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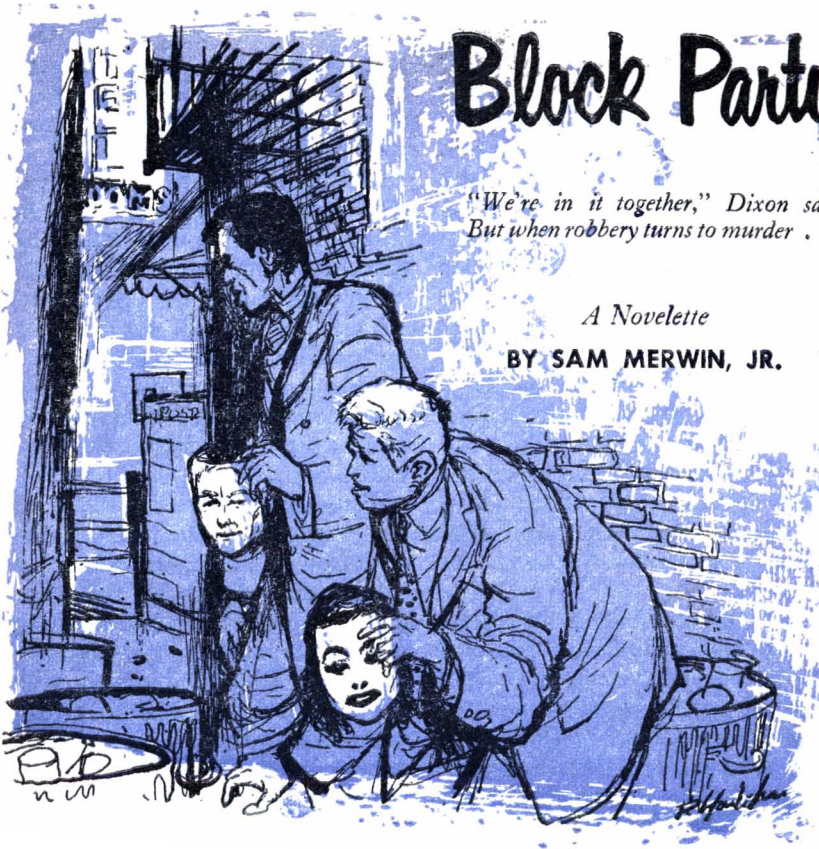
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# Block Party

*"We're in it together," Dixon said.  
But when robbery turns to murder . . .*

*A Novelette*

**BY SAM MERWIN, JR.**



IT WAS three past one in the morning, and the party was almost put away for the night. Where gaudy booths and loud music and spicy, hot Italian foods had lent gaiety, only litter and squalid emptiness remained, both mercifully softened by the East River darkness.

Against the moonswept sky, the sixteen-story shaft of the Hotel Kipp, reared in pre-depression times

as forerunner of a building boom that never developed, dominated its brick-tenement neighbors like some latter-day Gulliver. Hugging its shadow, Tony and Carl lurked in the half-alley between hotel and Mrs. Fiametto's candy-and-newspaper store.

They were waiting, impatiently, for the last vestiges of carnival to remove themselves from the scene.

Tony was a moderately tall young man whose droop and generally languid appearance masked the fact that he was both swift and immensely muscular. Carl, a Nordic rarity in that overwhelmingly Mediterranean district, was fair and short, with a pear-shaped Teutonic build. His outward stolidity concealed intricate inner meshworks of fears and rashnesses.

Both young men held plastic rubber masks in their hands — Tony's a likeness of Hopalong Cassidy, Carl's of Joan Crawford. The Joan Crawford had been Tony's idea. Tony had most of the ideas. "It will mix them up," he'd said. "Make them look for a couple of queers."

"As long as they don't start looking for us," said Carl. "*Kee-rist!* Won't that truck ever pull out?"

"Don't get your drawers in an uproar," said Tony, and his own voice sounded a half-pitch higher than usual. "We gotta play this by the clock, like Dixon told us."

"You sure it'll work?" said Carl after a moment. "I mean, what if something goes haywire?"

"It won't unless we goof," Tony said. "You know what to do when we hit the lobby. The main thing is to do it right — and not to hurry. Like Dixon told us."

This robbery was going to be a pushover, he told himself. The way most of the kids he knew got in trouble was they didn't have a plan for what to do once they'd made their

haul. They got caught with their loot, or spent it so heavily the cops got wise, or tried to sell it the wrong way — which was like asking for a trip to Elmira.

Thanks to Dixon, they were all set. This was a straight business deal. They got a yard apiece and all the cash in the hotel safe. Dixon only wanted the stuff in the Johns dame's envelope. He knew it was in the safe — he'd been on duty as night elevator operator when the playboy's wife deposited it there a week earlier, when she had checked into the Kipp.

Tony thought about Margo Kenneth Johns, soon-to-be Jimmy Johns' sixth ex-wife. He had seen her a half dozen times, walking to the corner for a cab or getting out of one in front of the hotel. Not just a dish — a full meal! She made even Myra Fiametto look like a drab hunk of nothing. Margo had it all, and in the right places. No wonder a rich bastard like Jimmy Johns had grabbed her. Tony wondered what it was like to have a pin-up like Margo move in with you — and what it was like to have her move out. Johns should know, he thought. The lucky jerk had had enough of them — both ways.

Carl gave him a poke under the ribs, bringing him out of it. "Tony, the truck!" he whispered.

Except for the dim solitary street light, half way to the corner, and the dim glow of light over the hotel entrance, the block was dark. There

was a clatter as the last of the boothmen got his "office" loaded on a pickup truck, a few words between boothman and driver, then the sound of the truck rumbling around the corner.

"Okay," Tony said. "Put it on." He worked the Hopalong mask over his face. It was hot and it stuck to his skin and, for a moment, until he got the eye-slits in place, he could not see. When he could, he looked around, found Carl still struggling with his Crawford mask. Tony helped him, then said, "Remind me to ask you for a date next Tuesday, gorgeous."

"Cut the clowning." Carl's voice sounded funny and distant from under the plastic.

"Okay," Tony repeated. "Just remember — don't pull your gun till we're inside. Got it?"

Joan Crawford nodded, and Tony suppressed a sudden impulse to laugh. Old Carl looked so *dammed* funny wearing that crazy face. He wondered what Margo Kennett Johns had on her play-boy husband in that envelope in the safe — what it could be that would get a guy like Johns to risk a setup like this. He wondered what Dixon was getting for rigging the deal. Plenty, probably.

Dixon was smart. It was his night off. "If I'm on the job when you pull it," he had told Tony, "I'm as good as dead. They'd be asking too many questions. And one of you might goof during the strike and

get me jammed up. I've got to be out of it. But you kids come to my place the minute it's over. Don't stop for anything. Just get over there fast."

It made sense. The whole deal made sense. There were, maybe, a couple of hundred kids in the block who would be suspected. The cops would never pin it down to Carl and himself. Even if they did, the rap was not a bad one — maybe six months or a year — and the pay was okay. Not only the yard, but what they'd get out of the hotel safe. There was bound to be plenty of cash in it, with all those rich screwballs who lived there.

"Come on," Tony said, taking a deep breath. "Let's go."

Five quick paces to the hotel door, then through it, then down three steps to the lobby level. At the rear, the two elevator doors were closed, just as Dixon had said they would be. There was only one elevator working at this time and the night operator was eating his supper in the kitchen. He wouldn't appear for half an hour unless somebody rang for him.

Smitty, the night manager, knew they meant trouble the moment he saw them in their masks, carrying their very real-looking plastic automatics. He was standing behind the desk with his hands on it, and his ruddy face went pale. He just stood there, staring at them, not making a move.

Carl pointed his gun at him while

Tony darted around the end of the desk, past the switchboard, and used it as cover to put his own gun on Smitty. This was the first danger point. If anyone came in while Carl was standing there, alone in the open, it meant trouble. Tony waited, sweating, until he heard Carl's breath at his shoulder.

They had made it.

He said, "All right, man, let's have the key to the safe."

Smitty, still saying nothing, got it out of a drawer under the desk. He looked as if he was going to keel over, and dropped it. Tony steeled himself for the clatter as it hit the imitation-marble floor. But the key landed on Smitty's toe and made almost no noise.

"Pick it up," said Tony softly. Smitty picked it up.

They prodded him into the little office in back of the pigeonhole partition where the guests' mail and messages and room-keys were kept. Tony nodded toward the big steel door set into the far wall. "Open it," he said. Smitty opened it.

Behind the door the safe sat in its steel nest. Tony said, nodding toward the lock, "The combination, and no stalling. You know it." He almost added "Smitty" and the near-lapse shook him hard. He had a crazy feeling, as if he were walking along the edge of a skyscraper top in a high wind.

Smitty twirled the dial, turned it the other way, reversed it again. He gave a yank and the door swung

open. Without looking away, Tony told Carl, "Tie him up." He had almost made another slip — almost called Carl by name.

Carl got busy with the wire he took from his pocket. He was good at that sort of thing. He wound a loop around Smitty's neck, another around his wrists, another around his ankles. He pushed Smitty down on his face on the floor and ran another piece of wire from the loop around his neck to that around his ankles. If Smitty tried to straighten out, he'd garrote himself. Carl had learned the trick from one of the local Korean veterans. They'd used it on prisoners.

Carl gave Smitty a kick, causing him to jerk convulsively. He began to make low gurgling noises. Busy at the safe, Tony said, without looking around, "Make him shut up."

There was the sound of another kick, but the noises kept on. Tony said, "Maybe you tied it too tight."

"No," Carl said. "He's just got a thick neck."

"Leave him alone then and give me a hand."

Some of the stuff in the safe was in steel boxes. Tony and Carl didn't bother with them. They grabbed the heavy brown paper envelopes and stuck them in laundry bags they pulled from under their slacks. The envelopes were stacked alphabetically. Margo Kennett Johns' was near the middle. Tony gave a grunt of relief as he spotted the scrawled autograph at its top. He had been

unable to repress a fear that she might have pulled it out before they got to it.

But she hadn't. Its bulk was reassuring. He slipped it inside his shirt so it wouldn't get mixed up with the others. "Hurry up, man," he whispered to Carl. "We ain't got all night."

"But you said . . ." Carl stopped and looked at him and the Joan Crawford face was grotesque.

"Never mind what I said — *move it!*" Tony snapped. In the silence that followed, he was relieved that Smitty had stopped kicking up a fuss. Which was good. He had nothing, personally, against Smitty. Hell, he'd even played pinball with him in the candy store sometimes, before Smitty went on duty. He was a great one for body-English — and resistant *tilt* signs.

Tony froze as footsteps, uneven footsteps, sounded in the lobby. There were two of them, a man and a woman. A deep voice said, "Hey there, Smitty, where are you? Want a drink, you old crud?"

There was a feminine giggle, then: "Jake, don't be so vulgar!"

"Look who's talking!" was the jeering male reply. "Okay, Smitty, if you don't want it, you don't get it."

More footsteps, then the loud peal of the night elevator bell. Tony listened, his every nerve-end quivering, his every pore open. He wished to hell it weren't Dixon's night off. What if the other night

man came to the desk? What if he looked in back and found them? Tony picked up his plastic pistol from where he had put it on the floor.

The door to the kitchen in back swung open. This was the moment. Tony waited, setting himself for the bluff he might have to pull. But all he heard was: "Morning, Mr. Wilson — morning, Miss Causey." There followed some muttered rumbles of indistinct conversation, then the lift door slammed shut.

Tony grabbed his laundry bag. He stood up. He said, "Move it, Carl!"

They slipped out the hotel door and made the turn into the alley. There they stripped off their masks and dropped them in an ash-can. Let the cops find them. They wouldn't learn anything Smitty couldn't tell them. Tony slipped his plastic pistol back into his slacks pocket, motioned Carl to do the same. They took off the gloves Dixon had given them for the job.

For some reason, Tony felt relieved to see Carl's stolid face in the shadows, instead of the Crawford mask. "Come on, Carl," he said again.

They slipped through alleys and backyards like a couple of large cats, until they were on the street below. There was no sense risking anyone in their own block seeing them. There was one bad moment, after they reached the avenue. The whole city suddenly seemed to explode with

sirens and bells. But it was only a fire, not cops.

Six minutes after they left the Kipp they were knocking at the door of Dixon's place, under the front stairs of a tenement house five blocks away.

Dixon lived with a big brass bed, a golden oak bureau, three chairs — one a rocker — a mirror, a towel-stand and, on the brown plaster wall, a Marilyn Monroe calendar and a color print of the wolf overlooking the distant village at twilight from a snow-capped hill. He was a man of about thirty, of medium height and compact build who escaped handsomeness by the utter lack of character in his face, the near-total absence of personality.

He let the boys in and stood back while they dumped their laundry bags on the bed. He accepted the Margo Kennett Johns envelope from Tony with a grunt. Then he rubbed short, mouse-blond hair and said, "Everything go okay?" There was a faint trace of the South in his accents.

"Yeah," said Tony. "A drunken couple came in, but they didn't see us. They went on up when they couldn't raise Smitty."

"That bastard!" Dixon said. Dixon, Tony suspected, had once come from what they called a "good" family, and he didn't like a crumb like Smitty ordering him around. How did a guy like Dixon get to be a night elevator-man in a place like the Kipp, Tony wondered.

"What do we do now?" Carl asked. Tony saw that Carl had unaccustomed rings under his eyes. Strain maybe, or maybe the single green-shaded light that dangled from the ceiling. Dixon's eyes looked circled, too.

"Be my guests," Dixon said, expansively pointing toward the bed. "We got a little wait for the payoff. Why not look over what you hauled?"

"How long we got to wait?" Tony asked. He didn't like the idea.

"Maybe half an hour, maybe longer," was the reply. "I couldn't be sure you'd make it on the dot. So what? We're okay here. Count your loot."

They got busy. It took them forty minutes. There wasn't as much cash as Tony had expected, only a little over two grand. The rest was a lot of letters and documents, like wills and deeds of sale. There was even a sheaf of uranium stock.

"Maybe we should have taken the tin boxes too," Carl said, scowling and dropping cigarette ashes on the linoleum floor covering. "That's where the rocks are."

"Yeah?" There was scorn in Dixon's soft voice. "You get a lot of hot jewelry and you got to sell it for cashew nuts. And they can trace stones. You did all right for a few minutes' work."

"What the hell, Carl!" Tony said, sheafing through a stack of crisp twenty-dollar bills. "We got over a G apiece."

"And we got a bill apiece still coming," Carl said. "When the hell do your guys get here, Dixon?"

"They'll be along," Dixon said. "How about a drink?"

"I'm dry enough," Tony said. He flipped the tiny radio on the bedside table onto an all-night disc jockey program.

"Me, too," Carl said.

"Keep that thing low," Dixon said, nodding toward the radio as he got a bottle out of the closet.

They had a drink, and then another. Tony said, "Listen, Dixon, you should of seen Carl in that Joan Crawford face. I wanted to make a date with him, he looked so good."

"You looked so great in that Hopalong puss," Carl said. He riffled the money again and the action brought a seraphic, relaxed expression to his face.

Tony glanced at his watch. The hands were creeping close to three o'clock. He said, "Your pals better get here soon, Dixon. We done our job and we want our dough. We don't figure to be around here when it gets light."

The music on the radio had been replaced by a commercial. Now the commercial was replaced by the hourly five-minute news program. The announcer said, "Burglars broke into the safe at the Hotel Kipp early this morning, shortly after a block party closed, and got away with an undisclosed amount of cash. However, in making the robbery they trussed night manager Terry Smith

with wire so tightly that he was strangled to death. Police are currently combing the block, since they suspect the robbers, from their obvious familiarity with the hotel, may have come from the neighborhood. . . ."

Dixon looked at Carl, then at Tony, and he was no longer nearly handsome. His face was old and hard and deeply set with lines and shadows. He said, "All right, which one of you did it?"

Carl was sitting on the bed, staring at the radio with his mouth half open.

Dixon slammed a fist into the palm of his other hand. He said, "Not that it makes any difference. We're all in it together, if we're caught. No wonder my contact hasn't showed up. They must have heard." He paused and his voice became soft again as he asked, "Why in hell did you have to kill him?"

"Christ, I didn't do it on purpose," Carl said.

"That's right," Tony said. "If Smitty hadn't tried to wiggle around, he'd have been all right."

"But he must have made some noise," Dixon said.

"He did," Carl said. "Tony told me to shut him up, so I gave him a kick. And he kept right on making crazy noises."

"You jerks!" Dixon said. "He was choking to death. Why didn't you loosen the wire around his neck?"

Dixon walked to the door and



back again. "You realize this means a first-degree murder rap for all of us if we're caught? All we wanted was a neat little robbery, to cover the theft of Margo Johns' papers. She had enough in that envelope to shake Jimmy Johns down for half a million clams. His people were willing to pay plenty to get the stuff."

Tony's eyes narrowed. "How much is plenty?" he asked.

Dixon snapped, "None of your business, kid. He opened his wallet, pulled out a couple of hundred-dollar bills, handed one to each of them. "I'm paying you off myself," he finished. "Now I'm gonna get you out of here."

"How?" Tony said. He was confused by the way things had gone wrong so fast. He and Carl were murderers — maybe worse, he had let Dixon play them for suckers. And now he couldn't afford to put up a fight.

"I got a car outside," Dixon said. "Picked it up last week. I'm gonna drive you to Jersey, and you can grab a bus there. Pick up your dough. We better be going."

He assembled all the litter on the bed and stuffed it into the laundry bags while Tony watched sullenly, wondering if he could make a move and what move he could make. It was like Dixon said . . . they were in it together. Still, he was glad he hadn't *done* it. Obliquely, he felt sorry for Carl.

Dixon led them outside where a

rickety sedan waited at the curb. He had a little trouble starting the engine and cursed, then said "Never knew a used car-dealer who wasn't a thief at heart. But I thought we'd better have one ready in case something happened."

"You mean you thought of it?" Carl asked, wondering. Dixon just grunted as he got the old vehicle under way.

He drove them across the George Washington Bridge and Tony looked at the great sweep of city and river and felt the copper taste of fear begin to form at the base of his tongue. He wondered what Carl was feeling — or if he was feeling anything. You just couldn't tell about Carl.

They were across the river and taking a winding byroad through some woods. Tony said, "Hey Dixon — this the way to the bus stop?"

"It's one way," Dixon said. "I'm trying to keep off the main roads. Why take any extra chances?"

"What are you gonna do?" Tony asked.

"I'm going back," said Dixon. "Hell I got to. I done my share of big time already, and I'm not craving anymore. If I took a powder they'd be on me for sure."

"They'll be on to us, not seeing me and Tony around," Carl said. "Go to Mexico," Dixon said. "You've always been belly-aching about living it up. Your time just came sooner than you expected, That's all.

The car began to buck as the

motor coughed spasmodically. Then it jerked to a halt. Dixon leaned on the wheel and said, "Of all the goddamn times for this hunk of junk to break down!" Then, more reasonably, "Know anything about motors, Tony?"

"Not me." Tony shook his head. Carl said nothing.

Dixon grunted and got out. He went forward and lifted the hood and vanished behind its oddly threatening shape as it cut off the lower sky. On either side of them were woods. All Tony could hear for a moment was the sound of frogs croaking away in some unseen, nearby pond.

It was the silence that cued his flash of understanding. Dixon should have made some noise out there. But he didn't. And all at once, Tony knew what was going to happen. Dixon was going to kill him, kill them both. There was no other answer.

What difference did it make to him whether they were caught in New York or somewhere else? Once the cops had them, they had Dixon, too, and on a murder rap. He couldn't afford the risk.

Why drive them way out here? And why have the car break down in a lonely spot like this? Only one answer fitted all the questions that raced through Tony's mind. He was dead, Carl was dead. He was about to move himself, but Carl already was moving, fast, soft, cat-like.

If Dixon had faked it with the clutch — Tony knew *that* much — the car would still go. Carl was behind the wheel now and Tony felt tight and scared inside. He figured they had maybe two-three seconds.

The ignition on. The motor responded. In gear the old car lurched forward, struck something, lurched forward again. Tony thought he heard a faint, desperate cry.

"Come on," Carl said, scrambling out of the car. Dixon was lying half underneath it, on his back. A corner of the headlight must have caught him leaning forward. The whole top of his head was a bloody mess. And the front tire had run over his neck, breaking it so that his head lay almost side-ways along his left shoulder.

"Kee-rist!" Carl said. "You killed him," Tony said, inanely feeling sick to his stomach. They had found the gun, about five feet back, where Dixon had dropped it. A Remington .32 automatic. Carl handed Tony the gun. The safety catch was off. He took out the magazine, then drew back the barrel casing, shook the cartridge out of the chamber, returned it to the magazine and put the magazine back in the handle. "He was ready to give it to both of us," Carl said.

Tony nodded, realizing that some sixth sense of self-preservation had sent his stolid companion into spontaneous action.

"What do we do now?" Carl's

mouth and eyes were round in the moonlight. He looked about ready to burst into tears.

"Get his wallet, and the Johns' envelope," Tony said.

They bent to the task.

"What now," Carl asked again.

"We walk," said Tony. He had a new plan to meet the new conditions. If they kept heading west, they'd hit the highway. There they could pick up a hitch to the nearest bus-stop, and be on their way to the border. No one, at least for a long long time, would connect them with the car in the woods and the body beneath it. They'd know someone had murdered Dixon — but they'd pin the Kipp robbery and Smitty's murder on him. Which, Tony felt, was only fair.

Meanwhile, he and Carl had the Johns envelope. They had Dixon's wallet, with whatever clues it held to the million-dollar contact. They could make a deal by themselves. Visions of fifty-buck racetrack windows and hundred-buck women danced in his head. He and old Carl would never have to worry about money again.

They made the highway in seventeen minutes, got a lift on a truck in eleven more. They had breakfast in a Newark cafeteria and were heading south, in a Greyhound, at a little after eight o'clock. The morning was sunny, the bus was warm and comfortable, its motion and reaction made them sleepy . . .

Tony woke up first. The brief

panic of not knowing where he was followed by a sense of well-being. He looked at Carl, snoring softly on the aisle seat, his mouth half-open as usual. He debated waking him up, decided to let him sleep a while longer. Tony lolled in his own well being, the deep inner satisfaction of knowing that no matter how you cut it *his* hands were not blood-stained. A sigh escaped from him.

The seat in front of them was empty, but Tony could see a tabloid folded and wedged in between the seat and the side of the big vehicle. He pulled it out and opened it up. The story was front-page headlines, along with a picture of blonde Margo Kennett Johns, clutching a mink coat over a nightgown.

The caption said — "*I've been robbed of papers worth at least \$1,000,000.*" There was more, of course, and more inside on page three. It was mostly about the murder of Smitty. Tony noted that Smitty's full name had been Jerome Lionel Smith. Jerome Lionel — what a name for a night manager making, maybe, sixty bucks a week, he thought.

But the paper didn't have much else. It was too soon for the full treatment, even if the cops were talking.

He got out Dixon's wallet. There were seven hundred-dollar bills in it, along with forty-seven in smalls. Taking off the hundred apiece Dixon had given Carl and himself, Tony

figured he must have collected a grand in advance. He began to whistle softly to himself as he went through the cards in the wallet, seeking some trace of the Johns contact.

Some of his sense of well-being faded when he failed to find a trace of it. There were plenty of cards, with plenty of phone numbers scribbled on the back. First names, street addresses, phone numbers. None of them meant a thing.

He stuffed the money in his own pocket and got out the Johns envelope he'd taken from the safe. There were letters, letters so hot they made him gulp, and dozens of strips of film. He held one of them up against the window. It reminded him graphically of the obscene movies he had once seen at a stag smoker.

No wonder, he thought, Jimmy Johns and his lawyers were willing to pay anything, to do anything, to get them back. He wondered how big a price he could set when he got in touch with them. Or they got in touch with him.

*Or they got in touch with him!* The cops might give up in time, be satisfied with what they had — Dixon's body and most of the loot from the safe, back in the car. But Jimmy Johns' men would never quit. They couldn't. And once they'd found who had the evidence, it would be a lot cheaper and neater simply to arrange a rubout.

With sickening clarity, Tony saw

that he should have left the Margo Kennett Johns envelope with Dixon's body. If police had found them, that would have been that. But the fact they weren't found would put Johns and his agents after them — and they'd never stop until they either had the papers or knew they were destroyed.

Destroy them — that was it. Burn the damned things. But how to prove to Johns' operatives, when they caught up with them, that he *had* destroyed them, that he hadn't had copies or photostats made?

It wasn't going to work. No matter what he did, they'd be coming after Carl and himself. They were probably after them already. They'd question Dixon's landlady, his neighbors, Mrs. Fiametto. They'd pretend to be working with the police. They'd *use* the police. And when they had the information they wanted, they'd strike — anywhere.

Two kids — one named Carl, the other Tony. They'd have descriptions, sooner or later they'd find them. Two kids — one named Carl, the other Tony.

Tony noticed a big low sports convertible that was hovering on the flank of the bus, clinging there for maybe a couple of miles. He caught the flash of sunlight on the twin circles of the driver's sunglasses as he looked up at the bus windows. Involuntarily, he cringed back in his seat. How could he be sure they weren't on the trail already.

When he looked again, covertly, the convertible was pulling on ahead. Using his forearm, he mopped sudden sweat from his face. Two kids — one named Carl, the other Tony.

They wouldn't be looking for one kid named Tony. Especially if his name was something else. He had over two grand in his kick, and the sleeping Carl had more than an-

other. With over three Gs, a guy could go a long way — by himself.

The pistol, the real pistol, he had picked up near Dixon's body, tugged heavily at his hip pocket. Tony was grateful it wasn't a still heavier, bulkier forty-five. He looked at Carl, listened to his gentle snoring.

He wondered how it was going to be. He had never been alone, really alone, in his life.

