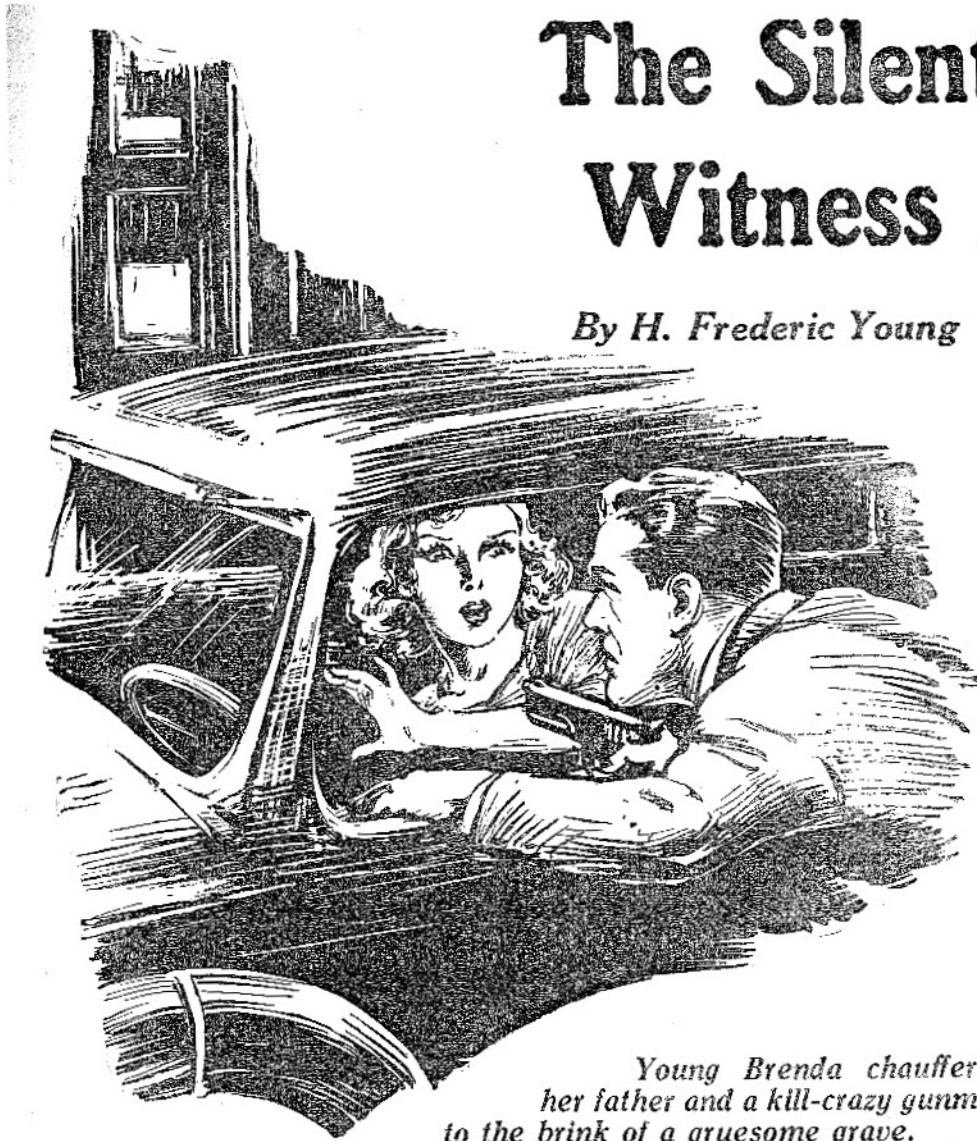


# The Silent Witness

By H. Frederic Young



*Young Brenda chauffeured her father and a kill-crazy gunman to the brink of a gruesome grave.*

AS SHE stepped along the dark foyer, Brenda simply could not resist the dual voices behind her father's bedroom door, so she paused and frowned. Then, her hand moving hesitantly, grasped the knob and gently turned it, pushing the door slowly inward.

She took one step across the threshold. She stopped and felt tight inside. A man, waving a black automatic at her father, turned and scowled at her. He wore a black overcoat and a black, rakish hat which he had not bothered to remove. He made a

curt motion with his head while the gun flicked her way.

"Step inside, Babe."

She did not move. "If it's money you want," she said unsteadily, "I'll open the safe. Father's stubborn and probably wouldn't."

He dug in his coat pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes, working one free and grasping it with his thin lips. Then he grinned and a beam of morning sunlight easing around the curtain flashed on his white teeth. "It ain't money, Babe," he

said, patting his coat pocket with his free hand. "I've got that already."

She watched him crease a match with his thumbnail and light the cigarette. She looked at the automatic and the man's eyes, both merciless.

"Then what do you want?" she asked, but the expression on her father's face almost told her.

"Your father just decided to go for a nice long ride this morning." The man gave a short chuckle. "I didn't figure you would be up this early. But since you are you'll have to go along."

She turned to her father. He glanced up helplessly. Brenda paled; her fingernails dug into her purse. "You mean—"

"Take it easy, honey," her father said. "I sentenced this gunman to life in prison, ten years ago. He got a parole and he's back for revenge. He can't get away with it."

"Step on it!" snapped the gunman. "You're wasting my time. I got places to go." He flicked ashes on the floor and added: "Anybody but a yokel could get by with this job."

The girl chewed thoughtfully on her lip. "Are we going in your car?" she questioned the man.

He looked at her, and she could feel the insolence of his eyes. "Why, Babe, when you plan a thing ten years you ain't liable to make a phony move like that. In the first place I ain't gotta car. Now listen close, Babe, because I ain't got time to be repeating myself. We all three walk out the front door, just like me and your father was taking you to work. Do you usually drive down yourself?"

She hadn't moved, kept leaning against the door jamb. "I used to," she admitted, with a sidelong glance at her father. "But since I lost—"

"Never mind the explanations!" the man snapped. "I just wanted to know if you

could drive a car." The girl's father parted his lips to speak, but the gunman waved him to silence by the quiet menace of the automatic. "Don't waste my time arguing. Get your coat on, judge. . . . When we get in the car you take the wheel, Babe. That'll look natural. Your father will sit in front with you, and I'll sit in the back seat. Don't forget I gotta gun. One squawk or phony move if we pass a copper, and I can silence you plenty."

"I'm ready," said the girl's father.

Outside, in the crisp morning, they stepped quickly to the garage. Brenda slipped inside the big sedan and moved under the wheel. Her father handed her the key, and soon the motor was humming.

The gunman sat in the back seat with the automatic on his lap. "Get moving!" he ordered. "What's the delay? And one more thing—don't break no traffic rules."

Dropping the car into reverse, Brenda eased out of the garage and then began spinning the wheel.

"The other way," the man said.

**S**HE reversed the wheel and the car moved forward, sputtering and jerking a little.

"Damn it! Choke it a little," snapped the man from the back seat. "I'm not a yokel. Don't try to pull a motor stall on me."

"Which way?" asked Brenda icily.

"Turn right at the next corner, then north on the Valley Boulevard. Nice place, about twenty miles out. Just one motor cop on that stretch this time of morning."

They drove along in silence a few miles. Brenda began to realize how thoroughly the gunman had worked out his little plan. Just one motor cop along this stretch, she knew. And, Judge Balcomb's daughter or not, she'd learned that Drescoll, the morning cop on this run, would stand no infraction of traffic rules.

Three times in the past year Drescoll had flagged her down and issued her a ticket for speeding. She remembered his reproachful words the last time. "That'll be the end of my trouble with you for a spell. Miss Balcomb."

They were humming along a level stretch when the gunman, jabbing something cold into the nape of her neck, suddenly warned her to travel slower.

"We're nearing the copper's hangout," he said.

The girl's father sat in stony silence. Finally the gunman growled a curse.

"Here he comes."

"Yes, it's him." Brenda went tight inside.

The man leaned back in the seat. His eyes were on the motorcycle, too. "I'm aiming at the back of your head," he told the girl. "Just look plenty natural, is all. I can see your face in the rear vision mirror, so don't try any monkey-shine faces at the copper."

"No, I won't—"

She sat perfectly at ease and looked straight ahead as the drone of the white motorcycle came even with the car, then passed.

The man in the back seat chuckled softly, then shot a quick glance through the back window—and sent a curse through his clamped teeth.

"That damn copper!" he exclaimed. "He's turning around."

**B**RENDA was ostensibly fighting down a smile, and in the rear vision mirror she saw the gunman's mouth twitching while his eyes nervously darted from side to side. Then the faint wail of a siren came knifing into the car.

"Hit the gas!" screamed the gunman.

Brenda stomped her right foot down and the big sedan leaped out. Her lips were tight and she barely breathed. The chase

went through low hills and swept around wide curves. Brenda watched the speedometer waver past ninety. The siren spilled its eerie wail through the interminable thickets, growing steadily louder. From the corner of her eyes the girl could see the front wheel of the motorcycle. The gunman lowered a window and fired. The siren chopped off.

Other shots thumped against the girl's ears. Suddenly the car lurched dangerously.

"He's shooting our tires!" Brenda cried, fighting the wheel in desperation.

"The dirty rat!" yelled the gunman.

The sedan bounced off one shoulder of the highway. Lurching, it bounded across the road and slewed along the brink of a ditch. Brenda's strength gave out, and the car skidded and careened at a low embankment, then plopped on its side and scudded along the payment.

Drescoll, the motor cop, leaped from his machine and let it amble off into the ditch. He jumped atop the overturned car, yanked open the rear door and pounced down, his service revolver digging into the befuddled gunman.

In a few minutes Brenda and her father, shaken badly but unhurt, were standing outside the car.

Drescoll had manacled the gunman. Now the officer was glaring soft-heartedly at the girl.

"Well," he remarked, pushing back his cap and smiling. "I should give you a ticket for driving a car when your driver's license has been suspended, Miss Balcomb. But since you were forced to drive, I won't."

The gunman stared at her a moment, while Brenda fussed with her tangled hair and gave him a defiant smile.

"Yokel," she purred.

"Yah!" spat the gunman.

"There's more'n one way of calling the cops," chuckled Officer Drescoll.