

*Misery likes company. So does the grave. And Gavin Clark had more than
one foot in the grave. His brain, warped by his wife's
unfaithfulness, concocted—*

A Devil's Highball

By G. FLEMING-ROBERTS

FORTUNATELY, Gavin Clark considered the whole affair calmly, else the thinning walls of his aorta might have been broken, and its rushing, red cargo of life would have been given up. Since the doctor had told him that he might live nearly a year longer, if he avoided excitement, he had taken everything calmly—even the unfaithfulness of his wife.

Perhaps he had got used to the idea of death. Perhaps that is why he had contemplated murder with greater passiveness than a society woman contemplates another tea.

Since that evening when Clark had unintentionally overheard a conversation between Randolph Shortly and Madeline Clark, he had plotted coldly and impassionately. It was to be simple—this murder, for only simple murders succeed. In the one week that Randolph Shortly had been staying at the Clarks' he had shown himself to be a hog for drink. That fact alone simplified matters. Then at the inquest, it would be called suicide. Clark would see to that.

Gavin Clark took a piece of paper from his pocket and for the eleventh time compared the writing on it with the writing on a letter that Shortly had sent from the mountains. Clark chuckled. He could have made fortunes at forgery, he thought. He had wisely written it on a sheet torn from Shortly's note book. It ran:

Dear Madeline:

What I saw in your eyes last night makes it impossible for me to go on living. Without you, I can't live; yet with you I could never face the sun. There is one honorable way out. I have taken it.

Clark chuckled again. He hadn't attempted a signature. It would have been tricky and entirely unnecessary.

He pocketed the note and drew a small vial from his pocket. The white and red label read:

TRIOXIDE OF ARSENIC—DEADLY
POISON!

Rat poison it was and to be used on a rat.

Rat! Clark thought that was putting it rather mild. Had he not been Shortly's best friend, "rat" would have done nicely. But he *had* been Shortly's best friend. It was he, Gavin Clark, who had staked Shortly when Shortly had been broken in health and finance. It was Clark who had sent Shortly to the mountains to regain his health. And Shortly *had* regained his strength. He was now disgustingly healthy—for through the green eyes of a chronic invalid, health is disgusting. This man—this Randolph Shortly, had returned from his mountains to steal another man's wife; and at that, a man who had one foot—nay, more than that, in the grave.

Tonight would be the time. Madeline had to preside at some sort of a club meeting. Shortly would be far gone in drink. Clark would prepare a friendly night-cap that would be a cup of true darkness, and all would be over.

Why hadn't Madeline and Shortly had the decency to wait until he was dead? But no; he was glad he had learned the truth, for now Shortly would pay!

Even at that moment, Clark could make out the voices of Madeline and Randolph coming in low blurred tones from the sun-room. Perhaps they were arranging the details of their flight. He wanted to hear what they were saying; yet he feared that some sentence would arouse passions that would hasten that rupture which spelled death. No; he must live—live to attend Shortly's funeral.

Thus, determined to put eavesdropping

beyond temptation, Gavin Clark took up his hat and wandered out into the garden.

Let them talk! He knew the truth.

UNFORTUNATELY, Gavin Clark didn't know the truth. Had he listened to that conversation between his wife and Randolph Shortly, the arsenic would have found its way down the kitchen drain; for at the moment that Clark left the garden door, Randolph Shortly was waging the one decisive battle of his pampered life.

"Don't you see, Madeline," Shortly was saying, "I *can't* do this thing to Gavin! Can't you realize what a real friend is? Can you imagine the man you love being weak enough to take advantage of that friendship? Everything that I have I owe to Gavin Clark. Yet, you would have me betray him in order that we might go away together."

He paused, watching the lovely shoulders of this woman; watching every movement of those shoulders, shaking with sobs; trying to watch them as he would have watched the shoulders of a marble statue shaken by a quake.

His victory over himself was complete. He understood her now. She had been a child of love and had become a woman of love. The wound that he had created would soon be healed. He decided to leave on the morning train. He would never see her face again—except in dreams.

Night came quickly for Madeline and Randolph, but slowly for Gavin Clark. Madeline had given up all thoughts of going to her club, but she could not endure her husband's roof for that night. She would go to her sister's for the week end.

How this decision pleased Gavin Clark! How it relieved Randolph Shortly!

Two hours of cribbage with drinks. Two hours of drinks without cribbage: Four hours all told and Randolph Shortly gazed over the rim of his glass at two Gavin Clarks.

Gavin was a good pal, but there wasn't any use of there being two of him. Now if there had been two Madelines.... Shortly's thoughts were becoming tangled.

With a hilarity that was genuine, though not drunken, Clark extended one of two tall glasses towards Shortly.

"Come on, Ran," he urged; "you're not going back on me? Have this last glass with me, won't you? Just what you need to pull you up the stairs."

"S' help me!" Shortly gurgled.

The mud-sloven swine! thought Clark.

"S' help me! Never went back on a pal yet. Not goin' to now."

Clark's right hand held two glasses—two glasses that were Siamese twins. Two swell glasses in one hand. That was funny, Randolph thought.

"Where 'n hell zit?"

"Right here," said Clark, drinking from his own glass.

"Shur?" Shortly seized at the twin glasses with both hands. The liquid slopped as he raised it to his lips.

Clark stood watching the man's Adam's apple slide up and down as he gulped.

"Good stuff!" exclaimed Shortly as he crumpled into his chair, his head and shoulders flopping on the table.

It sounded like the carcass of a dead cat being thrown over the alley fence, thought Clark.

Gavin had no idea that arsenic worked so fast. Perhaps Shortly was only asleep. Anyway, he wouldn't wake up in a long time.

Clark took the empty arsenic vial from his pocket and placed it on the table. Then he took one of Shortly's clammy hands and pressed it against the bottle.

So much for fingerprints! Now for the note!

He placed the scrap of paper on the table near Shortly's glass. Then he tiptoed up the stairs.

He was glad the house was new. He hated creaking floors.

Chuckling softly, he made his way to his own room, undressed, and got into bed. He went to sleep almost instantly—for murderers *do* sleep.

HOW long Clark slept he did not know. It was still dark when he awoke. But why had he awakened? What was the rushing sound that seemed to come from his pillow, or even from his own ears?

His heart!

The thought boomed on his brain.

But why did it murmur so loudly in his ears? What was that noise—that noise in the hall?

Clark listened intently—as intently as he

could with that terrifying lub rushsh—lub rushsh sound in his ears.

There was something walking—walking up and down the hall outside his door. Something that walked as Shortly had walked. It was the same stride that had taken Shortly up the highest peaks of the mountains.

And Shortly was lying dead below, Clark kept repeating. There were four lethal doses of arsenic in his belly!

Gavin stared dry-mouthed at the darkness.

Lub rushsh, went his heart.

He must get up! He must see who walked with Shortly's walk, up and down the hall! Quickly out of bed! Quickly press the light switch! Quickly open the door!

Dry-mouthed, Gavin stared into the dimly lighted hallway.

God! It was Shortly! Shortly's ghost?

Lub rushsh—lub rushsh—rushsh—

Not a cry escaped Gavin Clark's lips, as he tottered and fell at Shortly's feet.

Shortly glared half-drunkenly at the clay thing on the floor.

"So you'd poison me, huh? Make out I'd killed myself, huh?"

Clark didn't hear. He would never hear.

"Poison me, would you!" Shortly's voice shook. "Dam' lucky for me I've been taking big doses of arsenic regularly up on those mountains to strengthen my wind and ease my nerves. You get used to that stuff after a while. Gavin, you must be crazy!" He kicked gently at the body.

"Takes all the arsenic in hell to poison an arsenic-eater!"