

The Judge picked that con's barber chair to prove he had no hard feelings. But he learned that the ex-killer had arranged for a close. . .

Shave and a Scare Cut

By Daman C. Fenwick



JUDGE KNAPP knew he was going to die. There was death in every scrape of the razor across his flabby throat. He sensed what was coming the moment Barney started to shave his neck. The quiver in the hand that held the razor against his throat and the queer hypnotic stare.

In that brief instant before death many things flashed through his brain, like a condensed newsreel in a racing movie projector. What strange force was it that drew him irresistibly to Barney's chair in the Union Barbershop? Bill Travis, in the first chair, had shaved him regularly for ten years. Why hadn't he gone to Bill's chair?

"Are you sweatin', Judge?" Barney asked suddenly in a whisper, bending down low as he spoke.

Yes, he was. The razor was pressed hard against his throat and the sweat was oozing from his gaping pores. Not daring to move his head, he rolled his eyes.

It seemed so incredible, this. Here he sat, in this crowded barbershop on a Saturday afternoon, with a madman holding a razor to his throat, and he was so utterly helpless, so afraid to die. There were dozens of waiting customers in the shop, but they were absorbed in the radio and the last race at Hialeah Park. The air was heavy with tobacco smoke and the aroma of hair tonic and soap.

Barney looked almost happy now as the razor scraped around his neck. "You know,

Judge," he whispered, "I use to lay awake nights in my cell and dream of something like this. Every night for fifteen years. Your flabby neck close and me with a sharp razor in my hand."

Knapp's body suddenly stiffened. He tried to rise in the chair, but Barney's hand held him down.

"Don't try that, Judge," he said hoarsely. "One swipe of this razor and they'll have to sew your head back on to bury you." The blade was almost breaking the skin on his neck.

He relaxed again, if a body numbed with fear can relax. Someone turned up the volume on the radio. An announcer was describing the entries for the final race. There was a political argument going on at the next chair. Knapp groaned inwardly. He and Barney couldn't have been more isolated in the Rose Bowl the day after New Year's.

This afternoon when he had first seen Barney at the Club Bar, he had been stunned by the change in the man. He knew Barney had been released on sick parole, but those fifteen years in the state penitentiary had aged him horribly. His hair was white and dry, strung out like strands of hemp over his big ears. His body was thin and bent, deep wrinkles lined his mouth and eyes.

The handsome Barney Ott who rode out of town handcuffed to the sheriff fifteen years ago had been a political power and gambling boss. Barney's two weaknesses had always been expensive silk shirts and long shots in the races. He could never resist a 100-to-1 shot, even if the horse was

practically en route to some dog food factory.

"Sometimes they pay off," he'd say with a shrug.

Touched by Barney's broken, shabby appearance, he had reached for his wallet. All he had in it was a new hundred dollar bill. He was going to send it to his son Bob at Randolph Field for a birthday present. It had been hard scraping enough together to get that crisp new bill at the bank this morning. Yet, impulsively, he had forced the bill into Barney's hand.

"No hard feelings, Barney?" he had asked.

Barney had only smiled twistedly, pocketed the bill and then, as usual, gave Jim a tip on a horse.

YET, it had been such a little thing to do. After all, it had been partly Barney's patronage that helped to establish him in a nice law practice.

His mind raced back fifteen years to that day in criminal court. It had been a 100-to-1 shot with newly elected Prosecuting Attorney J. Willis Knapp on the short end of the betting odds. It was a murder rap. There had been a fixed race which had not stayed fixed. A great deal of money changed hands. A jockey was murdered.

The state's evidence had been slim. But what was lacking in evidence Knapp made up with a dazzling display of oratory that impressed the women of the jury. He had won. Barney Ott got life.

They didn't think he would do it. Then they called him ungrateful when he did. "Biting the hand that fed him," Barney had said when led from the courtroom.

That was probably why he had stepped into Barney's chair today. "See, Barney," he had said as the chair was tilted back, "no hard feelings."

He looked up into the ex-gambler's sweating face. Barney was trying to smile, a

queer toothless smile.

"I knew I'd get you in this chair if I waited long enough," he said in that hoarse whisper. "I was so afraid my heart would give out before my chance came. You know, at the pen they put me to work in the prison barbershop because of my bad heart. Couldn't do any manual labor. That's where I got the idea for this, shaving necks every day and wishing it was you."

Knapp squirmed slightly in the chair. He wanted desperately to live now. Yet, only this morning he wanted to die, had even thought of it seriously. The Haig political faction was definitely after his hide. Steve Haig, head of the faction, had been Barney's lieutenant in the old days. All of his troubles dated back to the day Barney had been paroled from the state penitentiary. He wondered if there were any connection.

The Haig faction had brought about the investigation into his management of the big Morgan estate for the young Morgan twins. It had looked very bad in the newspapers, supposedly mishandling funds. This contributed greatly to his defeat for reelection.

Yet he had done nothing ethically wrong. He had been authorized to invest the estate's money in good sound stocks. But how could he have anticipated Pearl Harbor and our entry into another world war? When the businesses failed, the stocks became valueless, leaving a big financial hole in the estate.

Now the Haigs had him over a barrel. Disbarment proceedings had been instituted. This would wipe out his law practice, what there was left of it. There would be nothing for Bob to return home to. Bob would have to start his own practice under the stigma of that cloud which had hung over his father.

He wanted to live now so that he could fight. Yes, fight like Bob was fighting. He wanted to run for office again, after this Morgan estate thing was settled.

BARNEY was lathering his neck for the third time. The skin was red and burning from the incessant scraping, but the razor never left his throat as he spread the lather.

There was an excited stir across the room. "There they go!" somebody shouted.

"Three times I hit the parole board," Barney went on. "I could have made it each time, but you put in a kick, so they flopped me. The fourth time even you couldn't stop me. The prison doc said I wouldn't last long. My heart. They let me go then. A sick parole.

"Things have sure changed, eh, Judge? You on the skids, the old gang all broke up, some in the Army. Just as well. I'd never had landed this job if they hadn't been desperate for barbers. I knew you came here regularly. I been waiting for you. I knew you'd come."

Knapp opened his quivering lips all though to speak, but Barney quickly silenced him by pressing the blade against his throat.

"I know what you want to say, Judge," he went on. "They'll burn me in the chair for this. I don't think so. The prison doc said I'd be dead in two or three months. That was four months ago. I'm living on velvet now. I got nothing to lose. You have."

Somebody was banging a fist against the wall across the room and yelling, "Come on, Ladybud!"

A riveting machine pounded at his temples as he looked up imploringly at the ex-gambler's flushed features. Barney's eyes, staring wide, were aglow with the fire of his emotion. Beads of perspiration rolled off the end of his nose.

"I won't mind going now, after winning this hand. My flush beats your straight, Judge." His left hand caressed Knapp's red throat like a surgeon preparing for the

incision. "No hard feelings, eh, Judge? And thanks for the hundred dollar bill."

The hand holding the razor against his throat had stopped trembling. Knapp's tongue seemed dry and stuck to the roof of his mouth. His body was drenched with cold sweat. Barney raised himself to his full height.

Knapp steeled himself against the foot rest of the barber chair, trying hard to force some sound through his parched lips. His lungs were bursting with air, but the sound just wouldn't leave his throat. Every nerve in his tense, perspiring body was waiting for the razor to strike.

There was suddenly a lot of noise in the room. Men were shouting.

"Ladybud wins!" an excited radio announcer was yelling.

Knapp's eyes were glued to the face of the crazed gambler. Barney was looking away from him now with a vacant look in his eyes. He was staring at something across the room.

Suddenly the expression in his eyes went blank and his lower jaw dropped. The hand about Knapp's throat fell away and thumped against the arm of the chair. The gambler seemed to be sinking slowly toward the floor. There was a clattering sound, like metal falling to the floor, followed by a loud thud.

Jolted back to life, Knapp popped up out of the barber chair as though he had been shot out of a mortar. The force of his leap sent him crashing against the shelf of hair tonic bottles, where he flopped about weakly while bottles rolled off the floor.

"Holy smoke!" somebody yelled. "Look at Barney. He's passed out."

"Hell, no wonder!" a barber interjected, "he had a hundred bucks on Ladybud—a 100-to-1 shot."