

Smoke Scream

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Hambone Noonan, Hinkey's flatfoot chief, usually hooked for free anything he wanted, such as pushcart bananas. But when Hambone lit up a black market stogie he'd lifted from a cadaver's cigar case, it was up to Hinkey to pay the murder-written tobacco bill.

SGT. LOUIS GARFUNKLE
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DEAR LOUIE:

Saw Eva last night. She said she heard from you Friday, and you was griping because you couldn't get the Gothic line when you wanted it. You should beef, Louie. Here we can't get sirloins, nylons, the kind of butts we smoke, or many other articles—so don't think it is so soft here on the home front.

We have trouble with a black market, which is not a store in Harlem but speakeasies for all kinds of rationed

products. Imagine a dame going to a joint on West Fortieth, say, and pushing a little buzzer. Then telling a guy who opens a peephole that Benny sent her and told her she could get the swellest bobby pins at an unreasonable price.

C'est la guerre, Louie. A black market business helped us solve a very strange double rub-out which had me and Hambone Noonan quite puzzled. Hambone is about the same as usual. Only his feet are getting a little flatter, his noggin harder, and he thinks Dumbarton Oaks is a flunky for Churchill.

But enough of Noonan, Louie. It is one day some cops find a corpse up on Katonah

Avenue in the Woodlawn section of the Bronx. Me and Hambone go up and look at it. We learn that the extinct was on the tax roll as Humbert K. Wangle and was quite a respected citizen in his neighborhood. He even sang baritone in a church choir and sent eight underprivileged sprouts to a camp every summer.

The cadaver is about six foot in length. When it was alive, it was not hard on the eyes, especially the face. It has a nice long nose and a kind face, lean like G. Cooper's.

Some citizens gathered about tell us that Wangle did not have an enemy in the world.

"He had a friend then that wasn't too good fer him," Hambone says skeptical. "Once I heard a famous man say he could always take care of himself against enemies, but he wished somebody would pectect him from some of his friends. Was he robbed?"

"There is a hundred and ten bucks in that roll we took off him," a cop says. "And we found it not sewed up in his clothes either. He also wears a diamond ring they would not sneer at if you tried sellin' it for six C's, Noonan. This is goin' to be tough as the victim was so honest I can't believe it."

"The suit he's got on must of cost a hundred," I says. "The cigars there they took off him are no smudge pots."

"Well, he won't smoke no more of them," Hambone says. "Have one, Alvin."

"I can think of easier ways to git sick," I says. "You are a ghoul, Hambone."

"Noonan is right," a cop says. "I ain't had a cigar like that in years. There ain't no harm in it."

"Awright," I agree. "I got a politician friend I want to keep in good with. I'll take one."

HAMBONE and a cop light their cigars. They sit down by the corpse

and puff at the coffin spikes and say "Oh" and "Ah" over and over, and run the stogies along under their bugles to get the aroma.

"I feel like a big business magnet," Hambone says. "Git the smell of real Havana, Alvin?"

"Look, is this a smoker or a corpse we are attending?" I ask. "Shouldn't we keep interrogatin' the friends of the deceased? What his business was? His past or his love life?"

"You tryin' to tell me how to conduct a investigation, Alvin Hinkey?" Hambone sniffs. "I was makin' headlines when you was still trying to swaller your first safety pin. Awright, you in the green overcoat, tell us about Wangle."

"I live next door to him," the citizen says, and identifies himself as Gregory Ganseneffer. "He lived with his sister. It was me found the corpse on my way to the station this A.M. Somebody shot him."

"That we know," Hambone says impatiently. "Who done it?"

"If every citizen who found a corpse could tell you cops that," Ganseneffer snorts, "we would not be broke supporting a police force in the manner they are accustomed to."

"Nobody in the world had a reason to murder Humbert. He had a nice real estate and insurance business downtown and never went out nights after eight o'clock. He never drank or went around with dames."

"Then he should not miss bein' alive," Hambone quips. "Hmmm, shot with a Betsy while his back was turned. This is a crime that could easy go unsolved, Alvin."

"You can say that again," I counter.

"He was dead about eleven hours when he was found," the medical examiner says. "Now how did it happen, Ganseneffer, you just happened over a corpse who was almost hid by that big bush, huh?"

“My dog follers me to the station every morning,” Ganseneffer says with heat. “He put up a fuss. I went to see why, and there was poor Humbert. Are you accusin’ me?”

“Everybody in the world is guilty unless they are innocent,” Hambone says, “Ever have differences with Humbert Wangle?”

“Only once,” Ganseneffer admits. “We had one difference of opinion over who was to be elected vestryman three days ago. I said Irwin Schneck was the logical man. Humbert insisted it should be Mervin Ashpelter, as he suspected Irwin of digging into the collection plate.”

“Now we are uncoverin’ the sordid mess, Alvin,” Hambone says. “Sometimes there is quite a take when the plate is passed around. If Irwin was making some hay, he could have had a citizen splitting with him. Ganseneffer admits he was for Irwin, and if Irwin didn’t get in a vestry again, Ganseneffer’s racket—”

Louie, I sit down and hold my noggin in my hands. Hambone keeps questioning the neighbors. One says Ganseneffer was the top man in Civilian Defense pistol practice and could split a letter T on a tomato can label from a hundred paces.

“You are the only suspect,” Hambone says to the outraged Bronxite. “You give me an alibi from eight last night to as of now, pal. Worse murders have took place in my time because of less reason. Awright, the law is waitin’, Ganseneffer.”

“Sure,” the character says. “I was—now look here, it is none of your business! This is a democracy and I know my bill of rights!”

“So do I,” Hambone says, looking at me with triumph written all over him. “It says a citizen is entitled to a speedy trial in a court of law in front of a jury of his peers.”

“Peers,” I says.

“I went to school as much as you, Alvin. Piers are what you tie big steamboats to. You keep out of this,” Hambone says. “Why can’t he give an alibi?”

“You got me there,” I says.

“Wa-i-i-t a minute,” Hambone yelps and grabs Ganseneffer’s sleeve as the citizen tries to edge away. “I got to hold you for questionin’. If Wangle had no enemies nowhere else, he had to have one around home. Let’s go and talk to a D.A., Ganseneffer. Maybe you will stop havin’ amnesia when you see him.”

TWO hours later the citizen will not give an alibi, so they hold him over in the big sneezer downtown. I am coming out of the bastille, when who do I meet but a citizen who is a brother of a girl who knows a girl who is close to the doll who jots down shorthand for The Little Flower himself, the guy I told Hambone I like to stand in with. This character has a desk job with the sanitation department, and possibly keeps on file the numbers of all the ashcans in New York.

“Ev’nin’, Mr. McGonigle,” I says. “Remember me? I am the detective you met at a party Agnes Schlossbutz threw a couple weeks ago. Have a cigar.”

“Don’t mind if I do, pal. Can’t place you right off,” McGonigle says, and takes a sniff at the Corona. “Pinch me, I’m dreamin’.” He looks at me funny, Louie, after taking a gander at the fancy band wrapper around the smudge pot.

“Awright,” I says. “So if that’s a hunk of dried broccoli, don’t blame me. I don’t know a White Cockatoo from a La Corona Imperfecto. It was given to me an’—”

“Look, pal,” McGonigle says. “Let’s stop in somewhere and have a beer.”

“Oke,” I says.

We have two beers. Then this McGonigle says, “Hinkey, this is an Ante

Bellumo cigar and costs sixty cents. Where would you get it? What big racketeer are you bosom pals with?"

"Now look here," I says. "I do not care if you are the custodian of the mayor's fire helmet. You can't accuse me like that. Why, the idea! I never was so—I ought to punch you right in the nose. I will not sit here and—"

"Look, Hinkey," McGonigle says. "These cigars are worth a dollar apiece to the big shots and citizens who sit in front of clubhouse windows. They are at a premium as I heard a councilman tell LaGuardia only a week ago. They can't be had."

"Then how have I got one?" I says to the wiseacre.

"Tell *me*, Hinkey."

I do. Then McGonigle says, "Funny, huh? Three months ago a warehouse loaded with Ante Bellumos was cleaned out over on Eleventh and Thirty-ninth. I wonder how much a certain character paid for this one? Let's look him up and ask him, Hinkey. I'll give you a swell lead toward a big black market. You can keep it to yourself—"

"The man who give it to me is dead," I says. "I mean a cop took it off the deceased an'—"

"Yeah? Well, you better find out where the corpse got it, Hinkey. I couldn't tell you how to go about that. You take this cigar band an' hold it for evidence, and I'll finish the cigar. Didn't the murdered guy have no relatives?"

"A sister," I says.

"Well," McGonigle says. "I'll be moseyin' along, Hinkey. Maybe I been makin' a Carlsbad Caverns out of a gopher hole, and that corpse put in a big supply of these babies before they was beginning to git scarce. Just forgit it, huh?"

I go over to the booth after McGonigle leaves and call up Hambone Noonan. "I got an angle on the Wangle killin'," I says. "It

looks like maybe Wangle was puttin' on a respectable front, and all the time was a black market operator. Here's the way I figure it. I—"

"Look, Alvin," Hambone says. "You stop readin' comic detectives. An' how is it you always call me when I am holdin' at least a full house here in the back room? I do the thinkin' for us, Alvin. Since when did an apprentice lay the bricks and the expert worker hand them to him? Anyways, the D.A. suspects Ganseneffer like I do."

"I'm awful sorry, Hambone," I says.

LOUIE, I go uptown and see the late Humbert Wangle's sister. She has a pan that makes you think of early Gothic architecture. She is wearing a high-necked taffeta dress that was the last thing in style when the first Roosevelt lit out for San Juan Hill. She is a spinster and is quite bereft, and surrounded by damp hankies.

"It is an awful time to bust in," I says to Miss Wangle. "But the mail must go through—I mean the law has to keep goin'. Did you, by any chance, take possession of your brother's personal effects, after he was taken to the—you know?"

"I did," the doll sniffs.

"He liked his cigars best of every thin'," I prompt.

"It was poor dear Humbert's only vice," she confesses. "For awhile he could not get the kind he liked and was hardly fit to live with. Then he told me he had found some and was a changed man. His clothes and things are up in his room. If you wish to look them over, go right ahead, Inspector."

"Inspec—? Er, quite right, Ma'am," I says.

I go upstairs and finally walk into a room that smells of the remains of hundreds of stogies, so I know it belonged to Humbert. I find a memo book and look

through it. There are names of buildings and stores and such that a real estate operator has to have if he wants to rent or sell them.

One of them sounds funny to me as citizens assured us that Wangle was no penny ante real estate man. The address is Joe's Stationery & Cigar Store on Tenth Avenue. I slip the memo book into my pocket, Louie, and go out.

Seven hours later I am standing a block from a very second rate hotel known as The Luxuro on Third Avenue and a Hundred Twenty-sixth Street looking down at a corpse with Hambone Noonan. This cadaver is one that looks like it deserved all it got.

The defunct has a pair of eyes so close together, he would have only needed one lens to wear if forced to consult an oculist. His mouth is as thin as a line in an etching. There is an old scar starting at his left ear lobe which ends up at the point of his chin.

Hambone finds something in the corpse's pocket and starts shaking. "L-look, Alvin," he says. "It is what they call a coincidents. What does this character have jotted down on the back of that piece of paper, the address of Humbert K. Wangle, Real Estate & Insurance?"

"Here is also a gat," a cop says. "It is loaded!"

"He could of shot Wangle," I says. "We can tell if the bullet they took out of Wangle came from this gun. But who shot him?"

"Wangle would not associate with such riff-raff," Hambone gulps. "Now, here is a key to a hotel room. We will go to the flophouse, an' ask who he registered under. This is worse than a opium dream. Here is the corpse who killed Wangle, maybe. But you can't lock up a corpse. This reminds me once of a pitcher I saw in a book where big fish kept swallowing little fish. Then a

bigger fish would swallow the big fish an'—how long could this go on, Alvin?"

We go to the hotel which is quite a dump, Louie. A big fat geezer says the deceased registered there as John L. Sullivan.

"It has to be a fake name," Hambone says.

"Hugh," I says. "We better call up the fight commissioners to be sure, Hambone." I sigh and paw at my face. Then I suggest the corpse might have a record.

"That scar never was got at a Sunday school picnic."

"Of course," Hambone sniffs. "That is only routine, Alvin."

I see a classified directory open and upside down on the late taxpayer's iron bed. It is open at real estate operators. I look for Humbert Wangle's address and find it. Then I look all over the wall at the head of the bed. Sure enough there is Humbert's name and address scribbled on the plaster where the paper is torn off.

"See that, Hambone?" I says. "This defunct citizen we found came to town just to consult Humbert Wangle. It looks like Humbert must have had a past that was quite illegal, and it caught up with him. We should hurry downtown and look at the records and the art gallery. Ain't this excitin'?"

"It'll drive me nuts," the big lummo says. "I hate chain murderin'."

DOWNTOWN, we check up on citizens who are wanted out of town worse than a letdown in butter rationing. We compare fingerprints taken off both Wangle and John L. with smudges on file.

Yeah, Louie, there is a record for the second corpse. He is an escaped convict from Pennsylvania and was doing five years for robbery and had one to go when he went over the wall. The warden of the Keystone State sneezer had the character

billed as Frankie "The Snipe" Killigger.

Frankie was picked up after appropriating a payroll in a dishonest manner in Trenton. But they found none of the moolah on him. All the grilling in the book could not make him divulge the name of his partner or where the take was stashed. Fingerprints on the safe tripped Frankie. A night watchman who recovered from having two bullets inserted in him gave a description of Frankie's ally as best as he could.

"It is quite plain," I says. "Frankie took the rap to protect his part of the loot. When he made contact once more with his old pal, he found the citizen had squandered the legal tender on wine, women, and song, or had put it in a business such as buying or selling real estate and such?"

"Humbert Wangle!" Hambone says. "You are learnin' fast under me, Alvin. Read the description of the crook who was supposed to have robbed the Gribble Girdle and Foundation Company, Alvin. 'Six foot tall and a long straight nose an'—"

"Yeah," I says. "We are very sure Frankie rubbed out Humbert. But who erased Frankie, Hambone? Maybe there was a third crook in on the payroll. We will have to wait and see, I suppose, until somebody boffs him. Oh. I'm goin' to leave this all up to you, Noonan, and look in on a little black market tip I got. Really, this is a case that will take more brains than what I got."

"That is what I like in a man, Alvin," Hambone says. "Admits his limitations an' is willin' to let more experienced hands take over. You an' me'll go places as a team some day, Alvin. Good luck with the black market. If I need you—"

I am not too concerned over two citizens getting only what they should have received, Louie. It is these black markets that I will not stand for.

I go over to Tenth Avenue and walk

into Joe's Cigar Store. It is only a hole in the wall where most of the mags on sale are about hayburners and how to beat the bookies. There is a little cigar case with only a few stogies on display. On duty is a little character with a bluish nose and a scowl that looks permanent.

Standing there being waited on is a very opulent-looking individual whom you would expect to see tapping for attention on the cigar counter at the Waldorf or the Ritz. The frowsy attendant reaches under the counter and produces a fancy cigar box and opens same. All the time he looks at me just as if I was holding up the joint.

"Yeah," the little character says. "We only save the pop'lar brands for our ol' customers, Mr. Brownley. You can have five today. A dollar—"

The customer hands the clerk a bill, picks up five cigars, and strolls out. It could have been a buck or a five-spot. I was very sure it was the latter, as I have seen those colored bands on the coffin spikes before. Then in comes a tall character and pushes by me. He turns and asks the clerk how things are going.

"Okay, boss. Awright," he sneers at me. "What you want?"

Louie, I look at the boss of Joe's Cigar Store then. If you had propped Humbert Wangle's corpse upright and painted a thin black mustache on it, you would have the boss of Joe's Cigar Store.

"I am registerin' votes," I says. "How many here? Names, please?"

"Look, Bub," the big guy snaps. "I wa'n't born yesterday. What's your business?"

"Well, I will git down to business," I says. "There was a citizen murdered uptown who smoked Ante Bellumo cigars. We heard they was not to be had. His name was Humbert Wangle. I just saw this geezer hand out some of the dollar stogies. Maybe Humbert was one of your

customers, seein' as he had your store marked down in his memo book. Joe's ain't for, sale, is it?

"No, it ain't," the guy says. "Awright, so maybe the guy was a customer. So I lose one, huh? If a wholesaler sells me a few boxes of the Coronas, I should ask where he got 'em, huh?"

"Let's divert," I says. "A ginzo named Frankie Killigger was murdered not so long ago. Near the Luxuro Hotel. We are quite sure he rubbed out Humbert Wangle. It is quite a coincidence that he looks like you, pal—the first corpse."

"What goes?" the frowsy looking clerk yelps.

"Pipe down," the big guy says. "I got to hear more."

"Look," I says, "When Frankie came to town, he looked up Humbert Wangle in a phone book. So he must have known long ago the name of the character who helped him knock off a payroll. He gets on Wangle's trail, finally spots where he lives, and goes in ambush like a Jap sniper. He fixes Humbert Wangle's wagon. He is surprised not long after to feel the bite of a Betsy himself. Now it would seem to me that Frankie knocked off a citizen he only thought was his old partner. There had to be another geezer looked almost like him."

A FUNNY look starts coming into the eyes of the owner of Joe's Cigar Store. Then it all comes to me which almost cost me my life as usual. I do not have sense enough to stop from thinking out loud, I am so proud of my brains.

"Now," I goes on. "When a certain character learned that a Humbert Wangle was murdered, he knew right away it was a mistake and should have been him. So he knows right off his old pal has hopped the sneezer over in Pennsylvania and is on the prowl so he must get the citizen before he gets him. He remembered that at one time

Frankie hung out at a certain hotel.

"I am quite sure Humbert Wangle had a skeleton in a closet, and it belonged to a wayward brother or somethin'. Funny, huh? Just because that first corpse had Ante Bellumo Coronas in its pocket, I should meet up with a citizen who could pass for Humbert himself if he shaved off his must—"

Louie, right then and there I almost swoon. I can see that I have hit the jackpot, but have no idea I will collect the reward. If I had stuck with Hambone Noonan and left the black market tip I got from McGonigle alone, I would not have been facin' a fate worse than death.

"I got the Betsy on him, boss," the frowsy attendant suddenly says.

"Nice," the big guy says.

"Thanks for tellin' me, flatfoot," the owner of the joint bites out. "You would have gone up there and coaxed the works out of that hairpin of a sister of mine. She would have finally broke down and told you Humbert did have a brother he wanted to forget. Yeah, the guy was an honest John, but when it come to cigars he wasn't above gettin' them where they were hot and selling for a dollar per. Imagine his surprise when he saw me!

"Look, you better step in back, Bub, where we can straighten this thing out."

"Sorry," I says. "I have to report to the D.A. in about—"

"Start movin', punk," Bluenose says.

"Yeah," the prodigal son of the Wangle family snaps. "Stir your dogs. This Ganseneffer they got hooked for Humbert's rub-out hasn't an alibi, huh? Only you seem to know so much. So if nobody never sees you ag'in—"

Louie, I guess you think only G.I.'s get a chance to die for law and order, huh?

Well, I have no choice but to go into the back room and get killed. I would have been just as dead if they had shot me in the

store.

The owner of the joint admits he is Stanley Wangle and that Frankie found out his family name once while hiding out after a holdup. "Yeah, when me and Frankie knocked off the girdle payroll, I was known as Silky Matoon, I worked that smooth. I always expected maybe Frankie would come looking for me and his dough. I always made it a habit to carry with me a very efficient Roscoe. I knew when Frankie learned that he had knocked off the wrong Wangle, he would come after the right one."

"That's the Betsy you knocked Frankie off with," I says to the crook. "The one you will murder me with, huh?"

"Yeah. Now out in back, in a big cellar, is about ten or twelve thousand cigars that will retail for a buck each. That is a lot of hay coming in the next couple months. Even if you did not know I rubbed out Frankie, you would be just as big a menace to me for knowing about the cigars. It was my last big job, that warehouse.

"Hey, Itzy, get Mike and Banjo Benny in here!"

The two dishonest characters enter. This big fiend tells them to start mixing some nice concrete.

"To make sure you don't come up when we toss you in the drink, copper," Wangle, alias Silky Matoon, sneers. "Ever see a concrete negligee, flatfoot?"

Wangle's mugs go out to mix the concrete. The owner of the cigar store offers me a slug of rye and an Ante Bellumo to steady my nerves down.

"See, I got a heart?" he says. "I will shoot you after you have finished with the stogie. That loses me a buck, givin' you that cigar."

IT LOOKS like I am stalemated worse than a rabbit chased in a bear's den by a wolf pack. I have never smoked a cigar but

once before in my life. I remember how I prayed I would pass out, I was that sick, Louie. So I says I will smoke this buck stinkweed and get so sick, dying will be a pleasure. I take a light and start puffing away.

"Guys should have more sense than to become cops," the killer says. "Look at the bad end they can come to."

I keep my trap shut and look for a means of escape. I can hear the male zombies out back mixing sand and cement and stirring it up. I am sitting near an old gas stove, which must be where Joe's clerks and race track mugs make coffee at times.

I have one arm placed over it. I am quite sure I could turn on some gas if I can distract the unlawful character holding the Betsy. I am also anxious to get possession of the miniature bazooka as I am sure it fired the slug into Frankie.

"You know," I says to the executioner. "If this is Friday the Thirteenth, it is my birthday. It is quite a party I will celebrate with, is it not?"

The black sheep of the Wangles grins and turns his head away to take a gander at a calendar hanging on the wall. I reach for a gas jet quick and give it a twist. Then I take a deep drag on the Ante Bellumo and nearly pass out. Wangle is going to town on his stogie, too, and all other smells in the joint are crowded out. Of course the windows are all closed tight, so nobody could hear me outside if I should try to scream for cops.

"You hear how the Green Bay Packers made out yesterday?" Wangle says. "I ain't seen a paper. Who you think will get into Berlin first, Stalin or Eisenhower?"

Imagine such cold blood, Louie. You would think I was a jobber come in to dicker over the price of writing ink.

Louie, I begin to get groggy from something worse than the cigar. This

Wangle starts sniffing like a cat following a liver truck. He gets up from the chair. I take a deep pull at the Ante Bellumo so the tip will get very red. Then I heave it against the wall near the stove.

Sparks fly. Then there is an awful roar like a buzz bomb breaking up in Dover. I take off like a P-38 and follow a window out into a back alley where I make a one-point landing in a big ashcan.

Pieces of Joe's Cigar Store shower around me. With them comes Silky Matoon. I can hear him yelling for Mike and Banjo Benny while in flight. He hits somewhere down the alley, and I squirm loose from the G.I. can. A fire alarm is sounding and cops are blowing whistles.

Then I see a character zigzagging through the debris with the top of a pinball machine draped around his neck like a Sir Walter Raleigh collar. It is Banjo Benny. Benny is carrying a big Betsy. Before he can shoot at me, I pick up part of the gas stove and get him in the shins. He cries out in agony and his Betsy goes off. The slug gets another plug-ugly in the posterior region.

Something is moving in the alley just as the cops come in. I chase it and it is Wangle. He is still knocked loose from his marbles and is saying for the other leathernecks to get up and go forward as Tarawa has to be taken.

"Give me your gun, Sarge!" I says to the fiend. "I will lead the attack on the next pillbox." The geezer hands me the Betsy and says he will recommend me personally to MacArthur. Then the cops swarm toward us. Wangle says we are lost as the Japs have got us on the flank.

"Awright! Don't make a move!" a cop says.

"I don't think I will ever make a lively one again," I says. "I am Alvin Hinkey from Headquarters. You got any liniment or ice cubes? I am burned to a crisp."

Louie, I try and explain to Hambone. "Look, I didn't keep nothin' from you. I said I had a black market tip and that is all I thought I had. I would not have met up with Stanley if Humbert was not a black market cigar customer—"

Louie, Hambone blew his top right in front of the mayor himself. They give him sedatives and put him to sleep in a cell. Ganseneffer was released.

On the way out, he winked at me and whispered fast, "I was with a Commando's widow havin' tea—and only the morning I found Humbert's corpse, I heard the Commando was not dead after all, and was already on his way home. If I had told the cops where I was—you know how Commandos are. Have a couple of cigars, Hinkey!"

I faint, Louie. They take me to a hospital for third degree burns and say I have all the symptoms of battle exhaustion.

I wish you would write and tell me if the war in Europe is over. Over here a lot of citizens are gettin' up Victory gallops and are using their Civilian Defense helmets to grow petunias in.

I hate to hurt morale of the armed forces, but you know that eight hundred bucks you sent for your sister to keep? I saw her with a mink coat yesterday and some jade earrings, but maybe she won a jingle contest or something. Get a Nazi for me, Louie.

As ever,
Alvin