

STORIES

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Three Detective Stories

- PARTNER'S PAYOFF** Roger Dee 6
The guy had the gun—but Al had the guts! A short short story
- THE MURDER TAP (A Novelet)** M. E. Chaber 26
Private Eye Hamil had only one client—but that one was plenty
- VENGEANCE IS NOT ENOUGH** Bruce Elliott 67
Henry cradled his dead son in his arms, and his mind went blank!

Three Western Stories

- TIME FOR VIOLENCE** Hascal Giles 51
They were waiting for one thing, a chance to kill the squatter!
- HAWK IN THE SUNLIGHT** Robert Stephens 84
He was about to lose his best friend, and find— SELF RESPECT
- BRANDY ON THEIR MINDS** Paul Randell Morrison 102
Cruelty meant one thing to C. C. Sisters, another to the burro!

Three Sports Stories

- CHEESE CHAMP (A Novelet)** Bill Erin 10
The fight fans called Welter yellow, so he took on a man-killer
- DIAMOND OUTCAST** T. W. Ford 55
Was it any wonder the hapless Bulls made an outcast of Carlson?
- THEY'RE DEAD AT COOPERSTOWN** Fletcher Flora 98
It certainly looked like a no-hitter for good old Southside Drum

Three Science-Fiction Stories

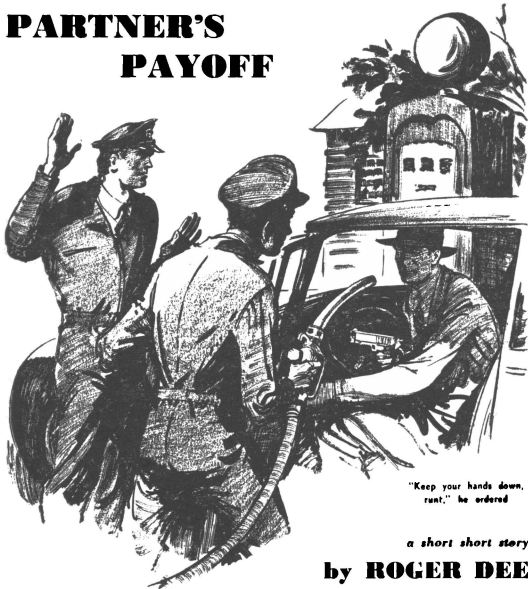
- EARTH PERSON SINGULAR** Charles A. Stearns 43
Sometimes, a space alien's bark can be worse than his aardvark!
- KING LODGE REVISITED** Herbert D. Kastle 76
The kid from the future insisted that Tim King was his ancestor
- BANNION'S CAVE** Margaret St. Clair 90
Lycias paid a heavy price for his daring in tinkering with time

See "A Word to Our Readers" on Page 83

ALEXANDER SAMALMAN, Editor

The guy had the gun — but Al had the guts!

PARTNER'S PAYOFF



"Keep your hands down, runt," he ordered

a short short story

by ROGER DEE

I USED to feel a cut or two above Al Wirtz, in spite of liking him well enough to go partners with him in our two-man gas station. That was partly because I'm a big guy and Al is an undersized runt with a gimpy leg, but it was mostly because I was in World War II from Bizerte to Berlin, while Al never got past his draft board. I saw plenty of

rugged action on that jaunt and I guess it gave me the feeling that I had an edge on Al all the way.

But that was before our Saturday-evening stickup. I don't feel that way any more.

Al was hosing off the drive-in apron out by the pumps when the trouble broke, and I

(Concluded on page 8)

was inside the station, racking up a new line of fan belts. Our rush was over at seven-thirty, and there wasn't another car in sight when this thin-faced character drove up and honked his horn.

"Gas," he said when Al limped over. "Fill her up."

Al nodded and dunked the pump nozzle into the tank. The drifting smell of raw gasoline was heavy on the air, the way it is on a still summer evening. The driver got out, lighting a cigarette, and flipped his match away as he came toward the station.

The match didn't go out. It lay there, sputtering and smoking, almost under the humming gas hose.

Al put a foot on it quick. "Hey, watch that stuff!" he yelled. "You want to touch this heap off like an A-bomb?"

The guy ignored him and came on into the station. I put down my fan belts, figuring he was looking either for the john or the telephone.

He didn't ask for either. Instead he took an automatic out of his coat pocket, as off-hand as I'd fish out a folder of matches.

"Empty the register, friend," he said, snicking off the safety. "And don't get reckless."

I'd learned enough in the ETO to know when a guy is running a bluff. This baby wasn't.

I cleaned out the register on the double, forgetting I'd ever been a hero. I was nicked a couple of times overseas and being shot up don't feel like the books tell it. It hurts like hell—if you're lucky. This guy had all the



breaks—the street was as quiet as a church, and Mahaffey, the beat cop, was taking ten down at the corner coffee slot.

"Stuff it in this," ordered the holdup, flipping a folded paper bag at my feet. I wadded the bills into it and twisted the top shut.

"Now toss it over and walk out ahead of me. Easy does it!"

EVEN after a busy Saturday there wasn't more than four or five hundred dollars in the register, but it meant a lot to me and Al. We were still operating on a shoestring, and a loss like that could put us in the red for months.

But I didn't stall any. Four hundred or four thousand, it wasn't enough to risk a slug through the stomach.

This guy was an old hand at the racket and he knew his business. He even had a pair of side-cutter pliers in his pocket, which he used to snip the telephone cord. He handled the whole thing so smoothly that Al hadn't tumbled to what was happening until I was beside him at the pumps and the holdup was covering us both with his gun.

The bandit tossed his paper bag into the front seat and climbed in. Al started to put up his hands, still holding the gas hose, but the guy warned him off.

"Keep your hands down, runt," he ordered. "You two stand fast and you may get stuck up again some time. Move a foot, and you won't."

That was when Al squeezed the trip on the hose nozzle and slashed an inch-thick stream of gasoline over the bandit from his Adam's apple to his belt buckle. The auto seat was fast soaking up puddles of the stuff: the whole car smelled like a refinery.

"Now, wise guy, go ahead and shoot—if you want to," Al said, cool as you please. "You know what'll happen if you do. One muzzle flash will send your crate up like a barrel of TNT."

I could tell from the look on the holdup's face that he'd already realized that.

"You can shoot and commit suicide, Jesse James," Al said, reaching in and lifting the ignition key out of the dash. "Or you can sit tight and hand over the gun."

The bandit didn't shoot, of course. He passed over his gun and sat shivering like a wet dog until I got Mahaffey up from the corner coffee slot.

It's too bad more guys like Al Wirtz don't get past their draft boards. With a couple of companies like Al, the road from Bizerte to Berlin would have been a lot shorter. ● ● ●