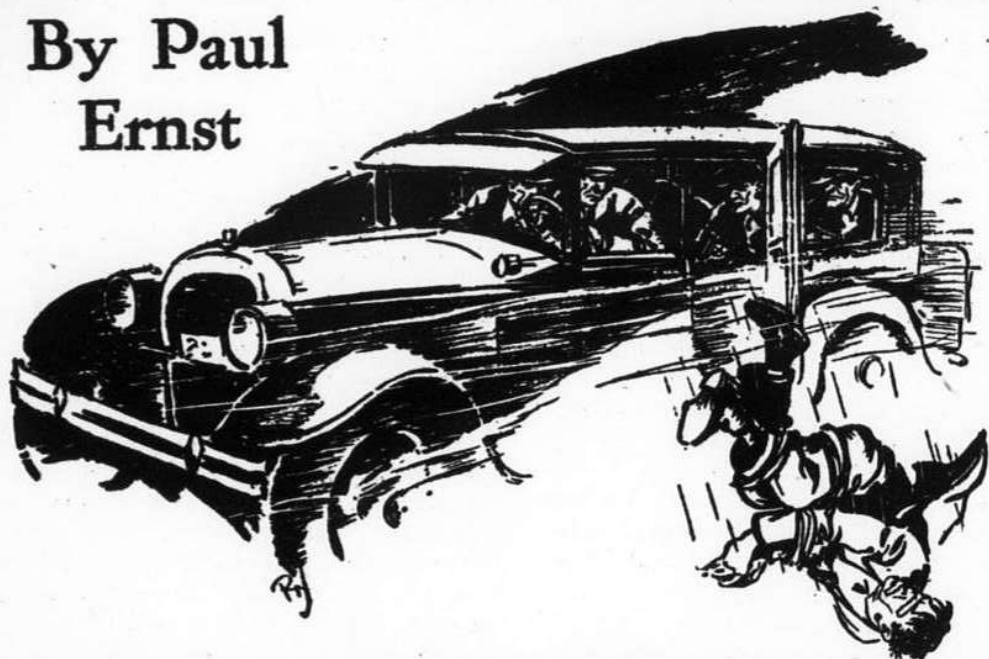


By Paul
Ernst



***Crooks try to subtract a copper from life—and
find he had added up a***

Mathematical Doom

for them!

DETECTIVE PEARSON'S hands clenched in his coat pockets as he went, head down, through the rain toward Greer's house. The small scar over his left eye was a white line of tensility. If Greer did as he had promised he would, the Golden mob was through; they would get the chair for the Marrone massacre.

That massacre had stirred the country. Four Marrone men, including Marrone himself, had been caught in a dingy tavern on the south side of Chicago, lined up against a wall, and cold-bloodedly pumped full of lead by seven men with machine guns.

Every one knew who the seven men were. They were the Golden mob, led by Sam Golden, who had sworn to get

Marrone for muscling in on his cigar-store racket.

But knowing, didn't help Pearson, detailed to the case, to get the goods on Golden. Then—he had gotten a lead!

Two men had actually been in the tavern at the time of the massacre, and had witnessed it. One, a truck driver by the name of Barney, had stepped from the washroom just as the shots rang out, and had ducked back unseen.

The other, a small business man, had been in the phone booth and watched through the glass panel, also unobserved by the gunmen.

On these two, Pearson had gone to work. And, it had not been easy work. Testify against the Golden mob? Sure!

And get filled with machine gun slugs yourself!

The truck driver, Barney, had finally agreed to testify, if his name were rigidly concealed till the very hour of the trial. And, at length, the business man, Greer, had tremblingly agreed to do the same.

Pearson rang the bell of Greer's house, devoutly hoping the man would live up to the promise. Almost before his finger had touched the buzzer, the door was opened and a white, frightened face peered out at him.

"Come in," the man chattered. "You're sure no one followed you?"

"I'm sure," Pearson nodded. He didn't blame the man for his fright. He was taking a deadly risk.

"I won't stay long, Mr. Greer," he said. "You know what I want. If you'll just sign a statement that the men you saw kill Marrone and his men were Sam Golden and his mob, recognized absolutely from photographs, I'll have enough to get a warrant out. Then, at the last minute, you'll come to court under guard."

"All right," Greer said, biting his lips. "I'll do it. Step into the library and I'll write as you dictate."

Pearson followed the plump, little man into the next room, in the front of the house. Greer sat at a desk there.

"Don't sit in line with a window——" Pearson barked.

The warning was too late.

There was a *spang!* of broken window glass. Greer gasped, half rose from his chair, clutching at his breast. Then he fell.

Pearson sprang, white-lipped, to the window. He knocked the loose glass away and leaned out. He could see nothing in the street, but down the block there was a parked car, facing north.

Swearing under his breath, he started for the door. A voice sounded:

"All right, copper, drop your gun and put up your hands!"

Pearson whirled.

Six men stood in the hall doorway. Each had a gun in his hand. The leader was Sam Golden, a man whose bulk dripped with fat, whose little black eyes were buried in rolls of it. His lips stirred in a sneer.

"If it isn't our friend, Pearson!" he snarled. "Glad to see you. We wanted to see you so much that we sneaked into the back of this guy's house to get you, while another of us took care of the guy himself through the front window."

His eyes reddened.

"Been a busy boy, ain't you? Two witnesses rounded up on the Marrone job. Well, here's one that won't talk!" He prodded Greer's body with his toe. "The other won't either—after we get through with him! Where did you put the other witness, Pearson, that you thought we couldn't find him?"

Pearson drew a deep breath.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he said.

"We will know before we get through with you!" Golden spat out. "We'll have his name and address and everything!"

He walked closer to Pearson.

"I don't mind telling you you're close to six feet in a cemetery! But if you'll name the second witness to the Marrone job, we'll let you go."

Pearson's eyes probed Golden's pig-gish ones.

"You're going to bump me off anyway," he shrugged. "Why should I talk?"

"You'll talk!" grated Golden.

His right arm moved.

Unprepared as he was for the blow, Pearson was yet able to duck his head a bit as the gun barrel crashed against it. He was not completely out when he dropped, though he was as paralyzed

as though unconsciousness had claimed him.

"Carry him to the car!" he heard Golden rumble savagely. "We'll take him to the joint and make him talk!"

He felt himself carried, then heard a car door open and felt himself jammed into a tonneau. The car started.

Pearson could have sat up now, but he didn't try it. He pretended to be still unconscious.

"We'll take him to the joint and make him talk," Golden had said.

What joint? If he could discover Golden's lair and lead a raid on it, he might wipe out to some extent the disgrace of having Greer murdered right under his nose. That is, if he could ever get away from the place so that he could lead a raid on it!

A lot of ifs—

He opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of an electric sign with the words, "Carter's Better Bread," on it.

"Sam," a man in the back seat with him suddenly said, "hadn't we better fix this guy so if he snaps out of it he won't see anything?"

"Yeah," said Golden.

Pearson cursed. Adhesive tape was pulled tight over his eyes and mouth. No chance now to see where they were going.

The car stopped, probably for a light, then whined ahead in second gear. It's pick-up was sluggish.

"Couldn't you swipe a better bus than this one?" growled a man in the back. "We'd be in a hole if a prowler car chased us."

"No prowler car will," grunted Golden. "The boys'll be listening to the radio on such a lousy, rainy night."

THERE followed silence in which small sounds came with agonizing clarity to Pearson's ears. He was like a condemned man, listening to the last things he would hear on earth.

He heard the whine of a street car off to the far left, the flop of a loose tire chain hitting one of the rear fenders of the stolen car, the spattering whine of its tires on the drenched pavement.

He heard the rasp of a match as one of the killers lighted a cigarette, the whine of another automobile starting somewhere near at hand. If only he could signal the driver of that other car! But, of course, he couldn't.

The car went for a long time in the direction in which it had started. Then it turned left. Pearson felt it rumble across the tracks on which had run the street car he'd heard. It kept on in this direction for an unguessable length of time, then turned right again.

"What you going to do to this guy to make him talk, when he wakes up?" ventured one of the men in the back seat.

"He'll find out," said Golden, with an oily chuckle.

Pearson felt a cold finger touch his spine. The existence of these killers depended on his own death, after they'd got from him the identity of the other Marrone witness so they could wipe him out, too. But there was one thing he was determined on. They might kill him—but he'd never deliver the life of the truck driver to them!

The heavy, old car turned abruptly to the right. The loose chain flapped against the rear fender at a higher speed, and the tires sang louder on the wet pavement. They sang in a different key, too, as though the character of the road had changed a little.

"In about three minutes," rumbled Golden, "we'll have this guy where we want him. Has he snapped out of it yet, or is he faking?"

Pearson felt the toe of a heavy shoe crash sickeningly against his ribs.

"Still out," a man said after a little while, during which Pearson felt the breath on his cheek of the speaker,

whose face was down close to his own.

"O. K. He'll come out of it in a little while!"

The car plunged ahead faster, then at length slowed down. Pearson felt it swerve, as a vicious hand at the wheel skidded it off the pavement and onto some stuff that sounded like cinders. Then he heard branches scrape against the side of the car, indicating that it was being hidden in the underbrush from the sight of the road they'd left. The rear door was opened. Pearson was rolled out on his head and shoulders.

"Come on you! Quit stalling! Get up! You're too big to carry!"

PEARSON groaned and sat up. His ruse had gotten him nowhere. There was no use to continue it further.

He was sitting on soggy, wet ground. He could feel that. But, of course, he could see nothing. The tape over his eyes insured that only too well.

He was kicked to his feet. Hands grasped him on either side and urged him forward. He stumbled over tree branches, was kicked again when he fell to his knees.

Pearson tripped over a step, and then heard wood flooring under his feet. A moment later a match scraped, and then he felt a different texture of the blackness induced by the blinding tape, and guessed that a light of some sort had been struck.

A door slammed shut. He heard the scuffle of feet and the scrape of chairs. He was locked in alone somewhere, in some remote spot, with all the seven members of the Golden mob.

Golden himself started the inquisition. Pearson was banged down into a chair. A heavy hand cracked across his face, and Golden's voice rumbled: "All right, copper, come across! Tell us what we need to know! Who's the other guy you talked into squealing on us, and where does he live?"

"His name is Santa Claus," said Pearson, through mashed lips, "and he lives at the north——"

Another blow silenced him. His head rocked to the impact of it. Golden spoke again.

"Not like that! You'll only knock him out! There's other things to do that'll hurt as much, but won't make him unconscious!"

That was the last clear sentence Detective Pearson heard for a long time.

It is unbelievable what a strong-willed man can take without breaking down. Pearson was plenty strong-willed. In addition, he had before him the clear knowledge that if he gave the name and address of Barney, the truck driver, he was killing him as certainly as though he had shot him with his own hand. Killing him for being upstanding enough to testify against a dangerous mob simply for the good of the community at large.

He fainted once. They brought him out of it.

"Damn you, Pearson, come through! What's the guy's name? Where does he live? Tell us, and we'll quit this and let you live!"

"Only—kill me—anyway——" Pearson mumbled. "Couldn't let me—live now. Go to hell!"

They went on with it. Again Pearson's head lolled over on his shoulder. "Out again!" Golden rasped. He cursed bitterly.

Another spoke up.

"Look, Sam, let's can this. I don't think we have to make him talk, anyway."

Golden inquired profanely as to his meaning.

"Look. We knock this cop off, see? We leave him where he'll be picked up right away. It gets in the papers. The other witness, whoever he is, reads about it. You think he'll open his yap then? With the dick that told him he'd be safe, found full of lead?"

THERE was silence; then Golden's voice came slowly:

"Maybe you're right, Mickey. Anyhow, I think we'll do it like that. This guy'll never talk. I've seen 'em like this once or twice before. Nothing you can do with make 'em sensible."

"We take him here?" a voice said, unemotionally.

"Not here!" Golden replied. "Somebody around here might hear the shooting and decide, maybe, that the joint ought to be looked into. We've kept it clean so far; we won't take any chances on getting somebody curious now."

"Then——"

"Cart him along the road, ten or fifteen miles in the hot car, and give it to him! Leave him right on the highway!"

They picked Pearson up, bleeding, bruised, limp in their hands.

"Four of you take him," Golden rumbled. "And here—tie his hands and feet. Tight! We don't want any chances of a slip!"

Pearson's arms and legs were bound with many lengths of cord, so tightly that his flesh bulged between the loops. The tape was still over his eyes and mouth.

They carried him from the hang-out, wherever that might be, to the car hidden in the underbrush. They threw him in again. Gravel or cinders whirred under the wheels. Then the monotonous clank of the loose chain against the rear fender began again as the machine sped along still another road.

And these things Pearson heard. For he wasn't out. The second time his head had rolled down on his shoulder like the head of an unconscious man, had been pretense gone through with on the slim chance that his tormentors would give him a little interval from pain. And he had kept up the pretense harder than ever when the ensuing talk sounded.

Take him out on the highway and kill him? That was O. K. Better a slug in the brain than the prolonged torture for a secret he would not divulge.

But now, as the old car sped along, Pearson was not quite so resigned to death. Faint hope was stirring in him. The hope was induced by the position his lax body had chanced to assume when they threw him into the rear of the car.

He half sat, half lay, against the left-hand door of the car. And his shoulder blade was jammed against the door's handle.

On and on the car went. Pearson waited. He must have the proper circumstances.

And then, he thought, they presented themselves.

The car swerved. He heard it pass a pleasure car that had a noisy motor, and a thing that from the sonorous roar of its motor and the rumble of its wheels must be a big truck. He waited for about thirty seconds.

Then he jerked his shoulder hard sidewise, and propelled his body backward, as the door unlatched itself.

There was an agonizing instant when he was in mid-air. Then he hit the pavement as limply as possible, rolled over and over, and knew no more.

PEARSON was in a hospital room when he came out of it. Detective Ames, a buddy of his, and some young fellow with clear blue eyes and a good, solid chin were leaning over him.

Ames turned to the youngster.

"You're regular, guy," he said. "You saved his life when you stopped and picked him up. And you didn't put yourself in any healthy spot!"

"Aw," the young fellow said, "I wasn't too bad off. The guys in the car had to turn around and come back. And there was a truck between me and then that bothered 'em. I had plenty of time to pick him out of the road.

Then all I had to do was duck when they came back toward me, shooting. Before they could turn around again I was gone."

"Nice work," Ames said. "We picked up the car later, but not the guys——"

"Hey!" said Pearson, struggling to sit up.

"Oh, you're out of it," Ames said. "Well, take it easy——"

"You say you picked up the car they carried me in?" Pearson mumbled, talking with difficulty through bandages.

"Yeah, but——"

"I've got to get up! Get a couple squad cars, and bring that car around!"

"You fool! You've got a busted collar bone, and you're bandaged up till your own mother wouldn't know——"

"I don't care if I've got a busted neck! You get about ten of the boys in a couple of cars, and put me in the lead in that car, and I'll take you to Golden's hang-out!"

Ames stared.

"You're balmy! You were blindfolded when you were there. This kid says he picked a yard of tape off your eyes."

"The car," said Pearson, "will lead us to Golden's joint, where I was held. Take me back to Greer's house, where they got me, and put me in that car."

It was a strange procession that started out from Greer's house in the dirty gray of a reluctant, rainy dawn at about four-thirty.

In front was the big car in which Pearson had been taken from the murdered man's house. Behind it were two police cars. Pearson sat propped beside the driver, a mass of bandages, wincing as the driver brushed him in slipping into first gear.

"North," he said to the driver. "The car was facing north when it started, and it didn't turn around anywhere, so that's the first direction."

The car rolled north along the residence street. The two police cars followed. The character of the street changed and stores appeared. Over one was a sign, "Carter's Better Bread."

"We're right," said Pearson. "Keep going."

"How do you expect to find the way?" demanded the police driver. "You think you can spot the turns by bumps in the road, or something?"

"No," was all Pearson said.

He relaxed in the seat—and closed his eyes.

Ames, in the back seat of the car, snorted a little.

"What do you think you can do with your eyes closed——"

"Shut up," snapped Pearson.

Ames stopped talking the car went on.

For some time it rolled north. Then Pearson opened his eyes.

"Stop," he said.

The car stopped so abruptly that the cars behind it almost rammed it. Pearson stared anxiously around.

The street was near the city limits, now, with small factories around it. Ahead, for some distance, there was no turn. Two hundred yards behind, there was a narrow, little-used street going off to the left.

"Back her up and take that street to the left," said Pearson.

The driver looked at Ames, shook his head, but did as he was commanded. The car started down the narrow street. Pearson shut his eyes again and made himself as comfortable as his broken collar bone would permit. The car bumped over a street car track.

This time the trip was not so long. Much sooner than the last time, Pearson's eyes opened and his command to stop cracked out. And this time the car was past the city limits and on a narrow road, into which the narrow street had gradually changed.

A little beyond was a wider road, of concrete, going to the right.

"That way," said Pearson.

Once more he shut his eyes.

AMES and the driver were tense now, as were the men in the cars behind. How did Pearson, who had been blindfolded shortly after leaving Greer's house, think he could lead the way back to the Golden hang-out?

On and on the car sped. Pearson's face was tense. His closed eyelids puckered a little.

"Hold it," he said, after about eight minutes.

"Here?" protested the driver. "You sure have slipped! There ain't a thing within three hundred yards——"

"We can't drive right up to Golden's joint like this!" snapped Pearson. "They'll have a look-out. What do you think would happen if he spotted a couple of squad cars trailing the car they stole and ditched last night?"

"I want to locate the joint from a distance if I can. Then you can get up close, on foot, maybe break right in, before they're onto us."

He stopped. His lips began to move, while apparently meaningless words came from them.

"Thirty-two inches, I'd say. Yeah, that's close enough. Times three and a seventh is a hundred inches with a half inch over. Call it an even hundred. Times two hundred and fifty-four, divided by twelve——"

He was silent a moment. Then he said: "Four tenths of a mile. Yeah, that ought to be pretty close. Ames, flag the first thing on wheels that comes past here, will you?"

The first thing on wheels was a big gasoline truck. Ames stopped it, showed his badge, looked inquiringly at Pearson.

"Got a speedometer on your truck?" Pearson asked.

The driver nodded.

"All right, get this, and get it the first time. Peg your speedometer. Go ahead along this road for exactly four tenths of a mile. Then stop, get out and look at your wheels, like you thought you had a low tire. After that, climb back in and keep on going. Your job will be done then."

"O. K.," said the driver, after a perplexed shrug.

TENSELY, Pearson watched the truck as it went on down the road. The rest watched with him with almost equal tenseness. He seemed so sure of what he was doing!

"The thing closest to that guy, on his left, when he stops, will be Golden's hang-out," Pearson said. "And when we get the mob I want just one crack at the fat rat——"

"The truck's stopping," said Ames.

They peered ahead. The gas truck had stopped. The driver got out, walked around the truck, looked at each of the wheels, then went on.

Almost immediately to his left, the only thing for some little distance on either side, was an odd structure. It was an imitation of a Dutch windmill that some enterprising road house proprietor had built years before, thinking the novelty of its architecture would get the crowds. It hadn't; the place was boarded up now, had been closed for long enough to be half fallen down in sections.

"That's the hang-out," said Pearson, wearily. "The windmill. I don't think they'll have any idea I could find the place, even though I did get away from them. They'll probably all be there, and they'll come out shooting——"

They did. Two cops were hit; three of the seven forming the Golden mob died. But they got the other four. And in the hang-out they got some outlawed, yellow-backed hundred-dollar bills listed

as part of a four-year-old kidnaping ransom, some bonds from a recent bank holdup, and three machine guns, which matched the slugs taken from the bodies of the slain Marrone men.

BACK in the hospital, Ames bent over Pearson again. The doctor, outraged that a man in Pearson's shape had gone for an automobile ride, tried to shoo Ames out of the room. But Ames wasn't going till his curiosity was satisfied.

"Come clean," he said. "You'd have been mud in this town, with Greer killed right beside you and the Marrone case shot to pieces—if you hadn't more than made up for it by getting twice as much evidence as we need in Golden's hang-out. But how did you lead us to the hang-out?"

"You've heard of how an old horse can find the way to a place it knows, all by itself?" grinned Pearson. "Well, this old car did the same——"

"Nuts!" said Ames. "What was the trick?"

Pearson's grin sobered.

"It was the chain. I'm kind of surprised you didn't guess it, Ames."

"What chain? What're you talking about?"

"The loose tire chain on the car's rear wheel. It slapped the fender."

Ames' right fist smacked into his left palm.

"I should have guessed it! As simple as that!"

"Sure," said Pearson. "I got the idea as soon as I heard it. Count the number of times that loose chain slapped the fender between each turn, and you'd have the distance the car went with me blindfolded in it. So I did.

"We went fifteen hundred slaps north from the electric bread sign, eight hundred and twelve to the left, sixteen hundred and fifty-four to the right. But on the last turn I stopped us at fourteen hundred before we gave our hand away. That left two hundred and fifty-four more turns of the wheel.

"Thirty-two inches wheel-diameter, times 3.141, or about three and a seventh, is the number of inches the car travels with each wheel turn. Multiply 'em out and you get four tenths of a mile—which was the distance ahead of us to Golden's hang-out."

Ames shook his head.

"God help the crooks in this burg if you ever get past mathematics and start using algebra on them!" he said.



When the horse runs home, and the ground is hard,
And you wish you were safe in your own back yard,
Don't faint, don't swear, and don't count ten—
Just rip off the wrapper and yield to that yen...

Compose yourself

with



the
Quality Gum