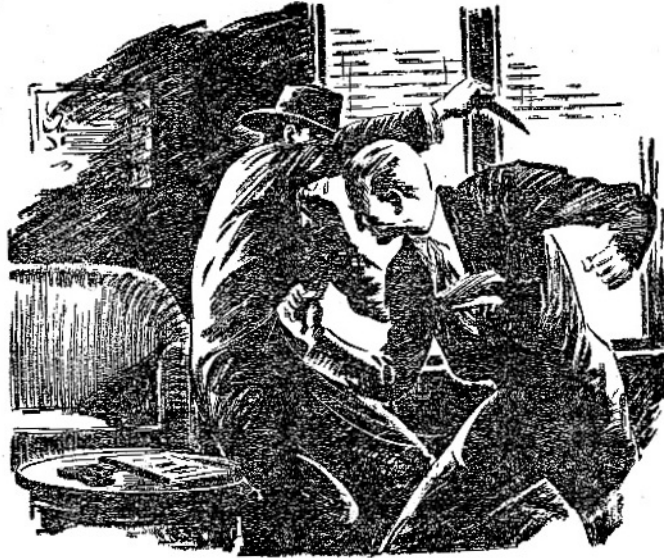


While several "murders" are being "investigated" at Ken Fullard's rented summer place, he quietly uncovers evidence of another type of crime that is—



Fullard hit Burnside just above the belt

STRICTLY SINISTER

By JOHN L. BENTON

WITH THE coming of night the old house began to creak from the weary weight of its years. There was a dismal air about the place, as though it was lonely for steps on the winding staircase, for voices and laughter of those who were no longer there, and would not come back again.

Ken Fullard was surprisingly sensitive to his surroundings for a big, husky blond man who was of the aggressive type. He wasn't quite sure he had made a wise move in renting the old Carter place on the Shore Road out in Westchester for the summer. Yet the house up on the hill had looked quaint and attractive when he had asked the real estate agent about it as they were driving by.

"That's the Carter place," George Spencer said. The real estate agent was a thin, sandy haired man who looked like a tired red fox. "No one has lived there for the past five years. The place is for rent,

all right, and I can get it for you cheap. We don't have much call for those big, old-fashioned fourteen-room houses these days, Mr. Fullard. Most families prefer the more compact type of dwelling."

"I like the looks of the place," Fullard said. "Could we look over the house now? As I told you the play in which I was in just closed after a long run and I'm looking for a place where I can spend the summer and just rest."

"Then you might like this house," Spencer turned his car into the winding gravel driveway that led up the hill to the front of the house. "Fortunately I have the keys to the place with me. It is completely furnished. In fact everything in the house is just as it was when the Carter family—when they left."

The agent had shown Ken Fullard through the house. On that morning the rooms were bright with late April sunshine. The furniture was old but

comfortable and in good taste. It was easy to see that this place had been a home.

On the first floor there was a long wide hall, a reception room, living room, dining room, butler's pantry and kitchen. On the second floor there were five good sized bedrooms and two baths. While on the third floor were three servants' rooms, a store room, and a fifth room with a locked door.

"Don't know what's in there," Spencer said as he tried the door. "I have to try and get the key or have the door opened if you decide to take this place." He smiled. "Won't you find it rather large—the house I mean—for just yourself, Mr. Fullard?"

"Perhaps," said Fullard. "But I expect to have quite a few house guests during the summer, and naturally I'll have to hire servants. This looks like just what I want."

FULLARD had rented the house through the agent without ever seeing any of the Carter family. The lease was signed by John Carter. Fullard had engaged a butler, cook and maid through an employment agency in New York. The servants were to arrive at the house on Monday morning. Fullard had driven out there alone in his car early Sunday morning, and now he was about to spend his first night in the old house.

With the coming of darkness the old house seemed to have changed. There was a strange atmosphere about it that Fullard did not like. It seemed almost sinister.

He was standing in the big living room staring at the logs burning in the open fire place when the doorbell rang. The electricity had been turned on and so had the gas. The phone would be back in use by Monday. George Spencer had taken care of all of that for Fullard. The lights burned on the lower floor of the house.

Fullard went to the front door and opened it. A tall, thin gray haired man

carrying a black bag stood on the porch.

"I'm Doctor Pearson Burnside," he said, brushing past Fullard and stepping into the hall. "Got here as quickly as I could when I received the message. Where are they?"

"Where are who?" Fullard asked as he closed the front door from the inside.

"Carter, his wife and the two girls," Dr. Burnside said impatiently. "Take me to them at once! Hurry, man, at least some of them may still be alive."

"Alive!" Fullard muttered dazedly. "What do you mean?"

"Great Heavens!" The doctor glared at him. "Don't you even know what happened here not more than twenty minutes ago? John Carter shot his wife and two daughters, then tried to kill himself. Where are they? I'm the family doctor. I must see them at once."

"But this house has been vacant for five years," Fullard said. "I just rented the place for the summer. There is no one here now but me."

"Nonsense," said Burnside. "I know the Carters still live here. Why I treated Martha, the youngest daughter, for a bad cold just a week ago. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Kenneth Fullard, an actor," Fullard said. "As I just told you, I rented this house for the summer."

"The phone is in the living room," the doctor said, walking along the hall. "John called me from there and told me what he had done. Then I heard the sound of a shot over the wire. That's it. They must be in the living room."

Fullard started to follow Dr. Burnside, then halted as the front doorbell rang again. He went to the door and opened it. Two men dressed in ordinary clothes stood on the porch. One was tall and thin and the other was short and stocky.

"Police," said the thin man. "I'm

Inspector Frank Maxwell, and this is Detective Sergeant Luther Day.”

“Yeah,” said Day. “Where are the stiffs?”

“I don’t know,” said Fullard resignedly as he stepped back to let the two men enter. “Perhaps you’d better take a look around.”

He made up his mind that he wasn’t going all through the business of explaining that he had rented the house and that there was no one else there again until he was asked.

Down the hall Dr. Burnside came out of the living room, closing the door behind him. The doctor turned the key in the lock of the door, and then dropped the key into his pocket.

“Awful!” Burnside said. “All four of them lying there—not a spark of life in any of them. I examined them all. Oh, why did John do it!”

“Bad timing,” Fullard said so softly that the other men did not hear him as Maxwell and Day advanced toward the doctor. “Should have delayed the entrance a little longer.”

“Good evening, Inspector,” the doctor said. “How are you, Sergeant.”

“Then it is murder and suicide, Doctor,” Maxwell said.

“That’s right.” Burnside nodded, and then glared at Fullard. “And this man has been trying to tell me that the Carters haven’t lived here for the past five years and that he just rented the house.”

“Smart cookie, eh?” said Day, staring at Fullard. “Knows all the answers.”

“How many ‘sides’ have you got, Day?” Fullard asked.

“None—all ad lib,” Day said, “I mean what are you talking about?”

KEN FULLARD smiled faintly as he saw the way Maxwell and Burnside were glaring at the short stocky man. In

Fullard’s estimation this was getting interesting. He was curious about what would happen next. He wondered if the three men really thought they would get away with this elaborate bluff they were trying to put over. Did they think anyone in his right mind would believe all that stuff about John Carter having murdered his wife and two daughters and then committed suicide in this house now?

“I’d like to talk to you alone, Mr. Fullard,” Doctor Burnside said, taking the key of the living room from his pocket and handing it to Maxwell. “You can take over, Inspector. As County Coroner 1 will make my report on this as murder and suicide.”

Fullard decided that if he could get the doctor away from the other two men that he might find a way to force Burnside to talk and discover what this was all about. He watched Maxwell take the key and start toward the locked door with Day close behind him.

“Suppose we go up to my room, Doctor,” Fullard said. “We can talk there.”

“Excellent idea,” said the doctor, heading toward the stairs.

He stepped back to let Fullard lead the way as they went up the stairs to the second floor of the old house. The doctor was wearing a dark soft hat and a topcoat. Lights were burning in the room that Fullard had selected as his bedroom and the two men stepped in here.

“What’s on your mind, Doctor?” Fullard asked, walking over to a bureau and opening the top drawer. He drew out a fully loaded .45 automatic, and it was in his hand as he turned to face Burnside.

The doctor scowled as he stared at the gun. He seated himself gingerly on the edge of a chair without removing his hat or coat.

“I’m glad you sent for me, Mr. Fullard,” he said, glancing at the black bag

he still carried and had placed on the floor beside his chair. "I can see that you are run down even before we start making a physical check-up. Some of it is mental, of course."

"Naturally," Fullard said as he seated himself in a comfortable chair and placed the automatic beside a magazine on a low round table in front of him. "Why I even suffer delusions! I actually think that you and those two men downstairs are here to investigate John Carter murdering his family and then committing suicide."

"I see we made a serious mistake, Mr. Fullard." Burnside sighed. "We underestimated your intelligence." The gray haired man's eyes flashed angrily. "Of all the rotten actors I ever worked with Day is the worst. The fool doesn't even know how to keep in character. You ask him how many 'sides' he had—meaning how much dialogue there is in his part—and he is fool enough to say he is working ad lib. A fine way for a detective-sergeant to talk!"

"Hardly the way we would have played it, would we, Burnside?" Fullard said with a smile. "You know I have been wondering how long you three have been using this vacant house, and just what you left here that made you feel you had better get rid of me in a hurry when you learned that I had rented the Carter place."

"That is something I suspect you will never learn." Burnside got to his feet. "I might also mention that there are times when a man can be too smart for his own good, Fullard."

Burnside walked over and stared at a framed college diploma hanging on the wall that had evidently belonged to someone in the Carter family. The light switch was close to it. Fullard stood up.

"A nice printing job," he said. "Almost as good as the job you boys have been

doing with those counterfeit tens and twenties."

Burnside pushed the light button, plunging the room into semi-darkness. He lunged at Fullard with a wicked looking knife upraised in his hand. Fullard hit him just above the belt with a powerful right. Burnside dropped the knife as he doubled up from the blow. He staggered back and sank weakly into the big chair he had vacated.

"You really shouldn't have tried that," Fullard said as he picked up the automatic, dropped it in his pocket, and then switched on the lights. "You are much too old for the part. Besides I don't think your boss is going to like the way any of you are playing your roles tonight."

"What do you mean?" Burnside asked weakly. "My boss? Who told you about him?"

"Suppose we don't go into that now," said a hard voice from the doorway of the room.

GEORGE SPENCER stood there, and the sandy haired real estate agent looked far more dangerous than any sleepy red fox now. He held a gun in his right hand.

"To bad you insisted on renting this house in such a hurry, Fullard," Spencer said. "Since it was on the lists I knew that if I didn't rent it to you some other real estate agent would."

"And you just didn't get time to cart that printing press out of that locked room on the third floor," Fullard said. "Naturally you didn't want to risk doing it in the day time when the men from the gas and electric company were working around here." He smiled. "Besides our men have been watching this place for some time."

"Your men?" said Spencer. "What do you mean?"

"I'm from the Treasury Department," Fullard said. "A former actor who became a T-Man. Much better job—we are never at liberty between shows."

"Get him, boss!" shouted Burnside. "Kill him, and let's get out of here."

Fullard's automatic roared through the side pocket of his coat as Spencer raised his gun. The real estate agent staggered back, a bullet in his right arm. He dropped his gun.

From downstairs there came a shout—the roar of a gun and then everything grew quiet.

"My men are taking care of Maxwell and Day," Fullard said. "You had a nice setup, boys, but the Government is very sensitive about bad art work when it comes to money. We noticed that some of the counterfeit bills came from people who had bought or rented property out here in Westchester. Finally we decided that George Spencer was the man who interested us the most, and we were right."

"So that's why you rented this house," said Burnside. "You know that all of the

Carter family save Mr. John Carter are spending the summer in Europe, of course."

"No, I didn't know that," Fullard said. He grinned. "I thought John had murdered his family and then committed suicide. At least I would have thought so if it hadn't been so badly played!"

There were Government men in the hall with Maxwell and Day as prisoners. They took Spencer and Burnside away with them. Other men had broken open the door of the room and found the press and the counterfeiting plates there.

"I'm glad of one thing, Fullard," Spencer said as he was leaving. "I've stuck you with this old house for three months anyway. You signed a lease on the place."

"I'm glad of it, too," said Fullard. "I'm starting my vacation next week, and this is just the place to spend it."

"I knew it," said Burnside sadly. "He even has the punch line on the final curtain!"