

Nicholas Nocturne was far too egotistic to take his own life – even in the spectacular way he died. Obviously, he had had a bit of help in falling out that window . . .

DEATH OF A DEJECTED EDITOR

by DENNIS WIEGAND

DETECTIVE Sergeant Ralph Oliver was quietly seething as he hustled Policewoman Sally Ryan along the crowded pavement. The heavy going against the flood of noontime traffic did nothing to ease his spirits.

“But I don’t get this, Buster,” Sally protested. “All the man said was ‘Let’s lamp the gams, sister’, I didn’t think people really said that. And the way he chewed on that cigar; and that derby hat! I think he was precious!”

“I should’ve dipped the lug,” said Oliver tersely.

“Well, after all,” said Sally, reasonably, “if you go night-clubbing at high noon and catch the floor show in rehearsal, can you blame the impresario for thinking you want a job in the chorus line?”

“*Fifty-Seven Varieties!*” snorted Oliver. “What a corny name for a night spot! If I was back on the Vice Detail I’d padlock it just on the strength of that.”

Sally laughed lightly; bright blonde and built on almost over-ripenly lush lines, she was accustomed to being mistaken for a showgirl or a hood’s moll. In fact, she did everything she could to encourage this common mistake, since she found it extremely useful to her career as a policewoman.

“Come on, Olly-Wolly,” she soothed him, “let’s give it up and find a nice little French restaurant for lunch. It’s a waste of time to try to make the rounds of the joints in the middle of the day.”

“But when else can we have a date?” he complained. “Both of us working nights like this?”

“Dig up a hot lead,” she advised, “and then request Lieutenant Corcoran to assign me to the case. We’ll do our dating on the job in some opium den. What could be cosier?”

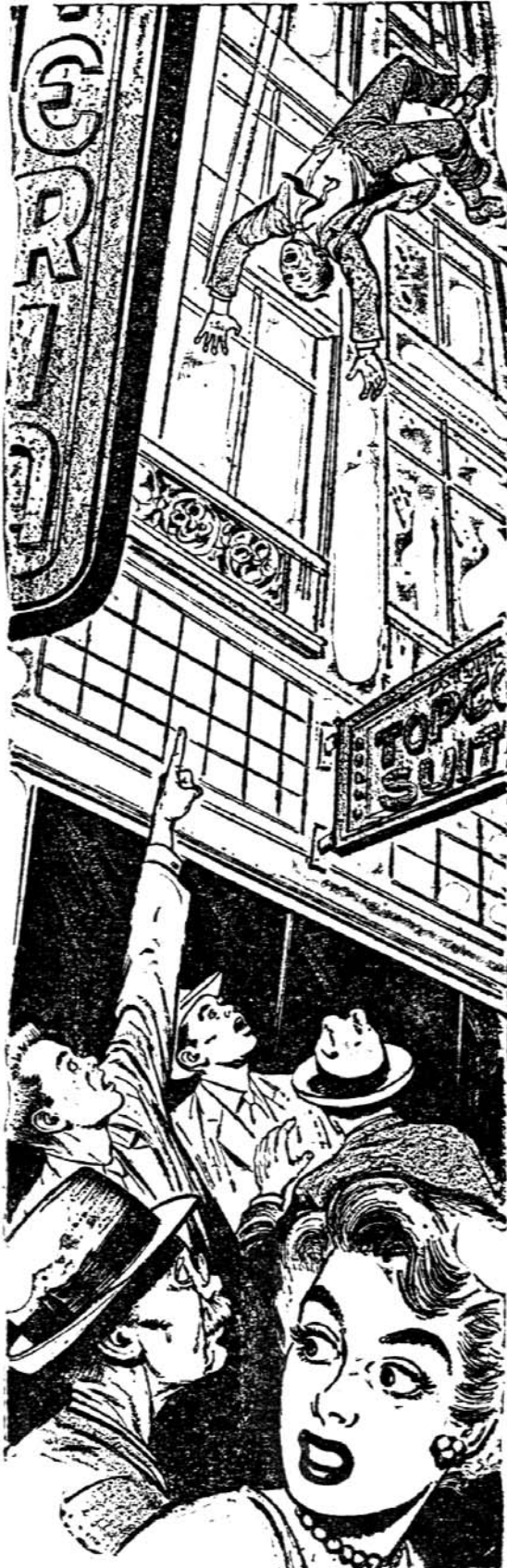
“Corcoran,” said Oliver. “What’re you trying to do, spoil my appetite? If it wasn’t for that glorified file-clerk I’d be back on the Vice Squad knocking pimps around.”

“Now, now, Buster,” she chided. “After all, these hopheads blow up and give you a little action now and then. Anyhow, what you need is more practice using your brain instead of your brawn. You still don’t believe me when I tell you that you’re brainier than you are brawny . . . not that you aren’t cute, in a bulldozer sort of way.”

“I wish you’d stop parroting Emmett Corcoran’s police college line of guff,” he said testily. “After all, there’s no getting away from the fact that . . .”

There was a sudden nauseous squelching sound and then a quick flurry in the crowd just ten paces ahead. Instinctively, Sgt. Oliver darted forward, dragging Sally with him. Within seconds he was palming his badge and thrusting stupefied pedestrians aside. Already several of the spectators were being sick in the gutters, and leaning against lamp-posts.

Somebody had taken a dive off a building. A good high one, judging by the sound he made in landing. Oliver chopped at a ghoulish smart-aleck youth with the edge of one hand. The kid squealed



and clapped a hand to his numbed neck, and forgot about his souvenir collecting.

"Honest, copper," protested Sally, "I didn't do it. I gotta witness, I tell yuh; yer bustin' me arm!"

Ralph Oliver relaxed the grip he had unconsciously locked on her arm. He spun her around and headed her toward the building entrance.

"Beat it, kid," he ordered. "You don't want to see this."

"Hey, wait a minute," she complained. "You're forgetting that I'm a cop, too, and from a long line of cops . . . not the least important of whom is my father, Patrick A. Ryan, our beloved precinct commander."

"Right now," he said coldly, "I'm in command here. You go call your old man; this is a good two blocks inside his precinct."

"Nuts!" she replied, snatching two folded newspapers from under the arm of a dumbfounded bystander. "These are being commandeered by the police," she told him. She thrust the newspapers at Oliver.

"Here, you cover him up," she advised. "It'll give you something to do till the thinkers get here."

IF ANYONE of the stunned spectators overheard this unseemly squabble between the police officers he must have considered it the effect of the shock. But as Sgt. Oliver efficiently maintained a tiny island of clear side-walk in a growing, pressing, heaving ocean of people, Sally went the rounds of the inner circle of spectators writing names and addresses into her notebook.

In an incredibly short time, summoned by a flood of telephone calls from the surrounding office buildings, the rising whine of a flotilla of police cars converged on the spot.

The crowd melted away from the curb side as the first of the squad cars and an ambulance pulled up. Even the smartly-uniformed Lieut. Emmett Corcoran, whose principal duties were personnel administration, had been lured from his desk in precinct headquarters by the address of the building from which the death leap had apparently been made.

Before higher brass from downtown police headquarters had arrived to take over command,

Lieut. Corcoran managed to maneuver Oliver off the scene with an order to check the huge building for the springboard of the suicidal jump.

"He ought to know I'm not on duty," growled Oliver, pressing his way through the mob blocking the entrance to the building.

"Never mind, Buster," advised a voice from behind his broad, battering shoulders. "I'm still with you. My dear old childhood playmate, Emmett, didn't see me."

Sgt. Oliver grinned broadly and felt better about being dismissed from the scene so that Corcoran could hog the show when the headquarters men arrived to make a check on precinct handling. Apparently, he thought with satisfaction, the coldly efficient Lieut.

Corcoran still lacked a certain something. How an ungainly and ominous heap of newspapers lying on the sidewalk could distract the attention of even the most duty-bound policeman from Sally's bright banner of blonde hair was hard to understand.

Locating the starting point of the fatal leap proved to be an easy matter, despite the vastness of the hive of offices. Sgt. Oliver found one of the staff of janitors waiting for him with the information that a window was apparently out on the 14th floor. The bank of thermostats in the basement, controlling the air conditioning system, had telegraphed that something drastic had happened to temperature and humidity control on the 14th floor.

That meant the offices of *The Gasp Group, Inc.*, which occupied the entire 14th floor, explained the janitor as he rode up in the elevator with them.

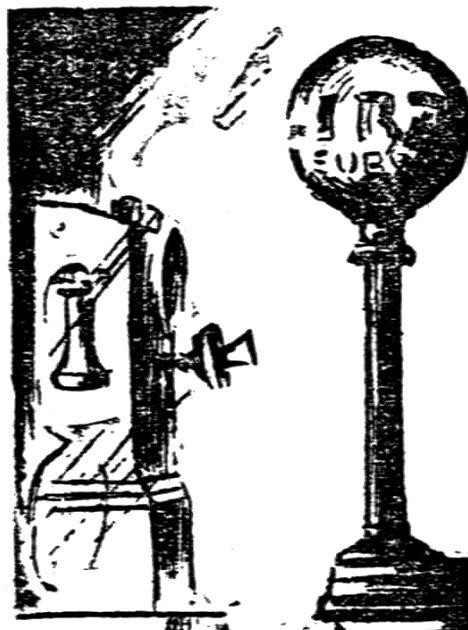
Ralph Oliver didn't have to be told that *GASP!* was a highly successful magazine based on reports of actual crimes, preferably murders heavily buttered with sex angles and liberally garnished with frank photography.

"Must be somebody busted a window in one of the offices along the front of the buildin'," continued the janitor garrulously. "And that means one o' the big shots. Like an executive editor, maybe."

"Oh, brother," breathed Sally fervidly, "won't Daddy love to see what *GASP!* does with this story! He can't stand that magazine because they jazz up the facts of a case too much; and they

positively loathe him, because he refuses to talk to their reporters."

"Oh, *GASP!* is just one o' their string, Miss," explained the janitor. "They got a whole flock' o' other magazines. They put out *Murder Monthly*, too. . . a real fav'rite o' mine."



THEY SWUNG through a wide double door, lettered from top to bottom with the names of magazines published by *The Gasp Group, Inc.* and entered a smartly modern reception room. A burly man with a shock of long, greying hair and a gone-to-seed moustache was waving a brief case under the pertly turned-up nose of a sleek and slender brunette.

"I tell you Mort," she was protesting, "I know Nick had this luncheon appointment with you. After all, I marked it on his calendar myself. But he told me to cancel it a half hour ago; said something more important had come up and he didn't want to be disturbed."

"You could have called me, couldn't you?" raged the man. "This guy Nocturne not only swipes my plots, but now he wastes my time. I ought to send him a bill for what I would have written if I hadn't knocked off early to rush into town for this appointment."

"I did call you, Mort," the brunette placated him, "but you know how that rural line is out there. And by the time I did get through, your wife said you'd already left. I'm terribly sorry, Mort;

but you know the great Nicholas Nocturne.”

“If you think you’ve got a beef,” she added bitterly, “just remember the raw deal he gave me.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” cut in Oliver, palming his badge, “but somebody’s just taken a dive out of one of the front windows on this floor. Who would it be? And who around here would be able to identify any of the guys who had one of the front offices?”

“Why, why . . . I don’t quite . . .,” fluttered the brunette. With a visible effort she drew herself together. “I’m Miss Slarr . . . Gretchen Slarr. I’m secretary to Nicholas Nocturne, executive editor of our fiction magazines in the detective field. He has a front office; in fact, I believe he’s the only one of the senior executives still in the building right now.”

“In his office, eh?” said Oliver. “Come on, let’s so see him. Which way?”

Gretchen Slarr swung her lithe shape from behind the kidney-shaped reception desk and led the way down a corridor which lay behind a plain, unmarked mahogany door. The irate man with the briefcase followed unobtrusively, although he seemed more interested in what was going to become of Sally Ryan than he was in what might have happened to Nicholas Nocturne.

“This is my office,” explained Miss Slarr, opening a door, “and that door leads to Mr. Nocturne’s office. I had just taken over the reception desk for a few moments for the regular girl. She had to . . .”

She hesitated, flustered. Then she said, almost plaintively, “Nick, I mean Mr. Nocturne, gave me strict orders not to disturb him. I’d rather you’d just go right in by yourself. After all, the police . . .”

But Sgt. Oliver already had the door to the executive editor’s private office open.

“Jackpot,” he said tersely. “Sally, call the transmitter and have them tell the boys downstairs to send the brain trust up here. You, Miss Slarr, get busy on that phone and get me somebody responsible who has a front office in the building across the street.”

Having arranged with the police radio transmitter to call the squad cars downstairs, Sally stood gingerly on the threshold of Nick Nocturne’s plushy private office. The janitor was peering eagerly over her shoulder.

“That window sure is busted out,” he commented. “Figured it would be. All these windows’re fastened shut so’s the air conditionin’ works right. On’y time they’re ever . . .”

“No other windows broken or open on the facade of this building,” said Oliver returning from his telephoning. “Talked to two lawyers and a doctor who have front offices in the building opposite.”

“Look,” Sally pointed out, “there’s his lunch on a tray. He didn’t eat it. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sgt. Oliver brushed the sentiment aside.

“Also very fishy,” Sally added.

“Nothing so fishy about it,” said Oliver impatiently. “Guy’s going to take a high dive, he’s too nerved up to eat. Wish those bookworms’d get up here so we could go get some lunch.”

THE DETECTIVE strode impatiently out into the corridor to meet the ranking officers who’d conduct the routine investigation.

Gretchen Slarr sat behind her desk, ashens-faced and wilted; Sally turned to look at her just in time to catch the consoling pat on the back the bushy-haired character was giving her. He quickly withdrew his hand.

“I’m Mort Gage,” he told Sally. “I write for this outfit. Detective stories. But this is the first time I ever heard of a police detective taking his girl friend out on the job. It’s an angle I’ll have to try.”

Sally ignored him and gave the secretary a warm smile of womanly sympathy. Bearing down on the throaty, chorus-girl tone of voice she had found so useful in dredging up confidences in powder-rooms, she said, “He wasn’t such a bad guy, after all, was he? Guess that’s the way it is with that charming-heel type of guy. Know just how you feel, Honey. Go ahead and cry.”

Gretchen Slarr said nothing, which told Sally approximately what she had wanted to learn. She turned her attention to Mort Gage. “I’ve always wanted to meet a real, live writer,” she cooed huskily. “I’m just crazy about detective stories, but I don’t think I’ve ever read any of yours.”

“Must have,” said Gage; “couldn’t help it. I write more of ‘em than any other guy in the world; just don’t use my name.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Sally sympathized.

The pale blue eyes, set deep in the wrinkles of the writer's face, seemed to turn several shades darker.

"Might pick up some back copies of *Murder Monthly*," he advised. "Almost anything under the name of Nick Nocturne will do."

"That's not fair, Mort!" cut in Gretchen, aroused. "You were paid a bonus for all that Nick Nocturne by-line stuff."

"Not all," he emphasized curtly. Sally's more or less aimless probing of the world in which Nick Nocturne had lived and had his being was cut short by the arrival of Lieutenant Emmett Corcoran and a lieutenant from Headquarters together with an impressive entourage of harness and plainclothes officers.

"What're you doing here, Sally?" said Emmett Corcoran in surprise.

The lieutenant from downtown shot him a peculiar glance which plainly said that he wondered how Corcoran, a notorious bluenose, had come to know this dish.

"Nobody's been inside this room?" Corcoran asked her.

"Not since we've been here," Sgt. Oliver affirmed.

"Right," snapped Corcoran. "You're relieved now, Sergeant; sorry your off-duty time was curtailed."

The police cortege filed into the private office and fingerprint men flanked off, carefully sifting the room for fingerprints which it was almost certain would never figure in an investigation.

Ralph Oliver took his second dismissal from the limelight in good humor. What did it matter that the guy was a big shot and there'd be a flock of publicity? It was still just a dumb thing for any guy to do; and it didn't provide a chance to trade punches with anybody.

WHEN HE and Sally were settled in a quiet corner of one of those expensive French restaurants where the food costs more than the overhead, Oliver's eager digestive juices were promptly thwarted.

"Let's just have an omelet," suggested Sally. "They're very good here, and we don't have much time."

"Hey," he protested, "What gives? A doll

like you comes in here and demurely orders nothing but a cheap little omelet, you know what'll happen? They'll call the cops and have us run in on suspicion."

"Quit stalling around," she ordered. "You know that Nocturne business is a phoney; we've got work to do."

"Aw, Sally," he complained, perusing the listed varieties of omelet on the menu, "there's nothing in that business. Nothing you can put your finger on."

"What you mean is there's nothing you can put your fist on. The man who has a desk like that one doesn't put his feet on it . . . nor does he eat his lunch off it."

"And too many people have good reasons for not liking his guts," agreed Oliver. "I intercepted two more out in the hall and sidetracked 'em into their own offices."

"Come on, Buster," coaxed the girl, "let's give it a go, old boy."

The elderly waiter, coming up to the table, raised his eyebrows in Gallic surprise.

"I've got better things to do with my time off," grumbled Oliver. Then in French he'd picked up in the *Rue Pigalle* during the war, he ordered two cheese omelets. The waiter's eyebrows stayed up all the way back to the kitchen.

While the fact of a crime may be detected by a flash of intuition, it isn't often solved by anything except long, dreary routine questioning. So Sally Ryan and Sgt. Ralph Oliver drew up a schedule and divided it between them.

By the time they returned to precinct headquarters that night for briefing on a minor raid on a "tea parlor", Sally had determined that Gunther Wade, distinguished publisher of *The Gasp Group Inc.*, loved Nick Nocturne like a brother . . . like Cain did his brother Abel. Nick, it seemed, had an irritating habit of picking off and using up the most delicious of the new gift employees as fast as Wade hired them. Snatched them right out from under Wade himself, so to speak.

With equal subtlety, and even more flattery, Sally had wormed her way into the confidences of sleek, energetic Barton Trask, an associate editor of *The Gasp Group, Inc.*

"Sure Nick committed suicide," he assured

Sally. "Know why? He was dejected, that's why. Everybody around here's heard him crying for years that you can't buy a good lead novel for twenty-five bucks nowadays."

But the heavy irony told Sally what she wanted to know about Barton Trask—that and his caustic analysis of Nick Nocturne's editorial mistakes and blunders. Trask, it seemed, knew just how to put *Murder Monthly* into the bigtime slick-paper field inside of six months . . . if only he had a free hand. It looked as if he had just that now.

Summing it up for her father, Sally pointed out: "It's just too much to believe that, with so many people running around with motives for pushing Nocturne out a window, a guy like this Nick Nocturne would accommodate them by jumping out of his own accord."

"Grant you that, Sally," admitted Captain Patrick A. Ryan, disgustedly poking at a heap of the paper-work he detested. "Guys like that want to live just for spite. Never heard of a first-class heel killing himself for any reason."

"Then why not give Ralph . . . Sgt. Oliver, I mean . . . a rain check on this narcotic deal?" she pursued. "It's just a headquarters draft, anyhow. Strictly for the newspapers."

"Two good reasons right there," he said wryly. "Headquarters and the newspapers. Furthermore, this Nocturne business has a clean bill from both headquarters and Corcoran. I can't order an investigation over their heads on nothing but a shrewd guess. Sorry, Honey."

"Dismissed!" he ordered sharply, as an afterthought.

DR. CARSON UPDIKE, Deputy Medical Examiner, fiddled with a letter-opener. Squinting across his desk at Sgt. Oliver he absent-mindedly performed an autopsy on his desk blotter which apparently had succumbed to some suspicious coronary affliction.

"But in terms of the layman," Oliver pressed, "what does all that mean, Doc?"

Updike obligingly translated his medical description of Nick Nocturne's remains. "Boy, was that guy a mess!"

"I heard him land myself," said Oliver slowly. "And I called on a flock of witnesses a policewoman on the scene had noted down. No

question of his not having come from a long way up. But it struck me that there was hardly any blood. What I want to know is, why wasn't there a lot smeared around?"

"Could be because there were only minor lesions of the skin," sighed the bored and weary Medical Examiner.

"But I saw a couple of places where the skin was broken," protested the detective. "Deep gashes."

"I know," conceded the doctor wearily, "Hide was pretty well torn up around the head."

"Well?" said Oliver provocatively. There was a long silence.

"I'm not a detective," replied the doctor, defensively. "But I'd like to have the address of the correspondence school that taught you."

"Then the lack of blood could mean he was dead long before he hit the sidewalk?" queried Oliver eagerly.

"Otherwise he must have taken off from Mars and died of old age on the way down," said the doctor. "Funny how great the power of suggestion is," he mused. "There was another obvious point I overlooked . . . or, rather, chose to misinterpret under the strong suggestion of suicide."



"You mean there was definite evidence of a cause of death other than the fall?" the detective pressed him.

"Not exactly," demurred the Medical Examiner. "But there was this distinct groove in the skull . . . about an inch wide and three-quarters of an inch deep. Ran almost the full length of the skull from forehead to base. I just chalked it up to his having landed head first on one of the

expansion joints between the blocks of the sidewalk, but . . .”

“But the tar joints have long since shrunk down below the level of the blocks!” Sgt. Oliver finished for him.

“Exactly,” agreed the medico. “When I first noticed that groove crushed into the skull, I could see those expansion joints sticking up fresh and new . . . just about right to make that impress.”

“I’m going over to check that sidewalk right now,” declared the sergeant.

“Don’t waste your time,” advised Updike, tossing a half dozen large, glossy photographs into the detective’s lap. “Here are the photos of the body *in situ*, and they show the sidewalk joints clearly.”

“I’ll take these with me, if you can spare ‘em, Doc,” said Oliver briskly. “And give me a break on this, will you? Stall sending up a new report until morning, huh?”

“Young man,” said the Deputy M. E., “Do you think I’m in such a tearing rush to inform my superiors of what a bumbling nincompoop I am? I’ll spend the whole night confirming suspicions, if you like.”

Sergeant Ralph Oliver had just time for one more stop in downtown headquarters before reporting out at the precinct station. He almost ran up the dingy, echoing staircase to Fingerprint Identification Division.

“Look, Ralph,” he pleaded with one of the print experts, “I’m just a precinct bum and I can’t get an order for an overtime job, but I need a process on the prints on that lunch tray in the Nocturne office. You’ll be able to match ‘em with a record, I think. Also check ‘em against the prints you picked up elsewhere in Nocturne’s office. Bet you a twenty you find them on the back of one of those steel-pipe chairs.”

“Humh,” pondered the fingerprint man, studying a chart. “Chairs marked D, E, F, and G, that’d be. Okay. It’ll take about four hours of my time; but that figures out at five bucks an hour. You got a deal, brother.”

THE “TEA PARTY” the precinct narcotics detail broke up that night proved to be almost as memorable as the one once staged in Boston Harbor.

The punks were pretty far gone by the time

the stakeout men signalled for the raid, and three of them had guns. In the wake of artillery cover provided by uniformed men, Sgt. Oliver conducted a lively infantry skirmish with bare fists through two bedrooms and the kitchen of the sleazy flat.

And in the squad car on the way back to the station, Sally had a brisk and decisive cat-fight in the rear seat of the police sedan with one of the two girls who had been in the flat.

Wearily, but contentedly, Oliver checked the car in at the garage where the bits of feminine apparel, tufts of long hair, and isolated buttons and dislodged snap-fasteners would be swept out of the back seat and the car would be prepared to go back on the prowl with the morning shift.

“Turned out pretty good at that,” he told Sally with satisfaction, when she emerged from the police matron’s office neatly and cleverly pinned, patched and painted back into presentable condition.

“That was strictly for the birds,” she said. “Or maybe for the birdbrains. Speaking about brains, what did you get on the Nocturne Case?”

He told her. Then she briefly outlined what she’d learned in the offices of *The Gasp Group, Inc.*, including the fact that no witness could be found who had seen Nocturne leave his office by any exit save the window. Also that no one had seen anyone enter Nocturne’s office, including the man with the lunch tray.

“But that doesn’t mean a thing,” she concluded. “Obviously someone *did* bring that tray in. Oh, and one more thing. That Gretchen Slarr, who was getting the brushoff from Nocturne since her novelty wore down, admits that she didn’t see Nocturne after ten o’clock in the morning. She got the order to cancel Mort Gage’s appointment by telephone.”

“Telephone?” cut in Oliver. “Why telephone? I’d swear there was one of those interoffice squawk-boxes on his desk.”

“That’s Momma’s little boy!” she encouraged him. “There was and is; what’s more, the glamorous Gretchen was too flustered by her emotions to be sure whether the call came from an inside or outside line. The girl at the switchboard doesn’t remember the call, either.”

“Well, well,” said Oliver with satisfaction. “That seems to clear up one point. Too bad the

Medical Examiner can't be sure now as to just how long before he hit the pavement Nocturne was killed. That morgue cooler bollixed up the possibility of checking back by means of body temperature and degree of rigor. But it's a cinch he wasn't alive when that call was made."

They checked out with the desk sergeant to go across the street to an all-night diner to sweat out the last two hours of their shift over coffee.

"But the pattern doesn't add up to anything," complained Oliver, moodily stirring his coffee and absently checking over the customers at the counter.

"Sure it does, Buster," Sally pointed out. "It spells *alibi*. Somebody went to a tot of trouble to spell it out good and clear."

"I get it," said Oliver: "And naturally you've already checked his desk calendar to see who needed an alibi, because he was in Nocturne's office—or had access to it—plus a more or less good reason for knocking him off."

"Well, yes," said Sally hesitantly, "but it was no good. It was Nocturne's morning for laying out the dummy on *Murder Monthly*. The lead novel is usually tied in with current news interests as closely as possible. You know, with whatever is the crime sensation of the month. So they don't make up the magazine as far in advance as most magazines of the type are. So that means two days a month when he can't break the day with appointments, except maybe one or two very important ones."

"Sure. Okay," put in Oliver impatiently, "but none of the people with motives . . . at least none of those we've run across so far . . . could hope to build an alibi for the whole morning. And not one of them actually did have an ironclad out-for-lunch sign up at noon when the fake suicide was staged."

"That's right," agreed Sally. "But there was an appointment for eleven o'clock pencilled on his calendar in his own handwriting, Gretchen claims. All it said was '*Crkpt . . . there*'."

"Who's this Mr. Crkpt? Sound like a Russian. Or a Balkan character of some sort."

"Don't let your imagination run away from you, Buster," she chided. "This is a police examination . . . not a Congressional probe. Gretchen Slarr translated it. Says it refers to a very well known mechanical engineering consultant

named Cyrus P. Ward. He thinks he can write detective stories. Turns out some very weird stuff, according to Gretchen; and Nick Nocturne always called him CrackPot. Claimed that's what the initials C. P. stood for."

"And that 'there' business," cut in Oliver with a flash of inspiration, "obviously means in Ward's office, instead of 'here', meaning Nocturne's."

"You're cutting ice with a buzzsaw now, Buster," the blonde assured him. "By the frozen acre, too."

"Where's this guy Ward's office?" he demanded.

"No office, Darling. A laboratory, if you please," she told him. "And brace yourself . . . it's on the 17th floor of the building across the street from Nocturne's office."

"Oh, no!" he begged, in mock agony. "Not a mad scientist! Better even a bearded Balkan spy."

JUST THEN, one of the countermen caught Oliver's attention. He was waving a telephone handset. "For you," he called. "Take it in the booth."

"Collect your gear," he ordered when he returned from the telephone booth. "That was the desk. Said my boy, Ralph, downtown in Identification called up and said for me to come down and collect my double sawbuck."

"Buster!" she cried. "You mean you've got him taped already?"

"Sure," he said with an effort at modesty, "I had it figured as a hired killing. Just as soon, that is, as I had it figured as a killing. Characters like these editorial big-bugs don't do their own killings."

"I don't know," she said, slowly and doubtfully. "Seems to me I'd prefer even the mad scientist angle."

"Come on, Honeybunny," he urged, in expansive good humor. "Let's go get this guy. Obviously it's one of the regular hacks in the pay of some wise guy in that office. It was a pushover; all he does is go up to Nocturne's office wearing a waiter's white jacket and carrying a lunch tray. Nobody's going to notice him. He cuts into the private office when the Slarr babe ducks down the hall for a minute. Then he conks Nocturne with one of those modern chairs made out of chrome-

plated gaspipe. Then he stalls off Gage with the phone call, not knowing about the interoffice gadget. Promptly on cue at the stroke of noon he gives the body the old heave-ho through the window."

"Well done, Buster," she gave in. "We'll let it go at that . . . for now."

AT DOWNTOWN headquarters they found a weary, hollow-eyed identification expert awaiting them with the file on a certain Algernon William Wright.

"He's a petty hoodlum," explained the print expert. "Works around cafes and bars, when working. Too dumb to wear gloves; too dumb for real dirty work."

"Just the kind of punk an amateur crime-buyer would pick out," said Oliver defensively.

"You'll see for yourself," said Ralph wearily. "Took it upon myself to put out a pick-up order for him. You can push these punks around about all you want; he'll be here any time now. Here's your twenty."

"G'wan," growled Oliver, thrusting back the proffered bill, "You trying to make me ashamed of myself? I'm cutting you in on the credit for this one, too."

"I don't buy this punk for big stuff," affirmed the fingerprint man."

"Those big shots might not know a killer when they see one . . . but little Algy knows he's a punk."

As if to illustrate the point, two huge policemen came in with a dried-up little man who had the furtive, terrified look of a rabbit who'd just ducked into a bear's den to escape a dog.

With Sally watching him, Ralph Oliver couldn't lay a fatherly hand of good counsel on the little hoodlum. But it wouldn't have done any good, and it wasn't necessary; the little guy ran off at the mouth both literally and figuratively.

"Honest," he pleaded. "I didn't know what the caper was till I read the papers. It ain't clear even now; I jus' know what I tol' yuh."

What he told them, over and over again, was that a distinguished-looking man . . . "a real gennulmun". . . had approached him in the cafeteria where he worked.

The gentleman's proposition was simple and involved only the simple and boyish crime of

breaking a window. It was all a part of a joke he was playing on a friend. And, of course, these country club characters were always playing elaborate and expensive pranks on one another. All he had to do was bring up the lunch as an excuse to get up the service elevator and into the inner office corridors without being noticed.

He was to allow plenty of time to get into Nocturne's office unseen. He was to leave the tray on the desk and smash out one of the windows at exactly noon, or as close to it as possible. Then get out unseen. It was a lead-pipe cinch and very clean, for the money.

"Okay," conceded Sgt. Oliver finally, tiredly dragging on his coat again. He gave Sally a long speculative glance.

"Come on, Snow White," he said. "Here we go to the mad scientist's den."

SALLY CALLED the precinct desk to check them out for the day's duty and they took a cab uptown through the slowly awakening city streets. In the building opposite the shining modern structure which housed *GASP!* and its' little brethren, Oliver easily found a janitor who was impressed by police badges.

The 17th Floor suite which accommodated the activities of Cyrus P. Wade Associates, Consulting Engineers, had a slightly old-fashioned and spartan air.

There was a barren, drafty waiting room furnished in heavy, practical golden oak, surrounded by a range of little private offices and drafting rooms, like monastery cells. Beyond that insulating partition of offices lay a large and lofty room fitted out with huge and heavy tables and ranged with a fantastic jungle of mechanical equipment. There were models of farm machinery and construction machinery. There were full-scale machines of doubtful purpose, in all stages of assembly.

"Mad scientist is right!" Sally gave a long, low whistle. "What a twisted brain this guy must have!"

"Makes plenty of sense to me," countered Oliver. "Always did have a yen for machinery; wanted to be an engineer."

"Well, read it to me," demanded Sally.

"This is no longer an active firm, for one thing," interpreted the detective. "Offices unused.

Dust all over everything. Most of the models are for obsolete machines. This guy is either retired or just taking on a job now and then for the heck of it. Works alone. And there's obviously . . ."

"What's up?" Sally took note of the break in the commentary.

"Get a load of this thing!" he cried, enthusiastically patting a nondescript heap of joints and arms and beams. "This is it, kid! This is the answer! What a dope I've been!"

"Looks like a frozen nightmare," said Sally disparagingly.

"This is an editor-ejector," he proclaimed. "Saw one of these in action two summers ago. Guy came around to the farm where I was staying to demonstrate it."

"What's it do? Besides eject editors," demanded Sally, suspicious of this new enthusiasm.

"It was built to fire heavy bales of hay from a truck right up into a hayloft," the detective explained. "The thing's uncanny. You set it for the weight of the bales, hook her up to an air compressor, load a bale of hay onto this sliding platform, take aim at the door of the hayloft and fire away."

"What's so good about that?" said Sally naively.

"Don't you know what a job it is to haul hay up to a loft with a block and tackle?" he demanded. "Or what an expensive and clumsy rig an endless belt conveyor is?"

"No," said Sally coolly. "I can't say it ever came to my attention. But I can see where this gadget would come in mighty handy for flipping any old bodies you happen to have around over across the street into somebody else's doorstep."

"And for a guy who's handy with a sliderule," added Oliver, "it's no trick at all to slap it down exactly where you want it. A million to one no one will notice the body hurtling across the street a dozen or more stories up. Just figure out the weight of the body, the distance, the trajectory. Just like aiming heavy artillery."

"Very tidy and surprisingly small, too," Sally pointed out. "What's this thing?"

"Storage tank for that little electric compressor over there. Builds up enough air pressure that way," explained the detective.

"But," he added a little wistfully, "you don't

seem to be very much surprised."

"No," she admitted. "It was when that Barton Trask was kidding around about Nocturne's being dejected and killing himself. The word, 'deject' is right out of Latin, and literally it means 'to throw down'. I sort of started to think about the possibility that Nocturne didn't jump down, but was thrown down."

"It's the way you look, I guess," sighed Oliver. "Makes a guy forget you have a college education."

IT TOOK well over an hour to convince Corcoran and the other powers-that-be that the death of Nicholas Nocturne was not a suicide. Then, with the full panoply of the ranking law, they called at the apartment of Cyrus P. Wade while that gentleman was finishing the late breakfast of a semi-retired bachelor.

"That's 'im!" shrilled Algernon William Wright. "That's the gennulmun who got me inda this jam fer bustin' that winder!"

Cyrus P. Wade was indeed a gentleman. He indulged in no undignified and unsportsmanlike denials and protestations; he knew when he was in the soup with both feet.

In his statement, given in a wry and cultivated tone of voice, he explained that the hobby of his declining years had been the writing of detective stories, written around various ingenious murder devices suggested by his years of experience as a topflight mechanical engineer.

"But Mr. Nocturne invariably rejected my manuscripts," he explained. "And with an insulting little note that implied that my contrivances were impractical and the fancies of a lunatic. Then he would promptly adopt my idea and farm it out to some hack, or re-cast it himself."

"Finally I'd had enough of his ill-bred impertinence. He actually dared to laugh at the bale-gun idea when I embodied it in a narrative . . . although these machines are already patented and on the open market."

"So you bought one and made an appointment to demonstrate it to him," suggested Sgt. Oliver.

"Exactly," said the old man with a triumphant smile. "Although I fear that I failed to convince him in the end, since it was unfortunately necessary to hit him over the head

to get him onto the platform.”

“You had an appointment for lunch with someone in the building?” queried Sally Ryan, fighting against an overwhelming impulse toward sympathy for this well-mannered and charming killer.

“With a group of three old friends who have offices in the building, and with whom I regularly take luncheon,” he agreed.

“You know,” mused Oliver, “you’d have gotten away with it, more than likely, if you’d only chloroformed him so he’d be alive when he hit the pavement.”

“That was precisely one of the late Mr. Nocturne’s objections to my story,” said the old man. “Perhaps I should have paid greater heed to his advice.”