

When his past threatened to wreck his future, John Liegh decided to write a

Devil's Billet Doux

By Cliff Howe



JOHN LIEGH drew the fifteenth circle on the morning of February twenty-first. Little circles on his desk calendar marked the nights he had slept little or not at all.

Besides the calendar was a check book, and it had been there fifteen days. Next to the check book was a packet of paper smaller than John Liegh's palm. The packet consisted, first, of a letter which John had penned:

Dear Jim:

Sorry I have taken so long getting these notes to you. I was mighty glad to help you out by acting as secretary in your place at the last lodge meeting. Hope the cold is better

Best wishes,

JOHN.

Though Jim Spears, for whom the note and the attached lodge meeting minutes were intended, was president of the bank three blocks down Front Street from John Liegh's office, that tightly folded packet had been on John's desk fifteen days.

John Liegh had scarcely finished drawing the fifteenth circle when the phone rang. It was Jim Spears calling to ask for the sixth time why he hadn't received the notes John took at the last lodge meeting.

"Why, haven't you got those minutes yet, Jim?" John asked. "Swear I must be getting absent-minded. I'll see if I can find them kicking around here somewhere."

John hung up as the opening of his office door brought on a cold nausea as

though there was a snowball rolling around inside his belly. When he saw that it was Town Marshal Gilling who entered, he relaxed a little. There was once a time when the glimpse of a uniform would have made John quail, but not any more. He smiled in his mild manner at Gilling and said:

"Come in and set a while, Dan."

Dan Gilling shook flabby chops. "Consarn you anyway, John! Think a man smart enough to make the kind of money you do would have more horse sense. Never can tell when some city crooks are going to hit this town, yet for the past two weeks every time I try your door at night I find it unlocked. Either you got to get less absentminded or let me have a key to lock up with."



John Liegh laughed quietly. "I've nothing here to steal."

"All the same, a cop's job is to prevent crime. And you're practically invitin' somebody to bust in here. So," he warned as he backed from the door, "after this you lock up."

For fifteen nights, John Liegh's office had been unlocked. Surely, John's past would soon roar down upon him from the city on the night train. A man cannot lock

his door against his past. John Liegh had tried it before.

ON THE seventh of every February, every year for twenty years, Arthur Kent and John Liegh's past had dropped in on the little office. Yet today was the twenty-second. If Arthur Kent was dead, if the past died with him—

"Well, if it ain't good old Spike!"

John's thread of hope was a cobweb, ripped ruthlessly by the roaring voice from the doorway. The cold nausea returned to John.

Arthur Kent was a big man, black-browed, loud-mouthed, bullying. He barged into the room and, he and John Liegh's past called out in unison: "Long time no see yah, Spike, old boy. Remember the time you spit out the window and hit the warden in the face?"

John Liegh's face screwed into knots of agony. "For Pete's sake, not so loud, Art! The people in this town respect me for what I am now, not what I was."

Then he stood up, brushed his hand quickly across the desk, stepped around the desk to Arthur Kent. "Let me take your coat, Art," he said quietly.

Kent's laughter sneered. "Thanks, Spike. You always were a damned dirty little worm, like some rich punk's valet."

Wordless, thin cheeks flushed, Liegh took Kent's coat to the rack and hung it up. Then he returned to the desk to sit opposite Kent.

"Just blew in last night," Kent said. "I held off a couple of weeks so you could hope I wasn't coming."

John shook his head. "I've been expecting you. I have made a sufficient deposit in my checking account to take care of your yearly allowance."

Kent nodded. "But I'm boosting the price a little bit. I figure you'd be willing to pay a little more now, with your

daughter marrying that rich guy in Chicago. Three thousand bucks is the price."

John reached for his check book. He said very quietly: "This money I'm giving you now will have to do you. I'll pay you the three thousand, but it's the last penny you'll get from me. If you come here again, I'm going to kill you."

"Sure, I know. The number of times you've been going to kill me has excited all the undertakers from here to the coast. You always were a gutless worm. Never will forget the time you pulled a gun on me, then couldn't go through with it."

"This is the last time, Kent," John spoke through clenched teeth. "I've been to my doctor. He tells me my blood pressure is rising dangerously. I've got to stop worrying and get more sleep. So one of us has got to go."

Kent shrugged. "Go ahead and kick off. I'll put the screws on your daughter's rich husband. I think he'd keep me going, rather than have it get out his wife is the daughter of an ex-con. Now you pay up and you won't see me until next February—unless I should get a little short in the middle of the year."

JOHN picked up a pen and made out the check in the amount of three thousand dollars, payable to Arthur Kent. At the bottom he signed: "John Leigh." He tore out the check savagely, handed it to Kent. "Now, get out," he said.

Twenty minutes after Arthur Kent had left, the telephone rang. It was Jim Spears calling.

"Say, John, about those lodge meeting minutes—I found them. Or rather Dan Gilling did."

"Where?"

"Ever hear of a man who calls himself Arthur Kent?"

"No," John said thoughtfully. "Don't

think I did.”

“Well, I found the ledge meeting notes in his coat pocket. Dan Gilling says you been leaving your door unlocked at nights. He figures this Arthur Kent walked into your office, stole the report together with that note to me which was attached.

“And when Dan Gilling pinched this Kent man, Kent said he was a friend of yours and then started calling you a lot of names. He said you were an ex-convict, and that was more than Dan Gilling could stand. He hit Kent over the head with his gun. If you’ll come down here, you and I can swear out a warrant—”

“Wait a minute,” John cut in. “I don’t get this. Why steal that note to you, and the lodge report? That’s hardly a big enough crime to send a man to jail.”

“Why—why didn’t I tell you about the check, John? This Kent wanted that note you wrote to me as a specimen of your handwriting. The man’s a forger and a damned good one. We caught him trying to cash a check for three thousand dollars. And he had forged your signature so pretty, he’d have sure taken us in except for one thing. If that note you wrote to me had been signed with your full name, he’d have trimmed us all right, see?”

“No,” John said bewilderedly.

“Well, when Kent forged your name, he tripped up on the spelling of the last part of it. He signed the check ‘John Leigh’ instead of ‘John Liegh’.”

John Liegh looked at his calendar and smiled at the chain of penciled circles. The fifteenth was the last.