

# DEATH IS TOO EASY

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Officer Truce Didn't Like to Kill—But He Forgot His Squeamishness When His Partner Was Trapped!

“CALLING Car Seventeen! Seventeen! Seventeen! Go to Ninth and Harvard! Ninth and Harvard! Burglary! See the woman! See the woman! That is all!”

The voice came droning over the radio. John Loess, driving the car, snorted with disgust.

“That’s us,” he said. “Probably a cat got into the window box and made a noise, and the woman’s out on the sidewalk in her nighty waiting for the coppers to hold her hand for her until she gets over being scared.”

“It’s a yell for help, Jack,” said Martin Truce, his co-prowler. “It’s our job to answer ‘em. And maybe there is a robber, and you can kill somebody!”

Thus Martin Truce effectually shut the mouth of complaining John Loess, who had just made headlines in all California newspapers by killing his third criminal in a gunfight. They were beginning to say that he was a modern Wyatt Earp, a streamlined Wild Bill Hickok, and he was rather liking it—or so Martin Truce thought.

John Loess snorted and gave the car the gun. It jumped under them both. Loess was a perfect driver, could handle any car, even in the Los Angeles traffic, probably the world’s toughest. That traffic, according to Los Angeles coppers, would whiten the hair of the best New York drivers with its speed.

John Loess knew every shortcut, every rule of the road. What he didn’t know he could guess at. He never grazed anybody’s fenders, never hit a pedestrian, but he scared plenty, and he came entirely too close to many cars for the comfort of their drivers.

John Loess, at twenty-four, was a hard, disillusioned young man who found little good in anybody, and none at all even in petty criminals. He liked Martin Truce, however, mostly because Truce, an older man, with vaster experience behind him, didn’t hesitate to express his thoughts about Loess or anybody else. Martin Truce was a straight

shooter with guns and words.

The scream of rubber matched the wail of the siren. The prowler car took the turn into Harvard on two wheels. It just missed an old man who discovered, at the last moment, that he, who hadn’t walked without a cane for years, could still jump for his life. Martin Truce clucked disapproval.

“Well, I didn’t hit him, did I?” said Loess.

There wasn’t a “woman” to see, but there was trouble on the corner. Two men were fighting with one man. The one man was in pajamas, the two men in rough clothes. It was a commentary on the speed of the police that Loess and Truce had arrived so hard upon the heels of the robbery, whatever it had been. The car swung in to the curb. The man in pajamas went down. The two men whirled toward the back of the house before which the fight was taking place.

The man in pajamas, his head covered with blood, cried out as he collapsed.

“Don’t let them get away! Don’t—”

The two officers didn’t hesitate. Their gun hands were already rising as they ran across the lawn to the man in pajamas. The two guns spoke, at the same time. The two running men went down. One of them lay very still. The other writhed in anguish. His moans could be heard easily by the two coppers, who now knelt beside the man in pajamas.

“A woman telephoned the police,” said Loess, studying the situation. “One of the burglars caught her at it. Her husband, if that’s who this gent is, then tried to grab and hold one or both of the burglars. The other joined in, and they used their jacks on him.”

THEY left the man in pajamas, strode to the two men on the ground in the shadows between this house and its nearest neighbor.

“I took the one that’s still moving!” said Truce quietly.

Loess didn’t say anything. He could sense

reproof in the voice of his partner. Truce took the weapon of the man whose kneecap he had broken. Loess merely grunted.

"That makes four, eh?" said Truce. "It wasn't necessary. You're a crack-shot. You could have brought him down, same's I did this one."

"If you'd done as I did, these lads wouldn't have had to be tried in court. I saved the county and state plenty of time and money."

"You've no right to kill every man who commits a crime," said Truce. "You could have—"

"I'll be commended for it," said Loess. "The man was a lawbreaker. Any other copper would have shot to kill."

"I didn't!"

"You don't think. You could have settled the whole case, and made sure that neither of these laddybucks ever prowled another house."

"Jack, you're a natural-born killer!" said Martin Truce, softly. "You don't belong in the police force at all. You're using it as an excuse to *kill*, do you understand? I've been watching you, listening to your very heartbeats.

"You like to read about yourself in the newspapers. So do all big-shot gangsters. You're deadly. So are hired murderers. And you can't go to the chair, Jack—*because you're an officer of the law!*

"You're using that fact to give yourself a right to hunt what some people consider the greatest game in the world—man! You don't kill to punish, you kill because, as an officer of the law, you can kill and get away with it!"

The face of Jack Loess was white in the dim shadows of the alley between the two houses. He looked down at the man he had shot, touched him with his foot.

"Know who he is?" he asked. "He's Monk Gowan! Wanted for three kills, all done during house prowls. If I'd met him two years ago he wouldn't have killed those three people! He rates being killed."

"Too easy!" said Truce. "Too easy! His punishment doesn't last long enough. Besides, you're keeping an honest judge and jury out of work. And something else, far more important, you're making Jack Loess more of a killer than Monk Gowan. And I'm finished with it, Jack! I'm asking for relief. I want to ride with a human being again, before I get carbuncles on my own conscience!"

Loess stiffened, but his voice was calm.

"Suppose we go on investigating this show we're on!"

Truce put the bracelets on the man he had wounded, manacled him to the iron fence. Then both officers hurried back to the front of the house, where the man in pajamas still lay, moaning, calling a woman's name.

"Dulcie! Dulcie! Dulcie!"

Loess and Truce exchanged glances. Then Truce led the way inside. They pushed open the outer door, then an inner door. The house was filled with silence. There were no lights. Truce was playing his flash ahead of him. He carried his gun in his right hand.

The pencil of light from his flash suddenly struck upon a white face, a woman's face. It held there for a moment. Then Loess swung his own flash around, found the light switch. The room became bright as day. The woman on the floor beside the telephone was a young woman, had been pretty. Truce knelt beside her, touched her heart.

"Dead!" he said grimly. "She must have heard the burglars, got up to investigate, got caught phoning the police—and been killed by one of the thugs!"

The woman had been struck a savage blow on the back of the head. It had knocked her sprawling. She had rolled to her back. She had not known what had struck her, perhaps.

A frantic voice was coming out of the telephone, the receiver of which was dangling off the overturned stand. Truce put the receiver to his ear.

"This is the police," he said. "Give me headquarters."

THE experts would have to take it from here on. When they began moving in, and Leslie Osman, the man in pajamas, started to tell the story of how his wife, Dulcie, had got up without waking him and walked to her death, the prowling cops were back on routine.

"Now, Marty, what do you think?" said Loess. "I only wish I'd been there sooner to drill Monk Gowan. I'd have kept him from braining Dulcie Osman. I killed him too late—except to keep him from killing someone that will *now* go on living. Don't you see? If every copper used his head, like I do—"

"I told you, before we knew what had happened

there,” said Martin Truce, “that I’m through. I want a human partner, not a killer, do you understand? Even the most ghastly murderer, Jack, is a human being. You’re forgetting that. You need some dreadful shock to wake you up. I don’t want to be around when you get it.”

“It wouldn’t be,” said Loess, “that you’re slightly jealous because I get all the publicity? Because nobody ever even writes that there are two men in this car?”

“Pull over to the curb,” said Truce. Loess did so. “You’re going to swallow that, here and now,” said Truce, “or I’m going to break your jaw, do you understand? I’m not pulling away from you because you’re a famous killer, but because you’re a killer! Also because the honor of a police force is based upon its value to the people, not on how many of them it can kill! Your kind doesn’t even belong in uniform.”

“The newspapers won’t say so!”

“They like sensations! But take a gander at the reporters themselves when they ask you questions. Half of them already have you marked as a killer who, sooner or later, will kill in such a way that you can’t hide behind a uniform! Their jobs, the reporters’ jobs, are stories—but you don’t see any of them asking you home, do you? And I’m waiting for that apology!”

For a long moment the two men locked glances. Truce stared into the chill black eyes of Jack Loess, studying the man more deeply than he ever had before. Loess glared back, and for just a moment Martin Truce saw in his steel-gray eyes the thing he feared—murder. For just a split second Loess thought even of killing Truce. Truce hoped to God he had been wrong, but he feared that he was not. He got out of the car then, slammed the door with finality.

“You can tell headquarters whatever story you like,” said Truce. “I mean what I’ve just told you so much that I’m risking my badge to keep from spending the rest of this cruise with you. That ought to mean something to you, but probably doesn’t!”

Martin Truce walked away. John Loess stared after him. Then he sat for a long time behind the wheel of the car, thinking—and finding himself becoming afraid. If there were one person on earth whom he respected, it was Martin Truce, who had just walked out on him. Was Truce right about him, Jack Loess? Was he an innate killer?

“*Why don’t I ever worry about the men I’ve killed?*” he suddenly asked himself, and with realization that he never had, that he was untouched not only by his shooting of Monk Gowan tonight, but by the death of the woman, Dulcie Osman, a chill hand of terror gripped at his heart.

“Is Marty right?” he asked himself. “If I weren’t a cop would I, sooner or later, be like Monk Gowan?”

He recalled that before becoming a cop he had wanted to join some foreign army, to get into war somewhere. Had that been because the urge to kill was in him?

It was something he had to fight out with himself. A cold anger at himself, at Martin Truce for criticizing him in spite of the fact that he had slain in line of duty, laid hold of him. While it lasted, he did not hear the voice over the radio, or think of his uniform.

It was as though a curtain of red had dropped over his thoughts. He drove the police car at a terrific speed. He seemed to be taking huge chances, though he was too good a driver for even on reflexes alone, to be dangerous. He drove south on Harvard, traveling like the wind.

**N**OT until he was in an area of comparative darkness did he realize that he had been followed, ever since he had left the Osman home, probably, by a car as well driven as his own. He set about losing that car. It clung to him doggedly.

And then, when he had driven into a stretch of street where there was no danger of collision, he discovered that the other driver had an even better, faster car. For it suddenly whipped in against him, on the left, and crowded him to the curb.

He wouldn’t have given an inch for anybody, but he had seen the muzzle of an automatic pointing at him, from the back seat of the pursuing car. There were several men in the car, three in the back seat. Two in the front, including the driver.

He could drill some of those men, certainly, but in the end they’d get him, if they wanted him so desperately that they were going to take such dreadful chances. Besides, he couldn’t drive at such a high speed, trying to avoid collision all the time, and shoot with any degree of accuracy.

He swung over to the curb, brakes screaming, rubber smearing the concrete. He jumped out, intending to take cover behind the car, fight it out from there. There hadn’t been time to summon

help. Nor was there any chance now.

The other men knew exactly what they were doing and were willing to pay whatever the price might be. John Loess was covered by four automatics before he could even get into position to start shooting. He swore bitterly, not at his attackers, not at himself, but at Martin Truce. If Marty had stuck with him, instead of walking off like a sulking child, he'd have seen the pursuing car, and they could have made a fight of it.

"Take it easy, copper," said a rasping voice. "The Boss wants you alive, see? We'll sort of shoot off a few arms and legs if we have to, but we're taking you in kicking, understand? He wants you bad. He's a great guy, the Boss.

"Perfectly willing for three-four of his boys, us boys here, to get killed, just to get the 'modern Wyatt Earp,' if necessary. And I'm sure you wouldn't want to kill any of us, would you? You never like to kill anybody, not really!"

He should have started shooting, of course, but he hadn't. And now, when he thought of broken legs and arms—he knew without testing the knowledge that these lads could put their bullets right where they wanted to put them—he didn't open fire. It wasn't lack of courage, but sound good sense.

"You can't kidnap coppers and get away with it," he said.

"We're doing it," said the rasping voice. "Whether we get away with it sort of depends. Okay, Barbo, do something with the prowl heap. We've got to get going!"

John Loess went into the back seat of the car which had run him down, capturing him with such consummate ease. One of his captors, starting to sit down on one of the jump-seats, suddenly drove a savage right to Loess' jaw. He went out like a light.

When he regained consciousness he was in a huge room, tied to a chair. The room was brilliantly lighted. There was a large table in the middle of it. A man with snow-white hair sat at the head of the table. There were a dozen other men with him, ranged at his right and left. When Jack Loess spotted the man with the snowy hair, and noted the faces of his "guests," his heart sank.

"Whitey Gargan!" he ejaculated. No wonder everything from petty pilfering to bank robbery was picking up in this burg, he thought. Whitey Gargan was a big-time crook for whose talents no job was too large, and none too small.

"You killed one of my men tonight, Loess," said Gargan, interrupting. "That makes the fourth man you've killed since you became a copper. I don't mind matching wits with the coppers. It's part of the fun of being Whitey Gargan.

"But I don't go for coppers who kill everybody who happens to be on the wrong side of the law, because they can do it in line of duty! Crime is a game to me, and not one that's played the way you play it. Even a murderer in this country has a right to trial by jury."

"Monk Gowan killed a woman tonight!"

"**D**ID you know that when you drilled him in the back? Nope, you didn't. The woman's an afterthought. And a copper like you makes my men nervous, understand?"

"So I have to do something about it, or I lose control of a city before I even get it, or know the names of its principal streets—and I don't like that.

"I'm here to coordinate crime, and you're a distinct bit of discord, Loess. So I've brought you here to tell you so and, if you don't change a bit, to break a rule of my own and simply have you shot!"

"Change?" said Loess. "What do you mean?"

"Accept enough of my dough so you can't squeal, then go back to your job, see? But use a little judgment after this. Don't drill everybody you see."

"And the alternative is?"

"You're done for. Time enough, too. Your personal publicity makes things too tough for men like me and the lads I run. It calls too much public attention to the state of the city's morals. Well, what do you say? You're a killer already, you shouldn't mind accepting a bribe, if it's big enough!"

A cold fury, the same cold fury that had entered him when Martin Truce had called him a killer, settled in the pit of Loess' stomach. He met the cobra-like stare of the leader of this newest California mob—forced out of some Eastern city—with the desire in his heart to rip him apart with his bare hands. He longed to be free among his fellows with two gats, one in each hand, so that he might fight until he dropped. The faces of Gargan's men made him like that. All were wanted men. There were murderers among them. All were men who would rather commit murder than earn their living honestly.

"Well?" persisted Gargan. "Why make a show

of hesitating? If you had the guts to refuse, you'd have the guts to take criminals alive. You'd have had the guts to fight my men when they ran you down a couple of hours ago, so quit stalling."

"You can go plumb straight to Hades!" said John Loess. "I'm one egg you can't buy, or handle in any way at all. If you'll just turn me loose with a couple of guns—one gun—"

A rasping cackle came from Whitey Gargan.

"Brave talk, Loess. Turn him loose, gents, and go to work on him. Maybe we can soften him up a bit. If we can't—"

The alternative was plain. One of the men who had captured Loess in the first place, the same one who had knocked him cold, kicked over his chair. His head crashed against the floor. Someone brought out a knife, to cut his bonds. Somebody else gave him a sickening kick in the ribs.

He had no idea where the house was in which he had found himself. He took it for granted that nobody knew where he was. Whitey Gargan hadn't spent all his devious life out of prison without planning every step he took in advance.

The situation was this: He, John Loess, was going to have to become Whitey Gargan's man, as so many other men in so many other cities had become Whitey Gargan's men, or else Whitey was going to have him killed—as he fancied Whitey had had many another copper killed.

He never for a moment considered giving in to Whitey Gargan. Nor did he for a moment intend to take the last rap lying down. Maybe this mob would fix him up, all nice and pretty for the morgue, before they were done, but they wouldn't hear him squawk, and if he had any chance at all, he'd take somebody with him. Failing in that he'd leave his marks on as many of them as he could. Naturally, they weren't going to give him guns, even one gun.

**T**HEY were just going to "soften him up." Whitey Gargan could always use a man on the force if he could manage it, and it would be rather nice to have the man who was so famous for killing crooks. It would give Whitey prestige among his own men. Whitey didn't overlook things like that. Loess knew. He'd read a great deal about Whitey, in magazines—things could be said about Whitey, but couldn't be proved in a court of law.

They got the ropes off Jack Loess, and allowed him to get to his feet, but no further than that.

Obviously these men of Gargan's had had a great deal of experience, softening people up. They went at it like men who knew every move. They used fists and gun muzzles—as a matter of routine precaution, he figured.

They could slug a man, but if he turned out to be tougher than they had expected, they could always shoot him. Loess didn't approve of anything about these men of Whitey Gargan's. Much less did he approve of Whitey Gargan himself.

He began to express that disapproval both verbally and with his fists, feet, head—everything about him that could express disapproval. But he had no guns. He didn't know what had happened to them. And he still felt as he always felt about crooks.

So, Whitey Gargan was trying to "take over" Los Angeles. The law didn't know it, or Loess would have known it. There had been an increase of all types of crime, that was all. Whitey usually started small, worked up. Whitey was almost an institution, and the policeman, or dick, or police force that got him, finally, would be doing a vast public service.

The men of Whitey Gargan lined up. One of them, the one who had slugged Loess first, in the kidnap car, slugged him again. Loess went spinning down a line of husky looking thugs, everyone of whom smashed at him either with a gun muzzle or a fist. His head swam with the ache of the blows. He had never been hurt so much and so often, with so little chance to fight back.

He sprawled on his back, panting, blood dribbling down both jaws from smashed lips. His pain-filled eyes focused on the man who had hit him in the car, and several times since, and he started crawling back up. Maybe he'd never get his hands on that baby, but he couldn't be killed for trying—or at least wouldn't be, right away.

He flung himself forward. A man moved out at him. He sent a left to a fat face, felt the hand sink into soft flesh, heard a man swear. His eyes were still glued to the face of the man who had slugged him the most. He must get to him, smash him once, at least once, for luck. There wasn't much sense in it maybe, but the urge was there—and a copper didn't just up and quit.

The man he wanted most wasn't unwilling. He came to meet John Loess, and he moved as if he knew a great deal about fighting. He had cauliflower ears, too.

John Loess got one hand on this man. Then he went down from a right-hander that almost tore his head from his shoulders. He didn't have a chance against the man with the cauliflower ears—so what chance could he possibly have against him and as many others as Whitey Gargan cared to loose on him?

He staggered and fell to his knees when he tried to get up to resume the struggle with Cauliflower Ears. But through the sick fog which enveloped him he could hear the voice of Gargan.

"Don't you realize you can't get anywhere, Loess? Suppose you forget it? My doc'll fix you up, you take a little hush money, be Whitey Gargan's man, and we'll call this thing off."

"You remember where I told you to go, Gargan?" said Loess, through smashed and bleeding lips. His voice sounded crazy even to him, because it appeared that teeth were also missing.

"Well, the door is still open, as far as I'm concerned. There are a lot of things I wouldn't do with Gargan money. I wouldn't take it even to save my teeth and lips and whatever else your cannibals want to chew on!"

"Try him some more!" said Whitey Gargan.

**T**HEY were closing in on Loess who was on his feet, getting ready to take some more, when a voice that Loess couldn't believe was real sounded in the room.

"That'll be all for now, gentleman. The law has moved in!"

There wasn't much of the law that had actually moved in. It was just Martin Truce, who would have two guns, no more, and no chance to reload either of them. Martin Truce, the man who didn't believe in killing criminals for any reason! And while one of these gents lived and could think, he would keep right on shooting. They were whirling now, to take a crack at Martin Truce.

Bullets began to hum in the place, to kick splinters put of the floor, to break windows, to create a terrible bedlam.

Loess tried to help all he could. His erstwhile attackers had turned their backs on him to get a crack at Truce, who had somehow managed to follow, get in, and break up the "softening-up" process. Loess didn't ask how. Maybe Whitey had been too sure of himself, hadn't thought sentries necessary. In any case, here was Martin Truce, his guns flaming.

Cauliflower Ears went down. He fell right at Loess' feet and Jack looked down at him. There was a hole in the bridge of his nose, with blood oozing from it. Whitey Gargan was yelling commands. The room was shambles.

"Hey, Jack," yelled Truce, "catch!"

One of the weapons came spinning, end-over-end, to Jack Loess. Then, with fist and gun muzzle, Jack was fighting his way to stand beside Martin Truce. He saw Whitey Gargan, scrambling for what appeared to be a door. He used two shots on Gargan, saw him go down. Loess grinned to himself. It was good to have a gun in his hand again.

There were soon plenty of guns. Loess shot a couple out of men's hands himself. And he sent bullets into them in plenty of other places. There were dead men scattered around. Martin Truce was fighting now with one hand only. His left arm hung limp at his side, and blood dripped from every one of his fingertips. He must have taken a slug through the elbow. The arm seemed to be broken. But Truce was doing very well with the good arm.

Men were breaking for the doors now, going down as though they were being tripped by an invisible wire. Bullets were coming close to Loess and Truce still, for Loess' legs both felt numb, and he wasn't sure that he could stand on them much longer. If he went down this time, he wouldn't get up again.

Martin Truce, the man who had called him a killer was shooting to kill. He must have changed his mind.

Loess was feeling giddy, even silly. He wanted to laugh at the whole foolish business. The smell of powder, the odor of blood and the constant taste of his own blood all added up to pure nonsense. Just because he had killed a man in line of duty, and got into an argument over it with Martin Truce, a lot more men had been killed, and more were going to be killed before this nest of thugs was wiped out. But Whitey Gargan, whatever happened, was through in Los Angeles, before he had even got started.

If Gargan did the usual, of course, some friend of his would haul him out before the police followed the sounds of shooting right into his hideout.

Now and again, in the midst of the shooting, Loess turned to see whether Gargan was getting away. He wasn't, so far. He was writhing, probably

cussing, yelling commands to his gunmen, but he wasn't getting away.

Nor did he.

THE officers from a lot more prowl cars came in, just as the first of Whitey's men started out through the door, and Loess yelled to a sergeant that Whitey Gargan, no less, was the man on the floor, near the far door. They got Whitey, then, in a hurry.

This done and the rest of the gunmen collared, Loess and Martin Truce looked at each other. Then they looked down at the dead men scattered about. Loess shook his head and made clucking sounds with his mouth.

"Shame on you, Marty!" he said. "You've killed some people! I shot at legs and arms. That's why we've got Whitey Gargan to send to the gas chamber. I'm surprised at you, Marty, after all you said to me. Right here, in no time at all, you've killed more men than I killed in months of what you called hunting!"

Truce's face was very white. There was no hint of a smile on it.

"I regretted what I had said," he explained, "and started to go back to the car. I saw you haul away from the curb. I commandeered a car I thought was fast enough to catch you. I saw that other car swing in behind you. I followed, that's all."

"And will finish in tomorrow's papers by being the man who captured Whitey Gargan," said Loess grinning, "and rescued the 'modern Wyatt Earp'! Then you come in here, you who argue against killing, and shoot five men to death. You toss me a

weapon, but I don't kill anybody. I just break a bunch of bones. How do you add all that up, Marty? Am I to be the critic hereafter, and you the killer?"

"Maybe," said Martin Truce, "we're neither one of us so good alone. Maybe we make a better team, after all. But I don't know. When I slipped in here, and saw them working on you I—well, maybe there's a bit of killer in each and every one of us."

"Only *my* killer, Marty," said Loess quietly, "is, and always will be, on the side of law and order. No one I have shot bothers me, you understand?"

Martin Truce looked down at the gunmen he had shot, shook his head.

"Funny," he said, "I don't feel anything, either. Maybe it's because they were working on somebody I liked, someone very close to me. Maybe that makes the difference?"

"To a cop," said Loess, "every man, woman and child he's supposed to protect is as important as a loved one. That's why I'm a cop. I feel that way. Sometimes it gets in the way of 'sportsmanship' and I shoot a man, but when I think of Dulcie Osman, lying there by her dangling telephone . . ."

"That'll do," said Truce, swaying on his feet. "I'll never preach to you again!"

Loess grinned.

"Suppose we put it this way, as partners should," he wagged his head. "You preach at me when you feel like it. I'll preach at you when I feel like it. It'll help to pass the time."

"Between shootings?"

"Between *deserved* shootings!"