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Murder Is My Business. By William Foster Hopkins

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The author: Teen-age olympic threat, college football star, touring vaudeville performer, contract bridge authority and a man of compassion, sensitive to the unfolding human drama which surrounded him for 50 years of his life as a practicing criminal defense lawyer.

The setting: A large Midwestern city straddling the Mason-Dixon line, its riverboat past giving way, in turn, to the bawdy "roaring twenties," the depression years, World War II, and finally, the Space Age. All different and yet a certain sameness because the cast of characters changed but little—murderers, gamblers, rapists, robbers, thieves, homosexuals, adulteresses—but mostly murders or those accused of murder.

The story: The experiences of a young man who determined upon graduation from law school that he would devote his life to the defense of those accused of crime. His career covered a period of 50 years and over 500 murder trials interspersed among thousands of other lesser offenses. Each one had its own emotional trauma for those individuals involved. The author of this story did not escape unscathed in this respect.

This book is mostly about murder. The story is written from the vantage point of the next best thing to a front row seat at the time the dastardly deed was done. That vantage point is occupied by Mr. Hopkins, attorney for the defense and, as such, the first man to hear the full story, usually before the corpse is cool, from the lips of the accused of the events and uncontrolled passions leading to that most final solution—Murder.

But come down front with Mr. Hopkins for just a few scenes from this panorama of homicide. Did I say that he was the first one to hear the gory details from the accused? Well, usually but not always. For instance, there was the case of the scantily clad, beautiful society matron found brutally stabbed to death. The police arrested the water meter man, obtained his written confession to the crime and had him re-enact the slaying before a movie camera in the home where the murder occurred. All this before he had a chance to talk to his defense lawyer. It is in this episode, however, that the author takes you behind the scenes and describes the endless pavement pounding and spade work necessary to prepare a case for the defense. There is the investigation of dozens of false clues and unconfirmed rumors or
reports. There are long nights when sleep will not come as the trial date approaches and he wonders if he is doing all that can be done for his client. He goes over his case point by point, witness by witness and time after time. The author's description of this most exquisite form of self-torture is a masterpiece readily recognized by others, in whatever walk of life, who have wondered, alone and terrified, whether or not they were equal to the task ahead of them.

The serious theme of murder is lightened periodically by the author’s reminiscences about his boyhood along the banks of the Ohio River, the simple but long remembered pleasures of a bygone era. He recounts carefree days as a law student when he watched for a pair of gloves hanging in the undertaker's window across the street as a signal that several young men were needed to hire out as professional pallbearers. They were models of propriety as they carried the corpse to the last resting place; fist-waving participants in games of craps in the rear of the hearse on the way back. One unforgettable vignette occurred in the early days of his law practice when, having nothing else to do, he obtained permission to witness an electrocution. The impact of the grisly spectacle stunned the young lawyer at the time. The condemned man lunged straight at him repeatedly, barely held in place by the restraining straps, as charge after charge of electricity was sent through his body—twisting, turning, and writhing as wisps of smoke from the burning flesh curled aimlessly as a visible and unforgettable stench. Years later his vivid description of this scene to a jury in his closing argument saved an accused murderer who had nothing else going for him except this vivid description.

On and on the reminiscenses of 50 years unfold. There was the greedy sister who hired killers to murder her brother for his money—killers who cut off his head and hands to prevent identification. Another passage describes the wealthy farmer's wife who conspired with her lover, the hired hand, to kill her husband and place his body on the railroad track to make it appear as an accidental death. The tale of gangland rivalry for control of the rackets along the river is unnerving. The episodes portray a never-ending stream of human passions at their worst viewed from a front row seat.

The random reminiscences are interrupted, this time by a murder, so macabre, that the entire community was aghast. Edythe Klumpt was a pretty school teacher and the mother of
several children. She had a lover and the lover had a wife. It was alleged that Edythe Klumpf shot the wife, stuffed the body in the trunk of her car and went to school to teach her class. The next day she drove to a public park, poured gasoline on the body and watched it burn—all of which she confessed. The description of the tremendous effort to save this accused murderess' life will hold the reader spellbound.

This is a well-written, partly humorous and partly dead serious, story about a subject which has held a fascination for people through the ages. In summation, this book is recommended for anyone who wishes to spend a few most interesting hours with an outstanding defense attorney as he goes about his work.

JAMES J. GEGAN*