The Fantastic Career Of Daniel E. Sickles

By William J. Moyer

THIS is a story about murder.

Unlike the crime thriller that may be on your television or radio tonight, the circumstances are not "purely coincidental" and the pistol shots which echoed through Lafayette Square just 94 years ago gave the city a "thrill of horror" such as it had not had in a "quarter of a century," according to The Star of that day.

The murder occurred February 27, 1859—otherwise dreary Sunday.

The victim was Philip Barton Key, attorney for the District and a son of Francis Scott Key.

He was slain by Daniel E. Sickles, a young Representative from New York. An up-and-coming politician, Sickles was a close friend of President Buchanan, and some say he had his sights set on the presidency. The shots blasted away those ambitions, if he had them, but they did not keep him from having a fantastic career which brought him fame as a Union general in the Civil War and did not end until his death in 1914.

The motive for the slaying was Key's clandestine romance with Sickles' wife.

Twenty years younger than her husband, Therese Baglioli Sickles was the daughter of an Italian opera singer. She was only 17 when Sickles married her shortly before going to London in 1853 with Buchanan as First Secretary to the United States Ministry. They returned when Buchanan ran for President in 1856.

Sickles was elected to Congress. Dan and Therese Sickles entertained in elegant style in a big house on Jackson Place N.W. They paid $3,000 a year rent. Therese wore jewels worth $5,000 and drove about in a "splendid carriage."

The Star said Sickles was "distinguished by much fascination of manner and in personal appearance is somewhat of a lady killer."

Then Key came into their lives. Tangled love affairs were not new to him. His brother had been killed in a quarrel over a woman and Philip himself barely escaped a duel over the Baltimore belle he had married. His rival, a Col. May, accused Key of "unfairly supplanting" him.

Key's wife died, and he was a dapper widower—about-town when he met Mrs. Sickles. Eventually, Sickles learned of the romance. Finally, the two men came face to face at the southeast corner of Lafayette Square.

"You accosted me," Sickles shouted. "You have dishonored me!"

A shot rang out.

"I am murdered," witnesses said Key groaned, sinking to his knees.

Two more shots...and he was dead.

Sickles waved confidently to friends from the carriage which hauled him to jail, where a "special cell was whitewashed and cleared of vermin for him." Friends thronged to jail to visit him while almost a state funeral was held for Key. The town gossips never had it so good.

At the trial came the bombshell that established a precedent in criminal trial procedure. Sickles pleaded not guilty by reason of temporary insanity, and was acquitted. One of his attorneys was Edwin M. Stanton, later Lincoln's Secretary of War.

Therese returned to New York, where she died after a few melancholy and secluded years.

But Sickles went on. Appointed a brigadier general by Lincoln, he distinguished himself at Antietam, Chancellorville and Gettysburg, where he lost a leg. He sent the limb to the Army Medical Museum; the splintered bone still is on display there.

After the war, he was too harsh as military governor of the Carolinas. President Johnson made him minister to Spain. In a few years, he was back in New York—but without his bride, a dashing Spanish senorita. She preferred Europe.

In New York, Sickles became sheriff, a member of the Civil Service Commission and chairman of the State Monuments Commission. In 1893, he again was elected to Congress.

When the century turned, Dan Sickles was growing old and sick and tired. In 1911, a shortage of $27,000 turned up in the Monuments Commission's accounts. Sickles was fired.

Two years later, the end was obviously near. His wife—after a 28-year separation—was at his bedside when he died in his 80th year.