

Off the Record

A Case Outside the Bounds of Regular Duty Becomes a Bullet Interlude When Murder Overtakes Jim West's Pal



West's fist caught him full on the mouth, knocked him back against the cab

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AFTER the woman had finished talking, Jim West stood for a long time at the window, staring out into the night—silent, thoughtful. Then he turned, crossed over to the table.

"Is this his gun?" he asked. His voice was flat, casual.

The woman nodded. "He told me to give it to you."

West picked up the gun, broke it, snapped it shut. He dropped it into his coat

pocket. Then his eyes sought the woman. He was much taller than she—heavy, broad of shoulder. The woman had remembered him as being young but when she looked now into his face he seemed old and something in the expression in his eyes caused her to step back.

"I'm glad you wired me," he said. "I'm going now." He turned toward the door but her voice stopped him.

"Where, Jim?"

"To finish what Ed started," he answered.

The woman hurried up to him, took him by the arms. She shook her head. "No—no—you mustn't. He's too strong and powerful."

"No man's too strong and powerful to die, Helen. A bullet will have the same effect on Keegan as it did on Ed."

"But you'll never get to him. He's too well protected. Then—there's the police. They protect him."

A brief smile twisted Jim West's lips. "Just some of the police." He pushed the woman away, went out the door and down the corridor to the elevator.

In the lobby downstairs he loitered for a few minutes while the girl at the telephone desk was busy. When she was free he leaned over the counter, grinned at her.

"Who did she call?" he asked.

"You mean 8-B?"

"Yeah."

The telephone girl hesitated. She scribbled something on a piece of paper. "I—I told you when you went up that I couldn't give out information."

West reached for the paper. "Sure, I know. Let me have that paper, I want to write something down."

The girl handed him the paper. There was a telephone number scribbled on it.

He stuck the paper in his pocket, pulled out a bill.

"Buy yourself a yacht," he suggested.

The girl took the bill, and her eyes widened. In a burst of confidence, she said: "You know, a telephone girl hears funny things sometimes. Today a fellow went upstairs to see a woman and after he had gone the woman called a Market number and told some man that the man who had called on her had tumbled for her story like a load of brick."

Jim West nodded. He reached for another bill. "Buy two yachts." Then he winked at her, stepped outside and hailed a cab. As the cab moved away from the curb he noticed a figure hurry from the shadows near the

apartment door and take the next cab in line. Already he was being shadowed.

As his cab rolled down the boulevard, closely followed by the other one, Jim West fingered the gun in his pocket and thought of Ed Harris. The last time he had been here, Ed had been with him. It had been sort of a vacation for them both, a swell vacation. But now Ed was dead, the victim of an assassin's bullet. As he thought of Ed's carefree spirit, his wholesome love of life, his reckless devotion to his friends, the lines in Jim West's face tightened. He leaned forward, tapped his driver on the shoulder.

"That cab behind us," he said. "It's been following us ever since we started. I want to talk to the chap in it."

The driver looked around at him. "I don't want to get in any trouble, Mister."

"Then keep out. But you know the town. I want you to head out for the residential district; act like you were trying to shake him but don't. When you get to a nice quiet place, swing into an alley an' stop. I'll get out and when the other cab cuts into the alley I'll climb it."

The driver shook his head. "I don't go in for that kind of stuff." West took out his gun, slid it forward until it pressed against the driver's head. "I think you do," he suggested.

Without a word, the driver swung his cab off the boulevard and headed east. The other cab followed. West's driver increased his speed. They came to a residential section.

"This all right?" the driver asked.

West nodded. "Fine. Take the next alley."

The cab cut into the alley, slowed down. West got out, ran back to the entrance. As the following cab turned into the alley he swung on the running board. His gun pointed through the glass at the man inside.

"Pull up an' stop," he ordered the driver.

The cab stopped and West pulled open the door. He reached inside and jerked the

man there out into the alley. His gun he dropped back into his pocket.

"I don't like people following me," he snapped.

The man shook his head, tried to break away. He said: "I—I wasn't—"

West's fist caught him full on the mouth, knocked him back against the cab. The man slid to the running board, then got up and swung wildly for West's head. He missed and West hit him twice more. He staggered, fell to the ground, lay there whimpering.

"Next time," West suggested, "you better bring a friend along with you. Maybe you better bring several."

He started ahead toward his own cab, saw the driver of the cab that had been following him standing a few yards away, a heavy wrench in his hands, but the driver made no motion to follow him.

When he got back to his own cab he said: "Now let's go to the police station."

The desk sergeant told him: "Mulaly's not on duty now. He works days."

"Still live at the same place?" West asked.

"Yeah, unless he's moved since yesterday."

West thanked him and went outside. It wasn't far and he decided to walk. Fifteen minutes brought him to the house on the fringe of the business district where Mulaly lived. There was a light in the front room. He knocked on the door and when the tall, grey-haired man opened it, he grinned and said:

"Well, Mike, looks like old age was making you soft."

Mike Mulaly peered out at him, saw who it was and his eyes widened. "Jim West!" he cried. "By all that's holy! Come on in an' take a load off your feet. When did you—" He broke off and a frown crossed his face. Suddenly sober, he said, "I'll bet you heard about Ed Harris."

West nodded, came inside.

Mulaly said: "The missus is in bed." He walked over, pulled the shades down to the bottom, sat down in his chair and filled his pipe. When West didn't speak, he said: "You're lookin' well, Jim. When did you get to town?"

"This afternoon."

"When—when was it you heard about Ed Harris?"

"This morning. I took a plane. Tell me about it—"

MULALY shook his head. "There isn't much to tell. Some trucker happened to see his body lyin' in a ditch by the side of the road just outside the city. He was shot six times—in the back."

West's lips tightened. "In—the back."

"Yeah."

"What's the story back of it, Mike?"

The policeman again shook his head. "I don't know, Jim. When he came back here he said that he was gonna settle down. He was an engineer, you know, an' he started out in the contractin' business. I didn't see much of him. I don't even know how he was gettin' along."

"Who did he play around with?"

"I don't rightly know, Jim. Oh, I saw him occasionally but not often. I guess he was pretty busy."

"Keegan still the king-pin here?"

Mulaly's face darkened. He nodded, then he said: "Him an' Scabolt."

"Who's Scabolt?"

"Another Keegan, only he's worse than Keegan. Together the two of them run the town. Keegan is the front man, the polished gentleman, the politician. Municipal graft, job peddlin', alky—those are his strong points. Scabolt runs the rackets. Numbers, racing, gamblin' of all kinds, vice, dope—he controls 'em all."

"But who is he?"

"Hell, I don't know. He blew in here from some place a coupla years ago. He

keeps pretty much in the background.”

Jim West scowled. He lit a cigarette, drew smoke into his lungs and blew it out toward the ceiling. Then talking slowly, almost to himself, he said: “Ed Harris and I worked together for a long time. We had some tough assignments from the Acme, one of them here. We had to slap Keegan down that time. I guess you remember it.”

“Yeah. So does he.”

West nodded. “When Ed left the agency he came out here to go into business for himself. I used to get occasional letters from him. The last one I got was only a month ago. He mentioned Keegan, said Keegan was letting him alone. He mentioned a girl, too. A Helen Vinton. Did you ever know her, Jim?”

The policeman shook his head.

“I met her tonight. She looked like a million dollars. She gave me Ed’s gun, said that when Ed left her the night he was killed he told her he had an appointment with Keegan and that if anything happened, she was to wire me right away.”

Mike Mulaly tapped out his pipe then stuck it in his mouth, empty. He pulled on it and the pipe made a dry, sucking sound. Jim West got up, crossed the room. He picked up a telephone book, looked for a number. After a minute he said: “I don’t see Scabolt’s name listed.”

“It wouldn’t be,” Mulaly said. “Do you want it?”

“Yes. I do.”

Mulaly went to the phone and dialed a number. When the connection was made he said: “Pete, this is Mike. Where can I telephone Scabolt?” After a moment he said, “Thanks,” and hung up.

To West, he said: “His number is Market 2-8735.”

Jim West pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. It was the paper the telephone girl at the apartment house had given him. The number listed there was the same.

“Where can I find Keegan?” he asked.

“He lives at the President.”

West nodded. He got to his feet. “Thanks a lot, Mike.”

Mike Mulaly came over to him. “You ain’t goin’ to do anything—anything—”

“The Acme’s a funny agency, Mike. When one of its agents is murdered it doesn’t like it—even if the agent isn’t working for them any longer. Besides, Ed was a friend of mine.”

“But Keegan’s stronger than he was, Jim. An’ besides, there’s Scabolt.”

Jim West shrugged his shoulders. “There’s always Keegans and Scabolts.”

“Another thing, Jim.” Mike Mulaly’s face flushed. “The—the police will be against you.”

“You, Mike?”

The big policeman shook his head. “Never, Jim. But I don’t count for much.”

Jim West put his hands on Mike Mulaly’s shoulders. “One friend, Mike, is worth a score of enemies, any day in the year.” He turned away, passed through the door.

THE bellhop looked frightened. He reached his hand for the money, drew it back without touching the bill in West’s hand.

“What’s the matter, son? Don’t you want it?” West asked.

The kid nodded, licked his lips. “It ain’t that. Sure I want it—but—but—it won’t do you no good, Mister. They can’t nobody get up to Mr. Keegan’s place unless he wants ‘em to.”

“Maybe you better let me worry about that,” West suggested. “Where is it?”

The kid eyed the money again, took it. “You take the elevator to the top floor, the seventeenth. There’s a private elevator from there to the penthouse.”

West nodded. He left the washroom where he had cornered the bellhop, found the

elevators. He got in and said: "Seventeen." It was after midnight. There was no one else in the car. It took him to the seventeenth floor, discharged him. To the left of the corridor he saw a single elevator door. He found the button, pushed it.

When the door opened he had a gun in his hand and to the flatnosed man who was running the elevator, he said: "I'm going up."

The man swallowed a couple of times, nodded. Maybe he guessed what was coming for when he got the cage to the top he ducked his head and whirled. But he wasn't fast enough. The barrel of West's gun slammed him in the head, knocked him cold.

Jim West eased his body to the floor, opened the door of the cage. He stepped out into a little hall, turned to the left, moving forward silently on the balls of his feet. The hall opened on a library and at the entrance, West paused. Across that room, seated at a desk, was a man. His head was buried in his arms as though he had fallen asleep.

West called: "Keegan!"

The figure didn't stir.

West raised his voice, called in a louder tone. Still the figure didn't move.

Perplexed, Jim West's eyes swept the room. He didn't see a soul. He listened, heard not a sound. Then he moved forward. While he was still several paces away he saw the spreading red stain that was soaking into the blotting pad on the desk, and near Keegan's hand, the gun.

Scowling, he moved closer, felt the back of Keegan's neck. It was still warm. He had been shot quite recently. West was still frowning down at the dead man when he heard the sound of the elevator. His scowl deepened, then, but he didn't rush out to the hall. Instead, he looked around for a stairway.

He tried three doors but didn't find it. He was moving toward the fourth when he heard the cage returning. That fourth door was

locked, but even as he tried it, the elevator cage reached the top and its doors opened to spew forth uniformed officers.

Three of them rushed at West, collared him, the others pushed on into the library. One of them, huge, red of face, West remembered, and with the memory his lips curled bitterly. Turk Pugsley, as crooked a cop as ever disgraced a uniform, cruel a man as he had ever met.

The policeman who held him dragged him back into the library. He made no resistance. Even when Pugsley came over to him, smashed him in the face with his fist, West only rolled his head with the blow, making no effort to break loose and fight back.

"Just in time," Pugsley gloated. "Caught you red-handed, didn't we?"

West said: "Well, you timed it rather well."

Pugsley glared at him, thick lips drawn back from his teeth, fists clenched. "Cold-blooded murder," he snarled. "I ought to take you apart, pull you to pieces. Hangin's too good for you!"

WEST shrugged his shoulders free though two of the men still clung to his wrists. "But you couldn't take me apart, alone, could you, Turk?" he said. "You might even have a hard time with two men holding my hands."

Pugsley cursed him. He crossed over to the desk where Keegan lay, picked up the gun and stuck it in his pocket. West's eyes narrowed. Perhaps there had been fingerprints on that gun but there would be none when Pugsley was through. He looked around the room, saw a tall, thin man standing in the entrance, a man who must have just come in. Pugsley saw him, too, and moved over to meet him.

"Keegan's dead, Mr. Scabolt," Pugsley said. "But we've got the murderer."

Scabolt came forward into the room,

crossed over to the desk. For a moment, every eye in the room was on him and in that moment, West acted. Perhaps his easy surrender, his lack of resistance, made the men who were holding him careless. But at any rate, when he jerked forward, then back, he broke their holds on his wrists.

They cried out, grabbed for him, but West had ducked away and they tangled with each other. Then, as the men in the room whirled to face him, Jim West had his gun out. His face was stern, his eyes had a look in them that made those who were nearest to him stand back. And his voice, when he spoke, cracked like a whip:

“Just stay where you are. Don’t move!”

Scabolt looked at him for the first time, eyes narrowed, a faint smile on his lips. Pugsley was breathing hard. His face was as red as a beet. As West backed to the library entrance he started forward.

“Come on, Pugsley,” West invited. “Just two more steps.”

Pugsley stopped, undecided.

Jim West had reached the library entrance. To the room at large, he said: “If anyone of you men come through this door before I reach the elevator, it’ll be the last door you ever pass through.” His voice was low and even. He smiled at them. Then he backed through the door, ran to the elevator and slammed it shut.

The cage dropped him to the seventeenth floor. He stepped out. No elevator was waiting for him there and he didn’t dare wait. Finding the stairs he started down them to the sixteenth floor. At the turn he almost bumped into a girl who was climbing up. She shrank back against the wall, stared at him. West hardly noticed her as he passed but before he had reached the sixteenth floor she had turned and was coming after him.

“Wait,” she called.

He hesitated, looked up at her. She was small, dark. There was something tragic about her face, her eyes.

She said, suddenly: “You’re Jim West.”

West nodded.

“I’ve seen a picture of you, the one where—”

Footsteps sounded in the corridor above. The girl broke off, looked up, then hurried down to West. “Come,” she said. “I’ve a room on this floor. They’d never think of looking for you there.”

Once inside her room the girl turned to him. “What happened up there?” she asked.

Jim West shook his head. “First, just who are you, anyhow?”

“I’m Helen Vinton. Ed and I—we—” Her eyes filled with tears.

West nodded. Then the girl whom he had interviewed earlier was not Helen Vinton. Well, he had suspected as much. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. Whoever it was who killed Ed Harris had known that he would come to avenge his friend and that person had anticipated his arrival by having some other girl wire him, then pose as Helen Vinton, and steer him—toward Keegan.

THEN it wasn’t Keegan who had killed Harris. Since that other girl had telephoned Scabolt, then Scabolt must be the one.

As he thought of it, it seemed likely to him that the rest of it had been engineered by Scabolt. The girl had steered him to Keegan. Scabolt knew he would be coming, had been here, had probably killed Keegan himself and then brought the police in to catch him when he showed up to see Keegan. With Keegan out of the way Scabolt would have the whole show to himself. It was a perfect set-up.

“What are you doing with a room here?” he asked the girl.

“I—I thought maybe I could discover who killed Ed. There’s a Mr. Keegan who lives in the penthouse above. From something Ed said I think that either he—did

it—or another man named Scabolt.”

“What were you doing on the stairs?”

“I was going to try and get up to see Mr. Keegan,” she said, defiantly.

Jim West grinned. He reached for the telephone, called Mulaly. “Mike,” he said, when he got him, “if there’s any honest men left on the force get them over here to the President right away. I’ve got a hunch that I’m going to need help.”

He hung up, turned to the girl. “Can you lie?” he asked.

She looked surprised but nodded.

“This might work out in court,” West told her. “But I’m afraid that maybe it wouldn’t. There’s danger connected with what we’ve got to do but if you’ll risk it—well, maybe it’ll turn out all right.”

The girl’s eyes sparkled. “Try me.”

WHEN West stood before the door of the private elevator to the penthouse as it was opened by the man who had opened it for him the last time, that man backed away, his face pale and frightened.

“Come on out, beat it,” West ordered. “I’ll run it myself.”

The man hurried out, down the stairs. No sooner had he gone than Mulaly, three men, and the girl came up. With West they got into the elevator. “He’ll phone Scabolt,” West guessed. “And when Scabolt comes back he’ll bring Turk Pugsley and plenty of help. It might turn out to be a nice party.”

They reached the penthouse floor. One of the men, short, bald, squinted at West curiously. “I’ve often wondered what kind of a man you were,” he said. “If this plan of yours works the whole city will be indebted to you. If it doesn’t, you’re still a brave man and I’ll do all I can to help you.”

Jim West smiled, thinly. “If it doesn’t, I won’t need your help, Commissioner.”

They found the penthouse deserted and with the exception of West and the girl, hid themselves, conveniently. West went over

and sat down at Keegan’s desk. The girl followed him.

“You know your part?” West asked her.

She nodded. “I know now why Ed thought so much of you,” she said, softly.

Jim West made no answer. He sat at the desk, quietly waiting. When he heard footsteps rushing up the stairs he didn’t even move.

The girl said: “They’re coming.” She looked toward the library door.

The footsteps sounded loud in the hall and, led by Pugsley, half a dozen men came into the room. Scabolt was with them. His key to the stairway had been necessary to let them in.

Pugsley had a gun in his hand. He raised it, might have shot if it hadn’t been for the girl, but the unexpected sight of a girl he had never seen stayed his hand.

“This time you won’t get away,” he snarled, moving forward.

“I never meant to get away,” West answered. “No reason for me to. You see, I didn’t kill Keegan.”

Pugsley’s laugh was scornful. He turned on the girl. “Who are you?” he asked. “An’ what are you doin’ here?”

“I came up here tonight to see Mr. Keegan,” Helen Vinton answered. “I—I had a key to the staircase. I got here just as he was murdered.”

“Then you saw it?” Pugsley’s voice was triumphant.

The girl nodded. “I saw it. That man is the murderer.” She raised her arm and pointed toward Scabolt.

“What!” Pugsley turned to look at Scabolt. The tall, thin man’s face reflected his surprise, his guilt. But that expression was only there for a moment, then it was gone.

“Ridiculous,” he said. “West is the man. The girl is lying.”

Helen Vinton said: “I came in quietly. They didn’t hear me and I was going to wait

until that man left. Then I saw him kill Mr. Keegan. I tell you, I saw him as plain as I see him now."

The men with Pugsley looked worried. Pugsley's own expression was troubled. He turned to his men.

"Watch them," he ordered. "Both of them." Then he jerked his head to Scabolt and with him moved over to the side of the room. They conversed for a moment in low tones, and West, watching them, smiled.

They had stopped close to a closet door and it was behind that door that the commissioner was hiding. After a moment they came back toward the center of the room. They had just reached there when that closet door near where they had stood, opened, and the commissioner stepped out.

"It's no use, Scabolt," he said. "It won't work. I heard you."

Scabolt and Pugsley whirled to face the commissioner. West watched. He saw Mulaly step from behind another door, he saw the other two men come into the room.

Mulaly had a gun in each hand. He looked happy. Both the other men had their guns out.

Pugsley turned white. He gasped: "You—you—" His hands rubbed at his eyes as though he could not believe what he saw and hoped to rub the vision away.

THE commissioner nodded. He looked at the men Pugsley had brought with him. They started to back toward the door. The commissioner halted them. "If you men are in town tomorrow," he said, "I shall prefer charges against you to the city council." Then he turned back to Pugsley.

Pugsley stood where he was, stricken dumb.

"Arrest him," the commissioner said.

Mulaly came forward. He snapped bracelets on Pugsley's wrists.

Suddenly, and without warning, Scabolt

turned and fled. He headed for a door that led toward the rear of the penthouse. Two of the men in the room snapped shots at him. They might have hit him with another shot but West's body got in the way as West hurried after him.

Jim West was just two paces behind Scabolt when they passed through the door. In two more he caught him. It was dark in the room but West didn't need any light. He was thinking of Ed Harris while he worked. He was plenty rough. It was Mulaly who finally pulled him off of Scabolt but by that time Scabolt was ready to talk. And he did talk, while the commissioner listened.

Helen Vinton whispered to Jim West. "You guessed right, almost to the last detail."

West nodded. "That's my business. Sometimes my life depends on it."

The commissioner turned to him. "I wish that I could thank you adequately, Mr. West. There aren't many policemen like Pugsley. If it wasn't for men like Scabolt, there wouldn't be any. You've done a nice bit of work for us."

Jim West looked at his watch. "You can do me a favor," he said,

"Name it."

"There's a plane leaving for the East in forty minutes. With a squad car wide open I could make it."

"But—but can't you stay for a few days. I thought maybe—"

Jim West shook his head. "I've gotta work for a living an' I'm in the middle of a tough case in Cleveland. This was off the record. I've got to get back on the job."

Shaking his head, the commissioner telephoned for a squad car. "It's to take a crazy man to the airport," he explained over the phone, "an' if he misses his plane the driver better be good at thinking up excuses."