

MURDER IN THE WANT ADS



A Captain March Caper by Frank Gruber

*Hellish death lurked in the fine print of the classified page.
Captain March sets a trap with his own life as racket bait.*

CAPTAIN DOUGLAS MARCH lived just off North Avenue, but during his residence in Chicago he had formed the habit of walking south once a week to Division Street and partaking of Joe Rocaforte's ravioli.

He was seated in a booth enjoying the ravioli and meat balls when Rocaforte, the proprietor, came up and stood nervously at the edge of the booth. Captain March smiled at him. "The ravioli is fine, Joe," he said.

"Glad you lika heem," replied Rocaforte. He dry-washed his hands and looked apprehensively out of the window. Finally he cleared his throat. "Captain March, somea friend a mine tella me you one damn-fine fighteeng man. He say you fight in de wars all over da wol', China, Sout' America, Yoo-rup. I likea ask you 'bout something. Yes?"

"Why, sure, Joe," Captain March said, putting down his fork. "Anything I can do for you I'll be only too glad..."

"Just waita one minoot, I show you something." Greatly relieved Rocaforte waddled away. Captain March saw him rummaging in his cigar counter and wondered what the Italian restaurant man was so concerned about.

But he was never to hear it from Rocaforte's own lips, for just as the restaurant man started out from behind the counter toward March, a long, black object crashed through the window and fell at Rocaforte's feet. March, startled by the breaking glass, half rose to his feet. He saw the foot long chunk of gas pipe and the sputtering fuse at the end of it—and then the entire front of the restaurant dissolved into a holocaust of fire, flame, flesh—and hell!

The only thing that saved Captain March's life was the fact that he was sitting well back in the restaurant. The explosion lifted him clear off his feet, smashed him back against the rear partition. The ravioli on the table as well as the table itself heaved back on to him. For a moment he lay stunned, while debris rained all about him.

But as the din of the concussion died away, March regained control of his senses. He shook his head to clear it of the ringing, then crawled out of the booth into the litter-strewn floor. He looked toward where Joe Rocaforte had been a moment ago and felt suddenly ill at the stomach.

An excited, chattering crowd was forming outside the restaurant. March heard the screaming of a police siren in the distance. In the rear of the restaurant a horrified face peeked out from the kitchen.

March picked his way grimly to the mangled remains of Rocaforte. The Italian's left arm was gone at the elbow, but his right was whole. In the clenched fingers was a piece of paper. March stooped and plucked it out of the dead fingers. He looked at it blankly. It was merely a half column of fine print torn from a newspaper, with a heading, "Business Opportunities."

THE police car siren wailed to a stop out in front and the cops beat their way through. They came into the wrecked restaurant, three plainclothes men. One of them pounced on Captain March.

"You!" he snapped. "You didn't see a thing, of course?"

"What?" March's eyebrows went up. "No—nothing except a gas-pipe bomb. Someone threw it through the window. But I didn't see who threw it."

The detective turned to his companions. "Same old stuff, boys. No witnesses."



Captain March understood. Bombings in Little Italy were not so unusual, stabbings and shootings were everyday affairs—but finding a witness to admit he'd seen anything—that would have been rare indeed.

In his hotel March pulled out the clipping from the Business Opportunities column. The ads were the usual sort of thing. Merchants wanted partners, firms wanted help “with small investments.”

But about half-way down the column March's eyes stopped. This must be Rocaforte's ad:

“Restaurant owner,
specializing in Italian foods,
wants capital to expand.
Splendid opportunity.
Box L-138 *Morning Globe*.”

March looked at the want ad for a long time. And the more he thought about Joe Rocaforte the more he became determined to do something about it. The determination rose out of March's passionate instinct to help the underdog, the man who was getting kicked around by someone bigger and stronger. And just because he was in a civilized city didn't mean that he would sit idly by and watch someone being bombed out of existence. Besides, March had been in the restaurant at the time of the bombing. He hadn't been hurt—but he might have been. That made the thing personal.

After a while March left his room. At the corner of Dearborn and North Avenue he flagged a taxi. In ten minutes he climbed out before the big building that housed the *Globe*. At a desk inside he composed an ad:

“Restaurant owner wants
capital to expand business.
Splendid proposition
for investor.”



Back on Clark Street, near North Avenue, March interviewed Oscar Schmidt, owner of the *Superior Restaurant*, an old friend. “I've got a proposition for you, Oscar,” he told the proprietor. “How much money do you clear in a day?”

Oscar Schmidt shrugged. “Business ain't so good lately. Mebbe twenty dollars a day.”

March reached into his pocket and brought out a thick roll of bills. He counted off four fifties, hesitated and added another. “Two-fifty,” he said, “for renting me this restaurant for three days?”

The details were arranged quickly.

There was a cook, dishwasher, a waitress and waiter. Schmidt called them together and told them that for three days March was the owner—only his name would be Oscar Schmidt.

MARCH spent a couple of hours in the restaurant getting accustomed to the work, then about ten o'clock called to the waitress, Julia, to take charge of the cash register. “I'm goin' downtown for a few minutes,” he told her.

There were six letters for him at the newspaper office. The first five were duds.

March looked at the last envelope before tearing it open. This was the last chance. He tore it open and began to read the neatly typed letter. And suddenly his breath began coming faster. It *might* be the man.

The letter read:

Dear Sir:—

I am willing to invest up to ten thousand dollars in a thriving restaurant, provided you can furnish satisfactory proof that the business is showing a profit, even though small. I shall expect a one-third interest in your restaurant, but I shall not want to be an active partner.

Sincerely yours,
Gilbert J. Drexel.

An address and telephone number was given. March picked up the phone and dialed Mr. Drexel's number. A moment later a suave voice replied.

"Hallo, Mr. Drexel," March said, "I chost received your letter. I like the sound from him. I got very good restaurant business over on Clark Shtreet, near Nort' Avenue. I like for you to look him over. Yes?"

"Why, yes," replied Mr. Drexel, heartily. "I must attend a director's meetin' at the First National Bank but afterwards I can run up to your place. Shall we say at two?"

It was five minutes to the hour when a big, shiny limousine pulled up in front of the Superior Restaurant. March, looking through the window, spoke to Julia, the waitress. "Remember now, you're not to forget for a minute that I am Oscar Schmidt. Tell the others."

TWO men came into the restaurant. One was about 45, tall, slender, and with a distinguished graying mustache. He wore yellow gloves, white spats and carried a *malacca* stick. The other man was short, heavy-set and wore a derby.

"Mr. Schmidt?" asked the man with the distinguished look.

"Ja," said March, bobbing his head eagerly and wiping his hands on his white jacket. "And you are—Mr. Trexel?"

"Drexel, yes," corrected the financier. "And this is Mr. Crowder, my accountant. I thought I'd bring him along."

"Ach, ja, you vill want to look at the pooks," March's accent became thicker. "I got nize restaurant, don't you t'ink?"

"Very nice place, indeed," agreed Drexel. "I particularly like the location. And if the place were made a little larger and some nicer furnishings put in I think you'd have one of the finest restaurants on the north side."

"Dot's vat I t'ought," said March eagerly. "I like put 'bout two t'ousand dollar into the place for improfement...."

"Two thousand?" Drexel arched his eyebrows. "My dear sir, I think you should put in about four thousand and do the job up

properly. Yes...the more I look at this, the better I like it. I believe I'd be willing to invest five thousand dollars in this place."

"Fife thousand dollars!" exclaimed March. "Why—how—how much interest you want for that?" He knew very well that the real Oscar Schmidt would have been glad to sell the restaurant outright for that sum.

Drexel smiled assuringly. "Well, Mr. Schmidt, as I wrote you I have my other interests. So as long as you'd be really doing all the work I believe I'd be content with a one-third interest for my investment."

March pretended to ponder the matter. After a moment he said, "I t'ink dot would be all right. Now mebbe you like see my pooks, ja?"

Drexel waved a gloved hand magnanimously. "Mr. Crowder is a certified public accountant. He can stay here and look over the books. If his report is satisfactory I'd be willing to make the investment immediately."

March rubbed his hands together. "Dot iss fine Mr. Trexel. I am a fast vorker. He can look at the pooks dis afternoon, then tomorrow, mebbe we get togedder and sign the papers, ja?"

Drexel held out his gloved hand. "That's splendid, Mr. Schmidt. I'll see you then, tomorrow." He smiled pleasantly and walked out to his fine limousine. A burly uniformed chauffeur held open the door for him.

"And now if you'll show me your books, Mr. Schmidt," said Crowder, the accountant briskly.

"Sure, sure." March led the accountant to the cash register. From underneath he brought out a couple of small ledgers.

Crowder put on a nice act. He took the two ledgers to a vacant table, then brought out the contents of his brief case, dozens of elaborate forms. He perused Schmidt's books for an hour, figured and scrawled over the forms. Finally he gathered everything together and brought the books back to March.

"Mr. Schmidt," he said, "I find that this restaurant has shown a substantial profit. Not large, but steady. I believe I shall recommend that Mr. Drexel make the loan."

March beamed. "Dot's fine, Mr. Crowder, hafe a cigar!" He brought out a box of the best ten-cent cigars in the showcase.

Crowder took one of the cigars and put it in his pocket. Then picked up a small printed form and slid it under March's hand. "And now, if you'll take care of this, I'll make my report."

March looked blankly at the form. "Vot iss dis?" he asked. "I—I don't under stand?"

Crowder shrugged. "Why, I'm a Certified Public Accountant, that's my bill for making the audit."

March caused his forehead to wrinkle. "Four hundred dollars. Why—you on'y work an hour!"

"Look here," said Crowder, leaning forward confidentially. "You know as well as I do that this whole business isn't worth five thousand dollars. Mr. Drexel doesn't know that. If I tell him to make the investment he will. Do I make myself clear—why I want four hundred dollars?"

"Ja, you like gyp your—your boss. I don't like that."

Crowder suddenly lost his temper. "The hell with what you like. You agreed to let me audit your books and I did the work. You owe me four hundred dollars, whether Drexel invests in your business or not. Get that through your fat Dutch head!"

"I get it," said March, slowly. "But—I don't pay!"

Crowder sputtered and fumed. He raved and threatened. But March put on a rare exhibition of German stubbornness. He refused adamantly to pay Crowder's bill, even when the accountant cut it to three hundred, then two hundred. At last Crowder threw up his hands and stormed out of the restaurant.

March walked back to the middle of the counter and reached for something he had noticed there that morning. A baseball bat. The night man kept it handy for unruly drunks. He brought it up to the cash register and stood it handy to his reach.

Ten minutes later Crowder returned to the Superior Restaurant. He was accompanied by a burly giant with cauliflowered ears. March

recognized him as the man who had acted as Drexel's chauffeur earlier that afternoon.

The big man took the initiative. "Me pal Crowder here tells me you owe him a little bill and won't pay it."

"Dot's right," said March, grimly. "He may be a certified public accountant—but he's a *verdante* crook, too. I don't pay him one *pfennig*."

The big man reached for his hip-pocket and March held his breath. But the bruiser brought forth only a blackjack.

"Me, I don't believe in this suing business," he observed. "It takes too long and costs money. You owe Crowder four hundred smackers. Are you going to shell out or do I knock it out of your thick head?"



MARCH picked up the baseball bat and stepped away from the cash register so he could have free clearance. "Shtart somet'ink!" he invited grimly. "I gif you a knock on the headt mit this ball-bat!"

The bruiser retreated a step. He grinned in sickly fashion. The blackjack was a fine weapon at close range. The baseball bat had a three foot longer range. Crowder scuttled to the door.

"Listen, podner," said the bruiser. "We ain't gettin' nowhere. I'm just gonna warn you, you have that money ready in an hour or—it's gonna be just too damned bad for you!"

"Mebbe you call the police, ja?" taunted March.

"No, we ain't gonna call the cops," replied the bruiser. "We got other ways of gettin' even. I'm warnin' you...."

"You'll bomb me like you did Joe Roca-forte," March wanted to say, but caught himself in time and said, instead, "You Crowder, you crook, I go to your boss, Mr. Drexel, and tell him what kind of a low-life you are. I go now, right away!"

"All right, you go to him," snapped Crowder. "He'll tell you to pay me the money. He's an honest man! Come on, Gus, we'll let him alone—for now!"

Gus, the bruiser, backed to the door willingly enough. March watched them out of sight. Well, now for the final scene.

March called the waitress to take care of the cash register again. He went back to the kitchen, looked around. His eyes came to rest on the gas range.

"Mike," he said to the cook, "have you got a meat saw around here?"

Mike brought out a hacksaw and watched March with a puzzled air when the latter shut off the gas at the meter. When March began sawing on the gas pipe, his mouth fell open. But March continued grimly.

A half hour later, March paid off a taxi at the corner of Addison and Western Avenue. He walked two blocks west and came to a stop before a two-story brick house. It was the only house in the block.

He climbed a short flight of stairs and rang a bell. A moment later the door opened and Gilbert Drexel looked at March in astonishment. "Why, Mr. Schmidt!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect you here!"

"Didn't dot Mr. Crowder tell you I was coming here?" asked March.

Drexel coughed. "Why, Crowder was here awhile ago and said he'd had a little difficulty with you, but—come inside.

MARCH entered the house. Drexel led the way into a combination office and living room. "I have another office in the Merchandise Mart," he said, "but I prefer to handle my financial affairs from here. Sit down, won't you?"

March looked around the room and chose an overstuffed sofa chair, near the window. Drexel seated himself behind the mahogany desk. March saw his eyes glance covertly at a closed door across the room and his lips tightened.

"Now, then, Mr. Schmidt," said Drexel brusquely. "Mr. Crowder reports that your

books are in excellent condition and suggests that I make the investment. That seems to indicate that Mr. Crowder is doing the right thing."

"Dot's nice from him," said March. "You make the investment?"

"Of course. Tomorrow, we'll go down to my attorneys' and draw up the papers. Let's call it settled then."

"Fine—but vot about dis Crowder?"

Drexel's expression indicated that that was a small matter. "Why, just pay him the money. He earned it—and tomorrow you'll have five thousand dollars to expand your business."

"Four hundred dollars I should pay for a hour's work, Mr. Trexel?" asked March. "Dot ain't goot business!" March drew a fat cigar from his pocket and lighted it.

Drexel's suave manner disappeared. "Listen here!" he snapped. "You'll pay that four hundred or...."

"Or you'll bomb me as you did Joe Roca-forte?" cried March.

Drexel's mouth fell open. At the same instant the door across the room opened and Crowder and Gus sprang into the room.

March remained seated and looked at the three disconcerted crooks. He laughed shortly. "The game's up, boys! I'm onto your racket."

"He's a cop!" yelled Crowder. "That—that accent! It's gone!"

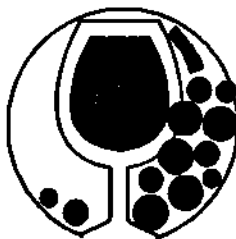
"Right!" snapped Drexel. "He's been stringing us right along. Well, copper, you did a fine job, but it's too bad—for you!"

He stooped suddenly and his hand shot down into the drawer of his desk, partly open. It came up with a revolver in it.

"You made a mistake coming here alone!" Drexel snarled. "It's curtains for you."

March puffed at his cigar and shrugged. The shrugging pushed the top of a round object up from his coat. It protruded about an inch.

"Uh-uh," he said, "I didn't bring any one with me, but I brought *something* with me. Look!"



He shoved at the bottom of his coat again and the round object poked up several inches, the top of it coming within two inches of his glowing cigar. The three men looked at March and cried simultaneously.

"A bomb!"

"Yes," replied March. "A nice little gas-pipe bomb—like the one you tossed into Joe Rocaforte's restaurant on Division Street. Member?"

Gilbert Drexel's face was ashy and the hand holding the gun trembled. "Y-you light it—and—I'll shoot!"

March's eyes became suddenly grim and his tone lost its bantering note. "You shoot and every one of us'll be blown to bits. This fuse burns fast. You won't reach that door!"

The panic of all three men was evident.

But Drexel was beginning to recover. He had a sharper brain than the others. "You're bluffing," he said. "You haven't got the nerve to light the bomb. You'd die with us."

MARCH grinned wolfishly. "Listen Drexel, I was in Joe Rocaforte's restaurant when you threw in that bomb. I saw what it did. Rocaforte was a friend of mine and I swore to get the murderers who killed him. And I will—even if I have to go with them."

"Who are you?"

"That doesn't make any difference, but if it'll please you to know, my name is March, Captain Douglas March!"

Drexel drew in his breath sharply. "Captain Douglas March," he repeated. "I—you're the man who cleaned up those employment agencies."

"Yes, and I'm cleaning up on your racket. I know all about it, you answer these Business Opportunities ads, get the suckers all het up by promising to put a lot of dough into their business, then you stick them for whatever the tariff will stand for auditing charges. And when they refuse to pay you toss a bomb into their places...."

"No," said Drexel. "Rocaforte threatened to go to the police...it was the first time we bom—"

"And the last time," snapped March. "I'm getting tired. Throw over that gun!"

March brought the gas-pipe up to the cigar. The fuse sputtered. Drexel screamed in terror and threw the gun away from him. March had counted on his doing that in sudden panic. The gun landed on the sofa and he started for it.

But Gus, the bruiser, let out a yell suddenly. March whirled and lashed out with the gas-pipe at Gus. He caught the big man on the side of his face and the shock of the blow caused the bit of sputtering fuse to drop from the gas pipe.

Gus staggered back and bumped into a chair.

"The bomb!" cried Crowder. "It's empty!"

He made a scramble toward the gun on the sofa. March leaped at him and swung the gas pipe again. It landed on the small of Crowder's back and smashed him to the floor. The little man screamed and clawed at the floor. March scooped up the revolver then and held it on Drexel who was going frantically through another drawer of his desk.

"That's all!" March announced. "Come around from there!"

Drexel was licked. His shoulders slumped and he moved out. March walked behind the desk and began pawing through the papers with one hand.

Fourth from the top he found a letterhead on which was printed:

"Joseph Rocaforte, Italian Restaurant, Ravioli a Specialty."

"I guess this will cinch it," said March. "If you escape the chair you can spend the next thirty years in jail figuring out another Business Opportunities racket."

