



Suddenly the man swung a right hook at Cantrell's jaw, and it landed

DEAD MAN'S NERVE

By JACK BRADLEY

Old Jimmy Cantrell of the Force starts off on the last tour of his beat—and runs smack into a gruesome case of murder!

THEY had all been nice down at the station house before he set out. Everyone had been careful not to notice that his shoes were unshined and his shabby old uniform unpressed. And, above all, they had been careful not to notice the smell of liquor on his breath. Some of the older cops, whose lives he had saved during the wild raids and gunfights of the crazy Prohibition Era had come up to grin embarrassedly and shake his hand. One of the police reporters had even done a brief article about him with the headline:

VETERAN PATROLMAN TO RETIRE
Old Jimmy Cantrell's Last Tour Tonight

The article was a brief sketch of his twenty years as patrolman in Hell's Kitchen. It told of innumerable fights and raids in which he had taken part. The time he had shot down three of the Krumer mob. Of a night when he had walked into a hail of lead, his own gun shot out of his hand, to smash down an escaped convict with his nightstick.

It was a nice story and old Jimmy

Cantrell rather enjoyed being the center of attraction for once. If only it hadn't been for that talk with Captain Marvin.

Marvin had called him into his office just a before he left.

"So this is your last tour, eh, Cantrell?" he had asked quietly. "You're letting your application for retirement stand?"

Cantrell turned his head a bit so the Captain wouldn't smell the liquor on his breath.

"Yes, Captain, I'm letting it stand. I—well, I guess I'm getting a little too old to pound a beat, sir."

Marvin looked at him somberly for a moment.

"All right, Cantrell," he had said then. "That's your privilege. Only we do need cops pretty badly these days, you know."

Before Cantrell could answer, young Lloyd Marvin, the Captain's son, had walked into the office. As always, Cantrell had felt his heart leap at the sight of the trim, athletic young cop. He was so young! So young and clean-looking!

If only things could have been different and he could have had a kid like that on the Force! His fingers had tingled with desire to muss that mop of unruly blond hair, and he had tugged embarrassedly at his tunic, ashamed of the wild intensity of his emotion. It was plain Hades to love another man's son like that.

"I just wanted to speak to Jimmy before he left," Lloyd had said easily.

"Save it until he comes off duty, Lloyd," his father had said curtly. "We'll both see him then. Right now, I'm talking to him myself."

"Okay, then. See you later, Jimmy." Lloyd had grinned and gone out.

WHEN he had left, Captain Marvin had cleared his throat uncomfortably a couple of times before he could blurt out the question he wanted to

ask.

"Uh—that trouble you told me about that time—you know. That still as bad as ever?"

Old Jimmy had looked stonily at a map on the wall.

"Yeah. Just the same as it has been ever since that fight with Tiny."

Marvin nodded understandingly. "I see. Well, then, maybe it's better this way. It's just that I'm worried about Lloyd. He's been seen going into Tiny's club a couple of times lately, and I can't understand it. I know the boy's ambitious and it might be that he figures Tiny can help him get ahead. That no-good is swinging a lot of weight in the precinct, lately."

"I know," Cantrell had said. "I tried to speak to Lloyd about it a couple of times but I didn't get far. Lloyd hasn't got much use for sloppy cops."

"He's too young to understand, Jimmy, and he doesn't know about your trouble. Anyway, there's probably nothing you could do about it. So, we'll just forget the whole thing. And tonight, when you come off duty, you're coming home with us for a bit of supper. Good luck, Jimmy!"

He had pressed Cantrell's hand quickly and turned back to his desk. . . .

Old Jimmy Cantrell was making his last tour! All over the grimy, ancient neighborhood the word had spread and he had to stop a score of times to pass a few words with friends. The long years of exposure to wind and rain, plus the oceans of whisky he had consumed, had given him a bad case of arthritis. And now his stiff, bent figure in the faded old uniform and his slow, steady "harness bull" walk made him look, for all the world, like an aged beetle, as he plodded through the littered streets.

On past Mike's Lunch Room, where he always stashed his raincoat when a

storm threatened. On past Kiernan's—a moment's stop at Klotz's Liquor Store, to try the door. Old Man Klotz had been yammering about that bum lock for five years and hadn't done anything about it. Another stop at Tony's fruit stand, where Tony was waiting breathlessly to make him a present of a huge basket of fruit.

Cantrell began to feel a warm glow in his heart because of the grand friendliness of these people. He knew them so well! Twenty long years of looking after them, keeping their kids out of trouble, giving them advice. Why, that warehouse down the street—that was where he had taken the escaped convict the police reporter had written about. But he, himself, thought of it as the place he had caught Tony's oldest boy breaking into.

He had grabbed the kid by the scruff of the neck that night, and whaled him plenty with his night-stick. Tony had never known about that night. The kid was now a foreman in a war plant.

Yes, it was going to be tough leaving these people. He almost wished—

He snapped out of it abruptly. He had run into trouble and it was the kind of trouble he dreaded most. Nothing more than a bunch of longshoremen gathered around a sidewalk crap game, but he knew only too well what could happen. He forced a tolerant grin on his weather-reddened face as he came up to them.

"All right, boys. Break it up. Break it up. You can go into the alley, back of Hannegan's and shoot craps all night, for all I care, but not out here in plain sight of everybody. Come on, now, break it up."

Most of the men in that crowd were the old-timers he had known for years and they moved back at once. But there were a couple of strangers to him and one of them had the dice. That one faced about hostilely.

"Say! Why don't you go take a walk

for yourself, copper? We ain't botherin' you!"

It started to come up, the way it always did, that old feeling of sick panic. Jimmy Cantrell swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed forward calmly.

"I wasn't kidding you, fellow. I said to break it up and I meant it. Come on, now!"

He prodded the stranger lightly with the tip of his night-stick. And that touched it off.

"Who are you pokin' around, flatfoot?" the man snarled.

Suddenly he slapped the night-stick aside and lurched forward, swinging a right hook at Cantrell's jaw. And it landed. Landed so clumsily that it was almost harmless, but it landed.

And, as always, the panic changed to an insane red haze, and through the haze Jimmy Cantrell felt himself moving forward, his stick poised in cold, murderous readiness. He heard a voice within him shrieking:

"Careful, now! Don't cripple him. Don't get yourself into another jam!"

EVEN as he started to swing, it was all over. Two of the old-timers had grabbed the stranger and yanked him back out of reach of that club.

"All right, Jimmy!" one of them yelled sharply. "Don't hit him! We'll take care of it! Easy, now!"

Between them they hustled the man off down the street and as they went Cantrell heard one of them saying breathlessly:

"Don't ever do that again! Don't ever lay hands on old Jimmy Cantrell. I've known that cop for the last fifteen years and I bet he's been up on charges a dozen times or more for half killing fellers that laid their hands on him. He's funny about that. He just can't stand it when you put your hands on him."

The stranger growled something in

reply and then they were out of hearing down the street. Cantrell turned and went on down his beat. He was shaking like a leaf and the sweat was pouring out of him. All of the warm, pleasant feeling he had had was gone.

Suddenly he looked up sharply. Young Lloyd Marvin was standing across the street, looking at him. Just standing there looking. Cantrell wondered how anybody could put so much searing contempt into a look as Lloyd was doing.

He started to raise his night-stick in halfhearted salute. Abruptly Lloyd snapped about and strode away, without returning Cantrell's wave.

Far down the street, Jimmy Cantrell saw him turn in at the entrance of Tiny Anderson's club. He started after him, then gave it up. That would involve explaining about "that trouble", and Captain Marvin was the only one in the precinct who knew about that.

It had happened during the second year Cantrell was on the Force. Prohibition was in full swing and the mobs were riding high. Night after night big black sedans roared in from sheltered coves on Long Island, their tonneaus piled high with liquid platinum. Gangsters swaggered through the streets of Hell's Kitchen, their pockets bulging with money, their guns for hire to the highest bidder. Money, money, everywhere to the man who was willing to take a chance.

Jimmy Cantrell and Joe Marvin, himself a patrolman at the time, had been sent to arrest a cheap hoodlum named "Tiny" Anderson. It was a routine arrest, a matter so unimportant that Joe Marvin had stopped off to make a phone call while Cantrell strolled in alone to make the arrest. They had forgotten that the man they were after hated cops more than anything else in the world.

"Tiny" Anderson had been a promising

heavy-weight prizefighter before he lost his license for crooked fighting. He had always blamed the cops for the loss of his license and when Cantrell came in, he had seen his chance.

He had taunted the green young bluecoat into laying aside his gun and night-stick, and then had gone to work. Slowly. Carefully. Jimmy Cantrell had never had a chance, from the first, against those trained fists. Tiny could have knocked him out any time he wished.

But he hadn't wanted to knock out the young cop. He had wanted to hurt him. Dancing around Cantrell, he had bored in again and again, planting his skilled hands like a medieval torturer planting his knives.

Old-timers in Hell's Kitchen still talked about that fight, but Jimmy Cantrell never remembered much of it afterward. To him, it had been only an eon-long nightmare of getting up off the floor to face that bullet-headed figure with the broken nose boring in—always boring in.

He had been out on his feet toward the end of it, and only dimly aware of Joe Marvin rushing in past him, of Joe's night-stick smashing across that broken nose. Later, in the hospital, they told him that Marvin had beaten the big ex-prizefighter to a pulp, but that hadn't changed things for Jimmy Cantrell.

A week or so after he had left the hospital and gone back on duty, he had had to break up a fight between two drunks. There had been a brief tussle that another cop would have forgotten in five minutes. And afterward Joe Marvin had found him crouched over in an alley, shaking, sweat pouring down his face. He had straightened himself shamefacedly as his fellow officer had come up.

"I'm all right," he had said shakily. "Just a touch of nerves, I guess." He told about the brief tussle he had just had. "I've

been that way ever since the fight I had with Tiny. Soon as anybody lays their hands on me, I simply go to pieces. Looks like I'll have to get off the cops if this keeps up."

"Aw, forget that stuff," Marvin had said heartily. "Give up your job when you've got a sick father to look after? You can't. Why, anybody's liable to be a bit jumpy after a fist fight that's put him in the hospital for two months. But you get over things like that after a while."

OH YES, you get over things like that after a while, old Jimmy Cantrell was thinking now. For the first few weeks you walk your beat with your heart in your throat at the sight of any harmless drunk, who might swing at you.

And then you learn that if you take just the right amount of whisky the panic isn't so bad, and if you do run into trouble the whisky in your brain turns that panic into a murderous red rage that will carry you through if only you can keep from hurting your man too much—and most of the time you can.

So you get the reputation of being a mean-tempered cop and the neighborhood toughs learn to keep their hands to themselves and things are much better.

Fight after fight comes up through the long, long years and you gradually gain a deadly sureness with gun, night-stick, chairs, bottles—in fact any weapon except your hands. You never get over that. The fact is that you're not the least bit afraid of any weapon on earth except the hands of men.

In the course of time, you win a couple of citations for bravery and, almost inevitably, you save the lives of a number of your fellow officers. After that they sort of look after you. They make no effort to hide their disgust at your sloppiness and your drinking, and they keep away from

you as much as possible. But after all, you've saved their lives so they sort of look after you when things are too bad.

Oh yes, you get over things like that after a while.

Cantrell was snapped out of his painful reverie by a voice calling him.

"Hello, Jimmy!" It was old man Klotz, hurrying toward his liquor store, a huge cardboard sign under his arm. "I hear this is your last night?"

"Yup. Through tonight, Mr. Klotz."

"Well, I'll be down at the store, working late. Stop off on your way home and I'll have something for you. One of these." He held out of sign for Cantrell to see. It read:

WE HAVE A LIMITED AMOUNT OF SCOTCH
FOR SALE
CUSTOMERS ARE LIMITED TO ONE BOTTLE

Old man Klotz chuckled. "Limited amount," it says. I got my whole cellar full of it—every bottle the ABC board will allow me. What that stuff would bring on the black market! And me selling it at ceiling price! Anyway, I'll have a bottle for you. Just rap on the window and I'll let you in."

"Okay, Mr. Klotz. I'll be seeing you."

Cantrell nodded as pleasantly as possible and walked on. His mind was a seething turmoil as he remembered the look of utter contempt on Lloyd Marvin's face and realized that he had to find some way to warn the boy about Tiny Anderson's crowd. The big ex-pug had risen a lot since the old days, but he was still a mobster. And nothing but trouble ever came when a cop started getting chummy with that sort.

Down at the waterfront, Cantrell swung around, and hurried back to cover the rest of his beat. There was only one way to go through with a fight. Get in and get it over with. When he passed Tiny's

club, he would go in and have it out with the kid.

He stopped at the Jerome Street box to ring in, then cut across past Klotz's Liquor Store. Abruptly he stopped. There wasn't anything wrong that he could see. It was just that sixth sense that any cop develops that had made him stop. He looked inside cautiously.

There was a dim light burning over the cash register and the stock on the shelves seemed in order. Then he saw what it was that had made him stop. The small cabinet Klotz used for special displays had been pulled aside. And that cabinet usually rested over the trap-door leading to the cellar. The special trap-door old Klotz had made, so he wouldn't have to go out on the street in rainy weather to get into his cellar.

Even so, Klotz was probably working down there. He had been headed for the store when Cantrell had last seen him. Jimmy Cantrell tried the door cautiously. It swung open at once. He stepped in and snapped on the light.

Old man Klotz was lying sprawled out on the floor, behind the counter. His bald head rested on the new sign and the lettering was blotted out in one place by the blood from a hole over his right eye. Beyond him, Cantrell could see the open door of the cellar. Somewhere old man Klotz had bragged to the wrong person about that cellarful of Scotch.

CANTRELL walked over to the telephone unhurriedly and dialed, his keen, old eyes going over the place, while he waited for Marvin to answer. There was the alcove where the look-out had stood, watching the street both ways. It hadn't been too difficult, nor was it difficult to figure out who had pulled this job. This was strictly neighborhood stuff, and it fairly shrieked of Tiny Anderson and his

mob.

"Hello!" he heard a rasping voice over the phone. "Captain Marvin speaking."

"Jimmy Cantrell, Captain. Somebody's knocked off Klotz's Liquor Store and killed old man Klotz. And I'm pretty sure I know who done it. It's—"

He stopped short as though a gun had been jabbed into his back. He knew police procedure only too well. One minute after he mentioned Tiny Anderson, a squad car would be roaring through the streets to Tiny's club. And if they found Lloyd Marvin in there, it would mean a terrific black mark against Lloyd's record at the least. At the worst, Tiny might have planned some way of involving Lloyd in this job.

"Who'd you say it was, Cantrell? I didn't get it. Hello! Hello!"

Old Jimmy Cantrell sighed jerkily and hung up, his face a sickly gray. Well, then, this was it. The one thing he had dreaded more than anything else, during the long years. He would have to face that broken-nosed figure again.

For a long moment he stood there beside old man Klotz's body, feeling himself go weak with fear. Then he turned and went out of the door, closing it behind him.

A fire-escape led up past Tiny's club and Cantrell climbed it as quietly as possible. A window slid up without too much noise and he stepped into a dark back room, his Police Positive held alertly in his hand. A connecting door, leading to the front room was closed but a glint of light showed under it. Old Jimmy Cantrell tiptoed over and put his eye to the keyhole.

Lloyd Marvin was sitting alone at a table, a half empty whisky bottle before him, his blond head on the table on his arms. Even as Cantrell looked, he heard the door open and two of Tiny's hoods came into his view. They were the Marino

brothers, Phil and Danny. They started slipping out of their topcoats at once and, at the slight noise, Marvin raised his head groggily.

"Hey! Where you been?" His voice was thick.

Danny Marino laughed harshly. "Where have we been? Why, we've been right here with you all the time, chum. We was just going out for some fresh air. You want to go ring in? Come on, I'll give you an arm."

Lloyd stumbled to his feet and rubbed his eyes. "Don't tell me that I passed out on two drinks."

So that was it. Lloyd was to be their alibi, and they had pulled the job on old Klotz. Cantrell raised up, shoved the door open and stepped into the room, his gun held steadily on the Marino brothers.

"You passed out, all right," he told Lloyd. "Your whisky was doped, you fool."

Danny Marino spun about, his hand starting toward his shoulder.

"Go right ahead, Danny," Cantrell told him genially. "You might make it at that."

The hood dropped his hand sullenly. Back of him, Lloyd Marvin looked at them, bewildered, but Cantrell knew there was no time to explain.

"Where's Tiny?" he snapped.

"Right here behind you, Cantrell," a voice said placidly. "I got here a little ahead of the boys and stepped behind the door when I heard you open the window."

Tiny Anderson stepped out, holding a heavy automatic in his hand. The big expug was smiling a little as he came forward on the balls of his feet, as lightly as a cat. He waved the big gun at Cantrell.

"All right, Jimmy. Drop your gun and night-stick. This little visit of yours is going to change our plans a bit but it won't make too much difference. It just means that we'll have to go to the trouble of

getting rid of you punks, that's all."

Cantrell let his gun and night-stick fall to the floor and, just as Tiny picked them up, young Martin went for his gun. Even in that blurry moment, old Jimmy had time to feel a kindly contempt for the young fellow's rash clumsiness.

He saw Tiny Anderson step aside and swing the big gun—almost leisurely it seemed—and saw Lloyd's face turn to a bloody smear as he went down with his nose crushed.

"That's the first payment on what your old man did to me once, punk!" the big man snarled. "You been hanging around my boys for a long time now, trying to get a line on them, so how do you like it now that you got what you were after?"

HE STOOD above the unconscious young cop muttering oaths, but Cantrell did not hear them. He stepped forward and lifted a heavy oak chair. As calmly as a boxing instructor planting a punch he meant to explain later, he swung the chair against Danny Marino's skull and knew the man was dead before he hit the floor. The chair swung back and there was a dull snap as Phil Marino's neck broke.

And then he felt the chair snatched out of his hands, caught one flashing glimpse of that broken nose boring in again as he crashed back against the wall, blood spurting from his split lip. Tiny Anderson stepped back, rubbing his skinned knuckle, his eyes raging pools of madness.

"Before you go out of here in a box, I'm going to give you a taste of what I gave you twenty years ago!" he snarled.

His left slashed out and Jimmy Cantrell felt the searing pain of the blow, knew that his nose was broken. Then his eyes widened with surprise. And suddenly he laughed!

He was not afraid! For the first time in

nearly twenty years he was facing the hands of a man without that sick feeling. And why not, he thought briefly. He was as good as dead, already. What was there for a dead man to fear? It didn't make the slightest difference how much he was hurt. The only thing that mattered was to hold this murderer long enough for that fool young cop to come to and take over.

Tiny came in with a rush, hooking those hurting fists into his stomach, and that was all that Cantrell needed. He knew, of course, that he could never land one punch on a trained fighter and he did not mean to try.

He simply reached out and grabbed Tiny's coat lapels, yanking the big man off balance for the one moment he needed. Then those rheumatic old fingers closed around Tiny Anderson's throat and stayed there.

It was really a lot like that other time he had fought Tiny. There was a great roaring in his ears and he was only dimly aware of what was happening. There were terrific flashes of pain, as Tiny's fists landed time after time against his unprotected face, but somehow he managed to keep his jaw close enough to the big man's chest to keep from being knocked out.

Then the flashes of pain stopped and he felt Tiny's fingers tearing frantically at his hands, realized with a thrill that the big man was going mad with terror. After that, there was a long period of just holding on

against those tearing fingers. Until he realized that there was more than one set of fingers tearing at his. From a long way off, somebody was shouting at him and he realized that it was the voice of Joe Marvin. Then he sighed a little and let the grateful blackness roll over him. . . .

He must have been out quite a while, he thought, because the grimy clubroom was full of people when he opened his eyes. Doc Raymond was sponging away the blood from Lloyd Marvin's face and a couple of plainclothesmen were going through the pockets of the dead prizefighter. He struggled to sit up and Joe Marvin came over to him at once."

"Are you all right, Jimmy?" he asked anxiously.

Old Jimmy Cantrell grinned weakly through his battered lips.

"Sure I'm all right," he said. "May have to ask for a couple of days off, on sick leave, but I'll be right back on my beat in less than a week."

Captain Marvin looked at him sharply.

"Oh. Then you're . . . you want to withdraw your application for retirement?"

"That? Sure I'm withdrawing it. The only reason I ever made the application, in the first place, was that trouble we talked about. And I got over that tonight."

Joe Marvin grinned and ducked his gray head closer to old Jimmy's.

"Sure you did, you big fool. I told you that night, twenty years ago, that you get over things like that after a while."