

Once he allowed that there was nothing personal about someone's leaving a murdered man in his office, Simon Randall began to see the light in this case. Just enough light to reveal a blank wall ahead. . .

DEATH ON SUNDAY

by H. C. BUTLER



It was the little fat man—with a bullet hole in his head.

HE WAS as drunk as a dockhand on Saturday night which is one reason I didn't believe him when he said it. I was half looped myself, which was another reason.

He said, very simply, "I'm going to kill a woman."

Just like that . . .

I'm Simon Randall, private investigator, more glamorously known as

an eye. It was a hot, muggy Saturday night—the kind Miami doesn't brag about in the travel folders—and I'd been working late in my office. About nine o'clock I closed up and ambled across Biscayne Boulevard to Louie's place for a few beers. That's where I met the little round man.

He was occupying the end stool at the bar and I sat down next to him. He was about five feet tall and five feet wide and had the general contours of a beachball. His greatest circumference was at his beltline, and above and below that point he simply tapered. His face was round, too; his cheeks pink and puffy, his global dome completely bald. And he was talkative.

Nothing's more boring than a talkative lush, but this guy turned out to be different. I found that he could tell the most fanciful lies of anyone I'd ever met. He told me about the time he fought bulls in Barcelona, for example. And the time he'd gone over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

So he was an interesting liar anyway—and if you didn't take anything he said seriously you could spend an entertaining evening with him. It was about ten o'clock—I was on my sixth beer and he was on his umpteenth highball—when he said it.

"I'm going to let you in on a big secret," he said, wagging his chubby finger in my face. "I'm going to kill a woman!"

I just laughed it off. "Better not tell me; I'm a private dick."

"Hoho!" He slapped his knee with his fat hand. "Now just imagine *me* telling *you* I'm going to kill a woman!" His round eyes thinned out. "I am, though. By gawd if I'm not!"

It still didn't register with me. How can you believe a guy who's been slinging wild tales all evening? "Why a woman?" I asked, egging him on.

"Why *not* a woman?" he asked practically. "In detective stories they always kill a beautiful woman—they make such pretty corpses. Why should I be different?"

Like I say, this was at ten o'clock. Time for a hard-working private dick to head for home. I drained my beer.

"Make it a strip-teaser," I suggested, "and leave her on an Oriental rug with a knife between her ample breasts. That's the way it's always done."

I left him sitting there. In ten minutes I'd forgotten all about the little round man and his strange stories.

THE NEXT morning was Sunday and I wouldn't ordinarily have gone to the office. But I'd left some papers there I wanted to pick up, so after a stomach-settling breakfast I went back to the Pennant Building where I had my cubicle.

Ernie, the prune-faced janitor, gave me the eye as I went in the back way. "Working this morning, Mr. Randall?"

"A private dick's work is never done," I paraphrased, grinning at him.

Then I took the elevator to the fourth floor, ambled down the long hallway and unlocked my office door. I stepped inside—and stopped.

There was a man sitting at my desk. This in itself was unusual, especially on a Sunday morning, but there was another aspect that made it more unusual. The man was the little round character I'd met the night before in the bar across the street. He sat in my swivel chair, leaning back comfortably, his chubby hands folded complacently over his bulging stomach.

What threw me was the fact that he had a little round bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

I stood there a moment, not quite grasping it. After all, finding a murdered man sitting in your locked-up office isn't

exactly a commonplace experience. And the fact that it was the little round man made it all the more incongruous.

What was it he had said? Oh, yes—he'd said he was going to kill a woman. A pretty woman, as they did in detective stories. And here he was sitting at my desk with a bullet hole in his own head!

How crazy can you get?

I kicked my office door shut with my heel. I walked over and touched him. He felt clammy and stiff. I'm no doctor, but I've seen a few corpses, and I made a quick guess that he must have been killed about ten hours ago. That would set the time somewhere around eleven o'clock last night. I'd left the bar, and the little round man, at ten.

It occurred to me, then, that I didn't know his name. I felt in his inside coat pocket and found a leather wallet. He had a few dollars, some unimportant papers, and an identification card. The name on the card was Loren Swenson.

It rang a bell in my memory, but not very loudly. Loren Swenson was a name I should know. I had that feeling, anyway. Yet I couldn't place the name. It hung around in my brain like an unwelcome intruder, and it wouldn't leave.

Loren Swenson was something out of the past, something old, something mysterious and vague and without exact meaning.

For the first time I realized there was a draft in the room. I looked at my window and noticed the lower glass pane was punctured near the latch. There was a hole big enough for a man to have reached his hand through and unlatched the window. It was unlatched, too.

I pushed the lower pane up and looked out. The window opened on a fire-escape that descended to the alley and ascended to the next floor, which was the top floor. I was about to swing my leg through the

window when I saw something on the sill.

A drop of blood!

The air had dried it and it was brownish now, but undoubtedly blood. I began to get ideas then. I went out on the grill-work of the fire-escape and began to examine the steps leading up to the floor above. On the second step from the landing was another brownish stain.

I went up the steps to the next floor. Four steps up was still another. This brought me to the office window above mine, and what I saw there set my heart racing.

A smear of brownish blood on the window sill!

IT WAS making incredible sense. A trail of blood droplets from the office above me to my room meant one thing—Loren Swenson (damn that name!) had been killed in the office above mine and then had been dragged down the fire-escape to my office. The killer had broken my window, dragged Swenson's body into my cubicle and put him in my chair.

That posed a logical question. Why had he picked on *me*?

I tried the window to the office above mine but it was locked. I retraced my steps to my own office and went back in. I looked again at the little round man and shuddered.

The correct routine was to call the police. I wondered, though, if that was the smart routine. I had had a ruckus or two with Inspector Clyde Groat of Homicide recently, and I was sure he'd be delighted to find a corpse in my office.

It would be a damned difficult thing to explain!

I looked at Loren Swenson again. The little round hole in the little round head of the little round man intrigued me. It was such a tiny hole that I guessed it must have been made by a .22 slug. The blood was

only a thin trickle down over his button nose and his chin.

Then I noticed another thing. There were three long, red scratches down the side of one puffy cheek.

I sighed and decided not to call the police—yet. Not until I could explain this a little better. I eased out of my office and locked the door again. I went to the elevator, rode it to main floor, and found the janitor and watchman, Ernie. He was sitting on a stool near the entrance reading a newspaper.

“I need some help, Ernie,” I said. “Who occupies the office right above mine?”

Ernie rubbed the stubble of his pointed chin. “That’d be Spencer Fain. You know, the Santa Claus with the beard.”

I nodded. I knew him, all right, although I hadn’t known that he occupied the room above mine. Spencer Fain was the building character. He was a lawyer and a peculiar one. He wore a long white beard and his eyes were always covered with dark sunglasses. When he walked in and out of the building, which was only in the early morning and late evening, he wore a black felt hat pulled down over his eyes. He never dressed in anything except a jet black suit—peculiar attire for Florida.

With the face foliage, the dark glasses and the pulled-down hat, there wasn’t much of his face visible.

Aside from all this, he kept pretty much to himself. We had him labeled as an extreme introvert because he associated with no one except his clients, and had precious few of those.

I looked at Ernie. “Did Fain stay late in his office last night?”

The old watchman nodded. “I was working the late shift last night, started days this morning. Fain didn’t leave his office last night until about eleven o’clock.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive. I was sitting at the door when he walked out. He usually says goodnight, but he must have been thinking about something last night because he didn’t say a word.”

“You sure it was Fain?”

Ernie chuckled. “How could you miss him with that beard and those glasses and the black hat and suit and all. What a character!”

I **STOOD** there thinking about it. So Spencer Fain had been in his office until eleven o’clock. That was, I figured, the approximate time Loren Swenson had been killed. And Swenson had obviously been slain in Fain’s office and then lugged down the fire-escape to mine. It was adding up.

“Anything wrong, Mr. Randall?” Ernie said, growing suspicious.

I shook my head. “No. But I’d like to have Fain’s home address, if you have it on file.”

Ernie nodded. “Sure. We have records on all Pennant Building tenants.” He went into a tiny room off the foyer and checked a card file. He gave me the address, outside the city limits on the Tamiami Trail. The way it looked, Spencer Fain was my bird, and I got into my jalopy and headed for swampland.

Spencer Fain’s home turned out to be a luxurious white stucco place with an old-south, Kentucky colonel atmosphere. It set majestically on a filled-in area surrounded by everglade swamp. You had to drive up a cinder drive for half a mile to get to the front door.

Real hoity-toity and high class with none of the frills left out. Hollywood movie stuff, reeking with glamour. Fain, I decided, must have had a few well-heeled clients after all.

A penguin-like servant answered my

knock. When I asked for Fain he looked me up and down. "Mr. Fain is not in," he said.

"Then I'll talk to whoever is in," I said.

Apparently I made it sound demanding enough because he ushered me in. I walked into a large, luxuriously furnished living room that looked as if it had been picked out of the East Indian issue of *House Beautiful*—it was fit for an Oriental potentate. In the room—about half a mile away at the far end—was a woman and a man.

The woman said, "Yes? What can we do for you?"

I ambled across the ankle-deep rug in her direction. I have good eyesight and even at a distance I could tell that she was a very lush tomato. She was dressed in a black, clinging dress that accented her curves so that anybody could understand. And she had curves too—large full breasts, a slim waist, smooth provocative hips. She was a brunette with dark jet eyes and her red lips reminded me of soft, smooth velvet. She was just the type to drive a man to the booby-bin, blubbering his lower lip.

The man with her was not Spencer Fain.

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Fain," I told the woman.

She smiled and stood up. She had a nice smile and a soft, half-husky voice when she spoke "Mr. Fain is out of town. I'm his wife, Judith. Can I help you?"

She motioned to a chair and I sank into it. She dropped languidly into hers and crossed her legs. I kept looking at her legs and almost forgot what I'd come for. "When did he leave town, Mrs. Fain?"

"A week ago."

that Fain had left town a week ago didn't jibe with Ernie's story about seeing him leave his office at eleven o'clock last night.

The man in the room stirred restlessly. He was dark and handsome with a typical Florida tan, but there was something slightly effeminate about him. His features were delicate, his hands thin and tapering, like those of a musician's. He had obviously never done any manual work in his life.

The effeminate part of him could have been a misinterpretation on my part, though, because he grew suddenly aggressive.

"See here, Judith. You don't have to answer this man's questions . . . Who are you, anyway?"

I grinned. Judith Fain's remarkable beauty had been so striking that I'd forgotten to introduce myself. "I'm Simon Randall. I'm a private detective in the same building where your husband has his office. I'm working on a case that I thought Mr. Fain might help me with."

"I see." Judith Fain produced a cigarette and the dark man hastened to light it for her. I got the impression that he would hasten to do most anything for Judith Fain, and that Judith would accept the services. "I'm sorry Mr. Fain isn't here. Can we do anything for you? . . . This is Dr. John Sterling, a friend of the family and our personal physician."

I stood up to shake hands with Sterling. He just inclined his head. "Poison ivy," he said, holding out his hands. Both were covered with red blemishes. "Damnable stuff!"

I muttered a half-hearted consolation, and sat down again. I instinctively didn't like Dr. Sterling. He had a superior attitude about him, a way of looking down his nose at you as if you were a new bug under a microscope. He also had a definite

WARNING BELLS started to ring in my head. This woman's statement

suspicion of my motives. I could see he'd be a hard man to deal with and I liked Judith Fain better. Who wouldn't?

"Your husband may be involved in something serious," I said to her. "There's been a murder in the Pennant Building, and there's considerable evidence to indicate the killing might have occurred in Mr. Fain's office last night."

Judith Fain's face washed white. Her red lipstick stood out sharp against the paleness of her face. "A murder!"

"Yes. I'm afraid the police will want to see Mr. Fain. Where is he?"

She took a deep, fortifying breath. She laid down the cigarette, unsmoked. "He's in Chicago." She named a hotel. "I'm sure he could be reached, if necessary. But he couldn't have committed a murder in his office if he was away!"

"I think you ought to call him," I suggested.

This irritated Sterling. He made an impatient gesture. "Perhaps we'd better let the police handle this," he said. "We don't have to take orders from you!"

"No," I said, "you don't. But I think it would be wise to inform Mr. Fain of what's coming."

Judith got up silently and walked to the phone. I watched her hips sway slinkily beneath the black dress. Sterling was watching too—the lecher.

"I think Mr. Randall is right," she said. "Who is this person who was—killed?"

I gave her all the details. All except the fact that the corpse was sitting in my office and that I hadn't yet notified the police. She dialed the long-distance operator and asked for the hotel in Chicago. "I'll let you talk to him," she said.

WE WAITED a long moment while the call went through. Dr. Sterling

kept staring first at Judith, then at me. Then:

"I'd like to talk to Mr. Spencer Fain. He's staying at your hotel."

Another wait. A few squawks on the other end. Judith's eyes widening, black coals against the whiteness of her face. She said "thank you" in a small voice and hung up.

"He—isn't there," she said. "Never registered."

Sterling bounced from his chair like a rubber ball, went toward her and took her arm protectingly. "Judith!"

I shrugged. "I didn't think he would be, Mrs. Fain. The night watchman at the Pennant Building saw your husband leaving the building last night about eleven o'clock."

Judith Fain's breath came to a startled gasp. She sat down again, staring at me. "I—don't understand. He said he was going to Chicago on business. Are you sure the night watchman didn't make a mistake?"

I smiled at her. "Hardly, Mrs. Fain. Your husband is, as you know, rather distinctive looking."

"But this man that was killed—what did you say his name was?"

"Loren Swenson."

"I don't think my husband knew a man with that name."

I got up. "I'd just sit tight, if I were you," I advised. "The police will be in on this soon, and they'll probably question you. And when they find out your husband was supposed to be out of town, and wasn't, they'll start looking for him. I thought, since your husband and I work in the same building, it would be nice to let you know the situation before the cops surprise you."

She thanked me graciously. She was a real nice woman, but I couldn't say anything similar about Sterling. He

practically snarled a goodbye to me, and I had an almost uncontrollable impulse to throw him bodily through the French glass door behind him.

I went out and got into my jalopy with a wild thought pushing through my mind. Spencer Fain, the eccentric, the guy with no clients, had done well for himself. He had a mammoth home and he had Judith. I judged Judith to be about twenty-five. Spencer Fain could be around 70.

I kept wondering what he had that I didn't have.

I headed back up the Tamiami Trail toward Miami. I had one more stop in mind before going to the police. The morgue of the biggest newspaper in town, where I might find out something about the identity of Loren Swenson.

The name still intrigued me.

I had a little trouble because it was Sunday, but I finally found an old boy who opened things up for me. And I was in luck. They had a file on him with a few clippings and a picture.

The picture checked. It was Loren Swenson, all right—about five years ago. The clipping was also dated five years back. The headline read: *Con-Man Gets Eight Years in \$100,000 Swindle*.

THAT SET the memory wheels spinning in my noggin. The story explained that Loren Swenson, known con-man had swindled at least \$100,000 out of several trusting "marks" and was scheduled to spend the next eight years in the pokey for his rash adventure. An ironic twist to the story was the fact that Swenson had been picked up on his honeymoon, having just that day married a redheaded showgirl called Rhonda Lee.

There was only one sad note in the story—the cops couldn't find the money. They suspected that Swenson had stashed it somewhere, and that wife Rhonda might

know where it was. Rhonda, however, said this was untrue—she had married Swenson not for money but for l-o-v-e.

So it was easy to figure out. The eight year sentence had obviously been cut to five, and now Loren Swenson was in circulation again—or had been until somebody, perhaps Spencer Fain, had put an end to his existence.

I decided I had enough background now to let the cops know that a corpse was sitting in my office. It would be rather simple to show them that Swenson had been killed in the office above mine, and a con-man background might give them ideas as to motive—which could hardly involve me because I'd never had any money to be conned out of.

Well, I called the police and I met them back at my office, and for awhile it was nip-and-go with Inspector Clyde Groat who would have liked to hang it on me but couldn't. We went up to Spencer Fain's office and did some nosying around—and found a few drops of blood on his carpeted floor. Other than that the room yielded no clue that would help us to find the mysterious Spencer Fain.

The cops took pictures, dusted my room for fingerprints, had the M. E. look at the body, and finally carried the little round man away. I told them everything I knew about the case and Groat finally said, "I think you're leveling on this. Just keep your nose clean and stick around where we can find you."

Which was easier than I'd expected.

The next morning I was sitting in my office mulling over some of the angles. I had just received a report from the Inspector. Swenson had been killed by a .22 slug, as I'd thought. The time of death had been about eleven o'clock in the evening, which tied in with the business of Spencer Fain leaving the building at that time. There had been no fingerprints

except mine around my office, and places where there should have been prints—such as the window sash and latch—had been wiped clean. I was kicking this around when my office door opened and Judith Fain came in.

I scrambled to get her a chair. She sat down, crossing her legs in the provoking manner again, showing just enough nylon to pique my curiosity. She was dressed trimly in a business suit tailored to fit her body snugly, and her black hair billowed down to rest lightly on her shoulders.

"I had to come to see you, Mr. Randall," she said, sort of breathlessly.

I smiled my best smile. "Can I help?"

"I don't know. Have you—found out anything?"

I shrugged. "A little. But not much that makes sense. You haven't located your husband, have you?"

SHE SHOOK her head. The billowy hair did a shimmy. She looked incredibly lovely, and what an old goat of seventy was doing with her I couldn't figure.

"I checked the Chicago hotel again, thinking there might have been a mistake the first time, but he never checked in there." She twisted a handkerchief in her lap—a nice, inviting lap. "The police are in on it. They questioned us horribly. They've got a—what do you call it?—a dragnet out for my husband. They think he killed this Loren Swenson and then—"

"Lammed?"

"Yes."

"It looks that way," I said. "What do you think?"

She shook her head again. "I—I don't know what to think. All I know is that Spencer is a fine man, a successful man, and I can't think of him as a killer. I feel that, well—maybe he's been kidnapped."

"Why kidnapped?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I haven't really figured it out. It's just that I kind of think maybe the murder of this Swenson and the kidnapping of my husband are part of the same crime—some sort of plot."

I shrugged. It was a possibility, of course. But it didn't hang together like the other theory—that Spencer Fain had killed Loren Swenson and then blew town.

Suddenly she took three one-hundred dollar bills out of her purse and handed them across the desk. She looked at me steadily with those jet-black eyes.

"I want to engage your services. I have no confidence in the police. If you can find my husband and clear him of this murder, I'll be willing to pay you anything you ask. Please!"

I looked at the green stuff. It looked lovely. But I didn't want to take it. I had a personal interest in this case. After all, the dead man *had* been found in my office. And I wanted to find the guy who'd tried to frame me. If that turned out to be Spencer Fain, I didn't want to be in debt to his pretty wife and have to try to save his skin. I shook my head.

"Never mind the money," I said, making it sound gallant. "I'll see what I can do anyway."

A moment later she left the office, a very worried woman. I walked to the front window and gazed down at Biscayne Boulevard's tangled traffic. I saw Judith Fain emerge from the building and walk briskly to a red convertible parked at the curb. Dr. Sterling jumped out of the car, took her bare arm and guided her into the seat. The smile she gave him would have melted pig-iron.

For some unexplainable reason I got a twinge of jealousy. I liked Judith and I didn't like Sterling. And she appeared to be too palsy-walsy with him. It gave me a sudden idea.

I waited until the red convertible disappeared north on Biscayne Boulevard and then sailed out of my office. A moment later I had the nose of my jalopy pointed toward the Tamiami Trail.

WITHIN half an hour I slid the car up in front of Spencer Fain's southern-looking home and banged on the immense door. Judith Fain and Sterling, having headed north, wouldn't be there—which was what I planned on.

When the servant made simpering noises about Mrs. Fain not being around, I pushed the door in and said, "I'll wait."

He didn't like it, but he must have thought I was a cop because he made no protest. I walked into the lush living room and the servant left me alone.

It was what I wanted. I started a quick, but thorough, search of the room. I wasn't sure what I'd find, or even if I'd find anything at all. But some ideas were beginning to take shape in my mind, and there were a number of things I might find that would verify my suspicions.

It didn't look promising. I took hasty looks into table drawers, behind the cushions of the couch, everywhere I could think of. But no dice.

Until I noticed the fireplace.

It was a giant stone fireplace, such as are rarely found in Florida homes. A towering, north-country thing with a large fire pit.

And in the blackened fire basket were the charred remains of a fire.

That struck me as strange. No one had needed a fire for months, and the blackened ashes had that look of newness, as if the fire had been of recent vintage.

I reached down and pushed my hand through the ashes. They were soft paper ashes, and it didn't look like I'd find anything valuable because everything had been burned completely.

Except the wires.

I pulled the wires out of the bed of ashes. They were thin wires, bent in the form of a hook—something like a buttonhook only with a larger loop. There were two of them, charred black by the flames.

And suddenly, surprisingly, a jagged piece of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place.

Instinctively I knew where I had to go now. I got up and headed for the back of the room. I stepped through the French doors onto a large flagstone veranda. Something was driving me now—a compulsion powered by suspicion and a sudden dramatic realization of the truth—through the back yard and toward the swampland some hundred feet away.

The back of Fain's home was a tangle of everglade. He had built a wood platform out over the swampy water for some distance, so that he could safely walk into the everglades and admire the tropical plant and animal life. I walked to the end of the platform and found a swamp boat sitting in the stagnant water.

The swamp boat was tied to the wharf. I stepped down into it. The boat moved and the still water woke up and licked at the hull. Apparently Spencer Fain—or someone—had enjoyed taking the swamp boat out into the uncharted waterways of the everglades.

And now Fain had disappeared—and these same water wastes might hold the secret of his disappearance.

I glanced around the tiny swamp boat. At the front end I saw something that set my heart racing.

A jagged piece of black cloth caught on a protruding nail.

And another piece fit the puzzle. . .

I didn't have to go any further. The whole thing was taking shape, making incredible sense.

I SCRAMBLED out of the swamp buggy onto the dock—and stopped abruptly. Dr. Sterling and Judith were standing a few feet away, watching me. And Sterling had a gun in his hand, pointed in my direction!

“What are you doing, Randall?” he asked me, and I didn’t like the tone of his voice. It had a nasty, gloating ring.

I looked at Judith. She looked puzzled. I said, “I think I have news for you, Mrs. Fain.”

Judith’s eyes widened expressively. You—found my husband?”

“Not exactly. But I think I know where he is.”

Sterling said, “What sort of nonsense is this?”

“No nonsense.” I turned back to Judith. “You’ve got to be brave, Mrs. Fain. I know now where your husband is, and I know who killed Loren Swenson.”

“Please! Tell me!”

I let my eyes shift to Sterling. “Spencer Fain is dead,” I told them both. “He’s in a nameless, watery grave out in the everglades behind your house. Dumped there by a man whose hands are covered with signs of his crime—not poison ivy, but a tremendous covering of mosquito bites!”

It was like dropping an A-bomb. Judith’s thin hand new to her mouth.

Sterling’s face turned an ugly purple.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” I said. “About five years ago. Loren Swenson, at that time, was a con-man who went to jail after fleecing some innocents out of a hundred grand. At the time he was married to a showgirl named Rhonda Lee. The cops suspected that Swenson had hidden the swag, and that redheaded Rhonda Lee knew where it was—but apparently they could never prove it. Anyway, Swenson served five years and was recently released. I met him in a bar on Saturday

night, and you know what he told me? He told me he was going to kill a woman. I didn’t believe him because he was drunk. But I guess he really meant it. He was going to kill a woman—and that woman was Rhonda Lee.”

I grinned. “You can guess what had happened. This Rhonda babe obviously had told him she’d wait for him and keep his hundred grand safe—and then when he was safely tucked behind bars she forgot the promise and ate up the money. Now, he was bent on revenge. He was determined to kill Rhonda Lee for what she’d done to him.” I looked at Judith. “You’re a brunette now, Judith, but you’re really redheaded Rhonda Lee, aren’t you?”

It was a bluff. I wasn’t sure. But the way everything else fit, that seemed the only answer. Her face washed white.

“You’re crazy!” Her voice was high, ragged, teetering on the edge of hysteria.

I knew I was right then. I went on with the saga.

“You ate up the hundred grand and then, always hungry for money, you married Spencer Fain. That made it a little matter of bigamy, but that didn’t bother you. You simply changed your name, dyed your hair, forgot to mention your previous spouse, and settled down with old Spencer—who, you figured, would soon die and leave his fortune to his loving wife. Right?”

SHE DIDN’T answer. Sterling hissed through his teeth, “Go on, Sherlock.”

“Old Spencer didn’t die soon enough,” I said. “And meantime, Judith, you fell in love with Sterling. So what happened? The two of you decided to get rid of Spencer, take whatever cash you could get your hands on, and flee the country. Of course, you didn’t want his body found too quickly—not at all, in fact—so you dumped it in the everglades, figuring the

alligators would help disguise the remains.”

“You can’t prove any of this!” snarled Sterling.

I grinned, and kept going. “You were all ready to flee when a terrible thing happened. You, Judith, got a phone call from your husband—Loren Swenson! That really threw a monkey wrench in the works. Swenson knew you had remarried, and if you simply fled now he would go to the police and tell them the bigamy angle. That would open up an investigation, and the murder and everything would come to light. So, in desperation, you decided to get rid of Swenson too. You arranged a meeting with him in your husband’s office, and there you planned to kill him. Right?”

Judith’s mouth twitched. “Why not admit it? You’re not going to live to tell this anyway!” The words poured out, unimpeded, loosely.

“So that meant he was planning to kill you and you were planning to kill him, and since he was fool enough to show up drunk, you got the drop on him. You’d figured it out well. You decided to use your one crime to supply an alibi for your second. You figured on killing Swenson and framing it so it would look like your husband did it and blew town. That would get rid of Swenson and set the police looking for your non-existent husband. And after a reasonable lapse of time you could quietly leave the country. That’s why you killed Swenson in your husband’s office.

“But you were smart enough not to make it too obvious. You knew that if your husband had killed a man in his office he wouldn’t leave the corpse to be discovered there. That would look like a plant. So you lugged Swenson down one floor to my room, carefully leaving a trail of blood, however, so the cops wouldn’t miss the

significance. That, in fact, was one of the first suspicious things I noticed. The small bullet hole in Swenson’s head didn’t bleed enough to leave all the blood drops on the window sills and fire escape. It looked faked to me. As a doctor, Sterling, you would have no difficulty getting a phial of blood and dropping it on the steps as you went down. You figured the cops would assume the blood was Swenson’s, and never lab test it.

“The last thing you did to complete the picture was ingenious. To make sure suspicion was directed at Spencer Fain, whom you’d already killed, you impersonated him when you left the building. A black suit, pulled down hat, dark goggles and a fake beard did it. It was you, not Fain, the janitor saw leaving the building at eleven o’clock the night of the kill. Isn’t that the way it was done?”

Judith Fain let a slanted smile cut her lips. “How did you get on to all this?” she asked.

I smiled. Smiling into the face of Sterling’s gun was no easy thing to do, but I forced it.

“There were clues. I began to get wise when you visited me in my office, wanting to buy my service. That seemed phony—a device to make me believe you were sincere in finding your ‘kidnapped’ husband. And when you left my place and I saw you and Sterling exchange loving glances and an arm squeeze, I began to wonder if maybe you two knew more about Swenson’s death and Fain’s disappearance than you were admitting. About that arm squeeze—your boy friend wouldn’t shake hands with me for fear of contaminating me with poison ivy. Yet he grabbed your arm without fear of infecting you. That tipped me off that it wasn’t poison ivy you had at all—and as I thought about it it occurred to me that your hands really looked as though they had

been half-devoured by mosquitoes. You must have worn a net to protect your face from swamp mosquitoes when you disposed of Fain's body, Sterling, but forgot about your hands. The idea was nebulous in my mind at the time, but it brought me right back here to Fain's home in the everglades. And when I found the curved wires in the fireplace, that completed the entire picture."

"Curved wires?" Sterling's voice was rough-edged now.

"Yes." I took them from my pockets. "These were from the false beard you wore when you impersonated Fain—the wires that fit over your ears. The beard part burned away."

STERLING merely tightened his grip on the gun. I didn't like it, but I kept going.

"I had the story then. How you'd killed and disposed of Spencer Fain in the swamp, then impersonated him after killing Swenson. The swamp boat added weight to the story. The piece of black suit caught on a nail as you moved Fain from the boat to his watery grave clinched it."

Sterling smiled slowly. The sun glistened on the gun. "Clever," he grated, "but you won't live to tell anyone. Get in the boat!"

He meant it, and I stepped off the dock into the boat. It rocked gently. Judith got in and sat near the engine at the back. Sterling stepped down, stood spraddle-legged.

"I'm giving you a nice marshy grave along with Fain. The cops will be looking for Fain as the killer of Swenson, and when things cool off Judith and I will just quietly leave the country."

Judith started the motor and the flat-bottomed boat moved into the uncharted waterways. It cut through sharp-edged sawgrass. A mass of water lilies parted as

the bow of the swamp boat pushed through. Somewhere a tropical bird squawked raucously.

We went on for fully fifteen minutes, ever deeper into the swamp. Finally, on signal from Sterling, Judith stopped the boat.

I looked around. Here the sawgrass was almost ten feet high. Lily pads obscured the water. Off to the right I saw an everglades prowler—the black corrugated back of an alligator, barely visible in the marsh.

Sterling should have shot me, but he couldn't resist being threatening. He took a step toward me in the boat, the gun leveled. The step was his undoing. The boat rocked in the sleepy water and he momentarily lost his balance.

It was enough. The gun wavered as he caught himself, and I moved in with a right that smashed against his jaw. Judith screamed. Sterling reeled backward, stumbling over a seat. I hit him again in the belly, and when he swooshed forward, I splashed my fist into his mouth. The gun went off, filling the air with its roar. Sterling went over backward into the water.

I stood looking at the spot, expecting him to rise to the surface. Apparently my blow had stunned him, because he didn't reappear. The muddy, bug-infested waters closed over him, hiding him in their murky depths.

The alligator slid forward silently, went down into the water. I shuddered and turned to Judith.

"Maybe Sterling killed your husband for you, I don't know. But he didn't kill Swenson, did he?"

Fear swam in her eyes. "You—mean—"

"I mean that you killed him. There were two points which indicated a woman had killed him. First, there must have been

a struggle when you shot him, because there were fingernail scratches down the side of his face. Men don't scratch when they fight—women do. The second thing was the fact that he'd been killed with a tiny .22—a woman's gun. You shot him, didn't you, Judith?"

She broke, sobbing uncontrollably, her shoulders shaking. I took her place at the rear of the little boat and gunned the

engine. I had my own gun in my hand now and turning her over to the police would be routine.

I looked at her. She had everything, this Judith Fain. Looks, a fine form, intelligence—the kind of girl who should never want for anything.

I kept wondering why some women can't resist killing their husbands.