

MURDER MUSIC



The blow sent Smith reeling back

By CHARLES STODDARD

Detective Ward Heath Uses Ten Fingers to Play a Piano But Only One to Pull a Trigger When Murderers Tune Up!

DOWN at Centre Street they thought that First Grade Detective Ward Heath was just plain nuts. Any guy who spent all his spare time tickling the ivories of a baby grand piano didn't belong on the Headquarters Detective Squad. In the estimation of the moss-backs he should have been pounding out boogie-woogie with a bunch of jive artists in a night club.

"With that long hair of his, he even looks like a musician," said Mike Casey, who had come up from the ranks the hard way and as a consequence

had calluses on his disposition. "Besides, he's too young. He's got too many newfangled ideas to make a good detective."

"I smell the strong odor of sour grapes," said little Joe Higgins, the ballistics expert. "Ward did some mighty nice work in tracking down the gang that pulled that silk warehouse heist. He pinned the rap on 'Hash' Lugan and his boys, and, he made it stick. He proved that Lugan bossed the job by tracing the brass button the harness bull tore off Hash's sport coat when they gave the cop twenty

slugs in the body. Pretty smart.”

“Dumb luck!” exclaimed Casey impatiently. “If that’s detective work, I’ll take molasses.”

“You would,” said Higgins. “It’s slower.”

“Sure,” said Casey. “And where is Ward Heath now that he’s off duty? Probably home playing the piano and making the neighbors wish he had taken up knitting instead.”

BUT Casey was wrong. Ward Heath was home all right, but he wasn’t playing the piano. He was looking into the business end of an automatic held in the hand of an extremely mean-faced man.

The electric player-piano attachment that Ward Heath had on his baby grand was softly playing—“Autumn Nocturne in C Minor.” The detective had been intently analyzing the piece when the man with the gun had appeared.

“It’s always polite to knock first before barging into a strange apartment,” Heath had said, mentally condemning his carelessness in leaving the front door of his apartment unlocked. “What do you want, Hard Guy?”

“The name is Smith.” The man with the gun scowled. Heath wasn’t acting according to the best rules and regulations in gangster circles and Smith didn’t like it. Even a detective was supposed to get a bit jittery when he found himself covered by a rod.

“Shut off that blasted music. The boss sent me around with a message, see!”

“What is it?” demanded Heath. “Doesn’t your boss like classical music?”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” said Smith. “I was to give you this.”

He reached carefully into his pocket with his left hand, pulled out a small envelope, and handed it to Ward Heath. The blond-haired detective looked inside the envelope and pulled out a long railroad ticket.

“New York to Chicago on the Great Lakes Limited leaving tonight,” he said. “That’s one of the deluxe stream liners. This ticket cost your boss a good bit of dough.” He smiled ironically. “I didn’t know he cared.”

“Can the malarkey,” snarled Smith. “You’ll use that ticket tonight if you know what’s good for you, Heath.”

“But I don’t know anybody in Chicago,” protested Heath. “You wouldn’t want me to go all that distance just for the train ride?”

“I ain’t worried about that.” Smith cast a quick glance at the piano which was still playing softly, and then frowned as though puzzled. “I’m just doin’ what Hap tells me, see!”

“So you’re one of Hap Vane’s boys,” said Heath quickly.

“Yeah?” Smith leered at him. “Try and prove it. And will you shut off that piano? I’ve heard that piece somewhere before and it don’t sound right.”

“That’s why I’ve been studying it,” said Heath. “It’s the grace notes. I noticed that myself.”

“The what?” Smith glanced again at the piano.

For just an instant he was off guard, and that instant was enough for Heath. The detective got in a hard left to the chin that sent Smith reeling back. At the same time Heath’s right hand flashed into the side pocket of his coat and came out with his own automatic. The piano stopped playing as it came to the end of the roll.

“Now we’ll settle this quick,” said Heath grimly. “Drop your gun before I put a bullet through you!”

SMITH dropped his automatic to the floor as though it had suddenly become red hot. He looked very unhappy. Now that Heath had the drop on him, the gunman was giving a poor imitation of a cornered rat—a poor imitation because a rat would fight and Smith wouldn’t.

“There—there ain’t no reason for you to do any shootin’,” he said nervously. “The boss just told me to give you the ticket and tell you to get out of town. I’m just a messenger boy.”

“You’d be a disgrace to any telegraph company,” said Heath disgustedly. “Beat it.”

Smith, amazed at getting off so easy, dashed for the door. Heath had his reasons for letting him go. The detective smiled grimly as he heard the outer door of the apartment close with a bang.

“Now why is Hap Vane so anxious to get me to leave for Chicago tonight? And what made him think I’d put up and go on his say-so?”

Heath dropped his gun back into his pocket and picked up Smith’s automatic. His brows were furrowed in thought. He had been working on a comparatively minor case. Two days ago a bank messenger had been robbed and the policeman with him knocked out by three men as they had been going down one of the ramps leading to the lower level in Grand Central Station. The gunmen had managed to make their escape in the crowd, getting

away with a briefcase containing five thousand dollars.

As usual, the descriptions of the three men given by witnesses had varied to such an extent that they were useless. Now it occurred to Heath that there was a connection between the robbery and Hap Vane's run-out order to him. For Heath had been in the station when the robbery took place. He had not seen the robbery, being on the upper level at the time, and he had been on the upper level for a purely musical reason—to hear the noonday concert given by the organist on the balcony. But the two events—the robbery and the recent visit to him—were tied together in a strange way.

"The way Smith recognized the nocturne but didn't think it sounded right has me wondering," he muttered. "I think I'll take a run down to Grand Central. Maybe I'll pick up a loose end."

Heath locked the apartment and headed for the station. When he reached it, he strolled casually through the huge expanse of the upper level. People were bustling about, buying tickets, awaiting the arrival of trains or getting ready to depart on others. The strain of organ music came again to Heath's ears, carrying clearly through the great depot.

"Autumn Nocturne again," he muttered. "Sounds terrible. That piece was written for the piano, not for the organ."

He had heard the same piece being played on the organ here in the station on the day the bank messenger had been robbed! It had interested him enough to make him buy the roll for his piano. He had also bought the sheet music and had intended to see how well he could play it after he had listened to the roll.

"The organist seems to have an especial liking for that piece," he thought. "Wonder, is there any particular reason for it?"

HE MADE his way up onto the balcony where the organ was located. To his surprise he found a pretty blond girl clad in a yellow dress seated at the keyboard of the organ. She glanced up in surprise on seeing that she had a visitor, but she kept on playing.

"I'm Heath, Detective Bureau, Police Headquarters," he said. "Why do you insist upon playing that nocturne? It sounds terrible on the organ."

The girl finished playing the nocturne and leaned back on the organ stool. For an instant she

gazed calmly at Heath, conscious that he was young and good looking, and then she smiled.

"Are you here officially?" she asked. "Or merely as a music critic?"

"A little of both," said Heath with a friendly grin. "I hope you don't mind, Miss—"

"Doris Russell is the name," said the girl. "I agree with you, Mr. Heath. The nocturne wasn't written for the organ—it's a piano piece—but I play it as a special request. There's the nicest man who comes here two or three times a week. He told me his wife left on a trip some months ago. She died suddenly while she was away. Autumn Nocturne was her favorite. Her husband asked me to play the piece because it was here in the station that he last saw his wife alive."

"Very pretty!" said Heath, who was too much of a hard-boiled police detective to be overly sentimental. "In fact, just a little too sweet." He glanced at the music on the organ rack, and his eyes became suddenly more intent.

"Do you happen to know the name of the man who asked you to play the nocturne, Miss Russell?"

"Why, yes," said Doris Russell. "John Harvey. He told me that he was the president of Seventh Federal National Bank."

"Oh!" Ward Heath looked disappointed. "It's easy enough to check up on him." Heath seemed to turn suddenly shy. "You'll probably think I've a lot of nerve—but would you have lunch with me?"

Doris looked at him for a moment, and decided that she liked this lean blond young man.

"I like men with nerve," she said. "Besides, I'm sure I'll be quite safe lunching with a member of the police department."

"Gosh!" said Heath boyishly. "I was scared to death for a moment you'd give me the cold shoulder. What time are you through with your concert?"

"I'm through now. That's why I stopped playing." She shifted off the electric controls of the organ and got to her feet. "Shall we go?"

"Swell!" Heath helped her gather up her music. "This looks like my lucky day."

By the time they had finished their meal they were good friends and Doris had agreed to have dinner with him the next evening. Heath was glad he was off duty even though he still had been working on the bank messenger case. He persuaded the girl to lend him her organ music of the nocturne.

IT WAS late in the afternoon when he finally left her at her apartment on the east side of town. She lived there with her father, who was a railroad man working on the New York Central. Heath returned to his own place feeling good. She liked him, he thought. Maybe that liking would develop into something deeper, as it had already done with him.

But, as he reached the front door of his apartment, a feeling of danger swept over him, driving out all other emotions. He had learned to heed such warnings, so it was with caution that he unlocked the apartment door and entered with his hand in the pocket that carried his gun.

He scowled. There, as calmly as you please, sat Hap Vane, occupying the most comfortable chair in the living room. Heath was more annoyed than alarmed to find Hap Vane there. In his estimation, the lean hatchet-faced visitor was little more than a small-time racketeer.

"What's the idea, Vane?"

"Been waiting for you, Heath." Vane bit off the end of an unlighted cigar and stuck it in his mouth. "Figured I could talk you into taking that train for Chicago tonight."

"What makes you think that?"

"See you having lunch with the Russell dame," said Vane calmly. "It gave me a good idea. My boys had orders to wait until they saw you come back here. The guy I had planted outside is doing a little telephoning by now."

"About what?" asked Heath.

"He's tipped off the boys over on the east side that it's time for them to snatch the Russell dame."

"Why, you—"

"Don't do anything foolish, Heath," said Vane. "I got you covered with the gun in my pocket." The gang leader smiled. "Now, if you was to take the Great Lakes Limited tonight like a nice boy, maybe I could talk my boys out of the idea of bumping off the girl."

"And if I refuse?" demanded Heath tensely.

"That will be too bad—for the girl." Vane took the cigar out of his mouth with his left hand and began to whistle softly. It was part of the theme melody of Autumn Nocturne. "I'd kind of hate to see her bumped off just because you were stubborn."

"Looks like you've got me, Vane." Heath seated himself at the piano and ran his fingers lightly over the keys. "If I leave tonight, will you guarantee to

release the girl?"

"Why not?" said Vane. "Holding her ain't going to bring in any dough. Her dad's just a switch tower man on the railroad—he couldn't put up much jack for ransom."

"Suppose I reported this down at Headquarters before I left?"

"You won't do that." Hap Vane got to his feet. "If you did, the girl would die in a hurry."

"All right," said Heath resignedly, still playing softly. "I'll leave for Chicago tonight."

There was no answer. He stopped playing and glanced over his shoulder. Hap Vane was gone and Heath heard the outer door of the apartment close softly. The detective went to the phone, picked it up and then put it down again without dialing a number. If he phoned the detective bureau, he'd be risking the girl's life. He couldn't do that. Already she meant too much to him.

With a sigh, he settled himself at the piano again. He took down the organ music of the nocturne Doris had lent him and placed it on the rack.

"Written in C minor, and to be played with the voc-humana stop out according to this music. And Mr. John Harvey even gave Doris this organ music to play. It's too pat. I don't believe Harvey's sob story."

HE SAT there for some time, deep in thought. Finally he went back to the phone after looking up the number of the information booth in Grand Central. He dialed the number.

"Can you tell me the first junction stop on the run of the Great Lakes Limited?" he asked. He waited a moment. "Crestwood Manor," he repeated. "Thank you." He hung up with an expression of satisfaction on his face. "So that's it," he said. "But why? I still don't know that."

It was night when Ward Heath, carrying a small bag, reached Grand Central Terminal. He waited for the gates of the Great Lakes Limited to open. As he did so, some men appeared, wheeling a four-wheeled hand-truck on which there was a big iron-bound box. Heath watched with interest, noting that station police were guarding the box. He flashed his own badge.

"Looks like that must be pretty valuable," he remarked to one of the railroad police.

"It is," said the policeman. "Half a million dollars being shipped on the Limited by the

Seventh Federal National Bank to their Chicago branch.”

Things were shaping up. Heath, noticing everything while appearing to notice nothing, saw that the little gunman, Smith, was watching him from the crowd some distance away. The train gates were opened and the truck wheeled through. The gates were then closed and locked again.

Heath considered picking up Smith and trying to force him to tell where the girl had been taken, but decided against it. Time was the vital thing. He was determined on one thing—to get to the junction at Crestwood Manor before the Limited arrived there.

He found the train dispatcher in the big room beyond Track 35. He talked swiftly and insistently. At first the dispatcher acted as if he could not believe what he heard, but he finally nodded.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll get in touch with the division super and tell him what you just said. It doesn’t seem possible, though.”

“It’s got to be,” said Heath.

He hurried to the gate as it was opened for the Limited’s passengers. Walking down the ramps, he threw a swift glance over his shoulder. Smith was following. They wanted to make sure he really took the train.

Heath found the car that had his seat number, went inside and sat down. Smith stood out on the platform watching, but he was still there when the train pulled out of Grand Central.

When the Limited finally arrived at the 125th Street Station and stopped to take on more passengers, Heath got off quickly. It was a dangerous move, but he had to make it.

HE DASHED down the steps and out onto the street. There he hailed a white and green police prowl car as it rolled by. The officer at the wheels swung the car into the curb as Heath ran to it. He displayed his badge and the men in the car took a good look at it.

“What’s wrong?” demanded the man sitting beside the driver.

“The Limited!” exclaimed Heath, glancing up at the elevated tracks as the streamline train pulled away from the station. “It’s going to be wrecked at the junction at Crestwood Manor.”

“Oh, yeah?” said the prowl car policeman. “Then why didn’t you have the railroad wire on ahead and stop the train before it got there?”

“I tried to tell the dispatcher at Grand Central,”

said Heath quickly. “But he acted like he thought I was nuts. I couldn’t take a chance on him.”

“Okay,” said the car’s driver. “We’ll head for Crestwood Manor right away. But Doyle, you stay here and phone this in. I’ll take this guy and head for the Junction.”

“We’ll all get hell if this ain’t really so,” protested Doyle, but he leaped out of the car and let Heath climb in beside the driver.

The car sped away with siren screaming. Heath knew that the highway was a shorter route to the junction than were the tracks of the railroad. All the same it was a race against time, since the streamliner was a lot faster than the police car.

They tore madly through the night. Finally they saw the lights of the railroad junction ahead of them. Heath leaped out of the car and raced across the tracks toward the switch tower. He could see figures moving around up in the structure that stood on a platform high above the tracks. Heath tripped over a rail and fell. But Blake, the officer from the police car, had been running close behind the detective.

Blake reached the ladder that led up to the switch tower and began climbing hastily. He was halfway up when a gun roared from the platform above. The police officer lost his grip as a bullet got him, and went hurtling down to the ground to sprawl there motionless.

Heath was on his feet. He ducked into the shadows beneath the tower. From far off came the whistle of a train. The Limited was coming fast. With signals clear it would tear through the junction at seventy miles an hour or more.

“I’ve got to get up there,” muttered Heath. “But if I try the ladder, they’ll shoot me down just as they did Blake.”

He started climbing up one of the girders that supported the tower. It was a hard climb but he finally reached a spot where he could peer in through a wide-open window. A startling scene met his gaze. Hap Vane was there, and another hard-looking man was with him. A gray-haired man who apparently had been in charge of the switch tower for the railroad sat bound and gagged in one corner. Doris Russell was standing near the bound man.

“The Limited is coming,” said Vane gruffly. “As soon as it gets near enough I’ll throw the switch that will shoot it over on that blind track that Russell told us about. Smart trick, our bringing the girl here so we could force her father to talk and

tell us the right switches to use.”

“Yeah,” said the other man. “And if she makes a wrong move, she gets a bullet in her.”

“Here she comes!” exclaimed Vane.

The bright headlight making a white path of light on the track in front of the oncoming train.

“Time to throw the switch!”

Vane reached for the switch lever just as Heath raised his body above the level of the sill. Vane’s colleague fired at the detective but his bullet went wild.

Heath got the aide through the heart with his first shot.

“Duck down, Doris!” he shouted. “On the floor!”

The girl dropped. Heath put a bullet through Vane’s right arm before the gang leader could draw back the switch lever. The Great Lakes Limited roared by on the main line track and swiftly disappeared into the distance. Heath breathed a sigh of relief as he climbed in through the window.

“Mighty close,” he muttered, glaring at Vane. “Almost wrecked the Limited so you could get the half million dollars she’s carrying.”

“Half a million!” exclaimed Vane. “What are you talking about? John Harvey just paid us twenty-five grand to wreck the train. He ordered me to have my boys destroy a big metal-bound box that was on the Limited. Harvey claimed there were some papers in that box that would send him to jail if they were ever examined and he couldn’t get them any other way”

“And you swallowed a yarn like that?” said Heath in amazement. “You didn’t know about the half a million that was being shipped from Harvey’s bank?”

He frowned when Vane shook his head.

“If Harvey ordered you to destroy the box, I guess there wasn’t any money in it,” he said thoughtfully.

Doris had removed the gag from her father’s mouth and was untying the ropes that bound him. Heath continued to glare at Vane. The gang leader evidently realized there was no way out for him and he was willing to talk.

“I ordered Smith to be sure you were on the streamliner, Heath,” said Vane. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“Never mind that,” said Heath grimly. “You wanted me on that train so that I would be killed in the wreck. Guess you thought that was a good way

of getting rid of me without having it look like murder. But I want to know why?”

“Hash Lukan and that bunch you sent up the river were our pals,” said Vane.

RAILROAD detectives and local police were now swarming around the tower. Vane was placed under arrest and taken away. The men he had brought with him, who had been waiting at the end of the blind track for the wreck of the Limited, were rounded up. Heath phoned police Headquarters in New York and told them what had happened. He was informed that John Harvey would be picked up and arrested at once.

Hours later, when Heath and Doris were back in New York, the whole case had been cleared up. As Heath had suspected when he had learned the iron-bound box on the train was empty, the bank president had planned the whole thing. Harvey had embezzled half a million dollars of the bank’s money. Desperate when he learned the bank examiners were going to investigate, Harvey had offered Vane’s mob twenty-five thousand to wreck the Limited.

That way, he could make the bank examiners believe that the missing half a million had been on its way to the Chicago branch of the bank when the wreck, apparently for purposes of robbery, took place. He had filled the iron-bound box with newspapers at the bank, submitting them for the real money there. The money was to replace his own embezzling.

“That business of having you signal Vane’s men by playing the nocturne on the organ was pretty elaborate,” Heath told Doris. “But Harvey didn’t dare even phone Vane. The first time they tried out the signal was when the bank messenger was robbed. Harvey was just testing out Vane’s men then to see if they would carry out the job.”

“You noticed that it was written so I had to play it with the voc-humana stop out,” said Doris.

“Yes, and it worried me when I first heard it, for the piece wasn’t written for the organ. That’s why I got the music and a player roll of the nocturne and was studying it when Smith showed up. Then, when a lug like that recognized it, I knew there was something wrong.”

“And when I played it at noon today, that must have been the signal for Vane’s men to go ahead and wreck the Limited tonight,” said Doris. “Vane knew that the train would be wrecked and he

wanted you to be on it.”

“Right.” Heath frowned. “I sure was worried when I found they had kidnapped you.”

“So was I,” said Doris with a smile. “I was

afraid we might not be able to have dinner together tomorrow night.”

“What a gal!” exclaimed Heath delightedly.