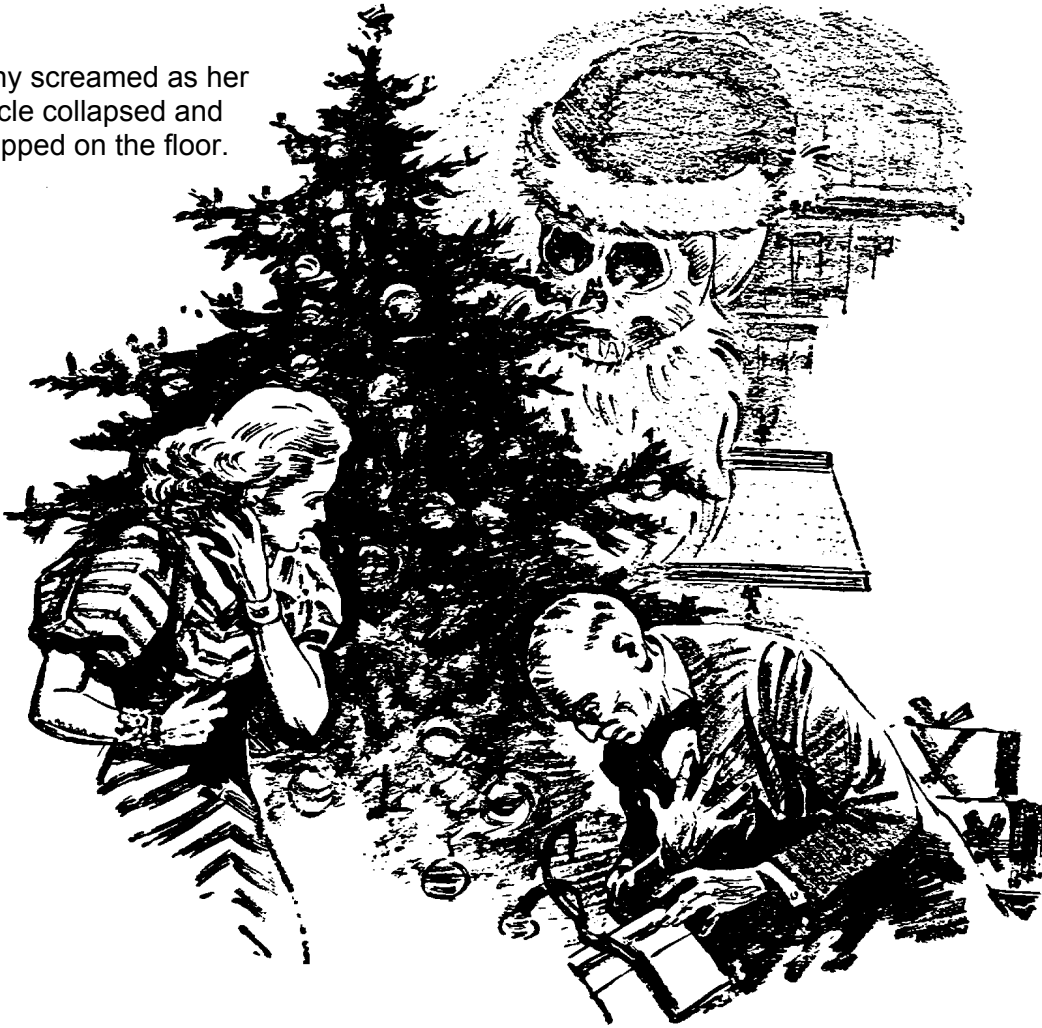


# DEATH PLAYS SANTA CLAUS

Penny screamed as her uncle collapsed and dropped on the floor.



By JOHNSTON McCULLY

Lieutenant Mike O'Hara of homicide makes short work of a murder case—so that he can spend his Christmas at home!

**D**EEP disgust formed a picture in the face of Detective-lieutenant Mike O'Hara as he sat before his desk in the Homicide Squad's room at Police Headquarters. It was nine by the clock on Christmas Eve.

O'Hara had anticipated a Christmas Eve at home with his wife and their two young children, for it was his regular time off duty. He had intended donning a Santa Claus costume and giving the kids the time of their young lives. A Christmas tree had been prepared, and a closet

was filled with presents.

But lots had been drawn to decide which members of the Squad would spend Christmas Eve on duty and which would serve through Christmas Day, and O'Hara had drawn a Christmas Eve position.

So had Detective Sergeant Ed Rassman, who was busy now with the radio in a corner of the room, and bringing in Christmas music. In deference to O'Hara's fit of gloom, he kept the radio turned low.

“So it’s Christmas Eve,” O’Hara growled. “When a man should be at home, if he’s got kids. The only homicides we ever have on Christmas Eve are simple killings, the result of fights which are the result of too much Christmas firewater. There’s never any question about ‘em. No mysteries to solve. The patrolmen on the beats could handle ‘em and make a report. Right?”

“Right!” Rassman agreed. “But you never can tell. And by workin’ tonight, Mike, we get tomorrow off. We can eat Christmas dinner with our folks.”

The telephone bell on O’Hara’s desk gave three quick jangles, the alert signal. O’Hara’s face grew stern, and he reached for the phone. Those three jerky rings meant business.

“O’Hara at this end!” the lieutenant barked into the mouthpiece.

“Maybe you’d better take that call, lieutenant,” the telephone desk sergeant answered. “Sounds important.”

“Switch ‘em on.”

The desk sergeant made the switchboard connection.

“Homicide Squad!” O’Hara barked. “Lieutenant O’Hara speaking.”

A cultured, well-modulated masculine voice came to him over the wire.

“This is Dr. Morgan Stampf. I am at the residence of Cecil Fargall on Empire Boulevard. I regret to report that Mr. Fargall passed away a few minutes ago under circumstances that appear suspicious to me. Though I have been his personal physician for several years, I thought it best to notify the police and have an investigation made.”

“Quite right, sir!” O’Hara replied. “We’ll be right there.” He cradled the phone and got out of his chair. “Punch the button, Ed,” he ordered Rassman.

“We roll?” Rassman asked.

**O**’HARA nodded assent as he reached for his hat and overcoat. Rassman pressed a button and started things moving. The Homicide Squad was going out!

The speedy sedan with daring chauffeur would be waiting for them when they hurried into the basement garage of Headquarters. The police photographer and the fingerprint expert would follow in a car always ready and carrying their

equipment, and two minor Squad men would be with them. “Doc” Layne, the medical examiner on duty, would be notified promptly and chase them to the address.

With its siren wailing a warning to traffic, the sedan rushed and skidded through the streets, with red lights burning. It cut across a corner of the busy retail business district where throngs were making the usual last-minute purchases.

It turned into broad Empire Boulevard and sped along that toward an old residential part of the city where imposing mansions sat far back from the street in groves of trees, and expressed the grandeur of an earlier era.

About an inch of snow was on the ground, and fine snow was drifting through the air. Perfect Christmas Eve weather, O’Hara thought.

“And I should be home playing Santa Claus for my two kids,” he growled at Rassman.

“If this turns out to be a twister case—” Rassman began.

To the sergeant, a “twister” case was one involving a mystery to be solved and calling for clever work on the part of the Squad, instead of routine stuff.

“Don’t even think that!” O’Hara barked at him, as the police chauffeur, who was listening, grinned into the rear vision mirror. “A twister, with us opening it up, means we’d have to stay with it until the end. Then where’d our Christmas Day at home be? If it’s a twister case, we’ve got to crack it wide open before morning, even if we have to beat the truth out of somebody. I’m going to spend Christmas at home! Let’s hope this Cecil Fargall died of a heart attack caused by indigestion.”

“I know, Mike, but there’s small chance of that,” Rassman warned. “Dr. Morgan Stampf is one wise medic, I’ve heard. He wouldn’t have called us for an ordinary heart attack.”

“Stampf is a fashionable society doctor,” O’Hara explained. “I’ve met him a few times. He reminds me of a human icicle. But some doctors and surgeons get like that, seeing so much misery and pain. They harden themselves against it, same as we do.”

“This Cecil Fargall has a lot of moola, huh?”

“According to common report, he has money stacked up in about a dozen banks,” O’Hara replied. “He’s about seventy. The family has been

here since the town was only a wide place in the trail. Almost died out now. He has only one relative as far as I know—a niece named Penelope. Everybody calls her Penny. Sensible girl of about twenty-three.”

Behind their sedan, a siren wailed and indicated that the second Squad car was on their heels. O’Hara relaxed in the seat, lit a cigarette and took a few puffs. The sedan was making good speed on the wide boulevard which traffic seemed to have deserted at that hour.

Finally, the car turned into a driveway and ran up to the front of a huge, old-fashioned mansion and stopped. The second car was there by the time O’Hara and Rassman got out of the first. As O’Hara and the others started up the steps to the front porch, a third car whizzed up and skidded to a stop, and Doc Layne got out of it and hurried to them.

O’Hara called a couple of men to him.

“When this gets out, the news hawks will flock here,” he said. “I don’t want reporters messing around until I know what’s what. You two stand guard and keep ‘em out. I’ll tell ‘em everything later.”

O’Hara went up to the front door with the others of the Homicide Squad behind him, but before he could ring, the door was opened by a tall, distinguished-appearing man in evening attire.

“I am Dr. Morgan Stampf,” he announced. “Thank you for being so prompt. Please come in, and I’ll give you the scant details, so you can get at your work.”

Dr. Stampf ushered O’Hara and the others into an elegantly furnished anteroom and waved them toward chairs. He looked what O’Hara had called him—a human icicle.

“This is a tragic occurrence,” Dr. Stampf said, when they were seated. “I have been Cecil Fargall’s personal physician for years. He was a splendid cultured gentleman.”

“I know all that, Dr. Stampf,” O’Hara cut in. “Just tell us what’s happened here, and please make it as short as possible. It’s Christmas Eve, and we’re short-handed.”

“Very well. It was Mr. Fargall’s custom to have a sort of private family party on Christmas Eve. He always had a tree with presents heaped beneath it, and his old houseman, Fred Denshaw,

always put on a costume and false face and acted as Santa Claus. His guests this evening were only threes—his niece and ward, Miss Penelope Fargall; Mr. Bob Blodger, her present romantic attachment; and myself.”

“You’ve been here all evening?” O’Hara asked.

**D**R. STAMPF shook his head.

“Oh, no!” he said. “I had a call to make on a patient, and telephoned that I’d be in a little late to partake of Christmas cheer, and for them to go ahead with their Santa Claus show and not wait for me. I arrived only a few minutes before I called you.”

“Where are the others?” O’Hara asked.

“In the living room. Mr. Fargall died in the library, where he had the Christmas tree. I left the body there and asked Miss Fargall and Mr. Blodger to retire to the living room and remain there.”

“Just what happened?”

“When I came to the house and rang, the door was opened by Bob Blodger. He said Santa Claus had just done his stuff—Santa being Fred Denshaw, the old houseman—and had gone to prepare the buffet lunch. In addition to Denshaw, there are only two servants, a cook and maid. Mr. Fargall felt that, in war time, he should get along with a small staff.”

“After you came in?” O’Hara hinted.

“I removed my hat and overcoat and started for the library with Bob Blodger, saying I’d be glad to have a drink and toast myself before the fireplace. As we went along the hall, we heard Miss Fargall scream, and ran to her at once. Her uncle had collapsed and dropped upon the floor.

“I asked Blodger to aid me, and we put him upon a couch. I expected the usual heart attack. Mr. Fargall was past seventy and has had repeated attacks of acute indigestion.”

“But it wasn’t an ordinary heart attack?” O’Hara asked.

“In my judgment, no. Your medical examiner—Doctor Layne, here—can make his own investigation. I think he will detect at once a scent of bitter almonds.”

“Prussic acid?” Doc Layne snapped.

Dr. Stampf nodded his head in assent.

They went into the library. Layne went to the

couch and made an immediate examination. O'Hara looked around the room, while Rassman began his usual prowling. The photographer and fingerprint men stood aside, waiting to be called to do their work if they were needed.

There was the Christmas tree in a corner. Wrappings from packages were scattered around the room. Opened and unopened boxes of presents were on the tables and chairs. A portable bar had been set up in one corner, and beside it was a table covered with luncheon foods.

Doc Layne concluded his examination.

"Prussic acid, hydrocyanic, I'd say," he reported to O'Hara. "Every symptom. And no indication it was taken through the mouth."

"He didn't drink the stuff, you mean?" O'Hara asked.

Doc Layne shook his head negatively.

"How'd he get it, then?"

"I'll continue my examination," Layne said, giving O'Hara a level look.

"All right, Doc. Rassman, come with me. Dr. Stampf, we'll join the others, please. You other boys stay with Layne."

They went to the big living room. Penny Fargall and Bob Blodger were sitting on a divan. The girl was sobbing softly, and Blodger had an arm around her, trying to comfort her.

"Tell me exactly what happened," O'Hara instructed the girl.

"We had been having a happy time," she replied. "Dr. Stampf phoned and said he'd be delayed, so my uncle told Denshaw to get into his costume and play Santa Claus."

"Usual sort of costume?" O'Hara asked.

"The same one Denshaw has used for years. Red flannel trimmed with white, and he always wore a Santa Claus mask and heavy fur gloves. He came in and got the presents from beneath the tree and handed them to us and bowed, as always before. He left Dr. Stampf's gifts in a little pile under the tree. Then Uncle Cecil remarked about the buffet supper, which was a hint for Denshaw to retire, take off the costume, and make hot coffee. Uncle had told the cook and maid they could have the evening off. He always did that on Christmas Eve."

"What happened after the houseman left?" O'Hara asked.

"Uncle was laughing at a funny little toy I

had bought him as a gift. Suddenly he dropped it, tried to get out of the chair and to his feet. A horrible expression came into his face, and he dropped to the floor."

"Who was with him at the time?"

"I was alone with him," Penny said, "The door bell had rung, and we guessed Dr. Stampf had arrived, and Bob hurried to let him in, knowing Denshaw was busy in the kitchen. I screamed when Uncle fell, and they came running."

"All that correct, Blodger?" O'Hara asked.

"Yes, sir."

O'Hara eyed him. Bob Blodger was about twenty-eight, the son of a good family. He had won a reputation in football in his college days. He had been in the Marines, had seen some hard fighting and had been invalided home. O'Hara knew young Blodger was working now for a bond company, though his family had plenty of money and he really did not have to work.

**T**HAT Bob Blodger and Penny Fargall were in love with each other, there could be no doubt. The way they looked at each other, the way they acted told that. But O'Hara, who read the newspapers religiously, even to the want ads and society news, for professional reasons, had not noticed a report of an actual engagement.

Doc Layne came to the door and called O'Hara, and he excused himself and went to talk to the medical examiner.

"He got it in his right hand," Layne reported. "Must have been a hypo needle. There's a puncture, and burn."

"You mean somebody gave it to him?"

"We searched around, and didn't find any needle. Searched his clothing and all over the room."

"How long did it take the stuff to work, Doc?"

"Hard to say. It'd depend on the strength of the solution, the condition of the victim, and all that. It was a few minutes after nine when we got the call. I'd say he died about that time.

Can't be sure, but it's close enough."

"Somebody must have jabbed him," O'Hara mused. "Far as we know now, Dr. Stampf wasn't here. According to all stories, he rang the door bell a moment before Fargall dropped. That leaves

Penny Fargall and young Blodger—and the houseman. Umm! I've got an idea."

He hurried back to the living room and sat down, a picture of poise. He spoke in a voice which did not betray excitement.

"Miss Fargall, did anything unusual happen while the presents were being distributed? Did your uncle act normally?"

"Yes," she replied. "He was joking and laughing. He was always like a boy on Christmas Eve. It was one redeeming trait—" She stopped abruptly.

"Redeeming trait? Am I to gather that you didn't exactly like your uncle?"

"He was both my uncle and guardian," she replied. "He and a bank were to handle my fortune until I was twenty-five, which will be in seven months. We—we didn't see alike about some things."

"Romantic affairs, for instance?" O'Hara asked.

"Mr. Fargall didn't want Penny to marry me," Bob Blodger cut in. "Penny and I really love each other. I have plenty of money, and so has my family, though not as much as Mr. Fargall, of course."

"What was his objection to you, Blodger?" O'Hara wanted to know. "I happen to know your fine family, and if you could support her, and she was in love with you, why should there be an objection?"

"My uncle was a tyrant," Penny Fargall broke in this time. "He was a man who wanted to order the lives of all around him. I never actually quarreled with him, but I did demand that he let me marry Bob. The other day, I threatened to marry Bob anyhow, without uncle's consent."

"Any idea why he didn't want you to marry Blodger?"

"He said he wanted me to marry an older man, an established man who had attained prominence. Such a man, he held, should always marry a young woman of good family and estate, so she could preside like a queen over his household, and give him strong, healthy children to carry on the line. That sort of thing was a mania with him."

"I see."

O'Hara got up and paced around the room for a moment, while the others watched. Doc Layne

was standing in the doorway, and Dr. Stampf was sitting off to one side saying nothing. O'Hara stopped pacing and faced them.

"Mr. Fargall was murdered!" he snapped.

"Murdered?" Penny cried, as she gripped Bob Blodger's arm. "But—he just collapsed. Nobody touched him!"

"You said he was laughing and joking while the presents were being distributed. Think, now! Did anything at all unusual happen?"

"It may not amount to much—" Blodger began.

"I'll decide that," O'Hara snapped at him. "What was it?"

"Well, when Santa Claus handed him one of the packages—the very last, if I'm not mistaken—Mr. Fargall cried 'Ouch!' and shook his right hand. An instant later, he said a pin in the ribbon around the package had stuck him."

"Santa Claus handed him the package?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Fargall unwrapped it, and Santa Claus—that is Denshaw, left to get rid of his costume and make coffee. A little later, the door bell rang, and Penny asked me to answer it because Denshaw was busy. I let in Dr. Stampf, as you know."

"Where is Denshaw, the houseman, now?" Hara asked. "I think I'll have a little talk with him."

"Probably in the kitchen," Penny replied. Straight back to the cross hall, then to the right. Denshaw's living room is just off the kitchen, too."

"Get him, Ed!" O'Hara snapped at Rassman.

**A**S RASSMAN hurried away, O'Hara looked at the others again.

"As I said," he told them, "Mr. Fargall was murdered. Prussic acid killed him. It was injected in the right hand. When he said a pin had stuck him, he got the poison."

"Then Denshaw did it!" Blodger cried. But why should he?"

O'Hara signaled for him to be silent, and faced the girl again. "Miss Fargall, how long have you lived here?" he asked.

"My mother, who was my last surviving relative except Uncle Cecil, died when I was ten. Uncle Cecil brought me here. Almost immediately, I was sent away to school, and that

kept up until schooling was over. Then I had a debut, and since that have lived on here, with frequent trips abroad—before the war.”

“How long has Fred Denshaw been houseman here?”

“He was here for some years before I came. He really was butler, when Uncle Cecil had a big house staff. He’s been a sort of general handy man since Uncle cut down the staff because of the war. He thought it was the patriotic thing to do. My uncle had his faults, but he was a real patriotic American. I’ll say that for him.”

“Did he ever have any trouble with Denshaw?” O’Hara asked.

“I can answer that,” Penny replied. “I’ve heard them several times recently when they seemed to be quarreling, and it surprised me that Uncle Cecil, so proud and arrogant, would tolerate it. I expected him to discharge Denshaw, but he didn’t.”

“Know what they were quarreling about?”

“No, sir. I didn’t hear actual words, just their angry voices. And once I saw Denshaw come from the library, and his eyes were blazing and his fists were clenched.”

Rassman came to the door, and called, and O’Hara hurried out to him. Rassman called to Doc Layne, too.

“I found the houseman, Denshaw,” Rassman whispered. “He’s on the floor in his own room—dead.”

“Put the photographer in front of the library door,” O’Hara snapped. “Put the fingerprint man on guard at this door. Call in one of the men outside—Carlson will do—and tell him to stand by here in the hall, Quick!”

Rassman hurried down the hall toward the door, barking orders.

“So we’ve got a twister, maybe,” O’Hara said to Doc Layne.

The men were stationed quickly, then Rassman took O’Hara and Doc down the hall, through the enormous kitchen and to the houseman’s room.

Denshaw was stretched on the floor, face upward. On the floor beside him was a tumbled Santa Claus costume, as if he had just cast it off. Doc Layne made a swift examination.

“Same stuff,” he reported. “Puncture and burn in the left hand.”

Layne went on with his examination while O’Hara and Rassman searched the room.

“So Fargall and this man had been quarrelin’ about somethin’,” Rassman summed up. “He jabs Fargall and kills him, then comes back to his own room and jabs himself.”

“With what?” O’Hara said, “We haven’t found a needle.”

“This man got a heavy shot most instantly,” Layne reported

“Would he have had time to needle?”

“I’d say not. He probably dropped a second after he was jabbed. Somebody could have held him, jabbed, waited until the stuff did its work and then dropped him on the floor.”

O’Hara looked at Rassman. “Ed, let’s assume that Denshaw decided to kill his employer and then commit suicide. If so, why the trickery? Why didn’t he just kill Fargall with a gun or some other weapon and then make away with himself? Why the jab in the hand while playing Santa Claus? And housemen, as a rule, don’t go packing prussic acid and hypo needles. Prussic isn’t easy to get.”

“I’ve guessed it, Mike—somebody else killed them both,” Rassman decided. “Tried to make it look like Denshaw had killed Fargall and then himself. It’d look good, specially since Fargall and Denshaw had been quarrelin’ about somethin’.”

“So it seems, Mike,” O’Hara picked up the discarded Santa Claus costume. It was of ordinary red flannel, trimmed in white, and the mask had been tossed down near it. O’Hara sniffed at the costume, then held it for Rassman to sniff.

“Moth balls,” Rassman said.

“Right! And why not? They’ve been using this costume each Christmas Eve, and packing it away meanwhile.”

O’Hara went over to Denshaw’s body, knelt beside it, bent forward and sniffed and sniffed. He motioned for Rassman to do the same.

“No moth ball smell,” Rassman said.

“Right again,” O’Hara declared. “Which means that poor Denshaw didn’t have on that Santa Claus costume tonight. Somebody killed him in here as he was preparing to put the costume on. That somebody played Santa Claus in Denshaw’s place—and killed Fargall.”

“So it’s a twister,” Rassman said.

“And we’re goin’ to crack it quick,” O’Hara

declared. "I'm not going to spend Christmas Day away from my family working on a case. Get out your flashlight and come with me."

THEY went out the kitchen door and flashed their lights. There was an inch or more snow on the ground, and tracks were in the snow. They led around the side of to the driveway. The tracks were all alike. Somebody had come around the house and entered, then had gone back the same way.

"Let's get inside," O'Hara said. "Things are commencing to shape up. We'll get some facts, now, maybe. Keep your mouth shut about things."

They went back to the living room. Penny Fargall was sitting on the divan beside Bob Blodger again. Dr. Morgan Stampf was still in his chair, puffing languidly at a cigarette.

"The houseman, Denshaw, is dead," O'Hara announced bluntly. "In the same manner. The first reaction was that he killed Mr. Fargall because of their quarrel, and then committed suicide. But certain things now lead us to believe that somebody else killed them both."

"Killed them both?" Dr. Stampf cried. "Who could have done it? How—and why?"

"There is no indication of any stranger being in the house tonight, though such a thing is possible," O'Hara told them, standing beside Dr. Stampf's chair. "So . . . well, look at yourselves. Who had the opportunity? Miss Fargall did. Mr. Blodger did. Denshaw did, but he was a victim himself so is out of it."

"How dare you suggest such a thing?" Blodger began indignantly.

"Tut, tut!" O'Hara interrupted, shaking a finger at him. "To me, everybody is guilty until proved innocent. By the way, do any of you happen to know who benefits by Mr. Fargall's will?"

"I can tell you something of that," Dr. Stampf replied. "Mr. Fargall made a new will about a year ago, and consulted me regarding one part of it. And he happened to tell me what he intended doing with the estate."

"What?"

"Large amounts for various charities, of course. A fortune for Penny, his only surviving relative. Denshaw was down for ten thousand dollars for long and faithful service."

"And you—?" O'Hara questioned.

"Mr. Fargall's wife died of cancer. He spoke to me some years ago about leaving an amount to be used as a special fund for the study of cancer. I was to use the money to found a clinic and build a sanitarium, of which I was to be the supervising director. A splendid idea!"

"I agree with you," O'Hara said. "Have you had any recent disagreements with Mr. Fargall?"

"I? Only because he disregarded my instructions about his diet. He had grown subject to fits of irascibility and was rather difficult at times, as Penny can tell you."

"Disagree about anything else?"

Dr. Morgan Stampf hesitated a moment, puffed his cigarette, took it from his mouth.

"It must come out, I suppose," he replied. "Mr. Fargall had an idea—and he was a man always fixed in his ideas—that I could make myself famous as director of the cancer clinic. I suggested he found it at once and not wait until after his death and settlement of his estate. He disagreed with me on that. And there was another matter."

"What was it?" O'Hara asked.

"Well—he had ideas about family. He wanted his fortune to remain in the family to a degree, same as many men do. He wanted his niece to be connected in some manner with whatever his money accomplished. That is why he did not want her to marry Mr. Blodger. In fact, he desired a marriage between Penny and myself."

"What?" Penny and Blodger cried together.

Dr. Stampf smiled slightly. "Yes, Penny, I was the man he meant when he said he wanted you married to an older man with an established reputation. I have never married, you know. I told him the idea was ridiculous, and he grew angry. Not that any man in his right mind would refuse such a bride as you, my dear"—he bowed to Penny—"but my heart interest is elsewhere. I had a college sweetheart. We quarreled and she married another man. Two years ago, she became a widow. We have met and renewed our attachment."

"I understand," O'Hara broke in. "Let's get back on the beam. You and Fargall fussed about it?"

"To such an extent that he told me, recently, that if I didn't agree to a marriage with Penny he

would change his will and name another physician to head the clinic.”

“Well, let’s check on everything,” O’Hara said. “You told me, Dr. Stampf, that you were late for the party here because you had to call on a patient.”

“Yes. Henry Zeller, who lives in the Royal Arms apartment house a block down the street. He’s rather old and getting almost helpless. Has a nurse continually.”

“Did he have a bad attack tonight?”

“Oh, nothing like that!” Dr. Stampf replied. “The nurse wanted to get off to go to a Christmas Eve party. So I called and let her go, then I sat with Mr. Zeller and gave him a sedative that would put him to sleep for hours, so the nurse wouldn’t have to hurry back. When he dozed off and I was sure he was all right, I hurried here.”

“Remember what time you got here?”

“A little before nine.”

“When did you go to visit Zeller?”

“About eight or a little before. The nurse possibly can verify the time.”

**O**’HARA gave Rassman a direct look, and the detective sergeant slipped into the hall quickly. The Squad man, Carlson, appeared to take his place.

“Dr. Stampf, in fairness to you, I’m having your story checked,” O’Hara told him. “If you people will excuse me for a few minutes, I’ll attend to matters and then come back.”

Doc Layne had made arrangements for the removal of the bodies. The police photographer had flashed bulbs and exposed films. The fingerprints man had searched everywhere for prints. Reporters had got word of Fargall’s death and were waiting outside the front door, held there by O’Hara’s guard.

O’Hara hurried back to the living room, got from Penny the name of her uncle’s attorney, and went to the library to telephone him and apprise him of Fargall’s death. Then he went out and faced the reporters.

“Bear with me a little longer, boys, and I’ll give you the whole thing,” he said. “It’ll be a clean-up of the case, I hope. Mr. Fargall was murdered, and so was his old houseman, Fred Denshaw. That’s all for now.”

He got away from them, slammed the door

shut in their faces, and went back along the hall, his head bent, thinking.

In the living room, he sat down on the end of a couch, lit a cigarette and glanced at the others.

“Miss Fargall, and you, Blodger, think carefully now before you answer. When did you see Denshaw last?”

“If he wasn’t the Santa Claus, it was just a little before Santa Claus came to the library,” Penny replied. “Uncle told him it was time for Santa Claus to appear. Denshaw was putting food on the buffet table.”

“This Santa Claus—did he resemble Denshaw?”

“Well, we supposed he was Denshaw,” Penny said. “Seemed the same size.”

“How about his voice?”

“He never spoke. Uncle never allowed that. Said it broke the illusion to have Santa Claus speak. He just gave us the presents and bowed.”

“Notice his hands?”

“He was wearing big fur gloves,” Bob Blodger put in.

“And very handy when it came to concealing a stubby hypo needle,” O’Hara remarked. “Just before your uncle collapsed, Miss Fargall, did you touch him?”

“No. I was sitting on the corner. Bob was beside me. Uncle was in the big easy chair beside the reading desk.”

“You touch him, Blodger, or shake hands with him?” O’Hara asked.

“No, sir. Are you intimating I killed him? And I wasn’t out of the library, so I couldn’t have killed Denshaw.”

“Very cleverly put,” O’Hara

O’Hara turned to Dr. Stampf. “Since this tragedy has occurred, I suppose hasn’t been changed, and you’ll have the chance to go ahead with the sanitarium.”

“I presume so,” Stampf replied. “It will be a monument to Mr. Fargall.”

“How long ago was it you would not marry Miss Fargall, and he threatened to change the will and name another doctor?”

“Three days ago, I believe.”

O’Hara got up and killed time pacing around the room. He was waiting for Rassman, who had gone to the Zeller apartment a block away. And finally Rassman returned and beckoned him, and



O'Hara went into the hall. He listened to what Rassman had to say, then went back into the living room with Rassman beside him.

Rassman whispered to the squad man, Carlson, as he entered, and Carlson drifted across the room and unobtrusively took up his position. O'Hara took the center of the floor.

"I think we have this thing solved," O'Hara said. "One of you now in this room killed both Mr. Fargall and Fred Denshaw."

Penny and Bob Blodger and gave gasps of horror. Stampf brought out his cigarette case, carefully selected a cigarette, lit it with an expensive lighter, and returned lighter and case to his pockets. He fumbled for an instant in his waistcoat pocket, then settled back to smoke and listen.

"By the way, Dr. Stampf, you didn't see Denshaw this evening?" O'Hara asked.

"I didn't."

"Nor see the Santa Claus, whoever played the part?"

"I did not."

"When did you see the costume last?"

"Why, last Christmas Eve. I was a guest here at the usual party, and Denshaw played Santa Claus. I'll always remember it, because Denshaw got nervous and knocked over a table and smashed a vase, and was apologizing all over the place."

"I remember that, too," said Penny.

"Dr. Stampf, you travel in fashionable society," O'Hara said, "and I presume you wear evening clothes a great deal?"

"Almost every evening," Stampf replied, smiling slightly. He also had a look of slight bewilderment in his face.

"You don't have to put up your evening clothes in moth balls then," O'Hara said, smiling also.

**L**IEUTENANT O'HARA puffed at his cigarette a few times, then extinguished it carefully in an ash tray and straightened.

"Well, I think we can consider this case closed, which will give me a chance to spend Christmas at home with my family," he said. "Dr. Stampf, you went to Zeller's apartment a little before eight, as you said. Sergeant Rassman checked on that. The nurse had returned when

Rassman was over at the apartment a few minutes ago. She says you came and she left immediately at about a quarter of eight."

"That's correct," Stampf replied. "I talked with Zeller for a time, and finally gave him a sedative, then came here."

"Isn't it true, Doctor, that you gave him a sedative at once? He became unconscious immediately, and gave you an opportunity to leave, and Zeller couldn't tell afterward what time you had left. His apartment on the second floor is served with a private automatic elevator, and nobody saw you leave. You hurried back here, entered house and accosted Denshaw in his room as he was preparing to put on the Santa Claus costume."

"I beg your pardon!" Dr. Stampf expressed indignation.

"Wait until I am done," O'Hara requested. "You held Denshaw, who was not a strong man, jabbed him with a needle and killed him. You put on the costume and hurried to the library and played Santa Claus. You killed Mr. Fargall. Then you went back to Denshaw's room, took off the costume, hurried out of the house and around to the front door and rang the bell, getting here about the time Mr. Fargall dropped dead."

"Are you daring to intimate—"

"I'm not intimating. I'm accusing you, and arresting you, for the murders of Mr. Fargall and Fred Denshaw. And knowing that the undertakers might discover the cause of death, you couldn't certify to a natural death from a heart attack, so you called the police. You probably thought Miss Fargall or Mr. Blodger would be suspected and blamed. You believed your alibi perfect."

"Why should I—have killed those two men?"

"To get the fat job of handling a fortune for a clinic and sanitarium, make yourself an international reputation possibly, and have plenty of money to marry your old college sweetheart. You knew Fargall would change his will."

"Preposterous!"

"Oh, let's end it!" O'Hara snapped. "The Santa Claus costume reeked with moth balls. Denshaw's clothes did not, so he didn't have the costume on over them. But your evening clothes, which you use continually and which are never packed away in moth balls, do. You put on that costume and played Santa Claus tonight and killed

Fargall . . . Watch him, Carlson!”

O’Hara barked the last words at his Squad man. Dr. Stampf had lifted his left hand and taken the cigarette from his mouth. Then his right hand went up swiftly and slipped something between his lips. His teeth crunched a capsule.

“This will make three of us,” Stampf said.

“You guessed it right, Lieutenant O’Hara.”

His head jerked up, he gasped, his eyes rolled, and he would have toppled from the chair if Carlson had not held the body back.

“I didn’t even have time to tell him how he left his tracks plain in the snow,” O’Hara said.