



Borgia's Barbecue

By TED COUGHLAN

Two mysterious deaths at a roadside restaurant send Red Perry hunting a murderer and his recipe for ruin!

SHERIFF PETE DOLAN'S husky voice lifted sharply as he remonstrated with the short, incredibly thin man with a mane of red hair and the face of an impish elderly elf.

"Look here, Red, just because you're back in Miami and on the staff again, there's no reason to go off half cocked when a drunk dies from acute indigestion."

Dolan's wide-set blue eyes swept over the perspiring crowd in Betty's Barbecue, a salt box of a building dwarfed by the royal palms shading it.

He lowered his voice. The corners of his pale, wide mouth were lifted in a smile, as he added:

"You've been out of a job so long, you're trying too hard to make good. You

don't need that with me, son. I know you can dig out facts, or I wouldn't have recommended you for re-instatement."

Red Perry rumped his flaming hair, abashed, but stood his ground.

"I wish you'd order an autopsy just the same, Sheriff. He's not the only guy that got sick around here tonight."

"Forget it, Red. Let's have a beer and get out of here."

They drank their two mugs of draught, ate a greasy hamburger each. Red Perry insisted on taking the names and addresses of all the customers in the place, before they left the garish roadside stand.

Two hours later Perry became violently ill. The nausea came upon him so suddenly that he did not quite get to the bathroom. He swallowed a piece of lemon and a cup of strong, black coffee.

As soon as he could walk again, he picked up the telephone and called the sheriff.

"How do you feel, Sheriff?" he asked shakily.

"I don't know whether to call the undertaker or go out and clean up that joint," Dolan answered gruffly.

"So, you too!" Perry groaned, as another spasm hit him.

"Meet me back at Betty's right away," the sheriff ordered.

Perry reached the barbecue before his boss. The juke organ blared, and customers still danced under the colored electric bulbs.

Slumping into a corner booth, he glared at the offending machine. His head was splitting. He laid his flaming mane on the table's checkered oilcloth as the waitress came to take his order.

"What's the matter, Mister?"

"Where's Betty?" he asked gruffly. "Tell her I want to see her."

"Take it easy, pal. You're not the only customer in the joint."

The girl wrinkled her snub nose and arched her plucked eyebrows saucily.

"No, but I'm the sickest one," Perry growled, tightening his plastic belt around his thin waist.

BETTY came over, a professional smile glued to her face. She squeezed herself between the bench and the narrow table, and sat opposite her customer.

"What is it, Red? Want something special?"

"Yeah. A glass of clean water and a toothpick. Say, what kind of poison did you put in those hamburgers tonight? The one I ate a couple of hours ago made me lose everything I've had for ten days."

The smile died from the woman's face, but she showed no surprise.

"I'm sorry, Red. You, too? I had several complaints about that meat. I've thrown it out. Can I get you something to make up for it? No charge, of course."

"I couldn't eat a bite. My stomach feels like an erupting volcano. But I could do with a good shot."

Betty nodded, walked away, and came back with a half pint of rye.

"Gee, I'm much obliged. I know you haven't a license to sell the stuff. Say, how many other poor guys got feeling this way, Betty?"

"I'm not sure. Three others complained to me. It must have been the hamburgers—that's what they all had. I threw the stuff in the garbage can. I'll sure tell that salesman something tomorrow when he comes back."

Perry looked around carefully. The joint was full. Most of the men were drinking beer.

The snub-nosed, bleached blond waitress was dancing with a man in painters' overalls. Betty was glaring angrily at the couple. Several others were eating plate dinners.

He nodded to a friend of his, seated alone at a table across the room. The man did not notice him. He got up and started hurriedly for the lavatory.

When he came out, his face had a pale gray hue like the synthetic marble bar, and sweat poured down his caved-in cheeks. He saw Perry and slumped down beside him.

"What did you have to eat?" Perry asked sympathetically.

"Goulash. Boy, it must have been powerful stuff! I'm all in."

He loosened the neck of his shirt, gasping for breath.

"Here, try this."

Perry poured a stiff drink and held it to his friend's trembling lips. The man swallowed it gratefully and blinked.

"What are you doing out here, anyway?" Perry asked. "You don't live in this neighborhood. I thought you had a downtown route."

"Oh, just relieving one of the guys on vacation. I do my own work in the daytime, and his at night. If I ever eat again, it won't be here!"

Rising shakily, he staggered out to where his beer truck stood under the broken neon sign.

Red Perry walked into the kitchen and looked around. "Everything's as clean as one can expect for a jook joint!" he mused. Then, turning to the cook he posed a blunt question. "What are you putting into the food tonight? Arsenic?"

The cook, a pale, emaciated youngster in dirty white slacks, looked frightened. He backed into a corner and screamed at Perry.

"You get out of here! There's nothing wrong with my food! If a couple of drunks get sick, am I to blame for it?"

"All right, bud, don't let it get you down."

Perry's freckled nose wrinkled as he sniffed at the pot of goulash on the stove. He shouldered his way out the swinging back door.

By the fence, separating the barbecue from an empty tract of land, he saw unmistakable signs that several others had eaten the tainted meat.

RECOGNIZING the siren on the sheriff's car, he went back into the barbecue. Several of the customers started to leave, but he stopped them and sat at a table with a view of both doors.

As the sheriff pushed open the front door, a middle-aged man in paint-spattered overalls, looking much the worse for drink, stood up and lurched toward the side entrance.

"Wait a minute, buddy!" Dolan yelled. "I want to talk to everybody here."

The man stopped and twisted toward the sheriff. His lean, red face was screwed with pain, and his body was heaving with convulsions. The sheriff rushed to help him. Perry jumped up, too.

Before they could reach the stricken man, he fell to the floor. His body gave a violent twitch, then lay still. Perry bent over him, feeling the man's heart. After a tense pause, he looked up at Dolan.

"Another one, Sheriff. Do you still think it was acute indigestion?"

"I don't think." The sheriff swore. "Get busy, call the medical examiner! Tell them lugs of mine out in the car to make sure nobody leaves this place. Where's Betty? Who is the cook around here?"

He barked all the questions, hardly waiting for answers. Shoving the sobered customers into the eating booths, he summoned Betty to a corner table and questioned her.

"What did those two guys eat here tonight before they caved in?"

Betty was now plainly scared. Her hard mouth trembled while she nervously toyed with a cigarette.

"They drank mostly beer. They're both regulars. I don't remember serving them anything but a couple of hamburgers."

"Any of that meat left in the kitchen?"

"Oh, no. As soon as they complained about it, I threw it out."

"When?"

"Just—just after the first one died. You and Red had the last two I served tonight, so help me."

"Then this one," Perry interrupted, pointing to the corpse, "must have had something else." He stared at the dead man again and asked, "Isn't he your divorced husband?"

"Yes," Betty admitted, sobbing. "But I didn't do it."

The sheriff's head jerked up. He looked hard at the woman, then barked a sharp order to Perry.

"I'll talk to her. You search the kitchen. Make sure that cook doesn't take a powder. Send him in here."

Perry sent the trembling youth out of the kitchen, and examined every container on the shelves and in the ice box: salt, pepper, and sugar canisters; an assortment of spices and flavorings.

On the top shelf, just over the stove, were round commercial boxes of iodized salt.

He tasted the contents of the sugar, salt, pepper and flour containers. Nothing suspicious there. The liquids he put in a cardboard carton and brought them to the sheriff, to be sent down to the police laboratory for analysis.

The medical examiner arrived while he was in the kitchen. When he got back to the main room, he recognized the harsh, staccato voice answering the sheriff.

"How the heck do I know without an autopsy? Might be alcoholism,

indigestion, or poison. Most likely arsenic. Where's the other corpse?"

"Down at the morgue. Take this one along and get me a report on them as soon as you can. I'll be here for a couple of hours."

THE sheriff waved the medical examiner away and called the cook over to his table.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Roy Watson. I've only been here a few days. I ain't done nothing," he blubbered. Dolan quieted him and the cook continued. "I used only the meat Betty bought from the salesman today. I seasoned it with the stuff from the shelves. I don't even know the names of any of the customers."

It developed that he was a sunchaser, working in the South during the winter months, and following the tourist trade to Northern resorts in the summer.

When Dolan asked for his health card, Watson fumbled in his pocket, then admitted he hadn't one.

"I was through here tonight, anyway," he explained. He pointed his greasy finger at Betty. "She fired me because I didn't have one."

"So you got sore at her and started poisoning her customers, is that it?" the sheriff remarked ironically.

"I didn't do nothing! You gotta let me go," the cook cringed.

Dolan called in one of his men, a tough-looking two-hundred pounder who towered over the youth.

"Lock him up for the night before he flies the coop," he ordered.

After questioning everybody in the place, Dolan admitted that he was stumped.

"Well, here's your chance," he growled at Perry. "Show me how good you are! What can be the motive for

murdering two stumble bums in a joint like this? They didn't have five dollars between them.

"Just because one of them was Borgia's ex-husband and maybe played around with the waitress ain't enough. There's more than that to it."

"How about the cook?" queried Perry.

"He hasn't got courage enough to kill a cockroach," Dolan brushed the suggestion aside.

"We'll find the motive!"

Perry sounded more confident than he felt. His brain whirled trying to figure out why anybody should want to kill a couple of poverty-stricken crackers whose only ambition in life seemed to be to make enough money to keep them in beer.

He went behind the bar, drew two glasses of draught beer, and carried them back to the table.

"I like salt in mine!" the sheriff grumbled.

Without a word, Perry got up, went back into the kitchen, took down an open box from the shelf, and brought it to Dolan. The sheriff poured some into his glass, and took a long swig from it.

His face screwed into a grimace, his prominent Adam's apple jerking spasmodically. He spat violently on the cement floor.

"Where the heck did you get that beer?" he roared.

Perry's drink tasted all right. He took a sip from the sheriff's glass. His palate felt the difference at once.

Setting the glass back on the table, he spilled some of the salt from the box on the palm of his hand, and put a pinch on his tongue. It puckered his lips.

"This isn't pure salt, Sheriff. It's mixed with arsenic. I know. I've used enough of it spraying groves when I was inspecting. This killed the two guys. The box is half empty!"

He turned on the gaping cook whom a deputy watched over sullenly, chain smoking.

"When did you open this box?"

"It was already open when I got here tonight, but it was full," stammered the cook. "I used about half of it, cooking."

A BLEAK hard look crawled into Red Perry's narrowing eyes.

"Who brought that arsenic here in the first place, to this Borgia's Barbecue?" Dolan scowled at Betty. "You ought to know by this time that arsenic ain't healthy."

"I never had any poison around the place," Betty sobbed. "That guy who sprayed my orange trees must have left it behind him."

"Who is he? Where can I get hold of him? When was he here?"

The sheriff reverted to his stunt of asking questions without waiting for the answers, as he generally did when excited.

"I don't know his name," Betty replied. "The meat salesman sent him around. I gave him the spray job."

The front door flew open, and a heavy-set, blustering man shouted a genial greeting.

"Hi, Betty! Why the gloom?"

"Who's that?" Dolan demanded.

"The salesman I was telling you about," Betty whispered, round-eyed.

"Hey, you! Come here!" Dolan roared at the newcomer.

The salesman's grin faded as he stamped over to the sheriff's table.

"What's your name, and what do you do?" rasped Dolan.

"Johnny Conant, star salesman for the South Miami Wholesale Meat Distributors. What goes on around here?"

He had lost none of his supersalesman's genial personality.

"Oh, nothing much. Just a homicidal

maniac loose somewhere. He killed two guys tonight with your rotten meat.”

Conant’s fleshy mouth dropped wide open as he stared from Perry to the sheriff, then to Betty for confirmation. He read it in their solemn faces. He started to reply, but the words caught in his throat.

“Who is that guy you sent out here to spray Borgia’s orange trees yesterday?” persisted the sheriff.

The salesman seemed at a loss.

“Whose trees?”

Dolan gestured, toward the roadside proprietress.

“Oh, that guy! He has a nursery down by our plant in South Miami. He’s good with plants.”

“And careless with arsenic!” the sheriff growled.

“Want me to run down and get him for you, Sheriff?” Perry asked.

He wanted to get away from the barbecue, to think things over.

“Yeah, go ahead. Got your gun with you? All right. Bring him down to the office. I’m going back pretty soon to see what they found out. There’s nothing more to do around here tonight.”

“Watch yourself down the highway,” Conant warned. “Remember the practice blackout is due in fifteen minutes. You’ll have to drive without lights.”

The detective picked up the salt box of arsenic and left the barbecue. Outside he put the box into the sheriff’s car, then walked up to the back of the building to his own coupe.

Unlocking it, he stepped on the running-board, and looked over the fence separating the roadside stand from the empty acreage.

Four huge graders loomed inside the gateway, ready to rip up the place at daybreak. He wondered idly who was going to build way out here beyond the city limits.

Remembering the blackout instructions, Perry drove slowly, without lights, toward South Miami. He was too impatient to wait until the blackout was over.

Just before he reached the dangerous left hand turn leading to the South Miami Highway, he heard the roar of a truck behind him. Peering back, he could distinguish only the blurred bulk rushing toward him.

He pulled over to the side of the road, but not quickly enough. The truck sideswiped him. His coupe somersaulted onto the soft shoulder, pinning him behind the wheel.

The truck stopped. He heard feet hurrying toward him. At least, the guy was not a hit and run driver, he thought, trying to extricate himself.

Because his back was twisted toward the door on the upper side of his crazily leaning coupe, he could not see the man who opened it. A crushing blow landed on the back of his neck. The interior of the coupe was filled for an instant with flashing stars, then everything went black.

SLOWLY coming back to consciousness, Perry could not remember for seconds what had happened.

Dazedly he looked around him. To his amazement, his coupe was back on its four wheels, and parked off the road.

The back of his head felt as if somebody had hewn a chunk out of it. With his bruised hand, he felt a clot of blood, and a large lump.

Opening the dash compartment, he examined the inside. Nothing was missing, although his papers were scattered all over the floor of the car. Neither his wallet, with its few dollars, nor his gun had been taken. He shook his aching head.

“Whoever socked me, must have been looking for something I didn’t have,” he

mused.

He tried to think what it could be, but could only figure out that his attackers had righted his car, so that people driving past would not stop to investigate.

The street lights were on again. The practice blackout was over. He started up the car, switched on the headlights, and drove to the nursery, its tree-tops darkening the white highway just beyond the wholesale meat plant.

When his lights picked up the sign, BILL JONES NURSERY, he turned into the palm-lined driveway, and stopped before the house.

A tall young man in riding breeches and knee boots came out to the car.

"Are you Bill Jones?" Perry inquired.

"Yes. What can I do for you this late?" the young man asked. Swinging his flashlight, he noticed the blood on Perry's neck. "You're hurt! What happened? Better come into the house and let me fix you up."

Red Perry clambered out of the car and followed his host into the house.

In the bathroom, Jones dressed the wound. The detective volunteered no information about how it had happened, so, according to the crackers' ethics, the man ignored it, but suggested a drink.

"Looks like you could stand a stiff one."

While they were sipping rum, Perry told the nurseryman what had happened at the barbecue.

"Did you leave any arsenic behind, after spraying the trees?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. I left about a quarter of a pound, maybe more. I buy it in five-pound packages. It's cheaper that way. I didn't mean to leave it behind. Just plumb forgot it."

"What kind of a package was it in? Was the insecticide the white or the new,

bluish powder?"

Perry's mop of red hair was standing on end again.

"White. It was in a bag, with the formula and directions for using printed on it."

"What a state! Anybody can buy poison by the ton!" Perry exclaimed. "Did you know either of the dead men?"

"Don't think so. There are several families with those names around here, but I don't know any of them. Poor trash."

"Ever been at that barbecue before?" Perry demanded.

"First time in my life. It's a new joint. It opened only a month ago, but it has a tough reputation already."

"Do you have a phone here?"

JONES pointed to the wall. Perry strode to it and called the sheriff, informing him that he would bring Jones to the office early in the morning.

It was after midnight, and there was no use dragging the nurseryman up there now. He sized the man up, and knew that he would come of his own will.

"Don't forget to see Dolan early tomorrow, or he'll have a deputy after you," Perry warned, preparing to depart.

"I'll be there," Jones promised.

Perry drove back to the barbecue, deciding that he wanted to have another talk with the alleged Borgia, before he went to sleep.

The place was closed, but he routed Betty, who lived upstairs. When she came down, sleepy-eyed, and staggering slightly, he asked quietly:

"Do you own this property, Betty?"

"No, I only rent it. I have a year's lease with option of renewal."

"Who is the owner?"

"I don't know," she yawned. "I got it through a real estate agent. I didn't read the lease because it was all small print.

The real estate man said he would make alterations himself.”

“Thanks, Borgia.” The sinister soubriquet slipped out again. “Go back to bed. The sheriff’ll probably pester you some more early tomorrow. You’ll have the entire State Health Department on your neck, as well.”

“I may lose my license!” Betty wailed, climbing back to her quarters.

Perry tried to puzzle things out, sitting in his car. He had to solve this case. He studied a picture of his pretty, prematurely aged, dark-haired wife and two junior editions of himself, and shook his head mournfully.

They hated to stay up there in the central part of the state with her parents. But he could not afford to bring them back to Miami until his job was secure.

If he could get to the bottom of the case in a hurry, Dolan would make his temporary appointment a permanent one.

But what could he do? Two apparently harmless crackers had died, and several others been made ill by arsenic. What could be the motive? Sheriff Dolan might have been right, suggesting a homicidal maniac, intent on wholesale murders.

He was still brooding over it when he heard the steady roar of truck motors.

Down the road a stream of army “jeeps” were turning the corner just beyond the barbecue. He watched them line up in columns of four in front of the gate to the empty field.

When he finally reached his tourist cabin, his head hurt so much he could not sleep. Going to an early breakfast, he bought the morning paper, and read it while waiting for his bacon and eggs.

The murders shouted from the first page, crowding out the war news. In an obscure corner, he read a modest caption.

COUNTY DEEDS LAND TO GOVERNMENT

This was a frequent happening, so he read the paragraph casually while the waiter put his coffee on the table, and its aroma awakened his appetite.

After breakfast, he read the item again, then drove to the sheriff’s office. Jones was there, looking spent after the cross-examination he had gone through.

“Well, what did you find out last night?” Dolan growled.

“All I got was a bump on the back of the head,” Perry grimaced. “Somebody ran me off the road, then socked me instead of helping. I still don’t know what he was looking for, but I have an idea. What did the M.E. have to say?”

DOLAN scowled darkly and temper crowded roughly through him.

“Both guys died from arsenic poison. They had enough of it in their stomachs to spray ten acres of citrus. There’s going to be an inquest. But unless you dig up more evidence the verdict will be ‘death by misadventure.’ ”

“I don’t believe it was an accident, any more than you do,” snapped Perry grimly. “How did the arsenic get into that salt box? It didn’t crawl out of its original package? The cook swears that Jones wasn’t anywhere near the kitchen.”

“Somebody planted it there, all right,” Dolan agreed. “But why?”

Perry lit a cigarette, leaned back in his chair and eyed Dolan, smiling ironically.

“Well, Sheriff, you have it half-solved. The rest should be easy,” he bantered, now feeling quite sure of himself.

“What do you mean half solved?”

Dolan bit a cigar in two, stuck one end of it in his mouth and began chewing furiously.

"You know the victims. You know they were poisoned. All you need to learn is who did it and why."

Dolan's cheeks flushed with rage and he glared hotly at the detective.

"Since you're so smart, tell me the answers!"

"I can," retorted Perry, his smile broadening.

"You what?" Dolan jumped to his feet so violently that he upset his heavy swivel chair.

"I'll tell you who did it, as soon as I make a telephone call," Perry promised. "But I guess I'd better pick up the murderer before he bumps somebody else off."

"Get out of here!" Dolan bellowed. "Haven't I got enough to worry about without you kidding me."

"I'm not kidding you, Sheriff. I'll be back in an hour with the proof." Perry threw his cigarette stub into the cuspidor. "Better keep Jones here until I get back, and bring that cook over. He's still in jail, I guess."

"Where else would he be?" Dolan snapped irritably.

Red Perry grinned and went out. He entered the nearest phone booth, called Betty, and asked her one brief question.

"What's the name of your real estate agent?"

"Intercity Realty Corporation. Why?"

There was a fierce note of worry in the woman's voice.

Perry hung up without replying. After searching through the phone book, he dialed the real estate number.

"What's the lot and block number of Betty's barbecue out on Red Road?" he demanded when a girl's voice answered. "This is the sheriff's office calling."

Obtaining the stammered information, he went to the tax collector's office in the courthouse. He searched the plat book,

made a few more telephone calls, then returned to Dolan's office.

"Well, where's the proof?" the sheriff demanded.

"Here!" Perry tapped his freckled forehead. "Wait a few minutes. I'm expecting company. I just rounded up a few suspects."

HALF an hour later, he addressed the group in the sheriff's office. Among those present were Betty, Watson the cook, the beer salesman, Jones the nurseryman, the snub-nosed little waitress and the meat salesman.

"One of you is a killer. Not an intentional murderer, but guilty, just the same," he announced dramatically. "Those two killings were accidental, to a degree."

"What do you mean, accidental?" Dolan broke in. "If I ever saw more deliberate murders—"

"The killer had nothing against his two victims, Sheriff. They might as well have been anybody else. He was only trying to discourage Betty's customers from eating there."

"Why should anyone want to do that?" Conant demanded. "If what you say is true, it lets me out. I certainly wouldn't want to ruin my meat sales."

"I agree with you." Perry smiled, lighting another cigarette. "I suppose the same goes for the beer dealer. But then the arsenic wasn't in the beer."

"Never mind the play-acting, Red! Which one of those bums do I hang?" Dolan had his gun in one hand and handcuffs in the other.

But Perry was enjoying his triumph too much to be hurried. He cleared his throat and resumed without haste.

"The motive had me stumped at first. Betty was jealous of her ex-husband. Murders have been committed for less than that," he said, his eyes sweeping

everyone. "The cook had been fired. Not much motive there, but with his mentality, he might have tried to ruin Betty's trade out of spite."

"How about me? What motive could I have?" Jones asked.

"None that I could see," Perry admitted. "You just supplied the poison. You could be in cahoots with the killer." He stopped Jones' protest with a gesture and went on: "Both salesmen had the same motive. Profit. When I realized that the army was taking over that empty acreage, I knew I was on the right track. The rest was routine."

"That all sounds fine, but who did it?" Dolan demanded impatiently.

"There's your man," snapped the detective, pointing to Conant.

"You're crazy!" Dolan and Conant spoke at once.

"Maybe I am," Perry agreed placidly. "But before you put me away, read this."

He handed Dolan the morning paper, his thumb indicating the paragraph about the land deeded to the government. The sheriff read aloud: ". . . was deeded to the government by Dade County. The army plans to build a camp for the new draftees since most of the old training camps are overcrowded."

The sheriff's bushy eyebrows raised in a question mark. He swung to face the detective.

"That's the eighty acres behind Betty's barbecue," Perry told them all. "She only leases the place. Conant is the owner. You can check the records over in the tax collector's office. Conant wanted to force Betty out of business before the camp was built.

"He planned to run the restaurant himself. It would be a gold mine, right next to an army camp."

"You can't prove a thing on me!" Conant blustered.

"Oh, no? A little check-up on your scraped fender will show it was your truck which ran me off the road last night. I just remembered how you warned me about the blackout dangers. I know what you were looking for, too.

"You saw me take that box of arsenic out of the restaurant, and thought I had it with me. You didn't see me put it in the sheriff's car. You brought Jones up there to spray the trees, and when he got through, swiped the arsenic he had left.

"You had access to the kitchen and planted it there, figuring it would only make the customers ill, but they died. "

Conant, terrified, collapsed like a pricked balloon.

Red Perry could not resist the final crack:

"You should have stuck to serving meat, and not trying arsenic pie."