

THE KID FACES DEATH

Steve Fisher

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"Slug" O'Donnel leaned back in his chair, took a toothpick out of his mouth and pointed it.

"Danny," he said, "I promised you that time the Hindu kept you locked in his closet that I'd give you a break on another case sometime. Now that was a rash statement, made in a moment of --of--"

"Of gratitude," Mike Ryan, his redfaced detective partner, came in dryly.

"Yes," Slug O'Donnel went on--"of gratitude. You must know, Danny, that tipping off kids like you on big crimes, no matter how smart the kids are or how lucky they are in turning up a valuable clue now and then, is, to say the least, highly irregular. If the chief found out, your friend, Mike Ryan, and I might get bounced out of the homicide squad like a couple of duck eggs out of a hen's nest!"

The twelve-year-old shoe-shine boy's eyes became a trifle troubled. He shifted the shine kit to his other shoulder, turned his checkered cap around and around in his hands. He had red hair, freckles, and frank blue eyes; and he had been featured in several cases with Slug O'Donnel and Mike Ryan, where he had been able to spot clues that aided them in making important arrests.

"What are you driving at, Slug?" he asked.

Mike Ryan lighted a short stogy and puffed on it. "Kid, what he's really driving at is that he wants you to do us a favor, and count that as the break he promised you."

"That's not true, Mike!" Slug roared. "I--"

"Sure it is," Mike Ryan interrupted. He shoved his derby back on his head. "You see, there's a guy down on Third Avenue, a merchant, who claims his life has been threatened. He hasn't any notes, or anything like that. Just claims that some one is going to try and murder him, and won't tell us who, outside of the fact that it'll probably be a woman.

"The chief thinks he's screwy. Says we can't throw a ring of police protection around every half-baked guy who asks for it. I'm inclined to agree with the chief. This guy--his name is Hudson-- refuses to cooperate with us beyond telling us that he's going to be bumped off."

"That's it, Danny," Slug said, "that's the whole story. Only, I interviewed the guy, and I was convinced that he was sincere. Naturally, a couple of detective sergeants like me and Ryan can't hang around a store waiting for murder to happen; especially when the chief doesn't sanction it. But--if anything should happen, we'd like to get a quick tip on it."

Danny sighed, his eyes shining. "I see; you want me to go down into that district and hang around shining shoes and keeping my eyes open. If anybody suspicious come around, I should tell you. If Hudson gets murdered, I should get you on the phone right away. Is that it?"

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"That's it," O'Donnel and Ryan chorused.

Danny Garrett grinned. "Sure!" he said. "I'm glad to do errands for you guys like that. Give me Hudson's address."

For three days Danny Garrett spent all the hours he had free for shining shoes in and around the neighborhood of Paul Hudson's combination soda–magazine–book–stationery store, and by now he had begun to agree with Mike Ryan and the chief that Slug was wrong about Hudson. The merchant seemed neither nervous nor unhappy; and Danny hadn't seen anything that would make him even slightly suspicious.

As a matter of fact, Hudson was a likable man, and Danny struck up an acquaintance with him.

On the third day Danny sipped a soda Hudson had given him for delivering some newspapers into apartment houses.

"Mr. Hudson," he asked subtly, "did you ever know any cops?"

Paul Hudson's dark eyes gleamed. He was a medium–sized man in his early thirties who had crisp and curly black hair, a swarthy complexion, and thickish lips.

"Sure," he replied frankly. "I told them I thought some one was going to murder me!"

Danny hadn't expected that, and he was astounded. He knew that Paul Hudson had a dry sense of humor, and that he often startled people by telling the truth—what he thought of them, their clothes, their wives, and whether or not he cared for their patronage. He had a score of enemies for this, but twice as many friends who looked upon him as something rare.

"You—you told them that?" Danny asked.

"Yeah," said Paul, and closed the subject.

Danny Garrett sat there drinking the soda. A tall, gray–haired man whom Danny recognized as Stanley Sims, a well–known doctor, and a good friend of Paul, came into the little store and sat down beside him.

"Hello, Paul!"

"Hello, doc," Paul replied, smiling slowly. "How's everything at the clinic?"

"Fine!" Doctor Sims boomed. "And Shirly is fine, too. She asked me to tell you she would see you later to–night. How is your treatise coming?"

"The treatise is coming along all right," Paul Hudson said, and he closed that subject, too. He had a deft way of doing that at exactly the time he wished.

Danny said he would see Paul later and left the store. He drummed up trade on Third Avenue, and two hours later came back and sat down on the newspaper rack in front of Hudson's establishment.

He saw Shirly Parker as she approached. She was garbed in her white nurse's uniform and a thin coat. Her hair was jet–black and coiled in rolls on the back of her neck; she had eyes that were as shiny as ebony.

Danny had learned long ago that she was Paul's girl. She entered the store, and Danny Garrett remained sitting on the rack.

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He was surprised to see Shirley Parker come out of the store less than five minutes later. She glanced at Danny, then up and down the street. Her face was as pale as a ghost. She had something bulky tucked under her arm that looked like a manuscript.

As she hurried toward the curb to call a cab, Danny noticed idly that she was wearing new shoes, that the soles, as her tiny feet went clip-clop, were spotless. Then a taxi pulled up and the girl climbed into it and made off.

For a moment the significance of this strange action did not fully dawn on the shoe-shine boy; then, alarmed, he jumped up and rushed into the store. Paul was nowhere to be seen, and there were no customers present.

Danny went around behind the soda fountain. There was no one there. He walked back into the small storeroom. Here he stared down, sucking in breath. He was too paralyzed to move.

Paul Hudson lay in a crumpled and bloody heap on the floor, his chest crimson with blood, his dark eyes, burning no longer, staring emptily past Danny. Some of the blood was still trickling to the floor.

It was obvious that Paul had been recently murdered!

When Danny's senses awakened to the full horror of what had happened he looked around. There was lipstick on the floor near the body, and it was rubbed into the wood. Shirley Parker must have dropped it in her hurry and stepped on it!

Danny Garrett could feel his heart beating like a hammer against his chest. He backed away, still gasping for breath. The rear door was open, exposing a back yard. Suddenly he saw a figure moving across the yard.

Running, Danny reached the door. Miller, the florist whose store was next to Hudson's, was retreating through the back door of his own shop.

Danny knew that he should phone at once, but something forced him out the door. He walked to the back of the florist shop, saw Miller—a squat, bald man—washing his hands. Danny looked around the yard. He bent, touched his finger to a drop of blood.

Temples throbbing now, he glanced again toward Miller, then hurried back in through Hudson's stationery store. He went at once to the pay telephone and put in a nickel. He dialed the police headquarters and asked for Mike Ryan.

"This is Danny," he said when the burly Irish dick came on the line. "It's happened!"

"What?"

"Paul Hudson has been—been murdered!"

"No fooling, kid?"

"Yeah—and darn it, Mike, next to you and Slug he was about the swellest guy going!"

Slug O'Donnel and Mike Ryan looked at the body of young Paul Hudson as the assistant medical examiner busied himself, with a preliminary examination. Uniformed cops had been placed at the front and back doors of the establishment to keep out the curious—some of whom had been Hudson's friends, some his enemies.

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"He guessed right about the murder," Ryan said at last, lighting his stogy, "and I thought the guy had a screw loose."

"I didn't," said Slug O'Donnel, who had a figure like a bean. pole and hair not unlike a straw mat. "I knew he wasn't kidding. And from what Danny has told us it's obvious who's behind it. No mystery on this trip, Mike. It's clear-cut: a jealous woman.

"And this is a case just like you'd expect of a woman. Nothing clever, nothing subtle. Stabs the guy, gets hysterical and beats. it. Even leaves her lipstick behind her in the rush."

Ryan pushed back his derby. He was skeptical. "It's too easy! Danny, are you sure Shirly Parker came out of the store like you said, just before you found Hudson had been killed?"

"Positive!" said Danny.

"When you deal with crimes of passion—love and hate," Slug O'Donnel snapped, reciting something he had read in the police journal, "the solution is bound to be simple. A person who murders under emotional strain is so worked up that he doesn't care whether he is caught or not. You can play the pin machine over there, Ryan, and chant about things being easy if you want, I'm going after Shirly Parker!"

Mike Ryan seemed a little sad as he watched Slug leave the store. He glanced back at Danny, then at the corpse, and said, "He's probably right, but I hate to admit it."

He bent down and scooped up some of the lipstick. While he gazed at the cosmetic, Danny told him about seeing the florist next door.

"Maybe we ought to go over and question him, Mike."

"Maybe so," Ryan replied. "Come on."

They went out the back way and into the florist shop through its back entrance. Miller finished attending a customer and turned to see them standing there. The squat man, light shining from his bald head, looked at the small shoe-shine boy, then up at the red-faced detective.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"Maybe you haven't heard of the murder next door."

"Sure," Miller grunted, "I heard of it."

"But it doesn't make you very sorry, does it?" Mike Ryan asked.

. Miller shrugged. Danny saw that he had a bandaged. finger. Ryan saw it too.

"Cut yourself?"

Miller nodded. "I broke a vase and had to take it outside."

"Yeah?" Ryan snapped. "Let's see what the wound looks like!"

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Miller took off the bandage and showed it to them. It did not look unnatural. Afterward Ryan, followed by Danny, went outside and saw the broken vase to verify Miller's story.

Danny Garrett began to wonder at the turn of events. Miller's story was logical. He had every right to be out in the small back yard; and he had an excuse for the blood. Then Shirley Parker must be guilty!

Ryan took Miller back inside to grill him; but Danny did not go along this time. He entered the stationery store again. He had no trouble, for the cop guarding the door had seen that he was with the homicide detective.

Danny saw them carry out Paul Hudson. He would like to believe that any one but Shirley had committed the crime; and yet, from fairly close relationship with Hudson, he had seen no one whom he could look upon now as a suspect.

He thought of Doctor Sims. Yet Sims must have been out of the place long before this happened. Maybe Miller had broken the vase to cover up for any questioning such as he was now undergoing.

Suddenly an idea came to Danny. He scooped up some of the lipstick as he had seen Ryan do; scooped it up with his finger nail. Again he left the store, and headed down the street toward a drug store.

It was a half hour later when Slug O'Donnel brought the police car to a skid in front of the stationery store and hopped out, a bundle under his arm. Danny Garrett and Mike Ryan saw him.

"She's gone," Slug wailed. "Can't find her anywhere! Skipped the city, I guess. I suggest we go right down to headquarters and send out a general alarm with her description and all that, Ryan."

"Where did you look?"

"At the clinic," Slug answered. "At her living quarters, the home of her mother; I even had some of the uniformed boys scout around to the homes of her friends. I tell you we worked fast, looked in all the logical places, and she's gone!"

Mike Ryan chewed on his short cigar for a moment, then he shrugged. "I thought I had a lead on a guy in the florist shop, but maybe not. This Parker girl must be guilty."

Slug snapped: "Must be? She is!"

But Danny Garrett was looking at the bundle under the skinny detective's arm. "Slug," he asked, "what's that?"

Slug O'Donnel answered the question, though he addressed Ryan as he did it. "The screwiest thing you ever heard of" he said. "I found it underneath a hidden plank in Shirley Parker's apartment when I was tapping around to find something hollow. Guess what it is."

"I'm not paid to guess," grunted Ryan.

"It's the manuscript of a book! Look, here's the title."

Danny saw it as it was held up:

Treatise: Of An American Medical Man By Paul Hudson

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"Imagine Hudson, a stationery-store guy, writing a book about medicine," said Slug as he and Ryan climbed into the police car.

Danny Garrett watched them drive off, then he headed down the street as fast as he could walk. He could imagine Paul Hudson writing a book like that, and he could imagine a reason for it. It was the book Shirley had taken with her from the scene of the crime.

He remembered Doctor Stanley Sims asking Paul about the book, and how Paul had answered with reserve, as though it were too personal a subject to discuss.

Danny went into a telephone booth and looked Sims up in a directory. A few minutes later he was at Sims's door, ringing the bell.

It was a brownstone house near Gramercy Park. It was pitch-dark now, except for the street lamps which glimmered a few feet away.

Danny waited impatiently for an answer; then he rang again. Still no answer. He went down the steps to the sidewalk to think. There was a curious burning inside of him, as though he were being foolish to leave.

At last he crept around the side of the house. It was abundant with ivy vines. Seeing a light that shone from one of the side windows, Danny climbed the small picket fence and peeked in.

He saw Doctor Sims, in shirt sleeves, his face covered with sweat, cross the room. There was something about the intensity of his expression that chilled Danny. The tall, thin surgeon disappeared from sight.

Still, Danny had not seen enough to warrant calling for the detectives; the clues he was following were, as yet, too vague. He leaped to the vines, clung to them, and crawled to the high sill of the window.

Ryan had always warned him about doing anything against the law, but this time Danny felt that Shirley Parker was in grave danger, and that if he didn't do something about it now it would soon be too late for anybody to do anything.

His desperate hope that he was right and that he might find the girl a prisoner here gave him courage and would, he thought, excuse him even in the eyes of Mike Ryan.

Carefully Danny lifted the window. Silently it slid upward. He squeezed his small body through and jumped to the carpeted floor of the room. There was no sound.

Danny saw Sims coming back, and he ducked down behind a chair. In a moment the tall doctor was gone again.

Danny rose again and moved forward. He was breathing hard now, and sweat had begun to crease his young face; his blue eyes were feverishly alert. Presently he found himself in a dimly lighted hall.

The faint odors of medicines and a dustless cleanliness that made the air dry and parched, came to his nostrils. It was as though he were in a house that had been closed fifty years ago from the outside world; a house that had not changed with the times, but remained stiff and cold and old-fashioned, so that to walk through its rooms was like walking in forbidden territory.

He was in the middle of the hall when he heard a short scream. It had come from a woman in a room just ahead!

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Danny turned and fled to the living room, and then he stopped. The scream sounded again. He looked about desperately for a phone. There was none.

He began thinking. Even if he did phone, the police, or his detective friends, might arrive too late. There was no one in the whole house who could help the person who was screaming but himself. Yet he was a lad, and to risk himself against the fury of a murderer—

Sweating what seemed like blood now, he turned and doggedly went back into the hall. He looked again for a telephone and saw none. He moved stealthily toward the room from which the screams had come.

He heard voices: "You and Paul tricked me! I want to know where it is!"

"If you knew you would kill me," Shirley Parker gasped. "You would kill me—"

"No," came the doctor's thick voice, "I will kill you if you don't tell me! Kill you here and now! It is only that manuscript that I want!"

Her voice was filled with terror. "Don't come near me again with that knife! That's your murder knife! Don't come near me!"

"Will you tell?"

"No!"

Danny heard her scream again. He turned the knob of the door. It opened easily. He saw the doctor's thin back, the shirt that was sweat-ridden; he saw the terrified, black-haired nurse half lying in a chair. Danny gasped.

The doctor had her in a strait-jacket. Danny knew that he had to work quickly. He moved to a chair, picked it up. He lifted it over his head. It was heavy, and that was not easy to do. He rushed toward the doctor.

Sims heard him and spun around. Danny had one fleeting look at the horrible, dilated eyes, the lock of gray hair that hung over the surgeon's glistening forehead, the surgical knife that was in his hand—

Then the chair crashed. It caught Sims squarely on top of the head. The doctor's legs went out from under him like pieces of string.

As he struggled on the floor in an effort to regain his feet, Danny's eyes centered on the bottoms of the doctor's shoes. Then the eyes widened as a thought raced through the shoe-shine boy's brain.

Sims was nearly on his feet again. Danny grabbed at a vase, crashed it over the doctor's head.

The surgeon groaned and fell back. Danny could see the phone now; it was in one corner of this, an old-fashioned operating room that probably dated to the doctor's early days of home practice. Heart smashing within him, the shoe-shine boy rushed to the telephone and picked it up. He kept his eye on Sims.

"Homicide headquarters—at once I . . . I want to talk to Mike Ryan!"

Ten minutes later the two detectives were in the room. They released Shirley Parker and put Doctor Stanley Sims, now returning to consciousness, in handcuffs. The girl was explaining.

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"When I saw what happened, I realized what the trick was," she said. "Paul had spoken of the possibility of his murder because of the treatise he was writing about the medical profession as he had seen it. You know, he served as an interne at the clinic and later as a surgeon.

"They said he had a brilliant future. But he found a corrupt system, that Sims and other doctors and men of prominence accepted bribes to cut down on patients' charity supplies. Paul Hudson was always an honest man who always told the truth, no matter what the cost.

"Maybe these systems had been operating in certain types of hospitals for years and years, he thought; still, it was no reason he should tolerate it. But when he came forward with his stories he found that he had no actual proof. He was laughed at, disbelieved, and authorities made it so hard for him after that that he was forced to withdraw his name from the medical rolls.

"So he bought that little store near the hospital .and devoted his life to gathering real evidence against certain members of the staff; mostly Doctor Sims, the head of the clinic. He put down everything in the book he was writing: 'Treatise: of an American Medical Man.' He told Sims and others of the book in an offhand way as an excuse for being around the hospital so much.

"I helped him all I could. But only Sims dreamed of what Paul Hudson was writing. He knew that if the book were published it would ruin him---put him behind bars. Break the rotten system, expose the graft---"

"And so," Ryan cut in, "he killed Hudson and left the lipstick so it would look like you had done it."

She nodded. "He thought he stole the manuscript, too. But Paul had had a dummy manuscript for just such an emergency. He kept the real one hidden and told only me where it was; that if anything ever happened to him, I must see that it was saved at all costs.

"When I saw the lipstick and that the dummy manuscript was missing, my only thought was to take the real manuscript to safety, and then go to Doctor Sims and try to get some evidence of murder on him. I thought if the police had caught me I would be locked up, wouldn't have a chance. You see---"

"That's all right," Ryan said. "We have the rat now. Thanks to the kid, here, and yourself. How'd you know she hadn't done it, Danny?"

Danny Garrett shifted his shine kit. "I took some of the lipstick to a drug store and asked them to look at it," he replied. "Sims must not have been very particular what shade he got. The kind that he had left rubbed into the floor was for platinum blondes!"

Ryan and Slug O'Donnel gazed thoughtfully. at Shirley Parker's black hair, then grinned.

But Doctor Stanley Sims, his eyes smoldering, came to life now. "So I left blond lipstick? What of it? Is that proof of anything? You can't hang a murder on me just because Hudson was writing a treatise in which I was mentioned! You talk like absurd fools!"

Danny Garrett was looking at Sims's shoes. He nodded to Slug, and the bean-pole detective lifted one of the doctor's feet up. Danny nodded, and Ryan looked also.

His feet both on the floor again, Doctor Sims stared at the detectives, his face growing more ashen in color.

"What is it?" he whispered thickly.

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"Something else you didn't think of," Mike Ryan said, puffing on his stogy. "You rubbed the lipstick into the floor to make sure it would still be there when we arrived. Well, it was! You did a good job. But the part that's got you slated straight for the chair is that that same lipstick is on the sole and instep of one of your shoes!"

The killer sagged like an empty sack. Slug O'Donnel dragged him from the room, and Shirly Parker followed.

Mike Ryan shoved back his derby hat and looked at young Danny Garrett. "Well, you've done it again, kid!" he said.