

MANHATTAN HAYRIDE

Ben Conlon

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Lights and music and laughter and menace! Jim Blake, of the narcotic squad, had shadowed too many men not to be aware that he himself was being tailed. Dummy Krail, proprietor of the amusement park, knew he was in the area. It didn't matter that Jim Blake was in plain clothes, that he was a new man on the detail, that he didn't act or dress or walk or talk like a dick. Dummy Krail was not dumb in any sense. He could talk like a big-shot mouthpiece. He could think and plan his path into the big dough, could think and plan ways to beat raps. And he'd know a cop in a crowd of Coney Island surf bathers. He'd know a cop in hell.

As soon as Blake had entered the big gate of the Empire Amusement Park, he had seen Krail. Krail had been looking over a new electric sign near the roller coaster. His back had been to Blake, but Blake had caught a quarter profile of the big, blond ex-ironworker who had shouldered his way ruthlessly to the top of the rackets. Krail had a finger in several lines of legitimate business, too. The Empire Amusement Park was one of them.

As soon as Blake came out of the Laugh House, he knew that his every move was being watched. He went back to the roller coaster, removed his snap-brim hat and bared his russet head to the breeze as the car hurtled down steep inclines, switched around corners. Then he tried the scenic railway called Satan's Plunge. And always he knew the eyes of that tail were on him. Always he knew the chances he was taking. Dummy Krail picked efficient killers who pulled jobs smoothly and quickly. This particular killer, Jim Blake felt sure, would strike fast if he had an inkling of the little Jim Blake already knew, and the great deal that he suspected.

Jim Blake passed the Tunnel of Love, smiled at the crowd of young men and women waiting to take rides. He continued on to Jerky Village. He bought a ticket, went up the ramp, was almost hurled from his feet as he entered the first long, dark corridor, worked by machinery, the floor writhed and pitched like a tempest-tossed sea. Girls shrieked and laughed. Men guffawed. Jim Blake guffawed, too.

About thirty feet along the heaving passageway, Blake stepped aside to the stationary flooring which a shrewd management had built there for folks who couldn't take the shaking up. A red bulb glowed on an exit sign, and Blake walked toward the exit. The way twisted and turned, and there were skeletons and red devils and other scary objects for those who liked their thrills with no shaking up. At the first turn, Jim Blake stopped and hugged the wall. His right hand gripped the butt of his Police Positive. He had come into the Jerky Village with design.

Three seconds ticked away four five six Then the lean, ratty-eyed fellow came around the turn to feel the muzzle of Jim Blake's gun jab into his back.

Nothing was said. Nothing had to be said. The ratty-eyed man put up his hands. Jim Blake took his automic, frisked him for more weapons, found none.

"Now, rat," Blake said slowly, "you're going to squeal a little."

The gunman glared sullenly. "What's the idea?"

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"I know what your idea was," Blake told him. "My idea is to find out where Dummy Krail's dope cache is and where Dopey Luren is."

"I don't know nothin' about any dope," the gunman said evenly. "I know Dopey Luren, sure, but I don't know where he is."

"Don't, huh?" The detective's blue eyes were bitter. He was thinking of the high-school kids lured by the thrill of marijuana. Kids brain-tortured, broken, ruined.

"You know all about it, rat," he said. "You know Dopey Luren was picked up. You know he sang for the cops, that he told about Krail's tie-in with the reefer ring told as much as the poor heel knew, which wasn't much. You know Dopey disappeared right after he got out on bail, and you know where he disappeared, Come on, now give, or "

The muzzle of Blake's gun pressed harder into the other's back.

"You can't do nothin' to me," the gunman insisted. "You wouldn't. You ain't got nothin' on me, not a thing. Even the rod I got a permit for that. I'm a licensed watchman in this here park."

Blake heard someone else coming up the stationary walk. Seemed to be a pair of kids and some older persons. Not good business to be found here in this spot. His left hand closed to a fist, shot up with dynamic force against the gunman's chin. All the strength in Blake's body all the fury and hatred and anger within him was in that rocketing left.

The gunman pitched forward, out cold, Jim Blake dragged his unconscious form back of one of the big papier-mache devils, waited there till a man and a woman, apparently husband and wife passed with two kids. Then, with the gunman's belt and tie, he trussed up his prisoner. He did it well; Blake had served a hitch in the navy as a youth. A handkerchief served as an efficient gag. The gunman would keep here, keep like a well-frozen egg.

Blake's keen glance riveted on the gunman's right hand and wrist, studied the dark smears, green and black. The detective seemed to be very much interested in these.

Music floated from the dim gloom of the Tunnel of Love. Jim Blake listened to the haunting strains briefly, absently, his attention focused on the crowd thronging about the small white ticket booth. Then he strolled toward the booth, bought a blue stub for one ride and waited in line for his turn in the endless line of floating boats. He felt a trifle ridiculous clambering in a seat alone, and a ruddy-cheeked youngster yelled at him:

"Hey, mister! Where's yer goil? She stand y'up?"

The crowd chuckled, Jim grinned and waved his hand as the small boat bumped ahead into darkness. Over his shoulder, he watched the small patch of brilliance fade and vanish as the heavy square-shaped craft followed the twining course.

Music rippled in his ears. His eyes were thoughtful.

Light glimmered ahead. The boat swung around a curve, passing a gay and colorful cottage scene, with two figures embracing in the shadow of rose-draped lattices. Then darkness once more.

Jim Blake trailed his hand over the side in the lukewarm water. His wrist scraped against the damp pilings forming the watercourse, slid gummily along. Light slanted into the stream again, and the detective examined his

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wrist, There were stains streaking the flesh. Dark stains green and black. A glow of elation brightened Blake's gaze. For the stains duplicated those that had discolored the hand of the gunman that he had knocked out and trussed up back there in the Jerky Village!

The gunman, one of Dummy Krail's lieutenants, had been in this tunnel recently. Why not

Blake waited until the next romantic scene came into view. Then, lithely, he leaped to the wooden bank, hastily bounded across the brightly lighted stage. He knew the way these stages were constructed. Behind a false front of lattice-work he found a small door, opened it and slid through, closing it behind him. His boat bumped on, out of sight.

The rear passageway in which Blake stood was dark, dank, silent. Blake could hear the rush and gurgle of water outside. Satisfied that he was alone at least here he moved along the passage.

Ten twenty fifty feet he went. He heard nothing, at first. Then, a distant buzzing. Short staccato buzzes, then longer ones, then three shorts again. Some code! A signal!

Padding along noiselessly, Blake heard a door ease open, scraping slightly. A boat was coming, too. Its sides scraped the pilings gently.

Blake rounded a turn, in half-gloom. He froze in his tracks as he watched a furtive figure with a small box in his hand steal out through a door cut into the wall overlooking the tunnel and poise on the small shelf beside the water. The boat scraped nearer, paused as the man held the bow. Voices

The boat passed along. The man slipped back into the passage. He was putting something into the pocket of his trousers. He stood there listening.

Several more boats passed by. Then above the man's inclined head a buzzer again sounded softly. A boat approached. The man stooped, and from a popcorn case extracted several boxes of the confection. He duplicated his previous actions, closing the wall door as the boat vanished. The boxes in his hand were gone, but he slid coins into his pocket again.

Jim Blake's eyes hardened. He took a stealthy step, another

The man swore, whirling, and Jim Blake's fist landed solidly. The man slumped, unconscious. Jim Blake packed a sock!

Working swiftly in the stabbing beam of his flashlight, Blake tumbled several boxes of popcorn from the carton. Shaking them, they rattled loosely. Blake ripped the covers free. From the midst of caramel-coated popcorn slid three cello-phane-inclosed cigarettes. Blake sniffed at them.

Marijuana! Reefers!

"So this is how Krail peddles his stinking cigarettes!" Blake muttered.

He tossed the torn boxes back into the huge carton, bound and gagged the dope peddler that he had knocked out. He dropped the sagging form close to one of the dark, dank walls. He had no time to lose; he must work fast.

Carrying the carton of evidence against Dummy Krail, the detective hustled back along the passageway. He managed to reach a larger room in the brick-lined corridor. This room, too, was dank and dark. Blake reached for his flash. But before he got it, he tripped over something. He knew immediately, knew instinctively, what it was.

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The thin pencil of light confirmed it: the body of Dopey Luren, the stoolie who had ratted on Krail and had told the little he knew that somehow Krail had figured a clever way to use his amusement park as a cover for taking kids of high-school age for a "hayride" at a profit.

Dopey Krail had been shot twice through the head. Killed because he had squealed. Stored in this dark, out-of-the-way place until it would be safe to take him out after the park closed and the crowds were gone and probably sink his body, incased in a barrel of cement, in the river!

Suddenly harsh, sharp voices carried to the ears of Jim Blake. At the same time he heard several pairs of feet beat with staccato insistence along the passageway!

Jim Blake pocketed his flashlight and slid his gun into his hand. He could hear one of the voices clearly now: "I tell you I ain't nuts, boss. I seen him take one o'the boats. But the boat came out alone."

"What the hell did you let him go in for, in the first place?" The voice was hard, powerful, dominating. Dummy Krail's voice.

"But boss, I didn't have no chance to stop "

The voices faded.

Blake waited until the men had passed the door. He thought it was going to be easy, at first. Then he heard them coming back. He'd be trapped in-here, unless

He ripped the door open and threw everything into one long chance. He came charging out through the doorway like a fleet broken-field runner and all but brushed against one of Krail's men. He got at least a dozen feet down the dim corridor before two guns snarled. Blake felt a burn across his right side. He staggered, then caught his balance and kept going.

Again guns banged away, three or four of them this time, but Blake was in the dimmer part of the passageway and in another instant had switched around a corner. In the feeble light of an overhead bulb he saw a metal door, tried it. It opened. He was in a small tool room opening on two others. One led to the platform where the attendants were aiding passengers into the waiting boats. The second opened into a small alley.

Blake slid into the alley. Across the narrow strip of concrete a large refreshment and dance rotunda glittered and pulsed with life and music. Blake grinned. Life maybe death!

The inner door banged open savagely. Krail pounded out into the tool room, out onto the platform. Blake could hear his bull-like tones: "Where'd he go? The copper "

"Nobody came out here, Mr. Krail "

"The alley! He's there, then!" Again Krail's tones. "Get him! Fast! Don't let him get away with that stuff. Come on!"

Blake swiveled his glance to the south, saw that the alley was dead end. To the north he could see the crowds. He could vault a low railing at that end of the alley and take his chance among the throngs out there. But Krail was desperate. Guns would bark, spitting leaden death. Children might be hit, women, innocent men. Krail wouldn't give a damn; anything to shut the mouth of a snooping dick, spirit away the evidence. Krail had taken some brazen chances before and his high-priced mouthpiece had seen him through.

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The detective darted across the narrow strip, slipped through a rear supply door of the refreshment rotunda. Two frightened helpers squealed at sight of the drawn gun in his brown fist, and scuttled behind tables. Blake legged it for the swinging doors. Through those doors he might find a rear window, could drop from there, have his long-chance gun battle away from the crowds

The double doors pelted open. Three of Krail's men were slamming toward him. Krail was no fool, had sent his men circling around he knew more about this set-up than Jim Blake did. A brace of shots burned over Blake's head. He ducked, heard lead crashing into something. He heard shouts: "He's in the supply kitchen, Dummy!"

Blake's lips went white as they snapped hard across his teeth. Voices shrilled high in panic. Customers were scrambling. Tables, chairs, were overturned. Glasses crashed and clanked. Silverware rattled tinnily. And over all came the blast of shots and the strident ping of ricocheting lead!

Blake didn't know whether he'd been hit again or not. He did know that he had strength enough to leap over an ice-cream counter. He heard guns bang again and felt warm blood trickle down his cheek. He crouched low, tucked the popcorn box safely under the marble counter. Bits of marble showered about him.

Blake came up like a jack-in-the-box, hurled a shot at a gunman who was creeping close. The gunman grabbed his middle and sagged to the floor. Blake saw the wall telephone in a little jog at the south end of the counter. He crawled down to it, took a big chance, leaped high, snatched at the receiver, jiggled the hook frantically. The operator's irritated voice beat brassily in his ears.

"Get the Bathland Avenue police station!" Blake screamed. "Say there's a man dead murdered in the Tunnel of Love, and "

A brace of bullets crashed into the telephone box on the wall, blasting out its electric entrails. Dead line now. Blake let the receiver slap back against the wall. He felt something burn across his left shoulder. He half crouched, half dropped behind the counter again.

To his right he could see another door, could see the hole cut in the middle of it. A door for handing through short orders. Kitchen in there. The knife switch would be in there. If he had darkness, perhaps he could hold out

He crashed his way through, found the switch where he believed he would, jerked it down. The brilliance of the rotunda blacked out into darkness. And through that gloom, Jim Blake crept out to the space back of the counter again. He'd be in greater danger here; it was gloomy but not pitch-dark. The outside lights of the Tunnel of Love, across the alley, reflected little blobs of light.

Krail's voice again: "Through the switch room, Whitey! You an Pug. Me an' the boys'll come along from the other end, get him in the mid "

Blake heard unexpected shots out on the midway, saw the flash of brass buttons. From his gloomy hide-out he could see into the light, could see the cop with the gun, could see the cop stagger. Some lone harness cop attracted by the shots, courageously coming into the fight. He saw the cop stagger again, and this time fall.

Blake groped around with his left hand, touched a metal box, high, steel-framed. An ice-cream refrigerator. The detective hugged the ground like a snake as he heard slugs carom off the box in whining protest. He kicked two large glass jars with his foot. Large-mouthed candied-fruit jars. And then came the slow, vicious, deliberate approach of stealthy feet. Of many feet. From right and left.

They would not shoot across the fountain. They would catch him in their cross-fire from either end Whitey and Pug from the switch room, Krail and his killers from the other side.

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Nervously, desperately, swiftly, Jim Blake worked. Seconds passed. Terrible seconds. Metal clinked, water splashed

The door to the switch room opened. Blake saw the smudge of a form there, fired a quick shot. Somebody cursed and slid to the floor. Maybe Whitey, maybe Pug. But whoever got it, it slowed up the other one, made him more cautious. It was the left side that Blake had to worry about now. The killers, he knew, were slipping warily along that side of the dark passageway. Jim Blake went back to work on the glass jars. Their wide metal caps were screwed down tightly.

The killers to the left were close enough now for Blake to hear their whispers. He'd be blasted out of the picture in no time now. Had the operator relayed his message to the Bathland precinct station? Anyhow

Easily, soundlessly, Blake took one jar and rolled it toward the left. He eased back, shoved open the switch-room door without exposing himself fully, dodged a shot, then rolled the remaining jar in there.

Krail's bull voice again. "All right, boys! Let him have it! All together "

From each end of the fountain came a deafening explosion. Twin blasts, blasts that ripped and tore through the air, that blanketed the strains of distant music, blasts that died away leaving the cursing moans of men. And from some vague place came the piercing banshee wails of police sirens.

Weak from loss of blood, Jim Blake sagged to the floor. But he was smiling, smiling painfully.

The first face he saw was the broad, red, Irish pan of Corrigan, skipper of the Bathland Avenue station. Then he saw plenty of faces the faces of other cops, of plainclothes men, of curious, morbid amusement-seekers, and hysterical women and round-eyed little children. And Dummy Krail. Krail was between two big cops. His right wrist was cuffed to the left wrist of one of them, and his left was cuffed to the right wrist of the other. The dope czar looked cowed, beaten.

Captain Corrigan was talking. "We found the body in there Luren's body," he said. "We got the call. But in Heaven's name, how did you hold out? What caused Krail and his men to go haywire and "

Detective Jim Blake told him. Then he turned to Dummy Krail.

"You were too greedy to stop your dope-peddling after you spotted me here in the park, Krail," he said. "You had your man tail me, thinking that if I got too close to dangerous territory, you'd stop the dope racket for tonight and leave me holding the bag. From the streaks of graphite on the hood's hands, I knew he'd been in the Tunnel of Love recently. I know you used that on your boats to help them slip through the narrower sections of the waterway. It was a hunch that and the kids hanging around the entrance to the Tunnel of Love. I managed to uncover your reefer peddling. I have the evidence right here with me. And if that cop your men shot dies "

"He's dead now," Captain Corrigan cut in. His broad face was very sober. "It was Daley, Mike Daley, up for pension next month. Well, those are the chances we all take in this game."

He tugged at Blake's arm, pointed to the inner walls of the rotunda, where crimson stains were spattered wildly. "It must have been a tough battle, with all that blood "

Blood, my eye!" Jim scoffed. "Those are smashed cherries. You'll find the smashed pineapples in the switch room. Not the pineapples that explode," he added, "although these exploded, at that!"

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He laughed. "You see, when they cornered me, I would have been a sieve, only I found those big glass fruit jars with plenty of water inside. The ice-cream refrigerator supplied chunks of dry ice frozen liquid air which I packed in the jars, screwing the tops tight "

"But how in the hell "

"Dry ice and water generate gas, captain. In an air-tight container, given time, it will make an explosion with sufficient force to shatter anything in the vicinity. Those rats were closing in on me. They were stunned by the explosions. And next time, I'm guessing, Killer Krail and some of his torpedoes'll be stunned for good. Krail was killing kids slow with dope. The State does it faster with that electric skillet up the river!"

THE END.