

KILLERS USE SEWERS

STAFFORD LEWIS

Table of Contents

<u>KILLERS USE SEWERS</u>	1
<u>STAFFORD LEWIS</u>	1

KILLERS USE SEWERS

STAFFORD LEWIS

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

The girl was in a hurry. Her red hair streamed in the wind and her stockinged feet pounded the ground in hard, swift strides. And she wore neither hat nor coat, though it was a cold winter night. That was strange.

Dave Sands was puzzled and amazed as he watched the girl run toward him. He didn't like finding the gate open, either; the night man always kept it closed. The gate was part of a high wire fence, surrounding the big grounds of the sewage= disposal plant.

Dave watched the girl run toward him by the light of a full, midnight moon. He was just entering the plant grounds, and she had to pass him to get out through the only exit within four hundred yards. He noticed a long, round purse flipping in the girl's fast moving hand, seeming to help pump her swift feet faster. He moved toward the girl to learn what her trouble was.

The girl was very close to Dave Sands, now. He stood directly in her path and shouted:

"What's the matter " Dave ducked as he saw the purse flip upward at his head. The purse glanced on the side of his cap, a hard, stunning blow. Dave Sands went down, dimly realizing the purse in the girl's hand was really a blackjack!

Dazed and half conscious, he heard a man's running feet on the driveway that led to the gate and the roar of a car zipping through it. The last thing he remembered hearing was the girl's scream!

The next thing Dave Sands knew, he was feeling very rocky. A tremendous pressure inside his head seemed to be trying to break his skull. His head ached so badly he could hardly see. He shook it and a sharp pain knifed at his brain. He quit the head-shaking.

He got up, shivering from the damp, cold wind that swept off Puget Sound and looked a- round. He could see no sign of the girl with the blackjack or the men who had chased her with a fast car.

Dave Sands fought his headache and tried to concentrate on the girl and the opened gate. He realized the girl must have been trying to escape from a gang of extortion murderers who had their victims so badly frightened neither the newspapers nor the police could get much information from them. Men who would be brave in the face of a threat of death from knife or gun are often terrified by threats of death by an unusual or revolting means. This gang's threat was either asphyxiation by sewer gas and then drowning in sewage or paying the money they demanded.

The first murder had failed through lack of specialized knowledge. A banker had been thrown in a trunk sewer and the body washed out into the Sound, making it look like an ordinary drowning.

The second and third deaths showed technical knowledge and had been effective enough to make more deaths unnecessary for the past week. A city councilman and the man on night duty at the sewage-disposal plant had been found down in a manhole overcome by both sewer and chlorine gas; the exit for the sewage was too small to

KILLERS USE SEWERS

let the bodies wash out into Puget Sound. There was no doubt that these men had died a horrible and revolting death.

A death Dave Sands didn't want to share. He switched the .38 revolver and holster from his right hip to the front of his belt, where he could draw it easier. Then he was ready to search the sewage plant for the killers or any trace of the girl.

Dave was surprised that no one had taken his gun. He was surprised even more, the next moment, at a scream.

It was the girl's scream; there was no doubt of that. Though, from the way she'd been traveling, Dave imagined she would be far away from the plant. But he was sure this was the girl. He listened to locate the voice.

To Dave, the scream was high and shrill and filled with terror! The short hairs rose on his neck as he located the sound beyond the control building.

Dave Sands ran around the underground wet well and along the weirs, the concrete ditches through which the sewage travels on its way to the control room. He took advantage of the fact that this tidewater flat land had been filled about five feet higher around the plant machinery and buildings; so he was able to keep pretty well out of sight of anyone on the higher ground by stooping over as he ran toward the digesters.

Dave could see a dark mound on the bank, just below the control building and in front of the clarifiers. Part of that mound was reflecting white moonlight and that was what gave Dave a sick, shocked feeling. He knew what the mound was before he was close enough to see well in the moonlight.

He was right. It was Mike Haines, though the still face didn't look like Mike any more; it looked more like a wax mask. Mike had worked the night shift alone at the plant from four in the afternoon until midnight. As the man in charge of the plant, Dave had taken the much more dangerous shift, from midnight until morning. Besides, as a member of a revolver club, Dave had a permit to carry a gun, the ability to use it and the respect of the police as a man who would never misuse his gun.

Dave examined the body of Mike Haines, feeling personally responsible for the death of his night man. There was a hole in Mike's chest, surrounded by dark, sticky stuff—blood. He'd been shot!

This second death convinced Dave that the extortion gang was completely ruthless. They had killed the second workman who had interfered with their plans to use the plant as a means for another ruthless murder undoubtedly the murder of the girl, this time.

Dave Sands squirmed up over the bank so he could see. Two men were dragging the girl toward a sewer manhole! A couple more were lifting the manhole cover, and the fifth was directing operations.

Dave sized the situation up. The distance and light were not good for shooting; yet something had to be done, fast. The manhole was filled with chlorine, a deadly gas used to purify the sewage.

Dave took advantage of the men's interest in the girl to make a fifty-foot dash to the control room. He entered it by the back way and promptly moved to the chlorine machine to shut off the gas. Then he looked at the dial which showed the pumping rate and periods when the sewage was moving.

That taken care of, Dave Sands walked through a door, past the showers and into the front entrance room, where he pushed a sliding window outward so he could shoot toward the manhole.

KILLERS USE SEWERS

The girl was in a tough spot. Three men were holding her arms, trying to force her, feet-first, through the manhole and down into the chlorine gas and sewage. As he watched through the window, Dave could see the girl didn't have a chance; but she was fighting. Her legs spread wide, with a foot braced on each side of the open manhole, she was stubbornly resisting all attempts to force her down to death.

The girl screamed as the man on the fat side kicked her foot from its braced position on the manhole edge. The foot twisted, as if the ankle were broken. Then the fiend moved to the other side for the final kick that would knock the girl's remaining foot from under her and send her down to a horrible death in deadly gas and filth.

Dave Sands forgot that only three men were around the girl. He had his .38 in his hand and was watching the gun barrel rock in line with a dark coat tail. He squeezed the trigger just as the killer's kick was nearing the girl's last, bracing ankle. The murderer jerked as though he had been hit with a sledge hammer, screamed as he went down, his kick stopped in midair.

The sound of leather scratching on the concrete floor reminded Dave of the two killers who had disappeared. The sound came from behind him.

As he jerked around, a voice snarled: "I got him."

The speaker caught Dave's gun hand and sunk a hard right under the V of Dave Sand's ribs in a paralyzing blow. Dave sagged. He was unable to move, but still able to see and think, as he felt himself held up between two men.

One man said: "All right, let's throw him in the manhole before he comes around enough to fight. We can tie the girl's ankles and let her down. This sap will untie her and make it look right."

Dave Sands was just beginning to regain the use of his muscles as he saw the girl's legs coming down into the manhole. He was thankful he had turned off the deadly chlorine as his supporting hands touched the girl's waist. He lowered her gently as he noticed the sharp, biting odor of the little chlorine which still remained in the manhole. Even in minute quantities, the gas is unpleasant. It acts by eating on the lungs, causing a cough that makes the condition worse. The victim must resist the urge to cough, even if he must be doped by a doctor to do it.

The manhole cover clattered back in place. In almost pitch darkness, Dave fumbled at the knots around the girl's ankles. She had to be free, otherwise, she might drown in the filthy water or be overcome by the gas. Besides, Dave hoped the killers would be careless and leave too soon; then he could force the manhole cover open. His knowledge of gas gave them a better chance to live.

All hope of escape that way died when they heard a car start. It stopped with a wheel resting on the manhole cover!

The girl seemed to realize this. She whimpered and buried her head on Dave's shoulder. Then, just to make it worse, the water around their feet began gurgling and rising fast.

"We're going to drown!" she screamed.

"No, we're not," Dave said soothingly. "That inflow of water is a break for us. Now, we have the impulses timed, and the noise will let us climb up out of the worst of the gas without being heard. Even that car wheel on the cover will help hide us."

The girl had courage. "You don't have to lie to me," she said. "We can't get out! I've read newspapers telling of men being killed by sewer gas."

KILLERS USE SEWERS

"We've got to climb," Dave Sands said. "We won't last long down here with this chlorine. I'll help you get up so you can stand on one of the rungs of this iron ladder. It's better to take part of the sewer gas up there, than the chlorine down here."

Dave helped the girl brace herself on the ladder with her good feet and had her to breathe the better air through a slit in the manhole cover. The heavy chlorine was below them.

To get the girl's mind off her cramped position and the slim chance of their ever getting out of the manhole, Dave asked questions,

"Why were you running so fast, without your shoes or coat, when I first saw you? You remember, in front of the gate."

"It was the only chance I had to get away from those murderers," the girl explained. "All, but one man, went off to run down the man who works here nights. They left the one to watch me. So I saw a blackjack in the man's pocket and waited till he got a bit careless. Then I jerked the blackjack out of his pocket and hit him with it. I kicked off my high-heeled slippers because they're awkward when a girl really wants to run, and I thought my coat might be clumsy, too."

"So that's why you hit me," Dave said. "You thought I was one of the gang."

"I'm sorry about that," the girl apologized. "But it doesn't matter, now. I don't think either of us will ever get another chance to get away from those murderers."

Dave didn't answer her. He was concentrating on some way to escape from that manhole.

After minutes in her strained position, standing on the iron rungs of the ladder, the girl said: "I don't think I can hold myself up here for many hours!"

"You won't have to," Dave told her. "We're either going to get out of here or get stuck in a tunnel and drown there. That water will run for fifteen minutes and then shut off for five, if the inflow hasn't changed since I looked at the graph. It was taking five minutes for the wet well to fill up enough to start the automatic pumps and pump it dry again. We catch the incoming sewage that way so the pumps won't have to run steadily."

When the sound of the water told Dave the flow was slackening, he climbed down and found the water was getting quite low near the tunnel entrance.

He helped the girl down the ladder, saying: "The chlorine isn't so strong, now, but take shallow breaths anyway, We've got five minutes to go fifteen or twenty feet. I'll go first; you crawl after me. If the water comes before we get through, my body will shut it off enough to let you get back in here, provided you keep your head. All right, let's go!"

He started crawling as fast as he could, the girl behind him. The slick growths along the cement walls didn't help, and the five minutes seemed gone before he was halfway through.

Dave Sands saw the end of the tunnel, and squirmed with fresh energy toward the concrete pit which the tunnel opened into. It was a good thing he did; the water was beginning to roll over the edge of the clarifier and into its circular ditch, then falling down into the pit where Dave was climbing to his knees, The girl was still in the tunnel, the sewage water rushing in on her. Dave Sands reached into the tunnel, caught her hand and jerked the girl into the safety of the deep pit with him.

KILLERS USE SEWERS

The girl was wet and all mussed up, soaked to the skin with filthy water. Her red hair, made darker by being wet, drooped down over her face.

Dave said: "Look, ordinarily I'd quit before I'd crawl in that filthy water, but, now, we couldn't be any slimier or dirtier. It's too easy to see us here; but if we crawl along that circular, three-foot ditch, we can't be seen if we make it under that steel walk that goes out into the middle of the clarifier. At least, the clarifier takes all the solids out of the sewage before it drops the water over the side."

"I'll do anything you say," the girl told him. "But I don't see what good it'll do to hide. When the men look down the manhole and find our bodies aren't there, they'll just start hunting and find us."

"I'll take care of them," Dave said grimly. "Even if I have lost my gun, there are other weapons. Maybe we can't hope to hide very long, and we can't get away without being seen; but we can still fight and maybe win."

It was very unpleasant moving through sewage water on hands and knees, hidden by the three-foot walls of the ditch around the clarifier. Dave helped the girl to her feet under the concealing arch of the walk, and supported her to make the strain on her bad ankle lighter.

He peeked around the edge of their hiding place and grinned.

"We get a break for a change," Dave announced. "All those killers are around the man-hole trying to see if we're dead yet."

Dave got ready to leave, then turned to the girl. "Look," he said. "There's going to be a lot of cops here soon, and maybe some shooting, so keep under cover. If anything happens to me, have the cops check up on my boss the big boss. The first extortion murder failed because of lack of knowledge then the next one and this attempt show knowledge of this plant and the sewer system we take care of. You can be sure it wasn't one of my men."

The girl smiled, saying: "You may grow up and be a detective, yet. It is the superintendent of streets and sewers. I wasn't supposed to see him, even if I was about to be killed. But I did. From what he said, you haven't even seen Bowen since before the first murder. It was very clever of you to point out a man who had no apparent connection with the murders. You must feel you know your men very well."

"The rub is going to be proving it," Dave told her. "If we're both killed, there isn't much chance of his conviction."

Dave Sands climbed out of the clarifier, leaving the girl there, his wet clothes dripping as he ran the few feet to the control building. He pushed through the swinging doors and staked his life and the girl's on his knowledge of the sewer plant. He did it by pushing an electric plug into a wall socket, starting an emergency siren used to call the men in from the large grounds. Though he only used one man on each night shift, during the day several men were often working in the large grounds of the sewage-disposal plant,

"He's in that building!" Dave heard the killers shout the moment they located the sound. And he hoped a police prowl car would hear it. The four remaining men ran toward the control building, guns in their hands.

Dave ran into the chlorine-tank room where the deadly gas was stored under pressure in a two-thousand-pound tank. He quickly freed the end of a short length of tubing that led from the big tank to the feed lines, traveling to the machines that mixed chlorine gas with the incoming sewage. He bent the tubing, so it was at about the height of a man's face, and pointed it at the doorway through which the killers had to come to reach him. The trap was set!

KILLERS USE SEWERS

Dave Sands heard the heavy pound of running feet on the cement floor, close behind him. He swung up on the cement base under the chlorine tank though he knew it was too late to hide still keeping his hand on the handle that shut off the gas.

He saw three men crowding in the open doorway a few feet from him and wondered where the other man was.

Dave sized up the situation as he heard feet outside of the painted windows which lined both sides of the chlorine-tank room. The fourth, and most dangerous man, located himself nicely by breaking a window with his gun barrel. That was bad. The three men in the doorway were lined up with the open end of the chlorine tubing but the fourth wasn't.

"I guess you've got me." Dave said, taking a better grip on the black handle that controlled the shut-off valve on the chlorine tank.

Then he took a deep breath and vaulted to the floor, his weight forcing the handle to open the valve, freeing the chlorine gas!

The effect was terrible! The three men in the doorway took the high-pressure jet of chlorine directly in the face. They doubled over, blinded, gasping and coughing! Confined in that narrow room, the heavily concentrated gas did deadly work.

Dave lunged backward to shut off the chlorine. The sudden move saved his life, making the bullet fired by the man outside the window catch him in the shoulder instead of the heart.

Dave went down, scooped up one of the fallen gunman's weapons with his left hand and came up firing through the broken window. His bullets caught the fourth killer in the chest.

Dave bent his knees and dived through the broken window to the open air, so he could take a breath without inhaling the deadly chlorine.

His body and the gunman's seemed to hit the ground at the same time. Perhaps the killer Dave had just shot had been trying to hold himself up long enough to take another shot. Any-way, he never managed to pull the trigger. Dave took the gun away from him.

Heartened by the sound of a rapidly approaching police siren, Dave walked over to the clarifier and helped the girl out of her filthy hiding place.

"The leader of the extortion gang is Bowen, all right," Dave was saying. "If you and I both accuse him before the police, we ought to get a confession. You see, I'm afraid the city engineer will have to find a new superintendent of street and sewers. I shot Bowen in the chest. He may not live very long."

"Here're the police, now," the girl said.

The sound of screaming rubber almost drowned out her words as the prowler car came to a skidding stop.

Captain McReady took charge. He was a big man, in charge of the homicide squad.

Dave and the girl led McReady to where Bowen lay.

"Hello, Marie," Bowen said. "The mayor will be pleased to hear his daughter has been saved by the engineering department's most rapidly rising young man!"

KILLERS USE SEWERS

Dave was surprised. "Are you the mayor's daughter?"

Bowen broke in before the girl could answer. "You'd better listen to me while you can," he said. "I'm dying!"

McReady turned to one of his men. "Take down this confession," he said, as a plain-clothes man pulled out a paper and pencil.

"Given another month," Bowen went on, "I'd have made enough money to become a very important man. Now, my whole gang is wiped out. You'll never get my men out of that gas-filled building, alive."

Dave nodded in agreement.

"My men had a good idea, but they weren't smart enough to handle it. The victims had to be actually found, drowned in sewage and not floating in the Sound. This plant was an ideal spot, it involved a bit of risk; yet I liked the idea of putting the victims down in that manhole unharmed. Then there would always be some doubt about whether it was murder or just an accident through ignorance of this sewage-disposal plant. So many people are curious about this place and want to inspect it, that anything could happen.

"Too bad about you, Marie. If your body had been found in that manhole, your father would have done anything to save your sister from ending up the same way even to blocking police efforts."

Marie turned to Dave, shuddering at Bowen's cold-blooded regret that she was still alive. Bowen's strength seemed to give out at that moment, letting him sag back limply. He was dead!

Dave Sands turned to McReady. "Haven't your men found the man I shot when he was trying to kick Miss Engstrom down the manhole?"

"Yeah, they found him," McReady answered. "The boys have him on a stretcher, now. Your bullet shattered his hip,"

"Bowen was wrong again," Dave Sands announced with satisfaction. "That means one of his men will live to stand trial!"

THE END.