



AS THE BOSS OF THE WATER-FRONT PRECINCT MOVED OFF IN THE DIRECTION OF THE STATION HE CHUCKLED SOFTLY TO HIMSELF. LUCK! A GREAT CHUNK OF LUCK!

Safety First

by Herman Howard Matteson

SERGEANT RASS BITNER, officer in command of the water-front precinct and station, sat behind his flat-topped desk. The door leading into the front office was closed and the bolt shot into place. The sergeant wanted to be alone. He wanted to think. He *had* to think.

In his pudgy hand he had a roll of bills. He counted them again and again. Two hundred dollars! Rass Bitner knew perfectly

well that there were two hundred dollars in the roll, but he wanted to think, had to think, and the operation of fingering the money seemed to inspire and stimulate cerebration.

The possession of the two hundred, brought no joy, apparently, to his policeman's heart. His little round head had settled itself snugly down into his number seventeen-and-a-half collar. The sergeant had no neck to speak of.

Sergeant Bitner was worried. He had just answered a phone call from headquarters. The chief himself had been on the other end of the line. The talk over the phone had been about a roll containing four hundred dollars. Four hundred dollars had been taken at the point of a bulldog gun from a tugboat captain named Hoy Weston. With profane and acerbic language, the chief had informed Rass Bitner that unless the stick-up artist was apprehended and the four hundred dollars returned to the seafaring person named Weston, why, Sergeant Rass Bitner was due to hear, and feel, something drop.

Whereat the heart of Bitner grew troubled. The identical two-hundred-dollar roll that he was worrying between his pudgy fingers was an exact, mathematical half of the four hundred whereof the seafaring person had been robbed.

His superior's sharp mandate had given Sergeant Bitner an unpleasant start; but Bitner was an old hand at the game. For a few moments the chief's words fretted his soul, but only for a few moments. Then, like the sea after a passing gust, he became serene, composed, confident.

Bitner rose, shot back the bolt, opened the door. In the outer office three plain-clothes men and a harness bull were playing checkers with a stool-pigeon named Callie Ream.

The sergeant opened the front door, descended the steps, and made his way up the street, his small, piglike eyes squinting. Sergeant Rass Bitner was thinking. He always had been a thinker, which explains why he was a sergeant and not a harness bull, why he owned real estate, a bank balance, mortgages, and notes of hand.

Sergeant Bitner knew his chief. When the chief tossed his head and began baying the moon, police folk of Barnacle City took to the tall uncut. The sergeant had been frightened only for a few minutes, but he knew just the same that it was up to him to get busy. The

restoration of the whole four hundred was out of the question. It had been split several ways, the largest portion coming Bitner's way. Every jitney had long since been squandered, save the two hundred in the hands of the careful Mr. Bitner.

Still thinking, Bitner walked on slowly. If a proven thief could be dragged forward, and say a hundred or so of the plunder restored, why, that would suffice—would not only suffice but gain Bitner praise from the chief, and perhaps a lieutenantcy.

About three squares from the precinct police-station a little park nestled in a triangle formed by two intersecting streets. Through this park Bitner walked slowly, his cunning little eyes no longer upon the earth, but scanning and appraising shrewdly the occupants of the various benches.

He came to a sudden pause, puckered the corner of his mouth, and, without turning his head, expectorated copiously. A long, lanky, youngish man, dressed in what was obviously a new suit, was draped over the back and arm-rest of one of the benches, sound asleep.

Sergeant Bitner took a soft step forward and peered into the sleeper's face.

II

As the boss of the water-front precinct moved off in the direction of the station he chuckled softly to himself. Luck! A great chunk of luck! Luck always favored a man with nerve and get-up, and Bitner had always had plenty of both. The sergeant always claimed that the best verse in the Bible was "faint heart never won fair lady."

Reentering his private office, Bitner closed and latched the door, and walked to the "mug file." Tacked to a number of hinged frames were the photographs of yeggs, dips, two-story men, pete men—members all, in police parlance, of the Johnson family.

Turning the files swiftly, Bitner finally

found what he sought. The third photograph from the left showed a countenance not in the least vicious or abandoned. Indeed, the face was an attractive one, though homely as sin, with a humorous twist about the mouth—the face of the identical person in the new suit who was draped over the park bench asleep.

Sergeant Rass Bitner chuckled again, slipped back the bolt in the door, took his seat at the desk, and touched a button. The blotter clerk appeared in the doorway.

“Tell Tom I want to see him.”

Promptly Tom Downey, plain-clothes man, entered the office and closed the door behind him.

“You recollect that ten-spot I shoves you here a day or so back, Tom?”

Tom nodded his head slowly. He recalled the incident. He had spent the ten. A demand for a blow-back would have proved embarrassing in the extreme.

“Well, Tom, the party in whose bankroll that ten-spot was a pewholder, has pulled out his snort stop. He’s roared. The chiefs teeterin’ on his hind legs this morning, and says we gotta bring a lamb to the block for that job, or he’s goin’ to drop a depth-bomb in this precink. Get that?”

Tom began to look interested, also relieved. There had been no call thus far for a return of the ten. If the job weren’t going to be too tough, he was willing to work out the ten and help the sergeant. So he said questioningly:

“Well?”

“They’s a long, lanky party beatin’ room-rent on one of the park benches,” replied Bitner. “He’s wearin’ a new suit. Take a pipe at number three, left, there in the fambly album, Tom.”

Tom Downey stepped to the mug gallery and studied the photo. Detective Downey smiled and nodded his head. Perfectly he recalled the horselike

countenance and lanky figure of party number three, left.

“That same bird is right this minute asleep out there in the park, Tom. Y’understand?”

Thoroughly Tom understood. A look of rare intelligence overspread his face, reaching as far as the top of his flap-pointed collar.

Sergeant Bitner, with a sigh, pulled the roll of currency from his pocket and slowly, reluctantly, counted out seventy-five dollars. He looked at the bundle, peeled off twenty-five dollars, and returned it to the roll, which he thrust back into his pocket. Fifty dollars was enough for a plant; no use being foolish.

Then he reached into a drawer and produced a double-action bulldog revolver of ancient pattern. Bitner shoved the money and the gun toward Detective Downey, who grinned, picked them up, put them into a pocket, and departed.

Again Sergeant Bitner pressed his desk bell. Promptly the blotter clerk presented himself to receive his superior’s orders.

“Dannie,” said the sergeant, his brusque, authoritative office manner having been almost completely restored, “tell Joe Rogers to caper down the street to Mann’s and fetch Divvy here, quick!”

Within ten minutes Detective Joe Rogers opened the door of the sergeant’s office and thrust through the portal a rat-faced young man who wore mauve-colored, cloth-top shoes. He closed the door and returned to his game of checkers.

Like a trapped rodent hunting the remotest corner of his cage, Divvy backed away as far as the confines of the room would permit and braced his narrow back against the wall.

“Divvy,” said the sergeant severely, gloating in the manifest fear that his presence inspired in the sunken breast of the cringing

dip and stick-up artist, "you recollect that four hundred bucks you jips off'n a seafarin' party here in the wharf-shed a few days back? Oh, yes, you do! You sticks him up with a gat and takes his poke off'n him. You remember all right, Divvy! Well, I—"

"But, chief—" expostulated the wretched Divvy. In his dealings with the police, Divvy always addressed the minion of the law as "chief." It often seemed to help a little.

"Shut up! I say you recollect the episode. Well, they's a roar. You just naturally got to beat it out of town, Divvy. Head for Oshkosh or Terry Hut, and don't you come back here till the twittering birdies nest again. Get that, Divvy?"

"But, chief—"

"Shut up! And you ramble sudden, Divvy. Get that—sudden?"

"But, chief—"

Divvy came forward boldly to the sergeant's desk, drowning the latter's repeated "Shut up!" with shrill and quaking expostulations.

"But, chief, I give up three hundred bucks out of that four hundred head of kale. You know who to. I had some bills to pay. I'm broke. I can't jump out on just 'God bless you, darling.' I had some bills to pay. I—"

"Oh, I'm wise, I'm wise!" snorted the sergeant. "You buys a thimble of snow"—cocaine—"and another thimble, and you takes a sleigh-ride. Look how them hands of yourn tremble! Your mug is like a fish belly. Here!"

The sergeant handed Divvy a twenty-dollar bill.

"Now beat it. For looks, you'd better ride the plush about five dollars' worth. Then my advice is to mope the leathers. The exercise 'll do you good, and the twenty 'll last longer. Now you figure you've kissed us all good-by, Divvy. Into the high!"

The sergeant waved an imperious hand toward the door. Divvy slid from the room,

out through the front door, and faded.

III

HAVING somewhat the expression of a man who, walking the crowded street, turns to discover that he has got some other man's wife or mother by the arm, Detective Tom Downey entered the sergeant's office. Tom fixed his gaze upon a spot on the wall, while he dug into a hip pocket and produced an ancient bulldog gun and a roll containing fifty dollars. He laid the gun and the money on the desk and turned back to the door. There he paused. Whatever had happened amiss had rendered the plain-clothes man speechless. He waved his hand, traffic-cop style, while his lips opened and closed dryly, like the fluttering gills of a dying fish.

Whatever Tom Downey had intended to say remained unsaid. With a final hand-wave and another gill-flutter, he closed the door after him.

Sergeant Rass Bitner sat staring down hard at the gun and the money. Tom had zammed the job! Unframed, the long, lanky person no doubt slept peacefully on. Tom had zammed the job! A man of much subtle practise in the gentle art of framing, Tom Downey did not often zam a job.

Swallowing hard, Bitner touched the gun with his pudgy fingers and fondled the roll of bills. Real gun, all right, and real money!

"Whatinell!" exploded the sergeant, as he pressed the call-bell.

Joe Rogers entered in response to his superior's waved command.

"Joe, is Tom drinkin'?"

Joe shook his head.

"Has Tom got fambly trouble? Anybody died? Is he sick? Got religion?"

To all these questions Joe continued to shake his head negatively. Far as he knew, Tom was all right.

The sergeant pointed to the bulldog

gun and the wad of bills.

“You recollect them ten bucks I shoved you here a day or so back, Joe?”

Joe looked apprehensive. He also had expended his ten dollars of easy money. Yes, he remembered that a little jingle of cash had come his way.

Gulping hard, stabbing his thick finger at the gun and the money, the sergeant proceeded to elucidate.

“Well, the seafarin’ party that Divvy jipped that four hundred off’n has roared. The chief says they’s got to be a blow-back, and the stick-up that done the job has got to get grabbed and crucified. Now Divvy hain’t here; he’s on his way to Salt Lake. The four hundred’s spent. Divvy’s been indulgin’ free in dope. So we got to look our hand over good, Joe. Take a pipe at number three, left, Joe!”

The sergeant pointed to the rogues’ gallery. Joe stepped over and studied the benign, homely countenance of number three, left. Joe grinned and nodded. He remembered perfectly the “phiz” of number three, left.

“Well, Joe, we just gotta drag a lamb to the altar. That number three party is asleep, if Tom didn’t give him his dinner call when he zammed this job, right here in the park. We gotta get that gun onto this party, and that roll into his clothes. Get that? Then let Ben Steen or some of the boys get a high sign and pick him up. That clear, Joe? Now, don’t you zam out on this. Whatinell d’you suppose is the matter with Tom?”

Joe Rogers zam on a job, a simple pickup like this? With a cocky toss of his head, Joe picked up the gun and the wad of bills. It didn’t matter what had been the matter with Tom Downey; there was nothing the matter with Joe Rogers. That bird roosting on the park bench was just as good as on his way, the jewelry snapped about his wrists.



IV

HALF an hour later, the harness bull on duty on the station beat knocked upon the sergeant’s door, advanced, saluted respectfully, and laid upon the desk an old-fashioned bulldog revolver and fifty dollars in bills.

Sergeant Rass Bitner’s jaw jarred open and hung wabbling.

“I—you—he—whatinell!”

“I’m walking my beat,” explained the harness bull. “Joe Rogers comes tearing out of the park like he’d had a speed pill. As he lopes by he slips me this gat and these leaves of lettuce, and he mutters kind of crazy like for me to give ’em to you. Talking kind of loony, Joe says he’s got to see a oculist and a nerve specialist, and then take a good long rest in a sanatorium. With that he lams onto a car and beats it.”

Sergeant Rass Bitner swallowed hard a time or two.

“All r-r-right,” he stuttered. “You kin go now.”

The moment the harness bull had closed the door behind him, Sergeant Bitner rose and walked three times around his office chair. When luck ran tough, that three times around the chair frequently turned the tide. It could, at least, do no harm in the present

distressing situation.

Then, having worked his gambler's supplication to the deity of chance, Bitner seated himself. With a trancelike expression in his little eyes, he absently fingered the gun and the wad of money. Then he pressed the bell.

"I wanta see Skid."

At once Lafe Skidmore, plain-clothes man, appeared. Not only was "Skid" a natural abbreviation of his surname, but it was an appellation that fitted him to a T. No man on the force was more adept than he when it came to greasing the skids for a "fall guy."

"You recollect them ten bucks I slips you a day or so back, Skid?"

It was difficult for Skid to recall so negligible a sum, but he did remember vaguely that a pinch of cigar-money had come his way.

"Well, Skid, they's a roar—headquarters. Divvy is on his way to Tucson, Arizona. The chief says we gotta bring a veal to the block, and recover back that four hundred bucks for the sailor that got jipped. Get that, Skid? Well, you're in, even if you didn't nick the roll for but a ten-spot. Get that? You do? You'd better!"

The sergeant twisted in his swivel chair and pointed to the mug rack.

"Number three there, Skid, left."

Skid remembered number three, left, and grinned as he recalled some vastly humorous circumstance in connection with the homely young man.

"Well," said the sergeant, "that number three bird, right this minute, is in the arms of Orpheum. Maybe you don't get that; it's poetry. I mean that bird's asleep in the park, on a bench. See that old cannon there, and that wad of dough? We gotta frame this sleeping hoozus in the park. Somebody has got to get grabbed for this sailor job, and it might as well be him."

"Soft!" exclaimed Mr. Skidmore in

tones of disdain, as he pocketed the gun and the money. "Soft! That bird is just as good as in the wagon and on his way. Soft!"

Half an hour elapsed; an hour. No signs of Mr. Skidmore. Sergeant Rass Bitner paced the floor, chewed tobacco savagely, and exclaimed half aloud forty times:

"Whatinell!"

At last Bitner could withstand the suspense no longer. He clapped on his gold-braided cap. Swiftly he walked down the street in the direction of the park.

A single look sufficed. The tall, angular person, wearing a new suit, still lay draped across the back of the park bench, asleep.

Back to the station went Bitner, to take a fresh chew and another walk about the floor. Another half-hour went by, and no signs of Mr. Skidmore.

Bitner thrust his head from the office door and called sharply to Callie Ream, the stool-pigeon, who still sat playing checkers with Ben Steen, a harness bull who was soon to go on relief.

"Callie," said the sergeant, "you prance out and lamp around and see if you can find Lafe Skidmore. When you find him, you tell him to report back here quick, like he knowed we was gashin' up a piece of soft money. Hurry!"

Breathing hard as evidence of the haste with which he had gone about the business entrusted to him, Callie Ream returned.

"I found him. Skid can't come. He can't walk. He can't talk, neither. I found him in Banner's saloon, h'istin' 'em with two hands. He'd been cryin'. I seen the tear-streaks on his face. His chin was still quiverin'. All he could do was kind of gurgle, and point for me to take something out of his pocket. Here it is."

The stool-pigeon laid upon the desk an old-fashioned bulldog gun and fifty dollars in currency.

“Yow! Yow! Yow!”

Sergeant Rass Bitner settled his clawing fingers into his own hair, lifted himself from the office chair, and went leaping and yowling about the room like a rabid dog.

“Yow! Yow! Whatinell! Get out o’ here! Beat it!”

And the stool-pigeon beat it, slamming the door after him.

Immediately Sergeant Bitner tore the door open again, emitted a yell that shot Ben Steen, the harness bull, out of his chair like a jack-in-a-box.

“Ben, you come here. Come on!”

The sergeant gave an enginelike puff between words, betraying thereby the extreme profundity of the emotion that possessed him.

“Ben—they’s a bird—settin’ on the end bench—in the park. He’s a long—gangling party. In a gray—suit. He’s asleep—or was. If he hain’t asleep—when you get there—put him to sleep. And get these—into his clothes. You understand—*get-these-into-his-clothes!* He’s just got to be framed. Get that, Ben?—framed. Now, beat it, quick!”

Officer Steen glared about wildly, seized the gun and the money and tore for the front door; only to return within less than fifteen minutes.

As he entered the sergeant’s private office, Officer Steen was unpinning the star from the breast of his uniform coat. He reached into a hip-pocket, pulled out his leather-covered “sap,” and placed it upon the desk. He reached into the armhole of his vest on the left side and brought forth a pair of shiny handcuffs. Beside the sap and the handcuffs and the star he laid his gun and his night-stick. In addition to the exhibits named, he placed upon the polished mahogany an old bulldog gun and fifty dollars in money.

Officer Steen then threw his hands heavenward, worked his neck in his collar

where it was tight, and walked out without a word. Officer Steen had turned in his tools. Officer Steen had resigned.



V

HANDS hanging limply at the sides of the chair, legs extended, toes pointing ceilingward, Sergeant Rass Bitner sat huddled, staring stupidly at the stuff on the top of his desk.

And thus for a long time he sat and stared, while the telephone rang and rang. The blotter clerk answered, as the phones in the inner and outer offices were linked in circuit.

“It’s the chief, sergeant. I thought you must be out, so I answered. The chief says this sailor, Hoy Weston, grabbed Divvy just as Divvy was climbin a train for somewheres. It hain’t no good news, sergeant. The chief says he gave Divvy the third, first taking away his thimble of snow. Divvy broke down and coughed. The chief wants you, sergeant, at once, at headquarters.”

Still the sergeant stared at the collection on top of the desk. Presently a shrewd-faced boy, who sold newspapers on the corner below, entered the outer office and asked to see the sergeant.

“I got a note for you, sarge. A hoozus

in the park gimme a dime to fetch it. Here it is!"

The newsy laid a crumpled bit of paper on the desk and departed.

It was some time before Sergeant Bitner could coordinate his faculties sufficiently to reach, open, and read the note:

DERE SARGUN BITNER: You remember how two years ago, when I come from the banks for an outling, you framed me and sent me to the pen for a year. Safety first, sarge. This year I takes no chances. Before arriving down at your city, I goes to Middleton and I gets the tailor to build me a new suit of clothes without no pockets. Good-by, sarge.