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*Gang is safe,
thanks to U.S.*



One day the gang walked into the fruit and vegetable store, stared hard at owner Bernard Brown and told him the way things were:

"We had a meeting on you. We want money."

They didn't have to tell Brown who they were. Their matching berets were the mark of the Black P. Stone gang.

Brown said he'd think about it. They told him there was nothing to think about and said they'd be back.

After they left, Brown's fear turned to anger. Brown, 34, had worked hard, selling produce out of the back of a truck, to buy his own store on E. 43d St. Why should he pay extortion to thugs?

BROWN PHONED THE POLICE and reported the threat. But nobody came out.

A few days later, the gang was back. This time they were blunt:

"We want money. Or you gonna die."

Brown ordered them out of his store and he called the police again. This time an officer came to see him.

The policeman listened to the story and asked: "You have a gun?" "No," Brown said. "You ought to get one."

That was the only help the policeman offered. Maybe it was all he could offer. Extortion and death threats by the black gangs are routine.

Guns aren't hard to get, especially on the South Side. Friends pass them around. Casual acquaintances sell them.

Brown took the policeman's advice. Where he got it, he's not saying. It really doesn't matter.

BUT SOME THING STRANGE then happened. Into his store walked agents of the U.S. Treasury. They had a warrant and they seemed to know exactly what they were looking for.

They went to the back room of the store, looked under Brown's bed and pulled out a sawed-off shotgun.

Under our erratic gun laws, an ordinary shotgun is legal; a sawed-off version is not.

And federal law requires that a sawed-off shotgun be registered with the Treasury Department.

Brown, who has little education, said he didn't know about such things. And he was probably being truthful. Besides, he was more concerned with young men in berets who threaten death. THEY don't have to register with the Treasury.

How did the feds know about a shotgun under a storekeeper's bed? Brown believes that a boy who worked in his store was also a Stone, and tipped off the gang. The gang, in turn, may have tipped off the feds. To protect themselves, of course.

BROWN WAS ARRESTED AND released on bond. And for

several months, nothing happened. He didn't see the gang again. He hoped they had decided to leave him alone.

But extortionists can't be effective if they permit victims to brush them off.

One afternoon, the wind blew Brown's canopy loose. He went outside to fix it.

While his arms were stretched above his head, five bullets tore into his back and legs. As he fell, he saw the berets and recognized one face.

Brown spent 38 days in Michael Reese Hospital, 8 of them in intensive care after the doctors picked the slugs out of his body. But he survived.

He told the police he definitely saw one of the gunmen, a guy called Mack. But the police couldn't find Mack.

Now Brown is out of the fruit and vegetable business. His health was shaky for awhile and he had nobody to mind the store.

BUT THE CASE ISN'T closed. Brown is still fighting. To stay out of jail.

Brown is in federal court, standing trial for not registering the shotgun with which he hoped to defend himself against the Stones.

If he's convicted, Brown could get up to 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Brown believes that if he could tell the jury how he was almost killed, he might receive an understanding verdict.

But the zealous prosecutor, John A. Meyer, has asked the judge to prevent the jury from hearing anything about Brown being threatened and shot. He says it has nothing to do with the case.

Which just proves that the things that occur in the antiseptic atmosphere of a federal courtroom have nothing to do with life on 43d St. and the rest of the real world.

IF JUDGE JOHN F. GRADY agrees with zealous prosecutor Meyer, then Brown is as good as gone.

That would be an interesting chain of events. Brown was probably shot by the Stones. And the Stones might have been responsible for the tip to the federal agents about the shotgun. Now Brown might go to prison.

If that happens, then Mack, who is still on the loose, ought to sleep better, knowing that the federal government is protecting the Stones against dangerous fruit and vegetable peddlers.