



# BLACK MASK

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K. S. WHITE, Editor

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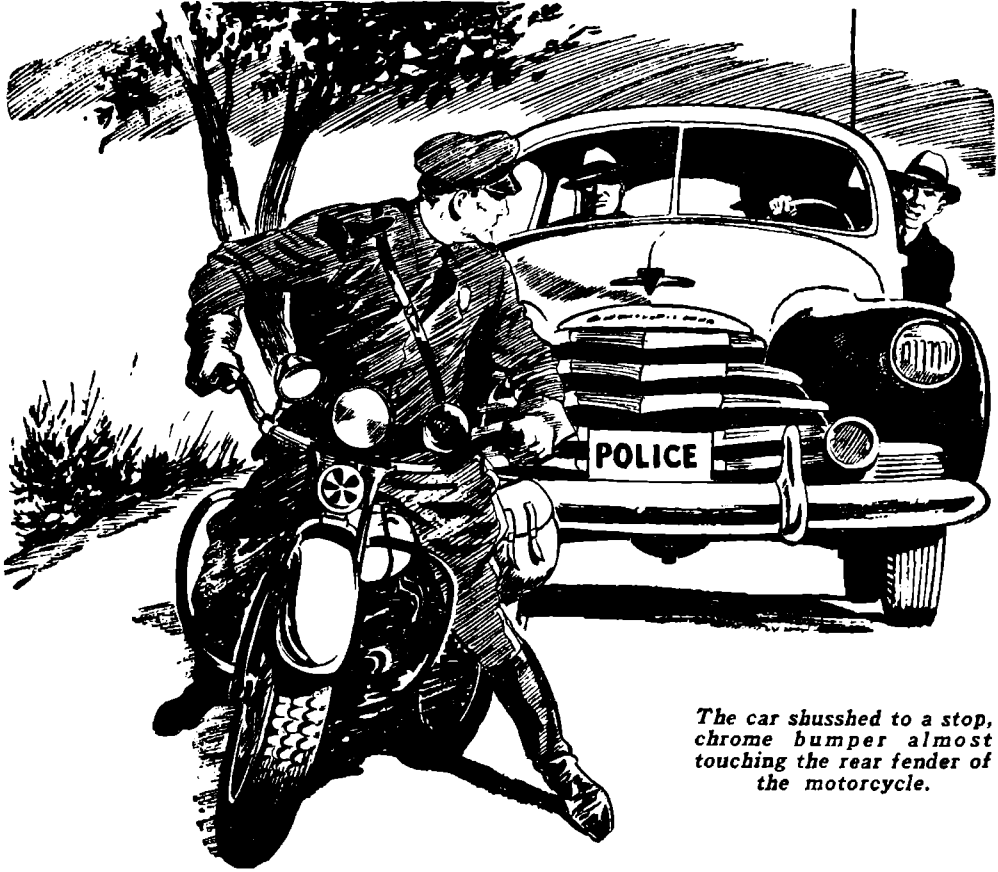


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# GUN IN HIS BACK

By COLEMAN MEYER



*The car shushed to a stop, chrome bumper almost touching the rear fender of the motorcycle.*

**T**HE white motorcycle rocketed to the crest of the grade and Patrolman Ben Scoggins sighed heavily as his wrist eased the throttle for the downhill run. Life, he reflected, was getting very complicated . . .

Abruptly and simultaneously he

clamped the front brake, swore under his breath, closed the throttle. A white patrol car loomed ahead and Scoggins remembered the Headquarters Bulletin: ". . . And all such patrolling, unless in actual pursuit or emergency, shall not exceed the lawful speed limit . . ." He

**The Inspector couldn't see Patrolman Scoggins for dust, so the police department was dumbfounded when Scoggins got the best Emily Post treatment from the Chief.**

had forgotten that the inspector had stumped angrily away from that painful office scene slightly before him and that the inspector was headed north toward Richmond City.

The memory of the office scene brought red to his wind-burned features even as he was snubbing the plunging motorcycle. A couple of guys had heisted the Richmond City Bank this morning. The automatic procedures of the patrol had invoked a road block with cars and motorcycles at strategic points, a block that had been called off after the passage of an hour denoted that the bandits had somehow filtered through the twenty-mile screen.

And it had been highly unfortunate that their abandoned black sedan had been found a half-mile in on the road Scoggins was supposed to be blocking. Especially so since Joe Rivers' vineyard was *three* miles in on the same road and the presence of three pounds of grapes in Scoggins' saddlebags had proved difficult of explanation.

The inspector had been forthright and pointed; horribly so. And the actions he had so balefully discussed threatened short shrift to Scoggins' pleasant dreams of pensioned retirement two years hence.

The motorcycle pulled up slowly on the white sedan. It was proceeding at a sedate forty. Scoggins straightened his Sam Browne belt, shifted his holster to hang at the proper angle. He rode to the open driver's window. A man smoking a cigar was sitting alongside the inspector. There was another man, alone, in the black who waved in a friendly sort of fashion to the motorcycle patrolman.

The inspector looked over. Their faces were only a foot apart. "Ah, there—Scoggins," he said pleasantly. "How are you?" Then he smiled.

Scoggins restrained the abrupt wobble

of the motorcycle, brought it carefully back to the side of the car.

"Going to Richmond City to check in?" the inspector continued, almost gayly.

Scoggins nodded in dazed fashion.

"That's good," the inspector offered with a pleased air as though the fact that Scoggins was checking in furnished him with some small personal pleasure. Then he nodded at the others in the car. "Some men from the chief's office. I'm dropping them off. See you later." The white car slowed abruptly.

The motorcycle spurted ahead as Scoggins held it at a legal fifty-five. His sun-bleached brows drew down in bewilderment as deep-set eyes watched his handlebar mirror until the white car had gone down to pin-point dimensions. Then he twisted the throttle to a quick seventy, held it there for a while. Maybe he had the fat boll-weevil all wrong. Maybe the guy wasn't such a jerk . . .

Two minutes later the thought struck him with the force of a blow, nearly unseated him from the motorcycle.

His big hand clenched the front brake, stretched the cable. The rear tire squalled from the pressure of a heavy foot.

The driveway to Ranse Owens' place was narrow. Scoggins thought for a frantic moment that he wasn't going to make it as the bike skidded under fierce braking.

Ranse was out in the chicken yard, came walking over to the fence. "Hello, Ben—"

Scoggins was shouting even as he was getting the motorcycle turned around. His commands were urgent—explicit.

Ranse listened intently, forebore even a single question. He threw the feed pan down, departed for the house on the run.

Scoggins dropped in the clutch, roared back out the driveway.

**H**E looked anxiously ahead as he hit the highway, breathed a sigh of relief. The inspector's car was still behind, couldn't possibly have seen him turn into Ranse's place.

Scoggins jumped on the clutch, burned rubber and went rapidly through the gears with a wide-open engine. He crouched low as the motorcycle plunged downgrade toward Richmond City.

The first corner, Scoggins felt sure, was not a ninety-mile-an-hour turn. He tightened down the steering damper, hoped that he was wrong . . .

Seven minutes and ten miles later he was still trying to get his heart back where it belonged. Then he saw what he was looking for. It was another white patrol car, coming toward him. He thought swiftly. It would probably meet the inspector's car within a few minutes.

Scoggins blinked his red lights with swift, imperious flashes, held up a free hand as he braked furiously with the other, crossed to the wrong side of the highway. The patrol car pulled to a stop on the highway shoulder. Sergeant Berry's head hung curiously from the window.

Engine still running, the beefy, red-faced patrolman shouted swift instructions.

Berry's face ran the gamut; puzzlement, amazement, comprehension and, finally, disagreement. His head started to negate. The motorcycle man didn't even pause to listen. He ran it all off in one breath, waved aside the dissent, shouted, "Sit tight—here!"

The motorcycle made crackling noises, squalled rubber and was gone, leaving a shouting sergeant talking to a tiny trail of smoke.

Berry returned to the car, started the motor indecisively once. Then he shut it off, sat rigidly in the seat.

Scoggins continued on a full mile, sur-

veyed the road carefully on both sides. He nodded to himself, stilled the motorcycle on the highway shoulder, kicked out the sidestand. Then he rested on the saddle in the carefree attitude of a point man.

Ahead the road ran straight for another quarter-mile to disappear behind a hill. Beyond it, Scoggins knew, was Richmond City. At this point the concrete strip was almost levee in formation, dropping off sharply on both sides to fields considerably lower.

Scoggins' eyes were sharp in his rear view mirror. He twisted the handlebars slightly to bring the road behind into better view. Then his gaze alternated between the tiny four inches of glass and anxious looks ahead. Traffic of normal volume flowed by . . .

It was just as his eyes identified the dot in the mirror that his ears caught the screech of brakes from up ahead. The funneling traffic stream showed frantic stoplights. Cars squealed rubber. The moving metal river ground to a heavy stop.

Scoggins looked around. The rear view mirror told him the moment. The white car shushed to a stop, chrome bumper almost touching the rear fender of the motorcycle. Head turned over his shoulder, the patrolman watched it idly. His big hands were twisting at the front snaps of his belt.

The inspector scowled furiously from the window. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"Hell of a bad accident up ahead, Inspector," Scoggins called back with cheerful humility.

The man alongside the inspector rolled his window down. "So there's a bad accident—so you're sitting *here!* He gestured with the cigar. "By God, somebody's gonna hear about this! Get up there, get the road cleared!"

"Yes, *sir!*" Scoggins acknowledged the

order with alacrity. He swung a booted leg free of the motorcycle, bent over the machine for an instant. Then he pivoted, walked steadily back toward the white car, arms swinging free at his sides.

"Your belt—your gun . . ." the inspector goggled faintly.

"They're on the motorcycle," the patrolman nodded. He came to the window side, looked at the stilled traffic packed in behind the white car. "Look fellows," he continued easily, addressing the other two in the car. "So far it's only armed robbery. Nobody's been hurt. And the State won't hurt you. A stretch maybe, but that's all. That's a lot easier than the hot seat. And the hot seat's a cinch if you get excited."

The man with the cigar clipped off an oath. "C'mere, copper—closer!" he ordered in a tight voice. He looked tensely ahead. There was no evidence of unusual interest in the cars to front or back—an officer striding to an official car . . .

Scoggins raised his hand very deliberately to sill level, rested them there. "Get smart."

"I am smart!" The man with the cigar leaned forward tensely. "Walk around slowly, copper. Slowly! Get in my side! In back. Do it easy—easy! Or the inspector gets a full clip right where it hurts—right in the belly!"

The inspector gurgled faintly. His pop eyes closed.

Scoggins raised his uniform cap with meticulous care, wiped a hand across his brow. His fingers came away wet. "It's no good, guys." His voice was tightly casual. "I just looked back down the highway. There's a patrol car cross-ways on the road and a guy with a riot gun leaning over the hood. Up ahead—" he gestured toward Richmond City, "you couldn't get through with a helicopter."

"The hell you say," Cigar-face said grimly. He shot a swift look to the side of the highway, the far fields. "C'mon," he rasped to the man in the rear seat. "We make the side. We take these guys . . ."

Scoggins shook his head slowly. "It won't work," he grinned past the ashen face of the inspector. "It won't work." His head tilted a short invitation to gaze out the window. "Look!"

The man in back grated: "Kee-rist!"

Heads appeared over the bank where the highway grading dropped off, heads in felt hats. At eye level. And alongside each head appeared the slender spire of rifle barrel.

"See what I mean," the patrolman said brightly. He spread his big hands, palms up on the metal of the sill. "O. K.—so you blast and you make a couple of stiffs for the State—" He hunched his shoulders slightly. "It ain't no profit, guys. There'll be lots of stiffs. Everybody loses that way . . ."

After a moment he said quietly: "Good! Better come out now so I can look you over. Leave your hardware inside!"

**T**HE inspector harummphed, harummphed. The sound filled the tiny office. There was a sly twinkle in the eyes of the gray-haired captain as they met Scoggins' glance and then returned to the portly frame in the chair. It still twitched at horrifying memory.

"One of them was lying on the highway when I came by. You know how it is now—nobody stops any more. They leave that for somebody official . . ." A giant shudder shook the inspector's carcass. "The other man was concealed and when I stopped to investigate—well, that was it. The one on front held a gun jammed in my side every instant, told me exactly what to say and how to

say it. I tell you—" His head shook and another shudder rippled the fat body.

"But that was brilliant police work—to have recognized those men from that meager bank description . . ." He looked up swiftly. "Scoggins—I'm putting you in for sergeant's grade!"

There was peace in the tiny office. The inspector had departed. The gray-haired captain looked quizzically at the patrolman. "What I don't see, Ben—" he began.

"I had to get to Ranse's place and out again—quick," Scoggins interrupted. "Before the inspector's car caught up with me or before they saw me turn off the highway. Ranse catches on quick. Like I been trying to tell the inspector—the people in this county are my friends. He got on the phone, got the guys near Richmond City to snarl up the traffic with a couple of hayricks crossways on the highway. Then he got the others to pick up their bird guns and sort of assemble on both sides of the road."

"So you took your gun off . . . ?

"What else could I do?" Scoggins

shrugged. "You know how itchy guys in a jam get. And the wrong move might have meant a dead inspector. Which might not," he added scratching his nose reflectively, "have been a bad idea."

He turned to leave.

The captain's voice caught him with his hand on the knob. "Ben," he mused. "I saw the teletype on those men. One five eight, a hundred and fifty. One five nine, one eighty. Nobody saw their faces. Tell me—how do you tell a guy is five feet eight inches and a hundred and fifty pounds when he's sitting down in a car?"

Scoggins looked over his shoulder, opened the door, peered cautiously out. He closed the door carefully, stood with his back against it. "Cap," he confided in a heavy whisper. "I wouldn't a knowed them guys if they was Clark Gable and Robert Taylor. All I know is—any time I ride up alongside the inspector and he says 'Good afternoon, Scoggins,' with practically joy in his voice, Cap—" he paused impressively—"somebody *must* have a gun in his back!"