

# DOUBLE-BARRELED EVIDENCE

By FRANK JOHNSON

*Mystery Surrounds the Death of George Noble!*

**I**T WAS nearly five o'clock when Harvey Thompson drove his sports roadster into his stall of the sturdy little two-car garage. Closing the wide swing door on his side, and, without a glance at the closed door on his uncle's side of the garage, he lurched unsteadily to the house. Dawn was breaking as he let himself in, more or less in his usual condition of slight intoxication.

Thrusting his keys back into his pocket, he became aware of a sticky, gummy substance on his hand. Mumbling crossly to himself, he stumbled into the living room and snapped on the ceiling lights.

On the ball of his left thumb, where he had gripped the inside of the garage door, was a fragment of white paint, and a bit of half-dried surface skin that he had rubbed loose from the door in closing it. He grimaced faintly, recalling that Matthews had painted the interior of the double garage the day before.

Wiping fretfully at his thumb with his handkerchief, he was advancing to the liquor cellaret to pour himself a shot of rye when a movement on the divan attracted him. Larch, the butler and old family retainer, was getting hastily to his feet.

"Morning, Larch," said Thompson owlishly. "Taken to sleeping in the parlor?"

"Oh, it's you, Master Harvey," responded the butler. "I must have fallen asleep, sir. I was waiting for Mr. Noble's return."

"What? Is Uncle George still out!"

"Yes, sir," said Larch, a note of slight reproach in his tone. "He went out about nine o'clock in search of you, sir. He wanted to talk with you."



Sergeant Gordon

"Nine o'clock! Last night? Well, he never got to the Tumble Inn roadhouse. I was there from midnight on, and I didn't see him."

"What time is it?" asked the butler, tugging out the watch from his waistcoat. "I—good heavens, it's after five o'clock! Something must have happened to the master."

"Nonsense," said Thompson, pouring himself a stiff drink as he swayed on widely planted feet. "Uncle George probably came in and went to bed while you were snoring away in here. He wouldn't have driven thirty

miles at night to the Tumble Inn, anyway. What did he want to see me about, Larch?"

"You should know, sir," replied the butler in frank disapproval. "Your gambling and drinking. Mr. Noble has been quite despondent for several weeks—worried over financial matters, I think. I'm sure he hasn't come in, but I'll go see."

**T**HOMPSON grunted and dropped into a chair to nurse his drink while the butler hurried upstairs. The young man knew that Larch implied a lot more than he had said, knowing Thompson would understand.

The Noble fortune was fast going on the rocks, and Harvey Thompson's wastrel tendencies weren't helping it any.

In a moment the butler returned. His lean and wrinkled old face was gray with anxiety.

"Mr. Noble is not here, Master Harvey," he announced. "I thought I heard his car drive in about midnight. But when there was no further sound, and he didn't come to the house, I figured I must have been mistaken. Was his car in the garage when you came in?"

"I didn't look. You know there's a partition wall dividing the two halves. How about a pot of coffee, Larch? I'm going to take a shower and then go to bed. When Uncle George comes in, tell him to wake me if he wants."

"First, sir, I'd like to see if his car is here," the old butler insisted anxiously.

Grumbling about the inconvenience, Thompson followed the butler out to the garage. The door on his uncle's side of the building was tightly closed but not locked.

"Careful of the paint, Master Harvey," cautioned Larch. "Matthews painted the interior yesterday morning and it's still fresh."

"Yeah," muttered Thompson. "I found that out. Go on, open the door. I want to get to bed."

George Noble's car was in the garage.

So was George Noble. Seated in a slumped position behind the wheel, he seemed asleep. But the ignition switch was on, and the gas tank was dry. George Noble was dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Young Thompson sobered up like magic. He took one swift look and rushed back to the house. Grabbing up the telephone, he frantically called the police.

**S**ERGEANT GORDON was a quiet, easy-spoken man with unobtrusive manners and gray eyes that seemed sleepy but which could turn to splinters of ice when he willed.

He surveyed the situation methodically before asking questions. Then he went to work on the housekeeper, the butler, the handy man, and the nephew.

"Must be suicide," he finally concluded. "Noble was despondent over the state of his finances. Dying was the only way out for him. His insurance—a hundred thousand dollars—straightens out his estate. But it doesn't help the old boy himself. Sad business. No motive for crime. No trouble with kin or help. Just one question. Who inherits the bulk of Noble's estate?"

"I don't know," said Thompson glumly. "I guess the servants are all provided for. At least, I hope so. As for relatives, I'm the nearest of kin that I know about. You might ask Uncle George's lawyer."

"I will," agreed the sergeant casually. "The M. E. said the old man died about midnight. You tell me you were at the Tumble Inn roadhouse from midnight until you came home at five o'clock. I'll call there, too. Just a routine check-up."

"Of course," said Thompson, nodding. "I was playing cards with Jack Doyle and his crowd. I don't remember the exact time. I was a little high."

Larch cleared his throat audibly. The housekeeper sniffed her disapproval. Sergeant Gordon glanced sharply from one to the other, then went into the library to the

telephone.

In a short while he returned.

"Everything checks," he announced soberly. "Thompson, you are the principal heir. Before I call the dead wagon, let's go back to the garage."

With puzzled frowns the heir and the trio of servants trooped after the police officer. The medical examiner had gone, and two bluecoats stood guard, awaiting further orders.

Gordon motioned one of them to open the door to Noble's side of the garage. When this was done, the sergeant pointed out the location of the exhaust pipe on the dead man's car, then indicated the freshly painted inside of the door.

When closed, the door was within a few feet of the exhaust. And the fresh white paint was all blistered and blackened in a wide, circular spot by the heat and soot.

"The motor ran until it was out of gas," the homicide sergeant explained unnecessarily. "In this tight little garage the fumes quickly killed him."

"That's obvious," said Thompson gravely. "I just can't make up my mind whether it was an accident, or Uncle George did it on purpose."

"I can," retorted Gordon, suddenly grim. "It's no accident to close the only door tightly, then get back in the car to sit there with the motor running until the gas kills you. Ryan, open the door on Thompson's side of the garage."

The policeman addressed did so with alacrity. Gordon pointed at the inside of Thompson's door. Further words were needless. There, in exactly the right spot to catch the exhaust fumes from a running motor, was a second blistered discoloration to match the one on Noble's door.

"Since the garage was painted yesterday," droned Gordon, "that was also

blistered last night. And it was done by your roadster's exhaust pipe, Thompson.

"Not sure that your uncle's motor would be sufficient to do the job, you ran your own motor, also, to make certain that enough carbon monoxide would foul the air. Don't try to tell me that your uncle started the job in your half of the garage and then moved his car over into his own side to finish things."

**T**HOMPSON stared with bulging eyes at the telltale circle of soot.

"I—I—" he began nervously.

"Don't bother to lie," said Gordon curtly. "It was your car leaving, not Noble's returning, that Larch heard about midnight. Sure, Doyle claims you were at the Tumble Inn at twelve o'clock, but he also admitted that you owe him ten thousand dollars and that he was pressing you for the money.

"Since your uncle didn't have the money, you had to kill him to get the insurance. So your pre-arranged alibi at the Tumble Inn isn't going to stand up—not in the face of this double-barreled evidence. Harvey Thompson, I arrest you for the murder of your uncle."

Thompson wilted.

"Uncle George had it out with me here in the garage last night," he admitted. "He—he fell asleep after I promised to reform. The temptation was—was too great to resist. I had to meet Jack Doyle and tell him something. Uncle George was old and ready to die, anyhow. So I started both cars to hurry the job. I forgot about that fresh paint."

"Yeah," agreed Gordon dryly. "You tried to do too good a job. Instead, you just manufactured some double-barreled evidence against yourself. Let's go down to Headquarters."