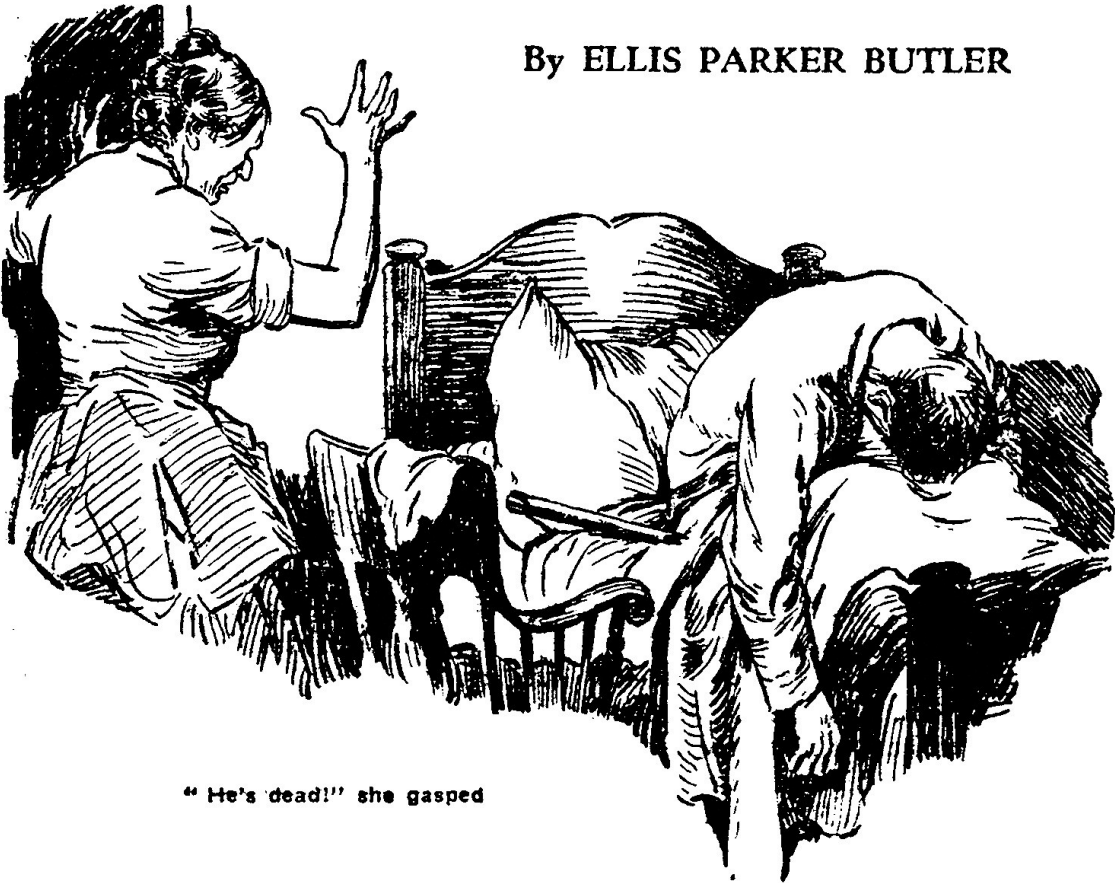


Murder Money

By ELLIS PARKER BUTLER



"He's dead!" she gasped

A murderer often leaves behind a clue for the law—but in this clueless crime the law unwittingly provided its own solution

I SEE how they are talking about doing away with sheriffs now on account of them being back-numbers and no good anyway, not having the money or the organization to chase these modern criminals like a state constabulary can with radio and all. I guess maybe that's all

right, too. What they say about sheriffs being elected because they are popular fellows instead of because they are experts at crime detection, like they ought to be, sounds sort of reasonable to me.

Still and all I shouldn't wonder if some of the sheriffs had some brains, too.

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Maybe their day is past and some of them did some good work off and on. What I'm thinking about right now is a case that happened right here in our county-seat and the way Sheriff Elbert Donworthy handled it. It looked pretty good to me at the time. Maybe a state police crowd could have handled it better, but I don't know.

What happened was that this man, Rance Dalton, got murdered in his bed in his own house right here in this town of Bexer. He was knocked on the head with a club—a heavy cane he always carried—while he was asleep and probably more than half drunk. The cane, split some but not broken clean in two, was left on the bed beside Rance, and it was easy to see that Rance had roused up in bed and that he had been hit while trying to sit up. He was bent over forward and had been hit on the top of the head, and some of his hair was on the knob of the heavy cane.

There was no doubt that he had been killed for his money, because it was gone. Rance was a gambler. Just being a gambler don't mean that a man has money—far from it—but in this case it did mean that Rance had money. And I'll tell you why—Rance never came back to Bexer unless he did have money. When Rance Dalton's money was low he got on the train and went to Chicago or St. Louis, or maybe Kansas City, and the town of Bexer saw no more of him until he had money again. Then he came back and rested—for as long as his money lasted.

In a sort of way the town of Bexer was proud of Rance Dalton. If gambling had been a little more respectable, the Bexer Weekly News would have printed one of

these "Local Boy Makes Good" columns about him, because that was how we felt about Dalton. He was one of us small town fellows and he went out and tackled the big sports of the big bad cities and he beat them every time. He was something to be proud of.

Here in Bexer he never played for money, not real money—penny ante, maybe, or contract at a tenth of a cent, just to be friendly, but that was all. Bexer was his home; he made his money elsewhere.

So this time, like always, the home-coming of Rance Dalton was quite an event. The usual lot of us were sitting on the veranda of the Bexer House that afternoon and a tramp had shuffled up to the veranda steps. He had just got off the freight from the west, I guess, and he was surely a dirty and unwashed specimen. Andy Fuller, who owns the Bexer House, was sitting there with us and the tramp whined something about not having had anything to eat for three or four days, so Andy told him to go around back and he would give him a feed. Andy went in through the hotel and the tramp went around by the side. The country was full of men out of work and everybody helped them all they could.

Sheriff El Donworthy was there on the veranda, and so was I and eight or ten more of us, when the Chicago train came in twenty minutes or so later. The depot was just across the street. I saw Rance Dalton get off the one Pullman the train had, and I would have known him by his limp if by nothing else.

"Boys," I said, "there's Rance Dalton back home. The depression must be over

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and money easy again.”

JUST then a tramp came around from the back of the hotel. He felt in his pocket for a cigarette and lighted it and sat on the bottom step. Rance came across the road toward us.

Behind Rance came Mose Brown carrying Rance's three pieces of luggage. Rance had a pleased glad-to-be-home look on his face. He was always glad to get home—gambling was his profession and his job, but what he liked was the old home town and his old friends and good companions.

Rance, as I said, walked with a cane. He dragged one leg a little because of the paralysis he had when he was a kid. He was about forty now, thin-faced and pale. He looked like a gambler out of a book, and he wasn't ashamed of his profession. He was honest at it.

All of us got out of our chairs when Rance reached the veranda steps. He came up the steps, helping himself by holding to one rail, and we gave him a hearty greeting. Mose Brown stood a minute at the bottom of the steps and then he sat down on the bottom step near the tramp to wait for Rance. He did not dare come up on the veranda because he was one of the few that Andy had ever ordered off it. He was a loafer and a bum, no more and no less, and Sheriff El had had him in the calaboose half a dozen times—stealing this and that. He had one of these sly-fox faces with the left eye drawn down at the outside corner where Orty Jones had hit him with a brick one time when they had a drunken row.

“Well, boys, back again and glad of it,” Rance Dalton said as he shook hands with us. “The old town sure does look good to its wandering boy. And I'm back for a good long rest this time—yes, sirs!”

“You made out pretty well, did you, Rance?” El Donworthy asked, and Rance patted the breast of his coat.

“The cards ran right for me this time, El,” Rance said with his quiet smile. “They were good to me for sure, fellows. What I've got in my pocket here means I won't have to leave you for a good long time, boys.”

He saw Orty Jones then, sort of hanging on the outskirts of us on the veranda, Orty not being quite one of our bunch. He was a sort of odd-job man-of-all-work in Bexer and had bootlegged quite a little until prohibition got wiped out, and he was on his uppers pretty bad, there not being many odd jobs. Not that he was crazy about working much. El Donworthy had had Orty in jail plenty of times, too, but mostly for assault and battery when drunk, like when he hit Mose Brown with a brick.

“How, Orty,” Rance greeted him. “My place all trimmed up nice and everything?”

“Yes, Mr. Dalton,” Orty said. “I kept it spic and span—yes, sir.”

“Good!” Rance said. “How about you helping Mose carry my bags up to the house?”

He tossed Orty a half-dollar, and Orty caught it, and went down and took one of Rance's bags, and he and Mose went off toward Rance's house, but what I want to make clear was that Mose Brown and Orty Jones and the tramp and all of us had

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heard Rance say he had a lot of money in his pocket. We all knew it.

“Where’s Andy?” Rance asked us. “What is this—a drought in this town?”

Andy, like I said, was the owner of the Bexer House and he should have been out there on the veranda when Rance arrived because the coming of Rance always meant drinks. I went to the door and called “Hey, Andy! Rance is here!” and from somewhere inside the hotel Andy shouted “All right; coming!” and presently he was with us and Rance was telling him to bring out drinks for all around. That was all normal; it was always that way when Rance came home—it meant happy days and here’s-to-you.

WE sat there talking and having drinks—quite a few drinks—and Rance told us some of the things that had happened to him while he was away and we told him what had happened in Bexer.

“Andy,” Rance said, “this is a lot better stuff than you had the last time I was home. You certainly are serving a highly improved grade of poison. But, boys, I’ve got some stuff that will make your throats happy. I’ve got a dozen bottles in one of my grips that just about tops anything that was ever put in a glass. We’ll test it after dinner; we’ll have a little party.”

Most of us went home for dinner but Rance ate at the hotel. That was regular with him—he took his meals at the hotel, usually having breakfast about noon, but he slept at home. So after dinner this day he walked on down to his house with Milt Morris, the town clerk, to get set for a party. Andy sent Terry Breen, the hotel

handyman, along after them with a chunk of ice and a dozen bottles of ginger ale and soda to do until Rance could get a supply of his own. And Terry Breen wasn’t any too high class a citizen. Nobody knew anything about his past except that he had been a drifter until Andy took him on and gave him a job. A big, red-headed guy, nobody knew where he had come from.

By the time I had eaten my dinner and got to Rance’s house his front porch was beginning to look like a real party. The clan was gathering.

Rance’s house was not what you might think a gambler’s house would be. It was not a flashy place. It always reminded me of some nice old grandma in a lace cap, neat and tidy and respectable. It was white with green shutters, a simple old-style story-and-a-half cottage with vines on the front porch lattices and lilac bushes and all. It had belonged to Rance’s mother before she died and Rance kept it just as it always had been. It was his home.

The house stood far enough from any other houses so that Rance could have these parties on his porch without annoying anyone, but there was one thing Rance never did—he never had parties inside the house. When he was home during the warm months, Rance had plenty of parties on the porch but when the weather got too cold for that he met the fellows at the Bexer House. He never asked them inside the cottage to carouse or to have even a drink.

AT any rate, on this night the fellows gradually arrived and Rance brought out chairs for them and opened bottles and it

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turned out to be quite a party. I don't just remember how I did get home. It must have been about midnight when I left, and I seem to remember that several others left with me but I would not swear to that. I know that Milt Morris, our town clerk, told me the next day that when he left, Rance was pretty thoroughly stupefied. That was after I left. Milt always goes rather easy on the strong stuff because of doctor's orders. He said nearly everyone had gone home when he left. He had Pen Harmon in tow, Pen not being able to navigate alone.

The murder was discovered the next day at noon. Rance Dalton had not shown up at the Bexer House for breakfast but Andy thought nothing of that because of the party. He supposed Rance was sleeping off the effects of that extra fine stuff he had bragged about, but he expected Rance would drift down to the hotel sometime along in the afternoon, probably looking paler than ever.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, however, Phil Straus, who is our Bexer iceman, delivered the usual ice at the hotel and Andy spoke to him.

"You might stop up to Rance Dalton's," Andy said. "Rance got home yesterday and he'll be wanting ice from now on, I guess. I let him have a piece yesterday, but from what I hear of the party they had last night, Rance will be wanting more than he's got left to cool his head off."

"I'll go around that way," Phil told Andy, and just before three in the afternoon he parked his ice truck in front of Rance's house and got down from the

seat. He was crossing to the gate—the place has a white picket fence—when he saw Mrs. Eliza Gunnerson coming toward him down the street. Phil waited for her.

Out there toward the edge of Bexer the street is already almost a country road and the sidewalk is only two planks laid side by side—twelve inch planks. Most of the way this narrow walk is grown up with weeds on either side but in front of Rance Dalton's place the weeds were not only cut, but from the fence to the walk and from the walk to the road there was good green grass, always neatly cut. Rance paid Orty Jones so much a time for keeping his yard and these strips of lawn trimmed, because this place was his home and he was proud of it. He wanted it to look nice at all times and especially when he happened to come home to it.

In the same way he paid Mrs. Eliza Gunnerson so much a month to keep the house dusted and swept and in order while he was away. When he was at home he paid her more and she made the bed and kept the inside of the house tidy for him. She was a nice old lady and had been a friend of Rance's mother and she would have had a hard time getting along if it had not been for the money she got from Rance. Phil Straus waited until she came up to him.

"I hear Rance is back," Phil said. "Andy Fuller said he guessed Rance would be wanting to take ice again now that he's home."

"Yes, he's back," said Mrs. Gunnerson, sort of crossly. "He's back, and a nice carrying-on there was last night if I'm a judge, him and that drunken lot. None of

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my business, I dare say. Yes, he'll want ice; you might as well fetch in fifty pounds to start with."

"Yes, ma'am," Phil said, and he turned back to his truck. From under the cushion of his seat he took one of the record cards he hung up for each customer to mark down day by day how much ice he delivered. He put this in his hip pocket and went to the tail of his truck and tonged a fifty pound chunk of ice. He went around to the back door of the house with this.

MRS. GUNNERSON had unlocked the back door and it was standing open. Phil went into the kitchen, lugging the ice, and Mrs. Gunnerson opened the refrigerator door for him. While Phil was putting the ice in, Mrs. Gunnerson went into the forward part of the house, and Phil wiped his hands on the sides of his pants and dug a pencil stub out of his shirt pocket. He wrote Rance Dalton's name on the record card and went to hang this on a nail beside the door, and he was turning to go when Mrs. Gunnerson came scuffling into the kitchen. Her face was as white as chalk and her eyes as big as dollars.

"He's dead!" she gasped. "He's dead!"

"Rance? Dead?" Phil asked, and the old woman sank into a chair by the kitchen table, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out an ugly picture.

"He's dead!" she cried again, and Phil started for the front part of the house. Mrs. Gunnerson got up and followed him. There were three rooms in the front part of the house and one of these was Rance's bedroom. It took Phil only a moment to see that Rance was dead, doubled forward

in his bed as I have said. The broken heavy cane lay on the bed at his side.

"Keep back, ma'am," Phil said as Mrs. Gunnerson, wringing her hands, came behind him into the room. "We don't want to touch him—that's the law. How come you happened to find he was dead?"

She told him. She said she had come to the house that morning because it was her regular day to sweep and dust, and as soon as she saw the litter of glasses and bottles and cigar stubs and ashes on the porch she knew Rance was home. Inside the house she found Rance's luggage, two of the bags open. Rance's bedroom door was ajar, open half a foot or so, and she glanced in as she went past it, but she looked in only enough to see his clothes tumbled on a chair. By that—for he was neat when sober—and by the mess on the porch, she guessed that he was sleeping off the effects of a carouse.

"But I might have known," she wailed, as if having known sooner that he was dead mattered at all. "He wasn't snoring like he does when he's been drinking a lot—I should have known!"

At any rate, she told Phil, she had set about cleaning up the mess on the porch and she washed the glasses and put them away, and tidied things up, and went home to her lunch. By the middle of the afternoon, she judged, Rance would be up, so she had come back then to make his bed and she had met Phil, as we know. Rather worried, she had looked into Rance's room, pushing the door wider open, and we know what she saw.

"It's a damn shame," Phil said, for everybody liked Rance. "That stick was

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what it was done with, I guess. Now, listen, Mrs. Gunnerson, you'd better stay here while I go tell El Donworthy."

"In this room? Do I have to stay here?" asked the old woman, her voice shaking.

"You don't need to stay right in this room," Phil told her. "You stay in the house, that's all. And don't let nobody come in this room till El Donworthy gets here. We'd better shut the door."

They went out and Phil shut the door. He drove back down town and he found Sheriff Elbert Donworthy on the veranda of the Bexer House where he and I and six or eight other fellows were waiting for Rance to turn up, and Phil—pretty excited for him—told us what had happened to Rance. And I'd like you to notice that Orty Jones, the odd-job man, and Mose Brown, the town loafer, were both there, most likely—anyone would say—hanging around in case Rance showed up and passed around free drinks again.

RIGHT away the fellows started up, going to rush to Rance's house, but El Donworthy got his long lank self to the head of the veranda steps and spread out his arms.

"Hold on now!" El ordered. "Hold on now, boys! I'm sheriff of this county and this is my job. Don't you all go sprawling down there and messing things up before I have a chance to look. George, you come along with me; Phil can take us down quick in his truck."

My special invite was because I was Donworthy's "deppity," as he called me.

"I can take the whole lot of you," Phil said, but Donworthy was thinking of

something else. He picked out Milt Morris, the town clerk.

"Looks like this might be a chance to use them hounds of mine after all," the sheriff said. "Milt, you go around to my house and get them, and take them up to Rance's. And ask my wife for my hip-gun; she knows where it is. And the cattridges—they're in the same drawer. Come on, George—let's go."

By the "hounds" El meant two bloodhounds he kept in his back yard in a kennel there. They were quite a joke with us and we had ragged El quite a lot about them. He had got them from a fellow the first month after he had been elected sheriff, six or eight years before, and he had bragged too much about what a help they would be to him, so they were quite a laugh. He never had had a chance to use them in any shape or manner.

Anyway, Milt Morris went off toward El's house at a run, and most of the rest of us piled into Phil's ice truck and we went jouncing down to Rance's place with what ice Phil had left bumping and thumping among us. By the time we reached the small white house, the news of the murder was getting around town and plenty more—men, women and children—were starting for Rance's. In half an hour every person in town who was not bed-ridden must have been in the yard.

El Donworthy set Phil and another fellow to keep one and all out of the cottage, and El and I went inside. Mrs. Gunnerson was on guard like Phil had told her to be, and she took us to the bedroom.

Well, I might string this narration out till kingdom come, telling what El said and

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what I said, and how El and I hunted for clues and signs, but what's the use? We did not find a smell of a clue. The money was gone from the inside pocket of Rance's coat. The window was open and Mrs. Gunnerson said Rance always slept with it open, and anybody could have climbed in easy enough. Rance's own cane had been used, so that did not help any, and we could not make out any finger prints if there were any to find. Outside the window the grass was short and the ground hard and footprints wouldn't show, and already a mess of folks were there, looking in at the window at us and at poor Rance there on the bed.

"George," El said when we had decided that there wasn't a clue of any kind we could discover, "I didn't think there was a man in Bexer mean enough to do this to a good fellow like Rance."

"How do we know it was anybody in Bexer, El?" I asked. "It may have been an outsider. What if some city crook knew that Rance had that wad of money on him? Or how about a tramp? Say! How about that tramp that came to the hotel yesterday?"

"By thunder!" El exclaimed. "It might be him at that, George! We'll investigate than angle, deppity. It's a blamed shame, though, that he didn't leave a piece of his shirt or something. If it was that tramp he'll be beating it away from here; we could put the hounds on his tracks if we had something of his for them to smell of."

"How'd it be if you let them smell of the grass outside the window? Or of the floor of the room here?"

"Sort of hopeless, George, with all

them people tramping on the grass," El said. "And I don't know how we'd go about showing the hounds whose scent to track from the room here, what with Rance and you and me and Phil Straus and Mrs. Gunnerson all having been in here. Anyway we might try it."

WE went out front, and Milt Morris was there with the two hounds—Brick and Bessie—each on a leash. The yard was full of people, front and sides, and a lot more outside of the fence, all talking about the murder, and telling what they knew about it, which wasn't much.

Some of the people, especially boys and such, were clustered about Milt and the hounds.

"I've got them here, Elbert," Milt called as we came out on the porch, and El said "All right" or "O.K." or something of the sort, but old Doc Overton was arriving, and El turned back as far as the door with him, telling him to go in and see what was left of Rance, but that it was a clear case of murder.

Doc made another scent to confuse the hounds in the bedroom.

"Now, folks," El said from the top of the steps, "I want you all to get back and leave the way to the gate free, because I'm going to try out my hounds and see what comes of it. I'm going to let them smell of that room and see if they can trace down the murderer."

Mose Brown was just coming in at the gate. Orty Jones was standing close to the hounds; he moved over towards us and spoke to El. Quite a few near by could hear him.

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“Sheriff,” he said, “before you start them hounds I want to get this straight with you. My tracks will be in that bedroom. Yestiddy morning Mrs. Gunnerson asked me to go in there and hang up a shade, and I done so. And my tracks will be all over this yard; I cut the grass yestiddy and there ain’t a foot of the yard I didn’t tramp on.”

“Well, now, Orty,” El said, “that’s just too bad. We’ll have to take that into account some way, that’s all. I don’t know as my hounds will be much good—”

That was as far as he got. Mose Brown had edged into the yard while Orty was talking, and El’s eyes were on the crowd to see if they were going out of the yard as he had asked. He saw Mose Brown slouch careless-like over to the hounds with one hand hanging down limply. I myself saw a small yellow cube of something drop from Mose Brown’s hand. The next instant El had pushed Phil Straus out of his way, bumping against me, and had jumped down onto the lawn and was kicking another small yellow chunk of the same thing from under the nose of the Bessie hound. His foot hit Bessie’s nose and she gave a yelp and jerked back, but El hadn’t been in time to keep Brick, the other hound, from getting the other hunk of stuff, and Brick was chawing and gulping it.

El picked up the yellow cube Bessie had not got and held it to his nose and sniffed it, and his next move was sort of movie drama stuff.

He reached out and grabbed his gun from Milt Morris and stuck it into Mose Brown’s ribs.

“Hands up!” she ordered. “I arrest you in the name of the law, Mose Brown, for the murder of Rance Dalton!”

He let the Bessie hound sniff of Mose Brown’s shoes and when he led her to the bedroom she just about went crazy. She smelled Mose Brown all over the room—on the floor, on the windowsill, even in the inside pocket of Rance’s coat. She was almost distracted, there was so much Mose Brown scent there.

The yellow stuff was not poison—it was cheese, common store cheese—but it gave Mose Brown away. Mose Brown knew, and Sheriff El Donworthy knew, and most of the rest of us knew, that when a dog eats cheese its nose loses mighty near all its ability to smell anything. Mose Brown was afraid of those hounds’ noses.

There was no doubt, from the way the Bessie hound acted, that Mose Brown had been in that bedroom where he had no business to be, and later on that same day, we found Rance’s purse and money hidden in Mose Brown’s shack, and Mose broke down and owned up to the murder.

“Well, I don’t know, George,” El said to me. “Them hounds wasn’t such a total loss after all, was they? They maybe didn’t track *to* anybody, but they tracked *from* him, and it done as good. Sort of reverse English, huh?”

THE END