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Satan's Bank Night

By William G. Bogart



Somewhere in the darkness of that movie house, among the expectant crowds waiting for the turn of fortune's wheel, lurked a killer. And Barney, two-fisted dick from H. Q., knew that the wheel of fortune was going to be somebody's wheel of misfortune.

IT WAS HARD to tell which was the more dilapidated, the scrawny nag pulling the delivery wagon, or the wagon itself. Its paneled sides badly in need of paint, the vehicle creaked on wobbly wheels along the gravel drive leading to the rear of the rambling stone house set among old elms.

On the sides of the wagon body, in cracked yellow paint, was advertised: SUPREME LAUNDRY. And just beneath this: We Call And Deliver.

My little, bright-eyed partner, sitting beside me on the driver's seat, asked: "Do you think we'll make it, Barney?" He looked ahead, along the upward grade of the gravel drive, and his little black eyes were sort of doubtful. He studied the loose-jointed mare, that had slowed to an indifferent walk now, and his expression was downright glum.

I said: "You never can tell, partner. But it's got to work, this time. I've tried everything else." To the lagging horse, I added: "Gid-yap, Alice."

The "Professor" was giving me the once-over, and grinning. He sighed, said: "Dear me, Barney. What a sight you are! New York's most hard-boiled detective, wearing the garb of a laundry delivery boy. No fooling, you look ridiculous."

He smiled up at me in that bird-like little way of his, small face bright beneath his thick mop of white hair. The Professor—who was formerly a well-known judge—looks like a Kentucky colonel, pint-size.

Being six-three, red headed, and right now garbed in a white apron that barely reached my knees, maybe I did look kind of silly. But the assignment which the chief at H. Q. had handed me was more so. It seems the city magistrate had handed this subpoena to the chief, after half a dozen of his men had failed to serve it.

One, dressed as a messenger, got thrown down the front steps. Another, pretending to be the mail man asking for a

signature to a special delivery letter, got conked on the head by a buxom Polish cook. So some one got the bright idea that Barney Penney—who doesn't frighten easy—should be assigned the job of delivering this piece of paper that will bring wealthy Anthony Burk into court. And Barney Penney happens to be me! So here we were.

The nag made it. Right up to the back porch. I climbed down from the chariot, opened the rear tail board and hauled out a big laundry hamper. My little pal, the Professor—one of the greatest criminologists in the city—hopped down beside me, looking funny with his white apron tucked up around his waist. He whispered, as he went over the laundry hamper:

"Now remember, Barney. No rough stuff. Tact will do this better than uncouth methods—"

"Sure," I replied. "But if any hefty cook gets careless with a rolling pin—" I took a squint from beneath the pulled-down cap I'm wearing and saw no one about. "Come on."

I swung the big hamper to my shoulder, climbed the steps of the rear porch and knocked loudly on the screen door. The inner door was open, but no one seemed to be in the large kitchen.

You see, we had learned that Anthony Burk used this laundry. I had bribed a driver to loan me horse and wagon for an hour. The punk had held out for ten bucks. But what the hell. The chief has told me that there's a fancy fee waiting for me if I can deliver this subpoena to Burk in person. And since it's my day off anyway—

Still no one answered. I set down the basket and really got to work on the screen door. The whole door jamb rattled. My partner announced: "It's Thursday."

"And it doesn't look like rain," I added with a snort. "So what difference does that make?"

"The help are usually off on Thursday," he continued.

"Oh, I get it." I watched the Professor try the door handle.

"Besides, it's open," he explains. "Why not try going in?"

"Swell idea," I said not so nastily, and dragged in the hamper while he held open the screen door. Inside the big kitchen, I stood in the middle of the room with my hands on my hips and yelled loudly: "Laundry!"

THAT didn't seem to do any good, either. I looked at the Professor and said: "Anthony Burk has got to be here. I happen to know that he isn't at his office, or out of town—"

But he was already pushing back a swinging door that led through a butler's pantry. He said over his shoulder: "Come on, then. We're in, aren't we? Let's take a look."

I followed him into a darkened living room, through an arched doorway into sort of a library and out into a deeply carpeted, wide hallway. The place was richly furnished. This Anthony Burk, head of a large string of movie theaters, was in the dough.

Still no one protested our ambling around the house like this. The place was like a morgue. At the foot of a stairway leading to the second floor, the Professor hesitated. "We really shouldn't—" he started to object.

But I got my big bulk past him and started up the stairs. "The hell you say," I put in. "I've gone to enough trouble to deliver this subpoena, and before I leave I'm going to be sure that we haven't missed Burk." He trailed along behind me as I reached the second floor.

We found Anthony Burk in the second room to the right, apparently his bedroom. He didn't object to being served with the summons. He *couldn't* protest.

He was dead.

The theater owner was a small man, about fifty, and rotund. He had a pink face and

wore grays that almost matched his steel-gray hair. Only his hair wasn't gray now; it was a bloody mess. His head had been bashed in by some heavy instrument that was missing. Anthony Burk was lying on the rug, at the foot of the bed, and his open, staring eyes gave me a chill.

Delivering a subpoena to a dead man! This sure was a new one for the "Free-lance Squad." Yeah, that's what they call the Professor and me, since we get assigned to all sorts of cases that are off the beaten track.

He said now: "My, my. How crude!" He shuddered, got down on his hands and knees and started crawling around the rug. He tripped over his laundry apron; then loosened it and dropped it to one side. He disappeared beneath the bed.

I suggested: "Sure, I'll speak to the killer about it for you. He should be more considerate."

Maybe the Professor didn't hear me good. Voice muffled, he called out, "Who?"

"The guy what done it, of course!"

"Oh!" he answered after a moment. Then: "It could have been a woman, you know."

"Why?" I prodded.

My pal had stopped moving around beneath the bed. He was silent for a moment; then he clipped out: "A crime of passion, see? Perhaps hate. That's one good motive, always. Look at the condition of his head. They *could* have stopped sooner."

I looked at the dead man, and a chill ran icily across my chest. I said: "Yeah, they sure could have."

But the Professor was saying: "You know, Barney, there's more to this recent theater trouble than what you think. Only the other day Inspector Deering was saying that folks are complaining about these bank nights, Whirl-o'-Win nights, and so on. Now, take this—"

I barked out, "You take it," and

jumped toward the open hallway door. The thumping coming from one of the other rooms sounded urgent.

I FOUND the girl tied up in the closet of the bedroom across the hall. She had a small, oval face and sea-blue eyes. She was about the size of the Professor, and where her rumpled skirt had skirled up around rounded knees, I didn't have to look twice to see that she had a nice form. She had been crying.

She stared fearfully out of those pretty eyes while I got the cruelly cutting cords from her wrists and slim ankles. I don't wonder she looked scared. Burly me, freckled face made to scare babies, towering over her in the crazy white apron! Maybe she wondered where my meat axe was. I looked not unlike a butcher.

I got the gag out of her mouth, a small, curved mouth that was delicately sweet. She cried out: "Oh, you beast! You're the one who sneaked up behind me, knocked me out and tied me up." She was struggling as I helped her to her feet.

I scratched my head and said: "Now look, lady. Don't get me wrong. I just arrived here. Besides—" I took off the apron, fumbled in my pocket for my shield and proved to her that I was the law.

She sank weakly into a near-by chair then, and sighed. "Oh, that's better." But she bounced right out of it again, small hands going to her bosom. "But where's my brother?"

I frowned, patted her hand as she clutched at my arm, and said soothingly: "Let's start from the beginning, huh? I came here to deliver a summons—" I broke off, said nothing about the dead man across the hall, and asked instead: "Now you tell me just what happened. First, who are you, sister?"

She was rubbing her bruised wrists now. She said: "Oh, that. I'm Mary Blaine. Bob and I live here with Uncle Anthony, you

see." Her blue eyes looked fearful again. "Well, I was alone here in the room, just finishing dressing. Bob—that's my brother—called in and said to hurry. We were going out. When some one came in a moment later, I didn't bother to look. I thought it was him—Bob. Then this terrible man grabbed me from behind, dragged me toward that closet and—"

"Who?" I prompted, studying her frank blue eyes.

"I don't know. He hit me with something then and—and I came to in there!" She indicated the clothes closet "Then you just opened the door. I thought you were the one—"

"I see," I murmured, though I was still up in the air. Of course, it could have been her own brother. The one who grabbed her, I mean. I prodded:

"Your brother. What does he do?"

"Do?" she asked wonderingly.

"Work," I explained. "Is he old enough?"

She smiled. "Of course. He's twenty-six. He's manager of one of uncle's theaters." Her pretty eyes clouded and she gripped my arm again. "You said something about being a policeman Is it anything to do with the trouble they've been having at the theaters?" She suddenly looked worried as hell.

It was then that I remembered what my pal the Professor had been saying. I remembered some other things, too. The Burk chain of flicker houses had been accused by certain patrons of running some shady bank nights and other forms of lottery pools. I think this subpoena I was carrying had something to do with that complaint. I said:

"Now take the following easy, miss. I might as well tell you now as later—"

Mary Blaine screamed at that instant. "Look out! Behind you—"

The heavy-set man with the green eyes was halfway to me, and the thick walking

stick in his hand was already descending in a wicked swing.

I sidestepped—but not quite soon enough. The heavy cane grazed my skull, dug into the shoulder muscle close to my neck. The shock was paralyzing. My right arm, for the moment, was useless.

But not my left. I spun around with the force of the cane blow, sent out a steaming left hook and missed the big man's jaw by a fraction. The cane started swinging again.

Somewhere behind me, Mary Blaine cried out: "Oh, stop it! I know him now. It's—"

BUT THIS came too late. The cane caught me across the back this time, and I saw red. I plowed into this bird with the queer green eyes and the face that was half jaw. He certainly could take it. I got him backing toward the hall door, but that damned cane kept swinging and slashing, and I knew if I didn't take him soon, that heavy cane would find my skull.

I saw the Professor then. Hopping about like a bird, he stood in the hallway waiting for this big bruiser who was backing toward him. He had a gun in his hand, but dared not use it because of the girl. But he swung the gun muzzle in a short arc.

It caught the green-eyed stranger behind the ear, a light blow, but the man went down hard. And stayed down.

Shuddering, the ex-judge stepped gingerly over the big, limp form and came into the room. His suit was dusty at the knees from crawling beneath the bed, and his flowing black tie awry. He bowed deeply from the waist, facing the girl, and said:

"You'll have to pardon my partner's actions, miss." He indicated me, "He's just a roughneck at heart sometimes."

Mary Blaine shook her curly blonde head, and explained: "Oh, it was perfectly all right." She indicated the still figure on the floor. "Mister Smith, that's who he is, was

going to strike him. But I don't know why."

The Professor smiled benignly then, pocketed his gun. He says: "I believe I did the proper thing then."

His black eyes clouded up and he looked from me to the girl, then back at me again. "Barney," he said, "this fellow looked in the other room, saw—what was in there, and then heard you talking in here. He must have jumped to the conclusion—"

But the blonde girl had caught what the Professor had started to say. She cried out: "Wh—what's in there?"

Gently then, my partner took her arm, led her out into the hall. I admired him for the courage needed for what he must now tell her...

Later, her firm little chin held stiffly, she came back into the room. She had taken it like a soldier. She explained: "I can't understand it. Of course, there has been some trouble at one or two of the theaters. But nothing that would lead to—to murder!"

The Professor, who I can see is getting anxious to call Homicide, perched his frail little form on the arm of a chair and said softly: "Tell us about this theater trouble, Miss Blaine." His alive, black eyes told me that he already knew more than he was telling.

The blonde-haired girl was walking up and down the room, upset but managing to keep control of herself. She said: "It started a couple of weeks ago. Patrons complained that there was something suspicious about the way people were winning on Whirl-o'-Win nights. In these community theaters, you know, patrons get acquainted, or recognize each other after seeing the same faces there week after week, all hopeful of winning. But now, these same patrons claim that recent winners have all been total strangers. Some have requested an investigation."

Mary Blaine sobbed once, continued: "Uncle Anthony never did anything dishonest in his life. All those various cash pool nights

were on the level. I *know* it—”

“Of course, child,” the Professor interrupted soothingly. He hopped to his feet and gave me a guarded nod with his head toward the hall. “Now, is there any one you can stay with, while we get this—this unpleasant business over with? The police must come, you know. Where’s Mrs. Burk?”

The girl looked startled. “Oh, didn’t you know?” she asked, just as though the Professor should know all about everything.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied. His eyes blinked, and he added: “What?”

“Uncle Anthony and his wife are separated. She left just yesterday.”

I started to whistle, but the Professor caught my eyes and gave me a dirty look. He asked her: “Isn’t there anyone else—”

Just then I recalled what the girl had said about her brother. “Look,” I exclaimed. “Your brother? Where in the devil did he disappear to?”

She suddenly looked scared as hell, and gasped: “Oh, I forgot. Perhaps something has happened to him.”

The big man on the floor snapped out of it and started to get up.

I HAD A TIME with him for a while. After I got him calmed down, seated on the bed, we learned that he was Philip Smith, a business associate of the dead man’s. At first, he was inclined to be antagonistic, but the Professor, in his calm, easy way, has a manner of handling such people. After a moment he had the guy explaining.

“Trouble!” he explodes, green eyes flashing. “That’s all we’ve had. First, Burk’s wife decides to leave him, holding out for plenty of alimony, too! We’ve been losing money at the theaters, also running these lottery nights. But we have to do it, to keep up with competition. Now, the managers and operators are holding us up for more money,

besides this trouble from patrons who think prize winners are picked by us. Imagine!”

Just then I got to thinking about that weather-beaten nag and wagon out in the rear drive that was costing me ten bucks an hour. I put in: “The chief’ll raise hell about not putting in a call, partner. Let’s get going!” I looked at Mary Blaine and figured maybe I’d spoken too hastily.

There was a French phone on a table near-by. The Professor lifted the receiver, got H. Q. and gave Homicide the low-down on the killing. Hanging up, he said to the girl: “You wait here in your room. I’ll make things as easy as possible for you.” For a guy in his fifties, my partner wasn’t so slow!

Outside in the hallway, the Professor said to big Philip Smith: “And you can wait in one of those rooms down the hall. Get going.”

Mumbling, Smith stalked down the hallway. It was then that I remembered something else beside the girl’s missing brother. I said to my partner:

“Say, when you were under that bed, you mentioned something about these Whirl-o’-Win nights, being held at Burk’s theaters. What made you say that?”

His eyes sharpened then, and his hand dipped into his side pocket. “Gracious me,” the Professor exclaimed, “I almost forgot. I found this little paper disk under the bed. Now what do you suppose it means. ‘Pink—48,’ it reads, and—”

I took the disk from his palm and said: “Hell, haven’t you ever been to one of those bank nights when the pool gets up around three hundred?”

The Professor frowned. “Heavens, no! I can’t stand the crowds.”

I was staring at the pink-colored disk. “It’s for the Phoenix Theater,” I indicated. “That’s one of Burk’s places. And—” I was suddenly intensely interested—“it’s dated for tonight! That’s strange.”

“Strange?”

“Sure. These disks are usually handed out as patrons enter the theater for the evening show. How did this one get out for to-night's show, unless—” I broke off, an idea slowly building up in my mind. I like to play hunches, and I had one now. I continued: “I'll keep this. I'm going to that show at the Phoenix tonight. You stay here and handle things. Meet me in the Phoenix lobby about seven tonight.”

He shook his head vigorously, said: “Barney, you jump to conclusions. Now, first, we must locate Mrs. Burk. Yes, I would very much like to talk to Mrs. Burk. If you'll get busy on that angle—”

I said: “Sure, I'll take care of that, too. And the girl's brother. It's funny about him—”

The young man coming down the steps from the third floor above, said rather shakily: “There's nothing funny about it at—all!”

I knew right off that it was the girl's brother. He had the same blue eyes. But he was tall, lean-looking, and his straight hair was ash-blond. He looked like he had been shoved down three flights of stairs.

His face was bruised, and his brown suit was plenty mussed. A length of frayed cord was trailing from one of his wrists. He pushed past the Professor into the murder room, stared out of unblinking eyes for a moment; then he swung toward us, rapping out: “So he *did* get him then!”

I stepped closer to the young man, my hand ready to slip to my shoulder holster, though I doubted if that would be necessary. Robert Blaine didn't look like a dangerous sort of person. I asked: “Who did?”

“The man who got me, of course.” He motioned up the stairway. “I went back up the stairs to get my coat. He must have been waiting in a closet near the head of these stairs. He jumped me then, knocked me down, dragged me into the closet, where he left me tied up.” He indicated the cord hanging from

his wrist. “I got this, and the one tied to my ankles, loose on the edge of a broken, metal waste basket in the closet.”

The Professor had flashed his special police badge; briefly, we had told young Blaine what had happened as far as we know. Eyes wide, he blurted: “Where's sis—Mary?”

My partner indicated the girl's room. “She's all right. The rest of the law will be here any moment. Leave her alone for the time being. But about this person—”

I put in: “Yeah, *who* conked you?”

“The man from the theater,” young Blaine said.

“What man?”

“The one who threatened Uncle Anthony the other day. I don't know his name. He's been in several times, complaining about prize-money nights at the theater. I think he was slightly whacky, for he threatened uncle because he had never won any cash on the jackpot nights.”

The Professor asked: “Where's your aunt—Burk's wife?”

Young Blairie's lean face suddenly tightened. “I dunno,” he said shortly.

I knew he was lying.

My partner gave me a strange look, said: “Never mind. But you know this man who knocked you out upstairs?”

Young Blaine nodded. Squad cars were pulling into the front drive at that moment; the dying moan of a siren penetrated the terrible stillness of the big house. The Professor said suddenly:

“Take him with you, Barney. Locate this man he speaks about. Also Mrs. Burk. I'll fix it here with the homicide men. Hurry!”

Blaine asked: “May I wash up before we start, sir?”

I said that would be all right, and waited on the second-floor landing until my partner went down to let in the bulls. Young Blaine went down the rear stairs to the kitchen. I wondered why he had lied about his

aunt, and tried to recall what the woman looked like. It seemed to me I had seen Mrs. Burk around some place.

Just to verify things, while the Professor was taking the cops to the murder room and sending one man to stand guard over the room in which was burly Philip Smith—the dead man’s associate—I slipped up to the third floor and looked over the closet and near-by bedroom that was young Robert Blaine’s.

I spoke to a couple of squad men on the way down to the kitchen via the front hall. One officer was stationed at the front door. He started to ask questions, but I was in a hurry now. That nag and laundry buggy were costing me real dough. I hurried through the dining room into the kitchen.

Young Robert Blaine wasn’t there.

Neither was he any place else, when I sent a couple of dicks to scour the house and grounds. Puzzled, I went back to the laundry wagon. The nag had pulled the wagon over to the edge of the gravel rear drive, and was nibbling at some grass. I had one hunch: Mrs. Burk. Wherever she was, I was suddenly betting that Robert Blaine had gone to her.

Why? Because I was suddenly remembering where I had once seen the woman. At a charity affair at a local hotel. She was Anthony Burk’s second wife—there never had been any children in either of his marriages—and this second wife was in her twenties, pretty as hell and—

Why wouldn’t a good-looking chap like Robert Blaine go for her in a big way? Perhaps he suspected her of this murder, had gone to help her! Perhaps my partner’s idea of murder for hate wasn’t so far off at that!

I jumped up to the wagon seat and slapped the reins against the mare’s back. I rapped: “Come on, Alice, amble! We’ve things to do!” I was thinking to hell with the laundry basket back in the Burk kitchen. I was

anxious to get rid of this crate and pick up my bus. The laundry driver could call for his wash later.

The roadway out of the Burk place wound through elms set close along the road. It was mid-afternoon and hot. I sat stiffly on the hard seat and tried to get speed out of the nag.

Something prodded my back then, and a hard voice, obviously disguised, said: “All right, master mind. Just sit as you are. Pass that paper disk, which you have in your pocket, over your shoulder with your *left* hand. Careful now! A forty-five slug makes a nasty hole in a guy’s back!”

SLOWLY, brain pounding and a pulse in my throat beating wildly, I followed directions. My left hand rose to my shoulder. Every muscle was tense for action. The gun no longer pressed my back. Now!

My left forearm, hooked, went back and up, clawing for my captor’s head. If I ever got that head in a squeezing headlock—

But I didn’t twist fast enough. Something that felt like the business end of a pile driver landed on the back of my skull. I was smashed down against the seat, hands clawing out to grab anything to support me. I made a feeble attempt to reach my gat. It was a useless movement. I felt suddenly as though every nerve in my body were paralyzed; my arms couldn’t do what my mind ordered them to.

I tried to turn, to get a glimpse—

Wham came that clubbing blow again. And as darkness settled over six-foot-three of helpless copper, I had the thought that there had been two large laundry hampers in this chariot. My attacker must have hidden in the second one, beneath the dry wash....

A radio-car cop found me tucked away in the basket in a lot up in Riverdale. That’s the fashionable New York suburb where

Anthony Burk had lived. The cop says he got a flash saying the horse and wagon had wandered back to the stables, with both hampers missing. The driver had located one at the Burk home, of course. But the other— Well, here it was, with yours truly in it!

It was dark, almost seven o'clock. After the cop had patched up my battered head—he had a first-aid kit in the radio car—he took me to where I had left my flivver, and I called the Professor from a drug-store phone booth. I located him at headquarters.

"Barney," he cried over the wire, "I thought you were killed or something."

"The Irish die hard," I put in hastily. Then: "What's happened?"

"Plenty," the Professor started in rapidly. "First, this associate of Burk's— Philip Smith—is involved terribly. He has been going around with the dead man's wife; he also has charge of the books for those theaters, and there are discrepancies. Also—"

"Yes?" I prompted.

"The medical examiner says Burk was killed early this morning. We've learned Mrs. Burk was out there early, to pick up some things—"

I put in: "You still have a yen about that murder-for-hate angle, eh? What about young Robert Blaine?"

"Well, really now, I don't know," he replied, in answer to the first question. "There are too few clues, though it looks bad for this associate, Smith, and that stranger who threatened Burk at the theater. The one Robert mentioned. Oh, yes, we found Robert Blaine at the woman's hotel. He ran there to her, probably upset and thinking she did it. I've learned he was quite in love with her."

"But where—" I started to ask.

"She left for Chicago this morning, on her way to Reno. We've ordered her to be stopped at the Chicago station tonight. Young Robert was allowed to go to the theater. He is trying to find this stranger for us, the one who

threatened Burk."

I had been watching a clock on the wall across from the booth. I said quickly: "Now look, partner. Time's short. I'll see you at the theater shortly. Now get this: It's Whirl-o'-Win night, with the jackpot at four hundred bucks. I'll be wearing a tan trench coat and fedora. Watch for me in the lobby immediately after the winners are called. I'm playing a hunch, partner. Listen for Pink— forty-eight!" I started to hang up.

"Wait!" the Professor protested. "I've got this girl on my hands."

"Meet me at the movies!" I rapped out, and cut him off.

OUTSIDE, it had started to rain. Climbing into the old rattletrap, I wheeled the bus over to Broadway near the end of the Van Cortlandt subway, chiseled a second-hand clothing dealer out of a tan trench coat for a couple of bucks, picked up an old fedora at the same place and headed downtown toward Dyckman Street. The Phoenix Theater was in the Bronx, in that section.

The flivver's tires made squealing sounds on the wet pavement as I did a Barney Oldfield through the early-evening traffic. Parking a block away from the Phoenix, I slid into the old coat, pulled the fedora down over my head and hoped to hell no one would recognize Barney Penney. I've been in enough gun battles with crooks around the Big Town to be pretty well known.

Luckily, my assailant from the laundry hamper had overlooked the gun in my shoulder holster. I had a hunch I might be needing it. Because, for once, there had been too few clues in this case for my bright little pal, the Professor. He figured crimes with his brains, when he had something to dig into.

But I prefer to use my fists on rats. Together, the Professor and I got along swell, though he worried himself to death about my rough methods. And this looked like one time

when a killer was going to be caught with action—a fast play. Tonight!

The theater was fairly crowded, but a few rows in the rear of the orchestra still contained a few empty seats. And near one aisle, I spotted my partner, seated with blonde Mary Blaine. There was an empty seat next to them, on the aisle side. I waited until the usher had taken some one down the aisle, then slipped to the empty seat in the covering darkness.

The Professor said: “This seat is taken, sir.” Then he peered at me hard, exclaimed softly: “Barney! I had a hunch you’d find me here; saved this seat for you.” He moved over toward the aide, so I could sit between him and the girl. I still wore my coat, collar up around my neck.

Mary Blaine touched my arm, whispered: “Your friend tells me you are going to try something unusual—”

I nodded quickly, said: “Careful. I don’t want anyone to recognize me here. But you—”

Her deep eyes held mine; she was sweet and young and lovely. She said, still with a catch in her voice: “Robert and I are orphans, you know. Your partner has been so kind. He asked me to come here with him tonight, to try and help you and him. He wanted me to explain this Whirl-o’-Win wheel to him.” She made a motion with her hand. “I know this theater well, of course.”

To the Professor I said: “And Robert? He’s here, too?”

“Up in the office,” my partner, said softly. There was a newsreel on the screen, and we had a chance to talk swiftly. Within ten minutes or so now, the roulette game would be played on the stage. He continued: “He’s described this stranger we’re seeking to one of our plainclothes men. The officer is in the lobby now. We hushed up the murder, for the time being, because of your crazy hunch

about this pink disk. Didn’t want to scare anyone off.” His sharp black eyes narrowed. “Just what is your crazy hunch?”

I said, “Wait,” starting to turn to the girl. But the Professor was gripping my big arm, looking at the bandage partly hidden at the back of my skull by the upturned collar of the coat. “You’re hurt!” he whispered.

I grinned. “Just a scratch.” Turning to the girl, I asked: “How would one get beneath the stage here, Mary? I’ve got to hurry, too.”

Breathless, she explained, nodding with her head toward the front of the theater. “Down this aisle. It angles to the right up front, behind those curtains. There’s a door behind there. Go down the steps inside— But why—”

“Swell!” I cut in. “See you later.” And to my pal, “Remember, right after the prizes are awarded, in the lobby. Follow me. Leave the girl here.”

I LEFT THEM then, and under cover of darkness along the aisle, slipped to the little door Mary had mentioned. To one side of the stage, in darkness, I saw the big wheel that was used for Whirl-o’-Win. It was really three wheels within a wheel, all made like a roulette wheel with numbers. Ten spins constituted the game for the evening. Patrons entering the theater were handed small paper disks, each containing a color and a number.

One spin of the wheel selected the lucky color; another spin on a wheel within the great outer wheel picked the lucky number. The person holding this combination then stepped to the stage and the large outer wheel was then spun. This wheel was marked off somewhat like the old “put-and-take” game. The lucky ticket holder might win a dollar, two, perhaps five. The excitement of the game was that the big outer wheel contained segments that offered ten percent, or fifty percent, or even all of the jackpot

accumulated over a series of nights. And tonight that jackpot was four hundred dollars!

I reached the basement unobserved.

There was a dim light on at the foot of the stairs, and prowling around I reached a point approximately beneath the big roulette wheel located above. Within moments, I had found what I sought—just as the door opened at the head of the stairs and some one started down.

It was dark here where I was; I had been working with a small pocket flash. I had noted the small storage room near the foot of the stairs. The door to this was open.

Silently, I slipped into the protection of the room entrance, waited until some one had passed and gone toward the wheel. Of course, it would have been an easy matter to step out, take the visitor by surprise. But this was not what I wanted, for this person was needed in my plan.

As soon as the arrival was away from the spot where I was concealed, I slipped out and, catlike, went back up the stairs. And none too soon.

The newsreel was almost finished, and soon the theater would be flooded with light. Still protected by darkness, I reached the back of the theatre while all eyes were upon the screen.

When the lights came on, my head was again covered with the old hat, and I was mingling with patrons standing behind the glass screens that separated the rear row of the orchestra from the deeply carpeted lounge behind. A bright spot flashed on the big Whirl-o'-Win wheel, and down an aisle on the far side of the theater I saw young, tow-headed Robert Blaine heading for the stage.

As was the custom in all these community show houses, the theater manager took charge of the roulette game.

No big prizes were won on the first half dozen spins. Salmon-3; pay \$3.00 and put \$2.00 into the jackpot. Hollywood Green-27;

pay \$4.00 and put 33.00 into the jackpot. So it went, with the audience tensely waiting for some one to crack the real prize money. The fifty percent of the jackpot section of the wheel came around to the pointer, barely nudged past. Patrons groaned.

It was the ninth spin and one to go. Pink came up on the first spin of the smaller, inner wheel. Then the number. 40—45—46—47—48! It stopped on 48. *Pink-48*, the number of the small paper disk that my unknown assailant had taken after I'd been knocked cold.

Near the rear of the audience, a man rose from his seat and started down the aisle toward the stage. He was tall, wedge-shouldered, with a pasty-white face. I was positive that I had never seen the man before in my life.

Again the large outer wheel spun. Around and around, then starting to slow. Past the jackpot mark, past the fifty percent and the ten. But wait. They were coming up again. It stopped on—Pay 100%. *The jackpot!*

The audience went wild, started cheering the lucky person who was four hundred dollars richer. Young Robert Blaine smiled at the winner, but his face was strained from the ordeal he had been through this afternoon. Into a sack he quickly placed the prize money, and the man with the pasty face hurried up the aisle. I was already headed for the lobby.

In the crowds starting to leave, some one brushed against me. It was the Professor, and his eyes were curiously bright and snapping. In passing, he whispered quickly: "That winner, Barney—I recognized the man. A small-time gambler named Roy Holden. I think I see the setup, partner, but you're flirting with death. You better take some men—"

I kept my head low, whispered hastily, "Too late now!" and ducked out to the street, moving away from the brightly lighted

marquee. My little friend was soon lost in the crowd.

THEN I spotted the lucky winner, the big-shouldered man with the pallid features. The average person forgets faces so quickly that none recognized him slipping off into the shadows away from the theater. I didn't.

Shadowing is something I learned long ago. I was hardly fifty yards behind him as the stranger continued straight down the street, turned the corner and headed for the block behind the theater. Darkened store doorways helped me out. He turned right again at the next corner, and I lost him for a moment in the darkness. It was a residential street, dark, deserted. It seemed that his steps had stopped then.

Carefully, shielded by trees now, I edged forward—and heard the squishy footsteps in the alleyway close to: me. He had turned right again, into the alley. It was a tunnel of blackness, and lurking death. For I knew this was the end of the trail now. Heavy gat in my hand, I stalked forward slowly, ever alert for those steady footsteps to stop. It wasn't one burly man I had to face, but this prize winner and the one he was going to meet. And one of them—a killer!

The steps slowed, moved around a bit, stopped.

I went forward fast. Two people had started talking.

I ripped out: "Hold it! Just hold it like that. One phony move and—"

The one I had been trailing—I could see him dimly now—whirled away from the doorway and his hand streaked beneath his coat. Gun-flame flashed, a slug ricocheted off the brick wall behind me. I fired point-blank. The one the Professor had stated was a gambler went down, clawing at his chest. From the doorway that had opened here in a high, stone wall, the second figure leaped

toward me. A sound like that a terrified animal makes in its throat came from his lips. There was a gun in his hand, and it was suddenly kicking against the palm of the one who was a murderer.

Relentlessly, a slug in my left arm, another clipping my big ear, I went forward. The man screamed, and hurled the gun. I fired, not a fatal shot, but one that caught him high in the shoulder and sent him smashing against the wall. Another hit him in the leg. He went down, groveling, and I kept going right up to him and holding the gat steady.

He screamed: "No! No! No!"

Then he passed out. I dragged him into the open doorway. There was a dim light inside, and I was in a small room behind the stage of the Phoenix Theater. I had known it would be the theater, of course.

I was dragging in the pasty-faced gambler when the Professor and a cop ran in from a passageway that led from the main part of the show house. My friend exclaimed:

"Barney, I thought I was too late. I figured the setup when you went beneath the stage tonight, and I knew this gambler would come back around here after he got the money. But I couldn't find Officer Reilly here, and it took some time—"

I said wearily: "It's okay, partner, I got him anyway."

The red-faced patrolman was staring at one of the two figures on the floor. He breathed: "Holy Saints! It's Mister Blaine—Robert Blaine! Who'd imagine—"

The Professor met my gaze, nodded. "Pink—forty-eight!" he said, with a sigh.

But I was thinking of the girl, Mary. I asked my partner about her.

"Back in the office," he explained. "Barney," he added sadly, "I had to tell her what I figured you were up to. You see, I've had the hunch all day, too, but I don't like to play hunches. So I told her what to expect

about her brother, a killer—”

His eyes brightened. “Only he’s really her step-brother. She thought a lot of him, but she’ll get over this. You know why, Barney?”

His face was a kindly smile now. “Why?” I asked. My left arm was paining like hell.

“She’s coming to live at my home. You know, Barney, I’m a lonesome old man, save when I’m out crime-smashing with you. She’s a lovable child, and I’m going to be very happy—”

I said: “You lucky so-and-so!” And then, to the patrolman, indicating the two unconscious figures, “Come on, give me a hand here—”

LATER, my partner and I went back to the theater office for Mary. The gambler, dying, had confessed. It seemed young Robert Blaine had been deeply in debt to him and a crowd of local gamblers. Being manager of his uncle’s theater here, he had worked out a plan for fixing the Whirl-o’-Win wheel, spotting the winners of the large jackpot nights that came around every month or so. One of the gamblers was always holder of the lucky disk.

Thus Robert Blaine managed to pay up his debts, and get more money for his pastime. Of course a young usher had been in the crooked wheel business—he had been the one

I had seen come down beneath the stage—and he confessed, too. I saw to it that he would get off easy, after a good scare, because of his age. Blaine had bribed the lad handsomely.

We learned also that Anthony Burk, the innocent victim of all this, had suspected something about his young manager-nephew, and had called the turn, threatening exposure. Thus Robert Blaine’s motive for murder—fear. The story of the stranger threatening his uncle had been, naturally, a stall by Blaine to throw us off the trail and allow him time to make tonight’s haul.

An hour later, my little partner and I had Mary tucked between us in the front seat of the cart. The Professor said:

“Mary’s going to ray place, Barney. My housekeeper, Mrs. O’Day, will love her. You better stop, too, and have that arm patched up—”

I had started to comment, “Who wouldn’t love her?” looking into those lovely blue eyes, when Mary, chin up now, looked worried and exclaimed: “I didn’t know you were hurt!” Then she added: “Hurry! I know something about nursing. I’ll take care of that arm for you.”

I looked across her blonde head at my partner, grinned, and said meaningly: “And coffee? That’s more important than the scratch on my arm.”