

# THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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Issued monthly by

PRO-DISTRIBUTORS PUBLISHING COMPANY, Inc.

25 West 45th Street, New York, New York

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION \$2.00

SINGLE COPIES 20 CENTS

Western Advertising Office, Wrigley Building, Chicago, Ill.

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Entered as second class mail matter, March 1, 1920, at the Post Office  
at New York, N. Y., under act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A.

# The Catpaw

By Ward Sterling

I

THE Peck mansion was as carefully guarded as a prison. At the front and rear doors armed operatives from the best detective bureau in the city—all tried men—were posted day and night. Others patrolled the grounds. There was not one chance in ten million for anyone to creep through the network of protection we had thrown about the aged millionaire and his family.

Yet the first murder occurred within twenty-four hours of the time set by Lon Bixby!

Lannagan, the second man, did not report for duty in the morning as usual. Jenkins, the butler, entering the room when he did not respond found him cold in death.

The tragedy had taken place some time during the night. The body was cold and rigid when we rushed into the chamber in response to the butler's frantic calls for help.

Bloated to nearly double his natural size, blackened, the limbs twisted as from convulsions, the face drawn out of shape, the unfortunate man presented a terrifying spectacle.

Doctor Maxwell, Peck's regular physician, who was locked up in the house with the remainder of us, gave as his opinion after a hurried examination that death was the result of poisoning.

Yet Lannagan had eaten nothing, to the best of our knowledge and belief, that the rest of us had not also eaten. That had been a part of our agreement—that we would all partake of the same food—in order to protect Peck from

poison. Nor had anything in the provision line been brought to the house. Prepared to stand a siege, everything—even the fresh meats—had been purchased in advance and stored away in the refrigerating plant downstairs.

Doctor Frye, the coroner, summoned by telephone as soon as the tragedy was discovered, agreed with his colleague that Lannagan had been poisoned. It was his belief, however; that the poison had been administered by injection into a vein.

Both physicians made a careful examination of the body. Just above the knee they found two minute punctures in the skin! Here, too, the swelling seemed more aggravated than elsewhere, while the spot had turned a darker hue.

The body had every symptom of death from snake bite. Yet we knew that there was not a snake in the house nor could there have been one in the room. Lannagan had, according to my instructions, slept with his windows and door locked. They were in this condition when the body was found, for it had been necessary for the butler to let himself into the room with his pass-key. The other servants had locked themselves in in the same way. An alert detective had been posted all night in each corridor.

In spite of the precautions, in order to make certain, we removed every piece of furniture from the dead man's room. There was no possibility of a reptile having been hidden there. Nor could a man have, in any possible way, entered the house.

To make matters more complicated we knew that Lannagan had not left the

## II

house that day nor the day before. For this was a part of the arrangement that we had made.

Ponder as I would, I could think of no possible solution to the puzzle. It was as mysterious as Poe's "Mystery of the Rue Morgue."

Peck, the storm center—the man for whom all these precautions were taken and for whom poor Lannagan had died—was the calmest of us all.

Five minutes after the appearance of the coroner, the millionaire was summoned to the phone. In accordance with my determination not to allow him out of my sight day or night, I accompanied him to the library.

A harsh, metallic voice—a voice so loud that it could be heard all over the big room—informed him that the death of a member of his household had been a warning—a warning sent to prove to him that in spite of all his precautions his enemies were able to strike when and where they pleased. His own death would follow in good time.

Shaking slightly, yet game to the core, he motioned to me and handed me the instrument. The voice died out in a mirthless, diabolical chuckle. Then the receiver at the other end of the wire was hung up with a click.

Jiggling the hook up and down, I succeeded in getting "Central" within a few seconds. An instant later I was connected with my friend, Armstrong, manager of the traffic department, to whom I hurriedly explained the situation and requested that the call be traced.

Armstrong moved speedily. For, in spite of the fact that hundreds of calls go through the Capital Hill exchange every hour, so thorough is their system that inside of five minutes he had me back on the wire.

The call had originated in one of the pay stations at the Pennsylvania depot, ten miles away!

PERHAPS in my efforts to hold the reader's attention I have not explained matters as thoroughly as I should. Then, too, like all detectives, I am a poor narrator of my own experiences. What seems to the average person to be an exciting adventure is to us only a part of the day's work—an episode to be forgotten as speedily as possible after it has been disclosed to judge and jury. Yet the Morgan Peck case is so unique in criminal annals as to be worthy of being put in a class by itself.

The reader will recall the sensation in financial circles caused by the appearance of Alonzo Bixby, the South African magnate. For two short years he was one of the king pins of The Exchange.

Then came the battle between Bixby and Peck. It was short, but memorable. Peck, backed by his years of experience, crushed his enemy beneath his heel as a farmer scotches a harmless worm.

Bixby, cornered, his fangs bared, showed his makeup by turning crook. Timothy Owen, Peck's right-hand man, was killed. Over the body of his friend Morgan Peck swore vengeance. One of Bixby's retainers, arrested by the police, admitted the murder, charging Bixby with having instigated the crime. All of Peck's gigantic fortune was placed at the disposal of the prosecution. The trial lasted for weeks, an army of lawyers battling for every point.

In the end the jury sent Bixby to the penitentiary for life.

The day that sentence was pronounced is one that will long be remembered in newspaper and legal circles. Bixby, surrounded by his lawyers, his beautiful young wife at his side, listened impassively to the judge's voice. It was not until the officers seized him to part him forever from the woman he loved that he gave way to his emotions.

Leaping to his feet, his rough-hewn face quivering with diabolical rage, he shook his huge fist at Morgan Peck!

"Damn you! In prison or out, I'll get you!" he shouted. "I'll make you suffer as you're making me! An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!"

Raving like a madman, they dragged him away.

Remember, Bixby was still a wealthy man and money will buy almost anything—even liberty. There were those among us who predicted that Bixby would not remain long behind prison walls. We were correct in our surmises.

In just eleven months and three days he was at liberty. With him disappeared half a dozen guards. How much he paid them for his liberty no one will probably ever know for none of them were ever captured. Some of us hold to the theory that after helping Bixby make his escape, they were killed at his orders. But that is another story.

Three weeks after Bixby made his break from prison an effort was made to blow up Peck's office with a bomb. Fortunately the financier was absent when the package was received. The secretary who opened it lost his life.

A week later someone fired a shot at Peck in the dark. Only the fact that the old man moved slightly at that instant prevented the assassin's bullet from finding its mark. As it was, only a slight flesh wound rewarded the attempt.

Then Peck's colleagues took a hand. He was the center around which one of the biggest financial deals ever pulled off was being engineered—a deal that involved governments. His death would have meant a world panic. In spite of his sneers at their fears—for Peck was a battler who fought for the sheer love of the sport—they finally induced him to obey their commands.

He was locked in his own house, surrounded by guards as I have stated. The best detective bureau in the city was

engaged to look after his safety. Half a hundred operatives were put to work combing the country for his enemies.

I—and I trust that the reader will pardon the seeming egotism displayed—as the best man available among all of the detectives in the city, was placed in charge of the guards surrounding Morgan Peck.

Two hours after we had taken our precautions a special delivery letter mailed from a downtown station was received. It read as follows:

*Peck: I swore that I'd get you and I meant it. By cooping yourself up like a sick chicken you have opened the way for my vengeance. Inside of forty-eight hours I'll strike! God help you from now on.*

"Bixby."

### III

MORGAN PECK was said by his enemies to be a man without feeling, nerves or love. A widower, his only daughter dying in childhood, having few near relatives, he had schooled himself against emotion. Yet that afternoon after the body of poor Lannagan had been removed from the house and we sat together in the big library discussing the affair, two things took place which threw a different light on the old man's character.

Gladys Peck, his niece—an orphan and his nearest relative—a girl whom he had raised from childhood, passed through the room. The old face lighted up and, as she passed out of hearing, he turned savagely to me.

"I don't give a damn about myself," he growled. "I'm old enough to cash in—time's coming sooner or later anyway. But God help Bixby if he harms that girl! And God help you if you let him!"

That was all. Yet in his face was an odd light that betrayed the gruffness of his voice. I wondered if his enemies knew of his love for this orphan girl.

I shuddered as I thought of what might happen if they chanced to learn—and struck him through her.

The other incident I mention was when a cat—an ordinary, common variety of feline—entered the room and, with back arched, rubbed purringly against the millionaire's leg.

"Funny little devil!" he grumbled. "Picked him up five years ago when he was a kitten. Somebody'd turned him out to die—freeze to death. Damn such people! Stuck him in my overcoat pocket and brought him home. Never cared for cats—Angoras, Persians and the blue-blooded aristocracy of catdom—but this little cuss made a hit with me. Scrapper! See that spot of red hair on his head? That shows it. He'd fight the Old Nick! Intelligent, too. Makes the servants all stand around. Got a habit of biting 'em on their ankles. They all like him, though. Funny, ain't it? Got a lot of human traits in him. Reminds me a little bit of myself," he added with a smile, reaching down and rubbing the cat's head affectionately.

And this was the man whose enemies claimed him to be without a heart!

That same afternoon the coffin came!

An undertaker's wagon stopped at the front door and two solemn-faced men brought the casket up the steps.

In accordance with his orders, the detective on duty refused to admit them, but called me. Cross-questioned, they knew nothing. The coffin had been ordered from the Morgenstein Casket Company and they were here to deliver it. The address was plainly marked.

Detaining them after ordering the unsightly reminder of the death, that was constantly in our midst, replaced in the wagon, I hurried Holdridge, one of the brightest operatives under my direction, over to the offices of the casket company. He returned inside of thirty minutes.

The casket had been ordered by mail.

A bank draft for four hundred dollars drawn by the First National Trust and Savings Bank—one of Peck's own institutions—had accompanied the letter.

The letter merely stated that a death would shortly occur at the Peck home and asked that the coffin be delivered immediately.

A telephone call to the bank proved fruitless. The draft clerk remembered drawing the draft, which was paid for in cash, but, owing to the large number of similar papers which passed through his hands daily, had no recollection as to who his customer had been. In fact, only the number on the draft recalled the incident to mind at all.

I released the two men from the factory. In my own mind I was convinced that the affair had been pulled off by Bixby merely in an effort to break down Peck's morale.

But they failed to reckon with the old man's fighting spirit.

#### IV

THE remainder of the afternoon and the night passed uneventfully, everyone, warned by what had happened the night before, doubling his vigilance.

I spent the following morning in going over the reports of the fifty-odd operatives scattered about the city in quest of Bixby. Despite the fact that the former haunts of the big South African had been combed by our men not only could no trace be found of the financier himself, but several of his closest friends—men who at the trial were proved to have done his bidding without question—had also disappeared.

As for Mrs. Bixby, it appeared that she had left the quiet hotel, where she had remained since the trial, nearly a month before her husband had made his escape. And the trail was too old to follow. She had dropped out of sight as completely as though the earth had opened up and swallowed her.

For two hours I sat at the big library table and went over the case from every angle. There were a number of things that puzzled me more than I was willing to admit. In the first place who and what had killed Michael Lannagan?

I had proved to my own satisfaction and to that of Peck that the second man had not been absent from the house an instant from the time that he, like the rest of us, went into seclusion. Eight trained detectives—each an ex-policeman—men with years of service behind them—were ready to swear that no one had entered the mansion. These men had taken turns in watching the place and grounds in shifts of two hours on and two hours off during the entire time since we had been in a state of siege. On the other hand I realized that Bixby had money and that money will buy almost anything. Yet I was not ready to condemn these men on mere conjecture.

Then, too, there was the matter of the special delivery letter. Who was in such close touch with the money-master that they were able to find out to the minute when he had been driven into seclusion? Outside of our own party only his closest friends knew of our plans. And had it been a mere coincidence that the telephone call from the pay station at the Pennsylvania depot had come in just after the arrival of the coroner?

Was there someone in the house who was signaling the happenings inside to our enemies on the outside?

Was one of our own number the murderer? Would he, when the time came, strike down Peck as he had struck down Lannagan?

I reached for the list of those who made up our party and checked it over in the hope that through it I might arrive at the truth. In addition to Peck, his niece and myself, there was Doctor Maxwell, an old friend—a man immensely wealthy in his own name and who had been the millionaire's private

physician for thirty years. All of the servants had been in the old man's employ for periods ranging from over a quarter of a century of service on the part of Mrs. Langtry, the housekeeper, to ten years on the part of Lannagan, the murdered second man. Peck had hired them all and vouched for them. The detectives, as I have stated, were all men with years of service behind them.

No, on the face of it, it seemed like an impossibility. Yet there was the murder of Lannagan to prove the falsity of my reasoning.

It was shortly after noon when Peck and I, smoking in the library, were brought to our feet by a shriek for help from the servants' quarters at the rear of the house. Drawing my revolver and shoving the millionaire, who would have taken the lead, behind me, I rushed in the direction from which the sound came.

Fred Deets, who acted as chauffeur and valet for Peck was lying on his back in the middle of the kitchen in convulsions. Beside him stood Mrs. Mulcahey, the cook, from whose voluminous lungs the shouts for help were emanating. Coincident with my arrival came the others with the exception of the two men stationed at the doors. They, like the veterans they were, remained at their posts.

In response to my orders Jenkins summoned Doctor Maxwell, who was asleep in his room. Inside of a minute the physician, his emergency kit in his hand, made his appearance.

He shook his head as he bent over the stricken man and felt his pulse. For a second there was silence. Then the physician straightened up with a shrug of his shoulders.

"He's dying!" he said quietly, while Mrs. Mulcahey let out a wail of despair.

I turned to the physician. "Do you think—"

"Same as Lannagan!" he answered. "See for yourself how the poor fellow's starting to bloat. After nearly half a century of medical experience it's the first case I ever failed to diagnose—or at least make a fairly good guess at."

He stopped suddenly. A shudder over the body of the man on the floor. Then his jaw dropped.

Fred Deets was dead!

## V

I TURNED to Mrs. Mulcahey.

"Tell me just what happened!" I commanded.

"Sure, and that's th' worst of it," she sobbed. "There was nothin' happened at all. He was sittin' here as happy as you please talkin' to Teta when—"

"Teta? Who's Teta?" I demanded.

"The cat," Peck answered grimly. "Deets was one of Teta's warmest friends. The little animal is decidedly emphatic in his likes and dislikes, but poor Fred was one of his favorites."

I nodded. Then to Mrs. Mulcahey: "Go ahead with your story!"

"Well, sor, as I was sayin' he was sitting there talkin' to Teta when all of a sudden I heard him give a little gasp. Me back was turned to him at the time. I looked around quickly—just in time to see him slide from th' chair with th' froth comin' out of his mouth. I yelled for help and you seen th' rest."

Mrs. Mulcahey had been with Peck for eighteen years, my records showed. That she was not the murderer was a certainty. Yet Deets had been killed under her very eyes. I questioned her for nearly half an hour, in the hope that she might recall having seen some other member of the household in or near the kitchen at or about the time Deets was stricken down. But she was emphatic. She and she alone had been with the dead chauffeur.

There was nothing to do but send for the coroner again.

Meanwhile the body had been removed to an upstairs room where Doctor Maxwell made an examination. He called as I passed through the hall. As I entered the room he pointed to the naked body of the murdered chauffeur.

Close to the knee of the right leg the skin was blacker than elsewhere.

And in the center of the dark spot was a tiny puncture similar to the ones we had found on Lannagan's leg!

A detective occasionally gets "hunches." If he is a good one he plays them to the limit. I, as I have stated before, believe—and I trust that the reader will not accuse me of egotism—that I am among the top notchers despite the poor opinion he has received of me through my rambling account of the murders in the Peck mansion. Just now I got a "hunch." I decided to play it.

Hardly taking time to thank my friend, the physician, for his courtesy, I hurried downstairs to the library where Peck was busy reading, the big cat curled up in a ball on the chair opposite.

The millionaire looked up in astonishment at my catapultic entrance.

"Mr. Peck!" I burst forth, "I want to borrow Teta!"

The millionaire elevated his brows. "You *what*?" he demanded.

"I want to borrow Teta—the cat, here. I've an idea that he'd make a first class detective. I'll promise you that I'll not injure him in the least, but I am firm in the conviction that he can lead us to the murderers of Lannagan and Deets—the men who are trying to get at you and, possibly, at Miss Gladys through you."

As I spoke the big cat arched his back and got onto his feet with a yawn, exercising his digits by drawing and withdrawing his claws in the padding of the chair half a dozen times. The action decided the old man. He looked up at

me with a suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes.

"The little cuss is a scrapper as I told you," he chuckled. "Look at the way he girds up his loins for action at the mere mention of taking a part in the scrap. Take him and welcome—but don't let him get hurt."

With a curt nod of thanks, I picked up the cat and carried him upstairs to my own room. For the next half hour the little animal and myself were busily engaged among the retorts and tubes which Doctor Maxwell had brought from his laboratory for experimental purposes during his enforced detention and which I borrowed for my own uses. When I had completed my task I turned to the furred beauty with a smile of satisfaction:

"Teta," I whispered, "this whole affair is a secret between the two of us. I thought that I was on the right track—and now I know it. You're the boy who'll bring home the bacon. It's up to you to get the men who killed your pals—Lannagan and Deets. Will you do it?"

There are some people who claim that cats have no intelligence. I stand ready to swear that Teta, Morgan Peck's cat, understood every word I said. For he rubbed against my leg with a loud pur-r-r-r of satisfaction and immediately took up his station close to the door as if clamoring for action.

We went down the stairs together.

I stopped at both front and rear doors and gave my instructions to the operatives on watch:

"I want to be informed the minute the cat meows to get out," I instructed them. "Pass this word on to the men who will relieve you. Remember, no excuses go. Before he is let out, I am to be called!"

Fifteen minutes later Olmstead, on duty at the rear door, called to me:

"The cat's howling at my station," he said.

I followed the animal to the door and personally let him outside.

## VI

ACROSS the lawn I followed the cat with my eyes until he disappeared around the corner of a nearby garage. O'Leary and Cain, the two men on duty on the grounds, had had their orders. As Teta disappeared down the alley I saw O'Leary dodge around a nearby bush and follow him. A second later he reappeared and approached the house.

"Your friend, the cat, went into a barn that's been transformed into a garage at 1424 North Tenth, just five houses below here," he reported with a grin. "And if you'll pardon the joke, chief, I've shadowed darned near everything that walks, but it's the first time I ever trailed a cat."

Stepping to the telephone, I called up my friend Hitchens, chief of detectives, who was cooperating with us in every way possible. Satisfied with the results of my conversation, I sat down to spend the remainder of the afternoon among Peck's books.

Suddenly the phone at my elbow jangled. Turning, I picked up the receiver and answered the call.

The same metallic voice that had talked to Peck the day of Lannagan's murder answered my gruff "Hello!"

"Peck?" he asked.

"I'll call him," I responded.

"Never mind," the other answered. Then as I hesitated for words, the voice went on:

"Tell your boss he can prepare for another killing! It may be him and it may be another, but his time is coming soon!"

The voice died away in the same harsh laughter that I had heard before.

I hung up the receiver with a bang and jiggled the hook to attract the attention of "Central." An instant later I was connected with my friend Armstrong



to whom I again explained matters, while Peck looked on, his furrowed face wrinkled in doubt.

This time Armstrong was speedier than before. Scarcely had I hung up the receiver than he called me back.

"The phone call was from the booth in a drug store at the busiest corner of the city. To trace the person who had called would be an impossibility."

Packard, on duty at the rear door, called me at fifteen minutes past five o'clock.

"The cat just came in!" he yelled.

The afternoon's hunting had evidently been of the best for the cat was purring contentedly as he passed down the hallway on his way to the library. But I was taking no chances of a scratch from his sharp claws, for I protected my hands with heavy gloves as I tenderly picked him up and carried him upstairs to my room. Ten minutes later I was at the telephone with my friend Hitchcens at the other end.

Half an hour afterward there came a sudden blast of a police whistle. From a dozen different directions from where they had been stationed hurried policemen and detectives, all centering on the big brick house at 1424 North Tenth.

There was no response to our knocks. A burly policeman hurled his bulk against the door! It refused to give way! He swung an axe over his head! Came a sound of splitting wood! A second later we were inside the hallway.

A revolver spit at us from down the corridor! Another flashed from the head of the stairs! We answered them shot for shot, bullet for bullet. For five minutes the battle waged. Then our superior numbers told.

We dashed through the smoke-filled rooms, gathering in our prisoners. Four men were caught in the net—and one woman. She was Mrs. Lon Bixby. Her husband, suffering from a severe wound

in the shoulder, was one of the four. The remainder were merely his tools.

## VII

BATTERSBY, one of Bixby's aids, confronted with the murders of Lannagan and Deets, turned state's evidence and confessed. Slick, one of the others, backed him up in his statements.

Bixby, as I had figured from the first, was the instigator of the whole diabolical affair. How he made his escape from prison, however, is something that he refused to divulge—even when he and his confederates were taken to the gallows to answer for their crimes.

How did they kill Lannagan and Deets? By means of Teta!

Unwittingly, the little animal was the indirect cause of both murders. Battersby, according to his own confession, had been posted by Bixby, who had, while still in prison had him engage the place at 1424 North Tenth Street under an alias in order that he might watch the Peck home.

In his guise as a servant he had got acquainted with Deets while the latter was working with one of the cars. He had noticed Teta come out of the barn at 1424 which, having been empty for a number of years, was filled with rats. As the cat passed Deets, the latter had bent over and scratched it, making a chance remark about Peck's affection for the animal. He had also remarked with a chuckle at a fondness the pet had for drawing and withdrawing his claws in whatever he chanced to be lying on—a habit which all cats indulge in at times.

Battersby, alert to give every detail to his employer, had remarked this fact, to Bixby in his report. The latter saw an opportunity to turn the incident to his own advantage. Learning that Peck's cat frequented the barn, he had catered to the animal in every possible way until the animal passed a great deal of its time in and about the Bixby place!

Failing in his attempts to kill Peck, the instant that he had chased the millionaire to cover Bixby seized upon the cat to carry out his own diabolical ends. Covering the animal's claws with a concentrated extract of venom made from the poison of a cobra, he had turned it loose leaving it to Fate as to where death would strike.

Peck was likely to be the first. He was the cat's master and the animal would be more likely to be with him than anyone else. That it was Lannagan who was the first was simply one of those peculiar freaks of chance.

The cat, purring contentedly on Lannagan's lap, had stuck his claws slightly into the servant's knee. Lannagan had worn thick trousers and, as a result, a great deal of the poison was rubbed off as the claws went through. He was therefore not stricken until during the night when the venom had gone entirely through his system.

On the other hand Deets, wearing a pair of thin trousers—and there might have been more of the poison on the cat's claws or it may have been fresher—was stricken almost immediately after the sharp points had penetrated his flesh.

Bixby, a native of South Africa, was an adept on poisons which led to the fact that he finally selected this subtle method of committing his crimes.

Located so close to the Peck home, he was able to see from his window a great deal of what was going on around the mansion. As a result, when the coroner called, he knew that death—through the cat—had struck. But he did not know who. He had a confederate stationed downtown somewhere close to the Pennsylvania station. It was but the work of seconds to call the latter up and instruct him to call Peck to the phone. When the latter answered in person the confederate knew that death had struck someone else and so informed Bixby.

The second telephone call was sent in a spirit of mere braggadocio after Teta's claws had been smeared for the third time with the poison. The coffin was sent for the same reason—and to break down Peck's morale.

How did I know these things? Conjecture, and conjecture only. At first glance I imagined—as did Doctor Maxwell and the coroner—that the two punctures in Lannagan's leg were caused by the fangs of a snake. The fact that the symptoms were all those of snake bite led to this deduction. It was not until after Deets had died and Mrs. Mulcahey had told me that Teta had been on his lap at the time that the idea suddenly came to me.

Coupled with this fact was that of finding a puncture on Deets' leg similar to that on the leg of Lannagan. I had noticed the cat's habit of pressing his claws into everything on which he sat. Peck had told me that the cat was a favorite with the two men who had died. I put two and two together and made four of them.

When I borrowed the cat I took him to my room and, with my hands gloved, I scraped his claws and submitted the scrapings to chemical tests. The results showed snake venom.

The remainder was easy. I had only to disinfect the cat's claws and then turn him loose. When my men reported where he went, I summoned Hitchens and asked him to station his men near the house. When the cat returned, I seized him before he had had an opportunity of killing anyone else and again scraped his claws. The chemical tests showed snake venom in great quantities.

The raid on the house at 1424 followed.

I've often wondered if Teta knows the part he played in the death of his two friends and the detection of the murderers? Who knows?