



● *The short story of a man
who learned to count the
hard way.*

THE SIXTH SHOT

BY WILLIAM ROUGH

His subconscious registered the first three explosions while he was still asleep. At the fourth he jerked upright in bed, his insides rattling.

He fought for control, telling himself it was only his grandfather shooting target in the basement range. The old gun crank had left the soundproof door open again.

It was no use fighting, he'd been in Tunisia and he reacted as always, now, at the sound of shots; perspiration sluiced from his pores, his hide tingled, the detonations set the hemispheres of his brain vibrating.

He fell back on his pillow, washing stiff fingers through his

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crisp brown hair. This wasn't Africa; it was home, his grandfather's house, the Bradley mansion in the old Spuyten Duyvil section of the Bronx.

Jamie squinted at the luminous clock by his bed. It hit him squarely. If old Barney were shooting at three o'clock in the morning, he wasn't practicing!

Barney Bradley had died against the wall of his beamed library, sliding down it to a half sitting position just under the light switch. There was no mark on his meaty face or bald head. The slugs all had poured into him below the shoulders. Dampish splotches on his bathrobe showed this.

Jamie braced himself, the corners of his mouth twitching like a fiddle string. His eyes flicked to the dangling door of the old wall safe, storehouse for commercial jewels used by the Bradley Shipbuilding Co.

"A burglar," Jamie said, sick. "A slob of a burglar."

Footfalls scampered from the servants' quarters. The three-toned door gong was peeling, "*Bong, bong, bing.*" A nightstick drummed on the front door. The shots had carried clearly.

Jamie hunched. He'd seen it before, but not like this, not at home—an old man against a wall, bullet riddled without a chance.

Without a chance? Jamie's brown eyes glinted on the area around the body. He forced himself to lift Barney, searching. There was no gun anywhere.

The butler made a choking sound behind Jamie and was awkwardly trying to shield the cook and the maid. They screamed.

"Stop that!" Jamie ordered. "Let that cop in. Call Ray—"

"I'm here!" A slope-shouldered, black-mustached man, short of forty, set air in motion as he bored into the library. "'What's—'" His words sliced off. His green eyes cruised the room once, then poured glittering accusation at Jamie. And more—hate.

Jamie sucked in air. He and Raymond Bradley were first cousins. Their fathers had been lost in World War I, and old Barney Bradley had raised them, decreeing in his will that the one who rose highest in the Bradley Shipbuilding Co. was to inherit two-thirds of it, the other one-third.

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With Jamie away, Raymond, deferred, had gained authority. Then Jamie came back.

He wasn't glamorous or a hero, but he was a warrior still, seasoned, and knowing why ships had to be built. Scorning sermons, he pushed the men and they liked it. So did the board of directors and Barney Bradley. Authority began shifting from Raymond to Jamie.

Yet this was the first time, with death between them, that Jamie recognized what was in Raymond.

Jamie was startled, then wary. He let Raymond do the talking to the local patrolman, the prowler car officers who came next and, following them, a streamlined modern lieutenant of homicide.

The lieutenant looked at the old safe. "No trick to crack that. Boxmen don't usually kill, though. What's missing?"

Raymond counted the neat packets inside the safe. "Nothing. Grandfather probably got here just in time."

"Hm-m-m, How many shots were fired?"

"Five."

"Oh, more than that, sir!" the cook squeaked.

Raymond quieted her with a glance, and the butler said prudently, "Five is right, sir."

"Quite." Raymond nodded. "I counted them."

Jamie jerked. "Six. I counted them."

It was an issue. The medical examiner said, "There are five bullets in the body."

"Witnesses get mixed up," the lieutenant shrugged. "If six shots were fired but only five struck Mr. Bradley, the sixth would be in the wall behind him."

"And it isn't," Raymond said quickly.

Jamie's brain twanged. Raymond was insisting only five shots had sounded.

Abruptly, Jamie strode out and up to his grandfather's room, a detective playing watchdog at his heels. When he came back to the library, Jamie hefted a target pistol, a .22 on a .45 frame, and ordered, "Search the room!"

"Hm-m-m. Why?"

"Do I have to do it myself?"

"Now, Mr. Bradley—"

"Search it!" Jamie ordered.

The lieutenant snapped, "It'll be searched in the routine when—"

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Jamie twitched and lifted the gun. "Search it! Look for a bullet hole!"

Jamie sweated it out. They were ready to jump him to a man, as they worked. The lieutenant's eyes smoldered.

Jamie looked at Raymond. Raymond was just as eager to jump as the rest. More eager, Jamie saw, for Raymond was afraid.

There was no bullet hole.

"Did you examine the carpet?" Jamie demanded. "The upholstery? The pillows?"

"We ain't amateurs," growled a detective. "I'll bet a month's pay—"

"Then you'd lose! I heard six shots!" Jamie licked his lips. "Lieutenant, if I put up the gun, will you give me thirty seconds to explain?"

Raymond adopted the tone an adult uses with an upset child. "Now, nobody's blaming you, Jamie."

The lieutenant warned, "Thirty seconds even."

Jamie handed him the gun. "It's been fully reloaded, but look inside the barrel. It's dirty."

"So?"

"That's my grandfather's favorite gun. He kept it by his bed. He never put it away dirty in his life!"

"Jamie, easy! You've had shooting on the brain ever since you got back." Raymond put a hand on Jamie's shoulder.

Jamie couldn't take that. His fist snapped to. Raymond's jaw. Raymond crumpled.

"I heard six shots, and bullets don't melt!" Jamie ripped open Raymond's dressing gown. He tore Raymond's pajama coat clear and snatched a piece of adhesive tape from Raymond's left shoulder.

"There's the sixth bullet hole in this room!" Jamie snarled.

"He couldn't get out of that hole," the lieutenant said, later. "He admitted he was substituting low-grade synthetic sapphires and rubies for the real ones in the safe. What would have happened?"

Jamie's voice was tight. "The precision instruments in the battlewagons we're building wouldn't have been *precision* instruments. I would have been blamed. It was my department."

"Oh, so when the old man saw Raymond sticking his nose into a department where it didn't belong, and where Raymond knew there was

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going to be trouble, later— Hm-m-m.”

Jamie said, “If it had been a real burglar, there’d have been only one shot, Barney’s. As it was, he recognized Raymond, hesitated, and Raymond shot first, three times. Barney snapped one sitting going down. Then Raymond stepped in and fired twice again to finish it.”

The lieutenant nodded. “And he saw right away that if he left the old man there with a fired gun in his hand, everybody would guess the truth. So he ran up the back stairs, reloaded the gun and returned it.”

“But didn’t have time to clean it,” Jamie said, “and that was it.”

“You must’ve had more than that to go on.”

“I had three things,” Jamie said grimly. “One, a gun crank like my grandfather wouldn’t prowl the house without his baby ; two, if Barney were downstairs dead, but his .22 was up beside his bed dirty, then he’d had the gun down here, had used it, and someone else, someone who knew just where the gun was kept, had put it back. Three, six shots had been fired.”

The lieutenant’s nose wrinkled. “Flimsy.”

“Not when your men didn’t find a sixth bullet hole,” Jamie said. “A bullet fired in a house has to hit something. It didn’t hit windows or furniture; what else could it have hit? It could have hit what a crack shot aimed it at, a man.”

The lieutenant shrugged. “I wouldn’t build a court case around a witness who heard six shots when the rest claimed five.”

“You might if you saw my army discharge,” Jamie said.

The lieutenant’s brows arched.

“It was a sapper,” Jamie explained. “When we detonated land mines, we lined them up, took cover, and counted the explosions as they went off. One day, there were seven mines, and I counted seven explosions and stood up.” Jamie shivered. “I’d miscounted,” he said, low. “I thought I heard seven, but only six had blown. I was lucky I was standing side-wise. I didn’t get it in the face.”

The lieutenant puckered his lips.

“I’ll never miscount shots again,” Jamie said. “Would you?”

“Hm-m-m.”

THE END