

Murder in the Gunroom

By

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Introduction

The Lane Fleming collection of early pistols and revolvers was one of the best in the country. When Fleming was found dead on the floor of his locked gunroom, a Confederate-made Colt-type percussion .36 revolver in his hand, the coroner's verdict was "death by accident." But Gladys Fleming had her doubts. Enough at any rate to engage Colonel Jefferson Davis Rand—better known just as Jeff—private detective and a pistol-collector himself, to catalogue, appraise, and negotiate the sale of her late husband's collection.

There were a number of people who had wanted the collection. The question was: had anyone wanted it badly enough to kill Fleming? And if so, how had he done it? Here is a mystery, told against the fascinating background of old guns and gun-collecting, which is rapid-fire without being hysterical, exciting without losing its contact with reason, and which introduces a personable and intelligent new private detective. It is a story that will keep your nerves on a hair trigger even if you don't know the difference between a cased pair of Paterson .34's and a Texas .40 with a ramming-lever.

Chapter 1

It was hard to judge Jeff Rand's age from his appearance; he was certainly over thirty and considerably under fifty. He looked hard and fit, like a man who could be a serviceable friend or a particularly unpleasant enemy. Women instinctively suspected that he would make a most satisfying lover. One might have taken him for a successful lawyer (he had studied law, years ago), or a military officer in mufti (he still had a Reserve colonelcy, and used the title occasionally, to impress people who he thought needed impressing), or a prosperous businessman, as he usually thought of himself. Most of all, he looked like King Charles II of England anachronistically clad in a Brooks Brothers suit.

At the moment, he was looking rather like King Charles II being bothered by one of his mistresses who wanted a peerage for her husband.

"But, Mrs. Fleming," he was expostulating. "There surely must be somebody else.... After all, you'll have to admit that this isn't the sort of work this agency handles."

The would-be client released a series of smoke-rings and watched them float up toward the air-outlet at the office ceiling. It spoke well for Rand's ability to subordinate esthetic to business considerations that he was trying to give her a courteous and humane brush-off. She made even the Petty and Varga girls seem credible. Her color-scheme was blue and gold; blue eyes, and a blue tailored outfit that would have looked severe on a less curvate figure, and a charmingly absurd little blue hat perched on a mass of golden hair. If Rand had been Charles II, she could have walked out of there with a duchess's coronet, and Nell Gwyn would have been back selling oranges.

"Why isn't it?" she countered. "Your door's marked *Tri-State Detective Agency, Jefferson Davis Rand, Investigation and Protection*. Well, I want to know how much the collection's worth, and who'll pay the closest to it. That's investigation, isn't it? And I want protection from being swindled. And don't tell me you can't do it. You're a pistol-collector, yourself; you have one of the best small collections in the state. And you're a recognized authority on early pistols; I've read some of your articles in the *Rifleman*. If you can't handle this, I don't know who can."

Rand's frown deepened. He wondered how much Gladys Fleming knew about the principles of General Semantics. Even if she didn't know anything, she was still edging him into an untenable position. He hastily shifted from the attempt to identify his business with the label, "private detective agency."

"Well, here, Mrs. Fleming," he explained. "My business, including armed-guard and protected-delivery service, and general investigation and protection work, requires some personal supervision, but none of it demands my exclusive attention. Now, if you wanted some routine investigation made, I could turn it over to my staff, maybe put two or three men to work on it. But there's nothing about this business of yours that I could delegate to anybody; I'd have to do it all myself, at the expense of neglecting the rest of my business. Now, I could do what you want done, but it would cost you three or four times what you'd gain by retaining me."

"Well, let me decide that, Colonel," she replied. "How much would you have to have?"

"Well, this collection of your late husband's consists of some twenty-five hundred pistols and revolvers, all types and periods," Rand said. "You want me to catalogue it, appraise each item, issue lists, and negotiate with prospective buyers. The cataloguing and appraisal alone would take from a week to ten days, and it would be a couple more weeks until a satisfactory sale could be arranged. Why, say five thousand dollars; a thousand as a retainer and the rest on completion."

That, he thought, would settle that. He was expecting an indignant outcry, and hardened his heart, like Pharaoh. Instead, Gladys Fleming nodded equably.

"That seems reasonable enough, Colonel Rand, considering that you'd have to be staying with us at Rosemont, away from your office," she agreed. "I'll give you a check for the thousand now, with a letter of authorization."

Rand nodded in return. Being thoroughly conscious of the fact that he could only know a thin film of the events on the surface of any situation, he was not easily surprised.

"Very well," he said. "You've hired an arms-expert. I'll be in Rosemont some time tomorrow afternoon. Now, who are these prospective purchasers you mentioned, and just how prospective, in terms of United States currency, are they?"

"Well, for one, there's Arnold Rivers; he's offering ten thousand for the collection. I suppose you know of him; he has an antique-arms business at Rosemont."

"I've done some business with him," Rand admitted. "Who else?"

"There's a commission-dealer named Carl Gwinnett, who wants to handle the collection for us, for twenty per cent. I'm told that that isn't an unusually exorbitant commission, but I'm not exactly crazy about the idea."

"You shouldn't be, if you want your money in a hurry," Rand told her. "He'd take at least five years to get everything sold. He wouldn't dump the whole collection on the market at once, upset prices, and spoil his future business. You know, two thousand five hundred pistols of the sort Mr. Fleming had, coming on the market in a lot, could do just that. The old-arms market isn't so large that it couldn't be easily saturated."

"That's what I'd been thinking.... And then, there are some private collectors, mostly friends of Lane's—Mr. Fleming's—who are talking about forming a pool to buy the collection for distribution among themselves," she continued.

"That's more like it," Rand approved. "If they can raise enough money among them, that is. They won't want the stuff for resale, and they may pay something resembling a decent price. Who are they?"

"Well, Stephen Gresham appears to be the leading spirit," she said. "The corporation lawyer, you know. Then, there is a Mr. Trehearne, and a Mr. MacBride, and Philip Cabot, and one or two others."

"I know Gresham and Cabot," Rand said. "They're both friends of mine, and I have an account with Cabot, Joyner & Teale, Cabot's brokerage firm. I've corresponded with MacBride; he specializes in Colts.... You're the sole owner, I take it?"

"Well, no." She paused, picking her words carefully. "We may just run into a little trouble, there. You see, the collection is part of the residue of the estate, left equally to myself and my two stepdaughters, Nelda Dunmore and Geraldine Varcek. You understand, Mr. Fleming and I were married in 1941; his first wife died fifteen years before."

"Well, your stepdaughters, now; would they also be my clients?"

"Good Lord, no!" That amused her considerably more than it did Rand. "Of course," she continued, "they're just as interested in selling the collection for the best possible price, but beyond that, there may be a slight divergence of opinion. For instance, Nelda's husband, Fred Dunmore, has been insisting that we let him handle the sale of the pistols, on the grounds that he is something he calls a businessman. Nelda supports him in this. It was Fred who got this ten-thousand-dollar offer from Rivers. Personally, I think Rivers is playing him for a sucker. Outside his own line, Fred is an awful innocent, and I've never trusted this man Rivers. Lane had some trouble with him, just before ..."

"Arnold Rivers," Rand said, when it was evident that she was not going to continue, "has the reputation, among collectors, of being the biggest crook in the old-gun racket, a reputation he seems determined to live up—or down—to. But here; if your stepdaughters are co-owners, what's my status? What authority, if any, have I to do any negotiating?"

Gladys Fleming laughed musically. "That, my dear Colonel, is where you earn your fee," she told him. "Actually, it won't be as hard as it looks. If Nelda gives you any argument, you can count on Geraldine to take your side as a matter of principle; if Geraldine objects first, Nelda will help you steam-roll her into line. Fred Dunmore is accustomed to dealing with a lot of yes-men at the plant; you shouldn't have any trouble shouting him down. Anton Varcek won't be interested, one way or another; he has what amounts to a pathological phobia about firearms of any sort. And Humphrey Goode, our attorney, who's executor of the estate, will welcome you with open arms, once he finds out what you want to do. That collection has him talking to himself, already. Look; if you come out to our happy home in the early afternoon, before Fred and Anton get back from the plant, we ought to ram through some sort of agreement with Geraldine and Nelda."

"You and whoever else sides with me will be a majority," Rand considered. "Of course, the other one may pull a Gromyko on us, but ... I think I'll talk to Goode, first."

"Yes. That would be smart," Gladys Fleming agreed. "After all, he's responsible for selling the collection." She crossed to the desk and sat down in Rand's chair while she wrote out the check and a short letter of authorization, then she returned to her own seat.

"There's another thing," she continued, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Because of the manner of Mr. Fleming's death, the girls have a horror of the collection almost—but not quite—as strong as their desire to get the best possible price for it."

"Yes. I'd heard that Mr. Fleming had been killed in a firearms accident, last November," Rand mentioned.

"It was with one of his collection-pieces," the widow replied. "One he'd bought just that day; a Confederate-made Colt-type percussion .36 revolver. He'd brought it home with him, simply delighted with it, and started cleaning it at once. He could hardly wait until dinner was over to get back to work on it."

"We'd finished dinner about seven, or a little after. At about half-past, Nelda went out somewhere in the coupé. Anton had gone up to his laboratory, in the attic—he's one of these fortunates whose work is also his hobby; he's a biochemist and dietitian—and Lane was in the gunroom, on the second floor, working on his new revolver. Fred Dunmore was having a bath, and Geraldine and I had taken our coffee into the east parlor. Geraldine put on the radio, and we were listening to it."

"It must have been about 7:47 or 7:48, because the program had changed and the first commercial was just over, when we heard a loud noise from somewhere upstairs. Neither of us thought of a shot; my own first idea was of a door slamming. Then, about five minutes later, we heard Anton, in the upstairs hall, pounding on a door, and shouting: 'Lane! Lane! Are you all right?' We ran up the front stairway, and found Anton, in his rubber lab-apron, and Fred, in a bathrobe, and barefooted, standing outside the gunroom door. The door was locked, and that in itself was unusual; there's a Yale lock on it, but nobody ever used it."

"For a minute or so, we just stood there. Anton was explaining that he had heard a shot and that nobody in the gunroom answered. Geraldine told him, rather impatiently, to go down to the library and up the spiral. You see," she explained, "the library is directly under the gunroom, and there's a spiral stairway connecting the two rooms. So Anton went downstairs and we stood waiting in the hall. Fred was shivering in his bathrobe; he said he'd just jumped out of the bathtub, and he had nothing on under it. After a while, Anton opened the gunroom door from the inside, and stood in the doorway, blocking it. He said: 'You'd better not come in. There's been an accident, but it's too late to do anything. Lane's shot himself with one of those damned pistols; I always knew something like this would happen.'"

"Well, I simply elbowed him out of the way and went in, and the others followed me. By this time, the uproar had penetrated to the rear of the house, and the servants—Walters, the butler, and Mrs. Horder, the cook—had joined us. We found Lane inside, lying on the floor, shot through the forehead. Of course, he was dead. He'd been sitting on one of these old cobblers' benches of the sort that used to be all the thing for cocktail-tables; he had his tools and polish and oil and rags on it. He'd fallen off it to one side and was lying beside it. He had a revolver in his right hand, and an oily rag in his left."

"Was it the revolver he'd brought home with him?" Rand asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "He showed me this Confederate revolver when he came home, but it was dirty and dusty, and I didn't touch it. And I didn't look closely at the one he had in his hand when he was ... on the floor. It was about the same size and design; that's all I could swear to." She continued: "We had something of an argument about what to do. Walters, the butler, offered to call the police. He's English, and his mind seems to run naturally to due process of law. Fred and Anton both howled that proposal down; they wanted no part of the police. At the same time, Geraldine was going into hysterics, and I was trying to get her quieted down. I took her to her room and gave her a couple of sleeping-pills, and then went back to the gunroom. While I was gone, it seems that Anton had called our family doctor, Dr. Yardman, and then Fred called Humphrey Goode, our lawyer. Goode lives next door to us, about two hundred yards away, so he arrived almost at once. When the doctor came, he called the coroner, and when he arrived, about an hour later, they all went into a huddle and decided that it was an obvious accident and that no inquest would be necessary. Then somebody, I'm not sure who, called an undertaker. It was past eleven when he arrived, and for once, Nelda got home early. She was just coming in while they were carrying Lane out in a basket. You can imagine how horrible that was for her; it was days before she was over the shock. So she'll be just as glad as anybody to see the last of the pistol-collection."

Through the recital, Rand had sat silently, toying with the ivory-handled Italian Fascist dagger-of-honor that was doing duty as a letter-opener on his desk. Gladys Fleming wasn't, he was sure, indulging in any masochistic self-harrowing; neither, he thought, was she talking to relieve her mind. Once or twice there had been a small catch in her voice, but otherwise the narration had been a piece of straight reporting, neither callous nor emotional. Good reporting, too; carefully detailed. There had been one or two inclusions of inferential matter in the guise of description, but that was to be looked for and discounted. And she had remembered, at the end, to include her ostensible reason for telling the story.

"Yes, it must have been dreadful," he sympathized. "Odd, though, that an old hand with guns like Mr. Fleming would have an accident like that. I met him, once or twice, and was at your home to see his collection, a couple of years ago. He impressed me as knowing firearms pretty thoroughly.... Well, you can look for me tomorrow, say around two. In the meantime, I'll see Goode, and also Gresham and Arnold Rivers."

Chapter 2

After ushering his client out the hall door and closing it behind her, Rand turned and said:

"All right, Kathie, or Dave; whoever's out there. Come on in."

Then he went to his desk and reached under it, snapping off a switch. As he straightened, the door from the reception-office opened and his secretary, Kathie O'Grady, entered, loading a cigarette into an eight-inch amber holder. She was a handsome woman, built on the generous lines of a Renaissance goddess; none of the Renaissance masters, however, had ever employed a model so strikingly Hibernian. She had blue eyes, and a fair, highly-colored complexion; she wore green, which went well with her flaming red hair, and a good deal of gold costume-jewelry.

Behind her came Dave Ritter. He was Rand's assistant, and also Kathie's lover. He was five or six years older than his employer, and slightly built. His hair, fighting a stubborn rear-guard action against baldness, was an indeterminate mousy gray-brown. It was one of his professional assets that nobody ever noticed him, not even in a crowd of one; when he wanted it to, his thin face could assume the weary, baffled expression of a middle-aged book-keeper with a wife and four children on fifty dollars a week. Actually, he drew three times that much, had no wife, admitted to no children. During the war, he and Kathie had kept the Tri-State Agency in something better than a state of suspended animation while Rand had been in the Army.

Ritter fumbled a Camel out of his shirt pocket and made a beeline for the desk, appropriating Rand's lighter and sharing the flame with Kathie.

"You know, Jeff," he said, "one of the reasons why this agency never made any money while you were away was that I never had the unadulterated insolence to ask the kind of fees you do. I was listening in on the extension in the file-room; I could hear Kathie damn near faint when you said five grand."

"Yes; five thousand dollars for appraising a collection they've been offered ten for, and she only has a third-interest," Kathie said, retracting herself into the chair lately vacated by Gladys Fleming. "If that makes sense, now ..."

"Ah, don't you get it, Kathleen Mavourneen?" Ritter asked. "She doesn't care about the pistols; she wants Jeff to find out who fixed up that accident for Fleming. You heard that big, long shaggy-dog story about exactly what happened and where everybody was supposed to have been at the time. I hope you got all that recorded; it was all told for a purpose."

Rand had picked up the outside phone and was dialing. In a moment, a girl's voice answered.

"Carter Tipton's law-office; good afternoon."

"Hello, Rheba; is Tip available?"

"Oh, hello, Jeff. Just a sec; I'll see." She buzzed another phone. "Jeff Rand on the line," she announced.

A clear, slightly Harvard-accented male voice took over.

"Hello, Jeff. Now what sort of malfeasance have you committed?"

"Nothing, so far—cross my fingers," Rand replied. "I just want a little information. Are you busy?... Okay, I'll be up directly."

He replaced the phone and turned to his disciples.

"Our client," he said, "wants two jobs done on one fee. Getting the pistol-collection sold is one job. Exploring the whys and wherefores of that quote accident unquote is the other. She has a hunch, and probably nothing much better, that there's something sour about the accident. She expects me to find evidence to that effect while I'm at Rosemont, going over the collection. I'm not excluding other possibilities, but I'll work on that line until and unless I find out differently. Five thousand should cover both jobs."

"You think that's how it is?" Kathie asked.

"Look, Kathie. I got just as far in Arithmetic, at school, as you did, and I suspect that Mrs. Fleming got at least as far as long division, herself. For reasons I stated, I simply couldn't have handled that collection business for anything like a reasonable fee, so I told her five thousand, thinking that would stop her. When it didn't, I knew she had something else in mind, and when she went into all that detail about the death of her husband, she as good as told me that was what it was. Now I'm sorry I didn't say ten thousand; I think she'd have bought it at that price just as cheerfully. She thinks Lane Fleming was murdered. Well, on the face of what she told me, so do I."

"All right, Professor; expound," Ritter said.

"You heard what he was supposed to have shot himself with," Rand began. "A Colt-type percussion revolver. You know what they're like. And I know enough about Lane Fleming to know how much experience he had with old arms. I can't believe that he'd buy a pistol without carefully examining it, and I can't believe that he'd bring that thing home and start working on it without seeing the caps on the nipples and the charges in the chambers, if it had been loaded. And if it had been, he would have first taken off the caps, and then taken it apart and drawn the charges. And she says he started working on it as soon as he got home—presumably around five—and then took time out for dinner, and then went back to work on it, and more than half an hour later, there was a shot and he was killed." Rand blew a Bronx cheer. "If that accident had been the McCoy, it would have happened in the first five minutes after he started working on that pistol. No, in the first thirty seconds. And then, when they found him, he had the revolver in his right hand, and an oily rag in his left. I hope both of you noticed that little touch."

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