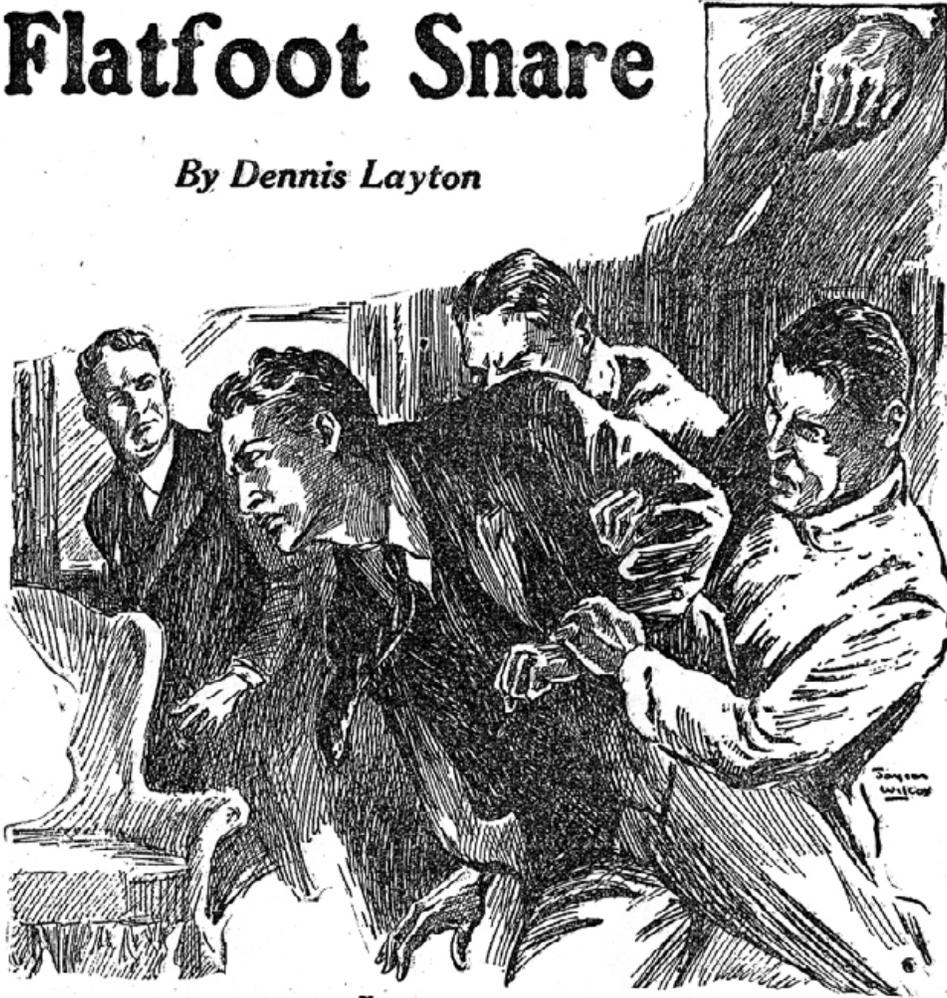


Flatfoot Snare

By Dennis Layton



He was a dangerous gunman who mixed candy with killing—and he taunted the cops with clues. But when he shot a blue-coat, the Candy Kid bit on more than he could chew and found himself holding a different kind of bag.

OFFICER BRIAN sat down at the table in the rear of the restaurant. For a brief moment he contemplated the steak before him. Then, cutting off a small piece, he turned his attention to the evening paper that lay folded beside his plate.

Blatant headlines screamed the news of the day. Large black letters blazoned out momentous happenings. But Marty Brian, though interested, refused to become excited. He read slowly, casually—so slowly, in fact, that he had almost finished his dinner before he turned over to the

second page. Then, for the first time since he sat down at the table, Brian tensed.

The item that caught his eye was not as large as others on the first page, but to Brian its import was larger.

STOREKEEPER KILLED IN HOLDUP CANDY KID SUSPECTED

Brian's dinner was forgotten while he read the account. The storekeeper had been ruthlessly shot down while defending a few paltry hard-earned dollars from a pair of dapper, masked robbers. A lone passerby

had seen the holdup; had seen the leader of the two killers in the act of transferring a marshmallow from the pocket of his tight-fitting blue suit to his thin-lipped mouth. And by that egotistical and deliberate gesture alone the Candy Kid had been identified.

Any further details regarding the cold-blooded murderer and his partner were few indeed. The two always wore masks; always wore gloves. Newcomers to crime they were, undoubtedly, for not a stoolie had yet come forth with their true identity. A couple of small-time criminals, but dangerous—with the killing complex. The police force could do nothing but shrug its shoulders and pray for a break.

That break seemed remote. The Candy Kid and his cohort chose their jobs with care. There was never a jam of pedestrians to thwart their getaway. Always they had slipped into the safe obscurity of the city.

And the papers, naturally, were raising hell.

All this flashed quickly through Marty Brian's mind as he finished the item. There was a faraway look in his pale blue eyes as he sipped meditatively at his coffee.

What a catch that would be for some cop! There'd be an editorial for praise; perhaps a promotion, more money. If only the gods of chance would toss that break in his lap. If only—

Then it happened.

Brian was at first unaware of the entrance of the two men. He sat with his back toward the front of the small restaurant, and so was not watching the door to the street. A tall screen just as effectively concealed him from the doorway—his blue shirt, his Sam Browne belt, and the uniform cap lay on another chair.

Brian's first intimation of anything wrong came when a low, gritty voice seeped into his consciousness.

"This is a stick-up, mister!"

For a brief moment Brian thought that his imagination was playing a trick on him. He turned, half expecting to see old Jim Hogan puttering around at the cashier's desk with some task or other, entirely alone. But what he did see brought Brian to his feet; sent his tough, bronzed hand down toward the holster on his hip.

Two men stood facing Jim Hogan at the desk—thin, dapper men, with large silk masks covering the entire upper half of their faces. Each held a gun, and each gun was pointed unerringly at old Jim Hogan's heart.

For a tense split second, Brian took in the scene. His heart raced faster, as he saw the taller of the two men reach in his side pocket and bring out a white coated marshmallow, indifferently lifting it to his mouth.

Then Brian let out a bellow and ran forward, his gun streaking up.

But as quick as Brian was, the Candy Kid was quicker. And even as Brian's finger constricted on the trigger, the Kid's gun roared.

Brian felt the hungry lead bite into his hand; felt his police positive slip from his nerveless fingers. Hot rage consumed him, blotting out all the instinctive laws of self-preservation. Before him stood a masked, cold-blooded killer. Scum of society. Forgotten was the smoking gun held in the murderer's gloved hand, a gun that might at any second blast him into eternity. He was a cop, a defender of the public. Brian dove forward.

He hurled himself through the air toward the blue-clad legs of the killer.

The Kid's gun spewed lead. Another gun roared, and Jim Hogan grabbed at his shoulder. All this Brian saw, as the two stick-ups started to beat a surprised, hasty retreat for the door. Then Brian felt his hands close securely about the ankle of the Candy Kid. Brian then realized, this rat wore spats!

There was a tense struggle. Brian, gritting his teeth, clung on while the Kid fought to gain his balance; fought to free his leg from the grasp of the cop.

His hold weakening because of his wounded hand, Brian raised his good hand and grasped at the Kid. Clutching fingers caught the killer's coat pocket—ripped it down, wide open. Then a fourth shot rocketed through the small restaurant, and something burned along the crown of Brian's head. For a second or two consciousness remained with him. Then blackness, like an ebon curtain, slowly dropped over him.

WHEN Marty Brian came to, he was soaked in a welter of perspiration. He sat up slowly, blinking his eyes in the sudden brightness. A terrific pain sliced through his head; jolted like the thud of a blackjack. For a few moments he was conscious only of his own existence. Then a voice by his side said slowly:

"Feelin' okay, copper?"

Brian looked up to see Joe Devlin, a radio cop, by his side. He smiled thinly, ran his uninjured hand over his head, and replied:

"I will be. Did you get 'em?"

Devlin's face was set. He shook his head slowly, sighed.

"Nope. We got the call, but they'd beat it when we got here. Maybe they'll be picked up, though; the whole town's bein' watched. Too bad you—" He stopped, coughed suddenly, then smiled.

But Brian had got the inference Devlin had tried to cover up. "I know. I was a chump. I had them, and let 'em get away. I'm probably in for it, all right, when Sergeant Hollis gets here."

Brian looked up, saw the crowd of people outside the restaurant held back by a couple of the nearby beat cops. He turned back to Devlin again.

"Hogan hurt badly? I saw him get it just before I passed out."

Devlin's face seemed to grow even longer. He glanced quickly at the cashier's counter. Brian followed his movement and saw, for the first time, Devlin's prowl partner, Fogarty. Fogarty was standing at the end of the counter, looking down at the floor. As Brian glanced up, Fogarty's deep voice boomed out:

"He's dead!"

Brian started to say something, stopped and just stared into space. Jim Hogan dead. Killed in cold blood right before his eyes. And that death could have been prevented, too; if only he'd drawn quicker; if only—

Those thoughts throbbed in Brian's tortured brain as he sat there, staring blankly. From off in the distance came the banshee wail of the homicide squad car. Intermingled with it was the insistent clanging of an ambulance bell.

Suddenly Brian leaned forward, picking up a crumpled paper bag that lay on the floor by his feet. Small white flakes of powdered sugar clung to it.

He examined it closely, his forehead furrowed. It seemed to be a perfectly plain bag that had once held marshmallows. Then suddenly, with a start, Brian remembered that it had dropped to the floor when he had torn the Kid's pocket. Excitedly Brian carefully stretched the container out flat.

For almost half a minute, he went over the paper bag. Instead of calling Devlin's attention to something he discovered, he stuffed the paper in the breast pocket of his shirt. He rose slowly, staggered across the room and got his gun.

Brian had almost reached the door when Devlin caught him by the arm.

"Hey, what's the rush? Wait'll the ambulance—"

Brian paused, took a deep breath.

"Can't." He glanced down at his blood-caked hand, clenched his fist. "It don't hurt

much, and I've got to do something."

"But Sergeant Hollis will—"

"Listen, Joe. I've botched this thing already. I've got a slim chance to square things, but I've got to act fast! If I'm right—"

He left the sentence unfinished, started forward.

Devlin's grip tightened. The whining of the sirens came closer; snapped an urgent message to Brian's brain.

He loosened Devlin's grasp.

"I've got to hurry!"

He opened the door, stepped into the noisy crowd.

LESS than an hour after the shooting had occurred, Brian was standing in the dark recesses of a tenement doorway. Directly across the street, the hazy yellow light of a small candy and stationery store tried feebly to thwart the dismal gloom of the night.

Brian was not in uniform. He had made a hurried stop at his small bachelor apartment and changed into dark civilian clothes. But his service gun still hung on his hip, and his coat was unbuttoned.

Brian was working on a hunch, and he was playing that hunch to the hilt. He kept thinking only of vindicating himself for what he considered a failure in his duty.

Time passed slowly, aggravatingly. Occasionally Brian felt that he had blundered. He realized, full well, that he should not have taken the initiative; that he should have turned his clue over to the homicide squad. But he knew what would happen if he had. They would have listened, nodded their heads, and eventually get around to what Brian was already doing. By then it might be too late.

So Brian had taken the chance. And now, if it proved that he was wrong, well—He shrugged his shoulders. No harm would

have been done—except to himself. And that—

Suddenly Brian realized that he wasn't wrong. The two figures who appeared so abruptly across the street were all too familiar. Though Brian couldn't see their faces, he knew that the slim, dapper men who entered that stationery store were the killers. It was their carriage, their manner, as much as anything else.

He glanced up and down the street, adjusted his gunbelt, and stepped out of the shadows. He crossed the gloomy thoroughfare slowly, keeping his eye on the yellow splash of light that filtered through the dirty window of the store. Reaching the opposite sidewalk, he didn't hesitate, but walked boldly in.

The little bell over the frame tinked as Brian opened the door. The two men spun about as though motivated by the same spring. In the silence that followed the last echoes of the bell—a silence that seemed to hang heavily over the small store—Brian's gaze locked with that of the dapper men.

No one spoke. Speech wasn't necessary. Brian knew he had been recognized. The face of the taller man—the Kid—had become a hard mask, thin-lipped, cruel. His small black eyes glittered. Then his glance dropped and he started forward, as if to pass.

Brian backed to the door, easing his hand toward his holster.

"Take it easy, Kid. I've been looking for you."

As he spoke, Brian's fingers closed over the butt of his gun. The man before him tensed, made a move toward his coat lapel, then hesitated.

"Lookin' for me? For what?"

Brian's blue-barreled gun glinted in the pale light as he brought it out.

"Are you comin' peacefully, spats and all, or—"

There was a sudden movement in the rear of the store. Something flashed through the air.

Brian ducked, felt a hard thud on the side of his head, heard the sound of breaking glass. Then he saw himself, for the second time that night, looking down the black tunnel of a nickel-plated .32.

The roar of a gun sounded immediately after the crash of glass. Flame licked out to lap hungrily at Brian's face. But in ducking the thrown object, he had also ducked the bullet. Now he went into action.

He felt the trigger of his positive give beneath the pressure of his finger. A dull boom caromed off the walls of the small store. The shorter man—the one in back who had fired both bottle and bullet at Brian—screamed, then slipped to his knees.

The Kid had his gun out now; had it out and was bringing it to bear directly on Brian's forehead. Brian fired. At the same moment, he threw himself forward.

The two shots sounded as one. The whine of a bullet lived in the receding noise of the guns as it spanged into a car out in the street.

Before the Kid could bring his gun down, Brian crashed into him. Once more he found the Kid's legs in his grasp. Together the two rolled to the floor. A third shot blasted like a charge of dynamite in Brian's ear. But the bullet, fired in haste, went wild.

Brian checked his fire. He wanted to take the Kid and his cohort alive if possible; wanted them to go through the tortures of the damned as they waited for the charge of electricity that would end their existence; wanted them to suffer the full penalty for their cold-blooded killings.

He twisted about, slashed out with his gun. It grazed the thin-faced killer's scalp, deflecting the aim of the fourth shot as the Kid blasted away. Burning powder stung Brian's eyes, singed his brows. Gritting his

teeth, he raised his gun once again, brought it crashing down on the Candy Kid's head. The form under him went limp.

For a moment Brian waited, alert for a ruse. Then, satisfied, he glanced over to where the shorter man lay, blood spewing from a wound in his shoulder, a vacant look on his unconscious features.

Once again Brian heard the distant whine of sirens. A pair of prowl cars tore to the scene.

Brian sat up, glanced idly at the bottle of soda water that the Kid's partner had hurled at him, and which crashed through the glass of the door. He turned as the owner of the store came up from behind the counter.

"What's going on?" The man—short, fat, wide-eyed—was panting. He stared hard at Brian, then at the two men on the floor. Brian, breathing deeply, watched him.

"And why," the storekeeper went on, "do you come into my store and—"

Brian glanced from the man to the packages of marshmallows displayed in the dirty showcase. He dabbed for a moment at his perspiring forehead, then saw the bottle of soda on the floor. He picked it up.

"Here—take this cap off. I'm thirsty."

BRIAN was sitting on the Candy Kid—now manacled to his partner—and sipping the soda through a straw when the first of the prowl cops barged into the store. He sucked in the last drop of soda, set the bottle down and grinned.

"Late again—as usual."

But Brian was not in a bantering mood when, after he had locked the prisoners up, he was on the carpet in Sergeant Hollis's office. The sergeant, big, beefy, red-faced, a recruit of the old school, pointed a stubby finger menacingly at Brian.

"This better be good," he thundered. "Those mugs have got a shyster mouthpiece already and he's squawking like hell. He claims they thought you were holding them

up and that they were only protecting themselves. We can hold ‘em on a Sullivan charge for the guns maybe, but there’ll be plenty of trouble if we can’t prove more.”

Brian licked his dry lips; mopped nervously at his perspiring forehead.

“We can, all right,” he said slowly. “You see, when I found that marshmallow bag in Hogan’s restaurant, I figured how it might be a good lead on the Candy Kid. For on the bag, you see”—he held out the paper container for Hollis to look at—“is the name of the store where they were bought—where the Kid bought ‘em. It’s stamped on pretty faintly, but if you look close, you can read it.”

Hollis adjusted his glasses, squinted at the almost obliterated red markings on the bag. The name had been stamped there with a cheap home-printing outfit. The sergeant’s thick lips moved as he read:

MAX BERSON
230 THIRD AVENUE

Brian went on as Hollis put the bag down:

“So I figured that if he bought some marshmallows there once, he might buy them there some more. In fact, if he happened to live around there, he might buy them there all the time. So, as I knew he was out of marshmallows, it was a good bet that he’d buy some more there tonight.

“It was just a hunch, but it worked out.”

Hollis’s face became very grim. He shook his head slowly, stared hard at Brian.

“Brian,” he said softly, “you’re a good cop. I appreciate your zeal. I have no doubt you meant well, and I can readily understand why you took the initiative instead of turning your evidence over to the detectives. I can understand, because I was a cop once myself.”

He paused as the door swung open. A clerk stepped in.

“There’s a habeas corpus downstairs for them two crooks that were just booked.”

Hollis groaned, swung about and faced Brian.

“You know what that means?”

Brian nodded. “Sure—a hearing before the magistrate in night court.”

“Exactly.” Hollis’s voice became deeper. “And at that hearing, their lawyer will rip hell out of that marshmallow bag evidence. We can hold them on a Sullivan charge, yes; but right now they’re booked for murder. The papers’ll raise—”

Brian smiled. He tossed onto the table a package he had been holding.

“Take that along. It oughta do.”

Hollis glanced at the package, a police department tag on it, picked it up, opened it. Inside was a pair of spats. He glanced at them for a moment, then at Brian.

“Well?” His voice was menacing, but Brian smiled.

“That’s another reason I didn’t wait for the detectives. You see, in Hogan’s restaurant I caught the Kid by the legs. Well, when I remembered that, I remembered seeing spats on him.

“You see, he took a shot at me in the restaurant, hit my hand. Well, my hand bled and when I caught him about the ankles, naturally some of the blood got on his spats. Now if you’ll look closely, you’ll see what I’m getting at—a swell set of Officer Brian’s fingerprints.”

Hollis looked over the spats carefully. He found the red-smudged prints.

“So you see,” Brian went on, “I had to get him before he might take them off. I took them when the desk sergeant booked him.”

Hollis looked up.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he said. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard of a cop’s fingerprints convicting a killer.”