

Bullet Ransom



By
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Sergeant Martin Pell thought he knew most of the angles of crime psychology. But when he used a human guinea pig in a rat-hunting experiment, he got a new slant on the workings of a trigger-mad mind.

EDDY SWIFT was in the middle of things. Much to his discomfort, “things” consisted of five high-powered sweat lamps that burned holes in his eyes, and three dicks who pounded questions on his ear drums.

Captain Jackson let his voice drop until it reached that stage of low-pitched seriousness that was even more foreboding than his usual bellow.

“There’s one more chance for you, Eddy,” Jackson said. “Come across before we really turn on the heat—get me?”

Eddy showed not the slightest sign of having got the captain. He looked very much the part of a tough egg who could take it.

“Now,” said Jackson, still with his calm, foreboding voice, “what did you have to do with the Kirk kidnaping?”

Swift's lips suddenly broke open and an oath spilled out. He glanced around at the faces of the detectives nearly hidden behind the glare from the lamps. He passed a shaky hand over his damp brow. He repeated his well-worn answer. "I don't know a thing about it."

Then he added: "If I did, do you think I'd tell you? I've been on the grill before. I know just how far you can go. You can drive me nuts, maybe; but that's nothin' as to what would happen to me if that mob got wise. Have you lousy dicks got that? Now, what you goin' to do?"

And that was a good question. Jackson didn't know the answer. He drew his colleagues into one corner of the little cubbyhole that served as a sweat box down at the ninth precinct station.

"Well," Jackson whispered, "what's the answer?"

If Martin Pell hadn't walked into the sweat box at that time, the captain's question would have gone unanswered. Sergeant Pell often had unusual ideas. He had one now.

"Has Eddy opened up yet!" he asked.

Three weary dicks shook their heads.

"Nope," said Jackson, "and that's only the first chapter. He's scared of somebody and that somebody isn't on the police force. He's scared of his boss!"

Pell nodded. "Just as I expected." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the latest edition of the *Star*. His finger tapped at black headlines. "See that?"

Jackson read:

SWIFT SAYS HE WILL TELL ALL

There followed beneath the headlines a graphic account of how Eddy Swift had broken down under terrific grilling and had promised to spill the names of the lads who held Henry Kirk for ransom.

Jackson's jaw sagged. He looked at Pell. "Of all the—"

Sergeant Pell held up a warning hand. "Don't say it, cap. It's the smartest trick I ever pulled."

"You ever pulled!"

"Since when have you been working on a rag?" another dick asked.

Pell smiled complacently. "What do you think of my plan?"

Jackson wiped his brow. "I don't see any plan. All I see is that some reporter's got a better imagination than that guy who wrote them *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. We haven't had a cheep out of Eddy—" Jackson stopped suddenly, rubbed his chin and looked shrewdly at his sergeant. "So you told that tale to the reporters?"

"Sure," Pell replied. "You're gettin' the idea. All we got to do is turn Eddy loose—"

"Yeah!" Jackson scoffed. "Then what'd we have? Still a kidnapping—plus a murder. Oh, you're a big help. Of all the nuts in the cake, you're the biggest!"

"No, sir," one of the other dicks broke in, "that isn't so dumb. Pell means some one of us can follow Eddy. If his boss is so tough, he'll be out gunnin' for Eddy after he sees this paper. Eddy'll be the come-on for the big shot."

"Right!" said Pell. "That's why I fixed this up. Damn clever, if I do say so."

Captain Jackson scowled at his sergeant. "Young man," he said as if about to mete out some terrible punishment, "you've signed a man's death warrant!"

Pell paled perceptibly. The captain went on: "And you're going to be fully responsible. Yes, we'll turn Eddy loose. You're going to fish for big fish—and you're using men for bait." He turned sharply around and strode over to Eddy Swift.

"But, captain—" Pell objected.

“You’ve got your orders. And bring the bait back—alive!” The captain spoke quietly with Eddy. He said: “You’re free—and I hope to heaven you’ll come back!”

And Eddy could see nothing charitable in Jackson’s prayer. But of course Eddy didn’t know why he was going free.

Swift left the station with a tune whistling from puckered lips. And behind him, Pell kept thinking that Eddy was whistling for lead. Twice in one block, Pell felt his right hand jerk toward his shoulder holster. That was because of two big sedans that pulled near the curb and ran slowly past Eddy Swift. One of the cars carried a collector from a milk company; the other car contained five tourists hunting for Cousin Letty’s.

THOUGH it was yet early in the evening, the sidewalks were not crowded. In the street was an occasional ripple of traffic. A blind beggar with a tapping cane stopped a man ahead of Eddy, held his hat in his hand, and asked for money. The man dug into his pocket, slipped something to the beggar and walked on.

Pell watched the blind man tap with uncanny accuracy up to Eddy. Like most hard eggs, Eddy had his soft sides. Blind beggars seemed to be one of them. He fished in his pocket while the beggar stood there, hat in his left hand.

Then one of Pell’s unusual ideas bumped on his brain. He yelled at the top of his lungs: “Eddy Swift!”

Swift jumped around as if he had been jerked by a string. And at the instant he jumped, the beggar’s hat was lanced with gun flame. The bullet meant for Eddy spanked a steel lamp-post and, ricocheting, mashed itself against the stone side of a building. The beggar, by some miracle suddenly acquired sight—and most deadly

sight. He saw Pell legging towards him frantically grabbing for his underarm gun.

The beggar let a shot rip out. It fanned Pell’s ear lobe and dug splinters out of the telephone post. Then the “blind” man legged for the alley with Pell’s wild, hot lead singing music about his head.

Pell shouted something at Eddy that might have been an order to stay put. He swooped up the beggar’s hat in one hand as he rounded the corner of the alley. His whistle went to his mouth and its shrill, blasting signal slashed the air. The blind man who could see over gun sights disappeared up the back stairs of the brick tenement.

Gun gripped in his right hand, and still holding the beggar’s hat in the other, Pell skipped two steps at a stride after the beggar. At the top of the flight, Pell found himself surrounded by doors all alike except for numbers dully painted above. A woman with her hair in curlers popped out of one door and stood there, fists on hips and eyes gleaming.

“Where’d he go?” Pell shouted.

“Sure and I don’t know what you’re talking about! And I don’t see what right you got coming into a respectable house like this—”

Pell decided that in dealing with this landlady chivalry was definitely out. He’d have to get tough. “Listen here, lady—see this?” He flashed his badge. “Now, you’re shielding a potential murderer. If you don’t want to go for a ride in a sedan that opens up behind, you’d better tell me where he is. He came up here and I saw him. Here’s his hat. Ever see it?”

Pell had found one woman who wasn’t awed by the sight of a badge. Her tongue was keen, double-edged and wagged at both ends. Her finger wagged, too.

She painted vividly her tenants, each with a halo sagging down behind his or her ears. And in the middle of this lecture

on the high moral standard of her house, Pell saw a natty blue uniform bobbing up the stairs. He passed the buck.

"Riley," he called to the cop, "you and Terry Durgan tear this place apart. A man just broke in here after trying to bump Ed Swift. Here's his hat. He was wearing old clothes—ragged blue serge suit, gray flannel shirt. Carries a gun and can use it. Apt to pretend he's blind if he gets in a tight place. Go get him!" And Pell beat a hasty retreat down the stairs. After all, his first duty was towards Eddy. If Eddy had strayed off by himself—

He rounded the corner of the alley, looked both ways. Where Eddy had been standing was a ragged newsboy.

Pell had seen a blind man undergo a remarkable transformation on that corner, but no miracle would extend to the making a news urchin out of Eddy Swift. Pell swore loudly and with such amazing proficiency that the newsboy stood by with gaping mouth until the recital drew to its damning close.

The kid ventured a timid: "Mister."

Pell pivoted. His hard heels ground on the pavement. "Huh?" he grunted.

"That guy, with the funny face like a bulldog that was in the shootin', he got a lift."

"**YEH?**" Pell put a dime in the kid's fist, slapped him on the back, and told him he'd make a great copper some day. Then he ran for the taxi stand on the corner. He nearly pulled the door off the yellow getting in. He barked an address—1650 Court Street. "And a good tip if you do it on the double," he added.

The taxi jerked, snorted, and roared. The driver was hot after the tip. Sliding tires shrieked on the corners. Pell held on, leaning forward as if to urge the cab to greater speed. Seven more blocks. Then brakes yowled, and Pell was thrown down

on his knees on the floor. He hung on the latch, swung open the door, and scrambled to his feet on the sidewalk.

"Wait!" he barked at the driver.

Sixteen hundred and fifty Court Street was a bright spot in a rather dingy portion of the city. It was something like a modern miniature of the Court of Miracles in Old Paris. Here, members of the clan of periodically lame, halt and blind beggars came regularly for their transformations. The front of the shop was placarded by John Sacs-Costumer. But it was the back entrance that the professional mendicants used.

Pell went in the front door. One of the numerous nephews of Uncle John approached the detective with an overly polite query upon his lips.

"Where's John?" Pell growled.

"He is very busy just now. Maybe I can help?"

Pell flashed his badge. "Go get John," he commanded.

The man bowed and turned down the lane of clown, Pierrette, and Harlequin costumes to the curtained door at the rear. He stayed longer than was necessary to find anybody's uncle. When he returned he was alone.

"I made some mistake, sir, for which I apologize. Mr. Sacs is not in."

Pell's voice slid up the scale when he said, "Oh, no?" Uncle John's nephew got a sharp elbow thrust where it made him grunt the loudest. Pell was running down the room and through the curtained doorway.

Beyond was a room littered with grease-paint boxes, filthy mops of hair intended for wigs, straps for "amputating" legs, and other litter for which Pell had no name. But there was no other sign of Uncle John than gray-blue smoke which had probably coiled from an unkempt pipe.

Pell shoved through the back door and looked down the alley. A small round tail light and the unmistakable clattering of an old car as it turned the corner was the only trail that Uncle John had left.

As Pell hurried back through the shop to Court Street, the clowns and Pierrettes did a little dance on the clothes racks to the rhythm of his tread. He reached the curb, tumbled gracelessly into his cab and snapped an order.

“Straight ahead. Did you see an old Ford turn up this street from the corner?”

The driver, of course, hadn't noticed.

“Then, get to the intersection and stop in the middle of it.”

The taxi driver had always wanted to do just that. He obeyed implicitly.

“Left!” snapped Pell. “See that car struggling along up there? Well, speed up beside it and crowd him into the curb. You ought to be able to do that,” he added, thinking of his own fender-crushed car.

As the cab drew alongside, Pell glimpsed the mangy white hair of John Sacs. John coaxed more speed out of his car. The cab began to nose in. Sacs yelled some sort of warning as the taxi swerved threateningly. John crammed his wheels and crashed against curb and telephone post.

John was standing on the walk shoving a dirty finger at his crumpled fenders and yelling something about damages. Pell got out, grabbed the man by a fistful of coat front and shook him until he yelled, “Police!” at the top of his lungs.

Pell saw a bluecoat coming across the street on the double. “That's just fine,” he said to himself.

“John!” Pell snapped. “Who was the blind man you fixed up tonight?”

“Blind man?” John Sac's shoulders hunched.

The patrolman came up roaring, but was pacified by a glimpse of the

detective's badge.

“Now,” said Pell, “either you tell who the last blind beggar was whom you fixed up in your shop or you toddle to jail as an accomplice in an attempt at murder!”

“Murder!” yapped the cop.

John smiled knowingly. “How much is it worth to you?”

“Not a damned thing! But not telling me is worth a punch on the schnozzle.”

“Come on, spill it!” The cop threatened with his nightstick.

“It was Joe Daley. Why he wanted it, I don't know.”

“Maybe he was goin' to a fancy dress party,” sneered the cop.

“S'all I need to know,” said Pell. “You take John to the jug. We may need him as a witness.”

“But you're not going to tackle the Daley mob alone?” the cop gasped.

“Sure. I've got a chance of roundin' 'em up while they've got dirt on their hands. Send a squad over there and you wouldn't get a thing. They'd be all washed up. Make Uncle John behave,” he added as he jumped for his cab.

“You know a dive up the street called the Rainbow Hotel?” he asked the driver. “You ought to. It's a hot spot—and it's Daley's place.”

THE cab stopped and Pell got out. He crushed a five dollar bill into the driver's hand. “Wait here for thirty minutes. In case I don't come out, get a squad of cops over here.”

The driver nodded grimly, and Pell started towards the Rainbow. He entered the gray lobby and crossed to the bar where beer was strong enough to slap a man down.

Bill Krantz was behind the mahogany, but he did not press the warning button beneath the counter. He had known Pell to stop in often to chew the fat and take a

glass of something on the side.

“Huntin’ for something, sergeant?” he asked.

“Yeah. Something pretty wet,” replied Pell with a raise of his brows.

Krantz winked. “I got you—and I got it.” He started towards the back of the bar where in another room he kept his private stock.

Pell followed him with seeming nonchalance. Once the door had closed behind them, his gun bristled in his hand.

“Krantz!” he barked.

The bartender turned around to stare at the gun in amazement. Then he laughed. “What’s the matter? We haven’t fallen out after all these years!”

“And we aren’t fallin’ out now, if you’re nice!”

“Sure, sarge. Ain’t I always nice?”

“Then get me upstairs to Joe Daley’s place. If you don’t I’ll sure as hell paint red spots all over your apron!”

Krantz paled. “I-I—if I do, Joe’ll get—”

“He won’t do anything if I get him,” interrupted Pell. “And if I don’t, he won’t know you put me wise, anyway. Now, on your way. My gun goes into my pocket and I don’t mind spoilin’ this coat!”

Krantz shrugged fat shoulders resignedly. He led the way to a flight of enclosed stairs at the back of the room. They climbed to the second floor.

“Straight down the hall to that room,” Krantz pointed. “The boys got a few games back there, and you won’t be noticed because all kinds of guys go there—even stiff shirts. Go to the door on the right side of the game room and knock—three longs and a short. Got it?”

“Got it,” replied Pell. He pulled the badge from his vest and stuck it in his pocket. He tugged his hat over his eyes and gripped the automatic hidden in his pocket. Then he entered the gaming room and walked as if he were going somewhere

and knew how to get there. He knocked at the side door in the prescribed manner. The door opened. He sauntered in. There his easy-going manner traded for taut muscles and tensed nerves.

“It’s a stickup!” he snapped.

Three pairs of hands hesitatingly reached for the ceiling. One hand unhesitatingly reached for a gun. Pell’s gun spat. The man doubled, clawing at his left shoulder.

“There’re slugs for all!” Pell chopped at the words with his teeth. “Where’s Daley?”

Pell sensed a movement behind him. He turned, half ducked, as something crashed down on him. The duck saved his skull. The blow, timed poorly, only brushed the side of his head and slashed at his shoulder.

It wasn’t enough to put Pell to sleep; but he wobbled, forced his eyes to roll back, and slumped to the floor. A possum wasn’t the only smart animal, he thought.

“Frisk him!”

FINGERS prodded and poked at his pockets. Pell felt his automatic and handcuffs being removed. Then thin, hard fingers caught his ankles, and hands went under his arms. He heard a door creak open and felt himself being carried in the direction of the sound. Then he was allowed to flop on the floor, and again the voice spoke.

“We’ll let him sleep it off. Watch him, Pete, and when he comes to, we’ll find out what he knows.”

“Okay, Joe,” a voice rasped.

Shoes tapped and the door creaked closed. A lock clicked. Pell lay there and sniffed cautiously. Tobacco smoke—lots of it.

“This is goin’ to make it tough for you, Eddy,” rasped the voice.

“Yeah?” sneered Eddy Swift.

“Sure, Joe Daley knows you musta squealed. How’d this dick find this hideout? You musta told him!”

“But I didn’t, damn it!” said Eddy.

“You can’t talk out of it,” growled the other. “And if you’re hopin’ for the cops to come, you’re out of luck. Daley’s got this place fixed up cop-proof. Soon as the bulls come, Bill Krantz pushes the button. That locks a steel door across the game room. We shy across that covered runway to the next building. Daley’s got smoke bombs all fixed up to hide us till we make the getaway.”

“This guy got in, didn’t he?”

“Sure, but one cop might get through where a squad couldn’t. I guess—”

A grunt, coming from the other side of the room, interrupted the rasping voice.

“That’s Kirk,” said Eddy. “He’s gettin’ thirsty again.”

“Yeah, damn him! All I done for the past three days is give that guy water. He’s worse than an elephant.”

Pell’s eyelids opened a slit. Eddy was sitting tied down in a chair. A bound and gagged man lying on the bed looked like Kirk. The other fellow was running water out of the tap for Kirk’s drink Eddy had his head turned watching his jailer.

Pell saw that he was lying at the side of a small table. Looking upwards, he could see the stem of a pipe sticking over the edge. He glanced toward the door. The key was on the inside.

The man with the gravel voice was removing Kirk’s gag in order to give him water. Eddy was still looking on. Pell’s right hand snaked up. Fingers closed over the pipe. He smuggled it into his pocket. Lord, that bowl was hot! Then he inched his legs close to his body. The mobster had one hand under Kirk’s head and the other holding the glass of water. It was his chance. He wriggled over on his side and snapped to his feet. The stem of the pipe

punched out of his pocket like the muzzle of a gun.

“Hands up, you!” he growled.

The mobster dropped the glass of water. He let go of Kirk’s head. He spun around, deceived by the detective’s bulging pocket. Then his right hand jabbed towards his gun.

Pell leaped. Left hand locked on the man’s gun wrist. Right hand smashed the side of his jaw. The man staggered, clawed for his gun but caught Pell’s wrist instead, just as the detective’s fingers found the man’s pocket. Pell grabbed the gun, inadvertently pulled the trigger before he could get it out. The bullet ate harmlessly into the floor, but the report gave the mobster a case of jitters. He released the hold on Pell’s wrist and the detective pulled the gun free.

Heavy fists pounded on the door. “What’s goin’ on in there, Pete?” Daley called.

THE snout of Pell’s newly acquired gun muzzled into the man’s back. “Tell ‘em you had to shoot me!” he hissed.

The man hesitated. A prod from Pell’s gun promised trouble.

“Aw, I had to plug this damned dick,” he said. His growl wasn’t very formidable now.

“What the hell!” yelled Daley. “Open up, sap!”

“Go ahead and open the door,” Pell whispered. But as the gunman started to obey, Pell clubbed the gun and let him have full weight of the butt on the top of the head. Pete melted.

“Hey, Joe Daley—” Eddy Swift started to squeak a warning.

Pell’s eyes blazed. “Damned ungrateful!” he grunted. Gun nosing, he crossed to the chair in which Eddy was tied. He raised his gun to put Eddy out of the picture. Eddy’s squeal ended in a

groan. His head nodded forward.

The pounding on the door increased. The unconscious Pete was called by more endearing names.

Pell husked his voice until it approached Pete's growl. "Wait a minute, Joe."

Then he went over and frisked Pete. Another gun in the shoulder holster. Well heeled, that guy! Then he reached up and snapped off the lights. He approached the door on tiptoe and cautiously turned the key. Daley and his pals were stamping and pounding on the door with such vigor that they did not hear the lock click back. Then Pell walked to the back of the room and crouched in the corner opposite the bed containing the kidnaped Mr. Kirk.

Again he imitated Pete's voice. "Well, come in, why don't cha? Turn the knob. That's what it's for!"

The door opened. Three men tried to push through at once.

"Stick 'em up!" Pell snapped. Daley had no intention of doing anything of the kind. "Take it, then!"

Daley took it on the chest and sank forward on his knees. Gun flame jumped from the doorway. The bullet dashed plaster dust from the wall back of Pell. The detective let go with both guns. Somebody yelped.

"When you guys got enough, let me know," Pell growled.

A gun snaked around the door frame to shoot at sound. Pell got the hand that held it. Another yell and the gun plumped to the floor. Then silence. Pell cat-footed toward the door. He stuck his head out. Joe Daley was gasping out breath from lungs that crackled. Another man nursed a shattered wrist. Still another was hanging on to the calf of his leg. Blood seeped through his fingers.

Pell chuckled. Covering the two men who still clung to consciousness, he picked up their guns from the floor. Then he returned to where Kirk was tied. He snapped on the light and began to untie the captive oil magnate. He was halted by the buzzing of an electric signal. He hurried to the door and looked out.

From downstairs came the sound of hurrying feet.

"Guess that's the squad raiding this joint. Why don't you guys run?" he jibed.

The man with the shattered wrist groaned.

When Captain Jackson and his squad burst into the room, Pell pocketed his guns and grinned. "It's the Daley mob, cap. Guess they're pretty well washed up. Kirk's safe and sound. And the bait I fished with is still alive—but kind of sleepy right now!"