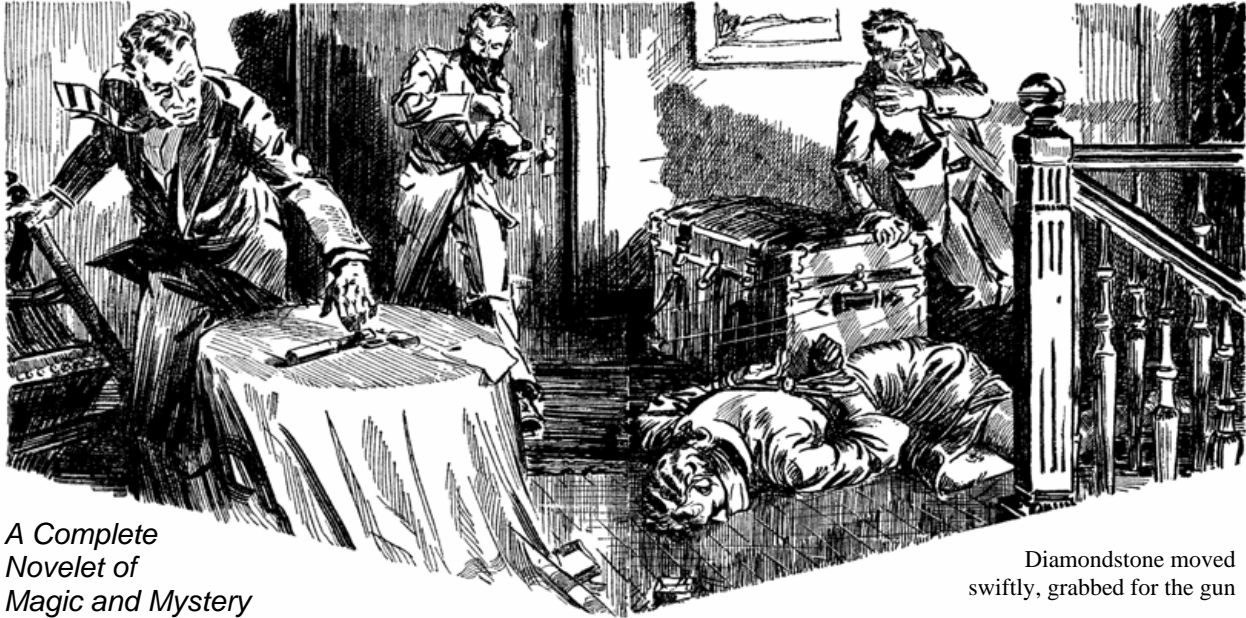


The Murder of the Marionette

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*A Complete
Novelet of
Magic and Mystery*

Diamondstone moved
swiftly, grabbed for the gun

CHAPTER I DEATH WRITES A LETTER

THERE was something about the quality of the voice on the phone that recalled to Diamondstone a newly painted park bench, for it was both cordial and forbidding.

He stood at the window of the Palms Hotel and listened intently to its musical gruesomeness.

"Furthermore," it said, "I don't think you'll like it here at Mayfair Beach at all. Allow me to extend the invitation to leave Florida on the next train. There are, Mr. Diamondstone, *two* universal tragedies: one is living too long—and the other is dying too soon."

Diamondstone popped the shell of a peanut with his right thumb.

"Uh-huh," he sighed. "In your opinion, if I remain in Florida I am not apt to experience the first of these two tragedies."

"Precisely. Should you decide to stay, as I hope you will not, you can't escape us. Even now our all-seeing eyes are upon you. You are in your shirt sleeves. A pair of blue braces is cutting into that too, too solid flesh of your shoulders. With one hand you are cracking peanuts—"

Diamondstone's knees hinged. His powerful

body struck the floor hard enough to threaten the plaster in the room below. Yet he managed to retain both phone and peanut.

The blue blaze of his eyes was focused on the window pane. A small neat bullet hole had appeared there like a sinister eye, staring at what would have been, a split second before, a vital portion of Diamondstone's anatomy. The red-gold brow over his left eye raised quizzically.

"So," he muttered to himself. "The all-seeing eye is located in the window of the hotel across the street." His firm lips curved into a suave smile that was wasted on the transmitter of the phone.

"My!" he exclaimed. "What extraordinary hailstones you have in Florida." His blue eyes became brittle with laughter as he thumbed his nose at the telephone. "If your all-seeing eye can see what I'm doing now—"

Thunderously, the connection was broken. Diamondstone, avoiding the window, got over to the light switch and turned out the light. He went back to the window in friendly darkness to watch two men hurry from the front of the hotel across the street and get into a car. Two men—the one who was proficient with a silenced gun, and the other who had been speaking after the manner of a newly painted park bench.

Death Dances Like a Weird Puppet Until Diamondstone Cuts the Strings of Doom!

“And I’m damned if I’m not going to put my finger into the paint just to see how much of you is bluff,” Diamondstone soliloquized, as he picked up the telephone which had begun to jangle again. In another moment the phone whispered tensely in the voice of a frightened woman.

“MR. DIAMONDSTONE! Thank heaven you are safe!”

Diamondstone, with a glance at the bullet hole, remarked that he was thanking heaven most fervently.

“Come up, Miss Chartis. Hotel lobbies have bigger ears than small pitchers,” he suggested.

Miss Niki Chartis drew a breath that was like an audible shudder.

“Then I’m right? It really is a murder plot!”

“Decidedly,” Diamondstone murmured. “Though these killers are a little confused as to whom to kill.”

He left the phone to put on his tan Palm Beach coat. He surveyed that portion of his bigness which the door mirror could handle, buffed the toes of his yellow-tan shoes, and put a little oil on the troubled waves of his red-gold hair. He then considered himself fit to meet Niki Chartis.

It had been a letter from Niki that had brought him from Indianapolis to the Florida resort city of Mayfair Beach. Niki Chartis was the younger sister of a juggler Diamondstone had been acquainted with when he had trouped in vaudeville as Diamondstone, the Great Magician. Niki’s letter had been filled with bad dreams, a woman’s intuition and inexpressible fear of a murder plot in the hatching. When she entered the door of his room Diamondstone was firmly convinced that hysteria was no ingredient in the delectable concoction of Niki Chartis.

She had short, fine-spun, wavy brown hair that was tucked back over her ears. Her eyebrows kept within bounds without the aid of tweezers. She had a babyish brow, brown eyes, a nice nose. Her lips were firm and determined, her chin cut in decisive lines. She was long-legged, yet well-proportioned. There was just a hint of golden orange in the pink of her soft cheeks.

Niki Chartis was evidently a bit puzzled with Diamondstone. His height and muscular development suggested that he possessed the grace of a steam shovel, yet when he walked to the door to meet her the impression of awkwardness was at

once forgotten. His stride was catlike. The slightest motion of his long-fingered hands suggested power and suppleness. And that secretiveness that made the girl want to see all around him at once was offset by the amazing frankness of his intense blue eyes.

He asked her to take a chair. “But not near the window. I find the night air particularly unhealthy.”

Heedless of his warning, Niki hurried to the window where Diamondstone immediately joined her to draw her back.

“Look,” she whispered. “Down there in front of the drugstore. See those men?”

There was a dark-faced, roly-poly sort of man who carried a yellow walking-stick and twirled a silken mustache.

“Louis Lheureux,” said the girl. “The elderly gentleman with the pipe is Dr. Curtis Polk. And that tall, blond young man—he has the pinkest eyelids you ever saw—he’s Ben Consadine. He’s quite nice and artistic.”

“They don’t look at all like the unholy three to me, though the Frenchman is a bit devilish in his appreciation of ankles as the ladies stroll by.”

“They’re all staying at Hospitality House,” Niki said. “They may have followed me into town.”

Diamondstone was unimpressed. He could have given a number of reasons, none of which was murder, why men would follow Niki Chartis to the ends of the earth.

NIKI sat down and crossed her knees. “I’m sorry I brought you here,” she said, regarding him steadily. “I’ll never be able to afford to employ a detective like you.”

Diamondstone sat down on the writing desk. He picked up a four-inch square of paper, held it in both hands, and exhibited it back and front. He smiled broadly.

“Gratifying to know the aura of magnificence surrounding me,” he said, as he deftly fashioned the bit of paper into a cone. Holding the cone at its tip, he gave it several smart flips with his forefinger. A bit of brightly colored silk blossomed from the top of the cone, seemed to grow until it became a beautifully embroidered Chinese silk handkerchief. Still smiling, but albeit somewhat mysteriously, he tore the empty paper cone into bits which joined the peanut shucks that littered the floor.

“Something from nothing,” he explained as he handed her the handkerchief. “My services are like

that. I'm disgustingly wealthy and the opportunity of serving you will increase my riches."

Niki smoothed the gay piece of silk across her knee. "It's lovely," she said in a husky monotone that Diamondstone thought would never become monotonous to him. "And you're awfully nice. I suppose there's no dissuading you."

"None whatever."

"Then I may as well tell you that about a year ago, being out of work, I noticed an ad in a paper. Men and women who were utterly alone in the world were urged to apply. Both my brother and I applied, though he used a different name and address, so that none would suspect that we were not without family connection. Both of our applications were accepted, and we went to work for the Continental Distributors Company, which sells nationally advertised products from door to door and at greatly reduced prices."

Diamondstone's red-gold brows raised, but he said nothing.

"We had good luck. The products were just about everything the consumer needs—soaps, groceries, medicines, silk hosiery, underwear, kitchen aids, even fur coats. It sounds crooked, but those who bought received plenty for their money.

"Before our applications for jobs were accepted, however, we were given rigorous physical examinations. Then, some time later, we were approached by a man whom Buddy soon discovered to be a life insurance agent."

"Er—did he have a voice like a park bench?" Diamondstone interrupted. "Ah, but I see you don't understand. Go on."

"Well, it seemed that the concern gave their employees bonuses in the form of annuities which were to make them independent in their old age. Details of these annuities were kept pretty well covered, but a man isn't apt to ask questions if someone simply requires his signature to make him financially independent in his old age.

"But my brother—you know how quick he was—caught a paragraph in the annuity contract that struck him as queer. It seemed that if the insured died before he reached the retirement age, a lump sum of thirty thousand dollars went to his beneficiary."

Diamondstone's voice was soft. "And the beneficiary was the Continental Distrib— Ah, but I see it wasn't," as Niki shook her head.

"No, Buddy had never heard of the person

whose name was written in the beneficiary space. You begin to see possibilities, don't you? Well, that's exactly what happened! Several months later, while in Philadelphia, my brother was struck by a car and killed. The driver was not considered at fault because evidence pointed to the fact that Buddy was drunk." The girl shuddered.

"And that," she said with an air of finality, "made it murder. Buddy never touched a drop of liquor in his life. I read in certain books on poisons that there are a number that might have been mistaken for alcohol. So I think that Buddy was poisoned, thrown into the street, and deliberately run over for the sole purpose of collecting on the annuity-insurance policy that the firm had given him."

"And I suppose the beneficiary was an agent of your Continental Distributors, eh?"

The girl nodded. "I think so. But I couldn't bring myself to go to Philadelphia to speak to the police. First, such a move on my part would have turned the eyes of the crooked company on me and possibly have shortened my allotted span of life. Second, I was afraid of the police, because I am convinced that I have actually been peddling stolen goods. Goods stolen by my firm, of course." She grimaced.

"Hm-m. Undoubtedly. Behind the company you'll probably find the biggest fence in the country. But what brought you to Florida?"

Niki Chartis' trembling fingers opened a gaily colored purse. She took out a typed letter bearing the heading of Continental Distributors. She handed it to Diamondstone, who held it to the light.

Dear Employee:

You have been selected as one of those lucky salesmen to receive our extra bonus of two weeks' vacation in Florida, all expenses paid.

When you consider that there are nearly a hundred salesmen in our employ, this is indeed an honor.

You will be my guest at Hospitality House, Mayfair Beach, Florida. Our house party begins not later than midnight, December 10th.

The note was signed by the president of the company in a curious ink scrawl. Diamondstone's brows drew together in a scowl.

"Ever meet this president or any other official?"

"No. I have received frequent communications, all signed in the same way. But don't you see what it is? Under pretense of giving us a vacation, we

will be gathered together so that we will be so much more easy to murder. After all, if we're each worth thirty thousand dollars—dead, that is— But what do you make of the signature?"

Diamondstone squinted and studied it. "It looks like 'M. Ort.' Or possibly just 'Mort'."

Some of the soft, sweet coloring left the girl's face. " 'Mort,' I think. You know, that's French for 'death'."

CHAPTER II SHADOW ON THE WALL



THE TALL iron gates of Hospitality House closed with a clang that had about it all the quality of hopeless finality which distinguishes an interment. Diamondstone was inside those gates, fully conscious of his loneliness and of the festoons of Spanish moss which swayed lightly from the twisted tree branches like ghosts of old gallows birds. Yet the subtropic night had for him the charm of an exotic woman. It was both intoxicating and dangerous, the very qualities that lured him on.

A narrow balcony, edged with a low iron rail, belted the large, yellow brick house at its second story. The balcony extended on the south side to become a roof garden over a glassed-in porch, and there were lanterns and radio music, and the tinkle of ice in tall glasses. The house party without a host was in full swing. Here the star salesmen and saleswomen of the Continental Distributors Company were enjoying their reward, oblivious to the fact that they were worth thirty thousand dollars apiece, dead!

Diamondstone strode up the steps to the front door. The door was open and the screen unlocked. Beyond was a small hall, inadequately lighted; with its single chair. A spiral of steep walnut stairs extended to the upper story. Without preliminary, the magician-sleuth entered, a suitcase in each hand.

From the hall he went into the living room. Here was darkness unbroken, save for a square of light thrown on the wall at the south end of the room, and this square of light came from the door of the adjoining room. Diamondstone put down his bags to grope for the light switch, then paused as into the square of light on the wall stepped the shadow of a man.

Gargantuan, this shadow, and hideous in its threatening attitude. The head was a shapeless blob, except for the chin. Either the man wore a pointed beard, or the lower part of his face was masked by a triangle of handkerchief.

Diamondstone started down the long living room toward the shadow. Inadvertently he ran into a coffee table, upset it with an alarming crash. Instantly the shadow moved; an arm went up, fingers clenching about a gun. The gun clubbed down once. Then the shadow was gone.

Diamondstone kicked up with his right leg and jerked the little automatic from its clip beneath his trouser leg. Gun in hand, he entered the room where the prowler had been. Curtains of golden damask waved beside open windows. Beyond was darkness and the swaying ghosts of Spanish moss. Diamondstone ran to the French windows, stopped, turned quickly, blue eyes incredulous. Here, in this small lighted room, was the maddest of crimes he had ever witnessed. It had no *name*.

"Unless," the magician-sleuth muttered, "you could call it puppet-cide."

LYING on the floor was a huge collapsible suitcase, wide-open. In the top of the suitcase was a collapsible miniature stage. In the bottom, on beds of cotton, reposed a number of dolls about twelve inches in height, the heads artificially fashioned of some sort of plastic material. The dolls were marionettes, for fine black threads were attached to arms, legs and heads so that they could be manipulated by a puppet master.

On a polished walnut table, one of the puppets had been stretched out, the plastic head smashed into three parts by the blow of a gun-butt. Was Diamondstone's imagination getting away with him, or was the broken head with its plastic features similar to the face of one of the men Niki Chartis had pointed out to him from the hotel window—the dark-faced, roly-poly man she had said was a Mr. Louis Lheureux? To one plastic remnant was glued a long silky mustache that certainly caricatured the fat Frenchman.

"Diamondstone—"

The magician-sleuth's eyes swerved from the table and the mangled puppet to the long stretch of damask curtain beside the French window. The curtain breathed with a muffled male voice.

"Diamondstone, you have been warned. Yet you persisted in coming here. Very well. You and I

shall be playing a most dangerous game. You are going to die. Everyone within this house is to die, one after the other. You may be the first or the last. The order is of no consequence. After the first death, possibly the police will be here. No matter. The victims shall not meet with murder. Only 'accidental death,' in the eyes of the law. And whosoever shall find it murder won't live to tell about it," the voice sneered.

"Is this a challenge?" Diamondstone grated. His gun swung toward the curtain.

"A challenge. Your skill against mine, with the reward for your victory being certain death. I advise you to lose, Diamondstone."

Diamondstone massaged the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Suppose I put an end to the game by shooting into the very center of that curtain. True, I have some slight compunction about damaging such fine damask—"

"That would be a grave mistake, Diamondstone. For it would only mean another death by accident. You would not care to be the instrument of that accident, would you?"

A shrill woman's cry keened through the mutterings of the muffled voice. The curtain billowed out into the room. The lithe form of Niki Chartis was flung from behind the curtain into Diamondstone's arms, hampering the shot he might have chanced at the shadowy figure of a man springing lightly through the open window and disappearing into the gloom.

Niki checked her scream, looked wide-eyed into Diamondstone's face. Her cheeks were pale. Red lipstick had been smeared about her mouth by the hand that had held her gagged behind that curtain.

"You saw him—saw his face?" Diamondstone whispered.

Niki shook her head. "His face was covered with a cloth. I was just going out in front to watch for you when I saw someone prowling about in this room. I slipped in behind the curtain, saw him take out that puppet of Ben Consadine's and break it there on the table. When you came in, he ducked behind the curtain. Oh! I was terrified—too terrified to scream. And then I thought you would shoot—"

"Hush," Diamondstone whispered, "someone's coming."

That someone fell over Diamondstone's suitcase, cursed softly. By the time the magician-sleuth had found the light switch in the living room,

the man who had encountered the suitcase was sitting in a chair, rubbing his shins, blinking, peering up at Diamondstone through spectacled, close-set eyes.

DIAMONDSTONE smiled placatingly. "I'm sorry to be late, Mr. Mort," he said.

"No," said he of the barked shins. "No, I'm not Mr. Mort. Just Mr. Wood, Mr. Mort's secretary." He had a futile sort of voice. "Mr. Mort has not yet arrived."

"Hm-m. I can't be too sure," Diamondstone muttered.

Wood asked to see Diamondstone's invitation. Diamondstone had the typed letter Niki Chartis had given him, and this seemed to suffice; for as the others of the house party drifted down from the roof garden, he was introduced. The name of Diamondstone seemed to arouse no suspicion and no comment. But Mr. Mort knew why Diamondstone was there, and Mr. Mort seemed to worry very little about his presence.

Diamondstone met Ben Consadine, a blond young man with pink, sore-looking eyes. It was Consadine who made a hobby of puppets. Then there was Dr. Curtis Polk, pipe-smoking Dr. Polk, who was white-haired and benevolent. He went to great pains to explain that he was not in Mr. Mort's employ, but simply a friend of Wood's.

"A very strange party," remarked Dr. Polk. "Where *is* our host? Not even Mr. Wood has met him."

"Probably Mr. Wood's very good fortune," Diamondstone muttered as he turned a curious eye on Louis Lheureux, the rotund Frenchman with black-bean eyes that threatened to disappear in mobile mounds of fat every time the man opened his mouth. There was not the slightest doubt but what the murdered marionette successfully characterized the Frenchman's face. Why? And why had Mr. Mort taken the pains to smash the puppet's face? Lheureux was fairly pushed out of the way by a sprightly little man named Morris Greenbush. Greenbush grasped Diamondstone's hand.

"Well, well, well," he said nasally, and gave the magician-sleuth's arm a pump with each "well." Then he darted off, after the manner of an uncertain honeybee, to buzz at an unattractive young woman with red hair.

Then there was Mrs. Belle Fotos, fragile in her

middle age, who broke down all barriers between herself and Diamondstone with her first words.

"I'm a widow lady," she said mournfully, and this no doubt accounted for her love of sorrowful purple. Her dress was all purple, unrelieved by any ornament save knobby silver buttons marching in a soldierly line on her bosom, the third button from the top missing. She was creating something with knitting needles from yarn that was the same unhappy shade.

The unattractive redheaded girl came up to cover Diamondstone with jumps from her pale brown eyes. She gushed, the type of woman who labors to give birth to her personality. Her name was Stella Moore.

"Oh, *Mister* Diamondstone," she fluttered, "have you met our Mr. Greenbush?"

Greenbush was the honeybee man who came buzzing up again.

"Well, well, of course. Just shook hands a minute ago," he beamed. He brought his lips up into a grin that formed a U about his long, crooked nose. He was even fuzzy like a bee, for there was nothing on his head but black fuzz, contrasting with the whiteness of his scalp.

Greenbush was seeking pink-eyed Ben Consadine in his busy, uncertain manner. And when he found Consadine, he whispered in the latter's ear. Consadine lowered his head and strode into the small room where Diamondstone had conversed with the unseen Mr. Mort. A moment later, Consadine gave vent to such a remarkable selection of oaths that Mrs. Belle Fotos dropped her knitting to cram her fingers into her ears.

GREENBUSH romped to the center of the room, gesticulating with his hands.

"Someone has smashed one of Mr. Consadine's dummies," he announced.

"Puppets," protested Stella Moore. "That's what they're called."

Greenbush shrugged. "So there's a difference?"

The secretary, Wood, went to look at the damage. Diamondstone heard his futile voice saying something about calling the servants and investigating.

"Investigating?" shouted Consadine, as he exploded from the little room. "My God!" The glance of his red-rimmed eyes struck like an arrow at the rotund figure of Louis Lheureux, and, like an arrow, quivered there a moment before the angry

man dashed into the hall to go up the steps.

Over his shoulder, Consadine called a warning. "When you do any investigating, it will be murder!"

Then there was an immensity of silence in which all, perhaps, were vaguely aware of the unseen presence of Mr. Mort, even as Diamondstone was. Stella Moore chose to hug her thin, bare arms and complain of the chill of the air. Or perhaps she was cold with fear conjured up by the gruesome tone of a clock chiming midnight.

"Morrie," she appealed to Greenbush, "would you go up to my room and get that little jacket?"

"Sure," Greenbush said, with his U grin, and left the room. Diamondstone approached the sweet loveliness of Niki Chartis. The others were crowding around Wood, who had just summoned a Japanese cook and a tottering old butler. Wood was asking futile questions about the broken marionette.

Diamondstone spoke behind the back of his hand. "What did Consadine bring his puppets for, Niki?"

"It's his hobby," said the girl. "He said he had a very special puppet show he had written for the occasion. Queer, though—when he talked about that puppet show, it wasn't as though he was offering us a treat. Something more like a threat."

Diamondstone's blue eyes wandered toward the fat Lheureux, who had detached himself from the others and was being pursued by Stella Moore and her personality. It required all of Lheureux's continental gallantry to suppress a yawn. Finally, he muttered something to the redheaded girl, broke away, and came over to where Diamondstone and Niki were standing. Lheureux was sorry to withdraw from such charming company, he said, but he was going to bed.

"So early?" Diamondstone was pleasantly surprised.

"So sorree," Mr. Lheureux said, as he consulted his watch. "Seven minutes pas' midnight. Pas' my bedtime. So I muz toddle off to bed, as you say."

"Waddle is the word in your case, my fat friend," Diamondstone muttered, as he watched Lheureux move toward the hall. He whispered to Niki: "You and I know that puppet of Consadine's was smashed as deliberately as though the smasher had contemplated murder. What's the answer? From what you've told me of your brother's death, I hardly think Mr. Mort needs practice at murdering. Besides, he'll contrive accidents. Think

of the potential wealth Mr. Mort has in his hundred employees, at thirty thousand a head—”

“I’m going to bed,” Stella Moore announced loudly.

DR. POLK yawned comfortably. “At ten after twelve? Indeed, we’d all be wiser if we did. Odd our host hasn’t showed up.”

“Say, the night is still young,” declared Morris Greenbush, as he came flying into the room with Stella Moore’s jacket. “How about a game of cards, Doctor? And you, Mr. Diamondstone?”

Diamondstone smiled mysteriously. “Hm-m. I don’t think you’d care to play with me.”

“Well, if you insist, Morrie,” Stella Moore tittered, “you and I could have a game of double solitaire.”

Mrs. Belle Fotos sniffed disgustedly. Then she and her knitting got up and tramped to the stairs. Dr. Polk had retired. Wood had dismissed the servants and was on the point of going to his own room. Niki followed Diamondstone into the small room where lay the broken marionette.

“Niki,” the magician-sleuth said, “you’d better go to bed. Don’t undress. Lock your door. Scream at the least provocation. Not that there is apt to be provocation. Every death that Mr. Mort engineers will have to appear accidental. Otherwise, the insurance company holding the policies on his employees is apt to get suspicious. Run along, now. I’ve got to think.”

“Can’t you think when I’m around?” she asked coyly.

Diamondstone looked down into her lovely face and wordlessly shook his head. Something in his intense blue gaze brought a warm flush to her face. She felt the flush and retreated toward the stairway in an attempt to hide it.

Diamondstone went over to the table and studied the pieces of the broken marionette. Joining the pieces roughly, he made absolutely certain that the puppet’s face represented the face of Lheureux, devilish mustache and all. Then he closely examined the other puppets in the suitcase. There was not the slightest similarity between the faces of these other puppets and the present occupants of the house.

Then he sat down to the methodical eating of peanuts, scowled at the wall, and listened to Stella Moore’s irritating laugh and Morris Greenbush’s chatter coming from the next room.

“That man Greenbush,” he commented, “has more ‘wells’ than an oil company.”

It was half-past one when Diamondstone was aroused from what threatened to be a doze by the whisper of slippers feet. There was no other sound in the house. He raised his head, eyes sharpening on a shapeless figure in—Diamondstone groaned inwardly—a purple bathrobe.

“Mrs. Fotos?” he said. “Ah, but I see it is.”

She shuffled toward him, gulping her breath like a beached fish.

“I—I can’t sleep,” she gasped. “Just such a shock as this, the doctor said, would kill me. I—I’ve just come out of the hospital. A very, what you might call touchy operation. I’m not apt to stand much more of this.” She withered into a chair. Diamondstone got up and put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. There was a jarring pulse visible in her thin throat.

“Shock?” he prompted.

“Yes. I was awakened from a sound sleep by a splash. It was horrible! I knew what had happened. There was no other sound. Just that horrible splash. No floundering. The splash— And I lay there, my heart shaking the bed, too frightened to move. What Mr. Consadine said about murder got me all upset. And then the splash in the silence of the night—”

“Splash?” Diamondstone prompted.

“Yes; noise water makes when you fall into it. It’s that swimming pool at the back of the house. It’s right under Mr. Lheureux’s window, and when I first laid eyes on it I felt something terrible would revolve around it. Don’t you ever have uncomfortable hunches?”

“Uh-huh. Multitudes of them.” Diamondstone started for the door. “Don’t come out. I’ll have a look at the pool. When did you hear this—er—this splash?”

“Oh, it seemed like hours ago. I just lay there until I couldn’t stand it any longer. When everything’s dark, time doesn’t matter, does it?”

Diamondstone went into the hall and out the front door. He trotted silently around the house, looking up at the girdling balcony as he ran. At the back was the pool, a long oblong of water, distorting a reflected sky of quivering stars and a smeary moon. Directly above the pool, the iron rail of the balcony had been torn loose and dangled from the corner, where metal rivets persistently held it.

Then he looked down into the pool; looked beyond the rippling reflection. Down there in the cool depths was another vague moon that was motionless—the face of a human being.

CHAPTER III
THE INVISIBLE HOST



DIAMONDSTONE, stripped to his shorts, stood on the edge of the pool and drank deep lungfuls of the exotically perfumed air that had somehow lost its charm. He was as dripping wet as the limp body that repeated dives had enabled him to bring to the surface.

The waterlogged corpse was that of Ben Consadine, the tall, blond man who was the fashioner of puppets. His corpse, in the cold eyes of Mr. Mort, was thirty thousand dollars in insurance money.

As soon as he had his breath, Diamondstone knelt and examined the contents of Consadine's pockets. There were the usual articles a man carries, but nothing to indicate robbery. Nothing, for that matter, to indicate murder. But then, Mr. Mort didn't murder; he arranged "accidents."

Consadine's watch, which was fully wound but not running, found its way into the magician-sleuth's pocket as soon as he had pulled on his clothes. It was when he was putting the watch away that he discovered his little automatic was missing. Diamondstone's blue eyes shifted about the moonlit area around the swimming pool.

"So," he whispered, "Mr. Mort paid my clothes a visit while I was in the water. I must be very careful to avoid anything that has the makings of an 'accident' about it."

As he hurried away from the pool, Diamondstone caught sight of a grotesque figure rounding the corner of the house. It was Lheureux, ridiculous in bathrobe and nightcap. He all but bumped into Diamondstone, who caught him by his fat shoulders. Lheureux went into gestures and a babble of French.

Diamondstone steadied the man. "Could you," he asked, "get all that frog out of your throat and start in again?"

"*Mon Dieu!* I have come out for a breath of air. Is not that Stella Moore enough to take one's breath? I could not sleep. I come out for a walk—"

"In your nightcap?" Diamondstone's eyes were laughing. "Were you afraid someone would see you?"

"*Non, non.* That was not it. I heard a splashing sound in the pool. I was wondering—"

Diamondstone pointed to the break in the iron railing of the balcony above their heads.

"**I**AM very much afraid this is a bad night for sleeping. Consadine, however, solved the problem of insomnia permanently. He splashed—he was not splashing—in the pool."

"Consadine? Ooh! *Mon ami, vous—*"

"Stop blubbering! Did you know Consadine?"

"*Mais oui!* Like three brothers— Consadine, Saunders and I. We were all in this business—from door to door selling. We were all in New York. Naturally—"

"Saunders?"

"You have not heard of Saunders? He was with our company. *Mon pauvre ami!* Saunders, he kill himself with a revolver, six, no, four months ago!"

"Hm-m. Thirty thousand dollars," Diamondstone muttered. And if Consadine and Lheureux were like brothers, Consadine's glances at Lheureux that evening had very little fraternal affection in them.

Diamondstone took Lheureux by the shoulder; took, perhaps, Mr. Mort by the shoulder. Together they returned to the front entrance of the house, where Diamondstone had had to comfort Mrs. Belle Fotos.

"And do not inform the others of the accident," Diamondstone warned. "I am going to notify the police."

"Poleez!" Lheureux squealed. His eyes fled back into the mountains of fat that socketed them.

Diamondstone, a cautioning finger on his lips, picked up the hall phone and called the Mayfair Beach police, to announce simply that one of the guests had fallen into the pool and drowned. Then he hung up and hurried up the winding staircase behind Mrs. Belle Fotos, who was whispering to the walls that her heart would never, never get over the shock.

"Which is Consadine's room?" Diamondstone asked of the Frenchman, who had pattered thunderously up behind him. Lheureux pointed out the room.

Diamondstone opened the door, found the room lighted, the bed undisturbed. He went through the

room swiftly and into the adjacent bathroom. Then he turned to the closet where was hung Consadine's "other" suit. His long, graceful fingers searched the pockets and produced a folded manuscript, neatly typed.

"A play," he murmured. "Presumably a puppet play. The title: 'Was It Murder?' And in the cast of characters a Mr. Mort and a Joseph Saunders."

"Saunders," whispered Lheureux. "Our frien'!"

Diamondstone hurried over the script, found at its conclusion the line:

Detective: And so the suicide of Joe Saunders wasn't a suicide at all. I arrest you, Mr. Mort, as his murderer!

"Mr. Mort!" Lheureux said in a shocked whisper.

Diamondstone's eyes rested shrewdly upon the fat man. "You are not surprised, then, that it is herein indicated that Saunders was murdered."

"But yes—" protestingly.

"Yet you are surprised that Mr. Mort was his murderer."

Lheureux pawed Diamondstone's shoulders and sputtered excitedly a moment before he could translate his thoughts into English.

"But of course, there is certainly some doubt when a man kills himself. But Mr. Mort, our employer—why would *he* do this thing?"

Diamondstone shrugged quite as eloquently as Lheureux. "We have no facts. Just Consadine's suspicions. Consadine thought Mr. Mort murdered Saunders. And—shades of Hamlet—that was why Consadine brought his puppets. He planned to put on a show here that would enable him to accuse Mr. Mort of murder through the lips of his puppets." He looked one-sidedly at Lheureux. Was the Frenchman laughing at him?

Consadine had seen opportunity for murder, as well as motive, in the life insurance contract that Mr. Mort's employees had signed. Was it that Consadine had suspected Lheureux as being the mysterious Mr. Mort? "Mort" is French for death, as Niki Chartis had said. Lheureux had been in New York at the time of Saunders' death. And if Consadine had wanted to accuse Mr. Mort of murder in his puppet play, and if he believed Lheureux to be Mr. Mort, then that explained why one of Consadine's puppets had been fashioned to resemble Lheureux—the puppet which was to play the part of Mr. Mort.

BUT did that explain the attack on the puppet-image of Lheureux? Diamondstone didn't think so. Aloud he spoke. "No, Mr. Mort is much more thorough."

"But I do not onerstan'," Lheureux objected.

"Who," asked Diamondstone, "does?"

The magician-sleuth ran fingers through the dankness of his red-gold hair. He went to the casement windows and stepped out on the narrow balcony. He examined the iron railing. It was so rusty that it might easily have been broken by accident. And the fact that the balcony encircled the house was not helpful in eliminating suspects. Anyone might have stepped from a second-story window, got Consadine out on the balcony, and pushed him through the rusty railing and into the pool. Diamondstone stepped back into the room.

"You think this could be something—something very ugly?" Lheureux whispered at him.

"Very ugly," Diamondstone said. "But," as he recalled Mr. Mort's warning, "it is a very ugly 'accident', of course."

Below stairs the doorbell rang insistently. Diamondstone stepped out onto the front porch and closed the door behind him. Outside was a man in plainclothes and a uniformed policeman.

"Where's this fella you said was drowned?" demanded the man in plainclothes. "I'm McArthur, chief of police at Mayfair Beach."

Diamondstone pulled out a card that identified him. The chief glanced at the card.

"A private detective, eh? Anything phony about this drowning?"

Diamondstone's lips lifted at the corners. "Who am I to venture an opinion before the law has its inning? Please don't consider me as a detective at all. I am merely Mr. Mort's guest."

"I get you," said the chief. "And who is this Mort guy?"

"Considerable confusion exists as to that point," Diamondstone said. He directed them to the pool behind the house. Then he went back into the hall. Niki Chartis was coming down the stairs.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"It would be folly to limit the wrongness to 'something'," he said, unsmilingly. "First a marionette is murdered. Then the marionette's master—"

"Ben Consadine?" Niki came down the last of the steps quickly to stand beside him, looking very small and frightened.

Diamondstone nodded. "And when you understand the reason for smashing the puppet—well, then you don't understand it at all. Here are facts," and he ticked them off on his fingers.

"Consadine suspected that a friend of his named Saunders, also associated with this crooked concern, was murdered by Mr. Mort. Furthermore, he suspected that Mr. Mort was Lheureux. So, borrowing a plot from Shakespeare's 'Hamlet,' Consadine created a marionette show in which a puppet resembling Lheureux was presumably to play the part of the villainous Mr. Mort. Consadine was counting on watching closely Lheureux's actions toward the accusations in the play to substantiate his suspicions—that Lheureux was Mr. Mort, and that Mr. Mort was a murderer.

"Now, if Mr. Mort smashed the puppet modeled after Lheureux, then Consadine couldn't put on his play. But in smashing the puppet, didn't Mr. Mort practically admit to Consadine that he, Mort, was Lheureux? He did. But in preventing Consadine from putting on his show Mr. Mort might have thought to keep the incriminating information to himself and Consadine, killing Consadine before the latter could spread it around that Mr. Mort was Lheureux."

"I UNDERSTAND now," Niki said.

"Pardon the contradiction, but I don't think you do. Because if Mr. Mort was Lheureux, wouldn't he have either stolen the puppet or destroyed it beyond recognition? I'm inclined to think that the puppet smashing was, magically speaking, misdirection."

"What do you mean?" she asked, puzzled.

Diamondstone took a cigarette from a pocket case and held it under Niki's nose.

"Let this be Mr. Mort. My left hand"—he showed it empty and then balled into a fist—"represents Lheureux; and resembles the general rotundity of his body, incidentally. Now, keep your eye on Mr. Mort, represented by the cigarette."

With great deliberation, Niki saw Diamondstone put the cigarette in his closed left fist. His right hand, fingers wide spread, dropped to his side. He shook his left fist, flourished the fingers apart, and exhibited his left hand back and front.

"The cigarette's gone," Niki marveled.

Smilingly, the magician-sleuth shook his head. The fingers of his right hand gesticulated, produced the cigarette from a thumb-palmed position in his

right hand.

"That," he explained, "was misdirection. You weren't watching the cigarette; you were watching my left fist. You were watching Lheureux instead of Mr. Mort, just as he intended me to do."

"But," Niki objected, "if Lheureux was wrongly suspected by Consadine, why should Consadine be killed? More misdirection?"

"More murder," Diamondstone corrected. "Are you forgetting the awful motive behind this house party? Mr. Mort nets thirty thousand dollars for every death occurring among his employees. And, of course, if killing Consadine heightened my suspicion of Lheureux, Consadine ought to be killed first, shouldn't he? And all this misdirection is for our benefit.

"You and I heard Mr. Mort say that he was going to commit murder. We can go to the police and say: 'Mr. Mort murdered Consadine.' The police, first of all, are going to wonder how we can prove it was murder. Then they're going to ask the embarrassing question of who Mr. Mort is."

Diamondstone's voice was grim. "And we're not able to tell them anything more definite than that Mr. Mort is someone in this house. No, the misdirection is for you and me; to get us to look elsewhere while Mr. Mort is up to more hellishness."

Chief McArthur pushed open the hall door then. "Well, the guy, simply leaned too heavy on the rail up there and fell into the pool. Where are the rest of the folks? I got to see if any of them witnessed the accident."

"Upstairs," Diamondstone told him.

McArthur turned to his subordinate. "Get 'em all down here. Too bad. But it'll only take a minute."

Diamondstone turned, entered the living room, removing Consadine's watch from his pocket as he did so. The hands of the dead man's watch had stopped at ten minutes past midnight. He put the watch down on an end table and dropped into a chair beside it. So engrossed in the contemplation of the dead man's timepiece was he, that he did not notice that McArthur and Niki had followed him into the room.

"SAY, what's all this mystery?" McArthur said.

Diamondstone's head jerked up. "Mystery? Oh. I wonder if you'd have any consideration for the

wish of a dying man. Hm—m—I think you would. If something happened to me, if I should disappear, commit suicide, or be unable to get out of the way of a steam roller, my dying wish, would be that you do certain things, McArthur. First, I'd want you to find out if the dead Mr. Consadine had any relatives or friends, so-called, who might cash in on a life insurance policy amounting to thirty thousand dollars. I'd like you to check with every life insurance company and nab the man or woman who makes the claim.

"There's a man in this house who isn't exactly nice. He assaulted a marionette, he stole my gun. Back in your fair city he took a potshot at me, or maybe had someone do his shooting for him."

"In Mayfair Beach?" gasped McArthur. "Why, that town's as clean as a pin."

"People," Diamondstone said dryly "have been known to get lockjaw from the prick of a pin. You'd be rather surprised to know that I believe a large business concern devoted to the disposal of stolen goods has its headquarters in your town." Diamondstone picked up Consadine's watch and started to put it in his pocket.

"What are you doing with Dr. Polk's watch?" Niki asked him.

"Dr. Polk's?" Diamondstone exclaimed.

"Look here, Mr. Diamondstone," McArthur was objecting. But all of Diamondstone's attention was on Niki Chartis.

"That watch," the girl said. "Isn't it Dr. Polk's? Anyway, he has one just like it."

Diamondstone's red-gold brows drew together. "So," he hissed.

A thumping, bumping, crashing sound came from the hall. Diamondstone sprang to his feet to give McArthur an utterly new conception of speed. A straight-arm push in the chest shoved McArthur out of the way. Then Diamondstone was gone—through the living room, around a corner, into the hall.

At the foot of the steps lay a mound of purple—inert, pitifully huddled. It was Mrs. Belle Fotos. The grey of her face matched her hair. She had changed into her purple dress. She was clutching her knitting. The five metal buttons on the bosom of her dress quivered slightly, and then stilled.

Down the stairs came McArthur's assistant, notebook in hand. He slipped on the polished stairs, propped his notebook to seize the rail to prevent himself from piling up on top of Mrs. Fotos. The

man's wild-eyed stare met Diamondstone's.

"She musta slipped. Hurt?" asked the policeman.

Diamondstone dropped beside Mrs. Fotos. "No," he said huskily. "Dead. Get Dr. Polk, McArthur. You, cop! Come down here!"

Diamondstone's long fingers raked along the floor near where Mrs. Fotos had fallen. He picked up something, palmed it. The policeman joined Diamondstone. Coming down the steps were Dr. Polk, Greenbush, Wood and Lheureux. Diamondstone seized the law officer by the shoulder and pulled him into the living room. The magician-sleuth's eyes burned with the blue heat of a Bunsen flame.

"Quick," he said, "how did this happen? Who pushed the woman?"

"Pushed— Say, I was standing ten feet behind the old lady. There wasn't any other soul in the hall. I seen her slip. Didn't I slip myself?"

"I saw *you* slip. You dropped your notebook to clutch the stair-rail. Why didn't Mrs. Fotos drop her knitting and do the same thing when she felt herself slipping? Because she didn't *feel* herself slipping. She fell because she was knocked out, and in her critical condition a sharp blow to the head—any serious shock, in fact—meant death."

"Say, listen, if anybody had sapped the old lady I'd have seen it. She *walked* to the top of the stairs—"

Diamondstone left the policeman abruptly and swung back into the hall. Stella Moore had joined the others. She resembled hysteria about to happen, and it was Niki Chartis' embrace that seemed to be holding the redheaded girl together. Dr. Polk got to his feet beside the body and nodded gravely at McArthur.

"Possibly a small fracture. Undoubtedly struck the back of her head on the edge of a step in falling. A sharp blow to the brain-stem such as she received is frequently fatal to younger and sturdier persons. A woman in her condition—" He shook his head. "A most unfortunate accident."

"One, two, three, four, five," counted Diamondstone. "Five buttons on Mrs. Belle Fotos' dress. Metal buttons, round and heavy. Third button from the top is missing. It was missing last night."

"Are you mad?" demanded Wood's futile voice. His narrow face was the color of plaster.

"Going that way rapidly," Diamondstone muttered. Slowly he opened the fingers of his right

hand. Nestled in his palm was a round, silvery button—the object he had picked up from the floor beside Mrs. Belle Fotos.

“Button, button, who *had* the button? Who returned it to Mrs. Fotos—so effectively?”

CHAPTER IV HOMICIDE HOST



SMILING slightly, Diamondstone bent over the top of a small drum table which he had monopolized as a stand for his apparatus. In the row of chairs in front of him, was the most unusual audience he had ever performed before. Dr. Polk refused to face the magician squarely, for he said he was skeptical of “tricksters.” Morris Greenbush, with his impish grin, promised to be a heckler. Stella Moore was there to titter at Morris Greenbush’s witticisms. Lheureux’s eyes kept disappearing, for he yawned frequently. Wood, the missing host’s secretary, was irritable and nervous.

Niki Chartis, perfectly aware that Diamondstone was playing with dynamite, watched him with wide eyes, and now and again stole a glance at the other spectators. It was three-thirty in the morning. The police had gone and the undertaker’s ambulance had called for the bodies of Mrs. Fotos and Consadine.

Diamondstone had never undertaken any magical performance as nerve-wracking. Directly in front of him sat Mr. Mort, whoever he was. And while the others might be fooled, Mr. Mort would not be; he would see through the magic to find evidence of murder that pointed directly at him.

“I wish you’d stop this farce,” snapped Wood, after Diamondstone had performed a few preliminary tricks. “You’re no amateur magician, and you know it.”

Diamondstone smiled. “Thank you.”

“I mean,” Wood went on, “that you’re not just a Mr. Diamondstone. You’re *the* Diamondstone. I’ve read about you. You’re a detective, and a damned smart one. You’d have fooled me if you hadn’t brought out those tricks. What’s it all about? What’s the idea of having us sit around here at this hour of the morning and watch you make handkerchiefs and cards vanish? Mrs. Belle Fotos was murdered, wasn’t she?”

Diamondstone frowned thoughtfully as he

picked up a pharmacist’s mortar from the table.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,” he said slowly. “I do believe we can say that Mrs. Fotos was urged to fall down the steps by an impulse originating outside her own body. But it would be difficult to prove, however.” He paused a moment. “Now, for our next little experiment, I require a watch. A gentleman’s watch,” he added.

Morris Greenbush stared at those about him. “Any gentlemen in the audience?” That brought a silly laugh from Stella Moore.

“Dr. Polk,” Diamondstone urged, “will you lend me your watch?”

Dr. Polk frowned. “I suppose I must.” He brought a watch out of his pocket and handed it to Diamondstone. The magician-sleuth examined it closely. Niki Chartis had not been mistaken. This watch was a replica of the one Consadine had had—an expensive timepiece of American make.

Diamondstone nodded his thanks. He then dropped the watch into the pharmacist’s mortar, picked up a pestle from the table and fell to work on Dr. Polk’s watch, apparently.

“Here,” Dr. Polk said, as he heard his watch being ground to fragments, “you can’t do that to *my* watch!”

Stella Moore tittered. Lheureux stopped yawning. Niki Chartis began to pick her fingers. Morris Greenbush was annoyed. “Sit down, Doc,” he said. “I’ve seen this one. It’s a fake.”

“Is it?” Diamondstone’s eyebrows went up. He tipped up the mortar and poured a handful of broken glass, bent watchcase, wheels, springs and bearings into his palm.

Dr. Polk cursed. “I won’t have it. Give me back my watch!”

DIAMONDSTONE extended the wreckage to him. “If you want it, all right. But I’d rather put it together for you.”

“You’re damned right you’ll put it back together!” Dr. Polk snapped.

Diamondstone then consigned the watch parts to a paper sack, which he blew up. Oh yes, the watch parts were inside the sack. The spectators could hear them rattling. But then Diamondstone popped the sack—an explosion that caused Stella Moore to scream and Niki Chartis to jump out of her chair. But there was no rain of watch parts, nor yet the appearance of Polk’s reconstructed timepiece. Diamondstone picked up an apple from the table

and handed it to Wood.

"Please cut this apple open," he invited.

Wood took out his knife, fumbled it and the apple, cut his thumb, cursed.

"Here, let me do that," said Greenbush. "What Mr. Diamondstone did was to palm the watch and then stuff it into a slot in the apple. I've seen this before."

And Greenbush took the knife and the apple from Wood, halved the apple, then embarrassedly pulled his long nose.

Diamondstone began to chuckle. "What did you find inside the apple, Mr. Greenbush?"

Greenbush sat down. "Apple seeds."

"But my watch!" protested Dr. Polk.

Diamondstone took a large white handkerchief from his breast pocket held it draped over his left hand.

"My next experiment is an extremely interesting one. I spread my handkerchief over my hand, in this fashion. Then I lift it up and produce Dr. Polk's watch—"

His red-gold brows drew into a puzzled frown. He peeked under his handkerchief.

"Odd. That watch of yours wasn't a Waterbury, was it, Doctor?" He whisked aside the handkerchief to display a large, footed goblet, brimming with water.

Diamondstone put down the glass of water. He went over to Morris Greenbush and began patting Greenbush's pockets. He sighed.

"I thought you might have the watch, Mr. Greenbush." Then he returned to the table, made a pass over the glass of water. There was a *clink*—and Dr. Polk's watch suddenly appeared in the glass of water.

"YOU'LL ruin that!" Dr. Polk shouted.

Diamondstone was looking at his own wristwatch. "I'm trying to," he admitted. "Ben Consadine had a watch just like this one of yours, Dr. Polk. I am expecting your watch to stop, due to the water getting into its movement. It should require approximately the same time to stop as Consadine's did, when it was submerged in water. What time did Consadine fall into the pool? It must have been close to half-past one this morning, when Mrs. Belle Fotos heard the splash—*one* splash, if you please. A drowning man is not apt to make just one splash, like a rock, unless the man happens to be dead before he hits the water.

"But we know Consadine was *drowned*. If he was dead before he hit the pool, he must have been drowned in his own bathtub, with the special assistance of a murderer. This murderer, sometimes known as Mr. Mort, found it safer to wait until we were all presumably in bed before going to Consadine's room, removing Consadine's body from the tub, and going out the window onto the balcony which circumscribes the entire house. Then Mr. Mort simply pushed Consadine's body over, or should I say through the rusty railing, to let it drop into the pool. Apparently, Consadine had leaned too heavily against the weak railing, and had fallen into the pool.

"And—let's see. Dr. Polk's watch when submerged, stopped in nine minutes and three seconds. Presuming that Consadine's watch stopped in approximately the same time, we know just when Consadine was forcibly submerged in the bathtub.

"To get to the second 'accident', now. Mrs. Fotos lost one of the heavy round buttons off her dress. It was Mr. Mort who found that button and recognized its possibilities as a projectile, when fired by a slingshot. A slingshot can be rather a deadly weapon. It shoots harder and more accurately than most air rifles. Now, a short while ago, just as Mrs. Fotos was about to descend the stairs, Mr. Mort fired the heavy missing button silently and with deadly accuracy at the back of Mrs. Fotos' head—a particularly vulnerable spot, since the nerve center which controls the vital functions is located there.

"Because of Mrs. Fotos' critical condition, the murderer had little chance to fail in his attempt. If he did, no harm done, because the button projectile would have aroused no suspicion. The button might have been torn from Mrs. Fotos' dress in the fall. Fortunately, I noted the absence of the button last night." The magician-sleuth paused a moment to let that sink in.

"Thus, in the killing of Mrs. Fotos, Mr. Mort used a silent, un-noticeable, if not invisible weapon, firing his slingshot from *behind* the policeman who was standing in the hall, then ducking back into the door of his room before the policeman thought to turn around. And, of course, the cop's attention would be focused entirely on the falling Mrs. Fotos."

Diamondstone smiled, bowed. "That concludes my part of the performance. Judge, jury and

hangman will attend to the concluding act.”

He turned quickly, went into the hall and ran up the steps. He slipped into a small closet in the center of the upstairs hall, where he had noticed an extension telephone resting on a shelf at the back. He picked up the phone.

“Police Headquarters—” Diamondstone began. A crackling sound vibrated in the receiver. Mr. Mort had moved as quick as the magician-sleuth, to cut the line.

Footsteps in the hall. Diamondstone turned quickly. The door of the phone closet, struck on the outside by a lunging form, slammed shut even as Diamondstone threw his weight against it. Again, someone had moved as quick as he. A key turned in the lock, was withdrawn. Diamondstone backed up to buck at the panel, paused to listen to a high-pitched, somehow sinister hiss.

He sniffed, looked upward. In the ceiling, four full feet above his head, was the outlet of an old-fashioned illuminating gas fixture, the origin of the hiss.

Diamondstone dropped to his knees, as a strangled cough escaped his lips.

CHAPTER V MR. MORT PACKS UP



FROWNING, Mr. Mort, his features masked by a triangle of black cloth, stood in the upstairs hall. With him was a man with a cauliflower ear, and another man whose voice Diamondstone had likened to a newly painted park bench. On a little table was a long-barreled, silenced pistol. In front of the table were two sizeable trunks. Beside one trunk lay Niki Chartis, bound and gagged.

“The others lammed out of here before I could sew them up,” Mr. Mort was saying. “They’ll get the police and crab the whole damned act—the insurance business and the stolen goods business, too.”

“If,” said the man with the park-bench voice, “you hadn’t smashed that puppet, Diamondstone wouldn’t have upset the beans.”

Mr. Mort sliced the air with his hand. “Nuts! This Diamondstone guy and the girl knew we were up to killing. I knew Diamondstone would come here, looking for murder. I knew he’d know the ‘accidents’ were something else, even if he didn’t

have proof. And until I could invent some ‘accident’ to remove Diamondstone, I had to keep his attention on the wrong track. So I pulled the puppet murder. If we’d stuck to the fence business and left this insurance scheme of yours alone, we’d be in the clear now.”

“What you goin’ to do wit’ de goil?” asked Cauliflower-ear.

“You’re going to put a bullet in her,” Mr. Mort said. “We ship the dame’s and Diamondstone’s bodies in these trunks to addresses unknown.” He looked at his watch. “Diamondstone has been in there with the gas thirty minutes. Get out the stiff and fit him into the trunk.”

Mr. Mort took out a key and opened the phone closet. Diamondstone’s big body was stretched at full length on the floor, face up, chest motionless, head toward the rear of the closet.

The murderer got hold of Diamondstone’s feet and dragged him into the hall to drop him behind one of the trunks.

“You, Spike,” he addressed Cauliflower-ear, “put the slug in the girl. Your gun’s right over there. See that you do a better job than you did when you tried to plug Diamondstone.”

“Aw, dat guy moved too damned fast,” muttered Spike. He detoured around the trunk intended to be Diamondstone’s coffin and reached for the gun on the table.

But Diamondstone moved much faster to save Niki Chartis than he had moved to save himself. His limp-looking legs became pistons of power that sent the trunk torpedoing to mow the legs out from under Spike. Then Diamondstone was on his knees, on his feet, a gyrating mountain of power, moving with the elusive speed of an arrow. He seemed but to brush by the table where the pistol lay. Then he whirled across the hall.

The wall stopped him. The gun he had snatched from the table halted the quick draw of the man with the park-bench voice. Diamondstone’s lips curved into his suave magician’s smile.

“Now all together, my children of the devil,” he said. “One compact little huddle. Hands way up. Hold it, Spike; not too close to Mr. Mort. And if, in hell, you trap a man in a lethal chamber, don’t forget to plug up the keyhole. I simply knelt, held my nose, glued my lips to the keyhole, then flopped down and played possum when I heard you about to open the door.”

“PRETTY damned smart, aren’t you?” Mr. Mort said bitterly.

Diamondstone chuckled grimly.

“I’m inclined to agree with you, since smartness is a matter of comparison. When I can see how dull-witted you were, I don’t show up so bad, after all, do I? When you drowned Consadine in the bathtub, you forgot to remove his watch. The watch stopped at ten minutes past midnight. Watches of that type stop due to water-logging after about nine minutes, as you saw me prove. That meant that Consadine was forced beneath the water in the bathtub at about one minute past midnight.

“Later, when the household was supposedly asleep, you took Consadine out on the balcony, just outside of Lheureux’s window. It was easy enough to do, when you consider the balcony runs all around the house. Like the smashing of the puppet, that was to keep me watching Lheureux, rather than you. Then you broke down the iron railing and threw Consadine’s body into the pool, to make the drowning appear accidental.

“But the watch showed you up nicely. If Consadine was forcefully submerged in the bathtub at about one minute past midnight, only one person could have accomplished the job. Not Lheureux, because he didn’t go upstairs until seven minutes past midnight. But at the time of the murder, Mr. Morris Greenbush was upstairs, presumably looking for Stella Moore’s jacket—but actually engaged in one of his thirty-thousand-dollar ‘accidental’ murders. So ring up the curtain, Greenbush, and let’s see you grin!”

Greenbush, alias Mr. Mort, yanked aside the mask. He wasn’t grinning now. He was as ugly as a gargoyle.

Diamondstone eyed him contemptuously. “And

when I pretended to look for Dr. Polk’s watch on your agile person, I discovered something in your pocket that was the unmistakable shape of a slingshot—the simple device you used in shooting that hard button that resulted in Mrs. Belle Fotos’ death.”

The magician-sleuth’s voice was ironic. “And to think that you were making love to Stella Moore! Then, if all had gone well, you’d have killed her like the rest of your star salesmen and saleswomen. Not painfully, of course— You’re a sentimental rat.” Greenbush snarled in impotent rage, but he was helpless now.

“And what the hell do you think you’re going to do about it?” demanded he of the park-bench voice.

Diamondstone didn’t answer for a moment. He was listening intently to the scream of a police siren in the distance.

“Evidently,” he said, “some of the other guests of Homicide House have contacted Mayfair Beach. I really don’t think I have much more to do. There are, as every life insurance agent tells me, *two* universal tragedies—living too long, and dying too soon. I don’t think any of you three need to worry about the future at all. You really don’t seem to have any. You see, Mr. Greenbush—Mort and Mr. Spike are going to sit on Mr. Park Bench—only he’ll have wires attached—”

“And,” Niki Chartis told Diamondstone, as he untied her after the Mayfair Beach police had taken charge of Morris Greenbush and his buddies, “I don’t see that I have much future, either. You’ve lost me my job with your detecting and all.”

Diamondstone frowned. “One of these days I’m going to relax. And when I do, I want you to be my secretary—so that we can take it easy together.”



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

FRAME FOR A LADY

A Complete Novelet of a Baffling Murder Mystery

Jig-Saw That Defies Solution!

By CLEVE F. ADAMS



AND MANY OTHER STORIES OF CRIME