

# Top It Off with Death

By Basil Wells

**A killing in a locked room is always a puzzle—except to this Sheriff's impractical brother-in-law.**

THE sprawling barnlike Stayn homestead lifted its ugly slate-roof towers above the grove of maple trees that roofed the steep slope of Gleason Hill. A long extension ladder set into the front lawn's light greenness reached above the second story to the base of a dragon-topped tower sprouting from the roof covering the attic.

"There's no question about it not being suicide?" demanded the fat little man with the tomato-red face and the blur of snowy hair.

"Course not, Fred," snorted Sheriff Mort, his lanky body twisting out of the seat of the black pickup truck. He pushed the plaster cast of his left foot to the ground and fumbled for his crutches. "Leonard Stayn phoned, said they found him in the library."

"Odd he'd have Rell Forbes fixing the roof," said Fred Rogers, "if he was planning to die. You know how tight George always was with his money."

Sheriff Mott's snort of disgust at his brother-in-law's words brought a wry smile to Fred's lips. Leo Mort considered him to be an impractical, easy-going clown whose ideas were bound to be valueless.

"George Stayn was a good citizen," the sheriff said reprovingly, resting his weight on his crutches, "and he was careful with his money."

This was meant to be a dig at Fred. Most of Fred's profits from electrical wiring and the fixtures he sold went for books and fishing equipment. Fred coughed, choking back a

chuckle.

"Come right in," invited a voice from the porch steps. "He's upstairs as we found him, Sheriff."

Fred studied the man and woman above them as Sheriff Mort worked his painful way upward. Five cement steps he must climb to the porch level, his fractured ankle swinging.



Leonard Stayn was tall and light-haired, the memory of shrapnel in his uneven walk. Ida Davis was tiny and dark, her rounded arms and plump face deeply tanned.

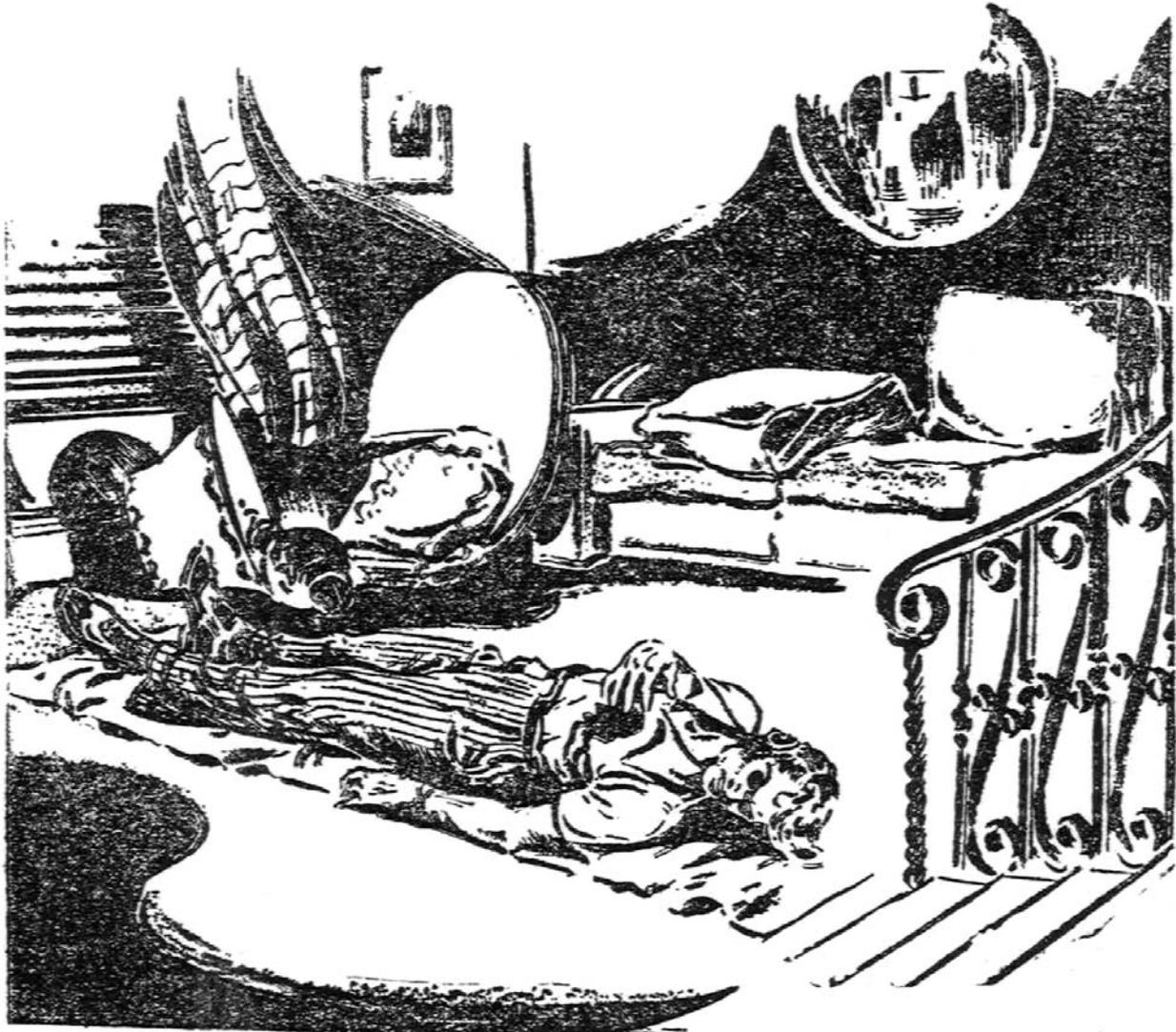
It was the girl who had spoken.

"We heard the shot while we were walking out on the lawn," she was telling Mort hurriedly. To Fred it seemed that her voice was strained. "We went up. He lay dead before the fireplace, the gun beside his head."

Stayn bit his lip. Fred saw that his eyes clouded over for a moment and he was frowning. Excitement built up inside the fat little man. His red face glowed brighter.

"We found him," admitted Stayn. "Mrs. Proctor came next, and then Rell Forbes came down from the roof. He suggested that we'd better phone you."

They were walking across the wide porch now, the afternoon sun left behind. Mrs. Proctor, the housekeeper, and Rell Forbes, Beechridge's plumber and general repairman, were talking together there on a creaking chain-hung seat. The bony woman stood up, her stringy grey hair darker in the shadows. Forbes' chunky bigness



remained sprawled in the unsteady wooden swing.

"I heard you, Ida Davis!" her hoarse voice boomed out triumphantly. "Trying to make out you and Leonard were together. Len was in his room packing."

She turned her pale gaze on the sheriff again. "They'd been quarreling. Len was leaving for good."

Fred walked along the porch until he could see the ladder leaning against the front of the house. The ladder passed the library's single window. Fred knew that was the library for he'd put two new floor plugs in George Stayn's study less than six months before. Ida Davis, alone on the front lawn, could have climbed the ladder, fired through the open window and tossed the gun inside.

Or Len Stayn could have slipped into his brother's book-lined room and killed him. All Beechridge knew there was ill feeling between the two men. Leonard was twenty years younger than George. Before his stretch in the Army, he had been addicted to fast cars and double chances. He'd been involved in several accidents, one fatal. George had spent several thousand dollars keeping him out of jail.

Apparently the younger Stayn had come back a changed man, quiet and serious now, but George didn't trust him. He'd permitted Len to run a vacant garage he owned for wages and his board.

FRED came back to where his brother-in-law was scowling at Ida and Len. The sheriff didn't like the way this case of suicide was

threatening to develop into something else.

"Well," he said to the girl, "how about it?"

Rell Forbes chuckled and ran his broken-knuckled fingers through his stiff reddish hair. He was a great one for practical jokes and gadgets to implement them. He seemed to be taking a lot of pleasure in the muddled situation at the Stayn's.

"Might as well tell him," he said to the girl. He wet his lips, grinning. "Remember that I saw you down there."

Ida's face darkened and then paled. She looked at Leonard.

"Told you it was silly trying to say we were together," he told her. "Why lie about it? George killed himself."

Ida blinked back an angry gleam. She nodded.

"Silly of me," she admitted. "I was on the lawn alone. I looked up and saw Mr. Forbes. A moment later the gun went off."

"And you thought maybe Len . . ." Sheriff Mott's voice trailed off questioningly.

"I was the first one to reach him," said Len quickly. "He was bleeding and groaning. I bent over him. Ida thought I had shot him."

He laughed shakily, his eyes shifting from the girl's face to Mott's long weather-beaten features.

"Why don't you ask Mrs. Proctor where she was?" snapped Ida Davis angrily. "She's always threatening to leave for a new job or to get married again. She would, only, George had promised her ten thousand dollars in his will."

"You—hussy!" shrieked the housekeeper's voice. She sprang toward the smaller woman. Fred thrust himself in her way and held her back.

"No," he told the sputtering woman, "no more wrangling."

"Come on up to the study," said Sheriff Mott nervously, his crutches rapping on the bare boards of the porch.

"It's her and him," Mrs. Proctor's spiteful voice cried out, "cooked up this whole thing. Len killed him. She was going to swear they was together. Now they ain't got a leg to stand on."

Rell Forbes was standing in the open doorway grinning delightedly at all the excitement. Now he went ahead of the sheriff and the others up the steps to the second floor.

"We'll see about that," said Mort impatiently

as he swung along on his crutches.

Apparently Mrs. Proctor disliked the two young people. That dislike was probably mutual. Now that George was dead she would be leaving. Len and Ida were engaged, and few married couples in Beechridge employed housekeepers or other servants. So she was voicing her spite.

Still, her accusations might be designed to cover up her own guilt. So far, of the four possible murderers in the Stayn household, Ida and Rell Forbes had eliminated one another—unless of course they were working together. Fred doubted that possibility. Of course Forbes might be planning to blackmail the girl if she were guilty.

"Argued all through dinner." The noon meal was always dinner in Beechridge. Mr. Proctor was still talking. "I thought Leonard was going to strike poor George."

"Something about the garage. Len wanted to buy—give a note or mortgage. George told him the judgement from that auto wreck case with Mrs. Black, her that's married now to Rell here, would make trouble."

Sheriff Mott grunted something and swore under his breath at the last few steps of the staircase.

"Fifteen thousand it was," rumbled the housekeeper's voice up ahead, "and George wouldn't pay a penny of it for Len."

"I'd have paid it off," broke in the younger Stayn. "She'd have taken it in small installments. Her lawyer said so. But George wouldn't listen." His voice thickened. "He wanted to keep me slaving right here under his thumb."

"I've tried to get him to leave before," Ida put in. "He's a fine mechanic. The Metzgar Iron Works need plenty of help."

They left the stairs and turned left along a close-ribbed strip of black rubber carpet tacked thriftily over the thick green rug of the hall. The second door on the right was the dead man's study.

"WE'LL have to consider murder a possibility," said Sheriff Mort to the others. "I'll know for certain when we take paraffin tests of his hands. If he did not fire a gun there'll be no burnt powder on them."

He turned to the watching quartet. "The same test will be given to you at my office."

Fred cursed under his breath. He'd insisted that his brother-in-law learn something of fingerprint lore and the other tests when he was elected six months before. But now Mort had spilled the whole business to them. All of them could explain how they had been plinking at a target or shooting at a rat.

He waited. Oddly enough, none of them volunteered any such information. Maybe, he found himself thinking, George Stayn had really shot himself. But he couldn't believe that somehow.

Three of them had a motive. The Stayn estate must be worth half a million dollars. Leonard and Ida would inherit that. The ten thousand dollar bequest to Mrs. Proctor was another motive. As for the repairman—he had been on the roof.

Fred bit his tongue. Something that Mrs. Proctor had said sparked his brain. They had been arguing about Leonard taking over the garage and why George had refused. Maybe he'd found a motive after all.

He hurried down the stairs to the front lawn and climbed the ladder. As he passed the window he caught the sudden angry scowl of Rell Forbes.

In about a minute he would come charging out of the house and up the ladder after Fred; so the electrician made his hands and feet move faster.

Up the short ladder at the base of the tower he swarmed to the flat metal-roofed square topping it. The triple-throated chimney of the house lifted beside him. He climbed the weathered metal framework supporting the sooty dragon and peered down into the black openings.

There were fresh scratches, grooves in the rectangular opening nearest him.

From below excited voices came up to him. The open fireplace in the study must lie directly below him. He caught sight of a black cord looped over a sooty nail inside the chimney. He pulled it up.

It was a jointed pole of light wood and metal with a number of fine wires traversing its length and a mirror attachment at its lower tip. Most interesting of all was a folding arm of riveted metal X's that could be extended or shortened by control wires.

A heavy foot jarred the metal roof. He climbed quickly down from the dragon's support to face the narrowed blue eyes of Forbes. He had released the cord and the rod went slapping down the chimney. It would miss the offset fireplace and end up in the basement.

"One of your gadgets?" he inquired.

"This's for sticking in your nose!" cried Forbes.

He scooped up his slating hammer and slashed at Fred's head. The little electrician ducked and dove at the bigger man's legs. Rell Forbes spilled backward—off the narrow deck of the tower roof! Forbes bounced as he struck the metal gutter at the slate slope's bottom, then caromed, screeching, off into the ravine on the house's north side.

Fred winked at his brother-in-law. Beechridge's news correspondent was pumping him about the case.

"Forbes lowered the rod to the fireplace. With his periscope and the revolver attachment he could fire into the library. He shot Stayn, then made the gun drop beside George's head."

The sheriff was warming up now. He brandished his crutch.

"Rell Forbes wanted the fifteen thousand dollars coming to his wife, the widow of Harold Black, from Leonard Stayn. And with George dead, Leonard could pay it. So he tried to make it look like suicide.

The reporter scribbled busily in his blue notebook.

"And you," he said, "with your foot in a cast, crippled, foiled his plan."

Mort cleared his throat. "Umm. Yes. Fred helped some."

