

A Burning Clue

By E. HOFFMAN PRICE

A murder and a suicide! The insurance company held up \$50,000 on the grounds that the shots were fired after 12 noon. But there was no proof. Neither was there proof that the shots were fired before 12 noon. Claire faced a difficult problem.

“DO you mean to say,” demanded Claire Dennison of her newly widowed sister, Martha Jarvis, “that the insurance company refuses to pay off, simply because you can’t prove that Jarvis died before 12 noon instead of some time after that hour?”

“That’s exactly it,” affirmed Martha, sighing wearily. “You see, the premium hadn’t been paid for some time. The extension expired at 12 noon of the very day that his latest playmate called with her pearl-handled light-housekeeping pistol and demanded a showdown. With no insurance, and the house mortgaged to the last shingle, I’m left absolutely broke.”

“If that red-headed good-for-nothing hadn’t become penitent a minute after she did the first good deed of her life, and then shot herself, we might prove that Jarvis died before noon,” thought Claire; but she said to her sister, “Can’t you find *anyone* who heard the shots?”

“Not a soul. There’s so much shrubbery around the house, and it’s so far from the street—and, you know, a .25 automatic is hardly louder than the snapping of a stick. Claire, there’s just no use!”

“But we’ve got to figure it out, Mart!” insisted Claire. “Let’s see—old Aunt Julia says she left the house about half past eleven that morning. How did you know the time?”

“The radio was announcing a domestic science lecture, and Jarvis said, ‘Shut the damned thing off!’ They checked the broadcasting station, and got the time. She also remembered she had just loaded his pipe. That’s it, over there.”

Claire followed her sister’s gesture, and saw a Turkish water-pipe with its brass fittings, and flexible stem, nearly two yards long, coiled about the neck of the glass water jar.

“She told the coroner all about loading the pipe,” resumed Martha. “And how she came back, finding them both ‘all daid,’ and the pipe turned over, and a hole burned in the rug.”

Claire noted the clean-cut, square hole burned through to the warp of the old Persian rug.

“How did that happen?” she wondered.

“When that woman shot him,” explained Martha, “he had the pipe stem coiled about his wrist, like he always did. They’d been quarreling before Aunt Julia left. Anyway, she opened fire. And it didn’t take much of a move on his part to pull the pipe off the table. The cake of charcoal that keeps the tobacco burning just ate its way into the rug.”

Claire’s fingernails were turning from rose to dark brown from the smoke of her disregarded cigarette.

“Mart,” she said, finally, “call Aunt Julia. I want to talk to her.”

For several days Claire pondered on the elusive problem, but in vain.

“Good Lord!” she exclaimed a dozen times over, “why couldn’t one shot have stopped his watch, like in a story mystery? All those details, and not one thing to prove he died before noon!”

The deep brand of that last pipe stared up at her from the rug, and mocked her. There was a record of the crime; but it was as vain as the fleeting, spiteful crack of that tiny, deadly pistol which no one had heard. But how to use it?

Claire questioned old Aunt Julia over and over again; but the old negress recollected only irrelevant details. But finally, out of the confusion, Claire picked a bit of hope. She phoned her sister’s lawyer.

“Mr. Cartwright,” she said, “bring the insurance adjuster, and a copy of the testimony of the coroner’s inquest—yes, I have something up my sleeve. . . . Please try, anyway. . . . Thank you.”

THEY called the following morning: Cartwright, politely humoring a woman’s whim, and utterly hopeless of deriving any benefit from it; and Bartlett, the adjuster, courteous, suave,

and determined that his company would not pay \$50,000 on any policy that had expired, even if only by five minutes.

"Mr. Cartwright," began Claire, "when did Aunt Julia turn off the radio, the day Mr. Jarvis died?"

The lawyer consulted his file of testimony.

"At 11:32 A.M.," he answered. And then, to Bartlett, "Here it is."

The adjuster nodded. "I'll accept that. It's official."

"And according to the testimony," resumed Claire, "she set his pipe before him at practically the same time."

"Right," admitted Cartwright.

"But I don't see," protested the adjuster.

"Just have patience, Mr. Bartlett," said Claire, sweetly. "Oh, yes, I forgot something. How long could Mr. Jarvis have lived after the shots were fired?"

"Death was practically instantaneous. According to our doctors, he couldn't have lived over a minute, if that long," replied the adjuster. "But—"

"That's fine. Now, Aunt Julia," continued Claire, turning to the old negress, who had entered in response to her ring. "Prepare that pipe, just as you always did."

"This is irrelevant," protested Bartlett. "We're not interested—"

"Oh, but you will be!" enthused Claire, as she smiled at his disgust. "Do step into the kitchen and watch."

Bartlett swallowed his impatience. They all watched Aunt Julia put a square cake of charcoal on the gas burner, then shred a golden brown leaf of Persian tobacco, soak it in water, and wring it dry. She molded it into a heap, and placed it in the bowl of the pipe. Then with the brass tongs she picked up the glowing charcoal and laid it on the tobacco.

"Take it out in front," directed Claire. "Just where Mr. Jarvis was sitting."

"Really interesting," began Bartlett, ironically. "Still—"

"Might as well see it through," suggested the lawyer.

They sat there, watching the film of white ash accumulate on the surface of the charcoal. Claire put the mouthpiece to her lips, and drew deeply. The pipe gurgled, and bubbled, and a tiny wisp of smoke left her lips. As the charcoal burned, the

outer coating of ash fell away.

"Do try it," invited Claire, offering the pipe stem.

Both men hastily refused.

Claire's glance shifted to the clock on the wall. She drew again. Another tiny wisp of smoke. She coiled the flexible stem around her wrist.

"The way they do in Cairo," she explained, with a triumphant glint in her eye. "Like Mr. Jarvis did."

"Mrs. Dennison," protested the impatient adjuster, "I can't see that this is getting us anywhere!"

He rose as if to leave.

"Oh, you don't? Well, Mr. Bartlett, it's about time to show you!"

She also rose to her feet.

"Look out!" the men cried in warning. But too late. The flexible stem about her wrist dragged the pipe from the table. The glowing charcoal lay like a great, living ruby on the Persian rug. They smelled the stench of burning wool.

"Let it alone!" commanded Claire, sharply, as Cartwright seized the brass tongs.

They glanced at her, and at each other, and at Claire's sister, and shook their heads significantly.

"Look!" she insisted, ignoring their meaning glances.

She saw them wince as the square of red hot, living fire perceptibly settled as the nap beneath it was consumed. The wanton destruction of that antique fabric had an almost horrible fascination for them. They saw the black, oily distillate from the wool rise up along the edge of the coal. Then the coal shifted again, sinking deeper.

"Mrs. Dennison, are you in your right mind?" demanded Bartlett. "That rug is worth hundreds—"

"Not hundreds," retorted Claire. "Exactly \$50,000!"

The adjuster stared, speechless.

Claire seized the brass tongs. There was a perceptible sigh of relief as she picked the hungry destroyer from that rich, old rug. And then silence as they regarded the caked blackness that marked the burn.

"Mr. Bartlett," began Claire, breaking the silence, "compare that burn with the one made when Mr. Jarvis was shot. As you may have noted, I smoked the pipe about ten minutes before I overturned it. The size of the hole I burned will convince you that Jarvis could not have been smoking much longer when he overturned his pipe.

“The cake of charcoal diminishes about a quarter of an inch every ten minutes. Try it.

“And,” she concluded, “you see, this rug is worth \$50,000!”

“Guess you pay off, Bartlett!” exulted the lawyer .

“You win,” admitted the adjuster, as he reached for his pen, and a sheaf of papers.