

Dead Letter Officer

"Alvin Hinkey" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

When Alvin Hinkey, the harness bull Hawkshaw, connected two loose-end skull crackings to get a spine-tingling crime circuit, he forgot to cut himself out of the hot-spot hook-up.

Mr. Louis Garfinkle, Sgt.
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DEAR LOUIE: Have been looking for a letter from you, but as Hambone Noonan says, how could you have time to write when you are up to your neck in black markets? Hambone says if you go shoppin' in Tokio to pick up a pair of real silk loungin' pajamas, Louie—purple if possible—as he got himself a new doll. He met her at a murder, and if you could see this blond blister, you would believe it. Which reminds me of quite a job me and Hambone turned in for the D.A.

One morning, early, I am taking a day

off from pounding a beat up around Gunhill Road, and go on a busman's holiday which is like a subway guard going to the Mammoth Cave to spend a week. I visit with the boys downtown who belong to the homicide squad. We are batting our gums there when a report comes in about a corpse who has died under suspicious circumstances. The remains, it seems, looked to be nothing but a tramp, but after all, Louie, murder is murder whether the victim turns out to be a Wall Street broker or a Pell Street panhandler.

Hambone, a contemptuary named Cateye Coogan, and yours truly go up to a tenement on East Twelfth Street to look at the cadaver.

He was named Otto Foody and had the smallest and cheapest room on the top floor back. Somebody has liquidated him with a firearm that is no doubt illegal.

The landlady says she cannot understand who would want to risk the hot squat to rub out such a no-good. "Why, he never had no friends or no enemies," Mrs. Mutoffnik says. "He never had more than his weekly rent money in his life, an' most always he had that a week or two late. I was goin' to evict him anyways, so this is a kind of break for me."

"It is goin' to be tough to find a motive here, Alvin," Hambone says. "But you keep your hands off things as you are no longer in plainclothes, don't forget."

"If this suit I got on ain't plain, then Karloff doubles for Charles Boyer in the casbars," I snap at him. "What was Foody doin' under the washbasin in the corner there? Did he have to fix his own plumbin'?"

Mrs. Mutoffnik says what do you know and waddles over to where I am pointing. The old carpet has been lifted up there and a couple of boards are loose.

"You think Foody might of been a crook an' hid jewels under there?" Hambone remarks to Cateye.

"He lived here five months," Mrs. Mutoffnik sniffs. "I don't remember Foody goin' out at night even oncet. He was scared in the dark. He wouldn't know a ruby from a pearl unless they was both dames. I guess nobody heard the shot as the elevated trains make a lot of racket goin' by here. Anyway the killer most likely used a maximum silencer."

It looks like one of those murders, Louie, that won't get solved. I am glad I am not stuck with the case. Hambone gets down on his knees and lifts up the boards under the washstand. Believe it or not he finds something and not a cockroach. It is a gummed wrapper that you see around

bunches of moolah in the banks. On it is printed, *Chelsea Title & Trust*.

"So he wasn't a crook, ha?" Hambone yelps. "Then little elfs or lepercorns stashed some lettuce here. There is a date on this label, Alvin. February, 1939. He stole a hunk of currency that time an' has been livin' off it ever since. Who said crime don't pay?"

"So he was a dumb bum, huh?" Cateye says. "He never put on no dog, so the cops never suspected him. Well, we'll check on his prints, Noonan, an' see if he's got a record."

"You tryin' to tell me how to run my business?" Hambone snaps. "I'm in charge here."

THE appraiser of the defunct persons arrives and apologizes for being tardy. "I had to go get my bag. Left it in Rita's place—er—my niece, ha, ha. So that's the corpse there, huh?"

"No, no," Noonan says. "That's Alvin Hinkey. Alvin, stop dozin' off."

The examiner says Foody has been extinct for about nine hours. A .32 calibre slug has passed through his skull in the region of the *tentorium cerebelli*.

"Tell us how he died in English," I says.

"Nine hours!" Mrs. Mutoffnik exclaims quite horrified. "Get him out of here!"

We ransack the hall room to find nothing to prove the loser led a double life. We learn that Otto last worked for the D. D. & T. Exterminator Co.

I find spots under the washstand, Louie. "That looks like blood," I says. "The criminal person punctured a finger with one of the nails on that board he lifted up, huh? See if the corpse did it."

Otto's fingers are quite woundless. Hambone says the spots could have been there for at least three days. "Maybe Otto cut himself shavin'," he sniffs. "There is a nick on his chin. He—!" He grabs at Mrs.

Mutoffnik who right away gets down on her knees and wipes up the spots. Too late.

"Tsk-tsk," I says.

"What's all the squawk!" Mrs. Mutoffnik yelps. "You think I can rent a room with blood in it? You can't tell whose blood is which anyway as I read in a detective story magazine you couldn't."

Hambone sighs and mops his pan with his sleeve. "I guess it was nothin', Alvin. We better go downtown an' have them check on the stiff there. Where's the stiff sedan?"

There is no record of Otto having been a dishonest character. His prints are not on file. There isn't a flatfoot in the big town who remembers ever having seen Otto. But when Hambone Noonan checks with the brass at the Chelsea Title and Trust, they trace back and show us where one of their messengers was bopped in 1939 and relieved of a leather reticule containing almost thirty thousand fish.

Cateye Coogan snaps his fingers. "I remember that job, Hambone. They slugged the runner coming out of a subway. One of the crooks was recognized by a citizen before he scrambled. Don't you remember, Noonan? The witness told the cops he listened to all them Crook Buster programs on the radio an' read all the detective story mags like they was religion. He was sure the crook with the droopy left eyelid and ribbon-clerk mustache was—what was his name? The D. A. will tell us."

"An' the cops picked up the honest citizen to protect him an' tossed him in jail," I says, nodding. "They did not let him loose until the cops had raided a joint on the West Side and knocked off two of the messenger hijackers."

"I was thinkin' of that all the time," Hambone says. "Alvin, don't forget you are only a harness bull walkin' a beat on the moors. If we want your advice we'll ast fer it."

Well, we get a load of the old case

downtown about an hour later. The cops said the case was closed after Droopeye Duggy and Fungo Glipp had been rubbed out. Of course, neither one of the gees had been able to confess where the take was cached, as even at that time, the D.A. had not put a spiritualist on the payroll.

"That was a mistake, of course," the D.A. tells us. "They should have took at least one of the hoods alive. It looks like one of the crooks had a room at Mrs. Mutoffnik's house at the time, just to stash the dough in an'—why—how would this guy Otto Foody know that? I'll bet he was an accessory with Glipp and Droopeye Duggy. He got away."

"You sure are on the old ball today, D.A.," Hambone says. "That sure is figgerin'."

"I don't see how you do it," I sniff. "So Otto was like a pheasant who flies away quick when the hunters come so that they will chase her instead of her chicks. What a break for him Droopeye and Fungo was shot. But what became of all the thirty grand? And who would know Foody had it there?"

"Listen, Hinkey!" the D.A. says. "If we knew everythin' we wouldn't have to keep a police force! Noonan, it is up to you to find all the rest out."

"Come on, Cateye," Hambone says to Coogan. "We can't git no moss if we don't roll some stones. Alvin, you keep out of this."

"I'll be very happy to," I says.

I AM walking my beat up near Gunhill the next night when a sprout rushes up to me and says for me to come quick as his ma has found something terrible.

"Your old man boiled in a tavern, huh?" I sniff. "First it is a cat I got to git down out of a tree, then it is a kid with its noggin stuck between the bars of its crib. Now I got to help somebody git a stew bum out of—awright, show me the way, Buster!"

I follow the kid three blocks. Louie. We

come to a fair-to-middling apartment house close to 207th Street and go upstairs three flights. In front of an open door is a fat dame wringing her hands. "Well, what's the rhubarb?" I snaps at her.

"Come quick, Officer," she says. "This is awful."

She was not kidding. I go into a two-room apartment and spy a nicely clad character of about thirty years sprawled out on the floor near a studio couch. He is not drunk and is not asleep but very dead. Somebody has bashed him over the noggin with something heavier than a chocolate bar.

"Where's the telephone?" I ask. "This is for the homicide squad."

After I call the Bronx finest, I go back into the room and look around, touching nothing, of course. I quiz the dame. She is a housewoman and says the corpse is named Eddie Prawn. She says Prawn was quite a man about town and wrote a column for a Bronx paper. It was called Prawn's Personalities.

"I've seen it," I says. "There is more dirt in it than there is over at the dump. Well, somebody caught up with the jerk, huh? At least four dozen citizens had a right to fix his wagon."

"But who?"

"Maybe somebody like that blonde there over on the table," I says. "The pitcher of the chickadee, of course. Who is she? Looks kind of familiar."

"She's been here a couple of times," the dame says. "I don't know her name."

"It'll be around somewheres," I says. "She looks like she weighs about a hundred pounds soakin' wet. She couldn't never punch her way out of a paper bag to say nothing of her havin' cracked a noggin as tough as Prawn's looks. Lot of murders around lately, aren't there?"

The Bronx dicks arrive, and so does the cadaver analyst. Prawn has been dead for two hours at least. The cops fine-comb the

two rooms and come up with a flock of addresses and telephone numbers.

"Of course he would have them," I observe. "The line of business he was in—"

"Yeah," a cop says. "It would take us six days to call all these numbers. When we got through what would we have? This character had more enemies than Franco. He made a dozen a day with his lousy column. Well, I wonder if a doll bit him before she slugged him. Got a bandage around his finger."

I look down at the stiff, and my heart starts pounding like a sheriff's fist on a bankrupt's door. Maybe it was just coincidence, sure. Ha!

"Not a clue nowheres," a flatfoot gripes. "I'd like to meet up with one of them detective story writers! Well, let's begin on the blond babe there. She's a special or wouldn't be framed on his table."

He picks up the photo. On the bottom there is some writing that says, *To my darling Eddie, from your Yola. Always and always. Love.*

"Mush," a cop sniffs. "Well, look up this Yola in the book there, Benny. Git her address an' we'll go an' grill her. Looks like this is a two-timin' deal."

We find out the blond dish's full name is Yola Hubber, and that she lives in a pueblo just four blocks away. I lay the address away inside my skull, Louie, and go back to pounding the beat for another hour.

Two murders and I got no cut in either one! I keep thinking of the bandage on Eddie Prawn's finger, but figure there must be about eight or nine thousand people a day in this city gettin' their fingers cut some way or another. How would Prawn get connected with a bum like Otto Foody? There was no sense in my thinking, so I forget about it.

I turn a corner quick and bump into a taxpayer who has just emerged from a tavern. "Why, if it ain't Chipso Welky," I says. "When did you git out?"

"Hiya, Hinkey," Chipso says. "Couple

days ago, pal. Lemme tell you I'm finished wit' the illegit. I'm cured, Flatfoot. Never ag'in. It's the straight an' narrer fer ol' Chipso. I've learned me lesson, Hink. I ain't holdin' no hard feelin's against you an' Noonan fer handin' me the rap on that fillin' station job. Say, how is that big slob?"

"Same old Noonan," I says. "Well, you keep your nose clean, Chipso."

Yeah, you get to know a lot of ruffians while you are on the force, Louie. You should know. I guess you didn't remember Chipso Welky. A penny-ante operator who always thought a hundred bucks was a burglar's bonanza. I think he did about three years.

WHEN I get to my rooming house, Hambone Noonan calls up. "Thought you'd be interested, Alvin," the big lemonhead barks. "We got a lead on the Foody case. We located that witness of the old bank job. He says he was sure there was a third party mixed up in it, an' was most likely Otto. Somebody got wise he was an'—well, I'm not tellin' you everythin'. Thought I'd call to cheer you up, Alvin. After all you've been my prodigy an' I ain't give up on you. Just do your time in the sticks for a while longer, an' I'll keep after the D.A. to give you a lift."

"Your kindness is almost too much for me, Hambone," I snap. "How will I get to do somethin' big out here so's I can get promoted back to a detective?"

"You got me there, pal," Hambone Bays. "Just remember what I've taught you about not overlookin' little details. Why, a pair of dice you snatch from the sprouts out there might've belonged to Arnold Rothstein once. Well, so long, Alvin."

I slam the receiver on the hook. It would be Noonan's luck just to solve the Foody fadeout by accident as you can't keep jabbin' a thread at a hole in a needle and not get it through sometime. I am about deciding to

quit the police force when I fall asleep.

Something happens the next night around ten P.M. I am over to the bastille peeling off the monkey suit when I hear some cops talking about a hair-pull they had been called in to squelch at an address that sounded quite familiar to me.

"Were them two babes goin' at it when we got there? Wow! The black-haired wench was ahead on points a little when we broke in. The blonde had a mouse under her eye, and one of her ears was a little shredded. Oh, Brother!"

"What was their names?" I asks casually.

"Huh? Oh, hello, Hinkey. Yola somethin' or other, and a thrip named Imogene. We was goin' to lock 'em up, but we find this Imogene is the sole support of a widowed mother an' was a WAC in the war, so—"

"What was the brawl about?" I ask.

"They wouldn't tell us," the cop said. "Most likely over a guy. Well, the blonde give us each a snort of nice hootch an' we went out after tellin' them they would each get a year if they disturbed the peace again. Let's see, that brunette is named Imogene LaLune. What a lousy break for Prawn, huh? Him bein' on display in a mournin' manse with this goin' on? This Imogene sings at Tony Fuccia's place on Fordham Road."

Next morning I call up a detective and ask him to look up Imogene LaLune in Prawn's little red book. He says she is listed and why do I want to know?

"After all," I says. "I'm a cop an' want to help all I can. Nobody seems to have got nowhere with two murders in one week, so if I get any dope on Prawn's dames, I'll let you know."

Now, that evening, after my stint is done, I go over to Tony Fuccia's and listen to this Imogene sing. She has a frog in her throat and the low tones get you somehow. I get hold of Tony and tell him who I am and that I have to talk to the warbler. He gets a little

flunky to show me where her dressing room is. I am sitting in the six-by-eight when LaLune slinks in. "Well, what do you want? Who let you in here?"

"The boss," I says. "I am a cop. Seems like that blonde is goin' around sayin' things about you an' Eddie Prawn. Oh, what she calls you—"

"That peroxidized hunk of tripe!" Imogene fairly screeches. "I told her to lay off or I'd—look, she might be kiddin' the cops but not me!" Imogene sits down, lights a cigarette, and pours it on. "I happen to know she's two-timed more guys than you can count on a centipede's feet. Glamor gal, huh? She started out by bein' the torch for a lousy crook named Chalky White. Eddie Prawn told me. He knew everythin' about every dame in this part of town.

"Well, Chalky gets grabbed in a holdup on the West Side, and he gets two to three years. What does that babe do but cross him up right away. Then she takes up with Eddie, but when he sees me, she is a dead mouse. She had reason to kill him and I'll bet she did!"

"Chalky White," I says. "Hmm, I recall the tough boy. A couple of months ago, maybe a little more, I remember somethin' happened to him up in the big house. What was it now?"

"She said she'd get Eddie," Imogene snaps. "That tramp! If I loved a guy and he went to jail, I'd stick just the same. You cops must be thicker than I always thought. Get the goods on that washed-out moll!"

LOUIE, I go downtown the next morning and consult with certain citizens. I learn that Chalky White died in the infirmary and not St. James', but Sing Sing's. Still, I am going around in circles, but wait!

It is always dynamite when you play one dame against another. I call at Yola's little flat and tell her that Imogene is saying terrible things about her, one of which is that

she rubbed out Eddie Prawn. "Did you?" I ask her. It is no wonder her name is Hubber, Louie. You should have seen her in the housecoat.

"That little gravel-throated buzzard!" Yola howls. "I'll carve myself a piece of her torso if she—!"

"Chalky White. He died, huh?" I inquire.

Yola nods. She grabs herself a stiff drink, but don't offer me one. She says, "I got a letter from him a year ago saying he figured he wouldn't last out his rap!" She takes another hefty snort and I waited.

"He was goin' to send me a note tipping me off to somethin' if he figured he wouldn't make it. That was Chalky. He always figured to see I was well-heeled. But he's dead, and I did not get any note. But somethin' happened that's got me nuts!" She takes a third belt and I see her eyes cross a little.

"Go on," I says. "I am a pal."

"Well, I am out one afternoon, and Eddie Prawn comes here. I had to go out quick to see about some nylons and I told him to wait. When I get back, the guy is gone. The elevator boy tells me a man came to see me. Not Eddie. He knew Eddie. The guy said he'd leave an envelope under my door. But there wasn't one there. I don't get it. The elevator boy saw the letter in the guy's hand."

"Eddie Prawn was a gossip columnist," I says. "It was his business to get the dirt wherever and whenever he could. Maybe he gobbled up the letter. If it happened to be from Chalky White, why—"

"Yeah!" Yola tosses a bottle behind the couch. "And that louse maybe found out about some dough Chalky had somewhere and—why, the stinker! Of all the breaks I git—"

My ears are full of little bells, Louie. There is a buzzer inside my noggin, and I have not even had a drop of hard stuff. I says in a faraway voice, "Maybe the elevator guy

got a good description of the visitor.”

Yola hiccups, quickly snaps a partial plate back in place, and nods. “Short and fat. Had a tin ear and a little scar on the side of his nose.”

The buzzers fill my dome. The room goes round and round. Who fits that inventory? Chipso Welky! He’s just out of the big house. He most likely knew Chalky White quite well. I do not hang around any longer, but stagger out of there.

“You cheap flatfoot,” Yola says. “Drink up all my scosh an’ walk out. Go ahead, an’ drop dead when you walk down sthairs! Hic!”

It is fantastic. There is a link between the Foody slaying and the Prawn liquidation. I go over to the precinct house and pull on my blues. I pound a beat until nine P.M., then get back into civvies again and amble over to a certain tavern. I am there for almost an hour. After my seventh beer, Chipso walks in. The character nods pleasantly and asks for a brand of jolt syrup that retails at close to seventy cents a throw.

“Times are gettin’ good, huh?” I remarks. “Most citizens are finding it hard to live the way they have been accustomed these days, Chipso. Inflation, black markets, and such.”

“Look, I been away a long time. I get three bucks, I spend it silly, Hinkey,” the crook says. “Try gettin’ locked up fer about three years. You won’t figger nothin’s too good for you when you git out. Hows about havin’ a slug?”

“I am on a beer diet,” I says. “I guess you got some fun and extravagance comin’, Chipso. Ha! Well, go, easy on the stuff.”

“You bet, Pal.”

I GO out and duck into a dark doorway half a block away. I wait almost an hour until Chipso emerges from the gin mill. I tail him uptown for seven blocks, then see him duck into a cheap flop with a sign that says,

Hotel Iola.

I go into the joint five minutes later and walk up to the little lobby on the second floor. A puffy and oily citizen is at the desk reading *Super-Mystery Comics*. “What room is Welky in?” I asks just as if nothing was on my mind save Hambone Noonan.

“Twen’y seven,” the sloppy gee growls and goes back to the adventures of his favorite ghoul.

I go up and rap on the door. Chipso calls out, “Who is it?”

“Hinkey,” I says.

Chipso looks wary as I break into his little room. “What you want to see me for, huh?”

“What would I want to see you about, Chipso?” I counter. “It sure wouldn’t be to ast for a contribution from you for the choir boys’ rest camp. Did you, by any chance, happen to be Chalky White’s cellmate up at the big house?”

“Sure,” Chipso says, and slumps down on the bed. “So what?”

“Well, Chalky has a dame named Yola. He sent her a note by a pal just before he gasped his last breath,” I says. “You slid it under the doll’s door or handed it to a guy named Eddie Prawn to give to her. But you was curious, Chipso, and knew what was in it before you delivered it, huh? Steamed it open perhaps? You had lots of time.

“Seein’ that the cops was told there was a third crook in on the holdup of the Chelsea Title an’ Trust messenger, I was thinkin’ lately it might have been Chalky.”

“You’re nuts, Hinkey!” Chipso says. “Me, sneakin’ a look at a letter from a cellmate to his doll? Why—”

“Yeah, you would do anythin’, Chipso, to make a dishonest dollar,” I snap at him “You rubbed out Foody—er—no, you couldn’t have as it was Prawn cut his finger on the nail in the boards under the washstand—you rubbed out Prawn!”

“You can’t never prove it!” Chipso

yowls. I see he is as guilty as a wolf with wool in its teeth.

“No? Well, you most likely have got that thirty grand right here in this room somewhere, you big crook!” I says. “All we cops have to do is get a search warrant. I’ll call them right away!”

Chipso says, “You won’t call nobody, Hinkey!” He whips a Betsy out from under his pillow. I remember I left mine back in the precinct house. That was smart, huh, Louie?

“I bet you’re the only one knows this,” Chipso snarls at me. “Too bad, Hinkey, as I liked you a little bit! No, I ain’t goin’ to shoot you as it makes a noise. I just pulled the gat to see if you got a gun. Step over here and turn around. If you make one yell, it is good-by forever. Huh, you ain’t heeled. Are you stupid!”

“Looks like it,” I gulp out. “I guess you’ll cave in my dome like you caved in Prawn’s, Chipso?”

“Nice guessin’, Hinkey,” Welky says. “Thirty grand, all mine. Too bad. Start movin’ across the room there as I must get that bottle on the radiator. It’ll be quick, Hinkey! Thirty grand! Fer that much cabbage, I’d murder all my own relatives.”

I guess Chipso’s eyes were not as good as they were once, and that the jailhouse rusted his wits a little. The string hanging down from the light cord brushes my pan.

I yank the cord quick. Everything goes as black as the inside of a raven. Chipso empties the Betsy as I make a dive. I heard the bullets chip into the floor not more than six inches from my cowlick. I let out a cry of pain, groan, and play possum.

Chipso bends over me, and I reach up and give him the old heave-ho. He flies against the door and goes out into the hall with it and bounces off the wall. A fire pail slips off a hook and comes down and settles quite firmly over his noggin. It is one of the shortest fights with a crook I ever remember,

Louie.

All the flea-traps open up and lodgers pour out into the hall. “Call the cops!” I yelp, and pick up a fire axe. I whang the blade of it over the fire pail. Chipso gets quite as limp as a string of boiled spaghetti.

WHEN the cops get there, I have them ransack Room 27. After a half hour search, they find close to thirty grand distributed throughout the lining of a reversible topcoat Chipso has hanging in the closet.

When I get over to the bastille, I call up Hambone Noonan. He has just come in from the movies. “Never mind the Foody case,” I says. “It was solved along with the Prawn rub-out, Hambone. It was Prawn who got stuck with a nail in Foody’s room. Come on uptown and look at the guy I caught. Prawn killed Foody. Then—well, come on up and hear the rest.”

“If this is a rib, Alvin—”

“If it is, you can fracture my clavicle,” I retort.

Hambone Noonan and Cateye Coogan are present when Chipso makes a detailed confession, with a stenog handy.

“Yeah, when Chalky give me the note to take to his moll, I figured there might be somethin’ hot in it, as once or twice, he talked in his sleep and mentioned a name. Like Hinkey here guessed, I steamed the letter open. It told where thirty grand was hid. Then I says to myself, I’ll play it smart, and let the doll or her boy friend risk gettin’ by the guy who had that room rented an’ get the stuff. Anyways, I figured maybe I was bein’ tailed, just out of stir.

“So I cased that dame’s apartment and watched Prawn come out. I followed him to where he lived. Sure enough, that night, he leaves his place about eleven P.M. I was waiting for him when he got back. I stuck a Betsy in his ribs an’ we went inside. Yeah, he had the thirty grand. He’d crossed

Chalky's dame. I thanked him for gittin' it for me an' crocked him!"

"It is fantastic, ain't it, Hambone?" I ask.

Cateye Coogan puts his cigar on the table and tries to light his fountain pen.

"Dolls, Noonan," I says. "When they are after the same meal ticket, they can sure mix things up. You should of worn false whiskers when you delivered that billy doo from the big house, Chipso."

"You can't think of everythin', Hinkey," Welky sighs. "Just because Chalky's torch is two-timin' him, I get caught on a perfect setup. Prawn gets the dough fer me and

knocks off the roomer an' I'm in the clear—an' then—look, how did it happen again?"

"Crime never pays," I says.

"Why wasn't Noonan patrollin' your beat?" Chipso yelps. "I'd still be sittin' on velvet. The breaks I git!"

"I resent that!" Hambone chokes out. "Alvin, you're ungrateful. You could have cut me in on this."

"You wouldn't have believed it," I says.

Well, Louie, the D.A. says I will most likely be put back on the force as a detective before I know it.

Your pal, *Alvin.*