

Manuscript of Murder

By PETER WARREN

*Literary agent Carter learns
that truth is stranger than fiction!*

WILLARD Carter put down the phone and ran his fingers through his thick dark hair in a gesture of annoyance. There was a frown on his strong face as he glared at the bald-headed man who sat opposite Carter's desk.

"Authors—they're driving me mad!" Carter said. "Why I ever became a literary agent when I might have picked some nice quiet job like being shot out of a cannon, is beyond me. That was Gay Gilweather I was talking to over the phone. She was on the best seller lists last spring. Her next book is due at the publisher tomorrow, and she tells me it is only half finished and she is going to Miami for a rest."

"The bombastic type," Russell Holmes said, gazing sadly at Carter. "I was afraid of that. Exactly the sort of individual that I abhor."

It suddenly dawned on Willard Carter that this was the first time in his life he had ever seen the tall, bald-headed man who sat across from him. Russell Holmes had arrived at the literary agency just a few minutes ago. He had found Carter there alone and announced he was a writer seeking an agent.

Carter had taken Holmes into his private office, but before he could do any more than learn the man's name, the phone call from Gay Gilweather had interrupted them.



There was a desperate struggle

Now Carter felt strangely uneasy, there was something about Holmes' eyes that reminded the literary agent of those of a dead fish.

"Judging from what you just said, Mr. Holmes," Carter remarked dryly. "This doesn't seem like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"Night and day for the past three months I have dreamed of this moment," Holmes said in a strange voice, completely ignoring what Carter had just said. "The moment when I would find you alone." He suddenly drew a small revolver from his pocket and covered Carter with the gun. "When I would have a chance to kill you, Willard Carter!"

"Very dramatic," Carter said, staring at the gun and not caring for the looks of it in the least. It was much too realistic. "I suppose this is the opening of the first chapter of your detective novel and you are acting it out to impress me."

"I'm disappointed," Holmes snapped icily. "I thought you were a better judge of character than that, Mr. Carter. Surely you don't actually believe that Russell Holmes would stoop to such childish actions. This is real. I came here to kill you, and I am determined to do it!"

"I suppose you will permit me a few hundred last words to learn just why you are so anxious to make me into a corpse," Carter remarked. "You know—the murderer gloats over his intended victim."

CARTER was gradually growing more and more convinced that the baldheaded man was some sort of a nut, and the best thing to do was humor him, particularly while Holmes had that gun in his hand. In Carter's estimation, Holmes talked more like a ham actor in an old-fashioned melodrama than a real killer.

"All right," Holmes said. "Perhaps it is only fair that I let you know that I am

cognizant of the dastardly deed you have perpetrated."

"Soft lights and slow music, Professor," Carter murmured, and then as he saw Holmes glaring at him, "Beg pardon, what did I do?"

"Perhaps if I mention the name of Howard Allen you will understand," Holmes said.

"Howard Allen is a new writer on my list," said Carter. "But his first novel, 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' really is something. The first publisher I submitted it to grabbed it up at once. They are sure it is going to be a best seller, and one of the book clubs selections. I got Allen a two thousand dollar advance on the book, and he is going to make plenty of money out of it. Strange sort of a bird—lives in a little town out West and refuses to come to New York. All my contacts with him have been by long distance phone, and through letters and wires. What about him?"

"There is no such person as Howard Allen," Holmes said. "I wrote 'Tomorrow's Sorrows.' I sent it to you to market for me under my name. Two months ago I read in a Texas paper about you having placed 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' by Howard Allen. At first I thought you had decided to bring the book out with Howard Allen as the author, for some reason/ and that you would doubtlessly explain the reason to me. There has been no explanation. No royalty advance check has come from you."

"But that's impossible," Carter said. "You couldn't have written that book. I've talked to Allen over the long distance phone as I told you, and he assured me that he had received the check for the advance."

"Very clever, Mr. Carter," Holmes said coldly. "You received and sold my book under the name of Howard Allen. You pocketed the two thousand dollar

advance and plan to keep on taking the money. In time it will probably amount to thousands if the book is a best seller and some motion picture company becomes interested.”

“Have you a carbon copy of the manuscript?” Carter asked. “If you have, we can compare it with the original at the publishers. If they are the same, I’ll believe that you did write ‘Tomorrow’s Sorrows.’”

“I neglected to make a carbon copy,” Holmes said. “I have nothing to prove I wrote the book save my own word. I realize that I can’t hope to collect any of the money from you. I never will be able to do so—but at least I will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are dead. That you can’t steal any other writer’s work as you have stolen this one of mine!”

Holmes rose to his feet so swiftly that Carter leaped up in alarm. As he did so, the literary agent knocked over the chair in which he had been sitting. The two men circled around the desk, so that Holmes was now behind it.

Abruptly Carter lunged across the desk. With his right hand he caught Holmes’ left arm, while his left hand grabbed the bald-headed man’s right wrist. This was the hand that held the revolver.

A quick twist and Carter forced Holmes to drop the gun.

“Let me go,” Holmes snarled. “I suppose you will murder me now to keep me from talking.”

SUDDENLY Carter released him and stepped quickly around the desk and grabbed up the gun. Holmes shuddered and walked over and dropped into a chair.

“You realize that I could turn you over to the police on a charge of attempted murder,” Carter said coldly.

“I know,” Holmes answered bleakly. “I must have been mad—insane. But this

thing has been on my mind for the past two months. I live alone in a little house in a small town called Springview out West.”

“Springview,” exclaimed Carter. “Go on.”

“My writing means everything to me,” Holmes went on. “I have sold some short stuff, but the book was my best work. It took me two years to write it. When I had it nearly finished, I wrote you asking if you would handle it for me. I didn’t even have a title for it then. You wrote and said you would be glad to look the book over. When it was finished I sent it to you.”

“I don’t remember ever having received a manuscript from you,” Carter said. He was puzzled. While Holmes’ attempt to kill him could only be considered the action of a crazy man, Holmes now sounded like he was telling the truth. “Tell me what happened after that?”

“Nothing,” said Holmes. “I was quite sure you had received the manuscript since it was not returned to me. I waited to hear from you, and then read about ‘Tomorrows Sorrows’ in the paper as I told you before. Then I decided I would come to New York. By this time I was sure you had tricked me and I got the crazy idea of killing you.”

“Under the circumstances you were quite justified in feeling there was some crooked work upon my part, Mr. Holmes,” Carter said, picking up the chair and again seating himself at the desk. He dropped the gun into the side pocket of his coat. “I received the manuscript of ‘Tomorrow’s Sorrows’ from Howard Allen in Springview, Texas.”

“But it is a very small place and I know everyone there,” said Holmes. “There is no one by the name of Howard Allen in the whole town.”

“My secretary is home ill with a cold,” Carter said. “So I am working alone today.

I've an idea though. Suppose that I call Springview long distance and try to talk to Howard Allen there? You listen on the phone in the outer office and see if you recognize the voice. There's a chance you might be able to do so."

"Splendid!" said Holmes. "I'll do that."

Holmes went into the outer office as Carter picked up the phone and put through a person-to-person long distance call to Howard Allen in Springview.

"Please hold the wire," said the long distance operator.

Carter frowned as the door of his office swung silently shut. There was no reason for Holmes closing that door if he was listening on the other phone. But while Carter was holding the wire, he did not want to put down his phone and investigate now.

He heard his operator tell the operator in the nearest big town in Texas that she was calling Springview. Heard the Texas operator say, "Are you paid?"

Then when the New York operator said it was a paid call, the Springview operator was given the number and started ringing it.

After what seemed a long time to Carter, the New York operator told him there was no answer. She asked if he wanted her to try again later. He told her never mind and hung up.

Carter went to the door of his office and opened it. He stood there staring into the outer office and feeling strangely weak and sick. Russell Holmes was sprawled face downward on the floor, a knife sticking out of his back. His overcoat and hat that he had taken off when he first arrived at the literary agency, were placed neatly on a chair. There was no one else around.

The door of the outer office opened and a short, stocky man stepped in. He

looked at the still figure on the floor and then blinked. He glanced at Carter.

"Now what?" Jim Lang asked. He wrote humorous books and was always in character. "I know authors bother you at times, but don't tell me you have started murdering them."

"Very funny!" Carter said bitterly. "But this happens to be a real murder, providing Holmes is dead. I fail to see anything funny about the situation."

Lang frowned. In his earlier days he had been a newspaperman. He had covered a few murders and knew what to do. He knelt down and checked for pulse and heartbeat but there was none. It was obvious that the man on the floor was dead.

Carter moved closer and stood watching Lang. He noticed that Holmes was tightly clutching a crumpled envelope in his right hand.

"He's dead," Lang said, getting to his feet. "Better phone the police and report a murder. How did it happen, Will?"

Carter glanced at the glass paneling of the outer door. The transom above the door was half open and he thought he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure moving outside. It looked like there was someone out there listening.

"I'll phone the police in a few minutes," Carter said, raising his voice a little. "Holmes was alone here as far as I knew when it happened, but I think I know who killed him."

"How do you know?" Lang asked.

"Because Holmes left a clue as he was dying," said Carter. "He still has it clutched in his right hand. Come on into my office and I'll tell you about it, Jim. Staying here with the corpse gives me the creeps."

LANG stepped into the private office. Carter followed him and closed the

door. The literary agent swiftly told the writer about Russell Holmes' visit, his attempting to use the gun, and the story of the apparently stolen manuscript.

"This is Holmes' gun." Carter said, drawing it out of his pocket and moving to the door with the revolver in his hand. "He was going to kill me with it."

Carter suddenly drew the door open. A small gray-haired man dressed in a dark overcoat and dark hat was bending over the body of the dead man and tugging the crumpled envelope out of Holmes' hand. He quickly stood erect and thrust the envelope into his pocket.

"Who are you?" Carter demanded, covering the gray-haired man with the revolver.

"Why I'm Howard Allen," said the stranger. "If you are Willard Carter you certainly have a strange way of greeting your authors."

"Sorry, Mr. Allen," said Carter, but he did not lower the gun. Lang stood behind him in the doorway watching and listening. "But since there has just been a murder here, as you see, we have to be a bit careful. Doubtless, you know the deceased, since you and Russell Holmes both came from Springview."

"I knew him by sight," Allen said. "He lived at four-twenty-six River Avenue, a mile and three-quarters south of the post office." The gray-haired man frowned. "Who killed him?"

"You did," Carter said quietly.

"I did?" Howard Allen stared at the literary agent in amazement. "You're crazy! Why should you suspect me?"

"Because you stole the manuscript of Holmes' book, 'Tomorrow's Sorrows' and sent it to me to be sold under your name," said Carter.

"I don't see how he could possibly have done that," Lang said as he listened. "He didn't sneak into Holmes' house and

steal the manuscript of the book. If he had, Holmes would have mentioned it to you, Will."

"Who was the one man who was in a position to grab that manuscript when Holmes sent it out and place the Howard Allen name on it?" Carter demanded. "I'll tell you. The local mail carrier who only knew Holmes by sight, and yet knew his address was four-twenty-six River Avenue and a mile and three quarters south of the post office. Only a postman who had that route would be so sure of the exact distance from Holmes' house to the post office."

"But I still don't quite see how it was done," Lang said.

"Holmes told me he lived alone," Carter continued. "The man he was most likely to talk to was the postman, and yet he might not even know the mail carrier's name. He probably was all excited over finishing the book and told the postman he expected to make thousands of dollars out of it when it was published. The temptation was too much for this mail carrier."

"I get it now," Jim Lang said. "Probably Holmes was tired and didn't want to walk nearly three miles to the post office and back again. So when Allen, the postman, came around, Holmes gave him the book manuscript all ready for mailing."

"Exactly," said Carter. "But Allen didn't mail the manuscript right away. He changed the name and address on the manuscript and envelope to his own and then sent the book on to me. I knew only Allen's handwriting. As far as I was concerned, Russell Holmes had nothing to do with 'Tomorrow's Sorrows.' I was working only with Howard Allen."

Allen suddenly turned and darted for the outer door. Carter raised the revolver and shot the gray-haired man in the right

arm. Allen howled in pain.

“Don’t shoot again!” he wailed. “I’ll admit everything. It happened just the way you said. But when Holmes told me he was coming to New York to see you, I followed him. I knew you had never seen him or knew his signature. I hoped that you would think Holmes was crazy and not believe the story about the book having been written by him. I thought my signature would clinch it.”

“But when you learned that I was beginning to believe Holmes you got frightened and killed him,” Carter said. “I suspected the killer might be listening outside so I mentioned Holmes having left

a clue that told me the identity of his murderer.”

“The crumpled envelope, you mean?” Lang asked.

“In a way it is a clue,” Carter said. “Holmes may have been trying to tell us it was a postman who killed him by that envelope, but it meant nothing to me. I was just bluffing. I was right about the postman angle though.”

“You sure were,” Lang said.

“Phone the police while I keep Allen covered, Jim,” Carter said. “Tell them we have had a murder here and the killer is waiting for them.” He smiled grimly. “Maybe they won’t believe the story of the crime. It’s too much like fiction!”