

# EDGAR WALLACE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH 1966

VOL. 1 NO. 1



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EDGAR WALLACE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 1, March, 1966. Published monthly by Classic Mystery Publications, Inc., 315 West 70 St., New York, N.Y. Subscriptions, 12 issues \$6.00, single copies, 50¢. Second class postage pending at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. Copyright 1966 by Classic Mystery Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.



## BEWARE OF THE DOG

*Fred Brown is one of the most versatile writers alive—a master of the crime story, the deduction story, the supernatural story, the science-fiction story, and, especially, a master of the O. Henry type of short-short with a surprise ending. Here he is with one of his best efforts in that last category, a murder-and-retribution yarn so tight and lean that it seems even shorter than it is . . .*

by **FREDERIC BROWN**

**T**HE SEED OF murder was planted in the mind of Wiley Hughes the first time he saw the old man open the safe.

There was money in the safe. Stacks of it.

The old man took three bills from one orderly pile and handed them to Wiley. They were twenties.

"Sixty dollars even, Mr. Hughes," he said. "And that's the ninth payment." He took the receipt Wiley gave him, closed the safe, and twisted the dial.

It was a small, antique-looking safe. A man could open it with a cold chisel and a good crowbar, if he didn't have to worry about how much noise he made.

The old man walked with Wiley out of the house and down to the iron fence. After he'd closed the gate behind Wiley, he went over to the tree and untied the dog again. Wiley looked back over his shoulder at the gate, and at the sign upon it: "Beware of the Dog."

There was a padlock on the gate too, and a bell button set in the gatepost. If you wanted to see old man Erskine you had to push that button and wait until he'd come out of the house and tied up the dog and then unlocked the gate to let you in.

Not that the padlocked gate meant anything. An able-bodied man could get over the fence easily enough. But once in the

yard he'd be torn to pieces by that hound of hell Erskine kept for a watchdog.

A vicious brute, that dog.

A lean, underfed hound with slavering jaws and eyes that looked death at you as you walked by. He didn't run to the fence and bark. Nor even growl.

Just stood there, turning his head to follow you, with his yellowish teeth bared in a snarl that was the more sinister in that it was silent.

A black dog, with yellow, hate-filled eyes, and a quiet viciousness beyond ordinary canine ferocity. A killer dog. Yes, it was a hound of hell, all right.

And a beast of nightmare, too. Wiley dreamed about it that night. And the next.

There was something he wanted very badly in those dreams. Or somewhere he wanted to go. And his way was barred by a monstrous black hound, with slavering jowls and eyes that looked death at you. Except for size, it was old man Erskine's watchdog.

The seed of murder grew.

Wiley Hughes lived, as it happened, only a block from the old man's house. Every time he went past it on his way to or from work he thought about it.

It would be so easy.

The dog? He could poison the dog.

There were some things he wanted to find out, without ask-

ing about them. Patiently, at the office, he cultivated the acquaintance of the collector who had dealt with the old man before he had been transferred to another route.

He went out drinking with the man several times before the subject of the old man crept into the conversation—and then, after they'd discussed many other debtors.

"Old Erskine? The guy's a miser, that's all. He pays for that stock on time because he can't bear to part with a big chunk of money all at once. Ever see all the money he keeps in—?"

Wiley steered the conversation into safer channels. He didn't want to have discussed how much money the old man kept in the house. "Ever see a more vicious dog than that hound of his?"

The other collector shook his head. "And neither did anybody else. That mutt hates even the old man. Can't blame him for that, though; the old geezer half starves him to keep him fierce."

"The hell," said Wiley. "How come he doesn't jump Erskine then?"

"Trained not to, that's all. Nor Erskine's son—he visits there once in a while. Nor the man who delivers groceries. But anybody else he'd tear to pieces."

And then Wiley Hughes dropped the subject like a hot coal and began to talk about the widow



who was always behind in her payments and who always cried if they threatened to foreclose.

The dog tolerated two people besides the old man. And that meant that if he could get past the dog without harming it, or it harming him, suspicion would be directed toward those two people.

It was a big if, but then the fact that the dog was underfed made it possible. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, why not the way to a dog's heart?

It was worth trying.

He went about it very carefully. He bought the meat at a butcher shop at the other side of town. He took every precaution that night, when he left his own house heading into the alley, that no one would see him.

Keeping to the middle of the alley, he walked past old man Erskine's fence, and kept walking.

The dog was there, just inside the fence, and it kept pace with him, soundlessly.

He threw a piece of meat over the fence and kept walking.

To the corner and back again. He walked just a little closer to the fence and threw another piece of meat over. This time he saw the dog leave the fence and run for the meat.

He returned home, unseen, and feeling that things were working out his way. The dog was hungry; it would eat meat he threw to it. Pretty soon it would be taking food from his hand, through the fence.

He made his plans carefully, and omitted no factor.

The few tools he would need were purchased in such a way that they could not be traced to him. And wiped off fingerprints; they would be left at the scene of the burglary.

He studied the habits of the neighborhood and knew that everyone in the block was asleep by one o'clock, except for two night workers who didn't return from work until four-thirty.

There was the patrolman to consider. A few sleepless nights, at a darkened window gave him the information that the patrolman passed at one and again at four.

The hour between two and three, then, was the safest.

And the dog. His progress in

making friends with the dog had been easier and more rapid than he had anticipated. It took food from his hand, through the bars of the alley fence.

It let him reach through the bars and pet it. He'd been afraid of losing a finger or two the first time he'd tried that. But the fear had been baseless.

The dog had been as starved for affection as it had been starved for food.

Hound of hell, hell! He grinned to himself at the extravagance of the descriptive phrase he had once used.

Then came the night when he dared climb over the fence. The dog met him with little whimpers of delight. He'd been sure it would, but he'd taken every precaution — two pairs of trousers, three shirts, and a scarf wrapped many times around his throat. And meat to offer, more tempting than his own. There was nothing to it, after that.

Friday, then, was to be that night. Everything was ready.

So ready that between eight o'clock in the evening and two in the morning, there was nothing for him to do. So ready he set and muffled his alarm, and slept.

Nothing to the burglary at all. Or the murder.

Down the alley, taking extra precautions this time that no one saw him. There was enough moonlight for him to read, and to grin

at, the "Beware of the Dog" sign on the back gate.

Beware of the dog! That was a laugh, now. He handed it a piece of meat through the fence, patted its head while it ate, and went up toward the house.

His crowbar opened a window, easily.

Silently he crept up the stairs to the bedroom of the old man, and there he did what it was necessary for him to do in order to be able to open the safe without danger of being heard.

The murder was really necessary, he told himself. Stunned—even tied up—the old man might possibly have managed to raise

an alarm. Or might have recognized his assailant, even in the darkness.

The safe offered a bit more difficulty than he had anticipated, but not too much. Well before three o'clock—with an hour's factor of safety—he had it open and had the money.

It was only on his way out through the yard, after everything had gone perfectly, that Wiley Hughes began to worry and to wonder whether he had made any possible mistake. There was a brief instant of panic.

But then he was safely home, and he thought over every step he had taken, and there was no possible clue that would lead the police to suspect Wiley Hughes.

Inside the house, in sanctuary, he counted the money under a light that wouldn't show outside. Monday he would put it in a safe deposit box he had already rented under an assumed name.

Meanwhile, any hiding place would serve. But he was taking no chances; he had prepared a good one. That afternoon he had spaded the big flower bed in the back yard.

Now, keeping close under cover of the fence, so he could not be seen in the remotely possible case of a neighbor looking from a window, he scooped a hollow in the freshly spaded earth.

No need to bury it deep; a shallow hole, refilled, in the freshly turned soil would be best, and



could never on earth be detected by human eyes. He wrapped the money in oiled paper, buried it, and covered the hole carefully, leaving no trace whatsoever.

By four o'clock he was in bed, and lay there thinking pleasantly of all the things that he could do with the money once it would be safe for him to begin spending it.

It was almost nine when he awakened the next morning. And again, for a moment, there was reaction and panic. For seconds that seemed hours as he lay rigidly, trying to recall everything he had done. Step by step he went over it and gradually confidence returned.

He had been seen by no one; he had left no possible clue.

His cleverness in getting past the dog without killing it would certainly throw suspicion elsewhere.

It had been easy, so easy for a clever man to commit a crime without leaving a single lead. Ridiculously easy. There was no possible—

Through the open window of his bedroom he heard voices that seemed excited about something. One of them sounded like the voice of the policeman on the day shift. Probably, then, the crime had been discovered. By why—?

He ran to the window and looked out.

A little knot of people were gathered in the alley behind his house, looking into the yard.

His gaze turned more directly downward and he knew then that he was lost. Across the freshly turned earth of the flower bed, strewn in wild profusion, was a disorderly array of banknotes, like flat green plants that had sprouted too soon.

And asleep on the grass, his nose beside the torn oiled paper in which Wiley had brought him the meat and which Wiley had used later to wrap the banknotes, was the black dog.

The dangerous, vicious, beware-of-the-dog, the hound of hell, whose friendship he had won so thoroughly that it had dug its way under the fence and followed him home.

