

Death collects the fares when—

Satan Drives the Bus



By Wyatt Blassingame

ALLEN SARGENT was grateful for the girl across the aisle. He didn't like to ride buses and with the storm blowing so that headlights seemed beaten back upon themselves this trip from Minneapolis to Duluth gave promise of being particularly unpleasant. The girl across the aisle had chestnut-colored hair that curled close to a well-shaped head, wide intelligent eyes and a mouth that was made for smiling. With her to look at the trip might not be so bad.

The rest of the passengers didn't offer much. Sargent looked them over, making a game of guessing their professions. All the lights were out in the bus except the dim overhead one, but somehow the shadows seemed to sharply outline the characters behind them.

In the front seat on the left was a short, bald-headed man who chewed an unlighted cigar and beamed pleasantly at nothing. "A salesman," Sargent thought. "Probably deals in flour or linoleum."

Behind the salesman sat a faded, middle-aged,

poorly dressed woman who stared vacantly ahead. A country woman who started working in the fields when she was six and has been tending babies since she was sixteen, was his guess.

Behind her sat a blonde, hard-faced woman. Sargent had smelled liquor when she got on the bus, and when she spoke to the driver, calling him "Baby," her voice had been too loud.

In the next seat was a big, hardboiled looking man who had a scar across the right cheek from ear to mouth. "He's tough enough to be a gangster," Sargent thought. "And still—" There was something furtive, something gruesome about the way the man's eyes shifted, peering at the persons around him, then out into the storm. "He's frightened," Sargent told himself, "but he doesn't look like a man who would know the meaning of physical terror."

On the back seat a Negro sat alone.

Behind the priest was the oddest looking individual on the bus. Sargent could only see the back of the man's head now, but he remembered

the face. It wasn't an easy one to forget. Framed in wild shaggy hair that fell almost to the graying and mangy beard, was a thin, wrinkled face with a beak of a nose below insane eyes. There was a vacant seat behind him and then the one in which Sargent sat. No one else was aboard except the driver.

As Sargent started to turn to the girl again, the lean, bearded man jumped into the aisle, twisting in an effort to face everybody. His voice was thin and terrible, the voice of a man insane. "It's death! Death and sin! They are riding with us, and they shall strike; they shall kill us all because someone here has sinned against God and man!"

Everyone looked toward the man in the aisle, stunned by his sudden outburst, and for a moment there was no sound except the wind and the rain against the windows, the hum of the tires and motor. The driver glanced at the rearview mirror but the lurching of the bus made him center his attention on the road.

"It's death! Death and sin!" the man screamed again. His eyes were hot flames. Saliva drooled from one corner of his mouth. "They are riding this bus with us and they shall kill us all. Someone here has sinned against God!"

"Well, who the hell hasn't?" inquired the blonde. The man behind her had crouched deep into his seat and despite the shadows Sargent could see the curious way in which the scar twitched on his cheek. Once more he had the impression that this man, despite his bulk and toughness, was afraid.

THE bus began to slow down. The driver turned slightly and said, "Sit down, old man. What's biting you?"

"Fiends!" the man screamed. "You laugh at me. You call me an old man. And you!" he leaned suddenly toward the blonde and she jerked back in her seat. "You daughter of shame, you shall know the fires of hell soon. You brag that we have all sinned. Yes, but death and sin ride incarnate here. You shall die with them. We shall all die with them because someone has sinned more than you are capable of."

"Sit down, old man, you're drunk," the driver said. The bus had almost stopped now.

The salesman said: "Keep driving. I'll take care of him all right."

The driver hesitated. He was already late. "Okay," he said. The bus began to pick up speed

again.

The priest was smiling, a little self-conscious as most persons are when someone else begins to carry their own professions to an extreme. "How do you know that sin and death are on this bus?" he asked.

The man turned to him, eyes wild. "Know!" he cried. "I know because God has told me. I know in the same way that I know we shall all die unless we escape from the sinner."

"Why can't this sinner guy confess to the father and let him make it all right with God?" the blonde said. "There ain't no need of troublin' us all with it."

"Confession will save his soul," the bearded man said. "But not his life. Nor yours! Nor anyone's!" He screamed the words, flinging his arms wide so that the gesture included the whole group.

The Negro on the back seat said, "Lawd Gawd. Lawd Gawd, lemme out dis bus. My feets too good not to use 'em now." The salesman laughed; the girl across the aisle from Sargent smiled slightly, but her eyes were on the madman. The fellow in front of her shrank deeper into the shadows; the scar on his face was livid now and fear showed in his eyes.

"We will all die because someone—" The madman's voice broke suddenly. He lunged toward the girl across from Sargent, stuck his face close to hers. "Are you guilty?" he screamed. "Are you—?"

Allen Sargent was already on his feet. He caught the gaunt man's shoulder, jerked him around. "Listen," he said quietly, "you can get off this bus if you want, or you can ride and keep quiet." And almost gently he tossed the maniac back into his seat where he slunk, gazing with red, insane eyes at the man above him.

"Thanks," the driver said. The bus began to move more rapidly. The sound of the storm beating against it grew louder.

Sargent stepped back and sat down beside the girl. He had been wanting to talk to her and here was a chance. "I'd better sit with you," he said. "That nut seems to have you picked out as the friend of sin and death."

"Thank you for taking him away." When she smiled Sargent knew that he liked this girl a hell of a lot. "I'm really not as bad a woman as he seems to think."

They talked for five minutes. In that time

Sargent learned that her name was Jane Brownfield and she was a librarian in Duluth, and that her eyes, when looked at closely, were the prettiest he had ever seen although in the shadows he couldn't make out their color. "I'm going to be in Duluth for some time," he said. "I hadn't planned on it, but now it seems necessary, and if—"

The crazy man was suddenly in the aisle again, shouting: "Death and sin. Death and sin!" His voice boomed through the bus, drowning out the sound of the wind and the rain.

"We shall all die!"

And death struck while he stood there, long arms raised, beard jerking.

The salesman was on his feet, leaning backward as though his spine were being snapped. Both hands tore at his throat and from his wide-open mouth vomited a scream of agony and terror. His wide eyes were bulging, his whole face contorted, the pink cheeks gone purple. He reeled two steps down the aisle, striking seats and bouncing off.

The scream went high and thin until, like a too tight wire, it snapped. The man went backward and lay still, his horrible face staring up into that of Allen Sargent.

THERE was a motionless, frozen chaos in the bus. The driver had stopped and stood at the head of the aisle as though unable to move. The passengers were motionless in their seats, looking down at the man whom they all knew, instinctively, to be dead. Even the madman was sitting down, quiet. And because of the silence within the bus the sounds of the storm came louder. Sargent could hear the rain slashing against the windows and on the roof, could feel the giant shoulder of the wind shaking the bus.

The driver came down the aisle, stiff-kneed. His face gray, he leaned over the salesman, put his hand on the man's heart. Slowly he stood up. "He's dead!"

Abruptly the Negro in the back began to moan. "Oh Gawd, oh Gawd! Hit'll kill us all lak the gentman said. Hit'll kill us all."

Jane Brownfield's hands caught Sargent by the wrist and held on tight, but she did not speak.

The maniac stood up violently. "Death and sin!" he screamed. "I told you they were here with us because someone has sinned unspeakably!"

"Lawd Gawd," the Negro moaned. "Don't strike dis pore nigger down. I'se stold and I'se lied and

I'se sorry and I don't wanta die." His voice rose in a wail.

Allen Sargent said: "Shut up. Somebody in this bus is probably going to die all right." He made a short gesture toward the man on the floor. "Somebody in this bus killed him and the police shouldn't have much trouble finding out who."

The drab-faced country woman spoke for the first time. "It won't be me, but—"

"Let's get started," the driver said. "We'll stop at Perry Corners and telephone Minneapolis. The police can get here in an hour."

"Sin and death! We shall all die!" the maniac screamed. The rain hammered insanely against the windows.

"You mean us all gotta wait for de poollice?" the Negro asked. "I ain't killed nobody. All you gentemans know dat. I gotta—"

"You got to see the cops with the rest of us," the driver said. He turned toward the wheel.

The Negro said: "I'll be damned if I'm going to wait for the cops." Everyone looked at him because of the sudden change in his voice. He was standing erect at the rear of the bus, a blue steel automatic in his hand. "When you get me to Duluth the rest of you can see all the cops in town. But we're not stopping before then."

The driver said: "Why you damned—" and stopped. "Hell," he finished softly, "you're no nigger."

"Right. I'm Pete Meadows. They're looking for me in Minneapolis because of a couple of bank robberies. I don't know who killed that man in the aisle. I didn't, but I'm not waiting for any cops. Now get started driving."

"A-all right." His face pale with fear, the driver went back to the wheel. The bus began to move through the night again. Pete Meadows stood in the rear. The gun was in his coat pocket, but the outline of it was plainly visible.

The scar-faced man turned in his seat. His square, hard mouth was contemptuous as he looked at the gunman. "So you're Pete Meadows," he said, and snorted. But as he faced front again he noticed the dead man on the floor. Abruptly the scar was livid along his cheek and twitching with terror.

"Sin and death!" the madman screamed. "We shall all die because of the sin that rides this bus. And you!"—he stabbed a lean finger toward the gunman—"you shall die with the others and your soul shall burn in hell!"

“Sit down,” Meadows said. “Sit down and shut up.”

The countrywoman got on her knees in the seat, leaning over the back of it towards Meadows. “Mister, can’t I get off down here ‘bout five mile? My old man’ll be drunk, and the kids—”

“You can ride back from Duluth,” Meadows said. “Sit down.”

“But I—” She stopped. In the pale glow of the overhead bulb her face was a gruesome white. Her mouth was wide-open though she made no sound. Her hands came up slowly toward her throat.

“Sin and death!” the madman chanted. “We shall all die!”

THE countrywoman stepped into the aisle. Slowly she began to arch backward. Her face was turning purple now, the eyes rolling up. And all at once she began to scream and her hands ripped at her throat until the wrinkled skin tore and blood ran down in streams. She staggered down the aisle, shrieking. The bus lurched and raced on through the night, flinging the woman from side to side. Then her foot struck that of the dead man in the aisle and she fell headlong. The scream snapped off.

“It’s another one,” the scar-faced man said huskily. “That’s two that have died without any reason and—”

“They die because someone here has sinned irredeemably,” the madman cried. “We shall all die.”

The blonde got on her knees in the seat. Beneath its thick coat of paint her face was yellow with fright. “It’s comin’ right down the aisle toward me,” she said frantically. “I don’t know what the crazy man is talkin’ about, but if somebody here’s done somethin’ I—I wish they’d tell that priest. I don’t wanta die! I don’t wanta die!”

“Confess and save your souls,” the madman shrieked. “It is too late to save the body.”

The priest was pale, but there was courage in his round face. “I shall be glad to hear confession if anyone wishes to make it.”

Jane Brownfield was clutching Sargent’s hand. “What’s happening?” she whispered. “What is it? I can’t understand.”

Sargent said: “I don’t know. But it won’t happen to you.” He turned to face Meadows who stood motionless at the rear of the bus, hand on his gun.

“Listen, we’ve got to find out what’s happening here before it kills us all. Why don’t you skip the bus, let the rest of us stop at the first telephone and call the police?”

The gunman shook his head. “I’d be in a hell of a fix, out here in the woods. I’ve got things arranged in Duluth and I’m going there.”

“It’s coming down the aisle toward me!” the blonde shouted. “It’ll kill me next. I’m gonna get off!”

“You’re going to sit where you are,” Meadows said.

The bus hustled on through the night, and the storm beat black and furious at the windows. It was as though the bus were part of another world, part of the storm itself howling through the darkness.

Sargent turned in his seat, his hands tight clenched on the arm as he judged the distance to the gunman. A full two yards and he would have to move sideways into the aisle first. There wasn’t a chance of making it.

Jane Brownfield caught his arm and pulled him close to her. “You can’t,” she whispered. “He’d kill you.”

“I’ll wait for a chance. Don’t worry, I’ll get him.” He tried to make his voice natural but there was a queer tightness to the muscles of his throat.

“That’s not the man I’m afraid of,” she whispered. “It’s the way those others have died, the way they scream and their faces turn purple. It’s that crazy man shouting about sin and death as though they were persons here with us. How did he know that man and woman were going to die?”

“Perhaps he knew because he was going to kill them.”

“But why? How?”

“He’s insane. Maybe that’s reason enough.”

“But how did he do it?” Her voice was getting thin, fearful. “We were all looking at him. He couldn’t have done it. He couldn’t! And yet—”

“Steady,” Sargent said. “Steady.” But inside his own body he could feel the cold fingers of terror. His eyes kept coming back to the pair of corpses that bounced and jiggled horribly with the swaying of the bus. Both lay, their backs arched, faces turned up so that the purple bloated skin showed plainly. The mouths were still open, twisted by agony and fear.

WHAT had killed this man and woman? And why? There had been no connection

between them. They had never seen one another before tonight. Why did this madman chant about sin and death? And where would death strike next?

Sargent's jaw set until muscle bulged the tan skin. His gray eyes slitted. Suppose something happened to the girl beside him. Suppose she suddenly began to scream and stood up, ripping the blood from her throat while the skin turned purple? Suppose it happened to her—or to him—as it had to the others, without warning?

The blonde was sobbing now. "It's coming down the aisle toward me. I'll be next. I'll be next." She rocked back and forth in her seat. Across from her the maniac sat with his feet in the aisle. The priest also was turned to face the other passengers. His face was pale, but courageous. The man with the scar was huddled deep in the shadows but Sargent could see his eyes constantly turning to the bodies in the aisle. "It's odd he should be so afraid of them," Sargent thought, "and so contemptuous of that murderer and bank robber behind us."

Pete Meadows said suddenly: "Driver, what'll happen if we pass this next station without stopping?"

"I—I don't know. They'll probably telephone ahead to find out what's the trouble."

The gunman hesitated, then his charcoaled lips pulled tight. "All right," he said. "You'll stop and get off and stretch like you generally do. I've ridden this bus before. But you won't go in the station and nobody else is getting off."

No one answered except the black fury of the wind and the rain. The bus roared on steadily. The maniac began to mumble to himself. Saliva drooled across his lips to mingle with his beard. Five minutes passed before the bus swung to one side of the road and stopped near a small store and filling station.

The driver stood up and faced Meadows. "What—what do you want me to do now?"

"Step out and stretch," Meadows said. "I saw you do it in the rain once before and you'll do it again tonight. But keep close to the bus like you did the time before so you won't get wet. Then after a minute or so climb back in and let's get started."

"Yes, sir." The driver's hand shook on the door handle as he turned it, then stepped out.

The maniac jumped to his feet, screaming, eyes aflame. "I will ride this bus no longer with death and sin! I leave you all to destruction!"

"Sit down before I shoot you."

"Shoot, Child of the Devil! Shoot! But I shall not stay to be destroyed as Sodom was destroyed; to be cut down by the plagues of Egypt. Shoot!" His voice was a shrill scream, his arms wide flung.

THE gunman tensed forward, automatic outlining his coat pocket. Sargent knew the things that were in his mind then. If the crazy man kept shouting he would attract the attention of the persons inside the store; if he were shot there would be the sound of the pistol.

"Listen," Meadows said, "if I let you off this bus will you give me your word of honor"—his face twitched as he added—"as a man of God, not to mention what is happening here?"

The man's face contorted. "Why should I tell? God will strike you down. I shall keep silent."

"Well, get the hell out of here!"

The big scar-faced man and the blonde were standing up now, talking at once, terror in their eyes. "It's coming down the aisle. It'll get me next," the blonde kept saying. The big man was pleading to be allowed to go.

Meadows said: "Shut up, both of you. That guy was nuts and I let him off because he was too crazy to keep in here. But if either of you get off, it'll be with a bullet in your back."

The priest said quietly: "There is some strange death riding with us. You understand that by keeping these persons here you may be responsible for their murders."

"That'll be just too bad, but I can't help it. If they get off they'll be responsible for my murder."

Sargent was tense against the seat's edge, his narrowed eyes watching the gunman. If he would come one step closer—

The driver climbed aboard and got in his seat. The bus lurched forward. "Sit down, all of you," Meadows said. He stepped farther back and Sargent knew there was no chance to get to him without being killed.

Sargent turned to look at the girl beside him. Her face was drawn, but when she met his eyes, she smiled. He said, "Good girl. I don't think Meadows wants to harm any of us and we'll ride on safely."

"It's not Pete Meadows I'm afraid of. It's that other thing—the thing that kills without any reason or warning. It's what that crazy man said about us all dying. And somehow I feel—"

Sargent caught her hands. "Let's not talk about

it. You'll only get more frightened than ever."

"But I want to talk about it. I have to! I'm not going to get hysterical, but I can't sit here waiting for that death to come to me, and not even think about it. Isn't there *something* we can do?"

"It's not going to hurt you," Sargent said. His muscles were drawn so hard they ached, his eyes narrowed, fierce. "If I only knew who, or what—"

"Perhaps it was the crazy man and now that he's gone nobody else will be killed. But somehow I feel that—that it's going to come to all of us. I keep remembering what he said, that we are all going to die."

It was then Sargent noticed for the first time the speed with which the bus was moving. The rain was as thick across the windows as ever but the sound of it was drowned by the roar of the motor and the whine of the tires. Abruptly the machine lurched to one side and began to bounce violently.

Pete Meadows yelled: "Damn it! Where are you going? Are you mad? Slow down! You're off the highway!"

And in answer the driver began to laugh, a loud, rolling, furious laughter. Sargent jerked forward, feeling the hairs lift along the back of his neck. The girl clutched at his hand.

For the laughter ahead was that of a madman! It was worse. It was laughter from hell.

"Slow down, before—" And then it happened.

The bus stopped as though a giant hand had caught and twisted it sideways. Sargent was flung hard against the seat ahead of him, smashed down to the floor. He saw Pete Meadows plunge headlong in the aisle, the gun bouncing from his hand. He heard the jagged scream of the blonde and the guttural shout of the scar-faced man.

Then the hellish laughter flooded through the bus again and for a moment there was no sound except it and the beat of the wind and the rain.

THE second that followed seemed ages long to Sargent, the things that happened simultaneously seemed each separate and distinct like white-hot irons burning their pictures into his brain.

He saw the man whom he had thought was the driver standing at the front of the bus facing them—and that man was hell itself! His face was triangular like that of the devil, his eyebrows V-shaped and red, his ears pointed. And from his mouth rolled the laughter that was like that of

devils rejoicing over tortured souls.

In that same instant Pete Meadows came to his knees in the aisle, saw the man at the front of the bus, cursed, and dived for his gun. The man did not stop laughing. The blonde was screaming insanely, the scar-faced man gibbering thick, terrified nonsense. The priest had been knocked to his knees in the aisle and crouched there. Jane Brownfield was half on the seat, half off, both hands holding to Sargent's arm.

Meadows got his fingers on the gun and started straightening. The man with the face of hell kept laughing, his head thrown back, eyes flaming.

Meadows' gun came up, stopped, wavered. The muscles around his mouth began to quiver. His eyes opened so wide in his blackened face that only the whites were showing. Then the gun clattered in the aisle and he had both hands at his throat, tearing it, ripping the flesh away in long gouges. His back began to arch and he was screaming. The cry had no beginning but was born full-throated and horrible, drowning out the laughter, the wind and rain, driving every sound out of existence except its own terror and agony.

Then the man fell backward among the other bodies and the scream was gone. Through the bus rolled again the sound of devil laughter, the hiss and mutter of the storm.

Sargent got slowly to his feet, pushed the girl behind him and held her there. The blonde's cries had become a low, choked sobbing as she stared at the man in the front of the bus. The scar-faced fellow was panting heavily, crouched in his seat, his eyes wide with an unholy fear. Even in that brief glance Sargent knew that it was not death this man feared; it was something beyond and more horrible than death.

The hellish laughter drooled to an end. The flame-colored eyes swept over them. The man chanted: "You shall all die. All of you. Are you prepared?" His gaze fastened on the blonde.

"No!" she screamed. "I don't wanta die. I don't—"

"You're going to die," the creature said. "Is there anything you want to say first?"

It was Sargent who answered. Horror was like raw steel in his chest. His brain felt crushed and he had to force it to action. Twice he had made abortive movements toward the thing at the front of the bus, and twice he had stopped. If It could kill Pete Meadows as It had done, without even ceasing

to laugh, without moving its hands, there was certainly no chance of reaching It in a wild rush down the aisle. "It's a man. Deformed, hideous, but It's a man," Sargent had kept telling himself.

So now he spoke to It, hardly recognizing his own voice. "Why do you have to kill us? Why do you have to kill this girl first?"

The man laughed again, low and terribly. "I am Death," he said. "I have come for all of you because one of you is most guilty."

"You're crazy."

The man paid no attention but looked at the blonde again. "Is there anything you want to say before you die, anything that will make death easier?"

"Yes." She was barely able to speak. "I—I want to confess to that priest. I ain't never been religious, but if I'm—" she choked.

"You have two minutes," the man said. "You may save your soul, but not your body."

She stood up, staggered, but caught at the seat top. Somehow she crossed the aisle to the priest and kneeled in front of him. Under the beat of the wind and the rain Sargent could hear the low mutter of her voice as she spoke.

JANE BROWNFIELD was not crying, but her labored breathing, the way in which she fought back hysteria was audible. Sargent put his left hand on hers, squeezed it. Then he leaned forward in his seat, tense. If the devil-faced man would take his eyes off them for one second, would glance at the girl kneeling close in front of him, then would come his chance.

But the man didn't. He stood there, laughing softly, never looking at the girl but always watching the passengers with eyes like red flame. Outside, the demons of rain and wind beat against the bus, shaking it with their fury.

Abruptly the man said: "Your two minutes are up. You die."

Sargent tensed forward for the moment when he would look down to kill the blonde. That would be his chance to rush. Not much of one, but the best he could hope for.

And then terror beyond bearing struck him. It was as if fear were some material object which had suddenly been crammed into him until his entire body was splitting from the pressure. He tried to cry out, but his throat was clogged with fear, and fear had crushed his lungs against one another with

awful pain.

For the man had never glanced toward the blonde, had never taken his eyes from the other passengers and had made no movement. But with the words "You die," the girl screamed and lunged to her feet. Her face was already turning purple, her back curved like a drawn bow as she clawed at her throat and staggered into the aisle. Her shriek ripped through the bus, banged against the windows—and cut short as she fell.

Jane Brownfield made a short, moaning cry. "How—? He can't— He's not human!"

Sargent was too sick and hopeless to answer. He had been so certain that the devil-faced man would bend over the girl to kill her, that he would have a chance to attack. But the man had not even glanced at her. It was impossible for him to have killed her. And yet—she had died horribly as the others had.

"It's your turn, Scarface," the man said. "If you want to confess for the sake of your soul, do it. You have two minutes."

The big man stood up, the scar livid and twitching along his cheek. Even now he did not seem afraid of death but of the weird manner in which it was coming and of something beyond death. "Yes, I want to confess." He went and knelt before the priest.

Once more that long and awful period of waiting began. The sound of the man's voice, low and mumbling, the beat of the storm, the sound of his own heart and husky breathing.

Jane Brownfield took Sargent's hand, pulled him around to face her. There were tears in her eyes but her voice was almost steady. "He'll kill one of us next. We've only two minutes."

Sargent did not answer. He leaned and kissed her. Then abruptly he was sitting straight, his hands fierce around hers. "You're not going to die!" he whispered. "I'll get you out of this. I'll get us both out. I've got to, now."

"Your time's up. You die," the man said in the front of the bus. And in the same moment the scar-faced fellow began to scream.

JANE put her face hard against Sargent's chest. He kept his arms around her, and though neither of them looked, they could hear the big man's feet staggering blindly, hear the tremendous agony of his shriek, and they could vision the purpling face, the gory throat as he ripped at it. There came the thud of the body and the scream cut short.

“All right, mister. It’s your turn.”

Sargent pushed the girl away and stood up quickly. “I want to confess before I die.”

The devil-faced man said: “To hell with this confession business. I’m getting tired of it.” His eyes were on the girl now, hot and lustful.

“A man’s last wish,” Sargent said huskily. “You’ve got to let me.” He stepped quickly down the aisle.

“Let him have his way,” the priest said.

The man hesitated, said: “Get it over with.” He was watching the girl and the red flame of his eyes burned brighter.

Sargent went down on one knee in the aisle. The priest said: “Both of your knees, my son.”

“Like this?” Sargent’s movement was almost too swift for the eye to follow. His right fist came up from the floor as he straightened. With one hundred and seventy pounds behind them the knuckles landed on the priest’s jaw, raising him completely out of his seat and snapping him backward. And in the same motion Sargent turned and dived for the devil-faced man.

It wasn’t much of a fight, but as Sargent got up from the unconscious body Jane began to jerk at his arm. “Why did you hit the priest?” she cried. “And look at him—his face is purple! He’s dead!”

“Of course he’s dead. He had the blow gun in his mouth and when I cracked his chin he got one of his own darts in him. At least I’d be willing to bet that’s what happened. It had to be either the make-believe priest or the devil-faced man killing these folks and it wasn’t the devil-faced fellow. We both watched and made sure of that. Now that I’ve got through beating his makeup off, you can see he’s the lunatic death-and-sin guy who got off the bus when it stopped. He probably knocked the driver on the head, put on his coat and hat and climbed in when nobody was looking.”

“But why did the priest—? Why would he kill anybody?”

“I don’t know who that fellow is—or was. But it’s a cinch he was no priest. And what the reason behind the whole thing is I can’t exactly say, but when the police find out who everybody is, they’ll figure out the motive without much trouble. They’ll probably persuade this devil-faced-lunatic to tell them, after we drive the bus on to the next town.”

A blinding glare of light at police headquarters and the threat of a rubber hose that was never used

made the man who had disguised himself first as a lunatic, then as the devil, talk readily enough. Standing back in the shadowed darkness of the room, Sargent listened. He could scarcely see the police standing around him, but he was aware of them.

“I didn’t kill anybody,” the man said. “All of you must remember that. It was Pete, the fellow dressed like a priest, who killed them.”

“Why did he kill them?” the police lieutenant asked. “Start at the first.”

“All right,” the man said. “I’ll tell. But I didn’t kill them. Pete killed them. It was because he had to get O’Neil—the one with the scar.”

“Start at the first,” the lieutenant said again.

The man took a deep breath. “It was started in South America eight years ago,” he said. “Pete and O’Neil and I were back in the Chaco together. We found some ruins there. And in one of them was a ruby, the size of an egg. It was enough to make us all rich. But O’Neil double-crossed us. He stole the ruby and the boat, leaving us in a swamp. We would have died—we almost did—but some Indians found us. It took five years to get away from them and make the coast. It took three more years to find O’Neil. We learned he still had the ruby, but he was a killer and we were afraid of him. It was Pete’s idea to frighten him into telling us where the ruby was. Pete knew how superstitious he was. He was worse than a nigger. So we set out to scare him. We pulled spiritualist tricks on him. We hounded him. He thought us both dead and he started seeing ghosts. He heard moans at night and all that sort of thing. He tried to run away, but we followed him. He was still running when we pulled this last trick on him on the bus.”

“And did he tell where the ruby was when he confessed?” It was the lieutenant’s voice out of the dark.

“Yeah. I know he did because Pete wouldn’ta killed him if he hadn’t. But Pete didn’t tell me—and Pete—”

“Pete,” the lieutenant said, “is in the same shape you’ll be in after the executioner finishes with you.”

Later Sargent repeated the story to the girl. “All very simple,” he said, leaning down and kissing her. “But I don’t think we’ll ride a bus on our honeymoon.”