

Twin Murders



The Forty-four in my pocket started bucking

A Star Reporter Smells Trouble—and Barges into a Grim Crime Frame-Up and Doublecross!

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THAT Friday night I was down at Eddie's joint by the river listening to the good sounds the wood was making while it burned inside the pot-bellied stove and not giving a damn how hard the wind howled up and down Reno's streets outside. Give a guy a chair he can sprawl in and a bottle of whiskey close enough so he doesn't have to stretch for it and a square-shooting crook like Eddie to talk to and what more can he want?

Sure, Eddie's a crook, but what the hell do I care? I'm no cop, and he and I get along fine. What he does is his own business, and then, too, whenever I get sick of turning in stories of ga-ga divorcees Eddie can usually put me in line for a neat little yarn that's good for a second page column.

Like this Friday night. Eddie sucked at his cigar a couple of times, and then broke a five-minute silence with:

"Must be hell to be twins, Silver."

“Yeah?” I opened both eyes for a minute to look at him. “How come?”

“I was just thinking it must be hell,” he said slowly. He blew a smoke ring before he added, “Especially if you’re a guy like Happy Brand.”

“Huh!” That made me sit up. “Since when’s he got himself a twin? Happy Brand happened to be a one of Reno’s big-shot gamblers—and I mean *big*. He owned half the chips in the Satin Slipper Club.

“You ought to get a look at him if you don’t fall asleep in the next half hour,” Eddie said. “He blew in here a week ago and I thought he was Happy on a bat until he put me wise. Since then he’s come in every night about this time for a couple or three shots of red-eye.”

“The hell you say! What’s that make the score?”

“I wouldn’t want to be quoted, Silver,” Eddie told me, “but the guy adds up to no good in my way of seeing. He plain don’t like that twin of his over at the Slipper, and he don’t like having to dig deep for a quarter when it’s drinking time.”

“Yeah?” I tilted a couple of fingers out of the bottle into my glass and out of the glass into my mouth. When the whiskey had got through burning—it wasn’t bad whiskey, just strong—I had figured out that Eddie was putting me onto a good story. Eddie has a habit of saving his breath for those black cigars of his unless he *really* has something to say.

I WAS beginning to wonder if it would be worth while to reach into my pocket and get out a cigarette when the door to the outside swung open and about twenty cubic feet of Sierra wind bounced off the bar and slid down my neck. As I made a grab for the whiskey bottle, I caught Eddie passing me a wink. I twisted my head for a look over my shoulder.

Twin? The guy might have been Happy

Brand himself gone sour on the world. He had the same high cheekbones with the skin drawn tight over them, the same high-bridged nose, the same go-ahead-and-sock-me chin. Only his mouth was pulled up in a tight, hard sneer, and Happy’s mouth keeps laughing like his eyes.

This guy’s eyes I couldn’t see because of the hat brim pulled down over them. The band on the hat was a little frayed, and so were the cuffs of the overcoat he had pulled tight around him. Wrapped around his neck and tucked into the overcoat was a scarf that would need a lot of washing to make white again.

I watched him go to the bar and wait for Bill, Eddie’s barkeep, to come out of the back room. When he ordered rye, I pushed up out of my chair and went over to him.

“How’re ya, kid,” I said, and slapped him between the shoulder blades. “Don’t you know your friends any more?”

He snapped his head around and I got a look at his eyes. Boy, were they sweet! A rattlesnake with a hangover couldn’t look less pleasant.

“What the hell’s the idea!” His voice was hoarse, and I could smell a heavy load of whiskey on his breath. The white line of a thin scar that ran down the left side of his nose and into the corner of his mouth didn’t make him any prettier.

“Listen, Happy,” I started, when Eddie broke in with:

“Maybe you two guys ought to be introduced proper like. Silver, you’re s talking to Joe Brand, Happy’s brother. Joe, that guy with the white hair ain’t nobody but Silver Carey, punk reporter for the *Bee*. Don’t ask me what made his hair go like that ‘cause he ain’t over thirty-five and the most work he does is to crawl on the outside of a quart of my whiskey.”

Joe grunted, and I said, “Brother? You must be twins!”

“What the hell if we are?” Joe said. “I’m

not doing any bragging about it.”

“Have a drink with us, anyhow,” I said. “We’re drinking rye, and you can’t stand at the bar here without getting tired.”

He shrugged. Then he walked over and sat down in my chair, and I had to pull one halfway across the room for myself. When I started to pour him a drink he said, “I’ll get my own. Hey, you,” this at Bill, “bring me a bottle.”

“We got plenty,” I told him.

“To hell with that. I got money and I’ll pay for my own.”

When Bill brought him his bottle he fished out a wallet and split it open in front of us. Money! The thing was stuffed. When he pulled a twenty out of it, I looked at Eddie. Eddie was staring at the ceiling and blowing smoke rings.

While Bill went to get his change, Joe left the wallet lying open on the table. There was a picture showing from behind the celluloid of the card compartment. I stretched my neck out for a look at it. I couldn’t see all I wanted to, so I reached out for the wallet.

HE grabbed my wrist and snapped out, “Hey!”

“Go on,” I said. “I just want to look at the picture.” He took his hand off my wrist, but kept watching me.

It was a picture of Happy Brand and him. They were kids about high-school age, I guess, dressed just alike.

“I’d know you by your sour puss,” I said, reaching the wallet back toward him. As I did my arm hit his whiskey bottle and knocked it bouncing on the table. The top was out and the whiskey hissed across the oilcloth and onto his lap. He jumped up, wiping himself off and cursing.

“Sorry as—” I started to say, but he didn’t wait for me to finish. He jerked the pocketbook out of my hand and strode to the bar. He poured two drinks inside of him, got

his change, and slammed out the door without a damn your eyes.

“Nice guy,” I said.

“Yeah.” Eddie was looking at me from behind his cigar smoke—looking at me hard. “What’d you want to do that for?”

“I smell something rotten.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. Well, I guess I better be going, Eddie.”

“Okay, Silver. Don’t get lost.”

I kept about a hundred yards behind Joe Brand, thinking what a crazy fool I was to have left Eddie’s place. I had to keep blinking the water out of my eyes, the wind was that cold. It carried little flakes of snow in it that lit on my face and made it itch.

Joe was doing a certain amount of staggering at first, but the cold air fixed him up so that he would have been pretty fair on a chalk line. He headed straight down the river for about six blocks and then swung left. I knew then that he was going for the Satin Slipper Club.

The Slipper’s a hang-over from prohibition days. You rap three times on a heavy door and a guy peeks out at you through a dinky hole. You show your card and he lets you in. And that’s not as dumb as it sounds. The sucker falls for stuff like that, gets a kick out of a joint that he thinks is hard to get into. Which the Slipper isn’t, because all you have to do to get a card is let Happy get the idea you’ve got a little jack in your pocket that’s burning holes.

The guy took one squint at Joe and let him in. About twenty seconds later I gave my three raps. The hole opened up and I recognized Fall, one of Happy’s guards.

“Oh, hello, Silver,” he grinned. “How goes it?”

“Swell. I’m freezing to death. Let me in.”

Inside, I saw Joe Brand at the other end of the big room knocking on the door to Happy’s office. It opened and Meltzer,

Happy's partner and owner of the other half of the Slipper, stuck his face out. Meltzer didn't look any too pleased, but he let Joe in and shut the door behind him.

"Who's the boy friend?" I asked, jerking my thumb at the closed door.

"Him?" Fall scowled. "Happy's brother—twin."

"Been around here much?"

"Yeah, pretty much the last week. Never seen him before that, though."

"Okay. Thanks." I ambled across the room and got as close to the door as I could without telling everybody what I was interested in. I pretended to be watching a little white ball making monkeys out of half a dozen people, all the time trying to get an inkling of what was going on in that office.

Just my luck the door was built thick, made to hold back the coppers in the good old days. Only once could I make anything out when somebody—it sounded like Happy—yelled: "You damn rat, get out of here!" Which made my ears itch to get closer.

It was maybe about a minute later that I heard the first shot. It was muffled through all that wood and nobody at the tables noticed it. I saw that Fall, the guard at the door, had heard it though. His eyes narrowed up and his hand slid under his coat. Me, I backed up out of the way.

The second shot came twenty seconds later, and right away the office door swung open. Joe Brand came out crouching low, a gun in his right hand.

He had the joint spotted, all right. Before Fall could make a move the gun in Joe's hand bucked. Fall just leaned back against the wall, then slid down to the floor. From where I was I could see the blood pumping out of a hole in his neck.

A woman by me screamed. There was a mad scramble all over the place to get out of the way, which didn't seem to bother Joe Brand at all. He swung around to the right

where another guard had his gun half out, let go again. It wasn't such a good shot that time. The guard flopped to the floor and lay there screaming for about a minute before he died.

"Take it easy!" Joe's voice cut across that room, cold and hard. He shut the door behind him and twisted a key in the lock. As he shuffled across the room in that low crouch of his, keeping his eyes on all of us, I saw that he was carrying a stuffed briefcase in his left hand.

He kicked Fall's legs out of the way, backed outside through the door. For about twenty seconds after he closed it on him, there was a dead silence. Then hell broke loose.

They milled around, scared to go outside, not knowing what to do. One guy had sense enough to get onto a phone, put in a call for the cops. The rest stared at the two bodies and jabbered, or else pounded on the locked door to Happy's office and yelled. One sophisticated looking dame went off in a corner by herself and got sick. Good old Eddie had smelled out a front page yarn for me this time.

I PUSHED my way through them for the door outside, on the way noticing spots of blood that must have been spilling out of Joe. When I got out into the street there wasn't any sign of him. There was more snow in the air and the whole street was empty.

Around to the left there was an alley. Joe might have gone that way, so I poked along it, hoping to pick something up. All I got was wet feet.

The sound of a siren coming up the street pulled me out of the alley. I got around to the front just as O'Shane and a couple of his coppers were piling out of the police car.

"Nice night, Irish," I told O'Shane.

He looked at me and grunted. "I mighta known you'd be around," he said. "What the

hell's been going on here?"

"Nothing much. Just a few guys rubbed, that's all."

"Yeah? Who done it?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Come on and see for yourself." We pushed in through the door.

Things were pretty much like when I went outside, except that the door into Happy's office was open. So many people were crowded into the room that I couldn't catch any sight of Happy—or what might be left of him.

O'Shane's a pretty smart dick. I'd seen him work before and he does all right. He stood now staring around the big room. He didn't have to ask to know that Fall and the other guard were dead.

"Harry, you stick here," he said to one of his coppers. "Don't let anybody in—or out."

He turned then and went across the room, pushing his way into Happy's office. The other cop and I followed him.

Happy was there still alive but without any grin on his face. He was slumped in his chair behind his desk, a blood-soaked bandage around his chest. On the right side of the office a door opened into a washroom. Meltzer, Happy's partner, was sprawled face down there in the doorway, the blood spread around his head in a pool a yard wide.

"Come on, clear out of here, all of you," O'Shane snapped at the people that were standing around gawking. "Beat it into the game room until I need you."

WHEN he had got them all out, he slid the door shut and spun toward the owner.

"The doc'll be here in a minute, Happy," he said. "Hurt bad?"

"Not too bad, O'Shane. Just through the muscle." Happy turned in his chair and looked at Meltzer. "It might have been worse."

"What happened?"

Happy stared at the polished top of his desk. He was worried plenty, I could see that. He opened his mouth once to say something, and then shut it up again. O'Shane waited for about two minutes before he broke out with:

"Well, come on! What's eating you?"

"Listen, O'Shane," Happy said, looking up, "he was crazy with worry and half drunk, too, or he'd never have done this."

"Who? Who's crazy?"

"He means his brother Joe," I said. "His twin brother."

"Yeah?" O'Shane glanced at me. "I've been hearing about him. He do this?"

Happy nodded. "Yes, he did it."

O'Shane turned on the cop that had come in with us, barked, "Put out a net to pick up Joe Brand. You know what he looks like—like Happy here. Get a—" He stopped and stared at Happy, asked, "Where's he been living?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. Go out and get him."

The cop nodded, went out.

O'Shane's a hard-boiled dick. You got to be in a place like Reno. Like a lot of hard guys, he's got a soft spot hidden down underneath where you don't see it except once in a blue moon, and then you have to look close.

When he stared down at Happy sitting there with a hole in his side and a bewildered look in his eyes and said softly, "I guess you better spill the whole story," I could see how he felt. He was picturing himself in Happy's place, having to turn the heat on his own brother, and the picture wasn't setting well on his soft spot.

"You'll do what you can for him?" Happy asked.

"This is murder," O'Shane said. "He'll get a fair trial."

"Not premeditated," Happy replied. "Joe was in a spot. He didn't spill it to me, but he needed money bad. Last night I let him have

what I could, but it wasn't enough. Tonight he came back for more. I—well, in this game you may have plenty of cash on hand, but that doesn't always mean it's yours to put where you please.

"When Joe came in here, Meltzer and I were stacking about ninety thousand in cash, getting ready to lock it up. Joe saw that, and he couldn't savvy why I wouldn't let him have a piece of it. It's a hell of a thing, O'Shane, for a guy that needs dough to have to stand and just look at ninety thousand laying on a desk in front of him. You know that."

"Yeah, sure," O'Shane agreed.

"I guess it drove him nuts to see it there," Happy said. "Maybe it's my fault. I shouldn't have had it laying there like that, but Meltzer let him in before I could get it out of the way. Joe never planned to take it—he never meant to hurt anybody. Just the sight of the money was too much for him. Then when he pulled a gun on us, Meltzer tried to take him. Joe pulled the trigger without thinking, and then when I tried to stop him, he shot me. He was just crazy and—"

Happy stopped talking when the door opened and Doc Macer came in. The people outside were staring in, trying to see what we were doing.

"Shut the door, Doc," O'Shane said. "Happy here needs some looking at. Meltzer's cashed in."

While the doctor was looking at Happy's wound I walked over to the window at the back of the office, stepping around the pool of blood that had come out of Meltzer's head. There was more blood spilled on the window sill. Outside, big flakes of snow were showing in the light that streamed out.

AFTER about a minute Doc Macer said, "Get me some hot water."

"I'll get it, O'Shane," I said. Meltzer's body was in my way, so I asked, "Okay if I

move this guy?"

"Yeah," O'Shane grunted. "Slide him over against the wall there."

I got Meltzer by the shoulders and dragged him through his own blood and out of the way. Then I went into the washroom, shutting the door after me.

When I came out, I sat on the desk and watched Macer probe into Happy's wound. It was a nasty looking hole through the muscle just under the arm pit, not bad but still close to the heart. It must have hurt bad with Doc swabbing it out, but Happy didn't show it except for some sweat on his face.

"Must be tough to have a murderer for a brother," I said.

"Shut up!" O'Shane barked at me. "If you can't keep your trap closed, get the hell out of here."

"I was just thinking, that's all."

"Well, don't think."

"Okay," I said. "Only another thing I can't help thinking is that you're never going to get your hands on Joe Brand."

"Yeah?" O'Shane looked at me hard, and Happy turned his head to stare at my face. "What do you mean by that, Silver?" O'Shane had learned that I'm not always asleep—that's why he let me come in with him.

"I mean a lot of things, copper. One of them is that a guy that'd frame his brother is a rat." I reached in my pocket and fished out a picture, holding it carefully by the edges. It was the one I had slipped out of Joe Brand's pocketbook when the whiskey spilled on him.

"Ever see that?" I asked Happy.

He leaned over to look at it, and his eyes widened.

"Yeah," he said. "It's Joe's. It's a picture of me and Joe when we started to high school. Where'd you get it, Silver?"

"I just got it. O'Shane, you better hang on to this; it's got Joe's prints on it and they might come in handy."

“What’s in your sleeve?” O’Shane asked, picking up the picture.

“An ace,” I said. “An ace that’s going to spell gas house for you.” I stared hard at Happy, my face showing plain enough what I thought of him.

He leaned back in his chair and just stared at me like I was nuts. It was O’Shane that barked out:

“What the hell are you saying, Silver!”

“I’m saying that this guy here is Joe Brand.”

Happy laughed out loud. O’Shane swore.

“You’re off your nut, guy,” O’Shane said. “I’ve known Happy for years.”

“Sure, O’Shane, but don’t forget they are twins—identical twins.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to pull, Silver,” Happy said, “but it’s just plain crazy. We were easy enough to tell apart—”

“Where?” I said at him sharply.

“And still are. Joe got a cut across his nose and mouth when he was a kid, and the scar’s still there plain enough. Look, you can see it in the picture,” He started to take the picture out of O’Shane’s hands, but I knocked his arm out of the way.

“You’re crazy, Silver,” O’Shane said, staring at the picture. “The scar’s there all right.”

“Yeah, there are a lot of things in that picture,” I said. “And there are a lot more things in the bathroom.”

When I said that, Happy’s head jerked. A look came into his eyes that I recognized. It was the same one I had seen in Joe’s eyes. O’Shane saw the look, too.

“Only two shots were fired in this room,” I said, “and I can prove that. One killed Meltzer, one wounded you. Then how come Joe was dripping blood all over the floor in the game room outside?”

“You’re crazy as hell,” Happy sneered. “Come on, Doc, tie me up so I can get out of here.”

“Wait a minute,” O’Shane snapped.

“Let’s hear you, Silver.”

“One thing about you,” I said to Happy, “you got plenty of guts. You might have got away with it, too, except for a couple of things. One of them was the blood you dripped going outside, and the blood you spilled climbing back in through that window.”

He knew I had him, I could tell that by the cold glare in his eyes, by the set of his mouth.

“It was a smart stunt,” I went on, “and I guess Meltzer was in on it with you. Unless I miss my guess that ninety grand was insured, so you would win double.”

“Get on with it, Silver,” O’Shane said. “What’s this all about?”

“JUST this, O’Shane. In the bathroom yonder there’s a panel that opens up to let you get at the plumbing. I sort of nosed around in there and found a few things. Some of them I got in my pocket.”

Doc Macer and Happy and O’Shane all stared at me while I reached in my pocket and pulled out a little jar.

“That,” I said, “is flesh make-up. This,” I took out a bottle of clear liquid, “is collodion. Treat them the right way and they’ll make the swellest scar—even to drawing up the skin at the edges. Then here’s another bottle with acetone in it to take off the collodion in a hurry.”

“What about this, Happy?” O’Shane barked. “What’s it doing there?”

Happy didn’t answer. He was thinking—thinking hard.

“I found a few other things,” I said. “A forty-four with four shells gone out of it, and a briefcase. The briefcase was crammed with money—maybe about ninety grand.”

“Damn you, Silver!” Happy glared at me, his mouth hard and twisted. Then he jerked into action. He came to his feet, his chair smashing over backward. Dragging open his desk drawer, he whipped out a gun,

covered us with it.

“Okay,” he said. “I know how to fix wise guys. Keep away from your gun, O’Shane.”

“Don’t be a fool,” O’Shane said. “You’re licked, Happy—take your medicine.”

“Licked hell! I did this, sure, and I’m going to get away with it. All I got to do is get Joe’s gun and put you out of the way with it, then say Joe came back and cut loose in through the window.”

“Poor Joe,” I said.

“You kill him, too?” O’Shane asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Get around here where I can watch you.” He started to back into the bathroom.

“Wait a minute, Happy.” My hand was still in my coat pocket. “I got you covered—with Joe’s gun.”

“Yeah?” He swung around toward me. “Think you can outshoot me?”

“Sure,” I said. “Sure, I can outshoot you.”

O’Shane caught on. He jumped to the side and went for his gun. Happy’s eyes came off of me for just a second, and one second was all it took to start the forty-four in my pocket bucking.

There were two shots in it. The first caught Happy in the abdomen, slammed him against the wall. He was doubling up, his face writhing with pain when the second slug ripped into his chest. That finished him, sent him pitching face down onto the floor alongside of Meltzer’s body.

O’Shane looked at me, shook his head slowly.

“Who the hell was that?” he asked in perplexity.

“Happy. Happy Brand.”

“But you said he was Joe.”

“Sure,” I agreed, “he is Joe.”

“Look, Silver,” O’Shane said, “put me straight on this. I can’t make sense out of it.”

“It’s that picture, O’Shane. When I first saw it I had a hunch that a good story was breaking, and I was thinking it might make a swell picture for the front page. I got looking at it to see how good the detail was, when I spotted something phony as hell. Look at it again, O’Shane.”

He did. After a minute he said, “Hell! The guy with the scar doesn’t have any shadow.”

“Sure, he doesn’t. Why should he? There never was such a guy. Happy faked that picture just to help convince us he had a twin. He showed up around town in his make-up so that people would get a chance to see Joe, know that Happy did have a brother that looked exactly like him except for the scar.

“I guess this is what he did tonight. When he and Meltzer had locked themselves in here, he fixed up his rig, went out the back window there. He showed up at Eddie’s, then came here. Looks like then he double-crossed Meltzer, shooting him down in plain cold blood. The hole in his own side was just more atmosphere.

“When he went out after that, he locked the office door. That was to give him time to get around the building, back into the office, and get his scar washed off. After that, it was just plain sailing, or so he thought.”

“Yeah,” O’Shane said. “That’s what he thought.”

“Let’s get a drink,” I said. “It’s bad business to frame your twin brother — especially when you are your own twin.”