

A detective is a good witness to your innocence when your homicide scheme is foolproof. But how can you trust a flatfoot in a case of . . .

Murder off the Record

By Bill Morgan



DR. AUGUST FIELDING stood there in the upstairs bedroom and passed a hand with faint nervousness over his graying hair. There was nothing to worry about, really, he told himself. It was 9:58 in the morning by his strap watch. The city detective was due to arrive for guard duty at eleven. That was just about right; ample time to get ready.

The expensive cabinet radio stood by the four-poster bed with its lid raised, revealing the record-player mechanism and the shiny surface of the clean blank record. The disk had cost Fielding exactly fifty cents, he recalled. It would net him in the neighborhood of \$50,000. Which wasn't a bad deal, considering the absolute lack of risk.

The doomed old man in the white linen pajamas stirred feebly beneath the satin quilt. Fielding was prepared for that. He knelt beside his medical bag and took from it a sponge the size of an egg and a slim canister of ether. He moistened the sponge, pressed it deftly to Claude Blaylock's quivering nostrils.

Not that Blaylock could cause trouble in this weakened condition. But he might very possibly be capable of speech later when the detective arrived. It could be awkward if he expressed curiosity over Fielding's reason for making a home phonograph record at his bedside.

The old man sighed deeply and lay still. Fielding put the ether away. Moving

swiftly, he took the nickel-plated microphone from its place inside the cabinet. He set it on the carpet, facing directly into the radio's speaker. He switched the set on but kept the volume control turned off. Then he started the blank record spinning, lowered the needle onto it.

He recorded one minute of absolute nothingness. At the end of the minute he gradually opened the volume control. It was a dance band playing. He allowed it to continue for ten seconds. Then he thumbed a pushbutton and tuned in a male quartet from another station. He continued pushing buttons at intervals of a few seconds until he got a loud-voiced announcer saying:

" . . . who defies the attempts of the underworld to muzzle him. Ladies and gentlemen, we present your fearless crusader for law and order in this city, Jimmy Lullwood!"

FIELDING stood up, carefully, so not even the squeak of his shoes could be picked up by the microphone. Frowning, he stared at the almost lifeless body of Claude Blaylock. Not lifeless enough, as long as radio reporters like Jimmy Lullwood, were around. When a man was as near death as Blaylock rested, the conscience sometimes did strange and terrible things.

Lullwood's voice was sharp, biting, "An open letter to Claude Blaylock: *Once to every man comes a chance to atone for past errors. You have that chance now,*

Sir. By your own admission, you are at the door of Death. You therefore need not fear the retribution of the law. You can freely admit to any guilt. . .

Fielding continued to stare at the flaccid figure on the bed. His mind was automatically, without any volition of his own, dropping back to a September night in 1926 when Claude Blaylock had pitched headlong into his office, clutching both hands to the red wetness that smeared his coat. The nightmare of that experience lived with Fielding again. The wild pleas of the wounded man, the promise of money, big money; the struggle of ethics against greed that had raged within his own mind.

Greed had won and, contrary to all the old proverbs he'd learned as a boy, it had given him strength. Never had his probe and scalpel moved with greater ease and skill. The bullet came free; the patient lived. The police never knew of that backroom surgery. Money changed hands but, more importantly, a codicil appeared in a grateful politician's will; "To my dear friend Dr. August Fielding I bequeath. . ."

Jimmy Lullwood's incisive voice was running on. *"It is alleged, Mr. Blaylock, that you have engaged in political vice and corruption for two decades. It is further alleged that no less than a dozen men, both in public life and the underworld, are connected with your shady operations. You have the chance to finger them at no cost to yourself. And that is why I am waging this campaign against your conscience. You are the key figure. Despite warnings from your confederates, I intend to turn that key. . ."*

Fielding stabbed a blunt finger against the radio console. The voice cut off in mid-sentence. Slowly, absently, almost without thinking, Fielding picked up the microphone and called in a choked, muffled voice:

"Gus! Help me! Gus. . ."

It took three minutes to replace the microphone, set the record so it would be ready to play when he needed it, lower the lid of the radio, and air out the bedroom to kill traces of the ether. Then he went downstairs to the living room and sank into Blaylock's flowered wingchair.

He smoked a cigarette and thought about the \$50,000. It made pleasant thinking. For two weeks he had lived in breathless fear that the old man would make a deathbed confession and thus enable the law to nullify the will, turn the fortune back to those he'd stolen it from.

He'd been acutely afraid of such a thing happening this morning, when Blaylock had asked him to phone Headquarters for a bodyguard. It could mean only one thing. Blaylock was getting ready to talk and wanted protection against the other men he'd implicate. So Fielding had let the butler off for the day and set his murder scheme in motion. No poisonous drugs, easily traceable to a medical man; he was too clever for that. The scheme was so simple that death would seem a mere accident. . .

DETECTIVE SERGEANT ERNIE DALPERT arrived at two minutes before eleven. He came through the doorway with a certain bulky grace—a heavy-shouldered man in a blue suit and crusher hat. Big and slow-moving and not too bright, Fielding decided, which fit in with his plans very well.

"They probably explained downtown that you're wanted for guard duty," he said easily. "But I have an idea Mr. Blaylock may want to give you special instructions. You'd better have a talk with him."

He led the way upstairs. The old man was still groggy from the ether, which was fine with Fielding. Conversation wasn't necessary or, for that matter, desirable.

The main thing was that Alpert could see he was alive.

As part of the window dressing, Fielding took the old man's pulse. It was stronger than yesterday, he noted. Heart cases like this sometimes lingered on for weeks. It was good he'd finally taken action.

He turned to Alpert with pretended concern. "He's pretty weak, more so than I thought. Maybe we'd better not disturb him."

Alpert shrugged. "That's okay. Let him sleep."

"I'll see if he's running a fever," Fielding said. "Then I'll join you downstairs."

"Fine, fine." Alpert went out into the hall. An instant later, his steps could be heard on the stairs.

Fielding moved swiftly. He threw back the quilt and seized Blaylock by the scruff of his tight-collared linen pajamas. He inserted an index finger beneath the collar and twisted until the cloth cut into Blaylock's throat like a taut cord.

The old man's face went beet-red. He opened bulging eyes, closed them again, rallied enough to struggle briefly. For perhaps thirty seconds his aged body was tense with the effort. Then the resistance went suddenly out of him. He wilted, fell back on the pillows.

Fielding maintained the pressure until he was sure death had come. Then he swung the body halfway out of bed and anchored it in that position by hooking the tail of the pajama coat on a corner post of the bed. The effect was quite realistic, as though Blaylock, in trying to lean out of bed to reach the radio, had lost his balance. One could almost see him falling, being brought up short by the snagged pajama coat.

Fielding cut short the appreciation of his handiwork. There was one thing more

to be done. Carefully he raised the lid of the radio, put the needle in place on the freshly made record. He lowered the lid, played with the dials on the front of the set. Then he went downstairs.

Detective Alpert was seated on the divan, glancing over the morning paper. "Trouble brewin'," he said conversationally. "Too many people got a funny idea about Mr. Blaylock. They figure he really knows something about a lot of the crime we've had around town. Figure there's a chance he's gonna be pressured into sayin' something before he passes on."

Fielding sat down in the wing chair, close to the stairway. When the time came, he would have to beat Alpert in the race to the bedroom.

"It's this Jimmy Lullwood that's causing the trouble," he said. "He's a publicity hound. Building himself up as the man who can goad Mr. Blaylock into talking. Lullwood's charges are sheer poppycock, of course, but they might put Mr. Blaylock in a bad spot if some thug or other got to believing them. That's why you're here. We've got killers in this town. Some of them wouldn't wait to check the facts if they got rattled enough."

Alpert nodded thoughtfully. "You said a mouthful there, Doc. It's rotten, the underworld we've got. Rats and killers, and all because we've got cheap politicians to front for them."

He looked as if he intended to say more, but the dance music had started drifting downstairs. Fielding felt a thrill of anticipation. The record had been spinning for a minute now, playing through those silent grooves he'd put on it. The effect was perfect, as though Blaylock had just this instant turned on the radio.

"Guess he wants to hear Lullwood's eleven o'clock broadcast," Fielding said. The radio was making the familiar garbled

sounds of tuning from one station to the other: the male quartet, more music, finally Lullwood's station. The illusion was uncanny in its realism. Fielding felt a glow of accomplishment.

He handled it rather well when the record ended, he thought. Lullwood's voice abruptly cut off, as though Blaylock had snapped off the set. The muffled cry followed: "*Gus! Help me! Gus!*" And then Fielding was sprinting up the stairway, a good dozen yards ahead of the other man.

In the bedroom, he flicked off the radio's main switch, then struck a shocked attitude near the bed. "Claude! What happened?"

Alpert was beside him, clutching his arm. "Good heavens! Must have fallen—"

FIELDING seemed to break free of his shock. He knelt and disengaged the pajamas from the bedpost, let Blaylock gently down to the carpet. He felt for a pulse, then turned to Alpert with a grief-tautened face. "This is ghastly! Strangled himself! My dearest friend—"

"Steady," Alpert said. His voice was husky with sympathy. "Must have toppled over when he leaned out and shut off the radio. His pajamas caught—"

Fielding had to work hard to hold down the surge of exultation rising inside him. Beautiful! Every last detail of it! He turned his face from the detective for fear his triumph would show. He forced a tremor into his voice.

"I—I hope you'll help me look after the details, Sergeant. This has hit me pretty hard. If you'll call the medical examiner—"

Alpert was gentle. "Shucks, Doc, I don't think that's necessary. It's plain the thing was an accident. Nobody else was in the house, and you and me was downstairs—"

"I know," Fielding said. "But we've

already seen how vicious gossip can get around. I'm named in Blaylock's will after all. There might be talk. I'd rather you called both the M.E. and the homicide squad, just to head off loose talk."

Downstairs he relaxed in the wing chair while Alpert made the phone calls. He closed his eyes and thought of the way his checkbook would look with that heavy new balance in it. \$50,000. Enough to give him all the luxury he could want for the rest of his life. The figure might even be larger, once they got to delving into the real extent of the late Claude Blaylock's wealth. . . .

Alpert came back from the phone. "Okay, Doc. I fixed everything up, even though I still think you're leaning over backwards. And as for callin' in the homicide boys, that may turn out to cause trouble in the long run, the way they get things all mixed up. They're a bunch of dopes, if you ask me."

"Oh?" said Fielding. He glanced at the detective tolerantly. He felt almost an affection for Alpert, the way the boob had so accommodatingly fallen for his scheme.

"You oughtta heard what they was tryin' to tell me over the phone." He paused and scratched his chin. "Hey, Doc, suppose we go up and turn that radio back on for a minute."

A wave of chilly alarm washed over Fielding. He tensed. Not that there was anything wrong. There *couldn't* be anything wrong. The thing had gone too smoothly, all the way. And yet there was that strangely reflective look on Alpert's face. And there was the queer request he'd made.

Fielding's voice wasn't as steady as he wanted it to be. "Why, of course, Sergeant. Whatever you say—"

He swung out of the chair and moved to the stairway ahead of Alpert. That was important, he reminded himself. He'd have

to get to the radio ahead of the detective. He'd have to turn the switch from the phonograph to the standard broadcast position. It would be disastrous if Alpert found it turned the wrong way.

He had to use will power to keep from breaking into a trot as he entered the bedroom. He fumbled with the front of the radio, blocking Alpert's line of vision with his body, and got the change made. He turned on the main switch and waited for the thing to heat up.

His forehead was lightly beaded with sweat as he faced the detective: He tried to sound casual. "Now what was it you wanted to check, Sergeant?"

"Oh, just that crazy idea the boys downtown were tryin' to put over on me. They had to be wrong, because Mr. Blaylock had his radio tuned in at eleven. He was listening to Jimmy Lullwood. We could hear it all the way downstairs—"

Alpert broke off. Fielding frowned. Abruptly, then, he felt the blood draining from his face. The radio was warm now,

and its voice was like the Voice of Doom. He lunged toward the set, but Alpert's gun was out with dazing suddenness. And the friendly sympathy was gone from his face, too. It was replaced by a hard, pitiless mask of anger.

"You made a record!" he said hoarsely. "You had to, because that's the only way you could have done it—the only way you could have alibied yourself for Claude Blaylock's murder!"

Fielding tried to say something, tried to think up a quick answer. There could be none, of course. Not with the way the radio was going on. Stark chilling fear gripped Fielding as he listened to the announcer:

". . . and so gangdom struck back at the crusading menace that could possibly have badgered a confession out of the dying Claude Blaylock. *Jimmy Lullwood was shot and instantly killed as he left the studio after his ten o'clock broadcast this morning. . .*"