

ARGOSY

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Illustrating Seven Footprints to Satan

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The Kidder

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "Board Fence," "The Pebble of Justice," etc.

AN ARGOSY ODDITY



JOE stopped at the top of the last flight of steps and swallowed. It was pretty awful. He was going to speak to Pete's mother, and they'd burned Pete this morning. Electrocuting him. He'd kidded with the guards all the way into the execution-chamber, and somehow that trick of kidding—which was Pete all over—made everything so awful that Joe was going to tell Pete's mother about it.

He'd go crazy if he didn't tell somebody. It'd cost him enough, already. Sleepless nights and tormented days. And it'd cost him Marge, too. But he'd do it again if he had to. Only—he had to tell somebody or go off his nut.

This was where Pete's mother lived. Top floor, walk-up tenement. That would be her door. Joe swallowed again and moved desperately toward it, and it opened. A child came out. Twelve—thirteen years old. Soiled dress. Hard-boiled. Pete's kid sister. She stared at Joe suspiciously.

"I'm Joe Bennett," said Joe with an effort. "I—used to be a friend o' Pete's. Can I talk to his ma?"

The child seemed to recognize his name. She jerked a grimy thumb over her shoulder.

"You c'n go in. Ma's in there. I'll be back in a minute. I'm goin' to the store."

She spoke into the door in a language of which not one word was intelligible to Joe. She went clattering downstairs. Her

air was that of a swaggering pride in a brother who had merited the high honor of the hot seat.

Joe went inside. The room had a bed in it and clothes hung on nails against the wall. Pete's mother rocked by the window in a numbed, frozen silence. Her hair was streaked with gray. Her face was drawn and tired and very bitter. But her eyes were dry.

"I'm—I'm Joe Bennett," said Joe, dry-throated. "I—guess Pete musta mentioned me around home. I—had to come," he added desperately, "because Pete an' me, we used to be such swell frien's. An'—an' I guess I sent him to the chair."

HE was not able to look at her. But he felt a strange and terrible relief at saying it aloud. Pete had been a swell fella. Kidding all the time, but a swell fella—until he got mixed up with that wrong mob.

"Listen, Miz' Schia'cha! I—I got to tell you how it happened. Pete an' me, we'd been goin' around a lot together before he got mixed up with that mob. We was friends! Even after he got mixed up with 'em we was friends. He never seen me that he didn't do some kinda kiddin' about how many men he'd bumped or somethin'. I didn't take it serious, knowin' how he kidded, an' I didn't take it serious, either, when he told me he was goin' after Marge.

Y'see, Marge is my—girl friend, Miz' Schiancha, an' she's a swell kid. I—I didn't think he meant it—"

Pete's mother said in a hoarse, guttural voice: "Wait—"

"I got to tell you!" said Joe fiercely. "I gotta tell somebody an' you oughta know! When—when Pete got in that trouble over that killin' I felt pretty bad. When he sent me a message to bring him some cig'rettes. I took a chance to help him. He was my friend! I kep' him goin' while he was waitin' for the heat to cool off so's he could slip: outa town. An' then"—Joe swallowed a third time—"then I found out Marge'd been to see him too. I raised hell with Pete, seein' Marge while he was on the lam for a killin'! He laughed at me. 'Hell,' he says, 'I told you I was goin' after Marge. I laid out a job for her to pull, to get us some cash, an' we're leavin' town together when she pulls it.'"

Joe's voice grew thin.

"I was crazy about Marge, Miz' Schianca, an'—an' to think of her goin' off with him, an' him on the lam for a killin'—"

He moistened his lips. The old woman in the rocking-chair said something in the language Joe did not understand. It was bitter and it was full of hatred.

"So I called up the cops on the phone," said Joe thinly, "an' when the desk sergeant answered, I told him where Joe was. An' if you want to get even, Gawd knows I ain't had any fun since—"

He half sobbed. But then he heard footsteps. And then a voice, a strained and utterly familiar voice, called:

"Miz' Schiancha! Miz' Schiancha!"

It was Marge. Joe Bennett turned blindly to hide. A coat against the wall behind the bed. He covered behind it. He heard Marge come falteringly into the room.

"Miz' Schiancha . . . a little girl told me you'd be here. I'm—I'm Marge. I guess Pete told you somethin' about me." Her voice broke. "I—I hadda come, Miz' Schiancha! Pete was such a swell fella until he took to runnin' around with that mob!

Such a swell fella! Always kiddin' . . ."

Then Marge sobbed.

"But I ain't been able to sleep for weeks! I—I'm the one that sent him to the chair! Listen! He was hidin' out for that killin'. An' he sent for me. An' he says him an' Joe was goin' to pull a big job an' skip out West an' did I wanna come along. Joe was feedin' him. I knew that! But he was gonna take Joe—an' get Joe in killin's too. . . . An' I'd been hopin' for Joe an' me—an' I couldn't bear it. So I called up the p'lice station—"

Joe came blundering out, staring queerly. She saw him. Her face went even whiter.

"Listen!" said Joe, through stiff lips. "He was kiddin'. It wasn't so. He was tryin' to get a rise outa you. Like he kidded the guards this mornin'. He kidded you an' he kidded me—an'—"

There was the clacking of high heels. The child with the dirty dress came in, swaggering proudly, with a paper bag in her hand. Pete's mother spoke to her in the language Joe did not understand. She poured out a flood of incomprehensible syllables. The child listened disdainfully.

"She says," she translated scornfully, "she figgers you' friends of Pete's, an' to tell you that Pete's lawyer found out that the fella he was rentin' a room from turned him over to the cops. Pete'd said somethin' to him, just kiddin', an' he got scared. Pete's lawyer seen the letter he wrote to the bulls. So Ma says that if you' friends of Pete's you might like to know that some of Pete's other friends got that stool-pigeon las' night an' he's floatin' in the river this mornin'."

Joe gulped. Marge caught her breath.

"Ma don't talk English," said the child contemptuously. She added: "You comin' to the funeral? It's goin' to be swell! An' didja see the papers? Pete was kiddin' all the way in—"

"Gawd!" said Joe, choking. "Shut up, kid. We—uh—we got to go. You' comin' with me, ain't you, Marge?"

"Sure, Joe," said Marge, unsteadily. "For always. An' no kiddin'."