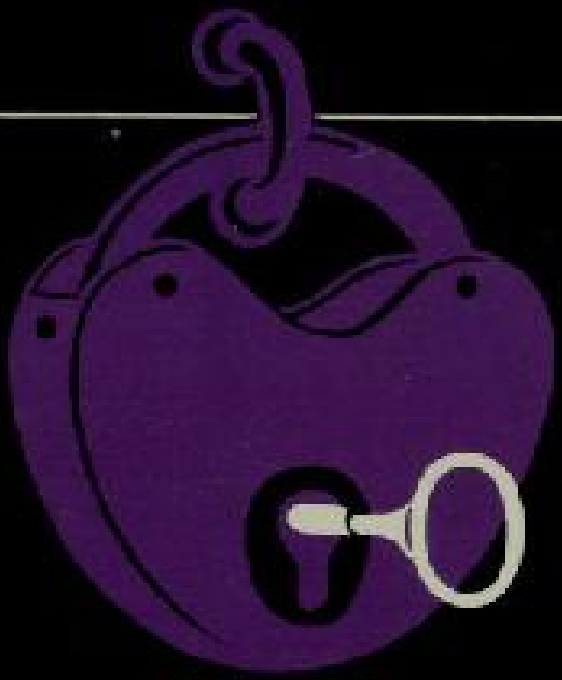
The Locked Room Reader



Edited by
Hans S. Santesson

Stories of
Impossible Crimes
and Escapes

The Locked Room Reader

This brilliant collection—fourteen stories and two complete novels—reflects the many variations on the Locked Room theme, probably the most provocative and stimulating of all challenges in the mystery genre. It is a bonanza for the discriminating mystery reader.

More than thirty years ago, John Dickson Carr's great detective, Dr. Gideon Fell, lectured learnedly on the subject of hermetically sealed rooms. He was, of course, in part drawing upon precedents established by Israel Zangwill in his 1895 novel *The Big Bow Mystery*, and by Melville Davisson Post in his story *The Doomdorf Mystery*, both of which are included in this volume.

Dr Fell suggested a number of explanations of these seemingly impossible crimes. It could be murder legally speaking, even though the victim had been influenced to kill himself. This might be done with the help of an allegedly haunted room (very effective on a weak heart) or the use of a maddening gas introduced from outside. It could be murder by a hidden mechanical device, "a trap set by somebody long dead."

Or it could be murder committed by someone making use of illusion and impersonation, or by somebody outside the room creating the impression that the fatal act must have been committed by somebody inside.

Last, but not least, there is of course always the chance that the victim could have been murdered later than the evidence would suggest—or earlier.

Difficult as it is to believe, the possibilities are infinite, and the special delight of the Locked Room mystery is its constant capacity to surprise the most sophisticated reader. Haven't we all known the joys of the revelation that makes us say, "Of course, why didn't I think of that?"

HANS STEFAN SANTESSON has been editor of the *Saint Magazine*, the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, and six earlier anthologies. He was awarded a critic's Edgar by the Mystery Writers of America. He is actively interested in Indo-Pakastani affairs and has written and lectured on Indo-Islamic art and literature.

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Stories of Impossible
Crimes and Escapes

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To

FREDERIC DANNAY—

who has contributed so much to the present stature of detective fiction!

Introduction

Within our time the mystery novel has not only "come of age," it has also shown a tendency to disclaim, indeed with some embarrassment, affinity with the novels of Anna Katharine Green, Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, the Baroness Orczy or, for that matter, E. Phillips Oppenheim.

Similarly, the essentially intellectual-*and*-escapist challenge of much of the writing in this field in the thirties and the forties is close to being a thing of the past in these days, when we seem to be overly preoccupied, even in our mysteries, even in our detective novels, with the things which have within them the seeds of our culture's destruction.

There is no denying that the times have changed. People still believed in good manners, or at least pretended to do so, in the days of Lord Peter Wimsey, Mr. Fortune, Max Carrados, Philip Trent, Dr. Hailey, Philo Vance and others. Living as we do in a violent age, we appear to have become fascinated by the methodology of this violence and moral decay. We seem to have neither the time nor the patience to be concerned with the reasons for what is happening. We are instead more than content with having reflected in much of this so-called fiction the reality that our streets are as unsafe today as the streets of the Rome of Constantine the Great.

We are told, often by those who are under the impression that this sub-Freudian exotica labeled as detective stories is truly representative of the field, that much of the charm for us of the genre lies in the essentially improbable nature of these stories.

This may be true. There is no denying that these variations-ad-nauseam on the James Bond formula (yesterday one would have talked of the Mickey Spillane formula), exercises in sex-and-sadism complete with bikini-clad nymphomaniacs, are escapist reading fully as much as were E. Phillips Oppenheim's portraits of yesteryear's international society.

But it is not novels such as these that we talk of when we discuss the writing in this field that will be remembered long after these momentary successes are forgotten. Far from it. When we do so, we talk of the sort of writing represented in this anthology, and also of the work of Julian Symons, Nicolas Freeling, J.J. Marric, Wenzell Brown, Cornell Woolrich,

Ed McBain for that matter, and still others, whose stories can be said to mirror our times, reflecting our foibles and our strength.

The stories in this anthology, dealing with many of the varieties of impossible crimes postulated by Dr. Gideon Fell more than thirty years ago, in John Dickson Carr's novel *The Three Coffins* (1935, Harper, New York), represent a further development in this field, the importance of which cannot be too greatly stressed.

When the modest (yes—modest) Dr. Fell elaborated on the variety of crimes which even in those days could conceivably be committed in a hermetically sealed room—which really was hermetically sealed, and from which no murderer had escaped for the simple reason that no murderer had actually been in the room—he was of course in part drawing upon precedents established by Israel Zangwill in his novel *The Big Bow Mystery*, and by Melville Davisson Post in his story "The Doomdorf Mystery," both of which are included in this anthology.

Dr. Fell suggested a number of explanations of these seemingly impossible crimes, including the possibility that it never was a case of murder, but merely a series of coincidences ending with a happening which looked like murder.

On the other hand, it could be murder—legally speaking—even though the victim had been influenced to kill himself or, so it would seem at first, literally to "crash into an accidental death." This could be done with the help of an allegedly haunted room, particularly if the subject was prone to hearing voices, or by the use of a gas introduced from outside the room which would make the victim go berserk and become self-destructive.

Or it could be murder by a hidden mechanical device, "a trap set by somebody long dead." Any combination of factors could have triggered the means of death.

Or it could be suicide, inside the locked room, intended to look like murder. A man might for example stab himself with an icicle—the icicle would melt, and murder would be presumed inasmuch as no weapon would be found inside the locked room.

Or it could be murder, committed by someone making use of illusion and impersonation as tools in the long-planned act; or it could be murder which "although committed by somebody outside the room at the time,

nevertheless seems to have been committed by somebody who must have been inside…"

And, last but not least, there is of course always the possibility that the victim could have been murdered later than the evidence at hand would suggest.

The stories in this anthology reflect these and other variations on the Locked Room theme, and the many and varied ways in which the illusion or "reality" of the locked room can be created. I can only hope that you will enjoy them as much as I have enjoyed them, time and time again, over the years. They reflect the maturity and the lasting contributions of the genre to Anglo-American letters.

I am particularly grateful to Edward D. Hoch for his helpfulness, and to both Henry Morrison, my agent, and Lee Wright, my editor at Random House, whom all of us in this field respect so much, for their understanding.

HANS STEFAN SANTESSON

Contents

The late Craig Rice was a warm and very human—and often very exasperating—person, missed by all of us who knew her and argued with her—and loved her. Here is a classic Locked Room story —yes, classic, even though it stars the irrepressible John J. Malone.

CRAIG RICE

HIS HEART COULD BREAK

John J. Malone shuddered. He wished he could get the insidious melody out of his mind—or, remember the rest of the words.

As I passed by the ol' state's prison,
Ridin' on a stream-line' train—

It had been annoying him since three o'clock that morning, when he'd heard it sung by the janitor of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar.

It seemed like a bad omen, and it made him uncomfortable. Or maybe it was the cheap gin he'd switched to between two and four A.M. that was making him uncomfortable. Whichever it was, he felt terrible.

"I bet your client's happy today," the guard said cordially, leading the way toward the death house.

"He ought to be," Malone growled. He reminded himself that he too ought to be happy. He wasn't. Maybe it was being in a prison that depressed him. John J. Malone didn't like prisons. He devoted his life to keeping his clients out of them.

Then the warden told me gently—

That song again! How did the next line go?

"Well," the guard said, "they say you've never lost a client yet. "It wouldn't do any harm, he thought, to get on the good side of a smart guy like John J. Malone.

"Not yet," Malone said. He'd had a close call with this one, though.

“You sure did a wonderful job, turning up the evidence to get anew trial,” the guard rattled on. Maybe Malone could get him a better appointment, with his political drag. “Your client sure felt swell when he heard about it last night, he sure did.”

“That’s good,” Malone said noncommittally. It hadn’t been evidence that had turned the trick, though. Just a little matter of knowing some interesting facts about the judge’s private life. The evidence would have to be manufactured before the trial, but that was the least of his worries. By that time, he might even find out the truth of what had happened. He hummed softly under his breath. Ah, there were the next lines!

Then the warden told me gently.
He seemed too young, too young to die,
We cut the rope and let him down—

John J. Malone tried to remember the rhyme for “die.” By, cry, lie, my and sigh. Then he let loose a few loud and indignant remarks about whoever had written that song, realized that he was entering the death house and stopped, embarrassed. That particular cell block always inspired him with the same behavior he would have shown ata high-class funeral. He took off his hat and walked softly.

And at that moment hell broke loose. Two prisoners in the block began yelling like banshees. The alarms began to sound loudly, causing the outside siren to chime in with its hideous wail. Guards were running through the corridor, and John J. Malone instinctively ran with them toward the center of disturbance, the fourth cell on the left.

Before the little lawyer got there, one of the guards had the door open. Another guard cut quickly through the bright new rope from which the prisoner was dangling, and eased the limp body down to the floor.

The racket outside was almost deafening now, but John J. Malone scarcely heard it. The guard turned the body over, and Malone recognized the very young and rather stupid face of Paul Palmer.

“He’s hung himself,” one of the guards said.

“With me for a lawyer?” Malone said angrily. “Hung himself—“He started to say “hell,” then remembered he was in the presence of death.

"Hey," the other guard said excitedly. "He's alive. His neck's broke, but he's breathing a little."

Malone shoved the guard aside and knelt down beside the dying man. Paul Palmer's blue eyes opened slowly, with an expression of terrible bewilderment. His Ups parted.

"*It wouldn't break*," Paul Palmer whispered. He seemed to recognize Malone, and stared at him, with a look of frightful urgency. "*It wouldn't break*," he whispered to Malone. Then he died…

"You're damned right I'm going to sit in on the investigation," Malone said angrily. He gave Warden Garrity's wastebasket a vicious kick. "The inefficient way you run your prison has done me out of a client." Out of a fat fee, too, he reminded himself miserably. He hadn't been paid yet, and now there would be a long tussle with the lawyer handling Paul Palmer's estate, who hadn't wanted him engaged for the defense in the first place. Malone felt in his pocket, found three crumpled bills and a small handful of change. He wished now that he hadn't got into that poker game last week.

The warden's dreary office was crowded. Malone looked around, recognized an assistant warden, the prison doctor—a handsome gray-haired man named Dickson—the guards from the death house, and the guard who had been ushering him in—Bowers was his name, Malone remembered, a tall, flat-faced, gangling man.

"Imagine him hanging himself," Bowers was saying incredulously. "Just after he found out he was gonna get a new trial."

Malone had been wondering the same thing. "Maybe he didn't get my wire," he suggested coldly.

"I gave it to him myself," Bowers stated positively. "Just last night. Never saw a man so happy in my life."

Dr. Dickson cleared his throat. Everyone turned to look at him.

"Poor Palmer was mentally unstable," the doctor said sadly. "You may recall I recommended, several days ago, that he be moved to the prison hospital. When I visited him last night he appeared hilariously—hysterically—happy. This morning, however, he was distinctly depressed."

"You mean the guy was nuts?" Warden Garrity asked hopefully.

"He was nothing of the sort," Malone said indignantly. Just let a hint get around that Paul Palmer had been of unsound mind, and he'd never collect

that five-thousand-dollar fee from the estate. “He was saner than anyone in this room, with the possible exception of myself.”

Dr. Dickson shrugged his shoulders. “I didn’t suggest that he was insane. I only meant he was subject to moods.”

Malone wheeled to face the doctor. “Say. Were you in the habit of visiting Palmer in his cell a couple of tunes a day?”

“I was,” the doctor said, nodding. “He was suffering from a serious nervous condition. It was necessary to administer sedatives from time to time.”

Malone snorted. “You mean he was suffering from the effect of being sober for the first time since he was sixteen.”

“Put it any way you like,” Dr. Dickson said pleasantly. “You remember, too, that I had a certain personal interest.”

“That’s right,” Malone said slowly. “He was going to marry your niece.”

“No one was happier than I to hear about the new trial,” the doctor said. He caught Malone’s eye and added, “No, I wasn’t fond enough of him to smuggle in a rope. Especially when he’d just been granted a chance to clear himself.”

“Look here,” Warden Garrity said irritably. “I can’t sit around listening to all this stuff. I’ve got to report the result of an investigation. Where the hell did he get that rope?”

There was a little silence, and then one of the guards said, “Maybe from the guy who was let in to see him last night.”

“What guy?” the warden snapped.

“Why—” The guard paused, confused. “He had an order from you admitting him. His name was La Cerra.”

Malone felt a sudden tingling along his spine. George La Cerra was one of Max Hook’s boys. What possible connection could there be between Paul Palmer, socialite, and the big gambling boss?

Warden Garrity had recognized the name too. “Oh yes,” he said quickly. “That must have been it. But I doubt if we could prove it. “He paused just an instant, and looked fixedly at Malone, as though daring him to speak. “The report will read that Paul Palmer obtained a rope, by means which have not yet been ascertained, and committed suicide while of unsound mind.”

Malone opened his mouth and shut it again. He knew when he was licked. Temporarily licked, anyway. “For the love of Mike,” he said, “leave out the unsound mind.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” the warden said coldly.

Malone had kept his temper as long as he could. “All right,” he said, “but I’ll start an investigation that’ll be a pip.” He snorted. “Letting a gangster smuggle a rope in to a guy in the death house!” He glared at Dr. Dickson. “And you, foxy, with two escapes from the prison hospital in six months.” He kicked the wastebasket again, this time sending it halfway across the room. “I’ll show you from investigations! And I’m just the guy who can do it, too.”

Dr. Dickson said quickly, “We’ll substitute ‘temporarily depressed’ for the ‘unsound mind.’”

But Malone was mad, now. He made one last, long comment regarding the warden’s personal life and probably immoral origin, and slammed the door so hard when he went out that the steel engraving of Chester A. Arthur over the warden’s desk shattered to the floor.

“Mr. Malone,” Bowers said in a low voice as they went down the hall, “I searched that cell, after they took the body out. Whoever smuggled in that rope smuggled in a letter, too. I found it hid in his mattress, and it wasn’t there yesterday, because the mattress was changed.” He paused, and added, “And the rope couldn’t of been there last night either, because there was no place he could of hid it.”

Malone glanced at the envelope the guard held out to him—pale gray expensive stationery, with “Paul Palmer” written across the front of it in delicate, curving handwriting.

“I haven’t any money with me,” the lawyer said.

Bowers shook his head. “I don’t want no dough. But there’s gonna be an assistant warden’s job open in about three weeks.”

“You’ll get it,” Malone said. He took the envelope and stuffed it in an inside pocket. Then he paused, frowned, and finally added, “And keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Because there’s going to be an awful stink when I prove Paul Palmer was murdered…”

The pretty, black-haired girl in Malone’s anteroom looked up as he opened the door. “Oh, Mr. Malone,” she said quickly. “I read about it in the paper. I’m so sorry.”

“Never mind, Maggie,” the lawyer said. “No use crying over spilled clients.” He went into his private office and shut the door.

Fate was treating him very shabbily, evidently from some obscure motive of personal spite. He’d been counting heavily on that five-thousand-buck fee.

He took a bottle of rye out of the filing cabinet marked “Personal,” poured himself a drink, noted that there was only one more left in the bottle, and stretched out on the worn red leather davenport to think things over.

Paul Palmer had been an amiable, stupid young drunk of good family, whose inherited wealth had been held in trust for him by an uncle considered to be the stingiest man in Chicago. The money was to be turned over to him on his thirtieth birthday—some five years off—or on the death of the uncle. Carter Brown. Silly arrangement, Malone reflected, but rich men’s lawyers were always doing silly things.

Uncle Carter had cramped the young man’s style considerably, but he’d managed pretty well. Then he’d met Madelaine Starr.

Malone fit a cigar and stared dreamily through the smoke. The Starrs were definitely social, but without money. A good keen eye for graft, too. Madelaine’s uncle was probably making a very good thing out of that political appointment as prison doctor.

Malone sighed, wished he weren’t a lawyer, and thought about Madelaine Starr. An orphan, with a tiny income which she augmented by modeling in an exclusive dress shop—a fashionable and acceptable way of making a living. She had expensive tastes. (The little lawyer could spot expensive tastes in girls a mile away.)

She’d had to be damned poor to want to marry Palmer, Malone reflected, and damned beautiful to get him. Well, she was both.

But there had been another girl, one who had to be paid off. Lillian Claire by name, and a very lovely hunk of girl, too. Lovely, and smart enough to demand a sizable piece of money for letting the Starr-Palmer nuptials go through without a scandalous fuss.

Malone shook his head sadly. It had looked bad at the trial. Paul Palmer had taken his bride-to-be night-clubbing, delivering her back to her kitchenette apartment just before twelve. He’d been a shade high, then, and by the time he’d stopped off at three or four bars, he was several shades higher. Then he’d paid a visit to Lillian Claire, who claimed later at the trial

that he'd attempted—unsuccessfully—to talk her out of the large piece of cash money, and had drunk up all the whiskey in the house. She'd put him in a cab and sent him home.

No one knew just when Paul Palmer had arrived at the big, gloomy apartment he shared with Carter Brown. The manservant had the night off. It was the manservant who discovered, next morning, that Uncle Carter had been shot neatly through the forehead with Paul Palmer's gun, and that Paul Palmer had climbed into his own bed, fully dressed, and was snoring drunk.

Everything had been against him, Malone reflected sadly. Not only had the jury been composed of hard-working, poverty-stricken men who liked nothing better than to convict a rich young wastrel of murder, but worse still, they'd all been too honest to be bribed. The trial had been his most notable failure. And now, this.

But Paul Palmer would never have hanged himself. Malone was sure of it. He'd never lost hope. And now, especially, when a new trial had been granted, he'd have wanted to live.

It had been murder. But how had it been done?

Malone sat up, stretched, reached in his pocket for the pale gray envelope Bowers had given him, and read the note through again.

My dearest Paul:

I'm getting this note to you this way because I'm in terrible trouble and danger. I need you—no one else can help me. I know there's to be a new trial, but even another week may be too late. Isn't there *any* way?

Your own

M.

"M.," Malone decided, would be Madelaine Starr. She'd use that kind of pale gray paper, too.

He looked at the note and frowned. If Madelaine Starr had smuggled that note to her lover, would she have smuggled in a rope by the same messenger? Or had someone else brought in the rope?

There were three people he wanted to see. Madelaine Starr was one. Lillian Claire was the second. And Max Hook was the third.

He went out into the anteroom, stopped halfway across it and said aloud, "But it's a physical impossibility. If someone smuggled that rope into

Paul Palmer's cell and then Palmer hanged himself, it isn't murder. But it must have been murder." He stared at Maggie without seeing her. "Damn it, though, no one could have got into Paul Palmer's cell and hanged him."

Maggie looked at him sympathetically, familiar from long experience with her employer's processes of thought. "Keep on thinking and it'll come to you."

"Maggie, have you got any money?"

"I have ten dollars, but you can't borrow it. Besides, you haven't paid my last week's salary yet."

The little lawyer muttered something about ungrateful and heartless wenches, and flung himself out of the office.

Something had to be done about ready cash. He ran his mind over a list of prospective lenders. The only possibility was Max Hook. No, the last time he'd borrowed money from Hook, he'd got into no end of trouble. Besides, he was going to ask another kind of favor from the gambling boss.

Malone went down Washington Street, turned the corner, went into Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, and cornered its proprietor at the far end of the room.

"Cash a hundred-dollar check for me, and hold it until a week from"—Malone made a rapid mental calculation—"Thursday?"

"Sure," Joe the Angel said. "Happy to do you a favor." He got out ten ten-dollar bills while Malone wrote the check. "Want I should take your bar bill out of this?"

Malone shook his head. "I'll pay next week. And add a double rye to it."

As he set down the empty glass, he heard the colored janitor's voice coming faintly from the back room.

"They hanged him for the thing you done,
You knew it was a sin,
You didn't know his heart could break—"

The voice stopped suddenly. For a moment Malone considered calling for the singer and asking to hear the whole thing, all the way through. No, there wasn't time for it now. Later, perhaps. He went out on the street, humming the tune.

What was it Paul Palmer had whispered in that last moment? "*It wouldn't break!*" Malone scowled. He had a curious feeling that there was some connection between those words and the words of that damned song. Or was it his Irish imagination, tripping him up again? "*You didn't know his heart could break*." But it was Paul Palmer's neck that had been broken.

Malone hailed a taxi and told the driver to take him to the swank Lake Shore Drive apartment-hotel where Max Hook lived.

The gambling boss was big in two ways. He took in a cut from every crooked gambling device in Cook County, and most of the honest ones. And he was a mountain of flesh, over six feet tall and three times too fat for his height. His pink head was completely bald and he had the expression of a pleased cherub.

His living room was a masterpiece of the gilt-and-brocade school of interior decoration, marred only by a huge, battle-scarred roll-top desk in one corner. Max Hook swung around from the desk to smile cordially at the lawyer.

"How delightful to see you! What will you have to drink?"

"Rye," Malone said, "and it's nice to see you too. Only this isn't exactly a social call."

He knew better, though, than to get down to business before the drinks had arrived. (Max Hook stuck to pink champagne.) That wasn't the way Max Hook liked to do things. But when the rye was down, and the gambling boss had lighted a slender, tinted (and, Malone suspected, perfumed) cigarette in a rose quartz holder, he plunged right in.

"I suppose you read in the papers about what happened to my client. Palmer," he said.

"I never read the papers," Max Hook told him, "but one of my boys informed me. Tragic, wasn't it?"

"Tragic is no name for it," Malone said bitterly. "He hadn't paid me a dime."

Max Hook's eyebrows lifted. "So?" Automatically he reached for the green metal box in the left-hand drawer. "How much do you need?"

"No, no," Malone said hastily, "that isn't it. I just want to know if one of your boys—Little Georgie La Cerra—smuggled the rope into him. That's all."

Max Hook looked surprised, and a little hurt. “My dear Malone,” he said at last, “why do you imagine he’d do such a thing?”

“For money,” Malone said promptly, “if he did do it. I don’t care, I just want to know.”

“You can take my word for it,” Max Hook said, “he did nothing of the kind. He did deliver a note from a certain young lady to Mr. Palmer, at my request—a bit of a nuisance, too, getting hold of that admittance order signed by the warden. I assure you, though, there was no rope. I give you my word, and you know Fm an honest man.”

“Well, I was just asking,” Malone said. One thing about the big gangster, he always told the truth. If he said Little Georgie La Cerra hadn’t smuggled in that rope, then Little Georgie hadn’t. Nor was there any chance that Little Georgie had engaged in private enterprises on the side. As Max Hook often remarked, he liked to keep a careful watch on his boys. “One thing more, though,” the lawyer said, “if you don’t mind. Why did the young lady come to you to get her note delivered?”

Max Hook shrugged his enormous shoulders. “We have a certain—business connection. To be exact, she owes me a large sum of money. Like most extremely mercenary people she loves gambling, but she is not particularly lucky. When she told me that the only chance for that money to be paid was for the note to be delivered, naturally I obliged.”

“Naturally,” Malone agreed. “You didn’t happen to know what was in the note, did you?”

Max Hook was shocked. “My dear Malone! You don’t think I read other people’s personal mail!”

No, Malone reflected. Max Hook probably didn’t. And not having read the note, the big gambler probably wouldn’t know what kind of “terrible trouble and danger” Madelaine Starr was in. He decided to ask, though, just to be on the safe side.

“Trouble?” Max Hook repeated after him. “No, outside of having her fiance condemned to death, I don’t know of any trouble she’s in.”

Malone shrugged his shoulders at the reproof, rose and walked to the door. Then he paused, suddenly. “Listen, Max. Do you know the words to a tune that goes like this?” He hummed a bit of it.

Max Hook frowned, then nodded. “Mmm—I know the tune. An entertainer at one of my places used to sing it.” He thought hard, and finally

came up with a few lines.

"He was leaning against the prison bars,
Dressed up in his new prison clothes—

"Sorry," Max Hook said at last, "that's all I remember. I guess those two lines stuck in my head because they reminded me of the first time I was in jail."

Outside in the taxi, Malone sang the two lines over a couple of times. If he kept on, eventually he'd have the whole song. But Paul Palmer hadn't been leaning against the prison bars. He'd been hanging from the water pipe.

Damn, and double damn that song!

It was well past eight o'clock, and he'd had no dinner, but he didn't feel hungry. He had a grim suspicion that he wouldn't feel hungry until he'd settled this business. When the cab paused for the next red light, he flipped a coin to decide whether he'd call first on Madelaine Starr or Lillian Claire, and Madelaine won.

He stepped out of the cab in front of the small apartment building on Walton Place, paid the driver, and started across the sidewalk Justas a tall, white-haired man emerged from the door. Malone recognized Orlo Featherstone, the lawyer handling Paul Palmer's estate, considered ducking out of sight, realized there wasn't time, and finally managed to look as pleased as he was surprised.

"I was just going to offer Miss Starr my condolences," he said.

"I'd leave her undisturbed, if I were you," Orlo Featherstone said coldly. He had only one conception of what a lawyer should be, and Malone wasn't anything like it. "I only called myself because I am, so to speak and in a sense, a second father to her."

If anyone else had said that, Malone thought, it would have called for an answer. From Orlo Featherstone, it sounded natural. He nodded sympathetically and said, "Tragic affair, wasn't it?"

Orlo Featherstone unbent at least half a degree. "Distinctly so. Personally, I cannot imagine Paul Palmer doing such a thing. When I visited him yesterday, he seemed quite cheerful and full of hope."

"You—visited him yesterday?" Malone asked casually. He drew a cigar from his pocket and began unwrapping it with exquisite care.

"Yes," Featherstone said, "about the will. He had to sign it, you know. Fortunate for her"—he indicated Madelaine Starr with a gesture toward the building—"that he did so. He left her everything, of course."

"Of course," Malone said. He lighted his cigar on the second try. "You don't think Paul Palmer could have been murdered, do you?"

"Murdered!" Orlo Featherstone repeated, as though it was an obscene word. "Absurd! No Palmer has ever been murdered."

Malone watched him climb into a shiny Cadillac, then started walking briskly toward State Street. The big limousine passed him just as he reached the corner, it turned north on State Street and stopped. Malone paused by the newsstand long enough to see Mr. Orlo Featherstone get out and cross the sidewalk to the corner drugstore. After a moment's thought he followed and paused at the cigar counter, from where he could see clearly into the adjacent telephone booth.

Orlo Featherstone, in the booth, consulted a little notebook. Then he took down the receiver, dropped a nickel in the slot, and began dialing. Malone watched carefully. D-E-L——9-6-0——It was Lillian Claire's number.

The little lawyer cursed all sound-proof phone booths, and headed for a bar on the opposite corner. He felt definitely unnerved.

After a double rye, and halfway through a second one, he came to the heartening conclusion that when he visited Lillian Claire, later in the evening, he'd be able to coax from her the reason why Orlo Featherstone, of all people, had telephoned her, just after leaving the late Paul Palmer's fiancee. A third rye braced him for his call on the fiancee herself.

Riding up in the self-service elevator to her apartment, another heartening thought came to him. If Madelaine Starr was going to inherit all the Palmer dough—then it might not be such a trick to collect his five thousand bucks. He might even be able to collect it by a week from Thursday.

And he reminded himself, as she opened the door, this was going to be one time when he wouldn't be a sucker for a pretty face.

Madelaine Starr's apartment was tiny, but tasteful. Almost too tasteful, Malone thought. Everything in it was cheap, but perfectly correct and in

exactly the right place, even to the Van Gogh print over the midget fireplace. Madelaine Starr was in exactly the right taste, too.

She was a tall girl, with a figure that still made Malone blink, in spite of the times he'd admired it in the courtroom. Her bronze-brown hair was smooth and well-brushed, her pale face was calm and composed. Serene, polished, suave. Malone had a private idea that if he made a pass at her, she wouldn't scream. She was wearing black house-pajamas. He wondered if they were her idea of mourning.

Malone got the necessary condolences and trite remarks out of the way fast, and then said, "What kind of terrible trouble and danger are you in, Miss Starr?"

That startled her. She wasn't able to come up with anything more original than "What do you mean?"

"I mean what you wrote in your note to Paul Palmer," the lawyer said.

She looked at the floor and said, "I hoped it had been destroyed."

"It will be," Malone said gallantly, "if you say so."

"Oh," she said. "Do you have it with you?"

"No," Malone lied. "It's in my office safe. But I'll go back there and burn it." He didn't add when.

"It really didn't have anything to do with his death, you know," she said.

Malone said, "Of course not. You didn't send him the rope too, did you?"

She stared at him. "How awful of you."

"I'm sorry," Malone said contritely.

She relaxed. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to snap at you. Fm a little unnerved, naturally." She paused. "May I offer you a drink?"

"You may," Malone said, "and I'll take it."

He watched her while she mixed a lot of Scotch and a little soda in two glasses, wondering how soon after her fiance's death he could safely ask her for a date. Maybe she wouldn't say Yes to a broken-down criminal lawyer, though. He took the drink, downed half of it, and said to himself indignantly, "Who's broken-down?"

"Oh, Mr. Malone," she breathed, "you don't believe my note had anything to do with it?"

"Of course not," Malone said. "That note would have made him want to live, and get out of jail." He considered bringing up the matter of his five-

thousand-dollar fee, and then decided this was not the time. “Nice that you’ll be able to pay back what you owe Max Hook. He’s a bad man to owe money to.”

She looked at him sharply and said nothing. Malone finished his drink, and walked to the door.

“One thing, though,” he said, hand on the knob. “This—terrible trouble and danger you’re in. You’d better tell me. Because I might be able to help, you know.”

“Oh, no,” she said. She was standing very close to him, and her perfume began to mingle dangerously with the rye and Scotch in his brain. “I’m afraid not.” He had a definite impression that she was thinking fast. “No one can help, now.” She looked away, delicately. “You know—a girl—alone in the world—”

Malone felt his cheeks reddening. He opened the door and said, “Oh.” Just plain Oh.

“Just a minute,” she said quickly. “Why did you ask all these questions?”

“Because,” Malone said, just as quickly, “I thought the answers might be useful—in case Paul Palmer was murdered.”

That, he told himself, riding down the self-service elevator, would give her something to think about.

He hailed a cab and gave the address of the apartment building where Lillian Claire lived, on Goethe Street. In the lobby of the building he paused long enough to call a certain well-known politician at this home and make sure that he was there. It would be just as well not to run into that particular politician at Lillian Claire’s apartment, since he was paying for it.

It was a nice apartment, too, Malone decided, as the slim mulatto maid ushered him in. Big, soft modernistic divans and chairs, paneled mirrors, and a built-in bar. Not half as nice, though, as Lillian Claire herself.

She was a cuddly little thing, small, and a bit on the plump side, with curly blonde hair and a deceptively simple stare. She said, “Oh, Mr. Malone. I’ve always wanted to get acquainted with you.” Malone had a pleasant feeling that if he tickled her, just a little, she’d giggle.

She mixed him a drink, lighted his cigar, sat close to him on the biggest and most luxurious divan, and said, “Tell me, how on earth did Paul Palmer get that rope?”

“I don’t know,” Malone said. “Did you send it to him, baked in a cake?”

She looked at him reprovingly. “You don’t think I wanted him to kill himself and let that awful woman inherit all that money?”

Malone said, “She isn’t so awful. But this is tough on you, though. Now you’ll never be able to sue him.”

“I never intended to,” she said. “I didn’t want to be paid off. I just thought it might scare her away from him.”

Malone put down his glass, she hopped up and refilled it. “Were you in love with him?” he said.

“Don’t be silly.” She curled up beside him again. “I liked hun. He was much too nice to have someone like that marry him for his money.”

Malone nodded slowly. The room was beginning to swim—not unpleasantly—before his eyes. Maybe he should have eaten dinner after all.

“Just the same,” he said, “you didn’t think up that idea all by yourself. Someone put you up to asking for money.”

She pulled away from him a little—not too much. “That’s perfect nonsense,” she said unconvincingly.

“All right,” Malone said agreeably. “Tell me just one thing—”

“I’ll tell you this one thing,” she said. “Paul never murdered his uncle. I don’t know who did, but it wasn’t Paul. Because I took him home that night. He came to see me, yes. But I didn’t put him in a cab and send him home. I took him home, and got him to his own room. Nobody saw me. It was late—almost daylight.” She paused and lit a cigarette. “I peeked into his uncle’s room to make sure I hadn’t been seen, and his uncle was dead. I never told anybody because I didn’t want to get messed up in it worse than I was already.”

Malone sat bolt upright. “Fine thing,” he said, indignantly and a bit thickly. “You could have alibied him and you let him be convicted.”

“Why bother?” she said serenely. “I knew he had you for a lawyer. Why should he need an alibi?”

Malone shoved her back against the cushions of the davenport and glared at her. “A’right,” he said. “But that wasn’t the thing I was gonna ask. Why did old man Featherstone call you up tonight?”

Her shoulders stiffened under his hands. “He just asked me for a dinner date,” she said.

"You're a liar," Malone said, not unpleasantly. He ran an experimental finger along her ribs. She did giggle. Then he kissed her…

All this time spent, Malone told himself reprovingly, and you haven't learned one thing worth the effort. Paul Palmer hadn't killed his uncle. But he'd been sure of that all along, and anyway it wouldn't do any good now. Madelaine Starr needed money, and now she was going to inherit a lot of it. Orlo Featherstone was on friendly terms with Lillian Claire.

The little lawyer leaned his elbows on the table and rested his head on his hands. At three o'clock in the morning, Joe the Angel's was a desolate and almost deserted place. He knew now, definitely, that he should have eaten dinner. Nothing, he decided, would cure the way he felt except a quick drink, a long sleep, or sudden death.

He would probably never learn who had killed Paul Palmer's uncle, or why. He would probably never learn what had happened to Paul Palmer. After all, the man had hanged himself. No one else could have got into that cell. It wasn't murder to give a man enough rope to hang himself with.

No, he would probably never learn what had happened to Paul Palmer, and he probably would never collect that five-thousand-dollar fee. But there was one thing he could do. He'd learn the words of that song.

He called for a drink, the janitor, and the janitor's guitar. Then he sat back and listened.

"As I passed by the ol' state's prison,
Ridin' on a stream-line' train—"

It was a long rambling ballad, requiring two drinks for the janitor and two more for Malone. The lawyer listened, remembering a line here and there.

"When they hanged him in the mornin'
His last words were for you,
Then the sheriff took his shiny knife
An' cut that ol' rope through."

A sad story, Malone reflected, finishing the second drink. Personally, he'd have preferred "My Wild Irish Rose" right now. But he yelled to Joe

for another drink and went on listening.

"They hanged him for the thing you done,
You knew it was a sin,
How well you knew his heart could break,
Lady, why did you turn him in—"

The little lawyer jumped to his feet. That was the line he'd been trying to remember! And what had Paul Palmer whispered? "*It wouldn't break.*"

Malone knew, now.

He dived behind the bar, opened the cash drawer and scooped outa handful of telephone slugs.

"You're drunk," Joe the Angel said indignantly.

"That may be," Malone said happily, "and it's a good idea too. But I know what I'm doing."

He got one of the slugs into the phone on the third try, dialed Orlo Featherstone's number, and waited till the elderly lawyer got out of bed and answered the phone.

It took ten minutes, and several more phone slugs to convince Featherstone that it was necessary to get Madelaine Starr out of bed and make the three-hour drive to the state's prison, right now. It took another ten minutes to wake up Lillian Claire and induce her to join the party. Then he placed a long-distance call to the sheriff of Statesville County and invited him to drop in at the prison and pick up a murderer.

Malone strode to the door. As he reached it, Joe the Angel hailed him.

"I forgot," he said. "I got sumpin' for you." Joe the Angel rummaged back of the cash register and brought out a long envelope. "That cute secretary of yours was looking for you all over town to give you this. Finally she left it with me. She knew you'd get here sooner or later."

Malone said, "Thanks," took the envelope, glanced at it, and winced. "First National Bank." Registered mail. He knew he was overdrawn, but—

Oh, well, maybe there was still a chance to get that five thousand bucks.

The drive to Statesville wasn't so bad, in spite of the fact that Orlo Featherstone snored most of the way. Lillian snuggled up against Malone's left shoulder like a kitten, and with his right hand he held Madelaine Starr's hand under the auto robe. But the arrival, a bit before seven A.M., was

depressing. The prison looked its worst in the early morning, under a light fog.

Besides, the little lawyer wasn't happy over what he had to do.

Warden Garrity's office was even more depressing. There was the warden, eyeing Malone coldly and belligerently, and Madelaine Starr and her uncle, Dr. Dickson, looking a bit annoyed. Orlo Featherstone was frankly skeptical. The sheriff of Statesville County was sleepy and bored. Lillian Claire was sleepy and suspicious. Even the guard. Bowers, looked bewildered.

And all these people, Malone realized, were waiting for him to pull a rabbit out of his whiskers.

He pulled it out fast. "Paul Palmer was murdered," he said flatly.

Warden Garrity looked faintly amused. "A bunch of pixies crawled into his cell and tied the rope around his neck?"

"No," Malone said, lighting a cigar. "This murderer made one try—murder by frame-up. He killed Paul Palmer's uncle for two reasons, one of them being to send Paul Palmer to the chair. It nearly worked. Then I got him a new trial. So another method had to be tried, fast, and that one did work."

"You're insane," Orlo Featherstone said, "Palmer hanged himself."

"I'm not insane," Malone said indignantly, "I'm drunk. There's a distinction. And Paul Palmer hanged himself because he thought he wouldn't die, and could escape from prison." He looked at Bowers and said, "Watch all these people, someone may make a move."

Lillian Claire said, "I don't get it."

"You will," Malone promised. He kept a watchful eye on Bowers and began talking fast. "The whole thing was arranged by someone who was mercenary and owed money. Someone who knew Paul Palmer would be too drunk to know what had happened the night his uncle was killed, and who was close enough to him to have a key to the apartment. That person went in and killed the uncle with Paul Palmer's gun. And, as that person had planned, Paul Palmer was tried and convicted and would have been electrocuted, if he hadn't had a damn smart lawyer."

He flung his cigar into the cuspidor and went on. "Then Paul Palmer was granted a new trial. So the mercenary person who wanted Paul Palmer's death convinced him that he had to break out of prison, and

another person showed him how the escape could be arranged—by pretending to hang himself, and being moved to the prison hospital—*watch her, Bowers!*"

Madelaine Starr had flung herself at Dr. Dickson. "Damn you," she screamed, her face white. "I knew you'd break down and talk. But you'll never talk again—"

There were three shots. One from the little gun Madelaine had carried in her pocket, and two from Bowers' service revolver.

Then the room was quite still.

Malone walked slowly across the room, looked down at the two bodies, and shook his head sadly, "Maybe it's just as well," he said. "They'd probably have hired another defense lawyer anyway."

"This is all very fine," the Statesville County sheriff said. "But I still don't see how you figured it. Have another beer?"

"Thanks," Malone said. "It was easy. A song tipped me off. Know this?" He hummed a few measures.

"Oh, sure," the sheriff said. "The name of it is 'The Statesville Prison.'" He sang the first four verses.

"Well, I'll be double-damned," Malone said. The bartender put the two glasses of beer on the table. "Bring me a double gin for a chaser," the lawyer told him.

"Me too," the sheriff said. "What does the song have to do with it, Malone?"

Malone said, "It was the crank on the adding machine, pal. Know what I mean? You put down a lot of stuff to add up and nothing happens, and then somebody turns the crank and it all adds up to what you want to know. See how simple it is?"

"I don't," the sheriff said, "but go on."

"I had all the facts," Malone said, "I knew everything I wanted to know, but I couldn't add it up. I needed one thing, that one thing. "He spoke almost reverently, downing his gin. "Paul Palmer said '*It wouldn't break*'—just before he died. And he looked terribly surprised. For a long time, I didn't know what he meant. Then I heard that song again, and I did know." He sang a few lines. "*The sheriff took his shiny knife, and cut that ol' rope through*." Then he finished his beer, and sang on, "*They hanged him for the*

thing you done, you knew it was a sin. You didn't know his heart could break. Lady, why did you turn him in." He ended on a blue note.

"Very pretty," the sheriff said. "Only I heard it, '*You knew that his poor heart could break*.'"

"Same thing." Malone said, waving a hand. "Only, that song was what turned the crank on the adding machine. When I heard it again, I knew what Palmier meant by 'It wouldn't break'"

"His heart?" the sheriff said helpfully.

"No," Malone said, "the rope."

He waved at the bartender and said, "Two more of the same. "Then to the sheriff, "He expected the rope to break. He thought it would be artfully frayed so that he would drop to the floor unharmed. Then he could have been moved to the prison hospital—from which there had been two escapes in the past six months. He had to escape, you see, because his sweetheart had written him that she was in terrible trouble and danger—the same sweetheart whose evidence had helped convict him at the trial.

"Madelaine Starr wanted his money," Malone went on, "but she didn't want Paul. So her murder of his uncle served two purposes. It released Paul's money, and it framed him. Using poor old innocent Orlo Featherstone, she planted in Lillian Claire's head the idea of holding up Paul for money, so Paul would be faced with a need for ready cash. Everything worked fine, until I gummixed up the whole works by getting my client a new trial."

"Your client shouldn't of had such a smart lawyer," the sheriff said, over his beer glass.

Malone tossed aside the compliment with a shrug of his cigar. "Maybe he should of had a better one. Anyway, she and her uncle, Dr. Dickson, fixed it all up. She sent that note to Paul, so he'd think he had to break out of the clink. Then her uncle, Dickson, told Paul he'd arrange the escape, with the rope trick. To the world, it would have looked as though Paul Palmer had committed suicide in a fit of depression. Only he did have a good lawyer, and he lived long enough to say '*It wouldn't break*.'"

Malone looked into his empty glass and lapsed into a melancholy silence.

The phone rang—someone hijacked a truck over on Springfield Road—and the sheriff was called away. Left by himself, Malone cried a little into

his beer. Lillian Claire had gone back to Chicago with Orlo Featherstone, who really had called her up for a date, and no other reason.

Malone reminded himself he hadn't had any sleep, his head was splitting, and what was left of Joe the Angel's hundred dollars would just take him back to Chicago. And there was that letter from the bank, probably threatening a summons. He took it out of his pocket and sighed as he tore it open.

"Might as well face realities," Malone said to the bartender. "And bring me another double gin."

He drank the gin, tore open the envelope, and took out a certified check for five thousand dollars, with a note from the bank to the effect that Paul Palmer had directed its payment. It was dated the day before his death.

Malone waltzed to the door, waltzed back to pay the bartender and kiss him goodbye.

"Do you feel all right?" the bartender asked anxiously.

"All right?" Malone said. "I'm a new man!"

What was more, he'd just remembered the rest of that song. He sang it, happily, as he went up the street toward the railroad station.

"As I passed by the ol' state's prison,
Ridin' on a stream-line' train,
I waved my hand, and said out loud,
I'm never comin back again,
I'm never comin back a—gain!

Colonel Druce had been stabbed—but no one could possibly have stabbed him…Father Brown's encounter with this classic variant on the Locked Room concept may be your first introduction to this remarkable man who some benighted souls insist never existed! Neither do these unfortunate people believe in the existence of either Ellery Queen or Sherlock Holmes. We can only hope for their enlightenment. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who remember the name of Sherlock Holmes. And who know Father Brown. . .