

Hand of Double Doom

by Vance C. Criss

Wendell Barst didn't believe in taking chances. Even when he played with murder, he played safe. But he overplayed his hand when he forgot that sometimes the hand of death deals double.

WENDELL BARST slipped from the shadows through the mist into the side door of the Security Building. He hugged the wall, sidled along the corridor to the rear stairs. Floor by floor he crept up—halting, dodging into shadows at every sound.

He reached the top floor, padded noiselessly to the offices of the Warnik Investment Company. Once in, he breathed easier. Who would suspect anything if he found one of the confidential clerks of old Sol Warnik, president of the company, in the office after hours?

But Barst played safe. He slipped into Warnik's private office, turned the beam of a tiny flashlight on the safe and opened it. He took the old man's revolver from a drawer, slipped it into his pocket and closed the safe.

He hurried into the file room. Examining the revolver by flashlight, he smiled when he found it fit for use. He took out a blue-stained cartridge, inserted a fresh one, set the cylinder so the new cartridge would fire first. An old cartridge might not fire. He didn't believe in taking chances.

The revolver went into a black bag Barst used for carrying office papers. The bag went into a drawer of his desk.

He opened the door; the corridor was clear, and he eased out. He inched to the rear stairs, crept down step by step. Reaching the first floor, he dodged out the side entrance and walked around the

block.

His play was different when he strolled into the main entrance of the Security Building. "Hello, Gertie," he greeted the girl at the cigar stand. "A pair of cigarettes."

The girl handed him two packages. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sol Warnik enter the lobby, cross to the elevator. "Mr. Warnik's on time again," he said with a glance at the clock. "It's just eight. Old Sol is as punctual when he comes back at night as he is in the morning."

The girl nodded. "If that clock ever stops," she said. "I'll set it by Mr. Warnik."

Barst tossed the cigarette into a cuspidor. "See you later," he said. "If I don't hurry out to the girl friend's house she'll be peeved."

Outside, he turned up his collar and hurried to the side entrance. He slipped in, sidled to the rear stairs, again crept to the top floor. Putting aside his stealth, he walked briskly to the Warnik offices and stepped in. He hung up his hat, opened a drawer in his desk and knocked at the door to Warnik's private office.

"Come in," Old Sol growled.

Barst entered and approached his employer. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, "but there's a matter in that Burgin estate I'd like to ask about before I finish my report."

"Make it snappy," Warnik told him.

Barst headed for the outer office.

"This skin trouble's put me in a bad humor," the old man mumbled on. He took a bottle of lotion from the table in front of him, poured some out, rubbed it on the backs of his hands.

Barst returned, carrying the bag in his left hand. He set it on the table and thrust his right hand into the bag.

"I won't take but a minute," he said.

THE gun spewed a muffled crack—the lead crashed into Warnik's heart. The old man slumped, his jaw sagging, eyes staring wide, blood staining his shirt.

Barst took the gun from the bag and put it on the table. He crunched out the glowing sparks about the hole in the bag, folded it carefully and thrust it in his hip pocket. He'd burn that bit of evidence in the fireplace in his apartment that night.

He picked up the gun, took out his handkerchief to wipe off the telltale prints. The elevator stopped on his floor. He stiffened. Soft footsteps approached the door, a key slipped into the lock. Cat-eye Annie Silva, Old Sol's girl friend, stepped into the room. She stared at Warnik hunched in his chair, then turned her eyes and glared at Barst.

"Mr.—Mr. Warnik has—has shot himself," Barst stammered. "I just came in and found him like—like he is now."

Annie's eyes blazed at the clerk. "You're a liar!" she snapped. "He didn't kill himself. He didn't have any reason to. You killed him. I told him not to trust you. I know your kind—always so nicey-nice. Smile in your face and stab in your back."

"I tell you I didn't," Barst hissed.

Annie took a step toward him. "You lousy liar," she cut in. "You'll burn for this. I'll see you do."

Madness flamed in the murderer's eyes. His face went white. He pointed the gun at Annie and fired.

The woman's scream died in a groan.

She crumpled on the floor.

Barst stooped above her, felt her pulse. She'd never charge him with murder.

Hurrying to Warnik's side, he wiped the butt of the gun, thrust it into Old Sol's right hand. He forced the lifeless fingers about it, then wiped the barrel and jammed the handkerchief into his pocket. He was ready if anyone came in. He waited, tense. No one came.

The murderer crossed to the safe, opened it and took out the last unregistered bonds. No one would ever know of these—or others he'd stolen. He locked the safe, wiped the knob and dial.

For the second time that night Barst slipped into the hall, down the rear stairs and out the side door unseen.

He glanced at his watch—twenty minutes past eight. He hurried to his car and drove swiftly to the Mason home where Marian was waiting. A maid ushered him into the library.

"Miss Marian will be down in a minute," she said and disappeared down the hall.

Barst stepped to the clock above the fireplace, set it back twenty minutes.

Marian entered. Barst rose, took her in his arms and kissed her. "You're late," he chided and glanced at the clock. "It's a quarter past eight and I've been waiting five minutes."

Barst chatted gaily for an hour, showing no nervousness. Every now and then he coughed.

"You ought to do something for that cough," Marian urged.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "a glass of water might help."

Marian left the room. Barst stepped to the clock, moved it up twenty minutes. Marian came back. Barst drank the water. His coughing stopped.

Barst left a few minutes later. He parked near the Security Building and

went in the front way.

"I decided I'd come back and do a little work before I turned in," he told Bob Blake, the elevator operator.

Blake smiled knowingly, shook his head. "I wouldn't, if I was you," he said. "The old man's got company. I took her up early tonight, and she hasn't come down."

Barst's face showed no surprise. "Annie—as usual?" he asked.

Blake nodded.

"Then I'll trot along," Barst said, turning away. "Old Sol doesn't want me or anybody else around when his Annie's there."

BARST sat in the office the next morning with the other employees. He responded calmly when Jerry Hogan, Warnik's attorney, summoned John Warden and himself. Warden was the other confidential clerk. The two went to Hogan's office on the floor below.

Hogan was more than an attorney. He did his own investigating. Several men in State's Prison could testify it didn't pay to defraud a Hogan client.

Barst and Warden took seats across the table from the keen-eyed, hawk-nosed old attorney.

"One or both of you," Hogan began, looking into the distance but noting every fleeting expression of the men he faced, "may be able to help clear up what appears to be a very baffling mystery."

"Mystery!" both exclaimed and glanced questioningly at each other.

"The police announced after their first investigation," Hogan went on, "that Warnik, for some reason unknown to any but the principals, shot and killed Miss Silva. He then turned the gun on himself."

The meek little Warden, always frightened, stared wide eyed. "Wasn't—wasn't it that way?"

"Perfectly obvious," Barst chipped in.

"Perfectly obvious," Hogan agreed, "and equally incorrect."

Warden fidgeted. Barst relaxed and asked with a scoffing smile, "how did it happen then?"

Hogan settled back comfortably.

"The first shot," he said, "killed Warnik. The second' killed the woman. Warnik, already dead, could not have fired that shot".

Barst's first breath was a gasp. His face blanched, muscles tensed, then he caught himself and eased back. "Someone must have a vivid imagination."

Warden, puzzled, frightened, shifted his eyes from one to the other. "How do you know?"

"The bullet that killed Warnik," Hogan explained, "was from a new cartridge—the first one fired. The bullet that killed Annie Silva was from a cartridge that had been in the revolver some time—fired second."

"As we see it now," Hogan went on, "someone Warnik had no reason to fear was in the room with him—killed him without warning.

"Miss Silva, who had a key to the office, entered unexpectedly. She may have suspected something—may have caught the murderer red-handed. To save himself, he killed her."

"I—I thought," Warden ventured, "the—the revolver was found in Mr. Warnik's hand."

"It was," Hogan agreed. "Someone else put it there."

Barst's face clouded, then brightened. "If that's true," he said, "the man's fingerprints should be found somewhere on the revolver."

Hogan smiled encouragingly. "You're thinking straight," he said. "But the gun showed no other prints. Neither did the knob on the safe—from which all the unregistered bonds are missing." Hogan

paused. Then: "The murderer could have worn rubber gloves."

Barst lighted a cigarette. "I'll be glad to help solve the affair," he said, "if there's any way I can."

"Our first step," the attorney resumed, "will be to ask every employee to account for his whereabouts last night. Neither of you, I'm sure, will find that difficult."

"I won't," Barst spoke up. "I happened to be in the lobby when Mr. Warnik came in. The girl at the cigar counter and I both saw him. We noticed it was eight o'clock and commented on his punctuality. I went from there to call on my fiancée."

"After I left her home, I decided to go to the office to finish a little work. I changed my mind, however, and went home when the elevator man said Mr. Warnik had a caller."

THE old attorney smiled. "I'm glad to hear that," he declared. He turned to Warden. "You, no doubt, will be able to give just as good an account of yourself."

Warden paled. "I—I can't," he stammered. "I went for a walk. I left our home a little after seven o'clock. I didn't get back until nearly ten."

Hogan eyed the clerk sympathetically. "Surely, you met some one who will remember."

Warden's agitation was pitiable. "I—I walked through a section with which I am unfamiliar. I frequently do that. I—I didn't see a single person I knew."

Barst became sympathetic. "That does put you in a tough spot."

Hogan fixed keen eyes on Warden. "The fact that you can't prove where you were last night doesn't prove anything else," he said.

"I'd like to get some light on one point on which there is a disagreement," he went on after a moment's pause. "Just how would a man put a revolver in a dead

man's hand?"

He opened a drawer in a table and drew out a revolver. "It isn't loaded," he said.

"I'll be the dead man." His manner changed as he thrust the gun at Warden. "Put this in my hand."

Warden shuddered. "I can't—I can't," he wailed.

Hogan turned to Barst. "You try it. Warden may have a reason for not wanting to."

Barst's smile was superior. He glanced contemptuously at Warden, took the gun and stepped around the table to Hogan's side. Hogan slumped forward. His right hand lay palm down in his lap. Barst took Hogan's hand in his, clamped the attorney's fingers about the gun, stepped back. "There," he breathed. "Nothing hard about that."

"Thanks." Hogan replaced the revolver in the drawer. He looked up as a knock sounded at the door. "Come in," he growled.

The door opened. "A gentleman to see you on important business," his secretary said. "Won't take but a minute."

Hogan excused himself and stepped into the reception room. He returned, accompanied by two burly men.

"Mr. O'Mara," he said, "let me introduce Mr. Barst." The two shook hands. "Mr. Barst is charged with Sol Warnik's murder."

Barst stiffened, tried to laugh. The laugh was ghastly.

"That's a lie," he snarled. "You haven't got a thing on me."

Hogan spoke calmly. "Only your fingerprints on a dead man's hand."

"It's a lie!" Barst shrieked. "Fingers don't leave prints on anybody's hands."

"You forgot the lotion, Mr. Barst," Hogan continued. "I noticed it on Mr. Warnik's table this morning. Some of it

was on the backs of Mr. Warnik's hands—and on the back of my right hand when you so kindly helped with the revolver.”

“But I wasn't there. I can prove I wasn't.”

“Alibi witnesses can be mistaken—fingerprints can't.”

Barst's eyes bulged, his breath rasped. He coughed, clutched at his throat and slumped to the floor.

Hogan stepped to his side, placed a hand over his heart. A smile, mirthless, sardonic, curled his lips.

“He'll come out of it in a few minutes,” he said. “Funny,” he added, musingly, “he killed two people and then sat here without a tremor—then he faints away like a weak sister. Like most of his kind, he can dish it out—but he can't take it.”