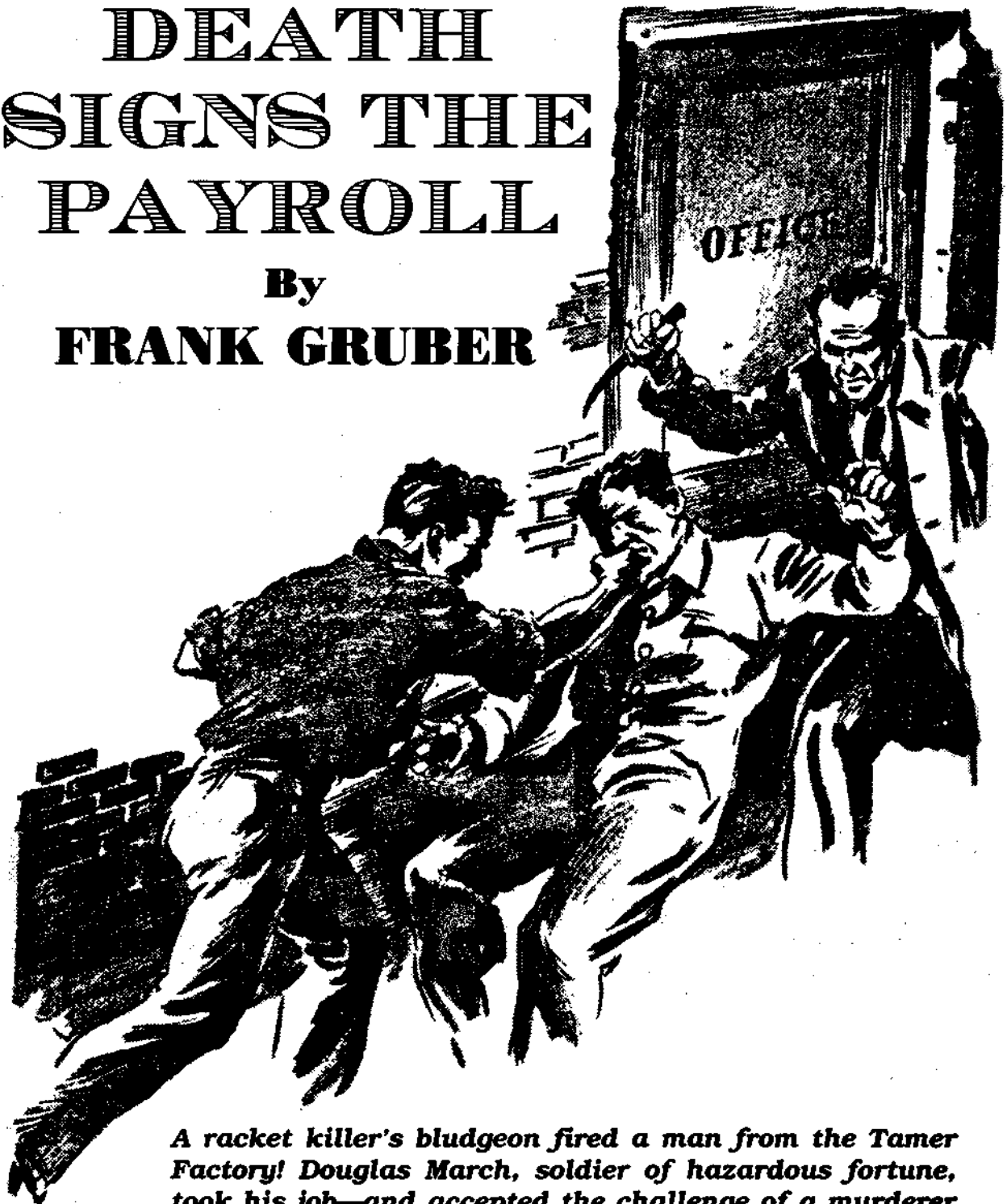


DEATH SIGNS THE PAYROLL

By
FRANK GRUBER



A racket killer's bludgeon fired a man from the Tamer Factory! Douglas March, soldier of hazardous fortune, took his job—and accepted the challenge of a murderer who built his fortune on the misery of human hearts.

CAPTAIN DOUGLAS MARCH sat on the front steps of Mrs. Bayer's boarding house, smoking an after-dinner pipe. Up and down the street other men were sitting on their steps, smoking and reading the evening papers. Women sat out front, too. A group of yelling urchins were playing baseball out on the street.

March enjoyed the peace of these uneventful days in Chicago—But even as he thought about it, the peacefulness of the scene was broken. A black touring car careened around the near corner and came hurtling down the street.

March watched its approach uneasily, for he knew that boys playing ball on the streets were prone to wait too long before dispersing

before an automobile.

The car, however, slackened speed as it approached. Its driver tooled it toward the curb, just a few feet from where March was sitting. The tonneau door opened and a man appeared in the doorway. He hesitated there a moment, then suddenly plunged forward. March gasped and came to his feet. He saw the man hit the sidewalk on his face, saw, too, the hands that had propelled him forward.

He sprang down the steps and lunged toward the car. But it was too late. With a roar of gears it shot away. March shot a keen glance at its fast-disappearing rear end, but the license plate was hidden from his sight by the shouting boys, their interest in baseball suddenly diverted. March dropped to his knees beside the man who lay on the sidewalk.

He felt suddenly sick as he saw the blood-soaked hair on the back of the man's head. And the ugly wound.

Yet there was life in the prone figure. As March knelt, the man raised his head a couple of inches and half twisted his face toward March. His mouth worked spasmodically and gasped out the words: "*Couldn't pay... Tamer... Townsend...*"

And then blood spurted from the man's mouth and his face hit the sidewalk. March had seen men die before, in China, Central America, Europe. He rose to his feet.

He became aware of excited chattering all about him. He looked around and saw that a small crowd had already collected and that people were rushing out of buildings on all sides.

The blast of a police whistle split the air. March stepped back, said to everyone in general, "He's dead."

A uniformed policeman burst through the fringe of spectators and almost tripped over the body on the sidewalk.

"Who—what happened?" he gasped.

"A car drove up to the curb," March explained. "This...man...was thrown out. He's dead."

"Who're you?" barked the policeman.

March shrugged. "I live in this house here

and happened to be sitting on the steps when the car pulled up."

The cop looked around the circle of faces. A middle-aged, stout woman, nodded her head and said vigorously, "Dot's right. He rooms in my house. Und he's a fine man."

Some alert neighbor had phoned for an ambulance. Its screaming siren heralded its approach.

With the ambulance came a lieutenant of police. The patrolman, already on the scene, relinquished his authority with a sigh of relief.

The dead man was identified by him wailing widow. His name was Tony Kohlman and he lived next door to Mrs. Bayer's boarding house.

"No, he never had no enemies," his widow sobbed.

The ambulance took the body away. The police lingered fifteen or twenty minutes, grilling, asking questions but seemingly paying no attention to the answers. A dozen people, besides March, told the same story. The car had come around the corner, stopped at the curb and Tony Kohlman had been thrown out. Four people had taken the license number of the car.

MARCH told the lieutenant of the dead man's last words. "'*Couldn't pay...Tamer...Townsend*'."

The lieutenant shook his head. "Gang stuff. The car was probably stolen, but we'll check on it, anyway. But...I never heard of any gangsters named Townsend or Tamer."

And then the police left and life on Cleveland Avenue resumed its usual course. The boys started up their baseball game again. Their elders went back to their front steps, read their newspapers or talked with their neighbors about the "excitement."

BUT March didn't go back to his steps. He went instead into his boarding house and rapped on a door on the second floor. It opened a few inches and a pasty face appeared in it. But it did not smile.

"Uh—hello, Mr. March," said the man

with the pasty face.

"Can I come in, Joe?" March asked.

Joe Becker's face clouded, but March was already pushing his way into the room. Inside, he looked at the open suitcase lying on the bed. "Packing, Joe?" he asked.

"Uh—yes, I'm going out of town for a couple of days. My mother's sick at home."

"Sorry to hear it, Joe." March looked around the room. It was sparsely furnished, much like March's own room. An iron bedstead, a chest of drawers, a rocking chair, a small table. And a radio. That, March knew, didn't come with the room. It was a nice radio as radios went. At least from outward appearance.

"Going to leave your radio behind?" March asked.

Becker's eyes widened and for a moment showed fear. Then he pulled himself together. "Of course, I said I was only going to be gone a couple of days."

March sat on the bed beside the open suitcase. He said, quietly, "Tony Kohlman was a friend of yours, wasn't he, Joe?"

Becker inhaled air sharply. "Yes, but—but...It's too damn bad," he finished lamely.

March looked thoughtfully at Joe Becker. "Listen, Joe," he said. "You heard the noise outside and I saw you looking out of the window. But why didn't you come downstairs? You and Tony Kohlman were such close friends. I saw you together often."

Becker flared up. "I heard someone holler he was dead. What good would it have done me to run downstairs?"

March sighed. "Joe, why was Tony killed?"

Becker backed to the wall. "Why—why, how should I know?"

"I think you know, Joe. Listen, I'm your friend. You can tell me. What are you afraid of?"

Becker's mouth twisted for a moment. Then he half-whispered, "You see, I got a warnin' too."

March leaned forward. "From who?"

"What the hell!" Becker burst out. "If

they're gonna give it to me, I can't help it. I'll tell you. It was the Acme Adjustment Agency."

"What's that? A collection agency?"

Becker nodded. "It's this radio. I bought it on time and then I lost my job and couldn't keep up the payments."

"Then why didn't you let them take the radio back?"

"They wouldn't do it. They said I had to pay for it in full."

"How much do you still owe on it?"

"Sixty dollars. It was one-twenty altogether. I paid ten dollars down and five a month."

"I think you got gypped on it," said March. "I doubt if that radio is worth more than sixty dollars."

"You're telling me? I've seen better ones since for forty bucks. But, anyway, the company claimed that I signed an agreement giving them the right to garnishee my wages if I didn't keep up the payments. I worked at the American Tea Company then and when they garnisheed my wages I got fired. A company rule. Lots of companies have 'em. Then when I was out of a job the gyp radio outfit sold my bill to this Acme company. They're the ones that have been after me lately. They were after Kohlman, too."

"Ah," said March. "Now we're getting somewhere. Kohlman bought a radio, too?"

"No, he bought furniture, from the Tish Furniture Company. I don't think he got gypped like I did on this radio but his payments were too stiff and he had a hard time meeting them. Then the company sold his bill to the Acme gang. And they started hounding him...and he had a job with the Tamer Leather Company."

"Tamer?" exclaimed March sharply.

"Yeah, it's a big place over on Townsend Street."

March's forehead wrinkled. Tamer and Townsend. Tony Kohlman had gasped out these two words. Had he merely been worried about his job? Or had his brutal assault something to do with the leather factory?

March questioned Becker further. The lat-

ter talked freely once he had got started. The Acme Adjustment Agency apparently specialized in delinquent and hard-to-collect accounts, which some installment houses were no doubt glad to dispose of at a discount, particularly when they had already collected most of the retail value of the merchandise sold. March knew something about installment merchandise, knew that a hundred-dollar piece of furniture seldom cost the dealer more than thirty dollars and that anything they got over that was clear profit. If a furniture company could collect sixty dollars on a hundred-dollar bill and then sell the balance for half-price it was doing a profitable business.

When he had heard the complete story from Becker, March said, "Listen, Joe, I don't know if this Acme outfit had anything to do with Kohlman's death, but I'm going to try to find out and if they did..."

"You'll fix 'em, Captain?" asked Becker, eagerly. "If anyone can do it, you can. These cops..."

"I'm going to try my best," March promised. "But in the meantime, Joe, to play safe, I think it would be best if you really left town for a few days."

Joe Becker left Mrs. Bayer's boarding house a half hour later, by the rear door. And March took over Becker's room.

As he saw it, there would be a lot to do now.

IN THE morning he put on one of Joe Becker's old suits. Unshaved and walking with a slouch, he could pass readily enough for a factory hand.

The address of the Acme Adjustment Agency was given as Room 1412, Pelard Building. When March called there he was chagrined to find it merely a mailing address concern, presided over by a youthful Armenian.

The Armenian drove a hard bargain with March. It cost the latter ten dollars to get the information he wanted.

"All I do is readdress the mail to Ninety eight Wells Street," he said.

March walked over to 98 Wells Street. His suspicions about the Acme Adjustment Agency were growing and they became even more concrete when he discovered the office on the eighth floor of 98 Wells Street to be locked.

He found a locksmith at Randolph and Wells and for \$1.50 purchased five keys. Four were unnecessary, for the first one unlocked the door of the collection agency.

March went into the office, locked the door on the inside and switched on the electric lights. The place was sparsely furnished. There was merely a battered desk, a card file and a couple of chairs.

March went through the desk, found that it contained only stationery bearing the name and mailing address of the Acme Adjustment Agency.

He attacked the card index. There were about five hundred cards. He ran over the B's and found a card for Joe Becker. Typed on it was the name and address of Joe Becker and a cryptic notation:

\$60.—1—2—3. S. A. next.

S. A. That probably meant "strong arm".

There was no card for Tony Kohlman. Which was strange, for Becker had assured March that this same outfit had been after Kohlman...But perhaps it wasn't so strange. They had "collected" from Kohlman and removed his card from the file. He was not 'active' now.

There wasn't a single thing in the office by which March could identify an individual with the Acme Adjustment Agency. The owners of the agency, it seemed, preferred to remain incognito.

He was about to leave the office when he saw the knife lying on the desk. It was a queer knife. It had a round wooden handle and a crescent-shaped blade about eight inches long. But the blade was curved downwards, toward the cutting edge instead of away from it as in most knives. And instead of being pointed the blade was cut off squarely.

March frowned as he stared at the knife. It was not a common type, but not an uncommon type either. He raised the thing to his nostrils

and caught the faint odor of...leather.

Yes, of course. This was a leather knife. Shoe repair men used it. So did workers in leather factories. And someone in the Acme Adjustment Agency used it to open envelopes.

Tony Kohlman had worked in a leather factory. The trail to it was growing strong. And...there should be a vacancy at the leather factory.

March put the knife back on the desk and left the office. He caught a Clybourn Street car outside and rode in it to Division and Crosby. He left the car there, walked two blocks to Townsend Street and the Tamer Leather factory.

The company had a surprisingly small office force, merely a girl and a cold-faced man of about forty-five. March guessed that the company had its main office downtown.

"Need any help, Mister?" March asked.

"No," the cold-faced man said. "We're full up."

"Sure, mister?" persisted March. "I—uh—thought maybe there'd be an opening on account of...of that fella that was bumped off yesterday."

The office man sat erect. "So you heard about that and thought you'd hurry over and get his job, huh?" He added something under his breath that sounded like "buzzard", but March pretended not to hear.

"Yeah," the man went on. "Maybe we do need a man. I'll find out." He picked up his phone, pushed an electric button and waited. March heard a horn blow out in the factory, two long and three short blasts. It was a call system used in factories for locating foremen who usually couldn't hear phone bells because of the noise of machinery.

After a moment the office man spoke into the telephone. "Hello, Johnny? George Reese. Do you need a man? Yeah thought you would. All right, I'll send him up."

He hung up the phone and said to March: "Climb up to the third floor and ask for Johnny Carson. I guess he can put you on."

March's face lit up. "Thanks, mister." He left the office and climbed the concrete stairs

to the third floor. He entered into a babel of noise.

PULLEYS whined, machines stamped, roared and banged. Factory hands, both men and women, worked at benches and machines. The smell of leather was strong and pungent in March's nostrils. He didn't like it...Neither did these workers perhaps, but they had to put up with it.

"Where's Carson, the foreman?" March asked a strapping young man who wore a blue shop apron.

The man shook his head, roared, "What?"

March roared back: "Carson, the foreman!"

"He's back in the counter department." The man amplified his instructions by pointing to the rear of the building. March made his way through machines and barrels and workers to the rear of the building. The noise was less violent back here. Finally, in a long, narrow room, shut off from the main room by row upon row of stacked wooden barrels, he found an athletic-looking man of middle age. He wore a tan canvas shop coat. The coat distinguished him from the ordinary workers who wore merely aprons and March guessed that he was the foreman.

"Mr. Carson?" March asked. "Mr. Reese said you had a job."

The foreman looked at March. "Yeah, I got a job," he said. "But I don't know whether you want it. It only pays \$18.50 a week."

March simulated eagerness. "That's all right. I need a job bad. I been out of work a long time."

"Yeah? Well, if I put you on will you stick until you find another job?" The foreman asked the question disarmingly. March almost stumbled into the trap but caught himself in time.

"No, I'll stick here I ain't much for changin' jobs. I'm a steady worker. Just try me out, mister. You'll see."

The foreman shrugged. "Well, you don't look much like a factory hand, but I'll give you a trial. When can you start to work?"

"Right now!"

Carson turned away. "Oh, Hugo!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

A fifty-foot bench, divided into sections, stretched along the outer wall. At each section, save one, a man sat on a high stool and sorted leather counters, hard upright supports for the heels of shoes.

A grizzled old man with long white mustaches left one of the sections along the bench and waddled up. "Here's a new man for you, Hugo," Carson said and walked off into the noisy section of the shop.

"I'm Hugo Gonsser, the straw boss," the old fellow said. "C'mon, I put you to work." He led the way to one of the vacant sections of the bench. It was piled high with leather counters, thrown on the bench.

The first thing March saw was a leather knife on the bench. A duplicate of the one he had seen at the Acme Adjustment Agency. His eyes lit up.

"We gotta sort these," Hugo explained. "They're all two—M-O-X-O's, but we got to sort them for heavy, medium and rejects. And trim those that got ridges or been squeezed out of shape by the moulding machine. Like this."

He picked up a moulded counter with his right hand, flipped it into the palm of his left and squeezed it expertly with both hands. "Feel this," he said then. "It's a heavy."

March felt it. "And what's a medium?"

Hugo rummaged through the pile, his expert eyes picking out a counter. He tested it. "This is medium," he said.

March felt the counter and shook his head. The difference between a medium and heavy was infinitesimal. "They all feel alike to me," he told the straw boss.

"But they ain't... You'll get the hang of it, soon. Anyway, they're six and a half iron and they're supposed to be heavies. So if there's one you ain't sure about, put it in the heavies."

March chuckled. "I get it, but—what does six and a half iron mean?"

"That's the thickness of the leather. It's measured by irons when it's flat. You know, there's thirty-six irons to an inch."

March hadn't known. He had never heard of an "iron" as a unit of measurement. The thing began to intrigue him. "And what does two—M-O-X-O mean?"

Hugo explained. "The two means second grade, the first grades ain't got glue in 'em. The M stands for men's and the O-X for oxfords. And the last O is the size. Double O is the biggest size. They run double O, O, one, two, all the way to seven, which're for the little kids. Get it: second grade, men's oxfords, size O."

Hugo instructed March further. He showed him how to telescope four counters, then four more and finally turn over one bunch of four and push it into the upright four, making a compact pile, containing eight counters, that was easy to handle. The bunches of eight were piled along the board partition and when there were enough stacked into barrels, stood upright in layers.

Hugo was a garrulous old fellow. "You're lucky to get in my department," he said. "It's the softest work in the place."

"Yeah, but doesn't it get monotonous?"

Hugo was puzzled by the word. "Mono...to...?"

"Tiresome."

Hugo's eyes lit up. "Yeah, sure, but when you git sleepy you can stand up awhile. You won't get that way though... 'cause you're the new man and you gotta help pile up the barrels now and then."

He jerked his head toward the rows of barrels behind the drying racks. March grimaced.

"Those barrels look heavy. How do you stack them up four-high?"

"With an elevator. You and Sam'll pile 'em up. You'll see."

Hugo talked volubly about himself, but finally left March to work alone. March climbed up on the high stool and sorted counters for ten minutes in silence. Then a roly-poly German at the bench on March's left spoke to him.

"How you like de chob?"

March shrugged. "A job's a job these days. I been out of work a long time. I'm lucky to

get this one...although I hear the fellow who had it before me wasn't so lucky."

The German turned abruptly to his work. March waited a minute, then said, "This is the bench that fellow who got knocked off worked at, isn't it? Huh."

There was a strained silence for a moment, then the roly-poly man replied in a low voice, "Yah."

"What sort of a fellow was he?" March persisted.

The German did not answer. March waited awhile, then turned to the man at his right, a young Italian of about twenty or so. "I hear the guy who worked at this bench got knocked off yesterday."

The Italian grinned in a sickly way. "Yeah, I read about it in the papers. S'too bad."

March did not press him further, for he too seemed reluctant to talk about Tony Kohlman.

HUGO returned with a small pad of paper. "Gimme your name and address. I got to turn it in for the payroll."

"Joe Becker's the name," March replied. He added the address. Hugo noted it carefully and departed.

March sorted counters. His back began to ache after a while and he stood up, shifting from foot to foot. Then he sat down on the stool again. After an hour the work seemed unbearable. He left his bench to get a drink of water at the fountain behind the barrels.

When it seemed that he could stand it no longer, the bell finally rang for lunch. Everyone at the long bench stopped work and scurried for the lockers. They brought out their lunches, hurried to their benches and began eating as if their lives depended on wolfing down as quickly as possible.

March shrugged, and ploughing through the myriad of machines in the front part of the shop, left the building. In a restaurant a block away, on Larrabee Street, he caught a quick snack.

At twelve-thirty he was back sorting counters. The afternoon was a nightmare. This was the first day in his life he had ever worked in a

factory. At the age of eighteen he was flying airplanes. And at nineteen he was in a war. By the time he had reached twenty-five the newspapers were printing stories about Captain Douglas March, the famous soldier of fortune. He was in Chicago now convalescing from a stubborn wound received in the Gran Chaco a year ago. He'd been taking things easy in Chicago.

Until recently.

And then through circumstances he'd been impressed by the apparent helplessness of the average people around him. For most of his life March had traveled around the world, getting involved in trouble and fighting the fight of the underdog. And then, in Chicago, he'd learned that there were just as many oppressed people as he could find abroad; persons exploited not by governments, but by unscrupulous individuals.

And March had taken up the battle for them. He had entered into the Tony Kohlman thing without hesitation merely because he'd suspected that Tony Kohlman was only one of thousands of people being exploited, harassed and menaced by vicious racketeers.

Strong-arm collection agencies. The Acme Adjustment Agency was only one of many. But this particular one had stepped across the line, had committed murder. And March was determined to bring them to justice. If working at a tedious factory job meant furthering his work, March was willing to do it, no matter how much he detested the work.

But nothing happened that day. March worked at his bench, sorting counters. He tried to talk to his fellow workers, but none would talk about Tony Kohlman. And finally, at five o'clock March had to return to Mrs. Bayer's boarding house with a feeling that he was up against a blank wall. He'd learned some things at the office of the Acme Adjustment Agency. But he hadn't learned enough. There was now a lot more to do.

March had his supper and for an hour afterwards walked the streets. Finally he went into a large drugstore on North Avenue. "I'm an amateur chemist," he told the pharmacist in the

prescription department. "I'm wondering if there are any chemicals that would make a very strong stain on the hands that would be hard to remove."

"Sure," replied the pharmacist. "I got some powdered permanganate of potassium on my hands the other day and it was two days before I could get the stain off. I tried everything, too, but the only thing that I found would do the job was oxalic acid."

March talked with the pharmacist for a few minutes, then left the store with a small purchase. In his room at Mrs. Bayer's house, he wrote a letter making it purposely illiterate. It was to the Acme Adjustment Agency and read: Gentlemen:

Please do not annoy me any more about that phoney bill you claim I owe you. I did not buy the radio from you. And anyway I can get a better radio for less than the money you claim I still owe on it. If you want the radio come and get it. But I refuse to pay the sixty dollars.

Yours truly,

Joseph Becker

A half hour later he mailed the letter.

MARCH was at the Tamer Leather Company at seven-thirty the next morning. He sorted counters until nine o'clock. And then he received a surprising interruption. Reese, the timekeeper, came up to his bench and leaned against it.

"Listen, Becker," he said, "a skip tracer from some collection outfit was just down in the office. Says he has a bill against you and unless you start making payments on it right away, he's going to garnishee your wages. Get it?"

March's face showed amazement that was not simulated. "How the devil did he find out where I was working?"

"How should I know?" snapped Reese. "These skip tracers are damn good though. They sometimes follow a man for days. Well...what are you going to do about it? You

know, the company doesn't stand for garnishees. You get your pay garnisheed and you're fired."

"But I don't owe the money to that outfit," protested March. "They bought the claim from the radio store. And I'm perfectly willing to have 'em take back their damn radio."

Reese shook his head. "You're just like all the suckers. You don't look at what you sign. Half the sales contracts the installment houses have state very clearly that the companies do not have to take back their merchandise. The buyer also signs away his right to trial and agrees to pay costs of tracing him in event he skips. The skip tracer that was here said it cost them fifty dollars to find you."

"You mean they're going to add that to the bill?" yelped March.

"Of course—and you better make some arrangements to pay it!"

"I won't!" exclaimed March. "I'll go to the District Attorney's office. This Acme outfit are a bunch of crooks—and worse. I know enough about them to..." He suddenly shut up.

Reese looked at him curiously. "It's your funeral, not mine," he said and walked off.

Ten minutes later Hugo, the straw boss, waddled up to March's bench. "All right, Joe," he said, "You can get your barrel training now."

Sam Salamo, was a stocky, swarthy man of about thirty. "And don't call me salami," he warned March, when Hugo introduced him. He led March to the rear of the stacked barrels. About thirty burlap-covered barrels stood around on the floor. "Here they are," he said. "You'll be sweating by the time we get them all stacked up."

The weights of the different barrels was stenciled on the sides. They weighed from about a hundred and eighty to over two hundred. It seemed that they had to be piled up throughout the various rows of barrels, according to size of the contents.

Sam and March lifted the barrels to a height of two. But when they had to stack them up three and four high, the "elevator" was used. This stood about ten feet high, operated

by a cable being wound on a drum. A crank shoved over a squared bar raised the platform on which the barrel and one of the men ascended. A brake was utilized to lower the elevator.

"I usually ride the platform," Sam Salamo said, "but I ain't goin' to take no chances with a greenhorn. The damn handle comes out once in a while."

March had already wondered about that. There was no cotter pin to hold the handle on the squared bar. If the man turning the crank accidentally pulled outwards the crank would come off...and the elevator would drop.

"How often does that happen?" he asked Sam.

"Not often. Last time was two—three months ago."

"What happened...when it fell?"

"The guy was lucky. He only got a busted leg."

March snorted. "Only a busted leg. Well, pardner...be damned careful with that crank."

He maneuvered a barrel on to the platform. Sam spat on his hands, braced himself and began turning the crank. March stepped on to the platform containing the barrel as it rose to knee height. There was nothing for him to hold himself...except the barrel, and if the platform dropped out from underneath him, his purchase on a barrel would be a disadvantage.

There was, however, a cross arm on top of the elevator. When it was raised to the height of four barrels March could hang on to that.

Sam stopped turning the crank and applied the brake to the drum. March maneuvered the barrel off the platform on top of another in the stack. It was tricky work and he had to heave and tug to get the barrel on straight so that the cylindrical bottom rested squarely on the top hoop of the barrel underneath.

Sam loosened the brake and the elevator descended swiftly. He braked it to a stop a few inches from the bottom.

Sam leaned against the elevator and looked curiously at March. "I s'pose you ran up a lot of bills while you were outta work, huh?"

"A few," March replied. "But they don't worry me."

"No? Maybe you'll find out different one of these days. I know a collection agency that was after a guy."

"You mean Tony Kohlman?"

"Look," said Sam. "Let's pile up some barrels, huh?"

He maneuvered a barrel onto the platform, then stepped on it. Sam began winding the crank and March wondered suddenly if he had been talking too freely.

He had. When he was near the top, the platform and barrel suddenly dropped away under March. March, sensing something about to happen, had prudently reached out his hands for the cross-bar and he instinctively lunged for it when the platform was whisked out from under him. He caught it and hung there while the platform and barrel hit bottom with a crash that shook the entire factory floor.

March let go his hold on the crosspiece and dropped to the floor.

"It wasn't my fault!" yelled Sam.

He started to back away down the aisle. March squeezed around the elevator and started after Sam. The squat man let out a howl and burst into flight. He caught up to Sam Salamo at the first floor. He caught him by an arm and heaved to a stop.

Then the office door burst open and Steele, the time-keeper, popped out.

"I just got fired," said March, "so I was coming in to get my pay. Sam's, too. He's quitting."

"What the hell you talking about?" barked Steele. "Your pay's been garnisheed and Sam...Sam ain't quitting."

"All right. You got my letter, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

March sighed. "So you're going to try denying that you own and operate the Acme Adjustment Agency. You're going to stick to the story that a skip-tracer followed me here?"

"I never even heard of this Acme."

March reached out suddenly and caught hold of Steele's left wrist. He jerked it out of the man's pocket. "Then why the hell are your hands all stained brown? You spilled iodine on them, did you? That's permanganate of potas-

sium and there's only one thing'll take it off. I dusted my letter, that I wrote to you, with the stuff. The moisture in your skin dissolved it and you haven't been able to get it off. When you're in jail, Steele, try using some oxalic acid on it."

Steele brought his right hand out of his pocket and March suddenly let go of the man's left hand and leaped back. There was a wicked-looking leather knife in Steele's hand. He was ready to strike.

"All right, copper," Steele gritted. "You asked for it. You're the only one who knows. No one has even seen me go into the building where I get my mail."

"Sam gets it for you every morning?" asked March. "And he helps you with the strong-arm stuff in the evening?"

Sam Salamo began growling deep in his throat and started moving to get behind March. March let him move a few feet, then suddenly lunged sideways at him. His fist shot out in a sweeping hook and he struck Steele's henchman a powerful blow on the side of the head. The blow knocked Sam backwards...

The scream startled March. It came from Steele. Sam staggered away from in front of Steele and then March saw the knife in Steele's throat.

The thing had been entirely accidental. When Sam had been knocked against him Steele had instinctively thrown up his forearm to ward him off...and the knife had been turned inwards. The force of Sam's body had hit his forearm and the knife had done the rest.

Steele collapsed to the concrete floor.

March dropped his hand on Sam's shoulder. There was no fight left in the man.

March heaved a tremendous sigh. Avenging Tony Kohlman wouldn't make Kohlman's widow feel any better...but at any rate there would be no other widows because of the Acme Adjustment Agency. And about five hundred people throughout the city would have more money for their families. They would probably never know, and would never ask, why the belligerent collection company no longer bothered them.

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