



MURDER at LAKE IROQUOIS

by Charles Maxwell

*Love and laughter were rife at the gay house-party. Then—they found
Viola's lovely naked body, stabbed—*

TO Helen Travis, there seemed a vague undercurrent of impending tragedy eddying through the house. She almost regretted accepting Barney Clayfield's invitation. But Barney was a big-time revue producer, and Helen hoped to land a part in his show. Besides, it was too late for regrets now. She was already part and parcel of the week-end party here at Clayfield's rambling summer mansion on Cayuta Island, in the middle of Lake Iroquois.

She looked down over the second-floor balcony at the merrymakers on the wide veranda below. Despite the gaiety of the scene, a faint sensation of uneasiness brought a frown to her smooth white forehead. She tried to throw it off; tried to blame it on the sultry atmosphere of the midsummer night, with its faint promise of an impending storm in the offing.

Again she looked down from the balcony. Barney Clayfield's champagne was being consumed in huge quantities. The crowd was growing very drunk. And among the drunkest of all was Viola Warner.

Viola Warner was red-haired and sensuously

attractive. She had been the star of Clayfield's last production. Now she was executing a sinuous, suggestive dance in the center of a group of applauding males. Her flat hips were weaving wickedly, and her pointed breasts bobbed up and down under her light summery dress beneath, which was no hint of restraining brassiere. Her husband, Bob Warner, the mystery-story author, stood at the edge of the crowd, grinning tipsily at his wife's blatant posturings.

AGIRL wormed her way through the crowd of men surrounding Viola Warner. The newcomer was slender and young and blonde, and there was contemptuous challenge in her sea-green eyes. Helen Travis, from the balcony, recognized the blonde girl. She was Sheila Conners, who had been Viola's understudy in Barney Clayfield's last show. That professional jealousy existed between the two girls was an open secret.

Sheila stared insolently at Viola Warner. "Ah, Cleopatra!" she purred. "Captivating all the men with your fatal charms again, eh?"

Viola's eyes flashed. "Envious ——usual!" she taunted.

Sheila Connors laughed. "Me—jealous? Of what?" With an abandoned gesture the blonde girl lifted her flaring chiffon skirt hip-high, displaying a pair of smooth, stockingless, tapered legs topped by lacy pink step-ins. "Look!" she challenged the crowd at large. "Have I any cause to be jealous—of that?" she gestured scornfully toward Viola Warner's slender calves.

The auburn-haired Viola turned white. Angrily she whipped off her silk frock over her head and stood revealed in tissue-thin black scanties. The firm, snowy mounds of her breasts jutted boldly, arrogantly, almost bursting through the cobwebby brassiere. "If you had a figure like mine you might get a break in Barney Clayfield's next show!" she spat venomously.

"Maybe I'm going to get a better break than you aspect!" Sheila Connors retorted mysteriously.

Barney Clayfield himself, short and fat and bald, injected himself into the scene in a desperately facetious attempt to relieve the tension. "Here, here!" he cried good-naturedly. "If this is to be a beauty contest, I've got a better idea. Let's all take a swim in the lake—with no bathing suits allowed! We undress right here. Men wear their shorts, girls their undies!"

A laughing chorus of approval greeted his suggestion. Clayfield lifted his voice. "Okay, then. Ready—on your mark—get set—*strip!*"

Helen Travis looked down at the bacchanalian scene below. Despite the wild hilarity that drowned out the soft rustling of discarded garments, she still sensed that minor undercurrent of impending tragedy. It filled her with vague forebodings. Intuitively she had no desire to join in the revelry. Instead, she turned and went softly into her own room.

Through her closed door she could still hear the gay shouts from below. And yet it seemed as though the laughter and merriment held a false note, masking something ominous. She stiffened in sudden fright as a discreet knock sounded at her door. Then she smiled at herself for a silly fool, and opened the door.

It was Frank Wallace. He stood there in the doorway, clad only in shorts. Frank Wallace was an artist for whom Helen had posed in the past. He was tall and broad-shouldered and boyish, and his smile was infectious. Helen's eyes widened in genuine surprise.

"Why—Frank! I didn't know you were here on this party!" she said. And somehow his very presence here in this house seemed to relieve her instinctive feeling of uneasiness. She gave him her slender hand. He

pressed her fingers, and a thrill of pleasure tingled through her being.

He grinned at her, his eyes frankly appreciative of her lithe curves and piquant features. "I didn't know you were here, either," he told her, "until I happened to look up at the balcony. I saw you slip into your room. Aren't you joining in the fun?"

She shook her head. "I—I guess I'm not quite feeling up to par," she confessed. "I'd rather not. But please go on with the others. We can visit later."

"That's a promise!" he returned eagerly. "I intend to monopolize you all day tomorrow!" He left her there.

HELEN went back into her room. A cool breeze from Lake Iroquois rustled the curtains at the window overlooking the water below. She went to the open window and gazed out. A full moon rode high in the sky like the baleful orb of a watching, saturnine genie. In the distance dark clouds were gathering, scudding before a rising wind. Little white-caps showed far out on the surface of the lake, and on the horizon a yellow streak of lightning flickered like the forked tongue of a snake.

On the beach below, Helen could see a score of figures. Barney Clayfield's swimming party was starting. Already some of the crowd had splashed into the water. Thin scanties, wet by spray, clung lovingly to glistening feminine bodies, limning every delicious curve. Like semi-nude nymphs and satyrs, the men and girls plunged into the steadily-rising waves.

From Helen's window she could recognize nearly everyone in the clear, relentless moonlight. Barney Clayfield's rotund figure and shining bald head moved about from group to group. There was Sheila, like a naked blonde goddess, her corn-yellow hair piled high on her head. There was Viola Warner splashing water at her mystery-author husband. Helen made out the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Frank Wallace as he joined the others.

A larger part of the bathers raced down the beach in some crazy game of tag. But immediately under Helen's window there remained Viola Warner and her husband, Barney Clayfield, Frank Wallace and Sheila Connors. Viola turned to the blonde Sheila. Her taunting voice rang out bell-clear. "I'll race you out to the float! she challenged.

Sheila laughed mirthlessly. "I can beat you at swimming even better than I can best you at vamping!" she answered. The two girls struck out for the anchored float that bobbed lazily in the rising swells a hundred yards from shore. Helen watched interestedly as Barney

Clayfield and Frank Wallace dove after them. Bob Warner, Viola's husband, seemed to take no interest in the race. He stood, hands on hips, alone, knee-deep in the water.

For a fleeting moment Helen gazed at the sky. The scudding, ominous clouds were gathering like ghostly cavalry, and thin, driving wisps of gray loped across the moon's pale face. Lightning flashed at the far edge of the lake, and in its wake sounded a rumble of distant thunder, menacing, threatening. Helen looked again at the water. The four swimmers had gone more than half way to the floating raft. But Viola Warner must have been tiring. She was dropping behind the others. Her arms were no longer moving; she seemed to be motionless in the water.

Then Helen heard Bob Warner's shout as he noticed that his wife no longer moved. The mystery-author plunged into the water and started swimming with long, clean strokes toward's Viola's still, white, unclad figure. A sudden, sickening fear squeezed at Helen Travis' heart. She turned from her window, raced out of her room and down the stairway to the first floor of the rambling house. She dashed through the front door and out upon the beach.

She reached the water's edge. Then she moaned softly. Bob Warner and Frank Wallace were stumbling through the surf. In their arms they bore a limp, ghastly burden. They reached the sandy shore, with Barney Clayfield and the wide-eyed Sheila Connors close behind.

Helen said, "Frank—what happened—?" in a strained voice.

Gently the artist helped Bob Warner lay the softly sagging body of Viola Warner upon the sand. They rolled her over, face downward. Helen Travis gasped. There was a jagged red wound in Viola Warner's perfect, classic bare back. Blood still oozed from the mouth of the wound. Helen felt suddenly faint. "Is she—is she—?"

Frank Wallace nodded moodily. "Dead!" he answered "Knifed in the back!"

And as he spoke those portentous words, the storm broke overhead. A great jagged fork of lightning ticked across the sky and the earth shook under a terrific blast of thunder. Huge raindrops began to fall. To Helen Travis they seemed like drops of warm blood—Viola Warner's blood!

Eyes staring with horror, Helen gazed at that still white figure stretched lifelessly on the sand, pelted by the relentless rain. Even in death Viola Warner was lovely. It seemed as though that glorious bosom must

surely flutter; that the dead girl must languidly rise, shrug her ivory shoulders in that insolent gesture so characteristic of her. Sheila Connors was weeping bitterly, noisily. A feeling of disgust welled up within Helen's heart. Sheila was acting—trying to steal the spotlight. She had hated Viola—hated her like poison!

Barney Clayfield was the first to speak. "We—we can't leave her out here in this storm," he muttered. "We've got to take her into the house——"

"And we've got to have the police!" Bob Warner grated savagely. "Somebody here is a murderer—somebody killed my wife! That somebody will hang!" he snarled.

Clayfield shook his head. "No use summoning the police now," he answered slowly. "They can't get a boat over here from the mainland in this storm."

"Then by God, I'll take charge!" the mystery-author cried venomously.

As though in a distorted, unreal nightmare, Helen watched while several men gently picked up Viola Warner's pathetically limp body and carried it toward the big, rambling summer house that had been suddenly plunged into stark tragedy. The scantily-clad throng dispersed slowly and in small groups moved through the driving rain to that somber structure.

INSIDE the great hall, they placed Viola's marble-white body on a couch. Bob Warner stared down at his murdered wife, his face a grim, tense mask. He leaned over, lifting the lovely lifeless form, studying the jagged wound in that perfect back. He plucked at the torn flesh with unsteady fingers. Then he lowered the body back upon the couch and covered it reverently with a robe

One by one the other had drifted in and donned wrappers and dressing-gowns and negligees. Bob Warner turned haggard, vengeful eyes on these silent watchers who, only a little while ago, had been so gay. Harsh lines were etched at the corners of his thin-lipped mouth. His burning glance sought out Barney Clayfield and Sheila Connors and Frank Wallace, separating them ominously from the others.

"One of you three killed Viola!" he grated savagely, "And I'm going to find out which one?"

Barney Clayfield wheezed protestingly. "But—but that's absurd, Bob!" he cried, "I—I needed Viola. She was to star in my new show!"

Frank Wallace's voice was clear, incisive. "I hardly knew your wife, Warner. I'd have no reason to harm her."

The mystery-author's lips curled sarcastically. "You three swam with her toward the raft. The others were



from your path!”

“No — no — no!” Sheila’s answering cry of defense was like an agonized wail of sheer terror rising above the storm’s heavy thunder outside. “I had no cause to envy Viola! Clayfield was going to give me a part almost equal to hers in his new show. Look!” With an abrupt, defiant gesture she threw off her thin, flowered kimono and stood there before them, her beautiful alabaster body naked and entrancing, like a perfect chiseled Grecian statue suddenly come to life. Her eyes challenged the group who stared at her. “What cause had I to envy Viola Warner? Am I not as beautiful as—as she was?”

Suddenly her poise vanished. She collapsed sobbing in Barney Clayfield’s arms.

Frank Wallace spoke quietly. “You must be wrong, Warner. Sheila couldn’t have killed Viola. The girl wore nothing but a thin silk step-in, “Where could she have carried the knife?”

some distance up the beach. One among you three plunged a knife in Viola’s back. All of you had the opportunity and one of you had both opportunity and—*motive!*”

He whirled at Sheila Connors in sudden, maniacal fury. His long trembling forefinger jabbed at her gaudy kimono like a rapier. “That one who had both opportunity and motive was you!” he screamed at the white-faced, shrinking blonde girl. “You hated Viola! You envied her! You were her understudy in Barney Clayfield’s show last year—and you knew she was to play the star part in this year’s production. You wanted that role for yourself. There was only one way for you to get it; and that way was—to kill Viola—remove her

THEN Warner laughed dramatically, unmusically. “I’ll tell you where she carried the knife!” he snarled. “She carried it in the piled-up folds of her yellow hair!” He stretched forth his trembling hand. “Look! This is what I found adhering to the wound in Viola’s back—*three long blonde hairs!* You saw me pull them from the hole made by the knife, when I examined Viola’s body just now!”

“You—you mean——”

“I mean that when Sheila drew the knife from her hair, it pulled out these three hairs with it. Then she plunged the knife into Viola’s unsuspecting back—and the hairs remained in the wound!”

“And the knife—!” “She must have thrown it into

the lake, where it will never be found—so that there will be no chances of fingerprints linking her to the murder!”

Sheila Conners screamed once, horribly. Then she fainted.

Barney Clayfield spoke. “We’d better take her to her room and lock her in until morning—until we can get the police over here to Cayuta Island.”

Bob Warner’s eyes gleamed savagely. He surveyed his group of stricken, nervous auditors. “Every one of you knew Sheila’s jealousy of Viola. And every one of you were on the beach tonight when—when Sheila murdered—my wife! You’ll all be witnesses——”

Frank Wallace stepped forward. “There’s one who wasn’t on the beach, Warner. One who needn’t be mixed up in this nasty business. It’s Helen Travis, here.” He went to Helen’s side and encircled her trembling waist protectively with his strong arm. “Helen was in her room when the murder was committed.”

The mystery-author’s eyes narrowed as he stared hard at Helen Travis. “You were in your room?” he demanded sharply.

Helen nodded.

“Did—did you happen to be looking out the window?”

“Y-yes.” Helen’s knees felt suddenly weak. “But I didn’t see anything I didn’t see Sheila—kill Viola! It must have happened when I looked up for an instant at the clouds racing over the moon. When I glanced down at the beach again, you were still standing there in the surf, near the shore with your hands in front of you. Then I noticed that Viola was no longer swimming—was dropping behind the others——”

Warner granted. “All right. You’re out of it. Now everybody go to bed. Don’t try to leave the house. I’m going to stand guard personally at Sheila Conners’ door until daybreak!”

Still trembling, Helen moved to the stairway with Frank Wallace at her side. “My room’s next to yours,” he whispered softly. “If you need me, just call.”

AS she undressed in the darkness of her bedroom, Helen Travis could hear the faint sounds of the other guests as they retired to their various chambers. She slipped out of her dress and unfastened the gauzy brassiere behind which her perfect breasts nestled like twin rounded half-melons. She slipped her step-ins down over her hips and kicked them aside. She shrugged into a filmy, gossamer nightgown. Then, inevitably, her glance went to the window that overlooked the storm-tossed lake. With a shudder she

pulled the shade, shutting out the storm’s lightning-tongued anger. She stumbled wearily into bed and drew the covers up over her.

But she could not sleep. Before her eyes persisted the picture of Viola Warner’s lifeless, almost-naked body lying out there in the sand, blood still oozing from that gaping wound in her back. . . .

An hour passed on lagging, leaden steps. It was after midnight now. Helen dozed fretfully. And then something brought her to wide-eyed wakefulness—some instinctive sixth sense that hinted at danger stalking through the rain-drenched night. Her glance went toward the window, just outside it there was a narrow ledge-like coping. It seemed as though she heard a faint sound. Her eyes widened. *A hand was fumbling at the window; pushing aside, the drawn shade from the outside!*

She wanted to scream, but her dry, terror-stricken throat emitted no sound. The hand moved with a flicking motion just as a brilliant flash of lightning sundered the sky above. In that split-second of blue-white illumination Helen saw a glittering, metallic thing speeding through the room toward her. She threw herself sidewise in the bed. There was a dull *plop*, muffled and indistinct, on her pillow where she had lain an instant before.

Again the lightning flashed. Helen’s staring eyes saw a knife buried to the hilt in the soft folds of the pillow——

She screamed.

There came a violent pounding at her door. It burst open. Frank Wallace lunged into the room. “Helen—Helen! What’s happened!”

He had her in his arms. She was clinging to him like a frightened child, unmindful that the shoulder strap of her nightgown had fallen down over one bare arm, revealing the full, pink-centered sweetness of her breast. “Frank—Frank—someone threw a knife at me——” she gasped.

The broad-shouldered artist reached over and clicked on the reading-lamp beside her bed. As he did so, Bob Warner strode into the room, his eyes glaring. Helen pointed to her pillow——and then her jaw sagged. Her eyes widened in disbelief and amazed, terrified surprise. Abruptly she shuddered with fear of the unknown. *There was no knife in her pillow!* It had vanished as though into thin air! And yet—there was a gaping rent in the pillowcase where the weapon had been: a hole whose edges were stained faintly pink, as though with washed blood!

Others were crowding at the doorway now. Bob

Warner turned to them. "It's nothing," he said imperiously. "She just had a nightmare. Go on back to your rooms, all of you!"

WHEN they had gone, the mystery-author's face became suddenly lifeless, defeated, haggard. His shoulders slumped. "This thing is beyond me!" he muttered the admission. "There —there's something evil, horribly evil, in this house; something we can't put our fingers on. We'll have to wait for the arrival of the police to clear things up——"

Frank Wallace nodded and held Helen closer to him. "I'm afraid you're right, Warner," he agreed slowly. "And there's no use frightening the others in the house any more than they have been."

Helen clung to the broad-shouldered artist "Frank — I'm afraid!" she whimpered, her warm young body trembling against his. "Don't—don't leave me!"

He smiled down at her very gravely. "I'll stay here with you the rest of the night if you like," he answered. He looked at Bob Warner. "And I suppose you'll want to go back to guard-duty at Sheila Connors' door?"

The mystery-author nodded shortly and went out.

In the silence of that tense room, Helen's eyes were wide, rounded pools of fear. She stared into the impassive countenance of Frank Wallace. And abruptly he crushed her in his arms. His lips met hers and lingered there for a long moment. His hand found her bare breast and cupped it tenderly. She swayed against him.

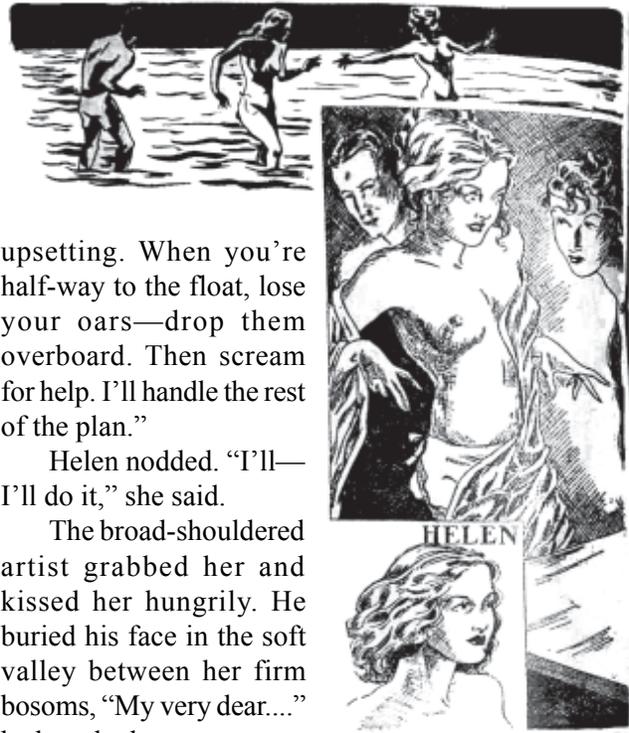
After a long interval he held her away from him and searched her eyes with his. "Helen——" he whispered.

"Yes!"

"Are you—willing to help me in an experiment? An experiment that might untangle this nightmare?"

She met his burning glance. And suddenly she knew that she was his, body and soul; that she would follow him to the ends of the earth, obey his commands though they brought her to direct peril. She faced him. "I'll do whatever you say, Frank," she answered simply. It was her confession of faith, her testimony of love.

His lips were close to her ear. His voice, even then, scarcely carried to her over the noise of the abating storm outside. "Listen," he said. "I want you to get dressed. Sneak downstairs. Go to the boat-house at the edge of the lake. You'll find a dory there. Unfasten it. Row toward the float—the float Viola and Sheila and Clayfield and I were swimming toward when—when Viola was murdered. The storm is passing now; the waves are going down. There's no danger of your boat



upsetting. When you're half-way to the float, lose your oars—drop them overboard. Then scream for help. I'll handle the rest of the plan."

Helen nodded. "I'll—I'll do it," she said.

The broad-shouldered artist grabbed her and kissed her hungrily. He buried his face in the soft valley between her firm bosoms, "My very dear...." he breathed.

"I didn't do it! I didn't!" her agonized cry rang out

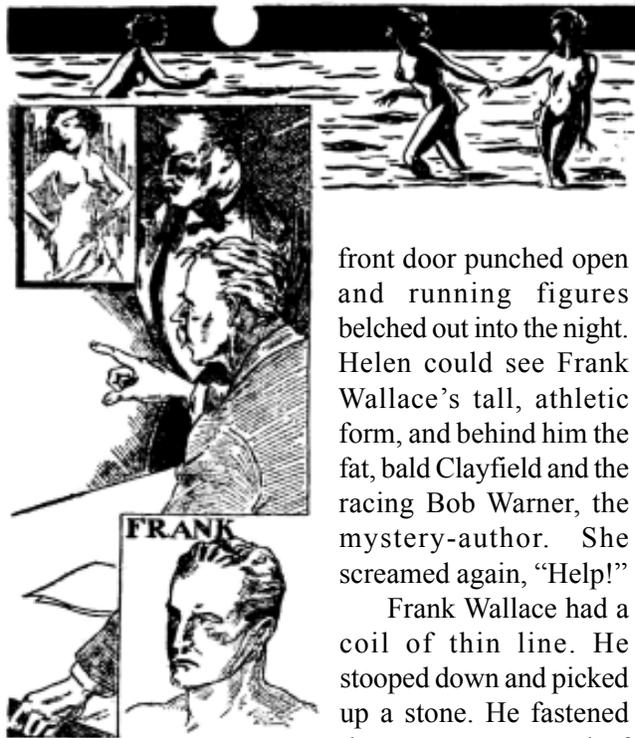
IT TOOK but a minute for her to dress. Then Helen crept noiselessly out into the hallway and downstairs through the solid darkness. She found the front door and slipped outside. The rain had ceased now, and hurrying patches of broken clouds raced across the newly-washed face of the moon. The steady beat of the surf against the beach had modified its thunder.

Helen came to the little boat-house below the rambling summer mansion. She went inside. She found the little dory bobbing in its miniature, enclosed, roofed-in harbor. She untied the painter and shipped the oars. She stepped into the little craft and pushed it out of the boathouse.

It bobbed crazily in the swells. She rowed with all her strength through the diminishing white-caps. And at last she was half-way to the float anchored out in the lake.

Helen drew a deep breath. Then she cast the oars overboard and watched them floating away from the dory. She looked toward the darkened, ominous summer residence of Barney Clayfield. Then she opened her mouth, and screamed piercingly, shrilly.

She waited an instant. Then she screamed again. Lights were flashing on inside the house. The shadows of moving figures were silhouetted against the windows. Abruptly the first floor blazed with light. The



"You hated her; you envied her; you killed her!" he grated.

front door punched open and running figures belched out into the night. Helen could see Frank Wallace's tall, athletic form, and behind him the fat, bald Clayfield and the racing Bob Warner, the mystery-author. She screamed again, "Help!"

Frank Wallace had a coil of thin line. He stooped down and picked up a stone. He fastened the stone to one end of the line. Then he threw the weighted end of the line out toward Helen's

drifting dory. It fell far short of its goal. He hauled it in and tried again. Once more the line fell short.

She saw Bob Warner grab at the line and haul it back to shore in looping coils. She saw him pick up the stone weighted end. He poised his arm and threw.

Straight as a speeding arrow, the stone sped out over the water and struck with a clattering clump against the dory, trailing the line behind it like a tenuous, dark comet. Helen fumbled at the line—and dropped it overboard ineptly.

She saw the mystery-author haul the line back to shore. She saw him poise his arm again. Once more the stone left his hand with savage accuracy, to land squarely inside the dory. Helen grasped it and fastened it to an oarlock. Many hands laid hold of the other end of the thin, strong line. She felt the little boat being drawn to shore. It grated on the beach. Barney Clayfield, knee-deep in the water, dragged its snub prow up on the sand.

Helen stared beyond the little fat producer. Her face went white. Frank Wallace had a blue-steel revolver in his hand—and he was pointing it straight at Bob Warner's heart!

The artist's voice was grim, deadly. "Stick 'em up, Warner! And don't try any funny business! *I'm going to turn you over to the police for murdering your wife!*"

The mystery-author sagged backward. "What—

what—?"

"You did it! We've got the goods on you now! You walked right into the trap. The accurate way you threw that weighted line out to Helen in the dory gave you away! You were in love with Sheila Connors. You wanted her—and you wanted to be rid of Viola, your wife. Also, you wanted Sheila to have your wife's role in Clayfield's new production. You stayed on the shore when we swam toward the float tonight. When Viola was half-way to the float, you killed her—*by throwing a knife into her back!* A knife to which was attached a length of fishing-line. With that fishing-line you drew the knife back after it had done its deadly work."

WALLACE paused, breathing heavily. "Then you accused Sheila Connors—the girl you were in love with—of committing the murder. That was a herring across the trail—a trick to throw suspicion from yourself. You knew the case against Sheila was insufficient for the police to hold her; the evidence was too flimsy. But it was enough to fool everybody—to divert any suspicion from yourself. And then you learned that Helen Travis hadn't been on the beach; that she had been watching from her bedroom window. You got frightened, Warner. You decided to kill Helen, in case she had seen too much. You came to her window and threw the knife at her on the bed. The fishing-line was still attached to it; that's why we didn't find the knife when we looked on the pillow. You'd drawn it back with the fishing-line—leaving a faint blood-stain on the pillow—a stain from the haft of the knife that had killed your wife!"

"You — you can't prove —" Warner gasped.

"Yes, I can! Because when Helen screamed just now from the dory, and you dashed downstairs, I slipped into your room—and found the knife with its coil of fishing-line. Here it is!" He exhibited the damning clue.

Warner sagged. His furtive eyes darted like a cornered rat's, seeking escape. But there was no escape for Bob Warner. He was surrounded by silent, grim men from the house. He shrugged helplessly. "I—I guess you've got me!" he whispered through dry lips.

Frank Wallace handed his revolver to Barney Clayfield. "Take him up to the house and phone for the police," he said. "They can make it to the island now—the storm's over." Then he turned to Helen Travis and slipped his arm about her willing waist. "The storm's over," he repeated tenderly, "and tomorrow the sun will shine for you — and for me——"

She looked up at him. "The sun will shine for us — for a thousand tomorrows," she answered softly.