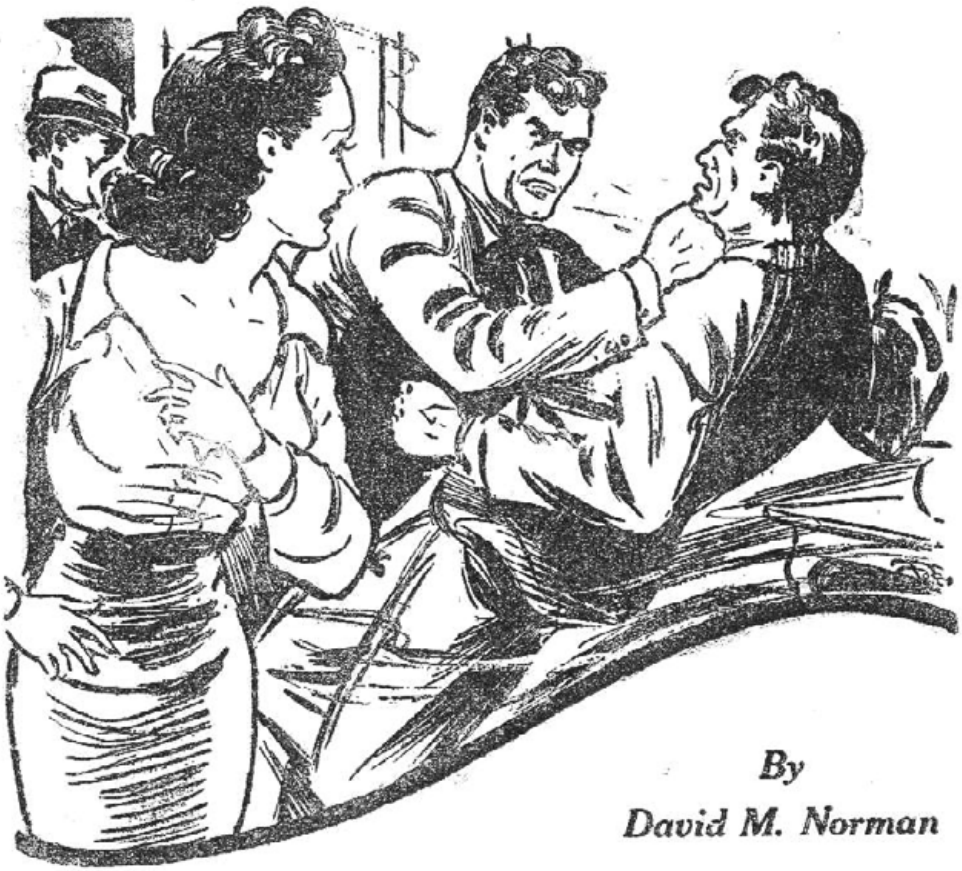
10-Story Detective, January, 1943

Detective Lee Shannon never had much trouble in dealing with killers he could see. But he had to learn a new kind of sleuthing when he locked horns with . . .

The Phantom Avenger



By
David M. Norman

LEE SHANNON hoofed it from the bus line five blocks away. Busses were not allowed to go through this extremely exclusive section and Shannon wondered why, what with the rationing and lack of rubber.

He was of average height and build, average enough to pretend to be almost any type of man from hod carrier to banker. That was what helped make him an ace operative for the Apex Detective Agency.

Shannon was trying to figure out just what kind of a case he was going into this time. Hugh Thatcher was reputed wealthy, a recluse for years and hard-headed enough to know whether he wanted a private detective or not. But his specifications had been strange. He gave the exact height and weight of the operative whom he wanted sent to his home at once.

Shannon stopped beneath a street light, pulled a thin envelope from his pocket and read once more the little dope on Hugh Thatcher that the agency had assembled. He was fifty-seven and single. He had an adopted son, but nothing was known about him. Four years ago his business had collapsed, investors had been properly

buncoed out of their money and a great scandal had arisen.

Thatcher tried to take the easiest way out—by a bullet through the head. Even that didn't work because he recovered. His partner's name had been David Wiley, but there was nothing in the file about him.

Shannon stuffed the papers back into his pocket and walked briskly to the big white gate leading to Thatcher's large, imposing house. There wasn't a 1ight in any window. Shannon scowled, but went up on the porch and punched the doorbell.

He heard it ringing inside, but still no lights were turned on. He rang again and gradually a premonition started to creep over him. Just about the time he decided to phone the regular cops, he heard faltering footsteps and the thump of a rubber-tipped cane. A burglar chain clinked, a lock turned and the door opened.

Shannon peered through the darkness, trying to see just who this was.

"Are you the detective?" the man asked in a nervous voice.

"Yes, sir. My name is Shannon from the Apex Agency. I didn't think anybody was at home so—"

"Come inside, Mr. Shannon. Quickly. I'm risking my life standing here with the door open. Please hurry."

Shannon didn't know where he was when the door closed because the darkness inside was even more intense.

The man said, "I am Hugh Thatcher. I sent for you. Please stand just as you are for a moment."

THATCHER reached out, gripped Shannon's shoulder and then turned around. He backed up until he stood back to back against the detective. Shannon felt Thatcher's hand touch the top of his head and heard a grunt of satisfaction. Then Thatcher spread his arms wide and slowly brought them together, as if he were measuring the width of Shannon's body.

"Good," Thatcher said. "Very good. You are exactly my size. Exactly."

Shannon's patience was going fast. "Look, Mr. Thatcher, you're paying good money for me, but I think I'm entitled to know what the blazes this is about. Why not turn on some lights?"

"No lights," Thatcher said quickly. "Here—take my arm. I'll lead you to the living room. No lights now. I must trust you not to turn them on."

"Trust me?" Shannon gaped.

"I'm blind, Mr. Shannon. I've been blind ever since I tried to kill myself four years ago, but that isn't generally known. I couldn't stand sympathy. I wanted a man my weight and height because I have a dangerous mission for him. I'll pay well—even a substantial bonus for yourself."

"But what's my size got to do with it?"

"Someone is going to try and kill me tonight. I want a man to take my place and catch the would-be murderer."

Shannon broke out in a cold sweat. He was to take the place of the victim! That left this job squarely on his shoulders. There could be no failure—not for him. Failure meant death.

Shannon sat down in an overstuffed chair. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness now. He made out Thatcher's form moving toward another chair directly opposite and no more than three feet away.

"I shall enlighten you," Thatcher said. "I received a letter—anonymous, of course—indicating that sometime tonight I would be killed."

"Well, then, name the men who might have a motive for killing you," Shannon suggested. "We might round them up before they even get started."

Thatcher laughed bitterly. "It would take an army corps to do it, Shannon. Four years ago I was in business. My partner was David Wiley. We failed. Wiley saw it

coming and tried to stem the tide by using the securities of our clients. Even that couldn't prevent the crash. Those clients blamed me for their losses. Me—not Wiley. Oh, no. He brazened it out while I felt so badly I put a bullet through my head. It only blinded me. All those clients have a motive. Don't you see that all we can do is wait for the killer to turn up?"

"I guess you're right." Shannon looked around the darkness apprehensively. "What about Wiley? And didn't you have a son?"

"An adopted son. Sensitive lad. When I failed, he left me. I'm hoping to get him back soon. His name is Alan—Alan Thatcher. I want to make up for the heartache I caused him. I have some money. I didn't lose everything, you see."

"What of Wiley?" Shannon asked.

"Him!" Thatcher said it as if he were speaking of Hitler. "Wiley was responsible for the crash. He was the crook, but smooth enough to blame it all on me. Yet I doubt Wiley would have the nerve to murder a mouse. I have a niece too—she rarely comes to see me. Her name is Joan Denton. She operates a beauty parlor and is too proud to ask for my help."

Shannon leaned back. "Thanks for the dope. If anything should happen, those people might help me. Mind if I smoke? I'll be quick with the match and palm the cigarette."

"Go ahead," Thatcher said. "In fact, I think I'll light my pipe. It's somewhere around here."

A PACK of matches fell to the floor. Shannon got up, struck one of his own matches and held it to Thatcher's pipe. In the flare he saw a pasty-faced man with very white hair and dark-colored glasses.

Thatcher puffed, sighed and relaxed. Shannon lit his cigarette, fanned out the match and returned to his chair.

"This letter threatening your life," he said. "Who else knows about it?"

"No one," Thatcher answered promptly. "I have no friends I'd trust. I live alone here, except for a woman who comes in daytimes to clean up and prepare my food. Oh, yes—reach over on a table to your left. You will find dark glasses similar to those I am wearing and also a cane. With those you can pass as myself in the darkness. It is perfectly dark, I hope."

"Plenty," Shannon grunted. "I'm in charge now, I suppose. Have to be, Mr. Thatcher, if I'm going to protect your life. We'll sit here, just as we are. I've a gun on my lap so don't be afraid. If a killer comes and attacks me, I'll take care of myself. If he tackles you, I'll smear him."

"Very well," Thatcher said. "I'm glad you suggested that. I don't care much about being alone, even if you are taking my place. Also, a blind man hears exceptionally well. If anyone approaches, I may be able to tell you."

"Good," Shannon grunted. "We'll keep quiet now. Just speak softly if you hear anything."

Thatcher's pipe glowed dully and the light from the bowl was reflected in those dark glasses he wore until he seemed to be a red-eyed ghost of some kind. An utter silence descended over the house and Shannon grew more and more worried. This was no way to capture a killer—merely waiting until he arrived and struck. The chances were fifty-fifty that Shannon would be the victim. Thoughts of this made him douse his cigarette quickly.

Suddenly Thatcher leaned forward and his voice was barely audible. He had a peculiar voice anyway. It was more of a whisper than out-and-out speech.

"Shannon—someone prowling out front. I heard a bush brushed against."

"Stay just as you are," Shannon arose,

holding his gun tightly. “I’ll have a look. Warn me if you hear the sound again.”

Shannon tiptoed to the front door, moving very carefully so he wouldn’t bump against furniture. He removed the burglar chain quietly, turned the bolt and opened the door a crack. He listened for a moment, heard nothing and then risked going out on the porch. He spent two minutes there, peering around the sides of the house. Thatcher must have been mistaken. Nothing moved.

Shannon went back to the living room. Thatcher was still seated in the chair. Shannon could see him plainly enough. A small amount of light drifted through a window directly across the room.

“Keep listening,” he said. “I saw no one, but your ears are better than my eyes.”

“Yes—I know,” Thatcher whispered. “The sound traveled to the back of the house, Shannon. I’m pretty sure I heard someone near the rear window. Have a look, please. This killer might break a window and start shooting.”

“I wish he would,” Shannon said. “That’s better than waiting here in the darkness. Keep your ears open, Thatcher. I’m going to the rear window.”

THIS time Shannon used the cane to feel his way along. The rear window curtain was drawn. He raised it a notch and peeked out. If six giants had been standing four feet from the window, he couldn’t have seen them in the gloom.

“Can’t see a thing,” Shannon whispered. “We’d better just wait.”

Shannon felt for the latch on the window, found it secured and then remembered that he hadn’t locked the front door. He used the cane again, moving it slowly ahead of him as he walked. Twice it saved him from painful collisions with furniture.

The door was just as he’d left it. He turned the bolt, inserted the burglar chain and returned to the living room where he sat down again. Thatcher had nothing to say. Shannon longed for another cigarette, but he was becoming more and more certain that this was not an act. That Thatcher’s fear was genuine and based on something substantial.

“That anonymous letter,” Shannon said. “I want to see it later on, Mr. Thatcher. Sometimes those letters present more clues than a layman might think.”

There was no reply.

“I said,” Shannon repeated, “I’d like to see the threatening letter—”

Only silence answered him and Shannon felt his skin begin to prickle. He arose quickly, moved over beside Thatcher and bent down. He touched the man and felt him sag. Shannon gave a cry of fear and bolted toward the entrance to this room. He located a light switch and flooded the room with light. Turning, he stared at Thatcher. Stared long and in utter disbelief of what his own eyes saw.

Thatcher was slumped half out of the chair. His dark glasses hung from one ear. Eyes that had been blind in life were now blind in death. There were livid blue marks around the man’s throat.

Shannon rushed over beside him, picked up a limp hand and felt for a pulse. There was none. Thatcher had died, just as that anonymous letter had threatened. But how had the killer struck? Thatcher had been alive two minutes before and it takes three or four minutes to throttle a man. Besides Thatcher would have raised some rumpus. The strongest attacker couldn’t have prevented that.

Shannon held the cane in one hand, his gun in the other, and searched that house from attic to cellar. Every window was closed and locked. Every door bolted from inside. A murderer couldn’t possibly have

escaped—and yet, where was he?

Shannon returned to where the corpse sat and placed his hand against the dead man's forehead. The body was warm. As he removed the hand, Shannon saw streaks of black on the flesh. He looked at his hand. The fingers were stained with some kind of ink.

There was more of it on the floor, tiny little crosses that looked as if they'd been stamped there. Shannon repressed an urge to call the police and get out of this house before death struck again. Instead, he sat down slowly and tried to figure it out.

A man had been choked to death three feet away from him. He was some detective all right. The murderer had made his escape in a matter of seconds and certainly not through any doors or windows.

Sweat stood out on Shannon's forehead like sequins. He was in more trouble than he thought. The cops wouldn't swallow this weird story. They'd say Shannon did it. Why, they wouldn't know, but they'd promise to find out. The cops had no particular love for him anyway. He'd solved more than one case right over their heads.

SHANNON arose and paced the floor, still swinging the cane. He placed the rubber tip of it against the wall and leaned heavily on it. When he turned away, one of those tiny crosses appeared on the wall. Shannon examined the rubber tip of the cane. It had been carved into, deeply too, and wadded with something soaked in ink.

He went over to the dead man and picked up the cane that still rested between his legs. That cane had been similarly treated. In the hallway was a rack with more canes. Shannon looked at these and swore softly. It was just one mystery upon another. Every cane had been similarly dealt with. What did it mean? A blind man wouldn't have tried to turn the rubber tips of his canes into ink-soaked rubber stamps.

Shannon stopped in front of a series of bookcases. He stared at the volumes. Everyone dealt with the supernatural. Thatcher, then, had been a student of the eerie. Perhaps this had something to do with the way he died.

And yet, Shannon felt, there was something wrong with this setup. Naturally, Thatcher couldn't have read these books, being blind, so someone must have attended to him in this particular angle. Shannon's brain spun madly as he tried to figure it out. The manner in which Thatcher had died—the mystery of the cane tips—the books on the supernatural. What was a blind man doing with a library in which many of the books were recent, printed after he'd become blind?

Shannon smoked half a dozen cigarettes. Not once did he think again of calling the police. If he wanted to avoid trouble, he had to clear up this case and then—and only then—notify the cops.

He studied the tip of his cane again. Those marks had some definite connection with the murder. There was no question about that. Thatcher would be bound to use a cane wherever he went. If the cane was arranged so it left certain marks, a trail would be formed.

A trail! That was it! Shannon jumped up and started a fresh search of the house. This one was done in an entirely different manner. If there was a cross-marked trail, it must have been removed and that meant certain portions of the floor would be cleaner than others. It takes more than a dry cloth to remove ink stains.

Half an hour later Shannon quietly left the house, locked up and walked briskly to the nearest neighborhood business section. There he entered a drug store, made a purchase and returned to the house. He let

himself in and spent another few minutes being very busy.

Finally, he entered the study adjoining the living room where Thatcher still sat in death. Shannon seated himself behind a desk and checked through a phone book. He called Alan Thatcher first. The dead man's adopted son lived in a hotel. A desk clerk informed Shannon that Alan Thatcher hadn't left his room all evening so far as he knew.

Shannon then talked to Alan and explained what had happened. Alan promised not to call the police and to come over himself, at once. Then Shannon found Joan Denton's name in the book and called her. She gave a startled gasp of genuine sorrow and astonishment at the news.

David Wiley's servant answered Shannon's next and last call. He reported that Wiley was not at home, then changed his mind suddenly and stated that Wiley was just coming in.

Wiley listened to Shannon's statement.

"So the old fool finally got it, eh? I thought this might happen. I'll be over immediately."

ALAN arrived first and turned out to be a slim, thin-faced young man with a receding chin and watery blue eyes. He took one look at his foster father and almost collapsed.

David Wiley was just as Shannon expected him to be. Big, smooth-tongued and utterly without emotion. He bent over the corpse and studied it intently. Joan Denton, an attractive brunette, was the last to arrive. Obviously shocked by her uncle's death, she seemed none too anxious to remain in the same room with the body.

Shannon led them all into the study.

"Here it is—cold," he said. "I'm a private detective hired by Thatcher to protect him. I did my best and failed. He was murdered while he sat not more than three or four feet away from me. A man who could pass through locked doors or windows."

"Keystone cop," Wiley growled. "Thatcher would have been better off to retain a boy scout."

"Perhaps," Shannon acknowledged. "I have not notified the regular police—"

"Good heavens, why not?" Alan demanded hotly. "Do you think that after this failure you can solve the case?"

"I not only hope so," Shannon said, "I've got to. The way things look now, I might be accused of the crime. Alan, your hotel indicated you hadn't left your room all evening. That gives you an alibi. Wiley—what's yours?"

"I have none," Wiley growled. "But there isn't a man living who can prove I was here in this house."

"Not a man living," Shannon repeated slowly. "Remember that, please. How about you, Miss Denton?"

"I left my beauty parlor about nine-thirty and took a long walk," she said. "I have no alibi—none at all."

"Wait a minute," Wiley said belligerently. "What do you mean about referring to the fact that no living man will solve the case?"

"Perhaps"—Shannon waved a hand at the book shelves which they could see through the doorway—"a dead man will solve this problem. Thatcher believed in life after death. Someone must have read those books to him."

"I did," Joan said. "I used to spend hours reading to him. Some of those books would make your flesh crawl."

"And did Thatcher believe in ghosts?" Shannon asked.

"As much as he believed in life itself," Joan answered. "You see, he tried to kill himself after the failure of his business. He

almost died and he claimed he was so near death that he heard voices from beyond, that he actually experienced the first stages of that trip we'll all take some day."

"Just what I thought," Shannon said. "Now let's talk about money. If Thatcher failed so completely that even his clients lost their money, how was he able to maintain this big house and live as he did?"

"I can answer that one," Wiley said. "Thatcher left everything to me. I took the blame for putting clients' money into the business in an effort to save it. Thatcher drew every nickel he owned, cached it somewhere. In this house, I imagine. A blind man can't go around visiting hiding places for his money."

SHANNON nodded. "Thatcher talked to me quite a bit before he died. He told me he was not exactly a poor man. He also mentioned the fact that you, Alan, were one of the few persons he liked. Wiley, he regarded you as an enemy. And you, Joan—he was more or less neutral in his feelings toward you. I—"

Alan broke in. "I—don't think we should sit here chinning while my father is dead in the next room and even the police haven't been notified. Let them find out who killed him."

"My sentiments exactly," Wiley agreed. "And what the blazes makes this house so uncomfortably hot? I'm roasting."

"It might be a bad conscience," Shannon said curtly. "We're not going to call the police. If one of you moves toward a phone, so help me, I'll do some slugging."

"Just what do you mean?" Joan asked.

"I can't afford to have the cops come into this. They don't like me. Furthermore, I was retained to help Thatcher. I'll do that even if he is dead."

"But how?" Alan groaned and mopped his forehead.

He finally removed his coat. Joan fanned herself with a magazine. The heat was becoming almost unbearable and radiators hissed with a surplus of steam.

"I mean that if Thatcher believed so strongly in an afterlife and the power to return to earth after death, he'll try to come back. He'll exert all his will power to show us who murdered him. Because you see, my good friends, I think one of you did it."

"One of us?" Joan gasped.

Wiley moved forward, fists clenched. Shannon gave him a horse-laugh.

"Yes, one of you. And, Wiley, if it's a scrap you're looking for, you've come to the right man. I'm aching all over to slug somebody."

Wiley retreated slowly and all the sweat on his face wasn't from the heat of the house. Shannon pulled over a straight-backed chair, straddled it and looked at the trio.

"Joan, I can't understand how a slip of a girl could have pulled this job. Maybe you're out. It takes strength to strangle a man—even a blind man who can't fight back. However, we'll leave that up to Thatcher—if he returns in ghost form.

"Wiley, Thatcher hated you and you had no liking for him. He thought of you as a crook. Perhaps he was right. You have no alibi, but on the other hand, you don't stand to inherit anything from Thatcher's death. A motive seems lacking."

"You are going to insinuate that I killed him," Alan said half angrily.

"But you possess an alibi," Shannon said. "Furthermore, Thatcher told me he liked you and that his money would eventually be yours. Perhaps Joan hoped to inherit the estate too, knew she was out and hired someone to do the job."

Joan's blue eyes flashed angrily, but

she said nothing. Wiley began to pace the floor. Alan just dug himself deeper into the big chair he occupied. Shannon looked at them all. He was still far away from the truth and time was growing more and more precious. One of these three was bound to insist on calling the police and Shannon knew he couldn't prevent it.

"I suggest we look around the house," Shannon said. "All four of us will stay close together. We might find a trace of the killer. Are you willing to do that?"

They agreed, each anxious to get farther away from the grim souvenir of murder in the adjoining room. Shannon led the way past the corpse and stood to one side while the others filed by. He watched them narrowly. Joan never looked at the body, but Wiley stared at it as if he expected the corpse to stand up and denounce the killer. Alan looked once and shivered violently.

"FIRST of all," Shannon said, when they were in the hall, "Thatcher told me about an anonymous letter he got warning him he was to be murdered. I'd like to find that note. Also, the way the killer got out of the house—and the money supposed to be hidden here. We'll begin upstairs."

They searched every room. Joan seemed to be growing impatient, but it was also obvious that she trusted Shannon more than she did Wiley or Alan. She managed to walk beside him as they went downstairs again.

"What are you up to, Shannon?" she whispered. "You don't really think the old man is coming back?"

"Maybe I do," Shannon replied. "Thatcher possessed great will power. If anybody could come back, he's the man."

"I heard that." Wiley stopped descending the steps and turned around. "I'll give you half an hour more, Shannon, and then I'm calling the police. This is all sheer nonsense. Why, anyone of a thousand people had a reason for killing the old goat. They blamed him for losing their money."

"But not you," Joan answered heatedly. "Oh, not you, Wiley. You talked those clients into believing Thatcher was responsible. He tried to kill himself and only succeeded in building up that theory."

Wiley turned crimson and continued to descend the steps. They all assembled near the dining room. By now, the heat was almost insufferable. Even Joan complained about it.

"We'll all go down cellar and see what's happened to the furnace," Shannon suggested. "Alan, lead the way. If we stick together, no one can say any other member of this group had a chance to suppress evidence and—Alan, what's eating you?"

Alan stared at the floor—stared so hard his eyes bulged out. Wiley looked too and gave a yelp of terror. Joan gripped Shannon's arm so hard he winced in pain.

There, on the hallway floor, were more of those strange inked crosses—a dozen of them. And while they watched, more and more appeared. They seemed to be leading them somewhere.

Wiley said, "What are they? What makes them appear like that?"

Shannon ran over to the cane rack, picked out a cane and held it so they could see the tip.

"They come from Thatcher's cane. Every one was notched like that. It's Thatcher's. He's back. He's back, I tell you, and trying to tell us something. Lead us somewhere. Come on, follow the marks."

Wiley held back until Shannon gave him a hard shove. Joan still clung to Shannon's arm. Alan was bent double, peering at the strange crosses that kept appearing.

Automatically, they followed them and the trail led to the cellar door. They opened it and saw more of the marks on the steps. They seemed to simply materialize out of the wood, one by one. Shannon went down the cellar steps. The whole basement had been turned into a playroom which had gone to seed since Thatcher's blindness, but the floor was scrupulously clean even though the furniture and walls were thick with dust.

THOSE eerie crosses continued to grow right out of the floor. There was a billiard table at the far end of the playroom and behind it was a rack for cues. The doors of this were closed.

The ghost trail—of a blind man—led around the billiard table and ended right in front of the cabinet. More and more of the marks appeared now, as if the ghost were impatiently tapping his spectral cane to get some action.

Wiley leaned against the billiard table, face ashen. Alan suddenly gave a shrill yell, turned and started running madly. Shannon was after him in a flash.

"No you don't," the detective said. "Thatcher led us to this cabinet and it means something. We'll have a look. I'm betting his money was hidden right here and somebody stole it. The same person who murdered Thatcher later on. If you make a break, Alan, I'll sock you."

Shannon opened the cabinet doors. He removed the cues, saw a hook strangely out of place and tugged at it. A foot-square section of paneling came away in his hand. Behind it there were three small shelves, stacked with what seemed to be money.

Shannon grabbed one pile and flung it on the billiard table.

"Phony money," he said. "Stage stuff, play money. The man who swiped the dough put that in its place so Thatcher wouldn't know the real money was gone. This stuff has the consistency of real cash and a blind man might be deceived. Alan, you'd better start talking before your foster father decides to really materialize himself."

"But I don't know what this is all about," Alan wailed. "I swear it. I don't know—"

"Okay," Shannon said. "Then we'll go upstairs, sit down around the corpse and wait. Thatcher was able to come back and lead us to this hiding place. He'll come back again and make a real accusation."

Alan began to whimper. "No—no, I won't do that. I—I don't like dead people."

Shannon swung around, opened Alan's coat and began to search him. In one pocket he found a flat key.

"This opens a check room locker, doesn't it? Speak up, Alan, or we'll wait until Thatcher comes back. It won't be nice—a blind ghost. A ghost who taps his cane and leaves a mark to show us where to go."

"I did it," Alan screamed. "I did it. I'll talk, only get me out of here. I know what those crosses mean. Nobody else does. Even Thatcher didn't know until I—I killed him. That's why I know it's his ghost come back."

Shannon shoved Alan two feet away, doubled up one fist and knocked him cold.

"SORRY I had to do that, Joan," he apologized, "but I couldn't help myself. This little rat repaid Thatcher's kindness in bringing him up by murdering him. There never was an anonymous note except in Alan's imagination. He cooked that up to motivate a reason for calling in a detective. But Alan made a mistake when he told me about that letter. Posing as Thatcher, he said nobody else had read this letter and I wondered how a blind man would know what it contained if it wasn't

read to him."

"Then Alan stole the money and replaced it with this stage money?" Joan asked.

"Yes," Shannon answered. "He figured Thatcher wouldn't know the difference until he tried to cash some of the money in. By that time, Alan hoped to be far away. Then, I suppose, he remembered that blind people have such an acute sense of touch that they can sometimes tell the denomination of a bill by feeling of it. That made murder necessary."

"But how?" Wiley asked. "You were in the same room—"

"Alan rigged this whole business," Shannon explained. "He knew he'd be suspected and had to have an alibi. He called my agency, posing as Thatcher. I came here and Alan, disguised as Thatcher, met me. He talked in a stage whisper which I thought was rather odd. He insisted the house remain pitch dark.

"His disguise was simple and he actually let me see it in the light of a match. Alan wore the dark glasses and had powdered his hair to look grey. He wore one of Thatcher's suits. Alan built up a nice yarn about how much Thatcher loved Alan, how much he hated Wiley and what he thought of Joan. Alan sent me on a wild goose chase to the front porch.

"While I was gone, he removed Thatcher's corpse from some hiding place in the room, placed it in the chair and hid behind it. Naturally I thought the occupant of the chair talked to me. Alan then sent me to a rear window. Then he quietly slipped out the front door. I suspected nothing, of course, until Thatcher didn't answer me. Then I found he was dead. The body warm—yes, because Alan strangled him just as I arrived at the house."

"But those strange marks?" Joan asked. "How did they appear so mysteriously?"

Shannon laughed. "All of Thatcher's canes were grooved and inked so the tips would leave a mark whenever he tapped the cane. Alan did that. It was a smart way to find out where Thatcher had his money hidden. He probably cooked up some reason why Thatcher should visit his cache, followed the marks later on and after he got the dough, wiped them clean. You'll notice this cellar room floor is very clean while everything else is dusty. I located the cache before calling you here,"

"But that doesn't explain how those crosses appeared while we watched," Wiley insisted.

Shannon said, "I merely played up Thatcher's belief in ghosts. Before I called you, I visited a drug store and purchased a chemical. I impregnated the tips of the canes with this chemical and looked for the hiding place of Thatcher's money. I found it, used the cane to tap a course from the hall to this rack behind me. The chemical remained invisible until affected by heat.

"I turned up the furnace full blast. There are pipes directly beneath the floor where the trail begins so I knew the marks would come out there first. Gradually, the others took form. The cellar was not enough to affect the chemical and all I was afraid of was that they'd take shape before we got down here.

"Alan just couldn't take it. I knew the killer would be nervous. I purposely led you near the corpse several times and talked a lot about ghosts. His alibi at the hotel could easily be arranged. There are exits that do not lead through the lobby. Wiley, will you go upstairs and phone the police? Joan, you'd better stay here with me while I keep an eye on Alan. It isn't very pleasant upstairs."