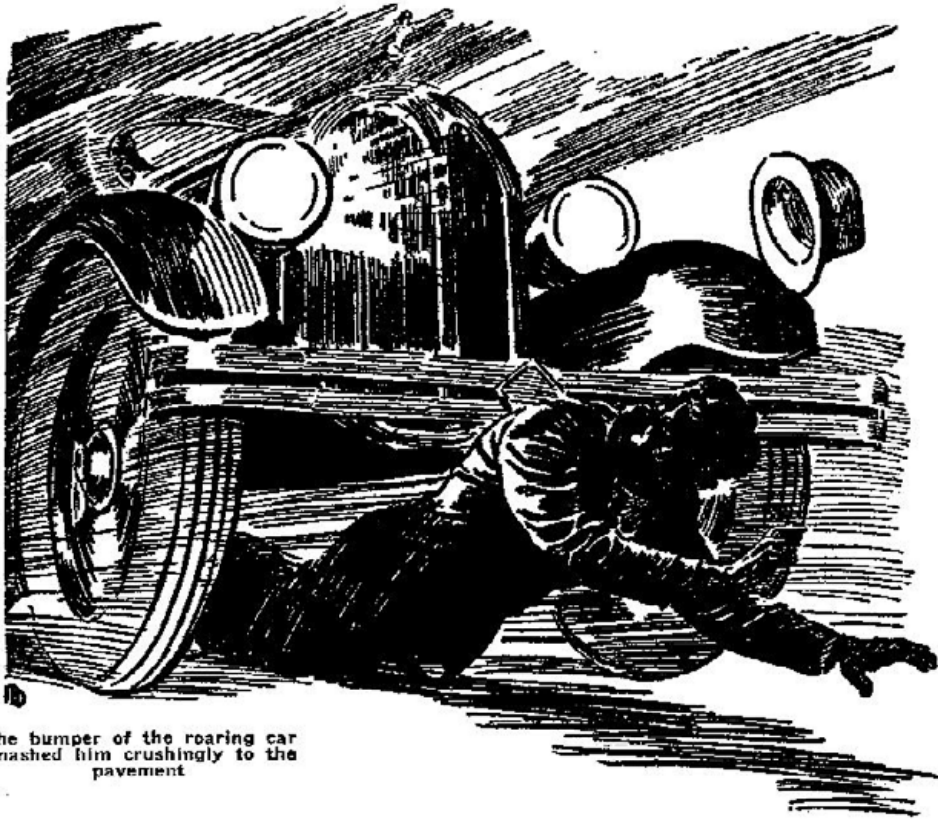


MURDER ON WHEELS

By **LEO HOBAN**

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The bumper of the roaring car smashed him crushingly to the pavement

Detective Ruppert Did All His Sleuthing in His Armchair— But It Took More Than That to Send a Killer to the Hot Seat!

AT FIRST glance the accident seemed but another hit-and-run casualty of the everyday variety.

Valia Cacchione was just stepping from the curb of the sidewalk when the big sedan raced down the street to intercept his path. Cacchione's face was white and startled as he made a desperate attempt to leap behind the protecting framework of the El column, across the way.

The sedan, tires screaming under the abrupt twist of the steering wheel, swerved madly from its course. It headed directly for the helpless pedestrian. Cacchione never had a chance. He threw his arms

over his face a split second before the bumper of the roaring car smashed him crushingly to the pavement. He was killed instantly.

The sedan, swaying wildly from the impact, held its path on the narrow street until it reached the corner. There the panicky driver, depending on a skid to take the car clear, cut too sharply, crashed into an El girder. There was the scream of rent metal, clash of steel against iron, and the left side of the car caved in.

Through the broken windshield a dazed figure crawled painfully out onto the hood. He slid down into the street,

wavered on his feet for a few moments, then staggered on into the protecting darkness of the avenue.

A ROUTINE hit-and-run accident shouldn't have interested First Grade Detectives Arthur Ruppert and Luke Wise. But, grim-faced and furious, they were interested.

For both were still squirming from the bitter tongue-lashing the inspector had turned upon them earlier in the evening. He had had them on the carpet for more than twenty minutes. Five fatal hit-and-run accidents within their district during the past month. And thus far, not a single arrest!

They had just begun their routine check-up of the previous accident reports, with the heavy black sedan mentioned in three of them, when the flash announcing Cacchione's accident came in at Headquarters.

It was dapper Detective Wise, agile and blunt-spoken, who checked the license plates of the abandoned sedan. They proved to be phonies, which fact, strangely enough, was highly encouraging.

For the fictitious plates seemed to bear out the inspector's contention that the "accidents" hadn't been accidents, but willful murders—murders competently executed.

It was the senior member of the sleuthing team, Detective Ruppert, ponderous, gray-haired and efficient, who ordered chemists to restore, through acid application, the engine number of the sedan. A chisel had been used to obliterate the number, but the job had been bungled. An hour's work under lights in the street, and the chemists announced their findings. A quick check-up with Records finished the job.

The sedan had been sold to Peter Annel, unemployed. He had a petty

criminal record as long as a gorilla's arm and a puny mind the animal would have scorned.

Detective Wise was optimistic, as usual, when driving Detective Ruppert to the dismal rooming house address on Vine Street, Annel's last known address.

"It's a cinch," he said. "This monkey, like all jail-simple punks, suddenly goes wacky and vicious and gets even with all his enemies. But he don't do it, man-to-man. Protected himself, he just has his hack mow them down. A safe way and a cowardly way that'd be just like him and—"

"But done too efficiently for Annel to figure out by himself," Ruppert pointed out. "There's something much bigger here than appears on the surface. And where did a punk like Annel get the sugar to buy the sedan?"

Detective Wise pulled at his small mustache.

"I guess, as usual, you're right, chief. Only this thing is screwy."

"I hope that is all it is, but I've a hunch it's another Murder, Inc.," Ruppert said ominously.

It was early dawn, but, strangely, there was a small crowd gathered near the curb of Annel's rooming house. A hefty Swede, with handlebar mustache and a short flannel nightgown that ballooned in the mild breeze, was gesticulating wildly. He kept swiveling his head and looking up the street as if expecting unwanted trouble.

Wise braked the car and was out of the coupe and peering up at the Swede before slow-footed and paunchy Ruppert lumbered forward.

The Swede put his hand against Wise's chest and pushed him aside. He walked directly to Ruppert.

"You a cop?" he asked. That was Ruppert for you; he wasn't only a first-rate officer, but one who took his job so

seriously that his profession had left its indelible imprint. Ruppert was a walking billboard that screamed “Law.”

“Yes—detective,” Ruppert said. “What goes on?”

“Murder!” the Swede grumbled. “And in my rooming house, too. I run a respectable dump and some tramp sneaks in the second floor rear room and—”

WISE bounded up the brownstone steps. Ruppert took the Swede by the arm and propelled him into the smelly corridor.

Annel lay supine, tongue protruding, glazed eyes bulging. One of his socks had been placed around his throat and twisted into a knot that still remained a tangled mass of loose skeins at the back of his neck.

Death had come silently—and efficiently.

The room had been ransacked. The three drawers of a bureau had been carefully placed one atop another after their contents had been spilled on the floor.

“Who turned on the lights?” Ruppert demanded.

The Swede looked vague.

“I dunno. That’s why I came in. I wanted to ask this guy if he thought he was in some hotel that don’t mind people burning lights until dawn. I found this.”

The bed on which Annel’s body lay showed no signs of a struggle. Only a deep depression where his head had been pressed against the pillow was indicative of violence.

Wise had been prowling around like a caged mountain lion, strangely quiet.

“Any other entrance to this room?” Ruppert asked.

“No,” the Swede said, “and no way into the building except by the front door. The back door got warped during the last

rainy spell and won’t open for nobody no more.”

Two cruisermen entered the room. Seeing Ruppert and Wise, they looked relieved.

“We got a call there’d been a bump-off,” one said. “Sure glad to see you men here. Now we—”

“You can take over and have the morgue Maria move up,” Ruppert said lazily. “We’ve checked. We’ll go over your reports later. Come on, Wise.”

“But, chief, there’s something missing,” Wise said.

“I noticed. Come on.”

Riding in the coupe again, Wise turned his head.

“Annel’s pants are missing,” he said. “Why shouldn’t them trousers of the punk’s been around?”

“I don’t know.” Ruppert was frowning in concentration. “But we got more important things to check than looking for a lost pair of britches. We’re going to go back over all these hit-and-run cases and we’re going to find out why people have been getting run down by this sedan.”

“I knew it was murder,” Wise said enthusiastically. “Why, this Annel really was doing a wholesale business an’—”

“What we got to find,” Ruppert said glumly, “is who he was doing the killing for. There’s gotta be a good reason to explain why Annel himself got knocked off when he had to leave the sedan behind him. Whoever hired him knew he was a punk that would talk under pressure. So Annel got bumped.”

“And his pants are gone.”

“Yes,” Ruppert echoed softly, “and his pants are gone.”

THE first hit-and-run victim had been Sam Locke. He had widowed a buxom woman and seven children, neighbors said. After the accident, the

widow and her family had moved away from their tenement apartment, leaving town. Money from somewhere had stilled the flow of the widow's tears.

The second hit-and-run victim had been Thomas Carter. His widow, gay and smiling, had remarried. She and her new husband had opened a sour smelling tavern near the docks on the insurance money left her.

The fifth victim had been Grandici. His modest home was neat and clean, his widow young and pretty. He left nothing. The widow now worked in a five-and-ten.

In each of these cases, witnesses reported, the black sedan had been the death car.

"We'll take these three and come back to the other two cases if we have to," Ruppert said. "Now, let's go eat."

Wise had the reports before him, spread across his desk. He was shifting the vari-colored papers of the first, second and final reports, making neat piles of them.

"You go eat," he said shortly. He sounded excited. "I'm going to get the reports on those other two cases. Something is adding up here."

"Sometimes," Ruppert said, "you act like a cub newspaperman. Always getting het up and seeing spooky little men that aren't there. And sometimes I wonder how you ever made first-grade."

Wise grinned. "Because we crack these cases, chief. I look them up; you figure the angles out; and then we bust them wide-open together. I go too far at times; you don't go far enough at times—so at all times we got balance."

"That isn't what the inspector thinks," Ruppert said glumly. "He sorta intimated we were unbalanced for overlooking these hit-and-run cases, and that maybe the Department would prosper if our rating fell off from first-grade."

"I don't think," Wise said, "we're going to fall off this one. We'll probably get decorated for cracking it so fast."

"Yeah, we'll get decorated with Bronx cheers." Ruppert moved ponderously through the doorway. Wise made his way swiftly to the Records room.

When Ruppert returned, Wise had his fedora pulled far down over his eyes, his back flat against the chair, his legs extended. When he looked up, his dapper mustache was drooping in discouragement.

"I should have ate, too," he said glumly.

Ruppert let it go at that. He was accustomed to Wise's moods—flying high one moment, in the depths the next, then bouncing back again to abrupt exuberance.

NEXT night, going on duty, Wise popped into the detectives' lounge, frantically signaling for Ruppert to come outside.

He was excited, trying to keep his voice confidential in the crowded corridor.

"The morgue just released Annel's body to Pettricio's Mortuary. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Yeah," Ruppert said, "it means that the punk is gonna be planted."

"But you don't understand," Wise said. "Going through those five reports this morning, this Pettricio's name kept cropping up. He received three of the bodies. Then everything comes down when two of the five bodies don't go to his mortuary, but to Cleneger's."

"So what?" Ruppert snorted. "They're the only two decent morgues in that district."

"And both cheap, neither charitable."

"Right."

Wise punched his index finger against Ruppert's broad chest.

“That’s what makes this look phoney. The three hit-and-run knockoffs who got insurance cash got nice funerals at Pettricio’s. Two of the stiff’s didn’t leave anything behind but families and best wishes. Cleneger buried them without no razz-ma-taw. But he didn’t get Annel’s body, and from our search and the reports made by the cruiserman Annel didn’t have a dime, not even a pair of pants.”

“Proving what?”

“Just this. Annel didn’t leave any relatives. Pettricio, saying he was Annel’s friend, said he didn’t want him to be buried in no Potter’s Field, that he would plant him nice. He claimed the body. Pettricio wouldn’t do that for anybody. He’s nuts over money. We know it, everybody in the district knows it. It don’t add up. Nobody was Annel’s friend, especially Pettricio.”

Ruppert considered.

“Maybe you’ve hit on something. Isn’t much to go on. But let’s go pay our regrets to Annel and have a chat with Pettricio. Maybe he can tell us something about these other funerals where people ran but still got hit.”

Wise was darting the coupe through the heavy traffic, weaving it agitatedly in short dashes with sudden stops, then spurting again. Even his driving was indicative of his temperament.

“When I went to eat this morning,” Ruppert said, musingly, “I found a back door open. It was the Swede’s. Somebody, a very strong guy, had gone back to Annel’s room. It took a strong guy to open that door. Maybe a strong guy opened and closed it around dawn?”

“It was a strong guy who held Annel pressed against the bed so hard he couldn’t even squirm,” Wise said. “Some guy he wasn’t afraid of, some guy he knew and trusted and—”

“And that lets out Pettricio,” Ruppert pointed out. “He’s just a small a pop-eyed weasel with all his weight in his belly.”

Wise’s mustache drooped and the coupe stopped jitterbugging in excited dashes.

“Damn,” Wise said, “you’re right.”

WISE still was silent and depressed when the pair entered the mortuary. Pettricio’s office was deserted. In the chapel an ornate casket, surrounded by flowers, was bleakly alone.

It contained the body of a giant of a man, small of head and mammoth of jaw, the wide shoulders bulging against the sides of the casket.

“For a guy nobody apparently cares about,” Ruppert opined, “he’s getting a nice casket and plenty of flowers. Mourners usually buy flowers . . . and this guy ain’t got no mourners.”

“Maybe he left dough for his own funeral. “Lonesome guys often do.”

“Dough,” Ruppert said. “Dough. Let’s look up Annel.”

They found Annel’s body in the back on the slab. The room reeked of formaldehyde.

The muscular attendant, in his undershirt, his front covered by a rubber apron, was using his thumbs on the corpse’s protruding eyes. When the thumbs came away Annel’s eyes bulged no longer. The eyelids were closed.

“Nice work,” Ruppert said. “Whaddya do with that thick, black tongue of his now?”

The attendant spun about.

“What do you men want? Nobody allowed back here.”

Ruppert flashed his shield.

“Just looking,” he said in his best official manner. “This was a murder case, you know.” Wise was prowling about the

room, disregarding the corpse. His eyes were avid.

"It's a murder case no more," the attendant said, "as far as I'm concerned. We got a release for this stiff and he's mine. You'll find the papers in the boss's office."

Ruppert turned on his heel and strode out into the chapel.

"Total release from the morgue, huh?" Wise queried the man.

"Total."

"When do you plant him?"

"I don't know. That's up to the boss. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. It don't matter. He has no relatives. I don't care. My job is to make him look nice."

"Nice work if you can get it," Wise said. "What you dressing him in?"

The attendant jerked his thumb at the tied bundle of clothing still marked with the cardboard morgue number.

Ruppert lumbered into the room. His wide eyes were narrowed. He was taking quick puffs on a black cigar that he rolled back and forth across his mouth.

"How long has Pettricio been agent here for the Star Accident and Casualty Company?" he asked. Ruppert carried two policies and a practicing license in his hand.

"Six or eight months—I don't know," the attendant said. "I got a policy. It's cheap and they give you a good funeral. Notice what the stiff in the chapel is getting, and him without no relatives to see to it that contracts are carried out. The boss knows his stuff."

"I guess so," Ruppert grudgingly admitted. "He sells 'em policies at a nice commission and cashes in a second time when he plants them. You can't beat a combination like that—as long as business remains good."

"It's been good, pretty good!"

"I know it. Let's go, Wise. We got

some checking to do."

"What shall I tell the boss?" the attendant called after them.

"Just say we were glad to find out he was an insurance agent."

THE pair sat at Headquarters, Ruppert at ease, Wise drumming his fingers nervously.

"Take it easy. He'll plant both the stiffs tonight, or I'm no detective," Ruppert predicted.

"Detective, hah!" Wise fumed. "Sitting around on your chair doing nothing—"

The telephone rang.

Wise grabbed the receiver, then smashed it down on the cradle.

"Come on," he yelled at his mate. "Pettricio is planting them both, has just loaded both caskets into one hearse."

Ruppert moved with surprising speed.

"Drive it, Wise, drive it," he urged. "We gotta make the cemetery first. I want to see this."

Wise clamped his foot all the way down on the gas, the coupe going hell-bent for destruction or a record.

The two open graves were side-by-side. A pair of grave-diggers stood atop the high mound of fresh earth, cigarettes dangling from their lips.

Ruppert flashed his shield. Wise talked. The diggers disappeared into the darkness, minus overalls and muddied caps.

The hearse pulled up.

"Give a hand here," Pettricio yelled.

Decrepit hats pulled low, dressed in overalls, Ruppert and Wise approached. Pettricio was alone.

"We'll let 'em down by hand," he ordered. "No formalities. Pull out the boxes now. I got business to attend to tonight. The heavy casket goes in the right hole, the other in the left."

Ruppert and Wise struggled between

tombstones with one casket and placed it near an open grave.

Pettricio held a flashlight on them and puffed furiously on a cigar. His derby was cocked over one eye.

The second casket was lighter in weight. It was placed near the second open grave.

"Drop 'em quick," Pettricio said. "Fill up the graves."

"Now, we can't do that, Mr. Pettricio," Ruppert said in a sad voice. "You know we gotta sign papers in the morning that we buried a body and not a lump of lead. We gotta take a quick look to make sure."

"What the hell," Pettricio said. Then, "Go ahead."

Wise already was prying at the lid of the lighter casket. When he pulled up the lid and Pettricio used his flash on the corpse, Ruppert said almost sorrowfully:

"Pettricio, you're under arrest!"

Ruppert shouldn't have taken a desperate and canny man for granted. Pettricio leaped over the casket. A split second later he spun about, a pistol in his hand that lanced flame.

Ruppert staggered back, clutching at his shoulder. Wise went forward in a flat dive, hearing the hungry drone of bullets near his head. His shoulder crashed against Pettricio's legs, driving him prone. Wise's fist raised and descended twice, and Pettricio lay still. He was ready for the hot seat.

"GO over it again, boys," the inspector said next morning. "You tell it, Ruppert. It'll take Wise too long."

Ruppert, his arm and shoulder in a sling, smiled at Wise.

"Well, Wise found it out, I figured it out, and this Pettricio lug walked into it.

"Pettricio confessed that he had ordered this dumb Annel to knock off some of the policyholders who had

contracted with him on signing of the policy to splurge on funerals. There's not much of an angle in that, even if he did collect twice through commission and funeral expenses.

"But Pettricio added another item, which this dumb Annel had stumbled upon and which he held over Pettricio's head to guarantee his own life. Pettricio would plant his victims, then dig 'em up again, making one hundred per cent on the deal, and then selling the bodies to some crazy doctor, Maurice, for experimental purposes. Dr. Maurice also is in the can.

"The guy who did the digging-up was this big guy in the other casket, a moron. When Annel cracked up that sedan he called Pettricio and told him what had happened. Pettricio couldn't take a chance on the squirt talking, so he and his gorilla broke in through the back door of the rooming house. While the gorilla held the numbskull, Pettricio strangled him with his own sock. Later, Pettricio bumped the gorilla to keep him from talking.

"This Pettricio was smart. To see how far he could trust this Annel on his first job, he had him bump a man who wasn't a policyholder. He thought if anything went wrong, it couldn't be traced to him. Still another time this dumb Annel killed the wrong guy. These two didn't get real funerals, but at least Pettricio didn't dare do anything with their bodies."

"What was the evidence Annel held over Pettricio?" the inspector asked. "What you had against him amounted to no more than circumstantial evidence when you made the arrest."

"Annel's pants!"

"Pants!"

"Yes. Wise figured it out that the cluck was a real jailbird. Our records show it. Real jailbirds don't like to be shaken down completely for all their dough. Some like to bring marijuana inside with them, too.

They have secret little pockets in which to carry things. Annel's was in the seam of his trousers' seat, near the top. He had once threatened Pettricio that his pants could put Pettricio in the electric chair. So, after the kill, he copped the pants and tried to bury whatever secret they contained along with Annel. That was a mistake."

"It sure was," Wise said. "Annel didn't have no pants when found. But when we opened the casket he was wearing them.

"In the seam-pocket we found Annel's record of bump-offs and what he got paid for each—and by whom."

"Hmm," the inspector said, "one pair of britches turns out to be a bookkeeper and an executioner. They were a wonderful pair of pants."

"But the seat," Wise said, glancing in his partner's direction, "was a little worn and thin, like maybe the guy liked sitting down and didn't believe working for a living was worthwhile."