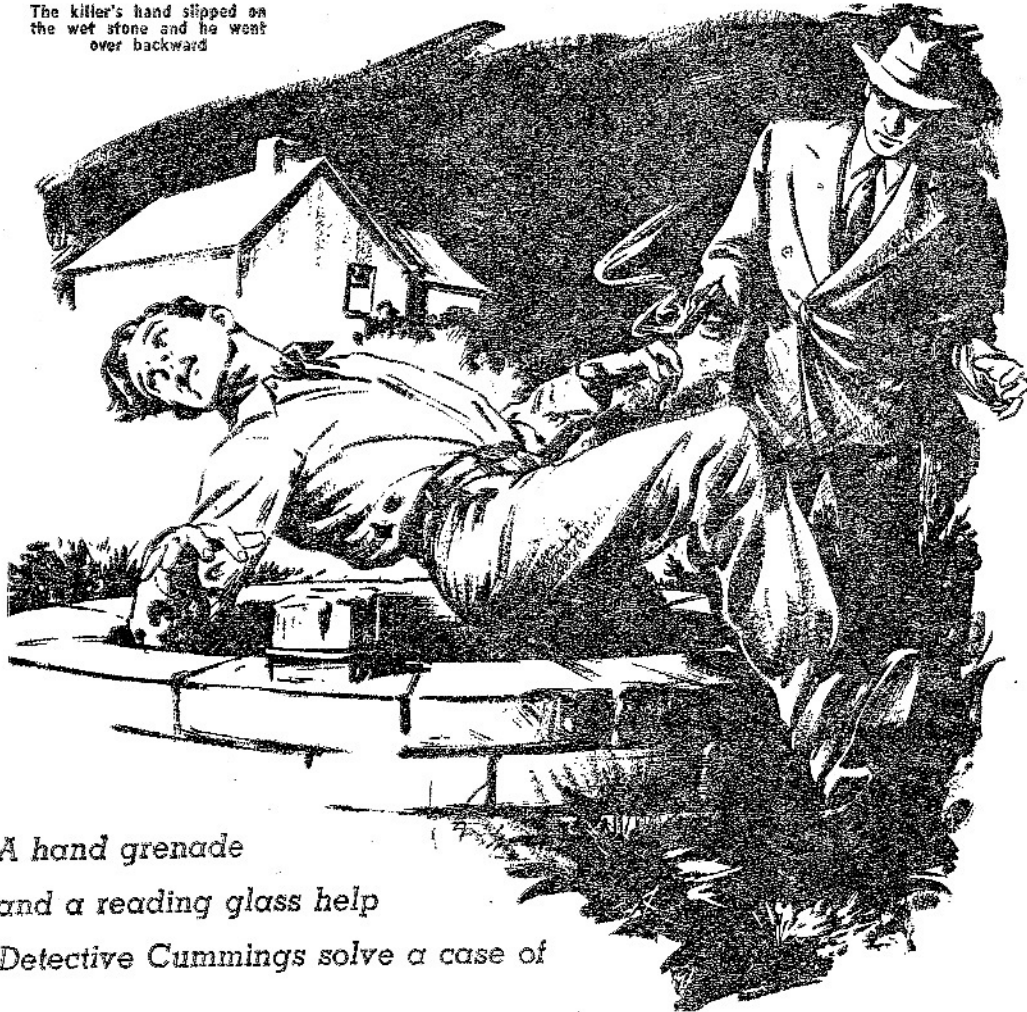


The killer's hand slipped on the wet stone and he went over backward



*A hand grenade  
and a reading glass help  
Detective Cummings solve a case of*

## **MURDER** IN FINE PRINT

by O.B. MYERS

**J**OHN CUMMINGS stirred his coffee moodily. Through the smoke-hazy air of the Alden Street Coffee Pot drifted the mingled odors of cabbage, lamb stew, and fresh cup cakes—and the man at his side kept talking about murder.

“Uncle Horace’s estate may not be worth much,” the man, Fisher Wayne, was saying, “but he had a nice, fat insurance policy. Everybody in Farboro knows that, and everybody in Farboro knows that Dan Gaylord is the only heir he’s got. There’s all the motive you could ask for—more

than enough for a low-down heel like Dan. And ever since he came back from that trip to Arizona, Dan’s been hanging around his uncle’s place all the time. I’ve even seen him there mornings, on my first swing around the North Side. John, everybody thinks you ought to clap Dan Gaylord in jail before he collects that insurance and skips town for good.”

The young detective stirred uneasily on his stool. It was all very well for everybody in town to think whatever they pleased; it cost nothing to think. And it

was easy enough for Fisher Wayne to talk. He didn't have to back up his talk with action.

The broad-shouldered young fellow at his side was in the simple gray uniform of a postman, but it wasn't so long since he had been wearing a different sort of a uniform in Normandy, where he had seen considerable violent action. Fisher still thought in the blunt, direct channels of the soldier. If an infantry recon patrol found itself faced with a barn in which the leader suspected the enemy might be hiding, he tossed a grenade through the door, waited for the smoke to clear, then looked to see if he was right.

Such forthright methods, in civilian life, were not permissible even to an officer of the law. Before you tossed a grenade, or its equivalent, you had to do more than suspect; you had to know. Before you so much as stepped through a citizen's door to make an arrest, you had to have definite, concrete proof that would stand up in court. An opinion, even though it coincided with the opinions of five thousand of your fellow citizens, wasn't enough.

"Look, Fisher," Cummings said, patiently. "Everybody in Farboro knows that Uncle Horace was a lazy old rascal who slept late every morning. We also know that he was in the habit of smoking cigarettes in bed. When his shack is discovered on fire at seven-thirty a.m., with the flames evidently starting in the bedroom, isn't it natural to assume—"

"Sure, sure," interrupted Fisher Wayne sarcastically. "That's just what Dan figured, of course. He figured it would be a natural conclusion for anybody to jump to; that Uncle Horace had dozed off and dropped a lighted butt in the blankets. Well, everybody isn't *that* dumb." Meaning by everybody, himself, of course.

Cummings shook his head slowly. "If that fire was deliberately set, someone had to get in there to set it. I don't know how light a sleeper Uncle Horace was, but at that time of day, having just finished a night's sleep, he'd wake up prettily easily. Especially if an intruder came right into his bedroom, where it was started. And if he'd waked up, he'd have got out. He was smothered by smoke and fumes, you know, without ever getting out of bed."

THE postman dug his fork into a wedge of pie, and shrugged.

"Don't ask me how Dan did it," he grumbled. "I'd swear he did it. It's your job to figure out how."

"We've checked on Dan Gaylord," said Cummings. "He's been living in a furnished room at Mrs. Pearson's here in town. It's a full mile and a half from Uncle Horace's cottage. Mrs. Pearson saw him this morning at a few minutes after seven when he came down to the kitchen to get some hot water for shaving. She saw him again right around seven-thirty, when he left the house. And he was shaved the second time she saw him. It would have been physically impossible for Dan to go out to the cottage, set the fire at the time it must have been set, get back, and shave, in less than half an hour. He has no car, you know. Mrs. Pearson noticed his presence particularly, she said, because he's been in the habit of leaving earlier."

"Yes—to go out and toady his Uncle Horace," sneered Wayne. "Oh, he's been just as nice as pie to the old man lately. Cut the grass for him, mended the broken windows, cooked his meals and washed his dishes. I guess he was afraid the old boy might change the beneficiary on that insurance policy, or just quit paying the premiums. Dan even brought him presents—a bakelite cigarette holder that

must have cost all of forty-nine cents, and a reading glass.”

“A reading glass?” murmured Cummings. “Uncle Horace never wore spectacles. I thought his eyes were unusually good.”

“I guess they were, but he said the magnifying glass came in handy for reading fine print. He showed it to me a couple of days ago. It was as big around as that ash-tray, set in a metal rim with a straight handle of black wood, carved. The handle was twisted a little, at an angle. Looked like an antique.”

“Fine print?” mused Cummings. “Now I wonder what fine print Uncle Horace found it necessary to read.”

“Search me.” Wayne shrugged. “Insurance policies, maybe. They have a lot of fine print on them, don’t they? Dan told him it was a souvenir he’d brought back from Germany, though how he could have picked it up I can’t imagine. I happen to know that Dan was with a quartermaster truck company in the Eighth Air Force in England, and never set foot on the continent, much less in Germany. He was a bad egg in the Army. When they transferred him to the infantry in Forty-five he went A.W.O.L. for six months, and ended up in that prison camp in England where after the war they had a lot of gripes about mistreatment, and court-martialed some of officers. They should’ve beat their brains out, the malingering slackers!”

Like every G. I. who faced gunfire, Fisher was contemptuous of those who had dodged it.

Cummings finished his coffee and pushed away the cup. His eyes were half closed.

“A reading-glass,” he muttered thoughtfully. “And Dan gave it to him, eh? You sure Uncle Horace had it there only a day or two ago?”

“That’s right,” Fisher Wayne said. “I saw it.”

Cummings nodded, and slid backward off the stool.

“Well, Fisher, I’ll be seeing you. And thanks. Maybe you don’t exactly know it, but you’ve given me an idea.”

Leaving the Coffee Pot, he ambled up Alden Street to the first corner and climbed into the police coupe that was parked at the curb. He drove around the block, then headed out toward the north side of town at a leisurely pace.

The old Gaylord bungalow stood on a small plot up a side road. It wasn’t more than a hundred yards from the nearest house, but there was a grove of trees in between, so that the smoke pouring from the windows early that morning had not been noticed until after the flames had gained considerable headway.

Even so, the exterior of the building had suffered little damage outside of smashed windows and scorched paint. The roofing, of asbestos shingles, was unhurt, and the walls stood firm.

Inside, however, it was another story. There were only three rooms. Two of them had been ruined by fire, the third by water. What little furniture Uncle Horace had owned was now charred sticks and water-soaked padding. A bureau had toppled over, spilling its drawers. Clothing was tattered and trampled by muddy feet. The front door, splintered by an axe, hung drunkenly on its hinges.

**F**IREMEN had done a good job of preserving the shell of the structure after they arrived, but they had not arrived soon enough to save Uncle Horace. The frame of the old four-poster bed was more than half consumed. To the bare wires of the spring clung the few ragged fragments that were all that was left of the bedding.

From that smoking mare's nest they had lifted the old man's corpse.

John Cummings had come out that morning, shortly after the first alarm, and had taken a quick look around. Now, with the fire-fighters gone and the onlookers drifted away, he made a closer search. He combed through the debris on the floor, pulled open drawers, turned over books and soggy papers that lay in the open maw of the old-fashioned roll-top desk in the living room.

He poked around the window sills and shelves among all the junk accumulated by a man living alone—jelly glasses holding thumb tacks, linseed oil, dried bulbs; undarned socks, newspaper clippings, broken cuff links. An endless miscellany of articles, useful and otherwise. But no reading glass.

He finished with the bedroom and living room, and went into the kitchen. Here there was less disorder, but more places to look. The cupboards were cluttered with pots and utensils that had apparently been neither used nor washed for twenty years. It took the detective nearly half an hour to cover it thoroughly.

He moved on to the shed that leaned wearily against the rear wall. Here, littered about the rotting floor or suspended from pegs in the beams, Uncle Horace had kept his tools, and since he had been accustomed to do odd jobs about town, it was an odd assortment of implements. Hammers, saws, chisels, a lawn mower and a scythe, broken rakes, coiled garden hose in assorted lengths, rusty sickles, pipe fittings and washers. Cummings covered himself with dust and grime, poking through it.

He came back into the house wearing a puzzled frown. For some time he stood in the desolate bedroom, trying to visualize the room as it had been before the tragedy. Two windows on the south side, one on

the east. A chair here, the bureau there, the bed cater-cornered against the end wall.

Scrape marks on the floor showed where it had been dragged a couple of feet from its original position. He pulled a tape measure from his pocket and stretched it from the sill of the end window to the approximate position of the bed, then peered thoughtfully out of the window.

It was strange about that reading glass. It had been here a day or two ago, for Fisher Wayne had seen it in the old man's hand. Yet it was not here now. Then it had been removed. But how? And why?

He dismissed the idea of petty thievery by firemen or spectators. It was not an article of sufficient value for that. The theory that was forming in his mind began to take definite shape.

He drove back into town, and parked in front of the Guernsey block on the main street. In the second floor rear he found a door on which was lettered, "Haven Jones, Attorney-at-Law," and below it in smaller letters, "Real Estate, Insurance, Brokerage." He walked into an anteroom that was empty, but was immediately greeted from beyond the door that opened into the inner office.

"Why, it's John Cummings! Come in. What's on your mind?"

Haven Jones was in his late forties, with a long, spare frame, thinning hair, and angular, bony hands. He had a sharp nose, slightly hooked, a small, cautious mouth, and keen, piercing eyes that betrayed nothing of his motives or intent.

Among other contacts, Cummings knew him as defense attorney in a number of minor criminal actions. He remembered him as a sharp antagonist who knew his legal technicalities perfectly and used them to the hilt.

**D**ETECTIVE CUMMINGS dropped into a straight-backed chair, pushed

back his hat.

"It's about Uncle Horace Gaylord," he said.

"Oh, yes. A shocking way to die, isn't it? Though I understand he was unconscious, never waked up."

"That's what we believe, yes. But I wonder if you know something about his financial affairs?"

The lawyer's eyes veiled. "I was his attorney, yes. I have his will there in the safe. I represent the insurance company which holds the policy on his life, and I will probably handle the estate. Of course, as a lawyer, I am bound to treat my clients' affairs with a certain amount of confidence, and unless your inquiry is in an official capacity—" He paused deliberately.

John Cummings nodded. "It's official," he said.

"Uncle Horace owned his home," the attorney went on rapidly then, "but it was mortgaged to the hilt. Even after recovering fire insurance, his equity in the property won't amount to much. His personal belongings will hardly bring enough to pay for the funeral. The only item of any consequence in the estate will be his life insurance. It's a twenty-five-thousand-dollar policy, with double indemnity for accidental death, taken out in Nineteen-fifteen when his wife was still alive.

"When he came home from World War One with gassed lungs and found her dead, he changed the beneficiary to his nephew, Dan Gaylord, who was then an infant. Since that time Uncle Horace has lived on his pension, and what he could make doing odd jobs, but he's always managed to keep up with the premiums on that policy. That also is in my safe. Would you like to see it?"

"No, that's all right, Mr. Jones," said Cummings. "That story's about the way

the rumors have it, but I wanted to be sure." He pondered while lighting a cigarette. "Double for accidental death, eh? That means that Dan will get fifty thousand dollars, doesn't it?"

"That's right. He'll have to get off the rolls of the Fifty-Two-Twenty club, at least." The lawyer spoke sarcastically.

Cummings nodded. "You say that you represent the insurance company," he said, after a moment. "That means that the payment to Dan will come through you?"

"Yes. They'll probably send me the check to hand to him. In fact, Dan phoned me an hour ago. He's coming in to see me at four o'clock about it."

John Cummings sniffed faintly. "Didn't lose much time, did he? But tell me, Mr. Jones. How do they determine whether death was accidental or not?"

"Well, the local representative—in this case myself—sends in the claim, along with a copy of the death certificate and other pertinent information, and makes a statement of recommendation. The company checks, and if there's any doubt about the circumstances they may send an independent investigator. Naturally they're not eager to pay double unless it's truly an accident." He hesitated. "In this case there isn't much question, is there?"

Cummings did not reply for a moment. Then he spoke with slow deliberation.

"It's been our assumption that Uncle Horace dozed off with a lighted cigarette in his hand, which then set fire to the bedding. It is known that he constantly smoked in bed. Now I don't know how your company defines an accident, but it seems to me they might make out a strong case for culpable negligence. Smoking cigarettes in bed is obviously dangerous; anyone knows that. A man who did it infrequently might be excused, but a man who does it habitually simply invites disaster, and it seems to me that the

resulting fire hardly comes under the heading of an accident.”

The lawyer looked keenly interested, but shook his head.

“You’ve got a fine technical point there, John, but I doubt if it would stand up in court. If not an accident, then it must be deliberate, and no one in his right mind would choose that method of committing suicide. Why, what are you driving at?”

Cummings took a deep drag on his cigarette. “Mr. Jones, you asked me when I first came in if my visit was official, and I said it was. That was true—up to now. But from now on, it’s not. I’m no longer discussing facts. I’m going to air theories, and perhaps ask for your cooperation. By the way, do you have a reading glass?”

The lawyer looked puzzled. “Why, yes. I never use it myself, but some of these legal documents have a lot of fine print, and my clients are apt to be elderly.” He pulled open a drawer of the desk.

THE detective took the glass from his hand. It had a lens about four inches in diameter, a plain nickel rim, and a straight handle of the same metal chased in a simple design. Cummings set it on edge on the desk top, where it balanced in a vertical position on the flat rim.

Then he rose, went to the wastebasket, and tore a generous corner from a castoff newspaper. Moving across the room to where the early afternoon sun steamed in through the window, he dropped the fragment of paper on the floor and squatted next to it. Holding the glass in one hand, perpendicular to the rays, he moved it back and forth until it focused where he wanted it.

Like almost everyone else, he had always known that a convex lens focused the sun’s rays to a point which was hot. However, he had never actually tried the simple operation, and he was astonished at

the speed of the reaction. Within five seconds a wisp of smoke arose, and within ten seconds the paper was charred through and glowing around the edges of a hole.

“Look out!” snapped the lawyer, half rising.

John ground the paper under his heel and stood up. “Would you call that an accident, Mr. Jones?”

“Well—not exactly. But what’s the connection?”

“Uncle Horace had a reading glass in that house, which his nephew Dan had given him,” Cummings said, with flat emphasis. He told briefly what he had learned from Fisher Wayne. “One of the windows in the old man’s bedroom faced east. The bed, in its normal position, stood within a few inches of that window sill. If that glass had been balanced on the edge of the sill, like this, there would come a certain time as the sun rose when its rays would focus on the blanket. Maybe earlier, maybe later; the exact time is unimportant. But it would be early enough to find Uncle Horace still asleep.”

“You mean—Dan murdered him?” Haven Jones murmured.

John’s tone was almost bitter. “Everybody in town, including me and probably including you, too, suspects Dan of murder. The motive is plain, and Dan has always been an unsavory character. The problem has been to establish not who, or why, but how. Remember that when the fire broke out, Dan was nearly two miles away, and hadn’t been in Uncle Horace’s cottage since the evening before. Well, this”—he gestured toward the glass—“shows us a possibility of how.”

The lawyer nodded slowly. “Dan’s been out there a lot, both morning and evening. He could have checked all the conditions, maybe experimented when the old man wasn’t around. He’d set the glass upright on the window sill the night

before. If it was raining in the morning, or if the focal distance wasn't quite right, well, nothing happened, but there was still nothing to give him away. He had only to try again."

"Don't forget, this is all theory," Cummings pointed out. "We are only guessing. We have nothing to substantiate it. Even if we knew, even if we could prove, that the glass on the window sill had been the cause of the fire, we would still be a long way from jailing Dan Gaylord. We would have to prove, in addition, that he had placed it there himself, with the deliberate intention of murder in his mind. And with the only possible witness dead, that's just about impossible—unless we can somehow coax Dan into helping us."

The lawyer's eyes narrowed slightly. "And is this where my cooperation comes in?"

The detective nodded. "When you see Dan, play up the culpable negligence business. Tell him the company will probably refuse to class it as an accident, and hence will pay only the face value of the policy—twenty-five instead of fifty thousand. Throw a lot of technical terms at him. Dan isn't strong on the stuff that comes in fine print. Tell him that you're going to recommend negligence rather than accident, as long as the fire was caused by smoking in bed."

"With what object in view?" demanded the lawyer.

"The glass has disappeared," Cummings reminded him. "I combed every room. Dan must have taken it—his object, of course, to divert all suspicion from anything but the cigarette-in-bed theory. But when he finds out that theory is going to cost him twenty-five thousand, he may think again. He may see that he can draw attention to the glass as a possible cause without any risk to himself.

He may figure, as we do, that it will be impossible to hang anything deliberate and premeditated on him. So he may try to put it back."

"And if he does?"

CUMMINGS spread his hands. "If we can catch him in the act of returning it," he said, "I don't know how much it will prove in court, but it will certainly be an incriminating circumstance that's a lot more than we have on him right now."

Haven Jones nodded. "I'll do it, John. Mind you; I don't think the company will actually take any such position. But I'll see if I can make Dan believe that they might."

John Cummings thanked him, and left. He did not return again to the Guernsey block that afternoon, but waited until nearly eight o'clock in the evening, when he called at the lawyer's home. Jones opened the door himself. "Let's go out here on the porch, John," he said, as he glanced over his shoulder. "I've got guests in there."

He had closed the front door behind him. "I talked with Dan," he said. "I put it to him just the way you put it to me. I said I was going to recommend payment of single indemnity only, on the basis of deliberate negligence by Uncle Horace."

"What did he say to that?"

"He was considerably upset. In fact, he was angry as the devil. Said he'd protest it in court. I told him he had that right, but that I had to protect the interests of the insurance company. I ended up by telling him that I was going to recommend as my conscience saw it—unless somebody showed me proof of true accidental cause."

"What did he say then?"

"He gave me a queer, sharp look, muttered something about seeing what he

could do, and walked out.”

Cummings uttered something between a grunt and a chuckle. “Well, we’ll see what happens. I’ll keep in touch with you.”

He climbed into his coupe and drove out toward the North Side, but deliberately did not take the turn that led past Uncle Horace’s. Instead he continued along the main road for nearly a quarter of a mile, parked the car under a tree at the edge of a field, then reversed his direction on foot. He did not wish the car to betray his presence.

It was dark as he neared the house, but he kept in the shadows of the trees and refrained from using his flashlight until he was sure that there was not one there ahead of him. Then he crossed the narrow lawn toward the rear, past the circular stone coping that marked the old well, and entered the back door.

Blackness greeted him; blackness that seemed to be intensified, rendered almost solid, by the overlay of soot and grime. He used his flash for only a minute, just long enough to pick his way into the living room, find a straight chair that would hold his weight, and placed it where he wanted it in the bedroom. Then he returned the lamp to his pocket and sat down to wait.

The smell of charred wood, smoke, and soggy ashes was so strong it almost gagged him. He longed for a cigarette, but dared not risk it. The glow would be a beacon of warning in that house of death, to betray him to a visitor. The windows were pale oblongs in the gloom, discernible only after his eyes had accustomed themselves to the complete absence of light.

The silence was like thick cotton wool in his ears, broken only by the distant hum of a car on the main road or by an occasional scratch or scamper under the floor. Rats, driven out by fire and water,

were finding their cautious way back.

After about an hour the moon rose. Its deceptive, silky radiance illuminated the open yard, but intensified the shadows to inky pools, painting a slowly shifting chiaroscuro as it climbed into the sky. It gave a breath-taking beauty to a drab and sinister scene, a contradiction that brought a skeptical grunt from deep in the detective’s throat. That soft effulgence was meant for lovers, not for murderers—but at least it helped his vigil.

He had placed his chair so that he could look out of either window. Through the end one he could see at an angle across the yard toward the road, and through the other he had a broad view of the back yard, the orchard beyond, and just the corner of the shed that stood next to the back door.

To this shed he devoted most of his attention. He felt that his visitor, if he had one, would approach by a circuitous route rather than openly, and Cummings did not want to be taken by surprise.

THE hours crept with leaden slowness. For a while he was desperate with the desire to sleep. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and slapped his face to keep from nodding off. Toward midnight the drowsiness passed, and he was fully alert again, though bored, and stiff with chill.

For the fiftieth time he glanced at his wrist-watch. The hands said five minutes of two. He rose and stretched, tensing and relaxing the muscles of his arms and trunk as far as he could without shifting his feet. He resumed his seat without making a sound, and almost at once caught a flicker of movement far back in the orchard.

He tensed, leaning forward to peer through the back window. Yes, a shapeless blotch was moving from one pool of shadow to another. It was nearing the

house, and when it emerged from the orchard into the open, he saw that it was a man wearing a dark gray shirt and slacks and, oddly, sneakers so white that they must have been brand new. A soft hat was pulled low enough to keep the moon's rays off the upper part of the face, but the police officer recognized the wide shoulders and swaggering gait. It was Dan Gaylord.

John Cummings felt a peculiar sensation in the small of his back, as if his hackles were rising. It was not fear, but not quite hatred; just the instinctive reaction of concentrated alertness of a man of law and order who feels himself in the presence of a beast of the jungle. A man faced by a murderer.

The fingers of his left hand closed on the flashlight, and his right located the butt of his police positive. He shifted his weight forward soundlessly, ready for a move in any direction.

Dan Gaylord walked cautiously but steadily toward the house until he disappeared from the detective's vision. Young Gaylord was at the back door. Cummings could hear when he could no longer see. But the door did not open; there were no footsteps on the kitchen floor.

Puzzled, Cummings strained his ears. He heard sounds; vague, indefinable sounds; not inside the house but near. It dawned on him that Gaylord was in the shed, doing something. But what? He could not mean to leave the glass in the shed. That would hardly bear out a hypothesis that it had started a fire in the bedroom. Minutes passed. What the devil could he be doing?

Then suddenly Dan Gaylord reappeared out in the moonlight. He was walking leisurely, neither toward the house nor away from it, but across the back yard. Under one arm he held a short-

handled rake, and over his shoulder was part of a coil of rope, the rest of which trailed out behind him. His hands were engaged in tying knots in the rope a couple of feet apart. When he came to a halt by the well, John Cummings began to guess his purpose.

Of this, the only visible part was the circular wall roughly four feet in diameter which extended a couple of feet above the surface of the ground. It had once been surmounted by a truss of beams, to support a pulley, and a shingle roof, but the roof had long since fallen in decay and the posts had been sawed off short, though their stub ends were firmly cemented in the stonework.

Gaylord looped the rope about one of the posts and knotted it in place with great care. He dropped the knotted length down inside the well, and leaned over the coping with a flashlight to peer after it. Then, after hooking the rake through a belt loop, he swung his legs over the coping, seized the rope in both hands, and slowly lowered himself out of sight into the black hole.

In the bedroom, Cummings ground his teeth in silent satisfaction. Perhaps this was not enough to convict in court, rules of evidence being what they were, but it was enough to convince him. He rose deliberately and being careful to make no noise, moved through the living room and the kitchen and out the back door. Crossing the shabby grass, he took up a position about ten feet to one side of the well. There, arms akimbo in the full moonlight, he waited, his features set in a grim and uncompromising mask.

He had to wait quite a long time. At the bottom of the well Gaylord was apparently having some difficulty. Cummings could see the visible foot or so of rope strain at the post, slack off, then strain again. He could hear grunts, and splashing, and the click of metal against

stone. An occasional louder and bigger splash would be followed by a bitter and heartfelt curse, and heavy panting.

**A**T LAST Dan Gaylord began the ascent. Cummings knew, because there were no more splashings, and because the rope was under constant tension. The post creaked faintly under the strain. The officer waited, his own tension thickening.

Gaylord's dark-haired pate appeared, streaming water. His shoulders came up level with the coping, paused there. He had evidently found the rake useless, and had had to go under water himself to search with his fingers. He was dripping wet, and smeared with mud and slime, and clinging wisps of submarine weeds. He brought up to the open air with him a stench of rotten, long-buried ooze.

One hand left the rope to grip the edge of the coping. Holding himself so, he used the other hand to take an object from his shirt pocket. With exaggerated care he laid it on the smooth stone, where it clinked faintly. It was a reading glass with a flat metal rim and a straight black handle. His hand started back—and then it he raised his head and saw John Cummings standing there.

The breath hissed softly between his teeth.

"You killed him!" said Cummings quietly. His calm was ominous.

"No!" panted Gaylord, without moving. "No!"

"You're a murderer, Dan Gaylord, and I can prove it."

This statement may have been a slight exaggeration, but the time for quibbling would come later. The detective made it a blunt impeachment.

Under the muck Gaylord's face was white, but he tried to bluster. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You gave Uncle Horace that glass, just to get it in the house. You calculated carefully the position of the bed, and the window sill. You got up early mornings to come out here to observe the slant of the rising sun and the angle necessary for focus. Then last night you placed it exactly where it belonged, and this morning, when the sun came up, your Uncle Horace died. You killed him!"

"You're crazy!" protested Dan Gaylord, but there was a note of desperation in his voice. "The reading glass may have been there, and started the fire, but you can't prove I put it there."

"Who else but a murderer," accused Cummings relentlessly, "would have thought it necessary to pick up the glass in the confusion after the fire and drop it down the well? And having done that, who else in the world but you, having learned from Haven Jones that twenty-five thousand dollars hinged on proof of accidental cause, would have known where to look to recover it? You've put the noose about your own neck, Dan Gaylord—and I hope they pull it tight!"

Gaylord's right hand had dropped out of sight. "You double-crossin'—" he said, through clenched teeth.

Cummings had done considerable talking and a great deal of waiting, letting his case develop itself. Now action started, and it was all compressed into a few seconds.

Dan Gaylord's hand jerked up from his pants pocket holding a gun. He leveled it at the police officer and squeezed the trigger. It gave forth a sodden click. He had forgotten that he had been under water for a considerable period, that the water, thick with ooze and slime, had clogged his weapon.

At the sight of that gun Cummings went for his own. He was quick, but still only the misfire saved him. The police

pistol was in his fingers as Gaylord drew back his arm and hurled his own useless weapon at the detective's head. John Cummings fired.

Seeing his man disarmed and helpless, the police officer did not shoot to kill. Purposely he aimed to send a bullet whizzing as close to that head as possible without hitting it. His object was to intimidate, to enforce obedience to his orders, not to maim. But the result horrified him.

Dan Gaylord's effort of hurling his own gun, coupled with the instinctive reaction to duck, tore loose his grip on the well coping. His left hand slipped on the wet stone, grabbed desperately at the air. He went over backward, clutching frantically, his features distorted by terror. In an instant he vanished below the edge of the coping.

FROM the black depths of the well came a terrible, strangling scream. The circular column of stone seemed to reverberate, and to funnel it upward, so that it rose straight to heaven like the last despairing cry of a lost soul begging for mercy. Then it was abruptly extinguished in a muffled splash, and all was silence.

John Cummings worked as fast as he could, but it was no quick matter to lower

himself thirty feet into the weed-grown well, even with the rope to help. And after he was at the bottom, in four or five feet of roiled water crimsoned by blood, it was an almost superhuman task to get a grip on Gaylord's body and work it up to the surface again, alone and unaided.

When finally he had stretched it on the grass, and caught his own breath, he found that his haste had been unnecessary. The back of Gaylord's skull had been crushed in like an eggshell, where it had struck a protruding stone just above the surface of the water. He had died before ever settling into the ooze.

Cummings sat down on the well coping, again to wait. Without qualms he considered the aspect of the case as it now stood. Among all the numerous documents and reports to be filed before it was closed, there would be a great deal of fine print, no doubt. But at least he reflected, he had a reading glass. It lay there next to his hand, gleaming coldly in the moonlight. As odd an instrument of murder as he had ever encountered.

From the direction of town he heard the faint moan of the siren on a prowler car, searching for the source of that shot. With a feeling of deep satisfaction he lighted a cigarette.