

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

THE CASE OF THE

FIERY FINGERS

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**OMIC AND THEFT IN A GRIPPING
PERRY MASON MYSTERY**



THE CASE OF
The Fiery Fingers

"So," Mason said, "after the fluorescent powder had been placed on the jewel box *you* touched the jewel box and *Mr Hallock* touched the jewel box."

"Yes."

"So presumably at that time you and Mr Hallock both had fluorescent powder on your fingers."

"I assume so. Yes."

"There were three people in the downstairs part of that house. All three of you had fluorescent powder on your fingertips. You, Mr Hallock, and the defendant. Is that right?"

"Hallock and I had a right to have the fluorescent powder on our fingertips. The defendant didn't."

"What do you mean, you had a right to?"

"We had a right to go to the jewel box."

"Certainly," Mason said, "but if you are going to rely on the assumption that the fluorescent powder on a person's fingertips meant that a piece of imitation jewellery had been stolen, you could say that since Mr Hallock had the fluorescent powder on his fingertips that he had taken the piece of jewellery."

"Certainly not."

"Why not?"

"Because he wouldn't have."

"How do you know he wouldn't?"

"He was there for the purpose of preventing the theft."



By the same author in Magnum

THE CASE OF THE BIGAMOUS SPOUSE

THE CASE OF THE DEADLY TOY

THE CASE OF THE FABULOUS FAKE

THE CASE OF THE HESITANT HOSTESS

THE CASE OF THE LONELY HEIRESS

THE CASE OF THE MUSICAL COW

THE CASE OF THE SPURIOUS SPINSTER

THE CASE OF THE WORRIED WAITRESS

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MAGNUM BOOKS
Methuen Paperbacks Ltd

A Magnum Book

THE CASE OF THE FIERY FINGERS

ISBN 0 417 02410 X

First published 1957
by William Heinemann Ltd
Magnum edition 1978

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Magnum Books are published
by Methuen Paperbooks Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London, EC4P 4EE

Made and printed in Great Britain
by Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd
Aylesbury, Bucks

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FOREWORD

IN ALL the earth there is probably no mental occupation quite as fascinating as that of finding clues and then accounting for them, which is all that detective work really is and about all that astronomy really is.

A detective, for instance, finds the head of an unburnt match broken off and lying by itself on the floor at the scene of a murder. Is it a clue or is it just one more bit of trivia?

Perhaps he will deduce that the murderer was given to the habit of snapping matches into flame with his thumbnail, that this particular match was slightly defective and therefore the head broke off in place of snapping into flame.

Then when the murderer is apprehended the detective will find out that the man simply wanted a small stick with which he could push a key out of the lock in a door, and had broken the head off a match and used the matchstick to fulfil his purpose.

And so it goes. Whenever a man feels that he has an explanation to account for some physical clue he is only too likely to find that his conclusions, while brilliant and logical, are completely incorrect.

But if these clues happen to have been discovered by an officer of the Massachusetts State Police there isn't much possibility of a brilliant but erroneous deduction.

Because such clues are sent to the laboratory of Dr Joseph T. Walker, scientist, toxicologist, and general all-round technical detective, who has an uncanny ability to separate mental wheat from imaginative chaff, the answers given are the right ones.

Let a discarded coat be picked up along one of the Massachusetts highways by a casual pedestrian who happens to notice what seems to be a bloodstain, and watch what happens.

Dr Walker's piercing eyes make an examination which is different from the ordinary examination because he knows of a dozen things to look for, things that never would occur to the ordinary man.

That little hole, for instance, may seem to be of minor insignificance until by photographing it in infra-red light he brings out powder stains proving that it is a bullet-hole. By using soft X-rays he will find bits of metallic fragments in the garment, and

by a spectro-analysis of those fragments will name the manufacturer of the bullet in question.

Or perhaps that peculiar imprint which is visible only under a certain angle of transverse lighting will, when properly photographed, assume the form of a perfect circle indicating that the wearer of the coat may have been struck by a hit-and-run driver. The headlight of the offending automobile left its circular imprint in the garment, whereupon a microscopic examination is quite likely to bring out little slivers of glass, some of which may be distinctive enough to furnish an important clue.

A further microscopic examination of the threads of the garment may disclose a flake-like substance no bigger than the head of a pin, which Dr Walker will turn on edge, and examine under a powerful microscope. He will then announce that this is a small chip or flake of paint peeled off from an automobile driven by the hit-and-run culprit. The automobile, he will announce, was first painted a robin's-egg blue when it came from the factory, it was next painted a conservative black, then covered with a neutral tan and is now a vivid red.

I have watched Dr Walker at work in his laboratory. I have peered over his shoulder while he has discovered things that the average man would never even look for, and then has translated those things into clues which, properly evaluated, have on countless occasions led to the apprehension and conviction of a criminal.

I first became acquainted with Dr Walker at one of Captain Frances G. Lee's seminars on homicide investigation at the Harvard Medical School. I have since had occasion to drop into his laboratory several times. Every time I do so, I find him engaged in some fascinating crime problem where his common sense, his uncanny keenness of mind, and his marvellous technical training bring forth logical but unexpected conclusions, just as a magician reaches into an unpromising silk hat and brings forth a very live, very convincing, and very substantial rabbit.

Of course, the rabbit was there all the time, and from the viewpoint of the magician the silk hat was the logical place to look for it.

I know of many cases where Dr Walker's mind, following physical clues as a bloodhound follows scent, has brought murderers to justice, and I know of some cases where the same mental qualities have been used to prevent innocent men from being unjustly convicted.

Quickly, modestly, unobtrusively, Dr Walker goes to his work day after day, dedicating his life to the cause of practical justice.

Society needs more men like Dr Joseph T. Walker. The time and money spent in the highly technical training such men must have to become thoroughly competent represents a profitable investment on the part of organised society.

But there is more than mere technical training that makes Joe Walker the man that he is. He has an unswerving loyalty to his ideals, a quiet courage, an inherent faith.

And so I dedicate this book to a competent scientist, a true friend, and a man whose pattern of life is a source of inspiration to those who are familiar with it,

DOCTOR JOSEPH T. WALKER

E. S. G.

Chapter One

PERRY MASON had just returned to the office after a long day in court.

Della Street, his secretary, pushed a stack of half a dozen letters on his desk and said, "These are ready for you to sign, and before you go home there's one client in the office whom you should see. I told her I thought you'd see her if she'd wait."

"How long's she been waiting?" Mason asked, picking up the desk pen and starting to skim through the letters which Della Street had typed out for his signature.

"Over an hour."

"What's her name?"

"Nellie Conway."

Mason signed the first letter, Della Street efficiently blotted the signature, picked the letter up, folded it, and slipped it in the envelope.

"What does she want?" Mason asked.

"She won't tell me, but she says it's an urgent matter."

Mason frowned, signed the second letter, and said, "It's late, Della. I've been in court all day and . . ."

"This girl's in trouble," Della Street said with quiet insistence.

Mason signed the next letter. "What does she look like?"

"Thirty-two or thirty-three, slender, dark hair, grey eyes, and the most perfect poker face you have ever seen."

"No expression?"

"Wooden."

"How do you know she's in trouble?"

"Just the way she acts. There's a peculiar tension about her and yet her face doesn't show it."

"Any signs of nervousness?"

"Nothing outward. She drops into a chair, sits in one position without moving her hands or her feet, her face is absolutely expressionless, her eyes move a little bit, but that's all. She doesn't read, she just sits there."

"But not relaxed?" Mason asked.

"Just like a cat sitting at a gopher hole waiting for the gopher to come out. Not a move that you can see, but you have the feeling of inner tension—waiting."

"You interest me," Mason said.

"I thought I would," Della Street said demurely.

Mason abruptly signed the rest of the letters in the pile of mail without even bothering to glance at them.

"All right, Della, let's get her in. I'll have a look at her."

Della Street took the mail, nodded, stepped out into the outer office, and returned shortly with the client.

"Nellie Conway, Mr Mason," she said crisply.

Mason motioned the woman to a seat in the soft, comfortable chair which he had installed in the office so that by lulling clients into complete physical relaxation he might relieve their emotional tension and so loosen their tongues.

Nellie Conway disregarded the motion and took one of the less comfortable wooden chairs, moving with a gliding silence as though she had trained herself to make no unnecessary sound.

"Good afternoon, Mr Mason. Thank you for seeing me. I've heard a lot about you. I was hoping you'd get in earlier. I'm going to have to hurry because I have to be on duty at six o'clock."

"You work nights?"

"I'm a nurse."

"A trained nurse?"

"A practical nurse. I work on cases where the people can't afford hospitalisation or trained nurses. We work longer hours and, of course, we do things a trained nurse won't do, and we get less money."

Mason nodded.

Nellie Conway turned to fasten steady grey eyes on Della Street.

Mason said, "Miss Street is my confidential secretary. She will sit through the interview and make notes, if you don't mind. She has to know as much about my business as I do in order to keep things co-ordinated here in the office. Now what did you want to see me about?"

Nellie Conway folded gloved hands, turned her triangular face towards Perry Mason, and, without the faintest flicker of expression in voice or eyes, said, "Mr Mason, how does one go about preventing a murder being committed?"

Mason frowned. "I wouldn't know."

"I'm serious."

Mason regarded her with searching eyes, then said, "All right. This is out of my line. I specialise in defending people who are accused of crime and I try to see that my clients at least get an

even break, but if you *really* want to know how to go about preventing a murder I would say there are four ways."

"What are they?"

Mason held up his hand and checked off the four ways on his fingers. "One," he said, "you remove the victim, or the potential victim, from the danger zone."

She nodded.

"Two," Mason said, "you remove the murderer, or the potential murderer, from the place where he can have any contact with the victim."

Again she nodded.

"Three," Mason said, "you remove all weapons of murder, which is pretty difficult to do."

"So far they've all been difficult," she said. "What's the fourth?"

"The fourth," Mason said, "is the easy one and the practical one."

"What is it?"

"You go to the police."

"I've been to the police."

"And what happened?"

"They laughed at me."

"Then why come to me?"

"I don't think you'll laugh."

Mason said, "I won't laugh, but I don't like abstractions. My time's valuable. Apparently you're in a hurry. I'm in a hurry. I don't like this business of having a client say, 'A wants to murder B.' Let's get down to brass tacks."

"How much are you going to charge me?"

Mason said, "That depends on how soon you quit beating about the bush."

"I'm a working woman. I don't make a great deal of money."

Mason said, "Therefore it's to your interest to have the charge as low as possible."

"That's right."

"So," Mason said, "you'd better tell me what this is all about, and talk fast."

"Then how much will you charge me?"

Mason regarded the wooden face across the desk. He glanced amusedly at Della Street. His eyes turned back to his client and softened into a smile. "One dollar," he said, "for advice, if you've told your story within the next four minutes."

There was not the faintest sign of surprise in her face. She repeated merely, "One dollar?"

"That's right."

"Isn't that unusually low?"

Mason winked at Della Street. "What's your standard of comparison?"

She opened her purse, her gloved hands took out a coin purse. She opened it, selected a folded dollar note, smoothed it out, and put it on the desk.

Mason didn't touch it. His eyes kept regarding her with puzzled curiosity.

She closed the coin purse, put it back in her bag, snapped the bag shut, put the bag on her lap, folded her gloved hands on the bag, and said, "I think Mr Bain wants to murder his wife. I'd like to prevent it."

"Who's Mr Bain?"

"Nathan Bain. He's in the produce business. You may know him."

"I don't. Who's his wife?"

"Elizabeth Bain."

"How do you know all this?"

"By using my powers of observation."

"You're living in the house?"

"Yes."

"Waiting on someone?"

"Yes, Mrs Bain. Elizabeth Bain."

"What's the matter with her?"

"She was hurt in an automobile accident."

"Bad?"

"I'm afraid worse than she realises. There's been an injury to the spine."

"Can she walk?"

"No, and she isn't ever going to walk again."

"Go ahead," Mason said.

"That's all."

Mason's face showed annoyance. "No, that isn't all," he said. "You think that he wants to murder her. You aren't a mind reader, are you?"

"Sometimes," was the unexpected answer, delivered in a calm voice.

"And you're getting this from reading his mind?"

"Well, not exactly."

"There are other things?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

She said, "Nathan Bain wants to marry someone else."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-eight."

"How old's his wife?"

"Thirty-two."

"How old's the girl he wants to marry?"

"About twenty-five."

"Does she want to marry him?"

"I don't know."

"Who is she?"

"Some woman who has an apartment in the city. I don't know exactly where."

"What's her name?"

"Her first name's Charlotte. I don't know the last name."

Mason said irritably, "I'm having to draw it out of you like pulling teeth. How do you know he wants to get married?"

"Because he's in love with this woman."

"How do you know?"

"They correspond. He met her at a convention. He loves her."

"All right," Mason said, "so what? Lots of healthy men thirty-eight years of age have restless eyes and a roving disposition. It's a dangerous age. They come back home if you leave them alone. Sometimes they don't. There are lots of divorces, but there aren't many murders."

Nellie Conway opened her purse. "Mr Bain offered me five hundred dollars if I would give his wife some medicine."

Mason cocked a quizzical and somewhat sceptical eyebrow. "You're certain of what you're saying, Miss Conway?"

"Absolutely certain. I have the medicine here."

"Why did he say he wanted you to give it to his wife?"

"He didn't say. He just said that he thought that this medicine would be good for her. He doesn't like his wife's doctor."

"Why not?"

"The doctor was an old friend of Elizabeth's."

"You mean Bain is jealous?"

"I think so."

"Look," Mason said irritably, "all of this doesn't make sense. If Bain wants his wife out of the way he'd much rather have her divorce him and marry the doctor than to try and get rid of her by giving her poison. If he wanted to—let's take a look at this 'medicine'."

Without a word she handed him a small glass tube which contained four tablets about the size of a standard five-grain aspirin tablet.

"Were you to give these to her all at once?"

"Yes, at bedtime—when she was being quieted for the night."

"Did he pay you the money?"

"He said he'd pay me the money when I'd given her the medicine."

"How was he going to know if you gave it to her?"

"I don't know. I guess he trusts me. I wouldn't lie."

"Not to him?"

"Not to anyone. I don't believe in lying. It weakens your character."

"Why didn't *he* give her this medicine?"

"He can't go in the room with her."

"Why not?"

"The doctor has said he couldn't."

"You mean a doctor tells a husband he can't go in the room where . . .?"

"Elizabeth hates the sight of him. She gets upset, almost hysterical every time she sees his face. We're forbidden even to mention his name."

"Why does she feel that way?"

"I think she really knows she'll never walk again. Mr Bain was driving the car when the accident happened. She thinks it was avoidable."

"You mean that he deliberately tried to . . .?"

"Don't put words in my mouth, Mr Mason. I said she thinks the accident was avoidable."

Mason's facial expression was a combination of exasperation and curiosity.

"I gather you don't like Mr Bain?"

"He's a very strong, fascinating man. I do like him, very much."

"Does he like you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"So," Mason said, "he comes to you and offers to pay you five hundred dollars to give his wife poison, thereby putting himself entirely in your power, leaving a witness who could testify in case anything did happen to his wife. . . . It doesn't make sense. . . . How do you know it's poison?"

"I just *feel* that it is."

"You don't know what the medicine is?"

"No."

"Did he tell you what it was?"

"No, just that it was medicine."

"Why did he tell you he wanted you to give it to his wife?"

"He said he thought it would make her feel better toward him."

"This whole thing is screwy," Mason said.

She said nothing.

"And you went to the police?"

"Yes."

"To whom did you go?"

"I went to the police station and told them I wanted to see about a murder, and they sent me to a room that had a sign on the door saying 'Homicide'."

"And what did you do?" Mason asked curiously.

"I told someone my story and he laughed at me."

"Do you remember his name?"

"His name was Holcomb, he was a sergeant."

"Did you show him this bottle?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I never got that far."

"What happened?"

"I told him, just as I've told you, that I thought Mr Bain wanted to murder his wife, and I tried to tell Sergeant Holcomb why, but he laughed at me. He was in a big hurry. He had to go some place and he said . . . well, he said an unkind thing."

"What did he say?"

"He said I was neurotic, but I'm not."

"When did Mr Bain give you this medicine?"

"Yesterday."

"Did you tell him you'd give it to his wife?"

"I made him think that I might."

"And you've been carrying that little bottle around in your purse ever since?"

"Yes."

"Taking it out from time to time when you wanted to get at something that was underneath?"

"I suppose so."

"In other words," Mason said, "there aren't any of his fingerprints left on that bottle by this time?"

"I don't suppose so."

Mason took the bottle, removed the cork, looked down at the

contents, then spread out a sheet of paper and dumped all four of the tablets on the table. As far as the eye could determine, they were all identical. Mason picked out one of the tablets, returned the other three to the little tube.

He said, "Della, get me two plain envelopes, please."

Della Street opened the drawer of her secretarial desk, took out two envelopes and gave them to Mason.

Mason took the tablet he had taken from the tube, put it in an envelope, sealed the envelope, wrote his name across the flap, then took the tube containing the three tablets, placed it in the second envelope, sealed the flap, wrote his name across the flap, and said to Nellie Conway, "Write your name across the flap so that part of the name is below the sealed flap and part of it is on the flap, just as I've done."

She took the pen and wrote the name as he had instructed.

"What's Bain's address?" Mason asked.

"Nineteen-twenty-five Monte Carlo Drive."

"You go on duty at six o'clock?"

"That's right."

"How late do you work?"

"Until eight in the morning."

"Then what happens?"

"A day nurse comes on."

"You have the longer shift?"

"Because the night nurse doesn't have so much to do."

"Why does she need a night nurse? Doesn't she sleep at night? In other words, couldn't the nurse be within call——"

"Mrs Bain is a little difficult to manage at times."

"Why?"

"Well, her mind is upset. She's been worrying a lot, and . . . well, the fact she won't let her husband in the room . . . the doctor wants a nurse with her all the time. Expense doesn't mean anything to them."

"Who has the money?"

"She does."

"Bain is in the produce business?"

"He makes a living," she said, "but Mrs Bain has the money. It's her private property. She inherited it. She had it when she was married. That's why he married her."

"Does Mrs Bain know about this other woman?" Mason asked.

"Of course. That's where I first got my information."

"From Mrs Bain?"