



Sheriff Mat Scott admitted to himself he was just a Hick Cop, but sometimes a hicktown lawman picks out some clues that the city cops overlook . . . and gets his man for murder



THE HICK COP

By LEO HOBAN

THE body lay sprawled in the curious flatness of death near the huge mahogany desk in the spacious library. The .38 caliber revolver was clutched in rigid fingers in the right hand. The hole in the right temple was precise and ringed with an uncertain and wavering circle of brownish-black cordite.

"Yep," Matt Scott drawled, "'pears it's suicide alright. But it's downright strange that old man Urlap should take his own life. There's no reason for it, seems to me. He had money—plenty of it—a nice daughter and son, an' always seemed to be chipper and happy. Yessir, it's downright strange."

"Begging your pardon, sir," the butler said, "but Mr. Urlap had been very despondent of late. Something had been troubling him."

"Like what?" Scott's bushy eyebrows arched and his faded blue eyes were steady and inquisitive. Bundled in his dripping raincoat he looked like a huge and friendly mastiff. He was the one-man police force of the mountainous village of Greentree, the county seat, three miles distance in the valley below. Violent crime in the sedateness of the mountain fastness was unusual—and disconcerting. Sheriff Scott, for the first time in his life, felt his confidence in his own capabilities waver. Petty stuff was his everyday diet. But suicide—or murder?

"I'm not sure just what the trouble was, sir," the butler went on, "but Mr. Urlap wasn't himself ever since his daughter announced her engagement to

that polo player, Mr. Yoder."

"Is that so?" Scott drawled. "That's interesting. When was this Mr. Yoder up here?"

"Not for two weeks, sir, when the engagement party was held in the garden."

Sheriff Scott looked through the drenched windows of the library out into the garden. When lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, the white glory of the eucalyptus tree in the far corner showed briefly. It was the only such tree within hundreds of miles and had been the dead man's prize possession in his strange garden. Collecting strange specie of exotic plants had been Urlap's hobby and his garden his pride.

"He didn't like this Mr. Yoder?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"He was civil to him, but I'm certain that he did not approve of him as a future son-in-law."

"Just why do you think that?" The butler's obvious attempt to cast suspicion on Yoder vaguely bothered Scott. He was attempting to make things appear too pat, whereas actually he was the only occupant of the mansion at the time of Urlap's death.

"Well," the butler said hesitantly, "you could tell the way that he looked at him and he was rather aloof, too, and—"

"And what?"

"Well. . . . Mr. Urlap recently has received a great deal of mail from a detective agency. I'm sure that he was trying to check up on Mr. Yoder."

“You seem damned sure of a lot of things,” Scott grunted. “Where are these letters?”

The butler’s eyes wavered. “He—he destroyed them.”

Sheriff Scott’s mouth went tight. This butler making things pat again—too pat.

“You hear the shot?”

“No sir. I left Mr. Urlap in here about three hours ago. I found him—like this—when I brought him his evening scotch and soda. Then I called you.”

“How about his dinner? It’s away past dinner time.”

“We were having dinner late. Miss Urlap and her brother and his fiancée and Mr. Yoder were to come to dinner. I believe the storm has delayed them. They should have been here some time ago.”

Sheriff Scott’s pulse quickened. The futility he had known in dealing with this staid and impassive butler abated somewhat. City cops might have known what to do about the butler, instead of asking obvious questions. Scott admitted to himself that he was only a hicktown lawman and that if he did crack this case it probably would be through some channel that only a small-time cop might immediately recognize. With additional suspects such a possibility gathered strength.

“Didn’t they phone that they would be late?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Yoder phoned from Bennett about an hour ago.”

“An hour ago! Why didn’t you inform Mr. Urlap of this? You would have discovered his body sooner if you had.”

“Mr. Urlap had left orders not to be disturbed until scotch and soda time.” The butler said austere, “I always obey instructions.”

SCOTT knew futility again. This butler . . . everything so damned pat. He would have liked to smack the guy around. But only city cops can get away with that.

“Could anyone get into this place without you knowing it?”

“No-o,” the butler said hesitantly, “unless”—he jerked his right thumb—“unless they came over the garden wall. And that’s unlikely.”

During the intermittent lightning flashes Scott studied the sheer high wall and guessed its height at about twelve feet. Anyone topping that would have to have great agility and strength.

“You sure that that’s Mr. Urlap’s gun?” It was

the third time Scott had asked the question.

The butler regarded him sadly, and said almost benignly: “Don’t you think you should call city police? After all, a suicide is serious.”

Scott tugged at his stubbled chin. “There’s something about this that don’t smell right, but it’s beyond me. I guess I will have to call ‘em.” He started toward the telephone on the desk.

The ringing of the front doorbell stopped him in midstride. Its echoes rang hollowly through the huge house.

The butler looked questioningly at Scott.

“Bring them into the sitting room,” Scott instructed. He looked again at the telephone, paused, then turned his back to it, crossed the library and closed the door behind him.

He was standing spraddle-legged, his wise eyes veiled when the four young people entered the room. He knew the two Urlaps, but the other girl and Yoder were strangers to him.

Yoder was a six-footer, flint-eyed, and walked with the muscular grace of an animal. His eyes met Scott’s and his natty mustache became a tight line above his tight mouth.

“Why—Sheriff Scott—how nice of you to come,” Patricia Urlap began, then stopped abruptly. “Is anything wrong?”

“Please sit down,” Scott said. He turned to the butler. “You, too.”

Patricia’s face went pale and her clenched hands trembled as she seated herself on the divan. Yoder took a position beside her and slid an arm about her shoulders.

Four pairs of eyes regarded the grizzled old sheriff quizzically. The butler sat primly at the edge of his chair.

“There has been an accident—” Scott began.

Patricia turned to the butler. “You were instructed to watch father carefully, Moler,” she accused the butler. “He wasn’t well.”

“Dammit, sis!” young Urlap said, “I told you we should have gotten a nurse and not left father with this leech.”

“Bother that,” Patricia said. “The important thing is what has happened to father. Tell us, Sheriff Scott.”

“All in time,” Scott said softly. “There’s some questions first.”

“If it’s serious trouble we should call city police,” Yoder snapped. “This old foggy should have been pensioned long ago.”

Scott stiffened. The obvious and immediate antagonism of the polo star was surprising. Scott's steady eyes swept over the lithe figure from the top of his shining head to the soles of the brown brogues. Suddenly Scott expelled a huge breath, knowing a great relief.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "City cops have all sorts of modern crime apparatus that an—an old fogey like me just naturally don't have. But a hicktown cop might notice something a city cop would overlook. I don't think we will need the city police."

Patricia had her hand pressed to her mouth. Her voice came in an almost inaudible whisper.

"Father is dead?"

Scott shifted his feet uncomfortably.

The butler coughed politely and said: "Very sad, miss. He took his own life—a suicide."

"No, he didn't," Scott said flatly. "He was murdered!"

YODER spun on his heel to face the butler. "You damned murderer," he shouted. "Patricia told me about you, how you were always chiseling on the old man, but he kept you on anyway—even liked you."

"He was my master—a good master!" the butler said simply.

"So good," Yoder derided, "that he left you twenty-five thousand dollars in his will. You knew Patricia and I were coming here to live after our marriage. Then you wouldn't have been alone with him—had a chance to murder him and collect. So you took this last opportunity knowing you were safe from witnessing eyes because we were delayed by the storm."

"That makes quite a case against him," Scott says. "Might hold water. City cops, I guess, would hold him—but I'm not goin' to."

"What!"

"Nope," Scott drawled, "but I'm taking the murderer in. I understand you called from Bennett, Mr. Yoder, to tell that the party would be late?"

"Why—why, yes," Yoder's voice was suddenly brittle, "just before I joined the party at Morrison. It was me that made them late, you see. Roads were in terrible condition."

"So's the bridge between Bennett and Mormon," Scott snapped. "Yup, it's in terrible condition. Fact is, it was washed out five hours ago."

"Why—why, perhaps I was mistaken from which town I made the call. It might have been—lib—"

"No—you're right—it doesn't matter," Sheriff Scott said harshly. "I'm taking you in for murder. I don't know what your reason was for killing the old man, but I got a hunch it was to make sure of your marriage and the fortune Patricia will inherit. The old man had found out something not very nice about you, and was ready to expose you. What it is doesn't interest me. The city cops and the D.A. will present it in court. They're good in tracing down such things. I ain't."

"I'll say you are not much account for anything," Yoder laughed raucously. "You suffer from delusions. Why you can't arrest me—for murder—on a mistake in memory that I made. Why it isn't even evidence."

Sheriff Scott moved his scraggly head of bushy hair. "You're right, son, dead right. Couldn't rightly take a man in on that evidence."

Some of the color returned to Yoder's face. "You old fogey, you'll hear about this. Why I'll slap a court suit on you that—"

"You won't be able, son. It's hard for a man who's going to die in the electric chair to do any suing."

"What!" Yoder was suddenly stiff again and his head was cocked to one side as though he could hear the swift beating of the wings of doom.

"Yep," Scott lazed. "You're not supposed to have been up here for a couple of weeks, Yoder, yet the mud on the instep of your shoes is cluttered with the brown fallen needles of the eucalyptus tree. And there's more of them sticking out of the cuffs of your trousers. Only an athlete could scale that wall and you did that tonight."

A small automatic seemingly jumped into Yoder's hand.

"All right, hicktown cop, you got me, but neither you nor anyone else in this room will be alive to present such evidence. You're taking it first, hick!" The gun centered on Scott's breast. He steeled himself for the impact. The two women were screaming.

As though felled by an axe, Yoder suddenly pitched face forward. The fragments of a heavy vase were scattered about the floor. Blood oozed from a gash in the side of his head.

Scott retrieved the dropped gun and turned twinkling eyes on the butler.

“Is that any way to act—throwing vases at to do it. Shall I call the city police now?”
guests?” “Sure thing. I don’t want this varmint around
“Sorry, sir,” the butler said impassively. “I had me.”