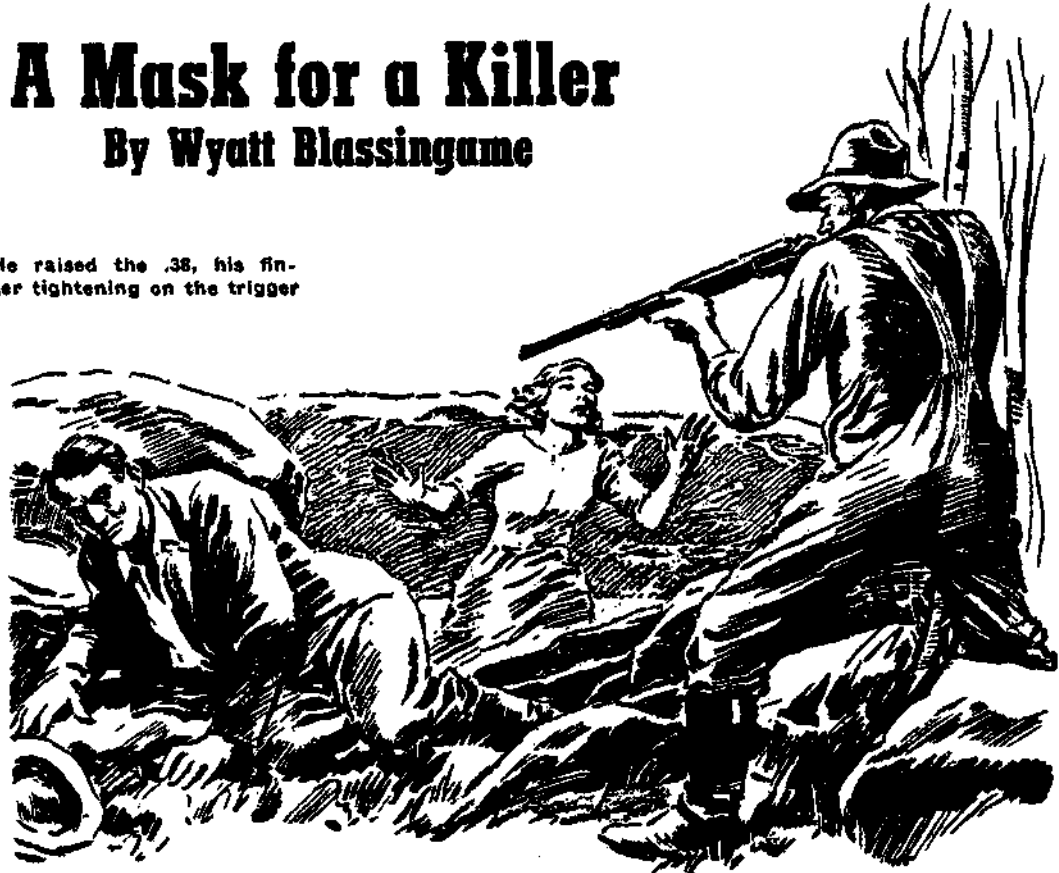


# A Mask for a Killer

By Wyatt Blassingame

He raised the .38, his finger tightening on the trigger



*Bob Mason had known in advance the chances he was taking. Somewhere in these hills was The Masked Bandit—but there, too, was the girl, Mazie, who seemed to matter more*

**H**E WENT out of the cabin and he emerged into moonlight again where the sleek face of the rock jutted out from the mountainside, overhanging the tops of the trees a thousand feet below.

He stood there, and, with hands that were carefully steady, he rolled a cigarette and lit it.

He had known when he came to these mountains the chances of coming out alive would be slim, stacked against him, and he had accepted that.

But he had not known he would fall in love. In Washington they had not warned against that.

It was a man the newspapers sometimes called "The Masked Bandit," sometimes

"Jesse James II," whom he had come to find. The last of the train robbers. A man misplaced in history. A ruthless figure who struck without warning, always masked and gloved, and who could fight his way out of tight places with a kind of exulting, savage joy. That was all the Government knew about him—except that he was tall, strongly built, and vanished between jobs into these wild southwestern hills.

The Chief in Washington had told Bob Mason, "Go down there and live. You're a collector of folk tales, or maybe a botanist studying the tree and plant life of the section. Live with them. Talk to them. Drink with them. Make them like you. Maybe you'll pick up something."

That was five months ago. In the five

months he had boarded with old Miz' Taylor and her niece, he had learned many things. He knew a lot of the hill people, especially the young ones. They had begun gradually to take him into their confidence, accepting him as one of them, almost. But never completely. He knew the location of two stills, which he had not reported. But he had learned nothing about The Masked Bandit.

What he had learned was that he was in love with Mazie Taylor.

He had learned this gradually, as he had learned most of the other things. For two months he had seen her going about the mountain house, quietly, busy at the cooking and cleaning, and he had scarcely noticed her. A slim, shy girl with blue eyes and hair the color of thick cream. And then one day he had realized that she was pretty. Mazie's skin was tanned, but it was smooth and flawless. Her nose was straight and quiline. He had watched her more attentively after that.

Even so, no ideas that he was in love with her occurred to him. Until the night down at old man Moorehead's store when he was drinking corn with some of the young men and heard Pete Tisdale say he was going to marry Mazie, or run her to death trying. The sudden furious anger he felt surprised him. After that he began to understand. But he had never said it aloud, not to Mazie, or even to himself.

HE took the cigarette out of his mouth now, and spat on the glowing tip, dropped it on the rock and stepped on it—he had learned to be careful with fires. He wondered what Mazie would say if she knew why he was here, who he was. Federal agents had come into these hills before. Some of them had never returned.

He tried to imagine how Mazie would look on Pennsylvania Avenue wearing that loose-fitting cotton dress, and barefooted—and he tried a laugh that wouldn't come. It wasn't funny at all.

He went back to the house.

The first thing he saw when he lit the lamp in his room was the open suitcase

under his bed. It had been closed when he went out. He was sure of that. A cold feeling crawled along his spine.

He went over and pulled out the bag. It was almost empty, because most of his clothes were in the ancient wardrobe against the wall. A few pairs of socks, a few neckties orderly arranged. He touched the place where the lining was loose. He could feel beneath it the small gold badge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Then he heard the sound in the doorway and he spun about.

Mazie stood there, holding one of his shirts.

Neither of them moved for a moment. Her face seemed paler than usual, her eyes larger. After that first instant she did not look directly at him. There was a kind of odd stiffness about her.

She said, still without looking at him, "I was looking for the shirt you were wearing this morning. It needed mending. I fixed it for you."

"Thanks," he said.

She turned and went out again.

He sat on the side of his bed and told himself it was absurd to be alarmed. She had merely opened his bag thinking the soiled shirt might be there—and, in fact, he had put it there. There was almost no chance that she had seen the badge. And yet—there was that possibility. An accidental touch of the fingers, the lining tangled with the shirt and pulling backward— He wanted to be sure.

She was standing on the front porch, staring out into the moonlit night. It was after nine o'clock, late for her to be awake, and old Miz' Taylor had been in bed for two hours.

"A beautiful night," Bob Mason said, and stood beside Mazie at the railing. It was all he could manage to say.

Mazie did not look at him and did not answer.

The wind carried that cool green smell of spring. It made a whispering in the oaks and it made the shadows on the clean-swept yard seem to tremble and quiver.

"You shouldn't have bothered with mending my shirt," Bob Mason said, finally.

"Somebody has to do it for you, while you're here."

He never knew whether he meant to, or not. His hand touched hers on the banister rail. His fingers closed around hers. He had never touched her before, except by accident. She turned slowly, very slowly, and looked up at him. Her face was pale in the shadows. And then he kissed her, hard, and, in the moment while her lips were against his, he lost track of time and what he had come here for; he was conscious of nothing but the warm, living presence of the girl.

She pulled back away from him. When he saw her face, he was shocked. It might have been made of frozen tallow. Her mouth was twisted, but no sound came from it. She turned and vanished into the house.

For a brief second, just as the darkness swallowed her, he thought he heard a kind of muffled sob, a gasp of repressed agony; but the thought was gone as quickly as it had come, as completely as the figure of the girl had vanished into the dark night.

Something moved beyond the yard. A shadow materialized and moved toward him through the spotted darkness.

It was Sam Henry, Mazie's cousin. Sam Henry lived by himself a mile, or so, beyond Coon Creek. He didn't try to farm, as most of the hill people did; there wasn't even a cleared field within three miles of his cabin. He hunted and fished and trapped a little in the winter, and made his own whiskey, and what else he did nobody knew. He was a tall, dark man with the eyes of a hawk and an air of violent but controlled restlessness about him. He had a way of moving that was like a hunting mountain cat, easy and swift and silent. He was related to Mazie on his mother's side; there was some whispered talk about who his father had been, but Mason had never been able to learn the story.

He said, "I thought I seen Mazie out here a minute ago."

"She just went in."

Sam Henry was taller than Mason. He had a rifle in the crook of his right elbow, the muzzle pointing forward and down, toward Mason's feet. Mason had seen him shoot a wild turkey once, shifting the rifle from that position so swiftly that the movement was almost invisible. Moonlight touched on the dark, sharp planes of his face. He said, "Ain't you been here a might long time, Mr. Mason?"

"I like it here," Mason said.

"I ain't seen you around pulling any leaves off the trees and bushes in quite a spell."

"I'm classifying those I've already gathered," Mason's voice was smooth, yet hard. His gaze met that of the other man squarely, but he had the weird impression that this man, like the animals he lived with, could see in the dark.

"Pulling leaves offa bushes is a mighty funny way to make a living," Sam Henry said. He seemed to speak more to himself than to Mason. He stood with his head tilted slightly to one side, listening, poised. Inside the house there was only silence. There was no sound anywhere, except the stir of the wind.

Sam Henry turned on his heel and went down the steps, across the yard, and into darkness.

MASON saw Mazie at breakfast the next morning, but old Miz' Taylor was there, and Mazie's eyes avoided him. There was no chance to speak to her during the day, and the few glimpses he had of her, no expression at all showed in her face. Last night took on an impression of unreality: his fear at finding the open suitcase, the kiss on the shadowed porch, the tortured look on her face afterward as she had turned away from him. And Sam Henry's brief visit. Had the mountaineer seen him kiss Mazie? Or had he been uncertain what he had seen because of the darkness?

It was after supper that night when

once more Mason found Mazie alone on the front porch. She did not look at him when he stopped beside her. He said, "Why did you run away last night?"

Her voice was very low. "You don't belong here. Why don't you go away?"

"Do you want me to go away?"

She was rigid, holding the banisters. He could hear her breathing.

"Do you want me to go away?" he said again.

"Yes. While you still can."

"What do you mean?"

She said, very slowly, looking away from him, "You don't know much about us back here in the hills. We go our own ways." After a moment she added, "If Sam Henry'd seen you kiss me, he'd a killed you."

"Why?"

"He knows you don't belong among us."

Mason stared at her. Did she believe there was a bar between them that he could not pass and would not want to pass, that kissing her could mean nothing except insult? He grew suddenly and unreasonably angry.

"All right!" he said. "If a man's got to be born here and live here all his life to look at a woman—" He broke off when he heard the voices in the yard.

"Heyo, Mr. Mason," a man said. "You wanta go coon hunting with us?"

He could see them now. There was Pete Tisdale, who had said he was going to marry Mazie, and the Barber twins, Buck and Bill. And there was Sam Henry. They stood there grouped at the foot of the steps, each with his rifle across his arm. But there were no dogs with them. They waited quietly, looking up at him, a motionless group welded together by the moonlight.

"Sure," Mason said. His voice was cold in his throat. He felt Mazie's convulsive grip on his wrist. "Sure. I'll go with you." He went around Mazie and down the steps. He didn't have a gun. He hadn't even brought one when he came here five months ago, because a gun can't be hidden as easily as a badge, and he didn't want to

arouse suspicion. One gun against four of them would have done little good anyway.

They went across the yard and into the blackness under the trees and along the path which sloped downward toward Coon Creek. He had been with all these men before; he had spent a lot of time meeting the young men and had become friendly with them.

Pete Tisdale said, "We ain't going coon hunting this time, Mr. Mason." Friendly, or not, they still called him Mister.

"No?" Bob Mason said.

Buck, the bigger of the Barber twins, laughed harshly. "Pete just said that in front of Mazie."

"Where are we going?"

"Buck'n-Bill got a gallon of corn down to the creek bank. We thought you'd like a drink."

The breath went out of Bob Mason with a long slow gasp. His knees felt weak with relief and he stumbled over a rock in the path and laughed. He had drunk with them before. He had made a point of it. Men talked freely when they drank, and Bob Mason could carry his liquor and remember what he heard.

**THEY** built a fire on the creekbank. The wood crackled as it burned and the flames threw yellow and black shadows across the faces of the men hunkered about it. They passed the gallon jug, drinking by hooking the forefinger through the ring at the jug mouth, then balancing the jug across the elbow and tilting the elbow upward. They talked, their voices growing louder, whooping with laughter at the same old stories their fathers and grandfathers had told before them.

All but Sam Henry. His black eye flashed with wild lights. When he drank it was with fierce, angry gulps. He could not sit still, but would stumble off now and then for firewood and return to huddle what he had gathered upon the blaze. He was like a caged and restless animal. His throat would work, his mouth twitch as he tried for words; and yet he could not find them. He could not take his part in

the telling of the old stories because of something within the man himself which seemed to hold him back.

This was the night Mason learned that Pete Tisdale had shot and killed a Federal Revenue Agent two years before. "With that gun he got right there in his hands!" Buck Barber yelled. In the firelight a bit of white froth shown as it slid across his chin. "I seen him!"

Later, Bob Mason sat alone on the flat shelf of rock that jutted out from the mountain side. The moon was far down in the west. The light touched the top of Old Baldy covering it with an eerie yellow tint. Mason sat there and smoked. It was not the liquor which made him feel sick deep in his stomach. He had kept quiet about the stills; that hadn't been his business. But the murder of a Federal Agent was. He couldn't ignore that. He wished he'd got the information some other way than by pretending to be a friend.

And there was Sam Henry. Sam Henry, he'd learned, left the mountains every now and then to go trade in his furs. "I go different places," Sam Henry had said. And, on at least some occasions, those trips had coincided with the raids by The Masked Bandit.

That afternoon, Mason went across Coon Creek and, circling, came in behind the cabin where Sam Henry lived alone. It was a single room log building, yardless, with blackjack and juniper bushes close-spaced around it. A triangular strip of land ran away from it, ending in a pointed cliff that overhung the valley.

For a half hour Mason watched the house, crouched behind a clump of sassafras bushes; then he straightened and went to the door and knocked, calling for Sam Henry. There was no answer (he had been fairly sure there wouldn't be) and he went inside.

He searched, careful to leave no mark of the search behind him. He searched as he had been taught, inch by inch, overlooking nothing, but he found no proof that Sam Henry was the man he wanted. For months that suspicion had been build-

ing in his mind; yet he had nothing definite, nothing that would stand up in a court. The thing he looked at longest was the shovel propped up against the wall.

He circled back across Coon Creek to old Miz' Taylor's and wrote a letter, and at twilight he set out to walk the three miles to the road where the R. F. D. driver passed each day. The letter was addressed to a man named Smith on one of the residential streets in Washington.

At the supper table he asked Mazie casually. "When does Sam Henry carry his furs to the city to trade in?"

"No special time," Mazie said. "Whenever he got enough."

"When'd he go last?"

She thought for a moment. "'Bout Christmas, I think. Long 'bout a week, or two 'fore you came."

Her eyes grew suddenly dull and hard. "What you want to know for?"

"I just wondered how many furs he gets."

"I don't know nothing about it." She got up and went into the kitchen, carrying the plates.

It was two days after this that the law officers arrived and took Pete Tisdale and Pete's rifle, and Buck Barber and drove away. They came so suddenly, so quietly, and left with such speed that not until they were gone did the hill people actually realize what had happened.

Gaunt, tanned men began to walk the mountain paths, to drift by ones and twos into old man Moorehead's store.

"For that revenuer shot two years ago."

"How'd they know? How'd they know after this time?"

"Somebody reported on him. That's the only way they coulda known."

And then somebody mentioned the name of the one stranger, the one outsider who had been among them recently. "Mr. Bob Mason."

"You reckon he'da done it?"

It was Buck Barber's brother, Bill, who said, suddenly, "That night we was drinking down to Coon Creek! We was talking 'bout it then! You remember, Sam?"

Sam Henry said nothing. He stood alone, his dark face set. His hands moved on his rifle barrel. A dull light was brightening in his eyes.

"That—!" Bill Barber said. "It's him a.L. right. Pretending like a friend, and then—"

"Any snake would do a thing like that ought to be shot," old man Moorehead said.

VOICES beat back and forth through the room, rising, growing sharp and loud, keening toward the point where they would break and cease in action. There were two Tisdales in the store. Eyes turned toward them.

"Me and Joe," one of them said. "We going after him."

"And me," Buck Barber said.

From the sunny front porch of the store a man said, "Sam Henry, may I speak to you a minute?" There was no sound after that. They all stared at Bob Mason standing there on the sunlit porch.

Mason said, "Sam Henry," and gestured for the other to come toward him. Sam Henry did not move. Mason's eyes took in the crowd swiftly. He stepped forward and leaning close to Sam Henry said, "I saw those officers who took Pete Tisdale. They were looking for you too. They asked me if I knew where you lived, and I told them I didn't." He spoke quietly, but those who were standing close by heard him.

It was a thin and breathless moment. The road forked here toward life or death. And Bob Mason thought, *I'm winning. I'm going to carry it off.*

Mazie Taylor came into the store. Her eyes were like fires in her bloodless face. The skin was pulled tight across her cheekbones. She came straight toward Bob Mason, one hand stretched in front of her. With the hand close to his face she opened her fingers. The gold shield of the F. B. I. lay on her palm.

"I found this in your suitcase," she said. "I know now why you was kissing me four nights ago, why you been asking me

'bout Sam Henry and his trapping. You think it's out of season. You think you can send him to jail like you done Buck Barber and Pete."

It was very still in the store. Sam Henry's hand slid toward the trigger of his rifle.

Looking at Mazie Bob Mason said, "That's only partly true. That's not why I kissed you. I did that because I love you." And then Sam Henry swung up the rifle muzzle. Mason caught it with his left hand. He crossed his right fist to Sam Henry's jaw, spun, and was out of the door running. Ten yards from the store porch the brush closed in, but between him and the brush the open sunlight lay like a vast plain. He could almost feel the impact of a bullet in his spine. Then he was in the brush. A bullet whined at his ear. He never remembered hearing the sound of the shot at all.

His lungs were on fire and he could scarcely breathe when he reached Sam Henry's cabin. He lay in the sassafras bushes, panting, and with red flecks moving before his eyes. Gradually his breathing slowed toward normal, but there was not long to wait. Sam Henry came down the trail at a dog trot, passed Mason's hiding place, and went into the cabin. A moment later he came out carrying the shovel.

The spot where he began to dig was near the pointed edge of the cliff. Thick pine needles covered the ground here, and there was no sign it had ever been disturbed, but it was loose and crumbly when he spaded it up. Three minutes later he tossed the shovel aside, knelt, and lifted a large cardboard box. From this he took a .38 revolver, gloves, a mask, and a batch of bills.

Mason waited until Sam Henry started back for the cabin and was within feet of him. He stood up, and there was a gun in his hand now (he *had* seen the men who came for Pete Tisdale and he had got the gun from them), saying, "Drop that stuff you're—"

And it was here that fate took a hand

A mountain rattler, sluggish in the early spring, whirled not two yards from Mason's foot. Instinctively he jumped. His foot struck on a loose rock and he fell, rolling away from the snake, into the open view of Sam Henry.

**T**HE mountaineer's face held a wild, exultant look. He was a man finally finding self expression, finding release from the thing which tortured him. He raised the .38, waiting until Mason would stop rolling, his finger tightening on the trigger.

The girl's scream was so sharp that, for an instant, it stopped even Sam Henry. And then she was on him, clawing at him, beating at him with both hands. He staggered backward and dropped the gun.

Mason was on his feet now, breathing hard. He had been very close to death. He said, "Thanks, Mazie."

For perhaps four seconds the men faced one another. Sam Henry's dark eyes looked at the gun Mason held, and at Mason. He whirled and began to run.

Bob Mason shouted at him, leaping after him, stopping, raising his gun. Then he lowered it again.

Mazie screamed.

Still running, Sam Henry went over the edge of the cliff. He seemed to hang there, motionless, like some great hawk with its wings spread. And vanished.

Mazie stumbled toward Bob Mason and buried her face against his chest. "It's better that way," Mason whispered. "Sam Henry could not have lived in prison."

She had control of herself soon. She said, "The others from back there at the store, the Tisdales and Bill Barber, they're looking for you. They'll shoot. You'll have to go out by Goat Gap and down to Charlotte that way."

"I don't know the way."

"That's why I came. To show you."

"How did you know to come here? You couldn't have followed me."

"I knew you was after Sam Henry because you been asking questions 'bout him. And I knew if you was after him you wouldn't leave without him."

"I had to force him into showing where his stuff was hidden. I didn't have any proof without that. And I thought he'd get it if he believed the officers knew who he was and were after him."

"Who he was?"

He explained to her, briefly. "I didn't know," she said. "I thought it was just trapping out of season. But they say his daddy was an outlaw and he's always been wild."

The path went steeply upward. The sun was gone now, but the gray haze of twilight hung over them. It was cool and the wind blew little wisps of Mazie's hair about her face.

"You found that badge the night you mended my shirt?" Bob Mason asked.

"I felt it through the lining. I thought I knew what it was, but I didn't look. I was scared to look."

"Why?"

"I didn't—I didn't want to know." She was quiet as they went onward. The darkness gathered and whippoorwills began to sing. "When I heard the law'd got Pete, I knew then. I—Pete was my cousin—"

"But later you came to help me."

"Yes. I didn't know I was going to. I just did."

They were at the mouth of the gap when the girl stopped. "You can find the way from here. You just keep going down, south and east."

"Perhaps I could find the way," Mason said. "But I'm not going alone from here. Not ever."

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## NEXT MONTH

A THRILLING TRUE STORY

# THE THUMB TACK MURDER

By H. W. CORLEY