

18. The Doheny murder mystery

MY first taste of really “big-stuff” came early in February, heralded by a two a.m. call from Chief Wheeler. As I sleepily admitted my identity into the mouthpiece of the telephone, he told me, with characteristic calm, what had happened.

“Les, young Doheny has just been murdered! Get out to their Beverly Hills home as soon as possible.”

All thought of sleep vanished. “You mean E. L. Doheny’s son?”

“The same,” admitted the chief. “I’ll meet you there.” He hung up.

I turned from the instrument and started to scramble into my clothes. This was “big-stuff!” Doheny senior had attracted international attention because of his alleged bribery of Albert B. Fall, former Secretary of the Interior, in return for a lease on the Navy’s Elk Hills oil lands. The oil baron was reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in the country, and I already knew that any homicide involving the family of wealth is loaded, in the parlance of the squad room, with dynamite. Such an assignment can easily “make” or “break” a detective. Veteran dicks, nearing the retirement age, dodge an assignment of this caliber; they hate to risk their pension by an un-political move.

To me, however, it spelled opportunity, and while I was full of sympathy for the Dohenys, I was delighted with the chance to prove my ability. With the accelerator squeezed against the floorboards, I raced my car through the semi-deserted streets of Hollywood and Beverly Hills to the palatial Doheny mansion on Doheny Drive.

To my amazement, I found the place completely surrounded, not by the police, but by a cordon of private detectives, or guards. The house itself is in the center of a huge estate perched on a beautiful knoll in one of the region’s most exclusive residential sections. The grounds are encircled by a high fence and to enter, one must pass through great iron gates. It would be simpler to crash Buckingham Palace.

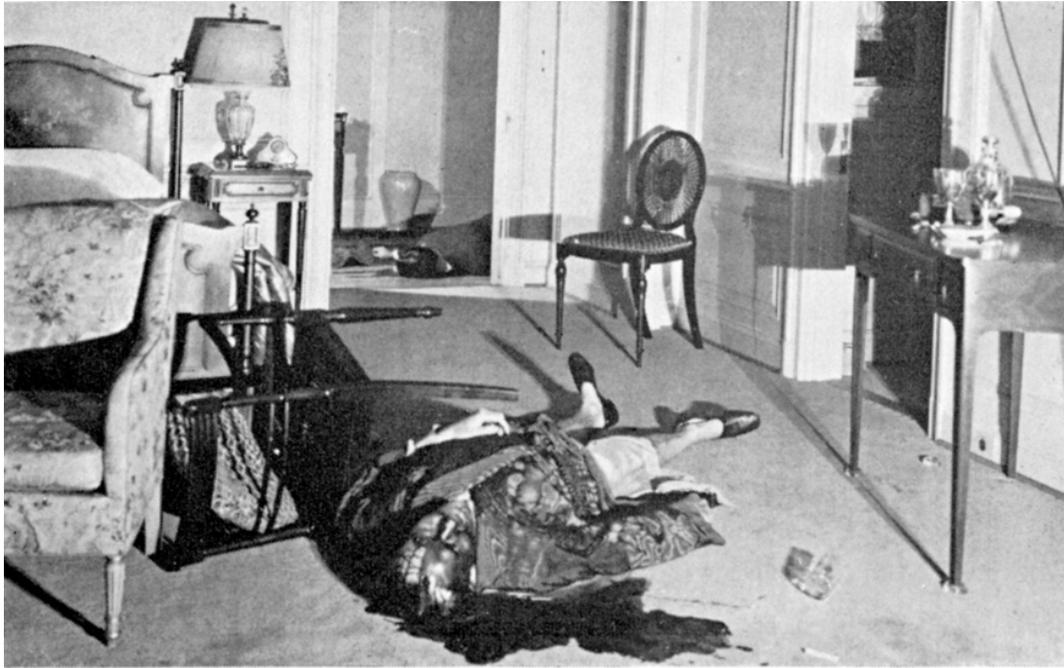
A trio of these armed guards stopped me at the gate and they seemed as certain that I was not going to enter as I was certain that I was. A very unpleasant scene was prevented by the timely arrival of a fourth guard who asked if I was Mr. White, and on receiving an affirmative reply, waved me inside. I drove up to the house and was admitted by one of those frozen-faced butlers, properly and immaculately garbed despite the hour and the tragedy.

The district attorney himself was on the scene, as well as Chief Wheeler and members of the Beverly Hills police department. The atmosphere of the mansion made it seem as though there must be some mistake-that this thing could not have happened. I sensed this as I walked into the awed silence, but when I was taken into the presence of the two corpses, they were just as dead as any of the score or more "bindle-stiffs" I had found in the jungles.

The peculiar wrench that comes when stepping into the scene of the death of an individual of great wealth is not a personal idiosyncrasy of mine-it is a characteristic reaction of all officers with whom I have come in contact. Whether it is caused by a subconscious fear of the power of money, or the more understandable appreciation of the possible political furor, I cannot state. A homicide dick usually the most skillful and experienced of officers-is no less sympathetic than any other type of man, but the exigencies of his task leave little time for sentimental expression. Furthermore, like a mortician, constant association with such affairs make them appear commonplace. By this time in my experience, a dead man was, in the colloquialism of the profession, just so much "cold meat"; I could walk in and set about my work with practically no reaction. That is why I was conscious of my present emotions, and puzzled. And I found that every man present appeared affected the same way.

In a luxurious bedroom lay the corpse of Doheny, clad only in his underwear and a silk bathrobe. There was a hole through his skull from ear to ear and he lay on his back. Blood was criss-crossed in a crazy pattern over his finely chiseled face.

Another corpse lay in a doorway less than twelve feet from young Doheny. This was Hugh Plunket, Doheny's secretary. He lay spread-eagled on his stomach, his face in a pool of blood that welled from a hole in his head. There was a smudge on the ivory-tinted wall where fragments of brain had splattered and the rug beneath his feet had been shoved sideways as he slumped in death.



E. L. Doheny, Jr., dead, with Plunket visible in doorway beyond

Wheeler told me to see what I could learn-from the physical evidence. I went to work.

After fingerprinting both bodies, I rolled Plunket and found a fine Beasley model .45 caliber Colt revolver. The gun was quite warm. I wrapped it carefully so as not to injure any latent fingerprints. I made photographs of the room and the bodies, and packed a bottle of whiskey and several glasses and odds and ends that might supply some evidence when examined at my laboratory. My particular job was to reconstruct the events from the physical evidence. The D.A. and Wheeler questioned the witnesses.

On completing my work, I learned the story as they had recounted it-an amazing story, to be sure.

Plunket (so the story went) had lost his mind and murdered his benefactor, then committed suicide. The crime had taken place at approximately eleven o'clock. The Beverly Hills police were notified at midnight, and at two a.m., the district attorney and the sheriff's office

were called. (Incidentally, the sheriff's office homicide squad had appeared on the scene a short time before, but when they found our office in command, they seemed well satisfied.)

There were no eyewitnesses to the actual shooting, but all other witnesses belonged either to the family or to the household staff, with the exception of a prominent "society" physician. A sufficient lapse of time had passed between the actual shooting and the arrival of the authorities to allow the witnesses to recover their emotional equilibrium. The testimony dovetailed with remarkable accuracy. Briefed, it went something like this: that Plunket had gone berserk; that on hearing the shots, witnesses had run towards the hallway which led to Doheny's bedroom, only to be met at the door by Plunket. They retreated when he threatened to kill them. Plunket then slammed the door and a moment later they heard the shot which presumably ended his life. When the witnesses went in and found the bodies, they retreated without disturbing anything.

One witness, however, reported that the shots, all of them, had been fired in quick succession-within a full second ... "One-two-three!" she described it.

This story did not quite fit the physical facts as I found them, and with a shock, I began to suspect that something was wrong. But apparently the other investigators were satisfied with the set-up, so I decided to say nothing about it until I developed some concrete proof. However, as I started to leave the house, Chief Wheeler, whose astuteness I had constant reason to respect, whispered to me to proceed to the morgue and examine the bodies in detail.

We arrived at the morgue about the same time-the corpses and I. There I found powder burns around the bullet-hole in Doheny's head, proving the gun was held less than three inches away at the moment it fired. I found no such markings on Plunket's head.

One of the sheriff's men ambled in, perched himself on a nearby drainage table and watched me work. From the expression on his face, I assumed that he, too, was curious about the shooting.

"Find anything of interest?" my audience inquired casually.

"Sure," I told him. "I don't believe Plunket killed Doheny! Something is warped about this case!" The deputy sheriff grinned.

“So what?”

“What? Why, we’ve got to get at the bottom ...” He wagged his head.

“Personally, I think you’re right-about the shooting.

But there’s no ‘we’ stuff as far as I’m concerned. Old man Doheny is too big a man for me to monkey with, kid.”

I was jarred by this attitude and immediately concluded this veteran was crooked.

Undaunted, I spent the remainder of the night developing the photographs, working up the latent finger-prints on the bottle of whiskey I had confiscated, and making tests with the revolver that had allegedly slain the two men. The gun presented several puzzles. Although I fired it many times, it did not heat up to any noticeable extent; I could not reconcile this to the fact that it was so warm when I took it from under Plunket’s body, admittedly several hours after the shooting. Nor could I discover any evidence of fingerprints. It is, of course, not unusual to find all finger-prints obliterated, but invariably, unless a gun has been wiped clean or is heavily oiled, the steel portion of the weapon will bear “smudges” (unreadable finger-prints).

There were many other questionable points brought out, and at ten o’clock the following morning, I wearily telephoned Chief Wheeler and enumerated my findings. He listened attentively and told me to report in person to the district attorney.

Buron Fitts received me in his home. Tired and irritable, I was a little more blunt than I would have been under other circumstances.

“Mr. Fitts,” I declared wearily, “Chief Wheeler instructed me to bring this report straight to you. I don’t believe Hugh Plunket killed Doheny and then committed suicide-at least it could not have happened in the manner described by the witnesses. The physical facts and the testimony of witnesses do not jibe. I understand, too, that some people believe the Doheny family are too influential to tamper with.”

Fitts reddened.

“There isn’t a man in the United States that’s big enough to stop me from conducting a criminal investigation,” he snapped. “What did you find?”

This was my first private interview with Buron Fitts.

He was a young man, forceful and filled with a mixture of idealism and practicality. Few people really *knew* Buron Fitts, for his personality changed in a direct ratio to the number of people in his presence.

I liked him best when I met him alone. He was a fighter and was, at the time, undergoing a series of attacks from anti-administration papers for his aggressive prosecution of Asa Keyes, under whom he once, years before, served as a deputy. By some warped process of reasoning, these papers took the stand that he should not have prosecuted Keyes because of the fact that he had previously worked under him. As I outlined my findings to the district attorney, I wondered if he would risk censure by dragging this case into the limelight.

“Despite testimony to the contrary,” I explained to Fitts, “I can prove by finger-prints on both the glasses and the liquor bottle that Plunket and Doheny were drinking together just prior to the shooting. That could be checked further by a chemical examination of the contents of their stomachs. When I examined Plunket lying on the floor”—I illustrated my point with photographs—“he had a half-burned cigarette held in his left hand in such a way that it would have been impossible for him to have opened the door and threatened witnesses as they so testified. He had the gun in his right, by their story.”

As I continued to enumerate the discrepancies in the evidence, the district attorney’s interest became keener. Finally he stopped me with an impatient gesture.

“But if Plunket did not kill Doheny, who did?”

“I can’t tell you that at this time. My job is merely to show you we have not found the truth-as yet.”

Fitts rose briskly.

“We’ll damn soon find that out!” he snapped and went to the telephone. He gave a few crisp instructions, and we proceeded direct to his office in the Hall of Justice.

Detectives began to filter in with various witnesses in tow, all surprised the affair was to be rehashed. Fitts examined them, including the physician. The D.A. asked if I had any questions.

At this time my experience at interrogating witnesses had been limited, but I asked a few questions on one point.

“Doctor, you were in the house at the time the shooting took place and you rushed into the bedroom within a matter of seconds thereafter. Is that correct?”

He nodded affirmatively.

“Doheny was dead when you arrived?” He again nodded.

“And the body was not disturbed in any way?” “It was not disturbed.”

“Then, Doctor, as an experienced physician, will you kindly explain how blood could run *up* from the ears and cross back and forth over the face of a man who never moved off his back?”

The physician hesitated. He was trapped and he knew it. In a low voice he admitted that young Doheny had lived for approximately twenty minutes after the shooting and during that time they had picked him up, then replaced him on the floor.

Fitts was surprised and angry. He asked if I had any other questions, but I was satisfied. I wanted to turn the whole thing over to more experienced brains than mine.

The new turn of events in the case caused a twenty-four hour sensation, then it was dead . . . *dead*. Fitts made a valiant attempt to get at the truth; how valiant, it took me a long time to fully appreciate. But when the case finally petered out, I took an awful beating from newspaper men and the other dicks in the bureau. I was accused of being everything from a faker to a plain damn fool. I was ready to agree to the latter definition.

It was from one of the veteran “broken-arches” that I drew the most concise summary of the situation.

“You were wrong, Les,” he told me with a sigh. “You should have let sleeping dogs lie until you could definitely prove just what *did* happen.”

“But, damn it,” I groaned. “How can you prove a thing like that unless you are allowed to investigate it?”

The answer was a shrug.