

Five-Star Fury

By Tom B. Stone

Into the mouths of the hungry newspaper presses Chris Carter fed dynamite copy.



CHRIS CARTER had passed the corner newsstand with its mounted papers, the heavy black *Ledger* headlines screaming about the election the next day, when he noticed the little man stepping from the sedan.

It was because of the little man's ears. They were really tremendous. Huge, flapping appendages that threw the rest of his body and head completely out of proportion. Yet, as large as they were, his eyes were the opposite. Small and colorless behind low hung lids, they were mere patches of lightness against his sallow skin. His dark grey sharkskin suit and silk shirt and crocheted black tie held neatly with a gold pin were expensive, and good-looking. He wasn't.

Chris Carter did the poultry filler on the *Ledger*, Cleeport's lone paper, so it wasn't strange that his mind should pursue those channels. Unashamedly staring, he compared the little man's fleshy ears with a turkey's wattles, and was mildly surprised at their similarity.

The little man turned, small hand on the car door.

"Don't you worry, Ben," he said in a high, reedy voice. "I'll handle him. He knows what's good. Taking your dough was sticking his neck in a rat-trap. He's gotta play ball."

Chris glanced at the occupant of the tonneau, a heavy-set individual with merry, curved lips and rubicund cheeks. His eyes were set in pleasant laughter crinkles, and his head cocked to one side like a cheerfully

inquisitive sparrow. Momentarily, Chris expected him to explode into flesh-quaking laughter. He received an unpleasant shock with the fat man's voice.

"We don't leave anything to chance," the man said in a flat, dead voice, utterly devoid of emotion. "Sam Travers does what's expected—or there's no more Sam Travers!"

Chris Carter blinked, unpleasantly disturbed as if he had quaffed aged brandy and swallowed, instead, acid vinegar. Travers! Sam Travers! Why, that was the name of his city editor! Of course, these two were talking about some other Travers, still.

Surging pedestrian traffic swept Chris Carter on past the car, and he shrugged off the feeling of agitation.

The city room was a cacophonous clamor. Chris felt the staccato beat of life throbbing, the never subdued imminence of excitement with something of a thrill. For sixteen years he had gloried in the keen electric tension it awakened within his lean, gaunt frame, as sharply today as that first cub reporting day.

The mantle of his weariness was doffed as quickly as he might discard his mismatched tweed suit or battered felt hat. Latent blue fire glowed deep in his eyes.

"Carter! Got your chicken filler?" Travers, the bull-necked city editor, roared across the clattering room.

"Right away, chief," Chris waved, shoulders slumping defeatedly.

He had wanted to talk about the Greeley story, to relax in the flow of words concerning the state's live-wire special prosecutor. The story was page one stuff. Prosecutor Greeley had secured indictments

against Paul Thiele's mighty political machine; then, mysteriously, the incriminating documentary proof had disappeared!

Greeley's hands were tied. The Thiele juggernaut chuckled. Cleeport's long-suffering public were mystified, numbed to the accusations sensing political intrigue. Yet they could be depended upon to throw their votes against the corrupt incumbents—if the missing records could be found, and exposed!

Johnny Brady was covering the story for the Ledger. His crackling up-to-the-minute column sent pride glowing in Chris Carter's eyes, for he liked to feel that in some small manner his coaching and sage advice had aided Johnny up the ladder. A long time had passed since Johnny, an eager-eyed cub, had joined the staff.

Chris surveyed the office, searching for Johnny's lean, brown face. He then dismissed the idea as he stared at the stranger, seated at the city desk, who was watching Sam Travers with sharp, unfriendly eyes.

"The little man with the big ears," Chris murmured, bewildered. He knew now that the mention of Sam Travers' name had not been a reference to some other Travers. Because Sam was hunched over his desk, penciling copy at a great rate, and his square cheeks were gray, tight, and his lips compressed to thin, straight lines.

Thinking back, Chris remembered the fat man with the merry lips, and he scowled bitterly.

"A fine newspaperman, I am. That was Paul Thiele's county leader, Braddock. Ben Braddock. That little guy is Vane Qualey, Braddock's hound dog. They got Travers tied up in some crooked work, and Qualey's here to make sure Travers toes the line. What a line?"

He knew, with lightning-like clarity, as a copy boy dumped yellow pages before

Travers, and Vane Qualey leaned over the desk, reading every word, pointing to several pages and shaking his head.

"Censoring everything that hits the presses," Chris muttered, real excitement stirring inside him. "Ten to one it's the Greeley story. They're afraid something'll break. Braddock's taking no chances we run anything the public might see. And the *Ledger's* the only sheet here—"

Travers yelled crisply: "Carter! Telephone—"

Chris grabbed copy paper, pencil and hurried across the room. Scooping the receiver against his ear, he heard Johnny Brady's voice rattling excitedly. It was difficult to follow the snapping words that peppered his brain, but he managed to nod, and say huskily, "Okay—check," and hung up with a trembling hand.

"Hurry that stuff, Carter," Travers scowled. "The presses roll soon."

Fumbling with a stubby briar, Chris bobbed his head. "Just a minute, chief." He watched a match spurt scarlet, a tiny living beacon. Confidence oozed through his thin bones, and he sat down, pecking at the keys with increasing rapidity.

HIS face flushed as he handed Travers the copy. The city editor scanned it, snarled: "What the hell kind of copy is this? You plastered?" His small, bright eyes raked Chris Carter's face. Over his shoulder Vane Qualey read the poultry copy, and grinned. Travers flung back the sheets.

"Go over it—stick to your own stuff. You're not doing fashion news,"

Cheeks afire, Chris shambled back to his desk, conscious of Vane Qualey's thin, derisive laughter. He rewrote three pages, stood up slowly, face stiff as cardboard, blood roaring thickly in his ears. Travers glared with exasperation as Chris bent down.

"Those leghorn prizes. Want I should list 'em singly—or group 'em?"

Travers exploded. "How the hell do I know?"

Under his booming snarl, knifing acutely, came Qualey's quick jeering ridicule. When he brought back the pages later, Travers scowled, without looking at them, "Send 'em up the chute. Heaven help you if there's anything wrong!" and went back to the mounded copy before him.

The air tube hissed as the carrier-enclosed sheets shot up to the composing room. Minutes passed, long, terrifying minutes. Chris sat at his desk, holding to the typewriter carriage until his knuckles showed white through the skin. The distant rumble of presses shook the building foundations, rousing him. He walked to the water cooler.

"They're rolling now, Qualey," Travers snapped, his voice edged with tension. "Too late to do anything now. The polls'll be open by the time they hit the streets. Tell Braddock he's set for another three years."

Chris Carter's hand, lifting the paper cups, trembled and water trickled back onto his wrinkled cuff. Outside, exhaust blared from delivery trucks as the cars wheeled out across the dawn-gray spokes of the sleeping metropolis with the still-damp edition.

A copy boy ran in, tossed folded copies on the city desk. Vane Qualey stood up, cocking his jaunty felt hat over his big ears. Suddenly he stiffened, staring at the outspread paper.

Travers leaped to his feet, lips flaying apart, hands spread flat on the front page, glaring at the page-one story under glaring black streamers. "Carter! *Carter!*" he choked thickly. "You—you slipped this story by me—sent it up instead of that chicken filler!"

Chris Carter released the typewriter. He stood up, strangely poised, thin shoulders squared.

"Yes. That was Johnny Brady who called me before. He knew Thiele and Braddock had the *Ledger* sewed up tight. Braddock paid you well to kill any possible break on the Greeley story."

Travers' breath whistled audibly. He paled. Vane Qualey's thin body tensed, his eyes grew very bright and hard.

"Johnny Brady got Lew Jerrel to sing. Jerrel was Braddock's contact man. He told where the records were hidden. But the story was useless, unless the voters got it in time. Johnny thought of me—my chicken filler. Harmless old Carter—but I managed to burn you up, to annoy you with the first copy I wrote, and then rapped out Johnny Brady's real story—the Greeley yarn, with a note to the composing room to front page it! So, old Carter slipped the story past you, Travers! I'm still a newspaperman, and proud of it! Are you, Travers?"

A gun appeared in Vane Qualey's small gloved hand, spouting flame as it roared. A wave of sound engulfed Chris Carter. He spun, an icy finger tracing his left side, numbing it.

The city-room doors flailed inward, emitting a stream of blue-uniformed figures. Chris saw Johnny Brady's anxious eyes, and crumpling, smiled into a great, blinding glare. . . .

Johnny grinned. "You're okay, Chris. The slug nicked your ribs. We got Qualey, and warrants've been issued for Thiele and his whole crowd."

Heedless of gnawing pain, Chris Carter breathed deeply, savoring of the wine of content. His feet tingled, having trod the exciting trail.

Brady chuckled. "A second Stanley. You've got a feature page-one yarn to finish."

Chris swallowed, mumbling gruffly through hot tightness in his throat: "Well, what're we waiting for? Hey, copy . . . !"