

Big Top Kill-Ride

By
Leonard Lupton



Tonight was the opening of the Dipperoo, the carnival ride that was the last word in thrills. But before the official premiere, there was an unscheduled rehearsal—that was the last word in murder blueprints.

WE WERE eating supper in the cookhouse when it happened. It was fully an hour before carnival opening time and the sudden clash and clatter of a thrill-ride going into unexpected action startled every showman on the lot.

What made it ten times worse was the sudden, shrill scream as that thrill-ride clattered to a crescendo. It was the kind of a scream that whirrs through the eardrums

and pierces the brain with the cold certainty that horror has struck.

The man sitting next to me at the cookhouse counter swiveled around on the stool. His feet hit the ground running. All along the counter and back at the tables showfolks were getting up and forgetting that they ever had been hungry.

I took out after the guy who had sat next to me. His name was Dan Hopping. He was foreman of the twin ferris

wheels—Eli No. 5's on this show. As I pounded along after him I began firing questions.

“What’s happened?” I shouted at him. “Why is there a ride in motion this early? Maybe the crew is just testing—”

Dan Hopping flung his answer back across his shoulder as he ran.

“Nobody would be testing *that* ride! It’s my new one—the Dipperoo!”

That didn’t mean anything to me then. I’d just joined up with the carnival company as a barker on the front of the Fun House. But even before this excitement about the ride got under way I’d had time to find out that everybody on the show was punchy with the jitters.

The ride that was in motion was off at the far end of the midway. I hadn’t paid it much attention before; it seemed to be set off from the midway as though it wasn’t meant for public use. I wondered about that now as I followed Hopping under the rope fence that circled the ride.

Hopping was swearing and as I looked toward the platform of the ride I felt like swearing, too—or being sick.

It was death in an ugly form. One of the sideshow freaks, Little Eva, had pitched headlong out of the single car of the thrill-ride and crushed her skull when she’d struck the platform. Little Eva was a pinhead—you must have seen her type of freak; midget size or a little larger—with a conical skull coming up almost to a point.

“I was sure it was Eva when I heard that scream,” Hopping said. “Remember how she screamed and covered her ears when she dropped the bag of popcorn back at the cookhouse?”

I remembered all right. That pointed little skull of Eva’s hadn’t had room for her brain to develop. She was a birdlike little creature with a birdlike brain. Because she was harmless she had been

allowed to roam the midway and that fact had annoyed some of the showfolks.

THE whole scene came back to me now. I had just sat down at the counter to eat supper. Eva had got up to leave. A fellow they called Gus, who was a wrestler in the athletic show, had put salt in Eva’s cornflakes and that had set her off screaming. Then she’d come back with a bag of popcorn and bumped against Sophie LaVerne, fan dancer in the cootch show.

LaVerne had pinched Eva where it would do the most good. Eva had screamed, and then delighted at her own terror had dropped the popcorn and covered her ears. I’d heard this La Verne was the boss’ girl—and believed it now. Real showfolks are never cruel to the little people.

One of the other showmen, a fellow they called Fiero, had grumbled about the management letting Eva hang around the cookhouse. I remembered Fiero more particularly than the rest because he was the fire-diver on this carnival—what is known as the free act.

I hadn’t told anybody, but before joining out with this carnival I had spent a long session in a hospital. And before that, I had been the fire-diver on a carny in the Midwest. Ironically, that’s where the money was, the free act! But long weeks in a hospital bed, after a slight miscalculation of air currents, had convinced me that I was done with the high ladder for good.

Now, as people crowded around us and the show owner himself came pushing and shoving through the crowd, I was wondering if this had been an accident—or murder. And if it was murder, did we have three lively suspects in Gus, LaVerne, and Fiero?

I tried to remember if any or all of them had been at the cookhouse yet when that ride had gone into action and Eva had screamed. But so many people had been around the cookhouse that I couldn't remember. All I knew for sure was that Eva had been able to get as far as the thrill-ride.

If anyone or all three of the others had left at about the same time, they, too—or he, or she—could have been at the thrill-ride. I looked around and I saw Gus and LaVerne, but I didn't see Fiero. Since I had no authority to say or do anything at all I just stood there waiting to see what was going to happen next.

The show manager forced his way through the crowd yelling orders.

“Get back!” he shouted. “Let us get through here!”

The manager was a big man, dressed in plenty of flash. He had pink-barbered cheeks and his eyes were the lightest, coldest blue I had ever seen. His name was Stetter, and something about his whole pink, fleshy appearance reminded me of a baby porker.

“Well, Hopping,” he said, and his hand fell heavily on the ride foreman's shoulder, “what did I tell you? That ride is a failure, the way you've built it—a death trap!”

Hopping flinched a little but he didn't cringe. He looked up at the ride. Obviously I can't give you all the details, but the Dipperoo was Hopping's own baby. Experience as a ride foreman during summer vacations plus an engineering degree from college had given Hopping the skill to invent and build the Dipperoo.

The thrill device itself was a one-car ride. It was simple and sound and unquestionably a potential moneymaker. The single car of the ride traveled down a narrow trestle, looped-the-loop on a continuation of this trestle and ended

against a recoil spring which flung the car back through a trap and left it on an elevator ready to be raised back into position for the next trip. I had been around carnivals most of my life and had never seen anything like it.

As the crowd milled closer, Stetter, the manager, turned and pushed those nearest him. A thin, dapper man with him had been at the cookhouse earlier tonight while I was eating supper.

“Get back,” Stetter said. “Let the police officer here take charge!”

Sophie La Verne, the fan dancer, ignored his plea. She had been wearing a summery, light-colored coat, and now she thrust this at Stetter.

“Cover the poor thing up,” she said. She was sobbing, and it seemed to me that everything she said and did was part of an act. I remembered how she had pinched Eva, only a few minutes before, and made her scream.

But now, under these circumstances, it was easy to be suspicious of everyone. I looked with interest at the man who had accompanied Stetter on that jostling journey through the crowd. He was thin and dapper and he didn't look much like Headquarters to me, but he was speaking to a uniformed policeman who had crowded up from the direction of the pay-gate, and the cop had nodded and gone off.

It was the thin, dapper man who called for attention.

“The police will be here in a minute,” he said. “We can't disturb anything until the coroner holds a preliminary inquest. I'd suggest that none of you leave.”

Hopping, too, stood within the half circle, near Eva's body; and finally it was to him that La Verne appealed, again holding out the coat.

“Cover the poor thing up—I can't bear the sight—”

HOPPING flung the coat over the small, crumpled body. As he did so he gave LaVerne a curious glance. I wondered if it had seemed to him, as it had seemed to me, that she was laying it on too thick. I didn't want to go corny with suspicion—but after all, she had pinched Eva earlier this evening and made her scream and cover her ears. It hadn't been any loving or playful pinch.

The thin, dapper man glanced at Hopping as he flung the coat over Eva. He said curiously, "It was your hammer, wasn't it, Hopping, that was flung through the window of the office wagon this morning?"

Hopping started and turned quickly.

"Sure—my name was on it. Proof enough that I didn't throw it!" he said swiftly. "I've never had any trouble with Mr. Stetter—"

The detective looked at Stetter.

"I suppose that's true or he wouldn't say so in front of you. Tell me, Stetter—this man is dressed like a ride foreman. Did he have anything to do with the ride-car on that other riding device that broke loose and smashed through the rail?"

"No," said Stetter promptly. "And he didn't throw the hammer. I explained that to you when you arrived. Someone is trying to disrupt things on this show, but I'll swear that Dan Hopping had nothing to do with any of these accidents."

"But he is the inventor and builder of this ride, isn't he?" The detective nodded toward the riding device which had flung Eva to her death.

"I am," Hopping spoke quietly. "But I don't understand how Eva fell out. There was a safety-belt, and even if that wasn't fastened, there was a bar across the seat for her to hang on to. Eva wasn't too bright, maybe—but sheer instinct would have caused her to get a life-and-death grip on that bar."

"Apparently," said the detective, "it was the *death* grip she got! I suppose this ride is included in the new liability insurance which covered the accident on the other ride?"

Stetter spoke up with the answer ahead of Hopping.

"It is," he said quickly. "While the ride wasn't ready until tonight, I included it in a blanket policy. Since ownership reposes in my name I could do that. And I own it—as Hopping will verify."

"Well—" said Hopping. He took a deep breath and nodded, and I saw the faintest gleam of triumph in Stetter's eyes.

The detective shrugged. "In that case, there seems to be no direct violation of any law, excepting that someone persuaded the freak to take a ride in the car. It would be difficult to prove that there was any murderous intent."

No one said anything. I glanced at Gus and at La Verne. Already tonight I had seen them both torment Eva; and there had been one other who had joined in making life miserable for the pinhead midget. One who wasn't present at the moment—the diver, Fiero.

More than that, I knew beyond all shadow of doubt now, that Eva had been murdered. I knew that it would be possible to prove as much! But I didn't know why she had been murdered, not yet I didn't; nor by whom.

But one other thing I did know, and as it turned out, it was the thing that was most important of all; I knew where Fiero was right now, and from professional experience in Fiero's own line I was willing to doubt that Fiero had been the murderer.

The cop's gaze swung around the circle of curious faces. He said slowly, "We don't have a medical examiner in this part of the state. We still use the old coroner system. The body can't be moved

until the coroner gets here. We'll hold a preliminary inquest then."

Stetter looked at his watch. He swore. He said, "Officer, it's almost opening time. I'll have to shut off the ticket sale at the pay-gate. And there's no point in wasting gasoline to start up any of the rides. I'd like to talk to the ticket-sellers, and since Hopping is a foreman I want him to contact my other foremen—"

The detective hesitated briefly. There was a faint, mocking gleam in his eyes. "All right," he said at last. "You two can go along about your business."

I FIGURED then that the detective could guess what it was all about, too. For I was beginning to guess. For one thing, the detective had sent someone to phone for the coroner. There would be a cop at the front gate to keep the crowd from coming in, and I don't think Stetter fooled anyone on the lot with that talk about wanting Hopping to contact the other ride foremen. All the other ride foremen were right here in the crowd of carnival employees crowded around the Dipperoo.

It was only a few minutes after Stetter and Hopping left the scene that the coroner arrived. He examined the body briefly, studied the cause and effect, and then motioned to the undertaker and his assistant. He said something to the detective, and the detective spoke to the rest of us.

"I'll want you all down at the office wagon," he said. "I particularly want a man named Gus and a woman named La Verne. I'm certain that neither Hopping nor Stetter were foolish enough to leave the midway." He hesitated a minute and then said: "Has anyone in the crowd seen a man named Fiero? Does anyone know where he is?"

I'm sure that by then a good half of the carnival employees present knew where

Fiero was, just as I knew, and had known, all along. It was an interesting study in mob psychology. No one spoke.

"No?" he said. "Well—we'll pick him up. Meanwhile, remember please that there's a cordon of police thrown around the midway. It will go tougher than ever with the man who tries to walk off this lot."

As I turned to attend to some business of my own, I wondered if Stetter had had time to finish trapping Hopping in this web that he had spun. For there wasn't any question in my mind—regardless of the person he had used to accomplish his purpose—that Stetter was responsible for the death of Eva.

The cop was hardly out of sight in the direction of the ticket wagon when the babble of excitement broke out. There was no longer any question of where Fiero was.

With the cop gone, half the faces on the lot turned upward. It is axiomatic that a person hardly ever sees above the level of his own eyes when he's talking, and the cop had been doing a great deal of talking.

Fiero was on the high ladder above the tank into which he dived nightly. I would say from my own experience that he had gone up there to test the rigging and that what he had seen from that breezy perch had frozen him immobile.

Most of the crowd waited right there by the Dipperoo, but—out of professional curiosity, let us say—I sauntered over to the base of the ladder.

"Fiero," I called to him. "The cop's gone. Come on down."

Maybe I was shaking a little. This was as close as I had been to a high ladder since the accident.

"Fiero!" I said again.

He looked down at me. I could see his face. It was mocking. Fiero didn't know anything about me, except that I was a

newcomer—the barker for the Fun House. No wonder he smirked. I had no right to demand that he come down and tell his story. He knew that. But there was something that Fiero didn't know.

“Yeah?” he said mockingly, down the breeze. “You want me, huh? You come and get me then!”

“Fiero,” I said, “the cops will throw a cordon around this tank when they find you're up there. Then they'll shoot you down. Come on down now. Tell *us* your story—”

“Go away,” said Fiero. He was maybe halfway up that ladder and I could hear him clearly. “I don't know you. I don't want anything to do with you or cops. Carny people stick together. Go away.”

Carny people stick together? If I hadn't been shaking so with the knowledge of what I had to do I might have laughed. Carny people stick together all right—and Fiero didn't think I belonged.

Well, that was my fault. Shame at the knowledge that I would never dive again had sealed my lips. I hadn't talked about my past. But now I came closer and I called up to him.

“You better come down, Fiero, or I'm coming up after you. Those cops will figure out sooner or later that it *was* murder, and someone will take the rap.”

“Nobody knows nothing,” said Fiero said. “Go about your business.”

“All right,” I told him grimly. “All right—I'll go about my business.” After all, it *had* been my business once.

I reached for the rungs of the high ladder.

FIERO stood there above me and watched. I was looking up as I climbed and I saw the mocking expression on his face change. Suddenly, he, too, started to climb. With that quick, graceful,

hand-over-hand motion of the professional high-diver's running ascent, Fiero raced up the high ladder until he reached that tiny platform near the top.

There he waited, and I am sure that he thought that my nerve would crack before I ever reached the top of that slender, swaying framework.

Each rung that passed under me as I made that running ascent was like a milestone; and the thing that kept me going was the simple thought: “*I can come down the same way I went up!*”

I was only ten feet from Fiero when I saw him straighten and tilt his head, there on the little platform.

It hadn't occurred to me that Fiero would attempt a dive. He was in sports shirt and slacks, not in tights; and yet I knew from the position of his body that he was going over. I froze on the ladder, not daring to jump him or to make the ladder sway. Only seconds later he was gone, a curving flash in empty space.

As I gained the platform myself I saw him strike, saw the white flash of spraying water.

It would take many precious minutes to slide and scramble back down that ladder. Fiero would break for the open, run into that cordon of cops outside the show lot.

I closed my eyes for a minute. I got the feel of evening air against my face. I made my brain a blank, for thinking terrified me. One minute—one second—there was the good, solid feel of the platform under me. The next second the white ladder was a spinning blur as I curved in the air. I struck the water sprayed and still I had no time to feel relief. I struck out for the side of the tank and opened my eyes, and there was Fiero, half in and half out of the tank of water.

His fish eyes goggled and his mouth hung open and for the first time since I had

left the hospital I laughed. I spit water out of my mouth and said, "So I'm not carny people, huh?" And I grabbed at Fiero and we fell over the rim together and struck the ground.

"Who?" I said to Fiero, and sat on his chest and grabbed a handful of hair on his head and banged his skull to the ground, "who framed Dan Hopping? Who helped Stetter frame him? Was it Gus? Was it LaVerne?"

He said, "Let us up, will you? I know you now. That was Gabriel's dive—"

I said, "All right, I'm Gabriel. You know the whole story. Who put the pinhead on that ride?"

"It was LaVerne," he said. "Stetter made her do it, sure—but it was LaVerne," he said. "Stetter made her do it, sure—but it was La Verne. I wouldn't have told nobody but you. You was twelve weeks in the hospital and only a damn fool would have dived in that wind that night—"

"Only eleven weeks," I said. "Hopping didn't have insurance, did he?"

"No," said Fiero, "but he has now, I'll bet. Only he hasn't any ride. That would be Stetter's price for covering him! That Dipperoo will be a gold mine for Stetter—" He stopped and looked up. The detective had come back. A harness cop was with him.

"All right, boys," the detective said. "You can stop playing now. I'm not from headquarters at all. Sorry to fool you folks, but I've just nailed Stetter and Hopping for collusion. I'm from the insurance company that branched out into ride liability insurance this season—"

"Collusion?" I said. "You mean Hopping swapped ownership of that ride to get it under the policy that Stetter holds with your company? He swapped title *after* the accident?"

"Yon are a bright boy!" the detective said sarcastically. "I gather Hopping was a

friend of yours. He'll get a fair trial!"

"So will Stetter," I growled, "but not for collusion. And Hopping can hardly be blamed for sliding out from under what he knew was—murder."

"Murder!" the detective snorted. "Listen, that freak fell out on her head. So what? There was a bar there for her to hang on to. You couldn't get Hopping clemency with that story, and you can't pin murder on Stetter!"

"No?" I said. "Look—how did you blow in here in the first place?"

"There was an accident on one of the other rides. It was the second one since the policy went into effect. I dropped by to check up, and Stetter mistook me for a local cop that he had sent for. I let it ride. I thought maybe that story about the hammer through the window had some kind of a hookup with the other two accidents. It didn't."

Again I said, "No?" I looked at the sarcastic face and didn't like it. I said, "Did it occur to you that Stetter might have tossed that hammer through the window himself?"

"Why?"

"In order to have a cop on hand investigating, when Eva was killed. He needed a cop handy to panic Hopping into signing over that ride."

"Again that presupposes murder," the detective said to me crisply. "In court it becomes necessary to prove murder. You can't!"

"I can't?" I said "Listen— I've a witness to swear that it was Stetter's girl friend, LaVerne, who coaxed Eva into that ride and released the starting lever."

"So what? Putting Eva into that car might be malicious mischief—but hardly murder. Sorry, but your pal Hopping goes to jail. Even though the pinhead wasn't strapped in, there was a bar for her to hang onto—"

“Sure,” I said, “but she didn’t hang onto it for long.”

“That would be ridiculous. Even the limited intelligence of a monkey would know enough to hold tight under such circumstances!”

“Yeah?” I asked him. “Did you ever see a girl on a carnival thrill-ride who didn’t scream?”

“No,” he admitted. “They always scream.”

“Okay,” I said. “And Eva screamed. I heard her. We all heard her. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing,” he said, puzzled; and then he started to get excited. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Come to think of it—”

“You come to think of it kind of late,” I said. “You had the same opportunity I had, there at the cookhouse, to see Eva. She screamed three different times during supper and you saw what she did, the same as I saw—”

He had kind of a stricken look on his face. He didn’t pay much attention to me. “Of course,” he said in growing excitement. “That’s it! Stetter knew and La Verne knew! A woman always screams on one of those rides, and when Eva started to scream, every time—”

“Yeah,” I said, and my voice got raspy. “When Eva started to scream, she *always* let go of whatever she held *and covered her ears with her hands!*”