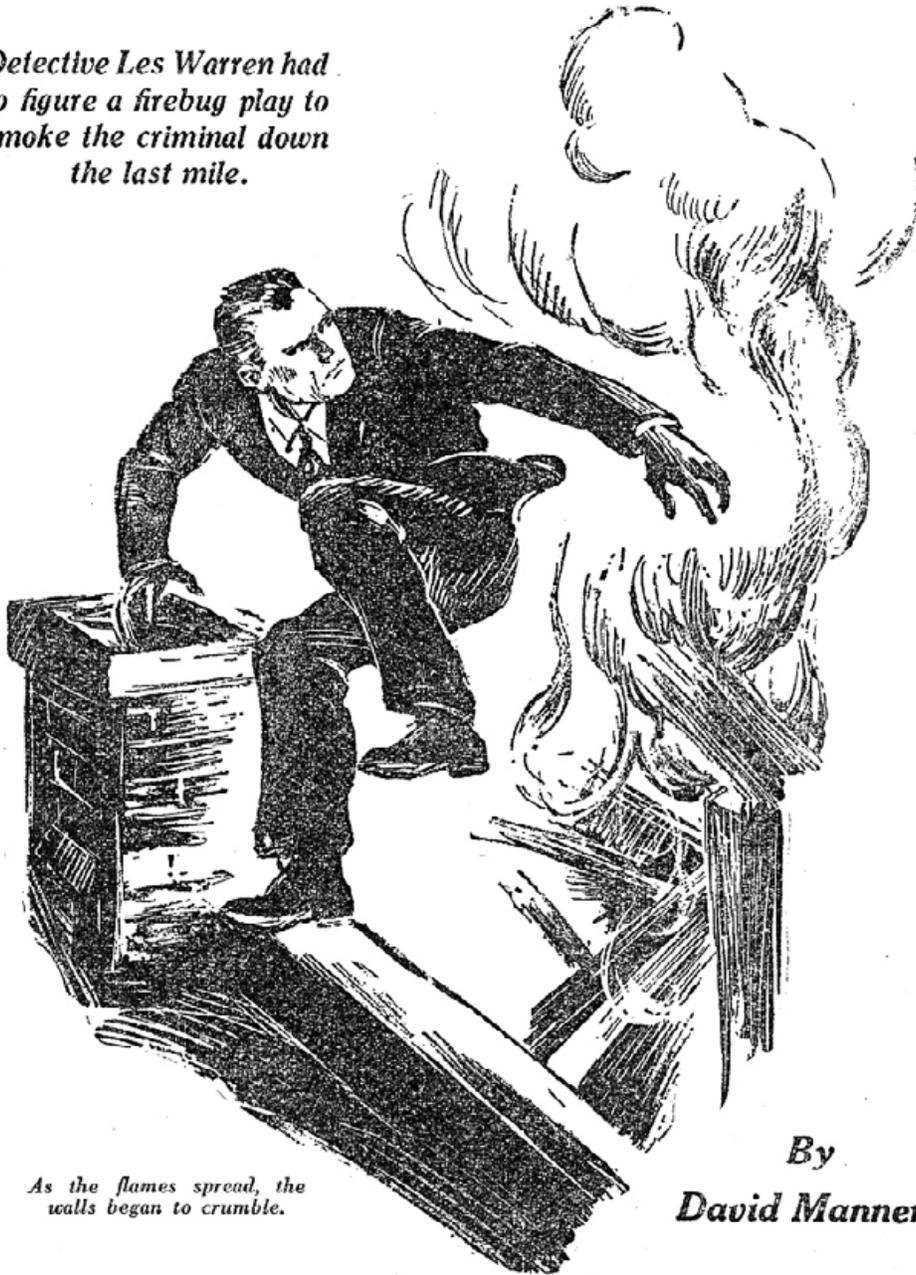


Arson By Proxy

Detective Les Warren had to figure a firebug play to smoke the criminal down the last mile.



As the flames spread, the walls began to crumble.

By
David Manners

THE place was a big one. The kind that looks like a made-over palace, with crystal chandeliers, tables set among palms, and luscious steaks that can make a man forget anything. But Les Warren, private dick, saw it wasn't doing Sam Mosby much good. He wasn't eating,

and he was jumping every minute of the time he sat there in his chair.

"I can't die now," he said again, in his pleading, jerky voice. "I can't let them kill me."

"Plenty men have gotten threatening letters before, without it meaning

anything. Relax.” Les was getting a little weary of repeating that, too.

“But you don’t seem to understand what it means. If I die now, it’s not just me that goes, it’s the end of my work. Who will there be to carry on? The city will have no new building code, the slums will go on as before, and the Government won’t advance any money for building projects. Don’t you see what that means? It means that upon my work depends construction employment for thousands, and new homes and hope for the people who live in tenement hovels that should have been torn down twenty years ago.”

“You said you were doing it for the wife and kiddies, just a little while back,” said Les. He looked at Sam Mosby. It seemed funny that Mosby should fear anyone. He was big and powerful and with a pair of hands that looked like bludgeons. He’d been a pro boxer and his nose and ears showed the effects of it.

All around, he was a fiery-tempered, violent man, used to having his own way and having it in a hurry. It was a little funny, too, to think of him as a reformer. But that’s what Mosby was. To hear him talk, you’d think his heart was made of mush. All he was worried about were the underprivileged and the poor.

He was responsible for a dozen new playgrounds. They named school buildings after him. Now he’d set to work on the city’s slums. He was a tough gent to come up against. It was lucky he was on the right side.

Les Warren’s six feet and one hundred eighty pounds looked tiny up alongside of Mosby. But since the civic reformer thought he needed his protection, Warren was going to give it to him.

Les watched as Mosby suddenly ceased his squirming in his chair and straightened.

“That’s him!” Mosby gasped.

“Who?” Les Warren’s eyes moved over to a ruddy-faced man who was just being shown to a table by the head waiter.

“Bertrand Craig! That’s the double-crosser who’s been sending me those letters, telling me I’d wake up some morning with my throat slit if I didn’t lay off trying to put over a new building code. Who else would it be? I could knock his block off.”

MOSBY was a wild one all right. He jumped up out of his chair, eyes flaming and fists clenched. He started pushing his way over to Craig’s table. Les grabbed his arm to stop him, but he jerked loose. He upset a chair that was in his way before he confronted Craig. It looked then like someone else instead of Mosby was going to get his throat slit.

“Craig,” Mosby said, and he threw a packet of letters down on the table before the man, “you got some tall explaining to do. If you wrote these notes I’ll bash your head in.”

Craig was a little fellow, but slick. You could see it in his calm, easy manner. In the meticulous way in which he dressed. He was cool and clever. Mosby had told Les that Craig had risen from a common electrician’s helper to a position where he owned millions in slum property. It took a wise one to do that, and one who knew how to play his cards. Craig knew how to make money and how to hang on to it. He looked at the notes Mosby had thrown down.

“So they’re out to get you,” he mused. “It’s about time. You’re too raw, Mosby.”

“Damn you, Craig, don’t hand me that!” Mosby swore. “It will take more than threats to stop the work we’re doing. I know you’d like to see me six feet under. Maybe you will, but not before a law’s on the books that will stop your profiteering at the expense of human misery.”

Craig was very cool. "That law will never be passed. It's vicious and unfair. You can't go ahead and condemn millions of dollars worth of real estate. You and your high-handed reform methods are through, Mosby. For all we're concerned, you're as good as dead now. Anderson and Macauley are in with me on this. We're fighting together to the last ditch."

Mosby sputtered out like a wet firecracker. He came back to his own table and sat down, glowering.

"The gall of that man," he said. "He sails around in his yacht and has time for golf and pigeon breeding. But he won't put sanitary plumbing into his firetrap tenements."

Les had heard it all. "Who are Anderson and Macauley?"

"They're a couple other real estate operators. But they have hearts and social consciousness. They'd come around if it weren't for Craig. But now with the three of them working together. . ."

Mosby seemed suddenly crestfallen and spent. He shrugged as if, after all, maybe the thing was hopeless. Maybe he never would be able to put across his plan for putting to an end the city's blighted areas.

Les got up. "I guess I'll be going."

"See here," said Mosby. "You can't do that. I'm paying you to guard me. They'll—"

"I don't think there'll be any throat-slitting tonight. Anyway, what I'm going to do now is part of my protection—and a hell of a lot more effective than my sitting here."

"Craig's a killer," Mosby said.

Les looked down at Mosby's rocklike fists. "Yeah," he said.

He wondered about it later as he slipped into a drug store and looked up several numbers in the phone book. He paid a couple of visits around town after

that. Details. It was getting dark when he got back up to the Beekman section where Bertrand Craig lived.

It was a swell building, fronting on the river, with a private yacht landing and a seaplane tied up nearby. Some class. Craig had plenty dough. Les strolled up the block before he went inside. From that distance he could see the building's roof.

There was a pigeon loft on top of it, and Les could see a man up there now with the birds. As he watched, the man released one. The bird circled, then fluttered away.

CRAIG had a triplex apartment. That meant he had three floors in the building. He, like a lot of others, found that more practical than a big town house, which he had but kept boarded up.

Les picked a feather off the man's coat when he was shown into Craig's private study.

"Been up with the birds?"

"Why—yes," said Craig. "Yes."

Craig was a slick one, all right. Polished as a billiard ball. He was almost the same height as Les, but wiry and hard.

"I thought I ought to tell you this," Les said. "Sam Mosby has hired me to protect him, but I don't want to get mixed up in anything off-color. To be frank, Craig, I think it's you that needs the protection. Mosby is a hothead and liable to do anything. Watch yourself."

A slow grin overspread Craig's rather hard face. There was a tone of surprise, but delighted surprise, in his voice. "Yes?"

He got very friendly then, and insisted on cracking out a bottle of liquor.

About a half hour passed and the phone rang. Craig's face went white when he answered it. He dropped the receiver back in the cradle as if it were too heavy to hold.

"Good heavens," he gasped. "I'll never

forgive myself for this. A block of my buildings are on fire down on Avenue A!”

“Tenements?” Les Warren asked.

“Everyone of them. There must be two hundred and fifty families living there. If any of them—”

Craig lost his coolness. He bobbed about like mad. He called for his car at the garage, and while he was waiting for it, prancing nervously, Les slipped onto the phone. He called Sam Mosby. There was no answer.

The fire lit up the entire sky. These were buildings put up quickly, before the turn of the century, to accommodate the tremendous waves of immigration then coming from Europe. They were outmoded and unsafe. Their building law violations got by only because there were no stringent enforcement measures. When Mosby’s new ordinances went through, they would all be condemned.

There was no getting near the scene of the fire. Apparatus and police cars blocked the way. It was easy to see the block was a complete loss. The helmeted smoke-eaters were battling valiantly only to stop its spread to other buildings. Fortunately, it was a warm evening, and very few of the tenement’s occupants were inside when the alarm broke.

Craig left his car, and Les followed him inside the fire lines. He wondered about Mosby. Then, among the confusion of figures scurrying about, he saw the man, his blocky face ruddy in the fire glow. Mosby saw Bertrand Craig at about the same instant that the real estate operator saw him.

“Get him!” Mosby shouted to Les. “Craig’s burned these buildings down for their insurance.”

Les took it slow. He didn’t know just how much he could trust this Mosby. His zeal was a little too great. “Yeah?” he said.

“Sure,” Mosby exclaimed. “He knew

that when the new code went through all these buildings would be worthless. But now they still have value—plenty value. Craig will collect a half million insurance—so he thinks. But he’s going to burn first! Two old folks lost their lives in this fire; that makes it murder!”

Craig looked like a trapped rat, but only for an instant. An accusation like that one is enough to frighten anybody. He grew deadly cool, and his crisp words snapped on his tongue.

“I haven’t been near these buildings. You know that yourself, Warren.”

“But there’s an old trick of lighting a candle in a pile of greasy rags, Craig. In three-four hours the candle burns down and sets fire to the rags. It’s an old firebug stunt.”

“But I haven’t been down this way in two days. I can prove that. But where have you been, Mosby? How come you’re down here now? Trying to pull a John Brown by setting fire to these buildings, figuring that resentment against another slum fire would send your new building code flying through?”

“Yeah,” said Les. “How about that, Mosby? How come you’re here? You heard Craig say that he had the backing of Anderson and Macauley to fight your plan, so you figured you were licked, is that it?”

Les had taken out the gun he carried in his shoulder holster. This thing was breaking. In just about a minute, the pieces would be flying.

“Yeah,” said Craig. “How about it? Get down off your high perch, Mosby.”

MOSBY was licking his lips. Les was looking at him, but as he did, his expression suddenly changed. Les Warren’s free left hand went into his pocket and brought out something white and fuzzy. He turned on Craig.

“Recognize this? You’d better. I

picked it off your coat up at your apartment. You'd just been up on your roof with your pigeons. I'll bet you used to have a pigeon loft here on top of these tenements."

Craig's eyes went wide and his mouth rounded. He was bewildered. Mosby spoke up.

"Yeah. He did. He used to fly pigeons back and forth from here to his other place. Maybe he still does."

"This feather's going to make you fry, Craig. You set fire to these buildings, trying to collect insurance on them while they were still worth something. Well, two people died in that fire. That makes it murder."

Craig backed away. "You're kidding, fella. How could I? I wasn't near these buildings—"

"Yeah, but maybe once having been in the electrical racket gave you an idea. Maybe you rigged up an electric toaster in a heap of oil-soaked wood shavings. All it needed was the juice to set it going. Then you released your little messenger of death. It was trained to fly straight for this loft. When it landed, on its regular perch, you had it rigged so that it would close the contact and start that toaster. Then—"

It hit Les Warren like a hurtling rock. He was so engrossed in telling his story, he was caught off-guard by Craig's sudden move. Craig hit him hard, upsetting him. His quickly darting hand snatched away Les' gun. He backed off, covering both Les and Mosby. The three were alone there at the edge of the blazing building.

"Damn you both!" Craig swore. "The two of you will have to die now! Back around near that building wall, both of you!"

Les shook his head. "Too late, Craig. That game won't work. I telephoned my message to Chief Henderson at

headquarters before I left your place. You kill us and—"

Craig's tense face tightened even more. He was remembering, apparently, having seen the detective on the phone. He swore. He looked behind him at an alleyway, then raised his eyes. In just about a minute, the wall above would come crashing down into that alley, blocking it. If he could make it through just before . . .

Suddenly, he turned and ran. Les clipped off a curse. Craig was getting away. He'd make it through, but pursuit was impossible with that wall coming down. He was getting away, just when—

Les stopped. There was rubbish in the alley. It was a little thing, a brick maybe, but one of Craig's hurrying feet hit it. Down he sprawled. He looked up, terrified. Those precious lost seconds signaled his doom.

Les and Mosby turned away as the flaming brick wall cracked, poised in mid-air. It crashed down with a rumble and a spurt of fire.

"A little thing," Les said when he could talk. "It tripped him."

"How did you know? How could you have figured it was him?"

"It was a chance. Like his running down that alley. I knew he'd once been an electrician, but I didn't get the idea till he gave it to me himself. Remember when he said: 'Get down off your high perch'? That gave me the notion. A little thing, but it toppled him."

Mosby was big and husky, but he looked a little ill and shaken. He saw Les Warren turning away.

"Yeah, I've got to go," said Les. "I've got to find Chief Henderson. You see, it wasn't him I phoned up at Craig's apartment. It was you."