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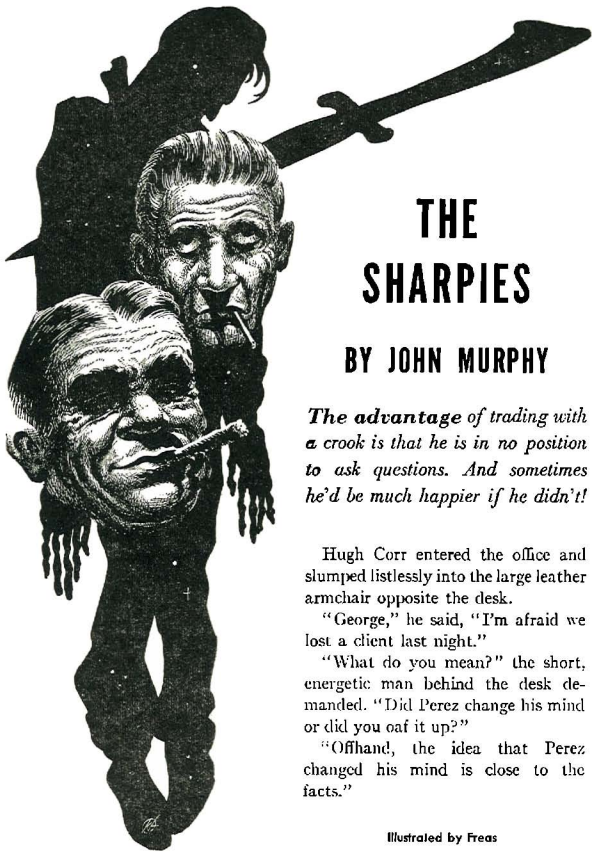
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THE SHARPIES

BY JOHN MURPHY

The advantage of trading with a crook is that he is in no position to ask questions. And sometimes he'd be much happier if he didn't!

Hugh Corr entered the office and slumped listlessly into the large leather armchair opposite the desk.

"George," he said, "I'm afraid we lost a client last night."

"What do you mean?" the short, energetic man behind the desk demanded. "Did Perez change his mind or did you oaf it up?"

"Offhand, the idea that Perez changed his mind is close to the facts."

Illustrated by Freas

"I don't believe it. He wanted those planes in the worst way. We were all set to close the deal today." George began to work himself up to a fine fury. "Why you big baboon, if you—"

"Easy, George, easy." Hugh held up a restraining hand. "I know that Perez wanted those planes real bad. But somebody else apparently didn't want him to have them. About eleven last night, that somebody stuck a large knife into dear old Perez who then took very sick and died."

There was a moment's silence. George rubbed his nose reflectively.

"How come they didn't get you, too?" he asked with mild interest.

"Perez was a little jumpy yesterday evening, it would seem with good cause, and when we got to his apartment house, he asked me to go ahead and see if there was anyone in the hall. There wasn't. When I went back, there he was, making like a doornail." Hugh shuddered slightly. "I made sure he was dead and then I went away from there."

"Any cops?"

"I didn't wait to see, but I guess some eventually came. There's a squib on page ten of this morning's paper saying that the body of a Senor Perez was found and that the police think his killing may have been for reasons connected with the politics of his native land."

"How right they are. I expect that those planes would have made the

difference for him and his revolution." A flash of concern crossed George's face. "Do you think that we're in the clear?"

"As far as the gendarmes go—yes. But if the lads that scragged Perez have been following him around, they may know that he'd been trying to do business through us." Hugh sighed gloomily. "I wish we were legitimate."

George was stung. "We are legitimate. If somebody wants something, we find it and buy it for him. It's none of our business what he is going to do with it."

They wrangled desultorily for a few minutes. It was apparently an old, familiar, and tired quarrel. Finally George voiced the question that had been in both their minds:

"Well, what do we do now?"

"With respect to *l'affaire* Perez, nothing. Except cancel the airplanes and stick to busy well-lighted streets for a while. But as for new business, I don't know. Have you had any nibbles from anyone?"

"No. So far I—" He was interrupted by the buzzing of his desk intercom. He flipped the switch.

"There are two gentlemen to see you, Mr. Hanley," it announced. George bit his lip indecisively. Abruptly he said, "Please show them in." Hugh raised his eyebrows.

"If it's Perez's pals, we might as well get a look at them," George told him. He opened his top righthand desk drawer and adjusted something within.

They both regarded the door expectantly.

Neither could restrain a start at the sight of the two men the pretty receptionist ushered into the room. Both were tall, broad shouldered and perfectly tailored. Their faces were handsome with a wooden regularity of feature. They were identical twins. Each carried a large new brief case.

"Mr. Hanley?" the man on the left asked.

George took his hand out of his desk drawer and admitted that he was Mr. Hanley. He introduced Hugh as his partner.

"I am John Smith and this is my brother Jesse Smith," the same one of the two continued. "We understand that you are commission agents?" The Smith's eyes were almost a true green.

"Yes, Mr. Smith, we certainly are. Won't you please sit down?" There was a wide smile of hearty good-fellowship on George's face. These were surely not from the homeland of the late lamented Senor Perez. They sounded like business and if the best names that they could think up were John and Jesse Smith, who was he to complain? "We have a wide reputation, gentlemen, for always deliv—"

"We know your reputation. We have investigated and determined that you are able, discreet, and without principles. Therefore we wish to employ you."

Hugh regarded the pair with deep interest. He wondered what they wanted and hoped that it wasn't hot surplus warplanes. There was a strange note in John Smith's voice; it was low and harsh and not at all in keeping with his suave exterior. Also, although there was no accent, it was definitely not the voice of a native American.

"In outline, we have something which we wish you to sell. Then with the money thus gained we want you to purchase a quantity of different items for us. Naturally, we expect to pay a commission." Jesse Smith spoke for the first time. His voice was a duplicate of his brother's. His face, as did his twin's, kept the immobility of a well trained poker player.

"Both on the sales and on the purchases?" George asked quickly.

"Of course."

George beamed. Hugh felt a doubt begin to form in his mind. This was too easy.

"What is it that you want us to sell?" he asked.

"Gold. We have here about four hundred pounds." John Smith indicated the two brief cases. "Since we are in a hurry and since we do not wish to explain our sources, we realize that you may not be able to sell it at the highest price. However, we expect that you should realize about fifteen thousand dollars. That should cover the first installment of our purchases. Here is a list of the items we want." He turned to his brother. Jesse took a

piece of paper from an inside pocket and passed it over the desk to George. George wrenched his eyes from the brief cases and nervelessly accepted the paper.

Both Smiths then rose. "We will return tomorrow with more gold. You may report your progress at that time." They turned to go.

"But . . . but—" George was at a loss.

Jesse seemed to have an afterthought. "You had better engage a warehouse to store our purchases. If possible, in some outlying district."

They left. The room seemed very empty without them.

After a few seconds pause, Hugh rose and walked over to the nearer of the two brief cases. He tried unsuccessfully to lift it to a table. Finally, he gave up and loosening the straps, opened it on the floor. He blinked, reached in and withdrew a small bar of heavy yellow metal and carried it over to George. "Looks like it," he said. "And there's lots more of these in there. You know, those Smith twins are pretty robust boys. Maybe it's all the energy they save by not explaining things. What's in the list?"

George unfolded the paper and they read with a growing feeling of bewilderment. The wants of the Smith twins were widespread to say the least. After finishing, they stared at each other. George with an expression of frank perplexity on his face, Hugh

with a look of growing disquiet.

"Five tons of coal, a sewing machine, a Jaguar sports car, ten flashlights, ten barrels of gasoline, a bolt of tweed, a television set, miscellaneous perfume, and all that other stuff. What do they want it for?" George asked querulously.

"I don't know, George, I don't know. But there's one thing I do know, and that is we should have asked one or two questions before they left here. And then we should have politely and firmly told them we have enough troubles, thank you, and we recommend that you try across the street."

"Are you nuts? If that's really gold, we are going to run up quite a score. At these prices they can drive me out of my mind with curiosity."

"George, they scare me. They're too big and strong. And they were so sure of us. How do they know we won't go south with the gold? For that matter, we didn't even say that we'd take the job. Let's pin a note on the door telling them their bags are down in the janitor's office and go hide somewhere for a few days."

George wasn't listening. He was dialing a number on his private line. "Reilly can take some of this gold and I think I know a few other birds who can handle the rest of it. You go out and get the stuff tested. Find out how pure it is and make sure it's gold all the way through—Hello, Reilly? This is Hanley, chum, and I think I

have a little business for you. Now listen."

Hugh shrugged and turned away from his partner, now deep in an animated conversation. George was probably right, a gold brick in the hand was worth any number of fears lurking around in the bush of conscience. He hefted the metal bar reflectively. It had a cold, slippery, fascinating feel.

The next several days passed in a hectic round. The metal was gold all right, nearly chemically pure, and George was busy day and night peddling it off through his various channels. Hugh was even busier, shopping around the city like a thousand housewives on a spree. The Smiths visited them every morning, bringing more gold and more lists. Any questions or hints of questions were studiously ignored. Hugh bought paintings, chemical apparatus, a wide variety of books, a complete collection of antique firearms, and hundreds of other unrelated things. Before the week was out, the small warehouse that he had rented was half full.

At length, the Smiths arrived one day empty handed. George's face fell at the sight, but Hugh felt a happy stir in his heart. Perhaps the Smiths were finishing up. Conversation confirmed his hope.

"We must leave the city very soon," one of the Smiths said. Hugh and George had never since the first day been able to straighten out which was

John and which was Jesse, and had compromised by addressing each as Mr. Smith. This had worked out well, as the Smiths never seemed to be in doubt as to which of them was being spoken to.

"But we still haven't been able to buy all the items on your lists," George protested. "I don't think that we will be able to in less than another week."

"That is of no matter. See that as many of the remaining items as possible are delivered today. This evening we will all go together to the warehouse. We intend to move our purchases tonight."

"Move them tonight! There must be twenty truckloads there. I don't think I can hire enough trucks between now and then for you to be—"

"We will handle the transport," he was interrupted.

George fought a valiant delaying action with no help from Hugh, but his clients were calmly adamant. However, when the Smiths told him that money still due from the sale of the gold could be kept, he stopped objecting and began to wholeheartedly suggest plans for speeding them on their way. The Smiths insisted that a rendezvous be set for all of them to meet before going to the warehouse. They then ordered that the watchman who had been engaged be dismissed immediately.

When they were alone, Hugh complimented George on a truly outstand-

ing display of avarice in action and went forth to push delivery on as many of the final purchases as he could.

They met the Smiths, as specified, at the office and then all traveled to the warehouse in George's car. The building was dark, the street deserted. Hugh meditated upon the wisdom of accompanying the Smiths to such a place. He pressed his elbow against the gun under his arm and was glad that foresight had prompted him to bring it, but he wished that foresight had told him to stay in bed with a sick headache.

They stood beneath a feeble light over the door of the warehouse while Hugh got out the keys. Without preamble, one of the Smiths pointed to a shadowy doorway across the street.

"Why are those men hiding there?" he asked.

Hugh quickly faced about. There was a sudden excited voice, and two men darted out of the shadows across the way. One turned and threw a glittering something that flashed through the dim light and then rapidly ran up the street after his companion. Hugh ducked and drew his gun, but the two disappeared down an alley before he could get off a shot. He thought of giving chase for an instant but decided that he did not want to play peek-a-boo up an unlit alley with any such citizens as those. Behind him he could hear George's excited voice.

"Perez's playmates!" he was say-

ing. "Hugh, I'd forgotten all about them! One of them threw a knife. Did you see that, Hugh? It only missed me by a hair. Why didn't you shoot him? Why didn't—"

"Calm down, George, they're gone." Hugh replaced his gun and picked up the keys from where he'd dropped them. "I think that we'd better get inside. I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, about this little scuffle. Just some business acquaintances who—" His voice died away. The thrown knife had not passed harmlessly by as he had thought. It was sticking out of the chest of one of the Smith brothers, buried nearly to the hilt. "Mr. Smith! Here, let me help you! George, take the keys and open the door. There's a phone in the office. We need an ambulance. Smith's hurt." Hugh moved to take the wounded Smith's arm.

"It is nothing." Both Smiths were regarding the knife without interest.

"Does it interfere with your movement?" the unhurt Smith asked.

The other moved his arms about. "No, not at all. Let us go inside. We can remove it there." George opened the door with shaking hands and then before his and Hugh's unbelieving eyes, the two Smiths walked unhurriedly into the building.

Hugh went ahead and led the way with a small pocket flash through the cluttered main room of the warehouse to the inner office. After hastily locking the outer door, George brought up the rear.

Once within the office, Hugh turned on the light and illumined the drab dirty room. The Smith who had been hurt was tentatively wiggling the knife in his chest as if to see how firmly it was stuck. The other Smith moved over so he blocked the view. His shoulders heaved. When he turned again, he had the knife in his hand and was wiping it carefully with a pocket handkerchief. There was no discernible expression upon either of the Smiths' faces. And worst of all, there was no blood, not anywhere. Glancing at George, Hugh could see that his partner was feeling fear for the first time.

"Is . . . is he all right?" George croaked.

"Yes," replied Smith. "Now we must make arrangements to go."

Hugh took a deep breath and thrust his feelings down with an effort. He wanted very much to see the Smiths go, he would be glad to help them accomplish any and all preparations.

"Here are your lists," he said. "All the checked items are out in the warehouse. If you want to inventory them, we can do it now. When are your trucks arriving?"

"We will not inventory them. We do not have sufficient time," replied the Smith who had the lists. He put his hand in his coat pocket and withdrew a shining instrument. "Do you have religious beliefs?"

Hugh and George looked their question.

"We will allow you a little time for any rites which you may wish to perform. Then we shall kill you."

Cold terror gripped Hugh's brain. The certainty came to him that he would die strangely and be nothing just as soon as the Smith with the vicious round shining thing decided that he had had enough time for prayer.

Suddenly there was a souging sound and the door disappeared. It didn't crumble or crack, it was just gone. Something flashed through the vacancy to bury itself in the opposite wall with a vicious thud. On the way it severed the arm of the Smith holding the weapon just below the elbow. The other Smith whirled to face this threat. He held a fighting crouch for a few long seconds and then straightened and dropped his arms resignedly to his sides. He mouthed some strange sounds to the darkness beyond the door. In answer, five men entered the room.

They were tall, like the Smiths, but they were completely bald and had a cast of features that was utterly different. The brows were indented, the chins sloping, and their noses so short as to be little more than a small protuberance with two round holes. Each wore a type of tight coverall garment. Hugh felt a wonder even through the terror that gripped him. These were not human beings.

The two Smiths were efficiently

hustled into a corner of the room. They stood there side by side, facing the newcomers, a steady, slow, flow of yellowish fluid dripped from the stump of the Smith with the lopped off arm. As a final touch of horror, one of the coveralled beings looked around, picked up the severed forearm and courteously returned it, after having removed the weapon from the clenched fingers. The injured Smith nodded and took it in his remaining hand.

An entirely incomprehensible conversation between the Smiths and their obvious captors took place. Finally, in apparent response to an order from one of the strangers two of them stepped forward, reached up and incredibly began to peel off the Smiths' hair and faces. After the wigs and masks were gone, the Smiths stood revealed as members of the same race as the coveralled beings. Another order from the chief and one of the Smiths' captors left the room. He shortly returned with an apparatus resembling a small camera on a tripod. This was set up in front of the Smiths, and the strangers gathered behind it. One of them took notice of George and Hugh for the first time since they had entered.

"Turn around," he said in grating English. They did. Hugh was mildly surprised to find that his limbs obeyed him.

There was no noise but suddenly an odor filled the room, as if someone was baking potatoes and had left them in

the oven too long. Hugh tried to pull his mind into a point, to think of nothing. He could hear the heavy breathing of George beside him, and with almost clinical abstraction began to count the number of his friend's almost tortured breaths. After a time that had no measure, one of the harsh voices commanded them again to turn around.

One of the beings was folding up the camerallike apparatus. In the corner where the Smiths had stood there was nothing. The dust on the floor seemed thicker than before. In another few seconds, Hugh knew he would break and bolt for the door. The chief stepped forward to stare closely at himself and George.

"We guard this system," he said. Then he turned and made a motion to the others. They walked out the door, quickly, but without haste. Possibly five minutes had passed since they first had entered the room.

George turned and was violently sick in a wastebasket. Hugh moved on stiff legs to the door and looked out into the dim cavern of the warehouse. Nothing moved. There was only the hodgepodge of the Smiths' purchases.

George recovered and came to join him at the door. "What happened?" he asked in a voice that was only barely under control.

Hugh took out and lit a cigarette, making all his motions with great care

as though the lighting of a cigarette was an important and delicate process. He inhaled deeply, without pleasure, and began to speak.

"Well, I think that the Smiths came from outside—way outside. They were probably a couple of sharpies, just like us, trying to hustle a fast buck or what passed for a fast buck with them and their kind. I guess they had a market for all that"—he gestured at the goods piled in the warehouse—"or maybe they were taking samples to see what might have a demand back home. Anyway, they hired us to get it together for them because we knew our way around. Then, just when they were ready to take off, those other birds came and called time on them. The Smiths must have broken some rules so they got . . . burned up or something."

"Who were those others?"

"You heard what that guy said. They 'guard this system.' I don't know if he meant solar system or star system or what. I don't know who put them here or why. I don't know whether they are supposed to keep things out, or us in, or both."

They stood silent and then with mutual accord started to walk. "You and I, George, are going to have trouble getting to sleep nights," said Hugh as they neared the outer door, "from now on."

They left the warehouse and started back to the city.

THE END