

ATOM BOY

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EText from pulpgen.com

Thrilling Detective
, April 1947

Retired and rustivating Pete McLean, former policeman, sees something new in crime-fighting in a rural setting!

MY NAME'S Pete McLean, and I've been mixed up in a few gunfights in my time as a member of the police force in a big city. But when a fellow gets to be seventy, even though he's still hale and hearty, the idea of taking things easy is pretty attractive.

So I retired and brought my granddaughter Effie along to this quiet little Vermont place. Effie, who is twenty-three, was married at twenty, and after about a year she had to call it quits. After her divorce, she came back to me; so she was in the mood, too, for peace and quiet.

You can rusticate grand up here with the Green Mountains all around. If that's what you want. It came hard for me, at first. You know, the captain of a precinct in a big city gets used to action.

The nearest village is Hewlett Corners, hidden from us behind a hill. There's nothing here but woods, a field, a brook, and an undulating white stretch of highway with our little house beside it. It didn't take me long to discover that farming wasn't in my line. I had to do something, so this being one of the main highways through Rutland, I put in a little gas station. The new cars were all coming in now; there was quite a bit of traffic and I did nicely.

It was a Saturday, about sundown. Hot as blazes. It had been a busy afternoon and I was glad when it began to slacken up a bit. I was seated on a stool in front of the little service room behind the gas pump. The house is about a hundred feet to one side, with a white picket fence and tiny garden between it and the road. Effie was there, getting supper.

A car came around a curve from the direction of Hewlett Corners. It slackened, turned into the driveway and pulled up in front of me. It was a big open car, one of the flashy kind, with a New York tag. The back seat was empty; three young fellows sat in front.

"Hiya, grandpop," the driver said.

"What'll you have?" I asked, getting up.

“Eight gallons. Maybe she'll take ten.”

All three of them got out and looked around. There's plenty of their kind in a big city. You know, the slick-haired, wise-guy type, who think they know everything. One of them stood near me at the pump and lighted a cigarette.

“Take it easy,” I said. “Watch it.”

He grinned, but I didn't.

“Okay, grandpop,” he said. He tossed it away.

I gave them eight gallons, checked their oil and tires, and filled the radiator. The driver, a dark-haired, sallow fellow without much chin, handed me a ten-dollar bill. I'd spotted them for the kind that inspires you to give a second look at their money to be sure it isn't phony. This picture of Hamilton looked okay. The slim, smallish driver and one of his companions followed me in to the cash register. This other fellow was a husky lad with a dished-in nose.

Maybe premonitions have some sense to them. Anyway, the big one blocked the doorway and the other stood close beside me. As I opened the register, I had an uneasy feeling that it was too bad there was so much cash in it. I saw the rat-faced fellow dart a look over my shoulder at the stack of tens and a couple of twenties I had. Then another car sounded outside. Maybe nothing would have happened at all; or maybe that car came just in time. Anyway, the fellow in the doorway moved out. I closed the register, handed over the change, and the rat-faced youth and I went outside.

“Nice place you got here, grandpop,” he said. “You do pretty well, eh?”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Well, see you again, boys. Have a good trip.”

The car that had come up had paused but hadn't turned in. Evidently the people in it had changed their mind, for now they were driving off.

The big, ugly fellow had gotten into the front seat of the open car.

“Come on, George,” he called. “Let's get goin'.”

But George lingered. “You open late Saturdays?” he wanted to know.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Sometimes not.”

He nodded and climbed in back of the wheel.

“Come on, Pete,” he called.

Pete, the third one, was a blond fellow in a flashy checked suit and sport shirt. He had been standing over by the picket fence gazing at the house. He turned and came to the car.

“What's that you got?” he asked. “A shop?”

Effie had a sign that maple sugar and syrup were for sale. And from a couple of elderly spinsters in

Hewlett Corners, she got some candlewick bedspreads on consignment. A few of them were hanging now over the porch railing.

“A shop?” I said. “Well, sort of.”

“Girl in there,” the checked-suit fellow said as he climbed in beside the others. “Just you two here? Lot of work for you, ain't it, grandpop?”

I skipped it. They started up their motor, and as Effie came out on the verandah, one of them yelled, “Hiya, sister.” Then they were gone.

Well, that was that. Hindsight is easy, but I must say that at the time I didn't think much about it.

And the next day young Albert Carter came to live with us. Which was quite an event, believe me.

It was a hot Sunday morning, and there wasn't much traffic. Effie was in the kitchen while I loafed on the verandah. A tall, rather thin figure came trudging along the highway from the direction of Little Creek Junction. He was carrying two suitcases, a small, battered leather one and a large, square box-like affair, and he looked dusty, hot and tired.

Seeing me on the porch, he waved a friendly greeting. Then at the gate he hesitated, pushed it open and came up the path.

“Good morning,” he said cheerily.

He put his suitcases down and stood between them, fanning his flushed face with his hat and pushing his curly brown hair back from his wet forehead. He wasn't the husky type; he looked rather studious. I guessed he was twenty-eight or thirty. But he was certainly tired and uncomfortable, although you couldn't tell it by the expression on his face. He was smiling as though everything in the world was just right. That smile was contagious. I grinned.

“Hello,” I said.

He motioned vaguely toward where the highway curves around the hill.

“I hope there's a town that way,” he said. “It's four miles the other way.”

“Hewlett Corners,” I said. “About a dozen houses, if you call that a town.”

He was hitchhiking to Rutland, he told me.

“I thought I was all set,” he said. “But the fellow petered out on me.” He gestured toward Little Creek Junction. “I had to desert him—he turned south at the crossroads back there.”

Effie had heard our voices and came to the verandah door, where she stood wiping her hands on her apron. My granddaughter is good-looking, if I do say it myself—trim and pretty, with her tousled brown hair framing her oval face. She took one look at this young fellow and he took one look at her. That seemed to be enough. Anyway, after that I wasn't exactly in charge of things.

“Why, hello,” he said brightly, with that winning smile.

“Hello,” Effie said. She came out beside me and took another look at him. “Won’t you come up and rest a while. You look so tired—”

He smiled at me, with a sort of deferential questioning to be sure it was all right with me. You couldn’t help liking this fellow.

“Get him a glass of water, Effie,” I said. “Or maybe you’ve got a bottle of pop?”

Well, that’s how we met Albert Carter; and the upshot was, I hired him to help me around the place. It promised to work out fine, too.

There wasn’t much to tell about himself, aside from the fact that he had no family and was a college graduate. He’d been wounded in the service, and was hospitalized for quite a while so that now he wasn’t too strong. Farming was Greek to him, and he didn’t know the first thing about servicing an automobile. After I taught him all I knew, he was as good as me. Better, in one way. That grin of his charmed the customers into wanting all the gas and oil their cars would carry. And by Tuesday he was talking them into buying maple sugar and candlewick spreads.

Effie and I hadn’t realized how lonely we were. Having Bert around brought a lot of cheer to the place which we hadn’t known we needed. But Bert had one peculiarity that wasn’t so good, and we found out about it that first Sunday evening. Our first intimation was a weird smell that drifted down from his attic room. I rushed up and found Bert with test tubes, chemicals and what-not spread all around. There was a little explosion just as I got there.

“Well, great heavens,” I said.

“It’s okay,” he said with a laugh. “I hoped it would do that.”

It seems Bert was a nut on chemistry. He’d been a research chemist with the Bureau of Standards in Washington when the war broke. He’d quit it, and enlisted. Now he was trying to land a job with some big chemical company. Meanwhile, he couldn’t let the stuff alone. Whenever his work with me was done, up to the attic he’d go. Our house sometimes smelled like a glue factory. Sometimes, at night, strange red, green and pink glows would show on the attic stairs. The electric fuses of the house wiring blew out occasionally. And there were frequent explosions.

Effie thought it was wonderful, so my feeble protests didn’t make much impression. But after one big blast, which by luck didn’t set the house on fire, I dashed up to Bert.

“Hey, listen,” I yelled, “what’s the idea? Do you do this for fun?”

“Sure,” he said. “Partly. I’m just experimenting, you know. It is fun, and there’s always a chance I might fall into something important.”

“You’re not trying to improve the atom bomb by any chance, are you?”

“No,” he laughed. “Nothing like that. Besides, the atom bomb is a problem of physics, not chemistry.”

I might have gotten used to Bert’s chemistry, if he’d kept it in the attic. But by Wednesday or Thursday of that same week, he began to spread it out. Effie found her teakettle steaming with no fire under it. No water in it either, for that matter, just some fool chemical which was evaporating into a white vapor. And at supper that night he poured me a glass of water which turned a sickly green in my glass. Then he

poured one for the delighted Effie. Only hers didn't turn green, it blazed up with fire.

Effie was thrilled. "However did you do that?" she said. "Bert, you're so clever—"

He winked at me. "Magic," he said to Effie. And to me: "Nothing at all but a little sliver of white metallic sodium, which perfectly naturally— from the chemical point of view, that is—blazes when it gets wet. But don't tell her. I want her to think I'm smart."

"Stop that stuff," I said, "before somebody gets killed around here."

It sure gave you an uneasy feeling being around Bert, who had heaven knows what in his pocket. I began to be afraid to light my pipe for fear snakes would come out of it.

Anyway, Saturday came, just a week after those three crooks had stopped and looked us over. I hadn't thought of them, but now somehow, just at sundown, memory of them popped into my head. Looking back to it, I could see how smoothly they had done everything, as though they had planned it ahead of time. One had moved over toward the house, to watch the road and to make sure nobody came out of the house. One of the others had blocked the little doorway of the service station room. A third had followed me to the cash register. They hadn't pulled anything, but they certainly had the proper setup, smooth as silk.

Then I shrugged away the thoughts. You can't spend your time thinking about what might have happened, but didn't. I got busy with two or three cars arriving at once, and forgot it.

After supper, as darkness came, things slackened. It had been a red-hot day, one of those breathless, oppressive days when you wished for a good snappy thunderstorm to clear things up. Sure enough, in mid-evening, there were distant clouds coming and a bit of wind that made the heat more comfortable. Between cars, I sat on the verandah.

Bert and Effie were in the kitchen, doing the dishes. I could hear them laughing. They were getting along famously. Bert, as it happened, had had an experience about like Effie's. He'd left his young bride and gone to war; and soon after he got back he found that all was not well. It wasn't Bert's style to be violent or dramatic. He just quietly told the lady off and got a divorce.

"Couldn't be helped, I guess," he told Effie and me. "Anyway, if at first you don't succeed—get what I mean? He flung Effie a glance, not brash because it had his queer sort of shyness mixed up in it. Effie had blushed.

They could have been talking like that now, out in the kitchen. Two cars came, but I didn't bother to call Bert; I handled them myself. After all, even at seventy you can remember when you were young.

At ten o'clock I joined Effie and Bert on the verandah. There hadn't been a car for quite a while.

"Guess we might as well close up," I said.

It had been a good day; a rush since before noon. There was quite a bit of cash in the register.

We waited till eleven. Nothing more doing.

"Okay," I said. "Late enough."

"I'll help you," Bert said.

We turned off the electric sign at the roadside. Effie was with us. With the big sign off, the darkness enveloped us. There was just a glow of light from the hall of the house, slanting out onto the verandah; and a glow from inside the little service station room. It was a black night now; no moon, no stars, just sullen-looking clouds overhead and the feel of rain in the air.

"I'll get the cash," I said. I had a little safe in the house where I kept it at night.

I was just starting for the register, when suddenly there was the sound of a car, the motor of it starting up near at hand. In a few seconds it came around the bend—two yellow headlights and a white searchlight at the side. The searchlight beam caught me, focused on me and clung. It all happened amazingly quickly. I had no time to do anything. With me standing there in the glare, the car came up and stopped with a shuddering grind of brakes, mingled with a man's voice:

"Okay, grandpop, stand still if you don't want to get shot."

Effie was near me, in the glare. She let out a little cry.

"Take it easy!" I murmured. "Stand still!"

I could see vaguely that it was a big open car with four men in it. Three of them leaped out, leaving one behind the wheel.

"Put them lights out," somebody growled.

The car lights went off. But there was still enough light for me to see that two of the men had Effie and me covered with leveled automatics. The men weren't masked, but their faces were just dim white ovals in the darkness.

"Make it fast," the man behind the wheel said softly. He sounded nervous, and his voice seemed familiar.

Then I caught a glimpse of his profile and recognized the rat-faced, weak-chinned fellow who had driven the car a week ago. And I saw that one of the men who had his gun on Effie and me was a big bruiser in a checked suit.

It was the same outfit, only now there were four of them. The new one was in front of me, a squat, thick little man, evidently much older. Then I got the idea. Those three young cubs hadn't been equipped for a holdup last week. But they'd looked the ground over, and now they'd brought their leader back with them. Parked nearby, and when we put the lights out to close up, they jumped us.

Effie and I were standing together with our hands over our heads. Then the third man saw Bert, who was closer to the car. Bert had his hands up, too, perfectly docile. The third bandit pounced on him, shoving a gun into his ribs.

"Make it snappy," the fellow behind the wheel called again. "Make grandpop give you the cash an' let's get out of here."

"Shut up," the squat man growled. "I'm givin' orders." He lined the three of us up. "This won't take a minute," he chuckled.

It didn't. The man in the checked suit and his companion held us, while the squat little man darted in and emptied the cash register. I had a gun in the table drawer there. In a way I was glad I couldn't get to it. One gun against three, especially in the open, only gets you into trouble. Then the bandit found it; he chuckled again and shoved it into his pocket.

In a few seconds, with all my cash stowed away on him, he came darting out again.

"Okay," he said softly. "You boys were right. Fair enough."

"Maybe the girl's got some jewelry on her," the man in the checked suit suggested.

"You let her alone!" Bert growled suddenly. "So help me, if you want to start anything—"

What I could see of Bert's grim, tense face suggested that he might have forgotten their guns and taken a poke at them if they'd come near Effie.

"Easy!" I warned. "Let it ride, Bert."

One of the young crooks laughed. "Grandpop's right. Safety first."

All that grandpop stuff riled me. After all, I'm not senile.

"Listen, you young squirt," I said, "I've had many a one like you sniveling in front of me with the guts scared out of him. Put away that gun and I'll take you on with my fists, man to man."

Maybe I could have done it, too, but I didn't get the chance. They kept us covered as they backed toward their car, turned and jumped into it. Then the headlights flashed on and the car roared away, around the bend in the direction of Hewlett Corners. In a few seconds they were gone.

"Well I'll be darned," I said.

"Where's the nearest police?" Bert asked. "Let's give 'em a ring. Not Hewlett Corners?"

"No, no." Hewlett Corners had nothing. "Call Little Creek Junction."

Captain MacKenzie made the four miles in about six minutes, with two cars and five of his men.

"Maybe that open car those fellows have isn't too fast," Bert suggested.

If we could catch them before they got to the White Notch crossroads—that's twenty miles. But from there, they could go anywhere. I got in beside Mac, in the smaller car, with Bert and Effie in the rear. It was beginning to rain, and all I could see was the blur of our headlights on the road.

That little car was speedy. It bucked and jumped like a scared jackrabbit. I never even saw Hewlett Corners, as we went by. But fast as we were, Mac's big car with his armed men, was faster. It drew steadily away from us.

From the darkness of the back seat, Bert murmured, "Good luck for us. Might be."

“Good luck?” I said. “Will be, if Mac doesn't wreck us, driving like this.”

“I wasn't thinking of that,” Bert said. “Those bandits—”

He didn't get any further than that.

“Listen!” Mac said tensely. “Gunshots! Darned if it isn't!”

It did seem that far ahead of us in the murk there was the sound of two or three shots. Then a silence. Then a couple more. We topped a rise. Down another slope, half a mile ahead of us the bandit car had pulled off to one side of the road, and the tonneau was blazing.

“We got 'em!” Mac murmured.

Mac's big car had pulled up a hundred yards this side of the bandits. The bandits were out on the road, ducking down behind their blazing machine with Mac's men firing at them. As we lurched down the hill, there was another exchange. We could see the stabbing bursts of flame, and see Mac's men darting forward.

It was all over by the time we got there.

“Swell,” Mac said, as his men herded the sullen crooks forward in the rain. The older one showed now to be a flat-nosed fellow about forty. I never saw an uglier-looking customer. His right arm was hanging limp where one of Mac's men had winged him. His pockets yielded all my cash, which was very nice. The three younger ones weren't hurt, they were just sullen and scared. I've seen plenty of young crooks like that. Too bad they don't get scared ahead of time.

“Shove 'em into the big car,” Mac ordered. “Keep away from that bus of theirs. Its tank could explode any minute.”

There was still some fire in the back seat of the big car.

“Now however in the world did they manage to get themselves on fire like that?” Mac murmured.

In the rainy murk I heard Bert chuckle. And when I gazed at him, he winked.

“I'm glad it rained,” Bert said.

Those little sticks of white metallic sodium! He'd had some in his pockets, tossed them into the back of the open car when it first dashed up in the darkness, with the bandits tumbling out of it!

Effie and Bert are engaged to be married now. Bert still putters with his chemicals. One explosion, last evening, was so bad, even Bert was surprised. Maybe some time he'll finish us all up by discovering something even nastier than the atomic bomb.

I hope not.

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