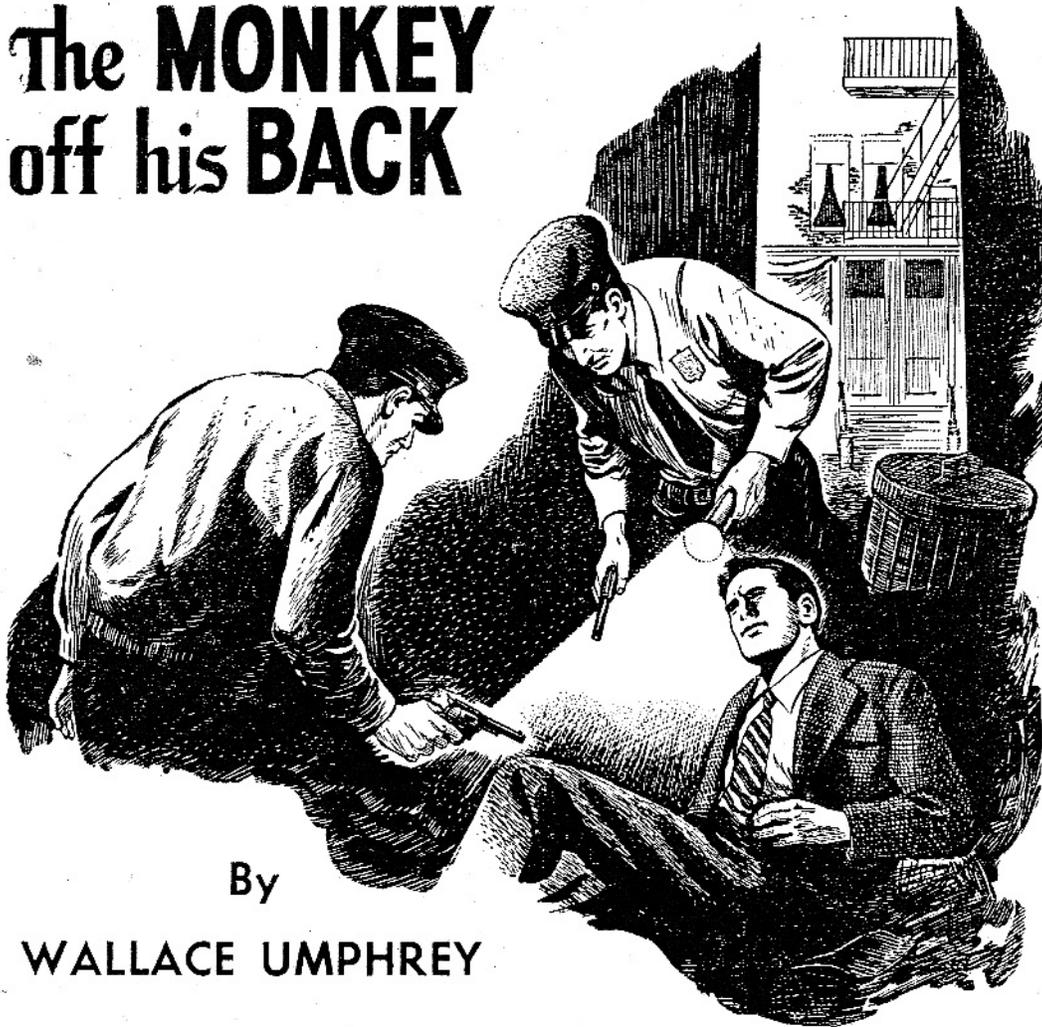


The MONKEY off his BACK



By

WALLACE UMPHREY

A Rookie Cop's Future Hinges on Giving a Summons for Speeding!

IT HAD to be Jo's father. It couldn't be anyone else. It had to be her old man, barreling along at forty in a thirty-mile zone, and his driver's license revoked a month ago for recklessness.

Conroy had said, "Let's squat him, Steve."

Steve Raglan didn't know it was Jo's old man. The streets were glistening wet under the lamps. Steve gave a touch to the siren and switched on the red blinker light. He was a rookie cop and the wail of the siren still made him jumpy. The big sedan pulled to the curb, waiting for the prowl car to haul up alongside.

"Give it to him good," Conroy said. Steve said, "Sure."

Rain slanted down in sheets. Maybe Conroy didn't want to get wet. Maybe he was tired. Ordinarily Conroy liked the chance to throw his weight around, but tonight he was in a sullen mood.

Steve felt the rain slap like a wet rag across his face. The sedan was still just a car that had been going too fast. Then Steve saw Jo's old man sitting alone behind the wheel and looking at him out of the rolled-down window. "That Conroy!" Steve said, wishing suddenly that Conroy'd shouldered some of the load

tonight.

Jo's old man stormed, threatened, then pleaded. Steve kept as quiet as he could. Things were bad enough already and he tucked his chin down while he filled out the summons, knowing already what Jo's old man thought of any guy who'd join the Force. "Cops!" Steve had heard it often enough. "Always with a hand out. Always after the angles. Plenty tough pushing people around, but ready to duck out from under when a crook comes up with a gun in his hand."

While he wrote out the summons Steve wondered where Jo was tonight. He didn't ask. This wasn't the time to mention Jo Buffano's name.

Steve watched the sedan drive away, then piled back into the prowl car. He was still holding the book open in his hand. Conroy swung the book around, glanced at it, then whistled. Steve grabbed for the book and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he remembered to shut off the red blinker light.

"What'd he say?" Conroy asked.

"Plenty," Steve said. "He's like everybody else—only a little worse."

"Yeah."

"Nobody loves cops." Steve hesitated. "He tried to bribe me to tear up the ticket."

"He'll get the boom dropped on him."

"Maybe not."

Conroy said curiously, "How much did he offer?"

Steve shrugged. "Twenty bucks."

"He'd have gone higher. You should've chased him up, then settled for fifty." Conroy was grinning. "Now you'll have to tear up the ticket for free. He's your girl's old man, isn't he?"

Steve regarded his partner. Conroy was a big man with a hard, tough, cynical outlook. Sometimes Steve wished he were more like him.

"He was doing forty in a thirty-mile zone," Steve said, looking away from Conroy. "Without a license. He earned that ticket."

Conroy shut off the dome light. He yawned, stretched lazily, then eased down in the seat.

"So you still got that monkey on your back," he said.

Four to midnight. Steve washed up, changed his clothes, then filled out his reports. He was a tall, lanky young fellow with dark eyes, and his hair had a reddish tinge. He was far from handsome, but the line of his jaw was clean and strong.

The desk sergeant, Lonny Zerbic, a fat gray-haired cop with over twenty years' service on the Force, hailed Steve on the way out.

"Call for you," he said cheerfully. "She wants you to phone right away."

Steve took the scrap of paper, knowing it was Jo even before looking at the number. He wasn't surprised, and it didn't make him too happy.

He leaned on the desk. "Does a cop always have a choice to make?"

"Everybody's got choices. It ain't just cops." Zerbic was looking at him. "You put in for a transfer yet?"

"Conroy's okay."

"Yeah," said Zerbic. "Like a hole in the head."

DRIVING out to see Jo, Steve tried to have a solid look at things. He'd phoned Jo and she wanted to see him right away. She wouldn't say why, but Steve knew. He knew, all right.

That monkey Conroy was always talking about was getting heavier and heavier on his back. He knew how to get rid of it, only he wasn't ready just yet. He had to decide whether or not to be like Conroy. It was like turning left or right at

a crossroads. When he made his choice he'd be okay.

Jo's kiss was cool, and right away Steve knew everything was changed.

"I want to talk to you, Steve," she said in a businesslike way, and he followed her into the living room. "Dad didn't want me to call you."

"Yeah," Steve said.

The radio was turned down low. Jo sat on the davenport and Steve wanted to sit beside her but he took a chair across the room instead. Jo was twisting her fingers and Steve watched her for a while, then he got up and snapped off the radio. Jo's old man wasn't around.

"You know his pride," Jo said. "His temper, too. I talked him into letting me call you." Her engagement ring flashed in the light. "He shouldn't have offered money. He's sorry now, ashamed of himself. But he was desperate. Steve, do you know what it's like to feel trapped?"

"Sure."

"I made him promise to go to bed before I called you."

"Forty in a thirty zone. No license."

"Nobody was hurt."

"No."

"The streets were empty—"

"Let's not argue," Steve said, "Why weren't you driving him tonight?"

"It was my fault," Jo told him. "There was something I wanted to do—a shower for a girl who's getting married next week. You had to work, didn't you?"

"I got to work every Saturday night."

Jo jumped up. "I'll make coffee and sandwiches."

Steve sat there. So Jo's old man had taken a chance. Why were people always taking chances with the law? Jo had wanted to go to a shower and her old man had barreled through a thirty-mile zone without a license. People always bragged about getting away with breaking a law,

but beefed like hell when they got caught at it.

For the past month Jo had picked up her father at the restaurant. Jo's old man owned it, a new place just getting started. Small and swanky and intimate. It was the kind of place where Steve couldn't afford to buy a meal and couldn't even read the menu if he had that kind of dough. Every night Jo's old man would close the place, count the money and put it in the safe, and then drive home with Jo. But tonight Jo had wanted to go to a shower and her old man had got a ticket.

Another cop, now. Another cop might've given Jo's old man a break. Another cop might've believed his story about leaving his license in his other pants and let him off with a warning. Only Steve, maybe, would know about the revoked license.

It had to be Jo's old man, Steve thought. It had to be him Conroy told him to squat.

Jo came back with a tray, the stone in her engagement ring flashing in the light. It was a small stone, but the best Steve could afford. Conroy was always pointing it out: a cop's pay was a big joke. Sometimes Steve got tired of Conroy's beefing. Still, Conroy had everything worked out easy in his mind.

Steve took a bite of his sandwich, scalded his mouth on the hot coffee. He couldn't read Jo's face. Faces never told much about what was inside. Jo was a pretty girl with dark hair and a nice figure inside a simple wool dress. Her eyes were greenish-gray with more green than gray. Steve hoped she wasn't thinking about giving the ring back.

"I haven't turned in the summons yet," Steve said.

Jo smiled eagerly. "Steve, I'm glad!"

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Steve said. "Tell him to give his story without

losing his temper or getting excited. Probably he'll get off with a fine. But he'd better not drive again."

"Oh, he won't touch the car." Jo was leaning forward. "The publicity. It'll be bad for the restaurant. The papers will carry it. Dad's having a hard enough time now." Her greenish eyes got intense. "Don't turn in the ticket, Steve. Just tear it up."

Steve looked at his half-eaten sandwich. "If I tear it up," he said after a while, "what about the rest of the guys who break the law? Do I let them off too?"

"This is different."

Steve didn't feel hungry any more. He wanted to get away. No use eating himself out for Jo tonight, not the way she was feeling. She began twisting her ring again, and Steve was scared she'd take it off. Better get out before she really did. Steve tried to have an honest look at himself. He was just a young guy without much in the way of brains, without much on the ball in the way of looks. No better and no worse than Mr. Average walking along the street. It made him weak in the knees, thinking of Jo giving him the gate.

She walked to the door with him. Steve wanted to kiss her, but he knew she wouldn't have it. Not now.

"If you love me," she said, "you'll tear up the ticket."

"Yeah," Steve said.

SOMETIMES four o'clock in the afternoon rolls around too fast. Steve had his clothes changed a few minutes early. He hadn't called Jo today and he wasn't going to. No percentage. No use knocking himself out.

From the looks of things Conroy was going to give him a bad time. Conroy's mood was more sullen than yesterday.

"Talk nice to me, pal," Conroy said. "You never turned in that summons last

night. I checked."

It was a bad day, Sunday, cold and rainy, and the police radio taking a nap for itself. Steve and Conroy cruised around. Conroy beefed monotonously about the bad weather, the routine, the low pay, everything. It got dark and they stopped at a hamburger joint and Conroy dawdled over the food and kidded the waitress. Conroy was always on the make. A small gray-haired man fussing in the kitchen kept scowling at him. Probably the waitress was the old guy's daughter.

When Conroy found out he couldn't make any time, he slid off the stool. Steve paid his check, but Conroy just stood there picking his teeth. The old guy came out of the kitchen and said, "How about your check?"

Conroy laughed. "You got protection. What keeps some punk from sticking you up?" He thumped his chest. "Me. You can't have everything."

Steve tooled the prowler car along. That Conroy! Conroy was so sure of himself that most of the other cops were a little awed. Only Lonny Zerbic saw things different. "Get yourself a transfer, Steve," Zerbic was always saying. "I like to see a youngster started off right. It's a guy like Conroy who gives the cops a bad name." Steve didn't know.

Zerbic claimed that Conroy was a braggart and a yellow-belly. "Get out from under his influence," he told Steve. "They say there's a rotten apple in every box." But the other cops kept quiet. Conroy was hard and tough and maybe they were a little afraid of him. Only old Lonny Zerbic sounded off.

"You and me," Conroy'd said when Steve had first been teamed up with him. "We'll get along if you keep your nose clean. Don't preach and don't tell me what to do. This is a lousy racket and you got to take what you can get. I been through the

mill.” It seemed funny, Steve thought sometimes, that Conroy never got a promotion. “Everybody thinks a cop is a dirty stinker with his hand out,” Conroy was always saying. “Why disappoint ‘em?”

Steve felt a sense of loyalty toward Conroy. “It might be a cleaner racket,” he sometimes wanted to say, “if the Conroys went out of it,” But Conroy was his partner and he never opened his yap.

“Damn Zerbic,” Conroy said now.

“What?”

“Always talking about me behind my back.”

“He’s okay.”

“Some dark night he’ll be walking home. That’s when he’ll get it.”

Steve said, “That’d be smart, wouldn’t it?”

Conroy grinned. “Sure.”

“You want everything for nothing.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “Maybe there’s things a guy ought to work for.”

Later Steve glanced at his watch. Just about time now for Jo’s old man to be closing the restaurant. Jo would be driving down to pick him up.

Steve was angry at himself. That had been great last night. Like a dope he’d stood there and only said “Yeah” to Jo instead of all the things he wanted to tell her. Saturday night, and he’d had to work until midnight. The night a guy ought to be stepping out with his girl. “*If you love me—*” Jo’d said. What did she think, anyway? That’d been great, all right.

“I got to see Jo,” Steve said.

“Her old man’ll be glad to see you too.”

“Yeah.” Steve grinned. “I’ll bet.”

“Why take any guff from him?”

“I don’t mind—much.” Steve thought about it. “He doesn’t mean half what he says. Everybody likes to sound off. When

he’s got me for a son-in-law he’ll decide a cop is okay.”

“On a cop’s pay when’ll that be?”

“I’ll make out.”

“You got it bad.”

“He’s okay.”

Conroy laughed. “You say that about everybody.”

Sure. Everybody was okay. Everybody except Steve himself, and that was wrong—somehow, somewhere.

THE restaurant was next to an alley on a dim and quiet street. The next street over was a brightly lighted thoroughfare. No sign of Jo yet. Well, Conroy wouldn’t mind waiting. Steve parked the prowl car out in front. Jo’d be along.

A young punk came out of the restaurant, closing the door carefully behind him. A skinny young punk, nattily dressed and kind of nervous. For a moment he stood there, a hand inside his coat. Just a guy who’d eaten a late dinner—

Only Jo’s old man’s closing time was half an hour ago.

“Hey!” Steve called out.

The punk had started to run. Maybe he hadn’t spotted the prowl car at first. He dove for the mouth of the alley.

“Stick-up,” Steve said.

“Maybe not,” Conroy told him.

“Lost his head. Shouldn’t have run.”

“You want to tell him that?”

Steve gave the orders. “Block this end of the alley. I’ll go around. He won’t dare run toward the lights. We’ll box him. He’ll give up without an argument.”

“Maybe he’s got a gun,” Conroy argued.

“Then he’s got a gun,” Steve said.

Conroy blinked. “Let’s go.”

Steve ran down the block. He hit the bright lights still running, and a couple of people turned to watch him. Steve dropped

to a fast walk. No use advertising what was going on. Better not have a crowd at his back. Somebody might get hurt.

He cut up the alley. The bright lights of the main drag were behind him now. The alley was a long black tunnel with danger lurking somewhere along its length. Steve halted abruptly, unlimbering his Police Positive. Danger. He hadn't considered that before.

Steve was breathing hard. His lungs couldn't get enough air. It was like being submerged in water. Conroy was at the other end of the alley, boxing off their quarry. Steve told himself they'd flush the punk out. His own breathing sounded loud in his ears. It was going to give him away. What if the punk had a gun? Sure he had a gun—and he'd use it too. Steve got the sudden notion that breathing was bad, something he ought to stop doing for a while.

The alley was filled with metal trash cans. Bump against one of them and the punk's gun would explode, all right. Steve's legs felt stiff and awkward, as if they belonged to somebody else.

Everything was different now. He'd listened to Conroy's talk about dull routine and low pay. It'd made sense. Eight hours a day. You put in your time and that was it. But now it wasn't the same. Now he was putting in everything—maybe his life. And despite all his beefing Conroy was doing the same. That Conroy! This was the part about being a cop that everybody overlooked.

Another step. And then he heard the shot. He could see the flash of flame. A trash can bumped along the alley.

Two more shots. Another. Then nothing.

Conroy had a small pocket flash in his hand when Steve came pounding up. In the beam Steve could see the punk lying among the cans, one leg doubled under

him. The skin of the punk's face was stretched tight over his cheekbones; only his eyes seemed alive.

"He tried to kill me," Conroy said.

"You fired first."

Conroy licked his lips. "It was him or me."

"You wouldn't give him a chance," Steve said. "We could've taken him without a shot."

"To hell with that." Conroy laughed, off-key. "I never shot a guy before. I feel funny. Like I'm eight feet tall."

"We got to call an ambulance."

"You call it."

"Was it a stick-up?" Steve asked suddenly. "It's got to be a stick-up."

Conroy bent down and picked up a small cloth bag, shining his light inside. "Judas! Three thousand bucks. Maybe more."

"It's Jo's old man's."

"Fifty-fifty," Conroy whispered. "Fifteen hundred apiece."

Steve said, "What're you trying to say?"

Conroy sucked in his breath. "We saw the punk run out. But before we could catch up with him, he passed the dough to a partner. This partner got away—"

"You couldn't make it stick."

"Nobody can prove different."

IT WAS all there, laid out in front of Steve's eyes. The cheap engagement ring because he could afford no better. Not being able to eat in the restaurant Jo's old man owned. Denying himself things so he could someday get married. All of it. Everybody always thinking a cop had his hand out. Trying to square a traffic rap with a chicken bribe. Not being able to step out Saturday night because of a lousy racket for a job.

That was what Conroy always called it. But maybe people meant Conroy when

they sneered at cops. Maybe Conroy was the bad apple. And maybe Conroy was talking sense.

Fifty-fifty. Fifteen hundred apiece.

But there was this other thing. The thing Steve had felt just a moment ago. Pride in himself and in being a cop.

“Nobody can prove different,” Conroy repeated.

Steve said, “The punk here?”

“Him?” Conroy sounded crazy. “To hell with him. He’s done for. Who cares about a punk like him? Better to—” The gun lifted in Conroy’s hand.

And then Steve leaped, backing the flat of his palm down hard across Conroy’s wrist. The gun clattered to the alley. As Conroy lurched forward Steve looped out a balled fist and the big man dropped to his knees.

“The old guy inside,” the punk whispered to Steve. “I locked him in the cold freeze. Better get him out.”

Steve picked up Conroy’s gun. Conroy was just climbing to his feet. Steve stared at him in the darkness.

“Attempted robbery,” Steve said. “Attempted murder. You want to try to make a run for it?”

Conroy licked his lips. “No.”

Now Steve was sitting in a chair and Jo’s old man was out in back someplace and the ambulance was gone and Conroy was slumped down in a chair against the wall. No guts, Steve thought. Conroy’d get the book thrown at him.

Jo came in, her heels clicking across the tile floor. She came to a halt in front of Steve’s chair. Before Steve could tell her what had happened, she touched his sleeve.

“Let me say something first,” she told him. “I’m sorry about last night. I don’t know what I was thinking of. Turn in that summons, Steve! It’s all you can do. Dad will take his punishment—”

“It’s already turned in,” Steve said. “I turned it in before I went on shift today.”

Jo’s eyes were shining and Steve was standing now, looking down into her face. Faces never told what was inside. Then he looked into her eyes, and maybe he was nuts, but for a brief instant it was like a curtain being pulled aside and he could see everything. It made him feel warm all over, and then the touch of her fingers on the back of his hand told him he hadn’t been mistaken.

Steve looked at Conroy, slumped against the wall. Conroy the tough, the hard, the cynical. The guy who believed you had to take what you could get. Conroy the braggart and the coward.

Conroy’s mind was free and easy—but so was Lonny Zerbic’s. And Zerbic was an honest cop. You had a choice to make and then you were okay, because that first choice made all the others easy.

“No more monkey on my back,” Steve said to Conroy. “But what you’ve got riding you now is a whole lot worse.”