

*When Detective Wilson tackled the case of the cafe society scandal,
he flung himself into a grim game on*

Satan's Playground

By Leon Dupont



STAN WILSON, assigned to duty in the district attorney's office, opened the door which read: *Philip Crane, Chief Assistant.*

Crane said: "Hello, Stan. I've got a little job for you."

Detective Sergeant Wilson shoved his hands in his pockets and glared. "You would pick half-past four in the afternoon for a 'little' job!" He sighed. "I wish I was back on homicide."

"I'm sorry," Crane told him, "but I was in court all day. I couldn't get to it before." He had before him the calendar of cases scheduled for trial. "It's the Baker case. He goes on trial for murder tomorrow. You know about it?"

"Sure, Baker's the young Broadway high-lifer that shot Mike Sloan in Mike's joint after everybody'd gone home. They said he lost fifty grand in the game there, and then knocked Mike off and took the dough back. What about it?"

Crane pressed thin lips together. "There's only one witness for the People, Stan. It's the coat-room girl at Sloan's place. May Landis is her name. I got the court to hold her in a hundred thousand dollars bail as a material witness. Well, it wasn't enough. Somebody put up the cash to bail her out—I suspect it was Baker's old man—you know, Baker's Department Stores, all over the country."

Wilson said: "Uh-huh. I began to see. And she's disappeared?"

Crane nodded. "I notified the surety to produce her today. No sign of her. She didn't show up for work today, either. You go get her and bring her in."

"Her address?"

Crane handed him a slip of paper. "That's where she lives. If she's not there, you've got your work cut out for you." He wagged a finger up at the detective sergeant. "Get this, Stan—*May Landis must be in court tomorrow.* Baker's got a damn good lawyer, and if I'm not ready for trial he'll spring Baker on a writ!"

"One thing more," Crane added, as the detective was about to leave. "This may help you a little. When Baker's old man was in court for his son's arraignment, I saw that punk Pete Kip, the private dick, hanging around him. That bird, Kip, has almost lost his license a dozen times. There's nothing he wouldn't do for cash. If Baker's old man paid him enough I don't think he'd even stop at knocking off this May Landis!"

Wilson paused on the way out. "If that louse, Kip, is mixed up in this," he said, his face going grim, "then you can count on May Landis' body turning up a couple weeks from now. I'd be willing to lay you even money that she ain't in the land of the living any more."

HE WENT back to his little cubbyhole of an office, got his hat and coat, and went out. He took a cab to Eighty-first and Columbus. This was one advantage of being assigned to the D. A.'s office. His expense accounts were paid without question.

At the address Crane had given him, which turned out to be a pretty fast rooming house, he flashed his shield and said to the fat landlady, "You got a roomer by the name of May Landis?"

The fat woman's jowls seemed to roll back to her ears as she smiled in evident relief. "An' sure," she said, "I'm glad it's the police that's here. I was just wonderin' if I hadn't ought to notify yez."

Wilson edged into the hall. "Yes?" he asked. "What seems to be the trouble?"

She produced a crumpled telegram form. "That girl hasn't been home for two days now, officer. I been cleanin' up her room, an' I found this under her bed."

Wilson took the telegram, smoothed it out on his knee. He read: "Can get you job traveling chorus good pay call at once." It was signed, "Larfils Theatrical Agency."

"When did this come?" Wilson demanded.

"Two days ago. Miss Landis went down there, an' she hasn't showed back. There was someone here from her place—she hadn't reported for work."

Wilson said: "Thanks, lady, I'll be seeing you."

She clutched his sleeve. "There's something else, officer. Today a gentleman came about a room. He said he wanted one on the top floor, front. That was Miss Landis', so I showed it to him. An' he acted awful funny. He looked all around, in the closets an' in the bureau drawers. Then he said he would take the room an' pay in advance. But I told him I couldn't rent it till next week, that I'd give him another one in the meantime. I didn't know if Miss Landis was comin' back or not. So he took the one on the top floor rear."

"Is he there now?"

"No. He paid for it an' said he'd be back tonight."

"What did he look like?"

"He was tall an' skinny, an' he had a

small mustache."

Wilson nodded. He folded the telegram and put it in his pocket.

"Thanks, lady. If he shows up you call this number and ask for me." He gave her a card and left.

Larfils Theatrical Agency was on Forty-eighth Street, one flight up in a converted brownstone house. They were closing up for the day when Wilson got there.

A girl in the front office was putting on her hat and coat. She looked at him, grinned, slid her gum over to one side of her mouth, and said: "We don't want no insurance, perfume, or candy, an' we never read magazines. Didn't you see the sign downstairs, 'No canvassing allowed'?"

Wilson grinned back at her, stepped close and flashed his shield. "Take a glim, sister. Not all is lead that don't glitter. Stow the language and tell me where the boss is."

She looked frightened. "Inside. It—it ain't a finish is it?"

"Not yet," he said grimly. "But you never can tell." He asked her very low; "You look like a girl that would help the law. Tell me this—did you see a dame that came for a job yesterday—"

She stopped him. "I wasn't here yesterday. Mr. Larfils sent me up to Stamford on some crazy errand, and told me not to bother coming back to the office."

Wilson eyed her keenly for a moment, then nodded. "All right, kid. Run along."

"B-but—I'll have to announce you to Mr. Larfils."

"Never mind, kid. I'll announce myself." He gave her a friendly shove, and closed the outer door behind her. Then he strode across to the glass door of the inner office, and opened it without knocking.

The man behind the desk was tall and thin. He had a mustache and a surprised look. He half rose. "How the hell did you—" He stopped. "Oh, hello, Wilson. What's the good word?" He sat down again, but he

wasn't very comfortable.

WILSON strode up close, leaned over him. "Look, Larfils," he breathed, "we're alone here. Your girl has just gone home. I'm going to slam you around so hard for the next ten minutes that your face'll never look the same again. It'll hurt like hell!"

Larfils jerked his chair back. "Wilson! You gone nuts?" He made to get up, but Wilson got a grip on his coat and swung an open hand to the side of his face. The sound of the *smack* crackled in the small office.

Larfils sprawled in the chair, looking up in dread. He raised his hand to his cheek, which was red. He blurted. "You got no right—"

Wilson grabbed his coat again. "Want more?"

"No, no! What did I ever do to you?"

"Nothing. But you're gonna do something *for* me. And right now, too, or we go on with the treatment."

"W-what do you want?"

"May Landis. Where is she? And don't tell me you don't know. I saw that telegram you sent, an' tried to get back today. Quick, spill it!"

A cautious, furtive look crept into Larfils' eyes. "Honest, Wilson, I don't know what you're talking about. I never—"

"All right," said Wilson. "Sorry I got to do this. You got anybody to run your place while you're in the hospital?"

"Wait a minute!" Larfils gasped. "I'll tell you!"

Wilson said: "Make it snappy. I lied about being sorry to sock you. It'd be a great pleasure. So don't give me the excuse."

Larfils still held his hand to his cheek. "I—I did send that telegram to May Landis, but didn't know it was off-color."

"Who'd you do it for?"

"He was an old guy, give me the name of Brown. He paid me five hundred berries to

get her over here, an' he drove away with her in a big car with a chauffeur. That was yesterday. Today he called me up and told me if I didn't want to get in wrong, I better go up to the girl's house and see could I get the telegram back, because she didn't have it on her, and if it was found I might get in dutch. That's all I know about it, so help me, Wilson!"

Wilson watched him for a minute while he cringed. Then the detective said: "I guess that's all you know, Larfils." He turned to go, then suddenly whirled, rapped out, "Do you know Pete Kip?"

Larfils started, his eyes narrowed. "I—I've heard the name. He's a private dick, ain't he? Is he mixed up in this?"

Wilson grinned. "Wait'll you see, boy." He went to the door. "Sorry I treated you rough. I kinda figured you knew more than that. We'll need you to testify when we pick up that crowd."

He closed the door on Larfils' astounded stare, and made a lot of noise going down. He slammed the outside door, but remained on the inside, stole back into the rear of the hall, and hid under the stairway. A moment later he heard the door of Larfils' office open. It was shut almost immediately. Larfils had not come down. He had gone back in again.

Hugging the wall as much as possible, Wilson stole up the steps again, and crept close to the flimsy door. He heard the whirl of a telephone dial, and then the voice of Larfils: "Long distance, give me Atlantic 4-3204, please."

AFTER a wait, Larfils' voice came again. "Pete this is Lou. Say, I hadda call you. Stan Wilson was just in here. He's on the warpath. An' he mentioned your name in connection with a certain matter. Seemed to know what he was talking about. I just thought I'd tip you off."

Wilson waited till he heard the click of

the receiver again, then twisted the knob and shoved the door open.

Larfils spun from the desk at which he had been phoning. His hand dived to his pocket, but Wilson covered the distance between them in two leaps. His fist swung up with the weight of his moving body behind it, and landed flush on Larfils' jaw.

Larfils' head snapped up with the blow, his hand swept back, knocking over the telephone, and his body crashed into the desk. He did a funny sort of back somersault over the desk, and landed up in a heap on the floor on the other side.

Wilson, breathing hard, paid him no more attention. He picked up the phone, spun the dial from the O, and barked into it. "Get me the chief operator—fast!"

The minute he got the chief operator, he snapped, "Detective Sergeant Wilson talking, Shield 43. I want the address of Atlantic 4-3204—and I want it quick! It's a long distance number."

In less than two minutes the operator's voice informed him. "That address is 48 Beach Street, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. The name of the subscriber is Marvin Baker."

Wilson thanked her, clicked down the hook, and when he got the dial-tone again, frantically dialed the number of the district attorney's office. When he got his man he said: "Listen, Crane, I got a line on that dame, May Landis. She's been snatched all right—through an agency gag. Larfils Theatrical Agency. I heard him phone a number and checked on the address. It's the address of Baker, out in Atlantic Highlands. Pete Kip was at the other end. Can you get the Jersey cops to raid that place? I bet the girl is out there!"

Crane said: "Listen, Wilson, I can't do it. The Jersey police would never raid a guy like Baker just because I phone and tell 'em he's violating the law. Why, he could have every one of 'em broke. I'd have to go out

there and make an affidavit, and get a warrant. They could be to hell and gone before I got the warrant out of a judge in Baker's home grounds."

"So what?" asked Wilson. "Are you gonna wait for evidence? Are you gonna wait till they bump the dame—if they haven't done it already?"

Crane snapped: "What the hell do you think you're on the D. A.'s staff for? It's up to you to go get the evidence. Step on it and get out there. I'll work from this end and do all I can to get the Jersey police to co-operate with you, but don't count on it. Go on, now, earn your pay. Bring that girl in!"

Wilson was silent for a moment. Then he said: "Oh. Just get her, huh? Okay, Crane. So long."

Wilson slammed the phone down, threw a glance at Larfils, who was as quiet as a dead mouse. He jammed his hat far back on his head, and went out.

He hailed a cab. If Crane wanted action, he'd get it—with a good fat expense account.

"Downtown and through the Holland Tunnel," he told the cabby. "And then south to Atlantic Highlands. Never mind lights or any little things like them. You're riding the law now, friend, and it's official business!"

THEY made it to Atlantic Highlands in one hour and seven minutes, which was good time even for a taxi driver suddenly gone colorblind.

The weather was snappy—one of those late winter hangovers—and the driver turned a frozen face in toward Wilson when they got to the town. "Now where?" he asked.

"Down to the shore. Look for Beach Street. And douse your lights when you get close." The ocean was making low, throaty, angry sounds which increased in tempo as they got closer. They stopped at the last unpaved street. The wheels crunched in sand. The driver got out and looked at the

street sign, came back and poked his head in the window.

"That's Beach Street, boss."

Wilson got out. "Look," he said. "I'm going down to number forty-eight. There may be trouble. If I don't get back in a half hour, you go scout up the police station in the town, and bring some cops down here. Understand?"

The driver nodded. "I get you."

He cleared his throat as Wilson started to go. "Say, cap. Don't get sore, but, in case anything happens to you, there's eight bucks on the clock, an' I'd hate to be out all that dough. You know how it is—"

Wilson took out a ten dollar bill and gave it to him. "You give me a receipt for that later. Never mind now, later'll do. If anything happens, I won't have to worry about collecting expense accounts."

He left the cab and walked down Beach Street. It consisted of a row of pretentious bungalows built on the sand. The bathing beach was private. All the houses except one were dark. The season wasn't appropriate for bathing.

The bungalow that was lit was number forty-eight.

Wilson took the gun out of his hip pocket and put it in his overcoat. Then he tried the front door. It opened under his touch.

He walked into a living room that was lit but empty. There were two bedrooms behind it, and then a kitchen. He walked through, and opened the kitchen door, looked out on the beach.

He saw a flashlight moving, and two shadowy figures. They seemed to be working at something.

Wilson stepped off the small porch, started toward the flashlight. For a second he was silhouetted against the light from the kitchen window. Immediately, the flashlight was put out.

WILSON dropped to the sand and rolled away from the strip of luminance into the shadow of the building. He was not any too soon, for there was a spat from down the beach, and a bullet plowed a long furrow in the sand where he had been. One of those figures had a rifle with a silencer; the distance was too great for a revolver.

Wilson squirmed to full length, and started to reach around for his own gun. Somebody behind him said: "Hold it!"

Wilson remained still.

"Get up. Keep your hands up."

Wilson obeyed. He got to his feet—it was a little difficult, with his hands up—and stole a glance behind him. "Hello, Kip," he said. "I see you're going in for the heavy stuff these days. Business must be bad."

Kip came out of the shadows where he had been hiding. He was a short, powerful fellow with a nose that had been broken and healed crooked. He poked a gun in the detective's back. "Business is gonna be good from now on, Wilson. I'm in for a pile of jack. And no comebacks."

"Is that girl dead?"

"Not yet. You're just in time for the show. I was waitin' for you. I got a tip you might be out."

Wilson said: "Take my advice, Kip, and pull out of this. I might be able to square it for you."

Kip snarled at him: "You ain't squarin' nothing from now on."

Wilson shrugged, started down toward the beach.

Kip raised his voice, called out: "It's okay. I got him!"

They approached two men who were working in the sand with spades. They had a deep pit dug. The sand was the wet, pasty variety of the Jersey shore, which kept the sides from caving in.

To one side lay a bound figure. Wilson saw that it was a girl. She was struggling on the ground, and as Wilson and Kip got close

she whimpered: "Don't do that to me. I swear I won't talk. I'll tell them I never saw a thing!"

One of the men who was digging chuckled. "You won't talk, all right. We'll see to that!"

Wilson asked very calmly, his hands still in the air: "You gonna kill us both?"

"Hell, no," Kip told him. "We're just gonna bury you two right here. The sand'll do the rest."

Wilson turned his head toward the taller of the two men who were digging. This man had gray hair, was well in the fifties. "You," said Wilson, "are Baker's old man. Do you realize what you're doing?"

BAKER turned up the last spadeful, flung down the spade. He said to the other man, "All right, Jake, you can stop. I guess it's deep enough now." Then he said to Wilson: "Yes, I know what I'm doing. Why wouldn't I when my son's life is at stake? What's this girl's life to me—or yours?"

Wilson said: "You fool! Don't you think our bodies will be found?"

Baker shook his head, smiled grimly. "Not here, they won't. When the tide comes up it'll wash this spot so smooth there won't be a mark."

The girl started to scream as they lifted her. Baker cursed, and they heaved. Wilson heard her drop into the hole with a thud. She was silent—either unconscious, or breathless.

Baker bent bushy brows on Wilson.

"You're next."

"Wait a minute!" Kip rasped. He said to Baker. "Keep him covered while I get his gun." He came close and put his hand in Wilson's pocket. "Wise guy, huh? Figured you'd get down in the hole and start fireworks! Pete Kip don't overlook bets like that, copper! That's why I get results."

Wilson said: "Here's a bet you overlooked." His hands flashed down at the

same time that he sidestepped. He imprisoned Kip's hand in his coat pocket, and deliberately jumped into the hole.

Wilson landed at the bottom of the pit, on his side. He felt a soft body beside him, and thought it was lucky for the girl he hadn't landed on her.

Kip came crashing down on top of him, but he was prepared for that. He got the private detective's head in the crook of his elbow, and using his forearm as a fulcrum, he pressed down on it with his left hand. He heard Kip gasp.

Wilson released the pressure, and with his left hand got the gun out of Kip's weakened grip. Then he reversed it and brought it down on the side of Kip's head. The private detective went limp.

Wilson rolled Kip off him, and looked up. Baker was peering over the edge of the pit. He clicked on a flashlight. Wilson blinked, shaded his eyes, and saw the muzzle of the rifle poking down at him.

He swung Kip's gun to his right hand, snapped it up, and fired between the rifle and the flash. Baker uttered a scream, and came tumbling down. Wilson caught him, got his hands all bloody, and eased the dead body over on top of Kip.

Using the two bodies to raise himself, Wilson climbed out of the pit, keeping his gun ready for Jake, the third man.

But Jake was fifty feet away, departing from there as fast as possible.

Wilson called out, "Stop, you!"

Jake swiveled around, raised a gun.

Wilson fired once, and Jake sprawled on the sand.

With a weary sigh Wilson got out his own flashlight and sent its beam down into the pit. The girl was stirring out of her faint. She opened her eyes, cried out, "I swear I won't talk!"

"Oh yes you will, sister," said Wilson. "You'll talk plenty—in court tomorrow!"