

The Big Cast Mystery

By Milo Ray Phelps



DETECTIVE
D. F. W.
SHORT

"I say this is the murderer's footprint,"
Magimple affirms, "and the key to this whole
business!"

THEY tell me every department has got one—some blunderin' blockhead with more luck than brains; I mean—but I'll back Murray Magimple against the field any day, and give you odds. The way this big balloon has risen to fame in the short time he's been on the force is a kick. I might even say, a kick in the pants—and my pants at that! Not only must I work with this guy, but he's moved

in on me, and—well, take that affair last week. . . .

It's the openin' night of a big musical show entitled "The Isle of Hotcha," and me and Murray are occupyin'

aisle seats, havin' been honored by the City Manager to pass judgment on the piece. All through the first act, the gags get thicker and the costumes

*No Man Knows Whether
Murray Magimple Relies on
Science or Blind Luck—but
Many a Man Suspects!*

thinner, and as the curtain glides down to thunderous applause from the gallery, I turns to Magimple. "Well, come on."

"Where to?" he grunts. "I'm comfortable."

"Why to call a riot squad," says I. "Have you forgot we're here to censor this?"

"But there's two more acts yet," he protests. "If we're gonna censure it, we oughta censure the whole thing, oughtn't we?"

My retort is blocked by the arrival of Dave Wenzel, the house manager.

"Well boys, how do you like it?" He leans in from the aisle.

"Great!" beams Magimple.

"Good." He leans closer. "Say, after the show, Sol Goodman, the show manager, is givin' a big party back stage. All the newspaper men will be there, and he wants you boys to come along. You know, to sorta meet the cast, and—"

"Sorry," I coughs. "We can't make it."

"Eh? Why not?" pops Magimple. "I'd enjoy meetin' some of that cast."

"Because we can't close up the man's show and then drink his liquor," I snaps.

"Close up the show!" echoes Wenzel. "Oh, see here now, Pepper, you can't be lookin' at this right."

But at this junction, we're interrupted by Goodman. He's a squat, worried little party with gold teeth and a bald pate, and he joins us all outa breath.

"That's all right. Let 'em close us," he pants. "Have 'em close us right now. You go announce it."

"What!" gapes Wenzel.

"Go announce it, I tell you!" He shoves him, protestin', down the aisle, and turns to us. "You gent's is in-

spectors, ain't you? From headquarters?"

"Right," nods Magimple.

"Then follow me. We've had a— an accident."

Me and Murray rises in surprise and trails him back stage. We walk into a dead silence. A dozen wide-eyed chorus girls line the rail of the iron stairway leadin' to the dressin' rooms. With hushed whispers they fall in behind us, follow us down to a door marked with a large gilt star. Here stands Rex Mulford, the leadin' man, pale clear through his make-up, guardin' the door. Goodman braces himself; then pushes inside.

One look tells the story. Face upon the floor lies Lola Gay, star of the show, a dark purple stain spreadin' down her left side through the folds of her blue silk dressing gown.

"My gosh!" gulps Magimple.

"Yeah," chokes Goodman. "We ain't had nothin' but trouble since we left New York." He sags onto a gilt chair and mops his brow. "Her maid discovered her and come at once after me. She's just as we found her—we ain't touched a thing."

My mind leaps to that crowded auditorium. "What about that door we come through? Is that always guarded?"

"All durin' the show," he nods. "Nobody passed but me and the mail."

"Good." I'm relieved. "Empty the house and put some one you can trust on both doorways. None of your company is to leave. Do you understand?"

"Sure. I know." He rises wearily and shuffles out.

Grabbin' the phone, I wakes up headquarters; then turns to Murray: "Well, here's where you get to meet that cast after all."

RECOVERIN' from his shock, he's pulled out one of his inevitable, black cigars, and now cocks his derby over one eye and blusters: "Yeah. But you can see it's a inside job, and I know these actors like a book. Have an answer for you in no time."

"I've heard that before," I sniffs, takin' in the room. "See anything of the weapon?"

"Not yet," he admits. "But it'll turn up."

"I've known 'em not to. May be under the body—won't know till the doc comes. What's out this window?"

I hooks a boudoir lamp and pokes it out the window to the end of the cord. This illumines a light well, walled on three sides by the theater buildin' and open on the alley. The bottom, formed by the roof of the first floor, is ten feet below the window, and covered with earth and a few neglected shrubs and grass blades.

"Ah! A roof-garden," pipes Magimple, shoulderin' me aside. "There's probably footprints down there. Go call up our expert on the preservation of physical evidence, and—"

"Aw, come down to earth," I growls. "We got no such party, and you know it."

"That's the trouble workin' with a dinky little department. No staff, no equipment." He throws up his hands in disgust and starts for the door. "Very well, I'll do it myself."

That's Magimple—everything high-class and scientific. We don't do nothin' right around here.

"Nix!" I barks. "You stay right here till the wagon shows, while I see if I can get things lined up a little. When it's time for you to get scientific, I'll let you know."

He don't like that, and hands me a dark frown as I pass out the door. But I know what I'm doin'. This is a hot settin' for a murder investigation, and It's gonna be a problem keepin' order. It's no time for Murray to go off on one of them tangents of his.

I find Goodman and Wenzel guardin' the doors, beatin' off the newspaper men. These guys claim they was invited to a party, and try and keep 'em out. The show people are pretty well outa sight. This is a double blow to them, I discover, because it probably means the end of the tour. It seems the show was bein' kept alive by one of the late star's admirers, and the house looks dark for everybody.

Accordin' to the door man, no one has left the buildin' since the shot, so that's that. I get a list of the entire company from Goodman. Then the wagon shows up, with Smoot and Taylor, a handful of cops, and a matron to handle the chorus.

Leadin' the way into the fatal dressin' room, I find Magimple nowhere in evidence; which is beyond me, because I didn't see him go out. The doc eyes the unguarded body reproachfully. I recall Murray's roof-garden, poke my head out the window, and there he is bendin' over a lit match.

"Hey! What's the idea?" I demand. "Say," he calls back, "I don't find no gun, but there's footprints down here, just like I told you."

"Okay. Leave 'em there," I bawls. "Get along in here now and gimme a hand."

"Be right with you," he mumbles. Well, the doc can't give us much except she was shot at close range and died instantly. The bullet's lodged in the body, so he'll have to tell us about that later, and there's no gun.

The whole troupe lines the doorways

and the balcony as the wicker basket makes its way down and out. Most of 'em are still in costume—an awe-struck bunch of half-clad, grease-painted, South Sea islanders.

As the body goes out the door, you can feel the tension break. I hands my list over to Smoot and Taylor, with orders to run everybody into their dressin' rooms. Then me and Murray retires to the scene of the murder and sends for the star's maid.

II

MRS. McCARTHY is an old hooper which gin and swollen ankles has put off the boards. She collapsed after the discovery of the body, and is only abroad now by grace of a pint of restorative which she's clutchin' with one hand under her apron.

She left the dressin' room five minutes before the act closed, says she, and stood in the wings with Miss Gay's wrap. The actress took this; then sent her around the corner for a bromo. She heard the shot as she was mountin' the stairway on her return.

"See any one leave this room?"

She shakes her head.

"See anything of a gun?"

"No, sor. I just took one look and then run after Mr. Goodman."

"See here," fires Magimple, brandishin' his cigar. "Looks to me like this gal got rid of you so she could entertain some visitor between acts."

"Between acts she dressed, sor."

"But why didn't she send the call-boy for that bromo?"

"Because he was busy rushin' beer," she hands him.

"Say, you can't tell me she didn't have affairs," insists Murray.

"Only one at a time," says the loyal servant, noddin' toward a framed

photo on the dressin' table. "I know of no affairs that should've caused any one to do 'er ill. She had a heart of gold. Look at 'er totin' an old shoe like me along for a maid! She was the spirit of goodness, rest 'er soul."

She swallows hard and nervously fingers the gin bottle. We lets her go.

Murray turns belligerently on the framed photo. "Who is this mug?"

"Eddie Cooke, the millionaire who was backin' the show," I supplies. "Lives in New York, so he's out."

"All right." He hunches his fat shoulders. "But we'll soon get to the bottom of this. I know these people; they're always willin' to talk."

"They talk too good, if you ask me," I sniffs. "The old lady made monkeys outa you."

"Oh yeah?" Full of indignation, he follows me next door.

This is occupied by Fritzie Cooper, the nifty blonde co-star. With her is Rex Mulford, and one Betsy Pringle who steps outa the chorus for a few specialty numbers. These two are clad for the street, but Fritzie is still in her island plumage—a cocktail in one hand, a sandwich in the other.

A big blowout, you recall, was scheduled for back stage to celebrate the openin'. Well, all the ingredients bein' on hand—and everybody feelin' in need of 'em—they have somehow filtered around. I don't like the look of this, but I guess the boys couldn't stop it. Magimple strikes an imposin' posture while I go through for the missin' weapon. Then he opens up on Fritzie.

"What was you doin' when you heard the shot?"

"Powderin' my armpits, since you ask."

I was afraid of this. Magimple winces and tries again.

"What did you think it was?"

"A shot."

"Then why didn't you investigate?"

"Because I don't rate a maid like the illustrious star. Maybe you don't know it, but the less you wear the more careful you gotta be putting it on."

"But didn't you poke your head out the door or nothin'?"

"Not till I was fully clad. By that time Goodman was there."

"Did you hear any noises? Anything to suggest that Miss Gay wasn't alone?"

"Didn't have to. I *knew* she wasn't alone."

Murray's eyes pop wide, and Betsy Pringle springs up with a cry of protest: "Fritzie!"

"Well, she wasn't," flares Fritzie. "He flew out to Boise, and he flew out to Denver. Why wouldn't he fly out here? I followed her, bow legs all along the balcony. She turned in her door just ahead of me. I heard her just as plain as day: 'Eddie! You here?'"

Pringle turns a dumb appeal to Mulford, and them two have a drink.

"You mean Eddie Cooke?" Magimple perks.

"That's right; the Biscuit King, and Lola's sugar daddy."

"For heck's sake, Fritzie," cries Pringle. "Think of yer job!"

"Aw I ain't got arthritis." The co-star curls her lip with disdain. "I can get a job any time."

FLUSHIN' scarlet, Pringle springs forward and clutches Murray by the lapels. "Listen," she cries; "she's just half off her nut, with the show closin' and all. What did McCarthy tell you? Just answer me that."

"That's my business," splutters Murray, backin' up.

"But it was a lotta slush, wasn't it?"

She hangs right on. "Well, don't believe it. Gay wasn't packin' McCarthy for love. It was to keep her quiet about Fred, that's what. McCarthy had a son she thought the world of. Two years ago Gay done him dirty and he jumped off a East River pier. Ask the old girl about that and you'll start gettin' somewhere!"

She flings away and grabs for the bottle. Murray gulps, and beads of perspiration start wellin' out on his forehead. I tackle Mulford, and get the fastest one yet. He don't know nothin', says he, except that if we run out of suspects he can give us two or three. To which Fritzie adds that he mighta done it himself, and how th' deuce long are we gonna keep 'em cooped up like this?

"Stick around!" barks Magimple, and makes for the door.

"Whew!" he emits, moppin' his brow. "Didn't I tell you this would be a cinch? Look't, we got three suspects already. Do you think Mrs. McCarthy coulda jumped out that window?"

"Aw, don't be a simp!"

"Well, somebody did. Anyhow, she had a motive, and she's gotta be held on suspicion. And Mulford oughta be held. And now I'm gonna check up on this guy Cooke. Look over that list, Shorty, and see if there's any other Eddies in this screwy outfit."

I hunt up the list while he's callin' headquarters, and then take a sour look around. All is not well. This gang is bred in the tradition that the show must go on regardless; and likewise it seems, so must the party. Our men are doin' the best they can, but the whole company is now playin' hide-an-go-seek, with the cops "it." On both floors, doors are openin' and closin', and the corridors are full of laughter.

Magimple rejoins me. "The cap'n says swell," he beams.

"Yeah. You probably give him the idea," I snorts. "Listen, we've gotta move through this bunch fast before they get out of hand. You take Smoot and work half this list while I take Taylor and cover the other half."

So we start, and, no reflection on the profession in general, this is the toughest bunch of guys and dolls I've ever seen assembled on one bill. The outfit is rotten to the core with intrigues and jealousies. Everybody's tongue is loosened by liquor and the common calamity, and do they talk!

A few minutes later I pass Magimple in the hall. "Zowie!" he elates, rubbin' his hands. "I got two. more. Fritzie coulda done it; she threatened to cut the Gay's tuneless windpipe while they was playin' Salt Lake. And Betsy Pringle had a swell motive. They tell me Cooke was her lumpa sugar before Lola lit on 'im."

Smoot, standin' patiently behind him, taps a finger on his forehead.

"I'm hearin' the same line, Murray," I warns. "Don't let it addle ya. What we need is facts, and that missin' revolver."

"I know," he rattles. "But there's five arrests I can make already!"

He hustles off down the corridor. I shakes my head and turns to Taylor. "What do you think?"

"I think they're ten up on us," he snorts, "and we're listenin' to a lotta belch."

"Me too," says I. "We'll try a couple more, and then chuck it. In the meantime here's somethin' that occurs to me. You phone the office and have 'em check on the suicide of one Fred McCarthy in New York two years ago."

He departs, and I walk in on the

comedian. He's alone—not even a bottle—and he eyes me darkly through his burnt cork as I frisks him and combs the joint. But when I'm through, he opens up complete in one issue.

"I had nothin' against the star but her salary. I was down havin' a smoke in the wash room and didn't even hear the shot. I only know one thing; that it'd be smart of you to find out who ditched a revolver in the life-boat."

"The which?"

"The life-boat. One of the props for act two."

"Oh! Thanks."

Outside I bumps into Magimple again. "Got another!" he pipes. "And this one's got teeth in it."

"Yeah. Hen's teeth," husks Smoot. He follows him in next door, and I makes for the balcony.

III

THE scene that greets me from below is a bedlam. The party has refused to remain confined to the dressin' rooms, and has overflowed to the stage. About twenty of the cast have improvised a night club outa sundry props, and are takin' turns about as patrons and entertainers.

At present, Fritzie Cooper is doin' the rumba. And the music for this classic is bein' furnished by two chorus men beatin' on the bottom of that up-turned life-boat.

At sight of this I leap for the stairs. When I'm halfway down, the place blinks into total darkness. Whoever hid that gun has pulled the main light switch. A composite scream issues from the stage and the upper rooms. I miss my footin', and go headlong.

"Lights!" I howls, scramblin' to my feet.

Taylor, back on the job, shoves me

his torch. I pick up the boat and we both dash toward the figure crouched beside it. The dislodged gun is clutched in the man's hand as we drag him upright.

"Sol Goodman!" I exclaims.

"But I ain't got a thing to do with it!" he squeals in terror. "Simply I seen my gun up there and knew it wouldn't do me no good to have it found by the body, and—"

"Find the janitor and get these lights on," I orders.

Somebody shoves this guy forward and he restores the lights. We clap bracelets on Goodman and lock him up, and a momentary hush is shocked into the assemblage. But only momentary. That three minutes of darkness has dislodged everybody aloft, and now we're in for it. Down the stairs they come floodin', chorus and all, past two helpless cops and the frantic matron. In their wake is Magimple, wildly wavin' his arms.

"What's the idea dousin' them lights?" he blusters. "I was just gettin' another lead from the soprano when she walked out on me in the dark."

"Never mind that now," I snaps, and tells him what I've got on Goodman.

"But his name ain't Eddie," he objects.

"I know, but maybe Fritzie was hearin' things. Anyhow he's our best bet so far, and if we can dig up a motive on him—"

"I got a motive," he pops, and starts pawin' through his notes. "Get a load of this: Lol Gay got Goodman his job. Ever since then she's not only been managin' the company, but nickin' him for a quarter of his salary!"

"Gosh! That fits."

"Sure," he beams. "I got motives

for everybody. Wait a minute now, and I'll tell you if he done it." He hunches his fat shoulders and plunges off through the millin' crowd.

I looks around in despair. The whole company is now on the stage, and mixed with 'em is half a dozen hawks of the press.

"Who let them guys in?" I explodes.

"I cannot tell a lie," grunts Smoot. "Magimple done it."

"He would!" I chokes, and dives for a phone. Because a press account of this mêlée ain't gonna do the department no good. If we confiscated the liquor in the beginnin', we mighta stood a chance, but we couldn't do nothin' now without startin' a riot. You can handle a bunch of men, but not a lotta women, and the boys have got all they can do to keep the curtain down and the doors guarded.

"Just gonna call you," says the sergeant. "Your bullet was a thirty-two."

"Good," says I, this bein' the bore of Goodman's gun.

"And here's a definite clue: There was half of a plain gold cuff link caught in the sleeve of the dead gal's dressin' gown."

"Okay. Is the cap'n there? Put me through to him."

Allen's voice is full of anxiety: "Well, how's it shapin' up?"

"Yes and no."

"But Magimple phoned it was in the bag," he complains.

"It's a difficult situation," says I, steppin' careful. "In fact, if it would be anyways possible, I think the whole gang should be dumped right in the cooler."

"I'll make it possible!" barks the old boy. "They can't bill an indecent show in this town, stage a murder, and

then top it off with a brawl! Line 'em up. I'll have some wagons sent right over."

WELL, you could as easy line up a swarm of bees, but we do the best we can. All the bums in the jug is turned out in their night-shirts; our two Marias, both city ambulances, and a dump truck backs up to the stage door and we pour out the works. Includin' the press! Hopefully I examine all the cuffs. Goodman is the last out—wearin' a button shirt. Oh well, he coulda changed it somewhere, thinks I.

As the last echo dies away down the alley, I survey the empty stage—now a wreck of torn scenery, broken flasks, and shreds of blue uniform—and breathe a hearty sigh. Then here comes Magimple through the back doorway, totin' a long ladder, and smeared with white from the chin down.

"What'n heck you been into?" I blinks.

"Plaster Paris, which the janitor uses to kill rats. He mixes it with corn meal, and—"

"Omit that. What *you* been doin' with it?"

"Makin' a cast of them footprints," he states proudly.

"Oh. Well, give us a hand now; we've got a busted cuff link to locate."

"Go right ahead," he shrugs, dustin' his broad front. "I never been no hand for set routine. It's always scientific deduction which solves these cases in the end, and as soon as that plaster sets—"

"Sure. I know," I sighs. "Come on, boys."

Well, we turned the theater inside out and don't locate that cuff link. I stagger home about dawn and find Magimple snorin' peaceful in the se-

curity of his plaster cast. And of course, I hope he's right.

I hit the squad room bright and early, open the mornin' paper and scan the heads. Eighty arrests have been made, and a statement is expected.

"So they wouldn't talk, eh?" cracks the sergeant.

I just grins. It looks like for once a case is treatin' me right. But did you ever know me to have any luck? The phone rings. The sergeant thumbs significantly toward the sanctum, and I straightens my tie and marches in.

Cap'n Allen is in conference with our consultin' criminologist. He greets me with a troubled frown and comes right to the point.

"Your bullet don't match your gun barrel."

"You mean she wasn't killed with Goodman's gun?" I blinks.

"That's what I mean," says he, tappin' the expert's photos. "You've got to dig deeper there, or you've got no case. Er—what's Magimple doin'?"

"Him! Oh, I think he's cleanin' up some tag ends down at the theater."

"Good. Valuable man—thorough—scientific. Well, that's all, Pepper. Get goin'."

I ducks back into the squad room much deflated. And there stands Magimple depositin' a newspaper parcel on the sergeant's desk. Bulgin' with importance he undoes this, revealin' a hunk of dirty plaster about the size of a shoe box. I takes a long squint at it and explodes: "What's that? A bust of Napoleon?"

"That's the cast I made last night."

"Aw nerts! And here I thought maybe you *had* somethin'."

"I've got the footprint of the murderer," he splutters indignantly, "and as soon as I match it up with one of Goodman's shoes—"

"You've lost a chapter. Goodman is out," I informs, and spills him the bad news.

"All right—all right!" He lifts a soothin' hand. "We've got plenty more suspects, ain't we? You don't see me tearin' my hair. Just gimme a little time, and—"

The phone rings. It's his reply from New York. Mr. Edward Cooke cannot be located, and it's rumored that he departed by plane for the west.

"See?" Murray spreads his palms bountifully. "There's another one. When you locate him, Shorty, just bring me one of his shoes, and—"

"Aw more nerts!" I bawls, hunts up Smoot and Tāylor and goes stormin' out.

IV

WELL, to cut a long mornin' short, we picks up that photo at the theater—figurin' if Cooke's here he's in cognito—and about noon I nabs him boardin' a plane at the air port. I books him quietly under his misnomer, and then hustles down to report.

What I walk into is plenty. Allen is cloistered with the coroner, the D. A., and the City Manager, and the air is blue.

"You! Do you know what you've handed in here?" he explodes, poundin' the reports piled on his desk. "When we started on these people, to shape up the coroner's investigation, every last one of 'em went back on his story!"

"No foolin'?" I gulps.

"I have just said so," he snaps. "You were listenin' to a lot of drunken drivel and stored up venom and didn't have sense enough to know it. Here the case is fourteen hours old and hasn't progressed an inch. What am I to tell the papers?"

"I just pulled in Eddie Cooke," I mentions modestly.

"You did! Why didn't you say so?" The room rises with one accord, and I leads the way.

But where to? Lola Gay was murdered at 9:30, and damned if Cooke don't produce four witnesses to prove that his plane didn't arrive till midnight! They let him outa there so fast it burns the hinges, but the damage is done. The papers have smelled a rat and matched him up with their morgue photos, and by two o'clock the streets is full of extras on the arrest, with a broad hint at the collapse of all existin' evidence.

Allen nearly chokes tellin' me about it. "In all my life I never seen the like of this!" he raves. "You were right there at the scene of the crime, and you've bungled it from first to last. We'll be lucky if we aren't sued for false arrest. And say, what do you know about these people's shoes?"

"Shoes?" I explodes.

"That's what I said. They claim they all woke up this mornin' without any footwear."

"Nothin'!"

"Very well. Get goin'. I can only hold 'em forty-eight hours, you know. Start back at the beginnin' and see if you can't work up a case."

I get goin'. If Magimple thinks I'm gonna run interference for him all his life he's crazy. What do I know about these people's shoes! Somethin' tells me I know plenty!

Arrived at our apartment I finds Bosco, our colored manservant, seated in the livin' room behind a ugly frown.

"Is Magimple here?"

He protrudes his thick lips toward the kitchen, and I kicks open the swing door. There stands Murray in a kitchen apron stirrin' a batch of master

in a mixin' bowl—with seventy-nine pairs of shoes piled up on the kitchen table!

"So here you are," I cries. "Listen. I found Cooke, but he got sprung in no time, and the rest of the case has fallen apart like a dime watch."

"You mean out of eighty arrests and all them motives we've got no case?" he demands, incredulous.

"That's what I mean. We've got to start right at the beginnin' and build up again. Now here's somethin' that occurs to me: I've checked on the McCarthy suicide, and it was two weeks before they fished his body outa the drink. Now if you've ever seen a floater after two weeks—"

He's payin' me no heed at all, and now he cuts in: "The shoe is yer positive—see?—leavin' a imprint which is negative. Now what you want is a split negative to compare with yer sample negatives. So you shellac yer positive, like this—"

Here he picks up that malformed hunk of plaster and I howls: "But, Murray, how many times must I tell you that ain't a footprint?"

"Eh? Since when ain't a print made by a foot a footprint?" he demands.

"I mean it ain't good for nothin'. It coulda been made by an ox, or a grompus, or a fallin' brickbat!"

"I say this is the murderer's footprint, and the key to this whole business." Stubbornly he sets his triple chin, wavin' the plaster under my nose, and suddenly I sees red.

"Gimme that!" Snatchin' it from him I heaves it at the wall, and it tinkles to the floor in a hundred pieces.

"Now bundle up them shoes," I barks, "and take 'em back to the jail before we get sued for 'em. Then you come along with me. Understand?"

But he's dropped to his knees beside

the fragments, and now he rises with a whoop.

"Look't! What'd I tell ya?" And there in his fat fingers is half of a gold cuff link.

"Well blow me fer a whistle!" I explodes. "Except it don't tell you nothin', because you don't know whose footprint that was."

HE ain't listenin'. He's back on the floor examinin' them fragments. And now he scrambles up and starts strugglin' outa the apron.

"Follow me!" he pipes, grabs his coat and hat on the way out, and don't even wait for the elevator.

"But see here now, Murray," I protests as we careens across town. "We got no time for any more hokus-pokus."

"Shut up!" he bellers. "I know what I'm doin'!"

He zooms down the alley in back of the theater, and sails through the stage door with his coattails flyin'. Inside all is dark and silent. He pauses in the middle of the deserted stage, then makes for a crack of light showin' through a door at the rear. We enter a small storeroom, and there on a box we find the janitor—a tired-lookin' young fella with a sad mustache—solemnly tapin' a busted broom handle.

"Hello." He looks up with surprise. "Somethin' I can do for ya?"

"Yeah," fires Murray, clutchin' him by the collar. "You can come along to headquarters for that murder last night."

"Me?" cries the guy, goin' white. "You musta made a mistake. I'm not with the show. My name is Wilson, and—"

"Your name is *Mud*," blustered Magimple. "And you done it all right." Snappin' the cuffs on him, he boosts

him out to the car and then turns to me: "I'll take him in. You go search his room and see what you find."

Well, what I find is a soiled shirt with a gold cuff link in one sleeve and the other empty, a thirty-two revolver, and half a dozen letters signed "Your loving mother." These we check against Mrs. McCarthy's scribble, and have a full confession in no time.

You see, Fred McCarthy was never dead at all, and his mother knew it. And she knew of his plan to confront Lola Gay with himself in person, hopin' for a reconciliation. But she didn't know of his determination to plug her if she turned him down.

What Fritzie Cooper heard was the name "Freddie" not "Eddie." He was waitin' in Lola's dressin' room at the end of the act, for her to rush into his arms. But she called him a bum instead. So he let her have it, dropped down the wall, and into the window of the storeroom. The shot was a big surprise to the old lady, but she covered for him the best she could by plantin' Goodman's gun. In fact it was the very angle I was startin' to work on, but how Magimple tumbled to it is a mystery to me.

Which it remains so till the next mornin'; because I can't get near him the rest of the day, he's so busy gettin' his picture took. And you should see the mornin' papers:

**STAR'S MURDERER TRAPPED BY
DEPARTMENT ACE! INSPECTOR
MAGIMPLE SCORES AGAIN!**

"Hey!" I barks across the breakfast board. "What do they mean, —guardian of our high moral standards as well as our law and order?"

"Oh, that's about me closin' up the show." And another spoonful of oatmeal disappears.

"You closin' it up! Why, you was the most appreciative customer in the house!"

No answer.

I reads on and strikes that plaster cast—to which he doggedly held while all the rest of the force was bein' misled by the drunken testimony of the revelin' company.

"Hey! What d'ya mean, you followed a straight line of testimony from the murderer's footprint to his door? That guy told us in his confession that he walked the brick cornice, and never once that evening set foot on that roof-garden."

"Did he?" he coughs. "I didn't happen to notice."

"Yeah. There's times when you ain't very noticeable," I cries. "Listen here. How did you get onto that roof when you first went ploughin' around there?"

"Jumped outa the window."

"I *knew* it!" I howls. "Then what you done was to make a print of your own big foot!"

Slowly he lowers the paper and scowls at me reproachfully: "What's the difference? It solved the case, didn't it?"

"Yeah," I splutters, beside myself. "But if you picked up that cuff link in yer *own footprint*, how did you know who dropped it there?"

"Simple," he munches, disappearin' again behind the news. "It wasn't picked up in the footprint. It was in the cast itself. So when you busted it, and I discovered that, I knew right away the janitor had dropped it in the plaster when he dished it out for me last night."

"What!" I collapses. "Of all the cockeyed luck! Honest t'gosh, Murray, you'd fall down a well and light in a rowboat!"



Holding the knife behind him; Gregg said: "I'm in trouble."

The Scarlet Letter

By

Ray Cummings

He Had Just Killed the Man—and He Knew It Was a Perfect Crime. But He Didn't Know That Murder Always Marks a Man Unmistakably!

GEORGE GREGG reached home at eleven P.M. that Saturday evening. The weather was raw and chilly—an overcast sky and the feel of rain or snow in the air. Gregg wore a light overcoat over his dinner clothes. He was a handsome young fellow. An artist; protégé of Kenneth Rance, the famous illustrator, with whom he lived.

The home of Kenneth Rance was a big rambling old-fashioned three-story frame house at the end of a somewhat lonely street here on the edge of town. There were no servants; just Rance, his niece, Dianne Walters—and Gregg. The house was dark now, except for lights that marked the lower front room, which was Rance's studio.