

A Snitch in Time

The kid hated the cops; for a detective had accidentally caused his broken back. But now that detective faced the electric chair—and only the kid held the key to the police pistol puzzle.



By
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YOUNG BOB REID laboriously descended the narrow stairs that led from the attic to Joe Miller's poolroom, his frail body stiff in the harnesslike contraption buckled under his shirt. A grimace of pain twisted his features, fed his bitterness against Detective Larry Regan. He would get even with Regan one day. When he was strong again.

Bobby was young to cherish hatred, only thirteen, but when a fellow had to

drag around with an injured spine, he was bound not to like the guy he blamed for his misfortune.

He didn't hate all cops. Just Larry Regan. In fact, one of the two new friends he'd made since the accident was a cop. Detective Sergeant Dave Weldon. The other was the pretty lady who drove him twice a week in a blue coupe to the hospital for treatment, and whose name Bobby had never learned. He liked her, very much. He liked Sergeant Weldon,

too, in a different way. He never felt shy with the big, red-faced detective, even entrusted him with the money he was saving toward the five hundred dollars needed to make his back well again.

With the sixty cents he had earned last night, Bobby was only a dime short of ten dollars. His brown eyes misted, reckoning it up. It would take an awful long time to reach five hundred dollars.

He shuffled out into the poolroom, lifting his chin. It wasn't good for a chap to be moping when he had work to do. Not that he needed to hurry. Joe didn't open for business before ten and it was only eight thirty now.

Slated for an orphanage after his parents died two years ago, Bobby had run away when they came to fetch him—had sought refuge in Joe Miller's poolroom. Joe allowed him to sleep in the attic and earn a few nickels and dimes at night among his customers. In return, Bobby swept the place each morning. Joe was a regular guy, had even let him come back when the hospital discharged him.

Bobby dragged along between the long, green-baize tables covered with dirty sheets, bent stiffly and picked up the newspaper thrust underneath the double front doors. Inside the big room, the air was foul and smoke laden. He opened the doors to admit a stream of cold clean air, then went over and dropped the paper on the cigar counter.

He couldn't miss reading the glaring headlines.

DETECTIVE SHOOTS BROTHER OFFICER IN COLD BLOOD

His eyes growing round, Bobby read carefully what was underneath. He didn't understand some of the words but the story was clear in his mind when he finished.

A message phoned in to Police Headquarters shortly after one o'clock that

morning had claimed that the two men wanted for the Morden robbery and killing were holed up in Delanty's vacant warehouse on Canal Street.

The squad sent out surrounded the building, started to close in just as a door opened and a man appeared there. He fired one shot which killed Detective Bradley, then collapsed. He was found to be Detective Larry Regan, apparently crazed with liquor. Whiskey bottles and drinking glasses in a rear room showed that three men had been there. Only one glass bore fingerprints—Regan's prints.

The gun used was Regan's service revolver. And the five hundred dollars found in his pocket proved to be part of the Morden robbery. A trapdoor leading to a jetty under the door had provided an avenue of escape for Regan's companions. Undoubtedly Regan had been working in with the killers, had gone there tonight for the payoff and his confederates made their escape when the police arrived.

THE first thought in Bobby's stunned mind was that Regan was out of his reach now. The law sent killers to the chair, especially cop killers! But—somehow it didn't seem true. Killing a man was different from chasing a kid for stealing an apple, even when the kid was Bobby Reid, left crippled perhaps for life as a result. It had been his own fault, Bobby knew, darting across the road into the path of an oncoming car.

His hatred for Regan arose from the fact that everyone took Tony's apples. Why, he'd even seen the cop on the beat select a rosy one and eat it and Tony stood beside him at the cart. So what right had Regan chasing him for doing what the cop did?

Both Sergeant Weldon and Regan had tried to make him believe that the cop took the apple with Tony's permission; that the

detective had chased him only to impress upon him that stealing an apple sometimes led to stealing bigger things.

Bobby shook his head, went slowly to a closet at the back for his broom and watering can. Half an hour later, the sweeping finished, he closed the front doors and slipped out the back way for breakfast. Charlie Wong, the moon-faced Chinaman who ran the Waldorf Cafe, refused to take money for the meals Bobby ate there since he came out of hospital.

Sergeant Weldon was in the poolroom talking with Joe Miller when Bobby returned. Weldon, a burly man with keen gray eyes set deep in his ruddy face, nodded to Bobby without his usual smile. He went out frowning a couple of minutes later. Bobby was waiting for him at the door, the sixty cents clutched in his hand. The detective brushed past him with a brief:

“Later, Bobby. I’m busy now.”

Joe came to the door, stood watching Weldon climb into the police car and drive away. He was a heavy, bullet-headed man with heavy-lidded eyes. His poolroom was popular. Some of his customers were crooks and ex-cons, but Joe Miller never inquired into their business. Just kept his nose clean and his lips clamped tight.

He went back behind the cigar counter and beckoned Bobby over. “Look, kid,” he said in his peculiar husky voice, “the dick, Regan, he killed a cop last night. According to this—” a thick finger stabbed the paper spread over the counter “—there’s no doubt he done it. But Weldon doesn’t seem to think so. He was asking about some of the boys. He might be asking you questions, see?”

“Not Sergeant Dave!” Bobby said stoutly. “He once told me a squealer always gets paid with a knife or a bullet sooner or later.”

Joe’s square head nodded. “He’s right,

kid. Take me. Anything I hear or see, I forget an’ the boys know it. If they thought you told Weldon things —” he shrugged — “mebbe you’d be dragged out of an alley, stiff, some morning!”

Bobby shivered. “Sure, I know,” he muttered uneasily.

“Okay, then.” Joe waved him away and went back to reading the newspaper.

Bobby combed his hair and prepared to meet the lady in the blue coupe. It was his morning for the hospital and she always picked him up in front of Bixall’s Drug Store on the avenue.

BUT for once the blue coupe wasn’t there when he arrived. A taxi stood at the curb, its driver, a freckle-faced chap, leaning against the hood and smoking a cigarette. He grinned at Bobby.

“You the fella for the hospital?”

Bobby nodded, puzzled.

“Hop in.” The driver opened the cab door. “I’m taking you there.”

“But—where’s the lady in the blue coupe?”

“Search me.” The hackie shrugged. “I got orders from the office to pick up a lame boy here for St. Christopher’s at ten forty-five.”

He helped Bobby inside. The youngster perched on the back seat, keenly disappointed. It was the first time in the two months since he’d come out of hospital that his friend had missed driving him there. He liked sitting beside her on the front seat, drinking in the fragrant perfume that surrounded her, feeling the warmth of her dark blue eyes when she looked at him

The taxi had gone when Bobby came out of the hospital. A police car, parked on the driveway, pulled out and rolled smoothly to the steps. Surprised, Bobby recognized Sergeant Weldon behind the wheel. The detective leaned across and

opened the door. Bobby clambered inside. Weldon's face was grave and thoughtful as he sent the car away.

"You heard about Larry Regan, Bobby?" he asked abruptly when they had left the hospital grounds.

Bobby nodded. "The paper said he had shot Bradley."

"They're wrong!" the detective growled. "Larry was framed. But I've got to prove it to save him. There's a chance you can help."

"Me help Regan!" Bobby laughed shrilly. His back hurt terribly like it always did for a while after the doctor had rubbed and pounded over his body. And now Dave wanted him to help the man responsible for his agony.

"I know how you feel, Bobby—" Weldon's gray eyes clouded. "Only you've got things twisted."

"Yeah, a twisted back!" Bobby cried bitterly. After a minute's silence he stole a glance at the sergeant's face. It was bleak and marked with deep lines around the mouth, as though something hurt inside him. "How d'you know he was framed?"

"I saw Larry this morning," Weldon explained slowly. "Someone claiming to be Dummy Grach phoned at ten last night, offered to give him some dope on the Morden job and arranged to meet Larry at Delanty's warehouse at midnight. Larry had reliable information before from the Dummy, so he went."

Bobby nodded. Sure, he'd heard whispers that the Dummy was a stoolie.

"Larry walked into a trap," Weldon went on, "didn't get a chance to see the men who held him up. They handcuffed him while they poured liquor into him. Everything went hazy after that, but Larry swears he dimly remembers someone sticking a gun in his hand and manipulating his limp fingers on the

trigger. The gun roared and he passed out. Headquarters doesn't believe his story."

"But—they didn't see anyone with Regan," Bobby said.

"It's a dark hole, black as ink around Delanty's. No chance for 'em to see the man holding Larry up, triggering the gun in his hand."

"Why don't you see the Dummy?" Bobby asked.

Weldon laughed harshly. "The Dummy was picked up early this morning—dead! Hit-and-run accident, they figure."

BOBBY shivered. Stoolies never lived long. He remembered seeing the Dummy around Joe's poolroom last night. "Why would anyone frame Regan?" he whispered.

"Larry suspected Nick Smale and Monk Hanna pulled the Morden job." Dave Weldon stared through the windshield, his eyes hard. "They might have done it to get rid of him. Had 'em both picked up for questioning this morning while I took a run out to their shack. But I found nothing that would help. They claim they were in Miller's joint until midnight. Joe says they were there but he couldn't swear when they left. That's where you might help, Bobby. Did you see them between eleven and twelve? Or notice anything out of the way before then?"

Bobby thought of the Dummy and something pricked his scalp. He jerked his head toward the window so Dave couldn't see his face. "You want me to be a stoolie!" he cried fiercely.

Maybe there was something he could tell Dave, but he didn't want to be found dead some morning—not for Larry Regan.

"Larry's life is at stake," Weldon said softly.

Bobby shook his head without looking around. "I don't know anything, Sergeant Dave," he said flatly. "Sure, I saw Nick and Monk last night, but I went up to the attic before eleven."

Weldon sighed deeply but didn't speak.

For the first time Bobby noticed the direction they were going. Joe's place was on the East side and they were heading for the downtown section. "Where we going?"

"Someone I have to see," Weldon answered briefly.

Bobby hunched back on the seat, feeling sick and miserable. He tried not to think about Larry Regan going to the chair.

The police car nosed into the curb before a big marble-fronted building. Weldon got out, came around and helped Bobby alight. They crossed the pavement and the detective set the revolving doors in slow motion, waited until the youngster had limped inside, then followed.

Bobby's heart suddenly pounded; his eyes brightened. He saw the pretty lady who drove the blue coupe, standing at the end of the rotunda. But she looked awfully unhappy. Her blue eyes were kind of misty, like pain trying to break through.

She caught Bobby's eyes then and smiled faintly.

"Wait here," Weldon said quickly. He placed Bobby on a seat and crossed over to the lady. They talked earnestly for perhaps four minutes then came toward him.

"Ann, my sister," Weldon said abruptly, "has some good news for you, Bobby."

Bobby nodded, bewildered. Why hadn't they told him before she was Sergeant Dave's sister? And what could Dave mean, good news for him?

"I'll leave him with you, Ann," Weldon was saying. "Keep your chin up.

And you, Bobby—" he touched the youngster's shoulder—"surprise waiting for you."

Bobby and Dave Weldon's sister watched his tall figure stride outside; then:

"I'm taking you to see a specialist Bobby," she said. "We didn't tell you until it was certain we could get him to undertake your case. There's a chance he can make your back strong again."

"Yes, ma'am," Bobby gulped.

Her hand slipped around his shoulder and guided him to one of the elevators.

FOR the next half hour Bobby was in a daze. He caught fragments of the grave-faced specialist's conversation with Sergeant Dave's sister.

"—my examination confirms Doctor Cairn's diagnosis. . . . Will advise you when to bring him. . . . Your address is 212 Belmain Avenue. . . ."

Then the elevator was carrying them swiftly to the ground floor. Bobby climbed into the blue coupe pleasantly aware of the delightful perfume that wafted toward him when Ann slipped behind the wheel.

But Sergeant Dave's sister hardly spoke to him during the trip. Bobby's elation slumped, studying her pale oval face.

"Dave will arrange everything," she told him when he got out in front of Bixall's. "Good-bye, Bobby."

"Good-bye, ma'am," Bobby muttered. "An' —an' thanks for taking me there." He thought he saw tears in her eyes as the car purred away. He didn't feel very happy now, in spite of his good fortune. . . .

Twilight's gloom had crept over the city when Bobby went into the poolroom.

Joe Miller stared at him queerly under his heavy eyelids. "Wimpy says he saw you ridin' with Regan's wife, kid. What about it?"

Bobby shook his head. "That was

Dave Weldon's sister," he said, smiling. He explained how she had been picking him up outside Bixall's on hospital mornings.

Joe's lips twisted in a faint grin. "Weldon's sister married Regan two-three years back."

Bobby stood dazed. Sergeant Dave's sister married to the man he hated.

"It ain't healthy for you, kid," Joe was saying, "running around with cops and their wives. An' it ain't good for my business, see? The boys might figure you a stoolie."

"I'm not a stoolie, Joe," Bobby whispered.

"Mebbe you'd better quit seein' any of 'em." Joe walked away. Over his shoulder he added: "An' Regan's the guy chased you into that car!"

His thin face grim, Bobby nodded. Joe was right. He recalled the address he'd overheard in the doctor's office. 212 Belmain Avenue. He would go there and ask Regan's wife who was paying for his operation? If it was Regan, then—he swallowed a lump in his throat—he would tell her he didn't want it.

Red Arnold, a taxi driver he knew on the corner stand, agreed to take him there, wait and bring him back for sixty cents.

BELMAIN was a quiet suburban street of neat bungalows. The taxi halted in front of 212 and Bobby crawled out.

"Won't be long, Red," he promised and limped along the path. He pressed a door button and waited. His heart was shaking his ribs and he wasn't sure now he should have come, vaguely aware of a struggle going on inside him.

Seconds later, the door opened and Sergeant Dave's sister, Ann, stood staring at him in astonishment. She was slim and very pretty in a neat blue dress. But her

eyes were sad and Bobby could see her under lip trembling.

"Why, hello, Bobby," she said quickly. "Come in!"

She closed the door once he was inside, led him to a cozy little room with nice furniture in it. Sergeant Dave Weldon was sitting in one of the big chairs, his face lined just as Bobby remembered seeing it that morning in the car. Dave's eyes widened in surprise but before he could speak, Bobby burst out:

"Joe just told me you're Mrs. Regan, ma'am!"

She glanced quickly at Weldon, then back to Bobby. "Yes, that's true, Bobby. Here, sit down." She had him settled comfortably in a chair before he could protest.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he muttered. "I—I wouldn't have let you drive me to the hospital if I'd known!"

"That's why we didn't tell you, Bobby," Weldon said quietly. "You blamed Larry for your accident, wrongly. But both Larry and Ann feel as badly over it as though he was to blame. They wanted to bring you here, adopt you. But we all realized it wouldn't do—yet. Larry arranged for Ann to drive you to the hospital, fixed it with Charlie Wong so you had decent meals and—he's been working for six weeks to get Doctor Anderley interested in your case.

"You see, Bobby, we didn't have the five hundred dollars to pay him, and Anderley took a lot of persuading. Larry finally got his promise to examine you today with a view to operating, then—you know what happened last night. We were afraid Larry's trouble might affect the doctor's decision. So Ann went to see him this morning. He was wavering, but she managed to convince him that you shouldn't suffer on account of Larry."

Bobby stole a glance at Mrs. Regan. She was sitting on a chesterfield, crying softly. He suddenly felt very small and ashamed. Why, she had given up all this morning to help him—and all the time her own husband was in prison, waiting until the judge should order guards to strap him in the electric chair. It came to Bobby in a flash—what he had to do.

He eased out of the chair and went over to Sergeant Dave's sister. "I—I guess I was wrong, ma'am," he gulped. "Maybe I can help."

A quick leap brought Weldon out of his chair. "What d'you mean, Bobby? If you know anything, speak!"

Bobby shook his head stubbornly. He couldn't squeal, not even to save Larry Regan. "I gotta see someone first," he muttered. He stumbled across to the door, winced when Sergeant Dave's fingers fell heavily upon his shoulder. "You'll spoil everything if you don't let me go—alone."

He heard Weldon expel a noisy breath, then the grip on his shoulder relaxed. He squirmed loose and went into the hall without looking back.

TWENTY minutes later, Bobby got out of the taxi at the corner and handed Red sixty cents. The hackie grinned and gave him back a quarter. There was a fair-sized crowd in the poolroom and Bobby managed to reach Joe's dingy office at the back without attracting attention. His heart thumping wildly, he stood there a minute checking those in the room.

He felt a quick relief. The two men he was looking for weren't there. He didn't want to see them here. He ducked inside the office, opened the long middle drawer in Joe's battered desk. His fumbling fingers gripped the gun he knew Joe kept there. He knew how to use it. Once, when they'd held a shooting match in the basement, Joe had shown him how it

worked, had let him fire one shot.

He shivered, seeing the brass-headed cartridges showing in the cylinder. He thrust the weapon in his coat pocket. It felt awfully heavy. He dodged out into the poolroom again, worked toward the rear door, dreading lest someone should call him to do an errand. But he reached the alley without being stopped.

It was a long walk to the Commons where Nick Smale and Monk Hanna lived in a small shanty far away from any other houses. Bobby utilized short cuts, spurred into frenzied speed by the fear that the two men might have left before he arrived there. The muscles in his back and legs were screaming with pain when he reached the edge of the Common. But he didn't feel the agony after he glimpsed a thin yellow streak through the darkness. Someone was still in the shack.

He crept slowly across the rough ground, fighting back a swift feeling of panic. He knew the layout of the shack, had been there with messages at various times. It was a two-roomed building with a door opening into the living room and another in the woodshed at the back. The light, he saw, seeped under a badly fitting shade.

Bobby paused at the front door, drew in a long breath then knocked loudly. He heard heavy footsteps inside and a hoarse voice shouted: "Who is it?"

"Me, Bobby. I've a message from Wimpy."

The door flung open, outlining a bulky figure. A huge hand reached out, dragged Bobby inside, then the door slammed shut.

The man admitting Bobby growled: "Okay, punk, spill it." A swarthy fellow and stocky, Nick Smale had the shifty eyes of a rat set close in his pock-marked face.

Bobby pulled the gun from his pocket and pointed it at Smale. "There's no message," he said, "I'll shoot if you move,

Smale!”

The crook’s sallow face was abruptly dirty white. “Put that thing away, kid!” he gasped. “It might go off!”

“It will unless you tell the police you shot Bradley last night, not Larry Regan!” Bobby wished the gun wasn’t so heavy. It was a hard job, keeping it pointed steady at Nick Smale.

“You’re crazy, kid!” Smale forced a laugh. “Hell, Regan shot the dick!”

Bobby shook his head, worried because Monk Hanna wasn’t there. He wanted to get the two killers together. But he guessed Nick Smale would have to do.

“I saw you talking to the Dummy ‘bout half past nine last night,” Bobby said. “Then the Dummy went out. He came back after ten and I heard him tell you: ‘It’s in the bag, Nick. He fell for it, hook, line and sinker!’ The Dummy phoned Larry to meet him at Delanty’s warehouse.”

Nick Smale’s eyes held a cunning gleam. “Why ain’t you told the cops?” he growled.

“I’m not a stoolie,” Bobby said. “You’re going to write it all down, just like it happened. How you an’ Monk Hanna made Larry drunk, then one of you held him up when the police came and pulled the trigger of his gun. I’ll kill you if you don’t!”

“**D**ROP THAT gun, kid, before I blow a hole through you!” Monk Hanna stepped out of the bedroom, a big automatic leveled at Bobby, an ugly grin on his thin lips. He was a small dapper man with a smooth round face and hard glassy eyes. “Drop it, quick!”

Bobby tried to say something but his tongue seemed to fill his mouth. The strength oozed out of his fingers and the .38 sagged. Too late, he attempted to lift it,

but Nick Smale had leaped across the room, wrenched it roughly from his hand.

“You little louse!” Nick Smale snarled, “holdin’ me up!”

“Hold it, Nick!” Monk said softly. “The kid’s smart, but not smart enough. If he’d gone to the cops with that story, we’d be facing the chair.”

“So we blast him!” Nick Smale snapped.

“No.” Monk laughed softly. “We’ll fix him the way we did the Dummy—an accident.”

Bobby’s legs felt boneless. He held on to the back of a nearby chair for support. “You—you killed the Dummy so he couldn’t squeal about last night,” he muttered.

“Sure,” Monk admitted smoothly. He thrust his gun into a holster under his coat. “He knew too much, same as you. Tough luck, kid, but we can’t take chances. Regan can’t prove his story with the Dummy and you dead. So he’ll take the juice.”

“That’s like murdering him!” Bobby whispered.

Monk nodded. “Sure, like remote control, kid. He takes the rap for me. Yeah, I shot Bradley same as you figured. Regan was getting too hot on the Morden killing. Mebbe Nick shouldn’t have blasted the watchman, but—” he shrugged.

“I’m goin’ to blast this punk, too,” Nick Smale said. “Another hit-and-run killing might tie him up with the Dummy an’ start something.” He raised the .38 and Bobby cringed in the chair, closed his eyes.

A gun cracked and Bobby braced himself for the pain. But none came, no impact of a bullet striking his body. Instead, he heard loud shouts, recognized Dave Weldon’s voice saying: “Don’t reach for your gun, Monk!”

He opened his eyes. Besides Sergeant Dave, half a dozen grim-faced detectives were in the room covering the two crooks. Nick Smale was holding a shattered wrist

The two killers handcuffed and taken away, Weldon put a couple of men to tearing apart the shack. Then he led Bobby out to his car.

“Will they let Larry—Mr. Regan go now?” Bobby wanted to know when they were speeding across the Common.

Dave Weldon smiled. “Yeah,” he said softly, “thanks to you, Bobby. The boys’ll find Nick’s gun that he used on the Morden watchman, along with the stuff they heisted. And half a dozen witnesses heard Monk admit last night’s frame-up on Larry, and killing the Dummy.”

Still bewildered, Bobby asked another question. “How did you get there in time

to stop him shooting me? I—I didn’t squeal, did I, Dave?”

“No, you’re not a stoolie, kid. I figured it best to let you go ahead your own way, trailed you back to Joe’s. I was close behind when you started out for the shack, guessed where you were heading for and phoned for a squad to meet me there. I found the secret of opening the shed door while I was at the shack this morning. We slipped in after Nick dragged you inside, heard all that was said. You were quite safe, Bobby. We had them covered all the time.”

Bobby sighed. He felt happy, until he thought of Joe. “Maybe Joe won’t want me back there now, Sergeant Dave,” he said.

“Forget Joe.” Weldon laughed. “Your home is with Ann and Larry from now on.”