

ONE BULLET MAKES MURDER

NORMAN A. DANIELS

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Gallagher, of the headquarters squad, slowly drew back the hammer of his Police Positive until the mechanism clicked. In the silence of the dismal tenement hallway it sounded like the crack of a whip and Gallagher looked around, startled by the sound. He kept on climbing the stairway very quietly, very slowly. On the top floor, in the questionable security of a dirty tenement, was Pop Higgins, the most wanted racketeer in the country. For two years his face had adorned every police bulletin board. The reward for his capture had grown from ten thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars. His nickname, Pop, didn't pertain to his being a parent. It was merely a contraction for Poppy because Higgins had been the biggest dealer in the opium extracted from poppy plants that the police had known in some time.

Gallagher kept on going, every nerve and muscle attuned for instant action. Higgins would shoot. He had everything to lose by capture and nothing in resisting arrest by murdering an officer. You can only fry a man once and Higgins knew it!

Gallagher reached the door of the tenement and tried to figure out his next move. To break it down would be highly dangerous for the panels were thin and not bulletproof. He knelt and tried to peer through the keyhole, but that was blocked, also. It began to look as though he should have carried out his first hunch to get a raiding squad armed with riot guns and gas. But Higgins was known to have shifted around so much that Gallagher bated to take chances on losing his prey by the slightest delay.

He cocked his head suddenly and listened. Someone was coming up the stairs. Gallagher hastily backed into the darkest portion of the corridor and waited. The man who appeared was about fifty, gray-haired and dignified-looking. He carried a letter in one hand and consulted it before he stepped up to the door of Higgins' hide-out. He rapped on the panels in a peculiar signal. A muffled voice asked something.

"It's Pickering?" the visitor said hoarsely. "Want me to read the letter you wrote?"

Chains rattled and a key turned. Gallagher saw a swarthy, thin face peer through the crack of the door. It was finally swung wide. Pickering entered, but as the door started to close, two hundred pounds of solid humanity struck the door, hurled Higgins back into the middle of the room and sent Pickering reeling over into a corner. Gallagher had his gum raised slightly for quick shooting. But Higgins was licked. He raised both hands.

"So we finally caught up with you," Gallagher said. "Don't move, Higgins, except to turn around while I frisk you. Pickering, you may be this mug's mouthpiece, but make a phony move and I'll drill you, too."

Higgins smiled wryly. "It's O. K., copper. I'm glad you showed up. I wrote Pickering a letter, see? I told him to come here and take me to the nearest cop. I'm sick of hiding out, being hunted like a mad dog day and night. I want to give myself up, and you might as well be the guy who nails me. And it ain't the cops I'm afraid of either. It's those mugs who used to run around for me like errand boys. They don't want me pinched because I'll make a deal with the D.A. They want me knocked off, see?"

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Pickering came forward. "That's right, officer. Here is the letter that Higgins wrote me. It's good evidence that he wants to surrender. All I ask for my client is secrecy. Don't announce this until he's safely locked up where those hoodlums can't get at him. Higgins is through washed up and he knows it,"

"O.K.," Gallagher said. "Just the same, I'm taking no chances."

He searched Higgins, but found no weapon on him. Steel links closed around the ex-racketeer's right wrist. He made no protest, but he did look worried. At a gesture from Gallagher, he left the room, started down the staircase with Pickering following up at the rear. Gallagher was on edge! He didn't like this. Maybe Higgins was turning yellow and ready to make a deal with the D. A.; still there was something a little too pat about it all.

The stairway was very dark and too narrow for both men to walk down it side by side. Gallagher gripped one end of the handcuff and let Higgins precede him. The prisoner glanced over his shoulder and smiled wryly.

"I'm glad it's you, Gallagher," he said fervently. "Some cops would have let me have it right where I stood; so I wouldn't be able to spill what I know. Wait until I talk!"

"Get going!" Gallagher snapped. Higgins shrugged and continued on down the steep stairway. Suddenly he pitched forward! Gallagher, clinging to the end of the handcuff, was caught off balance. Both men pitched headlong down the steps. Gallagher's gun flew out of his grasp and landed on the stairs.

Suddenly the old tenement house was a bedlam of confusion. Men seemed to spring out of the darkness and close in around the much-wanted racketeer and the detective who had arrested him. Gallagher started to get up, but a well-aimed pistol butt sent him sprawling again. There was a single shot, followed by a moan and a choking sob. Then the shadowy figures moved toward the door and vanished. Gallagher struggled to his feet, fumbled around and found his gun.

Pickering, white with horror, was kneeling beside Higgins. He looked up at Gallagher,

"They got him, officer. Drilled him through the heart! He's dead!"

Gallagher swore softly, hailed a patrolman who had come in answer to the shooting and had him send for the medical examiner and a squad from headquarters. He started to stuff his service pistol into its holster. The muzzle dragged across his white shirt front and left a black smear, Gallagher quickly, opened the breach, One bullet had been fired from the gun, One shot only had rung out one bullet had killed Higgins. And all evidence pointed to the fact that it had been, fired by Gallagher. Because of what Higgins knew, more than one cop would have wished him dead. Gallagher suddenly realized the spot he was in!

"What's wrong?" Pickering asked anxiously. "You look worried."

Gallagher put the gun away.~

"Everything is under control," he growled, "but I'm going to land the hoods who killed Higgins. You can travel, Pickering. I'll handle everything here."

Pickering nodded and left hurriedly. Gallagher glanced around; then he began crawling up the stairs on his hands and knees, examining each banister post. Halfway up, he emitted a grunt of satisfaction. There was a piece of thin, strong silken cord tied to one post. He untied it and slipped it into his pocket.

A radio car howled up and Gallagher put them in charge. He turned over his service pistol to one gaping patrolman.

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"That finished Higgins," he explained. "It's evidence."

Gallagher had one solitary card in the hole, Carew, the sniveling little pickpocket who had stopped him ten minutes before he had captured Higgins. Carew had given the tip-off and therefore Carew must have been in on the deal. Carew holed up in a cheap little hotel. Gallagher took a cab to the hotel. He selected the fire escape as his best means of entering without an alarm being sent through the place.

He reached the window of Carew's room, but the curtain was drawn. The room was dark and only silence greeted him. He tried the window and found that it wasn't locked. He slipped through it, moving the curtain aside as he did so. It was pitch dark in the room, but he could hear cautious breathing, as though someone lurked in one of the farther corners, ready to deal death. He reached out blindly and his hand seized the back of a sturdy wooden chair.

He raised it up, holding it as a shield and proceeded across the room. Something brushed against one of the chair legs. Gallagher turned swiftly, raised his weapon and slashed down with it. He heard a grunt of pain and then the room was suddenly illuminated for an instant by the flash of a gun.

Gallagher drove the chair straight at the spot from which the flame had lanced out. It struck the gunman and Gallagher bored in as fast as he could, driving the man back until he was against the wall. Someone else moved behind him. Gallagher raised the chair and brought it down with all his strength. He felt the legs shatter under the impact and someone dropped heavily to the floor.

Then a husky arm wound around his throat. He had put one intruder out of the way, but in doing so, he had opened up a way for attack by the other man. Gallagher tried to squirm out of that embrace and all the while his reeling mind steadied around one fact. Why didn't this man gun him out? It would have been a simple thing to do. Even the first shot had missed him by yards, as though it had been deliberately aimed away from him.

He reached up with both hands. His fingers dug into powerfully built shoulders. He heaved with all his strength and felt his attacker being lifted off his feet. Then a numbing blow crashed against the side of his head. Gallagher's fingers grew weak. The blow was repeated, with even more viciousness this time. Gallagher dropped to his knees and raised both arms to cover his skull against another savage blow. His senses were reeling badly. He managed to clamber back to his feet.

There was someone near the door. Courageously, Gallagher started forward. A man's form came out of the darkness in a leaping attack. Gallagher went down under the impact but he wrapped his arms around the man, forced him over on his back and drove home a short jab to the chin.

Oddly enough that chin seemed to possess no resistance at all. A wave of horror swept over Gallagher. At the same moment he heard the door of Carew's room close softly. He reached up in the darkness, clutched at the foot of the bed and drew himself erect. He staggered over to the door, found the light switch and snapped it on. Carew lay in the middle of the floor! He was stabbed through the heart, but there was no sign of a knife. His head rested in an awkward position and there was a bruise on the chin. Gallagher took three steps toward the body, passed into range of an old mirror over the bureau and stopped dead. His clothing, his hands and even his face were streaked with blood! Carew's blood!

He heard pounding feet in the hallway outside. He had to get away. He raced across the room and went through the window. But as he did so, the door opened. A harness cop and a watery-eyed hotel manager entered in time to see him. The cop's gun roared, but he fired much too fast and at a moving target. Gallagher went up the fire escape, not down. It gave him an added second before the cop could comprehend what had happened. When he did, the gun blazed again, but Gallagher was clambering over the edge of the roof and the slugs only whined harmlessly by.

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He studied his situation for a moment, saw that the adjoining building was not three feet away and its roof only a foot or two lower than that of the hotel's. He jumped across the narrow alley, ran over to a skylight and smashed it with his foot. He worried his bulky form through the skylight, dropped into a hallway and proceeded to run down the back stairs until he reached a courtyard, in the rear. The harness cop was blowing blasts on his whistle, but Gallagher knew that he had two or three minutes leeway before help could arrive. He vaulted a fence and vanished into the darkness of the water front.

"Now," he told himself grimly, "they'll have two murder raps listed on the blotter, and unless I work fast, my name will be opposite them as chief suspect."

He stopped long enough to wipe some of the blood from his face and hands. The spots on his clothing were not too noticeable. He pulled his hat low and walked swiftly across town to a residential section and approached an imposing house. He slipped up on the porch, peered through a window and saw Attorney Pickering pacing the floor in front of his fireplace. Gallagher tapped on the window and Pickering whirled about. He spotted Gallagher and motioned him to the door. A moment later Gallagher was pulling down the shades in the living room before he sat down and lit a cigarette.:

"I'm in deep," he told Pickering. "If a guy ever needed a mouthpiece, I do. Carew, a combination stool pigeon and pickpocket, tipped me where Higgins was holed up. Naturally, I figured Carew was in on the frame-up. If he was, they paid him off with a knife through his heart. I fought with the men who murdered him and one of them flung Carew's body into my arms. That's how this blood got all over me. Then the hotel manager and a cop came in time to recognize me. The bullet that killed Higgins came from my gun. what'll I do?"

Pickering sat down weakly and shook his head from side to side. "I don't know, Gallagher. It looks bad!"

"Well I'm going to do something about it," Gallagher said. "First of all I need a gun. Got one, Pickering?"

The attorney handed over a small caliber automatic, but with plenty of misgivings and protests. Gallagher shot a bullet into the firing chamber and thrust the weapon into his pocket.

"They may try to get you too," he cautioned Pickering. "The mug who headed what was left of Higgins' mob is named Renard. I'm going after him."

He wheeled toward the door and went out fast. Pickering shuddered and poured himself a drink of whiskey. He kept looking nervously at the windows, and the glass rattled against his teeth as he tried to drink. Five minutes went by. He started toward the hallway. There was a crash of breaking glass. One of the drawn curtains was torn down. A gun cracked and the bullet hammered into the woodwork framing the door. Pickering gave a squeal of alarm and did a nose dive across the floor. He was picking himself up when his phone jangled. He answered it in a croaking voice.

"Pickering," Gallagher's voice came over the wire. "Listen I just spotted Renard. He was heading your way."

"He ... he's already been here," Pickering finally managed. "He ... he took a shot at me. Gallagher, I'm scared. We've got to do something."

"I'll be right over," Gallagher said. "We'll both have to hide out."

Pickering was ready two minutes later, and he had a gun stuffed into his coat pocket. He met Gallagher while the detective was on his way to the porch. Neither spoke and the detective moved warily out to the sidewalk for a look around. He signaled Pickering that the coast was clear and they headed north, walking fast.

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A taxi rolled slowly down the street, suddenly picked up speed and swept in to the curb straight toward them. Its front wheels mounted the sidewalk. Pickering gave a yelp of horror. Gallagher was more practical. He gave the attorney a hard shove and sent him sprawling about five feet away. Then Gallagher jumped, too just in time to avoid being run down. The cab backed up hastily, grated gears and dashed off. Gallagher wiped his face and shivered as he helped Pickering to his feet.

"Whew!" he said softly, "That guy Renard is persistent if nothing else. First he tried to gun you out, and this time he must have swiped a taxi and tried to run you down. We'd better get away from here."

"No!" Pickering said wearily. "I ... I'm going back to my home. You're sure that was Renard in the cab ?"

Gallagher nodded. "I knew the rat. It was Renard, all right. Better run for it. He may come back."

Pickering gulped and nodded. He turned and ran madly toward his home. Gallagher sank quietly into the shadows, trotted lightly across estates and emerged at the rear of Pickering's home. There he took up a position from where he could observe three sides of the house. Renard, he knew, would soon be coming to call. For twenty minutes he remained there wondering if his hunch was not going to come true.

Then he saw a figure stealthily make its way toward the garage at the rear of Pickering's home. The door swung open and a moment later a big car rolled out. It gained speed along the drive, turned into the street and headed south, traveling fast. Another car pulled out from the curb, halfway down the block, and took up pursuit. Gallagher put two fingers to his lips and whistled twice. From around the corner came a cab. It slowed and the door opened. Gallagher hopped in. He leaned forward.

"Nice stuff, Jerry. You came in time. Just tail that buggy. They're after Pickering and we'll be after. them. And watch it that's Renard in the bus we're trailing,"

The driver gave a nod of assent, hunched over the wheel and held onto the trail doggedly. It took them out of the city, along a State highway and into a farming area, Gallagher relaxed, examined the gun he had borrowed from Pickering and saw that it was ready for action. Being a small weapon his big hand could close completely around it.

Suddenly the car containing the crooks gained speed. They had selected a quiet, straight stretch of road to go into action. The car roared closer and closer to Pickering's racing sedan. The driver was an expert. He suddenly turned the wheel to the left. Pickering, to avoid a crash, turned also. His car ran off the highway and into the soft shoulder. It rocked wildly for a moment and then stopped. Pickering climbed out, his hands high in the air.

"O.K.," Gallagher told his cab driver. "You've been decent about everything, Jerry, but there's no use sticking your head into trouble like this. I'll get out here."

The driver turned around and pulled up his cap. A gun was centered on Gallagher's chest. The driver smiled crookedly and he certainly wasn't Jerry.

"You'll get out all right, copper," he snarled. "We figured you might be laying low, waiting for us to contact Pickering. We been watching you, too, and knew the guy who owns this hack was a pal of yours. When we saw it parked around the corner from Pickering's, we guessed the rest of it."

"If you've hurt Jerry " Gallagher leaned forward, straining against his better instincts which told him that to act now would be foolish.

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"What he got," the gunman announced, "is a little tap on the wrist compared to the way Renard will handle you. Get out and keep your mitts high, or I'll spill you all over the road."

Gallagher shrugged in despair and obeyed. He was marched up to the big car in which Pickering sat, stiffly erect, his face the color of chalk. He was trying to talk, but his jaw trembled too much to make his words audible. Gallagher saw Renard, a short, wiry killer with a narrow hatchet face and black eyes that were slitted in hatred.

"Hold the copper just like that while I frisk him," Renard snapped.

He stepped up to Gallagher and rapidly searched him. "So you don't pack a rod no more," he laughed. "Too bad, copper, but you won't need one where you're going anyway. Get into the bus, and if you say one word to that shyster mouthpiece, I'll drill both of you."

Gallagher got into the car, squeezing his bulk against the slender frame of the attorney. There was silent, hopeless pleading in Pickering's eyes. Two of Renard's men were busily engaged in searching Pickering's car. One of them discovered that the back seat moved forward on hinges. He gave a shout of elation and pulled out two Gladstone bags. They were tossed into the gunmen's car. Renard got in beside the driver, knelt on the front seat and kept Gallagher and Pickering covered. Another thug held a gun against Gallagher's ribs. The rest of the mob got into Pickering's car, and they headed back toward the city.

Gallagher put the palms of both hands on his thighs and kept them there. Pickering held his arms shoulder high until they dropped of their own accord out of sheer exhaustion. The thug beside Gallagher removed the gun from the detective's ribs and hastily covered Pickering.

"He's O.K.," Renard laughed, "I took his gun away." .

~The car entered the city, chose an artery near the river and turned abruptly into territory that was familiar to Gallagher. They were going to the hotel where Carew had lived and died. The car stopped halfway down the alley beside a delivery entrance. Gallagher was jabbed with the gun. He walked into the hotel, found that he was inside a supply room; but Renard prodded him along until he emerged into a corridor near the back stairs. He went up these in answer to the pressure of Renard's gun and finally turned into one of the rooms.

"Sit down!" Renard ordered crisply. "So far you been showing a lot of sense, copper. I could make this tough for you instead of nice and easy; so keep on being good."

Pickering was shoved onto the bed. He leaned back against the pillows quivering in fear. Gallagher let loose with a long sigh of resignation.

"I suppose it's curtains for me, Renard? But sooner or later all this will be found out, and you'll be pointed right toward the chair."

Renard parted his thin lips in a superior sort of smile. "Think so, copper? Just for that I'll tell you how I'll finish up. Living on top of the world with nearly a half million in cash that belonged to Higgins. And you that's going to be my masterpiece. The cops will think you killed Higgins because he knew too much about the department and maybe you. They have evidence that you knocked off Carew too. Nobody saw you leave the hotel. I don't even know how you made it myself. They searched the dump and found no trace of you."

Gallagher nodded. "I get it. They'll find me here with a bullet hole in my skull and a gun in my fist. It will be suicide. There's just one thing I'd like to know. It's about Pickering. I figured him as being on the up-and-up. You seem to give me the idea that he was keeping Higgins' bankroll and was going to run out with it."

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"Sure!" Renard smirked. "We have watched him ever since Higgins was bumped. He had the dough in his house got it out of a safe—deposit vault this afternoon. Higgins gave him authority to get it."

"Then Pickering is a rat," Gallagher said softly. "I trusted him and he was ready to give me the double cross. I ought to "

Gallagher was on his feet suddenly. He gave Renard a tremendous shove and made a headlong dive toward the bed. Pickering shrank back, yelling for help.

Gallagher landed on top of Pickering. He pinned the man down by the throat, straddled him and rapped half a dozen blows to the jaw. Pickering's shouts ceased, his eyes glazed and he went limp. Gallagher retained his grip on the attorney's crawny throat. Suddenly he seemed to come out of a coma. He let go of the unconscious man, shook his head energetically and climbed off the bed. His big hands were tightly closed.

"In a minute," he told Renard, "I would have been a murderer, but if Pickering is to die you'll have to do it."

Renard snorted in contempt. "We'll take care of him. Now sit down over by that table. We haven't any more time to waste. Here is where you get it!"

Gallagher walked over to the table, sat down in a straight-backed chair and eyed Renard narrowly. The killer drew a cheap nickel-plated revolver from his pocket and spun the cylinder experimentally.

"There's a certain pawnbroker to whom this rod will be traced," he said. "He'll swear you came into his place, flashed your badge and told him this gun was stolen. He'll testify you took it away, and he didn't do anything about it because he knew you were a cop. Everything will point to suicide. Get ready, copper!"

Gallagher's eyes were narrowed, his lips firm. He raised his right hand a trifle. Mysteriously a small automatic popped out between his fingers. It spoke once, sharply. The gun in Renard's hand lost its high polish as blood spilled over it. Then Renard, stupefied by this turn of events, let the gun drop from shattered fingers that would no longer hold it firmly. One of his men rushed forward, pulling his gun as he did so. The small automatic barked twice. The gunman stopped short, clutched at his middle and without a sound, curled up on the floor.

The other two men promptly raised their hands. Gallagher lined them all up near the wall, instructed Pickering to walk behind them and search their pockets. The attorney obeyed, collecting a small arsenal, which he dumped on the table.

"That was great," he told Gallagher with a weak smile. "I'll see that you're repaid. What shall I do now?"

"Line up with your pals!" Gallagher snapped. "You're just as much of a rat as the lowest of them. You framed this whole business. When Higgins wrote you a letter saying he wanted to give himself up, he also gave you the power of attorney to ransack a safe—deposit vault and get his cash. You figured if Higgins never reached headquarters, his money would be yours. You enlisted Renard into your little plan. While you and I were upstairs, Renard tied a cord across the steps. Higgins tripped and fell, taking me with him as you planned, and you, Pickering, grabbed the gun that fell out of my hand. No one else could have reached it for it landed on the stairs, and you were the only person behind me. You shot Higgins through the heart with it and then dropped the gun again for me to pick up. You were working with Renard!"

"No!" Pickering whined. "No, Gallagher. You're wrong! Renard is no friend of mine. Why he ... he tried to kill me, tonight. You saw him do it."

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Gallagher laughed. "Renard didn't even know it happened. I sent that slug through your window. A taxi driver, who is a pal of mine, pretended to make an attempt at running you down I said it was Renard and you took the bait. You had Higgins' money hidden. You got it out and prepared to run for it. But Renard was watching you just in case. There is only one thing that I'm grateful to you for. This little automatic you gave me. When I was caught by Renard, I had it in the palm of my hand. When they shoved me into the car, I put it in your pocket. The gun is so small you never even noticed the weight. Then I pretended to go half crazy and try to kill you. Those taps on the jaw wouldn't have flattened a rabbit, but you passed out from sheer fright. All I wanted was the gun."

Pickering leaned weakly against Renard. The killer snarled something and gave him a violent shove.

"Now, boys," Gallagher said, "behave. You'll all be cell mates for quite some time. March out of this dump the same way we entered. I'm coming back here with a wrecking crew soon as you're in hock. Something tells me this joint is full of bugs stir bugs hiding out from the police."

The End.