

Mabel Thorne

The Sheridan Road Mystery

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Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I THE SHOT

It was a still, balmy night in late October. The scent of burned autumn leaves hung in the air, and a hazy moon, showing just over the housetops, deepened the shadows on the streets.

Policeman Murphy stopped for a moment, as was his custom, at the corner of Lawrence Avenue and Sheridan Road. He knew that it was about two o'clock in the morning as that was the hour at which he usually reached this point. He glanced sharply up and down Sheridan Road, which at that moment seemed to be completely deserted save for the distant red tail-light of a belated taxi, the whir of whose engine came to him quite distinctly on the quiet night air.

JUST THEN POLICEMAN MURPHY HEARD A SHOT!

Instantly his body quickened with an awakened alertness, and he glanced east and west along the lonely stretch of Lawrence Avenue. He saw nothing, and concluded that the sound he had heard must have come from one of the many apartment buildings which surrounded him.

Murphy pondered for a moment. Was it a burglary, a domestic row, or perhaps a murder? The position of the shot was hard to locate, for it had been but the sound of a moment on the still night. Murphy, however, decided to take a chance, and started stealthily north on Sheridan Road, keeping within the shadow that clung to the buildings.

He had moved only a short distance in this way when a man in a bath robe dashed out of the doorway of an apartment house just ahead of him and ran north. Murphy instantly broke into pursuit. At the sound of his heavily shod feet on the pavement, the man in the bath robe stopped and turned. Murphy slowed up and the man advanced to meet him.

"I'm glad you're handy, Officer," panted the man. "I think somebody has been murdered in our building. Come and investigate."

"Sure," assented Murphy. "That's what I'm here for," and as they mounted the steps of the apartment house, he inquired, "What flat was it?"

"The top floor on the north side," replied the man, who then informed Murphy that his name was Marsh, and that he lived on the second floor, just below this apartment. "You see," Marsh continued, "a little while ago my wife and I were awakened by a noise in the apartment over us. It sounded like a struggle of some kind. As we listened we felt sure that several people were taking part in it. Suddenly there was a shot, and a sound followed as if a body had fallen to the floor. After that there was absolute silence. I hastily put on my bath robe, and was hurrying out to find a policeman when I met you."

By this time, Marsh, with Murphy at his heels, had reached the door of the third floor apartment. Murphy placed a thick forefinger on the button of the electric bell and rang it sharply several times. The men could distinctly hear the clear notes of the bell, but no other sound reached them. Again Murphy pressed the button without response.

"Murder, all right, I guess," muttered Murphy, "and the guy's probably slipped down the back stairs. Who lives here, anyway?" he inquired, turning to Marsh.

"That's the peculiar part about it," was the reply. "The people who rent this apartment went to Europe this summer, and as I understand it, they won't be back for another month. The apartment has been closed all summer. That is what amazed Mrs. Marsh and myself when we heard this sound above us."

"It looks like we'll have to break in," said Murphy. "Let me use your telephone."

"Certainly," agreed Marsh, and led the way to his apartment.

Murphy sat down at the telephone. His hand was on the receiver when he suddenly paused and turned to Marsh. "You know," he commented, half meditatively, "it's funny we haven't seen anybody else show up in the halls. I heard that shot way down at Lawrence Avenue. At least the people across the hall ought to have been waked up by it. Are you sure it was in this house?"

"Why certainly," retorted Marsh. "Didn't I tell you that we heard the struggle and the shot right over our heads?"

"Well, it sure takes a lot to disturb some people," said Murphy, as he placed the telephone receiver to his ear and called for his connection. After some words he got his precinct station.

"Hello!" he called. "Is that you, Sergeant? This is Murphy. I'm in the Hillcrest apartments on Sheridan Road... Yes, that's right.... Just north of Lawrence Avenue. I think somebody's been murdered and we'll have to break in. Send the wagon, will you? ... Don't know a damn thing yet," he added, evidently in reply to a question. "Hurry up the wagon." He replaced the receiver on its hook; then turned to Marsh as he stood up.

"I think I'll hang around the door up there until the boys come. Much obliged for your help. You'd better get back to bed now."

"Oh, no," objected Marsh. "I couldn't sleep with all this excitement going on. And then—Mr. Ames is a friend of mine. He would want me to look after things for him."

Murphy looked Marsh over in evident speculation. The man was tall and broad shouldered. His face was clean shaven. The features were strong, with a regularity that many people would consider handsome. He was what one would call a big man, but this appearance of bigness arose more from a heavy frame, and exceptional muscular development, than fleshiness. Murphy took in these details quickly, and the pause was slight before he spoke.

"Who's Ames?" he said.

"The man who rents the apartment upstairs." Then apparently taking the matter as settled, Marsh added, "I'll go along with you."

Murphy grunted, whether in assent or disapproval was hard to tell, but as he climbed the stairs again, Marsh was close beside him.

Murphy placed his hand on the doorknob and shook the door as he violently turned the knob. The door was securely locked. Then he threw his two hundred and some odd pounds against the door itself. The stout oak resisted his individual efforts.

"No use," he grumbled. "I'll have to wait 'till the boys come."

The two men then sat down on the top step to wait for the coming of the police. They chatted, speculating upon the possible causes of the disturbance. Marsh, however, seemed more interested in getting Murphy's ideas than in expressing opinions of his own. At length they heard the clang of the gong on the police patrol as it crossed Lawrence Avenue. They stood up expectantly. An instant later there was a clatter in the lower hall as the police entered. They mounted the stairs rapidly—two officers in uniform and another in civilian clothes.

"Where's the trouble?" cried the latter, as the party climbed the last flight.

"In here, as far as I know," returned Murphy, as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the door of the apartment. "I can't get arise out of anybody. We'll have to break in."

Marsh stood aside while the four men took turns, two-and-two, in throwing themselves against the door. It creaked and groaned, and from time to time there was a sharp crack as the strong oak began to give.

In the meantime, the murmur of voices came up from the lower floors. Presently faces appeared on the landing just below where the police were working. Marsh leaned over the rail and in a few words outlined to the excited tenants what was going on.

Intent on their work of breaking in the door, the policemen paid little attention to their audience, and apparently did not notice that the door across the hall was still closed and silent. Murphy, however, recalled this fact later on.

At last, with a crash and a splintering of wood, the lock gave way and the door flew open. All was darkness and silence before them.

The five men stood grouped in the doorway, listening intently. The black silence remained unbroken save for the labored breathing of the men who had just broken in the door. The plain-clothes man then brought forth an electric pocket lamp and flashed its rays into the entrance hall, while the others drew their revolvers and held them in readiness. Then all stepped into the hallway. This was a large, square entrance way with four doorways opening from it. Two closed doors faced them. As they discovered later, these led to a bedroom, and the bathroom. The others, one opening toward the front of the apartment, and one toward the rear, were

wide archways covered with heavy velvet portieres.

The plain-clothes man found the wall switch and turned on the electric light. Instructing one of his companions to watch the hall door, he led the others in a search of the apartment. Seeking for the electric light buttons as they moved about the apartment, the men soon flooded the rooms with light. Each man with revolver ready, and intent on searching every corner, none of them gave much attention to the fact that Marsh was dogging every move, apparently as keenly on the lookout as any one of the party.

Their inspection revealed nothing more than that the apartment was apparently in the same condition as its tenant had left it. The door to the outside stairway at the back was locked and the key was missing. In addition to the regular lock a stout bolt was in place. The catches on all the windows were properly locked, and all the shades remained drawn down close to the sills. It was an empty, locked apartment, with no outstanding evidence of having been used for a long time.

The police, now joined by the man lately on watch at the door, stood nonplussed in the kitchen. The plain-clothes man uttered an oath. Then he addressed his companions.

"I've seen some mighty fishy situations, but this trims anything I ever ran up against. Ain't been just hearing things, have you, Murphy? A swig of this home-made hootch does upset a man dreadful, sometimes."

Murphy glared.

"I ain't never touched the stuff," he bellowed. Then added, aggressively, "You know damned well I wasn't the only one to hear that shot. The tenant downstairs heard it, too. It was him that brought me in."

"Well, you only got his word for it that this is where the shot, was fired. Maybe HE'S trying to cover something up."

Murphy started, then glanced around.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "Where's that guy gone to, anyway?"

Marsh, who had recently been close at their heels, was not now in the group. Murphy moved on tiptoe to the kitchen door and listened. On the other side of the dining room was the doorway to the entrance hall, and through the now drawn curtains this space was visible. Murphy could see that both these rooms were deserted, but an occasional swishing sound came to his ears. Turning to the waiting group, he silently and significantly jerked his head toward the front of the apartment. Following his example, they moved cautiously across the dining room and the hall and stopped at the door of the living room.

Marsh, with his back toward them, was just in the act of pulling a heavy, upholstered chair back into position. His moving of similar articles of furniture had made the sounds heard by Murphy.

Stepping suddenly into the room, Murphy inquired, with a note of sarcasm in his voice, "Kind of busy, ain't you?"

Marsh turned abruptly. If they expected to see any signs of confusion on his face they were disappointed, for he simply smiled cheerfully.

"Just following out a line of thought," he answered.

"What's the big idea!" asked the plain-clothes man, suspiciously, as he also stepped into the room and carefully looked over the man before him.

"Well, detectives in novels always search minutely for things which may not be apparent to the eye. When confronted with so deep a mystery as this one, I thought the application of a little of the story book stuff might do no harm."

"Huh!" snorted the plain-clothes man, as Marsh finished giving this information. "You're more than commonly interested in this affair, ain't you?"

"Naturally," agreed Marsh. "Remember, I live just below, and wouldn't like to be murdered in my bed some night. To hear a murder over your head is a bit disconcerting."

"How the devil do we know there's been a murder?" shot back the plain-clothes man. "We've only got your word for it."

"But this officer also heard the shot," and Marsh turned toward Murphy. "He was looking for the trouble when I met him."

"Yes," Murphy admitted. "I heard the shot, but I only got your word for it that it was here. If there was a murder, what became of the body?"

"That is for you gentlemen to find out," Marsh snapped back, now evidently alive to the fact that these men were regarding him

with something approaching suspicion. "I have already done more than my share of the work. I have discovered visible proof THAT THERE WAS A MURDER!"

This information startled the group of policemen. Hasty glances swept the room for a moment. Then the plain-clothes man remarked, with a meaning smile, "Well, I'M from Missouri."

Marsh walked over to where the policemen stood.

"Take a look around," he began. "There are certain accepted ways of placing the furniture in a room. When there is a radical departure from such placing, an inquiring mind is led to wonder. Notice the chair I was just moving. It is located almost in the center of the room—obviously not its regular position. So why was it there?"

"Say, you'd make some detective!" came in an admiring tone from Murphy. The others nodded approval of the remark.

"I began to examine that chair and its surroundings carefully," continued Marsh, ignoring the interruption. He then moved over to the chair, and added, as he pulled it to one side, "I moved it away like this. Now, look at the floor!"

The policemen crowded forward. What Marsh had found was apparent at once. On the light background of the rug was a large, dark spot which the chair had covered. The plain-clothes man stooped and placed his hand on the spot. It felt damp to the touch, and as he stood erect again, holding his hand under the light, they all saw that the fingers were covered with a thin film of red.

"Blood!" cried Murphy.

"Yep," affirmed the plain-clothes man. "Fresh blood!"

Excited exclamations from the others showed their appreciation of the discovery.

Marsh smiled.

"I guess that looks like a possible murder," he said.

"The chair was placed there to cover the spot, all right," now admitted the plain-clothes man.

"But what became of the body?" again questioned Murphy.

"As I said before," Marsh answered him, "that is for you to find out. It is not my business."

"SOME mystery!" exclaimed the plain-clothes man. "This is a job for Dave Morgan."

CHAPTER II DETECTIVE SERGEANT MORGAN

On Sheffield Avenue, just across from the ball park, where the "Cubs," Chicago's famous baseball team, has its headquarters, is a row of apartment houses. One realizes, of course, that these are not homes of wealth, but they have a comfortable, substantial look, which somehow conveys the idea that those who live there are good citizens, typical of the hard-working, progressive class that has made Chicago one of the greatest commercial cities of the world.

In one of these apartments lived Detective Sergeant Dave Morgan and his mother. He had located here in the days when, as a patrolman, he had walked beat out of the Town Hall Police Station, a short distance away. After his promotion to the detective force, he remained here because of the convenient location. The elevated railroad had its right of way directly back of his home, and the Addison Street station was only around the corner. He could quickly get to the Detective Bureau or almost any part of the widespread city.

Morgan's home was unpretentious but comfortable. The hand of a careful and thoughtful housekeeper was in evidence everywhere. In the big living room, at the front, were several lounging chairs, and along one wall, between the front windows and the entrance door, stood two roomy bookcases. A glance at the titles showed the owner's inquiring and investigative turn of mind. His interest in his profession was also indicated by several volumes on criminology, and even popular detective stories of the day. In the center of the room was a commodious table with a large reading lamp. Beside the table was the big easy chair in which Morgan always sat, and where many of the solutions of difficult criminal problems had been worked out by him. Just across from this easy chair, and within reach of an outstretched hand, stood a tabouret, holding the telephone.

On the morning following the peculiar occurrence on Sheridan Road, Morgan was sitting in his favorite chair. His slippers were stretched before him and clouds of smoke hung about as he puffed at his favorite pipe, selected from a row of about ten that were hanging on a nearby home-made pipe holder. This might be said to be an eventful day for Dave Morgan. Only the day before, he and his partner, Detective Sergeant Tierney, had completed the solving of a baffling case and placed the criminal behind the bars.

Now he had a well-earned and long-awaited "day off," and he was going to devote it to the restful pursuit of his favorite amusement—reading.

His mother, a white-haired, pleasant faced little woman, entered the room.

"Dave," she reminded him, "here's the morning paper. You forgot to look it over at breakfast."

"I know, Mother," he returned, "but I wanted to forget all about the world this morning. That Brock case has tired me out."

"But," she protested, "I notice from the headlines that there was a big murder on Sheridan Road last night. I didn't think you'd want to miss the details of that."

Professional instinct was too strong. Morgan reached for the paper and glanced quickly over the glaring headlines and the few words below, while the mother proudly watched him.

Morgan made a good figure for a detective. Not so tall as to be conspicuous, his breadth of shoulder and depth of chest clearly showed that he possessed the strength to meet most of the emergencies into which his work might lead him. His face had none of the hardened sharpness that usually marks the detective. In fact, although he was nearly thirty, his face still had a boyish look that made him appear younger, and taken with his sleek dark hair and mild brown eyes one would have presumed him to be just an average young business man rather than a hunter of criminals.

"No details here," he said, a moment later, laying the paper on the table. "They evidently received the notice just before going to press. Anyway, there is seldom much mystery about a murder. The men in that precinct probably have a line on who did it by this time."

"Yes, I know they use my boy only for the big cases," asserted the mother, and giving him an affectionate pat on the head, she went to her housework, while Morgan took a book from one of the cases, refilled his pipe, and settled down to spend a quiet morning in the big chair.

At eleven o'clock the telephone bell rang. Only a few words passed between Morgan and his caller, but the detective's face lighted up with interest. The instant he replaced the receiver he sprang to his feet, went to his bedroom, and hurriedly changed his clothes.

"Mother," he called. "The Chief has just 'phoned me that they have the biggest case for me that I ever handled. I must go down at once."

His mother came to the door of the room. "Can't you even wait for a bite of lunch?" she questioned.

"No," he explained, "it is a hurry call. The Chief says we cannot lose a minute in getting started. I'll have to stop in somewhere after I see the Chief."

Kissing his mother good-bye, Morgan hurried around to the elevated station. Fifteen minutes later he opened the Chief's office door.

"Sit down, Morgan," said the Chief, waving his hand toward a chair. "I've got a case here that'll make even you go some."

As Morgan sat down the Chief gathered up some typewritten sheets from his desk, and continued; "I didn't like to break up the first day you've had off in a long time, Morgan, but there was a murder on Sheridan Road last night—or early, this morning, to be exact—that has put a real mystery up to the Department. It'll need a man like you to solve it—if it can be solved. The newspapers had big headlines this morning, and the public will be watching us on account of the peculiar nature of the crime."

"I saw something about it in my paper this morning," said Morgan. "There were no details, however. The notice probably caught the last edition with little more than the fact that a murder had been committed."

"Well," exclaimed the Chief, "it's one of the biggest mysteries we've ever had handed to us. The shot was heard by both the man on the beat and a tenant in the building, but outside of the stories of these two men, and the discovery of a blood stain on a rug in a supposedly empty flat, not another thing has been found. The body is missing, and there is no trace of how it got out of the flat or where it is now. Here is a report of all that we know so far. By the way, your partner Tierney made this report. He happened to be on the job last night, so I told him to stick to it."

The Chief handed the typewritten sheets to Morgan.

"You will note," he went on, "that the man on beat heard a shot at about 2 A.M.; that he met a tenant from the house who said that he had heard sounds of a struggle, a shot, and something like the falling of a body. The police found the flat locked, and after they broke in could find no one on the premises. Nothing was upset, and there were no signs of the struggle, said to have taken place. Another peculiar thing is that the police even overlooked the bloodstain until the tenant who had heard the shot called their attention

to it. Tierney tried to get some more details this morning, but you will find from his report that none of the other tenants admit hearing the shot; that the tenant in the flat across the hall was apparently not at home, and that the janitor says the people who rent the flat in which the trouble occurred, have been away all summer. The only really definite information of any kind comes from this one tenant, Marsh."

"You'll probably find Tierney at the flat, as I sent him back after he had turned in this report. He may have found out something more by now than he could put in that quick report."

"Chief," said Morgan, as he thumbed over the typewritten sheets in his hands, "you say there has been a murder committed here. With this tenant, Marsh, and a patrolman, getting into action so soon after the shot, a body couldn't possibly be moved out of the house—certainly, not without leaving some trace."

"Well?"

"How do we know there was a murder?"

"We don't know—positively," returned the Chief. "But we're not going to take any chances. Even if there wasn't an actual murder, SOMETHING OF A CRIMINAL NATURE WAS PULLED OFF IN THAT FLAT LAST NIGHT. What it was, we're putting up to you to find out. Go to it, Morgan! So long!"

CHAPTER III INVESTIGATION

Leaving the Detective Bureau, Morgan stopped in a restaurant on Randolph Street for a quick lunch. From there he walked over to State Street and took the motor bus for the scene of the singular event which it was now his duty to investigate. A half-hour later he dropped off the bus at Lawrence Avenue and Sheridan Road. A few steps brought him to the Hillcrest apartments, where he found Tierney waiting on the front steps for him.

"The Chief telephoned me that you would probably be here about this time," said Tierney, after acknowledging Morgan's greeting. "I was on the job last night, and did a little investigating this morning, so the Chief thought you might want to talk things over with me."

Morgan nodded. "All right, let's go up. Can we get into the flat?"

"Sure," answered Tierney. "We put a temporary padlock on this morning, and I have the key."

Without further words the two men climbed the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. Tierney unlocked the padlock and they went in. Inside the entrance hall of the apartment, Tierney turned to Morgan.

"I suppose the Chief has put the case entirely in your hands, so it's up to you what you want to do first."

"We had better go into the front room here," answered Morgan, "and let me get a line on things. About all I know so far is that somebody THINKS a murder has been committed."

"You can't make much out of things as they are, that's a fact," assented Tierney, as they moved into the front room. He dropped into an easy chair close at hand, and pushed his cap back on his head, while Morgan went to one of the front windows and ran the shade to the top. Seating himself where he could get the full benefit of the light from the window, he drew out the typewritten report and read it over carefully.

"This is your report, isn't it, Tierney?" he inquired, folding up the sheets again and replacing them in his pocket.

"You bet; and I put into it every damned thing I know," asserted Tierney. "And that's mighty little," he added. "This is the most mysterious case I ever saw."

There was a pause while Morgan drew a pipe from his pocket and filled and lighted it. Then settling back in his chair, he looked at Tierney. "Got any theories?" he asked.

"No," replied Tierney. "I haven't any theories—but I've got a couple of suspicions."

"Well?"

"One," continued Tierney, "is this flat across the hall. Murphy—that's the man on the beat who heard the shot and investigated—Murphy noticed that in spite of all the racket we made breaking down the door last night, no one in that flat showed any interest. I tried to get in touch with them this morning. Nothing doing. Either they weren't home, or wouldn't answer the bell."

"That looks bad," commented Morgan. "You mentioned in your report that you talked with the janitor. Did he drop anything about them that you didn't think worth while putting in the report?"

"The janitor simply told me that a man and his daughter lived in the flat, and that he thought the man was away a good deal; so he supposed he must be a traveling man. They have always seemed to be quiet people. He has never even seen them have any company." "That's suspicious, too," declared Morgan. "Normal people usually have SOME company. Is that all?"