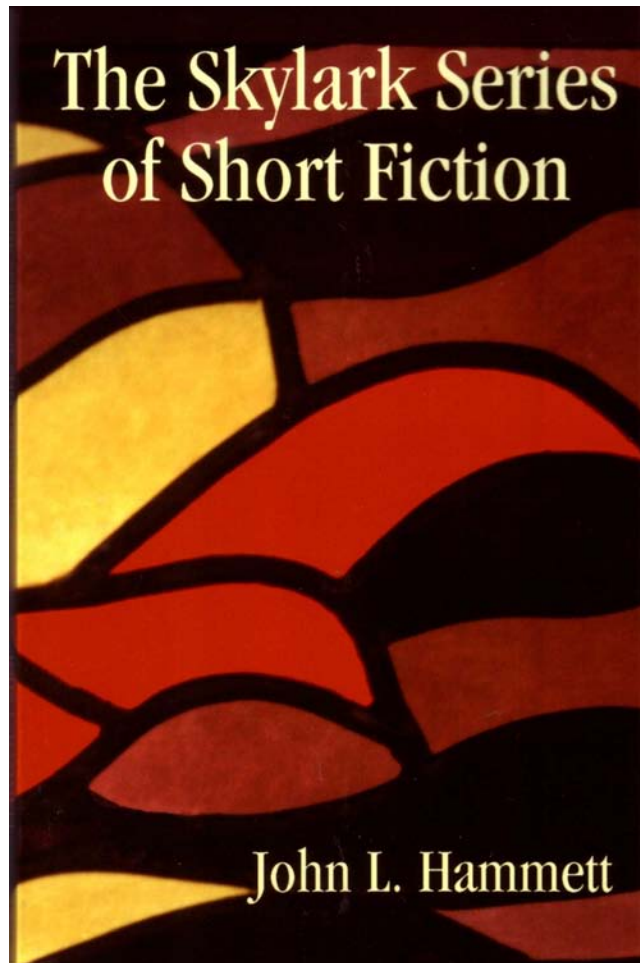


James A. Rock & Co., Publishers
Sampler No. 1:

Selections from: *The Skylark Series of Short Fiction*



John L. "Jack" Hammet passed away in May 2007.

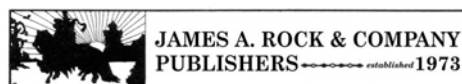
Jack Hammett had been writing plays and stories in the Washington, D.C. area since the 1940s and a number of his plays were performed by local theatre groups since that time, sometimes with Jack in the cast. In recent years he had recast a number of these one act plays as short stories, some of which are collected in the book *The Skylark Series of Short Fiction*

We had envisioned our first sampler as an anthology sampler of selections from several of our books, but now it is a memorial sampler of three fine stories from *The Skylark Series* by John L. Hammett. Enjoy!

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The Death of a "Crook" © 2006, 2007 John L. Hammett
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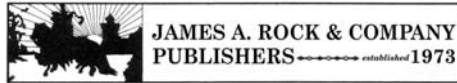
Selections of
The
Skylark Series of
Short Fiction



by
JOHN L. HAMMETT

JAMES A. ROCK & CO., PUBLISHERS
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

The Skylark Series of Short Fiction by John L. Hammett



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*This series of short fiction is
dedicated to my wife*

Dot Hammett

*without whose help it
could not have been
completed.*

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The Assassin

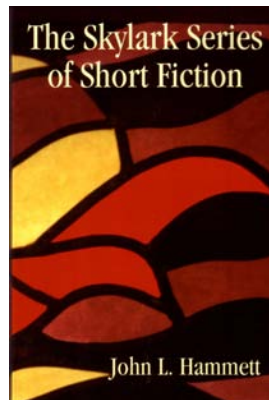


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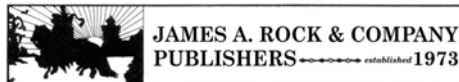
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The Assassin

The tall, white-haired Secret Service chief was moving behind the queue of citizens in their winter clothing, thinking *why* in God's name would the President of the United States put him through this. Christmas open-house at the White House would be an ordeal any year, but with the President's popularity at its lowest point, the cranks, the creeps, and the wackos were coming out of the woodwork.

Threats had been escalating over the past year. Hate mail had tripled. The Secret Service and the FBI investigators couldn't keep up with it. Some of the senders seemed to be *bona-fide* fanatics who provided classic profiles of deranged assassins. Files had been built on them, and the FBI lab was using all of their techniques and facilities to trace such communications and analyze every tangible clue. But, there were too many unresolved threats to give Bealton, the chief of the team guarding the President, any real comfort.

The open-house had gone well so far. The line of holiday well-wishers was strung out from the side entrance and the foyer into the Blue Room where the President and the First

Lady stood in front of a warm fire in an ornate fireplace decorated with festive swags of greenery and poinsettias. Individuals and family groups were taking turns coming forward from the moving line to be greeted by the First Family.

All of these visitors held tickets, having applied months before. Each had been cleared by a computer-search, as well as a cursory background check where warranted. As an added precaution, metal detectors had been installed for the visitors to pass through, and the normal Secret Service contingent had been enlarged.

As always, members of the President's security team hovered in the background, neatly dressed in their business suits and avoiding the ostentatious. Except for the anxious looks on their faces and the "comm" wires running from their collars up behind their ears, they would have been lost in the crowd.

Of course TV crews and their eerily bright lights were also in attendance along with the regular press, adding to the general problems of the security men. These presidential-event regulars had all been cleared routinely, but they often hampered the protective measures of the security team in bizarre efforts to get a *Pulitzer* or an *Emmy* out of the most mundane of photo-ops.

But for now, everything seemed perfectly normal in the orderly line filing through—people laughing joyously and obviously wishing the best for their elected leader. It seemed so harmless that Bealton wondered how any of them could be a hate-filled zealot or malcontent, wanting to destroy this perfect picture—just for his own malice and evil.

Bealton moved down the approaching line until he came up behind Grady, his second-in-command, standing watchfully by the entrance. A heavy-set, pugilistic-featured man, Grady had a perpetual frown on his face from the years of intense service to his country.

Grady's career had not been much different from Bealton's; they had had comparable assignments and service time. But, Grady had fought the bureaucracy, always complaining vociferously, while Bealton had attempted to fix the system wherever and whenever he could. So Bealton became the chief. And, as the chief, he consulted with Grady often, valuing highly the opinions and support of his cynical underling.

"How's our new man doing?" he whispered to Grady, referring to a young agent named Cilinski who had been detailed over that morning from a Treasury assignment.

"He doesn't even look Secret Service. His tie's too noisy."

"He's applied for a permanent transfer."

"You mean he likes this? Sonnavabitch! That proves he's unqualified just on a 'mental stability' level."

"Com'on Grady, except for experience, he's no different from you and me!"

"He talks too much. He doesn't fit the innocuous, ubiquitous posture of the service."

"Sounds like you've been reading the manual again. Remember Cilinski just completed training in June."

"It's that stupid grin. What are they teaching them down at Quantico now? He should look more reserved, more in-charge. So nobody will notice him."

There was a hint of exasperation in the chief's voice as he said, "We need the manpower; you know that, Grady. Let's give Cilinski a chance."

* * *

Grady was the most educated member of the team. Harvard Law School. Nobody knew why he stayed with active security duties long past his youthful assignment. Probably hooked on the excitement. And like his chief, the older you got, the harder it was to settle for a desk.

Part of Grady's job was to coordinate the results of the other outside investigative agencies with the team. He was the one who was briefed on any developing threats or suspected intrigues, and he was responsible for relaying the details of these dangers to the team.

That very morning, Grady had given them a "heads-up" briefing about a major threat being pursued at present, code-named "the Professor." The Professor had all the marks of a dangerous fanatic. His dire threats had been made through the mails; no phone calls. The FBI lab had attempted to trace everything: envelopes, paper, word-processor and printer usage, postage, mail-drops—everything, as far as their science would permit. Amazingly, they found each piece of his correspondence in some way different. The only constant was in the author's learned allusion to history. His threats were couched in terms of historical parallels: Caesar, Archduke Ferdinand, Presidents Lincoln and McKinley, among others.

The Professor's ravings also addressed his own place in History, stating his belief that he alone could change the course of civilization. He trumpeted his assertion of the boon to man-

kind that would result from the assassination of the current President. And, he wrote matter-of-factly of his own death—of his martyrdom to social anarchy as he viewed it, quoting Hegel, Marx, and Lenin.

From the tenor of his threats, the experts considered the Professor mentally unbalanced and very likely to act out his fantasies. His menace was foremost in the minds of Bealton and his team today, because there was evidence that he might have recently arrived in the nation's Capitol.

* * *

“Look at him!” said Grady, motioning toward Cilinski with his elbow backed by an eyeball and arched eyebrow. “Still making friends and influencing people!”

“Grady! His assignment requires some interface with the public.” Bealton turned abruptly and made his way back up the line to where Cilinski was marshalling people through the metal detector.

Smiling in his ingratiating way, Cilinski was occasionally assisting someone with too much change or too many keys ringing the alarm. Other times, he would be holding tourist cameras so the film could be protected while the owners made it through the detector. Or he would briefly pull away from his post to direct victims of the long wait to another Secret Service control spot where they could reach a bathroom—usually a frantic adult besieged by a youngster desperately crossing his knees.

Bealton had to admit that Cilinski appeared to enjoy these duties a little much. But so what if Grady was partly right. Cilinski would have to adjust.

Sidling up behind him, Bealton said in a carefully modulated whisper, "I noticed you chatting up the people in line. Give it a rest, Cilinski. Makes it more difficult to do your job."

"It helps me size up the different individuals, Mr. Bealton."

"Unless you got a suspicion, knock off the chatter."

"Yessir!"

* * *

For the next forty-five minutes, everything continued to go smoothly to Bealton's satisfaction. The end of the line of ticket-holders were finally approaching when Bealton was suddenly motioned over by the President himself.

While continuing to shake hands and exchange greetings with those in line, the President spoke over his shoulder to the big Secret Service man, "The press just told me that a number of people who were watching at home have shown up outside to try and get in on the end of the line."

"We've been telling them they can't get in without a ticket, Sir, but they don't seem to want to go home."

"How long have they been out there?"

"A couple of hours at most, Sir."

"That's no good! I want everybody out there now let through; understand? If they've been waiting in the cold that long, the least I can do is let them file through. But, put an agent at the end of the line to send away any latecomers."

"You don't have to do this, Sir; they were told early on."

For a moment, the President looked as tired as he must have been, but he forced a quick smile to recover. "I'll get the TV crew to announce an official cutoff on the air. That ought to do it, Chief. Just a little longer!"

“Yessir!” said Bealton, moving to implement the President’s orders.

Grady would be livid. This opened the door to too many unknowns. Bealton quickly decided to let Grady pass the word to the rest of the team. Because of his loyalty, Grady’s potential outrage would be nipped into bud while it was still a small nodule of fury.

When the chief reached Grady, he whispered, “Pass the word: the Prez wants to let the crowd waiting outside the fence file through.”

“Sonnabitch! Talk him out of it, Chief.”

“I tried. He says they’ve been standing out there in the cold too long.”

“Sonnabitch! These people are ciphers! They took ordinary and harmless, but we don’t have a clue on them. Not even the minimal names and addresses. Could be anybody!”

“Let’s make them sign in as they come through the entrance. And we’ll check their driver’s licenses—or whatever ‘I-dent’ they got.”

“Does he know what he’s doing to us?”

“He knows!”

“Does he know about current profile threats we suspect could be in this area? Like the Professor?”

“That’s *our* job. He has to trust us. Nothing’s changed. It ain’t easy; we just have to find a way to do it—to protect him—in spite of himself.”

“I wish I could begin to think about retirement. I got enough years.”

The chief knew everything was going to be alright when

Grady began to talk this way. No way would he volunteer to go out to pasture; only something catastrophic could cause that.

“I’ll leave Cilinski on the detector,” said the chief. “That’s a routine he seems capable of handling. And I’ll move most of the men up front so nobody can get near the Prez without our screening and control. Nobody’ll be able to even breathe an insult, much less try to attack him. Anyway,” he added ruefully, “that’s the best we can do for now.”

Grady said *sonnavabitch* again and made a face like he was going to vomit, causing Bealton to fight down an impulse to step back out of the way. But Grady’s countenance went grim instead. “If anybody tries, we’ll get them!” he said.

* * *

In about fifteen minutes, they had started the new crowd outside through, screening them superficially at a register desk first, and then filing them up to the metal detector station where Cilinski waited. The line proceeded with surprising order and dispatch. This group was much like the earlier one, only more anxious, being tired from their long wait.

A few undesirables had joined the crowd: a sloppy drunk who was turned over to the Park Police; a homeless pair who smelled so bad they had to be persuaded by two ten dollar bills to repair to a tavern a few blocks up Pennsylvania Avenue; and a nice-seeming couple who got into a political argument as they got in line and had to be threatened with disorderly charges to dissuade them. Also, there was a standard issue religious fanatic, loaded with tracts that he planned to unload on the First Family. But so far, it was a pretty rou-

tine turnout for this time of the year, with no apparent dangers to the President.

Although it had taken longer than either Bealton or Grady would have liked, there were only a few hundred left when a bearded, thick-bodied, middle-aged man, wearing a heavy overcoat and having a cast on his left leg, appeared in the line approaching Cilinski's station. He was assisted by a sturdy cane but he limped badly in moving along. Cilinski noted with some interest that his cast was ankle-to-knee, similar to what he, himself, had required after an accident the year before. That had been an especially frustrating experience.

When the man was still a short distance away in the line, Cilinski called out to him, "How'd you do it? I fractured mine last year skiing."

"Minor auto accident," said the man with the cast. "Broke a couple bones in the ankle."

"Bad news, isn't it?"

"Hurts like hell!"

"When did it happen?"

"Couple of weeks ago!"

"You're lucky to be out and about already. I was immobilized for three weeks before I even got crutches."

"They put in a plate and pins." The man hesitated somewhat deliberately. "That's not going to screw up your machine is it?"

"I can do a hand-scan," said Cilinski. "Why don't you come on up, while these folks are getting through?"

There were only a few people ahead of the man in the cast waiting to file through the metal detector doorway. He limped

around them using his cane to reach Cilinski at his post. “Let me have your coat,” said Cilinski. This giz isn’t quite as penetrating as the walk-through. He helped the man shed his big overcoat, which the agent immediately put on an adjacent table to run the portable scanner over.

The man in the cast next handed Cilinski his cane, and put up his arms as though for a strip search.

Cilinski studied the cane instead, “Nice workmanship!”

“It belonged to my Grandfather. I never thought I’d get to use it—at least, not this early in life.”

Cilinski ran the portable unit over the man’s body—slowly—covering every inch, with no result until he reached his left leg and cast.

Then the machine rang like a fire engine, startling even the man in the cast, and concentrating everyone’s attention on him.

“It’s the hardware I told you about,” said the man in the cast.

“They’re stainless steel, with plated screws—probably super-reflective. The Doctor warned me to expect an alarm at airports and security checks.”

Looks like he was right. But it shouldn’t give you any trouble, as long as they have the portable wands. And, most of them do, I believe.”

“I’m finished then?”

“You’re all clear. Drop back in line behind that lady with the fur hat and the two children.” Cilinski moved behind the security doorway, while the man stood in front, putting on his coat from the adjacent table. Then, Cilinski deliberately

passed him his cane through the detector. As he expected, there was no alarm. That would be a little too obvious; still, it had to be checked.

As Cilinski pointed him back into the line, the man in the cast said “Thanks” but his eyes stayed on the First Family. The lady in the fur hat was waiting to follow a family of four just ahead of her, shaking hands individually with the President.

Cilinski was surprised to find his mouth suddenly tight and dry. He could feel the adrenaline crackling through his veins. It was as though he knew something was wrong but he didn’t know what. It was weird! How could the man in the cast represent a threat; he had been checked more thoroughly than anybody else in the queue?

He watched as the man and his cane moved hurriedly to catch up with the line. The crowd had moved forward while he was being processed and the family had left, with the woman in the fur hat and the two youngsters now extending their hands toward the President. The man in the cast needed about five more steps to reach the area that the woman was going to vacate and he was making quick awkward strides to accomplish it. The cane was in his left hand alongside the injured leg. He hobbled forward. Cane with cast . . . then, good leg; cane with cast . . . again, the good leg!

As the lady and two children moved on, the President turned with his hand outstretched to welcome the man struggling toward him. And the voice inside Cilinski finally said “It’s wrong; the cane is wrong!”

Cilinski suddenly catapulted forward with a roar from deep in his throat and knocked over the man with the cast just as

he knelt, pushing a spring button concealed in the inside rim of the cast, which fell open to reveal a handgun in a holster strapped to his ankle. A woman in the crowd screamed. Cilinski had him in a headlock as he tried to draw the weapon and Bealton and Grady were on top of the grappling pair before their scuffle could even threaten to become a fight. Still, it took all three of them to subdue the assassin and get him cuffed. It had happened so fast, most of the people in the line didn't have time to be frightened. Most of them weren't really sure what had happened.

As Cilinski took him down, the man in the cast had been yelling "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" Nobody heard him at that moment. When the agents began to grasp what he had said, it came back at them like an echo.

"Always thus for the tyrant!"

"You hear that?" asked Grady.

"I think we got the 'Professor'," said Bealton.

"What Professor?" said Grady. "Cilinski turned that SOB into a tackling dummy! How the hell did you get on to him, Cilinski?"

"When they give you a leg cast, they teach you how to use crutches first; then later, a cane. Right off, everybody tries to put the cane opposite the good leg to substitute for the injured leg. Seems logical. But the cane should go with the uninjured leg. That way you're moving the good leg while you're supported on the cane. And you're moving the bad leg, supported on the good leg. The cane stabilizes you, as well as taking the most weight off the injured leg."

"Suppose you're left-handed," said Grady.

“Makes no nevermind,” said Cilinski with the smallest of smirks. “Apparently, the Professor never learned the right way. His way may have seemed effective enough to him, but that’s not the way the physical therapists teach you to use a cane. I finally realized the Professor was out of step!”

They watched the assassin in handcuffs being dragged out by the Park Police, who had been summoned by other team members.

Turning to go back to his post, Cilinski said with a grin pushing his voice into a high-pitched mimicry of Don Adams in the TV series, *Get Smart*, “The o-o-o-l-l-l-d revolver-in-the-cast trick!”

“I hate a smartass!” said Grady, not bothering to whisper.

“He did save the President’s life,” said the chief.

“Sonnavabitch!” moaned Grady, disconsolately.

“Sonnavabitch! Now, we’ll never get rid of him.

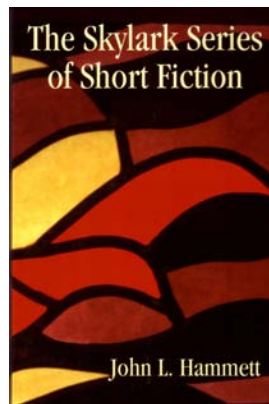
The Death of Blue Willie



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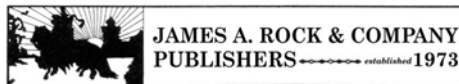
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The Death of Blue Willie

“They’ll be bringing the body of Caleb Sturmby in with the herd, Jedge,” said the taller cowhand named Hank. “Shot once, he was!”

“I’ll have to deputize a couple of men to get him buried,” said the Judge. “Where’s the killer?”

Sam, the other cowhand answered first, “They’ll be bringing him in too, Jedge. He got beat on a little, but he’s in purty good shape!”

The Judge stood, arms stretched out before him, leaning on the carved mahogany bar of his saloon, a ramshackle wooden building in a stand of cottonwoods at the edge of the town. That time of day, the place was empty of regulars. The two saddle-sore cowhands had just arrived, the precursors of a cattle drive on its way to the rail-head at Sante Fe, and had been served drinks by the Judge. After their two-month drought on the trail, with even water rationed, the two cowhands were temporarily in heaven.

The beer the Judge had served in giant schooners was a golden brewed liquid, as frosty as a winter morning with snow

swirling around. It had been cooled in a deep well in the saloon cellar which tapped into an underground stream from a spring high in the mountains on the horizon. The two cowboys seemed almost afraid to imbibe — as though the dripping mugs could suddenly turn into a mirage and fall into dust.

“How was this here Caleb shot?” The Judge’s expression didn’t flicker as he pursued his Marshall’s job.

“Right through the middle!” replied the cowhand named Sam with a laugh. He seemed anxious to take over the conversation.

The Judge’s eyes narrowed and he straightened up, putting his right hand on his hip by brushing open his coat and revealing a long-barreled 44 in its well-oiled holster.

“Didn’t ask thet.”

Sam caught the drift. “Sorry, yore Honor! Jest a little funnin’.” His voice, quavered slightly. “Didn’t mean no harm, Jedge!”

Hank tried to come to Sam’s rescue. “Queer thing though, Jedge; Caleb had a big smile on his face. Musta died happy!”

Despite the bright heat outside, the saloon was gloomy from the shading trees and the accrued grime. The dusty street running laterally from the building had invaded the double doors and the chinks and cracks in the walls, and had left its grit on every chair, table, and fixture. Only the top of the bar, constantly wiped shiny-clean by the Judge, reflected minute rays of sunlight struggling through the dirt-etched windows and around the gaps and openings in the framing and trim.

There was a large sign, placed high over the long mirror

behind the bar, which hailed its proprietor: "JUDGE ROY BEAN—THE LAW WEST OF PECOS."

"Caleb didn't know what hit him, Hank. That's what them boys wot seen it said. He didn't expect Noah to shoot." Sam finished off his schooner in one big gulp and pushed the mug across the bar. "Need another, Jedge."

The Judge didn't move or change expression, "You mean this heah Noah gunned down the victim in cold blood?"

Hank had been slow-tasting every mouthful of the cool nectar at least twice-over before swallowing it. Seeing that another round was coming up, he emptied his glass like Sam, with the foam whitening his moustache. Hank said, "From what they told us, Jedge, it was more complicated than thet!"

The Judge cocked an eye at the two of them. His voice was edgy as he said, "Well, I don't cotten to anything *complicated*. The law's straightforward. Either somebody killed somebody or they didn't! It's as simple as thet!"

"Noah ain't the type to kill nobody, Jedge," said Hank. "He's a Bible-toter!"

"He's the best shot I ever saw," said Sam. "Bible didn't teach him thet!"

The Judge's interest seemed to pick up. "Was this Noah ever a gunfighter'!"

This time, Hank was quicker: "No, no, Jedge! He's only a cavalry soldier turned cowpuncher . . . Uh —" He had to take a deep breath to broach the next question, but his interest in Noah's fate made him do it. "Yure Honor, I mean this respectful-like, but is it true thet they call you the 'Hanging Judge'?"

“I don’t pay no mind to what people call me. I don’t like no gunfighters! And, shootin’ an’ unarmed man is murder. I hang a man for that! Or . . . I kill him ifn’ he’d rather argue about it!”

“Well, them boys said Caleb didn’t have no gun on him when Noah up and shot him. “It was clear Sam had no love for Noah. His tone of voice said the verdict was in.

Hank shook his head at his companion followed by his forefinger, “I don’t believe that, Sam! Noah jess wouldn’t kill a man like thet!”

“Hah!” The Judge knew different. “You never know what an angry man will do. I don’t tolerate any killing, except in a fair fight . . . just like I don’t tolerate no cattle-thieving or horse-stealing! If any of that is proved in my court, the guilty hangs. That’s the law and I uphold the law — chapter and verse.”

“Caleb was allus trying to provoke Noah,” said Hank. “The trail boss hadda warn him to let Noah alone.”

“If you ask me,” said Sam. “It was Noah what wus unfriendly like!”

“It musta been an accident, Jedge,” Hank was still frowning at his friend’s comments. But, the other shook his head in response, “I don’t know whut you’re talking about, Hank. Them boys beat on Noah cause they said he tried to ride off.”

“Noah don’t run from anythin’ or anybody, Sam. He was a soldier!”

The Judge had finally decided to pour them another round, extending his left hand to collect payment as he poured from a pitcher in his right. In spite of the midsummer heat, he wore a black frock coat and a flat, small-brim black stetson.

His narrow gray eyes seemed never to blink, while his grim mouth with its untrimmed beard was all but hidden by a large, handle-bar moustache with curled ends overhanging his face.

“It ’pears to me, neither one a’you boys knows what you’re talking about! I’ll get testimony from them whut seen it — when they gets here. When’s thet?”

Drink in hand, Sam went to the window to peer out, “Trail boss jest rode up, Jedge!” He gulped down most of his refilled glass. “They’s here now!”

The three of them turned toward the doorway and in a minute a squat man, carrying a rifle and a saddle, shouldered his way through the doors, followed by two cowboys who also carried rifles. They pushed a sullen cowhand ahead of them, his wrists tied behind his back.

Their leader dropped the saddle he carried just inside the door. He propped the carbine against the horn of the saddle, and stood blinking in the gloom of the bar. “This here’s Caleb Stumby’s only property,” he announced.

The Judge beckoned them forward, although it quickly became unnecessary. Their faces caked with sweat and dust, they made straight for the bar, licking their cracked lips in anticipation.

The Judge addressed the prisoner, “Are you Noah? . . . You want a drink?”

“We’d like a drink, too, Jedge,” said the trail boss turning to the two men who guarded the prisoner, “wouldn’t we, boys?”

“I allus treat the man to get hung with respect,” The Judge’s voice was brittle. He put a brimming schooner in front of Noah, whose hands were still tied behind his back. “I ain’t no

charity; the rest of you will have to pay.”

“Jedge, you don’t wanna hang me. I ain’t guilty!” Noah looked thirstily at the cold drink he couldn’t reach, but with a certain reserve. “I don’t drink al-ky-hol no more, Jedge, but I’d shore appreciate a dipper of well-water.”

The Judge motioned to the two guards who still held their carbines with one hand, while holding Noah’s arms with the other. “Untie him, boys; ain’t nowhere he can run to. This here’s probably the end of the road for him, so it don’t matter none whether it’s a bullet or a rope.” Opening his coat slightly, the Judge again put his hand on the handle of his six-gun.

“You, Noah, go down that ladder under the trapdoor there in the corner;” the Judge pointed. “You’ll find the coldest water this side of them mountains. Just don’t get any ideas about avoiding trial; escaping prisoners are chased down and shot in my district.”

The Judge shifted Noah’s beer over to the trail boss and set out more mugs for the others, pouring their drinks in rapid, smooth motions. “That’ll be two-bits apiece, boys!”

The new arrivals weren’t as hesitant about indulging their giant thirst as Hank and Sam had been. Before the second guard had been served, the trail boss pushed his already empty glass forward, “I gotta have another, Jedge. My mouth’s still too dry to spit.” He turned to his men, first one side and then the other, “How about it, men? My treat!”

They all reacted predictably to his offer, “Yessir-r-e-e-e!” . . . “Can’t turn thet down.” . . . “I’ll drink to thet!”

The Judge obliged, pouring drinks all round and collecting from the trail boss, while he continued the conversation.

“Well . . . it don’t take much talk to make a ruling on a man what kills an unarmed man, even a Bible-thumper.”

By the time the Judge was finished, Noah had come back up the ladder with a big tin dipper of water, which he brought over to the bar after closing the trapdoor.

“That’s some kind a well, Judge. I never tasted better water. That’s a gift straight from the Lord.”

The Judge turned to Noah, “You ain’t here to preach, Noah. These boys tell me Caleb Stumby’s dead. You claim to be innocent. If you ain’t guilty, then who is?”

Before Noah could answer, the Judge suddenly placed a six-shooter on the bar from somewhere underneath. From the same place, he brought out a battered bible and placed it alongside the gun. Picking up the revolver, he spun the cylinder and shook out the bullets, catching them with his other hand and dropping the collection in the side pocket of his black coat.

“Hair-trigger on this.” He regripped the gun by its barrel and banged the wooden butt-handle on the bar like a gavel. “This here 2nd District Court of the U-u-nighted States Territory of Texas is now in session. Judge Roy Bean presiding!”

He banged the gun-gavel twice again, “Everybody raise your right hand!” With ceremony, he placed the gun on the bible, pointing toward the group in front of the bar. When each had found his right hand and raised it, the Judge said, “Do you boys swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothin’ but, so help you God?”

There was a chorus of, “Yep!” . . . “We do!” . . . “I do!” which became a confused babble.

“This here now is the murder trial of Caleb Stumby!” intoned the Judge. Looking directly at Noah, “How d’ya plead? Guilty or Not-Guilty?”

Noah responded with more fervor than anger, “Not Guilty! . . . by damn and be damned!”

The Judge was instantly irate, “The accused is reminded he’s in the U.S. Court and no profanity is allowed. It don’t help your case none either.” He glared at Noah and banged his six-shooter gavel again for emphasis.

Now that he stood accused, Noah found it impossible to be silent; his voice was loud, but a flat monotone. “Judge, I killed in the war ‘cause they did it in the Bible, but it’s wrong to kill otherwise. I didn’t—”

Judge Bean was not going to allow any change in procedure in his court. He banged the gun-butt gavel loudly until Noah was silent. “The defendant will shut the hell up!” He paused with obvious pleasure in the power he held, “Awright! Who’s gonna testify first?”

The trail boss spoke up before anybody else could volunteer, “Me, I guess, Judge. I was running this here drive and I should a seen it coming, Caleb and Noah that is! . . . I wasn’t in camp when it finally happened. We had bedded down the herd for the night and I was out checking the boys riding the perimeter. I heard two shots that sounded like they came from the camp and I galloped back in. The campfire was blazing and blowing sparks, and the boys had hogtied Noah. Caleb was a’laying there right where he fell, his head by the hot coffee pot sitting on a stone at the edge of the fire. T’was a wonder he didn’t fall in the fire — hair was singed.”

“I don’t need no educating talk; just get to the point!” said the Judge.

The trail boss gestured at the two cowhands who had been guarding Noah, “These two, Randy and Dilly, were t’only others in camp at the time. They’s the ones beat up on Noah ‘cause they thought he was fixin’ to escape.”

Noah had been shaking his head to deny the details during the trail boss’s account. Now he spoke up in spite of the Judge’s warning. “T’aint so! I warn’t going nowhere. Muh horse, ‘Blue Willie,’ spooked; thet’s all!”

The Judge banged the six-shooter gavel and thundered at Noah, “I told you to shut up! You get to say your piece when the time comes.” Then, he returned to the questioning of the trail boss, “Thet’s all you know?”

“These men was the onliest ones who saw whut happened, Jedge. And, they don’t ‘zackly agree. We sent Hank and Sam on ahead to notify the law, and we kept Noah prisoner for the rest of the drive, ‘til we could get here and turn him over.” He hesitated as though deep in his own thoughts, “Noah and me been on many a cattle drive together; I juss want him to have a fair trial.”

The Judge’s back was up at the implication, “I’m Marshall and District Judge for these parts, Mistuh! That a problem for you?”

“No, no! I didn’t mean nothing, Jedge.” The trail boss’ surprise was obvious. “I know a Judge has to uphold the law; that’s all any man could want for.”

“All I need is some truthful witnesses, and you’ll get your fair trial. The only trouble comes when somebody decides to lie to me.”

The trail boss seemed somehow relieved, “Randy and Dilly saw it, Judge. They’s the onliest ones can tell you what happened . . . except for Noah, a’course.”

The Judge looked over the two latecomers, “Which one of you boys is Randy?”

A smiley, freckle-faced youth, who looked about seventeen, raised his glass, “I’m Randy, Judge.”

“I’ll bet you are.” The Judge laughed for the first time, enjoying his own joke. Then he addressed the other cowboy, “You must be Dilly?”

“Names Dilyard, Judge. Everybody calls me Dilly!”

“Shore wouldn’t let them call me that! . . . Well, you start off, Dilly. You tell me what you saw. And, keep it nice and simple!”

As soon as Dilly opened his mouth, it became obvious that, after the long cattle drive, he was starved to hear the sound of his own voice, as well as dying to have somebody listen to him.

“It was a dark night, Judge, no moon. We wus laz’in’ round the fire ‘fore hittin’ the bedrolls. Cookie had closed down the chuck wagon but he left us a pot a’coffee. We wus telling some tales — jess Caleb and me, and Randy — uh . . . talking ’bout them gals back in Abilene. Wellsir, Caleb allowed as how there was somethin’ wrong with Noah, ‘cause he didn’t go up to Blossom’s place, where all them gals was, with the rest of us. Well, I tells him that Noah believes in the Bible, and he don’t lay with no women ‘cause that’s what the Bible tells him don’t do. And Caleb, he laughs like I jess told him the funniest joke in the whole world.”

The Judge had begun gritting his teeth, “Get to the point, Dilly.”

“Yessir, Jedge. Well, Caleb walks around the fire to his bedroll and pulls this flour sack out, kind a careful like, and he brings it over and puts it on the ground right in front of me and Randy. Then, he begins pokin’ around with a stick and somethin’ starts bumping up in that sack up until he gets it held down and damned if he don’t reach in that sack and pull out a rattler. Got holt of him right behind the head where all he can do is lash his tail around.”

The Judge’s voice hummed with his impatience, “Done that myself. Ain’t nothin’ to it if you get his head held down proper so’s he can’t strike you. Get on with it, Dilly.”

“Yessir, Jedge.” He took a deep breath. “Wellsir, I didn’t say nothin’ cause I knowed Caleb’s jess trying to get a rise outa us, but Randy — he says, ‘Where the hell d’you get that?’ And Caleb says, like he’s spent most his life herding snakes, ‘Oh, I run up on him this afternoon and thought he might come in handy. Nothin’ll make a man come outa his bedroll faster’n finding a snake a’sucking on his toes!’ “

“I said, ‘You try that on me, Caleb, and the snake will get the second bullet.’” Caleb laughed ag’in like what I said made it even funnier, and he says, ‘I kin find out how religious this heah Noah is; them true believers think snakes can’t hurt them, ‘cause the Bible says, “Ye shall handle serpents without harm come to Ye!’” Caleb was really a’laughin’ by now, having trouble finishin’ by sayin’, ‘I’ll jess hand him this here snake!’”

The trail boss chimed in as Dilly took a deep breath, “Caleb seemed to like trouble, Jedge. He was a good worker when

there was work to do, but he was always agitatin' somethin' when there was nothin' to do. I wus gonna let him go after we sold the cattle in Sante Fe."

Randy, who hadn't made his opinion known yet, took the opportunity to defend Caleb. "He just liked to show off a little, Judge. If you didn't pay him no mind, he soon got tired. I don't think he meant no harm."

By now, the Judge was really impatient with the trial's progress. "Dilly, you're taking too damn long to tell this here tale. Truth's gotta be simpler than that, son. Let's hear the rest from Randy." He motioned for Randy to pick up where Dilly had left off.

"Yessir, Judge. " Randy was a little confused at first, but he soon began to enjoy the sound of his voice, too.

"'Bout thet time, with Caleb still a holdin' thet snake, Noah came riding back in on Blue Willie, with his Bible in one hand and his rifle in t'other. I guess he'd been off meditat'in' — he seemed to do a lot a that. Well, right off Caleb got to joshing him 'bout handing him thet snake, and Noah said somethin' like, 'Put thet there snake down on the ground thar' by the fire so I kin kill it gentle-like, 'cause I don't want nobody to get hurt."

Randy was really enjoying telling his version by now, with the Judge getting more and more restless by the second, scratching his beard like it was harboring lice or buzzing with fleas. Noticing the Judge peering at him through slitted eyelids, Randy tried to pick up the pace.

"When Caleb starts telling Noah 'bout the Bible a'saying thet a snake can't hurt a true believer none, you can easy see

how scared Noah is of the snake! 'Course, that jest eggs Caleb on all the more, him being the joker he is, and he breaks into his big laugh and acts like he's gonna throw that rattler up in the air and right on top of Noah and Blue Willie. Noah got so scared thinkin' Caleb was ready to do it that his eyeballs bugged out like they was gonna roll right off his chin."

The Judge couldn't stand it any longer, "Damn it, boy; you 'bout as bad as Dilly! Get to whut happened!"

"Yessir, Jedge! Well, by now, the snake itself had stopped wrigglin' — like it was a'gittin' ready to make thet jump onto Noah by itself. And Noah had gone rigid in the saddle a'waitin', when, suddenly, Caleb made his move like he really was gonna pitch thet snake over on top of Noah. Just as quick though, Noah's rifle came up — with a sound like he had took a deep breath — and Noah shot the head clean off that snake as neat as cuttin' off a chaw with a Bowie knife. His second bullet blew Caleb to 'Kingdom Come!'"

The Judge exhaled in relief, "Eh, doggies! Finally! You boys shore rode around the barn a few times to locate the door. Well, it sounds cut and dried to me. Maybe Caleb shouldn'ta been fooling around Noah with no snake, but that ain't cause to shoot him dead."

Noah by now was bursting to tell his story, "Wait, Jedge; wait! It didn't happen like that!"

"Well, I guess you got a right to have your say, Noah." Despite his words, the Judge sounded reluctant to let the trial drag on. "Let's just get to the point. If it ain't been told right, how do you recollect it happening?"

"Anybody got half a brain is wary of snakes, Jedge. I sure

as hell am. I saw my brother bit by a rattler when I was just a shaver. He had grabbed some corn pone give to me by a neighbor, and run off — with me screaming after him. He didn't see the snake. I saw it, but I was so all-fired mad at him stealing my pone that I didn't tell him. The snake clamped onto his arm right by the armpit, and his whole arm swelled up and turned black as a hound's nose. First he howled like a hurt pup for about an hour. Then, he went quiet like he might doze off, and pretty soon, he started in to shivering."

"Our Pappy wanted to hit him in the head — to put him outa his misery, but my Momma wouldn't let him. Took that boy 'til sunup to finish dying." Noah shook his head with the memory, as though to dislodge it. "Ugly, it wus."

Everybody had fallen silent with Noah's recitation, even the Judge. Finally, Noah spoke in a hushed voice, "Them serpents in the Bible wus different from these here rattlesnakes of round-about. I know first-hand these varmints kills people; I saw it happen. So, I don't argue about snake treatment. I kill 'em first and look 'em over later. I believe in the Bible, but I don't believe in no snake-handlin'."

The Judge cleared his throat, "I don't like snakes myself, but that's no cause to kill a man."

"Jedge, I didn't shoot the man; I shot the snake."

"I don't plan to hang you for the dead snake, Noah. It's for your second shot what killed Caleb."

The trail boss thought he might put in a word for Noah, "Your honor, Jedge, could I say something?"

"Did you witness something you ain't told me could be evidence in this case?" The Judge's tone was downright un-

friendly. It set the trail boss back a bit. “Well, no, I didn’t Jedge. It’s jess that I thought —”

“Then, the answer is — No! I don’t want no outside opinions. You kin jess . . . Shutup!” The Judge turned back to Noah, “Why ‘dya fire that second shot, Noah?”

“I *didn’t* fire thet shot, Jedge. When Caleb first started in with thet snake, I quick turned my horse, Blue Willie, so’s he couldn’t see it and get spooked. He was used to gunfire cause I got him in the war, but he shore hated snakes. Thet first shot didn’t scare Blue Willie, but it made him turn his head to see what was going on. When he saw thet snake, he jumped a mile, and that repeating rifle of mine went off by itself. That’s the god’s honest truth, your Honor. I had nothing to do with firing that second shot! I wouldn’t a’killed Caleb no matter what!”

“You mean to say you wouldn’t a’killed Caleb Stumby if your horse hadn’t shied?” The Judge’s voice was so emotionless that none of the listeners could guess whether he really believed Noah’s story.

“Nossuh, Jedge! The Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ I had no right to take Caleb’s life, no matter how big a skunk he was.”

“Then, you’re saying the horse did it?”

“Well . . . not really, Jedge. No! No! Blue Willie didn’t mean to do it neither! It’s true he didn’t have much use for Caleb, cause they was both just cantankerous animals whenever they could get away with it, but Blue Willie wouldn’t hurt nobody. On a long cattle drive, there’s not a steadier horse around than Blue Willie. It was an accident, Jedge, and not the horse’s fault. You kin check it out!”

Dilly spoke up quickly to back Noah's cause. "He said it right, Jedge. That's egg-zackly what happened!"

"Except that Noah's second shot was squeezed off while the rifle was still lined up on Caleb!" Randy had to speak up if Dilly was getting back on the witness stand. "How d'ya 'splain that, Noah?"

"When Blue Willie got thet bit in his teeth to take off, I was too busy grabbin' leather to know where my rifle was pointed. It went off with his first jump. Then, Blue Willie quick took off for parts unknown and I was left hanging on, a bouncin' and a flappin'."

"And, you'd kept ridin' if we hadn't caught you, Noah! You wusn't a'coming back!" claimed Randy.

By this time the Judge had picked up his six-shooter gavel by the hand grip like he wus gonna use it. Instead, he banged the barrel sharply on the bar, "Order! . . . Order! . . . Godamn it! That's enough! Who's conductin' this here trial?" He paused to make sure they were all properly chasened. Then he addressed them all. "Well, I ain't hangin' a man for killing a snake and I don't plan to hang a man whose horse jolted his trigger finger. But, this here trial needs justice."

The Judge paused dramatically, letting the importance of his job sink into the small gathering. "This is my decision!" He banged his impromptu gavel again, amid dead silence.

"Hang the horse! . . . That's my ruling."

The onlookers were dumbfounded! Noah was the first to regain his voice, "Whut did you say, Jedge?"

"I said, we'll HANG the DAMNED HORSE!"

Suddenly all of them decided at the same instant that Judge Bean was joking. There was the start of loud guffaws, which were immediately cut short by the Judge banging his six-gun loudly and rapidly.

“You boys laughing at me?” The Judge had laid the empty six-gun on the bar and his hand now rested leisurely on his hip above the loaded weapon holstered at his side.

The trail boss quickly spoke up, “No, Jedge! No, no! Not at you! But the idea of hanging a horse . . . ugh?”

“That’s my god-damn verdict!” The Judge began loading the six-gun which he had used as a gavel. “A couple of mules and a tall tree! That’s all it takes.”

Noah had panic in his voice as he started to plead with the Judge, “But, Jedge . . . Blue Willie is a prime horse. He knows cattle —”

The Judge interrupted him, his countenance still without expression, “If it ain’t YOU to get hanged, Noah, because the horse caused it, then, it’s the HORSE what’s guilty. You can’t have it both ways. Which is it?”

It was a long moment before Noah could bring himself to speak. Finally, he let out an agonizing sigh. “But, Blue Willie was the best horse I ever owned, Jedge! Now, I won’t have no horse at all!”

“Well, Caleb had a horse, didn’t he? Now he’s got no need for a horse. I’ll tell you what the law can do for you, Noah. You pay the Court costs of fifteen silver dollars and buy a round of drinks for the boys here to celebrate your freedom, and I’ll award you Caleb’s horse. The Court claims his saddle as the price of his burial.”

For the second time Judge Bean had a faint smile on his countenance. Noah saw it and began to brighten up, himself.

“Fair enough, Jedge!”

With the necessary care, the Judge banged a full bottle of whisky on the bar as his new gavel, “Court’s adjourned.” He uncorked the bottle, “Okay, boys! What’cha gonna have?”

Immediately, loud conversation and laughter started up, with the Judge filling all the glasses, as everybody bellied closer to the bar.

“I think mebbe I’ll have one of them thar cold beers,” said Noah.

Short Order "Crook"

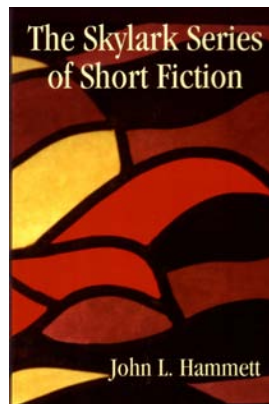


by

John L. Hammett

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Short Order “Crook”

*With Apologies to
The Great Comic Writers of the Sixties!*

“Lieutenant, I don’t intend to burn for the murder of that ‘Little Fink!’ I said.

“Nobody burns in this state anymore, Spiro — for anything. Twenty years with good behavior is about the worst you could get. Fact is, if you want to confess right now without benefit of counsel, a good lawyer could get you off later, with a mild reprimand and a full apology from the DA.”

“Don’t be bitter, Lieutenant. I read where it erodes the dentine off your molars. Anyway, you’ll have to look elsewhere, because I don’t plan to do any time for Eddie Kakastanos. He wasn’t worth my time alive; dead, I got even less reason.”

“Not even if you did it, Spiro?”

“Not even if I did it! But you got my alibi, Lieutenant. You know I didn’t do it. Why can’t you scratch me off your list?”

The Lieutenant scratched his head, his ear, the nape of his neck, and the seat of his pants, but I could see that I was staying on his list. He shifted the left lapel and shoulder of his coat, and I caught a glimpse of his police automatic as he tried to get the big holster into a more comfortable position in his armpit.

I was standing behind the “Short-Order” counter in my establishment in the Colossus Building, listening to Lieutenant Perazzo accuse me of “Murder-One!”

“Spiro, your alibi is the most versatile, the most detailed, the most elaborate, the most extensive, and the most complete I have turned up in many months. Therefore, it’s got to be the most phony. The ones that really sound phony, I seldom have to or ever bother to check out. They’re always legit. It’s the ones like yours, with all the fancy footwork, that I usually begin with. And most of the time, they’re as full of holes as a sieve. Even as full of holes as Eddie Kakastanos was, come to think of it”

The Lieutenant drained his coffee cup and I quick-reached behind me for the Silex, bubbling on the hot-plate, in order to lean across the counter and refill his empty cup. He looked a *why* directly in my eye, but I evaded his stare and said, “Show me the holes in my alibi, Lieutenant, and I’ll plug them up for you.”

“If you plugged a few holes for Eddie this morning, Spiro my friend, I’d rather you didn’t do me the favor.”

“Now, you know me, Lieutenant, I haven’t been in trouble since I left home and the Army — in that order. You don’t really think I done it, do you, Lieutenant?”

“You’re big on my list of suspects, Spiro. That’s all I know for now.” He didn’t smile and he looked like he meant it. “In fact, you’re Number One, based on alibi and motive.”

I had to go carefully and not “protest too much” in the parlance of that *Italian Poet*. “I have to agree that I wasn’t exactly a fan of Eddie’s. But, I wasn’t about to help his beneficiaries collect his life insurance, either” I said.

The Lieutenant looked at his coffee cup. I took the hint and refilled it, almost running it over in my eagerness!

"You got the wrong Number One, Lieutenant. Can't you take a little longer and hunt up some of Eddie's old friends and give them a chance? Why are they ineligible to play?"

"I dunno Right now you're ahead on points." I wanted a better answer. I needed to KNOW a lot more and I needed a lot more time to think. But the Lieutenant seemed deliberately uncommunicative; it wasn't like him.

Lieutenant Perazzo raised his cup and drained half the just-perked, ebony liquid as though it wasn't pure steam at all, at the same time pocketing the small official-looking pad that he had been making notes on. "You'll stay still for the next twenty-four hours, won't you Spiro?" It was an order, not a request.

I looked at the clock over the lunch counter. It was two thirty — slack time for the business. Rosa, my daughter, and Marianne, the other waitress, were in back eating a late lunch with the two cooks, and Sammy was tending the "Carry-Out" counter, where I was the short-order cook during regular hours.

Otherwise, the place was empty — except for the Lieutenant and me. I had to get more information if I was going to clear myself. It was a perfect time for a reverse interrogation if only Lieutenant Perazzo would just communicate!

While I was conniving, Lieutenant Perazzo had finished off his second on-the-house cup of coffee and was preparing to go. This was another reason I couldn't let him get away that easy; he had already cost me twenty cents.

“*Your list*, Lieutenant? Tell me the company I’m keeping on your list before you go. I’d like to know who I’m holding back from getting your best alibi award.”

“It won’t do you any good, Spiro.” He stared at me blankly for a full minute, which meant he was thinking. The Lieutenant always made it seem like a burdensome chore which he had never gotten accustomed to performing.

“But, I guess it won’t do any harm, either, Spiro.” Lieutenant Perazzo squirmed down tighter on the stool and braced his elbows on the counter, as though preparing for a long session. I got ready to prompt him, if necessary, in order to keep him going. But first, I started some new coffee. One way or the other, this thing was going to cost me money.

The Lieutenant began with a deep breath. “Okay! We start with the Eddie Kakastano’s unholy, or holey, depending on how you look at it, demise. Eddie had made his weekly collection run today — all morning in fact. Finished about 11 a.m. He must’ve got at least fifteen grand, judging from the gripes he’d been getting from all the law-abiding citizen-gamblers along those three blocks. He shook his head. I knew football pools were big, but I never realized they were that big!”

“Anyway, Eddie had been bringing the loot back to his office all morning according to Gladie — you know — she’s his secretary. She says there were big bills, little bills, and lots’ a change. Gladie had been helping him count it. He was keeping it in a small safe back in his inner-sanctum, where — again, according to Gladie — he had already stashed another 25 grand, his cut from the earlier football Saturdays.”

The Lieutenant looked skyward dreamily. "Thirty-five grand — Yessir A nice chunk of dough! Nossir, I didn't know football pools were that big — not *that* big, at all!

"Anyway, after the last collection, Eddie came back to his office — you know, the 'Kakastanos Enterprises,' on the third floor of this building, right back of the elevators — and sent Gladie out to an early lunch, obviously so he could tally the rest of his take alone.

"He did this regularly on Fridays in football season, anyhow, but today, it seemed a little special. Today, according to Gladie, Eddie was only counting the big stuff. He bagged all the coins uncounted, in canvas bank bags. And Gladie said that the whole time he was sweating so hard, she could smell him."

The Lieutenant looked at his empty cup and I took the hint and filled it, again.

"Yep!" He leaned back on the stool and I got quiet, reminding myself not to interrupt. "This time, it looks like Eddie must have had some bigger ideas. Gladie says that he had brought a small suitcase to work with him this a.m. which, for him, was very unusual. Also, it seems there is only one more football Saturday left in this year. And, it seems that this time last year, Eddie's prognostications went sour. He got hit pretty bad, right at the end, with no time left to recoup. Gladie says that Eddie barely broke even last year, according to the rumors that reached her from his clientele. Eddie never really let her in on all his gambling take, but she was a shrewd gal!

"So Eddie could have had other ideas this morning, besides counting all the money. He was probably counting on

all of it staying in his pockets. How do I know this? Well, I found out that Eddie had already lined those pockets with plane tickets to Mexico City. I phoned the airline agency over on Drake Street on a hunch, and Eddie had reservations for *this* weekend. Now, as it happens, ‘Kakastanos Enterprises’ imports some native-made gadgets — you know, jewelry and stuff — knick-knacks — off and on, from down Mexico way. I knew this from my earlier investigations of Eddie’s shenanigans. Eddie jobs this junk to the novelty-trash shops over on Breslauf Street. Part of his legit front! So-o-o, we know that little Eddie had a working passport to Mexico and an apparent good reason to visit and — earlier airline reservations.

But then, somebody let all his air out, most of his twenty-five grand disappeared, and that’s when we started counting noses.”

He looked at me suspiciously as he paused for breath and effect.

“I know all that, Lieutenant.” I said. “Since noon today, information on the shooting in the Colossus has traveled at least these ten square city blocks. It’s now coming back as an assassination attempt on the Peruvian Ambassador who has diplomatic offices on the 11th and 12th floor of this same Colossus building. It’ll get even better before quitting time tonight. But, I got my info straight from the original rumor, so I know all that. What about the other suspects?”

The Lieutenant paused again and looked mildly perturbed at the sounds of my impatience — clearing my throat and the like. But he was not dissuaded from his oratory. His tone was

ultra-official. "I said, we started counting noses. And you want names for those noses, right? This is how it started." The Lieutenant now did some more scratching while he picked up his train of thought, and I looked around the place nervously, hoping he wasn't getting the need to scratch from something in my "Short-Order" area. If I beat his murder-one rap, I wondered if I might still get indicted by the Health Department; with the condition of business, either one could be as fatal. Meanwhile, I decided that I'd better let Lieutenant Perazzo continue his story in his own good — or bad — way. I didn't want to discourage him under any conditions.

The Lieutenant continued, "Like I said, Eddie had good reasons to go to Mexico, only all of a sudden, he developed good reasons not to go. These reasons being six big .45 slugs, most of them taking flesh and bone and leaving nice room, dead-air space behind. Eddie could'a gone to a masquerade as a swiss-cheese or a sieve and took the first prize; only trouble was he would'a needed three or four friends to hold him together and escort him in. And, Eddie probably didn't have two friends that he could be sure were both out of jail at one and the same time."

Lieutenant Perazzo paused again dramatically. He was really beginning to enjoy himself in his role of prosecuting attorney, which had me graduating from chief suspect to the indicted defendant. I didn't want to interrupt him now, but I couldn't help myself.

"Lieutenant," I said, "I'd like to admit to you that you've got me plenty worried. My nerves began to go on the occasion of my last and forty-fifth birthday. Suspense I can't carry

like a full bowl of soup without spilling. Could you please get down to naming names. Uh ... present company excepted, of course!”

The Lieutenant continued with his loud elocutionary tone. He hadn't even heard me. “Eddie caught it around 11:40 a.m., give or take 15 minutes. He had placed a long distance call at 11:20, just after his girl, Gladie, left for lunch. We checked the phone company. So he must have been alive then. At 12:20, Gladie returned from lunch, and was seen going on the elevator and into the office by one of the other tenants on the third floor, also riding the elevator. And, as an aside, we've been busy interviewing as you will find out.

“Within minutes, Gladie went into a three-story case of hysterics, flew down the three flights of stairs — she couldn't wait for the elevator and it's a wonder she didn't break her neck — to the ground floor, where she was finally stopped by one of our boys, Officer Carosselli, as she ran screaming her blonde head off, out the front door and down the steps of this Colossus Building.”

“Officer Carosselli had parked his patrol cruiser in front of the Colossus to come in and get lunch in your — uh, restaurant.” The Lieutenant pulled up lamely, with this last bit of information, his voice suddenly going downhill, as though he was unwilling either to insult me or my establishment outright!

I had to take the liberty of correcting the Lieutenant on both those scores, “It's classed as a Grade-B Luncheonette, and Officer Carusselli had already finished eating and had left my counter to go out to his police car some ten minutes

before it happened. He must'a been reporting in to the dispatcher or something; he usually didn't stay around here that long."

I couldn't tell whether the Lieutenant heard my small corrections or not, since he immediately launched back into his subject. I had noticed that he was becoming more enamored of his deep-bass voice, which echoed through my empty place like a crooner in a sound chamber. I kept having the temptation to ask him whether he would like to sing, but I knew it was no time for flippancy. Besides, I was the one who was supposed to sing in the parlance of the police department! I was too, too convinced that the Lieutenant really had his eye on me for Eddie's murder, and I was sorry to have to admit I knew why.

Quite a few people had witnessed the argument I had with Eddie a few weeks before. I rarely lose my head, but when I do, it's a good thing I don't have two heads. I would'a belted him one with a meat cleaver, if I could'a gotten around the counter to him and if I didn't have to go back in the kitchen to get the cleaver. Eddie Kakastanos was one of the poorer examples of humanity; he could make you hate him even when he was trying to be nice. Of course, I always get over a temper in a hurry. I'm never that stupid for more than a few seconds at a time. And only under extreme stress.

But how to convince the Lieutenant? Meanwhile, that officer began to stroke his chin professionally, as he continued. "Everything worked in favor of your murderer . . . or murderess, as the case may be. Nobody heard the shots. They're repartitioning the fourth floor of this building for a new ten-

ant: new walls, different layout, new doorways. You can't really hear the uproar down here, but there's plenty of noise popping up there — has been for over a week. They're using air hammers to tear down the old plaster-block wall-sections and they even have cartridge-actuated tools driving studs and case-hardened nails in the concrete sub-flooring. Right now, you could shoot off a howitzer on that third floor and people would only grunt, cuss, or threaten to move out if it wasn't finished before the end of the year."

He paused again for effect. I added some coffee to his cup, although it was still half full. I was trying hard to encourage him.

"When we got to what was left of Eddie's safe, most of the money was gone — at least the big stuff. His overnight case was laying open on his desk and the small safe-door stood ajar. About two thousand in dimes and quarters was in canvas bank bags on the floor in front of his safe.

"So, thirty-five thousand was apparently gone! That's a lot of money; robbery looks like the big motive. But now, I ask you, why did somebody pump those six slugs in Eddie when any one of those shots would probably have done the trick? What d'you think, Spiro? Sound like a crime of passion? Or maybe, one of revenge? Maybe the 35 grand was only an added fillip, as they say in the novels?"

I managed to keep quiet in spite of my natural loquacious instincts. On previous occasions I had found that to keep Lieutenant Perazzo spilling out info, it was good to prompt and encourage him. But today, with him this wound up, it seemed very unwise to interrupt. I watched him as he smoothed his

brow and eyebrows, as though the effort to think was giving him a headache.

"Another funny thing is that our criminal had to lug all those stacks of cash out' a there and nobody saw him. He must'a had something or other to put it in; that's a lot of bulk to cart off in your pockets. He didn't even swipe Eddie's overnight, which was made in order for carrying that much loose stuff. How'd he ever do it? He should'a been seen or somebody should remember something. The murderer could have made a number of trips to carry off the cash piece-meal, but I can't understand it."

The Lieutenant looked suddenly at me, with an intent that almost made me jump. ". . . unless he was so well-known to everybody that nobody took notice of him!" He waited, but I filled his cup instead of answering.

"Let's get to the suspects," began the Lieutenant again, finally. Now, Eddie was a little fink, all right, but he was a big man with the ladies. You know what they say about those little guys! So-o-o, let's start first with the ladies on our list of suspects.

"First one we come up with is Shirl-Lea Levinson, the gal that runs the Ladies-wear shop on the ground-floor of this building. Apparently, she and Eddie were a thing a while back; in fact, for over a year. Everybody around here knew about it. Then, about six weeks ago they broke up. Eddie left her for some younger and greener pastures — so Shirl-Lea stated. And she told everybody who would listen to her that she would fix him, that she would get even. She was real mad! You know, 'the woman scorned'!

“But Shirl-Lea didn’t leave her shop today until 12:30. Mamie Kapowitz, that’s her assistant, left for an early lunch at 11:45 and Shirl-Lea says she had customers in the shop continuously from then on. I haven’t quite checked out her alibi at this point. Still, there’s reasonable doubt that Shirl-Lea could have left the shop unattended for the time needed without being missed. And, for certain, she would have been seen since she had to come out her front door, walk around to the entrance and into the lobby of the Colossus Building during the busiest time, what with the lunch crowds starting.

Easy enough to check it all out; I got a man running down her customers. We’ll have verification shortly. Right now, Shirl-Lea is pretty far down my list.

“Next with the ladies, we come to *your* Rosa, Spiro. Eddie was eating down here in your snack-bar every day, or every other day, for the past couple of months. And for most of that time, he was trying to play footsie with your daughter, Rosa, who waits on the counter here. You warned him: hands off. One of the cooks heard you. And you can stop trying to figure out which one to fire ’cause I ain’t about to tell you which one told us. Besides, a few other people heard that row between you and Eddie. And the big one later. So we know about the bad feelings, even without your kitchen-help squealing. They say your big fight with him was about money, and titles, and business arrangements. But that’s not as important to you as Rosa. I have an idea you could do some very rash things, Spiro, because of your Rosa.

“Then there’s Rosa, herself. I hear tell she seemed unimpressed with Eddie’s attentions. So I’m told! But nobody knows

how a thing like that is going to go. We're checking. Rosa may have been meeting Eddie on the sly somewhere; you're here early and leave late and she has plenty of time to herself . . . with her mother dead now."

Lieutenant Perazzo looked away, trying to get by the tough part. He knew Rosa's mother from before; she had been dead now a little over two years, and he knew I could never forget her. I felt like I would like to thank him for this glimmer of compassion, but I knew that would ruin it for him. It was better not to interrupt him anyway, as I said before.

"But, what about Rosa? Rosa's a little young to be a good suspect; that is, if she had sufficient motive — if Eddie did her dirt — which we don't even know yet. A seventeen year-old has got to be awful rough to pull off six shots in a man, like what happened to Eddie. Still, Rosa's got to be considered; she could have slipped away long enough. Sammy was holding down the Carry-Out while you were in and out, according to your own alibi, and only a few customers had come back here into the counter-service section that early. Rosa had plenty of time and opportunity. You, yourself, said she went out to the can about then. He rubbed wrinkles into and out of his brow some more.

"But Rosa's not as good a suspect as you, Daddy Spiro. As I said you value your daughter highly; anyone can see that. That's a motive right there: the protective papa! And you admit you had no use for Eddie; although lots'a people would agree with you on that. But you and Eddie had some business differences, I take it. You've been working hard to get this place going in the past year, haven't you? But it's too small.

You've got debts. You need cash to expand this or to get a new place altogether. Eddie had lots'a cash. Gladie said he told her he had already made you a small loan. When the interest slipped he tried to make you a deal to buy in. Of course, you were too wise for that — you would do all the work and he would siphon off all the profits. So you wanted no part of it. But he might have pushed his luck, might have gotten unreasonable — until you finally lost control. What kind of dirty deal did he try to pull? Was it enough to make you threaten him with a little bodily mayhem? Lots'a people heard you earlier! Was it enough for you to go after him for keeps?"

I didn't plan to answer that now so I kept real quiet. And the Lieutenant finally continued, after a wait that was meant to let me crack, or start to crack, if I were so inclined.

"Eddie's 35 grand is another motive that's good enough all by itself, Spiro. And with the small loan wiped out as a nice bonus. But your Rosa's the best motive for the six big shots. That took feeling. Somebody had to hate Eddie more than a little. You been pretty successful watching out *for* Rosa so far; at least what you know and what we know. That college boy she's got on the string; you approve of that don't you, Spiro? She's wearing his frat ring, shows it *off* to everybody! You plan *for* that to work out, don't you? Suppose Eddie threatened to wreck the budding romance? That would be sufficient motive for you. But, what's the matter with all these motives? You've got a lot going against you, Spiro!"

"Lieutenant," I pleaded, "I'm just a short-order cook!"

He came right back at me. "I think, Spiro, you might really be a short order 'crook!'"

"But, my alibi . . ." I said. I was tired of playing dumb, but I had to get the most out of the Lieutenant's storehouse of information. "My alibi?"

Lieutenant Perazzo barely controlled an outright guffaw. "A thing either of whole cloth, or sheer fabrication, depending upon which side you're sitting on. Either way, there's plenty of embroidery." The Lieutenant consulted his notebook. "Here's your alibi And I quote: 'At 11:15 to the storeroom in the first basement level of the Colossus Building to bring up two three-gallon jars of mustard; at 11:20 getting meat from the deep freeze for the cooks in the kitchen; at 11:23 to the front Carry-Out desk to take a big phone order for a business conference upstairs that didn't want to be interrupted for lunch; at 11:34, a salesman for 'Sweet-Fruit' beverages — you walked out to the lobby with that salesman to straighten out something or other; at 11:55, to the dry-supplies cabinet, which is on this floor at the rear of the elevators and right next to the rest-rooms, to get napkins, hot cups, and stirrers; and on and on and on, with unbelievable timing and picayune details into the afternoon — until right now in fact.

Do you have total-recall, Spiro, or did you graduate from a memory-training school? You see what I'm saying — your alibi is too detailed, too pat, too fancy, too complete. Little of it can be checked out with any accuracy. You were in and out of here so often and in so many different directions, that nobody around could swear you did or didn't have time between trips to run upstairs unseen, pop off Eddie, haul down the loot — two or three separate trips if necessary — and stash it in . . . I don't know . . . where would you hide about 35 grand

in mostly small bills and a few coins, if you just happened onto it, Spiro?”

But my alibi's true, Lieutenant. I swear it. My memory is my trade. I need it every minute. And the work details; that's my life ever since I been in this business — one long, rugged routine. It goes the same day-in and day-out. If it isn't mustard from the storeroom-pantry, it's mayonnaise. If it isn't the salesman from Sweet-Fruit, it's the Snack-Shot man. I've lived by the routine and my memory for years now. And don't forget, I got my original training following the ponies from track to track, after I got out of the Army. Before Rosa and her mother of course; before the restaurant business, before I got responsibilities and had to go to work.

“Even though I gave that up quite a while ago, my memory's good as ever, Lieutenant. In fact, name me a horse running 20 years ago and I'll tell you his mother and father, grandmother and grandfather on both sides, and at least 3 years of records on all of them.” I looked for signs of weakening in the Lieutenant's stony, cracked face, but the seams only told me it was still all going against me.

He pointed his accusation finger — at me. “Then, there's your missing gun — that missing .45 automatic from under your counter, Spiro. A .45 caliber was used on Eddie. That gets to be an awful big coincidence. You should have reported your gun stolen long before that same size heater ventilated Eddie Kakastanos. Makes it kind'a look *postfacto* now, doesn't it?”

“And another thing! Another consideration is your big need for hard cash. Any fool could see you're in trouble here.

You admit it! How long you gonna be able to stay in business like this?" He waved his hand and made my place look even more empty, even more desolate, even more inadequate. "I wouldn't have picked you to knock off Eddie from my dealing with you, Spiro, but money is always a good reason for anything, when a guy needs it bad enough!"

I surveyed my small domain as indicated by Lieutenant Perazzo's not too grand gesture. The customer service area was shaped right-angular, like the dog-leg on a golf course, with entrances at either end and the kitchen walled off inside the apex. The "Carry-Out" counter and its line-up took up the entire front portion, where the big wall-size window and the main street entrance were located. That front window, as I looked, was now steamed over from the heat inside against the mid-winter chill outside, and I could barely see the passersby, buckled over against the chill wind sweeping down Clinton Street from the northwest part of the city. Winter weather helped the Carry-Out business in the building, but it sure hurt the outside customer trade.

The Lieutenant and I were talking in the other end, the service-counter end, of my place, where three small booths and a semi-circle counter and ten stools were located. The Lieutenant was sitting on the last of these stools, while I hung over the counter listening. Directly behind him, the clear glass door of my second entrance opened into the back half of the Colossus Building which had housed the 'Kakastanos Enterprises,' including his bookie operations! The back of the elevator chimney and the section of two restrooms alongside it, partially obscured the view from my rear-door of the Colos-

sus lobby and its front entrance. When the double elevator doors opened, front and rear, my view commanded the whole lobby.

Behind me, as I stood at the counter facing the Lieutenant, ran the walled-off kitchen with two pass-through openings for service into the customer area. It was a good kitchen except that it lacked storage space. Because of this, I had commandeered room for the fast-moving bulky paper items in one of the janitorial closets located alongside the restrooms. And, also a back-up store room for supplies down on the first basement level.

Otherwise, the location of my place was a good one. It got traffic from the directions of both entrances; of course, some of the people were only short-cutting through to get from the Colossus Building to Clinton Street and vice versa. But I had a real captive clientele in the Colossus, itself. My place was too, too convenient for the “quickie” lunches that many of the businessmen and all the clerks and secretaries, were after. What was wrong was the cheap competition from the fast food chains across the street, down the block, around the corner, and so on. I had to get more volume to cut prices, to match or undersell them. Even if I was the most convenient, I was still losing potential customers. At the peak hours especially, I was letting too many get tired of waiting and walk away. The Lieutenant was right. Empty at this time was normal, but I had to expand for the busy times — the lunches and the coffee breaks. And, while I knew this, I didn’t know it was so obvious that a dumb city detective would know it. Maybe Lieutenant Perazzo just wasn’t so dumb! I’d have to think on that!

"You know, Spiro, we're pretty sure we've got that .45 automatic — the one that did Eddie in. One of the boys discovered it at the bottom of the elevator shaft. Funny! That's where they always drop the weapon, if there's an elevator in the building, and it'll stop between floors. A policeman always looks there first. The gun was wiped clean. Fired recently, with no slugs left in the clip. We're checking the numbers now, then we'll give you a chance to identify it. We'll be running tests on the ballistic identifications later. How many slugs did you keep in your clip, Spiro?"

"I don't remember, Lieutenant; it was only for show, anyway. But my gun's been gone a week now. And, I did report it earlier. I told your boy, Carusselli, at least a week ago when he was in here getting lunch and he said he'd see that it got reported. I haven't seen that gun for more than a week."

The Lieutenant began his scratching routine again. I think he knew it made me nervous. "Outside of those mentioned, I've got two other suspects: a man and woman. You don't know them; they were part of Eddie's gambling operations. Eddie was the king pin and they ran local pools for him in a couple of the bigger buildings down the block. After I finally got through to them, they told me they turned over some big money to Eddie in these past weeks. If the motive was pure robbery, they would have known how big the take was. They would have known what they could get. Robbery still doesn't look like the whole story, though.

"Of course, either one could have had additional motives. They could'a suspected Eddie was about to lam out. Eddie ran pretty much the same setup here about ten years ago.

This was the old Yorkshire Building then, before it was torn down and the Colossus replaced it. According to my info, Eddie welshed out that time and left his runners holding the bag while he lammed the country with a bundle. These same two runners were part of that earlier set-up. After waiting seven or eight years for it to blow over, Eddie finally sneaked back into the country. He must have made some token pay-offs, because he got into operation again. He's run it smoothly for a couple of years now, before this. But if either of those two patsies had suspected Eddie might get him self lost again, that would have triggered the final kiss-off — Eddie's six-slug farewell salute. They would even have felt religious doing it; they could have put themselves on the side of law-and order carrying out Eddie's just punishments.

"I don't know, though. I can't really believe they had any way of learning that Eddie Kakastanos might be preparing to strike twice in the same place. He was pretty clever. Gladie only got suspicious because of the suitcase and that was apparently a few days ago. Besides, both suspects' alibis are good — naturals, not too perfect but no real holes. Not like yours "

"Are those all your suspects, Lieutenant?" I asked.

"That's all, Spiro. Unless you want to include Rosa's college boyfriend . . . in a jealous rage or something! But I have an idea that at his age, he would go berserk in Rosa's direction if he had an inkling of some kind of betrayal. Undoubtedly, if violence was his way of solving a problem, he would knock her off, long before he got around to Eddie Kakastanos. From what I know right now, he's too smart a boy for that; and he's not the type anyway. Besides, he was over in class continu-

ously at City College today. We checked. He's got the best alibi of anybody."

I got a toothpick out of the shot glass on the counter. I've always thought I talked better chewing on a toothpick. Also, it helps me think. And right now was the time for me to think fast and talk fast. "You missed one, Lieutenant. What about Gladie?"

"What about her? I eliminated her right at the beginning. She couldn't have killed him. She can account for all her time all the way through. And we checked it out. Besides, she found Eddie and reported it. If the motive was robbery, she wouldn't have told me about the 35 grand. I would never have known how much cash was missing. The others who were involved in the gambling wouldn't have let on, because they've got charges facing them right now which they could have avoided. No, Spiro Most of what I know about this case, I got from Gladie. Without her cooperation, I'd be digging for a month.

"No, Spiro. I can't see it at all. This had to be a crime with a passion. And with Gladie, it was only business. I don't know how she did it, but she kept Eddie at arm's length all the time. I know that for a fact. Everybody knew it. Probably she has a boyfriend she's real gone on. I didn't even ask her. But, she was hands-off to Eddie for sure. That I know!"

I decided to speak up now. "There's something else, Lieutenant. My observant memory! Remember? At 11:15, I caught the elevator to go down to the storeroom on the first basement level. Eddie's Girl-Friday was on the same elevator, headed for the parking garage on the second or third basement-level."

He nodded. “That checks; that’s just what she told us. Third basement level! She got her car and went on from there to meet her mother at the Carillion Tea Room. It’s about twenty blocks uptown. We talked to her Mom, the manager, the waitress, everybody; it all checks out.” He gave me his blank look. So, I continued.

“Then I saw Gladie when she came back at 12:20. That’s a double-doored elevator, as you know. The back doors open and give direct access to my Snack-Shop and Carry-Out and the areas back in this end of the building. Anyway, Gladie must of got on down below, in the parking garage, and was headed upstairs obviously, when the button was pushed for the ground floor. Both doors opened and from here I could see Gladie was there waiting for Missus Gabriels, who also works on the third to get on. The doors closed and up they went.”

“Checks perfectly. You’d make a good witness against yourself, Spiro. Too bad it’s not allowed!” He waited for me to continue.

“Two minutes later, at most, Gladie came racing back down the steps screaming and slightly out of her head. She looked like Eddie might be right behind her with all his six holes sprouting lilies. She was in a real tizzy — a *bona fide* frantic panic. It strikes me that she’s usually an awfully cool customer to be that shook! It seemed a little out of character, like play-acting.”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at, Spiro. All you’ve done so far is become the perfect witness to a perfect alibi for someone that’s not even a suspect. Dead, Eddie was certainly not

looking his best, which was never very pretty anyway. His appearance, dead, was enough to shake anybody, most of all somebody that was in daily contact with him. I'm beginning to wonder about you, Spiro. Been sweeping up any extra nuts and bolts left unexplained on the floor back there?

"There's a couple of other things you apparently don't know, Lieutenant. Like the fact that Officer Carusselli knew I had that .45 back here under the counter long before I reported it stolen. I showed it to him about six months ago and told him I had a permit for it."

"Nothing unusual about that! You're supposed to let him know! If he's gonna protect your property and see that you don't get heisted during business hours, he needs to know what protection you got for yourself. Nothing wrong with that. He's got the beat!"

"There's more," I said. I knew I was getting on dangerous grounds, but I had no other choice. "Like the fact that Officer Carusselli's been coming in here and meeting Gladie for coffee a couple of times a week in the past couple months."

"That one I didn't know, but it happens to people all the time. She's a nice doll — and unattached. On top of that, he's single; that *doesn't* happen all the time! Why shouldn't they get interested? They're about the same range in age and interests. I think they make a nice couple!"

"First, you better ask him about the fur coat, Lieutenant."

"What fur coat?"

"Well, Gladie's got a beautiful, big, new, full-length alpaca fur coat. She's a big doll anyway, but this is a rich, full thing that makes her look five-feet wide. It's a monster! Gladie's

been sporting that fur since early fall; she even wore it in here one day last week when the building heat quit. She sat right up here at the counter on one of these stools; trouble was she took up three of them. Nobody could sit on the stool on either side without getting overpowered by that suffocating coat. It's a real fuzzy-wuzzy.

"Besides being that big, that coat must've been expensive. I don't know what it could have cost, but I know Eddie didn't buy it with that kind of salary. Anyway, my Rosa asked her where she got it — came right out, you know how kids are. She must have caught Gladie off guard. The straight question often gets the straight answer; there's no time for inventing lies. I don't think Gladie would have leveled with her if she had had time to think. But she didn't, and she told my Rosa that fur coat was given to her by Officer Carusselli."

Lieutenant Perazzo began to appear extremely annoyed. He got off the stool and leaned across the counter, his face an inch from mine. "You're getting in big trouble, Spiro. You're casting aspersions on a police officer. Also, I'm losing my temper. I don't think Carusselli was on this beat that long and you're making him a patsy for a fur coat he couldn't afford and a blonde he's only shown a passing interest in, so far as I know. You'd better be careful about your loose lip, Spiro. In fact, you'd better be careful about your general health and about pushing me much further or I'm liable to be up for a murder rap, myself — yours!" His voice bounced off the ceiling as his indignation mounted.

"Okay, okay, Lieutenant. I'm coming to the point. Gladie stopped in this a.m. before work to pick up some carry-out

coffee and breakfast rolls for her and Eddie and she was wearing that fur coat. I don't blame her; it's been plenty cold. Probably that coat felt pretty good this morning while her car was warming up.

"But, when Gladie went down the elevator at 11:15, she wasn't wearing her fur coat. Now that's alright too, because Gladie was getting right into her car in the heated garage downstairs, driving that heated car over to the Carillion Tea Room, and getting right out in their parking lot, which is adjacent to the front door. She couldn't catch cold or even be uncomfortable on that schedule.

"But, when Gladie got back here later, about 12:18 in fact, and I saw her headed up the elevator, she still wasn't wearing her fur coat. So it's logical to assume Gladie left her trophy hanging upstairs while she went out to lunch."

"Great work, Spiro! You're still proving a lot of nothing, and covering a lot of ground doing it." Lieutenant Perazzo gritted his teeth as he climbed back on the stool and settled himself belligerently. I'm going to let you talk, Spiro. 'Cause I have an idea you're going to save me a lot of time, trouble, and grief. With all this wild rambling and your unfounded suspicions, sooner or later, you're gonna hang yourself. Maybe right here and now! So I think I can afford to wait. Continue!"

The Lieutenant propped his chin in his hands so that he could stare unblinkingly into my eyes across the counter. I stared back just as hard in order to show confidence in my theories. But with the intense concentration I was exerting over my nerves and my thoughts and the rather spontaneous deductions springing full blown from disassociated memory

channels in the old noodle, I wasn't being very successful. I felt both eyeballs afloat in their saline solutions, brimming to overflow the straining sockets. I blinked against my better judgment and I knew I had lost face and probably what little credulity I had left with the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant," I said, as though to get his attention, although his orbs were practically straddling my proboscis, two minutes later, when Gladie ran screaming and howling down the stairs and bolted out the front entrance, she was wearing that fur coat. There's something significant right there; she stopped long enough to put on her fur coat. I know this because I heard the uproar she created coming down and I followed her out from behind the elevator chimney — I was getting paper supplies from the janitorial closet behind the stair exit at the time.

"I saw Gladie dash out the glass-doored street entrance and run straight down the front steps into the arms of Officer Carusselli. Right away, Carusselli started to comfort her and calm her down, fur-coat and all. The first thing he did was put her in the back of his police cruiser to sit down. Then he got something from the first-aid kit up front — ammonia probably — and started waving it under her nose. Next, he reached in the front window, picked the mike off the steering column and, I guess, called in to the dispatcher to get your guys alerted, cause ten minutes later, you arrived with your horde of homicide technicians and photographers swarming through the building and upstairs."

"That's exactly what he did — exactly what any good officer should do!"

"Right! Now, after you guys got here and took over, Officer Carusselli very solicitously helped Gladie back out of the cruiser, back up the front steps, back through the glass doors, and to a seat on the long leather chaise-lounge in the lobby, where she sat shaking and quaking until you got around to questioning her. Meanwhile, Carusselli made his report to you, got back in his police car, and drove off, even before Gladie had begun to give you the rundown on the events of her big day.

"So what! What are you trying to say, Spiro?" Now Lieutenant Perazzo really began to lose his temper. He had me wondering if he was gonna foam at the mouth. He must have had an idea where I was headed, but he still didn't know how I was gonna get there. And anyway, he didn't like the possibilities. "I'm gonna have you on the book for everything from obstructing justice to maligning a police officer, if that murder rap doesn't stick, Spiro. You better be able to back some of this up, cause you're in trouble — big trouble! What are you trying to say?"

I took a deep breath. "Suppose that Carosselli took my .45. He had plenty of opportunity when he was in here with Gladie in the slack hours. It stays under the counter, back out *of*sight and out of the way, and I don't ever have call to check on it. And Gladie and he were left alone plenty of times, like you and I are right now, while the crew was eating in back or possibly with me shaking off a salesman somewhere. That gun could'a been gone a week or two, or longer, before I would have noticed it.

"And, you know one strange thing, Lieutenant? Before today, Carusselli always parked on Clinton Street when he

came in to get his lunch-time sandwich or when he met Gladie for coffee. I don't ever remember him parking on Tenth Street before and coming in the front entrance of the Colossus to get to my place. But he did, today."

"Maybe he couldn't find a parking space!"

"Maybe. But today, after he placed his order, Carusselli left to go to the restroom. He never did that before either; he always hit the john and washed up before he got a seat and ordered. Today, his sandwich was waiting for him when he got back. A very strange and sudden change of habits."

"He was in a hurry. He had to go. Besides he had plenty of calls to make. Carusselli's a good, hard-working officer." The Lieutenant's disgust bit into every word.

"But afterwards, he hung around here an awful long time for a guy in a hurry. Supposing — I'm just supposing now — supposing Carusselli was lucky and nobody saw him slip out of the men's room, up the back stairs and back down again. Practically nobody uses those stairs; it could'a happened. He could even have chanced the elevator going up. Everybody's coming down this time of day.

"Supposing — just supposing — while he was up there, he shot Eddie with my .45, which I'm also supposing he got hold of earlier. Nobody would have heard the shots and raised a fuss. Too much hubbub on the floor above — you said so, yourself. But then, why would he sieve Eddie up like that? I don't know! Maybe to throw suspicion on somebody else! Maybe for a few other little things that Gladie didn't tell you about! Eddie couldn't have been nice to her; he wasn't capable. Maybe this was Gladie's revenge I don't know!"

Lieutenant Perazzo again slipped slowly, with too-deliberate a control, off his counter-stool, like he hadn't made his mind up whether to go, stay, or just punch me in the nose. When he spoke, I had difficulty understanding his words because he never once unclenched his teeth.

Spiro, I'm sorry I stayed to listen to you. That's the biggest crock of bullcrap I think I have ever come across in my career. You haven't got one — not one — shred of proof. I've heard enough! Unless you can come up with something better than those hallucinations of yours, I'll be in with a warrant for you in the morning. Better get somebody to sub for you tomorrow, so you can keep the business going until some shyster bails you out. And don't leave town tonight, or I'll issue orders to shoot to kill!"

He was shouting again at the end. He seemed out of control completely now, and on the verge of heading for the door at a run. He was that mad! He didn't trust himself to restrain any longer from justifiable police brutality, I guess! I held him dramatically with a big, policeman-like hand-signal to stop.

"Just one thing before you go, Lieutenant. You owe it to yourself — and to me, I might add — to go and sit in on the return of the fur coat. If my eyes didn't play tricks on me, about 15 minutes ago — right after our conversation started — I saw through that door," I pointed, "Gladie going down the elevator. The elevator back-door opened along with the front to let somebody off, but Gladie stayed on, obviously headed for the third-level parking to get her car. And once again she wasn't wearing her fur-coat. And you know why? Because she wasn't wearing it when she got out of the police

cruiser to let Officer Carusselli escort her into the lobby. She got in his cruiser with it, but she got out *without* it.

“Now, if you called the dispatcher and located Officer Carusselli — he’s still on duty, I imagine — you could intercept them and probably witness the return of the coat from his back-seat. That is, if Gladie plans to meet him right away at the prearranged place, as I suspect. And what you should do, Lieutenant, is feel the quality of the fur yourself. I should imagine it to be quite lumpy, also heavy, judging from the way Gladie was struggling across the lobby, even in her panic, just after she raced down the stairs from discovering the body. Even with her frantic scrambles, her feet were behaving like she was knee deep in glue or thick molasses, and about to sink out of sight. But, covering level-ground was about as slow-motion as a goldfish swimming in lard.

“I’m betting you’ll find about 35-grand worth of lumps in that fur coat, in small bills and big coins, stuffed in the lining. Carusselli must’ve stowed it for her after he killed Eddie, and before he ditched the .45 and sneaked back down to my place. Too bad! Those lumps would probably have gone for a honeymoon in Bermuda, or even a down-payment on a brick rambler with a carport in the suburbs. Who knows! They were a hardworking team, as long as a lover’s quarrel didn’t ruin the idyll! —Where you going, Lieutenant?” I knew where he was going, but I wanted one last chance before he got away. He turned to say something, but only sputtered in the attempt.

“You were wrong on one big thing, Lieutenant. My Rosa’s too smart for the likes of Eddie Kakastanos. One date was all

she had and that told her more than all my fatherly advice and cautions could have about that human animal. Besides, her college boy friend gave her his frat-pin last night. He graduates this year; so if you'll stop back sometime in the spring, I'll let you give them a nice wedding present, and then, I'll promise to forget all about your nasty accusations, and EVEN treat you to a few more cups of on-the-house coffee."

Funny! He should'a *thanked* me, but the farewell gesture he made on his way out was definitely obscene. It didn't make me mad. And when my Rosa come out of the kitchen immediately afterward, with the reflections of that tiny ruby-set frat-pin making her whole face a rosy glow with happiness, I had to stop and give her a fatherly hug right then and there!

