

DETECTIVE TALES

December Issue
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THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

A Novelette of Tense, Human Drama

By DAY KEENE

In Marty's Bar, Joe Herbert, alone, celebrated his fortieth birthday—forty wasted years of drudgery, and no hope in the future. . . . But he had his own idea of the kind of birthday cake he'd like. . . . With a flaming corpse as a candle!





He could see the blow start, but he couldn't avoid it. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Death Begins at Forty

LIFE had not turned out at all the way that Joe Herbert had thought that it would. He had dimly realized it for some time but on the night before his fortieth birthday, as he stood savoring his second shot of rye in Marty's bar, and wondering if he could afford a third, full realization burst like a hand grenade. He had not been smart. He had been dumb. With twenty years of hard work behind him, he had nothing to look forward to. The dreams he had dreamed—were dreams.

He fingered a third half dollar, listening to the waves of conversation that rippled up and down the bar. The lad on his left was boasting: ". . . so I puts a double saw-buck on his nose and the gee romps home at forty to one. For once my old lady. . . ."

Two times four was eight. Eight hundred dollars. Almost as much as he made in three months of seventy-eight working days. Another voice whispered harshly:

"Sure it's crooked. So what? If the O.P.A. fines me the maximum five grand, I'll still be fifteen to the good."

There was a mumbled murmur of approval. Someone began to boast of a quick deal in

black market tires. Herbert considered the half dollar. Easy, quick money. That was the thing. Get it, no matter how. If you had money you were respected.

The old copy book maxims were wrong. If you were decent, you were a prude. If you were honest, you were a sucker. Might made right. Two and two were five. To him who was willing to steal was given.

He reviewed his own life briefly. He had been loyal to his firm. He had worked hard. An occasional drink was the extent of his dissipation. He didn't gamble. He had never taken a penny that he hadn't earned. Had it paid him? It had not. At forty he was still an underpaid, over-worked, three-hundred-dollar-a-month paymaster weighed down by a burden of debt that it would take him years to lift.

He flipped the coin in his palm. At twenty he had promised himself and May that someday he'd be a rich man. At forty, he was counting pennies. May had even suggested that morning that they call off the modest birthday party they had planned.

"What with prices the way they are, Joe. And with a possible second operation necessary in the Fall, well—"

May had left the sentence unfinished. She didn't need to finish it. He knew. She considered him a failure. He was.

Herbert studied his reflection in the back-bar mirror. He saw a lined-faced, middle-aged man with graying hair. He had no distinguishing features. There were hundreds like him on the streets. His name might as well have been Doakes as Herbert.

Time was when he had had dreams. Now he no longer had reason to hope. Young Harvey was a cinch to manage the new South American branch mill when the appointment was made tomorrow. He tried not to feel bitter, and could not. By all rights of seniority the job belonged to him. It had been the job he had worked toward. It would have meant a jump from thirty-six hundred a year to twelve thousand dollars. It would have meant security. It would have meant a good car, and a maid, and graceful living, and all of the other things of which he and May had once dreamed.

"Dreams!" He snorted the word aloud.

HE thanked God that he wasn't completely a fool. He had known what the collection that the office force had taken up that afternoon was for. They were buying a going away present for Harvey. He had seen Harvey wink at Miss Kelly as he had contributed his dollar. All that he could expect was twenty more years of work and a gold plated watch and a yellow slip in his pay envelope on the day that he was sixty.

He felt suddenly very lonely. It had been

different when Jerry was home. He'd had someone to talk to then, someone to fight for. Now even Jerry was gone. The official notice had arrived two months ago. They had sent his boy to war and killed him.

He had to talk to someone. He slapped the coin down on the bar and when Marty had brought the bar rye, confided, "It's my birthday tomorrow, Marty. Yes, sir, I'll be forty."

The bar owner hesitated briefly after he had refilled the glass. For a moment Herbert hoped that he was going to say that it was on the house. He didn't. He rang up the money, smiling, "Is that so, Mr. Herbert? Well, congratulations!"

He padded on down the bar to serve a black-jowled youth. Herbert raised the shot glass to his lips, and set it down untouched. For ten years, six nights a week, he had bought a drink at Marty's bar. He had spent a thousand dollars in the place. He had seen Marty buy hundreds of drinks. It was just that he did not matter. Outside of knowing his name, the man did not know he existed.

He was nothing, no one. He was a gray-haired little man in a shabby suit.

Herbert sipped the bead from his glass and calculated roughly the amount of money that he could have stolen via padded payrolls and juggled time-books. Over the period of years he could have stolen thousands. The head office trusted him. They knew that he hadn't brains enough to steal. He handled one hundred thousand dollars a month. No one checked on his figures. And he paid himself three hundred.

A maggot began to bore into his brain. He was forty. So what? He still had years of life ahead of him. He was a comparatively young man. Jerry didn't need him any more. May would be better off without him.

The maggot bored deeper. One hundred thousand dollars. A man, even a man of forty, could do a lot with that much money. The war was almost over. He could go to South America, China, France, lose himself in the confusion of the reconstruction period that was certain to follow the war.

He gulped his drink and paid for a fourth. The rye flowed warmly through his veins and gave him an illusion of youth as he stared at a scantily dressed blonde on a calendar back of the bar. Such girls did exist. A man with a hundred thousand dollars would but have to crook a finger.

He compared her mentally with his wife as he had seen her that morning with night cream still smeared on her face and a faded dressing gown wrapped around her aging body. The hot flame that once had fused them had long since burned low. The official confirmation of Jerry's death had extinguished it entirely. May would be better off without him.

His life had been a failure. His death could be a financial success. May could have her second operation and live well on his own and Jerry's insurance.

The palms of his hands felt hot and sweaty. He wiped them on his trousers. He had thought of this thing before. He had thought of it and had put it from his mind in horror. Now he considered it seriously. The plan was daring, yet simple and uncomplicated. It was merely a matter of stepping beyond the pale of decency forever, that and of finding the proper man, some bum on skid row who had little or nothing to live for.

He realized suddenly that he was premeditating murder and had to hold to the bar for support. Broken fragments of conversation pounded against his ears.

"...cleaned up six grand and a half." . . . "So I up and I says to the broad" . . . "once this war is over" . . . "nuts to the Administration. And don't give me that patriotic guff." . . . "laying off two thousand men" . . . "get the money. Get the money and" . . .

"How about it, sport? Have a drink with me?"

Herbert realized with a start that the black-jowled youth had moved down the bar to his elbow and was addressing him. At any other time he would have been grateful for the company. Now all he wanted was to be alone. He had to think this thing out.

He shook his head. "No. But thanks." He drank the drink before him, smiled, "You see, I've already had my quota."

He walked quietly from the bar. As he neared the door he heard the black-jowled youth ask Marty, "Who's the rabbit little gray-haired guy?"

"Mr. Herbert," Marty told him. "He's paymaster for the Rollins Mills."

"Yeah. That's what I thought," the youth said soberly.

ON the street, Herbert lighted a cigarette with fingers that shook slightly. Rabbit, was he? Well, maybe he was. But even a rabbit could kick and run. Get the money. That was all that counted.

He toiled his battered coupé from the curb and drove slowly toward the water-front, his slightly drink-inflamed mind trying to alibi and rationalize the thing that he was planning.

He had been with the mills for over twenty years. He had begun as an office boy. He knew every phase of the business. He was consulted fifty times a day by everyone from the superintendent of the crushing mill to the head of the sales department. The South American branch belonged to him. And they were going to give it to Harvey. The only recognition that had ever been made of his knowledge or service was an occasional pat

on the back from Old Man Rollins, and the annual Christmas bonus. And even the typists got that.

Tomorrow was payday. Why wait? Get the money. Money was all that counted. If you had money you were the law.

He began to plan concretely. Two months before the mill had cancelled its armored truck service over his protests. The Old Man had pointed out that it was an unnecessary expense. In twenty years, no one had ever attempted to steal the pay-roll. If it was stolen, the mill was insured. So last month and the month before, Herbert had been forced to carry the entire amount in a case tossed carelessly into the back of his coupe.

He checked his movements of the morrow. He would leave the bank at ten. He would drive directly to the home office, drop off ten thousand dollars with which to pay the office force, then drive twenty miles into the mountains to the mill where he would pay off personally. He would make the trip alone. His only protection would be a .38 caliber Colt in the glove compartment. Most of the highway was well traveled and patrolled. He seldom met a car in the five miles between the highway and the mill.

Three miles from the mill the road followed the ridge of a valley only one quarter of a mile from the inter-urban station that served the new Amalgamated Chemical plant. The morning shift changed at one. By sliding down the slope of the heavily wooded hill he could easily reach the station. Three thousand men and women on the off-shift fought for places on the inter-urban and the busses. No one would pay much attention to an undistinguished little gray-haired man. It would make small difference if they did. Joe Herbert would be dead, shot through the heart by bandits and left to be cremated to an almost unrecognizable crisp in his gasoline soaked coupé.

He checked the things that might go wrong and found that there were hundreds of them. He also found that he did not care. Getting the money was all that mattered. He was tired of being a sap. He was merely gambling a life that did not mean a thing to him against ninety thousand dollars.

He parked his car on skid row and sat twirling the heavy gold signet ring on his finger as he watched the flow of boozy derelicts from one cheap saloon to another. That one was too tall. That one was too thin. He wanted a gray haired man about five feet nine who weighed around one hundred and thirty-five pounds.

A half hour passed, an hour. He had almost given up hope when a mild-appearing, gray-haired little man weaved up the walk, his knees sagging slightly with each step that he took.

"You! Sport!" Herbert whistled him to the car.

The bum stared in the window vacuously. "Yeah—?"

Herbert stifled a qualm of compunction, asked him, "You want to earn a new suit of clothes and fifty dollars?"

"I'd like to," the man said simply.

Herbert scrawled a street address on his scratch pad and passed it through the window. "Meet me there at ten-thirty tomorrow morning."

The bum grinned. "Yeah. Sure. And you'll hand me fifty dollars. Pistachios to you, brother."

"I mean it," Herbert said. He took his wallet from his pocket, extracted a twenty-dollar bill, tore it in two and handed one half to the man. "When you meet me I'll give you the other half of the bill, three more tens, and a good suit of clothes beside."

The other man asked, suspiciously, "For doing what?"

His blood pounding in his temples, Herbert wanted to scream, "For dying!" He said instead, matter-of-fact, "It's a very confidential matter. I—I might even make it a hundred dollars."

The man tucked the torn half of the twenty and the street address into a ragged vest pocket. His mind was fogged with cheap whiskey. Life had beaten him down too far for him to question the source of manna. "Sure. Okay. I'll be there," he agreed.

CHAPTER TWO

Pull the Trigger

A COLD moon lighted the room. Long after his wife had gone to sleep Herbert lay thinking of Jerry. Jerry had been proud of him. He hadn't considered him a failure. He wondered what Jerry would think if he could know that his dad was about to shoot a man in cold blood and abscond with ninety thousand dollars.

May Herbert laughed in her sleep. Herbert turned on one elbow and studied her curiously. May wasn't herself at all. She had known that he was slightly high but it had seemed to amuse rather than annoy her. She had even kissed him good night, something that she hadn't done for months. On two or three occasions during the evening he had experienced a feeling that she was about to confide something in him. But whatever it was, the urge had passed.

She had told him flatly that there would be no birthday party. He scowled at the ceiling. As if that mattered now. By this time tomorrow night he would be one of two things. He would be on his way to the East Coast

with ninety thousand dollars, or he would be in Central Bureau charged with theft and murder.

He forced himself to close his eyes. For forty years he had been a sap. Tomorrow he would begin to live. Life began at forty. Get the money. That was all that mattered. With ninety thousand dollars in his bank-roll, people would respect him. They would know that he existed. He closed his eyes and planned. Toward morning he slept and dreamed that he was aboard an ocean liner swimming in the ship's pool with the beautiful calendar girl. But when he helped her up the ladder, laughing, and attempted to kiss her lips, her face wasn't pretty any more. It was the gray, vacuous face of the bum whom he intended to kill in the morning.

He woke up, shuddering, bathed in sweat. He did not try to go back to sleep. He did not dare.

* * * *

"Ninety-eight thousand, ninety-nine, one hundred thousand, two hundred dollars and eighty-four cents." The bank pay-roll cashier looked up smiling. "Check, Mr. Herbert?"

Herbert said that it did. He forced himself to light a cigarette before closing and locking the case. There must be nothing unusual about the morning for anyone to remember.

The cashier volunteered, "You know, I think it's a dirty trick, the mill dropping their armored truck service. There ought to be a law. It puts a hell of a load on you."

Herbert locked the case and said that he did not mind. As Old Rollins had pointed out, the pay-roll was insured. So was he, for that matter. But no one ever paid much attention to him. No crook would ever pick him as the type of man who would be carrying a hundred thousand dollars.

The clerk agreed, laughing. Herbert could have struck him. He was as dumb as he, himself, had been. He had access to thousands of dollars and he lived on two hundred a month.

He pressed the button and a guard opened the door of the pay-roll division and locked it carefully behind him. "You ought to have one of those bags with a chain that cuffs on your wrist," he told Herbert. "All of us guards have been talking about the risk you're taking since the mill cut out the armored truck service."

Herbert shrugged. It might be well to plant a thought for the man to remember. "Oh, I suppose that I'll get it some day," he agreed. "But it's a job. And if I ever do get stuck up, having the bag chained to my wrist wouldn't do much good. They'd probably cut off my arm."

He walked briskly through the crowded foyer of the bank. From force of habit, as he

reached the walk, he looked both up and down the walk. He saw no one who looked suspicious and crossed the walk to his coupé.

He tossed the bag on the ledge behind the seat and transferred his gun from his shoulder holster to the glove compartment. The first step had been taken. The money was in his possession.

HE locked the car doors, backed from the parking spot, and drove carefully, observing all lights, but scanning the corner crowds closely whenever he was stopped.

He wondered what May had in mind when she had kissed him goodbye that morning. She had called him Jo-Jo, a term of endearment that she had not used for years. Women were peculiar. A man could live with one for twenty years and still not understand her.

Thinking of May made him think of Jerry. Thinking of Jerry reminded him of a point that he had overlooked. He would somehow have to get a new draft card. He doubted that it would be difficult. When a man didn't care what they cost, he could get gas, and steaks, and tires, and anything else that he wanted.

In front of the home office he parked in the space reserved for him, transferred the gun back to his holster, unlocked the doors of the car, took the case from the ledge of the coupé and strode into the building.

Miss Kelly greeted him gaily. "Ah ha. Now walks the ghost."

Herbert forced himself to smile. "Not until five o'clock," he told her. He walked on into his office, took the earmarked money from the case and put it into his safe. He regretted the ten thousand but it could not be helped. The money had to be found in his safe after his body had been discovered.

Harvey put his head in the door as he slammed the safe shut and locked it. "How's the big shot this morning?" he grinned.

Herbert was tempted to smack the grin from his lips but restrained himself. He could not afford a display of temper. "I'm just fine," he said calmly. "And you?"

Harvey held a palm to his temple. "Don't even ask."

Herbert ignored him to sort his mail and he went away. Harvey would of course celebrate. He was the type. There was nothing of importance in the mail. He relocked the pay-roll case, dropped the key into his vest pocket and was preparing to leave the office when his phone rang. He ignored it. It was probably the old man and he was in no mood this morning to listen to feeble explanation as to why the board of directors had passed him by. To hell with old man Rollins.

As he crossed the front office, Miss Kelly asked, "Mr. Rollins contacted you, Mr. Herbert?"

He shook his head. "No. Why? Is the old man looking for me?"

She nodded brightly. "And how. I guess that he wants to break the bad news."

He looked around the office. The typists and the file clerks were staring at him strangely. Harvey grinned at him through his glass partition and thumbed his nose.

"It can wait until I get back," Herbert told Miss Kelly heavily. He walked blindly on out to his car. To hell with them. To hell with all of them. If the bum was waiting where he should be he was walking out of the office for the last time. If the bum failed him, he would wait another month and try again. He was going to South America all right. But not for the Rollins Mills.

He jerked his car savagely into traffic and kept just within the speed limit until he reached the corners of Temple and Vine. The shabby figure was waiting. Herbert opened the door of the car. "Get in."

His car was rolling again inside of fifteen seconds. He doubted that anyone had noticed the bum getting into his car. If they had, there was no special reason why they should remember it and connect it with a charred body in the mountains.

"What's your name?" he asked the man.

"Mack," the other man told him.

"You live here in town?"

Mack shook his head. "Naw." He hesitated, added, "I don't live no place special."

"That's fine, just fine," Herbert said sincerely.

The man smelled sour and unwashed. "You told me," he said uncertainly, "that you'd give me fifty dollars and a new suit of clothes."

Herbert jerked his head at the ledge of the coupé where a somewhat larger bag lay beside the pay roll case. "The clothes are in that suit case. You take the case and change your clothes in Harry's Baths. Leave your old clothes in the locker. But bring the case back to me. And make it snappy. I'll be waiting outside in the car."

"And then I get the fifty dollars?"

"Then you get the fifty dollars." He swung the car to the curb a quarter of a block from the bath house. "Get going. I want you back here in ten minutes."

He gave the man a quarter for a locker and watched him up the street. His knees weren't sagging now but he walked as if he was punch drunk.

"He'll never be missed. He'll be better off," Herbert tried to salve his conscience. "Two more months on skid row and they'd pick him out of some alley."

HE waited, sweat beading on his forehead. If anyone that he knew saw him now he would have to postpone the whole thing. Pay-

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masters with ninety thousand dollars in their car weren't supposed to park on shabby side streets outside of Turkish baths.

Few people passed. He knew none of those who did. Few even glanced at the car. It was as nondescript as its owner.

Mack only took five minutes to dress in the underwear, socks, shirt, shoes, suit, and hat that Herbert had provided. He looked better but smelled as badly as before.

"I didn't take a bath," he told Herbert.

Herbert tossed the case back on the ledge and pointed the car for a cross street that angled out to the highway.

Mack was silent for blocks. At the edge of town he spoke. "About the fifty dollars, Mister—"

Herbert drove with his right hand as he took his wallet from his pocket and passed it across his body. "There it is. You can keep the wallet, too."

The man counted the money in silence, announced, "There's more than fifty dollars here. There are two twenties, two tens, and a five. And there's some papers, too."

"That's all right," Herbert told him. "Put it in your pocket." He twisted his signet ring from his finger and held it up for the man to see. "What's more, you can have this ring if you do exactly as I tell you to."

Mack peered at him suspiciously. "Wadda you want me to do?"

"You like the ring?"

The bum slid it onto one of his dirty fingers and rode admiring it. "It's a nice ring," he admitted. "But wadda I got to do?"

Herbert scowled at the winding highway. He was in no mood to concoct a story. The stage was set. He wanted it over with. Even if the police should be suspicious, there could be nothing to trap him now. An analysis of the charred body could only reveal his clothes, his wallet, his papers, and his ring.

"There's a pint in that side pocket next to you," he said. "Let's have a drink before I tell you."

The man uncorked the bottle and gulped a drink. "That's good whiskey," he admired Herbert's taste. He took a second drink and handed the bottle to Herbert. He wet his lips and passed it back.

"Go ahead. Help yourself. I have to keep my mind on my driving."

Mack rode nursing the bottle, content. No more mention was made of what Herbert wished him to do. By the time they had gone twelve miles the bottle was almost empty and Mack's head was nodding. Finally, he snored.

Herbert glanced at him sideways, then mopped the perspiration from his forehead. It was all over but the shooting. Now all that he

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

had to do was shoot the man, saturate the car with gasoline from the filled can in the rumble, and set the car afire.

Mack slid even lower in the seat. Herbert had reason to be pleased. Two miles from the gravel road winding up the mountain to the mill, he passed a State Patrol car. The trooper recognized him and waved.

Herbert tooted his horn in recognition. He had taken every trick so far. After the murder had been discovered, the patrolman would testify that he had passed the car and that Herbert had been alone. He could not possibly have seen his passenger. The bum's head was below the level of the window.

Herbert turned up the gravel road and slackened speed. He was on schedule. It was exactly twelve-thirty. He would reach the hollow at twelve forty-five. It would take him less than fifteen minutes to do what he had to do and walk the quarter of a mile down hill to mingle with the outgoing Amalgamated shift milling around the inter-urban station.

The car jolted on the rough pavement but Mack snored on. A mile up the road a mine truck passed and the driver waved as he recognized Herbert. That wasn't so good. He would testify he had seen Herbert, but he would also testify that he had passed no other cars on the road.

For a moment Herbert fought panic, then realized that he was being foolish. There were any number of wooded turn-outs on the road where a bandit car might be parked. Or, whoever robbed him might flag him down and escape in the same manner as he himself had planned.

He cut his ignition as he reached the ridge that led down into the valley. From here, he could see the road both ways for miles but his own car was hidden by trees. He pulled slightly off the road and set the handbrake. There were no other cars in sight. He must remember especially to soak Mack's hands in gasoline. They were the only possible source of identification. His teeth were his own. He had no dental chart.

He took the pay roll case from the ledge and set it in a clump of bushes on the down hill slope, then drew his gun from its holster and walked back to the car. This was it.

He tugged the sleeping man into a sitting position in back of the wheel, looked quickly up and down the road, then thrust the gun against his left side. His finger tensed on the trigger, relaxed. Sweat dripped down his cheeks. His whole body began to tremble. When his knees would no longer hold him, he sat down on the running board.

He had been a fool to think that he could do it. He was still a sucker, a sap. The money

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was his for the taking. But he would never take it. He had lived on the right side of the fence too long. All of his planning had gone for nothing. He could not pull the trigger.

CHAPTER THREE

Wanted!

A BLUE jay scolded in the thicket. An inter-urban trolley bell clanged impatiently. The change-shift siren blew at the Amalgamated Plant.

Herbert thought, aloud, "I must have been out of my mind."

He had a sudden desire to see May and take her in his arms, tell her that somehow, somehow, they'd make out. He had been as much of a fool to believe that he could leave her as he had been to believe that he could kill a man. She was a part of his life. After a man had reached forty, scantily clad blondes were fine, but only on calenders. He and May had had Jerry. Even in death he fused them beyond all possible separation.

The sound of a car motor brought him wearily to his feet. He dropped his gun back in its holster, pushed the drunken bum from the wheel and slid in beside him. He would have to drop Mack somewhere. He was welcome to the clothes and the money. All that he wanted were the papers in his wallet and his ring.

He released the handbrake and remembered the pay-roll. Before he could slide from in back of the wheel the car that he had heard drove up beside him and the black-jowled youth he had seen in Marty's the night before leveled a shot gun in his face.

"I'd keep my hands on the wheel, if I were you," he warned Herbert.

There were two more men in the car. Both of them got out. Both of them were armed. They came up one on each side of the coupé.

"Here we been waiting and waiting," the black-jowled youth told Herbert. "What detained you?" He asked one of the other men, "The payroll is in the car?"

The man looked at the leather case in which Herbert had carried the clothes for Mack. "Yair. At least there's a brown leather case on the ledge."

The youth nodded curtly. "That's it. But don't touch it, Maxie. We don't want to leave any prints on the car."

Herbert spoke for the first time. "You can't get away with this."

The black-jowled youth smiled thinly. "We'll risk it."

"How about this other guy, Pete?" the hood on the far side of the car demanded.

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Pete cocked the shot gun. "Give."

"He—he's a friend of mine," Herbert told him. "And he's drunk."

Maxie said, impatiently. "Come on. Come on. Let's get going, Mango."

"Keep your pants on," Pete Mango told him. He ordered Herbert to bring the case and climb into the other car.

Herbert wanted to know why he should. Mango told him because he'd shoot him if he didn't, and asked if that was a good enough reason. Herbert said that it was. He took the empty leather case from the ledge and stepped out of the car. Maxie slid his gun from its holster and dropped it into one of his pockets.

"You bring the stew, Carlson," Mango ordered the third hood. "I hadn't figured on him so we'd better take him along until we find out where he fits in the picture."

Carlson dragged the bum from the car. He woke up, protesting and throwing his weight around.

"Clip him!" Mango said crisply.

Carlson struck him in back of the ear with the barrel of his gun and half-dragged, half-carried him to the larger car. "He stinks like skid row," he told Mango. "Now what?"

"Now run Herbert's car into the bushes a ways like he was trying to hide it. Then we get out of here."

Mango grinned at Herbert. "Catch on, chum?" He pointed down the slope to the inter-urban station where the off-shift Amalgamated workers were milling around an already crowded car. "Get the picture? After twenty years of faithful service, one of the Rollins Mills most trusted employees suddenly gets a bee in his pants and lights out with the payroll."

Herbert felt suddenly sick.

"Catch on?" Maxie nudged Herbert. "And while the cops are looking for you, we're sitting on top of the payroll. No shooting. No blood. Just brains."

Herbert's throat felt dry and constricted. He had been through this same thing once. This thing couldn't happen to him. He clutched the handle of the grip he was holding until the joints of his hands ached.

Carlson returned. He had driven the coupé off the road and twenty feet into the bushes. Unless one was looking for it, it was difficult to see. He stripped his driving gloves from his hands and pushed Herbert toward the sedan. "Climb in, brother, and let's roll."

Herbert shook his head. "I'll be damned if I will." He lashed out with his free hand at Mango's face—and a curtain of black rolled down as Carlson slugged him with the butt of his gun.

DETECTIVE TALES

ANGRY hands were worrying at him, slapping his face. Then a douche of cold water struck him. Herbert struggled to sit up and Mango helped him.

"A wise guy, eh? Where's the payroll?"

His mind still fogged, Herbert stared at him stupidly.

Carlson suggested, "Give him a drink."

"I'll give him a drink," Mango said. Holding Herbert around the neck with one arm he rubbed his knuckles in his skull until the older man screamed with pain. "Now where's the payroll?" he repeated.

Herbert wet his lips. He was in what appeared to be a cheap hotel room. A dirty and cracked shade was drawn down over the only window. He knew that he was back in the city from the steady purr of traffic outside. Mack sat, sodden, on the bed reproving him with bleary eyes.

"A fine fix you got me in," he told Herbert. "These guys are gonna kill us." He reached for the whiskey bottle on the dresser and Carlson slapped his hand.

Maxie squatted down beside Herbert. "You heard Mango. Where's the dough?"

"I'm not saying," Herbert said. His voice sounded hoarse and cracked.

"Oh, yes, you are." Mango sounded confident. "We have ways of making you talk." He got up, walked over to the bed and cuffed him lightly. "What do you know about this, chum?"

The bum told the truth, concluding, "Then he gives me this wallet and his ring and says that after we have a few drinks he'll tell me what I gotta do. Then—well, I guess I kinda pass out."

Mango looked at Herbert with admiration in his eyes. "It looks like I had you wrong, chum. A sharper, eh? You were not only going to steal the payroll, you were going to leave a corpse for the cops to find. Sort of a torch exit, eh?" He strode across the room and kicked Herbert in the stomach. "Yes, sir. A high class dirty sharper and me figuring you for a mouse."

Herbert groveled on the floor in pain. He felt an odd sense of bodily detachment. The man who had planned the thing that Mango had just stated had brought this on himself. But that man had not been him. He would be damned if he'd give up the payroll. Not if it rotted in the bushes forever.

"Start talking, chum," Mango ordered.

"No." Herbert shook his head.

"Damn you for a stubborn mule!" Carlson made a swipe at him with his gun barrel and struck him across the temple. The last words that Herbert heard was Maxie complaining that the other man had struck him too hard.

THIS IS MURDER, MR. HERBERT!

WHEN he came to again the bright cracks in the torn shade had lessened and the volume of traffic had increased. That would be the rush hour traffic between six and six-thirty. He looked around the room. Mack was sleeping on the bed. The three hoods were playing cards and listening to a small radio on the dresser.

Carlson saw that his eyes were open and grinned, "I was afraid I'd killed you."

Mango said flatly, "You keep your hands off him this time." He picked a bottle and a glass from the card table and squatted down on the floor beside Herbert. "Look, chum. So we had you wrong. You're one of those little guys that look like a mouse, but you're tough. You can take it. But why make it hard on yourself?" He splashed whiskey into the tumbler and offered it to Herbert. He drank it gratefully. Mango continued, "We're tough, too. And you're in a bad spot, chum. Okay. So we can't break you. But we still can knock you off. And you don't want to die, do you?"

Herbert sat letting the warmth of the whiskey flood through him. This was one hell of a birthday, he thought. He knew what Mango was driving at. He wanted to make a deal. "How does it stand with the cops?" he asked.

"You're tagged, pal," Carlson grinned. "They've got out a five-state alarm. It seems that your boss don't trust you so much after all. He tips the State Patrol to keep an eye on you and when you don't show at the mine, they go look. A State Cop spotted your car twenty minutes after we left. They got all the highways and the piers and the depots blocked."

The radio buzzed and Carlson turned it up slightly. A police announcer droned: "Car 46. Car 46. Go to the corners of Bell and Maple. A man answering the description of Herbert is reported acting suspiciously. . . ."

Mango laughed. "Those cops. Always clowning. As if a lad who had just glammed ninety thousand bucks would hang around a street corner acting suspicious." He nodded at Herbert's empty glass. "How about another, pal?"

Herbert told him that he'd had plenty. The whiskey had failed to dull the pain in his stomach. His eyes were swollen to narrow slits. He touched the back of his head and fingers came away sticky with matted blood.

"You brought it on yourself, chum," Mango pointed out. "And we wouldn't want it to happen again, would we?"

Herbert asked him what his proposition was.

"You tell us where the dough is and we'll split fifty-fifty," Mango told him.

DETECTIVE TALES

Herbert asked how he knew that they wouldn't shoot him as soon as he disclosed the hiding place of the money.

Mango admitted, "That's the chance that you're taking. But look, chum. We aren't greedy. We'll take forty-five grand for an afternoon's work and call it square."

"What have you got to lose?" Maxie pointed out. "The cops are wise to you. And after swiping ninety grand, you can't just go back and say you're sorry."

"Play smart, pal," Carlson advised him. "Like Maxie says, what have you got to lose?"

Mango bent his face to his. "How about it, Herbert?"

"You go to hell," Herbert told him.

Braced as he was against the wall, he could see the blow start but he couldn't avoid it. For the third time a black curtain descended.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mr. Herbert Gets Paid Off

THE bright cracks on the torn shade were gone entirely. The hum of traffic had stopped. Herbert judged that it must be eight o'clock. He opened his eyes and peered through their slits without moving.

Mack was snoring on the bed. Carlson was beating a tympanic solo on the table with his fingers. The radio was still tuned to police calls. Mango and Maxie were absent.

"I'd like a drink of water," he told Carlson.

The hoodlum grinned, without moving. "Oh, you're with us again." Herbert repeated his request and Carlson resumed his drumming on the table. "Nuts to you, brother. We're through handling you with gloves, see? And the boys have gone for the car. We're going to take you somewhere where we can really go to town."

Herbert sat up and leaned against the wall. He knew that he would talk in time. Human flesh could only stand so much.

There was a buzz preceding an announcement on the radio. The police announcer said tonelessly: "Cars 21 and 26. Cars 21 and 26. Go to the Sante Fe freight yards. Railroad detectives have cornered a man in a box car whom they believe may be Herbert. . . ."

Carlson was amused. "You're running the cops nuts, chum."

Herbert repeated his request for water. The hoodlum considered it a moment, then lowered the front rungs of his chair to the floor and filled a glass with lukewarm water from the tap. Herbert drew up his knees, the better to brace himself. This was the last chance that he would have.

"Just so you don't pass out completely,"

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Carlson said. He bent over to hand him the glass of water. "Okay. Take it if you want it."

The man on the floor reached out a hand, then lashed out suddenly with his feet. Both heels caught Carlson squarely in the belly.

Carlson fell, rolled on his side in agony but managed to draw his gun from its holster. Moving unsteadily on his feet, Herbert snatched the whiskey bottle from the table and used it as a club.

Mack sat up on the bed at the sodden thud. "You—you've killed the guy."

HERBERT picked the dead man's gun from the floor. He uncorked the bottle, took a drink, then handed it to the frightened-eyed man on the bed. "Give me my wallet and my ring."

The bum whimpered, "You promised me—"

"Keep the money," Herbert cut him short. He slid his wallet back into his pocket and put his ring on his finger.

The key was in the room door. He unlocked the door and studied the hall. It was a typical cheap hotel hallway.

"Scram," he ordered Mack.

The man went unprotesting down the hallway clutching the quart bottle to his chest.

DETECTIVE TALES

At the stairhead he paused to tilt the bottle to his lips. Herbert followed him slowly, shoving the gun in his pocket. No one tried to stop him. A youthful clerk was in back of the desk in the lobby. He looked at Herbert's battered face and asked him, "What the hell happened to you?"

Herbert walked through the lobby without replying. Mack had disappeared by the time that he reached the walk. There were few people on the street.

Herbert could do two things. He could pick up the money as he had originally intended to, or he could surrender to the first policeman whom he saw and face the music. It might mean a long prison sentence. The least that it could mean was the loss of his job. Even with restitution the bonding company would insist on making an example of him. Meanwhile there was Mango. He walked a few steps into the shadows and waited.

He did not have long to wait. The familiar black sedan pulled up to the curb. He stopped Mango with one foot on the sidewalk and the other still on the running board of the car.

"If I were you, I'd hold it right there," he told him.

Maxie rapped out a sharp oath. "It's Herbert. He's got away from Carlson."

"Oh, yeah?" Mango rounded the hood of the car from the far side and Herbert squeezed the trigger of Carlson's gun. The slug missed Maxie and shattered the windshield of the car. Somewhere up the block a woman screamed.

A flash of flame leaped from Mango's hand. Lead ricocheted whining from the walk at Herbert's feet. Mango was still trying for the brass ring. He did not want to kill him. He was trying to shoot him in the legs.

The woman was screaming louder now. A man was shouting, "Police!" Herbert moved out into the red pool formed by the neon sign of the hotel and Mango shot again. Herbert stumbled as his left leg gave way.

His gun barrel lifted slightly, Mango started determinedly up the walk toward Herbert.

Herbert knelt on his sound knee, waiting.

"Don't be a damn fool," Mango cursed him. "Drop that gun or the next slug goes through your skull."

When he was ten feet away, Herbert pulled the trigger a second time. Mango stopped in the middle of a stride. His clenched left fist, knuckle out, lifted as if about to rap on an invisible door. Then the door opened suddenly and he pitched through it onto his face.

Maxie whipped the car in a sharp U turn and roared on up the street. Herbert continued to kneel, Mango's outstretched gun hand only inches from him.

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The usual crowd began to form. A panting patrolman elbowed through it and up to Herbert. "What goes here?" he demanded.

Herbert handed him the gun. "My name," he told him, "is Herbert. I believe that you're looking for me."

From there on things became hazy.

When the mist began to clear, he was lying on a high hospital bed and May was trying not to cry. She kept chanting like one of the high school cheer leaders at the football games to which they had gone to watch Jerry play, "It's okay, Jo-Jo. It's okay. You're going to be all right."

"Yeah. Sure. I'm going to be fine," he said.

Her chant dissolved into tears. She buried her face on his chest. Through her hair he could see Old Man Rollins and Captain Hawkins of Central Bureau. He wondered how much they knew.

Herbert forced himself to listen to May. She was sobbing, "Why did this have to happen? It was going to be such a happy birthday for you, Jo-Jo. You see, Mr. Rollins told me last night. That's why I called off the party. All of the office force were going to come to the house and surprise you."

HE lay very still. 'Mr. Rollins told me last night.' He and not Harvey had gotten the South American branch. That was why the girls in the office had looked at him strangely. That was why Harvey had called him 'Big Shot', why the Old Man had wanted to see him. And he had thrown it away.

May continued, "And everyone's been sending presents to the house all day. There was even a half-case of rye from someone who signed himself Marty." She sat up and wiped her eyes. "The card read, 'Happy Birthday to a valued and respected customer.'"

He closed his eyes a moment, told her, "You step outside for a minute, May. I—I've got to talk to the old man—alone."

She repeated his request to Rollins and she and Hawkins left the room. The Old Man walked over to the bed.

"How much do you know?" Herbert asked.

The mill owner eyed him shrewdly. "There seem to be some discrepancies," he admitted. "Hawkins can't make up his mind whether you're a crook, a fool, or a hero. I can't either," he added dryly.

DETECTIVE TALES

Herbert considered lying. Mango and Carlson were dead. It was unlikely that Mack or Maxie would ever show on the scene to dispute his word.

"No," he decided aloud. "I'll take what I have coming." He took a deep breath and told Rollins the whole story.

The Old Man was silent. "Well," he said. "I'll admit I've had this promotion in mind for some time. I thought that you were trustworthy." He spread his hands. "So I guess that's that."

"I guess so," Herbert agreed. "The one whom it's tough on is May."

Old Man Rollins' face creased in a smile. "I don't see why. I said that I wanted to tempt you. And you were tempted, weren't you?"

For a moment Herbert failed to understand him, then he asked, "You mean that you're going to give me the South American Branch?"

"Hell no!" the Old Man exploded.

"I'm sorry. I misunderstood you," Herbert admitted.

"You're damn right you did," the mill owner continued. "Hell. You're practically running the business right now. Why should I send you to South America? Young Harvey is going down there and I'm going with him to get him started. What in the name of blue blazes do you think that I've been grooming you for? Just as soon as you get out of here you step into my shoes as general manager."

He walked out of the room.

Herbert lay blinking at the ceiling. He thought of a lot of things including Jerry. Maybe Jerry would know some day. Maybe Jerry wasn't dead. Mistakes did happen. He had almost made a big one. Then for some reason he thought of Marty. Marty knew all of the quick money boys. He bought them drinks. But he'd sent Herbert a half-case of whiskey with a card that read: "To a valued and respected customer".

THE END