

SPECIAL REASON ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ By Louis Griffin

Willie Sharpe found that observation pays off at times!

WILLIE SHARPE, at the soda fountain, was serving his customers automatically. His mind wasn't on his job. He needed money badly, lots of it. He had a special reason.

He looked up. The letter carrier was just coming in to collect the daily receipts from the drugstore's post office substation.

Willie watched the carrier standing before the grilled cage near the soda fountain. Then he resumed his work. He sent cool drinks sliding across the polished counter to impatient customers.

"Plenty of money in this town and I mean to have some of it," Willie resolved grimly.

People thirsty and ill-tempered from the broiling sun of a July afternoon, streamed in from the street, dropping wearily at Willie's fountain. He worked feverishly, meantime, watching every move of the letter carrier. The last customer served, Willie slipped from behind the fountain.

He knew the carrier was waiting for the substation's daily remittance. Willie sauntered up to him. "Hello, carrier."

"Hi," the man in uniform replied, eyeing him sharply.

"New on this route, aren't you?"

He regarded Willie thoughtfully. "Yeah, I am."

Willie moved closer to him. "I know a lot of the boys at your station."

The man made no reply.

The ash-blond girl in the cage was laboring over her account. The carrier's eyes were going continually from her to the wall clock at her back.

"Where's Jimmy?" Willie inquired.

"Who?" The carrier's eyes remained glued to the figures the girl was adding.

"Jimmy Weaver, regular carrier on this route."

"Oh, him. He's er—sick."

"Stomach bothering him again?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Stomach."

"I told Jimmy he was drinking too many cokes this hot weather," Willie remarked, smiling.

HE SIDLED up beside the carrier. "How do you like the post office?"

The man looked at him quizzically. "All right—good as any job."

Willie watched the girl in the cage take a large sheaf of bills from a drawer and count them slowly, then check off a three-figured number on the tally sheet. She returned the bills to the drawer, brought out another wad and did the same.

"What time are you due at the office?" Willie asked, hoping to remind the girl of the time.

"I'm overdue now."

The girl slightly raised her eyes and continued. Willie knew Fran wouldn't hurry. She was just filling in, while the regular girl was on vacation. The post office department had discovered several errors in Fran's account and had warned her to be more careful.

Willie and the carrier watched her painstakingly run a pencil down a column of figures, whispering the result to herself. She finished and counted the bills again, checked them against the tally sheet, then slid the bills into an official envelope and sealed it.

The man in uniform watched impatiently, while Willie looked on, thinking what he could do with that much money. "You fellows catch it when you're late?" Willie said looking at Fran.

The carrier grimaced. "We catch hell."

Willie wondered how his own 160 pounds would look in a letter carrier's uniform. He stepped back, surveying the well-built man. His curious eyes roving slowly upward over the uniform, stopped abruptly, settling on the badge. "That makes it official, the badge," Willie thought. His eyes lingered on it. Letter carriers' badges had always fascinated him, since Jimmy Weaver told him that a carrier's uniform could command no respect without a badge.

He strolled across the floor to the telephone booths, entered one, deposited a nickel and dialed a number.

WHEN Willie came out he saw the carrier signing the remittance sheet. Then Fran gave him a sealed envelope. That would be the sheaves

of bills. Next she handed him a large, stout, khaki-colored envelope, its flap glued with sealing wax. Willie knew that was the jacket containing the registered articles.

He went to the door and looked up and down the busy street, ostensibly for a breath of fresh air to dispel the heavy, sweetish drugstore odor from his lungs.

Then he slipped behind the fountain. The carrier glanced irritably at the wall clock and hurried toward the street. A customer was yelling for service. Willie didn't hear him.

"Hey, carrier, have a soda," Willie called as he put something in a glass.

The carrier shook his head and went out. A deflated look darkened Willie's face.

He leaped from behind the fountain and dashed to the street. He saw the carrier's retreating back. The man was walking fast, clutching his bag. Willie started to run.

The carrier was nearing the corner. Willie—one step in back of him—employed a commando trick. His leg shot between the carrier's. The man in uniform sprawled to the pavement, losing his cap, but clinging to his bag. Willie pounced on him, fists flailing the man's face. The carrier flung his assailant away, and came up in a sitting position with a gun in his hand.

WILLIE hurled himself at the carrier again. A crowd was collecting. A bystander roughly shoved Willie off the carrier, who was bringing his gun up just as the corner traffic cop pushed through the crowd and knocked it from his hand. He collared Willie and the carrier, jerking both to their

feet.

"What's going on here?" the cop demanded.

"Officer, arrest that man," the carrier yelled, pointing at Willie. "He's interfering with the United States mail. That's a federal offense."

"That guy's a phony," Willie shouted.

The carrier lunged at him. "Officer, arrest that man and let me go. This uniform speaks for me."

The officer scowled at Willie. "Howdayuh mean phony?"

"He's got the wrong number."

"Wrong number?" the cop barked.

"Look," said Willie pointing to the pavement. "See that cap. Shield number 2504. That's Jimmy Weaver's number. Two carriers in the same office don't have the same shield number."

"Right," agreed a tall, frosty-complexioned man, elbowing his way out of the crowd.

"Hello, Inspector Craig," said Willie. "You got here quick."

"Your call was relayed from the main office to the local station," the inspector explained. "We just found Weaver. He was slugged as he was making a shortcut through a deserted warehouse. Uniform and badge missing."

The two men with the inspector took the impostor away.

Craig tapped Willie on the shoulder. "I'm reporting you to the postmaster for frustrating a mail robbery. That means a nice present for you."

"Thanks," said Willie. "I expect to be a police rookie soon. Needed money to get married first."

THE END