

High-Voltage Homicide

By Frankie Lewis



Palmer the Eel was as slippery as his prototype. But he had one lesson to learn—that a slip too many can mean a long slide to hell.

I'M SITTING in the *Clarion* offices watching a couple of goldfish swim around in a bowl when my mind shoots back to the "Eel." I was just a punk kid when this case broke, but some of you older readers might recall it. The "Crime of the Century" it had been called. Then, on the spur of the moment, I decided to pay a call on old "Pop" Murphy, ex-con now going straight as a watchman for Gaffney's Coal Yard. I hot-footed it to Gaffney's, where I found old Pop smoking a thick cigar.

When he saw me, he got up and greeted me like a long-lost son.

"Well, if it ain't Frankie! I hear you're a writer now. How do you like bein' a pen pusher?"

"Oh, it's easy to kill 'em on paper," I flipped. "But say, Pop, do you remember the case of Palmer the Eel?"

"Do I!" Pop slapped me on the back with a hamlike hand. "I was in the next cell to that rat at San Laramie. That's the bozo that croaked his sister. Grab yourself a seat, Frankie, and I'll tell you all about

it.”

The Eel came from a good family (said Pop). His old man was skipper on a whaler. A good old soak, too, but one of them blue-nosed saints, you know, straightlaced to the core. I sailed under him as a kid on the old *Hathaway*. When the whaling business went on the fritz, the old sea-dog took a crack at farming and didn't do bad at all. Then the love bug musta bit him, and he got spliced with a girl from the next farm to his.

Things went swell for old Yance, and before long he increased his acres and was blessed with a son, the Eel. If you ask me, the old man should have kept the stork and tossed that punk out in the gutter.

When Palmer's sister was born, the mother died; and when old Yance called in a nurse to look after them, the Eel almost raised the roof. The kid sister was never healthy. The Eel used to torment her so that, when he was eighteen, the old duck told his lovin' son never to darken his bathtub again.

The kid kicked around the globe for a number of years, and finally got himself a berth with the State Fish Hatchery. When he'd get his pay, he'd go down to the Skidway—that's the old Barbary Coast—and buck the old tiger for all it was worth.

Well, he had been at the hatchery for a couple of years, and I don't know why, but he was learning the p's and q's pretty fast. He had full charge of a group of rare fish.

The Eel never cared much about writin' home—footloose and fancy free, that's him. Then one day he got a wire from a firm of mouthpieces tellin' him his old gent had kicked the bucket. As there was only him and the kid sister, he decided to grab *all* the swag. He made up his mind to croak his own flesh and blood.

Then Palmer gets the smart idea of

how to bump off his sister. No rod or shiv for this baby. No, sir. He gets the screwy idea of bumpin' the dame off with an eel. That's how he got his moniker.

The guy takes a couple of big eels from the hatchery, puts them in a glass kiester, and before he gets to the house, he dumps the eels in a little pond that he and his kid sister used to wade in. Then, as though nothin' happened, he walks into the house like the proverbial, long-lost brother.

The sister is tickled pink to see the mug and tells him that half of what old Yance Palmer left is his. But was the rat satisfied? No; he's gotta get it all. He stalls around the joint for a while, in the meantime noticin' that his kid sister's got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel. The old man's death didn't improve her heart none either.

THE Eel pretends he's all love for his sister who, only a kid and not hep to the kind of a heel her brother is, falls for his line like a brick. Next day he asks her to wade in the pond with him, like they used to do when they were kids. He knows them eels was in the pond, so he makes her go in first. That's all the Eel wanted! The minute the dame's in the drink, she lets out a holler that would have raised the dead!

The Eel pretends to play the hero. He knows that the kid's deader'n a doornail. Her ticker couldn't stand the shock.

Now the Eel was gonna write his own ticket, but there was another fly in the soup. The girl had a boy friend that was no deadhead, and he near goes nuts when he saw the poor kid all cold and stiff as a poker.

The girl's sweetheart, who was one of them “toxicologams”—you know, a guy what works on poisons—gets a hunch that

the setup ain't kosher. It's the Eel's map that makes him leery. Well, when the kid's put to bed with a shovel, the Eel had hid all the evidence.

The boy friend checks up on his nibs at the State Hatchery and found that he spilled a line about them two eels dying and havin' to bury them. He goes back home and snoops around in the pond. What he finds there stands him on his ear.

He goes to the bulls and gets two of them to return to the Palmer house with him. He finds the Eel as snug as a bug. Yes, sir, Jimmie the Eel's sittin' on top o' the world.

The kid gives the chump a fast line about him knowin' about them eels being kept in the State Hatchery. The Eel sticks to his story about them dyin' and him burying them.

The boy friend's got plenty of savvy, though, and he tells Palmer that he knows all about a rare poison that them eels give off when they're dead. This scares the chump, and so just to prove he's a right guy, he digs 'em up for the boy friend.

The kid has the two bulls planted behind some bushes while young Palmer is diggin' up the dead fish. The kid excuses himself and beats it for a couple of minutes.

HE COMES back with a pair of rubber gloves and a paper-covered package.

The Eel shoves one of the fish to the boy friend; and when he takes it, the boy

friend pops:

"I'm gonna kill you, Palmer, just like you killed your poor sister. One touch of this dead eel and you'll die a horrible death!"

This near scares the punk to death, but he tries to bluff his way out. The kid keeps shouting: "You knew these eels were Electric Rays, and their shock will stun a horse. You put them in the pond alive. After your sister's death, you fished them up and killed them. Now I'm going to kill you."

With that he makes a couple of passes at Palmer with the dead eel. Palmer was ready to break by this time, he was half nuts believing that the dead ray was poisonous. But he still held out that the eels was dead when he brought 'em home.

"Then explain these!" And the poison guy sticks the jar full of little electric eels right in Palmer's kisser. "You didn't know that the female had spawned, did you, Palmer? And left these baby electric eels in the pond?"

Well, the killer sees that the jig was up. He knew that the guy had him dead to rights; and when the kid finally pushed the stinking eel in Palmer's face, the sucker, thinking he would catch some terrible disease, spilled the works. The dicks closed in and took him away.

If you ask me (Pop finished), the Eel learned a lot about fish—but he didn't learn quite enough.