By
O. B.
MYERS

Tom Farley, police department file clerk, has to go to the hospital before he can understand the—

MONEY ORDER MURDER

THE HOGARTH ARCADE led from the side street to the lobby of the Hogarth Building. Four shops fronted on the arcade, but at eight-thirty on Wednesday evening, three were closed and dark.

The only show window that was lighted held a small neon sign spelling *Diamonds*, and a meager display of watches and bracelets. The name of the firm, lettered on the plate glass, was Bengar & Haupt.

Two men turned into the empty arcade from the street. Peering into the lobby, they could see the night elevator man, dozing in a canvas chair. The doors were marked *Pull*, and all but one were locked. That made it simple to forestall interruption from that quarter. One man took from his pocket a small wedge of

hard wood and with his heel jammed it between the door and the sill, where it was later found.

The other man then entered the jewelry store, one hand deep in his pocket gripping a small calibre automatic. Walter Haupt, the junior partner, was alone in the store, back by the safe.

It was less than a minute before the man standing guard in the arcade heard two reports. Inside the small shop the quick shots cracked like lightning, but little of the sound penetrated the closed door, and still less reached the street. With a muttered curse of apprehension, he jerked open the door and ran inside.

He was just in time to see Walter Haupt, one hand clutched to a crimson blotch on his shirt front, slide to the floor out of sight behind the rear counter.

He cursed again. "You messed this up—but good!"

He ran to the safe and shook the handle, but to no avail. It was a modern strongbox that closed with a snap, and the jeweler, sensing what was coming, had slammed it just in time. The first man meanwhile darted behind the counter and opened the sliding panel. Using the flat of his automatic like a shovel, he scraped rings and brooches into his open hand and stuffed them into his pocket.

In a few moments they were together at the door, pocketing their guns while they peered out into the deserted arcade. From behind the counter came a harsh, gravelly croak, the desperate cry of a dying man fighting for his last breath. They paid it no heed.

Slipping out through the arcade, they were shortly around the corner on the main street, mingling with passersby hurrying toward the movie on the next corner.

In the lobby the elevator man heard faintly, through two closed doors, what he took for a backfire. He rose leisurely, stretched, and strolled toward the arcade entrance. When he found the door jammed, he had to go back, out through the Main Street entrance, and around the corner to discover what had wedged it. A little later he also discovered what lay behind the counter in the jewelry shop.

HE HAD seen the two departing gunmen, but only their backs, and could not tell much. One of medium height, broad through the shoulders—the other shorter, skinny, his coat buttoned tightly around him. Both had been wearing soft hats and dark overcoats; of the colors he was not sure. Such descriptions might fit a thousand men, including the police commissioner himself and his aide.

"They walked like they was in a hurry, but didn't want to show it."

Of course. They would have walked just like that. Anybody could state that, afterward. Of clues to their identity, however, they had left nothing, with the exception of two .32 calibre slugs which the medical examiner dug out of the lungs of Walter Haupt.

This much, and but little more, was known to Inspector Davidson, Chief of Homicide, twenty-four hours after the crime. He sketched it rapidly to Tom Farley, pausing frequently to bite his close-cropped moustache, a sure sign that he was stymied.

"There's a queer angle to this case," he began, then paused, and shifted the subject abruptly. "That old wound of yours, Farley; it has to be treated occasionally, doesn't it?"

Tom Farley was dumfounded. A clerk in the file room, he had been surprised when the inspector sent for him in the first place. In addition to close-clipped, reddish hair, sharp gray eyes, and a laughing mouth, he had a hole in his side where a cannon shell from an ME-109 had bitten

out a chunk just under his lower rib.

This last had gotten him a disabled veteran's preference on the Civil Service list, and hence his job on the force. But it had also secured him, against his wishes, a sedentary assignment in the file room, although he had passed the physical with flying colors. Now he was afraid it would again veto a more active role.

"Oh, no, sir," he said quickly. "Once last year, it got infected, that's all. But that won't happen again—I hope."

The inspector smiled understandingly. "You don't get my idea, Farley—yet. I've got a job for you to do—and that old wound will come in handy. We've found out that Haupt wasn't supposed to be in the store at that time at all. Bengar, the senior partner, was the one who regularly took care of the shop on Wednesday evenings. Haupt took Saturdays. Other nights they close."

"Do you suppose the crooks knew that?"

"I'll bet on it. These stick-ups don't just happen on the spur of the moment, you know. They're pretty well figured out before-hand. Those two hoodlums had probably cased that store for weeks.

"Last night the partners closed up at six-thirty. Haupt went home—he's a widower and lives with his niece in a small apartment on Hollister Avenue. Bengar ate dinner in the Morley Grill—we've checked that. He started back to open up the shop for the evening, but at seven-thirty-five he stepped in front of a taxi on Cedar Street. He was knocked down, unconscious, and a city ambulance took him to St. Agnes Hospital. He was still unconscious at eight-thirty, when the holdup took place, four blocks away."

"Gives him a pretty good alibi, doesn't it?" mused Farley.

The inspector grunted. "So perfect an alibi that I'm suspicious. In fact, we've been questioning that taxi driver all day long. He claims it was an accident."

"How did Haupt know about the accident?" asked Farley.

"He didn't. About eight o'clock he remembered a matter he wanted to talk to his partner about, so he called the store on the phone. When he got no answer he wondered what was wrong. Marion Haupt—that's his niece—urged him to forget it until morning, but he was evidently a worrier. He put on his hat and coat and walked to the store—it's only a few blocks. He found it still locked, and Bengar nowhere in sight. Wondering why, he went ahead and opened up himself. From the cash register, he may have had a customer or two. When the thugs walked in on him, he must have had nerve enough to put up a show of resistance. At eight-thirty-two he was dead."

TOM FARLEY had followed these details closely. "So it was pure chance that Walter Haupt was in the store, rather than Bengar, when the crooks walked in?"

Inspector Davidson chewed at his lip. "It's a mistake to assign to pure chance everything that you can't explain any other way. But I don't see how those crooks could have known about Bengar's accident, unless the accident was part of the plan. And Haupt going back to the store seems like chance, unless his niece was in on some deal that she isn't telling us about."

"A deal to send him out to be murdered?"

The inspector frowned. "She doesn't look the type. She's a cute little blonde number with big eyes, and straight answers. But you can't tell—she's the beneficiary under her uncle's insurance. And cute blondes have done murder before this."

Farley looked unhappy. “And you want me to stooge her?”

“No. It’s Bengar that I want to keep an eye on—for his own protection.” In response to Farley’s look of puzzled surprise, Davidson explained. “Bengar has been in the jewelry business for fifteen years, but back in the twenties he was a bootlegger. He was hooked up for a time with the Higgins mob, and ended up with quite a bankroll. That’s where he got the capital he put into the store. He was never arrested, but he had a reputation as a fast double-crosser.”

“You mean Bengar had something to do with Haupt’s murder?”

“No—I think it was meant to be Bengar’s murder,” declared the inspector. “Fifteen years is a long time, but the underworld has a long memory. Most of the Higgins mob are dead, but even a dead man has brothers, sons, or friends. Somebody could have been waiting, and may have hired a hot rod who didn’t know Bengar by sight. The haul of jewels is so small that I suspect the robbery was just a blind, to confuse us as to the real motive.”

Farley pondered this. “What does Bengar say?”

The inspector grimaced. “He’s no help. Says he knows nothing about the crime at all, and insists he has no old enemies who might want to kill him. But he may be just covering up, and the killer may try again. I want to bodyguard Bengar—but without his knowing it.”

Farley suddenly guessed. “You mean—in the hospital?”

“Yes. You weren’t on the force in the twenties. None of the mob know you—you’ve always been inside. I think you’re the man.”

He proceeded to explain his plan.

At nine o’clock the next morning Tom Farley lay swathed in sheets and blankets on a wheeled stretcher. As it rolled off the elevator and along the corridor, the aroma of ether and disinfectants enveloped him, mingled with that of roasting chicken. He sniffed distastefully.

Nothing showed that he was a cop. He had entered in plain clothes, and was clad now only in pajamas. He had given his occupation simply as *clerk*. His own surgeon, Dr. Avery, knew of the charade, but no one else. Nurses and orderlies all thought him merely a case of abdominal re-surgery, as did the other occupant of Room 216, a semi-private on the third floor.

The orderly transferred him deftly to the bed, tucked in the blankets, and departed. Farley lay with his eyes closed, breathing slowly.

After several minutes Dr. Avery came in, smiling and jovial.

“Well, how does it feel now? Better than last time? Just take it easy, my boy. I think we got all the old iron out of your ribs, this time. You won’t feel like eating much today, but by tomorrow you’ll be chipper as a nipper.”

FARLEY, playing his part, fluttered his eyelids and essayed a weak smile. After the doctor had left, he pretended to sleep for most of the morning, occasionally shifting as if restless, or moaning faintly through his teeth. But it was nearly noon before he turned on the pillow and murmured a tentative greeting to the other occupant of the ward.

The man in the other bed was sitting up amid the wreckage of a thrice-read newspaper. He wore a cotton bathrobe, provided by the hospital, and a single width of bandage was wound about his head. This rumpled his rusty brown hair, and gave a somewhat rakish slant to his features, which all focussed to a sharp point at the end of his nose. His eyes were small, dark, and greedy, and darted

uneasily from side to side. He made Farley think of a woodchuck trapped at some distance from its hole; a blend of fear and cunning.

"What's *your* trouble?" he asked. "Appendix?"

Farley shook his head, and explained about his old wound.

They conversed intermittently during the afternoon. At first, like most patients, they discussed chiefly the hospital, their symptoms, the food, and the nurses. Farley gradually veered to other topics, but he risked no direct questions about Bengar's past, and he didn't learn much. Bengar was skillfully noncommittal.

At five Dr. Avery reappeared, bringing with him an orderly who lifted Farley to the wheeled stretcher. This time he was taken, not to the main operating room, but to a small room at the end of the same floor used for changing dressings and minor surgery.

The physician threw back the sheet and fussed with the bandages about Farley's torso until the orderly had closed the door behind him. Then he leaned down to whisper quickly.

"You've got a visitor."

He stepped out, bringing Inspector Davidson back with him. Farley sat up, to ease the stiffness in his muscles.

"Well, you got a reading on him, Farley?"

"Not much yet, sir. One thing, he's not faking injuries. The bruise on his leg, and the gashes in his head, are certainly real. He told me all about the taxicab accident, and it sounds on the up and up, the way he describes it. He talks about the stick-up, too, but only what he could have read in the paper."

"I see." The inspector chewed his mustache, frowning. "But does he act scared, like a man who expects an attempt on his life?"

Farley shook his head. "I wouldn't say so, no. Just puzzled, and curious about what was going on. He was curious about me at first, I think. He asked if I had ever known Rip Mason, or Petey Atelli. I said no—but don't we have an Atelli in the files?"

The inspector grunted. "Sure—in the dead file. One of Higgins' lieutenants, got bumped off in nineteen-thirty-one. And Rip Mason was one of the Schultz mob. He kicked off in that Jersey massacre, in thirty-two.

"Why should he ask me about dead men?" inquired Farley.

"Just feeling you out to see if you'd ever been hooked up with the mobs." The inspector chewed moodily. "Well, keep an eye on him. He's the only lead we've got to this killing. But don't let him get wise to you, Farley. If he guesses that you're a cop, he'll certainly shut up like a clam."

It was after the inspector had left, and Farley was back in his bed, that an uneasy possibility entered his mind. The old enemy who had tried once to get Bengar might well try again. His agent had made a mistake in identity the first time. If the killer now walked into this room intent on murder, he might easily make a mistake again.

It was not exactly a comfortable thought.

BUT DURING the next two days very few outsiders walked into that room. Farley had no visitors, Bengar very few. An insurance investigator for the taxi company, and then Miss Marion Haupt.

On this second conversation Farley used his ears avidly, and after one look at the trim figure in the chic black suit, he used his eyes, too. She was something to stare at, with her honey-colored hair and deep brown eyes. Just the type of front-page beauty, he thought, for whom men

commit murder. But, he reminded himself, it was her uncle who had been killed, not her husband or lover. And Bengar certainly neither looked nor acted the part of a lover.

She conversed frankly, impersonally, as she might have with any older business acquaintance, and almost wholly on business topics. She had temporarily given up modeling to straighten out her uncle's affairs—a difficult task. Like most jewelry stores, this one ran in the red all year and made up its profits in the Christmas season. Now, in the fall, it was heavily stocked, but low on cash.

"Don't worry about it, Marion," Bengar reassured her. "I'll be out of here shortly, and take care of everything for you."

She had brought him his mail, some advertising matter and a single letter which she had picked up at his home. He stared at the letter for a moment, then ripped it open with his little finger.

Farley saw him take from the envelope a long, pale blue slip of flimsy paper. Bengar peered at it briefly. His lip twitched, although he seemed to be making a deliberate effort to keep his face expressionless. Then he tucked it quickly under his pillow.

"Anything there I can handle for you?" asked the girl.

"No, thanks, I'll take care of it. I ought to be back at the store by tomorrow, I hope. I'll take care of everything."

She rose, glanced once at Farley, and left abruptly.

At the door she almost ran into the floor interne.

"All right, Mr. Bengar. If you'll come down the hall with me, I'll examine you there. Make it under your own steam, can't you?"

Bengar threw back his blankets and left the bed eagerly.

Farley waited long enough for them to reach the room at the end of the corridor. Then he slipped softly out of his own bed and stepped over to the other. His fingers glided under the pillow and came out with the lightly crumpled slip of blue paper.

Yes, just as he had thought, it was a postal money order, in the amount of two dollars. But oddly, it was made out, not to Anton Bengar, but to Harry Morel, whose address was shown as 361 West Elm Street. Tom read it a second time to be sure. That was strange. Why should anyone send Bengar a money order made out to someone else?

A mistake? This case seemed to be full of puzzling mistakes. Yet Bengar himself, when reading it, had not questioned it, nor shown any sign of being puzzled. He had merely tucked it away as if it were a personal matter that he understood perfectly.

Farley slid it back under the pillow and had returned to his own bed by the time Bengar came back from his examination. The bandage had been removed, exposing a crooked weal above his ear.

"Well, they're going to discharge me tomorrow morning," he informed Farley with evident pleasure. "They're bringing my clothes up from the storage room now. So this is my last night."

"You're lucky," murmured Farley. "Take a drink for me."

Bengar shrugged, and sprawled carelessly on his bed.

But Farley had taken advantage of the other's absence from the room to wad his handkerchief behind a picture on the opposite wall so that it tilted as a mirror. Now his foresight paid off. He saw that Bengar, unaware of his scrutiny, unobtrusively slid his hand under the pillow and tucked the money order in his pajama pocket.

What fantastic solicitude for two

dollars!

Hospitals run on an early time schedule. They had eaten their dinner before six, were briefly inspected by the night nurse at eight, and turned out the light to go to sleep at nine. Bengar seemed restless, but Farley who readily adjusted himself to any routine, dropped into a deep slumber within five minutes.

HE AWOKE slowly, drifting into consciousness with the knowledge that he had not been asleep very long. He slitted one eye, saw that the room was dark, and closed it again. Then he became aware of sound—doubtless the sounds that had awakened him. They were very small sounds, but definite. Someone was moving in the room.

Now he opened both eyes wide, and turned his head slowly on the pillow. In the unrelieved blackness he made out a blacker shadow, over by the closet. At the same time he heard the sound of a man breathing.

He had lived with Bengar now for three days, day and night, and had come to know the rasping hiss of his inhalations. That was Bengar; he was up, moving about the room in the dark. Why?

Farley lifted his head a few inches, but did not speak or sit up. Now he saw that the blot of shadow was moving, gliding past the foot of his bed. In another instant the door swung quietly open. Against the dimly lighted corridor he saw plainly the silhouette of his roommate. Bengar was fully dressed, and carried his hat in his hand. The door eased shut with a faint click behind him.

At once Farley swung his feet to the floor and reached for the lamp on the night-table. When it flashed on, he saw that the other bed was empty. Astonished, he realized that Bengar had got up, put on his clothes, and departed. He was still puzzling over the why of this action when his glance came to rest on the rumpled pair of hospital pajamas draped on the foot of the other bed.

He jumped up and grabbed the coat, to feel in the small breast pocket. It was empty.

He dropped the garment and opening the door, peered up and down the long corridor. There was no one in sight. For a moment he was nonplussed—this development had taken him by surprise. What would the inspector want him to do now? There was no time to relay a message and ask for instructions. He remembered, however, that his primary job was to give Bengar protection, and that meant sticking with him. He hurried out into the hushed hall, completely disregarding the fact he was only wearing—pajamas—a light bathrobe and slippers.

A small lamp burned on the desk near the elevator, but the night nurse was busy elsewhere. Farley thumbed the button, but then took to the stairs, his sense of urgency increasing.

On the main floor a middle-aged attendant sat at a desk just inside the reception office. She sat stiffly erect, her expression severe.

“Did Bengar go out by here?” demanded Farley. “From Room two-sixteen.”

She stared in amazement. “Of course not. No one has gone out in the last half hour, except Dr. Hayes. And Mr. Bengar is not due for discharge until tomorrow morning. What are you doing, running around like this? You’re a patient. You should be in your bed.”

But Farley was no longer listening. There was no time to explain now who he was, what he was doing there, and why he was interested in Bengar. The man certainly had not gotten up and dressed

fully to visit around the halls. Like all hospitals, this one had many entrances and exits. Bengar had doubtless found another one and slipped out. To go—where?

Farley suddenly clapped his palm to his temple. He wheeled, straight-armed the protesting attendant out of his way, and ran to the outer doors. The night air hit him with a biting shock, reminding him that he wore only a cotton bathrobe over his pajamas. But there was no time to worry about costume now.

There was a taxi stand in front of the hospital. Usually at least one cab stood there at all hours. But now it was empty. He hurried to the corner, but covered two and a half blocks before he found a cab on Bryant Avenue.

"When you don't want a taxi, they run over you," he muttered. "But when you need one, you have to advertise in the paper."

The driver did a double-take, his second glance noting in astonishment Tom's costume. But Farley merely yanked the robe about him and leaped into the cab.

"Three-sixty-one West Elm," snapped Farley. "And make it fast."

He was about to add, "Two bucks if you make it in two minutes;" but remembered that he had no money. He also remembered that he did not have his police shield. That problem would have to wait.

THERE WAS something in Farley's voice that conveyed urgency to the driver. He stepped on it. A red light held him up at Main, but beyond that he made good time.

The western extremity of Elm Street had never been a high class neighborhood. Now it verged on a slum, warehouse and gas works squeezing the breath out of the few remaining tenements. No. 361 was the second of a pair of narrow brownstone fronts, once private residences, now seedy, third-class rooming houses.

The cab jounced to a halt. Farley sprang out and said to the driver, "Wait for me!"

"Hey, wait a minute, Mister!" cried the cabby suspiciously.

"I'm going right back," snapped Farley. "D'you think I'd stay out on the streets like this?"

That silenced the driver for the moment. Farley whirled and took the steps two at a time. The front door was not latched.

Only after he was inside, swathed in the dank aroma of sour sweat and stale cooking, did he realize that he still had a problem. This was presumably the home of a man named Morel, to whom someone owed two dollars. But how to find him? The hall was dark, so that Farley could barely make out the stairs, leading upward into gloom.

A few squares of cardboard were tacked to the wall. But the flicker of a match told him that none bore the name of Morel. The upper floors were silent, but as the match flame died he heard the murmur of voices. They seemed to come from beneath his feet.

To anyone else entering the house, they would probably have meant nothing. But to Farley they carried a half-guessed significance. He felt his way back along the dark hall until, at an angle in the base of the stairs, he found a door which from its position had to lead to the cellar. The fact that the door was locked confirmed his suspicions. What honest man ever locked himself in the cellar?

He shouldered it testingly, then drew back a pace and crashed it full force. The old lock splintered, and he was half sliding, half stumbling, down a steep flight of open wooden steps.

He caught just one quick glimpse of a

dank, murky basement, cluttered with ash cans and empty cartons. Bengar cowered against a wooden partition, his mouth agape with terror. In front of him stood a gaunt, stoop-shouldered man with his coat collar turned up, his hat brim pulled down, and an automatic gripped in his hand.

This man snarled, "Get him, Tug!" before Farley had time to see the other figure, crouched at the side of the stair.

The blow came from the side, a blind flash. Luckily it did not land square, but it caught Farley off balance, and he plunged in a sprawling heap to the concrete floor.

He was not out, nor even stunned, but for a moment he feigned helplessness while a broad-shouldered young hoodlum with a hard face bent over him to pat his pockets and his armpits.

The skinny man with the gun snarled viciously at Bengar.

"I thought you said nobody was comin' with you?"

Bengar's face was pale with amazement and fear.

"Why, he's from the hospital!" he stammered. "The other bed—he had an operation! I don't know him, I swear!"

The thin man focussed his gaze on Farley's face. Something about Tom's square-jawed assurance aroused his suspicions.

"He's a copper!"

The gaunt man wheeled savagely on Bengar.

"So—double-crossed us again, eh! Bringin' a copper with you! Smart guy, eh? You rat! We shouldda known!"

WITH each phrase he struck. His fist sank into Bengar's middle. Then he kicked him in the stomach. As Bengar folded forward, the hand with the gun lashed upward into his face. Blood spurted as he collapsed limply on the floor. The thin man continued to beat and kick him savagely, hissing and snarling like an enraged animal.

Meanwhile the square-shouldered youth stood over Farley, a foot's length of loaded rubber hose poised in his hand. When Farley clapped his hand to his bandaged side and moaned, Tug spoke warningly.

"Take it easy, copper! Or you'll get yours, too!"

Farley slid his hand under the top layer of bandages. In another instant he jerked it out, holding a dull finished police positive. The gun that the inspector had brought him after he had pointed out that, lying in bed unarmed, he was poor protection for Bengar.

"Drop that gun!" he commanded. "Back up against the wall!"

The thin man wheeled at the command. But he did not drop the automatic. Instead he pressed the trigger.

The first slug ripped like a hot poker through Farley's left forearm. Before the next one came he was on the move. A shifting target is hard to hit, and at close quarters a trained man can fire with equal accuracy while moving. He darted left, then right. The roar of his revolver mingled with the flat bark of the automatic, and the echoes filled the narrow cellar.

The .38 slugs were heavy. The skinny man went down on his side. He was mortally wounded, but still dangerous. Farley held his fire.

The automatic barked once more. But not at Farley.

Whether by accident or design, no one would ever know, but the last slug drilled Bengar's skull, lying three feet away.

The chunky youth was halfway up the flight of stairs.

"Come down here!" ordered Farley, whirling. "Keep them high! Now you haven't done murder yourself, perhaps.

But you're deep in this, and if you want to get out without sitting in the hot chair, you'd better talk!"

Tug talked—he practically talked his head off.

"Bengar was at the bottom of it," Farley told the inspector, later. "His idea was to pull a fake hold-up, collect the burglary insurance in full, and then split the actual swag with the crooks, afterward. They were to pull it on Wednesday night, when Bengar would be in the store alone, and would have the safe open for them to grab plenty."

"How did he get hold of Tug Gaffer and Blackie Downs?"

"Through his old contacts with the Higgins' crowd. They knew his reputation for a double-crosser, but it looked to them like a cinch. They would be holding the loot themselves, not Bengar, so how could he chisel on them? Nobody could foresee that Haupt would be in the store, and that Haupt would resist."

"The taxi accident wasn't part of the plan, then?"

Farley shook his head. "No. It was sheer accident. But Tug and Blackie wouldn't believe that, any more than you did. Its effect was to force them into committing murder, and to cut down their take to a small fraction of what they expected. They were sore. No hoodlum likes to murder—he risks the hot seat instead of a prison sentence. And they figured that Bengar had double-crossed them."

"Why didn't Bengar stay away from them, afterward?"

"Greed," said Farley flatly. "And he didn't realize how sore they were. He was uncertain at first, but he figured the taxi accident, being genuine to him, would be genuine to them. And when they sent him word to come get his split, he fell for it."

"How did they do that?"

"The money order. That had been arranged beforehand. There is no such person as Morel. But it gave him the address where he was to meet them, and it gave him the day. Two dollars—the second of the month. That's why he had to slip out of the hospital last night."

Farley nodded thoughtfully to himself. "Funny thing about that money order—if they had made it out to him, I would never have suspected it. But I couldn't imagine why Bengar should receive an order that was made out to another man's name."

The inspector grinned. "Curiosity kills cats, but makes cops."

A little later Tom Farley regarded his hastily bandaged arm. "They'll think I'm crazy, in that hospital, coming back with a wound in a different place."

Inspector Davidson regarded him benevolently. "The commissioner won't think you're so crazy, Farley," he said.