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# The Crooked Smile

By BRYAN IRVINE

**O**F COURSE, a man whose smile is all one-sided has no more right to return to Earth after death to pester people than has the man whose smile is straight. But—well—

Eight hours after his release from the penitentiary, Felix McGroin—better known in crookdom as Felix the Leech—flitted from tree to tree along Foothill Drive. Darkness was coming on. In Felix's pocket was a revolver; in his heart was murder. The prison from which he had recently been released was several hundred miles behind him; the home of his intended victim—one Crooked Smile Harry—was less than a mile ahead.

There were a number of reasons why Felix had definitely decided that death should forever erase the crooked smile from the face of Crooked Smile Harry. My, how Felix hated that smile and the wearer thereof! That crooked smile had been a large factor in the causes that led to Felix's four years in prison. It was that crooked smile that brought about the estrangement of Felix the Leech and Della Delmere, the latter being a beautiful and accomplished lady crook. Incidentally, Della had married Crooked Smile Harry shortly after Felix landed in the big penitentiary for a ten-year stretch. Six years of this sentence had been deducted because Felix had turned out to be a very proficient stool-pigeon for the prison's "screws".

As Felix hurried along in the gathering darkness, his warped mind, as it had done many times during his stay in prison, reviewed again the years preceding his donning of the prison gray. And always the crooked smile of his one-time pal stood out prominently in these thoughts of the past.

It had been that smile that lured Felix the Leech from his lone-wolf activities into a partnership with Crooked Smile Harry. That cursed smile seemed to draw people to Harry as a magnet draws needles. Funny thing about that smile. Nothing pretty about it. It was all one-sided, the left side of Harry's face remaining passive, expressionless, while the right side broke into a smile that seemed to hypnotize people. Well, it had been the undoing of Felix the Leech.

Felix and Della Delmere were engaged to marry and all was going well until along came Harry and his crooked smile. Della fell hard for it. It had been a simple matter for Harry, very influential in the city, to double-cross Felix and have him "railroaded" to prison.

So Felix had served his time, carefully made plans for the violent death of Crooked Smile Harry and, now since he was free and Harry was not aware of that fact, the score could be settled—so thought Felix. Felix had not once considered the probability of the failure of death alone

to take the crooked smile away forever.

The night wind brought a cold, drizzling rain. Felix turned up the collar of his cheap "discharge" coat and hurried on. Some crook friends had told him just where the quiet country home of the now wealthy and retired Crooked Smile Harry could be found. "A half-mile beyond the high concrete bridge over the river," they had said. "First house on the table-land beyond the bridge. No other houses within two miles of the place."

Felix came to the bridge. The swirling river far below broke with a sullen roar against the huge boulders that lay in its bed. Felix, after one hasty look into the black depths, drew back to the center of the bridge and hurried on. He shuddered. He had always hated water.

On the concrete approach to the bridge was a sharp curve around a small hill. From there the paved road led steadily upward to the table-land on which Crooked Smile Harry had built his home. Fifteen minutes of steady climbing brought the Leech to within sight of the house, a snug, modern bungalow sitting back in a grove of gnarled old oaks. Between the swaying branches of the trees Felix could see the lights shining through the windows.

SEVERAL hundred yards from the house the ex-convict left the road and, furtively circling a small rise in the grounds, entered the grove of oaks. At last he crouched behind the trunk of a large oak not more than twenty feet from the front door of the bungalow. On the driveway near the front door stood a new, bright yellow sedan of expensive make. Felix cursed softly as his eyes took in the lines of the beautiful car. Harry's car, no doubt—the car in which Crooked Smile Harry and the woman who was to have married Felix the

Leech rode about for pleasure. Felix's hand stole back to his hip pocket and brought forth the revolver. "Very soon, Harry," he snarled, "you'll ride in a hearse."

Voices from within the house reached his ears, the voices of a man and a woman. Now the woman laughed. Felix instantly recognized that laugh—Della! The front door suddenly opened. Harry and his wife emerged from the house, laughing and talking. They paused on the small porch while Harry drew on a pair of gloves and buttoned his raincoat.

Felix, hidden behind the branches of the tree, raised the gun and trained it on the man's breast. His finger tightened on the trigger. One second more and the score would be settled—but in that second Della, all unconscious of the menacing gun, stepped between her husband and Felix. The finger on the trigger relaxed. Then it tightened on the trigger again. Why not kill both of them? They were both traitors, cheats. The thought hurt. But he could not pull the trigger. Four years of carefully nourished hate had not killed his love for the woman. No, he could not harm Della. He would wait until she stepped out of the line of fire.

"And don't forget, Harry," the woman was saying, "you promised to be back home not later than 9:30."

"And I never break a promise, Della," Harry replied.

Felix could see the crooked smile on the man's face.

"I sometimes worry, Harry," Della complained. "You have enemies, you know."

"Plenty of 'em," Harry laughed. "But the only real dangerous enemy—Felix the Leech—is still in stir and will perhaps be in stir several years yet. When his term expires—well, he'll simply disappear some dark night. I'll see to that; so don't wor-

ry," patting her shoulder reassuringly. "Why, Della"—and his face was very grave as he looked her in the eye—"even death could not keep me away from you. I'll always come back to you, smiling and happy. I actually believe that if I should die before 9:30 tonight, I would be back here with you at that time."

"Oh, Harry," Della sighed, "I believe you. You are such a comfort!"

Felix smiled grimly. "We'll see about that, Harry dear," he thought. "Even death can not keep you away from Della, eh? We'll know very soon whether or not it can." Yet a cold shiver ran down Felix's spine. Never had Harry failed to do exactly as he said he would do. The ex-convict strove impatiently to banish the strange fear from his heart.

Della accompanied Harry to the car, unconsciously remaining between her husband and Felix. Even after Harry had settled himself at the wheel, Felix could not fire without the danger of the bullet striking Della.

The door of the sedan was closed, another wave of his hand to Della, another crooked smile and the bright yellow sedan shot away in the darkness toward the highway.

Felix was undecided what to do. For ten minutes after replacing the gun in his pocket he pondered. Then came a plan. He would return to the bridge and, at the sharp turn on the approach, wait for the return of the sedan. The pavement, because of the rain, would be slippery and treacherous. He of the crooked smile would not attempt to make that turn at a speed in excess of ten miles an hour. It would be a simple matter to dart from the brush at the side of the road, spring onto the running board and shoot the man.

**F**IFTEEN minutes later Felix stood, wet to the skin, cold and shivering, in a clump of bushes near the

end of the bridge. All would have been well had he been able to forget Harry's words to Della that "even death could not keep me away from you."

How the time dragged! To Felix it seemed that he had waited an eternity. And the rain: it had turned from a slow drizzle to a steady downpour. And the wind: it moaned, sobbed through the treetops. The piercing cry of a wandering coyote brought a gasp to the throat of Felix and a chill to his heart. From a treetop near the river came the monotonous, lonesome "who? who? who?" of an owl, asking, always asking—patiently curious, tireless, persistent. Then a deafening peal of thunder shook the heavens and a long, jagged, fiery claw of lightning momentarily lighted up the sodden land. The rain increased. More thunder, like intermittent detonations of a thousand cannon. More lightning, like white, blinding leers of countless lost souls.

Felix cursed frequently to bolster up his courage. Why did Harry's words keep running on through his mind—"Even death could not keep me away from you, Della." Felix consulted his watch by the light from the splitting heavens. Nine twenty-five! Even as he replaced the watch in his pocket, the glare of oncoming headlights brought his eyes to the bridge. The bright yellow sedan! On it came, glistening and dripping in the lightning's blinding glare.

Concealed in the brush, Felix could plainly see the crooked smile on the face of the man at the wheel. Now the car was on the approach. Very slowly it came toward Felix through the water racing down the approach. Felix the Lecch's hour of vengeance had come. No need of bounding onto the running board; Harry was less than six feet away. The ex-convict took careful aim and fired.

The report of the revolver was

swallowed in a mighty peal of thunder. For one brief instant the crooked smile vanished from the face of the man at the wheel, then it returned even as the mortally wounded Crooked Smile Harry placed a hand over his heart. The car came to a stop. Harry slumped forward, his head resting on the steering wheel, arms dropping lifeless at his sides. The sedan began to slide slowly backward. The murderer bounded onto the running board and flung the door open. Four more bullets went into the lifeless and bleeding thing at the wheel.

Quickly the ex-convict threw on the emergency brakes and switched off the lights. A moment later he staggered under the weight of the limp body on his shoulder. Half-way across the bridge he carried it. Then, after resting it a moment on the rail to catch his breath, he pushed it over. It went hurtling down toward the boulder-strewn torrent below; but before the seething waters covered it up, the murderer, looking down, saw the face of his one-time pal. White it was—white with the livid whiteness of death—and on it, very clearly seen in the glare of lightning, was the crooked smile.

**F**ELIX stumbled back to the sedan. Terror gripped him. The intense hatred so carefully nourished for four years, spent in a few short minutes, had left him weak and remorseful.

Gasping and struggling with the steering wheel, he finally succeeded in turning the car around and headed it across the bridge. The powerful motor roared and the heavy car lurched away in the darkness. Three miles from the bridge, the fleeing

man knew, was the road that led over the mountains and into Mexico.

Felix was a careful driver, having driven the warden's car while a trusty at the prison. But now, as he peered intently at the road ahead, a slight movement in the rear seat of the car, reflected in the small mirror above the steering wheel, caught his eye. It was nothing more than a vague, white flash. Again that flash of white. The murderer dared not look back. Fear, horrible and menacing, clutched at his heart. Then came a broad sheet of white lightning and—

The Leech's eyes sought the small mirror and remained fixed there and a scream of mortal terror rent the night air; for it was Harry back there in the rear seat—and on his face was the crooked smile! The little mirror did not lie. A deafening clap of thunder, the roar of the car's exhaust and another broad, white path of lightning. Another scream from Felix the Leech. Then a crash, the splintering of wood, rending of steel and sheet metal, the shattering of glass.

Next morning while the men of the wrecking crew were removing the mangled remains of Felix the Leech from the demolished car at the bottom of the deep ditch by the side of the road, they found, lashed firmly to the rear seat, in an upright position and unharmed, a life-size bust portrait of Crooked Smile Harry in a heavy black frame. Pinned to the frame at the top was a card on which was written, "To my wife, Della, from Harry, on our fifth anniversary." The portrait had been covered with oilcloth, black on the outside and white on the inside. The wind had blown part of the white side out during Felix's wild drive.

