

DETECTIVE TALES

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HALF-PINT HOMICIDE

By RAY BRADBURY

The Douser had a very simple way of taking care of some very complicated people. . . . As witness his effective remedy for the fat, lush and powerful Mr. Schabold. . . .

IT WOULD be wrong to say that the Douser got the idea just as he was being pushed off Union Bridge by a man. Truth to tell, Douser tempted the man with, "Come on, push me," and then stepped aside, politely, allowing the man precedence.

The man screamed.

So did a train that passed below a moment later.

A few minutes later Douser was talking over a phone to a very bad fat man. The man's name was Schabold. Douser talked jovially with him. Nobody called anybody any names.

"Yeah, Schabold. My name's Douser Mulligan. And this corpse, under the Union Bridge, I mentioned, was one of your bodyguards—"

The news was not good to Schabold. Douser consoled him:

"Know just how you feel, Mr. Schabold. That's three of your boys hurt in one month. One shot himself accidentally, and is still in the hospital. Another was picked up drunk on Main Street, dripping counterfeit money. That's sad."

Schabold spoke a few sad words, like a fat boy who just lost a bag of candy: "You're the little sparrow who hangs around the Central Jail, are you not?"

"That's right. Well, see you around, huh, Schabold."

Douser hung the receiver back on its prong to sleep.

He walked up toward the Jail in a cold

winter wind. Things were becoming fun, now. The next hour he'd dawdle speaking with Sarge Palmborg at the jail, keeping an eye peeled, patiently, for a large ebony limousine containing one fat man, well worried. Life was dull except on nights like this, when he had many people, assorted sizes, hating his miniature guts. Yes, sir!

Sergeant Palmborg was standing in front of jail an hour later.

"Evening, Sergeant Palmborg!"

"So here you are again!" Palmborg looked down a million miles. "So." He lit his pipe in god-like movements. "Don't nothing discourage you?"

"Nothing," said the Douser.

A moment's silence. "They took away your badge a year ago for being so damn flippant."

"It was a frame. Look." Douser formed a frame with his hands. "With gilt edges, too. Feel."

"And," Palmborg proceeded with his gray calm, "they robbed your holster like a bird's nest. And here you are, again, looking like a small puss who's digested the canary."

"A fine meal," said Douser.

The sarge nodded back one shoulder. "A body's cooling in there, just brought in from the railyards. One of Schabold's men. Naturally, you know nothing about him."

"Naturally."

"He was one of them gunmen connected with that Detroit bank killing. They never could get a thing on him."

"Except a locomotive."

The sergeant snorted. "You're in deep, lad. I don't know if you've pestered Schabold or not. Whoever did it, is in for it deep. Schabold won't take it. Three of his men hurt since he arrived in town a month ago—"

Douser was about to comment, when thunder boomed the winter night, and a big ebony limousine roared out of nowhere. Schabold sprawled on its velvety rear cushion, fat cold pork, staring out. "Well—" Douser clocked him. "Right on time—" Douser waved.

"Douser," pleaded the sarge. "Take your fingers away from your nose." The car roared out of sight. The sarge bit his pipe. "I'd like to get something on that blackmarketing bum, that soft ton of bacon—"

Douser babbled. "I got a theory. Schabold's rich, always has been. Why, then, did he go crooked? I ask you. Remember the old bromide; each of us carries the seed of our own doom? That's Schabold. Figure out his seed and you got him. Listen, here, sarge—"

They conversed in a rising wind. Waiting. Douser's heart thumped like a toy tambourine. Waiting. And when the ebony limousine came roaring by again, the sarge, on cue, whistled, and walked out to intercept it, Douser at his heels.

THE limousine rammed on its brakes, heaving Schabold into one window: "What's the meaning of this?"

The sarge smiled. "Got your draft cards?"

Schabold produced his with a glitter of hard rings on soft fingers. The sarge okayed them, and nodded at the bodyguards up front. "You, too."

"Uh—" said the bodyguards, "we—that is—we come out in such a rush we—forgot to bring them."

"Well, well," said the sarge. "We'll have to hold you until the FBI checks your draft status tomorrow morning. Climb out."

"Tomorrow!" Schabold emerged in large soft portions from his throne. He searched the sarge's face, found nothing, and shifted his wrath to his men. "You—careless louts!"

"You can go now," said Palmborg to the fat man. "We don't want you. You're okay."

Schabold flapped big red lips, changed his mind, got in the car behind the wheel, silent. Watching him, Douser got an idea of a large grey helpless barrage balloon maneuvered in life's winds by obedient servants forever running in its shadow. Now the balloon's tie-lines were clipped. Let the blimp scream for orders, let the wind blow. Douser was here now, to answer.

Douser jumped in beside Schabold in the front seat, slammed the door, waved bye-bye at the sarge.

"Hey!" rumbled the blimp.

"Night, sarge. You know who I'm with if I'm dead tomorrow. Remember." Douser turned to the fat man. "Let's go!"

It was hard to tell who was most amazed. Mouths were open. Somebody swore. The motor boomed and the car heaved off into the winter streets, roaring.

Douser settled cozily, worming his small bottom about, chuckling. "Slow down. We got all night to talk. About ways of you killing me and me killing you."

The car slowed. "All right, what's the deal?"

"No deal. This is a safe place to spend the night, with you. In the lion's mouth, I guess you'd say. Everybody saw you spirit me off into the night, fat man. That's just another part of my master plan. You don't dare touch me, tonight, or even tomorrow."

The road rushed under the car in a quick rubber whisper.

"Tell you how it is with me, Schabold. Sometimes I don't sleep nights worrying about the criminals walking free in this world. I get mad. Then I do things about it. I make sure a guy's a real honest-to-god criminal, then I start clicking. I eliminated your boy friends first, because if something happened to me, you might try and frame it off on one of them. That's your usual trick. But I want—"

ed you—*alone*. Just you, me and the next twenty-four hours, darling. It's your move."

Schabold strangled inside his lapels. His eyes were grey, blind, shining straight ahead: his jowls shaking.

Glancing at the swiftly running scenery, Douser said, "There's your house, Schabold. You want to stop and pick up a gun—"

Brakes screamed. Douser bounced like a ping-pong on the windshield. Schabold looked pleased, and bulged from the car to pump across the street, Douser pattering after.

They found a gun in the kitchen. Douser cheerily helped look for it. "Is it in the wastebasket? No. Refrigerator? I knew you wouldn't carry a gun by the jail. How about this jar of berry jam?"

Schabold found the gun. Munching crackers, Douser followed him back to the car. Nobody made any phone calls to warn anybody to come help somebody. The car roared again.

Schabold, with gun, settled down, over the shock of things. The bright eyes began to think inside the fat. He poked up the speed. They boomed through Beverly Hills, Douser whistling happily. When he finished whistling he asked the fat man a favor:

"Please, Mr. Schabold. Take out your gun."

"What for?"

"For the hell of it."

Schabold pulled the gun. "Well . . . ?"

Douser gave directions. "Stick it against my chest."

The gun muzzled with ugly pleasure against ribs the size of a small birdcage.

Douser panted on his fingernails, rubbed them boredly on his knee-cap with a slow, languid motion. "Now—pull the trigger."

THE car purred down into a husky mutter. Schabold whispered: "Oh, I'd love to pull this trigger. And keep on pulling it, over and over." The eyes in the fat opened, closed, opened again. "Lord, what it would do to your pint-sized machinery. It'd be worth it—almost."

"Almost?" wondered the Douser. "I gather there is some doubt?"

The gun chewed his ribs, more.

"Enjoy yourself. Play with me. You think you got me in a spot where you can laugh. Play with me. Go on."

The car crawled slow, and the wind blew hard and cold through the window. Schabold kept whispering slow and cold, too:

"But I don't want a jail-rap, I don't like trouble. Not now, anyway."

He put the gun away, with a great battle of will.

Douser's heart played hopscotch, marking lines on his stomach and jumping up and down on it, hard. He sweated.

Schabold sat thinking a long while as they

drove toward the sea. Salt wind blew in from the stars, and Schabold chewed over an idea like a wad of gum, and finally smiled, the wrong kind of smile, at Douser. Douser swallowed, tightly.

The ocean rushed to meet them with a boom of surf and a stretch of snow white sand. Schabold stopped the car and looked at the waves, his mind going out and in with them, deciding. When next he spoke, his voice was thoughtful, soft. The anger was gone, the excitement and fury. In it was the sound of a man whose decision is made.

"Douser, it's either you or me. . . ."

Douser's heart leaped in its cage like a frantic red bird.

Schabold confessed a bit. "I came to the Coast to blackmarket gas. I'm a business man, you might say. You get in my way, hurt my men, bother me at all hours. Tonight, I decided to supervise your demise myself. I never do a job alone, I need help. And my men are convenient hooks upon which to hang prison terms in case anything happens. That Detroit job, for example, they never proved a thing on us. I let Louie Martin take the rap for that cop killing in Fort Worth. There's always a way, Douser," he said indulgently, gently. "I have never been in jail in my life. I pride myself on my clever record. Never been in jail. You, now, tonight, thought to get me alone, to joke with me, work on me. Well, now, little man," he finished dryly, "get out of the car, very slowly, please."

The gun was in Douser's side again. Douser gentled the door open, slid out. Schabold slid heavily after, eyes shining like a saint.

"Goodbye, Douser."

"Don't be a fool!" Douser cried.

Schabold fired his gun.

He kept firing it until it was empty.

BANG. Douser jerked. **BANG.** He shriveled with it. **BANG.** It kicked his eardrums. Bullets sang hot songs. **BANG.** Ricocheting off sea-pebbles. Stars shook like fireflies. **BANG!**

Silence.

The sea came in and went out, lifting its salty skirts.

And out of salt silence, Schabold's soft, genuine laughter.

DOUSER'S fingers crawled like wary spiders, chest, stomach, legs, arms, then flying to his face.

Schabold kept laughing. "You should—have—seen—your—feet!"

Douser said simply, "I'm alive."

"Certainly." Schabold laughed again.

Douser looked almost disappointed. "You missed me on purpose!"

Laughter tears ran down the fat man's face. He was having fun, playing Douser's game

right back at him. Now he climbed back in the car, flicked the keys in the ignition, chortling. "Well, I don't have to kill you, Douser," he said. "For the last hour I've worked on some way to kill you while I had the chance. It was tempting. My emotions got hold of me. Well, I'll wait. A week or a month. Until my boys are sprung from jail. Wait until my alibi is water-tight, then you'll vanish and they'll never see you again. Why, you haven't got a thing on me." He was confident. "Not a thing. All I have to do is drive off, leave you here, go home to bed, forget the whole matter."

"There's only one thing wrong with your logic," said the Douser, reaching into the car and extracting the keys from the ignition with a deft move of fingers. "I haven't changed *my* mind. You can put off killing me, *you* think. But who changes *my* mind? You been big and fat and loud and rich for years. I'd do anything to pin something on

"Well, *there*, then!"

Douser slapped him.

"Hey!" Schabold crouched behind the wheel.

"I bet you never been kicked in the shins," said Douser. "I bet nothing ever happened to you, except one thing, the thing that made you turn crook. What happened, Schabold?"

Schabold blinked.

"You heard me." Douser leaned forward. "What happened."

Schabold waited and said, "1929."

Douser nodded. "Thought so. Bathed, manicured all your life. Life didn't touch you. 1929 slammed you, though. You couldn't take meeting reality. You turned crook and went on being rich the wrong way. That's what I figured. Well, fat man, shake hands. I'm life, I'm reality catching up with you again. I'm the stuff you been running away from for years. Life. Pain. Reality. That's me. Shake?"

you. Even if it meant killing myself."

Schabold looked at him as if he was a man from another star. "You're crazy. Crazy as a betel-nut!"

"Maybe." Douser jangled the keys. "If you drive off, leaving me here, I'll climb the palisades and jump off the cliff. Maybe I'll get killed, maybe not. Either way, it involves you for a prison term."

Schabold couldn't understand that. "I'm talking to a moron. You keep talking that way, I'll have to shut you up."

"Ah-ha!" cried Douser triumphantly. "See? You're trapped! No matter what you do, you're trapped. Kill me and you're caught with no one to pin the crime on but yourself! Don't kill me, and I'll kill you, or jump off a cliff—who knows?"

"You—you got a gun?"

That was funny. "No. Only my fists and my feet and a reputation for being a nuisance. I know you, Schabold. I've studied you a long time. Otherwise I wouldn't have risked coming with you. Some other Joe might've shot me. Not you. You're careful. Well, the fun's over. You ever been slapped in the face, Schabold?"

"No. . . ."

Douser was on the running board, one foot inside the car, kicking softly into Schabold's shins. Gently, at first. "I figure it this way—cops get killed everyday. What if I get killed? It's no worse. I have fun. I get my man. There!"

"Stop it, stop it, stop!" cried Schabold.

"I dare you to kill me! Come on, fat man!"

Schabold fell heavily out the opposite side of the car. Douser scrambled after.

Schabold panted out and in. "You—you can't—bother—m—me! Keep away, keep away!" he cried.

"Ever been strangled, Schabold? Let's try it!"

With a bear-like roar and a sweep of one arm, Schabold shook the clinging Douser loose like a cockroach. He threw his empty gun and missed. Douser kicked shins again.

"Getting your temper up, huh? Good." Douser danced around. "You're getting mad, Schabold. That's fatal. You're getting mad and you're going to die! You're an oyster with its shell off, soft and white underneath!"

Schabold lumbered forward. Douser darted around the car. "Tag, you're it!"

The fat man clutched a heavy rock and heaved it like a girl playing basketball, with

both hands. It clunked off the fender. Douser ducked and ran. Bellowing in a perfect fury, sounding the big expanses of his lungs, Schabold careened in heavy pursuit. He was off the edge, all the way. Instinctive self-preservation was overcome, swallowed by unthinking, bestial rage. He snarled.

"Douser, Douser, you little louse!"

They made a queer dreamy chase across deep sands with the sea-beat timing them, and only the stars watching. Ahead, half a mile off, was a necklace of lights lying by the sea—Venice Amusement Pier—calling them on.

IT WAS two in the morning when they reached Venice Pier, their tongues showing out of their mouths. The dark pier was deserted.

Slowing to a wary, quick-breathing walk, Schabold said,

"Oh, how I hate you, you louse."

Under the plankings the sea walked on salt feet between the piles. Schabold's feet were heavy, thick, tired, old, sludging.

Like a humming-bird, one moment Douser poised under Schabold's engulfing arms, the next instant he was gone.

Douser made movements.

Somewhere a merry-go-round burst into brilliant, blatant light. The blind eyes of Schabold focussed dully, bringing out of salt shadows horses frozen on brass poles. A calliope wheezed. Douser tossed a switch gaily. Horses shocked into leaping life, going around. Douser went around with them on a reeling world.

"Come and get me, fat man!"

Schabold obeyed, but the turntable threw him aside emotionlessly. He fell, and a moment later there were footsteps running, a night watchman flushing his huge belly and sweating face with a flashlight.

"Hey, in there!"

Schabold got up and hit the man a terrific blow. He wanted no outside distractions now. The night watchman tumbled, got up, and went off, yelling, for help.

"You just killed a man, Schabold!" taunted Douser, coming around, going away, coming around, going away. The calliope yelled with him.

Schabold began to cry, frustratedly. He held out angry fingers as if they, and wishing hard enough, would cease the revolving world where all values shifted and all horses laughed.

The merry-go-round stopped. With a chunky bleat, jowls shaking, Schabold clambered aboard, only to have the world jerk into life again. Screaming, he held to the swaying universe and could not find Douser, only a shadow running off down, away through a

corridor of awful music, like a little bird vanishing forever. . . .

* * *

They found Schabold at dawn, seated on the largest horse of the merry-go-round at Venice, going up and down and around, the music blaring, him going up and down in a heavy, mechanical, lethargic rhythm. Schabold liked the horses. He didn't want to get off.

He kicked the officer who tried to get him down off his mount. He also kicked another officer in the stomach, and bit a third.

So they put him in jail.

Sitting on the sergeant's desk a few days later, Douser heard the story from the sarge's own gentle lips,

"Schabold went stir nuts. He was jailed for disturbing the peace, that's all. But he kicked an officer. Then he added to his crimes. He rattled bars, took swipes at people, tore off his clothes, threw away his diamond rings, screamed, and finally broke a little guy's arm, claiming the little guy's name was Douser. Yeah, Douser, mind you. Schabold finally confessed *everything*. Blackmarket deals, killings, robberies. It was like a load on his stomach he wanted to heave up, so he could feel better."

The Douser nodded philosophically. "Just like I said. We all carry the seeds of our own downfall. Schabold never knew reality in his life. He kept a roll of fat and bodyguards between himself and life. So what happened? He met me. I was real. I hurt. I was death, irritation and stuff he'd never really known. He couldn't get away from me. So he reverted to full childhood, pulled a baby's tantrum. His type is soft, once life bumps them they fall down all the way and are dragged back up with a noose around their throats. I tell you, sarge, it's sad."

Douser slid off the desk. "So there you are. More than one way to pin something on a guy. Let him do it himself. That's all I'm good for. I'm no sleuth. I just know how to bother people. Nuisance value. See you later, sarge."

The sarge said, "Where do you think you're going?"

Douser scowled. "Well, this morning's paper says Dutch Corelli is arriving on the one fifteen train today. I thought I'd go down and throw a mud-pie at him and study his reactions for future use."

"You might get hurt, Douser."

"Say, I never thought of that!" remarked the little guy.

A moment later he was running out into the sunshine, and the sarge was leaning back, shaking his head and cursing softly. . . .