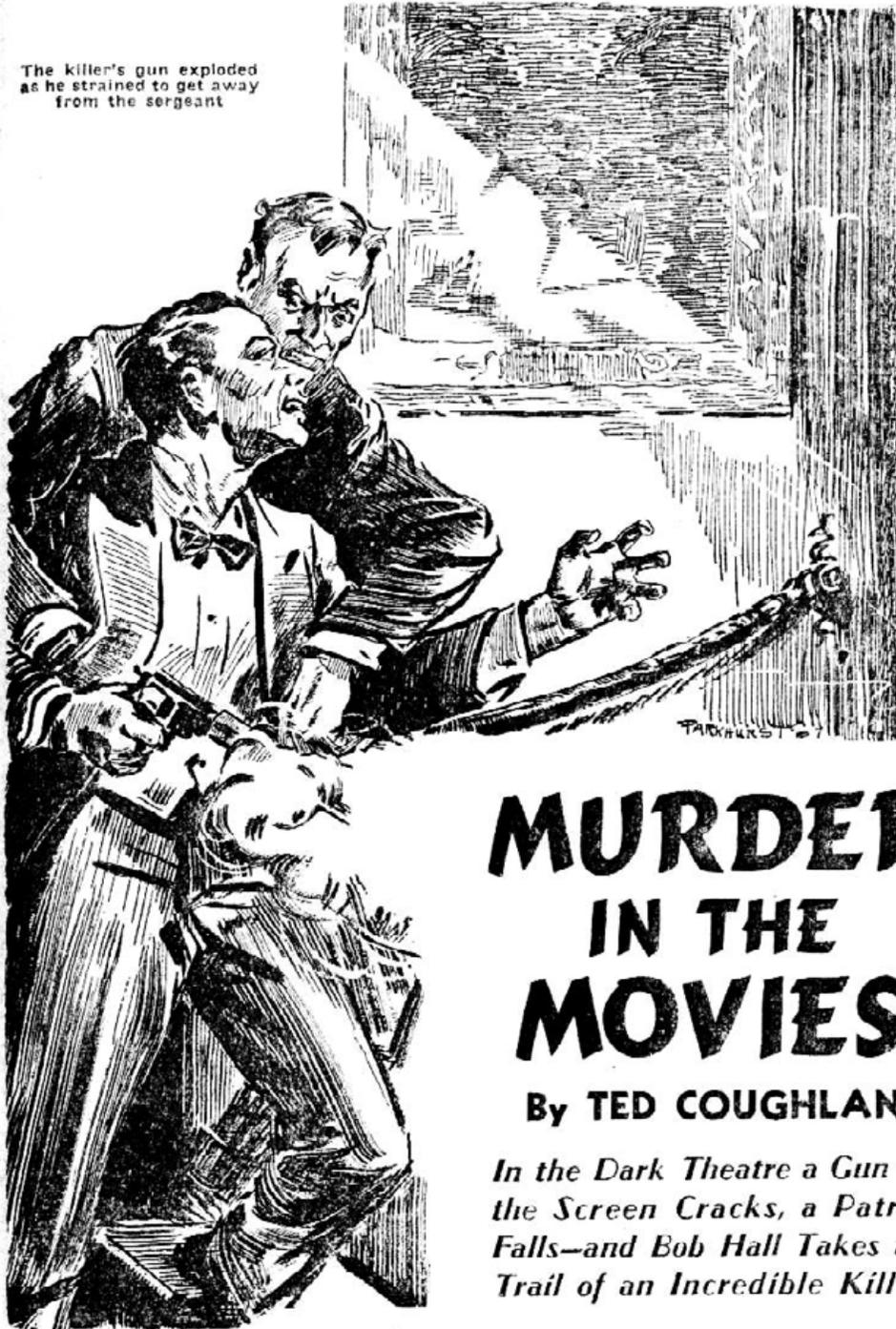


The killer's gun exploded as he strained to get away from the sergeant



## MURDER IN THE MOVIES

By TED COUGHLAN

*In the Dark Theatre a Gun on the Screen Cracks, a Patron Falls—and Bob Hall Takes the Trail of an Incredible Killer!*

**B**OB HALL was so absorbed in following the fast action on the movie screen that for a while he nearly forgot certain deplorable facts—one of which was the uncomfortable knowledge that he had been fired from his

job as reporter on "The Miami Standard."

It was hardly noon yet and the Princess Theatre had just opened for the matinee run. Only a sprinkling of patrons dotted the darkened auditorium, one here, another there, a few up in the balcony. Hall rubbed

absently at the dollar-sized bald spot on the back of his head, in a characteristic gesture, and kept his alert blue eyes glued to the screen.

Half way through the film he decided he was too close to the screen for best vision and he got up, moved back several rows in the nearly empty theatre and lowered his well-upholstered body into another seat.

The shots on the screen came suddenly and without warning. There had been no buildup. The villain of the piece just abruptly decided on a resort to arms and went for his gat. It spat fire and noise and a girl somewhere in the rear of the auditorium let out a startled squeal and then laughed audibly to cover her confusion.

The villain's target, the fellow on the screen, escaped injury, stayed on his feet—which seemed strange, because the flame from that lethal weapon had lanced out so convincingly that an imaginative man like Hall could almost feel the shock of the bullet.

Perhaps the lone man sitting several rows ahead of Hall had even more imagination, for now the edge of Hall's vision caught sight of him slumping from his seat to the floor.

Instantly the ex-reporter's eyes and attention focused on the place where the man had been sitting. It was weird, to say the least—almost as though the slug from that gun on the screen had nipped past its intended victim to reach right out into the auditorium after another.

Hall got up. He was quiet about it, for he didn't want to start a panic. Even a few people could make a big commotion, once they got started. He edged in from the aisle and sat down in the seat next to the victim. His eyes, accustomed now to the dark, took in the heavy form wedged there

between the seats, huddled and still on the carpeted floor.

THE man was humped over, on his knees, almost in a position of prayer. His head was drooped on his outflung arms, and in the faint glow from the screen Hall could see blood at the base of the skull. The position of the wound left no doubt at all that the victim was dead.

As a newspaper man and police reporter, Hall had seen death in many forms, become almost immune to scenes of violence. But somehow this got him for a moment. Maybe it was the liquor he had had the night before—the too-much liquor that had gotten him a curt “You're fired, Hall,” from the city editor that morning.

Anyway, he stared down at that huddled form with the ugly smear of red on the heavy neck, and his stomach twisted inside him. No one else seemed to have noticed. The picture went on, the sound track spilling its continuing dialogue into the now slowly filling auditorium.

Something about the man at his feet registered a note of familiarity, rang a bell in his mind, but he couldn't at the moment say just what it was. What he did know was that this was cold-blooded murder, and it might have come from anywhere, from any direction. He felt a chill ripple up his spine as he let his eyes turn slowly here and there, seeking movement that might have special significance. There was nothing.

Hall walked down the aisle, found a uniformed usher standing with arms folded, beside the rear rail of the auditorium.

“Where is Mr. Barnes?” he asked.

Barnes was the manager. Hall knew him, had been often in the theatre on his newspaper man's pass.

"I think he's—there he is now, sir." The boy jerked a finger at a tall, slender man approaching from the direction of the theatre office.

Hall stopped him. "Oh, Barnes."

"Yes? Oh, hello, Hall. What's bothering you?"

Hall shoved a thumb in the direction of the body.

"Little matter of a murder, it would seem."

"A—murder?"

The theatre man appeared to be thoroughly unnerved, and his voice came in a croak.

"Up there, about the fifteenth row. Somebody shot him during the shooting on the screen. Better call the police. Also, don't let anyone in or out." He turned to the usher.

"Did you see anyone leave in the last minute or two?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Hall," The usher's eyes were wide. "What—who?"

Barnes, white as a ghost, got hold of himself with a visible effort and went into action.

"The feature's nearly over," he said. "If we turn the lights up—"

"Don't turn the lights up," Hall snapped. "Run a short comedy—a news reel—anything, until the police get here and take charge. We don't want anyone running out on us, and we have no authority to hold them."

Barnes phoned the projection room, gave quick orders, then hurried to the ticket window.

"Don't sell any more admissions, Marge, until you have further orders." Then he turned to two ushers standing near. "Frankie, you and Charles close the doors, and see that they stay closed, except for the police."

Barnes hurried to the office, dialed the police station number, gave his

information and hung up. Then he lighted a cigarette, inhaled a deep drag and let it out nervously.

"Whew," he breathed. "This is terrible, Hall."

"Yeah," Bob Hall said. He lighted a cigarette, too, turned it slowly in his fingers, thinking. "If you don't mind," he continued, "I'll do a spot of phoning, myself."

"Help yourself, man," the manager said, and went out, smoke trailing agitatedly over the smooth shoulder of his tuxedo coat.

Hall released smoke between his teeth, blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed the phone. He scrubbed at that bald spot on the back of his head with a big, blunt-fingered hand.

**S**UDDENLY, in the silence of the empty room, he heard the relentless hammers of his hangover beating a dirge on the inside of his skull. For a little while, watching the picture, he had forgotten the night before, even forgotten Pete Parker's harsh "You're fired!"

"Fired," he muttered now, half aloud. "Hmmm. Could be. Or maybe not. We'll see."

He picked up the phone, dialed swiftly. When he had the raspy voice of the cadaverous city editor on the other end of the wire, he began to parley.

"Hall," he drawled. "Bob Hall—with a story."

The city editor informed him, in verbal blueprint, just where he could go with his story.

Hall grinned. "Okay—but you'll be soorry. G'bye, ostrich."

"Hey, wait a minute, you overfed ape. What you got?"

"Small item of a murder. Bob Hall, witness to a fatal shooting in a gin mill and chief witness for the prosecution in said

shootin' affair, now comin' before the courts—walks into a movie palace and sees a gent gunned down by a slug from the screen. Spectacular, and it's—"

"You have the wrong number," interrupted the raspy voice. "This is the Miami Standard, not the home for inebriates."

Hall crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray with a vehement gesture, and now he was not smiling.

"Look, Parker," he said. "I was within twenty feet of our friend John Waycross, when the gunman got him at the Green Eagle bar six months ago. That was an inside story, because Waycross was rich and important, and I was on the spot to give you a fast tip on it, and an exclusive story.

"On the strength of that—remember?—you gave this here wandering newshound a job on your crummy sheet, and—"

"And because you were due up today to testify for the D. A. in that Waycross thing, I gave you last evening and today off—and you go right down to the Green Eagle and get tanked to the snoot."

"Reliving the event, my friend, the better to tell the twelve good men and true all the gruesome details of how David Jordan shot John Waycross. Stop, look and listen, chief. This is the payoff. Murder must like the cut of my jib; because just now in the Princess Theatre I was closer to another victim than I was to Waycross."

"Murder—in the movies?" Hall heard the note of interest and excitement in Parker's voice.

"Yeah. And you could be in on the ground floor if you liked to play along with a guy and wouldn't go on an Anti-Saloon League rampage over a couple of glasses of beer."

A snort was the only answer for a moment.

"Hall, you are a staff writer for the Miami Standard. You even rate a byline. Now give us a flash on this thing for a makeover, if it sounds good. And then you can go to work on it. Hold the wire. I'll turn you over to rewrite."

When Hall returned to the foyer, the police were arriving, led by burly Ed Davis, lieutenant of the Homicide Squad. Under Davis' orders, the picture stopped, the lights went up, and the hundred or so of patrons were gathered under guard in the foyer.

Hall went, with Davis and two patrolmen, to where the body lay. The newspaper man was still trying to put his finger on what it was about the fellow that seemed familiar.

Davis edged his big figure between the seats and turned his flash on the dead man. He chewed thoughtfully on a wad of gum for a few moments, then turned to Hall.

"You saw what happened?"

"I did." Hall briefly told him all the facts he knew.

"He was facing the screen, of course?"

Hall nodded. "Guess so. Must have been."

"Then he was shot from the auditorium, not the stage," said Davis. "Slug hit him in the back of the head. But somebody would have seen or heard a revolver shot in the open here."

"Silencer, maybe," suggested the reporter.

"Probably. And at least a hundred people here, and darned near anyone of 'em could've done it."

**L**IEUTENANT DAVIS knuckled his stubbly chin with a sound like sandpaper and looked exasperated.

"Half of 'em are kids," he went on. "We can let them go. Sergeant Holcomb, attend to it. Barnes, did you see anything?"

Barnes, still nervous and agitated,

shook his head.

"I had just stepped into my office when the shots were fired on the screen."

The fingerprint men came, and the photographers, and the medical examiner. They got the body out where the M. E. could examine it, and Hall wondered again what it was about the man that seemed familiar.

The victim's registration card revealed little. He was Arthur Madden, aged thirty. His service classification was 4F, his occupation none and he had no next of kin.

Davis showed the card to Hall.

"That's a big help," he growled. "He lived in the Palatial Hotel, a flop house. A drifter and a bum. Why would anybody want to kill the guy?"

"Whoever did it must have known just when those shots were going to be fired, to tie in his own with them," Hall said.

"So?" Davis looked curious.

"So he—or she—must have seen the picture before."

Davis snapped his fingers.

"That's a fact. How long's that film been running, Barnes?"

"Three days," Barnes said. "We might ask Marge if she remembers any repeaters in this group we're holding. She has a photographic memory for faces."

Marge knew none of them. Nor did their questioning of the impatient, resentful men and women of the waiting group net anything until each was asked to look at the dead man. Hall, Davis and the others watched reactions carefully as one after another entered the manager's office and looked at the body lying on a table there.

One of the men, a thin, badly dressed young fellow with shifty eyes and yellowish-brown cigarette stains on his fingers showed such agitation that Davis turned a barrage of questions loose at him.

"Sure I knew him," the thin man

admitted, at last. "In New York. Him and me roomed together for a while. But I lost track of him a year ago."

"Until you caught up with him again here in Miami, huh?" Davis snapped. "All right, Martinson, come clean. Why did you shoot him?"

"Flatfoot, you're full of prunes. I never even knew he was here until just now."

That was all they could get out of Martinson, but the little fellow was hauled off to the police station, savagely protesting, for further questioning.

Hall phoned the office of "The Standard," and got Parker on the line.

"Come in and write what you've got," Parker said. "And it better be good!"

Hall glanced at his wrist watch.

"Look, Pete, let me give the dope to the rewrite desk. I'm due at the courthouse to testify in that Waycross case. Star witness, you know, all that kind of rot."

"The trial has been postponed for a week," Parker said. "Smith just phoned us from the courthouse news room. So come on in and hammer out your stuff."

Hall did.

"What's your angle on it?" Parker said when the reporter laid his copy on the city editor's desk.

"Martinson, probably." Hall hooked one leg over the corner of the desk and lighted a cigarette. "But so far there seems no motivation. As to the timing of the shot—and it must have come right pat with the shot in the picture—the fellow could have seen the film in some other town or other theatre."

"It took a sharpshooter to nail a man in the half dark like that," Parker commented. "Have you thought of that?"

"Jeepers, yes. Funny thing, though. Something about Madden—the dead man—that's mighty familiar, something that would, maybe, give us a line to work on. Can't think of it yet, but I'll get it.

Tonight I'm having a look at Madden's room at the Palatial, if I can get in. Davis will have been there with his sleuths, but I might dig up a lead they've overlooked. By the way, how's Jordan making out, down in jail? Still insisting he's innocent?"

**P**ARKER snorted. "He tells it to everyone who passes in the corridor, Smith says. Declares he never killed Waycross, wasn't within miles of the Green Eagle, that night."

Hall shook his head, his lips suddenly grim.

"I couldn't have mistaken him," he said. "I was at the bar and I had only a quick glimpse of him when he opened the side door, but that long nose, and the scar on his cheek. And he did admit to the D. A. that he figured Waycross flimflammed him in that realty deal. Heck, it's open and shut, and I'll so testify, much as I hate to point the finger of guilt at any man."

The Palatial Hotel was a dump, a shoddy place indeed! But the manager acted as if he were running the Ritz, and he wasn't going to let Bob Hall see Madden's room.

"The police were here, poking their noses into everything, ruining my business," he whined. "Now you come. How do I know you won't walk off with something?"

"I probably will," Hall snapped. "Unless they walk off with me first." He scratched his chest significantly.

"Hey, you can't talk to me like that!"

"Look, fella, how would you like to argue with the sanitary authorities?"

The man gulped and his eyes rolled.

"Well, if you hafta see that room, then I guess you hafta. Here's a key. Go on up."

Hall walked to the third floor and had a look at the dog kennel that the Palatial

called a room. A sagging bed, a broken, straightbacked chair, a chipped bureau that leaned wearily against the mildewed wall because one hind leg was missing. Hall pulled down the tattered window shade, and, by the light of the single bulb swinging on its cord from the ceiling, inspected the one-time living quarters of Arthur Madden.

The man's belongings had all been removed by the police. Hall found nothing, not a shred of anything that would help to solve the mystery. And it was a mystery why anyone would go to all that trouble to shoot down so obscure and insignificant an individual as this Madden.

Hall poked the sodden mattress with a disgusted finger. Then the smell of the place got him, and he turned to the door, ready to flee this unsavory joint.

Opening the door, he stepped into the narrow, dimly lighted hallway—and a bullet skimmed past his ear with a thin, eerie sound that ended in an audible spat as it hit the wall at the far end of the corridor.

As he flung his big body to one side, and down, he caught a glimpse of a figure on the fire escape, silhouetted against the city lights outside. The window opening onto that fire escape was open, and the figure was moving away from it, fast. Feet drummed on the iron ladder, leading down to the street.

Hall rushed to the window, saw the dark shape that had nearly reached the ground level in the alley. He started to follow, then changed his mind and tore for the inside stairway, taking the flights three steps at a time. But when he got to the alley entrance, his quarry had disappeared.

"We were right about the silencer," he told Davis later at the police station. "Nothing but a pop from that gun when he fired through the window at me."

Davis nodded, chewed on a cigar.

“Either Martinson is in the clear, or else he is working in cahoots with someone,” Davis said. “He’s behind bars, so it’s a cinch he isn’t the gent who tried to pot you, just now.”

“There’s got to be something important in that room,” Hall said. “Or else they think I have information that’s dangerous, something learned earlier in the day.”

“The manager of the Palatial,” Davis suggested. “Who else knew you were there?”

“Any number of people could have seen me heading for the joint,” Hall said, and Davis nodded in baffled agreement.

“And the silencer,” went on Hall. “You don’t just pick up one of those things at the dime store when you want it. The bird that shot at me was the same fellow who killed Madden, probably.”

“Got any ideas?” asked Davis, staring at the reporter.

Hall rubbed thoughtfully at that bald spot on the back of his head, and continued:

“The Palatial manager wasn’t in the theatre when the shooting occurred. Martinson was. But Martinson wasn’t the fellow on the fire escape just now. He-uhhh-”

**B**ALL’S voice trailed off. Davis moved his cigar over to the other side of his mouth and regarded the reporter. He was puzzled.

“What’s the matter with you, Hall? See a ghost?”

Hall inhaled a big drag of cigarette smoke, let it out in a nervous gust, and spoke through the blue cloud.

“I just got an idea.”

Davis laughed. “Better steer clear of ideas if they hit you like that, man. You’re absolutely green around the gills.”

But Hall was already halfway out the

door, and he flung his reply over his shoulder.

“I’m going to the theatre. Follow me in five minutes.”

Then he was out, hurrying down the street. A glance at his wrist watch showed the time. It was ten-twenty. He knew that Barnes usually went out for a snack and a breathing spell between ten and ten-thirty P.M. If he was following that custom tonight, Hall might play in luck. If not—the reporter’s eyes narrowed with determination as he hastened on his way—he’d just have to bull it through.

Barnes was out when he reached the theatre.

“Be back soon, Mr. Hall,” the usher said.

“Okay, I’ll wait in his office,” Hall said with the familiarity of long association.

The office was usually left open when Barnes went out for a few minutes. But tonight it was locked. Hall stood with his hand on the knob, his blue eyes glinting. The locked door almost confirmed his suspicions.

Unobtrusively he strolled to the sidewalk, and, when opportunity offered, slid into the alley between the theatre and the store next to it. The office window opened on that alley.

The window was not locked, and Hall had it open and, for all his bulk, was over the sill in a jiffy. A shaded lamp on a bronze base lighted the polished surface of the desk, leaving the remainder of the elegantly furnished room in dimness.

The desk was locked, but Hall had once, in his eventful career, been a private detective, and there were times too when a newspaper man needed entry to locked spots. So he always carried a bit of wire in his pocket, and the gadget did a neat, quick job this time, as usual.

The reporter went through that desk

with an eye and ear cocked toward the locked door of the office. If Barnes caught him there, and the desk contained nothing of consequence, it would be bad business. He would be out of a job again, maybe in jail. He liked Miami, wanted to stay, but not on-the-inside-looking-out.

The second drawer on the right yielded a packet of old letters which caused him to curse softly with satisfaction. He laid them aside, went on.

Beneath a layer of papers and dust cloths in the bottom drawer he found—a silencer! Not the gun to which it had been attached, only the silencer.

It was enough.

Then the key turned softly in the lock of the office door. The sound brought the newspaper man to his feet as though he had been jerked up by the hair. He turned toward the open window, but so swiftly did the door open, so suddenly did Barnes appear there with a leveled gun, that Hall knew his chances of escaping were nil.

The black bore of the heavy revolver held Hall's gaze for a fascinated moment, then he raised his eyes and met the cold stare of the slim young theatre manager behind the leveled weapon.

"Shot in the act of robbery." Barnes spoke softly. "Too bad, Hall."

The muzzle of the gun moved slightly, centered on the reporter's heart. Hall saw death coming and flung himself at the window, his flesh crawling with anticipation of the bullet's impact.

Over his shoulder, in action which was like the confused jiggle of movement on the screen when the film breaks, he saw Lieutenant Davis lunge through the door and grab Barnes from behind, jerking him backward into the foyer. He was too late to halt the shot, and the roar of the heavy weapon in the confined space slapped at the eardrums. But the slug went wild, and

in moments Barnes was disarmed and handcuffed.

TWO patrolmen hurried in, and Davis ordered the door shut and locked against curious theatre patrons who had been attracted by the shot. The night was not warm, but Bob Hall felt sweat on his shoulderblades as he turned to the wild-eyed prisoner.

"You nearly put it over, feller, but three times and out. Last time you whiffed it. Get out of the batter's box, Jordan."

Davis' jaw dropped. He stared in amazement.

"Did you say—Jordan?"

"James Barnes Jordan. Letters there in the desk to prove it."

"Brother of David Jordan, huh?"

"Cousin," the prisoner said sullenly. "It was worth five thousand dollars to Dave to have somebody shut your mouth, Hall. He had—has—plenty. Never mind how he got it. I'll talk—sure I'll talk. If it hadn't been for him I wouldn't be in this spot right now."

Later, in Davis' office at the station, Hall and the lieutenant talked it over.

"So Madden took the slug meant for you," Davis ruminated. "But I still don't see how you figured it out that Barnes—Jordan, rather—was our man."

"I thought of Barnes as soon as I realized someone had tried to get me and not Madden. Because I figured then that it must tie up with the Jordan trial, and then I remembered that at the coroner's inquest and the preliminary hearing I had seen Barnes. He was always around. He was even haunting the hallways while the grand jury deliberated. Too much Barnes to be a happenstance."

"Yeah, but how did you know it was you they were after and not Madden, there in the theatre?"

Hall, who had been caressing his bald spot with the palm of his hand, turned his head.

“See that spot?”

“Yeah. But—what’s that got to do with it?”

“Seemed queer, didn’t it, that anyone could target a slug in a half dark theatre the way Barnes—Jordan—did. He got Madden in the neck, a miss of only a few inches.”

“Yeah.”

“Quit saying ‘yeah,’ and listen. When I went into the theatre I sat down about three rows in front of Madden. But I was too close to the screen, and I moved to about five rows behind him. In that seat ahead of him, the edge of the beam from

the projector up behind the balcony must have highlighted my polished bald spot and made it shine like a dollar-sized bullseye. When I moved back, I was out of the light, partly under the balcony.”

“Clear enough, so far.”

“Well, you remember I said there was something about Madden that seemed important but that I couldn’t quite define? Something that kept evading me?”

“Yeah.”

“I was watching the action on the screen, of course, during that picture, but after I moved behind Madden I must have noticed subconsciously how the edge of that projector beam picked him up. Because you see, my friend, Madden had a bald spot exactly like mine.”