

ED MCBAIN'S *mystery book • no. 3*

NOVELETTES

- 94.....Before She Kills
An Ed and Am Hunter Novelette by Fredric Brown
- 8.....The Mourners at the Bedside
A Jeremiah X. Gibson Novelette by Hampton Stone

SHORT STORIES

- 2.....Sounds and Smells
by Fletcher Flora
- 120.....Because We're Friends
by Irving Shulman
- 44.....Incidents on B Street
by Paul W. Fairman
- 58.....Dead Drunk
A Johnny Liddell Story by Frank Kane
- 81.....Service Call
by Bruno Fischer
- 31.....Sacrifice
by Warren Frost
- 139.....Package Deal
by Lawrence Block

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

- 131.....Game by Herbert D. Kastle

THE CRIME IS MURDER

- 48.....Cure for a Headache by Stuart Palmer

SPECIAL REPORT

- 72.....Break-Out by Donald E. Westlake

FEATURES

- 92.....Cops and Robbers by Vincent H. Gaddis
- 130.....Future File

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INCIDENTS ON B STREET

PAUL W. FAIRMAN



NO ONE NOTICED HIM AT ALL. NO ONE AT ALL. EXCEPT THE GANG OF KIDS

HE TURNED INTO B STREET AROUND half-past three that afternoon. He came from no place in particular and he had no clear destination at the moment—this shuffling little non-descript who had caused some concern among the mothers of the Flat Point area; an entirely logical concern because his twisted body and ragged filth were translated easily into marks of latent viciousness.

So they were naturally worried when they saw him walking their streets and sitting empty-eyed in their parks. Some of them felt a complaint was in order, but none went quite that far because they were all honest taxpayers and neighborhood protection was up to the police. So the little man went his way, unaware of their low regard, the mute hostility simply not penetrating his consciousness.

He lived on Garth Place in a windowless little cubbyhole, existing by grace of a tiny pension of some sort—a pittance that gave him means of survival. He had no one and no one claimed him. Even his name was known only to the bank teller who cashed his monthly check and then forgot him until the next visit.

But it had not always been thus, even though the little man himself could not clearly remember when it had been different. There was a picture of better and more vital days somewhere back in his memory—bright days—but glimpses of them could be dredged up only by dint of great mental effort. And even then the memory-bridge never quite took

him back to the times before chaos, always threw him squarely into the blur of that terrible brink-of-death business from which great surgical skill had salvaged his life, but little else.

So he'd stopped trying to remember; content now to live from moment to moment in the half-world of damaged mind and broken body. A not-unpleasant life, really, because the sun warmed him on good days and the Garth Place furnace was generous with its heat when the streets turned icy.

Content because he was incapable of discontent and that about summed him up.

But on this particular afternoon a probing recall nudged him sharply. This occurred when he moved up B Street and saw four boys playing in the open basement of a burnt-out warehouse—a dangerous ruin—a second menace that had brought worry to the mothers of Flat Point.

Fire had gutted the building some months earlier—so fiercely that nothing remained but the basement and a three-floor brick wall running thin and fragile along one side of the excavation. This wall should have been long-since demolished, but a jurisdictional argument between two city departments had delayed the work. And until the dispute could be settled, red DANGER—NO TRESPASSING! signs had been posted on the three open sides of the basement.

But the four boys had ignored the signs with careless courage and an urgent *something* stirred in the crip-

pled man's mind; something that told him he had once been a person of authority; that protection of the public had been a part of his work, warning the foolhardy still his duty.

So, acting on this cloudy instinct, he straightened his bent back, frowned down into the pit, and called out, "Get out of that hole! What are you trying to do—get killed? Come on—get moving!"

The boys looked up in idle wonder. They'd seen the old bum before, roaming aimlessly through Flat Point, but they'd ignored him as being not even a worthy target for the hazing impulsive youth sometimes inflicts on the helpless.

But this was different. He'd made sounds like a human being—ridiculous sounds—and they commented.

"Dig the loud-mouth slob, you guys."

"Beat it, ya crazy lush."

"Is he for real, fellas?"

"Let's find out." And the fourth boy picked up a rock and threw it with enough accuracy to hit the man on the leg.

The sharp pain broke the spell, and he whimpered as he came back to reality because pain was an undefeated enemy he remembered well. And with pain came fear and he turned and ran off up the street although *ran* was hardly the word. He hopped along ridiculously on one stiff leg and one that gave limply under pressure; an amusing spectacle, and it was understandable that four boys, alert for chances of fun on this pleasant afternoon, should climb out

of the pit and take off in hot pursuit.

They closed in on him at the edge of Flat Point Park and what happened was no doubt his own fault. He should not have shown such terror. He should not have clambered like a scared, crippled rabbit up a rocky embankment as though danger were at his heels. He shouldn't have tempted the four boys in this manner with so many rocks handy. It was a stupid thing to do.

And certainly not the fault of the lads that they responded to a whim of the moment and threw a few of the rocks. They weren't bad boys; not killers by any stretch of imagination.

This was amply proved when an accidently accurate pitch hit the old man squarely in the temple and he dropped as though pole-axed; proved by the fact that the boys stopped throwing instantly and registered fright. They hadn't meant any harm. They'd only been having a little fun.

Immediately, the logical argument started as to which one had really thrown the lethal rock. They all denied it and accused each other. Then they debated as to whether any of the rocks had actually hit the old man. Probably not. He'd been drunk in the first place. Anybody could see that. And they hadn't been chasing him, either. They had as much right in the park as he did, so how was it their fault if the drunk old coot fell down and hurt himself?

They arrived at these conclusions as they retreated slowly—slowly to make it obvious that they really weren't retreating at all. And then

they remembered they hadn't been home from school yet and that their mothers would probably be worried. So they broke up as a group and each went quietly and obediently home.

The old man lay on the rocky hillside for almost an hour, just another drunk nobody paid any attention to until a squad car cruised by containing two policemen whose business it was to pay attention to bums.

They went up and looked the old fellow over, found him unconscious, and sent for an ambulance. The response was tolerably prompt, two internes arriving within twenty minutes, but the old man died halfway to the hospital.

What had happened was pretty obvious. An old drunk trying to find a secluded spot to sleep it off had fallen on a rocky hillside in the park and busted his skull. The mark of the rock was plainly visible. No perceptible signs of alcohol—but that didn't mean too much because you could never tell about those old rummies. Even if he hadn't been drunk at the moment, what was he doing there in the first place? Easy for a cripple to slip on that rocky incline.

As a matter of form the two policemen went back to check. And sure enough, there was a sharp rock with blood on it. You didn't even have to look close. After all, what was this? A big murder case or something?

So that closed one of the afternoon's incidents on B Street; the other—the sudden collapse of the brick wall into the basement of the old warehouse—generated more interest and excitement.

A woman across the alley was sure she'd seen some boys playing in the basement just before the wall went down. But a quick check showed the basement to contain nothing but bricks and mortar, leading them to believe the woman had merely wanted to "get into the act," to be momentarily important.

So, all in all, the incidents on B Street that afternoon were not without value to the community. In a matter of minutes, the mothers of Flat Point were relieved of two worries. Twin threats to the well-being of their children had been eliminated.

And that made it a better community.

A safer place to grow and prosper.