

Murder's Dress Rehearsal



By L. W. Carmichael

*When old-timer Sheriff Sholto put two and two together,
he found the ingredients that cooked up a killer's concoction.*

SHOLTO blasted the horn plenty before leaving his car and piloting his chubby frame up the garden path of the widow's house. You had to warn of your approach when calling on the widow after dark. If you didn't, your reception might have buckshot in it.

The big, bespectacled man beat a *rat-tat* on the door panels. A rasping voice promptly bit off, "Who is it? No tricks. I got a gun!"

Sholto grinned, amused as always by the widow's palpitating fear for her safety. "No tricks, ma'am. It's the sheriff."

The door opened a crack and a long-nosed, craggy face of a million wrinkles scrutinized the sheriff. Then, satisfied that her visitor was indeed the man he claimed to be, Sadie Callaghan rattled the chain loose from its moorings and permitted him to enter her hallway.

"I got to be careful," she whispered. "There's them as would wish me dead."

Sholto didn't argue. Hearing about them as would wish the widow dead was old stuff which he'd never taken seriously.

The widow said acidly, "You took your time getting here."

Sholto nodded. "Yes'm. I was over to the rod-and-gunners' outing in Tullerville. Anyways, a man my build can't hurry on a night as hot as this. Now, ma'am, the message you sent said something about you'd been robbed. What was took?"

"My dress," said the widow, "that rust-colored one I've prized this fifteen years or more. It was gone from my clo'esline when I went to take it in, about half an hour after sundown that'd be."

Sholto's blue eyes clouded behind his thick glasses. "You mean you brought me back from the outing just because you lost a fifteen-year-old dress!"

"It wasn't lost, it was stole."

"Maybe, Sadie, maybe not. Couldn't it have blown off the line or something?"

The widow sniffed. "Why, you old fool, there ain't been a breath of air all day!"

"Well, then," suggested Sholto, "couldn't you have put it somewheres else, thoughtless-like—like the way I lost my pants over in my feed store three weeks back. I could have swore they'd been stole, but the very next day Cy Jennings found I'd put 'em somewheres else entirely. He's still ribbing me about it."

"Maybe you don't know where you put your pants, but I sure know where I put my dresses," the widow said tartly. "Sholto, that dress was stole. And, know what, I think it was Rabbit Kohler stole it. I think he stole it just to spite me."

"Spite you for what, ma'am?"

"It's none of your business, Sholto, but since you ask, to spite me for telling him no when he went down on his bended knees and begged me to marry him!"

"Huh!"

Laughter rumbled inside Sholto's paunchy figure, threatened to erupt.

"Something funny?" asked the widow.

Sholto pulled himself together. "No, ma'am, except maybe the idea of a runt

like Rabbit thinking the likes of him could hitch up with a fine figure of a woman like you."

THE widow eyed him suspiciously.

"H'm. Sholto, I wouldn't marry that ragged wreck even if he washed himself, which it don't look like he's done in years. I wouldn't marry him if he come here courting with a golden crown on his head. Now you go pick him up. And, listen, here's something else you can do. Locate my nephew, Cy Jennings, and tell him he's to come here and guard me."

"Aw, you don't need any guard," scoffed Sholto.

"I do, too," insisted the widow. "What with Rabbit Kohler and that gunshooting I heard, I'm all nerved up."

"Gunshooting, ma'am?"

"Yes. Right back of the barn was where it seemed to come from. Just before the time I missed my dress, it was. A riflshot."

"Ma'am, that was just a poacher."

"Maybe, maybe not. Anyways, I don't like folks with guns prowling around my house, particularly when it's got a fortune in antiques in it, and particularly when I've got that feeling I'm being watched and threatened night and day. So you find Cy Jennings."

Sholto shrugged, turned to go.

"But you find Rabbit first," ordered the widow. "And if he has that dress, you slap him right into jail. Understand?"

"Yes'm," said Sholto.

He left the house, started up his old car. But he didn't go hunting for Rabbit Kohler because he just didn't take the alleged theft of a fifteen-year-old dress too seriously. Instead, he drove down to the village center, parked the car outside the feed store which he operated, and waddled across to the town hall, the building which housed his one-room police headquarters

and his one-cell jail.

He let himself in, snapped on the basement lights, went down to interview the young man he'd arrested for drunken driving at three that afternoon—some seven hours back.

This young man, tall, broad-shouldered Cy Jennings, blinked through the bars of the cell door at him. Cy looked thoroughly chastened. This wasn't surprising considering the way he'd kicked his reputation around.

Sholto said, "Sobered up, kid?"

Jennings nodded glumly. "Guess so. I got a hangover, though. Lookit, Wallie, does—does the widder know about—about this?"

Sholto grinned. "No, and she ain't going to. I ain't pressing charges. But don't get me wrong. I ain't letting you off light just because you're my right-hand man over to the feed store; it's because I'd hate you to get in dutch with the widder. Yessir, if she learned about you going to court on a drunken driving charge she'd blow her top. Cy, I'd let you out so's you could go to her right now, only that long nose of hers would get a load of that liquor smell on you. You still smell like you bathed in the stuff, clo'es and all. So what I'll do is just hold you here until morning."

"Gee," Cy said relievedly, "you're a swell guy, Wallie."

"Y'know," said Sholto, "I can't figger all this out. I thought you was an open book to me. You was the last man in town I expected to pick up for drunkenness. I knew you gambled some. I even knew you was a pretty cute gambler, too—the kind that can gamble and play it safe at one and the same time. But apart from that, you seemed to be everything the widder thinks you are—hard working, clean living, sober. How come you slipped? And on the day of the big outing, too!"

Cy shrugged. "Your guess is as good

as mine, Wallie."

"I ain't that good at guessing," said Sholto. "And now, maybe I should get you some eats." Here he broke into a chuckle. "Oh, Cy, you got to hear this one. Rabbit Kohler's been wooing the widder."

"Huh? Who told you that?"

"The widder herself."

"When?"

"Just now—ten minutes back."

Cy Jennings jumped a little, abruptly sat down on the cell's hard bench.

Sholto eyed him in surprise, said, "What's eating you?"

Jennings took a deep breath. "What's eating me! I'll tell you what. I'm thinking of what'll happen if the widder marries him. She'll change her will and leave the farm and all them antiques to him. That's what! Yeah, she'll leave everything to him instead of me!"

"Don't worry," said Sholto. "She turned him down."

A TELEPHONE shrilled upstairs. Sholto climbed up to his office and jerked the receiver to his ear. The call was from Sadie Callaghan.

"So, there you are," she said. "I been ringing up all over trying to locate you. Lookit, right after you left, I went outdoors and scouted around, figuring there might after all be something to what you said about the dress blowing off the line. And I found it, Sholto. I found my dress right there back of the barn."

"What'd I tell you?" said Sholto. "It's just like my missing pants all over again."

"No, it ain't," said the widow. "When I found my dress there was a bald-headed man in it!"

"A bald-headed—Sadie!"

"And, Sholto, the man was dead—shot in the back!"

"Sadie—no!"

"Sober truth, Sholto. You come and

see.”

Sholto hung up, walked to the head of the basement stairs, shouted down, “Cy, you’ll have to wait for them eats. I got big business that’ll maybe keep me for hours.”

There was a corpse back of the barn all right. Sholto beamed his flashlight up and down the length of it. It was the corpse of a bald-headed man of forty or so. It lay on its stomach, incongruously attired in the widow’s rust-colored dress, fingers clawing at the grass, the face still distorted from the shaft of frightful agony that had torn through the man as the bullet drilled through to his heart. .

Sholto felt the corpse for body heat. It had chilled some, despite the feverish heat of the evening.

“Know what,” said the widow, “I think he was shot not more’n five minutes before I missed that dress. Remember that rifle shot I told you about? Well, that was when he was murdered.”

Sholto nodded his agreement, said, “Ever see this man before?”

“No, never in my life.”

“Neither did I, Sadie. Fine thing, a stranger gets shot almost in your back yard, wearing one of your dresses—and nothing else beside.”

“Sholto, you mean he ain’t—he ain’t got nothing on underneath?”

“Not a stitch.”

Sholto straightened. “Sadie, go phone a couple of deputies and tell ‘em to bring Doc Poole out with ‘em. And call the state cops. This is too big for a small-towner like me to handle. Me, I’ll stand by the corpse until Doc gets here. No one should touch it until he arrives.”

The widow rustled off through the black night. Again Sholto beamed his light on the corpse while he pondered the tousled condition of the black hair that fringed the bald crown. He fingered the dead hands, nodded as their uncalloused

flesh and carefully manicured nails registered the fact this man definitely had not been of the laboring class. He studied the corpse’s feet. Black earth clung to those feet, had forced its way up through the toes. That earth had come from a plowed field.

Sholto peered about him while he tried to remember the pattern of the country immediately adjacent to this spot. He nodded. The only plowed field hereabouts was the one stretching between the edge of the widow’s land and the thin strip of woodland along the river bank.

Right then, with an abruptness that sent Sholto’s heart bounding clear into his throat, a sharp crack ripped aside the silence of the night and went bounding away and away in a diminuendo of rattling echoes. Sholto spun around, groped for his gun, uncertain for the moment whether or not the shot had been fired at him.

Again that sharp crack. And with it the top of the near-by barn sprang into silhouetted relief against the brief splash of fire on the far side of it.

So! The gunfire was not directed at him; it was directed at the widow’s farmhouse. It had to be. There was no other conceivable target.

SHOLTO tugged out his .38, waddled as fast as he could make it toward the scene of action. He rounded the corner of the barn at the precise second the rifleman rounded it, heading from the opposite direction. They crashed head-on. The rifleman hurtled backward under the impact of Sholto’s bulkier frame. Sholto rolled over him, hit the ground with a force that brought the breath belching out of him like the air out of a bursting balloon.

The sheriff got woozily to his hands and knees, groped in the grass for his gun and his glasses. He was still groping when

the other man got up and made a break for it.

Sholto's hand closed on a rock that was about the size of a baseball. He got to his feet, wound up, and let go. Unable to see in the complete darkness and, moreover, without his glasses, his shot was aimed purely by his sense of sound. But it found its mark for all that. A loud yelp of pain, an immediate slackening in the tempo of those thudding feet, left no doubt on that score.

Sholto started blindly, gropingly toward his man, then suddenly flung himself as flat as his fleshy figure would permit as fire flashed ahead of him and lead sang past his ear.

The footsteps resumed their thudding. Sholto did not pursue. Instead, he went back to recover his gun and his glasses. Without them he was helpless.

A couple of minutes later, the glasses once more on his nose, the gun again in his hand, he limped toward the old farmhouse. His heart was beating with anxiety as his imagination dwelt on the various bad things that could have happened to the widow.

He hammered on the door. To his intense relief he heard the widow's rasping voice. "Who is it? No tricks. I got a gun."

"No tricks, ma'am. It's me—the sheriff."

Again the cautious opening of the door, the cautious scrutiny. Sholto pushed his way inside.

"What did I tell you?" said the widow. "Didn't I say there was them as would like to see me dead? Didn't I?"

Sholto nodded, pushed his way through to the kitchen, clicked his tongue over the broken window and the shattered china.

"Tell me what happened," he directed.

"Well," said the widow, "I was just finishing them phone calls you told me to

make when suddenly the window fell in. Something zipped past my nose and busted my best platter on the wall over there. I stared dumblike for maybe five seconds before it dawned I'd been shot at through the lighted window. So I threw myself face down, and—so help me!—even at that, another bullet went clear through my hair and took that old gilt teapot Aunt Louise give me for a wedding gift."

"Sadie," said Sholto, "who'd want to kill you?"

The widow shrugged her thin shoulders. "Lots of people. Like I've told you so often, my life's been threatened for years. I could feel it all the time. But most of all I suspect that Rabbit Kohler. He was a mighty sore man when he left here today. He threatened to come back, too. 'You ain't heard the last of me, Sadie Callaghan. I'll get you yet,' was what he said."

"Y'know," mused Sholto, "if those shots come as close as you say they did, that was pretty fair-to-middling shooting. Could Rabbit shoot that good? Come to think of it, I guess he could at that. But then, well-nigh every man in this village could. We was born with guns in our hands. Lookit, I'm going over to Rabbit's shack right now. You stay here away from the windows, Sadie. And when the deputies come, tell 'em to go right out and stand by that corpse."

DESPITE the widow's protest that she didn't care to be left alone, Sholto let himself out of the house and headed across the pasture toward the woodlands wherein stood the one-room shack inhabited by Rabbit Kohler. Sholto walked warily, his every faculty tinglingly alert. It was of course, unlikely that the man with the rifle was still around, but you never knew, you never knew.

He saw nothing, heard nothing until he reached the woodland itself. And then he suddenly flattened himself against a tall maple. Someone was approaching him. He could hear the snapping of twigs in the underbrush. He took out his gun, cocked it, waited, his heart doing uncomfortable things within him.

The twig snapping, the rustling came nearer. And now came the sound of labored breathing. Sholto wiped sweat from his forehead, sweat that didn't all come from the heat of this summer night.

The prowler was almost on top of him now, passing the far side of the tree under which he crouched. Sholto eased himself into position. Then he hurtled forward.

His arms fastened around the skinny frame of another man. The man screamed his fright, went limp in Sholto's arms.

"One false move and I'll drill you," growled Sholto, poking his gun into the other's ribs and flashing a light on his face.

For a second or so he actually didn't recognize his captive. For even though he'd known Rabbit Kohler for thirty years or more, he'd never before seen him with his hang-jawed, rheumy-eyed face scrubbed and his whiskers shaved clear down to the skin line. Nor had he ever before seen him dressed in anything but greasy overalls. But right now Rabbit wore a multiple-hued bow tie and spotlessly white linen.

Moreover, as the exploring flashlight beam discovered, he was dressed in a hundred dollars' worth of the most fashionably tailored pin-striping the sheriff had ever seen. True, the tailoring was an atrociously bad fit, but for all that it almost made Rabbit look like a gentleman.

"Well, if this don't beat all!" exclaimed Sholto. "Where'd you get the duds, Rabbit?"

"Store bought," Rabbit said promptly.

"What store?"

"Mail order."

Sholto eyed him skeptically, twisted him around, pulled down the coat collar, and examined the tailor's label.

"Since when did a mail-order house peddle clothes tailored on Fifth Avenue, New York?" he asked. "Rabbit, you and me have got some things to talk over. We're going to the widder's house."

"Suits me," said Rabbit. "I was going there anyways."

"At this hour? At ten-thirty?"

"Why not? What I had to say couldn't keep till morning."

"So," said Sholto, "you couldn't wait till morning to let the widder see you in your new duds. She had to see 'em tonight, huh? Or could it be you daren't wear 'em in the full light of day?"

"You suggesting these duds is stole, Sholto?"

"Just that, Rabbit. Just that. Start walking."

They crossed the pasture together, went through the ritual of gaining admittance to the widow's house together.

THE widow laid down her shotgun, stared in amazement at the glory that was Rabbit Kohler. Then she threw her head back and went into a paroxysm of hysterical laughter.

"See," said Sholto, "even the fancy duds don't make any difference. She still thinks you're a runt. Too bad, Rabbit. Now all you'll get out of stealing them clo'es is a jail term."

"Who said I stole 'em?" growled Rabbit.

Sholto thought of the tousled condition of the corpse's fringe of black hair, of the black soil between its toes, of its lack of underclothing.

"Me," he answered. "You stole 'em from the bald-headed man who went

swimming in the river.”

Rabbit jumped. “So! He went to the police after all? I figured he wouldn’t dare—him naked like he was. I figured he’d maybe hang around until it was dark, and then drive off in his car in the hopes of picking up something to cover him somewheres else.”

“He had a car then?”

“Sure. He parked it down by the river. I was fishing. I seen him, but he didn’t see me. He looked all around, and I could tell he was tempted by the cool water. Finally he stripped right off and went in. So I swiped his duds, thinking I could get a nice price for them and no one the wiser. It wasn’t until just a short while back that I thought how they’d be just the thing to go visiting the widder in.”

“Nice of you to admit this,” said Sholto.

Rabbit gave a grunt of disgust.

“Why shouldn’t I? You caught me with the goods, didn’t you? If you hadn’t, I’d have lied like hell.”

Sholto grinned, turned to the widow. “So now you know where your dress went. That poor guy waited until it was near dark, then he scouted around for something to wear, saw your dress, and swiped it.”

“Disgracefulest thing I ever heard tell of,” sniffed the widow.

“Then,” Sholto went on, “someone with a high-power rifle, knowing you always made a practice of throwing a few handfuls of scratch to your chickens before they bedded down, hid in the trees and waited for you to come out. But instead of you, he saw this man in your dress. The light not being too good by then, he shot the guy instead of you. Maybe it was you did the shooting, Kohler?”

Rabbit Kohler stared. “Huh?”

“Rabbit, did you try to kill the widder?”

“Kill the widder? Why’d I want to do that? I love her—”

He broke off as footsteps crunched the gravel of the garden path.

A voice called, “State police.”

Sholto opened the door and admitted two uniformed men. Sholto said, “Glad to see you, fellers. We had a murder in town, and I figured I’d better have some real cops in on the case. But now I ain’t so sure. I got a hunch I can lay a finger on the killer myself.”

Cy Jennings jumped when he saw the bright buttons and the badges of the men who accompanied the sheriff.

Sholto opened the cell door and the three men crowded in. Sholto said, “Look for that welt I told you about, fellers.”

The troopers laid strong hands on the protesting prisoner, jerked him from the bench, twisted him around, pulled his shirt from inside his trousers, and studied his bare back.

“There it is,” said Sholto. “I knew that rock must have hit him hard enough to leave its mark. See the big bruise?”

Cy Jennings tore himself free. “Wallie, what is this!”

“You’re arrested for murder is what,” said Sholto. “Half an hour after sundown you shot someone you thought was Sadie Callaghan. Later, when you learned the widder was still alive, you had another crack at it. But you didn’t make it that time either, on account of me butting in like I did.”

Jennings forced a mirthless laugh. “How could I be outdoors shooting people when I’ve been locked in jail ever since three this afternoon?”

“But maybe you haven’t been in jail all that time,” suggested Sholto. “Frisk him, fellers.”

AGAIN the troopers laid hands on Cy Jennings. When they were through, Sholto picked up a couple of keys they'd turned out of the young man's pockets.

"See," he said, "here's a duplicate key to the front door and here's one to the door of this here cell. Three weeks back you swiped my pants and had duplicate keys made from the ones you found in my pocket. You took the pants instead of just the keys because that disguised the fact it was the keys you was really after. At the time I thought nothing of it because you joshed me into believing I'd absentmindedly put the pants some place else. Twice today you used them keys to let yourself out of this cell."

Jennings panted, "No, Wallie, I—I swear—"

The sheriff went on, "You figured that since you was the one who most stood to gain by the widder being murdered, you'd be the first one suspected when the end come. And you figured you could beat the rap by having yourself locked up here for the day—as sweet an alibi as any man could wish for.

"But, Cy it seemed to me kind of suspicious that a non-drinker like you should get picked up for drunken driving the selfsame day the widder was to be murdered, and the selfsame day me and most of the rest of the town was away to the rod-and-gunners' outing. So I got to suspecting you like all get out and before you knew it, hell, I could see plain as day how you could have worked the thing out!

"Like how you could get yourself locked up for the day by smacking your

car into the side of my feed store, and then staggering and rolling all over the place, and then getting abusive with me. You knew, of course, that I ain't the kind to play favorites; that I'd jail even the guy who worked for me if I found him drunk when in charge of a car. Then I got to wondering how you could do a killing while you was in jail, and I thought back to the time I lost my pants."

"Okay, okay," sneered Jennings. "So you found me with a bruise on my back and with keys I shouldn't have. You'll want a sight more than that to pin a murder rap on me."

Sholto smiled. "I got more, Cy. I've got the gun you did the killing with—yeah, the rifle you hid in the back of the broom closet right here in the town hall."

Jennings groaned, slumped down onto the bench, stared his horror.

Sholto concluded, "Wondering how I came to find it? Why, Cy, I understand you like I understand the back of my own hand. Like I said before, you're the kind that likes to gamble and to play it safe at one and the same time. So I knew you'd want the keys on your person and the rifle somewheres near at hand—just in case something went wrong and you had to make a break for it. Finding the rifle was the first crack in the case. Oh, by the way, these gentlemen are going to prove the death slug was fired from that rifle. You are, ain't you, fellers?"

One of the troopers chuckled. "Seeing you've done the rest of the work, I guess that's the least we can do," he said.