



Illustrated by BURNS

By ROBERT BLOCH

CRIME MACHINE

*For that real deep-down badness,
nothing beats the Good Old Days.*

“LET HIM alone,” said Stephen’s father. “It’s a phase they all go through. He’ll snap out of it.”

Stephen didn’t really believe he was ever going to snap out of it, but he was grateful that his folks let him alone. He wasn’t worried what they thought, just as long as they allowed him to watch the viddies.

Because his father was rich and connected with the university labs, Stephen had his own viddie set. While his parents indulged their normal tastes and watched the adult mush on the wall downstairs, Stephen stayed in his room and his own world.

It was a wonderful world for

any thirteen-year-old — the world called the Good Old Days. There were all kinds of viddie shows about the golden pioneer era of seventy-five years ago, the marvelous time when heroes like Dion O'Bannion and Hymie Weiss walked the Earth.

Stephen watched a show called *Big Jim* — about Big Jim Colosimo and his lovable friends. He watched *The Enforcer*; that was the one about Frank Nitti. He was a man of action, like the heroes of *Johnny Torrio* and *Legs Diamond*. The *Legs Diamond* show was very exciting, because Legs was the one who always danced his way around the bullets in a gang war. That was how he got his name.

Stephen learned a lot about the people who had lived in the romantic past. He knew about flashy gambling men like fancy Arnold Rothstein, who was so suave, and wild rascals like Bugs Moran. There was a new show out called *The Great Dillinger*, and that was pretty good. But the best of all was Stephen's favorite — *Scarface Al*. No wonder it was right up there on top with all the kids; its hero was Scarface Al Capone, the Robin Hood of Chicago, who took from the rich and gave to the poor.

Lots of times Stephen found himself humming the theme song, which went:

*Al Capone, Al Capone,
A mighty man who
walked alone —
Wherever daring deeds
are known,
Men sing the praise of
Al Capone.*

Stephen liked the way the machine guns came in on the end of the last line.

But then he liked everything about Al Capone; the way he got his scar — defending his sister from the crooked prohibition agents; the way he disguised himself as "Mr. Brown" when he was fighting the wicked cops and the thieving politicians of Chicago. Stephen knew all about Al Capone, riding in from his hide-out in Cicero to bring justice to Chicago and save pretty girls from the evil Vice Squad men.

Stephen joined the "Scarface Al Club" and ate enough cereal to get himself the complete prize outfit — the artificial scar to wear, the bulletproof vest and everything.

He might have been a very happy boy if he hadn't found his uncle's subjectivity reactor.

IT WAS a big machine, resembling nothing quite so much as the genetic control, which his uncle had also invented. The genetic control was a large box in which a woman could sit and

be bombarded by radiations which would eradicate recessive and undesirable traits in her ova, thus leading to the reproduction of healthy offspring. This apparatus, marketed under the popular name of "Heir Conditioner," was an immediate success because it was a failure. Nothing really happened, but the woman who used it felt better; in that respect it resembled a face cream and had the additional advantage of being much more expensive.

The machine which Stephen found — the subjectivity reactor — was a failure because it was a success. Not an immediate failure, for it was never manufactured or marketed, but a gradual failure. His uncle had devised it while still a young man, many years ago, and it too was a large box which contained a variety of mechanisms. Under their stimulus, the subject became capable of materializing, in tangible three-dimensional form, his immediate thought patterns.

The gradual failure came about because his uncle had experimented upon himself, and pretty soon his home was overflowing with tangible three-dimensional forms to which his wife objected; most particularly to the redheads.

Consequently the subjectivity reactor was carted off to the storage building behind the uni-

versity labs where Stephen's uncle and father both worked, and no one ever mentioned that it was also capable, by virtue of the same principle of materializing thought, of acting as a time machine.

Stephen himself found it out by accident one day when he was playing around, exploring the deserted warehouse premises. He noticed the boxlike apparatus and crawled inside, pretending for the moment that he was a hero like Pretty-Boy Floyd, hiding out from the dirty old Feds. He didn't pay much attention to the blinking lights and whirling mirrors which became self-activating the moment he stepped inside and closed the door; he was wishing he had a gat to protect himself in case that arch-fiend J. Edgar Hoover showed up. He'd show him!

"All right, copper — you asked for it." And he'd reach in his pocket and pull out his gat, like this, and —

Stephen felt the weight before he saw it. And then he *did* pull his hand out of his pocket and he was holding a gat. A real roscoe, a genuine equalizer. Stephen stared at it, his thoughts whirling faster than the mirrors.

The gun — where did it come from? He'd just thought about it and it was here; how could that be? Actually, he hadn't even



thought, just wished. The way he wished he had been around back in the Good Old Days, the way he was wishing now. He'd give anything to see real live American History in the making, like that morning of St. Valentine's Day in the garage on Clark Street . . .

THE MIRRORS revved faster and suddenly they disappeared. Everything disappeared.

It was like a viddie dissolve, so Stephen wasn't frightened. He knew the next scene would come up right after the commercial. Only this wasn't viddie and there was no commercial. The next scene came up when the blurring stopped and he found himself sitting in the same box, the mirrors still whirring and he heard the noise outside. Stephen blinked, tugged at the door of



the compartment, opened it, and saw the machine guns spit.

He knew where he was now. He'd seen it a dozen times on viddie, imagined it a thousand more. The garage, at eleven o'clock in the morning; the two executioners disguised in the uniforms of the hated police were mowing down the seven finks.

Stephen, in the subjectivity reactor, had materialized at the

very instant the firing started. For thirty seconds Stephen stared at the finks as they writhed and fell. And during those thirty seconds the finks became men. Men who wriggled and flopped after the bullets struck, until the two swarthy hoods in uniform stepped up and completed their work with revolvers. There was blood on the wall and floor, and a terrible, acrid odor. The two men noticed it, too, and commented harshly in Italian. One of them laughed and spat on the floor.

Stephen wasn't laughing and he felt that unless he got out of here right away he'd do more than spit. He started to close the door and it was then that the executioners looked up and saw him.

"What the hell —" said the short one, and raised his revolver. His taller companion slapped it out of his hand.

"Wait," he said. He stooped, picked up the machine gun, and faced Stephen in the doorway of the compartment "Awright, kid, how you get in here? Where you come from?" He raised the muzzle of his weapon. "C'mon, talk!"

Stephen talked. It was hard to, with the choking in his throat as he watched the machine gun muzzle that was like a cruel mouth — almost as cruel as the mouth of the man who held it.

It was hard to explain, too, and he wasn't sure he understood the situation himself. Certainly the shorter assassin didn't understand, because he nudged his companion and said, "He's nuts! Hurry up and give it to him — we gotta get outa here!"

The big man with the machine gun shook his head. "Shaddup and listen. Dincha hear? This thing goes through time. It's a time machine. Aincha never heard?"

"Porko Dio! No such thing —"

"No such thing now." The big man nodded. "But maybe they invent it later on. That's where this kid comes from. How else you figure he got here if not like that?"

"So?"

"So you wanna get outa here, right?"

"Sure, to St. Louis. That's where Al said we'd get the pay-off —"

"You know what kinda payoff we end up with." The big man made a nasty noise in his throat. "But suppose we *really* get out. Suppose we go back with the kid here."

He took a step forward. "Aw-right, kid, whaddya say?" He stared at Stephen.

STEPHEN stared back, into his face and the face of his companion. Here was his chance to

take two real live gangsters back into his own world, his own time. It was something he'd always dreamed of. Only he had never dreamed they really looked and talked like this. And he had never dreamed the reality he glimpsed over their shoulders; the torn, huddled, oozing reality on the garage floor. Now he knew all there was to know about the Good Old Days.

The big man raised his weapon. "Hurry up! We ain't got all day. Whaddya say?"

Stephen knew he himself didn't have all day, or even another minute. Fortunately, thanks to the viddies, he knew what to say and how to say it. His hand squeezed the trigger inside his coat pocket. First the small man went down and then the big man.

As the big man fell there was a short, staccato burst from the machine gun. Several bullets punctured the shell of the compartment. But by this time Stephen had slammed the door of the subjectivity reactor and hurled himself to the floor in quivering panic, wishing with all his being that he was back where he belonged . . .

He might have had a hard time explaining the presence of the gat if he hadn't wished so strongly that it would disappear. As it was, he emerged from the subjectivity reactor completely

unscathed. To all intents and appearances, Stephen was unchanged by his experience.

The thing of it was that from then on he never watched Scar-face Al any more.

"He's growing up," his mother said proudly.

"What did I tell you?" his father said. "I knew he'd get over it. All it takes is time."

When he said, "All it takes is time," he suddenly remembered Stephen's visit to the old storage building. That night he made a trip there himself to confirm his suspicions.

And there, as he expected, he found the subjectivity reactor — and the telltale impressions left by the machine-gun bullets.

Funny thing, they didn't penetrate with half the force of the old Colt .45a. Stephen's father stopped until he found the holes near the bottom of the machine. Stephen's father remembered the day those shots had been fired.

Sometime he'd have to tell Stephen. Tell him how it was when he was a boy, when the machine had first been invented. Like father, like son.

Stephen's father gazed at the Colt bullet holes and smiled reminiscently. He too had had his viddie heroes in his youth. Only his personal favorite happened to be the real 1870 Wyatt Earp.

— ROBERT BLOCH

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