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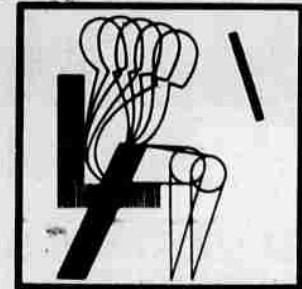
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First he was acclaimed for his bravery
at a disastrous fire, then some said he was a bold liar!
Here is the story of a "little guy's" search for justice

They Called Me a Hero—

LOTS OF PEOPLE dream of becoming a hero. I had the dream come true, and it turned out to be a nightmare.

I went from being a hero to heel and back to hero again. This is how it happened.

My uncle and I spent the evening of Dec. 15, 1962, with friends. It was past midnight when we started home in my ancient car. As we approached an intersection near the California state capitol in Sacramento, a woman driver passed us in a burst of speed.

I could see she wasn't going to stop at the intersection ahead, where the light was blinking red. Approaching on the cross street was a huge oil tanker.

The two vehicles collided in the center of the street in a crash of grinding steel and splintered glass. By reflex I slammed on my brakes. My uncle and I jumped out.

Seconds later we heard an explosion. I saw the truck driver frantically struggling to get out of the crumpled cab. From the car came the scream of a woman. Then silence. It was the last sound she ever made.

The truck driver jumped to the street and started running. Flames leaped from his clothes. The more he ran, the more the flames spread. He pawed at them with his hands without doing much good. I ran after him.

I overtook the driver and wrestled him to the street. Without thinking, I began beating out the fire on his shirt with my bare hands. It didn't hurt at the time. He kept yelling, "Help me, help me!"

Meanwhile, the explosion had sent showers of burning gasoline down on two nearby apartments. Later I learned that 8,750 gallons had erupted like a flame thrower.

I slapped again at the flames on the driver's clothing as he twisted in agony, but I was afraid to slap too hard. Burned flesh hung from his hands.

I got him to roll in the street. I had to roll him away from the truck because the fire kept moving toward us. Somehow I got him across the street, and he lay down in a puddle of water. That put out the rest of the fire.

His name is James R. Moore. He lay near death for months in a hospital, but recovered.

Next I looked up and saw the burning apartments. There are people sleeping in there! I thought.

Frankly, I was a little panicky by then, but I kicked in the front door of one apartment. There was a Chinese man inside, half asleep. I remember he was wearing funny-looking shorts with polka dots. This was to become an important detail in my story.

"Get out—fast!" I yelled. He hurried out the rear door. I ran back down the front steps and raced around the corner. As I ran, I knocked on doors hoping to alert the tenants. There wasn't time to go inside. Some of the doors were already wrapped in oil-dripping flames.

Then I fell down in the street. I think that was how I got burned, and here is an odd thing: the flames never touched me! The heat alone was intense enough to burn my skin.

I saw Moore still lying in the street. I led him down to

some railroad tracks, away from spreading flames. By now fire trucks and ambulances were there. Police loaded Moore into one ambulance and me into another. At County Hospital I was treated for deep burns on my right arm from the wrist nearly to the shoulder. Then I went home.

Next day the newspapers headlined: "Heroism of Passing Driver Cheats Death"; "Jobless Cannery Worker Hero of Fire"; and "Betti Named as Hero at Fiery Collision."

That week the city council voted me \$200 and a certificate for bravery. The money sure came in handy because I hadn't worked since the canning season, and I have three kids. Then the Safety Council announced it was considering me for its Valor Award. There was talk of putting me up for the coveted Carnegie Medal. I was feeling pretty good. I felt even better when an official told me the city would give me a job.

But the wheels of good fortune suddenly spun in reverse. I got a telephone call from police headquarters.

"We want to talk to you, Mario," said the officer. "Come on down here." I thought he just wanted a report.

But at headquarters I was taken into a room and questioned for several hours. One of the officers said bluntly:

"I've been checking up on that fire, Mario, and your story sounds fishy. We have witnesses who say that they never saw you near the scene."

"I don't know what you mean," I said. "Of course I was there. Ask the truck driver. Look at my arm, my burns." Suddenly I was scared, even though I was telling the truth.

The officer glanced at my bandaged arm indifferently. "The hospital reports say that burn could have been made by a sun lamp," he said. "Come clean, Mario. Why did you accept that money from the city for being a hero?"

Over and over, I protested that my story was the truth. I felt I was getting the third degree. Finally, they let me go home—"But we'll be seeing you again soon!" one said.

NEXT DAY the newspapers carried headlines of a different type. I was angry and bewildered when I saw: "New Report Casts Doubt on Betti's Role in Crash-Fire" and "Conflicting Reports Reopen Probe of Fatal Crash."

Then one night my wife said: "Mario, the police want to see you again. They came here—to the house!" Then she burst into tears. Watching her, I finally got mad. Why should I get pushed around? Why should my family take this? What had I done wrong?

I had heard of Anthony Scalora, a Sacramento criminal lawyer. I couldn't afford Scalora's fee, but I guessed right when I went to him. He has often helped the underdog, and he listened to my story sympathetically, then issued a statement to the press. "I am serving notice on the police: either charge Betti or leave him alone."

After that, the police questioning stopped. Several weeks passed, but the clouds of distrust still hung over my head.

"Hey, Mario, are you a hero or a bum?" one guy yelled at me on the street. A neighbor asked: "Have they arrested you yet?" Then I went to a city official to ask about the job that I had been promised.

A gasoline fire killed one woman, injured a man—and led Mario Betti (center in photo below) to the lie detector. George Harman (left) conducted the test. Reporter Dick Pollard (right) helped clear Betti.



Then a Heel

By **MARIO
BETTI**
as told to
Dick Pollard

"Oh, you're that guy in the fire," he said. "No, I'm afraid we don't have an opening."

I feared I would live out my life under suspicion—of what? But Scalora never let up in his efforts to clear my name. One day he telephoned me:

"I hired a private detective to check your story," he said. "He has found the Chinese man whose door you broke down. And he talked to other witnesses at the scene. Mario, your story checks out in every way!"

But so what? The world still didn't know I was telling the truth. I pleaded with Scalora to arrange a lie-detector test for me. "I want to stand or fall on the results," I said. He agreed.

SCALORA contacted Dick Pollard, my collaborator on this story and a staff writer for *The Sacramento Union*. Pollard and his editor, William R. Conlin, agreed, in their words, "that Betti should have his day in court."

Pollard arranged for a polygraph examination by the nationally known experts, Reid & Associates (see *FAMILY WEEKLY*, Dec. 2, 1962). George Harman was to conduct the test in San Francisco.

When the day arrived, I was a case of nerves. Sure, I was innocent of any wrongdoing, but would the test show it? Pollard reassured me as we drove to the city.

"Just relax, Mario, and tell the truth again when they start the test," he said. "Everything will be all right."

Nevertheless, my hands were moist and my mouth dry as Harman connected the wires of the mysterious machine and attached the blood-pressure bands. The questioning began. At first, Harman asked a lot of questions that had nothing to do with the fire. Suddenly he shot at me:

"Did you help the truck driver at the fire?"

"Yes," I said. I tried not to watch the needle which travels smoothly when a person is telling the truth but wavers at a lie. Did it waver? I couldn't be sure.

More questions, about my past life, my family, how long I had lived in Sacramento—and questions about the fire.

At last the ordeal was over. Pollard and Harman consulted in another room, leaving me alone with my fears. I was so confused by events I even had doubts about myself! Finally the two walked out, and Harman said: "You were telling the truth about the fire in every detail."

All I wanted to do was to get home and tell my family.

The Union carried the results of the lie test on the front page. The district attorney's office and police announced the following day their investigations were "closed." I was given a job by a friendly restaurant manager. Then came the Safety Council's citation:

"Man of Valor Award . . . to Mario Betti," it read. "For outstanding heroism at the scene of a disastrous fire."

Said *The Union*: "In our land, justice must prevail for the individual . . . he deserves the earnest concern of those who look after the preservation of our liberties."

Not that I want to be known as a hero. I just want to be a man who can hold his head up. Thanks to an attorney and a newspaper, I can.



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