

The Line Is Dead

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Smashing Detective Stories, December 1951

CHAPTER 1

EVEN FOR the French Quarter of New Orleans, Jeff Carver's apartment was a conspicuous litter. A Smith & Wesson .38, a Crescent Agency badge, a blackjack, a fifth of Spanish brandy, and a file of patrol service reports competed for the space he had cleared to make room for working out his second installment of income tax. And what made him frown was not the figures on the paper, but the missing exemption, as he called Alma Foster.

Alma was Carver's neighbor. Her second floor apartment was across the patio from his; and because of the Rube Goldberg methods of remodeling buildings a century and a half old, converting a French or Spanish mansion into a dozen or more studios and apartments, the quickest way from Alma's door to the stairs leading down to the patio was a bridge across to the balcony on his side. But Alma was finding less and less time to cross over for coffee, or to straighten things out. Her last visit, a breathless three minutes, had been to leave her income tax tangle.

"After all, darling, you're a detective; you can figure out what's wrong with it!"

She would have stayed longer, except that she had a dinner and dancing date with an important-looking lug who drove a red and black convertible Cad. And that was not two-timing: first, she had been entirely frank about her capering around with Herb Lowry, and second, she had never made Carver any promises. Her story was that, through meeting Herb Lowry's friends, she would have a grand chance of switching to a better job. Positions and promotions went largely on the basis of friendship or kinship: perhaps not a great deal more so than in other parts of the country, though with the difference that in this colorful and fun-loving city, people blandly admitted the facts.

A clannish place, the French city, so proud of its Old World background, yet hearty in its welcome to outsiders.

All this left Carver in the unpleasant situation of wondering whether he was being tolerant and generous-minded, or merely a chump. His frown exaggerated the angles of his face. So did the dark brows, and taut cheeks, and the straight nose which was slightly off center. His hands were lean, wiry and restless. A mosquito buzzed near him.

Irritably, he looked up, reached—and nipped the nuisance right out of the air, neatly, between thumb and forefinger. He had not quite touched the stage of grabbing pistol or blackjack for such chores.

The jingle of the bell brought him to his feet, and he pounced for the door. Alma had crossed the bridge; she stood spotlighted against the wrought iron work of the gallery, and the further background of massive masonry and stucco which on all four sides enclosed the dusky patio. Her hair was dark, all alive and rippling as though windblown.

She had fine teeth, but the center of her smile was in her dark eyes, and in her voice.

Alma wore a zippered robe which covered her from dainty ankles to the smooth line of her chin: the snug fit made it delightfully clear that she had that rare combination of slenderness and a full-fashioned feminine shapeliness.

“Hi, darling! How much do those bandits owe me for refund?” she asked, in gay and breathless optimism. Without waiting for an answer, Alma glided in, pivoted, and laying her long, slender hands against his cheeks, gave him a blithe and breathless kiss. “Ooh, I’ve got just time for a drop of brandy; I love Pedro Domecq.”

He looked at the hair-do, the makeup, now slightly smudged, and the golden sandals, open-toed and twinkling. He sniffed the billowing sweetness of Black Narcissus. “You smell like a date with somebody else,” he grumbled, and not as whimsically as he had tried to make it sound. “All right, honey, meet Pedro Domecq.”

He rinsed the coffee cups, which had been half full of inky black Creole brew, flushed the cigarette butts from the saucers, and poured a dollop of Three Vines.

“Jeff, you know who is really important. Don’t be that way. I am meeting people, and things are clicking. You do believe me—you know you do! I’d feel awful if you didn’t.”

“Why not let Herb fix up your tax headaches?”

“Oh, he sends his to an expert. How’s the patrol service?”

Eagerness lighted eyes and face: she had a knack of making present company seem the most important of all important persons.

CARVER WAFTED Alma to the Chesterfield with one hand, and with the other swept a clutter of newspapers and magazines to clear sitting space. "It's looking up, and better than being a private snoop. See here, you forget that better job; the patrol service is just about come to the point when it's enough for both of us. Look at the shoe-leather we'd save, not hustling back and forth over the bridge from my place to yours. We'd get a bigger place, on the ground floor, right off the patio with the two marble lions."

"On Toulouse Street? Mmmm... I'd love it."

"Exemption with golden hoofs! And every time I put you on the list of dependents, we'd tap the till for dinner at Antoine's, and then we'd go to the Slave Exchange to heckle the boss till he mixed a pousse cafe the hard way."

"And exchange me for another slave? Oh, quit trying to fascinate me that way! How's the patrol service?"

Between telling her of the clients he was getting, warehouse owners along the waterfront, pouring a refill of Pedro Domecq, and completing the ruin of Alma's makeup, he was quite certain that he was safely on the right side of the fine line that divides generous-mindedness from stupidity. The snarl of the buzzer broke in. He made a long lunge, cursed idiots who didn't bother to phone, then jabbed the button to release the latch of the door which opened from the street and into the arched passageway. It was shadowy, and perhaps sixty feet from door to courtyard.

So he sat back to wait. Hopefully, he began to think, "Someone forgot the outside key and needed a buzz to get in." He resumed talk about the patrol service.

All this was spoiled when, without a warning jingle, the door slammed open. A big fellow, blond and rugged of face, wearing an important look and in dinner jacket, barged in.

His expression of haughty disapproval, and the way he carried his head, made it plain that he not only knew what was wrong with the world, but also had the answers needed to make it right.

“Who the hell let you in?” Carver demanded. “Get out and try knocking next time!” The man wasn’t a client, and couldn’t be if he wanted to.

Alma bounced to her feet with a cry of dismay. “Oh, Herb, I didn’t know it was so late! Jeff, you’ve never met Mr. Lowry, have you?”

“Seeing was enough for me; skip the meeting.”

Lowry ignored both Carver and the remark. He caught Alma by the arm. “Can’t your tax problems hold?” he demanded. “Or how much longer shall I wait?”

Carver interposed. “Take your hands off, and put ‘em where they’ll do you some good, meat-head!”

And to show him where the hands ought to be, Carver hauled off and socked him. Lowry slammed back against the rickety table, knocking over the brandy. Carver, in no mood to flood the floor with any such liquor, whirled to retrieve it.

He had underestimated Lowry; instead of going glassy eyed, the intruder recovered and clipped him one that promised to lift his head and send it up through the ceiling. What settled the ensuing even exchange was Carver’s stumbling over a shoe; not one of those he was wearing, but one that should have been put away. He took a lurch, banged his head against the corner of the Chesterfield, and for a moment was too busy clutching the floor for support to have any chance of getting back into immediate action.

Alma flared up, “You can keep your dinner, if you’re in such a frightful hurry!”

Seeing that protest or apology would get him nowhere; and perhaps sensing that he had used up his day’s quota of luck, Lowry shrugged, and made for the door. The balcony decking sounded under his tread. By the time Carver regained his feet, the departing visitor was in the courtyard and not dallying to pick cape jasmin.

Carver, still unsteady, hustled Alma to the bridge. “Get on your phone and camp on it, honey. He’ll be calling when he cools down; and if he buzzes from the street and can’t get an answer from you, he won’t try my number again.”

She tried to smooth things over, but Carver’s response was, “He’s probably heading home to retouch his makeup, sulk awhile, and then come back. I’ll bust

in on him and give him something more than a rumpled shirt and tie, the flathead!”

“Oh, good Lord, Jeff! Don’t! You’re advertising it to the entire building. I’m awfully sorry; it is my fault, and he was all wrong, but—”

“Run along, run along. I’m not sore at you. But I’m taking care of that high-ranking drip!”

Once she had crossed the bridge, Carver thumbed the phone book, got the man’s address, and drove uptown. Lowry lived not far from where St. Charles Avenue branches off to become Carrollton.

WHEN HE got to the place, Carver chalked up a bad guess. The house was dark; the convertible was not in the garage.

Remembering, from Alma’s chatter, the bars that she and Lowry and his crowd had visited, he hightailed back to the Vieux Carre—the “Old Square”, that original French city once enclosed by parapets on three sides, and guarded by the river on the fourth.

He looked in at the Original Absinthe House, and the Old Absinthe House, both of which, appropriately, were on Bourbon Street.

Inquiry got him no word of Lowry or friends of Lowry. He had no better luck at several of the less historical spots. But at the Slave Exchange, operated by a solid citizen named Lamazou—who boasted that he never forgot a face nor the recipe for a drink, however complicated the latter or uninteresting the former—Carver got his break.

“I guarantee you, he was here!” the good man declared, happy to prove that the Slave Exchange offered services beyond the modest claim that here one got a better Sazerac than Old Man Sazerac himself ever mixed, and a better Ramos Fizz than the original Ramos had ever dreamed of. “He was here, and I tell you, he was sore.”

“What about?” Carver wondered, innocently and cheerily.

Since the information had not been given in confidence, the proprietor saw no good cause for making more of it than Lowry himself had. “About the income

tax,” he answered. “The government is gypping him, like everybody. Or it is the expert. So he is going home to fix it.”

“I’m an expert,” Carver declared. “And I bet I can help him plenty.”

Apparently, Lowry was going nonchalant, demonstrating to Alma that his tax problems were more important than women, she or any other. Carver, good and fed-up, regardless of how honest Alma’s intentions undoubtedly were, found it more and more necessary to leave Lowry with sufficient souvenirs of the evening so that his social inclinations would lead him elsewhere. Carver’s only mistake, as he saw it, had been to proclaim his intentions to Alma. It would have been much better to have said nothing, and let her guess, bit by bit, why Lowry no longer called.

If Alma really had to meet people who were the key to better employment, she could readily enough find a new face.

“A new face...” Carver savored the phrase, as, having overshot his mark by two numbers, he left his parked car and set out afoot to Lowry’s place. “A nice new one for Lowry ... just what that stinker needs.”

The house was old fashioned, one of the several survivors of the day when Carrollton was a separate town. It was set well back, with magnolias shading the front. The broad leaves of plantain stalks made a secondary screen about the house.

There were lights. The front door was slightly ajar. This was strictly custom-built; give him a taste of visitors who barge in without knocking.

Carver went down the hall toward the light, which came from a doorway. The room into which he stepped was in more of a litter than his own, but the effect was entirely different.

The phone, yanked from its wall niche, lay in the midst of a scattering of ashes and butts spilled from a smoking stand. Bourbon, broken tumblers, a bottle of Seven-Up, and a cigarette container were blended into a mess of papers swept from the work table, on which a typewriter still sat. Blood splashed the plaster, as well as the floor, and the overturned chairs.

Lowry lay there, a sodden and soggy heap. Whether this was a blunt-instrument

murder, or a knock-down fight in which the victor, running amuck, had booted and trampled an unconscious opponent to death, would require a closer inspection of the body than Carver wanted to give it. What upset his stomach was that this which was sprawled out before him was a horrible exaggeration of the decisive cold-caulking he had come to dish out. His wrath kicked back and sickened him. He would have run out—he had to fight the urge not to—had it not been for his loud-mouthed tour of bars. And there was even more: for, while this gruesome killing might not be connected with him, Alma would inevitably have her own doubts, her suspicions, so that human qualm would rise as a barrier between her and Carver.

He now had himself for a client. While this was a dish for the cops, Carver had too big a stake to let him stand by, without trying to make a clear cut and decisive case against the killer.

CHAPTER 2

CARVER latched the front door and went to the end of the hall to unlatch the back.

He drew a shade, so that light from the hall would not be visible from the street. Due to his unfamiliarity with the place, he had overshot his mark; a similar old-fashioned house had tricked him. He had parked in the shadows of tall trees. Finally, the avenue was wide, with a parkway and row of palms down the center. Thus his arrival had not been conspicuous.

Dodging blood splashes not quite dried dark, he began his survey. An electric clock, knocked out of action by the fracas, had stopped at 9:47. The time element, however, would not help Carver, for while the Vieux Carre bartenders would remember him, and in one spot at least, Lowry, their notions as to the hour would naturally be in round figures, give or take thirty minutes.

Two things other than professional ethics, the last being a consideration which a man who was in a tight corner would be inclined to ignore, kept him from setting the clock either forward or back, within the limits of the interval in which the coroner could place the time of death. Since he had to work on this case, any attempt at faking an alibi for himself might be making one for a man who might otherwise be charged with the crime.

Lowry had actually been engrossed with his income tax. On the floor, beneath the work table, was a duplicate return; there was also the Internal Revenue bill for the current quarter. The amount on this was several hundred dollars less than on the duplicate. A man who had the answers to everything would be inclined to look for someone to eat out.

And scattered papers indicated that giving a chewing out to everyone, from Congress down to the parish dog catcher, was a hobby of the deceased. His bitter invective and polished style should have made him a fortune. He gave his biting words away, and got a good bit of his output published in Vox Pop and Forum and Safety Valve columns of New Orleans and several other Gulf Coast city newspapers, all the way to Biloxi. His success was clear: clippings taped to carbons of the original blasts gave testimony.

A stamped envelope, freshly addressed to the Standard, lay on the table. There was no letter to match. Carver frowned.

“That’s an odd one! A fellow usually writes the letter, and then addresses the envelope.” He noticed a sheet of carbon paper.

It had been used only once; every impression of the type showed clearly, though in reverse, so that it would be difficult to read without holding it to a mirror.

He got just sufficient of the “Scathing indictment” to make him fold the carbon paper and put it into the envelope, which he pocketed. There had been words about income tax exemptions, and fumbling “experts.”

Anything that had been the target of Lowry’s indignation on that day would be worth studying. Whether his written words were actually a reasonable motive for murder was an open question, but Carver’s hasty glances at the samples convinced him that they were.

However, what promised to be a more pointed lead was in a pen-written letter, addressed to Lowry, and apparently by a woman: I can play just as dirty as you. If you think being dog in the manger is going to get you anywhere, just keep at it, and see who gets paid off, and how. It was signed, Guess Who? The shattered phone had kept him from notifying the police, even anonymously. And now, with a vindictive woman in the pattern, Carver had a greater stake than ever: there was the danger of having Alma involved; and, however unjustly, she would be, if the unknown woman in the case were cornered and began to tell her side of things.

Jeff pocketed that letter, figuring he had sufficient detail. Whether he could risk getting fingerprint gear and his miniature camera for close up shots of developed prints was a question which good judgment would answer with a king size No. The same applied to frisking the house.

A heel print in a pool of blood caught his eye. The track had been duplicated on the floor, for several paces. It was anything but clear, and was a job for a technician. His mounting uneasiness, and the urge to get out and show himself again in the Vieux Carre, became so strong as to scream a warning. With a dead phone, there might be visitors stopping to leave a note.

Carver snapped off the lights.

HE HAD barely done so when a car pulled up in front. Instead of with a lusty slam, its door had been closed too carefully, yet not softly enough for him to miss it. The unlatching of the front gate was done with too much care. A man and a woman were momentarily silhouetted by the glow of a distant street lamp. Advancing, they were absorbed by shadow, though he could distinguish them as darker masses, and moving.

Carver made for the rear. He had barely got to the stoop when a flashlight beam, lancing down the long hallway, softened the darkness about him. He paused at the jamb and risked pressing his face against the pane.

Reflection from the plaster of the hall picked out the blonde glint of the woman's hair. She and her companion must have used a key.

Carver went to the front with long, springy strides. He followed the walk until he had cleared the house. From there, stepping-stones reached toward the side fence. He vaulted this, and then, shadow protected, hurried to the sidewalk. Everything was clear. He noted the license plate numbers of the car, then got a look at the registration papers at the steering column.

This had barely been done when he heard the scream he had been expecting. Not knowing who or what the two were, Jeff had no thought either of waiting to make further observations, or to follow them, if they left.

They might not be leaving, for good reason. It was time and more than time to get going.

Carver lost little time following the long, crescent curve of the avenue until it crossed the head of Canal Street. At a pay station, he phoned police headquarters. He began, breathlessly, "Trouble Dennis Wayland's place," and gave Lowry's address. "D, dog; E, eager; N, nuts; I, Isidore; S, sugar—Get the name, and address, you'll get the trouble quick enough." He spelled Wayland, and then added, "He just killed Herb Lowry."

He hung up, and got going. Putting a stranger on the spot was unpalatable business, but with someone else on the defensive—even temporarily—Carver would have a better screen behind which to work. And whatever decent qualms he did have were restrained by the certainty that the two who had come to Lowry's house had moved furtively.

Possession of a key did not prove that their visit was legitimate.

Snapping on his radio, he followed Canal Street. Before he was half way to the river, Jeff heard the first police broadcast routine to patrol car. By the time he swung into the French Quarter's narrow streets, the Carrollton district had undoubtedly been sewed up tight. There was no night man on duty where Carver garaged his car, so his departure and return would not have been noted pointedly.

Once back at his apartment, he looked in the phone directory. Dennis Wayland was listed. He'd be tagged soon enough.

CARVER crossed the bridge to Alma's balcony. She was not at home. He concluded that she had snapped at some other Vieux Carre festivity. Alma would reason, naturally enough, that being away from home would keep her in a strictly neutral position, neither upsetting Carver's feelings by favoring the useful Lowry, by listening to him in the event that he called again, nor offending that high-handed man by continuing her stand in favor of Carver.

Thinking back, Carver discovered another useful angle in having set the police on Dennis Wayland. If, as the furtiveness of the visit suggested, the man had made plans against Lowry or had had trouble with him, at least the general pattern would appear in the newspaper account, and so save Carver a lot of leg work. And the prowler's blonde companion kept him reminded of the reproachful letter which some woman had written Lowry. There would be plenty to ask Alma, now that the police broadcast gave Carver a way of accounting for his knowledge of the event.

Her spontaneous flare-up of indignation at Lowry's high handedness cheered Carver, despite the position in which he was all too likely to find himself before the police went far with their work. Behind her gaiety and breathless frivolity, she was strictly bonded goods. He could not doubt her loyalty; he could count upon her not talking out of turn about his quarrel with Lowry. But he wondered, as he sat there, trying to plan his campaign, if she would suspect him. Or, suspecting, whether she could conceal her thought.

Even though he were not involved, or even questioned, the case would almost surely be a barrier between him and Alma until it was solved: and while the percentage of unsolved homicides was low, it was quite too high for Carver's taste. An ordinary killing, either with knife or gun, was one thing. The maniac

frenzy and vindictiveness that had been expended on Lowry indicated a killer whose personality was inhuman, whatever his form and appearance. This intangible, this emotional element, was Carver's greatest danger. Even though she had actively disliked the victim, the manner of his death would turn her stomach.

After an hour or so of telling himself that he had not a Chinaman's chance of getting any sleep, he tried it. In a restless way, he succeeded, until the jingle of the doorbell aroused him. The note was insistent, as though the tension of the finger had been communicated to the button.

It was not the police.

It was Alma, with her make-up taken off.

Like Carver, she had apparently been aroused from sleep. Her robe, all awry, revealed a sapphire-colored nightgown with lace panels which would have been intriguing under other circumstances. Carver's second blinking glance at the clock told him he had been dozing for a couple of hours. Meanwhile, Alma had come home, without having awakened him as she high-heeled it along the balcony, and across the bridge.

"Back for more brandy?" he grumbled.

She caught him by the arms. "You've got a client, Jeff, whether you want one or not."

Her animation had a flavor of a sort she had never displayed before. Alma was worried, frightened, and grabbing him for support, rather than for emphasis.

"What have you gone and done?" he countered, as he shut the door behind her. "You look as if you need a drink!"

PREMONITION gave Jeff a case of shakes that promised to match Alma's. Nothing less than the killing up in Carrollton could have knocked her into such a shuddering state.

As she gulped her brandy, Carver checked up the crazy pace of his imagination; yet, while no woman other than a side-show freak could have done that gruesome job, she could in some way have been involved.

“Oh, it’s not me. My girl friend is in a terrible mess. Though really it’s her boy friend that’s jammed up.”

“Well, as long as it is someone else,” he said. “I’m relaxing and you’d better do the same.” He felt better, yet he knew that things were closing in on him. “You look as if you’d been through the ringer. What’s the pitch?”

“They’ve picked him up for murder; you’ve got to do something.”

“No dice, darling. They’ll either find he’s all clean, or else they’ll clean him, and plenty.

What’m I supposed to do?”

“He’s not guilty. That’s why I told her you would help.”

“He needs a lawyer now. Have you—has she called one? Who’d he kill?”

“Herb Lowry! Isn’t that ghastly?”

Carver drew a deep breath, and stretched out his legs. “With a disposition like his, it’s a wonder it wasn’t done years ago. Some night-spot brawl?”

“No—right in his own house. Not long after he left here.”

“The hell you say! Well, if he hadn’t fouled things up, you two would have been on your way, and he’d missed his date with death. Or maybe you were lucky. Whoever had it in for him might’ve settled things wherever he found him, whether or not you were there.”

Carver had not done a neat job of finding out where Alma had been; and then the play came to him. He picked up her income tax papers, and said, “Here’s something to make you scream. You don’t get a refund. You’re hooked for something like \$40 more. You weren’t in when I took it over.”

She did not even glance at the papers. She said, earnestly, “Jeff, I felt terrible about this evening. I never knew Herb had such a temper or such high-handed ways. Can’t you forget that, and help me?”

“Who is the fellow that’s fouled up?”

“Dennis Wayland.”

“I mean, what is he to you? Job prospect?”

“I hardly know him. It’s on account of my girl friend. He managed to phone her just before he was picked up, so she called me. She said Denny couldn’t possibly be guilty. I told her I’d talk to you.”

And this promised an inside track, an offset against the pressure which was closing in on him. “Picked up, when?”

“Oh, a couple hours ago. She wasn’t able to get in touch with me till just now. I was out at Happy Landings, with a crowd. The lake was lovely tonight. Imagine, coming home to news like that.”

Carver made mental note of the resort near the Yacht Club. Then, “How come Wayland had time to phone the girl?”

“He saw the police car pull up at the house, and began to wonder. When they came up the walk, he knew something was wrong; he called before he let them in.”

“He must’ve been expecting trouble for sure, to be so jumpy.”

“Oh, good Lord, Jeff! You’re as bad as the police!”

“You asked for a detective,” he answered, grimly. “I’m not much of one, never was. Just a skip tracer, and a tracker-down of grand and petty larceny from water front warehouses.

Except for the time that watchman was killed. But this is what you asked for.

“And the way you are putting it, it is Wayland’s girl who is important. Look here, honey. Suppose tonight you had been with Lowry, and he had been nabbed for murder?”

“Please, Jeff! Please do believe me; there was nothing between me and Herb, except what I told you.”

“That’s not what I mean. My point is this—suppose it had been that way, and

Lowry had been nabbed, and you were fond of the guy and all upset. Why would any girl friend of yours be all of an itch to put a detective on the job? Unless you yourself had been in the mess, in some way or other. What has the girl friend been up to?”

“Is that important?”

“Well, of course it is! Aside from wanting to know what I am poking my beak into, how could I do anything if I didn’t know the facts?”

“I am all in a flutter!” Alma confessed, needlessly. “Cornelia is Herb’s wife. They’ve not been living together for quite a few months. He won’t sue her for desertion; she wants a divorce, and isn’t in a position to sue him.”

“I begin to get it now. Account of this Dennis—Denny—”

“Dennis Wayland. And Herb was holding out for pure spite.”

CARVER CHUCKLED. “Saves alimony and upkeep. Begins to add up. Wayland goes to the mat with Lowry, and somebody gets killed. I’ll see it in the morning paper, and then we can talk some more.”

“But he couldn’t have done it. She knows he couldn’t have!”

“Oh, to hell with him! The more you tell me, the more I am willing to bet she has red ants crawling all over her on account of something that ties her into the killing. What is it?”

Alma eyed him for a long moment. “There is something.” She caught his hand. “Jeff, darling, will you go with me to talk to her? Let her tell you.”

He pulled a long face, frowned with a reluctance he did not by any means feel. “Oh, give her a jingle and see! The night’s pretty well shot, and I’m getting curious, in a way.”

A moment later, Alma was crossing the bridge, to do a fast job of dressing. She had barely stepped out of her bedroom when he demanded. “If Cornelia is such a special and dear friend of yours, how come you’re running around with her husband?”

“Oh, he didn’t know that Cornelia and I knew each other. We didn’t meet—she and I didn’t—until after he and she had separated. I might as well come right out with it, Jeff, and I do hope you’ll understand.

“There wasn’t any job involved. I did meet Herb, and he did seem to like me. Cornelia snapped at the chance that he would get serious and on my account, sue her. Once he was free, I’d develop a change of heart and in a hurry.”

Carver’s expression made it clear that he did not fancy her having the role of semi-professional co-respondent. Alma continued, “It does sound calculating and nasty. Any wonder I didn’t feel like explaining? Even though you and I weren’t engaged, or anywhere near it, it would leave a bad taste. But it wasn’t quite the way it sounds; I never let him forget he was still married. If he drew conclusions and thought that that was all I thought wrong with him, it was his conclusion and his lookout. If he got a divorce by mistake, he’d be no worse off than before. And he was a dog in the manger!”

CHAPTER 3

CORNELIA LOWRY lived just beyond Audubon Park, no great distance from the house she and her late husband had occupied.

On the way uptown, Carver asked Alma, “Mind telling me a bit about Lowry? He had a hobby of making enemies and heckling people to make them realize how superior he was.

When he so barged into my place, it was really the expression of his face that invited a sock in the puss. Was he always that way?”

“No, he wasn’t. Really, he was awfully agreeable, most of the time. What put him into such a mood tonight was that this afternoon, when he tried to call me from his home, the phone was out of order. He had reported it that morning. The company had promised to tend to it, and they hadn’t. Then, when he came to pick me up, I was over here, instead of being at home to buzz back the minute he rang. He simply could not endure it when anything failed to go like clockwork.”

“I begin to get it,” Carver said, thoughtfully. “And it dumps a job on my hands, trying to figure who’d pulled a boner and got needled for it until he blew a head-gasket. Can’t count too much on any of the standard motives. He must’ve been an unhappy sort of guy, to make him run around acting like Jehovah on a white horse.”

“Jeff?”

“Yes?”

“Begin to believe now that those were duty dates, and that I wasn’t ever getting my head turned by that Cadillac and things? A man who never makes or tolerates a mistake is a frightful strain!”

He pulled over into the shadows between street lights, and took his time about assuring that he had not been suspicious—merely worried at times. After all, a fellow could lose a dependent before he even had her.

Some minutes after Alma had carefully checked him for lipstick smudges, he

was talking to Cornelia Lowry. She was a small, blonde person, with a confiding and wide-eyed expression. Without anything savoring of helplessness, she had an appealing manner that could be depended upon to get people, male or female, to do things for her instead of letting her sweat out her own problems. It may have been the softness of her voice, combined with the soft lines of her attractive face, that evoked that protective urge. Carver, sensing the effect at once, set up his guards; and at the same time, he understood how easy it had been for Alma to have been baited into the role she had played.

Carver lost little time getting to the point.

He cut in, abruptly, "Why did Wayland go to your husband's place tonight?"

"But—but he didn't! He wasn't there. He couldn't've been, he and I were together all evening."

"With who else?"

"Why, just each other."

"About the worst and feeblest alibi imaginable. Either deal it straight, or deal with someone else. If he wasn't there, how come someone tagged him?"

"He was framed!" Indignation choked her.

"The criminal framed him."

"If the killer did that, it was to cover himself. But you two might've been with a crowd, and then it'd been no good at all.

Whoever phoned either saw Wayland around there, or saw someone that looked like Wayland, or else knew that you two were in a huddle here, without any real alibi—and, knew that Wayland and your husband were all primed to tangle about you. There was something that made Wayland seem useful for covering up.

"And another thing. Wayland saw a police car pull up at his place. He had so strong a hunch they wanted him for real trouble that he buzzed you. He'd not have phoned if it'd been a traffic rap he'd been expecting, unless maybe it'd been hit and run driving, after he left you." Carver picked up his hat. "Suppose Wayland dummies up? First thing the police do is corner his friends, asking

about his other friends, particularly women. Your name will pop up. Then the fun begins.

“Whenever a man is knocked off, his widow and her boy friend are the first ones to be sweated. You can tell them, or you can tell me. I won’t monkey with this as long as you hold out.”

HE GRABBED the door knob. That brought Cornelia to her feet with a flurry of robe and a twinkle of legs. “Wait! We were there, Denny and I: we found him.” She fairly poured it out now. “It was the most sickening and horrible thing. We were so shocked we just got out, and quick. Afraid to report it, for fear the call’d be traced. And we’d be in it.”

“What’d you go there for in the first place?” Cornelia’s glance shifted to Alma, who gave her a nod. She answered, “I’d written a threatening letter, of a sort— not realizing I was playing right into Herb’s hands, if ever I did get cause for suing him. So, Denny and I went to look for the note. We thought he’d be away tonight.”

Alma cut in, “They counted on my being out to dinner with Herb. And when you and I and he had words, and he walked out, I didn’t stop to think he might go back home. I was so sure he’d make a point of caging another date, just to show me. And when it did occur to me to phone Cornelia, she was out.”

“Begins to shape up,” Carver admitted. “Get the note?”

Cornelia shuddered. “After what we saw, we just cleared out in a panic, once we got over the shock.” Then, triumphantly, “But Denny must have had it in mind when the police pulled up. That’s why the sight of them made him call me. That note—they’d found it, and put two and two together. Just as you said, widow and her boy friend are the first suspects. It wasn’t signed, but they’d start figuring on us.”

“You still have a key to your husband’s house? All right, and you’re entitled to go in. So am I, if you tell me to.”

“But why? I never want to see—”

“You won’t mind, when it’s cleaned up. He had an enemy. Finding who it was is the best way to spring Wayland. Alma tells me your husband kept notes on

everything.”

“Did he! He even kept cash register receipts from every bar,” Cornelia affirmed. “A mania with him. A record of everything. No, not stingy—just a methodical streak.”

“OK,” Carver said. “No matter what the police find and take along as exhibits, there will be things that won’t mean anything to them. That’s where you and I will get busy, and Alma, too. Looking for what points away from Wayland. All right, get dressed, we’re going places.”

“Oh, good God—not there and not tonight! Anyway, it is probably still being watched.”

“I didn’t mean there; you move in with Alma.”

“Why?”

“So when the police come looking for you, you won’t be here. Wanting to talk to you, and not finding you, will be a roadblock for them, which’ll give me a chance to work.”

“But Denny’s innocent!”

Catching her by the arm, he whisked her to her feet. “Get dressed, before I turn a hand to dressing you myself!”

“Go ahead,” Alma seconded. “We won’t be too crowded at my place.”

THE CHANCE that a police car would roll up to take Cornelia in for questioning kept Carver on edge until he had her well on the way downtown. And at Alma’s door, he paused to say, “In the morning, I’ll get Denny a lawyer; he’ll need one, and with all the trimmings.”

“We’re both flat broke,” Cornelia told him. “The first thing they want is a retainer.”

“How about your husband’s bank account? Even if you can’t draw on it, it’s enough yours now for a lawyer to see his way through.”

“Bank account!” she echoed. “There was an ex-wife—one before me—he was paying off. And income tax installments due. And now there’ll be an inheritance tax lien on the house. Lord alone knows how much he had borrowed on it. I never could keep track of things. Everything is in such a muddle that I don’t see how any lawyer would gamble on collecting his fee till he looked into the prospects.”

Her wide-eyed dismay and her quiet resignation to the inevitable had exactly the effect that Carver had anticipated; he knew he was playing true to form, the form of all of Cornelia’s public, when he said, “The chap who handled his tax problems would have the answers. Interest paid is a deduction, and the person to whom it’s paid is listed. Sometimes alimony is deductible, sometimes not, depending on whether it’s dished out by the month, or paid in a lump sum settlement. And so on—to say nothing of getting some leads as to who Herb was having trouble with in a business way. Guys he hated, he’d gripe about. Apparently to anyone who’d listen, Alma, you know the man I mean?”

“Wait, I’ll get his card; Herb gave it to me. Said it was frightfully inefficient working out one’s own tax. That an expert saved you more than the fee he charged.”

Carver, as he pocketed the card of Bradford Barstow, Salter Building, Camp Street, was thinking, But you still figure your own tax, so you can chew out the expert, in case his answers and yours don’t jibe. That’s the Herb Lowry Method. Nothing bucks a fellow up better than making a monkey of an expert. And once he had the immediate demands of the situation under control, he would go with Cornelia to Lowry’s house and give it a thorough going over. But for her arrival with Denny Wayland, he might have got a good deal further with his study of Lowry’s paper work.

The other angle was that Wayland could be guilty; that Cornelia had still held back the essence of the story. That is, she and Wayland might have been in a huddle the result of which had been that Wayland had resolved to go alone for a showdown, instead of fooling away time later hunting that spiteful letter. It was barely possible, yet, it was possible, that he could have killed Lowry without himself having been bespattered with blood.

Then, back to Cornelia, only a little down and off St. Charles Avenue, to tell her that Lowry had not been in. That would have made her insist upon going with

him to make the search. And he could not well have refused.

Since Cornelia believed Wayland innocent, she would solemnly swear he had not left her, to see Lowry alone. And she must surely believe him innocent, otherwise, after having seen that revolting slaughterhouse, the mere shade of suspicion would have shaken her.

Murder in Carrollton, as Carver expected, hogged the headlines. Cornelia was named only as the widow, who had thus far made no statement. Wayland was not mentioned at all.

Apparently they had booked him on suspicion, and had their reasons for not charging him.

Where Carver had expected that Wayland would be so strongly spotlighted that working on the case would be easy, the law had gone into reverse.

He read on. Cash register receipts in Lowry's pockets had given a list of Vieux Carre bars he had visited before going home and to his death. A bartender with a camera eye had described Carver as the unidentified man who had been looking for Lowry.

Another had stated, "He said he'd help him with his income tax when he caught up with him."

TO SPEAK of catching up with a man who is a couple of bars ahead of you is the most innocent expression in the world; and when you do find him, he may be a few drinks ahead, and, amiably enough, you will again be catching up with him. But Lowry's death gave another meaning to that same innocent phrase.

It would have been worse but for two things: first, that Carver had only recently moved to his place in the French Quarter, to be near the waterfront which his watchman's service patrolled; and second, he had been so busy getting organized that he had not been in the bars of the Vieux Carre to have become as conspicuous as an established resident of that quarter. He did almost all his business talking at the Sazerac, on Gravier Street, in the heart of the financial district, or else, in the market restaurants across from the French Market, from Tujague's and downward.

That Wayland was not mentioned suggested that the police had their doubts as to

the anonymous call. "I gained time, all right, turning him in," Carver grumbled to his image in the mirror as he shaved. "But time for whom?"

He had breakfast with Alma and Cornelia. He should have, but he did not relish the waffles. What killed his appetite was the glances they exchanged, glances he caught from the very corners of his eyes. Both women had read the paper, and both were a bit too bright to be convincing. There was no telling what manner of hell Cornelia might raise, by way of springing Wayland.

"You sit tight, honey," he said to the lovely blonde. "The cops are playing double foxy, pretending they're not interested in Denny. I'll get him a mouthpiece who'll go to bat with a habeas corpus or something. And then I'll see Barstow, the tax expert; your husband had to tell him a lot of details to keep the score straight. And after enough talk, he's bound to have told a few things that didn't pertain to deductions. Just sit tight, don't worry, and don't poke your chin out. If you land in the pokey, who's going to help me carry the ball?"

She went saucer-eyed, and looked up with an expression that predicted the words which followed: "Jeff, you're wonderful! I don't know what I'd do if Alma hadn't known you."

But Carver knew what he would be doing if Alma had not known Cornelia: he would not be working on a murder case to save his own hide, and he might even be having breakfast alone with Alma, in that apartment where white marble lions guarded the patio archway.

CHAPTER 4

AS HE HOOFED toward Canal Street, the boundary-line between the Vieux Carre and “uptown”, he pondered somberly on the way Alma had kissed him after breakfast: the under-cover wince, he called it, for lack of better words. She suspected him, or what was almost as bad, she was trying not to suspect.

He stopped first to see Pierre Livaudais, his attorney, whose “Creole” viewpoint would be useful. Creole meant native born, home grown, and not “mulatto.” By extension, Creole beef was meat that came from Louisiana, not from the northern packing plants; and there was Creole lettuce, and a good many tomatoes similarly tagged.

“Pete,” he began, “here’s a retainer, in the name of Cornelia Lowry.” Then, outlining the lady’s position, he continued, “Go see her boy friend. Tell him to dummy up and say nothing; don’t set the town afire to spring him. The way I’m working on this case, it’ll be no help having him on the loose right this minute. With him in the pokey, she’ll cooperate better, and we’ll all move faster.”

Livaudais’ chubby face beamed with amusement and knowingness. “You’re my client too, Jeff; don’t be afraid to tell me you’re working mostly in your own interest, you hear me?”

“You harpooning me!”

The attorney chuckled, and looked up from writing a receipt for the retainer. “It’s pretty plain to anyone who knows you by sight. I mean, reasonably well. Call me back every two hours. In case you don’t buzz me, I’ll come looking for you. You know where.”

“Third Precinct?”

“First there, but no telling where you might land. Good luck, Jeff, and don’t cut too many corners.”

As long as Carver kept moving, there was not too much risk of being picked up because of the description. Relatively few people can translate printed words into images that match up with life.

He found Bradford Barstow in the old, two-story Salter Building. The place had dusky halls, and the comfortable drowsiness of old time New Orleans. In flavor as well as shape, it was quite unlike the towering Hibernia Bank and the other modern buildings of the financial district.

Barstow himself was big enough to fill the acre of emptiness that would have been utilized efficiently in a modern place. He was not fat: he was simply large, muscular, and solid, with a tanned and angular face that bespoke strength. His was not hatchet-faced angularity; it was that of stone squared for the masons.

Barstow wore an imported plaid, brown with red check. His shirt harmonized, and his tie contrasted. His breast pocket handkerchief was just right. He was too consciously well-groomed for the comfortably outmoded office, and too dynamic. Carver sensed the jet-propelled energy of the man who greeted him, and clinched his words with a bone crushing handclasp which ended by planting Carver in a chair by the broad desk. It was too small to be a polo field, and too large for anything else: yet, it fitted the office.

In the few paces Barstow had walked, his shoes had squeaked. The tweet-queek-tweet, not loud, had jarred a silence broken only by the muted tick-tick of a typewriter in the inner office. The shoes did not fit the rest of the man's gear.

"Yes, Mr. Carver. What can I do for you?"

Carver pointed at the morning paper lying on Barstow's desk. "This business about Herb Lowry. Mrs. Lowry is badly shaken up about it all—I mean, the second Mrs. Lowry. She asked me to handle a few details for her. Such as tax information."

"You her attorney?"

"Power of attorney, yes. Lawyer, no. Give her a buzz if you have to check up."

"Let's hear what you want to know, first. Terrible thing, terrible. Though he was my client; she was not."

"That is right where you come in." Carver outlined the tax angles, income and inheritance; he touched on mortgages and interest payments. He concluded, "She is short of cash, and has a lot of immediate expense; she wants to know how she stands, and what liens there are against the estate. Bank statements would get her

nowhere. A tax consultant has it all, right on tap, assembled.”

“She’d better consult her attorney, don’t you think?”

“That’s something she doesn’t have at her beck and call. How many of us do? Anyway, what’s the score on Lowry?”

“Off hand, with so many clients, I’ll have to look it up.”

“Well, now,” Carver retorted, pleasantly yet pointedly, “I was talking to Lowry just yesterday evening, a couple of hours before he was killed. He was all up in the air about his second installment.”

THE PAPER had given this only scanty mention, yet it did seem that Barstow should have noted the reference to his specialty. He snapped back, “If you’re so well posted, why ask me?”

“As I said, you have the details.”

“I’ll call you back when I’ve looked it up.”

“Anyway, give me the law on it, the general picture. Maybe I didn’t make that clear.”

“I’ll have to look that up.”

“An expert ought to have that much at his finger tips. How come you don’t?”

For a moment Carver, seeing the anger flare in Barstow’s eyes, estimated his own ability at toe to toe slugging, and knew he would be a very poor second. Though he had means with him for leveling the odds, he did not want to use them needlessly. Then Barstow said, smoothly, “An expert is one just because he doesn’t guess. Since you are in such a hurry, I’ll take a look. Wait a moment.”

Barstow, shoes squeaking, made for the office beyond the dark paneling. The shoes were brand new. The well-groomed man had not taken time to give them the first polishing they should have had before being worn.

Carver followed on into the office where a black haired girl was transcribing dictation.

Barstow was reaching for the extension phone when Carver said, “Hell, man, do you farm your business out, or do you have to consult a consultant?”

“Take a seat out front. I’ll tell you everything I can when I have looked it up.”

“What I meant to tell you,” Carver continued, “is that the widow is not at home.”

He gave Alma’s phone number. “Call her where she’s staying and get her OK, so you can talk freely and answer any questions that I might bring up.”

Barstow eased up at once. “What was that number again?”

He made a memo when Carver repeated; and then Carver, turning to the door, gave him a final word: “Go to it, pal, I’ll be waiting.”

Once in the front office, he went to the desk and lifted the handset. He got it to his ear before Barstow had done spinning the dial.

Carver was not surprised by what he heard. Barstow had police headquarters, and was saying, “I’ve got the man you’re looking for in the Lowry case. Answers the description perfectly. Sure, I’ll detain him.”

No sooner had Barstow hung up when Carver followed suit.

Instead of clearing out, Carver stuck; and it was sticky work; he had a fine case of the shakes. For an instant, he was tempted to go back to the inner office and settle matters. He glanced at the clock. Less than a minute had passed, when he heard Barstow’s solid footsteps.

The man stepped out. He had a leveled automatic. “You’re under arrest, Carver. Don’t start anything. The police are on the way.”

“Arrest—what for?”

“Murder of Herbert Lowry. You answer the description perfectly.”

Carver answered, calmly, “Put up that gun, or I’ll sue you blind for this. You’re asking for a slug for false arrest, and I’ll see that you get it. Better look up your law first.”

And then he whisked the inkstand he had snared while holding Barstow's attention, catching him off guard with his casual voice.

The fluid blinded the expert; the shot he jerked went wild.

Meanwhile, Carver had followed through. He bounded inside Barstow's reach and smashed down with his blackjack. The impact staggered him. The second wallop crumpled him.

BARSTOW had barely hit the deck when Carver knelt and yanked off his shoes.

Once in the hall, he strolled toward the stairs.

He was in the lobby, standing on a weighing machine, when two cops barged in. They ignored him, and the stairs; instead, they stepped into the elevator.

Carver, captured shoes nestled under his coat, made for the waterfront. Two of his nightwatchmen had quarters over a restaurant in the area that fringed the L&N tracks. Since the newspaper had described his suit and added "well-dressed," Carver decided upon an immediate cure. He went up to borrow some clothes.

Waking up the watchman, Carver lost no time in changing, and wasted none on explanations. When, half an hour later, and probably long before Barstow could remember his own name, Carver began his prowl of South Rampart Street, he wore a suit that matched the district. He carried a metal tool kit, such as service men take when going to fix household appliances; in addition, he had Barstow's shoes.

At each loan office and second hand store, the specialty of the first couple blocks of the street, he unwrapped the shoes and began his spiel.

"Look, you sold me these last night, and now I don't need 'em. I promoted a pair, for free."

"Give you a dollar."

"Dollar, hell! You just sold 'em to me last night, how about a refund?"

"I sold 'em? Not those shoes, and not to you."

In honest indignation at chrome-plated nerve, the trader would produce a sample from his odd lot of new shoes, to prove his point.

After several attempts in other places, Carver got a new reaction. “Sure, I sold these, but not to you.”

“If you didn’t sell ‘em to me, who didja sell ‘em to?”

“To a fellow twice your size. I never saw you before.”

“Sure you saw me. It was about ten o’clock last night,” Carver hazarded. “You waited on me when you got done with him.”

“What you think this is, huh? It was eleven, and there wasn’t anyone but that customer. I lose money keeping open nights, I don’t know why I do it. I’m just too obliging. Now listen, I’ll give you something else in trade. Hat? Shirt? Socks?”

“Trade, go shove it; I want my money back.”

“What for? Ain’t they good shoes?”

Ignoring that point, Carver continued his griping, “You couldn’t sell anything like these to that well-dressed guy in here before you waited on me—the well-dressed guy that wasn’t here. I was.”

“What’s the matter with those shoes?” The man snatched a box from a heap of perhaps half a dozen. “Factory seconds. Nationally advertised where it ain’t sandpapered off clean. There’s a broker on Gravier Street buys these whenever I get some, you hear me?”

“Well, they squeak.”

“Ah... they squeak? Now, I tell you a fellow what’ll fix that for a half a dollar.” He gave Carver the name of the cobbler. “I didn’t sell you anything; I never saw you before but I’m doing the best I can for you. And I got some sneakers with gum rubber soles that don’t squeak. Maybe you need something quiet in your work.”

HAT SETTLED, Carver phoned Alma’s apartment, expecting to talk to Cornelia.

Alma herself answered, saying, "I'm taking the day off. Last night was too much of a beating. Good Lord, Jeff, you are in for it; there's a plainclothesman down in the patio, pretending to be a new tenant. Where are you?"

"I'm getting all fixed to put the clamps on Barstow so he'll tell me more about Lowry's enemies and business deals. Instead of talking to me, he called the cops. Didn't you hear?"

"It's not on the radio."

"How's Cornelia doing?"

"She's half frantic, and she swears she'll get another lawyer if yours doesn't do better, and soon. How are you going to see more of Barstow, after the way he acted? And where could I see you?"

"Nowhere! If they weren't pig dumb, they'd've found out by now about you and me, from somebody around the Quarter, and started searching your place to find me. Or maybe they are not so dumb, and are waiting to follow you when you try to meet me."

"How'll you handle Barstow? Maybe I ought to talk to him?"

"I'll tangle with him at his house, and see he gets no calls through. You keep your nose out."

He hung up, and made for his next destination, the Garden District, which lay between Saint Charles Avenue and the River.

CHAPTER 5

AFTER dismissing his cab, he phoned Barstow's home. Carver was not using his car; the garage was undoubtedly staked.

He got no answer, so he set out afoot with his tool kit, in which he now carried the shoes.

The Garden District was largely one of two and three-story dwellings, set well back and in the midst of grounds shadowed by tall magnolias and palms. Some were still occupied by the descendants of the original builders; others, however, and many of them, had been subdivided into kitchenette apartments, or converted into rooming houses.

This one-time spacious district had become crowded beyond the imagining of those who, perhaps a century ago, had left the French Quarter to live in what then was suburban quiet, seclusion, and dignity.

Barstow's place, as nearly as Carver could size it up, was a reconverted carriage house, somewhat apart from the brick red, ginger-bread mansion whose grounds included nearly a quarter of a good sized city block. Washlines and their flapping cargo assured him that so many families lived there that he had only to move in boldly. Instead of going down the drive, he opened a side gate, and cut across the grounds.

Barstow, he noted from the cards at the doorways, occupied half the carriage house. He rang, and after getting no answer, used the thin leaf of spring steel which he carried as a companion to his kit of educated keys. The latch yielded readily. He stepped into a living room from which a bedroom opened on one side, and a kitchenette from the other.

Reconversion had been going on for some years. In addition to the gas-fired wall-heater, there was a fireplace with a grate for charcoal.

The furniture, the wallboard, and the jogs that indicated the ways of remodeling, suggested a French Quarter interior, except that the ceilings were not high enough.

He noted the oversized camphor chest that some Chinese artisan had carved with infinite elaboration. A paper bag of charcoal was sitting in the scuttle. Two empty bags lay near the rack which supported poker and hearth broom. There were a few sticks of pine kindling, lying within the loop of binder twine that had secured the lot. Though the place was fairly well dusted and picked up, it had the familiar, comfortable slovenliness of quarters tended by a woman who knew that few bachelors ever snoop around looking for dust on the rungs of chairs.

The ash tray on the table, not far from the phone, had half a dozen butts that had been ground out when a quarter smoked; none had lipstick on them.

He got all this in a slowly circling glance; then he stepped into the bedroom, rather than waste time on the camphor chest, or the writing desk, or the kitchen.

In lieu of built-in clothes closet there was an old fashioned armoire, dark and of a size which came near convincing Carver that it had been custom-built for some lady who needed emergency storage space for a lover biding his chance to jump from a second-story window.

And that wardrobe cabinet was what interested Carver.

It contained two blue suits, and two grays, as well as slacks and jackets, and a tweed.

There were no shoes in the bottom of the armoire; there were only patterns in the dust film to show where shoes had been. In the drawer at the bottom of the armoire he found trees for as many pairs as had been sitting on the deck just above.

He glanced under the bed. No slippers. He opened a small locker. The absence of shoes made one of his hunches take shape. However, the lack of shoes is a fragile argument, unless it leads to something positively existing, and substantial.

A lot of leg-work confronted him; and then, the problem of not being picked up until he had gone further into things. Right now was a good s time to phone Pierre Livaudais, and ask the lawyer how Cornelia had been behaving, and what the police were doing about Denny Wayland. He could wait for a call back if need be, which made this spot very handy.

Carver stepped into the living room to make the call.

HE HAD barely touched the handset when a vague sound startled him. The lid of the big chest had lifted, though not enough for it to come to rest against the wall. Barstow, flushed from strain but showing no evidence of air shortage, had his pistol leveled.

“Nothing you can throw this time,” he said. “Turn your back while I get out where I can talk better.”

Carver had raised a window so that he would have a quick exit in case of surprise, but he had been on the alert only against someone coming in the door. And now, being shot as a housebreaker was a hot and immediate prospect. The shock of realization had such an impact that he could not become as shaky as a lesser danger would have made him. Though numbed by the knowledge of what the ensuing seconds promised, he had at the same time become keener, more aware of trifles. He was all sharpened up, as though he were an intensely interested spectator of what was about to happen to someone else: he knew that however quick he was, and sufficiently well coordinated to pluck mosquitoes out of the air with thumb and forefinger, he could not get at his shoulder holster in time.

Barstow’s voice was too carefully controlled. There was something other than wrath in his eyes. Like the face, they radiated purpose and resolution. However, these were restrained by something which Carver had not yet perceived. Barstow had only to pull the trigger, and when it was over, his explanation would be simple and sufficient: he had surprised the housebreaker who had that morning resisted arrest, slugged him, and taken his shoes.

That Barstow controlled the trigger-finger which he so plainly wanted to give a workout meant only that there was something he wanted to know; there was something about which he had to be sure.

Carver’s acting on a wrong guess would set the automatic popping.

“I said, turn around. You’re too quick to trust.”

“Mind if I call Cornelia Lowry first? She sent me here, you know. To clear up some suspicions of hers.”

“That’ll keep; do as I tell you.”

As Carver turned, he picked up Barstow's image in the wall mirror. The weapon shifted for an instant as Barstow straightened and stepped from the chest. That shift gave a hint as to the man's muscular coordination; he had too much of it for comfort.

That Barstow had not fired was significant. There was no telling how much the mention of Cornelia Lowry had contributed to that shred of indecision: yet, far as he could trust the mirrored image, there had been a change of expression, a subtle shading of momentary doubt, the evidence of an additional thread of restraint.

WITHOUT twisting his head, Carver ignored the twitch between his shoulder blades and said, "Listen to why I'm here, and you might see things in a different way. In a way that concerns you plenty."

"All I know," Barstow answered, "is that you're wanted, and that you're a housebreaker. Turn around now if you've got anything to say before I have them come and get you."

But as he faced about, Carver was more certain than ever that Barstow was double-talking: he wanted the police only after the housebreaker was in no shape ever to give an interview. The encounter, as long as it lasted, would be a matching of pretense by pretense, for whichever one made it, the first mistake would be final. Carver did not need more than two shreds of time for him to get his gun from its spring clip holster, and he did not send engraved announcements.

"When you came at me with a gun, in your office," Carver said, blandly, "I had to work fast. I had to stay out of the pokey till I could use the information my client gave me."

"You were in such a hurry," Barstow retorted, "that you took time to grab my shoes. What for?"

That, then, was why Barstow had paused to parley, instead of firing at once. And that reference to shoes also made it more certain than ever that Carver was about to get a foreclosure on heavily-mortgaged time. Yet this warning, this confirmation of his danger, gave him a glimpse of the slender chance of getting clear, provided he did not upset Barstow's balance. The man was keyed up. It was not a matter of waiting for cause or water-tight legal excuse to shoot;

instead, from the moment of Carver's entry, it had been only a question of waiting until there was no longer any reason for not shooting.

"Oh, the shoes?" Carver shrugged. "What Cornelia sent me for was to find the letters you took from Lowry's house last night."

"What letters? I wasn't at the house."

"He had written about the income tax swindle you pulled on him," Carver explained. "He made an original and a copy. All Cornelia could find was the carbon paper itself, a sheet that had never been used before. It's easy to read, but I told her that while that was enough to put you on the hook, the way to get you sewed up tight was to find the original and the copy, the two sheets you took out of the house. They'd both have your fingerprints—prove you had been there and had grabbed the unmailed letter. Much handier that way, to make you fork over what you chiseled from Lowry."

"But for her having the carbon paper he used when he wrote his gripe to the Standard, you would look fine, claiming you had cooled me as a burglar. Begin to see what I mean?"

Though it was plain that Barstow was catching on, the gun did not waver. "There was a dispute about his tax return, yes."

"Damn right there was. He sent you his check for the installment plus fee," Carver set forth, according to his figuring of what must have been done to cause such a beef. "You made a faked return, putting in dependents and exemptions and deductions he had not claimed. Then you sent the Internal Revenue a draft in his name, for a smaller amount. You jerked down a couple of hundred bucks difference. I'm not the only one who knows that now."

BARSTOW'S voice remained calm.

"I did nothing of the sort. And I make any mistakes, or any penalties that come from them. My fee is insurance for that very thing."

"Sure it is," Carver conceded. "Most people don't have good memories, or a good head for figures. That's why they hand the simple job to an expert. Lowry was different; when he got his bill for the next quarter, he saw it was a lot lower than it should have been—and instead of whooping with glee, like Joe Doakes

would have done, he figured it out for himself, to find out how come he had been rooked on the first installment. Most people would've been so happy about the government making a mistake, they'd never dreamed of looking into it.

"He didn't intend to let you get away by just making good. He had it figured you were gambling that most clients would not catch on, and that each one who did not would be a clear profit.

"So, you had plenty of motive to kill Lowry to keep him from exposing you to the public. You'd been cold-caulked with an indictment as long as a boxcar. You went to shut him up or buy him off. He wouldn't listen to reason. He probably swung at you, and you slugged him to death. Getting rough now will do nothing but make it plain that you blew your top and tried to kill the story by settling me. So don't waste any ammunition."

"You're trying to blackmail me into not turning you over to the police."

"Sure, I am. And you are willing to make a deal to get that sheet of carbon paper from Cornelia Lowry so what her husband wrote about you won't blow you up sky-high."

"Lowry told me about her and Wayland," Barstow said. "Naturally anything she could use against me would get the heat off him."

"You're catching on. And it's just a question—" Carver deliberately reached for one of the partly smoked cigarettes in the ash tray. "Question of getting that carbon paper."

He plucked the book of matches from the clip on the tray and jerked one loose. Before striking it, he paused, to add, "Once she takes a notion to—"

He struck the match, without first having closed the cover; that the whole pack flared up was anything but an accident. He let out a yell and turned, making a slapping motion as though to beat out the hissing, flaming matches which had apparently "frozen" to his left hand, as they so often do in such case.

But they were not stuck. He flicked them away, and as he did so, he reached for his gun.

Startled, shaken by the frantic yell, Barstow fired, a split second after Carver's

shot. He staggered back, and stumbled on a wadded rug. Instead of shooting a second time, Carver clouted him with the barrel of his revolver.

That flattened the tax expert. The automatic skated across the floor. Carver slumped back into a chair, and stretched out his legs. He laid the gun on the table. The main difference between him and the man who lay twitching on the floor was that the latter was totally unconscious.

His cheek stung from flecks of unburned powder. That would help, in case Barstow did not pull through.

THERE WERE voices outside, all a brawl and a gabble. Someone was coming in the bedroom window he had left open. Someone else was pounding at the door. He got up, and in the ensuing moment, saw that he had all the company he could handle.

The neighbors were the chattering background. Alma and Pierre Livaudais lurched in over the threshold as Moreau, a plainclothes man Carver knew, stepped in from the bedroom. It turned out that he had trailed Cornelia to Livaudais' office.

And Barstow was sitting up before the saturnine detective had more than put through a call for ambulance and headquarters.

Firing as he had, from a crouch, Carver had drilled the man high enough in the chest to leave him a very good chance of surviving; too good a chance, it developed, when he noted that the shot had been pretty much off center.

“Sure, I followed Lowry around from bar to bar,” Carver said, in answer to Barstow's demand that the cop arrest the housebreaker. “He was howling about how he had been gypped. Did I make his return?”

Barstow retorted, “I wasn't at the house— he phoned me—I promised him I'd make good.”

“You phoned him,” Carver countered. “And then went out and ended by killing him, kicking, slugging, or what not. Where'd you phone him from, and when?”

“I phoned him back after I went over the records—about half-past nine or a bit later. From the Royal Family Liquor Store, on St. Charles. Ask Curley. I got

change for phoning, and asked him if the clock was right. I called back—”

“He answered?”

“Certainly he did. I heard wrangling and quarrelling; the line went dead.”

“Prove that, can you?”

Barstow’s wound did not bother him enough to keep him from showing triumph.

“Ask Curley. When I came from the booth, I kicked about not getting my money back, the line was dead.”

Carver turned on the detective. “He’s cooked his own goose. That line—”

And then Alma cut in, “That line was dead all day. Herb Lowry was beefing about it. Barstow couldn’t have phoned Herb. He killed Herb himself, tore out the phone, then made an anonymous call to put Denny Wayland on the spot. He must’ve known about Denny and Cornelia.”

“But the shoes have it,” Carver said, when he got his chance. “Look in my tool kit and see the pair I took from Barstow. Go to Riley’s Loan Office on South Rampart. There’s a man there who’ll tell you he sold those shoes to Barstow. And if you look around this place you won’t find any of Barstow’s old shoes. He got rid of them on the chance that he’d tracked enough blood to leave a print, or stepped on soft ground in the garden. He could not take a chance that destroying just the pair of shoes he wore out there would save him. Any pair of shoes he had worn would give a good idea about the walk of the wearer, the way he threw his feet, the way he carried himself—the sort of things you can get from a moulage or a footprint in blood or tracked liquor.”

“You can’t prove anything from shoes I haven’t got!”

CARVER turned to the fireplace. “I was going to phone Pierre, and then look in the grate. It had just struck me that he’d used a hell of a lot of charcoal, considering the weather we’ve been having. Two bags of it, and a spare.”

He knelt, and dug into the grate, and under it. He produced shreds of warped leather, of charred cloth, and bits that had not been burned.

“Can’t risk putting the stuff into the garbage; the collector frisks it for salvage. Throwing a package away is dangerous. But charred stuff like this seemed safe enough to dump into the rubbish can. So, it wasn’t burned carefully, and to a finish. If the lab technician can’t find blood in these samples, the guy deserves to be turned loose. And redouble it, if they can’t find blood smudges on the car upholstery. Judging from what the paper said, the Lowry place must have been a bucket of blood.”

Then the ambulance arrived, and more cops, and some newspaper men. Moreau gave Carver a shrewd eyeing, and said, “I’m willing enough to let well enough alone, but if you didn’t put through that anonymous call, then I’m next year’s carnival king!”

“A crack like that could get you a slander suit,” Carver retorted. “That’s a clear dig at my fitness to practice my trade, profession, business, or calling. It reflects on my character and integrity. You might as well turn Denny Wayland loose.”

“He is loose. Not a blood smudge and he couldn’t possibly have cleaned himself up, and his car, too, in such a short time, between the killing and pickup. You ought to see the mess that place is in!”

And that was enough to make Carver turn to his attorney.

“Pete, drive me and Alma home, will you?” Then, as they got to the lawyer’s car, “Sure there’s room in front, particularly since Alma hadn’t developed career-girl hips. But we’re sitting in the back seat to talk about exemptions on the hoof, and the peeping Tom lion in the patio of the Two Brothers, on Toulouse Street.”

“We’ll have dinner at my place,” Alma murmured, once they were under way. “I know Cornelia and Denny will be way too busy for sociability.”

“Listen, honey,” he corrected. “You mean, we will be way too busy for sociability.” He raised his voice. “Get that, Pete? One drink, and you’ve got a date somewhere else!”