

# Murder at Bridge



# **MURDER AT BRIDGE**

---

**ANNE AUSTIN**



**CruGuru**

MURDER AT BRIDGE

Copyright © 2008 by CruGuru.com

ISBN: 978-1-920265-14-4

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

All of the characters in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

First published in 1931.

This edition published by Cruguru.com in 2008.

[www.cruguru.com](http://www.cruguru.com)

For ARLINE AND F. HUGH HERBERT



## CHAPTER 1

---

---

Bonnie Dundee stretched out a long and rather fine pair of legs, regarding the pattern of his dark-blue socks with distinct satisfaction; then he rested his black head against the rich upholstery of an armchair not at all intended for his use.

His cheerful blue eyes turned at last--but not too long a last--to the small, upright figure seated at a typewriter desk in the corner of the office.

"Good morning, Penny," he called out lazily, and good-humoredly waited for the storm to break.

"Miss Crain--to you!" The flying fingers did not stop an instant, but Dundee noticed with glee that the slim back stiffened even more rigidly and that there was a decided toss of the brown bobbed head.

"But Penny is so much more like you," Dundee protested, unruffled. "And why should I be forced always to think of you as a long-legged bird, when even our mutual boss, District Attorney William S. Sanderson, has the privilege of calling you what you are--a bright and shining new penny?"

"I've known Bill Sanderson since I was born," the unseen lips informed him truculently, even as the unseen fingers continued their fiercely staccato typing.

"Ah! That explains a lot!" Dundee conceded handsomely. "I just wondered, amidst all this bonhomie of 'Bill' and 'Penny,' why I--"

"I only call Mr. Sanderson 'Bill' when I forget!" the small creature defended herself sharply. "Goodness knows I try to be an efficient private secretary! And I could be a lot more efficient if lazy strangers didn't plump themselves down in our best visitors' chair, and try to flirt with me. I don't flirt! Do you hear?--I don't flirt with anybody!"

"Flirt with you, you funny little Penny?" Dundee's voice was a little sad, the voice of a man who finds himself grievously misunderstood. "I only want you to like me, if you can, and be a little nice to me, for after all I--"

"Oh, I know!" Penny Crain jerked the finished letter from her typewriter and spun about on her narrow-backed swivel chair to face him. "I know you are

'Mr. James F. Dundee, Special Investigator attached to the office of the District Attorney,' and that you have a right to drive me crazy if you want to."

"Crazy?" Dundee was genuinely amazed, contrite. "I beg your pardon most humbly, Miss Crain. I'll go back to my cell--"

"Your office is almost as big and nice as this one," Penny retorted, but her sharp, bright brown eyes--really almost the color of a new penny--softened until they took on a velvety depth.

Dundee did not fail to notice the softening, nor did the little heart-shaped face, with its low widow's-peak, its straight, short nose, and its pointed little chin, made almost childish by the deep cleft which cut through its obvious effort to look mature and determined, fail to please him any more acutely than on the other days of the one short week he had been privileged at intervals to gaze upon it.

"But the files, and--other things--are in this office," he told her, his blue eyes twinkling happily once more.

"Don't you dare touch my files again!" Penny cried, springing to her feet and running toward the wall which was completely concealed by drawers, cabinets and shelves, filled with the records of which she was the proud custodian. "That's why I said just now that you were driving me crazy. Thursday you took a whole folder of correspondence out of the letter files and put it back under the wrong initial. I had to hunt for it for two hours, with Bill--I mean, Mr. Sanderson--gnawing his nails with impatience. He thought I had filed it wrong, and you might have made me lose my job."

Unconsciously her slightly husky contralto voice had sunk lower and trembled audibly.

"I'm awfully sorry. I shan't touch your files again, Miss Crain."

"Oh--go on and call me Penny," she conceded impatiently. "What do you want now?... And you can get anything you need out of the files if you'll just put the folder in the bottom drawer of my desk, so that I can file it myself--correctly!"

"Thank you, Penny," Bonnie Dundee said gravely. "I'd like awfully to have the complete transcript of 'The State versus Maginty.' Mr. Sanderson is determined to get a conviction where our former district attorney most ingloriously failed. The new trial comes up in two weeks, and he wants me to try to uncover a missing link of evidence."

"I know," she nodded, and stretched her short, slender body to pull down the two heavy volumes he required.

Without a by-your-leave, Special Investigator Dundee resumed his comfortable seat, and laid the first of the volumes open upon his knees. But he did not seem to take a great deal of interest in the impaneling of jurors in the case of one Rufus Maginty, who had won the temporary triumph of a "hung jury" under the handling of the state's case by District Attorney Sherwood, deposed in November's election.

Rather, his eyes followed the small, brisk figure of Miss Penelope Crain, as it moved about the room, and his ears listened to the somehow charming

though emphatic tapping of her French heels.... French heels! Hadn't she been wearing sensible, Cuban-heeled Oxfords all other days of this first week of his "attachment" to the district attorney's office?... Cunning little thing, for all her thorniness and her sharpness with him, which he now saw that he had deserved.... Pretty, too.... Damned pretty!... What color was that dress of hers?... Ummm, let's see ... Chartreuse, didn't they call it? Chartreuse with big brown dots in it. Bet it was sleeveless under that short little jacket of golden-brown chiffon velvet.... By Jove--and Dundee lapsed into one of the Englishisms he had picked up during his six months' work in England as a tyro in the records department of Scotland Yard, before he had come to Hamilton to make a humble beginning as a cub detective on the Homicide Squad--yes, by Jove, she was all dressed up, for some reason or other.

"Of course! Because it's Saturday and you have the afternoon off!" Dundee finished his reverie aloud, to the astonishment of the small person trying to reach a file drawer just a little too high for her. "I mean," he hastened to explain, "that I've just noticed how beautiful your costume is, and found a reason for it."

There was sudden color in the creamy face. The French heels tapped an angry progress across the big office, and Penny sat down abruptly in her swivel chair, reached across the immaculate desk, snatched up a morning paper and tossed it, without a glance, in the general direction of her tormentor.

"Page three, column two, first item," she informed him ungraciously, and then began to search with a funny sort of desperation for more work to consume her extraordinary energy.

Bonnie Dundee grinned indulgently as he opened The Hamilton Morning News and turned to the specified page and column.

"Ah! My old friend, the 'society editress,' in her very best style," he commented as he began to read aloud:

"Mrs. Juanita Selim, new and charming member, is entertaining the Forsythe Alumnae Bridge Club this afternoon, luncheon to be served at the exclusive new Breakaway Inn on Sheridan Road--"

"I've read it--and I'm busy, so shut up!" Penny commanded, as she gathered up pencils to sharpen.

Quite meekly, Bonnie Dundee subsided into silent perusal of an item he was sure could have no possible interest for himself, in either a personal or professional capacity, unless Penny's name was in it somewhere:

"--after which the jolly party of young matrons and maids will adjourn to Mrs. Selim's delightful home in the Primrose Meadows Addition." He chuckled, and dared to interrupt the high importance of pointing-up pencils. "I say, that's funny, isn't it?... 'Primrose Meadows Addition!'"

"I don't think it's funny," Penny retorted coldly. "It so happens that my mother named it, that my father went into bankruptcy trying to make a go of it, and that 'Mrs. Selim's delightful home' was built to be our home, and in which we were fortunate enough to live only two months before the crash came."

"Oh!" Dundee groaned. "Penny, Penny! I'm dreadfully sorry."

"Shut up!" she ordered, but her voice was huskier than ever with tears.

Dundee's now thoroughly interested eyes raced down the absurdly written paragraphs:

"Although not an alumna of that famous and select school for girls, Forsythe-on-the-Hudson, graduation from which places any Hamilton girl in the very inner circle of Hamilton society, Mrs. Selim has been closely identified with the school, having for the past two years directed and staged Forsyte's annual play which ushers in the Easter vacation.

"Indeed it was Mrs. Selim's remarkable success with this year's play which caused Mrs. Peter Dunlap, long interested in a Little Theater for Hamilton, to induce the beautiful and charming young directress to come to Hamilton with her. Plans for the Little Theater are growing apace, and it is safe to conjecture that not all the conversation flying thick and fast about 'Nita's' bridge tables this afternoon will be concerned with contract 'conventions,' scores, and finesses which failed.

"Lovely 'Nita' was elected to membership a fortnight ago, when a vacancy occurred, due to the resignation of Miss Alice Humphrey, who has gone abroad for a year's study in the Sorbonne. The two-table club now includes: Mesdames Hugo Marshall, Tracey A. Miles, Peter Dunlap, John C. Drake, Juanita Selim, and Misses Polly Beale, Janet Raymond, and Penelope Crain."

Dundee lowered the paper and stared at the profile of District Attorney Sanderson's private secretary. So she was a "society girl," a "Forsyte" girl! Was that the reason, perhaps, why she had been so thorny with him, a mere "dick"? Well, he wasn't just a dick any longer. He was a Special Investigator ... A society girl, playing at work....

But there was more, and he read on: "As is well known, the 'girls' have their 'hen-fight' bridge-luncheon every Saturday afternoon from the first of October to the first of June, and a bridge-dinner, in which mere men are graciously included, every other Wednesday evening during the season. Mr. and Mrs. Tracey A. Miles are scheduled as next Wednesday's host and hostess."

"I take off my hat to your 'society editress'," Dundee commented with false cheerfulness, when he had laid the paper back upon Penny's desk. "She makes half a column of this one item in what must be a meager Saturday bunch of 'Society Notes,' then writes it all over again, in the past tense, for an equally meager Monday column.... Like bridge, Miss Crain?"

Penny snatched up the paper and crushed it into her wastebasket. "I do! And I like my old friends, even if I am not able, financially, to keep up with them.... If that's why you've suddenly decided to stop being--comrades--"

"Please forgive me again, Penny," he begged gently.

"I was born into that crowd, and I still belong to it, because all of them are my real friends, but get this into your thick Scotch-Irish head, Mr. Dundee--I'm working because I have to, and--and because I love it, too, and because I want to earn enough before I'm many years older to give Mother some of the things she's missing so dreadfully since--since my father failed and--and ran away."

"Ran away?" Dundee echoed incredulously. How could any man desert a daughter like this!

"Yes! Ran away!" she repeated fiercely. "I might as well tell you myself. Plenty of others will be willing to, as soon as they know you are--my friend.... As I told you, my father"--her voice broke--"my father went bankrupt, but before the courts knew it he had sent some securities to a--to a woman in New York, and when he--left us, he went to her, because he left Mother a note saying so. His defrauded creditors here have tried to--to catch him, but they haven't--yet--"

Very gently Bonnie Dundee took the small hand that was distractedly rumpling the brown waves which swept back from the widow's-peak. It lay fluttering in his bigger palm for a moment, then snatched itself away.

"I won't have you feeling sorry for me!" she cried angrily.

"Who owns your--the Primrose Meadows house now?--Mrs. Selim?" he asked.

"The 'lovely Nita?'" Her voice was scornful. "No. She rents it from Judge Hugo Marshall--or is supposed to pay him rent," she added with a trace of malice. "Hugo is an old darling, but he is fearfully weak where pretty women are concerned. Nita Selim had known Hugo in New York--somehow--and as soon as Lois--Mrs. Dunlap, I mean--had got Nita off the train, the stranger in our midst tied herself to Hugo's office and he's been tagging after her ever since.... Though most of the men in our crowd are as bad as or worse than poor old Hugo. How Karen keeps on looking so blissfully happy--"

"Karen?" Dundee interrupted.

"Mrs. Hugo Marshall," she explained impatiently. "Karen Plummer made her debut a year ago this last winter--a darling of a girl. Judge Marshall--retired judge, you know--had been proposing to the prettiest girl in each season's crop of debs for the last twenty years, and Hugo must have been the most non-plussed 'perennial bachelor' who ever led a grand march when Karen snapped him up.... Loved him--actually! And it seems to have worked out marvelously.... A baby boy three months old," she concluded in her laconic style. Then, ashamed; "I don't know why I'm gossiping like this!"

"Because you can't find another blessed scrap of work to do, you little efficiency fiend," Dundee laughed, "Come on! Gossip some more. My Maginty case will wait till afternoon, to be mulled over while you're losing your hard-earned salary at bridge with rich women."

"We don't play for high stakes," she corrected him. "Just a twentieth of a cent a point, though contract can run into money even at that. The winnings all go to the Forsyte Scholarship Fund. On Wednesday evenings the crowd plays for higher stakes--a tenth--and winners keepers. Therefore I can't afford to go, unless I sink so low as to let my escort pay my losses--which I sometimes do," she confessed, her brown head low for a moment.

"Is this Mrs. Peter Dunlap a deep-bosomed club woman, who starts Movements?" he asked, more to bring her out of her depression than anything else. "Bigger and Better Babies Movements, and Homes for Fallen Girls, and Little Theater Movements?"

The brown head flung itself up sharply, and the brown eyes hardened into bright pennies again. "Lois Dunlap is the sweetest, finest, most comfortable woman in Hamilton, and I adore her--as does everyone else, Peter Dunlap hardly more than the rest of us. She is interested in a Little Theater for Hamilton, but she won't manage it. That's why she got hold of Nita Selim. Lois will simply put up barrels of money, without missing them, and give a grand job to a little Broadway gold-digger. Funny thing is, she really delights in Nita. Thinks she's sweet and has never had a real chance."

"And what do you think?" Dundee asked softly.

"Oh--I suppose I'm a cat, but I can see through her so clearly. Not that she's bad; she's simply an opportunist. She's awfully sweet and deferential and 'frank' with women, but with men--well, she simply tucks her head so that her shoulder-length black curls fall forward enchantingly, gives them one wistful smile out of her big eyes that are like black pansies and--the clink of slave chains!... Now go on and think I'm catty, which I suppose I am!"

Bonnie Dundee grinned at her reassuringly. Not for him to explain that practically all women and many men found themselves "gossiping" when he led them on adroitly, for reasons of his own. Which of course helped make him the excellent detective he was.

"So all the men in your crowd have fallen for Nita Selim, have they?"

"Practically all, in varying degrees, except Peter Dunlap, who has never looked at another woman since he was lucky enough to get Lois, and Clive Hammond, who's engaged to Polly Beale," Penny answered reluctantly, her color high.

"Including your young man?"

"I haven't a 'young man,' in the sense of being engaged," Penny retorted, then added honestly: "I have been letting Ralph Hammond--that's Clive's brother, you know--take me about a good deal.... Ralph and Clive have plenty of money," she defended herself hastily. "They are architects, Clive being the head of the firm and Ralph, who hasn't been out of college so very long, a junior partner. It was the Hammond firm that drew up the plans for Dad's--I mean, my father's--Primrose Meadows Addition houses. He had our house built as a sort of show-place, you know, so that prospective builders out there could see how artistic a home could be put up for a moderate sum of money. But he didn't quite finish even that--left half the gabled top story unfinished, and Nita has been teasing Hugo to finish it up for her. It looks," she added with a shrug, "as if Nita will get what she wants--as usual."

"And Ralph has acquired a set of slave chains?" Dundee suggested, with just the slightest note of sympathy.

"And how!" Penny assured him, grimly. "A simile as out-of-date as my clothes are going to be if I don't get some new ones soon. Not that the crowd minds what I wear," she added loyally. "I could dress up in a window drape--"

"And be just as charming as you are in that grand new party dress you have on now," Dundee finished for her gallantly.

"New!" Penny snorted and turned back to her desk in a futile effort to find something left undone.

Dundee ignored the rebuff. "How many suckers--I mean, how many gentlemen with moderate incomes actually built in Primrose Meadows?"

"You are inquisitive, aren't you?... None! Our house, or rather the one Nita Selim is living in now, is the only house on what used to be a big farm.... Why?"

"I was just wondering," Dundee said softly, almost absent-mindedly, "why the 'lovely Nita' chose so isolated a place in which to live, when Hamilton has rather a large number of 'For Rent' signs out just now.... By the way, know what time it is now?... Twenty to one! Get your hat on, young woman. I'm going to drive you out to Breakaway Inn."

"You're not! I'm going to take a bus. One runs from the Square right past the Inn," she told him firmly.

And just as firmly Dundee escorted her out of the almost deserted, rather dirty old courthouse to where his brand-new sports roadster--bought "on time"--was awaiting them in the parking space devoted to the motors of those who officially served Hamilton County.

"I know why you want to drive me out to the Inn," Penny told him suddenly, as the proud owner maneuvered his car through Saturday noon traffic. "You want to see Nita Selim. Clank! Clank! I can hear the padlocks snapping on the slave chains right now."

"Meow!" Dundee retorted, then grinned down at her with as much comradely affection as if they had been friends for years instead of for a couple of hours. "Is Nita very small?" he added.

"Little enough to tuck herself under the arm of a man a lot shorter than you," Penny assured him with curious vehemence. "And if Penelope Crain is no mean prophet, that's exactly what she'll do within five minutes after she meets you--just as she is wistfully inviting you to join the other men for the cocktail party which is scheduled to break up the bridge game at 5:30. Then, of course, you'll be urged to join us all at the dinner-dance at the Country Club tonight."

"Will she?" Dundee pretended to be vastly intrigued, which caused the remainder of the drive to be a rather silent one, due to Penny's unresponsiveness.

Breakaway Inn was intensely Spanish in architecture and transplanted shrubbery, but its stucco walls were of a rather more violent raspberry color than is considered quite esthetic in Spain or Mexico.

"There's Lois Dunlap's car just driving up," Penny cried, her face softening with the adoration she had freely professed for her friend. But it clouded again almost instantly. "And Nita Selim. I suppose Nita was a little ashamed to drive up in her own Ford coupe."

As Dundee helped his new friend to alight his eyes were upon the two women being assisted by a uniformed chauffeur from Lois Dunlap's limousine.

In a moment the four were a laughing, exclamatory group.

"Oh, what a tall, grand man you've got yourself, Penny darling!" the tiny, beautiful creature who could only be Mrs. Selim cried out happily. "May I meet him?"

"I shouldn't let you," Penny answered frankly, "but I will.... Mrs. Selim, Mr. Dundee.... And Mrs. Dunlap, Mr. Dundee.... How are you, Lois? And Peter and the brats?"

"All well, Penny. Petey's off on a week-end fishing trip, and not one of the brats has measles, scarlet fever or hay fever," Dundee heard Mrs. Dunlap say in the comfortable, affectionate voice that went with her comfortable, pleasant face and body.... Nice woman!

But his eyes were of necessity upon Nita Selim, for that miniature Venus was, as Penny had predicted, almost tucked under his arm by this time, her black-pansy eyes wide and wistful, her soft black curls falling forward as she coaxed:

"You'll come to the cocktail party at my house at 5:30, won't you, Mr. Dundee?"

"Afraid I can't make it," Dundee smiled down at her. "I'm a busy man, Mrs. Selim.... You see, I'm Special Investigator attached to the District Attorney's office," he explained very deliberately.

"O-o-oh!" Nita Selim breathed. Then, step by step, she withdrew, so that he was no longer submitted to the temptation to put his arm about her too intriguing little body. And as she retreated, Dundee's keen eyes noted a hardening of the black-pansy eyes, the sudden throbbing of a pulse in her very white neck....

"No, don't mind about calling for me," Penny protested a moment later. "Ralph has already volunteered.... Thanks awfully!"

As Dundee backed out of the driveway his last glance was for a very small figure in a brown silk summer coat and palest yellow chiffon frock, slowly rejoining Penelope Crain and Lois Dunlap. What the devil had frightened her so? For she had been almost terrified.... Of course she might be one of those silly women who shudder at the sight of a detective, because they've smuggled in a diamond from Paris or a bottle of Bacardi from Havana....

But long before his car made the distance back to the city Dundee had shrugged off the riddle and was concentrating on all the facts he knew regarding the Maginty case. It was his first real assignment from Sanderson, and he was determined to make good.

Four hours later he was interrupted in his careful reading of the trial of Rufus Maginty by the ringing of the telephone bell. That made four times he had had to snap out the fact that District Attorney Sanderson was playing some well-earned golf on the Country Club links, Dundee reflected angrily, as he picked up the receiver.

But the call was for Dundee himself, and the voice on the other end of the wire was Penny Crain's, although almost unrecognizable.

"Speak more slowly, Penny!" Dundee urged. "What's that again.... Good Lord! You say that Nita Selim...."

After a minute of listening, and a promise of instant obedience, Dundee hung up the receiver.

"By Jove!" he said slowly, blankly. "Of all things--murder at bridge!"



## CHAPTER 2

---

---

As Special Investigator Dundee drove through the city of Hamilton at a speed of sixty miles an hour, his way being cleared by traffic policemen warned by the shrill official siren which served him as a horn, he had little time to think connectedly of the fact that Nita Selim had been murdered during a bridge game in her rented home in Primrose Meadows.

Even after the broad sleekness of Sheridan Road stretched before him he could do little more than try to realize the shock which had numbed him.... "Lovely Nita," as the society editor of The Morning News had called her, was--dead! How, why, he did not know. He had asked no details of Penny Crain.... Funny, thorny little Penny! Loyal little Penny!

"Judge Marshall has telephoned Police Headquarters," she had told him breathlessly over the telephone, "but I made him let me call you as soon as he had hung up. I wanted our office to be in on this right from the first."

Beautiful, seductive Nita Selim, almost cuddling under his arm within three minutes of meeting him--dead! A vision of her black-pansy eyes, so wide and luminous and wistful as they had looked sideways and upward to his, pleading for him to join her after-bridge cocktail party, nearly made him crash into a lumbering furniture van. Those eyes were luminous no longer, could never again snap the padlocks of slave chains upon any man--as Penny had expressed it.... Dead! And she had been so warmly alive, even as she had retreated from him at his mention of the fact that he was attached to the office of the district attorney as a special investigator. What had she feared then? Was her death a payment for some recent or long-standing crime? Or had she simply been withdrawing from contamination with a "flat-foot"?... No! She had been afraid--horribly afraid of some ulterior purpose behind his innocent courtesy in driving Penelope Crain to Breakaway Inn.

Well, speculation now was idle, he told himself, as he noted that his speedometer had dropped from sixty to thirty in his preoccupation. He speeded again, but was soon forced to stop and ask his way into Primrose Meadows. The vague directions of a farmer's son lost him nearly eight precious minutes,

during which his friend, Captain Strawn of the Homicide Squad, might be bungling things rather badly. But at last he found the ornate pair of pillars spanned by the painted legend, "Primrose Meadows," and drove through them into what soon became a rutted lane. Almost a quarter of a mile from the entrance he found the isolated house, unmistakable because of the line-up of private cars parked before the short stretch of paved sidewalk, and the added presence of police cars and motorcycles.

Dundee turned his own car into the driveway leading from the street along the right side of the house toward the two-car garage in the rear. Ahead of his roadster were two other cars, and a glance toward the open garage showed that a Ford coupe was housed there.

As he was descending Captain Strawn's voice hailed him from an open window of the room nearest the garage.

"Hello, Bonnie! Been expecting you.... Damnedest business you ever saw.... There's a door from this room onto the porch. Hop up and come on in."

Dundee obeyed. Driving in he had noted that a wide porch, upheld by round white pillars, stretched across the front of the gabled brick house and extended halfway along its right side, past a room which was obviously a solarium, with its continuous windows, gay awnings, and--visible through the glittering panes--orange-and-black wicker furniture.

It was easy to swing himself up to the floor of the porch. Strawn flung open the door which led into the back room, remarking with a grin:

"Don't be afraid I'm gumming up any fingerprints. Carraway has already been over the room.... The Selim woman's bedroom," he explained. "The room she was killed in."

"You have been on the job," Dundee complimented his former chief.

"Sure!" Strawn acknowledged proudly. "Can't be too quick on our stumps when it's one of these 'high sassiety' murders. Dr. Price will be here any minute now, and my men have been all over the premises, basement to attic. Of course it was an outside job--plain as the nose on your face--and we haven't found a trace of the murderer."

Although Mrs. Selim had taken the house furnished, it was obvious that this big bedroom of hers was not exactly as the Crain family had left it. A little too pretty, a little too aggressively feminine, with its chaise longue heaped with silk and lace pillows, its superfluity of big and little lamps, its bed draped with golden-yellow taffeta, its dressing table--

But he could not let critical eyes linger on the triple-mirrored vanity dresser. For on the bench before it sat a tiny figure, the head bowed so low that some of the black curls had fallen into a large open bowl of powder. She was no longer wearing the brown silk summer coat whose open front had given him a glimpse of pale yellow chiffon.

He saw the dress now, a low-cut, sleeveless, fluffy affair, but he really had eyes only for the brownish-red hole on the left side of the back of the bodice, about halfway between shoulder and waist--a waist so small he could have spanned it with his two hands, including its band of fuchsia velvet ribbon.

There also had been a bow of fuchsia velvet ribbon on the lace and straw hat she had swung so charmingly less than five hours ago.

"Shot through the heart, I guess," Strawn commented. "Took a good marksman to find her heart, shooting her through the back.... Funny thing, too. Nobody heard the shot--leastways none of that crowd penned up in the living room will admit they did. They'll all hang together, and lie like sixty to keep us from finding out anything that might point to one of their precious bunch! But if a gun with a Maxim silencer was used, as it must have been if that whole crew ain't lying, the gunman musta been good, because you can't sight with a Maxim screwed onto a rod, you know."

"Have your men found the gun?" Dundee asked.

"Of course not, or I'd know whether it had a Maxim on it or not," Strawn retorted. "My theory is," he added impressively, "that somebody with a grudge against this dame hired a gunman to hang around till he got her dead to rights, then--plop!" and he imitated the soft, thudding sound made by the discharge of a bullet from a gun equipped with a silencer.

"Doesn't it seem rather strange that a professional gunman should have chosen such a time--with men arriving in cars, and the house full of women who might wander into this room at any minute--to bump off his victim?" Dundee asked.

"Well, there ain't no other explanation," Captain Strawn contended. "Outside of the fact that my men have gone over the whole house and grounds without finding the gun, I've got other evidence it was an outside job.... Look!"

Dundee followed the Chief of the Homicide Squad to one of the two windows that looked out upon the driveway. Both were open, since the May day was exceptionally warm, even for the Middle West. The unscreened window from which he obediently leaned was almost directly in line with the vanity dressing-table across the room.

"Look! See how them vines have been torn," Strawn directed, pointing to a rambler rose which hugged the outside frame of the window. "And look hard enough at the flower bed down below and you'll see his footprints.... Of course we've measured them and Cain, as you see, is guarding them till my man comes to make plaster casts of them.... Yes, sir, he hoisted himself up to the window ledge, aimed as best he could, then slipped down and beat it across the meadow."

"Then," Dundee began slowly, "I wonder why Mrs. Selim didn't see that figure crouched in the window, since she must have been powdering her face and looking into the middle of the three mirrors--the one which reflects this very window?"

"How do you know she was powdering her face, not looking for something in a drawer?" Strawn demanded truculently.

"For three reasons," Dundee answered almost apologetically. "First: her powder puff, as I'm sure you noticed, is still clutched in her right hand; second: there is no drawer open, and no drawer was open, unless someone has closed it since the murder, whereas on the other hand her powder box is open; third:

the left side of her face is unevenly coated with powder, while the other is heavily but evenly powdered. Therefore I can't see why she didn't scream, or turn around when she heard your gunman clambering up to her window, or even when he had crouched in it. I don't see how she could help seeing him!"

"Well--what do you think?" Strawn asked sourly, after he had tested the visibility of the window from the dressing-table mirror.

"I'm afraid, Captain Strawn, that there are only two explanations possible. The first, of course, is that Nita Selim was quite deaf or very nearsighted. I happen to know from having met her today--"

"You met her today?" Strawn interrupted incredulously.

Dundee explained briefly, then went on: "As I was saying I have good reason to know she was not deaf, but I can't say as to her being nearsighted, except that it is my observation that people who are extremely nearsighted do not have very wide eyes and no creases between the brows. I am fairly sure she did not wear glasses at all, because glasses worn even a few hours a day leave a mark across the nose or show pinched red spots on each side of the bridge of the nose."

"You must have had a good hard look at her," Strawn gibed, his grey eyes twinkling, and his harsh, thin-lipped mouth pulling down at one corner in what he thought was a genial smile.

"I did," Dundee retorted. "Well, conceding that she was neither deaf nor half-blind, she would necessarily have heard and seen her assailant before he shot her."

"What's the other explanation?" Strawn was becoming impatient.

"That the person who killed her was so well known to her, and his--or her--presence in this room so natural a thing that she paid no attention to his or her movements and was concentrating on the job of powdering her very pretty face."

"You mean--one of that gang of society folks in there?" and Strawn jerked a thumb toward the left side of the house.

"Very probably," Dundee agreed.

"But where's the gun?" Strawn argued. "I tell you my men--"

"This was a premeditated murder, of course," Dundee interrupted. "The Maxim silencer--unless they are all lying about not hearing a shot--proves that. Silencers are damned hard to get hold of, but people with plenty of money can manage most things. And since the murder was premeditated, it is better to count on the fact that the murderer--or murderess--had planned a pretty safe hiding place for the gun and the silencer.... Oh, not necessarily in the house or even near the house," he hastened to assure Strawn, who was trying to break in.... "By the way, how long after Mrs. Selim was killed was her death discovered? Or do you know?"

"I haven't been able to get much out of that bunch in there--not even out of Penelope Crain, who ought to be willing to help, seeing as how she works for the district attorney. But I guess she's waiting to spill it all to you, if she knows anything, so you and Sanderson will get all the credit."

"Now, look here, chief," Dundee protested, laying a hand on Strawn's shoulder as he reverted to the name by which he had addressed the head of the Homicide Squad for nearly a year, "we're going to be friends, aren't we? Same as always? We know pretty well how to work together, don't we? No use to begin pulling against each other."

"Guess so," Strawn growled, but he was obviously pleased and relieved. "Maybe you'd better have a crack at that crowd yourself. I hear Doc Price's car--always has a bum spark plug. I'll stick around with him until he gets going good on his job; then, if you'll excuse me for butting in, I'll join your party in the living room.... And good luck to you, Bonnie!"

Dundee took the door he knew must lead into the central hall, but found himself in an enclosed section of it--a small foyer between the main hall and Nita Selim's bedroom. There was room for a telephone table and its chair, as well as for a small sofa, large enough for two to sit upon comfortably. He paused to open the door across from the telephone table and found that it opened into a closet, whose hangers and hat forms now held the outdoor clothing belonging to Nita's guests. Nice clothes--the smart but unostentatious hats and coats of moneyed people of good taste, he observed a little enviously, before he opened the door which led into the main hall which bisected the main floor of the house until it reached Nita's room.

Another door in the section behind the staircase leading to the gabled second story next claimed his attention. Opening it, he discovered a beautifully fitted guests' lavatory. There was even a fully appointed dressing-table for women's use, so that none of her guests had had the slightest excuse to invade the privacy of Mrs. Selim's bedroom and bath, unless specifically invited to do so. Rather a well planned house, this, Dundee concluded, as he closed the door upon the green porcelain fixtures, and walked slowly toward the wide archway that led from the hall into a large living room.

He had a curious reluctance to intrude upon that assembled and guarded company of Hamilton's "real society." They were all Penny's friends, and Penny was his friend....

But his first swift, all-seeing glance about the room reassured him. No hysterics here. These people brought race and breeding even into the presence of death. Whatever emotions had torn them when Nita Selim's body was discovered were almost unguessable now. A stout, short woman of about thirty was tapping a foot nervously, as she talked to the man who was bending over her chair. John C. Drake, that was. Dundee had met him, knew him to be a vice president of the Hamilton National Bank, in charge of the trust department. Penelope Crain was occupying half of a "love-seat" with Lois Dunlap, the hands of the girl and of the woman clinging together for mutual comfort. That tall, thin, oldish man, with the waxed grey mustache, must be Judge Hugo Marshall, and the pretty girl leaning trustingly against his shoulder must be his wife--Karen Marshall, who had jumped at her first proposal during her first season.

"Yes, well-bred people," he concluded, as his eyes swept on, and then stopped, a little bewildered. Who was that man? He didn't belong somehow,

and his hands trembled visibly as he tried to light a cigarette. Leaning--not nonchalantly, but actually for support--against the brocaded coral silk drapes of a pair of wide, long windows set in the east wall. Suddenly Dundee had it.... Broadway! This was no Hamiltonian, no comfortably rich and socially secure Middle-westerner. Broadway in every line of his too-well-tailored clothes, in the polished smoothness of his dark hair....

"Why, it's Mr. Dundee at last!" Penny cried, turning in the S-shaped seat before he had time to finish his mental inventory of the room's occupants.

She jumped to her feet and threaded a swift way over Oriental rugs and between the two bridge tables, still occupying the center of the big room, still cluttered with score pads, tally cards, and playing cards.

"I've been wondering if you had stopped to have dinner first," she taunted him. Then, laying a hand on his arm, she faced the living room eagerly. "This is Mr. Dundee, folks--special investigator attached to the district attorney's office, and a grand detective. He solved the Hogarth murder case, you know, and the Hillcrest murder. And he's my friend, so I want you all to trust him--and tell him things without being afraid of him."

Then, rather ceremoniously but swiftly, she presented her friends--Judge and Mrs. Hugo Marshall, Mr. and Mrs. Tracey Miles, Mr. and Mrs. John C. Drake, Mrs. Dunlap, Janet Raymond, Polly Beale, Clive Hammond, and--

At that point Penny hesitated, then rather stiffly included the "Broadway" man, as "Mr. Dexter Sprague--of New York."

"Thank you, Miss Crain," Dundee said. "Now will you please tell me, if you know, whether all those invited to both the bridge party and the cocktail party are here?"

Penny's face flamed. "Ralph Hammond, Clive's brother, hasn't come yet.... I--I rather imagine I've been 'stood up,'" she confessed, with a faint attempt at gayety.

And Ralph Hammond was the man who had once belonged rather exclusively to Penny, and who, according to her own confession, had succumbed most completely to Nita Selim's charms!--Dundee noted, filing the reflection for further reference.

"Please, Mr. Dundee, won't you detain us as short a time as possible?" Lois Dunlap asked, as she advanced toward him. "Mr. Dunlap is away on a fishing trip, and I don't like to leave my three youngsters too long. They are really too much of a handful for the governess, over a period of hours."

"I shall detain all of you no longer than is absolutely necessary," Dundee told her gently, "but I am afraid I must warn you that I can't let you go home very soon--unless one or more of you has something of vital importance to tell--something which will clear up or materially help to clear up this bad business."

He paused a long half-minute, then asked curtly: "I am to conclude that no one has anything at all to volunteer?"

There was no answer, other than a barely perceptible drawing together in self-defense of the minds and hearts of those who had been friends for so long.

"Very well," Dundee conceded abruptly. "Then I must put all of you through a routine examination, since every one of you is, of course, a possible suspect."