



The man with the pointed nose slid into the front seat, a gun in his hand

LUCK of the IRISHER

By NICHOLAS ZOOK

When a man must get some medicine to his sick daughter and two thugs order him to drive the other way, he's got to think fast!

I HADN'T seen Janey since Lolli died, and that was a year ago. But now she stood before me and I wondered how I had missed the strong resemblance. She had Lolli's firm mouth and gray eyes and the same impatient way of brushing back her hair.

Janey was Lolli's younger sister. I don't suppose many men notice the kid sister of the girl they marry. I didn't. My eyes and heart had all been for Lolli. Now I felt as though a year had flipped back and Lolli was with me once more.

But not for long. There was the urgency of running downtown to Mel's drugstore.

Janey unbuttoned her coat and her eyes were troubled as they studied mine. "What's wrong, John?"

"Catherine," I said. "She's feverish and won't sleep. Doc says it's gripe and not to worry. But I am worried, Janey.

That's why I telephoned you."

She had her coat off: She looked sympathetic and competent at the same time. She nodded to the bedroom.

"Is she in there?"

"Yes. I've got to go out for a while and I can't leave her alone. Doc gave me a prescription for a mild sedative. It may make her sleep more easily."

I hesitated, feeling awkward and apologetic. "If you could, I'd appreciate your keeping an eye on her until I get back. I won't be long. Maybe half an hour."

"Of course," she said. "You and Catherine are all the family I've got now, you big lug. I wish you'd called on me sooner."

Gratitude made me warm and big inside. I swallowed hard and reached for my coat. It was good to see Janey again.

I tiptoed into Catherine's room, but it

was a useless gesture. She was sitting up in bed, bathed in the yellow spot of a night light. She looked thin and pale and much too small to be three years old.

“Janey’s here to take care of you, dear,” I said. “Daddy’s got to go out for a while.”

I expected her to cry, but she didn’t. I don’t think she remembered Janey, but she looked at her with interest as Janey came into the room.

I kissed Catherine on the forehead and went out.

THE night was dark and biting cold. I pulled up the collar of my coat and hoped the car would start. It took a little coaxing, but finally the engine sputtered.

I backed the car out of the garage and into the yard. I jammed on the brakes as the car thudded into something. Silently I cursed. I had forgotten to move a pile of logs I had cut for the fireplace. The car had backed into it. I didn’t have time to survey the damage now. I just hoped the car would run.

It was about three miles into town. I stepped on the gas and watched the speedometer needle jump to fifty. It was a quarter to eleven. Mel closed shop right on the stroke of eleven and I didn’t want to miss him.

The luck of the Irish was with me. Traffic was light, the signals were green all the way, and I didn’t pass any cops. This was especially fortunate since the drive against traffic violators was very intense.

I made it in six minutes. Mel was putting his cash into a leather bag when I pushed through the door. He paused, while his bushy gray eyebrows shot up, and grunted.

“Howdy, John. How’s the little girl?”

I shook my head. “Not so good, Mel. Grippe. Doc gave me a prescription for

her.”

I handed him the slip of paper. Mel adjusted his spectacles, scratched his bristly chin and studied the prescription.

“Good thing it’s a simple mixture,” he said. “I was planning on going to bed early. Have this for you in a jiffy.”

He dropped his money bag carelessly on the counter and shuffled into the drug cage. I heard the tinkle of bottles and the pouring of a liquid. And then I heard the door open and felt the brief gust of a cold wind.

Two men walked casually in, too casually. They were big men with broad faces and granite-cold eyes. Their features were unlike. One had flat features and a little chin, while the other had a sharp nose and jutting chin. Yet they had a definite resemblance as to type. Two of a kind, I thought. A pair of blackjacks.

The flat-faced man headed for the magazine rack and idly flicked the pages of a detective magazine. The other approached and came to a stop on the other side of the cash register. He took me in with narrowed eyes and glanced briefly at the cage where Mel was mixing the prescription. Then he leaned forward on the counter, as though studying the labels on the patent medicines.

Mel had seen them. His thin mouth jerked tight. But beyond this he gave no sign of recognition or interest. He shuffled out of the cage with a bottle.

“This’ll fix her up,” he grunted. Casually he stuffed the bottle in a paper bag and just as casually put the leather money bag in with it.

“Pay me some other time,” he said.

I took the package with hands that trembled slightly.

“Thanks, Mel,” I said, and headed for the door. I expected any minute to feel a restraining hand on my shoulder, but I didn’t look back once. I marched out,

threw the bag on the back seat of the car and hopped in.

Maybe I was letting my imagination run away with me. And maybe Mel was becoming frightened or overcautious in his old age. But those two men meant a stickup to me. I hoped I could find a cop in time to help Mel, in case they got rough.

I thumbed the starter button urgently. I heard a familiar whirring, but no roar of the engine. I worked the starter again and again with mounting despair. At the same time, I fed the engine gas, hoping it would catch. It didn't. I only succeeded in flooding the carburetor.

I flicked off the key and decided to go back. I couldn't leave Mel in there alone.

AT THAT moment the car door opened on the passenger side and the man with the pointed nose and jutting chin slid in. He had a gun in his hand. I saw it for a moment and then felt it, jabbing my side.

The other one threw open the back door and clambered in. Neither of them so much as glanced back in the direction of the drugstore.

"Where is it?" the gunman demanded.

"In the back seat, the other one spoke up. "I got it here, Sam. The old guy stuck it in the bag, just like he said."

The gun relaxed at my side. Sam said, "Then let's get out of here. At least we don't have to worry none about transportation." He jabbed the gun again. "Get going and keep going, straight down Front Street till I tell you different."

I sat quite still. "The car won't start," I said. "Don't know what's wrong with it."

His voice was a low threat. "Start it."

I flicked on the key and pressed the starter button. I gritted my teeth with anger as the engine roared. I put it in gear and rolled down the street.

Funny what you think of at a time like

that. I thought of Mel, perhaps dead in the drugstore, of Catherine with her feverish brow and wide eyes, of Janey keeping a vigil for me. I didn't think of myself, or the possibility that they might kill me.

"The old man, what happened to him?" I finally asked.

"Lucky he didn't get a bullet in the bread basket," snapped Sam. "He talked, so we let him off easy. With a clout over the head that will keep him sleeping for an hour."

A weight lifted from my mind and my thoughts focused on the situation. If only I could attract the attention of some cop. But it would have to be done without the knowledge of the two gunmen.

We stopped for a red light. In the rear-view mirror I spotted the blue uniform of a cop, walking our way. Then the idea hit me.

I lifted my foot from the brake pedal and dropped it quietly back. I did this again and again, hoping it would work. I knew enough Morse code to send an SOS signal. By pressing and releasing the brake pedal, I tried to flash dots and dashes through the flashing taillight. It was a fantastic idea, with probably a hundred-to-one chance of working. But right now anything was worth a try.

I was part way through my second set of signals when the traffic light flashed amber. The cop was nearer in my rear-view mirror, near enough to show that he was studying the car intently.

The traffic light turned green and I shot the car ahead with a jerk and a burst of speed. The gun was hard against my ribs, so I slowed to a normal speed.

"No tricks, wise guy," snarled Sam. "Not if you want to live long."

"Okay," I agreed meekly.

We traveled eight more blocks before another red light stopped us. Sam's eyes were on me. I didn't dare monkey with the

foot brake. Another ten minutes, I thought, and it might be all over. I was surprised the prospect of death didn't frighten me more. I was calm, even resigned.

The dark car approached from the rear at high speed. I watched its headlights glow as it came alongside. The car halted and the blue uniform of a cop darted through the door.

The flat-faced man in the rear saw him first and leaped from the car. The cop shouted an order to halt and then started to run.

Sam lifted his gun and jerked the door handle with his free hand. I threw myself at him, forcing the gun hand against the dashboard until the weapon dropped.

He cursed and swung out with his fists. The narrow space of the car hampered him. The blows fell weakly on my shoulders. He twisted about, his face wrinkled into a snarl, and began to pummel my head and body.

I was taking the beating without much effective resistance when a second cop collared Sam. He pulled Sam out of the car and shoved a service revolver under his nose. The fight went out of him.

The other cop led Sam's partner, handcuffed, down the street in the direction of the patrol cruiser.

I POURED out my story, beginning with the prescription for Catherine and ending with my scheme of flashing an SOS signal.

"And it worked," I said proudly. "He caught the signal and got hold of you."

The cop shook his head. "He didn't get any SOS. Jenks wouldn't know Morse code from Greek. But he did spot the rear of your car. You don't have any tail lights. With the drive on against traffic violators, we got orders to nail anybody whose car isn't up to scratch. We were told to run you down."

I remembered how I had backed the car out of the garage and into the pile of logs. That had been the car damage. The luck of the Irish was with me, I breathed fervently. Now, if only Catherine would get well.

It was another half hour before I got away. I drove quickly home and let myself in with as little noise as was humanly possible.

The bottle was in my hands as I tiptoed to the bedroom. Janey was sitting by the bed and Catherine lay with closed eyes. A smile touched Catherine's lips as she said, "Please, tell me another story."

Janey began, in that voice that was so much like Lolli's, "Once upon a time—"

Catherine sighed, and her face was peaceful as she dropped off to sleep. I set the sedative on a table. Catherine didn't need that stuff. She needed someone like Janey.

Janey looked up suddenly. A smile flickered in her gray eyes and I knew the luck of the Irish had done me another good turn in calling her back tonight.