

THREE-WAY DEATH

*The Jinx Was Death—
But Whizzer Figured
He Was Smart*

By **BENTLEY
WILLIAMS**

*Author of "Moon of Madness,"
"Murder Party," etc.*



Down crashed the sapper

WHIZZER CUPKIN stood in the night-shadowed doorway of the turreted, almost legendary Banbraugh place on upper Fifth Avenue, tensely gripping a blackjack in his right hand.

The door edged open. Old man Banbraugh, who dwelt alone, appeared; a stray moonbeam touched his bald, suspicious head.

"Well?" His voice had the petulant rasp of the stubbornly aged. "What is it?"

Whizzer, easing over so that his right hand would be hidden by the wall, gulped.

"I—I phoned you at five o'clock. Them goods—" He tapped his pocket. "They're here—"

"Je—Goods?" Old man Banbraugh

hesitated, but avarice got the better of him. His bald head craned forward and he extended a skinny hand.

"You can't come in," he warned.

"What've you got?"

"This!" Whizzer snarled.

Down crashed his sapper. A man appeared up the street. Whizzer faded into the doorway, found a length of chain barring entrance. Whimpering now from tension, his hand groped and wavered, finally unshipped the catch. He wriggled in.

In a moment he reappeared, breathed a low guarded whistle. From across the street the man approached, ran up the steps.

"That old' guy's got a skull like paper, Max," Whizzer told him spitefully.

"I conked him once and he's horse meat already."

"Yeah?" Max Stope was instantly apprehensive. "Garsh, we—"

"Save it! We're in and we're still alive, ain't we? They said it couldn't be done—well—we did it and it was soft!"

He had maintained that all along. Through all the years he'd heard the underworld talk covetously of old man Banbraugh's fabulous jewel collection, and Whizzer Cupkin had figured the job a soft one. Not even talk about the jinx that protected old man Banbraugh's jewels made him think anything else.

Whizzer knew that what the underworld called the "jinx" was really the astounding effectiveness of the old man's self-invented burglar-resisting devices. Four times had crooks tried to buck that "jinx." And three times they came out of the Banbraugh place—dead. The fourth crook died too—a victim of Patrolman Delahanty's Irish eye. Of course, the gun in Delahanty's fist had a part in it, too.

And so, because he believed in a formula of strategy and brains, Whizzer Cupkin was now standing in the supposedly impenetrable Banbraugh mansion. The quality of his strategy was represented by his early phone conversation with the old man when he described some jeweled pieces that brought a note of eagerness into the old collector's voice. An appointment resulted.

As for brains—Whizzer believed he had used plenty in persuading Max Stope, pete man, to come and open the safe. Whizzer wanted no part of that risky job.

It was not brains, according to Whizzer's definition, that caused him to approach the house when Delahanty was at the end of his beat. That was just common sense. Max Stope touched

Whizzer's arm.

"What are we waitin' fer?" he asked.

Whizzer stooped and grabbed at old man Banbraugh's body.

"We're not," he said, "Gimme a lift with this."

Together they carted the body through the hall lobby into the dining room adjoining.

"Snap it up," Whizzer directed.

He released the corpse, gazed around at the wood paneling that extended halfway up the walls; the dark walnut furniture; the oils of varying sizes that hung about. The largest, a full length portrait, flanked the right side of the mantel. He crossed over and scrutinized the drawn shades.

Max Stope, after extracting several articles from his pocket and laying them on the table, began an expert inspection of the woodwork.

Silence hung over the room for a time while Stope investigated. Whizzer sat in one of the walnut chairs, his bright eyes watching every move. Stope finished up the paneling and shook his head. Then he began looking behind the pictures, came finally to the large portrait. At his touch it began to swing away easily when—

There was a sudden blinding light. Stope yelled, leaped back in fright. Acrid smoke swirled about.

"Easy, Max!" Whizzer slid forward, reassuring.

"It's a flash!" he guessed. "Must be a camera planted, but we'll find it. It's nothing, Max."

"Yeah?" Stope was nervous, defiant. "That's what you say, but—"

"Bah, keep quiet!" Whizzer snarled. "I'll fix it—you stay put!"

In swift, unfaltering strides he pushed into the back of the house and down into the basement. At once a purring

sound met his ears. He drew out his flash, walked over to a small, locked iron door. He sniffed; the area was strong with the stink of a battery repair shop. And the sound came from behind the door. He frowned dubiously.

At length he turned to a search for the switch box. On finding it, one sweep of his arm and he threw off the current. The purring stopped. Eyeing the small door as he walked past, Whizzer walked slowly up the steps, his thoughts churning.

IN the dining room, Max Stope was juggling a torch of his own.

“Turned the juice off, hey?” he asked.

“Right. No more stunts now. I guess the can must be behind that picture. Crack it—then we’ll hunt up that negative.”

“Yeah?” Stope’s face was a muddy blob.

After a pause Stope scooped tools from the table, moved over to the portrait and began work. Whizzer expelled a soft sigh and slipped his sapper away. In that darkness he’d found it hard to tell whether Stope would need persuading to start work.

Again the room was silent save for the pete man’s tinkering with the safe.

“Okay,” he said finally.

The two crooks rushed to the hall, closed the sliding door behind them and waited. Whizzer was sweating now. His sensational coup was ruined if the charge were too big, too loud.

The solid walls blanketed the noise well. Stope’s voice held a note of pride.

“Not so dusty, huh?” he queried.

“Skip it,” Whizzer grated. “Grab the stuff fast!”

His own elation he choked off. Slope made straight for the safe, shook his head.

“Lucky I brought a claw along.” He laid down his flash, picked up a compact jack.

“Swell.” Whizzer, in whose mind an idea was working, said it from the doorway.

In a trice Stope had the jack adjusted and at work,

Whizzer was still over by the door when the jack finished its work. As Stope laid it down and put a hand on the safe, he was still there. It was from that spot he heard the gun blast, saw the pete man’s torch fall, heard his groan as he crashed to the floor.

After that he sprang forward and played his own flash over Stope’s body and gazed at the reddening hole in the crook’s chest. Drawing his gloves on tighter, he chuckled understandingly. Something that had bothered him since his trip to the basement was very, very clear now.

Old man Banbraugh had been shrewd enough to wire his little devices to two circuits. Anticipating that some smart crook might crash the place and have the wit to throw off the house current, he had arranged uninterrupted protection by installing storage batteries!

Whizzer’s eyes glistened appreciatively. If he hadn’t happened to be cracking the joint at a time when the batteries were being recharged he wouldn’t have known what the hell to think—might have fled in panic! But now it was soft!

He peered into the safe, past the gun wired to the side and let his glance rest avidly on rows of jewel cases. Swiftly he scooped them up. After finishing he stepped back, searching the back of the swinging portrait and the recess for a camera. Sliding his hand over a confined, shadowed indentation in the wall, he found it—flashlight bulb and miniature Kodak

with battery attachment. Deftly he released the negative and pocketed it, a relieved grin on his face. "That's that," he murmured. But there was one more thing—

FROM his pocket he whipped the sapper and faced old man Banbraugh's body. "Meet your murderer!" he jeered, bowing ironically. And placed the blackjack in one of Stope's hands for a moment, then put it in the fallen pete man's pocket. His light showed him blood flecks on the wounded man's mouth. It looked like the end for Stope. But if it wasn't, he would find himself tied to the murder! Whizzer's lip curled. Jinx house, huh? Swiftly he scurried through the hall.

Before opening the front door, however, he was prudent enough to glance through its small, heart-shaped glass. What he saw out there made his heart turn over. Copper's uniform! Delahanty!

On the verge of going to pieces, Whizzer braced himself. The thing to do, he told himself savagely, was to sit tight; give Delahanty time enough to move along. He did think fleetingly of using another exit, but that was out; all exits were barred tight. No, old man Banbraugh

had fixed it so that all traffic had to go through that front door.

It wasn't hard waiting. He even reflected patronizingly on the effectiveness of old man Banbraugh's electric apparatus that had cut Max Stope down. But where the old man had slipped was in failing to figure there might be a Whizzer Cupkin to step in and carry off the loot!

He glanced out again, chuckled exultantly. There wasn't even an officer Delahanty around to put on his shooting act. He placed a sticky hand on the knob, began to pull. Gently, ever so gently, he drew back the door until—

Gun crashes spat from opposite sides of the vestibule. Whizzer, slugged in vital spots, screamed, slumped. He whimpered, felt drowsed; there was a pain—

And then along with that pain a cloudy feeling came over Whizzer Cupkin. A feeling that in placing guns in the vestibule to fire automatically if the safe were feloniously opened—that maybe—maybe old man Banbraugh had figured a Whizzer Cupkin might step in to carry off the loot. Whizzer sighed and died.