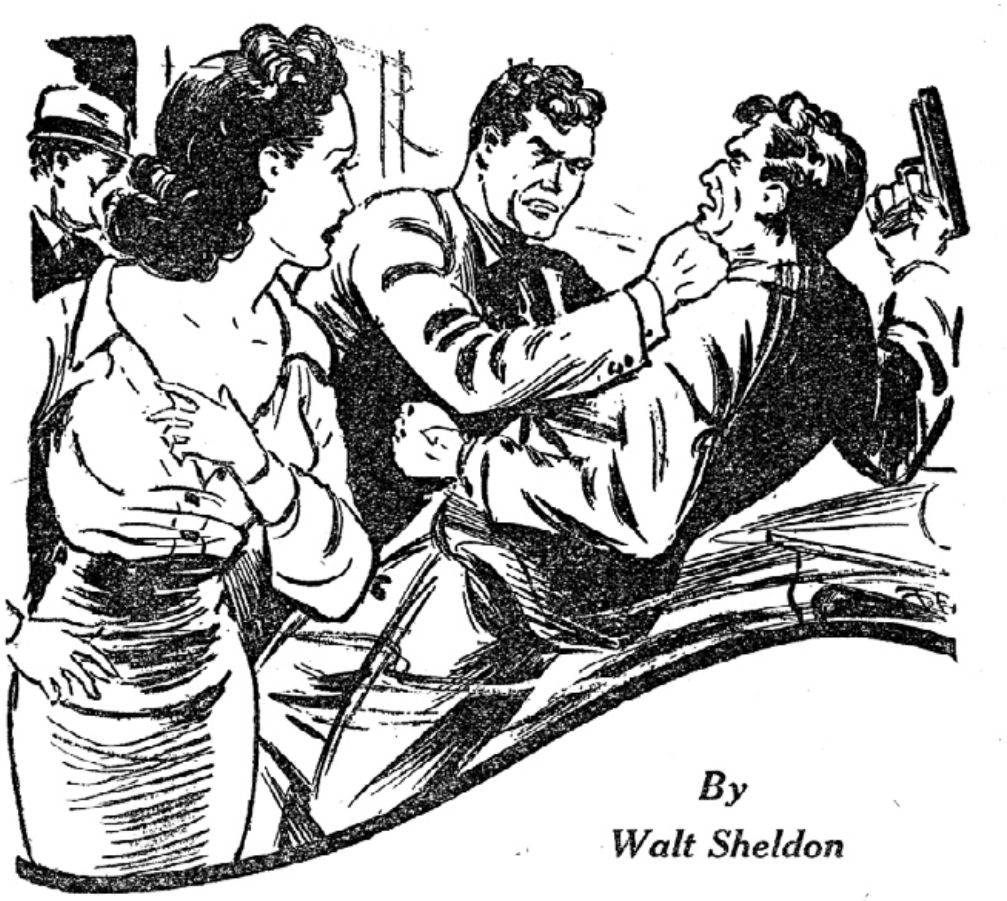
Ten Detective Aces, December, 1939

Pistol Performer



By
Walt Sheldon

Cord Kenyon had been tops as a pistol performer. But now holdup guns forced him to stage a new kind of hot-lead exhibition. And Kenyon had no time to rehearse for a coffin role.

ONE lonely buck. Cord Kenyon looked at the green rectangle in his hand and shrugged his big shoulders. Tomorrow it would be gone. Tomorrow a bread line and a flop house. Kenyon drummed on the hotel's cheap dresser with his long fingers.

There was a knock on the door. Kenyon plunged the buck into the pocket of his threadbare pants and opened the door stingily. He saw three figures in the dim hall. Three men.

"Kenyon?" It was a deep, well-focused voice.

"Yeah." Kenyon kept the door slitted.

"Open up. I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"How'd you like to make five hundred dollars?"

Kenyon snapped a sharp breath back between his teeth. "Come in," he said, opening the door. The three men entered. Kenyon's eyebrows clamped into a tight little wedge.

"Oh, it's you, Farnes," he muttered. I might've known there'd be a catch to it."

"Take it easy," said his visitor. "These aren't the old days when Cord Kenyon the Great shot the clothes from a beautiful girl at a distance of fifty—measure 'em—fifty

feet. And Gerald Farnes is no longer a honky-tonk barker on the midway."

Kenyon smiled slowly. "Yeah, you have done all right by yourself since then, haven't you, Farnes?"

He made a rapid inventory of the man. Farnes was medium-sized, dressed in a flawless dinner jacket that hung with the clinging perfection of satin. His face was smooth, good-looking, but under the eyes were little purple puffs; in the nose, enlarged pores and streaked blood vessels.

"As I recall, Kenyon," said Farnes, "you never did like bush-beating. So I'll come to the point." He adjusted an imaginary flaw in his tie. "Kenyon, I'll pay you five hundred dollars to shoot me in the leg!"

Kenyon stared at him quietly. He looked at Farnes' two companions lounging at the half-open door. One was thick, stocky, his puffy cheekbones nearly hiding his eyes. The other was darker, had a battered nose and big green fish orbs.

"As far as most people know," continued Farnes, "I am no longer a midway pitch-man, but a playboy reeking with dough and ancestors."

He paused, produced a gold cigarette case, flipped it open and held a white bank of smokes toward Kenyon. The latter shook his head and fished a crumpled pack of smokes from his own shirt pocket.

"Unfortunately," resumed Farnes, "the gambling luck that's kept me going has started to peter out. And then there are current expenses—like blondes and brunettes."

Farnes blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air. "You've heard of Glenda Brent-Collings, the tobacco heiress?" he asked. Kenyon nodded slightly. "She owns," said Farnes, "a diamond necklace worth, roughly, one hundred thousand dollars. I have a plan to—ah—to acquire it."

"So where do I come in?" asked Kenyon.

"You will be present at the—ah—acquisition. Being a bit of a marksman, you'll shoot me harmlessly in the flesh of the thigh. You see, the fact that I get shot will automatically clear me of suspicion."

Kenyon folded his arms. "The answer," he said, "is nothing doing."

"And that," returned Farnes, still smiling, "is where my pals Cutter and Guppie come in." He motioned to the men at the door. "Fellows, Mr. Kenyon doesn't want to play."

The one with the fish eyes said: "Oh, he don't, don't he? Come on, Cutter." Cutter nodded and followed.

"These two gentlemen," stated Farnes, "have somewhat persuasive personalities. I'd accept the offer if I were you, Kenyon. You have nothing to do but fire the shots. Cutter and Guppie will handle all the other details."

Kenyon glanced at Cutter and Guppie. They had bland, lifeless stares fixed on him; their figures were slouched, relaxed.

"You don't think," Farnes said, "that I'd be so dumb as to come here and spill my plans without being pretty certain you'd give in?"

Kenyon said: "You can take your five hundred bucks and stick it in your eye."

He shot his hand forward and his long fingers clamped on Farnes' wrist. He pulled and gave his own wrist a half turn. Farnes spun about so that Kenyon had his arm locked tightly in the small of his back. The marksman glanced over Farnes' shoulder and saw Cutter and Guppie lugging from under their armpits a brace of big black automatics.

"Easy," said Kenyon in a low voice. "Use those roscoes, and I'll break Farnes' arm."

Cutter and Guppie looked at each other dumbly.

"Come on, you dopes!" shouted Farnes. "He hasn't a gun!"

The two men shifted their grips to the barrels of their guns and stepped forward. Kenyon backed slowly toward the bureau pulling Farnes with him.

Cutter and Guppie took one more step and Kenyon gave the playboy a sudden shove. Farnes sprawled clumsily into the gunmen's shanks and they spilled in a scrambled heap atop him.

Kenyon took a running broad jump. Guppie's hand caught his ankle and the floor came up into his face. The skin opened a little just above his left eye. He yanked his foot free and ran for the door, crouching.

He heard Farnes yell: "Get him!"

Then he reached the door and at the same moment a heavy body hit him in the back of the knees. His head hit the floor again. About the same time something batted the back of his skull. The western hemisphere came down around his shoulders and the lights went out.

Kenyon was still in the hotel room when he awoke. He was stretched out on the bed and Farnes was standing over him. By the doorway, he could make out Cutter and Guppie and hear the clicking of coppers as they calmly matched pennies. Farnes noticed his open eyes.

"You weren't very smart, Kenyon," he said.

The sharpshooter's head was throbbing with a dull pain that seemed to spread from his eyebrows to his occipital bone. Farnes was looking at his wrist watch.

"We leave in a few minutes," he said, "so I'll give you the dope now."

"Farnes," returned the man on the bed, "did you ever hear that old one about leading a horse to water and trying to make him drink?"

The ex-barker smiled slowly. "I should think by now," he said, "you'd have stopped underestimating me."

Kenyon slumped. "Okay, Farnes," he said. "You win." He watched the playboy closely.

"Now you're sensible," Farnes said. He stepped back and leaned lazily on the window sill. "Here's what happens. At a quarter to eight this evening, I escort Glenda Brent-Collings to the eleventh floor of the Bellevue-Parker. We'll be heading for the Banker's Club annual dinner in the Rose Room, and Glenda will be wearing her diamond necklace. You three will be waiting in the hallway.

"As we round the turn, Guppie steps forward and shoves a gun into my ribs. You'll be a few feet down the hall. Cutter, of course, will be right behind you. Then I'll pretend to struggle with Guppie and he'll throw me against the opposite wall. I'll stand perfectly still as though I'm dazed, and you'll shoot me so that the bullet just scratches my leg.

"After that, Guppie snatches the necklace and you all run into Room 1106—I've already reserved it. There's a fire escape leading from 1106. You go down to the tenth floor, take the elevator and calmly leave the building."

Farnes looked as though he might take a bow.

"Okay," said Kenyon quietly. His face was motionless; only a trace of a squint showed that he was thinking—hard and fast.

Farnes glanced at his watch again and said: "Let's go."

Kenyon rose and Cutter stepped behind him.

"I ain't no marksman, wiseguy," he said. "But just try something and see how much I miss."

Twenty minutes later, Kenyon, with Cutter and Guppie, stepped from the elevator to the top floor of the Bellevue-Parker. The sliding doors shut behind them

and Cutter's gun poked his captive toward the stairwell. They descended to the eleventh floor.

When each man reached his station in the hallway, Cutter said: "Better check the fire escape."

Guppie disappeared for a moment, then returned and clipped: "Okay." He looked at his watch. "Get set—only about two minutes."

Cutter handed Kenyon a revolver. "Two cartridges in there," he said. "That means you get two chances and no more, see? And if you ball things up—" He grinned and patted the shiny barrel of his own weapon.

Around the corner of the hallway came the noise of an elevator door opening. Kenyon gripped the gun and bit his lower lip. He felt Cutter's automatic poke firmly into his left kidney. As he watched, two figures appeared around the bend of the corridor. A few tiny dots of sweat came to the bridge of Kenyon's nose.

It was dim in the hallway, but that didn't stop Kenyon from whistling softly through his teeth when he saw Glenda Brent-Collings. She wore a clinging gown that seemed to shimmer both rose and blue, and on her white throat there sparkled a necklace of the biggest, brightest diamonds that Kenyon had ever seen. Farnes, immaculate in his dinner jacket, smartly offset her dazzling beauty.

Guppie stepped to the middle of the hallway and leveled his gun. "This is a stickup. Just be quiet and you won't get hurt, see? Keep your hands at your side where I can see 'em."

Glenda gasped inwardly and clutched at her necklace.

"I said hands at your side!" growled the gunman.

Farnes snapped, "See here, you can't get away with this!" He stepped forward and slapped his hand on Guppie's automatic.

Guppie clinched and the two men rocked together. From the gloom of the hallway, Kenyon watched, his eyes half closed, his mouth spread in a pencilled line. Cutter's gun poked a reminder into him.

Suddenly Guppie shoved Farnes. Glenda's eyes were wide as she watched the playboy thud into the opposite wall. She made a half turn and clenched her hands into tight, nervous little knots.

Cutter brought his face closer to Kenyon's ear. *"Now!"*

Two shots, like two notes of a kettle drum boomed through the hallway. The sweat on Kenyon's face was glistening, the line of his mouth was now a mere razor slit. He watched Farnes clutch his leg where the bullet had seared the flesh, then swung his eyes toward Guppie.

Guppie was clutching at Glenda's throat and getting nowhere fast. He stopped and swayed with indecision.

"Come on," snarled Cutter, "in a minute this joint'll be full of people!"

Guppie turned and spread his hands. "The necklace ain't here!" he said.

Farnes looked up from his wound. "That's impossible!" he snapped. Then he suddenly clenched his teeth as Glenda stared at him, wide-eyed.

Cutter mumbled: "Necklace or no, I'm lammin'." He grasped the doorknob of Room 1106. Kenyon crouched, then uncoiled and sprang at Cutter. He landed on the gunman's back.

One hand encircled the thick neck, the other dug its long fingers into the tendons of Cutter's gun wrist. Cutter let out a sharp yell and dropped his automatic.

Kenyon shoved the man away and flopped on the weapon. Right on top of that came two shots. He heard one slug hit the floor beside his ear and then something plowed through the flesh just above his

left collar bone. He felt a hot pain go all through his arm.

"It's a double-cross!" yelled Guppie.

Kenyon lifted Cutter's automatic, took a split-second aim and pulled the trigger. Noise, smoke, and on the broad surface of Guppie's forehead a sudden black hole. Guppie fell on his face.

There was the sound of voices and running feet in the hall. Kenyon heard them dimly. He tried to forget all that blood cascading from his shoulder. It seemed that Cutter was trying to step over him and get into the doorway of 1106. He dropped the automatic, shot his hand up, grabbed something and hung on. He was still hanging on when he went to sleep.

Cord Kenyon was in a white, cool bed. There was hospital smell in the air. He began to notice some faces above him. That one in white seemed a doctor. Then a nurse—a couple of cops—and a heavenly vision that looked exactly like Glenda Brent-Collings. The vision was speaking.

"I waited until you awakened," she said. "I wanted to thank you personally."

Kenyon smiled weakly. "Then you've figured out the whole setup?"

"You mean Farnes." She looked grave for a moment. ''Yes. He's been arrested. If it weren't for you—"

Kenyon raised his good hand. "Skip it," he said.

"It was lucky," said Glenda, "that my necklace clasp broke when it did, and the necklace fell into the front of my dress. You really took advantage of the moment. In fact, my father can use men like you. How'd you like to be the family's personal bodyguard?"

"Would I?" shouted Kenyon. "Lady, you hit a bull's-eye."

One of the policemen grinned at him. "That was mighty fancy shootin', brother. Where'd you learn to handle a gun?"

"In the circus," answered Kenyon. "I used to shoot buttons from a girl's dress so it would fall off. Then, as a climax to the act—" he paused and looked at Glenda with a half smile— "I'd send a bullet right through the clasp of her necklace!"