

# S.O.S. Stake-Out

by Arthur W. Phillips



*When G-man Gil Bentley answered the hurry call from Ex-Fed Sam Harper, he never figured that he would have to run the deadly gauntlet of an ... S.O.S. Stake-out*

**G**IL BENTLEY treasury agent, shook his head, forced unwilling, lead-weighted eyelids to remain open, fighting a maddening craving for sleep. His foot pressed hard on the throttle, sending the gray roadster humming through the last deep cottage shadow lining Weston's short main street, clear of the village, his bleak eyes scanned the black, wooded mountainside sloping high to his left.

He smiled crookedly. Maybe Sam Harper's S.O.S. meant another night with only an hour's hurriedly snatched sleep. Tired lines pulled each corner of the Fed's wide mouth, added a grimness to his clear-cut face, made

him look older than his twenty-eight years.

Months of hard work tracking down a gang of counterfeiters had ended four days ago at a deserted house, from which his quarry had vanished into thin air short hours before. Bentley had spent those four days tirelessly combing the countryside. But without results. Tonight, dispirited and admitting temporary defeat, he had phoned district headquarters asking for instructions.

A terse order to contact Ex-Fed Sam Harper in his vicinity puzzled him considerably.

Weariness forgotten, his head abruptly snapped forward. His eyes, hard, curious,

stared through the windshield. The speedometer dropped to a crawling zero. Standing by the roadside, apparently deserted, a large sedan loomed in the glare of the headlights.

A shrill scream suddenly ripped out, shuddering through the dusk. Bentley's foot crashed the brake pedal into the floor. He recognized stark terror in the piercing wail. His keen eyes urgently swept the dark, sloping woods, glimpsed a narrow byroad just ahead. The lane leading to Harper's shack.

The cry shrilled again, broke off sharply. Before its echo had died away, Bentley flashed out of the car, his lean body streaking for the dirt road.

The Fed tore through the darkness, slapping feet ringing a rapid tattoo on the hard, rutted ground, eyes narrowed grimly. A hundred feet away, a shapeless mass writhed in the black night. He saw the heap suddenly disintegrate. One shadow, a woman's, dropped like a stone. The others, two of them, plunged into the thick brush, instantly lost in the wood's ebony depths.

**B**ENTLEY'S long-legged strides quickly covered the intervening yards, pocket flash spraying a cone of light over a limp figure.

"You hurt?" He bent closer, felt a chill apprehension until the recumbent form stirred, twisted to stare up at him.

A deep terror faded from the eyes meeting his own. He saw they were a clear blue. The girl took his proffered hand, came quickly, lightly to her feet.

She laughed shakily. "Thanks to you, no. For a dreadful moment I thought you were another one." Her hair, he noticed, was the color of ripened corn, and a rising wave of pink washed out the pallor on her oval face.

A girl worth looking at, Bentley found himself thinking, his gaze flickering over her slim figure. Suddenly aware of an answering flush staining his own tanned cheeks, he

frowned, covered his confusion by a curt query.

"Know who they were?"

"No." The girl shook her head emphatically.

"You live in Weston?" Bentley went on, wondering what a young and pretty girl could be doing on this lonely road at night, unaccompanied.

"Oh, no, my home lies three miles that way." A shapely arm stabbed vaguely up the mountainside. "Dad was to have picked me up in the village over an hour ago. I came this far to meet him. I'm Nancy Harper."

Quick surprise gleamed in Bentley's eyes. "Not Sam Harper's girl?" He stepped back, studying her with new interest.

"Do you know dad?" Nancy Harper said eagerly.

"I'm on my way to see him now." A grin chased the harsh lines from Bentley's face. What Fed didn't know Sam Harper! Rookies were still fed the story of how Sam broke up the notorious Wes Simms' gang a year ago, splitting four of its members evenly between the morgue and the chair. Unfortunately, a bullet received during the terrific fight had forced Harper's retirement from the department.

A sudden, ugly thought wiped away Bentley's grin, molded his jaws to granite hardness. Wes Simms was still at large. Had the ruthless, sinister killer anything to do with Sam's request today for a Fed operative—and this attack upon his daughter?

He said: "I'm Treasury Agent Gil Bentley. Never met your dad personally, but—"

"An, you never will. Stick 'em up, Fed! Lively, or the dame gets the first slug!"

Bentley felt his heart leap. He pivoted, hands raising slowly, bleak eyes on the two dim, menacing figures stepping from behind a clump of underbrush, a few feet away. Shooting a swift glance at the girl beside him. His lean body tensed. In her light dress, Nancy

Harper made a clear target.

“Okay, sister. Circle round and come over here!” the same voice snarled.

Her face a frozen mask, the girl stood stiffly for a breathless second, her wide, staring eyes searching Bentley\*s gray ones. His blood raced curiously. A cool alertness in the blue depths seemed to invite some action on his part.

“Step lively, damn you!”

Bentley gave the girl an imperceptible nod. Then, like a cloud blotting out the moon, his body flashed in a quick, sidewise leap, covering her slimness, right hand streaking under his coat.

“Drop flat, Nancy!” he yelled. He heard the girl’s panting breath as she plummeted earthwards.

**O**RANGE-RED LICKS stabbed the darkness. The Fed’s flesh tightened as lead in the air whispered of death. His .45 jerked into action, ribbons of flame spitting bullets. He heard a shrill yelp of pain, grinned as he dropped to one knee. A slug tore through his hat. He fired coolly, trying to place each shot.

Then, abruptly, his assailants’ guns fell silent. He emptied his magazine in the direction of their crashing retreat through the undergrowth, jerked upright, a wicked grin splitting his lean face. The girl rose to her feet behind him.

“Let’s get moving,” Bentley muttered. His eyes probed the darkness as they ran swiftly over the uneven road toward the highway. His fingers expertly slipped home a fresh clip in the automatic.

“They—they meant to kill you and—kidnap me,” Nancy whispered fearfully. “But what does it all mean?”

Bentley shook his head without answering. Thinking how close death had been to them, a cold sweat oozed through his pores, drenched his skin with a chill clamminess. He had to get Nancy home

quickly and warn Harper of the danger threatening her.

When they reached the end of the lane, Bentley gripped the girl’s arm, raced over the smooth road toward his car.

Suddenly, the wood’s dark maw behind them vomited flame. The Fed pushed Nancy ahead, followed her around the back of the roadster, ducking for cover.

“Lie flat in the ditch,” he whispered hoarsely.

Spanging slugs bounced off the metal sides of the car, clipped upholstery from the top of the seat. Over the side of the car, Bentley answered the hail of lead. His left hand found the switch, snapped off the headlights.

*Wham!*

A loud report exploded almost in his face, brought a deep curse rumbling in his throat. He felt the roadster sag under the burst tire. His heart thumped madly, like a runaway pump. The next bullet might find the gasoline tank. He ducked, whirling, went over the ditch in a crouching leap, feverishly searching the undergrowth.

Within a minute, he found what he sought. Back at the car, opening the door, he dragged a clump of gorse inside. Topping it with his hat, he hoisted the brush onto the seat, pausing long enough to loose a fusillade of lead into the woods opposite before crawling out. The thugs’ guns increased their intensity.

Bentley grinned, dropped into the ditch, crawled ahead to where Nancy crouched. “Keep going,” he whispered. Another loud burst announced the front left tire’s destruction. The girl on her way, Bentley turned, aimed deliberately at the dummy just below the hat.

“Got him!” A hoarse yell of triumph rang from the woods as the gorse toppled over. The thugs ceased their fire.

Bentley waited through a minute of tense silence. Then two grim shadows darted out of the black void, racing for their car. The

Fed held his fire until they were halfway across the road; then he opened up on them.

The leading shadow lurched suddenly, spun sharply and dropped sprawling on the road. The other, a short, stocky lump of a man, swerved, bolting like a startled rabbit for the sedan. Bentley vaulted out of the ditch, strode into the open, but the fellow was already inside the big car.

Gears meshed, an engine roared into quick life. The Fed's gun clicked empty as the sedan rocketed away. He grinned wryly, reloading his weapon before holstering it.

**T**HE MAN on the road had stopped a slug in his heart. A weasel-faced thug, his thin, narrow face was twisted in a vicious snarl. Bentley didn't recognize the man. He hauled the corpse unceremoniously into the ditch, went back to where Nancy sat on the embankment. She was crying softly, holding her head in her hands.

She glanced up when he touched her lightly, forced a wan smile to her bloodless lips. "I feel sick," she murmured. "I'm an awful little coward."

Bentley patted her shoulder, felt her slender body trembling. "You played up like a seasoned veteran," he told her, and meant every word. His eyes slanted across to the roadster. The two left wheels rested on their rims. "We'll have to crawl back to the village for new tires. Stay here while I turn the car."

Clambering into the car, Bentley retrieved his fedora, kicked out the dummy. Tiny knots bunched his tight jaw line. Nancy was in great danger. Someone wanted her—alive! Wanted her badly enough to kill a federal agent if he stood in the way. Why?

Several things troubled Bentley's mind. Did this business tie up with Sam Harper's request to district headquarters? And why hadn't the ex-Fed been more explicit? According to the chief, his message simply read: "Imperative you send good man at once."

Bentley backed the roadster into the lane, started out.

Sweeping out of the black night, glaring headlights abruptly thrust the questions from his mind, sent his foot mashing the brakes. A car raced hell-bent toward them, going in the direction of Weston.

Nearing the lane, the plunging car lurched under screaming brakes, headlights winking out. Stabbing flames licked the darkness. A bullet whizzed past Bentley's ear. He ducked, lunged out of the roadster, grabbing for his gun. Yammering bursts of hot, raking lead followed him. He hurtled flat, rolled over and over, a split second ahead of eternity with each twist, answering slug for slug with each gyrating whirl.

The hail of lead ceased abruptly. The car jerked forward, a thundering fury streaking into the night.

"Did he hit you?" The girl came running from the ditch. "Oh, I—I'm so terrified," she whispered, panting.

Byes cold, bleak, Bentley pushed her into the car. Whoever they were, the thugs meant business. Sweat-dampened hands tight over the wheel, he pushed the car, limping, toward Weston....

Three quarters of an hour later, equipped with new tires, the roadster bumped and swayed over the lane's hard, uneven surface. Pleasantly aware of Nancy Harper's nearness, of the warmth of her slender body brushing his own, Bentley steeled himself against its subtle influence, forced his thoughts back to the menacing events of the evening.

From the man at the service station, the Fed had learned that the mysterious car had swept through the sleeping village, dark and unidentified. Before that, besides his own, only one other car had driven by the station after Nancy had passed to meet her father.

"It was the Manor car, Miss Nancy," the attendant had added. "Happened to catch a glimpse of the new chauffeur as he drove by."

He must have passed you just outside the village.”

NANCY HARPER’S voice broke into Bentley’s thoughts. “I don’t seem to remember seeing or hearing the Manor car go by.” She hesitated a second, then added: “And I’m positive no car stood on the road when turned into the lane.”

The Fed nodded thoughtfully. Waiting further along the road until they spotted you, most likely,” he suggested. He glanced sidewise at Nancy. A tiny frown puckering her forehead’s smoothness, she burst out:

“This business concerns dad. He—he was worried over something when he came in to supper last night. He went out later, and didn’t come home until after midnight.”

“He gave you no explanation?”

“Dad never explains,” she said. But this morning he insisted that I stay with friends in the village, promising to call for me tonight. He wanted me out of the way, for some reason. I can see it now. And he hasn’t come to take me home.”

“We’ll soon hear what he has to say.” A frown darkening his face, Bentley pushed the speedometer up another five miles. So the ex-Fed had given his daughter no inkling of what had prompted his urgent call to headquarters. The Fed’s thoughts switched to another angle. The Manor car, it must have passed the girl, yet—

“Tell me something about the Manor,” he said abruptly.

Ormond Manor, Nancy told him, lay in the valley, several miles from the village. The owner, John Ormond, sometimes accompanied her father fishing, and, on rare occasions, Sam Harper visited the Manor.

Bentley’s frown deepened. The incident of the car might be significant. Could Ormond be the sinister figure behind tonight’s attempt to capture the girl? A soft whistle suddenly escaped his lips.

Wes Simms!

There was the possibility that the ruthless killer, having discovered Sam Harper’s retreat, was seeking revenge for the breaking up of his gang a year ago, was working to this end with John Ormond. A connection between the two men, and known to the ex-Fed, might account for Harper’s choice of this secluded spot to live with his motherless girl.

Bentley’s mind switched to another track. Somewhere within a thirty mile radius, the threads of his own broken trail lay hidden. Supposing Sam had stumbled across the trail? In the hands of the counterfeiters, Nancy would be useful as a hostage.

The Fed shrugged. Why conjecture idly when they would arrive at the house in a few minutes and hear Harper’s story?

Like a black fog, the darkness had closed in tight. Scattered over the mountainside, clumps of high shrubs and gorse took on grotesque shapes. Bentley felt the girl shiver, released his right hand long enough to press her arm.

He stirred restlessly, keen eyes probing the blackness ahead. A fringe of young saplings, with tall trees beyond, loomed like a ghostly patrol in the headlights’ misty beams. The road here snaked through the woods for the last mile.

They reached the clearing presently. The house, a five-room affair, stood way back from the lane. Bentley felt the girl’s body tense. She gripped his arm, whispered fearfully:

“Look! The house is in darkness and the flivver’s still here. I—something has happened to dad!”

Nancy leaped from the car when it turned along the narrow drive, ran swiftly toward the house. The Fed switched off the lights, started in her wake for the grim, desolate-looking place. He could hear the girl’s voice, calling shrilly to her father. His slaty eyes flickered through the eerie, shrouding gloom. Beyond the clearing,

swaying trees whispered in the sable blackness.

A PRICKLY fear halted him abruptly, sent him, stiff-legged, circling the house, then back to the road for a last check-up. Sam's absence alarmed him. Death seemed to be in the air.

He padded back, past the roadster. He threw a glance over his shoulder, paused uncertainly, believing he had detected a dark form lurking in the ebony depths beyond the road. But nothing moved. He went on to the house, telling himself he was mistaken.

In the shack, he dropped the heavy door-bar into position, strode to where Nancy stood in the living room doorway, anguish and fear written on her pale face. Bentley pushed her into the room. The girl had lighted a lamp.

"He—he isn't here!" she cried. She was trembling.

"Don't get panicky, Nancy." Bentley avoided her eyes, "He's probably visiting somewhere."

She shook her head stubbornly. , "He only visits the Manor. He would have used the car had he gone there."

Bentley's face hardened. He said abruptly: "I'm taking' you back to the village where you'll be safe."

The panic suddenly left the girl's face. She regarded him earnestly. "I'm not leaving until I've found dad," she stated simply. "Dad's gun and fishing rod and tackle are missing. It—it doesn't make sense. Why would he send me away if he was going fishing?"

The Fed drew a long breath, telling himself that the cold fear whispering in his mind must be wrong, that Sam Harper was still alive. He said, tight-lipped: "Where does he usually fish?"

"The pool," Nancy told him quickly. "You can see the Manor from there. It's a sort of phenomenon. Nothing else is visible from the ledge except Ormond Manor. But, please,

hurry!"

"Slip on a dark coat. We'll leave by the back door."

Once in the woods, Bentley and the girl became part of the umbrageous gloom. The Fed called a halt before they had traveled far, listened intently for perhaps two minutes. He hardly believed they would be followed, but they were up against a ruthless gang of killers.

A deathlike stillness wrapped the woods.

Lips grim, Bentley nudged the girl along the narrow trail. It brought them onto the road half a mile beyond and above the shack. A faint noise, like a dirge of horror, rustled through the night. The sound grew louder as they walked swiftly on, presently identifying itself as running water.

The fishing pool looked darksome, eerie. A wide stream splashing down the mountainside fed a natural basin in a long, narrow plateau. A cascading waterfall carried the stream on its course down into the valley. Tall shrubs raggedly fringed the banks.

Nancy's hand stole out, rested for a second on Bentley's arm. He wished that she hadn't come. The white cone of his flash slipped over the ground, picked up a long, slender rod lying across a flat rock. Sight of it sent a cold trickle up and down Bentley's spine.

The girl had seen it, too. She sucked in a noisy breath. "Steady, Nancy," the Fed muttered.

The beam drifted, rested on an arm stretching from behind a clump of gorse. The fingers were stiff and unnatural, ghostly in the wavering circle.

A faint sound filtering between her bloodless lips, Nancy darted forward. She dropped, moaning, beside a still form.

Bentley stared down, thin-lipped. Sam Harper had been dead a good many hours. Flies and the afternoon sun had done nasty things to the ugly hole gaping black in his

temple.

The Fed pressed the girl's shoulder sympathetically, then walked away. He let his flash trickle over the pool's swirling surface, staring into its inky depths. Sam's fishing rod had been merely a blind to screen his real errand. But what was the errand?

**C**LICKING off the flash, Bentley strode to the edge of the plateau. A long way down in the valley, a small cluster of lights twinkled. He remembered what the girl had said.

Ormond Manor!

A black, queer-shaped object on the ground caught his eye. It lay near the root of a large shrub. He bent, picked it up. His heart skipped a beat. Field glasses!

So John Ormond *was* the errand. That tied up with the Manor car following Nancy. Bentley's mouth lightened to a slit. He dropped the glasses in his pocket.

A short, high scream of terror knifed the darkness, sent him whirling, right hand streaking for his gun. He saw a squat, lumpy figure beside Nancy. A hoarse voice croaked:

"Hold it, Fed! There's a rod ticking the dame's neck!"

Bentley froze. A second shadow rose from a thicket, came behind him, jammed a blunt muzzle in his spine. He felt his gun jerked away.

"Give me ten minutes start with the dame, Marty, then turn on the heat. Dump the stiffs in the pond an' run the Fed's bus a coupla miles down the highway. Then get back to the Manor."

"Gil!" A rough hand abruptly shut off Nancy's desperate cry. Bentley moved, felt the gun's threat, and froze rigid.

The short man dragged the struggling girl to her feet. Bleak despair darkening his eyes, Bentley watched helplessly as she disappeared in a pool of blackness.

His low query, "What do you intend doing with her?" brought a rasping chuckle.

"Pipe down, rat. I'll do the talkin', in ten minutes."

Every nerve in his rangy body taut, Bentley fought a mad desire to explode into action. The hard rim cutting through his coat saved him. That way meant sudden death. Only ten minutes, anyhow! Reckless thoughts burned his brain like white hot needles. He must find a way to live, to save Nancy! His feet moved cautiously, braced for a swift, side-wise leap.

The gunman outguessed him. "Don't try it, mug! You're only a pinpoint from hell!"

Ten minutes ticked by like a dragging eternity. Then, sick at heart, Bentley heard the thick voice grunt, "Time's up! Get over by the pool!" The gun punched hard into his spine.

Bentley felt suddenly like a man relieved from death at the last minute. Darkness hid the quick gleam in his eyes. Pivoting sharply, he walked obliquely toward the pool. The thug followed closely, breathing in short gusts.

Passing the rock holding Sam's rod, the Fed's lithe figure tensed. His foot crashed silently down, caught the butt of the fishing rod. The tapering wand hissed through the murk. He yelled, "Look out! Snake!" and whirled.

Uttering a startled oath, the man called Marty leaped backwards.

Bentley galvanized into cyclonic action. A deft kick jerked the gun from the fellow's hand. Then, hurtling forward, the Fed smashed home vicious rights and lefts, forcing Marty back with each blow. There was only one thought in his mind. To finish the fight and get to the Manor. Straightening like a piece of released steel, he shot home a dynamic right, putting every ounce of his lean, powerful body behind it. The blow broke squarely on the man's chin. He staggered, slipped, tried to recover, then disappeared.

A hollow thud followed.

Bentley sent a white disc searching below the plateau. Fifty feet down, a broken,

twisted thing hung draped over a knife-edged boulder.

The Fed wasted a precious minute going through Sam Harper's clothing. The gun was missing from its holster. His questing fingers found a little red memorandum book tucked away in a vest pocket. His face set hard and grim, reading the last few lines written inside:

*Wed. Saw one of Simms' old gang in village today.*

*Thurs. Nancy safely out of way. Believe gang at Manor. Wired Layton for man.*

Bentley's lips flattened in a cruel line. Working together, Simms and Ormond were responsible for Sam's death; and now Nancy was in their hands! A cold panic seized him. The girl faced terrible danger. These devils were unscrupulous.

His brain raced furiously. State Police Headquarters lay twenty-five miles away. At the first sign of threat, the girl's life would be forfeit. Force was out. He had to get inside the Manor—alone.

Locating the dead Marty's gun, he ran swiftly along the path until he found a trail leading down into the valley.

**O**RMOND MANOR, a stoutly built, rambling old house, lay in apparent darkness. Bentley slipped among the blanketing shadows, edged cautiously around the side of the house. One of the rooms on the ground floor must be occupied.

He caught a quick breath, headed swiftly to where a thin sliver of light seeped between a window and its shade halfway along the side of the house.

The dead Marty's gun tight in his right hand, he rapped sharply on the window with his left, then dropped to the ground. Lead seconds ticked by before his straining eyes saw the shade move at one corner. A thin

leering face peered out, searching the darkness.

Bentley's left arm raised slowly, waving, feebly. He heard the window being raised a little, and grinned.

"Who's that?" a piping voice shrilled.

Bentley groaned, a realistic effort, and mumbled hoarsely. "Me, Marty. Ugh-h!"

"Say, what'n'ell's wrong, Marty?"

"The damned Fed had a knife," Bentley husked weakly. "Stuck me before I could plug him. Ugh-h! I'm bleedin' to death."

"Jeez, Marty, be right there." The window slammed shut.

The Fed waited a couple of seconds before easing his lank form over the cool grass for a few yards. Then, springing to his feet, he raced toward the front of the house. Reaching the angle, he flattened against the wall, gun hand upraised.

Seconds later, he heard the thug racing along the sanded path, to tear around the corner like a rushing bull. Bentley's arm fell, everything he possessed behind the blow. A sickening crunch, and the fellow pitched forward on his face, and lay still.

Bentley rounded the corner, pounded up the steps, plunged into the hall, gun in hand. Swift, noiseless strides, took him to a half-open door farther down on his left.

The Fed's gun covered the two men staring in amazement at his sudden appearance.

A short, dark-faced man eyed the gun in Bentley's hand furtively, fear and surprise in his black, beady eyes. The other, a plump little man with a round, shiny face, started up out of a deep leather chair. Cold, swift terror gleamed in the blue eyes staring at Bentley. He gasped: "W-what—who—"

"You Ormond?" Bentley clipped. The man nodded. "I'm a federal agent," Bentley went on grimly.

Ormond's face had turned a mottled purple. He whispered: "I— You don't know

what you're doing. If I only had time to explain, but you—"

The Fed cut him short. "I'll worry about that. Where's the girl?"

Eyes lancing hatred, the swarthy man snarled: "Find her, Fed. Argh-h—"

Bentley had leaped forward, his arm a flashing arc. His gunsight ripped into the fellow's cheek. "Talk fast, damn you! Next time I'll drag out an eye."

The thug ducked, hand diving beneath his coat. Bentley went into real action then. His knee smashed into the leering face. He followed this with a left jab that shocked the crook erect, then dropped him with his gun-clenched fist. The fellow's gun skidded across the floor. He lay there moaning. Ormond stood watching, frozen stiff.

The Fed bent, arm whipping up again.

"Simms," the thug whimpered, "in the basement."

Bentley yanked ropes from a pair of drapes, bound the man, then gagged him with his own handkerchief. He turned.

"DON'T move!" The chubby-faced Ormond covered him with the thug's gun. Bentley could see the beads of sweat lining the little man's plum-colored features, saw white patches on the knuckles gripping the gun, a tenseness in the finger curled around the trigger.

"Drop your gun 1" Ormond's voice sounded like that of a little boy trying to play desperado.

The Fed tossed the gun to the floor. Ormond's desperate eyes flickered down for just a second, but it was all Bentley needed. His left hand didn't seem to move, but hard fingers clamped like steel bands around the gun wrist. A quick wrench, and the weapon clattered to the floor. Bentley's right hand flashed over, knuckles like rocks landed flush on Ormond's jaw. The little man collapsed limply, like a pricked balloon.

The Fed scooped up his gun and darted

out.

A grim, ominous silence filled the long, empty hall as Bentley raced toward the servants' quarters. The basement door released a murmur of voices from below as it swung back.

The Fed waited a tense moment.

A light bulb hung just over his head, its whiteness leaving him an easy mark should anyone chance to look up. Ignoring the wall switch in case it controlled the lights in the basement, Bentley reached up, rapidly unscrewed the globe. He grimaced, feeling its heat burning his fingers, thrust it hastily into his pocket.

Starting down the steps, he cursed softly. A board creaked noisily underfoot. The hum of voices ceased abruptly. Some one shouted: "That you, Louie?"

Aping Louie's voice, Bentley growled, "Yeah" and continued down the stairs. Without warning, a man stepped into the square of light, glanced up.

The hair on the back of Bentley's neck stiffened.

He saw the man's hand jerk for a lightning draw, saw his mouth open to yell. He bunched and jumped. His shoulders met the fellow's chest, crashing them both to the floor. The Fed bounced to his feet, gun swinging in a half circle.

A swift glance showed him Nancy in the grip of a burly, evil-faced man, her arms securely bound. Wes Simms! A spitting gun located another, a slit-eyed, vicious gorilla over by the wall. Foxy Blunt!

Bentley snapped a quick shot in reply, the man on the floor crouched for a spring, and whirled. His foot lashed out, caught the stooping man under the left ear. The fellow's back arched, then he slumped, neck at a queer angle.

A bullet fanned Bentley's ear, another nicked his arm. He crouched, ripping slugs at Foxy. He didn't dare fire at Simms for fear of hitting Nancy. Ploughing across his knuckles,

a bullet sent white-hot pain along his arm, jerking the gun from his paralyzed fingers.

A scream ripped out. "No, don't kill him!" Nancy Harper's voice held something besides fear, brought a momentary gleam to Bentley's eyes. Simms' bloodshot eyes searched the girl's face, an ugly leer writhing his vicious lips. He laughed hoarsely.

"Hold it, Foxy. These two monkeys are in love. We'll give the Fed an eyeful of the dame's fadeout before he gets his."

Foxy's mouth twisted in a hideous grin. He gun-muzzled Bentley over to the end wall, expertly kicked his legs from under him. The Fed pulled himself to a sitting position, staring to where Simms had swung the girl against the wall.

"Give her a taste of heat, Wes," Foxy suggested.

"Swell idea." Simms' hand slapped hard across the girl's face. Bentley lurched to his feet. Foxy flattened him with a savage kick that sent the Fed writhing in agony. He retched, rubbing his side, then his bleak eyes were suddenly hopeful.

**S**IMMS' voice was still rasping ugliness. "Not satisfied with sending two of my pals to the chair, your old man had to butt in again. Too bad he didn't remember the sun reflects on glasses. Gave him away, neat. Okay, Foxy, cover 'em both while I get that live wire. Give her a taste of what the hot seat's like."

Foxy stepped back a pace, his pale eyes darting between Bentley and the girl. Bentley's gaze followed Simms over to a corner of the basement. He smiled grimly, eyeing the printing presses and other equipment partly assembled there. He had picked up his lost trail—maybe too late.

Chuckling evilly, Simms grabbed a coil of wire from a peg on the wall. One end connected with the main electric wire; the other gleamed a dull red where the copper strands were exposed.

The Fed groaned, twisted over as if in

pain. His left hand slipped cautiously into his pocket. His groping fingers closed over the globe reposing there. He groaned again, heaved convulsively. Foxy laughed, failed to notice Bentley's hand move almost imperceptibly. Unnoticed, the bulb flew over to the right of where Foxy stood.

*Crash!*

Simms jerked up short, dropping the wire. Foxy whipped around, a hot curse spewing from his ugly lips. In the same instant, feet braced hard against the wall, Bentley hurled himself forward in a low tackle. His shoulders slammed into Foxy's side. His arms wrapped about the man's chest, pinioning Foxy's arms in a tight grip. Tightening the pressure until it was a frenzied, bearlike hug, Bentley swung the helpless Foxy around, felt ribs crack under the awful force he exerted. All this in one split second.

Simms' gun was in action now, blasting their direction. Bentley felt Foxy go suddenly limp in his grasp. He released his right hand in time to grasp the man's falling gun. Simms was still pumping lead. Bentley could hear the slugs thudding into Foxy's riddled body. The gang leader made a dive for Nancy, but before he could reach her, Bentley fired, once, twice!

Simms twirled crazily, a vile oath snapping short on his lips. His arms clapped once, like a beheaded, chicken's wings, then, clawing his stomach, he crashed heavily to the concrete.

Dropping Foxy's blood-spouting corpse, Bentley darted to where Nancy stood, weak and trembling. "You're safe now," he muttered. "The gang's wiped out, except for—"

**H**IS bleak eyes caught a furtive movement on the steps. Ormond's white face came slowly into view. Bentley's lean body tensed, his gun covering the little man.

"Thank heavens you're both safe," Ormond gasped. "Sorry I tried to hold you up, but I was desperate. These men held my wife

prisoner somewhere in the house.” The little man’s voice carried the ring of truth. “They’d threatened to shoot her at the first sign of trouble. You looked like starting trouble before I could get to her.”

Working swiftly on Nancy’s bonds, Bentley nodded his understanding. He said: “How did they happen to be here?”

“Held me up with guns, three days ago. Using Mrs. Ormond as a hostage, they forced me to dismiss all the servants, saving they would take their places. The man,

Simms, seemed to have it all planned out. Said they intended staying several weeks. They brought machinery to install for manufacturing counterfeit money.”

Bentley didn’t hear the last part. The ropes free, he slipped his arms about Nancy, drew her close. She clung to him, sobbing.

He let her cry for a few minutes, then, “Nancy,” he whispered gently, “I can’t take your father’s place, but I—”

Nancy’s eyes told him plainly that there was no need to say any more.