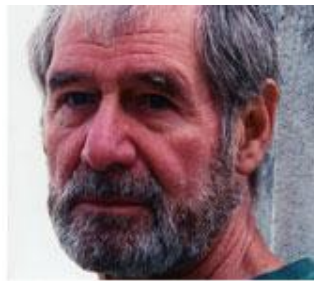


**Love or Money
by Ed McBain**



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Ed McBain is one of the most enduring and illustrious names in crime fiction. His bestselling previous titles include Ice, Candyland, Money Money Money, Fat Ollie's Book and The Frumious Bandersnatch. Ed has also written a number of screenplays, most notably Alfred Hitchcock's The Birds. In 1998, he was the first non-British author to be awarded the Crime Writers' Association/Cartier Diamond Dagger Award. He also holds the Mystery Writers of America's coveted Grand Master Award and the Sherlock Award for Best International Detective. Ed McBain has been writing successful crime fiction for over 50 years and lives in the United States.

LOVE OR MONEY: ED MCBAIN

THE RESTAURANT WAS FREQUENTED by the city's literati, a place neither Carella nor Meyer could afford on their annual salaries as Detectives/Second Grade. They were here only because the Medical Examiner had isolated the cause of Helen McReady's death as arsenic poisoning, and they wanted to know if there was any rat poison on the premises.

"We don't have rats in this restaurant," Martha Bailey told them. "Except for the-two legged variety."

The food here was reputed to be atrocious, but you'd never have guessed that from the crowds the place attracted or the girth of its eponymous owner, who reportedly ate her own fare and who had to weigh at least as much as a baby elephant. Some forty years old and wearing what the hippies used to call a granny gown, patterned in paisley, Martha stood in stout blonde defiance, her hands on her hips, challenging the detectives to find either rats or rat poisons in her pristine kitchen.

"Who do you mean by two-legged rats?" Meyer asked. Bald and burly with china-blue eyes and the patience of a safe-cracker, Meyer stood beside Carella in the midst of all these glistening pots and pans and spoons and ladles and mixing bowls. Both men were wearing light-weight, light-colored suits in defense against the torrid August weather. Carella had the casual bearing of an athlete. Head slightly cocked, brown eyes slanting a bit downward to give him a somewhat oriental appearance, he seemed intensely interested in just how Martha Bailey would answer his partner's question about two-legged rats.

"Writers," she said.

"I thought writers liked this place," Carella said.

"Doesn't mean I like writers," Martha said.

Talk about biting the hand, Carella thought.

"Did Helen McReady come here often?" he asked.

"Only with Harold."

"Harold?"

"Ames. Her editor at the paper. I tried to discourage it but he's a regular. Writers get nervous when a critic's on the premises."

"So how come she chose this place for her birthday party?"

"She didn't," Martha said. "Harold made the booking. He comes here a lot. Sometimes alone with her. They were... ah, very close, shall we say."

An arched eyebrow.

"Meaning?" Carella said.

“Listen, speak no ill of the dead, am I right? The lady was happily married. Enough said.”

Meyer and Carella exchanged a glance.

“Made the booking for what time?” Meyer asked.

“Eight.”

“What time did they leave?”

“Must have been ten, ten thirty. And by the way she was perfectly fine when they left.”

“Where were they sitting?”

“Harold’s usual table. Come, I’ll show you,” she said and led them out of her spotless kitchen.

Martha had decorated the dining room the way she thought an old colonial tavern might have looked. Or should have looked. Heavy wooden beams from which long stemmed, white clay pipes were hanging. Pewter tankards lined up on shelves behind the bar. High-backed wooden booths with cushion seats. Candles in sconces on all the walls. Lanterns hanging all over the place. Carella expected George Washington to ride in on a white horse.

“This is where Harold likes to sit,” she said, and showed them one of the larger round tables. “I save it for him whenever he books.”

“So who was at this party?” Carella asked.

“Well, Harold and Mrs McReady, of course, and her husband, go figure.” Another arching of the eyebrow. “And her little actress friend. Just the four of them. Cosy”

“Which little actress friend would that be?” Meyer asked.

“Well, actress,” Martha said, and pulled a face. “She’s a chorus girl actually. Playing in a little musical up the street. All dimples and long legs.”

“What’s her name? Would you know?”

“Sure. Cyndie Carr. With a ‘y’ and an ‘i,e’. The Cyndie.”

“Who do you think poisoned Mrs McReady?” Carella asked.

“Nobody got poisoned in my restaurant,” Martha said flatly.

“At first I thought it was just something she’d eaten,” George McReady said. “I was feeling fine, but I’d ordered a steak, and she had the trout. So I thought maybe the fish was tainted. Unless...”

They were sitting just outside the funeral home's viewing room, where his wife's corpse was displayed in an open coffin. McReady seemed truly grief-stricken. A thin, almost gaunt man in his early sixties, they supposed, he sat twisting his gnarled hands, unable to stop the tears that streamed down his face.

"Chills aren't a symptom are they?" he asked. "She was feeling a little chilly earlier. In the restaurant. But that must have been the air-conditioning don't you think? She was sitting right under one of the vents, even I felt a bit chilly and I was sitting on the other side of the table. Cyndie offered her a shawl. She was still chilly, but I don't think that was the poison. I don't think chills are a symptom are they?"

"When did you suspect she might have been poisoned, Mr McReady?"

"Well, when she began vomiting. That was when I became truly alarmed. What she brought up had the consistency of rice water, so I knew at once that something..."

"When was this, Mr McReady?"

"Shortly after we got home. Well, we were already in bed. Midnight? Around then? She'd been complaining of a burning pain in her stomach and a sore throat. But then she began vomiting and her skin got clammy, so I rushed her to the hospital. By then her face was turning bl..."

He broke into fresh sobs and buried his own face in his hands.

"Were all four of you drinking the same thing?" Carella asked.

"What?"

"The wine. The beer. Whatever."

"Oh. I don't know what the others were drinking. Helen had a martini before dinner and white wine with the fish. Yes, that's right, I remember now. Harold ordered a bottle of Merlot for himself and me... we were both eating steak... and a Chardonnay for Helen and Cyndie. She was eating veal, I think. Cyndie."

"Who poured the wine?" Meyer asked.

"The waiter, I think. Why?"

Anger suddenly blazed in his eyes like an open fire in the midst of quenching sobs.

"Never mind the waiter," he said. "It wasn't any damn waiter who poisoned her."

They knew when to shut up and listen.

"Both of them had motives," he said bitterly. "They were both furious with Helen."

"Why was that, Mr McReady?"

“Simple jealousy! I knew about Harold all along, of course, it had been going on between them for a long time. You make adjustments. A marriage is making adjustments, isn’t it? But this was something new. Another woman? A cheap little lesbian whore? Helen never seemed... well... that way.”

They kept listening.

“When I learnt that Harold had invited Cyndie to the party, I begged him to phone her again, tell her it was called off, tell her anything. Didn’t he know they were lovers?”

McReady shook his head.

His tears had stopped.

His hands were tightly clenched.

They waited for something more.

Patience, Meyer was thinking.

“The chills couldn’t have been a symptom.” McReady said, as if trying to convince himself, nodding, remembering. “Because once she moved from under that vent, she was alright again. Changed seats, and was cheerful, laughing, drinking. Everything still boy-girl-boy-girl, well, sure,” he said, “They were both there to celebrate her birthday, right? Both her little darlings,” he said bitterly, and began sobbing again.

They found Cyndie Carr in a second-floor exercise room just off the Stem, close to the theatre district and her apartment. She did not look like she needed any fitness routines. Some five-foot nine inches tall, wearing black tights and a sweat-stained black tank top that scooped low over somewhat exuberant breasts, she came off a treadmill with her hand extended, long blonde hair stringy and damp, dimpled smile on her face, blue eyes flashing.

“Hi,” she said, “Whussup?”

Just as if someone hadn’t been killed the night before.

They always wondered about the ones who pretended murder was merely par for the course. In their experience, these were the ones who were either plain stupid or were hiding something. Cyndie Carr didn’t appear to be stupid, but neither could they imagine what she might be hiding. Unless she was the one who’d poisoned Helen McReady.

“Glad you could make time for us,” Carella said.

“Just barely,” Cyndie said, sighing, straddling one of the press benches. “I’ve got to be back at rehearsal by two,” she said, and glanced up at the clock on the gymnasium wall. Everywhere around them, good-looking men and women were prancing and lifting and flexing and grimacing. Made Meyer want to go on a diet. Carella too.

“So tell us about last night,” he said.

“You know... do I need a lawyer here or anything?” Cyndie asked.

“Why would you think that, Miss Carr?”

“Hey,” she said.

They waited.

“Helen was poisoned, duh?” she said, and twirled a forefinger in her dimpled cheek.

“These are just routine questions,” they assured her.

“I’ll bet,” she said.

“How’d you happen to get invited to this party?” Carella asked.

“Helen invited me. Well, actually it was Harold who called me. It was his party, after all. But Helen’s the one who suggested it.” She hesitated. “We’re friends,” she said. “Were.”

“How long had you known her?”

“She came back after a show I was doing a few months ago. Little musical based on Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. Folded in a week, but Helen liked it. Well, love or money, you know how she felt about that. So we started talking...”

“Where was this, Miss Carr?” Carella asked.

“I just told you. Backstage. My dressing...”

“Oh. When you said she came back, I thought you meant she returned...”

“No, I meant backstage. To tell me how much she’d enjoyed the show. And we got to talking, and one thing led to another, and we met for lunch the next day, and became friends. Which is why I was at the party. Because Helen asked Harold to invite me. But, you know...”

They waited.

“Never mind,” she said.

“No, what, Miss Carr?”

“I think if we’re gonna talk some more here, I’d better call a lawyer. Because, I have to tell you, this doesn’t sound at all routine, guys, and I sure as hell don’t want to be accused of murdering my best friend in the entire world. Got it?” she said, her face beginning to crumble.

“Got it,” Carella said. “Thanks for your time.”

“Sure,” she said, and turned away to hide the sudden tears in her eyes.

“There are only two things worth writing about,” Harold Ames was telling them. “Love or money.”

He was in his early fifties, they guessed, lean and green-eyed, with brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard, sitting in slatted sunshine behind a vast desk in his air-conditioned corner-window office. It was now two in the afternoon, and they were here at the newspaper not to listen to literary suppositions, but to learn about that dinner party last night.

“Do you know who said that? Ames asked.

“No, who said it?”

“Helen herself. Well, Jane Austen said it long before Helen did, but she was fond of repeating it. Those words were her credo, in fact and many writers disliked her for it.”

“Anyone in particular?” Meyer asked. “These writers who disliked her?”

“Thousands,” Ames said. “You can’t be the book reviewer for the most influential newspaper in the country, and not expect to make enemies.”

Enemies, Carella thought.

A much stronger word than ‘disliked’.

“Tell us about the party last night,” he said.

“Are we all suspects here?” Ames asked. He seemed amused by the thought.

“No, my partner and I aren’t,” Carella said.

“I meant the three of us.”

“Are any of you writers?”

“Oh, I see,” Ames said.

They waited to see what he had seen.

“You think... because I said writers disliked her, that perhaps a writer poisoned her. Is that it?”

They said nothing.

“There were hundreds of writers in Martha Bailey’s last night,” Ames said.

Narrows the field a bit, Carella thought.

“Were any of them at your table?” he asked.

“Writers were stopping at the table all night long, sucking up to Helen.”

“How do you mean?” Meyer asked.

“Glad-handing her, all smiles, hello, Helen, how have you been? Paying their respects, you know. Looking for that good review on the next book.”

“You’re saying...”

“I’m saying there were wine glasses sitting right there in the open. I don’t know what the lethal dose of arsenic is...”

“Three grains,” Carella said.

“Which is about what? A teaspoon?”

“Much less than that. A pinch, actually. However much she ingested it was enough to kill her in four hours.”

“What I’m saying is any one of those ass-kissers could have leaned over the table and dropped it in her glass.”

And if pigs had wings, they would fly, Carella thought.

“What was your relationship with Helen McReady?” he asked flat out.

“I’m editor of the book page. That was our relationship. Editor to reviewer.”

“That why you dined alone together so often?”

“I didn’t realize we dined alone together all that often. But yes. We had many things to discuss.”

“Love?” Meyer asked. “Or money?”

“Books,” Ames said.

“When did you learn that she was having an affair with Cyndie Carr?”

“Is that a fact?”

“George McReady seems to think so.”

“Jealous husband,” Ames said, and shrugged.

“How about jealous lover?”

“Mr. McReady says he phoned to ask you to dis-invite Cyndie to the party. Is that true?”

“I couldn’t very well do that, now could I? I invited her because Helen asked me to.”

“She give you any reason for that?”

“She didn’t have to. It was her birthday, after all. But, yes, they were friends.”

“Intimate friends, according to McReady.”

“Well, as I said, a jealous...”

“Didn’t he tell you that Cyndie and his wife were lovers?”

“How’d you feel about that, Mr. Ames?”

“Didn’t he specifically say...?”

“Gentlemen,” Ames said, and spread his hands on the air. “Please. This isn’t a police station, and I’m not under arrest here.”

“You ordered the wine last night, isn’t that right?”

“Yes.”

Curtly now. Lips tightly compressed. Angry frown on his face.

“The red for you and McReady, the white for Cyndie and Helen.”

“If you say so.”

“Well, they did drink wine from the same bottle didn’t they? Cyndie and Helen?”

“I wasn’t checking to see who drank what. In fact, I wasn’t even at the table all the time.”

“Oh? Where were you?”

“I recall going to the men’s room at one point.”

“Was this after you dropped the arsenic in Helen’s glass?”

Ames said nothing.

“Because if the poison wasn’t in the bottle itself...”

“... it had to’ve been dropped in her glass.”

“Isn’t that so Mr Ames?”

Still nothing.

“Did you put that poison in her glass, Mr Ames?”

“The waiter poured the wine,” he said flatly, ticking off the points like a schoolmaster. “Red for George and me, white for the ladies. Helen was complaining about the air conditioning. I excused myself to go to the gents’. She seemed her usual cheerful self by the time I came back to the table. George proposed a toast, and we all drank. If someone poisoned her wine while I was gone...”

Ames shrugged.

“Is that it, gentlemen?” he asked. “Because I have work to do, you see.”

What happens next? Over to you...