

ED MCBAIN'S

mystery book • no. 1

- novel**
92.....*The Empty Hours, An 87th Precinct Novel*
by Ed McBain
- novellettes**
42.....*Film Strip, A Shell Scott Novellette*
by Richard S. Prather
- 2.....*Midnight Blue, A Lew Archer Novellette*
by Ross Macdonald
- short stories**
66.....*Confession* by Helen Nielsen
- 74.....*Hard Sell, A John J. Malone Story*
by Craig Rice
- 36.....*Assassin* by Fletcher Flora
- graveyard shift**
140.....*The Faces* by Richard Matheson
- the crime is murder**
25.....*On a Day Unknown* by Anthony Boucher
- special report**
81.....*Reasonable Facsimile* by Rex Lardner
- features**
64.....*Cops and Robbers* by Vincent H. Gaddis
- 73.....*Future File*

editor
Ed McBain

managing editor
Robert Goodney

associate editor
Demi Marciano

art director
Sol Immerman

designer
Richard Smith

production manager
Maxwell Marxe

cover
Harry Bennett

Ed McBain's Mystery Book, No. 1, 1960. Published bi-monthly by Pocket Books, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20, N. Y. Copyright, ©, 1960, by Pocket Books, Inc. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Application to mail at second-class postage rates is pending at New York, N. Y. and Buffalo, N. Y. The editorial content has not been published before and cannot be reprinted without written permission. All stories are fiction, and no actual person is mentioned by character or name. Any similarity is coincidental. Single copy: 35¢; six issues (one year): \$2.00 in the United States and Possessions and Canada, \$2.50 in all other countries. Subscriptions should be addressed to Ed McBain's Mystery Book, 1 West 39th Street, New York 18, N. Y. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited submissions of manuscripts and artwork. No material submitted will be returned unless accompanied by postage. Address all manuscripts to: Ed McBain's Mystery Book, Pocket Books, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York 20, N. Y. Printed in the U.S.A.

ASSASSIN

FLETCHER FLORA

IT WAS ALL THE GIRL
HAD TO LIVE FOR
NOW—SOMEBODY
ELSE'S DEATH.

CROSSING THE HOTEL LOBBY, ARLEY Sears descended two steps and pushed his way through a silent swinging door into the cool shadows of a cocktail lounge. He stood quietly for a moment while his eyes dilated in adjustment to the shadows, and then he saw Laurel sitting alone at a tiny table, designed for five-o'clock intimacy, beyond half-a-dozen other tables that were now unclaimed. She was wearing a black linen sheath that had drawn, in the way of sheaths, above her nylon knees, and her pale hair was a light in the ersatz dusk. He felt, seeing her, the familiar resurgence of lust and love and pity and pain that he always felt when seeing her anywhere at any time, or even when, not seeing her, he remembered the last time and waited for the next.

Making his way among the tables, he sat down across from her, the tiny table between them and their knees touching beneath. Her right hand lay beside her stemmed glass, palm down, and he dropped his own beside it in the opposite position. The hands lay at rest for seconds side by side, and then hers crept into



his and was at rest again. The bartender, the only other person in the room, arrived and waited. Arley, suddenly aware of him, glanced up and down again, looking at the glass, half filled with amber, beside the clasped hands.

"What are you having?" he said. "A daiquiri?"

"Yes," she said, "a daiquiri."

"It looks good," he said. "I think I'll have the same."

"A daiquiri is good on a hot day," the bartender said.

He went back to the bar to make it, and Arley and Laurel sat silent, hands clasped, until he had returned and gone again. Laurel's hand lay in his as still as a white stone, but Arley could sense, as he always could, the intensity of her excitement. He could measure it by the slow cadence of her controlled breathing and the brightness of her eyes and the barely perceptible rigidity of her thin face. It was more than excitement, really. Much more. It was a fever and a sickness, and it made him sick to see it. Perhaps she was not quite sane. Whatever you called it, sickness or insanity or dedication, she would never be well, the fever slaked, until he had done for her, after all these years, what he would surely do within the next half-hour.

An eye for an eye, he thought. A tooth for a tooth.

He rarely thought in biblical terms, and it disturbed him that he did so now. He did not wish to think in terms of retribution or primitive

justice. He wished to think only in terms of what he must do for Laurel's sake—and for his own, as a corollary, because he could never recover her if he did not.

"Have you been outside?" he said.

"No."

"The streets and the square are packed."

"I know. I watched from the window of the room."

"Did you leave your key at the desk?"

"Yes. My door is unlocked."

"Good. The clerk will remember that you were out of your room all the while, and the bartender will remember your being here."

"At most, they'll be able to estimate only the general direction of the shot. It may not come to what the clerk or the bartender will think or say."

"Probably not, but it's just as well to anticipate things."

"Darling, I'll kill myself if it goes wrong for you. I swear I will."

"Don't think about that. It will go well."

"You must be careful that no one sees you when you go up."

"It's not likely. Everyone's attention will be focused on the square within the next ten minutes. There should be no difficulty in slipping up the stairs. Afterward, I'll simply come down the back way, as you directed, and around to the front entrance on the outside."

"Suppose someone sees you coming down."

"That's a risk. A slight one. I told

you that. Chances are, however, most of the hotel help will be around front in the crowd or up on the roof. It's something we have to count on."

"It seems very dangerous. So much depends on things going just right."

"You wanted it this way. You said you wanted it just when everything was going big for him. All at once, you said, with a big crowd cheering."

"Yes. That's what I want." The fever was raging now in her bright, bright eyes. "And later, darling, we'll go away, you and I, and I'll be so good to you, and always so grateful, and I'll make you happy and never sorry for what you did. I promise."

"Sure," he said. "Everything will be fine."

She withdrew her hand from his and lifted her glass, touching her lips with the thin edge of crystal. He lifted his own in response, and they drank together to everything being fine, and then they continued to sit in silence drinking the daiquiris slowly. After a while they became conscious of a kind of beating in their ears, the diminished waves of a giant sound a long way off, but it was actually the crowd in the bright, hot streets and square outside the closed and air-conditioned hotel. The bartender, leaving the bar, walked down the room among the tables and chairs to a window covered by heavy maroon drapes. He pulled the drapes back a few inches on one side and stood there with his back to the room, looking out across the street to the square beyond.

"He's arrived," Arley said. "You can hear the crowd now."

"Yes," she said. "He'll begin speaking in a few minutes."

"I'd better go up."

"You remember the room number?"

"Yes."

"You remember what to do and where to go afterward?"

"I remember."

"Good luck, darling."

"Good is our kind. We won't change it now."

"Hurry back, darling. I'll be waiting here."

He stood and turned and walked away without looking back, ascending the pair of steps into the lobby and crossing to the stairs beyond the elevator. The clerk and two other men were standing at the front entrance, staring out through the glass of the double door. They did not hear him or turn to see him as he went up the stairs to the first landing and passed out of view.

He climbed to the third floor, next to the top, and turned right from the stairs and walked down the hall, parallel to the street, to the last room on the street side. The hall made a right-angle turn to the left there, running the length of a wing to the rear of the building, where there was a narrow green door that opened, he knew, upon narrow stairs descending to an alley exit. He paused outside the room, Laurel's room, looking down the empty hall to the green door, and then he took a pair of thin cotton gloves from a

pocket and put them on and opened the door to the room and entered. Inside, he abandoned the casual attitude he had sustained so far and began to move swiftly, with economy of motion and deadly purpose.

From a closet, where Laurel had left it, he took a rifle, already assembled. He checked to make certain it was loaded, and it was. Smokeless cartridge. There was a telescopic sight attached, but at this distance he would not need it. He had been firing rifles since he was a boy, and he was an expert marksman.

Moving to a window overlooking the street and the courthouse square across the street, he knelt before it on one knee and raised the sash just enough to allow him to sight through the narrow opening from the kneeling position, the tip of the rifle barrel resting on the sill. The air above the street shimmered with heat, distorting his vision, and he closed his eyes for a moment, retreating briefly into darkness with a sense of vast reprieve. The crowd below was silent now, caught and held by a tall man with a mane of black hair who stood raised above them on an improvised platform on the courthouse lawn. The man's voice, amplified, a strangely harsh and mesmerizing cry, was clearly audible to Arley, kneeling by the window, but the words, whatever they were, did not register and had no meaning. Opening his eyes, coming out again from darkness, Arley squinted through the telescopic sight at a patch of black hair above a close-set ear.

John Corrigan, he thought. Governor John Corrigan.

Corrigan, the Boy Wonder. No longer a boy, but still a wonder. In the beginning of his glittering career, just after college, county attorney. Next, state's attorney general. Now governor. And men in places of power were already talking about the big job, the top spot beyond which there was really no place else to go. Four more years, they said. Only four to go to that big, big job.

Well, it hadn't been easy, but Corrigan had made it look easy. A brilliant mind, no denying that. No compassion whatever, and an absolute genius for swift and ruthless action. No heart, no conscience, no costly susceptibility to remorse. Only, all in all, a cold and clear and deadly dedication to getting where Corrigan wanted to go.

He had ruined more than one man on the way. Probably he had forgotten most of them. Probably he had even forgotten the minor judge, unfortunately in his way in the early days, who had been destroyed utterly. By contrived evidence. By innuendo. By brutal and open accusations based on the merest of possibilities. But never mind that. The judge had given it credence by putting a bullet into his own brain, and if Corrigan had not forgotten him entirely, he at least remembered him rarely. And he had almost certainly forgotten the seventeen-year-old girl who had stood in black, like a widow, by her father's open grave, her face frozen and still, her eyes already acquiring

that bright, bright light of dedicated hatred. But Arley hadn't forgotten her. He had loved her then, and he loved her now, and she was waiting for him this instant in the cool, dark lounge below. He could not remember when he had consciously begun to share the burden of her mission. Perhaps from the beginning. Perhaps, seeing her in black beside the open grave, he had known at once what he would one day do. . . .

The harsh voice rising from the courthouse square reached a climax of emphasis, almost a scream, and the speaker stood fixed in dramatic pose, an arm raised high, the fist clenched. The crowd roared and screamed in response, sustaining a kind of frenzy. Someone down by the platform began to beat wildly on a bass drum, and someone else, somewhere on the square, began to set off a series of giant firecrackers.

Now, Arley thought. Now!

He did not wait, after squeezing the trigger, to see the man below, still fixed in his cataleptic pose, still fixed in his cataleptic pose, shudder and sag and crumple with a kind of deliberate and final quality of drama into a heap of wilted summer suit. Dropping below the level of the sill, he reached up in the same motion and drew the window shut. Rolling over twice, he stood up and went out into the hall, making certain that the door locked behind him. By the time the crowd in the streets and the square had recovered from stunned immobility he was halfway down the hall to the narrow green door.

Where the stairs came out on the floor below, as Laurel had told him, there was an unlocked closet in which cleaning supplies were kept. He left the rifle and the cotton gloves in the closet, a matter of two seconds, and went on down the stairs and out into a narrow alley paved with brick. They would find the rifle, of course, but no matter. He had acquired it long ago in a way that would make it impossible to trace it to him. He had kept it, he supposed, although never admitting it even to himself, for this particular day.

The streets and the square were a mass of milling men and women. Hardly anyone, except those near the platform, had as yet learned exactly what had happened. Working his way toward the hotel entrance, hugging the front of the building, Arley turned into the lobby past the clerk at the door, who said something to him in a voice thin with near hysteria, and went on, without answering, across the lobby and down the two steps into the dusk of the lounge.

Laurel was waiting quietly where he had left her, and she had not, apparently, moved in the slightest. She must have moved actually, however, for her glass, which had been empty, was now half full. She stared at him without speaking, and he could hear her measured breathing.

"All right," he said softly.

"Dead?"

"Yes. Dead."

"Are you sure?"

"He was standing perfectly still.

I had a perfect aim. I'm positive."

She looked down into her glass, cupped in her hands, down, down past the olive in amber depths to the black pit of her father's grave. When she looked up again her eyes were dull, the bright light gone, cinders left by the fire of fever that was also gone.

"I don't seem to feel anything," she said.

"Maybe later," he said.

But he knew that she would not. Now at the end of her long dedication she had achieved, instead of

peace, an arid emptiness that he would share and never fill. After her bright, intense obsession, the long design of a special death, there would be nothing left for which to live, certainly not for him, and he understood with silent and assured despair that he had killed two people from the window upstairs.

"Darling," she said, "thank you so much."

"You're welcome," he said.

He wanted a drink, and he wished the bartender would come back from wherever he'd gone.