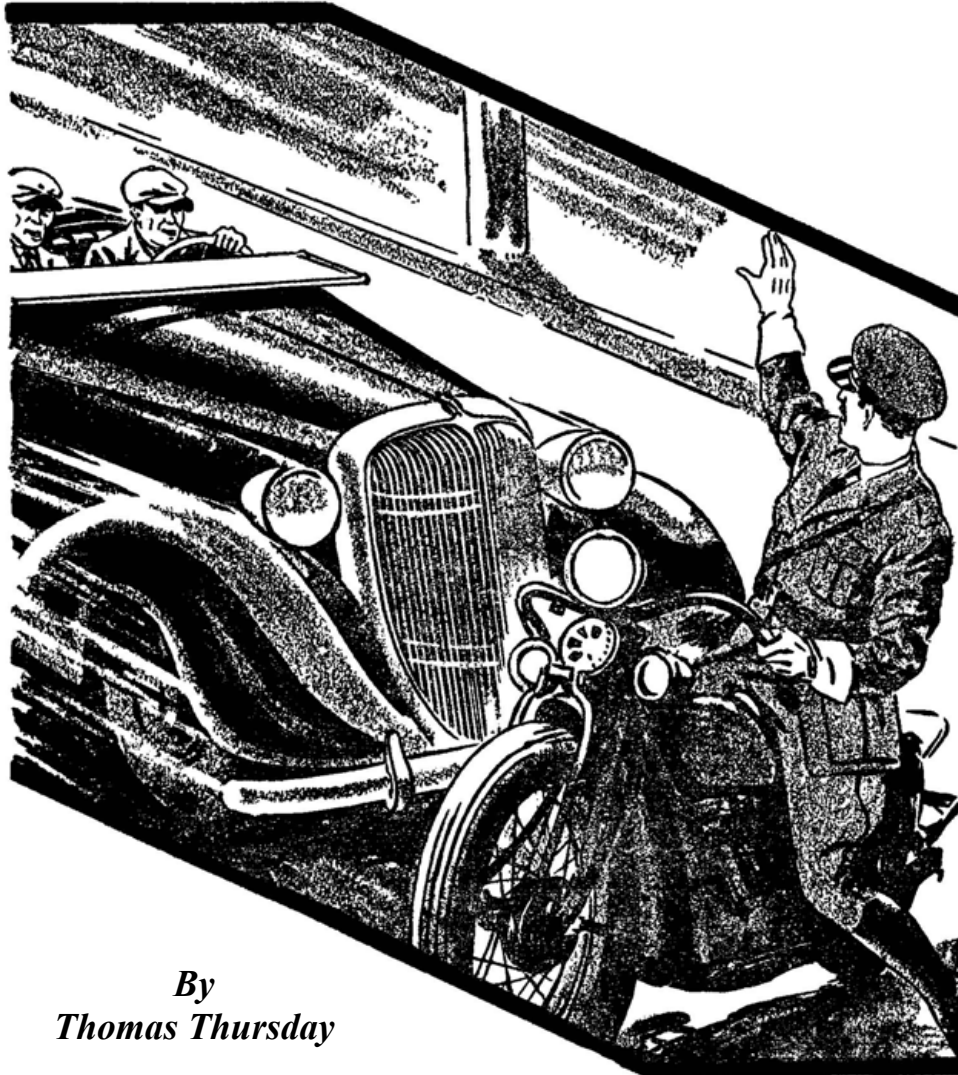


Wherein John Stoneparte, master of the art of spieling, matched wits with two masters of the art of stealing. But they didn't know that a spiel and a steal could trip the scales of justice to cancel a . . .

License for Theft



*By
Thomas Thursday*

AS the prospect approached—he hoped it was a prospect—John Stoneparte rolled both feet off the desk and let them fall with a bang. Business was terrific—terrifically terrible—and why in hell he had ever quit the spindle-wheel racket with mud-operas for the used-car biz was a headache to him. Suppose he had been caught no less than sixty-nine times with a gaff on his wheels, he always eeled out of the enraged mob, didn't he? He did. Then imagine him

in a game where a guy had to be honest almost all of the time!

Well, maybe this hickwah now entering the portable office would play the part of Santa Claus and buy a car.

“My name,” began the stranger, “is Raymond Rutherford, and I'm looking for a bargain in cars.”

“My friend,” beamed Stoneparte, “I sell nothing but bargains. I know how to buy right, that's why I can sell right. Er, how about a very slightly used

Monmouth Eight, with less than four thousand miles running?”

He'd only set the speedometer back ten thousand miles on that one, two thousand miles below his normal magic touch.

“Where is it?” asked the prospect.

“Right in back of you. Ain't she a dandy?”

Rutherford took one fugacious look at the car and scowled. “What do you run, a junkyard?”

The finer feelings of Mr. John Stoneparte were wounded. What's more, he was irked. No one had ever suggested that *Stoneparte Service—The Best in Good Used Cars*—was a junkolo trap. Had this guy made such a crack while Stoneparte was behind his spindle-wheel on a carnival midway, he would have jumped over the counter and given him a neat plastering with a fine concrete finish. Now, however, he was in a legitimate biz and was obliged to be suave, polite and courteous to even waffles like the guy before him. And business and tact being what it is—if it is—Stoneparte slipped his temper back into low gear and smiled cherubically.

“I see you are gonna be hard to please,” said Stoneparte. “That's the kind of customers I like. The more folks know about cars the better chance I have to sell them.”

“Maybe I come to the wrong place,” sniffed Rutherford.

Again Stoneparte's temper started to rise to his carnival days altitude, but once more he checked himself. “If this ain't the right place,” said Stoneparte, “there ain't any in Florida. How about something extra special in a practically new Cadomobile? It's got a paint job that is so fresh that you can still smell it.”

“Let's see it.”

Stoneparte led his prospect to the rear of his portable office. “Ain't she a peach?”

“How do I know?” said Rutherford. “I've sampled some rotten peaches in my day. What you want for it? But wait—before you reply, cut it in half and I'll still be stuck.”

Stoneparte hoped that this constant temper-repression would not add to his high blood pressure. The cheerful thought that he might be able to stick this potato good and proper aided him to keep calm.

“Listen,” went on Stoneparte confidentially, “this is a very unusual case, and I can give you a deal that will make you happy.”

“What the devil do I want to be happy for?” demanded Rutherford.

Oh, well, figured Stoneparte, maybe he'd have to give this dude the works. Too much is more than enough, and why should any one insult John Stoneparte when he was being nice and kind?

“Brother,” said Stoneparte, “if you ain't looking for a real bargain, I'm just wasting your time.”

“Don't worry about my time, feller; I got more time than the Naval Observatory.”

“As I was saying,” continued Stoneparte, hoping that he wouldn't bust this bird on the beezer, “there is a history about this car that will hold your interest.”

“Shoot the fairy tale, kid; you're faded.”

“WELL, a guy named Peter Oliver McGee come in yesterday and says his home is in Jacksonville and that he has been here a few days and lost almost a grand in the nightclubs shooting craps. So he brings in this car and says he will give me half of whatever I can get, but I shouldn't sell it for less than a thousand.”

“How much did you say?”

“Only one thousand dollars,” replied Stoneparte.

BEFORE continuing Stoneparte had to pause for temper-adjustment. But, if he should ever be lucky enough to catch this monkey in an alley, he'd sure smack him silly.

“Do you realize,” went on Stoneparte, “that this car is practically new and that it cost over three grand when bought less than a month ago?”

“Why the new paint on a new car?” asked Rutherford.

“Y'know,” retorted Stoneparte, “that's what I been thinking. I wouldn't be surprised if the car was, maybe, hot. That's why it is less than one-third the price it should be. I took the car in good faith and why should I lose sleep over it, hey?”

“Never lose your sleep,” said Rutherford. “It always gets the bed manufacturers sore.”

“As I was saying, I don't care whether a car is hot or cold, so long as I take it in good faith. That lets me out, don't it?”

“Not with me,” said Rutherford in a new tone. “A hot car is a stolen car and any dealer caught with one is on the spot.”

“I don't know what you're driving at,” said Stoneparte, somewhat uneasy.

Rutherford lifted the hood and examined the

serial number on the engine.

“H’m,” came from Rutherford.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you’re under arrest for the possession of stolen property, and I’d like to see you get out of it.”

“You can’t do that to me,” said Stoneparte with a show between fear and bravado. “I tell you I don’t know nothing about it.”

“That’s really what the guy said who was caught sneaking out of a bank at three A.M., with a bag full of dough and wearing a black mask.”

“I tell you I ain’t in no hot car biz,” exploded Stoneparte. Then he got a sudden thought. “Say, who the hell are you?” he demanded.

Rutherford flipped back his coat and gave a quick flash of a gold badge.

“Auto Theft Bureau,” said Rutherford. “I guess you’re due for the works.”

“Listen!” begged Stoneparte. “Listen, will ya? This guy comes to me, and I don’t know him from Adam—”

“Or even Eve, huh?” put in Rutherford.

“He says his name is Peter Oliver McGee, just like I told you, and tells me he goes broke shooting craps in the night spots. So I take his car just to oblige him and figger I can help him out and also get a piece of change for myself. That’s all I know, and I swear I’m innocent!”

“Captain Kidd and Blue Beard had the same tale. It’s kind of old and hackneyed. Sorry, feller, but I’ve got to take you down for booking.”

“Will you pul-leeze listen? I got a character for honesty and square dealing. I also got a large, honest family to support. Give a guy a break, can’t you? I’m just a poor, innocent sucker what got roped in, that’s what I am.”

“Did the guy who lost his car get a break?”

“Can’t you just take the car and say you found it out in the woods some place?” begged Stoneparte. “Give an honest guy a break, can’t you?”

“Which honest guy are you talking about?”

“Why, it would break my poor wife’s heart if this got in the papers. And my oldest daughter, Mabel, is just about to graduate from high school. Be reasonable, won’t you?”

“You say you got a large family?”

“Have I! Three boys and three girls, all fine youngsters who have always been proud of me because I always took care of them proper like a good father ought to. Why, my good wife would

die if you took me down. And think of what my neighbors would say!”

“You got neighbors, huh? Maybe I better call on them and see if they have been missing anything lately.”

“Honest, officer, my reputation is A Number One, and I ain’t never had any scandal in my whole life. Give a guy a break!”

RUTHERFORD struck a pose that should pass for deep thought.

“I’ve been thinking things over,” he said finally. “Although I think you knew this car was red hot, I am going to give you a break on account of your large family. I know how that is—I got a large family myself.”

Stoneparte’s sigh of relief was quite audible.

“So I’ll just take the car back to headquarters and say I found it abandoned along a lonely road. But I hope this will be a lesson that you will remember until you take your seat in the chair.”

“That’s fine and I sure do appreciate it,” beamed Stoneparte. “You have saved an innocent man from a fierce jam. I’ll do something for you sometime.”

“Is there plenty of gas and oil in this boat?”

“Just put in ten gallons and the oil was changed at the same time.”

“Okay,” said Rutherford. “Well, I’ll be keeping an eye on you. Better keep your chin and nose clean.”

He stepped on the starter, the motor purred, and he drove off the lot, leaving Stoneparte in a happy daze. Turning west on Flagler Street, he coasted along until he was out of heavy traffic, then stepped it up to sixty.

“A sweet-purring bay,” mused Rutherford. “I wonder whose car it is?”

He again pressed the accelerator and the car raced to seventy.

“H’m,” he laughed. “Can you imagine me with a large family?”

Back on the used car lot, John Stoneparte was in a mellow mood. His face was fairly jovial for the first time in six weeks.

“I guess I put that one over okey-doke,” he chuckled. “But can you imagine me with a large family? Woof!”

An hour later a short, freckled man appeared on the lot. He was Peter Oliver McGee. As he neared the portable office, Stoneparte actually leaped from his seat to meet him. This was the mug he wanted

to see—and how!

“Well, well, well,” began Peter Oliver McGee. “I see you sold my car. Nice work.”

“Sold—hell!” roared Stoneparte. “You got me in one fierce mess with that scow. You dirty crook, I ought to paste you one on the puss.”

Peter Oliver McGee blinked in amazement. His expression seemed to indicate that he could not believe his ears.

“What are you trying to put over?” demanded Peter Oliver McGee.

“I’d like to put a brick over your head,” snapped Stoneparte.

“I don’t know what you’re driving at.”

“Oh, you don’t, hey?” continued Stoneparte. “I’m telling you that a dick just walked in here an hour ago and took the car to headquarters. How d’ya like them berries, hey?”

“I get it,” snorted Peter Oliver McGee. “You framed me. But you can’t get away with it. You can’t swipe my car and make me like it. I think you’re just a hot-car grifter, that’s what you are.”

Stoneparte couldn’t take it any longer. His temper had risen beyond his control and it was too late to count ten, or even six. Why, back in his carnival-circus days, he had almost murdered guys for only ten percent of the guff he was taking now. Like a bull out of a Spanish ring, he leaped toward McGee. His right hand was cocked for the blow that had laid so many cold in his midway days. But Peter Oliver McGee was a bit quicker. In a flash he had a gun in his right hand and it was pointed directly at the temple of Stoneparte.

“Back up and pipe down,” commanded McGee.

“Fight with your fists,” snarled Stoneparte. “I ain’t no gunman.”

MR. McGEE seemed not to hear at all. “Walk back into that office coop and do it speedy,” went on McGee.

Stoneparte backed and did it speedy.

“Now,” went on McGee, “sit down and listen.”

“You can’t do this to me.”

“Okay—but I’m doing it.”

“What’s eating you?” snapped Stoneparte.

“I’ll tell you,” obliged Peter Oliver McGee. “I left a car here for you to sell, and you sold it and are now trying to give me the old runaround. I got at least five hundred dollars coming and I want it. Pay, or I’ll plug you!”

“Didn’t I tell you that a dick come in here a

hour ago and took the boat to headquarters?”

“I ain’t interested in that fairy tale. The Grimm Brothers wrote the only kind I like. Now, how much have you got in the cash till?”

“Only a few bucks,” said Stoneparte, “and I need that to buy food for the wife and kiddies. I got a large family to support.”

“Me, too,” said McGee. “Which makes us even.”

McGee, still covering Stoneparte, spied a rope hanging on the wall. He grabbed it.

“I guess I’ll have to use some persuasion,” opined Peter Oliver McGee. “Keep still—I’m going to tie you up. If you don’t you’ll become a tasty treat for some embalmer.”

“I tell you there ain’t no dough in the till,” whined Stoneparte.

McGee had him tied in the chair in less than a minute. It was a work of art, and one that an efficiency expert would have okayed as first class. He next opened the register and took out a roll of bills, leaving the silver alone.

“That’s the mortgage money,” howled Stoneparte.

“That,” said McGee, “is very tough, indeed.”

“It is due tomorrow, and if it ain’t paid, my wife and kids will be kicked out into the street.”

McGee counted out four hundred and sixty dollars.

“You still owe me forty bucks,” said McGee, “which makes it five hundred, the same what’s coming to me. What have you got in your pockets?”

“Just some keys,” said Stoneparte.

“I love to see the keys,” said McGee. “Who knows, perhaps some will fit the cells in Alcatraz, where some of your friends are stopping.”

He frisked Stoneparte’s pockets and came out with a twenty-dollar bill and some small silver. He returned the silver.

“Which makes only twenty bucks you owe me,” said Peter Oliver McGee. “You can mail that to me. Just address me at RFD 41144, Frozenburg, Ice County, North Pole.”

“Listen, you boob,” snapped Stoneparte. “You can’t get away with this.”

“Did I hear you call me a boob?” asked McGee nonchalantly. “Well, figure this out: I’m here, free and fine, with your money for my car, and you’re there, tied neat and nicely. Who’s the boob?”

“I’ll get you some day if I have to choke for it!”

Stoneparte spat some tobacco juice with much force and vigor. It flew by McGee's face, missing it by a hair.

"Now, then," went on McGee, "all you have to do in order to save your fat body from a condition resembling a sieve, due to a large peppering of lead, is to remain quiet and gentlemanly for at least five minutes after I have departed hence. After that, you have my permission to notify the cops, the Marines, the Army, the Navy, with the French Foreign Legion tossed in for fair measure."

McGee cut the phone wires.

"The phone rates," he said, "in this town are terrible. I am just trying to cut down your bill. No wires, no phone. No phone, no bills. Get it?"

He backed out the door and then shut it, pushing the bolt, leaving Stoneparte to peace and solitude.

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, a taxi drew alongside of a parked car two miles beyond the city limits on the Tamiami Trail. McGee paid off the driver and told him to beat it back to town and to forget that he had ever noted such a mug as that of Peter Oliver McGee.

Rutherford was reading a love story magazine and appeared very bored. He found the magazine in the car and was amazed that such happy folk could exist, even between the covers of a periodical.

"Okay?" asked Rutherford.

"Okay," said McGee, getting in beside him.

"Any trouble?"

"Cinch. And the take was nearly five hundred."

Rutherford started the car and headed for Tampa.

"I been thinking," said Rutherford, "this hot car

stuff ain't our racket. You got to be a specialist to get away with it."

"Funny," said McGee, "I been thinking the same thoughts. Suppose we gilly this bus just outside of Tampa on some side road?"

"That's jake," said Rutherford.

At that moment a motorcycle roared beside them. Officer Don Dickson, State Highway Police, suggested they stop for a little chat.

"Gentlemen," said Officer Dickson, "kindly pull over to the curb." Dickson was famous for his politeness and had won a newspaper award for being the most courteous officer on the highway.

"What's the matter, officer?" demanded Rutherford. "We been going too fast?"

"Far from it," smiled Officer Dickson. "I must commend you for your safe and sane driving."

The gun that came up from seemingly no place covered McGee and Rutherford before they could do any sharp-shooting themselves.

"You fellows must be amateurs," said Dickson. "Why, we have some local talent that could give you some good tips."

"What's biting you?" demanded McGee.

"I'll explain," obliged Officer Dickson. "In the gentle art of car stealing one should have brains enough to get a new license with a new paint job. Meanwhile, gentlemen, please pass over your ironware and then follow the leader."

Two guns fell into the hands of Dickson.

"What did I tell you?" complained Rutherford to McGee.

"Yeah, I remember," said McGee. "This hot car stuff ain't our racket. You got to be a specialist to get away with it."