

THE
BLACK-EYED
BLONDE

A PHILIP MARLOWE NOVEL

BENJAMIN
BLACK

AUTHOR OF *CHRISTINE FALLS* AND *HOLY ORDERS*



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

It was one of those Tuesday afternoons in summer when you wonder if the earth has stopped revolving. The telephone on my desk had the air of something that knows it's being watched. Cars trickled past in the street below the dusty window of my office, and a few of the good folks of our fair city ambled along the sidewalk, men in hats, mostly, going nowhere. I watched a woman at the corner of Cahuenga and Hollywood, waiting for the light to change. Long legs, a slim cream jacket with high shoulders, navy blue pencil skirt. She wore a hat, too, a skimpy affair that made it seem as if a small bird had alighted on the side of her hair and settled there happily. She looked left and right and left again—she must have been so good when she was a little girl—then crossed the sunlit street, treading gracefully on her own shadow.

So far it had been a lean season. I had done a week playing bodyguard to a guy who had flown in from New York on the clipper. He had a blue jaw and wore a gold wristband and a pinkie ring with a ruby in it as big as a boysenberry. He said he was a businessman and I decided to believe him. He was worried, and

sweated a lot, but nothing happened and I got paid. Then Bernie Ohls in the Sheriff's office put me in touch with a nice little old lady whose hophead son had pinched her late husband's rare coin collection. I had to apply a little muscle to get the goods back, but nothing serious. There was a coin in there with the head of Alexander the Great on it, and another one showing Cleopatra in profile, with that big nose of hers—what did they all see in her?

The buzzer sounded to announce that the outer door had opened, and I heard a woman walk across the waiting room and pause a moment at the door of my office. The sound of high heels on a wooden floor always gets something going in me. I was about to call to her to come in, using my special deep-toned, you-can-trust-me-I'm-a-detective voice, when she came in anyway, without knocking.

She was taller than she had seemed when I saw her from the window, tall and slender with broad shoulders and trim hips. My type, in other words. The hat she wore had a veil, a dainty visor of spotted black silk that stopped at the tip of her nose—and a nice tip it was, to a very nice nose, aristocratic but not too narrow or too long, and nothing at all like Cleopatra's jumbo schnozzle. She wore elbow-length gloves, pale cream to match her jacket, and fashioned from the hide of some rare creature that had spent its brief life bounding delicately over Alpine crags. She had a good smile, friendly, so far as it went, and a little lopsided in an attractively sardonic way. Her hair was blond and her eyes were black, black and deep as a mountain lake, the lids exquisitely tapered at their outer corners. A blonde with black eyes—that's not a combination you get very often. I tried not to look at her legs. Obviously the god of Tuesday afternoons had decided I deserved a little lift.

"The name is Cavendish," she said.

I invited her to sit down. If I'd known it was me she was coming to call on, I would have brushed my hair and applied a dab of bay rum behind my earlobes. But she had to take me as I was. She

didn't seem to disapprove too much of what she was seeing. She sat down in front of my desk on the chair I had pointed her to and took off her gloves finger by finger, studying me with her steady black eyes.

"What can I do for you, Miss Cavendish?" I asked.

"Mrs."

"Sorry—Mrs. Cavendish."

"A friend told me about you."

"Oh, yes? Good things, I hope."

I offered her one of the Camels I keep in a box on my desk for clients, but she opened her patent leather purse and took out a silver case and flipped it open with her thumb. Sobranie Black Russian—what else? When I struck a match and offered it across the desk she leaned forward and bent her head, with dipped lashes, and touched a fingertip briefly to the back of my hand. I admired her pearl-pink nail polish, but didn't say so. She sat back in the chair and crossed her legs under the narrow blue skirt and gave me that coolly appraising look again. She was taking her time in deciding what she should make of me.

"I want you to find someone," she said.

"Right. Who would that be?"

"A man named Peterson—Nico Peterson."

"Friend of yours?"

"He used to be my lover."

If she expected me to swallow my teeth in shock, she was disappointed. "Used to be?" I said.

"Yes. He disappeared, rather mysteriously, without even saying goodbye."

"When was this?"

"Two months ago."

Why had she waited so long before coming to me? I decided not to ask her, or not yet, anyway. It gave me a funny feeling, being looked at by those cool eyes behind the veil's transparent

black mesh. It was like being watched through a secret window; watched, and measured.

"You say he disappeared," I said. "You mean out of your life, or altogether?"

"Both, it seems."

I waited for more, but she only leaned back a farther inch or so and smiled again. That smile: it was like something she had set a match to a long time ago and then left to smolder on by itself. She had a lovely upper lip, prominent, like a baby's, soft-looking and a little swollen, as if she had done a lot of kissing recently, and not kissing babies, either. She must have sensed my unease about the veil, and put up a hand now and lifted it away from her face. Without it, the eyes were even more striking, a lustrous shade of seal-black that made something catch in my throat.

"So tell me about him," I said, "your Mr. Peterson."

"Tallish, like you. Dark. Handsome, in a weak sort of way. Wears a silly mustache, Don Ameche-style. Dresses nicely, or used to, when I had a say in the matter."

She had taken a short ebony holder from her purse and was fitting the Black Russian into it. Deft, those fingers; slender, but with strength in them.

"What does he do?" I asked.

She glanced at me with a steely twinkle. "For a living, you mean?" She pondered the question. "He sees people," she said.

This time I leaned back in my chair. "How do you mean?" I asked.

"Just what I say. Practically every time I saw him, he was about to leave urgently. *I gotta see this guy. There's this guy I gotta go see.*" She was a good mimic; I was beginning to get a picture of Mr. Peterson. *He* didn't sound like *her* type.

"A busy fellow, then," I said.

"His busyness had few results, I'm afraid. At any rate, not results that you'd notice, or that I noticed, anyway. If you ask him,

he'll tell you he's an agent to the stars. The people he had to see so urgently were usually connected to one of the studios."

It was interesting, the way she kept switching tenses. All the same, I had the impression that he was very much the past, for her, this Peterson bird. So why did she want him found?

"He's in the movie business?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say *in*. Sort of scrabbling at the edges with his fingertips. He had some success with Mandy Rogers."

"Should I know the name?"

"Starlet—ingénue, Nico would say. Think Jean Harlow without the talent."

"Jean Harlow had talent?"

She smiled at that. "Nico is firmly of the belief that all his geese are swans."

I got out my pipe and filled it. It struck me that the tobacco blend I was using had some Cavendish in it. I decided not to share this happy coincidence with her, imagining the jaded smile and the twitch of disdain at the corner of her mouth that would greet it.

"Known him long, your Mr. Peterson?" I asked.

"Not long."

"How long would not long be?"

She shrugged, which involved a fractional lift of her right shoulder. "A year?" She made it a question. "Let me see. It was summer when we met. August, maybe."

"Where was that? That you met, I mean."

"The Cahuilla Club. Do you know it? It's in the Palisades. Polo grounds, swimming pools, lots of bright, shiny people. The kind of place that wouldn't let a shamus like you put his foot inside the electronically controlled gates." That last bit she didn't say, but I heard it all the same.

"Your husband know about him? About you and Peterson?"

"I really can't say."

"Can't, or won't?"

“Can’t.” She glanced down at the cream gloves where she had draped them across her lap. “Mr. Cavendish and I have—what shall I say? An arrangement.”

“Which is?”

“You’re being disingenuous, Mr. Marlowe. I’m sure you know very well the kind of arrangement I mean. My husband likes polo ponies and cocktail waitresses, not necessarily in that order.”

“And you?”

“I like many things. Music, mainly. Mr. Cavendish has two reactions to music, depending on mood and state of sobriety. Either it makes him sick or it makes him laugh. He does not have a melodious laugh.”

I got up from the desk and took my pipe to the window and stood looking out at nothing in particular. In an office across the street, a secretary in a tartan blouse and wearing earphones from a Dictaphone machine was bent over her typewriter, tapping away. I had passed her in the street a few times. Nice little face, shy smile; the kind of girl who lives with her mother and cooks meat loaf for Sunday lunch. This is a lonely town.

“When’s the last time you saw Mr. Peterson?” I asked, still watching Miss Remington at her work. There was silence behind me, and I turned. Obviously, Mrs. Cavendish was not prepared to address herself to anyone’s back. “Don’t mind me,” I said. “I stand at this window a lot, contemplating the world and its ways.”

I came back and sat down again. I put my pipe in the ashtray and clasped my hands together and propped my chin on a couple of knuckles to show her how attentive I could be. She decided to accept this earnest demonstration of my full and unwavering concentration. She said, “I told you when I saw him last—about a month ago.”

“Where was that?”

“At the Cahuilla, as it happens. A Sunday afternoon. My husband was engaged in a particularly strenuous chukker. That’s a—”

“A round in polo. Yes, I know.”

She leaned forward and dropped a few flakes of cigarette ash beside the bowl of my pipe. A faint waft of her perfume came across the desk. It smelled like Chanel No. 5, but then, to me all perfumes smell like Chanel No. 5, or did up to then.

“Did Mr. Peterson give any indication that he was about to decamp?” I asked.

“Decamp? That’s an odd word to use.”

“It seemed less dramatic than *disappeared*, which was your word.”

She smiled and gave a dry little nod, conceding the point. “He was much as usual,” she said. “A little bit more distracted, perhaps, a little nervous, even—though maybe it only seems that way in hindsight.” I liked the way she talked; it made me think of the ivy-covered walls of venerable colleges, and trust fund details written out on parchment in a copperplate hand. “He certainly didn’t give any strong indication that he was about to”—she smiled again—“decamp.”

I thought for a bit, and let her see me thinking. “Tell me,” I said, “when did you realize he was gone? I mean, when did you decide he had”—now it was my turn to smile—“disappeared?”

“I telephoned him a number of times and got no answer. Then I called at his house. The milk hadn’t been canceled and the newspapers had been piling up on his porch. It wasn’t like him to leave things like that. He was careful, in some ways.”

“Did you go to the police?”

Her eyes widened. “The police?” she said, and I thought she might laugh. “That wouldn’t have done at all. Nico was rather shy of the police, and he would not have thanked me for putting them onto him.”

“Shy in what way?” I asked. “Did he have things to hide?”

“Haven’t we all, Mr. Marlowe?” Again she dilated those lovely lids.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On many things.”

This was going nowhere, in ever-increasing circles. “Let me ask you, Mrs. Cavendish,” I said, “what do *you* think has become of Mr. Peterson?”

Once more she did her infinitesimal shrug. “I don’t know what to think. That’s why I’ve come to you.”

I nodded—sagely, I hoped—then took up my pipe and did some business with it, tamping the dottle, and so on. A tobacco pipe is a very handy prop, when you want to seem thoughtful and wise. “May I ask,” I asked, “why you waited so long before coming to me?”

“Was it a long time? I kept thinking I’d hear from him, that the phone would ring one day and he’d be calling from Mexico or somewhere.”

“Why would he be in Mexico?”

“France, then, the Côte d’Azur. Or somewhere more exotic—Moscow, maybe, Shanghai, I don’t know. Nico liked to travel. It fed his restlessness.” She sat forward a little, showing the faintest trace of impatience. “Will you take the case, Mr. Marlowe?”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said. “But let’s not call it a case, not just yet.”

“What are your terms?”

“The usual.”

“I can’t say I know what the usual is likely to be.”

I hadn’t really thought she would. “A hundred dollars deposit and twenty-five a day plus expenses while I’m making my inquiries.”

“How long will they take, your inquiries?”

“That too depends.”

She was silent for a moment, and again her eyes took on that

appraising look, making me squirm a little. “You haven’t asked me anything about myself,” she said.

“I was working my way around to it.”

“Well, let me save you some work. My maiden name is Langrishe. Have you heard of Langrishe Fragrances, Inc.?”

“Of course,” I said. “The perfume company.”

“Dorothea Langrishe is my mother. She was a widow when she came over from Ireland, bringing me with her, and founded the business here in Los Angeles. If you’ve heard of her, then you know how successful she has been. I work for her—or with her, as she’d prefer to say. The result is that I’m quite rich. I want you to find Nico Peterson for me. He’s a poor thing but mine own. I’ll pay you whatever you ask.”

I considered poking at my pipe again but thought it would seem a little obvious the second time around. Instead I gave her a level look, making my eyes go blank. “As I said, Mrs. Cavendish—a hundred down and twenty-five a day, plus expenses. The way I work, every case is a special case.”

She smiled, pursing her lips. “I thought you weren’t going to call it a case, as yet.”

I decided to let her have that one. I pulled open a drawer and brought out a standard contract and pushed it across the desk to her with the tip of one finger. “Take that with you, read it, and if you agree with the terms, sign it and get it back to me. In the meantime, give me Mr. Peterson’s address and phone number. Also anything else you think might be useful to me.”

She gazed at the contract for a moment, as if she were deciding whether to take it or throw it in my face. In the end she picked it up, folded it carefully, and put it in her purse. “He has a place in West Hollywood, off Bay City Boulevard,” she said. She opened her purse again and took out a small leather-bound notebook and a slim gold pencil. She wrote in the notebook briefly, then tore out

the page and handed it to me. “Napier Street,” she said. “Keep a sharp eye out or you’ll miss it. Nico prefers secluded spots.”

“On account of being so shy,” I said.

She stood up, while I stayed sitting. I smelled her perfume again. Not Chanel, then, but Langrishe, the name or number of which I would dedicate myself to finding out. “I’ll need a contact for you, too,” I said.

She pointed to the piece of paper in my hand. “I’ve put my telephone number on there. Call me whenever you need to.”

I read her address: 444 Ocean Heights. Had I been alone, I would have whistled. Only the cream get to live out there, on private streets right by the waves.

“I don’t know your name,” I said. “I mean your first name.”

For some reason this brought a mild flush to her cheeks, and she looked down, then quickly up again. “Clare,” she said. “Without an *i*. I’m called after our native county, in Ireland.” She made a slight, mock-doleful grimace. “My mother is something of a sentimentalist where the old country is concerned.”

I put the notebook page into my wallet, rose, and came from behind the desk. No matter how tall you might be, there are certain women who make you feel shorter than they are. I was looking down on Clare Cavendish, but it felt as if I were looking up. She offered me her hand, and I shook it. It really is something, the first touch between two people, no matter how brief.

I saw her to the elevator, where she gave me a last quick smile and was gone.

Back in my office, I took up my station at the window. Miss Remington was tap-tapping still, diligent girl that she was. I willed her to look up and see me, but in vain. What would I have done, anyway—waved, like an idiot?

I thought about Clare Cavendish. Something didn’t add up. As

a private eye I'm not completely unknown, but why would a daughter of Dorothea Langrishe of Ocean Heights and who knew how many other swell spots choose me to find her missing man? And why, in the first place, had she got herself involved with Nico Peterson, who, if her description of him was accurate, would turn out to be nothing but a cheap grifter in a sharp suit? Long and convoluted questions, and hard to concentrate on while remembering Clare Cavendish's candid eyes and the amused, knowing light that shone in them.

When I turned, I saw the cigarette holder on the corner of my desk, where she had left it. The ebony was the same glossy blackness as her eyes. She'd forgotten to pay me my retainer, too. It didn't seem to matter.