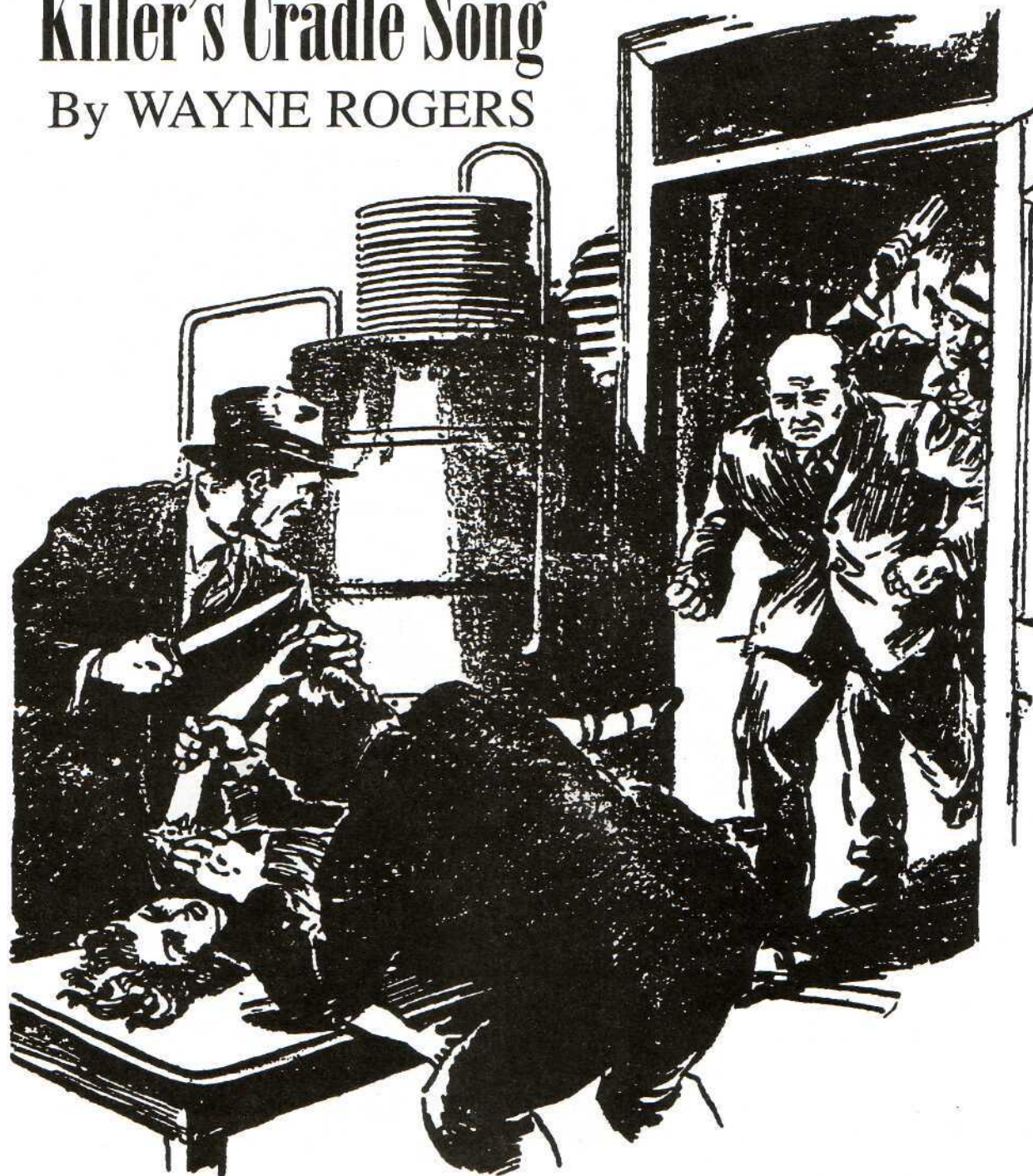


Killer's Cradle Song

By WAYNE ROGERS



When the nursemaid was hacked to death before Brother Henry's very eyes, and her tiny charge spirited away, the guardian of the Five Corners' Mission had but one choice. To avenge this horror, he must follow a torture-trail that led through a nursery of murder and a bureau which married brides to the Devil!

BROTHER HENRY mopped the perspiration from his bald head with a soggy handkerchief. His face was mottled, for, when a man reaches the fifty-year mark, climbing up and down five flights of stairs in a dingy, foul-smelling tenement takes something out of him. That was the trouble down here in the Five Corners—bells were out of order so often that they couldn't be trusted. Nothing to do but trudge all the way upstairs, and then maybe

find that there was nobody home ... It was all he could do.

Suddenly, the moist handkerchief stopped as if glued in place. Brother Henry's usually placid face became wide-eyed, paled as the churning blood ebbed out of his cheeks. Like a statue, in his rusty black suit and hat, he stood-listening, every nerve aquiver; and then he was racing down the street with surprising speed for one of his plumpish build.

Ordinarily a crowded street, at that moment it was miraculously deserted—except for the young woman who lay on the sidewalk, shrieking and strangling in her own blood! Except for the girl and the fellow who bent over her, swiping at her viciously with something that gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight!

The girl had been running and screaming. She had tripped and fallen—and in the next split-second that wicked blade was slashing at her. All this Brother Henry saw in the twinkling of an eye; and then he was racing frantically to her rescue.

It was too late; he knew it even as his legs got into motion. The assailant leaped to one side, darted through the awestricken onlookers who were beginning to gather seemingly from nowhere, and then was off down the street and around a corner — but not before Brother Henry had caught a fleeting glimpse of his face. That one glimpse told him that the fellow was not a regular denizen of the Five Corners, even if there *was* something familiar about his features...

As soon as Brother Henry dropped to the sidewalk beside the girl he saw that she was dying. Her throat was almost severed, and her neck and breast had been cruelly hacked. Blood was gushing from her, saturating her clothing.

"Hilda!" he gasped in amazement. "Hilda Carlbund!" as he recognized the nursemaid for whom the New York police had been searching

for a full week. "What happened to you, child?"

But the girl couldn't talk; she could barely breathe. There was little that could be done for her, but at least he could get her off the sidewalk and to the near-by mission. There, he might do a little something to ease her pain. Willing hands helped him lift her into the cab he had signaled—and, as the taxi sped the few blocks to the settlement house that was his home and headquarters, Brother Henry puzzled over it.

A week ago Hilda Carlbund had disappeared one afternoon with her charge, young Jerome Taylor, four-year-old son of a fairly well-to-do merchant. That was Hilda Carlbund, who lived all her life in the Five Corners until she went uptown to work. Overnight, all the city knew about her and was hunting her and the Taylor child. But it had been useless. Not a word had come from her.

Of little Jerome there had been plenty sign. Each day one of his baby garments, hideously blood-soaked, had arrived at his parents' home with a ransom demand that was preposterous. The sum was altogether beyond the reach of the frantic family. Only today the papers were carrying photographs of his last garment—the blood-stained undershirt that had been closest to his little body.

And here was Hilda Carlbund, dying in Brother Henry's arms!

JOHAN SMITH, his assistant and all-around, right-hand man at the Community House, was at the door almost the instant the taxi came to a stop. The moment he saw the bloody burden Brother Henry handed out to him, Smith's angular, square-jawed face blanched. Several times before Smith had seen flowing blood, Brother Henry had recalled, but never had it affected him this way—never had it made him so ashen-white, tremendously agitated.

Brother Henry was scurrying around, rush-

ing to his medicine-chest, sending Smith after water and towels. Although he was no physician, emergency doctoring was among the multifarious chores which had become his.

Hilda Carlbund's breathing was easier, but her eyes were already glazing.

"Jerry—my baby!" she gasped. "Those—terrible—butchers—"

"Who are they, Hilda?"

The blood-drained lips moved. Sound began to issue from them. But if Hilda Carlbund named her killer only John Smith heard her. For, at that moment, his broad-shouldered figure suddenly intervened between her and Brother Henry as he lifted her slight body in his arms—then the death rattle was choking her, and she was no more.

At that moment, resenting his assistant's sudden intrusion, it also came to Brother Henry where he had seen the face of the knife-wielding killer. It had been right here in the Community House! Two weeks ago, after evening service, the man had been standing there in the doorway talking to John Smith!

"She was murdered by a man who would be handsome except for a pair of dark, too closely set eyes," Brother Henry said slowly as he looked down at the still form Smith was lowering to a bench. "A young man you appeared to know, John. I remember seeing you talking to him after one of our meetings."

John Smith's face was still pale, but shook his head. "So many strangers come here," he said slowly. "You could hardly expect me to remember."

THE police came and took Hilda Carlbund's body away. They had found no trace of her killer. They jotted down the description Brother Henry gave them.

He would always remember that close-eyed killer and be on the lookout for him. But, meanwhile, perhaps there might be a clue worth something that could be gleaned

from her family. He lost no time following his hunch. But, when he had climbed up to the squalid three rooms that were the Carlbund domicile, there was little there to reward his effort. Only Hilda's old mother was at home.

"Man—crazy—dat vas it," she repeated over and over. "Man—crazy she vas. Crazy she should get married. Not vun of our boys here—no, no! She should marry a rich man—a man out of her class. Even so crazy she vas going around to marriage brokers—agencies, vat you call dem? Like this new vun on Lun-deen Street. Nothing good comes out of things like dat. I knew it, but Hilda would not listen—"

Brother Henry climbed down those stairs again and began patrolling the Five Corners. Block after block, he combed; day after day, for nearly a week. It seemed that sometime he must glimpse the face of that close-eyed killer again. But by the sixth day he had had no success—and then the newspapers were again smeared with black, screaming headlines.

LITTLE BARBARA STERLING, the five-year-old daughter of millionaire Stewart Sterling, had disappeared with her nurse the night before! The police dragnet had failed to bring in a single clue to their fate or whereabouts.

Brother Henry stared at the ominous looking headlines, and could feel his bald scalp prickling. The nurse, Gladys Tiedeman, was a Five Corners girl! This wasn't just a coincidence, a sixth sense whispered—or instinct that had been uncannily dependable in warning him when his people were in danger. Something hellish was brewing down there in the Five Corners; something that was preying on these bewildered souls so helpless without his guidance and protection ...

But what could it be? Where should he begin to look?

All the way back to the Community House

he debated that. If only John Smith could recall that man with whom he had talked in the doorway—then they might be able to get somewhere. Perhaps, if he were prodded again, it might stir his memory. But when Brother Henry went downstairs to John Smith's basement quarters they were empty. The man's clothing and personal effects were gone, on his table a brief note. John Smith had unexpectedly been called away for a few days.

Brother Henry's placid eyes were unusually narrowed as he glanced around that room. Until a year ago, it had been merely a basement room, but since John Smith had moved into it the four walls with the simple furnishings had seemed to imbibe something of his rugged, uncommunicative personality. And now John Smith was gone ...

It hardly seemed that it was little more than a year since that night when Brother Henry had matched his two fists against gangster weapons to rescue a man, whom he had never seen, from walking, unsuspecting, into a death-trap. That man, when the battle was over, introduced himself as John Smith. Sum and substance, it was all that Brother Henry had ever learned about his past.

"John Smith" had moved into the basement room that very night and immediately constituted himself a combination fireman, janitor, caretaker and all-around assistant of the Community House. An excellent man to have around; a splendid worker, and reliable in every way. But about his past, he had said never a word—though, on more than one occasion, unexpected talents had suddenly bobbed up out of it. Talents that came in very handy.

Brother Henry idly pulled out empty drawers, opened stripped closets, picked up a scrap of paper and discarded it. Then he got down on his knees to fish out a sheet of memo paper that barely stuck out from beneath John Smith's bureau. Brother Henry straightened the slightly crumpled paper in his hand. Then his eyes

widened.

The names of eight girls were listed on that sheet—eight girls born and raised in the Five Corners and now working for wealthy families as maids or governesses! Eight names in John Smith's handwriting—and one of them Gladys Tiedeman!

The vision of John Smith talking to that sleek-haired killer in the Community House doorway flashed back into Brother Henry's mind. With it came a vision of Smith's white-faced agitation when Hilda Carlbund had died—of the way he had intervened just when the dying girl was gasping the name of her murderer. Somehow, John Smith was involved in these kidnappings!

RESTLESSLY, Brother Henry roamed the narrow, congested streets of the Five Corners, his eyes seeking, seeking. He sought two men now—John Smith and the close-eyed killer who had talked with him. But nowhere was there a trace of either. Then suddenly it came to Brother Henry that he was making no progress this way, and was neglecting another possibility. The other girls on that list! Surely, suspicious overtures had been made to some of them!

Brother Henry checked his list and began the canvass. It was slow work. In some cases, he could not get in to see the girls at all. In others, nothing worth while was to be learned. But finally, when he sat in her room with blond young Olga Zabriski, he stumbled upon something that sent a tingle of excitement down his spine. Lying on the table, which served her as a desk, was tossed a printed prospectus from a marriage agency on Lundeen Street ...

Eligible bachelors, wealthy young men seeking wives, Marry into High Society, Love and Luxury await You, A Happy Married Life Yours for the Taking, Ease, Clothing, Travel, The Things You have always wanted in Life. One after the other, these alluring phrases

leaped up at Brother Henry as he listened to Olga's rambling prattle. The Harmon Bureau, he noted the name and the address. Lundeen Street—that was the new agency to which Hilda Carlbund had gone. Suddenly, he recalled that it was only a block from Lundeen Street that the girl had been overtaken and murdered!

Brother Henry could feel the fine hairs at the back of his neck rising like those of a hound on the scent. He knew that address on Lundeen Street—knew it well. The building was a noisome, crowded tenement—no fit location for an agency of any character or consequence.

As soon as he could get away from the Zabriski girl, he started back downtown, and, half an hour later, was in front of the six-story tenement, inspecting it carefully before he went into the vestibule. There, beneath one of the bells, was what he sought—an aluminum nameplate for the Harmon Agency. It was located on the top floor, left hand, back in the rear.

Brother Henry didn't ring that bell. He didn't even stop at the Harmon door when he had plodded his way up through the choking smells that clotted the dimly lighted stairs and hallways. Past it he went until he reached a closet-like opening that contained a ladder leading up to a scuttle in the roof. Through this, he groped his way across the dark roof until he reached the fire escape.

THERE was a light in two of the three windows in the apartment beneath him, and he made his way down the treacherous-runged ladder very gingerly until he stood on the sixth-floor landing. The window immediately at the foot of the ladder was closed and dark, but as he pressed close to it he heard a sound that set him aquiver with excitement.

The low, whimpering cry of a little child!

Cautiously, he tried the window, but it was locked on the inside. Warily, he crept across to

the lighted windows. The shade behind each was drawn—one clear to the bottom—but there was a ribbon of light about an inch deep beneath the other.

Brother Henry knelt and put his eyes to the slit. It was all that he could do to suppress the shout of exultation that bubbled up into his throat. The room into which he peered was roughly fitted out like an office, with desk and chairs—and backed against the desk was Gladys Tiedeman, struggling helplessly in the hands of the killer whose knife had hacked Hilda Carlbund to death!

The fellow had a rope, which he was lashing around her wrists, then around her body to secure her helplessly as he up-ended her on the desk and tied her ankles.

"Peter! Peter—what have I done?" she was pleading frightenedly. "Why are you doing this to me? You promised!"

A brutal slap across the mouth cut short her protests, and she subsided into smothered sobs as her eyes fearfully followed his every movement. Brother Henry's eyes probed into a far corner of the room where a figure lay huddled on the floor. That figure was John Smith—John Smith, unconscious, perhaps dead!

If he could only manage to get that window open and leap in on the killer ...

With infinite caution he applied his fingers to the casing, pushed upward. The window yielded beneath his efforts, began to open—and suddenly it was as if something had exploded inside his head! Something that burst a blaze of light in front of his eyes as splitting pain penetrated every inch of his skull!

He was falling—but he fought that off, staggered groggily to his feet only to feel strong arms gripping him, holding him helpless.

"Open up!" he heard a rough voice husking to the fellow inside the room. "Here's a wise-guy who came down the fire escape. I should've bust his head instead of only clout-

ing him!"

Vaguely, Brother Henry was aware of being dumped through the window, of staggering to his feet and gaping stupidly around the shabby office—a slovenly office with a milk bottle and the remains of a meal on dirty plates on the mantelpiece. Sickening waves of nausea were sweeping over him, and his head felt as if it must burst with pain. But, gradually, command of his senses was coming back.

"Geez!" he heard the close-eyed killer swear. "This is the lousy sky-pilot that almost nabbed me when that Hilda dame cut loose and tried to make a break. I been waitin' to get a crack at him."

His hand flashed to his hip pocket and came out with a snub-nosed automatic that covered Brother Henry's stomach. The close-set eyes narrowed, glinting with the evil lust of the born killer. But suddenly the other man stepped in the way. He was older than the youth; a man of about fifty, paunchy and hard-faced, stamped with dissipation.

"Hold it, you fool!" he snapped. "So this is the big shot from the Community House, eh?" he regarded Brother Henry speculatively. "Played right into our hands nicely, didn't you? Don't you see what this means?" he turned on the killer. "We're collecting through the Community House, ain't we? That's the idea—and now we've got the boss, himself, to do the writing for us. What could be sweeter? Over there to that desk, you!" he gripped one of Brother Henry's arms, twisted it behind him and half-kicked him across the office.

Out of the desk drawer he took a sheet of paper and red crayon pencil. He thrust one in front of the prisoner and jammed the other between his fingers. Dully, Brother Henry stared down at the paper—and then his ears tingled, strained. That was a noise in the hallway! Someone was coming to the door—someone who might ...

But the young killer's gun muzzle was cold and hard against a spot just behind his ear—and when the door opened it was to admit another thug of the same sheik type. Instead of aid, the new arrival had made the odds even more hopeless.

SICK at heart, Brother Henry sat there and wrote as he was directed. He wrote a barbarous, cold-blooded demand for an extortionate ransom—ransom that was to be paid through the Community House if the parents of little Barbara Sterling ever again expected to see her alive. There was nothing to be done against such odds. Any attempt of resistance would only mean quick death, the end of any slight hope that might still remain. Yet, the moment he had finished the final word, he wished to God that he had flung that crayon to the floor and refused to write a single line, even though that meant immediate death!

"Good!" the grey-haired devil chuckled, picking up the ransom note and eyeing it with satisfaction. "We won't lose no time with this Sterling bozo. We'll send him a little reminder of his brat, with the note. Come on in with me, Harry—you're a pretty good surgeon. You stay out and keep an eye on this preacher, Pete."

With fearful clarity those words seeped into Brother Henry's brain! He remembered the pitiful, blood-stained garments that had gone back, one by one, to little Jerry Taylor's folks. These hell creatures had the Sterling child in the other room, and were going to mangle her—to send part of her body back to her distracted father as a warning of what would happen to her if he delayed settling with them!

The door of that side room opened. A light flashed on, and then it closed behind the inhuman monsters—closed on a child's startled scream! That piteous cry stabbed Brother

Henry to the heart, chilled his bones. Then a torrent of red rage rioted in him.

The killer was no longer standing at his side. He had moved to a position in front of a desk from which he could grin mockingly at his prisoner while he toyed with the gun. From the other room came a shrill, childish shriek of terror. The killer glanced toward the door, smirked—and in that moment Brother Henry went into action.

Up from the desk-top he swept a full well of ink, hurled it full in the killer's face, to blind him with the black bath a split-second before the berserk avenger came leaping across the desk-top with pounding fists. With one sweep of his strong right arm, Brother Henry batted the automatic out of the fellow's hand and sent it flying across the room. Guns did not interest him; all that he needed was his capable pair of punishing fists.

He took fierce delight in pounding that bleating killer, smashing him back, beating him to the floor. Again and again, he hit.

Then Brother Henry was across the room, flinging wide the door to what looked like an anteroom of hell. Evidently, that room had been used as an illegal distillery. Bottles and jars lined the walls, and the giant, writhing worm of an illicit still filled all of one end. In the center was a dirty kitchen table on which that devil's own drama was being enacted.

Pinned down, beneath the brutal hands of the old man, was the squirming body of little Barbara Sterling, doll torn from her fingers and tossed to the floor, to be trodden on by the evil-eyed killer who held one of her tiny hands outspread while he poised a carving knife to hack off one of her fingers!

For a moment, Brother Henry poised there in the doorway, his fists white-knuckled while those inhuman monsters gaped up at him in snarling amazement. Something in the eyes of the knife-wielder warned him—a gleam of

exultation a second too soon—and Brother Henry hurled himself out of the way just as a milk bottle in Pete's hand smashed down on his left shoulder. It would have brained him had he not jerked his head out of the way just in time.

Pete raised his bottle for another vicious blow, just as his partners came running to his assistance. But before he could again bring the weapon down—a shot roared out in the office, and the back of Pete's head spurted blood as he pitched to the floor. Brother Henry did not wait to investigate the source of the shot. His balled fist swept up and caught the grey-head on the side of the jaw, and then he was boring in like a bull, his hand reaching for that carving knife as he hurled himself at the fellow called Harry. Once the knife got free, ripped down his arm, cutting through his coat and slicing into the flesh beneath—then his fingers closed around the fellows wrist, bent it back inexorably until he howled with pain and dropped the knife.

Locked in that frenzied struggle, Brother Henry was only vaguely aware of what was going on around him. The gray-haired leader had a gun in his hand, was raising it—but there in the doorway was John Smith! John Smith with the automatic Brother Henry had knocked out of Pete's hand!

"You dirty, double-crossing rat!" the oldster snarled. "You'll not get away with it, Come—"

But again John Smith blotted out a name just as it was about to be uttered. The roar of his gun drowned it out—and its dead-center bullet silenced the old man forever.

Dimly, Brother Henry was aware of those things, just as he was aware of the shrilling of a police whistle in the room; of the rush of feet in the hallway. The police! Instantly, his mind flew to John Smith. The leader had called him a double-crosser. Did that mean that Smith had been one of this gang of kidnapers until an

eleventh-hour reformation? If it did, the police would grab him—unless he could flee by the fire escape window. But the police were already pouring through that!

DIMLY, Brother Henry was aware that they were all around John Smith, that they tore Brother Henry, himself, from the strangely still body of his antagonist—a body impaled on the sharp knife which he had been about to wield on a helpless child ...

"There's the Sterling kid!" a worried police sergeant was shouting.

"And here's the Taylor youngster stuck away in this closet!" another exultant voice announced. "Safe and sound, except that the poor kid's almost starved."

"You win, Smith," the sergeant was mopping his brow with relief. "It sure sounded to me like a crazy scheme, but you put it over—I got to hand it to you!"

"It was the only way we could trap these fellows," John Smith was saying quietly. "I used to know the old one, Jake Harmon—out West," he explained. "When they landed here in the Five Corners, they tried to talk me into their scheme, but I thought it was a crazy nightmare. I didn't think they had the nerve to try it—until little Jerry's clothes started coming back. Even then, I thought they were bluffing until they murdered Hilda Carlbund."

"They had to be gotten dead to rights and stamped out. But the only way I could do that was to hunt them up and appear to throw in with them. I brought them a list of girls, such as they wanted—girls from around here who are working as maids for wealthy employers. I set them onto Gladys. But, before that, I had it all arranged with her to come down here to their marriage agency and seem to fall for one of their sheiks. That's the way they wormed their way into the confidence of Hilda Carlbund and planned to make other girls do as they were told."

"Gladys really deserves most of the credit for this stunt. She carried off her part beautifully—and, by doing it, probably saved a lot of innocent kids and girls from kidnapping and possible death. But if it hadn't been for Brother Henry"—he turned gratefully to his chief, "we'd both have been out of luck. They got wise to me tonight and belted me over the head with a gun. I was nearly unconscious on the floor, and things looked pretty bad for a while—until Brother Henry came in and tossed that gun right into my hand!"

Brother Henry grinned, but in the back of his mind his thoughts were milling.

It came to him that it made no difference what John Smith's name was. John Smith, as he was today, was all that mattered!

~ THE END ~

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