

*Years Pass and the Ways of Men part – But the Hideous  
Poison of Vengeance Remains Alive!*



*Jenks pounced and struck*

# PAGE *the* MURDERER

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**R**ODDY JENKS stood in rigid astonishment. It was Martin all right. Ten years had made him greyer, more flabby. But despite the fact that he was the last person in the world Jenks expected to see in this big hotel lobby crowded with men at the Retail Hardware Dealers' Convention—here he was, standing over there with a group of men, smiling with that damnable ingratiating smile—that dirty double-crossing smile with which he had won Fanny.

It shot a wild thrill of triumph through Jenks

so that he tensed, drawing back against one of the ornate onyx pillars of the old-fashioned hotel. Ten years! The old hate surged through Jenks, as strongly as it had ten years ago. His twitching fingers crept to his inner pocket. The folded, ivory-handled knife was there. For ten years he had carried it. And now at last the time to use it had come!

Jenks edged into the throng of men, pressing forward to get closer to Martin. There were two hundred men or more here in the jammed lobby.

All, Jenks and Martin included, were wearing the convention badges—little brass medallions with a pendent white silk ribbon—and the dealer's name and city was written on a card in the center of the medallion. Concealing his face, Jenks slouched past Martin and took a swift look at Martin's badge.

Jacob Hartwell, San Francisco! Damned double-crossing coward! He had stayed in the hardware business because that was the only business he knew. But he had changed his name and gone all the way to the Coast, and started over again. No wonder Jenks had never been able to locate him.

Jenks had shoved his way to the hotel desk. A crowd of men were standing there three deep, importuning the clerk, who was far too busy to notice Jenks as he took a swift look at the hotel register.

Jacob Hartwell, San Francisco, Room 814. The room was marked single. No one else was here with Hartwell. Jenks moved away—

Jenks had Room 920. It was almost over 814, one flight above. But there was no fire-escape; nothing to connect the two rooms.

The evening session of the convention was finished. Martin would be coming up to bed presently. Jenks took the crowded elevator to the ninth floor. When the elevator was gone, and the hall momentarily empty, he darted to the stairs, went down to the eighth floor.

The padded, old-fashioned halls were dim. At the recess of the stairhead, Jenks was almost in darkness; and he crouched, staring along the hall to where he could see Room 814.

He had only a minute to wait. The elevator presently disgorged the big flabby Martin, who with his familiar shambling gait, went to his door, opened it, went in and closed it after him.

For another minute Jenks stood tense, with his heart pounding against his ribs; and his fingers clutching the ivory handle of the knife which now was out of its sheaf, ready and waiting after ten years—

His gaze darting watchfully around the hall, Jenks rapped softly on the door of 814. Martin hadn't been inside more than half a minute; he came to the door at once. It was a big, heavy-paneled door; it would muffle the sounds from within—and Jenks would take good care that

there was no scream.

MARTIN opened the door a few inches; Jenks shoved his foot into the opening.

"What do you want?" Martin said.

Jenks' head was down. He mumbled, "A message—" He shoved at the door so that the surprised Martin stepped backward—and Jenks darted through, closed the door and stood with his back to it. The door had a spring lock. Jenks heard it click as it closed.

"You!" Martin gasped.

"Yes. It's me. Caught up with you at last!"

Jenks hardly moved. His right hand dangled at his side so that the bared knife blade was partly behind him. The dim light from a table lamp showed the small bedroom, with its single bed; a wash-stand in the corner, and a single window. Jenks' darting glance saw that the window shade was drawn fully down.

Martin had staggered backward, bumped into a chair and slumped into it where he sat gasping like a frightened toad. The color had drained from his face.

"Why—how are you, Roddy?" he gasped. Sit down, Roddy. How—how you been all these years?"

"I'll stand," Jenks said. "So you dropped the Martin? Hartwell now?"

"Oh—you know that? Why, yes, Roddy. Fan thought—you know, a new start and all that—"

"And then she died," Jenks murmured.

For all that he was chattering with terror, Martin tried to summon a little spunk, "I treated her well," he mumbled. "As good as you would have, Roddy. She'd made a mistake—she didn't love you. She had bad lungs—you knew that."

Martin and Jenks had been pretty well down and out, ten years ago. Then, together, they'd pulled the holdup of a wholesale hardware store in which Jenks was clerk. Eight-thousand-dollar payroll. A man was killed. Martin had blamed Jenks for that—but what the hell? The murder was necessary.

They had split the eight thousand. Then Martin, dirty double-crosser, had persuaded Fanny that Jenks was no good—

JENKS was saying, "I told Fanny what I was going to do to you—that day I found her in

your flat—and she was dying then. I waited for you that day—”

Martin’s eyes clung to Jenks’ face with a fascinated stare; his big flabby hands were writhing in his lap.

“Did you, Roddy? That’s too bad. I did come, later. She—she told me what you’d said.”

“An’ then you beat it,” Jenks rasped. “She was dead when I got back there at midnight. Couldn’t even get a doctor for her, could you? Afraid I’d come in, you damned—”

“Now, Roddy—don’t get excited. That was ten years ago, Roddy. You’ve got it all mixed. We’ve both prospered since, haven’t we? So you’re in the retail line, same as I am? Hope you’re doing well, Roddy—”

Jenks took a step forward. And then Martin saw the knife. His fingers gripped the arms of his chair, half lifting his flabby body as though he didn’t have the strength to jump to his feet. And he gasped:

“Why—why, Roddy, don’t be a fool! That’s all forgotten—I don’t bear any malice—”

He saw the knife coming. It was only a second, as Jenks pounced and struck. The scream choked in Martin’s throat; his flabby hands futilely tried to ward off the knife, but it cut through their fumbling clutch.

Just a second or two, with Jenks stabbing and twisting the knife deep into the flabby chest. He held one hand on the knife handle, and the other clapped over Martin’s mouth. Got him now! Knife in his heart! God, why wouldn’t he die! It was like fighting with a dead man, for the flabby bulk had surged convulsively upward. The hands were trying to clutch at the panting Jenks. The goggling, watery eyes were staring with the agony of death in them.

Just a second or two. Jenks was aware of a clink on the board floor; then all at once the life was gone from Martin so that he sagged, slumped and tumbled against the small side table that held the light. It crashed to the floor, with Martin’s body half on it. The light was extinguished.

Done! The thing was finished. In the silence and darkness there was only Jenks’ panting breath. The drawn window shade was now a big yellow rectangle from the light outside. It filtered in, enough so that now Jenks could see the dead Martin lying twisted on the floor with the knife

handle sticking up from his chest.

Triumph swept Jenks. Nothing to do now but get out of here. But he must wipe the fingerprints off that knife handle. He knelt, carefully wiped them off with his pocket handkerchief. Martin was dead, unquestionably.

The knife sheath! Jenks still had it in his pocket. Like the knife, it could never be identified. He took it out and dropped it on the floor. Now to get out of here. Too dangerous to linger....

In the silence of the dark bedroom suddenly there was a tiny, muffled voice:

*“Hello! Eight-fourteen! Hello—”*

The telephone! It had stood there on the little table behind the lamp, had fallen to the floor where it was lying now with the receiver off the hook and the startled operator’s voice coming from it!

Panic swept Jenks. Should he replace the receiver? What had the girl heard? He must get out of here! The hotel employees would be coming any minute. But there was still time. It was only twenty feet down the hallway to the hall stairs.

Jenks swung for the door and suddenly checked himself. A stabbing memory transfixed him. That clink on the floor, during those seconds while he had fought with the dying Martin! What had clinked?

Mechanically Jenks’ hand went to the lapel of his jacket. His medallion badge! In the struggle it had been knocked to the floor.

**“HELLO!** What’s happened up there?”

Insistent, microphonic voice, engulfing Jenks with panic, as though a third person were here, to be a witness to this killing. But he mustn’t get rattled. His fumbling hands on the floor found the medallion, shoved its tab back into his buttonhole; and in another second he was cautiously opening the door.

But there was no one; and he darted out, closed the door, gained the dark seclusion of the staircase and crouched, panting, with the panic dropping from him now and triumph taking its place.

All finished! So simple! He was no different now than all the other two hundred men here in the hotel who soon would be startled to hear that

one of their number had been mysteriously murdered.

The alarm came even sooner than Jenks had anticipated. A narrow escape indeed, for almost as he reached the stairway, the elevator stopped, disgorging hotel employees who in a moment were pounding on Martin's door; pounding and shouting so that other doors began opening.

Like fire in prairie grass the alarm spread throughout the crowded hotel. The eighth floor corridor all in a moment was thronged with jabbering, excited men. The rapidity of it confused Jenks. He started up the stairs. But the shouting voices and the pounding had carried up there. Guests were at the staircase head; then they started down.

Jenks retreated back to the eighth floor, and from the stairs, unobtrusively he mingled with the crowd in the hall.

"What's up?" he demanded. But the man beside him did not know. At 814 the door was being pounded. Somebody said it was the night manager and the hotel detective. Then a bellboy arrived with a pass-key. The door opened. The manager and the detective burst in.

"Murdered!"

The word rippled over the jostling crowd, bringing an awed silence. Then the babbling voices broke out louder than ever.

"Murdered! Who is he?"

"Holy Mackerel!" Jenks murmured to the man beside him. "Come on—let's take a look—'spose they'll let us?"

But the hotel detective shoved them back. And presently the local police arrived. The door of 814 admitted them and banged closed.

"Jacob Hartwell, his name was," somebody said.

Nobody seemed to know him.

"A pistol shot?" Jenks said.

Nobody knew; then a man said he had heard a bellboy say it was a knife stab. The telephone got knocked over, is how it happened to be discovered—but the telephone girl didn't hear anything that could indicate who the killer was.

Jenks chuckled to himself. What a cinch!

Then suddenly Jenks' heart leaped; his blood turned to ice. Down through the crowded hall a uniformed bellboy was saying:

"Call for Roderick Jenks...Call for Roderick

Jenks...."

It seemed for that second as though all Jenks' senses were wafting away into an abyss of horror, so that the stuffy, crowded hall swam before his gaze.

"Call for Roderick Jenks... Call for Roderick Jenks... Call for Roderick Jenks..."

Jenks clutched for his scattered wits. What was this?

"Call for Roderick Jenks—Oh, hello, Mr. Jenks—there's a call for you—"

Damnably that this bellboy so quickly spotted him—damnably that the bellboy knew him by sight. Because Jenks had ordered a drink and cracked ice, and then cigarettes at suppertime tonight, and had given the boy a lavish tip for his triple errand.

"Oh—call for me?" Jenks said. "Telephone? Which way do I go?"

Then a big, solemn-faced man materialized at the bellboy's elbow. "This way," he said. "The captain wants to talk to you."

The captain! What did that mean! What was wrong? The numbed Jenks felt himself being shoved down the hall, and around him the men were staring with sullen silence. Then there was the door of 814. It opened; yawned with light. Jenks was shoved over the threshold.

"What's happened? What's the matter?"

In the glare of the room light, the big, uniformed police captain loomed over Jenks.

"You're Roderick Jenks? Room Nine-twenty?"

The bellboy had edged himself in here. "That's him." His voice was high-pitched, treble with excitement, "I know him—"

"Y-yes, sir," Jenks stammered. "That's me. What can I—I don't know anything about—"

A flashlight darted to Jenks' chest. And the captain's heavy voice was booming, with a grim, ironic menace:

"So we just had to page the murderer—and he comes with all the evidence!"

"Page me?" Jenks stammered. "Why—why should you—"

"Because you left your name on the floor here," the captain retorted. "Naturally we paged you."

Name on the floor? That little clink as he had struggled with the dying Martin!

Jenks saw his metal medallion as the captain dangled it before him. And with a rush of horror he understood. He had stabbed almost into Martin's badge.

It, too, had been knocked off in the struggle.

Fatal mischance! Jenks' hand went to his coat lapel. Numbly he stared down. It was the badge of Jacob Hartwell hanging on him, with its little silk ribbon crimson with blood.