

OUCH! A Cut-throat Job at a Cut Price



Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney in *Smart Money* (1931)

by Reg Green

"You double-crossing rat, I'll get you for this!"

Like Jimmy Cagney shoving a half grapefruit in a dame's face, this fragment of dialogue stood for an entire class of gangster movies and it posed a dilemma that I've puzzled over ever since: how to guard against the treachery of one of the gang ruining the perfect crime.

A few weeks ago working out a solution became urgent as I took a walk with a hired killer down Noir Alley, the Turner Classic Movie program of black and white movies that adds zest to Saturday nights. That week the way both sides protected

themselves against a doublecross was standard: half the payment now, half when the corpse turned up dead. It seems foolproof but, in fact, it's as full of holes as the victim.

Put yourself in the killer's shoes. Having got what they wanted, what's to prevent the mob from telling you to get lost when you turn up with an IOU for the second installment? They're not going to lose any sleep worrying that you might file a complaint at police headquarters that you've received only half the going rate for bumping off a prominent citizen.

And think, with equal sympathy, of the paymasters: if you've hired the kind of man willing to take big risks (and in that line of work, why would he be anything else?) wouldn't you worry that he might take the first payment, skip town, buy himself a business somewhere using his skills – cement mixing, perhaps – and avoid the tasteless business of killing someone he has no personal animosity toward?

None of this deception would be necessary if the financial arrangements were laid out more clearly for clients who want to get a dirty job done while they continue to present an impeccable public appearance. The problem of finding such arrangements kept bothering me until just last week when I found the answer where I should have looked in the first place: a politician's office.

The clue was in an old newspaper article I came across by Jimmy Breslin of the NY Herald Tribune, often described as the best newspaper columnist of his time. In a tight New York primary, he reported, a local boss who lived near the waterfront offered to deliver a block of votes for the incumbent in return for a pair of sea boots for each vote. Once again the formula was half to be delivered before the primary, half afterward.

But this time the incumbent was quite confident that, having made the first delivery, the votes would be cast as promised.

How so? Because all the boots he delivered in the first payment were for the left foot.