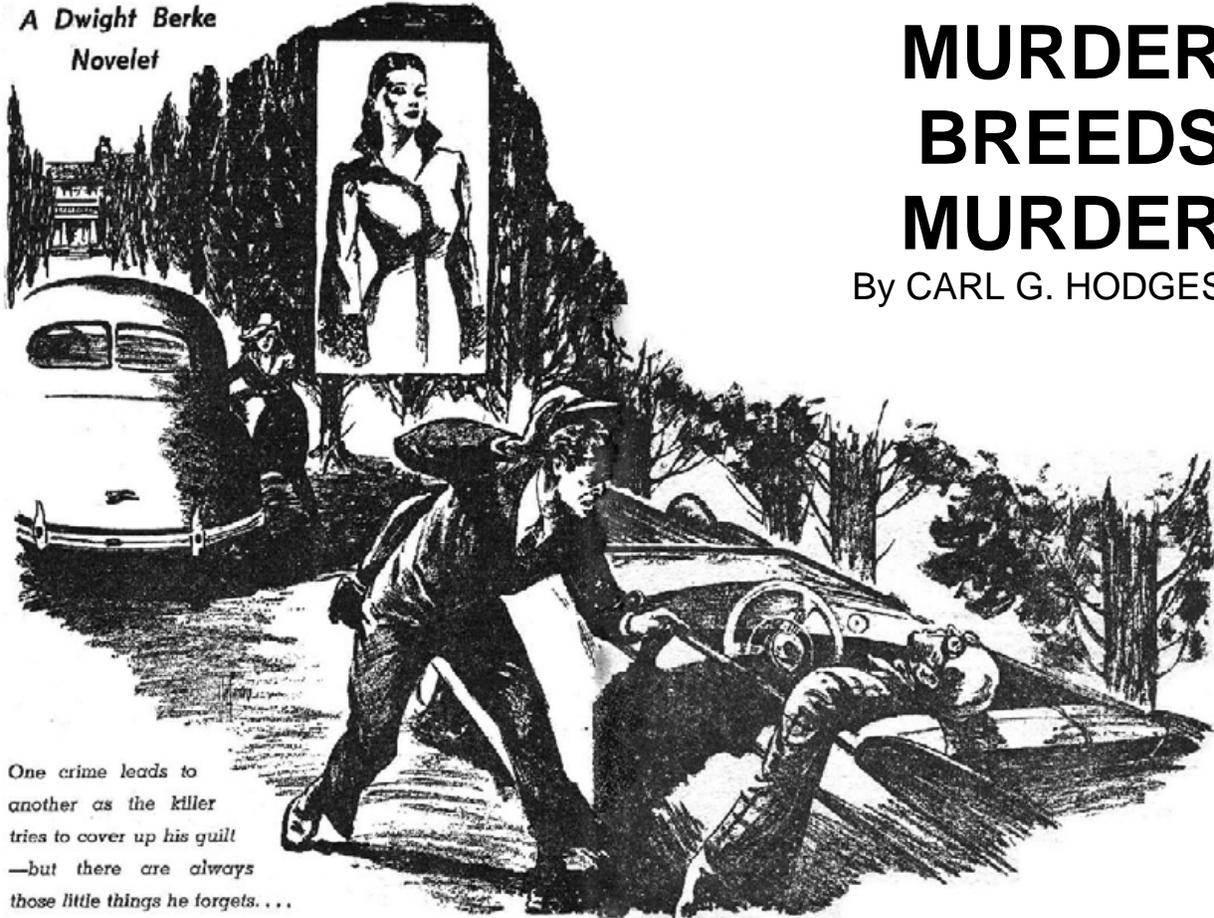


A Dwight Berke  
Novelet



One crime leads to another as the killer tries to cover up his guilt—but there are always those little things he forgets. . . .

# MURDER BREEDS MURDER

By CARL G. HODGES

## CHAPTER I

### NO NOOSE IS GOOD NOOSE

**G**AIL pointed sleepily through the windshield of the coupe where it had the PRESS label stuck on the glass.

“There’s the turn into Hazelcrest Farms,” she said as she put her hand across her pert face to stifle a yawn. “Darling, why we have to drive out here at eight o’clock in the morning to get a story about a bang-tail called War Commodore is more than I can understand. I’ll bet the horse isn’t even up yet, let alone Colonel Jurka.”

Dwight Berke, sports editor of the *Journal*, grinned happily at his wife, who did the camera work for the paper.

“It’s a treat to get up without Jap bombs for an alarm clock.” His blue eyes warmed. “Two years was a long time without you,

baby.”

He moved one hand off the wheel and chucked her under the chin.

“The Colonel will be up. He’s a bug on fresh air. He drives that yellow roadster of his with the windshield flat and goggles on his eyes. And he gets up at dawn, even if he is seventy. Racing stables have morning workouts at six o’clock.”

He sent the coupe speeding down the hard road past the Memorial Lawn Cemetery, and made the sharp turn into the poplar-lined gravel road that led into Colonel Jurka’s mansion. Behind it sprawled the barns of the Hazelcrest Stables. As they drove between the poplars, “Di” could see the pennant of red and gold flaunting the Colonel’s colors over the main barn.

Gravel churned under the coupe’s tires as Di Berke drove forward.

“There’s the Colonel’s car parked up

ahead," Gail said, suddenly. Her voice rose. "He must have had trouble. The front wheels are over the ditch and the radiator's smack up against a poplar."

Berke drove past the yellow roadster.

"The Colonel's in it," he said. "Probably asleep. He was pretty high last night, maybe, and couldn't make it to his bed."

He braked the coupe and got out, and walked back over the gravel. He noted that the roadster's bumper was hanging loose where it had smashed into the poplar, and the right front tire was twisted flat under the rim. He could see that the windshield had been screwed flat over the hood, and he could see the Colonel's head lolling on the leather of the seat back, an immense pair of goggles strapped across his eyes.

Di Berke jumped to the running board and reached over to wake the Colonel. Then his eyes caught the ugly splatter of blood on Jurka's shirt front, and the crude wire noose that had ended his life. He moved back in horror, and stumbled and fell back into the gravel. He picked himself up then, and hurried back to Gail.

She saw his face, drained of color.

"What's wrong, Di?"

Di shoved his hat back off his red hair and drew a deep breath. "The Colonel is dead. Somebody strangled him with a wire noose. Cut his throat from ear to ear!"

Her face went white, too. "This calls for pix, I guess."

She pulled her four by five off the back of the seat by its shiny strap and started back over the gravel.

"Set the camera, baby," said Berke, "and let me snap the shutter. He's not a pretty sight."

She walked on, purposefully. She climbed resolutely on the running board of Jurka's roadster. Her eyes sought to focus on the corpse without actually seeing it. Her flash bulb popped. She got off the running board and climbed up on, the hood for a shot straight

down on the Colonel. Another bulb flashed. She wavered weakly. Di grabbed her and helped her down.

She smiled, in sick fashion. "Whew! I'm a ninny." She shook her dark head to get the cobwebs from her brain. "I'm all right, darling. What do we do now? Phone the Journal or call the cops?"

"Both," said Berke. "We'll phone from Jurka's house."

DI PUT the phone back on its cradle and grinned at Gail. "The *Journal* scrapped the first page; going to put out an extra. A boy'll come out to pick up your pix."

He walked across the living room of Jurka's home, a living room big enough to hold a dance in if the costly Oriental rugs were rolled out of the way.

"I called Morf, too. The Inspector will be out here, pronto." He glanced at the stately vase of brilliant flowers on the Renaissance table. "What kind of flowers?"

"Gladiolus. Glads to you, mate. Jurka was bugs about them. Raised them in his own greenhouse. Even had one species named after him."

Berke looked impatiently toward the staircase. And at that moment a seductive dream came floating down. He pursed his lips and uttered a low whistle under his breath.

"Howl, don't whistle, wolf!" Gail snapped.

Mrs. Jurka came down the circular staircase and across the Oriental toward them. She was about twenty-five, and every hair in her sleek, dark head was minutely in place. Her complexion was faultless; her carriage haughty, yet seductive; enticing in a sheer robe wrapped revealingly around her luscious curves. Her eyes caught Di's and the ice-water of her gaze washed over him. Di noted that her eyes were dry, although he knew that her maid had apprised her of the tragedy.

Di tried to be brief. "We're from the *Journal*, Mrs. Jurka. Can you supply us with

some facts? Where was Colonel Jurka born? When? Did he have any enemies?"

Her lips moved stiffly, but she was composed. "He was born in Kingston, New Mexico, in 1870. That's where his silver mine was located. He had no enemies. He had few friends."

"Surely a man like the Colonel . . ."

"The Colonel was not a man given to friendships." Her voice was cold, decisive. "He had many acquaintances, few friends."

"Who was he with last night, Mrs. Jurka?"

"Wilton Esmond. Mr. Esmond called the Colonel last night. He left immediately to meet him."

"Who's Esmond?"

"President of the Empire Finance Company. He's crazy about flowers. Used to teach botany in the High School here." Her eyes had a veiled look. "Tod Hunter was the Colonel's partner in a silver mine years ago. He could tell you more about the Colonel than I."

"Hunter? Is he the gambler that runs the bookie joints and the High Hat Club?"

"He owns the High Hat."

The sound of a wailing police siren floated in from the hard road.

"That will be the cops, Di," Gail broke in. "We'd better scram out there and see what big shot Morf's got to say."

By the time they drove the coupe back to the scene of the crime, a black police car was parked on the gravel behind Jurka's car and Fleming Morf was on the running board of the yellow roadster. He scowled when Berke came up.

"Find anything, Inspector?"

Morf grunted. "Can you smell murder, Berke? What brought you out here so early in the morning?"

"I came out to see the Colonel about War Commodore. There was a rumor out that he was going to enter him in the Derby next year. Instead, we came on this."

Morf turned his apple-round head and

looked at Di.

"I've searched his pockets. Keys. Cigarettes. A wallet." He spread the wallet open to show a thick sheaf of bills and several blank checks.

"What's the folded paper in the pass pocket?"

Morf opened it. "It could be a hot tip. A note dated yesterday. 'I.O.U. TEN G'S'." He showed it to Di. "The signature's a scrawl. Can you make it out?"

Di studied the paper, and his pulse throbbed.

"Yeah, Wilton E. Esmond. He's a big shot in the Empire Finance Company."

Morf grunted. "After I take a look around here, we'll look up this Esmond and see what's cookin'. Ten grand might be a motive for killing Jurka."

"Wouldn't a guy that killed him for ten grand take the note along with him?"

Morf walked away and moved along the line of trees. He stopped where a tiny footprint marked a soft spot in the ground.

"Looks like we got a woman to look for, too. That print was made some time last night."

Berke grinned. "A woman didn't kill Jurka, Inspector. It would take a man, and a strong one at that, to twist that wire noose enough to slash Jurka's throat halfway through."

Berke moved along the line of poplars, running the palm of his hand upward along their smooth trunks. Morf grunted cynically as he watched.

"Nobody climbed them trees and then jumped into Jurka's car. Not at night. Jurka drove too fast for that."

"Did Jurka always drive with the windshield down, Inspector?"

"Every time I saw him drive, he did. He was a bug on fresh air."

Morf moved back to the roadster. He took the loop of wire from around the dead man's neck and wrapped it in a cloth he found in the

glove compartment. He returned to the police car and spoke to Chuck Ryan, his oafish aide.

“Get headquarters on the radio and tell ‘em we got a job for the coroner. You stay here till he comes. Then bring Jurka’s car to headquarters so we can check it for fingerprints. I’m going to can on Wilton Esmond.”

Di signaled to Gail. “Looks like the Empire Finance Company is our next stop.”

Morf called after him, surlily. “Keep out from underfoot. Berke. The police can handle this without you butting in.”

**T**HE Empire Finance Company occupied small but ornate offices in the Gray Building. When Di Berke and Gail entered, the cashiers’ cages were empty and the clerks and stenographers were gathered, murmuring, in a circle around Wilton Esmond, who held a copy of the *Journal* extra with its glaring headlines, COLONEL JURKA MURDERED.

Berke talked above the murmuring to the dapper, silver-haired executive, who wore a dignified pin-striped suit and a pair of rimless glasses hanging from a black ribbon fastened to a gold reel on his vest. Berke thought he could pass for a movie version of a successful banker.

“Mr. Esmond, we’re from the *Journal*. Could you talk to us for a few minutes?”

Esmond gave the paper to a girl, and signaled his visitors toward his own office.

“Certainly. If it concerns the death of my friend, would you mind waiting a few moments? Inspector Morf is on his way up.”

In five minutes Morf barged in. His eyes slitted when he saw Berke.

“I thought I told you to keep out from underfoot?”

“News is news, Inspector, and it’s my job to get it. What are you beefing about? It’s okay with Mr. Esmond.”

Esmond smiled warmly and passed a humidor around the desk. He lit a cigar and shook his handsome head.

“His death was a profound shock. I was with the Colonel last night. And now. . .” He left the sentence hanging sadly in the air.

Morf handed the note he had taken from Jurka’s wallet across the desk to Esmond.

“Did you sign this note?”

Esmond smiled, sadly. “I did. As a friendly joke between us.”

“Joke?” Morf exploded. “Is it a joke for you to owe a man ten thousand dollars?”

“But that note,” Esmond explained, “doesn’t refer to money, Inspector. Ten g’s refer to the ten gladioli bulbs which the Colonel gave me last night.”

“Flowers?” Morf’s voice trembled on a shrill note of incredulity.

“Yes. The Colonel was—what my pupils used to say about me, too—bugs on flowers. Especially glads.” The fervor of his hobby swept him away. “The Colonel had a ruffled hybrid—primulinus—he had developed himself. He gave me ten bulbs for the gateway at Memorial Lawn Cemetery.” He added, proudly, “I’m a director on the board of Memorial Lawn. I planted the bulbs myself first thing this morning.”

Morf got up. “That’s all I wanted.” He snorted angrily. “Flowers!”

Di questioned Esmond. “Do you know of any enemies who might have. . .?”

“No one who would kill. The Colonel was extremely jealous of his wife. She was young and beautiful and it was only natural that men should be attracted to her.”

“What men, for instance?”

“Jon Graco, for one. He’s the band leader at the High Hat. Plays the trumpet.” He smiled sadly at a memory. “I met the Colonel at the High Hat last night. He would never meet me there before. But he came last night. It was funny. . . his wife was there, too, apparently without his knowledge. She and Graco were having a little tete-a-tete during the intermission, when the Colonel came in. There was quite a scene. Jurka squirted a full bottle of seltzer all over Graco, and then walked off

with the mute to Graco's trumpet. Then the Colonel stormed into Tod Hunter's office and tried to get him to fire Graco."

"What happened?"

"Hunter told him to go chase himself. Seems like Hunter didn't like the Colonel any better than the Colonel liked him."

"What did Graco and Mrs. Jurka do?"

"They went out, I guess. They were gone when the Colonel came out of Hunter's office."

"What time was this?"

"About midnight."

"Why are you so sure?"

"We waited to see the floor show. Then I took my bulbs and drove home. The Colonel was still there when I left. He was a little tight."

Gail broke in, "Mrs. Jurka said that you called the Colonel last night, and immediately afterward the Colonel went to the High Hat to meet you. Yet you say now that Mrs. Jurka was there with Graco when the Colonel arrived. The two stories don't agree."

Esmond was not flustered in the least. "I had to wait a long time for the Colonel. She could have left their home after he did and still gotten to the High Hat first."

"Is Graco a married man?" Berke asked.

"I don't know, I'm sure."

## CHAPTER II

### THE PLOT QUICKENS

**I**T WAS almost noon when Di and Gail entered the High Hat. The chairs were piled on top of the tables and scrubwomen were busily cleaning up the litter of the previous night from the cocktail lounge and the midget dance floor. Off to the south end of the big room, behind a door hidden by a screen painted with a life size picture of a racing horse, they could hear the quiet rustle of paper. They moved to the door.

This was Tod Hunter's bookie joint, that

enabled him to cater to the gambling instincts of his patrons the clock around. A sleepy ticket writer was on duty, lazily entering the morning line on the track charts and attaching racing forms to the chains on the baize-covered tables. The man glared through his cigarette smoke at Berke.

"Tod don't like to be bothered so early in the morning. Go peddle your papers."

Berke spoke quietly. "Tell Hunter there's somebody from the *Journal* to see him, or I'll mash your head together so your ears touch!"

The ticket writer lost his cigarette in his comical alacrity to move away from Di and enter Hunter's office.

Gail giggled. "One of these days you're going to bluff the wrong guy."

"You notice I only bluff the little guys," Di admitted shamelessly.

The ticket writer came out of Hunter's office and sidled around a table, away from Berke. "Go on in, tough guy."

Tod Hunter was huge. He sat behind his desk, slitting mail open with a stiletto-like paper knife. The thin weapon looked like a toy in his big fist. His clothes were evidently costly but just as evidently stock size and his huge bulk stretched the seams flat. His eyes were hard, cold, cynical with his seventy years but his voice was brisk and booming.

"What do you want, Berke? I've got no time for reporters with long noses."

"Colonel Jurka was murdered last night, Hunter. Strangled with a wire noose."

"I read the papers. So what? Somebody should have killed him long ago. Why come to me?"

Di answered that frankly but he masked his words with a smile and edged his hat back off his head.

"You happen to be one of the few men I know that could cut a man's head nearly off with a wire noose."

Hunter gave him a quizzical look. He sat silently for a long moment. Then he allowed the stiletto to rattle on the desk top and leaned

back in his groaning chair. A deep laugh boomed out of him. Then his face set sternly.

"I'm happy the old buzzard's dead. Happy that somebody caught up with the phony. That's what he was, Berke, a phony. Now he's dead, maybe folks will forget his money, his flowers, his young wife . . . and remember what a phony he was."

Berke made no move to speak.

"Even his title was phony. He won it by sitting in a poker game down in the Black Range for forty-eight hours without getting out of his chair. He and I were partners in a rotten silver mine down in Kingston, New Mexico in the early nineties. He double-crossed me in a deal and I beat him over the head with a beer bottle and I never saw him again until he came here with his baby bride."

"Silver mine? That where Jurka started his fortune?"

"Naw. It was an old, abandoned mine that we reworked. Not much more than day wages in it. Jurka got his money some other way. Stole it probably. I've got a hunch his wife knows plenty. There ain't no more heart in her than a cantaloupe. She's cold as ice and just as hard."

Berke grinned. "I'm still listening."

"Jurka bought the Hazelcrest joint and brought in some racing stallions for breeding. War Commodore was one of the colts. He started a stable of his own and began running his nags in the early races at the local track. I was running a hand book out there when he hit town. He had me barred, just for meanness. Then I built the High Hat. And the grape-vine told me that Jurka had plans for a new night club on the drafting board. Anything to fight me."

"Looks like Jurka's death was mighty convenient for you, Mr. Hunter. You lost a competitor."

"Glad of it." Hunter chose to ignore the sally.

"You saw Jurka last night?"

"Yeah. Jurka wanted me to fire Jon Graco because Jon was carrying on an affair with his wife. Jon ain't the first guy she ran around with. There was a scandal about her and Charley Sexton, when Sexton committed suicide."

"What did you tell Jurka?"

"I told him where he could go. I told him if his wife didn't run around with Graco, she'd find another sucker."

"Then Jurka left?"

"No. Ralf Leone was in here when Jurka busted in, and Leone hid behind the clothes rack. When Jurka started to leave, Leone popped out on him and put the bee on Jurka for five grand."

"Who's Leone? The jockey they ruled off the track?"

"Yeah. A mite of a Frenchman, but a good guy. He claimed Jurka offered him five grand to bump his mount into the favorite in a race where one of Jurka's nags was running, twenty on the line. Leone did, and Jurka's nag won, but they ruled Leone off the track for a year."

"What happened when Leone faced Jurka?"

"Jurka told him to go jump in the river. And Leone cursed him for two minutes and said, 'I'll kill you, rat, if it's the last thing I do on this earth!'"

Hunter spread his hands wide on the desk top and seemed to be studying the heavy flesh.

"But Leone couldn't have killed Jurka with that wire noose, Berke. Leone didn't weigh a hundred pounds."

Berke grinned at Hunter. "You could. Got an alibi for last night?"

"One that'll do. I didn't leave here till four o'clock this morning. The cashier can back me up in that."

"How about Leone?"

"I don't know."

"You operate your own parking lot here at the High Hat? Who's the attendant?"

"Bob Keating," said Hunter. "A war

veteran with a bad leg.” He scribbled an address on a slip of paper. “Here’s his address, if you want to look him up. Now, scram out of here.”

THEY drove to police headquarters to see if Morf had unearthed any leads. The inspector was all smiles when he saw Di and his chest swelled with importance.

“What’s cookin’?” Berke asked.

Morf’s button nose crinkled up.

“We got some quick breaks. Ryan made a cast of the footprint we found near the car. We figure it might be Mrs. Jurka’s, ‘cause when Ryan brought the car to headquarters we looked in the trunk and found this.”

Berke glanced at the odd-shaped metal object.

“A mute for a trumpet? With Graco’s name on it.”

“Right. It’s Graco’s all right. And we checked on his movements last night. At three o’clock this morning he boarded the bus at the Country Club on Route 40. That’s only a hop, skip and jump from the spot where Jurka was killed.”

“What’s your theory, Inspector?”

“Graco hid in the turtleback of Jurka’s car while it was parked at the High Hat. When they reached the road to Hazelcrest, Graco got out and strangled Jurka with the wire noose. Then he took the bus back to town.”

“What’s Graco’s alibi?”

“We haven’t located him yet. We got a net around his house. When he shows up, we’ll nab him.”

“What would be Graco’s motive?”

“The oldest one in the world. He bumped off Jurka so he could get his wife. Mrs. Jurka is a doll.” He whistled softly.

“Maybe Graco’s already got a wife. Then it wouldn’t do him any good to bump off Jurka.” Di grinned as he watched Morf shake his round head, and then he told the inspector about the interview with Tod Hunter and the news about Ralf Leone.

Morf snorted. “I know Leone. He ain’t no bigger than a minute. He couldn’t strangle a baby with a wire noose.”

“He had a pretty good motive, Inspector. Jurka double-crossed him on a five grand deal.”

“You can go nosing around all you like, but we’ll pick up Graco. He’s the killer.”

Di and Gail left the inspector’s office and walked down the hall toward the elevator. Ahead of them was a mere whisper of a man in a tight-fitting blue suit.

“I wonder what he’s doing here?” Di wondered aloud.

The elevator doors opened and Di hailed the operator but he didn’t wait and the little man in the blue suit vanished downward from their vision.

“That little squirt,” said Di, “was Ralf Leone, the jockey. Wonder what he was doing here in City Hall?”

“Maybe paying his taxes,” Gail bubbled, “or getting a marriage license, or a dog tag.”

Berke chucked her under the chin.

“Don’t make fun of the last two items, baby. They’re both the same price.”

They got Bob Keating out of bed at the address that Tod Hunter had given them. Keating was a paunchy young fellow with a leg deformed by a shrapnel burst on Okinawa. He was sleepy-eyed and slow to understand but eager to talk.

“Esmond,” Keating said, “left the High Hat about 1:30. I remember, ‘cause I had to move Jurka’s yellow roadster out of the way. Jurka left about an hour later. There wasn’t but two or three more cars left on the lot.”

“Was Jurka alone?”

“Sure thing. He tossed something in the turtleback before he got in the car. But when he left he had a stowaway.”

“Stowaway?”

“Yeah. Somebody run out from behind another car and slid into the turtleback just before Jurka drove out.”

“Was it Jon Graco?”

“It wasn’t Graco. I’m sure of that. It was a little guy. And besides, Graco left earlier with Mrs. Jurka.”

“Thanks,” sad Berke. “You’ve been a big help.”

Gail smiled at Di as they left Keating. “The thing that Jurka tossed into the turtleback could have been the mute from Graco’s trumpet. Graco didn’t ride in the trunk and leave his mute behind, like Morf thinks.”

Her husband nodded.

“And the stowaway that climbed into the baggage compartment of Jurka’s car could have been the jockey, Ralf Leone.”

They drove back to the High Hat, and met Wilton Esmond coming out. Esmond was all smiles. He waved a slip of colored pasteboard in his hand.

“A hundred on War Baby’s nose in the third at Aqueduct. Fifteen on the line. The muts aren’t in yet, but I’ll soon clean up.”

“Good going,” Di said.

He moved through the big room into the bookie joint, crowded now with men and women studying the racing forms and the wall charts for five tracks. Di spoke to a ticket writer.

“Where’s Hunter?”

“In his office.”

They moved into Hunter’s office. The gambler looked up, annoyance plain on his face.

“Where does Graco live?” Berke asked.

“1456 Douglas, I think.”

“Thanks,” said Berke.

**M**ORF’S police car, with Chuck Ryan at the wheel, was standing in front of the apartment house where Graco lived. Inside, Morf was walking up and down the living room like a lion in a cage, firing questions at a nervous Graco, who was trying to light a cigarette from a box on the table.

Morf didn’t stop long enough to notice the reporters’ entrance. He rasped at Graco.

“It ain’t gonna look pretty to your wife and kids back in Chicago when they see your name plastered in the paper, tied up with the Jurka dame.”

Graco’s dark eyes burned somberly, and he ran his fingers through his black, shiny hair.

“You dumb cluck! I’ve told you a dozen times I had no reason to kill Colonel Jurka.”

Di Berke butted in. “Graco, where’s the shirt you wore last night? The one that Jurka doused with seltzer water?”

Graco hesitated. Then he squared his shoulders.

“If I tell you everything that happened, will you go easy in the paper?”

“Sure, the *Journal* doesn’t want to crucify anybody. But you’d better tell the truth. We’ll check your story.”

“I took Mrs. Jurka home in her car. When we got there, she offered me a dry shirt. The Colonel and I were about the same size. We went up to her bedroom. I went into the bathroom to change. I heard thunder and lightning and I was afraid the Colonel would show up to beat the rain home, and I knew I’d have to catch the last bus—”

“You’re nuts!” grunted Morf. “There wasn’t no lightning and no thunder. It was clear as a bell all night.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Graco said, with heat. “When I came into the bedroom Mrs. Jurka was sitting on the bed in her negligee, ready to retire. But the lightning and thunder made me hurry to catch my bus. I said good night and left.”

He stopped to light another cigarette and his hands were shaking with emotion.

“I walked down the gravel toward the hard road. I saw Jurka’s car parked by the road. At first I thought he was waiting to waylay me. Then I saw that he—was—dead.”

“You saw that by the lightning flashes, I suppose?”

“No. The storm had passed. The sky was clear.”

“See anybody around the car or on the road?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you call the cops, Graco?” Morf snarled. “You knew a murder had been committed.”

“I didn’t want my wife to know anything about me and Mrs. Jurka.”

“I think the guy’s telling the truth, Morf,” Di said.

“If Graco didn’t kill Jurka, then we’re clear out of suspects.” Morf spread his hands wide and shrugged. “Tod Hunter was the logical one. He’s big and strong and he hated Jurka. But he’s got an alibi.”

“There’s still Esmond.”

“His alibi’s ironclad. We checked his story. He did everything just like he said, even to taking the ten gladiolus bulbs out to the Memorial Lawn Cemetery early this morning. Esmond’s in the clear.”

“How about Leone, the jockey? The parking attendant at the High Hat saw a little guy jump into the turtleback of Jurka’s car last night.”

Morf whistled softly. “Could be. Leone’s a little squirt. He could have ridden in the turtleback, then squirmed out and put the wire noose around Jurka from behind.”

“Only I don’t think Leone would have the strength to strangle Jurka so efficiently.”

“Things we know fit him,” Morf said. “The footprint we found by the car. We thought it was a woman’s. But jockeys got tiny feet. It was Leone made that print, I’ll bet a plugged nickel. Where does Leone live? We’ll put the heat on him.”

“Maybe we ought to do a little more snooping out at Jurka’s estate,” Di suggested. “If Leone did make that footprint, he may have made others. If he rode in the turtleback to get out there, it’s a cinch he had to get back to town some other way. He may have walked. We could check all the night service stations along the way. The more information we get before we try to put the finger on him,

the better luck we’ll have.”

### CHAPTER III

#### THE FINGER POINTS

IT WAS only a few minutes before six when Morf and Di and Gail reached the spot where Jurka had met his death. In the footprint they had found, there were still traces of the plaster Ryan had used in making a cast later that morning.

Berke looked through the grove of poplars and heavy foliage to the east, bathed in the soft light of the setting sun.

“That’s the only direction a man could take to get out of here, if he didn’t take the regular road. Let’s cut through and see what we find.”

He set off through the line of poplars and heavy brush, the others tailing him closely. Presently they came to a barbed wire fence. Beyond the fence trampled grass showed where someone had walked around a parked automobile. The footprints in the grass were small.

“Leone!” Morf said. “The prints are the same as the one by the car. He came here to a parked car and made his getaway through the gate of the Memorial Park Cemetery.”

Berke shook his head. “I don’t think so. Notice that the prints of shoes show between the parallel lines of the tire tracks. Leone got here either *before* the car got here or *after* it left. He couldn’t have made those prints while the car was standing here.”

“He had a confederate waiting for him, Berke, or someone picked him up later.” Morf grinned. “At least we got enough evidence to put the finger on Leone. We can make him talk. Let’s get back to town.”

“Wait, Inspector. As long as we’re so close, I’d like to give the Jurka place the once-over, just for my own satisfaction. I’d like to check Graco’s crazy story about the thunder storm last night. You wait for me here. I’ll be

back in twenty minutes.”

When Berke rejoined them, he had strange news.

“Mrs. Jurka has gone to town to see the funeral director. I palmed myself off as a dick and got upstairs to Mrs. Jurka’s bedroom. I found out that Graco wasn’t crazy when he said he heard thunder and saw lightning flashes last night.”

“You’re talking in riddles, Berke.”

“The thunder that Graco heard came from a recording on a phonograph in Mrs. Jurka’s closet. The lightning came from flash bulbs hidden in the drapes. And there was a camera with a synchronized control on Mrs. Jurka’s bed. Remember, Graco said Mrs. Jurka was in her negligee sitting on the bed when he came out of the bathroom?”

Morf’s mouth dropped open. “The old blackmail racket?” His mind leaped to swift conclusions. “They dealt in compromising pictures! Colonel Jurka was in the racket with her!”

“Right. I guess Tod Hunter knew what he was talking about when he said that Mrs. Jurka knew where the Colonel’s money came from. She was just the come-on for Jurka’s real racket—blackmail.”

Morf’s sharp eyes glinted. “Maybe Graco knew what was going on, maybe he just acted dumb for our benefit. He had a real motive for killing Jurka if he suspected that the Colonel and Mrs. Jurka were in cahoots.”

Berke shook his head. “I think that Graco has been telling the truth. I think Jurka’s killer rode in the car with him.”

“That brings us right back to Leone again.”

“Could be,” said Berke. By this time they had reached the spot on the road where Jurka’s death had been brought about. “Let me show you something, Inspector.” Di walked across the gravel and ran his hand up the trunk of a poplar.

“See that spot where the bark has been rubbed shiny and pieces of it rubbed off?”

“Yeah. What of it?”

“Jurka was not killed by the wire noose that we found twisted around his neck. He was nearly decapitated by a wire stretched across the road between two poplar trees.”

Morf jumped to conclusions like a grasshopper.

“It fits! Leone is a Frenchman and the French underground—the Maquis—specialized in stretching wires across the road to decapitate Nazi motorcyclists. But why the noose around Jurka’s neck?”

“That was a red herring. The killer wanted it to look as though Jurka had been strangled by a tremendously strong man. After Jurka was dead, his killer cut the wire off the trees and made a loop to drop around Jurka’s neck hoping to put us on the trail of a strong man instead of a weakling, and then he made his escape, taking the wire with him.”

“That’s enough,” said Morf. “Let’s go to town and snap the cuffs on Leone. He’s not as smart as he thought he was. They got to get up pretty early in the morning to fool me.”

Gail nearly strangled with mirth.

They drove to town rapidly and the street lights blinked on as they stopped the car in front of the shabby rooming house where Leone lived. Morf flashed his badge on the landlady and that frowsy individual led them to Leone’s hall bedroom. Morf opened the door and flicked on the light.

Ralf Leone, fully dressed, was lying on the floor beside the old-fashioned bed. He was face down, his arms outflung. A shiny stiletto was buried to the hilt in his back. He looked very dead.

**M**ORF cursed in despair.

“There’s the best suspect we had, deader than a mackerel.”

“The last time I saw that stiletto,” said Berke, “Tod Hunter was opening his mail with it.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. Right, Gail?”

Gail nodded, "That's Hunter's, all right."

Morf picked up the phone and called police headquarters to report the murder and to notify the coroner. As he replaced the phone a tiny scrap of paper flickered off the table in the breeze from the open window. Morf glanced at the scrawled name and number.

"Mary 6584," he read. He spoke the number into the transmitter. After a moment's wait he asked the instrument, "Who is this speaking, please?"

He hung up and looked at Berke. "I told you that Graco was mixed up in this thing somehow. The woman who answered the phone was Mary Graco—Mrs. John Graco." He let his words sink in. "She's not out of town, like Graco said. What was Ralf Leone doing with her telephone number hidden under his telephone?"

Di's brain buzzed with sudden inspiration.

"This case is getting more muddled every minute, Inspector, but if you'll play ball with me, I think I can name the killer for you."

Morf didn't answer. He just stared at Berke.

"Call everybody that's got any connection with the case and tell them to meet us at the High Hat at 8 o'clock." Di said. "I'll meet you there at nine."

Morf was puzzled. "Why nine?"

"If they meet you there at 8 and you hold them there till I come, I'll have a full hour to do some snooping around without any interference. Get it?"

"O.K." said Morf, "I'll play ball."

Hunter's office was crowded. Hunter sat behind his own desk, his feet raised to its glossy surface. Wilton Esmond sat beside the desk, in an arm chair. Graco, dark, sullen, sat with Mrs. Jurka on a leather settee by the wall. Chuck Ryan stood solidly by the door and Fleming Morf sat in a straight-backed chair near the window, his round eyes blinking at the group, as he looked them over, one by one.

Di Berke rapped on the door panel promptly at nine, and Ryan admitted him and Gail to the room. Berke walked across to the desk and deposited a thin pasteboard box on Hunter's desk, a box about the size that would be needed to accommodate half a dozen phonograph records. Then Ryan provided chairs for the sports writer and his wife.

Mrs. Jurka crossed her nyloned legs and a flicker of annoyance rippled her cold features.

"Why did we have to wait an hour for him? Must we be subjected to questioning by a reporter from a yellow rag, Inspector?"

"Keep your rouge on, sister," Ryan ordered. "You can talk when the boss says the word."

Hunter took his feet off the desk. "It's irregular."

Berke grinned at Morf. "While we're getting ready, you might have Ryan make a search for weapons. I don't want to be shot or stabbed right in the middle of my questioning."

The search revealed that only Hunter was armed. He wore a snub-nosed automatic in a shoulder holster. Ryan swiftly removed it and laid it on the desk, away from the gambler. Then he looked at Di.

"They're clean, Berke."

The reporter got to his feet. He glanced at Hunter, at Esmond, at Graco and Mrs. Jurka.

"Any one of you could have had a good motive for killing Colonel Jurka. Hunter was barred from the track because of Jurka and he probably had other reasons for wiping out old scores. Graco might have wanted to kill him because he found out that the Colonel and Mrs. Jurka were setting him up for a blackmail scheme."

Berke smiled briefly at Mrs. Jurka's start of surprise.

"Yes, we found the recording and the cameras this afternoon, Mrs. Jurka. We know now where the Colonel got his money. He was using you as blackmail bait. You may have

wanted him dead so you could collect all the blackmail for yourself.

“You, Esmond, owed the Colonel ten thousand dollars. You stood to gain ten grand by killing him. And rid yourself of an ogre.”

Esmond smiled and sat calmly in his chair.

“I told you that the I.O.U was for ten gladioli and not for ten thousand dollars. No amount of melodrama can change the facts.”

Berke didn't answer him directly. He faced all the suspects.

“Anyone of you might have wanted to kill Colonel Jurka. The one who did also killed Ralf Leone, because Leone knew who the killer was.”

Mrs. Jurka's tone was flip.

“We all know that, smart man. You don't have to be a two-bit reporter on a yellow sheet to figure that out. But who did the killing? Tell us that.”

“I will.” Berke turned slowly to face Wilton Esmond. “Esmond, you killed Colonel Jurka to stop him from blackmailing you.”

**E**SMOND showed utter shock. He regained his calmness slowly and smiled. “I've never had my picture taken in Mrs. Jurka's bedroom.”

“No. But you appropriated money from the Empire Finance Company to play the horses. I found out tonight from your auditor that you were short over fifty thousand dollars. Jurka also found it out and was blackmailing you. So you figured out what you thought was a perfect blueprint for murder to rid yourself of him.”

Esmond moved in his chair and started to rise. He lost his calmness under the awful drag of fear and his face flushed with rage as he looked at Morf.

“Inspector, this farce has gone far enough!”

“Sit down!” Morf barked.

“Last night,” Berke continued, “you put your plan into action, Esmond. You called Jurka at his home and asked him to meet you

here at the High Hat. You also asked him to bring you ten gladioli bulbs. He came here, and you made excuses for not being able to pay, but you did give him a note for ‘ten g's’.

“You left here in your car and drove out to the Memorial Lawn Cemetery. You're a director on the board. You parked your car and walked through the trees to the gravel road that led through the poplars to Colonel Jurka's home. You stretched a wire across the road between the poplar trees and waited for Jurka. You knew that he always wore goggles and drove with the windshield down. The wire almost decapitated him. You cut the wire off the trees, then, and formed a wire loop around Jurka's neck, because you wanted to make it appear that he had been strangled by someone riding with him.”

Esmond's face was white. “Poppycock!”

“Shut up,” Morf said. “Let him finish.”

Berke went on.

“You left Jurka, then, and returned to your car and drove back to town. You had no way of knowing that Ralf Leone was hidden in the turtleback of Jurka's car, and that he trailed you and got the license number of your car.”

Morf broke in.

“Mary 6584. Then the name and number we found on Leone's table was not Mary Graco's telephone number, but the license number of Esmond's car. Maryland 6584.”

“Right. Leone went down to the City Hall this morning and looked up the number in the books. Then he started to blackmail Esmond for the five grand he knew he could never collect from Jurka. Esmond agreed to pay him the money. Instead, Esmond went to Leone's room and killed him with the stiletto he'd stolen from Hunter's desk.”

Esmond squirmed. “Purely a chain of circumstances that you've invented. You don't have a shred of proof.”

Di Berke smiled and pointed to the pasteboard box on the table.

“But I have proof. Proof that will put you in the electric chair.” He continued. “This

morning you carried out what you thought was the clever part of your plan. You drove out to Memorial Lawn Cemetery and parked your car in the same spot you used last night. Then you planted the ten gladioli bulbs that Jurka had given you. But you dug the hole deep and buried the wire that killed Jurka. I dug it up less than an hour ago.”

Esmond’s eyes wavered and now they had the look of a cornered animal, with the shiny glaze of terror. His voice trembled.

“Poppycock! Memorial Lawn is built over an old auto wrecking yard. You dug up some old wire.”

“This wire had blood and bits of poplar bark on it,” said Berke, drily.

Inspector Morf moved slowly across the room toward Esmond. Then he froze in his tracks. For Esmond leaped to the desk and swept up Hunter’s gun with his clutching fingers and turned to cover them menacingly.

“Sure, I killed the rat! He needed killing! And the jockey stuck his nose in too deep so I had to kill him, too. Murder breeds murder! Make one move to stop me, and I’ll blow you apart!”

Esmond edged toward the door, and Chuck Ryan moved away under the threat of the gun.

Then Tod Hunter got to his feet and spoke, drily.

“You can pull the trigger on that pop gun till your finger falls off! It ain’t loaded!”

Esmond whirled with blazing eyes and swung the gun to cover the gambler. He pulled the trigger in a blind frenzy. There was only a

metallic click. He threw the gun in a rage as Mod and Ryan closed in on him. He struggled briefly, until they put cuffs on him, and then he subsided, sobbing.

Morf growled at Berke.

“You let him scare us half to death with that unloaded gun. Why didn’t you tell me that you and Hunter had cooked up that deal to make Esmond convict himself?”

“I phoned Hunter right before you got here. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know how good an actor you were.”

Mrs. Jurka came across the room with the sinuous grace of a panther cat in her seductive body. She put her hand on Di’s arm and fairly purred.

“I take back everything I said about you. I think you’re wonderful.”

Morf glared stonily at her. “Listen, sister. You got no clean bill of health with me. Maybe it’d be smart for you to move to some other town where the cops like cameras and trick recordings and blackmail. Let’s say thirty days, sister.”

Gail moved across with a slinky motion and put her hand on Di’s arm and looked up in her husband’s face, aping Mrs. Jurka with her words.

“I think you’re wonderful.”

Di gave her a playful peck on the cheek and a slap where it would do the most good. .

“You got good judgment, baby.” Then he grinned, and moved his hat back off his red head with the boyish gesture that she adored. “Come on,” he said, “we’ve got a story to write.”