

# The Too Perfect Alibi



*They towed in the corpse-laden boat.*

By Robert C. Dennis

*Several people had a motive to kill the attractive redheaded widow. But it took the young doctor to analyze the ingredients that went into that rowboat rub-out.*

“YOU,” Young Doctor Allenby informed his tired, handsome face in the rear-view mirror, “are one damn fool!” He was, for a fact. Instead of driving directly home for a salami on rye sandwich with a bottle of ice-cold beer on the side—and then to bed—he was going to a moonlight swimming party!

Sally Sandlock had invited him obviously for the purpose of showing him that she, despite his brutal and complete uncalled-for criticism, was not a petty woman. He had accepted probably because he was, he thought morosely, falling in love with her. That alone proved he was a damn fool. For Sally was an

exquisitely beautiful and impossibly spoiled young woman.

“When old Doc Morgan smacked you the day you were born,” Pete had told her, “he set a precedent that unfortunately wasn’t continued!”

“And just who,” Sally had wanted to know in her most dangerous tone, “should handle that assignment? You, perhaps?”

“Well, if you were my wife—”

“There, Doctor Allenby, you put your finger right on the weakness!”

Pete released a long and dispirited sigh, and clicked on his headlights to cut the deepening twilight. As he did so, a car came up from behind and rocketed past with a harsh, truncated blare of its horn.

Pete swore with a tired earnestness. Some fool drunk, he thought, who'd crack up and need medical attention, maybe even an emergency operation. As if doctors never got tired!

THERE were times when Pete felt he should have been a veterinarian. Animals, at least, didn't go out looking for trouble, but when it came, they had the grace to suffer without temperament!

Take his last call, for instance, that fat little Jacobson boy who had come down with the measles. Third case in town, too. You'd have thought he was dying! And all the while his mother kept up a running commentary on the current choice scandal.

"I declare," she'd exclaimed, "that redheaded Mrs. Herrick is just running hog-wild! Her husband must be turning right over in his coffin at her carryings on. First Dave Beck's boy Steve, then young Jimmy Sandlock. And now who do you suppose it is?"

Pete put on a horrified expression. "Not Mr. Jacobson!"

"Certainly not! Why, I never heard of such a thing! I declare—"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Don't you worry about the widow, Mrs. Jacobson. If the good ladies of Grand Point don't ride her out of town on a rail, some jilted lover will put a bullet in her head, and that will settle it all."

Mrs. Jacobson had given him a very prim look and muttered darkly that if he wasn't the only doctor in Grand Point, he'd have to be a little more careful of how he talked.

She was wrong. If doctors were as plentiful as empty beer bottles in the summer cottages, he would still say exactly what he thought. Pete just didn't give a damn.

The Sandlocks' tall covered gate loomed whitely in the dark, and Pete

swung onto the crushed stone drive wondering glumly if the redheaded Mrs. Herrick would be there. If so, should he make a big play for her? Sally was certain to have one of the handsome cottagers in tow.

Half a dozen cars were already assembled beside the large green and white house. This was the Sandlocks' year-round home, and set in among the smaller cottages, it looked substantial and imposing. Two powerful floodlights on the front of the house illumined the white boathouse and a sizable section of the river. Over the narrow pier jutting out into the river, more lights had been strung so that the whole place was almost as bright as day. For a moonlight party it seemed slightly ridiculous.

GLANCING at his watch, Pete saw it was just nine-thirty. He promised himself solemnly to be home and in bed at midnight. Then, swim trunks under his arm, he walked down toward the group of people on the approaches to the pier.

Sally, in a canary-yellow one-piece suit, detached herself and came to greet him with charming and phony effusiveness. "Pete—how sweet of you to come! I think you know most everyone, don't you?"

He said yes he'd met all of them before, except the summer people, and he now met them, making no effort to remember their names. Except Wayne Burnett, Sally's personal acquisition, a large, handsome, soft-looking lad who probably hadn't done a day's work in his life. He had a very wide frank smile, full of gleaming white teeth, that would be a great deal more sincere if he used it less frequently.

"Wayne belongs to our country club. In the city, you know," Sally explained brightly, letting Pete know that this was an

old friendship, not a summer affair.

Pete said. "Hello," shook a big soft hand, and doubted that Burnett and he would ever become old friends. He greeted some more people including Steve Beck, the mayor's son, and Sally's brother Jimmy. He noticed that Mrs. Herrick wasn't present. He'd seen her only once, and that from a distance, crossing Main Street in Grand Point, one hot, sunny afternoon. Her hair had really sparkled. She'd looked young and slender and—dangerous. Maybe too dangerous for Sally's party.

"I thought Ann was coming," Burnett said suddenly, as if picking up a telepathic interest in the widow.

"She is," Sally said. "She promised to run over. Maybe she's waiting for someone to call for her. . . . Jimmy, be an angel and run up and get her."

Jimmy Sandlock looked embarrassed and unwilling but he said, "Oh, all right." He put on a jacket and went off toward the parked cars.

"Pete, you scoot into the boathouse and change into your trunks," Sally ordered and began explaining to someone that Ann lived right next door, first house to the north, and one had to invite a neighbor, didn't one?

The other girl said, "Yes, of course." But all of a sudden Pete didn't care if Ann Herrick never came. There was a sudden, almost ugly tension in the air, and he was simply too worn out for petty squabbling. He wished he were home in bed. He'd have slipped away if he could have been sure Sally wouldn't keep getting into his dreams. But she would, and he might as well suffer here where it was cool.

In his trunks he cut as fine a figure as anyone. A little paler, of course, because he got damn little time for sun-bathing, but all that running around from patient to patient had kept the fat off. He had good

shoulders and long, powerful legs, but he was much too tired to be conceited about it.

EVERYONE, except Jimmy Sandlock, was down on the end of the pier which was like the cross-bar of a letter T. Pete joined them just as Jimmy's car drove around the corner of the house and stopped. Ann Herrick wasn't with him. Conversation thinned a little, waiting for him to come down and report.

"She wasn't home. The lights are on, and the door is open, but there's no one there."

"She might have been out on her dock," somebody suggested.

"I looked there," Jimmy said shortly. He was a blond, rather excitable young fellow, a year or so younger than Pete. He was engaged to little Linda Telford who moved closer to him now, as if to soothe him. "She wasn't anywhere around the place," he finished. "Her boat was gone. Maybe she went for a row."

"That's funny," Sally said, mystified, perhaps even a little worried. Everyone else seemed considerably relieved. Particularly Steve Beck who yelled, "Last one in—"

There was some frantic splashing and a lot of silly squealing, and then everybody climbed up on the dock and reached for cigarettes. Wayne Burnett was never more than a few feet away from Sally, which seemed perfectly all right with her. Pete decided maybe a bad dream was preferable after all, and began thinking of an excuse to break away gracefully.

"Look!" some girl cried. "There's a rowboat adrift!"

It was about forty feet out, just on the edge of the illuminated patch of water, floating idly down stream. The lights from the dock were bright enough to show up

the name painted on the bow: Ann.

"That's Ann's boat," Sally exclaimed.

Some female said, "You don't suppose she fell out and—"

"Of course not," Sally snapped. "Ann's a fine swimmer. We'd better get her boat."

"I'll go," Steve Beck said. His dive was long and shallow, and he came up almost beside the boat. He put his hands on the side of the boat as if intending to clamber aboard. Then he halted and looked back toward the dock. "Give me a hand, will you, Pete?"

Something in his voice sent Pete into the water. Even before he got there and peered into the boat, he knew, somehow, what he'd see. Steve's face was dead white. "Is she—"

"She is," Pete told him grimly. "Very dead. Tow it in— I'll clear off the dock." He swam back to the ladder which had been nailed to the front of the pier and climbed up into a breathless, waiting silence. "Into shore," he ordered crisply. "I don't want any fainting females on my hands!"

The authority in his voice drove everyone toward the house—everyone except Sally. "I'm not going in. Is it Ann, Pete?"

"Yes," Pete said wearily. "And she's been murdered. Somebody beat her head to a pulp. Now, will you go?"

"Yes, Pete," Sally said, swallowing.

THEY were all huddled on the veranda of the big house when Pete and Steve finished towing the boat in along the pier and up onto the beach. Sally's father wasn't home from the city yet, and her mother was at her bridge club. Jimmy Sandlock, the next in authority, looked as if he would be having a wingding if it weren't for Linda Telford's steadying hand.

That left it pretty much up to Pete, since in any case, he was the town coroner. "I'll call Chief Wheeler," he said, and went on into the house. He felt sorry for Sally and sorry for himself. He had a pretty good idea that he wasn't going to get to bed by midnight.

Presently Chief Wheeler was saying, "Hello? Hello?"

"Sam, this is Doc Allenby. I'm calling from the Sandlocks'—"

"Glad you called, Doc. I've been trying to get you at your office. Got a funny sort of red rash on my face."

"Good Lord!" Pete said.

"Nothing serious, is it, Doc?"

Pete sighed gustily. "No, it's just the measles. A man of your age! What the hell did you do with your childhood? Never mind—we've got trouble here. That redheaded widow has been murdered in a rowboat."

"Murdered! I'll be right there, Doc."

"You will not!" Pete shouted. "You're quarantined. Do you think I want everybody in town coming down with the measles? I've got too much work as it is. You go to bed, Sam. Just deputize somebody and get him over here."

"Okay," Chief Wheeler said after a pause. "Raise your right hand."

"Not me, you fool!"

"Why not you? You're right there on the scene. You know the circumstances. Just tell me the details, and I'll tell you what to do."

Pete closed his eyes and said wearily, "She was beaten over the head with a blunt instrument. She'd been dead about fifteen minutes, I'd say. The shaft of a broken anchor had been tied to her as if the murderer intended to weigh the body down when he threw it overboard. That was probably the blunt instrument. The rope on the bow was trailing in the water."

"Came untied and the boat floated

away,” Chief Wheeler declared. “What else? Who saw her last?”

“I don’t know. Young Jimmy Sandlock drove up to her house about ten minutes ago, but she wasn’t home. Probably already floating down here.”

“Get another rowboat and get the exact time it takes to drift from Mrs. Herrick’s pier down to the Sandlocks’.”

“Okay chief!” Pete said and hung up. He went back out to the veranda. “Chief Wheeler is sick,” he told them. “I’ve been deputized to carry on a sort of investigation. I don’t know whether that empowers me to make an arrest—”

“Do you think you’ll know whom to arrest?” Wayne Burnett asked incredulously. “Have you done this kind of thing before?”

“No,” Pete said shortly. It hadn’t occurred to him that he would be unable to discover Ann Herrick’s killer. He’d been called on for so many and varied things among his patients that he’d come to think that what had to be done could be done, and he was the one to do it.

He said to Sally, “I want to use your rowboat.”

“I’m coming with you,” she said instantly. “What are you going to do?”

“Get the boat ready,” he ordered, ignoring her questions. “I’ll be with you in a minute.” He left the veranda and went around the corner of the house to his car. His flashlight was in the glove compartment, and as he was getting it out, he saw by the clock on the dashboard that it was only five minutes to ten. No more than twenty-five minutes had elapsed since his arrival here. It had seemed like two hours.

PETE slammed the car door and stood there a moment testing the flashlight. The beam made only a weak, yellow spot on the crushed stone driveway, but it

ought to be sufficient. Then a gleaming object on the ground caught in the glow of the flashlight. Pete stooped and picked it up. It was an earring, a green stone set in a gold disk.

His face bleak, he put it in the pocket of his trunks. The mate to it was on Ann Herrick’s right ear lobe.

Pete stopped at the boathouse and got his watch. Then he went on down to the end of the pier where Sally waited in her boat.

“I’ll row,” he said, and she moved back to the stern without a word. He gave her the watch and flashlight to hold.

It was something like a hundred yards to Ann Herrick’s dock, the same sort of pier as the Sandlocks’. Against the current it was fairly hard going. Pete rubbed a blister on the inside of his thumb before he made it.

Leaving Sally to hold the boat against the pier, he climbed up and looked around for bloodstains or other clues. He saw neither. The lights were still burning in the house, just as Jimmy had said. The place had a pall of silence over it that merely being deserted couldn’t account for. Pete swore patiently under his breath. *Next*, he thought, *I’ll be getting psychic*.

It wasn’t that, he knew. It was quite simply that even without assembling the facts, he knew who had killed Ann Herrick, and it wasn’t going to be good.

He climbed back into the boat, got the exact time of the watch Sally held, and said, “I’ll swim alongside. Just let it drift.”

The current caught it away, slowly at first, then with slightly increased momentum. Letting Sally ride it down was a more precise test since his own hundred and seventy-five pounds would probably cause some deviation. Not that it really mattered.

The moment they were within the circle of light from the Sandlock pier, Pete

reached over the side and pulled Sally's wrist over close to his eyes. The ride had taken three minutes and some fifteen or twenty seconds.

"All right," he told Sally quietly. "I'll call Sam Wheeler now."

"Give me all the time schedules since you got there," the Chief ordered.

"I got there at exactly nine-thirty," Pete said. "Within three or four minutes of that time, Jimmy Sandlock was sent by his sister to get Mrs. Herrick. He was gone about ten minutes, give or take a minute, and reported back that she wasn't home. It would be five minutes later, more or less that we sighted the boat."

"Adds up, doesn't it?" Chief Wheeler asked quietly. "In other words, the boat broke loose during the time young Sandlock was at the widow's or within a minute or two after he left. And I understand the kid was playing around with the widow. And him engaged to that little Telford girl! What do you think, Doc? Could it be anyone else?"

Pete's voice was utterly empty. "In carrying the body down to the boat one of Ann's earrings caught in the murderer's clothing and pulled off. He didn't notice it, and it fell off after he got back. I found it near the parked cars."

"Yeah!" the chief said. "That does it. It has to be somebody at the party. Anyone else leave?"

"No. And I was the last one to arrive."

THERE was a prolonged silence, and then Sam Wheeler said, "I want Jimmy Sandlock held on suspicion of murder."

"Damn you," Pete said without emphasis, and hung up.

Immediately, Sally popped into the room. "You're going to arrest Jimmy," she charged. "I heard what you were saying."

"You shouldn't eavesdrop," Pete said

tiredly. "Sam wants him held. Look at it!" he said as she started to speak. "Somebody from here killed Ann. She is wearing only one earring. The other one was lying on the driveway near the cars. It could only get there if it dropped from the murderer's clothes. It couldn't have been there earlier, or one of the cars would have run over it and ground it into the crushed stone."

"Then it was someone else," she flashed. "Steve Beck, maybe. He was running around with her. I happen to know Ann got men involved and then demanded money. And you know as well as I that Steve has only what Mayor Beck gives him for spending money."

"Did Steve leave the party, Sally? Did anyone else?" Pete's face was numb from holding the muscles so rigid. "It simply couldn't be anyone else! If the boat was already gone when Jimmy got there, that would mean it took ten minutes or longer to drift down here."

"I know," she said helplessly, "and it only takes three minutes." She started to cry, soundlessly, without any fuss or bother. "Help us, Pete," she pleaded. "I know Ann threatened to tell Linda Telford about Jimmy's carrying on if he didn't give her money, but he didn't kill her. I know he didn't. Jimmy told Linda everything, and she forgave him. Please, Pete, do something!"

She was a humble, appealing little girl, not at all spoiled and Pete loved her till it tore him up inside. But he was only a tired, small-town doctor and he couldn't perform miracles. No matter how badly they were needed, he couldn't do it. But Sally was looking at him, complete and explicit trust in her eyes. *Now, he told himself, is your chance to win her, Doc! Just a little miracle!*

Well, he thought wearily, *if it has to be done, it has to be. Suppose. . .*

"I have to call Mrs. Jacobson," he said,

reaching for the phone again. "Her boy's got the measles."

Sally said bitterly, "And Jimmy is going to be arrested for murder!"

"Go outside and hold hands with your boy friend!" Pete's voice was hard.

Her face stiffened, and the tears stopped. "Don't think I won't do just that, Doctor Allenby!"

WHEN she was gone, Pete called Mrs. Jacobson. His hands were shaking. "Mrs. Jacobson, you know that information about Mrs. Herrick you were telling me today. The part where I misunderstood and thought you meant Mr. Jacobson. Whom did you mean?"

He wondered if Sally were eavesdropping again. Pete was glad she couldn't hear Mrs. Jacobson's answer. "Thanks a lot, Mrs. Jacobson. Good-by."

He hung up and went out to the veranda. Everyone turned to stare at him. Sally was defiantly holding Wayne Burnett's hand.

Pete said, "I'm supposed to make an arrest now on Chief Wheeler's instructions. It isn't a very pleasant duty. I'm not a policeman." He tried not to see the scorn in Sally's eyes. "So I'll tell you all who killed Mrs. Herrick and how. Then the guilty person can give himself up without any further trouble. I think that's the only decent way."

"I didn't do it, Pete," Jimmy Sandlock said quietly. "I know you've figured it out, and it *couldn't* be anyone else, but still I didn't do it."

Pete didn't look at him. "There's positive proof that the murderer is one of the people at this party—Ann's earring. It has also been established that in order to drift from her pier down here just when it did, the body must have been there during the time Jimmy was there. He claims it

wasn't—so if he's not lying, the boat must already have been sent adrift!"

There was a startled silence. Steve Beck said, his voice hoarse with tension, "If the boat took ten minutes or longer—but how could it? You proved it takes only three minutes."

"Maybe it was dragging an anchor or something to slow it up," Wayne Burnett suggested. "Wouldn't that do it?"

"It's a possibility," Pete conceded. "But it's too haphazard, and anyhow there weren't any dragging weights. No, it was done differently than that." He paused briefly. "We all assumed that the boat started from Ann's dock – three minutes away. I say it started a mile upstream! The murderer rowed Ann's boat up there earlier this evening, probably up to the pier at Crimmin's old place because it's vacant now."

"Then he went back and got Ann, drove her up there, killed her, and put her in the boat. He faked it to look as if the body were to be sunk, set the boat adrift, and rushed down here. He arrived at the party a few minutes ahead of me. His car shot past me as I drove along the road."

"But everybody arrived about the same time," Sally exclaimed! "How will we ever know?"

"That ought to be fairly simple," Pete said grimly, licking the blister on his thumb. "Whoever rowed a boat a mile against that current is a cinch to have some lovely blisters!"

"Oh!" Sally let go of Wayne Burnett's hand as if it were hot.

"Yeah," Pete said, "you, Burnett. You knew Ann Herrick in the city—at the country club. I imagine she was blackmailing you too, so you killed her. Your plan was a good one," Pete said grudgingly. "You had a perfect alibi. Ann was apparently murdered a hundred yards

from where you were in plain sight at all times.

"In fact, I would have testified that you couldn't possibly have killed her. She probably wasn't quite dead when you put her in the boat. She died during the ride, which was a little break you hadn't counted on. But your alibi was too perfect. It also alibied everybody else at the party. So you saw a chance of pinning it on someone."

"Wayne, it was you who asked where Ann was," Sally burst out.

**B**URNETT was smiling, but it was a meaningless expression. His face was white and strained. He didn't say anything.

Pete said, "He knew Sally would send someone up to get Ann, and since Ann had her hooks in almost everyone here, the only person Sally could tactfully ask to go was her brother. Did you try to pin this on Jimmy deliberately, Burnett?"

"I warned him to stay away from Sally," Jimmy addressed Pete. "Maybe he had it in for me."

"But that's where he slipped," Pete said. "Because, unknown to him, you no longer had a motive. According to what Sally told me in the house, you'd already squared things with Linda."

"I wouldn't have listened anyway," Linda said fiercely. She held Jimmy's arm and looked at him with shining eyes.

Pete sighed unhappily. "Well, there it is, Burnett. When you tried to take the

curse off that too perfect alibi, you picked on Jimmy, who had no need to kill Ann. So it had to be someone else. One of my patients, who knows everything that happens in Grand Point, tipped me off that you had been seen with Ann." He looked at Steve Beck. "Call your old man, Steve, and see about making the arrest. I don't want any part of that."

He stared for a moment at Wayne Burnett sitting in his chair, too defeated to move, to realize just what was happening. Then Pete turned toward the boathouse to get his clothes. Sally followed him.

"Pete," she said quietly, "you were right—I am a spoiled brat. Do you want me to eat tacks?"

"I want you to go to bed!" Pete said. "Otherwise you'll probably come down with the measles, too. Then I'll have one more patient."

"If you weren't the only doctor around here, you could send someone else," Sally said in a small voice.

Pete started to say that with all the temperamental patients he already had he undoubtedly would send someone else. But he held the words. Jimmy Sandlock hadn't gotten little Linda Telford to look at him like that by saying mean things. When it was the girl you loved, you had to give a damn. He said, "I wouldn't trust any other doctor to take your pulse, darling."

That got him even more than a look!