

Fred Cameron, Former Pavement Pounder, Turns to Pharmacy—and Gets the Dope He's After!



The light flashed on Ape as he came shooting

WEB OF DOOM

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AT twenty-two, Fred Cameron looked forward to dark streets and still darker narrow alleys, through which the law marched grimly, a little like the gods of old. He'd dreamed of sirens screaming and guns blazing. He'd dreamed of adventure and thought that "the cops" would be its certain path.

Behind him, then, had been the

university, his degree in pharmacy; and John Cameron, his uncle, who owned a drugstore, just off Front Street, and had fondly hoped nephew Fred would join him in it. Prosaic things, drugs and shelves and counters. Youth had ideas and ideals!

So young Cameron, gray-eyed, blond, husky as a colt and not less frisky, had joined "the cops." And for ten years, he'd

pounded the Front Street beat. Not once in all that time, however, had duty drawn his gun. Not once, except on target range, had he fired that gun. The alleys remained just alleys, filled with old boxes, old smells.

"The cops," the law, he realized, had failed him.

COMING up Front Street this night at ten o'clock, Young Cameron felt a little sad. On another beat he might have won promotion. As a detective he might have faced real danger. Look at "Roxie" Kane, for instance. For months he'd been suspected of backing a huge marijuana ring in this and surrounding territory. Crime after crime had been laid at Kane's door—but that was as far as they'd got; at his door. No one had ever succeeded in establishing any proof of Kane's guilt.

There were other things, robberies and brawls, but they never seemed to happen in Fred Cameron's vicinity. And after tonight there wouldn't be another chance, for within an hour he was turning in his gun and shield—forever. A month before, John Cameron had died. He'd left the Cameron drugstore to young Fred.

He was thinking now, on his last round, that Front Street certainly had failed him as far as adventure was concerned.

"Hell, I'm a sap to think at all," he muttered, and stopped in his tracks at a crash deep in the alley he was passing.

It sounded like boxes tumbling to the ground. And steel wheels were moving on cement. Thieves? Cameron's pulse quickened and his hand sped to his gun and flashlight. Slipping into the gloom for a hundred feet, two hundred feet, he stopped, letting out a deep breath.

Death had suddenly come to the Front Street beat; but it was simple, sordid death that wouldn't rate a paragraph in the newspapers. Cameron looked down on the crumpled body of old Joe Bidwell.

A character, Bidwell. Skinny, unshaved, his lips and chin tobacco stained. He'd owned a push-cart, and God alone knew or cared where he lived. But the alleys were his stamping ground. He poked into trash cans and sometimes he stole, but nothing ever worth a dime. Empty cardboard boxes, crates, waste paper were his stock in trade. Days and nights, his push-cart would creak out of this alley or that, piled with the things he'd collected, and usually Joe Bidwell would plod behind it, looking half starved.

He'd starved himself once too often, Fred Cameron knew as he knelt beside him. Old Bidwell's body was little more than a rack of bones.

The poor old wretch had died as he had lived, squeezing hard to the pennies that should have nourished him.

This, then, was adventure, the last adventure with the Law. Cameron sighed, shoved the push-cart aside, eased old Joe's body off the alleyway. Routine search of Bidwell's clothing revealed a stub of pencil, a small black memorandum book, a bottle opener. Nothing to warrant a second glance. Not even a thin dime to turn in at the desk. Cameron put the book in his pocket, snapped off his light and got to his feet.

Twenty minutes later, the morgue wagon swung into the alley, and old Joe took his next but final ride. Cameron went back to his beat. Back, eventually, to the precinct house to a handshake, a pat on the back.

"Damned sorry to lose you, Fred," Captain Morris said. "I'd sort of hoped you'd change your mind." Cameron grinned wryly and shook his head. He took one last look at his shield, still on the captain's desk; turned away. Outside, he shivered. It seemed, somehow, there was something still undone.

"Sap," he growled, and strode on down

the street.

The drugstore was still lighted, though it was closed for the night. Cameron, passing on his way home, paused and rapped on the door. A moment later Walter Lonsdale came out of the enclosed rear office.

Lonsdale was about forty, partly bald, a little stooped, and sallow. He'd been with John Cameron for several years, and during the last two, when Cameron had no longer been able to get down to the store, he'd had complete charge of it. Business, under his guidance, had prospered.

"Well, Fred!" he greeted as he unlocked the door. "Didn't expect to see you tonight. I'm working overtime myself; checking the books to be sure everything is in good order."

Cameron smiled. Anything Lonsdale touched would have to be in good order. Lonsdale was that kind of man, farsighted and cautious.

"Lucky for me you did stop, though," Lonsdale added, "I can make you a last offer. I've talked to the bank and they'll extend my credit another two thousand."

"You're a determined fellow," Cameron said, and chuckled.

"Because I know this business—and like it." The last three words were somewhat of a slap. Lonsdale plainly disapproved of people who studied for one career and for ten years toyed with another. "Fred, I doubt if you belong behind a counter. We can close the deal now."

"But I don't want to sell," Cameron answered. He'd stopped by the soda fountain, drawing himself a glass of water. "I'm in the drug business to stay now, Lonsdale, and I hope you'll stay with me."

Lonsdale nodded glumly. "You'll be down in the morning to take over?"

"Early in the morning. I've got a lot to learn."

Cameron's eyes roved the big front room, its clean, well stocked shelves. Beyond the central partition was the pharmacy; on the left, opposite it, the office walled in opaque glass. Between these two ran a hallway into the storeroom, and then, barely visible now, the barred back door.

"Anyhow, don't worry, Walter," Cameron went on. "Changes, if any, will come slowly. I've got a book on the desk in the office, ready to jot down improvements occurring to me. When the time comes, we'll discuss them carefully. By the way, I've never been downstairs. Do we use the basement?"

Lonsdale nodded. "Store space mostly, and the fountain equipment. Sirups, extracts. Why not go down now?"

"Too late." Cameron grinned. He helped himself to a cigar, lit it, started for the street.

"I hear you had a death on the beat tonight?" Lonsdale commented.

Cameron's face sobered. "Old Joe Bidwell. Probably a heart attack, but starvation was probably back of it."

Lonsdale frowned. "The amazing thing to me is that old Joe lived as long as he did. Well, good night, Fred."

Cameron walked the dozen blocks to his rooms, head bent, thoughtful. But his thoughts were of the drugstore, his new responsibility. He didn't consciously hear the car until he was turning up the walk toward his door.

In second, gathering speed, that car was. Cameron hit the first porch step, turned to toss away his cigar. That turn was salvation. He saw flame darting from the car's back seat.

There wasn't time for dismay. Sheer instinct ruled Cameron's actions. Muscles trained for an emergency, though never before encountered, instantly drove his body into the bushes beside the stone steps.

His feet struck ground as lead spattered the porch.

BULLETS came like clawing hail; tugged at his coat sleeve, the hat on his head. By that time Cameron's big body was almost level with the ground, partially screened by the steps, and the car was roaring on its way.

It took the first corner, disappeared.

For a long minute Fred Cameron remained crouching. Now that the danger was past he could he dismayed.

Now he could wonder why, by all that was holy, *he* had been marked for death!

Inside, he told startled tenants aroused from sleep that nothing was wrong. But reaching his room he turned on the light and stood staring at his bullet-punctured uniform cap. The attack didn't make sense. So far as he knew he had no enemies, not the kind who wanted his life. Front Street hadn't been that kind of beat.

But there was no mistake. Whoever had tried to kill him had waited on this street, at this house, for *him!* And doubtless they believed they'd got him. Beyond that, Fred Cameron's mind drew a blank. He sat down, lighted a cigarette, shook his head. Plunging his hands into his pockets he started to lean back—and as suddenly jerked erect, lips parted.

In the right pocket was the loose-leaf memo book he'd taken from old Joe Bidwell. Because of the unimportance of Bidwell's death, and his own problems this last night on the force had made him forget to turn the memo book in. He took it from his pocket and began to frown.

The pages were new—and blank!

Puzzled, Cameron finally tossed the book on the table beside him. Then he stared at it in amazement. Peeping from its center, dislodged by its fall, was a single twenty-dollar bill! In the pocket of a man who most certainly looked as if he had

practically starved to death!

For at least ten minutes, Fred Cameron did not rise. Once he reached for the telephone to call police, but shook his head. Barely hours after he'd quit the force, he didn't like to run back to them for help. Besides, he had no clue to his attackers. He had nothing but this book with its blank pages, plus a twenty-dollar bill. And yet in his own mind he guessed now why death had rained at him from a passing car this night.

Joe Bidwell had been murdered!

Motive came first, of course, and Cameron could not conceive a motive. But was there even legal proof of murder? That, he meant to find out at once, and this time he did pick up the phone. But instead of calling Police Headquarters, he called Doc Victor Ortini, toxicologist in the medical examiner's office.

Ortini's voice answered drowsily. "Hell, Fred, it's nearly one o'clock!"

"I've got to see you, Vic," Cameron said grimly. "Get into your clothes, man—drive around here. I'll be at the curb."

"Where do we go then?" Ortini groaned.

"The morgue," Cameron said softly, and hung up.

CHANGING from his uniform to plain clothes for the last time he went back downstairs, the street was silent, raw with a rising wind. Soon two headlights showed blocks, a car swung in at the curb, and Cameron ran across the walk and climbed in.

The thin, dark Ortini drove them to the morgue as Cameron told him what had happened.

"Vic," Cameron said, "I want you to take a peek at the body before the undertaker gets it. We should be in time since old Joe died on the street and had no physician, no relatives, no friends. The

ambulance surgeon provisionally suspected malnutrition. He may have signed the death certificate already, but there's a chance we're in time."

They were in time, and a few minutes later stood in the eerie presence of Death. Old Joe's nude body looked almost too frail ever to have been that of a live man. Ortini took off his coat and leaned over the slab.

"No wounds, no punctures. . . ." Presently he sighed. "The trouble is, Fred, we'd have to do a formal autopsy to be sure of the exact cause of death. On the face of things, there is nothing here to disclaim the examining surgeon's statement. I can't go ahead with an autopsy either. Of course, we could wrangle one from M.E. or the D.A. but that would probably have to wait until tomorrow."

"How about his eyes?" Cameron suggested.

Ortini lifted the lids. "Dilated. You expected contraction? Fred, the surgeon would have noted that, you know."

"I know Joe Bidwell was murdered," Cameron stubbornly insisted.

"Hold on. I was about to say that in the case of certain narcotics, for example, the findings are not always characteristic. The popular belief is that all drugs contract the pupil; more often they're normal in size or dilated, even just *before* death. Suppose we take opium—" He stopped, dropped his cigarette on the floor, ground it out. "Wait a minute, Fred. I want to make a phone call."

HE went out of the room, and Cameron looked at his watch. One-thirty. . . . He had a feeling that every passing moment was important, that delay now might ruin everything. There was still many things he wanted to do yet this night, but of course first. . . . The door opened and Ortini returned, grinning.

"I'm leading with my chin, maybe. I've called the medical examiner and I've sold him a bill of goods. He's coming down; he's phoning the D.A., too. I called Headquarters and a couple of Homicide dicks are coming over. Meantime, we're going to cut."

"You mean you—"

"I mean," Ortini interrupted, "your hunch is contagious." His hands were drawing up a stand, laying out instruments. He slipped into a white smock, then rubber gloves. "In a case like this, with a man like Joe Bidwell involved, almost anyone is apt to jump to conclusions. He was a bum; he went about, half starved, half the time eating out of trash cans, or getting hand-outs. So it's easy to jump to the conclusion malnutrition caused his death. But you raised some doubt, and since Bidwell was never known to be a drug addict, my mind raised another."

"Opium?" Cameron hazarded.

"Could be. The porphyrroxine test, or the Husemann reaction, or the urotropin or formaldehyde reaction will establish proof."

"My God, Vic!" Cameron cried. "That will take hours!"

"Hold your horses," Ortini answered equably, "there's another, perhaps extra-legal, but pretty accurate." He picked up a scalpel, made a quick incision just below the dead man's chest. For a moment he was silent. Then: "Blood is fluid and dark in color," he said. "Significant, Fred. But I was going to say we always have odor, characteristic odor, immediately perceived on opening the stomach."

"You recognize the smell?"

Ortini looked up. He was no longer grinning.

"Opium!"

Fred Cameron wheeled abruptly and started for the door.

"Hold on!" Ortini called, but Cameron

didn't stop. He hit the street and at the corner hailed a cruising cab.

"Front Street!" he yelled and sank back on the seat.

But not to relax. Thoughts in his mind were like tangled vines, and speeding through the lonely streets he sought to place them in some semblance of order.

The cab stopped at the entrance to the alley in which Joe Bidwell had met death. Cameron paid off his driver. This time he had no flashlight, but he had matches and he went over the ground, the push-cart, even the boxes piled upon it. Carefully, doggedly—without results.

Nevertheless, he moved on, not back to Front Street, but deeper into the alley. Over ground he knew. His ground during ten years on this beat, but the alley tonight was different. It had the same old refuse, the same old smells, but it seemed darker, as though each shadow held menace. He was in the midst of them when he stopped short, at sight of a car.

A shiny car, black, parked—and empty. A car behind a store all night was not particularly unusual; behind *this* store, tonight, it suddenly was unusual. Cameron, treading softly, rounded it, passed a barrel, paused just beside the building.

The blow came with only a swishing sound. It came from behind him, from behind the barrel. Cameron whirled in time to see the blot of a big body, arm upraised. Instinctively his head jerked aside, but even so, his brain seemed to explode. The blows kept on coming, like trip-hammers, and suddenly he no longer could think or see. . .

WHEN young Cameron opened his eyes, he was lying on cement. It was cold and it smelled damp. He started a groan, stifled it as he realized that any sound or movement might be dangerous. He lay quietly, breathing shallowly, and the first thing he heard was the nervous pacing

of heavy feet. Near him, back and forth. From beyond, he heard the steady click as of light machinery.

Cameron's head was throbbing, but the pain was like a tonic. Presently, he chanced one cautious glance upward, into gloom stabbed by distant feeble light.

Instantly he placed the pacing man. However indistinct his features, he was familiar with that square chin; with the shoulders and arms that hung loosely like an ape's! "Ape" Lorghum, long known to the police.

"I tell you we're going to push our luck too far," Ape was saying. "This guy's supposed to be dead, then he turns up here in the alley. It's a break for us I was outside watching."

"You damned fool, you did the shooting," a harsh voice answered.

"Sure, and he fell off the porch steps, didn't he? How was I to know we'd missed? Question is, what's he been doing since we tried to bump him off?"

Mirthless laughter came then. "Ape, you don't know how to reason. He's a cop—or he was, until tonight. Percentage says he'd go to the cops, squawking. But we know he didn't. If he had, the bulls would have been swarming around here with him. Is he conscious yet?"

Ape came across the cement floor. His foot cut under Cameron's shoulder, rolled him over. Cameron groaned but kept his eyes closed.

"Still out," Ape said, and retraced his steps.

Cameron took another chance, and saw where that other voice, still unrecognized, was coming from. A room off this room, and therein was the light. There too, the machine. Small, compact, motor driven. Like those he had often seen in windows, advertising cigarettes. Manufacturing cigarettes for the curious gaze of the public.

But there was, nevertheless, a

difference. Not in the machine, but in its fodder. Stacked on the floor, like so much loose alfalfa, were piles of dried weed. Cameron's jaw tightened as he recognized the obvious answer to that. Marijuana!

"How much longer, Roxie?" Ape Lorghum muttered.

Roxie! The man the police had long tried to get. The man alleged to deal in dope—Roxie Kane!

"Listen, Ape!" A third voice broke in now in answer.

Cameron didn't consciously hear the next few complaining words for he was too conscious of the owner of that voice. Walter Lonsdale! The trusted employee of John Cameron! The man who for so long had been manager of the Cameron drugstore.

At last the picture was complete, for one other thing Cameron knew now, too. His whereabouts. All around him were casks, jars, immense jugs and bottles. Within reach of his hands was a keg with a peculiar steel spigot that could only be soda fountain equipment. A keg of simple sirup plainly labeled.

Fred Cameron was in the basement of his own drugstore! And in this other room, doubtless always padlocked to the store's sales staff, was the seat of Roxie Kane's nefarious operations. Here was the reason old Joe Bidwell had died. No longer did Cameron wonder, puzzled, as to why Bidwell had been murdered. Bidwell's business had been to poke into barrels and buildings. He'd poked once too often—and too far.

Simple soul that he was, Bidwell's knowledge had either been discovered, or he'd tried to shake Kane and Lonsdale dawn. In view of the twenty-dollar bill in the notebook, that might be it. Twenty dollars—piker's dough—but what else had Joe Bidwell been but a piker? A man who had been eager for hand-outs. And one

hand-out, probably a sandwich, or perhaps a bottle of beer had contained opium enough to kill him.

Cameron's mind brought up sharply. The logical reason for old Joe's killing had come like lightning, but with a part of his mind only. The other directed frenzied action, toward so frail a hope it seemed insane.

"Ape, we're safe, I tell you," Lonsdale persisted. "And in a few minutes we'll have this batch finished. You're sure Cameron is unconscious?"

Ape turned around, and this time Cameron's eyes closed a shade too late.

"Hi'ya, copper!" Ape said. "Stay right where you are, flat on, the floor. . . . You guys in there, what do I do now?"

FRED CAMERON looked beyond Ape Lorghum and into Lonsdale's sallow face.

"So you wouldn't sell?" Lonsdale grinned. "Fred, I told you you didn't belong behind a counter. I knew then you never would get behind one either."

"And that was the reason for trying to shoot me?" Cameron hedged.

"Oh no. We were going to move out, and I'd have set myself up in business elsewhere. It wasn't the drugstore, Fred, so much as the way things began to happen. Too bad you didn't have time to look over the basement earlier tonight. That would have saved us a lot of trouble."

"I'd have gone down first and got it plenty then, uh? That it, Walter?"

"With a hammer." Lonsdale nodded gravely. "Because you had something then we had to control. Something innocent enough to anyone's else's eyes, but looks like it wasn't so innocent to yours. So you figured old Joe was murdered, eh, Fred? Too bad—for you. For a little thing like that you lose everything."

"So I'm going to be forced to sign

away my store," Cameron murmured.

"Oh, no." Lonsdale's thin lips twisted. "That wouldn't look good when they find your body. I can buy now, legitimately, from your estate. You and Joe Bidwell can talk things over if you meet up. Old J De can tell you how he tried to butt in on us, too."

The machine in the other room stopped. Moon-faced Roxie Kane, squat, thick-shouldered, came to the door. His small eyes looked at Cameron, squinting in the semi-darkness, as he pulled a heavy automatic from beneath his well tailored coat.

"The stuff's ready, Ape," he said, a hard smile spreading over his many-chinned face. "Pack things up. . . . And listen, Lonsdale! This ex-copper's my meat. I got experience in jobs like this."

"Here?" Lonsdale asked nervously. "Don't forget that front window is right beneath the sidewalk grating."

"Huh! We don't have to worry about that window. We got our other little room. A cannon couldn't hardly leak its roar in there. It's tailor-made, Lonsdale, tailor-made. All right, copper, climb to your dogs."

Cameron didn't move. His muscles felt frozen. Adventure. . . . His first and last. He knew he was not afraid of Death, but he didn't want to muff his lines.

If there was only some one thing he might do to delay this execution! With just a little more time. Headquarters might connect opium and this drugstore, but this was a forlorn hope. They might come, but it would be too late. They wouldn't find why old Joe had been murdered, or wouldn't find proof he had been.

"You heard me!" Roxie Kane snarled. "Get up." He raised his gun, took a threatening step forward.

The frozen feeling in Cameron suddenly thawed. An almost liquid

eagerness took its place. He started to rise, fell back against the wall, cringing.

"Cops!" Roxie spat. "Take their damned uniforms off and they're yellow. By hell, Cameron, I'll—"

Kane took three or four quick steps forward. But the last faltered as he gasped. The dope seller's gun arm flew upward as Fred Cameron's body, braced against the wall, flashed into motion.

His lunge caught the stubby Kane, toppled him in a pudgy heap. Two frantic blows tried for Cameron's face. He scarcely felt them as both his hands fought to wrench Roxie's gun from his tightened hand, as well as the crook's flashlight.

It happened so unexpectedly, that Walter Lonsdale, across the room, stood still, jaw dropped. By the time he cried, "Ape!" Cameron was driving forward.

THE ex-policeman shot twice, weaving the gun to bring both men within its arc. Lonsdale spun about, clawed at his shoulder. Roxie Kane's little eyes in his chubby face, widened stupidly. He tried to clamber to his feet but fell back with a thud. Cameron leaped to the door of the other room.

The blood sang in his head and in his veins as he hit the doorway. . . . A cellar, musty, almost dark—better than an alley. A gun spitting flame—and flame, too, squarely in his path.

He heard lead spatter the wood beside his face and shouted aloud. Lead caught his arm, his thigh, but though it swerved him in his onward leap, it did not stop him.

In the little room, Ape crouched behind the small cigarette machine. Cameron burst through the doorway, the flashlight centered on Ape as the thug came shooting; and with the other hand shooting coolly himself, with a precision he'd always known he'd have.

One moment the walls thundered. With

Cameron's third bullet, Ape Lorghum pawed the air. . . .

"You damned fool," Captain Morris said slowly. "Don't you know a good cop never tackles a job like this alone?"

Fred Cameron, wincing a little as Dr. Ortini began to clean his wounds, still managed a grin.

"But I'm not a cop any more."

"You had me worried, Fred," Ortini cut in. "The M.E. took over and I went around and routed Morris. We realized the blowoff would be in this precinct. Hold still—do you want to keep this slug in your leg?"

Cameron held still, teeth clenched, but he went on talking.

"When I dropped into the drugstore before midnight tonight, Lonsdale tried to get me into the cellar. But he didn't dare be too insistent. No use rousing my suspicions about something I wasn't yet suspicious of. Anyhow, he knew Kane and Ape Lorghum would be waiting for me at my home."

"But why?" Morris growled.

"Because of the memo book I'd taken from Joe Bidwell's body. Lonsdale knew I hadn't turned that book in, hadn't yet connected it with old Joe's murder and what it meant. But having it at all, I had to die before I did have a brainstorm and connect it. For that book, regardless of its blank pages, proved Joe Bidwell had been not only in this store, but where he had no business to be—in the office. Because, you see, that book belonged to *me!* My own name was stamped in gold on the cover. Just yesterday, I'd taken it from stock and left it on Lonsdale's desk."

"I guess I understand now." Ortini nodded. "Lonsdale apparently didn't miss

the book until Bidwell had gone. Doubtless he followed him, but the old fellow died before he reached him. Then you came bounding into the alley, Fred, so Lonsdale didn't dare show himself then."

"That's the idea. They didn't know what I'd do, finding the book on Bidwell. And they were not sure there wouldn't be an autopsy, no matter how cleverly they'd planned Joe's death, and of course it would disclose opium. In that case, the book would have established a link between Bidwell and the Cameron drug store that Lonsdale couldn't get around."

"Two things more," Captain Morris grunted. "You say Kane started for you and you got his gun. How?"

"There was a keg of plain sirup, used in mixing the soda fountain extracts, right beside me. For one instant when Lorghum had his back turned on me, I raised the flat steel plate on the spigot, and wedged it with a match stick. The sirup dripped quietly and spread out on the floor. In the dimness none of them saw it.

"So"—young Cameron grinned—"I drew back, and since they didn't dare risk shooting me outside the sound-proof chamber, Kane had to come and get me. See how it was? I spun a sticky web, and my fly not only stepped into it, but slipped!"

"There'll be a promotion for cleaning up both the marihuana ring and Joe Bidwell's murder," Morris stated. "Do you want to come back to the force, Fred?"

"Not on your life!" Cameron chuckled. "I've had more adventure in a few hours as a drug store owner than in ten years as a cop!"