

# Assignment to Hell

*A G-Man Mixes  
Printer's Type  
with Gun Lead*



*By Frank Gruber*

*It was a clever setup—Handsome Danny Needham, gangster supreme, using a little old tin-lizzie for his bank raids. It was clever, too, the way that tin-lizzie could vanish into thin air. But G-man Smith was banking on the chance that the robber-baron was so clever he'd give himself away....*

ELMHURST, IOWA, baked under a stifling sun. The townfolk had retreated to the shelter of their homes and business places, and Main Street was deserted except for a car or two that rolled listlessly along the street.

Tom Bedford, publisher of the *Elmhurst Clarion*, his shirt sticking to his back, turned to the big plate-glass window which faced the street, pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and mopped his perspiring forehead. At that moment the roar of a heavy-calibred pistol shattered the oppressive heaviness of the quiet street.

The pistol report had scarcely started to echo across the street when another gun blasted, then another and another. The town came to sudden life; a high-powered automobile motor roared up the street, a woman screamed and a man yelled at the top of his lungs. Glass shattered.

The handkerchief dropped from Tom Bedford's hand. For a moment he stood; crouched and flatfooted. Then he bounded around his desk and in two great leaps had caught up a double-barreled shotgun that stood in the corner of the little newspaper office.

"Bank holdup!" he cried, to the lean young man who was just springing up from behind the second desk in the office.

Bedford lunged for the screen door, crashed into it with his big shoulders and almost fell down the three concrete steps to the sidewalk. The young man, the reporter on the *Clarion*, hit the screen door as it rebounded and spilled out to the sidewalk after his employer.

A little flivver, seemingly vitalized by the devil itself, hurtled toward the newspaper office, Bedford said, "Ha!" and brought the shotgun to his shoulder. It spat fire and thunder.

The terrifically speeding flivver was less than fifty feet away when Bedford fired, and retaliation was instant. An ugly snout was

shoved over the side of the car and began to spew fire, lead, and hell. Chips of brick from the building behind Bedford and his reporter flew like hailstones. The plate-glass window tinkled and crashed.

The shotgun in Bedford's hands roared again. More slugs chattered from the machine gun, of the speeding car. Bedford yelled and threw himself flat on the sidewalk.

The machine gun stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The speeding flivver was past the newspaper office, roaring up the street in excess of sixty miles an hour, an amazing speed for such an old, dilapidated car.

Bedford climbed to his feet and shook the shotgun in the direction of the disappearing car. "Damn you!" he swore loudly.

"Handsome Danny Needham!" It was the reporter who spoke. He, strangely, had not thrown himself to the sidewalk when the machine gun was in action. Bedford, looking at him now, was surprised that this young man should be so unruffled by the thing he had just witnessed. The only sign of excitement the reporter showed was in his eyes, which were brighter than usual, and his chin, which was thrust out a bit more than ordinarily.

Cars began roaring past, on the trail of the fleeing flivver. People spewed from the buildings all around. In ten seconds a hundred people were running and milling around in the block between the newspaper office and the next one where the first shooting had started.

"Bank holdup!" was the cry. "Handsome Danny Needham!" Thus verifying both Bedford's and his reporter's guesses.

A crowd was gathering around the newspapermen. "Damn!" Bedford abused himself. "The champion trap-shooter of Cedar Valley—and with two shots I score two complete misses, at fifty feet. Bah!"

"Lucky you didn't break the windows of the furniture store across the street," suggested the reporter at Bedford's elbow. "You were aiming, right at them when you

fired that second shot.”

Bedford turned on his reporter, his eyes shining. “Smith! Hey! This is press day. We close in a half hour. Quick, inside, have Gliffe tear out the whole front page. Get at that typewriter. This is the best story of the year. Start it: ‘Bank held up. Bandits make getaway under fire.’ I’ll get the details and give them to you as you write. Hop to it!”

Smith’s eyes lit up. “I gotcha, boss.” He whirled and dashed into the office. He bounced down into his swivel chair, ripped out a sheet of paper from his typewriter, hurled it to the floor, and, with quick, practiced fingers, rolled a brand-new sheet into the machine.

His fingers began flying over the keys; they clicked and clattered.

**P**RESS day! Let the townsfolk gab about the big event outside. Walter Smith was the reporter of the *Elmhurst Clarion*. He wrote the news.

He worked furiously. Doors banged, people dashed in and out of the office. Tom Bedford’s voice boomed as he swore and stormed from office to press-room and out to the street. He shouted commands at Smith, gave him details of the bank robbery as he received them from people outside. A thing like this happened only once in the lifetime of a weekly newspaper publisher. The biggest story of the year, breaking on Thursday afternoon, press day, right in front of the newspaper office; and the publisher playing an important part in it. That was news!

Tom Bedford tore a sheet of copy from Smith’s typewriter, dashed into the press-room. Smith inserted another sheet, tapped the typewriter keys furiously. Five minutes later Bedford tore it from his machine. Then another sheet, and it was finished.

Smith’s weary arms dropped to his sides. He leaned back in his chair and was conscious again of the stifling heat that, in the fever of composition, he had forgotten. He

extracted a limp package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and damp packet of matches. They refused to light. He picked up a lighter from his desk and flicked it into flame. He was applying it to the cigarette, when Bedford came into the office.

“It’s done!” he cried. “Be on the streets in ten minutes. An extra!” Smith looked different now. Before, he had been the newspaper reporter, forgetting all else in the heat of writing a story. He had been young, alert, vibrant with life. Now, strangely, he looked older. There were stronger lines in his lean face, and the jaw seemed to stand out more prominently. Where he had looked scarcely twenty-five before, he now looked thirty.

“You’re pretty sure it was Handsome Danny Needham?” he asked carelessly.

Bedford nodded vigorously. “Sure. They didn’t wear masks. Jeff Miller and a couple of the boys at the bank recognized Danny from his pictures. They’ve seen them often enough. But even if they hadn’t recognized them, that getaway car was a giveaway. It’s figured in almost all their escapes. A little old flivver, looking like fifty others in any town they hit. But scooting off at eighty miles an hour. You saw them shooting by here.”

“I guess you’re right,” agreed Smith. “You certainly had a narrow escape when they opened with that Tommy-gun.”

“Brrr!” Bedford shuddered. “Don’t I know it? I was a fool to run outside with that shotgun. Just a miracle that guy with the gun didn’t cut me to pieces—and my plate glass window.”

“Fifty bucks will buy you a new one,” said Smith. “But what about the twelve thousand they got from the bank?”

“That’s covered by insurance—for which I’m damn’ glad.”

Smith looked curiously at his employer. “You’re president of the bank, aren’t you?”

Bedford shrugged, and it seemed to Smith that his lips drooped. "I own about forty-five per cent of the stock. President of the Elmhurst State Bank, that's me." He laughed shortly.

Smith began picking at his fingernails with a nail file. "You don't sound very enthusiastic about it. I imagine I'd be if I were president of a bank."

Bedford looked at Smith. "Maybe you wouldn't be, Walter. I'm thirty-five years old. I own half the bank, this newspaper, the furniture store across the street, the hay, grain and feed business up by the railroad, the Bon Ton Restaurant, the Elmhurst Hotel and a few other odds and ends. I'm the richest man in town—in the county, in fact. When I came to this town ten years ago I didn't have a dime. That's what enterprise has done for me. I showed these hay-shakers a few things about business."

Smith forgot his nails. "If you own all those businesses, why do you devote practically all your time to the newspaper. You probably don't make as much off this in a year as you do, say, off the hotel."

Bedford chuckled. "Smart boy. You're right. I make very little off the paper—but—because of it I am able to make money from the other businesses. A small-town paper is a powerful weapon. It makes public opinion, controls the politics. The paper is my most important asset. I can employ some one to run the bank and the other things, but I prefer to run the paper myself."

Smith nodded. He rose to his feet. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'd like to file the news at the telegraph office for the Des Moines paper. I've been picking up a bit of change corresponding for the Register."

"Okay, Walter," Bedford said. "I like to see a young fellow with some initiative."

**S**MITH left the newspaper office. Outside she regarded the shattered plate glass window, and shook his head. He continued up

the street to the railroad depot a block away.

There he picked up a pad of telegram blanks, bit his lip for a moment, then wrote a brief message. But it wasn't addressed to the *Des Moines Register*, and nothing was said in the message about a holdup. It read simply:

PETER SMITH

343 Keosauqua

Des Moines

Uncle stopped over today.

WALTER SMITH

He shoved the telegram to the station agent, who scanned it.

"Forty-five cents," he said. "Didn't know you had relatives in Des Moines. I got a cousin—"

"My brother." Smith cut in. "I run down and see him now and then."

He paid the fee for the telegram, waved a hand at the station agent and departed before the man could impart to him confidences pertaining to his cousin. There were many things on Walter Smith's mind. His brother, "Peter" for example. Peter had a different name in Washington.

There he was listed on the records of the Department of Justice as Sanderson, and right below the name was the one of Walter Smith. A month ago Walter Smith had received his order from the head of the department:

"The Needham gang must be smashed! Since Needham made his break from the Indiana penitentiary, he and his gang have held up more than sixty banks in Iowa. He's been identified on several occasions. I'm sure his hideout is somewhere in Iowa. All the banks the gang has held up have been within a hundred-mile circle. Somewhere inside that circle is their hideout. We haven't been able to find it, but we've traced some of the hot money. It originates in the neighborhood of a town called Elmhurst, population three thousand. I've a hunch that the hideout is

somewhere near that town. Go there, report to Sanderson in Des Moines. That's all."

Before he had joined the Department of Justice, Walter Smith had been a newspaper man. He wanted a legitimate reason for being in Elmhurst so he could work without being suspected by anyone. By a strange coincidence—and the exchange of a hundred dollars—the boomer reporter who worked on the *Clarion* decided to try greener fields on the same day that Smith arrived in Elmhurst. Smith applied for the job and was taken on.

He had worked for the *Clarion* one month at the time of the holdup of the local bank. His job was an ideal one for his purposes. He was out on the street constantly, talked to everyone under the guise of getting local items. He learned some interesting things about townfolk, but after a month he was as much in the dark concerning the whereabouts of Handsome Danny Needham and his gang as when he had first come to Elmhurst. Handsome Danny's career of crime continued meanwhile. He held up banks right and left. One day he would strike in Keosauqua County; the next day, a hundred miles north in Butler County. Sheriffs and local law officers set traps for Handsome Danny. He sprung a couple of the traps, but slipped out of them with such ease that law officers were chagrined.

After he filed the telegram at the railroad station Smith returned to the newspaper office and found it deserted. On Bedford's desk was a stack of newspapers, still damp. He picked one up, scanned the headlines:

NEEDHAM GANG HOLDS UP  
ELMHURST BANK.

He started to read the account he had written himself, when a box in the center of the page caught his eye, and he gasped aloud. He had not written this item. It read:

WHERE WILL HE STRIKE NEXT?

Handsome Danny Needham has, during the past four months, held up an average of two banks a week. He has jumped from county to county. No one knows where he will strike next. It may be up in Waterford or down in Mitchell. No one knows.

IT was nine-thirty the morning of Thursday, one week after Handsome Danny Needham had sacked the Elmhurst State Bank. Walter Smith, of the Department of Justice, sat in a car on the main street of Mitchell, Iowa, which was some fifty-odd miles from Elmhurst. The car was rather dilapidated, but under its hood was an engine capable of doing ninety miles an hour. It was patterned after the car he had seen hurtling past the office of the *Clarion* a week ago.

Up the street, two blocks from the Mitchell Bank, stood another car. In it sat Special Agent Maxton. South of town, in a cornfield, at the edge of the road, was Agent Cooper and his motorcycle.

Smith got out of his car now and then, stepped into neighboring stores and made small purchases. He dawdled over them, then returned to his car and read a magazine. Ostensibly he was a farmer waiting for his wife who was shopping in the stores. Now and then, he warmed the motor of the car.

Always he watched the bank in the next block. Cars stopped before it, a dozen or more flivvers of the same general vintage as THE CAR. Smith saw too, a burly, blue-uniformed figure sauntering casually in the next block, now and then chatting with townspeople.

Smith was playing hookey from his job in Elmhurst. This was press day, and he was committing a cardinal sin for a weekly newspaper man, being A.W.O.L. from the job on press day. Bedford would probably fire him when he returned. But if the plan today was successful, Smith wouldn't want to return to the job.

Smith watched the policeman in the next block. At eleven-thirty he left the bank block and came toward Smith's car. Smith started to read his magazine. The policeman passed him with a mere glance, turned right at the next corner. Smith put away his magazine. The cop had evidently gone home to lunch. Things could be expected to happen. Smith was sure it wasn't a coincidence that Handsome Danny struck when local policemen were off duty. Some one "cased" these jobs for Handsome Danny.

Five minutes passed. Smith watched the cars stopping near the bank. He could distinguish nothing from them.

Ten minutes. Smith stepped on the starter of his car to warm the motor.

Then hell exploded in the next block. A machine-gun began to chatter like a giant riveting machine; screams of men and women split the air. The Tommy-gun roared continuously for ten seconds, stopped a moment, then roared again. Now and then its roar was punctuated by sharper, cleaner reports.

Smith roared his motor to life, began backing away from the curb. The gun up the street stopped chattering and a motor roared. Smith got his car out beyond the line of parked cars—and then a little flivver, motor roaring, fairly skimmed over the cobblestones and passed him.

Smith hunched low over the wheel, slipped the car into gear and stepped on the gas. The car leaped forward. The bandit flivver by this time was a block away and picking up speed. A mile ahead of it, in a cornfield, was Agent Cooper. Smith hoped that Cooper would obey orders, not try to mix with the gang, but merely try to trail them to their hideout.

Now Smith's car was hitting sixty; seventy in the next block. He was gaining on the car ahead. Behind him he heard the screaming of a siren. The town was sending up the alarm. In a few minutes the roads

would be swarming with police officers, vigilantes. The G-man on the other side of town was no doubt pounding along in the rear. But, right now, all that stood between the bandits and Smith was a lone man with a motorcycle.

Handsome Danny Needham had one foot in a trap. Would the trap hold—or would Needham slip it?

Eighty miles an hour, and Danny saw the curving road at the edge of town. The bandit car, three hundred yards ahead would have to slow down a bit to take that curve.

Smoke began to puff from the rear of the bandit car. The wind-shield in front of Smith shattered to pieces. Slugs struck the hood of the car. A bullet in a tire, and he would be finished. Smith let his foot up from the gas a bit.

Then he saw Cooper up ahead. The G-man was on his motorcycle and had his gun in his hand; he was prepared to fight the bandits. Damn' fool!

SMITH stepped on the gas again, jammed the pedal down to the floor. He heard the Tommy-gun chatter ahead, saw Cooper's motorcycle jump from the road and hurtle into the ditch. Smith almost cried aloud. Well, now it was up to him alone. The trap had failed.

The pavement ahead suddenly lifted straight up into the air. A terrific detonation shook the road. Smith gasped and jerked his foot from the throttle. He knew instantly what had happened. The bandits had thrown a hand grenade into the road behind their car. Smith was so close behind, and coming so fast, that he knew it would be a miracle if he could stop the car before it hit the broken pavement.

He clutched the wheel wildly and set himself for the shock. The car hurtled forward. He'd released his foot from the gas, but he couldn't put on the brakes at the speed he was going. That would surely upset the car.

The broken concrete flashed nearer, and then, at the last instant, Smith saw that the

shoulder of the road was fairly wide. He jerked the car to the right. He hit bits of concrete, lumps of dirt. The car dipped into the ditch, and Smith jerked wildly to the left. The car leaped out of the ditch, hurtled crosswise across the rough pavement and nosed into the ditch on the other side. The engine went dead.

Not even knowing whether his tires were still all intact, or whether the car would be able to get out of the ditch, Smith jammed his foot on the starter. Ah, the motor caught. He put the gear-shift into reverse and stepped on the accelerator. The motor roared, and the wheels churned round and round, but didn't grip. He cursed and reversed, shot forward a few inches. Into reverse— Ah, the wheel took hold. In an instant he was out of the ditch and on the road again.

Precious seconds had been lost. The bandit car was out of sight around the curve. But in a few moments Smith would be around it, then there was a long, straight stretch.

Smith took the curve at sixty miles an hour. Before him the road lay like a wide, gray ribbon. Smith's mouth dropped suddenly open. The flivver was gone. All that was on the road was a huge truck coming toward Mitchell. Was there another curve ahead? Had the bandit car already made it at its terrific speed? Or had it turned off on a side road?

Smith stepped on the gas pedal and cursed luridly. The truck lumbered toward him. Smith wondered for a moment whether it were best to stop and query the truck driver. But he would lose a two full minutes by that— more than two miles at the speed the bandit car had been going. The truck was a huge, ten-ton stake truck, loaded high with baled hay.

Smith decided against stopping and swung past the truck without losing speed. A quarter mile beyond he topped a slight knoll, and then his last hopes sank. The highway stretched straight for at least three miles, and there wasn't a single car on it. The bandits must have turned off on a side road. There

was woods here, and it needn't have turned off very far for Smith to have missed it.

He stopped his car and turned around. Before he could start back, another car, coming from Mitchell, hurtled toward him. Smith waved to it and the car stopped. G-man Maxon leaped out.

"Lose you?" he cried.

Smith nodded. "Yes, they threw a grenade on the pavement and almost spilled me. By the time I got around, they must have scooted down a side road. There's a dirt road back a ways. I'm going to shoot up the right side of it for a mile or so and ask at some farmhouses. You take the left side. If you learn that a car passed, continue after it and leave word at a farmhouse. I'll be on your trail not less than ten minutes later. Good luck."

Maxon ran back to his car. A couple of hundred yards back Smith shot off the road to a narrow graveled turnpike. He had to throttle down his speed to less than forty miles an hour to hold the road. A quarter of a mile from the paved highway he came to a farmhouse. A middle aged man was cutting weeds beside the road.

"See a car pass here a few minutes ago?" Smith yelled.

The man shook his head. "Ain't seen no one pass for more'n a couple of hours."

Smith's spirits plunged. "Are you sure?"

"I been workin' here since breakfast time," the farmer assured him.

Smith let in the clutch again, stepped on the gas. He couldn't take any chances. A half mile beyond he came to another house. A boy in his teens was whittling a stick in front of the house. To him, Smith repeated his question: "See a car pass here a little while ago?"

"No, mister," replied the boy. "Ain't seen none all morning."

Smith cursed softly as he turned his car with difficulty in the narrow road. Needham had sprung the trap and slipped out of it.

At the concrete pavement he met Maxon, also just returning from a useless quest.

“But where could the car have gone?” cried Smith, “It couldn’t have disappeared from sight down that straight stretch of road in the few minutes I lost sight of it.”

“Maybe these farmers on these side roads are in cahoots with the gang and lied to us.”

Smith shook his head. “That seems almost impossible. They’ve made these strange getaways from other towns. They can’t have farmers in cahoots with them all over the state. There’s only one other explanation possible—I wonder....”

Suddenly he started. “Cooper! I almost forgot. He was hurt.”

A DOZEN cars had already gathered at the spot where Cooper had been shot by the fleeing bandits, but Cooper had already been removed. Inquiry produced the information that the G-man was only slightly injured. A bullet in the left arm and some bad bruises from his fall. He was in the local hospital receiving first aid treatment. Smith wasted no time at the scene of the accident. He did not want to reveal his true identity. It would mean delay, criticism and perhaps argument. He had to make a report to the Des Moines division, and that would be difficult enough.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon when the truant reporter entered the *Clarion* office. Tom Bedford, sleeves rolled up and looking harried, cursed him.

“Where the hell you been? Don’t you know this is press day?”

Smith winced. “I’m terribly sorry. I ran over to Waterford last night and got tanked.”

Bedford leaned back in his chair. “I’ll be damned. I just got rid of one souse reporter last month, and here I’ve got another. Well, lemme tell you something—” He stopped suddenly and snorted in disgust. “What the

hell! You’re all alike. Get at that typewriter and get busy. But I warn you, if you get drunk on press day again—”

Smith grinned. “Oke, chief. I’ll do my drinking on Fridays hereafter.” He stripped off his coat, threw it on a desk. Then he stopped. “That’s funny,” he said. “Hay in a newspaper office.”

Bedford looked across his desk, saw Smith staring down at a small wisp of hay on the floor.

“What’s so funny about it? You know I own a hay business along with a lot of other crazy businesses. One of my men was just in here.”

Bedford and Smith got the paper to bed at seven o’clock, only a couple of hours late. Smith returned to his hotel then, washed up and had dinner across the street in the Bon Ton Restaurant—another Bedford-owned enterprise. While he ate, his mind worried over the puzzle of the vanishing-flivver—and Tom Bedford. Bedford owned half of Elmhurst, had more than two hundred people working for him in his various enterprises. He probably didn’t know half of them personally; certainly he couldn’t investigate every man employed by his various managers.

Smith arose from his chair and sauntered outside. At the garage in the next block he rented a car for the evening. He climbed into it and drove up the street. The Elmhurst Hay, Grain & Feed Business was located beside the railroad tracks.

Smith parked his car in front of the office. There was a large yard beside the office. He peeped in and saw a couple of ten-ton trucks parked in it. A watchman came out of the yard.

“Hello there,” Smith greeted him. “I’m Walter Smith. Work for Bedford.”

“So do I. You’ll be the newspaperman,” replied the watchman. “What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Bedford asked me to check up for him. All his trucks here now?”

“O’ course not,” replied the watchman. “Only two in the yard. Two are upstate somewhere buying hay, and the fifth’s out on the farm. Bedford knows about it.”

So Bedford owned five of these trucks, and they were accustomed to traveling all over the state. That gave the truck near Mitchell a legitimate reason for being in that section—but it was still a coincidence that Smith should run into it there. A truck on “the farm”; that was something new. Smith hadn’t known that Bedford owned a farm. But it wasn’t surprising. He owned almost everything else.

“That’s right,” he agreed with the watchman. “Say, he told me to run out to his farm with some orders for the manager. I haven’t been out there before, and I’m a bit mixed up in my directions.”

The man stepped out to the sidewalk. “Go straight up this road to the first fork going left. Take it and continue about a half mile, then turn right on the graveled pike. ’Bout a quarter mile on it—then you can see it.”

**S**MITH climbed into the car again. It would be dark in a half hour or so, and he wanted to get a glimpse of Bedford’s farm while it was still light.

He had no difficulty in following the watchman’s directions, but he was surprised to discover that Bedford’s farm was in a rather remote section. He passed only one other farm-house until he came to the Bedford farm, and he saw then that the buildings were almost a quarter-mile from the road. He stopped the car before a lane leading in to the buildings.

“Lookin’ for something?”

Smith started. A man had stepped out from behind a clump of trees. He was holding a double-barreled shotgun. Smith carried a .25 caliber automatic strapped around the calf of his right leg. The bigger gun he’d carried that afternoon was in the bottom of his trunk at the hotel.

“This the Bedford farm?” he stalled.

The man with the shotgun spat out a

stream of tobacco juice. “It shore is. Who are you?”

“I’m Walter Smith. Work on Bedford’s newspaper.”

“Yeah? I s’pose you got some instructions from Bedford for Hank Barnes. Well, go on right up to the house.”

Smith didn’t want to see Barnes, but the man stepped on the running-board, holding his shotgun in the hand that he held away from the car. Smith cursed inwardly and started for the farm-house. He’d have to do some bluffing and stalling.

Then as he approached the farmhouse Smith saw something that interested him; a big hay truck standing inside the barn, with the doors wide open. Why drive the hay truck inside the barn on a hot summer’s night? Smith stopped the car and climbed out. The man with the shotgun dropped off the running-board and yelled. “Oh, Hank, some one to see you.”

A man inside the house came to the screen door, but did not open it. Smith could see the vague outline through the screen, but could not recognize the man.

“Whaddya want?” came the brusque query.

“Mr. Bedford sent me out to ask if you got back all right with the hay?”

There was a slight pause, and a chill ran up Smith’s spine. He had a hunch that he’d guessed the wrong thing to say. But then Barnes answered: “Yeah, we got it all right, and I got something here for Mr. Bedford. C’mon in and get it.”

Smith climbed up to the veranda. The screen door opened—and Smith looked into the black muzzle of a huge .45 automatic. “C’mon right in. Mr. Smith,” snarled the man behind the gun. He backed away, giving Smith room to enter.

Smith walked forward, and then his eyes lifted from the gun to the bearer’s face. His heart seemed to turn a complete somersault—Mr. Hank Barnes was none other

than Handsome Danny Needham. Smith had never met him in person before, but he'd looked at that face so often on reward notices and prison photographs that he knew it almost as well as his own face. Well, this was the end of the trail.

Then he looked behind Barnes and saw—Tom Bedford himself!

No wonder they'd been suspicious of him. He'd told the man on the road that he had a message for Barnes, had told Barnes a minute ago that Bedford had sent him out here—and here was Bedford himself.

**F**OOTSTEPS sounded behind Smith; rough hands felt his clothing. Smith held his breath. Ah, the hands missed the automatic strapped around his calf.

Bedford stepped forward, his eyes snapping. "You've been snooping too much, Smith."

"A reporter's habit," said Smith.

"You're the guy who almost sprang that trap on us near Mitchell today," snarled Handsome Danny Needham. "You're a damned G-man!"

Bedford growled: "And you told me you were on a binge over in Waterford. Well, you were a good reporter, but as a copper you've been a washout. You made too many mistakes."

"I dunno about that," said Smith, drily. "You made too many mistakes yourself. Last week when you fired those blank shotgun shells, for instance."

"I wondered about that," said Bedford. "When you kept repeating how lucky I was in not shooting out the windows of the store across the street."

"And the hay in the office this afternoon," said Smith. "And advertising your next holdup on the paper. Your newspaper blood was too much for you. You couldn't resist the temptation to predict the news."

Bedford's eyes glinted. "Ah, you guessed from that."

"Of course," said Smith. "I'd worked for you a month. You made two similar predictions. No one paid any attention to last week's news, but I did. The hay truck was a good stunt though—but too perfect. A flivver can't vanish into thin air, so it had to be in the hay truck. Danny held up a bank, scooted out of town to where the truck was planted with the tailboard let down. It was simple for Danny to run the flivver up into the truck, slam up the tailboard and stack three or four bales of hay in back to conceal the flivver. Sixty seconds was enough for the disappearing act."

Bedford's lips, were thin. "You figured it all out, didn't you?"

"Not quite," replied Smith. "I don't know how you got lined up with Danny."

Bedford laughed shortly. "You may as well know that too. Well, I arranged Danny's break from the Indiana jail. Danny's really a native of Elmhurst. His real name is Powers. He ran away from home as a kid, changed his name to Needham. I went through the Indiana Penitentiary with some newspaper men a couple of years ago and recognized him."

"And your small-town empire was toppling, because of financial difficulties, so you got Danny out of jail, planned his jobs and split the swag—which you used to bolster up your business here?"

"T'hell with all this!" snarled Handsome Danny Needham. "Bedford, let's get this over with. I'm honin' to clear out."

"What!" Bedford was really shaken. "You're goin' to light out?"

"What the hell!" exclaimed Danny. "How do I know this G-man didn't tip off some one? There's a hot seat waiting for me somewhere, and I ain't anxious to sit in it, so I'm playin' safe. We bump him off, and I clear out."

"But what about me?" exclaimed Bedford. "I can't clear out. My money is tied up."

"That's right," agreed Handsome

Danny. "It wouldn't be safe for you—or for me to leave you here."

For a moment Bedford didn't grasp the significance of Needham's words, but then he suddenly gasped: "You—you wouldn't!"

Handsome Danny's eyes were cold as a snake's. "Money doesn't mean a damn thing to me, Bedford. Nothing does—except my life. I can't take any chances with that."

Smith's spine tingled. In one moment hell would break loose here in this room. Handsome Danny Needham had three henchmen, every one of them armed. On Smith's side there was only himself—and Bedford. Smith had a tiny .25 calibre seven-shot automatic. A mere pea-shooter.

He saw Bedford's face working. "You can't kill me, Danny," he pleaded. "I won't—" In the middle of the sentence he whipped out his gun. The move caught the gangsters by surprise. They leaped back wildly and clawed for their own guns.

Smith threw himself to the floor and jerked at his trouser-leg. The gangsters, believing him unarmed, were concentrating on Bedford, and the publisher received the full brunt of the initial attack. Guns exploded, and Bedford cried out in anguish.

Then Smith began shooting, the little gun making spiteful cracks that punctuated the reports of the bigger guns. Handsome Danny was in the fight with two guns. Bedford across

the room, was down on his knees, firing his gun mechanically.

A slug almost lifted Smith from his feet, hurled him back on his knees. His left shoulder went completely numb. A body tripped, fell on him. He jammed the little automatic against the body, squeezed the trigger. The body went heavily limp. Smith shoved it off him, clawed frantically at a big gun that lay in loose fingers. He dropped his little pea-shooter, began firing with the big gun.

Something exploded in his head; he was sightless for the moment, but continued to pull the trigger instinctively. Fire seared along his ribs, and that returned his vision. A blurred figure staggered into focus. Smith fired the gun at it.

Then suddenly there was no more firing. Smith wiped the back of his left hand across his sticky face and looked around. Bodies lay all around the room, limp, huddled. One was crouched on hands and knees. Smith, looking hard, recognized a face with part of the jaw shot away. Tom Bedford. Pain-stricken eyes looked into Smith's.

Compassion swept over Smith. "You made up for it, Bedford," he said softly.

Bedford's tortured eyes widened for an instant, then the head fell forward, and the body collapsed to the floor. He was dead.