

Deadline at Midnight

By Frederick C. Davis



They said that Johnny Foster had too many friends for a small-town cop. And when someone put the snatch on him, it looked like the critics were right. But Johnny proved that even dead pals can payoff for him in live lead.

IT WAS twenty-three hours now since Johnny Foster had disappeared. Nobody in town could explain it. He was simply gone with scarcely a trace—Fairview's favorite son and greatest hero, just home from the war. All we knew about it was that something strange and violent had happened to Johnny at a little past twelve o'clock last night.

So far Johnny Foster hadn't gone back to his old job as assistant chief of the Fairview police force, which numbered four men in all; he'd gotten his discharge only a few days ago. He was staying temporarily at the home of Chief Webb, a hulking man with grizzled hair who loved Johnny like a son.

The chief was surprised when Johnny didn't show up for breakfast this morning. Then he began to do a really man-size job of worrying because next he discovered that Johnny's bed hadn't been slept in.

Chief Webb had hustled right down to headquarters, where he'd found no sign of Johnny. Then he'd gone scouting around town with a dark frown and a pointed question for everyone he met, "You seen Johnny Foster anywhere?"

He'd learned first that Johnny had left the Fairview Inn bar at closing time, midnight, and had started walking toward the chief's home alone. No further information about him was to be picked up until the chief waded into Davey's Men's Wear. Arnold Davey, spruce as always, a spare man with a bobbing Adam's apple, thoughtfully adjusted his tie as he said, "Wonder if that was Johnny's voice that woke me up."

Then Davey explained, "Heard noises in the street. It was right after the courthouse clock struck twelve. Sounded like two men fighting. Then a car rushed off. Said to myself, that's just a couple of

drunks, but—say, I hope it wasn't Johnny Foster, in trouble.”

Chief Webb found something important right in front of Arnold Davey's house, in the gutter—one of Johnny's ribbons. No question at all that it was Johnny's, because no other ex-doughfoot in Fairview had a D.S.C. It had been ripped off Johnny's uniform during a struggle. Looking at it, the chief and I felt heartsick. It could mean so much and it said so little.

Webb kept plugging, buttonholing people and asking after Johnny, scouring the town for him; but still we couldn't find out what had become of him. We kept all this as quiet as possible, so as not to stir up the whole county. The only other thing we could do was wait for developments. Nothing developed.

THAT was how it was now, at eleven in the evening, twenty-three hours after Johnny Foster's disappearance. Chief Webb was pacing his office, trying to believe no harm had come to him. I perched on a table, chain-smoking, watching the street door, hoping—vainly, I was afraid—that Johnny would soon turn up under his own steam.

“There's one big trouble with Johnny, chief,” I said with a newspaper-man's cynicism. “He's too sweet a guy.”

Everybody loved Johnny Foster, even as a cop, and he loved 'em right back. The entire population of Fairview, all thousand of them, would readily swear that there was no nicer guy on earth than Johnny.

His homecoming was practically a riot. Ever since stepping off the train from Fort Dix he'd been mobbed by bosom pals. Last night must have been the first time he was really alone since his return, and then—How could we guess, so far, what had happened to Johnny then.

Johnny really appreciated being back

home. He'd started having himself a time, of course, but he hadn't forgotten the serious side of it either. He had dog-faced it all through the hell of central Europe and had come out whole. But while he was overseas some of his oldest friends at home had died, and that had saddened him. One of the first things he did, and the most characteristic, was to visit their graves with armloads of flowers.

Who could say we might not be doing the same for Johnny soon?

Johnny wasn't soft, though. He could be plenty tough when he needed to be, and certainly he knew how to use his head. But I just couldn't help riding him about all this glad-hand stuff. “You really mean it, Johnny, even if some of these other guys don't. But what does it get you?”

“It happens to be my nature, but look at it in a practical way,” Johnny answered. “It's good, having friends, I like doing things for 'em. They like me, too. In a pinch they always help me out. It's the only way to live—with an open heart, among friends who can count on each other.”

I said to Chief Webb, wryly, while we waited, “Now it's backfired on him. That big, open, warm heart of his led Johnny into some sort of trap last night. Think of it—he fought his way across half an enemy continent with hardly a scratch; then he comes home and one of his so-called friends clips him. And maybe that's his finish.”

The telephone rang then. Chief Webb's face lighted up with elation as he said eagerly, “Johnny? Hello, Johnny?” I dove for the extension and clamped the receiver to my ear in time to hear Johnny saying, very quietly, “Can't talk more'n half a minute, Chief. Better just listen.”

Webb couldn't “just listen.” He peppered questions into the phone. Johnny was strangely silent again until the chief,

puzzled and wary, let his words stumble to a stop.

“Can’t tell you where I am,” Johnny said then. “Don’t know who’s got me here. I’m blindfolded and tied up. Whoever this guy is, he’s got a gun in my back.”

Chief Webb held the phone tightly and asked with care, “What does he want, Johnny?”

“Get rid of that plaster cast.”

Webb said tensely, “Go on, Johnny.”

“He’s giving you until midnight to do it—an hour. Take the cast out on the sidewalk. Smash it up with a hammer. Throw the pieces into the street for the cars to run over. If you do this right he’ll turn me loose. If you don’t do it he’ll kill me.”

After a speechless moment Chief Webb asked, “You believe that, Johnny? I mean, will it really end up like he says, one way or the other?”

Johnny said, “This guy means business.”

Webb swallowed and couldn’t answer. Then Johnny’s voice came again, higher pitched on a note of urgency. “I had to tell you that, but never mind what happens to me, Chief! Let him do what he wants with me, but don’t destroy that evidence, don’t—!”

Johnny had said too much. The connection quickly went dead.

FOR a long moment Chief Webb sat there at his desk, very still and pale. Then, with fumbling hands he unlocked a cabinet and brought out a white plaster cast. It had the shape of a man’s spread-fingered hand. It was vital evidence in the murder of Ed Ackley.

Only yesterday morning K. Edward Ackley, a flashy, high-living widower, had been found dead in the back room of his antique shop on Cedar Street. He had been

very thoroughly beaten with a hand-wrought poker. Few people were dismayed to hear of his sudden passing. Ed had considered it good sport to violate another man’s home and marriage. He had bragged about his conquests, some of them fictitious, some real.

Plainly enough, somebody’s husband had finally decided that Ed was wolfing one wife too many. Good riddance it may have been, but homicide was not the proper way to solve one’s personal problems—so Chief Webb had a murderer to smell out, regardless.

When fleeing the death room, unseen, the murderer had skidded on the mossy brisk walk. He’d fallen, leaving an impression of one flattened hand in bare, moist earth. Webb had quickly preserved it in plaster. The imprint itself, soon blurred by rain, was entirely obliterated now. The fragile cast remained as the only clue in existence to indicate a killer’s identity.

Chief Webb hadn’t gotten very far toward identifying that hand of death. He had several suspects, of course. There was Paul Christy, for example—the jeweler whose very pretty wife Ellen lapped up every man’s flattery. There was also Howard Graylock, over at the First National, whose second wife was twenty-two years his junior. With a dozen prime possibilities, added to the fact that the guilty man might be almost any adult male in the county, Webb had faced a ticklish assignment. And now—

I watched Webb’s pinched face and sensed the wretched thoughts going around and around in his mind. It seemed a very small price to pay for a friend’s life—just a chunk of plaster. But . . .

“If I destroy this evidence,” the chief was thinking aloud, “it will be exactly the same as deliberately turning a murderer free. By doing it I’ll also bring Johnny back, safe and sound, but by destroying

this evidence—”

He looked up, his grey eyes dulled with inner pain. “We’re dealing with a man who’s going mad. First he was crazy-jealous; now he’s desperate with fear. He knows this evidence will soon catch up with him. His own life is at stake. He’s got everything to win by this insane gamble and nothing to lose if it fails—nothing to lose even by killing Johnny, because we can’t hang him twice.”

Webb shook his grizzled, hard-looking head. “I can’t bargain with a killer. Johnny knows I can’t. That’s why he told me—never mind what will happen to him.”

The chief turned back to his phone, now grimly decisive. He talked to the three other men on his force. One he ordered to the telephone exchange on the chance that we might hear from Johnny again, even though he knew in advance there was practically no hope of tracing the call through the dial system. The second man he assigned to watch Paul Christy, the third Howard Graylock. That was all he could do to help Johnny and it added up to practically nothing. Again he stared at that all-important plaster hand.

Until midnight, Johnny had said. One hour.

Twelve or thirteen of those sixty minutes were already gone. The evidence would not be crushed in the gutter in front of headquarters. Justice would not be shattered. The integrity of two men would remain intact. We would watch the clock and see Johnny Foster’s last hour of life tick away.

Thirty minutes of it were gone now.

Now twenty minutes. Now only ten.

“Yeah,” I said bitterly, “be everybody’s pal. And which one of Johnny’s many chums is going to help him out of this jam?”

Finally it was midnight again; inevitably the whole hour had run out.

THE trill of the telephone bell seemed shockingly loud in the stillness. Webb’s hand sprang to the instrument. In half a second I had the extension in my fist. We heard Johnny’s quiet voice.

He said, “You did the right thing, chief. I knew you would.”

Webb and I clung to the phone. Stunned, I didn’t dare interrupt. The chief answered slowly, “I had to do it this way, Johnny. You knew that and you had the guts to face it.”

Johnny said next, “He let me make this last call to say so-long. Well, so-long, chief. Please give my regards to all my friends, will you? Especially say goodbye for me to old man Gabe Bennett, first thing, and next be sure to go to Aunt May Grover—”

Suddenly the connection broke. Had Johnny said too much again? I couldn’t think. My face was cold, my heart thumping heavily. This was the death of Johnny Foster, I told myself. In my numbness I wondered why he hadn’t thought to mention a farewell for me, and at the same time I was startled to see Chief Webb pushing a huge revolver into my clammy hands. The chief blurted, “Come on; come on, quick!” and went hustling out the door like a wild man.

I couldn’t guess what this meant, but I ran after Webb, around the corner and down Kings Street. It was black and quiet. To my amazement Webb dodged into the gate of the Fairview Cemetery. Trailing him down a dark path, I saw him circling among the headstones. He flashed a light and gasped, “Keep following me!”

We scrambled together over a stone wall. This brought us to a breathless standstill at the edge of a lawn, gazing at an ordinary clapboard house that was all dark. It was the Kobler home, temporarily closed up while the family vacationed in Maine.

“Guard that front door,” Webb whispered. He had his own gun ready. “I’m going in the back way.”

He scouted off. Too dizzy to think, I skirted around to the veranda just in time to hear a crash from the rear—it sounded like a door getting kicked down—and then two quick shots.

After a few minutes Chief Webb unbolted the front door, grinning. There in the living room, wearing an even broader grin, was Johnny Foster. I hugged him and we all laughed shakily. Then we frowned at Arnold Davey, who was squirming in pain in an easy chair with one of Webb’s bullets in his left shoulder.

After leaving Davey at the hospital under guard we trooped happily back to headquarters. There was something I still didn’t understand—how the chief had been able to rush straightaway, at the very

last minute, to the hideout where Davey was holding Johnny hostage.

“Why, Johnny told me exactly where to go,” Webb explained, chortling. “He’d gotten a few peeks under his blindfold and had recognized the room because he’d been there before, same as he’s been invited into practically every other home in town. Then, over the phone he told me, ‘Say good-by to old Gabe Bennett first, then to Aunt May Grover.’”

“Well, both Gabe and Aunt May are dead and buried—died while Johnny was overseas. Going from the one grave to the other put me on a beeline to that house alongside the cemetery. Naturally Johnny knew whose graves pointed the way—naturally.”

“You see, pal,” Johnny said with another grin for me, “it’s good, having friends. Even dead ones.”

