
DETEKTIVE Lieutenant Donald MacDonald, L.A.P.D., was newly commissioned and inexperienced. He had never been inside a priest's study before. For the matter of that, he had never seen a murdered priest.

While he listened to the housekeeper, he tried to keep his eye on the diocesan map of parishes, on the unfinished poster announcing a Baked Ham Dinner with Bingo, on the glaring chromo of the Sacred Heart; but his gaze kept shifting back to the body.

"The poor dear old man all alone in the house," the woman was saying. "Father Guerrero off on a sick call, and me hurrying out to the Safeway because we was that near out of flour and he did love his coffee-cake of a morning, the saint that he was."

There was no point in staring at the body. The photographer had taken it from half a dozen angles. The surgeon hadn't got there yet. The body was their business between them. But a black cassock with a stiff white collar, a thin peaceful old face with a fringe of gray hair — these didn't go with murder.

"I'll never forgive myself, that I never will. To leave him alone with the world full of Nazzies and Kingdom People and suchlike!"

MacDonald brought his eyes back to the witness. "And you were gone how long?"

"That I can't tell you, Officer, not to the minute. That nice young man at the Safeway, the blond one, he was showing me snapshots of his youngest and —"

"But roughly?"

"Well, say ten minutes. Fifteen maybe."

"And what time was this?"

"I'm not one to look at the clock day in and day out, Officer, like my poor sister's husband that never held a job six months in his life, God rest

his soul, but it was before dinner, that I know, because it was all in the oven and a good half-hour to go yet.”

“And dinner was at what time?”

“Six o’clock sharp, and Father Guerrero gets his sick call five minutes before I left, and he’ll come home without a bite in his stomach, the poor lamb, to find his pastor . . .”

The woman had wept before, and it had taken ten minutes to bring her back to the questions. MacDonald hastily interposed, “That would make it about five-thirty you left?”

She gulped a little. “Yes, Officer.”

“You got back some time around quarter of six?”

The gulp was stronger. “Yes, Officer.”

“And found Father Halloran . . . ?”

The gulp won. She nodded silently and turned her streaming face away.

MacDonald damned the surgeon’s delay and doubly damned the fascination of that hassocked corpse. The housekeeper was huddled in silent sorrow. MacDonald could catch the dry clicking of her lips as the beads of a rosary slipped through her fingers. He forced himself to stare at the body with what he tried to make an impartial and experienced eye, and lined up the facts.

Entrance of bullet below heart to the right. Exit in left shoulder blade. Bullet found in back of chair. Priest had been sitting. Murderer then must have been kneeling to achieve angle of shot. Query: false pretense of confession? Memo: find out mechanics of confessional positions. Time of death: 5:30 to 5:45, pending surgeon’s report. Memo: check time with blond Safeway clerk. Time . . .

Lieutenant MacDonald bent over the corpse and pushed back the black sleeve on the left arm. Wristwatch. A bare chance . . .

MacDonald rose and looked at the praying woman. There was a new and speculative quality in his stare. The broken wristwatch had registered exactly 7:06.

Detective Lieutenant Dan Barker, L.A.P.D., felt no compulsion to stare at the body on the bed of the seedy Skid Row lodging house. There was more blood on the face of the questioned witness. There was blood on the floor too, and on the luridly prophetic tracts proclaiming the Kingdom; and the corpse had bled very little.

Barker let another short right jab light on the unshaven jaw of the witness and watched the head bobble on its scrawny neck. "Come clean, friend," he grunted. "You can't get away with it."

The witness tried to stem his nosebleed with what might once have been a handkerchief. Barker slapped his hand down. "Come clean," he repeated.

"Honest to gar, copper, I don't know nothing. I hears the shot and I looks in here and I says, 'Wow! This is where the bulls come in.' So I runs downstairs and I finds Finney on his beat and he takes a gander and calls in you boys. And honest to gar, copper, that's all I know."

Barker looked him over reflectively and decided on the nose. A light tap jerked the head back and set the blood flowing at a doubled rate. "We've got you cold, friend. Why'd you kill this Marsden jerk?"

The witness leaned over to let the red stream hit the floor. A drop splashed on Barker's right shoe. The officer raised his foot and swung it at the witness's fleshless left shank.

"Keep your blood to yourself, friend." His voice was toneless. "What'd you do with the rod?"

The witness hopped on his right leg and held both hands clasped to his left shin. He moaned. His hopping left bright discs of blood around the floor with spatter-drops radiating from them.

"The rod, friend," Barker went on calmly. "We've got you cold without that, but maybe we could make things easy if you'd help us."

"Honest to gar, copper . . . Oooo . . . !" The witness's voice wavered like an air-raid warning as he hopped about.

"Stand still and on both legs, you yellow-bellied stork."

The witness stood. "Honest, I don't see no rod. I hears the shot and I says, 'Cripes, that screwball next door took the short cut home,' but then I looks in and I don't see no rod so I goes for Finney just like I says."

Barker smiled now. "You don't see no rod, is that it, friend?"

"Sure, copper. Just like I tells you. Honest to —"

"For gar's sake forget about gar for a while. And you didn't see the murderer come out of this room either, friend?"

"I don't see nobody. Hell, copper, I ain't covering for nobody. If I see 'em, I'd sing. I play ball. You ask Finney."

"I'm asking you. You don't see nobody?"

"Nobody. Honest to —"

Meditatively Barker drove a right against the witness's left ear. The

head described a long arc on its skimpy neck and met Barker's left at the end of the arc. The neck stood straight again. The head wobbled and the eyes were glassy. Barker laid a flat palm against the chest to prop up the body, and swore as blood dripped on his sleeve. His other palm slapped the bristly cheeks until a little life came back to the eyes.

"O. K., friend. Now listen to what you've said. This room's at the end of a hall. You're in the next room down. You hear a shot, you think this Marsden creep has killed himself, you run out and look in here. You don't see no rod, you don't see nobody." He mimicked the witness's wavering pipe. "So, my friend, honest to gar, *you* killed him."

The witness started to open his mouth. A backhand slap closed it and opened his lower lip. Barker had more reasons than vanity for wearing a heavy ring.

"You're listening now, friend," Barker reminded him. "You thought stashing away the gun was smart; they couldn't pin it on you that way. That's where you were wrong. A gun, and it could be suicide. No gun, and it's murder. And you're the murderer, because anybody else would have had to pass you in the hall." Barker paused. "There's one other thing that's phony," he added. "How can you be so cockeyed sure of the time?"

The split lip thickened the witness's speech. "I used to work in a watch factory. Sometimes I do repairs for Joe's pawnshop over on Main."

Barker laughed. "Repairs. O. K. We know Joe's a fence. You alter identifications for him. That'll help you."

The witness decided not to argue. "So I'm setting this watch, see, when I hear the shot. That's how I know what time it is. It's just 7:06 when they get him."

Detective Lieutenant Herman Finch, L.A.P.D., sniffed the aroma of the secretary's obviously custom-made cigaret and lit his corncob defiantly. Twenty years on homicide had still not put Finch completely at ease in any dwelling assessed at over \$15,000.

"And you don't know of any threats against the Judge?" he puffed.

The young man smiled disdainfully. "Judge Westcott did not move in circles where threats against one's life are a commonplace, Lieutenant."

"Social-like, maybe not. But all the same the Judge was on the bench. I've never known a court officer yet didn't get threatened some time by some poor sucker."

The secretary tapped his cigaret into a delicate glass ashtray. "Judge Westcott was never threatened. I'm certain that in my confidential capacity I'd have been aware of such a development."

"Horsefeathers!" muttered Finch, whose slang never managed to catch up with the times. He looked around the lavishly furnished room. "What do you know about the Judge's will?" he demanded abruptly.

The supercilious youth was unmoved. "I am afraid that's a matter on which you should consult —"

"Sure, formal-like, but you could save me a lot of trouble if you knew."

The secretary shrugged. "Very well. The servants and I receive nominal bequests. The residuary estate is divided among several charities. If you care to know their names . . . ?"

"Later on, for the record. No family?"

"None to my knowledge. Judge Westcott was an orphan and a widower."

Finch poked his index finger into the corncob bowl. "Nominal," he said.

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant?"

"Nominal. What's it mean?"

"What — ? Oh, the bequests. As to the servants, I don't know. In my case, as I have gathered from the Judge's hints, it means something between five and ten thousand. Surely . . ." He hesitated.

Finch let the silence grow, then drawled out a "Yes?"

"Surely you could not consider such an insignificant sum as providing me with — well, a motive?"

Finch said nothing. There isn't anything you can say to people who call five or ten grand insignificant.

"I'm sorry not to be more helpful."

Finch roused himself. "No way you can narrow the time? Damned doctors always shillyshally — helpful if you can check up on 'em."

"No. The Judge regularly spent the hours from six to eight in his study alone. He often dozed off. I found him when I went in to rouse him for dinner."

"Ground floor, French windows, large grounds. . . . I can see how anybody might slip in all right. But how about the noise?"

"The curse of civilization," the secretary sighed. "A shot can be so easily confused with —"

"I know," Finch cut in. "A backfire. Criminenty! If I had me a buck for every time I've heard a witness talk about backfires, I'd be retired and doing

right nicely, thank you. But the shot wasn't all. There was pretty much of a brawl in there."

"I heard nothing, and most of the time I was here in this adjoining library."

"You must have heard it. Hell of a rumpus."

"Then it must have happened before I came in here, around six-twenty, or after I went upstairs to dress at seven-thirty."

"Uh-huh." Finch nodded abstractedly and walked over to the study door. The room was a shattered mess. Chairs overturned, ashstand spilled, telephone sprawling, clock . . .

Finch puffed harder on his corncob and strode over to the clock. It was electric, and the struggle had jerked it loose from the wall plug. "Hot zig-gety zag!" he murmured. The clock had stopped at exactly 7:06.

Detective Lieutenants MacDonald and Finch, holders of the newest and oldest lieutenant's commissions on the force, decided on another cup of coffee.

Finch glanced up at the clock in the all-night lunch wagon. "They say the stuff keeps you awake. But when you finish work after midnight, you'll sleep all right."

MacDonald frowned at the counter. "You know," he said, "I had the damnedest thing happen to me tonight."

Finch grinned. "Watch it, Mac."

The younger officer half-answered the grin. "I know. You always say murder's enough in the day's business; keep it quiet after hours. But this is funny. I'd just like to know if it happens much."

Finch stoked up the corncob and said, "Shoot."

"I know it crops up in fiction, but it seems too blamed helpful to be a usual thing. I actually did have a corpse where the wristwatch broke in the fall and established the time."

"Check with the medical evidence?"

"Close enough. You know doctors. But not with the one witness. House-keeper claims she found the body an hour earlier, fainted, and didn't get around to calling us for years. Puts me on a spot. I'd like to believe her; I'd like to believe the watch. Did you ever have anything like that?"

"Can happen. Matter of fact, something like it cropped up today. Electric clock pulled out of the wall, stopped at 7:06 sharp."

MacDonald choked on a swallow of coffee.

"Too hot, Mac?"

"No. Only . . . That's the same time as mine. The wristwatch. 7:06, exactly."

Finch removed his pipe.

"What goes, friend?" a man down the counter called over.

Finch waved a greeting. "Hi, Barker. Damnedest thing. Mac and I were both out on homicide cases today, and there were stopped timepieces in both cases. But that isn't enough: they were both stopped at six minutes after seven."

Barker announced sharply that he would be violated in an unlikely manner.

"Me too," Finch agreed. "Can you tie that?"

"Tie it? Friend, I can make it look sick. I arrested a Skid Row bum today for shooting the crum in the next room. He claims it was an accident and all he did was hear the shot — at exactly six past seven."

"Criminently!" Finch muttered. MacDonald was speechless.

"Wait a minute, friends," Barker went on flatly. "That ain't the half. While I'm booking this bum, a call comes in from a prowl car squad. They've just dragged a dentist out of his burning office. Toasted up pretty, he was, and a nice handy little smashed wristwatch to show he collapsed at I'll give you one guess what time."

There was a dead silence. Then Finch spoke, and with a certain quiet authority. "Barker, come over here." He lowered his voice when the other approached. "Look. There's something haywire, and if we three play our cards right we can make sense out of it. Four men don't die at exactly 7:06 just for the hell of it. There's a pattern here."

MacDonald nodded, but Barker let out a snort. "Nuts," he grunted.

"Look, Barker. I know you're smart. You've got a sweet record of convictions, and we won't talk about how you got 'em. But I've been in this game since you were kneehigh to a grasshopper, and I know a screwball setup when I see one."

"Nuts," Barker insisted. "It's chance."

"Four men's too many for chance."

"Friend, nothing's too many for chance. I've been at Padrino's joint when the red came up twenty-three times running, and me with my money on the black all the time till I switch to red on the twenty-fourth. Then bingo!

she's black. That cured me. There's no patterns. It's all chance."

"Play in with us on this, Barker, and I'll swear it won't do your rating any harm."

"Deal me out, friends. I got better things to do tonight than play games with you. Or maybe you wouldn't understand about that? Anyway, I've got my murderer, all locked up and softened and ready to sing. So nuts to you, my friends."

Finch scarcely glanced after the departing officer. He headed straight for the pay phone and dialed the familiar number. "Finch speaking, homicide. . . . Look, boys, I need some dope. I reported a shooting tonight — Judge Westcott. Has the ballistics report come in yet? . . . O. K., when it does I want it checked with the reports on the cases of Lieutenants Barker and MacDonald. . . . Check. Can you dig up now the report Barker just filed? . . . O. K., read me the high points." He listened, nodding and adding an occasional query. "Thanks. And I want all the dope you can scrape up on a dentist that a prowl car found burned tonight. . . . No, that's all I know; you can dig it out of the records from that. All the details you've got on the man, and an extra careful autopsy. Five'll get you ten there's a bullet in that body; check it against the other three. . . . No, I'll phone back in an hour. . . . Check."

MacDonald started as Finch took his hat off a peg. "Where are you going? I thought we were going to talk this thing over?"

"You're coming with me, Mac."

"But where?"

"Son, I've sort of shown you the ropes, like, around this department. You know all about the vice squad and the chem lab and the ballistics department and the burglary division and God knows what else. But there's one section you never saw before tonight."

"And that's where we're going?"

"On the nail, Mac. We're now headed for the Chula Negra café, sometimes known as the Screwball Division, L.A.P.D."

MacDonald got the picture as a rapid walk took them up North Main Street to the Chula Negra. A scandal and political shakeup in the department a dozen years ago. A captain who was in it up to the neck but pulled enough wires to get clear. A lieutenant who took the rap.

Nick Noble, the lieutenant's name was. He'd broken more big cases than

any other man in the department, and half of them some completely screwball setup that usually has the police rocking on their heels. Like the university professor who objected to the existence of one-eyed beggars, and took measures accordingly.

Nick Noble's wife was sick when the shakeup came. She needed an operation badly. She didn't get it. Broke, disgraced, a widower . . .

"It's no wonder he took to drink," Finch said, "but it's hell he had to do it the way he did." Nick Noble was a wino, the lowest and soddenest kind of drunk that even the Skid Row of Los Angeles can exhibit. Nobody knew where he lived or what he lived on. Nobody knew anything except that he hung out at the Chula Negra and that he could still think.

The one thing that interested him beside his cheap sherry, the one hold life still had on him, was the fascination of his old profession. And he could still give cards and spades to any man in the department when it came to the freakish, the outrageous, and the unbelievable.

Nobody bothered to consult Nick Noble much any more save the old-timers of Finch's generation. The younger men trusted mostly to the laboratories or, like Barker, to their own fists and maybe a rubber hose. "Not that you can't crack ninety-nine of your cases with a lab or a hose," Finch added. "But the hundredth one needs a man like Nick Noble, and Mac, this looks like the one in a hundred."

The Chula Negra didn't run to barflies or juke boxes. It catered to nothing but the single-minded eating and drinking of the local Mexicans. Finch walked over to the third of the ramshackle booths and, motioning MacDonald after him, slid in.

MacDonald had expected a fat and bloated hulk. But alcoholism makes some thin, and Nick Noble was one of these. He was a wizened man whose sharp nose seemed trying to push out of his dead white skin. His hair and heavy eyebrows were white too, and his eyes so pale a blue as almost to match them.

There was a water glass half-full of sherry before him. He took a long swig and made a swipe at his nose before he saw the officers. "Herman!" he said softly, and looked sidewise at MacDonald. "Friend?"

"Friend. Lieutenant MacDonald, homicide."

"Glad," said Nick Noble, and struck again at his nose. "Fly," he explained. "Stays there." There was no fly.

"I'm afraid," Finch began, "it's up to you again, Nick."

A pale light glittered in the dead blue eyes. "Give," said Nick Noble. Finch gave.

Nick Noble finished another glass of sherry while Finch talked, and chased the invisible fly away from his nose six times. That nose seemed to grow sharper as he drank, and his pale eyes paler.

"Through?"

Finch nodded. Nick Noble leaned back and rested his head against the flimsy partition. A film glazed his eyes. He was silent so long that young MacDonald frowned and looked from the empty glass to Finch. But Finch shook his head.

Finally Nick Noble spoke. "Questions."

"O. K., Nick."

"Man on Skid Row. Lige Marsden. Occupation?"

"None, unless you count standing on street corners passing out pamphlets."

"Pamphlets for what?"

"Kingdom something."

"People of the Kingdom?"

"Check."

The pale eyes glazed again. MacDonald remembered the minor sect. The priest's housekeeper had mentioned it. Strange sort of anarchic idealism — civic disobedience as a religious principle. Denial of all rights of authority.

The eyes opened, and Nick Noble asked another question. "Dentist. No name?"

"Not yet. In a minute I'll phone back and check."

"Find out all about him. Especially Draft Board."

"Draft Board?"

"Was he a member?"

Finch nodded. "What else, Nick?"

"Nothing."

MacDonald started. "Aren't you interested? Aren't you going to —?"

"Interested? Oh yes. Pretty problem. Pattern. Thanks, Herman. Proof tomorrow."

Finch grinned. "Don't mind him, Mac. He can't help grandstanding."

"No grandstand. Murders tie together. Motive for time not quite clear yet. Only one murderer possible."

MacDonald half-rose. "You mean we can — ?"

"Tomorrow. Don't rush it."

"But if there's a murderer loose — Damn it, Noble, our main job isn't catching criminals; it's preventing crime. And if —"

Nick Noble smiled faintly at Finch. "Young," he said. Then to MacDonald, "All right, boy. No danger. No more murders. Not possibly. Check tomorrow. Now phone, Herman."

When Finch came back, his grin spread from ear to ear. "Criminenty, Nick, you can always pull a rabbit out of the sherry bottle. You've done it again, you son of a biscuit-eater."

"What did you find out?" MacDonald demanded.

"Ballistics check. Same gun killed all four of 'em. And that means the times are phony. Whole damn 'struggle' at Westcott's was probably just to make that clock look plausible. But where Nick comes in with the Noble touch is this: The dentist's name was Dr. Lyle Varney, and he was on his local Draft Board. In fact, he was chairman."

Nick Noble nodded. "Good. Go home. Tomorrow, boys, I'll show you your murderer."

Half an hour and one sherry later, Nick Noble entered the lodging house on East Fifth Street. His slight figure, his pale worn features, his shabby once-respectable suit all seemed to belong there. The clerk didn't give him a glance. They come and go.

There were two corridors on the second floor. From the end of one came laughter and clinkings. Two rooms at the end of the other were dark, silent. Nick Noble's white hands fiddled for an instant with the lock of the last room. He went in, closed the door, and switched on the light.

The room was any one of a thousand others. All that distinguished it was the absence of ashes and beer bottles and the presence of blood on the floor and the bed. And the pamphlets.

There was a stack of these left undistributed, a stack that reached from floor to table level. Nick Noble picked up the top one and leafed through it. He set it down, then picked it up again, found a page, and reread the heading over a prophetic article:

THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST AGAIN

Nick Noble said "Six" three times, and his eyes glazed. He stood motionless. Then his eyes came alive. He put the pamphlet back, and nodded.

There were steps far down the hall. Nick Noble switched off the light. The steps came as far as the next door and halted. Then they moved on. The door of the dead man's room opened. The beam of a flashlight coursed around the walls, clicked off. The door closed.

Nick Noble crawled out from under the bed. He swatted at the fly that wasn't on his nose and thereby knocked off the cockroach that was on his sleeve. He heard the door of the next room open and shut. He listened, but there was no click of the light switch.

He left the dead man's room without a sound. He paused before the next door, the door to the room of Barker's prisoner. A light came and went in the crack under the door. He drew back to the hinge side.

The door opened in a minute, covering him. Through the crack he saw a man coming out, a man he had never seen before. He carried a flashlight in one hand and something heavier in the other. This man set them both down on the floor and fished a tool out of his pocket, the same tool that Nick Noble had used on the other door.

The strange man closed the door. Nick Noble moved with agility. His hand was on the automatic on the floor when the stranger's right connected.

This time Nick Noble's eyes were glazed somewhat longer.

He was still in the hall when he came to. He felt his way into the dead man's room and doused his head with stale water from the pitcher. He switched on the light and peered into the cracked mirror. The blood had clotted by now, black on his white skin. He looked closer. That was a heel mark on his cheek. His thin lips set tight.

Lieutenant MacDonald, reporting for duty next morning, was greeted by Finch. "For once, Mac, old Nick slipped up. He said no more murders. They found Padrino early this morning."

"Padrino?"

"That's right. Maybe you wouldn't know. He runs a bigtime gambling setup. Roulette and the works. Official-like, we don't know about him here. But he was shot sometime between one and three and his watch was broken and set to 7:06. Bullet checks, too."

MacDonald gaped. Finch frowned as he loaded his corncob.

Lieutenant Dan Barker was filling out his report on the latest sweating of the bum he had arrested. He yelled admittance when he heard a knock

on the door.

A uniformed sergeant came in. "Old screwball here insists on seeing you, Lieutenant. Got a minute?"

Barker glared distrustfully at the slight old man behind the sergeant. "All right," he growled.

Nick Noble came in quietly. When the sergeant was gone, he said his name. "Maybe you've heard of me."

Barker's expression changed. "Hell, yes. You're the wino the old-timers tell the tall stories about. What's on your mind?"

"Tried to see Finch or MacDonald. Out. You had the other case. Talk with you."

Barker eyed the heel-bruised old face suspiciously. "O. K., friend. What's the angle?"

"All solved. All the cases at six after seven. No use for me — credit better go to the force."

"You've heard there's another one?"

"Yes. That, too. Want to hear?"

Barker shifted in his chair. "Why not?"

Nick Noble pulled a bottle from his coat pocket and filled the water glass on the table with sherry. "Drink? Sorry. Forget regulations. Well: Look at murders. Pattern. Leave out Padrino now. Just yesterday's. Three deaths timed mechanically. Fakes. One death timed accidentally. Your case. Time true."

"So where does that get you, friend?"

Nick Noble made an attempt on the fly. "Look at men. Three represent authority. Priest, authority of church. Judge, authority of law. Dentist, authority of state. Draft Board. G guessed that. Likeliest kind of authority for professional man. Other man, no authority. Your case. People of the Kingdom. Hates authority."

Barker grinned a lazy grin. "So still what?"

"Look at time. Six after seven. What's that to six?"

"Huh?"

"What's five minutes of seven to six?"

"Six fifty-five."

"And seven sharp?"

"Oh. I get you, friend. Six sixty."

"And six after seven."

"Six . . . sixty-six."