

A Slay Ride for Santa

By Carl Memling



It was a strange Yuletide
— for bullets sang a
Christmas carol.

OUTSIDE it was snowing. The snow fell steadily, shadowing the city streets with white. Suddenly everything looked soft and clean, and the city smelled sweet. People out walking smiled greetings to total strangers; children bellywhopped down inclines on their sleds. It was heart-warming—the first snow of the season had come at the perfect time—and everyone felt happy.

Inside, nothing had changed. Well . . . if you looked hard, you could find a small dusty wreath in the window of the warden's office. But the cells and the long gray corridor remained dark and moodily silent, and if the prisoners in the city jail saw the snow through barred windows, they made no comment.

The snow fell in the prison yard, blanketing the gravel, and all it meant was no exercise that day, because overshoes weren't part of the prisoners' equipment. Men tossed and grumbled on their narrow bunks.

"Merry Christmas," one muttered sardonically.

"Shut up," his cell mate growled. But there was something else in the warden's office that betokened the season.

On his desk, surrounded by a mess of papers, stood an open bottle of Scotch.

The warden was an easygoing man, and this was the way he remembered the guards every Christmas. The old-timers didn't even have to be told; they knew they had a nip coming to them while changing shifts. It was medium-priced Scotch, tepid and astringent as it touched the lips, glowing with warmth as it whirled in the stomach. The bottle was less than half full now.

Such a small thing—a glass cylinder, eight inches long, with a thin neck above and some golden liquid sloshing around inside. Such a small thing—to start a chain of deaths. . . .

MYERSON shouldn't have had any; Myerson was a lush. With him, one drink led to another, and soon floors and walls turned to rubber and began to tip and slant.

If the warden hadn't been home helping his wife decorate the tree, he might have held him down to one drink. He certainly would have said, "This is for when you come off, Myerson—not for when you're going on."

But Myerson was alone in the office. A short bleary-eyed man with six hours of guard duty ahead, six long, slow-inching hours. . . .

The bottle remained upturned for a long moment and there were gurgling sounds; then Myerson smacked his lips and dragged the back of his hand across his face.

The bottle arced up again.

Minutes later, the guard he was relieving, asked him worriedly, "You all right, Mike?"

Myerson pawed the air for emphasis. "Sure I'm all right," he said. He lunged down into a chair and grinned vacantly and held his head rigid to show how steady he was.

The other guard shrugged and handed him the keys and walked away.

Myerson leaned back in his chair, yawning extravagantly. Then he scratched his red, wrinkled neck. The Scotch kept stoking warmth deep inside him.

"Merry Christmas," he called out to the row of cells. "Happy New Year!"

No one answered. He could hear men turning in their bunks. It was dusk outside now, and despite the close-spaced bulbs, the long corridor was swathed in shadows. Myerson sighed and let his eyelids drop; he slouched down in the chair and began breathing regularly. . . .

"Guard!"

Snorting, Myerson shook his head and

rapidly blinked his eyes. Then he saw by his watch that twenty minutes had passed.

“Guard!”

The voice came again, hoarse and rasping, from the last cell on the left. Myerson leaned forward. *Benson*, he thought tiredly. *That’s who’s calling. The lifer waiting to go up to the state pen. A tough egg. Mean. . . .* Myerson swore softly and staggered up from his chair. What’s the bum mean by breaking up such a nice warm snooze?

The walk down the corridor seemed to take a long time. At last Myerson stopped and leaned, exhausted, against the bars of the cell door.

“Yes?” he asked sharply. “What d’you want?”

Those were the last words Myerson ever spoke.

Stubby fingers snaked out through the bars and encircled his throat, the thumbs squeezing in front. Myerson’s body weaved and his arms flailed, violently at first, then slower and slower, and spluttering noises frothed from his twisting mouth.

Slowly his face flushed blue and his eyes bulged.

The keys fell from his hands, clattering onto the grey stone floor.

Benson kept squeezing till he was certain there was no life left in the guard. Then he relaxed his grip, pushed, and watched Myerson’s body spin backwards, slump, and thud.

Benson leaned forward, groped, picked up the keys, fiddled with them, inserted one into the lock of his cell door, twisted, and stepped out into the corridor.

The corridor was completely silent.

The other prisoners were small-larceny offenders, timid, all waiting for early release. They had heard the series of sounds that had spelled Myerson’s death—his shuffling towards the cell, his question,

the first quick squeal, the wheezing afterwards, the clattering of the keys, and the final thud of his body—and those sounds had driven so much fear into their hearts that now they all cowered back in their cells, afraid even to breathe; and they averted their eyes as Benson strode by on his way to the snow-white city outside.

IT WAS cold in the streets. The wind leaked through his thin gray uniform. He breathed hard, pulling the air in through his mouth till it swelled, cold and stinging, inside his chest. His eyes gleamed and he kept muttering over and over to himself, *I got out. They tried to give me life, but I got out.*

The snow crunched under his heels and he swerved every time he passed under a street lamp, quickly throwing his forearm up to shield his face.

I need time. A place where I can stop and think. I got to keep out of sight. I got to get out of this uniform. I got to contact the boys in New York.

Suddenly he frowned. Coming down the street, still more than a hundred yards away, was a group of carol singers, laughing boys and girls. He broke into a half-run, reached the corner before they could see him, and turned in.

The new street was dark and deserted. The windows of squat factories shone gray in the faint reflected light of the snow; and in the distance neon signs of bars glowed alternately red and green.

He was panting now, his heart was hammering heavily against his chest. The songs of the carolers twisted after him, carried on gusts of wind, prodding him on. Then he saw the black-mouthed opening of a narrow alley, and he plunged into it.

Inside the alley the shadows were so thick that he held his hands before his eyes, feeling he had to brush them aside. Panting, he leaned against a side wall.

Sweat pimpled his forehead, then evaporated, leaving stinging dots of cold.

He swayed wearily, and at first all he could think of was the taste of a cigarette in his mouth, how the smoke would hiss out through his nostrils. Then he thought of the damn fool lush of a guard who had called out, "Merry Christmas," to the silent cell block . . . and his hands curled reminiscently. *They tried to put me away for life!*

He was thinking of a cigarette, again, what he'd give for one quick drag, when he heard a faint moan. He swiveled around, peered into the darkness, and gasped at what he saw.

At first he thought it was a man, dead, and stained from head to foot with blood, then he saw it was only a drunk wearing a Santa Claus outfit.

The drunk was sleeping next to an empty bottle of whisky, and the wind was tugging playfully at his false white whiskers. Benson leaned down, trembling with excitement. He knew in a flash what he had to do.

All I need is that red suit over what I'm wearing, and those whiskers.

He glanced covertly over his shoulder toward the mouth of the alley; and then for the second time that night his fingers encircled a drunken man's throat. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, Santa Claus walked out of the alley. With a white beard, a bulging pillow-stomach, a red flannel suit trimmed with rabbit fur, and warm leather boots, he was easily one of the best-dressed Santas in the city that night.

Over his shoulders he carried a sandwich sign that he had found propped against the wall next to a man who would never moan in his sleep again.

GIVE TO THE S. A. M. MISSION

the sign said.

He walked through the streets, unconcernedly heading for the business section. Lights from store windows and theater marquees played on his face as he walked. He rang a little bell with one hand and held a tin cup with the other.

"Merry Christmas," he called hoarsely. "Merry Christmas!" And the men and women who dropped quarters and dimes into the outstretched cup thought his smile was full of Christmas cheer. . . .

JOE DIXON, Detective First Grade, had a warm spot the size of a watermelon in his heart for Christmas. He was crazy about kids, and for years now he'd been the man on the force whose job it was to dress up as Santa Claus and go down to the Xavier Orphanage and distribute the gifts to the children there.

Not many people knew that Dixon was an alumnus of Xavier himself.

He never needed a pillow for the Santa job; he was naturally as round as a tub of butter, and always smiling. *Almost* always would be more exact. There were days on the job when the smells of lust and blood locked his mouth into a tired scowl.

This was one of those days. In the last twelve hours two bulletins had come into the department. One concerned an escaped convict who'd murdered a guard, and another concerned an old tramp who'd been found half naked and dead in one of the city's more squalid alleyways.

Joe Dixon was angry. Christmas was the time of peace on earth and goodwill toward men. He considered it a personal affront that this year it should have come as a signal for a rash of brutal violence.

And now he wouldn't be able to go down to Xavier's at six o'clock to play Santa for the kids; he'd be too busy. . . .

Headquarters was thrumming with activity. Road blocks had been set up at all

the avenues of escape leading from the city and they were continuously reporting in; men were being assigned to search and research the area around the jail with a fine tooth comb; stoolies were being interviewed. . . . And Joe Dixon was assigned to look into the case of the old tramp.

He grumbled as he walked toward the alley where the body had been found. On a day like today, he thought, the newspapers should have happy headlines in red and green. Instead, big black letters were screaming:

LIFER KILLS GUARD AND ESCAPES.

Damn fool warden should have manacled him in his cell. A bad customer, that Benson, been convicted of everything but murder, though everyone knew he'd never stopped short of that.

It was cold in the street, and Dixon walked fast. Stopping only to give a quarter to the Santa Claus who was collecting for the S. A. M. Mission on the corner of Brad and Fourth, he arrived shortly at the alley. . . .

BENSON was shivering. He had walked the streets all night, ringing his bell and calling out, "Merry Christmas." Once he had stopped at a diner for coffee and a sandwich, and there he had permitted himself to the luxury of a smoke. Patrol cars kept whizzing by in the street, and men he recognized as detectives walked slowly along, carefully scrutinizing everyone.

But who would suspect Santa Claus? People stopped in front of him only to add to the clinking pile of coins in his outstretched cup. He smiled despite the cold, and felt clever and safe.

And what was most important—he'd had time to think. He knew now how he

was going to get in touch with the gang in New York.

It was ten o'clock in the morning when he stopped into a stationery store and asked for a pad and pencil. The proprietor wouldn't let him pay.

"After all," the proprietor said, "for Santa—"

He squeezed into a telephone booth, screwed up his eyes, gripped the pencil tight, and wrote slowly: *Merry Christmas. Having a fine time here. Pick me up at City Hall right away. Love, Harry Black.* And he addressed the message to a certain lawyer in New York who would know how to relay it immediately to the gang.

He read what he had written and smiled again. Only this lawyer and two other men in New York knew him as Harry Black. It was a code name for just such an emergency; and the newspaper headlines would tell them what the emergency was. Chuckling, he added a fictitious return address, then walked out into the street.

A few minutes later he beckoned to a short husky boy pulling a sled along the gutter. "Want to do Sanny a favor?" he asked.

The boy nodded eagerly.

"Take this down to Western Union—here's enough change—and tell them to send it right away."

The boy scooted away with the paper clutched in his hand.

Benson followed him with his eyes for a few seconds. Then, as he walked slowly through the streets, the smile on his face was broader than ever.

After that, all day long, at hour intervals, he went to the small park in front of the City Hall and looked carefully at all the parked cars. He knew at least six hours would have to pass before anyone showed up, but he kept going, hoping desperately that good luck would bring them sooner.

Even though the park was practically deserted, the policeman stationed there didn't think these recurring visits by Santa Claus were at all strange.

The fact was that the policeman was keeping his eye peeled for the convict who had escaped last night; Santas weren't bothering him. . . .

IT WAS four-thirty in the afternoon. The morgue attendant ripped the sheet back, and Joe Dixon stared down at the dead man.

The roly-poly detective had been to the death alley and he had checked all the bars in the neighborhood and he had talked with a man from the Fingerprint Division, but he still didn't know who the dead man was.

There was only one break in the case—and that was an important one. At first everyone had thought the victim had been strangled by another derelict in a drunken brawl; but then, gradually, the conviction had crystallized that he had been the escaped convict's second victim. The guard had been choked to death and so had he, and he had been stripped of his clothes because the convict needed a disguise.

Joe Dixon's round red face creased into a frown as he stood in the morgue and examined the bruise marks on the dead man's throat. The dead man's eyes were still open and their whites bulged like peeled onions; the tongue overlapped the mouth, gray and swollen.

Joe Dixon winced and turned away. He was used to sights like this, but not on Christmas.

"Finished?" the attendant asked.

Dixon shook his head and leaned forward again. There was something on the face—faint strips of rawness slanting over the cheekbones that puzzled him. Tenderly he touched the welts with his

fingers. Something stirred inside him . . . a fog of memory . . . something that made him bite his lips with anger because he couldn't see it clearly and express it in words.

He shrugged despondently. This case was getting him down. Maybe he was getting old. There were still miles of leg work ahead, and here he was mooning over some personal memory.

"That'll be all," he said curtly to the attendant.

The attendant pulled the sheet back, and Dixon stood by the slab for a long moment, a discouraged fat man in an old wrinkled coat. Then he nodded good-by and walked out into the street.

He kept thinking as he walked. There were still flophouses to check, a million tiny details to follow up—all of which would lead, most likely, to nothing at all—but first he had to go back to Headquarters to make a verbal report to his chief.

He glanced at his watch. If everything had gone well this year, this was the time he'd be picking up his Santa Claus outfit at the costumer's. He sighed when he thought of the kids asking for him, the way the small ones always perched on his lap and stroked his beard.

He stopped breathing. He froze there on the sidewalk, fixed with an idea that had the force of a bullet.

A moment later he squeezed his way into a phone booth. "Police Headquarters, quick!" he snapped at the operator.

Shortly afterwards, all patrol cars in the city received this terse bulletin over their radios: **PICK UP ALL MEN DRESSED IN SANTA CLAUS OUTFITS AND BRING THEM TO HEADQUARTERS. PROCEED WITH CAUTION—MAN MAY BE KILLER.**

BENSON was getting nervous.

Time was running out, and the city still

loomed like a trap around him. *Maybe Jenkins, the lawyer, is out of town, he thought, and a dumb secretary got the telegram and laid it on his desk, so he won't see it till he gets back too late. Maybe Jenkins is sick in the hospital. . . .*

The picture of the unread message made him moan and want to cringe momentarily against a wall. *Stop thinking that way*, he finally ordered himself. Then he looked at a store clock and saw it was close to five, and he started walking again towards City Hall.

"Merry Christmas," he muttered hoarsely as some people passed. He wished suddenly he had time for another smoke.

He felt icy cold, gripped in a vise of wind and fear. He'd spent a night and a day on his feet. How long could he keep it up? If they didn't come for him soon enough, the holiday would pass, and then his Santa Claus outfit would stick out like a sore thumb.

Maybe Jenkins got the telegram, but the boys in the gang are out of town. . . .

Then he saw it—the long black limousine with the New York license, parked with its motor running, near the City Hall.

Relief, like sweet heady wine, poured through him. He flung the cup to the ground and broke into a run.

Lefty Rizzio, good old Lefty, was hunched over the wheel, his hooded eyes shifting from side to side.

"Lefty—it's me!"

"Boss—what's the get-up?"

Benson chuckled as he threw himself into the limousine. "I'm Sanny Claus," he said. "Gimme a gun."

It took him a moment to see that the chamber was full. Then he lit a cigarette, dragged hard, and puffed out a thick hissing cloud of smoke.

"Let's go," he said.

The car leaped forward. Benson grinned and relaxed. "Good boy, Lefty," he said. "I'd have been cooked if—"

But the words rattled, then died out in his throat as, from the corner of his eye, he saw a police patrol car speeding alongside of them.

"Hey, you!" one of the cops yelled. "Hey, you—stop!"

He grunted and answered by shooting, and Lefty stepped hard on the gas. They whizzed forward, swaying in the snow-packed street, bullets streaming after them, *pikpoking* the metal frame of their car.

"Faster," Benson screamed. "Faster!"

But another patrol car turned a corner and came at them head-on. Bullets tore through the air, splintering it with whining sounds, forming spider webs as they cracked into the bulletproof windshield.

SUDDENLY Lefty screamed. They were skidding, swerving toward the curb. They jumped it with a quick thud, then crashed into the wall of an office building.

Benson lay still for a moment, a gray swirling vortex crowding his eyes. He had flung himself over the seat into the rear of the car the moment it had begun skidding. Now, groaning, he willed himself to movement, and looked up front. Too much of the steering wheel was jammed into Lefty's chest for him to be alive.

Benson stumbled out, ducked as a bullet whizzed by, staggered, and then ran into the office building. He heard screaming as he tore through the lobby, and he caught a quick glimpse of himself in a tall mirror, a wild-eyed Santa with beard awry, brandishing a pistol.

He saw a flight of stairs and he ran up. Then there was a corridor that he stumbled into, and after that a smoked-glass office door that he flung open. He slammed the door behind him.

A young blonde girl was seated alone at a desk. She stared at him, her mouth half open, her fingers poised over a typewriter, clutching handfuls of air. He lurched towards the desk, motioning with his pistol.

"Get over to the door," he rasped.

She moved slowly, trembling, and when she arrived at the door she spread-eagled herself against the glass to keep from falling. He leaned back on the desk. For the first time he noted a wriggling line of blood on his wrist. He swore and looked up again at the girl, his mouth quivering with rage. They stared silently at each other. Her face was pale, and her chest under the tight sweater heaved with sudden fear.

Now he heard running steps in the hall outside, doors slamming, and men calling out. Then the steps came to the door and they stopped.

Whoever was out there could see the girl's form silhouetted through the smoked glass; he knew that, and that was what he wanted.

"Benson," a voice called. "Come out or we'll shoot."

He tried to laugh, but the sounds crackled drily in his throat. "Shoot and you'll kill the kid who works here," he called back.

"We'll get you, Benson," the voice said. "You know we'll get you—why get the kid hurt?"

The girl sighed. She was chewing her lips, and her eyes were fluttering, the pupils zooming slowly under the lids.

This time he laughed, loud and harshly. "You'll have to get *her* first," he said. Then after a pause, "Unless you wanta give me a break."

The voice was silent outside, and then there was a whispered consultation, and finally the voice spoke again.

"What sort of break, Benson?" it asked

brusquely.

JOE DIXON was wheezing and his jowls were quivering as he mounted the stairs of the building where Benson was cornered. He had flapped a patrol car and heard about the ambush on the car-radio, and now he was here.

While the chief yelled at Benson through the door, Joe looked around, thinking. The door of the office next to the one Benson was trapped in, was ajar. Dixon's eyes lit up and he walked over to the chief and whispered, "Keep him talking," into the chief's ear.

Then he crept into the adjoining office and tiptoed over to the window. Slowly, praying for it not to creak, he pulled it up.

The wind rushed into the office and set all the loose papers flying around. Dixon leaned out and inspected the ledge.

It was narrow, hardly a foot wide. The sidewalk was more than twenty feet below. The block was already cordoned off, and the sidewalk was empty of people. It seemed to be waiting silently for a body to fall.

For a moment he thought of calling for a thinner, more agile man. Then he remembered the corpse spending its Christmas on the morgue slab, and he silently lifted a round leg over the sill.

He perched there, straddling the ledge, thinking. Then he pulled his pistol from his holster, checked the safety, and gripped the barrel between his teeth. Slowly he lifted himself till he was standing on the sill, while the wind tore at his jacket, daring him to start the perilous journey.

Inch by inch, hugging the wall, he moved sideways.

His nails tore with shredding sounds as he sought a grip in the smooth granite wall. The building seemed to be slanting over toward the street, trying to fling him

off. He moved another inch.

Now he could hear voices inside—the chief’s and Benson’s. He could hear the girl whimpering too. Sweat felt cold on the nape of his neck. He was a foot away now.

He’d have at the most, two or three shots before Benson would kill the girl. He’d have to shoot through glass, holding on with only one hand. The slightest kickback would send him toppling to the sidewalk that was still waiting below.

He pulled the pistol from his mouth, unlocked the safety, and took the final step.

For one quick instant he looked inside. Benson’s back was to him. The girl’s eyes were closed; her face was a moist plaster color. He aimed and pulled the trigger—once, then again and again. . . .

The shattering glass and the recoil spun him backwards. He screamed and there was a tearing gasp as his hand dragged down the wall. He caught the ledge with one hand, and flailed, kicking futilely.

Then he heard more shots above and he groaned and said to himself, “It didn’t work.”

After that, he began giving up. His fingers loosened and he relaxed and his body unhinged, giving itself to the inevitable plunge . . . when the chief and two young policemen leaned out of the window and pulled him in.

A MINUTE later Dixon opened his eyes. He was sprawled on a chair in

the office and the chief was smiling down at him. Benson was lying in front of the desk, his white beard soaking up blood from the floor.

“What were those shots after mine?” Dixon asked weakly.

The chief said, “We busted in shooting. But you’d nailed him already. You did a wonderful job, Joe.”

The young girl was sitting in another chair, drinking water from a paper cup. Dixon stretched his aching arms.

“How’d you know to call in the alarm to pick up all Santas?” the chief asked.

“From the marks on the dead old man’s face,” Dixon said. “They were left by the adhesive of the Santa Claus wig. I spotted them because that’s the kind of wig I use when I go to the kids at Xavier’s. It always does that to me—leaves raw marks on my face when I rip it off.”

Then he looked down at the watch on his chubby wrist and smiled sadly when he saw it was only six-fifteen.

“I could still make it at Xavier’s,” he said to himself. “But after all this shooting and blood, I don’t feel like. It sort of wouldn’t be fair, going to the kids with blood still hot on my hands.

“But next year, I’ll make it for sure,” he promised himself.

“What are you mumbling about?” the chief asked.

“Nothing,” Dixon answered. Then he added solemnly, “Merry Christmas, chief.”