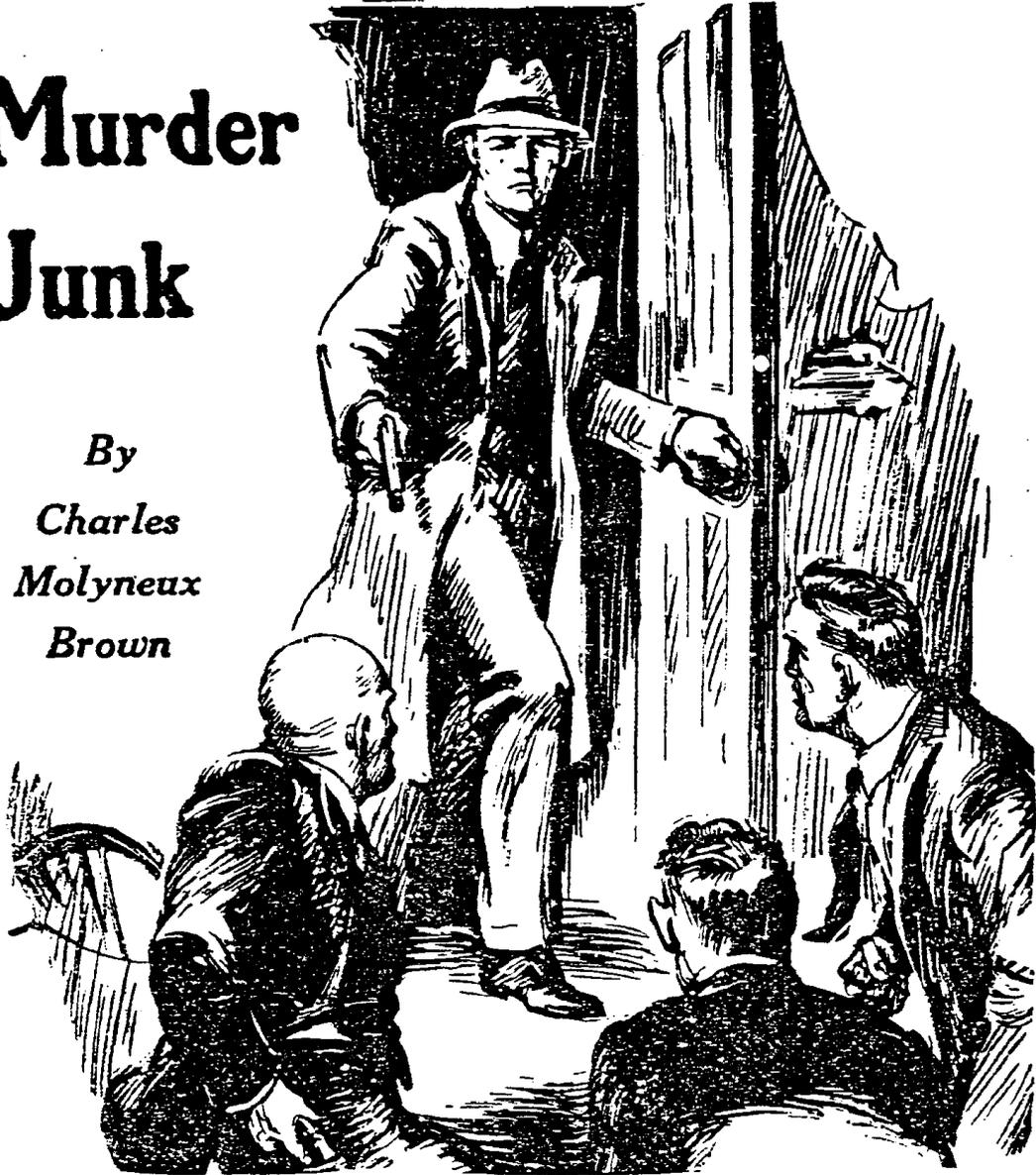


Murder Junk

By
*Charles
Molyneux
Brown*



Narcotics Inspector Gil Grady followed the treacherous trail of a hated menace, dope, straight into a dead-end trap. And his only hope of life lay in the dumbest of all creatures—oysters.

THROUGH a broken chink in the dirty glass of a back alley door, Gil Grady watched the three men in the shipping room of Dominic Sansone's small wholesale fish house.

The stocky little narcotic agent was taking a chance at his spying in broad daylight, but taking chances was part of Gil

Grady's everyday routine.

Vince Lido was in that shipping room, and the narcotic division suspected the man of being a big dealer in illicit narcotics, but so far he had been too clever to be caught handling junk.

Lean, swarthy, nattily dressed in a gray suit, Vince Lido was examining

carefully in turn the five barrels of shell oysters just delivered by an express wagon.

Pudgy, fat-faced Dominic Sansone, Vince Lido's uncle, looked on worriedly, fidgeting with his dirty smock.

The third man, a brawny, stupid-looking porter, seemed a little puzzled by Vince Lido's interest in the oysters.

Gil Grady guessed Vince Lido was looking for a secret mark, and the guess proved good when the lean man hissed an exclamation of satisfaction, snatched a marking crayon from the porter's apron and marked a big "X" on the side of one barrel.

The agent could hear as well as see through his chink. The smell wafting out was terrible, but he didn't mind that.

"Take 'em all down to the basement refrigerator room, Frank," Vince Lido ordered the porter sharply. "Put this barrel I've marked on one side. It's for a special customer, so don't let it get out on an order."

The porter rolled the five barrels onto a freight elevator, and the thing descended creaking to the basement.

Vince Lido turned to his uncle then. "We'll leave it lay till tonight," he announced briskly. "I got to go see some guys now and tell 'em to get their money together for a delivery."

Dominic sighed gustily, his fat face unhappy.

"Me, I wish I never listen to you!" he blurted. "I'm sorry I get into this business. Somebody talk, somebody find out, and then Dominic Sansone is in big trouble."

"Stop squawking," his nephew snapped impatiently. "You're in now. You'll be happy enough when you get your cut of the big dough. Anyhow, who's going to talk? Nobody knows anything but you and me—and the oysters. Oysters are dumb. They don't talk."

He pushed through swinging doors

to the front of the store. Dominic followed, wagging his head worriedly. The shipping room was temporarily deserted.

Gil Grady tried the door, found it unlocked and pushed it open a little way. He eeled through, closed the door softly and streaked silently for the entrance to the basement stairs he had spotted.

He stole down gummy treads into a dimly lighted, smelly basement. He crouched behind a pile of cases and impatiently watched the slow-moving porter roll the five barrels of oysters into a refrigerated room.

Two greasy bulbs made hazy light in there. Barrels, boxes and hampers of fish and sea food littered the room.

The porter rolled the last barrel inside, snapped off the lights at an inside switch, closed the massive, insulated door and dropped a latching bolt in place. He clumped to the elevator, and the thing creaked upward.

THE moment the elevator reached the upper level, the agent darted from his cover and reached the door. Carefully he lifted the latching bolt, pulled the door open and reached inside, snapping on lights.

Eagerly he popped inside the refrigerated room, pulling the heavy door not quite shut.

He saw the X-marked barrel at once, standing a little apart from others, and pounced on it.

With his pocket knife he cut away the burlap covering over the unheaded top of the barrel. Beneath chunks of dirty ice, shell oysters glistened wetly.

Grady turned the barrel on its side and began raking out the ugly lumps of shell oysters. When a good third of the barrel's contents lay strewn at his feet he uttered an elated grunt and pounced on four shiny tin cans disclosed.

The cans, about the size of condensed soup cans, were tightly sealed and unlabelled, moist from ice drippings and a little muddy from contact with shell oysters.

Eagerly he took one beneath a dangling bulb, punctured the top with his knife and shook into his palm a little dab of whitish powder.

He touched the tip of his tongue to the stuff, then spat quickly and wryly.

Heroin, pure and uncut! Enough in those four cans, when illicitly sold, to bring the big dough Vince Lido had mentioned.

Pocketing the punctured can, Grady cut an express shipping tag from the barrel. He read the smeary writing on it. The shipper was shown as a "J. Martinez," of New Orleans.

Gil Grady knew that a lot of heroin from the Honduras had been run into New Orleans recently, past vigilant agents there. Official warning bulletins had been sent other offices.

Any shell oysters shipped into Bluff City would likely come from New Orleans. Grady had known that, and heroin had popped into his head when he had seen the expressman deliver those five barrels to Dominic Sansone's fish house.

His hunch had been good. He slipped the express tag into his pocket with the shiny can. Agents at New Orleans shortly would be looking up J. Martinez, and Grady himself would take care of Lido, Sansone & Go

The heavy door squeaked. Grady whirled to face it, and shot up his arms when he stared into the ominous muzzle of a big automatic pistol held steadily in the hands of Vince Lido.

Behind him in the doorway, backing up the play with a rod in his hands, was a ratty-looking skinny man with the feverishly bright eyes of an addict. Dominic Sansone's scared, white face

looked behind them.

"Hold it, mug," Vince Lido snarled.

His swarthy face was contorted with rage and suspicion. He saw the spilled oysters and the three shiny cans and cursed savagely.

"Just what I thought," he rasped. "A narcotic dick. It's lucky for us Moke told me about seeing you duck into the alley while he was waiting in my car. And me having the hunch to come back for a look around."

None of the dismay the agent felt showed in his square face. He eyed the savage junk runner steadily.

"Get in there, Moke," Vince Lido snapped. "Frisk him good."

The ratty man eeled past his boss, circled to get behind the agent and deftly went over him. Eager fingers removed an automatic from a shoulder holster and plucked a blackjack from a hip pocket.

Moke made little mouthing noises as he worked. Patting over waistline and pockets, he felt the lump of the shiny can and drew it out. Vince Lido cursed afresh, advancing and snatching the can.

The ratty addict pocketed the lifted weapons, shuffled before the agent and pointed his rod at Grady's middle.

"Shall I let him have it, Vince?" he squeaked eagerly, finger twitching at the trigger of his gun.

"Not here, you fool," Lido snarled hastily. "Later on—after dark—we can take care of him. If he starts yelling clout him down."

Moke crouched, eyes glittering. All he needed was an excuse to shoot or clout.

"You can't get away with this, Lido," Gil Grady warned coolly. "Even if you bump me, there are others to get you before I'll be good and stiff. We've been watching you. My chief knows I'm tabbing you, and where."

"I know where I've seen you before now," Vince Lido spat at him. "You've been tailing me."

He stared hard into Grady's ice-blue eyes, then a cunning leer spread over the contorted, swarthy face.

"I'm guessing you're playing a lone hand," the junk runner snarled. "If you'd had a buddy with you he'd have been in on the play. I don't know how you tumbled to the oysters, but being smart has cooked you, G-guy."

"You'll find out differently, Lido. You'll never get away with the heroin." Grady spoke with confidence he hardly felt. The man had guessed too shrewdly. "You'd better call it a day and take your rap for illegal possession."

"Nuts. I'll get away with the junk and everything else. Think I'm passing up six or seven grand because a lousy narcotic dick throws a bluff at me?"

Vince Lido was cooler now. Shrewdness and nerve were cropping out again.

From the doorway Dominic Sansone waved fat hands and bleated a scared inquiry:

"What you do with this man, Vince? Already the big trouble comes. I knew it!"

"Shut up," Lido jerked over his shoulder harshly. "We'll take care of this bird, all right."

Quickly he picked up the other three shiny cans and pocketed them. His gleaming dark eyes made a quick survey of the refrigerated room.

Helpless, with Moke's gun inches from his stomach, Gil Grady watched the swarthy face.

"There ain't no other way out of this place but the door," Vince Lido announced with satisfaction. "A guy yelling in here couldn't be heard outside. It's made to order to hold the dick."

He backed to the entrance doorway, and, at his signal, Moke backed away too. Both rods covered Gil Grady unwaveringly. The agent watched them ease out of the refrigerated room, and his heart sank a little.

Dominic had a belated thought, and business instinct overcame uneasiness.

"Hey, I got orders for two barrel oysters to go at four o'clock," he yelled. "How I fill those orders, huh?"

"I'm leaving Moke out here to watch the door," Vince Lido told him. "You can get your oysters any time you want. The dick won't make no trouble."

The heavy door swished shut with a souging sound. A dull clank announced that the latching bolt had gone home.

"WELL, anyhow, I've got light," Gil Grady muttered grimly. Unless they can turn 'em off from outside, somehow."

The lights didn't go off. After a five minute searching prowl of the refrigerator room, Gil Grady knew there was only one way out, and it would take a battering-ram or dynamite to spring the door.

The concrete ceiling and cement floor; the thick, insulated walls, would muffle any shouts he might make from being heard outside on the street.

Grady had been in tight spots before this, and worked out. He realized fully the danger of his predicament now, but he wasn't panicky. He sat down on a box of smelly smoked fish and lighted a cigarette, thinking swiftly.

Come dark, and Vince Lido and more of his crew would appear, to take care of the grim business of escorting a lone narcotic agent on a oneway ride.

There wasn't a chance of the chief or any of the boys looking him up down here. They didn't know in the office about the wholesale fish house connection he'd

been tabbing.

Grady threw down his cigarette and paced as he thought. He glanced at his watch. A quarter of four. Pretty soon now, Dominic Sansone or some one in his employ would be coming for those two barrels of oysters to fill the orders.

Vince Lido had probably gone to arrange for dope deliveries tonight. There might be a chance to stage a desperate break when the door was again opened. But there was Moke and his rod. The little rat would welcome a chance to use it.

Grady paused and stared into an open barrel of shell oysters. It was one of an older lot than the five just received. The burlap from this one and others near it had been removed for re-icing.

Staring aimlessly down at the oysters, Grady saw that some of them had their shells open a little. He didn't know it, but they were drinking melting ice water.

He jarred the barrel, and the shells ail closed up as quick as a wink. A sudden flame of interest burned in the blue eyes.

Grady remembered reading in a newspaper once how a rat, prowling in a barrel of shell oysters, had gotten his foot trapped in a big bivalve.

He eased up to another barrel and glanced into it. He could spot a dozen oysters with shells a little open.

Resourceful brains lay under the red thatch of Gil Grady's head. He had a plan now, a slight one, but a forlorn try was better than no try at all.

He got out his knife, broke a thin piece of wood from a crate and for eight minutes was a very busy trapped narcotic man.

At four o'clock by Grady's watch, he heard the door latch clank. Cautiously the door opened. Moke's gun appeared in sight first, and then the cautious, ratty face.

Grady, sitting humped on his smoked fish box, met the leering eyes

dully. Moke shoved the door wide and made a beckoning gesture, keeping the agent covered.

Pop-eyes uneasy, the fat of him quaking, Dominic Sansone came into the refrigerator room. Gil Grady could hardly restrain a sigh of relief when the man seized on the barrel of oysters the agent had thoughtfully rolled nearest the door.

Quickly Dominic got that one out, and then the one just behind it. He seemed relieved to get that part over.

Moke wagged his rod and pointed a finger at his own belly. He let his jaw go slack and rolled his eyes suggestively.

"Tonight, mug," he mouthed evilly, "I hate narcotic dicks. One of 'em sent me up once, for a long rap."

He backed out, and the heavy door swung shut. Grady regarded it a little glumly. Maybe it would have been better to have taken a chance a few moments ago, swinging the short iron bolt he had found, and was sitting on now.

Still, his plan might work, and there was always tonight left for a desperate chance.

PACING most of the time, to keep his muscles from growing stiff in the cold, dank room, it seemed to Gil Grady that minutes had never crawled so slowly on his watch.

Since six o'clock, when he knew it would be dark outside, his ears had been anxiously attuned for the sound of that door hitch clanking again.

At four minutes past seven the sound came.

He whirled and faced the door, tense and alert. The short iron bolt was shoved down in his waistband, hidden by his coat.

The door opened with a rush this time, wide. Moke appeared in the opening, rod leveled, ratty eyes wickedly alight.

“Come on out, G-guy,” he ordered, retreating a little. “The boys are waiting for you upstairs. We’re going places.”

Stiffly Gil Grady marched out of the basement. Every sense tingled alertly. His little scheme hadn’t worked. He’d have to try and take Moke, and battle past the mob upstairs. There probably wasn’t a chance that he could succeed.

Moke halted him with a gesture, standing three paces distant, his rod pointing at the agent’s belly.

“Listen, guy,” the addict mouthed, “Vince says if you’ll come along nice and quiet, he’s promising you you’ll never know when a slug takes you. Make us trouble and you get it when you do, and where it’ll hurt the most. Get me?”

“You’ll never get away with it, Moke.” Grady grinned without mirth. “Remember, I told Lido that!”

Moke blinked. Nerve like this got him a little. He snarled to cover his uneasiness.

“We’ll see how good your nerve is when the time comes,” he husked.

Without warning, there floated down from above the sound of battering on doors, booming dully.

Moke froze, his jaw dropping, his eyes turned up.

Somebody bleated a scared yell upstairs. It sounded like Dominic Sansone’s voice. Gil Grady’s eyes gleamed with hope and exultation.

“It’s the cops, Moke!” Vince Lido’s yell came faintly. “Get the dirty G-guy!”

Moke didn’t have that chance though. The moment he had gone off guard, Gil Grady’s hand flashed to his belt and plucked out the iron bolt.

He struck for the sloping forehead, leaping sidewise as he did that.

Moke’s rod cracked belatedly. The slug merely twitched Grady’s fanned coat tails. The bolt crashed over the bridge of

Moke’s thin nose, crushing flesh and bone.

The skinny addict slumped. Grady wrested the automatic from a slackening grip and raced to the stairs.

Splintering sounds mixed with the battering noises now. Bounding up the stairs three treads at a leap, the agent popped into the shipping room.

Vince Lido and a man something like Moke in appearance faced the shipping room entrance doors, crouching with rods in their hands, ready to blaze when the doors gave.

Dominic Sansone huddled against a wall, fingers stopping his ears, eyes tightly closed, his fat face dirty gray in hue.

“Drop those rods, you two!” Grady rapped out the order, bracing his feet and bringing up his weapon.

Both the armed men whirled, startled consternation on their faces. Lido’s pal dropped his rod and shot his arms up, but the junk runner snarled and whipped his gun up for a try.

Gil Grady let him have one neatly placed in the shoulder.

Lido’s rod blasted, but the slug went wild. He staggered from slug shock, dropping his rod and clutching his spouting shoulder.

Gil Grady was coldly ready to give either of them lead where it would do the most good.

THE big, stoutly-made shipping room doors crashed down. Blue-coated, husky men with big guns in their hands barged in.

Right in the van of them was Gil Grady’s chief, Dan Arnold. His anxious eyes lighted up at the sight of Grady standing there grimly, covering his prisoners.

The cops made short work of shackling Vince Lido, the other gunman and the terrified Dominic. Dan Arnold

bounded over to make sure that his agent was unharmed.

"There's another rat down in the basement," Grady told the cops. "He's in a pretty bad way, I guess. I slugged him."

Cops darted down there after Moke. A grim captain of police and other officers holding the prisoners, ringed about Grady then. Tersely he told his story, omitting some parts of his experiences in the refrigerated room.

"The heroin," he wound up, "is in Dominic's safe up front, I imagine. How about it, Sansone?"

"Yes, mister," Dominic nodded eagerly. "All of it. Vince Lido, he get me into this big trouble. I make big mistake."

"You'll have a long time to think it over," Dan Arnold assured him grimly, and turned curious eyes on the agent.

"Now I want you to tell me how you worked the gag with the oysters, and got your message out," he demanded. "The chap who opens oysters at the Stag Cafe oyster bar found this thing in one he opened up a little while ago."

He fished a little celluloid slip, not much bigger than two postage stamps, from his pocket. Vince Lido stared curiously.

"This thing reads," Arnold went on briskly, "Call eight-five-five-two-nine. Tell Arnold Agent Grady held basement

Sansone fish house. The manager of the Stag called me, and I hustled the boys down. It looks like we made it just in time."

"Vince Lido and his men were just about to take me places," Grady grinned. "I told him though, that he'd never get away with it."

Then he told his chief and the astonished cops about observing the oysters with their shells open, and getting his idea.

"I whittled some little pegs and popped 'em in half a dozen of the big boys before they could close up," Grady explained. "Then I cut the celluloid leaves in my notebook in slips and wrote messages like that—six of 'em. I shoved the slips into the oysters and pulled the pegs. Then I salted my messengers in the top layers of two barrels of oysters Dominic obligingly delivered for me around four this afternoon."

"Well!" the red-faced police captain boomed. "I'll be damned!"

Dan Arnold, who knew how resourceful Gil Grady was, merely grinned.

"You told Dominic that oysters were dumb, this afternoon, Vince." Gil Grady's blue eyes danced at the gaping junk runner. "But oysters are not so dumb—when you put words in their mouths!"