

WAS THE MURDERER IN THE JURY BOX?

THE MINISTER AND THE CHOIR SINGER:
The Hall-Mills Murder Case. By William M.
Kunstler. Illustrated. 344 pp. New York:
William Morrow & Co. \$5.95.

By REX STOUT

THIS book will be a big help. From now on, when a writer of detective stories is accused of overdoing the nonfeasance, misfeasance and malfeasance of officers of the law, he can merely lift his brows and say, "Read William M. Kunstler's 'The Minister and the Choir Singer.'" Not that Mr. Kunstler has concocted a diatribe—or even drawn an indictment. He has merely assembled all the significant details, including new evidence, on one of the most famous murders and notorious investigations and trials in the annals of American crime, recounted them with precision and wit and reached a conclusion that cannot easily be challenged.

More than 40 years have passed since the September morning in 1922 when a boy and girl, taking a walk down a secluded lovers' lane in the outskirts of New Brunswick, N. J., found the corpses of Edward Wheeler Hall and Eleanor Mills, the handsome minister and the comely choir singer and sexton's wife. They lay on their backs side by side, under a crab-apple tree. Over their bodies were strewn Mrs. Mills's love letters. Three hours later the crab-apple had been stripped of all of its leaves and most of its bark by sightseers, and the police and prosecutors of Somerset and Middlesex counties had made their groggy start on "the most bungled murder mystery in modern times."

The crime was committed in 1922, but it wasn't until 1926 that a Grand Jury returned an indictment against Hall's socially prominent widow and her two brothers—an indictment based largely on an eccentric's changeable testimony, rejected in 1922, and spurred as a circulation stunt by a New York newspaper. William Randolph Hearst's Daily Mirror was determined to overtake Joseph Patterson's Daily News, and in 1926 the Hall-Mills murder case seemed just the thing to turn the trick.

MR. KUNSTLER'S report of the affair is not only well worth buying and reading, it is worth reading twice; first, at a gallop, for its exciting tale of murder and the slings and arrows of the aftermath—and second, going slow, for its fascinating account, fully documented, of sustained official ineptitude, surely never surpassed anywhere. It would be a good supplementary textbook—"How Not to Do It"—not only in a police academy but also in a law school. This is not too surprising: its author is both a practi-

Mr. Stout's own detective, Nero Wolfe, hasn't bungled a single case in his long, if fictional, career.

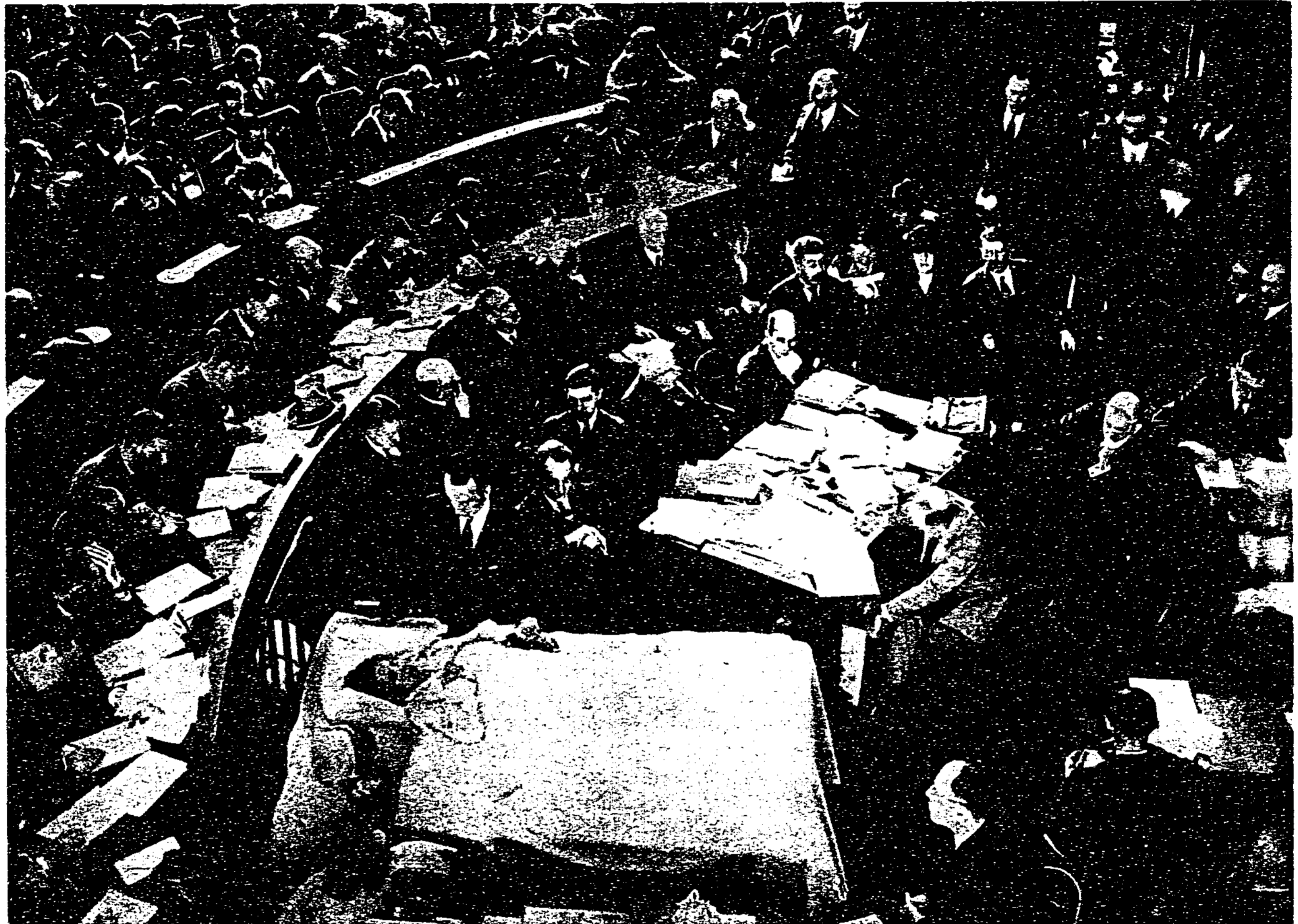
ing lawyer, specializing in civil liberties and civil-rights cases, and a professor of law at New York Law School and Pace College.

The tone of the Hall-Mills investigation was set by one of the two policemen first to arrive at the scene. As he stood guarding the bodies, waiting for reinforcements and averting his eyes from "the wound in the lady's neck which was entirely filled with maggots," sightseers came and jostled around, trampled the grass, despoiled

by the Governor of New Jersey, had the brass to present the card as his Exhibit 17! Ludicrous and appalling.

Mr. Kunstler had a big advantage over a detective-story writer: he didn't have to invent his characters; they were there on the record. Aside from the cops and lawyers it was a marvelous cast, and he presents them well. The headliner was not Frances Hall, the wealthy, genteel widow of the amorous minister, or Jimmy Mills, the dull, stodgy husband of the choir soprano

a witness bed instead of a witness chair. (The most striking of the 20 well-chosen illustrations in the book is a photograph of the courtroom showing the Pig Woman on the bed with the prosecutor standing beside her, his star witness, and the three defendants seated in the background.) Surely that outlandish creature, a chronic liar so indifferent to truth that she was uncertain about her own name (it was probably, legally, Mrs. William Easton), was an odd specimen to be given



The Pig Woman testifying from her bed at the Hall-Mills murder trial, November, 1926.

the crab-apple tree, and passed from hand to hand a calling card of Hall which had been propped against the heel of his left shoe.

The wanderings of that card during the four years that elapsed before the trial were typical of the whole tragicomic performance. It was taken to the office of the Somerset prosecutor; then to New Brunswick and "turned over to someone" in the office of the Middlesex prosecutor; then, in the summer of 1926, to the office of a fingerprint expert in Newark; then on a ride in a taxicab where it was handed over to the editor of the Mirror; then, somewhat later, to Middletown, N. Y., to another fingerprint expert; and then—no one knew just when—back to the prosecutor's office in Somerville. After that odyssey, the eminent attorney and State Senator, Alexander Simpson, who had been appointed special prosecutor

"who died for love" (Mills stuck to it that he had not known why his wife and the minister were so much together), or Henry Stevens, the widow's brother whose fiercest ambition was to catch a record bluefish, or even Willie Stevens, the brother who, despite his lifelong career as a witling, astounded the courtroom and ten million newspaper readers when, on trial for murder with his sister and brother, he proved to be more than a match for the brilliant prosecutor under cross-examination.

The headliner was, of course, their bizarre accuser, Mrs. Jane Gibson, who became universally known as the Pig Woman. A raiser of hogs and self-proclaimed eyewitness to the murder, she was brought in 1926 from a Jersey City hospital to Somerville in an ambulance and carried into the courtroom on a stretcher, and she testified from

the chief responsibility for the doom of three of her fellow-beings.

The prosecutor did his best with her. At the time of the trial, it would not have been fair to say that Simpson's only objective was to get a conviction no matter how; it was conceivable, one had then to admit, that Simpson honestly believed the Pig Woman's story, jumbled as it was. But 36 years later, in the fall of 1962, some faded calendar leaves were found by Mr. Kunstler and the current Somerset County prosecutor in a cardboard box in the prosecutor's office. The leaves were wrapped in a piece of crumbling yellow paper which bore the signature of James Mason, the chief official investigator in 1922. Indubitably they had been examined by Simpson, and an entry on one of the leaves, in the Pig Woman's hand, was conclusive proof that she had (Continued on Page 22)

The Murderer

(Continued from Page 1)

lied on her witness bed. Simpson must have known, after all, that he was trying to convict three people of murder on false testimony. It wasn't his fault that he failed. (But it was his fault that he falsely attributed "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" to Byron.)

If your chief interest in a murder mystery is its solution, you will find one in the last chapter. Mr. Kunstler supports it not with direct evidence, old or new, but with a reasoned elimination of alternatives, a persuasive analysis of the social forces of the times, and logical argument. If his conclusion is sound, it is highly likely that persons who could have named the murderers, or even one or more of the murderers themselves, sat as spectators in the courtroom while Simpson tried to condemn three innocent people. Indeed, if you accept Mr. Kunstler's solution, as I do, you will realize that it is quite possible — though Mr. Kunstler doesn't suggest it—that one of the jurors had himself, four years back, triggered the bullets that killed Edward Hall and Eleanor Mills, and had then slit the dead woman's throat from ear to ear. If so, doubtless it gave him a feeling of warm self-satisfaction to join with his

colleagues in the vote for acquittal.

In his last paragraphs Mr. Kunstler remarks that the solution he offers had been suggested by many persons from

the very first, and he gives three reasons for the failure of the police and prosecutors to explore the indicated line of investigation. Good reasons? Not if they were good men.

The New York Times

Published: February 2, 1964

Copyright © The New York Times