

# Murder's Crystal Ball

By Nicholas Zook

*Everything happened on Flanagan's beat—he really needed a fortuneteller to keep him straight. And then he ran into a horoscope artist who knew more about murder than he did about the stars.*



**I**T WAS opium, the stuff that sends men climbing to a better world and then drags them down to a hell of a torture. Somehow the federal narcotics agents traced the opium to an area about half a mile in radius. There the trail ended

and they couldn't find the distributor.

Why should a plain cop worry about narcotics? As a rule, I didn't. But this time it was different. That half-mile area was within my beat and until the distributor was found the narcotics men would

haunt that beat.

The federal men put on seedy disguises and took rooms along the beat. It got so I couldn't tell if the bum I told to move along was a federal man or a bum. But the stuff kept seeping out. Whoever was behind it had a foolproof way of dishing the opium out. And Sergeant Mulrooney, my superior, didn't like it.

I found him in his little cubicle of a room at the station. His face was beet-red and dented with deep lines of worry. He grunted when I came in and left me standing before the desk.

"You wanted to see me, sergeant?"

He savagely bit into a cigar, spewed the end on the floor and applied a match. He didn't answer until the air was filled with rapid clouds of smoke, rising like SOS signals.

"Flanagan, your beat has given this precinct a black eye," he thundered. "How do you think it looks to the old man when these federal agents have to move in to clean up your territory?"

I thought that over carefully. "They could be wrong," I said simply, "Maybe the opium isn't coming from my beat."

"Maybe today isn't Saturday," he sneered. He waggled the cigar in his mouth and exhaled another series of smoke clouds. "Look, Flanagan, I'll lay it on the line. Find the dope peddler before those federal men do and I'll recommend you for the promotion that's open."

I brightened. "Don't get him and you might find it a good idea to go to a barber's college and get yourself another trade," he continued with a glower. My chin fell almost to the middle button of my coat.

I was on my best behavior that Saturday night. I rattled doors, prowled around back alleys and trailed a half-dozen suspicious-looking characters. The beat seemed unusually quiet for a Saturday night and it had me a little worried.

I dawdled by the Rainbow Tavern, mulling over Sergeant Mulrooney's threat when I heard the shriek. It was a cry of pain, of anguish. It came from a dingy room over the tavern. I stood with my back to the stairway leading to the room, waiting for another sound.

Someone hurtled down the stairs and toppled me over. I gasped to get my breath and found a white-faced character named Arthur Haire sprawled beside me on the pavement. He lifted a lily-white hand to his head and fingered what might

have been a bump.

He gave me a startled look. "Sorry," he said. "Upstairs. There's a fight. Better get up there."

**H**E WAS on his feet and down the street before I could stop him. I whipped out my pistol and clambered up the stairs. This might be the break I was looking for. It wasn't.

It was a dingy room with a poker table in the center and loose cards scattered over it. Three men were huddled over a limp figure on the floor. They gaped at my uniform and looked as though they were going to run. I stopped that with a flourish of my pistol. When I had them lined up against the wall, I turned my attention to the prostrate figure.

He was Mike Miller, a small-time gambler. His open mouth and look of surprise on his relaxed face told me as much as the open wound in his chest. Mike Miller would no longer cut cards in this world. He was dead.

I pounded the floor with my club until the bartender came up. It would have been more to my liking to get the story from the three gents and wind up the case single-handed. But regulations are regulations. The bartender called the station and ten minutes later the Homicide Squad breezed in.

Once the boys in plain clothes got there I was shoved away in the background. I could have gone back to my beat without being missed but I wanted to hear the full story.

A couple of hundred bucks cost Mike Miller his life. There had been a small-time poker game and the deceased gent, who had never done an honest day's work in his life, was doing all the winning. Maybe it was a coincidence that he won the big pots whenever he dealt. Most likely it wasn't.

Mike had dealt himself a winning hand and was pulling in the cash when Arthur Haire stopped him and said Mike had dealt from the bottom. Haire was a professional card sharp who wasn't used to losing or being outsmarted.

Mike did what any honest gent would do when insulted. He poked a fist across the table and hit Haire on the snoot. Haire went down but came up fighting. Fighting with fire in his eyes and a long knife in his hand.

A minute later Mike Miller groaned his last with four inches of steel blade buried in his chest.

Haire didn't waste any time after that. He scooped up the money on the table, threatened the three witnesses with mayhem if they squawked to

the cops, and lammed.

The three witnesses signed sworn statements that Arthur Haire had jabbed Mike with a knife. It was an open and shut case for Homicide. Open and shut except for one thing. Arthur Haire couldn't be found. He left no traces, no clues, no nothing. And somehow the fact that Haire had toppled me over on the pavement had leaked out.

**S**ERGEANT MULROONEY had me on the carpet for half an hour Monday. He chewed a mangy stub of a cigar and glowered at me under his shaggy, gray eyebrows. I shot him an uneasy smile. The lines on his face were as deep as miniature canyons.

"You might have caught him red-handed," he sighed. "You had him flat on his back and let him get up and run away."

"How was I to know what was going on?" I objected.

"You knew where Haire lived and might have gone there after you heard the details about the killing," he snarled. "A fat lot of good you are on the beat. A man is murdered and you let the murderer slip through your fingers. Then you don't check on his room."

He leaned forward angrily. "Now we not only have the federal narcotics men prowling your beat but the Homicide Bureau as well. Homicide is mad at us, the chief is mad at us and the newspapers say we look the other way when something criminal happens. And why? Because you, Flanagan, haven't any more sense than an ox."

"But sergeant, his landlady said he never showed up there after the knifing, anyway. He just up and disappeared," I protested.

"Just went up in smoke like a blinking magician, eh?" He jabbed a finger in my direction. "More likely he's hiding right under your nose and you're too fat-headed to spot him. The alarm was broadcast half an hour after Haire killed Miller and he couldn't have slipped out of the city without being caught. I tell you. Flanagan, if you can't do any better, I'll—I'll send you back to the traffic division."

That scared me. All I could say was, "Aw, Sarge."

Back on my beat that night, I decided to try my hand at some sleuthing. If I outsmarted the Homicide Bureau by pulling in Haire, it would be a feather in my cap. I paid a visit to Haire's rooming

house.

Haire's landlady, Mrs. Penelope Fagin, wasn't much help. She was a tight-lipped old battleaxe whose stock phrase was, "I don't know nuthin'."

"He paid me reg'lar for the room and acted like a perfect gentleman," she croaked. "Besides that, I don't know nuthin'."

She grumbled under her breath when I asked to take a gander at the things Haire had left behind him. She stomped up the stairs to the third floor, wheezing and grumbling, and threw the door of a room open.



There was nothing of importance there. Some clothes, a couple of suitcases, some photographs, toilet articles and a bundle of envelopes marked "Horoscope for Capricorn."

After half an hour of subtle questioning, I found out from Mrs. Fagin that Haire wasn't a chummy guy and kept pretty much to himself. The only person that he had more than a nodding acquaintance with was Swami Ali Ghan, a Hindu mumbo-jumbo guy in a nearby apartment house. The Swami's racket was astrology and charting horoscopes for a small fee. That accounted for the dozen horoscope pamphlets in Haire's room.

**T**HE Swami was one of the more colorful persons on the beat. He wore a coiled turban, an ankle-length robe and whiskers that covered his face like a veil. He never bothered anybody and there had been no complaints against him so I closed my eyes to the fact that his business was outside the law.

I ambled over to his place, one of eight apartments in a brick block. He answered my knock by opening the door about a foot and pushing his face through. I could see my uniform scared him.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Can I come in?"

Grudgingly he opened the door wide enough for me to squeeze through, then he closed it behind me. I found myself in a sitting room, lit by a dim overhanging light with a cracked globe.

There were few furnishings, a studio couch, a couple of straight chairs, and a big, round table in the middle of the room. A chart and a pile of books were scattered on the table. It was one of those Zodiac charts with animals and strange writings around a big circle.

The Swami eyed me with suspicion. I took my time looking around the room and studying the chart on the table.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Patrolman?" His voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper.

"I'm looking for a guy named Arthur Haire," I said bluntly. "I understand he came to your place a couple of times. Is that right?"

His eyes widened. "Yes, he came here to get some readings on his future," he stammered in his whisper. "That is all."

I frowned. Haire didn't seem the kind of guy who would go in for junk like reading the stars. Reading the cards was more in his line. Yet there were the horoscopes in his apartment and now the statement of the Swami.

"Just what did you tell him his future would be?" I asked curiously.

"Professional ethics do not permit me to disclose that confidence," he said, drawing himself up to his full height.

I stared at the guy in amusement and shrugged. "Okay, Swami, it doesn't matter. Did you know him well?"

"No, just as a client."

He sounded frightened. I nodded and studied the wrinkled hands by his sides. He was nervously clenching and unclenching his fists. I got to thinking about that and about the way his eyes opened wide when I mentioned Haire.

Right under my nose, the sergeant had said. I toyed with the idea. Maybe he was right. Maybe Arthur Haire had put on some false whiskers, a turban and a robe. What better disguise could he have? In a rig like that nobody could tell him from

the real article.

Maybe that was Arthur Haire. He might have persuaded his friend, the Swami, to leave town while he pulled an impersonation.

The silence made the Swami more nervous. He cocked his head, tilting his beard at an angle. I smiled and edged nearer.

"Could you make out my future, Swami?" I asked. "At the regular price, of course."

He stiffened. "I read the stars only for my friends. It is out of the question."

"Was Haire a friend of yours, then?"

I had him there. He hesitated, then nodded. "In a way, yes."

"Maybe you could tell me where he is now, Swami," I suggested, edging nearer. "Maybe you know where he is now."

I leaped, pinning both his arms behind him and bowling him to the floor. We fell together, with me on top.

**T**ERROR was in his eyes as I straddled his chest and firmly gripped his beard. I tugged gently and it didn't give. With a knowing wink I tugged more fiercely. Nothing happened. I gave a last desperate heave and my heart sank.

The Swami howled in pain. His clenched fists beat against my chest and his feet kicked behind me. His turban tumbled from his head and I saw his bald, pink head, wet with perspiration. Guiltily I remembered Haire was not bald.

I stammered a quick apology and made a retreat to the door. As I slipped out, I could see the Swami holding his chin with both hands and rocking back and forth in pain. I shuddered at his unearthly howling.

That ended my sleuthing for the night.

The next afternoon I was back on the familiar carpet. Sergeant Mulrooney peered at me with a false smile and slowly lit his cigar. He flicked his match to the floor and leered.

"Quiet night last night, Flanagan?" Uneasily I shifted from one foot to the other and nodded. "Sure, Sarge, very quiet."

"Good," he purred. I breathed more easily, thinking maybe he had not heard about the Swami business. I was wrong.

"So quiet you gotta go and pull an old man's whiskers," he roared. "A poor, defenseless old gent who never did anybody any harm. Why, Flanagan, why?"

I grinned sheepishly. "Well, I figured . . ." My voice petered out.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," he interrupted with a shake of his head. "Next thing, you'll be taking lollipops away from kids."

"Well, I figured . . ."

"You figured," he stormed. "Well, don't do any more figuring. I had to talk fast to keep that guy from suing the department. If I get just one more teeny-weeny complaint about you, Flanagan, out you go on your ear. Now get out of here and remember—no more beard pulling."



Meekly I tiptoed out, wondering why I had ever wanted to become a cop. And wondering also how long I would remain one.

I had to redeem myself or go out on my ear so my sleuthing went on. I bought Mrs. Fagin a bottle of gin to cement our friendship. She cackled with glee at the gift and took a healthy swig straight from the bottle.

"Mrs. Fagin, where are Haire's things now?" I smiled.

Clutching her gin bottle, she stomped through a long corridor and led me to a room that occupied the whole rear of the first floor. It had an outer door leading down to the alley.

"Here you are," she said with a hiccough.

I gazed at mounds of dust-covered suitcases, furniture and loose paraphernalia.

"You mean all these things are his?"

She cackled and playfully poked me in the ribs. "No. This is my storeroom. I charge my tenants and anybody else with something to store for the room. Gotta make an honest penny somehow with prices as high as they are," she explained.

I recognized Haire's suitcases in a corner. Near them lay a number of rolled-up canvas charts. They looked familiar, too familiar.

"Does the Swami store stuff in here?" I asked.

"Him and half the people in the neighborhood," she croaked, "The apartments are small and they gotta put their extra stuff some place. So they come to me."

SHE toddled back to her room with the gin and I left to pound my beat. I figured maybe Haire would return to pick up his things. I was like a drowning man clutching at a straw, but I had nothing else to work on. The discouraging thing about it was that Haire's things weren't very valuable, hardly worth coming back for.

I mapped my beat out so I could try the back door of the room maybe once an hour. It seemed a waste of time but I had nothing to lose.

The week was quiet. I made only one near-pinch. A suspicious-looking character with a big, black mustache was snooping around Tony's fruit store and copped an apple. I clamped my hands on him and started for the station when he hissed a warning. I looked closer and recognized one of the federal narcotics agents. I quickly let him go.

I had forgotten about the opium peddler who was operating on the beat. Between that and Arthur Haire I had plenty to keep my eyes peeled for.

I saw the Swami more often than I wished. He swept past me like a haughty prima donna with his eyes straight in front of him. Neither one of us spoke.

Another Saturday night rolled around and I was getting discouraged. I was convinced that Arthur Haire was indeed a magician and had disappeared into thin air. City and state police, including Homicide, had uncovered no trace of him.

I made up my mind to pass the whole thing off as a bad job and try to live the business down. Maybe even Mulrooney would forget about it in time.

About a quarter to eleven I sauntered around the back of Mrs. Fagin's house to give it a final check. It was getting so I knew where every stone and ash can lay back there. Halfway down the alley, my heart flip-flopped with hope. An orange light showed through the dusty window pane.

Stealthily I made my way around the ash cans. I crept up the four stairs to the door and cautiously peered through the windows. I had raised my hopes

for nothing. It was not Haire but the Swami within the room. He had a legitimate right to be there and I was not anxious for another meeting with him. Mulrooney's warning had been too stern to ignore.

With disappointed eyes I watched the Swami search a mound of luggage. His white hands prodded the odd collection of luggage until they encountered one of the zodiac charts. He lifted it and set it to one side.

His hands probed again and found a familiar object. It was a bundle of horoscopes that I had seen among Haire's things. Since they had originally belonged to the Swami, I had no objection if he pilfered them. I turned to go.

Suddenly the image of those hands struck a responsive chord in my mind. That chord made the whole plot crystal clear. I returned to the window and peered once more. I was right. I knew I was right. I seized the doorknob and stormed through.

The Swami straightened with alarm at my entrance. When he recognized me, even his beard could not hide the amused leer that twisted his lips.

"We meet again," he said in his hoarse whisper. But this time I would not make the same mistake.

I STARED hard at his eyes. They were wide and abnormally bright, fierce and unreal. There was about him a detached air, something unusual and somehow frightening. Then I realized—opium. The stuff that kills fear and makes a swaggering champion out of the meekest coward.

I had my pistol in my hand, carefully trained on his stomach. That bearded face did not lose its leer.

"All right," I said quietly. "I don't make the same mistake twice. This time there won't be any running away."

His hands still clutched the dozen elastic-bound copies of horoscopes. The flick of his hand was quick, too quick for my startled reflexes. The bundle caught my gun square on the barrel and twisted the weapon from my grasp.

The bearded figure moved fast. A knife with a four inch blade slipped from the loose folds of the robe and was suddenly in his grip. He towered above me, a pouncing avalanche of flesh.

The knife cut the air with the whistle of a whip. I dove headlong into a corner of the room to escape the angry slash. Perspiration broke out on my forehead. That blow would have cut me open as neatly as the belly of a mackerel at the hands of a fishmonger.

The brilliant eyes gleamed with anger and the leering mouth permitted a growl to pass. He stepped slowly forward, his knife poised for the finishing blow, his body crouched expectantly.

I braced my knees against a suitcase and sent it hurtling across the floor with a desperate kick. The case scuttled against his legs and tripped him. He fell forward with a cry and I could hear a sickening thud as his head struck the floor.

I leaped to my feet and dove before he could recover his balance. I whipped out my club and tapped his wrist. He uttered a cry of pain and released the knife. I tapped his head less gently and he closed his eyes. They stayed closed for well over an hour.

When I recovered my breath, I gave one firm pull at his whiskers. As I expected, they came off. It was Haire, all right. Without the whiskers the face paint could not conceal his features. A half hour later the sergeant and I picked up the Swami and closed the case.

An hour later I was in the sergeant's office. This time he let me sit down and even forced one of his nickel cigars on me.

"Good work," he said, slapping me on the back. "We slipped one over on the Homicide Bureau and the federal narcotics men. Cleaned up both their cases with absolutely no help. With my help, Flanagan, you'll have your promotion in no time. Now tell me how you doped it out."

I gave a deprecating laugh. "Well, I figured—er—I deduced Haire thought of the Swami, his one friend, after he killed Mike Miller. He had nowhere else to turn. So he rushed to his apartment and forced the Swami to keep him under cover.

"Why? Well, the Swami didn't help Haire out of pure friendship. He was distributing opium through his horoscopes. Haire was one of his customers. We'd have known sooner if we had taken apart the horoscope envelopes that Haire had in his room. Within a compartment in each envelope was a pinch or two of opium.

"As I see it, the Swami got his shipments along with his horoscopes. He distributed the opium to his carefully picked clientele by giving them phony horoscope readings. Star-reading was a blind and a good one. At least it had the federal men fooled. Haire knew all this and threatened to squeal unless the Swami helped him out.

"Both men were about the same build. It was safe for Haire to dress like the Swami and get out

once in a while. He couldn't have been in a safer place, especially after I pulled that boner of tugging at the Swami's whiskers.

"Tonight, bolstered by opium, Haire figured on making his getaway by wearing the fake Swami rig. So he tried to pick up his things, particularly the opium he still had stashed in the horoscope envelopes.

"He had me fooled until I spotted his hands through the window. They weren't wrinkled with age like the Swami's. Instead, they were long, white and smooth, with freshly trimmed nails. They

looked just like what they were, a gambler's hands that hadn't seen work in years. I knew it wasn't the Swami, so I stopped him. And he gave himself away."

Mulrooney chewed his cigar and smiled thoughtfully. "Nice work, Flanagan," he said. "You might say Haire was within a whisker of getting away."

He roared with laughter. I choked on the cigar and joined in weakly. I felt I had to. The traffic division still didn't appeal to me.