

DEATH ON THE BOUNCE

By JOHN WALLACE

Author of "Pigskin Pirate," "Diamond Dust," etc.



He jerked an automatic from somewhere in his clothes, aimed it

Even a Fat Man Has Feelings—as Detective Callahan Discovers When He Takes Plenty of Punishment on a Murder Trail!

IT was a wet spring night, and Callahan's windshield wiper was snapping back and forth at about the same clip as that fat detective's nerves. His nerves were coiling and uncoiling for due cause. He had been making a pinch on a purse snatcher yesterday—routine stuff, except for the fact that the rat had kicked Callahan on the left shin. It would have been good for a fifty-yard place kick on a football field.

Every time the fat, green-eyed de-

tective put his left foot on the coupé's clutch or footbrake now, fork-tongued fire rode at a high gallop through his whole left leg. It was one of those things that caught you coming and going. If you took sick leave for a kick in the shin, you were a yellow heel to every clue clunk in your precinct; and if you went to work with that purple swollen shin—as Callahan was doing now, to make the midnight shift—you were an unsung martyr. Nobody could know

how badly you'd been kicked.

He was winding through one of those misbegotten Greenwich Village streets which start and end wherever they feel like it, without notable evidence of plan or sanity.

So when the stiff went overboard from about the sixth story of one of those crummy arty Village buildings, Callahan's nerves stood right up and hissed like cobras.

Because the stiff had bad manners in the circumstances. He was a fat stiff in a purple bathrobe and he wore a sort of Hindu turban around his scone and he yelled like a scalp-lusting Comanche all the way down. The trouble was that he landed smack on his head on the hood of Callahan's green coupe—which wasn't an agreeable thing to do at that time. Because Callahan naturally slammed on the foot brake with a bang and thereby sent the fiendish fires shrieking through his left leg as they never had shrieked before.

"Screeno! Blubber in the jackpot!"

Callahan sort of snarled it between his teeth as the coupé stopped. Callahan's wishbone smacked against the steering wheel and the fat stiff, after making a colossal dent in the coupé's hood, slid off onto the right running board. His head lodged between the right front fender and the hood.

WITH pain raging through the whole left side of him, Callahan banged out of the coupé's left-hand door and surged around to the other side. The fat detective looked up through the dark rain at the building on the south side of the street opposite his car. It had to be the building from which the other fat guy had taken flight. But there were no lights in the windows of the top two floors. A glance at the guy's dent in the hood told the rotund and irate plainclothes man that the fellow must have fallen from one of the top two stories.

Ordinarily, Callahan felt a mellow bond of kinship with other fat men. But not now. Right now the whole thing struck him as a personal insult, an invasion of privacy and an arro-

gant imposition.

Especially as the turbaned guy was dead. One look told the raging detective that, too. Black eyes wide open, staring ahead at nothing.

Callahan shook his ponderous head like a bull seeing red, and galloped across the sidewalk, up the steps and into the anteroom. If it was murder, Callahan had no business messing into it beyond keeping the premises and the occupants intact. But he didn't consider the limitations of his authority. The hot pain in his left leg was yelling like a Comanche itself.

The outer door was closed, but it wasn't locked as it ordinarily should have been in these seedy old apartment buildings. He barged in. It was strictly a walk-up joint, and he headed for the stairs. There wasn't any light on the first landing or the second.

He was starting up the second flight when somebody came down them in quite a hurry. He was taking about four steps at a time and evidently mistook Callahan for one of the stair steps in the dark, because he planted a foot right in Callahan's belly and kept right on coming. Callahan went down with a thud, rolled to the landing at the bottom. The escaping gee caught up with Callahan again, put a foot in his face and rounded the corner, going down the first flight with virtually undiminished speed.

Callahan's cheeks puffed out red, something like the cheeks of a turkey gobbler when it's getting to the point of mayhem. Callahan carried two hundred and fifty-five pounds on five feet and nine inches of frame. Which is quite a load to raise off the floor on an aching shin, especially when you're groggy from bouncing down half a flight of stairs with a muscular and hasty guy stepping on you.

But the fat detective got to his feet and was about to get under way in pursuit of the careless stepper, when at that moment more trouble came down that second flight. This time it was porcelain, instead of flesh and blood. It was a good-sized vase and it took Callahan squarely on top of

the noggin, shattering itself, but not the noggin. Callahan went down again.

"No man can call me that, you ungrateful mudslinger!" a high, female voice yipped from the landing above.

She came down the second flight, too, hitting most of the steps but hitting them unsteadily.

Callahan had risen to his right knee, was combing the porcelain out of his hair, and his expression was not pleasant to see. In fact, his moon face had achieved the considerable feat of twisting itself into something somewhat resembling the expression on the face of a dragon when its tail is being held in a roaring furnace and it is being stabbed by the devil with a pitchfork.

THE big detective roared, the woman stopped short, took a close, squinting look, and clasped a hand to her bony forehead.

"Dimpling—don't look at me like that!" she shrieked, and swooned.

Callahan snarled at her and started down the first flight, letting her lie there. It suddenly occurred to Callahan through the red inferno of his brain that his car and a fat corpse were still out front, and maybe they wouldn't be there long.

He hit the front door just as the muscular guy was banging shut the door of the coupé—from the inside—and throwing in the clutch.

"Hold it, you mangy spalpeen!" Callahan yelled, jerking his service automatic and throwing off the safety catch. "I'll blow your skull clear over into Sheridan Square!" Callahan had a bass voice, and it was plenty resonant.

The guy in the coupé looked around, kind of startled. Maybe he went pale. Callahan couldn't tell, because he was a pale guy to begin with. Pale and handsome. Practically pretty. With wavy black hair and collar-ad features. That kind of guy doesn't like to get his features all scrambled up. Certainly this one didn't, for he thought about it only through a couple winks of his long lashes. Then he shut the motor off abruptly and stepped out of the car,

meek as three sheep. Maybe too meek.

He dressed to suit his looks. Dark set of threads that you couldn't touch under a hundred and a quarter. Thirty-dollar shoes. But no hat, no topcoat. He had been sincere about leaving in a hurry.

"Come here," Callahan said, between his teeth.

"Certainly." The guy bowed slightly from the waist.

"You don't kid around when you got somewhere to go, eh?"

"Certainly not."

"I suppose you had to catch a plane for Hollywood."

"No. I was fleeing a woman's wrath. If you've been around women as much as I have—"

"My lashes ain't that curly," Callahan said.

The young guy—he was about twenty-nine—trotted up the steps. Callahan reached out a hand that was by no means all-fat and got the two-finger in the young guy's collar. He banged the guy in through the door in no gentle manner. He slammed him against the stairs' newel post and tightened his grip.

"What goes here, chum? Who's the broad who throws vases?"

"A lady whose identity I am not at liberty to reveal."

"Take another try," Callahan said. He banged the pretty guy's head against the ball on top of the newel post. Banged it hard. "You feel at liberty now?"

"Certainly not." The pretty guy's eyes narrowed slightly, but he could take it pretty well, for such a lovely lad.

"We'll go talk to her," Callahan said.

As he started up the stairs, shoving his quarry ahead of him, he noticed a sleek town car pull up in front. A man whose age was somewhere in the middle fifties got out and peered around at the doors, as if looking for a number. But Callahan paid no attention to him. There were more urgent swordfish to fry.

Callahan looked around the landing at the top of the first flight, found a dim hall light and switched it on.

The jury was still lying there. Too old, though, to rate the term jury. One of those light-headed dames who are forty-seven and make up or have the wrinkles ironed out to look thirty-seven in a dim light, Callahan decided.

KEEPING his gun on the young gent, Callahan turned her over. She blinked her eyes, looked vacant for awhile, and then sat up. Chivalry was not foremost in the detective's mode of living at the moment. That lump on top of his head was throbbing in perfect fiery rhythm with the ache in his left leg.

"All right," he snapped. "What about the fat stiff out front?"

"I heard him yell," the young guy said. "I didn't see him jump, but he obviously did."

"Yeah? You're sure of that, eh?"

"Not sure, of course, not having seen it. But Latma—that was his name—was frequently depressed. Often contemplated suicide."

Callahan was glad the young guy said that, even though Callahan had a couple of reasons for thinking it wasn't suicide. But as long as it *looked* like suicide, there was no reason to call the Homicide Squad. He didn't want to call the Homicide Squad because he considered this thing a personal affront to himself—and it's in the Irish nature to handle personal difficulties in a personal manner.

"We'll go upstairs and take a look," he said. "Maybe he left a note."

The corpulent detective prodded them up the stairs ahead of him. The hall lights were lit on the two landings above the first two. But they weren't lit on the fifth and sixth floors.

The lights came on in the fifth and sixth hall landings, however, as they were midway up the fifth. When they got to the top floor—the sixth—a lean, tall gent was shutting a fuse box set back in a dusty wall grotto. He slapped his hands together distastefully, dusting them. He spread a mere hundred and sixty pounds over about six feet two of frame. He had long, delicate hands, longish brown hair, and he wore a paint-stained smock.

"There's an incompetent landlady for you," he said, bowing slightly from the waist apologetically. "When a fuse blows a tenant must replace it."

"Fuse controls the lights on these two top floors, eh?"

"Yes." The tall gent, who was in his late thirties, looked at Callahan curiously. "And you?"

"I'm the law, passing by to catch corpses," said Callahan. "It's an act, but needs a few weeks in the small time for polish. Who the devil are you?"

"I'm an ahtist. Ibanez by name." The tall gent had a touch of foreign accent.

"I'm an ahtist myself—with this," Callahan said, prodding the tall gent in the belly with the snout of his automatic. "Lawman by trade. Where do you live—front or rear?"

"Rear." Ibanez's teeth clicked slightly, and his eyes narrowed.

"Let's go in."

Ibanez nodded, his nostrils flaring a little, and led the way in. It was a big studio room, with a bath and kitchenette in the back. Easels here and there, paint smeared on things, color everywhere you looked.

In the better light of the studio, Callahan looked all three of them over carefully. While he was looking, the doorbell started ringing downstairs, insistently. Callahan didn't pay any attention to that.

THE woman of this trio evidently had plenty of money to play with. Her clothes, her whole appearance, were plenty expensive. Her legs, in sheerest silk, were good. The legs were the last thing a woman lost, usually. Before they went, the face went up and beauticians prospered pounding her shape and looks into something they weren't. She was the age and type for two principal things—some sort of *ism* or incense-sniffing cult to occupy what there was of her mind, or a gigolo to trot around with her, and occupy her time.

Callahan's head and shin still ached with great vigor, but the fire in his brain was burning with a steadier flame.

"I do most of my deducing with

these," he said, and nodded toward his fist and his gun, noting subconsciously that the bell had ceased ringing downstairs, "but it doesn't take more than twelve years along Broadway, where my regular beat is, to get this scene."

"No?" Ibanez said coldly, looking at him.

"No. Works this way, approximately. The pretty boy here is the gigolo."

"Professional escort, if you please," Pretty Boy said, irked.

"I said gigolo, chum. The fat stiff is, or was, some sort of phony yogi or swami, the kind this old lady here —"

"You insolent, fat—"

"Don't yell, madam!" Callahan said. "Even though I have respect for the aged, I—"

She stamped her foot, shook her hennaed locks.

"I don't like interruptions," said Callahan. "The kind of phony yogi this old lady would fall for—especially if her gigolo recommended the swami-yogi as a man who lived six flights up in poverty because he was sincere and because physical comforts meant nothing to him."

"You lie!" The woman's blue eyes glared in a way which said merely that she lied when she said he lied.

Callahan leered at her and proceeded:

"And this genius artist here might just happen to be a friend of the yogi or the gigolo. Being an undiscovered genius who would paint her exclusive portrait for a few thousand bucks and make her look ten years younger"—Callahan jerked his head at a nearly finished canvas, a painting of this woman, on a big easel across the room—"he might move into this rear room right across from the yogi, and be recommended as a great painter by both yogi and gigolo. Especially"—this time Callahan, nodding toward a trunk which carried fairly fresh stickers from Spanish and Italian art-colony cities—"especially since he's a European genius who hightailed it out of Europe about the time this war began. It's always worth more money to be a *European* genius, where these rich old gals are concerned."

The woman was glaring at him in indignation and the mortification that accompanies such blunt truths. The two men were glaring for the obvious reason that they now hated his insides.

Somebody was clopping up the stairs to the sixth floor, unless Callahan's ears were lying.

"Now that the general setup's clear in the hot gray coals that reside behind that bump on my sconce," he said, "let's go take a look at the yogi's layout."

He gestured with the gun and they, gritting their teeth and glaring, went unwillingly.

THEY went out into the hall, and that middle-fifties gent who had alighted from the town car was standing there. He was wiry, alert-eyed behind rimless spectacles, and well dressed. Thin-faced, gray about the temples. Type of business man who married a good-looking woman and promptly forgot about her, except for when he wanted her to trot around the night spots with him once a week or so, or to help front for him on a business deal.

"Hello, chum," Callahan said. "You were ringing the doorbell, and that thoroughly incompetent landlady finally let you in, eh? You wouldn't be the wronged husband, would you? Because I think you *would*."

The business man seemed somewhat taken aback by the sight of Callahan with a gun in his hand. The woman seemed even more taken aback by the sight of her husband. The painter and the gigolo looked nonchalant and innocent-bystanderish all of a sudden.

"Who may you be?" the business man inquired, with some indignation, in a tenorish voice.

"I may be unpopular, but I like to play games." Callahan gestured toward the yogi's studio in the front of the building. "You might as well come in with us. What's the matter? Did you get suspicious about your wife's conduct and decide to come in tonight and catch 'em holding hands?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," said the business man, looking at Callahan sharply. "You, I presume, are an-

other bandit of sorts."

"Yes. But instead of opening safes I open jail cells."

Callahan flashed his badge briefly, then prodded them all into the yogi's studio. The main light, big and dim, was on in there now, since the fuse had been replaced. There was a heavy smell of some form of incense in the place. There were a variety of robes and, in front of a sort of throne, a big crystal ball of the sort which could flash spooky images that were impressive to the gullible, though not to the people who slyly manufactured them.

The window on the east, where there was a fire escape outside, was tightly closed. The front window, being on the south side of the street, faced north—and it was open. A tall window, not too wide, heavily draped in black. The sidewalk was narrow on this street. Just falling out the window, a guy might hit a car driving close to the curb, as Callahan had been.

He looked out the front window, keeping an eye on his prey in the room. He came back, looked at the artist and the gigolo.

"The yogi wouldn't have been holding money out on you, would he?"

They gazed at him with innocent nonchalance.

"I don't know what you mean," said the gigolo. "I am Mrs. Bronson's social secretary, being paid a regular salary."

"I am receiving an agreed fee for painting her portrait," said Ibanez, the artist.

"Why were you scrambling in such a hurry tonight?" Callahan asked the pretty boy.

"Isn't it natural to wish to leave the scene of a suicide which is embarrassing and possibly pointing a finger of suspicion at friends of mine?" The gigolo was morally indignant.

"Not if you and they are innocent. Where were you, Ibanez, and the gig—social secretary when the yogi went overboard?"

"In my studio," said Ibanez.

"How'd you know he jumped?"

"Mrs. Bronson came to the door and

knocked. She was very agitated. In the middle of a seance—always conducted privately by Latma—the lights went out. Latma moved from his throne and went out the window. We don't know why, or how. He was melancholy at times and talked of suicide."

"Well," Callahan snapped suddenly, "you can lay off the suicide gag now. That's worn pretty thin. Those phony yogis aren't the type to commit suicide. No grifter is, unless he's a hophead and can't get any more of his brand of lift. And this Latma guy was no hophead. Not the type. Matter of fact, he's a grifter named George something, who was pinched at Coney Island in Thirty-two for bootlegging out of a fortune-telling pitch he had in a boardwalk hut. I remember him, because I went along for the ride with some prohibition-agent friends of mine, and this George was fat like me."

THE woman seemed to shrivel a little inside. She wet her lips, her eyes constricted and she looked at the front window.

"The yogi was dead before he ever went out the window," Callahan said. "His skull was cracked."

They were all staring at him now.

"Mrs. Bronson, was there a blank space in your mind while you were in that seance?" Callahan asked.

She hesitated, and nodded. "I was always in a sort of trance during the seances, when he advised me how to conduct my life. Tonight there was a complete blank spot. I don't know how long. Something stung me on the hip, and—"

"Stung you?"

She nodded again.

Callahan scowled, rubbed his fat jowls.

"Did you go blank about fifteen seconds later?" he muttered.

"I—yes, I think so." She looked fearfully at each of the other three men in the room.

"There's some stuff called epival," said Callahan. "Shoot a little into a soft spot with a hypo and it puts you out fast for from five to thirty minutes, depending on the quantity.

Doesn't leave a hangover, or any memory of having been out. Were you stung right after the lights went out?"

She nodded. "Latma always turned the room lights out before a seance. The crystal would be dark as the room for awhile, then the crystal would slowly light up."

Callahan walked toward them, crouching a little, a mirthless smile on his moon face.

"Funny part is that Latma yelled all the way down to my car, or seemed to. But the funnier part is that Latma has a big, heavy Adam's apple like mine. I sing bass. It's the size of the vocal cords that makes the pitch and quality of a voice, and the Adam's apple shows that in a man. That yell was tenor. And there's only one tenor in this room now!"

Callahan whirled to the left, dived at business-man Bronson, got him around the knees, put him on the floor—and jerked off his shoes, clad in rubbers!

And the fat detective made the amazing discovery that he had bitten off a wildcat job. That wiry, middle-aged body of Bronson's had the strength—and the claws—of a Rocky Mountain cougar. Not to mention the same kind of eyes, now that he was fighting a showdown.

He twisted loose, clawed streaks down Callahan's face, kicked him in the belly, hissed like a cat, showed some ju-jutsu that even Callahan hadn't heard about. He threw Callahan over his head twice, against the wall, nearly broke his arm—and then, when he had Callahan stunned temporarily, he jerked an automatic from somewhere inside his clothes, whirled, drew back with the calm murderousness of a jungle cat and aimed it for the space between Callahan's eyes.

But Bronson made a mistake he had made before. He didn't keep track of his wife's whereabouts with complete accuracy. But he wasn't startled when the yogi's crystal ball swished through the air from behind him and hit him squarely on top of the head. He wasn't startled, because he didn't have time to be. He keeled over on his face, out cold.

Callahan lurched up on his insufferably aching shinbone, retrieved his gun, and reeled against the table.

"Much obliged old—I mean young lady!"

SHE was glaring down at her husband. "I knew he was jealous. I knew he was tricky. But I didn't think he'd descend to murder."

"It's more than jealousy with him, madam. What else?"

She looked sharply at Callahan for a long moment. Then she admitted:

"Latma—has been seeing things in the crystal. He advised me to leave my husband and marry—a younger man—who understood me, who was an artist." Her gaze flickered uneasily to Ibanez and away, quickly.

"I see. But what else, madam?"

"Don't call me madam! Well—my husband had signed over half his property and half his income to me—and another quarter of it to my sister. To beat taxes and surtaxes."

"So when he smelled this little frame-up by the yogi, the gigolo and the artist, he got murderous. He killed the yogi, figuring maybe his killing would scare you out of it. Or to hold the scandal and a murder accusation over you and keep you in line with his fortune."

She nodded. "I—I guess so. That's why he did it this way—so it could look like either suicide or murder."

"That's why he came back so fast—to trap you when you were all confused," said Callahan. "So he could hold it over you that he'd caught you right in the act. It was simple to get a key made for the front door, to slip up here when you and the yogi were alone in the room, put you both out with epival, crack the yogi's skull, toss him out the window. Then your husband went down the fire escape." Callahan held up the rubbers, pointed to rusty rung marks.

"You arresting us?" the gigolo asked.

"Yes. Don't know what I can stick you for legally, though you should all get ten years. You're all ratty—and I get beat up for your sins! Why'd you throw that vase at your gigolo, sweetheart?"

"He got scared when I told him what had happened. He started to run and he—he called me a murderous witch..."

When Detective Callahan staggered up to the precinct captain's desk half an hour later, that rock-hearted official beetled over his glasses.

"Callahan!" he roared. "What the devil do you mean reporting nearly an hour late for duty?" Then the captain broke off and stared, aghast. "In another saloon brawl, eh?" For that I'll see you get a forty-mile beat in the Bronx, barefoot! I ought to break you out of that badge altogether!"

Callahan gestured weakly out

through the glass doors, to where the desk sergeant was booking one murderous male, one villainous female, and two villainous males.

"Look what I brought you. Without the Homicide Squad. A fat stiff and four connections. I rate a promotion."

"Wha-a-t!"

"Yes. Promote me to the beat around Bellevue Hospital—so it'll be handy for Callahan when he solves his next case," said Callahan.

"What're you talking about?"

"I thought this was a suicide case tonight, and it blamed near was—for me!"