

KILLER 'ROUND THE BEND

William G. Bogart

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FOG rolled in from the murky Ohio River and crept over Front Street, making saffron disks of the dismal street lamps. Bill Shane, detective, striding along the water-front district of old warehouses and cheap beer joints, hunched his lean shoulders, pulled his head deeper into the upturned collar of his topcoat.

Bill Shane wondered if there'd be any trouble when he sought out the man known to him as Benny Smith.

An hour earlier he had received the phone call from the Levee Bar, and Benny, the informant, had said to look for him there. Benny had information about the murder of Andrew Benson. Information that meant plenty to Bilt Shane.

For Andrew Benson was the man Bill Shane had been assigned to accompany on the slow trip down the Ohio River!

Ahead, through the wet gloom, Bill Shane saw the small red neon sign: THE LEVEE BAR. Just another beer joint in a row of smelly river-front hang-outs. He moved ahead quickly.

Inside the place, there was thick smoke and the smell of beer coils that needed cleaning. The short bar was crowded with burly stevedores and workers from the river packets; big men, solid and unsmiling and seamy-faced from years on the river.

Benny whom Bill Shane had yet to meet had said on the phone: "I'm a little guy that don't look like much. Look for me in the first booth past the bar."

Faces turned toward Bill Shane as he picked his way carefully past beer-slopped tables. The detective realized that his quick manner, his business suit marked him as a city fellow. Those here wore rough jackets, sweaters. They talked with a slow drawl.

He saw the thin, sickly-faced man popping up from a booth in the rear part of the place. Nervous eyes sent an appealing look toward the detective, and the small man started to call, "Here I am, Mister Shane. I was "

And instantly others moved around the speaker, circled him and started walking him toward a rear doorway.

Bill. Shane rapped, "Say, what is this?" and followed.

But only for two or three long strides. Immediately he found himself likewise in the center of a grim-jawed group. He was aware of breaths that were sour with beer, of sweaty, wide-shouldered bodies. A big fist clamped on his arm and a man said, "Outside, you damned Yankee!"

Perhaps none saw the sudden change in Bill Shane's eyes. They grew a shade darker, became cold steel.

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Shane was as tall as any man present in the smelling barroom. But hardly as thickset or as solid. But what he lacked in weight, he made up in whirlwind speed.

He whirled on the bristly-jawed individual holding him, broke the grip on his arm and brought up a sizzling right. The sharp crack of the lanky detective's fist against the fellow's jaw made a blunt sound in the crowded, still room. The man staggered backward into the arms of some of his partners.

Immediately, Bill Shane swung on another stocky man who blocked his path. He straight-armed the fellow aside, jerked his left elbow sidewise and caught the riverman in the midriff. Shane clipped out.

At that moment, from the back of the barroom, there was muffled commotion as the little, pale-faced man was hustled out of the room and a door slammed.

Half a dozen burly forms piled upon Bill Shane.

Shane backed quickly off, got his fists up and started cracking jaws. He moved lithely, with precise machine-fast motion. Someone shoved him from behind, at the same time sticking out a foot and trying to trip him up. Another caught Shane with a blow behind the neck.

But the tall detective managed to keep his balance. His fists moved like pistons. His body weaved with blurred movement. He sent three-men down and swiftly slid to one side as two others jumped for him.

His assailants were big, slow-moving. Bill Shane had the advantage of a trigger-fast brain and experience in rough-and-tumble fighting. He hadn't been a cop on a New York beat for five years for nothin'. And now that he was a private shamus, that training came to his aid.

FINALLY, with one smashing drive, Bill Shane hammered the last of his opponents out of his way, broke free of the melee and made a fast plunge for that rear door. He slammed through and found himself in a dark, cobblestoned alley. Ahead somewheres in the gloom he heard the somewhat indistinct pattern of running feet. He followed.

The dark alley emerged on a side street leading back to Front Street. Coming out on the side street, Bill Shane could no longer hear the sound of hurrying steps. But he had a hunch!

Rivermen were the ones who had rushed little Benny Smith out of the saloon. And steamboat men had only one home: the river packets tied up against the shore.

Bill Shane headed that way.

He crossed wide Front Street, choosing a spot away from the meager light cast by street lamps in the gathering mist. There were no docks here; rather a slanting quay that led right down to the muddy water's edge. Ahead, vaguely, loomed the rectangular hulks of the packets. Three were tied up here at present.

Between himself and the paddle-wheelers, Shane thought he saw shadowy figures moving. He hurried on. He heard the slap-slap of the relentless Ohio against the landing stage; somewhere out in the river was the mournful hoot of a passing packet.

Suddenly, Bill Shane realized that the vague figures ahead had abruptly disappeared toward the very river boat on which he had a stateroom, a packet that was to leave for Pittsburgh tonight.

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He crept ttp the gangplank quietly. Perhaps little Benny Smith did have a cabin on this very boat. Perhaps that's how the informer had known about himself.

Shane reached the wide deck, moved past cargo stored ready for the journey upriver. Somewheres toward the stern of the wide, flat boat was the throb of boilers building up steam. The detective reached a passageway, passed along it in semidarkness. A stanchion light glowed feebly midway down its narrow length. Shane thought he heard someone moving ahead. Cabins lined either outer side of the boat

And then he did see someone. Someone came quickly from a cabin, closed the door and disappeared quickly toward the far end of the passageway. The steps faded out and there was thick, strained silence.

He hurried along the narrow passageway, paused before the door through which he'd seen an indistinct figure come. Quietly, his tall form tense, Bill Shane tried the polished brass knob.

The door opened, Shane saw only darkness within, and he stepped cautiously inside. He realized he was doing a cockeyed thing, but then the hunch persisted that Benny Smith had been brought to this very boat.

Shane struck a match, blinded for a second, then adjusted his gaze to his surroundings. The cabin was somewhat small. It contained a wash stand, table, rocking chair and a double bunk.

The man lay on the lower bunk, sprawled grotesque]y, Shane thought, for anyone sleeping. And his clothes were still on!

Before the match burned out, the detective peered closer, stared, his eyes bleak.

He recognized the unhealthy features, the thin face and form of the little man who had stood up in response to his name at the barroom. Benny Smith the informer who had been going to help out Bill Shane, in a matter of murder!

The little fellow's clothes were half ripped from his body, as though someone had made a frantic search. Whether or not the searcher had foand what he wanted was a question. But there was no question about the knife in Benny Smith's throat.

Eyes stared like polised glass in the dead man's face. Blood still pumped slowly around the hilt of the heavy knife.

Bill Shaoe remembered the shadowy figure he had seen hurry from this very room. Maybe there was still a chance of catching up with the person.

He started to turn

He turned in time to meet the crashing downward blow of a heavy weapon in his unseen attacker's hands.

BILL SHANE awakened to the throbbing beat of his aching head. He lay quite still a moment, trying to collect his senses. He moved his arms, his legs, breathed with relief when he realized he was not injured too seriously. There was only the damnable pounding in his brain.

And then he realized that this was only a part of the throbbing. The rest came from the boat itself!

He got up, swayed a moment uncertainly; then his jaw set grimiy and he listened to this other sound. He heard the pound of the huge paddle wheel at the stern of the river packet. He heard the throbbing of the huge booms which

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drive that paddle wheel. And he realized that the river steamer was under way!

He swung toward the cabin door, barged out into the dimly lit passageway and toward the forward deck. An officer, standing near the bow, turned and stared at sight of the tall detective. Blood still was wet on one side of Bili Shane's face.

To the officer, Bill Shane said briefly, "Get your skipper. There's a dead man aboard!"

It was only a matter of moments until the skipper himself came down from the wheethouse. A mate had relieved him. To the gray-haired, calm-featured old riverman, Shane said, "Round up all of the crew you can spare at the moment." He explained little Benny Smith's murder. "I want to find out if anyone has any ideas about this thing!"

Later, in the cabin with the dead man, apparently no one had any ideas. Bili Shane studied the immobile, grim faces of an engineer, of a couple of oilers, of deckhands who could be momentarily spared from duty. No one, apparently, had anything helpful for the detective.

And watching the men, Shane remembered the rivermen back at the barroom. They were a close-mouthed lot; they stuck together as men of the river will. All these men, even if they were innocent of crime, had heard of the murder of wealthy Andrew Benson. That murder had taken place on this very packet:

Benson, a wealthy New York jeweler, on a trip through the Ohio River valley, had been carrying a sample case containing jewelry valued in the thousands.

And now the detective was thinking of the murder-for-robbery motive, and that the killer had been someone aboard the packet and familiar with its layout.

The elderly captain gave orders for removal of little Benny Smith's body. He looked at Bill Shane. "You knew this man?" he asked. .

For a brief instant, Shane's cool eyes flashed over the group of boat men jammed into the small cabin. He suddenly had a hunch, as he said, "Yes in a way. And before you move him, or even attempt to, I have a suggestion to make."

The gray-haired captain looked at Shane. "Yes?"

The detective looked suddenly worried. He said, "Benny Smith was a very ill man. Perhaps he would have died anyway but someone hurried that death along. I learned just tonight that he had diphtheria "

"Diphtheria!" the captain exploded.

Bill Shane nodded. "So you'd better seal the cabin and get everyone out of here. I "

But the efficient skipper was already pushing the crew from the cabin. He said bluntly, "Damn right we will! And the first town we make, we'll quarantine the boat, remove the body and have the room fumigated before proceeding upriver. Everybody out!"

BILL SHANE went out, too, and shortly afterward slipped away from the excitedly talking men and moved quietly toward the stern of the packet.

In the semigloom of night, Bill Shane walked gingerly along the catwalk. One misstep and he knew he would be hurtled beneath the great thrashing blades of the monstrous paddle. Stinging spray lashed his face; his clothes

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were soaked.

And yet he crouched there on the catwalk and waited, eyes fastened on the water. Off to the starboard he saw the great bend they were taking in the river. Kentucky was off there in the gloom, a few lights of a small town blinking in the night. The shore was perhaps a quarter of a mile away.

Bill Shane kept watching!

And suddenly he saw the form bob past the stern, the figure of a man swimming. For a short moment water boiling at the stern swallowed the swimmer's figure; then he appeared again, far in the wake of the boat.

Bill Shane waited another instant, then tipped off his coat and shoes, stiffened and leaped far out from the menace of the grinding paddle wheel. His smooth dive took him well beyond the boat.

And then he broke the surface cautiously and drifted a moment with the strong tide of the channel.

Off toward shore, he heard the steady sounds of the man swimming. He could see no figure now, but the swimmer's arm strokes were distinct on the still night air. Bill Shane took out in that direction.

Fifteen minutes later, his feet touched the sandy bottom located right where the shore curved out into this bend of the river. Lights of the little shore town glowed feebly ahead in the night. And through the willows growing close along that shore a man was moving without trying to be silent about it.

Shane followed!

Followed through the sleeping town, along a single main street that was mostly in darkness.

Shane kept well to the rear, biding his time, knowing he was getting close to the end of the trail now. Finally he saw the man pause before a house, climb the steps to a doorway that was right next to the sidewalk and knock.

Finally his quarry stepped inside and the door closed, the sound echoing up and down the deserted, quiet street. Bill Shane waited a moment, then moved forward again.

He went quietly up to that same door, listened a moment, then carefully turned the knob. He stepped silently into a long hallway that, he saw, led to a lighted room at the rear. The door back there was open, and Shane saw white instrument cases

And as he stepped lightly forward he heard the pleading voice saying, "and so, doc, you've got to help. I tell you I was exposed to diphtheria. I got this cut on my hand and I figure maybe that damned stuff got in my blood."

SHANE went fast into the doctor's office. The doctor himself, an alert-looking, wiry man, jumped up and stared. The man, seated facing him, lurched to his feet, whirled to face Bill Shane; then, with a curse, he leaped for the tall detective.

The man snarled, "Damn you!"

But Bill Shane was ready for the speedy attack. He recalled the sock on the back of his head. He let loose with a haymaker that caught the moving man beneath the chin, hefted him to his toes and sent him across the doctor's desk in a crashing dive.

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Shane leaped quickly forward, seized the big man's arm, twisted it skillfully up in a hammerlock and reached with his free hand for his own hip pocket.

While his victim was still groggy from the blow, he snapped handcuffs on the fellow's hands and pushed him into a chair.

Bili Shane's glance swung to the alert-looking doctor, and he saw that he, himself, was now covered by a gun in the medico's hand.

Shane, with a start, realized that he must look like some sort of apparition. River water still dripped from his sodden clothes. His dark, thick hair hung about his face in shreds. But he grinned, fished a badge out of his trousers pocket and explained, "The name's Shane." He gave the name of a famous detective agency in New York City. "Perhaps you've heard of that murder of a wealthy jeweler aboard the packet River Queen?"

The doctor had been covering both Shane and the handcuffed, burly captive. Now the doctor stared and swung the gun to cover only the riverman. He said:

"So! Who is this man here?" He indicated the handcuffed, hard-jawed man Shane had slammed into the chair. The man, with baleful cold eyes, sat glaring at the gun and the detective.

For answer Shane moved forward, saying warningly to the doctor, "Watch him! He's a bad one!"

Keeping to the side, out of the line of the gun in the doctor's hand, Bill Shane quickly ripped loose the captive's shirt, undershirt and belt. What he had hoped to find was there.

A money belt strapped around the man's middle!

Shane's fast fingers quickly unfastened the canvas belt. He opened several pockets in the belt and dumped the contents on the desk. Jewelry! Stones of precious value spilled in a small heap beside medical books.

Shane said tightly, "The motive for murder!" and relieved the doctor of his gun. He watched his captive briefly, asked, "Know this man, doc?"

The doctor frowned. "Seems to me he's been here once in the past. He said he worked on the river steamers." He stared at Bill Shane. "But what's this stuff about diphtheria?"

Shane said, "A little guy named Benny Smith tried to help me. Apparently he knew something. I've since learned that he was often a stoolie for local police." The tall detective pushed the wet hair out of his eyes and went on, "Well, Benny was murdered before he could tell me anything."

"Yes," the doctor prompted.

"He was a sickly-looking little cuss. Looked like he was liable to have anything. And on a hunch, I said he had diphtheria. I just played it across the board that his killer might have been in the cabin when I said it."

"But how did you get here?" the doctor wanted to know.

Shane smiled briefly, moved toward a phone which he saw on the desk. He still kept his captive carefully covered.

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"This man got scared," he explained. "I heard him tell you about the cut on his hand. Guess he was fearful of infection from little Benny. And so he piled off that river packet as fast as he could and came here. We were fairly close to shore, you see, and he must have remembered you."

Bill Shane, lifting the receiver with one hand in order to notify the Cincinnati police across the river, finished with, "The only infection this rat is going to get is that caused by first-degree burns!"

The End.