

Freighted For Hell



by William Benton Johnston

Ex-Marine Kennedy of the F. B. I. had only one way to get his man in those somber Tennessee mountains, and that was to beat the moonshiners at their own wiles. But Kennedy knew nothing of the mountains or the shrewd, taciturn men who peopled them.

IT was mid-afternoon, yet the looming Tennessee hills, where moonshiners had plied their illicit trade for generations, cast long shadows on the streets of the little town of Bolivar.

"Marine" Kennedy, F. B. I. ace, and his assistant, Jimmy Coleman, stood on a corner of Main Street, talking to Sheriff Malley.

"Yeah," the sheriff told Kennedy in answer to the G-man's questions, "I've noticed that truck come down out of the hills and head toward the city, two or three times every week."

"And did you notice," Kennedy asked, "that when it returns, the logs are still on it?"

"By Golly," Sheriff Malley agreed, "since you mention it, that fellow *does* haul

the logs back. Now, what the heck would a guy haul logs *away* from the city for? He left early this morning and usually gets back about this time. Look, here he comes now."

A short, wheel-base truck, with three huge oak logs loaded on a regulation logging trailer, stopped at the intersection.

"Come on," Kennedy said quietly, "let's get that driver; Jimmy and I want to have a little talk with him."

They crossed the street and Kennedy yanked the truck door open.

"Pull over to the curb," he told the driver. "We want to take a look at this outfit and ask you a few questions."

"Go to hell with yuh," the fellow growled, "I'm hauling logs, not answering questions."

Kennedy flashed his shield. "Department of Justice agent," he explained and turned to the sheriff: "Arrest this man, Mr. Malley, I—"

A shot crashed like thunder out of the blue sky. Sheriff Malley staggered back and fell, face downward. Another shot and Jimmy Coleman gasped, coughed and crumpled up, blood gushing from his mouth.

Kennedy threw a quick glance about him even as he unholstered his automatic. The truck driver, both hands on the steering wheel, had not moved. Crowds passing along the street stopped and stared stupidly, but there was no evidence of a gun in sight.

Another pistol blast, and Kennedy felt a bullet rip through his coat and sear his forearm. Instinctively he dropped to the ground and rolled behind a parked car. Another bullet slashed the asphalt an inch from his head and splattered against the wall of a nearby building. Kennedy jerked his head to shelter, more puzzled than frightened, for even his trained eyes had not been able to spot the hidden gunman.

The truck started with a sudden lurch and roared down the highway leading to the dark and silent hills.

THERE was a stunned moment of inactivity before Kennedy leaped up and ran to where Jimmy Coleman lay. One glance, and the G-man stood erect, fury blazing in his eyes.

"Dead," he muttered. "Somebody will pay for this."

He was making a hasty examination of the wounded sheriff when a deputy ran up and introduced himself.

Kennedy turned to a bystander.

"Get an ambulance for Sheriff Malley," he snapped, and to the deputy: "Quick, a car; we've got to catch that truck."

"This coupe right here," the deputy told him, "let's get going."

When they straightened out on the highway, the truck had disappeared in the distance.

"He's heading for the hills," the deputy explained. "I know the route. What happened?"

"My partner and I came to Memphis," Kennedy explained, "to question Bill Correll in connection with the Bailey case. We found Correll to be a liquor dealer, handling moonshine stuff out of the hills, but police couldn't put a finger on him. He was glimpsed once in a while and his work was going right along, but Correll couldn't be definitely located.

"Jimmy and I watched his place and saw this log truck hanging around, loaded going and coming. We caught its Hardeman county license and came to Bolivar to talk to the sheriff about it. Then the truck showed up, and we stopped it. You know the rest: some hidden gunman opened up on us, killed poor Jimmy, dropped the sheriff and nipped me."

They topped a hill and saw the truck, its trailer of logs pitching and swaying with the terrific speed, just ahead. Then the driver swung off the highway into a side road.

"He's taking Silerton Lane," the deputy said, "it's a narrow, winding road to

the mountains.”

“Look.” Kennedy pointed his finger. “There’s a man crawling over the logs toward the cab. It looks like Correll. It is Correll. That’s Bill Correll sure as shooting.”

“But there was only one man in the truck. Correll couldn’t hide under three big logs. Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know,” Kennedy admitted tersely. “Step on it.”

Closer and closer they came to the speeding truck. Kennedy threw two shots at the cab as it disappeared over a hill. A minute later the deputy’s car topped the incline.

“Look out,” Kennedy yelled.

Bill Correll clung to the chassis of the truck and had cut the trailer loose. It swayed dangerously, almost tipped over, then came to a stop in the middle of the narrow road. The deputy snatched at his hand brake, skidded and crashed into the back of the trailer. The truck whipped around a curve, shot over the next grade and disappeared.

Kennedy and the deputy leaped from the coupe.

“Hurt?” the G-man asked.

“No, just jarred a bit.”

The car was damaged little: a headlight smashed and one fender crumpled. But the road was narrow, and the deserted trailer completely blocked the way. The coupe could not be driven around it, and the G-man and deputy discovered that the load of logs was far too heavy to move.

Kennedy began to examine the trailer.

“Something screwy about this load of logs; let’s have a look.”

He rapped on the nearest one with his pistol butt, and it echoed hollowly. Quickly he ran his hand over the rough bark and found that a section slipped back.

“Hollow,” he exclaimed. “So that’s the racket. Three hollowed-out tree trunks in which they transport their illicit liquor and in which Correll slips in and out of Memphis.”

He climbed up and tested the top log.

It opened like a trunk lid. Kennedy crawled inside and saw light through several places on each side.

“Loop holes,” he told the astonished deputy, “that accounts for the mysterious rain of bullets. Bill Correll hid in here and shot Jimmy and the sheriff.”



EX-MARINE KENNEDY

“This outfit cost a lot of money,” the deputy commented. “They hated to lose it, but had to block the road on us somehow. Reckon they’ll venture back to get it after we leave?”

“An idea,” Kennedy agreed. “Pull that smashed fender up off the wheel and hurry back to Bolivar. Make as much noise and kick up as much dust as you can, so that if they’ve stopped on some hill-top to watch, they’ll be sure to see you go, I’ll hide in this log and nab ’em when they come back.”

“Yeah, but there’s two of ’em and these hills are full of moonshiners. You can’t stay here by yourself.”

“Listen,” Kennedy said grimly, “Jimmy Coleman has been my buddy a long time, and I came to the F.B.I. from the U.S. Marine Corps. You do as I tell you and I’ll look after this end of it.”

“Okay”, the deputy reluctantly agreed, and in five minutes the dust of his departing coupe rose high above the winding road.

KENNEDY crawled inside the hollowed log and stretched out full length, his eye glued to one of the loop holes and his ears alert. Stillness, that sullen stillness that only the mountains know, descended on the lonely little road.

It was thirty minutes before "Marine" Kennedy heard a sound except the sigh of wind through pines and the distant call of a crow. Then there was the hum of a motor, and after that, the crunch of tires on gravel.

The sound of tires ceased, and Bill Correll's voice rose above the noise of an idling truck motor.

"They've gone back for help. Turn around and hook to the trailer."

Kennedy could not see the men, and prepared to surprise them as they worked hooking up the trailer. Automatic ready, he shoved against the top of the log. It did not budge, and the G-man realized that it fastened inside with some secret catch which his groping fingers failed to find. He heard Bill Correll shout: "Okay, all hitched; let's go."

Then the trailer began to move.

For half an hour they swayed and swung along, then began bumping, at reduced speed, over a much rougher road.

Once or twice the truck stopped, and Kennedy heard Correll and the driver answering some kind of a challenge. Through the loop holes he was able to glimpse the challengers: gaunt mountaineers in overalls and slouch hats, armed with high-powered rifles.

Finally the truck came to a last halt. Kennedy could hear many voices and knew from the greetings to Correll that they were in the camp of the moonshiners.

Through a loop hole he saw a camp fire and men moving about it. He heard Correll's laughing account of the killing in Bolivar and of outwitting the "damned G-man" on the Silerton Lane. Kennedy's jaw hardened, and he continued his vain search for the secret lock to his prison.

Night fell, and light from the camp fire cast weird shadows through the loop holes. Later, Kennedy heard the muffled exhaust of a marine motor.

"Boat from the still is coming in," Correll called. "Open up the logs, boys and let's get the liquor inside. We can't risk another run through Bolivar, but we can take a load to Jackson in the morning."

Kennedy heard the panels on the lower logs slide back, then a step up and a hand ran over the bark of the top log. Automatic ready, the G-man crouched back in the shadows of his strange prison and waited tensely. The lid was lifted, but the mountaineer did not stoop to look inside. He merely threw back the lid, climbed down from the trailer and yelled:

"All set, let's get the liquor."

Kennedy ventured to peep out. The night was pitch-dark, and the glow of the camp fire reached far into the blackness. He could see the mountaineers trooping down a slope toward the sound of the marine motor.

QUIETLY, the G-man crawled out of the log and scurried to the safety of the heavy timber and underbrush that surrounded the lair of the moonshiners. Flat on his stomach behind a laurel bush, he waited until the men came back, each carrying a wooden liquor case. These were packed into the hollow logs, and the crew went down the slope again.

Kennedy saw that there were about a dozen men working under Correll. At the sight of the murderer of Jimmy Coleman passing so close to him, the G-man fingered his automatic but restrained himself.

Presently Correll and his men returned, stowed the last of the liquor in the logs on the trailer and disbanded; some wandering about in the shadows, others grouping around the camp fire. Kennedy lay quietly in the brush and watched.

"I wish that grocery truck would show up," Correll complained, "so we could load the launch and let it get back to the still."

As if in answer to his wish, headlights showed down the mountain trail, and presently a huge wholesale grocery truck puffed up the steep grade. The moonshiners immediately began to unload sacks of sugar and corn meal, carrying it down the rough trail to the river.

CORRELL remained by the fire, but the truck driver shouldered a sack and followed the others. Kennedy slipped along after them. Down half a mile of rough pathway they went to where a dirty old launch was tied to an ancient and rotting wharf along a swift, narrow river. Kennedy placed the stream from the study of a map of the locality.

"Hatchie River," he said under his breath.

When the men went back to camp, the G-man followed at a safe distance. After they had gone to the river again, a quick and desperate scheme spun through his mind. Here was a grocery truck, a covered van with doors that locked in the rear, about to depart for Bolivar or some other "outside" destination. The load was off the truck. As soon as the driver returned, he would probably slam and lock the doors. There was a chance of the moonshiners immediately missing Correll and searching the truck, but it was remote—and the opportunity to get out of these deadly mountains with his prisoner was too good for Kennedy to pass up.

He rose from the brush, and with automatic alert, moved quietly across the clearing toward where Correll sat by the fire. The gangster did not look up until the G-man was almost upon him.

"That you, Bart?" he asked.

He glanced up and leaped to his feet just as Kennedy sprang forward. The G-man swung the butt of his heavy pistol, and Correll crumpled without a sound. Quickly, Kennedy slipped his cuffs on the man's wrists, gagged him, tied his feet with his own belt and heaved the inert form into the grocery truck. There was an old tarpaulin inside, and the G-man

used it to cover himself and his unconscious prisoner.

When the men returned from the river, the truck driver came immediately to his vehicle and slammed shut the rear doors. Kennedy heard a gruff voice inquire:

"Where's Correll; any you-all seen the boss?"

The truck's motor drowned out the voice, and the G-man breathed a sigh of relief when the clumsy vehicle went bumping down the trail. Kennedy grinned triumphantly into the darkness as he contemplated the luck he had encountered. Right into a moonshiners camp in the heart of the hills and out, single handed, with their boss a prisoner. Correll groaned and stirred, and Kennedy, remembering Jimmy Coleman, tapped him again with the pistol butt.

Presently the truck stopped, and Kennedy heard voices outside. He recognized the challenge of a mountaineer sentry.

"Let's have a peek at you-all," he heard the voice drawl. "We missed a keg of liquor the last trip you made up here."

"Nuts," the driver growled, "whet would I want with your rotten corn juice?"

"Hold your rifle on him, Tom," the voice continued, "while I search the back of this here truck."

Kennedy stiffened and slipped the safety on his pistol.

The truck doors opened, and rays of an oil lantern lighted the interior. The mountaineer clambered in.

"Something's under this tarpaulin," he said.

Kennedy sprang up, jamming the automatic against the man's stomach.

"Back up," he snapped.

When the man was outside again, Kennedy used him as a shield and covered the other sentry who ran around the truck.

"Drop that rifle," the G-man barked.

The Winchester clattered from the astounded sentry's hand.

“Get out,” Kennedy told the truck driver, “I’m taking this truck, and I’m going out of these hills—and you birds are going to stand here and like it.”

THE driver began climbing out of the cab, and Kennedy, watching the three men closely by the flickering light of the lanterns, heard rather than saw the dark shape move in the brush back of him. He whirled, but the barrel of a rifle smashed against his wrist and sent the automatic spinning. Instantly the two sentries and their comrade from the brush piled on the G-man. In a moment he was overpowered and his hands bound behind him.

The mountaineers found Correll and released him. He had regained consciousness and staggered up to Kennedy. He jerked the G-man around in front of the truck lights.

“Damn Fed,” he snarled, “how did you get in here?”

Without waiting for an answer, he smashed Kennedy a hard right in the mouth.

“Throw him inside and turn this truck around. Stay back there with him, Jud. We’ll take him back to camp, and I’ll find out how he got here before I hang him to the tallest pine in these hills. Bust me over the head with a rod, will you?”

He jerked Kennedy to his feet and knocked the helpless G-man down again.

Roughly, the mountaineers picked Kennedy up, flung him into the truck and turned it around.

Back at camp the moonshiners stared at the returning truck, at the G-man and at Correll’s bandaged head. He silenced their questions with a curse.

“Never mind all that. Untie this Fed. Stand behind him with your rifle, Jud, and if he makes a move, blow his spine in two. Tom, get a rope.”

Kennedy stood close to the fire with the muzzle of Jud’s rifle held hard against his back. He looked into Correll’s cold, angry eyes and into the indifferent, stoic faces of the

mountaineers, and his mind spun as quickly as it had ever turned in all his adventurous career. There was death about this camp fire, ruthless menace in the hearts of that killer and those taciturn moonshiners.

“Now, G-man,” Correll sneered, “tell us how you got here and what the hell’s on your mind.”

“We want you for questioning in the Bailey case,” Kennedy began.

Correll’s guffaw interrupted.

“So that’s it. Well, you’ll never put me through no third; nobody ever got out of these hills with a prisoner. Your pal got his this afternoon.” He took the rope which Tom brought him. “And this is where you get yours.”

Kennedy glanced desperately about him. The fire was before him, the steady pressure of Jud’s rifle barrel against his spine; on all sides darkness and the lanky forms of the mountain men. At his feet, close to the embers, two gaunt Shepherd dogs dozed peacefully.

A last, desperate thought clicked in Kennedy’s mind. Without moving his body, the G-man lifted his foot and stepped hard on the forefoot of one of the dogs. The Shepherd leaped up with an angry snarl and snapped the other dog. Instantly the two, short-tempered canines flew at each other, much to the delight of the mountaineers.

“Eat him up, ‘Rowdy’,” one man yelled.

“Get ’im, ‘Ring’,” others chorused.

In that moment, Kennedy felt the pressure of Jud’s rifle barrel lessen; sensed the vigilance of the mountaineers relax. With a quick twist of his body, the G-man stepped backward and past the rifle barrel. His hands fastened on Jud’s wrist, and with a lightninglike movement, Kennedy flung Jud, rifle and all, over his shoulder and into the camp fire.

Embers and burning sticks flew up and into the faces of the mountaineers, and Correll

fell backwards from his box. With one great leap, Kennedy cleared the fire and plunged toward the darkness. Three rifles cracked spitefully, and bullets whined about the G-man as he gained the brush. He turned the only way that he knew: down the rough trail toward the river.

Blindly he raced along the pathway. Twice he fell. Pursuit was instant, and Kennedy realized that, in spite of his start, these men who were accustomed to the mountains were gaining on him. They were so close behind him when he reached the rickety wharf, he had to plunge headlong into the river. For a minute he was under, then up and yelling:

“Help, I’m drowning. I can’t swim, and this water is deep,”

He let himself sink with a gurgling sound.

AS soon as he was submerged, the G-man swam, under water, back to the wharf and clung to one of the supports, his nose barely out of the water. Above he heard his panting pursuers and saw rays from a lantern one had brought along.

“He went down,” a voice insisted, “I saw him, and he didn’t come up.”

Correll arrived, puffing.

“You’ve let him get away, damn you! Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“Couldn’t, boss. We didn’t get in sight of him until just as he fell off the wharf. But he sunk, we saw him—and he went down gurgling and begging us to save him.”

“Mebbe so,” Correll said dubiously, “but I want to be sure. Give me that lantern; I’ll stay here and watch. The rest of you go back and get all the other lanterns. We’ll search every foot of shore close to the wharf. I want this Fed’s body. I got to be sure he got his.”

Kennedy listened to the men depart, heard their voices die away in the distance. Correll was just above him, pacing back and

forth along the rickety old wharf, swinging the lantern and muttering to himself.

By lantern rays shining through cracks, Kennedy saw that the wharf was made of wooden fence rails, nailed together in sections and fastened to pine poles sunk deep into the muddy bottom. The whole structure was old and rotten, and as Correll passed above, one section of the rails sagged and almost gave way. Kennedy moved to that section, careful to make no noise in the water. He tested it with his hands and found it quite loose. Then Correll’s weight was on it again, and it sagged down more than a foot. On an impulse, Kennedy grasped the loose end and yanked downward.

The section gave way with a sharp crack, and Correll plunged through into the dark waters below. The lantern was instantly doused, and in the darkness, Kennedy sprang upon him. The G-man secured a good hold on Correll and despite his desperate fighting, held the gangster under: held him under until his body relaxed and he struggled no more.

Kennedy then raised Correll’s head to the surface, and the man breathed in short, painful gasps as the water drained from his tortured lungs, but he made no other sound. Kennedy knew that the men with lanterns would be back in a matter of minutes. The water under the wharf was only five feet deep, and with his feet set solidly in the mud of the bottom, Kennedy jerked loose the sagging section of the wharf and found it to be six wooden rails, cleated together.

He lifted the inert form of Correll to this impromptu raft, and with his extra cuffs, fastened the man’s hands beneath the rails. He gagged him with two sodden handkerchiefs and strapped his feet to the raft with a necktie.

Through the trees he could see faint rays of lanterns reflected in the water, and the distant voices of the returning mountaineers reached his ears. Kennedy kicked off his shoes and shoved the miniature raft out into the current of Hatchie River. The G-man placed

his finger tips on the end of the rails and kicked silently with his feet, thus becoming a human motor which drove the strange craft along.

“Hell,” he muttered, “I learned to swim in Dad’s old mill-pond, just like this.”

He saw lanterns group about the old wharf, heard confused shouts and men calling Correll’s name. But the G-man and his unconscious prisoner were far beyond the lantern’s feeble beams—far out on the dark, swift waters of the river.

NERVES tense and on edge, Kennedy pushed the little raft along, never knowing what unseen danger, what whirlpool or stretch of rock-strewn rapids, might be before him. Once Correll stirred and began to struggle. Kennedy merely turned the rails over and let Correll’s head stay under water for a moment. Then he righted the raft. After that the gangster remained quiet and peaceful. An eternity of darkness and swimming and floating passed, then Kennedy began to hear the hum of motors and presently saw headlights of automobiles flashing along a road.

“The highway bridge over Hatchie River,” he exulted.

Under the bridge, he steered the raft ashore and unfastened Correll. The gangster made a feeble attempt to resist the replacement of the cuffs; but Kennedy roughed him up a bit, and he gave in, whimpering. Kennedy shoved him up the river bank to the highway, where a passing motorist picked up the two half-drowned men and whisked them away to Bolivar.

From the sheriff’s office, Kennedy called his chief in St. Louis.

“‘Marine’ Kennedy reporting,” he told the chief. “Got Correll here in jail. And I’ve found out how his liquor racket works, Kerchoo!”

“Fine, bring him in for questioning. Sounds like you’re taking a cold.”

“Yes, sir. Kerchoo. Got my feet a bit wet; had to bring Correll in by river and rail.”

“By river and rail? What are you talking about?”

Kennedy sneezed again.

“Floated him down Hatchie River, tied to a raft of wooden fence rails,” he chuckled.