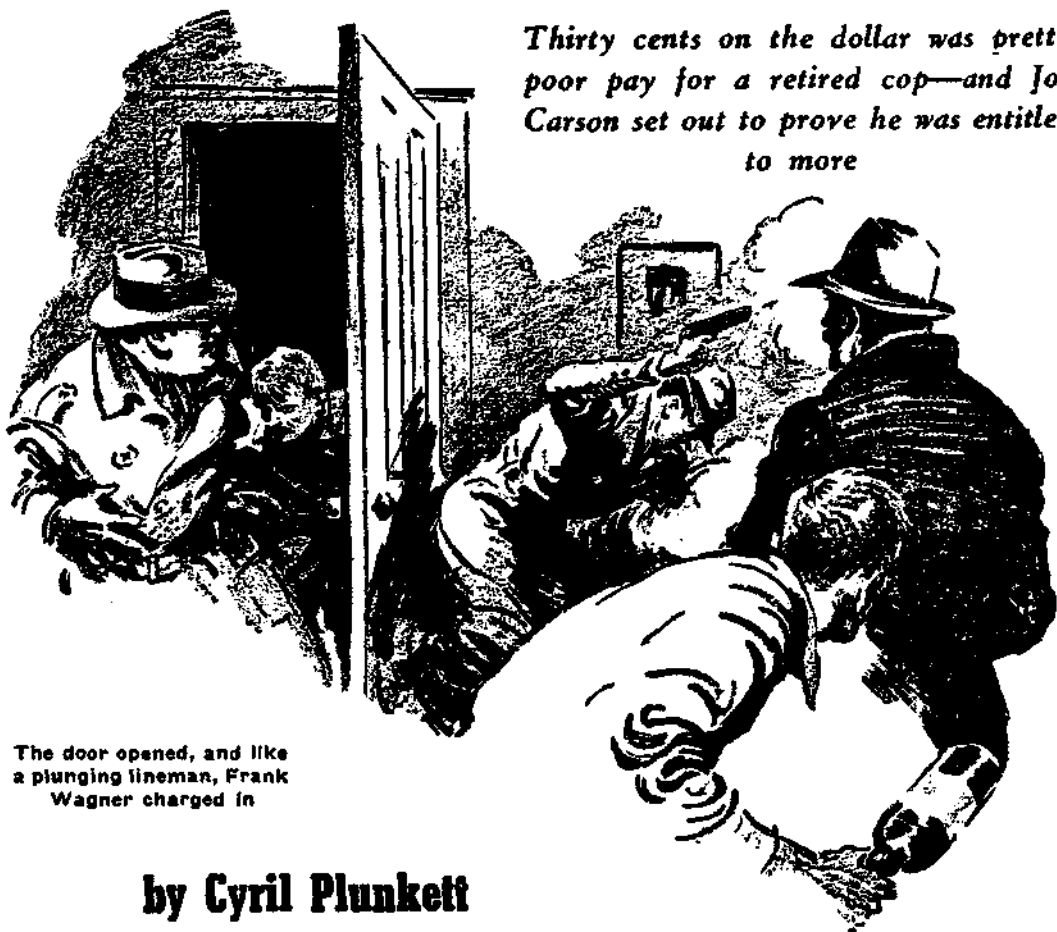


Thirty cents on the dollar was pretty poor pay for a retired cop—and Joe Carson set out to prove he was entitled to more



The door opened, and like a plunging lineman, Frank Wagner charged in

by Cyril Plunkett

Bullets For Your Birthday

ON THE fifteenth of April—the day before Detective Joe Carson's fifty-second birthday—the new administration handed him a present. Dismissal from the service. The newspapers carried it, along with his record: An injury received in line of duty. Twenty years of honorable service. The newspapers considered he had earned retirement and pension. But Carson knew the kind of checks the city was handing has-beens. Thirty cents on the dollar . . .

Joe cleaned out his locker, told the boys at headquarters he guessed he needed a vacation anyway; told them goodbye. He hit the street, blinked in the bright, late afternoon sunshine. Had there been no sun-

shine, the moisture would have welled within his gray eyes anyway. Fifty-two . . . Big shouldered, long armed; a face grim and square and weathered. A body, despite recent wounds, still strong and eager. A heart that beat dully now that all was over.

It was over. In more ways than one. In the murder front-paged this day; the killing of a man named Raleigh, which promised to break the town wide open. That murder was a dare to every honest cop. Carson sighed, trudged on, and forgot about Raleigh in the hopelessness of his own problems, the uncertainty of his future.

There was Ellen, his daughter. Just

eighteen, she was, and he'd wanted so much for her. There was the cottage on the north side of town, mortgaged to the hilt as a result of his wife's long illness and her death, some months before. And there was his bank book, the account closed out. A zero when the need was greatest.

So Joe Carson went home. To a homey smell of steak and French fries, his favorite dinner. To Ellen who cried, "Dad!" and came in from the kitchen to give him a happy kiss. She had black hair; her eyes were brown. She was proudly slender, lovely, with her mother's oval face. She was everything wonderful.

Carson sat down, fumbled for a cigarette. He said flatly, "Kid, it happened. I'm fired."

"But Dad!" She was suddenly on the arm of his chair. Her hand, on his shoulder, was as suddenly trembling. "I'm going to help, Dad. I'll get a job. With me working, why we—we'll have a bank account again!"

"A job," he said bitterly. "To help a failure when you'd planned to be free, and one of these days, married—"

She took the cigarette from his lips. She took a deep inhale.

"Maybe it's better I don't marry Frank Wagner right away, Dad. I-I love him, b-but Frank and I have such awful tempers. What a terrible time we'd have! Oh dear—the s-steak is burning!"

She ran for the kitchen and he sat staring after her. He knew she was crying. He thought. You've been worrying about this mess for weeks. It's here; it's past. Things can't get any worse. So they have to get better, don't they?

Amazingly, they did. The phone rang. It was Rayburn, the District Attorney on the wire.

Rayburn said: "I've just read of your retirement. Is that on the level, Joe?"

"I hadn't any choice," Carson answered heavily.

"Fine! I want to see you, tonight at my home. Can you make it?"

"Can I—?" Carson's throat tightened.

He could feel his pounding blood. "I'll be there within an hour."

PRACTICALLY with the preceding fall elections, and the assurance that a new city administration had been voted in, the con men had swept into town and set up their Big Store. Headquarters had been aware of this, of course; aware too that a disbarred and oily lawyer, Lou Blackwell, was probably behind the play. But Blackwell had connections like an octopus has suction pads. There was more than mere suspicion that his money was at work in the Department itself. The D. A.'s office alone fought this influx of high-gear crime. Joe Carson knew well what Rayburn was up against.

The D. A. was lean, professorial, about thirty-five. He came from a family long in public service.

"Here's the setup, Carson," he said, pacing the floor. "I'm convinced Blackwell is our man. But Blackwell's victims have all been visitors from out of the state. Notoriety, for one thing, prevents their returning to testify. When we do get a willing witness, we run into gangster methods. Intimidation.

"Well, last night this fellow Raleigh, apparently a lesser cog in the Blackwell machine, phoned me. He said he was getting a raw deal and offered to make a trade. I got hold of Peter Lassiter, told him to pick up another of my special operatives, and go out and get Raleigh immediately for questioning. But Lassiter couldn't locate any of my men, so he went alone. You understand, we preferred to keep the city police out of this. The new administration and Lou Blackwell are entirely too friendly.

"Anyway, Lassiter found Raleigh in a tenement back room, and brought him down to his car. When he got into the car there were two gunmen hidden in the back seat. They ordered Pete to drive outside of town. You know the rest if you've read today's papers. Once in the country, Pete Lassiter made a fight and they left him for dead. Raleigh was dead."

Carson went right on listening while Rayburn told him he was too good a homicide detective to be on the outside. He was to take Pete Lassiter's place until Pete was again fit for duty. If he produced, the job was steady.

Joe Carson said primly that he'd produce. He left Rayburn's home then, his step lighter than it had been for weeks. It was still early in the evening. Pete Lassiter was in St. Luke's Hospital, but a few blocks distant. A talk with Pete was first in order.

Lassiter was sitting up in bed, doing a one-armed shaving act. He shut off the electric razor when Carson entered his room, shoved out his good hand and cried, "Joe Carson!" He was blond, blue-eyed, about thirty. Though his head and left arm were bandaged, he looked debonair, handsome.

"They got me through the left arm, Joe," he said, reaching for the signal button after Carson had pulled up a chair. "I'd jumped the gun—it was the only thing I could do when the payoff came—and then took a blow on the skull. Luckily, they figured they'd killed me and scrambled."

A student nurse came in, turned off the signal light. Pete said, "Hello, darling! Will you be a good guy and put away my toilet kit?"

The nurse picked up the leather kit. "Why Mr. Lassiter, a real coat-of-arms—lions and swords and everything! You belong in a castle!"

Pete grinned. "And *you* belong on the boardwalk at Atlantic City—in a bathing suit."

Pete was like that. He had class; from the right answer and the clothes he wore, to the gold crest he affected on all his belongings. Everybody was his friend, and though he did frequent places like the Green Lantern, and frequently imbibe too freely, he'd been with Rayburn a couple of years and had done excellent work.

"So you're stepping into my shoes, Joe?" he resumed when the nurse had gone and Carson had explained his visit.

Carson nodded. "These rod-men, Pete . . . what did they look like?"

"And there," Lassiter sighed, "we turn up the joker. They'd taken off the rear vision mirror while I was in getting Raleigh. And when we reached the woods for the showdown, it was darker than a coal mine in hell. My guess is, they were imported."

"Did Raleigh spill anything?"

"He didn't have time before the gunmen flushed us. Afterward he kept his mouth shut. Scared stiff. So was I!"

Carson nodded again, disappointed. He'd hoped for a definite lead. Rayburn had already told him that the murder scene was a gravel pit—no footprints. Apparently no one had seen the gunmen enter Pete's car either. Nor had Rayburn's men uncovered a backtrail to Raleigh so far.

"The docs are discharging me in the morning, Joe," Pete said then. "I won't be so hot with my arm in a sling, but I'll be on the prowl—and to hell with sick leave! I'll slip you any dope I get."

"Thanks, Pete." Carson got up, left the room presently; walked down the hall, brows tight. Thoughts of Lou Blackwell wormed through his mind. Downstairs, he called a cab, directed it to the Reeger building where Lou maintained a suite of offices. The kind that were empty until noon, and often busy well into the night.

The rugs, here, were as soft as new snow; there was a carved receptionist's desk, an oil painting on the wall behind it. And a decorative blonde. When Carson entered and gave his name, a man lounging near the window got up, crossed the room, eased himself onto the desk. He was slender and dark and young. And grinning.

"Ex-copper, eh? Now what could you be wanting here?"

Carson's voice rumbled from deep in his chest, "Lou Blackwell."

"Lou's in Chicago, on business. He won't be back until tomorrow night, late. Too late for guys like you to make a touch."

Carson's fists were knotting. "You're new in town, aren't you?"

"So I'm new in town—so what?"

Carson's right arm right-angled in front of him. He looked at the clenched fist, changed his mind about using it. Swung around and left the room. The dark young man made a jeering noise before the door closed.

The jeering noise seemed to follow Carson to the street. He slept with it that night. And the following day, his birthday, was dreary, brooding, without a clue. Ominous in its portent to himself.

"Don't be downhearted if the breaks don't come at once," Ellen pleaded that evening. They'd had an early supper. She was going to a show, with her fiance, Frank Wagner.

"You don't know what solving this case means to me," Carson murmured.

"But I do! Dad, all day I've been pulling for you, hard. I feel almost as though it—it's my case, too. I—I want to go out and do some thing about it—for you."

A horn blew outside. "Back at eleven, darling," Ellen said. She kissed Carson and ran, and after she had gone he sat staring at the glowing fireplace, fiercely frowning. There were angles to this thing that worried him.

RAIN, slashing at the window, wakened him at twelve o'clock. He turned over—remembered suddenly that he hadn't heard Ellen come in. Carson got up and went into the hall. Her door was open, the room still and lonely.

The point was, Ellen always kept her word. "Back at eleven," meant just that; she was anything but irresponsible. When circumstances changed her plans, she'd never failed to phone home and tell him of the change. It was a routine begun during her mother's long illness, to save her mother worry. But she hadn't phoned to-night . . .

True, the rain might have held her up. She and Frank might have stopped off at some night spot permitted her, for a late snack, a dance. But why hadn't she *phoned*? Suddenly, curiously, Joe Carson remembered the dark, leering man in Lou Blackwell's office. He remembered Ellen's

words, ". . . it's my case, too, and I want to go out and do something about it."

The first warning chill slithered Carson's back. He slipped into his clothes, went abruptly to the telephone.

Headquarters, the first call, reported no pertinent accidents. Carson stared at the mouthpiece a long moment then, finally lifted the receiver again. He tried three numbers, small dine and dance places where he was known; places therefore permitted to eighteen year old Ellen. At the third try, the Green Lantern, Tim Murphy answered. Tim was an ex-cop turned bar-keep.

Tim said, "The colleen, Joe? Now we've been so busy I wouldn't know." There was a rattle of glass, a buzz of conversation. The rain, apparently, had tuned up business. Tim said, "Hold on a minute." It was Pete Lassiter's voice next on the phone.

"Joe?" Pete said. "I'm shel-celebrating my escape! Been here hours with sh-ome friends. But I don't remember seeing Ellen."

Pete, drunk, wasn't a novelty. He could keep his head though, even drunk, so the information was probably accurate.

"Joe, you think sh-something's wrong?"

Carson said guardedly he didn't know what to think. He hung up on Pete, and all the while, worriedly, came the prodding ticking of the clock. Ten minutes of one . . . Ellen simply *wouldn't* ignore him, his certain apprehension, this of all nights, his birthday. He tried once more, Frank Wagner's home.

Presently a voice said crossly, "Hello?" Wagner's voice!

Joe Carson took a deep breath. "Frank, is Ellen with you?"

"With *me*?" Wagner seemed astonished. "She went home two hours ago!"

"She isn't home. You say 'She *went*'?"

"I—" Wagner paused. "Listen, Mr. Carson, I'm coming over. Be there in fifteen minutes."

It was twelve minutes, exactly. Twelve agonizing minutes before Frank Wagner ran up the walk from his car. He was

blond, his curly hair dishevelled now. He had a sweater pulled over his pajama coat. Twenty-four, Wagner was, lean, serious, a graduate in chemistry. A quick temper was his one unpleasant trait. He was carrying a purse. Ellen's purse.

Wagner said, "I don't understand this at all, Mr. Carson. I—"

"What time did you get home tonight?" Carson interrupted.

"Me?" Frank Wagner looked queer and strained suddenly. "Around midnight, I guess. You want an explanation, of course. Well—Ellen and I had—a quarrel. We'd been to the theatre, and then we drove around awhile, talking—"

"About what?"

"About us, damn it." His cheeks flushed. "And about you. I couldn't see any reason why Ellen should ruin her life and mine because you're running into tough luck, because she feels she should help you. We argued about getting married, and we stopped at the Green Lantern—"

"You're sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure. What the hell is this, Carson? Are you trying to say I've done something to Ellen? Harmed her?"

"I'm trying to get facts," Carson replied harshly. "In time to help my daughter if—" his grim face winced, "if it isn't already too late. That's Ellen's purse you're carrying. Why?"

Wagner looked at the purse as though puzzled that he was carrying it. He handed it to Carson; nervously reached for a cigarette.

"I was bringing the purse back, that's all. Look, Joe, we broke it off at the Green Lantern, everything between us. It was around eleven o'clock, maybe a little before. In the middle of our argument she went to the phone booth—it's in the foyer near the side entrance—to call you to come and get her."

"And that's the last you saw her?"

"No. It happened she'd left her gloves on our table. I went up to give them to her, reached her before she could close the door to the booth. She had her purse open, a couple of little books—bank books,

I guess—in her other hand. Like she was looking in her purse for a nickel to make the call. I tossed her a nickel."

His eyes were flashing, angry memory of the incident. He seemed still in a rage at what had happened between him and Ellen; more so than concerned at her disappearance.

"Well," he continued shortly, "we had another argument. The purse fell on the floor, and everything spilled out of it. Nail file, compact, odds and ends. When I stooped to pick them up, she slipped past me and on out the side door to the street. She was still carrying the bank-books."

"And then?" Joe Carson pressed, snapping, unsnapping the catch of the purse.

"I went back and finished my drink. Then I drove around a while to cool off. Maybe she's doing the same thing, walking. Maybe— Good God, Joe, you don't think anything serious has happened to her, do you?"

Carson didn't answer, was very still. The purse was open; he stared at the things in it. Ellen's things, odds and ends a woman carries. Joe stared at the nail-file. . . . Abruptly he crossed the room to a desk, took from its top drawer a .38 Official Police Colt.

"Joe!" Wagner gasped. "What are you going to do?"

Carson said, "We're going places, in your car. And boy, drive like hell."

IT WAS a quiet street, quite dark. The rain was like a veil, gray, steady, whispering. Frank Wagner pulled to the curb at Carson's curt order, cut the lights. Carson said, "Wait here."

"But I'm going with you!"

"Wait here."

Carson got out, shivered as he crossed the street. He bore for a house in a wide, murky yard. The house was two-storied, the lower floor barren looking, windows uncurtained . . . empty. But slender lances of light appeared upstairs, stealing from drawn shades. A duplex, with the stairway running from a door on the narrow porch.

Carson took the unlighted stairs, to a tiny square hall above. Footsteps sounded beyond the door; the sudden urgent chime of a clock, striking twice. Carson rapped.

There was an instant reply. "Come in!" A sharply indrawn breath as Carson pushed the door open. The smell of whiskey was strong. Pete Lassiter was halfway across the room, swaying stupidly, staring. Pete said. "Why, Joe!" Startled, his surprise written on his face.

"Just get home, Pete?" Carson asked.

"Why—yes. Fifteen, twenty minutes ago. Did you locate your daughter, Joe?"

Carson kicked the door shut behind him. It didn't latch, but he was already moving into the room, four, five steps. He stood, his wide shoulders hunched a little, feet apart. His right hand hung just above the coat pocket, the revolver in that pocket. He ignored Lassiter's question.

"By taxi, Pete? Or were you driving your car?"

"By—" Lassiter laughed, glanced at the clock, appeared to change his mind. "Hell, I drove. My left arm's plugged, but it's not entirely useless. Want a drink, Joe? You look like—"

"And the car's in your garage now?"

"Joe, are you nuts? Sure it's in the garage." He turned toward a table, bottle and glasses there. He began to fill a glass; the bottle jerked abruptly, tinkled as it cracked the rim.

Carson was saying, "I want to see your bank books."

The clock ticked loudly. Lassiter's shoulders straightened, his bleary eyes narrowed, glaring.

"What the hell's the big idea?"

"So they're dynamite, Pete?" Carson taunted. "That's all I need to know. You were drunk earlier tonight; you're still drunk. You were celebrating at one of your usual hangouts, the Green Lantern. *You dropped those books accidentally in the phone booth, while making a call.* And when you discovered what you'd done, and came back to get them, you saw them in my daughter's hands.

"Obviously, she immediately realized

their significance. She hung onto them even though she'd dropped her purse in running away from Frank Wagner. You saw that, too. And the fact that, because of Wagner's interruption, she hadn't put through her phone call to me. So Lassiter, you followed her, and you got her. The Lantern was packed and you weren't missed. Maybe that means you weren't gone long. Only long enough to drive home, to your garage, to leave Ellen a helpless prisoner in your car, until you got orders, or could figure out what to do? Until you could beat it back to the Lantern quick, by taxi for an alibi?"

"Damn you, Carson, you're crazy!"

"But are the sums entered in your bank books crazy, Pete? Particularly the last sum? Bank *books*—you, a free spender on a small income. *How much did you get for killing Raleigh?*"

Lassiter was swaying again, breathing heavily. He licked his lips. "Are you accusing me of working with Lou Blackwell?"

Carson said, "Of blocking Rayburn's investigations at every step. Of calling Blackwell for instructions instead of Rayburn's operative the night Rayburn sent you to get Raleigh. It has to be that, Lassiter, because evidence—through the bank books—of bribe alone wouldn't have been sufficient motive for what you did tonight to Ellen. Raleigh's murder supplied that motive.

"Lassiter—" Carson's voice became gritty. "Ellen better be in your car, *alive*. We're going down to see, you and I—and God help you if you make one false move."

"That goes for you too, brother," said a quiet voice from the hallway.

Joe Carson whirled. But he didn't try for his gun. There wasn't any use. Lou Blackwell stood in the doorway. Beside him, grinning, was the dark, young man from Blackwell's office. The dark man held an automatic.

BLACKWELL'S stocky figure eased into the room. He wore a belted trench coat, a brown slouch hat. His skin

was sallow, shiny; a slender black mustache stretched wide above his mouth as his lips spread in silent laughter. His little black eyes were bright with awareness.

"In, Dicky—and shut the door."

He waved a pudgy, commanding hand, and Dicky, the grinning man, slid into the room also, leaned against the door.

Dicky said, "Hello, copper. Fancy meeting you here."

Carson didn't answer, heard Pete Lassiter chuckle behind him. The glass and bottle clinked again; Lassiter smacked his lips.

"I was afraid you weren't coming, Lou. In time. I was in a hell of a mess with you not back from Chicago and the girl on my hands. And then Joe, here." He laughed out loud, swayed over to a chair and sat down, legs sprawled before him. "I put in a call to your place for orders. Lucky I did, eh, Lou?"

Blackwell nodded, his eyes bleak, never leaving Joe Carson's face. And Carson, granite outside, cursed himself, the memory of Pete Lassiter glancing at the clock, the warning that hopeful glance should have been. There was no elation now in this proof of Lassiter's guilt of Raleigh's murder, nor in the hint that Ellen was alive. There was only a pounding, breathless apprehension.

"The girl? Carson's kid?" Blackwell wanted to know then.

Lassiter cursed. "She stumbled on a lead, Lou. But I got her in time, staked her out in my car. Then Joe showed—"

"How?" Blackwell snapped.

There was a moment of silence.

"He made a—a long shot guess, Lou," Lassiter stammered. "He came alone, didn't he?"

"How?" Blackwell repeated, snarling.

Carson said grimly, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Like that, eh?"

"He wants to be coaxed," Dicky snickered.

Blackwell smiled again, lazily, the pink end of his tongue sliding moistly along his thick lips.

"You're a smart copper, Carson, but smart coppers come two bits a dozen to me. They don't mean a thing. We're going down the back way to your car, Pete. We'll roll for the country and after a while we'll come back. You and the girl won't, Carson. You'll have bullets for your breakfast."

"It's his birthday, Lou," Lassiter cut in, jeering. "Bullets for your birthday, eh, Joe? You poor sap—"

"Shut up," Blackwell snapped. "Climb out of that chair, Pete, and fan him for a gun."

Lassiter mumbled, "Sure, Lou," and got up, and Joe Carson's heart began to beat quicker, harder. There was a little hope in this moment; none beyond it. Once unarmed, and doubtless bound, he knew he wouldn't have a chance. His mind considered, kaleidoscopically, Dicky, leaning against the door, automatic leveled, unwavering; Frank Wagner parked down and across the street; the gray, swirling veil of rain.

Frank, if he'd seen Lou and Dicky arrive and enter, apparently hadn't recognized them nor realized the significance of their arrival. There was no certain reason that Frank should; he may never have even heard of Blackwell. Nor would Frank see them leave. The back way. . . . Young Wagner would sit and wait, and wait, and though in the end he fingered the house and Lassiter; though in the end they all paid the price of murder, there was no consolation in that thought.

Carson sighed then, Ellen's life, his own, depended now on—there wasn't time so much as to complete the thought. Pete Lassiter had swayed up behind him, was reaching with his good arm for Joe's pocket, his revolver. Carson accepted the odds, lunged to one side, his right hand streaking down.

There was a curse, instantly the crack of Dicky's gun. But the automatic was pointing up, away from Carson's whirling body! Dicky was flying, off balance, toward the center of the room!

The door had opened, a battering ram

at Dicky's back, and coming through the doorway, like a plunging lineman on the gridiron, was Frank Wagner.

Carson shot twice from his pocket, saw Dicky spin on and fall. He saw Wagner dive for Lou Blackwell. He saw Lassiter closing in. Lassiter clutched the bottle from the table, swung it like a club.

Carson twisted in time, caught the blow on his shoulder. He had his gun out then, whipped it up, muzzle like a bayonet, squarely into Lassiter's face. Pete's howl of pain ended with a blow upon the skull.

"I got this guy, Joe!" Frank Wagner panted. Carson turned, to see the stocky lawyer hit the wall. Wagner downed him with one more blow.

"Good work, son," Carson said. "I'll phone for the wagon. You get downstairs to Lassiter's garage. You'll find Ellen there."

SHE leaned weakly on Frank's arm when he brought her back. She was sobbing, and the smell of choloform clung about her. Carson drew her to him, and his and his heart swelled into his throat.

"I wanted to help you, Dad. I—I knew what those bank books could mean the minute I found them."

"You did help, dear," he nodded, "both you and Frank."

"Those guys didn't see me when they

drove up," Frank began. "I didn't know who they were, but I wasn't taking any chances, so I followed them, crept up the stairs, listened at the door. I knew one of them was leaning against the door; I could feel it. So I gave him all I had.

"Say!" he added. "You didn't tell me how you guessed where Ellen was, where to come?"

"I didn't know where Ellen was," Carson answered gravely, "but I knew who had her and where to start. You and Ellen turned up the clues. I had only to weigh and interpret them."

"The purse, Ellen's purse?" Frank asked eagerly.

"The nail file *in* the purse, Frank. That file came from Lassiter's pocket, apparently had slipped between his bank books. He missed the books, but not the file. Ellen, of course, dropped it into her purse there in the Green Lantern's phone booth. That was a second before you reached her and she ran away from you with the books still clutched in her hand."

"But a nail file! I don't see—"

"The gold coat-of-arms that was stamped on it, son," Carson said softly. "The same crest I'd seen on Lassiter's toilet articles at the hospital." He cleared his throat then. "Bullets for my birthday, eh? They didn't figure that was one present a guy would send right back!"

COMING SOON

"LITTLE GUN"

by JOHN EARL DAVIS

USE **SPEEDWAY** DE LUXE **BLADES**
FOR FAST, SMOOTH, ECONOMICAL SHAVES

