



MICKEY DOLAN

*Ex-pug Mickey Dolan set out to collect a debt. But he found he'd rung up murder's number on crime's cash register.*

*By*

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## Agent for Murder

“**M**AYBE,” Judy said acidly, “you would rather be back in the ring?”

“Maybe I would,” I said. “It wasn’t any worse than hounding people for overdue bills. Now—if you’d have let me open a detective agency, like I wanted to—”

She sniffed. “Detective agency! What difference does it make what we call it? All our cases start out as collections and end up in murder. It’s just your perverse nature. You’re—”

I held up a hand in surrender. “Okay. What’s on the list for today?”

She started to riffle through the file. Then she glanced up. “Mickey, we don’t want to fight, do we? I mean, it’s your money, after all. If you want—”

I said: “Just to show you I think you’re right, I want you to pick out the tamest account in there. Anything. You be the judge.”

She smiled smugly. She had a card in her hand. “It’s a Mr. Enos Cragg of Milton Grove. Mr. Cragg is an old meanie who won’t pay for some pipe.”

“What kind of pipe? And where is Milton Grove?”

“Six-inch pipe. And Milton Grove is



ENOS CRAGG

only about twenty miles out of town, due west.”

The prospect of a twenty mile drive in the flivver wasn’t too pleasant. But Judy was pleading with her eyes. I took the card, kissed her lightly, and went out.

As the flivver rattled westward, I thought back to our argument. At Judy’s insistence, I had quit the ring when I was about two months from the welterweight crown. That had been disappointing. But then she’d picked this collection business. I’d wanted a detective agency, being a natural detective, more or less. I was now a collector.

You may think I’m a little soft in the head to let a girl dictate to me, but you’d understand if you could see Judy. She never won any beauty contests—but only

because she never entered any. And when you understand that I'm only five feet eight and not too handsome, you'll realize I'm a very lucky guy to land such a knockout.

By the time I'd pulled into this wide place in the road called Milton Grove, my natural good nature had returned. I stopped at a filling station and asked the red-haired attendant if he knew the whereabouts of a Mr. Enos Cragg.

He pointed up a gravel side road. "It's about a half mile from here, on the right side. You'll see his mailbox."

"He buy gas here?" I asked.

The fellow nodded. "Sometimes."

"How's his credit?"

The attendant hesitated, then shook his flaming head. "He pays cash. The boss won't give him credit."

"Oh," I said.

"Not that he hasn't got plenty," the fellow went on, "but he hates to dish it out. He's the slowest pay in the county."

Which didn't make my job any easier. I thanked the redhead and pointed the flivver up the road.

I didn't need to look for any mailbox. I saw the house a long way off. The way I knew, the back yard was piled high with pipe. By the back yard I mean the two or more acres directly behind the house. I turned in.

There was an ancient sedan parked on one side of the white frame house. The old man would be home then.

THERE was a handle in the middle of the front door. I gave it a whirl and the bell inside set up a clamor. No answer. I worked it again. With the same result.

There was just a chance he might be in the back, so I went around. There was a shed attached to the rear of the house. It looked like what they call a "summer kitchen" and it was about three steps lower

than the rest of the house. I knocked on the door—and it swung open.

I stood there and stared and I was sure some one had put a piece of ice at the base of my neck. My knees shook a little.

A lean, gray-haired man was sprawled at the bottom of the steps leading from the regular kitchen. His head was up against the leg of the summer kitchen stove, and there was blood at the base of that leg.

I put out a hand to turn him over, but he was stiff as the pipe in his yard. He must have been dead quite a while. The way it looked, he had stumbled, coming down the steps, and landed up against the stove leg. He was over sixty, and a blow like that could do it.

I went out in the yard again. It's funny, but I was thinking of Judy. I was thinking of how she'd accused me of looking for trouble, and I got the queerest feeling. Not that I'm superstitious. I just felt queer.

I could see no telephone wires leading to the house and I had no desire to go back in there anyway. I sent the flivver scurrying back to the filling station.

The redhead looked up in surprise as I steamed into the drive. I said: "Call the police—and the coroner."

"What's happened?" the kid asked. He was pop-eyed.

"There's a dead man up at Cragg's house."

He stopped staring then, and went in to phone. I sat in the car until he came out again.

"I suppose it's Cragg, himself," I said, "a thin man, gray-haired?"

Red nodded. "That would be him." Then he said quietly: "Alice is going to take it awful hard, poor kid." He sounded like he was kind of soft on her.

"His daughter?" I asked.

He nodded.

"An only child?"

He shook his head. "There's a son,

too—Lenny. He and the old man had a squabble.”

The local gendarme drove up then in a flivver older than mine, and I gave him my story.

He was a fat, dumb-looking slob and his suspicious little eyes were on my face all the while. When I finished, he grunted: “Sounds mighty strange to me. Old Cragg was spry. It ain’t likely he’d stumble.”

“You don’t even know if it is Cragg, yet,” I pointed out.

His broad face flushed, and he muttered: “Well, you’d better come along to the house, shorty.”

I had planned on doing just that. If the constable thought as I did, I must have been wrong, but there were some angles to the case I didn’t like.

While he inspected the body, I examined the pipe in the back yard. It looked like casing to me, six-inch stuff. The old man may have got a good price on the load and figured to sell again at a profit. But that didn’t sound logical.

The constable came out, wiping his brow with a dirty bandanna. He went over to the pump and filled a tin cup of water. He gulped it down gustily. Then a strange look came over his beefy face.

His eyes darted to the pipe. “Is that the stuff you came to collect for?”

I nodded.

“Who’s your client, shorty?”

I didn’t like that “shorty.” Five-eight isn’t short. I took out my card. “A Mr. Carl Lorg of Richfield.”

He wrote it down in a tattered notebook. A black ambulance drove into the yard then, the coroner’s. He was a lanky towhead.

When he saw me he held out a hand. “Mickey Dolan—or I’m crazy.”

“Right,” I said. I tried to place his face.

“You don’t know me,” he explained, “but I’ve seen you fight—and it’s a

pleasure to shake a right hand like that.”

I said, “Thanks,” and tried not to look smug.

HE NODDED cheerfully to the constable and they went back into the house. I was glad the coroner had recognized me. By the look on the constable’s face, I had a hunch he meant to hold me and I knew what Judy would say if that happened.

When the coroner came out again, he said: “He was hit with something heavy. He never got that crack in the skull from the fall.”

I wanted to ask a lot of questions, but I remembered what I’d promised Judy. From now on, I was strictly a collector.

I handed the constable my card. “If you want me, you can reach me there any week day.”

He sort of hesitated, but the coroner said: “I’ll vouch for Mickey. If he wanted to kill anybody, he wouldn’t need to use anything but his right hand.” He laid a hand on the law’s shoulder. “I’m going to analyze that wound back at the morgue. Maybe that will give you a lead, Sam.”

The constable said: “Somebody’ll have to notify the kids. It ain’t a job I hanker for.” He paused. “I guess Red, at the filling station, has been writing to Alice. Maybe he’d drive in with shorty, here, and break the news to her.”

“I’d be glad to take him,” I said.

Red agreed and his face showed the strain he was under. As the flivver rattled toward town, he told me a little more about the old man. How the old fellow had broken up Red’s romance with Alice. How he’d driven the son, Lenny, from the house when the lad came home drunk one night too often. He didn’t sound like a very pleasant old chap.

I couldn’t find a motive though. Or maybe I’m too mercenary. The only

motive I can think of in connection with a murder was money, and that farm didn't look so prosperous to me.

I dropped Red at the office building where Alice worked and told him I'd be back in an hour. Then I went to the office.

I told Judy the whole story. When I'd finished, she looked at me strangely. I said: "I'm jinxed. But I won't touch this case. That's a promise. But I told Red I'd take him home again."

"I'm going along," she said. I knew better than to argue.

Red looked like the last rose of summer when we picked him up.

"How'd she take it?" I asked.

"First rate." His eyes avoided mine. "She's on her way out there now—with her fiancé."

I knew now why Red looked so downcast. "Who is he?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Some Romeo from out West. She met him in town a few months ago."

Judy made some typically feminine crack about "pebbles on the beach" and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

After we dropped Red off at the station again, I said: "I suppose we'd better drive over to Richfield and tell Mr. Lorg to put in a claim on the estate."

Judy looked over suspiciously. "We could put in the claim."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I want to get his permission."

Again Judy fell silent, but it wasn't a comfortable silence exactly.

This Lorg was a bleak-eyed Swede who had one of the neatest farms I ever saw. He had something else, too; a lot of structural steel in his yard. "You in the junk business?" I asked him.

He laughed. "Naw. I thought once I had some oil here. But I was wrong."

"Oil?" I said. "Then that pipe you sold was—"

"Casing," he finished for me. "Oil well casing."

I said, "Oh," and things began to click in my mind. "What made you think you had oil here?"

He laughed and looked embarrassed. "Well, there was a boom in the next state. You remember it, maybe, about ten years ago? And I found some oil scum in the well."

"What caused it?" I asked.

He told me and I began to get a better picture of Cragg's death. I had the motive now, and some suspects.

"I'll put in a claim on the estate," I told him, "and let you know what develops. And if the constable from Milton Grove calls, don't tell him I was here."

As we chugged out of the yard, Judy said: "That finishes the business, as far as we're concerned."

I nodded agreement.

There was silence for about three minutes. Then Judy said hesitantly: "Have—have you any ideas on this case?"

I shrugged. "Sure." Then I lied. "I could name the murderer in twenty-four hours."

She waited for me to go on, but I didn't.

We both sulked all the way back to Milton Grove. I drove directly to the police station. The constable was alone in his office.

I explained that I was going to put in a claim and asked if an executor had been named for the estate.

He shook his head. "There's only the two kids. And Alice has always owned the farm, inherited it from her mother. She never bothered about it, let the old man work it. Whatever else the old buzzard owned will go to her. He and Lenny weren't so friendly."

MY FRIEND the coroner came in at that moment. He smiled at me and Judy, a little longer at Judy. He said to the law: "I found some Turkish tobacco dust in the wound. This fellow must have carried his blackjack in the same pocket with his cigarettes. So look for a suspect who smokes Turkish cigarettes, Sam, and you'll have a case."

Judy said quickly: "Well, Mickey, I guess our work is done."

"Turkish cigarettes?" I asked. "And you're sure it was a blackjack?"

"Our work is done, Mickey," Judy repeated.

"Okay," I said, not looking at her.

I stopped at Red's station for gas. There was a car in there with Oklahoma plates, a smooth roadster. A blond young fellow was behind the wheel, and the girl sitting next to him was red-eyed. I had a hunch it was Alice Cragg and her fiancé.

When they drove away, Red confirmed it. "His name's Madison, Lee Madison. He's going to sell the farm for Alice. He told me if I knew of any prospects to send them in."

"How about the son?" I asked. "Won't he be here for the funeral?"

Red shook his head. "Lenny's working on the coast. He can't make it."

I nodded. "Well, Red, I think the constable might be a prospect. And—I'm sorry about Alice, kid."

He grinned, but only with his mouth. "Yeah, I guess that's life, or somethin'."

I paid him and stepped on the starter. I said casually: "When did Lenny get this job on the coast?"

He scratched his head. "About a month ago. I don't see how he can keep it; he's an awful drinker."

I nodded good-bye. Judy tried to maintain her silence, but it wasn't her nature. "What was that crack about the constable, Hawkshaw?" she asked.

"Why," I said, "he's a livewire prospect. When he was out in the yard talking to me, he took a drink of water from the well. And I could tell by the face he made that he tasted the oil in it. He's probably called Lorg by this time and found out that pipe was oil well casing."

In a whisper, Judy said: "You mean that farm has oil on it?"

"The well has," I said.

"But does oil ever come that close to the surface?"

"In Tennessee it does," I said. "And in Lorg's back yard it did at one time."

She caught on then, and smiled. "Cragg's farm would be right in line, wouldn't it?"

"Hmm-hmm," I said. "But I'm worrying about Alice. I'd like to see her get a good price for her farm."

"Miss Cragg, you mean?"

"Okay—Miss Cragg. And I'd like to see her sell it to simple Sam. I don't like that slob."

Judy looked over at me, and she laid a hand on my arm. She said slowly: "I certainly spoil your fun, don't I, Mickey?"

I shook my head.

"And before you met me, when you were fighting, you were doing all right for yourself, weren't you?"

"I'm doing all right now," I said.

"And you really can take care of yourself," she went on. "For a little fellow, you're very strong."

"I'm five eight," I said. "If that's little, Napoleon was a midget."

"Mickey," she said, "this is the last time. After you solve this, you stick to collecting."

I smiled.

"If anything should happen to you," she said, "I'd die."

I swallowed my smile and I could feel it warming me as it went down.

BACK in town, I called a friend of mine who worked for the morning paper. He had a filing cabinet for a mind and he gave me all the dope I wanted in five minutes. Then I called the Atlas Oil Company and they gave me the rest.

It was getting pretty late now, though, so I decided to put the whole thing off until the next day. Judy and I went out to supper and then to a movie. But my mind wasn't on it. I was planning the next day's program.

I drove over to the Sherford Arms. It was a swanky apartment house and Lee Madison had a suite on the second floor. He opened the door, and I saw he was alone. Which suited me.

"My name is Dolan," I said, "Mickey Dolan. I'm interested in that farm out at Milton Grove."

He was a broad-shouldered lad and he looked plenty shrewd. He nodded to an upholstered chair. "Sit down, Mr. Dolan."

He was studying me closely. "Aren't you the collector, the man who found Mr. Cragg?"

"Mmm-hmm," I said.

"Did you intend to farm the place yourself, Mr. Dolan?"

"Well, yes," I said. "It's the kind of life I'd like." I looked him straight in the eye. "The air is so fresh. And I like the water."

His gaze didn't waver. "What were you prepared to offer?"

The place was worth, at the outside, about five thousand. "Eight thousand dollars," I said.

He shook his head. "The constable out there called me and made a better offer than that last night."

"How much more?"

"He offered twelve thousand—cash."

If I had any doubts as to the constable's honesty before, they were doubled now. That was a lot of money for

a salaried man to have—in cash. "You going to sell to him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I've half promised another man that I'd sell him a three months' option. I'm morally obligated to accept it if he wants to close today."

"I see," I said. Then I took a shot in the dark. "This other man wouldn't be a stooge, would he?"

His face tinged with color. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean he wouldn't be a pal, some one to help you hang onto the place until you start drilling?"

"Drilling?"

"Look," I said. "You're from Oklahoma. If anyone knew what oil casing looked like, you would. And you've been out to the farm with Miss Cragg often enough. You probably drank from the well. Let's put our cards on the table, Madison."

His face was dead white. "Are you suggesting I'd engage in something shady?"

"You've done it before," I said. "And you'd do it again. You might even commit murder; you might send Lenny out to California on a drunken holiday. As a promoter, you're known to be a very slick operator."

His voice was deadly calm as he said: "You've built up quite a case. I don't know whether to give you another drink or call the police."

"Call the police," I told him. "And we'll search the room for Turkish cigarettes." That really staggered him. For the first time he looked frightened. "Cigarettes—are you crazy? I smoke a pipe."

"There was Turkish tobacco dust in that wound on Cragg's head," I said quietly. "Are you going to call the police?"

He sat and glared at me.

"Then I will," I said. I reached for the phone.

His voice was sharp. "Don't!"

I sat back in my chair.

"I'm innocent," he said. "But you've built up a case. I suppose it's blackmail—and I can't afford that. I'll sell you the farm." He rose wearily. "I'll get the papers."

He was in the bedroom before I could stop him. But he was back in twenty seconds, a sheaf of papers in his hand. He laid them on the desk next to my chair—and I saw what was under them.

It was an automatic. He had it pointed at my chest. He didn't say a word, but I understood. He picked up the phone and called a number. Then he said: "Joe Spad, please."

A few seconds, and he said: "Joe? This is Lee Madison. I've got a little job for you. How soon can you be here? About twenty minutes? I'll be waiting."

As a pug, I'd known quite a few of the town's scum. And Joe Spad was a torpedo with a very vicious reputation. I shivered a little, though the room was warm.

MADISON turned to me and said: "I don't smoke cigarettes. But I blend my own tobacco." He pointed to three large casks in the bookcase flanking the fireplace. "One of those is full of Turkish tobacco. It might be embarrassing to me to have it analyzed."

A cask like that, I thought, would be a good place to hide a blackjack.

Madison still had the gun pointed at my chest. "Why is it," he said, "that little fellows are always so nosey?"

I didn't answer.

"You should have stuck to collecting," he said.

He was right about that. "Is the blackjack still in the cask?" I asked him.

"No. It's at the bottom of the river." He laughed dryly. "Maybe you'll join it, after Joe gets through with you."

"At least seven people know I was coming to see you," I said. "You'll have to blow town in an awful hurry. Now, if you'd use your head—"

His eyes narrowed, and I tensed. I had my good right hand bunched.

"You're lying," he said.

But he lowered the gun and I saw something. He had the automatic's safety on. I moved my feet imperceptibly. It would have to be my Sunday punch.

I kept my voice to a whisper. "I could give you five telephone numbers without even trying."

Automatically, he leaned closer—and I let him have it. He slammed back and went to his knees, the gun flying. I could have finished him then, but I'd been in the ring too long. I waited until he staggered to his feet. Then I smacked him twice—left and right. He crashed into the fireplace and slumped to the floor.

I conked him with the automatic—just for luck. Then I wrote a note. It read:

*Joe:*

*I had to leave. Meet me at Rico's in an hour.*

I signed it "Lee" and tacked it to the door outside. I knew that Joe Spad hung out at Rico's and I didn't think Joe would know Lee's handwriting. Because when Lee had called he used both his names. They couldn't have been too thick.

Then I called the office.

Judy sounded scared, but I said quickly: "Get Alice Cragg. Tell her you're from Lee and he had to leave town. Tell her he said she should accept the constable's offer immediately. In cash. Sell him the pipe, too, if you can."

“Okay,” Judy said, “but Mickey—you’re safe, aren’t you?”

“As safe as in church,” I said.

Then I picked up the gun and sat down to wait. Because if I tipped off the police now, the constable would get the whole story. In about ten minutes, I heard footsteps outside. Then some one took the note from the door.

If Madison came to now. . . But he was sleeping soundly. The footsteps went away.

It was going to be funny, I thought, when the constable discovered his new farm had no oil on it. I’d suspected when Lorg had told me that what he thought was a well was nothing more than a leak in the pipeline that the Atlas Company had running through his property. Milton

Grove was on the same line and the Atlas people told me they were preparing to dig for a leak there right now. The oil seeped down to the underground streams and thence to Cragg’s well.

The deal went through all right, and I turned Madison over to the city police. With him out of the way, I knew that Red would be back in there pitching.

Back at the office that afternoon, Judy said: “It really doesn’t seem ethical selling that farm to the constable.”

“He was trying to put over a fast one on Alice,” I said.

“Miss Cragg, you mean?”

“Okay. Besides”—and this was probably the real reason though I wouldn’t admit it to Judy—“besides, he shouldn’t have called me ‘shorty.’ ”