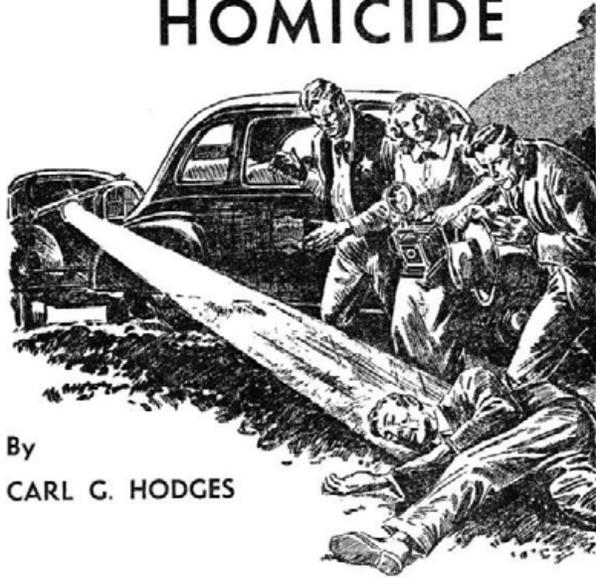


A DWIGHT BERKE NOVELET

# HIGHWAY HOMICIDE



By  
CARL G. HODGES



The murder of Police Captain Ferguson  
baffled the law — but a routine  
news picture put Di and Gail on the  
trail that led to the killer!

Cap Ferguson was lying on  
the road, in the glare of  
the lights from the police  
car, with a bullet hole in  
his head

## CHAPTER I

### CORPSE ON THE ROAD

DWIGHT BERKE of the *Journal* sat up straight as he watched a state trooper leap suddenly through the side-door of the Dalton Boys Tavern from the service station driveway outside. His eyes followed the natty khaki uniform as it raced through the dancing couples and disappeared into a telephone booth as the commotion of his entrance spread.

He watched a breathless farmer in overalls, carrying an empty glass jug, stumble into the room behind the trooper. The farmer's eyes were wide with excitement. He heard the staccato cry of "Murder!" from the farmer's lips and he grabbed his felt hat and jammed it down over his red hair as he got out of the booth. He nodded at his wife, Gail, and Howard Coe, newscaster for WTAX.

"We can forget about the softball champs," he said. "We got a murder."

He leaped across the floor into the swelling group around the man with the jug.

His wife, her four-by-five camera slung over her shoulder, was at his heels and Coe wasn't far behind.

Di grabbed the farmer's arm. "Did you say murder?"

"Sure as blazes," the farmer said, and he went into a recital, like a ham actor in summer stock, milking the drama dry. "My name is Olaf Johnson. I live half a mile up on Route One Twenty-three, with my wife, Gladys. That's the black top. The road, not Gladys. I was walking down here to get my jug of beer. I was walking along the shoulder, swinging my jug, payin' no never mind, when all of a sudden I stumbled—"

"Get to it, man! Get to it!" Berke snapped.

The farmer frowned but continued his starring role. "I stumbled. It was something soft. I lit a match. I only had one, and it blew out quick. But I knowed him. He didn't have his uniform on, but I knowed him right off. It was Cap Ferguson!"

Di whistled softly and looked at Gail. "Beth's boy friend goes through D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge and comes home with a mechanical leg and a gallon bucket full of

medals and then cashes in his chips on a township road.”

He looked sharply at the farmer. “In ‘Forty-two Ferguson was Captain of the Homicide Detail at City Hall. When he got back from service with that artificial leg, he took over as captain of the traffic detail for the state police. He got out of service a little over a month ago. How come you recognized him so quick—out of uniform—on a township road at night in the light of one match that went out quick?”

Johnson flushed. “Couple days ago Ferguson gave me a ticket for speeding. Cost me eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents in J.P. court. I don’t forget guys like that.”

Di grinned. “How’d you know he was murdered? Maybe a car hit him?”

Johnson said, “It wasn’t no car that hit him. It was a bullet, square between the eyes. And there wasn’t no gun around. That makes it murder, don’t it?”

Di said, drily, “You saw a surprising lot by the light of one match that went out quick.”

**G**RADY DALTON broke into the group then. He was the surly, saturnine one of the two brothers who had run their Dalton Boys name and a modern version of a Western saloon into a fortune during the war years.

“Come on, break up this clambake! You’re bothering the customers.”

Di said, “There’s been a murder, Grady. Cap Ferguson.”

“Who?”

“Cap Ferguson. A man who fought in a mortar battalion in France while you and Bob stayed home and drew beer and got fat.”

Dalton’s lip curled. “So he was a hero. And now he’s a croppie. We’ll have one minute of silent prayer for the sap.” His voice was raw. “I think he was a sap. I hated his gizzard. I’m tickled pink. Now clear the floor.”

He rudely shoved men away with his brawny arms. His was a brute strength, even in a tailor-made tuxedo.

Di whispered to Gail, “Keep track of things here, Toots. I’m using the pay phone outside to call the *Journal*. Be ready to travel with that four-by-five.” He left her and hurried to the telephone in the service station outside.

When he returned, the state trooper had completed his phone call and was talking to the farmer who had discovered Ferguson’s body.

“How far away is the body?”

“Quarter of a mile,” said Johnson. “Halfway between here and my place. I’ll show you.”

Berke butted in, with Gail at his side. “How’s about riding along?”

The trooper said, “Who are you?”

Di grinned. “Dwight Berke of the *Journal*. This is my wife, Gail. She takes news pictures.”

“Every time anybody in Sangamon County gets bumped off, you and that wife of yours get there before the cops. How come you’re Johnny-on-the-spot, here?”

“We covered the softball championship game at Municipal Stadium. Gail took the pictures and I wrote the story. After it was over, we ran into Howard Coe and he was so tickled about the WTAX team winning the State championship, he offered to buy us a drink.” He turned to Coe with a grin under his laughing eyes. “You better pay that check or Dalton’ll sue you.”

Coe chuckled. “One on the house won’t break him up.”

The trooper said, “I’m Ed Lonergan. Cap was my boss. We ought to get the killer who bumped him off. But we’re strictly traffic boys. I had to call Sheriff Couch. Cap was killed in the county, outside the city limits.”

“Fine,” said Di, “in a couple years more, Couch will find out that Cain killed Abel.”

Howard Coe was suddenly at their heels as they climbed into the sleek police car with the proud state seal in gold leaf on the doors.

"I roomed at Beth Jasper's rooming house next to Ferguson. He was a good officer and a gentleman. I'd like to help in any way I can."

When they got to the scene of the crime, there wasn't much to see. Cap Ferguson, dressed in a lightweight brown garbardin, without a vest, was lying on his side on the shoulder of the black top road. His clothes weren't rumpled and his neatly knotted four-in-hand wasn't even awry, but he was dead all right. Lying there in the glare of the state police car and the sheriff's official car, he logically could have curled up for a nap and gone to sleep, except for the hole that pierced his forehead, between the eyes.

Fat Sheriff Bill Couch was strutting around officiously, squinting his heavy-lidded eyes in ostentatious concentration. He wasn't used to murder, but he tried to freeze a blasé look on his beefy face.

While Gail's flash bulbs were popping, Di grinned at Couch. "What's your guess, Sheriff?"

Couch said, ponderously, "Ferguson was plugged by a man who knows how to shoot. Square between the eyes. But he wasn't killed here. He was bumped off some place else, brought in a car, and his body dumped in this place."

"How do you figure that?"

"Easy. Look at Ferguson's hands. Inside the palms. You can see black smudges, and tiny grains of that shiny white talc they coat new rubber auto floor mats with."

Di grinned. "Then we know that the man who bumped off Ferguson was driving a car with a new rubber floor mat. That your idea?"

"Yeah. But it could have been Ferguson's own car and the killer made his get away in it after he dumped Ferguson's body here."

The state trooper said, "He won't get far. We can trace Cap's car easy by the State seals on the doors and the special license plates."

Couch said, stiffly, "We don't even know, of course, that Ferguson came out here in his own car."

Di said, "Cap had an artificial leg, Couch. He wouldn't walk all the way out to this spot. He'd be driving a car, all right."

The sheriff said, "We can figure the angles later. We've seen everything. We'll order the coroner to haul him in. Then we can go to work."

**T**HE state trooper got into his car and Di and Gail and Coe and the farmer got in with him.

The trooper said, "I'll take a fast run out to the Y; maybe we can spot Cap's car."

Di said, "Then we can go back to the Dalton Boys. My coupe's parked by the softball park."

"Mine's parked at the service station," said Coe, the newscaster.

Di asked the trooper, "Lonergan, how long do you figure Cap has been dead?"

"Not over an hour. I saw a few dead Krauts at Bastogne. I'd say he was bumped off about nine."

"I saw a few dead Japs. My guess is about the same."

"Aw-aw!" The trooper braked the speeding car as his headlights bathed a car parked a hundred feet short of the Y on the shoulder of the road. "That's Ferguson's car," he said, and pulled off the road and braked to a stop behind it.

Lonergan got out and circled all around the car, his flashlight searching on the ground. Then he came back to the car.

"Ignition key in the dash. Cap didn't expect to be away long. Looks like he might have had a date with somebody to meet him here."

Di said, "Any tire tracks on the shoulder?"

"Only Ferguson's."

Di said, "Maybe you're right, Lonergan. Maybe Ferguson had a date with somebody. Came out here and parked, and waited. Then

somebody showed up, and killed him. But we got no way of telling whether the person who made the appointment killed him or whether it was somebody else. Only thing we do know is that the guy that bumped him off didn't want his body found here. Why? Maybe we better take a look."

They all piled out of the car and inspected the scene. And Gail caught her heel in a hole on the shoulder of the road and fell, her four by five nearly crashing to the ground before she grabbed it.

"Whew!" she said.

Di peered at the hole, about two inches square and a foot deep. "What's that for?"

Coe grinned. "It's a hole made by a surveyor's take, Di. There's been a contract let for resurfacing Route One Twenty-three and the highway engineers have been working here. I had that on my news broadcast on WTAX the other day."

Lonergan said, "Let's go. We'll head back to the Dalton Boys and I'll notify Couch that we've found Cap's car."

Olaf Johnson trudged away toward his home and the rest of them returned to the Dalton Boys. Lonergan drove his car up on the service station driveway, behind the service station office. They all got out and Howard Coe stopped beside his own coupe, parked behind the wash house. He opened the door, and turned to Di.

"If there's any way I can help, let me know."

Di had his foot on the bumper and he said to Gail, "I'll phone the story to the city desk while you pick up the coupe. Then we'll high-tail your pictures into the lab so we can make the deadline." He felt the heat of the radiator in the humid air and he moved away toward the tavern, mopping his face. Coe drove away.

Di phoned his story into rewrite. He gave only the meat in answer to questions, he said, "Sure, there's plenty of guys would like to see Ferguson six feet under. Grady Dalton for one. He was a dick for Homicide before the war,

till Ferguson kicked him off the squad for taking hush money. Then, there's Johnny Nick. He runs the service station right alongside the Dalton Boys Tavern. Ferguson sent him to the pen on a rap in '41. Nick won't mourn at Ferguson's funeral."

Rewrite said, "Cripes, that's two suspects already and the corpse ain't cold yet."

Di hung up the phone and walked outside. Gail hadn't shown up with the coupe so he moved down the cinder path toward the darkened stadium where the softball championship had been played. He could see his coupe standing alone in the shadows under a huge Chinese elm tree.

Then, his heart flopped over. That feeling of nervous butterflies was in his stomach. He could see the coupe and he could see that the door on the driver's side was open.

A terrified scream rang in his ears and he saw a burly form leap across the green and slam a blow down on Gail's head. Gail's slender form fell to the grass and her shadowy assailant grabbed something near her body, slung it around in the air and dashed it on the ground.

Di began to run. His eyes strained in the dark as he raced toward the coupe. His breath burned his lungs as fear gave wings to his feet. The dread menace of death was in his brain.

## CHAPTER II

### STOLEN PICTURES

A HEAD of Berke the shadowy form that had crushed Gail down turned crazily. He heard Di's pounding feet. He leaped away into the darkness and his form darted between a lane of trees.

Di fumbled at his armpit and his gun was in his hand. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the attacker's running form and he squeezed the trigger, praying the missile would find its mark. He cursed softly as the figure vanished. He halted and fired again. The roar of his gun

echoed against the trees. The bullet missed.

He ran and knelt by Gail's quiet body and gathered her in his arms. Her eyes were closed and she was moaning softly. He rubbed her wrists and slapped her face tenderly. She stirred, gasped and tried to wrench away. Suddenly she was beating Di in the face with both fists, struggling to escape his embrace.

"Hold it, Toots! I'm on your side. Remember?"

She sat up, and her hand went to the mass of waves piled high on her head and she winced when she felt the bump.

"Somebody slugged me, Di! Somebody slugged me in the dark."

"I know that," he said. "I'm wondering who, and why?"

"I can't help you there, Di. I didn't see his face."

She fumbled hastily for her four by five and the canvas bag in which she carried the exposed plates. Both were gone.

They found them ten feet away, lying on the grass. Both slides had been pulled out of each plate holder. Gail fumed, "The plates we took of Ferguson's body are ruined! Who on earth would slug me just to keep those pictures out of the paper?"

"Maybe somebody knows that something is in those pictures that will point to the killer." Di frowned. "This is getting nasty. From now on, Toots, you hang on to my coat tails. The man who plugged Ferguson will kill again."

The next morning, Gail was at her desk, inspecting the three-column cut on the sport page that showed the action around home plate in the fifth inning when Steve Duzak, of the WTAX team, had slid into home with the winning run and had broken his wrist. The picture showed most of the crowd in the home plate section and even the three-column cut showed myriad expressions of surprise, excitement, and shock on the spectators' faces, when they saw the play that scored the only run of the game and that clinched the

softball championship for the radio-sponsored team.

Di came back from a trip to the sheriff's office. He shrugged. "If we'd sent those pictures of Ferguson's body' in to the *Journal* by a cab driver like we did those of the softball game, we might have a worthwhile clue. The way it is, there's not much to go on."

"Couch find out anything?" Gail asked.

"The coroner got the slug out of Ferguson. It was a twenty-two bullet. The sheriff made a trip this morning out to the Y and he found the ejected cartridge. That proves it was an automatic. Couch figures that the gun used was a Colt Woodsman Sport Model. It's got a four-and-one-half-inch barrel instead of a six-and-one-half, like the regular Woodsman. The Sport Model would be easier for a killer to carry."

"Isn't it unusual for a killer to use a twenty-two?"

Berke nodded. "Yeah. But the Woodsman is a real target job and the guys who use 'em can hit what they aim at. Ferguson's killer plugged him squarely between the eyes."

Gail frowned. "Wasn't there anything in Ferguson's pockets that would give a lead?"

"Not much. A wallet, keys, cigarettes, a few coins and a memorandum book that was brand new. Had one name written in it. 'J. Peter Baxter, Eight-five-oh.' "

"Who's he?" Gail asked.

"I don't know," Berke said. "Neither does Couch. But he figures that maybe this Baxter is the man Ferguson had the appointment with. Eight-fifty could be the time they were supposed to meet. Lonergan and I both think he was killed around nine o'clock.

"Can't we check on Baxter?" Gail suggested. "Phone book, city directory?"

"Couch did that. He even called the metropolitan papers. He figured if the guy was important he might be on one of the subscription lists. No soap."

"Anything else on Ferguson's body?"

“They cleaned out his pockets with a vacuum cleaner gadget,” Berke answered. “About all they found was a bent second hand off an alarm clock and a one-inch patch of latex—sheet rubber. How anybody can make clues out of that, I’ll never know.”

**B**ERKE suddenly looked at his own wrist watch and then pursed his lips in a soft whistle.

Gail smiled. “Sounds like an idea hit you right hard. What is it?”

“That eight-five-oh in the back of Baxter’s memorandum book couldn’t have been a reference to a meeting time.”

“Why?”

“Elementary, my dear Watson. How could Ferguson make arrangements to meet anybody at eight-fifty? He didn’t carry a watch and there isn’t a clock on his car dash.”

He started out of the office. Gail grabbed her four-by-five. “You’ve got that look in your eye, darling. When that happens, it’s a good idea to have a camera handy.”

The Springfield Target Club had basement meeting rooms and a target range in the basement of the Masonic Temple and it was here that Di and Gail entered just before noon. A sunbrowned youth in a canary-colored T shirt was at the reception desk, nonchalantly putting twenty-two cartridges in clips of ten.

Di said, “We’re from the *Journal*. Do you have a membership list that I can look at?”

The youth pulled a black book out of a drawer and slid it across the desk. “You can look if you want, but who are you looking for? I can tell you whether they belong.”

“Johnny Nick, the man that runs the service station next to the Dalton Boys Tavern.”

“Yeah, he belongs. Fact is, he’s inside now on the target range. He ranks third on the targets in this man’s town.” He paused. “Second, since Cap Ferguson got bumped off.”

“I’d like to talk to Nick. May I go in?”

“Sure. That door.”

Di opened the door and ushered Gail into the long, narrow, low-ceiled room. Fifteen feet forward a low rail two feet high extended from wall to wall. In front of the rail was a plain table. At the end of the long room, under spotlights, two black and white bull’s eye targets were fastened to the wall.

Two men stood at the rail, in firing position, legs apart with the right slightly in front, their bodies angled forward to the right facing the targets, their weapons extended at full arm’s length, at eye level. They were firing rapid fire, their weapons barking with menacing spits of flame. One of the two target men was Howard Coe.

Gail said, surprised, “Howard, I didn’t think you could hit a barn if you were inside it.”

Coe turned around, shock on his handsome face. But he was careful to hold his gun on the target as he turned his body to stare at the unexpected visitors.

His companion was not so careful. He whirled around. His Woodsman barked and spat a slug. The whistling lead sang past Di’s head and ricocheted off the rough stone walls.

“Nick,” snapped Coe, “you know the rules! Never turn a loaded gun off the target. You might have killed Di.”

Nick was short, skinny and surly. “Heck, he hadn’t ought to of brought a skirt down here. That’s ag’in’ the rules, too.”

Coe placed his Woodsman carefully on the table by the rail and came forward to meet Di. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That shot could have killed you. Nick should have been more careful.”

Di said, grimly, “I’m not too sure it was an accident.”

Nick growled. “It was an accident, wise guy. When I shot at something, I hit it.”

“Cap Ferguson was killed with a twenty-two. It might be interesting to compare the slug they took out of Cap with one from your gun. You had plenty of reason to hate him,

didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. I hated him. He put me in stir." His smile was oily and ugly. "But if you start comparing bullets, mister, you're wasting your time. This ain't my gun. All the guns here belong to the Club and they're all alike. They're all Woodsmans."

COE interrupted the conversation. He glanced at Di and said, proudly: "Di, I'm no slouch with a twenty-two, myself. I could have killed Ferguson, if ability to fire a twenty-two is the only requirement for guilt."

Nick snickered evilly. "You? You rank Number One but you can't shoot man to man. You would owe me four bits on that last clip if you weren't too tight to bet."

Gail said, "We know that you didn't kill Ferguson, Howard, because you were at the softball game."

"Coe," Di said, "you're on the radio a lot. Does the name of J. Peter Baxter mean anything to you?"

"No. I don't think so. Should it?"

Di said, "Your frequency is eight hundred and fifty kilocycles, isn't it?"

"Yes. But what's that got to do with it?"

Nick broke in. "I remember the name. He was some kind of a screwball attorney. He advertised on your program, Coe."

Coe paused. "Maybe a spot announcement. You see, Di, I don't have a regular sponsor. My half hour broadcast is broken up by spot announcements. I have hundreds of different ones every month. But I can check back and find out if I had any announcements by this—"

"Baxter," said Di, "J. Peter Baxter."

They went to radio station WTAX and Coe painstakingly searched through his files for copy on Baxter's announcements with no success. The program director, however, was able to furnish the information that single spot announcements of J. Peter Baxter had been used on the news broadcast for a week from June 8th to 15th, two months previously.

"How did Baxter pay for it? Cash or check?"

The program director referred Di to the business office of the station. Here he got the information that Baxter's copy and cash to pay for it had been received by mail. The address which had been given was:

J. Peter Baxter, Attorney at Law,  
812 East Monroe, Centerville

Di took Gail by the arm. "Come on, Toots. We drive to Centerville and have a talk with J. Peter. Maybe we're getting warm."

Coe ushered them out into the station waiting room just as a pleasant, plump woman entered from the corridor. Her eyes were red and had a sober lifelessness to them.

Di said, quietly, "Gail and I offer our sympathy, Beth."

Beth Jasper smiled sadly. "Thank you both," she said. "You're very kind. But I feel empty—here. I can't help but think that Cap's only gone away on a trip, like when he left for service. It doesn't seem to me that he'll never—" Her eyes were dead-looking in her face.

And then she fought back her emotions and turned to Coe. "Howard," she said, "will you be kind enough to serve as a pall bearer?"

Coe took both her hands in his. "Kind, Beth?" he asked softly. "Honored is the word. Certainly, I will."

Di and Gail left the building with Beth Jasper. Di said, "This is hardly the time, Beth, but I'm hunting an answer or two. You and Cap were going to be married? When?"

"I wanted to marry him before he went into service. He didn't want to, because he was afraid he might not come back."

"How about Coe? You had dates with him while Cap was gone?"

She smiled, tenderly. "Not dates, Di. We are all adults. Cap was gone, I was lonesome, Howard was kind. A show, a movie occasionally, that was all."

Di grinned. "Did Cap fancy himself as an amateur watchmaker?"

"No. But he was a confirmed tinkerer. He had a shop in the basement of the house." Her eyes were glistening with moisture. "He had a lathe and a drill press and a band saw rigged up. He was always making bookends and ash trays and what-nots for the house."

Beth left them to catch a bus back to her rooming house. Gail said. "Di, where'd you get the idea that Cap was an amateur watchmaker, Hawkshaw? Just because there was a bent second hand in his pocket?"

Di grinned mysteriously. "There's a little matter of timing mixed up in this murder, Toots, and that second hand might lead us to an answer or two. Maybe after we talk to J. Peter Baxter, we'll know those answers."

### CHAPTER III

#### NARROW ESCAPE

CENTERVILLE was nearly eighty miles away. Number 812 East Monroe was a two story brick building, the ground floor of which was occupied by a cut-rate drug store and the upper floor was tenanted by dentists, insurance agents and others whose needs required only small, unpretentious suites.

They could not find J. Peter Baxter. They hunted up the rental agent at the local bank and made inquiries. The rental agent was cooperative.

"Baxter was a tenant at Eight-twelve a month or so ago. He was an attorney. A patent attorney."

"A patent attorney?" Di's eyes widened and he winked at Gail. "Toots, maybe we've hit the jackpot." To the agent he said, "Did he leave a forwarding address?"

"No. He had very little business. And he didn't attend to that. He wouldn't even be in his office for days at a time. He'd come in occasionally to pick up his mail and then he'd be off again."

"What did Baxter look like?"

The rental agent grinned. "If you'll pardon me, I think Baxter was a little bit wacky. He looked like a ham actor, and not even a good ham actor. He wore spats and striped trousers and a fawn-colored vest. He had horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like an owl and a hat that was too small for him. Sat up on top of his head like a bump on a log. And he had a scar on his face. Ran from his right ear about half way down to the point of his chin."

Di said, "If you hear anything of his whereabouts, will you let me know?"

The rental agent agreed readily.

They started back to Springfield in the coupe. As they neared it, Gail turned on the car radio to catch the news broadcast over WT AX. And they looked at each other with shock as they heard Howard Coe's perfect voice boom in over the speaker:

Coe's voice said, "Sheriff's deputies, acting under instructions from Sheriff William Couch, have located the murder weapon used in the killing last night of Cap Ferguson. It is a Colt Woodsman Automatic Sport Model of twenty-two caliber. Ballistics experts of the State's mobile laboratory have testified that the bullet which killed Ferguson was fired from the gun found by the law officers."

Di fumed. "Cut out the drama, bub. Who did it?"

The radio went on. "The owner of the gun is named as John Nick, the operator of a service station adjacent to the Dalton Boys Tavern on the southern outskirts of the city, approximately a quarter of a mile from the spot where Ferguson's dead body was found at ten o'clock last night.

"Nick admits ownership of the murder weapon, but denies any connection with the crime. Sheriff Couch is confident that the officials will eventually secure a full confession and he stated that Nick's motive might have been revenge for conviction of Nick by Ferguson on a burglary charge several years ago. Nick is being held in the county jail

without bond.”

Gail smiled, ruefully. “We go kiting off eighty miles looking for a Shakespearean nitwit with the impossible name of J. Peter Baxter while the real killer was right under our noses.”

Di said, “Johnny Nick might be dumb, but he’s not dumb enough to leave a murder weapon lying around loose for a dumb kluck like Couch to find.”

“Of course, you’ll swear that Nick is innocent. You and the cops never agree on a murder pinch.”

“You said it, Toots. Nick wouldn’t have nerve enough to commit murder.”

“Maybe he had nerve enough to try to bump you off at the target range? Remember that slug? Remember my getting conked on the head and the pictures stolen? Nick could have done that.”

Di pushed his hat back off his red hair. “He could, at that.”

They turned off the hard road, then, and Di piloted his coupe down the black top road that paralleled the river. They sped past the cluster of hunting and fishing cottages along the river, maintained by Springfield outdoor enthusiasts and then angled off the black top toward the concrete highway into the city.

Gail’s voice had an edge of fear. “Take it easy, darling. Pull over.” She pointed through the windshield. “This driver thinks he’s Barney Oldfield or Cannon-ball Baker.”

**D**I LIFTED his foot off the gas and the coupe slowed as he watched the big black sedan tearing down the black top road toward them. The big car was traveling sixty and the black top wasn’t wide enough for that kind of driving. Di slowed up more, and edged over toward the shoulder. He managed a meager S curve and straightened out.

And then he twisted the wheel viciously to the right. He went over the shoulder with his right wheels in desperation as the big sedan powered straight for them. Di’s breath stuck in

his throat and his heart stopped beating. The black juggernaut was on them, wheels glinting.

A smash was imminent. Di went into the ditch, wheels bumping, canted crazily at a thirty degree angle. He had to fight to hold the steering wheel.

The big car’s engine blasted power in his ears as it sped by. The whistle and swoosh of its tires was a symphony of death missed by a whisker.

Berke put the coupe back on the road. “That reckless fool! He was in an awful hurry to go some place.”

Gail had a perpendicular pucker on her brow. “That ‘he’,” she said, “was Grady Dalton or I’ll eat the steering wheel. And it looked to me as if he wasn’t just going some place. He aimed that car at us just like he’d aim a gun.”

Di said, “Why would Grady Dalton try to sideswipe us?”

“I don’t know. But that was Grady Dalton. I got the last three numbers of his license, six-seven-three. It was a black Acme. We can check at City Hall.”

“I’ll do that little thing, too. And if it *was* Grady Dalton, I’ll punch him in the nose.”

They drove into Springfield by way of the street on which Beth Jasper’s rooming house was situated. Di saw Ed Lonergan coming down the steps toward a State police car parked by the curb. He was carrying a metal box about a foot square and a foot deep by a metal handle.

Di pulled over to the curb and stopped. “It didn’t take long for Couch to nab Ferguson’s killer.”

Lonergan grunted. “Couch went off half-cocked. I tested the slug they took out of Cap and the cartridge case found on the black top near Cap’s car with the gun they found in Nick’s office. The slug went through Cap’s skull and wasn’t definite evidence but the cartridge case tied up with Nick’s gun.”

“What more do you want?”

“A lot more. A devil of a lot more. Johnny Nick’s got the best alibi I ever heard a killer have.”

“For instance?”

“From eight to nine last night Johnny Nick was in the Target Club at the Masonic Temple. They had some kind of a round-robin tournament and Nick was in charge of it. He never left the place for two hours. He’s got twenty-five witnesses that prove he couldn’t have killed Ferguson, including the Mayor, the Chief of Police, and the State’s Attorney.”

Di chuckled. “That ought to be ironclad. Where’s Nick now?”

“Couch had to let him go. Nick raised Cain and wanted his gun back. Said he needed it for protection at his service station. He’s open twenty-four hours a day. Couch is holding the gun as Exhibit A. The Target Club lent Nick a Woodsman till he gets his own gun back.”

“Where will Couch turn now?”

“He’s already turned. He’s got a dragnet out for Grady Dalton.”

“Dalton?”

“Yeah. Nick swears he sold Dalton a new rubber floor mat for his car two days ago. And Couch figures that Dalton could easily have found out where Nick keeps his gun and borrowed it long enough to kill Ferguson without Nick knowing anything about it.”

“Where’s Dalton?”

“On the lam, I guess. He was seen leaving town in his car a short time ago, and he hasn’t been seen since. We put a call on the police broadcast and Coe put it on the air over WT AX. So far, it looks like Grady Dalton’s gone into thin air.”

**W**HEN Di asked about Dalton’s license number, Lonergan consulted a memo book. “Illinois four-oh-eight-dash-six-seven-three, Black Acme sedan, ‘Forty-one model. Why?”

“He tried to shove us off the road out by the hunting cottages along the river. Start from there.” Di’s eyes glinted. “What’s in that box

you’re lugging, Lonergan? You a Fuller Brush man on the side?”

Lonergan’s Irish smile widened. “Naw. This is a traffic counter that Cap was working on in his workroom. You’ve seen dozens like it out on the State highways. A flexible tube lies on the concrete and when a car runs over it, the force of the air operates a diaphragm that actuates a counting mechanism in the box. They are used to count the number of vehicles that pass any given location in any given period of time.”

Di showed interest. “This traffic counter— it doesn’t happen to have a clock in it, does it?”

“Yeah. They all do. They’re all about the same size and shape and work on the same principle but the old-fashioned kind work with a storage battery to furnish the power for the operating mechanism. That’s where the one Cap was working on is different. He used the power of an alarm clock to run the mechanism. He hooked a rubber diaphragm up directly to the second-hand escapement. For every two clicks of the counter, the second hand counts one car. Cap’s idea is sound. A storage battery runs down and the count isn’t always accurate, where a clock runs for eight days and is accurate as all git out.”

Di frowned. “How come the second hand only moves on every two clicks?”

Lonergan grinned. “A car runs over the flexible tube on the pavement and the pressure of air operates the diaphragm. The reason they wait for two clicks to operate the counter is that the front wheels and the back wheels of any car operate the diaphragm. Two clicks mean that only one car has passed.”

“This diaphragm? It’s made of thin latex?”

“Right. That’s how come Cap had that patch of latex in his coat pocket along with that old second hand. And that’s why I came here to Miss Jasper’s to see if the traffic counter he was working on was still in his workroom. I had a hunch that maybe his killer had lured him into bringing the traffic counter

out on Route One-twenty-three last night. I was wrong. Beth Jasper says it's never been out of the house. Cap was pretty secretive about it."

Gail put in her two cents' worth. "What motive does Couch think Grady Dalton had for killing Ferguson? Because Cap had Dalton kicked off the force back in 'Forty-one?"

"That, and general cussedness on Grady's part. Couch found out that the bad blood between 'em got worse since Cap got back from service and took over the traffic detail. Cap got in the habit of using the Tavern phone to call in to headquarters. Grady kicked about it and a couple weeks ago, they wound up in a fight. Grady got the worst of it and he let it be known he was going to cut Cap down to his size."

"Kind of a juvenile motive, don't you think?"

"Maybe. But Grady's a surly cuss. And he did fly the coop. Guys that got nothing to worry about, don't take it on the lam, do they?"

At four o'clock that afternoon, Di had a phone call from Lonergan.

"Newshound," the state trooper said, "thought I'd give you a ring. A car bearing Grady Dalton's license number was seen right after noon parked in front of his fishing lodge on the Sangamon River about eight miles from here. He is one of the owners, along with a half a dozen other fishing addicts from Springfield. We lost him, but we're a cinch to find him before long."

Di said, "There's something else I'd like to know, Lonergan. That traffic counter you toted away from Cap Ferguson's workshop. Was it really the same one that Cap Ferguson has been working on?"

Lonergan hesitated. "How'd you figure that out? No, it wasn't. It was a regular traffic counter that works with a storage battery. I told you they all look alike. I didn't find out it wasn't Cap's until I took the lid off."

"Where's the one that Cap was working

on, then?"

"I'll be hanged if I know."

## CHAPTER IV

### KILLER AT BAY

SOON Di and Gail left the office for a sandwich at the Wagon Wheel, a restaurant near the building in which the studios of WTAX were housed. As they came out of the air-conditioned coolness of the popular eating place, they met Steve Duzak. Steve had his wrist in a plaster cast and his arm in a sling. It was the first time they had seen the softball star since the championship game.

Di said, "That's what happens when an irresistible softball player meets an immovable object. How long before you'll be able to play again?"

Before Duzak could answer, Howard Coe joined them. He grinned. "Anything new on the murder, Di?"

Di shook his head. "Not a thing except guesses."

Steve Duzak grinned. "Fishing for news, Coe? I thought you were supposed to broadcast it."

Coe noticed Duzak for the first time. "What happened to you? Break your hand on some body's jaw? Or run into a door?"

Steve was crudely facetious. "Naw. Steamboat ran over it."

At eight o'clock that night, after watching the teletype that was bringing in the stories on the major league ball games of the day, Di went back to Gail's desk and looked over the picture that she had taken at the softball game.

She said, "Why so interested in that thing? Looking for a clue?"

A queer look came over his face and he leaped to his feet. "Clue? Gail! It was right in my lap for the last four hours and I didn't have brains enough to tumble to it." He grabbed his hat and cried, "Come on! I'm playing a red-

hot hunch.”

Gail grabbed her four by five and was at his heels when he ran out of the office. “Where we headed for?”

“The Dalton Boys. And we better get there, pronto!”

Three State police cars were pulled up on the driveway in front of the Dalton Boys Tavern. The neat khaki uniforms of the highway cops were spotted at strategic spots on the driveway, keeping back a crowd of milling spectators.

Di leaped out of the coupe and Gail was at his heels. They headed for the Tavern entrance and they met Sheriff Couch coming out. Di took his arm.

“What’s up?”

Couch growled. “Dalton! Grady Dalton! He’s been shot dead—right between the eyes. Just like Ferguson.”

Di groaned. “Oh-ho! I was afraid of that.”

“Huh?” grumbled Couch. “What you talking about?”

Di talked to the sheriff briefly and then rejoined Gail. They entered the Tavern, while Couch disappeared down the driveway toward the service station office of Johnny Nick, plastered against the side wall of the Tavern.

The inside of the Tavern was dimly lighted. It normally did not open until eight o’clock and none of the shaded booth lights had been turned on. Grady Dalton’s body lay at the base of the platform on which the frontier orchestra performed. He had a hole in the middle of his forehead.

This murder was inside the city limits and because of that, Inspector Fleming Morf of the Homicide Detail was in charge, aided by two plainclothesmen. Morf was a bullet-headed egotist with a crew hair cut and a button nose that made him look like a Nazi sub commander. Bob Dalton, the dead man’s brother, was talking to Howard Coe in a soft, grief-filled voice. Di greeted them.

Morf was always publicity hungry and he saw an opportunity. “Berke!” he said,

pompously. “You can say that I am in charge of the investigation now and I’ll have the killer within twenty-four hours.”

“Why waste twenty-four hours,” said Di, curtly, “I can name the killer now.”

Morf’s eyes squinted. “Don’t keep us waiting, wise guy. We’re trembling with anticipation for your revelations.”

Di grinned. “Talking in here is like talking in a barn. Let’s go somewhere.”

Morf said, “If you’ve got to be cozy, we can use Johnny Nick’s office.” He led the way through a side door that opened into Johnny Nick’s service station office and the rest followed him. Gail and Howard Coe, Bob Dalton and the two detectives.

When they had all crowded into the tiny office, Sheriff Couch barged in from outside.

“What is this, a convention?”

Morf grunted. “Draw up a chair and let your feet hang, Couch. The wise guy’s gonna solve two murders by remote control.”

**H**OWARD COE was standing by the counter on which Johnny Nick’s cash register stood. His handsome face was alive with interest.

“Come on, Berke, and give. This will be rare material for my news broadcast on WTAX. Who is the murderer?”

Di dropped the name into a stunned silence.

“You! Howard Coe! You killed both Cap Ferguson and Grady Dalton!”

Coe’s mouth dropped open with a vacuous expression. “Me? Are you completely crazy?” He put his back against the counter and his fingers moved nervously along the edge. “Why should I kill Ferguson or Grady? Why?”

“You killed Cap Ferguson to get his traffic counter. It is a brand new principle on a gadget that is used by the highway and traffic department of forty-eight states and hundreds of cities. A patent on it would be worth a million bucks. That’s why you killed

Ferguson.”

He went on. “Then, somehow, Grady Dalton stumbled on to your secret and he went out to the fishing lodge on the Sangamon which you both happen to own shares in and found Cap’s traffic counter that you had hidden there. Then he came back here and was putting the bite on you for his share of the dough you’d made when you took out the patent in your own name. You had to kill him, too.”

“Tell me more,” Coe said scornfully. “You amaze me. If you weren’t so completely fantastic, you’d be funny.” His lips curled. “How did I do all the dirty work, screwball?”

“You planned well. You knew Cap was secretive about the whole thing. So you created a mythical patent attorney by the name of J. Peter Baxter and opened an office in Centerville. You played the part of J. Peter Baxter in clothes you used in the amateur production of ‘Get-Rich-Quick-Wallingford’ last summer. You mailed advertising into WTAX for radio spot announcements which you read on the air.”

Di Berke continued. “Cap Ferguson, owning an invention that he knew was worth a mint of money, listened to your suggestion that he tune in on Baxter on eight hundred and fifty kilocycles. He did that, and subsequently wrote to Baxter’s office in Centerville. You got the letters and arranged a meeting with Ferguson where he could demonstrate this traffic counter to you. Then you killed him.”

Coe laughed. “And then hauled the body a quarter of a mile in my car before I dumped him out, I suppose?”

“That’s right. Because the black smudge on the palms of Cap’s hands was from the flexible rubber hose of the traffic counter. You had to make it appear as if it came from the rubber floor mat of an automobile. And you had to get his body away from the hole left in the shoulder by the stake to which the traffic counter was locked—the hole you said was left by a surveyor’s stake.”

“Finish it up, Hawkshaw. Then what did clever little me do?”

“You drove back here to the Tavern. Next you went to the softball game—it wasn’t over yet—and you used that as your alibi. You made sure that Gail and I saw you at the game. The next morning you took Cap’s traffic counter out to the fishing lodge and cached it, and put an old-style counter in Cap’s workroom in Beth Jasper’s rooming house. But your alibi is no good, Coe.”

“Why? I was at the softball game. You saw me there.”

“You were at the softball game, yes. But only for a part of it. You didn’t even know that Steve Duzak broke his wrist sliding into home plate in the fifth inning. If you had seen the game from the beginning, you’d have known that.”

Morf broke in. “Go on, amateur. It sounds good so far. Maybe you’ve got something.”

“I have,” said Di. “Because Coe wasn’t at the game and he knew that the pictures Gail took would prove that he wasn’t. He slugged her and exposed all the plates. Luckily, we’d sent the baseball picture into the *Journal* by a cab driver and Coe spoiled only the picture Gail took of Ferguson’s body.”

Morf said, “But Ferguson was definitely killed with Johnny Nick’s gun. How do you explain that?”

“Easy enough. Coe was a member of the Target Club and so was Johnny Nick. Coe hung around here a lot and it is only reasonable to believe that he could find out where Nick kept his gun. He used it to kill Ferguson and returned it to Nick’s office when he came back here after the murder.” He paused. “Here’s more. After we all went to see Cap’s body, we came back here. The radiator on Coe’s car was still hot. If he had been at the softball game from the beginning, that wouldn’t have been true.”

“Where does Dalton come in?”

“Just like I said. Somehow he got wise to the fact that Coe had killed Ferguson to get the

traffic counter. He suspected that Coe had hidden it at the fishing lodge of which they were both members. He found the traffic counter and then he came back here and put the bite on Coe. Coe put on his disguise of J. Peter Baxter and killed him. He didn't want to share a million bucks with anybody."

**B**Y NOW Howard Coe's face had gone as white as milk. His right hand slipped under the counter and it came up with a Woodsman Sport Model. He leveled it, his face evil. Gone was the handsomeness. In its place was criminal ugliness.

"I'll use Nick's gun again! Get out of my way or somebody will get hurt! Don't move! I'll kill again!"

Coe backed away from the counter toward the door, the Woodsman unwavering in his hand. His left hand reached behind him for the door knob and pulled it open.

Ed Lonergan was standing there. The state trooper wasted no time. He grabbed his forty-five out of his holster. He banged the heavy butt down on top of Coe's head. Coe didn't even open his mouth. His knees sagged under him and he slumped forward on the floor, dead to the world.

Lonergan's Irish smile was focused on Di. "That traffic counter of Ferguson's was cached out at the fishing lodge just like you said. I got it in the back seat of my car."

Fleming Morf scowled as he bent over and snapped a pair of cuffs on Coe while Gail's flash bulbs popped. Then he barked at Di. "You're plenty smart, Berke, but you're mighty careless with other people's lives. Coe might have plugged some of us."

"Not with that gun." Di was grinning. "I had Sheriff Couch take the clip out of it."