

# Death is Deaf

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**Published: 1942**  
in »Hooded Detective«, Vol. III



Big Sid couldn't understand it, and he was a smart monkey. He had cased this job himself, personal. Had cooked up the scheme for pulling it off and spent a good two weeks laying the groundwork. Yet, here he was locked up in the county jail with the hot squat waiting to claim him.

Big Sid couldn't understand it. And he was a smart monkey. He had cased this job himself personal. Had cooked up the scheme for pulling it off. Had spent a good two weeks laying the groundwork. Nobody yet had ever called Big Sid Cloras a dummy either. Yet here he was locked up in their tin-can of a jail, as good as a dead duck. He couldn't understand it.

It couldn't be. Not for him, Big Sid. Yet the bars of that cell door were chrome steel, not papier mache. And those birds chatting down the hall were local coppers with a couple of men from the County Homicide Squad. And an escort of State Troopers were en route to take him over to the real clink at the county seat. It couldn't happen to him, Big Sid. But it had. And it was going to be for murder, maybe.

„Sid ... Sid,“ said Johnny the Itch almost reverently. He always addressed Big Sid that way. He said, „Sid, I think maybe I got something figured. But—but how did it happen, Sid?“

„Aw, shut up,“ said Big Sid with a disgusted glance over his thick shoulder. He didn't bother really looking at him. Nobody much ever had bothered looking at Johnny the Itch. He was one of those little insignificant hangdog things with vacant eyes. Round-shouldered. The kind they turn off the assembly line to hold up the fronts of pool parlors. He had that twitching muscle in his right cheek. It made the skin jerk and pull as if he were trying to get rid of an itch without using his hand. He could do one thing. He could tool a heap like a maniacal genius born with a steering wheel in his hands.

„Shut up,“ Big Sid grunted his way again and walked past the bowl in the corner of the cell. He was trying to figure this out. He stood there winding the tail of his necktie around a big finger.

Johnny the Itch pulled nervously at the wide-brimmed fedora jerked down on his bony skull. „But, Sid, I think I got a way to—“

Big Sid turned around, spat out his cigaret, heeled it into the concrete. He didn't take his eyes off Johnny the Itch for a long moment. They were big muddy eyes, protruding. When Big Sid looked at you that way, a guy felt he was being measured for a casket. Big Sid could haul off and belt your teeth down your throat with those tremendous arms of his. And those eyes would never change.

He really wasn't a tall or unusually large man, Big Sid. But he was solid beef. That big belly that filled out a double-breasted drum-tight. The massive shoulders that started minus courtesy of neck from right beneath his double chin. The big, wide-nostrilled nose that gave him a certain kind of heavy dignity. He exuded bigness.

Johnny the Itch fingered away sweat that rolled down from under his fedora and nodded obediently. He felt of the fedora gingerly as Big Sid turned away. Big Sid was thinking and had to be let alone. When Big Sid thought, it was real important. Later, he'd tell him.

Big Sid sweated and listened to the buzz of voices from down the corridor and tried not to believe he might have signed his own death warrant. He put his hands on his broad hips, ignoring the bandaged wrist where that copper's bullet had got him. He went back to the beginning.

It had been such a sweet set-up. This dinky little whistle-stop of a town. Duffyville. Over near the southwestern border of the state. With its single bank, the Duffyville National. And that motor parts plant on the outskirts with its heavy back-log of defense orders that had compelled a doubling of its help. A consequent raise in its payroll, too. And that payroll moved through the bank, naturally. Just a little matter of something over \$21,000 each week.

„It's a shame to take it,“ he, Big Sid, had said in the beginning. Then he had cased it thoroughly. And he had moved into town, openly and aboveboard. Registered at the little hotel as one „Samuel Norris.“ Big front with plenty of credentials and a neat black mustache which could be shaved off easily enough later. Then he had walked right into that bank and identified himself. Even opened up a small checking account. „Just for ready cash, of course.“

That was the way he did things. Cool and nervy. Always thinking, thinking ahead. He was a smart guy. Sure maybe you could grab that dough by blasting your way with the heaters plenty. But that kind of stuff only made you hot as

hell, afterward. You had to keep lamming and maybe you never got a chance to enjoy it. Big Sid wasn't dumb like that.

His way, it had been a cinch to get the whole layout. How the payroll cash was brought from up the line in an armored car to the bank before opening time in the morning. And the company guards came down and picked it up immediately after lunch for their auditing department. After lunch!

He had put his finger on that weak spot almost from the start. The quiet lunch-hour in a sleepy little town. When two of the tellers and the bank officers went home to eat the way they did in those hick burgs. That was the time for the snatch.

And even that was not to be done crudely. Not Big Sid's way. He was pretty well known in the Duffville National by then. Been dropping in to confer with the vice-president about the local real estate situation. It was so simple. A few hints dropped about the possible establishment of a new branch plant ... of course, a man wasn't always free to mention in advance whom he represented. And they'd have to get definite word about the extension of a railroad siding for the lading purposes, too.

Oh, it went over big. He knew how they did things in that bank. And he made them feel they knew him. Which was very important. Especially that teller down at the end window, Eckland. The one who stayed when the others went out to eat at the noon hour. Eckland was sort of good looking in a weak blond way. He studied accounting at night. „Samuel Norris“ said he might know of an opening for a bright young fellow there. When he came up to the city, they'd have to get together. Least he could do would be to show him around the hot spots some night. That always made Eckland flush some; you could see he was the type who dreamed of himself as a glamor boy, a killer-diller with the dames.

And there was that fallen-arched Paddy who was the guard. Nice and simple. An occasional cigar, a friendly slap on the back, did for him.

So there she was. Perfect. The clincher was to get away without firing a shot. Before there was a warning. No shooting and they would be miles away before they stopped rubbing their eyes in that one water-tank burg. Probably wouldn't have figured out exactly what had happened until some time Saturday. The payroll came in on Friday.

They scoured every main artery and side road and cart track for miles in every direction, he and Johnny the Itch. They figured on cutoffs in case of a chase and how they could double in their tracks. And the pass over the mountain ridge that would take them across the state line. And about forty miles down the line, on that abandoned farm, they located the old barn where they would switch cars. They would hide the second heap in the barn. Williams would take care of that. He was the trigger man. Sonny Williams, cool as ice behind the business end of a Tommy gun.

Now, Sonny Williams was—

„Sid,“ Johnny the Itch said, watching the cell door nervously. He couldn't keep the whimper out of his voice now. „Sid, time's getting short. I—I think I got a way, a chance for us anyways. I got something—“ His whisper cracked and he made a faint gesture toward his fedora as if he feared the walls had eyes as well as ears.

He was scared as hell. It made Big Sid sick. The little rat didn't have anything to be scared about. Not like he did. He glared at him. „I'm thinking,“ he warned heavily.

Johnny the Itch nodded so his under jaw jiggled. When a phone jangled down the corridor, his eyes bugged right at the door. Then he couldn't stand it any longer. „Look, Sid, how did it happen? You're smart. You figured it all out and—“ He half choked and had to dredge his voice up out of his throat again. He took his hat carefully by both hands. „Look, Sid, I got—“

Big Sid took him by a bony shoulder and threw him. Back over the lower bunk of the cell. Johnny's head bounced off the wall. One of the town flatfoots came down and stared in, chewing gum methodically. He gave barely a glance to Johnny the Itch. The latter crouched there, frozen, hanging onto his hat as if it were a hunk of dynamite.

Lighting a fresh cigaret, Big Sid paid no attention to the copper. He was thinking what to do. He pulled at a vest button and picked up the thread again. She had been all set. He had given the office to Sonny Williams. Williams had planted the second heap at the old barn and they had picked him up and rolled into Duffyville. Right on the nose. At 12.08 according to his wrist watch. Dropped off Williams on that residential street around the corner from the bank.

Swung around the block. The timing was perfection. He, Big Sid, went up the bank steps as Williams came along less than ten yards away. Williams with that long bundle under his arm that looked like a florist's box. The sub-machine gun was in that box.

A local tradesman was just leaving the bank, nodded to „Mr. Norris.“ Then he, Big Sid, was over dropping his left hand on that guard's arm, asking affably for the vice-president. He had left for lunch, of course. And Sid slid the automatic from his side pocket and tucked it in the guard's side.

„This is a stick-up, stupid... Keep your pants on an' don't try to be a hero. Now, pass me through!“

The guard's lips fell loosely away from his plates. He twisted his eyes over toward Williams. Williams was at a desk, the florist box lying in front of him, scribbling on a deposit slip. But Williams knew what was going on. The guard nodded his head on the fear-stiffened hinge of his neck and looked down at Eckland in the far cage, the only teller on now. The guard pointed toward the electrically controled door in the teller cage partition that cut off the offices and vault from the customers' side.

Eckland was looking down, smiling at „Mr. Norris.“ Eckland nodded. He pressed a button in his cage. The door down the line clicked. And he, Big Sid, was through, inside. It went smooth as grease.

Williams was over, the Tommy gun out. Had herded the guard into a corner where he was hidden from the teller as well as any passersby. Behind the partition, he, Big Sid, wasted only a single glance at the open vault. That would have been the stupid move. He was too smart for that. He moved swiftly down behind the empty cages toward Eckland's, walking on his toes. His left foot hit a discarded paper bill binder and it crackled and he pulled away from it so he struck one of those adding machines on a portable carriage. It jolted and rattled loudly. But Eckland did not look around.

Then he was right behind him. Had the automatic snout poking through the steel grille of the rear of the cage. Square at Eckland's back. Smack at the belt of his pinchback coat. „This is a stick-up, Eckland,“ he said quietly. „Don't try to be a hero—or I'll blow you outa your shoes!“

There was no sign from Eckland. He stood motionless, writing hand poised over a voucher.

„Now you're showing sense,“ he congratulated Eckland. „Now back up easy and unhook this—“

There was a low whistle. That would be Williams. It meant a depositor had come in. Williams had moved around to cover him with the Tommy gun. And that meant Eckland could see him and the gun now. Eckland's jaw unhinged and the pencil slid from his limp hand and fell to the floor. He peered forward, making gagging sounds.

„I told you this was a stick-up,“ he, Big Sid, told him, speaking louder now. „I got a gun on your back! Make a move for that alarm and I'll give it to you! I'm not fooling, Eckland!“

There was a long second ticking off into eternity. That Eckland almost acted as if he didn't hear. His head never even started to twitch toward the rear. One of his hands clawed at the counter in front of him. Then he was moving. His right leg. Shakily but purposefully. Toward that pedal that sounded the hold-up alarm, flashing it right to local police headquarters.

„Eckland, I'll kill—“ But Eckland's foot never halted. And he, Big Sid, let him have it in the back. Twice point-blank.

But even as he tumbled, buckling forward in the middle, twisting with agony, Eckland's foot found the pedal, punched it. The damage was done. The bank resounded with the strident clamor of the gong. And Big Sid knew its twin was galvanizing them down at police headquarters.

He ran for it. Was moving even before the teller's slumping body hit the floor. Got through the partition door; he had even thought to block the snap-lock with a paper wad. Williams was out, going down the steps. The Tommy began to chatter. Then it was clattering down on the sidewalk, Williams crumpling over it with two slugs in his body. That cop coming out of the hardware store down the block happened to be a crack shot.

He, Big Sid, had sent him scurrying back with one well-aimed slug though. Then headed for the car parked down beyond the „No Parking“ zone directly in front of the bank. He always believed in keeping the law when nothing was to be gained in breaking it. He was smart that way.

It was the cop running from across the street who got him in the wrist and made him lose the automatic. A lucky shot. Still, he might have made it. He got the car between them. He was almost at it, lunging for that open front door on the curb side. Johnny the Itch was quaking in there behind the wheel, hands up at his ears, yapping, „Cripes, I give up—I give up!“

Big Sid had always known how yellow Johnny was. That didn't bother him. He could take care of him when he got inside, got to that stubby .38 he had slipped into the glove compartment just in case. But he never got to it. That police car, roaring up from behind, siren a-scream, smashed into the tail end of their job. Jolted it ahead savagely. And with one foot on the running board, he was slammed to the ground hard, rolling his head against a tree. Then they had him. Him and Johnny the Itch. Only Johnny didn't count.

Big Sid shook his head. He still couldn't figure how it had happened. It was crazy, that guy, Eckland, committing suicide like that. Something had gone wrong but—

Johnny the Itch crept closer across the cell to Big Sid, shooting nervous glances toward the door. He admired Big Sid tremendously. Big Sid was so

plenty smart, not a dumb cluck like him. He didn't blame Big Sid for what had happened. It couldn't be his fault; Big Sid never made a mistake. He could think.

Maybe he had figured out what had gone wrong by now. He would ask him, then tell him what he had. It was dangerous to interrupt him when he was thinking. But time was growing short. And then when he knew, Big Sid would figure out a way to use it. Johnny put a hand to his jammed-down hat and spoke.

„Sid, you got it figured how we was double-crossed maybe? What slipped? I know you figured it right.“ His voice squeaked out of his throat. „But—Sid, I got something you can figure on now, maybe. I got—“

Big Sid whirled on him, one of his heavy hands sweeping. He batted Johnny the Itch's fedora onto the side of his head. Johnny clutched at it as if it might be a life preserver. He started: „Sid, I got a—“

One of the County Homicide men came to the cell door. He plucked the cold cigar from his mouth and nodded at Big Sid. „You're lucky, pal. The hospital says Eckland the teller will pull through. If he hadn't, it would have been first degree and the hot squat for you.“

Big Sid sneered. „Ah-h, that dumbhead, Eckland! He wanted to be a hero. He was asking for it!“ He spat disgustedly onto the floor. „If he'd had any sense, he wouldn't have gone for the alarm. I told him I had a gun in his back!“

The Homicide man shook his head. „He never heard you.“

„But I was only two feet away! I told him twice an'—“

„Eckland was stone deaf, chum,“ the Homicide man said.

Big Sid's lips curled. As if somebody had tried to tell him a fairy story. „Why, I talked to that chump many a time! I—“

The Homicide man agreed on that one. „Yeah, facing him. So he could look at you—and your lips. Eckland was a lip-reader. And—he was stone deaf, Cloras.“

Big Sid swayed. He might have pulled it off if that guy hadn't been deaf. Could have. He swore, raking his hair savagely. „I never figured on that! I never figured—“

„You—you never figured that?“ Johnny the Itch was on his feet when he screamed. His splinter of jaw jerked out fiercely. „You—Big Sid—the smart guy! You never figured—you—you was dumb?“

But he couldn't seem to believe it. Then—he did.

He jerked off his fedora, grabbing inside it. He came out with the stubby .38 from the glove compartment. He had been able to slip it out in the excitement after the capture. Nobody ever paid much attention to Johnny the Itch. Any more than they had thought to look under his hat when they searched him.

He said it again to Big Sid. „You was dumb.“ Then he just kept triggering until the gun was emptied and he had put five slugs fatally into Big Sid's carcass.

