

Round by Round, Check Gavey Outpointed the Law, but Fate Was a Different Kind of Opponent



The gangster sat up in the coffin

The Chair Cheater

By PAUL ERNST

Author of "The Ladder to Death," "Murder Mosaic," etc.

THE C Deck steward from the S.S. *Moravia* was a scrawny little man. His front teeth were too large and too prominent for his thin face. His mouse-colored hair stuck up in a cowlick behind and hung down wispily over his left eye in front. He was very much afraid of Check Gavey, but his fear was overcome to some extent by the knowledge that he was indispensable to the sinister-looking gangster.

Gavey, dressed in blue serge much different from the loud checks he usually affected, stared at the steward with eyes like black basalt. He moved slowly in his easy-chair, like a snake shifting its coils. Beside Gavey, his underworld pal, Slim Pujo, stood with slouched shoulders and smoked a butt. The gangster said coldly:

"You're getting three grand now, and three more when we land at Guatemala. Six grand.

That's a grand more than the reward out for me, so you'd be nuts to try and cross me."

The steward from the steamer *Moravia* moistened his lips.

"I wouldn't double-cross you anyway."

"If you tried it," Check Gavey said evenly, "you'd be very sorry. Okay, pal. Run along now and get things ready on the boat."

The steward nodded, looked into Gavey's deadly eyes, gulped, and left the apartment. Gavey lit a cigarette and got to his feet.

"Ten o'clock. Time to get down to the mortuary. The boat pulls out at one or two in the morning, and they're due to pick up the stiff about eleven."

"You're a smart guy, Check," said Pujo.

"I'm smart," nodded Gavey. "That's why I've lasted this long. Sidewalks clear?"

Pujo stepped to the window. He pulled the drawn shade back a crack and looked out.

"Nobody in sight."

Gavey slid the automatic from his shoulder holster and checked it. He snapped it deftly back in place and put on his dark, inconspicuous topcoat. This was followed by a soft hat with the brim turned down.

"They haven't got wise to this hideout yet," he said. "But they would, pretty soon."

"Yeah," said Pujo, putting on his own coat and hat. "The cops are tryin' hard, this time."

They turned out the lights of the cheap tenement apartment and went down dark stairs to the street door. Gavey hesitated.

"Wish we had a tommy-gun. But it's too bulky."

He opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk, with Pujo beside him. Pujo's car was down the block, waiting. They started toward it.

A patrolman rounded the corner and came toward them. Both men stiffened.

"Just walk along," Gavey breathed.

"If he ever gets a gander at your pan—" muttered Pujo.

"Shut up. Keep moving."

But Gavey slid his gun from shoulder to topcoat pocket. He walked along with his hand gripping it, head down so the hat brim shielded his too-publicized face.

The two got to the cop, started to pass. Then something about the attitude of the two, with their heads down to hide their faces, drew him.

"Hey, you two."

He started back toward them.

"Keep going," whispered Gavey through his teeth.

"You. Hold it a minute!"

GAVEY and Pujo stopped. They turned, slowly. The officer got a look at Gavey's face—the face of one of the most wanted men in the country.

"By God—*Gavey!*"

Fire lanced through Gavey's coat pocket. The cop spun half around and fell with his hand on his gun. Someone shouted up the block. Gavey and Pujo leaped to Pujo's car and raced off with tires screaming on dry asphalt. They slowed four blocks and two turns away, with no pursuit to bother them.

"Damn it," said Pujo. "Of all the lousy breaks—"

Gavey shrugged stonily. "The hell. I'm on my

way put of the country anyhow. Besides, they can't chase you any harder for five bump-offs than for four—or six, or eight, or whatever it is," he added indifferently.

They turned at decorous speed onto Seventh Avenue near Christopher Street.

"You sure the guy will be alone at Abel's Parlors?" Pujo asked.

"Sure I'm sure. Usually there isn't anybody there after eight. When a stiff is due to go out later, this one guy, Abel's handyman, sticks around. Then he goes home, and Abel opens the joint himself about nine-thirty in the morning. That'll be the first anyone knows anything's happened at the mortuary."

Gavey drew at his cigarette.

"By nine-thirty tomorrow morning, the *Moravia*'ll be a good many miles out. And nobody'll have sense enough to connect it with what happens at Abel's anyway."

Pujo inclined his head again in the dimness: they were running with the little dash-light out, of course.

"You got brains, Check. I think you'll get away with it."

"Sure I will. There isn't a chance of a slip. It's the only way, too. A snake with my face couldn't crawl out of this town, the way they're watching at the bridges and the tunnel and the docks for me."

The car swerved into Christopher Street.

"I'm the hottest guy in town," Gavey said, not without a certain distorted vanity. "The cops have dropped everything else to nail me. Well, maybe they'll feel better when they see another cop stiff with a Gavey slug in him."

"What do we do to the little guy working for Abel?" Pujo asked without taking his eyes from the street.

"What do you think?" Gavey retorted with a mirthless smile. "I'm takin' no chances at all, Slim. I'm cheating the chair, no matter how many guys stand in the way!"

Pujo nodded. Then he said, carelessly:

"Got dough, Check?"

"About sixty grand," replied Gavey, patting his coat.

Pujo blinked. His hands stiffened on the steering wheel, then relaxed.

"Hot stuff, from the Cattleman's Bank, Slim," Gavey said slowly. "I can pass it in Central America. You couldn't, here."

“Listen—I wouldn’t try to cross you—”

“I know, Slim. Sure, you would not.”

The car slowed a minute later.

“There’s the joint, up the street,” Gavey said. “Abel’s Funeral Parlors. Over a month I’ve been waiting for one of these joints to get something I could use. Now—it’s here. Retired sea captain by the name of John Harvey. Died here on a visit with his wife and daughter. Body to be shipped back with the family to Guatemala, where he made his home.”

THE car stopped. The two got out. No one remotely resembling a cop was in sight. They crossed the sidewalk to the plate-glass double door. Gavey still had his gun in his coat pocket.

He pressed the night bell in the stone beside the door. A short, rather fat man came from the other side and opened the doors a foot.

“Hello. What do you want—”

His voice died. Slowly his plump face paled as he took in the significance of Gavey’s bulging coat pocket, and the deadly expressionlessness of the two men’s faces.

He backed slowly away from the door, and slowly the two men followed. Pujo closed the doors and locked them.

“If this is a—is a stickup, there isn’t any money here—” the man faltered.

“This isn’t a stickup,” Pujo said evenly. Gavey didn’t bother to answer at all.

The three, with the plump man in front walking on shaking legs, went through the outer anteroom, through the small chapel, and into the white-walled rear chamber where Abel prepared and embalmed bodies. Pujo shut the chapel door.

“For God’s sake—” chattered Abel’s man.

Gavey’s topcoat pocket became doubly flame-burned, as another slug tore out of it and into a man’s body. The plump man seemed to shrivel as he fell.

“Get the slug, Slim,” Gavey said, turning his back. “No calling cards for the damn microscopes to work on. There’s to be no trace of a link between this mortuary job and Check Gavey.”

Pujo prowled the white wall behind where the plump man had stood, while Gavey checked two coffins on trestles at the back end of the room.

He grunted as he found the right one. John Hiram Harvey, the small silver plate said. And on the shipping tag, the name of the widow, Mrs.

Dolores Harvey, with a Guatemalan address.

“Here’s the slug,” said Pujo, prying battered lead from the wall.

Gavey put it in his vest pocket with the ejected cartridge shell, began unscrewing the casket lid.

“You’ll take the stiff in here and get rid of it,” he said. “The river—with plenty of weights. You’ll screw this lid back down, after I’m inside, leaving a couple air holes for me. Then, when the guys come to take the casket to the *Moravia*, you’ll hand it over like you worked here for Abel.”

“And Check Gavey, with half the cops in New York on his tail, goes out of the country in a coffin to Central America!” said Pujo admiringly.

“Right.” Gavey nodded, with a respect for his cleverness as impersonal as though it had been that of someone else.

THE *Moravia* was twenty hours out of New York. It bobbed in the warmth of the Gulf Stream, poking its nose ever farther south.

In the hold, boxes and bales creaked a little with the lift and fall of the hull. It was dark down there. But into the creaking darkness a man came stealthily, with a flashlight boring an uncertain path.

The man was undersized and scrawny, in a white steward’s jacket. He had prominent teeth and mouse-colored hair that stuck up stiffly in a cowlick at the back and sagged limply over his left eye in front. In his left hand he carried food wrapped in a none too clean napkin. Under his arm was a thermos bottle with water.

He walked between swaying piles of merchandise to a long black box in a corner. A coffin. He set the food and water down and, holding the flashlight in his left hand, unscrewed the lid of the coffin with a pocket screwdriver.

The lid slanted off and Check Gavey sat up. He stretched his arms and flexed his legs with a groan.

“Tough, lyin’ all cramped up like that for so long,” whispered the steward.

Gavey scowled at him.

“You should know! Try staying on the flat of your back for a day! But it’s better than the electric chair.”

He took the food and water, and ate. Then he smoked a cigarette, with the steward jittery because the red glint or the smoke might give them away. Finally, with a grimace, Gavey got back into the coffin.

“My God, I won’t ever want to lie down again. Screw the lid down like it was. I’d give twenty grand to leave it unscrewed so I could get out and ankle around once in a while. But I can’t take the chance of somebody noticing if it was unscrewed.”

The steward wiped sweat from his forehead. He put the lid back in place and screwed it down. Then with a furtive triple-knock to assure Gavey that everything was all right, he left.

In the coffin, Gavey managed to doze. He sought after sleep, fought for it, to help pass the horribly slow hours—

Footsteps brought him wide awake. Footsteps, in here! But many men had entered and left the hold while he lay here. There was no reason to think this visit meant anything.

However, as the steps came closer and closer, he began to sweat in the long black box. Then, through the air holes, he heard someone say: “There it is.”

The steps stopped right beside the coffin.

“Yeah. John Hiram Harvey. This must be it.”

“You squarehead—we’ve only got one coffin aboard, ain’t we? How could a mistake be made?”

In the black box, Gavey lay with his breath clogging his throat while great drops of perspiration coursed down his face and onto the soiled black satin on which he lay. What was this? Had the cops connected the bump-off of Abel’s man with the coffin shipped to Central America the same night? Had they radioed the ship?

Under Gavey’s right hand lay his automatic. He clutched it. He’d shoot his way out. No matter what happened—how many he had to plug—he wasn’t going back to the chair!

He expected to hear the rasp of the lid’s screws being turned. But instead he felt the coffin being

lifted. Going to take him to the brig or some place before opening the casket, huh?

That fool steward must have been trailed here with the food—

Gavey found himself standing upright for an instant as the coffin was held on end. Then he felt the thing jerk a little and heard a voice: “Catch it! *It’s slidin’ out of my hands—*”

Wildly, Gavey tried to throw his arms up and out to brace himself against a fall as he felt himself tipping forward. The cramped space of the coffin made such attempts futile, of course. His forehead banged against the coffin lid and unconsciousness claimed him as darkness claims a room when the light is snapped off—

THE ship’s bell tolled midnight. It was silvery on deck. The moon laid a metal path behind the ship, with the creamy wake from the slowed propellers embroidering it. The coffin bearing the nameplate John Harvey, retired sea captain, rested on the ship’s rail. With bared heads the ship’s officers and such of the passengers as cared to come to the afterdeck, stood while the last words of the short burial ceremony were spoken by the captain. Then the flag-draped casket, weighted, was slanted forward.

It slid out from under the flag and splashed into the sea. The splash was almost inaudible in the murmur of the ship’s wake.

Near the rail a middle-aged woman in black, with the great dark eyes of the Latins, sobbed on the shoulder of a girl with black hair and grey eyes.

“There, there,” the girl soothed, biting back her own tears. “Clean night and cool depths— It was Dad’s wish, Mother. He always said he wanted to be buried at sea.”