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MYSTERY

Every housebreaking seemed different—yet an alert detective came up with a single solution

**case of the
Capital Burglaries**

By WILLIAM T. BRANNON

UNTIL THE WAVE of burglaries began late in 1941, Precinct 8, in the fashionable northwest section of Washington, D. C., had been relatively free of crime. Suddenly, Charles T. Williams, the precinct's only detective, had a full-time job solving the strange crimes.

All the victims were national figures—cabinet members, high government officials, bankers, manufacturers—whose homes had been entered while they were away from Washington. There appeared to be at least three gangs at work.

One group concentrated on silverware but passed up other articles of value. A second group took no silver but carried away diamonds, valuable jewelry, objects of art, and cash. A third group of burglars apparently spent hours on a job and had a gay party—emptying liquor bottles, leaving lipstick-smudged glasses—while it removed anything that wasn't nailed down, such as cameras, radios, cuff links, and jewelry.

The burglaries had just one thing in common: in every case, cigarettes had been smoked, and some of the butts had been ground into expensive Oriental rugs.

An unusual facet of the case was that none of the stolen articles had been offered for sale in Washington. Though the capital had no pawnshops, secondhand dealers fulfilled the same purpose by buying jewelry and merchandise outright, then holding it for a reasonable time for resale. These dealers made regular, detailed reports to the Washington police. Pawnshops in nearby cities in Maryland and Virginia also reported to the Washington police. But none reported articles listed by Williams as stolen.

Seemingly stymied, Williams went over the burglary reports again and re-examined the evidence found at each home—the cigarette butts, the empty liquor bottles, the lipstick-smudged highball glasses. Then Williams got an idea: maybe there was only one burglar! Maybe he had staged the various entries carefully to make it appear that different gangs were at work! But how was he to find one man among the millions in the metropolitan area?

Williams went to headquarters and dug out the reports of dealers for several months. He began studying the lists of merchandise sold, the names and addresses of the sellers. He looked at one, passed it up, then came back to it. Several small items had been sold by a man who gave his name as Ernest Clauson and his address as 1427 M Street Northwest. The detective knew Washington and he doubted there was any such address. A check proved him right.

Why had a phony address been given unless the articles were stolen? Was the name fictitious, too?

The dealer who had bought the items from Clauson still had them—cuff links, a piece of dental gold, and a gold nosepiece. None had been listed as stolen in any of the



A secondhand dealer gave Williams his first real lead.

burglaries, but there was a chance they had been stolen and not listed. Williams recovered the articles from the dealer and began by canvassing the burglary victims.

After several fruitless calls, one victim said: "Yes, those are mine. I neglected to list them."

With a definite line on the burglar at last, Williams began looking for Ernest Clauson. He was not listed in the phone directories of Washington or nearby cities.

Williams had learned that people who give phony addresses often use right numbers but fictitious streets. He began looking up streets on which the number 1427 existed. It appeared on several northwest streets, and he tried them all. The last was N Street Northwest. At that address, a rooming house, a man came to the door.

"You Mr. Clauson?" Williams inquired.

"Yes. I run this rooming house. You want a room?"

"No, but maybe you can help me." The detective told of the burglaries, of his fruitless search.

"I don't think I have a burglar living here," said Clauson, "but I sure will keep my eyes open."

CLAUSON WAS AFFABLE and Williams was in no hurry to leave. Finally, Williams reached in his pocket. "Got a cigarette? I'm all out."

"Sure, if you like these." He produced a pack of a rare brand of cork-tip cigarettes.

"Just what I've been looking for!" Williams said. "Come on, Clauson, we're going to the station!"

Clauson was held while patrolmen went into the rooming house. They nabbed a man sneaking out the back door, then searched the house. They found roomful of loot from the burglaries—most of it packed in suitcases.

Ernest Clauson confessed he was the burglar in each of the different cases and bragged about how he had fooled the police by making it appear that there were several burglary gangs. The rooming house was an added touch. It was normal to see a suitcase being carried in or out of a rooming house, and no one would pay any attention.

The other man had plans for disposing of the stolen articles in New York and Philadelphia. He was convicted of receiving stolen property and sent to prison for five years. Clauson was convicted of the burglaries and sentenced to 15 years.

Detective Williams soon explained why he had been positive that only one man was involved: all the cigarette butts found in the various burglarized homes were the same rare brand of cork tips.