

MURDER HUNCH

By JOHN BENTON

Detective Ed Corey had an
idea, and played it for
all it was worth!

THE two men crouched in the shadows at the rear of the small private garage, waiting in the stillness of the autumn night. Ed Corey held an automatic ready, while Dan Stoll clutched a .38 revolver. Their gaze centered on the brush and trees off to their right.

"If he comes this way at all it's likely to be from that direction," Corey said softly. "And the moment he spots us he'll start shooting."

"Not if we shoot first," Stoll said. "But that's against police regulations. We're supposed to give a man a chance to surrender peacefully to the Law."

"Oh, sure," said Corey. "Even a killer like Ben Regan. Fat chance he'd give us."

There was something about this job that Ed Corey didn't like at all. In the ten years he had been a detective on the Center City police force he had always believed in playing hunches, and he had a feeling that there would be serious trouble before this night was over.

Ben Regan was a local gunman who was wanted as a murder suspect, but he had been keeping out of sight for the past few days and nights. He had been seen coming out of Paul Cooper's jewelry store at seven o'clock Monday night, and shortly after Walter Henderson, who had left a watch to be repaired, had walked



into the shop and found the jeweler lying dead behind the counter. He had been shot in the heart, and the store's safe had been ransacked.

Corey and Stoll had been given the job of trying to find Ben Regan and bring him in for questioning. They had searched the town without much success. If anyone knew where Regan was they weren't talking.

REGAN lived alone in a small frame house at the north end of town when he was at home. It was the first place the two detectives had looked for him. They had found the house locked up and apparently deserted. Armed with a search warrant, they had entered the house with a pass-key and gone through it from one end to the other without finding the man they were after.

They discovered that Regan's flashy and expensive convertible was in the garage behind the house. It had been Ed Corey's hunch that when and if Regan decided to leave town he would try to get away in the car, and do so under cover of darkness.

That was why Corey and Stoll had spent two nights waiting there near the garage, and were doing it again tonight.

"Sometimes I wonder if we aren't just wasting our time here, Ed," Stoll said, after a long silence. "Regan may be too smart ever to try and get the car. At least, until he feels the whole thing has blown over."

"Quiet," Corey cautioned. "Somebody's coming, Dan."

Corey aimed his automatic in the direction of the brush and trees to the right that were part of a vacant stretch of ground. A shadowy figure had appeared and stood looking toward the rear of the garage. The man was too far off and too

much in the shadows for them to be sure it was Ben Regan.

Suddenly he ducked down out of sight in the brush. An instant later a gun roared and Corey heard a bullet hum past his head.

"Let him have it," Corey grated.

Corey fired at the spot where he thought the killer had disappeared, and then heard a thrashing sound in the brush that might have been made by a mortally wounded man.

"Sounds like you got him," Stoll said. "Let's go see."

"Okay, but look out for trouble," Corey warned. "It may be a trick."

The thrashing sound ceased abruptly. They zigzagged toward the spot, so that they wouldn't present a good target if the man they were after should start shooting again.

Corey drew his flashlight with his free hand and switched it on as they reached the bushes. He circled the light around and finally gleamed it on a still figure sprawled face downward in the weeds.

"Got him, all right," Stoll said. "Regan was too smart, this time."

"Maybe," Corey said, staring at a head of thick gray hair revealed in the light. "If this is Ben Regan he sure aged in a hurry!"

From back at the garage there was the roar of a motor starting and then a flashy convertible rolled out along the driveway. It was moving fast as it reached the street.

"It's Regan!" shouted Stoll. "He's getting away in his car!"

"Don't shoot," Corey said as Stoll raised his gun. "He's too far away to stop him, and you might hit someone coming along the street."

The car disappeared around a corner. Corey dropped his automatic into a shoulder holster and Stoll put away his gun.

"Hold the light," Corey said, handing Stoll the flash. "Want to see who this guy is."

He turned the gray-haired man over. He was dead from a bullet in his chest. Corey felt his aim had been much too good.

"It's Walter Henderson, the man who found the jeweler's body!" Stoll gasped. "I've got a feeling that we are in trouble, Ed."

"So have I," Corey said grimly. "There is going to be quite a stew about this."

"It was self-defense," Stoll said. "He was firing at us."

"Was he?" Corey took the flashlight from Stoll and started searching around. "With what? I don't see any sign of a gun."

In the distance came the wail of a police-car siren, the sound growing steadily louder. Obviously someone in the neighborhood had heard the shooting and called the police.

"Who did the shooting, then?" Stoll asked. "We sure didn't imagine it!"

"Regan," said Corey. "He must have been here somewhere close to Henderson, started shooting, and then got away after I let loose my shot."

A PATROL car had stopped at the curb. Two uniformed officers were heading toward the brush and trees, attracted by the flashlight still burning in Ed Corey's hand. They arrived with guns drawn.

"It's all right, Brady," Corey said to one of them. "Ben Regan murdered this man and got away before we could stop him."

Stoll's mouth opened and closed like a frog catching flies, but he said nothing. It was evident that he was amazed at Corey lying about what had happened.

"We got a call to investigate the sound

of gunfire in this vicinity," Brady said. "Murphy and I got here as fast as we could. Then this is murder, eh?"

"That's right," Corey said. He handed the flashlight to Stoll. "Hold the light while I check on something, Dan."

While Stoll held the light and the two policemen watched, Corey knelt down and examined the corpse.

"Been dead at least four hours, maybe longer," he said finally. "Rigor mortis has set in. Hard to be sure of the exact time on that, you know. It differs in individual cases."

"But he was alive not more than twenty minutes ago," Stoll said. "We saw him."

"We saw him, all right," Corey said. "But I'm not sure Henderson was alive then. I've got a hunch that Ben Regan was using a dead man as a decoy. But how did he work it?"

"What you two are talking about is all Greek to me," said Brady, as he and Murphy stood listening. "And I can't even speak French."

Corey didn't bother to answer. He was going through the dead man's pockets. Center City's police department had no homicide squad, so it was the job of the men who might be on the scene to investigate the murder. As the top-ranking detective present, Ed Corey was automatically in charge of this case.

"Better phone in and report this, Brady," he said. "The body can't be moved from this spot until the coroner checks on it, of course."

"Yes, sir," said Brady, and he hurried away.

"Better have them put on a dragnet for Regan's car," Corey added, to Murphy. "Special-built light-blue-and-tan job, license number four-four-two-six-two. Take care of that, will you?"

"Yes, sir," said Murphy. He took out

notebook and pencil and jotted down the description of the car. "I'll phone in on it right away."

He hurried toward the street, leaving Corey and Stoll with the corpse. To their relief, no curious people had as yet come to see what was going on.

"Not a thing in Henderson's pockets," Corey said. "What have we got on him, Dan?"

"Walter Henderson, who lived in the neighborhood where Paul Cooper's jewelry shop is located, walked into the store at seven-twenty," Stoll said. "He found Cooper lying dead behind the counter—shot in the heart."

"I know all that," Corey said. "The gas company was digging up the street in front of the shop to repair a leak. They were using a compressed-air drill that made plenty of noise, which is why no one heard the sound of the shot that killed Cooper. But what have we got on Henderson himself?"

"He was a retired insurance salesman," Stoll said. "A widower with no children, and lived alone in a small apartment. Evidently had enough money to keep going. All he did, most of the time, was to hang around the neighborhood. Claimed the old-fashioned pocket watch he had left to be repaired was among the stuff stolen from Cooper's safe."

"Henderson was carrying a brown paper bag that was well filled and evidently contained groceries, for there was a box of cornflakes sticking out the top of it when we questioned him," Corey said. "And were we dumb!"

"What do you mean?" Stoll asked in surprise.

COREY hesitated a moment before answering. "I've got a hunch that Henderson was the one who killed and robbed Cooper," he said then. "The loot

could have been in that paper bag—it was big enough—and so could the murder gun. We didn't search the bag."

"That's right," said Stoll. "We were so convinced that Ben Regan was the killer, since he had been seen coming out of the jewelry store twenty minutes before Henderson found the body, that we just let it go at that. And witnesses said that Regan wasn't carrying anything in his hands. He was wearing no coat, just a sport shirt and slacks. He would have had a tough time hiding the loot on him."

"That's it!" Corey said. "Suppose that Henderson killed and robbed Cooper. Then Regan learns that he is wanted as the murder suspect—he has friends who would tip him off. So he ducks out of sight, but he knows that he didn't do the job. So he decides that Henderson is the one who really did it."

"Sounds possible," said Stoll as Corey paused. "Go on, Ed."

"So Regan goes looking for Henderson," Corey continued. "Regan probably figures that what Cooper had in his safe must be worth plenty or Henderson wouldn't have killed the jeweler in order to get it. Since he is the one who is wanted for murder, Regan decides that he is going to get that loot."

"I'll buy that," Stoll said. "Maybe Regan phones Henderson and pulls a bluff. He says that Henderson is in danger, but Regan can't talk over the phone and for Henderson to meet him here near the garage."

"All right," Corey said. "They meet somewhere around here. Regan shoots and kills Henderson, probably because Henderson stubbornly refused to turn over the loot to him."

Corey started searching around with the flashlight. He finally found a heavy pole about four feet long.

"Here it is," he said. "This is how

Regan worked it. Henderson's body has been lying here for at least four hours without being discovered. During that time I'll bet that Regan went to Henderson's place looking for the stolen stuff and probably found it. He decides to get his car and get out of town."

"Then spots us and starts shooting," said Stoll. "But what has the pole got to do with it?"

"Regan sticks the pole up inside the back of Henderson's coat and props up the corpse so that we think it is Regan," said Corey. "I take a shot at it, after the corpse falls over. The thrashing around in the brush that we hear is Regan crawling away."

They broke off as they spied a uniformed figure running toward them from the street. It was Brady.

"They picked up Ben Regan just north of town on the state highway," Brady said as he reached them. "The arresting officers said that they had orders to watch for a car

with Regan's license number and bring it in. Had the orders ever since yesterday."

"I know," said Corey. "I gave them the number just in case Regan did try to get away in his car. How did they happen to catch him—that car of his is fast."

"Yeah," said Brady. "But he ran out of gas."

"I thought he would." Corey looked at Stoll and grinned. "That's why we drained most of the gas out of his tank and then jammed the gauge so it read 'Full.' We didn't want Regan to get very far away."

"Funny thing," said Brady. "They found a big paper bag in the car loaded with jewelry and stuff. It had a box of cornflakes in the top and looked like it contained groceries."

"Boy, when we guess 'em, we sure do it right!" Stoll said.

"I wasn't just guessing," Corey said. "I was acting on a hunch, and my hunches have never been wrong yet!"