

There Hangs Death!

THE POLICE SAID IT WAS MURDER. BUT WHO HAD THE SUPERHUMAN STRENGTH TO DRIVE

A CRUSADER'S SWORD THROUGH DR. HILBER AND PIN HIM TO THE FLOOR?

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ANGELA'S FACE WAS WHITE, HER EYES SHOCKED AND ENORMOUS

The dead man was face down on the dark hardwood floor. He was frail and old, and the house was sturdy and old, redolent of Victorian dignity. It was the house where he had been born.

The wide stairs climbed for two tall stories, with two landings for each floor. He lay in the center of the stair well, twenty-five feet below a dusty skylight. The gray daylight came down through the skylight and glinted on the heavy ornate hall and pommel of the broadsword that panned the man to the dark floor.

The hilt was of gold and silver, and there was a large red stone set into the pommel. The gold—and the red of stone and red of blood on the white shirt—were the only touches of color.

Riggs saw that when they brought him in. They let him look for a few moments. He knew he would not forget it, ever. The bright momentary light of a police flash bulb filled the hallway, and they turned him away, a hand pushing his shoulder.

There were many people in the booklined study. He saw Angela at once, her face too white, her eyes shocked and enormous, sitting on a straight chair. He started toward her but

they caught his arm; and the wide, bald, tired-eyed stranger who sat behind the old desk said, "Take the girl across the hall and put Riggs in that chair."

Angela gave him a frail smile and he tried to respond. They took her out. He sat where she had been.

The bald man looked at him for a long moment. "You'll answer questions willingly?"

"Of course." A doughy young man in the opposite corner took notes with a fountain pen.

"Name and occupation?"

"Howard Riggs. Research assistant at the University, Department of Psychology."

"How long have you known the deceased?"

"I've known Dr. Hilber for three years. I met him through his niece, Angela Manley, when I was in the Graduate School. I believe he'd returned two or three years before I met him. He was head of the Archeology . . ."

"We know his history. How much have you been told about this?"

"Not very much. Just that he was dead and I was wanted here. I didn't know he'd been . . ."

"What is your relationship to his niece?"

"We're to be married in June when the spring semester ends."

"Were you in this house today?"

"Yes sir. I went to church with Angela. I picked her up here and brought her back here. We walked. We had some coffee here and then I went back to the lab. I'm running an experiment using laboratory animals. I have to . . ."

"What time did you leave this house?"

"I'd say it was eleven-thirty this morning. I've been in the lab ever since, until those men came and . . ."

"Were you alone at the lab?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you see Dr. Hilber when you were here?"

"No sir."

"Did Miss Manley inform you that she was going to stay here? Did she say anything about going out?"

"She wanted me to go for a walk. I couldn't. I had to get back. We sometimes walk up in the hills back of here."

"Did you know that Miss Manley is the sole heir?"

"I guess I did. I mean I remember him saying once that she was his only living relative. So I would know . . ."

"Did you know he had substantial paid-up insurance policies?"

"No sir."

"He opposed this marriage, did he not?"

"No sir. He was in favor of it. He opposed it at first. He didn't want to be left alone. But after I agreed to move in here after we're married . . . you see, he wasn't well."

"You had many arguments with him, did you not?"

Riggs frowned. "Not like you mean. They were intellectual arguments. He thought my speciality is a sort of . . . pseudo-science. He was a stubborn man, sir."

"You became angry at him."

Riggs shrugged. "Many times. But not . . . importantly angry."

The study door opened and two men came

in. The man in uniform who had come in said to the bald man, "Can't raise a print off that sword, Captain. It wouldn't have to be wiped. It's just a bad surface."

The bald captain nodded impatiently. He looked at the second man who had come in. "Doctor?" he said.

"Steve, it's pretty weird," the doctor said. He sat down and crossed long legs. "That sword is like a razor. It was sunk right into the wood."

"If it was shoved through him and he fell on his face, of course it would be stuck in the wood."

"Not like that, Steve. It's a two-edged sword. If he fell after it was through him it would shift enough to make lateral cuts. More probably it would be knocked back. Some of the shirt fibers were carried into the wound. No, Steve, the sword went into him after he was stretched out on his face."

"Knocked out?"

"No sign of it."

"Check stomach contents and so forth to see if he was doped."

"That'll be done. But does it make sense?"

"How do you mean?"

"If you're going to kill a man, do you dope him, stretch him out on the floor and chuck a knife down through him? Now here's something else. After we got him out of the way we found another hole in the floor. A fresh hole, about four inches from where the sword dug in. It's a deeper hole, but it looks to me as if it was made the same way, by the same sword. And there was only one hole in the professor."

The captain got up quickly and went out. Most of the men followed him. Howard Riggs got up and went out, too. He was not stopped. He saw Angela in the small room across the hall. He walked by the man outside her door and went to her. She stood up quickly as he approached. Her face was pale, her eyes enormous. He took her cold hands in his. "Darling," she said, "they do it . . ."

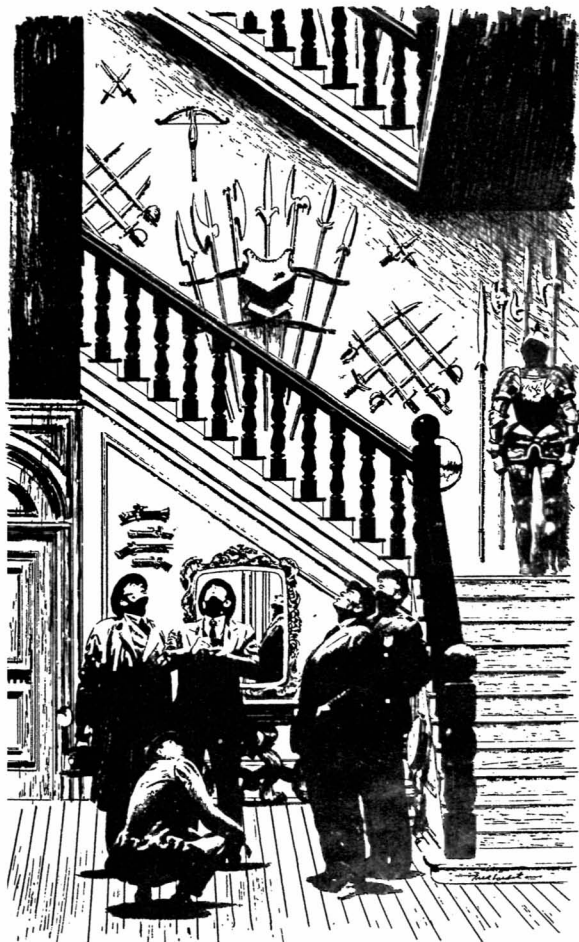
"I know. I know. Act so hard. Please."

"But he's dead, and the way they look at me. As if . . ." She began to cry and he held the trembling slenderness of her in his arms, murmuring reassurances, trying to conceal from her how upset and confused he felt in the face of the obvious hostility of the police.

The hard voice behind him said, "You're not supposed to be in here." A hand rested heavily on his shoulder.

Riggs turned out from under the hand and

OUR FICTION EDITOR SAYS:
Authors love thinking up new ways to baffles the police. We doubt that anyone has ever concocted a crime just like this.



THEY ALL STARED UP. AN IMPOSSIBLE CRIME HAD BEEN COMMITTED

released Angela. He looked back at her as he left the room, the stoic and managed a smile. It was a frail wan smile, but it was good to see. He hoped he had strengthened her.

Out in the hall the captain was on his knees examining the gouges in the dark wood. He craned his neck back and looked straight up. The men around him did the same. It was a curious tableau.

The captain gave an order and the sword was brought to him. The blade had been cleaned. He hefted it in his hand, took a half cut at the air.

"Heavy damn thing," he said. He glanced at Riggs. "Ever see it before?"

"It's from Dr. Hilber's collection of antique edged weapons. It dates from the twelfth century. He said he believed it was taken on one of the early crusades. The second, I think."

"You men move back down the hall," the captain said. He plodded up the stairs, the incongruous sword gleaming in his busy fist. Soon he was out of sight, and they could hear him climbing the second flight. There was silence—and then a silvery shimmer in the gray light of the stairwell. The sword flashed down, chunked deeply into the floor and stood there, vibrationless.

The captain came back down. He grasped the hilt with both hands, planted his feet, grunted as he wrenched it out of the floor. He smiled at Riggs. "I look at her and I say she could just about lift a sword like this. She couldn't stick it through the old man, but she could drop it through him."

"You're out of your mind!"

"The other hole is where she made a test run when he was out, to see if it would fall right. She says she came back from her walk and found him. But I find clumsy attempts to make it look like a proffered die. The jade collection in his bedroom all messed up. We got to check it against his inventory. Dart tracked into that room where the weapons are. Silver dumped on the floor in the dining room. If Doc wasn't on the ball, that stage setting might have sold me. *Might* have. But now we know it was dropped through him, and it was no theft murder, even if she tried to make it look that way."

They took Angela in on suspicion of murder. They did not let Riggs speak to her. They told him not to leave town. He did not understand why they didn't arrest him also. He sensed that he was being carefully watched.

THOUGH he was emotionally exhausted that night, it took him a long time to get to sleep. A nightmare awakened him before dawn. In his dream a shining sword had been suspended high over him, in utter blackness. He did not know when it would drop. He recognized the similarity to the legend of Damocles. He lay sweating in the profane sciences until his frightened heart slowed to a beat. It seemed then that it was the first time he had been able to think logically of the death of Hilber. He thought carefully and for a long time, and when he knew what he would do, he went quickly to sleep.

He walked into the captain's office at two o'clock on Monday. It was raining heavily outside. The captain was in shirt sleeves. "Sit down," the captain said. "You asked to see me, but I'll tell you some things first. The girl is sticking to her story. I half believe her. Besides, that corpse was in the center of the room with the sword sticking straight up. I can't see anybody throwing it and making it land that way, so we're trying to uncover other angles."

"Hilber had a good academic mind, but not what you'd call a practical mind."

"Keep talking."

"If he wanted to kill himself and make it

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THERE HANGS DEATH!

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look like murder, he would try to clear Angela by such clumsy business as the dirt tracked in, the silver on the floor, the disorder in the jade case. He'd never stop to think of the next logical step, that the police would accuse Angela of doing all that and mislead them."

"You try to read a dead man's mind and he can't tell you if you're wrong. You've got more than that, haven't you?"

"This morning I talked to his lawyer and his doctor, Captain, and I went to the house and they wouldn't let me in."

"I know that."

"HE HAD very little money. His illness used up most of it. He had forty-five thousand in insurance, in two policies, one of ten and one for thirty-five thousand. There is a suicide clause in the larger policy."

"So he beaved a sword up in the air and it came down and hit him in the back."

"He was operated on two years ago. The operation was not completely successful. The malignancy returned and this time it was widespread. He had six months to two years, and in either case it would not have been pleasant."

"So?"

"Did you ever hear of the Sword of Damocles?"

The captain frowned. "They hung

it on a thread over some joker's head when he wanted to be long, didn't they? It would take a special kind of nerve. Some timing device. Candle maybe. Let's go take a look, Riggs."

They looked. The captain brought the sword along. They experimented. It would have had to drop from the top floor. The railing encircled three sides of the stairwell. Nothing was tied to the railing. Nothing had been fastened to the skylight. They searched for a long time. The captain thought of the possible use of rubber bands, so they would snap

back into one of the bedrooms. They could find nothing. The captain rubbed his bald head. "No good, Riggs. The sword had to be dead in the middle. Nothing could have held it. The girl didn't come upstairs. The house was searched after we got here. And who could have held the sword out that far—in the center of the room?"

"Let me look around some more, please."

"Go ahead."

RIGGS finally wandered to the study. Dr. Hilber had spent most of his time there. He sat moodily in Hilber's chair and went back over every aspect of the previous day to see if he could remember anything that would help.

They had come back from church. Angela had opened the front door



with her key, mildly surprised to find it locked. They had walked back through to the kitchen. He remembered that Angela had wondered if her uncle would put in his usual appearance for Sunday morning coffee, then thought that he was probably immersed in reading one of the many scholarly books that were so much a part of his life. She had decided not to disturb him.

The memory of the morning gave him no clue. The Sword of Damocles had hung over the stairwell. And it had fallen. And the means of suspension was utterly gone, as though it had never been. As though it had vanished. He sat very still for a long moment and then got up quickly.

ANGELA was released at six. Riggs was asked to perform the experiment

again for the city District Attorney and two members of his staff. He and the captain had found the proper material after experimenting with various kinds of thread, and had purchased a sufficient supply of rayon tire cord yarn. Riggs took the sword to the top floor, knotted one end of the yarn around the metal railing, and cut off a piece long enough to reach to the opposite railing. To the middle of that piece he tied a length sufficient to reach to the floor far below. He then tied the sword to the middle of the strand, took the free end around and tied it to the opposite railing. The sword danced and shimmered in the air and grew still.

They all went back down to the main floor. Riggs lighted a match and touched it to the strand of yarn

hanging down. It caught at once and a knot of flame raced up the piece of yarn with stunning speed. Soon the heavy sword fell and imbedded its point deeply into the hardwood of the hallway.

By this time they reached the top railing, all traces of the suspension method had disappeared. The heat generated had not been sufficient to leave any mark on the metal railings.

The District Attorney sighed. "It's half crazy, but I guess I've got to buy it."

The captain shook his head and said, "It's the only thing possible. Nobody could have thrown that sword and made it land at that angle—or rather without an angle. And that stuff he used doesn't leave a trace. Without Riggs figuring it out, though. I don't know where we'd be."

The District Attorney stared curiously at Riggs. "How did you figure it out?"

"He was a classical scholar and with this setup—" Riggs indicated the open space above them and the railings, "it almost had to be based on the legend of the Sword of Damocles. That and the second hole in the floor. Those were the clues. He tested the method while we were out. That's why since we were out, the Sword of Damocles gave him his idea. Modern technology gave him the method."

And then he was free to go to Angela. The End