GEDEON murder 1937

Magyar családi

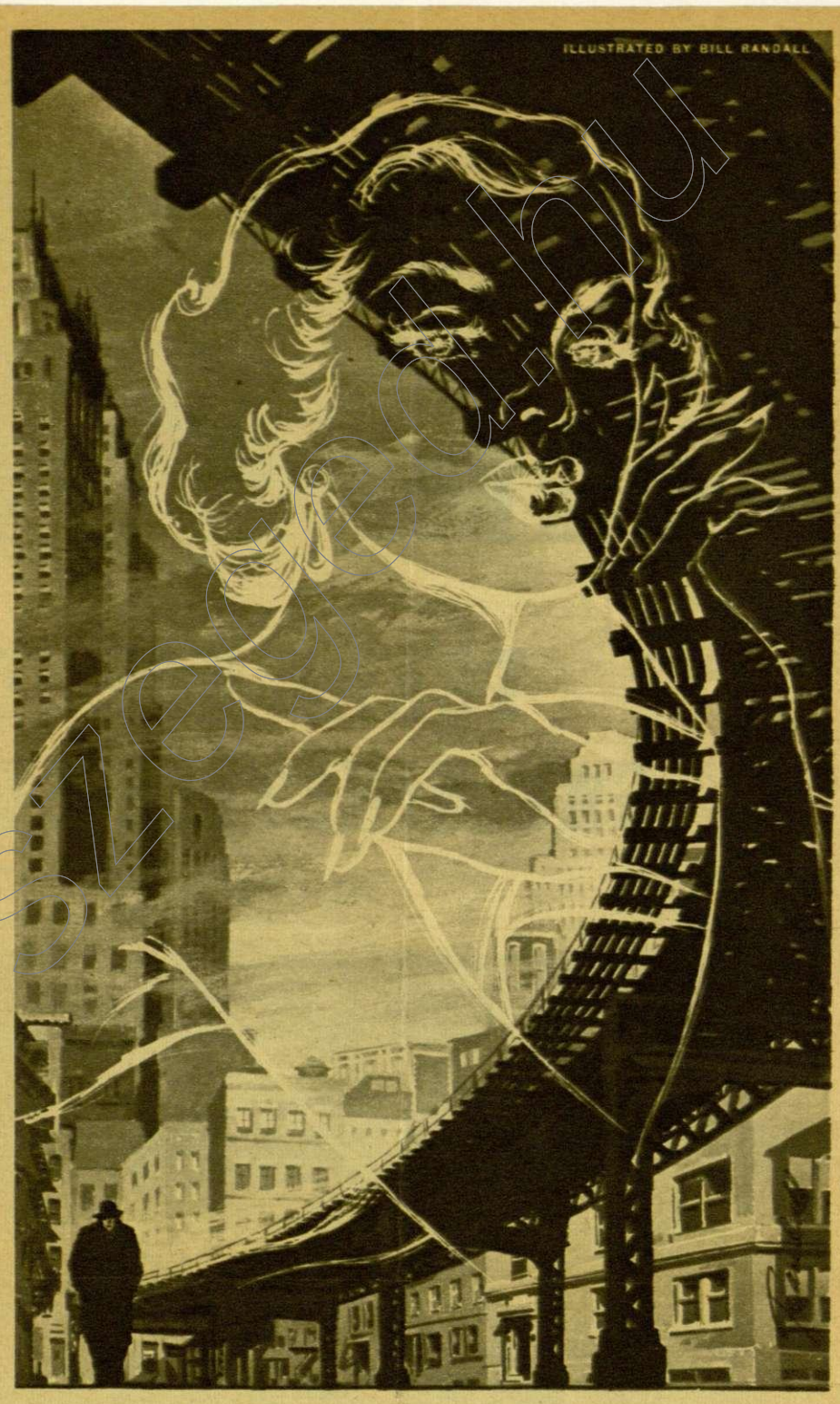
The strange case of the MAD SCULPTOR

1937 Easter

He said he might turn into a killer but no one believed him—until the bizarre all-night vigil during which he murdered three innocent people

CRIMES OF PASSION

By ELLERY QUEEN



Ethel didn't love him. She was happily married to another man. He knew that but — walking the streets in despair — he refused to admit it.

"One thing I'm ashamed of," murderer Robert Irwin said after surrendering to a Chicago newspaper, "is stealing that clock. To kill is one thing, but to be a sneak thief—!"

The young man who made this remarkable statement had himself predicted that some day he would kill. This prediction, ignored by society, was fulfilled in a ghastly triple murder on Easter Sunday, 1937.

A crime of passion it certainly was, but only in the sense of emotional upheaval in a disordered mind. Even this was a subject of controversy. At his trial Robert Irwin was pronounced legally sane by three psychiatrists for the prosecution, and an incurable maniac by two for the defense. And one eminent psychiatrist said he was neither, but suffered rather from a mental disorder that could have been treated and cured in time to save three lives.

Viewed from any angle, Irwin's story is a gripping one.

Irwin was born in the revivalist tent of an obscure religious sect, near Los Angeles. His childhood memories were of frenzied scenes of mass mysticism, hysterical talk of miraculous cures of disease by prayer and threats of hell-fire. His father deserted the family before the boy was three years old. Mrs. Irwin tried to support her three young sons with any work she could get. But her health was poor and pay was small. She had to apply to welfare agencies for supplemental support. Irwin's childhood was a nightmare of welfare investigations, tattered clothing and physical hunger made more acute by a regular diet—under threats of eternal damnation—of religious instruction.

He grew up intensely devoted to his mother and, at the same time, intensely hating her.

He had a bright, artistic mind. But because he felt inferior to his tough brothers and was afraid of being called a sissy, he developed a pugnacious streak. For the rest of his life he would fight at the slightest provocation.

When he was 14, he became interested in art. He began enthusiastically to collect pictures of statues and paintings, to model figures in soap. He was old enough to work now; but jobs were scarce. When he was 17, a court of domestic relations suggested that he might learn a trade in a reformatory. He asked to be sent to one and his mother agreed. He had committed no crime. She merely wanted him to get the decent care she could not give him.

Irwin remained in the institution for 15 months, where he began serious work as a sculptor. And here also he began to work on his curious theory of "visualization," which was to run like a ghastly thread through his life.

According to Irwin, "before a sculptor can make a statue he has first to make a mental statue . . . to visualize things first." So he would spend hours in a rigid position, trying to "see in his mind" pictures from his collection. His theory was that if he could train himself in "visualization," he would be able to project pictures at will from the depths of his brain and so "really see" things.

In this wholly mental world, visualization would enable him to communicate not only with living people, but with the dead also. Eventually, he hoped his researches and self-training in "visualization" would lead him to "rise above the material world."

After leaving the reformatory Irwin went to Chicago to see a world-famous sculptor, who was so impressed with Irwin's talent that he took the boy into his own home and sent him to art school. For a time Irwin worked in the sculptor's studio, showing great promise. But the compulsion to "learn to visualize by visualizing" made him leave that, too.

In Chicago he had met a girl named Alice to whom he confided his theory of visualization. On New Year's Day, 1931, he asked Alice to marry him so that they could "perfect" his theory together. Alice consented; they were to be married in August. But then Irwin encountered the works of the German philosopher, Schopenhauer. It was a fateful meeting of minds.

"Through reading Schopenhauer," Irwin said later, "I came to the conclusion that . . . the driving force in back of our lives, which can be used for other purposes, we sacrifice to the task of reproduction. I realized that if I could once bottle that up without a woman, I didn't need her." He wrote to Alice that the romance was off. He had determined to husband all his energies for the all-important task of discovering the key to "the universal mind."

He went to New York. Because of the depression, he barely scraped along on odd jobs loosely related to art. Thoughts of suicide began to creep into his brain. Not thoughts of killing himself directly, but of killing a girl who had embarrassed him, or an old lady who had befriended him, and then letting the law take his life.

In late 1931, he actu- *(Continued on page 26)*

Mrs. Mary Gedeon—Her fatal mistake was in asking Robert Irwin to go home.

Veronica (Ronnie) Gedeon—The moment she warned Irwin he would get into trouble, she signed her death warrant.

Robert Irwin—He wanted to kill so he could "go to the chair"—but he's still alive.

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ally went to the city psychiatric ward and asked for help, telling the doctor in charge, "I was going to kill somebody so I would be hung." He was palmed off on a convalescent home, where he worked as a waiter. But he wanted to work in art, so he returned to New York.

There he almost starved. In 1932 he tried to emasculate himself with a razor, wanting "to get my mental radio running in such a way that I can get in complete touch with the universal mind."

He consented to be committed to a state hospital where his condition was diagnosed (falsely, according to one psychiatrist) as dementia praecox. But a year later he was discharged.

It was about this time that he took a room with a family named Gedeon that lived in New York's Beekman Hill district. He had met them two years before and liked them.

In pretty Ethel Gedeon, Irwin found a substitute for the Alice he had given up in Chicago. But Ethel did not reciprocate his feeling.

She was impressed with his talent and his obsessive ambition to become a great sculptor. She argued amiably with him about his art theories and was fascinated by his elaborate talk of "visualization"; but romantically Ethel Gedeon gave Irwin no encouragement whatever. To her he was merely an interesting, if eccentric, young artist.

But to Robert Irwin, "Ethel affected me more than anyone else I had ever met." And he told of wanting to kill her because he "loved her and hated her." When Ethel turned her interests elsewhere, Irwin became tense and morose. He quit his job and, unable to find another, had to apply for home relief. He was in such a state that he voluntarily returned to the state hospital.

Two years later he was again discharged. On the advice of someone at the hospital he went to Canton, New York, and entered the theological school of St. Lawrence University. In Canton he worked with great energy. While studying theology, he taught two sculpture classes, one of them for children. Then misfortune struck again. One of his older students broke some of the children's sculpture, and Irwin's compulsion to fight got the better of him. The violent brawl that followed caused his dismissal from the University.

He returned to New York. The date was March 25, 1937.

On Good Friday, the 26th, Irwin went through the old, harassing experience of looking for work without finding it. The next day he took to lunch a girl he had known in Canton. When he finally left her, he was in low spirits. He began to prowl the streets.

Irwin knew that Ethel Gedeon had married a man named Kudner. Irwin had last seen her—and her husband—in July, 1936, during a visit to New York. And in December of 1936 he had visited Mrs. Gedeon and her other daughter, Veronica (Ronnie), an art model, in the Beekman Hill apartment. During that visit he had discussed her sister's marriage with Ronnie, asking whether Ethel was happy.

Now, three months later, the conviction had taken shape in Robert Irwin's stormy brain that Ethel Gedeon Kudner's marriage had broken up and that she was back living with her mother and sister. This was not true; Ethel was happily married and had her own home. But Irwin believed it unshakably.

While he walked the New York streets that late Saturday afternoon, Robert Irwin went through a mental and emotional crisis which he later described as "the bluest and blackest moment of my life."

Finally he made his way to the foot of East 53rd Street, on the Manhattan waterfront, and waited for nightfall. When it got dark enough, he was going to jump into the East River and drown himself.

But the old pattern reasserted itself. He changed his plan. Instead of killing himself, he would kill Ethel "and go to the chair for it."

He left the East River pier, found a hardware store, bought a file, went to his rented room on East 52nd Street to sharpen an ice pick, and then walked over to the Gedeon apartment. He reached the building about 9 p. m.

There was no answer to his ring. Irwin waited outside. Around 10 o'clock Mrs. Gedeon appeared. Glad to see him, she asked him up. Mrs. Gedeon had always taken a motherly interest in Robert.

Irwin questioned her about Ethel. When would she be home? Mrs. Gedeon assured him Ethel was no longer living there, but with her husband. Irwin did not believe her. He was going to stay there until Ethel came home.

Mrs. Gedeon's roomer, Frank Byrnes, a waiter, came home. Irwin had never met Byrnes. The waiter, tired after a long day, went to his room to go to bed. Irwin returned to his questioning. When was Ethel coming in? He had to see Ethel.

Nervously, Mrs. Gedeon began to remark that the hour was getting late and she had to go to bed. Wouldn't he please leave?

"At that moment I hit her a terrific blow with my fist and knocked her down . . . I grabbed her by the neck . . . I continued to choke her for about 20 minutes . . ."

Irwin carried Mrs. Gedeon's dead body into the bedroom and pushed it under the bed. He went into the bathroom, washed, turned out the lights—and sat down to wait.

Why didn't Ethel come home?

It occurred to him that Ronnie might get home "first," even though she kept late hours and this was Saturday night. If she did, Irwin intended to tie her up and keep waiting for Ethel. He had actually prepared a crude "blackjack" in the bathroom,

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using a rag and a bar of soap.

About 3 a. m. Ronnie came home. Irwin, waiting in the dark bedroom, heard the door close. He heard Ronnie go to the bathroom. She stayed there almost an hour, while he waited quietly in the dark.

At last the girl came out, unclothed, "and I hit her with the soap blackjack." The soap shattered and failed to knock her out. Before she could scream, he seized her throat, picked her up and put her on the bed.

He held her down in the dark there for almost two hours . . . still waiting for Ethel.

He did not molest Ronnie, although "she thought I was going to rape her." He did not think Ronnie knew who he was; she could not see him in the dark and he was disguising his voice. He kept her on the bed with his hand on her throat. She asked him, "Who are you?" but he could not remember what he answered. "The whole night passed like a blue daze."

He asked where her sister Ethel was; Ronnie said with her husband. He asked when Ethel was coming home; Ronnie said she won't come here. "I didn't know what to think," Robert Irwin told police.

And then, after two hours, in this strange impasse, Ronnie suddenly said, "Bob, I know you are going to get in trouble for this." And Robert Irwin knew that Ronnie Gedeon knew who he was.

"The minute she said that, I clamped down on her and choked her till she was lifeless, leaving her on top of the bed, her mother's body lying underneath."

Then he settled back—still waiting for Ethel. Dawn was graying the room.

And suddenly Robert Irwin remembered the boarder, Byrnes. Why hadn't Byrnes raised an alarm and tried to interfere during the noisy struggle with Mrs. Gedeon? Irwin did not know that Byrnes was hard of hearing.

He went into Byrnes' bedroom with the ice pick and stabbed the sleeping man seven times in the head. Then he went to the bathroom for the second time and washed himself.

And still Ethel had not come. Perhaps, after all, she was not coming. Well, if he could not kill her, he could go away with some pictures of her. He ransacked the apartment without finding any. But he did find two pictures of Ronnie. He took them, along with a small alarm clock.

Why the alarm clock? No one, least of all Robert Irwin, has ever been able to explain.

He left the apartment, "as calm as I've ever been in my life."

Robert Irwin had himself foretold the destruction he would wreak. Society had ignored him.

The barn door is locked now so you are safe—from this man, at least. Robert Irwin will be eligible for parole in 2031.

However, it is conceivable that somewhere there is another personable, earnest and idealistic young man—perhaps someone as promising a sculptor as Robert Irwin, or a divinity student—who at this very moment is announcing:

"I'm going to kill her because I love her and I hate her. And then, you see, the state will be able to kill me." ◄◄