

The Twisted Alibi

By Nicholas Zook

The plan of even the most cunning murder is no stronger than the hangman's rope.

SOME of the tricks that criminals pull have long led me to believe most thieves and murderers are stupid or careless. Of course, there are some bright ones, and I'll even admit the perfect murder is not only possible but has been recorded many times in reports of unsolved-crimes.

In my years with the department I've seen many silly blunders. Often the only thread by which we catch a criminal is the one he made himself of his own stupidity or carelessness.

Like the panicky thief who stole the fire chief's car for a getaway. And the smooth jewel thief who forgot to take off his mask and walked calmly down the street with it on until one of our boys picked him up. And the guy who knifed his wife and claimed it was suicide—even though the wound was in her back and the knife was found in his pocket.

Then there was the case of Eric Bligh who gambled that an alibi would keep him clear of a murder rap—and lost.

Early that night I was chewing the fat with Lieutenant Barney Foster of the Vice Squad. A conscientious guy who had been with the department as long as I had, Barney was fuming about our new police commissioner.

"Honest, Mac, this guy is a terror," he said. "You're lucky you're in Homicide. In my department every time we get a new police commissioner he tells the newspapers how he's going to clean up the city and he keeps us hopping for a month."

I chuckled. "What's wrong with that? You get your picture in the paper when you make a big pinch."

"The only time my picture is in the papers is when the commissioner wants a couple of cops in it for background," he said sourly. "Now, you take tonight's schedule. We've got enough work to keep us busy for a month. But Commissioner Longfellow wants it all done in a couple of hours."

He shook his head, sniffed through his graying mustache, and left. As for me, I sat in my office to go over some papers on a knifing that had taken place on the East Side. We had it cleaned up but I

wanted to be sure nothing had been overlooked before the report went to the district attorney. The usual routine.

I was lucky to be in Homicide. I admitted it to myself. When you've passed fifty, it's no age to go around raiding gambling halls and slot-machine parlors. It suited me to work on a murder, conduct an investigation and let some of the younger detectives do the legwork.

I spent maybe an hour on the papers and then turned to other reports that needed my attention. I lost track of time and, when the phone rang, I was startled to see it was a quarter to eleven. I answered it. It was the desk officer.

"Just got a call that Sylvester Bligh has been found dead, Mac. Bashed over the head. You know him?"

I frowned. "I know of him. Send the crew up to his place and tell Piper I want him to come with me."

Piper was in the office a couple of minutes later. He was a tall, husky lad who would make a fine officer one day. I liked working with him.

"Just heard about it, lieutenant," he said. "Bligh's pretty important, isn't he?"

"Yeah, at least he's got money," I admitted. "Pretty much of a hermit and thinks twice before he spends a nickel."

WE DROVE to a brown sandstone house that had been Bligh's home for fifty years. From the official cars outside, I could see that the medical examiner and the rest of the crew were there.

I nodded to the bulky cop who opened the door, and we went in. Bligh's body was in the living room. He was a wrinkled, gray little man who looked as though he had been stepped on. His head was crushed and a bloody poker lay nearby.

"That did it," the M.E. grunted with a nod at the poker. "About half an hour ago, I'd say."

I glanced at my watch. Eleven o'clock. That would put the time at about ten-thirty. I looked at Piper to make sure he had it. He was busy writing in his notebook so I turned my attention to the

fingerprint man.

"Can't be sure yet, but from what I've dusted on the poker I'd say no fingerprints," he said.

That would have been too easy, I told myself wistfully. Nobody leaves fingerprints anymore. They've been too highly publicized.

Piper was in a corner of the room, talking with a short, bald man with a monkey suit on. I sauntered over and joined them. Piper checked his notes.

"This is Amos Hardwick, the butler," he said. "Amos found the body about twenty minutes ago and called the station. Nobody else in the house. Amos and Bligh have been the only people in it since Bligh's wife died fifteen years ago."

I nodded. "Tell us about finding Mr. Bligh," I said.

Amos paled and his hands shook. "There's not much to tell, sir," he said. "I was in my room all evening. Mr. Bligh usually read until about eleven before going to bed. I came downstairs at twenty minutes to eleven to see if he wanted a glass of hot milk. I found him lying on the floor, dead."

"Hear any noise?"

"I didn't hear a thing all evening."

"Was the front door open?" Amos nodded. "It's always open until I lock up for the night."

"That's convenient," I murmured. "Scout around and see if any of the neighbors spotted anybody coming in tonight, Piper."

Piper left and I turned to Amos again.

"Know of anybody who would want to kill Mr. Bligh?"

He hesitated and licked his thin, dry lips. "Well, sir, he had little love for his nephew, Mr. Eric Bligh. They often quarreled about money. You see, Mr. Eric is the only living relative Mr. Bligh had, but Mr. Bligh never gave him a cent."

I whistled tunelessly. "Who gets his money in the will?"

"I'm not sure but I think it is Mr. Eric. Mr. Bligh made that fairly clear to Mr. Eric during their quarrels, but he insisted Mr. Eric would not get a cent during his life."

I didn't say anything, just waited for Amos to go on. He looked as though he had something else on his mind.

"Mr. Eric was very fond of gambling, sir. That's why he and Mr. Bligh were nasty toward each other. Mr. Eric was usually in debt and asking for a loan to pay his debts."

When Piper returned, he said he had found

nothing. It seemed the neighbors went to bed early. I hadn't expected to find anything out so I wasn't disappointed. We got the address of Eric Bligh from Amos and left the crew there to work the room over.

Eric Bligh lived in a tall, brick apartment house that must have cost him a small fortune a year. We looked up the janitor or, as they call them in those blocks, the superintendent. He was eager to talk when I showed him my badge.

"Sure I seen him come in. I was doing some emergency plumbing on his floor when he got off the elevator. Must have been eleven o'clock. Yeah, about that."

He would have been happy to chat with us longer but we had other work to do. We waved him back to his basement apartment and took the elevator upstairs.

ERIC BLIGH turned out to be a tall, thin man with a dapper mustache and quick smile. He had his tie and coat off when he answered our ring. I flashed a badge and we barged in.

"We're from Homicide, Mr. Bligh. Your uncle has been murdered," I said. I thought the blunt statement might surprise him into saying the wrong thing. He only gasped and went white. A convincing actor, I thought.

"No! Why, that's impossible! Who did it?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," I said politely. "Mind telling us where you were all evening?"

"You're joking," he said. "You don't mean you think I might have killed him?"

"Just checking on everybody."

"Well, sure. Be glad to tell you," he said readily. "I was with five friends from eight o'clock until about eleven. Any one of them will vouch to that."

I hadn't expected him to trot out a solid alibi so quickly. Unconsciously I had been pinning my hopes on a quick wind-up to the murder.

"And who are these friends?" I asked. Piper faithfully whipped out his notebook. Eric counted them off on the fingers of his left hand.

"Mike Curtis, Jed Blaine, Edgar Flynn, John Dustin and William Sousa. We were playing cards all evening at Mike's place."

My eyebrows shot up. Every one of the five was a small-time professional gambler, and Mike's place was good for a game any night of the week. Curtis had a reputation as "Alibi Mike," the guy

who would alibi anybody for a price. Still, in a court of law the word of Mike and the others would stand up. My only chance was to break down the alibi.

“Nice game with all professionals,” I said. “You don’t choose your company, I see.”

“That happens to be my business,” he snapped.

“Mind coming down to headquarters while we check with your friends?”

Eric shrugged. “Why not?”

We went down to the station in my car. We were all silent. I spent the time doping out how Eric might have worked the killing. He could have stayed with his friends until ten-fifteen after fixing his alibi with them.

Enough time to get over to his uncle’s place and return to his apartment before we showed up.

It is quite annoying when a man’s whole story is built around an alibi. Particularly when the alibi is a good one. Unless something turned up, it looked as though Eric might get away with it.

We went to my office where I left Eric with Piper. My next move was to put out a radio pickup call for Mike Curtis and the other men. I figured the boys could locate them in no time since they were probably expecting us to look them up.

In the corridor I bumped into Barney Foster, his tanned face lined with fatigue. He looked at me with disgust.

“What a night,” he spat out. “The commissioner had us jumping every minute.”

“Sorry I can’t stop to hear about it, Barney. I got something on,” I said.

He looked interested. “Murder?”

“Yep. We got our man, I think, but he’s got a solid five-man alibi for ten-thirty, the time of the murder. Friends of yours, in fact,” I said, naming the five men.

Barney stared at me as though I had developed another pair of ears and then roared with laughter. I flushed with anger and tried to pass but he held me back with a hand on my arm.

“Wait, Mac. This really is funny,” he got out between guffaws. “You can lock your man up because that alibi is as phony as a wooden nickel. One of the joints we raided tonight was Mike Curtis’s place, and we pulled all five of them in at exactly ten o’clock.”

It was my turn to stare. Then I chuckled. Eric had fixed everything, all right, but he had been careless in not checking with Mike after the murder. The alibi had blown up in his face. And do you know what Eric said when I told him? Did he deny his guilt or cook up another story?

No. He just looked sulky and said, “Five thousand dollars I paid them and look what they did to me.”