

The Key of Death

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YOUNG Dennis O'Toole, whose head was Irish cop and whose soul was Irish music, tensed at the sound of scuffling feet in the alley at his right. His flashlight beam fell on a skulking figure.

"Hands up!" he snapped.

"Okay, copper," the fellow mumbled, as he raised his hands.

A gun barrel arced from the shadows behind the officer, crashed on his head. Patrolman O'Toole crumpled unconscious on the pavement, forgot his

spare in place behind the tool box. He finished this, strode to the left rear wheel, now clear of the ground, dropped the steel wrench to ring sharply on the paving while he pried at the hubcap. This cap, more tightly fitted than the other, sprang loose with a high-pitched "ping."

DENNIS O'TOOLE, whose head was Irish cop and whose soul was Irish music, listened, smiled to himself.

Slug Stiever and Nick Ronni finished changing



"You're a sap, fella," Slug Stiever growled

concentration on harmonies for the Irish harp that the shuffling steps had interrupted.

The lawman woke to find himself bound and gagged in the tonneau of a speeding sedan. Cautious tests soon convinced him he could not loosen the bonds that sawed at his wrists and ankles.

A sudden, brief hiss rose above the whir of the tires on the concrete. With a muttered oath the driver slowed, stopped the car on the graveled shoulder at the right of the paving. The two men in the front seat leaped out. They found the left rear tire was flat.

O'Toole heard the box at the rear of the car jerked open, heard the clatter and scrape of the jack on the gravel. The long, steel handle rang on the concrete beside it. The "ping" of the spare wheel's springing hubcap followed a brief, metallic scrape.

While one man set the jack and began raising the axle, the other unscrewed the nuts that held the

wheel and got back in the auto. The car shot forward again. As it began to dip and rise along the twisting concrete, O'Toole knew the hoodlums were heading for the two hundred-mile-distant Carver City, notorious hiding place for crooks. But deep in the heart of the rocky, brush-covered breaks along Miller Creek they stopped, dragged their prisoner out of the car.

"You're a sap, fella, not to put a slug in his head and throw him into the brush," Slug Stiever growled. "Then he sure can't talk when they find him."

Nick Ronni laughed contemptuously. "Never kill a cop unless you have to. Raises too much hell—and gets 'em all taking a personal interest."

Ronni's argument won. The hoodlums carried O'Toole, now feigning unconsciousness, into the brush. They bound him to a tough young oak, and left him.

"We'll be far away when he gets loose," Nick

Officer Dennis O'Toole Combines Music with Sleuthing

Ronni chuckled, as they hurried back to their car.

Dennis O'Toole was free much quicker than they thought. Scuffing about the foot of the oak with his feet, he soon uncovered a stone with a jagged edge. Working his body painfully downward until he squatted on his heels, he hooked the cord that bound his wrists across the edge of the stone. The edge made a saw that quickly cut through the hemp.

Stiever and Ronni still were far from their goal when O'Toole woke a filling station man at the edge of the breaks. A minute later he had Night-sergeant Chambers on the line.

"Those hoods are wanted somewhere," he said at the close of his brief report.

"They're wanted here," Sergeant Chambers growled. "Tim Lacey, night watchman at the Avenue Jewelry Store, was killed tonight by robbers who looted the safe. They must have thought you were on their trail when they snatched you."

O'Toole understood then. The rear of the Avenue Jewelry Store was only a dozen steps from the alley mouth where he had been slugged.

"Broadcast a pick-up order for all sedans with demountable wheels," he snapped, "sedans that have the spare wheel and the tool box in the rear. That's the kind of a car those hoods drove—and I'll know the one that was theirs."

Two hours later Dennis O'Toole arrived at the state patrol's division headquarters just out of Carver City. The troopers already had picked up four cars that answered his description. Drivers and passengers were under guard in the assembly room.

"We've searched the cars and frisked the people," Captain Thorne, veteran of the state patrol, told O'Toole. "We didn't find anything that even looked like loot from a jewelry store."

Dennis O'Toole smiled. "It isn't certain yet that one of these is the kidnapper's car."

TROOPERS and the group in the assembly room stared as O'Toole stepped to the first in the line of cars. Opening the tool box, he took out the jack handle, dropped it on the concrete. Before the ring of the steel had died, he picked up the handle, dropped it back in the box, and closed the lid.

He repeated this at the second car, while the puzzled expressions deepened on the faces of the spectators. Contempt also showed on the faces of

two of the men who watched through a window, glancing now and then at each other.

O'Toole's eyes grew brighter as the jack handle from the third car rang on the concrete. He took a screwdriver from the tool box, started to remove the hubcap from the spare wheel, suddenly remembered the roadside change, and strode to the left rear wheel. He pried off the hubcap that sprang free with a lifeless "clunk." The shadow of disgust passed over his face as he replaced the hubcap, tossed the tools back in the box, and closed the lid.

When the lawman reached the fourth car, anxiety flickered an instant in the eyes of the two men whose faces heretofore had mirrored only contempt.

Again O'Toole's face registered a smile of satisfaction as the jack handle rang on the concrete. The smile gave way to a touch of grimness at the "ping" of the hubcap from the left rear wheel. His jaw set firmly when the wrench that fit the hub nuts rang on the paving. His face was stone cold justice when the hubcap of the wheel on the carrier flipped off with a high-pitched "ping."

He turned to face Captain Thorne. "This is the car the hoods who snatched me drove."

Captain Thorne didn't understand, but he took the police officer's word. He entered the assembly room, nodded to the two men from whose faces the contemptuous smiles had disappeared.

"You two come here."

Slug Stiever and Nick Ronni, unintentionally shielded by the group around them, lunged suddenly out of the room.

Captain Thorne reached the door in two strides. Two shots cracked from his automatic, and two hoods with slugs in their backs stumbled to the concrete beside their car. The captain, automatic in hand, towered above them.

"Where's the loot?" he snapped.

Nick Ronni always looked for the easiest way. "Under the bridge over Miller Creek."

The captain turned to stare again in puzzled wonder at Dennis O'Toole, whose head was Irish cop and whose soul was Irish music.

"How the devil did you figure it out?" he demanded.

O'TOOLE grinned at him, picked up the jack handle from the hoodlums' car. "Get this note." The handle rang on the paving. "That's G." He put the hubcap back on the left rear wheel, pried

it off. "Hear that 'ping'? That's D."

He quickly dropped the wrench on the concrete, and his smile grew broader. "That wrench rings a perfect F." He shoved the hubcap into place on the spare wheel, pried it off. "The note that cap 'pings' is B.

"Take those four notes together, G, D, F, and B, and you've got the dominant seventh chord in the

key of C major. I'll bet you couldn't get those same four notes in that same way from any one of another ten million cars."

Captain Thorne glanced at the wounded thugs, visioned the same two strapped in a lethal chair.

"I'd call that chord," he said grimly, "the dominant seventh in the key of death."