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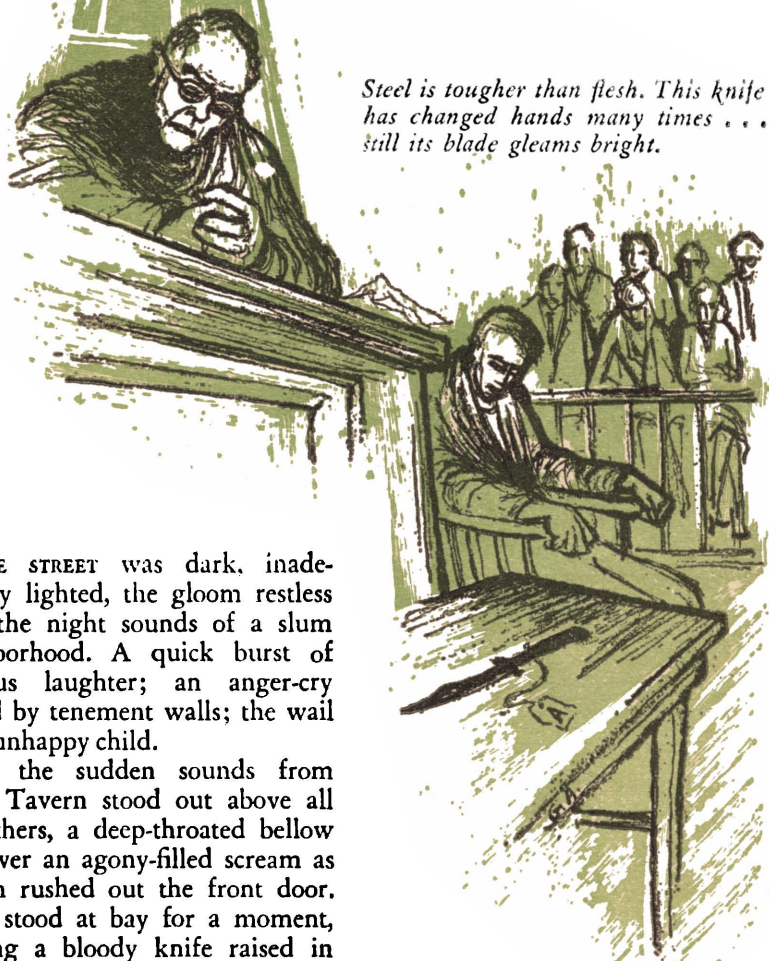
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SWITCH-BLADE

BY PAUL DANIELS

*Steel is tougher than flesh. This knife
has changed hands many times . . .
still its blade gleams bright.*



THE STREET was dark, inadequately lighted, the gloom restless with the night sounds of a slum neighborhood. A quick burst of nervous laughter; an anger-cry muted by tenement walls; the wail of an unhappy child.

But the sudden sounds from Ben's Tavern stood out above all the others, a deep-throated bellow laid over an agony-filled scream as a man rushed out the front door.

He stood at bay for a moment, holding a bloody knife raised in his fist as though to cut down anyone who barred his way. But the street was empty. No one chal-

lenged him. He turned and ran.

One block, two, then he realized he was still carrying the murder weapon and he threw it as far as he could; off into the covering night.

He heard its distant clatter as he ran on, fled until he was exhausted, then stopped in a dark doorway to rest and listen.

No one followed. After a while he grinned like a nervous cat and wiped a smear of the blood from his knife hand onto the wall beside him. His mirthless grin widened. He'd shown the bastard. The crumby, short-changing bastard. The heel had paid big for the extra half-a-buck. Plenty big.

The man looked out again. He was alone. He brushed his sleeves, made imaginary adjustments as though removing the marks of murder, and walked off down the street. Into oblivion. Never to be seen nor heard of in that neighborhood again . . .

The knife lay in the gutter where the man had thrown it. Lay until the sky paled and the street lamps went out and a sweeper truck came to scour the gutter with its three-foot broom.

The sweeper truck brushed the knife into a pile of debris and swept it along the gutter. But it was a heavy knife, with a thick, six-inch blade, and the broom was not large enough to sweep such objects up into the truck's dust bin.

So after the knife had traveled two blocks it caught on a crack in the pavement and escaped the broom along with a handful or two of tenement residue.

The truck rolled on. The knife lay where the broom had dropped it. Dawn came frowzily; lay heavy in the slum streets gaining the strength to become morning.

And with morning, came a boy . . .

His name was Tito Garcia. He was thirteen years old and he shuffled aimlessly along the curb wondering what to do with his day.

As he shuffled and wondered, his sharp eye caught a glint from a spate of filth in the gutter. His eyes darted and brightened. A knife. A switch blade!

He looked casually up and down the street. A few people were stirring but none paid him any attention. He sat down on the curb with his feet in the gutter, made a casual, aimless rite of transferring the knife from the gutter to his pocket. Then he got casually to his feet and moved on.

But the morning had changed for Tito Garcia. The day had changed. Now he was important. He'd found a knife and he was no longer a wandering juvenile; rather, a wary hunter as he went in search of his friends.

Within an hour he was the most important member of a group; five children of his own age who

trooped along with him, each sharing vicariously in the thrill and the importance of the knife Tito Garcia carried in his pocket.

"What we gonna do, Tito. We ought to do something with it. Knife a cop, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"Or stick up a joint? You can stick up a joint with a knife."

"Maybe that, too."

"Man, oh man! You walk into a joint and flash the shiv and if the guy doesn't hand over or gets cute—zing! Right across the joint. Into his gut. You know how to sling it, Tito? Hit the spot you aim at clear across a joint?"

"Sure. That's easy."

"Bet you can't. Bet you can't hit that telephone pole. Right there—in front of Marko's. Bet you can't."

"Easy. A cinch. Watch this . . ."

At the exact moment the switch blade flew from Tito's hand, the hand of Frank Marko, tailor and dry-cleaner, lashed out and left a bruise on the cheek of his nephew, Robert Bellam. And Frank Marko's voice lashed out also.

"You're nothing but a no-good bum! You steal, you lie, you cheat and then when you get into trouble you come running to me. I'm sorry for you because Katy's dead and Mike ran off somewhere and you got no father or mother, but this is it. No more! No more! I'm done. You get out of here and stay out!"

Robert Bellam, twenty-two, un-

stable, hot-tempered, gagged on his hatred and ran toward the door. He wanted to cry but the tears would have been tears of rage and frustration and they were close to the surface as he burst into the street.

There was red madness clouding his mind, through which his eyes saw nothing of what was going on around him; saw no children, no street—only the switch blade knife quivering in the telephone pole at the curb.

He lurched forward, snatched the knife, turned, and charged back into the store . . .

John Henry Davis, Judge of the Criminal Court, looked down upon the people in his courtroom; the prosecutor and the defense attorney; the defendant and the witnesses; the jury and the people who sat beyond the railing.

Judge Davis' mouth was set grimly and there was a touch of weariness in his face. After a few more moments of silence he raised his hand and turned his eyes on the clerk.

"Would you please hand me exhibit "A"?"

The clerk got up from his chair and took a switch blade knife from the table and laid it on the bench. Judge Davis picked it up and studied it. He said, "A young man has just been found guilty of murder in this courtroom. The experience of presiding over trials such as this,

of hearing convictions such as this, is not new to me.

"I have seen a sickening number of defendants such as Robert Bellam answer to society for crimes of violence, and I have come to believe that there is always a second defendant standing before the bar in these cases. But one that is never sentenced; one that never suffers the loss of life or liberty for crimes committed; one who is never here in person but is always represented by exhibit "A"—the gun, the knife, the blackjack, the brass knuckles.

"The defendant who is always represented by these, the tools of crime is Society itself.

"Perhaps this defendant cannot be castigated too severely in that sincere efforts have been made to eliminate these tools of murder and violence. But the facts of this case prove that the efforts are not great enough. Too many of the tools are still made available and in many instances were this not true, no crime of violence would be committed.

"There are too many guns still lying around in bureau drawers; in desks and homes and shops and offices; weapons called by many names and designated to many purposes in order to justify their existence. There are too many knives such as this one still available in stores and pawn shops masquerading under brazenly transparent classifications—sports equipment, novelties, objects of art.

"When the plain truth is that the gun and the switch blade knife and all the rest of these tools were made for but one purpose—to kill—and so long as they exist they will be used for that purpose and young men like Robert Bellam will be brought to accounting."

Judge Davis paused and was then about to go on but he saw that he was trying the patience of his listeners. He was annoying them. They'd heard the trial and conviction and now they were entitled to the verdict without a long-winded preamble from the judge.

He sighed, handed the knife back to the clerk and said, "Robert Bellam, arise and face the Bench." Then: "You have been tried and found guilty of—" and the rest of it as Judge Davis had grown to know it so well . . .

Months had passed, spring and summer had trooped by and winter had come to the tenements.

Tito Garcia a little older now still preferred the streets and the alleys to the drab flat in which he lived. So he came out as usual upon this particular morning but with something to change the routine slightly.

A letter. An official looking letter stuffed in the dirty box labeled *Garcia*. He pulled it out. It had his name on it.

He'd never gotten a letter before and the thrill of opening it was pleasant even though the contents

were disappointing and bewildering. The letter wasn't written. It was printed; a form of some kind with spaces for names and dates filled in on a typewriter.

Tito read it slowly and with difficulty.

Tito Garcia:

You are requested to call at Room 601 of the Criminal Courts Building where property impounded as evidence in criminal case Number 2637M will be returned to you. If you do not appear in person and lay claim to this aforementioned property within ten days after receipt of this notice, the said property will be turned over to the Department of . . .

Tito Garcia frowned over the letter as he walked slowly along the bleak street. What were they talking about? What property? Nobody had anything of his.

He puzzled all that day and when school was out, he zipped his jacket tight and walked uptown to the Court House.

Room 601 had a counter across the front of it with a wire grill to the ceiling and a small window through which a sour-faced, elderly man asked Tito what he wanted.

Tito handed him the letter and waited in silence.

The man read the letter and went back and searched among the shelves behind the counter and came forward with a heavy brown

envelope. He pushed a form through the window.

"Sign there, sonny."

Tito was eyeing the envelope warily. "What's in it?"

"I dunno. The law just says it's yours and I gotta give it to you when you come for it."

Tito picked up the pencil and looked at the form.

"Sign it kid. It's just a receipt, not a confession. Hurry up."

Tito signed and went out with his envelope and by the time he'd reached the street he knew what was in it. His inquiring fingers had found the hard shape of the knife in its careless wrapping.

He pushed the envelope into his jacket and thought about it on the way home. It's hardness and weight against his chest brought back memories of the cry inside old Marko's place that day. The cops coming. Two of them tackling Slick Bellam, dragging him down, throwing him in the wagon.

Memories of the cold, frightening atmosphere of the courtroom. The book they'd made Tito put his hand on before he sat in the chair and told what he'd seen. And the other kids sitting in the chair and telling too.

And Slick's face when the judge said what was going to happen to him.

Tito thought it over all the way home and by the time he was back in the neighborhood, he was low and blue and disgusted. He'd never

felt so miserable in his life and, two blocks from home, he suddenly snatched the envelope from his jacket and threw it as far as he could.

Then he ran.

The envelope fell into the gutter on the opposite side of the street, burying itself in a heap of dirty snow . . .

Several weeks went by and the weather turned slightly warmer, transforming the dirty snow into gray slush that was washed away down a nearby street drain.

Until a youth came by, walking close to the curb, his eyes downcast from habit rather than design. His glance caught something shiny poking its way out of a sodden brown envelope.

He stooped and retrieved it and glanced furtively about as he wiped it off and thrust it into his pocket.

And now, as he walked on, his step became more jaunty, his bearing more alert and erect.

His manner more purposeful as he moved through the drab street into the lowering night.

