

The Drink Tank 439

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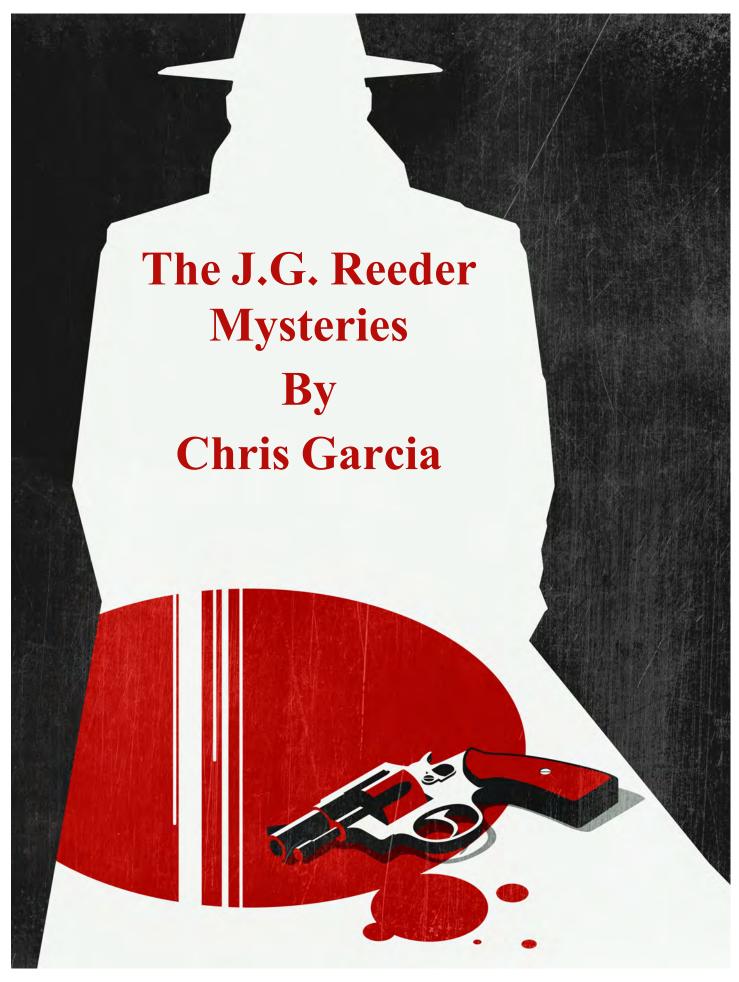
Page 35—Automatic Noir Title Generator by Christopher J. Garcia

This issue is the first of three. This one covers Crime Fiction from the beginning to 1950 (though honestly, it's the Victorian through to the 50s. The second will cover 1950 through 2000, so the end of the Pulp era, the paper-back days, the blooming of the modern writers. And finally, there's 21st Century Crime, which will include authors as varied as Ayelet Waldman, Aram Saroyan, and on and on. While we're focusing on novels and stories, yes, there will be some film and radio thrown in.

Because how could we not.

This issue comes after a bit of a break. I'm working on my book, and the world seems to be start-stopping itself along which makes planning difficult. We've got another coming in the coming weeks. It's on *Wheel of Time* and is the debut of the great Joel Philips on our Co-editors list!

This issue is dedicated to two comics legends, now loved and lost—Neal Adams and George Perez.



I grew up reading Sherlock, but as I got older, aside from Hollywood portrayals of the great detective, I've been less and less about him. I think part of it is the fact that he's just not nearly administrative enough for my tastes. I love the stories, and do revisit them, but it's like buying a pack of baseball cards when you're nostalgic and walking by them at Target. It's about that itch for the days when it all felt new.

And so, I was driving.

When I start on a project like this, I go and download every free audiobook I can find. Research, I say, trolling the depths of Libby, Overdrive, and the free area of Audible. I downloaded an audiobook of stories from the early twentieth century.

It was incredibly cheaply produced.

The stories were public domain, the performances ranged from okay to simple repurposing of earlier radio dramas -- lazy, and the audio could use a serious leveling. I was annoyed, but the second story on the thing was interesting, and it somehow stuck with me through the crap. I replayed the story, and then after that, I listened when I was at work, hopped on Amazon, and found a book. A physical book: the atomic representation of the words of the story that appeared on that crappy compilation. I committed to giving shelf space to it because it moved me SO.

The story was "The Treasure Hunt," the detective was J.G. Reeder, and the author was Edgar Wallace. Film history nerds will know that name from a little movie called King Kong. He was fairly prolific in the area of mystery writing, though, and crime fiction was a world where if you wanted to survive, you had to create a character you could turn into a series. Wallace did just that with Chief Detective J.G. Reeder.

Reeder is no Bulldog Drummond. He's not a hard-boiled detective. He's a smart, cunning shark of a detective, who somehow uses his knowledge and craft to get the bad guys to do his

bidding for him. The best example of this is the story "The Treasure Hunt."

The basic idea is this: a just-released forger, Lew Kohl, has naught but revenge on his mind against Reeder, who got him shackles so that Lew lost seven years to Dartmore. He's a smart and vicious type, though he has a "friend" in Stan Bride, who is letting him crash in his flat, despite the fact that they're both out on license. Lew is a charismatic baddie, not quite a Moriarty, but a solid bad guy who you want to get caught, but you kinda want him to get off on a technicality that allows him to show up again.

Now, like many Sherlock Holmes stories, there's an A and a B story, but unlike most Holmes stories, they play off each other, though they have 0% in common. Instead, Reeder uses

the criminals in one crime to solve the crime.

Well, that's a stretch, but it kind of makes sense.

This is a different kind of story, and one that plays with the idea of police procedure in a

way that was fairly revolutionary.

The other story is a straight-ahead missing woman case. A local baron, rich and about to marry his rich cousin only months after the disappearance of his wife on a cruise. That's very typical, and apparently he's so connected that even after an anonymous letter saying that he'd sold his wife's jewels in Paris, he's not searched.

Reeder investigates the disappearance, but he bumps up ore directly against Kohl. There's a fun visit of Kohl to Reeder where they both play the perfect roles. Kohl is brutally direct, while Reeder is suitably dismissive... until he's not. He produces a Browning out of nowhere and fires a shot across Kohl's brow. It's a wonderful cinematic scene. No wonder he wrote King Kong.

In the end . . . well I will only say that Reeder had everyone's number. One thing that is perfect is how Reeder's boss must properly eat crow at the end of the story. It's a lot like Holmes and

Lestrade, only Reeder is sticking it to his boss!

The other Reeder stories area pretty good, though this one feels so much more innovative for the time, as if it's a signpost that the crime fiction that we were getting from Doyle and his ilk was about to make a change into the stuff we'd be getting from Black Mask and those harderboiled detective types. I am psyched that I've got another volume of Reeder coming my way!!!

Forthcoming Sherlock Holmes Graphic Novel By Julian West and Ian Nicolas

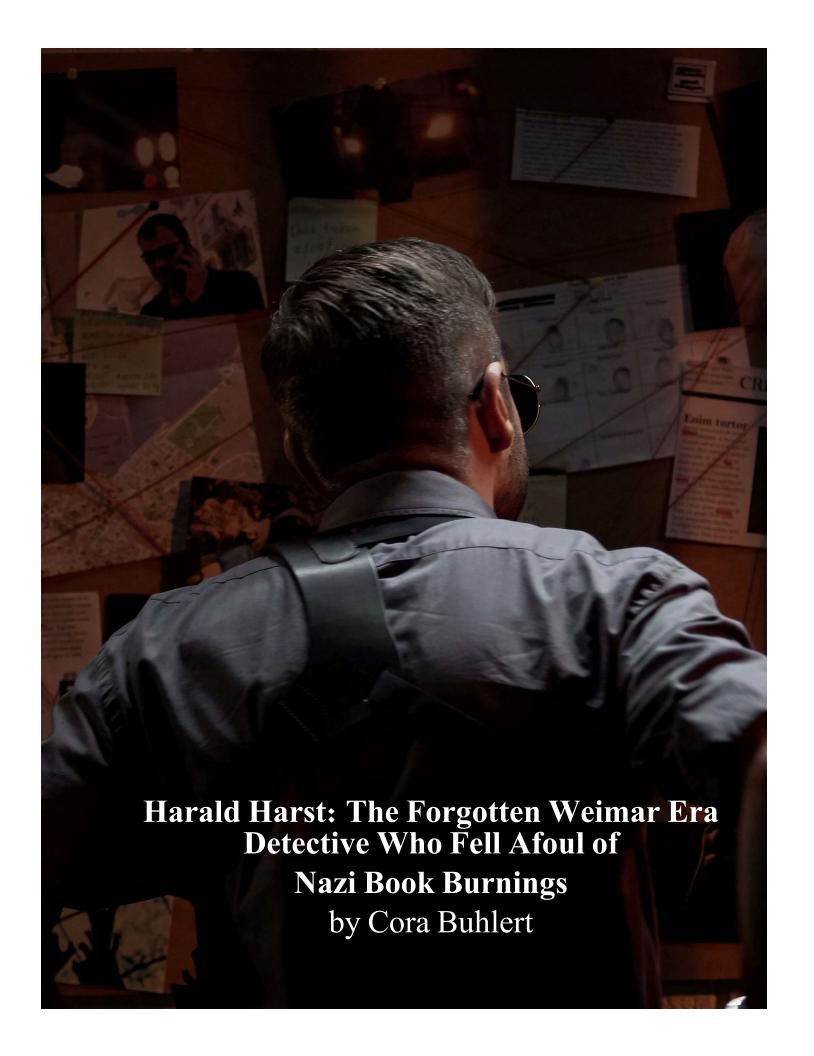












So-called dime novels or penny dreadfuls are a child of the industrial revolution, when the invention of the rotary printing press made it possible to publish cheap literature for the masses. The dime novel was born in the mid nineteenth century and in the United States gave way to pulp magazines at the turn of the twentieth century. But in Germany, the dime novel never died.

The German "Romanheft" or "Groschenheft" (a Groschen is a now defunct German coin roughly comparable to an American dime) grew out of the nineteenth-century colportage novel, a serialised novel sold in instalments by itinerant booksellers. Eventually, publishers began printing a complete short novel (actually a novella) in a single booklet and the "Romanheft" was born.

The modern German Romanheft, which can still be purchased in spinner racks at news-stands and supermarkets today, is a stapled 64-page A5 booklet printed on cheap pulp paper with a glossy cover that is published either weekly, biweekly, or monthly. There are "Romanhefte" devoted to romance, westerns, mystery and crime, melodrama, war stories, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Many heroes and heroines of German pop culture were born in the "Romanhefte," such as space hero Perry Rhodan, Ghost Hunter John Sinclair, G-Man Jerry Cotton, western hero Billy Jenkins, the heroic Dr. Stefan Frank, the doctor whom women trust, or Father Sebastian Trenker, the priest of the mountains, who has been uniting young lovers in Alpine landscapes for more than two decades now.

But though Romanhefte still sell well enough in Germany today, their popularity and circulation are a far cry from the heyday of the form between the early 1900s and the 1980s, when "Romanhefte" were a true mass medium, read by millions and passed on from reader to reader.

As with every form of literature that is popular and appeals to the masses, Romanhefte were hated by intellectuals, academics, religious authorities, and educators. They were blamed for crimes, suicides, and all sorts of other social ills and acquired the moniker "Schundheft" (trash magazine). Conservatives hated them, because they feared that "Romanhefte" would corrupt the youth and give young people ideas, whereas the Left hated them, because Romanhefte reinforced the status quo and did not even attempt to raise the consciousness of the working class.

When I was a kid in the 1980s, everybody agreed that Romanhefte were very bad for you and that good girls and boys did not read them. This message was reinforced when I witnessed a teacher confiscating a classmate's copy of the latest issue of *Ghost Hunter John Sinclair* in third grade, which horrified me, because how could a teacher just take away a magazine that had probably cost that classmate most of his weekly allowance? And if the colorful covers in the spinner rack at the local newsstand were not enticing enough, knowing that these brightly coloured booklets were very bad for you of course made them irresistible to me.

This is how my fascination with Romanhefte was born, which led me not only to amassing a sizeable collection of mostly post-WWII titles, but which also enticed me - once I was a student at university - to research the history of the form as well as its critical reception. And this is how I stumbled upon Harald Harst.

Crime fiction and mystery have long been among the most popular Romanheft genres. Indeed, some of the earliest "Romanheft" successes at the beginning of the twentieth century were translations of American *Nick Carter* and *Nat Pinkerton* dime novels as well as unauthorised *Sherlock Holmes* continuations by German authors. Homegrown detectives, albeit with English and American sounding names like Tom Shark, Pat Conner, Nic Pratt, or Lord Percy Stuart, soon joined the fray.

Romanhefte were banned in Germany in 1916, supposedly to protect the German youth from their evil influence and keep young men strong to serve and die in World War I, but in truth likely due to wartime paper shortages. But after the war, the "Romanheft" came roaring back in young Weimar Republic.

In 1919, the Verlag Moderner Lektüre in Berlin, one of the biggest Romanheft publishers of the time, began publishing a series called simply Der Detektiv (The Detective). The first six issues were reprints of pre-war Pat Conner stories. But in issue 7, a new character stepped onto the scene, Harald Harst, a brilliant amateur detective. The character soon became so popular that the series was retitled Harald Harst - Aus meinem Leben (Harald Harst - From my Life) in 1921.

In his first chronicled adventure "Zwei Taschentücher" (Two handkerchiefs), Harst is introduced as a young prosecutor working in Berlin. But then tragedy strikes and Harst's fiancée Marga Milden is murdered, "fridging" already being a plot device at a time when refrigerators were rare luxuries. Though it must be noted that Harst remains a bachelor and lives with his elderly mother for the rest of his career.

Of course, Harst apprehends the killer of his beloved Marga and develops a passion for solving mysteries in process. So, he gives up his work as a prosecutor and becomes a detective. The next few issues have him solving twelve fiendishly difficult mysteries as part of a bet in order to be admitted to the exclusive Universum Club, an idea borrowed from fellow Romanheft detective and adventurer Lord Percy Stuart.

Somewhere along the way, Harald Harst also acquired a companion in Max Schraut, also known as Comedian Max, an actor turned pickpocket, who reforms and joins Harst in his fight against the forces of crime and evil. Schraut is very much a Watson character, the ever-helpful friend and companion who's never quite as brilliant as the great detective, but always stands faithfully by his side. Like Dr. John Watson, Max Schraut also serves as the narrator who chronicles Harst's adventures from the third issue on.



Other supporting characters include Harst's widowed mother Auguste, in whose Berlin mansion Harst resides, Mathilde, the elderly cook and housekeeper of the Harsts, and Karl Malke, an orphaned teenaged boy who was taken in by the Harsts and now helps around the house and garden as well as with the occasional case. Like every detective worth his salt, Harald Harst also has an archenemy, the evil Cecil Warbatty.

To the modern reader, the most interesting of Harst's cases are those which take place in the vanished world of interwar Berlin or Hamburg or Königsberg, though Harst's adventures also frequently take him to the Middle East, India, America, and all over the world.

The often-harsh reality of the Weimar Republic also intruded into Harald Harst's world of high adventure and puzzling mysteries. The hyperinflation of 1923 costs Harst the fortune he had inherited from his late father, a wealthy timber merchant, and forces Harst to ask for money in exchange for tackling a case, something which clearly rankles the formerly wealthy amateur detective.

Harald Harst was the brainchild of Walther Kabel (1878 - 1935). A veteran of World War I, Kabel was one of the most popular and prolific German dime novel writers of the Weimar Republic era, writing mysteries, war and adventure novels and even erotica under a myriad of pen names. Harald Harst was his most successful character, racking up 366 adventures between 1920 and 1934.

Though Kabel also penned other popular series such as Abenteuer Abseits von Alltagswege (Adventures Away from the Path of Everyday Life), in which Kabel passes himself of as the translator of Olaf K. Abelsen, a Swede who finds himself accused of a crime he did not commit and is forced to go on the run across the world, having adventures and solving other people's problems, while unable to solve his own, much like Dr. Richard Kimble some thirty years later. The adventures of Olaf K. Abelsen occasionally ventured into the realms of science fiction and horror, unlike the more down to Earth Harald Harst series.

The end of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Third Reich also brought an end to the adventures of Harald Harst and the writing career of Walther Kabel. Romanhefte already were under scrutiny for supposedly corrupting the German youth and promoting all sorts of vices. And the Nazis were determined that the only ones who would be corrupting the youth of Germany would be themselves, so they clamped down on the Romanheft industry.

Now you might think that such a wholesome character as Harald Harst, who solves crimes, takes care of his ailing mother, befriends reformed pickpockets, and supports orphans could not possibly corrupt anybody. However, you'd be wrong, because a lot of Harald Harst's

adventures took place outside Germany or even Europe. Harst regularly interacted with people of other nationalities and races and did not necessarily consider them inferior to himself (though there are some yellow peril stereotypes that are offensive to modern readers to be found in the Harst stories). To the Nazis, this meant that the *Harald Harst* novels were not "national" enough and trash besides. The publisher promised to make changes to the series to make it more German. Gone were the striking modernist black, white, and red covers, replaced by photo covers featuring movie stills. But it was too late. Harald Harst was doomed.

As for Walther Kabel, he had briefly joined the Nazi party, enticed by the "Make Germany Great Again" rhetoric. However, according to the 1984 essay collection *Vom Robinson zum Harald Harst: Ein Abenteuer Almanach* (From Robinson to Harald Harst: An Almanac of Adventure), edited by Siegfried Augustin and Walter Henle, Kabel was quickly disgusted by the antisemitism and xenophobia of the Nazis – since to Kabel, making Germany great again did not mean denigrating other ethnicities – and left the party. Furthermore, Kabel really did not get along with the head of the Berlin chapter of the Nazi Party, a certain Joseph Goebbels.

Fast forward to 1933: The Nazis take power and Goebbels becomes Secretary of Propaganda as well as head of the Reich Chamber of Culture and its suborganization the Reich Chamber of Writers. Every writer publishing in Germany had to be a member of the Reich Chamber of Writers to be allowed to continue writing and publishing. So, Goebbels had his old nemesis Walther Kabel kicked out of the Reich Chamber of Writers, effectively ending his career.

Kabel did get to finish the *Harald Harst* series and laid his most popular character to rest much like Arthur Conan Doyle attempted to dispose of Sherlock Holmes. The final issue "Das Geheimnis um die Marga" (The Mystery of the Marga) takes Harst and Max Schraut to the Baltic Sea town of Swinemünde (now Świnoujście in Poland), where Harst gets mixed up in an adventure involving a yacht named *Marga* – note that Marga was also the name of his fiancée murder fourteen years before – and even falls in love again with a young woman who reminds him of the late Marga.

Alas, there is no happy ending to the story of Harald Harst. Trapped underwater in a diving suit that has run out of air, Harst manages to surface once more to scratch his initials into a bollard, before sinking beneath the waves to a watery grave. The series ends with Max Schraut visiting his friend's grave.

Kabel tried to keep the Olaf K. Abelsen series running - after all, Abelsen was a Swedish writer and thus not beholden to German law. But Kabel's secret was discovered and the Abelsen series, which had taken a turn towards the mystery genre in its final few issues, was cancelled as well.

Walther Kabel was out of work, banned from writing and impoverished. His books were banned and burned in public bonfires and his health was failing due to an injury sustained in World War I. He died on May 6, 1935, very likely of suicide.



The Nazis intended to purge literature of which they did not approve from the face of the Earth. And the true perfidy is that they nearly succeeded in many cases. Of course, the big names – Erich Maria Remarque, Arthur Schnitzler, Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann and his brother Heinrich, Lion Feuchtwanger, Joachim Ringelnatz, Stefan Zweig – were kept alive in exile publications and reprinted after World War II, though the works of Lion Feuchtwanger were remarkably hard to find when I was at university and wanted to read them. Lesser-known authors often had no such luck. And who would reprint Walther Kabel, an author of dime novel mysteries that were deemed trash even before the Nazis took over?

Romanhefte are ephemeral by their very nature, designed to be read and discarded. And what overzealous teachers and parents did not throw away was reduced to ash by Nazi book burnings. By the 1970s, only one complete run of the *Harald Harst* series was known to exist - part of the collection of a Berlin arthouse cinema owner and avid Romanheft collector. After his death, it was broken up.

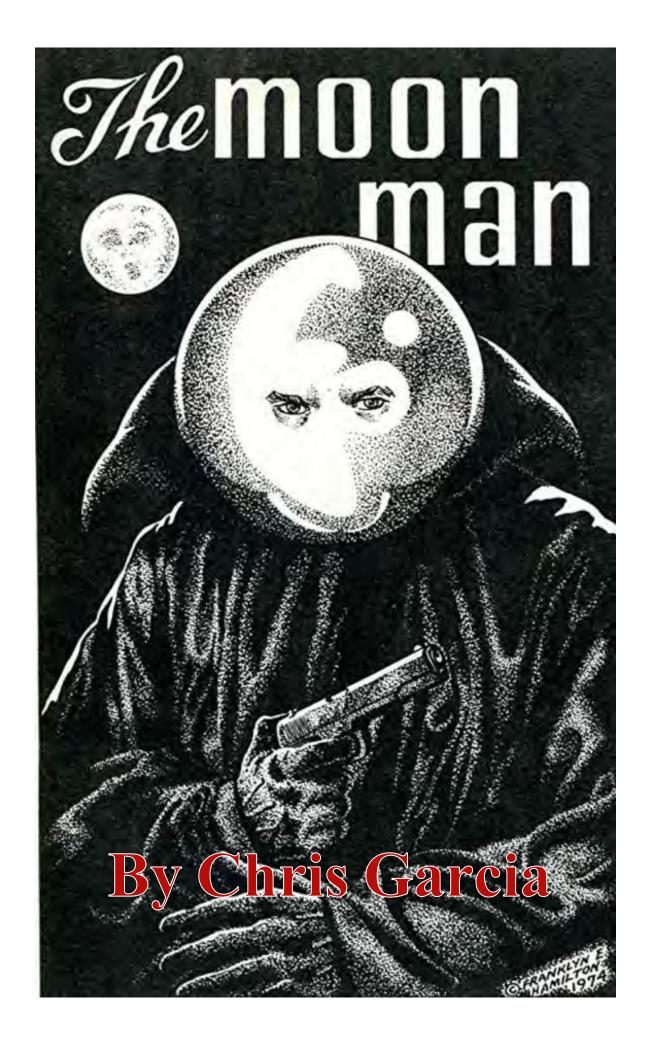
Harald Harst and his creator Walther Kabel were dead, their adventures burned to cinder on the Nazis' book pyres. However, the readers who had eagerly devoured Harst's adventures every week never forgot him. Even during the Third Reich, surviving copies of *Harald Harst* magazines were passed around like *samizdat* literature.

And when academic research into Romanhefte – long considered beneath the notice of literary critics – began in the 1970s, Walther Kabel and his most famous creation attracted the attention of a new generation of readers and critics. The above-mentioned scholarly essay collection *Vom Robinson zum Harald Harst: Ein Abenteuer Almanach* devotes several essays to Walther Kabel, his stories, and his career. It was in this volume, in the unlikely surroundings of the brutalist Bremen university library, that I first encountered Harald Harst and his creator and became fascinated by both. I passed on my research on Harald Harst and Olaf K. Abelsen (and several other Weimar Republic era German dime novel heroes) to Jess Nevins for what eventually became *The Encyclopedia of Pulp Heroes*. For several years, that entry on Harald Harst was the top search result on the internet for "Harald Harst" or "Walther Kabel" and netted me several lovely e-mails from elderly gentlemen who remembered reading the *Harald Harst* adventures as kids.

Harald Harst may have drowned in the Baltic Sea in 1934, but you can't keep a good detective down. And so, Harald Harst and his creator found an afterlife on the internet. Under German law, the copyright on Kabel's works ran out in 2005, seventy years after his death, so collectors scanned surviving copies of his work and uploaded them to Project Gutenberg. The website www.walther-kabel.de, operated by Kabel fan Detlef Reinholz, has been running since 2011 and has the aim of making all Kabel's works available online. They're not quite there yet, but Walther Kabel's works are more available than they have been in ninety years. That site was also invaluable in researching this article.

Eighty-eight years after he drowned in the Baltic Sea and the Nazis burned his adventures, Harald Harst is back again, just waiting to be discovered by a new generation of readers.





There are a lot of things one thinks of when they think of pulp-crime fiction. I always think of hard-boiled detectives and plots that are a bit convoluted, which the dialogue is tough as nails, and often pretty problematic when it comes to racial terms. There are a lot of hats, suits, tight-fitting dresses, and rods, machines, and sticks. It's almost a hyper-realistic world, though it's based on an exaggeration. It's supposed to feel like the scummy part of town you never go to, and it's supposed to create visceral reactions. The key, it's supposed to be stuff that we might see in our world.

It's not supposed to be a guy in a glass dome running about fighting crime, but alas, there was one, created by the legendary Frederick C. Davis - the Moon Man.

Great City was something like New York and Chicago rolled into one. It's a tough city, a corrupt city, but they have a driven, if not entirely up-and-up, police force. The problem is the politicos and a fair number of the cops, and apparently the entirety of the upper class. There's a cop, Detective Sergeant Stephen Thatcher. He's a legacy, the son of the chief of police for Great City, Peter Thatcher. He began to notice that there were people who were enjoying their illgotten gains, and not only the rich, but also those further down the economic ladder. As a cop, he only had so much leeway, so he had to come up with an alter-ego that would allow him to put the fear of God into people and keep himself hidden. He came up with a novel idea: a globe of glass that surrounded his head. That globe had markings that made it look like the moon. The dome was made of Argus glass, the same as two-way mirrors, so he could see, but no one could see him.

Every great mysterious hero needs a straight-ahead foil, and the Moon Man had his own boss as his bad guy - Det. Lt. Gil McEwen. He's presented as a competent boss, but also an officious blow-hard at the same time. HE was the constant, but there was also the fact that the crooks he took on were also after him. In a way, he's a Batman before there was a Batman, but at the same time, he was very different. He wasn't an orphan; he was the son of the chief, and he wasn't some eccentric billionaire. He was a cop. Thatcher's closeness to the police meant that he could use that to his advantage, while still acting as a criminal.

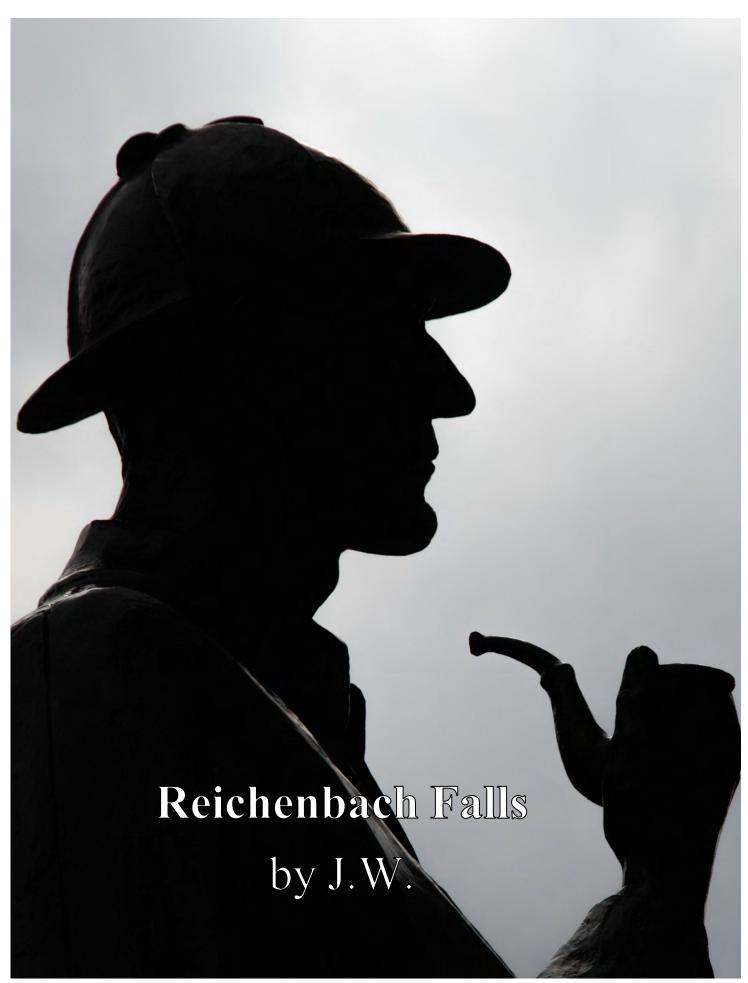
Every great hero also has a network. The Moon Man had two loyal assistants. The first is Stephen Thatcher's fiancé, Sue McEwen. The way Davis establishes her as Thatcher's fiancé is exceptional – "On Sue McEwen's third left finger glittered a solitaire. Steve had put it there. The wedding was not far off."

That's economy of concept, right there!

Steve doesn't really want her putting herself in harm's way, but alas, she will not be denied. She's a lot of fun and doesn't seem as much of a side-light character as most women in Pulp hero stories. I really enjoy the way that Davis works with her as a figure within the series of stories.

The Moon Man's other helping hand is former boxer Ned Dargan. He's a lot of fun, a palooka, but also a sweetheart. Thatcher saved him from starving to death. He's always the one who allows the Moon Man to save the day.

The adaptations and continuations of the Moon Man have been decent, but usually they change the way he's presented because an incredibly fragile globe on one's head is honestly a terrible idea. The idea of a Robin Hood-type character of course paid off big during the Depression, and Davis once killed him off, Conan Doyle-style, but had to bring him back, also Conan Doyle style. The first story is so clean, and the further ones are just about as smart as you're gonna find. The collections of the Moon Man stories are spendy, but they are worth it when you consider the amount you'd have to spend to read them in their first runs!



"A career which has now outlived its shadows and promises to end in an honoured old age" "Some day the true story may be told."

the last words of the last stories.

I was lead man with his lordship. The doctor was just behind me. I tried to take most of the weight, but he wanted to do his part. With us were the two Englishmen, the Frenchman, and the fat American. We had nothing in common except the coffin we were carrying. The Priest walked ahead of us.

Four days earlier, I was on a train heading out of Victoria station to a small town in Sussex. I was moving pretty fast, but I felt like I was going nowhere.

England was cute. The police wore giant hats and didn't carry guns. The soldiers wore even bigger hats and stood in the street wearing bright red suits that some women I know would kill for. If I'd been on a holiday, I might have had a good time. But I wasn't on holiday. I was working.

There are little fish that live with the big fish, in the lake, or the sea. Maybe the big fish snaps them up, but they have a chance. Take them away from the big fish and put them into a small pond and they get cranky. Leave them there a while and they get eaten by something they don't even recognise, or they just starve to death.

At home I'm a little fish in the sea. I don't exactly like L.A., but I know my way around. I don't like it that the cops are on the take and that the politicians are worse than the crooks. I don't like it, but I understand it. Now I was heading to some tiny village in Sussex, England, going to talk to the top man in my racket. I didn't understand anything.

There was no cab at the station, just like I expected. I looked around. The road went off in all directions with no clues to where.

There was a small boy sitting on a bench whittling a stick. He wore a suit that looked like it had been used to block a ditch. He kept looking over his shoulder at the station master, sneaky-like. I walked over to him and tipped my hat.

"What're you doing, kid?"

He held a finger up to his lips and gave me a stern look. "I'm a detective. He" - he pointed to the station master - "is a crim'nal an' I'm 'vestigating him."

"Uhuh. What you going to do then, plug 'im?"

He shook his head pityingly. "'course not. You've gotta get clues and ev'dence an' stuff. You can't just shoot them, that's cowboys."

I crouched down. "That's right. Can't just shoot 'em."

He nodded. "'less they shoot at you first, of course."

"Of course. Hey, this is some kind of coincidence. Happens I'm a shamus too. Working a case right here." I do the cheap detective, well, when I try.

His eyes widened. "Crumbs! Really? Actually, I thought you were, but I didn't say 'case it was a secret. Are you 'merican?"

I held up a finger. "There's things you don't need to know, buddy. Now, I need some help."

He stared at me, eagerly. "Righto! Do you need me to follow somebody?"

"Naw. I need you to tell me where I can find Adler Cottage."

"It's down that way. Straight down the road 'bout four miles. I say! Can I show you it?"

I shook my head. "No, kid. You stay here and keep an eye on this guy. I'll maybe catch you on my way back. I'll expect a full report."

It was quite a stretch to Adler Cottage, if he was telling the truth. I don't do much walking in L.A. If people see you on the sidewalk, they think you're a bum or a communist. I need to get around quickly and sometimes I need to get away quickly, which means a car. In England, I was moving real slow.

But I didn't hurry. My bag was light, and it was okay weather. I was getting paid for this. I'd just given a ten-year-old kid a tail job. I was a swell guy.

The car came out of nowhere. If I'd been on a sidewalk in Hollywood, I'd have heard it a mile off. It was drowned out by the damn quiet. It was a Daimler, a big one. It missed me by a quarter inch, but that was fine. It wasn't going much faster than a bullet anyway.

The driver hauled off on the shooting brake and it slid to a halt. He kept it in a straight line pretty good. He stood up and waved. I waved back. Why not? He hadn't killed me - not even a little bit.

He was wearing the full gear - coat, hat, big gloves, and goggles. If I had to put on that outfit to drive anywhere closer than Mars, I'd get there quicker walking. No wonder he drove so fast. I walked over to the car. It was a long walk. He'd taken a long time stopping. He pulled off the goggles and popped in a monocle.

"Sorry, old chap. I promise I wasn't goin' to hit you. I wondered - were you goin' to Adler Cottage by any chance?"



I looked him straight in the goggles. "And if I am?"

"Thought you might be. You look a bit of a fish out of water if you don't mind me sayin'. Bit like us."

He pulled off a gauntlet and held out his hand. I gave it a grip, then a little squeeze. He gave it back, not too hard, just enough to tell me he might be tougher than he looked.

He pointed to the front seat of the Daimler. There was a fat man sitting there. He glowered at me. "This gentleman is from New York. Fascinatin' chap. Been tellin' us all about orchids. Would you know him?"

"Sure" I said. "He's from New York, I'm from Los Angeles. We meet every morning when we go to Chicago to get milk."

I threw the crack at him to try him out, but Monocle just smiled. The smile said that I could push him a little bit, but he wouldn't fall over, and he wouldn't push back unless he had to.

I looked at the Fat Man. He was a big tub of guts, spilling over the edges of the seat like milk boiling over.

"A man I met said that orchids smelled like the rotten sweetness of prostitutes," I said.

The Fat Man grunted. He looked like a man who did a lot of grunting.

"I believe I know who you mean. Pah! The man is a fool and a degenerate." The Fat Man's voice was high and guerulous. I didn't think I was going to like him.

"He collected a handful of rare breeds because he needed a hothouse to warm himself in. When a man is devoted to carnality, he lacks entertainment when his body inevitably fails him."

"Actually, prostitutes smell quite pleasant." A quiet voice emanated from the back of the automobile. "They need to. It's the respectable working woman who smells badly at the end of a twelve-hour day. That's why they call them sweatshops."

The voice came out of a small, blank faced middle-aged man hiding behind a rolled umbrella.

"This is the padre," said Monocle. "All the way from London we've been jabberin' on about orchids and wine and books and food - and when we leave a gap the padre will say

somethin' profound and wise. Well, hop in, and off to see the Great Man."

I tossed my bag in the trunk and piled in next to the Priest. He gave me a sick little smile and stayed looking ahead. He didn't look like much, and I couldn't figure out what he was doing there - unless somebody was going to need the last rites.

Monocle drove quick, but I was willing to bet that he had something in reserve for when it mattered. I sat back with an elbow hanging out the side and pulled it in when we brushed past a tree.

"So just what do orchids smell like?" I asked. I felt like talking to someone. I thought I might like Monocle, but I didn't know how to take him, and I had nothing to confess that week, so I picked the Fat Man. He was New York rude, and I can handle that. I can do rude myself.

He sniffed. "Orchids can smell of almost anything. Turpentine, rye bread, honey, even urine. A small number can have the scent of faecal matter or rotting corpses. That man knows nothing about them."

"Maybe. I guess he has a lot wrong with him. I liked him anyway."

"One likes all sorts of people," said the Priest. "And dislikes them too, for no particular reason. I try to be extra suspicious of anyone I take a liking to. Likeable people can get away with so much."

I turned to him. "Do you get less suspicious of the people you dislike, Father?"

He shook his head. "I think I'm more suspicious of them, too. How dreadful, isn't it?" He gave a little smile.

"Know what you mean, Padre," Monocle shouted above the noise of the engine. "I'm always trying so hard to compensate for not likin' a chap that I can end up not realizin' what he's probably done.

"That is why I prefer not to see people face to face until I've had them interviewed and a report typed," said the Fat Man. "When I have evaluated the evidence, I will interrogate the person to establish the facts. Were I to allow my personal feelings to affect matters it would cause complete confusion."

"How about you?" shouted Monocle. "What are your methods?"

I thought for a moment. Suddenly we were all dicks together. I didn't like it. I was used to being the first one quick on the uptake.

"I don't have any methods. I wander around, annoy a few people, get bumped on the noggin and figure out what someone doesn't want me to find out. Then I find it out."

"Sounds awf'ly painful," said Monocle. The Fat Man grunted again.

"I make my living from the workings of my brain. If I permitted myself to have it damaged, I would be acting very foolishly."

"That's all very well, but how does one avoid it, don't you know? If a chap's already killed someone, and you're the fellow who's going to find him out, he's going to cut up nasty as often as not," said Monocle.

The Fat Man sniffed. He was alternating sniffs and grunts. "I employ people to use their abilities in the physical arena. That is not to say that the work is without its hazard, but I see no reason to place myself unnecessarily in harm's way."

"It's strange," said the Priest. "I don't seem to ever find myself in any particular danger. I can't imagine why."

"Well, if you don't mind me sayin' so, padre," said Monocle, "you look like such a pleasant, harmless fellow that it would take a fairly heartless murderer to want to harm you. He'd have to be a positive fiend."

The Priest sighed. "I suppose even a fiend might take notice of the cloth. It seems to afford me some protection."

"There's a chap I know," said Monocle "and he acts like a positive simpleton. People just

carry on talkin' when he's about, as they think he doesn't notice anythin'. While all the time - hullo - there he is!"

We pulled up beside another car, smaller than Monocle's. A man with round-rimmed eye-glasses was getting out of the driver's side. His face was even blanker than the Priest's. He walked around and opened the door and a short, plump man clambered out. He had a moustache that was too fussy for my tastes. His fingernails gleamed from a recent manicure. I could tell that he'd smell of some dainty fragrance that wasn't quite feminine, but not as masculine as I'd prefer. I could tell he was French with my eyes shut.

"What ho!" shouted Monocle.

Simpleton looked up, with a little frown. "Delighted to see you again, old chap."

Monocle turned to The Fat Man and me. "Not much to look at, is he, but I can assure you that the mind is not as absent as you might think at first glance." He turned back to Simpleton. "We have three gentlemen here"

He looked expectantly at Simpleton, who dithered, and pushed his glasses back on his nose.

"Um... hello. Didn't bring your man, then?"

"'fraid not. Don't know how I'll manage, frankly. Are you lost without your chap?"

Simpleton shook his head. "A positive relief to be shot of him. We parted on the doorstep."

He changed his voice to a gravely cockney. "Orf t'see more bloomin' detectives, then, cock? Low, very low. Glad I'm not coming. Don't let me down in front of 'is lordship - he's class, 'e is, even if 'e does let 'imself get dragged in the muck."

He blinked, and his voice reverted to its bland upper-class English accent. "Now, er . . . I think you know this gentleman - formerly of the Belgian police. Now joining us in private practice." The Frenchman waddled forward.

"Greetings, milord." The Frenchman turned to the Fat Man. "It is an honour to meet you at last. Mon père. M'sieu." That put me in my place – dead last in the pecking order.

We all shook hands and said how do you do, but nobody said how they were doing, and none of us wanted to know. Monocle had us all talking and acting according to his rules, and that was a game he was always going to win.

When we'd all finished shaking hands and nodding politely, the door of the cottage opened. There was a delay, and a tall, stooped man in a dressing gown lurched out. He was old - very old - and leaned heavily on a stick. The skin on his face was plastered tight to the bones. His eyes were rheumy but sharp, and they danced around the six of us.

Eventually his gaze settled on me. "I am sorry that you had to walk from the station, but at least his lordship was able to bring you the last two miles."

Monocle had a huge grin on his face as if he'd won the lottery. "Damp mark on the trouser cuffs," he whispered. "Had to have been walking but got here too soon to have come the whole way on foot. Fantastic, what?"

"Gentlemen, welcome. I fear that my hospitality will perforce be meagre. My health is precarious, and I rely on a housekeeper to provide my needs. However, I did not wish her to be present for the confidential business that we are going to transact. Please, come in." He turned and walked back into the cottage.

He led us into a small parlour, with a large, uncovered oak table. It was a little cramped, but Monocle and Simpleton were thin enough, and my shoulders fitted above the Frenchman's and The Fat Man's guts.

"I believe that each of you has a document which indirectly relates to me. Perhaps you will be so good as to place them on the table."

I reached into my jacket pocket and took out the envelope. The Priest did the same. I noticed that Monocle and the Fat Man both had their sheets flattened between pieces of card.

The Old Man leaned on the table. "Hm. Excellent. Each appears identical - a list of names in

the top right corner, and then the simple message: "Avenge me." And underneath is written a name. The name of my greatest adversary. Then a time, date, and an address. This address, to-day. It is all type-written, and there is no signature. The envelopes?"

"Mine came in a plain white envelope, with my name typed on it," said Monocle. "I found it on the doormat of my flat." He produced it from between two more sheets of card.

"And did the rest of you receive your copies in a similar manner?" We all nodded.

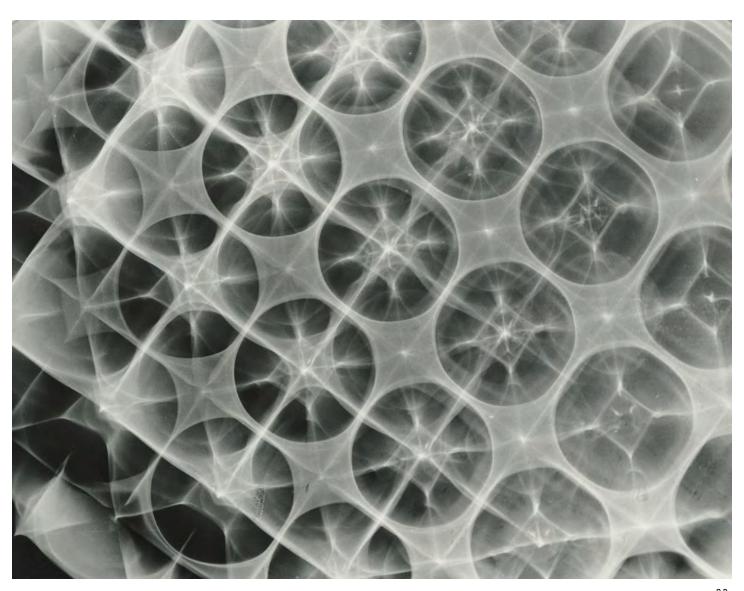
"I believe I may be able to shed some further light," said the Fat Man. "An employee heard the note being delivered, and realising that the post was not due, pursued the boy who'd slipped it under my door. He was employed by an agent who had received the note together with a small fee and a set of instructions. The instructions were no longer accessible."

"Mine was on the mat when I arrived at my office," I said. "And it had three thousand dollars with it. Bank draft."

"A fee was enclosed with mine as well," said The Fat Man. "I prefer to keep the amount confidential."

"My fee, it is also confidential," said the Frenchman. "I can say it was a substantial amount."

We looked at Simpleton and Monocle, who both shook their heads. The Priest coughed. "I viewed it as a donation. There are many worthy causes. I did feel a certain obligation..."



"So did I," I said. "I work for thirty a day. Plus expenses. That money bought me, for a couple months."

"So, the professionals have been retained, and the amateurs?" said the Old Man.

"Well... it seemed quite int'restin', sir, you know," said Monocle. "I'd heard of the man, of course. He's a bit of a byword as the master criminal, but he died more than forty-five years ago. Why would someone want to investigate it now? It's because it's pointless that it must have somethin' more to it. And a fellow likes to meet other chaps in the same business, don't he?" He looked around at the rest of us, like he was sizing us up.

"The language . . . it is interesting," said the Frenchman. "Avenge me. But he must be dead surely? Even had he survived - he was not a young man when he disappeared."

"If he did survive," said the Simpleton slowly, "then it hardly becomes necessary to avenge him."

"Someone else, speaking on his behalf," said the Fat Man.

This is all obvious, I thought. So why aren't I having a say?

The Old Man nodded curtly. "Perhaps, Father, you could oblige me by passing the lens - yes, just under the Bradshaw. Excellent. So, then, let us see . . .," said The Old Man. He stared at each of the sheets in turn. "I have written a monograph on the differences to be found between the output of different typewriters, even of the same model. Observe - yes, the tail of the 'y' of at the end of his name has a discernible break on each copy. Undoubtedly, they were prepared on the same machine."

I'd figured that much out when I first heard that there were multiple copies of the same note. Maybe the Old Man wasn't as smart as people said. Maybe he'd gone off a little, like milk left in the sun.

"There is also the matter of the other names," said the Frenchman. He sounded like someone used to bossing the show. I was used to bossing the show myself, but I didn't expect it to happen any time soon in this company. "All our names are here, but also many others. Why are they not here also?"

"The Chief Inspector has been in touch," said the Old Man. "He wrote to me enclosing this note" - he produced it with a flourish from his dressing gown pocket - "but indicated that as a serving policeman he would have no time for an investigation such as this. The Doctor is indisposed."

"This chap's a charmin' fellow," said Monocle, pointing to a name. "Bit of a crook though. If he had a letter with money in it, I don't expect he'd worry too much about what it was supposed to be for."

The Frenchman made a snorting noise. "I disapprove of criminals, charming or no. And this man?"

The Fat Man rumbled. "I know the man. He would be, I consider, both a policeman and a criminal. He is a federal officer, and a thug and disgrace. We are well rid of him."

"Neither have contacted me," said the Old Man.

"I recall this person," said the Frenchman. "He is a policeman, working in Paris, I believe. And this?"

Simpleton and Monocle both made the same face. It looked as if they'd sucked a lemon. "A bit of a thug, actually," said Monocle. "Quite like your federal agent cum hoodlum. This man's an excellent chap, but more of a spy-catcher than a detective. Not one for the old magnifying lens and cogitation."

"Perhaps this is an investigation too delicate for policeman or spies," said the Priest.

"Let us review the situation," said the Old Man. "Each of you received a copy of this note, at some time in the last few weeks. You have each come to the conclusion that the person referred to in the note is the professor of mathematics who was the leading criminal mastermind

of the last hundred years. One presumes that you were sent here because I was the last person to see the professor – falling to his death at Reichenbach Falls."

He smiled at us. "One would assume that the vengeance to be carried out would be meted upon your obedient servant. I trust that this can wait until you have eaten."

He stood up, ramrod straight for a moment. "However, we are past the hour of luncheon. I myself now eat little, and infrequently, but I cannot expect you all to adapt to an old man's ways. There is an hotel five miles from here . . ."

"Sir." The Fat Man raised one hand. "If I might interject. We are all busy men, and if we were to spend the day passing back and forth to an English hotel, with its cold food and warm beer, we will achieve little. If you will permit me access to your kitchen, I believe that we can prepare a simple meal that will suffice for us all."

The Old Man smiled. "The kitchen is the preserve of my housekeeper, but you are welcome to explore its depths."

"If that is acceptable to everybody?" He looked around and we all nodded. "Then perhaps we should begin. We passed a small farm on the way here, and there was a sign offering eggs for sale."

"I remember it," said Simpleton. "Shall I pop around and get us a few?"

"Thank you. Two dozen eggs should suffice, provided that they are laid today. An omelette must be made with the freshest of ingredients or it is fit for nothing." The Fat Man sniffed, actually smelling the air instead of showing disdain. "There appears to be a herb garden of some sort. I will investigate it."

"Gentlemen, please make yourself at home," said the Old Man. "There is I believe a new Aga range in the kitchen. I have little to do with it, but it may serve your purpose." He turned to the Fat Man. "I know you to be a connoisseur of the culinary arts. If there is any sustenance to be found on the premises, I will leave you to seek it out."

"If I might make a request," said Simpleton, in a high, foolish voice, "I couldn't help noticing a piano in the other room. A little singsong would be jolly, don't you think - if that's all right with you, sir? Then I'll get the eggs."

I stared at him. Was he feeble-minded?

"You are very welcome," said the Old Man. "I no longer play music myself - I now lack the strength in the fingers which is necessary for the violin - but I appreciate it still."

"Come along then - M'sieu, you'll join in, won't you. And you must have a good voice, being from America." Simpleton grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me into the adjoining room.

The room appeared to be some kind of office, strewn with papers, folders and books. A small upright piano was against one wall. Simpleton flung open the lid, sat down on a stool and flexed his fingers. "Right then. All set?"

The Frenchman moved over to a desk and silently placed a sheet of paper in a typewriter half buried under a mound of debris. "I am ready," he said.

"Sing up, then. This is a new song called "Roll Out the Barrel." D'you know it? Just clap then. Loudly."

He started to play, and I began to clap on the beat. Simpleton started to sing. As soon as we were under way, the Frenchman began to tap the keys of the typewriter, each tap masked by the noise we were making. We continued for several minutes, until he gave a quick nod and pulled the paper out.

Simpleton rushed over to him. "Does it have the broken 'y'?" he whispered. I looked. The sheet was identical to the notes we had each received. "Well, now. Well now!" he said, under his breath.

"So, the Old Man sent the notes?" I asked.

"To be sure," said the Frenchman. "Me, I had no doubt, but here is the proof."

"He served it up on a plate, didn't he," I said. "'Hand me a lens.' Leaving the typewriter for us to find."

"So, what is the old boy up to, I wonder," said Simpleton.

"The maestro is making us dance to his tune," said The Frenchman.

"Hell. At least I know who is sending me around the world. If he's paying me, I work for him," I said, and walked back into the hall. I bumped into Monocle carrying a box.

"Sir - awf'lly sorry - would it be too bad to offer you this case of Pichon - as we're imposin' on you?" Monocle was blushing like a girl on a first date.

"I would be most grateful, my lord," said the Old Man. "I have little appetite for the affairs of the flesh, nowadays, but a glass of wine and an omelette might do me some good."

"Jolly good. I'll settle these down. What time is it?" He disappeared into the kitchen, where he nearly bumped into the Priest. "'scuse me Padre! Lookin' for glasses!"



The Priest was carrying a plate with most of a cake left on it and had a bottle in his other hand. He gave me a glance.

"Perhaps you can help me. I found a stale sponge cake in the kitchen, and a bottle of sweet sherry. If you could hold these - thank you - let me see, a basket - perhaps you could put those down here for the time being - now, shall we see if we can find some fresh fruit? I place great stock on the importance of trifles, you see."

I followed the Priest through the kitchen into the garden at the rear of the cottage. I held the basket while he wandered around looking for fruit.

"We're all quite different, aren't we?" he mused, as he dropped plums into the basket. "I'm quite English, apart from being a Papist. You and the other gentleman so American, and such a French chap - wait, he's Belgian, isn't he? And with all our quirks. His Lordship so scatty, his friend so eccentric."

"But here we all are, aren't we?" I said.

He turned and looked at me, hard. "Yes, here we all are. We have that in common, don't we? We don't let go when we think there's something to find out that needs finding out. We don't run away or leave it for somebody else."

He reached for a blackberry, scratched his hand and licked it. "You could have put that money in the bank and done nothing, couldn't you? But you wouldn't. That's why we were chosen."

"But what about the others . . . oh, I see."

"That's right. They were to show us what we aren't. We aren't criminals or police or thugs or spies. That's why we're here and they aren't. They were invited so that they wouldn't come."

I followed him to an apple tree. "What do you know about the case? The professor of mathematics, I mean. The criminal mastermind"

I shrugged. "The same as anyone else. The Old Man busted up the gang. The boss of the gang chased him to Switzerland. He caught up with him, fell off a cliff in a struggle. Our host got away, and hid up for a few years."

The Priest nodded. "Does something seem a little incongruous to you? Knowing the kind of man he is - the kind of men we all are?"

I thought for a moment. "The running away?"

He nodded. "The running away. We don't, do we? We have to hold on until we find out all the answers. We might be frightened. Lord knows I've been frightened, many times. But I've always been so curious. Hello, my lord."

I looked around and saw Monocle striding up the path. "Hullo, Padre. I hope those eggs suit the cook. He seems very particular. I'd never risk buyin' eggs for my man."

I was thinking about what the Priest had said. For the first time, I felt as if I had something to contribute.

"Can I ask you guys something?" They turned and looked at me.

"What do you do when you're breaking a case, and someone gives the word that you should quit? Threats, a bit of violence?"

Monocle put his head on one side. "That's when you know that you're getting' somewhere, isn't it? You press on." He paused and thought for a moment. "Actually . . . I hadn't thought. I'm engaged at the moment. Finally."

"Congratulations, my lord. I think I read the announcement," said The Priest.

"I just wondered . . . what do I do if someone threatened my fiancée? It's never arisen before. I've never been bothered for myself, but . . . "

"What would she want you to do?" I asked.

"Oh, dear. She'd be furious if I ever pulled back on her account. I say, this is a bit awkward. I don't lead a dangerous life, far from it, but when one deals with murderers there's always the possibility . . . am I going to have to retire?"

"It depends," said the Priest. "I've never been able to retire because I've never sought out any of the incidents that I've been involved with. They just happened. I had no choice. Except, as we said, to walk away and leave it alone."

"Which we can't do," I said.

"That's all very well," said Monocle. "The lady is no wilting violet. She's as tough as I am. Tougher. But it's a nasty business sometimes. When I've caught up with some poor sinner and sent him to the gallows, I fall apart rather. I don't want her to have to deal with that."

"My lord!" The Priest spoke so sharply that I jumped. "You are to be married to this woman. You are to be one flesh, for better or worse. Don't – I beg you – don't hide your pain from her. She's already forgiven you for saving her life, for being rich, for having a title. Don't expect her to forgive your selfishness in not letting her help you. If you have to retire from this wretched business, then do so, but don't try to hide what's in your soul from this woman, or you had better never marry her at all."

I looked back and forth between them. Monocle was as dumbstruck as I was. Eventually he gave a little laugh. "Y'know, I had a much easier time from the C of E. Thank you for that, Father. Shall we gather plums?" We gathered plums silently for a few minutes.

It was Monocle who spoke first. "You've probably been mixed up with some tough customers in your time. Did they ever chase you off?"

I thought for a moment. "I've had to lie low a few times, but I never left town. Not till they did."

"And what did you do then?" said The Priest.

"I followed them." I said.

Brown and Monocle nodded together. "I think we have enough," said the Priest.

We wandered into the kitchen. There seemed to be a stand-off between the Frenchman and the Fat Man, but the Fat Man was winning. He was a man who liked his food, done his way, preferably by some flunky but he'd do it himself if he had to. Moncle and the Priest were sorting out the fruit. I wandered into the parlour.

Simpleton was in there talking to the Old Man. At least the Old Man was talking.

"The crucial aspect is attention to detail. I can recall seven separate cases where the police arrived before I reached the scene, and vital evidence was lost or destroyed. It became necessary to examine the boots of every constable who had attended a crime scene to give any hope of distinguishing footprints, for example."

He gave me a short, sharp glance. "Picking fruit, I see. How are you enjoying your sojourn in England?"

"England is . . . just fine. I like it very well" I said.

"And yet you appear dissatisfied in some way. If it is not the country, it must be your errand that you find objectionable."

I nodded. "I suppose... I live in Los Angeles, California. That's where I work. I know the cops, I know the crooks. I even know some of the ordinary people."

I took out a cigarette, looked at it and put it back. "This is not a holiday. I'm doing a job. I don't know what the job is, but I'm stuck with it. I'll keep working on it until the money runs out. I don't expect to get anywhere."

The Old Man nodded. "Please smoke if you wish, Mr. Marlowe. I no longer indulge, but in my time, I relied heavily on Madame Nicotine." I struck a match as he continued. I guessed he didn't get to talk much to the housekeeper.

"I myself chiefly operated in London. When I was called on to leave the city, it was usually for a small locality where I could quickly familiarise myself with the situation. I endeavoured

never to become embroiled in some metropolis with which I was not familiar, though I did visit Birmingham on one occasion."

"Maybe nobody ever sent you an envelope with three thousand dollars in it, sir," I said. Sir? Monocle had me doing it now.

"A number of people have sent me money in an attempt to persuade me to investigate certain matters. I place the money in a bank account for a year, and if I am not asked to return it then I donate the money to an appropriate charity. I choose between Afghan orphans and Mrs. McGuire's Academy for Fallen Women."

I nodded. "Yeah, that would have been the bright thing to do."

"Perhaps. I myself have not practiced my original profession for over fifty years, yet I continue to receive requests for assistance. Occasionally I give advice to Scotland Yard, but I have always refused to participate in an investigation. However, you are still involved in your profession, and one must make a living."

"Didn't you turn down cases that you didn't want - when you were in the business?" I asked.

"Indeed, indeed – when my worldly success had reached the level where rejecting a case was possible. On one occasion prior to that happy day, I worked for a week tracking down a missing Labrador puppy that had fallen from a moving van. The case lacked interest, the result was trivial, and the pay almost non-existent, but when the Earl of... well, perhaps that name is best not mentioned, even now – but the contacts made when searching for that dog led directly to a case that saved the reputations of three great families and led to the founding of a town in Western Australia which I believe has a theatre named after me. The small fee paid for an excellent supper."

"Huh. So, I should take the work until I can afford not to," I said. "And try not to annoy too many people."

"Precisely. Good advice to every working man."

There was a call from the kitchen. It was the Fat Man. "Gentlemen! I will be serving luncheon immediately. I implore you not to delay. The texture of an omelette is destroyed if left for more than a moment."

The Old Man walked into the parlor. I looked at Simpleton.

"Did he talk about anything that might help us?" I asked.

"He's an awfully clever chap," said Simpleton. "I thought he was giving me all kinds of

helpful information, but now that I think about it, he didn't say a thing." He pushed his glasses up his nose, even though they just slipped back to where they'd been.

"If he's not saying anything, is that telling us something?" I said.

"I think it is, but what exactly? Why wouldn't he want to talk about an investigation that he instigated?" Simpleton shook his head.

I thought for a moment. "If he didn't want something found out, then getting half a dozen top-notch detectives looking at it is a funny way to



hide it."

Simpleton stood up. "He must want us to know, but . . . he doesn't want to tell us."

"So, he wants us to figure it out for ourselves?" I didn't like that at all. I like my clients to be straight with me. There has to be a first time.

The Fat Man had us all sitting around the table in the parlor and brought each of us our omelette in turn. Monocle produced the wine. It was a good meal. In fact, one of the best I've ever had. The Fat Man might be a big sack of lard, but he can cook. My tastes in alcohol run from Bourbon to Scotch, with an occasional detour to Irish, but Monocle's wine was pretty good too. I held up one of the glasses to the light. The Old Man noticed me and said "Bohemian" and smiled.

Then the Priest brought out his trifle. It was okay. I was a little disappointed. I'd started to expect that any of these people could do anything, and the Priest'd be the best trifle maker in the world.

The Old Man picked at his omelette and took a couple of sips of wine. He was the kind of old where nothing feels good anymore. He waved away the trifle. While the rest of us were piling in he sat back and watched us. Eventually he spoke.

"As the strength of my younger years deserts me, I find it necessary to monitor my own physical condition with the same care that I once devoted to the London underworld. When I was in my thirties, I would often spend four days without sleep. Now I find that I require a rest of between thirty and forty-five minutes each afternoon. I hope you will excuse me. My lapses as a host are considerable, but unavoidable. Perhaps while I am asleep you may care to consider this final problem."

I debated whether to help him to his feet, but he got up surprisingly quickly, and was out of the room in a few seconds.

We didn't speak until we'd finished the trifle. Maybe it was better than it tasted. The Priest bustled around collecting the plates and brought them into the kitchen. I was all set to sit back and relax when Monocle jumped to his feet. "Better get on and clean the dishes, I suppose. Can't leave 'em for the great man."

The Fat Man showed no signs of stirring. His eyelids were drooping - which meant he was either falling asleep or wanted us to think he was. Simpleton and I followed Monocle into the kitchen. The Priest was wiping down the table. The Frenchman wasn't doing much of anything.

I knew that Monocle and Simpleton were bachelors, so I expected them to know their way around the kitchen. I was wrong. Monocle complained that his "man" always did the work for him. Simpleton said that his man didn't do a thing for him, but he was lying. I know how to wash American dishes, but this English setup was new to me. I couldn't find a faucet and I gradually came to believe that there wasn't one.

We poked around aimlessly for a few minutes. Simpleton pick up some kind of odd wooden object. We all stared at it. "It must be very interesting working in Los Angeles," he said.

I shrugged. "I keep myself awake, I guess."

"What have you been working on lately."

"A man hired me to find his son-in-law. A screwy family, two wild daughters."

I gave them the Readers Digest version. They did a lot of nodding and seemed interested. Monocle wanted to know more about the rare books than the pornography ring. He seemed impressed that I'd picked up enough to bluff my way, but guys like that know how to make you feel good.

"So . . ." said Simpleton. "What happened to the chauffeur?"

"Er . . . who?" I said.

"The chauffeur? Found dead in the river. Who did it?"

I thought for a moment. "I forgot all about him. Didn't make much sense then. Doesn't now."

Monocle nodded. "Can't solve everything, old chap. Got to leave a little something for the

police. And with all those women, I'm surprised that you could concentrate at all."

Simpleton's face lit up. "Tell him your latest, old chap."

Monocle looked a little embarrassed. "Oh, he doesn't want to hear our silly little cases."

"No, I'd like to," I said. "Get some idea what it's like working this side of the pond."

"Oh, it was serious stuff," said Simpleton. "One of the worst cases of vandalism I've ever heard of."

"Vandalism, huh?" I said. "Breaking windows, stuff like that?"

"You're a perfect swine," said Monocle. "Sometimes one has enough of murders."

Simpleton smirked. "He has always been attentive to his *fiancé*. Especially before she was his *fiancé*. Usually, she manages to dig out a murder for him, but in this case it was some broken chessmen."

"Broken chess pieces?" I said. "That's a serious matter."

We were all laughing when The Priest came in. He took the wooden object out of Simpleton's hand and gently prodded us in the right direction. The Priest sorted out hot water and dish soap from somewhere, Simpleton scraped off the dishes, I washed them, and Monocle dried like someone who'd never had a dishcloth in his hand before in his life. Maybe he hadn't.

"Do you believe it?" said Simpleton suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"The whole story about Reichenbach Falls. Does it make sense?" He stared at me. I looked at Monocle. He looked as if he'd eaten a cookie dipped in mustard and didn't dare spit it out.

"Sure. Why not. What's wrong with it?" I said.

"This running away business, for a start. He was being chased all over London by the Professor's gang. He didn't run away then. As soon as he'd found the evidence, enough to have the gang locked up, he told the Doctor he'd have to get out of the country for his own safety."

"He was a witness," I said. "He needed to be somewhere safe before the trial."

"He never testified at the trials," said Simpleton. "He was presumed dead. He'd given the evidence to Scotland Yard and it was enough to put the whole gang away."

I looked at Monocle again. He had something to say and didn't want to say it. I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"There wasn't any evidence against the Professor. Or the Tiger-Hunter, for that matter. None. Man kept strict arm's length from all his associates. They were let get their hands dirty. Not one scrap of paper from him. There were a few old-school coppers who never believed The Professor had anything to do with the gang, though when the Tiger-Hunter was nabbed with the airgun most of them changed their mind." Monocle looked away from us.

"I had a chief-inspector pal show me the files. The Old Man gave 'em a sackful of evidence - all circumstantial. Documents, letters, checks. Put dozens in jail and three on the gallows. Everyone from The Professor on down, but nothing on the man himself." He sat down heavily.

"I was rather wondering how the Professor got away," said Simpleton. "Hiring a private train is a little noticeable. So, the reason that he wasn't picked up at the port was..."

"...nobody was lookin' for him," said Monocle. "No point in arrestin' him. Couldn't charge the fella. Couldn't hold him for a minute."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Just hold on. The Professor was chasing the Old Man. I read the same story you did. The Old Man had wrapped up the case and needed another couple days for it all come together. He didn't want to arrest the Professor because . . ." I thought for a moment.

"Consider, mes amis." It was the Frenchman, now. We'd finished the washing up, so he

wandered in. "This is the great detective who we discuss. He is a master of disguise. His best friend does not recognise him when he returns. Could he not easily hide for two days? And this Professor. If he has a man who troubles him, he kinks his little finger like this, and an assassin is despatched. He does not himself chase across Europe like a madman." I noticed that for all his put-on accent, the Frenchman could pronounce an aitch as well as I could.

The doorway to the kitchen darkened as the Fat Man appeared. "Do men such as we flee from our enemies? Pfui! We defend ourselves and destroy them. That great man would run from even so formidable a foe as the Professor is laughable. That he would encumber himself with a dimwit like Watson when attempting to conceal himself is absurd. The story is impossible."

"Yeah?" I didn't like the Fat Man. I didn't like the way he said 'dim-wit'. I felt like he wanted to look at me when he said it. "If the Old Man wasn't running away, and the Professor wasn't chasing him, what do you think was going on?"

"I watch children playing sometimes," said the Priest. "They run around in all directions, and one really can't tell who is chasing whom. Then you ask the children and it's quite obvious to them."

"Ahh," said Simpleton, sighing. "It's simple enough, really. The detective chases the criminal, not the other way around. The Professor wasn't stopped because there was no evidence. So why was he running away?"

"It's a funny thing about criminals," said the Priest thoughtfully. "They always believe that you know what they are up to. The professional criminal, I mean. A man of previous good character might stand over his wife with the poker in his hand and deny that he had anything to do with it."

"C'est vrai," said the Frenchman. "I was a policeman for a little while. Always I would say to the thief - 'You were seen', 'We have evidence', always they believe. The English gentleman who kills, he says 'show me your evidence'."

"The Professor was just another crook at heart," said Monocle. "For all his genius."

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth," said The Priest. "Though in this case, just one man was pursuing."

"Hum. Yes," said the Fat Man. "The detective fools the Professor into fleeing the country. A bad strategy if he wished for him to be arrested, but he did not. Then he chases after him. To what end?"

"Oh, don't you see?" said Monocle. He had his head in his hands. He looked wretched. "It's bringing his friend along that gives it all away. He tells him that the Professor is chasing them both. He's expecting an attack from the Professor at any moment. He had the whole thing planned from the start. He just needed a witness."

"Of course. What a bit of luck that the Professor went to the mountains," said Simpleton. "He had the weapon all around him, so to speak."



"There is always a weapon," said the Frenchman. "A precipice. A train. A glass of water. A clever man will always find a way - and this is a very clever man."

"So. The Old Man follows the Professor to Switzerland. He disposes of him. And then he disappears. Why? He cannot surely have any fear of the confederates. They would be nothing without their master." The Fat Man's voice was getting on my nerves.

"I don't know how they do it here, but back in Los Angeles when two guys go down an alley and only one comes out, the cops want to talk to him" I said.

"And when two go down, and nobody comes out, there's nobody to talk to," said The Priest.

"Even the police in a small Swiss village would carry out an investigation that might prove embarrassing," said The Frenchman. "Difficult questions would be asked."

"So let them think that both men fell together. I have found that the typical policeman craves a neat solution above all else. The grief-stricken Watson would easily convince them that The Professor set upon the Old Man in a frenzy, toppling them both over the edge," said The Fat Man. "If Watson were convinced, his sincerity would help him to convince others."

"The Detective disappears, presumed dead. The Professor is dead. The truth about The Professor comes out and the Detective is a lost hero. He returns after some years and no investigation takes place," said Simpleton.

"Is that all?" asked the Priest quietly. "The greatest detective who ever lived produced a story that has convinced everybody for fifty years. Do you think he couldn't have fooled a Swiss policeman?"

Monocle looked up. "What then, padre? Why did he stage his death and disappear? Was it really to trick the rest of the gang?"

"Hardly. He had already broken the gang, apart from a single gunman." The Priest put his hand to his forehead and swept back his hair.

"You don't know my methods. How could you? What I do - in as far as I do anything - is to put myself in the place of the man who did the crime. So, I imagined myself on that terrible ledge. Satan brought the Son of Man to a high place to tempt him. Everything looks very small from a height, and one can imagine oneself very big. Of course, if there's someone looking up from the bottom it's oneself who looks very small."

He picked up a jug and poured himself a glass of water. "I'm usually imagining myself as a criminal, or a thwarted lover, but for once I'm the Detective. The man who hunts down the criminal and upholds the law. I'm justice. Suddenly I have my hands on this wicked man. I have prepared for this. It is a consequence of my failure – my failure to find the evidence to convict him. He has outwitted me, but he's not expecting this. He's older than me, and I'm very strong, and I've surprised him. I hurl him into the abyss." He took a sip from the water.

"What do I feel as I watch him fall? I think of my friend - my only friend. He's going to be worried. He's the straightest man I've ever met. Incapable of doubting me. I have to look him in the eye and either lie or tell him the truth. I can't do it. I am overwhelmed with shame. So I hide, for three years."

"He would have disguised himself," said the Frenchman. "A simple Swiss peasant. The Professor would never have expected such an attack. In London, bien sur, the criminal mastermind - he is always afraid. But after his escape, where is there danger? The Detective is the man of the law. Never would the Professor expect a murderous assault."

There was a moment's silence. "Why did he come back?" I asked.

"Oh, shame isn't very deep," said the Priest. "It stings like the devil for a while, but it doesn't last. Guilt would have torn at him for years, but he never felt any guilt."

He took another sip of water. "There was another man – in France. He was a detective too – a policeman. There's a terrible temptation when you're hunting criminals to think that you're better than they are. It's so easy to become much worse."

"Worse? Perhaps..." said The Frenchman. "He did what he thought he had to do. He saw an evil man escaping, to do more terrible evil. And yet he knew that he had moved to the other side of the line. How could he hunt criminals when he now was a criminal?"

"So, he retired, still at the height of his powers" said Simpleton.

Monocle stood up. "I cannot blame him," he said.

"It is not a matter of blame..." began The Frenchman.

"No. No. Listen. When my fiancée was accused - the man who had committed - I was sure had committed the crime - he would escape and she..." Monocle wiped his forehead. "There was no evidence, you see. Or what evidence there was, was all against her. She . . . she would hang. He would escape."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"He was immune to arsenic, you see. He'd built a tolerance. I needed to prove it. I told him the Turkish delight was poisoned."

"But it wasn't," said the Priest.

Monocle shook his head. "I tricked him. I would have if . . . "

"But you didn't," said Simpleton. "I needed to kill someone, once. It was a woman - a very bad egg altogether. A murderer. I couldn't do it. You couldn't feed arsenic to a murderer, even to save her life. It wasn't in you to do it. None of us would."

"Perhaps," said the Frenchman. "I do not know. Maybe one day I will encounter a man so evil that I have to end him, in whatever way possible."

"What will you do then?" said the Priest.

"I will not continue," said the Frenchman. "I disapprove of murder. The first murder - how often have we seen? Some old lady, of no use to anyone. A cruel husband. And then a witness. Another obstacle. Soon, life has no meaning. No man should take that step - but for us, especially, it is impossible."

"Every day I pray 'Lead us not into temptation'," said the Priest. "This is the sin I would be drawn to. That we would all be drawn to."

"Confound it!" shouted the Fat Man. "Enough of this empty moralizing. We have solved the case, have we not?"

"We?" I thought.

"What were we brought here to do? The man does not need to be told what he did. Does he wish his crime exposed? To what end? He could have confessed the deed whenever he wished."

"I've been wondering for a while," I said. "Why was I here? Why was he here, for that matter?" I gestured at the Fat Man. "We don't know anything about the Old Man, or Switzerland, or the Professor. Any two of you could have had this figured out."

There was half a bottle of wine on the table. I took a teacup and splashed some in. I could have taken a wineglass but I was feeling crude. I gulped half of it down and watched Monocle wince.

"I reckon I'm pretty smart. Any room I'm in, I expect to be the smartest guy in it. Right this moment I'm probably the dumbest guy in the room. If the Old Man wanted me here, it wasn't to solve the case. He had plenty of people to do that."

I took a sip. I didn't want to upset Monocle anymore, so I stuck my little finger out.

"You want to know my methods? I ask all the people who knew the dead man if they killed him or not. One of them says yes, I'm finished. If not, I keep poking around until someone takes a swing at me. Or a shot, if I'm lucky. It's a good technique. It works. I might write a phonograph about it. It's not worth a damn on a job like this. Usually there's a couple women as well. No women here, are there? Just us"

They were paying attention to me. What the hell.

"He didn't want us to do anything about this case. He wanted us to know about it. He wanted to teach us something."

"What did he want to teach us?" said Monocle.

"Whatever we need to know," said the Priest.

The Frenchman nodded. "I do not know what I will do, mon père, when the temptation comes; but I will know what the consequences are. So will we all."

I thought about it. I knew a lot of guys who'd improve the world a hell of a lot if they went horizontal and under the soil. Would I put them there? I'd killed before and expected to kill again - but to save somebody's life, maybe my own. Was I being selfish? The Old Man had killed the Professor, for everyone's sake. I swore at myself, silently. I'd do what I had to do. I wasn't going to murder anyone. Leave it at that.

"One more thing" I said. They looked at me. That's the moment that will stay with me, the five of them waiting for me to speak. No, four, The Priest had slipped away. "Why now? After all these years? He knows we can't punish him. We can't even talk about it. He's been safe for a long time."

"There's really only one possible reason why he should choose now," said The Fat Man, so softly we could barely hear.

"He wanted to tell us, but he didn't want to face us," said Monocle.

"Still ashamed," said Simpleton.

We stood in silence, which was broken by a loud knock on the door. "I'll get it," I said.

An old man stood on the doorstep, leaning heavily on a cane. "Take me to him," he said.

"He's asleep," I said.

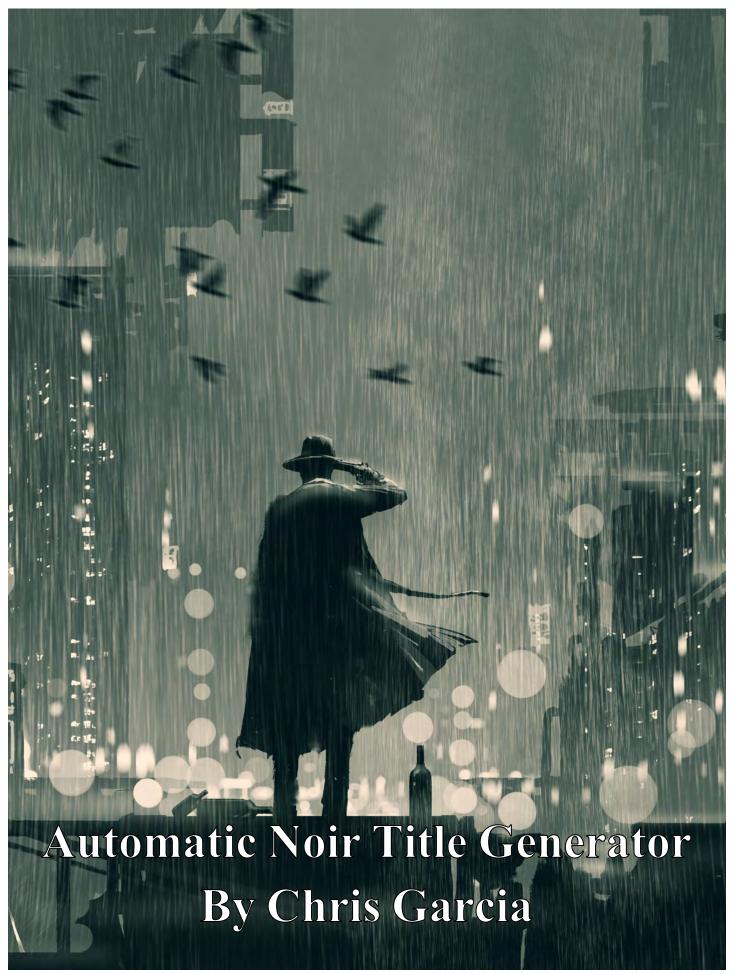
"It doesn't matter. I will sit with him until he wakes."

I led him in. "I don't know where the . . . " I began.

"I know," he said. He walked ahead of me, dragging his leg slightly. "I came as soon as he sent for me. He had an iron constitution, but he abused it abominably. I persuaded him to forego cocaine, but he continued to smoke heavily until last year."

He reached a door and tapped gently, then opened it. The Old Man lay on the bed, on top of the blankets, wearing a dressing gown. The Priest was kneeling beside the bed. The old man, the Doctor, walked over to him and held two fingers against his neck.

"He is dead," he said.



I found a generator that would allow you to feed in lists, and then it would spit out creative combinations from what you'd entered. I basically found as many film noir titles as I could, and I uploaded them. Here is the best of them with what I would imagine were the opening lines.

The Actor

Guido Pazzole stood at the stage door, smoking, hoping that one of the autograph seekers would be searching for more than his signature.

Green Rivers

Two green rivers merged into one on the far side of Breakman's Rock, where Alma Kubiak's body had lodged itself under.

Fallen Against the Grain

The bushels were stacked, full, and on the far wall leaned.

Bat Kay

Kristy never opened the door for strangers, but now she debated that policy.

The Night in the Evening

Darkness falls faster when the night arrives cold as the darkened steel of a knight's nightstick.

Follows

Like a loyal dog, failure will always follow.

Here Lies the Deceased

The dead man's jacket waved in the wind.

Evasive Telling

"No," she said, "I've never seen that man before."

Truth or Death

"His gun to the salesman's head, neither man understood how they'd reached that bluff."

Depth Harrow

She couldn't shake the feeling that she had seen him in the Harrow, at dawn, his eyes heavy with stony sleep.

Nightly Nights

Why was that night different from every other night?

The Case Against

He straightened the tie, the suit the county lock-up provided hung a loose in the should, tight at the neck, but had already seen three acquittals this year alone.

Algo

No one ever had to ask how to spell his name more than once.

Miami Full Moon

He hadn't looked out across the bay at night since the last night he kissed her.

On Tall Leaves

Wilkes-Barre was the Winston-Salem of Pennsylvania, or so the realtor claimed when she pushed the final purchase papers across her desk.

The Day of the Cleaners

None of Enzo Caliccio's men ever needed a silencer; no one would ever be left alive who could have heard the first shot.

Now She's Gone

The car pulled up, gravel-crunch announcing the cab's arrival.

Mojo de Ajo

"Another plate?" she asked.

The Lincoln Path

Walking from Downtown to the Brambles along the Lincoln Path cut nearly half-an-hour from the trip but exposed you to the kind of people who weren't civilized enough for either endpoint.

Gunshot Park

Map-makers know a name can bring about an effect.

Moon Inside Her Handbag

Had compact glinted in the streak of light from where the curtain had been cut in the minutes she waved the knife wildly at Tom.

Bacon And Legs

No waitress had a better reputation with those of bad reputation than Peggy.

Loose Change Woman

The next person who asked for a quarter would get the dead man's pocket change.

Losers Seldom Retire

His horse ran last, but it was fine; Miles had a plan to sell his blood if his landlord was sober enough to give him a three-day notice.

Should We Never Part Once More Again

Looking through the suitcase, he could tell that she had loved him, left him, and the loss had been given to him as a gift.

A Shore on The Other Side of The Water

"Someone close her eyes," Detective Greene said, knowing she had never seen the man who hit her.

