

A Ride for Mr. Two-by-Four



By
Bruno Fischer

When he started to tail the blue sedan for speeding, this copper never figured he'd have a death-tussle with the half-pint Hercules driving it. Nor that he'd be playing hide-and-seek with the corpse in the back seat.

SURE I want credit, mister. A cop needs all he can get if he hopes for advancement. Lay it on as thick as you like in that magazine of yours. But the fact is, about all I did was throw monkey wrenches into the works—anyway, until near the end.

I got my first sight of that blue sedan on Route 202, a couple of miles outside of Paterson. One of those cold, steady rains

was falling that turned to ice as soon as it hit the road. I was sitting in my patrol car watching the cars and trucks crawling along like they were feeling their way. Nobody was doing more than 20 that morning, and even at that speed the drivers were risking their necks.

So for a minute I couldn't believe that I was seeing straight when this sedan came along doing fifty if it did a mile. It nosed

out to pass a ten-wheel trailer truck, skidded clear across to the other side of the road, recovered just in time to miss a southbound coupe, cut in front of the trailer, and was on its way again.

I'd have given a day's pay not to have to go after that maniac in that weather, but that's my job. A couple of times I lost him at intersections and curves, but he stuck to the highway and was easy to spot. The car was a low-slung, two-tone blue job, with a New York license tag.

And it could step. Why we both didn't pile up on the turns, especially when we had to brake on that ice, I'll never know. I tell you, I was hopping mad. I crouched over my wheel, peering through my icy windshield and the blanket of rain, repeating aloud every cuss word I had ever heard.

Until at last, on a clear, open stretch, I pulled up alongside him. There was nobody but this little man in the car—or so I thought. When I gave him the horn, he threw a terrified glance at me. I was sure then that he'd been aware all along that I was on his tail, and he'd been trying to shake me.

He pulled over and I got out of my car and walked over to him stiff-legged so as not to slip on the ice. I was shivering from the cold and the rain froze as it hit my nose.

The words I was going to let him have were already blistering my tongue, but I didn't get them out. Not right away, that is. There was something so small and queer and pathetic about him as he cowered behind the wheel that I took another look at him. He was the kind of middle-aged, rabbity, watery-eyed man you'd think would be the last guy on earth to go tearing along at fifty or better in weather that gave the toughest truck driver the jitters.

"All right, I was speeding," the little

man said. "Write out your ticket and let me go."

"Just like that, eh?" I said. And I let him have both barrels of my tongue.

He sat there trying to shrink into himself. Not because of what I said. It was plain he wasn't listening to a word of mine, and when I paused for breath I heard his voice.

"I lost my head," he was muttering to himself. "But always the crowds. Even here in New Jersey the crowds."

I GOT a queer feeling listening to him. A nut, I told myself. Then he seemed to be shaking himself out of a bad dream and turned his head to me, and I wasn't sure. He was smiling now, looking as normal as the next man.

"I'm in a hurry, officer," he said. "If you're going to give me a ticket for speeding, give it to me."

I asked for his owner's and driver's licenses, and he handed them to me. His description tallied all right, and there was no doubt the car was his. His name was John Luce, and he lived on Eighty-something Street in Manhattan.

"Speeding, hell!" I said. "That was reckless driving. And we don't hand out tickets to out-of-state cars for that. We take them in."

All at once he was the most scared-looking man I had ever seen.

"Take me in where?" he said.

"To the judge."

"But I can't go!" His voice was as shrill as a woman's. "It's impossible."

"You think so?" I said. "You got room to turn here. I'll be right behind you in my car."

"Yes," Luce whispered. "I couldn't get away from the crowds."

There he was, off again. Well, if he was really a nut, all the more reason for me to take him in.

I started back to my car. As I passed the rear left door of the sedan, I happened to glance through the window. A man lay on the seat, his face down, and buried deep in his arms, his hat setting on the back of his head. His legs hung off the seat.

"Who's that?" I asked, going back to the driver's window.

Luce was bent over, fumbling for some reason with the ignition key.

"A friend of mine," he muttered. "He's asleep."

"Drunk?"

"That's right," Luce said quickly. His head came up and he looked at me, fear lining his face. "He passed out a while ago. I was speeding because I wanted to hurry him home."

"Home where?"

"In—in Suffern."

"That's no reason to endanger lives," I said. "He'll keep. You lead so I can keep my eye on you. I'll give you the horn when I want you to turn off."

I went back to my own car. The blue sedan started with a jerk and made a bad U-turn which almost took it off the road. I yelled an oath after him.

We crawled at no more than twelve and sometimes fifteen miles an hour. John Luce was setting the pace, and now he was too cautious. I had a notion that he was trying to stretch out the trip as long as possible. And that was odd because a few minutes ago he'd been so anxious to get his friend out of the cold.

I DON'T know, mister. Maybe if I was one of those super-detectives you meet in stories I'd have taken one look at the setup and known all the answers. I felt there was something screwy, but not too screwy. I mean, when you patrol the highways day after day you meet all sorts of funny people.

I guess I was thinking about that and

maybe a little hypnotized by the rain and the monotonous fanning of the windshield wipers, because the next thing I knew Luce's car was a hundred feet ahead of me and eating up the road. I stepped on the gas, and yelled out loud as if he could hear me, or as if it would do any good if he could.

Then he was swinging off the highway, skidding on two wheels onto a side road. I had no warning, but I had to follow. My wheels wouldn't grip on the turn, and for a couple of sick moments I thought I was a goner. But I managed to right my car and high-tailed after him.

This was a bad road, all curves, tough for making time on a good day, and now sheer suicide. But I was so sore I didn't care. I gave my car all it had. In a mile or two of the closest shaves I'll ever have, I caught him.

When he saw me roaring up to him, the heart seemed to go out of him. He rolled to a stop.

Before I cut my motor, I shouted: "I got my gun out this time."

And I had. I wasn't going to take any more chances with that wild little man. His hand was sticking out of the car window when I walked up to it. The rain pattered on the money he held out.

"What's that for?" I said furiously.

"The fine," Luce said. "It's all I have with me. Eighty-seven dollars."

I was so sore I had to restrain myself from taking a poke at him. I said: "Stick it in your pocket. You're coming in if I have to drag you all the way by your collar."

"Please!" he begged. "Please take the money, or give me a ticket."

His voice was the kind that would melt a stone; his watery eyes were blinking like he was about to burst into tears. I should have felt sorry for him, maybe, but all sorts of ideas were crowding my mind.

I said: "Why are you trying to bribe

me with more dough than your fine would be? Why are you so anxious to risk your neck and your friend's to get away from me? Who's he, anyway?"

"I told you—my friend. He's drunk."

"I'd like to ask him about it," I said.

I gripped the handle of the rear door.

"No!" Luce whimpered: "Please don't disturb him. He's sleeping. He—" The rest was a moan.

I had the door open and was shaking the drunk's shoulder. His hat fell off the back of his skull, and I could see that he had thick yellow hair that curled up the nape of his neck.

"Wake up!" I said. "Come on, snap out of it."

The drunk did not budge a muscle. I started to take my hand from his shoulder. My palm brushed the back of one of his hands. That hand was colder than the freezing rain.

I took a quick look at Luce. He was bent over the wheel, doing something there. I transferred my gun to my left hand, dug my fingers into the back of the man's hair, and lifted the head.

I'm supposed to be hardened, but I let out a yell. The black hilt of a small kitchen knife protruded from his throat.

THEN the sedan leaped. I was taken off guard like the greenest rookie. The door slammed my shoulder and spun me to the middle of the toad. The ice took my feet out from under me; the whole two hundred pounds of me hit the ground.

I got to my knees, skidding, and threw a shot after the car careening crazily with the back door flapping open. But the car had made distance, and I was dazed by the fall. Even before I shot, I knew the slug would miss by a mile.

Mad? Mister, I was shaking all over when I got to my feet. That little guy had made a fool of me twice. And that was the

least of it. I had found a murderer; had caught him cold with the victim's body, and I'd left him in possession of the car and victim and merely tagged after him for speeding.

I could see the Skipper's face when he heard that, and it was as unpleasant a sight as that corpse with a knife in its neck.

That was why I didn't radio in an alarm for John Luce and his blue car. I wanted a chance to redeem myself.

I didn't catch sight of the sedan. My patrol car was doing everything but flying, but that little man was in a mighty big hurry himself. Now I understood why.

Then I was out on Route 202 again, only farther north. I swung into the highway without breaking speed. He had been heading north when I had first spotted him. Besides, anybody who was trying to shake a New Jersey cop would hop over into New York.

The state line didn't stop me. This was murder, and I was in a hell of a spot. And then I saw that I was really in trouble, because I'd lost him completely.

I headed back to my own state, still not using the radio, desperately hoping for a break. And I got it—the only one.

Where Route 59 crosses 202 a short distance above Suffern, I spotted the two-tone car turning east toward Nyack. Evidently Luce planned to take the ferry across to Tarrytown and drive down to Manhattan on the New York side.

To my surprise, Luce stopped at once when I gave him the horn. For the third time I parked behind him and strode over to the other car. The dead man was no longer in the back seat, of course.

"Did I do anything wrong, officer?" Luce asked, trying to look as innocent as a newborn babe and not doing a good job of it.

"Cut it out!" I snapped. "Where's the body?"

He gave me a weak, tight smile. "What body?"

I opened the back door and got all the way into the back seat. My gun was out. I said: "If you try any funny stuff, I'll shoot."

"You're a New Jersey policeman," he said. "This is New York. You have no jurisdiction here."

"That's right," I agreed grimly. "But that's my worry. Your worry is how to explain the blood on this seat. New York won't have much trouble finding the body. The body and the blood in your car and my testimony will make an airtight case."

He swung around behind the wheel and stared at where I pointed at the rear seat. The kitchen knife, buried deep in the fleshy neck, had pretty well plugged up the hole. But there's always a lot of blood in those wounds, and quite a bit had poured out on the seat and soaked into the material.

JOHN LUCE went to pieces. He couldn't take any more. He dug the fingers of both hands into his cheeks.

"I—I didn't notice. His face covered the blood. So many things I overlooked."

"You overlooked plenty," I agreed. "Getting rid of that body won't do you any good—not after I've seen it. But most murderers aren't clever. They get panicky; their minds stop working."

He stared at me. "You think I—No no! I didn't kill him. My boy didn't either. I know that now. I—"

He choked off the rest, realizing that he'd said too much.

"What's this about your son being the murderer?" I asked.

"Son?" He huddled close against the window, a small, middle-aged man completely crushed. "I didn't say anything about my son."

"You said 'my boy.' That means your

son, doesn't it?"

Luce twisted around to me then. He looked so tired that it didn't seem possible that he could stay in one piece.

"I did everything wrong," he moaned. "But everywhere there were people. Listen! Bill didn't do it."

"Bill's your son?"

He grabbed my arm, leaning over the seat. "Bill didn't do it. I knew it couldn't be Bill, even in those terrible moments after I found the body in the car. You've got to help me."

"My job is to help," I said quietly. If I brought him in with a full confession, I'd be sitting pretty in spite of everything. "Suppose you tell me about it from the beginning."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. There's still a chance to do something, if I can make you see the truth."

"Sure."

John Luce said: "This morning I left the house at eight-twenty as usual to take the subway downtown to the office. I'm an accountant. Bill had left the car in front of the house overnight. I had a set of keys and I got into the car to drive it to the garage.

"On the corner I stopped for a red light, and it was only then that I happened to glance back and saw the man lying on the back seat. I knew by the coat and hat that it was George Maddock."

"Who's he?"

"George Maddock is a radio agent. My son Bill is a radio announcer."

"Oh, sure," I said. "Bill Luce."

"Yes. Well, when I saw Maddock in the back of my car, I thought he was drunk. I called to him, and when he didn't answer, I reached back and shook him. There was something about him that frightened me. I got out of the car, opened the back door, and lifted his head."

Luce closed his eyes; his voice

dropped. "The first thing I saw was that knife sticking so horribly from his throat."

"And you didn't call a cop because you figured your son Bill had done it."

He was silent for long seconds. "I'm not sure. The thing is, I recognized that knife right away. It came from our kitchen. I recalled that my wife was slicing limes with it while I was mixing drinks for Bill's guests."

"And you knew that Bill had used the car last."

I WAS becoming interested. "Go on," I said. "Keep talking."

"You don't understand," Luce said. "It's true Bill drove Maddock and Monroe Gibbs to our apartment from the radio station. He intended to take the car to the garage later, but by the time the others left he was too lazy to bother. Bill is a fine, ambitious boy, but he is lazy about some things. He didn't even bother to lock the car doors. If he had—"

"Is this Monroe Gibbs you mentioned the radio singer?"

"Yes."

"Gibbs has a summer home near here on Ramapo River."

"I know," Luce said. "I guess in back of my mind that's the reason I came this way across the Lincoln Tunnel instead of heading upstate. Because I felt that was the only way to save Bill. What would the police think when they found our kitchen knife in Maddock's throat, his body in the car which Bill used last? And I knew that sooner or later they would also find out about that fight the men had."

"What fight?"

"It really wasn't much," Luce said quickly. "I mean, it was chiefly between Maddock and Gibbs. Maddock was one of those blond, handsome men who played around with a lot of women. It seems that he had been seeing too much of Gibbs's

wife, and Gibbs had found out about it. Maddock was Gibbs's agent as well as Bill's, and Bill brought them both up to the apartment to make peace between them.

"Well, it didn't work out at all, because Gibbs got madder by the minute. And when Bill tried to pacify him, Gibbs flared up. Gibbs said: 'You should be on my side, Bill. Or don't you know about Maddock and Helen?' And Bill went white around the mouth. I guess it was the first he'd heard—"

He broke off with a gasp. He wasn't very bright about such things, and I guess his mind was pretty foggy with strain.

"Who's Helen?" I asked.

"She's nobody. Nobody at all."

I said: "She's your son's girl friend. Bill found out then that Maddock was doing the same thing to him as to Gibbs. And Bill didn't like it one little bit, did he? He probably went downstairs with the two men when they left."

"But he came up in a minute," Luce blurted.

"Enough time to get Maddock into the back of the car to talk things over and then stick the knife in him. That's what you thought when you found the body. You figured that if you could dispose of the body somewhere and get rid of the knife, the police would have a tough time pinning the murder on your son.

"But you can't dump a dead body in Manhattan in the middle of the day without being seen. You decided to get into the country and shove the body out on a seldom used road. But even on the Jersey side there were too many people and too much traffic. You got panicky. You started speeding to get away from the crowds."

Luce rested his head in his hands and looked at me in horror.

"No!" he said. "Perhaps at first I couldn't think straight, but then I did. Bill

wouldn't kill a man, so it had to be Monroe Gibbs. Gibbs had more provocation than Bill; he'd had time to plan it.

"And then I remembered something. I remembered looking out of the window before I went to bed. Bill was upstairs then; I heard him in his room. And I saw Gibbs in the street lighting a cigarette. He was standing at the car when he struck the match, and he must have been looking into the back seat."

"You're the only witness," I said, "and you're Bill's father."

LUCE TOUCHED my arm, urgently. "I'm not lying. I came this way for a reason. A murderer must be shaken after he kills. He wants to get as far as possible from the crime, especially when it's discovered. He'd rather not face people."

I called Gibbs's New York home from Paterson. He wasn't in. I made many calls. I couldn't get him. He's got a cabin out here in the country on Brigham Road. Listen! If he's gone to stay in his cabin in this kind of weather, wouldn't that prove he's guilty?"

I laughed.

Luce sank back in his seat. "So you won't help me after all? I thought if I told you everything, you'd do something."

"You told me because it no longer mattered," I said. "Once I saw that murdered man in the car, it was too late for you to do a thing. Gibbs would tell what happened in your apartment; the rest would come out. I've got only one job to do, and that's to take you in."

"It was too much for me," he whispered. "I hadn't even the courage to pull the knife out of Maddock's throat and throw it away. That might have made a difference."

I was wondering, then, if he wasn't a lot cleverer than he looked or sounded.

The fact remained, he could be the murderer better than anybody else.

"You didn't have time to hide the body where it won't be found soon enough," I said. "You'll save a lot of trouble all around by taking me to where you dumped it."

He nodded weakly. There was no fight left in him. He slid over and I got behind the wheel and turned the car. In a thin dead voice he told me where to go.

No fight left in him! That's all I knew about him, mister. Though how could I guess that that meek little guy would only stop battling with the last breath in his body?

He directed me down one of those narrow side roads that are all up and down hill. There was one hill that was especially nasty with a sharp curve at the foot of it and the road like glass. And as I started to turn the wheel, John Luce hit me in the face.

That's right, mister, he risked his life as well as mine doing what he thought he had to do. He didn't have much steam in his fist, but it was enough to snap my head sideways. Then he was clawing at my hands, trying to tear them off the wheel. I shoved my shoulder against his chin and knocked him against the door.

But it was too late to do anything about the car. The motor had died, but on that ice the wheels were having their own way of it. The car was off the road and gliding over ice-covered grass, and a tree jumped up to meet us. I had too much to do to watch Luce. I didn't see him reach into the dashboard compartment for a wrench. I didn't even see him smack me with it.

I don't know how long I was out. After a while I was aware of a terrific headache and I opened my eyes. I was slumped on the front seat of the sedan. I tried to get up and I couldn't. My hands and feet were

tied with heavy rope. He must have had it in the trunk of his car.

After a little squirming, I got my head up as far as window-level. The car had missed the tree. It had evidently skidded again, just after I'd been slugged.

I sank down again and tried the ropes. He wasn't good at that either. I shouldn't have much trouble getting loose.

"Lie still!" Luce said.

He was in the back seat, leaning over, and my gun was in his hand. There was something in those watery eyes of his that made me colder than the weather could.

"You can't get away with this," I said. "You—"

"Keep quiet!" he said, and there was no mistaking that he meant it.

He got a handkerchief out of his pocket and crammed it into my mouth and then tied a dirty rag across my mouth to keep the gag in. After that there couldn't be any conversation. We stayed like that, me tied up in front and not daring to try to get loose, and he in the back seat with my gun.

AFTER a while the rain stopped, but it got still colder. My muscles froze; my flesh ached and then went numb. And my head was on fire. Now and then I'd hear a car go by, but I couldn't yell, even if that gag wasn't in my mouth, because he had the gun. And a car parked off the road was a natural enough object. It didn't arouse suspicion.

A couple of years passed before night came. Luce got out and walked around in the twilight. When it was completely dark, he opened the door and started to pull me out.

I'm close to two hundred pounds and he doesn't weigh much more than half that, so he had quite a job, wheezing and panting, while I got a couple of bangs and bruises. But with that deathless persistence

of his he finally got me out and dragged me behind the big tree where I'd be hidden from the road.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If I can, I'll be back for you. Or I'll let somebody know you're here."

I tried to tell him through the gag that I'd freeze to death. He listened to me as if my mewling meant nothing. His narrow shoulders were bowed, there seemed to be no bones left in his body.

"I'm so tired," he muttered, "so very, very tired."

He disappeared and I heard his car start, return to the road, and then drive away. Then I was alone in the cold and dark, except for occasional headlights flashing by.

All afternoon I had known that he hadn't done a good job of tying me up, but I hadn't been able to do anything about it. Now, even with my cramped, frozen muscles, I got loose in ten or fifteen minutes. I was lucky he hadn't searched me and found my handcuffs.

My knees wobbled under me. For a mile I staggered along like a drunk till a light delivery truck picked me up. The driver took me to where I'd left my patrol car. Only it wasn't there any more.

I stood there in the darkness staring at the empty road, though I should have expected that. Of course they'd sent out a call for me when I hadn't reported in all afternoon. But I was sure it had been the New York State Police who had come across a New Jersey highway patrol car parked in their state. They'd inquired and then sent it back.

Three times I had let a murderer, or the accomplice of a murderer, make a sucker out of me. And he had my gun too. In other words, I was deeper in hot water than I could have dreamed of in a nightmare.

I'd cursed that little man before, but it

was nothing to what I called him now.

IN SUFFERN I got a taxi. In a few minutes I was back in New Jersey, where I could function legally again, though I was sure it wouldn't be for long.

I didn't go back to the barracks or even phone in. Instead, I had the taxi take me to Brigham Road, where I looked for the cabin Luce had mentioned. When I saw lights in the windows, I told the driver to stop and paid him off.

In the splash of pale light from the cabin windows, I saw a weird, distorted mass of shadow. It stumbled and staggered and made a sobbing, panting breathing. Without seeing it distinctly, I knew that it was a little man carrying a weight on his back much heavier than himself.

I started forward, took three steps, then stopped, remembering a thin voice muttering a short while ago: *I'm so very, very tired*. But not too tired. Never too tired.

I cut around to the front of the cabin. When I passed a window, I looked in. There was a rustic living room with a bright fire burning and a reading lamp lit over an armchair. Nobody was in that room.

I went up to the front door and knocked. Almost at once the door swung in. A short, meaty man stood in the hall. He wore a flannel lounging robe, scarf, and slippers, like a picture in a fashion magazine. This was Monroe Gibbs, the sweet-voiced radio tenor.

His mouth and eyes went wide at the sight of me. The color rushed from his cheeks.

"Are you Monroe Gibbs?" I asked.

He nodded, holding himself very stiff, waiting without breathing.

"That's all right then," I said. "We got a call from a neighbor that somebody was in your house. We had an idea that it was

closed for the winter."

His breath came out noisily. He smiled. "I ran up for a couple of days for a rest. Thanks for your-ah-vigilance."

Gibbs started to close the door. I put my shoulder against it.

"Just a minute," I said. "How do I know you're Gibbs?"

"Why, I— That's ridiculous. Everybody knows me."

"I don't. Can you prove it?"

He flared up, but he showed me papers in his wallet. I took a long time, listening all the while. Somewhere in the house a window opened. I wasted more time.

"Come, come," Gibbs said impatiently. "I'm freezing out here."

"Then let's go inside."

He threw me a sharp, suspicious glance and: turned into the house. I followed him up the hall and into the living room. He stopped dead. I looked over his shoulder.

EVEN though I'd expected something like that, I myself got a slight case of willies looking at it.

"George!" Gibbs whimpered. He turned to me, and his face was broken and old. "Officer, what does this mean?"

"What does what mean?" I asked casually.

"That—that thing there?"

"What thing?"

"That man! That body!" He gripped my arm. He moaned. "Good Lord, man, don't you see him?"

"See what?" I said. "Are you nuts? Nobody's in this room but us two."

He looked at me a long time, something in his eyes dying. Then he turned back to the thing standing against the window. Then he—

Well, mister, put yourself in Monroe Gibbs's place. You've killed a man the night before. Then you've gone away to

your country place so you wouldn't have to face people and maybe police questioning before you got a grip on yourself. You're pretty sure the murder will be pinned on Bill Luce, but all day you're alone and worrying and a cop appears and your nerves jump.

Then suddenly you see the murdered man standing there before you, many miles away from where you've left him. The knife you've stuck into his throat is still there. The blood on the shirt and the face is sheer horror in the flickering light from the fireplace. The dead eyes stare at you.

And the cop standing right beside you doesn't see it at all, so you know it must be a ghost, come back from the dead to accuse you.

Monroe Gibbs screamed. He clawed at me like a hysterical woman. He begged me to save him, and crazy words poured

from his mouth. But words that made sense all the same. Words that told me all I had to know about who had murdered George Maddock.

Then I heard a sickening plop and a sigh. The plop was the dead body falling on its face. The sigh was made by John Luce as he fainted dead away on the other side of the window where he had been holding the corpse up.

There's your story, mister. I got credit for bringing in the murderer of George Maddock, when all I did was to use my head a little.

All I have to do is think of a little man who kept losing his head and doing the wrong things. I think of him getting more tired than a man could be, and yet not stopping or letting himself be stopped because he had, a son whose life had to be saved.