

WIRED ALIBI

By
**ROBERT
LESLIE
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"I'm not going back to jail for something I didn't do!" he said.



Illustrated by Al Savitte

The victim was no longer alive to deny or confirm his murderer but Homicide Donaldson was trying to finger Dan Turner for the kill—because in a Sunset Strip gin mill the Ace private eye had uttered public threats to feed the victim crooner a load of venom . . . it was evident that Dan was in a king-size jack-pot!

FOR THE ninth time in less than an hour my phone rang and some dizzy jerk asked me if I would accept a subscription to the *Herald-Express*. And for the ninth time I said: "You're dialing the wrong number, bub. This isn't the Hollywood agency of the *Herald-Express*; it's Dan Turner, private eye. I keep telling you that." Then I added: "Look. It's three o'clock Saturday afternoon. I closed my downtown office at twelve and came home here to my apartment stash for some quiet drinking. Since two you've been jingling my bell and interrupting my solitary attempts to get plastered. Enough is enough. Kindly hang up and quit pestering me."

The guy said he was sorry; rang off. I returned to my tipping and cast a dour glance at the telephone; dared it to ring again. If it did I promised myself I would rip it out root and

branch.

It kept quiet. It stayed too quiet. I'd grown so accustomed to hearing the bell sound off every five or six minutes that the flat seemed lonely without it. I had a couple more snifters of Vat 69 arid began to feel restless. I get that way sometimes. What I needed was company.

Company came.

The knock on my door was brisk, uncompromising. It sounded almost unfriendly. I welcomed it, though. I opened up; stared at my pal Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad. "Well, hi!" I smiled into his beefy features. "Come in and irrigate the tonsils with varnish remover from Scotland."

He came in. but didn't appear interested in anything as warmly pleasant as Scotch. He studied me balefully; his glims were bleak and his expression frigid. "So you got home."

"Who, me? Sure. A little past noon. Have

a snort.”

“Don’t give me that,” he rumbled.

“You mean don’t give you a snort?”

“I mean don’t give me that business about getting home a little past noon.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” I said. “What *is* this routine? And who cares about when I came home?”

He cleared his throat ominously. “I care.” He jabbed a meaty forefinger at my chest. “This isn’t a social call; it’s an official visit. Get your hat and coat on.”

“Don’t be silly. I never wear a hat and coat indoors.”

“Get them on. We’re going out.”

“Now listen,” I said. “I—”

“We’re taking a ride.”

If this was an invitation I didn’t like the tone of its delivery. I got balky; planted myself firmly in the middle of the room and set fire to a gasper, blew out a defiant cloud of fumes. “Are you whacky or something?” I said peevishly. “What the hell cooks with this we’re-taking-a-ride patter? What’s on your mind?”

“Murder,” he said.

THEN I tumbled. “Oh. You need my professional aid, eh? That’s different.” I slid into my sports coat, ankled toward the door at a smart pace; “Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

He lumbered after me. “I didn’t say so because it’s not your professional aid I want.” We were in the hall by now. “Come along and quit stalling. Lock your door. I don’t think you’ll be coming back for quite a while.”

“Hunh?”

He reached past me, slammed my portal shut and put the clutch on my arm; steered me toward the stairs. “I’m taking you somewhere to show you something. Stop playing innocent.” Then he fired a sudden question at me. “What do you know about Stuart McCune and Johnny Faraday?”

“No more than you do, probably,” I said. “McCune’s a columnist covering the Hollywood beat for a string of dailies from coast to coast. Damned good man, too: he reports the genuine movie news, instead of curbstome gossip and key-hole rumors. As for Johnny Faraday, he’s a crooner; skinnier than Frankie-boy and makes the bobby-sox chicks swoon like crazy. Do I win the Packard, the Frigidaire, the mink coat and the free honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls for answering both questions correctly?”

“I can do without your gag lines,” Dave said as we gained the street. He shoved me toward his official heap parked ferninst the apartment house. “In with you. And tell me about the feud.”

“Feud? Oh, the one between McCune and Faraday:”

“That one.” Dave grunted and wedged himself behind his steering wheel. “Tell me.” He sounded as if he already knew but merely craved to kill time by hearing the story again.

I said: “Nothing much to it, really. This Faraday punk owns a set of pipes like a cow’s moo at milking time, although vast masses of our younger population think he’s the gaudiest groaner that ever mumbled into a microphone. Success has swelled his noggin to the dimensions of Hollywood Bowl, thanks to the popularity of his broadcasts and his movies. Okay. Not long ago Stuart McCune wrote an inoffensive paragraph to which Faraday took vigorous exception. For no valid reason, he burned.” I tossed away my coffin nail. “A mild joke was all McCune intended but Faraday didn’t see it that way. No sense of humor.”

“And then?”

“It was all very silly,” I said. “Faraday was in New York at the time and he sent a blistering telegram to McCune out here in L.A., threatening to bust him on the beezer next time they met. A sheer impossibility, of course.”

“How so?” Dave kicked his starter, got us rolling in the general direction of Wilshire.

“Look,” I said. “In the first place, McCune is as big as I am, which stands him six-feet-plus in height and a hundred and ninety in weight; whereas Faraday is about five-eight, and you could blow him over with a deep breath. He even has to hang onto the mike to keep from falling down when he broadcasts. For a puny punk of his caliber to threaten a guy as hefty as McCune is plain ridiculous.”

“And yet he *did* threaten him.”

“From a remote distance, yes. McCune ran it in his column for laughs. Then Faraday announced he was taking out a permit to pack a rod; whereupon McCune wrote a paragraph that he would start toting a fly-swatter to defend himself. Johnny Faraday got the worst of that exchange.”

“He got the worst, period.” Dave berthed his bucket in front of a swank residential hotel apartment near the Westlake district and beckoned me. “Come along, hot shot. I want you to inspect the damage.”

“What damage?”

“As if you didn’t know.” And he conducted me inside the joint, took me up to a lavish layout on the fifth floor.

Cops in uniform were clustered in the corridor, and others, plainclothed, infested the flat itself. Police photographers were buttoning up their unwieldy impedimenta, fingerprint experts were dusting surfaces with camel’s-hair brushes, a medical examiner was writing up his preliminary reports and cursing his ball-point pen because it wouldn’t spread enough ink, and a couple of meat-wagon guys were loading something gruesome into a wicker basket.

A sour look crossed the medical examiner’s mush when he noticed Donaldson barging in. “Near time you got back, Lieutenant. You wanted my opinion as to the time and immediate cause, didn’t you? Well, figuring it on his smashed wrist watch and the condition of the body, he was kicked to death

around two-thirty.”

“Kicked, hey? I thought so.” Dave dragged me over to the wicker basket. “Have a look at your footwork, heel,” he growled at me. “Then consider yourself under arrest for murder.”

I peered down at an object which once had been Johnny Faraday. Somebody had tromped the crooner to cranberry jelly and apparently I’d been picked to take the rap.

CHAPTER II

Dust on Her Heels

THEY LIKE to talk about mixed emotions. Mine weren’t mixed; they came in rapid sequence, one after the other, like Pullman cars on the Super Chief roaring through Azusa. First I fought down a sudden attack of caterpillars in my clockworks as I copped a horrified hinge at Faraday’s gory remnants. Then I felt a quick burst of sympathy for the punk; he had obviously died a very painful death indeed. Next came indignation at the assassin who had inflicted such merciless punishment. And finally a gathering resentment filled my nooks and crannies as I realized Donaldson was trying to finger me for the kill.

I favored him with a flabbergasted stare. “You must be out of your senses!” I caterwauled. “Accusing me of—”

“Stow it,” he cut across my truculent yelp. “And you can save that injured innocence act. It stinks.”

“But see here—”

He interrupted me again. “Listen. Are you going to deny being with Stuart McCune in a Sunset Strip gin mill last week and uttering public threats to feed Faraday a load of shoeleather?”

All of a sudden I savvied his drift; felt a guilty blush turning my complexion the color of a Santa Monica sunset. I remembered the scene he was talking about, and with that memory came a rapid awareness that I was in

a king-size jackpot.

It had been a Saturday night, just a week ago. I'd dropped into a groggery for a nip of highland tonic and a bite of supper; had encountered Stuart McCune nibbling a Martini at the bar. Big and brawny and full of the milk of human kindness, the columnist had insisted on buying me a jorum of firewater. "When Hollywood's ace reporter and Hollywood's top private snoop get together, it's a festive occasion!" he had announced to all and sundry. "Join up with me, Sherlock. We'll make an evening of it."

HE was already partially bottled; I could tell by the glaze of his glimmers, the strength of his breath. Drunk or sober, though, I liked the guy. "Okay," I said. "But slow down on the Martinis until I catch up with you. You're too far ahead of me."

"Want to know why?"

"Because you like Martinis," I guessed.

He made a farcical grimace. "I'm scared."

"Oh, come now."

"Honor bright. I'm drinking to drown my fears."

I went along with the gag. "Whistle the patter, pal."

"If you'd read my column once in a while you'd know. A great big bad man is after poor little me. He's going to mow me down—it says here. With a gun."

"Oh, John Faraday."

He winked elaborately. "Faraday indeed. I'm in a panic."

Oh, sure. He was in a panic the way the north pole is in Miami. The mere idea that a hulking slug like McCune could be scared of a half-pint crooner like Faraday brought giggles and titters from everybody within hearing distance in the bistro. I played up the routine. "Never you mind, buster." I patted McCune's hefty shoulder; "Pappy Turner won't let anybody hurt you. No, sir. If Faraday so much as says boo to you I'll feed him a dose of shoeleather medicine. I'll kick him into a

wooden kimono."

"My pal," McCune had warbled in alcoholically spurious gratitude. Then brightly: "Tell you what. I'll hold him while you boot the bejunior out of him. Hah?"

"It's a deal," I'd agreed solemnly. Then we'd both got swacked to the hat. . . .

So that was what Donaldson now had on his mind. Somehow he'd heard about the grog-shop episode and swallowed it as gospel. Rapidly recovering from my momentary stupefaction, I pinned the pitying focus on him. "You poor dimwit," I said fervently. "Don't you recognize a joke when you hear one?"

"Death is no joke, cousin," he growled.

"But my threat was. Hell's bells and hominy grits, that whole routine was for chuckles. McCune didn't need any protection from the likes of Faraday; he's massive enough to take care of himself. Moreover—"

Dave rasped: "Belay the chatter! The point is, you stated you were going to kick Faraday into a wooden kimono, and McCune promised to hold him while you did it. Okay, Faraday's been kicked into a wooden kimono; or anyhow he'll be wearing one as soon as the autopsy is taken care of down at the morgue. That turns the heat on you, bright-eyes. You and McCune both!"

"You actually mean you're going to pinch him, too?"

"He's already pinched and in the sneezer. I saw to that before I went after you."

I said: "Oh, brother. Of all the dopey—"

That was as far as I got. Before I could give tongue to more, a flame-haired filly came bouncing out of an adjoining room; flew at me and tried to rake out my peepers with her long, red-painted fingernails. "Killer!" she screeched from the top of her tonsils. "Dirty, stinking, cowardly murderer!"

SHE was a she-male of extremely ample proportions, needing no high-heeled footwear to make her almost as tall as I am. In

fact, her sensible walking shoes were thick of sole and mannish in mode; and when she lashed out, kicked me on the shinbones, I felt it all the way north to my dandruff. I winced, ducked her clawing talons and fastened the petrified gander on her while fending her off my brisket.

What I saw was damned attractive if you like Amazons. Below her glowing-ember coiffure were features of exquisite perfection: emerald optics, a chiseled patrician nose, lips as red as cherries and a complexion guaranteed to turn a studio makeup expert upside down with frustration. The cosmetic jar didn't exist that could duplicate this dame's creamy skin, her sun-tanned gorgeousness. I couldn't help noticing she was just as well equipped in other departments, too. She had every curve in the book, all of them proportioned to her generous size; and yet I was willing to bet there wasn't an ounce of excess fat on her framework.

Which was to be expected when you realized she was Janet Rice, one of the west coast's top lady athletes. She held cups for golfing, swimming, tennis, polo and probably wrestling; she was strong as tempered steel and agile as a rattlesnake. And she was obviously determined to strew my tripe all over the precinct.

That I couldn't allow. I swatted aside her outstretched mitts and managed to get a grasp on her wrists. Then I backed her to a nearby wall and pinioned her there. "Now take it easy!" I panted "And quit pitting your muscles against mine. You're bound to lose the decisions, so why waste all this effort?"

"Killer! Murderer!"

I said mildly: "Tutz, it's unchivalrous to call a lady a liar. But that's exactly what you are if you say I bumped Johnny Faraday. I didn't. Besides, what's it to you?"

"I was his . . . he was m-my . . . we were engaged."

This was astonishing news, indeed. "The hell, you utter," I remarked. "No wonder

you're all in a tizzy over his demise. I forgive you the hysterics, natch."

"Murderer! Killer!"

"Now, now," I said soothingly. "Mustn't always believe hearsay evidence. Just because a dumb cop name of Donaldson accused me—"

"He accused you because I accused you first!" she fired at me. "I sent him to arrest you." She squirmed. "Let me g-go!"

I was so dumbfounded I obeyed; loosened my grips on her wrists and permitted her to slide away from me. "You put Donaldson on my trail?" I blinked at her.

"Yes. Because I happened to be in a certain cafe the night you and McCune said you were going to k-kill Johnny. I overheard it." Her lovely mush puckered with combined grief and hatred. "Th-then when I came here th-this afternoon and found him d-dead, I realized who killed him. I called the police and told them. He only got in from New York last night and . . . this is what he c-came home to. Murder!" And again she sprang at me, tried to kick me south of the border.

THIS time Donaldson and a couple of flatties intercepted her, dragged her to the far side of the room before she had a chance to ruin me. I said: "Much obliged, boys. That chick is plenty dangerous with her hoofs, you'll notice."

"Implying exactly what?" Dave beetled his brows at me.

I lifted a casual shoulder. "Oh, nothing. Except you'll remember Faraday was kicked to death."

That brought a banshee yelp from the red-haired Rice wren. If glares could kill, I'd have been a defunct dick right then. "Are you hinting *I* murdered Johnny?"

"It's a theory, tutz."

"You're insane! I loved him! We were going to be married. The wedding was to be n-next month!"

I said: "That's your story, babe. The guy is no longer alive to deny or confirm it. After all,

slips happen in the best of romances. Maybe he got tired of you. Maybe he decided it was a bad match to make. It's possible he concluded he didn't want a wife who'd tower four or five inches over him in altitude and outweigh him a substantial twenty or thirty pounds in family fisticuffs. Perhaps he gave you the brush for some such reason and you couldn't take it. You've been too accustomed to winning; you're a champ in too many games. The thought of being ditched was more than you could live with, so you did something about it. The hard way."

Personally I didn't believe a word of this; I was only needling her because she had dumped me in the grease and I'm an ornery, vindictive louse. Oddly enough, instead of infuriating her I succeeded merely in reducing her to extremely feminine tears. Suddenly she started shaking like a cat coughing doorknobs; sobs visibly coursed through her Junoesque proportions, and brine began spurting from her sea-green glimmers to run down her cheeks in drops as big as mock oranges.

Dave Donaldson regarded me with extreme disfavor. "I bet you punch little babies, too!" He produced a set of handcuffs. "Come on, sport. Let's take a ride to the gow."

"Yeah, sure," I said, and held out my dukes. "Help yourself—go right ahead and nipper me. Throw me in a cell. And then get in training for the biggest lawsuit you ever had slapped on you for false arrest."

"Hunh?"

"I've got an alibi," I said.

Across the room, Janet Rice reacted as if she'd been rammed by a red-hot branding iron. Her piquant puss got as pallid as adulterated milk and she lashed out wildly with both arms, knocked an assortment of cops sprawling on their cornerstones and plunged headlong to the door; lammed from the premises under forced draft. Before anybody could stir his stumps to stop her, she was gone in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER III *Twice-Made Goat*

SOMEbody ALWAYS has to be the goat. This time, bad luck picked me for it. I could blame my reflexes; they're faster than average and I've got a habit of going into action a split second sooner than an ordinary guy. When I piped the red-haired Rice muffin copping herself a quick scam I lowered my noggin and dived after her. I was a considerable distance from the door, and just when I reached the halfway mark Donaldson got the same idea. Yelling like crazy, he hurled himself forward.

The result was inevitable. We came together in the open doorway and wedged there tighter than two bunions in a new shoe. Then, to make it more binding, a cluster of Dave's homicide minions piled onto us and the sheer pressure spewed us out into the hallway; dumped us on the carpet in a squirming tangle of arms and legs.

I felt like low man in a barrel of eels and my discomfort wasn't improved when Donaldson stumbled upright and got a fistful of my collar, yanked me off the floor. Shoving his map close to mine, he yodeled: "You double-crossing creep!"

"Who, me?" I goggled at him. "Come again. I don't get it."

"You did that deliberately!" he said. "You rammed into me on purpose and got us jammed so the dame could powder." By now he was breathing fire and brimstone on my necktie. "You wanted her to escape!" He seized my lapels, bunched them into knots of cloth that would never be the same again. "Why?"

"Don't be foolish," I said. "I never met the lassie before in my life. Why should I give a damn whether she escaped or not? As a matter of fact I was trying to stop her; doing you a favor, so to speak. And *you* rammed into *me*. You've got only yourself to blame." Then, by way of psychological hotfoot, I added: "It

seems to me a policeman in your position should be ordering his underlings to institute pursuit. In other words, yoicks and tallyho, the chase." I grinned at him. "How about that?"

He turned an apoplectic purple hue and bent a malevolent glare on the sundry officers who were picking themselves off the corridor carpeting. "You dopes!" he yeped. "Go after that woman! Bring her back here or I'll rip the badges off you with my own two hands! Get going."

They got going. "That's more like it," I said. "The next thing to think about is, why did she run?"

"Why did she run? That's obvious. She ran because . . . well, because she . . . she . . . I'll be— Why *did* she run?" He scrubbed his jowls violently with a calloused palm. "There wasn't a bit of reason why she *should* run. It don't make sense."

"I can think of one possible theory," I said.

"Yeah? Well go ahead and think of it. Out loud."

I SAID: "Okay. Assume she's the one that croaked Faraday for reasons previously mentioned. Assume she planned to use Stuart McCune and myself for fall guys. All right, the frame seemed to be functioning; you'd nabbed McCune and tossed him in the jug and now you announced you were arresting me. Then I said I had an alibi—which naturally scared the Rice quail. If I actually had this alibi, her frame fell apart. Realizing her schemes were backfiring, she lammed."

"Hmm-m-m," Dave said. "Glib, if not downright eloquent. Maybe you've got something there." Then he scowled. "Now tell me about your alleged alibi."

"Gladly. According to your medico, Faraday was bumped between two and three this afternoon. He said the guy's strap watch was stopped at two-thirty and the condition of the body pretty much confirmed that hour as the time of death. Check?"

"Check."

"Well, I was in my apartment stash from lunch time until you came for me, which was well after three o'clock. That gives me a clean bill of health."

His scowl deepened. "Wait a minute. Who was with you?"

"Nobody. I was alone."

"Then how do you figure that's an alibi? Unless you can give me corroboration—"

"I can," I said. "My phone rang every five or six minutes between two and three. I answered it each time, proving I was there. All we have to do is check the jerk that called me."

"Where is he?"

"That I don't know."

Dave's glims hardened. "Well, then, who is he?"

"I don't know that either," I admitted.

"What?"

"He was a stranger dialing a wrong number," I explained. "All I know is, he wanted to subscribe to the *Herald-Express* and called me by mistake. I kept telling him I was Dan Turner, not the Hollywood agent of the *Herald-Express*. Finally he quit ringing just a little while before you showed up."

Dave lifted a supercilious lip. "Oh, fine. A stranger phones you by accident and you expect me to accept that as an alibi when you don't even know who he was, or where he lives. Hogwash."

"But it's the truth," I said doggedly.

"Sheep-dip."

"And we can locate the guy."

"Nuts. I don't believe there was a guy."

I said earnestly: "Don't be obstinate. Come with me and I'll find him for you."

"Yeah? How? You know there's no way of tracing an exchange, let alone a call, on the dial system. Be your years."

He was right about the anonymity of the dial system but he'd overheard another angle. "We'll check the *Herald-Express* agency in Hollywood," I said. "Whoever this bozo was, he finally stopped calling me. That means he

got wise to himself and located the number he really wanted. If so, then he must have placed his subscription. We'll simply ask to see the list of new subscribers who ordered the paper after three today; it stands to reason there won't be many—maybe not more than four or five. Among them will be the party that pestered me. We'll quiz everybody on the list; narrow it down to someone who'll admit he kept phoning me by mistake. So then I'll have my alibi."

DAVE hesitated. He was thinking hard; I knew by the deep, furrowed creases on his forehead.

At last he said: "Thin, but there might be something to it at that." Then the telephone there in the defunct Johnny Faraday's flat buzzed musically and Donaldson grabbed it. He said his name into the mouthpiece, listened briefly and began to puff up like an infected thumb. A tide of scarlet crawled past his collar, into his wattles, and northward until it suffused his whole face. He put the phone in its cradle; moved erratically toward me in blind rage. "Gone!"

"Gone? Who?"

"McCune!" He pushed the word past lips as immobile as a slash in granite. "Your palsy-walsy Stuart McCune. He pulled some crazy hocus pocus at headquarters where we were holding him, and copped a sneak for himself."

"No!"

"But yes. You know what that means, of course."

I said: "It means he's pretty stupid for a supposedly bright newspaperman. Flight usually indicates bad conscience and a bad conscience postulates guilt."

"Yeah. His guilt—and yours."

"Now cut that out!" I squalled. "I haven't run away, have I? Besides, I told you about my alibi! And if you're thinking about lammisters, remember the Rice wren also scrambled."

"I'll get her back. McCune, too. And meanwhile I'm not taking any chances on you. You're going to the clink until I get things straightened out. Come on, hot shot."

"Meaning you don't intend to check on the *Herald-Express* for that new subscriber's name?"

Dave's leer was unpleasant. "Later, maybe, when I get around to it. Not just now, though." Again he flashed his handcuffs; approached me with the obvious intention of festooning them around my wrists. It was equally patent that I was the fall guy for all the vexations Dave had encountered since discovering he had a murder to solve and no legitimate clues paving the path to its solution. Dan Turner, goat.

So okay. I was a goat. I made like a goat. I bent forward as if suddenly cramped by an unexpected bellyache; drove myself kerblam at Donaldson's unguarded paunch. He emitted a gurgling gasp of pain, like water going down a faulty drainpipe, and collapsed in a writhing heap on the floor. I vaulted over his fallen poundage, blipped to the apartment's portal and powdered—fast.

CHAPTER IV

Not A Joy Ride

DAPPER WAS the word for Charles Martindale Martyn. He had chorus-boy hair as wavy as ripples in a millpond and yellower than a new gold coin, and his profile was so perfect it belonged in Greek sculpture. He wore woven leather sandals, fawn slacks and a sport shirt open at the classic throat to show he had no perceptible Adam's apple. When he answered my ring on his doorbell he was smoking a brown paper Cuban coffin nail in a holder as long as a symphony conductor's baton, its mouthpiece clenched between teeth so dazzling white they damned near blinded you. "Something?" he said in a voice like warm honey dripping on cerise velvet.

I matched him smile for smile. “I understand you subscribed to the *Herald-Express* this afternoon, right?”

“Oh, quite. You’re here to collect in advance?”

I said: “No, I’m not with the paper. Dan Turner’s the name. I want to talk to you a minute if you don’t mind.”

“Dan Turner. Dan . . . Turner.” He invited me into his stash with a languid wave of the cigarette holder. “That seems familiar. Now where have I heard it recently?”

The bungalow was small and unpretentious on the outside. When I barged into its living-room, though, it was like stepping into a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer set. The walls were papered in cream-colored silk applied in panels framed by split bamboo, and the windows were set off by pastel-green nylon drapes that swirled down from valances to floor like falling sea water. An off-white rug foamed up around your brogans when you went across it, giving you the effect of wading through whipped cream, while the furniture resembled something an interior decorator had dreamed up after a session with an opium pipe. There was a very small baby-grand piano painted lavender, a cushioned couch so low to the floor it looked downright deformed, a butterfly coffee table with legs not more than five inches high, and a profusion of puffy silken pillows scattered around where chairs should have been.

Barring the piano bench and the couch, the only way you could sit down in the joint was by squatting cross-legged on one of the scattered pillows: It would have been strictly in character for the harem of an Oriental potentate but I didn’t like it worth a damn. Nor did I like the perfumed heaviness of the air, a pungent fragrance which might either be incense or Martyn’s Cuban tobacco.

He sank gracefully down onto one of the floor pillows. “Dan . . . Turner. It seems to me . . .”

“I’m a dick,” I said. “Private.”

His face began to clear. “Oh. Now I remember.”

“Sure. You kept phoning me this afternoon between two o’clock and three. You mistook me for the *Herald-Express* agency.”

He put his head back and laughed. It was a liquid laugh; free of constraint, unembarrassed. His smooth throat rippled with each chortle. “Dreadfully bothersome, wasn’t I, old man. Sorry and all that sort of thing.” The laugh stopped and the teeth were switched off suddenly, like turning out a light. “How in the world did you manage to find me?”

“I asked at the newspaper agency. They took two subscriptions by phone after three today. One from a dame. The other was a bozo who mentioned he’d had a hell of a time getting the right number. That must have been you, so I took your name and address and came on over.”

HE looked enthusiastic. “But that’s marvelous! I mean perfectly marvelous. It’s like being a detective . . . oh, I forgot. You’re a detective, you said.”

“Private, yeah.”

“That’s the most fascinating kind,” he cooed through a smile; then the smile got switched off. “Why’d you look me up?” The tone was brittle on that one. No more warm honey on cerise velvet. You knew it was a man’s voice talking. All man, and you could ignore your first impressions. Sometimes old lady nature plays a prank—packs cold hard steel beneath a layer of seeming softness.

Charles Martindale Martyn probably had his reasons for the fop act. Maybe it went big with the janes. Protective coloration, so to speak. I tried to analyze it from that standpoint and it made sense.

Hard steel under seeming softness. I liked the picture. He and I could do business; we spoke the same language. Different dialects maybe, but the same language. The only thing he had that I didn’t have was *finesse*. I grinned

at him. "I looked you up because I've got to have an alibi and you're it."

"Alibi."

"There was a kill; some time between two and three today. I'm partially under the gun for it. I need you to testify that I was in my apartment that whole hour. You know I was because you kept ringing my phone and I kept answering."

He said: "Well, I'll be damned. That's the neatest gambit I've heard in a long while. Clever, too. Will the police buy it?"

"If they're smart they will."

"And if they don't?"

"All I'm sparring for is time," I said. "I figure to conduct my own personal investigation of Johnny Faraday's murder and pin it where it really belongs."

He stiffened. "Johnny Faraday? The crooner?"

"The crooner."

"He's . . . dead? He's the one who was killed?"

"Yeah. You knew him?"

"I knew his fiancée. I'm Janet Rice's press agent."

So that was how the Junoesque Rice tomato was constantly getting her name in the papers, her picture on the sports pages. She had a press agent. And that very press agent was the guy who could alibi me out from under an accusation placed by Janet herself. It was a small world.

I DIDN'T say any of this to Charles Martindale Martyn, however. I didn't want to test his loyalty to his employer. If he discovered it was Janet Rice who'd tossed me to the wolves, he might back up her play by refusing to confirm my alibi. Let sleeping dogs lie is my motto. After all, I was only a stranger to him. The Rice cupcake was his boss.

"You'll string along with me?" I said.

He looked profound. "Could be." He buffed his nails on a silk shirt-sleeve and then

rubbed the ball of the thumb over bunched fingertips. It was a gesture you might miss if you didn't look closely; but I was looking closely. I caught the significance. "Could . . . be," he repeated.

"Cute" I said. "We must be brothers under the skin."

"Oh?"

"I'm always on the make, too," I said. "For a dame—or a dollar."

"I adore dollars," he said. "Particularly in large quantities. Of course I wouldn't meddle with anything as hot as perjury. You couldn't bribe me to lie for you if you paid me Louis B. Mayer's salary. But in your case I'd only be telling the truth. Now if the truth is worth anything to you . . ." He let the balance of the thought dangle in midair like a magician's stogie with no visible means of support.

I said: "Would a century note help?"

His answer was an oblique question. "What do you drink?"

"Scotch."

"Absinthe is mine. Dreadfully expensive, absinthe."

He wanted the ante raised. I raised it.

"Two Yards?"

"Well . . ." he said. "Cash?"

"On the barrel, as soon as you testify." This was ridiculous, I thought. For once in my life I was being milked of a fee, rather than milking somebody. Somehow I liked Charles Martindale Martyn for having the guts to try it.

He said: "It's a deal. What do we do now?"

"Get in your car and roll on down to police headquarters," I said promptly. "I haven't got my jalopy with me."

"You'll love mine. It's a Mercedes-Benz. Imported, you know." He wrapped a canary-silk scarf around his throat. "Given to me by a certain actress whose name you'd recognize if I told it to you—which I won't, of course." He put on a striped blazer. "Shall we go?"

We went. His garage was behind the

cottage; and he was right. I loved the Mercedes-Benz. It wasn't as long as a destroyer but it had more brasswork. It was painted lavender, like the miniature grand piano, and it purred like a kitten full of cream. I wondered what he'd had on the actress who gave it to him. Plenty, probably. People don't give away jobs like that for charity. Martyn was quite a lad.

He was a lad I would have to watch, I reflected. It wouldn't be good to let him get his talons in me too deep; he might try to make a permanent career of it. I decided to keep my glimmers peeled at all times, just for safety's sake.

He backed the lavender chariot from its stall; hopped out and closed the garage doors. "Want to drive?" he asked me?"

"Yes. Thanks." I scooted under the wheel, waited for him to get settled beside me and then drifted backward to the street; tested the gears get the feel of them. When I looked up, there was a cab going by: a Tanner Yellow with one passenger slumped in its tonneau. The passenger was a guy with his hat-brim low on his mush, and when I piped him I forgot all about feeling out the Mercedes gears. I slapped into second, let out the clutch and shoveled ethyl to the motor. The rear tires whined for traction, got it. We went surging forward.

Martyn yelped: "Hey—!"

"Hang onto your bridgework, sonny," I said grimly. "We're taking out after that taxi. There's a party in it I crave to see."

"Wh-who?"

"Stuart McCune," I said.

CHAPTER V

Holes for a Head

TAILING THE columnist's hack would have been easy in my coupe. One of the advantages in a commonplace heap like mine is the fact that there are a million just like it, shabby of paint, dented of fender; nobody

pays any attention to you, making a tail job simple and uncomplicated. It was different with Charles Martindale Martyn's lavender Mercedes. I knew McCune would tab me if I came too close to him; I might as well have been riding on an elephant with a Neon-lighted trunk.

And I didn't want him to tab me—yet. Very likely he'd try to make a getaway, which would mean a chase at illegal speed through the streets, and possibly get a motorcycle cop after me. The thing I craved least was a cop on my neck at this juncture; not until I had collared McCune for a showdown. But sneaking up on his cab was going to be tough sledding.

Abruptly the Yellow swung hard right at the main gates of Paratone Studios; paused there and went on through the wrought-iron portals. I realized what the pause was for. McCune had identified himself to the gate guard. As a syndicated movie-news writer, he had access to all the lots in town and now he was ducking into a major layout. Why?

I wheeled in behind him, hoping the size and glitter of this buggy I was driving would zip me by the guard without a stop for explanations and credentials. The lavender bucket looked so much like a star's equipage I figured it would, impress the sentry into waving me right on in.

I was wrong. He blew his whistle, held up a palm. "Beg pardon, sir. Your pass, please."

"Listen, pal, I'm in a hurry and—"

"Yes, sir. Your pass, sir."

You can't curse a guy for performing his duty. Not out loud, anyhow. Damning him under my breath, I produced my private badge; flashed it under his trumpet. "I want to see somebody inside. Business."

"And the name, sir?"

"Dan Turner."

"What department is he in, sir?"

I said: "He's not in any department. *I'm* Dan Turner."

"Excuse me, sir. I meant the name of the

person you wished to see, sir.”

That was almost too hot for me to field but I made a stab at it. I knew I didn't dare announce I was after Stuart McCune, who'd just gone in; the guard, being so damned efficient, would probably have him paged while forcing me to wait at the entrance. Then McCune, realizing the score, would quietly make himself scarce—and I would have lost my quarry.

AN inspiration hit me. I remembered McCune was pretty gone on a brunette chick who worked in the makeup department, name of Wilma Cornell; a frill I'd met on two or three parties around town. I mentioned her monicker and added: “You needn't bother telling her I'm here; she's expecting me.”

“That's odd, sir. When an employee expects visitors she's supposed to notify us in advance, here at the gates. And Miss Cornell only mentioned Mr. McCune—”

“I'm with him,” I picked it up on the first bounce. “Separate cars, is all. Thanks, chum.” And I drove under the archway before he could think about it. Once inside I said to Martyn: “I think we're playing in luck. Evidently McCune phoned this Cornell quail on his way here, and arranged something.”

“You must have a crystal ball,” Martyn murmured.

“No, I'm just fast at putting two and two together. And I get hunches sometimes.” I parked in front of a long low stucco, building. “Let's go in.”

We went into the makeup department and found the room where Wilma Cornell earned her wages. It was fairly small, square, and had side windows and a skylight for natural illumination. A huge mirror made up one wall, there were shelves flanking it, and jars of greasepaint were ranged along the shelves. There were also some head-forms with various types of wigs on them and in the center of the room a barber's chair. The joint looked like a cross between a tonsorial

emporium and a beauty parlor. A guy was sitting in the chair, getting fitted with a Russian beard as black as the inside of a coal mine and thicker than ferns in a South American jungle. Hovering over him was Wilma Cornell, a diminutive chick with a lot of attractions. She wore a white linen smock, crisp and starched, but a sweater would have been better. A tight sweater, preferably.

SHE glanced up from her work, saw me, lifted an eyebrow in apparent surprise and said: “Hi there, Sherlock. Be right with you.” Then, to the guy in the chair: “All set, Mr. Smith. If the spinach slips this time, phone me from the sound stage and I'll pop around with a glue pot.” She jacked the chair from its incline and the bewhiskered bozo stood up, started for the door.

“No you don't,” I said, blocking him. “And lay off the Mister Smith routine. You're not fooling anybody with the crepe beard, McCune.” I grabbed his facial foliage and yanked.

The foliage came away, bringing some skin with it; the Cornell cutie's glue must have been very potent indeed. The guy gave vent to a heart-rending howl and stood revealed in naked-faced agony—a naked face I'd never seen before in my life. He wasn't Stuart McCune; he was a complete stranger named Smith.

Petrified by this astounding discovery, I stood rooted while he swung lustily at my dewlaps. Moreover, he connected; knocked me on my duff. Then, clutching wildly at his chin where the hide was all peeled off, he whirled and went racing outdoors screaming for somebody to drench him with a fire extinguisher; he was under the impression his complexion was burning.

From behind a screen at one corner of the room, a large character stepped into view and blipped to my assistance; lifted me off the floor and propped me on my pins. This new guy really was Stuart McCune, who had been

hiding throughout the entire sequence. He dusted me off and yammered: "For pipe's sake, Hawkshaw, whatever made you think I'd be lurking under a set of shrubbery? A mustache and a hair-dye, yes, but a beard! Of all the idiotic—"

"Hold on!" I snapped at him. "When it comes to idiocy, you're a fine one to preach, after the way you powdered from cop custody! Don't you realize that automatically made you a prime suspect for the Faraday bump?"

"That's just it. I was too prime. I realized I was in a nasty spot; and when the opportunity came to duck, I ducked quick. Self-preservation isn't an instinct you can argue with in time of stress. You act first and think about it later." He squinted at me. "Speaking of suspects, the police gave me to understand you were in the soup right along with me. That Lieutenant Donaldson slob said you were going to be arrested too."

"Yeah, but I've got an alibi," indicated Charles Martindale Martyn. "He's it."

McCune, who was a columnist, naturally knew Martyn, who was a press agent. No introductions were necessary. "Oh, so?" McCune said and looked wistful. "Wish I had one."

"Meaning you can't prove you were somewhere else when Faraday was being kicked off?" Martyn drawled. "I say, that does put you in rather a bad pickle, doesn't it?"

I said: "It does if he's innocent."

McCune reddened slightly. "Are you intimating I might be guilty, gumshoe?"

"Not intimating. Asking."

"I think I'm entitled to ask something myself," he parried me. "How'd you trace me here to the makeup department?"

"Luck and a hunch. The luck was when I saw you riding by in a Yellow. The hunch came after you turned into the studio. I'd been told how you made a getaway from headquarters, so I knew you were on the lam and figured this was where I'd probably find you."

He made a bitter mouth. "And pinch me to make yourself a here with the police, eh?"

"Not necessarily. The main thing was I wanted to ask you to your face if you murdered Faraday."

The diminutive Cornell doll exploded: "You don't have to ask!" and took a protective stance in front of the newspaperman, like a very small hen trying to mother an ostrich. "Stu wouldn't kill—"

"I wouldn't," McCune nodded. "And I didn't. Does that answer you, Philo?"

"Yeah," I said, "if you're leveling."

"I am. So now what happens?"

WHAT happened was not what he expected. It wasn't what any of us expected. The door smashed open and two studio harness coppers barged in. With them was a genuine bull, a prowler-car patrolman in the full panoply of his rank and majestic with authority. He had evidently been summoned to back up the efforts of the studio gendarmes; and the reason for the commotion was immediately evident. The character ham named Smith, whose phony whiskers I had denuded, entered noisily behind the minions of the law and pointed accusingly at me. His chin was a criss-crossed welter of adhesive tape as he yeped: "There he is! Arrest him!"

Obviously he was craving me pinched for peeling all the rind off his wattles. But Stuart McCune, standing close to me, evidently thought he was the one being pointed to. "No!" the columnist popped off loudly, "I'm not going back to jail for something I didn't do!" And he pulled a roscoe out of his coat, brandished it.

This fabulous maneuver left everybody in the room utterly bemused. I couldn't even figure where McCune had obtained the heater; it was a cinch he'd been frisked at headquarters before he'd made his scam, so he must have got the gat since then. The fact remained that he was now flourishing a firearm, holding three cops at bay with it. I

said: "Stu, you fool!"

"Quiet. We're going out. Me, you and Martyn."

Wilma Cornell collapsed in a swoon.

That was the last straw. The cops instinctively turned their glims on her as she fell in a huddled heap, and McCune put himself in reverse gear; sprang backward toward one of the open side windows. "Come on!" he commanded.

Well, what the hell? You don't debate issues with a man waving a cannon; he might blow his top completely and make holes in your head. Herding Charles Martindale Martyn before me, I gained the window and we went out. McCune followed; still backing, still covering the inside of the room with his fowling-piece. Then we all ran to beat hell.

CHAPTER VI

The Clay Pigeon Flies

IT WAS silly, of course. At least it was silly for me to make with the sprint act. I had nothing to worry about as far as the law was concerned; with a ready-made alibi, I knew nobody could involve me in the Faraday croaking. Of course I might draw a reprimand for pulling off a stranger's spurious whiskers but that was a minor matter. In fact, if I made like a detective and fastened the arm on the party who actually had bumped Faraday, the homicide department would be so grateful they'd blow down the whisker beef. And by now I was fairly certain I knew the killer's identity. All I needed was proof.

Moreover, I thought I knew how to get that proof. Piling into Martyn's opulent Mercedes-Benz, I was laying plans. McCune ordered me to drive, while he and Martyn sat in the tonneau. I started the power plant purring, backed out of the parking and whooshed to the main gates; arrowed through without stopping to check out. This was no time to think about studio regulations, and if that uniformed guard wanted to be offended

by my breach of protocol—the hell with him. I couldn't very well pause to tell him McCune had a roscoe aimed at me, anyhow. That might lead to bloodshed, with my blood being shed.

I drove fast.

Several blocks later I slowed, angled toward the curb. "Look, Stu," I said to the columnist. "This is all very mad indeed."

"Is it? I told you I didn't intend to be arrested."

"But those bulls wanted me, not you. It was because I harvested that Smith ginzo's spinach. Then you had to go and make a dope of yourself; tip your hand. Now Dave Donaldson will know where to pick up your trail as soon as he sees a police report of that hassle in the makeup department."

He put away his fowling-piece and looked rueful. "Every time I move I make a worse mess of things." He reached for the car door. "Sorry, Sherlock. I didn't mean to get you in dutch with the law. I wasn't just thinking straight."

"Skip it, chum," I said, putting blandness in my voice. "What do you figure to do now?" I added.

"Maybe I ought to take a chance, give myself up."

I said: "I wouldn't advise it. They'll sweat the living appleseeds out of you, after all the whacky capers you've been pulling. If I were in your shoes I'd hole up for a while."

"But . . . what hole?"

I mentioned an auto court I knew, out in the valley. "Martyn can drive you out there."

"But I thought you wanted me to go with you to headquarters," Martyn objected. "To establish your alibi, remember?"

I said: "That can wait. There's some snooping I'd like to get done with first." I slid out of the Mercedes, not mentioning anything about Janet Rice. At this juncture, the less said about the hefty quail with the oversized flat-heeled brogans the better. At times it pays to keep your kisser zipped and this was definitely one of those times.

HOPPING out, I watched Martyn and McCune get up front and roll away from there. Now I was afoot, but not footloose; I knew exactly where I wanted to go, the route necessary to get there, and the investigations I had to conduct along the way. These consisted in stops in every druggery, gin mill and hash dispensary along an imaginary line stretching from the apartment hotel where Johnny Faraday had been kicked to his ancestors; and at each step I buttonholed clerks, waitresses and bartenders with pertinent questions concerning their pay-station phones. Once I even spent a nickel to make a call of my own but for the most part I was content to ask information of the hired help.

At every second or third joint I learned something. Presently I knew I had all the answers and barged forth from my final stop into the gathering dusk. The afternoon was over and so was the mystery of Faraday's violent demise. Evening had begun to thicken and the scenario was rapidly approaching the fadeout.

A lavender jalopy purred to the curb alongside me, and Charles Martindale Martyn softly called: "Turner."

"Hi," I said. "Where's McCune?"

"I ditched him. Come here, smart guy."

"Sure, sure," I said, and moved toward the press agent's fancy kettle. Then I saw the rod he was holding in his lap, a .38 stubby with a blue steel barrel and mother-of-pearl grips. "Well," I said. "Packed, hunh?"

"Packed and set to blast," he said. There was no honey or velvet to his voice; it was strictly metal, hard, businesslike. "Get in, wisenheimer."

I got in alongside him. "Well?"

"I've been following you," he said.

"Yeah, I know."

He scowled. "You'd spotted me?"

"From the start," I said. "You must have dumped McCune almost as soon as you drove around the corner away from me. Then you got on my tail and stayed there. It's impossible

to shadow a man in a car like this. Too ostentatious."

"Okay. Be clever. It won't buy you anything—now."

"No, I suppose not."

He cast me a sidewise leer. "You must have tumbled to that one slip of the tongue I made, back in the Paratone makeup department. Right?"

"Right," I said. "You mentioned that Faraday had been *kicked* off. Meaning you knew the murder method. But I hadn't told it to you, so how could you know unless you'd been there? Unless, maybe, you were the one who'd kicked him off?"

Martyn sighed, "An inexcusable blunder. For a while I'd hoped you hadn't picked it up, I couldn't be sure, though. You played it deadpan. But then later, when you were so anxious to shove McCune off onto me, I knew you were just trying to get rid of me a while so you could do your checking."

"Bull's-eye," I agreed.

HE started the Mercedes; talked as he drove. "You've got too much brains. Sometimes that's dangerous for a detective. That one tiny slip I made . . . it started you backtracking along my route. If you'll permit me to congratulate you?"

"Go right ahead."

"Of course you were asking people about their public phones," he said. It wasn't a question, it was a statement of fact.

I nodded. "That phone routine was a nice gimmick. Nicest I've run into for years and years. Proves premeditation, too."

"Oh?"

"Natch. You had to figure it up in advance. Which meant you'd planned right along to murder Faraday." I added: "You were determined to croak him and you wanted an air-tight alibi. Before you left your bungalow, you dialed my apartment number. You knew of my rep as an honest private eye; you knew my word would carry plenty of weight with

the cops. So you phoned me and pretended you wanted to subscribe to the *Herald-Express*. You pretended you'd called a wrong number."

He smiled. It was not the dazzling teeth smile; it was thin of lip, mirthless, sardonic but not amused. "Tell me more."

"Then you started for Faraday's hotel," I said. "Along the way, you stopped at a pay station, dropped a jit and dialed me again. I answered and again you pretended it was a wrong number. We disconnected and you continued on toward Faraday's stash. Five minutes later you stopped in at another pay booth, dialed me, went through the whole routine again. In other words, starting at two o'clock, you called me four or five times, all the way to Faraday's flat—and then, reaching there, you trampled him to death. I think your next call to me must have been made right there at Faraday's, over his dead body, so to speak."

"Hmm-hmm."

"Then you started home again," I said. "And once more you dialed my number. No, not once more: four times more. Making exactly nine calls, all told. Nine calls, all of them supposedly from your own bungalow but in reality from pay phones along your murder route. As it happens, you were establishing an alibi for me; but it was just as much an alibi for yourself."

"Clever of me, eh?"

"Yeah."

"And clever of you to uncover the stunt."

I said: "That's the only way it could have happened."

"Which you proved by checking my various steps."

"Right."

He smiled that downward-curving smile. Its viciousness raised goose pimples on me, big enough to pass for warts. "Of course you realize you won't live to tell the police any of this."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said, and meant it fervently. I kept eyeing the roscoe he held in his lap, watching for a twitch of the trigger finger. One blast and I was a goner. And I couldn't make a dig for my own shoulder-holstered .32; if I tried it I was the same as installed under a gravestone. "There's only one piece of the puzzle missing," I said.

"What's that?"

"Your motive."

"What do you care what my motive was?"

I said: "I just hate to get rubbed out with a riddle still unsolved in my grey cells."

"You're so smart, why don't you guess?"

"Well, we know you're a blackmailer," I hazarded. "You squeeze dough out of people. You wanted to squeeze some out of me for the alibi you were giving me an alibi that was as much yours as mine. You couldn't help trying to make a few hermans even out of a situation like that, could you? And of course you told me this Mercedes was a gift from some actress. Actresses don't give away imported jalopies for the fun of it; there must have been a shakedown."

"There was."

"So maybe you had the bite on Faraday and he finally refused to cough up any more scratch. Maybe he even threatened to go to the cops about it. So you cooled him."

MARTYN giggled. "Wrong, gumshoe. You missed it a mile. Do you really want to know the truth?"

"It would ease my pain considerably."

"Jealousy," he said.

I fastened the perplexed focus on him. "Jealousy?"

"I'm in love with Janet Rice. Have been ever since she hired me as her press agent some years ago. I proposed to her, finally; and she laughed at me. She said she'd always supposed I wasn't interested seriously in women. Thought I wanted to walk alone."

"Well, don't you?"

He tightened up. "No cracks," he advised me grimly.

"Okay. Excuse it please."

"Ah, why should I worry what you think?" he said. "You won't live long enough for it to matter. So Janet laughed. Laughed in my face when I said I wanted to marry her. She told me no dice; she was engaged to Johnny Faraday. Can you imagine a big beautiful woman like her married to a crooner? I couldn't stand it. I killed him. I'll kill anybody that tries to take her away from me. And I'm killing you because you know all this." He parked before a vacant lot. "End of the line for you. Out."

I stepped forth. It was almost dark now. I moved onto the weed-grown vacant lot, with Martyn at my back, his cannon digging at my kidneys.

I said: "Let me turn around. Let me get shot in front."

"Brave, eh?"

"You can call it that." I was soaking wet with sweat and I was quaking like Jello in an earthquake. Brave! I was scared spitless.

I turned around. Martyn's gat came up. A blinding red flash stabbed at my peepers and there was a bellowing *Ka-Chow!* as a gun sneezed sudden destruction. It wasn't Martyn's gun, though; it was a police positive in the fist of my friend Dave Donaldson. Dave

had switched on the red spotlight of his official sedan, and thus illuminating the scene he slammed a slug into Charles Martindale Martyn's spine.

The press agent screamed. It was a sound that haunted me for days afterward. Then he fell down.

I leaned over him. "You missed a bet, pal," I said. "At soon as I knew you were trailing me along the telephone route I called headquarters. Lieutenant Donaldson's been shadowing us the past several minutes."

"I . . . I'm paralyzed . . ."

"You're croaking," I said. "Who's sorry now for bumping Johnny Faraday?"

He said harshly: "Sorry . . . I'm . . . glad I killed him. He'll never . . . have Janet. . . ." Then his glims walled back in the red glow of the spotlight and he cashed in his chips.

Dave Donaldson moved into the crimson beam, close to me. "I heard that, Sherlock," he said. "Looks like I didn't cut loose a minute too soon, hey?" Then he tacked on: "Thanks for making yourself a clay pigeon. This is one case you cleaned up quick. But I still don't savvy why the Rice girl ran away."

"For the same reason McCune lammed," I said. "They were both innocent and they were both scared they'd be railroaded. When all this hits the headlines they'll come out of hiding."

Sure enough, they did.