



## MURDER ON SANTA CLAUS LANE

By WILLIAM G. BOGART

*With a Blackout in Hollywood, Rookie Patrol Car Cop Johnny Regan Does Some X-Ray Work to See Through Crime!*

“**B**IG BEN” Slattery was at the wheel of the police cruiser, and he steered the car deftly through the heavy traffic along Hollywood Boulevard. Johnny Regan, young and lean-looking, sat slumped in the seat beside him.

For six months now, ever since getting on the force, Regan had been riding the bus with Big Ben. Slattery was a big truck-horse of a guy, jovial and easy-going. He was well established on the Force, and he had shown Regan the ropes. They got

along.

But tonight was different. For the past half hour Big Ben had been whistling “Holy Night” in an off key. Suddenly Johnny Regan blurted out:

“It was the night before Christmas, and all through the house . . . Aw, nuts!”

Big Ben looked across at him, his Irish blue eyes crinkling.

“What’s the matter, kid?” he demanded. “Ain’t you got that old Christmas spirit at all?”

“A fine thing it is,” Regan grunted.

“Tomorrow night Christmas Eve, and what do we have to do? Spend it riding around in this crate! They ought to give every cop in L. A. a night off.”

“Sure,” said Slattery. “And have every punk crook in town having the time of his life. I had off last year. You’ll probably get off next—”

He broke off, cocked an ear as he heard the small group of young people singing on the next corner.

Slattery slowed the car, pulled toward the curb. Girls’ voices were raised sweetly in a carol, and Big Ben’s heavy face beamed. “Now, ain’t that just swell—” he started.

“Aw,” grunted Johnny Regan. “Come on.” He waved his arm impatiently. “Look at things. No lights. Dimouts! Maybe even a blackout tomorrow night. And they used to call this Santa Claus Lane!”

But nothing Regan said could dim Ben Slattery’s cheerfulness. Lights or no lights, he had the spirit, and he kept on humming:

Hark, the herald angels sing . . .

Their loud-speaker crackled and the voice of the dispatcher came crisply over the air:

“Car Two-nineteen, attention. An emergency call. A woman in distress. Car Two-nineteen . . .”

Johnny Regan’s gray eyes brightened a trifle.

“Maybe she’s a blond and needs help. Anything to relieve the monotony! Let’s roll!”

**T**WO-NINETEEN was their car and their call. The address given by the dispatcher was not far. Ben Slattery tramped his brogan down on the gas and they were off.

Moments later they cut down the side street of small movie studios and rooming

houses—Poverty Row, as it was known in the trade.

Ben Slattery flicked on the adjustable spotlight and searched house numbers. He slowed before a house half-way down the block, stopped, and pulled on the brake.

“All right, kid,” he said. “Run in and see what the dame wants.”

He leaned back, pushed his cap to the back of his shaggy head, and started to whistle “Holy Night” again.

Johnny Regan gave his partner a pained frown and slid out of the car. He hard-heeled up the walk, was just feeling around for the bell button when the outside door was jerked open.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!” a woman’s voice said with relief.

She must have been waiting for him just inside the vestibule. A dim light glowed far back in the hallway, so that Regan could not get a good look at her features. But she appeared to be young, slim-built. Probably pretty.

He grinned in the half darkness.

“What’s up, lady? We got a call—”

“My baby,” she started, voice worried: “He’s ill. I’ve got to get down to the corner drugstore for something and I haven’t a phone.”

“I guess we could run down there for you,” Regan said.

“Oh, no,” the woman said swiftly. “I’ll have to go myself. It’s a special prescription and I want to make certain that the druggist compounds it correctly. If you could just stay with Cecil a moment—”

She looked up at him, hopefully, then motioned to the open doorway behind her. Another light glowed dimly in there, a small night light of some sort. The woman turned and led the way.

“He’s just fallen asleep again,” she said. “If you’ll just be very quiet. It will only take me a moment.”

Johnny Regan saw the plainly furnished room, and the open doorway to the room beyond. The woman looked up at him again appealingly, and she wasn't bad to look at. Not bad at all.

"Just a moment, lady, until I tell my partner," Regan said, "then I'll be right back."

"Hurry," she pleaded.

He moved outside, went back to the car, was grinning when he met Ben Slattery's inquisitive eyes.

"She was," he announced.

"She was what?" Big Ben demanded.

"A blonde! Nice, too. Look, I got to mind her kid while she runs down to the corner a moment. The baby's sick, and she's got no one to leave it with."

"What *is* this," Slattery growled. "A diaper service?"

"Now, listen," said Regan. "Only a moment, see? We've got to help her out."

A limping footstep sounded behind Johnny Regan, and he turned to recognize old Peter Kelsey, watchman at Acme Features, hobbling down the sidewalk. Pete was a nice old guy. Many a night in the quiet hours before dawn they stopped by to have a cup of coffee with him in his watchman's shack just inside the small studio grounds. Acme Features was one of the smaller Poverty Row outfits, and was located around the corner.'

**"T**HE leg bothering you again, Pete?" Regan asked with feeling, as the elderly man came limping up.

The watchman nodded. "I guess we're going to have rain for Christmas, looks like." He rubbed his thigh, smiling. "I can always tell."

From the open coupe window, Big Ben said:

"Come on, Pete. I'll give you a lift the rest of the way." He jerked his big thumb

at Regan. "My partner's got to play nursemaid for a bit."

As Ben Slattery opened the door, Regan hurried back to the house. The police coupe was moving down the street as the blonde opened the front door again.

"Okay, lady," he said. "I'll wait here for you."

She nodded toward the car disappearing down the block. Regan noted that she had slipped on a light sports coat and beret.

"Isn't your partner waiting for you?" she asked.

"He's got to run an errand," Regan said truthfully. He hoped Ben would take his time, and that the blonde would be back before him. He thought it might be kind of nice talking to her for a while. She was the kind who could take your mind off Christmas, and the fact that tomorrow night you had to work.

"Be quiet now," she whispered. "Don't frighten Cecil." She hurried out then.

Johnny Regan tiptoed into the drably furnished living room, gingerly sat down on the edge of a chair. He took off his cap, then put it on again, feeling foolish. What the blazes did you do if a baby started bawling?

He started listening for the slightest sound that would indicate the baby was waking up.

He found himself holding his breath, waiting. It occurred to him that it must be an awful strain to be a father. After a while he relaxed a little bit. No sound had come from the adjoining bedroom. Long quiet moments passed. Certainly the woman ought to be back.

He must have waited fifteen minutes, and was remembering that they had a box to pull shortly on another part of their beat when, disturbed now, Regan got up and tiptoed toward the bedroom. Maybe there

was something wrong with the kid. Maybe it had—died!

The thought jerked him into swift action. Using his flashlight, Regan stepped to the doorway of the adjoining room, snapped the light briefly, stared around for the crib.

And he continued to stare.

The room contained a battered washstand, a portable clothes-closet, two straight-back chairs and a single metal bed. The bed was made up and covered with a cheap imitation chenille spread.

There was no crib and no baby.

“Well, I’ll be a son!” Regan muttered and slammed toward the hall door.

What kind of a gag was this? Why had the blonde phoned?

In the vestibule he remembered. Phoned? What a dope he was! She had said she must run down to the druggist’s because she *had* no phone. Then how in blazes had she phoned the police?

Regan reached the sidewalk, was staring around looking for either the blonde or his partner, when he heard the shots. Two of them, flat and hard in the stillness of the long side street.

And they came from down there around the corner where Big Ben had headed with old Pete Kelsey!

**J**OHNNY REGAN was running. It seemed he would never reach the end of the long block. He swung the corner, unloosening the flap of his holster as he ran. He saw his big partner’s police coupe parked near the entrance drive of Acme Features. The door was hanging open.

Another shot sounded then, from inside the grounds of the movie company. Regan slammed through the open gates, caught the vaguest glimpse of a big form just swinging around the corner of one of the buildings. He started to raise his gun.

“It’s me, kid!” his partner yelled at

him. “Look out!” He waved an arm. “Over there! That back fence!”

Just as he called the warning, Big Ben jerked around in a peculiar manner. There was the crack of a shot. Regan thought, “The guy’s hit!” He dashed forward, keeping close to the building wall in a low crouch.

Slattery was hit. His left arm dangled uselessly. But his big blocky features were grim as he jerked his chin toward the rear, gloomy lot.

“Fence back there,” he explained tersely. “Two guys hiding. Watch it!”

“You wait here!” Regan said, and pushed past his big partner and slithered along the wall, covered by shadows of the night. He was thinking that it was his fault that Slattery was hurt. If he hadn’t been such a sucker for a dame’s attractive figure—

Grimly, with the .38 raised in his fist, he neared the end of the studio building, got the swift blur of a dodging form. A man was leaping toward the wire fence that enclosed the rear of the studio lot. Regan leaped out into the open and leveled the heavy weapon in his first.

A slug screamed inches from his head!

Regan threw himself down to the ground, whipped around, tried to locate source of that shot. He saw the second man going up over another section of the fence. He snapped a quick shot, looked back to see what had happened to the first fellow.

He was over the fence and gone.

Johnny Regan jerked to his feet and took out after the second man. Big Ben was running up behind him.

“I think you winged that second one, kid!” he was calling softly.

Then both of them heard the second man’s feet slap the sidewalk beyond the wire fence and start running. Before Regan could even get a bead on the man, he had

disappeared down a narrow alley that cut between two buildings beyond the studio lot.

Even as Johnny Regan raced toward the fence there was the sound of a car motor roaring into life. Then the motor sound was quickly fading in the distance.

Slattery drew up, swore vehemently. "Lost them!" he said.

Johnny Regan saw his friend's limply hanging arm.

"You need attention," he said. He started toward the studio building.

"Where's old Pete?" he asked abruptly. He had just remembered the watchman.

"He's all right," Ben Slattery said. His voice sounded suddenly tired. "Those two guys jumped us as we headed toward Pete's office. I shoved Pete on ahead of me inside the doorway. I might have banged his head or something. I was pretty rough about it."

**J**UST then, in the doorway of a small building just inside the gates, old Pete himself appeared. He seemed to limp more than usual, and he was rubbing his forehead.

"You all right, old-timer?" Slattery asked, more worried about the elderly watchman than he was about himself.

Pete nodded. "I've called the police. I guess I got a little dizzy. I banged my head on the wall when you pushed me inside the doorway." He looked at Big Ben Slattery and smiled, though he was still trembling. "Thank you for saving my life."

He reached out, touched the officer's arm gratefully, not noticing that the arm dangled strangely. Slattery involuntarily winced.

"Ben needs some attention," Regan said swiftly, and urged his friend toward the small office. At the same time, within the long block beyond the gates, police

sirens were already sounding shrilly in the night.

Regan was thinking that this was a fine thing indeed. Old Pete had had to call the police, and here he, Johnny Regan, was the police! He had certainly bungled things in a fine way!

All because of a baby—a blond baby!

It was almost dawn when they were finally back at Headquarters and tall, alert-looking Lieutenant Anderson had checked out the men on his division. Johnny Regan and his partner, Ben Slattery, were the last ones there, remaining behind, and now the Lieutenant was saying:

"And so those crooks were apparently after some Christmas bonus money that Acme was holding on hand for various employees. It's too bad they got away."

That's the way he said it, quietly, but Regan knew what Lieutenant Anderson was thinking. A couple of patrol cops on the job and crooks had slipped right through their fingers. And all because he, Johnny Regan, had been taken in by a blonde.

Only by the slightest margin had his partner missed death. And Slattery had even risked that in order to warn Regan as he had run into the Acme grounds.

"You better take a few days leave, Slattery, until that arm is in shape," the lieutenant was saying.

The way he said it, Regan thought, was even including Slattery in a silent reprimand for letting the potential killers get away. And just recently around Headquarters they had been talking about how Slattery was in line for promotion. He deserved it. He had been some time on the force.

Lieutenant Anderson looked at Johnny Regan.

"We've checked with that rooming house," he said. "A woman rented a room there for a few days. She and her husband,

the landlady said. They just moved out tonight. No forwarding address. They must have been spotting that Acme job, and the woman probably knew about that empty apartment right inside the ground floor, and worked that gag to get you and Slattery off the beat while the men pulled the job.”

“Slattery’s not to be blamed for this, sir,” Regan blurted suddenly. “It was all my fault. I fell for that woman’s story. I should have checked more closely.”

“Regan probably saved my life, Lieutenant,” Slattery said quickly. “If it hadn’t been for him—”

**T**HAT was like Slattery, Regan thought. Taking the blame equally. He wanted to protest, to explain that if it hadn’t been for his own carelessness—

But Lieutenant Anderson finished:

“So you’ll have to handle that beat alone, tomorrow night, Regan. I’m too short of men to put anyone on with you, and I’ve promised these others that they could have Christmas Eve off.”

“Yes sir,” said Johnny Regan, and he and Slattery went out.

Regan had his own car parked down the street.

“I’ll run you home, Ben,” he said.

Both of them were pretty quiet on the ride through the early dawn, and both of them were thinking, especially Regan. This was the heck of a Christmas present to give his friend—a slug through the arm.

When Slattery climbed out, he said, grinning:

“Keep away from blondes, kid.” But his face was pale. He had lost some blood.

“I’m sorry for what happen—” Regan began.

“Forget it,” Slattery said.

And because there was nothing else to say, Johnny Regan drove off. He kept thinking about that blond woman, and the

fact that she must be tied in with the crooks, and he was wondering how he could get a lead to the gang. . . .

He stopped around at the boarding house later that same morning. He talked to the landlady, but all she could tell was what she had told the police last night. The blond woman and her husband—“Goodness sakes, he might not even be her husband!”—had moved last night, leaving in a hurry, never even giving her a forwarding address for mail.

She took Regan in and showed him the small flat where the baby was supposed to have been sleeping last night.

“Of course I didn’t have the door locked,” she explained. “So many people are always coming in and out to look at rooms. Why, that hussy even kept the key to my front door, and she must have known I was going out last night!”

“Yes,” Regan said. “You sure can’t trust some people.”

He looked briefly but sharply around the small flat. He was wondering if there could be something that the blond might have left behind—some little thing that would give him a lead to the gang.

He found nothing.

Later, when he came on duty that night, his eyes burned from lack of sleep and he found himself in a tense, thoughtful mood. In the Department six months, and what a showing he had made! If he could only get a line on those crooks!

About eleven o’clock it started to rain. He recalled old Pete Kelsey’s prediction last evening. He guessed he ought to stop around and see Pete a moment.

It was a dreary night. Lights were dimmed in shops. Last night he had been growling because they would have to work tonight—Christmas Eve. But it wouldn’t have been so bad with jovial Ben Slattery in the car. Now it was like a hearse!

Regan steered the police coupe down

the long block leading to the Acme Studio. The rain kept coming down. He was midway in the block when the blackout sirens sounded. The weird, banshee wails shivered through the dismal night.

**R**EGAN watched to see if there were many cars moving in the block. All traffic except police and fire department cars was supposed to pull to the curb and park during an air raid warning. There had been several to date, here on the Coast.

But Regan saw no traffic moving within the block. It was deserted.

Or was it?

He was nearing the corner, driving slowly because of the suddenly blacked-out street lights, when he noted the sedan parked in gloom at the curb. He thought he detected the movement of someone behind the wheel. A girl!

Johnny Regan slowed as he passed, tried to get a closer look at the woman. Reflection of his own lighted headlamps gave him a partial glimpse of a face that was swiftly turned away from him.

Funny! He thought of that blond dame last night. He could have sworn—

A hunch told him to keep on driving, not stopping, not letting on that he had seen anyone in the car. Because he was suddenly thinking of old Pete Kelsey, and that Pete would be on duty at the Acme Studio just around the next corner. Could that woman parked there in the darkened sedan be a lookout for the gang?

Regan didn't turn at the corner. Instead, he rolled down another block, gathering speed in the darkness, cut around the square and headed back to the movie lot. Leaving the car parked in blackness in a nearby alley, he hurried toward the studio gates.

He saw an air-raid warden just disappearing down the block in the darkness. He was tempted to hail the man,

then decided against it. He had pulled a boner last night. Perhaps his uneasiness now was just imagination.

He noted that old Pete had the studio entrance gates locked, as they should be. Regan moved along the fence in the utter blackout darkness, located a spot alongside one of the buildings just inside the high fence, then started climbing over. He dropped lightly to the ground inside.

Pete's office was in darkness. But that was as it should be, too. The watchman had naturally closed the blackout curtains.

Regan hurried up to the door, started to reach for the knob, then gave a start as he saw the door partway open. And no light came from inside at all!

He hurried across the threshold, had taken two or three steps when he almost stumbled headlong over the limp form lying on the floor. He dropped to his knees as he heard the man's groan in the darkness.

"Pete!"

The old man mumbled something. Regan bent close.

"It's Regan, the cop," he said. "Tell me, Pete!"

The old man's words were faint.

"They shot me—chest," he said. He coughed, and Regan didn't like the sound of that cough. "I'm done for, Regan. There's nothing you can do. But try—get them—three men—guns—"

Johnny Regan tried to prod the information out of the old man. He caught the words:

"Office—there—"

The main office, that would be it.

The watchman was trying to tell him that the gunmen were in the main office of the studio, just across the lot!

"Pete!" Regan urged. "You're going to be all right. I'll be right back."

**T**HE old fellow was trying to say something. He held to Johnny Regan's arms, and Regan heard the faint words:

"I bought lights—other Christmas tree. Thought they might let me—"

Then, suddenly, his aged body went limp in Regan's arms. The officer felt for a pulse. There was none. Old Pete was dead!

Grimly, Johnny Regan whipped to his feet, unholstered his gun and spun toward the doorway. In a way, the blackout aided him. He moved swiftly across the dark area between the buildings, positive that no one watching from the main office could spot him.

He realized that the gunmen had tried a daring scheme. Almost trapped last night, they would hardly return tonight. That's the way the police would figure. That's the way they figured the police would figure. And so they had come back!

Pay-day was the day after Christmas here at Acme. That bonus money was probably still in the company safe.

Regan thought these things as he moved soundlessly toward the building. In the darkness, another dark blot of darkness took form between his eyes. The main office door—open! He approached it.

And just as he was two feet away, a man's figure appeared in that doorway. The fellow spotted the cop, dived back, kicked the door shut as he called a warning to someone within.

Johnny Regan hit the door and crashed it open before it could be locked. He fired instantly and saw a man drop, knew he was dead even before he dropped on his knees beside him.

He caught the barest glimpse of another man leaping toward him, then something slammed down on his head, the gun in the man's hand. He pitched forward, hit the floor, slid, gained his feet and whirled. His gun had fallen and

someone was hurtling toward him in the gloom, now that there was no flashlight. Two forms, because he could hear the men's forced breathing.

Regan crashed into one man, and with a blur of movement knocked the fellow's gun hand aside, grasped the man's wrist, twisted until there was a gasp of pain. The weapon clattered to the floor.

The second man seized him from behind.

Regan hunched forward, tried to fling the man over his shoulders. But the fellow hung on. The patrolman twisted, slammed a fist into the man's face. He broke free, dived aside and crashed into a wall. His hand slid along the wall and touched a row of light switches. He flicked one on.

Light flooded the room. One man was leaping toward him. The other was down on the floor, searching around for his gun. Johnny Regan saw his own gun, flung himself down in a dive and clawed out for the weapon.

But the one crook had reached his own gun first.

"Don't move!" he rapped out at Regan.

The gun in the man's fist covered him steadily. Regan climbed slowly to his feet, watching the dark-haired man's heavy, menacing features.

"Get his flashlight," the man covering the cop said.

The second man behind Regan moved close, frisked the officer, and stood back.

"All right," the man with the gun snapped. "Turn off that light. Move!"

Regan edged backward toward the light switches located on the wall.

"Use that flashlight and keep it shielded!" the gunman said to his partner. "These other lights on here might bring a raft of cops!"

**J**OHNNY REGAN'S hand went up to the wall switches. He turned slightly



to look at them. Something old Pete had said as he was dying flashed through his mind. There was a little lettered metal plate on the wall that made him remember.

He flicked the switch, found himself caught in the beam of the flashlight. The man with the gun came close to him and prodded him across the room. They moved through a doorway.

Regan saw that they had opened another door so that it shielded the office safe, which was open. The door was opened in such a way that, Johnny Regan realized, not even the light of the flashlight could ever be seen from outside.

"Aren't you going to give this guy a slug?" the man holding the flashlight demanded.

"Wait, you chump!" snapped the man who was moving toward the safe. He handed the gun over to his partner. "Wait until we're finished here," he said. "Then."

He bent down, continued rifling the drawers of the open safe. He dumped things into a sack that he had rested on the office floor. Regan was held covered by the light and the gun in the second man's hand.

He knew what was coming. The instant they were finished, and ready to scam, he got a slug. They had already murdered the watchman. A cop killing would make the rap no worse.

Regan's eyes glittered. There was nothing he could do. Nothing to do but die! If only someone—

He heard it then, the shrill whine of a police siren. The two men heard it, too, and the man bent down in front of the open safe came to his feet with a snarl.

"Douse that light!" he yelled automatically, obviously forgetting their captive.

As the light flicked out, Johnny Regan dived. He dived into the man who had been holding the gun, twisted it free of the

man's frantic grasp, reversed it in his fist and fired. It was all done in a breathless instant of time.

The man screamed, swayed against Regan.

The officer shoved him aside, heard him crash down to the floor. But Johnny Regan was leaping after the other fellow, trailing the sounds of the man's thudding feet toward the front office door.

The man dived through, straight into the glare of the flashlights and the guns held by police converging on the doorway.

"He's a killer!" Regan yelled, as he saw a heavy gun barrel rap down across the escaping man's head.

That's all Regan waited to see, and then he kept running. He saw the sedan that was moving slowly past in the street outside. He fired a shot overhead and the girl at the wheel drew up in sheer horror, probably figuring the shot was fired directly at her.

Regan pulled her from behind the wheel, held her arm. She was the blonde from the rooming house.

"You and I, lady, are going to have a little talk about Cecil," Regan said grimly. "Remember?"

And as they passed through the entrance gates, rejoining the police who were gathered there, Johnny Regan looked at the two small treelike shrubs that were brightly illuminated with colored Christmas tree lights.

**T**HE air raid warden was there too. "So I saw these lights," he was saying excitedly, "and hurried over here to complain to the night watchman, and found him in there—dead!"

"Old Pete tried to tell me as he was dying," Johnny Regan added quietly. "He said something about buying lights for his trees. Each year he used to light them up here, but this year he was worried because

the dimout rules might not allow it. He was telling Slattery and me about it one night.”

“You mean you managed to turn on these tree lights?” someone asked.

Regan nodded. “When they ordered me to turn off the lights inside the office, I saw the lettered plate for the switch that controlled the gate entrance lights. I took a chance that old Pete had hooked his Christmas tree lights up on that circuit. I snapped it on as I shut the other lights off.”

The block warden was saying they had better get the lights off. The police were loading a wounded killer and two dead ones into a car. Regan was still holding the woman.

He pushed her toward one of the officers.

“Take care of her a moment, will you?” he said. “I want to call up Slattery and tell him I’ve got it all straightened out.”

“You got what straightened out?”

“Blond trouble,” said Johnny Regan grimly.