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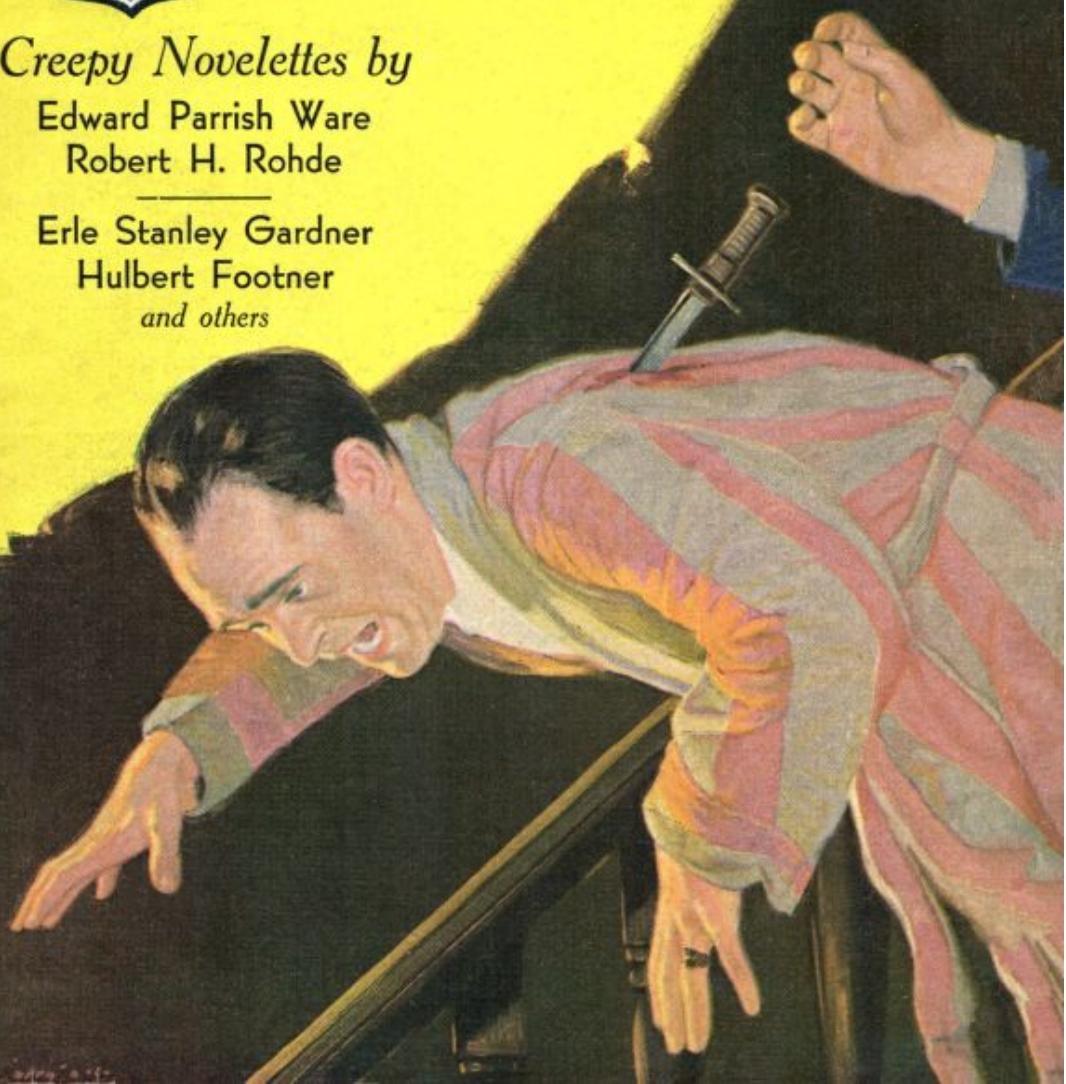
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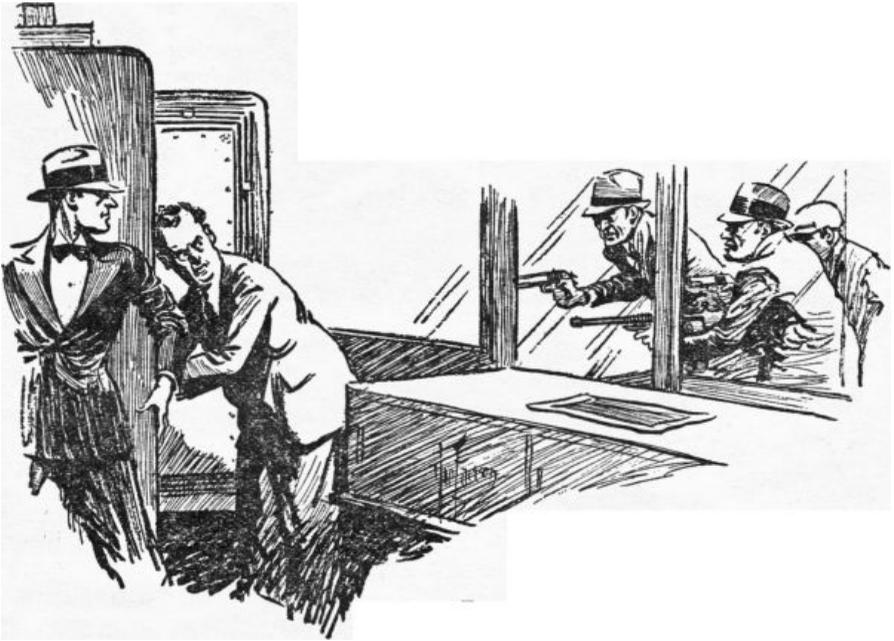
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The Kid Passes the Sugar

By Erle Stanley Gardner

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The Police Knew Only One Fact About the Patent Leather Kid—Strange Things Happened to Men Who Tried to Get Him



Three men ran toward the door of the store

The police knew six things about the man who had killed Grahame. First, that he was short and powerful; second, that he smoked Chesterfield cigarettes; third, that he wore a wrist watch; fourth, that he was well tailored; fifth, that he had killed Grahame by mistake, thinking that his victim was The Patent Leather Kid.

Sixth and last, the police knew that this man would die. The enemies of The Patent Leather Kid had a way of vanishing from what has been so aptly described as “this vale of tears,” and the manner of their vanishing was always somewhat unique, yet invariably effective.

Seated in his club, sprawled in a luxurious easy chair, Dan Seller discussed the matter with Inspector Phil Brame. Listening in, were Bill Pope, the tropical explorer, and Renfroe, the banker.

“That Patent Leather Kid,” growled the inspector, “gives us more trouble than all the rest of the crooks put together. Not for publication, I don’t mind telling you that I sure wish that bird hadn’t made a mistake, and that he’d gunned out The Kid.”

Dan Seller seemed slightly bored by the conversation.

“How does The Kid make you so much trouble?” he asked.

“Keeps the whole damned underworld stirred up, and on the front page of the newspapers,” growled the inspector. “He never lets things quiet down, keeps the department in hot water all the time.”

Bill Pope, hard bitten explorer, skin the color of mahogany, eyes the color of steel, volunteered a comment.

“Seems to me he’s doing society a favor,” he said. “The man drifts through the underworld and rips it apart. If you ask me, The Kid’s got a keen sense of humor, and does his stuff out of a love of adventure, just like I get a kick out of puttering around the head waters of the Amazon.”

Dan Seller flashed him a swift glance, but the explorer was studying the tip of his cigarette, and his face was utterly impassive.

Inspector Brame growled a surly reply.

“It ain’t doing the police any good to have the underworld stuck over the front page of the newspapers all the time.”

Renfroe, the conservative banker, nodded his approval.

Dan Seller, laying down his newspaper, arose, stretched and yawned.

“Well,” he said, “I’m taking a little walk in the open air before I turn in. I take it, inspector, that you haven’t any clues on the Grahame murder other than the description of the man who pulled the job?”

Inspector Brame chewed meditatively upon the end of a cold cigar.

“We’ve heard rumors,” he said cautiously, “that’s all. Grahame was to have met The Patent Leather Kid in that apartment. The Kid got wise and never showed up. The girl at the desk remembers seeing a man who was short, powerful, well tailored. He looked at his wrist watch to check the time, tossed a cigarette into the urn filled with sand, and barged into the elevator. Half a minute later the shots were fired. Grahame lived long enough to tell the police he’d been shot by mistake, that the man who did it thought he was The Kid, and was sorry. He didn’t mention any names. The underworld never does.”

Dan Seller yawned again.

“Oh, well,” he said, “maybe the man’ll turn up.”

“On a marble slab,” grunted the inspector, “and then there’ll be some more publicity.”

Dan Seller walked out of the room, and Bill Pope, raising his eyes, regarded the doorway through which Dan Seller had vanished, with eyes that were mildly speculative.

Those gray eyes of the explorer had seen much of life, and, if there were any occupant of that exclusive club who suspected that Dan Seller, ostensibly a mere millionaire idler, was, in fact, none other than The Patent Leather Kid, Bill Pope would be that man. Yet there was no evidence of suspicion in his eyes, merely a speculative appraisal.

And if Dan Seller had been aware of that speculative appraisal, he gave no sign. He caught a cab when he had walked a matter of five or six blocks from the hotel, sent the cab in a figure eight around a couple of squares, making certain he was not being tailed, and then went to a fashionable hotel where he kept a room as Rodney Stone. The employees of that hotel knew him as a business executive who travelled extensively.

Shortly after eleven o'clock, Dan Seller, in his role of Rodney Stone, the business executive, slipped out of the hotel by a back entrance and service stairway. Within two doors of the place where he hit the street was The Maplewood, an apartment hotel.

Dan Seller entered this hotel, and became at once a creature of another world.

The man at the desk looked up. His face was twisted in a smile. His eyes did not smile. The girl at the telephone smiled with both her eyes and her lips.

"Hello, Kid," said the man behind the desk.

"Hello, Kid," said the girl.

One and all in this strange new world, submerged beneath the business life of the city, they called Dan Seller "The Kid." It was not a mark of familiarity so much as a badge of respect. He was known in the underworld as The Patent Leather Kid, and by no other name. He was, after a fashion, as much of a mystery to the underworld as Dan Seller was to the fashionable club in which he lived the other half of his strange dual existence.

The girl at the telephone desk slipped off her headphones and came over toward the barrier. She was regarding The Kid meaningly.

"Didja hear about Grahame?" she asked.

The Kid didn't answer her question directly. Instead, he turned to the man who was standing back of the desk, just a little ways from the girl.

"A guy was telling me a hot one tonight, Winton," he said.

The clerk raised politely attentive eyebrows.

"Indeed?" he asked.

"Yeah," said The Kid, casually, almost too casually to be casual, in fact, "he told me that the tip that I was going to be at the place where Grahame got rubbed out came from a leak from the hotel where I lived. That's a good one, eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

And, still laughing, he strode toward the elevator.

But the man behind the desk was not laughing. He was standing perfectly rigid, and the sudden pallor of his face emphasized the fact that he had not shaved that morning.

The elevator operator greeted The Kid with deference, whisked him up to his penthouse apartment. The telephone was ringing by the time The Kid had the door unlocked.

The Kid took down the receiver.

"Yeah," he said, "what is it, Gertie?"

The voice of the girl at the telephone desk breathed softly through the receiver.

"Just thought you'd like to know," she said, "that Winton went into a panic, took what was coming to him out of the till, and beat it. He's quit his job. Went out of the door so fast you

could have played checkers on his coat-tails.”

The Kid grinned.

“Thanks, Gertie, only I don’t play checkers.”

“No?” she asked, “What do you play, Kid?”

“I play fair,” he said. “Gee, Gertie, I saw a swell platinum watch in the jewelry store on the corner. A lady’s wrist watch, with . . .”

She interrupted.

“Gee, Kid, I saw it too!”

“Well,” said The Kid, “maybe tomorrow night at this time you could tell what time it was without looking up at the clock.”

Her choking exclamation of thanks was merged in a cautious comment. “Kid,” she asked, “could I wear it in the open, or would it be hot?”

“When I give a woman anything,” observed The Kid, in a voice of dignity, “she can wear it anywhere.” And he slid the receiver back on the hook.

II

The Kid paused in front of the display window of the jewelry store. That window showed evidences of a business depression. A series of brightly colored tags with prices marked on them, and red lines drawn through the prices, showed where articles of jewelry would repose in the daytime. The risk of unlawful abstractions was too great to leave the articles on display at night.

There was a little display stand for the platinum wrist watch. It was covered with black velvet. The watch itself had been carefully tucked to bed in the big safe in the back of the store. But the price tag and the display stand remained, waiting for the wrist watch to make its appearance with the opening of the business day.

“Lady’s wrist watch—genuine platinum,” read the price tag. “A marked down bargain at \$980.00.” Then a red line had been drawn through the figure and another figure below it pencilled in: “\$795.00.” This figure, in turn, had been crossed out with a blue pencil, and down below, in flaming red ink, appeared the latest bargain price \$599.99.

The Patent Leather Kid surveyed the window in gloomy meditation. Some subtle sixth sense caused him to turn suddenly and glance over his shoulder.

A touring car with drawn side curtains was swinging around the corner from the boulevard. It swung in close to the curb and slowed its speed, crawling along until it came to a stop before the Maplewood Apartment Hotel.

The Kid could not see the driver, but he remembered the sudden exit of Winton, the clerk, and he had an instinctive distrust of touring cars that cruised about with the curtains locked into position on the side. He slipped into the shadows of the dark store building next to the jewelry shop, moved upon swiftly silent feet until he came to the cross street and then broke into a light, swift run. When the welcome mouth of the alley loomed before him he dodged into its inky blackness.

It was half an hour later that he entered a telephone booth in a cabaret and called the residence number of Sol Asher, the owner of the jewelry store.

It took three minutes before a sleepy voice answered.

The Kid let his own voice show that slight slurring of word endings which marks a certain stage of alcoholic conviviality.

“Sol,” he said, “d’yuh wanta sell that platinum wrist watch bad enough to open up the joint?”

There was a moment of tense silence at the other end of the line.

“Who’s speakin’?” asked the voice.

“A customer,” said the Kid. “I gotta swell wren that’s nuts over the wrist watch, an’ I’m nuts over the wren.”

“Would tomorrow do?” asked the voice. “The watch’ll keep, y’know.”

The Kid’s voice was crisply determined.

“The wren won’t,” he said.

There was a moment of silence.

“The price is five ninety-nine, ninety-nine,” said the voice over the wire, this time with a certain oily accent of keen alertness.

“Yeah,” said The Kid.

“Okay,” said Asher. “You got the cash?”

“I got a check that’s good as gold,” observed The Kid.

“This ain’t bankin’ hours,” whined the voice over the telephone. “Me, I do a cash business, y’understand. That there watch is priced now so close that I’m losin’ money when I make the sale. I ain’t goin’ to lose my sleep, y’understand, to lose money.”

The Kid let his voice become cheerful.

“Well, it’ll take fifteen minutes or so for me to get somebody to stake me to the dough. I’ll give you a buzz if I make it.”

The voice of Sol Asher was complaining.

“You want it I should wait up fifteen minutes in the cold to see if somebody cashes you a check?”

“Hell no,” observed The Kid. “I want you to wait up fifteen minutes to see if you’re going to ring up six hundred bucks in your cash drawer.”

And he slid the receiver back on the hook.

He left the telephone booth and went upstairs to the cabaret’s private dining rooms. A waiter gazed appreciatively at the five spot which was pressed into his palm.

“Mabel?” he asked.

“That’s the one I said,” observed The Kid. “And a couple of Bacardi cocktails.”

The waiter dropped the curtain into place, bowed deferentially. Exactly two minutes and thirty seconds later the curtain was pulled to one side again, and a big blonde with tired eyes stood on the threshold and gave The Kid a synthetic smile.

The Kid arose and held a chair for her.

The tired eyes lighted up.

“It’s swell to meet up with a real gent,” said the blonde. “Most of ’em don’t know how to treat a lady.”

The Kid grinned, patted her hand, sat down. The waiter arrived with the Bacardi cocktails, withdrew, paused to pull the curtain carefully into position, closing off every crack and cranny of the door so that the interior of the booth could not be viewed from the hallway.

The Kid raised his glass, smiled.

“Here’s how,” he said.

“I know,” said the blonde, and grinned.

“How’s the divorce coming, Mabel?” asked The Kid.

The blonde's fingers quivered. The smile faded from her lips. The tired eyes were startled. The glass tilted, part of the liquid slopped over to the tablecloth. The blonde lowered the glass just in time to keep it from dropping from the limp fingers.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked.

The Patent Leather Kid grinned.

"Just a bird who makes it his business to be in the know," he observed.

"What," asked the blonde, "do you know?"

Her hands were gripping the side of the table top now.

"I know," observed The Kid, speaking slowly and distinctly, "that you married Everett Winton, the night clerk at The Maplewood Apartment Hotel. I know that you separated two years ago. I know he gave you a raw deal and no money. I know that you had to earn your living and you tried fifteen or twenty things before you had to come to this."

And when The Kid mentioned the "this" he waved his hand in an inclusive gesture.

"And I know that you've met a chap that offers you everything you want in life, marriage, a home, a chance to be decent. I know that he's a good kid, and that he'll make you happy. And I know that Winton won't give you a divorce unless you slip him a nice piece of change, and that you're having a hard time getting your hands on the dough. Because of all this life here you can't get the divorce if he fights. He'll fight unless he gets his cut."

The Kid ceased speaking. The blonde stared at him with a sagging mouth and eyes that were glassy in surprise.

The Kid sipped his drink.

"You . . . you sure as hell do get around, big boy!"

The Kid nodded.

"I keep my health by knowing what I know," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"To you," said The Kid, "I'm just the big hearted guy that plays Santa Claus, the boy that's going to pass the sugar!"

"Yes?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"What's your cut going to be?" she demanded, cautiously.

"That depends," said The Kid.

"Well, spill it."

The Kid leaned forward and set down his Bacardi glass.

"Ever hear of The Patent Leather Kid?" he asked.

Her laugh was harsh.

"Naturally. You going to claim you're him?"

The Kid laughed, shook his head.

"No. I'm going to tell you where The Patent Leather Kid is going to be at precisely fifteen minutes past one o'clock. He's going to be buying a wrist watch at Sol Asher's jewelry store on the corner of Maplewood, down a half a block or so from The Maplewood Hotel."

Her forehead puckered.

"Well?" she asked.

"Winton, your dear husband, knows where that information can be sold for enough dough to give him his cut and more. He'll let you have your divorce for that information, maybe. Anyway, he'll promise you."

The blonde's strident laugh showed what she thought of her husband's promises.

“And,” went on The Kid, “if you’ll trust me in this thing, I’ll just leave you a cash deposit to prove I’m right.”

And his hand delved into his breast pocket, took out a wallet, extracted a five hundred dollar bill from the wallet, passed that bill over to the blonde. The Kid scraped back his chair. The blonde stared at the bill.

“You can tell him,” said The Kid, “that you overheard The Kid telephoning from here, asking Sol Asher to come down and open up the store so he could buy the wrist watch for a wren. It won’t cost him anything to check the information.”

She blinked her eyes rapidly.

“I can get him at The Maplewood?” she asked.

The Kid shook his head.

“No,” he observed. “I think you’ll find him hanging around Garibaldi’s speakie. That’s the hangout of ‘Bull’ Bogetti and his mob. Winton’s been sorta friendly with them lately.”

And The Patent Leather Kid bowed to the blonde, and slipped through the green curtain which shielded the interior of the booth from the view of those who might pass in the hallway.

III

The back of Sol Asher’s store was designed to furnish a certain amount of safety for the property which was on the inside. It was, however, only a comparative amount of safety. Under the skilled hands of The Patent Leather Kid, the locks betrayed their trust with no noise, and no great amount of inconvenience to the gloved hands of The Kid.

The Patent Leather Kid was careful to leave the back door of the place unlocked. He wanted a ready exit. He was also careful to avoid going near the safe. But he took from the pocket of his overcoat a rather strange device. It was a screw socket similar to the sockets which furnish the base for incandescent globes, and which screw into the wall or cord connections. But this socket did not support an electric globe. Instead it furnished the connection for two dangling cords with insulation running almost to the ends. The ends, however, were bare, mere naked wires with the ends frayed out.

The Kid borrowed a chair, climbed up on it, unscrewed one of the incandescents, inserted the socket with the two wires, arranged those wires so that they were not readily discernible, and then went into the little office, sat down at Sol Asher’s desk, and lifted the telephone with his gloved hands.

He called Sol Asher’s number.

The voice which greeted him was no longer sleepy.

“Okay, Sol,” said The Kid. “I got the money. You get here just as quickly as you can. I’ll be ready to close the deal at exactly quarter past one. She’s a swell wren, Sol. You’d oughta see the way she wears her fur coat! And talk about complexion! Say, she’s got the sort of complexion that . . .”

Sol Asher’s voice interrupted the flow of praise with a commercial question.

“The complexion be damned,” he said, “you got it the money?”

“I,” proclaimed The Patent Leather Kid, with that degree of jubilation which is the result of alcoholic stimulation, plus the natural reaction aroused by the appreciative appraisal of a wonderful figure and a good complexion, “have got the money, six nice crisp one hundred dollar bills, and the wren says if you don’t want to make the sale . . .”

Sol Asher's voice when he interrupted, was filled with that degree of mild reproach which was a sales technique of its own.

"Listen," he said, "you wouldn't want it a man should get up in the middle of the night to make it a sale, and then have the customer back down on him, y'understand?"

"Come on down, then," invited The Patent Leather Kid, his eyes twinkling.

"Right away," said Sol Asher.

The Kid waited until the line was free, and then called police headquarters. His voice, when he talked was a very fair imitation of Sol Asher's.

"Listen," he said, "this is Sol Asher, an' I got it the jewelry store on the corner below the Maplewood Hotel, on Maplewood Avenue. And I got it a lowlifer that gets me out of bed to come down and open the safe because he's got it a wren that wants a wrist watch, and I want it to have some police protection, so if it should be a stick-up . . ."

A voice interrupted.

"Well, what're you crabbing about? We told you we'd give you protection when you called the first time. There's a whole car full of hard boiled babies headed out your way now."

The Patent Leather Kid chuckled.

"That," he said, "makes it okay," and hung up the telephone.

The Kid smoked a cigarette or two, crouched down in the shadows back of the safe, seated in a chair that was tilted back against the wall. Minutes passed.

A touring car slid quietly along the curb, stopped. Steps pounded the pavement. A dark blotch of shadow loomed against the front door. There was the sound of a key in the lock. The Kid moved his chair so that he was completely concealed from the front of the store by the big bulk of the safe. He pinched out his cigarette.

A light switch clicked and the place blazed with light.

The Kid blinked his eyes.

Sol Asher walked heavily toward the back of the store. He paused to scrape a match along the sole of his shoe as he lit a cigar. He was breathing heavily, after the manner of fleshy men who have taken exertion.

Sol Asher walked in to the office and sat down. He waited a full three minutes, then started muttering under his breath. The Patent Leather Kid, attired in evening clothes, with shoes of patent leather, got to his feet.

"Okay, Sol," he said. "I got the money."

Sol Asher gave an exclamation which was like the wheeze of a collapsing tire.

"Hey!" he said.

"Right over here," observed The Patent Leather Kid. "Six one hundred dollar bills. Come and get 'em."

Sol Asher moved cautiously.

"Say," he demanded, "how'd you get in here? And what d'yuh mean coming into my place of business without letting me know—"

"Do you," asked The Patent Leather Kid, "want to sell me that watch or not?"

Sol Asher approached the safe.

"Vel-l-l-l," he said, "since you're here, once . . ."

He twirled the dials, and he stood so that he was plainly visible from the street, through the plate glass windows which looked into the interior of the store, blazing as it was with a brilliant light, designed to show the sparkle of the gems to the best advantage.

The Kid hugged the protection of the steel box.

Sol Asher jingled keys against the steel of the inside safe door, made fumbling motions with his right hand. He pulled out the wrist watch from the interior of the safe, and saw the six one hundred dollar bills which the Kid thrust into his hand.

Then The Kid stepped out into the open and took the wrist watch. Whereupon things happened with a sudden swiftness. The touring car disgorged three men who ran purposefully toward the door of the store. One of the men held a submachine gun in a position of readiness. The others held automatics.

Sol Asher gave vent to an oath.

There was the roar of a gun. The Patent Leather Kid pressed the two wire ends together. The naked wires, making a contact, gave forth a blue spark of flame, and then, as the fuse burned out, every light in the place was extinguished.

The submachine gun rattled into action. Bullets sang through the store, crashing glass, smashing plaster, ripping long wood splinters.

But The Patent Leather Kid, taking advantage of the darkness to move the single step which had been necessary to put him behind the safe, listened to the racket with an almost impersonal abstraction. His ears were attuned for another sound.

It came.

Running feet on the pavement. Nearby doorways disgorged broad shouldered men who ran forward, blowing police whistles. There was the roar of gunfire, the wail of a siren.

The Patent Leather Kid moved calmly. He walked out to the back of the store, slipped out into the shadows of the alley, and vanished into the night.

An hour later he dropped in to the Maplewood.

“Hello, Gertie!” he said.

She regarded him with wide eyes.

“Gee, where you been? There’s been a sweet mess down the street. Some outfit tried to hold up Asher’s store, and the bulls were put wise. They’d planted themselves, and they smoked up the gang until there ain’t enough left for the ambulances to cart away . . . Knowing what you said about the watch . . . Gee, Kid, I was afraid they’d put you on the spot. God, but I’m glad you’re okay.”

The Patent Leather Kid slid out his hand, along the counter.

“Present for you, Gertie.”

The girl’s hand slipped over his. The fingers gave a gentle pressure, then she started as the cold metal of the wrist watch pressed against her palm.

She opened her fingers, stared at the watch with bulging eyes.

“Gee, Kid . . . Gee . . . I . . .”

She stopped, choked for words, staring, incredulous, grateful, mystified, and her eyes showed not only gratitude, but an emotion which is infinitely more personal and warm. But there was a trace of awe in her manner, a respectful adoration which was almost a worship.

“Kid, how could you do it? The bulls were right there and . . .”

The Patent Leather Kid laughed.

“Just passing the sugar, honey. This is my night to pass the sugar. Be a good girl. I got an engagement.”

He stepped from the Maplewood, moved two doors and vanished into the service entrance of the hotel where he was known as Rodney Stone. He slept there, and was ready to appear at his club the next afternoon, freshly shaven, well groomed, his eyes twinkling at the world with lazy humor.

He happened to get in on the tail end of a discussion between Inspector Brame, Bill Pope, the explorer, Renfroe, the banker.

“And this guy,” grumbled the inspector, “was short and powerful, and he had a case filled with Chesterfield cigarettes in his pocket, and he wore a wrist watch. So we called in the jane that had seen the guy that killed Grahame.”

The inspector paused, sighed.

“Well?” asked Bill Pope.

Inspector Brame shrugged his shoulders.

“The same guy,” he said.

There was a moment of highly significant silence. Then Bill Pope chuckled.

“So the police were the ones that killed him,” he observed, and his eyes, turning speculatively to Dan Seller, known in other circles as The Patent Leather Kid, regarded him in meditative appraisal.

Inspector Brame nodded.

“Trying to stick up the jewelry store?” asked the explorer.

The inspector frowned.

“That, of course, was what we thought at the time. But we ain’t so sure now. You see, there was a guy that slipped in the store somehow, and was buying a wrist watch. He was visible from the street. Sol Asher can’t give a very good description, but he wore patent leather shoes, and evening clothes.”

Bill Pope threw back his head and laughed heartily.

“An accomplice?” he asked, at length.

“No,” said Inspector Brame, “we can’t even pin that on him. He bought a wrist watch, and he gave six perfectly good one hundred dollar bills for it.

“Of course, we ain’t sure. You see, there’s only a few people that ever have really seen The Patent Leather Kid. He’s a name to most of the underworld, and that’s all.

“We had a line we understood we could develop. A man called in, said his name was Winton, and offered to tell us where The Kid hung out, but . . .”

Inspector Brame paused to make an exclamation of annoyance.

“But what?” pressed Pope, the explorer.

“But the damned fool got killed,” said Brame. “Those boys that raided Asher’s place had a submachine gun, so my men didn’t give ’em very much of a chance. This guy, Winton, was in a touring car. When the battle started, he hopped out and started to run. The boys yelled at him and he didn’t stop. So they did the natural thing.”

It was then that Dan Seller made a suggestion.

“Perhaps this man, Winton, left a widow or some one that he’d confide in.”

Inspector Brame sighed.

“That’s out,” he said. “He left a widow, all right, and she’s so damned glad to get rid of him that she got completely plastered when she heard the good news. Celebrating, you know. She’s had a hard life, and she’s got a chance to marry again.”

“Well,” said Pope, “you can’t blame her.”

Dan Seller chuckled softly, as though at some very pleasant memory, and Inspector Brame regarded him with that degree of austere disapproval which the busy man of affairs regards a rich idler.

Renfroe, the banker, also frowned. The laugh, to him, seemed to be out of place. But Bill Pope, hard bitten tropical explorer, joined in the chuckle. Only his eyes, as they fastened upon Dan Seller, were thoughtfully speculative.

[The end of *The Kid Passes the Sugar* by Erle Stanley Gardner]