

# He Gave Him a Gun

*by Laurence Donovan*

*To Avenge the Murder of His Best Friend, George Burke Grimly Battles to Outsmart a Wily Killer!*

MORIARITY, the traffic cop, rubbed the back of a red-haired hand across his eyes. When he took his hand away, the man with the gun was still there. He was walking toward the Greystone Branch Bank now.

The man with the gun was wearing a neat, brown business suit. A soft hat that had a snap-brim at the right angle to shade his vision from the mid-afternoon sun. He was moving purposely toward the entrance to the bank.

The gun was carried carefully under the man's left arm, the muzzle pointed down at the sidewalk. The man appeared entirely oblivious to the gaping peasantry of midtown Manhattan. He seemed to be accustomed to those villagers who will crowd around a ballyhoo boy threading a needle, and who will buy thread because it went into the needle.

Moriarity's traffic whistle shrilled. His thumb flicked a button on the flap of his bolstered revolver.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, leaving traffic on its own and shouldering his way onto the sidewalk. "You with that gun! Stand still there now! What th' devil do you think you're doin'?"

The tall man halted, turning mild, blue eyes upon the cop. He blinked behind rimless glasses secured on a fine gold chain. His left hand gently stroked his long chin.

"Meaning me, Moriarity?" he said pleasantly. "I'm the only one about who seems to have a gun."

The traffic cop partly restored his dignity by roughly pushing three goggling youths and wanted to know why they were holding up traffic that way?

Moriarity's ripe tomato face suddenly

became redder. He made a movement to conceal the hand that had been furtively sneaking his revolver from its leather. His other hand wiped sweat from his forehead.

"By damn!" he grunted apologetically. "I didn't know you, Mr. Burke, in that new suit. Everybody was actin' kind of scared when they seen you—"

"Apparently going out for a little hunting in the peaceful jungles of the West Side," finished the tall man cheerfully. "It's a fowling piece, Moriarity, designed to kill birds. Seeing that birdshot would hardly make a dent in the tough stool pigeons of this district, and they being probably the only worthwhile game on the wing. I'll not be violating the ordinance against discharging firearms, et cetera."

"That's a good one, Mr. Burke," said Moriarity, chuckling. "But I seen you goin' toward the bank an' I had to think fast. Maybe you might've been a tougher bird than a stool pigeon."

HE saw George Burke's mild grin, so he judged his retort must have been clever and he laughed. A policeman halting a man with a gun carried openly was enough to block any sidewalk. Moriarity turned and waved a big hand.

"Move along, alla yuh! There ain't gonna be any shootin'! Out of the way there, an' let Mr. Burke through to his bank, you. This way, Mr. Burke."

Moriarity wedged an opening with a rough shoulder. In the entrance to the bank, George Burke smiled again.

"Thanks, Moriarity," he said. "Sorry to

have caused you all that trouble. The fowling piece has jammed and I couldn't find the carrying case for it. I brought it down to a shop to be fixed. I'm going up country tonight. Season opens at midnight."

"Good luck, Mr. Burke," Moriarity said, and went back to unsnarl the traffic at the corner.

So Moriarity failed to see the stony grimness that erased all the smiling mildness from Burke's face. He did not hear the words that gritted through Burke's suddenly clenched teeth.

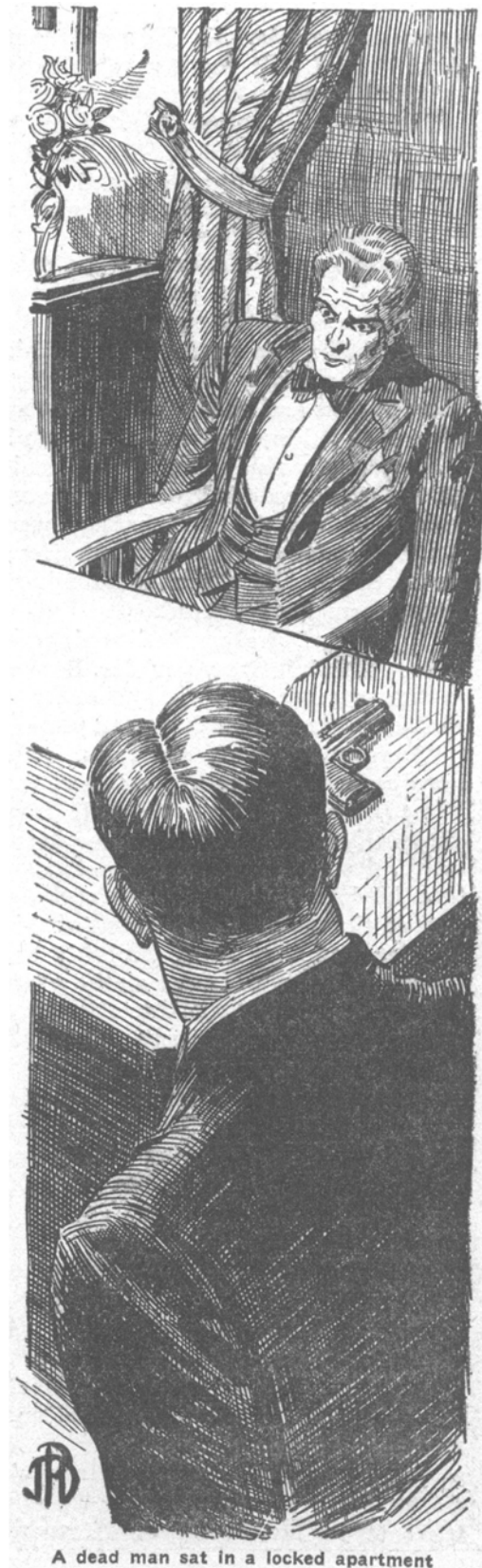
"And good hunting, Mr. Burke!" said the banker to himself.

Moriarity, four years now on the bank corner, the recipient each Christmas of a brand new five-dollar bill from the mild George Burke, would have been greatly shocked to know that a dead man sat in a locked apartment which Burke had visited less than an hour before. A dead man dressed in a tuxedo and a bullet in his head, whose very evident suicide the mild George Burke had set himself out to avenge.

George Burke walked swiftly through the bank lobby. Two clerks who were checking up books, glanced up and saw his long-chinned face, and immediately returned to their figures. Burke opened the door with the word "President" marked on its frosted glass.

He walked inside and set the light shotgun, a hand-tooled fowling piece, inside the washroom door. Then he came back to the wide, neatly kept desk. James Foster, the president, had always been a careful, orderly man. His desk always was as clean when he went to lunch, as when his papers were locked away for the day. It was well that this was so, for today James Foster had not returned from lunch.

Burke had been at his own cashier's desk when Foster had gone out at one o'clock. Foster had nodded, then had an afterthought



A dead man sat in a locked apartment

and turned back. He had removed a bright, newly notched key from his ring.

“Thought you should have a key to my private file, George,” he had said, and smiled when he said it. “Might save you the trouble of having it jimmed open if I should forget to come back from lunch some day.”

Burke now took this bright, new key from his pocket. He went over and inserted it into a steel filing case, the oldest and least modern in the office. Before he removed any papers, Burke stepped swiftly to the narrow, heavily barred window giving light from a short alleyway at the rear of the bank.

“I didn’t imagine it then,” he muttered. “They were in the crowd when Moriarity stopped me, and they followed me here.”

All he had seen in the alleyway had been a man’s slouch hat. But it had been pulled back too quickly as he had walked to the window. Burke reached up and closed the slatted shade.

THERE were various papers concerning the bank’s business in James Foster’s private file. Burke’s mouth went tight when he picked up one and read:

Changes in my will, as suggested, doubtless will be unimportant when this document is read. It is my sincere hope and belief that my daughter, Lela, will by this time have become Mrs. George Burke. . . .

Burke’s face was grimmer still a minute later. His hand shoved aside all other papers when he had opened a letter from a small package that had been carefully sealed. He read:

So, my dear Foss, I told you in stir why I never would carry a gun. I didn’t start out to become a torpedo. They take the raps, just as I took that one. I leave the rods and the choppers to the boys. That has kept me out of trouble. The Law can be morally certain of my little rackets, but the damned cops will never pin another rap on me.

This time I am compelled to request more than the usual remittance. The time has arrived to clean up

our old affair. So you will get together the fifty grand by the 20th, even if you have to “borrow” some from your bank. Much better this way than to see the depositors lined up after the tabloids have been anonymously informed that James Foster, bank president, is none other than one Gilbert Foss who served a stretch up the river.

A crossed “X” was the only signature. But Burke’s blue eyes were no longer mild behind his gold-chain glasses.

“So that was why he was sitting in that East Side dump with ‘Silky’ Stevens the night I blundered upon him,” murmured Burke. “If he had seen me then—” Burke broke off his short soliloquy sharply. He pulled newspaper clippings from his pocket. One of these said:

Inspector Monahan told the *Reflector* that the man killed attempting to collect the Groton extortion money is a member of the Silky Stevens crowd. It’s a moral certainty that Silky knows all the answers in the Groton case, as well as in several unsolved homicides.

The public criticizes the police for not taking drastic action against such known employers of killers and heads of rackets. But the best boys from the D.A.’s office never have pinned anything on Silky. His alibi is always unbreakable. He has personally never been known to go armed.

Surprised in his office at the Red Roller Roadhouse, Silky Stevens has proved more than once that he will not permit a more dangerous weapon than a toothpick about him, unless it is in the pocket of one of his own personal torpedoes. Though absolutely convinced that Silky is the head of numerous shady enterprises, there has never been a time when the police have been able to get evidence that would stick.

For more than twenty years, the smooth Silky had beaten every possible rap. The cops can’t walk in and shoot a man down, however strong may be their personal belief he is a killer who works through others. . . .

The clipping was dated but two weeks before.

GEORGE BURKE read it through twice. Then he stuffed it with the letter from James Foster’s personal file into an inner pocket. The open statement in the *Reflector* merely

repeated the charges that had appeared in other newspapers. It was easy to see that editors had little fear of libel.

“You can’t libel a man who openly boasts of his power and hires killers,” said Burke softly. “The big town’s full of them. The police know them by their first names all over, and the dumbest cop on a beat can pretty well recite the rackets and the murders for which they are responsible.”

Burke arose to his little better than six feet, then his shoulders drooped slightly. They helped maintain the mild aspect of his blue eyes and queer, long chin. He went into his own office, came out with a short ramrod and an oiled cloth. Glancing at the shaded window, he walked into the washroom.

Anyone close to the door would have heard a phrase coming from his tight-set teeth.

“I told you in stir I never would carry a gun,” he recited. “I leave the rods and choppers to the boys.”

The ramrod could be heard thudding softly as George Burke cleaned the hand-tooled fowling piece.

One of the clerks looked up as Burke emerged a few minutes later from his own room and locker at the rear of the bank. Burke was wearing a light tan coat, cord breeches and laced boots, with a long-visored cap over his gold-chained eye-glasses.

“Well, well, Mr. Burke!” said the clerk cheerfully. “I can see this weekend is going to be tough on the birds. How about a pheasant for my collection?”

“Perhaps I’ll have no luck, Jenkins,” said Burke, smiling. “Would you like a nice stuffed buzzard? Or a crow, Jenkins? Last season I shot only a skunk. Purely in self defense, of course.”

The clerks guffawed over the pleasant humor of their boss.

“Good hunting, Mr. Burke!” the other clerk wished heartily. . . .

George Burke brought his coupe into

the parking spot at the Red Roller Roadhouse in a drenching rain that made the darkness of the night more tense, and the lights of the roadhouse more brilliant. When he climbed out, his tan hunting coat was spattered with red clay and hung in discouraged, wet folds around his slightly stooped, bony shoulders.

Only a dozen customers were in the dining room around the dancing floor. A fat bartender was wiping glasses. The orchestra hadn’t begun to get hot yet. Perhaps there were other customers behind the green baize doors at the head of a stairway. Burke wondered if newspaper hints that Silky Stevens paid good protection to county officials for his gambling layout might be true?

A hat-check girl drooped a lower red lip and stared at him. Burke strode past her, wiping the rain from his glasses, his right arm cradling a muddied shotgun lightly. A broad-faced doorman with a squint in one eye and bulging shoulders, stared awedly at the new arrival.

His eyes played over the uncased fowling piece. It was his business to make sure none of the customers threatened the dignity of the Red Roller by appearing with weapons conveniently concealed.

“Wait a minute, mister,” he said to Burke. “Better check your artillery. This ain’t no target range.”

BURKE blinked at him benevolently, and looked ruefully at his light shotgun.

“I am merely having a drink to keep me warm, and I must wipe off the mud before it spots the barrel,” he stated quietly. “It’s a nice piece, hand-tooled by Steger. You know, the Steger who puts in weeks on a light gun like this.”

The doorman quirked his mouth and scratched a crumpled ear.

“Steger?” he said. “You wouldn’t mean ‘Butch’ Steger over in Brooklyn? Hell,

mister, he's poison. An' he ain't peddlin' no rods. He buys 'em."

"I'm afraid we are not thinking together," said Burke gently. "I'll not spoil any napkins. I've got an oiled rag in my pocket. Going upstate for the birds in the morning. Season opens, you know."

Two waiters wearing coats with side pockets conferred quickly with the fat bartender. A drunk customer mumbled and pointed. The other customers faced around, but Burke sat down at a table and beckoned to a waiter.

"Toddy," he said. "Hot, with cinnamon."

He ignored the waiter's narrowed eyes on the shotgun. The waiter swallowed a couple of times and went after the toddy. Something ought to be done about it, the waiter was thinking, but he didn't know any more what to do than the ex-pug at the door.

Another man with slick, black hair went through a door at the end of the bar. Burke was busily rubbing the mud off the blue, hand-tooled shotgun with an oily rag. Presently his drink came and he sipped at it. The mumbling drunk had had enough liquor to have intuition.

"'Tain't right," he muttered to a slack-mouthed woman. "Come on, baby, we're gettin' outta here. It's too funny to be funny."

Burke was aware he might have been followed here. He had been closely shadowed ever since he had left the apartment where the dead man probably was still sitting. The men who had followed him didn't know the man was dead, for they had been only street shadows when he had entered and left the apartment building.

A man equipped with big muscles came from the door by the bar and a diamond flashed on his little finger as he leaned nonchalantly for a moment on the mahogany. He talked a minute with the bartender and permitted his little black eyes to stray to

Burke's table.

Burke guessed Silky Stevens did not identify him. Perhaps he had never seen George Burke, the cashier. Silky nodded and smiled a little at the spectacle of a customer openly cleaning a gun at one of his tables. Two waiters replied to the nod, but they didn't smile.

Other customers went on with their drinking, eyes only flashing now and then to the man with the gun. Hell, they thought, the spattered hunter was too damned casual to mean anything. Burke downed the last of a steaming toddy.

Then he arose cradled the light fowling piece carefully over his left arm, and started toward the exit door. He paused, rubbed his long chin with the back of one hand and turned. The waiters, the doorman and two other hard-eyed men were breathing easier now.

Burke walked straight toward Silky's office door then. That wasn't a common thing for a stranger to do in the Red Roller. But only one man soft-footed to his side before he reached the door. The customers were stirring at the tables. They weren't so sure now that this didn't mean anything.

THE man came beside Burke and his hand in his side pocket was roughly suggestive.

"Wait a minute, you!" he snapped. "Where you goin'?"

Burke's mild eyes showed bland surprise.

"Why, I wish to speak to Mr. Stevens about his hunting farm upstate," he said. "I thought perhaps he might permit me to have a go at a few birds. He has the best cover in the country."

The bouncer-bodyguard of the person of Silky Stevens shook his head dazedly and swallowed hard.

"He ain't got no—" he began, then he changed it. "That's right, I've heard him

mention it. But maybe he don't want to see you, mister."

"Surely, he will see me," said Burke patiently. "A friend of his, James Foster, the bank president, said Mr. Stevens was a good fellow and—"

The guard's whole body stiffened suddenly. The thing in his pocket abruptly jabbed hard into Burke's ribs.

"Okay! Okay!" he said icily. "You'll see him, brother. But I'll take care of that shotgun."

"Why, yes, certainly," agreed Burke, passing the fowling piece into the guard's hand without hesitation. "You can hold it for me until I talk to Mr. Stevens."

The guard's eyes blinked rapidly. He took the shotgun into one hand.

"Walk on in, mister," he said then.

Silky Stevens sat beside the single desk in the room. Two other men lounged over at one side. Silky looked up with sleepy black eyes.

"Well, what is it, Card?" he demanded.

"This fella wants to see you about some huntin', Silky," said the guard. "I took his gun because—"

"Sure, Card," said Silky softly. "Put it on my desk. H'm! Nice piece of work."

Silky's hand went out and his fat fingers rubbed along the hand-tooled barrel. He smiled with his mouth at Burke, but his eyes did not smile.

The guard leaned closer to Silky. Burke didn't hear all he said, but the name "Foster" could be seen on his thick lips. Silky Stevens showed no reaction outwardly, but his eyes studied Burke more intently now.

Silky waved the guard to one side. The man joined the other two at the side of the room, thus placing the three partly behind Burke.

"Sit down," Silky said. "Have a cigar, Mr—?"

"Burke's the name and—"

The phone on Silky's desk buzzed softly. Silky reached for it. So, Burke decided, he had been followed from the dead man's apartment. No time now for preliminaries and Burke hadn't intended any.

"Don't touch that phone, Silky!" he snapped. "You other punks, get 'em up! It's a holdup! I said, up!"

Three gasping mugs saw a hand move faster than light. A neat, blue automatic came from under Burke's tan hunting coat. The guard who had taken his shotgun swore over his stupid oversight. Then he made an instant move to correct it. His hand dived into his pocket and stayed there.

FIRE leaped at him from Burke's hand. The mug knew then what it felt like to have a leaden slug pound into a man's vitals. He didn't feel it long, for he was dead when he toppled over. Another of the three had been trying to crab sideways. But his hands were up.

"Drop your rods one at a time, or you get it, too!" commanded Burke.

He was all the way around now, his back presented to Silky, Silky Stevens who wouldn't have a gun about his person since he took a rap up the river because of one. Burke heard feet scuffling as customers milled about excitedly in the room outside.

Still he heard no movement behind him. Then he started, as if to turn slowly toward Silky. One guard whipped a hand downward. But Burke had not turned all the way. A slug jumped from the automatic and made a neat slicing wound in the mug's throat. The guard looked surprised and sat down, dead.

Burke heard the shotgun scrape across Silky's desk, but he started walking toward the remaining guard, anyway. "I'll take your rod, fellow!" he said tersely. "It might be unlucky for you, too."

Burke knew now that Silky had a gun.

He could almost feel the hand-tooled barrel of the fowling piece centered upon his back. He knew the instant when Silky's forefinger was tightening on the trigger. Silky had never possessed a gun of his own since that rap up the river. Silky was about to kill a man with the man's own gun.

Burke fired his next shot deliberately, cold-bloodedly, adding up all of several events until they came to the dead man sitting at a table in his apartment. The score came to justified murder.

Until Silky Stevens pulled the trigger Time passed with dragging slowness for Burke. But in only one swift second, all hell erupted.

It came with a detonating, bursting blast of splitting steel and smoking, gaseous flame. A tearing piece of metal went into Burke's shoulder. His back tingled as if it were bare and the coat had been blown off of it.

The hand-tooled forward half of the fowling piece hit the rug and slid past Burke's feet to jam into the wall. Burke now slowly turned around.

Silky Stevens must have sat down heavily in his chair. But he did not know about that though. Where his face had been was only the bare, crushed frontal bones of his skull. The hands that had not used a rod in the years since that rap were no longer on the bleeding dead arms hanging inertly at his sides.

The phone was shattered, and lay on the floor. Burke knew the police soon would come. Two waiters with drawn guns appeared in the opening door. But they gaped and mumbled, and they suddenly decided to go away before the police arrived.

\* \* \* \*

"You say James Foster was cleaning his revolver when an old cartridge exploded?" said Inspector Monahan.

George Burke nodded.

"It looked that way to me, Mr. Monahan," he said. "His daughter, my wife, was up in the country. Foster had the short gun and the oiled rag in his hand when I found him. I knew he had been desperately worried over threats that came from Silky Stevens."

"So you started on the hunting trip, and dropped in to have a word with Silky, is that it, Mr. Burke?"

"That was it, Inspector," stated Burke in a mild voice. "I had dropped my fowling piece in the mud. Perhaps some got into the barrel and I hadn't noticed. When I mentioned Foster's name, Silky's boys decided to get rough. I was compelled to defend myself."

"And the wounds from the bursting shotgun are convincing proof that Silky tried shooting you in the back, Mr. Burke," said Monahan slowly. "But what about the matter of the threat, Mr. Burke?" he added. "The motive for Foster planning—well, cleaning his revolver?"

"I believe Silky Stevens threatened to kidnap Foster's daughter," said Burke. "That was mainly why I dropped in to speak to Silky."

"And gave him a gun," said Monahan thoughtfully. "That shell made one helluva blast."

"Smokeless powder *is* powerful, Inspector," said Burke. But not one-tenth as destructive as the nitro poured into the magazine under the choked and exploding shell, he said to himself. "Yes, I gave him a gun," added Burke, aloud.