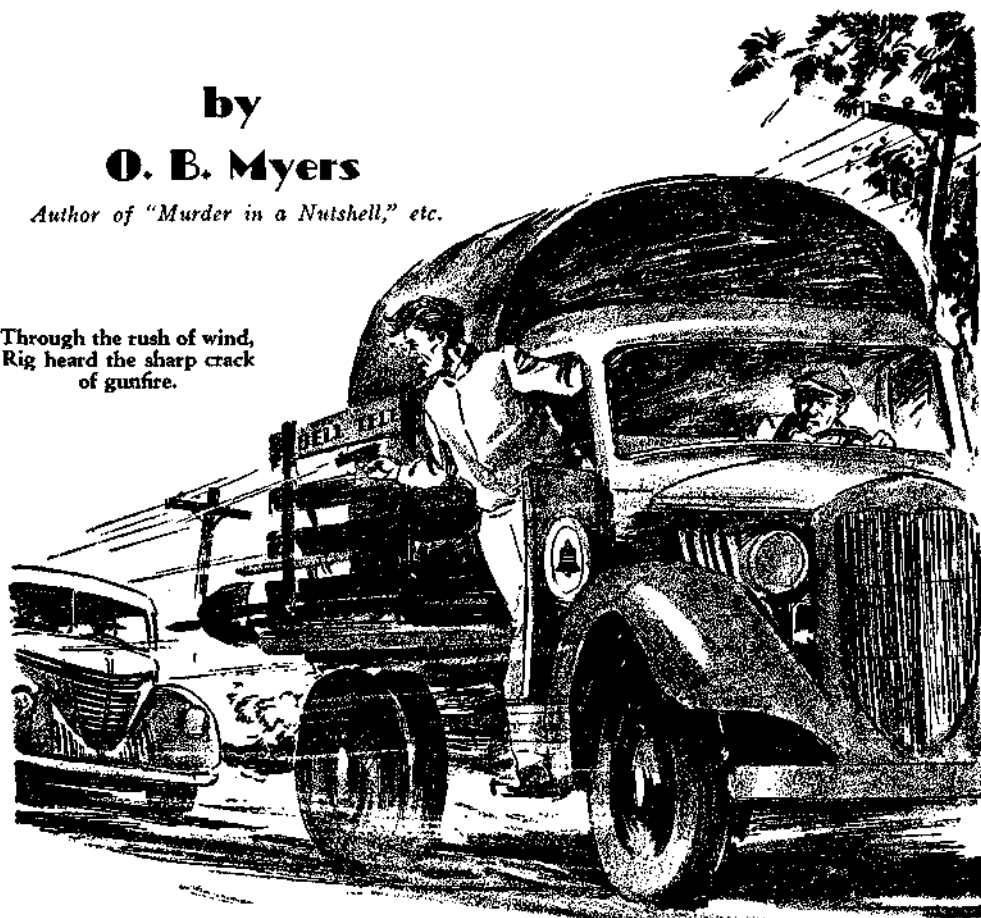


SHORT CIRCUIT TO HELL

by
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Through the rush of wind,
Rig heard the sharp crack
of gunfire.



The freckle-faced khaki-clad guy with the army automatic was tough, but when he tried to shove Rig Donaldson around, Rig got tougher—and found himself out on a limb that was pretty shaky even for a telephone linesman.

RIG was driving fast. Outside the city limits Whaley Turnpike was old macadam. The gray-green telephone company truck bounced over the pot-holes and slithered from side to side. He roared past a sedan that was parked well off the road close against the dusty

underbrush, and took a forty-five degree bend without slowing down. Rumbling into a straight stretch, he stole a glance at his watch.

With a grimace of disappointment he lifted his foot from the accelerator. He couldn't make it. Sandy was on the early

shift at the DX board, she went off duty at one. It was already quarter past. By this time she would have left the building. He'd have to eat lunch alone.

He braked gently, pulling the truck off to straddle the ditch. Switching off the motor, he rummaged behind the seat for his japanned tin lunch-box. Stepping down, he stretched arms and legs and prepared to sit on the running board, but changed his mind. He had climbed a dozen poles that morning. He was entitled to a little complete relaxation.

Pushing through the screen of bushes and striding under the spreading branches of a clump of oaks, he came to a glade on a gentle slope. There was no bite to the breeze here, and the October sun warmed the rank grass. Some distance beyond, the slope fell away into marshy ground. Automatically his eye noted the line of poles which, leaving Whaley Turnpike at the bend, led straight across the flats toward the distant blur of smoky rooftops that marked the beginning of the city.

He let himself down flat on his back and spreading his legs wide let out a sigh of contentment. If he couldn't have lunch with Sandy, at least this was the next best thing. It was a couple of minutes before he even reached for the box and fished out a cheese on rye.

But before he had more than started the second sandwich his relaxation came to an abrupt end. From somewhere behind his head, out of his range of vision, a voice spoke sharply.

"Well, what's the idea, buddy?"

Rig rolled up on one elbow. He saw a tall, gaunt young fellow with bony limbs and a narrow face that was covered with freckles. His pale blue eyes shifted constantly, and one corner of his mouth was lifted in a truculent sneer that gave a mean expression to a face that would otherwise have been merely homely. He stood near a stump with arms akimbo, apparently trying to appear as tough as possible.

"Have a plum?" said Rig pleasantly. "I'm just downing lunch."

"Not here you ain't," was the short reply. "Move on."

Rig betrayed surprise. "What's the matter with here? Do I spoil the view?

Or maybe you own this field, friend?"

"Never mind who owns it. I'm tellin' ya to get out of it."

Rig was not accustomed to being ordered around like a sheep. He got slowly to his knees, his brow darkening.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind telling me why? I'm a telephone lineman—that's one of our lines over there. I've got a right to inspect it."

"That cuts no ice now," said the skinny lad sourly. "The Army's guardin' this area now. You can forget about that line, see?"

RIG looked at him again. He wore light tan shoes and slacks and a khaki wind-breaker. They might have been army clothes, though he had on no hat and no visible insignia of any kind. Still, the military police at Whaley Barracks often went around in civilian attire when on duty off the post. The camp was near the village of Whaley, eight or ten miles to the east. The Signal Corps was training several thousand men there in the use of special apparatus and instruments. Much of their work was reported to be confidential stuff of the hush-hush variety, and precautions were taken against prying and sabotage. Some of the circuits on that pole line went to Whaley. It was possible that the military authorities were guarding them, even at this distance, though it was strange that Rig had never gotten a memo to that effect from the wire chief.

Rig closed his lunch-box and got to his feet. Company employees were constantly admonished to use courtesy, but when he was curtly advised to, "Make it snappy, lunk," it got under his skin.

"Say," he growled, turning on his heel, "how do I know you're an army cop? Where's your authority? Don't you have any badge, or something?"

The freckled man watched him narrowly through his lids as he lifted the lower edge of his wind-breaker a few inches.

"There's my authority," he snapped, patting a big black army Colt automatic. "Get goin'."

"O.K.," muttered Rig. "O.K."

He passed in front of the other man, moving toward the road. Inside he was burning up. Had he been asked civilly,

the situation explained to him, he would have made no bones about obeying instantly. But like any normal male he resented being treated like a dog. This bird acted as if an army automatic made him a czar.

"Gosh, my wallet!" exclaimed Rig, turning back abruptly.

The mention of a wallet is apt to focus anyone's attention, money being of practically universal interest. The other man stopped and turned, too, and as he turned Rig's long arm shot out. The lunch box banged on the side of his head as he staggered backward, clutching at his waistband. Rig followed up with a lunge that rushed him off his feet, and the two sprawled in the weeds, rolling over once. Climbing poles hadn't softened Rig's muscles any, and the crack on the skull had been just enough to take the edge off the freckled man's alertness. After a brief minute Rig scrambled to his feet, slipping the automatic into his pocket.

"Listen, sourpuss," he said bluntly. "I've got a lot of respect for the Army. If there were plenty of guys knew telephone work, I'd've signed up myself long ago. But if you're learning to be a soldier, fella, the first thing you'd better learn is to be on your toes. If I'd been your prisoner, you'd be very dead by now. O. K., forget it. Just in case your orders are on the level, I'm leaving here, so there won't be any trouble. And when you report to your sergeant, or whoever you report to, you can tell him you lost your gun to a civilian who was one jump smarter than you were, Gunga Din. You can get it back any time by asking at the office of the telephone company, on Jayne Street, see?"

The freckled man had gotten up as far as his hands and knees, his head cocked to stare up at Rig. He never uttered a word in reply, but his lips were livid and his gelatinous blue eyes were icy with chagrin and fear and sheer hatred. He did not move a muscle as Rig backed off through the underbrush, and still had not appeared on the road when the truck was rolling toward town and Rig looked back.

Mike Vail, sergeant of police, grinned when he heard Rig's story. "You must've scared the gizzard out of him," he commented. "Some of these recruits figure

a gun makes a brave man out of 'em, but they forget the other guy has fists. Lemme see that shootin' iron, Rig."

He carefully wrote down the serial number. "You want us to send it over to Whaley Barracks for you?"

"No, make him come after it," chuckled Rig. "Teach him to have better manners next time. I told him he could get it any time."

"You'd better not be luggin' it around without a permit."

"I've got a permit," said Rig. "Had it for two years, but never carried a gun. Maybe I'll get a thrill out of it."

WHEN he went back to his truck he slipped the automatic in his lunchbox and promptly forgot about it. That was on Friday. He spent that week end up at his sister's place on the lake, and the whole incident slipped from his mind. He drove back to town on Monday morning just in time to pick up the truck at the company garage and sort out a flock of service orders on his spindle. Around ten o'clock he was up on a pole out on North Borden Avenue, reporting to the wire chief with his handset. After Mr. Gowan had hung up, Rig buzzed the B board again.

"Give me the DX operator, will you?"

There was a click, a brief wait, and then a musically familiar voice said in his ear: "Long Distance, Redcliff?"

"That's the way it seems to me, too, honey. How's the queen of the cords this morning?"

In front of the toll board Sandy settled the plug more firmly in its jack and let her slender fingers slide down the cord. Instinctively her eyes swiveled around over her shoulder toward the chief operator, and she lowered her lips a little closer to the transmitter that rested on her bosom.

"Some day, Rig Donaldson, you're going to mistake a voice and find that you've dished out that line of yours to the supervisor."

Rig snorted. "Not a chance. Compared with you, she sounds like a mouthful of tacks. Besides, I could talk my way out of it."

"You think you can talk your way out of anything, don't you?"

"Anything but Alcatraz, darling."

"I suppose you figure on talking your way out of this trouble with the police?"

"The police? What do you mean?"

"Wait a minute." Her thumb flipped a key. Are you ready Pittsburgh? Go ahead . . . Certainly, madam. The charges on your call to New York were two dollars and ten cents . . . You're welcome." She pulled down a cord and entered a figure on the pad of slips at her elbow. "You want the wire chief, Rig?"

"No, I talked to him already. What's this about the police?"

"Mike Vail was here this morning looking for you. I met him in the hall on my rest period. I think he left a note on your spindle."

"Mike Vail? Oh-h-h, yes!"

"Oh-h-h, yes!" she mimicked him. "What's he after you for now? You been stealing apples again?"

"No, babies," retorted Rig. "I cut them up down cellar late at night, for a hobby. More fun!" He laughed, remembering, and told her what had happened the previous Friday.

"Rig, you must be crazy!" she said.

"You're absolutely right," he countered. "But it's not Mike Vail I'm crazy about. If you want to know who—"

"But I mean, he might have shot you—the soldier!"

Rig's chuckle was full of self-confidence. "Not that soldier. He had a little lesson coming to him, and he got it."

Rig's masterful esteem of his own abilities sometimes exasperated her. "Yes, teacher," she drawled. "If you give lessons in manners to everyone who needs them you won't have much time left for testing circuits. As for me—here comes the chief operator."

Rig held his thumb down to disconnect. When he lifted it after a minute he got a local operator and asked for the police station.

"Rig? Oh, yeah. This is Mike. Listen, that lad who sassed you last Friday—are you sure he was in the Army?"

"Am I sure? Why, I don't know. I didn't notice any chevrons or insignia, but I thought maybe he was a buck private. He said he was in the Army—at least, he said the Army was on duty there. Why, Mike?"

"Because we checked the serial number on that Colt. It's not an army gun at all. It's one of a lot sold at auction as defective two years ago in Brooklyn. Six months later it was lost track of in a pawnshop robbery. So I called the adjutant at Whaley Barracks. He tells me they've had no maneuvers out in that direction at all, haven't posted any guards within five miles of the place."

"Then my friend couldn't have been a soldier, eh?"

"I didn't say he couldn't. I just said the adjutant didn't know anything about him. Neither do I. I wish I knew more. I took a run out there this morning and looked around a bit. Found the spot all right, but I'm damned if I can figure why anyone should try to drive you off. There's nothing but bushes and trees and swamp and an empty road, and that line of poles across the flats. Hasn't been any trouble on that line since you were there, has there?"

"Not a thing," replied Rig. "I'd know if there had."

The cop's voice was puzzled. "Screwy, isn't it?"

Rig laughed. "Maybe I dreamed it," he said. "If it weren't for the gun, I'd say it must have been a couple of other fellows."

WHEN he told Sandy that part of it, on their way home from the movies that night, she looked at him in puzzled fashion for a moment, then threw back her head and laughed softly.

"Really, Rig, it isn't necessary," she said.

"What isn't necessary?" he asked.

"To impress me, I mean. I already think you're a pretty swell guy, you know. If you find a revolver somewhere in a ditch, you don't have to go to the trouble to make up all that story about taking it away from some yokel by sheer nerve just to show me what a big, brave fellow you are. I'd think better of you if you just told the truth."

"But, doggone it!" he cried. "I didn't find it! This bird pulled it on me. And besides, it isn't a revolver, it's an army automatic."

"I thought Mike said the man wasn't in the Army?"

He threw up his hands in helpless surrender.

"O.K., O.K. He wasn't in the Army. There wasn't any man, or any gun, either. Have it your own way and just forget it, will you?"

There was a faint coolness in her good-night kiss.

Whether she forgot it or not, Rig didn't. Driving out the turnpike the next morning to replace a guy anchor, he slowed as he passed the spot where he had been threatened. It was deserted. The utter absence of explanation for the little affair plagued his mind. That freckle-faced individual had looked pretty tough. He hadn't been engaged in any mere practical joke. But what could his motive have been? If he wasn't connected with the Army, then why had he said so? Was he, perhaps, interested in military affairs for some other reason? That was a possibility that might be serious. After he had finished the anchor setting, Rig drove on to the army camp and asked for the adjutant.

"Yes, your police sergeant asked me about it," said the major, who was a grizzled veteran of two wars with bleak gray eyes and a close-clipped accent. "But no men from this post have been assigned to watch that telephone line, or any others, in fact. That's your job, isn't it?"

"It just struck me this morning," said Rig, "that every long distance call you make from here goes out over that line as far as Redcliff. Sometimes, no doubt, you discuss confidential matters over the telephone—military secrets that might be of great interest to—well, to certain foreign powers. Their agents might be interested in listening in enough to risk tapping the line."

The adjutant drew in his breath sharply and his eyes narrowed. "What makes you suspect that?" he asked.

Rig shrugged. "I don't exactly suspect it. But that fellow must have been doing something around the neighborhood. And if your wires were being tapped, you'd like to find it out, wouldn't you?"

The major leaned forward. "You're damned right. But how?"

"To cover eight or ten miles of open wire foot by foot is a big job. And even then we might miss it, if the lead-in wires

for the tap are cleverly hidden. The easiest way is by a monitor circuit."

"What's that?" demanded the adjutant.

"Well, it's a tap-in of our own, right in the central office. Special operators listen on your line all the time, using a circuit with its own battery hook-up. If your line is being tapped, a girl with a good ear and years of experience can generally tell from the line hum."

The major smiled wryly. "So you tap your own wires, eh?"

"Not without your permission, and request," Rig assured him.

The officer leaned back. "I'll think about it. Thanks."

When Rig met Sandy that evening she said: "Maybe I shouldn't have kidded you about making up that story, Rig. Somebody seems to be taking it seriously, anyway."

"What do you mean? Who's taking it seriously?"

"They've pulled me off the DX board," she explained, "and put me on a monitor circuit covering the Whaley toll trunks. Mike Vail must have an idea that somebody is trying to listen in on the Army."

Rig said nothing about his own part. "Hear anything suspicious?"

"No, nothing but a lot of technical stuff that I don't understand."

EACH day he inquired, but the monitor circuits produced no evidence of a tap, and the freckled man was not seen again. Rig began to think that he had climbed out on the wrong limb.

On Friday he finished up his outside work in the morning and came into the central office just before noon. After filing his service reports he dug around in the permanent records until he found the installation department's file on the pole line leading eastward. He studied the maps and the engineers' symbols, checking each circuit, but he came across one marked with a symbol that was strange to him. He carried the sheaf of papers into the wire chief's office.

"Mr. Gowan, what the devil does this mean?"

The wire chief peered at the prints. "Why, that indicates a private circuit, a leased wire. What line is that, anyway?"

"Out of Redcliff east, to Whaley."

"Oh, yes. That's the private circuit between the propeller plant and the First National Bank." When Rig looked blank he explained. "A year or so ago they had a couple of hold-ups, remember? The second time they were sure that someone in the plant had listened in while the manager gave instructions to the cashier about when and how to send out the payroll. The truck carrying it was waylaid on the turnpike, you know. So they leased a private wire, direct from the manager's desk to the bank. It isn't cut in to the switchboard here at all. Our operators don't get any flash when it's used."

"Then it doesn't go near Whaley Barracks?"

"No, only as far as the propeller plant. They have other circuits, of course, to their PBX, for general use. They only use this one once a week, I suppose—on Fridays, when the payroll is ready to be sent out, in the afternoon. Rather an expensive proposition—probably costs them several dollars to make just that one call."

Rig nodded. "It's worth it, if it saves them a payroll."

When Sandy emerged from the operators' rest-room a few minutes later, she found him alone in the hall, staring grimly at the floor. She started to say something about lunch but he interrupted her.

"Anything new on those army circuits?" he asked.

"No, nothing. As far as we can tell, they're clear as a bell."

"Listen." He gripped her arm. "There's another circuit on that pole line." He explained what the wire chief had told him about the leased wire that ran to the propeller factory up the valley.

"What if that is the line our freckled friend is interested in?"

She stared at him. "But we can't put a monitor on that circuit. It's not cut in to the office, you said."

"That's just it," agreed Rig. "The only place it can be touched is after it leaves the cable and comes up on the poles."

"And you couldn't touch it without the company's permission."

He jerked his hand. "There isn't time. This is Friday, the payroll goes out this afternoon. The manager probably calls

the bank soon after lunch. It's nearly one now—in a little while that one weekly call will be on that wire. If anyone's listening, waiting—"

He broke off, peering at her sharply. She returned his stare with a steady glance. "What can I do, Rig?"

He took both her elbows. "Can you climb a pole?"

She paled slightly. "I—I don't know. Will you help me?"

"Of course I'll help you. It won't be easy, but you'll make it. Come on downstairs, the truck's in the street."

"Rig, have you asked the wire chief?" she asked, as she ran down the steps after him.

Rig shook his head. "He just went out to lunch. It would just start a lot of red tape, and we might be too late."

"Or Mike Vail?" she added, climbing into the truck after him.

"We can call him from the pole," said Rig, jamming his toe on the starter and leaping the truck away from the curb.

HE jumped two red lights on Twelfth and rolled her out Whaley Turnpike at sixty. Pulling up at the same spot where he had stopped for lunch a week before, he rummaged behind the seat for tools, spurs, safety belts, and a handset. Coming across the Colt, he dropped it in his pocket, but not before she saw him.

"Rig, what do you want that for?" she cried, wincing.

"Better take off your hat and coat," he said quickly, disregarding her question. "They'll only get in your way. Sit on the running board."

He strapped the spare pair of spurs on her legs, the harsh leather and forged steel incongruous against her shapely silk calves. As soon as his own were on, they hurried down the slope and plodded across the soft ground toward the pole line.

"You fasten the belt around the pole—there, like that. If you fall, it slows you up enough so you don't get hurt—outside of a skiful of splinters, anyway. But don't worry, honey, you won't fall. I'll be right underneath you as you climb. Dig in sharp and hard, and lean back against the belt. Here, give me your foot."

He rammed the steel spur into the dry

wood, and showed her that it would support her weight while she swung the other foot higher. Step by step he urged her upward, planting her foot for her each time, showing her how to shift the belt to keep pace with the climb, encouraging her when she tired, giving her a moment to rest now and then. He could have reached the top five times in the time it took them both, but at last she was up within reach of the lower cross-arm. Getting both her feet firmly set, he climbed quickly past her until his head was among the taut wires. Here he locked his own belt.

He gave her the handset, uncoiling the leads with a practiced twist. He checked his position—the private circuit was on the outside of the upper cross-arm. Deftly he snapped on the clips.

"What do you hear?" he asked in a low tone.

Clutching the pole rigidly with one hand, Sandy held the shiny handset to her ear with the other. Her eyes were blank, unfocused, with the intent stare of a person who listens as hard as possible. She frowned in tense concentration, her hand quivered slightly.

When her lips moved, he shook his finger at her. "Take it away from your mouth," he warned in a whisper. "Remember, if anybody's tapped in on that line, they'll hear your voice."

She lowered the handset, holding it behind her. "Rig, I—I can't tell for certain. It's so different up here—this instrument—"

"I know. Try it again," he urged her.

For more than ten minutes she did nothing but listen, shifting her foothold once as her muscles began to stiffen. The breeze tousled her golden-brown curls about her face, and tears blurred her eyes with the intensity of her effort. She lowered the set again.

"I can't be absolutely sure," she told him in a trembling whisper. "Sometimes I get a buzz that sounds suspicious, but then it's gone."

"Keep trying," he advised her shortly.

She nodded obediently. This time she had hardly had the instrument at her ear a minute before her expression changed abruptly. Her eyes opened wide, her hand pressed the handset tight against her

cheek. Rig tried to lean close, consumed with curiosity, but of course could hear nothing himself. Her lips were moving soundlessly, as if to memorize what she was hearing. After a few moments she gave a little nod. The conversation to which she was listening had evidently come to an end. Then she emitted a sharp gasp, and nearly dropped the instrument.

"Rig—that click!" she cried.

"What! What was it?" he demanded.

"I heard the manager of the propeller plant talking to the cashier at the bank," she told him rapidly. "He asked if the payroll was ready to start. The cashier said yes, it was in the truck. The manager told him: follow South Jayne to Hedley, then east to Fourteenth, up Fourteenth to the Old Mill Road, and out the Old Mill Road to the intersection near the plant. The cashier said it would start inside of a minute."

"Yes, that's the route," nodded Rig. "Nobody knows it till the last minute. But what did you say about a click?"

"Right after they hung up," she told him. "It was very plain. The click of another receiver being disconnected, somewhere on the line. Rig, somebody was listening in!"

He stared at her in mingled triumph and horror. "You sure?"

"I'm positive! That click was a dead giveaway. On a private circuit that doesn't go near the board it couldn't be anything else!"

He grabbed the clips on the ends of the leads.

"What are you going to do?"

"Put you on a local circuit, so you can call the police," he said grimly. "I don't know if we're guessing right, but if we are the cops ought to know about it pronto!"

AS HE fumbled nervously with the clips he heard the roar of a motor from the nearby road. From the tail of his eye he caught a fleeting glimpse through the trees of a big green sedan going like a bat out of hell, and apparently trying to go faster by the minute. He hardly noticed it at the time, but he remembered it later.

No sooner did he get the clips on a new pair than she shook her head at him. "Busy line," she said. "Try another."

He shifted the leads to a pair on the lower cross-arm. Again she shook her head. "They're ringing on here," she said. "Must be an uncompleted call. I can't break in."

"Damn!" he muttered. "Wouldn't you know, when you're in a hurry—"

As he moved the clips again, he thought he heard faint sounds from the ground, not far away, but they came from behind his back, and he did not take the time to turn and look until after he had clipped on to another pair. Then he saw nothing but bushes and tree-tops.

"All right, Rig," she said softly, and then louder, "Operator! Emergency—I want police headquarters, quick!"

He nodded in satisfaction. "Ask for Mike Vail," he told her.

"Hello, police headquarters? Is this Mike Vail? . . . Oh, good! This is Miss Sandrick, with the telephone company. . . . No, I'm not at the office now, I'm up on a pole, with Rig. Out on Whaley Turnpike, where he had that trouble last Friday. We've just discovered that the private circuit connecting the propeller company with the bank has been tapped! . . . Yes, tapped—someone listening in! Rig thinks that a payroll hold-up is being attempted, and he—"

The words froze momentarily on her lips. They heard the steely whine of the bullet first, followed instantly by the flat bang of the shot. Both of their heads jerked around simultaneously. In the clearing where he had eaten his lunch a week before Rig saw a figure crouching behind a stump. There was a tiny flash of scarlet flame, and one of the wires close to his ear went *s-s-zing!* Two feet of stub curled back against the pole with a snap.

"Hey!" cried Rig angrily. Exposed like a fixed target, he had a horribly naked feeling. "Sandy, get down—quick!"

She was paying no attention to him, but was once more speaking rapidly into the handset, giving Mike the names of the streets. Another shot rang out with a hollow roar. Sandy screamed sharply.

Rig suddenly remembered the Colt which he had dropped in the pocket of his jumper. He jerked it out and swiveled in his belt. He dared not look at Sandy for a moment. If that last bullet had hit her, he would never forgive himself. He

peered toward the stump and leveled the gun. When he squeezed the trigger, the automatic hammered out four or five shots in quick succession before he could relax his grip. He saw spurts of dirt and pebbles in the clearing, and also saw a man's figure roll out from behind the stump, stiffen, and lie still. When the shooting ceased it was ominously quiet.

"They should be on Fourteenth about this time!" Sandy was yelling into the handset, with magnificent disregard of the target practice going on around her. "Or perhaps on Old Mill Road. Have you sent out the car? We have no way of telling where the listeners were—"

"Sandy, are you all right?" cried Rig.

"Yes, yes!" she said hurriedly. He didn't know for a moment whether she was speaking to him or to the man at the other end of the line. "It jerked my safety belt, that's all. Frightened me for a minute. . . . Yes, Old Mill Road," she went on, into the instrument. "If they're cutting across from Whaley Turnpike, they'll probably take one of those streets on the east edge of town—"

Rig looked again toward the clearing, and felt a sudden sinking sensation in his stomach. To kill a man was after all a terrible thing, and the sight of that motionless figure unnerved him. Come to think of it, this had been all carried out on a wild guess. What if there were some awful mistake, and he had shot an innocent fellow man?

"I'll be right back," he said in a hollow voice and unsnapped his safety belt.

He went down the pole with dangerously long strides, hearing Sandy still talking above his head. He ran through soft muck and up the grassy slope, his eyes riveted to the man who lay flat on his back near the stump. He was a short, stocky man of middle age with dark, curly hair and a swarthy complexion. His eyes were half open, showing only the whites, and there was a sticky smear where his necktie should have been. Two slugs from that heavy automatic had plowed through the upper half of his chest, and he had probably died instantly. Rig, bending over him, felt a sudden sharp prod in the small of his back.

"Stick 'em up—high!" commanded a high-pitched voice.

RIG straightened up slowly, raising his hands without turning his head. He cursed himself inwardly. Why had he utterly neglected the possibility of two men being left to dismantle the tap, instead of just one? Intent on an errand of mercy, he had walked straight into a trap. From behind him a hand extracted the Colt.

"All right, you can let 'em down now," said the voice. "But keep 'em where they belong. You won't get away with no tricks this time!"

Rig turned, to see the skinny youth with the freckled face and the washed-out blue eyes. He was grinning evilly.

"It's you," said Rig. "I thought so. Only I didn't think so quite soon enough."

"You're damned right you didn't," replied the other, hefting the automatic familiarly. He jerked his head in the direction of the pole line. "Looks like you tried to gum the job on us. But you're too late, pal. It's pulled off by now. Snicker Gulick don't lose no time."

Rig recognized the name from accounts of gangster activities in the newspapers. "Oh, so that's who is running this stick-up, is it?"

"Yeah, but you won't ever be telling anybody about it," was the ominous reply. "The boys were to come back this way and pick up me and Nick," he went on, glancing callously at the stiffening figure by the stump. "Nick won't need picking up, but I need you and your truck. There may be a little excitement over on the other road, and they might have to change their plans. You come in mighty handy."

He gestured with the gun toward the road, being careful to stay at a safe distance from Rig's long arms. "Go in front of me. If any cars are passing, stand still."

For just an instant Rig hesitated. Sandy was still up the pole, he hated to leave her. This young tough with the gun had been some distance behind his companion—perhaps he hadn't noticed Sandy at all. If so, there was certainly no point in calling his attention to her presence. Rig headed for the road without a backward glance.

In the truck Rig took the wheel, the other man sliding in on his right. He sat as far from Rig as possible, keeping the gun in his right hand, well out of reach of a possible grab.

"Go straight down this road," he or-

dered. "At the second crossing turn left—the road with the concrete center and the black-top shoulders. And step on it—I ain't afraid to go fast."

Rig tried to hold it down to forty, but couldn't get away with it.

"This meat-wagon will do a lot more than this," the other remarked acidly. "Open up!"

His left foot slammed down on Rig's instep, pressing the accelerator to the floor and holding it there. The motor hummed warmly, and the light truck rocked.

"Here's your corner coming!" cried Rig.

"O. K.—swing it!"

The truck leaned on two wheels, the tires shrieking as they made the turn.

They were tearing along a better road now, doing close to sixty. From far behind him Rig heard the faint wail of a siren, and stole a glance in his rear-vision mirror. A car was a speck on the concrete behind him, but in spite of his speed was coming up hand over fist. His passenger peered backward, too, and saw it.

"Give her the gun!" he commanded frantically. "Step on it, damn your dirty hide, or I swear I'll let you have it right here!"

Rig fed her a little more gas

"No, wait a minute!" shouted his companion suddenly. "Take it easy, I think it's them!" He thrust out his head. "Yeah, it's Snicker! It's them! They never stopped for Nick and me, the rats! I'll fix 'em for that, by God! Slow down, slow down, you punk!"

He had twisted around and had one foot out on the running board, the better to see toward the rear. The other car, a dark green sedan, was roaring up rapidly. Rig watched it in his mirror. He heard the moan of its horn as it blew for him to move over. He did not move over, but clung to the middle of the road. The horn growled. "Snicker! Take it easy, will ya! It's me—it's Fred!"

The radiator of the sedan was thirty feet behind the truck. Rig could see the driver's head silhouetted behind the windshield. He could also see a head and arm extended from the right window. His passenger was half out in the open now, waving madly with the arm that held the automatic while he held on with the other.

Instead of slowing down, Rig was gaining speed again.

THROUGH the rush of the wind and the wild roar of both engines he heard the sharp flat crack of gunfire. In the mirror he could see the jets of flame where the hand and arm projected from the sedan. He crouched lower over the wheel and returned his gaze just in time to the road ahead. There was a curve—he took it with a dizzy swoop.

The freckled passenger had been cursing furiously at not being recognized—or perhaps at being fired at, recognized or no. But now abruptly his curses ended in a terrible strangling scream. Rig did not know until later whether a bullet did it, or the sudden curve, but the fellow lost his balance and swayed outward. He clutched desperately. His scanty grip failed to save him, but only pitched him downward close to the side of the truck. He vanished, and immediately there was a terrific jolt as the rear wheel passed over his shoulder.

At that speed it was nearly fatal. It took all of Rig's strength and skill to keep from careening into the ditch. With brakes and wheel he managed to keep control, slowing as quickly as he dared. When he had a grip on the road once more he looked in the mirror. There was nothing to be seen behind him. The road was empty. He braked to a halt and jumped out.

The green sedan was on its back, fifty feet off the road in an orchard, the body crumpled around a tree-trunk. The wheels were still spinning merrily, and apples were bouncing on the axles. Several hundred yards back along the concrete lay a huddle of clothing that did not move.

The wail of a siren was closer. By the time Rig got near the sedan a coupe with a wireless antenna and a spotlight on its roof was slewing to a stop in the road. He waited and let the police tug at the jammed doors. After all, that was their job. It was a bad mess inside—for several minutes they were uncertain whether there were two bodies in there or three. Mike Vail got Rig to one side after a little and pieced out the details of the action.

"Sure, they must have had a tap on that line for a couple of weeks," he nodded. "That gave them the route and the exact time, to a dot. If we'd had the tip a few

minutes later, they'd have gotten away clean. We've got cars out all over the county. I'd like to call in to headquarters and call them off." He looked around. "There doesn't seem to be any house around, does there?"

"Hell, we can clip in a handset on one of those wires up there—" began Rig. Suddenly he turned pale, and clapped his hand to his forehead.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Mike. Rig was already sprinting for his truck. "Sandy!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Sandy—my God!"

This time he never let the accelerator up off the floorboards once. He slid to a stop on Whaley Turnpike with wheels locked and leaped out.

"Sandy!" he was yelling. "Sandy!"

He saw her figure up at the top of the pole, but got no reply. He went up the pole like an ape after a coconut, still yelling. And he was none too soon. Her muscles, frozen with fatigue, were on the point of letting her down. He grabbed her bodily and took her down slung over his shoulder like a sack. Once on the ground he still held her in his arms.

"Sandy, you're all right?" he demanded, over and over.

"I—guess so. But oh, those spurs—"

"I know, I know! You're not used to it—your legs must be broken. Why didn't you come down, though?"

"I was afraid to, by myself. You said you'd be right back—"

"Yeah, but he held a gun on me, made me drive him off in the truck. Oh, they're all rounded up now. Mike caught up with us. I'll tell you about it afterward. All I want to know is, are you all right? Can you walk, do you think?"

She laid her head on his shoulder. "I don't want to walk."

He grinned happily. "You don't have to." Then he noticed that she still clutched the handset. "You little dope," he said gently. "Why didn't you buzz the office, get some other lineman out to help you? What do you think this is for?"

She stared blankly at the instrument. "I never thought of that. You took me up, you'd bring me down. I guess I didn't think of anything but you, Rig."

"Stick to that for always, will you, Sandy?" he murmured.