

# TIME TO KILL

*A Complete Mystery Novelet*



*My shifting hands on the valise at this moment was all that saved me.*

**By Leo Hoban**

*Fifteen hundred bucks to cart a wooden dummy across the continent! It sounded mad, but madder still was the murder that stalked Mike Grady when he took the job!*

**T**HERE I was, sitting in my office in Manhattan and minding my own business, when the bald-headed guy walked in and tossed five C notes on my battered desk.

If there had been any business save my own

to mind, I probably would have been more particular. But five C's—when you were just contemplating if Shanty Sam around the corner would go on the arm for another couple of hamburgers—definitely was real kush.

So when he put the valise, about four-by-three feet, on my desk alongside the five centuries, Mike Grady wasn't in any mood to argue.

"Just deliver this to me in the St. Francis in San Francisco," he said. "There's nothing hot about it. It's only a piece of wood, harmless and inanimate."

Boy, what a soft touch this was, boy, oh boy!

"What's in it?"

"A dummy," he mumbled. "Just a dummy. One of those things a ventriloquist uses. You know—a dummy?"

"Sure," I said. "Dummies. I know them—lots of 'em."

"Well, deliver it safely and I'll pay you one thousand more—provided it's safe delivery, of course,"

"Of course," I nodded, my eyes still being riveted on the five C's. "But why don't you take it to 'Frisco yourself?"

He shifted feet on that one, studied the flyspecks on the ceiling, and said: "People, you know, lose things . . . on trains. . . they're very careless. . . And there's a radio program this—er—dummy must sound off on. He's very important. Let's say like Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen, He rates. He's worth about five thousand a week. He must be delivered safely. Fifteen hundred is not much to get it across country."

Well, that seemed logical enough. What harm would there be in a dummy? Who would want it? Where would be the danger? A dummy cannot hurt anyone.

I gave some thought to that, but the main thought was that Shanty Sam and his hamburgers had been outgamed in the stretch by a miraculous five C's that represented steaks—big, luscious ones.

"It's a deal," I said, holding out my hand. "He'll be in San Francisco in five days."

The guy gave me one of those enigmatic grins, bobbed his head, and departed.

Just before the door closed a voice from the valise said: "Sucker. I'm going to knock off a guy!" I grabbed the valise, shook it—and its weight seemed heavy enough to be an actual body.

I began to sweat. The locks on the valise wouldn't open; I wasn't sure just what I had in

there. The voice had sounded too human to be a dummy's—yet it was out of this world.

On top of it—although stupid—I'm a conscientious private dick. I'd committed myself to safe delivery of the valise—so the only thing was to follow through.

The five C's and the thought of steak had a great deal to do with that decision. I picked up the valise, pocketed the dough, and was humming "California Here I Come" as I left the office and headed for the elevator.

I pressed the down buzzer and turned around, still humming. A short and nonchalant—almost demure guy—a vicious scar running down his right cheek—sauntered up to the elevator, I turned from him shifting the valise from right to left hand. To all appearances he wasn't dangerous.

That shift of hands saved my life; a knife, aimed at my ribs, made a slight ripping sound as it went into the top corner of the valise.

I whirled. The mug—looking disconcerted, shoved his feet out like a runner sliding into second. I went down, clenching the valise against my chest. The mug's foot lifted once, lashed out catching me flush on the chin. The world spun, I felt him tug at the valise, but hung on. The elevator hissed to a stop and the mug's feet pattered swiftly down the hallway. I got up, groggily.

The elevator man said: "Service ain't so bad that tenants gotta go 'round lying on floors. What's the idea, Mister?"

**I** GOT on the elevator, looked at the valise and also wondered.

Here had been attempted murder. For what? A wooden-headed, wooden-bodied image of nothing in particular, created for nothing more than amusement to the multitudes.

Or was he? The hunch was inborn that the thing in the valise was far more than that. There was something about him—or it—that called for killing.

Kill! Kill! Kill!

It kept going through my mind—dumb Mike Grady, a dick who is always a step or two behind current events. I just seem to get those kind of cases, like a kid gets cereal for breakfast. He protests a little too late, and to no avail.

But five C's is five hunnert (in Brooklyn)

and five hundred to me, coming from Brooklyn, was five more than the ten more I would get in San Francisco.

So I grabbed a train.

Well, everything was okay—peaceful like—until we rolled into Denver on the Transcontinental.

Boy! Had I met a blonde! She had stumbled into my compartment accidentally.

We had a twenty-minute stopover—and the blonde said she wanted some fresh oranges. The oranges on the train seemed fresh to me, but for a nice dame like the blonde maybe they weren't fresh enough. A dumb dick like me gets along with those kind any time—especially when he's got dough in the kick and time to kill.

I walked up 17th Street, bought a dozen oranges, and walked back under the Welcome Arch leading to the station plaza.

It happened when I was going down the ramp to the trains.

I was blissfully unaware of the crowds shoving this-and-that way around. After all, I just was killing time. We were still a good day and a half from San Francisco. I was thinking about the blonde. In a day and a half—anything can happen.

It did.

A tall, skinny guy in a down-pulled beaverskin stepped up to me as I was going down the ramp. I side-stepped, quick-like, pulling up the valise. I bumped right into an old and fat dame. She was puffing up the ramp and had her head down, plunging like a fullback bent on making three yards to goal.

Her shoulder smashed into the orange bag, splitting it, and the oranges went here and there, rolling down the ramp. I bent over, balancing the valise, trying to rescue one for my blonde doll.

That's when I found out that this time to kill between trains was the McCoy. A slug went "whoof" right past where my head had been, smashed through the valise, and pinged against the wall to my right.

I pivoted, bending low, and got a quick glimpse of the mug in the black beaverskin triggering his silenced revolver—and getting no result. That's one thing about silencers—half the time they'll jam after the first shot.

Bent on a tackle, I jumped forward.

I didn't make it, landing flush on my puss

instead, driven there by a wicked rabbit punch. My chin smacked the concrete, and there was a small blackout until I rolled over on my back and looked up at the fat dame who was ready to wallop me again with her umbrella.

A guy grabbed the umbrella and said: "Wotinell, lady? Why conk the guy?"

"The fresh thing!" she shrieked, pulling an orange from her bodice. "The nasty fresh thing! And me a respectable woman! I was only minding my own business."

She was struggling to bring down the umbrella again, but the guy holding the other end of it had it bent back over her shoulder and was giving me the bad eye.

I turned over on one elbow and reached for the shoulder holster. The mug in the beaverskin was backing away in the crowd. He gave me one frightened glance and swung behind the gaping apes that were ringing me in—and then was gone.

**W**HEN I did get my gun clear my pal on the other end of the umbrella nonchalantly kicked the automatic out of my mitt. His knee prodded the fat dame on the caboose, shunting her to the sidelines.

"Get up," he barked, and I found myself looking into the business end of a .38 police positive.

I'm dumb, but I've been around long enough to know when a serene-eyed guy can be dangerous and too calm for other people's good. And I didn't want any part of this guy. He was too calm.

I got up, very cautiously.

Being sensible, I couldn't mention that I didn't know the mug who had missed with the slug, that there was no reason for him to take a crack at me, that I'd never been in Denver before.

"What's it all about?" he said. "A man takes a punch, eh?"

That was my out. He didn't know about the silenced bullet, and I wouldn't tell him. That would have meant an investigation of several hours; the train was due to leave in five minutes.

So I played it smart, pulled out my wallet, and showed credentials as a New York private detective.

"I've been looking for a guy—a guy that had a want on him."

“What guy?”

I thought quick. “We’ve got him as Michael Eagle, a Brooklyn hood. It might be something else, but we got him as Eagle.”

“Never heard of him. What did he do?”

“Liquor hi-jacker,” I croaked. “Maybe there’s some murder mixed up in it.”

He made up his mind suddenly. “Okay, son. Go after him. Your train’s about ready to pull off.”

I went, lugging the valise.

Now I’m not one that worries as a rule, but the small hole in one side of the valise—and a larger hole to starboard—had me worried. After all, instructions had been to deliver it intact—and unharmed.

Already the outer casing had been slashed with a knife; and now a slug had gone entirely through it. And in all my experiences I’ve never known of a slug passing through something that didn’t do some harm. It’s a habit, a vicious habit, like eating tacks and nails.

I was thinking about this—and the other half of my \$1000 retainer flying out of the window on a fatalistic strike—when I pushed open the compartment door just as the train jerked and got underway.

I saw the blonde first, watched her eyebrows skate upward and her full mouth flatten out and her eyes open in amazement. It penetrated my dull noggin that this amazement wasn’t all ersatz. There could be only one answer—and it wasn’t the fact that I lacked a bag of oranges.

She hadn’t expected me to come back!

That was it. So it hadn’t been my battered puss—said not to be too unhandsome—that had prompted her to pick me up. She had put me on the spot with that gag about the oranges. She’d expected a few squirts to come my way, and those squirts weren’t supposed to be orange juice.

It didn’t make sense—even to a smart dick, and I wasn’t smart. I admit it. I just slog along in my bemused fashion, knowing that crime eventually stops like an inferior horse running on cocaine. And I’m usually right, given sufficient time and provided I’m lucky enough to be alive when the payoff numbers go up.

I put the riddled valise down, kicked the door shut and started toward the blonde. I didn’t know just what I was going to do save get answers to

questions.

“So,” a voice said from the compartment seat partly obscured when the door was open, “they shot Count von Mike?” The words didn’t make sense right away, but they stabbed prodding fingers into my mind and started whispers playing hide-and-seek among practically dormant cells. Count von Mike was an important somebody, but just who he was or why he was important was not at all important right then.

But the bald-headed, nattily-dressed guy sitting there was important—in a lousy sort of way—being no less than my employer.

I cannot say my mind was in turmoil, for it isn’t capable of much more than a lazy spin, which is practically high gear for me.

It shifted into high gear. Gradually it dawned upon me that he had known that possession of the valise called for murder—and had set me up as a stooge in a shooting gallery while he watched safely from the sidelines.

**I**N ADDITION it was apparent that he knew the blonde; they were not just chance acquaintances.

The whole setup was cockeyed. What point was there in hiring a shamus to deliver a valise, then having an accomplice see to it that the valise is not delivered safely?

In my language there’s only one way to find out such riddles.

I reached down, my left hand hooked onto his vest and shirt and he came upward. When he was up far enough my right backhanded him across his jowls four times before I permitted him to drop to the compartment seat.

At the first blow the blonde screamed and jumped forward. I kicked her feet from under her and when the lug dropped I turned to see what else she needed.

She was still on the floor, looking mad. A little automatic in her hand pointed at me, looking very mad—ominously and dangerously so.

It brought me to an abrupt halt.

She got up slowly, the gun holding steady. “Sit down, brains,” she said, “and listen to a fairy tale. Lugs like you have to learn the facts of life sometime.” I sat down abruptly. Nobody could have done anything else and stayed alive. Her eyes were rocks and she knew how to handle a

gat.

"Okay, sister," I said. "I've been put on the spot twice—once by the jerk, and once by you; and I want to know why."

"There's going to be a murder. You were just supposed to help it along."

"I—help—murder—"

"A nice clean murder—a piperoo. You wouldn't have been involved in any manner."

"Now listen, sister. Murder is murder; you don't get messed up in those things without getting yourself messed. On top of it, the victim is me. Two tries have proven that."

"I'm really sorry." She actually looked sad. "It wasn't meant to be that way. Why didn't you just let them have Count von Mike?"

"My job was to see that he was delivered safely. And whoinell, sister, is Count von Mike?"

"Remember any Sing Sing broadcasts?"

I got it then, got it good. Several years back there had been a comedy trio—one a dummy—who dominated two stooges. It was clever stuff—especially clever coming from a pen.

"You mean this guy?" I pointed to the guy out cold on the compartment seat. "And that?" My toe kicked the valise.

"Cut it out, chum," the valise growled. "This is no fun."

I took a quick look at the blonde—and, so help me, she laughed. "The Count's a really rough guy. He's very touchy, too."

"And spooky."

"Not so spooky—just tough," the guy said, sitting erect on the compartment seat. The backhands seemed to be forgotten, and apparently hadn't phased him too much.

He was looking at the holes in the valise, and I looked too—and shuddered. I was convinced that there was a human inside the valise. The voice had been as clear as that.

The shudders were not for the five C's I wouldn't get now, but the idea of lugging some midget around in a valise—and having him punctured when practically in my arms was repugnant. Also the cops toss guys in the can—and can them in steel for the duration—until they can explain why a guy should be in a valise in the first place and shot in the second place. And I couldn't explain.

The boss jerked his thumb at the valise and

said, "Give me Count van Mike."

I couldn't help it, but my hands were clammy and shaking when I grabbed the handle of the valise. I wasn't quite sure what I would find inside, but curiosity had me on a merry-go-round.

**I** NOTICED the boss' eyes as I bent over, turning the caboose to the blonde and the gat. His eyes were old and tired and sad. The hentracks around them looked like a barnyard after a rain. It came to me that such sadness was of many years' duration.

When I placed the valise on the boss' lap, he sighed and his breath was enough to send all distillery stocks skyrocketing. He was corn-cockeyed, a boozed-bosky, a lush-lalapalooza. And he was crying, the tears squeezing from his eyes, shuttling down the furrows of his cheeks, and making regular transfers from his chin to his flowing Oxford tie.

"Take a good, long look, brother," the blonde said. "Don't you know him?"

I took another look—and didn't know him.

"Maybe if he was wearing a toupee?" the blonde suggested.

Thus picturing him in my mind's eye—I got him. And holy Moses! It was the famed movie and radio ventriloquist, Harry Jergin. It was stupid that I had not recognized him before.

Now I knew what I had been carrying in the valise. He was known as Count von Mike in Sing Sing—but to the nation's audiences he was Charles Clunley—a humorous, mild-mannered dummy who was perpetually in trouble.

His trouble was real now; he was involved in attempted murder.

Jergin unlocked the valise and seated the dummy upon his lap. He caressed it and bent his head to its plastic one. There were two holes—one small, one large—in the dummy's head where the slug had passed through.

He was wearing a morning coat, a high top hat and a monocle. Jergin's hand fondly went down the back of the coat until it reached the aperture in the dummy's spine.

The dummy's mouth opened and its head swiveled and he looked up at Jergin.

"Jergin!" it said accusingly. "You're a murderer!"

"I'm not," Jergin whispered. "It's just your

imagination.”

“Imagination, hell! This hole through my head isn’t imagination. Damn it all, man, it’s a fact, an actuality! A bullet did it, a bullet you had shot at me. It’s your own fault. You engineered the whole thing.”

“I did nothing of the sort. I wouldn’t have you knocked off for anything in the world. Who deliberately would have holes punched in a meal ticket?”

“You would!” the Count whispered. And, so help me, that tricky and inanimate face actually was sorrowful and accusing.

Jergin looked down upon it in a shame-faced manner, and tears again started to roll down his cheeks.

“If it wasn’t for this dumb dick,” the dummy said, nodding at me, “I would have been kidnapped.”

Jergin’s hand raised too late to stop the last few words.

This was too much, far too much for a dumb detective. It came to me that Jergin was a slave to the dummy, that Jergin was a repressive, as the docs call it. And the dummy actually was an honest Jergin speaking Jergin’s mind as he himself was afraid to do, yet apparently unable to control himself.

Dual personality stuff is out of my sphere. I have enough trouble understanding just an ordinary sort of mug.

But this was not just one mug—there was two sides to him. And both—according to past performances—looked upon murder as inconsequential.

“What’s this about kidnapping?” I barked. “Who would want to kidnap a dummy?”

“You’d be surprised, Toots,” the blonde said, putting her toy back into the trunk women call a purse.

“You know I won’t let him be kidnaped,” I said. “I was hired to see that he was delivered safely.”

“Do you think he wants to be?”

I looked at the dummy on Jergin’s lap, and the dummy looked at me, and said: “No!”

Jergin said, “The slap-happy bum should be. He’s a killer!”

“I’m not, but you are,” the dummy said, facing Jergin. “It’s a vicious sort of death, too.”

Jergin’s hand again raised to throttle the dummy’s mouth too late.

Then he turned to me and said, “I will take care of the Count. We have a few things to talk over. How about seeing us tomorrow morning?”

Well that was quite a kiss-off, but after all he was the boss. He had hired me to protect the dummy, but now he was taking over the dummy himself. I didn’t feel right about it—but wotinell, I only work on salary.

I had nothing to say, so I walked back to my compartment, thinking of a few little touches of murder, a kidnaping to come, a screwy boss—and the correct way to sue the pants off the boss.

**WE WERE** hammering across the flats of the Continental Divide next day, the mountains under and below us on both sides, when it happened.

I was back in Jergin’s compartment. The blonde was Jean; she had told me that much. Jergin, himself, seemed bent on staying stiff. He was having a time, although a lot of it seemed double-talk, especially when he had the Count, or Charles Clunley, on his lap. It impressed me particularly that he kept referring and addressing the dummy as the Count—and not Charlie.

Dumb as I am, I smelled something about this that was Sing Sing all over again. The two attempts on my life may have had something to do with such a thought.

I was watching the scenery and I decided to leave Jergin’s compartment to go to the rear for a quick drink.

When I opened the compartment door, I saw the trigger guy in the beaverskin coming toward me. He wasn’t alone. Preceding him was a short, fat and confident lug, swarthy and heavy-joweled with a wide mouth and dinky eyes that were overlapped by bags of fat and dissipation. The scar-faced man who had tried to knife me as I left my office trailed them.

I slammed the door quick and turned to Jergin.

“They’re here again. Only now they’re triple instead of one at a time.” I reached for the shoulder holster.

Jergin’s bleary eyes seemed to clear momentarily. I thought I detected something canny and smug in their sudden glint. But at a

time like that you can never be sure of anything.

The knock on the door was loud and imperious—which seemed strange to me, seeing that the hoods must have known they were walking into a private dick's gun. They don't usually come for you with such effrontery and confidence.

I couldn't get it. The gun was flat on the side of my palm, and I bounced it suggestively.

"Put it away! Put it away, quick," Jergin ordered.

"Now listen—" I started to say.

"It's part of your job," he growled. "The rest of your fee will still be waiting in San Francisco."

I put it away and cursed myself for ever getting mixed up in anything as screwball as this. I'd been in crime before, but this thing was so unusual that I doubted that it all wasn't a dream up and over anything I had ever encountered before.

It was such a dream that it could only happen to dumb Mike Grady. It was to develop into the only murder (if you can call it that) that I ever heard of or expect to hear of where the killer went scot free. Or maybe he didn't? Maybe the victim killed himself? You figure it out. It's beyond the powers of a guy like me.

The knock sounded again on the door. Jergin picked up the Count, seated the little demon on his lap, and fondled it.

That did not make sense, either. Jergin was on the spot and knew it—and apparently did not care. He seemed inclined to play only with the dummy—the one thing that possessed the damnable part of his own most dangerous personality.

The knocking sounded again. Jergin grinned fatuously, and the dummy said: "Going to lose me?"

"I hope so," Jergin said in a sad voice. "I hope so."

The blonde said: "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition. The Count's out for murder."

Well I was quite sure now that Jergin—or all of us—was off the beam. I felt safer facing hoods. They spoke my language—so when Jergin said, "Open the door," I opened it almost thankfully.

The swarthy and confident man came in first. Trailing him was the dead-panned killer who had tried to knife me. And last of all was the mug

who'd shot the Count in the Denver station.

This cluck grinned at me and said: "You were born lucky."

I looked him over and knew it was true. "You weren't!"

"Shuddup and shut the door," the swarthy leader said, never looking at me. He was grinning toothily at Jergin and the dummy, like he had found his long-lost love.

**J**ERGIN was looking at me and his eyes were silently saying to play it smart.

I shut the door and pressed my back against it.

The gun said, "You were born lucky," and reached, beneath my coat and took my automatic.

I was boiling, but Jergin still was looking at me and nodding his head.

I don't like to be pushed around, but if obeying orders calls for pushing around—I'll push—up to a certain extent.

"This man, Count, was the one who tried to stab you and had you shot," Jergin said to the dummy. "His name is—"

"His name is Casso," the dummy mumbled. "Why you know I met him eight years ago. He's a high-binder from the word go—"

Jergin's hand raised, and—so help me—he slapped the dummy right across the puss, shutting it up.

The dummy rolled its glass eyes and looked despondently at Jergin.

"Listen," said Casso. "Don't ever hit that kid. Give him to me." He reached out, crooking his right arm.

"I don't want to go with Casso," the dummy said in a childish voice. "With him I'm mute, without character, and a killer—"

"What's he mean—killer?" Casso growled.

"I wouldn't know," Jergin said. "He says the damndest things." He passed over the Count to Casso. It was only later that, in analyzing the conversation, that I ever knew a man to tell another—before witnesses—that he would be killed. But—through the Count—Jergin did just that.

Jergin looked from the Count to Casso, and his eyes filled with tears again.

"G'bye, Count," he said.

"Say! What the hell!" The Count did not

sound like the Count at all. His modulated voice was gone. It was harsh, rasping and uncertain.

"Cute, aren't they?" the gun said to me. He was pretty confident about the whole thing. His scar-faced pal had seated himself near the blonde and was devoting his time between ogling her and Casso and the dummy.

"Yeah, Very cute. Clever, too."

The dummy in Casso's arms looked up into his face and said: "What's this, boss?"

"A snatch, kid,—a snatch."

"Now lookit here," the dummy said plaintively. "After all, I don't amount to much."

"You amount to one quarter of a million bucks!"

"My! My! You don't say so. Why for?"

"Because without you the great Jergin and his movie and radio rights cannot click. You're half of the act."

"So I am. So I am. I never thought of that before. A quarter of a million. My, oh, my! And here I've been selling my services to Jergin for a buck and a half a week. You have something there, pal."

"This will probably be the first time in history that a kidnaping did not concern a human being," Jergin said, looking out the window. "How did you figure that angle out, Casso?"

"Just figuring it safe, cluck. I don't want to go back to Sing Sing. They can't put you in the can for kidnaping a dummy."

"No, I suppose not."

"But what will you be without him. Contracts will be cancelled; it'll wash you up unless you bail him out."

Jergin took a long while to answer. "I suppose you're right."

"Yes, without the Count you're just a bum—like you were before I met you. This quarter million is just an old debt you owe, chum."

Casso started for the door, Scarface yawned, and the gun near me repeated, "You were born lucky."

I took him at his word when the train gave a slight lurch and the gun leaned toward the blonde.

I let fly with a left, clipping him alongside the head. My right hand grabbed his rod.

Casso cursed—and so did the boss. Scarface reached under his belt and came out with a gleaming stiletto. A lucky shot knocked it out of

his hand and the hand out of action.

I swung around and had both the gun and Casso in line of fire. Everything was under control.

The mistake I made was turning my back on the blonde. The blow came so suddenly and unexpectedly the whole train seemed to buckle and jump upward as the floor came up and hit me.

Vaguely I saw Casso heave the Count past me and saw him reach for his gun.

**T**WICE I triggered rapidly. Casso stood upright, but Scarface went down folding both hands across his stomach.

The blonde behind me screamed. Jergin made a grab for the Count.

The gun got to him first—and pulled him up under his right arm.

Outside the compartment I could hear passengers screaming. Then Casso's gun leveled down upon me and spat flame.

I felt nothing. The head just jerked. There was no feeling of pain. Oblivion swooped.

It was later in a Provo, Utah, hospital that I awoke. The bullet had only creased the skull—but now that crease hurt like the Devil incarnate.

There was a forlorn feeling, like you feel when you mess up an important job. There were cops and nurses and doctors there; but they weren't too inquisitive about me.

They seemed to be interested mostly in Jergin, who was in the next bed. There didn't seem to be much wrong with him save an egg-sized lump on his head.

"I tell you," he was telling the police, "it was a robbery—no more—no less—just a robbery."

He did not mention the Count—and so I kept mum about that even without being asked. I, too, was curious.

The questioning of Jergin went on. Casso and the gun, it developed, had made their getaway. But I'd killed Scarface, and Casso had nearly killed the blonde.

It was hard to control myself until the cops finished their questioning. I wanted to ask Jergin a few myself.

Finally that opportunity came.

Jergin came out with it himself.

"Mike Grady," he called softly from the next bed. "Are you awake, Mike Grady?"

"Yes." Doubtfully.

"I'm sorry about you having to risk your life."

"Yeah?"

"That's right. I didn't plan it that way. I just thought they would take the Count away from you."

"If you wanted him taken away by hoods, why didn't you just hold onto him yourself?"

"I wanted to make it look important—that I was trying to protect him. That he was of great value to me."

"Isn't he?"

"As a dummy—no. As a killer for the next two months—yes."

Well, if I hadn't been flat on my back in the first place, that crack would have laid me there.

How could a dummy kill?

"Casso just got out of Sing Sing," Jergin whispered. "I knew he was coming for me—and I knew how he would figure—that he wanted the Count."

"Yes?"

"You look like an okay guy. If you think I should be turned in—go ahead. But after all—I'm not killing Casso."

"Casso's being killed?"

"Yes. Minute-by-minute. While he waits for me to ransom the Count, the dummy he kidnapped is slowly killing him."

This was a different Jergin than the one on the train. There was something intense, urgent and sincere in his voice. I found myself liking him. There was something plaintive, appealing and honest about him as he discussed murder-in-the-making.

"Call it poetic justice, if you will," he said softly. "It goes back fifteen years."

I waited tensely, swearing to myself that Jergin was to land in the brig for what he had done to me. He sounded like a killer.

"I was an interne at a hospital," he said. "I was in love with a nurse. We had a small tube of radium worth a quarter of a million dollars. And that's what Casso meant when he set that value on the Count. He came in with his mob and raided the room in which my sweetheart was working. To get the tube he had to kill her.

"I heard the shot and came running, only to be taken as a hostage and shield as Casso made

his getaway. The mob fled to Pennsylvania and there had to bury the radium tube."

"Why bury it?"

"Ever hear of radium poisoning?"

"Sure."

"It causes osteomyelitis, an infection of the bones. Radium makes them gradually disintegrate. It's a very painful death."

"But sure death?"

"Right. It's impossible to counteract."

**“WHAT** happened in the Pennsylvania hideout?"

Jergin shrugged. "I was held captive for weeks. The New York papers—and the police, of course—because of my disappearance—got the idea that I was a member of the gang. The gang finally was captured. I told the truth, but Casso swore I actually was a member of the gang to weaken my testimony against him. When the gang was convicted I, too, was sent away—and for the murder of my own sweetheart. It was heartbreak, Mike; nutty as all get out—but true.

His voice was husky and just looking into his sad eyes and the hentracks surrounding them, I knew he was speaking the truth.

"I had always been interested in ventriloquism," he said, "so when in the big house I made Count von Mike. He started me on my career."

"But where does Casso come into the picture?"

"He's a fair ventriloquist of sorts—and he loves the Count."

"You're out of business when he has him."

"No—nothing of the sort. I'm going to stay off the air and out of films for a couple of months, making Casso believe I cannot operate without the Count. In any business you take insurance. I wouldn't take a chance on having just one Count von Mike. Some hoodlum dumber than Casso might have thought of kidnaping him."

"That's right, too. But who was the blonde?"

Jergin looked away, then turned his head slowly again. "She was the sister of the girl I was to marry. I guess I'll marry her now. All she's been living for was the day when Casso would walk into his own trap—and die."

"Casso die? How can anyone arrange that?"

"Well, that's up to you to decide. I certainly

am not knocking him off—and neither is the Count. Casso brought it all upon himself when he put on the snatch.”

“Now look,” I said, “that sounds nuts.”

“Okay—it’s nuts; but look at it this way: I’ve been out of the pen for eight years. Casso only got out last week. Only a few of us knew where that tube of radium was buried. I got to it first, and I knew Casso would come looking for me. Either the tube or one-quarter million. Both would have been the same. You were simply stage dressing.

“Well, he got the Count—and the tube that I put inside the Count—a few days ago. There wasn’t very much radium in that tube, Mike—only a very little in fact; that was the important thing. You see, the quantity wasn’t large enough to kill a man quickly, the way being in contact with a large amount can do. There isn’t enough to hurt a man

who was just in contact for a little while. But Casso’s going to be in contact with it for a long time, Mike—and for long periods at a time. I know him, he loves the Count, loves to sit it on his lap and practice ventriloquism. Get it?”

I got it—and I also got my other \$1000, for I never told Jergin’s story.

Casso happily bounced the Count on his knee for a little more than two months, until he was forced to go into a hospital. The Count was found—and the tube of radium returned to its original hospital. Casso died.

The Count is back in the movies and on the air again, but I never hear the act without repressing a shudder. Did either Jergin or the Count kill Casso, or did Casso kill himself? At any rate, as Jergin said—it’s what you’d call poetic justice.

**THE END**