

THE MURDER JOKE

ROBERT C. BLACKMON

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Fred Ames walked slowly along the dimly lighted third-floor hallway and stopped before the closed door of Apartment 3B. He looked at his strap watch and sighed deeply. Raising a chunky right fist, he knocked three times on the varnished door panels, spacing the knocks about five seconds apart.

He was a short man of about twenty-five, powerfully built, and his ruddy cheeks were bright with razor shine. His eyes were gray and steady, and sandy-brown hair showed beneath the edge of his slightly soiled gray felt hat. His suit was gray, a ready made, wrinkled.

After a few moments, the door opened, and he saw the big bulk of a large man in dark clothing and hat in the unlighted apartment beyond. The big man grunted a greeting. "How's everything, Marsh?" Fred Ames asked softly and went into the apartment. Marsh stepped aside to let him in and closed the door behind him. "Has Rick Ball settled down for the night yet?"

"Yeah, the lousy little one-eyed rat!" Bill Marsh's voice was a big, sour grumble in the darkness. "He came in about ten, as he's been doing the three nights we've been watching him. He's got a magazine, and he's sitting up in the bed over there, reading!"

Marsh snorted.

"And insurance company dicks like you and me, we've got to sneak around, as we've been doing for three days, and sweat and wait for the little rat to make some move that might lead us to the Shamrock Emerald. We've got to do that for peanuts, while that little punk over there takes it easy and sits tight on a hundred thousand dollars' worth of green ice!"

Marsh snorted again. Fred Ames could see movement in the semi-darkness as the detective moved a big arm. He was gesturing toward the windows.

"Yeah. Sure. It's tough, Marsh." Fred Ames grinned at Bill Marsh's big hulk over near the door, but there was little mirth in it. "It's around midnight, so I'll take over now. I'm not hurrying you, but if you want to leave—"

"Yeah!" Marsh grumbled. "I grab something to eat. I get some sleep. Then I come back here to watch that one-eyed rat another eight hours—for peanuts!"

Light spilled into the apartment as Marsh opened the door and went out into the hallway. The light chopped off as Marsh closed the door.

Fred Ames shook his head slowly and groped his way across the unlighted apartment to the chair placed facing the windows. He sighed as he eased his chunky body down into the chair and looked out across the narrow court.

Directly opposite and on the second floor of the building, were the lighted windows of another apartment. He could see everything in the apartment very clearly. A slightly built man of about fifty was in plain view of the windows. He was in his shirt sleeves, lying across the bed and reading a magazine. His dark-blue coat was hanging over the back of a nearby chair.

Fred Ames' wide mouth tightened.

The man on the bed in the other apartment was Rick Ball, one of the smoothest jewel thieves that ever drove an insurance detective out of his right mind.

Rick Ball, the National Indemnity Co. officials believed, had stolen the Shamrock Emerald, a walnut-sized chunk of vivid-green fire whose exact price few jewelers would care to set. National Indemnity had a hundred-thousand-dollar policy on the big gem, and it was either going to have to recover the Shamrock Emerald, or pay out one-hundred-thousand-dollars within a day or two.

National Indemnity Co. was stalling the payment as long as it could, while Fred Ames and Bill Marsh, two of its best operatives, shadowed Rick Ball twenty-four hours a day. Company officials believed Rick Ball would soon make some move that would lead either Fred Ames or Bill Marsh to the hidden Shamrock.

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The whole case was very hush–hush, and the police had not even been notified of the theft. The newspapers knew nothing at all about it. National Indemnity wanted the whole thing kept absolutely quiet until the Emerald was recovered.

Fred Ames settled himself more comfortably in the chair before the windows. He could not smoke, or move around very much, for fear of tipping off Rick Ball. So far, the little one–eyed jewel thief had made no sign that he knew he was being shadowed, though either Fred Ames or Bill Marsh practically got in bed with him. One or the other watched him every minute, each taking alternate eight–hour shifts. But Rick Ball had made no move that could be inter–preted as a possible lead to the stolen Shamrock Emerald.

Fred Ames yawned and shifted around in his chair and watched Rick Ball. He scowled.

The little jewel thief hardly moved as he sprawled on the bed and read his magazine. There was nothing about him to show that he was one of the smoothest gem thieves in the business. There was nothing about him to show that he knew the hiding place of a hundred–thousand–dollar emerald.

Rick Ball stirred a little, and Fred Ames stiffened in his chair. But the jewel thief was merely turning another page of his magazine.

Ames settled into a more comfortable position and swore under his breath. About thirty minutes passed; then someone knocked on the apartment door behind him. The knocks were spaced about five seconds apart. There were three knocks.

Sandy brows pulled into a frown, Ames got to his feet and groped his way across the un–lighted apartment to the door. Either Bill Marsh had come back for something, he thought, or one of the National Indemnity men had come with a message for him.

He reached the door, opened it—and gulped.

Standing in the dimly lighted hallway outside the door was a young woman. Her hair was smoothly golden about her small head, and she was very pretty. The blue dress she wore clung to her slender figure, and its color all but matched the blue of her incredibly large eyes. Her eyelashes were long and dark; her mouth small and red and slightly pouting.

"You...you're a detective, aren't you?" Her voice was low and husky. She seemed to be frightened.

"Well—yes, I...er...that is—" Fred Ames gulped again. He nodded. "Yes. I'm a detective."

"I thought you were."

The young woman flashed small white teeth in a quick smile; then she was frowning.

"I heard you knock on this door a little while ago, and I thought you were a detective. I... I'm so glad you are a detective. I want you to help me. You've got to. I think there's a burglar in my apartment. I heard something in there as I unlocked the door and I'm scared to go in by myself. I want you to see if he is in there. Please! I am Gloria Camp, a singer at the Blue Tavern. The apartment is just down the hall a few doors. It won't take you more than a minute to look. You'll do it, won't you?"

"Well, I—"

Instinctively, Fred Ames looked over his shoulder toward the windows of Rick Ball's apartment. He wet his lips.

If he left this crook unwatched for a few minutes and something happened while he was gone, National Indemnity would break him. But Ball was still in bed, reading. He hadn't moved for the past thirty minutes, except to turn pages in his magazine. He probably wouldn't move from the bed within the next few minutes,

Gloria Camp was a very pretty young woman in trouble, and Fred Ames was single.

"Well, all right, Miss Camp." He stepped out into the hallway and closed the apartment door. "Show me your apartment. I'll take a look for that burglar."

"Oh, thank you!" The girl flashed him another quick smile, and he grinned. "The apartment is just a few doors down the hall."

She pattered off along the hallway, the blue dress fluttering about her.

Grinning, Fred Ames followed her. He touched the butt of the automatic holstered under his left arm, just to be sure it was there. Not that he expected to use it, of course. The burglar didn't exist except in Gloria Camp's imagination. She'd probably heard something in another apartment, or something out in the street. Anyway, he'd met her. Maybe he'd drop around at the Blue Tavern sometime.

Gloria Camp turned into a short side hall and stopped before a closed apartment door. The metal markers on

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the door read: 3D. Fred Ames moved past her to the door.

"It's unlocked," Gloria Camp said quickly, almost breathlessly. "I unlocked it before I heard the b—burglar."

"All right. You stay right here in the hall until I come back out," he told her. "It won't take me a minute to look around."

Grinning, he opened the door and stepped into the apartment. There wasn't any burglar, of course, but he'd look around, just to be—

The apartment door swung shut behind him! Almost as the lock clicked, he heard a slight sound behind and to his left. His right hand leaped toward the butt of the automatic under his left arm, and he started to turn toward the sound. But before he could draw the gun, before he could turn, something whipped out of the darkness and hit him across the back of the head!

The force of the blow was broken a little by the brim of his hat, but there was still enough force in the impact to make it seem that his brain was suddenly compressed, that his eyes started from their sockets. His teeth banged together sharply and half the breath left this body in a whistling gush. He felt his knees strike the floor with a jolt that almost snapped his spine, and he was surprised that he had fallen.

He tried to pull his gun, tried to get to his feet, but none of his muscles would work right. His hat fell off over his face. He got the gun in his hand. Then the something came out of the darkness and hit him on the back of the head again!

The gun slid out of his hand, and he felt its thud on the floor beneath his knees. He didn't know that he had fallen forward, but he felt the rough nap of a rug slide against his face and smelled the dust from the rug. Then everything exploded into nothingness!

He came awake slowly, painfully. There was nothing but darkness when he opened his eyes. He moved, and his head threatened to fall apart. Then he remembered Gloria Camp, the beautiful young woman who had asked him to hunt a burglar in her apartment.

Grunting as his head throbbed, he managed to roll over and get his arms and legs under him. Then, gritting his teeth against the dizzying pain, he pushed to a kneeling position and climbed to his feet.

There had been a prowler in the apartment. He had been taken like the greenest of greenhorns. The prowler had merely waited just inside the door, then socked him. The man was gone, now, either out through the hall door or down a fire escape. Either way, the prowler was gone, and Fred Ames would be in the dog house with the prettiest girl he had ever seen, Gloria Camp.

Swaying dizzily, he stumbled across the dark apartment, found the door and groped for the light switch.

As the overhead lights came on, one startling fact smashed home to his mind with much the same force of the two blows which had struck his head.

The apartment was not occupied!

The davenport and chair cushions were turned up for airing. A built-in bookcase across the room was entirely empty and its shelves were dusty. There was a stale odor in the air that he hadn't noticed before. It was the smell of a place long closed. From where he stood, he could see into the little bedroom. The bed had no covers on it; its mattress was bare.

There was no mistaking the fact that the apartment was not occupied, nor had it been occupied for some time. Yet, Gloria Camp had said it was her apartment!

Jaws clamped tightly, Fred Ames recovered his hat and his gun. Gently, he eased the hat onto his aching head and holstered the gun. He opened the apartment door and stepped into the hallway.

The side hall was empty.

Stumbling, scowling, he made it to the intersection of the short side hall and the main passage. He looked both ways.

The dimly lighted third-floor hallway of the apartment building was entirely empty. Gloria Camp was gone!

Fred Ames stood for a few moments, scowling, trying to make sense of what had happened.

Then he remembered his job of watching Rick Ball, the little one-eyed jewel thief who had stolen the Shamrock Emerald.

His stocky legs were unsteady as he hurried back along the hallway to Apartment 3B. He opened the door and went in. His head was throbbing as he groped his way to the chair near the windows and eased himself into it. Frowning, he looked through the windows and into Rick Ball's bedroom.

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The skinny little jewel thief was still lying on the bed, still in shirt sleeves. He was now lying on his back and the magazine was on the bed beside his head. He was not reading.

Fred Ames stared at him for a full ten seconds, not moving a muscle. Then sandy-brown hair seemed to rise under the insurance detective's soiled gray felt hat.

Rick Ball's mouth was wide open. His one good eye was open, staring fixedly at the ceiling. His right hand was on his chest, and above the hand was an irregular crimson stain on the front of his shirt. Even as Fred Ames stared, the stain seemed to grow larger. A choked curse burst from Ames' suddenly tight throat. He could feel his stomach muscles freezing into a hard, cold knot.

The crimson stain on the front of Rick Ball's shirt was blood, fresh blood!

Jerking out of the chair before the windows, he stumbled across the apartment to the door and burst out into the hallway. Cold sweat ran down on his drawn face as he hurried along the halls and down the stairs to Rick Ball's apartment. His hands were shaking as he opened the apartment door with a master key.

Rick Ball was dead. He knew that as he went into the bedroom. The jewel thief had been stabbed in the heart, but the weapon was not in the wound. Ames didn't see it anywhere in the room. Ball hadn't been dead very long, because the blood was still soaking into his shirt front. His flesh was still warm. His one good eye was fixed, glassy with death. The other, an empty socket, was sunken and the lids were slightly parted.

Fred Ames stood beside the bed, his steady eyes sweeping about the room.

The bedroom didn't show any signs of anyone's having made a hasty search of the room, but it was certain that Rick Ball had been killed for the Shamrock Emerald. There wasn't any other reason that he knew.

It was equally certain that Fred Ames was out of a job. National Indemnity would probably blackball him with all other firms. If National Indemnity didn't blackball him, the newspapers would. And the newspapers would be in on this thing within minutes. It was murder, and the police would have to be notified. Ball had been killed, of course, after Gloria Camp had tricked him from his lookout to go and hunt burglars in the apartment that couldn't have been hers. He had to be taken care of before anyone could get to Rick Ball. That was clear. But if the girl was in on the thing, why had she given him her name, Gloria Camp, a singer at the Blue Tavern? That didn't make sense.

Fred Ames scowled and grunted.

The girl's name, then, couldn't be Gloria Camp. Yet, she hadn't looked like a person who would mix in murder-and-robbery. The person who had killed Rick Ball had either missed the Shamrock, or knew just where it had been hidden. The room didn't show any signs of having been searched. Rick Ball's clothing wasn't disarranged, as though he had been searched. The job had been a fast one. Ball, apparently, had had time only to turn over before the knife split his heart.

Fred Ames shifted uncomfortably. He could look for the Shamrock Emerald, but the killer had either gotten the stone, or it wasn't in the bedroom. There wasn't much to do now but call the police and take whatever came.

He glanced at his strap watch. The hands indicated one thirty. Six and a half hours, he thought, before Bill Marsh would come back on duty.

His chunky body stiffened.

An hour or two, now, wouldn't make any difference to Rick Ball. If Ames could find Gloria Camp, or the girl who claimed to be the Blue Tavern singer, she could give him a lead to the person who killed Rick Ball—the person who now had the Shamrock.

Moving swiftly, he switched off the lights in Ball's apartment, re-locked the hall door and headed for the street. A night owl cab took him to the Blue Tavern, a small restaurant on the fringe of the business section.

"Miss Camp ain't here," a weary-eyed waiter informed him. "She sang her last number right after midnight and left. The place is supposed to be closed now; but we got a party back there who—"

"Where does Miss Camp live?" Fred Ames cut in sharply.

"Well, now. I don't know whether I ought to tell you or not." Some of the weariness went out of the waiter's eyes. "I don't know you and—"

He looked at the company badge which Fred Ames flashed briefly. The rest of the weariness went out of his eyes.

"Oh, that's different! I always play ball with the police. Miss Camp lives at the Charlton Arms, Apartment C. But you're making a mistake. Miss Camp ain't done anything wrong. Anybody around the Blue Tavern'll go to bat

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for her. She ain't—"

Ames didn't wait to hear anything else. He headed for the sidewalk and his waiting cab.

The Charlton Arms was a small place on a side street. There was no elevator, but the stairs were thickly carpeted and Fred Ames' feet made no sound at all as he mounted to the second floor. Apartment C was near the head of the stairs. He knocked on the door, waited a few moments and knocked again.

After about a half minute, the door opened a few inches and he saw the smooth blond head of the girl who had told him she was Gloria Camp. Her small red mouth made a startled O.

She said, shrilly:

"You!"

"Right! Me!"

Ames thrust his shoulder against the door, driving it open. The young woman was flung halfway across the living room. Stepping into the apartment, he closed the door behind him.

"All right, Miss Gloria Camp—if that's your right name—we're going to get a few things straight, right now." His voice was steady, low. "I want to know why you claimed an empty apartment, why you got me to hunt burglars in it, and why you ran out before I came out of that apartment. If you haven't got the answers, I have!"

"Oh, that!"

The young woman was almost in the center of the room. She still wore the clinging blue dress and her eyes were incredibly large and blue. Her small mouth made a quick smile.

"That was just a joke on you. I thought you knew that by now. It must have been terribly funny after I closed the door—you hunting a dangerous burglar in an empty apartment!"

A little, tinkling laugh came from her throat.

"I was told that you always liked to play jokes on everyone else, but couldn't stand to have a joke played on you. That's one reason I helped with the joke on you tonight. That and the fifty dollars I was paid to get you to go into that empty apartment and close the door on you. It must have been a very good joke to be worth that much. And my name is Gloria Camp. I do sing at the Blue Tavern. Is there anything wrong with my name? Is there anything wrong with my helping to play a joke on you?"

Fred Ames stood perfectly still, staring at the girl. His mind was churning. Gloria Camp was either entirely innocent, or she was an accomplished actress.

"Nothing wrong with either—except that the joke was a murder joke!" he said flatly. His eyes were glistening. "You were paid to get me into that empty apartment tonight so someone could knock me cold, then murder a man in an apartment that another detective and I have been watching for three days. The man in that apartment was killed for a hundred-thousand-dollar emerald which he stole. The man who paid you to play that joke tonight was the killer!"

"Oh, no! No!"

Gloria Camp's eyes seemed to grow much larger. The color drained from her small face. She held slim hands up before her, as if to ward off a blow, and moved backward, away from Fred Ames.

"No! No!" Her voice was a terrified wail. "It can't be that! I...I couldn't do anything like that! He said it was a joke on you. He said he was your friend and he—"

"He was a big man." There was a cold sharpness in Fred Ames' voice. "He was wearing a dark suit and hat. He was—"

"Hold it just like that, Ames!"

The deep, heavy voice came from behind and to Fred Ames' left. He knew the owner of the voice. It was Bill Marsh, the National Indemnity detective who had been working with him on the Rick Ball case! He knew that Marsh would have a gun in his hand and that the big detective would shoot, with things as they were! He lifted his chunky hands shoulder-high. Gloria Camp would be in the line of fire.

"All right, Marsh," he said flatly. "I must have known it was you some time ago, but didn't realize it. Watching Rick Ball and thinking of the hundred-thousand-dollars got you. I should have known that when you griped about working for peanuts while Rick Ball sat tight on the Shamrock. I should have known when Miss Camp used our signal knock. She couldn't have been told about that knock, about my being in the apartment, by anyone but you or some other National Indemnity man.

"Somehow, you got Gloria to go after me, with the story of playing a practical joke on me. She couldn't see

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any harm in getting a man to go into an empty apartment, and then closing the door behind him. And she needed the fifty bucks you offered her. You were in that apartment, Marsh. You socked me when I went in. Gloria left the moment she closed the door behind me; that was all she was supposed to do. After you knocked me cold, you went to Rick Ball's apartment and opened his door with a master key. I know you've got one. I have, too. You knifed Rick Ball before he knew what was happening, and you got the Shamrock Emerald, Marsh."

Fred Ames moistened his lips. His mind was churning.

"Watching Rick Ball, Marsh, you discovered where he was hiding the Shamrock Emerald. I looked at the hiding place, too. But I didn't realize it then, I know now. Rick Ball was hiding the Shamrock in the empty socket of his missing eye."

"You're smart, Ames." Bill Marsh's voice was deep and menacing in the room. "But you're not smart enough. Rick Ball slipped the Emerald out of his eye socket Wednesday night, when I was on the midnight-to-eight shift. I guess he just had to look at it. He thought he was covered by the magazine, and he was. But I saw some of the green fire flash on his face behind the magazine. The overhead lights made it flash. Then he lowered the magazine, and the Emerald was gone. I knew he couldn't have hidden it in the bed, or anything like that. Then I remembered his empty eye socket and had the answer. I meant to report it, but I didn't."

Bill Marsh came into the apartment living room from an open doorway leading into Gloria Camp's bedroom. He came into Fred Ames' vision, a big, dark hulk of a man in a blue serge suit. He had a gun in his right fist. Black brows made a straight slash across his dark forehead. Beneath them, black eyes glistened brightly.

"National Indemnity wouldn't pay me anything extra, I knew, for spotting the Emerald. And I was tired of working for peanuts. I just didn't report it. I kept thinking about the stone and how much I could get out of it, so—"

Bill Marsh's big shoulders lifted, but the gun in his fist didn't move. He licked at his thick, heavy lips. His black eyes flicked to Gloria Camp, then back to Fred Ames.

Cold sweat crawled down Fred Ames' rigid back. He could almost see Marsh's brain working.

Gloria Camp and Fred Ames would have to die! Both knew that Marsh had killed Rick Ball. Both knew that he had the Shamrock Emerald. Living, both were threats to Bill Marsh. Dead—

"You came here, Gloria thought, to pay her the fifty dollars you promised her for playing the joke on me. But you really came here to kill her, Marsh!" Fred Ames spoke slowly. Every muscle in his chunky body was taut.

"Yes. I threw the knife I used to kill Rick Ball down the sewer on the way over here." Marsh spoke heavily, almost mechanically. "I was going to choke the girl. She might tell that I was the one who got her to make you leave that apartment. I was about to choke her when you came here, but she didn't know it. I stepped into the bedroom and waited to see who it was. I couldn't be seen in here—not with what was going to happen later.

"I met Gloria about a month ago at the Blue Tavern. I talked with her several times. I talked with her after I saw Rick Ball with the Emerald. Up to then I didn't see any way to get the stone, but I thought of the 'joke' stunt then. She didn't want to have any part of it at first, but the fifty dollars and a lot of talk got her. I had to get you out of that apartment, somehow. I should have killed you in the empty apartment, but I was excited, I guess. But now—"

Marsh licked his lips again. The gun in his big right hand moved a little. His eyes were brighter.

"It will be murder and suicide. You shot the girl, then yourself, with your own gun. The cops can figure it jealousy, a pact, or whatever they want. It won't make much difference. I'll be in the clear." He moved slowly toward Fred Ames, the gun spiking from his fist. "Turn around with your back to me, Ames!"

Gloria Camp had moved backward to the davenport. She was standing stiffly, with one hand over her mouth. Her eyes seemed to fill just about all of her small, pale face. She was paralyzed with terror.

"You can't get away with this, Marsh." Fred Ames kept his hands raised, but he did not turn. "The shots will be heard. Someone will call the police. You will be—"

"I'll have to take my chances on that." Marsh spoke hoarsely. His black eyes were much brighter. "The Shamrock'll bring me around fifty, maybe more. For fifty grand, I'd—" His voice went deeper. "Turn around!"

Fred Ames started turning, slowly. Gloria Camp, he saw, was now well out of danger, since Marsh had moved. Abruptly, he speeded the turning movement. Spinning around, he flung himself to one side and flipped the automatic from under his left arm.

Even as he moved, Marsh's automatic roared and the slug ripped a bloody furrow along his left side, scraping

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the ribs! Gloria Camp screamed shrilly then Ames' gun blast blotted out her cry as he snapped a shot at Marsh.

The big detective grunted explosively and fired again. Gun roar boomed deafeningly in the apartment! The slug clipped the left shoulder pad of Ames' wrinkled gray suit and gouged plaster from the opposite wall. Marsh fired again, almost as the plaster fell, and the slug knocked Ames' right leg from under him! He fell heavily, rolled over twice, then saw Marsh's big hulk over his gun barrel. Carefully, he triggered four fast shots and cordite fumes stung his nose—trills! He coughed and his side hurt.

Marsh's big hulk stiffened. His black eyes went wide with shocked surprise. His right hand lifted high in an aimless movement, and his dark fingers straightened. His gun fell to the floor at his feet.

Suddenly, he took two quick, aimless steps, his black eyes fixed and staring before him. Then his big legs collapsed beneath his weight, and he crashed to the floor with a jar that shook the room. He did not move a muscle after he struck.

Gloria Camp screamed again, shrilly, She tried to retreat another step, bumped into the davenport and sat down abruptly. The sudden movement pulled another scream from her. She put both hands over her eyes and kept on screaming, hardly waiting to catch her breath.

Fred Ames' face was drawn grimly. White lines dug in about his mouth. Moving painfully, he hitched himself across the floor toward Bill Marsh's big body. His right leg dragged uselessly behind him.

Reaching Marsh, he searched the big detective's pockets for the Shamrock Emerald and found it. The walnut-sized stone flashed green fire in the overhead lights as he held it in his hand for a moment, and the knowledge that a fortune rested in his palm made his lips twist bitterly. It was a fortune that he did not want, a fortune that had already cost two lives.

Grunting with the pain of movement, he stuffed the flashing green stone into his own coat pocket. It would go to the National Indemnity Co., of course. He did not want it.

With the Shamrock safe in his pocket, he stretched out on the apartment rug and sighed deeply. His side was on fire and his right leg was beginning to throb. Outside the apartment, somewhere in the hall, he heard a man shout hoarsely. A woman was talking loudly.

"Gloria!" he called. "Open the door for the police. They'll break it down if you don't. Everything's all right now, Gloria. Marsh's murder joke backfired on him!"