoat and the greasy soft hat of indeterminate colour.

Now he wore a grey overcoat and a grey snap-brim, both of which looked comparatively new. The knot in his tie

was neat and his white collar was clean. When he took off his hat, he revealed that his lank, straw-coloured hair was now smoothly slicked down.

He was a vastly altered Quinn to look at. But the old mockery still lay in his pale eyes and a faint aroma of beer still clung to him.

Piper said, "I have a business appointment with someone you probably know quite well—Madelaine actress."

"Oh, you have, have you?" Quinn touched up his thin nose and looked at Piper with a faint coincidence. "I happen to be calling on her. What time is your appointment?"

"Twelve o'clock. And yours?"

"I haven't got one. She just suggested I could see her at the Chancellor if I wanted to. That was when I met her plane in a couple of hours ago."

"You haven't wasted much time," Piper said.

"No, I suppose I haven't. I felt a trifle curious over the way she went dashing off from the airport."

"Perhaps she was in a hurry to see someone?"

"Yeh, that was the excuse she made." Quinn stopped pulling at his nose and fumbled in one of his pockets. Then he passed his hat from one hand to the other and flied in two or three other pockets. He said, "Must've left my cigarettes at the office . . . oh, thanks! Don't think I've any matches, either. . . ."

Piper gave him a light. Piper said, "You're making me curious. Why do you call it an excuse?"

"Film folk are never in a hurry to get away when they're being interviewed," Quinn said. "Yet she was in too big a hurry to pose for a picture. I've met a few glamour pusses in my time, but none of them acted as if she was rushing to a fire." In an innocent voice, he added, "Now I discover she had an appointment with you this morning. Could it be that you're the reason for all the haste?"

"If she got into London a couple of hours ago," Piper said, "there was no need for any haste."

"Maybe she wanted plenty of time to prepare for what-

er she's going to discuss with you . . . could that be it ? ”
Quinn's face was as naïve as his voice.

Piper said, “ You wouldn't be fishing . . . would you ? ”
“ What—me ! ” Quinn glanced up at the clock above the reception desk. The time was ten minutes to twelve.

You know I wouldn't do such a thing. But I'm always prepared to listen . . . if the other bloke's prepared to talk. And you've got a few minutes to spare before you need to keep your date.”

“ This fish isn't biting,” Piper said. “ All I can tell you is that I'm here to talk about insurance with Miss Grey.”
“ Why you ? ”

“ Why not me ? Insurance is my business, isn't it ? ”
“ You're an assessor—not a broker. You don't go around selling policies in the ordinary way. Your job is to give the clear or the thumbs down. What is it ? ”—Quinn cocked his head on a side and looked at Piper obliquely—“ the company wanted you to vet about the delectable Miss Grey ?
on . . . give an old pal a break.”

“ Not a chance,” Piper said. “ When you interview her, why don't you ask her yourself ? I'm not going to discuss my client's private affairs with a newspaper reporter. In any case, there's nothing in it that could be of the slightest interest to you.”

“ Sure ? ”

“ Perfectly sure ! It's just a piece of insurance business that wouldn't make any kind of story.”

“ But somebody thought it necessary to get you to handle it . . . eh ? ”

“ Necessary isn't the word I'd use,” Piper said. “ See you before I go . . . if you intend to wait. I'll tell her you're here.”

“ I'll wait,” Quinn said. “ I've told one of our camera boys to meet me at the Chancellor just after twelve, so I've got to wait.” He blew ash from his cigarette and grinned sourly. “ Don't get into a cosy session with the luscious Madeleine. I've a date for lunch at one o'clock. . . . ”

CHAPTER II

THERE WERE three other passengers in the lift that Piper up to the third floor—a square-built man wearing a camel coat and carrying a bulky brief-case, and fortyish women with yellow complexions and American accents.

The man with the brief-case got out at the second and the two women were going up to the fifth. They had penetrating voices that compelled Piper to listen although his mind was on other things. What they said served no purpose other than to distract his thoughts. And he wanted to do some thinking before he met Madeleine Grey.

Bits and pieces of his talk with Jordan of the Cress Insurance Company came back to him . . . "*... We've had quite a number of claims made on us by her ... wouldn't say there was anything off-colour about any of them but ... keeping the lady's property covered against theft or accidental loss has proved to be a trifle expensive ... don't want to fall out with her, of course ... we handle all her insurance: quite a tidy sum, too ... yes, insures everything except her own life ... injury to her looks, loss of a limb or of her sight ... any accident that might destroy her capacity to earn big money. ...*"

And just before Piper had left him, Jordan had said: "*No, she's never been interested in whole life insurance. A lot of stage and film people have a superstition about that kind of thing ... anyway, just size up the lady and let me know if you think there might be something ... you know what I mean, don't you?*"

As he went along the corridor, Piper remembered all those other times when he had been commissioned to carry out just such a task. And those occasions when one inquiry had led to another . . . and another . . . Why did so many people think they could defraud an insurance company

get away with it? Rich people, poor people, all kinds of people, and all obsessed with the same idea.

Jordan's vague suspicions had any foundation in fact, what could have possessed a woman in Madeleine Grey's position to take such a risk for so paltry a reward?

She was worth a lot of money. However high her living expenses were, she must still have been a wealthy woman. Anyone who was paid thirty thousand pounds a picture could hardly complain that she had difficulty in making ends meet.

By then he was outside the door of suite No. 15. On either side, the softly-lit corridor stretched in empty silence. Somewhere far off the hum of a vacuum-cleaner rose and fell. Two floors above, lift gates hissed shut . . . the distant motor whined . . . the lift began to come down.

When it passed the third floor, Piper knocked. After a moment he knocked again.

While he waited he wondered what kind of person Madeleine Grey was. She had youth and beauty and wealth. According to the standards of the popular cinema, she had some measure of ability also.

But it could hardly be an easy life. Always she had to guard her looks and her figure. What was she really like when she was not playing Madeleine Grey, the film star who had been called the Body Beautiful? What kind of world had she created for herself out of the fame and fortune that had been showered on her?

At the back of his mind Piper came to the conclusion that Jordan had a bee in his bonnet. At the same moment, he decided also that Miss Grey had not heard his knock at the door.

He knocked again—louder this time. After a short pause he used his knuckles once more.

On the other side of the door there was no sound. In all the thickly-carpeted length of the corridor there was no sound. At midday the average hotel guests are not often to be found in their rooms.

Yet . . . Madeleine Grey should have been in hers. Only a short time before, she had told the reception desk she

was expecting a caller who was to be sent up as soon as he arrived . . . so she could not have forgotten the appointment made some weeks ago.

. . . If she had left her suite, she could hardly have left the hotel. A woman of her striking appearance could not have crossed the reception lounge without being noticed. Quinn would have seen her while they talked together.

Piper drummed his knuckles on the door again. Inside suite No. 15 nothing stirred. With a touch of resentment pricking at his thoughts, he turned away and went back along the corridor.

The lift was still on the ground floor. He was too impatient to wait for it to come up. He used the wide staircase spiralling down past the lift-shaft.

Quinn was hunched in an arm-chair studying the sprinkle of people in the lounge and the cashier at work behind her grille. He said, "That was quick. I expected I'd have to . . . anything wrong?"

"I got no reply from her suite," Piper said. "Either she's gone out, or I was given the wrong number."

Quinn said, "She hasn't passed this way. I've been sitting here since you went upstairs. Maybe these people made a mistake. . . ."

The receptionist was a woman with silver hair and an artistically made-up face. She assured Piper that there had been no mistake. With a trace of irritation showing through her artificial smile, she consulted the register.

. . . Yes, Miss Grey had been given suite No. 15 on the third floor . . . she would hardly have gone out . . . it was only a few minutes since she had phoned down about her expected visitor . . . and she had not handed in her key. . . .

Piper said, "Would you care to make sure of that, please? I don't want to waste any more time if, for some reason, Miss Grey has gone out."

Inquiries showed that the receptionist was right: the key of suite No. 15 had not been handed in. On the keyboard at the other end of the long, curving desk, the hook labelled 15 was empty.

The receptionist suggested aloofly that she could ring Miss Grey if that would satisfy the gentlemen. . . . There was no reply from Madeleine Grey's suite.

With reluctant doubt in her voice, the receptionist said, "It is strange . . . she should be there. I'll try it again. . . ."

After it was more than obvious that no one was answering the phone in the suite on the third floor, Quinn asked, "Has that suite got a bathroom attached?"

"All our suites are self-contained."

Quinn gave Piper a quick look. His cynical eyes had suddenly become alert. He said, "It's always possible that she might've been taken ill. What d'you do in cases of that kind?"

"We might ask the housekeeper to open the door with a pass-key but"—the receptionist glanced from Quinn to Piper and then looked down at her well-kept hands—"I don't want to do a thing like that unless it's absolutely necessary."

Piper said, "In the circumstances, I think you'd be quite justified. If there is nothing wrong, no harm will have been done."

She gave the idea further thought. Then she said, "I'll have to get permission. If you'll wait a minute . . ." She retired into an inner office and closed the door.

When she came out again, she said, "Are you gentlemen friends of Miss Grey?"

"I have an important business appointment with her," Piper said. "I don't think she'd have broken it without letting me know. Miss Grey told you herself that she was waiting for me."

"Very well. I'll speak to the housekeeper. . . ."

Piper and Quinn were alone in the lift that took them up to the third floor. As they got out, a woman came through a doorway alongside the staircase.

She wore a black skirt with a white blouse and a narrow black ribbon at the throat made up in a floppy bow. She carried a key attached by a length of chain to a small block of wood. Pinned to her blouse was a blue-and-red enamel badge bearing the name of the hotel.

With a polite smile that embraced both of them, she asked, "Are you the gentlemen . . . ?" Then she turned and set off along the corridor.

Outside the door of No. 15 she hesitated and swung the key to and fro by its chain before she eventually decided to knock. Her small soft face looked quite untroubled. She held her head cocked in a listening attitude while she stared up at nothing with the whites of her eyes showing.

Half a minute went by. She said absently, "There isn't much doubt . . ." Her voice tailed off and she kept the rest to herself. Then very briskly she turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door.

The room they could see into was unoccupied. Directly facing were two doors. One was open just enough to afford a glimpse of a bedroom. The other was only slightly ajar.

Quinn said, "I think we'd better wait here while you have a look round. After all, you never can tell. . . ."

He and Piper stood and watched the housekeeper walk across the sitting-room, push the door of the bedroom wide open, glance inside, and turn to look at them. With a little shake of the head, she murmured, "No one in here."

Then she opened the second door. They could see a stretch of tiled wall and a small weighing-machine and part of a semi-sunken bath.

The housekeeper took a few steps into the bathroom and came out again. She said, "Looks as if Miss Grey must've gone out after all . . . even if no one did see her."

Piper said, "Do you mind if I take a look?"

"So long as Miss Grey doesn't come back and catch you in here"—the housekeeper's small bright eyes watched his hand feel in a pocket and come into view again—"I don't suppose anyone else will object . . . thank you, sir. But don't take too long about it, will you?"

"It'll only take me a couple of minutes," Piper said.

He gave the bedroom a rapid inspection complete to a final glance under the bed. He found nothing. It was just a well-appointed bedroom that had not been disturbed in any way. The satin bedspread was sleek and unwrinkled :