

Being a tramp printer, Pop Mitchell liked to take it easy by setting up only small-town headlines. But homicide slipped Pop's name into hangnose scareheads when his latest boss contracted for some . . .

Hot News from Satan



By Ken Lewis

POP MITCHELL jolted his ancient a jalopy to the curb and sniffed the wind like a skittish colt, surveying the shop front opposite him. He saw that the same tarnished gilt letters still proclaimed: *Avondale Weekly Gazette—Job Printing.*

Satisfied, he breathed deeply of the clear cool morning air and his blue eyes sparkled. "Ain't changed a bit in four years," he murmured, crossing the red brick sidewalk to the street door. His blue shirt was faded, his black pants patched

and shiny. But his thin white hair lay neatly along his scalp and there was something at once proud and gentle and altogether pleasant about the set of the fine-veined wrinkles above his cheekbones, as he pushed through the door.

The eyes of the girl working at a desk beyond the counter rose to that pleasantness and answered it. She stood up, small and lithe in her plaid skirt and brushed wool sweater, and smiled.

"Can I help you?"

He nodded, his forehead coming about on a level with the bow of the ribbon binding her dark curls.

“Ever’ spring about this time, Tim Riley used to have a couple days work for an extra man, settin’ up the county tax lists. Just tell him Pop Mitchell’s back.”

She shook her head gently. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Riley sold the *Gazette* and moved to California more than a year ago. Mr. Bassett’s the new publisher. Mr. Blaize Bassett—”

She indicated a glass-partitioned office behind her, where a big man with sleek black hair and heavy jowls sat scanning a paper from a pile of exchanges on the desk beside him. His face lifted at the sound, and his black flesh-ridged eyes fell on Pop. He pushed back his swivel chair and stepped through the connecting door, handling his vast bulk with surprising ease and economy of movement.

“You’re a printer?”

Pop could feel the black eyes appraising him. He nodded proudly. “Man and boy for fifty years—and never two straight weeks in the same place! Till the war”—he amended—“when the gov’mnt printin’ office put out a call. But that’s over now.”

Bassett’s smite was edged with faint contempt. “A tramp printer,” he mused. “I thought that breed was almost extinct. You’re the first to stop by since I bought this place.”

Pop nodded, somber with reflection. “Can’t trust the freights no more. Too dang fast. But I took my gov’mint money and got me a Ford.”

The big man’s decision seemed to crystallize suddenly. He strode forward, put out a blunt pink paw. His voice boomed with mellow affability.

“Fine—fine! You came along at the right time, old-timer. It so happens that I’m going to have to let my regular man

go, as soon as he shows up for work this morning. He’s been paying too much attention to Miss Lindell here. Can’t seem to keep his mind on his work.”

The girl’s breath sucked in and her cheeks darkened. “Why, that’s not so,” she gasped, “and you know it! If I want to go out with Tommy, that’s *my* business—”

Pop’s eyes twinkled with remembrance of the redheaded kid who had been Tim Riley’s regular printer four years ago.

“Tommy Kearns? I thought he was goin’ in the army.”

The girl bit her lip. “He did. But he’s back now. And if Mr. Bassett fires him, I’ll—I’ll quit, too!”

Bassett’s eyes flickered obscurely, but his voice was still bland. “We’ll discuss that when you drop by for your check tomorrow, Jean. And now I’d better get Tommy on the phone, and tell him not to come down today. I’ll mail him his final check.”

Pop shook his head judiciously. “I’m after no man’s regular job,” he said. “Never did hanker to stay in one place more’n a day or so at a time. Reckon I’ll just be moseyin’ along.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Bassett said sharply. “I’d decided to let Kearns go long before you showed up. There’s copy on the hook, if you want to work. Otherwise, I’ll set it myself. Heaven knows I’ve done it often enough before.”

Pop looked at the girl. Her chin was still high, her nostrils pale. “Stay if you want,” she said. “He’s stubborn, and—and mean! Now that he’s said this much, he’ll go through with it, no matter what anyone else does!” She turned on her heel and marched stiffly to her desk, began to empty its drawers of their personal contents.

Bassett grinned and gave Pop a knowing wink. “She’ll get over it,” he

said, gliding back into his office.

Pop hesitated a moment longer, then headed toward the vintage linotype machine visible behind a waist-high partition at the rear. On the way, he glanced back at Jean Lindell. Her head was still tilted defiantly, her shoulders rigid. But he caught the tiny quiver of her mouth, the two big tears glistening on her cheeks.

Pretty little thing, he thought. Spunky, too. He wondered if Tommy Kearns appreciated her . . .

JUST before noon, Pop lifted his wiry, slender-fingered hands from the linotype's keyboard, rolled himself a cigarette, and shook his head half-admiringly at the conversation which drifted back to him through the open door of Bassett's office.

The Gazette's new publisher, he decided, was a mighty interesting man to know. Take the way he was handling that market manager now. A man would have to be slick as a greased pig to wangle a double-truck ad—a two-page spread in the middle of the paper—out of any store, in a town this size, week after week.

Through the glass panel of the office, Pop could see the grocer's pinched, protesting face, "But I tell you, I can't afford it! My budget just calls for a one-page ad each week! I have to pay the difference out of my own pocket!"

Bassett spread his soft hands persuasively. "But Frank," he soothed, "think of the prestige that double-truck gives you. Nobody else in town can touch it."

"Nobody else could pay for it either! Not at the rates you demand! I'm warning you, Bassett—if you break me, you'll never get paid!"

Bassett chuckled placatingly, and put a hand on the other's shoulder. "Just think

about it awhile, Frank," he urged. "I'm sure you'll see how cheap that ad really is. By the way, don't miss the 'One Year Ago' column this week. I think you'll get a bang out of it."

The little grocer withdrew, his face drawn and unhappy. Another caller took his place in the inner office—a tall, silvery man with a long hard jaw and cold wary eyes. Pop recognized this one from a picture he'd set a caption for that morning. Roger Jessle had just been re-elected chairman of the board of county commissioners.

He waved aside the chair Bassett proffered, spoke abruptly, "I suppose you asked me over here to make sure you get the county printing contract again this year. Well, I may as well tell you now that the Nicholson *Sentinel's* bid was a good ten per cent under yours, and I mean to see that the contract goes to the lowest bidder at tonight's meeting."

Bassett smiled unctuously, but there was a glitter deep in his flesh-set eyes. "Tish tush, Mr. Jessle. I just thought you might be interested in an editorial I've written for tomorrow's paper. I can't seem to make up my mind whether to run it or not."

Jessle scanned the sheets of copy paper Bassett held out. As he read, his craggy face suffused and his long jaw tightened.

"If this—this dastardly attack on me and my administration ever sees print, Bassett," he stormed, "I'll sue you within an inch of your life, for libel!"

Bassett clucked sympathetically. "I'm afraid you should have studied your libel laws better, back when you were in the newspaper business yourself," he said softly. "You forget that a man in public office is open to editorial criticism at any time. That's one of the privileges of a free press. You can count on the fingers of one hand all the politicians who ever collected

a cent in a libel action.”

Jessle’s voice was parched with rage, “So help me, Bassett, if this mass of lies and half-truths ever appears in your paper, I’ll find some way to make you regret it, if it’s the last thing I ever do!”

Bassett’s shrug was smoothly conciliatory. “Well, as I say, I may decide to kill it. . . . As for this other thing you mentioned, of course since the *Gazette*’s circulation is the largest in the county we feel justified in asking a trifle more than the minimum rates for legal printing—”

Jessle pivoted on his heel and stalked out, his bony face livid.

Pop turned back to the linotype. The *Gazette*’s publisher was a mighty smooth operator, all right, he mused. But he wouldn’t like to be in his boss’s shoes. Someday, something very unpleasant was going to happen to Mr. Bassett. And somehow, Pop realized, he’d sort of like to be around to see it happen . . .

WORK on a weekly newspaper forms a sharply rising six-day pyramid, with press night as its climax. Advertising and social news may be gathered earlier; but on the day and night before the paper comes out, the bulk of front-page news must be written and set up, the type arranged in page forms, and the pages themselves run off—two at a time—on the clattering hand-fed press.

Thus, “press night” often extends into the early hours of the next morning. Especially if a last-minute news event has to be handled before the final run.

At 7 p.m., when Blaize Bassett left for the courthouse two blocks away to cover the Avon county commissioners’ meeting, Pop had forsaken the linotype for the stone-topped composing table and was locking up the inside page forms. And at half-past ten when Bassett returned, the inside pages had all been printed and the

first and last pages were also made up; except for two front-page holes labeled Commission Meeting and Front Page Editorial, and a small space in the “Looking Backward” column on the back page, which contained news highlights reprinted from previous years’ editions of the same week. Apparently, Bassett still carried the copy to fill these spots, either in his pocket or in his head.

The publisher’s heavy face was dark with anger, his deep-set eyes venomous as he pushed through the door.

“Get yourself some coffee,” he said shortly. “I’ll set the rest of this stuff up myself. I’ll show these two-bit politicians how to play ball! Take half an hour, if you want to. It’ll be at least that long before we’re ready to roll.”

Pop could hardly suppress a grin as he moved toward the door. Obviously Roger Jessle had called Bassett’s bluff. Pop knew what that meant. The county printing contract was worth several thousand dollars a year—profit which Bassett had high-pressured himself out of that morning.

At the door of the Trucker’s Inn down the block, Pop paused to wave at an open-topped roadster rolling along the street. In it was the small dark-haired girl, Jean Lindell, and a square-cut flame-headed young man whom Pop recognized as Tommy Kearns, though it was hard to realize that this grim-faced broad-shouldered young giant could be the same freckled youngster who had worked for Tim Riley four years before.

Engrossed in conversation, neither of them recognized Pop. He waited till the car slid to a stop before the *Gazette*, and the girl got out and disappeared inside. Then he shrugged and entered the all-night cafe.

Half an hour later when he returned, the roadster was gone, the street again

deserted. Light from the back shop filtered weakly through the *Gazette's* open street door. Crossing the outer office he thought he heard the rear door, opening onto an alley out back, scuff shut. After that, a strangely ominous hush seemed to fill the building.

He wondered at the silence, the lack of noise from the linotype machine where Bassett should have been setting up the final slugs of type for the week's edition. Quickly he stepped around its towering mechanism—and then he understood.

Bassett sprawled on the floor beneath the keyboard, the overturned linotype chair beside him. Blood reddened a dozen tears in his shirt front, welled sluggishly from a great crease in his scalp, where the skull had been broken. More of it mottled a dark bruise on his forehead.

Pop gasped, knelt to finger a flabby wrist; straightened again, his head shaking slowly.

That very unpleasant thing he had forecast earlier had caught up with Blaize Bassett at last. And Pop wasn't so sure that he was glad to be around now that it had happened, after all.

A heavy foot-long ingot of type-metal, cast for feeding into the linotype's melting pot, lay on the floor near the body, splattered with blood. Its three-cornered point had broken off and was still imbedded shallowly in the folds of flesh layering the corpse's ribs. Bassett's pockets had been turned inside out. A sheaf of galley proofs torn from the machine's copy spindle now strewed the composing table.

Numbly, Pop stumbled to the phone in the outer office, dialed the sheriff.

SHERIFF BEN WILLIAMS was a scrotchety, white-mustached old-timer at least ten years Pop's senior. "Umm, umm, ain't he a mess!" he clucked,

regarding the body with bright little birdlike eyes. "Looks like the killer knocked him out and tried t' stab him, then finished up by bashin' in his skull. Any idee who did it?"

Pop shook his head, eyeing the half dozen lines of type Bassett had set before he was killed, which now lay in a jumbled heap on the floor.

"Whoever did it was lookin' for somethin'," he said. "I thought I heard the back door scrape shut as I come in. Wonder if he found what he wanted, or if I scared him away too soon."

Ben grunted. "Well, I don't see no reason why you should've done it, then called me," he mused. "Still, you're a stranger in town, and you found the body. Reckon Jessle'll wanta question you."

"Jessle! What's he got to do with it?"

Ben shrugged. "As chairman of the county board, he allus likes to get in on anything big. Playin' detective, I guess. Anyway, he's on his way over. My number rings his phone, too."

Pop's eyes were thoughtful. He wondered if Roger Jessle had more than a passing interest in this case. It seemed logical, considering that morning's conversation.

Jessle hurried in five minutes later, his jaw tight, his face like scraped bone. He listened to Ben's story, then nodded.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Arrest this tramp for murder!"

Ben blinked. "A-arrest—?"

"Certainly! It's plain enough, isn't it? He killed Bassett to rob him. Then, when he couldn't find anything of value, and realized he'd be suspected if he tried to run, he called you himself, claiming Bassett was killed while he was out!"

Pop's eyes narrowed. "Now wait a minute, Sheriff," he protested. "You gonna let him get away with that? I happen to know what Bassett was gettin' ready to set

up when he was killed. An editorial givin' Jessle and the county administration here fits! He called Jessle in and showed it to him this mornin', threatenin' to use it unless Jessle saw to it that he got the county printin' contract again, at the meetin' tonight!"

Jessle eyed him savagely. "Can you prove any of this?" he demanded. "Of course not! . . . You see, Ben—it's open and shut! Take his fingerprints and lock him up!"

Ben studied his shoe tops hesitantly. "We-ell," he decided at last. "If you say so, Mr. Jessle. After all, you're the boss."

"Boss," Pop snorted, "is right! And folks thinks dirty politics is all confined to the cities!"

Two hours later, Ben slipped back to Pop's cell in the tiny jail adjoining his court house office. "Just wanted you to know I ain't quite the fool I might look," he whispered. "I found two sets o' fingerprints on that bar that killed Bassett—and neither one of 'em belongs to you. I ain't tellin' Jessle. Figure to spring it as a surprise at the inquest."

Pop nodded gratefully. "Thanks, Ben."

For a moment, he was tempted to tell the sheriff about Jean Lindell's visit to the *Gazette* office that night. But at the last minute, something stopped him. No use dragging her into this, if she was innocent. And somehow, he just couldn't picture the dark-eyed girl battering Bassett up that way, no matter how mad she might have been at him.

NEVERTHELESS, it was Jean Lindell who came in and confessed the next morning. Pop could hear her voice, low and tragic, in the office next door:

"I went in to get my check, and he—he said some things I didn't like about me and Tommy. He was jealous, I guess. I slapped him, and his face got all red and

ugly and he started for me.

"I—I was afraid. I picked up the first thing I could get my hands on, and hit him with it, and ran out. I didn't know he was dead. Not till this morning, when I heard you'd arrested Mr. Mitchell. Then I knew I couldn't let an innocent man suffer for something I had done—"

"Didn't know he was dead?" Roger Jessle ejaculated. "Good gosh, girl, what'd you think he'd be, after what you did to him? You must have hit him at least twice, besides trying to stab him!"

"Why, no, I . . ." She broke off, her voice hushed with shock. Then, dully, "Maybe I did. I don't remember. All I knew was that I wanted to get away—"

Jessle sighed. "All right, Ben. I guess that does it. Take her back and lock her up."

After Ben had put her in the next cell and left again, Pop called gently through the bars:

"There, there, Honey, you didn't do it. You might have hit him once, but you didn't beat him up that way. You think Tommy Kearns did that, don't you? That he went back when you told him what had happened, and lost his head, and finished him off."

She looked away. "We were going to be married," she said dully. "That's why I went back to get my check last night, instead of today. We were going to the city and look for work, together—" She crumpled to the bunk, shoulders quivering, while great sobs shook her body.

He nodded. "Well, you were right to keep still about Tommy. *He* didn't do it, either."

Ben Williams unlocked Pop's cell door half an hour later. "I'm gonna let you go now," he whispered. "But if you're smart you'll git outa the county right away." He nodded toward the next cell, birdlike eyes troubled. "I checked her prints against the

ones on that bar. She made one set of ‘em, all right.”

Pop’s head shook. “But you don’t believe she’s guilty, any more’n I do,” he said softly. “Jessle wouldn’t be so quick to believe it, either, if he didn’t need a suspect so bad, to keep himself from bein’ suspicioned. Look here, Ben, do you really want to catch Bassett’s murderer?”

“Yes,” Ben said simply. “I do.”

“No matter who it turns out to be?”

“No matter who it turns out to be. Roger Jessle may own this county lock, stock, and barrel. But long as I’m sheriff, I don’t aim to stand by and see an innocent party railroaded for murder, even if it does cost me my job at the next election!”

Pop nodded. “Then let’s you and me go back over there, all by ourselves, and take another look around. I kinda got a hankerin’ to see what Bassett was settin’ up on that linotype, just before he was killed.”

Ben eyed him dubiously. “But that last galley was spilled all over the floor! Can’t make head nor tails out of it, now!”

Again Pop’s head shook. “No matter. There wasn’t more’n a dozen lines of type on it. I can put it back together in no time.”

Ben considered, eyes brightening. “All right. We’ll go out the back way and sneak down the alley. I got the passkey from Bassett’s pocket. Things has come to a pretty pass, when the sheriff hisself has to hide, in order to do his own investigatin’!”

IN THE *Gazette*’s back shop ten minutes later, Pop straightened from the tray where he had reassembled the handful of type lines from the floor, and pulled a proof for Ben’s benefit. His eyes were troubled, thoughtful.

“Nothin’ there,” Ben groaned. “That’s just a little local filler about Frank Mayhew spendin’ the weekend in Center

City while his wife and daughter visits relatives in New York.”

“Yeah,” Pop mused. “Somethin’ funny about this. Wait a minute—”

Leaving Ben to ponder the galley proof further, he strolled into the front office and pulled the file of last year’s papers from a shelf. He leafed through it till he found the issue he wanted, then studied it carefully, item by item.

At last he straightened, shaking his head. The story he wanted wasn’t there. His eyes returned to a boxed obituary on Page One:

Friends of Miss Ida Terry, former market employee here, were shocked this week to learn of her death in a highway accident north of town early Monday morning. Miss Terry apparently died instantly when her car went out of control and plunged down a highway embankment, striking a tree. The wreck was discovered several hours later by a passing motorist.

Since her head had plunged through the right side of the windshield, leading investigators to believe that she was not behind the wheel at the time of the accident, Sheriff Ben Williams has ordered an inquest. Several broken whisky bottles are said to have been found in the wreck . . .

“Hey, Ben,” Pop called. “Come here a minute. . . Remember this case?”

Ben read the story bewilderedly. “Sure. But what—”

“Ever find out who was drivin’ that car?”

The sheriff’s head shook. “The driver’s door was open, and I guess he was throwed clear and managed to get away. We found some prints on the steerin’ wheel and sent ‘em to Washington, but they wasn’t on file. Advertised for any motorist who might have picked up a hitch-hiker near there, too, to come forward and give us a description. But nobody ever showed up. Why?”

Pop's eyes glowed. "You still got a record o' those prints?"

"Sure. But—"

"How about this Ida Terry? Pretty nice gal?"

Ben grinned reminiscently. "Depends on what you mean by nice. Hear tell she had quite a reputation. Anyway, the womenfolks around here made it so hot for her that she had to leave town—"

Pop nodded, his voice high with inner excitement. "All right, Ben. Now I want you to go back to your office and check the prints from that steerin' wheel against the second set on that bar that killed Bassett—the set that ain't been identified yet."

Ben eyed him hollowly. "But what in tarnation—!"

Pop grinned. "Never mind. You just might be surprised. Shake a leg, and bring your fingerprintin' outfit back with you."

When Ben had gone out, still shaking his head, Pop picked up the phone on the desk and dialed a number from the classified section of the local directory. After that, he stepped into the back shop and found a heavy brass pica pole—the foot-long rule printers use for measuring type. He shoved the rule down into his pants, so that its protruding upper end was masked by his left suspender strap.

BEN'S birdlike eyes were shining when he returned. "You sure hit the nail on the head!" he marveled. "Them prints check, all right! But I don't see what good that does us. We still don't know who made 'em."

"We may in a minute," Pop said, hearing the knock on the front door. "Get out your fingerprint pad and play along. I'm gonna try an experiment."

He hurried forward, knees shaky with excitement, and yanked open the door.

The little man outside paused on the threshold, eying him curiously.

"Come in, Mr. Mayhew," Pop said brightly. "Sorry to keep you from your work, but this'll only take a minute." He ushered the bewildered market manager into the inner office, where Ben Williams waited, poker-faced.

"Just give the sheriff here a set o' your fingerprints, and then you can go."

Frank Mayhew's eyes recoiled from Ben's beady stare, and his pinched face whitened. "Wha-what is this?"

"Just a routine check," Pop said smoothly. "We're takin' the prints of everyone that visited Bassett the day' he was killed. The sheriff's found one set that he ain't accounted for yet."

"But I—I fail to see—" The little grocer's eyes jittered miserably and he began to edge toward the door. Pop blocked his path.

"You refuse to be fingerprinted?"

"Why—why yes! Certainly I refuse! You have no legal right—"

Pop nodded. "Well, I guess it don't really matter. We already got one set o' your prints—two, in fact. One from the steerin' wheel of that car Ida Terry was killed in, and one from the bar that killed Bassett. Take him along, Ben. You won't have no trouble gettin' his prints, once he's formally charged with murder."

A nerve in Mayhew's temple twitched taut. "Nonsense! Don't listen to him, Ben! I don't know what he's talking about!"

"Why, sure you do," Pop said reasonably. "You're the one that was drivin' Ida's car that night. Bassett musta been the motorist who picked you up, afterwards. He promised not to turn you in, if you'd sign a year's contract for that big two-page ad in the paper. I don't imagine he was satisfied just to charge you the usual rates, either."

“You tried to talk him out of it, when your contract came up for renewal yesterday mornin’. He put you off, so you came down again last night and found him lyin’ on the floor, out cold, the way Jean Lindell had left him after he insulted her a few minutes earlier. You finished him off with the same bar she’d used. But you were so busy huntin’ that ‘One Year Ago’ item. he’d threatened you with that mornin’ that you forgot to wipe the bar off right away. And I scared you out the back door, before you got around to it.”

He broke off, turning to Ben. “That’s what Bassett was settin’ when Jean came in,” he said. “I knew it couldn’t be this week’s news, because the news part o’ the paper was all made up, except for them front page holes for the editorial and the commission meetin’ report. So I figured that story we found on the floor musta been meant for the spot in the ‘Lookin’ Backward’ column on the last page.

“But I couldn’t find no mention o’ Mayhew takin’ a weekend trip in *last* year’s file. So I figured it musta been somethin’ Bassett knew about personal, but hadn’t printed at the time—for a reason. Then, when I noticed that story of Ida Terry’s death, I just put two and two together and decided to play a hunch—”

Mayhew’s eyes had frozen over, his face became a whitely desperate mask. “Pretty smart for a tramp, aren’t you?” he croaked. “Got it all figured out! Well, let’s see you figure your way out of this one!”

His hand dipped into an apron pocket, came out with a flat black automatic.

“I was afraid something like this might happen, when you called me over here. So

I got this out of the cash drawer before I left. I slipped away out the back door here once before. Maybe I can do it again, if there are no witnesses left alive to identify me later!”

He angled the automatic at Pop’s head. A slight movement came from across the room, as Ben Williams’ hand slid toward his holstered revolver. Mayhew whirled, finger whitening on the trigger.

But Pop’s hand had already whipped to the hidden pica pole in his waist band. He brought it up, chopped it into the little man’s gun wrist with a single sweeping motion. A slug from the automatic knocked ceiling plaster into Ben’s wispy hair. Then the gun itself dropped from nerveless fingers and Mayhew grabbed his throbbing wrist bone, groaning with pain.

Ben’s revolver eyed him grimly across the desk top, as Pop snapped the cuffs into place, hiding the already purpling bruise. Ben shook his head.

“And here I’d of swore it was Jessle, after what you told me about that editorial.”

Pop nodded. “But there was one thing against it bein’ Jessle all the time. The same thing that was against it bein’ Jean Lindell, or Tommy Kearns. Yesterday mornin’ Bassett mentioned that Jessle had once been in the newspaper business himself. And no one who’d ever worked around a print shop would try to stab a man with a piece o’ type metal, the way the killer tried to stab Bassett. They’d of knowed it was too dang soft to ever penetrate a man’s ribs.”