

MURDER ON MAIN STREET

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

STAGGERING, the man picked himself up. He shook his head. He ran tentative fingers over the wound in his scalp. There was a lump all right. He stood perfectly still for a moment, then a reflex made him look down toward his feet. His little black bag was there. He picked it up.

It was dark, but not so dark that he did not see a flurry of movement to his right, about three hundred feet away. No time for that now.

Still staggering, he walked up the little broken shell pathway to the house. He knocked on the door. It slammed open. A woman in her middle fifties, hair flying, face distraught, croaked, "Doctor!"

"Mary! What's wrong?"

She said slowly. "It's Thomas. I think he's... dead!"

"Well... let's leave that to the old doc. Why do you think he's..."

"He's been stabbed!"

The doctor said, "What?"

"Yes! The knife is still..." She began to cry soundlessly.

He patted her on the shoulder. "Take it easy, Mary. Where is he?"

"In the living room. In the chair that he has sat in for twenty years, listening to the radio, just like he always

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did."

As a matter of fact the radio was still blaring when the doctor walked into the trim room. The dead man, head inclined to the loudspeaker, sat as though he were still listening. From the radio there came the hyena-like laughter of a prominent radio comedian. Swearing under his breath the doctor flipped the radio off.

He squatted down on his heels, and only then when vertigo made his head swim, did he remember about the blow on his head. He said, "Mary, look at my head. Is the skin broken?"

Aghast, she looked at a lump the size of a robin's egg. She said, "What happened?"

"I don't quite know. I got out of the car to come in and talk to Tom for a while, and as I stepped out of the car, something hit me. That's all. As I got up, I don't think I was really out, I saw someone run away... but he was far away by then. Too far to chase."

She looked at his face. "Doc, that must have been the one who killed my Tom! Could you see who it was?"

Dubiously shaking his head, the doctor said, "It was just a shape in the dark. A darker shape against darkness. I think it was a man, but that's just a guess. A woman in slacks would have made the same silhouette. He looked down at the face of the man who would never argue politics with him again. He said, "Mary, go next door and visit with the Jasons."

She turned to obey his suggestion. Then swiveling slowly back, she looked at the doctor's seamed heavy red face. "You don't think..."

She could see the same thought express itself on his face. "Mary... that nutty kid! Jimmy... he wouldn't... he was given a D. D., wasn't he?" the doctor said.

"He was a Section Eight, or that's what Tommy called it."

"The Army thought he was psycho. Mary, call the sheriff. Get him up here and then go over to Kitty Randall's and wait there. I'll pick you up later."

She went to the door. From there she said, "You know... there's one thing I don't understand."

He looked up, the futile stethoscope hanging from his ears. He pulled one earprong out. "What?"

"The radio said that there was likely to be a storm later on."

"Umm. It feels as if it were going to rain," the doctor said, absent-mindedly.

"You don't understand. I locked all the doors and windows. Ever since that time that Jimmy Jason scared me peering in through the window at night, Thomas put heavy burglar-proof locks on all the windows and doors."

"Hmmm."

"They're still all locked, doctor." The woman's grief torn face looked more haggard as fear made itself manifest.

"Are you sure? Have you checked?"

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She shook her head. "I looked all around this floor. I didn't go upstairs."

"You go ahead and call the sheriff and then go over to the Randall's. I'll check while I wait for the sheriff."

He heard the front door close behind her. He looked again at the dead man. The knife had gone straight through the heart. There was nothing else to do here till the sheriff arrived.

He walked toward the flight of stairs that led to the bedrooms. The windows were closed tight and bolted. Then moving more quickly, he went to the last room on the second floor. It was, he knew, a sort of rumpus room. The house had no cellar, nor an attic. He opened the door and looked into the room.

Odd chairs, a home-made bar that the junior Thomas Archer had sawed and nailed together. The windows in this room were bolted tight, too, he could see...

Mrs. Archer phoned her tragic call to the sheriff's office. That done, she walked, head held high, eyes tearless, jaws set, to the home of the girl that her son was to have married.

The Randalls, mother and father, looked at her in surprise. Pudgy, gentle man, and thin as a lathe woman, they made an odd pair. They had their hands occupied. Mrs. Randall was in the midst of knitting one of her famous cardigans. Mr. Randall's hands, up in the air, had the wool wrapped around them.

Mrs. Randall said, "Mary! Mary Archer! What gets you out of bed at this hour?"

Swiftly, in terse sentences, Mrs. Archer told her story. The Randalls looked their sympathy. Moving as a pair from the door which Mrs. Randall had opened with a hand full of wool, they brought Mrs. Archer into their living room.

"I can't... there just aren't words..." Mr. Randall said, gulping:

"First Tommy and now his father... oh Mary... I can't stand it!" Mrs. Randall's thin face contorted and tears rolled down her dried out cheeks. She went to Mrs. Archer, dropping her knitting wool. Her arms flew to comfort the bereaved woman. "Come along, my dear." She led Mrs. Archer out of the room. Mr. Randall, sitting stock still in stunned amazement from which he had not yet recovered, spoke to himself. "It just don't seem possible." He brooded alone. In the other room, he knew his wife would give what comfort there was to the widow.

In the deadly stillness of the night he heard brakes squeak. He pondered on that for a while, and realized then that this was murder... that the sheriff would be on the job.

The sheriff stepped into the Archer home. He was not at all what the words call to mind, but was instead a sturdy young veteran who had studied to be a policeman in a nearby big city until a game leg resulting from a piece of shrapnel put an end to those plans. He saw at first glance the corpse, and then at a second look, the pudgy doctor whom everyone in town called the old doc. Although, the sheriff thought, the doctor wasn't particularly old, just in his early forties... it was his air. He had a stodgy old man's attitude to the world. That must be what accounted for his nickname. Aloud, the sheriff said, "Hi, doc."

"Billy. Glad you could make it. This is a bad one, son."

The knife in Mr. Archer's heart precluded asking any questions about the cause of death. Instead the young sheriff said, "Who did it?"

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"Billy Tennen, as sure as my name is Doc Ender, I swear it must have been a ghost!" The doctor looked shamefaced at the sound of his words.

"How's that?"

The doctor explained about the windows and doors. The sheriff thought. He knew that all the houses on this block were as alike as peas. Having been in one down the street a while ago he knew what the layout of this one must be. Product of a fast-talking real estate agent, they were all a box set upon a box. The small box was the top floor with three rooms. The ground floor had a hall... at one end of the hall was a sun porch of some kind, next to that was the kitchen, and at an angle off that was the library. Or at least in the real estate prospectus it was called a library. In that other house he had been in, the sheriff remembered, the library had been turned into a nursery.

Aloud he asked what it was used for here.

"That other room? Thomas used it as a sort of office. He did a lot of work at home, you know," the doctor said.

Staring off into space, the sheriff reconstructed what he remembered about the second floor. Three rooms, two generally used as bedrooms. In this family, the sheriff knew there had been only three people. Young Tom, Thomas Senior, and his wife.

"What about the third room upstairs?" The sheriff gestured with a thumb upward.

"Tommy made that over into a rumpus room. I just came down from there," the doctor said.

"All the windows were locked?"

The doctor nodded. Right then the door opened and a man about thirty stepped in the front door that led right into the living room. They looked at him. The sheriff had expected it to be one of his men. It wasn't. It was... who was it? The sheriff tried to remember. He knew something about this man... what was it?

The doctor said, "Jason! What are you doing here?"

Jimmy Jason shrugged his sharp narrow shoulders. He said nothing. His narrow face was cement still. Eyes set too close together looked around the room curiously.

His face lit up when he saw the corpse.

Jason. The sheriff remembered something about a peeping tom charge against the man. He turned his back on Jason. He had had a thought glimmering when the door had opened.

"That room on the top floor," the sheriff said, "isn't there a trap door in the ceiling so you can get to the roof?"

The doctor, wrenching his eyes away from Jason, said, "Oh, yes. There's a trap door. It isn't locked, either."

"Well, then, what's the puzzle?" the sheriff asked. "The killer raced upstairs, climbed the ladder that leads to the trap in the roof and then went out and down!"

"Fine," the doctor said with a grimace. "That's exactly what I figured when I went up there."

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"But?" The sheriff left the question hanging in the air. He turned to look at Jason. The man was staring avidly, greedily, at the corpse's chest. His eyes followed a trickle of blood that went from the wound down toward the floor.

"Ordinarily," the doctor said, "there is a ladder there. Tonight there isn't."

The sheriff's stomach dropped. That made it awkward. "But... if the killer went up the ladder and then for some reason of his own took it along with him..."

He said this watching Jason's face to see if there was any reaction. There was, but it was just the result of the man's having seen a drop of blood fall to the floor.

"I thought of that, too," the doctor said, and his voice sounded aggrieved. "I'm not an idiot, you know."

The sheriff looked at the doctor who was putting his stethoscope into his little black bag. The sheriff thought dully that the doctor would look naked without the bag. He realized he had never seen him without it.

The doctor said, slowly looking off into space, "The ladder is out in back of the house near where you'd have to climb to come down from the second story roof."

The sheriff realized that something was coming. Something he wasn't going to like. He didn't.

The doctor said, "The ladder has been painted today. It's still wet." He paused, and then said, "There are no marks on the wet paint."

Suddenly, shockingly, a giggle tore through the silence of the room. The giggle got louder and louder.

CHAPTER II

THE sheriff stood in the center of the rumpus room. Downstairs one of his men was dragging Jason out of the house. Jason was still giggling. The sheriff could hear the obscene sound even up here.

He looked about him. On the walls there were some pictures of young Archer, some pictures of some pretty girls, and a machete. The machete reminded the sheriff that the young man had seen service in the South Pacific.

Behind the home-made bar there were, thrown helter skelter on the floor, more souvenirs of the war. A box about two and a half feet square decorated with what could only be Japanese art, rubbed against a primitive devil mask.

Some spears, some arrows, an iron woodbow... that about ended up the inventory of the room. Above him, as the sheriff looked up, was the trap door that led to the roof of the second floor of the house.

The ceiling was only about twelve feet from the floor. The sheriff, realizing that, went over to the bar. If someone had stood on the bar, then... he looked at the bar. It was dusty. There were no marks to show that feet had ever trod the surface of the bar.

The bar was four and a half feet high. A six foot man, like Jason, standing on it would be about two feet from the ceiling. A two foot jump, or just extending his arms upward, would give the man a hand hold on the opening in the trap.

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But the dust ruled that out.

Scrutinizing the room more closely, the sheriff understood the dust. It was everywhere. This room had been young Archer's. Only too clearly it had remained untouched since that time over a year ago when the War Department had sent the telegram that had spelled the end of all the Archer's plans for their son.

Only such a reason would account for the condition of this room. To a housekeeper of Mrs. Archer's reputation, dust in any other room would have been as bad as the scarlet letter in colonial history.

Bending over, the sheriff could see two sets of foot prints. One set were his own, the others must be those of the doctor. The sheriff followed the doctor's prints. They led to the center of the room. Clearly, the doctor had stood there and looked about him. Then he had walked to each of the two windows and looked at them. That done, he had walked to the Japanese box and... the sheriff looked at the box. The doctor must have seated himself on the box while he tried to puzzle things out. There was no dust on the top of the box.

From the box a set of foot prints led back to the door.

The killer, thought the sheriff, had not even come into this room! His examination was futile.

He closed the door behind him and walked out of the rumpus room; that room, dedicated to pleasure, which now was a funeral memorial.

He went through the other two rooms on the floor. Here was proof of Mrs. Archer's housecleaning proclivities. Not a speck of dust, not an article out of place. The rooms were like displays in a department store window.

All the windows were locked and bolted on the inside. The sheriff walked heavily, favoring his game leg, down the flight of stairs that led to the ground floor.

His men were busily at work. The corpse was gone. The photographer was finished with his work. Discarded flash bulbs lay in a heap near the chair where the body had been.

His fingerprint man was busily pulling the insufflator that spread white powder all over Mrs. Archer's polished furniture. Doc Ender sat with his little black bag between his feet in a corner out of the way. His face was set. His eyes were closed. He looked tired and old.

The sheriff settled down into a chair next to the doctor. The doctor forced his eyes open. He said, "Well?"

"There has been no one in the room that has the trap door but you and me."

"That's what I thought." The doctor eyed the sheriff. "What now?"

"The outside of the house, I suppose..." The sheriff turned to one of his men. "Looked around?"

The man, a heavy red faced middle aged man, said, "Yop."

"And?"

"There's a ladder next to the house behind the kitchen. It's just been painted today, I guess. The weather's been clabberin' up for a storm. Been humid. Paint hasn't dried. No marks on the ladder."

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It was late. The sheriff glanced at his watch. Two thirty. The storm, if it was coming, was in the stage where it holds its breath, just before it blasts out. There was no sound. They might have been in some hidden spot on the moon. There was a feeling of not being connected with the world. The small town, usually quiet at night, was dead still.

And the dead are still, aren't they, the sheriff thought wearily that's one of the few good things about death. Aloud he said, "Any foot prints?"

"Some funny ones." The man scowled in perplexity. "Two feet from the ladder there are two smudges. They've sunk about an inch into the loam around the house. It's fresh loam, they musta' been figuring on seedin' the lawn. These two smudges, they're about a foot around and they're almost circular."

"That's all?"

"Umm..." The man scratched his head. Then he took a notebook out of his pocket and riffled the pages. It seemed to aid thought. He said, "About a pace away from them two marks there's a crazy stone path. Whatever made the marks coulda' stepped right on to the stones. Wouldn't a' left no marks on that."

"Where does the path lead?"

"You know these houses, it leads all around and then out on to the street."

"I see." The sheriff rumbled his hair. He gestured for his man to go. The doctor and the sheriff were alone in the house where death had seemingly walked through solid walls and left no marks. None but those two circular impressions in the soft dirt outside the house.

Doctor Ender said, "Sheriff Tennan..." His voice dribbled off, was lost in the silence that hung as oppressively as the humidity.

"Yes, doc?"

"Is there anything I can do to help? You know how close I was to the Archers..."

"You're some sort of a relation, aren't you?"

"If you can call it that." The doctor smiled tiredly. "We were some kind of second cousins. I never did figure it out. Old Thomas said something about it the first time I met him right after I moved to the beautiful town of Harris."

"How long have you been here, doc?"

The doctor said, "I dunno. Seems like it's been forever... but it's only about four years, I guess."

"What did you do, before you came here?"

"Had a practice in another town just like this one. Name of Middletown. Why?"

"No reason, I just realized that you've become so much a part of the place that I'd forgotten you weren't a native."

"I've always been a little flattered I was taken in so fast. You know how it is in some small towns. If you're

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not born in them you're always a 'furriner'!"

"I guess your buying the drug store from old Calkins helped. You meet everybody in the store."

"Sure do." The doctor smiled. "You certainly find out all the dirt in town behind a drug store counter."

"It never occurred to me before, but I can see how you would."

The two men sat in companionable silence for a while, both busy with their own thoughts. The sheriff moved first. He said, "This certainly isn't getting us anywhere. I'll leave a man here tonight. Not that this killer is liable to return after what he has succeeded in doing."

"I wonder," said the doctor, "how the killer got in?"

The sheriff sat up sharply. He had been so occupied with the puzzle of how the murderer had made his egress that the entrance had not occurred to him.

"That's right! How did the killer get in?" The sheriff rubbed his eyes as he got up. He lit a cigarette. He held the match while the doctor stuffed his black briar pipe. He lit the pipe. Mrs. Archer had been in the house with her husband before he was killed... she would know if anyone had come in... the way this thing was stacking up it would seem that only Mrs. Archer could have killed her husband. The sheriff snorted to himself. He must be tired to even have such an idea. He could no more picture that woman sticking a knife in her husband than... than... he remembered a case he had been on only a month ago. That tired grey little woman hadn't looked as if she could take an axe to her husband, and yet she had. What's more, she had stuffed his remains in the furnace and burnt them... with the garbage...

How had the killer come into the house without Mrs. Archer knowing it and how could that killer, if one existed, have gone out of a house in which all the doors and windows were locked on the inside?

It left but one person. The sheriff looked at the doctor. The same idea had evidently struck the doctor. He said, "No... we must be wrong. Maybe... maybe tomorrow things will look different. Maybe you've missed something. After all, it is late. We're tired."

The sheriff nodded. He turned out all the lights but one. He and the doctor walked to the door. His deputy was standing guard there.

The sheriff said, "You go inside and take it easy. Don't fall asleep, though... or..."

The man said, "Sure thing, sheriff, thanks."

He went inside. The doctor, changing his grasp on his bag from his right to his left hand, said, "Look!"

They both looked up. The storm was breaking. Lightning lanced down from the clouds and embraced a hill top not far from them. The doctor rubbed his head. "It was over there where the lightning just struck that I saw whoever it was that played baseball with my skull."

"How does it feel?"

"Not too bad. I've got a splitting headache, but that's about all. Maybe that's why I've been having such crazy ideas about... you know. About the widow."

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The sheriff nodded. But he didn't have a headache even if the doctor did, and he could see no alternative...

They got into their cars. The rain hit just as the sheriff stepped on the gas. At least he hadn't gotten wet. His wife would be worried about him, he realized. She still wasn't used to his having to be out late at night. He grinned to himself. No sense in phoning her. She might be asleep... still smiling, he drove off. No, it wouldn't be a phone that would wake her.

After all, he had only been married two months.

In a way, it was too bad that the sheriff hadn't been married for twenty years. For if he had driven into the center of town to phone, he might have seen a bizarre sight. And he might have heard an even more bizarre sound.

Huddled in the rain, facing an angular stone, a dripping figure was bent over, hard at work. Muffled by the pouring water that sluiced down, the figure was chipping at something.

The sound, that of a hammer on a chisel, was low.

It is doubtful that even if it hadn't been raining, the sound would have been heard ten feet away. As it was, the sound died as it was born.

CHAPTER III

TEETERING as he walked along the edge of the fence, Bobby Crossen wondered why the days just before vacation seemed so long. His books balanced precariously on his head, he walked the railing pretending that he was the great, fearless tight rope walker, Don Daring... now there was a man. He remembered sitting in the circus holding his breath watching the man walk that rope way up high in the top of the circus tent. Last year, it had been, yet he remembered exactly how Daring had looked. Why couldn't he remember his school lessons that well?

He put the horrid thought of school out of his mind, even though the school faced him at the end of the railing he was walking. The rain was drying everything off. He wondered if maybe... suppose the rain hadn't stopped this morning... suppose the rain hadn't stopped for forty days and forty nights like the time Noah had to build that big boat. Would he have had to go to school anyhow?

He was at the end of the railing. Arms outstretched to give him balance, he had come to face with his fate. There was the school. He looked at it and sighed. Even if it had rained for forty days, he thought, they'd had a school on the boat.

He jumped down to the wet grass. Sure, there'd been a school on the ark. And his teacher would have been there. He thought, scowling with concentration that twisted his young face, on the boat he wouldn't have been able ever to give his teacher the slip. How can you play hookey on a boat?

He grinned. Maybe it was better it hadn't rained for forty days. One thing left to do, only one thing and then he'd have to walk across the street to school. He took out his handkerchief and spit on it.

This was a ritual. Like walking on all the cracks in the cement on the street. If he didn't do this, then something awful would happen like being left back and having the same teacher next term.

Holding the handkerchief, he walked to the bronze tablet on which was inscribed a message that already was little read. It said, 'Honor Roll.' That was way up on top, far over Bobby's head. Under this was a list of

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names. At the bottom of the tablet it said, and Bobby could recite it better than the Gettysburg address, "These are the honored dead, who, leaving the peaceful and fruitful pursuits of our town, gave up their lives in foreign climes that freedom might not die."

The names were listed alphabetically and Bobby sometimes wished they weren't, for it meant that he had to reach way over his head to polish his friend's name.

Bobby crumpled his handkerchief in his hand preparatory to rubbing his friend's name. That Tommy Archer, what a swell guy! Not like some of the other big guys that gave you a push and told you to stop hanging around. Nah... Tommy had always taken time out to talk to him.

Bobby sighed and looked up over his head. The name was gone.

Looking at it for a moment, the thought didn't strike home. Bobby was only ten and at ten the very foundations of your world don't rock under your feet... not often, anyway. It had been bad enough when the report came that Tommy was dead... but this...

The name was gone. Scars, bright in the sun, were all that remained of the name of Thomas Archer... 'who gave his life that freedom might not die.'

The marks of the chisel were deep.

If Bobby had been a little kid of... say nine, he might have cried, but he was all grown up now. Last year he had cried... but men don't cry. Of course, it might have been saliva from the handkerchief that he wiped across his eyes that left a glint on his cheeks. He snuffled, but then, he could have had a head cold.

Then he ran. He ran as if all the fears of adulthood had been made manifest in one awful jolt. He ran and he ran as though he were trying to escape his destiny.

He ran so hard that he landed right in the center of three men. He bounced back and would have run on if one of the men hadn't grabbed him.

The man said, "Bobby! What's wrong? You hurt?"

Bobby looked up. He wouldn't have said anything, he would have pulled free and run on if it hadn't been young Sheriff Tennan who held him.

The sheriff was nice. Almost as nice as Tommy had been. Besides, the sheriff had been to war, too. He'd know what to do about all this.

"The monument." Let it be stated that when Bobby spoke, he did not cry. The tears on his cheeks were drying and somehow he had snuffled enough so that his voice was clear. "Somebody went and... and..." He pointed at the memorial.

The sheriff walked over, still holding on to the boy. He looked and saw what the boy's quivering hand was pointing at.

He swore, long and earnestly and that made the boy feel better. That was the way a man should act. Not like a blubbing kid. When the sheriff had finished relieving his feelings, he said, "Thanks for telling me, Bob."

Bob... not Bobby!

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"You better get along to school now," the sheriff said.

Bobby nodded. Grownups always ended everything that way. But at least the sheriff would find out who had done... who had chiseled... who had...

Bobby ran away. He did not run to school. He ran home. Then, and only then, safe in the cellar, in the packing box that he had fitted up as a club room, he cried. He cried as if his heart would break. But he had waited until there were no grownups to see him.

The sheriff looked all around him. He knew the scene as well as he knew his wife's face. Across the street was the school. At the corner was the drug store. Up the street a little way past the grocery was the town's only hotel. It was charitable to call the rooming house a hotel. Mrs. Hubbards did insist it was a hotel even if the only transients were occasional salesmen. Past the 'Hotel' was the town pool room and on the other side of it the bar. It was the other bar. The good one where the Rotary met was on the other side of the monument. This bar, Teddy's, was just a bar. No luncheons, no speakers giving uplifting cultural talks to the clubwomen in town, just a bar. The sheriff liked it.

The sheriff looked down the street toward the 'hotel'. By the Lord Harry, he thought. I did Mrs. Hubbards wrong. She does have a transient.

He eyed the man who had just come out of the rooming house. Tall, rather distinguished looking, good clothes, of a kind that the sheriff was more used to seeing on his infrequent trips to New York than here in Harris; the man had an air.

He didn't look like a salesman, but if he was, the sheriff was willing to bet that he was a good one. There was an aura of self confidence about the man that the sheriff liked. His colonel had been a man like that. Even when his colonel lay huddled in a fox hole, his middle gone giving directions, he had retained that air of self sufficiency.

What the... the sheriff was surprised. The man had stopped short and was now walking straight toward the monument. The sheriff made a line with his eyes that went from the monument to the roosting house. Was it possible this man had seen someone at work defacing the Honor Roll? It seemed like almost too much to hope for.

Waiting impassively, the sheriff mentally crossed his fingers. The man walked past him and looked at the inscription on the monument.

"That was a pretty filthy thing to do, wasn't it?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yes it was. Know anything about it?"

The man said, "I don't know. Whose name was chiseled off?"

"Nice kid by the name of Tommy Archer." The sheriff waited. "Mean anything to you?"

"It might in a day or two. Right now I wouldn't want to say anything."

No use in prying, the sheriff thought. This guy looked as if red hot pincers wouldn't drag a word more out of him than he felt like giving.

"I'm the sheriff, in case the badge escaped you."

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"And your name?"

"William Tennan," the sheriff said resisting an impulse to add 'sir'.

"I see. Nice town you've got here."

"Could be. Mind telling me your name?"

"Lamont Cranston."

A narrow faced woman, leaning across the back of her fence, said to her neighbor who was busy hanging some things on a line, "You've heard?"

"What?" the woman asked, busy with her work. Her back expressed her determination to get on with it and not stand chatting all morning.

"So you haven't heard!" The woman almost chortled.

The back still said, I'll have no nonsense. This better be more than the usual run of gossip.

"About the murder..." That did it! The narrow faced woman smiled. Try and give her the cold shoulder!

The woman spun around, her wash forgotten. "What murder? Who's dead?"

"Someone you know." That'd annoy her.

"Who? What are you talking about?"

"You know how you've always stood up for that stuck-up Mrs. Archer?"

"Don't tell me she's dead!"

"Worse than that!"

"Tell me!"

Feeling that the woman had suffered enough, the other unleashed her tongue. "Well! She picked up a carving knife and cut her husband to ribbons last night!"

"I don't believe it!"

"You know my Nancy is going out with Ben Fox."

"Of course."

"He was on the case last night. Says it's open and shut. Says Mrs. Archer was alone in the house, windows locked, doors locked... and there was Mr. Archer with a knife in him!"

Distorted already, the tale grew in the telling. By the time it had swept over the town of Harris like a miasma, it had become a horror story with elements of Jack the Ripper and Bluebeard. Mrs. Archer's house was a murder castle. They had found bones of ten men under the house... there was blood on all the walls...

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Standing in Teddy's bar, the sheriff looked into the dregs of his glass of ale and porter. From a booth behind him, he heard two men talking. One's voice, heavy and groggy with overtones of gin, said, "Ya can't tell me the sheriff ain't in on it. How come he didn't catch up to her till now? All them stiffs all over the house... why ain't she in jail now? Tell me one reason she ain't in jail!"

The other's thin voice said, "Heh, I could think a' some reasons. Some of them old dames are pretty good! You just ask me, kiddo. I been around, I know. Didn't Ben Franklin say..."

The sheriff never did hear the misquotation from Franklin. One of his deputies came into the bar and said, "I don't know what's come over this town. The old women have been gabbin' so you can't hear yourself think. They got that widow woman in the noose right now to hear them tell it. Why can't women keep their mouths shut?"

"Don't worry, there are plenty of male gossips. We have old women in our sex, too," the sheriff said, loud enough for his voice to penetrate the booth. "Blabbermouths with their tongues swiveling in the middle. If they had half the brains in their heads they've got in their..."

One of the men stood up in his booth. "I heard you Billy Tennan... and don't forget I'm a voter. I voted for you in the election and I can vote you out!" It was the one with the ginny voice.

"If I'd known you voted for me I would have declined the election, you old souse!" the sheriff said.

"Tennan, keep still. He has about ten votes in his family! You know that!" The deputy was horrified. "That's old Farrigen."

"If I have to pander to creeps like that I'll hand my badge in." The sheriff was annoyed. He'd had a bad night and a worse morning. He had found out not one thing about the defacing of the Honor Roll. Not a lead. Not a soul had seen anyone near the monument. No one had heard a sound in the night. He had nothing to go on.

The sheriff had another ale and porter. He drank half of it moodily and then asked his deputy, "What about that knife?"

The deputy said, "Well... that's a long story."

"Don't worry about that," the sheriff said irritably, "what about it?"

"I had the coroner wipe the blood off it," the deputy said.

CHAPTER IV

IRRITATED because the knife had no fingerprints on it, the deputy went on, he wrapped it in paper, and after it was cleaned of blood, he went walking down the street.

He came to the hardware store and went in. "Hey, Charlie." The man who owned the hardware and feed store looked up. "What's new on the murder?"

"Nothin'; listen, I got a knife here."

"Let's see it. I sell most of the cutlery in town."

The deputy unwrapped the murder knife and let it fall with a clatter on the counter. The hardware man looked

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at it and sighed. "That's a fine clue, that is!"

"What do you mean?"

"C'mere." The hardware man led the deputy to the back of the store. He pointed to a big box. A stenciled sign on the box said, "Three Gross."

"Well?" the deputy asked.

"That's about the fifth gross of them knives I've had since I been in business. That is my most popular cheap knife."

"I see. That means there's well over five hundred of these around town."

"Plus what they sell in the five and ten and in the drug store!"

The deputy picked up the knife and slowly rewrapped it in the paper. "That's a big help, that is!"

The hardware man nodded. "Bum break. She probably picked the knife because she knew everyone in town had one."

"Whaddaya mean 'she'?"

The man leaned over the counter and said confidentially, "You don't have to be secretive with me. I heard all about it. Wonder why she stabbed him?"

The deputy said, "If you know so much about it, how come you don't know that?"

"You don't have to get so uppity with me. I know what I know!"

"Then you know more than we do!" The deputy, stalked out of the store. Behind him he could hear the hardware store man going to the phone. That would get it all over town, all right.

He went to the drug store and showed the knife to the doctor. Ender practically repeated what the hardware man had. He said, "That's my most popular seller. Sorry. I can't tell you anything more than that."

"What I figured." The deputy sighed. Now that he thought about it, he had such a knife in his kitchen. He rewrapped the knife again and went out on to the street.

A high pitched voice said in his ear, "When you gonna arrest her?"

He spun around. Wouldn't you know. The worst gossip in town. Mrs. Varry. He said, "Arrest who?" Just as if he didn't know.

"You know. Her! With all her stuck-up airs!"

"The fact that she wouldn't hang over a fence and gossip doesn't mean she's a murderess," the deputy said, and regretted it the moment the words left his mouth.

Mrs. Varry drew herself up to her five feet. She said, "So that's the way the wind blows! Very well!" She flounced off.

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Groaning, the deputy wondered why he couldn't keep his mouth shut. His wife would hear about this... then it would be nag, nag, nag. His wife was in the same club as Mrs. Varry. Oh brother!

He stalked off intending to go and report to the sheriff but before he had walked ten feet he had been stopped five times by different people all with the same question that Mrs. Varry had posed. What had gotten into his friends, he wondered. These were nice people, church going people, kindly people, ordinary, charitable, just... they weren't really like this.

It was as though a disease had struck the town like an epidemic. Even the men lounging in front of the pool room called the question after him. He snarled at them and went on. If this continued, there'd be real trouble.

By the time he had made his slow way to Teddy's bar, his wife button-holed him. She said, her voice snapping, "What's this I hear? Why were you so insolent to Mrs. Varry? You know what a sweet soul she is!"

"Sweet vulture you mean!" He snapped, his patience exhausted. "Now listen to me, Hattie!"

"You listen to me! I want you to go and apologize to Mrs. Varry! I won't have you talking that way to her!"

That was just the beginning. It went on for quite a while. Finally he said, "Hattie, I don't care what you say, I'm not going to apologize to that old trouble maker. She's a witch and you know it!"

"Oh! My best friend and you say a thing like that about her!" His wife swept off in a high dudgeon. That did it. That finished up his day in fine style. He went into the cool dankness of the bar with relief.

Having finished his story, the deputy looked at the sheriff. He put the paper wrapped knife on the bar and, turning to the bartender said, "A double, and quick!"

"Getting drunk isn't going to help any," the sheriff said.

"I know it, but you don't know my wife!"

The sheriff couldn't help wondering if his wife was ever going to get that way. It seemed improbable. He put the thought out of his mind. So the knife was a bust. He hadn't figured on it too much, but it certainly would have helped.

The killer was certainly a shrewd apple. No prints... no identification of the knife... no nothing! The sheriff ordered another ale and porter. He was stuck and he knew it.

He had gone over the circumstances of the murder so often that his brain was in a muddle. Could every one in town be right and he wrong? Had Mrs. Archer killed her husband?

CHAPTER V

"HEY, you!" The deputy sounded angry. He could see that his yell hadn't stopped the man who was walking around the house at 411 Dunne Road. The man continued walking. He did say, over his shoulder, "What is it?"

Against his will, the deputy put his gun back in its holster and walked up to the interloper. "What are you doin' here bud?"

"Looking."

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"For what?"

"Just looking."

"One of them characters that have to take a gander at a joint where somebody got killed!" the deputy said.

"Ummm... no, not exactly."

"You can beat it now," the deputy said. His hand dropped to his holstered gun. "And before you go, you better identify yourself. The sheriff might wanta know whose been nosin' around here."

The tall lean man hesitated for a moment and then shrugged. From his pocket he took a wallet. He flipped it open so the deputy could see his driver's license. He asked, "Will that serve to identify me?"

"Yeah. Lamont Cranston, huh? Where you stayin'? You're no townie or I'd know you."

"I'm at the hotel... if you can call it that."

"Stick around. We may be pickin' you up, see!" the deputy said, as though he were accusing Cranston of murder.

"I can hardly wait," Cranston flipped his hand at the puzzled deputy and walked off.

In the drug store the midday rush was subsiding. Behind the counter a boy whose pimply face showed that he took most of his pay out of the ice cream cans, said, "What'll it be?"

The girl said, "Now, Johnny, you know very well I always have the same thing, Swiss on toasted whole wheat, and a coffee malted."

"With no egg," the boy said, as he popped bread into the toaster.

"With no egg, I never have an egg."

"Look, Miss Randall, I know you never have no egg..."

"Tch, tch, double negatives! What would Miss Berwick say?"

"I'm finished with school and she ain't gonna say nothin'. Like I was sayin', I know you don't get an egg, but the doc read an article one time that said that some big chain of drug stores sold about ten times as many eggs when they had the jerks say whenever anyone ordered malted, 'With an egg?' Ever since, I gotta pull that line about eggs."

"And how many extra eggs have you sold?" Kitty Randall asked, smiling.

"About three!" The soda jerk had the malted in the machine. He turned about as he heard a man's voice.

The voice asked, "Is the doctor in?"

"Out in the back like always," the boy said.

"Thank you." The man went behind the counter at the back of the store.

MURDER ON MAIN STREET

The soda jerk said, "Where'd he come from?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I never saw him before. Nice looking, isn't he?" Kitty asked.

"Yare, if you like men. Me, I like girls." The boy leered. Of course, the pimples rather spoiled the effect, but it was a leer. He had practiced it in front of the bathroom mirror and was proud of it.

The girl smiled and said, "isn't that toast I smell burning?"

"Ulp." The boy turned to the toaster. Clouds of dense black smoke came out of it.

From the back of the store an irate voice called, "Johnny if you're fooling around with the girls again and let that bread burn I'm going to take it out of your pay!"

The boy whispered, "If he takes another dime out of my salary I'm gonna owe him money for the week."

Out in the back of the store, Dr. Ender looked up from his account book, "Uh, what can I do for you?" The man didn't look familiar. In a town of four thousand souls, there couldn't be someone he didn't know.

"Dr. Ender?" the man asked.

"Yep. What can I do for you?" The man looked around the dusty room. Apothecary scales, a mortar and pestle, stethoscope, drugs in bottles, some surgical instruments, medical books, medical magazines were all piled on each other. Dust covered all.

"Country doc has to be a bit of a jack of all trades, you know," the doctor said.

"So I see." The man looked down at Ender. "My name is Lamont Cranston."

"How do. Want a physical check up?" the doctor asked, "Examination room's back of this. Step in there and I'll..."

"No, I'm not here to see you in your medical capacity," Cranston said. "I'd like some information on the death of Mr. Archer last night. You know about what happened to young Archer's name on the Honor Roll?"

The doctor nodded. "Damndest thing I ever heard about."

"Could I prevail on you to give me an account of the murder?"

The doctor leaned back in his swivel chair. He hooked his thumbs through his suspenders. "Well, sir. You've come to the right man. I was practically an eye witness."

Ender gave the story in complete detail. When he had finished, Cranston asked, "Can you tell me more about this neighbor, Jason?"

"He's got something wrong with his head. I can tell you that. The Army gave him the bum's rush believe me!"

"What was wrong, do you know? Schizoid? Paranoid? Badly psychoneurotic, or what?" Cranston asked.

Rocking back and forth in his chair, the doctor said, "Words! Just words. Maybe I'm old school. But to me either a person is normal or they're batty. I don't go in for all this gibberish!"

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"There's nothing else you can tell me?"

"Nope, can't think of anything."

"Thanks. I'll be seeing you." Cranston got up. The doctor rose, too.

They walked out into the drug store where sundries were piled high on the tables. The doctor said, "Tcha! It's a shame. In my father's time, a man could be a doctor or a druggist. He didn't have to be both to make a living. And if he was a druggist, by God, he was a druggist, not a sandwich maker and a salesman for books, hot water bottles, and electric irons!"

Nodding agreeably, Cranston left the store.

The sheriff sat in his office. He felt stupid. He wondered if he should have tried to stay on in the city. Evidently he wasn't a very good sheriff. He felt low. Defeated by circumstance. There just was nothing for him to get his teeth into. For the hundredth time he went over the murder. How had a killer gotten into the house? He pulled the phone to him. Over his head were big 'Wanted' posters. As he asked for his number, he wondered if he ought to put out a poster saying, "Killer Wanted."

His connection through, he said, "Mrs. Randall? Is Mrs. Archer still there with you?"

"Why... yes. Who is this?"

"The sheriff. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Why, of course. I'll call Mary to the phone."

He waited.

Mrs. Archer's voice, dry, self controlled, said, "Yes?"

"Just before... you know... before Mr. Archer was..." The sheriff swore at himself. He sounded like a kid. "Mrs. Archer! Where were you just before your husband was killed?"

"Before? Let me see... I went upstairs to get his slippers for him... his feet hurt..." That did it. Her voice trembled.

"Then he was alone for, how long would you say?"

"I... I went upstairs and found his slippers in the closet... then I noticed there was some dust on the bureau. I wiped it off... I stood there... my son's picture is on my bureau... I just stood and looked at it for perhaps five minutes. Then I came down. It was then I saw..."

"I see. Thank you Mrs. Archer. All my apologies for bothering you at a time like this."

Her voice was strong suddenly. She said, "Sheriff, have you found the vandal that desecrated the memorial?"

"Not yet, ma'm. But I'm working on it. I'll find out who did it, don't you worry!"

"I'm not worried. I'd just like to get my hands..."

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She was turning some of her sorrow into anger, that was clear, the sheriff thought. He hung up. So there was a period when she was away from Archer. If someone had come to the door... no, she would have heard the bell. In his mind's eye, the sheriff saw the living room. If someone had come to the window, someone whom Archer knew... and if that someone had tapped on the window, Archer would have gone to the door. And then...

That got the killer into the house. If only Doc Ender wasn't so sure that no one came out of the front door. That would be the same thing.

The sheriff could see a killer going in the front door, stabbing Archer, turning around and going right out the front door. But at that time the doctor had been pulling up in front of the house. He would have seen anyone coming out of the door. As a matter of fact, if he had seen the person come out, perhaps he wouldn't still have that egg on his head.

The killer could not have gone out the back kitchen door, the sheriff knew, for in his mind's eye he could picture the chain on the door. You couldn't go out of a door and then hook a chain behind you, that was a sure thing!

Perhaps, the sheriff thought, getting to his feet impatiently, another examination of the house, this time by daylight, would clear some of the cobwebs out of his brain.

He walked, hard heeled, out of his office. He looked so angry that one of his deputies skidded out of the way as he walked toward him.

"Sheriff," the man said, hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"The town's in a turmoil. Honest, I haven't seen everyone so upset since the last presidential election. They all want to know why you haven't arrested Mrs. Archer!"

"You can tell them for me..."

Reading the expression on his superior's face, the deputy said hurriedly, "Not me! I won't tell them anything like that. Me. I have to live in this town!"

"Tell them," the sheriff sounded less angry, "that I haven't arrested her because I'm the sheriff and I have to have some evidence before I arrest anyone! I can't go on gossip!"

The deputy and the sheriff reached the street as the sheriff finished. A man standing in the street said, "Doesn't seem possible that the word gossip originally meant a god-parent, does it?"

The sheriff did a double take. It was Lamont Cranston. "God-parent? How's that?"

"God's sib. God's sibling, sibling meaning blood relation. God's relation, thus god-parent. But the words were easily slurred from God's sib to gossip..."

"That's interesting," the sheriff said. It had broken his black mood, anyway. "Can I drop you anywhere?"

"I'd like, with your permission, to examine the Archer house if I may."

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"Pile into the car. I'm on my way there. If, on the way, you can give me any good reason I should allow an outsider to poke around in my murder, why I may let you look the place over."

The car was driving down Main Street by now. "I don't know if I can convince you of my bona fides. In New York, I have on occasion been able to help the police and particularly Commissioner Weston on some few cases."

"Ah! Now I have it. I wondered why your face and name seemed so familiar. So you're that Cranston! Tell you what. I'll check on the phone out at Archer's. If you are who you say you are, why the sky's the limit. Okay? No hard feelings?"

"Of course not. I'll be glad to call New York. Would a word from Joe Cardona of Homicide do?"

"Sure would. I heard about him when I was in training for the cops." The sheriff grinned. "He must be quite a guy."

On the short drive to the house, Cranston regaled the young sheriff with some stories about Cardona. The sheriff said, as they drew up in front of the house, "But I'll bet he... or you, for that matter, never had a kill where the murderer seemingly walked through the walls... or else out of locked and barred windows."

"Don't be too sure." Cranston smiled. "I've had cases where killers seemed to do even more improbable things than that." He paused. "It was just on the surface, though."

"This doesn't just seem to be the case. C'mon in and I'll give you the details."

The two men of law got out of the car and walked toward the house. It seemed like a quiet middle-class house. You couldn't tell that murder had struck there once... and was to strike again!

CHAPTER VI

THERE was crepe hanging on the door. The sheriff bent down and peered in one of the windows. He said, "Someone's in there. A woman."

"Probably Mrs. Archer," Cranston said.

"Of course... she'll have to prepare for the funeral. If the idiots in this town don't force me to arrest her first."

"That's rather far-fetched, isn't it?" Cranston asked.

"Certainly... it's almost as though there was active venom at work. Our town's people may not be angels, but they generally show more sense than this..." The sheriff's voice dribbled off. He was deep in thought.

"What is it? An idea occur to you?"

"You bet! I'll check on the phone." The sheriff rapped his knuckle on the door.

"Hello," Mrs. Archer said. "Can I help you?"

"We'd just like to look things over. You haven't touched anything in the living room have you?"

"No," she snapped, "that idiot of a deputy won't let me into my own living room!"

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"Those were my orders, Mrs. Archer. Sorry." The sheriff didn't look very sorry.

He went directly to the phone. After getting Cardona, who raved about Cranston, he dialed another number. He got his number and said, "Charlie? You know all this rumpus that's being kicked up about... yeah... well, go nosing around and see if Bummy Byers is in back of it."

The sheriff turned back to Cranston. "That Byers... don't know why I didn't think of it before. He's been sheriff in these parts for twenty years. I defeated him last time. He swore he'd get back in office. I won't be the least surprised if he's the one who's stirring everyone up!"

"Could be," Cranston said, his eyes busy on the scene of the crime. The deputy stood to one side behind the chair in which Archer had been stabbed.

Cranston strode to the window and examined the locking arrangement. No hocus pocus with threads or strings could lock them. They had to be locked from the inside.

Mrs. Archer was standing in the doorway. Her face was composed. Cranston said, and his voice was like a whip lash, "When did you last see your uncle Jenkins, Mrs. Archer?"

"Uncle Jenkins... how in tarnation do you know him, young man?"

"Please answer Mr. Cranston's question, Mrs. Archer," the sheriff said. This was more like it. Evidently Cranston knew more about this than he had said.

"If you know so much," Mrs. Archer said tartly, "you should know he's my uncle-in-law. He was my husband's uncle."

Cranston nodded. "I know that. My question still stands! When did you see him last?"

"Must be nigh onto twenty years, if it's a day. Nasty old man he was."

"You've had no contact with him since then?"

"Not a smitch! My husband and he had a fight about the way he held my hand all the time. We never saw the old skinflint again!"

"You will give me your word on that?" Cranston asked seriously.

"I'm not given to lying, young man."

"I see. You did not know that he died about three weeks ago?"

"Land sakes, no!" she said thoughtfully, "I can't be a hypocrite and say I'm sorry for I'm not. He was mean and stingy. Oh... he was hateful."

"Hateful or not..," Cranston said, "his will has just been filed for probate."

She looked slightly interested. "What did he leave his money to? A home for banjo players?"

"He left slightly over two hundred thousand dollars to your son."

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Mrs. Archer's face crumpled. It looked as though a handful of clay had been crushed in an angry hand. "For Tommy... if he had lived..."

She left the room.

The door bell rang. The sheriff sent his deputy to answer it. An ill assorted duo walked into the room. Kitty Randall and slightly behind her, Jimmy Jason.

"Billy Tennan," Kitty said, "long time no see. How's Sally?"

"Fine, Kitty, just fine. We're happy." The sheriff grinned. He still hadn't gotten accustomed to having people inquire about his wife.

"Is there anything I can do to help Mrs. Archer?" Kitty asked.

"Run upstairs. She's pretty upset. Turns out if Tommy had lived he'd have been a rich man... Uncle just died..."

She looked startled and turning, ran up the stairs. The sheriff explained to Cranston, "Tommy's fiancée. Fine girl."

"When were they to have been married?" Cranston asked.

"Soon as he got out of the Army," Jason answered. The sheriff looked at him in surprise.

"How come you know so much about it, Jason?"

The man smirked. "I know plenty I ain't tellin'." He put his back to the wall. "Plenty."

"You don't say." The sheriff got up and paced toward Jason. "I made a promise to myself that when I became sheriff that I'd quit if I ever had to use the third degree on a person... but that doesn't mean I can't use it before I quit office."

Jason grinned weakly. "Relax... whatcha wanna know? I know lots... I know the lady next door never wears any nightgown when she goes to bed... I know somethin' about the people across the street too... they..." The sheriff slapped Jason across the mouth.

"Ben," the sheriff said to his deputy, "take this down to the jail. Throw him in the drunk tank. I'll be down later to talk to him."

The deputy tossed the chain of a 'comealong' around Jason's wrist. He pulled and Jason was dragged toward the door.

Before they got to the door, Cranston said in a low voice, "Suppose, Jason, just suppose I told some of the people around town that you chiseled Thomas Archer's name off the memorial list last night?"

The sheriff answered, "He'd be tarred and feathered!"

Jason opened his mouth to protest. Cranston gestured for the deputy to take the sniveling man out.

When the door closed, the sheriff said, "Got any proof? Think he really did it?"

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"I haven't the vaguest idea," Cranston said. "I think the killer did it. If Jason is the murderer, then I think he defaced the Honor Roll."

"But..."

"You'll find," Cranston said, "that letting him sit and stew about whether we are going to tell the town folks that he took Tommy's name off the monument will soften him up much more than clouting him around with a rubber hose."

The sheriff said, "Oh," weakly.

"Pain can only hurt just so much," Cranston said didactically. "A brave man can stand an inconceivable amount of real pain. Imagined pain however, is infinite! Let a man brood about what is going to happen to him and he'll collapse much faster than if you actually hit him."

"Jason should be pretty softened up by the time I get around to talking to him if that's the case. He's an awful coward."

Cranston went back to examining the room. The sheriff asked, "What's all this about Mr. Archer's uncle?"

"Jenkins," Cranston said. "He was murdered!"

CHAPTER VII

"HE was killed by someone who knew him well enough to realize he was a miser. That he could not resist something for nothing."

"How's that?" the sheriff asked. Above him he could hear high-heeled shoes. Kitty must be walking the floor with the widow, he thought.

"It's an old, old gag. The killer sent a box of chocolates with an advertisement that said the candy was a giveaway. All the person who received the box needed do was fill out a form saying whether he liked the candy or not."

"The candy was poisoned?"

"Indeed yes. Loaded with arsenic."

"Arsenic!" The sheriff pondered. "That's easy to get. Rat killers have it."

"It's even in some fly papers, as you may know. This seemed to have been soaked from fly paper. The candies were so full of it that each was potential death," Cranston said. "Jenkins ate the whole box before he died. He economized on food the day he ate it. There was nothing else in his stomach at autopsy."

"This is getting maniacal," the sheriff said. "It's beginning to sound like the Fall of the House of Archer."

Cranston nodded. "It's up to us to get a move on. To date the killer hasn't even been stalemated, let alone checked."

"You play chess?" the sheriff asked eagerly.

MURDER ON MAIN STREET

"A little, why?"

"So do I. There's no one in town who'll play anything but checkers though. Maybe we can have a game."

"Very well," Cranston agreed. "In the meanwhile, may I suggest that if Jason really does know anything, he may be in danger. I don't think that jail bars would keep out a killer who managed to get through these walls." Cranston gestured at the walls of the room.

"Check." The sheriff went to the phone and called the jail. He gave orders to someone to keep a sharp eye on Jason. Then, in an altered voice, he said, "And you listen to me, Margie, if this gets all over town I'll have your scalp!" He hung up.

He turned to Cranston and explained, "These small town phone operators have ears like stethoscopes."

Grinning, Cranston said that he knew that only too well.

"Want to look over the rumpus room?" the sheriff asked, eagerly. He was not too proud to ask Cranston for help. Or anyone, for that matter. He'd have listened to a parrot if he thought the parrot knew anything.

They went upstairs, avoiding the bed room in which the two women were talking in low voices. The sheriff opened the door of the rumpus and said, "Here it is. Watch out for the footprints in the dust."

He saw Cranston's eye light on the Japanese puzzle box. Cranston said, "Have you opened that?"

"Why no... it's just one of those boxes with a lock that doesn't need a key. You know, a puzzle box."

"Perhaps it is also the 'ladder'!" Cranston said.

"What?" The sheriff walked across the dusty floor disregarding his own injunction. He squatted down on his heels and looked at the box. He could see no keyway. He said, "You know how this opens?"

Cranston nodded. "Put it on the bar."

Lifting the box, the sheriff was surprised by the weight of it. Cranston pressed his forefingers down on the edges of the box. There was a muffled click and the top popped open.

The sheriff didn't quite know what he had been expecting, but if it had been a folding ladder, he was disappointed. For inside the box there was, of all things, another box.

Cranston pressed on the ends of this and again a muffled click precluded the opening of a top. The sheriff leaned forward eagerly to see what was inside this inner box. Once again he was disappointed.

Inside the inner box was still another box. This box was no more than eight inches square.

In the bedroom, Mrs. Archer dried her eyes with her handkerchief. She said, "That's enough of this crying. I won't get upset again. Thank you, my dear."

"Isn't there something else I can do for you? I feel so helpless," Kitty Randall said.

"Just being here, is enough my dear." Mrs. Archer looked at a little boudoir clock on top of her bureau. "Shouldn't you be back at work, dear?"

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"What time is it?"

"After two."

"Good heavens! I shall have to run. Sure there's nothing I can do... or bring you?"

"Not a thing in the world. Thank you again my dear." Mrs. Archer's sorrow worn face relaxed into a sweet smile that gave some idea of how she must have looked before she was so overwhelmed. Her face had good lines.

She sighed as Kitty left. What a couple Tommy and Kitty would have made. She blinked her eyes. No use crying over spilled milk. She looked at herself in the mirror over her bureau. She couldn't allow those two men to see her looking this way.

She made an attempt with powder and a little rouge to hide the damage that her tears had made. She was bent over toward the mirror when the window broke.

There wasn't time between the crash of the glass and the crash of the bullet that killed her to let her know what had happened. Her face was in repose as she fell to the floor.

There was a second crash of glass before silence descended. The bullet went on and broke the mirror she had been looking into. Shards of glass fell to the floor. Then the corpse was alone but for one companion... death.

In the rumpus room the sound of the shot made the sheriff leap for the door. Maybe it was because of his bum leg, or maybe it was because Cranston moved faster than anyone he had ever seen, but it was Lamont Cranston who went through the door first.

Ten feet down the hall and then stopping just in front of the door, Cranston stopped, pulled back one leg, and sent it crashing into the door. As the door slammed open, Cranston threw himself to one side. The sheriff grinned, even at that moment. There was a man who had been around. No walking into a death trap for Cranston!

Looking through the open door from the side of the jamb, Cranston could see that but for the woman who was on the floor the room was empty.

He entered then. Dropping to one knee he felt for a pulse. Nothing. He stood up to make way for the sheriff. The sheriff said, "No dice?"

"No heart beat," Cranston said, and looked at the splintered window and then at the broken mirror on the bureau.

"Killed with me in the house! That's just dandy, that is!"

"It won't help you to be reelected, that's a sure thing."

"What do I care about that? The poor woman... first her son, then her husband, and now this... now the people in this town had better shut their blating tongues or I'm going to go on the war path..." The sheriff looked up at Cranston. The man was standing at the window. He had picked his position carefully so as not to crush the shards of glass from the window. He was looking out the window. His eyes seemed to be focused in the middle distance.

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Getting up from the cadaver, the sheriff said, "What is it?"

Cranston said, "Maybe something, maybe not. Look."

The sheriff followed the direction of Cranston's gaze. On a direct line from the window, unobscured by anything, was the building where his office was. There were houses in between but the house they were in was on enough of a knoll so that there was nothing to stop a bullet for three blocks.

And in that building, under that roof, was the jail. And the drunk tank was on this side of the building! He had ordered Jason thrown in the tank!

"If it was Jason who did this, I shall feel like a murderer!" The sheriff said.

"Nonsense. There is nothing for you to accuse yourself about. However, it would be a good idea, I should think, for us to go take a look in the jail."

Silently the two men walked downstairs. Cranston waited while the sheriff phoned for his men to come out and repeat the things they had done just the night before.

"Although three blocks away as the crow flies... or a bullet," the sheriff said, "it's closer to five when you drive."

Cranston nodded.

The car pulled up in front of the jail. The sheriff swore. Cranston followed the direction of the sheriff's eyes. The sheriff was looking at a forty-year-old man who was holding forth on a street corner. The man had a paunch but he looked solid, solid as muscle can be.

Cranston asked, "Who's that?"

"Bummy Byers and kicking up trouble as usual. I told him to keep his mouth shut... now maybe I'll have to shut it for him." The sheriff got out of the car and walked toward the man who was saying in a loud voice, "And if I was sheriff I'd show this town a thing or two. I'd throw that Archer woman in jail so fast it'd make her head spin."

The townspeople gathered around Byers nodded their heads in agreement. The sheriff, coming into the circle, elbowed some people out of his way.

He said, "Byers, I asked you to keep that flapping mouth of yours shut!"

"No cripple's orderin' me around! You want me to shut up, Gimpy, you gotta make me!"

The crowd of people looked a little shocked. Gossipers they might be, but this was beyond the pale. They backed off a bit making low sounds.

"You've been trying for this a longtime, Bummy," the sheriff said quietly. "Trying to show me up. Trying to get me in a fight and show how much more physically fit you are! Think that'll help in the next election? Think you can get back in and hire all your relatives as deputies?"

Byers smiled showing jagged brown teeth. He spat some tobacco at the sheriff's foot. He said, "G'wan, you're too yellow to fight. I know your kind."

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The people, backing away, made a kind of ring around the two men. Cranston forced his way through them. He stood to one side. He said, "Need any help, sheriff?"

"You might keep some of Byers' relatives off my back in case I fall. They like to give the boots in a fight."

"I see." Cranston eyed some men who had been edging nearer to the two men. "I'll make sure it's a fair fight if you want to fight."

"I don't want to fight but there'll be no living in this town if I let this go by," the sheriff said. His face was tense. He was waiting, prepared for anything that Byers might do.

He was prepared for everything but what Byers did. The man's stocky leg shot out and kicked the sheriff in his lame leg, just under the knee cap. He fell to the ground.

The men in the circle grunted. Cranston said, "I'll take over if you want me to."

Teeth showing as he bit his lip, the sheriff said nothing. His arms whipped out. He grabbed Byers by the ankles and yanked him toward him. The stocky man fell.

His head hit the concrete with that sickening thud, like a melon hitting, that a head always makes. His face contorted. He said, "I'll break you in half."

The two men suddenly became a flurry of movement. Cranston watched the fight out of the corner of his eye as he kept his attention on a man who had a family resemblance to Byers. The man was near the sheriff. His leg was drawn back as though ready to kick out at the sheriff's head.

Cranston reached out with the side of his hand and clipped the man behind the neck. The man's head shot forward and he grunted. Cranston said, "I wouldn't if I were you."

The man faded back in the crowd, his hand rubbing his assaulted neck.

The men on the ground had stopped rolling over and over. They were in the gutter. The sheriff had managed to be on top when they had fallen from the sidewalk. Byers was under him. He smashed down with all his strength at the man's chin.

His head went back and hit the road. The sheriff stood up and looked down at Byers who shook his head from side to side. "Enough?" the sheriff asked.

Byers got to his feet. "Yeah. I got enough." The sheriff relaxed and started to turn around.

Cranston saw a flicker of movement and called out, "Tennan! Look out!"

Byers had brought a rabbit punch down on the sheriff's neck. The sheriff warned, had moved enough so that it landed on his shoulders instead of on the sensitive nerve centers at the top of the spine.

This time when he turned around his face was blank of expression. Byers stood his ground and as the sheriff turned, clipped him on the side of the face. A heavy ring on Byers' hand ripped the flesh off the sheriff's cheek.

The sheriff, stepping heavily forward, paid no attention to the blow. He hunched over and sent a solid right into Byers' belly. The man grunted but whipped out a looping right that caught the sheriff on the button.

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If they had been wearing gloves it would have knocked the sheriff out. But bare knuckles, although they hurt much more, do not have the stunning effect of gloves. Blood spurted from the sheriff's mouth.

He was to one side of Byers. He sent a strange blow. His fist didn't come anywhere near Byers. His elbow, looping around, did. With all the sheriff's strength behind it, the looping elbow blow caught Byers on the side of the chin. Cranston, who had seen many street fights, said, "That does it." He turned away from the fight as Byers fell to the ground.

He kept an eye on the crowd, making sure that none of the fallen man's friends came forward to attack the sheriff.

The men in the crowd were silent as they looked down at Byers. His jaw looked strange, part of it was sunken in. His eyes were open, but he said nothing. Peculiar mewling sounds came from his distorted mouth.

The sheriff, wiping the blood off his cheek, said, "That was for the kick in the knee, Byers." He looked down at the man. Byers was crying, tears streamed from his eyes. "Your jaw is broken. It's telescoped in on itself," the sheriff said coldly. "It'll be a month at least before you start blabbering again!"

He turned away. Cranston said, "I'd prefer charges against him if I were you. If you don't, he may."

"That's right," the sheriff said, "he struck the first blow, didn't he. That means he's guilty of assault and battery. Good. This is all an off shoot of the murder. Hasn't been a street fight in this town in years." His cheek clean of blood, the sheriff showed no signs of the fight, but that he favored his leg more than usual.

They walked up the stairs to the building. Sheriff Tennan said harshly to a man lounging in the hall, "Anyone in the tank but Jason?"

"Nah. We never have any trade except on Saturday night, you know that, sheriff."

Cranston was at the sheriff's side as they approached the barred enclosure that on occasion could hold as many as ten men. Now there was a single figure in it. That figure was Jason's. He lay sprawled on the hard jail cot. He was sound asleep. Or, if he wasn't sleeping, the sheriff thought, he was faking it well. He leaned over the sleeping man after he and Cranston entered the cell.

No tell-tale flicker from the eye lids as there would be if the man were holding his eyes shut. No... as far as the sheriff could see, Jason was sleeping the sleep of the just... or unjust.

He looked up. Cranston stretched up, looking out the one window in the cell. The sheriff stood up too. He looked out the window. Framed in bars he could see the window in the Archer house... he thought he could see the broken glass, but that was probably his imagination.

"With a good rifle and telescopic sights," said Cranston, "a decent rifle shot should be able to do a lot of damage from here."

"I'm no great shakes of a shot... and I could do it," the sheriff said. He looked down from the window to the sleeping man. Something glinted between the cot and the wall. The sheriff reached down and picked up the glinting object.

He held it up. "See this?"

"It's a shell. Looks big enough to be a .30 .30. But I suppose it isn't that big," Cranston said, after glancing at

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the rifle shell.

The sheriff was down on his hands and knees. He looked under the cot. There wasn't much else to search, the cell was so bare. "No rifle."

"Doesn't add up, does it? No man would be shrewd enough to get a rifle into a jail, then get rid of it... only to forget about the exploded cartridge."

"No sane man," the sheriff agreed. "But this..." He pointed to Jason, "is hardly sane."

"True." Cranston looked again at the sleeping man. He bent over. He found something too. It was, the sheriff saw, a piece of white string. The kind of string that they wrap bundles with.

"What can that be for?" Cranston said. "It might explain how a prisoner could get rid of a rifle. Have your men look on the roof in the immediate neighborhood."

Puzzled, the sheriff obeyed. He looked back as they left the tank. Jason was still asleep. Only a maniac would kill an innocent woman and then go fast asleep... the sheriff was sure of that.

Time passed slowly. The sheriff said, "If my men are ever going to find anything, they should soon." He paused, looked back at the chess board that they were both bent over, and said, "Anyway you're in a jam. Look at your knight."

"I am?" Cranston smiled. He moved his queen. "Check."

"Oh, brother! This thing must have me more upset than I thought." The sheriff looked up eagerly. One of his deputies came in holding an expensive looking rifle in his hands.

It was cracked across the butt. The 'scope' on the barrel was bent. Again, the sheriff thought, no sane man would do that, not to a lovely rifle.

He took it from the man. Cranston reached in his pocket and took out the string he had found in Jason's cot. There was a black smudge on the center of the string. One end of the string was tied in a small loop.

Cranston said, "There is an old Parisian Apache trick that was resurrected during the war by the Underground. Let me demonstrate with a smaller gun. May I borrow your pistol?" he asked the deputy.

The sheriff scowled with concentration. He didn't get this at all.

Apaches? Underground? A piece of string? It didn't hang together. But it did when Cranston demonstrated.

CHAPTER VIII

PUTTING the little loop of string around his forefinger, Cranston let the free end of the string go through the trigger guard of the deputy's pistol. Then he picked up the free end of string and brought it up to the fingers of his right hand which already had the loop of string on the first finger.

That done, he began to whirl the pistol around. It gathered speed. It made a blue steel arc around in front of him.

The sheriff, watching, thought if anyone looked in and saw this they'd think we were as loopy as Jimmy

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Jason.

"Imagine," Cranston said, "that I am whirling this in the open... or from a jail window. When it was whirling around fast enough, I would release the free end of the string. The loop on my finger would be held, the string would whip out and the gun would whip off into space just as surely as did the little stone that David slung at Goliath!"

It was, in effect, a primitive catapult.

Letting the gun slow down, Cranston said, "The Apache would hold someone up... perhaps kill them... then... if there was any sign of the 'flics', or police, the Apache would whirl the gun off into space. All evidence gone, he would face the gendarme with a free conscience. You may not realize it, but a heavy object like a pistol; swung this way, will fly up and over a five-story apartment building!"

The deputy said, "We found the rifle across the street, five houses down..."

"If Jason," the sheriff said slowly, "had thrown the empty shell out the window... and the string, there'd have been no proof that he had even seen the rifle."

"The Underground," Cranston said, as if there had been no interruption, "took over the old Apache trick. They'd chance it and shoot an S.S. man... or a Gestapo agent, and then, ridding themselves of the gun, stand pat and look innocent."

The phone interrupted this time. The sheriff picked it up and heard, "Hi, this is Bascomb... out at the Archer house."

"Uh huh. Go ahead. What about... Mrs. Archer?"

"You know all about that, she was shot all right. But listen, I found a whole flock of threatening letters in a cigar box in Mr. Archer's clothes closet!"

"Bring 'em down right quick!" The sheriff hung the receiver back on the hook. He said to Cranston, "Maybe our side is getting a break." He relayed the message about the letters.

"Good... but don't be too disappointed if they don't help too much," Cranston said.

The letters when they arrived were wrapped in string. The envelopes had been discarded evidently, for the letters were just folded on themselves and stuffed in the box. Seemingly they were in something like chronological order, for the threats increased in intensity as Cranston and the sheriff went through the pile.

An occasional letter was dated. One went back almost six years, as Cranston pointed out to the sheriff. For a long time the letters went, 'Your doom is on you.' Merely that, and nothing more. Then as time went on, the sentence was expanded. 'Your doom is on you, it is near... very near.'

The three last letters were more precise. They said, 'You will die, Thomas Archer, and die horribly... you know why. But I, I know when.'

Cranston put down the last letter and looked at the youthful face of the sheriff. "Must have been uncomfortable for Mr. Archer to live with this hanging over his head."

"Plenty uncomfortable. He was a cardiac case, you know. I wonder if the killer expected him to die of a heart

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attack?"

"The murderer was disappointed if that was his plan," Cranston said.

"Looks to me as if Archer never even showed these to his wife."

"Uh huh," Cranston agreed. "A brave man."

"So after hounding Archer for six years, the killer finally struck. I wonder... it must have almost been a relief for Archer to meet the person who had been threatening him for all those years..." The sheriff stopped as a thought occurred to him. He picked up the phone. Cranston examined one of the letters carefully while the sheriff was waiting for his connection. Whoever had sent the letters had taken no chance of being identified by handwriting or typewriter. The letters were carefully cut out of a book on typography. Each single letter was pasted down separately.

The sheriff said, "Kitty? Kitty Randall? Hi, it will help me if you remember something. How long were you going out with Tommy?"

He paused. "Long as that, eh? And how long ago was it that Jason made all that stink when he proposed to you, and you and your family and Tommy's family all went into a huddle and gave him his walking papers?"

Another pause, and then, "Six years ago... that's when I thought. Thanks a lot, Kitty... I better tell you this before you hear it from somebody else," he cleared his throat, "Mrs. Archer died this afternoon." There was a long pause this time. "Shot." Then, "I know... I am, too... I'd give anything to have been able to prevent it."

He hung up carefully, quietly. He turned to Cranston and said, "I thought I remembered a big fuss about six years ago..."

"Just about the time that the letters began to threaten Mr. Archer," Cranston said.

"Yup." The sheriff stood up. "I'm going to go and have my talk with Jason now. Want to come along?"

Cranston said, "No, I'll leave that to you. I have some things to do. I think we better end this mess tonight, although I don't think the killer has any more plans."

"Tonight?" The sheriff was astounded. "You mean you have enough to go on?"

"Just about enough," Cranston said. "See you later."

The sheriff watched him go to the door. He was puzzled. Standing in the doorway, Cranston said, "Bring Jason out to the Archer house about eight o'clock and I'll show you how a killer could go through solid walls."

"No kidding!" the sheriff said but Cranston was gone.

CHAPTER IX

HIS face was aching now, the sheriff realized, as he looked at Jason. He rubbed it as he said harshly, "Wake up."

Jason stirred. He knuckled his eyes. "Time to eat?"

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The sheriff grabbed Jason by the shoulder and pulled him off the cot. He slammed him down into a wooden chair. He thought, as he did it, I'm taking out the fight with Byers on this maniac. I'm getting even for the murders... and the way the town's behaving. It's not fair.

Jason looked startled. He said, "Hey, what's with you, sheriff?" The sheriff grabbed a handful of the man's hair and yanked his head back so that Jason was staring right into the bare bulb in the ceiling. He said, "You killed the two of them."

Shaking his head, no, Jason said, "No. Tennan, honest... no..." The sheriff rubbed the knuckles of his right hand with the fingers of his left. He said, "I've had one fight today... I can stand another one, if you can."

"No sheriff... believe me, I didn't kill him!"

"But did you kill her?"

"Who?"

The sheriff looking at Jason, thought, dully, oh fine, now he's gonna pretend he doesn't even know about Mrs. Archer's death. Aloud, he said, "You didn't stand up at that window this afternoon and send a bullet into Mrs. Archer's back?"

"No... no... I didn't, sheriff! Don't!" Jason's eyes followed the sheriff's fist.

Dropping his hand to his side the sheriff went over and sat down on the cot. He looked at Jason. "I can't understand a man like you, Jason. I confess it, you baffle me. How could you stab a nice, inoffensive old man like Mr. Archer... and what kind of a kick did you get out of shooting her..."

"I've read about things like that in books about abnormal psychology... but still I don't understand... I suppose it started with you pulling the wings off flies when you were a kid. It always does in the books."

"You got me all wrong, sheriff. I don't like to cause pain. That's one of the reasons I got a Section Eight out of the Army. I faint when I see pain."

"You faint because you get so much pleasure out of it, eh?" The sheriff's young face was harsh. In the raw light, the bruises from the fight showed.

Jason looked at the sheriff curiously. "What a funny idea!"

"You pretending it's not true?"

"It's not. Sheriff, did you tell the people in town that I chiseled Tommy's name off the monument?"

Remembering what Cranston had said about mental pain, the sheriff said, "Got you worried, eh?"

"C'mon, tell me. Didja?" Jason pleaded.

"Didn't think anyone saw you out in the rain. Thought you got away with it clean!" The sheriff stood up. Cranston was right. Jason looked much more worried about this than he had when he had been threatened with a fist.

The sheriff walked to the cell door. "See you a bit later, Jason." He grinned.

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Jason didn't like the look of that smile. "Tell me before you go! Do they think I did it?"

"Sure, they know it!" The sheriff lied as he left.

Perhaps an hour later, Jason looked up. He heard a sound out in the hall. His door, the door to his cell, opened. He scowled at the man who entered. He said, "What do you want?"

The man said, "Not much, I just want to talk to you."

"Haven't you caused enough trouble telling the people I chiseled the name off the Honor Roll? They'll be after me if I ever get out of here."

"What makes you think you'll ever get out of here?" Cranston asked.

Jason buried his head in his hands. He stayed that way for a long minute and said, "Well, they won't hang me!"

"Going to plead, insanity?" Cranston asked pleasantly.

"Go away, stop bothering me."

"I'll leave as soon as I've talked to you for a bit."

CHAPTER X

WHEN the Sheriff finished with Jason, he was exhausted. He looked dully at the clock on the jail wall. It was seven thirty. Just time to get some coffee... he realized he hadn't eaten, he hadn't called his wife. He went to the phone and called home. His wife chided him for not having eaten. He hung up with a smile. There was a gal! Not a word about not having called up about not being home for dinner. Just worried about his not having been fed.

He went downstairs and across the street to a lunch counter. He sat down at the counter heavily. The chef, a man named Cooky, said, "Hey, sheriff! Don't tell me the honeymoon is over so quick! It was only a couple of months ago you was tellin' me how you weren't goin' to get ulcers in here any more!"

The sheriff said, "Work. Let me have a hamburger and some coffee." It was only then that he looked at the man whom he was sitting next to. He said, "Hello, doc."

Doctor Ender said, "Sheriff, you look pooped. Trouble?"

"Plenty."

"Can I help?"

"No thanks, that fellow Cranston seems to be taking care of me. He says he's going to clean the case up tonight!"

"Good! That's the best news I've heard in a long time." The doctor spooned up some of his "Yankee Pot Roast and Gravy, Two Potatoes, One Vegetable, Roll and Butter, Sixty Five Cents."

The sheriff gulped his coffee greedily. He pushed the hamburger into his mouth. It tasted like straw as far as

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he was concerned, but he supposed he'd better have something in his stomach.

He said, "You heard about Mrs. Archer?"

"Yes... I just can't find the words to express my feelings. It's..." The doctor made a face. "In one way I'm glad, though. It shut up the stupid wagging tongues here in town that were blabbing about Mrs. Archer killing her husband. As if Mary could have hurt anyone or anything!"

Cooky leaned forward between them with his elbows in his hands. "Lots of people, you know, are saying that Mrs. Archer killed herself in a fit of conscience!"

The piece of hamburger stuck in the sheriff's throat. He gagged and said, "WHAT?"

Cooky nodded. "I swear I never heard the people talkin' so much about anythin'."

Gulping the meat down, the sheriff said, "But there was no gun or rifle in Mrs. Archer's room!"

Nodding agreeably, Cooky said, "They say that you were a friend of Tommy Archer's and you're coverin' up for Mrs. Archer. They say you were there and hid the gun."

They say... they say... The sheriff found himself hating the people whom he had known all his life. Hating the people who had elected him. Hating the whole town. They say... they had an idea in their skulls and nothing was going to blast it loose... unless... unless Cranston set off a charge of dynamite tonight that would send the whole thing high in the air and still 'they say' forever.

Cooky refilled the sheriff's empty cup and said, "They say it had to be Mrs. Archer who killed her husband and so she killed herself."

"And who," the sheriff asked, getting his voice back, "do they say chiseled Tommy's name off the monument? His mother? So as to bring dishonor to her son?"

Looking around cautiously, Cooky whispered, "Oh no... they say Jimmy Jason did that! He did it because Tommy took Kitty away from him... and because Tommy was a war hero and Jimmy wasn't. They say it preyed on Jimmy's mind until he went really cuckoo and blew his top."

"I see," the sheriff said bitterly, getting up and throwing a half dollar on the counter. "The next time 'they' say anything, you tell them that..." What was the use? The sheriff shut his mouth. The doctor finished up the last of his food and stood up.

"May I come along? I have an interest in this thing, too. The Archers were my best friends."

"Aside from their being related to you," the sheriff said.

"That doesn't enter it. There are plenty of relatives I can't stand. But Mary and Thomas were real people. I loved them." The doctor paid for his meal. "May I?"

The sheriff and the doctor walked out on the street. The sheriff looked up and down Main Street. There were little knots of people with their heads together. The street was as crowded as if it was Saturday night. The sheriff grimaced. They say...

Passing the doctor's drug store, the doctor poked his head into the store and called, "Take over. If anyone

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wants me, have them call me at the Archer house."

The sheriff could hear a youthful voice call back, "Oh, you're goin' over there? A guy name of Cranston called up and asked you to join him over there. Said he might need your help with somebody! Said something about how violent maniacs are!"

The doctor turned to the sheriff. "Guess I was invited anyhow." They got into the sheriff's car. The sheriff said, "My deputy's taken Jason over to the house already."

The doctor knuckled his eyes. "You can't know how grateful I'll be to see the end of this. I seem to be walking around in an unbelieving daze. It just couldn't have happened and yet it did."

"I know how you feel," the sheriff said. "Not in our town, things like this just don't happen in our town. That's why everyone's tongue is wagging so, I guess."

"This is the kind of thing you read about in the big city papers," the doctor said as he got out of the car. The Archer house was in front of them. The doctor said, "This is just the way it looked last night... I got out of the car expecting to go and chat with Thomas... I didn't know that he was dead even as I walked toward the house. And then, suddenly, I fell to the ground... it took me a minute to realize that I had been hit. Then... off there... I saw the silhouette of someone running away. Still I didn't realize how wrong things were... not until Mary unlatched the door, took the chain off and opened the door and I saw her face. Only then..."

They were at the door. The sheriff could hear the unlatching sound that the doctor had just mentioned. The doctor went on, "Even then I just thought that Thomas was sick... and then she spoke." The door opened. Lamont Cranston said, "Thank you for coming, doctor. I'm not too sure I will need you but it's better to be prepared."

"You think he'll get violent?" the doctor asked.

"Can't tell," Cranston said. "I called Dr. Mason, the other doctor here in town... but he's out. I thought maybe we could use two of you medical men."

"The young doc? He's generally out at night. He's courting a girl," the sheriff said.

Dr. Ender snorted. "The young doc! Bet he's no more than a year younger than I am."

The sheriff said, "Well, you know that's what everyone calls you two, the young doc and the old doc."

They walked into the house. The doctor said, "Yeah... if they've got something really wrong with them they come to me. If they just need some sugar pills and some sympathy they go to him!"

"That bedside manner!" The sheriff kidded.

"When he gets married he better have less of a bedside manner," Doc Ender said, "or his wife'll snatch him bald headed."

They were in the living room. The sheriff looked around. It was all wrong. A room in which a murder had been committed shouldn't look so cozy. A house in which two people had died by violence shouldn't look so warm and lived in, so comfortable.

But it looked as though Mrs. Archer had just stepped out into the kitchen to get some cookies and milk or

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coffee... as though Mr. Archer had gone to his room to get some newspaper clippings to prove a point in an argument.

The sheriff sat down. He looked at Jason, at the expressionless face with the eyes too close together. A handcuff joined him to one of the sheriff's best men. The doctor sat down next to the sheriff. Cranston was on his feet as though he were restless.

"Six years ago," Cranston said, "there was a family argument that involved the Archers, James Jason, Kitty Randall and her family."

As though on cue, someone knocked at the door. The sheriff went to the door. It was Miss Randall. She said, "Someone named Lamont Cranston asked me to come here at eight. He gave me some directions. Am I late?"

"No, not at all. Do what he told you to. Trust him. Cranston is just beginning whatever it is he has to say." The sheriff led her to a chair far away from Jason whose unpleasant face looked even more unpleasant than usual as he looked at the girl.

"That fight," Cranston went on as though there had been no cessation, "resulted in bad feeling on the part of Jason. He made various threats. As far as I can gather?" He looked interrogatively at Miss Randall.

She dropped her eyes from Jason's greedy ones. "That's true. It was pretty messy. He talked about acid in my face... that kind of thing. I was sure it was just talk..."

"He blew his top," the sheriff said.

"About a month later," said Cranston, "if I have my dates straight, Mr. Archer received the first of a series of threatening letters! They went on in an unbroken series from that time till just before Mr. Archer was stabbed to death with a kitchen knife."

"How horrible!" Kitty said. "Mr. Archer never said a word about them to me!"

"I think," said Cranston, "that Mr. Archer thought that as soon as you and his son were married that the letters would cease. But as you know there was a war... and your marriage was put off a long time."

"Too long," said Kitty, and her voice was bitter.

"Young Tommy died in the war. This seems to have set off an even more violent series of threatening letters... letters which culminated in murder.

"Sheriff, will you have one of your men bring the puzzle box down? I want to demonstrate how the killer escaped from a house where all the doors and windows were locked on the inside."

The sheriff nodded to one of his deputies. The man left the room. Cranston said nothing while he was waiting. No one said anything. The silence built up. It built and built until it was heavy and menacing.

The quiet middle-class room, so comfortable and reassuring, was now fraught with menace, the sheriff realized. He looked at Jason, who lounged against the wall as though he were in front of the pool room, preparing to whistle at a passing girl.

CHAPTER XI

THE deputy returned with the box in his arms. Cranston said, "Let us understand the circumstances that surrounded the death of Mr. Archer. Mrs. Archer was out of this room, upstairs in the bedroom. Someone came to the window and tapped on it. It was the killer, who, looking into this brightly lit living room, saw that Mr. Archer was alone. Mr. Archer went to the door and allowed the killer to enter. Mr. Archer locked and chained the door behind the killer.

"The killer is now in a house whose every door and window is locked on the inside," said Cranston, changing tenses, making it more immediate. "He talks to Mr. Archer for a moment, saying something that makes Mr. Archer relax. In that moment of relaxation, the killer stabbed the man he hated.

"There was no sound... oh, perhaps a susuration as Mr. Archer's dying breath whispered from his now flaccid lips. But certainly, there was no sound that would reach upstairs to Mrs. Archer's room.

"I can see, in my mind's eye," Cranston said, "the killer going up those stairs..." He gestured at the stairs. Kitty gasped.

"The killer went up those stairs with his killing thirst unassuaged. He intended, I am sure, to kill Mrs. Archer! But... something happened when he got to the landing... he may have heard a car pull up in front of the house... something happened. He ducks into the rumpus room, knowing that there is always a ladder in the room. A ladder that reaches up to the trap door in the ceiling of the room.

"Picture him running into the room and finding... no ladder! That day of all days, the ladder was outside the house, having been painted!"

"He looks up at the ceiling, sees the trap so near and yet so far. Remember, he does not know the circumstances. He has no way of knowing that all the windows and doors are bolted, barred locked. All he is interested in is getting out of the house unseen. He knows that a car is outside the house. He has no way of knowing who is in the car.

"He looks at the bar. Too rickety... it may fall under his weight. Then his eyes light on this puzzle box." Cranston gestured at the box. He bent over and opened the outside box. Inside was the second box. He opened this and from it took the smallest box. He set one box on top of the other.

It made a stack about five feet high. Cranston turned and looked at Jason. Cranston said, "The killer is over six feet tall. The boxes which he walks up as though they were steps brings him close enough to the trap in the ceiling so that he can pull himself up and through the trap.

"Out on the roof, he looks down and sees Dr. Ender getting out of his car. There's no time to spare. He drops from the top of the building to the little rim around the first floor of the house. It takes but a second. Another second for him to lean over and, grabbing the rim in his fingers, he lets himself stretch out to his full height. He drops to the ground. He is about to run away when he looks down at the soft loam into which he has dropped. Clearly identifiable he sees his own footprints. There is not much time. The doctor is out of the car. He is reaching back into the car for his little black bag.

"But there is the problem of his footprints. He steps from the crazy stone foot path back into the soft dirt. He spins around thus making circles of the footprints.

"That done, he steps back onto the stone foot path which holds no prints and sprints to the doctor. He comes up behind him and hits him on the back of the head. The doctor falls forward and the killer runs away.

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"He has not hit the doctor hard enough, he sees, as he pauses on a rise to look back. The doctor is getting to his feet groggily. He sees the doctor feel the lump on his head.

"He knows that he is too far away, that it is too dark for the doctor to identify him, he turns and runs away, secure in the knowledge that he had been seen by but one person... and that person is now dead."

"The doctor," Cranston went on, "pulls himself together and goes to the door where he finds that Mrs. Archer has just found her dead husband.

"The killer... who up to this moment has felt secure, suddenly remembers the boxes which he has used as a ladder. Could he have left fingerprints on the boxes?"

"This is very conjectural," Cranston said, "but I looked in a tree not far from the house and I found smudges that led me to think the killer came back, shinnied up the tree and from that vantage point could look into the house and see what went on.

"When there was a lot of commotion going on in the house, the killer came back through the now unlocked front door, raced to the rumpus room, put the puzzle boxes back together and put them back in place."

"That done, he sneaked out again. All the luck was on his side. No one saw him come or go. Now... the killer didn't know it, but he had, because of his machinations, set up an impossible situation. Seemingly, if you didn't know about the existence of the boxes, there was no way that anyone could get in or out of the house!"

"His heart," Cranston looked at Jason coldly, "if he has a heart, must have been happy when he heard the way luck had played into his hands! Not only had he gotten away with murder, but he had committed it under circumstances that made it look as if Mrs. Archer were the only one who could have killed her husband!"

Cranston reached into his pocket. He came out with some papers. He handed one to Kitty Randall. He said, "You have told me how your house overlooks the Honor Roll in the park. You have told me how, upset because of Mr. Archer's death, you could not sleep and therefore were pacing the floor late at night, last night. You have told me, too, how, looking out the window, you saw in the pouring rain a man go into the little park.

"You saw the man go into the park. You didn't see what he did because that was out of your line of vision. But you did see a man go into the park and then twenty minutes later come back out again."

Kitty nodded.

"I have a little deposition typed out," Cranston said, "covering all this. I would like you to sign this. It covers what I have just said, and you testify that the man you saw go in and out of the park in the pouring rain at two thirty in the morning was James Jason. Is that correct?"

Kitty nodded and taking the paper, scribbled her name on it as Cranston turned to Dr. Ender. "I have typed up a deposition covering what you saw last night, too. Would you sign this?"

He handed a paper to Ender and cleared his throat as he said, "Having killed Mr. Archer, Jason then destroyed Tommy's name. He chiseled it off the monument and went home to bed satisfied."

The sheriff staring at Jason's blank face, could find no trace of humanity there. Jason looked, if anything, amused at the accusations that Cranston was making.

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"Today," Cranston said, "Jason was thrown in jail." He paused and looked at Jason. "Somehow, someone whom Jason trusted brought him a rifle and a piece of string.

"With that rifle, Jason aimed through the barred window of the jail and shot Mrs. Archer who was in her bedroom upstairs. I have demonstrated to the sheriff's satisfaction how Jason threw the rifle onto a rooftop across the street."

"String?" the doctor mused as he scrawled his illegible signature to the deposition, in front of him. "You mean he used that old trick of French criminals of making a catapult with the string and slinging the rifle away?"

"Precisely," Cranston said, taking Kitty's and the doctor's depositions and handing them to the sheriff. "Will you sign these as witness, please?"

The sheriff did as he was told. He listened as Cranston went on, "Having solved the problem of how a killer walked through the walls of a house and how he shot and killed Mrs. Archer from the jail, I think we can consider the case closed."

The sheriff folded up the depositions and put them in his pocket. He said to his deputy, "Take him back to jail. Put him in solitary, not in the drunk tank. Take away his shoelaces, his tie and his suspenders or belt. Don't let him out of your sight, and don't let him..."

"I won't let him kill himself. That's too good for the likes of him." The man looked at Jason who was chained to him by the handcuffs. "Come on, you! You're lucky this is a law abiding community! You oughta be strung up!"

The accused killer and the minion of the law left. Kitty Randall was the first to speak. "The poor crazy fool. To think..."

"His confused brain," Cranston said, "probably figured that with the Archers out of the way, with Tommy dead, he would be able to get you to marry him."

The girl grimaced. "Ugh..." She wet her lips. "Can you imagine..." The doctor patted her shoulder. "Come on, my dear, you can sleep tonight. And if you can't, I'll give you some sleeping pills. It's all over now."

They left together. The sheriff said to Cranston, "I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"Forget it."

"I don't suppose I'll ever see you again?" the sheriff said.

"You will. When do you think this case will come to trial?"

"Month... or a month and a half," the sheriff said. "Why?"

"You'll see me before then. And..." Cranston smiled, "Don't be too hard on Jason. He is not the murderer."

Lamont Cranston adjusted his hat and walked to the door. The sheriff said, "What are you talking about?"

"Just forget it until the next time I see you."

"But..."

"Forget it." Cranston left.

CHAPTER XII

FIVE weeks to the day later, the sheriff was walking out of the drug store when he saw Cranston step out of a cab. It was a strange cab with a New York license plate.

The sheriff heard Cranston say, "Go into the hotel and take a nap, Shrevvie. I'll see you later."

"Cranston!" the sheriff called. "You rat, I'm going out of my mind. I called New York, I couldn't get hold of you! They said you were in Havana!"

Tanned, Cranston said with a smile, "They were telling the truth. I just wound up something down there. Filthy case. Dope smuggling."

"Does your coming back mean that you're going to end this case? Jason is due to go on trial in three days."

"He'll never go on trial. You can relax. Our murderer made the move that I have had to wait for."

The sheriff walked beside Cranston as the man, hurrying, made his way to a house. Cranston said, "I have to leave in three quarters of an hour. Must be back in New York tonight."

They entered the house. Cranston opened a closet. He stepped aside so the sheriff could see three suitcases all packed. "Know anything about this?"

"Not a thing. Good god! Does this mean this is the killer and not Jason?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. The only reason you didn't see it is that you're too close to the case. You need perspective in things like this."

"I guess I was too close to see it.

"Shall we end this?"

"Right now?" the sheriff asked incredulously. "Sure. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since you said that Jason was not the killer."

They walked out of the house. "I'm sorry," Cranston said, "but if I had told you, your attitude toward the murderer might have changed. One warning and..." Cranston took a bit of newspaper out of his pocket. It was a news item relevant to the last will and testament of one Jerkins. "You see if the killer had not been lulled into complete security..."

"I see..." the sheriff said as he read the item. He could feel bile in the back of his throat. Someone whom he trusted... and there was no insanity to ameliorate the murderer's deeds.

They were back on the street. Cranston said, "I haven't had time to eat today."

"You can get a sandwich in Doc Ender's drug store, or a hamburger in the lunch counter."

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The drug store was next to them. As they went in, the sheriff said, "Since you dropped that little bomb shell, I've been thinking. There was a hole you could drive a jeep through in our reconstruction of Jason's 'crime.'"

"Of course. I had to talk fast to try and cover it."

"The dust in the rumpus room. The foot prints. Jason did not leave any track in the room that he was supposed to have entered. He never went to the puzzle box!"

"Right!" Cranston said with a smile. "I was afraid you would think of that while I was going through my routine."

"I felt like a dope when I did remember it."

"There were some other things that didn't jibe," Cranston said as they passed a counter piled high with hot water bottles. A big sign said, "Today Only, 98 cents." There was dust on the "Today Only" sign.

"Of course," the sheriff said eagerly, "I went to Kitty's house. On a dark night you could barely see the park, let alone see anything in the pouring rain." Nodding, Cranston looked around the drug store. No one was in it but the soda jerk. They walked toward the soda fountain.

"After all, Kitty told me you had given her instructions before she got there that night."

"She played her part well," Cranston agreed.

Sitting at the counter, Cranston ordered a cheese and lettuce sandwich from the pimpled face boy. Dr. Ender came out from the back of the store, an apron around his spreading middle. He said, "Lamont Cranston! For heaven's sake! Whatever brings you back to our town?"

The sheriff said, "He came back to help me arrest the real killer!"

The doctor's pudgy face contorted in surprise, "You don't mean to tell me that Jason isn't the real killer?"

"That's right," said Cranston around a mouthful of sandwich. "We had to wait for the killer to put a rope around his own neck."

"Did you really think," the sheriff said, just as if he'd known all along, "that you could get away with murder, Doc?"

The doctor gasped. His face went white and then red, then white again. Beads of sweat came out on his forehead. He said painfully, "If this is a joke, sheriff, I think it's in pretty bad taste."

"It's no joke," the sheriff said bitterly. "We've got you dead to rights. As dead as Mr. and Mrs. Archer." He paused. "You had to go and try for the inheritance, didn't you? That will hang you! We had no motive until then... and its pretty tough to go into court with a murder charge and not have a good motive."

"Money's a good motive," Cranston agreed as he hurried the sandwich down his throat. Things were going to pop any second now.

Ender got control of himself. "I don't care if you do think the money was the motive. You've still, no matter how you frame for the murder, got to show how the killer got in and out of the house."

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"Were you depending on that if the case against Jason fell through, Doctor?" Cranston asked. His face was cold.

"You..." The doctor was jittery. "You know... you figured it out!"

The sheriff repeated, "Did you really think you could get away with murder, doc?"

That did it. Cranston dropped the remains of his sandwich as Ender spun on his heel. He ran out into the back of the store.

Leaping from the stool, Cranston raced around the counter and back into the room behind the store. He was just in time to see Ender's pudgy behind go out a window. A bottle teetering on the edge fell from a crowded shelf.

Racing across the room, Cranston's hand went to the gun in the holster under his arm. He leaned out the window. In the street, crowded with shopping women, the doctor made his way like a terrified fox racing from pursuing hounds.

As the sheriff joined Cranston, he saw Cranston shake his head. He put the gun down. It was too risky. A wild bullet in that milling throng. He didn't dare.

He eased up the window sill and dropped out the window as had the doctor. The sheriff turned and ran out through the store spilling a woman as he ran. She looked after the sheriff and muttered something about his bad manners.

Out on the street, the sheriff looked left and then right. Down at the end of the street past the jail, he could see Cranston running.

He got into his car and went after the two men. His mind was in a whirl. Doc Ender... how could he be the killer... how could Cranston be so sure? Of course, there was the evidence that Cranston had shown him. The news item. Ender had sent proof to the probate court that he was related to the dead Jenkins. Since there were no other surviving relatives, Ender wanted the inheritance.

Driving the car at an insane rate through the crowded street, the sheriff could see why Ender had to be completely convinced that he was safe, otherwise, he would not have tried for the inheritance. All he had to do to get away with murder was to keep still. But he had killed for the inheritance, he had murdered two people... feeling safe, he would of course try for the prize for which he had killed.

He saw Cranston, then a second later he saw the doctor. The doctor was about fifty paces ahead of Cranston. The doctor risked a look over his shoulder. His face was contorted with fear. He turned his head back and ran on. His shoulders were heaving with the effort of running.

Ahead of the two men was a dead end. If the doctor ran into it he was finished. He ran into it. The car with the sheriff braked to a halt. He leaped from the car as he saw the doctor stand at the far end of the dead end with his hands at his sides. Cranston walked toward him stiff leggedly. Cranston had his .45 out.

The doctor pressed his back against the brick wall as though expecting it to break through and allow him access. Cranston came closer. He was perhaps twenty-five feet away.

Dr. Ender brought his right hand up from his side. His hand was going toward his mouth. The sheriff remembered the bottle that had teetered and then fallen in the back room of the pharmacy. The doctor must

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have grabbed some poison, the sheriff thought.

The doctor brought his right hand up close to his mouth. The sheriff thought, the dirty rat, he's taking the easy way. But he had forgotten the gun in Cranston's hand. A shot rang out.

It echoed in the narrow dead end. Blood spurted from the doctor's hand. The gun in Cranston's hand was steady. The doctor's face, falling to pieces, looked at his wounded hand. The capsule or whatever it was that he had held the sheriff couldn't see from where he was had fallen from the doctor's hand.

Ender's eyes fell to his bleeding hand. His face was wiped clean of expression now. He looked from his bloody hand to Cranston's set grim face. From there his eyes fell to the gun in Cranston's hand. A smile twitched at the corner of the doctor's fat face.

Deliberately he extended his right foot out in front of him. Cranston's finger tightened on the trigger. The doctor moved his left foot.

Slowly, at first, then faster, the doctor walked toward Cranston. The sheriff held his breath. Ender was trying to bait Cranston into shooting him.

His poison gone, he was about to commit suicide under the muzzle of a gun. He was perhaps ten feet away from Cranston now. Would Cranston shoot... give Ender the release he wanted.

The sheriff let his breath go out as he saw Cranston drop his gun hand to his side. Cranston said, "Forget it. It won't work, Ender. You're finished! You're going to die by due process of law. You're going to be given a trial and then taken out and hung. You will be hanged by the neck until you are dead."

The sheriff shuddered. Cranston's voice was one of doom. It defeated Ender. He relaxed. His hands fell to his sides. His head hung forward. His bloody hand was at his side. He looked at it incuriously as though it had just occurred to him that he had been shot.

Stepping in front of Cranston, the sheriff put a handcuff around the doctor's good hand. No word was spoken while they drove Dr. Ender to jail.

No word was said as they went into the jail. James Jason broke the silence when he saw the odd trio stop in front of his cell. He said, "It worked!"

Cranston said, "Yes, thanks to you."

Puzzled, the sheriff said. "You mean Jason knew about this?"

Cranston said, "What kind of a sadist do you think I am? Do you think I would let an innocent man sit in jail expecting to be hung? No, I told Jason I was going to frame the killer, just as the killer tried to frame Jason when Ender went out in the rain and gouged Tommy's name off the Honor Roll."

The sheriff opened the jail door. Jason stepped out and stretched. He said, "Maybe I'm not like all the rest of the people in town... maybe I'm cracked... I don't think so... but maybe... but say I'm different, I still don't like it when some creep like this fits me for a hemp necktie."

Ender said nothing as the sheriff pushed him into the cell. Cranston said, "You'd better call the young doc to take care of that wounded hand."

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The sheriff had a deputy call Dr. Mason who hurried over. Seeing them together, the sheriff was struck again by the two doctors' nicknames.

Cranston said, "The young doc is almost as old as the old doc."

Nodding, the sheriff said, "Yeah."

"It's obvious that the reason for the nicknames is that Ender is old in the sense of being old fashioned..," Cranston said. "You know, when I first met him I wondered about that. It didn't seem to me that even in a small town like this a good doctor would have to run a drug store besides being a doctor."

The sheriff and Cranston walked away with Jason as the young doc took care of the old doc's hand.

In his office, the sheriff said, "You've got a lot of explaining to do, Mr. Cranston."

Lamont looked at the clock and said, "A lot to tell and not much time to tell it in. You still have the depositions signed by Kitty Randall and Doc Ender?"

Nodding, the sheriff pulled them out of the old fashioned safe that lurked behind his desk.

Cranston picked up one and tore it in half and then in quarters. "This is a lie. We'll destroy it."

He threw the pieces of paper into the trash basket.

CHAPTER XIII

THE other deposition Cranston threw on the desk. The sheriff saw Dr. Ender's signature on this. Cranston said, "I had Kitty lie in order to make the noose seem tighter around Jason's neck. This other, the one that Ender signed is one of the things that's going to convict him.

"By the way, Jason, all my thanks for your help... and you can go home now. Have you ever spoken to a good psychiatrist about your guilt feelings from being thrown out of the Army?"

Jason shook his head sullenly.

"I'd suggest that you do. You're in a bad way through no fault of your own." Cranston scribbled a doctor's name on a slip of paper and handed it to Jason. "Give this to the doctor whose name I have written. He's not in this town. You can speak truthfully and need have no fear that he will ever say anything, to anyone."

Jason said no words, but his face looked his gratitude. He left.

As the door closed behind Jason and Cranston cocked an eye at the clock again, the sheriff said, "Two things before you go. What put you on to the doc, and how the hell did he get out of the locked up house?"

"There were two things. In the first place, the first time I met Ender, as I have told you, I wondered about how good a doctor he could be under the circumstances. Next I asked him to tell me about the murder. Now, he didn't know me from Adam. He made no attempt to find out who I was. Immediately he spilled his whole story to me.

"That seemed curious to me. In the first place, no decent doctor ever says anything about his cases, professional ethics close his mouth... if Ender talked about his medical cases as freely as he did about the

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murder, well... it just seemed curious. I got the impression that he was dying to tell someone his story."

"Because he was in such a rush you wondered whether the story was true or not?"

"Yes, exactly. Now remember too, that I came into the case by the back door. My first contact was when Jenkins died from eating poisoned candy. I was backtracking from there.

"It seemed clear that he had been killed for his money. Who stood to gain from the murder? It seemed obvious once I had read the will and found that it was left to Thomas Archer Junior, that young Thomas would have something to explain."

"But when you got here you found out that he'd been dead for a year" the sheriff said.

"That put me off my stride. I knew that under the terms of the will the money would go to Mr. and Mrs. Archer if something happened to young Thomas. That made the Archers the next obvious suspects. But what greeted me when I got here? The murder of Mr. Archer."

"The conditions made it look as if Mrs. Archer then had the motive and the opportunity."

"Right. The locked up house seemed to me to point the whole thing right at Mary Archer. But, I must confess that after meeting her, I couldn't see her as the killer. I remembered my feelings about Ender. I phoned one of my men and had him check on what other relatives there were left alive. He found that a doctor in this town was the last blood relation."

"I see."

"I didn't want to accuse Ender until I knew what happened. For all I knew he might not have known that he was in line to inherit. Jason could well be the real killer... but I didn't think so. The circumstances of the chained and locked windows and doors seemed to put Jason outside the pale.

"The only way I could see that Jason could have killed Mr. Archer was under the terms of the phony reconstruction I set up. But you know as well as I that the footprints in the dust made that impossible. Jason could not be the killer... not any way that I could make seem real to me."

"So you rigged that business with the puzzle boxes."

"That seemed so ludicrous when was saying it that I was afraid one of you would laugh at me. Perhaps in books someone might try something as involved and chancy as that, but I can't see it happening in real life."

"It seems clear to me," the sheriff said as Cranston looked at the clock again, "that Ender shot Mrs. Archer and then threw the rifle on top of a roof. Then on some pretext he got to Jason's cell..."

The sheriff ran out into the hall and caught Jason before he left the building. "You know, I had a question as soon as you left. If, as you set up the crime, Jason had piled the boxes on top of each other, how come when Doc Ender went up to the rumpus room to look for the 'killer' he didn't notice the boxes?"

"Good point, in a way," said Cranston, "that was my last test to determine who the killer was. If Ender had spotted that, if he had said that the boxes were piled up as they would have had to be, for Jason could not have gotten back into the house at that point, then I might have tried to figure out another murder method."

"There would have been the problem of foot prints in the dust anyway."

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"Of course," Cranston agreed.

"What about the circular marks in the loam outside of the house?"

"We'll get to that later. Ender stepped into the dirt when he ran around the house. He noticed the marks, and erased them as I postulated that Jason did."

Jason waved good-bye. He was in the doorway. The sheriff thought, "I've never seen him look like this. He seems almost normal." Perhaps it was the look of gratitude in his eyes... as he looked at Cranston.

The sheriff went back to his original thought. "And Ender threw the shell and the string into Jason's cell. Say... I never asked any of my men if Ender was in the jail!"

"I think you'll find that he wasn't. But, if you wrapped the string around the shell, it wouldn't be too hard to throw it into the cell window from the street! I think that's what he did."

"Could well be. The shell would supply enough weight... and, as luck would have it, Jason was asleep and didn't even know the shell and string had landed in the cot with him!"

"To a certain point, all the luck was on Ender's side. The conditions of Mr. Archer's murder for instance, were pure luck."

"One thing before you settle that puzzle for me. What about the threatening letters?"

"There are two possibilities there. Either Ender decided as long ago as six years that he was going to do all this... that was before he even moved into town... or... and I think this is more probable... I think that Jason sent the letters! It would be consonant with his peculiar behaviour pattern."

"You mean..."The sheriff was speechless. "You mean..."

"That the murders and the letters were co-incidental. Yes." Cranston got to his feet. He looked out the window. Down on the street in front of the jail a cab with a New York license plate was parked.

As Cranston looked down, Shrevvie got out of the car impatiently. He looked at his watch and then scratched his head.

"Take it easy, Shrevvie," Cranston called, "I'm on my way."

"I almost can't buy that," the sheriff said.

"Look at it this way. I don't believe those murders were planned that long ago. I think they came as the result of endless frustrations. I think they developed out of the dawning recognition on Ender's part that he was a flop as a doctor.

"As a matter of fact, I don't think that if young Thomas Archer had lived that this whole thing would have happened. But once Ender saw that one of the three people in his way had been destroyed it must have seemed like fate showing him the way."

"Ummm," the sheriff said. "Well, it's all over now but the hanging, so suppose you tell me how Ender hocused the locks or however it was that he managed that 'impossible situation' as you called it."

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Standing up, Cranston said, "My time's running out. Will you come along as far as the car with me?"

"Sure." The two men walked down stairs, the sheriff favoring his game leg.

"Let's get the picture of what actually happened on the night of the murder straight in our minds. Ender drove up in front of the house. He went to the door. I imagine that he'd been carrying that knife around with him for a long time. As we found out, it's a very common kind of kitchen knife. It had no identifying qualities.

"I can only think he was carrying the knife just for the opportune time. That night, when he was preparing to ring the bell he looked through the window and saw Mr. Archer sitting alone in the living room. Instead of ringing the bell, which as it turned out would have apprised Mrs. Archer of his presence, he tapped on the window.

"Mr. Archer let his murderer into the house. He locked and chained the door after the doctor."

They were out on the street. The cabbie whom the sheriff had heard Cranston call Shrevvie, was waving his aims at Cranston.

"One more second," Cranston said to the cabbie.

"Go on please," the sheriff said.

"The doctor and his victim sat in the living room. Ender sat for a minute and then on some pretext, perhaps offering to listen to Mr. Archer's heart which he knew was bad, he walked over to Archer. Bending over as though about to listen with a stethoscope, the doctor slid the knife straight into Archer's heart.

"That, incidentally, was another clue. I couldn't imagine many circumstances under which a man would let another man come close enough to him to drive the knife straight in from the front as the knife was driven."

"Then what?"

Getting into the cab, Cranston said through the open window, "Then the doctor walked out through the kitchen, took the chain off the door, unlocked the lock and walked out into the night.

"He ran around to the front and somehow inflicted that bump on his head. For all I know he may have slammed his head on the wheel of his car."

"I see... then, all this time he didn't know about the doors and windows being locked?"

"No. How could he? Now let's see what he did. He got out of the car, staggering in case Mrs. Archer looked out and went to the door rubbing his head. She opened the door at his ring. He was told about the atrocious murder which had just taken place and was astounded, horrified, etc., etc., etc."

"I get it now!" the sheriff said, light dawning. "Mrs. Archer told him about the house being locked up and sent him off on a search of the house. Sometime in his looking around, it occurred to him that he could take advantage of the circumstances!"

"Precisely. He just went to the back of the house and re-locked the lock and put the chain back on the kitchen door," Cranston said. He settled back in the cab.

"Not satisfied with that, he began to worry about a red herring and some time in the night he went out and

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chiseled Tommy's name off the Honor Roll."

"Somehow that was the rottenest thing of all... to hurt Mrs. Archer that way..."

"Dr. Ender was not, I fear, a very nice man." Cranston waved good-bye. The cab drove off.

The sheriff stood in the center of Main street waving good-bye. He stood in the center of a town which once again was a small town, full of nice people and bad, a town that could be very pleasant to live in now that murder no loner walked its streets.

The sheriff smiled. He looked at his watch and swore. It was late. He was late for supper again. He ran as fast as his bad leg would allow him to the phone. He called his wife. Then the smile came back. Yes, life in a small town like this could be very pleasant. "Sure, baby, I'm coming right home now. Nothing will stop me. See you in ten minutes."

THE END