

Murder—by Appointment



By Robert Turner

For months Johnny Lane had searched the country for a forgotten, fugitive movie idol. And just as Johnny was about to catch up with his fallen star, he learned that Death had cast them both for a fadeout in the morgue.

HE ENTERED the frowzy little hotel room while she was gone, and ransacked it; then he plopped into a chair to await her return. She came in with her face a mask of caked white paste, Irish green eyes blazing through it and a red splash of mouth demanding: "Well! Did you find what you wanted?"

"Torkey gave me a bum steer." His slightly slanting brown eyes grinned. "He said you were a cute little bundle. You're

not. You look like hell."

Yanking a sleazy Japanese wrapper tightly about her pert, perfect form, she drew herself up indignantly. "You can't get away with this. You can't just bust through all my things while I'm down the hall giving myself a facial. If you're a cop I demand your warrant." Particles of paste cracked, dropped to the rough floor. "Who are you? Who's Torkey?"

"All right," he said. He got up from the

frayed Morris chair where he had been sprawled. "I've got all the information I want. I'll go."

Her eyes got big as green traffic lights. With tiny, balled fists taut at her sides she blocked his exit.

"You—You're not leaving here, you lummoX, until you've answered my questions."

"Torkey is the clerk down at the desk." He grinned down at her. "I'm Johnny Lane, private shadow, and the dope I wanted was about you. You're Henrietta Doll, female shamus, working on a tracer case for a client named Mrs. Lennox. Now, if you'll get out of my way—"

"Very enlightening," she interrupted. "Now tell me what you really wanted before I turn you in for illegal entry."

"You shouldn't be so antagonistic." He laughed down at her politely, with his eyes. "We have a lot in common. Both of us have been searching the country for Alden March, once big-time star of silent movies. We've both traced him to this flea-bag hostelry."

"So you're the one!" she gasped.

"Yep," he told her reminiscently. "We crossed tracks several times. Out in Colorado at the Western Gold Mines Corporation which Alden March once owned through a phony investment. We were looking for a prospector named Donald Davis, running the mine for March for cake money, but he had disappeared. Yes, we almost bumped that time, but—"

"Why," she cried, flaming mad now, "are *you* after March?"

"Trade secret," he said, clucking his tongue. He impudently stuck out a finger, wiped it through the hardened paste on her face, regarded it wryly. "So long, Miss Doll. See you again some time and if you're not too bad with that mess off your face I'll buy you a drink." He stepped around her toward the door.

"You won't beat me out," she shrilled after him. "Alden March won't be back until late tonight. He never is. I'm grabbing him the second he returns, and I'd like to see you beat me to him!"

"You will," Johnny Lane caned back. "I know exactly where to find March at six o'clock. Bye, baby."

He ran down the stairs, away from her screaming voice, whistling, and into the cramped, cheap lobby.

"Torkey, my boy," he told the wispy desk clerk, "I want to make certain Miss Henrietta Doll doesn't get the same valuable information you gave me about Alden March's eating habits." Lane handed a five-dollar bill across the desk. .

Mr. Torkey ducked his head, grinned wisely. "Shut up like a clam I'll keep," he asserted.

JOHNNY Lane left the dismal confines of the Wills Hotel, walked through blistering wind and a flurry of snow to the subway station. Ten blocks away, at the extremely swanky Metropolis Hotel, he rode a shining chrome elevator to the twentieth floor and entered the suite of Mr. Guy Barker.

Barker was a big, rawboned man, expensively dressed, but his face was leathery, weather-beaten. He had big hands, red and gnarled from hard labor and swollen at the joints from arthritis. He steered Lane to an overstuffed club chair, stood over him, trembling.

"You say you've located March, Mr. Lane," he prompted impatiently, fidgeting with the heavy gold jewelry to which he was addicted. "I want all the details. All the details."

Johnny Lane wallowed in the softness of the chair, helped himself to a Havana filler from the table beside him. "Well," he began, clipping the cigar with his teeth, "although Alden March was the star of his

time, made a fortune in silent pictures, he finished out of the money. Talkies came in and he sound-tracked bad and went out. By 1930 he had squandered most of his fortune in gambling and in phoney investments.”

He paused to light the cigar, staring at Barker’s swollen, bony fingers twisting nervously. A plain gold band of a ring gleamed dully in the light.

“Then,” Lane continued, “March got mixed up in a murder, was charged with the killing. But he escaped on the way to the courthouse. He went on the lam, dropped right out of sight and no one knew whether he was dead or alive. Until now.”

Guy Barker stood holding his hands toward the flames coming from a blazing log fire, across the room. The *Metropolis* really gave the guests something for their twenty skins a day. He wheeled now.

“Stop it, stop it!” he roared. The lines in his leathery face pulled tight in a ferocious scowl. “Your monthly reports told me all that. Get down to what you learned last week.”

Not even glancing at his client, Johnny Lane blew smoke contentedly, went on in the same voice: “This morning I found out where Mr. March is living. I know just where you can find him at six p.m., tonight.”

“That’s more like it. More like it.” Barker’s voice lost its edge. “Where, Lane, where?”

“For my magnificent detective work,” Lane added, “I’ve received five C’s and expenses. When you’ve seen March I’m to receive an additional similar amount. But I’m afraid that won’t be enough. On this job I’ve acquired a taste for good cigars and travel. To further enjoy these luxuries, Mr. Barker, I shall need the second five hundred dollars now and the final five-century after you’ve seen March.”

GUY BARKER’S face twisted and writhed and looked like rotting yellow leather. “That—that’s preposterous,” he exploded. “It’s thievery. I won’t do it, Lane. We arranged those terms to begin with and—”

“That was before I knew there was going to be competition,” Lane interrupted. There was no excitement in his voice. “After ten years of lost-dogging it, Alden March becomes popular. I don’t know what’s behind the search, Mr. Barker, but I do know beating out keen competition deserves a bonus.”

Barker haggled, whined, bullied, but Lane remained firm, finally won. He folded five hundred-dollar bills, placed them in his watch pocket. Then he related how he found Alden March living at the Wills Hotel, how he took a room there himself.

“Bribing the desk clerk,” Lane said, “I learned that around six o’clock every night March eats at the near-by *Old Tymes Tavern*, a beer joint where the customers can watch old silent movies while they eat and drink. They show Alden March’s most famous picture a little after six. He never misses a showing. He’ll be there tonight.”

“That’s fine, fine,” Barker declared, beaming now. He played with his ring and his heavy gold watch chain. “Now what about the other party—the—”

“I also found out who the other party is that’s after March,” Lane butted in. “A female private detective named Henrietta Doll. She’s at the hotel, too, the floor below me. Her client is a woman named Lennox. Mrs. George Lennox.”

“Mrs. George Lennox?” Barker shouted the name. His eyes clouded with troubled memories. He brushed his hand across his forehead. “That means she’s found Alden March, too. She *can’t* get to him before me. Do something, Lane!”

Lane smiled, puffed on his smoke. “I

have, so take it easy. Neither the Doll nor her client know about the Tavern. They won't see March until he returns to the hotel late tonight. You'll see him at six. I don't ask for bonuses for nothing."

Barker was comforted a little. "But—but is she here—in the city? Mrs. Lennox, I mean."

"She arrives early this afternoon." Lane spat a bit of tobacco from his lip. "Going through Henrietta Doll's credentials and stuff, I found a telegram to that effect. The dame dick evidently notified her she had located March."

"I see, I see." Barker was all action, now. His big gaunt frame moved fast, pacing up and down, keeping in time with his fast-moving thoughts. "Here's what you do, Lane. Take no chances on that Doll person bumping into March on the street near the Tavern. Get her out of the neighborhood, some way, around that time. A little after six, ditch the girl and join me at the Tavern but don't speak to March until I arrive. He might get scared and leave."

Johnny Lane started for the door. "That's all?"

"Yes, yes," Barker said. He had already forgotten about Lane. He was concentrating on something. He suddenly called: "No, hold on. Call me around three this afternoon, in case there's a change of plans."

The detective went down to the lobby, called his own hotel, made a date with Miss Henrietta Doll for 3:30 that afternoon.

With the idea that Henrietta Doll might be all right out of the beauty mask, he spent some of his bonus on new duds, then headed for the Fifth Avenue Library. He went through West Coast newspapers of 1931, looking up details on the Alden March murder trouble. He didn't do this on assignment. It was for curiosity.

THERE had been quite a splash about it. March, then, had been as big a theatrical name as Barrymore. At a party at March's California home, a man had been shot and killed in the garden, with March's gun. March claimed innocence, that someone else had used the gun. But he had no proof or alibi.

He and a man named George Lennox were the only two suspects, because of the exact time of the killing. And the girl with Lennox swore he was with her at the time of the murder. That left March holding the bag. The circumstantial evidence against him was terrific, so March beat it on the way to trial, disappearing completely.

Lane was interested in the fact that a George Lennox was involved. That was the name of Henrietta Doll's client. Her searching for March after all these years had something to do with the old murder mystery, Lane figured. But he couldn't dope out the angle.

At three o'clock he called Barker. "Anything new?"

Barker hesitated, then said: "What are you doing about getting rid of the girl detective this afternoon?"

Lane told him, and Barker said, thoughtfully: "It might make you late for your date but you'll have to do it. Go to the public library and—"

"I just left there," Lane protested.

"What were you doing?" Barker demanded sharply.

"Passing time. Reading magazines."

"Oh," said Barker. He sounded relieved. "Well, you'll have to do this, Lane. Very important. Look up the birthdate of an eighteenth century composer named Hoffbach. He's little known, so you may have trouble. But bring me that information when you come to the Tavern, if you have to go through every book in the music section."

"But, it's less than a half hour until I

meet—”

“This is more important,” Barker cut in. “Please do as I say, Lane.”

Lane hung up before he lost his temper, but he hurried back to the library. To save time, he told a librarian his problem. She had never heard of Hoffbach, but she gave him half a dozen books and told him that if there was any information about the composer, it was in one of those volumes.

At a quarter to five, he slung aside the last book, still knowing nothing about Hoffbach. His name hadn’t ever been mentioned in the indexes. Fuming inwardly over the futile, dull research job, wondering what it could possibly have to do with the March search, Lane went to meet Henrietta Doll at the appointed place.

She was cute in a chic off-the-face hat and good-looking fur jacket. She was lovely, in spite of her fury. Her green eyes were wild and flashing, and her full lips drawn with temper. She swarmed all over him verbally: “You’ve kept me waiting on this crowded street corner in the snow and cold, an hour and a half. You’re a no-good lout!”

He had no comeback. Woebegone, he told her: “You’re right, but I couldn’t help it.” He explained about his research job. “And speaking of the library, why is Mrs. George Lennox, who helped Alden March into a murder rap, searching for him now like a long lost son?”

“Even if I didn’t hate you, I wouldn’t tell you my client’s business. What were you going to tell me about March?”

They turned into a cocktail lounge then and Lane managed to stall off the question until the second Daquiri, then he said: “I’m in bad with you, so I might as well finish it off. That was a gag to get you to see me. I don’t know any more about March than you do.”

She looked up at the clock over the bar

and Johnny Lane’s glance followed. It was twenty to six now. She downed her drink, slid gracefully from the stool. Her big green eyes blazed.

“Johnny Lane,” she stated, “in spite of everything, you were a likeable guy until this. I should be up in my room where my client is sitting waiting for me, and you kill the afternoon for me for nothing! It was a despicable trick.”

HE WATCHED her wheel toward the door. She had nice legs and Johnny Lane wished that business didn’t have to come before pleasure. He liked the kid. But there would be plenty of time after this was over to re-establish himself with her. He let her go because he would have had to ditch her anyhow in a few minutes.

He followed her out, made certain that she was not heading in the direction of the *Old Tymes Tavern*, then went that way, himself.

It was a big bar and grill, fixed up like a pre-prohibition saloon, with sawdust on the floor and artificial cobwebs in the corners, and murals of a bygone New York on the walls.

Lane walked past the bar and through a dimly lit ante-room which held the lounges and a row of phone booths in a corner. In the dining section it was very dark because of the movies. An early Charlie Chaplin picture was on and drinkers and diners were laughing at his antics.

The headwaiter came over and Lane squinted through the darkness and said: “Do you know Alden March, who comes in here about this time every night?”

The waiter nodded happily. “Yes, indeedy. We all know Mr. March. His picture will be on next. We did as you said over the phone, Mr. Lane. Mr. March is sitting right over there on the left.”

Lane’s glance followed the waiter’s

finger. Vaguely in the bad light he saw a man sitting at a table alone, staring at the screen, playing with a glass on the table. The private detective couldn't see his features or much about him. Lane turned suddenly to the waiter.

"What did you say? I made no phone call here."

The headwaiter's smile fell. "Sorry. Then of course you're not Mr. Lane. I just thought—"

"But I am. What did I say? I mean, what was said?"

"Mr. Lane, I'm a busy man. I've no time to fool. You asked, sir, that I make sure Mr. March didn't leave before you arrived. We are glad to oblige our patrons, Mr. Lane. Mr. March is still here, and I've pointed him out. Now you'll have to excuse me, sir."

He turned on his heel and hurried to greet another customer. Lane shook his head, went to a table, the only vacant one, on the other side of the room. He would have liked to join March, but he remembered Barker's warning. He looked toward March's table, but couldn't see him at all now because of the bright projector beam between them.

Wondering about the phone call, Lane turned his attention to the screen. The Chaplin picture was over and now Alden March was up there in the ancient fast flickers, making love to a heavy-breathing vamp. March had been handsome in a slim, desperate way, with his long nose, cleft chin and beetling winged eyebrows. Lane wondered how the old down-and-outer felt, watching this throwback to the glory days. He wondered if it hurt.

The picture was half over when a hand placed a package the size of a shoe box on Lane's table. He looked up at the headwaiter, who whispered:

"A Postal Union messenger just brought it for you, Mr. Lane."

Muttering thanks, Lane unwrapped the string and cheap paper. It was a shoe box, with all labels scraped off. Inside nestled a shiny black automatic. Lane put the lid back on the box quickly and looked around.

IN THE dark no one apparently had noticed the delivery. With the clatter of dishes and the hum of conversation no one had heard him tearing off the paper. Fingers trembling, he picked up the box and the wrapping and set them carefully under the table.

He stared up at the screen, seeing, yet not seeing anything that was taking place there. First the phone call, now a gun mysteriously sent to him here, in a box. It was too much.

He stood up, walked to the back and under the projector beam where it was higher. He looked toward Alden March's table. There was no one sitting there.

Lane uttered a choked cry, dashed to the table to make certain, then found the headwaiter.

"How long ago did Alden March leave?" he said through tight lips.

"Why—er—why, I didn't know he had gone," the man faltered. "I gave him the message that he was wanted on the telephone. But that was quite a while ago. Hasn't he returned to his table?"

Lane didn't wait to answer. He raced to the ante-room where the phone booths were located. He saw a door of one of the booths was closed. The automatic light was on, but there was a sort of mist clouding the glass upper part of the door. But Lane couldn't see anyone inside.

He went over and yanked the door. It didn't open easily, the way it should. He had to force it. And when he succeeded, the crumpled figure of a man who had been slumped down inside tumbled out.

Lane heard a startled cry behind him.

The headwaiter had followed him out. Perspiration was popping out on the man's bald head. He was muttering: "It's Mr. March. Someone's killed Mr. March."

While the headwaiter bustled into another booth and called the police, Lane bent over the cramped, crumpled figure on the floor. Tendrils of smoke wisped out of the booth, past his face, acrid with the smell of gunpowder.

The once handsome features had come lined and hardened with age, and he was wearing a big black bow tie, but the corpse was Alden March all right. Lane had no doubt about that. Then he remembered the gun gift he had received.

He tore back to his table, thoughts tumbling through his mind faster than the shadow pictures up on the screen. He noted subconsciously that the March picture was over now and another one was on. It was over just as March's life was over. Lane also rapidly figured how the thing was done.

The murderer must have been at the bar. He'd gone to the deserted ante-room, called the number of one of the other booths, muffled his voice and asked for March. March came and the murderer, making sure no one was around, left his booth. Then, either with a silencer or muffling the gun with something, he'd shot March.

Then he shut March into the booth, left, wrapped up the gun in the shoe box and took it to the near-by Postal Union office, or more likely, had someone take it in for him. The Tavern had been well cased and everything planned to the last detail.

Lane's fingers picked up the shoe box, fumbled it open. He sniffed inside, verified the fact that the gun had been recently fired. He knew what was going to happen now. The killer had made sure that Lane would be arrested for the job.

Carrying the box, Lane went out to face the music.

The headwaiter was talking to a sergeant in the ante-room. Two cops and a medical examiner were bending over the body. Another cop was holding back the crowd from the bar.

"There he is," the bald-headed headwaiter screamed. "That's him."

The sergeant and another officer came over and frisked him. "Why did you do it, son?" the sergeant asked.

LANE told them exactly what had happened, calmly, coolly. He showed his credentials and told them about Guy Barker. But even as the sergeant stepped into a booth to call Barker and check on his story, Lane got a feeling in his stomach as if a cold, wet snake was slithering around inside.

He suddenly realized that Barker was to have appeared here, and hadn't. The man who had called, impersonating him, could have been Barker. Barker could even be the killer.

The sergeant came back, his face grim as granite. "You'd better get a new one, Lane," he barked. "Your credentials show you're a private dick, all right, but you didn't get that roll of over four hundred dollars we found in your pocket from Mr. Barker. He's not a client of yours, he says. He doesn't even know you."

Johnny Lane wet his dry lips. "All right," he said finally. "Take me in and get it over with. The nitrate test will clear me."

He was right. Two hours later, at headquarters they had dropped the murder charge against him. But because of the waiter's evidence about the telephone call, and other circumstances that connected him with the case, Lane was booked as a material witness. A bail bondsman put up the thousand dollars bail for him and he

was let go.

Out on the street Lane was steaming with temper over this thing. He didn't like being made a dupe for a killer. He was so riled he didn't even bother to try to ditch the two headquarters shadows who had been put on his tail.

Lane phoned the Wills Hotel and asked for Miss Doll. Torkey was so excited, so blubbing and stuttering, that Lane couldn't get what he was saying for several minutes. Then the clerk calmed down enough to get some of it out.

"I—I just told you, you can't talk to Miss Doll, Mr. Lane. The police have her, for murdering Mrs. Lennox in her room. I—I can't stand it, Mr. Lane. I'm g-going mad. First the police here about poor old March and now this."

Torkey then went into more verbal acrobatics in his excitement. Lane had to wait until he had worn himself out, then question him all over again. By the time he had hung up, he got this:

Henrietta Doll had called up several times to speak to Mrs. Lennox. Torkey had to go up to the room to bring her down to the desk phone, since there were no instruments in the room. But no one had answered his knock. The last time, at Henrietta's worried insistence, he had entered the room with a pass key, found Mrs. Lennox on the floor, strangled. Dead. He told Henrietta. She came right up. So did the police. They arrested her for the murder.

Lane then taxied to the hotel to check on these new, terrible events in person. He was just starting into the lobby when they came out. A gang of reporters and detectives, and three uniformed cops dragging Henrietta, kicking and screaming, between them. Lane called out: "Henrietta!"

All of them stopped. The girl strained against the arms of her captors. Her green

eyes were wild, her mouth was twisted all out of shape.

"You dirty heel!" she shrieked at Lane. "You did this to me. You murderer! You won't get away with it, Johnny Lane. I—I'll get even for this. I'll kill you!"

"I—I don't understand, Henrietta," he stammered. He stepped closer.

"*You* don't understand!" she snarled. "You found that envelope this morning when you ransacked my room. You opened it, saw what it was and hid it. Then you came here, while I waited on a street corner for you, and killed Mrs. Lennox. But you framed *me*. You fixed it so that I had no alibi. But I'll get out of it. I—I'll get out!"

SHE broke into tearing sobs then and couldn't say any more. The police yanked her away and Lane, stunned, watched them put her into a police car.

Then he managed to corner one of the reporters and found out what Henrietta had been raving about. The police found an envelope hidden under the sofa. It had a note in it and ten thousand dollars in cash. The note said that if anything happened to Mrs. Lennox, the money was to be given to Alden March, when found. If he was dead, the money was to go to charity.

The police claimed Henrietta was the only one who knew about the envelope. That, they claimed, was her motive for the murder. The time of the killing had been fixed roughly at between three-thirty and six p.m. And because Lane had appeared late for his date with her, Henrietta could not establish any alibi other than that she had been standing on a street corner.

At the desk of the hotel, Lane gave Torkey another five dollars. He got the key to March's room—and some new information.

Alden March's room had been reached before Lane got there. Not by the police

alone, either. A trunkful of letters, papers and old clothing had been scattered all over in a thorough search. The pockets of the clothes were all inside out and the linings slit open.

Lane strode through the litter to the window. Little flurries of snow were beating in through a pane in the glass that had been kicked out. He peered through the window at the fire escape, then opened the window.

The fire escape ran past the room next door, also, the room which was Henrietta Doll's, the room where Mrs. George Lennox had been strangled. He saw now why the window was broken. The murderer, after killing Mrs. Lennox, had used the fire escape, kicked in the glass and thus entered March's room. That definitely tied up the two murders.

Lane fingered an almost invisible piece of thread caught on a sliver of the broken glass as he shut the window down again. But he did not remove it. With crime detection the science it was these days, that piece of thread would be almost enough to convict the man who had caught his pants on the splinter of glass when he kicked the pane in. All Lane had to do was find that man.

Leaving the room, he smiled fleetingly at the sounds of the scurrying feet of the headquarters men trailing him as they hurried to get out of sight.

OUTSIDE, Lane made for the subway, bought an extra of the *Chronicle* that had been shoved out on the strength of the double murder. He read it on the short ride to the *Metropolis Hotel*.

He read with especial interest the story Henrietta Doll had given the police. Mrs. Lennox's husband had committed the murder of which Alden March had been accused eleven years ago. Recently Mr. Lennox had died. His wealthy widow, now

that her husband no longer could pay for his crime, had set out to search for Alden March. If she found him still alive, she planned to vindicate Alden March and make up for his years as a fugitive.

She had proof of March's innocence, which she had withheld for all these years to cover her husband. If she found March alive, Mrs. Lennox was going to give the evidence, and suffer whatever penalty was involved. If he was dead, that would do no good, and she would continue to withhold the evidence and not blacken the reputation of her dead husband.

"Mrs. Lennox," Henrietta's story went, "had suffered from conscience all those years, and had been determined after her husband's death to right the wrong, if possible."

That story and another small item about the case, which said the police were baffled by a strange mark on Mrs. Lennox's throat—an abrasion shaped like a tiny letter "D"—gave Lane a lot to think about. So much that he ran all the way from the subway to the swank *Metropolis*.

Lane didn't announce himself via the front desk, but went right up to Barker's room. His knock brought no answer, so Lane tried different keys from his skeleton ring until one fit. He stepped into Guy Barker's suite, breezed quickly through the three rooms. Barker was out.

Now Lane looked around carefully, sniffing at a peculiar burning smell in the rooms. He turned to the fireplace. The log fire which had been roaring before, had burned out long ago. The fireplace was full of gray ash.

But as Lane bent over the fireplace he knew that was where the strange odor came from. Barker had recently burned some kind of cloth and some kind of heavily coated paper there.

In the bedroom Lane found Barker's trunks and other luggage all packed. He

smashed open a trunk lock and started hurriedly to go through the contents.

He was going through a brief case full of business papers when a slight sound behind him made him turn. Guy Barker was standing in the doorway, his lined face twitching, his big bony shoulders, hunched. In his hand was a gun.

"I was downstairs settling my bill, Lane," he said, his voice almost guttural in its hoarseness. His face was yellow. "Glad you dropped in, Lane."

"Thought you would be," Lane managed to get out. He turned slowly and straightened, his hands shoulder high. "I thought I'd come up and tell you a couple of your big mistakes, Barker."

"I don't have time to listen." Barker came a step closer. His swollen knuckles were white with the clutch of the gun. "I'm catching a plane. But first—"

"Wait!" Lane talked lightning-fast then. "You shouldn't have taken it for granted that Mrs. Lennox wouldn't tell her private detective, Henrietta Doll, *why* she wanted to find March."

Barker's eyes shifted. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the Police know Mrs. Lennox was going to vindicate March, Barker." Lane tensed his muscles. "When they learn your name was originally Donald Davis, that you're the man March let run his gold mine, they'll know you're the double murderer."

The gun trembled in Barker's hand, but it didn't shift aim. Barker's voice was weak as he said: "How—how did you learn that?"

LANE ignored the question, went on: "March let you run that mine, Barker, because it was supposed to be worthless. But after March ran away, you struck a big, new rich vein. You figured March

would never bother you so long as he was wanted.

"You got wealthy out of that mine, Barker, changed your name, spent and invested all the money as though it was your own instead of March's, who still had the deed. You rested secure until Mrs. Lennox came to you for information about March, knowing you were an old friend, saying she wanted to clear March. She also warned you not to tell anyone, in case March was dead."

Lane paused and Barker opened his mouth to interject a remark, but Lane rushed on:

"You thought Mrs. Lennox and yourself were the only ones who knew of March's innocence. March, still alive and cleared, could step in and take all your wealth away, Barker. Mrs. Lennox would keep quiet, unless March was alive, so there was no sense in killing her unless March was for certain not dead. So you hired me, and when I found March, the same time as Mrs. Lennox's detective, you had to act fast and get rid of all of us at one swoop."

Then Lane related briefly the way he had figured Barker had committed the crimes, and pointed to the living room. "But you burned in the fireplace the scarf you used to muffle the shot, and also any evidence you got from March's room. Those ashes can be analyzed, Barker. But the biggest mistake of all was your ring. Even though it couldn't be removed over your swollen knuckles, you should have had it cut off, Barker!"

The killer's glance flicked to his gun hand, at the heavy gold ring. It no longer looked like a gold band. It was turned around the right way. It had the letter "D" on it in raised gold. That ring had caused the mark on Mrs. Lennox's throat when Barker had strangled her.

The ring had been turned around with the letter "D" palm-side, the way Barker usually wore it, to hide the first initial of his changed name.

Barker looked up, a split second too late. Johnny Lane was already upon him, smashing the gun down even as Barker pulled trigger. He moved in close and clinched with the killer, holding tight with a bear-hug. The big man's arm was now around Lane, the gun still in it, but not in a position to shoot Lane. But he could wallop it down against the back of the detective's neck, and he did, in repeated vicious, rabbit-punching blows.

Lane's hunched shoulder took part of the blows, but not enough. Slowly his hold on Barker weakened. His hands slipped

gradually down the man's broad back. His head swam in a bloody haze so vague that he thought he must be dreaming that two other figures had leaped into the battle. Then his hands slipped altogether and that was all he knew

The room was full of cops when Lane came to. The two plainclothes men who had been trailing him, grinned. "Good thing we've been dogging you around all evening, Johnny," one of them said.

Then they told Lane that Barker had confessed, and his story jibed almost perfectly with the way the detective had figured it out.

Lane left a few minutes later. He had to hurry down to Center Street, to be there when they released Henrietta Doll.