

# The Sad Serbian

## Frank Gruber

FEW PULP WRITERS were as prolific as Frank Gruber (1904-1969), who at the peak of his career produced three or four full-length novels a year, many about series characters Johnny Fletcher and his sidekick, Sam Cragg; numerous short stories, many featuring Oliver Quade, “the Human Encyclopedia”; and screenplays, including such near-classics as *The Mask of Dimitrios*, *Terror by Night*, and, with Steve Fisher, *Johnny Angel*. He also wrote two dozen Western novels.

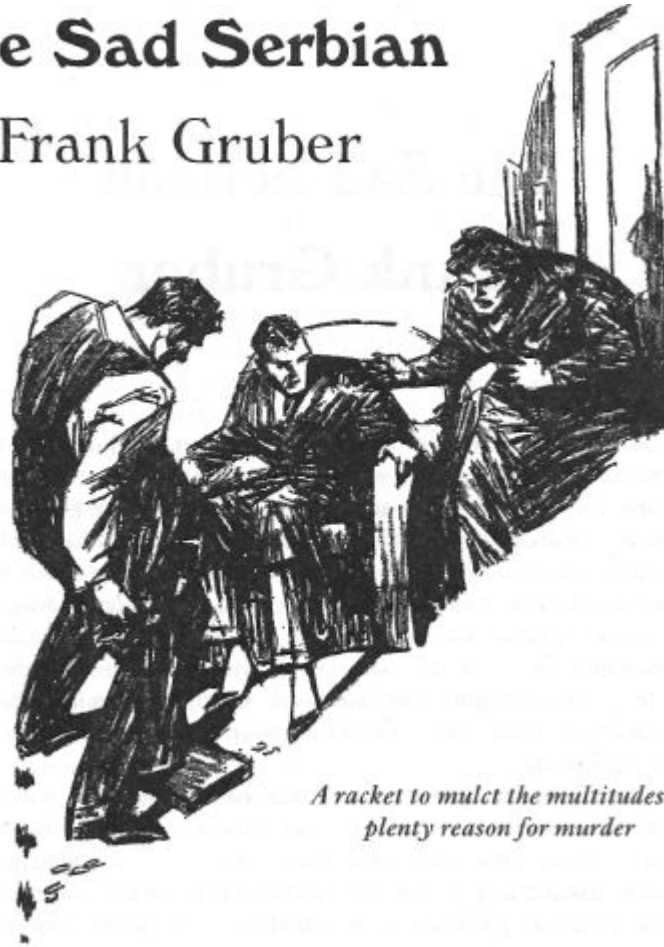
In addition to a relentless work ethic and a fertile imagination, he developed an eleven-point formula for his novels which certainly helped speed the writing process. In his autobiography, *The Pulp Jungle*, which is also an informal history of pulp magazines and the era in which they flourished, he outlined the formula for his mystery stories.

The successful adventure, he believed, needed a colorful hero, a theme with information the reader is unlikely to know, a villain more powerful than the hero, a vivid background for the action, an unusual murder method or unexpected circumstances surrounding the crime, unusual variations on the common motives of greed and hate, a well-hidden clue, a trick or twist that will snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, constantly moving action, a protagonist who has a personal involvement, and a smashing climax. These key points, of course, may well describe all of pulp fiction—and a lot of later adventure and crime stories as well.

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# The Sad Serbian

Frank Gruber



*A racket to mulct the multitudes is  
plenty reason for murder*

TO LOOK AT ME reading the death notices while I'm having my breakfast in Thompson's, you'd think I was an undertaker. I'm not, but my job is just as cheerful. Take this business today. I've got a bunch of cards with names, and I'm comparing them with the names in the death notices. I do this every morning and about twice a year I find a name I'm looking for. I strike pay-dirt this morning with the name Druhar.

I finish my breakfast and go out and hunt for my jaloppy, which I've got parked a couple of blocks down the street. I climb in and head for the North Side; 598 Blackhawk Street.

These foreigners certainly bury them early in the morning. Although it's only nine-thirty, they've already taken the crepe down from the door. There are a couple of kids

hanging around and I ask them: "At what church are they having the mass for Mrs. Druhar?"

"Saint John's on Cleveland Avenue," one of the kids replies.

I miss them at the church, so the only thing I can do is go out to the cemetery, which, according to the paper, is St. Sebastian's, seven miles outside the city limits. It takes me about an hour to get out there, so when I get to the cemetery, they're breaking up; going back to the cars that have brought them out. I grab an old envelope out of my pocket and wave it around as if it's a telegram, or something.

"Mr. Tony Druhar!" I yell.

A big fellow, who is just about to climb into a green sedan, says: "Here I am."

I run over and see that the license number on the sedan checks with the number on one of my cards. So I pull out the old repossession warrant and stick it into Mr. Druhar's hand. "Sorry, Mr. Druhar," I say. "I'm taking your car, on account of you haven't done right by the Mid-West Finance Company."

This Druhar looks stupidly at the piece of paper in his hand for a minute. Then he lets out a roar you could have heard over on Grant Avenue. "Why, you lousy, grave-robbing—! Is this a time to pull something like this, when I have just buried my poor grandmother?"

"That's how I found you," I tell him. "It says in the paper: 'Mourned by her sons, so-and-so, and grandsons, Tony Druhar, and so-and-so.'"

Some people certainly get mad. This Druhar fellow jumps up and down and takes off his hat and throws it on the ground and jumps on it. Then three fellows just as big as Druhar climb out of his sedan and surround me.

"So you're a skip-tracer!" one of them says, and lets a handful of knuckles fly in my direction.

I'm lucky enough to duck them, but I can see that this isn't the safest place in the world right now for Sam Cragg. I get a lucky break, though. A motorcycle cop who's escorted the funeral out here is just a little way off, and when Druhar starts all his yelling, he comes over.

"What's the trouble?" he asks.

Druhar starts swearing again, but I grab hold of the cop's arm. "I've got a repossession warrant for this car. This Druhar has missed six payments, and the Mid-West Finance Company wants \$188 or the car."

The cop gives me a funny look and takes the warrant from Tony Druhar. He looks at it

and then he looks at me. "I'll bet you hate yourself, mister, when you look at your face in the mirror every morning."

"Maybe I do," I tell the cop, "but if I didn't have this job somebody else would, and I haven't got a pull, so I can't get on the WPA, and I have to eat."

"Why?" asks the cop.

I can see he's all on the other side, so I give him some law. "Officer, this is a regular warrant, good anywhere in this country. As an officer of the law, I'm calling on you to see that it's properly served. I want this car or \$188."

There's some hullabaloo, but after a while Druhar and his pals get together and make me a proposition, which I am sap enough to accept. I'm a softie, and you oughtn't to be a skip-tracer if you are a softie. They've pooled up \$32 and they say that Druhar will have the rest of the money for me tomorrow. I'm just cagy enough, though, to make them all give me their names and addresses and prove them by letters and stuff they've got with them.

That's where I made my big mistake and how I got mixed up with the phoney prince.



EXT MORNING I drive up to 736 Gardner Street. Gardner Street is a little one-block chopped up street that has been dumped in between Stanton Park and Ogden Avenue. There are only about thirty houses on the street, and every one of them should have been condemned twenty years ago. Druhar is supposed to live on the first floor of one of these dumps.

I can't ring the doorbell because there isn't a doorbell, so I bang the door with my fist. Nothing happens so I bang it again. Then I figure I have been given the runaround and I get sore,

and push on the door. It goes open and I walk into the place. Druhar is at home. He's lying on the floor.

He's dead.

For a minute I look down at him and all sorts of cold shivers run up and down my back. This Druhar is a big fellow, but somebody has twisted his neck so that his face is looking over his shoulder.

There's a slip of paper sticking out of Druhar's pants pocket. I don't like corpses any better than the next fellow, but I reach down and pull out this piece of paper. And then my eyes pop out. The paper reads:

*"For value received, I promise to pay to Tony Druhar, Five Thousand Dollars. "*

W. C. ROBERTS

A promissory note, good in any man's court, if this W. C. Roberts has got \$5000.

I look at the thing and finally stick it in my pocket. After all, Tony Druhar, dead or alive, owes the Mid-West Finance Company about \$156.00.

I back out of the house and I'm on the porch when I see the taxicab that is pulled up behind my jalopy. The prince is coming across the sidewalk.

Of course I don't know that he's a prince then. I find that out later. But he certainly dresses the part. He's wearing a black, single-breasted coat, which is open, showing a fawn-colored waistcoat. Under it is a pair of striped trousers and below that, believe it or not, white spats. On his head he's got a pearl-gray Homburg. He's carrying a pair of yellow pigskin gloves and a cane. So help me, he's coming up to Druhar's house.

"Good morning, sir," he says to me in a voice that drips with some foreign accent. His

face is long and very sad and aristocratic. "I'm looking for Mr. Druhar."

What I want to do is jump into my jalopy and get the hell out of there, but I know how cops are, and it's just my luck that either the prince or the taxicab driver will remember the license number of my car, so I figure I may as well face the thing out.

"Mr. Druhar," I say, "is inside the house. He's dead."

The prince's mouth falls open, but only for a second. Then he reaches into his waistcoat and brings out a monocle and sticks it in his eye. He looks at me and says, "I do not understand."

"Maybe he doesn't either, but he's dead just the same."

He lets out a sigh. "That is too bad. I am Prince Peter Strogovich. This Druhar had applied to me for a position, and I was just about to employ him. It is sad."

The prince takes the monocle out of his eye and polishes it with his gloves. "You say he is inside? The police do not yet know?"

They know soon enough. Some of the neighbors have been attracted by the triple event—my jalopy, the taxicab and the prince in his fancy outfit. They have gathered and they've heard some of our talk, so there's a lot of chattering and running around.

In about five minutes, a squad car rolls up. In a few minutes more, there are ten or twelve cops around, an ambulance, and the emergency squad from the Fire Department.

There's a lot of excitement and when it all sifts down, the prince and myself are down at Headquarters, and Captain Riordan is swearing and asking a lot of questions.

Most of the swearing is at me. "I don't like your story at all," he tells me. "You were pretty sore at this Druhar. According to the neighbors, and his friends, you cut a pretty scene yesterday at the funeral of his grandmother. My idea is that you went there this morning to collect the money and you got into a fight with him."

"Wait a minute, Captain," I cut in. "Call up Oscar Berger, who's the Argus Adjustment Agency. Ask him if I've killed any of my skips before"

"There's always a time to start, you know."

The captain grunts and picks up the telephone. He calls the office and says, "Hello, Mr. Berger? This is Police Headquarters. I've got a man here by the name of Sam Cragg who says he works for you... What's the charge? Why, he said he was after a fellow who owed some money and it seems that the fellow got his neck twisted. What?" He listens for a minute, then he turns to me. "He wants to know if you collected the money."

I give the captain my opinion of Oscar Berger, which the captain translates into "No." He listens a minute more and then says, "O.K.," and hangs up.

"Berger says he fired you a couple of days ago."

I really get sore then. That was about the kind of loyalty you can expect from a man who'd run that kind of a collection agency.

Prince Peter comes to my assistance.

"Captain, I do not think this man killed Mr. Druhar. I do not think he is strong enough to do it. Besides, there are no marks on him, and Mr. Druhar would not have submitted without fighting."

"I could figure that out myself," snaps the captain. "He could have come on Druhar from the back and caught him by surprise."

The prince shrugs. "At any rate, you are not going to hold me? I have important matters..."

"You can go," says the captain. He scowls at me. "I still don't like your story, but I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. If I find out anything more, I can pick you up easily enough."

That's enough for me. I get out of Headquarters as quickly as I can. Outside, Prince Peter is just climbing into a taxicab.

I get a street car and ride back to Gardner Street where the jalopy is still parked. It's there all right, only it hasn't got any tires or headlights now. The damn crooks in the neighborhood have stripped them off.

When I start swearing even the kids on the street duck into the houses. I've got a good mind just to leave the rest of the junk right there, but when I get to Division Street I go into a saloon and telephone a garage.

By the time I get down to the rattle-trap building on Wells Street where AAA has its lousy offices, I'm in a swell mood—for murder.

I slam into the office and Betty Marshall, who practically runs the business from the inside, gives me the ha-ha. "So you finally landed in jail!"

"And it's no thanks to our boss that I'm not still there. Is he inside?"

He's trying to lock his office door, when I push it open and knock him halfway across the room. "Listen, Berger," I says to him, "what kind of a double-crosser are you?"

He ducks behind the desk. “Now take it easy, Cragg. I was just going to call Goldfarb, my lawyer, and have him spring you.”

“I’ll bet you were! Every day of the week I do things for you that keep me awake nights, and that’s the kind of loyalty you give me.”

“Now, now, Sam,” he soft-soaps me. “I got a nice bunch of easy skips for you. To make it up, I’ll pay you the regular five buck rate on them, although these are so easy you oughtn’t to get more than three on them. It’s the new account I landed, the O. W. Sugar Jewelry Company.”

“You call those easy skips? Hell, three-fourths of the people that buy jewelry on the installment plan pawn it before they finish paying for it!”

“Yeah, but they’re all working people in the lower brackets. You’ve just got to find out where they work and threaten to garnishee their wages and they’ll kick in.”

I take the cards he gives me. Like I said before, I hadn’t any pull and couldn’t get on the WPA.

These Sugar Jewelry skips are no better or worse than others I’ve handled. I find the first one, a middle-age Italian woman, cracking pecans in a little dump near Oak and Milton—the Death Corner. She gets eight cents a pound for shelling the pecans and if she works hard she can shell two pounds an hour. Why a woman like that ever bought a wrist watch I don’t know, but she did— and I make her promise to pay a dollar a week on the watch.



AM working on the second skip on Sedgwick near Division, when I get the surprise of my life. Prince Pete Strogovich, cane and white spats and all, comes

out of a little confectionery store. I step into a doorway and watch him saunter across the street and go into a saloon. Then I walk into the confectionery store. It’s a dump; dirty showcases, stationery, candy boxes and empty soft drink bottles standing all around. There’s a magazine rack on one side.

Next to it sits the biggest woman I’ve ever seen in my life. She’s six feet one or two inches tall and big all around. She weighs two-hundred or three hundred and none of it is flabby fat.

“What can I do for you?” she asks, her voice a hoarse bass.

I pretend not to hear her and started pawing over the magazines.

“Can I help you?” she goes on. “What magazines are you looking for?”

I make up the name of a dick mag.

“I don’t carry that one, but there’s plenty of detective magazines, just as good.”

“They’re not just as good,” I retort. “That’s the trouble with you storekeepers. You’re always trying to sell something just as good.”

She starts panting like she has the asthma and I give her a look. Her eyes are slits in her fat cheeks, but they’re glittering slits. She’s good and sore.

“Get the hell out of here!” she snaps at me. She starts getting up from the big reinforced chair and I beat it to the door.

When I get outside Prince Peter’s coming out of the saloon, dabbing a handkerchief to his aristocratic mouth. I walk across the street and meet him on the corner.

“Hi, Pete!” I say to him.

He knows me all right. But he isn't overjoyed to meet me. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

"Nothin' much, Pete, just trying to locate a skip."

"Skip?" he asks. "What is a skip?"

"Well, suppose you buy a suit of clothes on the installment plan, or a diamond ring or a car. You try to beat the firm out of the money and move without leaving a forwarding address. A skip tracer runs you down and hands you a summons. That's me."

"Then you are a detective, no?"

"Well, I do detective work, all right, but I'm not exactly a detective."

"So!" The prince gets out his monocle and begins polishing it on his gloves. He's sizing me up. After a minute, he decides I'm O.K. "My friend, would you do a job for me? For two weeks I have been looking for a man and I can not find him. He—he owes me some money, just like your skips. You think, perhaps, you can find him?"

"Probably, but you see, I work for a collection agency and I only look for people they want."

"But I would pay you well. Here!" He whips out a leather wallet and pulls out a couple of bills. Fifties. I take them from his hand and rub them. "You're paying me a hundred dollars to find this man for you?"

"One hundred dollars now. When you find him I give you four hundred dollars more. You work for me, huh?"

I fold the bills four ways and put them into my pocket. Argus Adjustment Agency pays me five dollars for finding a skip. Sometimes I

find two in one day. Sometimes I don't find two in a week.

"What's this fellow's name?"

"Roberts," the prince says, "W. C. Roberts."

I don't tumble right away, not until the prince says: "He owes me five thousand dollars. He has give me the note and promise to pay..."

And then I know. W. C. Roberts is the name on Tony Druhar's note, the one I'd slipped out of his pocket and had in my own right now. I say: "What was the last address you had of this Roberts, and what does he look like?"

"I do not know what he looks like," the prince says. "But his last address is—was," he pulls a tiny notebook from his pocket, "518 Rookery Building."

I write the address down on a card.

"He isn't there any more, I take it."

"No, he have moved and not give the new address. But you find him?"

"For five hundred bucks I'd find John Wilkes Booth," I tell him.

"Booth? I do not know him."

"Never mind. And where'll I find you?"

He thinks that over before giving me the answer. "At the Gregorian Towers on Michigan Boulevard."

I write that down, too, then I ask him the question that's been bothering me for a long time. "Say, Prince, would you mind telling me what nationality you are?"

He likes that. He pulls himself up straight and sticks the monocle in his eye. "I am Serbian," he says proudly. "My cousin was the king of Serbia. King Peter Karageorgovich."

Me, I don't even know where Serbia is. The name's vaguely familiar, but that's about all. I make up my mind to look it up sometime.

I leave the prince and get on a south-bound Sedgwick Street car, but at Chicago Avenue it moves too slow and I get off and grab a cab. I have a hundred bucks and I want to see what it's like to spend money.



THE ROOKERY BUILDING is one of those old office buildings that was built right after the war—the Civil War. One of these days they're going to tear it down and use the ground as a parking lot.

I go straight to the superintendent's office. "I'm looking for a Mr. W. C. Roberts, who used to have an office in this building," I say to him.

"Is that so?" The supe comes back at me. "Some other people are looking for him, too—including the cops."

"Ha, the cops! And why're they looking for him?"

"You ain't never heard of W. C. Roberts, mister?"

"What'd he do, kill someone?"

"Uh-uh." He gives me a funny look, then reaches into his pocket and brings out a slip of paper. He hands it to me and I look at it. It has some writing on it:

*"For value received I promise to pay to William Kilduff, five thousand dollars. "*

W. C. ROBERTS.

I pull out my own note—the one made out to Tony Druhar. I show it to the superintendent. "Hello, sucker," says the superintendent. "How much you pay for yours?"

I stall. "The usual amount, I guess."

"Five bucks?"

"Ten."

"You *are* a sucker. Us Irish only paid five. I heard some Polacks and Serbians paid as high as twenty bucks."

"Oh," I say, not knowing what this was all about, "so it depends on the nationality how big a sucker you are?"

"Yeah, sure. Most of us Irish know now we got gypped. But those hunkies—I hear they're still going for it. They refuse to believe that Roberts is a crook. That phoney prince keeps them bulled."

"Prince? You mean Prince Peter Strogovich?"

"Yeah, the guy with the fancy duds," he says.

"He claims to be a Serbian prince." I laugh. "I'll bet he gives his fellow countrymen a good line. Like to hear him some time."

"Why don't you go to one of their meetings, then? I think tonight is the Serbians' night. They hold their meeting at some hall on Halsted Street, near North Avenue."

"Say, what's this Roberts guy look like?" I ask.

"That's the funny part of it. No one knows. He never came to his office here. A



dame ran it for him. When the cops came in one day, she just went out and never came back.”

“Cagy, huh? Well, so long, sucker!”

“So long, sucker!”

When I get out of the Rookery Building I walk over to Adams Street and go into a saloon and have two good hookers of rye. I need them. This set-up is the screwiest I’ve ever run across in all my life.

Promissory notes, five bucks apiece... Serbians.

I have another snort, then go back to the office of AAA, on Wells near Randolph. Betty has just come from getting her hair done. I give it the once-over. “Like it?” she asked.

It’s set in the new up-and-at-’em style. “You dames get screwier every day,” I tell her.

“Is that so?” she says, coldly- “Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t get my hair done for *you*.”

It’s an idea I haven’t thought about before, but I make a mental note of it. Inside his private office, Oscar Berger rubs his hands together. He can do it better than a Maxwell Street clothing merchant.

“Well, how many did you find?”

“One, but I got some good leads on two more.”

“Only one, and such good prospects!”

“Nuts, Berger,” I say to him, “they’re as tough as any others and you know it. Look, tell me something, ever hear of a crook by the name of W. C. Roberts?”

“Yeah, sure. Haven’t you? But maybe that case broke when you were on your vacation.”

“It must have. What’d Roberts do?”

“Nothing much. Except swindle about five thousand hunkies in this man’s town. He’s an inventor, see, or claims to be one. He gets a bunch of these hunkies together and tells them he invented four-wheel brakes for automobiles, but Henry Ford or General Motors swiped the patent from him. He invented wireless, but Marconi gypped him out of the patent. So what? So he wants to sue Henry Ford and General Motors. But lawsuits cost money and that’s what he hasn’t got much of. So he gets the hunkies to finance the lawsuits. Mr. Roberts gives them notes. They lend him ten bucks now, they get five thousand when he collects from the big shots.”

“How much does he collect?”

Berger screws up his mouth. “Ten or fifteen billion. Boxcar numbers.”

“And the chumps fall for it?”

“They like it! According to the papers, ten or fifteen thousand hunkies kicked in from five to a hundred bucks per each.”

“And Roberts skipped?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“That depends. If the suckers were milked dry, maybe. But I understand there’s a lot of Bulgarians and Serbians and such still believe in Roberts.”

“Oh, sure, that’s the sweet part of it. Roberts warned them even before the law jumped on him, that he was expecting something like that. On account of Mr. Ford, Westinghouse and Edison owning the cops and sicking them on him. Slick guy, this Roberts.”

“Yeah? What’d he look like?”

“That’s the funny part of it. No one knows. He doesn’t show himself. When the cops tried to get him, they discovered that no one would even admit ever having seen him.”

“Not bad,” I say, “not bad at all.”

Oscar Berger gives me the once-over. “What’s your interest in this? Roberts didn’t put the bite into you, did he?”

“No. When someone offers me over four per cent interest I know he’s crooked. Not that I’d ever get enough to invest at four per cent.”

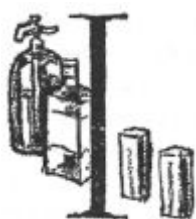
When I come out of Berger’s office, Betty is putting lipstick on her mouth. “All right, sister,” I say to her, “I’m going to give you a break tonight. Where do you live?”

“At 4898 Winthrop, but if you come up you’re traveling just for the exercise.”

“I like exercise,” I tell her. “I’ll be there at seven.”

“I won’t be home. . . . What’ll I wear?”

Nice girl, Betty. “Nothing fancy. We’ll go to some quiet spot.”



STILL have the best part of my hundred bucks the Serbian prince had given me. I get a haircut and a shave and have a bite at Harding’s Grill on Madison. Then I take a taxi to 4898 Winthrop Avenue, which is a block north of Lawrence and one east of Broadway.

The place is a second-rate apartment hotel. They won’t let me upstairs without being announced and when I get Betty on the phone she says she’ll be right down.

She’s down in five minutes. I almost don’t recognize her. She’s wearing a silver evening dress that must have cost her at least a month’s pay. Her hair’s brushed soft and shiny.

She certainly doesn’t look like the type of girl who’d work for a sleazy outfit like AAA. I say to her: “You look very interesting.”

“You never noticed it before,” she says.

“How could I? All the time I’m working for Triple A I’ve got a grouch. Skip tracing is a lousy-business.”

“I’m figuring on quitting myself,” Betty says. “One of your chumps came into the office last week. He was a big fellow, but he bawled like a baby. You were going to garnishee his wages unless he paid ten dollars a month on a cheap piano he bought for his daughter who wanted to be a musician, but changed her mind and eloped with a greaseball.”

“Nix,” I say. “Let me forget skip tracing for one night. I dream about it.”

“All right. Where we going?”

“A little place I discovered,” I tell her. “You’ve never seen one like it.”

I flag a taxi. Betty looks at me suspiciously when I give the driver the address, but she doesn’t make any comment until we climb out on Halsted Street, down near North Avenue.

She looks around while I pay the driver. “What is this, one of your jokes?”

We’re in front of a dump that has a sign on the window. “Plennert’s Cafe. Lodge Hall for Rent.”

“No. A fellow told me this place would be interesting.”

The cafe is a cheap saloon. You have to go through the saloon to get into the lodge hall, in the rear.

Betty's game, I've got to say that for her. We go through the saloon into the lodge hall. There are rows of folding chairs set up in the hall and most of them are filled with men, women and kids. You can cut the smoke.

Almost all the men in the place are dark complected. Some of them have to shave twice a day. The women are swarthy, too, although here and there you can see a blonde, just by way of contrast.

Betty comes in for a lot of gawking. She's glad when I pull her down in a seat near the rear.

"What is this?" she whispers to me. Her face is red and I know she doesn't like it any too well.

I say, "This is a patriotic meeting of the Sons and Daughters of Serbia. Look, up there on the platform, there's something you'll never see again—a Serbian prince."

Yeah, Prince Peter. He's pouring out a glass of water on a speaker's stand and the way some of the Serbs on the platform stand around, you can tell that they think a lot of Prince Pete.

There are about eight men on the platform and one woman. The woman is as big as three of the men. Yeah, she's the amazon who keeps the confectionery store on Sedgwick Street. She's sitting on a stout wooden bench near the side of the stage, where she can watch Prince Pete. She's pretty interested in him.

The prince drinks his water and holds up his hands. The room becomes as still as a cemetery at midnight.

"My country people," the prince says in English. And then he starts jabbering in the damndest language. He sounds off for ten minutes and I don't understand a word of it—until everyone in the place begins clapping hands and cheering and one or two of the younger fellows yell in English:

"The hell with Henry Ford! The hell with General Motors! We'll stick with Mr. Roberts!"

"Fun, isn't it?" I say to Betty, next to me.

"Is it? I suppose this is your idea of a joke."

"Not at all. You see in this room about two hundred of the choicest suckers in the city of Chicago. And do they like it? Listen to them."

About twenty or thirty of the Serbians climb up onto the platform. Prince Pete gives them some aristocratic condescension and they like it. Every one of them.

"You want to see the prince's monocle?" I ask Betty. "Wait here a minute."

I push through the crowd and climb up on the platform.

"Hello, Prince," I say to his royal highness.

Sure enough, the monocle comes out. He gets it out of his fancy vest and sticks it into his eye. Then he says: "Ah, Mister Cragg! How *do* you do?"

"Fine. And you—you're doing all right yourself, I see."

He drops his voice. "You have information for me, yes?"

"I have information, no. But I've got a clue. Another day or two—"

“Good! You let me know damn quick, yes? This,” he shrugs deprecatingly, “it is part of the game. You understand?”

“Yeah, sure, I understand.”

I go back to Betty. “Well, you got enough?”

“Oh, no,” she replies sweetly. “I’d like to attend another patriotic meeting. How about the Bulgarians, haven’t they got one tonight?”

“No, theirs is Thursday. But there’s a beer stube over on North Avenue—”

She gets up quick. In the saloon, the amazon gets up from a chair and grabs my arm. “You’re the man was in my store this afternoon,” she says.

I try to take my arm out of her grip and can’t. “That’s right, I wanted to buy a detective magazine. Uh, you got it for me?”

“Don’t try to kid me, young man,” she snaps at me. “I’m not as dumb as I look. I saw you talking to the Prince. That’s why I came out here. What’s he up to?”

I take hold of her wrist and this time she lets me take it off my arm. “Sorry, madam,” I tell her. “The affair between the prince and myself is confidential.”

Her eyes leave me for a second and she sizes up Betty. “This your girl?”

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“You’re a cop,” she says. “I can always smell one. You’re a private dick. And you’re working for the Prince. Well, I want you to do a little job for me. And I’ll pay you twice what he paid you.”

“He’s paying me a grand.”

“That’s a lie! Pete hasn’t got that kind of money. I’ll give you six hundred.” She’s wearing a tweed suit that would have made a fine tent for Mr. Ringling’s biggest elephant. She digs a fist into a pocket and brings out a roll of bills. She counts out six hundred dollars, in fifties.

“Here, now tell me what the Prince hired you for?”

I struck the word ethics out of my dictionary when I became a skip tracer. But Betty is breathing down my neck. I say to the fat woman. “That’s against the rules. A dick never betrays a confidence.”

Her piggish eyes glint like they had that afternoon when she’d got sore at me. She says, “All right, you don’t have to tell me that. I think I can guess. But I want you to work for me just the same. I think Pete’s two-timing me.”

“Two-timing *you*?”

She shows her teeth. They are as big as a horse’s. “He’s got a woman somewhere. I want you to shadow him.”

“And then? After I see him with the dame?”

“You give me her name and address, that’s all. I’ll do the rest.”

She would, too. She’d probably snatch the woman bald-headed. But that isn’t my worry. Not yet. I say to the amazon: “Oke, I’ll work for you.”

“Start tonight. Shadow the Prince. I—I can’t do it myself.” She scowls. “I’m too conspicuous . . . my size.”

Betty pokes me in the back with her fist, but I pretend not to notice. “All right, Miss—”

"Kelly, Mamie Kelly. You know my address. When you get results, give me a buzz on the phone."

She waddles out of the saloon and about two second later, the prince comes in. He catches up with Betty and me at the door says, "Ah, Mr. Cragg!" and looks at Betty like she was modeling lingerie. But he doesn't stop.



WHEN we get outside, he's waving his yellow cane at a taxicab. By luck there's another parked across the street. Even though it is facing the wrong way, I want it and want it bad.

I grab hold of Betty's wrist. "Come on!"

She jerks away. "What're you going to do? You louse, you can't double-cross your—your client, like that."

"Double-cross, hell!" I snort. "That's the only game the prince understands. We're following him!"

I drag her across the street and heave her into the cab. "Follow that yellow taxi!" I tell the driver. "Five bucks if you keep on his tail."

"For ten bucks, I'll run him down!" says the cabby.

He makes a beautiful U turn, just missing a street car. Then we are off, up Halsted Street.

"Some fun," Betty says to me. But she doesn't mean it.

I grin at her. "Now, kid, you got to take the good with the bad. I work like a dog all week for Oscar Berger. I do things that make me ashamed to look in a mirror and what do I get? Twenty, maybe thirty measly bucks a week. And

now comes a chance to make some real dough—and you squawk!"

"It's dirty money," she says.

I reach into my pocket and pull out Tony Druhar's five thousand dollar promissory note. "Look, Betty, I almost got thrown in the can this morning, because a guy was killed. I found this on his body."

She looks at the piece of paper. "Why, it's an I.O.U. for five thousand dollars!"

"Uh-huh, and every one of these Serbians tonight has at least one chunk of paper like this. Prince Pete's one of the higher-ups in as lousy a racket I ever heard of. That's why I'm working on all these angles. I'd do it even if I wasn't getting a cent."

Well, maybe I would at that. But I know it is a lot more fun doing with a flock of fifties in my pocket, and the promise of some more.

It goes over. Betty hands the note back to me and her eyes are shining. "I didn't understand, Sam. I think—I think you're swell!"

"So're you, kid!" I say. I throw my arm about her. And then the cab stops all of a sudden and the driver yells, "Here, buddy!"

"What?" "Where is he?"

"He just went into The Red Mill."

I look around and see that we are on Lawrence near Broadway. I climb out of the cab and help Betty, then hand the cabby a five dollar bill.

I say to Betty, "Maybe we'll get a chance to do some of that dancing you wanted."

We go inside and the headwaiter looks at Betty's silver evening dress and gives me a

big smile. "Good evening, sir. A table near the front?"

"Umm," I say, looking around as if night clubs were regular stuff with me. "Something not too public, if you know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir!"

He starts off down the side along the booths. At the fourth booth I stop. "Well, well, Prince!"

He's in the booth with as dizzy a blonde as I ever saw. He looks up at me and the monocle almost falls from his eye. "You!" he says.

"Yeah, me. Ain't it a coincidence?"

Then he sees Betty and catches hold of himself. He comes to his feet and bows. I say: "Betty, allow me to introduce his royal highness, Prince Peter Strogovich... or something."

So help me, he takes her hand and kisses it. Then he says, "But won't you join us? Ah, Mitzi, this is my old friend, Mr. Cragg. And Miss—"

"Betty Marshall."

The headwaiter is disappointed. He's losing a tip. I wave him away. "We're joining our friends."

Mitzi is giving Betty the once-over. She says, bluntly: "I saw him first."

"My eyes aren't very good," Betty gives her back.

It's over the Prince's head. He gives Betty an eye-massage, his face still sad, but lecherous. "That is a beautiful dress you are wearing, Miss Marshall."

I say, "Ain't it? Look, Betty, your nose is shiny. Why don't you and Mitzi go spruce up?"

"I was just going to do that," Betty says. "Coming along, Mitzi?"

Mitzi gives me a dirty look, but she gets up. When the girls are gone, the prince says to me, "She is charming, no?"

"She's only my secretary. Her steady is a prize fighter, who's very jealous. And now that we've got that cleared away, let's talk business. You've been holding out on me, Prince. You want me to find W. C. Roberts and all the time you're working for him."

"Of course I am working for him. But I do not know Mr. Roberts. I have never seen him. Always, he sends me just letters."

"What about the dough you collect from these hunkies, these countrymen of yours?"

"I send it to him, all! Then he mail me the commission, ten per cent."

"A very likely story. You collect from these people and mail it to Roberts. He trusts you?"

The prince scowls sadly. "That is the trouble. He does not trust me. One time, just for a joke, you know, I send him not as much money as I collect. Next week I get the letter from him. He know how much I have hold out."

"Ah, he's got a spotter. Someone who goes to the meetings and checks up on you. Right?"

The prince shrugs wearily. "That is what I think. But I do not know who it is. I have try to find out and I cannot."

I make a guess. "Maybe the spotter's name was Tony Druhar!"

The prince gets sore about that. "What you mean by that, Mr. Cragg?"

"Nothing. I was just joking."

"It is not a good joke. I go to see Mr. Druhar, yesterday, because he wants sell me note for ten dollars."

"You said you were seeing him because he'd applied to you for a job of some kind."

"When I say that I do not know you. It was because of note. I buy note sometimes at bargain."

He's lying like hell. Maybe a Serbian's note is a bargain at five dollars, but it isn't to an Irishman.

I say, "You send this money to Mr. Roberts; to what address?"

"I send the letter to General Delivery. In two-three days I get back letter, with my commission."

"Where's the letter mailed, Chicago?"

"Yes, that is why I know Mr. Roberts still live here."

"Well, it's a nice racket for you, Prince. As long as you get your dough, what're you kicking about? Why do you want to see Roberts?"

He doesn't like that. He gives me a once-over through his monocle. "Mr. Cragg, I pay you five hundred dollars to find Mr. Roberts. You wish to continue working for me?"

"Why, certainly, Prince!" I tell him. "I was just trying to get a line on Mr. Roberts... Ah, here're the girls."

They look like they'd chewed up the olive branch in the ladies' room. I get up and

say to Betty: "Gosh, I just remembered we're supposed to be at Bill's party."

"I was about to remind you," Betty says smartly.

I say, "So long, Prince. Be seeing you in a day or two."

He grabs hold of Betty's hand and tries to kiss it. She jerks it away. "I just washed it," she tells him.

"But your telephone number? And your address? I like to send you the flowers."

"I've got hay fever," Betty says. "I can't stand flowers. And I haven't got a telephone. I never learned how to work one. So long, Prince."

"Good-by!" snaps Mitzi. "It was nice meeting you."

We exit.

Outside, Betty says, "Nice boy, that Prince. Some woman's husband is going to shoot him one of these days."

"You forget Mamie Kelly. She's got something on him."

"You going to snitch on him?"

"Not yet. Still a few things to settle with him."

"You get anything out of him?"

"Uh-huh, the reason he wants me to find this Roberts. He tried holding out one week and discovered Roberts has a checker on him. My hunch is the Prince prefers a hundred per cent to ten."

The Red Mill is only a couple of blocks from Betty's apartment hotel. I walk east on

Lawrence Avenue with her. I turn her into Winthrop and we are almost to Ainslee before she's aware of it. Then she says, "You're taking me home? What a large evening!"

"Be a large one next time. Maybe tomorrow?"

"You'll probably take me to the Bulgarian or Siberian meeting."

I leave her outside her apartment hotel. She's sore when she goes inside. I can't help it. I'll see her in the morning. There's a couple of little things I still have to do and I have to get up early in the morning.

I go to a stationery store on Broadway that is still open and buy a large children's book, one with stiff covers. I have the clerk wrap it in the reddest paper he has in the store, some glossy Christmas wrapping paper.

Then I get an address label from him and a bunch of postage stamps.

It's a long ride downtown so I take the elevated. I get off at Quincy and walk over to the post office and mail the red package at the mailing window. Then I go to my cheap hotel on Jackson Street and go to bed.



EVEN-THIRTY I get up and have breakfast at Thompson's—without the Death Notices, this time. After which I hoof over to the post office to see if my little trick works. There are a couple of thousand lock boxes in the General Delivery room at the main Chicago post office. To watch them all during the rush hours would take eighteen pairs of eyes. That's why I mailed the book to Mr. Roberts. The postal clerk would put a card in his box, saying there was a package for him. He'd have to call at one of the windows for it.

So I fool around at a writing stand near the windows. I fill out eighteen or twenty post-office money orders for fancy amounts and tear them up or stick them in my pocket. I make one out every time someone comes from a box and goes to one of the windows to get a package.

It's nine forty-five when the red package is handed out. I'm almost caught sleeping, because I'd been expecting a man and this is a girl, a young girl probably just out of high school.

I'm right behind her when she goes out of the post office. She doesn't even suspect she's being followed. She walks north up Clark Street to Monroe, then turns east and goes into a building. I ride up in the same elevator with her to the tenth floor. When she goes in a door I walk over and look at the inscription on it. It reads: "Harker Service Company."

I wait about five minutes, then go inside. The girl I'd followed from the post office is at a typewriter, but another, a big horsy-faced dame, is behind a desk just inside the door. Beside her, against the wall is a big cabinet with narrow pigeon-holes. There are letters in most of the pigeon-holes and another stack on the desk in front of the girl. The red package is there, too.

I say, "I understand you run a business mail service here."

"That's right," the girl replies. "We also take telephone calls, forward mail and provide you with a business address. No room number is necessary. The charge is only \$2.00 per month."

"That's fine," I say. "Now, tell me, does a man named Brown get his mail here?"

She freezes up, right away. "Our service is absolutely confidential!"

"But I got a letter from Brown; he gave this address. I want to see him."



“In that case, you’d have to leave a message for him. Although,” her face twists, “there’s no Mr. Brown in our service.”

“I must have got the address wrong then,” I say.

I go out. There’s a cigar stand in the lobby on the first floor, with a marble game next to it. I buy a package of cigarettes and shove a nickel in the slot of the marble game. There was a sticker on the glass: “For Amusement Only. No Prizes or Awards.”

It’s a bumper game; the steel marbles make electric contact with springs and light up lights and register a score. I waste three nickels, then get some change from the cigar stand. “You’re playing that just for fun, you know,” the cigar stand man warns me.

“Sure, I’m killing time, that’s all.”

I spend a dollar on the game, then loaf around for a half hour and spend another dollar. It’s about eleven-thirty by then and the man at the cigar stand’s getting nervous about me.

I buy a candy bar and get the change in nickels and shove them into the marble game. “That’s costing you money,” the fellow at the stand says.

“So’s the dame I’m’s’posed to meet here!” I snap at him.

He chuckles. “Boy, how you can take it. Two hours!”

I pump two of the steel marbles into the slot and slam them both out with the plunger. Lights go up, a bell rings.

“Jackpot!” the cigar stand man yelps.

“No prizes, huh?” I glare at him. There’s a little knob in the front of the machine. I

pushed it and a small door pops open, exposing a box almost filled with nickels. There are about five pounds of nickels. I stow them in my coat pocket while the cigar stand chap looks on, sick. He’s still afraid that I’m a cop.

I quit then. It’s just twelve when I go into the Gregorian Towers on North Michigan and ride up to Prince Peter’s apartment.

He’s just having his breakfast. He’s wearing a purple dressing gown on which is embroidered a big red monogram.

“You have found him, Mr. Cragg?” he asks eagerly.

“Practically,” I say. “But the expenses on this job are very heavy. If you could let me have another hundred...”

He doesn’t like that. “What do you mean, you have found him—practically?”

“Well, I got past the post office, anyway. A girl gets his mail at General Delivery and takes it to an address on Monroe Street.”

“How do you know it is Mr. Roberts’ mail?” he cuts in. “Hah! Four days I have waited at General Delivery and cannot spot this girl, his messenger.”

“I can understand that. There’re about five thousand boxes there. I knew I couldn’t watch them all, so last night after I left you I bought a big flat book that I knew was too big to put into a post-office box. I had it wrapped in red paper and mailed it to Mr. Roberts. When the girl got this red package, I followed her.”

“To what number on Monroe Street?”

“The Davis Building. Room 1023. It’s a mail address outfit.”

“Mail address? What is that?”

There was a loud knock on the prince's door. He says: "The waiter for these dishes... Come in!"

The door opens and Mamie Kelly, all three hundred pounds of her, comes in. The prince jumps to his feet and turns about four shades whiter.

"Madame!" he exclaims.

She comes all the way into the room. She has something under her arm, a flat red package. The string's broken on the package and the paper disarranged. I can see the cover of a children's book.

I say: "Well, Prince, I must be going."

Mamie Kelly blocks the way to the door. She says, "Stick around, young fellow. Something I want to ask you."

"Yeah, sure," I say. "I'll run over to your store after a while. I've got to report at my office."

She shakes her big head. "No." She takes the book from under her arm and says, "Look, Petel!" and slams it over the prince's head. He goes down to the floor and stays there.

"Get up, you dirty rat!" Mamie Kelly yells.

The prince begins to whine. He sounds like a dog that has been whipped. Big Mamie reaches down and twists one of her meat hooks in the back of his purple dressing gown. She picks him up and tosses him into an easy chair. Man Mountain Dean couldn't have done it easier.

All of a sudden I think of something. Tony Druhar, the Serbian I'd found dead—with his face turned around to his spine...

Maybe you think I don't feel funny. A three-hundred-pound woman, all muscle and bone. My skin gets hot and cold and begins to crawl. What the hell, a man—you could belt him in the jaw, butt him in the stomach or kick him where it'll do the most good. But a woman—can you do those things to a woman?

The prince is as big as me, if not bigger. Yet Mamie Kelly handles him as if he was a baby. She turns to me and says, "So you think you're smart, sending me this book?"

"Me?" I say.

"None of that, now! Delia Harker's a cousin of mine. I never got a package before. When you came in there with your phoney stuff she got me on the telephone. I saw you from across the street fooling around with that damn pin game."

"Mamie!" yelps the Prince suddenly. "*You*— you are W. C. Roberts?"

"Of course I am. How the hell you suppose I got all the money to set you up in this swell hotel? You think I made it in that lousy store I run on Sedgwick for a blind?"

The prince is about ready to faint. I'm not far from it, myself. I'm concentrating on the door, wondering if I can get to it and out, before she can head me off.

Mamie Kelly says, "I give you all that dough, buy you the fancy clothes and what do you do in return? You spend the money on blond floozies, and try to muscle in on my racket. You think I don't know about Druhar?"

"Druhar?" the prince gasps.

"Yes, Druhar, the punk. He was starving, and I gave him a job at the store. He had to nose around, and then try to sell me out to you. Well, he got what he deserved."

“*You* killed him?”

“Like that!” she makes a motion with her two hands like wringing out a wet dishrag.

I take a deep breath and make a dash for the door.

I don’t get to it. Mamie takes a quick step to one side and falls against me. She knocks me spinning and before I can get up, she swoops down on me and grabs my left arm. She twists it behind my back in a hammerlock.

I yell and heave up, trying to turn a forward somersault. A bunch of nickels fall on the floor. And then—

I yelled to high heaven. She breaks my arm. The big, fat murderess! The bones grate in my elbow and I yell bloody murder.

I guess that saves my life. After all, it’s a hotel and she doesn’t want a flock of cops busting in. She lets go of my arm to grab my neck. I have just enough strength left to roll away.

She comes after me again, her big face twisted in a snarl. I can’t see her eyes at all, they’re buried in the fat of her cheeks. I’m so scared of her that I go a little crazy. I kick a chair in her way and she knocks it aside with one punch of her fist.

I try for the door again. She heads me off. I back away and step on some of the nickels that’ve spilled from my pocket.

And then I know what to do. It’s my only chance. Two minutes more in this room with

the amazon—and I’d wind up like Tony Druhar. Only more broken bones.

My left arm is hanging limp at my side and I’m dizzy with the pain of it. But there’s nothing wrong with my right arm. I rip open my coat with my right hand, shrug out of the right side of it and reach over to slide it down my left shoulder.

Mamie makes a noise like a female gorilla and starts for me. I jump back and find myself against the wall. But I’ve got the coat in my hand now, the coat with about five pounds of nickels in the pockets. A half-pound of them in the toe of a sock would have made a dandy black-jack.

She comes at me and I swing the coat with all that’s left in me. The noise she makes when she hits the floor reminds me of the time I got drunk at a dance and fell into the bass drum.

Prince Pete thinks this is a good time to make his getaway, but I beat him to the door and swing the weighted coat in his face.

“Wait a minute, pal,” I say to him. “You made a bargain with me—four hundred bucks more if I found W. C. Roberts for you. There’s Roberts. Now kick in. I need the dough, on account of I figure on quitting my skip tracing job and maybe getting married!”

He pays. Then I pick up the telephone and call police headquarters.

