

The Ebony Cat

Hardboiled PI

by Rex Whitechurch, ...

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*When a miser loans out five grand without security, something is wrong—
particularly when the borrower is bumped off within the hour afterwards!*

Chapter 1

Specialist in Shadow Cases.

It began just outside my door—the door that bore on pebbled glass the following information:

JOHN RANDOLPH BECKETT
PRIVATE DETECTIVE
SPECIALIST IN SHADOW CASES

The blonde girl with the black cat in her arms let out a shriek just beyond the said door. Then she lunged through the said door and fell dead across my desk, and the ebony cat streaked away!

“Plain case of murder,” said fizzy Police Inspector Gogalvatty, rolling his little piggy eyes into a glare of suspicion. “Plain case of murder right here in the office of this dumb shamus who tries to make us believe she staggered into his presence with a .22-automatic slug under her left arm. Besides, if you heard the shot, why didn’t you jump out of your chair instead of, as you say, waiting until too late?”

They carted the blonde’s body over to the morgue. Gogalvatty was moving about my office with a magnifying glass in his pudgy fist, hoping he’d find something that would give my story the lie. “It’s a good thing you bumped her,” he said, “or I would have died for want of excitement; it’s been dull so long.”

“My dear friend, Gogalvatty,” I said depreciatingly, “I did not bump her. It’s not a nice thing to say, to say there’s anything good about a swell dame like that being bumped. I’d like to know what there is good about it. And for the twentieth time within the small space of two hours I have said to you, my dear friend, Gogalvatty—I did not kill the blonde beauty.”

“You could have gotten rid of the gun,” Gogalvatty tossed his two hundred and forty pounds of fat out of my Morris. “You could’ve dropped it out the window. You could’ve—”

“Swallowed it,” I said, with dignified rancor. “You, Gogalvatty, are an ass; you have big ears and a bray and a barnyard smell. Why don’t you scam and let me find out in my own way why murder dropped in on me the very day my rent was due?”

Gogalvatty and I were close friends. Business had been below zero the past five weeks. Murderers had stopped murdering; thieves had stopped thieving,

and married folks had stopped stepping out on each other. Thus, at the precise moment my landlady, Edyth Widdle, was on her way to my office to collect two months' back rent, my door was wrenched open by the dying young lady from—

"Miss Waddle was your only visitor." Gogalvatty's little eyes were smaller than two lone peas on a big dinner plate. "She was the only one who showed up right after the murder was committed by those running feet. Yet Miss Waddle did not see any feet; she did not see anyone running. She did not hear the girl scream. She did not even know there was a girl who had screamed in her building, until she walked in and found her lying across your desk."

"Her name is Widdle, not Waddle," I corrected Gogalvatty. "Must I keep reminding you of that? Another thing, my dear Gogalvatty—she is called Twiddle by all her tenants, not Widdle."

"What's the difference?" the fat genius snapped. "Twiddle or Twaddle, Widdle or Waddle, it's all the same; she does not confirm your statement that a woman screamed in this building. Therefore you are definitely a suspect and I must warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

I munched on a peanut, put the bag in my pocket and my topcoat over my arm. "The proper place to begin your investigation is at the studio where the poor kid was booked to sing, and did sing, time after time, right into the hearts of millions of radio fans. Personally, I aim to begin at the morgue; and speaking of morgues—that's where you'll wind up if you insist on being a dumb jackass and not bringing your brains home from their extended vacation."

He followed me out into the narrow hall. I locked the door, buttoned my coat and marched to the lift. Old Georgie, the elevator boy some sixty-odd years of age, was waiting; he slammed the cage door, rolled his eyes and said, in a hoarse voice:

"Zickety Zam, there's that black witch's cat—!"

Scrooged up in a corner of the rattling lift was a black Tom. His eyes were like sapphires. His back was arched, and he was watching me with a suspicious gleam in his jungle orb, until I reached down gently, and spoke to him, and picked him up. He didn't sing; he spat a couple of times; but he didn't claw. Georgie sighed heavily.

Chapter 2

The Body of Ruth Cardova.

I dropped the Tom off at my apartment. I got him a big bowl of milk out of the icebox, patted his head, removed the thin leather collar from around his neck and put it in a bureau drawer, then rushed back to my sedan, headed for the city morgue up Edmond Street, and marveled at the beauty of the first snowfall of the year.

Old Ben's lumbago was at its peak on this day that was so unconducive to bodily comfort. Between cursing his pains and impudence, he managed to clump his way down the iron steps without dying for want of breath. He conducted me to the big storage room, where a white light shone against a white ceiling, and yanked out a crypt. He pulled it all the way out, and the rollers sounded like the beating of bat wings in pitch darkness.

Just as I bent over the poor kid to see the wound, scuffing heels raked down the iron stairs. "Reporters?" Ben muttered. "Them guys will be the death of me yet."

As long as I had known Ben he was always on the verge of dying. But he was as healthy as any sound man his age.

He turned away, moved his bent form to the door, pulled it shut behind him. Alone with Ruth Cardova, I inspected the wound with the impartiality of a veteran flatfoot. There were no powder burns. The bullet had entered underneath her left arm. The tiny puckered blue hole did not seem capable of causing death; but that was an illusion, of course.

"Strikes me," I thought, "that she was shot as she passed the hidden killer, maybe as she passed an open door. Either that or the culprit was walking beside her. But if such was the way it happened, then there would be powder burns. The corridors of the Ballanger Building are narrow. It isn't necessary to think she was shot by someone in one of those rooms she passed. Maybe there was a loiterer in the hall. Nope—that's out. On account of the narrow width of the corridor, there would be powder burns around the wound. Only by standing inside an open door could the culprit shoot her without leaving those burns in the flesh or on the clothing."

The sound of low voices disturbed me. I drew the sheet over the girl's face, observing a certain peculiar hardness around the eyes. In death when the features are relaxed, you find traces that reveal plainer than words certain characteristics.

Three men entered the room. Old Ben; Dave Cassidy, a leg man for the *Chronicle* who, on the side wrote an interesting column; and Tom Farris, production engineer for K VX.

There was nothing particularly striking about these men. Cassidy was short, wide and neatly dressed in a brand new tweed coat over a chalk striped blue suit. He wore a black necktie on a white shirt, and a black hat with the brim turned down all the way around. He was graying slightly at the temples, had a small, puffed mouth and a dimple in a stubborn chin; I could imagine Cassidy getting real fat by the time he was fifty.

Thomas Farris was a writer of soap operas. He was tall, sandy and balding. He wore glasses with heavy gold rim and thick lenses. He was clad in tweeds, even to a tweed topcoat, a black Flomburg and a pale blue shirt with a wine colored tie. His shoes were broad, oxblood, and his gloves were black knitted wool. He was about forty years old.

Farris nodded; Cassidy frowned, and old Ben swore under his breath. None of them spoke to me. I stalled near the door, until they had looked at Ruth Cardova. Gogalvatty was coming down the iron steps, with elephantine grace, in a black derby, a plaid brown topcoat that was as big as a circus tent, and carrying a brief case under one arm.

She had no lovers; when she was killed she was being starred in a soap opera by Farris.

* * * * *

Gogalvatty horned in, "Where did Ruth Cardova come from?"

"A little town west of here called Cameron," Farris said. "She'd been with us about a year. She wasn't the kind to run around. I had her out to night clubs a few times, and she'd never take more than one highball; at the most two. She was greatly ambitious—vowed to make the hometown folks sit up and take

notice, because she thought they'd been unjust in their criticism of her. They'd called her stage-struck, the usual things a small town says about a girl with lofty ideas."

"She didn't have no boy friends hanging around?" Gogalvatty expostulated. "You sure she didn't have no lovers, Farris?"

Farris flinched, his hands shook a little. He was a nervous man, and his cigar had gone out. "I don't think so," he said; he kept his voice down. "Of course we all made a play for her; I admit it. Even Cassidy took her out. But none of us was serious, if that's what you mean."

"She wouldn't play." Fat Gogalvatty made a wry face. "She wouldn't play at all?"

"She was very quiet." Farris looked at me, shrugged. I felt sorry for him. Gogalvatty was an ass. Gogalvatty was a fat monkey; he needed his nose punched. He was criminally sadistic.

Gogalvatty smiled. "She had a reason for going to see this mule-faced shamus. She wanted to hire him. She was either afraid of being murdered, or she was afraid of something else."

"That's what I'd like to know," said Cassidy, who up to now hadn't said a word. "What took her to Beckett's office?"

"And," Gogalvatty supplied cunningly, "who in the heck knew she was going to see him? And who killed her to keep her from talking?"

Farris sighed, stamped his cigar out on the stone floor. "I do not know how to answer your questions," he said coldly. "If I did, it would make me very happy."

* * * * *

On my way back to my office, I had time to do some hard thinking. Although I didn't expect to get a fee out of my work, I meant to do my utmost to solve the mystery. I knew Gogalvatty hoped to pin the crime on me. He was an ambitious donkey and didn't let a little thing like friendship stand in his way.

I began to have an uneasy feeling, like maybe someone was following and watching me, with a sinister purpose in mind. I could imagine a shadow falling aslant my path, a dark, hooded shadow whose eyes gleamed with anticipation. I don't know where I got the idea, but it actually caused a cold sweat to break out on my face. I was used to doing the shadowing and not being shadowed.

I put in a long distance call. Ten minutes later I had Ruth Cardova's father on the phone. He'd already learned of his daughter's demise and in his voice was his deep grief.

I learned one thing of importance to the investigation. Ruth had written home that barring misfortune she would be able to prevent the foreclosure on her father's business. It seemed he was facing ruin. Due to the war he'd been unable to get new cars to keep his auto agency going. He'd held on until he was heavily in debt. It would require an even five grand to put him back on his feet; this sum Ruth had promised she would raise. No doubt she'd had a loan in mind.

For a while I sat munching peanuts, the salty kind. It seemed Ruth Cardova had been a loyal little person. at least where her father was concerned. But I figured she'd been trying to borrow the money from the wrong man. Suddenly I thought of something, called Inspector Gogalvatty:

"Did you look in her purse?" I asked.

"Sure—there's five grand in it. Five one thousand dollar bills. I almost fell out of my chair."

"What would a gal be doing with that much money?" I asked.

"It ain't exactly cornfodder," he said. "When I come to think of it, you're the only one who knows what happened in your office. I should've arrested you hours ago."

"If I killed her," I said, "I could've paid my rent. As it is, I owe two months and I'm going to have to move."

"Which is neither here nor there," he rapped. "If I can hang Ruth Cardova's murder on you—"

I heard a furtive sound behind me, muttered quickly, "I mightn't live that long," and cradled the phone. Just then the atomic bomb dropped on my head, exploded and blew me into little bitsy pieces.

Chapter 3

They Knew She had the Money.

Slowly I picked myself together, put the pieces all back in place, crawled to my knees, then to my brogans and groped along the wall for the cupboard where I kept my whiskey. A deep charge of Scotch and I was able to take cognizance of the situation. A lump on my head as big as a goose egg showed where the bomb had landed but there was no cut place in my scalp and I figured I'd been hit with a flat-blackjack, flat because of the shape of the mountain.

My desk had been ransacked. The rug in the front room was a mess. They'd even looked in the geranium pots for whatever it was they'd looked for. And my desk had been moved at least four feet; on the floor lay the blue advertising blotter.

"The money," I exclaimed. "They knew she had the money and reasoned that I robbed her before the police came. Somebody knew she had that five grand—!"

I whistled, decided not to report the matter to the police and about twenty minutes later I was seated in a glass room, surrounded by mikes, filing-cabinets and other accessories that usually litter up a radio production engineer's office. Tom Farris had before him a stack of manuscripts, and he'd been working hard because his face glistened with sweat. But the room was none too warm to suit me.

"I just dropped around to chat a moment on a new angle," I said. In a deep chrome and red-leather chair I lit a cigarette.

"Glad you did," he said. "Gives me a chance to leave off work. I've been hard at it in here for an hour and a half, writing the latest episode of *She Lost Him Because She Loved Him*."

But I observed that the sweat dried quickly on his face and this made me wonder how he'd worked himself up to that lather in a room as cool as this one. I pulled the ashtray toward me. "Would you mind telling me how much salary Ruth Cardova was paid by your company?"

"Not at all," he said. "One hundred a week, with a raise coming up the day she was twenty-five, which would be next Tuesday."

"Why that?" I asked. "What difference did it make about her age?"

"Just a birthday present," he said. "She was twenty-four, nearing twenty-five and she spoke about it a lot, what she'd like to have when she was twenty-five."

"Oh, yes, of course," I said. "A hundred a week. It would take a long time to save five grand. Did she have any money, Farris?"

"Not much," he said. "I think she was sending home all she could spare. But I never heard her say. It cost her a good deal to live, the way she lived—I'd say around two hundred a month for her Plaza apartment, not to mention the cost of her wardrobe and other things."

"Sure, I see." I got up, went to the window and gazed out at the snow flakes swirling around a nearby church steeple and falling on the already white city. "Did she try to borrow from you?" I asked, casually.

"Never," he said.

"Do you know anyone with whom she could have secured a loan?"

"No," he said. "I do not."

For any girl making one hundred a week, borrowing five thousand dollars without security was next to impossible.

"I had a talk with her father tonight," I said suddenly. "Over at the police station they have her purse and it shelters five one-thousand-dollar bills. Her father said she'd promised to send that amount home if she succeeded in raising it, which she said she believed she could."

Farris got up slowly and peered down at me. "Beckett, it's funny where she got that money."

"You telling me?" I rose and walked to the glass door. "But I'm quite sure the cops will make it their business to find out where she got it," I said. "Well, good day, Farris."

* * * * *

A man came toward me through the blanket of snow as I approached my apartment which opened upon the sidewalk. I saw Dave Cassidy's blocky face and it was red; he'd been drinking. I led the reporter down the steps of the sunken living room and asked him to take off his topcoat. He declined, didn't even remove his snow sprinkled hat.

The black cat was not in sight.

"I want to talk to you, Beckett." The fleshy reporter sat down. "I think I've got something that will help you find Ruth's murderer. I'm not sure. What do you know about Edyth Widdle?"

I was making him a drink and paused, with the glass in my hand. I set the pink decanter down on the mantel. The fire was roseate in the soft table lamp.

"Edyth Widdle," I said, "is my landlady. She owns the Ballanger Building. She is a tight-fisted, youngish woman, a miser who finds bargains and squeezes the eagle until it cries bloody murder. She'd do anything for a dollar, and is the youngest and prettiest miser-lady in the Country. They say her father was like that before her."

Cassidy's red face flamed.

"Miss Widdle is a money lender," he said. "For good security she will loan you any amount. But the security must be excellent. This afternoon I saw Widdle and Ruth Cardova at the Rendezvous on Edmond Street. This tightwad was spending money lavishly, and Ruth had two highballs. They both wore corduroy slacks and fur coats. From the Rendezvous they crossed the street to the Ballanger. That was thirty minutes before Ruth was killed."

"All right," I said. "What about it? What ice does that cut?"

"Only this." Cassidy took the glass out of my hand, drained it. "Less than a month ago Widdle's office was entered and certain valuables left in her care as security for loans were taken. Mostly they were diamonds."

"I didn't know that," I said. "Anyhow I don't see the connection. I don't see what you're getting at."

"Okay," he said. "Just let this percolate: In Ruth's purse at headquarters the cops found five one-thousand-dollar bills. I'm guessing she got the money from this female Shylock because she returned her the stolen gems."

I gasped. It was startling. I peered at the pink decanter on the mantel and thought how pretty the cerise light was on it. By no stretch of the imagination could I place Ruth Cardova in the diamond robbery. "You're out of your mind," I said.

He stared at me and his eyes flamed. "Edyth Widdle has no license to do a pawnbroker's business. Think of the lawsuits that would follow her failure to return those valuables to their owners who demanded them and met their obligations to Widdle. Do you get what I mean now?"

"In short," I said, "our little small town heartthrob turned thief, then offers to return the securities if Miss Widdle will give her five grand."

"Beckett, you're a genius." He laughed jeeringly and set his glass down on the Turkish coffee table. "You're a deep, quick thinker; you have got the solution now and there can't be any mistake."

"After paying Ruth five grand, Miss Widdle gets so mad she sees red, shoots Ruth and recovers the money. Is that it?" It still didn't add up.

"Nope," I said, "that is not the solution."

Cassidy straightened, rubbed his broad face. I followed him to the vestibule. He regarded me cynically. "Inspector Gogalvatty suspects you of the murder," he said. "He's going to arrest you, says you are the most logical suspect. Ruth had to be shot in your office, for it didn't occur in the hall or there would be powder burns. The hall is entirely too narrow."

I heard him leave the house, went to the street door and watched him enter his car. The little street was filled with a deep hush. The church on the corner was majestic in the white silence. Cassidy's press car vanished and a curtain of snow fell behind it, leaving only pink lamps spearing out at me.

Chapter 4

Mr. Tom.

I hurried through the house looking for the ebony cat and I found Mr. Tom, curled up on my bed, under the comforter. I did not disturb his deep slumber, but turned toward the door and stopped. There was a covert movement beyond the threshold. Then the room was filled with a blinding, volcanic explosion. The floor rushed up and smacked me in the face, and all the lamps went out.

I crawled painfully back over a path littered with thorns. I got my hands on the bed, but didn't know it was the bed. I thought I was clinging to the wall of a precipitous cliff, and that there was a vast emptiness below me, and showing in the empty depths, far, far down there, so that I could barely see it, was something. There was a waterfall below me, the stream roaring like thunder

and a seething mass of clutching trapping hands that tried to pull me down into the depths.

I heard something cry out softly, and the bang of a door. The cat was glaring at me, his eyes brighter than any diamonds Ruth Cardova could ever have taken from Edyth Widdle, and he arched his back.

Now I knew what it was all about, for the Tom was crawling out from under that comforter where he'd been lying peacefully. A tiny clot of blood on my forehead showed where the bullet had grazed me, and the impact had momentarily knocked me out. I must have frightened away the burglar, because when I grabbed Tom and hurried out into the living room, with my automatic in my hand, the street door was open. Snow whirled and spun in a white magnificence on the vestibule rug.

It was about ten minutes later when I found Edyth Widdle's name in the phone directory and about ten minutes later when I got her on the wire. She was panting in the transmitter.

"Do you own a black tomcat?" I asked. "He answers to the name of Jo-Jo."

"Sure I do," she said, and her voice had a lot of music and pieces of velvet in it. "Who's this speaking?"

"John Randolph Beckett," I said. "I'm one of your tenants."

"You're the private detective whose office is on the same floor with mine," she said. "And you owe two months rent. Sure, I know. But what about my Jo-Jo?"

"I gave him a bowl of cream," I said. "He's all right. We've gotten to be pretty good friends since I found him. Suppose you meet me at your office, and I'll fetch him along; I suppose you're willing to pay a reward?"

"Possibly a small one," she said in a low voice. "How soon?"

"One hour," I said. "It's pretty cold out and I want to make myself a cup of coffee before I tackle this storm."

"I'll be waiting in my office," she said. "You bring Jo-Jo. Don't you dare come without Jo-Jo, Beckett; if you do, I'll move you out into the street."

There was a strange anxiety in her voice.

Chapter 5

Edyth Widdle.

I knew what she looked like. A rangy brunette, with long slim hips and clad always in tweeds. She had a pale, high-cheekboned face, a shapely mouth that looked hungry all the time and a deep bosom that she kept down by tight brassieres. She was stronger and bigger of physique than she looked, but she was quite appealing, despite all that. I imagined she was just past 30 years of age. But she had never been married.

I was beginning to see daylight. When Ruth Cardova ran into my office, she had Jo-Jo locked in her arms. I had just one question yet to answer. What was she doing with Edyth Widdle's tomcat?

But there was something else. I would get around to that later. The little matter of the attempt on my life and the slugging I got at the hands of the same nasty culprit, was still very fresh in my mind. I went back into the bedroom and

saw the pieces of the picture of my hunting dogs smashed on the floor, broken by the bullet that had narrowly missed killing me.

What did the nasty culprit want that I had in my possession or that he thought I had in my possession? Could it be—?

I ran to the bureau and dug out Jo-Jo's thin leather collar. Racing through my mind were certain clues which I was beginning to fit together. What, for instance, had Ruth Cardova been doing with Widdle's black tomcat?

She could have picked him up in the hall. No, that was out. I was sure she would not have picked up a stray cat.

Two: She had five grand in her purse when she was shot.

Three: She was with Widdle at the Rendezvous where she had two highballs with the miserly young woman.

Four: Edyth Widdle hadn't claimed her cat when she came to my office after the killing.

Five: She'd heard no gunshot, no woman scream.

And six: Edyth Widdle was a money lender.

I could've gone on all night linking Widdle with the murder of the radio canary, but I'm not a patient man. I pocketed the leather collar bearing the ebony cat's name on a thin brass plate, and headed for the Ballanger Building. I left the coveted cat behind, playing safe.

The storm was furious and there'd been a drop of four degrees in temperature since I'd gone home from my interview with Tom Farris, the playwright. I parked a block this side of the Ballanger, on Edmond near the Empire Bank. The clock over the sidewalk said ten o'clock, straight up and down. The chimes began to tinkle musically as I clambered from my car. In the pocket of my trenchcoat was my automatic and the leather collar. The city's ermine coat was studded with gems.

I was cautious as I entered the building. The lift had stopped running, and the vestibule was cold, with the steam turned low. I took the broad wooden steps. The Ballanger's an old building but a big one, and the staircase was steep. I crossed the landing slowly on the second floor, and soon the landing on the third, and finally reached the fourth. A light gleamed at the end of the hall. Beyond this the second door, in the elbow turn, was my office. I knew that Edyth Widdle's suite was the third door on my right as I started up the long corridor. A sudden flash of light gleamed on the fire-extinguisher; this warned me. I braked to a stop and reached for my gun.

Just then a door opened and a square of saffron brilliance appeared just two jumps ahead of me, on my right. The door of Edyth Widdle's suite had been quietly opened.

Flattened against the wall, I waited not breathing for fear I would be a target for a pistol gripped in a desperate hand. There came no disturbing sound, no sound at all. I edged along the wall, inching my way. When I reached the open door, I heard voices. I had arrived at my destination thirty minutes earlier than I had promised to be there. But the voices were muffled and I could make out none of the words; nor were they loud enough to be distinct so that I could recognize the speakers.

Boldly now, the gun gripped in my hand I crossed the threshold. I saw nothing. The bright lamp blinded me. I made out a desk which stood facing the door, low, modernistic, with greenhouse flowers forming a bouquet in a big vase on the blotter. Just as I put my hands on the desk, the door behind me banged shut.

The next thing I knew I was fighting silently, and desperately, for my life!

* * * * *

My hand, clutching the automatic, was pinned to my side before I could make use of the weapon. Somebody was fumbling with the front of my coat, and the buttons were torn away. I pushed this person back with my left hand, and strove hard to use the gun. I got away, but was followed closely by the man who'd tried to disarm me. I saw him looming straight in front of me, lifted the gun quickly and squeezed the trigger. There was a blinding red flash and the explosion of the little automatic. The form that loomed in my startled eyes, stopped coming at me and began to run away on his heels. He must've struck the desk hard, for the bouquet of flowers rolled off and crashed on the floor.

I skewed about quickly, but could not see my other antagonist. But hands were on me now, and I knew that I was going to have a hard time getting away this time. Something brushed against my face, and I felt the warm silkiness of a woman's hair. Edyth Widdle!

I don't know how she got hold of my wrist but she was so strong that she succeeded in twisting the automatic out of my hand. I heard it clunk on the rug. Then she must have tripped me, for we soon were rolling about on the floor. I felt the softness of her bosom, and the bareness of her, when she rolled up to sit down on me, and began to pound my head up and down on the floor. Only the thickness of the rug kept her from hammering my brains out through my skull.

I reared up and found that she was heavy enough to keep me pinned. I tried to grasp her hands, her fingers being buried in my hair. I got hold of one wrist, and tried to loosen her hold on my hair, but failed. She kept bumping my head. I threw my left arm out and the back of my hand hit my lost gun. Quickly I closed my fingers upon it, pulled it to me, and by bending my elbow was able to get the weapon close against her side.

Too late she discovered what I'd done, and she shifted her hold to my throat. But I had the gun against her ribs now on the right side, and I gently pressed the trigger. The savage crash of the gun left everything still for an immeasurable interval, then I felt the softness of the woman harden, and stiffen and then she just rolled off on the floor, still with one heavy leg thrown across me.

I scrambled to the phone, called headquarters. Gogalvatty answered. "Okay," he said, "I'll be over. But I hope they've made mincemeat out of you by the time I get there."

He was sore because I'd beaten him to the solution of the case. Funny how men who are big enough to hold jobs like this are just boys when it comes down to their personal feelings.

Chapter 6

Twiddle or Twaddle, Widdle of Waddle.

Gogalvatty sat facing me across his desk. He toyed with the leather collar and pulled the black cat's ears. Tom seemed to enjoy it, but I didn't. He'd held me

there two hours, just talking and not saying anything new or fresh enough to hold my interest.

“Of course the credit for the solution goes to our friend, Cassidy,” he said. “Cassidy tipped you off and put your brain to working. You figured the rest out from the start he gave you; it didn’t take a lot of sense to do that. Edyth Widdle wanted her jewels back, that Ruth Cardova stole. Ruth had seen where Widdle kept them in her desk, when she was there to get a small loan from the woman. Widdle didn’t know she was the thief, and when Ruth approached her on the subject of recovering them for her, she promised to give Ruth five grand. She kept her word. Then she decided to get her money back, and as Ruth was leaving with the money, Widdle jumped her. The black cat was there and took a hand in the struggle. He must’ve jumped into Ruth’s face and she held him to keep him from clawing her. And she didn’t put him down even after Widdle shot her.

“Ruth ran around the bend in the the hall, to your office. She knew you had an office there because when she stole the gems she looked around on the fourth floor. She figured you’d protect her. She didn’t know Widdle had wounded her fatally. Then Tom Farris, who was hooked up with Widdle in the money lending business, figured he’d better get Widdle’s black cat with the collar, away from you. He was in a tight spot, too.

“When he jumped you in the office he supposed you had the cat there, then when he tried to kill you in your apartment, he failed to find the cat that was sleeping under the comforter.” He sighed. “But I’ll say one thing for that Widdle woman; she’s not bad to look at, and when she gets well, I’m going around to see her. Of course she’ll get the chair, but I’ll take her some flowers. You see, Miss Waddle is the only one who’s ever given you a good heating.”

“Her name’s Widdle,” I said. “Not Waddle.”

“Well,” croaked the fat genius, “Twiddle or Twaddle, Widdle or Waddle, she has my sincerest best wishes for a quick recovery.”

I gave him a cussing, took Tom and went home.

