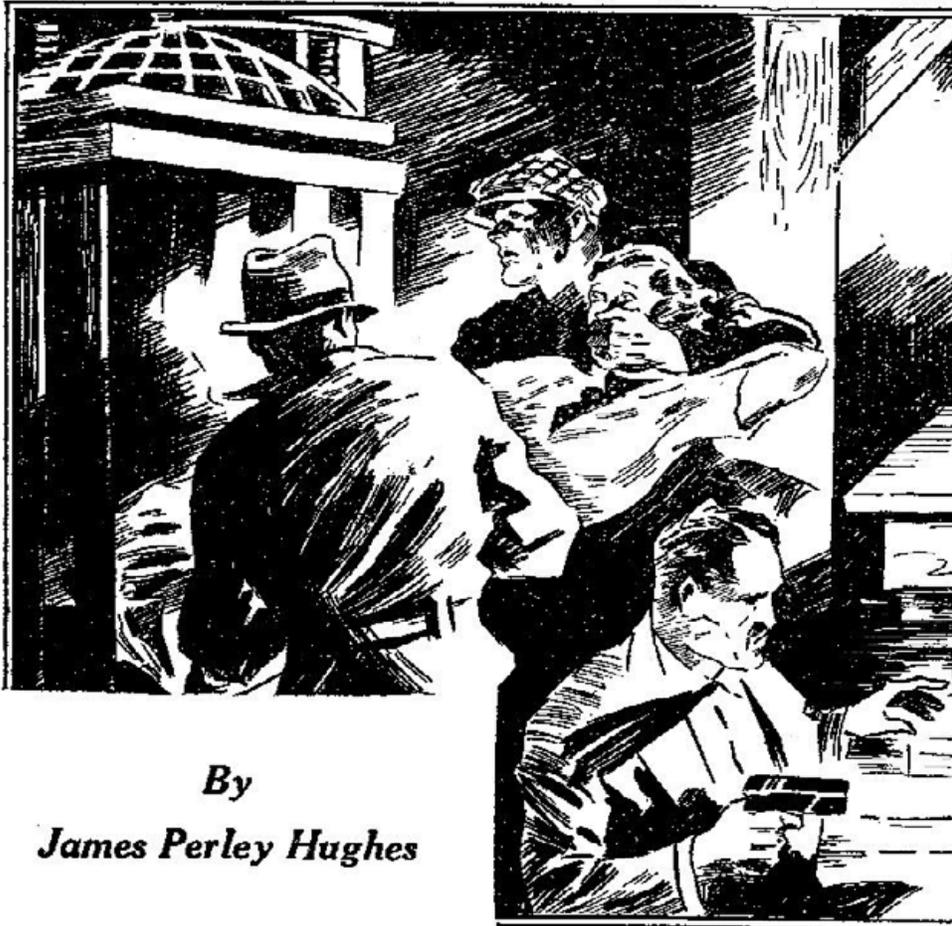


A radio expert was Detective Danny Phelan. But he wanted an expert movie fadeout with lovely Peggy Concannon. And his megacycle chase after Peggy led him straight into the jaws of . . .

Short-Wave Murder



By
James Perley Hughes

The ruthless gang had snatched Peggy Concannon.

DANNY PHELAN paused beside the rail dividing the office employees of the Reynolds Manufacturing Company from the space reserved for the general public. A girl, blonde and bright-eyed, looked up and smiled at him.

“Is this Mr. Phelan, the hotcha rhumba hooper or Professor Phelan, radio wizard?” she mimicked a brogue Danny did not possess. “Or—mayhap—it’s Detective Sergeant Phelan treading the gumshoe trail.”

Phelan flushed and leaned across the rail. “Listen, gorgeous, you ought to see my new short wave set. It’s—”

“I prefer you as the hotcha rhumba hooper,” Peggy Concannon broke in, “but flyaway, dickey-bird, this is pay day and little Peg of Your Heart is a busy lady.”

“How ‘bout tonight?”

“If you’ll forget the word ‘megacycles’.”

“Okay baby. We’ll swing it. What say?”

The girl bobbed her head and smiled again.

Then Danny went out. He had had no official business with Reynolds & Co., but had been in the neighborhood and that was excuse enough for an unscheduled sight of Peggy Concannon.

When Danny Phelan reached the sidewalk his eyes narrowed, hardened to bits of ice. A black sedan was parked on the other side of the street, its occupants looking about the neighborhood with a nonchalance that was just a little too studied. From the car's interior came the rollicking notes of the latest swing numbers, but Danny Phelan figured the set was also equipped to catch the police short wave broadcasts.

He slid behind a truck, and watched the men in the sedan. At the wheel was a cadaverous man, whose burning black eyes looked out from a death's head face. That was Joe Bennings, a graduate in crime from the grim, gray college up the river, whose campus is circled by high stone walls. Joe had returned to the city, a wiser, not a sadder, man. His talents had been sharpened by contact with master minds. Danny's eyes tightened when he saw Bennings take up an instrument not unlike a French telephone and speak into it. The car was equipped for two-way communication.

He started forward, intending to investigate, but the black sedan purred like a sleepy kitten and slid away from the curb. Phelan dashed into the street looking for a cruising taxicab. Although Center Street had been watching Joe Bennings since his return to the city, no actual crime could be fastened upon him.

But his presence on the West Side intrigued the detective. Bennings belonged on the other side of town. That two-way radio telephone was something worth looking into when a man like Joe Bennings had it installed in his machine.

Danny flagged a taxicab. "Tail that black sedan up ahead," he ordered, flashing his shield.

THE cab rolled along and soon was almost touching bumpers with the sedan. Bennings stopped at a street corner opposite the City Bank, but he only paused and then rolled on again. By this time Danny had identified the

heavily browed man who rode at Benning's side. He was Mike Novak, once a rod for a petty street corner loan shark but had gone up in the world to become Benning's bodyguard.

The black sedan took a corkscrew course through the lower city, but finally turned down St. John's Place and came to a stop in front of an old-fashioned brick house. Bennings and Novak alighted and went inside. Phelan was about to stop and attempt to examine the car's radio equipment, when a third man emerged from the house and drove the black sedan away.

Once more the taxicab followed, but the machine entered a garage, and its driver came out and dodged down a subway entrance. Danny puzzled for a moment and then went to the telephone. He had wasted a lot of time on something that was decidedly not his business, but he wanted a look at that car. It intrigued him. He got his chief on the line and received a crisp reprimand.

"I'll tell the communications crowd about it," the inspector rapped, "but you beat it up to Plaza Jewel Shop. Somebody pinched some ice up there, and they're burning up."

Phelan hung up and muttered deep in his throat. He was on the trail of something interesting and now he would have to listen to the wails of a jeweler who had been careless in displaying his gems to light-fingered customers. Meantime, his head buzzed with thoughts concerning the presence of Joe Bennings and Mike Novak in the manufacturing district. . . .

The diamond robbery proved just one of the hundred similar thefts that happen daily in a city of seven million inhabitants. The loss was comparatively small, and the merchant carried insurance. The complaint to the police was largely a matter of form. Noon had come, and Danny Phelan went to lunch before calling up the inspector. He ate alone, wishing Peggy Concannon were with him.

At the restaurant a scrap of conversation between two near-by waitresses drifted into his ears. Waitresses, like detectives, had their love problems, he discovered.

"What's the boy friend doing now?" one girl

asked the other.

“Right this minute, he’s on his way to the bank to get the payroll for his firm,” was the reply. “You see, ever since that girl cashier got— Gee! What’s got into that guy?”

Danny Phelan had tipped his chair over getting out of it. He left his apple pie *a la mode* untouched, but paused long enough to drop a quarter beside his plate.

He tossed a dollar bill to the cashier, to pay for a seventy-five-cent lunch, and then lunged into a telephone booth to call the number of the Reynold’s Manufacturing Company.

“Let me speak to Miss Concannon, please,” he said, when the voice of the Reynold’s operator came on the wire. “When did she go? Yeah, I know, but this is Detective Sergeant Phelan speaking. It’s police business. Thanks.”

He next called the West Side branch of the City Bank, but he was informed that Miss Concannon had come and gone.

Danny Phelan rushed out into the street and leaped into a taxicab. He called the address of the Reynolds Manufacturing Company and then flipped on the switch of the radio. A flare of swing music filled the cab, but Phelan wanted no shrieking of trumpets or moaning saxophones.

“Tune in on Center Street,” he told the driver, showing his shield.

“Okay, sergeant. I like to hear ‘em myself.”

NEXT came the droning voice of the squad-car director calling to his constantly shifting patrols. Danny fidgeted in his seat. The traffic was heavy, and the taxicab was making a snail’s headway getting across town.

“Car one hundred twenty-five—Car one hundred twenty-five,” the voice droned. “Go to Seventy-fifth and the Drive. Disturbance reported there.”

A high, shrill note, like the sound of a time signal, had come out of the air. It was the radio alert. It called upon the occupants of every radio patrol car to listen attentively to what would follow. The detective tensed as he waited.

“Signal thirty—signal thirty.”

Translated freely, the words meant: “A serious crime has been committed. Use every method to capture or kill the criminal.”

Phelan’s nails bit into his palms as he leaned forward and waited for the broadcast.

“Signal thirty,” Center Street called again. “Payroll robbers shot and killed John Neilson, guard for the Reynolds Manufacturing Company, at Beaver and West Streets at twelve-fifty-three. Using Miss Margaret Concannon, the company’s assistant treasurer, as a shield, they escaped in a green sedan, Y-two-thirty-eight-fifty-four, last seen going east on Beaver.”

Danny Phelan writhed in his seat.

“Tough on that girl,” he heard the taxi driver mumble. “Those birds don’t let witnesses live very long.”

The blood drained from the detective’s face. The chauffeur was right. Mobs that killed when they robbed wanted no witnesses to survive and testify against them.

The police broadcast was still going on. Cars were being detailed to block off the green sedan and capture the robbers. High up in the stately Center Street home of the police, a man was seated before a vast map of the city upon which were scores of brass disks. Each bore a number and represented a radio-patrol car. They were moved as orders were called into the microphone.

“Cars fourteen and fifteen, proceed to Beaver and Broadway, and work West. Cars nine and eleven, block streets north and south of Beaver. Cars six and nineteen, proceed along—”

A violent buzzing sounded making the words unintelligible, and Danny Phelan leaned forward, his eyes aflame. Then a new and strange voice sounded distinctly:

“Green sedan moving uptown on West Street. Disregard further orders. Catch green sedan before—”

“Have they gone nuts?” the chauffeur called over his shoulder.

“No, but they will when they find out what’s happened.”

“Howja mean?”

“Never mind, buddy. Beat it for St. John’s

Place. Never mind the red lights. I'll square you."

The taxicab changed its direction and moved into the swiftly flowing traffic of Park Avenue. Meantime, the radio buzzed with a strange mix-up of noise and orders. Two voices were speaking at once, voices that gave contradictory orders.

Danny Phelan sat on the edge of the seat, staring at the dashboard loud speaker. He recognized what was happening and knew the confusion into which the city's patrol would be thrown. Years had been spent in developing a system that would throw a net around daring thieves when they tried to escape, and now all that was being destroyed by a clever trick.

"Plan number two," a voice called from the buzzing box. "Circle! The green sedan is now moving along West End Avenue between Ninety-sixth and Ninety-eighth Street. Cars one hundred nineteen and one hundred twenty-one, move down Riverside Drive to Eighty-fourth and contact Squad Sedan number two. Signal thirty—signal thirty. . . . Green sedan found abandoned. Gangsters and girl going up Riverside Drive in dark-blue limousine—two-ninety-eight-fifty-two. Note numbers, and stop on sight."

"Gee—what's coming off?" the chauffeur asked, when a flow of cross-town traffic at Fourteenth Street made them pause.

"Plenty—more'n plenty. Keep going, buddy. See how many trucks you can dodge."

PHELAN could see the gangster's strategy. They were shunting the hunt to the upper West Side. The confused signals threw the radio patrol into a mad dashing that would take hours to straighten. Meantime, they would seek sanctuary on the East Side, to remain holed up until the chase died. Even with the confusion in the pursuit, they would take a round-about way to St. John's Place. With a little luck, he might beat them to the old brick house.

It was a long gamble, but the only chance in sight. To call for aid would further endanger Peggy Concannon. If anything happened to her,

it would be his fault. He had been a dope, and she was in peril because of his thick-headedness.

"Here you are, boss," as they turned into St. John's Place.

A glance up and down the street, and Danny slipped a bill into the chauffeur's hand. The man saw its size and grinned.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

"Yes. Tell headquarters that they'll hear from me, but not to do anything before dark if they don't."

"Okay, sergeant. The best of luck!"

Phelan hurried up the street, as the cab rolled away, and dashed up the steps to 411 St. John's Place. He tried the door and found it unlocked. He was not surprised. Joe Bennings and Mike Novak would not want to be forced to fumble with keys when they arrived. He glided into the dim hall and looked around, his service revolver in his hand. Then something hard touched his back and a voice growled in his ear.

"Better let me have that rod, buddy."

A hand reached out to take his gun from him. Then prying fingers found the handcuffs he always carried in his hip pocket. A rumble of laughter came from his captor.

"That's saving trouble," the voice said. "Put your hands behind you before I blow a hole in your spine."

Phelan lowered his hands and felt the cool touch of the manacles about his wrists. Then the locks snapped. He had been made a prisoner without a struggle. He had taken a chance, a long chance, and had muffed it at the very start.

Soon Bennings and Novak would be coming—with Peggy Concannon. They might die together. His jaw tightened. Not if he could help it. Danny wanted a more conventional fadeout to his love drama.

"Get going up the stairs," his captor commanded.

Phelan marched ahead, prodded by the other's gun when he hesitated. He entered a room on the third floor and was ordered to sit in a chair far away from the windows. Then the man stepped to a low-wave radio set and

snapped on its current. Phelan's keen eyes followed the man's movements. It was plain he was an expert, adjusting the wavelength of a low-powered broadcasting hookup. The man took up a French phone and began speaking into it, calling a number that might have meant anything.

"Larkin, boss," he said a minute later. "Got a fish on the hook. Want him cleaned?"

Danny's eyes hardened. The murderer was ready to strike without delay.

"Okay," the man spoke again, after an interval, "I'll wait until you get here."

Phelan stared at his captor. The presence of the radio was an opportunity he might never get again. It was not operated on the police wavelength, but a megacycle frequency far from any authorized band. A gone feeling struck the pit of his stomach as Larkin hung up the French phone and looked at him.

"The boss'll be here in a minute," he said. "I can tell by the sound. He's close."

"So what?"

"So you ain't going to be with us for long, Buddy."

The man lighted a cigarette and looked out the window. He stiffened suddenly and hurriedly crossed the room and took a heavy cord and bound Danny's handcuffed hands to the back of the chair.

"I wouldn't try going anywhere, if I was you," he warned.

Phelan said nothing. His eyes were on the radio set. Larkin followed his glance.

"Don't think you can call anybody on that, buddy," he said. "All you'd get would be the car—and it's out in front."

A grin, and he went out the door.

DANNY PHELAN hardly waited for the latch to click. Larkin had overlooked one salient bet when he searched him. The tiny key to the handcuffs was in his vest pocket, and not with his other keys. He had taken a tip from a veteran sergeant in that respect. The old-timer had once been prisoned with his own cuffs, and after that, he always secreted the key in a

seldom-used pocket.

With the man's foot sounding on the stairs, Phelan began maneuvering. Holding the chair to which he was tied between his legs, he leaned forward until he all but stood upon his head. He wriggled desperately, until the handcuff key fell out. Then he lay on his back, chair and all, and took the key in his fingers. The locks snapped, and the manacles fell to the floor. Then came the task of getting out of the cord. He managed it, after scraping his wrists severely.

The sound of voices came from the floor below. He listened intently for Peggy's familiar tones. None came.

"What'll we do with her?" some one asked. It must have been Mike Novak.

"Let Bob Larkin handle her. He's got one job now," Joe Bennings answered.

Phelan glanced around for a weapon. There was none. He turned to the radio and snapped on its lever. A feverish wait for the tubes to warm, and he fished through the atmosphere for a police signal—but the ether was silent. Then he groped for other bands.

A voice came into his ears, a man's voice. He grew taut as he listened to:

"Base calling Itasca—base calling Itasca. Please come in."

This was the Coast Guard summoning one of its revenue cutters out in the bay or Long Island Sound—then silence.

Danny Phelan left the receiving dial in position at the Coast Guard frequency. Then he slid the broadcasting control by easy stages as he spoke into the transmitter.

"Danny Phelan—Danny Phelan," he kept saying, listening at the same time for the sound of his own voice. When he heard it, he knew he could be on the Coast Guard frequency.

"Danny Phelan—Danny Phelan," over and over again.

Then it came like a whisper, his own voice, speaking his own name. More adjustments, and the sound grew stronger and stronger. Then he launched a new summons:

"Coast Guard base—Coast Guard base Please come in. Please come in—any Coast

Guard station.”

He held his voice low to keep it from being heard below. Tingling seconds dragged by, but at last he got an answer:

“Base speaking—who’s calling? Please follow regulations.”

Phelan’s muscles tightened as he whispered into the microphone: “This is Detective Sergeant Daniel Phelan. Please telephone Center Street—Spring 7-3100. Tell them I’m at Four-eleven St. John’s Place. Men who killed guard in payroll robbery are also here with girl captured. Tell them to use care—may kill both of us. Understand?”

“Yes, sergeant. Hope this isn’t a joke or—”

“It’s not! Step on it. Hurry or—”

He paused as steps sounded on the stairs leading to the room. He listened intently. Two persons were ascending the stairs. He held his breath.

One was a woman; he could tell by the step. She was saying nothing, but he heard Bob Larkin directing her. Then Bennings’ voice sounded from the foot of the stairs.

“Come out—you know where—when the job’s finished,” he called.

“Okay.”

The front door was closed, and Danny Phelan looked out the window to see a car slide away from the curb. It was a bright-red sedan, bearing New Jersey plates. The gangsters had followed their usual practices in addition to jamming up the police-call system.

Phelan jotted down the number and then snatched up a heavy pair of pliers that Larkin had used in making adjustments to the radio.

THE footsteps on the stairs were nearing the top, and Phelan hurried to the door, flattening himself against the wall. Now the steps were coming down the hall. He gripped the pliers tighter.

“Get in there sister,” Bob Larkin said. “You’re going to have company in this.”

The door swung open, and Peggy Concannon stumbled in. No wonder he had not heard her voice. For a piece of tape had been

placed across her mouth. Her eyes were blinded in the same manner. Danny’s muscles tightened as Bob Larkin stepped into the room.

“Say where!” His automatic was in his hand. “Where’s—”

The pliers crashed down on the top of his head, and in another moment Phelan was on his back. Another blow, and the man’s knees buckled. He raised his gun, and the crash of its discharge roared out; but a second later the weapon fell to the floor as Phelan struck again. Danny grabbed up the weapon, and again his handcuffs clicked—but this time they tied Larkin’s hands together. Then, just for luck, he threw the key away.

“Don’t holler—but it will hurt a little,” Danny Phelan said, grasping the tape that sealed Peggy’s lips.

She started at the sound of his voice and came toward him, groping. A twist, and her lips were free. He paused to kiss them, before he took the adhesive from her eyes.

“Oh, Danny,” the girl cried, “I—”

“Just a minute, honey—we’ve got to get those birds. I was a dope this morning, but I’m clicking this afternoon.”

He turned to the radio and again summoned the Coast Guard. The operator answered his first summons.

“Phelan again,” he said into the microphone. “Tell Center Street that gang is riding in a red sedan—New Jersey license, three-G-twenty-nine-fifty-four. They haven’t gone far, and—Wait a minute!”

He turned as he saw Bob Larkin regaining consciousness. He strode across the room and jammed the man’s own automatic against the back of his head.

“Listen, buddy,” he said, “you’re calling Joe and Mike back here. Think fast and play square, or I’m spattering your brains all over that set. You’re the guy that jammed up that police broadcast. Now you’re going to jam something else.”

“Okay, but—” The man jingled the handcuffs.

“They stay, pal. I know my megacycles. I’ll

get your wave band—then you do the talking.”

Larkin nodded his understanding. Then Phelan told the Coast Guard to stand by. A minute later Danny’s prisoner was talking into the microphone telling Joe Bennings that he must return for the radio set. They had forgotten it. Phelan listened for the reply. The gang leader agreed.

Once more Danny contacted the Coast Guard. Strange orders leaped through the air. Sand trucks were ordered to St. John’s place. After them would come squad cars loaded with detectives bearing Tommy-guns. The ether throbbled with the details.

Pausing long enough to thoroughly truss Bob Larkin, Danny Phelan and Peggy looked out the front window. They saw a red sedan, with a New Jersey license, glide down the street. Suddenly a sand truck rumbled by and crowded it to the curb. Another blocked its passage from in front. Then two limousines appeared. Thompson machine guns were thrust out their windows.

“Honest, Danny—it’s just like a movie,” Peggy gasped as she watched.

“Well, I guess it’s up to us to put on the fadeout,” he answered.

And she co-operated.