

The Sordid End to the Swap-Mate Scandal

To this day, the people of Amesbury do not know who was in The Set. They only know that the game of trading wives crept through their corner of New England like a moral stain, until beautiful Lorraine Clark, haunted by her lost innocence, slew the husband she had loved since her girlhood

BY GEORGE SCULLIN

Up in that odd northeastern angle of Massachusetts, intruding hard into the dark pine hills of New Hampshire, is the venerable, time-passed town of Amesbury. For reasons known only to its Puritan founders, it has its back turned upon the bright tidal waters of the Merrimack almost as though it were renouncing the worldly sea trade that had brought such ostentatious prosperity to Newburyport across the river. Instead of facing outward, toward the Atlantic only five miles away, Amesbury, like a walled city at the harbor's edge, lies within an amphitheatre of hills, facing only itself. From its summits ancient mansions frown across at each other with inbred politeness. Lower down, on winding, crisscrossing streets that were once cowpaths, a modern business district has been imposed upon gabled structures that were old a century ago. And still lower, on the floor of the self-contained valley, is the litter of gaunt, red-brick factories that speaks of better days. Amesbury once flourished as a center for the manufacture of shoes, hats, and especially carriages and sleighs. Now most of these enterprises exist as, in the hopeful words of the Chamber of Commerce, "desirable industrial sites," and many of the townspeople find their employment across the river in Newburyport.

Because Newburyport also figures in this bizarre case, much against the fastidious wishes of its upper set, it must be described as quite the opposite of Amesbury. From its boat yards, starting in 1630, went fleets of fishing boats, fleets of privateers during the American Revolution, and then, for a hundred years, fleets of the largest, fastest merchantmen ever to sail the seven seas in search of outrageous profit. The money is still visible on High Street, three miles of the largest, most ornate wooden mansions in America.

Five years ago Amesbury failed to observe its three-hundredth anniversary, all pride in its historic past having been wiped out by a series of disclosures of its much-too-lurid present.

It all began quietly enough, shortly after Amesbury had celebrated its 299th New Year. It began, in fact, with a whisper. "If the truth ever gets out about some of the parties around here, a lot of young couples will have to leave home." By March, 1953, Amesbury and Newburyport were both aware of a new group in their midst known only as "The Set."

If no one knew any members of The Set, there were few in Amesbury who could not talk knowingly of its monthly rituals, of the sophisticated way in which young husbands put their wives in a jack-

pot, and then gambled for new mates for the night. In Newburyport, from the mansions on High Street to the beer parlors on the waterfront, the talk was all of the same set, but there the rituals were called "wife swapping parties," and the belief seemed to exist that the set had found some enlightened way of breaking the monotony of monogamy. It was all just talk, and the more knowing dismissed it as such, but with the discovery of the body in June, 1954, the gossip could be dismissed no longer. Overnight, Amesbury and The Set became the focus of national attention.

Reporters sifting the limited evidence and the wide assortment of rumors could find only one point on which to agree. That was that the Melvin Clarks were too nice a couple to be drawn into so sordid an affair. Whether the reporters were local, or from Boston, New York, or the national wire services, they constantly referred to "model family," "beautiful wife," "ideal husband," and "perfect marriage," and for once the hackneyed phrases were both suitable and accurate. Yet the Clarks were tragically involved, and as the case developed it became apparent that the forces that had caught them up could likewise envelop any young American couple.

In Amesbury now Lorraine Clark is
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remembered as the beautiful girl she was, and the charming wife and mother she became, because that is a pleasant memory. She was born in 1927 to Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Eaton and raised in their comfortable home at 7 May Street. From Lorraine's first appearance in Sunday School, she was destined to attract boys. According to one of her classmates, she had the kind of beauty that could be regal without being snooty. "No airs about her, if you know what I mean. I never saw her snub anybody, not even after she started going with Mel. I guess she didn't have to. She wasn't the kind boys got fresh with."

As a matter of fact, after she met Mel in her freshman year at Amesbury High, the rest of the boys knew they didn't have a chance anyway. Melvin Clark, Jr., was small and slight during his high school years—his Navy record shows he reached five feet, nine inches, 140 pounds—but he was the handsomest boy in his class. He was the All-American boy type, with brown hair, brown eyes, regular features, and a wide smile that was utterly engaging. He was two years older than Lorraine, the only child of Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Clark, Sr.

From all reports, the meeting of Mel and Lorraine was a case of love at first

but there was no doubt about their "going steady." Mel's plans, prompted by his father and cordially sponsored by Lorraine, called for his going on to college to study electrical engineering, a field in which he showed great aptitude. World War II changed all that with crushing abruptness, as it changed the plans of hundreds of thousands of other young couples.

Impulsively, and there are those around Amesbury who say too impulsively, they married before Mel shoved off to join the Navy. Mel was nineteen and Lorraine seventeen, and if that does seem a precocious age for matrimony, there were uncounted thousands of other couples caught up by the same urgent demands.

In joining the Navy, the young husband was doing his duty. Furthermore, going down to the sea in ships is as much a part of New England tradition as Plymouth Rock. That is why so many old homes still carry that odd, boxlike affair on the roof called a widow's walk. But at seventeen, in a modern era, Lorraine could scarcely see herself confined to a widow's walk, patiently scanning the sea for sight of her husband's returning ship. Others younger than she had done it in centuries past, but there was a difference

she was dutifully at home with her parents. Outwardly she evidenced no frustrations, but women who have shared the same emptiness will say they were there.

With Mel's release from the Navy early in 1946, they encountered another phenomenon, as baffling to them as it was to their contemporaries. They met as married adults to resume a high school courtship. That they made this difficult adjustment is an indication of the depth of their love, but having passed the first step, they were still faced with the next. Amesbury, for the first time, faced the same housing shortage that tormented the rest of the country. The young Clarks were confronted with the choice of paying high rents, or moving in with one or the other of their families. They chose the high rents, in the meantime making plans to build as soon as possible.

It was a mutual decision, doing much to consolidate their marriage, and for the first time Lorraine could feel she was really doing her share as a housewife. She began to blossom after that, becoming absolutely radiant after the birth of Marlene late in the year. She resumed her church work, and entertained frequently in her home. A year later Sally was born, and then, in 1949, Mel got the boy he wanted when Michael arrived.

By now the financial pressure was on, familiar to all couples with growing families. Said one of his life-long friends, "Mel was in a sweat all the time. Not having a college education bothered him. He was always trying to make up for it, studying on the side, but with three kids arriving in less than four years, he was always having to take on extra work, and then he'd be too tired to study."

Lorraine did not mind the self-denial. With her three fine children, her fine husband, and her churchwork, she was a woman fulfilled, and if she had to scrimp, that, too, was part of the New England tradition.

Then Mel got his first big break. He got a job with the Columbia Broadcasting System's Hytron Laboratories across the river in Newburyport, working in the television tube department. It combined his aptitude for electrical work with his ambition to get ahead, and in a matter of weeks he was able to report to Lorraine another break. "There's a job open in my department as night foreman. That means from eleven at night until seven in the morning, but listen to this—it's a hundred and thirty-five a week. We can start building our house!"

They had already picked a site for what they always referred to as their dream house. It was about three miles north of town on the shores of Lake Attitash.

They started building in 1950, but

*The men tossed their house
keys into a hat. At a
signal, the wives pulled them
out. It seemed, for the
night, to solve the problem
of marital boredom.*

sight. Mel's waiting for Lorraine to escort her home became as familiar a sight on the school's front lawn as Kraske's famous bronze Statue of Doughboy that is a photographic must for all tourists. They weren't talking of marriage then,

now, Lorraine was a more than attractive girl finishing high school, wearing an almost visible "hands-off" sign because she was married. At the time when she would normally be enjoying male adulation at its peak, with dates for every occasion,

even with Mel doing all the electrical work, and devoting every spare minute to the project, they found themselves caught by sharply soaring prices. By the time their dream house was completed in 1951, they were desperately over their budget.

As Lorraine was to tell Amesbury Police Chief Edmund McLaughlin later, under far more strained circumstances, "It meant absolutely that I had to help out. It meant leaving the children with my parents, but there was this job in the diner in Merrimac, and what with tips, we could make ends meet."

More Than Just a Job

It was a little more complicated than that. Like most small town girls, Lorraine had worked before. Baby-sitting, seasonal jobs, and Saturday work in department stores, and such occasional chores as would return a dollar, but that was only work. What she was doing now was work plus the emotional wrench of tearing herself away from three small children and a beautiful new home. It was not slavery by any means. Merrimac is a pretty town only five miles west of Amesbury, and the diner, catering to local trade, is a far cry from the greasy spoon familiar to all congested highways. But as events were to prove, it was no place for Lorraine, because any separation from her children at this point would have carried the same impact.

Even now, it is hard to realize that Lorraine, the mother of three splendid children, was only twenty-five when she first took the job in Merrimac. She was just reaching the full beauty promised by her adolescence, but along with her beauty, provocatively contradicting it, went a small-girl, almost baby voice. It was, in a way, a dangerous combination, beauty and voice appealing to the protective instincts of every male, but at the same time providing enticement all the more alluring because of its young innocence. There is no reason to believe Lorraine knew this at that time. She knew she was beautiful. She had been told so often enough to groom herself accordingly, making every attractive detail of her features count, but never did she consciously combine beauty and girlish voice to become cutely coy.

For transportation to and from her job, Lorraine used the family's second-hand Hudson convertible. She left for work around eleven in the morning to cover the noon rush hour, and arrived home between eight and nine, after the supper rush. The timing was such that Mel could have used the car for his night work in Newburyport, but neither liked the idea of Lorraine's being left out at the lake without transportation. Another car being out of the financial

picture, Mel bought a scooter, and on that, he made the half-hour ride to work.

Friends are now able to see where several things started to go wrong during the year of 1952. The cottage on Lake Attitash was out in the wilderness, with the loons shrieking their ghastly laughter on the lake, and all sorts of noises in the underbrush. Lorraine, alone with the children after Mel left for work at night, had to fight those minor fears herself—small fears, taken one at a time, but cumulative.

Then there was the problem of adjustment. At first they had thought they would have their mornings together, after Mel returned from work, and their evenings together after Lorraine returned from work, and both would have ample time with the children. But Lorraine, returning exhausted from her work at 8 p.m., was not up to greeting a husband freshly awakened from his day's sleep, nor could she, freshly awakened in the morning, see him as a romantic figure when he wearily returned from his night's work.

At what now clearly appears as a critical point, Mel unwittingly removed himself further from the family by undertaking a new project. As he saw it, Lake Attitash offered several attractive possibilities as a boating and picnicking area, and to that end he started planning a boat rental service to open in the spring of 1953. Not having the capital to buy new equipment, he bought old boats, and devoted his spare time to repairing them.

In working all night on a highly technical job, and then working all his spare hours to build his own business, Mel was only doing what was expected of any thrifty New England young man. When Lorraine tried to tell him that this was 1953, and that wives were no longer the drudges the Puritans had made them, he was ready with an eager answer: "Look, if we can make some money renting boats, next year we can open a resort store. Sell supplies to picnickers and campers—the works. Then you won't have to work in a diner any more. You can run everything from right here."

To Lorraine the rosy future he painted seemed a long way off, almost unattainable. By right of three hundred years of New England heritage, Lorraine was supposed to be a housewife and mother, dedicated to serving her family. By economic necessity she was supposed to be a modern working girl, a glib waitress in a diner. But there was no one to see then that in her, such duality of personality could produce only conflict.

By her own admission, Lorraine knew she was failing as a wife and mother as early as December, 1952. She was impatient with her husband, and when Mel did take his first day off in months—to go

rabbit hunting instead of taking her to Lawrence or Portsmouth or some place where there was life—she felt deserted. At the same time, when one of her daughters asked, "Mommie, aren't you ever going to stay home to play with us?" she had the feeling of being the one who had deserted the whole family.

The ironic note here is that Mel, sensing Lorraine's disturbed feelings, sought to make amends by throwing a party. Some say it was a New Year's Eve party; others say it was later in January. Lorraine's own admission was that at a party in January, 1953, after Mel had gone to his job, she first became an unfaithful wife. No man was mentioned in this admission, and the indication is that she yielded because for the first time in months she got the kind of attention her beauty had taught her to expect.

In committing her first act of adultery, Lorraine was yielding to no passionate impulse, regardless of how impulsive the act might have been. This, it is important to remember, is the land of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, and of Hester Prynne, the young girl who donned the vivid "A." This is also the land of the witch hunts in which a married man could and did denounce as a witch the strange woman found in his bed, having no other ready explanation. In Lorraine's mind, with her first transgression, she became a creature beyond the pale.

Now the story of Lorraine and of The Set become curiously mixed. There is this story that still persists, reasonably intact, after all these years: The set consisted of some twenty couples, all very, or "veddy" as some would have it, sophisticated members of the elite of Amesbury, Newburyport, and Salisbury Beach, with occasional guest couples from Boston and the art colony at Gloucester. In their opinion, faithfulness was for the unenlightened clods who still thought of sex as an act limited to man and wife. Their own broad view was that sex was a purely physical manifestation, of no more significance than dining, drinking, or dancing with another man's wife, or another woman's husband.

A Satisfactory Way to Swap

Yet, as rumor still has it, even in this idyllic atmosphere, jealousy would intrude. While the wives were willing to concede that sex was impersonal, and of no more significance than a sentimental waltz, they were not quite capable of seeing, without jealousy, all interest concentrated on two or three of the most attractive women in the set. Here in these rumors, Lorraine's name is heavily underscored, as though by feline claws, but no one will say by whom.

But The Set was resourceful, as they assured themselves a sophisticated group

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would be. One night in June of 1953, so the oft-repeated story goes, the set was meeting in a sheltered cove on the bay side of Salisbury Beach, and the usual pairing-off of temporary mates took place. Still remaining around the dimming campfire were three or four ill-paired couples who, if they were sure of nothing else, were positive their legal mates were somewhere in the bayberry brush, not dealing with them fairly. They were not in a complaining mood. They were lower than that. Somehow they felt inferior, as though they were the unwanted, the rejected. Then said one with alcoholic brilliance, "What we should do is draw lots. Play spin the bottle, or something like that. Then it would all be fair and square, we'd all have mates, and there wouldn't be anybody left sitting around the fire feeling jealous."

A Fair and Exciting Game

The ultimate solution was the key game. Into a hat the men tossed their flat, brass, remarkably similar house keys. A brisk shaking, and then into the hat groped the wives at a given signal. To whatever master of the house the key belonged, so belonged for the night the woman who had drawn it. It was fair, exciting, and it left no wife or husband room to complain of chicanery.

To the question of where Mel was during these wife-swapping parties, there still persists an airy answer. "He worked nights, remember?"

Such an answer only prompts another question. If Mel was not a participant—and he wasn't—whose husband did Lorraine swap?

At this point a curious figure enters the case. To go back a little, working with Mel when he had been on the day shift at the electronics plant had been a young man named Arthur Jackson. On casual acquaintance, Jackson was an ingratiating character. Maybe his black, curly hair was a little too oily, his figure a little too gross, his dress a little too flashy, his mouth a little too coarse, his glance a little too bold, and his manner a little too familiar, but these were details that were to become apparent only later. At the time Mel brought him home to meet Lorraine, he was a very subdued boy. His wife was divorcing him and the blow to his ego was numbing.

One smile from Lorraine was enough to salve his wounded pride. She was two years his senior, which made her solicitude all the more flattering, and soon Jackson was a regular guest of the Clarks, frequently going with them to the Saturday night parties at Lake Attitash. Describing those parties recently, one of the participants said, "Of course we had parties out here, and still do. What else is there to do? Amesbury is

a dead town for young people, so we make our own entertainment. Mel and Lorraine were good fun, especially when we could get Mel to play the piano, and maybe we'd have some beer and sing, but nothing wilder than that. For heaven's sake, don't get us mixed up with The Set. We're just folks out here."

But for Lorraine, that was only her surface life being revealed for friends and neighbors. By no later than March of 1953 she had found in Arthur Jackson all the attention and flattery Mel was too busy to give her. No longer was she the neglected wife, the harassed mother of three, the humble waitress in a diner. She had a lover younger than she, and she must have amazed him with the fierceness of her ardor. With the breaking of her marriage vows in January, she was in a restless, reckless mood, alternately tormented by her New England conscience and desperate urges to escape it. Attention and reassurance were not something to be yearned for wistfully. They were something she had to have, and in Jackson she found them.

For a time Jackson filled her needs, and then her implacable conscience caught up with her again. Now she was not a woman who had impetuously sinned once, but a scheming woman deliberately seeking ways to be with her lover. In her hours alone, the enormity of her sins was overwhelming, driving her into a more frantic search for new excitements in which to forget them. She did not dare look at her past, and the distant future, filled with dire promises of Puritanical retribution, was too awful to contemplate. Henceforth for Lorraine there could be no time but the immediate now.

There is no evidence of when, where, or how Lorraine met The Set. There are only the rumors. These rumors say that in The Set Lorraine found what she craved. Sophisticated couples. College graduates. Artists. Sons and daughters of prominent people. If they could make light of sex, and call a little friendly adultery a liberating symbol of the new order, then a small-town girl who had never gone past high school had nothing to worry about.

Once trapped by that line of thought—not new but as old as the human race—Lorraine's search for excitement changed into a rapidly accelerating flight from reality. In the fall Jackson rented an apartment in Newburyport, giving Lorraine a key, and there she would visit him after work, cooking his suppers for him and otherwise taking care of his needs.

Probably the most remarkable feature of Lorraine's dual existence was her ability to be her naïve self in the presence of family and friends. She could, in fact, gossip as eagerly about The Set as any

of her friends, and her wide-eyed, baby-voiced astonishment at its scandalous conduct was too realistic to be doubted. Somewhere in the course of a year she had learned how to keep her two lives so separated that they didn't even meet in her own mind.

April 10, 1954. At 4 A.M. Mel sought out his superintendent and reported he was too sick to finish out the night shift. It was an aching raw morning, well below freezing, but Mel chose to ride home on the scooter in spite of his boss's worried suggestion that he rest on a cot in the first aid room. Thus for the first time in years he arrived home unexpectedly, some three hours ahead of time. It is still a subject of speculation as to whom he found—or didn't find—when he arrived in the chill blackness of that pre-dawn hour. Was Jackson there, or was it that Lorraine wasn't there? These are but a few of the unanswered questions that serve to keep the case open to endless speculation. Established beyond doubt is that sometime that morning, Mel and Lorraine had a quarrel.

At eleven that morning Lorraine, her beautiful composed self, drove off to work, stopping first at her parents' home to visit for a moment with the children. She was composed all during her working hours. Mel was not. At three that afternoon his friend Kenneth Cook arrived to help him move some boats as planned, but Mel was not up to it. "I feel lousy," he told Cook. "I was sick last night, and couldn't sleep today. Make it tomorrow morning, huh?"

If one side of Lorraine was calm and composed, the other side was tense, nearing hysteria. When she left work at 8 P.M., it was to drive directly to the dream house at Lake Attitash, and behind her she could feel a following wave, ready to come crashing down.

Pleas Instead of Punishment

The quarrel began where it had left off that morning. Mel, sick and exhausted to the point of collapse, was tormentingly reasonable. Maybe if he had been furious and violent, acted the outraged husband, Lorraine might have accepted it or even welcomed it as the punishment that was her due. But when he pleaded with her to think of her children, her parents, their marriage, he was appealing to the very things she didn't dare think about. Every mention of the children was a stab at her conscience. Every mention of her parents forced an agonizing surge of guilt. And Mel was pathetic, bewildered—if he had taken better care of her, she wouldn't be in this trouble. He, not Jackson, had driven her to sin.

An hour. Two hours. Three. "Think of the children." "Give up the partying." "Come back to us." Pleas more searing

than epithets. Pound, pound, pound came the words. Children, parents, marriage. They were the only words Mel had. She had to shut them out. Silence them. There was the small pistol. The one she kept loaded for protection during her lonely nights. She sprang for it.

Mel was too slow. She shot him in the head before he could reach her. Terrifyingly, he did not fall. He grappled with her, bruising her chin, bruising her shoulder. She fired again. He fell, and crashing down with him came that following wave. Now it was not Mel she was killing, but her whole guilt complex. When she fell upon him, stabbing wildly with a steel knitting needle, it was her conscience she was trying to destroy.

Her fury spent, Lorraine became icily calm. No remorse swept over her to confuse her thinking. Any love she might once have felt for Mel was as dead as he was. Now she was remembering an explanation she had heard somewhere for the absence of fish in the Merrimack, something about the chemical plants up-river dumping enough wastes to turn the water into an acid bath. And that would do it. Calmly she dragged the body out to the convertible and stuffed it into the trunk. She collected two fifteen-pound mushroom anchors from Mel's boats and a coil of radio wire from his workshop.

It was now nearing 4 A.M., a good hour, and as it was Palm Sunday, there would be no late stragglers returning from parties. Staying to the back roads, she drove her burden to the Rocks Village bridge, once the main structure over the Merrimack but long since by-passed by the thru-way bridge at Newburyport. There in the center of the bridge, enclosed in darkness, she wired the anchors to the body, one to a hand and one to a foot. The iron rail was four feet high and latticed with strap iron through which not even a child could fall, so she had to perform an incredible feat of strength to lift the weighted body—180 pounds in all—over the rail, but she willed herself to the effort, and her will was more powerful than her body. The corpse splashed heavily, and Lorraine drove to the cottage to sleep soundly.

No master criminal ever covered his tracks more neatly than did Lorraine. Before going to work at the diner that Palm Sunday morning, she showed her bruised chin and shoulder to her parents and Mr. Clark, Sr., with all the plaintive, baby-voiced hurt of a woman who has been struck by her husband for no good reason. "This time he has gone too far," she said. "If he doesn't apologize right away, I'm going to leave him."

When Kenneth Cook arrived at the Clark cottage that morning, he found the place deserted and the doors locked. "That wasn't like Mel, but then, being

Palm Sunday, I thought maybe he had gone to church." At 2 P.M., Mel failed to show up for the Sunday dinner his mother had prepared for him, and further concern was shown when he failed to appear at work that night. But Monday morning Lorraine cleared all that up.

"He was waiting for me in the car when I came out of the diner last night.

cruel and inhuman treatment and desertion.

As if to prove her point, state police recovered the convertible on April 19, a week after Mel's disappearance. It had been left only that morning in a parking lot in Everett, a northern suburb of Boston, and the key was in the lock. No attendant had parked the car, but one

No longer was she the neglected wife, the harassed mother of three. She had a younger lover, and she amazed him with her ardor.

We drove over and sat in front of my folks' house, but when I wouldn't go out to the cottage with him, he got mad all over again. He drove off, and now I haven't even got a car to go to work in. He's sulking, that's all."

But on Wednesday Mr. Clark, Sr., was worried enough to report to the police that his son was missing from home and job, "and that's not like my son." Oddly, at this stage Mel had unwittingly connived at his own disappearance. No doubt brooding over the way his marriage was falling apart, and thinking of his happier days in the Navy, he had spoken in many places of a wistful desire, "to go down South and see some of my old Navy pals." Police investigating Mel's movements up to the time of his quarrel with Lorraine heard this story from one of Mel's friends at the plant, from the chef at the all-night diner where he ate, and from a cousin. When they questioned Lorraine about this point, she became pitifully stricken.

"Now he's deserted us," she said with a small girl's wail. "It's the end. Now I am going to get a divorce."

And on April 16, through her Newburyport attorney, C. Francis Leary, she began divorce proceedings, charging

early-arriving worker said he thought he remembered seeing a man walking away from it. When the police examined it for signs of violence, they discovered through laboratory tests that the trunk had been cleaned with benzene, but neatness was no crime, and there were no traces of blood.

Lorraine closed the dream cottage and moved in with her parents, removing only her clothes, a davenport and a chair, the furniture being needed to fill out the rooms her parents had set aside for her. Dutifully she was home every night not later than nine-thirty, just as she had been while Mel was in the Navy. So perfectly did she fit the picture of the wife who had been wronged that by June even Mel's friends had come to think he had flown the coop.

June 2, 1954. The spring floods had surged down the Merrimack, and were gone. The day was warm, the tide abnormally low in the marshes. On the south side of the river, midway between Rocks Village bridge and Wickford Point, a woman birdwatcher carefully stalked through the marsh grass hoping to sight nesting waterfowl. When she could go no further without sinking, she pulled out her high-powered binoculars

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and began scanning the outer pools. What she sighted instead of waterfowl was the half-submerged corpse in that final stage of decomposition that shocks even hardened coroners. Herself almost another victim of the crime through heart failure, she made her way to dry land in a half-fainting condition, and managed to phone the police.

No boat could be forced through the marshes to the pool in which the body floated. No approach to it could be made on foot. If a birdwatcher with high-powered binoculars had not arrived. . . . Only by extending fire ladders across the muck did the police manage to recover the body. It lacked a hand and a foot. Only a few shreds of outdoor clothing remained on it. The features, even the teeth, had been battered beyond all possible recognition. The fingers of the remaining hand were in shreds, only a few tatters of skin still adhering to the thumb. But a few grueling hours later Medical Examiner Daniel Leary was able to announce that the victim had been slain by two small caliber bullets through the head, and numerous fine stab wounds, as from an ice pick. His report was that the body had been in the water for about two months, and that its battered con-

dition was probably due to its having been dashed against submerged rocks during the violence of the spring floods. He set the age of the victim as near thirty, weight, approximately 150 pounds, and hair, brown. He accounted for the missing hand and foot by pointing to a broken strand of wire still attached to the remaining ankle. "I think you will

find," he said, "that the body was torn away from weights attached at the points where arm and leg are severed." Thus quickly had Medical Examiner Leary produced an accurate picture of the cause of death and the manner in which the corpse had been dumped. But in two months, swirled on by the floods, the corpse might have been carried down the Merrimack from as far as fifty miles away. The police, judging by the unnecessary thoroughness with which the murder had been carried out—two fatal shots in the head and numerous fatal stabs with an ice pick—concluded they had the victim of a gangland execution on their hands. They notified Boston, but the police there, after a hopeful check of their undesirable characters, found them all unpleasantly accounted for. The next step was to see what could be done with the tatters of a thumbprint.

The most painstaking work could produce only a loop here, a ridge there, and a whorl near the ball of the thumb. With that scant amount of information, not even the fabulous fingerprint department of the F.B.I. had enough to work on. But there was the missing persons report filed on Melvin Clark, age twenty-nine, weight 150, hair brown. The Navy

That put the case squarely in the hands of Amesbury Chief of Police, Edmund McLaughlin, and Essex County District Attorney, Hugh Cregg.

McLaughlin went to work digging up everything he could find on the murdered man's habits. Cregg interviewed Lorraine. If there was a quarrel violent enough to lead her to sue for divorce, it could have been violent enough to lead to murder.

"Mel didn't have an enemy in the world," Lorraine assured him. "No one, absolutely no one, would want to kill him. He could get hot-headed, but he never hit me but that once, and all the time I kept hoping he'd hear about the divorce and come back to stop it."

No one could have been more convincing. It was Lorraine Clark, the mother of three, speaking, and the other side of her personality was thoroughly hidden. She couldn't have shot Mel. Mel had deserted her, and if he was gone, how could she have killed him?

McLaughlin was doing a little better. He moved into the dream cottage with all his laboratory equipment and a team of experts. An X-ray machine peered through the plaster walls in search of buried bullets. Chemists went over the walls and furniture for traces of gunpowder. Ultra-violet lamps sought in eerie blueness the stains of blood that would show up black. Under that intense scrutiny, though the murder was two months old and the house had been cleaned with a powerful detergent, they could see the murder happening in front of them. The first gout of blood, the wavering trail around the room, the pool where the body had come to rest, the trailing smear leading out the back door.

The *Newburyport News* reported that the scene of the murder had been located. Boston papers were interested. A Rocks Village resident read the first reports and was stirred to remember that around April 11, in an hour of insomnia, he had heard a heavy splash in the river, and then seen a car near the center of the bridge turn on its headlights and drive away. McLaughlin sent a frogman down, and an anchor was located of the type used by Mel.

In his investigation of the cottage, McLaughlin had discovered lighter areas on the walls, dust-free, as though articles of furniture had once stood there. He questioned Lorraine, and she readily told him she had taken the davenport and chair, and just as readily released them for laboratory inspection. About the blood stains washed from the floors with a powerful detergent, she could add nothing. She hadn't picked up the furniture until two weeks after Mel's disappearance, and it was no surprise to her that the floors were clean, "because I always kept a clean house." When laboratory

*If he had been angry,
had threatened her with the
punishment she secretly wanted,
it might never have
happened. Instead, he pleaded.*

Department produced his fingerprint record, and when the loop, the ridge, and the whorl where superimposed on the whole print, they fitted into place like three pieces from a jigsaw puzzle. If that was not conclusive evidence, two fillings from an unbroken tooth were identified by a Newburyport dentist as work he had done for Mel.

tests revealed dried droplets of blood concealed in the floral design of the upholstery, her horror was unfeigned. "I've been sleeping on it," she gasped.

McLaughlin and Cregg had to concede that Lorraine would hardly take blood-stained furniture into her parents' home if she was guilty. Had she had the faintest doubts, she could have destroyed the furniture.

Science had done magnificently well in an impersonal way. It had identified an all but unidentifiable corpse. It had located the death scene. It could blueprint the murder in ultra-violet light. It had traced the body's course from cottage to bridge to swamp. But at no point could it grasp the human factor.

It could not provide a motive. It could not identify the killer, or killers. It could not say who had parked the car in Everett, who had cleaned the cottage, or even who, besides Lorraine, had seen Mel alive on Palm Sunday. Wrote Lorraine to Jackson: "I can feel your arms around me . . ."

There were no fingerprints. No weapon had been found. There was only the circumstantial evidence pointing to Lorraine, and that led nowhere. The guilty Lorraine had ceased to exist, so thoroughly eliminated that the widow was as eager to see Mel's killer captured as anyone, despite the fact that Mel had beaten her.

The reporters continued to dig, but not along scientific lines. They just went from one rumor to the next.

At last to their rescue, driven by envy over the publicity Lorraine was getting, came Arthur Jackson. He knew all there was to know about wife swapping parties, he said, and he was willing to imply that he knew all there was to know about Lorraine. McLaughlin picked him up, grilled him thoroughly, and then to all intents and purposes threw him out. Jackson was aggrieved. He complained to reporters that no one really appreciated what a great lover he was.

A Lie Detector Test

The fact was that McLaughlin had gotten all he needed out of Jackson. If science had failed him, Cregg was ready to help with the age-old rule that the man with the most gossip is probably the man with the biggest interest in the crime. Once more Lorraine was brought in for a new line of questioning, the first item of which was, "Would you mind taking a lie detector test?"

Lorraine could hardly say no. To do so would be a tacit admission of guilt. For the test she was taken to Boston, and this time science redeemed itself for the very reason it had failed before. In all the conclusions it had previously reached, it could not find the human factor, and now it could not find the human

factor in reaching its conclusions. The lie detector impersonally registered Lorraine's emotions while she answered 120 questions so convincingly that her human interrogators could only believe in her innocence. But the machine, utterly immune to her beauty, her baby voice, the pathetic wringing of her hands, had a different verdict. As one of the officers said recently of that occasion, "Her answers as registered by the machine led us to believe she should be questioned more pointedly."

The more pointed questioning took place in Lawrence, with McLaughlin and Cregg doing the pointing, supported by a staff of male and female officers. Did it involve admissions made by Arthur Jackson? Did Lorraine break because she had been betrayed by the man for whom she admitted having "an uncontrollable passion"? It was a closed session. Known are the persons present at the questioning. Known is the fact that her confession covered three pages of single-spaced, typewritten copy. Known is the fact that District Attorney Cregg refused to make the confession public.

That was on June 26. Nothing was made public. On June 27 every newspaper from Calais, Maine, to San Diego, California, was carrying the story of Lorraine's confession, and the perfidies of one Arthur Jackson. According to the degree of revulsion of the reporter, he was described as Blabber-Mouth, Kiss-and-Tell, Boastful Beau, and Lover Boy. But Jackson was grateful for his notices. "Man, you don't know what this case has done for me," he said. "I can hardly fight the girls off."

In her cell awaiting trial, twenty-seven-year-old, baby-voiced Lorraine could no longer flee from the past, the present was too awful to contemplate, and only the future offered some hope of redemption. Slowly she pulled herself together, facing the life she had sought to escape ever since that night in January, 1953.

The trial took place as scheduled on November 29, 1954. Now, in direct testimony and cross examination, would be answered all the questions about The Set. Now would be explained how the car had reached Everett, who had cleaned the house, what had happened to the murder weapon, what had happened when Mel had returned unexpectedly from work that Saturday dawn, who . . . In the courtroom the suspense was so taut the long-dead air was vibrant.

Judge Fairhurst entered, and there followed the solemn ritual by which the court was declared in session. Then Attorney Leary was on his feet declaring, "Over my wishes, my client pleads guilty to second degree murder."

It was all over. It was not over for

the Lorraine who had found herself in the unique position of exposing family and friends to the revelations of a long-drawn-out trial. Unanswered went the questions. Officially that was all there was to the case. Lorraine had killed her husband, and for that crime Judge Fairhurst sentenced her to life imprisonment. Unofficially the case was not closed. As long as those questions are unanswered, it will remain open to speculation all the more endless because speculation can lead nowhere—and everywhere.

The Letter Is Still Scarlet

But there was to be an anti-climax. If Blabber-Mouth could not be linked directly to the murder, there still remained on the Massachusetts books that same law that had once condemned Hester Prynne, the adulteress who wore the scarlet "A." The next day Arthur Jackson was brought before Judge Fairhurst for trial without a jury. He entered smugly, convinced of his immunity, and for the first half-hour he couldn't believe what was happening to him. One by one, with astounding alacrity, the witnesses appeared against him. Chief McLaughlin was first, eagerly leading off with a flood of damaging testimony. Following him came three more top-ranking police officials, confirming and adding to his testimony. By the time they had finished, Blabber-Mouth was reduced to Blubber-Mouth, tearfully protesting he was just an innocent boy caught up by the excitement of the case. "Maybe I kissed her once or twice," he pleaded, "but that was all."

"I don't believe you," said Judge Fairhurst flatly, sounding a warning for all errant, excitement-seeking wooers. "In reference to the conduct of this man, he can take a large measure of the responsibility for wrecking that family. That girl is going to be doing penance for a long time. I feel he should do penance for a long time, and that is what is going to happen to him." Thereupon he handed down the limit—three sentences on three counts of adultery, each one for a year in prison with the added provision that they be served consecutively, one after the other.

Jackson has served his terms, and as of now he is "out West somewhere," for which Amesbury is grateful. Lorraine is still in prison, the cell-mate of her conscience. As for The Set, there have been some divorces amongst them, but they have found no escape. In the words of an officer connected with the case from its beginning, "Those people have to live with themselves for the rest of their lives. Maybe they can stand what their husbands and wives have done, but I'd say that's a mighty long stretch."

THE END