

"I guess that cement has set enough," said the fat man. "Time to go."



THE POTTER'S HAND

By GEORGES CAROUSSO

They had never been able to pin a thing on Badden—until he outsmarted himself and left his mark for all time on a dead man.

IT WAS damp and clammy in the little dock shack. The kerosene lamp on the table threw no warmth. Its globe was dirty and its wick untrimmed and evil-smelling. Its dim light reflected on the beads of perspiration on the faces of the two men. One of them was soon going to die. The other was going to kill him.

The one who was going to die had a deep gash across his forehead where a gun barrel had slashed him. The dim light of the lamp shone on the fresh blood that trickled slowly past the corner of his eye and down the hard line of his jaw. It gleamed dully on the damp surface of the drying cement setting slowly in the bucket into which his feet had been plunged.

When the lamplight no longer reflected on it, he would die. It was forty feet down to the bottom of the river.

He chuckled, and the fat blond man sitting across from him looked up and raised his pale eyebrows. His pudgy fingers tightened on the grip of the Luger.

"Don't get nervous," the man who was going to die said. "You did a pretty good job of tying these ropes on me. I was just thinking of a toy I had when I was a kid. I'll bet you never had toys to play with when you were a kid."

The fat man tightened his lips and said nothing.

"It was one of those little celluloid clowns with a round base filled with lead. You'd lay him down and he'd pop right up again. Like me down on the bottom of the river with the cement at my feet swaying back and forth in the tide but never lying down. I was very fond of that clown. I used to call him Mr. McGillicuddy."

"Very funny, Norton," said the fat man. "You may do a lot of swaying in the tide, but you aren't going to do any popping up—ever."

Outside the blacked-out windows, the thin spring rain, driven by the Northeaster that had been blowing for two days, hissed against the glass.

A tugboat panted laboriously up the river against the tide and the wind. In the distance, toward the mouth of the harbor, a bell buoy clanged monotonously like a giant metallic heart. Beneath the shack, the dark water lapped with greedy tongues at the crusted piling.

The man who was going to die listened to the sounds.

"What gets me," he said, "is that you're making the mistake of killing me. You know, Bill Duffy and I never did manage to get anything on you."

"Oh, sure! I'm in the habit of believing the FBI!" the fat man said.

"No kidding, it's true. We knew there was a leak somewhere on the movements of troops and materiel, and Bill and I sort of boiled it down to someone who could get around the waterfront—someone with a Coast Guard pass. Maybe someone with a fleet of tugboats. Tugboats, moving ships around the harbor, get to know a lot of stuff that could be of use to the enemy. Then, we boiled it down to you, but actually, we couldn't pin a thing on you."

"Really," the fat man said sarcastically. "Is that why you were trying to pry open my safe tonight?"

"Oh, that . . ." Norton said. He made a

motion as if to brush the matter aside, but the ropes around his arms prevented him. "Bill Duffy is down with the flu, and I was just playing a hunch. We had given you up as a bad job."

"Or a good job. Too good for you stupid fools!"

THE fat man looked down impatiently at the cement. It had begun to set around the edges of the bucket, but the center still gleamed in the dull lamplight. Norton followed his eyes down and grinned crookedly. "Not yet," he said. "You wouldn't want it falling apart and me popping up again like Mr. McGillicuddy."

The fat man fidgeted nervously and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his wrist.

"Relax," said Norton soothingly. "And light me a cigarette like a good guy."

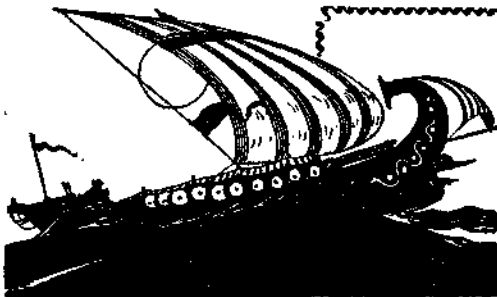
The fat man frowned and hesitated, then he lit a cigarette and put it between the condemned man's lips.

"Thanks," said Norton, squinting his eyes and talking around the cigarette. "You wouldn't want to do a little bragging, and tell me how you got the information to the enemy? The villains in stories always do when they're sure that the hero is going to die."

"I'm sure that you are going to die," the fat man said. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"You were good," Norton said grudgingly. "Damned good! We weren't able to pick up even one loose thread."

"Of course not. I work alone. I trust no one."



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"That's the trouble with you people," said Norton sadly. "No faith. You don't trust the world to run itself, so you decide to do the job yourself. And what happens? You get your ears pinned back. But do you learn anything? Do you see what funny little people you really are? No, sir! No sense of humor at all. You believe everything you hear. So a little guy with a trick mustache comes along and feeds you a lot of hops about being Supermen who should run the world. And what do you do? Do you laugh yourselves sick? No, sir! You go right out to get your ears pinned back again. And you'll get them pinned back again, you know."

"You are very amusing," said the fat man sarcastically.

"I am!" said Norton eagerly. "I can do parlor tricks. I can blow smoke rings. I don't suppose you want to see me blow smoke rings? No, I guess not. I can make things with clay. Did you know I started to be a sculptor? Why, I even carved a horse out of a bar of soap once at a party. I can do card tricks. I do a mind-reading act with Bill Duffy—send the words to him in code by flickering my eyelashes. There's no end to my talents. I'm a very accomplished guy. I can—"

The fat man tucked the pistol in a shoulder-holster.

"I guess that cement has set enough. Time to go."

The beads of sweat on Norton's forehead swelled and grew heavy, and ran to join the trickle of blood at his temple.

"The cement hasn't set enough yet," he said. "I can wriggle my toes in it. What's the matter? Don't you believe me? Does a guy have to have a little trick mustache before you'll believe him? Go ahead and find out for yourself."

The fat man reached down and tested the surface with his fingers.

"It's hard enough for my purpose," he said cheerfully.

"You can at least give me time to finish the cigarette. The condemned man is always permitted to finish the cigarette. It's a gesture. It has flourish. I like flourish. Take saluting, for example. Walk down the street some time and watch the G.I.'s. When they salute an officer, it's just as if they were saying: 'Brother, you and me are going to rub those stinking Nazi noses in the mud someday, right where they belong. . .'"

"You are stalling for time," the fat man said angrily.

Norton smiled crookedly around the butt of his cigarette.

"Of course. You don't blame me, do you? By the way, did I happen to mention that you'll get the chair for this?"

"Bah!" said the fat man.

Norton shrugged indifferently and spit the stub of the burned-out cigarette from between his lips.

"Bill Duffy will get you, sure as Berlin is in ruins," he said. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

ERIC BADDEN looked up as the door to his office opened silently and two men walked in. His round blue eyes grew rounder, and his pale eyebrows went up in surprise, and he smiled quickly to hide the sudden stiffening of his lips.

"Bill Duffy!" he said, forcing a ring of gladness in his voice. "Don't you fellows ever knock before walking into a man's private office?"

He laughed as if it were some huge joke, but the muscles across his chest and at the corners of his mouth were tight, and his laughter didn't sound very convincing even to himself.

He cut it off sharply and said: "Well, what do you want?"

Bill Duffy walked slowly across the room and sat down at the edge of the desk. The other man moved a bit sideways and leaned back against the wall with his hands dug deep in his pockets.

"They found Norton's body this morning," Bill Duffy said slowly. "A barge rammed and sank by Pier Ten, and the diver who went down found Norton's body. There was a bucket of cement around his feet holding him down there."

The fat man wiped the perspiration from his pale forehead.

"That's too bad!" he said. "Sounds like a gang murder."

"It does." Bill Duffy nodded his head. "Only it wasn't. Everyone makes a mistake some time. You made yours when you killed Norton."

The fat man started to get up but Bill Duffy pushed him back in his chair.

"You see, Badden, we had never been able to pin anything on you. We still can't. Except this murder. And we have a rock tight case against you." He laughed hollowly. "Rock tight, Badden," he repeated for emphasis.

"I don't understand. . ." The fat man's voice trailed off weakly.

"No," Bill Duffy said. "You wouldn't! Norton always said you guys were thick. What I can't figure out is how he got you to leave a complete set of fingerprints on the cement block."

"My fingerprints!"

"Norton used to say that a sculptor left his mark for all time on the clay he moulded. You left yours on the smooth cement. And on your Coast Guard pass."