

# Any Body Here?



## *“Dizzy Duo” Yarn*

By Joe Archibald

*For the first time in their hoydenish homicide career, Snooty Piper and Scoop Binney got involved with a recluse. For a Beantown battle-ax had hidden from the world for forty years — and when she appeared at last, it was only to stage another disappearing act.*

THE city of the cod and the bean is quite cultural if you do not happen to be a police reporter for one of its journals or a cop on the Hub payroll. Me and Snooty Piper generally get our gander of Beantown through its seamy side, like on that morning when we enter a very shabby room over a gin mill on Causeway Street. It is quite stuffy with cops and a monstrosity wearing a derby named Iron Jaw O’Shaughnessy.

O’Shaughnessy is the kind of public watchdog who is just dumb enough to hold a flashlight for a burglar and then get blackjacked for a reward, after which he’d forget all about the identity of the culprit. If there is anything he hates worse than an ulcerated tooth it is police reporters,

especially if their names happen to be Piper and Binney.

We get our glimpse of the deceased while holding our handkerchiefs to our noses: the window has only been opened for a couple of minutes and there is quite a lot of public utility vapor hanging in the air. Iron Jaw fans himself with his derby while he gets the verdict from the appraiser of the violently departed.

“This guy was plenty soused before he switched on that burner,” the medical examiner says. “That bottle on the table has only got about a gill of firewater in it. Well, it looks like suicide all right. Been dead about seven hours, I should say. For Heaven’s sake, O’Shaughnessy, don’t light that roll of broccoli you got in your

mouth.”

“You think I’m that dumb?” Iron Jaw sniffs.

“I do,” the professional citizen says bluntly. “Let’s see who he was.”

They case the deceased’s wallet and find an old draft card that says he was Calvert G. Fothergill. There are very few clams and some change in his poke. He is wearing an old herringbone suit that is worn right down to the bones, and each shoe has a hole in the sole. I would say the character was about forty years old.

“A suicide, huh?” Iron Jaw says. “Well, let’s comb this joint to see if he has any next of skin. The city has expense enough without havin’ to bury the likes of him.”

“You’re a har-r-rd man, McGee!” Snooty says as he shoves past two cops and gets closer to the remains. “You said it was a voluntary rubout, which makes me suspicious, Iron Jaw.”

“You keep your hands off, lemonhead,” the big flatfoot yelps, “or I’ll aspixiate you without gas!”

“Look at his right hand,” Snooty says. “It looks like he was scratched not long ago. The marks have almost healed up.”

“Amazin’!” a cop says. “He knew somebody who kept a pet squirrel or a cat an’ tried to stroke it. Sha-aaddup!”

**T**HE law comes up with enough evidence to show that the late Calvert Fothergill had once been an actor of sorts. They find an old scrapbook in a beat-up valise in the closet and Iron Jaw flips the pages.

“A clippin’ from a Kankakee, Indiana, paper dated eleven years ago. Fothergill carried a spear in a road production of *Ben Hur*. Yeah, an’ here it says he was a soldier in a whistle stop showin’ of *Carmen*. This clinches it. A broken-down ham who’ll never git another egg throwed at him. Awright, leave us have the authority to

move the stiff. Git all his personal stuff together an’ we’ll expound it until identification, if any . . . You find any murder clues yet, Piper?”

“I can dream, can’t I?” Snooty says petulantly. “Scoop, it looks like we’ll never git another murder. Let’s go to the Greek’s as I don’t like the feelin’ of gas-jet propulsion.”

We wait until the deep-freeze mobile unit rolls away with the defunct. Then a fat citizen in a flashy pinstripe suit jumps out of a sedan and tells the cops he is the owner of the tavern and the landlord of the unlovely pueblo where all this takes place.

“I got here soon as I could,” the citizen says. “Who was it?”

“A snook named Fothergill,” Iron Jaw says. “What do you know about him?”

“Not much. I threatened to heave him out a couple months ago,” the landlord divulges. “But he paid his rent up to last week. Never worked nowheres an’ always moochin’ drinks. I never saw him with nobody but bums like himself. Well, good riddance, I says.”

“Come on, Scoop,” Snooty says.

After the first beer in the Greek’s, I notice that Snooty is not quite satisfied with the morning’s work. “Look,” I snap at him, “what did the big brain observe that slipped past the Boston crime experts?”

“It is nothin’,” Snooty says. “Only I never saw a male citizen with such small feet. I mean the corpse.”

“Maybe he was a distant cousin of Cinderella,” I sniff. “Let’s have another beer.”

“I guess back in my family tree I had an aunt or somethin’ that was psychic, Scoop,” the halfwit sighs. “Somethin’ back in that house didn’t smell right.”

“Someday they will make cookin’ gas smell like lavender or jasmine or lilac,” I says, nettled. “Give ‘em time.”

We go over to the *Evening Star* and

bang out a very brief account of the suicide, and then Dogface Woolsey comes out of Mr. Guppy's office and he looks quite agitated. He even seems glad to see us.

"Piper," Woolsey says, "get over to Abigail Hepplethwaite's right away. Take Binney with you. She hints that she has quite a feature story for the Sunday pages."

"She's goin' to buy the gold in Fort Knox, huh?" Snooty says.

It is quite possible that the old doll could do that and still have enough left over to corner the uranium market. Abigail lives in a modest cottage of nearly forty rooms in Back Bay, and is quite eccentric, to say the least. She is a social lioness, the smartest horse player in any bookie's book, and poison holding a pair of sixes in a poker game. She admits that she always got quite a boot out of me and Snooty.

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" I says to Snooty. "We could get there just in time for lunch, which should mean at least filet mignons and strawberry shortcake."

"And cocktails, Scoop. Dogface, you ever taste one of her Ted Williams Specials. What a belt!" Snooty exclaims. "We're off, Scoop!"

**A**BIGAIL is quite jumpy when we are ushered into her presence by a sloe-eyed maid who Snooty dates up while walking from the front door to the Hepplethwaite parlor. The old doll is wearing a fetching negligee trimmed with ostrich feathers at the neck, and Snooty says she looks simply ravenous, and gives her a double whistle.

"You're a liar an' you know it," Abigail says.. "It's so much bird gravel, but I like it. Sit down, boys."

She whisks a racing form out of sight and pats the pillows of a divan we are certain must have been owned at one time by Marie Antoinette.

"I'll tell you why I sent for you two comics when we get something under our belts," Abigail says. "Fifi will bring it right away."

Fifi did. I take a gulp out of my glass and somebody inside my dome hits an anvil with a sledge-hammer. My Adam's apple jumps up in my throat and falls back into place and makes a sound like a plucked harp string. I look at Snooty and he is clutching at his throat. I am quite sure the concoction would put hair on a tool chest.

"A little mild, I'd say," Abigail says after draining hers. "Fifi will never learn to make 'em right. Well, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Yeah," Snooty gasps. "Wait until I put the top of my dome back on."

Abigail gives us quite a story. It seems that at one time she had a girlhood friend named Esmerelda Prynne who at the age of thirty had been jilted by a suitor. From that day on she had shut herself in from the cruel world and had become a recluse. She had drawn the curtains of the windows in the old Prynne residence on Beacon Street, had even boarded some of them up. Tradesmen had seldom if ever caught a glimpse of her for the past forty years.

"I never heard of a worse loser," Snooty sniffs. "She phoned for her groceries, huh?"

"Left notes out under a brick on the back stoop," Abigail says. "I practically forgot she was alive the last twenty years. Oh, I heard stories from people I know. They said Esmerelda took to wearing a heavy veil. Once or twice she was seen near the Commons late at night wearing the clothes that were in style when Garfield was shot. And all because of a two-timing squirt with pretty sideburns."

"Stories of recluses are a dime a dozen," Snooty says. "After the one about the Collyers in New York—"

“Keep your shirt on, Piper,” Abigail snaps. “Did I ever give you boys a turkey? Esmerelda has flown the coop. Take a look at this letter she wrote me.” She spreads open a sheet of old writing paper and hands it to Snooty.

Snooty reads it aloud. “My dearest and oldest friend Abbie. This will be a surprise after all these years, won’t it? But I have to tell somebody good-by as I am going away from this awful world. I won’t ever come back. I want to die far from the place of my great sorrow. I have settled everything on my nephew Aubrey, not that he deserves it. But he will have to wait until I am proved legally dead. Your old friend, Esmie.”

“I went to her house just after I read it,” Abigail says. “I banged the knocker and threw gravel at the windows, but nobody answered. We have got to get in there and get those cats she was supposed to have kept. I’d like to take a peek in that bat’s nest just for curiosity, boys. It looks like she mailed this letter just before she lit out. Poor old babe. Her writing is kind of shaky. Let’s see, she would be about—never mind!”

“Fast thinking,” Snooty grins. “Being one of her girlhood friends, you’d have—well, we can get the cops to help us.”

“I’ll call ‘em right away,” Abigail says.

An hour later we get out of Abigail’s limousine that is as big as the special one Hitler had made. First thing we see is Iron Jaw O’Shaughnessy and two other cops sitting on the steps.

“Who can force a door in better?” Abigail says to us apologetically.

“A fine way to waste the taxpayer’s money,” O’Shaughnessy gripes when we alight from the Hepplethwaite town car.

“You shut your big trap,” Abigail retorts, “or this time tomorrow you’ll be looking for a job in a circus! Start forcing entrance to this house, you big overactive thyroid!”

IRON JAW finally breaks the door open and we step inside. All the smells that have been locked up in the old homestead for decades hit us right in the kissers and they do not remind us of apple blossom time. The front parlor looks like a setting for a Dracula chiller; Iron Jaw walks in first, then turns and hops out again. His big pan is covered with cobwebs, and a big spider is sitting on the bridge of his nose and leering at us. Another one runs around the brim of his derby.

“Most likely she lived, ate, and slept in the kitchen,” Abigail says and starts toward the back of the house.

We turn on the flashlights. The kitchen is quite spacious and contains an old stove and a sink dating back to Bull Run. There is an old iron bed and a table on which are the remains of a scanty repast. On the wall is a calendar advertising a surrey with a fringe on top.

“Some spook paradise,” Abigail sniffs. “Here is a copy of *Pearson’s Magazine* of 1897. O’Shaughnessy, you can see cats have been kept here. There’s milk in that pan by the stove, and on the shelf there are cans of cat fodder. Go upstairs and see if you find any cats. Piper, you and Binney look in the cellar.”

Me and Snooty go down into the dark and clammy cellar where there is a big rusty furnace and a bin half full of coal. Also shelves loaded with old fruit jars, bottles, etcetera. Somethings runs across my foot and it is no pussy cat. My hair stands on end.

“Let’s get out of here before the rats attack us by force,” I says.

Snooty has the door of the old furnace open and he is playing the flashlight around.

“See any old corset bones, gold teeth or shoe buttons?” I ask scoffingly. “Look, that only happens on Mr. Skeen’s radio program.”

“This furnace don’t even have one clinker in it, Scoop,” Snooty says. “See any cats?”

“Look, these rodents down here would eat ten cats alive if they dared poke their whiskers down here. Let’s go back upstairs.”

We do. Iron Jaw and the cops are there. The big slewfoot is telling Abigail he did not see a sign of a mouse chaser.

“I know Esmerelda kept pets,” the old doll says. “Most likely she put them out of the way and buried them in the back yard before she left.”

Snooty walks over to the stove and grinds out a cigarette butt in an old saucer that is on a shelf. “Was the old babe worth much?” he asks, and his voice sounds funny.

“Only about half a million,” Abigail says.

“You don’t say!” Snooty gulps.

“Well, if this is all you want with the cops,” Iron Jaw says testily, “leave us git out of here. This is only a case for missin’ persons. That old crow is as nutty as a fruit cake an’ we’ll most likely find her on the Commons treed by some squirrels.”

“You may go,” Abigail snaps. “You broadcast a description of her, O’Shaughnessy. An old girl with a dark veil on, and buttoned shoes and mutton sleeves, and wearing the old new look. She’s about five feet seven.”

Iron Jaw withdraws, growling down his big chest.

“She must have had a lawyer,” Abigail says. “Her nephew, Aubrey, will most likely know who he is. He’ll get in touch with the police when the word gets out. Poor Esmerelda.”

Abigail drops us off at the *Evening Star* a few minutes later and we go up to the madhouse and knock out the story. It makes the second edition and is on the front page. It says that a Beacon Street

recluse is missing and that the cops believe she might be off her trolley. Me and Snooty think we gave a resume of her frustrated past quite skillfully.

It is not more than four hours later that a citizen who is employed by the Whippet Bus Lines calls up the Berkeley Street bastille and informs them that an old doll answering the recluse’s specifications got on his bus two days before. How could he forget her? She toted an old straw suitcase and wore high button shoes. She got off in Providence.

“Looks like Esmerelda thought it would give her a hand,” Snooty says outside the D.A.’s office. “Ha. Well, we still can’t find a murder.”

“Let’s forget it,” I suggest.

“I could but for one thing, Scoop,” Snooty says. “I don’t think that old babe smoked a pipe.”

“Huh?” I grab him by a lapel. “Look, do you know somethin’?”

“Maybe a thing or two, Scoop,” Snooty says. “An’ maybe not a thing.”

WHEN we get back to the city room there is a note on Snooty’s typewriter. It says to call Abigail. Snooty hops into a booth. He stays in it for fifteen minutes. When he emerges he is quite loaded with hypertension.

“I must think somethin’ over, Scoop,” he says. “Let’s go to the Greek’s.”

After some bourbon Snooty tells me why Abigail called. “This nephew of Esmerelda’s went to the cops. He told ‘em that the old babe’s lawyer was one of a firm on Milk Street. Cushingam, Cushingam, Honeywell and Cushingam. The D.A. called Abigail, Scoop. Abigail motored to Milk Street and braced Honeywell. Honeywell told her he got a letter from Esmerelda about three weeks ago askin’ him to come and call. It was the second time in thirty years he saw her.

Well, the old doll had her will changed. Instead of leavin' her clams to a home for cats she made Aubrey Gimper her beneficiary like she wrote Abigail."

"So what?" I ask.

"I wisht I knew," Snooty sighs. "Anyway, we should go and see this Aubrey Gimper. Abigail says he lives over in Chelsea and is an expert illuminatin' old books, especially Bibles.

"I never knew they wired any for electricity," I says.

We go over to Chelsea and find Aubrey in his studio which is in a modest home on a short side street. He is a very scholarly looking character with thick-paned cheaters and a good half of his noggin is forehead. He wears baggy tweeds and square-toed shoes.

"We are from the press," Snooty says. "Of course we realize you're upset about your poor aunt's takin' it on the lam but I thought you might give us some clues where she might have gone."

"Isn't it terrible?" Aubrey replies, and lays down a brush that has been dipped in gold. "I've tried to help her but she resented it, gentlemen. I don't believe I've been in that house three times during the last twenty years. I really have no idea why she would go to Providence or why she left at all. Oh, I am beside myself."

Snooty takes a pipe out of his pocket and then reaches the other hand into the pocket of his topcoat. "Ah, nuts, I forgot my pouch. Have you any tobacco about, Mr. Gimper?"

"I do not smoke or drink, sir," Aubrey says.

"How long since you have smoked a p—?" I begin.

Snooty quickly steps on my foot and asks Gimper does he think Esmerelda sewed her clams up in the lining of her clothes when she took the powder.

Aubrey gets quite indignant. "Powder?

I am very sure my aunt was not a drug addict, my good fellow! I always assumed that she would leave her money to some charitable institution. Now if you don't mind. I am quite busy—"

Snooty looks quite deflated when we get out into the street. "It was a dead end, Scoop," he says dolefully.

"You expected to find a trunk and a hatchet in there? A high button shoe?" I ask him with a sneer.

"I am tryin' to think of somethin' I can't seem to, Scoop," the crackpot says. "Let's go to the morgue."

"This is silly," I says. "I am going to the *Evening Star*."

"I'll see you at the roomin' house, Scoop," Snooty says, as I walk away from him.

**H**E COMES into the room we share over in Cambridge three hours later and there is a look in his peepers I have been sorry to see more than once.

"Well, where is the old babe's corpse delecti and who dismembered her?" I ask mockingly.

"Scoop, you would never make a great detective as you are too naive," Snooty says. "I have been to the morgue and to police headquarters where I talked to some experts in the lab. Tomorrow I shall case certain places of business that might help me tie things together."

"Look, knucklehead," I says. "The old babe got on a bus that went to Providence. Nobody had a motive for rubbin' her out as only a lawyer an' Abigail knew she changed her will. Aubrey was resigned to bein' cut off without a pants button. The old chick is nutty like Iron Jaw says. You have never been worst."

"Have it your way, Scoop," the character sniffs. "Like the cops, you already have forgot somethin'. An' don't forget you can stumble over a root a quarter

of a mile from the tree that owns it.”

“It is too bad you was born so late,” I retort. “You an’ Esmerelda would have made a swell pair. Go an’ hit the sack an’ sleep it off, Snooty.”

At nine-thirty A.M. the next morning I am walking down Washington Street with Snooty Piper who has a list of names on a little sheet of paper he has gleaned from a classified directory. Snooty finally leads me into a building and he takes a gander at the office directory and then precedes me into an old lift. We get out at the fourth floor and soon are standing in front of a door that says:

TALENT, INCORPORATED  
ENTERTAINERS FURNISHED FOR ALL  
OCCASIONS FROM STAG TO OPERA.

“I don’t get it,” I says sourly.

“I hope I do,” Snooty says, and walks in.

There is a blonde cookie seated at a desk in a room three times the size of a phone booth. She explodes her bubble gum and appraises us quite impertinently.

“Sorry, we ain’t had no call for burlesque comics,” she says.

“Very funny,” Snooty snorts and flashes his fire badge. “Look, sister, show us who runs this ham-curin’ joint!”

“Okay, so who don’t make mistakes?” the blonde says. “Right through that door that says Mr. Bethringham. I’ll buzz him.”

We crash the talent reaper’s office. The character wears a flashy plaid double-breasted suit and a striped shirt and red and purple tie. He nods pleasantly.

“I would like to find out,” Snooty says, “if you ever secured a job for a guy named Calvert G. Fothergill who claimed he was an actor. You most likely keep a record of clients.”

I get butterflies in my stomach and my head feels as light as a nickel’s worth of goose down.

“Fothergill?” Bethringham squeaks. “I don’t have to look, my friend. I read in the paper where he turned on the gas. Poor fellow, I remember the last part I got for him. In a road company that toured the sticks from Maine to Rhode Island. Best part he ever had, the only one he could put over. He had the lead in Charley’s Aunt.”

“Jackpot!” Snooty says. “Come on, Scoop. You get it now, I hope.”

“I shall get it when I get to a drug store,” I manage to reply. “A box of aspirin.”

I get bourbon at the Greek’s instead. After the third jolt what I begin to see scares me.

“Remember I said that stiff had the smallest feet I ever saw, Scoop?” Snooty whispers at me. “Charley’s Aunt. It is a guy who always plays the old babe, see?”

“I wisht you hadn’t,” I says.

“We have got to establish that Fothergill was in that house on Beacon Street,” Snooty says. “That he put on Esmerelda’s clothes an’ practiced her henschcratch writin’, that it was Fothergill who changed her will with the lawyer. That his own clothes were in the suitcase when he hopped the bus to Providence an’ that when he come back he was rubbed out. Why?”

“Stop, Snooty,” I implore. “I must have a recess.”

“An’ Honeywell, the lawyer, could easily have been fooled,” Snooty goes on. “How many times had he seen the recluse? The stories that have been goin’ around have it that she never let herself be seen without her hat an’ veil on! Well, as soon as I get word from the police lab, Scoop, we’ll be sure it was a rubout.”

“Where is the corpse, Snooty?” I choke out.

“We will find it somewheres,” Snooty says. “Justice shall be done.”

AN HOUR later we are in the police lab. A technician tells Snooty that the bottle he found in the saucer in the recluse's kitchen matched up with the mixture found in an old pack of tobacco in the pocket of a deceased citizen named Fothergill. After which revelation Snooty rushes me out of the bastille and into the first cab that comes along. He gives the driver the address of Abigail's modest cottage.

"Abigail's been goin' there with Aubrey every day to check up on what mail comes to Esmerelda," Snooty says. "An' to see that it was covered by the cops. She might have somethin'."

The moment we step inside the Hepplethwaite parlor, the old doll asks if any clue to Esmerelda Pryn's whereabouts has been forthcoming.

"Nobody has yet proved they could communicate with the Great Beyond," Snooty says bluntly, and Abigail nearly swallows her upper plate. She sits down quick and fans herself with her lorgnette.

"W-what did you say, Piper? My left ear hasn't been actin' too good lately," Abigail says.

"I have every reason to believe she was a victim of very foul play," Snooty says.

"Name one, Philo Wolf," Abigail sniffs.

"The Esmerelda who talked with the lawyer smoked a pipe is one," Snooty says. "The old babe git any mail the last couple of days?"

"Just a couple of bills," Abigail says, and reaches into her beaded reticule. She hands them to Snooty. He takes a gander at one and tosses the other to a table.

"Huh, the Back Bay Consumer's Coal Company, Please remit. Ten tons of buckwheat—" He ogles Abigail. "She only kept a fire in that stove in the kitchen the year 'round, Miss Hepplethwaite. It would take her over ten years to burn that much."

"Oh, I asked Aubrey about that, Piper," Abigail says. "He says it was time to order coal before the prices went up and that she would forget it and there might be a coal shortage before she got around to thinkin' about it. He took the initiative and ordered it two or three weeks ago."

"That sounds sensible to me," I says.

"Piper," Abigail snorts, "you could build a dead fish into the biggest marine disaster in history. Er, what was that I thought you said? Esmerelda smoked a pipe? How silly can you get, Piper?"

"You ever see a play called Charley's Aunt, Miss Hepplethwaite?"

"About fifty times is all," Abigail says. "Wha-a-a-t? You mean somebody impersonated Esmerelda and forged her name an' wrote me that letter? How do you make that out?"

"By startin' from scratch," Snooty says. "I suggest that we have a meeting at Esmerelda's place and invite Aubrey Gimper, Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, and ourselves. When shall it be convenient for you?"

"I'll call Jimpson to bring the boiler around in just five minutes, Piper," Abigail says. "I'll call headquarters and Aubrey Gimper. You'd better be able to prove you're not whacky, Piper."

"He'll need practice," I says skeptically.

Snooty just comes up with a silly grin.

An hour and a half later we are sitting in the kitchen of the Pryn hermitage listening to rodents at play overhead and below. They make me shiver.

"There was a worst rat lived here for a time," Snooty says just as we hear footsteps that belong to a pachyderm. In comes Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy with a very pained expression wrapped around his cigar. He leers at Snooty.

"What's the big idea, fishface?" Iron Jaw yelps. "Oh, I know you're behind all

this!”

“You was too far behind,” Snooty says. “They do not put combinations on gas burners as anybody can turn them on.”

“Sh!” I says. “Somebody’s comin’.”

**A**UBREY GIMPER comes in and glances owlshly around. He is wearing rubbers and carries an umbrella. “Good evenin’,” he says. “I’m anxious to know why we’re all here.”

“Your aunt never went to Providence, Aubrey;” Snooty says, and Iron Jaw’s cigar jumps and spills ashes on Abigail’s Lily Dache hat.

“Keep away from me with that smudge pot,” the old doll yelps and caves Iron Jaw’s derby in with her reticule.

“Why, they saw her,” Aubrey says.

“An impersonator,” Snooty says. “I think I know who he was, Mr. Gimper. His name was Calvert G. Fothergill, the late ham who run up a big gas bill on his journey across the Styx. Once he played in Charley’s Aunt.”

“You mean my aunt was victimized by—why, that is horrible!” Aubrey says.

“I am quite sure she is a victim,” Snooty says. “But how would Fothergill benefit by liquidating the old babe?”

Iron Jaw gasps for air. Finally he clears the rust out of his pipes. “Piper, are you incineratin’ that that suicide was connected with the old dame’s disappearance? You’re cracked worst than the Liberty Bell.”

“Think back, custardhead,” Snooty sniffs. “There were scratches on the corpse’s hand. I found a cake of tobacco in that saucer on the stove an’ I had it analyzed at the police lab alongside some that was found in the personal effects of the late Calvert Fothergill!”

“The fiend!” Aubrey Gimper exclaims.

“The deceased had to have help with that job,” Snooty says, not even looking at Esmerelda Prynne’s nephew. “In fact, he

was hired by his murderer to take the old babe’s place and copy her handwritin’. But they had to get rid of the recluse’s cats as well as her. One of the mousers was quite resentful and clawed the impersonater before he chloroformed it—or whatever means he used to expunge the felines. Now only one citizen could benefit from the old babe’s rubout, and he was the one who hired Fothergill to dress up as Esmerelda Prynne while the lawyer changed her will so that Aubrey Gimper would get the half million clams.”

I look at Gimper. It is hard to see his peepers behind his thick cheaters but his pan gets as pale as the underside of a mackerel.

“You lowdown skunk!” Abigail yelps at Aubrey Gimper.

“Prove it!” Aubrey screeches. “Where is her body if she was murdered?”

“Yeah, Piper,” Iron Jaw scoffs. “Pull that one out of your green hat! This is fantastic!”

“Gimper,” Snooty says, “You ordered ten tons of coal for your poor ol’ Aunt Esmerelda, did you not? Without her say-so. Ten tons—which is a lot of coal to heat a cook-stove. Iron Jaw, how good are you with a shovel?”

My stomach jumps up into my throat, for quick as a flash Aubrey steps out of character and pulls an ugly-looking Betsy. Iron Jaw is shocked out of what senses he had for the nonce and I feel as if I’m nailed down.

“I’ll kill the first one that moves!” Gimper screeches. “Nobody’s going to burn me!”

He starts backing up and Abigail yells for Iron Jaw to do something for Heaven’s sake. She moves when she says it and Gimper fires the roscoe and I see a rhinestone ornament fly off her bonnet. Iron Jaw attempts to launch himself to the attack but trips over a chair and bangs his

noggin against the stove.

"If I live through this" Abigail wails, "I know one cop who'll save his arches!"

Aubrey Gimper's glimmers are burning through his glasses and he bares his teeth. "I'm goin' to kill you!" he says and looks at Snooty. "You were the one that did this! Just as I open this door behind me you will die."

"No, Gimper!" I choke out. "We are pals!"

"Then you will die, too!"

"Iron Jaw!" Snooty yips. "Oh, an' I had him here for protection. That big slob! Well, here goes a try—"

**T**HE door swings open behind Gimper. He steps back and then there is an unearthly feline yell and the next thing we see is a cat wound around the assassin's leg and it is working with four sets of claws and all its teeth. Aubrey Gimper screams with pain and the gun flies out of his hand and into Abigail's lap. The cat lets go and streaks across the room and under the stove.

"Ha, it was one of Esmerelda's cats they missed," Abigail yelps and points the Betsy at Gimper. "Put up your noggin or I'll blow your hands off, you dirty killer."

Iron Jaw gets up and pulls his gun.

"That's it, lemonhead!" Abigail yells at him. "Lock up the horse as they just burned the stable. Grab him, boys!"

"Look, give me a break!" Aubrey pleads. "You'll all swear I was demented, huh?"

"Sure," Abigail says. "We'll have the dome specialists examine you and O'Shaughnessy here in front of a jury. It'll prove you are much brighter than he."

"I wouldn't stand a chance!" Aubrey moans. "Oh, why did I do it?"

"Awright!" Iron Jaw says. "Stick out your paws, Gimper. An' I won't stand for bein' humiliated in a courtroom like you just said, Miss Abigail Hepplethwaite! Was it my fault I tripped?"

"You would stub your toe on a tennis court," Abigail sniffs, and then looks for her smelling salts. "P-Piper, is Esmerelda down there under the—?"

"Yeah, but you ain't goin' to watch the digging," Snooty says.

The cops did find the remains of Miss Esmerelda Prynne under ten tons of coal. Aubrey, no doubt, had been quite sure he had committed a perfect crime, and that with the old babe last seen on her way to Providence the cops would always keep it on the books as a Missing Person case.

"Yeah," Gimper later told the D.A. "I hired Fothergill. When he got back from Providence in his own clothes I was supposed to pay him a thousand dollars. I didn't have it and he threatened me. I knocked him off with the gas after getting him drunk."

"Yeah," the D.A. says. "He wouldn't be patient like you figured to be, until the law announced a missing recluse legally dead. I could wait for a half million for a few years. Too bad, punk!"

"See what happens when you don't start from scratch, Iron Jaw?" Snooty asks the big moose.

O'Shaughnessy has no comeback. Who ever has when Snooty Piper is pitching? Some day there will be an explanation of him but it will have to come from the Harvards. Or from a certain institution located at Danvers, Mass.