

JIMMY PAYS A DEBT

George Allan Moffatt

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"A little gift from Big Pete," Killer Morgan said to Patrolman Jimmy Dale in the soft, whispering voice Morgan always used. "Big Pete appreciates the way you cooperate, and there will be more—plenty more, in just a little while." Jimmy Dale picked up the hundred-dollar bill, looked at it a moment; then he folded it carefully and slipped it in his pocket.

"Thanks, Morgan," Jimmy said. "I can use this and plenty more."

The muscles in Jimmy Dale's face tightened a little as he spoke, but his youthful face remained expressionless. He sat awkwardly in the chair in the rear room of Big Pete Dalton's saloon. His uniform was still stiff because he had only worn it several weeks.

"Play ball with Big Pete, kid," Morgan said, "and you won't have any worries. Big Pete takes care of his friends—and his enemies."

A faint smile crept over Jimmy's face at that last remark. He knew better than Killer Morgan how well Big Pete Dalton took care of his friends and his enemies. Twenty-three years before, Jimmy had been born in the old tenement, two blocks away from the saloon.

Even then, the grim and brutal shadow of Big Pete had hovered over Snake Street, a thing of fear and terror to the pale and hungry men and women and children who lived in those old tenement houses. They knew only one law and that was the law of Big Pete Dalton, the undisputed czar of that district that the police had years before dubbed Snake Street. The name was appropriate because of the swift death that came from darkened doorways and the winding and twisting streets.

As a child, Jimmy had played on those streets with children whose faces were pinched with hunger and fear. Jimmy's mother had that same haggard look. All the women in Snake Street did.

And then, when Jimmy was fourteen, his father had been brought home one night. He was on a stretcher, and there was a bullet hole in the back of his head. His body had been found in a dark alley.

Jimmy knew, just as his mother did, who had fired that shot. They knew what happened to anybody that got in the way of Big Pete. Jimmy's father, a just and conscientious man whose one hope was to be able to move his family away from the neighborhood of Big Pete, had gotten in the way of Big Pete.

There had been a killing, a common enough occurrence on Snake Street, and Jimmy's father had seen it. He was too honest to lie to the police and so his body was found in the darkness with the bullet through the back of his head,

"Jimmy, my boy," the mother said, "don't talk and don't do anything foolish, now. It will only mean that I will lose my son, but remember—always remember—and sometime you will get your chance."

Jimmy didn't do anything foolish that night, though he wanted to rush out of that tenement and reek his vengeance on Big Pete. He waited and didn't forget!

Two years later his mother died of grief and Jimmy still remembered. When he was old enough, he entered the cadet school for the police department. He graduated with honors, and the day after he graduated he went to see Lieutenant Carney, who had been the policeman on the beat when Jimmy's father was murdered.

"It's suicide, Jimmy," Lieutenant Carney had said. "You won't last a week in Snake Street. Big Pete is a hundred times more powerful, now, than he was when you were a kid."

"I'll last a week." Jimmy answered, "but after that—well, time will tell."

As Jimmy folded that hundred-dollar bill and put it in his pocket, he knew he was facing what Lieutenant Carney called suicide.

He left the small room through a rear door, walked down the alley until he came to a street. It was midnight

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and Snake Street had gone to bed. Few lights showed from the dirty tenement houses. Slinking forms darted swiftly and silently in the shadows along the walls of the tenement buildings.

Most of these were Big Pete Dalton's men. Big Pete had accepted Jimmy with the same unconcern he accepted all new cops on Snake Street. If the cop co-operated, he paid him well; if he didn't, the cop disappeared mysteriously or was suddenly taken off the beat.

Big Pete had advanced much in the ten years since Jimmy's father had been killed. Snake Street was still his headquarters but his gangs operated in all parts of the city, pulling jobs that left the public and the police dazed.

And after each big job, his men would disappear in Snake Street with the loot. Time and again police squads had raided the district, but they found nothing but dirty old tenements and frightened people with hunger-pinched faces.

A week before, the biggest jewelry store in the city had been looted in Big Pete's usual daring and amazing technique. The loot and the gang had disappeared in Snake Street and nothing had been found of either.

Jimmy was thinking about this last job as he walked down Snake Street. He had played his game differently than other cops who wanted to get Big Pete. Jimmy knew he couldn't fight Big Pete in his own neighborhood.

But he reasoned that working with Big Pete for a week would give him a chance to find things out. When Killer Morgan, who handled all the cops, approached him his first night, he found Jimmy amenable to reason and bribes.

In that week, Jimmy had learned what he wanted. He had learned that the coal company that operated the coal barges from the foot of Snake Street was owned by Big Pete and that these barges sometimes made mysterious trips at midnight.

Jimmy walked quickly, darting nervous glances at the shadows around him. He knew that every move he made had been watched.

The muggy smell of the river came to him. He turned to the right and walked down a narrow side street that led to the river and the barge-company office.

The darkness ahead of him moved and a man disappeared behind a building. Jimmy kept walking.

There was a footstep behind him! He swerved, but he didn't move fast enough. A man laughed. Something crashed down on Jimmy's head! His knees buckled, but his right hand brought his gun out.

There was another sickening crash on his head. Something hit his wrist, and his gun went flying out of his hand.

He was sinking to the sidewalk. Everything was going around and around. There was another blow and things stopped going around and around.

Jimmy hit the sidewalk unconscious!

Consciousness came back to him in fitful spurts of pain in his head. He didn't open his eyes. He couldn't because he felt weak all over.

The pain in his head became continuous, He was lying on something hard, and whatever this was had a peculiar throbbing and rolling movement, He moved his arms and then his legs.

He heard somebody talking over him, He opened his eyes, and a brilliant light blinded him. When his eyes became accustomed to the light, he saw the thin and hawklike face of Killer Morgan.

"Well, kid," Killer Morgan said in his half-whispered voice, "do you feel better, now?"

Jimmy blinked. He saw that he was in a large room that housed the storage part of a barge. The barge was moving. He could tell that by the vibrations of the floor,

The room was filled with men. At first, they were nothing but a blur to Jimmy. He raised himself up. His head was throbbing. He tried to figure what had happened. He remembered taking the hundred-dollar bill from Killer Morgan.

He remembered heading for the river. He had intended to check on the movement of the barges and he was going to report this to Lieutenant Carney.

After that, he didn't remember what had happened.

Now Killer Morgan was standing over him. Even in his befuddled brain, Jimmy knew that he hadn't fooled Killer Morgan or Big Pete.

Big Pete Dalton. Jimmy was staring at the hulk of fat and muscle that was big Pete. Big Pete sat in a chair, chewing a cigar nervously, a habit he had had ten years before.

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His moon-shaped face was red. His beady eyes flashed as he looked at Jimmy. "So a little kid that used to live in my neighborhood came back to get Big Pete," the mobster snarled. "Smart boy, you are, Jimmy Dale—smart like your old man. I told Killer Morgan to give you money but to keep his eye on you, Killer watched you; and when you got too inquisitive about those barges, we thought we'd take you for a little ride."

Big Pete gave a heavy belly laugh. The men standing around him laughed with him. Jimmy shook his head to clear his brain. He raised himself up to a half-sitting position. He looked around the barge. It was clear how Big Pete handled his loot,

The coal barges made daily trips down the river. Big Pete's men could hide on them until they arrived at a city a hundred miles away. There the loot could be handled without suspicion.

It was all clear, now, but—

"Well, Pete," Killer Morgan said, "how long are we going to waste time with this kid? We'd been wiser to have given him the works and dumped his body in the river."

Big Pete chuckled, a strange and grunting sound. "You're always too impatient, Killer," he said. "This kid is smart. We let him stick around a week, and maybe he learned something in that week that he has passed on to Carney or the other cops. He'll never live to get off this barge, and we can find out what he knows."

"Start him talking," Killer Morgan growled. "We aren't making time, and we still have to pass Hog's Head."

The muscles in Jimmy's legs bunched and tensed, but he remained on the floor in the half-sitting position. Hog's Head was three miles down the river, a large tongue of land that stuck out in the water.

When the barges passed that point, they had left the city limits.

Jimmy looked around the room. He figured that the room was directly under the cabin at the rear of the barge. There was a door leading to the stairs. This door was open about an inch and Jimmy could see what looked like a wooden stairway to him.

He looked at Killer Morgan. The killer had walked a few feet away from him and was standing near Big Pete's chair. There were five other men in the room. They were typical killers of Big Pete's mob.

"We'll start working on him," Big Pete assured Killer Morgan, "I think he'll tell plenty when we get through with him."

Killer Morgan turned and started for Jimmy. Three other men started in the same direction. Morgan got within a foot of Jimmy.

And then—

Jimmy sent every ounce of his strength behind his legs as he lunged forward in a lunge with such speed that Killer Morgan did not even know it had started until the cop's shoulders crashed against his legs and sent him down on Jimmy with a vile curse.

Jimmy hunched his back up and tossed Morgan off him; then he twisted around, grabbed the gunman's legs and raised him up in the air.

As he did, Big Pete was bellowing orders. The three men that started for Jimmy reached for guns, but the rookie sent Killer Morgan's body around him like a human bludgeon and sent these three men to the floor.

They went down with Morgan's inert body over them. Jimmy lunged for the chair Big Pete sat in. The leader had started to raise his bulky body out of the chair, but Jimmy hit the chair as Big Pete got halfway out of it. Big Pete and the chair went down in a splintering mass.

Jimmy went headlong over the chair and the squirming body of the mob leader. Two guns roared! The bullets clipped the wooden wall within an inch of his head. He kept going in his headlong lunge. Another gun roared. The bullet splintered the wood of the door as Jimmy went through it!

He hit the stairs with his head and shoulders. It stunned him for a split second, but in the next split second he was going up the stairs. He saw that the stairs led to the door of the cabin.

He reached the top of the stairs. A man below him was firing wildly in the darkness. The bullet thudded into the wood above Jimmy's head. He pushed the trap door over his head and hoisted himself onto the floor of the cabin.

But as he did, two men came for him, crashing down on his body. It seemed to Jimmy that the barge was spewing men from every part of it.

He raised his body up on one knee, shoved himself forward and got away from the two men that had hit him. Men were rushing for the cabin, from the port and starboard side of the barge. He could hear the bellowing voice

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of Big Pete coming from the stairs underneath him.

Three men closed in on him! Something hit him on the back of the head and he went down. He brought his right up. It caught a human stomach and he heard a man roaring with pain.

Jimmy got out from under that mass, He landed against the south wall of the small kitchen, rolled over and crawled to his knees.

He was staring at the wall. He dove for it as two men came diving through the air at him. His fingers fumbled on the wall.

There was a stinging pain in his fingers and then the two bodies hit him and sent him sprawling on the floor. The door of the cabin was open and beyond that was the Stygian darkness of the night.

Jimmy got out of that door. Men were over him. The monotonous chugging of the tug arose above the din of yelling men.

Jimmy's head was whirling. His breath was coming in short gasps. A blow caught him on the head. It sent him down flat on the deck, squirming and struggling in a consciousness that seemed to be leaving him.

Then he was being lifted up. He could hear Big Pete giving orders. His head cleared slowly. He was being carried down the stairs, and, the next thing he knew, he was thrown on the floor of the barge room.

He turned over on his side. He saw Killer Morgan locking the door to the stairs. He saw Big Pete, his fat face twisted with hate, walking toward him.

Big Pete didn't say anything. His heavy shoe went back and then the toe hit Jimmy in the chest. It sent blood spurting from his mouth.

But he managed to say: "O. K., Pete. You got me and I don't like to be tortured. I'll talk! I'll tell you anything you want to know."

Big Pete stood over him, a snarling hulk of hate, while Jimmy pulled himself to a half-sitting position.

"What do you know?" Big Pete snapped at him.

"Plenty, Pete," Jimmy answered weakly. "I know, for instance, that you use this barge to carry your loot away. You got your tracks covered pretty well by that fake barge business—"

"What you know," Killer Morgan cut in, "isn't half important. What have you told Lieutenant Carney or the chief at headquarters?"

"I told them," Jimmy was talking slowly, "that if they sent me down to Snake Street, I would locate Big Pete's hide-out and find out how he handled his loot. I told them that I was born on Snake Street, that Big Pete murdered my father and that I had been waiting ten years to get him—"

This amused Big Pete. He let out a belly laugh and said: "If that is all you told them, I ain't worried."

"I told them that I would get you," Jimmy retorted, "and whether you'll believe it or not, I have got you. You'll kill me, all right, and you'll hide my body; but you can't hide what I have reported to headquarters. I got you, Big Pete, even if I did have to wait more than ten years."

Big Pete's face was red with rage. His answer was another kick that sent Jimmy down. Then Big Pete said to Morgan: "Give him the works!"

Jimmy felt sick all over. The kick sent more blood in his mouth, but that didn't make him sick. The realization that all he had said was mere boasting was what made him sick.

He didn't have a chance to report to Lieutenant Carney. He had waited a day too late!

Killer Morgan pulled his automatic from his coat pocket. He brought it up. Jimmy saw this move. Somewhere out on the river came the faint blast of the tugboat horn.

Jimmy's muscles tightened. He saw the finger of Morgan starting to squeeze the trigger. Jimmy whirled around, in his half-sitting position. His feet hit the gunman's ankles, The gun in Killer's hands roared as it dropped to the floor, and Killer Morgan hit the floor at the same time with a crushing thud.

The gun fell within a foot of Jimmy. He lunged for it and his fingers closed around the butt. He brought it up. His finger squeezed the trigger. The gun roared. A man, coming for him, grabbed his throat and went down.

Two guns roared at Jimmy's right! There was a sharp pain in his side. He dove for a table. Guns kept roaring. There was another stinging sensation in his leg.

He whirled around. The gun in his right hand roared twice. One man went down, but the second bullet missed.

Jimmy was scrambling backward. He knew there was no chance to get through the door. It was locked. There was a cabinet near the wall. He headed for it; landed behind it as bullets riddled the floor around him.

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His left side was numb, and blood was running down his right wrist. The barrage of bullets against the cabinet stopped.

Jimmy pulled himself around. He saw a man coming at his right and another at his left. He fired at the man at his right. The hood went down, holding his leg. Jimmy fired over his shoulder at the man at his left.

The man ducked out of sight. Jimmy could hear Big Pete's roaring voice as he gave orders, but his head was pounding too wildly for him to understand those orders.

A bullet snapped the wood near his ear. He tried to think how many shells he had left in his gun, but he couldn't remember. He couldn't remember anything but that he was going to die!

Big Pete! The murderer of his father! Those years of waiting to revenge that crime and to clear Snake Street of that hulking creature of death!

He had failed in both. A gun roared at his left. The bullet clipped the air less than an inch above his head. He heard Big Pete's bellowing voice out in the room.

Big Pete! Only one thought possessed Jimmy's dazed mind. He had one bullet left. He would use that for Big Pete. If he were successful, he wouldn't fail.

He threw his right leg over his left and then crawled out from behind the cabinet. Everything was blurred in front of him, but in that blur he saw Big Pete.

Jimmy brought his gun up. It roared, but Big Pete was still standing there. Jimmy squeezed the trigger again. His gun clicked on an empty chamber!

Big Pete laughed. "I'll finish him off, Morgan!" Jimmy heard the leader's voice faintly.

Then he was conscious that Big Pete was standing over him. He could see those beady eyes. That was all he could see of the man he had vowed to get.

The gray film over Jimmy's eyes cleared a little. He saw Big Pete's gun come up. It came up slowly, as if it were being raised with supreme satisfaction.

"Your old man," the mobster snarled at him, "thought he could cause me trouble, and now his kid thinks the same thing. Your old man died and so will you. And nobody will ever find your body because it will be at the river bottom."

Jimmy tried to move his left leg, but his whole body was numb, now. He saw the leering face of Big Pete. He saw the gun come up a little higher, until the barrel pointed at his head.

He saw Big Pete start to squeeze the trigger!

Jimmy made one last—almost futile—move. He thrust his arm out. His fist cracked against Big Pete's ankle. It was a weak blow, but it threw the leader off his aim. His gun roared and the bullet went wild.

Big Pete gave a roar of rage. He jumped back and brought his gun up again. Jimmy lunged forward weakly. He never knew whether he reached Big Pete or not. There was a roaring explosion somewhere in the room. Men were cursing. Big Pete was bellowing.

And then Jimmy's head started to whirl crazily. He lost consciousness!

When he came to, somebody was holding his head in a pair of strong arms. Something hot was going down Jimmy's throat. It brought strength and warmth back to his body.

He opened his eyes and blinked in amazement. He was looking in the rugged and leathery old face of Lieutenant Carney!

Jimmy closed his eyes. He thought he was dreaming. "Jimmy," he heard Lieutenant Carney cry hoarsely, "Jimmy, you did it! You did it! We got Big Pete and all the loot of the jewelry store. Big Pete is on his way to the electric chair, but open your eyes and look at him. The sight will do you good."

The words brought Jimmy back to his senses. He opened his eyes. He was still in the barge room. It was filled with policemen from the river detail.

But what Jimmy stared at was the hulking body of Big Pete, the czar of murder and crime for thirty years. He was slumped in a chair. Handcuffs were on his wrists and his moonface was a pasty white.

"I never dreamed of being present at the final capture of Big Pete when I was put in charge of the river police two weeks ago," Lieutenant Carney said. "I was checking up on the men at the inspection station on Hog's Head when this barge came down the river. Word was flashed to us that this barge, as it neared Hog's Head, was running without its green and red barge lights.

"No barge is allowed to pass Hog's Head without lights because beyond Hog's Head is the sea, and a barge

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without lights is a danger to all shipping. We came out here and boarded the barge and heard what sounded like the Battle of the Maine below deck. When we got down here, Big Pete was putting the finishing touch on you. What were you doing here and what happened?"

Jimmy looked at the pale and fear-stricken face of Big Pete, who had suddenly become a cringing and whimpering creature.

"Big Pete got suspicious of me because I spent a lot of time at the barge yards," Jimmy explained. "I figured out that he was using one of those coal barges to get his loot and men away. A very clever scheme and one that fooled the police. But someone conked me on the head tonight and when I came to I was on this barge, and my chances of living were about a million to one against me.

"Then I heard Killer Morgan say that we hadn't passed Hog's Head. I got an idea—a long shot but it was the best I could think of. I knew that no barge could pass Hog's Head if all the lights were not on. I knew that if the green and red lights were off, the barge would be stopped.

"I made a break and got up in the cabin, I wanted to get into the river; but if that failed, I wanted to get to the light switches and fuse boxes. I worked on a barge as a kid, and I know how they operated. I reached the cabin, with men sprawling all over me; but I did get to the fuse for the red and green lights. I knocked the fuse loose; then I headed for the river.

"I didn't get to the river. But when I was taken back down here, I tried to stall for time until the barge nearer Hog's Head. When I heard the tug whistle as we neared Hog's Head, I couldn't stall them any more. Big Pete and his killers started to finish me. I never thought I'd live to see the capture of Big Pete, but I figured the police might find his hide-out in the bottom of this barge."

Lieutenant Carney looked at the whimpering Big Pete and said with a laugh: "I guess the kid was too smart for you, Pete. You signed your death warrant when you killed his father ten years ago."

Big Pete tried to talk, but the words stuck in his throat. Jimmy looked at his old friend, Lieutenant Carney and said: "I guess dad's death helped to free Snake Street."

"It sure did," Lieutenant Carney agreed. "But take it easy, now. You're going to a hospital, and after that—well, there will be a little reward awaiting you in the form of a quick promotion."