The Case of the South Philly Slaughterers

Prescription: Murder 1

by Alan Hynd, 1903-1974
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Introduction

My father, Alan Hynd (1903–1974) was one of the foremost true crime writers of his day. Over a career that spanned almost fifty years, he wrote close to two dozen published books, probably more than a thousand magazine articles, several radio and TV shows and a couple of films. It was not a bad life's work - it was just mostly about bad people.

He had a style, which was more anecdotal than scholarly, more entertaining than academic. A keen sense of humor, sometimes very dark, was never lost on the events, and was almost always conveyed in his reporting. ***Prescription: Murder!*** is a small sampling of some of his more memorable articles, classics in the annals of true crime. This collection is about doctors who killed, for example. There are four episodes about doctors and then a bonus track about a nursing home. This is stuff that just couldn't be invented. Where possible, I've included illustrations from the eras of the story. They are all in the public domain.

I have gone through all of these stories and re-edited them for modern audiences. In some cases, I made small additions, adding information that may have come to light on these cases in the forty years since my father died. I've retained his jaundiced outlook on the cases he wrote about, and kept his style. I like to think I have done it in a manner that would have pleased him. Hence I added my name as a writer here more than an editor. In the final years of his life, I ghosted several articles for him. So I can think of no one more qualified than myself to tinker.

A final note: The dialogue in several of these articles is closer to the truth than one might think. All of it was taken from court proceedings of the era, credible newspaper accounts and actual confessions, then "cleaned up" a bit.

Alan Hynd's stories, which appeared in publications from, ***The Reader's Digest*** and ***The Saturday Evening Post*** to ***True Detective,*** had thousands of fans in their day. Thanks to the accessibility of electronic publishing, it is never too late to become one.

If you like true crime, or just a crazy jaw-dropping story, this is probably for you. Enjoy.

Noel Hynd
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Los Angeles, California

The Case of the South Philly Slaughterers
...in which a homicidal threesome made accidents pay.

The trouble with Doctor Morris Bolber, who functioned as a faith healer in the Italian section of South Philadelphia back in the Terrible Thirties, was that he could never quite bring himself to have much faith in the theory that murder will out. This attitude of the discerning doctor sprang in part from conditions right in his own neighborhood. Bolber, whose ear was never very far from the ground, was aware of three instances wherein ladies, for various reasons, had poisoned their spouses.

The Philadelphia Police Department, without realizing it, or in fact caring much, was lending an assist to this shocking state of affairs. The Department in the Thirties was honey-combed by grafters from City Hall down to the flatfeet on the beat with the result that many honest cops were usually so preoccupied by worry over getting the rug pulled from under them that they didn't notice what was going

on among the citizens. Thus a murderer who was sly enough not to throw his victim out with the garbage or appear in the New Year's Day Mummers Parade with somebody's head stuck to a broomstick, stood in a fair way to go unmolested indefinitely. And, for a man who was *really* clever, the field of pre-meditated homicide offered opportunity practically beyond limit.

All of that raises the curtain on one of the strangest episodes ever in the history of American homicide. Let's consider the three main players, a pair of cousins named Herman and Paul Petrillo and their associate, one Dr. Morris Bolber.

Herman Petrillo was born in 1899 in the province of Campania, near Naples. He came to the United States in 1910 and first worked as a barber. Then he found more profitable ways to make money: his schemes first consisted of arson and insurance fraud. Eventually, however, he came across a small Philadelphia gang selling counterfeit five-dollar bills for half the face value. Petrillo bought in, learned the business, so to speak, and was printing his own.

Herman Petrillo's cousin, Paul Petrillo, also landed in Philadelphia in 1910. He married shortly after his arrival in the States and opened a tailor shop, Paul Petrillo, Custom Tailor to the Classy Dressers, on East Passyunk Avenue. The business was successful for many years. Then along came the Depression and no one was buying new threads. So Paul the Tailor was on the rocks financially. Soon thereafter, he got into the life insurance racket. He sold cheap policies: weekly premiums were 50 cents or a dollar. The insurance company he worked with was a fly by night outfit that never had any intention of making a big payout. It also did not require a medical examination of the insured. So Paul Petrillo would sell policies mostly to sick and injured middle-aged men. A good deed, you think? Think again. Petrillo had his own game plan. He was working with immigrants, don't forget, people who were often illiterate in English. So Petrillo would list himself on the policy without the policyholder's knowledge, often making himself the sole beneficiary. At first, Petrillo was playing a numbers game and hoping for a hit in the form of a death of someone that he had insured. Later on, things would take a darker turn.

Paul Petrillo also had a side interest, stemming from legends he had heard as a boy in Italy: faith healers. A superstitious man, he was also fascinated by magic; particularly as it was practiced by men who claimed the power to take away a person's pain. Through this interest, and prowling through the nether regions of South Philadelphia, Petrillo came across a middle-aged man known in the neighborhood as Louie the Rabbi.

Louis was actually a Russian Jewish immigrant named Morris Bolber. Bolber had been raised by his grandparents in a small village near Moscow. He was a child prodigy, entering Grodno State University at age nine and graduating at twelve. He then became interested in the Kabbalah as well as other ancient books of magic and mysticism. His fascination morphed into a fixation. In 1905 he traveled to China and sought out a legendary sorceress. Bolber lived with the old woman for five years, then immigrated to New York City in 1911, calling himself "Dr." now, following his education in China. He married and settled on the lower East side. He worked as a teacher, saved his money earnestly, and ran a grocery store. For many years, he led a normal life.

Then came the Depression. His business failed. Bolber packed up his wife and family and moved to Philadelphia. But now he had an inspiration: He sent out handbills announcing his new practice as a faith healer.

So by the mid-1930's, Paul Petrillo had met the man known as Dr. Morris Bolber. Through Paul, Bolber met Cousin Herman. And so there they were, the counterfeiter, the insurance guy and the fake doctor. Things were reader to roll.

By the year 1932, Doctor Bolber was in nasty financial straits once again. The pickings in the faith healing field had been slim since the Great Depression of 1929. The faith healer's patients had either lost faith in him or couldn't afford to be healed.

So the doctor, as he was called, with a wife and a houseful of off-spring to support, had gone into a side business: selling bottles of stale ginger ale spiked with saltpeter to women whose husbands had strayed from the connubial couch. The saltpeter had slowed down the husbands but it hadn't slowed down a parade of creditors to the doctor's domicile and office, in a faded-red brick house on the corner of Ninth Street and Moyamensing Avenue, in the heart of the Quaker City's Italian district. One morning in February 1932, Bolber was in a state of acute depression as he sat in a gloomy front room that he used for professional purposes, against a background of scuffed leather volumes on abracadabra, while a howling wind rattled the windowpanes. The faith healer looked somewhat incongruous in such a setting, for he was an affluent-looking little man of 42, neatly barbered, alert of eye and sharply turned out. As he sat there in his office, railing at the fates, somebody pulled the bell at the front door.

Bolber rushed to a window to see whether it was friend or foe: patient or creditor. The caller was a new patient, a moderately attractive woman of about 30, the wife of a man named Anthony Giacobbe, who ran a dry-goods store. She had come to get a bottle of that stuff she had been hearing about, the stuff that slowed men down. Mrs. Giacobbe told Bolber that her husband was spending so much time and money on drink and other women that he was letting his business go to pot.

“We’re even having a hard time keeping up his insurance,” said Mrs. Giacobbe. “Insurance?” said Bolber, all ears. “How much insurance does your husband carry?”

“Ten thousand dollars’ worth.”

Doctor Bolber was visited by an inspiration. He gave Mrs. Giacobbe a bottle of stale ginger ale spiked not with saltpeter but with an aphrodisiac strong enough to transform a broken-down wreck into a howling wolf.

“Come back in a couple of weeks,” said the doctor, “and let me know if this has any effect on your husband.” As soon as Mrs. Giacobbe left, Bolber, according to an admission he was one day to make to the cops, had an inspiration. He hustled around the corner to the hole-in-the-wall tailor shop run by his friend, Paul Petrillo.

Petrillo, a chubby man in his thirties, with heavily greased black hair and the smell of Sen Sen on his breath, had for some time been collaborating in a unique arrangement with the faith healer. Petrillo made free suits for Doctor Bolber in return for the names of women married to men who were neglecting their homework.

Petrillo was one day to be revealed in a courtroom as a gentleman with phenomenal amorous powers. This particular day, when the fraudulent faith healer slipped the wolfish tailor the name of Mrs. Millie Giacobbe, something new had been added. Petrillo was not only to seduce the lady; he was to pretend to fall in love with her and propose marriage.

“But what about the husband?” Petrillo asked.

“Never mind about him,” said Bolber.

“Just get the wife nuts about you and I’ll take care of the husband.”

“How?”

“I’ll kill him.”

“But why knock the guy off, Doc?” asked Petrillo. “What’s the angle?”

“Insurance. He’s got $10,000 worth of insurance. We can get half of it from the wife. That’ll give us $2,500 apiece.”

Petrillo was all for it. In 1932, $2,500 was a bundle.

“How you gain’ to knock the guy off, Doc?”

“Poison,” said Bolber. “I got a poison that’ll fool any doctor.”

“What’s the name of it?”

The substance Bolber had in mind was conium, a lethal herb known to the layman as hemlock, the stuff that was in the mickey that did in Socrates, the Greek philosopher, in

500 B.C. The attractive feature of conium, which was easily disguised in food and drink, was that when it was adminis-tered to a patient suffering from any one of a wide variety of diseases it caused the ailment to worsen materially. Making things even more convenient in the Giacobbe household, the man of the house was a chronic drunk. It would be easy to slip something into his beverage.

Next morning Petrillo sprayed himself with cologne and, posing as an encyclopedia salesman, called on Mrs. Giacobbe after her philandering husband had left for his place of business. In a couple of weeks, Mrs. Giacobbe called on the faith healer again. The stuff that he had given her to slow down her husband had had no effect.

“But I don’t care,” said Mrs. Giacobbe. “I’ve met somebody else.”

“And you’re in love with him?”

“Yes.”

Bolber sat in his office half the night writing a dramatic act, complete with instructions for gestures, by which Petrillo was to propose marriage to Mrs. Giacobbe. Next day, after Giacobbe, the marked man, was away at business, Petrillo called on the wife. On bended knee, he professed his undying love for the lady.

“Let’s get married and run away some-wheres,” he said, beating his chest.

“But what about my husband?” asked Mrs. Giacobbe.

“Something could happen to him.”

Mrs. Giacobbe had never thought of such a happy eventuality.

“What could happen?” She asked.

“We could take all his clothes off when he comes home drunk some night and he could get pneumonia from layin’ there naked with the cold wind blowin’ right on him.”

A few nights later Bolber was sitting in his office listening to Petrillo relating the happy developments.

“Giacobbe didn’t go to work today,” the tailor was telling the faith healer. “Me and his wife stripped him when he come home drunk last night. He woke up with an awful cold this morning.”

Mrs. Giacobbe had gotten her husband thoroughly starched again that night.

“So we stripped him again a little while ago,” Petrillo went on. “The weatherman says it’s gonna be down to ten above tonight. When Giacobbe wakes up tomorrow morning he ought to be practical blue.”

The next night Petrillo reported to Bolber that Giacobbe had contracted pneumonia. The family doctor had been called and had prescribed two kinds of liquid medicine.

“Good,” said the faith healer. “Tell Mrs. Giacobbe to come around with that medicine.”

The patient quickly began to come apart at the seams. The bona fide doctor wasn’t surprised.

“Your husband was a heavy drinker,” he explained sadly to Mrs. Giacobbe. “Heavy drinkers often fail to survive pneumonia.”

“My poor Antonio,” said Mrs. Giacobbe, warming up to the idea of an early widowhood.

After the funeral, Bolber sent for the widow. There would be a fee, he explained, for his doctoring up that medicine, a fee of half that insurance money. Mrs. Giacobbe, not too bright and happy to be rid of her faithless spouse so that she could marry the ardent tailor, willingly forked over the five grand in cash.

It wasn’t long before Mrs. Giacobbe appeared in Bolber’s office greatly distraught. Petrillo had banked his romantic fires. The doctor made a ticking sound and shook his head sadly. The male animal was an unpredictable beast. There was nothing, he feared, he could do to help the lady.

One night, after office hours, the faith healer suggested to Petrillo that they get busy on another husband. Where, Petrillo asked, would they find a man carrying enough in-surance to make the enterprise worthwhile?

"We'll insure somebody ourselves," said Bolber. The doctor had already been thinking about his own patients. He went to his card file and selected one.

"Now here's a woman named Lorenzo whose husband is a roofer. We could insure the husband for say $10,000, with double indemnity in case of an accident, and then get him pushed off a roof."

How, Petrillo inquired, would they get Lorenzo insured without his knowing it? And who would push him off the roof? Bolber ignored the questions.

"Your cousin," he said to Petrillo. "The one that was pinched a couple of years ago for counterfeiting."

"Oh, you mean Little Herman. Herman Petrillo."

"That's the fellow. He used to be an amateur actor, didn't he?"

"Yeah, before the Secret Service pinched him for that bum money. He used to act in church plays."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's a spaghetti salesman."

"Get him here," said the faith healer.

Herman Petrillo, the once-and-future counterfeiter, was a foxy-looking toy man given to loud checked suits and overcoats with belts in the back. Doctor Bolber decided that Little Herman would blend perfectly into his scheme. Bolber explained to Little Herman that he was to pose as Lorenzo, the roofer, in taking out an insurance policy. Then, after the policy was issued, Herman would shove the real Lorenzo off a roof. Little Herman, a real stinker, was simply mad about the plot.

Paul Petrillo, carefully coached by Bolber, assumed the role of a canvasser and called at Lorenzo's home one day when Lorenzo was up on a roof in a distant part of the city. A few weeks after laying the groundwork, Paul asked Mrs. Lorenzo if she would marry him.

The lady said she would be glad to except that she was already married.

"But supposin' something should happen to your husband," said Petrillo.

"Like what?" asked the seduced wife.

"Like him fallin' off a roof." Mrs. Lorenzo, who caught on quickly, liked the idea. Now Doctor Bolber instructed Little Herman to telephone to the Philadelphia offices of the Prudential Insurance Com-pany, palm himself off as Lorenzo, and ask that a salesman come to the Lorenzo home the next day at noon, when the real Lorenzo would be up on a roof somewhere.

When the salesman called, there was Mrs. Lorenzo, the faithless wife, and Little Herman, the stand-in husband, looking for all the world like what they weren't, applying for a $10,000 policy with double indemnity for accidental death. And they had cash in hand to pay for the first quarterly premium.

A Prudential doctor called the following day, found Herman to be a sound actuarial risk, and in due time the policies arrived in the mail. Mrs. Lorenzo intercepted them. Doctor Bolber began to follow the real Lorenzo around, the better to spot some plausible way of striking up an acquaintanceship with the man. He fell into conversation with the roofer in a bar one night. Thus he discovered that Lorenzo was mad for dirty French post cards. Doctor Bolber acquired a supply of the French art and gave the stuff to Little Herman. Late one

afternoon Little Herman buttonholed Lorenzo when the marked man came down off a roof and sold him some cards.

"Get a hold of me any time you got more of this stuff," Lorenzo told Herman. Doctor Bolber, too cagey to be hasty, allowed a few months to elapse before giving Little Herman the nod to take care of Lorenzo. But finally Little Herman appeared on a roof that Lorenzo was repairing solo. He had a new batch of French post cards for the roofer.

"Gee," said Lorenzo, "these are pippins. How much?"

The question was to remain unanswered. Little Herman, looking around to make sure nobody was observing him, gave the actuarial risk a shove and in a twinkling Lorenzo was plunging eight stories to the street.

Six months passed before Doctor Bolber summoned Little Herman again. "You ever go fishin'?" Bolber asked.

No, Little Herman didn't know anything about fishing.

Bolber told him to bone up on the sport and to buy himself some tackle.

"We've found a man by the name of Fierenza who got $5,000 in double indemnity already," the faith healer said. "He fishes every Saturday afternoon in the Schuylkill River. Your cousin is going to make love to his wife."

One fine Saturday afternoon, when Fierenza was about to go out in a rented rowboat, who just happened along but Little Herman. Actor that he was, Little Herman, carrying bait and tackle and wearing hip boots and a battered hat bright with artificial flies, looked more like a fisherman than a real fisherman.

"You goin' out in that there boat alone?" Little Herman asked Fierenza.

"Yeah," said Fierenza. "How about me and you sharin' the boat and we'll split the expense," suggested Little Herman. The diminutive fiend patted his hip pocket. "I got a bottle with me, too."

Out on the water, in a sheltered cover where nobody could see them, Little Herman asked Fierenza if he could swim.

"No," said Fierenza.

"Not a stroke?"

"Look," said Fierenza, "if I went overboard I'd be drowned."

"Hey," said Little Herman a few sips of booze later, pointing to something behind Fierenza. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"There. *Behind* you!" Fierenza turned and there was a shove, a scream and a splash.

Little Herman, who could swim better than a lot of fish, dived off the other side of the boat. Then, good and wet, he climbed back in the boat again and rowed ashore. There he acted the role of a heart-broken friend.

"It's all my fault," he said. "I should have saved him."

With three victims, Giacobbe, the dry-goods merchant, Lorenzo, the roofer, and Fierenza, the fisherman, disposed of within a year and a half, for an over-all take of $25,000, Doctor Bolber saw nothing ahead but a golden future. Many of the immigrant women who would be there clients had burdensome abusive husbands with whom they had been stuck with back in Italy. Since most were practicing Catholics, divorce was not an option. Thus Bolber and his two associates were

selling a product that had a certain appeal. Similarly, most people in South Philadelphia knew better than to go to the police.

"There's no telling," Bolber said to the Petrillo cousins while the three sat around the faith healer's office over a jug of Chianti one night in the summer of 1933, "where a thing like this could end. Why, we could establish branches all over the country—like Household Finance."

Doctor Bolber, having his ear to the ground, had gotten a rumble about a most remarkable woman in North Philadelphia, a woman named Maria (or Carina) Favato who was known in her own bailiwick as the Witch. The Witch, who was a widow, was in the same profession as Doctor Bolber: faith healing, saltpeter and general mumbo jumbo.

The Witch, who was a widow, was in the business of getting rid of unwanted husbands for wives. Not for insurance money, but just to get rid of the men. This impressed Bolber as a wanton waste of golden opportunity and that was why, on one hot summer night, he journeyed across town to converse with Mrs. Favato.

One look at the Witch convinced Doctor Bolber why she had taken on that appellation. The woman, in her early forties, was strictly out of a bad dream: short, squat, with a hooked nose and a face that reminded Bolber of a batch of fresh dough with two currants for eyes. The Witch, it developed, had heard of Bolber and so, since the two immediately understood each other, they dispensed with the preliminaries and began to talk shop.

What, Bolber inquired, did the Witch use to poison errant husbands?

"Best stuff is arsenic," said the Witch. "What you usin'?"

"Conium."

"What that?"

"It's from the carrot family. It's also known as hemlock. It's what they used to poison Socrates with," Bolber said.

"Who?"

"Socrates."

"Philadelphia man?" the Witch inquired.

"Not exactly," said Bolber.

Doctor Bolber asked the Witch if she was married.

"Had five husbands," said the Witch. "Poisoned three."

"And did you collect insurance on the ones you poisoned?" Bolber inquired pleasantly.

The Witch nodded. Now Bolber explained how simple it was to collect insurance on the husbands of other women. The Witch was fascinated and craved details. Bolber supplied them.

"Jesus," said the Witch. "Look all the money I coulda made if I'd thunk of that."

Bolber patted the Witch's hand. "Never mind," he assured her. "We'll make up for lost time."

The Witch went to *her* card file. A hapless janitor named Dominic Petrino emerged from the file as a sound prospect. Petrino's wife had been buying saltpeter from the Witch for some time without appreciable results. The faith healer explained to the Witch that Paul Petrillo, the wolfish tailor, would romance the janitor's wife and condition her for the plot. Then Little Herman would pose as

the janitor for the benefit of the insurance people and when the real janitor was bumped off the Witch would be cut in on the take.

"Good," said the Witch. "While you doin' that I be lookin' for more husbands."

After Paul Petrillo had set things up in the Petrino home, Little Herman, the actor, hovered in the wings, ready to go on stage and essay one of his finest roles. One day when the real janitor was at work, Little Herman, dressed like a janitor, and smelling like one, sat around the Petrino flat with the faithless wife when a salesman for the Prudential Life Insurance Company called.

Herman said he would like to take out a $10,000 policy with double indemnity. The salesman, although as fee happy as the average policy peddler, inquired how a janitor could keep up the payments on such a big policy.

Doctor Bolber, the sly one, had prepared well in advance for that very question. He had fixed up a couple of fake bankbooks that made it appear that the janitor had $12,000 in sav-ings.

"Me and my wife here turn over houses," Little Herman explained, meaning that the couple dabbled in real estate. That made everything all right.

It was two days later, when a doctor for the Prudential called to give the stand-in applicant a physical examination, that Little Herman had a few bad moments. This same doctor had examined Little Herman more than a year before, when Little Herman had posed as the husband of Lorenzo, the doomed roofer.

"Haven't I seen you someplace before?" asked the doctor.

"Never seen you in my life, Doc," said Little Herman.

"But I could swear that I've examined you for insurance before."

"You couldn't of, Doc. I ain't never taken no out insurance before." The doctor ascribed the whole thing to a case of mistaken identity, examined Little Herman, found him a sound actuarial risk, and the policy was issued.

A few months passed. Then Doctor Bolber gave the nod for the end of the real janitor. Petrino worked in a tenement house. The faith healer handed Little Herman a monkey wrench, instructed him to pose as an inspector for the gas company, sneak up behind Petrino when the janitor was at the top of a flight of steep stairs, and crown him with the wrench.

"It'll look," Bolber explained, "like that janitor just fell down the stairs and fractured his skull."

One night, a couple of weeks later, Doctor Bolber again crossed the city to pay another visit to the Witch. He handed her five hundred dollars for her cut of the Petrino take. "Who else you got for us?" he asked.

The Witch had a fishmonger named Luigi Primavera. It was the same evil story all over again, with Paul Petrillo romancing the wife and Little Herman Petrillo standing in for the doomed man. But this time there was a new twist. Doctor Bolber, warming up to his work, decided to take a more personal hand in matters. "I'm going to kill this man Primavera personally," he in-formed the Petrillo cousins

"How, Doc?" asked Little Herman. "I'm going to run over him with an automobile," said the faith healer. So one rainy day, while Primavera was hawking fish on a lonely street in South Philly, Doctor Bolber, at the wheel of a car with a souped-up motor and fake license plates, waited until the victim left his wagon to knock on some doors. Then the doctor stepped on the gas, ran up on a sidewalk and sent poor Primavera and his fish flying.

Late that night, the doctor sat in his office reading the early editions of the morning papers. The papers carried the story of the hit-and-runner who had killed the fishmonger. Some people living on the street where the fatality had occurred had told the cops that the driver of the car, whose description fitted that of Bolber, had apparently been deliberate in run-ning Primavera down.

The faith healer sat in his office most of that night, drinking and thinking. Just as daylight was peeping through the blinds in his office he reached a momentous decision. Henceforth he would eschew accidental deaths in favor of natural ones. True, a natural death paid only half the insurance money that a double indemnity one did, but it was less likely to excite suspicion.

Next Doctor Bolber was visited by an inspiration that was to prove a bright milestone in the history of premeditated homicide. He decided that a canvas bag, filled with about twenty pounds of sand, would, if brought down properly on a man's head, render the victim temporarily unconscious. Repeated additional blows would induce a cerebral hemorrhage and a sand bag would leave no outward traces of having been applied.

Doctor Bolber's sandbag technique proved just as successful as he predicted it would be. For three solid years, from 1934 to 1937, Paul and Little Herman Petrillo, working stealthily under the faith healer's supervision, traveled throughout the Quaker City, respectively romancing wives and sand-bagging sleeping husbands. And by now, a new twist had been added. With the assistance of The Witch in North Philly, some of the recent widows were now being primped for remarriage... with the intention of taking out new insurance policies on their new husbands and then arranging for their lucrative demise.

The Witch proved to be a most valuable scout for the satanic doctor.

By January of 1937, some five years after Mrs. Anthony Giacobbe had first appeared in Doctor Bolber's crummy office asking for some saltpeter for her errant spouse, the faith healer had given the nod for an estimated fifty killings. By now Bolber's faded-red brick home at the corner of Ninth Street and Moyamensing Avenue had taken on a new look by an expensive mid-town decorating outfit.

The Petrillo boys were also doing splendidly at the bank and chasing around town in expensive automobiles. The Witch, who was a baseball fan devoted to the fortunes of the local Philadelphia Athletics, was to be seen regularly in a field box at Shibe Park, eating hot dogs by the half dozen, spilling mustard on expensive satin dresses, and invoking the wrath of the nether regions on the players of visiting clubs.

Everybody was fat and rich. But were they happy? You're damned right they were!

So far as the Philadelphia Police Department went, Doctor Bolber might very well have still been sitting there in his office in South Philly for several decades beyond the Thirties, giving the lethal nod to the Petrillo boys. Only one cop in the entire department—a smart and honest dick by the name of Sam Ricardo—got a whiff of what was going on.

Ricardo, like Doctor Bolber, was a fellow who kept an ear to the ground. Thus, in the early months of 1937, he heard the first faint rumbles of a murder-for-insurance ring at work. Ricardo didn't hear any names, just that there were, and

had been for some time, some not-so-brotherly goings on in the City of Brotherly Love.

Detective Ricardo went to his superiors and asked to be assigned to investigate the rumors he had heard. His superiors looked at Ricardo as if the man were not quite bright. So Ricardo was assigned to some pedestrian investigations while Doctor Bolber continued on his satanic way.

It was in a jail house, of all places, where something developed that was, in the final analysis, to trip up Doctor Bolber. There was a fellow named George Meyer, not a bad soul, who was doing a stretch in a workhouse for a minor offense. Meyer put his time in durance vile to good advantage by inventing a cheap cleaning fluid. So when he was about to get out of the can in the spring of 1937, he asked a fellow con if the con knew of anybody on the outside who might be able to finance the cleaning fluid so that George Meyer could get it on the market and make a legal living. Meyer also had an upholstery business.

"Yeah," said the fellow con. "Look up a guy by the name of Herman Petrillo. He's got all kinds of dough."

Meyer went and met with Petrillo. Little Herman only half listened as George Meyer expounded the prospects for his cleaning fluid.

"I ain't inarrested in nothin' like that," said Little Herman. "But tell you what. You go out and dig up a guy we can get insurance on and knock off and I'll cut you in on it."

George Meyer asked for more details. Little Herman, thinking he was safe talking to a recently released convict, supplied the details. Meyer, still playing it straight, said he'd think it over. Meyer, who wanted no part of a return to incarceration, went to the police where eventually he met with Detective Ricardo. Riccardo, seeing a winning hand when he was dealt one, moved Meyer to the office of the U.S. Secret Service, the federal agency that investigates counterfeiting, and offer them his assistance. Ricardo knew Petrillo was a counterfeiter and guessed the feds might be interested in what George Meyer had to say.

They were.

Three months earlier, a man named Ferdinando Alfonsi, 38, had died under mysterious circumstances. A bright up-and-coming assistant district attorney named Vincent McDevitt, who would later become the D.A., himself, had drawn the case from his boss, amidst rumors about various murder-for-profit cases in Philadelphia. But the investigation had gone nowhere. But now, acting on Meyer's snitch, a Secret Service agent, known only as Agent Landvoight, working undercover under an alias, visited the District Attorney's office and soon landed in the office of McDevitt.

Landvoight told McDevitt that he had an informer, Meyer, who had told him of a group of men and women based in Philadelphia who ran a murder ring to collect insurance money. Involved in the ring was one Herman Petrillo. Landvoight was already familiar with Petrillo. He had tried for years to arrest him for counterfeiting, but every time the authorities served a warrant Petrillo outfoxed them.

Meyer had told Landvoight that Petrillo had offered him $500 in legal tender and $2,500 in counterfeit bills, if Meyer could organize a hit on a man named Ferdinando Alfonsi. He then handed him an 18-inch piece of pipe.

“Do it in his home,” Petrillo said. “Bash him with the pipe. Then carry him up the steps and throw him down. It’ll look like an accident. Got it?”

Meyer had no intention of carrying out the crime, but played along hoping that Petrillo would offer money. Petrillo would not pony up a nickel up front. In the end, Meyer scored some cash by selling the information to the Secret Service.

Understandably, Landvoight was more interested in the counterfeit bills than he was in any murder conspiracy. He offered to keep on paying Meyer if he would continue to play along with Petrillo’s scheme. The down and out businessman had little choice and reluctantly agreed.

Agent Landvoight arranged for Stanley Phillips, a street-wise agent of the Secret Service, to work with Meyer. On August 1, 1938, Meyer and Phillips met with Herman Petrillo at a local diner. Petrillo was uncomfortable discussing the plans in public, so the three men went out to the street and sat in his car. Meyer introduced Phillips as Johnny Phillips, a friend of his that was fresh out of prison after serving time for murder.

Herman Petrillo liked the pedigree. The conversation soon turned to Alfonsi. He suggested that they take him to the Jersey shore, drown him and make it look like an accident. Phillips was not interested in the murder plot but wanted to get his hands on some of Petrillo’s counterfeits. So he suggested that Petrillo give them some money to buy a car. They could use the car to run him over and leave his body in the road. Petrillo liked the idea, but suggested they steal a car, rather than buy one. There it remained for three weeks. Then the men met again at a diner on Thayer Street. Petrillo still did not want to give the men money to buy a car but offered to sell them some bogus currency.

Petrillo pulled out a counterfeit five. Phillips was impressed with the engraving and agreed to buy $200 worth of the bogus bills. Petrillo said he needed two weeks to deliver.

Phillips was pleased and so was his boss, Landvoight. After years of undercover work, they were now close to busting Petrillo. But when two weeks went by with no further communication, Phillips began to worry that Petrillo might have flown the coop. He asked. Meyer to try and find out what was going on. Petrillo had vanished.

Meyer decided to first check on Ferdinando Alfonsi, the man Petrillo wanted dead. He drove to the man’s home. A middle-aged woman opened the door and informed him that her husband was very ill and could not get out of bed. As quickly and politely as he could, Meyer took off.

Agent Phillips felt ill when Meyer explained the situation. They had failed to protect the prospective victim. Phillips called together several other agents and a small posse, posing as insurance representatives, went to check on Alfonsi’s condition. When they went inside his home, they were shocked. His pupils were bulging and he could neither move nor speak. The agents then contacted the Philadelphia police. Alfonsi was moved to a hospital.

On the same day, Petrillo contacted Meyer and told him he had the counterfeits. A meeting was arranged at a nearby bus stop. Meyer and Phillips met him there. Petrillo gave the man an envelope, which contained 40 counterfeit five-dollar bills.

Philips was happy to finally get the money, but was also voiced interest about Alfonsi. “You still want that guy killed?” Phillips asked. Petrillo laughed.

“Don’t worry about it,” He said. “He’s in the hospital and he ain’t coming out.”

In the hospital, Philadelphia investigators ordered a urine specimen from Alfonsi’s doctors, which later revealed large quantities of arsenic. So now the case bounced back to Vincent McDevitt, the district attorney. McDevitt had the cops arrest Petrillo on charges of attempted murder. But when Alfonsi died a few weeks later, the prosecution hit the jackpot. The charge was upgraded to homicide.

Needless to say, the arrest of Petrillo was all over the front pages of the Philly papers. Among those who saw Little Herman’s picture in the papers was the Prudential insurance doctor who, after having examined Little Herman as Lorenzo the roofer, had thought the fellow looked somehow familiar when he later turned up as Petrino the janitor.

So the wise doctor also went to McDevitt. The A.D.A. found some detectives he could trust and put the wives of the roofer and the janitor on the griddle. Thus they found out about Paul Petrillo, the wolf, who figured large in the whole operation in more ways than one.

When Vincent McDevitt questioned Herman Petrillo, he was skeptical that he would walk away with anything he could use. After all, this was the same man that the Secret Service had worked for so many years to arrest. But a surprising thing happened. Petrillo sang like a canary, almost proud of his life’s work. He provided the D.A.’s office with a mind-boggling list of victims and conspirators, ratting out his cousin, Paul Petrillo, along with Morris Bolber, as the masterminds behind the entire operation. Petrillo said that all but three of the victims had been killed with arsenic. He also recounted how the arsenic was often passed off to a victim as a “love potion,” complete with *fattura* or “hexing” qualities drawn from Italian folklore.

But McDevitt’s office now had the problem of proving Petrillo’s allegations. The only way they could get solid proof would be to exhume every victim. McDevitt already had Ferdinando Alfonsi’s medical records and decided to proceed with that case. He knew that he could always file other charges later.

The Petrillo cousins, knowing the law finally had them, began to sing in unison. Stories about Doctor Bolber, the faith healer, and the Witch emerged from the vocalizing. The Witch was arrested at her home before she could grab her broomstick and beat it. She began to talk, too. But when the cops went around to the brick house on the corner of Moyamensing Avenue and Ninth Street. Doctor Bolber had vanished. It was months before the law caught up with the doctor in Brooklyn, New York running a delicatessen.

MAY 12, 1939

13 Arraigned In Extensive Poison Case

'Hexing' Tales Heard As Police Prepare For Early Mass Trials

SEVEN ARE WIDOWS OF MEN WHO DIED

One Woman Claims She Gave Husband Only 'Love Potion'

Mrs. Millie Giacobbe

Carina Favato

Then Bolber, too, decided to sing. Everybody was singing his own tune, to save the flesh around his vocal chords. A whole raft of faithless wives were caught in a dragnet as a result of the confessions of the master plotter and his associates.

Herman Petrillo's trial began on March 13, 1939 in Philadelphia's City Hall. The presiding judge, Harry McDevitt, no relation to the D.A. Vincent McDevitt, was a defense attorney's worst nightmare. The judge was known in legal circles as "Hanging Harry." Petrillo's lawyer, Milton Leidner, was a close friend of the judge, but the defense attorney did not expect any leniency.

During the trial, Herman Petrillo didn't offer much of a defense, other than to claim that Bolber, the faith healer, had mesmerized him with "the evil eye" and forced him to do all that bad stuff. The jury wasn't buying it and neither was Hanging Harry.

On March 21, 1939, the jury foreman, 42-year-old Margaret Skeen, read the verdict to the court. Guilty, with a recommendation for death, she announced.

"You lousy bitch," Petrillo snarled as he lunged toward the jury foreman. However, guards quickly restrained him and the judge banged his gavel in an attempt to bring order back to the courtroom. When the courtroom settled down, Judge McDevitt congratulated the jurors.

"You can see how mean and vicious this man is," he told the jurors. "You now realize that was the only verdict you could have returned." He then sentenced Herman Petrillo to die in Pennsylvania's electric chair. Following the verdict, defense attorney Leidner stood up and apologized to the court.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wouldn't have defended this man had I known he was such scum."

Further inquiry would follow. Upon the conclusion of the trial, investigators announced that 70 bodies would be exhumed and examined for signs of arsenic.

But Little Herman wasn't finished. In an effort to escape the electric chair, he agreed to cooperate with the prosecution. By May 21, 1939, 21 more arrests were made in connection with the poison ring. As the investigation continued, detectives discovered that Herman Petrillo and Bolber also had a matrimonial agency, which was apparently created in order to find new husbands for widows of their victims. Upon finding a new mate, the recent widows would marry and then take out life insurance policies on their new spouses. Afterwards, it was up to the members of the ring to do away with the insured and collect the money.

On May 25, 1939, Morris Bolber pled guilty to murder, possibly hoping that his plea would earn him a lesser sentence. His plan worked and he was eventually sentenced to life imprisonment. A few months later, in September 1939, Paul Petrillo also pled guilty.

Nevertheless, Paul was not quite as nimble as Bolber and was sentenced to die in the electric chair. But the last major player in the poison ring, the Witch, Maria Favato, also drew a life sentence. In the end, 13 men and women besides Bolber and the Petrillos were either convicted of or pled guilty to first-degree murder. All of these convicted killers served long sentences, the shortest being not less than 14 years in prison.

Paul Petrillo died in the electric chair in April 1941.

Seven months later, Herman Petrillo, who was involved in maybe a hundred murders, died like a coward. When his rubbery legs failed him, guards dragged the weeping man to the death chamber, forced him into the chair and forcibly bent his arms in order to strap him in. He made several attempts to stand up and had to be held in place while other guards fastened the straps.

"Gentlemen, you don't want to see an innocent man die!" he cried. "Give me a chance to prove my innocence. I want to see the governor."

They didn't and turned on the juice.

Thirteen years later, on February 15, 1954, Morris Bolber died of natural causes while awaiting his third parole petition. The Witch got off with life in prison, but also died within prison walls. Some of the wives went to prison; others got off for testifying for the state against Bolber, the Petrillo cousins and the Witch. The last of these lovely ladies passed away in the 1960's, bringing to an end the episode that is still known in South Philadelphia as "Arsenic Incorporated."