

# **MARKED MURDER**

Norman A. Daniels

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Trooper Bill Kent, on patrol duty, heard the car roaring up behind him. He twisted his head, looked through the rear window and saw the car heading toward him. It was doing at least seventy.

"The fool," Kent muttered. "He must be blind drunk not to see this white cruiser of mine. I've got to worry about him getting past me before I can hope to catch him."

Kent pulled far over to one side and slowed down considerably, but his right foot stayed on the gas pedal, just in case this speed demon thought he might want to wreck a police car.

The onrushing sedan didn't slacken its pace at all, nor did it turn out in the least. Kent let it get to within five hundred feet, realized the driver most certainly didn't care whether or not he hit anything, and then gunned his own cruiser. It hurtled over the soft shoulders, through a small bush and finally stopped two feet from a stream which would have bogged him down for hours.

The crazy driver shot past. Kent saw an arm raised in mocking salute. He put his cruiser into reverse, backed to the highway and prayed that no farmer's hay wagon, or a jittery driver, would get into the path of this fool. Straightening out, he took a firm grip on the wheel, hunched over it and revved up the motor to its full capacity.

The cruiser was especially geared for high speeds, and in a moment the distance between the cars was being slowly cut down. Kent snapped home the siren switch. He thanked whatever fates were responsible for the little traffic along this quiet road at this late afternoon hour. In even fairly heavy traffic, that car ahead would have wreaked havoc.

The siren didn't seem to have much effect on the wild driver. Kent knew that eight miles ahead was a small town with narrow thoroughfares. If this fool went through it at the speed he was going now, plenty of people might be killed. Grimly, Kent drew his service pistol from its holster and laid it on the seat beside him. Very soon he'd be within gun range and could plug that car's gas tank.

Then the car ahead began to slow appreciably, and Kent's foot sought the brake pedal. He was still doing sixty when it happened. The door beside the driver's seat opened and a man came hurtling out. He hit the running board, bounced off and landed directly in the path of Kent's car!

Kent noticed the abandoned machine begin to zigzag crazily; then he had to shift all his attention to avoiding running over the man sprawled out on the road.

It was impossible! If he kept on roaring ahead, he'd crash the abandoned car and probably kill himself. The only thing to do was risk an attempt to skirt the fallen man. Kent gave the wheel a firm turn. The car rocked wildly while tires screeched and brakes helped to wear out a dollar's worth of rubber. Then he felt a sickening thump. The right wheels of the car bobbed upward. For a moment Kent was sure he'd go plummeting into the forest which lined the highway! Fighting desperately, he managed to get control of the wheel again. He

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slowed up, veered to the right side of the road and turned around as fast as he could. Then he shot back to where the man lay.

Kent got out, ran over to him and knelt. He shuddered at what he saw. The man was dead. The fall had probably killed him, for the back of his head was bashed in. Kent was sure the wheels of his car had only passed over the torso.

One hand was outflung, the fingers clenched tightly as though the dead man was holding onto something with which even death couldn't make him part. He was about fifty, dressed in overalls and smelled of a farm.

Kent opened the clenched fingers and frowned. The hand held nothing, but it was very badly bruised. In fact, it looked as though the fingers were almost severed. Turning the hand gently so that it lay palm up, Kent studied it intently.

There was a circular bruise, ugly and deep. It was about the size of a half dollar. Farther back, on the heel of the hand was an odd cut that went down to the bone. It looked as though it had been caused by a piece of metal with a sharp tip and tapering flanges, like the letter V.

Kent saw another car approaching and hailed it. The driver was a farmer. He took one look at the dead man.

"That's Leeming. He's got a farm up near Nettleton Creek. Odd cuss, tooÑregular miser. What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Kent said. "He fell out of his own car while I was trying to catch him for speeding. Stay here, will you? His car shot off to the right, up the road a bit. I want to have a look at it."

Kent found the car. It had mowed down several small trees and had finally stopped against a big bush. There was nothing in the car.

Kent thrust his hat to the back of his head and tried to puzzle things out. It could have been suicide; in fact, that was exactly what it looked like, except for that bruised hand and the strange marks on the palm and the heel. Those hadn't been caused when he fell, and Kent was equally positive his car hadn't run over that outflung hand.

He went to the back of the machine. There was gasoline splashed around the tank, near the cap; yet none of this had come from the tank. It was almost dry, indicating that the dead farmer must have stopped for gas somewhere not very far from the spot where Kent had picked him up.

Kent left the driver of the other car on guard while he raced south toward the nearest telephone. He recalled that there was a gas station about one mile beyond the point where he'd been parked, a Blue Goose Service Station, one of a group doing business in this section. Perhaps Leeming had stopped there, and the attendants might have some clue to his erratic behavior.

Kent rolled up to the pumps and stopped. An angular man of about forty, came out, wiping his hands on a piece of waste.

"Leeming?" the man said in answer to Kent's question. "Nope, he wasn't here. But I know the guy surly sort. Stopped here a couple of times but didn't like our service. We didn't give him a discount as he demanded. Say was he driving a maroon-colored sedan?"

"That was it," Kent said.

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The attendant whistled softly. ~Whew! He tore past here about fifteen or twenty minutes ago, traveling as if all the wild devils fresh out of Hades wore right back of him. I kinda thought he'd kill himself before that ride was over."

Kent got out of the car. "I'm going to use your phone to call the barracks. Leeming is dead all right. He fell out of his car four or five miles up the road."

Kent fumbled in his pocket and discovered he didn't have a nickel in change. He handed the attendant a dollar bill.

"How about some nickels so I can phone?" he asked.

The attendant waved aside the bill and proffered a five-cent piece. Kent shook his head.

"Thanks just the same, but I'd rather use my own money "

The attendant shrugged, stepped over to the cash register and his finger hesitated above the button labeled with initials, as though he'd forgotten which initials he should press to indicate who had opened the register. Then the bell rang, and a drawer slid out.

"That's some register," Kent grinned. "Looks as if it must have cost as much as the whole filling station."

The attendant patted the ornate register lovingly. "Yeah, the Blue Goose Oil Co. doesn't hold back when it comes to registers. This baby sure cost a lot, and it's almost as hard to operate as a transatlantic Clipper. Here's your change, trooper."

Kent took the silver, shook his head at the ornately engraved cash register, then made his phone call. He returned to the scene of the accident and waited until men from the barracks arrived. Then he headed for Leeming's farm.

He rolled past the White Barn Dairy, a large and apparently prosperous farm, saw Leeming's more weather-worn place and turned into the driveway. A man, in farmer's garb and carrying a hoe, approached the car with his mouth agape.

He answered Kent readily enough. "My name's Alec Ainley. I work for Leeming. Why?"

"Leeming is dead," Kent told him. "I want to look over his house. And, by the way, how has Leeming been acting lately?"

"Funny like a crazy man. Hollered at me every time he was around. Acted like he belonged in an asylum. How'd he die? Suicide? I've been expecting that."

Kent nodded and went to the house. The front door wasn't locked. Ainley had headed for the barn.

Kent made a methodical search of the house, mostly to locate any evidence of relatives who should be notified. Leeming kept an old-fashioned desk in one of the attic rooms. Apparently, this was his office. Kent sat down and rummaged through the drawers.

Gradually, he accumulated evidence which certainly did not indicate that Leeming had been insane. His books were in perfect order and showed a decided profit. The harvest season was over, the hired hands paid off. Kent grunted and studied the list of hired men. Nowhere was there a man named Ainley

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He slammed the drawers shut and sat back, but only for a moment. From downstairs came a distinct sound of light pounding. Kent arose, tiptoed to the stairs and went to the second floor. Now, he was sure someone was downstairs, working stealthily. He descended the steps carefully, one hand on the butt of his gun.

A quick look in the front parlor revealed Ainley kneeling at the fireplace and trying to work a brick loose.

"All right," Kent said icily. "Stand up, Ainley, and lift your arms high. Robbing a dead man, were you?"

Ainley rose, his face a sick green color. He kept blinking owlishly, but there seemed to be no intense fear in his eye. Kent heard a soft step behind him, started to turn, and then the blackout came!

First, there was a terrific smash on the back of his head. The sunlight, streaming through the west windows, started to gyrate like a million powerful searchlights. He felt himself slipping. With a final, desperate effort, he squeezed the trigger of his service pistol, heard the single shot ring out then oblivion!

He sat up, less than five minutes later, and found that he'd fallen squarely on top of his gun. He arose, staggered to the front door and looked out. Apparently, Ainley and his fellow crook had been alarmed by the shot and fled.

Kent returned to the parlor, saw that the fireplace brick was still in place and worried it loose. In a hidden compartment below it, he found a tin cash box.

He opened this by knocking off the cheap padlock with his gun butt. Inside was about three hundred dollars in cash, papers concerned with the farm and a plain white envelope. He slit the seal and a dozen half dollars poured into his hand. One fell to the brick floor of the fireplace and landed with a dull thump. It didn't bounce like true silver, nor issue the characteristic clanging sound.

With a grunt of amazement, Kent tested the other eleven coins. They were all phonies. Cleverly made, bright and shiny, but worth about two cents instead of the fifty prescribed by law.

Tucking the box under his arm, Kent locked up the house, returned to where his cruiser was parked and drove away.

He rolled past the spot where Leeming had met his death. It was deserted. Finally, he pulled into the Blue Goose gas station.

The same attendant came out, but there was a second man with him, now. A beetle-browed, pugnacious type, who hovered in the background.

Kent extended a half dollar. "You gave me this in change remember? It's counterfeit. Test it yourself and see."

They walked into the station. The attendant rang the coin on the cash register shelf, opened the register and took out another half dollar.

"Sorry," he said. "Somebody must have slipped this one over on me."

Kent stepped close to the register, dipped his fingers into the compartment reserved for half dollars and tested each one of them. They were all genuine.

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"Just wanted to make sure nobody else would get more of those phonies," he explained. "Well, I've got to report to the barracks and submit details of Leeming's death."

But Kent didn't head for the barracks. He did travel in the opposite direction to Leeming's farm; but two miles away he took a crosscut, returned by way of another road and a second crossroad until he finally stopped about a quarter of a mile from Leeming's farm. The house was dark.

Kent shut off the lights of his car and parked it well off the road. He approached Leeming's place afoot.

Certain there were no prowlers about, he cut across the fields in the direction of the big dairy. There were plenty of lights there, especially in the huge barn. He saw a trim, streamlined delivery truck parked by the side of the house, and behind it was a heavy sedan.

Kent reached the back of the barn, moved slowly toward a window. then suddenly dropped into the high grass.

A man had rounded the corner and was slowly pacing a beat which circled the entire building. He passed by one of the lighted windows, and Kent recognized him. It was Ainley, Leeming's hired man. Ainley carried a rifle nestled in the crook of one arm and looked as though he knew how to use it. Kent let him pass by, arose warily and made a dive for the man. His service pistol was clubbed, and before Ainley knew what happened, the gun smacked down on his head! He uttered a groan which Kent stifled as quickly as possible. The trooper eased the man to the ground, took away his rifle and also an automatic which he found in a hip pocket.

On sudden inspiration, Kent examined the unconscious man's hands by running his fingers across the palms. They were soft certainly not the hands of a farmer's hired man,

Kent shoved the automatic into his pocket, holstered his service pistol and made sure there was a shell in the firing chamber of the rifle. He reached the big doors of the barn and found them tightly shut, but a smaller door wasn't locked. He opened this and found himself in a tiny office.

Now he could hear voices voices of at least three men and there was a peculiar acrid smell in the place. Kent turned and locked the small door from inside. With light steps he crossed the room. pushed open another door and peered out into the barn proper.

The sign outside the farmhouse indicated this was a dairy, but there wasn't a cow in sight. The several stalls were empty.

At the far end of the vast building, three men were working around a small blast furnace, a long bench and a portable foot press.

Kent edged closer. Then he broke out in a cold sweat. Someone was trying the small door! Whoever it was, now began to pound on its panels. The three men looked up.

"Don't move!" Kent snapped. "Back toward the wall and stand there with your hands high. Get going!"

"It's that copper that lousy trooper I conked at Leeming's," one man snarled. "I should have knocked him off, but I was afraid the shooting might be heard."

"You're always afraid," another of the trio snarled. "Now look at us. Copper, there ain't much use in denying what we're up to. But listen to this we could fix things so you could retire in about one year and live like a king."

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Kent had an idea they were talking to hold his attention. Half a second later he was sure of it. Glass smashed and a gun roared! The bullet glanced off the barrel of Kent's rifle, knocking it from his hand. He whirled, his hand darting toward the service pistol. The holster flap was open and he got that gun out faster than an old-time Western road agent.

The man at the window was sighting for a single shot that would finish things. Kent's gun blared first. The gunman didn't make a sound. The gun fell out of his hand, he leaned forward slowly and then something seemed to be pulling him down.

But the three crooks in the room had split and were racing for hiding places now. Kent fired at one, missed by a fraction of an inch, then ducked for cover himself.

His refuge a stack of baled hay was secure enough. Bullets plowed into it, but the stuff was tightly baled and impervious to revolver slugs. Kent was just beginning to feel pretty good again when the roar of a submachine gun blasted and bullets swept all around him. They came from a loft, high above and well sheltered.

While the Tommy-gun kept up its chatter, forcing Kent to shove himself closely against the bulwark of hay, two of the men streaked through the barn toward the office. Kent heard the door slam. He didn't know what their plans were, but they must have one and good, too if the man with the Tommy-gun agreed to remain behind and risk a battle with the trooper.

Kent fired two quick shots at the loft and drew about fifty in reply. He was cornered and knew it. Calmly thinking a way out, he placed fresh ammunition in the cylinders of his gun. His eyes studied the loft, saw a big tackle block with a thick metal shell. It was dangling from a track which led to the loft door, through which heavy articles were hauled into the barn.

The tackle block was turned at angle from the point where Kent stood.

The gunman was crouched behind a piece of sheet steel provided with a firing slit. Apparently, this whole thing had been set up for just such an emergency.

Kent had no time to lose. The others would be back to pull whatever trick their crafty brains had fashioned. With a machine gun angling to reach him, he'd be in a bad spot.

Kent knew ballistics and angles. If he could plant a steel jacket against the side of that block, it might ricochet and force the gunman from behind his steel shield.

Kent leveled his pistol and sent a prayer winging with the bullet. It failed. The slug ricocheted all right, but in the wrong direction. Failure taught him a lesson, however, and his second shot got results. The slug banged against the metal casing of the tackle, slipped sideways and whistled behind the steel shield.

He heard the gunman give a yelp of pain, and suddenly the man arose, exposing himself for an instant, Kent was prepared for this, and his gun banged just once. The gunman came reeling from behind the shield, reached the edge of the loft floor and plummeted down!

Kent raced to the ropes dangling from the tackle block, went up them swiftly and grabbed the machine gun. He glanced at the drum, swore softly and threw the gun down. There were only half a dozen slugs left. He slid down the ropes, ran through the barn and scooped up the rifle that had been shot out of his hand.

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He reached the office and took a quick look through its small window. Those two men, their forces now augmented by Ainley, who must have recovered consciousness and attracted their attention, were climbing aboard the truck. Kent knew what they were about to do. They'd start the truck and smash down the big barn doors. Kent had to prevent that, but he didn't quite know how. There was an old tractor in a corner. On a bench were a number of empty quart canning jars, covered with dust and cobwebs. His eyes darted around the place, saw a five-gallon tin and opened it. It was full of gasoline.

Outside, the truck motor roared into life. They were probably waiting for a signal from the machine-gunner, because the truck didn't start to roll at once.

Kent hastily poured gasoline into four of the quart jars until they were three fourths full. Then he slopped in thin, used motor oil which had been drained off the tractor and allowed to stand in a flat pan beneath the machine.

Sealing the jars hurriedly, he scoured around for pieces of cloth. He tied these to the jars with wire, soaked them in gasoline and then approached the big doors.

It was easy to open one of them a crack. He set down the jars carefully and lit a match; then, one by one, he set fire to the gasoline-soaked cloth tied to those jars. Before the flames spread far enough to reach his fingers, he rolled the jars out in front of the barn.

Bullets began to sing, but the doors were stout and Kent was careful. He grabbed the rifle and waited. The men in the truck realized, now, that Kent must have been victorious over the machine-gunner and were prepared to crash through the barn and take him with their guns.

Those flaming jars must have made the men laugh. As though they'd stop this truck. The truck began to move and gained speed with every yard. Kent's rifle was aimed at the jar farthest from the barn. As the truck neared it, he fired. The jar broke, spilling the mixture of gas and oil over the ground. The flaming rags set fire to it. One by one, he cracked those jars open until the entire area around the front of the barn was a living sheet of flame.

The truck brakes squealed as the driver put all his weight on them. It stopped and the three men jumped out, narrowly missing the flames. They fired a few shots to hold Kent back; then they streaked toward the sedan. It backed out of the driveway as Kent veered around the flames. He saw it head south.

Instantly, Kent climbed into the truck and took up the chase. The truck couldn't possibly outspeed the sedan, but it did get Kent to his parked cruiser in the quickest possible time.

He transferred to the police car and took up the chase in earnest. In three minutes he spotted the speeding sedan and gave his own car the gun. He knew he could overtake them, now.

As with Leeming's car, the distance rapidly diminished until Kent was within pistol range. Now, the trouble really began! Two of the men in the sedan were in the back seat. They smashed the rear window and began shooting. Kent's windshield stopped several slugs, but it cobwebbed so badly that he had to risk thrusting his head out of the window to see.

More bullets spanged against the fenders and the radiator. He knew the car must be leaking water, but there'd be enough to keep him going for a long time yet.

Then the car gave a violent lurch to the left. It seemed to rise up on its rear wheels for an instant. They'd hit a tire. Kent fought the wheel with all his strength: but the car shot off the road, bounced over the shoulders and

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landed sideways against a tree.

Kent got out, shaken but unhurt. He quickly estimated the damage and found that the right-hand side was caved in and one tire was disgustingly flat, but the car could still run. In fact, the motor purred smoothly.

Kent went to work. He'd changed tires often, but never one quite so fast as this.

In five minutes he was backing to the road again. He knew that it would be practically impossible to catch up with those killers, now, but they'd have work to do along their route which would take up some time. Also, he realized that when his car left the road, it must have looked like the finish for him. They'd probably be more or less secure in the belief that he'd be unable to spread an alarm for many minutes yet.

Therefore, Kent took the next side road, bounded over its ruts at top speed and reached a busier highway running parallel with that which the killers were using.

He found that the siren was still intact and sent traffic out of his way with its din. Four miles farther on, he came to the intersection of both highways. Directly ahead was one of the Blue Goose gasoline stations. He'd shut off his siren long before and now rolled to a stop in the middle of a field. He shut off the lights and knew the car would be safe there. Nobody could spot it from the highway.

Running fast, he approached the gas station from the rear. There were no cars at the pumps. Two men were inside, smoking and playing cards. Kent pushed the door wide.

One man started to reach toward his overall pocket, but froze at the sight of Kent's gun.

"Turn around," Kent ordered.

He forced them against the wall, took a small-caliber gun from each, then compelled the taller of the pair to remove his overalls. Next, Kent tied them up, applied efficient gags and shoved them into a small supply room.

He donned the overalls, picked up a service man's cap and waited. There were three Blue Goose filling stations along the road over which the killers traveled. Kent was certain they'd stopped at each one. Therefore he was well ahead of them.

Kent walked up to the cash register, one similar to the gaudy, expensive affair he'd already seen in another of the gas stations. He pressed a button and a drawer flew open. Kent took out the supply of half dollars and tested them. They all rang true. He frowned; this wasn't in the cards, not according to his way of thinking.

Then he pushed all of the letter buttons. The last one reacted differently from the others. A second drawer flew open, a drawer concealed by the devious engraved designs on the surface of the register.

This lower drawer was well filled with cash, and every half dollar it contained was a phony.

Kent heard a car slowing up, glanced out of the window and saw it enter the gas station. He closed both drawers, pulled down the peak of his attendant's cap and waited.

Three men got out, led by Ainley. They strode up to the door, walked in and Ainley approached the register.

"Things are hot," he said. "We're cleaning out the phonies until it's safe to pass them again."

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Ainley, his hands full of the counterfeit coins, turned around when he got no reply. His two aids stood with their hands stretched high. Kent, the uniform cap off, now, had a pair of guns, and one was pointed squarely at Ainley.

"Take a nickel out of the register," Kent ordered. "Walk over to that phone and call the barracks. Make it snappy, or I'll put a bullet through you and do it myself."

Lieutenant Brady of the State police let several of those phony half dollars run through his fingers.

"They certainly are clever imitations," he said. "How'd you corner this mob of counterfeiter, Kent?"

"Leeming gave me the tip-off," Kent explained. "He must have gotten several of these phonies and was sore about it. He suspected the Blue Goose filling station nearest his farm and probably tried to grab a handful of the coins. An attendant slammed the drawer shut, but Leeming's hand was in it. He had a coin in his palm, and it was pressed so hard against the flesh by the slamming of the drawer that it left an impression—a murder mark! Part of the design which projected above the edge of the hidden drawer also gouged the heel of his hand, leaving another characteristic mark.

"Leeming must have suspected the farm next door to his place, too, and with reason, because a dairy farm usually has cows. Anyway, they had to kill him and yet make his death look either accidental or suicidal. They used me to frame it. One of the men drove Leeming's car, keeping low so I couldn't see him. When I followed, he pushed Leeming's body out, drove the car off the road and, while I was busy trying to avoid running over Leeming, got away."

Brady nodded. "I often wondered why a combine from the city bought up these gas stations. It was a swell way to put those phony coins into circulation. They must have passed thousands of them. Over a period of time, the profits would have been tremendous. Still, I don't see how you connected these gas stations with Leeming's death."

"Easy," Kent chuckled. "Leeming had stopped to get gas. They slopped plenty of gas on the outside of his car. It was still a little wet when I examined it, so I knew Leeming must have taken on fuel at the nearest station. I went there and things were almost too serene. When I found those phony half dollars in Leeming's house, I began to see things clearly, so I returned and told one attendant he'd given me a phony half in change. He didn't even show surprise; just opened the drawer that was used in case anyone spotted the fake coins and demanded good ones in their place.

"Let's take a run up to the dairy," Kent went on. "I'll show you the nicest little counterfeiting plant you ever saw."

THE END.