

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 317 Baldwin Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Hanging of Aspara

By LEAVENWORTH MACNAB

ASPARA was to die.* The jury took fifty minutes to decide his fate. Next day, lurid scare-headed stories told the populace that the man who had murdered Scaffa, the photographer, believed to be a ringleader in Black Hand affairs, would be hanged in the Parish prison yard in a few weeks. And the populace was thrilled, for nothing awakened greater interest than a prospective hanging, especially when the hangee had got rid of his victim with disgusting bloodiness and brutality.

To keep the thrill to its highest pitch the newspapers got on the job early. Day after day stories to quicken the pulse and feed morbid desire were printed. Reporters worked their imaginations over-time to make their sheet the favorite reading with the hanging devotees.

Sensation after sensation was sprung. The greedy readers were told that an attempt would be made to save the Aspara family from the ignominy of a hanged member by having a sharpshooter pick the murderer off as he made his way to the gallows. Then efforts to send poison and other means of personally wooing death were shriekingly told. The thrill grew.

*Although fictitious names are used throughout this story, nevertheless the sensational newspaper hoaxes described herein actually occurred just as told. Those residents of New Orleans who remember the Aspara hanging may wonder what newspaper it was that is here given the fictitious name of the News; but since that newspaper is no longer published, and Aspara himself long ago passed from this life at the end of a hempen rope, it suffices to print the facts (here revealed for the first time) and let the News and its enterprising police reporter retain their anonymity.
—Editor.

The *News* was as sensational as its limited means and the law allowed. It catered openly to the lovers of sensation at its reddest, and it refused at all times to permit truth to interfere with its plans.

In former hangings the *News* had had matters pretty much its own way. Its "hanging edition" was always on the street before the cause of it had passed into the unknown. Thousands of copies were sold and their contents devoured before the less sensational papers gave forth their versions. And with papers selling at five cents a copy—well, the *News* needed all the money it could get, for reporters insisted upon eating.

But the Aspara hanging had kindled the entire press. Even the sleepiest of the papers was sitting up, and the *Index*, the one approach to the *News* in sensationalism, was preparing to get out an Aspara hanging edition that would leave nothing unsaid in the way of sensational detail. The *News* must look to its laurels. It did.

PETE KEENE, owner and editor of the *News*, came into the local room one afternoon and summoned MacTavish to his sanctum. "Mac" had blown into the *News* office a few months earlier and landed a job. His unleashed imagination and utter disregard for facts endeared him to Keene. He found thrills on whatever run was assigned to him. He put real estate in the first column of the first page time after time, and found scandal upon scandal when the waterfront was his

assignment. So Keene readily saw that the police run was where he properly belonged.

Scoop after scoop resulted from the transfer. The sedate morning papers contented themselves by ignoring these as "fakes," but nevertheless the subscription list of the *News* grew rapidly and the street sales brought constant smiles in the business office.

But the efforts of the *Index* in the interest of the Aspara passing were bearing undeniable fruits. The paper was finding readers that heretofore had been absolutely faithful to the *News*, and a canvass of the *News*' circulation showed a falling off for several days. Drastic steps must be taken.

"Mac," said Keene, when the two were seated in his office, "we've got to do something. We're slipping. I want our hanging edition to break all known records, and I want our subscription list built up meanwhile."

"I've written everything that had a semblance of fact in it," said Mac, "and a whole lot more that had not even that. Truth is, this Aspara is dead from the collar up. If he led the *Mafia*, then it is a harmless thing. He spends his time with the priests and refuses to use even the little English he knows when we try to interview him. There's only one thing to be done."

"And that is—"

"Fake it and fake it strong."

"What have you in mind?"

"A series of sensations inspired by ourselves. Let us put over some fakes so big and so truthful-seeming that even the old morning cronies will have to take notice. I'll never be content until I make them print as follow-ups our worst fakes. They brand us as liars and by that means nullify our scoops when they are genuine scoops."

"Go as far as you like, Mac. But what stories are there?"

"There are always stories; the air is full of them. Give me until tomorrow morning and I will submit a plan."

Two days later a "box-car head" in the *News* told the city that a bold attempt to cheat the gallows of Aspara had been made. A cake had been mailed to him from a point in Mississippi. It was a harmless-looking confection of the sponge variety, but cleverly buried in it were two sharp saws.

The cake was delivered at the prison about half an hour before the home edition's deadline. It came in a special delivery package. Scarcely had it been received when Mac approached the sheriff.

"Sheriff Short," he said excitedly, "is it true that weapons have been sent to Aspara concealed in a pie or cake?"

The sheriff was acutely surprized.

"Who in H— told you that?" he shouted. "There's a leak somewhere in this office! Why, the cake has scarcely been cut! I demand that you tell me who informed you."

Mac looked innocent and rather hurt.

"Why, Sheriff, our office just called me to say that such a rumor reached them. Is it true?"

"Well, since you know, it is true. Here's the cake. It's a clever piece of work, too. See how the saws have been baked right in it. See how the heat has tarnished them."

Mac looked and concealed a smile.

"That's what comes from long experience in detecting crime, Sheriff," he said. "None but an expert would notice a thing like that."

Then he hurried to a telephone.

"Let her go, John," he said to the city editor. "The cake came and Sheriff Short is trying to find the leak in his office—the leak that gave

us the tip. It's a good thing we thought of mucilaging the edges of the cake where we inserted the saws. Quote the sheriff as saying the saws were baked in the cake."

The press room at the Criminal Court was in a furor when the *News* scoop became known. Hurried trips to the sheriff's quarters confirmed the story. There were the cake and the saws, and the sheriff telling how cleverly the work had been done. The *Democrat* and all the others had to run the story. The cake was mailed from Pass Christian, and correspondents there told of the tall, dark, foreign-looking man who had been seen skulking about the town, carrying a suspicious-looking parcel. None of these was acquainted with the business manager of the *News*.

SCARCELY had the cake grown stale when another thriller quickened the heart-beats of the populace. This time holy-picture cards were the novel means of getting Aspara on the front pages. Innocent-looking post cards were mailed to the condemned man. But Sleuth Short was not taking any chances. The cards felt bulky. He opened one of them with his jack-knife. A white powder spilled upon his desk. Aha! Someone trying to smuggle poison! Isn't it damnable?

And just then Mac appeared.

"Is it true that poison has been sent to Aspara?" he asked.

The sheriff bellowed his anger. He cursed his underlings, but finally admitted the truth of the story.

"I know a great deal about poisons," he said, "but this baffles me. I will send it to the city apothecary for analysis. That's all that can be done now. But who the H—— told you about it?"

At ten minutes to deadline Mac called the city editor.

"Went through swimmingly, John," he said. "The quinine is to

be sent to the city apothecary for analysis and that, you know, will mean a couple of months. Short says he knows a lot about ordinary poisons but this baffles him. Probably some deadly importation. Play that up. I forgot it when I wrote the story last night."

The two big beats brought the *News* into its own again. Its public was back eating out of its hand, and the hanging was only a day off.

"We just want one more sensation," Keene said to Mac, "and the thing is done."

Mac was writing a sob story, to appear after the hanging, about the lone bouquet of faded flowers laid on the bier of the murderer by the frayed little woman that called him husband, when Keene made the suggestion. Mac thought a minute.

"I have it!" he said. "Spring a story today that a reprieve may be granted Aspara. That will disappoint the people tremendously and make them watch and hope that it fails."

"Great!" shouted Keene. "John, call the governor on long-distance while Mac writes the story."

The governor was asked whether he would grant a reprieve if Aspara made a confession implicating the Black Hand. Of course, he said he would. Then Mac hurried to the condemned cell and spoke to Aspara.

"I come with a message from the governor," he said melodramatically as he approached the bars. "If you will confess what you know about the Mafia, the governor will grant you freedom."

Aspara shot a look of hate at the intruder.

"Me no confessa," he snarled. "Me confessa to priest only."

But that was enough.

"Aspara will carry his knowledge of the Mafia to his grave," began the follow-up story. "He stolidly maintains his silence and even the offer of

freedom made by the governor fails to move him. When the reporter of the *News*, sent by the governor to Aspara, gave him the message which pointed the way to possible freedom, the condemned man spurned the chance to save his life. Even the pleadings of his wife, a fragile, pitiable creature, failed to move him. He flung her angrily from him and snarled: 'Me confessa to priest only.'

And the world read and chuckled. The suspense was lifted. Aspara was to die—the story of the death agony was to be told in all its gruesome details.

MAC wrote the story of the hanging the night before it happened. It was an easy task, for people go to the scaffold in much the same way. There are certain things that one can be practically certain about. The shudder and the drooping forward of the body at the first sight of the gallows is always perfectly safe. The Criminal Court building, too, is a splendid setting for a tragedy of this kind. The condemned cell is on the top floor and the procession reaches the yard of the Parish prison by a winding stairway. Then the tread of the feet on the paved flooring, then the glimpse of the gallows, and the shudder, and then—that was as far as Mac ever got. The rest of the journey could be taken as certain to go off without a mishap.

As the Aspara procession turned the corner, Mac jumped to the 'phone which he had preempted in Judge Skinner's office.

"Let her go, John!" he shouted.

Then, while he rushed down the stairs and into the prison yard to see the victim cut down, and get the intimate details for the home edition, a thousand sturdy voices began to yell through the streets of the city:

"All about the hangin' of Aspara."

It was half an hour later before the *Index* got on the street.

TWO months after Aspara's death Keene and Mac and the city editor had the heartiest sort of a laugh. The city apothecary had just handed down his finding in the case of the holy-picture cards and the white powder they contained. It stated that he had tried the substance on rats and found that it was a slow poison of the deadliest sort.

"It's a pity we can't tell the truth for once and get the laugh on them all," said Mac as he picked up the half-emptied package of quinine from Keene's desk.

"It would be the best sort of a joke," said the city editor.

"Yes," opined Keene, "but remember there will be other hangings—at least I hope so. The last edition certainly broke all records for sales, and our circulation has grown steadily ever since. People are coming to know who feeds them the right sort of stuff, and we must not spoil it."

"Well, anyway," commented Mac, "we made the old fogies follow us a half dozen times. I'm satisfied. But just let the city apothecary get gay with me!"

