

crin  
love  
abo

seemed I loved a girl and a girl  
I't think of anything else to talk

In the court room, as the letters were being read, I noticed that by the way they craned forward and glued their eyes on Mr. Flannery and put their hands to their ears every one thought that it was pretty swell to be loved like that.

In the case of the older ones it probably refreshed their memory as to their own youthful enthusiasm, and it is entirely possible that a number of them said to themselves: "Well, it is just too bad. The good old days are over."

I don't doubt that in the audience there were a number of people dominated by an abnormal, unreal conventionality, by the theory of some church, or the fear of the opinion of some of their friends, or this or that; who maybe felt that it was all wrong and that they were listening to something unbelievably bad.

If they felt so I noticed that they did nothing about it. They hung to their chairs for fear that five or six hundred outside might get one of them.

Now please don't imagine that I am an ogre descended on the world to destroy its conceptions of right, truth, beauty, fair-mindedness and fair play. I am not.

If this boy really cold-bloodedly and with malice aforethought killed this girl and killed her without being terribly swayed or bewildered by some other influence which he did not individually bring upon himself but which came upon him as life comes upon all of us, I would say, sure, execute this monster, because in that case he would be a monster.

But I cannot get out of my mind—and these letters that I heard help to keep it there—that he was influenced by the very chemical and physical influences which betray all of us at certain times in our life, and particularly in our youth.

*New York Post*, October 5, 1934

## DOROTHY KILGALLEN

Though best known to people of a certain age as a panelist on the popular 1950s television quiz show "What's My Line?"—on which participants tried to uncover the offbeat occupations of weekly guests—Dorothy Kilgallen (1913–1965) first gained prominence as a news reporter and columnist. The daughter of James Kilgallen, a star journalist for the Hearst syndicate, she began her own writing career after her freshman year in college and, at a time when most female reporters were relegated to the society and women's pages, was soon earning bylines for her stories on disasters, murders, trials, and executions. A publicity stunt devised by her newspaper—an around-the-world race by commercial airline against a competing team of reporters—brought her international attention and she soon found herself in Hollywood, where she reported show-business gossip, collaborated on a film (*Fly Away Baby*) inspired by her globe-spanning exploits, and even appeared as a reporter in *Sinner Take All* (1936). She returned to New York City in 1937 and became a popular Broadway columnist and eventually a radio and television personality.

This account of the Robert Allen Edwards case, based on her firsthand reporting, appeared in a posthumously published collection of her work, *Murder One: Six On the Spot Murder Stories*.

### Sex and the All-American Boy

#### *In Court*

The Defendant:  
For the Defense:

ROBERT ALLEN EDWARDS  
LEONARD MORGAN  
FRANK MCGUIGAN  
JOHN C. PHILLIPS

For the Prosecution:

DISTRICT ATTORNEY  
THOMAS M. LEWIS  
ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY  
HAROLD FLANNERY

Presiding:

JUDGE WILLIAM A. VALENTINE

It was the consensus among my male colleagues, who either saw Margaret Crain in the flesh or studied her photographs, that she had about as much sex appeal as a pound of chopped liver. At twenty-three she was thin, dark-haired, shapeless, with a hawklike nose that seemed always to be sniffing something unpleasant. Her pale blue eyes looked coldly out through large silver-rimmed spectacles. Her demeanor was decorous, demure, and virginal. If ever a truck driver had whistled at Margaret, his license would have been revoked immediately because of defective vision.

Margaret lived in the upstate New York town of East Aurora. She taught music in the school system of nearby Endicott, and she was known as an excellent teacher. Her parents were highly respected citizens, devout churchgoers. Her brother was an ordained minister and Margaret sang in the church choir. In all, the Crains were an exemplary family.

Robert Allen Edwards, the older of two brothers, came from a family that generations ago had given its name to the town in which they lived, Edwardsville, Pennsylvania, a hundred miles from East Aurora, New York. At twenty-one Robert was a handsome young man with bright black eyes, dark wavy hair, and the perfectly regular features we used to associate with Arrow Collar ads. In behavior he was quiet, polite to his elders, unflinching in his attendance at church on Sundays. Indeed, he frequently mentioned a desire to become a minister. Robert had the kind of clean-cut appearance and generally trustworthy manner that made people believe he would go far one day.

At the time Robert was twenty-one and Margaret twenty-three, Freda McKechnie was twenty-six (or possibly twenty-seven, her age was in dispute). Freda was a little meatier than Margaret Crain, but even the newspapers hadn't the courage to call her a beauty. Freda lived with her parents and a younger brother next door to the Edwards home, and as is only natural, the two families were well acquainted. Both Mr. Edwards and Mr. McKechnie worked for the Kingston Coal Company. McKechnie had a somewhat better job, but Edwards, because of the family's historic connection with the town, had a bit more status. The

McKechnies were pleased when Robert Edwards took Freda to church picnics or parties, although they may have wondered what incredibly handsome Robert saw in their plain-Jane daughter, who was, besides, more than a little older than the boy.

Margaret, Robert, Freda—I don't believe a more unlikely trio has ever played a sex-saturated love game that ended in tragedy so terrible, so unexpected.

Margaret and Robert had met while both were students at Mansfield State Teachers College in Mansfield, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 1931. Margaret was a senior, president of the college Y.W.C.A., a member of the vested choir and the campus orchestra. Robert was a freshman and president of his class. Margaret and he were first attracted by their mutual interest in music and dancing. Not long after, they discovered a mutual interest in more earthy things. The would-be minister and the teacher-to-be made a perfect pair: he ministered to her insatiable needs; she taught him a thing or two he hadn't known before.

In the spring of 1932 Margaret was graduated and returned to her home in East Aurora. A year later Robert left school when the financial burden became too great on his family and went to work for the same company that employed his father. Only distance separated him from Margaret, distance easily conquered when she helped him to buy and maintain the auto he needed to wipe out the intervening miles. Robert became a frequent weekend visitor at the Crain home, where his good looks, good manners, and unflinching consideration for others made him welcome in that house of virtue and godliness. The Crains liked him. He wasn't wealthy but he was steady. When he was out with their daughter, the Crains slept well.

Back in Edwardsville, Mr. and Mrs. George McKechnie felt much the same way. They had known Robert for years—he was the boy next door. Of course, he far outshone Freda in physical attractiveness, but Robert spent so much time around the McKechnie house, and took Freda out so often, that everyone assumed the two young people eventually would marry.

If Robert knew of this assumption, he certainly didn't share it. But Freda, approaching spinsterhood, was infatuated with him, and in his gentlemanly way, always ready to help out a friend, he availed himself of her favors from time to time. The cemetery in Edwardsville was one of their favorite resting places. There, during the intermissions, so to speak, our All-American Boy read detective stories to his partner in passion, scoffing at the endings, which always found the culprit in custody. He also gave her a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the "shocking" novel that had been allowed free entry into the United States only a few months before. At night, lying on her bed and gazing dreamily across at "Bobby's" house, Freda would invoke some of the more memorable passages in the book, the few she could understand.

Thus Robert, in modern parlance, had it made. Weekends in East Aurora with Margaret, the rest of the week in Edwardsville with Freda—his young life was filled with thrills. The girls knew of each other's existence, of course, but Robert kept the true nature of their relationships well concealed.

By mid-June of 1934, Freda discovered that she and Robert had gone to the cemetery once too often. The knowledge made her uncharacteristically nervous and depressed. She refused to eat, complained of sleeplessness, and began to look decidedly run-down. Her normally cheerful disposition left her. Always quick to laugh, she now didn't laugh at all. At last she let her sister Mary Ellen persuade her to see a doctor.

Early in the afternoon of July 23, 1934, accompanied by her mother, she entered the offices of Dr. Meyers. She left her mother in the reception room and talked to the physician in his private office, well aware of what he was going to tell her.

After the doctor had examined her and asked the usual questions, he said gently: "How did this happen? You know who the boy is?"

Freda bowed her head. "Yes. I know when and who."

"You ought to get married," the doctor advised.

"Yes," Freda said, "I want to."

"Will he marry you?"

Freda hesitated. "I don't know," she said.

As he scrawled a prescription for a sedative the doctor urged her to talk to the young man—he tactfully didn't ask for his name—about getting married as soon as possible. Then he said: "I suppose you want to tell your mother about this now, don't you?"

Freda jumped up in alarm. "No, no. I won't tell Mother. Please, Doctor, don't tell her!"

Dr. Meyers agreed. Freda joined her mother, and the two women left in silence. Mrs. McKechnie maintained later that she thought her daughter was suffering from nothing more serious than a nervous complaint.

As soon as she safely could, Freda telephoned "the boy" at the office to give him the news. They agreed to meet that night. Robert's voice over the phone had lulled Freda's fears and she dressed carefully for the rendezvous, more eager to be with her lover than worried about the thing they must discuss.

They drove around aimlessly in Robert's family car (his own was in East Aurora being repaired) while she told him what the doctor had said. Robert had no doubt that he was the father of the baby because, as he was to say later, "I knew it wasn't any other fellow."

When Freda had finished, Robert thought for a while. Then he said: "You can do one of two things. We can get married or you can go to a doctor about it. I'll give you your choice." Freda chose without an instant's hesitation. "I'd rather get married. I would rather have the baby."

Robert made no protest. He accepted her decision, but suggested that they wait until his next payday, August 1, when they could elope to Eunice, West Virginia. He knew a man there, Robert said, who would probably give him a job. They could begin a new life.

Freda went home, bursting with happiness. Robert went home to brood.

Freda's parents and friends were overcome with joy when she told them she was a bride-to-be. In the week that followed she laughed and joked like her old self. She bought material and started to make a

wedding dress. To her best friend, Rosetta Culver, she confided that she was going to embroider all her underwear with lover's knots, and as they laughed and giggled, even drew the pattern with a fork on a tablecloth.

Robert had other ideas for tooling up for the wedding. On Saturday, July 28, he traveled to East Aurora to pick up his repaired car—and to repair his relationship with Margaret Crain. She had, of course, received his "Dear Margaret" letter. But he discovered that she had lost none of her desire for him, nor he for her. It must have been a spectacular weekend, for, as he admitted later, he began to think about a plan to unravel his now hopelessly tangled love life.

On Monday night, July 30, Bobby was back home, dutifully dining with his fiancée, her family, and Rosetta Culver. He was rather quiet that evening, but Freda, giddy with wedding preparations, was lively enough for both of them. Her jokes and antics left everyone but Bobby convulsed with laughter.

After dinner Robert and Freda drove Rosetta Culver to her home in nearby Wilkes-Barre. On the way back Freda suggested that they drive to Harvey's Lake—a favorite resort—for a swim. It was raining, and rather cold, but Freda insisted. So Robert drove to the lake and parked near one of the docks.

A cottage not far off was occupied by Mrs. William Patton, mother-in-law of Freda's sister Elizabeth. Freda visited with Mrs. Patton for half an hour before returning to Robert in the car.

As Robert said later: "She undressed first and then I did. It was when I was undressing, the thought struck me that I should do away with her because of her condition and my other girl."

So Robert Edwards, that nice boy, that model of Christian upbringing, that young man who one day hoped to minister to the souls of his fellow men, took a leather-covered blackjack from the glove compartment of his car and slipped it into the waistband of his bathing trunks. Then he and Freda walked slowly toward the water's edge.

A few minutes after ten o'clock he emerged from the water alone. He dressed, dumped Freda's clothes under a tree a short way off, and

drove home. On the way he bought some chocolate bars for his mother. Before going into the house he hung his wet trunks on a clothesline behind it.

Next morning, the thirty-first, Freda's mother telephoned Rosetta Culver. She was frantic with worry, she said, because Freda hadn't come home the night before. Rosetta said she had no idea where Freda might be: Freda and Bobby had driven her home and then left. She hadn't heard from Freda since.

Mrs. McKechnie waited until noon before phoning Robert, who was home from the mines for lunch. He walked next door to the McKechnies', and seemed unconcerned that his fiancée had been out all night.

"Bobby," Mrs. McKechnie pleaded, "where is Freda?"

"Why, I don't know."

"Wasn't she with you last night?"

"Yes, but I drove her back home and left her on Main Street near the house."

"Oh, Bobby," Mrs. McKechnie wailed, "something terrible has happened to Freda. I know it."

He smiled. "Why, Mrs. McKechnie, nothing has happened to her. What could happen to her?"

"I don't know, Bobby, but that girl didn't call me last night. She never did that before—stayed out all night and didn't let me know where she was. Bobby, is there anything wrong with Freda?"

Bobby's face shifted expression. He looked deeply sincere. "No, Mrs. McKechnie," he answered. "Freda and I were never intimate. We were good pals, that's all."

Mrs. McKechnie then said in despair: "Bobby, don't stand there. Do something. Get your car and look. See if she has wandered off somewhere."

Robert Edwards left, but not to look for Freda. He went back to work.

As the afternoon hours dragged by, the McKechnie family huddled in the parlor, sick with apprehension, waiting for some word from

Freda. White-haired George McKechnie was home, and his elder son, and his married daughter, Elizabeth Patton, and Freda's uncle, Shadrich Dodd.

Five o'clock passed with still no word, and they sent for Bobby Edwards again. He reappeared, as nonchalant as he had been in the morning, and went into the kitchen and sat down to talk with Mr. Dodd. As Mrs. McKechnie had, Mr. Dodd questioned Robert closely.

"Robert," he began, "I'm deeply concerned over Freda. Now tell me the truth—what happened between you and Freda last night?"

"Well . . ." Robert started to reply.

But the ringing of the telephone cut him short.

John McKechnie, Freda's brother, answered. It was a policeman. Freda's body had been found in Harvey's Lake. John walked back into the parlor. "They've found Freda," he said. "She's dead. She's met with foul play."

Old George McKechnie leaped from his chair and shouted: "Our Freda's been murdered."

Elizabeth Patton walked into the kitchen and broke the news to her sister's fiancé. He paled, and looked surprised. All he could say was "What?"

Elizabeth heard her father stumbling toward the kitchen. She pushed Robert toward the door. "Bobby," she cried, "get out of here before my father kills you."

With Freda's body in the hands of the police, bits and pieces of the tragedy fell swiftly into place. Newspaper reporters streamed into Edwardsville and Wilkes-Barre. They observed, and concluded the obvious: the death of Freda McKechnie had all the appearance of a second *American Tragedy*. The first had been the drowning of pretty "Billy" Brown by Chester Gillette in the waters of New York's Moose Lake in 1906, the case on which Theodore Dreiser had based his celebrated novel.

Freda McKechnie, her belly already beginning to swell with the murderer's seed, had been found in shallow water at the edge of Har-

vey's Lake by a frightened teen-ager who saw her white bathing cap bobbing at the shoreline. When the body, clad in an orange bathing suit, was taken from the water, it became apparent that this was no ordinary summer drowning. The back of Freda's skull had been crushed by a blow of terrific force.

A few minutes later bathers passing a clump of trees near the lake came upon the clothes Freda had been wearing when she left the house the night before. With them was the red pocketbook Robert Edwards had given her for Easter. In the meantime, detectives had found a blackjack lying a few feet from the water's edge.

An autopsy, mandatory in the case of violent or mysterious death, revealed no water in the dead girl's lungs, proof that she was dead before she sank into the lake. The coroner decided she had died as the result of a blow by a blunt instrument. The autopsy also disclosed that Freda was pregnant.

That was enough for Chief County Detective Richard Powell. He ordered the arrest of Robert Allen Edwards on suspicion of murder.

Edwards was picked up at his home at ten o'clock on the night of July 31 and taken to the nearest state police barracks. His father, stunned but protesting his son's innocence, went along.

An hour later Detective Powell began the first of his interrogations.

"Bobby, give me the truth about what happened to Freda that night."

"Well," Robert began, "I had eaten supper and started down the street in my car. I met Freda and a girl friend and drove the girl friend to her home in Wilkes-Barre. I let the girl friend off and returned to Edwardsville. I let Freda off at Plymouth and Main streets between eight-fifteen and eight-thirty."

"Why did you let Freda off nearly a mile from her home?"

"I didn't want her parents to see us together. I saw her walk away toward the brewery. I was tired and wanted some sleep. I had driven from Buffalo on Sunday and didn't get home until three o'clock Monday morning. But actually I didn't go home anyway. I met some of my friends."

"Okay," said Powell, "give me their names."

Edwards grinned sheepishly. "It's funny, Mr. Powell, but I can't remember their names."

But he did remember that before going home he had stopped off at a drugstore to pick up some chocolate bars for his mother. And the drugstore clock, he recollected, was running slow. But the names of those friends: he just couldn't remember.

"Bobby," Powell said, "we found tire tracks near where Freda was killed. They match the tires on your car. We found your bathing suit hanging on the line in back of your house."

Edwards shrugged his shoulders.

Powell walked outside, went back five minutes later to ask: "Bobby, are you telling me the truth?"

Bobby raised his right hand. "Mr. Powell, I'm telling God's truth."

Suspect and detective fell silent. On the wall above their heads an old clock hammered out the seconds, and only its sound broke the heavy silence.

"Look," Edwards said at last, "I want to tell you what really happened. Freda and I were at the lake. She telephoned me in the morning and made a date to see me. We met that night and went to Sandy Beach. The bathhouses were locked. We changed our clothes in the car. We went into the water and waded to the float. I got a notion to dive. I dove. When I came up, my hand struck her under the chin; she fell backward and hit her head against the float."

"Go on," said Powell.

"We swam to the float and got up on it. She got cold and went back into the water. I saw her white bathing cap disappear. I went out for her but couldn't find her. I went back and got in my car and drove away. When I realized I had her clothing, I hid it at the foot of the tree."

There were no further questions that night. Robert Edwards was detained, however, and spent the first of what were to be many nights behind bars, the last place on earth anyone who knew Bobby Edwards ever expected him to be.

Tuesday night they took the suspect out to Harvey's Lake. When

they returned to the state police barracks, Bobby called Powell aside. "I want to tell the truth," he said.

Powell led him into the interrogation room and they sat down facing each other. "Bobby," Powell asked, "when were you intimate with Freda?"

"I never was intimate with her."

A note of pleading crept into Powell's voice. He had known Bobby and Freda since they were children. "Robert, she's dead, and her child is dead. Don't blacken her any more than what she is."

The young man considered this for a few seconds. "I'm going to tell the truth, but when I tell you it was an accident you won't believe me."

Powell told him to continue.

"While we were getting from the float into a boat she slipped and fell. I felt her and there was no pulse and no heartbeat. I was afraid. I went back and got my blackjack and let her have it so it would look like an accident."

Would he dictate a statement to that effect? Robert said he would, and did—ten typewritten pages of it. Then he went back to his cell. He had told three stories. He would tell a fourth.

The next morning Robert was questioned by the Wilkes-Barre police chief, Ira C. Stevenson. They went back over the conflicting stories. Stevenson pointed out the wealth of circumstantial evidence against him—the fact that Freda was pregnant, his romance with Margaret Crain, the blackjack. Finally the chief said: "There's two lives gone, Bobby, hers and the baby's. You better tell the whole truth."

And this time he did.

"We swam for a while," he said. "We talked about getting married and about her having a baby. The water was a little over four feet deep, and when she ducked down once, she came up with her back to me."

"I pulled out the blackjack quick and hit her on the back of the head. I hit her with the blackjack and then I left her in the water. I could see her white cap go under. I got out and dressed as fast as I could, but I threw the blackjack in the water. Freda's clothes were in the car. After I'd put mine on, I drove back a way and left them under a tree. Then I

drove on home after stopping to get a couple of chocolate bars for my mother, and went to bed."

When he had finished, Robert buried his face in his hands and wept.

On Friday, August 3, Robert Allen Edwards was charged with the murder of Freda McKechnie and remanded to the Luzerne County Jail. The next day Margaret Crain rushed down from East Aurora to be at his side. Her mother and her brother the minister came with her. Margaret and Bobby spent a half-hour alone. Then she talked to reporters.

Bobby, she said, could not possibly be guilty. Was she engaged to him? Engaged? Well, there was an understanding between them. "It had not been officially announced," her brother interposed, "but it was definitely understood by the families." At this point Leonard Morgan, Robert's chief counsel, stepped forward and remarked: "At the request of the family I want to take this opportunity to deny certain rumors that have been reported to us concerning the relations of Miss Crain and Edwards. They are absolutely untrue."

"Absolutely," Margaret added. "And I'll stick to him no matter what happens. Bobby's in trouble. My place is with him." For the time being, Margaret explained, she was returning to East Aurora. But she would be back to see her Bobby.

After Margaret's whirlwind arrival and departure, reporters went to see the McKechnies. Had they known about Miss Crain and Mr. Edwards?

They most certainly had, Mrs. McKechnie answered, biting off each word. "Freda and Bobby had quarreled about Margaret Crain. She had come down from East Aurora to stay with Bobby's folks, but Bobby had promised Freda that Margaret was going home the next day and that he would never see her again."

George McKechnie didn't much want to talk about Margaret Crain. He preferred to talk about Robert. "It's a good thing I didn't get my hands on him, that's all," he declared. "Bobby wouldn't be in Luzerne

County Jail. He would be in a place where his only judge would be the Lord. If justice is done he will be sent to the electric chair."

On August 21 a Luzerne County grand jury indicted Robert Allen Edwards for first-degree murder. The panel had needed only thirty minutes to arrive at its decision. Yet the speed with which the grand jury moved did not allay the fears of the prosecution that something might go wrong at Robert's trial. He had repudiated that confession he spilled out to Chief Stevenson. It was just possible, the prosecution reasoned, that the trial judge might refuse to admit the confession as evidence. Without Robert's incriminating statements, with only his admission to Detective Powell that he had blackjacked Freda after she died accidentally, the state's case against the defendant was far from airtight. And it might collapse altogether unless motive could be proved beyond a shadow of reasonable doubt. Margaret Crain had already sown the seed of doubt by stating publicly that her relationship with the handsome defendant had never gone beyond the hand-holding stage.

But a few days later a couple of detectives entered Robert's bedroom for a methodical search of his belongings. Hidden in one of his bureau drawers they found a packet of letters from Margaret. They proved that she and Robert had indeed been intimate, that she was extremely passionate and very much in love.

District Attorney Thomas M. Lewis read the letters, noted their fervent tone, and assumed that if Margaret had written love letters to Robert, then Robert might have reciprocated in kind. He also decided that if letters from Robert to his music-teaching sweetheart could be produced in court, they might establish a motive for Freda's murder that could be made perfectly clear to any jury of level-headed citizens. A few hours later Harold Flannery, Lewis' assistant, was on a train bound for East Aurora, fully aware of two important points of the law: Pennsylvania could not extradite Margaret from New York as a witness; she could not be forced to part with the letters, if such there were.

Margaret's father came to the door, and when the assistant prosecutor explained something of his reason for being there, Mr. Crain

invited him inside to meet Margaret and Mrs. Crain. For the next hour or so Flannery, Mr. Crain, and his wife talked about the weather, the crops, the depression, anything but the murder of Freda McKechnie. Margaret sat on a rose-colored love seat with her legs curled beneath her and said nothing. Finally Mr. Crain asked his visitor if it was true Freda was carrying Bobby's child at the time of her death. Flannery nodded.

"About what they say Bobby has done," Mr. Crain said hesitantly. "Couldn't there be some mistake?"

"No," said Flannery, "there couldn't. The prosecution has the blackjack—the blackjack that Robert had in his car when he drove home from East Aurora the weekend before the murder."

He then turned to Margaret. "We have your letters to Bobby," he said.

For the first time since Flannery's arrival, Margaret showed some sign of emotion. She blushed. "Well," she sighed, "they should make interesting reading."

"Now, now," Flannery said soothingly, "they're just the letters of a girl in love. What we would like," he added smoothly, "are Bobby's letters to you."

She looked down at her hands, wound tightly together. "Tell me," she said. "If I gave you Bobby's letters, would they be read aloud in court?"

"Only those parts which are offered in evidence," Flannery replied. "How much would that be?"

"I don't know. I'd have to read the letters."

"All right," she said slowly, "I'll get them for you. Do you want them all?"

"No, only the ones he sent you during the past few months."

Margaret walked upstairs to her room. She was back in a few minutes. "Do you want them wrapped?"

"I'd appreciate it," Flannery replied.

The following morning District Attorney Lewis and his assistant, Flannery, began reading Bobby's letters to Margaret. They expected to find the usual avowals of undying love and affection expressed strongly

enough to provide a motive for Freda's murder. They found the avowals, all right, but "usual" is hardly the word. What they uncovered was a cesspool of erotic, profane, and obscene writings that made *The Memoirs of Fanny Hill* look like a toned-down version of *Little Women*. And threaded through these steaming passages, most of them apparently tactical reconstructions of some of their sexual activities of the recent past, was the sought-after motive—as plain as Margaret Crain's face: Bobby and Margaret were dead set on marriage.

Flannery returned to East Aurora the next day. He made it perfectly clear how much Margaret might be hurt if those letters were read in court. It would be better for her simply to testify that she expected Bobby to marry her; that it had been understood between them; that they were in love with each other.

While Margaret hesitated, Mr. Crain asked Flannery to leave so that Margaret could have time to think things over before coming to a decision. Flannery checked into a local hotel to await the girl's call. It never came. Instead, Thomas Mangan, a Binghamton, N.Y., attorney telephoned to say that he was representing Miss Crain and that he thought it unnecessary for her to go through the ordeal of testifying against Mr. Edwards.

Flannery went to see Mangan and patiently outlined the damning contents of the letters. But Mangan refused to try to persuade his client to change her mind. "It is unnecessary," he said, "for my client to go to Wilkes-Barre."

At precisely ten o'clock on the morning of October 1, Judge Valentine hurried into his third-floor courtroom, mounted the bench, and looked toward the clerk of the court. The clerk arose and cried out: "The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania versus Robert Allen Edwards."

Thirty newspaper reporters and a battery of special writers, including Theodore Dreiser (representing the *New York Post*), whose novel *An American Tragedy*, as I've mentioned, so closely resembled the Edwards case, opened their notebooks and awaited the questioning of prospective jurors. Two hundred spectators, who had maneuvered



their way into the musty courtroom, leaned forward. In the corridors on the first, second, and third floors of the courthouse, policemen struggled to control five hundred others who hadn't the special passes that would have admitted them to the courtroom itself. Outside, the line of would-be spectators extended a half-block to River Street and down River Street to the banks of the Susquehanna River. For Wilkes-Barre it was quite a spectacle.

Only the defendant appeared bored by it all; he showed no trace of emotion. He was impeccably dressed—freshly pressed blue serge suit, white shirt, dark blue tie, and highly polished black shoes. He was closely shaven; his black hair was slicked back and down. The legend beneath his high school yearbook graduation picture had read: "Smiles for the ladies, never tears; Bobby's conquests will last for years." I could see why.

By late afternoon the panel was complete: twelve "blue-collar" workers, all male.

When darkness came, lights winked on in the courtroom. A light breeze blew from the Susquehanna River, bending the trees outside like performers bowing at curtain call. Assistant District Attorney Flannery rose, stepped to within a few feet of the jurors, and began the prosecution's opening statement.

He ran through the early moments of Bobby and Freda's "courtship," his voice gay, his face alight with Freda's joy. "Freda was happy as a girl can be," Flannery said. "She had made a dress—she was going to be married. Last Christmas, Edwards gave her jeweled clasps. And at Easter he gave her a red purse—the one that was found in the lake when her body was lifted to the surface!"

The defendant leaned forward. He was no longer bored. He glowered at the prosecutor. But Flannery, ignoring him, dragged the image of Margaret Crain on stage, told of her torrid relationship with Bobby, then dismissed her in one curt sentence: "She made the down payment on the car in which Bobby Edwards drove Freda McKechnie to her death."

The prosecutor shifted the scene to Harvey's Lake on the night of July 30: "They undressed in the car near the icehouse. It was raining heavily. They put on their bathing suits for a swim, although the weather was so unfavorable. Freda skipped light-heartedly down to the water. Edwards closed the car door and followed her. In his hand he carried the blackjack with which he planned to kill her. Two other couples were on the beach. Two lights showed. That could not be the place. He led her further on into the pitch-darkness. She ran into the water—he lagged on the beach.

"Freda started swimming. He stepped into the water after her. Freda's back was turned. Her hour had come. And he was ready! He drew the blackjack from his bathing suit and struck her a frightful blow on the head. She stopped swimming, swayed—and he seized her hips and forced her down under the water until she sank. He flung the blackjack into the lake."

Flannery stopped. The deed had been done. There was little left to tell, but the prosecutor told it well. He recounted Bobby's various stories, each one more fantastic than the last. And finally the confession.

"Is it too late to tell the truth now?" Flannery quoted the defendant. "Well, I've prayed and read my Testament and my parents tell me to tell the truth. Here it is. Freda didn't faint, she didn't fall and hurt herself. I had been thinking of doing this ever since she told me she was to become a mother—because I wanted to marry Margaret Crain."

When the trial resumed Tuesday morning, October 2, District Attorney Lewis called Freda's mother as his first witness. She walked briskly to the witness chair: a study in black—black dress, black coat, black slightly brimmed hat.

"Freda and Robert went to the same church," she said in reply to Lewis' first question. "Freda had a boy friend, George Thomas, but she gave him up for Bobby. Bobby used to visit Freda four or five nights a week. They didn't do much. Bobby would just come in and sit with Freda. They went for walks and to the movies sometimes. They were very friendly. When Bobby went away to Mansfield College, they

corresponded. Bobby gave Freda a pair of lingerie clasps for Christmas. For Easter he gave her a pocketbook. Freda carried that pocketbook the night she went out."

Mrs. McKechnie's voice grew husky and her words stumbled a bit as she told how the romance between Bobby and Freda cooled with the intrusion of Margaret Crain.

"I saw Margaret Crain one night in the backyard of the Edwards home during one of her visits. I heard a voice say, 'Honey, it's too hot. Please don't kiss me.' I looked out and there was Margaret Crain with her hand on Bobby's shoulder. I was surprised. Freda was away from the house at the time."

She told how Freda had become ill a few weeks before her death. "She seemed depressed. She lost her appetite, was very nervous and worrying. I took her to see Dr. Meyers. She began taking medicine." The medicine, said Mrs. McKechnie, her voice barely above a whisper, was for Freda's "nervousness."

District Attorney Lewis picked up the thread of his interrogation.

Q. I want you to tell me what occurred on the Sunday before your daughter's death.

A. She had bought some clothes. She tried on a dress and stood around looking at herself in the mirror.

Q. What was her demeanor on that occasion?

A. She was as happy as a lark. I never saw her so gay. She asked me how she looked and I said fine. The dress fitted her real well.

Q. Did she try on anything else?

A. Yes, a skirt.

Q. Do you recall Monday night—the last night Freda was home?

A. Yes.

Q. She had dinner at home that evening?

A. Yes. I never saw her so happy. She had us all in stitches at the table, imitating Joe Penner and all the funny radio stars, and she had us hilarious.

Q. Tell us when you saw her after dinner, what happened?

A. I saw her last walking down the street with Rosetta Culver. They were laughing. I don't know about what.

Q. That was the last time you saw her alive?

A. Yes.

Lewis was finished. Defense Counsel McGuigan moved in to cross-examine. He asked her to remember the time she and Freda visited Bobby at Mansfield College.

Q. You say Margaret Crain was there at the time?

A. Yes.

Q. You saw her and you knew Edwards was paying quite a bit of attention to her, didn't you?

A. Yes.

Next on the stand for the prosecution was Rosetta Culver. She was everything Freda was not—blond, attractive, poised. I wondered if handsome Bobby had ever tried to lead her down the cemetery path. Apparently not. Because on the Wednesday before he went to East Aurora for the last time, Bobby had provided Rosetta with a date and the two couples went driving in the Poconos.

"Did you stop at some point?" Lewis asked.

"Yes."

Q. Was it on a lonely country road?

A. Yes.

Q. Was it dark?

A. Yes.

Q. Did anyone get out of the car after you parked?

A. Yes, Freda and Robert got out.

Q. Where did they go?

A. Down the road.

Q. Did they take anything with them?

A. Yes, a blanket.

Q. How long were they gone?

A. About fifteen or twenty minutes.

Q. You stayed in the car?

A. Yes.

Q. When they came back, what did you do?

A. They took me home.

Lewis then asked Miss Culver to describe Freda's manner and appearance prior to that nighttime excursion to the Poconos.

"Very melancholy and down-hearted," the girl replied.

And after the Poconos jaunt?

"Lively and joking," Miss Culver recalled. "She seemed happier than I'd ever seen her."

Mr. McGuigan, in cross-examining Rosetta, wrung from her the admission that her blind date on that Wednesday night was in fact a married man. "I didn't know that until afterward," she explained primly.

Lewis then called three more important witnesses during the morning session: Dr. Meyers, the physician who told Freda she was pregnant; the dead girl's married sister, Elizabeth; and Elizabeth's mother-in-law, Mrs. William Patton, Sr.

Dr. Meyers recounted Freda's visit to his office. Mrs. Patton described the dead girl's short visit to her cottage at Harvey's Lake just before she and Robert went swimming that fateful night. Elizabeth, tense and on the verge of tears, admitted that Freda had undergone a drastic change in the week before her death. But Elizabeth thought her sister's gaiety was "synthetic." Mr. McGuigan objected, and Lewis cautioned Elizabeth against "giving your opinion." The dramatic moment of her testimony came when she described her conversation with Robert Edwards on the day after the murder.

"I asked Bobby where Freda was," Elizabeth said. "He said he had no idea. I said, 'Bobby, Freda isn't in trouble, is she? Is there anything wrong with her?'"

Q. What did he say?

A. He said: "Why, no. Freda is too big for anything like that. We were never intimate that way; Freda was too big for that."

During the afternoon session the district attorney summoned Reverend Elson Ruff, minister of the Lutheran Church at Harvey's Lake. The clergyman explained that he had been chaperoning a party of

young people at the lake and happened to be standing at a window in the skating-rink pavilion at about nine-thirty on the night of July 30.

"It was raining," he testified. "I watched two young people—a young man and young woman—going down into the water almost directly below me. I saw them go out about a hundred and fifty feet along the edge of the water until they got beyond the float and out of sight. They were wading, not swimming."

Back in his cell that night, Bobby learned that Margaret Crain had talked to reporters in East Aurora. "No matter what happens," she told them, "I'm through with Bobby Edwards." This could hardly be classified as one of the great renunciations of history. Since her appearance in Wilkes-Barre a few days after Freda's death, Margaret had communicated with her pornographic pen pal but once. She sent him a Bible and a brief plea to read from the Good Book. "Do it," she implored, "for the good of your soul."

Detective Powell, frequently in tears because "I knew Robert all my life," was the third day's first witness. He told the jury how the defendant gave conflicting versions of Freda's death before finally blurting out: "I want to tell the real truth." Then Robert's ten-page typewritten statement, describing how he cracked Freda's skull with the blackjack, but only after he found she had died in a fall from the lake's float, was admitted into evidence.

Freda's father followed Powell to the stand. Difficult to understand at times, because his speech was laced with a heavy Scotch burr, Mr. McKechnie described his daughter's relationship with Robert Edwards, and told how he tried to assault Bobby when he learned that Freda's body had been fished out of Harvey's Lake. "I went toward him," Mr. McKechnie said. "But they grabbed me and guzzled me and put me to the floor."

McKechnie's testimony drew a wisp of a smile from Theodore Dreiser. Judge Valentine noticed the smile, glared at the novelist, and snapped: "Mr. Dreiser, I cannot tolerate this facial expression in the presence of the jury." For the remainder of the day Dreiser kept his

features locked in solemnity, but I wondered what had amused him. Could he have been wondering, somewhat sardonically perhaps, whether Bobby Edwards had ever read *An American Tragedy*? Had Bobby, like Dreiser's Clyde Griffith, pulled back at the last critical minute, only to have an accident complete the job for him?

There was little to interest Dreiser, the reporters, or even the spectators, until late in the trial day. Then District Attorney Lewis very methodically began submitting for handwriting identification the 172 love letters written by Edwards to Margaret Crain.

Assistant District Attorney Flannery's hobby was amateur theatrics. He had appeared in a number of theater group productions in and around Wilkes-Barre and was regarded as quite accomplished for a non-professional. Logically, then, he should have welcomed—even relished—the opportunity to read in court Robert's letters to Margaret Crain. But he didn't welcome it at all. He was to say later that reading publicly what the defendant had written privately was “one of the hardest jobs of my life.” Fortunately for Mr. Flannery, but unfortunately for the spectators, whose ears were flapping in anticipation, the defense and the prosecution had agreed privately that only as many of the letters need be read as were necessary to demonstrate that Robert had a flaming passion for the outwardly chaste music teacher. Even so, the “selected” correspondence boosted the courtroom temperature quite a few degrees.

When court convened for the fourth trial day, the letters lay in a neat pile on the prosecution table. A few minutes after ten o'clock on the morning of October 4, Flannery reached down, picked up the top letter and began to read:

“November 24, 1933

Sweetest Darling:

Well, after last night I feel more in love than ever. I swear I love you more than ever. We have our sweet honeymoon dreams, haven't we? I guess I didn't tell you last night, but I want you to know.

I love you. I love your letters. I was so happy to get them. Let's do our tryst,

kissing on paper when we are apart, but the originals are better. Beloved, I love you more than life. I'll love you forever.”

Flannery took up another letter:

“Momet Perfect: [“Momet,” French-Canadian for “my kid,” was Robert's pet name for Margaret.]

I love you, dearest, I love you much more than any of my letters begin to say. The only way I can ever show you a bit of my love is by actions. I am worshipping you, my Momet. And I pray the day is not long when I can take you into my arms and keep you there for all time to come. I truly adore you, dearest. Our souls are one, one forever.”

Flannery read on:

“I'm sorry you didn't get my letter. I love you, my sweetheart. Do forgive your boy. I love you, blessed, truly I do. I love your long happy letters. Of course I remember that night with you—in the car. How could I forget?

A week from tonight you come to me. I can hardly wait. I want you—all of you. Let's make it next year—our marriage. I can't wait. Keep your lips warm and wet for me. I love to give you a massage. You know I love to do everything for you.”

The defendant looked miserable, almost sick. His face was a ghastly white, and his hands when they ruffled the sheets of paper (he had been given typewritten copies of the letters) were shaking. Sometimes he followed the words with his eyes. Sometimes he merely looked up and listened.

Flannery read on:

“My Goddess:

Hello, dear wife. How much do you love me now? Oh, I love you. I will surely have a lump of love to show you this weekend. We are really man and wife now. Don't you feel that? I'm coming to you on Saturday. Your loving and devoted husband.”

(At this point Freda's father rose from his seat and left the courtroom.)

"Momet Blessed:

I am dying to see you and be with you so we could be one in body again. I love you more and more. I can't hardly wait for summer to come so I can take you swimming."

The defendant buried his face in his hands, and those sitting near heard him cry out: "Oh, God, I wish I had a gun."

Relentlessly Flannery picked up still another:

"I saw the blast furnaces roaring last night and I thought how cool they were compared to my ever-glowing love. I can't stop loving you. It would kill me. I love every cell in your body. It is our blessed trysting time and I am lying on my bed and thinking of you and I know you are thinking of me. You have showed me an abundance of love I didn't know could exist. I love you with all of me. Do you recall our actions the last time? How I wish we were together doing them again."

The letters were filled with promises of marriage. "I'll get you drunk and marry you someday, okay?" he wrote in one message.

And in the confusion of his sex-tormented mind, he wrote often to her of prayer, and of church, and even of his hope of one day becoming a minister.

"I was offered a job in a brewery, Momet, but I refused. After all, I am going to be a minister someday and it might not look right to work in a brewery."

Flannery reached for a letter dated July 26—just four days before Freda's death:

"It is our trysting time, Momet, I am going to go to bed in a few minutes and hold you close. Our love is growing with every breath I take. I love you to the deepest depths of my soul. I love you in a divine way, my blessed sweet wife."

And, finally, on July 27:

"I love you. I will love you always. I cannot wait until Sunday when I will see you."

Flannery was finished. Robert sat with his head bowed. The prosecutor turned toward the judge. "The state rests," he said.

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John Phillips launched Robert's defense with an eloquent opening statement in which he depicted the defendant as a young man ensnared by a woman five—or was it six?—years his senior.

"He went to Mansfield College and there he met Margaret Crain," Phillips told the jury. "A love and affection grew out of their companionship. His friendship for Freda McKechnie did not grow cold—it was interrupted. And his companionship with the other girl grew into love. When he returned home he had to have love and companionship—so he turned to Freda. Their love was a mutual desire. He was twenty-one, she was twenty-seven. There was no ring, no letters, no promises. There was no concealment of his love for Margaret Crain. But a physical desire arose between Robert and Freda."

Phillips then told of Freda's telephone call to the defendant, telling him that she was pregnant. He retraced their steps to Harvey's Lake on the night of July 30.

"They rested on the dock," Phillips said. "Freda was cold. She said: 'I think I'll have one more dip.' Robert said: 'My bathing suit is dry. I'll wait here.' To the left of the dock a rowboat was tied. Freda stepped to the prow of the boat. She threw her right leg over the side. She fell back, her left shoulder against the side of the boat, her head striking the other side. Robert got up. He went to her. He felt her pulse. There was none. He felt her heart. There was no beat.

"He thought to himself: 'Freda's dead. She's pregnant. I've been with her. I'm to blame.' He had a stampede of judgment. His mind was a turmoil. Reason had fled him. He didn't know what had happened."

Phillips paused. "You have waited this long, gentlemen of the jury, to hear the real story of this boy's life. We call to the stand the defendant, Robert Allen Edwards."

Bobby was calm as he raised his right hand to take the oath. Then he sat in the witness chair, crossing his left leg over his right. Phillips asked how old he was.

He told his age, his residence, his school, his meeting with Freda.

Q. Then when you went to Mansfield, did you correspond with her?

A. Yes, in the first part of the school year. About three letters apiece. We never wrote after that.

Q. And when you came home, were you on friendly terms with her?

A. Yes.

Q. In 1932 did any members of the McKechnie family visit you at Mansfield?

A. Yes, Freda's mother and brother.

Q. You had met Margaret Crain by this time? You were friendly with her?

A. Yes.

Q. Now, when you left school, did you correspond with Miss Crain?

A. Yes.

Q. Were you friendly with Freda McKechnie?

A. Yes, casually.

Phillips then asked his client to explain why he had given Freda a set of lingerie clasps the previous Christmas.

"Well," Bobby replied smoothly, "I went over to Freda's home because she had sent me a card and I wanted to thank her for it. I asked her what she had received, and it seems she had not been particularly blessed. I felt sorry for her. My mother had some clasps she was giving to her Sunday school girls. I wrapped up a pair and brought them to Freda."

Phillips swung suddenly to the question of Freda's pregnancy.

Q. Did you discuss it?

A. Yes.

Q. Did she say you were the father of the child?

A. Yes.

Q. When you learned you were the father of her unborn child, what did you tell her?

A. That we would be married.

Deftly, then, Phillips led Robert, the jury, and the spectators back once again to Harvey's Lake on the rainy night of July 30. Yes, the defendant said, they swam out to the float. And Freda fell and struck

her head. He found no pulse, no heartbeat. He panicked, pure and simple.

"What did you do next?" Phillips asked.

Robert leaned forward in his chair. "I hit her over the head with a blackjack to make it look like an accident," he whispered. "She was already dead. She had fallen into a rowboat and I felt her pulse and knew she was dead."

Phillips turned toward the prosecution table. "Your witness."

But the prosecutor would have to wait. Judge Valentine rapped his gavel twice, and court was adjourned for the day.

On October 5, 1934, in Wilkes-Barre, two enterprising youths stood outside the Luzerne County Courthouse, hawking mimeographed copies of Bobby Edwards' love letters to Margaret Crain. Inside the courthouse the young man who had been dubbed the "coal-town sheik" settled himself in the witness chair and awaited cross-examination by District Attorney Lewis.

"Isn't it true," the prosecutor began, "that to carry out your pledge to be true to eternity to Margaret Crain, you intended to tap Freda on the head and slide her body into the water to make it look like a drowning?"

"No, sir," Robert replied respectfully, "I had no such intention."

Q. You struck her to make it appear like an accident, you say?

A. Yes.

Q. And then you placed her clothes hundreds of feet away—to make it look like more of an accident, I suppose?

A. I put them there. I don't know why.

Q. You didn't just throw her in the water? You eased her in?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you show how you hit her with the blackjack?

Robert recoiled slightly as Lewis pushed the blackjack toward him. "I don't know," he replied. "It doesn't look natural."

Q. But you did hit her a terrific blow?

A. I don't know.

Q. But you heard the medical examiner testify it was a blow that would fell an ox, didn't you?

A. Yes, I heard him say that. I remember he said it was a terrific blow.

Q. Isn't it true that while striking her on the head—"letting her have it," as you told the police—you broke the strap on the blackjack?

A. No, that isn't true, so far as I know.

Lewis turned toward the jury and held up the weapon, dangling it by the broken thong. Then he turned back to the defendant. "Isn't it true," he inquired, "that to carry out your pledge to be true to eternity to Margaret Crain you intended to hit Freda on the head and slide her into the water to make it look like a drowning?"

"No," Robert retorted sharply.

"You hit her harder than you intended to," the prosecutor shouted. "Isn't that true?"

Bobby slumped back in the chair. "I don't know," he whispered.

"What! Speak up! The jury can't hear you."

"I said I don't know."

The prosecutor then picked from previous testimony a series of lies the defendant admitted telling in the past—to Margaret, to Freda, to her parents, to the police.

Q. You told those lies, didn't you?

A. Yes.

Q. But you want this jury to believe you are now telling the truth?

A. Yes.

Without trying to mask his disgust, Lewis snapped, "That's all," and strode back to his chair. Robert rose slowly. His eyes swept the courtroom. Then, with head down, he walked rapidly back to the defense table.

Mr. McGuigan had two more witnesses—the defendant's mother and father. Mrs. Edwards came to the stand, dressed entirely in black as if she were already mourning her dead son.

The defense lawyer started by asking her if she was at home on the night of July 30. "Yes," she replied.

Q. Did he bring you anything?

A. Yes, he brought me some candy bars.

Q. Did he then go to his room?

A. Yes, at about midnight.

Q. Do you know whether or not he slept?

A. I don't think so. I could hear him tossing and moving about, and I said to his father: "Robert is restless. He can't seem to sleep."

Mr. Edwards followed his wife to the stand. It was his fiftieth birthday that day. He was asked only one question—how did his son behave on the morning of July 31?

"He was unusually quiet," Mr. Edwards answered. "He was pale and not as talkative as usual."

That was it. Five days of sensational testimony and suddenly it was over.

After a brief recess District Attorney Lewis began his closing statement. It was a scathing denunciation of the defendant and his mistress from East Aurora.

He described Robert as "the cruelest, coldest defendant who ever walked into a courtroom." Margaret he termed "a red-hot mama" and "a filthy hag."

"If you acquit this boy," the prosecutor rumbled at the jurors, "then let's get blackjacks by the thousands and give them to all our boys and say to them: 'If you get a good girl in trouble, take her to the lake some night and give it to her.'"

"He said he loved that creature—you can't call her a lady—as a wife. But he didn't love that pure, clean creature who was about to bear his child. Freda has gone to her reward. Gentlemen, it is your duty to send him to meet her, the mother of his unwelcome child. Gentlemen, I ask you to send him to eternity."

Lewis' comparatively short address packed quite a wallop. McGuigan

could never hope to match it. So instead of breathing fire, he invoked cool logic in pleading with the jurors to find Robert innocent.

"The Commonwealth has no case," McGuigan said. "Its case is built on suspicion and circumstantial evidence so weak it is afflicted with pernicious anemia. Robert's amateurish way of thinking drove him to blackjack the girl to make it look like an accident. He was bewildered, he was confused. If he committed this crime, this boy is the dumbest criminal agency I ever observed. How can you say all these preparations—these dumbbell preparations—were part of a plan to kill this girl?"

"You can't," the defense attorney concluded. "The arrows of logic point to his innocence. The case the Commonwealth built is an empty shell. Unless you find the victim died a violent death at the hands of the defendant, your verdict must be not guilty."

The twelve jurors retired at 8:54 on the night of October 5, 1934, to start their deliberations. Robert sat in his cell, writing a letter to Margaret Crain. At midnight Judge Valentine notified the jurors that they could break off deliberations—or continue them. They sent back word that they would continue. And so, as Wilkes-Barre and Edwardsville slept, and as a light rain fell, twelve stolid men weighed the fate of Robert Allen Edwards.

It was still raining at seven-thirty the following morning when the jury sent word to judge Valentine that a verdict had been reached. A half-hour later Robert walked into the near-empty courtroom and took his seat at the defense table. Phillips wasn't there. Neither was McGuigan. He had sent his son, a young attorney who appeared slightly bewildered and highly nervous. The defendant seemed calm. But the twitching of a muscle below his right eye betrayed him.

At 8:10 A.M. the jurors filed into the courtroom. They had to walk past Robert Edwards. He looked up at each, searching their faces for a clue, an answer, a sign. None would meet his eyes.

They shuffled into the jury box and remained on their feet. They shifted their bodies nervously, ducked their hands into their pockets, or kept them behind their backs. The foreman handed an envelope to

Clerk William Henderson. Judge Valentine asked if they had reached a verdict. Yes, they had. Judge Valentine nodded toward Henderson, and the clerk took the envelope to the bench. Then, at another nod from the judge, Henderson tore open the sealed document. His hands shook slightly as he did so. His voice quavered, as he read:

"We find the defendant, Robert Allen Edwards, guilty of murder in the first degree with the death penalty."

In Edwardsville, George McKechnie sat on the front porch of his cottage. Reporters stood around him, asking what he thought of the verdict. "Well," he answered slowly, "I'm sorry for Dan Edwards and his wife and that other boy of theirs, too. But Robert Edwards took my little girl's life, and justice has been done—as far as it can be done."

In East Aurora, Margaret Crain's father met reporters at the door of his home. Margaret, he said, was in seclusion. She would see no one. A newsman asked Mr. Crain: "What do you think of the verdict?" "We have always felt the ends of justice would be met," Mr. Crain answered, then he shut the door.

Robert Allen Edwards was twenty-two years old when it came time for him to die. Early on the morning of May 6, 1935, he walked without assistance to the electric chair at Rockview Penitentiary in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. He was murmuring a prayer as the black hood fell over his head.

I've sometimes wondered who—or perhaps "what" is more appropriate—was really responsible for the death of Freda McKechnie and the execution of Bobby Edwards. Bobby murdered Freda, of that there is no question. And the sovereign State of Pennsylvania exacted payment from Bobby for his crime. But what overpowering fear inspired Bobby's desperate act? It was a premeditated but not a reasoned act. There were alternatives. Bobby rejected them. Why? Out of love for Margaret Crain? In spite of the letters, I say: Impossible! (I'd like to



have a dollar for every salacious love letter, complete with proposals of marriage, that has passed between young people who never wound up within a mile of an altar!) Was marriage to Freda so certain to be a *permanent* disaster? He could not know, he could not even guess.

Bobby felt a responsibility toward Freda, a responsibility that derived from his understanding, *and abject fear*, of the moral code in which he had been brought up. He had been born into a society that encouraged the kind of cowardice that to him made murder, a dark and forbidden avenue of escape, seem more acceptable than the simpler risk of marriage—a risk that, in time, might have been no risk at all.

He was afraid. He was afraid to talk to any of those who might have helped him. That was what has struck me so forcibly about Bobby's puny, misspent young life. He was afraid to confide in anyone whose mature advice and counsel might have shown him a bit of daylight on the road ahead. He was afraid of society—afraid and ashamed. And out of his fear and his shame and his cowardice, he gambled away Freda's life and his own. You might almost say it was society who handed him the dice and urged him to throw.

*Murder One*, 1967

## EDNA FERBER

For Depression-era Americans, no crime in living memory was as heinous as the abduction of the 20-month-old son of the revered "Lone Eagle," Charles Lindbergh. On the evening of March 1, 1932, Charles Jr. was spirited from his second-floor nursery in the Lindberghs' home in Hopewell, New Jersey; a note left on a radiator grill demanded \$50,000 in cash for his safe return. The crime set off a worldwide paroxysm of outrage and grief (H. L. Mencken deemed it "the biggest story since the Resurrection"). After weeks of false leads, dashed hopes, and cruel hoaxes, the mystery of the baby's whereabouts came to a terrible resolution when his decomposed corpse was discovered in the woods four miles from the Lindbergh home. More than two years passed before a suspect—a German-born carpenter named Bruno Richard Hauptmann—was arrested for the crime. His sensational 1935 trial ended with his conviction, and on April 3, 1936, Hauptmann went to the electric chair protesting his innocence.

Among the writers sent to cover the trial was Edna Ferber (1885–1968), one of the most popular authors of her time, best known for her novels *So Big* (1924), winner of the Pulitzer Prize; *Show Boat* (1926), the basis for the perennial musical classic by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein; and *Giant* (1952), one of seven of her books that were turned into successful films. The sharp social conscience that infuses Ferber's books is equally evident in this scathing firsthand portrait of the media circus surrounding the Hauptmann trial.

### Miss Ferber Views 'Vultures' At Trial

Writer Is Shocked by Chatter of the 'Chic'  
Who Gather for Flemington Holiday.

**F**LEMINGTON, N.J., Jan. 27.—It is considered chic to go to the Hauptmann trial. Though I myself am not chic, and have never been invited to an Elsa Maxwell party, I hope I know what is being done. A