

Underworld Waterway

By
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Pete Grimm knew that if his dad's murderer had escaped, it must have been by way of the riverfront ferry for fugitives. But before he could block that underworld waterway, Pete had to sign up personally for a first-class cruise to Hades.

CARLTON SUMMERS had his back to me. Below him was a wide view across the city to the Missouri River. I saw, when he turned, that his eyes strayed to the sharp paper knife on his desk.

"Good afternoon," I said. "If you'll kindly give me a moment—"

"What else can I do?" He was sullen, angry. "You nearly knocked the door down, Pete Grimm."

I tried not to look as fierce as I felt.

“Sorry.”

“In a pig’s eye.” He shoved a big hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “I suppose it’s about killing Daggens’ ferry by promoting an election for a new bridge. Sure. You don’t need to tell me, Pete. Only this time you’re going to add that I’m the owner, not Jim Daggens, that the Indian just works for me. Maybe you’re going to say I didn’t sell out to Daggens two years ago, lock, stock and barrel.”

“Great!” I clapped my hands in mock applause.

I could see the Big Muddy through the fifth-story window, with Daggens’ rafts floating at the water’s edge, and the shack where the Indian lived.

“Last night,” I said, “Henry Morse was murdered in his home, and Wash Hague skipped town. I guess he went for a raft ride across the river. If the state brings him back from the Kansas side it will cost big money. I came here to warn you to save the state that expense.”

“You’re bluffing?”

“No. I don’t bluff about anything as serious as my father-in-law’s cold-blooded murder.”

“Got any proof on Wash Hague?” Summers’ face was oddly cold and strong and sinister.

“Plenty.”

Summers sighed. “He’ll come back. Why cross bridges—”

“Speaking of bridges,” I interposed, “that explains why Henry Morse was liquidated. He was fighting for a bridge. You don’t want a bridge, Summers. The ferry business is worth ten or twelve thousand a year to you. Certain documents were stolen from Henry’s safe last night, proof that you’re operating an illegitimate concern. Bloodstains in my father-in-law’s study reveal where a gloved hand worked the knob of the safe. Maybe you were there, too.”

The lawyer grinned ominously. “What about the combination?”

“Wash Hague didn’t have to know it,” I stated. “He’s served two prison terms for opening safes without blowing them. He has very sensitive fingers and very keen ears.”

Summers studied my face. “What’re you going to do?” His long fingers slid to the paperknife.

“Get the new bridge and run you out of town,” I said coolly.

He scowled. “That’s a big order, Pete.” he sneered. “You can’t get the bridge, not alone. Henry Morse could’ve made it, but not you. And Morse is dead!”

I spun the chair aside, seeing through a red fog. Something drummed in my head like an artery about to burst. “I’ll keep on trying till I hang you,” I snarled.

He glared at me. “Produce your evidence and stop trying to bluff me,” he snapped back. He was breathing hard.

I didn’t know whether to rush him and risk the knife or to call his hand and show him.

Common sense rescued me. I dropped my hand to the doorknob. “All right,” I said. “You’re from Missouri. You’ll have to be shown. But when I’ve finished showing you, Summers, they’ll have you in the lethal pig tank at Jeff City—for the murder of Henry Morse!”

His harsh, jarring laughter echoed in my ears as I went to the elevator.

ORDINARILY I’m not quick-tempered.

I’ve never made it a policy to shoot off my mouth until I’m sure of being right. I realized now I wasn’t sure. I’d allowed Carlton Summers to destroy my mental reserve. He knew what I was trying to do; that I was throwing the paper’s support into the fight for the bond flotation for the bridge.

When I reached the *Banner* office, I poured a tin cup of whisky from a brown demijohn with a strap through the handle: Pop Crane left the linotype machine, stepped through the door in the thin partition. He wiped his ink-smearred hands on his printers' apron.

"What's wrong now, Pete?" Pop helped himself to the jug and the cup.

"I'm going to run an editorial in tomorrow's paper," I said. "We can make the killer show his hand. It'll tie in with a strong pro-bridge editorial. Without firing a shot stronger than paper bullets we can bring the skunk out from under cover. As matters stand I've no proof that Wash Hague is the murderer. All I know is he's hiding out and can open a safe without blowing it."

"Well," Pop demurred, "that ain't proof. He's been ferried over to the Kansas side, but that don't spell anything either. How you mean you can fetch him out in the open?"

"Leave it to me," I said cryptically. "If I put enough dynamite in it, Carlton Summers will have to produce Wash Hague for self-protection."

I had adopted some of my father-in-law's tactics. For twenty years I'd been working under Henry Morse, had married his only daughter. He had taken me in when I was a kid, made a reporter out of me. I'd done the leg work and Henry the brain work, and they'd always said we'd made a swell team. But I'd gleaned some knowledge of his technique and I was going to use it.

Closing the street door, I drew the shades. I called Pop Crane from the back room. "You're in charge," I said. "I'm going to drift around town to dig up some data. I'll find something, but I don't know what. See you later, Pop."

"Wait, Pete." He stabbed out a friendly hand. "That ferry stuff is good. You can

find that Carlton Summers has sent well-paying clients across the river to keep them out of jail. Jim Daggens, the Indian, is sore at Summers, I hear. Maybe he's the one to concentrate on in your fight for the new bridge and to bring Henry's killer to justice. Daggens might be persuaded to talk."

Something hummed in my mind. The Indian was the one man Carlton Summers was afraid of. I had never understood how the criminal lawyer and ferry owner controlled Jim Daggens. He didn't do it by paying him as much as the Indian deserved for the risks he took.

"See what I mean?" Pop grasped a chair, spun it on one leg. "Instead of attacking Summers, take an editorial swing at Daggens, get the ferry runner scared."

I went back, poured another jigger in the tin cup. Pop's suggestion seemed all right. I could play innocent, pretend I didn't know Summers was opposing the bridge, that I didn't know he was real owner of the ferry. But that wouldn't click. I'd already tipped my hand. If I'd stayed away from Summers—

"I'll find a way," I informed Pop. I replaced the jug, moved to the street door. "Run your church news on the front page," I ordered. "I'll hammer out a bridge story for the editorial. If anything develops to hit Summers hard enough, we can find the front page space we need."

LOW in spirit, I sauntered through the city park on Frederick Avenue, passed the Pony Express statue and the City Hall, walked on through the heat to Mierhoffer's Funeral Home. My wife had been there with her sister, but they weren't there now. I felt pretty badly about the whole thing, the way my father-in-law had been murdered.

Henry Morse had been a newspaper

publisher of distinction in the state, one of the oldest, too. For months he'd tried to promote the new bridge. It looked good at the time of his demise. My father-in-law had become obsessed. It would take a lot of money but the bond issue would carry. We needed a bridge.

I left Mierhoffer's, walked over to Edmond Street to the Rendezvous, and had a bottle of soda. I didn't want to drink in public. Of all things, who should walk into the Rendezvous but Wash Hague. Of course he was an Edmond Street character. If I stayed there long enough and he was in town, he was bound to come in.

Hague saw me, stopped abruptly. Maybe he'd been looking for me. He moved briskly in my direction, his neck bowed, his eyes narrowed. He was big, red-faced, sandy of hair. His blue eyes were bright and ominous. His brown sport shirt was open at the collar. He tapped a straw sailor on the gleaming bar.

"I hear you've been talking behind my back, Grimm," he snapped.

Deciding quickly the best way to handle the ex-con was with kid gloves, I forced a disarming smile. He was bold, no doubt confident of Carlton Summers' ability to keep him out of a jam. I looked down at his two-tone shoes.

"I didn't know you were in town," I said crisply. "You're smeared with river mud, Wash. Maybe you've been fishing?"

He underwent a slow change of color. "It's none of your concern where I've been," he said, disgruntled. "I repeat, I hear you've been talking behind my back. Do you aim to write me up in the Banner?"

"No doubt," I said, pushing the pop bottle out of the way. "Only it may not be as serious as you figure. Just because you're smeared with Missouri River mud is no sign you've been over in Kansas on the ferry."

His broad face darkened. His gaze sharpened at my expression of good humor. "Didn't you tell someone you know I killed Henry Morse and robbed his safe?"

I grinned. "I believe I did have a little conversation with Carlton Summers," I admitted. "Could be he misunderstood me. Did he fetch you back from Kansas on that account?"

"What you driving at?"

I smiled down my nose. "Have a drink, Wash. Name your poison."

I traced circles on the bar with the pop bottle. A man in a clean mess jacket came to serve us. "Give my friend a drink," I said. "He'll call it."

"Straight whisky, with water," Hague said. He spun a red leather stool, plopped down, bracing his muddy shoes on the foot rest.

"I'm wishing you nothing but bad luck," he growled, raising the glass. I watched him toss the liquor down, smiling faintly. I had my first clue and could afford to be generous.

"Wash," I said, as he shoved the empty glass away, "someone besides me's going to talk louder than I could. I guess perhaps you'd better wise up."

He jerked nervously erect, his face ghastly in the blue fluorescent lights. "Who c'n talk? Nobody knows a blamed thing. But, just for your benefit, I didn't kill Henry Morse."

"No?" I sighed deeply. "Then you're being framed. You're likely to be arrested at any moment, Wash. Yesterday afternoon you were at Summers' law office. I don't suppose you know the heat's on him and his ferry business?"

I was taking a stab in the dark, but it clicked. His head came up quickly, his hat plunked on the floor.

"What you mean—his ferry business?" he grouched.

I let this pass without comment.

"I went up to his office, sure," he continued. "But he's a lawyer. The devil take the ferry, I don't care anything about that. I went to see him on personal business yesterday afternoon, just as you claim—but my business didn't have anything to do with murder."

I snapped sweat on the tips of my fingers. It was a warm June afternoon. "Well," I said, "Summers wanted certain documents Henry Morse had locked in his safe. The safe was opened by an expert—one who didn't have to blow it. One man in this town is noted for his skill in that direction, and one alone. He associates with Summers. Put the rest of the jigsaw together and what picture do you get, Wash?"

WASH seemed vastly troubled, got off the stool and fumbled for his hat. He was under a great emotional strain. Sweat made blue globules on his cheeks.

"I was out of town last night," he said. "I didn't intend to be gone long. I told 'em over at my boarding house I would be back. I didn't find out about the murder until a little while ago."

"Until you returned from Kansas," I said quietly, again peering at the river mud on his two-tone shoes. "If that's the truth, it's a cinch you're being framed. Summers sent you away last night so it would look bad for you."

"We'll see about that." He slued around, bowed his neck and started toward the street door.

The sun dappled the sidewalk, made the plate glass pink. I left the Rendezvous shortly behind Wash Hague, feeling I'd started something, I didn't know what. I strolled slowly along Edmond Street, something like a feeling of triumph beginning to assert itself.

The next two hours brought so many developments I was barely aware of the time, until suddenly I realized how important time was.

I went back to the *Banner*. I put enough dynamite in the editorial I was writing to jar the roof off the town. That river mud on Wash Hague's two-tone shoes was enough proof to make me feel secure. The rest would come in due course.

The weather was hot. The perfume of greening things came in from the park. The sun was a scarlet ball as red as blood, bounding off the windows. Pop Crane lowered the green-and-white awning over the sidewalk. Now I heard the machine-gunning of his linotype.

A long shadow fell slantwise across the threshold. I skewed round on my swivel chair. Carlton Summers leaned against the door jamb, sweat rivering off his chin, fanning himself.

"You go on over to my office, Pete," he said, "and wait till I come. I'll have something for you. I think you'll be right pleased to get it. Just understand that I don't want to be crossed up. This business of you trying to tag me for Henry's murder has got to be stopped."

"You can do it with proof," I said coolly. I poured myself a short drink. "Have one?" I asked cordially.

"No, thanks. I never drink when I've got something of importance to do." He stalled in the doorway. "You know what I'm driving at. I'm going after proof to show you I'm on the level. You just go on over to my place and stay there till I come back."

"I guess there's nothing to keep me from doing that," I said. I bent over to put the jug back under the desk. "How long is it going to take you to get me some evidence?"

He stopped frowning and put his hat back on his head. "I don't know, but not long. I'll have to make a little drive. Not more than thirty minutes, Pete. But don't leave my office till I return or you won't get the lowdown on your father-in-law's murder."

"All right, Summers." I got up, reached for my panama. Then I walked to the window and watched him gun his Buick down Frederick Avenue.

TEN minutes later I stepped off the elevator on the fifth floor of the Corby Building. It was nearing sundown, exceptionally warm in the corridor. The marble walls threw off the heat and made it hard to breathe. The door of Summers' front office was ajar. I pushed on in. I could see into the private room beyond. A dark blotch on the grey carpet jerked me erect.

Prostrate on his back, arms outflung, was a man. Blood was pooled around his head. It made me sick because his skull was caved in. Gore made a crimson question mark on his forehead.

Something sticky adhered to my left hand where I'd grasped the outer doorknob. Blood was on my palm and on my coat. Glaring at the stain I knew I was indelibly marked. My heart catapulted. Trapped! The evidence stacked up largely. I'd engaged in a scene at the Rendezvous with Wash Hague. Then he had sought out Carlton Summers and had been murdered.

The whole thing assumed shape. I saw what had missed me before. It was Summers who murdered my father-in-law to destroy the evidence of his illicit ferry operations. After that he sent Wash Hague away. Daggens had ferried Hague to the other side of the river. After he'd been away long enough, Summers had him brought back. The lawyer's reason for getting Hague out of town was to frame

him for the murder. Wash Hague had been victimized by the unscrupulous attorney the same as Summers was now trying to frame me for Hague's death.

Carlton Summers would point out that while he was away from his office, I'd found Wash Hague. We had resumed our argument and I had killed him!

The weapon of the murderer was an ash-stand with a heavy metal base. Seizing this with my handkerchief-draped hand I concealed it in a clothes closet. It was possible it held the killer's fingerprints, though this was doubtful. After all, Summers was a shrewd, brutal criminal lawyer.

Gliding carefully to the phone I called the *Banner* office. Pop Crane answered. I instructed him to meet me near the Francis Street railroad depot, near the river, telling him I was in a mess of trouble. His breath skirled on the wire.

Approaching the river from the Burlington tracks, I could see the three flat ferryboats hitched to black iron posts. Near Daggens' shack I paused, looked back. Pop Crane had not yet appeared. Walking hurriedly across the double row of tracks, I started down the embankment. The huge Indian was cleaning fish on a bench against the wall of the shanty, on the waterside, his scaling knife gleaming in his hand.

For a moment I regarded him without stirring. Obviously he didn't see me. I was fully aware of the grave danger which confronted me. At any moment now Hague's body would be found and a general police alarm would go out for me. Carlton Summers would see to that.

I was afraid I'd made a mistake in not calling the law before leaving the scene of the murder. The cops wouldn't be likely to forgive me for taking matters into my own hands, even though I was editor of their only newspaper.

SUDDENLY, I heard Pop Crane coming in my old jalopy. The car was bucking and lurching like a drunk. I'd been skinned on my last tank of gasoline. The car sounded very much like it was too old and tired to hang together. When Pop halted it, something clattered in the motor. It wasn't quite what one needed to run away from the law.

Sweat was streaming over Pop's old, lined face. But his brown eyes held a bright, youthful glitter.

"You wait here," I said, "get her warmed up. In case we have to scam we don't want her falling apart in every joint. If you hear the cops coming, sound the horn. It's do or die, now."

"All right, Pete," he said. "But you shouldn't've gone to Summers' office and raised hell this afternoon. Nor should you have jumped Wash Hague in the Rendezvous."

"So you've heard about that already?" I was astonished—yet wasn't it what I'd been expecting?

He nodded. "It's all over town," he said.

My heart sank. I waved to him and walked down the steep embankment, thinking how important time was when a guy's life was at stake.

The crimson sun was sinking in the river, made the water red as blood. Smooth waves lapped hungrily at the gumbo shore, rocked the flat ferryboats up and down, eddies churning around them. They were secured to the iron posts with lengths of thick rope.

Daggens heard me, slued around. The long knife glistened in his hand. He was lithe, broad-shouldered, clad in brown denim. The felt crown of a black hat from which the brim had been cut was crammed down on his skull. His big-boned face was dark, his eyes red and black.

"Hello, chief," I said. "That's a nice catch you're cleaning there."

He nodded, his face impassive. "You giving me a writeup, Pete, in the *Banner*, about how long I've been running these ferryboats?"

"Probably," I said. "But first I want to ask some questions." I gazed off at the tree-lined Kansas side. "Yes, of course I'll write you up, Daggens." Kansas was a good three hundred yards away, but every foot of it was treacherous water.

The big Indian clasped the knife firmly. Wavering shadows of river-cooled twilight embraced him. His eyes shone with a strange brilliance, like maybe they masked an ever increasing fear.

"They used to ferry the Indians across from White Cloud, the stretch of territory the government traded them for the best farming land in the state," I said. Yes, it would make a good story, but recent developments would make a better one. I shuddered. Every moment now I expected to hear the scream of police sirens. "Where's Carlton Summers?" I asked.

"He's not here."

A windshield sparkled in some willows behind the shack. "Stop lying, Jim," I said curtly. "There's his Buick."

"You go on over and find out," he said, sullenly. "I don't keep track of him. How come you're asking me about the lawyer?"

"He's your boss," I snapped. "Don't stall. I've got some important business with him, concerning a murder."

I thought he jerked a little, but his brown face remained impassive.

"I'm not interested in the murder." He took a long step toward the house. I beat him to the door. That bloody knife shed sun glints. I stepped on a fishhead, flattened it in the black gumbo. Summers wasn't in the house.

"You ferried Wash Hague across the river last night," I stated. "This afternoon you brought him back. Is that true?"

"I'm not answering questions," he replied evenly. "You'd better go away and leave things as they are. I don't like your lies. You know I own this ferry."

"No, you don't," I remonstrated. "Summers owns it lock, stock and barrel. It's been in the family seventy years. That old stall about Summers disposing of the ferry to you for cash doesn't click. He's kept the bridge from coming. But Henry Morse had proof that would've put the ferry out of commission. That's why he was murdered last night. Summers didn't want the bridge because the ferry paid too well."

THIS really upset Daggens. I whirled, stomped down to the big main boat. It was nothing more than a large raft with a smooth floor. Daggens followed, looking furtively behind him. The nasty river smell deepened.

"The new bridge will put an end to this," I said. "Within the past few months you've been violating the law, hauling fugitives across to the Kansas side."

I stamped far out on the raft. It rocked a little. I groped for the long steering paddle at the stern end. It was held by a small steel piece slipped into an iron socket. Just then Daggens decided to rush me.

Stooping, I dropped quickly to my knees and he struck me hard. I almost went overboard. That long knife flashed as it arced over my head.

He was thrown out of balance, and was slow to get his feet under him. Jumping forward, I grabbed at the paddle, yanked it free of the socket. It was six feet long, heavy. Swinging it, I whirled on the balls of my feet.

Daggens was closing in, crouched, the

knife held against him. But he couldn't dodge the long paddle. It slammed against his head, almost carried me overboard with him. I was hurled to the floor, heard Daggens strike the water.

He seemed unconscious as the waves rushed over his head. But I saw his battling those waves furiously a moment later, when his head bobbed into sight. I felt him grip the raft, as he reached it, sputtering and trying to call out something to me. I bent down and helped him aboard. It was a good thing he hadn't drowned. We'd need him and his evidence.

"Take it easy, Pete," Pop Crane said. "Don't try to drink it all at one gulp." I put the demijohn on the floor and listened to Pop's story.

He had come down to the raft to help me, found a white hand floating beside it in the water. Carlton Summers had been knifed by the Indian when the lawyer went there to kill him, after murdering Wash Hague and trying to frame me. The Indian had been told about Henry Morse's murder by Wash Hague when the latter was being transported across the river last night.

Summers figured that as long as Hague and the Indian knew he killed Morse he was in danger. Besides the papers he had got from Morse's safe wouldn't do him any good, the bridge would come and he'd go to the gallows. So he decided to wipe everything clean by permanently eliminating the threats to his security.

Then the Indian had attacked me because of what I'd said about the bridge coming, because he figured I'd find the murdered lawyer's body.

Well, we got the new bridge. And we got Henry's killer. Funny how you look at a new bridge over a big stream and never give much thought to what a toll it cost to put it there.