

Case of the Widow's Hoard

By WILLIAM T. BRANNON



She was poor and didn't have an enemy in the world, yet she had been beaten to death. Why?

WHEN DETECTIVE Sergeant David Harris was assigned to investigate the murder of Mrs. Florence Helka, a 72-year-old Detroit widow, the case looked hopeless, with no clues and no apparent motive.

Mrs. Helka owned a small bungalow in one of the older residential sections of Detroit. Her only income was a \$60 monthly welfare check, which was supplemented by donations of food and clothing from her church.

When Mrs. Helka was hospitalized for a minor heart ailment, the church paid the bill. The neighbors were fond of the friendly widow and helped her in many small ways. She was last seen alive about 10:30 p.m. Friday, June 25, 1954. She had been visiting next door, but hurried home to close the windows because of a sudden rain.

Mrs. Helka was not seen the next day. When nothing had been heard from her by 6 p.m., the neighbors decided to look in. When she couldn't be roused, they forced the front door and found her in a negligee, lying on top of her bed. The covers hadn't been pulled back.

Police made a quick investigation and could find no signs of a struggle; nor was there the usual evidence of a prowler. The bed clothes were not disarranged, the rugs were not ruffled, no drawers hung open, no furniture was out of place. The only fingerprints were those of the victim.

The back door was closed

and locked, but there was a small hole in the glass panel. A hand could have reached through and unbolted the door. But there were no fingerprints, not even smudges.

An autopsy revealed that Mrs. Helka had died about midnight Friday and that death was due to an internal hemorrhage caused by heavy fist blows about the head.

The neighbors were certain that the widow had little if any money. She kept her savings in a metal box on the dresser, where police found it. The only fingerprints were those of Mrs. Helka, and the box contained \$55 in bills. The neighbors thought that was about what she might have saved.

Questioning of dozens of the victim's friends convinced Sergeant Harris that Mrs. Helka had no enemies. If this were true and if robbery wasn't the motive, why had she been killed?

Detectives came up with two leads: an iceman had been seen entering the back door of the Helka home about 1 p.m. Saturday. The church had recently given Mrs. Helka a new electric refrigerator; why would she be getting ice? Others recalled that an elderly man had quarreled with Mrs. Helka some months before. Most of the neighbors had turned out when the body was found, but this man, who lived across the street, hadn't. Why?

THE ICEMAN was found and explained why he had taken ice into Mrs. Helka's home.

She felt she couldn't afford the \$4 a month it would cost to operate the refrigerator and had kept the old-fashioned box. Nearly every day, the iceman had some ice left over and he brought it to her, making no charge.

When he arrived at the bungalow Saturday with a large chunk of leftover ice, the back door was open. He put the ice in the box, as he had done many times, thinking the widow was out shopping and had left the door open for him. As was his custom, he closed the door, which had a spring lock, when he left. He had worn gloves and that accounted for lack of fingerprints. The iceman was not held.

The neighbor across the street admitted the quarrel.

"It was silly and I apologized," he declared. "I've been to see Florence many times since then to help her with small chores."

He said he had been at a movie when Mrs. Helka was killed and hadn't returned home until late; he hadn't learned of the murder until the following day. A lie test cleared him.

Without any leads, Sergeant Harris sent five detectives into the area to ring doorbells

and ask questions. One thing still puzzled him: Mrs. Helka undoubtedly screamed when she was assaulted; why hadn't anybody heard her?

Questioning hundreds of people, the detectives found nobody who had heard a scream or a call for help. They came up with only one name—that of Frank Hunt, who rented a one-room apartment in the next block.

The records showed that Frank Hunt was an ex-convict who had been paroled in November, 1953.

Sergeant Harris knew that all elderly widows are reputed to keep money hidden—and that many of them do. He reasoned that this was the work of a professional criminal: he had been careful not to leave his own fingerprints and he had made no effort to wipe up prints, as an amateur might have done. Only someone living in the area would have known about Mrs. Helka.

Though there was no proof of robbery, Harris believed that was the motive. A clever professional criminal, finding a good hoard, might have left the \$55 behind to confuse the police investigation.

Frank Hunt seemed to fit this pattern, and an order

was sent out to pick him up for questioning. While detectives were looking for him, Sergeant Harris did some quiet investigating on his own. First, he checked the weather bureau, then he talked to Hunt's employer and his landlady.

After that, the search for Hunt was intensified. He was found in a tavern, and after he had failed a lie test he confessed the murder.

He had broken in and forced Mrs. Helka to open the metal box, which contained \$285. He had taken all but \$55, which he had left behind purposely. Then he had beaten Mrs. Helka to death because she recognized him.

ASKED WHY he had been so certain that Hunt was guilty, Sergeant Harris explained: the killer had struck during the storm when the widow's screams would be drowned out. But this couldn't have been planned ahead, because the storm broke suddenly. So the prowler had to be someone who lived close by.

Hunt had made two mistakes which convinced Sergeant Harris he was the killer. He had left his room only a few minutes before the storm broke and hadn't been back since. On Monday morning, he had failed to report for work. Hunt hadn't informed his parole officer that he had moved or quit his job. Both were parole violations, and Sergeant Harris felt Hunt wouldn't have jeopardized his freedom without a very strong reason.

