

# Homicide's Crimson Chariot

By Rex Whitechurch



*Hurting through the city streets, the dying girl told Ambulance Surgeon Carlton the name of her killer. But before Carlton could shriek it to the police, he had to halt the rush of justice by throwing himself into the murderer's crimson path.*

**T**HE red ambulance seemed to catapult, tilting dangerously, and all but threw me into a sprawl on the bouncing floor. The wind roared around us, to be heard screeching above the shrilling of the open siren. Red was bent over the wheel with his deft hands maneuvering the streaking vehicle through the busy traffic lanes. And the dying girl on the cot was uttering a little prayer with her stiffening lips fumbling over each word.

She groped pitifully for my hand. I saw the way her blue eyes rolled, felt the

quivering of her slim body, the spasmodic jerking of her tight muscles. Her voice was a faint whisper as it came to me, mingling with the crashing sounds around us.

“Dick didn’t—he didn’t—” She made another effort. I fished for the hypo case. This was agonizing. It was awful to have to crouch there and watch her die, more awful to watch her suffering. But surely she wasn’t in such great pain. I knew of the numbness that must be in her body. Where there’s such numbness there cannot be excruciating pain.

But Letty Grooms was trying to tell me

something, only she didn't have the necessary strength to finish what she had started. The hypo was the sole means of quieting her. Although there was no hope, she must preserve her strength. It wasn't conceivably possible that this little murder victim could live.

I got the hypo ready and a sterile needle.

She was trying again. "Dick didn't—he—he tried to help—keep him—from doing it! You see—please don't let them—cause Dick trouble—over—this—Doctor Jerry! It was Ran—"

She died that way, still trying to tell me of her sweetheart's innocence. Oh, where were the police? Why couldn't they have someone here to take down this poor kid's statements?

She clasped at my hand, seemed to want me to hold to her so she wouldn't slip away in the dark. Maybe this was comforting to her, helped her in the gathering obscurity of death. Despite my professional training, despite all the things I'd seen in medical school, despite my cold exterior, a hot tear bit savagely at my left eye. I was ashamed, yet not ashamed, for showing such weakness.

There wasn't anything I could do, there wasn't anything anyone could do.

I reached down and drew the sheet up over her face. Then I seized the tube, placed my lips to it. "Cut her down, Red," I said. "Let Bertha walk. This kid has just quit on us."

I WALKED home through the warm spring sunshine with a bundle of newspapers under one arm, my satchel in the other hand. The four rooms of my apartment were cool and inviting and comforting to my jaded nerves. Hopper had a warm supper waiting me. He came out of the kitchen, diminutive and shiny

black, to take my hat and satchel and to bring out my robe.

"This sure am the nicest of spring nights, suh. I been over in the park, if you don't mind, suh. The birds was whistlin', the grass is greener than a ten dollar bill, suh."

"Sure, Hopper," I said. "After all these cold winter nights, spring is actually here. Have we had any telephone calls?"

"Yes, suh. There was a gemman, said he would phone you later, suh. The call was nearly an hour ago."

I sat there in my favorite leather chair and read the tragedy. The girl's apartment was all bloody. She had been shot five times. The room in which she was found by her landlady was torn upside down. There had been a fight. It didn't seem possible a man and a woman could fight like that.

There was a suspect, but he could not be found for questioning. The girl, at the point of death, had been whisked away from the apartment by the ambulance surgeon, Dr. Jerry Carlton, who had found her alive. He'd sought to remove her to an operating table at once, before the police could properly scrutinize the case. But she had expired en route to the Davenport Hospital. The police surgeon had not yet arrived. Two uniformed men were in charge. Carlton would be questioned.

Yes, there it was again, as if it were my fault that the poor kid was still alive, that the police had been too poky to get there in time to detain me. To me a life was a life, and any life was precious to a doctor. It was silly to take chances on letting a patient die just because the police were poky. But there had been another murder, and of course it wasn't the police surgeon's fault.

Inspector Haig Davelleto called. "Davelleto speaking. This Carlton? I want

to see you. Details. Suppose I come right over? I called you an hour ago.”

“Do so by all means, Davelleto;” I said. “I will have finished dinner by the time you get here. I’ll have a drink and a cigar for you.”

He clicked up.

It was twenty minutes before he arrived, a thin, dark-clad, sad-looking Latin, with black hair and penetrating hazel eyes. Not for a moment was there any relaxation in his hunting, scrutinizing expression. That guy was keyed up all the time.

He sat down with his hat on his knees, fumbled a moment with his black four-in-hand.

“Carlton, I’m not going to reproach you. I guess you did what anyone else would have done. But it’s always best to wait for the police. However, you know the gruesome details of this particular case. The girl was murdered, presumably by her country fiancé who came here to make her marry him. She refused because she was a career girl, making good in radio. She had talent, a promising future. It isn’t conceivable that anyone else—”

“Have you arrested him?” I said coldly.

“We can’t find him. He told his friends back home if she didn’t marry him and abandon her career, he was going to see she wouldn’t prosper. A sort of half-mad bluff, some think. But he surely meant it. He was brooding, too, because he was turned down by the medical board after being called by the draft for military duty.”

“What is this man’s name?” I asked coldly.

“Dick Farran. He’s a banker up in the little town of Hewett, where they both have lived all their lives. It’s a town of about seven thousand.”

I repeated the name, sat tense with the girl’s dying words hammering at my consciousness.

“Just why he shot her five times is the question I’m trying to answer. The bullets were solidly fatal, I gather from your report.”

“Just one was,” I corrected him. “I removed the fatal slug from the base of the sternum. The remaining four bullets wouldn’t necessarily have been the cause of death. It was the chest wound that I overlooked. Had I seen it in time, I wouldn’t have removed the body.”

“That is all very well, Doctor. We’ve received the slugs and now are looking for the gun. It’s a .25.”

“I can’t help you there,” I said coldly.

“No, of course not. But what I’m trying to get at. This Dick Farran’s actions brand him as either a fiend or of a grave mental disorder produced by extreme jealousy. To think of pumping five bullets into the woman he cared enough for to want to marry. I can’t grasp it. But, did she say anything to you before she died?”

I took a cigar from the wrought-iron box at my elbow, saw he had his smoke going. Hopper brought in two jiggers of whisky and soda.

I decided, then, I would wait. It was inconceivable that the girl had talked, dying as she was at the time. To take advantage of this until I could thoroughly decide seemed the best course to follow. It wasn’t that I wished to withhold information pertinent to the investigation, but I had a reason difficult to hurdle right now.

“I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she did say something. I was thinking of giving her a hypo. My mind was elsewhere. When I heard her voice I bent down quickly, but her words trailed off, became incoherent. If I could do a

little hard thinking on this, I might recall something she said.”

“You’re not stalling, are you Carlton?” Those uncanny, shrewd eyes flickered over my face.

But I was steeled, didn’t give myself away. “No,” I said coldly.

“That’s all I wanted to know. I called the sheriff in the country and talked with him. He is watching out for Dick Farran. I have men looking for him, too. In case I learn anything imperative, I’ll come back. I understand now why you were in such a hurry to remove the girl from the apartment. Thanks, Carlton. I’ve enjoyed your nice hospitality.”

He went out then, sad-faced, looking like he wanted to cry but just didn’t have anything to cry about. He was always so sad.

THE phone rang again. Without moving from my chair, I took the handset. The voice I heard was strange to me, rasping, furtive, dwindling hoarsely. It sounded as if the speaker thought even a faint whisper could be heard all over the world.

“Dr. Jerry Carlton?” The voice waited.

“Yes,” I said. “This is Carlton.”

“I’d like to see you at once. I’m hurt, I—”

“Who are you?” I asked quietly.

“Dick Farran!”

The name catapulted through my mind. “Where are you?” He told me. “I’ll be right there,” I said. “Be careful and hold everything until I make it.”

I drove across town in my blue convertible. The little third class hotel’s dingy, ungainly facade was agleam in the brilliance around the throat of the thoroughfare. It had begun to mist rain. I went posthaste to the desk, asked for the bogus name Farran had told me he was registered under, and was conducted to the

fourth floor in the single, squeaky elevator. The door was forbidding, needed a new coat of paint. The number 407 was upside down.

Dick Farran was handsome in a pale blond way. Besides, he was immaculate and cultured. He stripped off his shirt, showed me where he had been shot. The bullet was still imbedded in the muscle. I put him on the bed, took tweezers, fumbled around with the sharp points and extracted the slug. I held it on the palm of my hand and studied it carefully. It was a .25, a trifle mushroomed.

Applying a bandage to his arm, I said coldly, “This is very fortunate, Farran. If I’m not mistaken, it’s going to save you from the electric chair. Now you must tell me all about it, leave out none of the details.”

He sat there peering at me, sweat beading on his palish face. His lips were firmly compressed.

“Well, I was told I could trust you,” he prefaced weakly. “I called you for that reason. I knew you’d come over if you could. I don’t know who shot me. I don’t know who shot Letty. I went to her apartment after telephoning her at the studio. She asked me over. I told her I’d waited long enough, five years. She’d promised to marry me. But for some reason now she said she couldn’t. I don’t think she meant what she was saying, but there was somebody in the apartment for whom she was saying it.”

“Go on,” I said coldly.

“Well, I guess I got a little rough. For a moment I went blind. I’d been hurt by her words. Maybe I was just frantic because she said she couldn’t go through with the wedding. You don’t know what it meant to me. I tried coaxing and pleading. She pushed me back toward the door. Then I told her I wasn’t going to give her up. Just then a gun started exploding. I don’t know

who was doing the shooting.

"There was an iron fire escape outside her window. The bullets were coming from there. I got the first slug, but I don't think the man was after me. I'm sure he was hidden in the apartment, when I first went there and slipped out on the fire escape. Letty ran staggering toward me. I got blood on my clothes. My arm was dripping blood. When she fell, I ran out, still crazy. I wanted to catch that guy in the alley. But I missed him. When I started back, I heard a siren."

"I see," I said. "What then?"

"Knowing I'd be charged with the crime and believing her dead, I jumped in a taxi, got out seven blocks from here. That's all."

I got up, bent over him and felt his pulse. He was doing all right.

"Do you know anyone whose name sounds like Ran?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know anyone here."

I went over to the door, jerked it open quickly. A shadow moved along the hall. I heard a snapping of his coat against his legs. I shut the door, locked it, and went to the phone.

"You'll need protection," I said coldly. "I'm calling the police. There's no use to get excited or alarmed. This slug I have will save you. As soon as I leave here, you lock the door. I'll leave a gun. I can't wait."

I had Davelleto on the wire. He said, "Well, well, what a swell break. You stay right there."

"Impossible," I said. "I'm due at the hospital. You can find me there."

"Why can't you wait?" he urged.

"I have a sick patient who needs my attention," I snapped.

"Okay, you tell Farran to stay put."

I didn't tell him about the slug I'd removed from Farran's arm, and cautioned

him not to. I merely told Davelleto I had what I was sure was proof of Farran's innocence.

Yet I wondered as I walked hurriedly along the hall if it was clinching proof.

I GOT in my car and drove to the hospital. I walked up to the third floor. Private Detective Jarl Kendricks was recuperating from a bullet wound. I talked to him a little while, then left the hospital and drove straight east on Fredrick Avenue past the city administration building to my apartment nearby. I unlocked the door and went in. A moment later the buzzer sounded. I crossed back to the door and opened it.

A man in a trench coat with his hat brim lowered stood peering in at me and blinking in the lights behind me.

"Hello, Jerry," he said, in the light patter of spring rain. "May I step in out of the wet? I have arthritis."

"Sure," I said. "Come in, Standall."

He stepped around me, walked to a chair, and sat down on the arm. He dropped his hat on the floor.

"How's the column?" I asked.

"So-so, monotonous like all types of creative writing. How's doctoring finicky old maids and rheumatic granpappy's?"

"At times, tiresome; at other times, full of interest."

"I covered the story of Letty Grooms' murder," he said suddenly. "She was a swell kid."

"She was," I said. "None better." Then, coldly, I said, "Have you any particular business with me, Standall?"

I knew Stan Standall, peep-hole columnist. He was ambitious, flighty, drank some. But he was a good friend in a pinch.

"Yes," he said, "I wanted to tell you they've got the culprit over at headquarters. I guess it might be good if

you went over there. Your name's been popping up in the conversations. They've started working on Farran."

"I'll go over now," I said.

"Good, I can ride over with you."

He was eager nervous. I saw he'd gone to the door without his hat. "You're forgetting your hat," I said.

He started. "I'd forget my head," he said, "if it wasn't fastened to my neck." He went back and put his hat on.

Farran was being questioned politely. Davelleto entered the big police room looking morose.

"Carlton, this sure is a mess," he said sadly.

"I'd like to see you privately," I said.

He led me down a corridor that stank with disinfectants, turned into a small office this side of the steel gate to the bullpen.

"He couldn't have shot himself," I said. I tossed the .25 slug on a table under a big lamp. He picked it up quickly.

"I dug it out of his arm," I continued. "He's lost blood and needs rest. Suppose you let me take him home with me. Then you come over after a while. I'll have the whole thing cleared up for you."

He seemed undecided, walked back and forth across the room with his hands in his pockets.

"It would be highly irregular. The reason is because this slug doesn't prove him innocent. In the struggle the girl might've shot him. We know they fought. Maybe she had the gun and he took it away from her. It's inconceivable that it happened any other way."

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "But I have another reason to believe it happened exactly as Farran says."

Davelleto stopped pacing, looked sorrowfully at me. "Why are you so interested in this case, Carlton?" His voice had a raw edge.

"Why," I said coldly, "I'm trying to clear an innocent man."

"What's the other reason?"

"The girl talked."

His eyes quickened into a glow. "And you forgot what she said?" he asked suddenly. He was leaning forward with his hands on his hips, his head craned forward.

"Yes, but I'm trying to remember. If you won't let me have the prisoner, you put him to bed and get a physician. He's weak."

"Okay, I'll let you have him."

I felt an exultant wave go through me. If what I had in mind worked out, I'd have the solution within the next two hours.

Stan Stand all heaved his bulk toward me, a dark, scarfaced individual who had made a name for himself with his fertile typewriter. He squared his shoulders in his trench coat.

"Carlton, you'd better be careful. I'm your friend. I know things about this case you don't. Maybe you'd better drop out."

"No. Thanks for the warning, Stan," I said. "I'm playing it to the finish line."

"All right," he answered morosely, "don't say I didn't warn you."

I nodded. Dick Farran was being led across the room to me out of the glare of the merciless lamp. He lurched, was unsteady. I knew he was weak from loss of blood, lying in that hotel room so long. I led him out across the walk to my car. He got in. I drove straight home through the light pattering rain.

We went in. Hopper was not there. I locked the door. I made Farran lie down on the studio couch and covered him up.

I made myself a drink, then sauntered to the telephone. Davelleto answered.

"Send a couple of men over here," I said. "I'm going out. I don't want to leave Farran alone."

"They're already there," the inspector

said. "Look out your window."

"So you don't trust me?" I said coldly.

"Sure, I trusted you," he said. "I believe you're playing this big. But if there's another suspect, if anyone killed Letty Grooms beside Farran, you're in danger. I couldn't leave you alone. If the culprit sees that Farran's being exonerated, he'll make some attempt to tighten the screws on him, probably on you, too."

"I don't see how you figure," I said. "Just what could he do?"

"I don't know, but he'll be desperate if he knows anything that's going on now, will show his hand." Davelleto's voice was sad and low.

"Well, I'm leaving here. Maybe what I'm thinking about won't pan out. I may find myself in need of your help."

"You can have it any time, Carlton," he said.

**S**TICKING a gun in my pocket, I told Farran I'd be back soon and left the apartment. I saw a police car curbed down the street several doors. The headlights were off, but a man was smoking in the front seat. I got in my car and drove to the hotel where Farran had been holed up. The rain pattered on the car top like a gentle tap dancer working out.

I obtained a key at the desk on the pretext that my patient had left some papers and had sent me back to look for them. I walked into the dismal room. The blinds were drawn. I snapped on the dim bulbs in the high ceiling. I began to make a careful search of the room, wound up feeling inside the mattress on the iron bed. I found a hard object, flat, wrapped in cloth. I quickly removed it from the protection of the striped covering. It was a handkerchief-wrapped gun.

A sound outside in the hall sent my nerves into a gallop. The door was pushed slowly open. I realized then I should've

locked it. I put the gun under my hat and held it in my hand.

A shadow flicked on the high ceiling, danced on the dirty, flowered wallpaper. The man's face was visible now. He had his hat brim lowered. His eyes gleamed balefully at me.

"So you came back here to stash the evidence against Farran," the man's voice said.

"Why have you been following me?" I retorted.

"Because I knew what you were up to. You're being well paid for this. After all, Farran's a small-town banker."

Stan Standall's face was set in obdurate lines.

"Funny," I said coldly. "Why do you risk so much for the law?"

"For the value of the story I'm getting now," he said sardonically. "You came here knowing he lied about not killing Letty, and found the gun. You figured it would be here. Now you're planning to ditch it, so they won't have any evidence against him."

"Maybe," I said, "but why did you follow me?"

"I told you I guessed what you were up to."

I could've laughed in his face. "Is this the first time you've been here tonight?"

He turned tallow pale. I saw him step back, stand flat against the door. His eyes were murderous.

"Yes," he said. "I've never been here before."

"You're a liar!"

"Don't—"

"And," I continued, "you killed Letty Grooms. You were crazy about her. She told you about Farran. You were there and hid when he came to the apartment. She said the things she did to him, because she knew you were listening and had a gun trained on them. But you know she loved

him, and you couldn't take it. You had to fix her, so he couldn't get her."

"You're crazy," he grated. "You couldn't prove that in a thousand years."

"Oh, yes," I said, "I can prove it. Her dying statements will prove it. She called you Ran. I went over to see Jarl Kendricks at the hospital tonight; He has known you for ages. Your name's not Stan Standall which you use for your column, but it's Ransey Standall—Ran for short. And she said Dick Farran didn't kill her; that it was Ran!"

"How you going to prove it after you've come up here to destroy evidence against Farran? You don't think when they find out about this they'd believe your story?"

"The gun's not all I found," I said.

He gaped and his thin mouth fell open. "You're stalling," he snarled.

"Okay," I said, "let it go at that. "We'll let Davelleto decide who's telling the truth."

He grabbed for his gun then. I shot him with the handkerchief wrapped gun I held under my hat. I wasn't sure it was loaded, but it was all I could do. The blunt explosion sounded like a thump on a bass drum. Smoke curled around my head.

Through the screen I saw the startled expression on his face, saw his eyes widen, saw the red cherry on his shirt grow into a red plum. I saw his blanched face and the color leaving his throat, when he threw his head back. I saw the black hole the bullet made in his bright green necktie.

Then he started teetering, lurching, then lunged at me with a low moan. He

had his arms out straight. Again his trench coat made that cracking sound around his legs that I had heard in the hall. His splayed fingers groped for my throat. I caught him by the shoulders and slammed him to the floor. He kicked his legs out convulsively, rolled over upon his side. Quickly, I bent down to tear his shirt away, so I could stop the flow of blood from his wound.

He lived to confess and to burn.

I testified that Letty Grooms had stated in her dying words that Ran had killed her. I further stated that I had known Letty Grooms ever since she'd come to the Davenport Hospital for treatment for overwork. My best friend, Dr. Warren Clarke, chief of the hospital staff, had introduced me to her. During an attack of illness she had sent for me to come to her apartment.

I further testified that while attending Dick Farran at the hotel, I had suddenly opened the door and heard Ran Standall's trench coat snapping about his legs as he fled down the hall. I further testified that Farran was the man Letty Grooms loved and had meant to marry, that she had told me so at her apartment.

Last, I testified that I had found Ran Standall's initialed handkerchief wrapped around the gun he had stolen back to poke into the mattress to frame Dick Farran. Like he'd forgotten his hat in my apartment in his great haste to get away from the hotel, he had forgotten and left his handkerchief around the weapon from which he had erased his own fingerprints.