

THE ARRESTED HAMBURGER

By John S. Halbert

Early August, 1966:

Not long after the flying trip to Auburn, I was in the control room of the radio station on my regular evening shift while we were broadcasting a New York Yankees baseball game. Considering that we were in Alabama at a time of deep division between the North and the South brought about by the Civil Rights issues raging at the time, the popularity of the Yankees---the *baseball* Yankees---was an intriguing turn of events. It seemed as if the local Southerners were willing to overlook the decidedly-Northern name, as the 'Bronx Bombers' had an avid following in our area.

As usual, on this evening the telephone lines were busy, with most of the calls coming from fans asking about baseball scores, as we were the only station in the area with a direct-line sports ticker. Because we used a studio microphone that the announcer switched off when he (or she) was not speaking on the air, the telephones in the control room didn't actually ring---a bank of blinking lights announced all incoming calls.without the sound of bells.

Right after the Yankees game had finished and I was just starting the regular music program, the telephone light began blinking. I punched-up the call, expecting another ball score request.

"I wanna talk to the manager!" a surly male voice demanded. "Gimme the manager!"

I turned down the volume of the studio monitor. "You want to speak to the manager?"

"Yeah! The manager! It better be right now!"

Something about the tone of his voice put me on guard. "He's not here after regular office hours. You can reach him in the morning."

"Look, buddy, I'm telling you one more time---put the manager on right now and don't argue with me. I'm tired of your baseball games! You hear?"

So that was it: the fellow didn't like baseball on the radio. But broadcasting the Yankees' games had been a good programming move for our station, so I decided try to calm him down. "As I said, the manager is not in right now, and besides, the Yankees are very popular with our audience. People seem to enjoy the games, and we are happy they are on our station."

"Get those ball games off the radio!" There came a string of oaths. "If I have to, I'll take my gun and shoot my way into your station and put a stop---once and for all---to you and your baseball games!"

At that point, I hung up on the caller, and mulled over the unsettling conversation. Was it a crank call or was the guy really intending to take a gun and open fire on the radio station?

We had an arrangement with the Tuscumbia Police for special nighttime protection for our station, which was a converted Victorian gingerbread two-story house located in an older, settled part of town, with plenty of street lights and sidewalks. (We were only about a block from the famed Helen Keller birthplace.) It was usual for us to call the dispatcher with special information for the police and the desk officer often gave us police-related news tips. It was a handy relationship that benefitted both us and the police department.

I rang-up the dispatcher about the call. He said they would keep a special watch on our

place, and not to worry. Even though I had dealt with phoned-in threats before without anything happening, there was something about *this* guy's voice that set me on edge.

In the meantime the ballgame had ended and the music show went on. I delivered a newscast, opened the next program and started a record.

All at once, there it was---a hunger pang. At that moment, the telephone light started blinking. On the line was the welcome voice of my friend Don, the first time I had talked with him since the Auburn trip.

"John, buddy!" he drawled, "here's the deal . . . I've got this big date going tonight---a really hot little number. First time I've been out with this chick and she wants to see what the radio station looks like. Okay to come by?"

"You bet! And while you're at it, how about dropping by a hamburger place and bringing me a burger and fries?"

Don said he wouldn't take long, and to leave the front door unlocked. We had used this arrangement before.

It was just as the last hour of the music show was starting when it happened.

BLAM! CRASH! Gunshots! Someone was shooting at the back of the building!

KA-BOOM! BANG! A salvo of bullets tore through the engineering space behind me, zinging past the equipment racks and into the control room! A picture on the far wall shattered and fell to the floor. I gaped wide-eyed at a perfectly-rounded, half-inch hole that suddenly appeared in the glass picture window between master control and the next studio. A puff of sound-proofing material hung in midair directly over my head. Horrified, I realized I was almost directly in the gunman's line of fire! Diving for the floor, I grabbed a phonograph record and held it over my head as a makeshift shield. Frantic, I scuttled out into the hallway, trying to put additional walls between me and whoever the madman was in the backyard.

CRASH! Another round of gunfire exploded out back! In the control room, the record turntable played on, its bouncy, popular tune adding incongruous, cheerful notes to the mayhem. With the studio microphones turned off, the radio audience, of course, had no inkling of what was happening at the broadcasting station.

BAM! SMASH! The sound of breaking glass announced a new fusillade of gunshots as more bullets whanged through the back door!

Then there was a break in the bedlam. I scurried across the hallway into the programming office and hunched underneath a bay window. Peeping over the sill, I spotted in the outside shadows a stocky, dark-haired individual holding a pistol in his hand, loping around the side of the converted Victorian house. The fellow was looking straight ahead, unaware that I was watching him.

THUMP! SCRAPE! A commotion broke out at the front of the house! Muffled shouts and sounds of a struggle came from the porch. Hunkered-down, hugging the hallway wall, I crept toward the front lobby and peered around a door frame into the entry foyer. Through the glassed front door, I observed a heavysset, middle-aged man in a policeman's uniform pointing his service revolver at a cowering youth who had his hands upraised. A torn paper bag lay at the captive's feet.

"Now I've got you!" the officer exulted. "You're under arrest! We've been looking for you! I've got the evidence right here!" He motioned his pistol at the ripped-open bag whose contents were scattered all over the porch. The florid-faced lawman glared at his prisoner. The officer had arrested my friend Don! My hamburger was also under arrest as evidence!

I tapped on the glass to get the officer's attention, and stepped outside. In a few moments, we

had everything straightened out. The officer sheepishly explained that when "this suspicious character" had walked up the sidewalk with a "dangerous-looking bag" in his hand, he had naturally assumed it was the suspect about whom the dispatcher had warned him to be on the lookout! With apologies, the patrolman tipped his hat to leave.

"Wait! What about the gunman at the rear?"

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In a hurry I told the policeman about the threatening phone message and the shooter at the back of the building.

"No foolin'!" He again pulled out his pistol and waved it with importance. "Let's go and see."

The three of us slipped around the side of the old house to the rear. No one was there; the grounds were deserted. Evidently the gunman had heard the scuffle on the front porch and cleared out. After a quick look-around that revealed some tell-tale flattened blades of grass in the dew, but no other clues, we made our way back to the front sidewalk.

"Is this the radio station?" called a feminine voice from a car parked at the curb.

Don gave a start and hustled to his vehicle. In a few moments, an attractive brunette appeared at my friend's side. "I---I want you to meet Millie," he stammered. The officer tipped his hat, and I nodded.

The girl looked at me. "Is this part of your radio program?"

My radio program!

Omigosh! In all the uproar, I had completely forgotten about the record on the turntable! Vaulting back up the front steps two-at-a-time, I dashed down the corridor toward the control room. Was the record still playing? Was the equipment still working? Were we still on the air? *How would I ever explain all this to the boss?* With my heart in my throat I flung open the door with the "NO ADMITTANCE" sign on it and bounded into the control room. To my relief, the big turntable was just finishing the last cut on the album. Gasping, I dropped into the seat at the console. A quick scan-around revealed that, incredibly, were still broadcasting---the studio equipment racks and the main control board were still intact and operating. There was a noticeable odor of gunpowder in the room and an odd brown hue hung in the air. The telephone indicator board was a solid bank of blinking red lights.

Still breathless, I started the next song. Fortunately, just before all the excitement had begun, I had cued the next record on the other turntable. It was titled, *"I Don't Want to Set the World On Fire!"*