

MURDER BY THE CLOCK

By IVAN CAMERON

EVERY detail in Herman Muller's plan to kill his uncle, rich old Edgar Blitz, was complete. As the mellow chimes of the great cathedral clock across the street pealed eight P. M., he thrust the razor-edged hunting knife into his belt, buttoned his overcoat and slipped out of his apartment.

He went up a short flight of stairs to the roof. The apartment houses stood in a row, their flat roofs adjoining, so he had no difficulty reaching a building at the end of the block. He opened a door with a skeleton key, walked down three floors to the street. He had not been seen. The night was foggy.

As Muller drove downtown, he glanced frequently at his expensive wrist-watch. It was now four minutes past eight. By eight-twenty he would reach an alley in the rear of the Blitz Department Store.

And Muller knew he must commit his crime between eight-twenty and eight-thirty—ten vital minutes in which he could not make a false move. The most important element in the perfect crime was the timing, and he had figured out his murder plot to a mathematical nicety. At exactly eight-thirty, "Pop" Hendrick, the night-watchman, would punch the clock on the fifth floor and inspect the executive offices.

But by then, Muller would be speeding homeward and his uncle would be dead, with a knife in his throat.

It was just eight-twenty when Muller's pass-key grated in the alleyway door. His car was parked a block away. A light burned on the fifth

floor. This was Friday and Blitz was in his office signing the Saturday payroll. The safe would be open, containing about fifteen thousand dollars for the busy morrow.

Muller crept through the silent store, a crafty smile on his thin lips. Cruel, predatory lines were etched on



The long, keen blade sank deep

his sharp-featured face. It was going to be a thrill—bumping off his stingy, ill-tempered uncle. Blitz would squirm and gurgle like a frog on a gig!

Muller's hatred for his relative dated from the day the old grouch had put him to work as a common employee "to learn the business from the ground up." But there was a will, and when Blitz died, his nephew

Gravity Puts a Nick in a Killer's Smooth Plan!

would inherit the bulk of the estate. He could wait no longer. He needed ready cash—now!

From the third floor upward, Muller moved with breathless stealth, clinging to the shadows and pausing often to listen for Pop Hendrick. He did not see nor hear the watchman. This did not worry him. Pop was near-sighted and half deaf. Avoiding Pop was easy.

Unheard and unseen, Muller gained the fifth floor, tiptoed along the hall to his uncle's office. He saw a figure silhouetted against the glassed-in partition.

He squinted at his watch. It was eight twenty-four. He had six minutes. Plenty of time. He dropped his gloved hand on the knob.

EDGAR BLITZ looked up from his desk with a start. Surprise turned quickly to anger.

"What's this, Herman? You know employees can't enter the store after six o'clock."

Knife held behind him, Muller advanced to the desk. His dark eyes burned with excitement and he was smiling sardonically.

"I happened to be driving past—saw the light in your office. I want to talk to you about a raise."

Blitz's fat face turned crimson.

"You want a raise? Why, you're the biggest loafer in the store, Herman! I ought to fire you."

Muller took another step forward. He was within striking range now. His body tensed, his arm stiffened. And for the first time, Blitz noticed the gleam in his nephew's eyes.

"Herman!" he cried, half rising from the chair. "Herman, what are you—"

His voice ended in a frightened bleat. Muller's arm whipped from behind his back like an uncoiling snake and the long, keen hunting blade sank deep. Blitz's eyes bulged with astounded unbelief. Blood gushed from his mouth. His body jerked frightfully. Then he collapsed, and rolled to the floor.

Muller shuddered, fought back an instant panic. Breathing hard, he

stooped, withdrew the knife, wrapped it in his handkerchief. He stepped quickly to the safe. Packages of currency were fastened together with rubber bands. He filled his pockets, cast a triumphant glance at the corpse, and hurried out.

As he glided down the back stairs, he saw by his wrist-watch that he still had a couple of minutes to spare. Pop Hendrick was not in evidence, but was certain to complete his half-hour tour of the store on the fifth floor at eight-thirty sharp.

Outside, Muller dropped the knife, handkerchief and gloves into a sewer. He continued on through the mist to his car.

Twenty minutes later, Muller had parked in his own neighborhood, and was making his return trip over the rooftops. He was elated. Everything had gone smoothly. Once in his apartment, he would put the currency in a specially constructed hiding place. The fifteen thousand would carry him for a year—until the will had been probated.

Muller put the key in the latch, turned it, went in. He flicked on the light—then paused in frozen amazement. His face was suddenly livid, his bloodless lips pressed tightly against his teeth.

He was staring at a scowling, heavy-set man, eye to eye. Then another man stepped from behind the door, kicked it shut. He flashed a badge.

"We're the law, Muller," he snapped.

Muller swallowed hard and his sweat-dampened shirt clung to his shivering spine. He couldn't speak.

"Where were you at eight-thirty, Muller?" demanded the heavy-set officer.

Muller's eyes were staring wildly.

"I—I was out for a ride."

The big detective guffawed. "Some alibi, eh, Pete?"

"Yeah. The guy's a card. Say, Muller, what did you do with the knife?"

"Knife? Officer! What are you talking about?"

"Frisk him, Joe!"

Practiced hands ransacked the shaking Muller's clothing — and found the money! The detectives did not seem surprised. Then, suddenly, handcuffs clicked over Muller's wrists. He stared dazedly at the two stern-visaged detectives. Caught red-handed! But how?

"What I can't savvy," remarked the detective who had been called Joe, "is why a smart baby like you would pick a time like eight-thirty to knife your uncle. Didn't you know the night-watchman punches in on the fifth floor at that time? Didn't you know he would see you and phone?"

Muller staggered back, his brain whirling. Eight-thirty? They were crazy! Why, he had set his watch by the cathedral clock that very night. It was always correct. On leaving for work in the mornings at seven-thirty, he habitually set his watch by the big clock and he had never failed to arrive on the dot.

And now, from across the street, the enormous time-piece spoke in deep, sonorous tones, chiming off the hour of nine P. M. Muller stared at his wrist-watch. It read nine P. M.

The other detective caught the mo-

tion, stepped over to Muller, examined the watch, then looked at his own. He grinned. "How long have you lived here, Muller?"

"Moved in a week ago. Why?"

"Study the big clock and compare it with your watch, Muller."

From his apartment window, Muller stared upward at the grim Gothic tower. Upward it rose, to lose itself spectrally in the fog, but the ponderous hands of the clock were plainly visible. And at every second, the huge minute hand kept gaining—or else Muller's little wrist-watch was mysteriously losing time. It gave him an uncanny feeling of doom. Dimly, he heard the detective speak.

"Too bad you didn't know about that clock, Muller. It's never correct except on the half hour. The minute hand is so big and heavy, it loses five minutes in time on the upward haul when pulling against gravity. But the hand moves faster on the downward movement and gains it all back. You set your watch at eight P. M. before starting out tonight, and so you were five minutes slow in your timing. That's why old Pop Hendrick saw you murder your uncle!"



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