

Pinch-Hit for Death

By Frank P. Lockwood



*This was where he should be
lying dead.*

To State Trooper Steve Barry this was not just another murder hunt. On this highway of doom his brother had met sudden, violent death. And all the time Steve Barry knew that he himself was supposed to have died—and that a quirk of fate had thrust his brother into his own coffin.

OLD AMOS FINNEY beamed from behind the counter of his small ice-cream store on the Limms Highway. This murder business boomed his trade. Since the state police took over the rear of his place for temporary headquarters, crowds had been milling about in the heat-haze of the August day.

A telephone rang.

The supple figure of Steve Barry stiffened as he rested lean fingers on Captain Locke's desk, awaiting that officer's recognition. Three nights ago Steve's brother, Matt, had answered a ring like that in the sub-station at Limms....

Matt Barry had turned from the phone to the recumbent figure of his brother, Steve, stretched out on the bed in his quarters.

"Call for you."

"Oh, lord!" Steve groaned. "And I'm dog-tired. What is it?"

"Wrecked car on the Limms Highway. Looks like someone's had an accident."

Steve yawned and made to get up. Matt said:

"I'll take it for you, kid. It's probably routine."

"But you can't—"

"Sure I can. Used to be in the service, didn't I? If it's anything important, I'll call you."

Steve sighed. "If you only would!"

"Why not? You're nearly out. Relax!" And Matt left on the mission.

He never returned. Now Steve stood but two hours after Matt's funeral, insistent upon helping in the search for his brother's murderer. . . .

Captain Locke leaned over the desk on thick arms. "You're quite sure they mistook your late brother for you?"

"Absolutely!" Steve averred. "No one knew Matt was here. We looked a lot alike."

Locke nodded and drummed the desk. "Too bad you didn't go out. Your prize ring experience might have saved a murder."

Steve accepted the rebuke quietly.

"You say you suspect no one in particular?"

"That's right, sir."

"Then what could you do in South Flats?"

"Nose around."

Locke snorted. "And nose into trouble! No, it don't sound healthy."

That thin line, cutting the hollows on Steve's brown cheeks, deepened. "But, sir—"

"I'm sorry. We can't afford trouble on the Flats. Old Granite Puss would love to go for us on false arrest."

Sergeant Monk Jordan wheezed from the end of Locke's desk: "Who's Granite Puss?"

LOCKE nodded toward Steve Barry. "Ask your buddy. He was brought up around South Flats. . . . That is all, Barry."

Steve Barry went out of the store followed by the stocky Sergeant Jordan. They stopped at a shaded spot removed from the captain's hearing. Barry's thin face was tense.

"Routine, routine!" he complained bitterly. "Sit around and wait for leads—like that old woman who heard some one groan."

Jordan said nothing.

"Or," Barry raved on, "that patch of gray pants on the barbed wire fence. Probably some chicken thief's."

Suddenly Jordan prompted: "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Who's Granite Puss?"

Barry shrugged. "A penny pincher named Uriah Skelly."

Jordan's little black eyes widened. "You mean that queer gink from Soway who nearly beat a small boy to death a few years back?"

"That's him. The kid swiped a dime on Skelly."

"Some one in the crowd kicked his spine before you could get him away?"

Barry nodded glumly. "Correct."

“I remember.” Jordan whistled. “They gave him a year or two. When he got out, everyone in Soway froze him stiff. So he moved onto South Flats with the half-bakes. . . . Sa-ay! You don’t think Skelly—that is, that Matt—”

“Why not?” Barry demanded.

Jordan scratched his head. A V of black hair left but an inch between its apex and his bushy brows. “He was suspected of a couple of murders after he got out. But they couldn’t get anything on him.”

Barry countered with: “But wasn’t it funny—the two guys who were battered to death like Matt—happened to be the D.A. who convicted Skelly, and the bird supposed to have kicked him in the spine?”

Here Jordan threw a wrench. “But this Skelly is crippled—goes on crutches. He couldn’t have battered your—that is—”

“Granite Puss has brains, Monk, and money—money he’s made protecting the scurvy mongrels he lives among. Police haven’t pinned anything on the South Flats area since Skelly moved in there.”

“You think he hired some one to—”

“He could, couldn’t he!” Barry came back. “Those half-bakes down there think he’s king of the master minds. They’d do anything for him. He gets them out of all kinds of jams.”

A trooper strode out of the store. “Hey, Barry! The captain wants you.”

Barry re-entered the store. Locke was drumming again.

“Barry, I’ve been thinking over your request. You might go to the Flats.”

That deep line broke into arcs when Steve smiled. “Thanks, captain.”

“But mind you—no arrests! Report your findings to me first.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take Jordan with you. And start now.”

TEN MINUTES later, Steve Barry and Monk Jordan were purring up the Limms Highway through the deadly heat that had burned grass lifeless and drooped the dust-coated foliage of trees. A quarter mile out, Barry braked the troop-car and they got out. Barry pointed to shrubbery near the road.

“There it is!” His face twitched. “Monk, his arms were twisted out of their sockets!”

Monk Jordan nodded soberly. “I know. Awful!”

“What *kind* of a devil—?”

“Devil is right. And that wrecked car business—?”

“Was a gag,” Steve Barry finished, glancing around. “The killer could have ducked across that field and down the gully by the tracks. Once over them, he’d have a back road to South Flats. Not a chance in a thousand anyone would see him at that time of night.” Sieve frowned. “Funny thing, Monk.”

“What?”

“Skelly’s been out of prison three years. These three murders have been six months apart—and all alike! Another thing.”

Monk Jordan waited invitingly.

“There’s only one bird on South Flats big enough to maim a man like that.”

The sergeant frowned. “You mean Orlie Sykes?”

Barry nodded. Jordan started to protest, noted Barry’s set face and desisted.

They got into the car and sped on. Late afternoon had them slowly driving along the main street of South Flats, dubbed Poverty Boulevard by the neighboring town of Soway. Straight to the house of Uriah Skelly on the far end of the street. Skelly’s place stood out in its smear of white paint like an electric sign over a dark alley. On some boards of an unpainted addition built from packing-box lumber, a firm name was stenciled in black.

Granite Puss sat on his porch in a chair, crutches by his side. A barrel-chested, long-armed man, shorn of his brute strength

by an indignant citizen's kick. He was alone save for a bristling gray dog, allied to the wolf breed. Low and ominous growls came from him as the troopers approached.

Steve Barry yanked his gun from the leg holster. Jordan restrained him.

"Easy! We're on Skelly's property—and without a warrant."

A small, rat-featured man appeared in the doorway. It was Mort Sprague who looked after Skelly for his board and keep.

Granite Puss chewed tobacco slowly. He ejected a stream of its juice toward the troopers. It would have struck Barry had he not jumped aside.

"What's the idea, Skelly?" Barry demanded darkly.

Granite Puss motioned. "Where that struck is the deadline for skunks, rattlesnakes and vermin!"

Barry trembled with rage. Again Jordan restrained him.

"Don't come any closer, troopers!" Skelly warned. "I've brought Wolf up to hate striped pants. State your business from there."

Barry fished into a pocket and produced a piece of gray cloth. "Ever see that, Skelly?"

Skelly chewed calmly. "What is it?"

"Part of a man's pants." Barry would have sworn fear jerked into Mort Sprague's eyes; but Skelly's face remained granite.

"Can't say that I have."

"It was found on a barb-wire fence off the Limms Highway."

"Got a warrant for anybody?"

"Not yet."

"Better get going—until you can bring one!"

BARRY'S jaw tightened. "We're looking around first, Skelly." He touched Jordan's arm. As the two turned away, Barry's observing eyes took in the layout of the place.

They drove back the length of Poverty Boulevard. Derelicts—unkempt, misshapen

and weird-eyed—stared at them from the squalor and stench of filth-strewn dooryards. At the home of Orlie Sykes, the troopers stopped and asked questions. The giant Orlie was one soul on the Flats who had never shown open dislike of a police uniform.

But he could give them no information; yet Steve Barry was positive that same flash of fear that had whipped into Sprague's expression, gleamed in Sykes' eyes.

Back at headquarters, the pair reported to Locke. The troop captain drummed his desk crisply.

"Afraid you wouldn't find anything. Glad you didn't let Granite Puss egg you into trouble."

Barry vent back to the sub-station, very disheartened. This placid inactivity burned him.

In the bathroom, Jordan started water running. "Calm yourself, fella. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Barry paced restlessly. "I can't eat—I can't sleep."

"The mills of the gods grind slowly."

"I had to lie in bed coddling my lazy carcass—and let my brother go out to get killed!"

Jordan soaped his hands. "Don't lash yourself that way."

"I might as well have murdered Matt!"

"You'll so nuts if you don't get off that line."

"Suppose it had been *your* brother?"

Jordan walked into the bedroom with a towel. "I know how you feel but—"

"No, you don't!" Barry flared: "Nor anyone else. If they did, they couldn't just sit and wait for something to happen."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know," Barry cried, "but I can't stand this. I've *got* to have action!"

"Better climb into bed, fella. Something will happen. Murder will out."

"I'll make it 'out'!" Barry walked to a window and stared down upon the street

below. Distant thunder rumbled. “You go to bed. Don’t mind me.”

Jordan shrugged, disrobed and tumbled in with a sigh of relief. A minute later he was sound asleep.

Barry continued pacing the room. Finally he sat down. Catching up a magazine, he idly turned its pages. From one of them a firm name leaped out at him. Barry’s eyes jerked to the ad and picture above that name—and as they did, his spine stiffened and his hair fairly rose.

Jordan jerked straight up in bed as the magazine leaving Barry’s hand hit the wall back of the sergeant. Simultaneously, sharp lightning zigged, followed by a dread crackle of nearness.

“Jordan, I’m going to South Flats again!”

“Wait a minute, fella!” The sergeant clambered out. “Hold everything!”

“I’m jumping the service!”

“Nix! You can’t do that.”

Barry shot back, “I’m doing it!” and started stripping off his service trousers.

“It’s a misdemeanor!”

“So what?”

“The super will send you up for a year.”

“Hand me my blue pants from the closet.”

Jordan tried reasoning. “For cripes sake, listen! That whole Flats mob is crazy. They could kill you! And Shelly would cover it up in some way. Don’t you see?”

Barry went to the closet himself and got the blue pants. Jordan backed up against the door.

“You’re not going!”

Barry pulled on the pants and buckled the belt. “You tell Locke in the morning that I’ve quit!”

“You’re not going!”

Steve Barry looked at Jordan and sucked in his breath quickly. You couldn’t argue with the sergeant. He ate service with

his meals, he dreamed service in his sleep. It was his god.

So Barry clipped him with a right that had the iron and accuracy of a trained and fit body. The sergeant plopped on his face.

MIDNIGHT! Gloom, wind and the pounding of the summer storm on the muddy stretches of South Flats. Lightning flashed, and the one-story hovels came out in weird, split-second relief.

Granite Fuss Skelly lay on his back in bed and listened. On a cot in another corner, Mort Sprague snored through the fury of the night. Suddenly:

“Mort!”

Sprague roused slowly, “Eh— what?”

“Something’s wrong!”

“Yeah?” The little man, garbed in pants and sweatshirt, got to his feet.

“Listen!” Skelly commanded.

Lightning zigzagged and thunder pounded relentless echoes along the gloom of the sky. Skelly whistled shrilly at his dog. There was no answering whine, not even in the lull of the storm. Skelly cried:

“Turn on the light!”

Mort Sprague fumbled his way along the wall to the switch. He pressed the button.

A tense, slim figure stood with back against the wall and .38 leveled. “Stand where you are, Sprague—and put your hands behind you!”

“I knew it!” Skelly cried. “Barry, I’ll have you out of the service for this!”

“I’m already out, Skelly. Move over here, Sprague.” Barry clicked handcuffs on the trembling man.

Granite Puss snarled suddenly: “Wolf! My dog! You—”

Steve Barry enlightened the man. “I threw a noose of steel cable around the dog house. It had a rag with chloroform on it. The dog passed out for a while.”

“Why, you—”

“Save it! Skelly, I want money.”

“You’ve come to a fine place for it.”

“I know that,” Steve said quietly. “I’m out to find who killed my brother. It’ll take coin. You’ve got it—I need it.” And when Skelly’s granite expression did not change nor speech come from him: “All right. I’ll search the dump till I find it.”

No fear showed in the snaky film of Skelly’s eyes. Bolstered on two pillows he sat in bed and stared hard at the trooper. Barry returned the stare, hazarding:

“The most likely place you’d hide money here would be in the cellar wall. In case of fire, you could dig it out of the ruins.”

The bright eyes flickered now. Barry knew he had struck home. But Skelly persisted:

“I tell you, Barry, there is no money here.”

Barry moved a pace nearer Skelly’s bed. “Listen! I had reports on you when you were up. You studied law in the prison library every chance you got. Why? So you could come out and teach these South Flatters how to steal and get away with it. You raked off your percentage protecting them with alibis. I figure that kind of money is as much mine as yours.”

Quiet between them. The storm howled outside. Rain hammered hard on the roof. Lightning flashed and crackled with breathtaking sharpness.

Then it happened!

THE MAN who all Soway County had supposed was crippled, rose from his bed with the agile ease of a trained athlete. He stood naked save for the black pants that draped his squat, bowed legs. Barrel-chested, ape-armed and cruelly intelligent of face, he looked plenty formidable to the slim trooper who faced him from the kitchen doorway.

“When you go into the cellar, I’ll go with you?” Skelly promised. “One of us won’t come back!”

“I’m not going into the cellar,” Barry

assured him. “That was a gag to force you onto your feet.”

Skelly jeered: “Smart! Now what?”

“That part’s up to you.”

“Right! . . . Barry, you’re trapped! I know my way around this house in the dark. You don’t. Right from Where I stand I can shut off the lights!”

Mort Sprague whimpered. Barry’s eyes never left those fixed, snaky ones of Skelly.

“I’m glad you came to me, Barry. For three years I’ve been exercising and disciplining my spine, strengthening my whole body—and the doctors said I’d probably never walk again! The world has their word for it. What an alibi! No one would ever believe what care and training have done for me.”

Barry’s manner invited Skelly to continue. The house shuddered under a terrific crash of thunder.

“Barry, you forced entrance here. You chloroformed my dog. With your gun, I’m going to kill Sprague—”

The hapless wretch in handcuffs screamed his terror. “Oh, jeez, no! You can’t! You—”

“And then, Barry, with a heavy piece of firewood I’m going to crush your windpipe! It will be the kind of blow Mort would strike running onto you in the dark. Can’t you imagine, Barry, your windpipe fills with blood, you can’t breathe, you choke!

“And then tomorrow, when the bodies are found, I tell them you shot Sprague just as he clipped you with the stick!”

For five seconds, no one moved or spoke. Thunder shook the house to its foundation.

“I made a mistake when I got your brother. This time there’ll be no slips—no torn pants. Then, after you’ve been taken care of, I’ll clear out of these parts, change my name and live on what I’ve made out of the Flats.” And the face that had earned Skelly the

sobriquet of Granite Fuss now lit with a savage anticipation.

Sprague screamed: "Shoot him! Why don't you shoot him?"

Barry couldn't shoot him. He had no warrant, no right to be here—except a hunch. He said: "Maybe you can shut off the lights from where you are, Skelly, but you can't get into the kitchen without coming through this door. And that's where you'll have to come to get my gun!" He had to break Skelly through Skelly's weakest point—his vanity over his physical rehabilitation.

Barry bent low and sent the .38 spinning through the kitchen darkness. Then he straightened. "Now, lights or no lights, come on! You won't get a chance to jump on my back, the way you did Matt's!"

AS SKELLY poised, figuring how quickest to settle this man between him and the gun, Barry knew that every muscle in his opponent's body was hard as the unyielding face that topped it. When they came to grips, he could expect no quarter from the iron-muscle law-breaker.

Lightning crackled and thunder pounded against a quivering earth. Skelly charged.

Barry could have sidestepped that lunge. But he meant to stand or fall by his aim to keep Skelly out of the kitchen and away from that .38. So he pounded a right square into the ex-cripple's face, backed by everything he had. The blow did not check Skelly in the least. He came on, the sheer weight of him crowding Steve through the doorway and into the blackness of the kitchen.

Sprague screamed. A hissing crackle and boom as lightning struck on the Flats.

Barry, unbalanced, bumped a chair and it overturned. He went down. Without a sound, Skelly shuffled after him. Sprague yelled:

"Don't let him get hold of your arms! He'll tear them off you!"

As Barry rolled over and came up, one foot contacted the .38. He kicked it under the stove. Back-pedaling to gain stance, the trooper rammed the kitchen table. He shot around, placing it between Skelly and himself. And Skelly, even in the darkness, sensed the move. He jammed the table against Steve's thighs, pinning him to the kitchen wall.

Plates in the cupboard over Barry's head rattled. Facing the glow from the bedroom, Barry saw the table was littered with supper dishes. He caught one up and broke it in Skelly's face. No sound from Granite Puss. The trooper smashed him with another. Skelly swung a frying pan, opening a gash over Steve's eye. Blood streamed from it.

With a tremendous surge, Barry shoved the table back and dropped. Under Skelly's weight, that table hurtled in to the wall with a crash. A rifle on brackets dropped to the floor and exploded. Barry scrambled from under the table and to his feet. The back of his hand smeared blood from his eye.

As Skelly charged him in the darkness with the unerring aim of a cat, the trooper drove a left and right into his body. Skelly grunted but came on.

Barry circled, keeping the light to Skelly's back, playing for a vulnerable spot. He hoped desperately to drop Granite Puss for the count. But, maneuvering in this unfamiliar darkness, Barry constantly bumped furniture. He couldn't get set because Skelly crowded him relentlessly.

Then one of those long, sweeping arms caught Barry, lifted him onto the stove and nearly off the other side. The trooper rolled as Skelly sought to pin him there. Granite Puss caught one of his arms.

Then blackness! Lightning had blown out a fuse.

ALURID FLASH lit up the kitchen for a split-second. A terrible scream ripped from Sprague, outlined in the doorway, as he saw Barry's arm twisting up his back. Barry

lashed a heel into Skelly's groin and broke the hold. But as he turned to paw with that left hand, he knew Skelly had rendered it useless.

Now, with a lone hand, he must keep Granite Puss off—in a blackness with which Skelly was at home through long years of daily habit. A one-armed fight for his life against a man who was inhumanly powerful.

Again Granite Puss caught him with one of those sweeping blows, and again Barry was catapulted onto the stove and off to the floor. He fell on the rifle. Coming up he gripped the barrel with his one good hand near the trigger guard. Fighting physical exhaustion, he ploughed that gun butt straight against the bridge of Skelly's nose!

A horrible scream, the first real sound to come from Granite Puss. Barry dropped the heavy rifle from sheer weakness. But he must keep going, keep fighting!

As Skelly backed away in that darkness, silent after that one cry, Barry knew he would be coddling the mess of broken bone and mangled flesh. So he followed up those shuffling steps. Against the outer kitchen door, he bumped Skelly.

With that left hand from which Granite Puss had twisted all punching power, Barry pawed to locate the left side of Skelly's body—the vulnerable heart. Blood blinded one eye. He did not bother to wipe it away.

Then Barry found his mark! He ripped his good right hand into the spot backed by one hundred and eighty pounds of steel-spring desperation. The slump and sag of Skelly's body told he had struck home! Just one more punch! And, he felt so weak, so futile!

Lightning flashed again. It lit up the gory splash that was Skelly's face. In it the

eyes rolled from temporary paralysis. Barry's right came back. Darkness again, but his eye had located the spot unfailingly. The fist caught Skelly right on the button and completed his demoralization. But even as Granite Puss collapsed, Barry felt himself going. He called weakly to Sprague:

"Get a rope! Tie him! Get a—"

But suddenly he remembered Sprague was handcuffed. There was a loud pounding somewhere, then everything went black. . . .

Sergeant Monk Jordan bent over the bed in the sub-station where Steve Barry lay swathed in bandages. "You see, quick as I came to, I got Locke and the boys to follow you out there."

"But my resignation!"

"Resignation, my eye! What do you take me for?"

"But I told you I was quitting—and I socked you."

Jordan rubbed his jaw, grinning. "You just practised on me for the Skelly job. What put you wise to Granite Puss?"

Steve Barry looked away. A long strip of plaster nearly covered his left eye. "I saw a firm name on that packing-box addition to Skelly's house—the part they hadn't got 'round to paint yet. I saw that same name under a magazine ad. It was for an exerciser to adjust and strengthen spines."

"Oh-h!"

"Did they get Skelly, Monk?"

"They sure did."

"Was Locke—sore?"

Monk Jordan grinned again. "Not too sore. And I guess he's recommending one Stephen Barry for a sergeantcy."