

Mr. Potter Finds a Clue

A SHORT-SHORT STORY
By DENNIS PLIMMER

MR. POTTER calmly surveyed the figure in the chair, the figure from whose horribly shattered forehead blood oozed thickly. The glow from a street-lamp outside fell across the face and illuminated the dirty whiteness of frayed shirt-front over which a trickle of dark fluid was already coagulating.

He looked at the corpse for several minutes in silence. Then he raised his eyes and glanced about the room.

It was a small office in a semi-abandoned building on New York's lower East Side, a few blocks south of the Manhattan approaches of the Brooklyn Bridge. The only visible furniture was an old fashioned rolltop desk, a revolving chair behind it (in which the corpse was sitting), and a small safe. The desk top was bare of papers or other paraphernalia. Two uniformed patrolmen stood at the door.

Mr. Potter turned his eyes reluctantly to the corpse.

"Well, Potter," the harsh voice of bulky Detective Inspector Conway broke the silence, "what's the cadaver's name?"

Conway, despite his truculent manner, had a profound respect for Mr. Potter, and especially for Mr. Potter's amazing memory for facts and names. Once tell Mr. Potter the number of an electric refrigerator in Persia or the annual-rainfall in Madagascar, and he'd never forget it. A minor sideline of Mr. Potter's was his unique and penetrating acquaintance with the ever-shifting population of New York City, and particularly with that part of the population which is, has ever, or might come in contact with the law.

"Emil Kranz," replied Mr. Potter quietly.

THAT'S right! that's right!" came a quavering voice from the doorway. The voice belonged to old Garber, the caretaker of the building. Garber had discovered the murder some time earlier, and it had been his excited phone message

which had brought Conway to the scene.

"Oh," said Conway, bending over to look at the late Emil Kranz more closely. "Apparently you're right again, Potter."

Mr. Potter said nothing. He was always right.

"Well," pursued the policeman, "tell me about this bird. What's his racket? He must have a racket of some kind, or you wouldn't know him!"

Mr. Potter accepted this tribute in silence.

"Emil Kranz," he began, "used to be a dealer in first editions. I met him during the 1920's. He made a good deal of money in the years that followed, I imagine, for he soon left the book selling game and hired a Park Avenue apartment, from which headquarters he went in for an even more lucrative profession—bootlegging! This carried him through the twenties and up to 1928 when he lost his shirt in the market. After that, he dropped out of sight. I've seen him only once or twice since on the street, but we've never spoken." Mr. Potter sighed, "I believe you'll find all that substantially correct, Inspector," he concluded.

Conway scratched his chin.

"Bootlegger, eh?" he muttered.

"Say, Garber," he turned to the old caretaker, "what time did you hear that shot?"

The old man cringed.

"Just ten-fifteen, mister."

Mr. Potter's watch now said ten thirty-eight. Garber had been quick!

"Where were you when you heard it?"

"In my room—downstairs—in the cellar."

"You say that Mr. Kranz was the only tenant in the building?"

Garber nodded.

"I see."

"How long," Mr. Potter questioned, "did it take you to get from your room to this one?"

The old man scratched his head.

"Not more'n three or four minutes. Less."

"And as you came up the stairs from the

cellar," Mr. Potter went on, "you say you heard a door slam?"

"Sure," agreed the old man, "I heard Kranz's door slam and when I got to the hall I saw a man going out the front entrance."

"Into the street?"

"Sure, into the street!"

"You've no idea of his appearance?"

"I couldn't see nothin'. It was too dark."

"And then you came into Mr. Kranz's office, and you found him dead?"

"Bleedin' like a stuck pig. At first I couldn't hardly recognize him."

"Well," Conway remarked bluntly, "all that may be true or it may not."

"It is true," murmured Mr. Potter.

Conway stared at him.

"Is it?" he said. "All right, Garber, scram. Go down to your room. We'll call you when we want you."

"I suggest," ventured Mr. Potter as soon as Garber had gone, "that we search the room."

Conway's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"What is there to search?" he exclaimed.

"The desk's empty. Cleaned out. I saw to that."

"The safe."

"Got to wait until we get a locksmith to open it."

Mr. Potter walked over to the squat iron object.

"I seem to remember," he explained as he squatted down in front of the strongbox, "that safes of this particular make are exceptionally easy to open. I read of a method once in an article." His hands were busy on the single knob, whirling it this way and that. "Old-fashioned safes of this type are a positive incitement to crime, and should be legally abolished for that reason!" The door of the safe swung open. Mr. Potter looked up and smiled. "You see what I mean, Inspector?"

Conway grunted as he knelt down beside his friend.

"These," said Mr. Potter as he withdrew two small leather-bound volumes, "represent, I should say, Emil Kranz's nest-egg. In the open market they'd fetch four figures at least!"

He laid them aside carefully and inserted his hand once more into the safe. This time he produced a sealed white envelope.

"Now," said Mr. Potter amiably, "what would this be? Not love letters surely? Shine your flashlight, Inspector."

A yellow shaft of light fell on the envelope's face. Conway read the inscription aloud:

"To the Police in the event of my death," Conway's voice sounded puzzled. "What's this? What's this?"

Nervously his thick fingers ripped the envelope open.

"To the police," he read again, "In the event of my death by violence, check up on the movements of Dr. Wilson Barrows."

The brief missive bore Kranz's signature.

"And who," asked Conway wearily, "is Dr. Wilson Barrows?"

"Ex-lawyer. South American explorer. Expert on native poisons. To be appointed a Justice of the State Supreme Court soon. Rich."

"Notice he didn't use any native poisons here. Just stuck to the tried and true. Know where he lives? No, don't answer me! Of course you do! You know everything! When you die, I'm going to have you stuffed!"

"Before that happens," Mr. Potter pointed out mildly, "don't you think it might be wise if you turned over the remaining routine here, to Lieutenant Denny outside in order to be free to pay a visit to Dr. Wilson Barrows?"

HALF an hour later, the official car drew up before the Sixtieth Street residence of Dr. Wilson Barrows. It was a typical New York brownstone house, four stories in height, plain, old-fashioned, solid.

Mr. Potter and the Inspector mounted the five stone steps to the front door and rang the bell. There was no answer but they had noticed lights shining from the top floor windows and this encouraged persistence. They rang several times more, until suddenly the door opened to reveal a black hallway.

"What you want?" demanded a thin ageless voice.

"I'm from the Police Department," announced Conway stolidly, "and I want to see Dr. Wilson Barrows."

"I go ask; you come," invited the voice and Mr. Potter and the Inspector entered the dim

foyer.

The unseen survivor hurried up the stairs.

Conway's eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness quickly, and as the servant disappeared, he muttered the single word "Dwarf!" to Mr. Potter, who nodded sagely, his brow wrinkled.

A moment or so later, the servant, a gnarled brown, monkey-like creature scarcely four feet high, reappeared to conduct them upstairs.

They found a door open on the top floor. This the dwarf indicated, mumbling "Doctor" and then scurried away.

The two men entered the room.

IT was a remarkable room, the walls heavily encrusted with trophies and mementos of Dr. Barrows' days in South America. There were clusters of spears, daggers, shields, in addition to several mounted heads. On a table stood a tiny idol carved from bone and garishly painted with raw colors. But the strangest of all the inhabitants of the room was its owner. Dr. Wilson Barrows himself.

As he rose to greet them, he was revealed as nothing short of a giant. He stood a good six inches over six feet and was proportionately broad. His skin was dark from tropic suns and his eyes were a bright blue. His thick hair was a strange shade of reddish-gold faintly shot with gray. He wore a full beard of the same hues.

"Gentlemen," he said in a deep melodious voice, "may I make you welcome? Please sit down. Will you have anything to drink?"

"No thanks, Doctor," muttered Conway who was deeply impressed.

Mr. Potter shook his head, smiling faintly.

"My servant, Uru, tells me you're from the police. How can I help you?"

"Well," Conway began, "we're investigating a murder."

He paused but Barrows offered no comment.

"The victim," the policeman continued, "was a man by the name of Emil Kranz. Ever hear the name?"

The giant shook his head, but Mr. Potter had been quick enough to catch a momentary gleam of recognition in those bright blue eyes.

"He was," continued Conway, "a dealer in first editions and a bootlegger."

"A unique combination," ventured Dr. Barrows, "but how does the death of this man concern me?"

Mutely, Conway held before the other's eyes the note they had earlier found in the safe.

"Whether or not you know him, doctor," Conway remarked, "he certainly seems to know you. And to fear you." He paused. "Emil Kranz. Think!"

Suddenly the doctor's huge frame was shaken with low chuckling. "I'm sorry. Inspector," he said finally, "I did know this man. I met him first through his books, but later when I found out that he was systematically breaking the law, I dropped him instantly. I had never really liked him, but we had had something in common through our interest in first editions. Naturally when you asked me if I knew him just now, my first instinct was to say no! May I apologize?"

Conway nodded, unmoved.

"Where were you," he asked, "at a quarter past ten this evening?"

The doctor's hand played idly over the small bone god which rested on the low table at his side.

"I was here," he replied.

"In this house?"

"Of course. But surely, Inspector, you're not taking poor Kranz's accusation seriously?"

"Can you prove your statement?" Conway had ignored the doctor's question.

"I think so," replied Wilson Barrows evenly.

"May I ring for Uru?"

"Go ahead."

The man rose arid picking up a tiny hammer struck a small bronze gong which hung by the door.

"Doubtless," he remarked, "Uru startled you somewhat?"

"I'll say he did!" confessed the Inspector.

"Of the Brazilian branch of the Vala tribe, isn't he?" murmured Mr. Potter.

BARROWS raised his eyebrows in surprise. Just then Uru entered and stood blinking in the bright light.

"Where," Conway asked the dwarf abruptly, "was your master at a quarter past ten this evening?"

Uru replied without hesitation.

"Home," he said sharply.

"All evening?"

Uru nodded emphatically, his small evil eyes glowing.

"Uru," said Conway then, "do you know what happens if you tell a lie?"

Uru's dark lined skin flushed.

"Who lies?" he thundered in a thin impudent tone. "I no lie! I truth! Doctor home all night!" He turned to his master. "I go?" he begged.

Conway nodded to Barrow and Uru hurried from the room with a last venomous glance at the two intruders.

"Well, Doctor," said Mr. Potter suddenly, "it looks as though we've both made a mistake and we're deeply sorry to have inconvenienced you."

"No inconvenience at all," the doctor boomed, all joviality suddenly returning to his face. "Are you sure you won't have a drink before you go?"

"No thanks," returned Mr. Potter quickly, "but I'd like to know one thing. That little god on the table "under your hand—is that the original Vala Death God?"

"Your knowledge is amazing," exclaimed Barrows. "Yes, it is."

"How interesting!" Mr. Potter took it in his hands, examined it with what seemed to the Inspector to be exaggerated care, and then replaced it on the table. "Well, we must be running along. Come, Inspector."

Conway, with his docile belief in Mr. Potter's line of action, whatever it was, turned to go. They had reached the doorway to the hall when Mr. Potter swung back.

"IT seems silly to bother you again, Dr. Barrows," he said, "but I wonder if you could tell us just what it was you were doing at precisely fifteen minutes past ten?"

"Listening to an all-Wagner broadcast on the radio. The program ran from ten to eleven. It was

over about ten minutes before you came in."

Mr. Potter managed to convey a warning nudge to the policeman, who unostentatiously slipped his hand to his revolver.

"At a quarter past ten tonight," Mr. Potter announced them in a firm low voice, "the local power-plant went dead, cutting off all electricity in this neighborhood. Had you been at home, doctor, you would have been aware of this and aware of the fact that one cannot listen to the radio when there is no electricity to run it!"

"Therefore," the doctor's voice sounded ironic, "I was not at home and consequently was employing my time in murder? Granted that, what motive would I have had for killing this obscure Emil Kranz?"

"The best motive of all, doctor," replied Mr. Potter. "Fear! It would not do for a justice of the State Supreme Court to be unmasked as the business associate of a bootlegger."

The doctor's hand rose suddenly from the table to his mouth.

"Grab his hand!" ordered Mr. Potter. The policeman did so, as the other drew his revolver.

"I don't think," remarked Mr. Potter as he removed the tiny bone idol from the doctor's fingers, "that you are destined to die from the poison concealed in the head of the Vala Death God. I'm afraid you must resign yourself to the less spectacular methods furnished by the State."

"Come along, Barrows," muttered Conway as he slipped the bracelets over the murderer's wrists. "Potter, how in hell did you know about that power plant breakdown? The lights were okay down at the station, and they seem to be okay up here."

"There was candle-grease on Uru's sleeve, Inspector. Candles are hardly the usual form of illumination on Manhattan Island except during just such an emergency. And so—I guessed!"

And Mr. Potter smiled innocently.