



"Hook this up," Toby Petrelli ordered

ONE HOUR BACK

By C. S. MONTANYE

Eddie needed fifty bucks and Eddie could handle dynamite, but he had his own ideas when he was asked to make a time bomb!

I NEEDED the fifty bucks bad, but I should have been smarter than to fall for Toby Petrelli's line. The whole trouble was Marge. Marge Gannon, that's the girl I was going steady with.

Marge's kid sister, Ruth, needed an operation. Marge had all the dough she needed for it except a measly fifty bucks.

That night when Toby spotted me at the Omega Alleys, I was in the mood to listen.

"Hello, kid," he said. "Haven't seen you much."

"I've been around," I said, and wondered what was on his mind.

I knew all about Petrelli. He was bad news. He had been yanked a couple of times. Grand larceny, assault, things like that. Both times he had beaten the rap

because there wasn't enough evidence to put him where he belonged.

Toby Petrelli was a labor agitator in a small way. "Chiseler" would be a better word. He dreamed up ideas to get a buck or two, weekly, out of a guy's wages. He was like a fat spider feeding on the pay envelopes of all the guys in town.

I'd heard, that right now Toby was trying to swing something up at United Canneries. That was the big salmon outfit in the northern part of the state. Marge's uncle, a party named Simon Cafferty, was superintendent in charge of the men. From what the girl friend had let drop I figured Toby Petrelli was trying some sharpshooting with the guys at the cannery.

When I finished rolling my last box,

Toby bought me a beer.

“Look, kid,” he said. “It’s raining. Why don’t you let me give you a lift home? I’ve got a car outside.”

“Thanks, I can walk,” I told him.

He slapped me on the back.

“C’mon, don’t be a dope. Besides, I want to talk to you. I might be able to throw something your way. Maybe you could use a half C, how do I know?”

Fifty bucks. That hit me right in the bread-basket. Funny, he should mention that amount. Two hours ago Marge had been almost nuts trying to figure out where she could get the fifty for Ruth.

THE medico wanted to go to work Saturday on the kid sister. But they wouldn’t turn a wheel at the hospital without lubrication. Advance payment for the room, surgery, anesthetic and so forth.

The angles I had to raise the dough were no good. Six months ago, when I was blasting for the K and L Construction bunch, it would have been a cinch to swing it. Now, waiting for a break, I was living on credit with hardly two dimes to rub together.

“Okay,” I said to Toby. “Let’s ride.”

He grinned. I never liked his looks and nobody else did. He was the original Mr. Five-by-Five. He was like a tub on legs. He had a moon face, oily hair and eyes like a rat.

I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw a locomotive by the bell, but fifty bucks was something else, if it was legitimate, which was the question.

We parked his bus in front of my boarding house and I took him up to my room. I told him to keep his voice down because Mrs. Wasson, the landlady, didn’t cotton to her boarders having jam sessions late at night and disturbing guys trying to sleep.

Toby sat on the bed. He weighed the springs down. I sat in the only chair. Petrelli sucked on half a cigar, if you could call it that. I knew I’d have to open the window after he left to air the place out.

He fixed his beady little eyes on me.

“Ever hear of Joe Chapman, Eddie?”

“Yeah. He used to be a small contractor. Why?”

“I’m backing him. He’s got a contract to build a dam up the river.”

I sat up straighter. Chapman was a good egg. On the beam. He’d never gotten anywhere with his bids because the K and L outfit, when I was with it, always undersold him. But he was on the level and that made this sound better.

“He’ll be in the market for a first-class blaster—after the first of the month.” Toby rolled his cigar from one side of his crooked mouth to the other. “I’ve been thinking of you. Been out of work some time, haven’t you?”

“I’m waiting for a defense plant job to break. Over at Ogden. Skelton Powder.”

Petrelli grinned.

“You might wait six months before you get word. They’re bringing most of their men from the Middle West. I know, I’ve been snooping.”

I believed that.

“What about Chapman?” I said.

Petrelli kept his eyes on me.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about. We’ve got some dynamite. Not a whole lot. We haven’t got priorities—yet, and the dam is, still more or less a private affair. What we need is a guy to come up to the shack tomorrow and put together a test charge. I’ll supply the stuff. You fix it and you get fifty dollars for your work.”

It sounded all right. But somehow there was a something in Petrelli’s face that made me suspicious. I couldn’t put it in words, but it was there.

Another thing, what he offered was too much for my part in the job. That is, it would be too much in ordinary times. But maybe he couldn't get anybody who knew how to handle TNT. Most of the high explosives bunch were working for Uncle Sam, these days.

Petrelli wrote an address on a slip of paper.

"Think it over, Eddie. If you want to do it come up here tomorrow at noon. You can take the bus to the end of the line. It's a twenty-minute walk from there."

I CALLED Chapman on the telephone the first thing in the morning. He remembered me. He told me it was straight stuff. He told me Petrelli was backing him and he did have a contract to build a dam up the river.

So I took the eleven o'clock bus out.

The address was near Lake Lawson, six miles north of town. Petrelli owned an acre there. There were shacks on it, tool sheds and the like. He stored junk there. A broken steam-shovel, other pieces of rusty machinery.

I found him in a shack that had the words *Danger - Explosives* painted on the door in red. Petrelli came out and shook hands with me. On the phone I had asked Chapman not to tell Petrelli I had asked questions about him. Little Toby didn't like people who didn't trust him.

"So you came up, Eddie. That's good. Come on in and I'll explain what I want."

The shack was like any one I used to work in. Racks for the bang sticks. The walls asbestos insulated. The tools rubber-coated.

He showed me his dynamite stock and it was low. Low for heavy work on a riverbed. However, he had enough on hand to make a good sized rock charge.

Petrelli picked up an empty leather suitcase. He split it in half and laid it on

the table.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"You've seen the stock, Eddie. Build me a blast in here, in this suitcase, that I can put safely in the car and drive up to Chapman's with. We haven't got any blasting material there to set it off with. So I want you to make a time charge out of this. Fix it so I can hook an alarm clock in. You know."

That sounded screwy. I looked at him and he must have seen what was in my expression. Instead of smiling, he pulled his mouth together. His eyes were like bits of coal.

"What do you say, kid? Fifty bucks." He pulled a fat roll of dough out of his pocket and peeled off two twenties and a ten. "Still interested?"

I thought of Marge. I thought of the kid, Ruthie. I thought of Saturday and I swallowed the bad taste in my mouth and nodded.

"Okay," I said, and my voice was kind of thick.

"Attaboy, I knew you would tackle it. Here, shove this in your pants." He gave me the money. "Can I have it by six tonight?"

I nodded again.

"Yeah, but I'll have to go back and get some of my own tools. Leave me the key to this place and I'll come out and put it together later this afternoon."

Petrelli leaned against the workbench. He began to smile. One of those cold-as-ice smiles that makes the shivers go up your spine.

"You wouldn't forget to come back, Eddie? You wouldn't get absent-minded on me or anything? Because," he said, "I don't like guys who forget easy."

"I'll be back. You paid me, didn't you?" I said.

MARGE cried when I gave her the fifty.

"You got this honest, Eddie? You wouldn't do anything you'd be sorry for?"

I put my arms around her. The top of her head just came to my chin. She was wearing a house dress. I could feel how warm and soft she was.

"This is legitimate, baby. I'm working for it."

"You're sweet, Eddie. Please forget I said what I did."

I kissed her and she said I had to stay for lunch. While she got it together I went in and talked to Ruth. The poor kid was propped up in bed. I told her stories and tried to keep her laughing.

Now that the kid was all set to be taken care of Saturday, Marge's spirits went up. She was happy all during lunch. She talked a lot about the future—about us getting married.

"Eddie, guess who came to see Ruth yesterday? Uncle Simon. I spoke to him about you. He says he's going to have a job for you at the canneries as soon as he gets the labor trouble over with. Isn't that swell?"

Then she went on to tell me the trouble Cafferty was having. Little by little my appetite began to fade. By the time she'd finished I could feel a buzzing inside my head.

I kissed her good-by and ducked back to the boarding house to get my tools. I kept them in an old bag in the closet. Then I chased over to the bus stop. It was after three when I got out to the end of the route and going on four when I reached the shack.

Petrelli wasn't around.

I started to make his time bomb. I worked slowly, carefully. You can't hurry when you're handling dynamite. I had a lot of wiring to do, a lot of fitting. I had to

pack the stuff in so it would be tight in the suitcase and not rattle around.

I was almost finished when I heard Toby's car. By this time it was pretty hot. Like the close, steady heat that comes before a thunderstorm. Sweat rolled down my face. I looked up when Toby came in.

"How you doing, kid?"

"All finished."

He came over and looked in the suitcase.

"Swell. Here, I bought this."

He took the wrapping paper off a new alarm clock. It was small and wound up. I looked at my watch and saw that it was the right time.

"Hook this up," he said.

I could feel the heat of Petrelli's body as he stood beside me. He had taken off his coat and had his sleeves rolled up. His hairy arms were round and thick.

"I just had word from Chapman. He's going to use this tonight so first thing in the morning he can put a clear-away gang on the stone and get it out of the way."

"What time do you want it set for?"

Toby scratched his oily head.

"Let's see. It's about an hour's drive up the river road. Better make it for seven."

WIRING the clock in was the toughest job of all. Petrelli backed out of the shack. He wasn't taking any chances getting his fat carcass spread all over the landscape.

I clamped the last wire in place, shut the suitcase, locked it and buckled the two straps. Then I picked it up by the handle and carried it to the car.

Petrelli's fat face had beads of sweat all over it. He watched me lay the suitcase on a folded blanket on the floor in the rear of his two-door sedan. He looked at it nervously.

“What about bumps, Eddie? Any danger of it going off?”

“Not if you drive slow and take it easy. You’ve got cement all the way up the river road. I don’t think you have to worry. It would take a pretty hard jolt to set this charge off. You’ve seen them handle dynamite. There’s no danger at all unless you get rattled.”

He licked his thick lips and got in under the wheel. He backed the car and looked out the open window.

“About that job with Chapman, Eddie; I’ll let you know,” he said.

I stood and watched the sedan until it turned and disappeared up the highway.

It was cool and nice at Marge’s. She had the radio turned low. A little breeze blew the curtains in and out at the windows. Ruth was asleep and it was an hour after dinner.

“I’m glad you ate better, Eddie,” Marge said to me. “You acted funny at lunch. I mean, the way your face got white and you didn’t seem hungry.”

“I’m all right,” I told her.

“Remember we were talking about Uncle Simon?” She laid her head against my shoulder. “How this Petrelli had been threatening him because my uncle threw him out of the canneries last week? Well, it seems Petrelli called Uncle Simon this afternoon and gave him one more chance. He said Uncle Simon will have to do what he wants or else—”

She kept on talking but I hardly heard her. I hardly heard anything except the news announcement that came in the middle of a musical program on the radio:

“We interrupt our program to bring you a special news bulletin! There has been an explosion at Weldon Bridge!”“The man spoke fast. “A green Buick sedan, driving at legal speed, mysteriously blew up when nearing the bridge. It was such a terrific blast that so far the State Police have been unable to identify car or owner. It is hoped—”

Marge shut the radio off. She came back and sat on the couch with me again.

“I’m worried about Uncle Simon, Eddie. From what I hear about Petrelli, he’s just the kind that might try to kill him! What should I do? Petrelli said if my uncle called the police he’d get him anyway.”

I put my arm around her. I was kind of shaky inside. My mouth was dry, too, and I felt cold.

“I wouldn’t worry, baby,” I heard myself telling Marge.

“Why? What can you do in a case like this?”

She snuggled up to me. I kissed the top of her hair, the fluffy, brown-gold hair like silk.

“Well, for one thing,” I said, “you can always set the alarm-hand on a clock back an hour. I mean, so it will go off at six instead of seven!”