

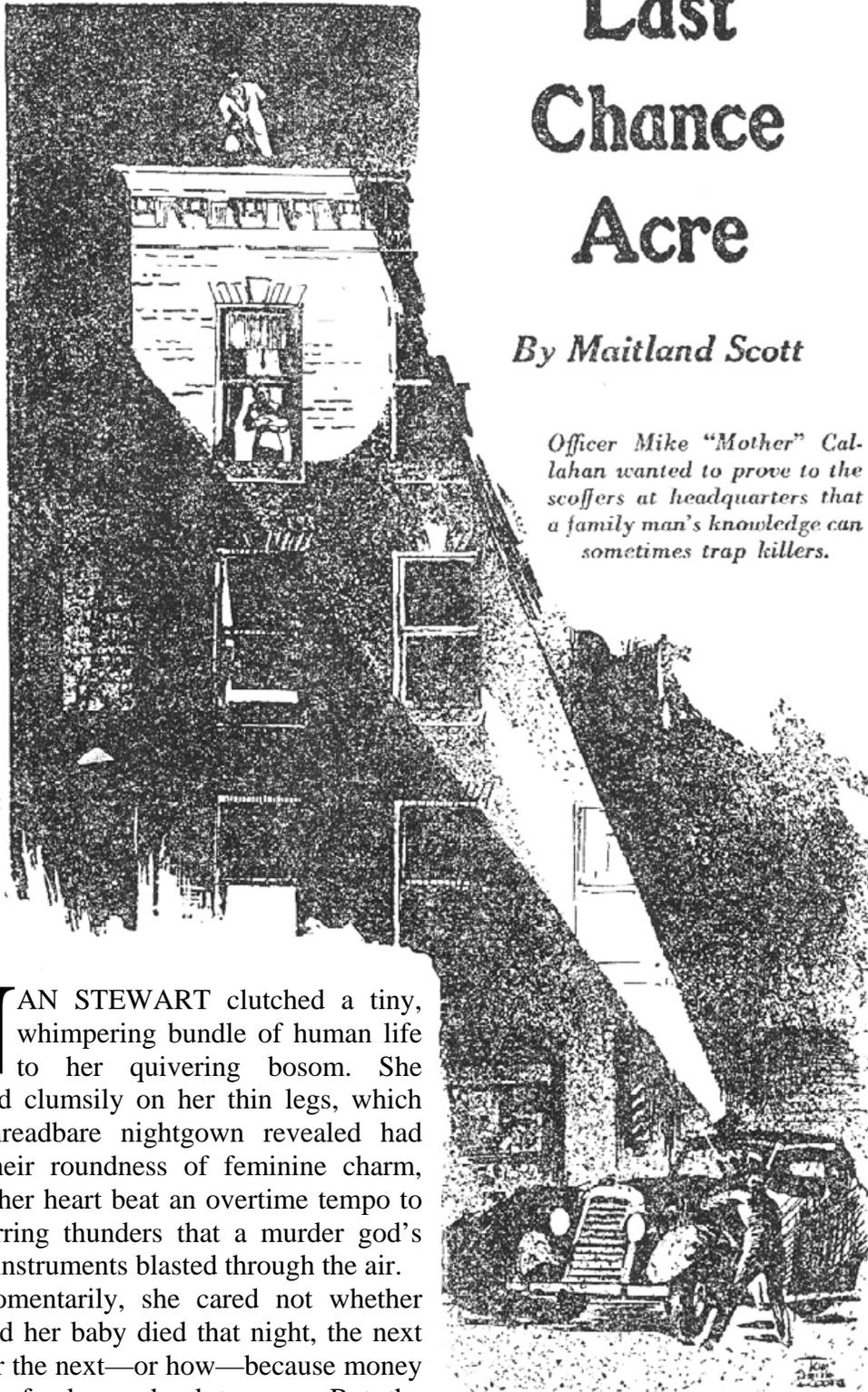
Last Chance Acre

By Maitland Scott

Officer Mike "Mother" Calahan wanted to prove to the scoffers at headquarters that a family man's knowledge can sometimes trap killers.

NAN STEWART clutched a tiny, whimpering bundle of human life to her quivering bosom. She faltered clumsily on her thin legs, which her threadbare nightgown revealed had lost their roundness of feminine charm, while her heart beat an overtime tempo to the jarring thunders that a murder god's death instruments blasted through the air.

Momentarily, she cared not whether she and her baby died that night, the next day, or the next—or how—because money to buy food was hard to earn. But the primitive instinct to woo life soon returned⁴⁹ to her, and she thought she would scream



if those hideous gunshots did not stop. For hell had come to Last Chance Acre.

The Masked Raiders, unidentified killers, had been routed upon their exit from a near-by warehouse, through a shrewd stake-out executed by G-men. The gang had dropped their precious burdens of looted furs, and—cut off from getaway cars—had gained the shelter of Last Chance Acre, a dreary group of tenement buildings on an edge of the city's swampland.

Widowed Nan Stewart stumbled to the edge of her shabby bed in a top-floor room of the Acre. Numbly, she wondered if she should try and take her baby out of the house. But the sound of the battle, waged between an hundred-odd lawmen and the Masked Raiders, was too frightening; so she huddled on the bed and tried to quiet the petulant whimperings of the infant in her arms.

The sound of a running gunfight came from the roof immediately overhead—pounding feet, staccato pistol and Tommy-gun shots; an occasional groan, the thud of a falling body. An ever-tightening cordon of surrounding police was evident below—the sporadic *rat-tat-tat* of machine guns, dependent upon the sighting of a masked figure scooting over at one or another of the roofs covering the tenements of Last Chance Acre. And from time to time a searchlight's brilliant beam put to shame the cheap, flyspecked bulb in the ceiling of the young mother's room, as it made a traversing course of that particular house.

Directed by a few young and alert G-men, more than a hundred plainclothes men and harness bulls spread a tight cordon around Last Chance Acre, and prepared to search every inch of those grimy tenement houses for the human rats that had sought refuge there. For now no more of the gang could be found upon the

roofs. It was truly a Last Chance Acre for the remainder of the Raiders, whose members had killed so ruthlessly in their thieving—and for Nan Stewart, who could not find work enough to keep her baby and herself properly alive.

Footsteps sounded outside the young mother's door a few moments after the sounds of gunfire had died away, but she scarcely paid them heed. Just another alarmed tenant moving about in the hall, she thought. Then several knocks came on the door, and a hoarse voice gruffed:

"It's the law. Open up. Everybody outta here--quick!"

Nan threw a worn coat over her thin, girlish shoulders, wrapped the baby in a blanket, hurried to the door, and opened it. Then she staggered back into the room, a scream rising to her throat. But steel-like fingers fastened about her windpipe, stopped her outcry from rising farther.

One of the Masked Raiders, heavy automatic in right hand, pushed Nan back into the room with his grip upon her throat. Holding her baby more tightly, she felt waves of cold fear rise from her stomach.

The man was panting raspily from the exertion of fighting and escaping the law. She could see the glitter of desperation, of fierce savageness, in his eyes showing through the sighting slits in a hood like mask that cowed his head; she could smell the reek of sweat from his body, of exploded cordite from his automatic.

The masked man darted a quick look around the single room, slowly released his grip upon her throat.

"Not a word out of you, sister," he clipped, and wagged the gun significantly.

Nan Stewart retreated slowly backward to the bed, clutching her child protectingly to her breast as she whispered fearfully, shakily:

“Please, you won’t—”

“Shut up,” the gangster cut in, voice low. “I’d as soon let you have it or not—the way I’m fixed. . . . So, your name’s Stewart, eh? Where’s your old man?”

For a moment Nan Stewart was stunned at hearing her name spoken by the gunman. Then, when she realized that he had learned it from the penciled name-card on the door, she answered with an effort:

“He—he’s dead. . . .”

The masked man came farther into the room and poked suspiciously into a rickety closet, gun ready, before he said:

“He’d better be like you tell me, or the kid gets blasted.” He jerked off the mask and stuffed it into a hip pocket. “I gotta get an idea—an’ if you don’t keep your nose clean, all round, sister, that brat gets it first. That’s a promise!”

The young girl-mother’s soft-brown eyes looked piteously into the hard, pale-blue ones of the gunman as words trembled from her lips:

“I—I’m telling the truth. I’ll do anything you say; only don’t hurt my—my baby.”

A police searchlight flashed its prying shaft into the dimly lit room, and the gangster shrank back to the wall nearest him. Then clumping feet sounded dimly, five stories below. How was he to remain there, undetected, until that cordon of watchful hounds of justice was removed? He knew that a fine-combed search had begun in every house of Last Chance Acre.

For a moment, Rudy Heimer, leader of the Masked Raiders, got panicky. Then a steadying gleam came in those pale-blue eyes of his. Galvanized into action, he made swift, deliberate preparations to save his very life. His movements were executed with the grim care of a man who knew that the slightest slip would mean for him the sear of the electric chair. His terse,

careful instructions to Nan Stewart were uncompromising in the quick penalty he would deal out should she fail in the slightest degree.

TRAFFIC OFFICER MIKE CALAHAN’S police positive was ugly, dangerous in his right hand as he pounded his other fist on Nan Stewart’s door. Calahan’s face was ugly, too, but it was not dangerous in expression; it was wreathed in a prepared smile of friendliness. For Mike Calahan felt embarrassed at disturbing honest folk, especially families. His proudest and happiest boast was that of family man.

“Open up, please, Mrs. Stewart!” he bawled pleasantly, reading her name from the soiled name-card. “It’s the police; so don’t be afraid. We’ve got to search the whole house.”

There was the sound of footsteps, and Rudy Heimer, coat off and vest comfortably unbuttoned, holding the baby in the crotch of his left arm, opened the door.

Heimer’s voice was gruff, annoyed, as he essayed to say with annoyed convincingness: “Everything’s okay here, officer. My wife ain’t well, and all this here shooting has upset her enough.”

At this point a harness-bull sergeant stopped at the door. He grinned at sight of Calahan, and said:

“Okay, Family Man, don’t miss a rat hole. There’s five thousand fish in rewards for that masked rat guy.”

Calahan closed the door, sized up the room with quick, sympathetic understanding. It was a typical tenement hovel of Last Chance Acre: large brass bedstead, wash-bowl in a corner, with flimsy gas range beside it, rickety board closet—no bath room. Then his glance took in Heimer, sympathetically, because of the wan girl in the bed.

But Calahan, being a “family man,” pondered a bit at the clumsiness of the way that Heimer was holding the blanket-wrapped baby.

“Don’t go outside your rights in casing the rooms in this house,” he remembered the sergeant’s instructions. Of course, being a family man, these instructions were not necessary where there was a mother and child.

“Sorry, folks,” he said, ducking his head at Nan Stewart. “I’ll have to look in the clothes closet. I’ve got to search this place—just as a matter of routine. This here Masked Raiders gang that’s been makin’ all the ruckus, is due for the chair. The leader’s worth five grand, too, you know.”

Heimer said: “Okay, officer, but please hurry. We’ve had enough trouble already, keeping the kid from being scared at all the noise.”

The baby was still whimpering fretfully, and Officer Calahan cooed inanely at the infant before going to the closet.

An almost imperceptible tightening came at the corners of Nan Stewart’s eyes when the mention of a five-thousand-dollar reward was made. Everything was so hopeless, so hopeless—and the sound of the words, “five-grand,” hinted so much happiness and chance for her baby and herself . . .

But how could she tell this cop what was hidden before his very eyes, without endangering the life of her baby? How could she let him know, unknown to the gunman, so that the police could safely capture the killer with the hard, pale-blue eyes? There was her baby’s life—and the heavy automatic in the right-hand pocket of Heimer’s trousers. . . .

MIKE CALAHAN turned from the empty closet, again eyed the way

Heimer was carrying the baby, and said to Nan Stewart: “Well, good-night, ma’m. Sorry to disturb you folks. Guess you’re havin’ a hard enough time without all this stuff goin’ on. I—”

Heimer interrupted: “Sure, sure, officer—that’s all right. I gotta get this little son of mine to sleep now.”

The muscles in Nan Stewart’s thin body tightened at Rudy Heimer’s words as the officer started toward the door. Through her mind there pounded the thoughts of:

“Five thousand dollars . . . her baby . . . a chance for them both . . .”

When Calahan turned at the door and again ducked his head at her in a self-conscious bow, she said:

“Yes, officer—we’re so worried, and all the shooting has got on our nerves. The baby, and everything—we’re so poor . . . Even the clothes for my son—the baby, he only has those knitted pink things left to wear from better times; they’re too small for him now, too. Oh, we— Well, I shouldn’t talk to you about our troubles.”

Mike Calahan’s big frame tensed under his dark-blue uniform, and he dropped his hand from the doorknob and moved slowly back into the room. Again his eyes surveyed the scene—a typical poor couple in Last Chance Acre, with the shirt-sleeved husband trying to quiet an undernourished baby while an over-worried mother tried to rest. Even the man’s coat, hanging over the back of a scarred chair seemed to be in place.

“Sure, sure, ma’m, I understand,” said Officer Calahan in a deep, kindly voice. “Even if I say it for myself, I’m a family man, too, y’know; an’ I’m sure wishin’ you an’ the little son a lotta better luck.”

Mike Calahan’s greatest ambition was to be a real lawman; detect, do something in the line of out-and-out crime subduction. But Calahan’s forte had

seemed to lie only in a specialized sense of vehicular orderliness, which had kept him waving at traffic for many a long year. And many were the good-natured but secretly soul-hurting gibes of his fellow officers assigned to non-traffic tours.

“Good old Mike—he wants to work up to plainclothes man. Mike—why, he’s the family man. Round up a crook? Ha, ha—he’s a family man; he couldn’t even catch a cold.”

Mike Calahan’s homely face hid his thoughts: “Family man I am—sure. But maybe a family man can be a helluva lot smarter than them fellas think—smarter than them, too.”

The kindly traffic cop said to Heimer: “Well, mister, I’ll be wishin’ you folks a lotta luck.” But he was really stalling, again taking in the details of the room—cracked walls and ceiling, dirty floor, lack of chairs, a cheap, garish table lamp, from which the bulb was gone

In few, quick seconds, Mike Calahan was wondering if he should take a chance. It would cost him plenty if he blundered. But Calahan was a family man, and that was the code by which he lived.

“Well, folks,” he said, “I’ll be goin’, just as soon as I say good-bye to the little one.”

Officer Calahan commenced to gamble his career on the force by grinning and stuffing his police positive into a side pocket for his ample greatcoat, to allay any possible suspicion. Calmly, swiftly, he took the baby from Heimer. Then, holding the mewling infant with practiced ease, he walked, smiling affably, over to the bed where Nan Stewart lay. There he put the child down beside her.

“Mr. Stewart,” he said with supreme satisfaction, “I see you don’t know how to hold a baby very well Well, after you’ve had your seventh, like I’ve had,

you’ll know how to handle the little rascals a bit better.”

For a moment Traffic Officer Calahan hesitated. He knew he was taking a chance to act the way he was planning. Then the galling salutations of his comrades on the force came back to him:

“ ‘Mother’ Calahan, howya? Still trying fer Homicide, ol’ family man who couldn’t even catch a cold? How’s the Sherlock Holmes business comin’?”

All that was enough reminder. Mike Calahan acted, quickly swiftly, now that the baby was out of Heimer’s reach.

RUDY HEIMER was a second quicker, however. Suddenly suspicious, he yanked the heavy automatic out of his trouser’s pocket, swung the muzzle toward the bluecoat’s midriff. Calahan leaped, got a grip on Heimer’s gun-wrist. The two locked in a desperate death struggle.

Mike Calahan struggled silently, intent upon making no sound; for he wanted the full credit of getting his man single-handed. Heimer tried to make no noise for the simple reason that he knew the house was full of cops. Even so, the homely traffic officer managed to grin assuringly at Nan Stewart, who, heart pounding, was too excited to more than stammer out:

“Yes—yes, he’s one of them.”

Calahan pulled downward, suddenly, forcefully, and at the same time, shot a clutching grab at Heimer’s left wrist. The action threw the Masked Raider’s pistol muzzle so much out of line that the traffic cop thought he would have a chance.

Mike Calahan did his best, but his honest heart sank when he found that the wiry muscles of Heimer were too much for him. The right wrist of the gunman, wiry and inexorable, was slowly, surely turning that lethal pistol muzzle straight at his face. Heimer was too strong, and in sheer

desperation, Calahan tripped a stocky leg of the pale-eyed man.

Traffic cop and Masked Raiders' chieftain fell to the floor with a dull thud. The rickety table wobbled, and the lamp it bore fell soundlessly upon Calahan's back and rolled to the floor near him. The two men wrestled and twisted desperately. Then they were again deadlocked for the moment, but that sinewy wrist of Heimer's was relentlessly twisting the muzzle of the automatic to aim directly at Calahan's forehead.

Family Man Calahan held on desperately, and was suddenly aware of the empty socket of the useless reading lamp. It was hard and awkward under his left forearm. Mike Calahan thought thoroughly, but rapidly, before he expended his last bit of energy in a wild chance.

The fingers of the traffic cop tightened cruelly upon the tendons in Heimer's wrist, and the pain of the pressure made the gangster's fingers unclench, shoot out straight. Then Calahan shoved those extended fingers violently under the edge of his left forearm.

Nan Stewart's breath caught in her throat, as, half fainting, she watched the desperate struggle. Suddenly the bodies of both men stiffened, and they both grunted with hoarse, strangled sobs. Heimer's gun fired a shot before it dropped from his paralyzed fingers. And then Calahan had scooped the weapon up from the floor.

The homely traffic cop had the upper hand now, and he made Heimer get up from the floor. "Mother" Calahan had done a lot of careful thinking in those brief seconds when he had been deadlocked with sure death. He had gambled perilously—and won.

Kindly Calahan, the traffic cop who wanted most of all to make the homicide squad, had played a fifty-fifty chance

against the Grim Reaper. He knew that when a light bulb burns out, a person pushes the switch button on and off repeatedly to make sure that the filament is burned through, then removes and throws away the bulb—and sometimes leaves the current to the socket *turned on*. That was the one, slim chance upon which Mike Calahan had acted.

When Officer Calahan had shoved Heimer's extended fingers violently under the edge of his left forearm, toward the gaping mouth of the empty socket, he had succeeded in getting a finger of the gunman inside the socket. Both men had been shocked. But Calahan, with prepared will-power, had captured the dropped automatic before his adversary could recover.

Racing footsteps were now pounding toward the door—the result of the shot fired from the pistol. Calahan dragged his gun-covered captive across the room. Then he had the door open, and men crowded into the room.

THE leader of those men of the law was in civilian clothes; young, alert, taking unbelievably short time to size up the situation—a G-man.

"Good work, officer," he said. "That's Rudy Heimer, head of the Masked Raiders. One of his pals we've been sweating down in the basement just described him."

Nan Stewart pushed herself feebly up in bed, started to speak, but only moaned feebly.

Mike Calahan, feeling a delightful, warm glow of pride suffuse his chest, said: "Now—take it easy, Mrs. Stewart. Don't worry about nuthin'. That five-thousand-dollar reward'll make everything just rosy for you and the little one."

The sergeant who had ribbed Calahan not so many minutes ago, removed his

visored cap and scratched the head beneath it bewilderedly.

“Well, I’ll be damned if old ‘Mother’ Calahan, the family man, hasn’t— If that ain’t a piece of luck!”

Mike Calahan swelled his chest indignantly—and proudly—as he said in a triumphant boom: “Oh, wise-guy sergeant—so, I’m a family man who’s no good goin’ after crooks—can’t even catch a cold, eh? Well, smart guy, is that baby a boy or a girl? Don’t stall around. Answer me!”

The sergeant was ruffled by the traffic cop’s disrespect to his rank—but then there was Calahan with a take worth five thousand dollars

“Well—well, I dunno whut y’mean,” he forced out. “How can I tell whether it’s a boy or girl. Whut the hell has that got to do with—”

Family Man Mike Calahan thrust out his homely pan and crowed: “You’re darn right yuh don’t know. It takes a smart

family man to know a thing or two.” He turned slightly toward Nan Stewart, whose eyes were fascinatedly directed toward his face. “Don’t think that a family man like me doesn’t know that you wouldn’t have said pink clothes to me for a baby boy, Mrs. Stewart, except to put me wise. You were calling the little one *son*—and so was this here rat, Heimer. Pink baby clothes is only fer girl ones; baby boys wear—blue ones.”

The sergeant stuttered and stammered while the G-man, whose quick deduction told him most of the story, smiled amusedly.

“Everything’ll be okay now for you an’ the little one,” said Calahan beamingly to Nan Stewart. “That five thousand’ll do plenty.”

If Mike Calahan had ever boasted before of being a family man, it was nothing to what he spouted from then on. And he got shoved up to Homicide