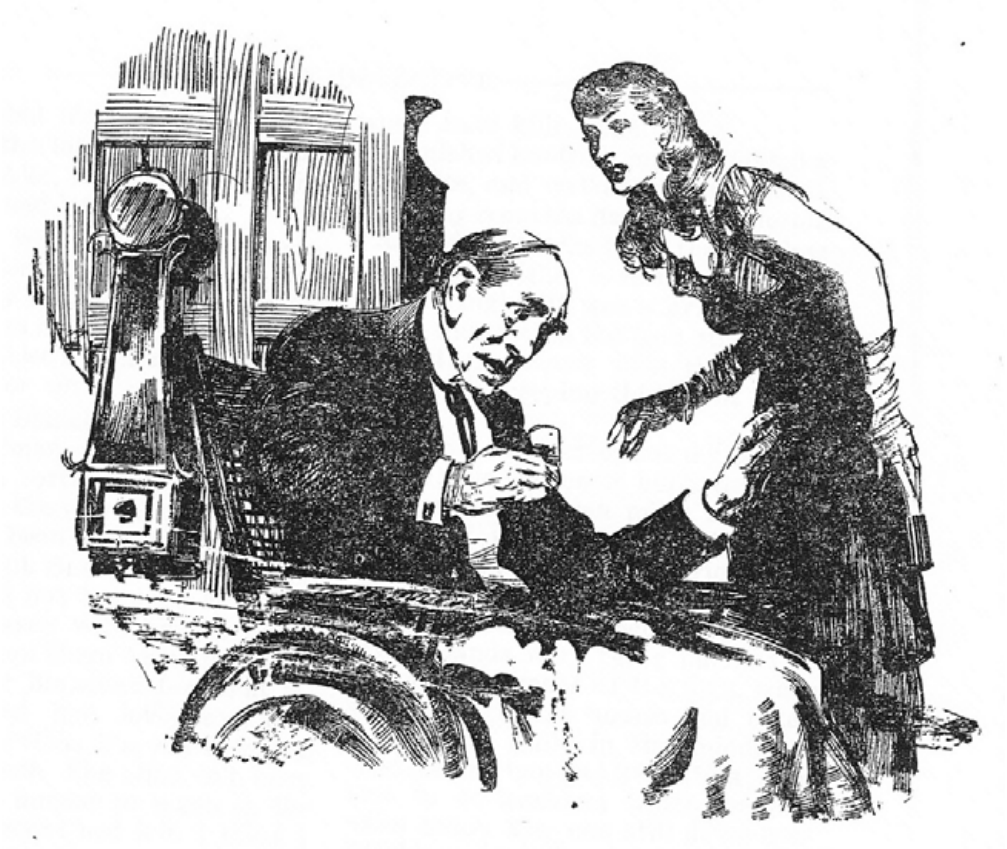
10-Story Detective, December, 1947

The small-town police captain hadn't been invited to the party until it was all over—and the man who'd thrown the shindig had become a . . .

Host to Homicide



By Milton T. Lamb

I GAVE quite some thought to murdering my brother Alec myself, especially after the visit of the bigwig from Colonial Oil, which I'd managed to keep secret. You'd have thought about killing Alec yourself, had he been your brother.

Before the accident he had been, perhaps, bearable, a fat, bald, selfish, stuffed shirt-but bearable if, like me, you could take living with him easier than working for a living. But Alec had come out of the auto wreck that night a man who would never again walk. Misfortune and pain might mellow some people, but it had the opposite effect on Alec. He pitied himself; he hated the world; he wanted to torture all who were around him.

So we lived in the big, depressing house in the Florida everglades that our parents had willed the two of us, Alec chained to his wheel chair, I chained to Alec. The Sloan fortune was gone, the house smothered with taxes. The once beautiful lawn and grounds were being claimed by weeds; our thousand acres were a marshy, reptile-infested mockery. And I was shut up in the lonely hull of rotting house with Alec, forced to live on the pittance we had left.

From his wheel chair he bellowed constantly for attention. There was barely money for the lone servant we had left; so to make matters worse, I was elected Alec's male nurse, whether I liked it or not.

There was Blanche, too, to consider. Blanche Millman, of the family that had taken a fortune out of Florida pine trees in the way of naval stores. Blanche had been with Alec the night of the accident. She hadn't been seriously injured but her face had been literally sprayed with bits of flying glass—and now there were those tiny scars all over Blanche's face that almost changed her loveliness into something horrible. She was drinking herself to death. She shouldn't have gazed in the mirror so much at the scars the accident had left. I think I loved Blanche once.

And perhaps the house itself bred the thought of murder, the air of decay, the odor of rot. No matter how bright the Florida sun, the house seemed forever to wear the gloom and chill of a tomb. And I had time to think about it. Muggy tropical days; nights that seethed with buzzing insects, the heat thick and unabated, wrapping you like a cloying shroud.

At first I toyed with the thought, like a child playing with a flaming match. It was something to take my mind off the stifling heat. But the heat itself seemed to play me tricks, and soon the thought was like little bubbles of heat, rupturing in my brain. *Why not? If a man gave attention to all the little things . . . why not?*

BUT I knew as I dressed for Alec's party that night that I wasn't the only one who thought of his murder. Everyone he touched, he hurt. He seemed to enjoy it, and that invariably drove the hurt deeper. Consequently, damn near everybody he touched would have killed him.

I finished knotting my tie, lighted a cigarette, and walked to the window. From my room the flat, dreary Florida everglades stretched into the limitless vastness of the lowering, seething Florida night. It was a grim, dismal scene, moist with the lush stagnation of centuries, dank with the feel of slithering, creeping things out in the night.

No one, I reflected, but my parents would have chosen to build this onetime mansion seven miles from the village of Palm City. But that had been in the twenties, the period when, all over Florida, dream cities were being erected on paper, when manmade islands were being pumped up out of the stomach of the Gulf, when swank apartment houses and hotels were being built in the middle of stretches of tropical desolation to be first to do business when the new cities came. You can still drive over Florida and see the gaunt, bedraggled ruins of a lot of these swank buildings, monuments to a hysteria that never became a civilization.

That was our house. Our mansion. It was to have been in one of the finest sections of a vast city of pleasure. But the crash had come. Palm City had never mushroomed. We were still stuck seven miles out in the 'glades, and standing there with the sodden decay of the house enveloping me, a bitter laugh escaped my lips. Murder? If only a man paid attention to the little things, all the details . . .

I crushed out my cigarette, left my room, and went downstairs. I could hear Alec's voice in the library, which contained once proud volumes slowly gathering mildew. Alec was blaspheming at old lady Lynch, our one servant.

I listened to him berate her for the way the crab had been prepared last night. Then I shrugged and walked down the hall to his bedroom to borrow a shoelace.

I opened Alec's door and almost

kicked the plain, white envelope that lay on the carpet. It looked as though the envelope had been slipped under the crack of the door, and 1 bent to pick it up.

It was unsealed, the flap tucked under. I pulled the flap out; the square of note paper was as bare of identifying marks as the envelope. The message was typewritten and unsigned, reading tersely: *You'll do as I say, or the party tonight will be your last!*

I smiled faintly as I pushed the note in my pocket. An almost childish, desperate, hysterical outburst, the note showed to what lengths Alec was capable of driving people. Any one of several persons could have pushed that note under his door today.

I removed a lace from one of Alec's shoes, put it in my own, and went back to the kitchen, where I found some cold roast duck. I was nibbling at it and thinking of the note, when Mrs. Lynch came in. She looked as if she were about to cry. She slammed a pan on the stove.

"Honestly, Mr. Colin, if he weren't your brother—I—I could almost—" Her mouth tightened over the words.

I said, "Don't mind me. Go ahead and say it. A lot of people could cut his throat." Then after a moment, I asked, "Who has been in the house today?"

"Oh, several people. Miss Blanche, Miss Marline Smythe and that gentleman—" it seemed a note of sarcasm crept into Mrs. Lynch's voice when she said gentleman—"that gentleman of Miss Smythe's, Mr. Anthony Hughes. Maybe one or two more. Mr. Alec is always pestering them to drive out."

"Maybe he gets lonely and tired in the wheel chair, Mrs. Lynch."

She made no comment, and I added: "I suppose everything is ready for the party tonight?"

"There's plenty of liquor, if that's what you mean," Mrs. Lynch said. "There's always that, even if Mr. Alec hasn't the money to pay his cook. I guess I'd better check the refrigerator and see about the ice for tonight."

"I've already seen to it, Mrs. Lynch. You needn't bother."

"Well, it's a shame you don't handle the financial affairs around here, Mr. Colin."

"He's the older brother and all that stuff, Mrs. Lynch. It was in the will. But cheer up, maybe I'll kill him—or somebody will do it for us." She looked shocked, but she laughed, the way I felt, the way that note had read. She laughed like the maddening weather, with heat, tightly, hysterically. I left the kitchen.

BLANCHE MILLMAN was the first guest to arrive. I opened the front door for her at nine. Her eyes were too bright; her breath was like a gust of wind from a bourbon bottle. She swayed a little. The drinks she'd had had seemed to tighten the skin of her face, causing the multitude of tiny scars from the auto accident to seem to glow.

"Welcome to Sloan Manor," I said, "and another of Alec's shindigs."

"Oh, damn him and his shindigs!" Blanche stepped into the hall. "Colin, I don't mind telling you that no one would ever come around this house because of Alec except that he—"

"That you're all afraid of him," I said. "You know he'd make himself a nuisance, phoning you at all hours for weeks, if you didn't show up for one of his parties. Well, you'd rather endure him an hour or two once a month than to take his devilish consequences."

"Something like that," she agreed. "Let's let him have his sadistic wake and get it over! Where is he?"

"In the living room." I glanced out the

front door. “Sorry I can’t announce you in the best butler fashion, but I spy headlights.”

Blanche navigated a swaying course toward the living room, and I hurried across the veranda to move her car, which she’d left in the middle of the rutted sandy drive.

I pulled Blanche’s car out of the way as the other car drew to a stop before the front door. I ran up the sagging steps to the veranda that still retained a ghost of its columned magnificence, and the two new guests turned.

“Oh, hello, Colin. We were just ringing.” It was Marline Smythe, a slight blonde, who bore on her small face a martyrlike expression, always, that made you think she was searching soulfully and desperately for heart-rending disappointment in love. Beside her, tall, sleek, straight as a bogus duke, stood Anthony Hughes.

“I was moving Blanche’s car,” I said. “Come in.”

“Reluctantly.” Anthony Hughes’ voice could have crooned, but now as he spoke, his one word was cold, hard. He added, “I might inform you, Colin, that I wouldn’t be here, except for Marline. I think as much of your brother Alec as I do of—”

“A salamander. Thank you, Mr. Hughes. I think you’ve voiced those sentiments before.” I didn’t like him. He had no dough, but he spent plenty, and most of it came from Marline.

She hadn’t been born to wealth. She’d been plain Mary Smith, secretary to a writer once and had picked up enough story technique so that she made an income writing for the confession magazines that a congressman would envy. With that tortured, martyr psychology of hers she had a natural knack for it. She kept two secretaries busy pouring out her sweet, lush stories of the agony that can come through love.

She and Anthony Hughes disappeared into the living room. I heard Alec greet them. “Marline, little dove! Ah, and an odor—could it be a rodent you have leaning on your pretty arm, Marline?”

I knew that Anthony Hughes’s lips tightened considerably at Alec’s remark. I heard Marline say with a soulful sigh: “Oh, Alec, must you envy me the company of a kind, understanding man?”

I thought: *She’s writing the dialogue for her next story.* Had it not been for her, Anthony Hughes would never have come here. But since Marline came, Anthony couldn’t bear the thought of letting his meal ticket get away from him even for a moment. I speculated that even a gigolo had to work at unpleasant tasks now and then for his livelihood, and turned into the living room.

Alec was already demanding a drink, and the others looked as if they needed it. I sighed and excused myself and went out to the kitchen.

WITH some trouble, I broke a tray loose in the refrigerator, dumped ice directly into the glasses. I was very careful about it, making sure I filled one glass well with ice, even at the expense of the others. Alec demanded that his drinks be cool even if somebody else had to drink tepid highballs. I put the glasses on a tray, went back to the living room. I poured bourbon, added soda. Marline Smythe was sitting at the piano; but the piano was out of tune and the middle C ivory had peeled, giving the grand a ridiculous, snagged-tooth look. Marline seemed to be projecting her soul to Alec with her gaze, and Anthony, leaning on the piano, didn’t like it.

Blanche came over to me. “I’ll serve the drinks, Colin,” she said with a faint hiccough. “I’ve got to do something at this

wake!”

I handed her the tray, and since Alec was the wheel chair invalid, she went first to him, then the others. The sight of alcohol—and I’d made the drinks strong—lifted the gathering for a moment. We drank.

Marline was trying to get a minuet out of the piano. Blanche giggled. The grand was more out of tune than I’d thought. The music was a crazy, clashing conglomeration of discords.

Like tinkly, weird, murder music!

The thought had no sooner crackled in my mind when into the music came another sound, a horrible, choking sound, guttural and dark, like the roiling of water in the swamps outside.

The music stopped with a crashing dissonance. All of us spun to look at Alec. He seemed to be trying to claw his way out of his wheel chair. His face was twisted. A spasm shook him. He stared at us, eyes jutting, sweat oiling his face, trying to speak. He pitched to the floor; a great convulsion seemed to shake him. Then he was still.

Marline Smythe screamed. A confession story heroine couldn’t have done it better.

I think the whole Palm City police department came. They were everywhere, prowling, measuring, taking our fingerprints. Alec lay in the middle of the carpet where he’d fallen, a bulk that sent shivers up my spine. We were herded over into a corner by a man who introduced himself as Captain Jak, head of the Palm City detective department.

Jak was a very average-looking man, tall, lean, quiet, wearing steel-rimmed glasses. A Florida cracker. But something about the way he moved and spoke . . . something in the cold depths of his eyes, the, uncompromising set of his thin lips . . . those certain little somethings combined and caused you to know that here was a dogged man who would see anything through to any end.

He was digging skeletons out of closets with the finesse of military intelligence and the determination of a desert prospector finding gold.

He’d asked us the preliminary questions, and at the moment was concentrating on Anthony Hughes.

“You say you didn’t want to come here, Mr. Hughes?”

“No.” Anthony looked pained, his face white, as if he were about to faint and couldn’t decide whether or not he wanted to.

“Then you came here tonight because of some ulterior motive?”

Anthony mopped his face. “See here, my man, I came because I—because—” He stopped speaking, but he darted an unconscious glance at Marline, and Jak had his answer.

Jak turned to Marline. She twisted her hands and blurted, “I had Anthony bring me here, but I—”

“Yes, Miss Smythe?”

She didn’t speak, and Jak said, “Weren’t you about to marry Alec Sloan at one time, Miss Smythe? And didn’t he leave you waiting at the altar while he went on a drunken party with another woman—a party that ended in a terrible auto crash?”

Blanche’s face tightened. Marline Smythe’s face was white; her gaze dropped. “Yes—I—he jilted me once.”

“And you wanted to kill him?” Her childish blonde head jerked up.

“No, I loved him! I still loved him—I wanted him back!”

JAK’S gaze turned inexorably back to Anthony. “She wanted Alec Sloan—you wanted her. You couldn’t get her while she wanted Sloan, so you—”

"Don't be ridiculous, my man."

"I am not your man," Jak said quietly.

"Well, I—I wouldn't kill a man for any woman! As far as that goes, Blanche Millman might have thought a lot of him, too—despite the fact that she was with him in that crash that scarred her face!"

Blanche closed her eyes. She was sober now, stone sober. Her voice came from down deep in her lungs, a soft, fierce whisper. "You're wrong, Anthony. I hated Alec. I wanted to see him dead. Drinking wouldn't make me forget—nothing would! Unless you're a woman, you can't understand. He was careless that night. I begged him to drive slow. He just laughed and stepped on the gas. And look at me now!" She sobbed, her voice rising almost to a scream. "Look at my face—my scarred ugly face!"

1 slipped my arm about Blanche to steady her. I'd loved her once—before she had given me the toss in favor of Alec. Then I'd learned to hate her, I guess, for weakening to that fatal, savage sod of charm Alec once had seemed to have for women.

Jak looked at her, at all of us grouped there in the corner, without expression. As if musing to himself, he said, "Murder, you know, consists of little things. The accumulation of little things leads to it. And the act of murder in itself is not the one single action a lot of people would think. The act of murder is a lot of little actions again accumulated. A few seconds of time here, a movement there, a word, a look, a dark thought flashing in a twisted mind.

"But murder being what it is, no one person is ever big enough to handle all those little things, because each little thing that is being accumulated is like a pebble dropping into a still pool. Each pebble sends out its ring after ring of ripples, until they're all running into each other, overlapping each other, until the pool is churning. And no one person, no matter how smart, is capable of covering himself completely, of bringing calm back to the pool! Do any of you want to say anything?"

No one spoke.

"We're going to work on the little things," Jak said simply. "I'll want to talk to all of you again tomorrow."

"You mean that's all," I said.

"For now. I wouldn't advise any of you to leave Palm City, and if any of you happen to see a strange man hanging around the place where you live, don't be alarmed. It'll only be a shadow, assigned by me. We don't want anyone else getting killed, do we?"

I reached in my pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Something fell from my pocket to the floor—an envelope. That note that had been under Alec's door when I'd gone in his room after the shoelace.

The way I pounced on it interested Jak. He snapped his fingers, reached, and jerked the envelope from my hand. He read it, his eyes going hard. "Where did this come from, Colin?"

"I opened Alec's bedroom door, just before the party. It was on the floor."

He looked from face to face. "Which of you has been here today?"

I said, "Any of us could have put the note under his door, Jak. Blanche, Marline, and Anthony were by—trying to make excuses to stay away from Alec's party, I guess, only he wouldn't hear of it, of course. But the note is probably of no consequence. It—"

"Colin, you wouldn't have some idea who really wrote the note? You wouldn't be trying to cover somebody?"

The flesh of my face was tight. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

He smiled faintly. "We'll see. Those little things, you know. But if I catch you

holding out any information, I jail you, Colin, and throw the key away!"

The house that night was more like a tomb than ever. Now and then a creature screamed out in the swamps. It kept me bathed in cold sweat. It was like having Alec's soul out there in the dark marshes.

THE next morning Jak arrested Blanche for murder.

I didn't know it, though, until I got to his office. When he phoned me, he just said, "Colin, come down. I want to have a powwow."

"Some of those little things?" I cracked.

Jak was alone in his office when I got there. He looked up from the onion-skin reports he was studying and said, "Sit down, Colin."

He looked at me steadily and said, "You were pretty sweet on Blanche Millman once, weren't you?"

"I might have been."

"And that's why you held out on me. Why you didn't show me that note of your own accord. You knew Blanche had written it, slipped it under Alec's door in an hysterical moment."

I splayed my palms on his desk. "I didn't know any such thing! You're crazy if you think Blanche wrote that note!"

He leaned back in his chair. "Let me bring you up to date, Colin. We work while others sleep. The autopsy showed that your brother was killed with a hell of a strong dose of cyanide. Analysis of what was left of Alec's bourbon and soda showed the drink was loaded with the poison. Blanche served those drinks, Colin."

"And I mixed them, damn it!"

"Don't try to go noble on me, Colin! It's old-fashioned, and this is neither the time nor the place. If you had poisoned Alec's drink, you'd have served it to him yourself. Blanche slipped the poison in his drink between the time she took the drinks from you and served them. Item two: Somebody had tried to wipe that sheet of note paper clean of fingerprints before putting it under Alec's door—because only your prints were scattered over the note, Colin. You'd handled it. If that note hadn't been wiped of prints, there'd have been yours and *someone else's!* But she missed, Colin. One of Blanche's fingerprints was in the upper corner of the note. The third little thing: The note was written on paper that matches stationery we found in Blanche's apartment. And it was also written on a portable typewriter on her desk."

I stood up. "Can I see her?"

Jak shook his head. "She's being questioned upstairs." As I started out, he asked, "Where are you going, Colin?"

"To get a lawyer."

"You'd better get a good one. We got an airtight case. Strictly airtight!"

The lawyer seemed to think so, too. I talked with him all morning, then I went home.

The next day was Friday. We buried Alec. The sky was very blue, and the sun was very hot. That night creatures screamed in the marshes.

The next day, about noon, I was in the living room where Alec had died, walking the floor. I heard a movement behind me and started to turn and tell Mrs. Lynch for the fifth time that I didn't want any lunch. But it wasn't Mrs. Lynch. It was Jak.

I hadn't seen him now for two days. He looked gaunt, hollow-eyed, as if the heat were getting him.

"I came in without knocking, Colin."

"That's okay."

JAK watched me pace for a moment, then said, "How does it feel, Colin, to walk over the spot where your brother's

body has lain in death?"

"Not so good." I kept my back to him.

"I guess not," Jak sighed heavily. "You keep thinking of the way you killed him, don't you, Colin?"

I whirled on Jak, hot words boiling up in my throat. But the words became cold curdles somewhere behind my tonsils. Jak had a gun in his hand, pointed at my stomach.

"Listen, Jak—"

"You listen. Those little things, remember, Colin? Surprising how much oil they've been drilling for in Florida recently. A bigwig from Colonial Oil came to Palm City, came out to see you. How do I know? From a desk clerk, Colin, a quiet, nameless little man who is a desk clerk at the hotel where the bigwig from Colonial registered. The oil man asked the clerk how to find your place, and the clerk remembered and came to headquarters to tell us, thinking it might have some bearing on the case, when he heard that Alec had been murdered.

"Just a little thing, a man asking directions. A quiet clerk you've never even seen, with a sense of duty. Just a pebble dropping in the black pool of murder, sending out its never-ending ripples! That started me, Colin."

I sank into a chair.

Jak said, "Let's say that you saw the oil man, Colin, before Alec did. You knew that you'd never see a dime of any oil rights money if Alec got it, so you stalled the oil man to give you time to get your brother out of the way. Then I began to wonder how you managed it. In my questioning I, ran across a quaint little thing, the fact that Alec always hogged a well-iced drink. From Mrs. Lynch I gathered a little remark that you had made to the effect that, *on the night of the murder, you had already seen to the ice.* So I knew the poison was not merely in the drink—*but in the ice!*

"You knew Blanche would serve the wheel chair invalid first—and you knew which drink Alec would automatically take. If he had by any remote chance taken the wrong drink, you could have reached quickly for the ice-poisoned drink yourself and pretended to spill it or taken it out to the kitchen and dumped it, to await a later time when Alec's murder would have again been opportune. But he took the right drink, as you had known he would, and your plan was set. All the details cared for? Oh, yes, Colin, all that you could foresee!"

"But Blanche—"

"A dupe in your hands, Colin! You were so very smart, weren't you? You knew you'd be suspected of Alec's death unless the police solved the murder quickly. In addition, you picked Blanche as your sacrifice to your own safety because you hated her for throwing you over once. How your mind must have savored that sort of thing—setting the stage, toying with human beings, exacting a warped revenge! It was daring. It was smooth. It was the most subtle frame-up I've ever heard of, Colin, if that's any satisfaction."

I licked my lips. "But the note—"

"You wrote the note, slipping into Blanche's apartment a day or two before the murder. Then you pretended to let the note fall into my hands unintentionally. You see, we found some of your fingerprints in Blanche's apartment. We found one on a vase on her desk, where you'd moved the vase when you sat down at her portable to write that note."

Somehow I mustered a laugh. "You fool! Of course my prints are in Blanche's apartment. I've been there often!"

"But not within a week prior to the murder?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Blanche says you hadn't."

"Well, I hadn't! So what about it?"

"So you've just condemned yourself, Colin! You say you hadn't visited her for a week prior to the murder. Your fingerprints were on that vase on her desk. Yet she swears she did not buy that vase until the day before the murder!"

"She's lying!" I screamed.

"No, Colin. Another little thing. Another little series of ripples drowning you, Colin! We checked with the old dealer who sold Blanche that vase. He identified the vase, showed us the sales slip!"

I wiped my face on my coat sleeve. "You'll never prove it! You—"

"You'll talk," he said. He hit me as I jumped up, as if he liked it. He knocked me down on the floor and said quietly, "There'll be other little things, Colin. So many others that we'll dig up! Little things like the tiny strands in a rope—a rope strong enough to hang you! You'll talk, Colin!"

I lay there sobbing. It had been so perfect; I had felt so secure. Yet at the first puff of wind my murder house had toppled like a deck of limp cards.

Jak hauled me to my feet. "Too many little things, Colin. Just too many little things!"

Sure, if there was a guy like this Jak to put them together.