



One of the men fired twice, and Mr. Murphy fell to the pavement

# HOLDUP

By JACK KOFOED

*The fear of vengeance lives and grows with a boy who was sole witness to murder, and when the dread day comes—*

**A**LL boys enjoy the game of cops and robbers. When I was a kid, I loved it. Ever since I've remembered it. When I was little, I wanted to be a policeman. It seemed like the biggest and most important

job in the world.

When I was about twelve years old, I lived in Philadelphia, and the cop on our beat was a big, red-faced man named Tim Murphy. He was nice, and never interfered with our

street ball games. He even fixed it with the neighbors whenever we broke a window pane. We were all crazy about Mr. Murphy and thought him better, and more important, than the President of the United States.

One summer afternoon, Mom sent me to the grocery to get a loaf of bread. I had just come out of the shop when an automobile stopped in front of Schmidfogel's jewelry store. At that time of the day there weren't many people on the streets. The men were working, and the women were home, getting dinner started.

It was very hot, and the sweat was running down the back of my neck. I thought how nice it would be under the trees at Willow Grove, with a picnic basket, but we didn't have much money then, and picnics were few and far between.

I stopped in the doorway of the store, looking at a pile of chocolate bars, and wishing I had one. That's the only reason the men in the automobile didn't see me. They were busy tying bandanna handkerchiefs, such as railroaders use, over their faces.

I knew who they were, because they lived on Warnock Street just back of us. They hung around Hartman's poolroom, and played snooker all day. Their names were Harry Wisnewski, Danny Phillips and Les Burcher. I didn't like them, because they were bullies and always kicked the little kids around.

The men jumped out of the car, leaving the motor running. All of them had pistols in their hands, and they rushed into the store, where Mr. Schmidfogel was standing behind the counter. I came out of the doorway and peeked. Mr. Schmidfogel had his hands up in the air, and his chin was hanging. He was the most surprised man I ever saw in my life. Two of the thieves were back of the counter, grabbing things out of the showcases and cash register.

OF COURSE I had been to enough movies to

know a holdup when I saw one happen right under my nose. At first, I thought of running for Mr. Murphy, but just about this time each day he stopped in at Hess' saloon for a glass of beer. It would take too long to reach him. The Warnock Street gang would be gone by the time I got back.

It never occurred to me that I could tell Mr. Murphy who they were, and they would be arrested anyway. I was afraid they would get me for it. But, I wanted to help Mr. Schmidfogel if I could do it without being hurt, for he was a nice man, who bought me ice cream cones once in a while. Then I thought: "They'll need that car to get away in. They can't run around Germantown Avenue with masks on."

The men in the store were too busy to notice me, so I went around to the street side of the car. I yanked the ignition key out of the switch, and threw it across the street. Then I ran, because those guys would kick my teeth out if they found out what I had done.

But I couldn't pull myself away from drama like that, so I stopped halfway up the block, and waited to see what would happen. I had dropped the loaf of bread, and was scared to go back for it, even though I knew Mom would give me plenty for that when I got back home.

The robbers came out of the store. One of them carried a big, canvas bag. No sooner were they on the sidewalk than the burglar alarm above the door began to jangle and shrill. Afterward I found that Mr. Schmidfogel had locked the door, and lain down on the floor with his hand on the button that started the alarm.

The Warnock Street men jumped nervously. They had done little jobs before, but this was their first big one, and they were easily startled. They went for the car, and when they saw the key was gone, they cursed like I never heard anyone curse before.

Mr. Murphy came running up the

street. He must have heard the alarm while he was finishing his beer, because there was a wisp of foam on his mustache. His face was almost purple from the heat and exertion, and he panted and yanked at the pistol in his holster. The men threw down the canvas bag, and pelted past me as fast as they could go. They were too busy to notice a small boy at that moment. One of them turned and fired twice. The sharp reports made me jump.

Mr. Murphy fell down on the hot pavement. He twitched a little, and lay very still. I began to cry, because I knew he was dead, and I loved Mr. Murphy more than any other man in the world except my pop. It was then that I made up my mind I was going to get the three men for what they had done.

The men ran around the corner. I edged along the store fronts and took a look. There was nobody else in sight, except the three of them. They stopped, took off the bandannas and threw them and the pistols down a sewer culvert. They were all pretty white and shaken, and didn't seem to know what to do.

"You killed Murphy," said Burcher, hi\*, voice shaking. "Why in blazes did you have to do that?"

Wisnewski tried to swagger it through.

"So all right," he said. "So you're all in it as much as I am. He had it comin' to him, the fool. There's only one thing to do. Nobody saw us. Let's go back, and say we heard shots, and what's the matter? It's the only way out."

Danny Phillips began to snuffle.

"Shut up," said Harry Wisnewski. "If you tip this off, I'll kill you just as quick as I did Murphy."

I just had time to duck into Orr's hardware store next to the corner when they came past, running. I ran after them.

A pretty big crowd had gathered by this time. They all stared at Mr. Murphy, who lay crumpled and still on the sidewalk, and listened to Mr. Schmidfogel, who had picked

up the bag and was talking very fast and loud.

"What happened?" Harry asked, and made a clucking sound with his lips, when he saw Mr. Murphy.

A patrol wagon rumbled up, and a half dozen cops and plainclothes men jumped out, including Mr. O'Brien, the detective lieutenant, who was in charge.

THE Warnock Street crowd separated, and mingled with other people, and kept saying: "Ain't it too bad about Mr. Murphy?" and things like that.

That is, Danny and Les did, but Harry didn't say anything after his first remark, and he didn't look at Mr. Murphy again.

Mr. O'Brien began asking questions, but no one had any answers. Mr. Schmidfogel couldn't tell who the bandits were, because of the bandanna handkerchiefs. But he was so flustered he wouldn't have been of much use anyway.

No one else had seen what happened. The automobile wouldn't prove anything, because it had been stolen from Mr. Harrison, who lived on Somerset Street. I knew the police would not find any fingerprints for all the men had worn gloves.

"So nobody knows anything, hey?" the lieutenant said in a flat and disgusted voice.

I edged up to him, and whispered:

"I do, Mr. O'Brien. Don't talk loud, 'cause I'm awful scared."

"All right, son," he said. "What is it?"

I told him about taking the key out of the switch, and throwing it across the street. By this time the ambulance had arrived, and the men in white were putting Mr. Murphy's body on a stretcher. This caused everybody to crowd up as close as they could. Nobody paid any attention to Mr. O'Brien or me. Then I told him about how they shot Mr. Murphy, and ran around the corner, and threw their pistols and handkerchiefs down the culvert.

Mr. O'Brien's face kept getting

brighter and brighter, and he patted me on the shoulder. Of course, we were talking low, because I didn't want the Warnock Street bunch to hear me. It was still scared, and if they hadn't killed Mr. Murphy, I would have gone home without saying anything.

A policeman went across the street, and scabbled in the gutter until he found the key. That proved to Mr. O'Brien I had been telling the truth.

"Look, boy," he said, "you'd make a better cop than most of the lunkheads who are workin' for me. Just one more thing. Think hard. Would you know these men again if you saw them?"

"Sure, I know them, Mr. O'Brien," I said. "They are Harry Wisnewski and Danny Phillips and Les Burcher. It was Harry who shot Mr. Murphy. They're right here in the crowd, because they thought if they came back nobody would know they did it."

Well, Mr. O'Brien called a couple of his men, and they grabbed the Warnock Street boys without warning. They screamed bloody murder.

"It's a bum rap," Wisnewski kept saying. "You ain't got a thing on us, copper. We'll sue you for false arrest."

That didn't get them anything. They were bundled into the patrol wagon. By this time the whole neighborhood knew what had happened. Mom came out, and she was so excited she forgot to scold me for losing the bread.

I didn't want anybody to know I had told the police, but in five minutes everybody did. They said I was a hero, and everything like that, and Mr. Schmidfogel gave me a ten-dollar gold piece, because if it hadn't been for me, he would have lost all his jewelry.

Of course, I was the star witness at the trial. I felt a little funny sitting in the witness chair, and looking at Harry and Danny and Les. They were all cleaned up, and had new clothes, and looked better than I had ever seen

them before. I kept thinking that, if it hadn't been for me, they would be in Hartman's poolroom, playing snooker, instead of being tried for their lives. It made me uncomfortable.

Maybe it was because I was the only witness, but while they were convicted, it was for armed robbery and manslaughter instead of murder, which would have meant the death sentence. So, they were given twenty to thirty years in the Eastern penitentiary.

When the judge pronounced sentence, Harry Wisnewski turned around and looked at me.

"You dirty little rat," he said. "If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be in this jam. By the time I get out of stir you'll be grown up, but you can't go anywhere I won't find you. I'll kill you for this. I'll cut the heart out of you—"

QUICKLY the policeman grabbed his arm, and jerked it. He was a big man and must have squeezed pretty hard, because Harry winced, and the sweat came out on his forehead.

"Shut up," the cop said, "or I'll give you a goin' over you won't like when we get out of court."

That night, on the front pages of the *Bulletin* and *Ledger*, there were pictures of the Warnock Street boys, and of me—and I was a hero all over again. But, I kept thinking of what Harry Wisnewski said—and how his eyes glared—and what looked like foam at the edges of his mouth. That made me scared again, because at home there were no policemen to look after me if anything happened.

It got so I didn't sleep well and would wake up screaming. Finally Mother went to see Mr. O'Brien, and he came to the house to talk to me.

"There's no use bein' scared, son," he said. "They won't be out of the pen for twenty years at least. By that time they won't be so

tough, and you'll be big and husky, and able to take care of yourself. Don't worry about it, son. Everything will be all right."

Well, it sounded all right, and reasonable enough, but I couldn't get over that experience in a hurry. Neurotic? Maybe. Or, maybe it was only that some things make a deep impression on a boy's mind, and dig in, and stay there in spite of everything he can do. While I was living in Philadelphia, I used to call up Mr. O'Brien every once in awhile, and ask if the Warnock Street boys were still in jail.

The detective would laugh, and say:

"Sure. It ain't often anybody breaks out of the Eastern penitentiary."

But I always held my breath when I opened the newspaper in the morning, fearing I'd see a story that Harry Wisnewski was on the loose.

Even when I went to college, I'd have occasional nightmares, and in them Wisnewski was gunning for me. I'd wake up in a sweat, and it would take a long time for me to get back to sleep again.

I got back to Philadelphia occasionally after I started working and would see the people around Germantown Avenue. My old friends knew how I felt, and they kind of laughed at me for being a silly billy, but that didn't help.

Hartman's poolroom, where the Warnock Street crowd used to hang out, was closed, and a delicatessen store was in its place. Of course, the old crowd who had been Wisnewski's friends would have been scattered by this time, anyway, but I was glad the poolroom had disappeared.

"A good thing, too," Mr. O'Brien said once when I went to see him. "There were probably more bums developed in that joint than any place in the neighborhood. I always thought Hartman was a fence, but I never could pin anything on him."

So what? I didn't care about any other

hoodlums than Harry Wisnewski, and he was stuck away in the pen for from twenty to thirty years. Still, I kept thinking, he might get time off for good behavior, and sooner or later he would be out. I remembered how he had looked at me in the courtroom, even though I was only twelve years old, and how the saliva had dribbled from the corners of his mouth.

I knew he would try to kill me some day. I was sure of it. No matter how much time passed, Harry would hate me more than anybody else in the world. I remembered the look on his face when he had shot Mr. Murphy. There was something of the rat about him—gray and little-eyed, and you could almost imagine the musty smell.

The years went by. One after the other, treading on each other's heels. They went fast for me, but they must have been going very slowly for Harry Wisnewski and his pals in the routine of prison life.

One day is twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours make fourteen hundred and forty minutes. That amounts to eighty-six thousand and four hundred seconds. In twenty years it would be more than sixty-three billion seconds, and for every one of them Harry Wisnewski would hate me more and more. He'd have to kill me. He couldn't do anything else. No one could endure that accumulation of hate without killing.

I don't mean to say I went on worrying day in and out, but fear rode in on me at odd moments. It might be in a subway train, where I'd see another passenger who reminded me of Harry. Or, perhaps in the middle of the night, I'd wake up and imagine I saw his eyes burning at me through the darkness.

There was a feeling of certainty in my heart that some day he would come looking for me. Then, I'd lie on the pavement, or the floor, or whatever it was, the way Mr. Murphy had on the hot cement of Germantown Avenue.

It didn't make sense, but that's the way

it was.

MORE years went by and I was doing very well with the advertising firm I had joined in New York. I was married to a wonderful girl and had a couple of swell kids. The memory of Harry Wisnewski and the Warnock Street mob faded so that only occasionally did dreams about him bother me.

One afternoon I came back from lunch feeling very happy. The boss had told me I'd been elected a vice-president of the firm, and my salary was upped along with the promotion. I called my wife on the phone, and we held a mutual cheering session. It was a lovely, lovely day.

My secretary, Miss Allison, came in.

"There's a man who wants to see you," she said. But she didn't get a chance to finish, because the man pushed in past her.

Miss Allison looked at him indignantly. "You can't come in here," she told him.

"Dry up, sister," he said, "and beat it. This is very, very private."

He pushed her through the door and slammed it shut.

I looked at the man who was standing there, one hand in the pocket of his coat.

"Who are you?" I asked, aroused by his roughness.

"You ought to know," he said. "Look at me. I'm Harry Wisnewski. They let me out of the pen yesterday, and I came to see you as fast as I could. That was plenty clubby of me, don't you think?"

I gulped, my mouth suddenly dry as ashes.

"What's the matter?" the man went on. "Ain't you feelin' good? You look awful pale."

I shut my eyes for a minute. All the things that had happened on Germantown Avenue that summer afternoon so long ago were vivid in my memory. It wasn't possible,

but what I feared had finally caught up with me.

I opened my eyes and looked at Wisnewski again. If I had met him casually on the street, I wouldn't have known him. He had been tall and good looking in a common sort of way, with slicked down hair. Now he was an old man, with dragged down shoulders, and veins on the back of the one hand I could see. Prison had done a lot to him.

If only I had a gun in my desk! Being afraid, as I had been for so many years, it was criminal that I had neglected to get one. If only—!

At least I would have had the chance of shooting it out instead of being a target. I thought of rushing him, but I was standing behind the desk, and by the time I could get around it, he could pump half a dozen bullets into me.

Wasn't it ironical? A few minutes before I had been the happiest man in the world. Now I was the most frightened.

"It's a laugh, you havin' a secretary," Harry said. "The last time I saw you, you were just a dirty-faced kid." He paused, and his eyes narrowed. "Remember the last time I saw you?"

That had been in the courtroom, when Wisnewski threatened to kill me. He must have seen that I remembered, for a queer glint came into his eyes. There wasn't any use ducking it, and my nerves wouldn't let me just stand there and talk.

"All right, Harry," I said, trying to keep my voice from doing jumps. "What's on your mind?"

I knew what was on his mind, but I had to bring it out into the open.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I was just a kid," I said. "I did what any other kid would have done. I guess if you hadn't killed Mr. Murphy, I wouldn't have said anything, but Mr. Murphy—"

"Shut up," he said. "It don't make no

difference why you did it. The main idea is that you got me stuck away in stir all this time. You can't even begin to understand what that's like. A guy sits in his cell, and he thinks and thinks until his mind spins around like a top. He thinks about the time he was on the outside, and could do what he wanted. Then he remembers how long it will be until he's on the outside again."

The hand in his pocket twitched. I thought he was going to pull the trigger, and my whole body froze.

Then I said to myself: It's good-by to everything—to Myra and the kids and my job. I'm going to die right here in this office, but if I have to die, I'd better do it like a man. What good would it do to beg and crawl? I would only be demeaning myself.

"Okay, Harry," I said. "You're stir crazy. You came here to kill me. You've twenty years in the pen behind you. All that's ahead is the electric chair, if you knock me off."

WISNEWSKI grinned crookedly. "That might not be so bad," he said. "It's quick, anyway—quicker than time in the Big House."

"Go ahead," I said. "You did it fast to Mr. Murphy. He never knew what hit him. Why fool around with me?"

Wisnewski sat down in a chair by the door, putting the width of the office between him and me. He kept his right hand in his coat pocket. There was no chance of catching him off guard. I wondered about Miss Allison. She didn't know about the thing that had been worrying me, so it wouldn't occur to her to call the police.

"I did a lot of thinking in jail," Harry said.

"About me?"

"Yeah, about you. When they sprung me, the warden gave me ten dollars, and a lot of advice I didn't need. The ten got me to New York, and paid for a room and a meal. A pal

of mine loaned me his gun. That's all I got now—the gun. I ain't got enough dough to get back to Philadelphia, even if I wanted to go there."

"If you use that gun on me, you won't need carfare to Philadelphia. The only ride you'll take will be from the Tombs to the Death House, and the state will pay for that."

"You did me a dirty trick, kid," Wisnewski answered, "and if I rubbed you out, it wouldn't even up what's happened to me. But, I ain't so old yet. There's a chance for me to have a little fun. If you—"

Then I knew what he was driving at. He wanted me to buy my life. All he wanted was money. I could have jumped into the air and yelled with joy. If I gave him every nickel I had, it would be a cheap deal. Buy my life? Of course, I would.

"How much do you want?" I asked.

"Twenty grand," he said, "one for each year I put in at the Eastern penitentiary."

"Okay. You can have it."

Harry scratched the stubble of whiskers on his cheek. "You got it here?" he asked.

"Certainly not. I'll have to send Miss Allison to the bank with a check."

"You gave in awful quick," said Wisnewski. "No tricks now. Danny Phillips is in this with me. You pull a quickie, and he'll finish you tomorrow."

"No tricks," I agreed, "if you'll get out of the country, and leave me alone."

The ex-convict let out a thin little sigh.

"All right," he said. "Call the dame in."

I pressed the buzzer, and Miss Allison entered. She seemed a little flustered, and perhaps a bit resentful at the way this shabby stranger had treated her. But she also seemed a little relieved that nothing unpleasant had happened.

Harry came over to the desk to watch while I wrote a check for twenty thousand

dollars. Probably he wanted to make sure I didn't slip her a note, tipping off the deal.

"Take this to the bank right away, Miss Allison," I said, "and get back as fast as you can."

She looked me hard in the eyes and must have guessed this was blackmail. I was afraid she would say something that would frighten Wisnewski, and in his obvious mental state, I was afraid he would begin shooting up the place. Even after twenty years he might have a touchy trigger finger. There had been no need for killing Mr. Murphy. The Warnock Street gang could have outrun him without difficulty.

"Shall I—?" Miss Allison began.

"There's just one thing for you to do," I said brusquely. "Get to the bank and back as fast as you can. It shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," she said, starting across the room.

The door of the outer office opened and closed. A bulky man with white hair and a close cropped pepper and salt mustache, entered, and came straight to the open door of my office. Wisnewski took his hand out of his coat pocket, and seemed to shrivel. The man was Mr. O'Brien, the Philadelphia detective lieutenant. At the sight of his broad red face all my cares vanished into thin air.

"Hello, Mr. O'Brien," I said. "I'm certainly glad you came."

"Your secretary called me, and I hurried right over." He looked at my visitor, and whistled. "Don't the darnedest things happen, though?"

"You mean Harry Wisnewski being here?"

Mr. O'Brien looked around with a startled air.

"Wisnewski? Where?"

"Right here." I pointed.

Mr. O'Brien burst into a roar of laughter.

"That's not Wisnewski. Harry tried a jail break, and nearly killed two guards, and they gave him ten years extra. I don't think he'll live his term out. You'll never have to worry about him again."

"Then who is this guy?"

"Why, that," said Mr. O'Brien, "is Joe Hartman, who used to run the poolroom, where Harry and the boys hung out. What did he try to pull on you?"

"He made me think he was Wisnewski, and wanted twenty thousand dollars for not killing me."

Mr. O'Brien honked with laughter again.

"Fear is a funny thing, son," he said. "It can get you into a lot of unnecessary trouble. Everybody along Germantown Avenue knew you were scared of what might happen when Harry Wisnewski came out of jail. Joe knew it as well as anybody else. He probably figured you hadn't seen either Harry or him since you were twelve years old, and wouldn't recognize him. So he thought it would be pretty easy to shake you down. Didn't you, Hartman?"

The former poolroom owner nodded sullenly.

Mr. O'Brien took a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and neatly clipped them over Hartman's wrists. Joe didn't resist. He just stood there, looking as though the end of the world had come. It had—for him.

"Fear is one thing," said Mr. O'Brien, "and luck is another. The New York Department has been looking for Hartman and they asked me to come over, to help them. He had tried that old confidence game stuff on a couple of credulous women. The boys up here figured I knew more about Joe than they did. When I got in town I called your office to tell you that you didn't have to worry about Harry Wisnewski any more. You weren't in, so I left my phone number with Miss Allison.

When this character showed up, she

called me.”

“But, why?” I asked, turning to my secretary. “I never said anything about Wisnewski to you, Miss Allison. If you called the police about every crackpot who comes to see me, we’d have detectives here all the time.”

Miss Allison smiled for the first time.

“You didn’t tell me, sir,” she said, “but your wife did. She told me all about Harry Wisnewski, and told me to call the police any time I suspected something was wrong.”

Mr. O’Brien took Joe Hartman by the elbow.

“We’ll take a little ride down to headquarters,” he said. “You have a smart secretary there, son. She rates a dinner and theater tickets for what she did.”

“Sure,” I said, “sure. That and a good, fat raise, too. This has cured me. I’ll never be afraid of anything else as long as I live.”

But, you know, it was funny. As Mr. O’Brien and Hartman went out the door, I thought of Harry Wisnewski.

“Ten years more,” I said to myself. “I wonder if he’ll still want to come after me then. Heck, I got ten years to worry about that!”