

# BEFORE ELECTION

By WARD AINSWORTH

The girl Custer had been hired to guard was killed almost under his very eyes. On top of that, Custer had withheld vital facts from the police. Now, unless he could find that other girl, Custer was behind the eight ball.

Gaxton murdered!" she exclaimed.  
"I must get away from here!"





AUL CUSTER'S hand hovered over the doorbell, but he never rang it. There was the strangely muffled sound of a shot within the house, followed by another. Custer reached for the doorknob, and found the door locked. Without hesitation he vaulted the low railing of the veranda and streaked for the window at the side of the house from which he had seen light on his approach up the walk.

The light was only an orange slit that escaped the drapes meant to obscure it. While Custer vainly tried to peer inside, a woman's scream tore at his ear-drums. Instantly he dived for his gun. He chopped down with it, smashing the glass so that his hand could reach in to unlock the simple catch that held the window.

Then he was over the sill into the richly stocked library of the house. A man lay on his back on the floor beside a flat-topped desk. Blood discolored his shirt-front, and spread as Custer bent over him. One out-flung hand held a revolver.

His eyes fluttered weakly and his lips moved pitifully. Custer's head dropped lower. "You're Paul Custer? I'm Gaxton. I sent for you because I'd just discovered that Mayor Flanders has been cashing checks made out by Max Bonnell. Phil Wakefield, who's running for election against Flanders, knows nothing about it. But his fiancée, Sue Shirley, does. And she's in danger. I sent you the retainer and asked you to come here because I want you to protect her."

There was a gush of blood from his mouth, and Custer knew Gaxton had told him all that he ever would.

The detective got to his feet. His mind was racing over the facts as he knew them.

GAXTON had been the campaign manager for Phil Wakefield, reform candidate for mayor. Although it was Wakefield's avowed purpose to smash the political machine of his opponent, the present incumbent, Mayor Flanders, Custer knew Wakefield's reputation well enough to know that Wakefield's fight would be absolutely clean, completely devoid of mudslinging.

Wakefield was even Quixotic enough to refuse to use such information as that that Gaxton had just given him, that Mayor Flanders had been receiving sums of money from Max Bonnell, the most notorious racketeer in town. But the fact that Sue

Shirley, Wakefield's fiancée, had the information, and was consequently in danger, put a different light on the whole matter.

Custer's eyes roamed thoughtfully about the library. And then a sound like a gasp caught his ears from the adjoining room. Gun leveled, he brushed aside tapestry hangings and came into the living room.

At the foot of an open stairway lay the huddled figure of a girl. Her skirt had rucked up high above her knees, revealing the shapeliness of glorious legs. Above her stocking tops there was the gleam of ivory flesh.

The bodice of her dress had been ripped as if in a struggle, and through its tatters Custer got a hint of swelling curves that sent hot bloody racing through his veins.

He came nearer and stared at the ugly bruises on her throat. She stirred, and a moan came through parted, crimson lips.

Custer stooped and caught her up in his arms. Her body was warm and vibrant against him. The pulsations of her quivering bosom on his chest quickened his pulses. He started up the staircase with his burden.

At the head of the stairs there was a boudoir whose door was open, and the detective walked in and deposited the girl on the bed. He closed the door behind him, found a phial of smelling salts, and held it under her nostrils.

Her long lashes fluttered, and soft brown eyes opened wide. She sat upright. "Where am I? Who are you?" she gasped.

Custer studied the piquant beauty of her heart-shaped face. "You're in Sam Gaxton's house," he said. Then, suddenly: "What do you know about his murder? I'm a detective." He gave her a fleeting glimpse of his badge.

The girl's mouth opened wide. Fear leaped into her eyes. "Gaxton murdered! And you a detective! I must get away from here!" Silk-sheathed legs slid to the floor and she stood up.

CUSTER caught her arm. "Not so fast. You better tell me what you know before the police get here."

For answer the girl tore herself from Custer's grasp and made a dash for the door.

The detective seized her before she could get through and tossed her bodily back onto the bed. "You don't want to talk!" he grated. He was angry

now. "I haven't all day to fool around with you. I tell you there's murder been done."

He reached for the neckline of her already ruined dress, and ripped. The material came away in his hands in pieces.

The girl's face turned red, and her blush continued down over naked shoulders. If possible, she was more alluring in dainty underthings than she had been before. She tried to cover herself with her hands. "You—you heel!" she cried. Her lips were trembling.

Custer grinned at her. "I did that just to make sure that you won't scam out of here while I go downstairs to call the police." He found a key in the door and locked it as he went out.

He had reached the bottom of the stairs before he heard the sound in the library. It wasn't loud, but it certainly hadn't been made by the corpse. Noiselessly he reached the tapestry hangings that separated the living-room from its neighbor. He drew the hangings back an inch and peeked in.

A man in pajamas and dressing-gown was bent over the desk, taking something from one of the drawers. Custer tossed the curtain aside and took a quick stride into the room. His gun covered the pajama-clad man. "Stand still, and put 'em up!" he commanded. He advanced another couple of steps and jammed his gun viciously into the man's kidneys.

The man turned and spoke through thin, bloodless lips. "I can explain, sir."

Custer said, "Who are you? Start talking!"

"I'm Mr. Gaxton's secretary, sir. I heard shots and came down and found him lying there."

"What were you doing in his desk?"

"Mr. Gaxton had told me that he had had some extremely important papers delivered to him this evening. I wanted to see if they had been stolen—if maybe they had something to do with his being killed."

"Well?"

"The papers were missing. I've been all through the desk."

Custer glanced down and saw that each of the desk drawers had been forced open—not unlocked. "You're lying!" he said. "You weren't supposed to touch anything in that desk!"

He ducked backward as something nicked his shoulder. The man had a paperknife in his hand and was lunging at the detective again.

Custer side-stepped and caught the man's wrist.

He twisted and the paperknife fell to the floor. He twisted harder and the man went down to save a broken bone. Custer fell on top of him. Ruthlessly he brought the barrel of his gun down on the man's skull. The man twitched, and lay motionless.

**H**ANDCUFFING his captive, Custer then reached inside the man's dressing-gown and found the long, flat package in the pajama pocket. Custer transferred it to his own pocket.

His next step was to telephone Police Headquarters. He asked for Lieutenant Quigley, told him that Sam Gaxton had been murdered at his home, that he, Custer, would await the arrival of the police.

While he waited, he examined the room. There was an open window on the side opposite that from which he himself had entered, and there were a couple of fresh blood spots on the sill. That might have meant that Gaxton had wounded his killer.

Custer seated himself in the swivel chair behind the desk, and opened the package he had taken from Gaxton's secretary. It was made up of a sheaf of canceled checks for large amounts. They were drawn by Max Bonnell and endorsed with the mayor's signature, Henry Flanders! This was the discovery of which Gaxton had told him as he lay dying!

Besides the checks there was an envelope addressed to a Sue Shirley. Somehow the name struck a responsive chord in the detective's memory. He opened a newspaper that was lying on the desk. In it were photographs of Phil Wakefield, reform candidate for mayor, and his fiancée, Sue Shirley. Then Custer remembered that Gaxton had told him the girl's name. Evidently the checks had been sent to the girl's apartment in that envelope.

He stared at her photograph. Sue Shirley was the girl he had locked up, half-stripped, upstairs! And he had been hired to protect her from Bonnell's vengeance!

He would have gone up to her if he hadn't heard the shriek of sirens outside. He reached the door before Lieutenant Quigley could ring the bell. The lieutenant was accompanied by the medical examiner and a couple of uniformed men.

Rapidly Custer outlined the bare facts of the case, omitting only any mention of the girl or of Gaxton's dying words or of the package of checks.

Old friendship and mutual trust made Quigley's examination less thorough than it might otherwise

have been. In a few minutes Gaxton's body had been taken out, and the secretary, protesting his innocence of the murder, had been turned over to the uniformed men. Quigley asked Custer, "Have you looked over the house?"

The private detective nodded, praying that his old friend would let it go at that. "Let's get going," Quigley said, in answer to Custer's prayer.

On the street Custer stalled around his own car until the officers from Headquarters had driven off. Then he went back.

This time he took the stairs in leaps to the boudoir where he had left Sue Shirley. She was still there, still on the bed—but she'd had a visitor in his absence.

Custer's knees grew watery and his face went white. The girl's faultlessly modeled body was still lovely to the eye, even though against the white sheen of her skin there was an ugly crimson pattern where blood had flowed down over her bosom from a knife-wound in her throat!

CUSTER went to the open window and cursed himself when he noticed the porch roof outside which would have made access easy for any normally agile man.

He put out the room's only light and sat down in the darkness to try to piece things together. He himself, he knew, was now behind the eight ball for having withheld any mention of her presence to the police.

As he figured it, she must still have been in the house when Gaxton was killed. It was she who had screamed just before Custer had entered. Then his entry must have frightened away the murderer, who had lurked outside, ready at the first opportunity to return and silence his only witness.

In the light of his flash Custer reexamined the package he had taken from the secretary. For the first time it occurred to him to look into the envelope addressed to Sue Shirley. There were two pictures—police photographs—in it. One was of the racketeer, Max Bonnell. The other was a vivid blond girl whom Custer recognized.

Her name, Flo Elwood, was typed on the back of the picture. When Custer had seen her last, she had been in court on a vagrancy charge. For no good reason, he had jotted her name and address in his notebook.

It wasn't much to go on but it was the best Custer had. Somewhere, he reasoned, there must be

a tie-up between Bonnell and the blonde. He wasted no time in getting downstairs and out to his car.

Half an hour later he drew up before a roadhouse dance hall in the outskirts of town. Contrary to his usual custom, he tackled his problem in a round-about way. He was very casual when he paid his admission fee to the dance floor and bought tickets. He sauntered in as if he hadn't a thought in the world but an evening's entertainment.

But although he was carefree in appearance, Custer's eyes were missing nothing. He scanned the hostesses who worked there and saw no one who even remotely resembled Flo Elwood, but he had hardly expected to. He wasn't licked yet.

A few minutes later he was dancing with a tall redhead whose ideas of dancing were decidedly less conventional than his. "Phew!" he said. "It's hot! Can't we find a private booth somewhere and have a few drinks?" He slid a folded bill into the girl's perspiring hand.

The booths were dim and so constructed that it was almost impossible for one passing to see what was going on inside them. Custer seated himself beside the girl on the leather-cushioned bench that ran in a semi-circle around the table. He ordered drinks and at once the girl was sitting on his lap, both bare arms around his neck. Her perfume was cheap but intoxicating.

For preamble, he kissed her, and her mouth clung to his until his bloodstream was like molten lava. It was a struggle for him to make his hands behave and to remember the object of his visit. He slid another bill from his pocket to her hand and almost gasped when she transferred it to her bosom.

"You can do me a big favor, honey," he said. "I'm trying to locate an old girlfriend, Flo Elwood."

The girl eyed him speculatively. "Flo's in the big time now," she said after a pause.

He grinned. "Who's putting up the do-re-mi?"

The girl was very virtuous and obviously piqued. "Say, what's the big idea? What's it to you?"

Custer pulled her closer to him, his hand tingling to the feel of soft feminine flesh. "I'm not going to do any harm to Flo! I want to see her just once. From then on, all my spare time's going to be spent with you!"

The redhead looked doubtful. Finally she said, "Flo's somewhere in the country. I don't know the address. I've talked to her on the phone a couple of times, but the last time I called the phone had been disconnected."

Ruefully Custer produced still another bill. "This is yours if you can remember that number," he said.

The girl's greedy hands snatched at the bill. "Don't tell anybody I told you. Flo's a good kid. The number is Pembroke-6278."

Custer didn't stand on ceremony in getting out of the dive to his car.

**T**HROUGH police and telephone company contacts, he had little difficulty in locating the address that corresponded with the number. It was all of thirty miles out of town that he found the house.

It sat back a couple of hundred yards from the house in a grove of tall trees, and once had evidently been a highly pretentious establishment. Custer parked his car a short distance from the entrance to the driveway and proceeded on foot.

The lower half of the house was completely dark, but light filtered through the foliage of a tree on the second floor. Custer went to the back of the house and patiently tried his selection of skeleton keys on its lock. The job was absurdly easy.

Guiding himself with cautious use of his flashlight, he made his way to the second floor, down a darkened corridor to the door of the room from which he had seen the light. There was no sound within.

Custer drew his gun, and, with that in hand, knocked loudly on the door.

A feminine voice, sounding startled, asked, "Who's there?"

Custer called loudly, "Open the door!"

He heard footsteps come up; then the same voice said, much more quietly, "I can't. I'm locked in!"

Another of the detective's keys made short work of the problem. Revolver poised, he shoved the door suddenly inward.

The girl in the room gasped. She was alone, dressed in pajamas that could never have been intended for public view. But she herself—it was Custer's turn to gasp—was very obviously built to spread light and sunshine in a jaded world! From the top of her blond head to the toes of her bare

feet, she was all shimmering curves, properly spaced. Her bosom was rounded and firm, her waist slender, her hips beautifully feminine, her legs the sort of legs to drive men crazy.

Custer couldn't take it. He forced himself to look away. He noticed the disarranged bed, the bottle and glass on the table, the ashtrays of cigarette stubs, the containers designed for food.

He grinned and showed his badge. "How are you, Flo? What goes on?"

The girl's eyes hardened. "What's it to you? You've got nothing on me!"

The detective still grinned. "You don't think so? Sam Gaxton, Phil Wakefield's campaign manager, was killed tonight. It seems that Gaxton had too much on Mayor Flanders to be permitted to live." He brought out the package that had been in Gaxton's desk. "Somebody wanted very badly to get hold of this."

**O**NE by one he held up the canceled checks. To top off his display, he produced Flo's own picture. "For a reason that you may guess, this photograph was with the checks."

The girl's crimson lips parted. Her eyes were wide.

Custer showed her Bonnell's picture. "And this little number, your boy friend, was represented, too!"

Color drained from the blonde's face. "That stuff was found where the man was murdered?"

Custer nodded. "Also, there was a girl who was killed because she knew too much."

Flo Elwood dropped into a chair. Her lips framed the words: "My God!"

Custer was unrelenting. "You may be sure, sister, that the police are going to want to question you."

Flo leaned toward him, careless how her pajama jacket fell away from the eye-filling curves it was meant to cover. She was very earnest. "But I had nothing to do with it! I've been locked up here for three days! They even took my clothes so I couldn't get away!"

Custer recalled how he'd tried the same trick on Sue Shirley, and he winced. But he collected himself at once. "Who's 'they,' Flo?"

The girl's lips quivered. She made a pathetic figure huddled in the chair. She didn't answer.

Custer went over beside her, slid an arm around her. "You don't have to be afraid to talk to me," he

said. "Why are you locked up here?"

The blonde swallowed nervously. "This place belongs to Mayor Flanders," she said. "I used to pal around with him a lot when he wanted to make whoopee. A few nights ago he brought me out here on a party. The mayor got stewed to the gills. I was taking him back to town when Max Bonnell drifted in. Max got sore."

"What about?"

"Max told the mayor he'd have to stay away from me until after election. That we might be seen together, and it might start a scandal. The mayor blew up. He told Max that he'd do as he damned please. That nobody was going to wet-nurse him. So Max got the mayor outside and poured him into his car. Max had him driven home.

"Then Max took my clothes away, had the phone disconnected, and locked me up. He was afraid I'd show up in town and upset his applecart."

Paul Custer was very thoughtful. "What's the reason that Max Bonnell can tell the mayor where to head in?"

"Because Max can swing a lot of votes. Honest to God, Mister, you don't know how many rackets Max controls! Without the votes he can deliver, the mayor could never be reelected. And naturally Max don't want any reformer muscling in when he's sitting pretty."

Custer stood up. "I think I get the picture. Come on. We're getting out of here." He took the girl's wrist and pulled her to her feet.

"Where we going?"

"Straight to my house," the detective answered. "I'm hiding you out there. You'll be safer there—unless you'd like to go down to Police Headquarters."

"Not the police!" the blonde cried. "I'll go with you. But what'm I going to wear?"

Custer grinned. "Maybe you ought to have something, or my reputation will be no better than the mayor's! Come on; we'll find a coat or something somewhere downstairs."

Suddenly the girl's eyes fixed on a point over Custer's shoulders. Panic leaped into them. A voice from the doorway behind the detective called, "Up with 'em, you stinking dick!"

CUSTER raised both hands and turned around slowly. The ratty little man in the doorway was Max Bonnell! There was a bandage on his left wrist.

"Wise guy, aren't you?" Bonnell snarled. "But not wise enough to know that I own that dancehall joint where you went looking for Flo Elwood!" He spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Get his gun, Flo."

With terror written all over her face, the girl obeyed orders. She passed the gun to Bonnell. The racketeer hadn't finished with her. "Now frisk him for a flat package he's probably got on him."

Wordlessly, the blonde took the canceled checks and the two photographs from Custer's pocket.

Bonnell's eyes lit up viciously. "That's all I wanted! It's curtains for you now, wise guy!" His finger tightened on the trigger of the gun that menaced the detective.

At that moment, Flo, standing at one side, hurled the contents of her glass of liquor. Bonnell stepped backward, cursing, mopping at his eyes, and Custer waded in.

A slug from the racketeer's gun plowed a hole in the ceiling. But there was only that one shot. Physically Bonnell was no match for the detective. A single roundhouse right lifted Bonnell from the floor and almost tore his head off. He fell in a limp heap.

Custer ripped a bed-sheet into strips and bound and gagged the smaller man. He put the checks and pictures back into his pocket, recovered his gun. He smiled at Flo, "Thanks, sister. I won't forget that. You'll get every break I can give you."

He tossed Bonnell over his shoulder and started down the stairs. In the first closet they came to they found a man's overcoat for Flo. They started forward again when there came the sound of squealing brakes in the driveway.

Flo dashed to the nearest window. "It's three of Max's men!" she gasped.

Custer heard heavy footsteps on the veranda. It was the girl's mind that worked fastest then. "Here! Back into the closet!" she whispered. "I can handle them."

With his limp burden Custer crowded into the narrow space. He heard the blonde go back upstairs. Then he heard the men's footsteps pass his closet door and follow. He strained his ears.

"Where's Max?" he heard one of the men ask.

"In there," she replied.

Then the detective heard a door slam and a lock click. Almost at once Flo was down the stairs. "I locked them in. But we'll have to hurry!"

CALLOUSLY Custer dumped his prisoner into the rumble seat of his coupe and closed the lid. He slid behind the wheel as the girl climbed in from the other side. He had his foot on the starter when a second story window in the house went up and there was a flash of flame and the crash of a shot. But it was wild shooting at that distance.

The detective pointed his car toward the city.

Before they had gone a quarter of a mile, there was a glare of reflected light in Custer's windshield. Flo looked back. "They're right behind us!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Regretting that he hadn't dreamed they could break out so quickly, Custer pressed his throttle to the floorboards. Guns cracked behind them. A bullet punched through a fender. But Custer's break came just in time.

A red semaphore glowed ahead of them. There was the screech of an approaching train. The detective took a chance and almost threw his car over the tracks. The train crashed through behind him so closely that it seemed like a matter of inches. But it had cut off the pursuing sedan.

FOR miles there had been no sign of Max's men when Custer turned into the driveway of his own suburban bungalow. He led the girl in through the back way to his den. He patted the girl's shoulder. "After what you did for me back there, I guess I don't need to worry about your waiting for me until I get back. I'm going to take Bonnell down to Headquarters."

He had started for the door when he heard movements in his driveway. He stuck his head out a window and a gun barked at him. He ducked back, but not before he had seen two men carrying Bonnell's trussed figure toward the sedan at the curb in front. Its motor was going. Once more he cursed his own carelessness as he plunged out the front door of his house, gun ready.

He reached the lawn in a hall of shots. And then an answering volley rang out from across the street. Custer saw one of the men carrying Bonnell go down. And he recognized the new element in the picture as Lieutenant Quigley and a squad of his men.

Bonnell's men threw down their guns and raised their hands.

Quigley came up to Custer. "What kind of party

are you throwing now?" he demanded. Then for the first time he recognized Bonnell. "What goes on?"

Quickly Custer explained his capture of the little racketeer, and the attempted rescue.

Lieutenant Quigley scratched his head. "I'd come out here to see if you knew anything about a package of canceled checks that were supposed to have been in Gaxton's desk when I ran into the shooting. You see, that secretary that you cracked down on spilled his guts when we got him to Headquarters.

"He was on Bonnell's payroll and he'd tipped Bonnell off that Gaxton had some documents he was going to use in the campaign against Mayor Flanders. Bonnell came after them, shot Gaxton, and then was scared away before he could get what he wanted. The secretary says that Gaxton winged Max, but it couldn't have been very serious.

"We went back to Gaxton's house and found a dead girl upstairs. We figured she'd seen Bonnell kill Gaxton, and was herself stabbed to silence her. But—about those checks?"

Grinning, Custer gave him the package.

"Where'd you get it?" the lieutenant asked.

CUSTER lied cheerfully. "I found it on the lawn after you'd gone."

Quigley scowled. "I think you lie," he said. "But it's all worked out this time. Some time you're going to learn to cooperate with the police or I'm personally going to see you locked up!"

The policemen left a grinning Custer. He went back into the house. "I heard what you said to the police. And you gave them my picture!" Flo Elwood said reproachfully. "You said you'd give me a break!"

Custer drew a photograph from a side pocket. "I held this out," he said. "It's a lousy likeness, anyway!" He tore it to fine pieces.

Flo almost leaped at him, her face wreathed in smiles. She threw both arms around his neck, and her full lips were parted when she fairly smothered him with her kiss. Custer could feel the beat of her heart as if it were his own, so closely was she strained against him.

"Of course," he said, "now that you're washed up with the rackets, I assume you're going to be a good girl—but not too good!"