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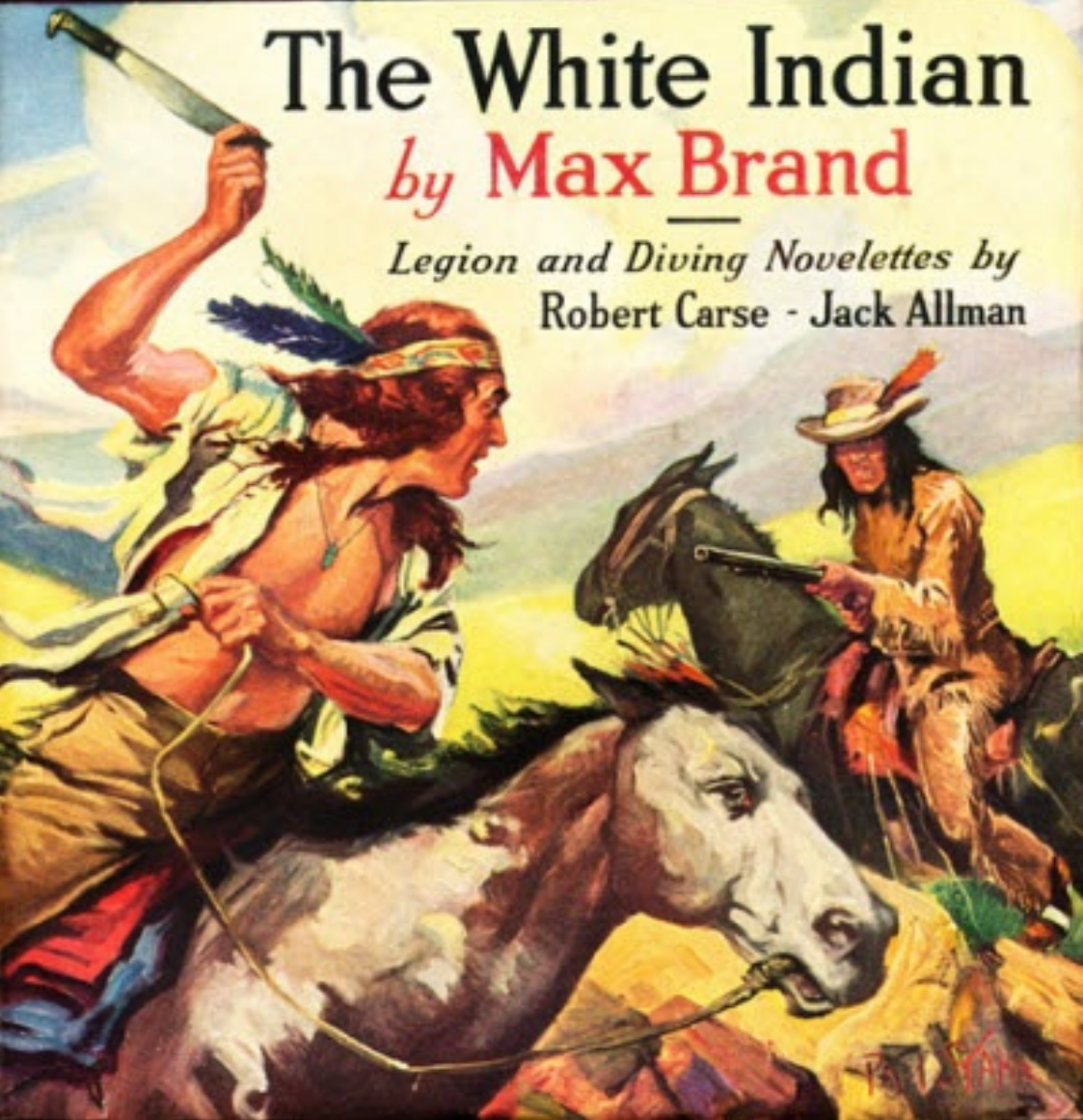
ARGOSY

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WEEKLY

The White Indian *by* Max Brand

Legion and Diving Novelettes by
Robert Carse - Jack Allman



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Hot Goods

Ray Cummings

First published *Argosy Weekly*, September 9, 1933.



“You can’t get away with it,” Leroy said

It was crook against crook when Pete Leroy met Basker—with the devil after both of them

Pete Leroy had the theory that crooks were the easiest suckers of all to swindle. And it gave him a thrill when this fellow Basker tackled him. Basker was a confidence man, but not a very smart one. That was obvious. It hurt Leroy’s pride a little that Basker should pick him for a sucker; but it only showed that Basker was a poor judge of character, which is a fatal defect in a confidence man.

Leroy had sized up the situation within a few minutes after Basker—half an hour ago—began to work on him. Leroy, through long experience, knew all the tricks of the trade. Basker was using the “rush-touch” method; all in a breathless hurry; a great emergency which forced Basker to make a sacrifice and gave Leroy a chance to profit.

“It’s your chance,” Basker was saying earnestly. “I’m going out to Topeka to get married. I’m forty-five, but that’s not too late to get married, is it? The ring’s my present to her. I couldn’t afford it, but I bought it for her anyway. You know how that is—an’ now my kid brother’s in a jam. Wild boy—always in a jam, but this is serious. Here’s the telegram I just got from his lawyer. He needs bail—an’ a little

cash for bribery money. You know how that is. I just got to sell you this ring—got to telegraph the cash back to New York the next time this train stops. Now listen—”

They were sitting in Leroy’s compartment of a fast transcontinental train, heading west over the plains of Kansas. It was about ten o’clock at night. Leroy shared the compartment with George Snell, his partner. They were traveling to Topeka on a special job—a little blackmail affair which had been pending a long time. Snell was in the club car now. Basker, who had boarded the train in the early evening, didn’t know of Snell’s existence. And Snell was waiting now in the club car for the signal to get into action.

Leroy said, “Well, I don’t like to buy things from people I don’t know.” He sat back and looked reluctant but open to argument. He was a young fellow who by his aspect could have been a traveling salesman of the prosperous type. He added:

“You’ve got cash. You said so. How much do you need? How much have you got?” He smiled. “I don’t want to drive too hard a bargain with a man in trouble. In fact, I don’t think I’ll go into this thing at all.”

“You must,” Basker urged. “You can’t let me down. I want you to drive a bargain—that’s all right, it’s your chance. My kid brother’s in jail. You know how that is—”

It was obvious that Basker was lured in the beginning by Leroy’s bankroll. Leroy had bought ginger ale and cigarettes from the porter a while ago, and flashed the roll. That roll was a conceit of Leroy’s to which Snell had always violently objected. But it was genuine money and Leroy got a kick out of showing it. And now it had brought them this sucker. Basker had gone to work on Leroy the minute he saw the roll.

“You know how that is,” Basker was saying.

“Yeah,” said Leroy. “An’ don’t say that any more times. Get down to cases. You said you had a few hundred dollars with you—”

Basker had done more than that. With a show of earnest harassment he had briefly produced a very handsome gray leather wallet, filled with large bills. And it was then that Leroy had interrupted the affair for a minute, hurried into the club car and fixed things up with Snell.

“About six hundred an’ fifty,” Basker said. “That’s all I’ve got. Here—you don’t believe me—look at it.”

Basker was a pretty fair actor. He was a middle-aged, flabby fellow, with seedy clothes, and he needed a shave. And a haircut. His stringy, iron-gray hair was plastered now on his wet and harassed forehead. Certainly he looked the part he

was playing. Leroy judged he was a one-system man, always working this "I'm-in-desperate-trouble" gag.

The wallet was very handsome, and the money in it—twenties, fifties and hundreds—was real money. Leroy prided himself that he was an expert on that. He hated counterfeit money. So did Snell. They avoided it now after several disastrous experiences of the past. And they could spot it a mile away.

Basker's money was real. But the telegram from his kid brother's lawyer was phony. Leroy was a stickler for detail. Basker had given him only a hurried look at the crumpled telegram. He had never thought that Leroy would notice that the date was wrong. But Leroy looked for that at once. The date was more than a week old—and there were several other little things that showed it was merely typed on a telegraph blank.

Leroy said, "Let's take a look at that ring again. I don't think I want to buy any jewelry."

The train was speeding at a good clip, with the wind rushing past the screened but opened windows of the compartment, and with a rhythmic clatter of the rails.

"You got to help me out," Basker said. He shuddered as the train whistled. He added, "That whistle—is that for Careyville?"

"No," said Leroy. "Don't think so. Ten or fifteen minutes yet before we stop."

"You just got to help me," Basker insisted. "I'm going to wire the money at Careyville—we stop there ten minutes. Listen—don't argue—name your price. I'll make any sacrifice within reason."

It struck Leroy that Basker was rather overdoing his show of excited haste. He acted on the verge of panic to sell this ring and wire the money from Careyville. In an hour they would reach Topeka, which would do just as well for the mythical kid brother. That was the trouble with unskillful crooks—they were apt to overdo the rush act.

"How much money you need?" Leroy demanded. "You got six-fifty—how much you want to wire?"

"A grand," Basker said. "Er—that is, I mean, a thousand dollars."

What a bungler! Leroy grinned to himself. An honest man in desperate trouble saying he needed a grand!

Basker tried to cover up the slip; he added hastily, "Listen—look at the ring. I shouldn't have bought it for her—you know how that is. I paid sixteen hundred for it. That stone is three and three-quarter carats!"

Leroy held the ring up to the dim compartment light. It was a very large, very

handsome looking solitaire, platinum mounted. But though Leroy never failed to spot counterfeit money, he was not so sure when it came to jewelry.

“Sixteen hundred,” Basker insisted. “That’s what I give for it. I need to wire a thousand—I got six-fifty. Say you give me five hundred. That leaves me a little over. I don’t want to be broke. You know how that—”

“Maybe,” said Leroy, “but I don’t know much about jewelry.”

He handed the ring back. He pushed the button for the porter. It set Basker into a panic. He shoved the ring into his vest pocket. He leaped to his feet, gripping the wash stand to steady himself as the train lurched. And he gasped:

“What you—what you doing? You not—not going to help me?”

“Ordering ginger ale,” Leroy said, smiling. “Sit down—you’re all excited. I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you.”

“Oh!” It calmed Basker. He sat down and mopped his forehead. “You will buy it?” he said eagerly. “Make it four-fifty. What a chance for you! I swear I paid sixteen hundred. Maybe I’ve got the jeweler’s bill of sale with me.” He began rummaging his pockets. “No, guess I haven’t. I must have thrown it away. You know how—”

There was a rap on the door. Leroy called:

“Come in, George.”

The porter stood in the crooked little companionway.

“Two ginger ales, George.”

“Yassir. Comin’ up in a rush, sir.” His white teeth shone in a field of black. He seemed very pleased with Leroy, in anticipation of the fat tip which would come from this compartment at Topeka. He closed the door.

Leroy sat back again. Leroy himself was in a rush now, but he took care not to show it. Ordering this ginger ale was the signal to Snell. The porter would go to the club car buffet to fill the order. Snell would see him; ask him if the ginger ale was for Compartment B in Lake Torrington car. And then Snell would get into action.

Leroy said, with a show of sudden decision:

“All right, Basker. I’ll go you. It’s taking a chance—honest, I don’t know phony jewelry when I see it. But I think you’re on the level.”

“I am. Of course I am. I paid—s’elp me—sixteen hundred. Listen, let me—”

Leroy raised a hand. “You don’t need to talk any more. I’m slow deciding—an’ then I’m decided. Here’s your money.”

He produced his bankroll. But immediately put it back into his pocket. Some one knocked on the door again. It was the porter with the ginger ale. He fitted the bracket table between the windows, put the ginger ale and glasses on it and took his

money and tip with a grin, and thanks.

“O. K., George,” said Leroy. “Oh, an’, George—how long before we get to Careyville?”

“’Bout ten minutes,” said the porter. “Was pretty late, but we sure is makin’ it up.” He departed.

Now,” said Leroy briskly, as the door closed, “let’s finish this up. Here’s your money. Four-fifty, you said.”

Basker put the ring on the table. Leroy counted out four hundred and fifty dollars in fifties and twenties. He kept his hand on the pile, breathlessly waiting. And then came another knock on the door.

“That fool porter,” Leroy muttered. He called impulsively, “Come on in, George.”

The door opened. The bulky, thick-shouldered figure of Snell loomed in the narrow doorway. His cap was pulled low over his eyes. He slipped into the little compartment and closed the door after him. And snapped its lock with an ominous click.

Leroy gasped. Basker seemed to wilt. Leroy grabbed the ring and Basker grabbed the money. But Snell pounced, not on Leroy, but on Basker, twisting his wrist so that the money fell back onto the table.

“That’s better,” Snell muttered menacingly. “You leave it there, brother—want to have a look at that—an’ a little talk with the two of you.”

“A hold-up!” Leroy gasped. He reached slowly for the bell-button, but Snell said vigorously:

“You better not do that. I guess you birds don’t want any publicity.”

Basker had collapsed on the bench. His face was gray; his teeth chattering.

Leroy said, “Who—who the devil are you? A hold-up? You can’t pull that—can’t get away with it.”

Snell stood towering over them. He showed no weapon, but his bulk, his lowered cap, his leering, confident grin were menacing enough. Snell could look and act like a pretty tough customer when he wanted to—and he was doing just that now.

Basker was completely breathless from fright. Leroy made a show of getting on his feet, but Snell knocked him roughly back.

“You sit where you are,” Snell commanded. “Who’m I? Well, I ain’t a dick or a cop—nothin’ like that. I ain’t an officer of the law at all—nor a hold-up man. In my own Chicago racket, if I told you my name you’d know it, all right.”

Basker just sat staring, pop-eyed. What Leroy gasped neither of the others seemed to hear, so Leroy shut up and gave Snell the floor.

“What I’m doin’ here—” Snell was addressing Leroy now—“I’m trailin’ you. I’m hired right now by a millionaire, Jamison. Know of him? The Jamison case?”

Basker looked suddenly confused. But he knew of the Jamison case, of course. It was nationally famous. A millionaire’s child kidnaped. A large ransom paid; and when the child wasn’t returned, the numbers of the ransom bills were made public. And then the father hired several notorious underworld characters to make further contacts with the kidnapers.

Snell picked up some of the money off the table—the money which Leroy had just paid Basker. He examined the bills triumphantly and dropped them back to the table again.

“Hot money!” he exclaimed. “I knew it! Jamison’s ransom money! So you birds are the Jamison kidnapers, are you? Won’t this be nice for me!”

Snell was flourishing an ugly automatic now. But it was totally unnecessary. Leroy was shrinking back, trembling, and watching Basker. The confusion on Basker’s face turned to horror. And when the kidnaping story sank in, he utterly collapsed. Swindling is a very mild crime compared to kidnaping.

Then Basker found his voice. He mumbled, “No! No! That’s a lie! I’m no kidnaper. Maybe he is—that’s his money. It’s not mine. If it’s hot money I don’t know about that.”

“Shut up!” said Leroy. The train whistled. The brakes went on a little; they were slackening pace for Careyville. Leroy met Snell’s leering, exultant gaze. Leroy said:

“See here—we’ve got money. I stole those bills—I’m not a kidnaper—”

“Well, you can tell that to the police an’ Jamison,” Snell retorted.

Basker wasn’t so dumb. He came suddenly to life. He produced the gray wallet, waved it.

“Listen, this ain’t hot money. It’s mine—good money—six-fifty. You—you take it. Let me get off at Careyville.”

Snell snatched at the wallet and stuffed it into his pocket. “You’ll beat it off the train?”

“Yes! Yes! You let me go,” Basker pleaded. “I’m no kidnaper—I don’t want to be mixed up in the Jamison case. All I want is to get off this train—”

The train was really slackening now. Inwardly Leroy was gloating. They had Basker petrified. The last thing in the world Basker would do was make any commotion. He’d duck off the train at Careyville and run for his life. The train would

go on, bearing Leroy and Snell to Topeka as per schedule. And they would have Basker's diamond ring—phony or not as the case might be—and his assuredly good six hundred and fifty bucks.

The train whistled again. Snell snatched up Leroy's money from the table. He swung his weapon on Leroy.

"You," said Snell, "I'll take you on to Topeka an' turn you over."

"And m-me?" Basker chattered. "I can go now? You'll let me go? You know I ain't a kidnaper—"

"Neither am I," growled Leroy. "He's an ass."

"Oh, yeah?" Snell barely turned. "You can go," he said to Basker. "Not now! Wait till the train stops. Just slip out quietly—"

"Yes. Yes—I'll do that. That's all I want to do."

He stood trembling by the compartment door. Snell kept Leroy covered with his automatic.

The train came to a grinding stop. A conductor was calling, "Careyville! Careyville!" The glow of distant electric signs showed through the compartment's windows.

And in the sudden silence of the motionless train came the sound of a commotion. The tramp of heavy feet in the car corridor; a *mêlée* of passengers' voices; a woman's sharp frightened cry; and a man's voice:

"That's all right, ma'am. We wired ahead for the police. There's a thief aboard."

The corridor outside the compartment suddenly seemed jammed with men. A voice—a heavy official, commanding voice—called:

"Watch those vestibules—don't let anybody out—"

The three occupants of the compartment were all on their feet, transfixed. Leroy saw a new horror on Basker's gray face. Basker stood at the door with a hand on the lock. He clicked the lock open: then he clicked it closed again. Then he swung around, in a panic, mumbling:

"Why—why, what's this? They've got me."

Another voice outside—very close outside their door: "Conductor says he went in here. We'll get him red-handed."

And somebody else called: "Three of 'em in here the porter says. Watch it, sergeant, they might be armed."

The doorknob began rattling. Then some one was pounding heavily on the door.

The three inside looked at each other. Leroy saw that like a fool Snell was in a panic. Snell could look bulky and impressive. He could overawe a cowering victim.

But Snell had an unconquerable fear of police. He was shaking now.

The pounding grew louder. A shoulder was heaving at the little door. But the metal door of a Pullman is not easy to break. A growling voice was saying:

“Open up here—you three—we’ve got you—”

Leroy had jumped for Basker, shaking him. “You damned idiot—d’you steal that ring?”

“Y-yes. Let me go—you—Yes, I stole it—”

“Here on the train?”

“Y-yes. From an old woman, jus’ a little while ago, before we stopped the last time. An’ from a man—two cars ahead—the wallet—I thought—”

The door still held, but it was shivering under the blows. Leroy turned to the window. Everything had happened within a minute. This accursed fool Basker had committed two robberies here on the train—no wonder he wanted to decamp at Careyville. The conductor had kept it quiet—watched and saw that there were two other men here with Basker. From that tank-station stop half an hour ago, word had been sent ahead to the Careyville police.

Leroy, at the window, found the shaking Snell and the even more frightened Basker crowding him. Basker was mumbling:

“You—you’re crooks, too? You’re scared, too? You—you fooled me. I thought ___”

“Shut up,” snarled Leroy; but it was drowned by the outside voice:

“Open up here!” and renewed violence to the door.

It was dark outside the windows. Lighted city streets were a block or so away. Most of the long train was under a station shed; but this car with two or three others stuck out into the darkness beyond the platform. Dark, just at the moment, on this side. Nobody out here. A chance now.

Leroy, in the midst of his whirling thoughts, was ripping the window-screens with his penknife. Feet first, he slid and dropped nimbly to the gravel roadbed. Basker and Snell stuck in the narrow openings, but he pulled them through. Snell turned his ankle; he ran limping and cursing with Leroy and Basker ahead of him.

Leroy led them. They ducked in the darkness close against the Pullmans. They came to the observation platform at the end of the club car. Nobody on it. They rounded it. The other side was brighter. Men were coming this way along the tracks.

“Back!” Leroy whispered. He turned. Then all three ran, with Leroy leading them across the tracks, and they ducked, behind a string of standing freight cars just as the men came around the end of the train.

A declivity was here. They ran down it, jumped a dark ditch. Basker stumbled and Snell fell; but Leroy hauled him up.

“This way,” Leroy whispered. “Run like hell.”

There was so much commotion up at the train that Leroy couldn't tell if they had been discovered or not. The dark freight cars hid them here. Shacks were nearby, all of them dark. There were fences here. Leroy darted into a little alleylike space; and came to a dark street of shacks. Ahead, at a corner with the lighted station a little beyond it, he saw an automobile standing parked, just what they needed. Every one around the station seemed crowding toward the train. There were several parked cars. Leroy ran for a big sedan. Its windows weren't closed. Luck at last! The ignition key was in place.

Basker tumbled in beside him as the motor purred; and Snell crowded in with them.

A clean getaway. There seemed to be no pursuit. Leroy skillfully turned the car, headed it into the city. A big street of electric signs, movie theaters, restaurant and shops, and a trolley car was ahead of them. That wouldn't do. There was a traffic light turning red. If pursuit started, to get caught in a street like that would be fatal. Leroy swung nimbly into a smaller cross-street and hit up a faster pace.

Basker, sweating and panting, was crowding him. Leroy said, “Shove over—give me room.”

Snell, too, moved over a little. Snell was recovering.

“Some class,” he gloated. “This damned fool crook here gettin' us into a jam like that. You got the ring, Pete?”

“Sure have,” chuckled Leroy. “An' you got the wallet—six-fifty. Not a bad haul.”

Leroy swung around another corner. Neither of them bothered with Basker, who sat cowering between them. Leroy saw now how nicely everything was coming out. Head now for Topeka—it couldn't be more than forty or fifty miles. They'd dump Basker off somewhere as soon as they came to a lonely part of the road.

Snell was saying, “Get us out of this fool city, Pete.” And to Basker he growled, “You sit quiet—we're takin' you for a nice little ride.”

It wasn't so easy to get out of the city. Another crowded street loomed ahead. Leroy became aware that there was a queer buzzing here in the darkness of the front seat. Something wrong with the motor?

Leroy's breath suddenly stopped. Right at his knees an eerie, microscopic voice began droning:

“Car X22, proceed to Northwest section, corner Twenty-eighth and Prairie

Avenue. A robbery reported, number 2802 Prairie—”

A radio! This was a police car they had stolen! Leroy very nearly ran into a parked truck. He heard Basker's cry of fright, and a curse from Snell. And then from the dark back seat of the tonneau behind them came another voice; not electrical—a voice real, and alive:

“Sit quiet, you three. Don't make a move—I've got you covered.”

Leroy barely missed a passing vehicle. He jerked at the wheel; he turned his head; the glow of a passing street light revealed a bulky, uniformed figure, seated alertly upright in the back. A policeman! He might have been dozing on the seat when they took the car. He was bareheaded and coatless. The passing light showed his coat rolled up for a pillow in the seat corner. But he was very alert now. He sat with a leveled gun in each hand. The light showed the grin on his face. He had heard the words of the three men on the front seat. He knew they were the crooks from the train.

The street light faded. The tonneau went dark; there was only a gleam on the ugly barrels of the two leveled guns. Leroy saw that the huddling Snell had his automatic on his lap. It clattered to the car floor as Snell's knees shook. Thank the Lord for that. Leroy couldn't imagine a gun-fight starting in this closed car.

He drove mechanically. He couldn't think of anything else to do. Basker and Snell sat tense and silent. The accursed radio droned and buzzed.

The man on the back seat said abruptly:

“We make a left turn here. Not so fast, you idiot.”

Leroy mechanically turned them. The street was fairly full of traffic. Leroy's brain was whirling with a million futile thoughts, but his hands and his feet did the right things like an automaton.

“'Nother left turn—” said the commanding voice.

Leroy made it.

“Easy now—not so fast.”

Leroy's foot came off the accelerator and went to the brake.

The voice said, cheerfully, “Over there on the right. Middle of the block. The two round lights by the steps. We stop there.”

They pulled up at the Careyville Police Station.

THE END.

[The end of *Hot Goods* by Ray Cummings]