

# **THE UNDERGROUND TRAIL**

Clifford Goodrich

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FRED FISHER's lanky frame humped wearily as he climbed the creaking stairs of the old hotel. He had no thought of danger, no thought of any kind, in fact, except the tired conviction that the man he intended to see probably would refuse to talk.

Ordinarily, Fred Fisher was cheerful and optimistic; but the events of the last three weeks had robbed him of all that.

And all because he could find no one who would talk.

Some cases are tough, others are tougher, Fred Fisher had been told when he'd joined the F. B. I. The corners of Fisher's mouth drew down bitterly. The guy who'd told him that hadn't known the half of it.

It was bad enough to work on a case when you actually knew that a crime had been committed. But then you at least had something to work on. This time there wasn't even that much to go on. There was nothing but rumors, vague and elusive, but still insistent enough that they couldn't be ignored.

Those rumors said extortion was being practiced on a large number of people, a particularly dirty, vicious type of extortion. Sums running high into the thousands were reported to have been paid. There had even been a name or so mentioned, names of a few who purportedly had been victims.

Fred Fisher had cailed on those who had been named. He had learned exactly nothing. No one would talk, no one would even admit there had been any attempt to extort money. That might have ended it except for one thing. For Fisher knew they had been lying!

Without exception every man he had questioned: had shown fear, a blind, seemingly unreasoning fear. A fear that had sealed lips as tightly as death.

The Federal agent swore softly. He reached the top of the stairs, turned down a dimly lighted hallway. Perhaps this time it would be different. At least this man had volunteered information, had written and asked that an F. B. I. agent call on him.

"But no one who lives in a dump like this could be a target for extortion," Fisher reflected gloomily, "I'll bet he either knows nothing, or has changed his mind and won't talk."

A frown creased his high forehead. The letter received at F. B. I. headquarters had asked for an agent to call at Room 402 at the Flannery Hotel, at 8 p. m. He was standing before Room 402; it was 8 p. m., but no light came from the old-fashioned transom over the door. There was no sound.

For just a moment a thin chill of premonition gripped Fred Fisher. Then he shrugged. If he was getting to the part where he imagined things, it was time he quit the case and let someone else take over.

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More as a matter of habit than anything else, he reached out, tried the doorknob. It turned silently in his hand and the door moved open.

Fred Fisher's eyes narrowed. The premonition of a moment before returned to raise the hair on the nape of his neck. For long seconds he stood motionless, ears strained.

Dimly, so faintly that he thought it might be his imagination, came a sound like that of a man breathing, Fred Fisher's hand flashed under his coat, came out with a .38 held firmly in his fist. His other hand crept around the edge of the door, fumbled for the light switch, found it.

For an instant more he hesitated, long legs tensed for a spring. Then he pressed the switch down.

The blast came immediately!

FRED FISHER was conscious only of a gigantic rush of air. His tall, lanky frame was picked up and hurled back across the hallway to crash hard into the opposite side. He went down, stunned, his ears ringing. Plaster and other debris fell about him. The entire building seemed to be shaking.

When he could get to his feet, he pulled out a flashlight and plunged into the wrecked room. After one glance he wished he hadn't been so hasty.

Parts of a human body were splattered all over the place.

The hotel had been quiet. It wasn't quiet now. Women were screaming and men were shouting. From a distance came the sound of a police-car siren.

Fred Fisher tried not to be sick, and went on with his investigation. He was still pawing through the crimson-splattered debris when the police arrived. Reporters and photographers were not far behind them.

Detective Sergeant Burns, head of the homicide squad, looked inquiringly at Fisher, raising thick eyebrows. "Give!" he said shortly.

Fisher's shoulders shrugged. "His name was Herman Grean, aged about fifty," he said calmly.

Burns' scowl deepened. "That's not what I want to know," he growled.

Fisher's expression did not change. "He was gagged and tied to a chair in the bathroom. Dynamite was placed under the chair and wired to go off when the light switch was turned on. He couldn't yell a warning; so he got blown all to hell."

A slow flush crept up Burns' heavy face. Rumbling sounds came from his throat. "You Federal agents! Smart guys! Try to keep information from the cops make their job harder. I suppose you were just walking by, happened to see this particular door, opened it and blew Grean up. You know what I want. What were you doing here? What was it you were after that caused somebody to make a human bomb outta this punk?"

Fisher remained silent so long that a newspaperman snickered. The flush deepened on Burns' face.

"We got a note from Grean saying he had something to tell us," the Fed said finally. "What it was all about, I don't know." His lips came together firmly.

Detective Sergeant Burns snorted angrily. He barked orders at the fingerprint men and police photographers.

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Fred Fisher stepped back. He sympathized with Burns' show of anger, knew the other had a right to be peeved. But to tell the case he was working on, what he had hoped to learn from Grean, would do no good. It would make newspaper headlines of just the wrong type. "Extortioner's bomb silences witness," those headlines would read.

That probably was just what the extortionist hoped for. The fear that Fisher already knew existed would be doubled. There would be less chance than ever of getting any one to talk.

Fisher moved unobtrusively toward the door. Burns did not notice. Quickly, the government man stepped outside, started down the corridor. Then he stopped and swore softly. A reporter barred his path.

"It couldn't be that Fred Fisher is working on that rumored extortion case, could it?" the other asked cockily.

Fisher's eyes narrowed. He knew the reporter, knew that Eddie Robbins had a reputation for being shrewd and of always getting his story. For just a moment he hesitated. A thin grin split Robbins' homely features his short, stocky frame seemed to rock with hidden mirth.

"You're entitled to your guess, Robbins," Fisher said coldly. He shouldered the reporter aside roughly. "But keep out of my way."

Robbins' expression was hard as he watched the Fed vanish down the stairway. Then his eyes narrowed, he turned, slipped after the other.

Fisher knew he had made a mistake being rough with Robbins. It did no good to be antagonistic toward the press. But he'd felt he had to relieve his feelings on someone.

His face was strained as he thought again of the scene in the blast-wrecked room, of the horrible death that had overtaken Herman Grean.

The explosion itself must have been almost merciful. Grean had not suffered then. But he must have undergone the agonies of the damned waiting for that death.

It was easy enough to picture what had happened. The extortionist had learned Grean was going to talk. He had surprised the other, rigged up the death trap.

Then had come the agony for Grean. The man must have died a hundred times mentally. Tied, unable to move; gagged, unable to yell; knowing he was seated over dynamite that when Fisher came in and turned on the light that he was doomed.

The killer had been fiendishly clever, Fisher thought bitterly. He even had seated Grean in such a way that it was unlikely that the person turning on the light, setting off the dynamite, would be harmed. And Grean's death would act as a warning if anyone else felt inclined to talk.

But the killer might have erred at that, Fisher thought grimly.

HE WENT to his car, got in, turned north toward Long Island. For even if Grean was dead, there should be one man still alive who knew his secret. And that man, the Federal agent reflected savagely, was not going to get away with keeping his mouth shut.

Grean had been investigated as a matter of course when his letter had come in. It had been easy to learn what little there was to know. Grean had worked for Hall Murtha, the importer, for more than thirty years. He had

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no relatives, no family at all. He lived in a cheap hotel. A silent, dour man, he had few friends, no close friend at all unless it had been Murtha.

Fred Fisher frowned slightly as he wheeled his car rapidly through traffic, crossed a bridge and sped out on Long Island. He wished he had investigated Murtha further. But there might still be time to learn what he wanted to know. He stopped at a cigar store and made a telephone call. Deep in thought, he did not notice the small car that kept on his tail when he resumed his trip.

Thirty minutes later he turned into the driveway to Murtha's home. Water lapped the shore of the Sound, a hundred yards away. A cool breeze whipped through the trees. Once the estate must have been beautiful. It still was, in a way, but it had been allowed to run down.

Fisher's eyes were calculating as he noticed the absence of all light in the big house. It was still early in the evening, far from bedtime.

He slammed the car door, strode toward the porch. Then he froze! A dim figure had materialized from behind a tree. The hard nose of a gun had been jammed into the small of his back!

For the space of a heartbeat, Fred Fisher stood perfectly still. Then he moved. He spun with lightning speed, elbow bent. The elbow struck the gun, knocked it aside. In the same instant his other hand flashed out, grabbing the assailant's revolver.

There was a brief struggle. Fisher stepped back, the other's gun in his fist. "Hold it, fellow! What's it all about?" he snapped.

A long, pent-up sigh came from the other. "I . . . I made a mistake," the man fumbled. "I . . . I thought you were someone else."

"I'm Fred Fisher of the F. B. I.," the government agent rasped. "And you?"

"Hall Murtha. This is my place." The man's voice was weary. "What was it you wished of me?"

"Let's go inside. We'll talk there."

Fisher's eyes were narrowed as he followed the other into the house. Murtha's small frame sagged, his face was lined. Silently, he led the Fed into a study.

For nearly a minute Fisher sat without saying a word. Then he leaned forward, put Murtha's gun on the table between them, said casually, "Herman Grean died tonight."

Murth tried to show surprise. He wasn't a very good actor. "G-Grean murdered! H-how terrible!"

"How did you know he was murdered?" Fisher snapped. "I did not say that, I merely said he had died."

The exporter's hands opened and closed. He darted a nervous glance toward the gun on the table. "W-why, I naturally assumed that. Y-you're an officer, so "

"You already knew," Fisher interrupted. "And you were outside with a gun, waiting for someone to call here. Was it someone you feared, some enemy, possibly the man who killed Grean? Or did you know I was on my way here? Was I really the one you were after?"

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Perspiration came in tiny drops on Murtha's forehead. He licked dry lips. "I . . . I can't tell you," he croaked.

"I think you were waiting for the murderer," Fisher said quietly. "I think that murderer is an extortionist, one to whom you may have been paying large sums of money."

Murtha's expression cleared, he laughed shortly. "And I think you're having pipe dreams," he rasped.

"Either that, or you are the slayer and extortionist yourself," Fisher went on calmly. "I am willing to bet you haven't an alibi for your time tonight. You live here alone, and "

THE SHARP ring from a telephone stopped him. A queer, strained look was in Murtha's eyes. Automatically, the exporter reached for the phone. "F—for you," he said thickly.

Fisher took the receiver, listened for a moment. "Thank you," he said. He hung up, started to turn. "Now, Murtha, it is time for you to talk," he started. His voice was hard. "I've learned "

His voice ceased, his jaw dropped.

Murtha had grabbed the gun! He stood halfway across the room, a look of almost maniacal fury on his features.

Mentally Fisher cursed himself. He had been so sure that the exporter was frightened and harmless that he'd been careless for a moment.

And there was no mistaking the spot he was in. The other was ready to shoot! If he could only keep talking, could manage to edge his way close enough for a spring. If he didn't

Deliberately he kept his voice low and calm. "You're making a mistake, Murtha," he said.

"Don't move! Don't move or I'll shoot." The exporter's tones were shrill. He almost shrieked the words.

Fisher's muscles tensed. Evidently he was going to be given no opportunity to spar for time, no chance to try to talk reason into the other. Yet he knew, even then, that he stood no chance, that he could neither get his own gun out and shoot or overpower the other in time to save himself.

"I don't want to do this," Murtha raved on. His eyes were wild. "I don't like to kill, but there is no other way. I've got to stop you."

Fisher's shoulders rose and fell. "I can take it, Murtha. But remember they burn you in this State for murder."

Murtha laughed, almost hysterically. "Burn me! They will have to catch me first. And do you suppose I worry about being burned?"

The Fed started to reply. Then his jaws clamped. There had been a sound, a faint ticking sound at one of the windows in the study, for just an instant he thought he had seen a face peering through that window the face of a man he knew.

Murtha heard the sound also. His back was partly toward the window. Fisher leaned forward, hand ready to shoot toward his holstered gun. The exporter wouldn't be human if he didn't try to move so he could see what was going on behind him. There might be a chance then

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Murtha did move. He leaped sideways with surprising speed. But he didn't take his eyes from Fisher, the hand holding the gun never wavered.

"There's a man out there, Murtha," Fisher said calmly. "A newspaperman, Eddie Robbins. He knew I was working on a case and must have followed me here. He has seen what is going on. He would be a witness against you. Now you know it would be suicide to shoot."

For a fleeting second Fisher thought he had won, thought sanity would return to the exporter. Perhaps he would have won. But everything happened at once!

Eddie Robbins swung a club, smashed out a windowpane. The look of indecision left Hall Murtha's face.

Just as the importer pulled the trigger of his gun, Fred Fisher went forward in a long, sweeping tackle, his lean frame completely off the floor.

Perhaps that was all that saved his life then, that and the fact that Murtha had been startled by the breaking window.

The gun cracked harshly. Then a blow like that of a sledge hammer crashed on top of Fisher's head. His tall, lanky frame was limp as he smashed to the floor.

FRED FISHER felt sure his skull was fractured. Or perhaps someone was just driving rivets into it, a lot of rivets with a lot of hammers.

That was all he knew at first. Then he tried to move, to sit up and discovered he was tied hand and foot, tied so tightly that the ropes were cutting off circulation.

For several minutes he didn't even have ambition enough to struggle. It wasn't until his nose caught a faint burning odor that his eyes opened. Then he wished he had kept them shut.

He was still in the study, pulled back toward one wall. His eyes were on a level with the floor. He could see the object in the center of that floor without difficulty. In fact it was too easy to see, too easy to understand why he could smell something burning.

Four sticks of dynamite were there. A burning fuse was attached to them.

Now Fred Fisher really knew how Herman Grean had felt while waiting for death. And the killer was playing true to form; he had killed with dynamite once and was using it again.

A muffled groan came from across the room. Fisher's head came up with a start. Painfully, he managed to focus his eyes. Then he understood.

Alongside of him, a few feet away, was a short, bulky figure, also tied hand and foot. There was a bruise over Eddie Robbins' left eye. Perspiration stood out on the reporter's heavy face. His habitual look of belligerency had been replaced by one of fear.

Robbins looked up as he heard Fisher stir. He tried to grin, but it wasn't much of a grin.

"At least I've got company on the last ride," he croaked.



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For a moment Fisher didn't reply. Sight of the reporter had somehow seemed to clear his head. He started thinking again and grunted disgustedly.

He'd been ready to give up without a fight. That wouldn't do. And it really shouldn't be so tough. All that was necessary was to roll across the floor and put out the burning fuse with his body.

Fisher tried it. He rolled just one foot. Then he found the killer had thought of that, also. A rope around his middle bound him to a door.

"I . . . I tried that t-too," Robbins panted. "It didn't w-work. B-but don't give up. We've still got a chance."

Fisher wondered how. It was sometime before he could twist himself into position to see what Robbins was doing.

Somehow, he had worked a knife out of his pocket, had got the blade open. Now the reporter was trying to keep the knife firm between his feet, while he sawed against the ropes around his wrists.

Fisher shot a quick glance at the burning fuse. It was shorter, much shorter. Robbins wasn't going to be given much longer. In spite of himself, a cold chill swept his lanky frame. He remembered the splattered remains of Herman Grean. Going out in a dynamite blast was a messy way to die.

He tried the ropes around his own wrists. There was no hope there. Square knots, sailor knots, were cinched so tightly there was no give in the rope at all.

The smell of the burning fuse seemed stronger Robbins had abandoned all pretense of calmness now. His movements were frenzied, frantic.

Fisher's lips came together in a tight line. Death was only seconds away! But if he was doomed, he would at least show he could take it with out fear.

A choked cry of triumph came from Robbins. The ropes fell away from his wrists. Instantly, the reporter slashed his feet free, cut the rope that bound him to a second door. Then he dived to the middle of the room, grabbed the dynamite.

One step carried him to the now open windows of the study. He hurled the sticks of dynamite through those windows.

A terrific blast followed almost immediately, a blast that rocked the house.

"HE WAS too fast for me," Robbins explained ruefully as he cut Fisher free. "I didn't have a gun on me, and I thought if I busted in, one or the other of us could get him. Instead he almost killed you, then he slugged me over the head. When I came to, both of us were tied up."

"Was Murtha still here," Fisher asked quietly.

Robbins shook his head, his stubby fingers massaged the Federal agent's wrists, helped to restart circulation. "No, but he must have just left. The fuse on the dynamite had just been lighted. A minute or so later I heard a boat start up on the Sound. I think he got away by water."

Fisher nodded, got to his feet with difficulty. His head still ached. A quick check showed him his gun was still in its holster.

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Robbins was looking at him curiously. "And now don't you think I deserve to know what it was all about? After all, what I really want is a story."

Again Fisher nodded "And you'll get it! You, yourself, mentioned an extortion case; so you must have heard some of the same rumors we did."

"Right!"

Fisher went to the open windows, looked out. Then he got out his flashlight and jumped to the ground outside. The ground was hard; it was difficult to make out tracks.

"It was a particularly dirty, vicious type of extortion," Fisher explained, and his voice went hard. "A type that left the victims terrified, not for themselves, but for others and for others that we could not help."

"I don't understand," Robbins said slowly.

Fisher did not answer for a moment. He gave a low whistle. The sweeping beam of his flashlight had picked out the spot where the exploding dynamite had landed. It had struck almost at the top of an old-fashioned well. The force of the blast had caved the well in.

"You've heard of people being in concentration camps abroad, haven't you?" he asked harshly.

"Yes, but "

"This is how the extortionist worked. Through an underground trail, this crook would learn the names of people who had been put in those concentration camps, would learn of it long before word reached relatives here.

"Then this fiend would contact those relatives, would threaten what had already occurred concentration camps and possibly death unless his demands were met. He would represent himself as an agent of the foreign government responsible, with power either to imprison or release."

Robbins' breath came in, "Well, I'll be And naturally, his victims fearing for the safety of their loved ones, would pay up and were afraid to talk."

"You've got it," Fisher rasped. "He must have cleaned up hundreds of thousands. The game could go on and on. After the victim learned his relatives were in a concentration camp after all, he would even be milked for more on the promise of getting them out."

"And it would hinge beautifully with Murtha's set-up," Robbins said excitedly. "As an exporter and importer, he could have ways of getting information out of Europe long before anyone else knew anything about it. And, of course, his entire plot would depend on getting information by an underground trail. But who would ever have suspected Murtha? Boy, you're good."

"You're right, except on one point," Fisher said quietly.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Murtha wasn't the extortionist!" Fisher snapped.

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FOR A long moment there was no sound except the soft splash of water from the Sound, the murmur of the breeze through the trees.

Eddie Robbins stood as if stunned, his stocky body rigid, legs widespread.

"B—but, I don't understand," the reporter gasped.

"I think you do, Robbins," Fisher said, and his voice was low and deadly sudden. His gun flashed to his hand, "For you see, you are the extortioner. You, as a newspaperman, had even a better chance of getting underground information than did Murtha."

Robbins swallowed hard, his head jerked up. For a moment he looked incredulous, then he laughed suddenly. "And I thought you were smart," he jeered. "Do you think I would have tried to blow myself up if I was guilty?"

"You didn't, Robbins," Fisher said. "That was one reason I know I've got you. My wrists were bound tightly with square knots sailor's knots. You were once a sailor, Murtha never was, therefore, you tied me. And you weren't tied tightly. You could have freed your hands at any time."

Robbins' eyes narrowed slightly, but his voice retained its jeer. "You're nutty, as any good lawyer could prove."

"What really happened tonight was this," Fisher went on unconcernedly. "Herman Grean learned his employer was being forced to pay out huge sums of money. Grean was going to talk, to tell what little he knew. Probably he told Murtha that. Murtha, terrified, must have passed the word on to you. You did the rest."

"You could never prove that," Robbins sneered.

"It wouldn't be necessary," Fisher snapped.

Robbins' jaw dropped.

"You had a hunch I was going to talk to Murtha, so you trailed me, after first telephoning him, warning him not to talk. I think he actually thought you were on your way to kill him also, at first. Then, when I did show up, he thought it would be just as perilous to talk to me. He feared for his family, you see.

"I didn't know about that family until after I got here. Until then, I thought Murtha might really be guilty. Then I got a telephone call, telling me that Murtha was not a United States citizen and that his family had gone abroad months ago and never returned. I could understand his fear, and had I been able to reason with him, things might have turned out differently, but he was beyond reason."

"A fine fairy story."

"No fairy story. You were listening outside the window; then you saw a chance to hang the whole thing on Murtha. Probably you were wondering how to get out, to kill all suspicion that an extortionist still was at work.

"You saw me go down. Then you killed Murtha."

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Eddie Robbins' breath came in sharply. For the first time his eyes showed fear. He glared into the beam of the flashlight.

"You rigged up that fake scene in the study, so you could even have me to swear you were innocent that Murtha must be guilty. But having framed him, you couldn't leave him alive; you had to kill him."

Robbins fists clenched, his big shoulder hunched forward. "Yeah? Very pretty. Except for one thing. Murtha did run away. I'll bet you'll never find him. And until you do, the story you've just told will never stand up in court."

"But you yourself told me where his body is," Fisher rasped, and a thin grin split his lean features.

"I . . . I what?"

"You couldn't take much time to dispose of the body. What better place than this old well. You dumped him there. And then you made the dynamite scene in the study serve a double purpose. You threw that dynamite directly into the well, figuring the explosion could hide all traces of your crime, that the body would remain undiscovered forever. Even at the last, you took the underground trail."

Robbins' eyes were those of a caged animal.

"We'll find the bullet in Murtha's body came from the gun you said you didn't have the gun you've got hidden beneath your shirt," Fisher ended softly.

A roar came from Robbins. Desperately he threw himself sideways, his hand tugging at his shirt. The butt of a gun came into view.

Fisher's face was calm. Deliberately he squeezed the trigger of his weapon.

The flashlight popped from his hand. His bullet went wild.

Robbins had seen and taken the only chance he had. There wasn't time to get his gun out before Fisher fired. One hand had swept up a heavy piece of rock, blown there by the dynamite blast. He had hurled that rock even as Fisher had shot. The shot went wild.

Fisher swore softly, leaped forward. He tripped, went down. That saved his life. Lead blasted over his head!

The Federal agent sighed, fired three times in rapid succession directly at the flashes of Robbins' gun. It wasn't pleasant to kill, but an extortionist isn't pleasant either. And Fisher was remembering Herman Grean's poor, splattered form,

Fisher was firing upward from the ground. Robbins died as he had lived by the underground trail.