

The Crimson Clue



By
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Although Dan Otis was only a small-town sheriff, he used big-town tactics to snare a killer who thought he could get away with murder.

BIG DAN OTIS ambled into the private office of Albert Ford, treasurer of the Elton Manufacturing Company. He paused just inside the doorway to beam at the three men seated in the office.

"Howdy, Al!" he boomed to the man behind the desk. "Hello, Mr. Elton! How are you, Greg?"

"Come in, sheriff," Al Ford invited, smiling a welcome. James Elton, president of the firm, nodded curtly.

Young Greg Carter, Elton's nephew and sales manager, gave the big visitor a careless nod. Carter's eyes seemed slightly

amused and his full lips curled a little in what might have been indulgent scorn.

Dan Otis chose a chair directly under the whirling ceiling fan. "Thanks, Al. It sure is a burner outside today!"

Big and ungainly, Dan Otis had little of book learning. But he did know men and had an uncanny ability for sizing them up. He had made Pulaski County a good sheriff for eight years.

Thick fingers of one hand went into an inside pocket of his shapeless old coat and came out again clutching a thick packet of currency. Otis tossed the packet on the desk before the treasurer.

“Don’t know as I’m crazy ‘bout being money messenger!” he observed dryly. “Knowin’ you’re packin’ ten thousand dollars of other people’s money ain’t comfortin’ thinkin’, drivin’ alone!”

Elton arched thin brows at sight of the currency and then glanced at his treasurer inquiringly. Greg Carter stared at the money.

“Old Laz Turnbull promised to come in at noon today and close the trade for that Coon Creek timber tract of his,” Ford explained to Elton. “I finally got the old coot lined up to trade. But he insisted on getting cash, so I asked Dan to take in a check when he went to Riverton this morning and bring back the cash. Our bank here probably wouldn’t be able to handle a check for that amount.”

“Well, I’m glad to know that you’ve at last gotten that erratic old fool to the point of a trade!” Elton’s tones betrayed satisfaction. “Going to close today, are you?”

Ford nodded. “Papers all drawn up and ready for his signature.”

Greg Carter jerked his eyes from the money and turned his face toward a screened window at the treasurer’s back.

“Well, what do you want?” he demanded sharply.

The others looked that way quickly. A man stood on the ground just outside the window, peering into the office. An unshaven, gaunt man whose lean face bore grease smears, as did the coveralls he wore.

Washed-out blue eyes were fixed just now on the packet of money on Ford’s desk. “I’m all done with your car, Mr. Ford. I got the trailer all hooked up and ready.”

“Thanks, Crumby! That was a quick job.” Ford’s tones were grateful. “Tell Mr. Mason I’m obliged to him for letting you off to fix up things for me.”

The man nodded, and crunched a way on the cindered alleyway between the one-story office building and the near-by wood-working plant walls, ivy grown.

Elton got to his feet. “Better have that money locked up in the safe, Ford. It might look tempting to any of the workmen passing your window.”

“It’s hardly worth while, Mr. Elton. It’s eleven o’clock now, and Turnbull is due here in an hour.”

HE OPENED the left-hand top drawer of his desk, picked up the fat packet, and dropped it into the drawer. Then he placed the sheaf of papers in there and closed the drawer. The other three watched that operation.

“You’re going fishing this afternoon, are you?” the president inquired.

Al Ford nodded. “I’ll get started by one-thirty, unless Laz Turnbull throws me down.”

“Hope you have luck,” the president grunted, and strode from the office.

Greg Carter got up, stretched, and yawned. “Think I’ll go for cigarettes,” he said.

He lounged from the office.

Ford eyed the sheriff. “You didn’t forget the other errand, did you, Dan?”

Dan Otis grinned, and dug into a side coat pocket. “Here you are!”

He passed over a small, round package wrapped in drug-store pink. Ford reached under his desk and lifted a battered tin tackle box to the blotter. He unwrapped the package, disclosing a paper carton. When he tried removing the cap, he saw that the label held the cap in place.

He opened the same drawer in which he had placed the money and took out a desk knife. He loosened the label and twisted the cap. A little of the contents spilled into the open drawer.

“That stuff is fresh, all right!” he

commented. "Just like gunpowder. I tried two drug stores in town here yesterday and their stock was old and gummy. I don't like to go into those snake-infested bottoms without a supply of this stuff."

Otis, grinning, watched his friend put the little carton away in the tackle box, and stow that back under the desk.

"It's nice and cool here, Al, but I reckon I got to be runnin' along to the office," he announced. "Hope nothin' broke while I was in the city."

"I haven't heard of any murders, Dan." Ford smiled. "Thanks for running my errands."

"It wasn't nothin'!" Otis clapped on his big hat. "Just you bring me a mess of perch. So long, Al."

Otis ambled through the wide hallway that separated the Elton Company's big general office from the several private offices and rooms on that side of the building. He turned off into a shorter, narrower passageway that led to the cindered parking lot between office building and the plant.

Crossing the lot to where his old touring car was parked, Otis' eyes fell on a neat coupe with a trailer attached. There was a small boat and some camping equipment packed on the trailer.

The man Ford had called Crumby was walking around the coupe, apparently searching for something.

He glanced up at the lumbering sheriff, caught sight of the star, and abruptly walked away from the spot.

Dan Otis' eyes followed the man. He noted also, when climbing into his car, that Greg Carter's snappy roadster, which had been parked next to the coupe was now missing.

OTIS' three-mile journey from the Elton Manufacturing Company's plant to his own office in the courthouse in

Pulaski Square was broken pleasantly with some short friendly visits. It was five minutes of noon when he reached his office door.

He paused there, mouth agape as he glanced in and listened.

The two young women clerks who checked over tax records were idle, huddled together and gazing apprehensively at a raw-boned shock-headed young giant who clutched a telephone at the sheriff's desk. The young man was Otis' chief deputy, Charlie Case.

"I got to locate the sheriff!" he was bellowing into the phone. "If you see him, Frank, tell him to get up to the office fast."

"What's all the excitement about?" Otis asked.

Charlie Case slammed up the phone and hurried over to his chief. "Been trying to locate you all over town, sheriff! Say, you got to get right out to the Elton Manufacturing Company plant!"

"Huh? I just come from there."

"There's been a murder there—since you left!" Charlie Case exclaimed. "Somebody killed Al Ford—in his office!"

Otis' broad face went suddenly stern and stiff. "Somebody—killed Al Ford? Charlie, you don't mean that?"

"That's the straight dope, sheriff!" Charlie Case's blue eyes were wide. "Mr. Elton himself phoned, and he's about crazy!"

Otis' wide shoulders drooped a little. His mouth tightened. Al Ford had been an old and a very close friend.

"I reckon," he muttered thickly, "we'd better get right out there, Charlie. Just a minute, son. There's something I want to take with me."

He crossed hastily to his desk, pawed through a filing basket. He selected a mimeographed letter and shoved the sheet into a pocket. Then he joined the eager deputy.

“We’ll take your car, Charlie,” he said quietly. “It’ll make better time than my old heap.”

Most of the Elton Manufacturing Company’s hundred or so plant employees were gathered in excited little groups in the parking space when Otis and Charlie Case got out to the plant. Otis descended from the car and strode to the office building, the deputy at his heels.

He entered through the rear entrance and pushed through the group of awed office employees in the big hallway. Just before reaching the open door to Ford’s office, he paused.

“You folks,” he ordered mildly, “had best get back to your desks. No use in cluttering up this hallway.”

With curious stares the little group drifted away. Otis walked into the private office.

James Elton, Greg Carter, and wizened little Peter Hassel, the firm’s cashier, stood in a huddled group.

Dr. Martin Parker, the company physician, stood by the desk, his face troubled and his eyes moist.

The body of Albert Ford lay slumped over the desk.

All eyes turned on the sheriff, but no one said anything immediately. Otis looked upon the dead body of his friend.

Otis went over to the desk. Charlie Case, eyes wide and face grave, entered the office and closed the door.

“How was Al killed, doc?” Otis questioned the medical man gruffly.

“He was struck on the head from behind, Dan, and his skull crushed. He died instantly, I’m sure,” Dr. Parker explained gravely. “The murderer used a hammer. It’s in the wastebasket, Dan, where he dropped it. I don’t think anyone has touched it.”

AVERTING his eyes from that Apitifully slumped figure, the sheriff passed around the physician. Then he bent over the wastebasket by the left corner of the desk.

The wooden handle of a mechanic’s hammer protruded from the wastebasket, the head buried in the litter of envelopes and papers. Otis drew the hammer out, his jaw tightening when he saw that scraps of paper stuck to the metal ball, blood-smearred.

The wielder of the hammer had wrapped half of a handkerchief about the greasy handle. There would be no telltale fingerprints, Dan Otis knew at once, and he saw also that the half of the handkerchief that might bear a laundry mark was missing. The remaining bit of rag would be difficult to trace to an owner.

Gently he placed the hammer on the desk, and let his eyes sweep the room in a slow circuit. He seemed not to be aware of the curious stares bent on him.

There was no evidence of a struggle. No overturned chairs. Papers on the desk were in order, except the desk blotter, hideous with a spreading crimson stain.

The screen of the window directly behind the desk, and some five feet from it, swung slightly ajar. The screen opened inward on hinges. It was the same window through which the man Crumby had peered.

Otis went over to the window, and without touching the screen, peered at the sill. Then he turned and looked down at the corpse.

“Fellow stood behind Al—and hit him with the hammer,” he mumbled, as if to himself. “I reckon he never knew what hit him!”

Greg Carter, immaculate in his white linens, stood under the whirling ceiling fan. His plump face was a little white. “Sheriff, that fellow Crumby—the

mechanic! He's cleared out, Cal Mason told us! He was seen leaving the mill premises, with his tool kit!"

Otis shot a glance at the excited speaker. Then he glanced at the hammer, picked it up and turned it to view the metal head from all sides.

"I reckon a man could have come through the window," he muttered, "and maybe without Al hearing him, or anybody outside seein' him come or go."

There was the sound of angry, muttering voices from the parking lot, floating through the windows. Then came the noise of scuffling feet in the hallway and a loud knock at the door.

Otis nodded to Charlie Case. "See who that is, Charlie."

The deputy threw the door open wide. Cal Mason, plant foreman, stood there. Behind him were two stalwart workmen holding in their grasp a white-faced, cowering man in greasy coveralls.

"I reckon we've got your killer, sheriff!" the plant foreman announced. "A couple of the boys found Crumby hiding down by the railroad tracks."

"I ain't done nothin'! I didn't kill nobody!" the scared mechanic denied hoarsely. Then his distended eyes fell on the corpse at the desk and he wrenched in the hands of his captors.

Otis motioned to his deputy. Charlie Case slipped a pair of handcuffs over the struggling man's wrists, held out by his captors. Then he yanked him into the office.

"You boys better go back outside." The sheriff was looking at the factory hands. "And thanks for catchin' Crumby. Cal, you stay in here."

He crossed over and closed the door when the two men reluctantly departed. Then he turned for a hard stare at the prisoner. James Elton and little Hassel, horror in their eyes, had drawn away from

the man. Greg Carter burst out with an exclamation:

"The dirty murderer! He ought to be lynched!"

Otis whirled on him. "None of that talk, Carter! Justice will be done. You keep words like that in your throat. It wouldn't take much to stir up those men out there."

Carter glared at him. "It's a good thing," he flared, "that some of our boys caught the killer! You never would!"

Otis ignored that. He finished his scrutiny of the cowering, wretched prisoner. "How come you runnin' away from your job, Crumby?" he asked gently, but with eyes hard.

"I—because—I ain't goin' to say nothin'! Except I didn't kill nobody!"

O TIS crossed to the desk and picked up the hammer.

"This yours, Crumby?" he asked.

The mechanic stared at the hammer, gulped when he saw the bloody head. "Yes, it's mine, but I lost it this mornin', or else somebody stole it!"

Growls issued from several throats.

"How come the initials D. H. cut on this hammer head, if it's yours?" Otis demanded grimly.

"I—the fellow I bought the hammer off of cut 'em!" Crumby whined. The sheriff turned to Cal Mason.

"How long has this fellow been workin' here, Cal? Where did he come from?"

The foreman glared at the prisoner. "He's a new man, sheriff. On the payroll as Jack Crumby, and he's only been here two weeks. I needed a milljack right bad and hired him when he came along. He said he'd been working for a mill down in Mississippi."

Otis nodded, put down the hammer and pulled open the top left-hand drawer

of the desk. He stared down into the drawer, then closed it smartly and looked up to meet Elton's anxiously inquiring gaze.

"The money's gone!" Otis announced. "Old Laz Turnbull wasn't here to close his deal, was he?"

"No! He didn't show up!" Elton said. "Otis, search this man!" A trembling finger daggered at Crumby. "See if he has the money!"

"He wouldn't have it on him—if he took it." Otis shook his head. "He'd have hid it somewhere. Who stumbled onto this first, Mr. Elton?"

"I did! It wasn't thirty minutes after you left here, Otis. I came from my office to ask Ford a question. His door was closed, and that was unusual. I knocked and pushed in, and saw him like that! I yelled for Greg and he came running from his office next door. We looked at Ford and saw that he was dead. Hassel and some clerks came. Hassel went to call Dr. Parker while I tried to get you."

Presently Otis raised his eyes. He stepped to the windows and pulled both of them down tightly. "Charlie, just switch off that fan for a little," he ordered curtly. "The noise—and those men mutterin' out there—bothers me when I try to think."

His eyes astonished, the deputy snapped a wall switch and the fan slowed down. The slight sound of its motor died away. Carter uttered a short, derisive laugh.

"I don't see what you need to think about!" he said. "You've got your murderer. What's the sense of all this hokum, Otis? You're just a country sheriff, not a slick city detective!"

Otis gave him a chilling glance. Then he swung one huge leg over a corner of the desk and looked at the prisoner.

"Crumby, when I come out this mornin', to get in my car, you were foolin'

around Al Ford's car," he began mildly. "What were you lookin' for, Crumby?"

"My hammer! I'd been using it on that job, and I couldn't find it when I picked up tools!"

"You saw me comin' and you sneaked off, Crumby. Knowed who I was, maybe?"

"I—I knowed you was the sheriff."

"I thought maybe that was it." Otis drew the mimeographed letter from his pocket and glanced at it. "You're Dudley Hallowell, ain't you, Crumby? You broke jail up in Knox County, where they was holdin' you for trial on a cuttin' charge. Ain't that right?"

The prisoner swallowed hard, then nodded. "Yes, I'm Dudley Hallowell!" he muttered miserably. "But I ain't never killed nobody—nor stole any money!"

"I sort of remembered there was a circular from the Knox County sheriff in the office." Otis' eyes swept around the circle of faces turned to him. "'Bout a fellow that would look a whole lot like Crumby, as I seen him this mornin'."

HE MOPPED at his forehead with his sleeve. With the closing of the windows and the stopping of the fan, the atmosphere in the private office, cool a bit ago, was rapidly becoming as torrid as the air outside.

Greg Carter, little beads of perspiration beginning to show on his own forehead, fretted a protest.

"See here, Otis! Why not take your man down to the jail and question him? What's the big idea of cooping us in here to suffocate, with the fan off?"

"A little sweatin', Carter, won't hurt you much," Otis observed dryly. "Might take off a few pounds of whisky fat. I don't figure on holdin' anybody for long now."

He glanced at little Hassel, huddled close to James Elton.

“Mr. Hassel, you can see the big door to the hallway from your desk,” he said. “You pretty sure none of your clerks were over this way ‘bout the time Al Ford was being murdered?”

The little cashier swallowed hard. “I’m positive no one was away from the general office about that time!”

“It ain’t likely,” Otis went on musingly, “that anybody sneaked into the hall from the parkin’ lot, and come to this office, Mr. Elton, or you would have noticed a stranger, or one of the hands.” He stared at Greg Carter sternly.

“Greg, when you got your car, just after leavin’ here when I was talkin’ with Al Ford, where did you go?”

“Why—I just drove to the little store at Five Points, and bought some cigarettes. I wasn’t gone ten minutes, hardly. And when I got back I went into my office and got to work.”

“Nobody come into this office through the window, Carter,” Otis said. “There’s a coating of sawdust on the sill that hasn’t been disturbed. But you could have come in here, Carter, and nobody would have noticed, from your office next door!”

Greg Carter drew back a pace. “What the devil are you driving at, Otis? Crumby came through that window, and killed Al Ford! If it wasn’t so damned hot in here, your clowning would be funny!”

Otis moved swiftly to a position where his big body was between Carter and the door.

“I’m sayin’ you picked up Crumby’s hammer!” he said sternly. “You brought it back with you, come in here after I left and found Al alone. He thought nothin’ of your goin’ behind his desk. You killed him, Greg Carter, and stole the money!”

Gasps were audible in the room.

Dan Otis glanced down at the man’s hands, hanging at his side. “Greg—*what’s the matter with your hands? There’s blood*

on ‘em, man!”

GREG CARTER, leaping back, raised his hands and stared at their plump backs. A whistling exclamation of terror escaped his lips.

The backs of his hands were splotted with purplish red drops, not unlike blood.

He snarled a savage oath and shook his hands. The stuff splattered over his white linen suit, in spots like blood.

“You—damn you for a doddering old fool!” Greg Carter’s hand whipped to his hip pocket and out again, a small automatic in his grasp. His eyes blazed with fear and hate.

“Get out of my way!” he screamed, leveling the weapon.

Charlie Case, who could snick off the head of a turtle on a log at thirty yards without half trying, yanked a heavy revolver from a belt holster and in the same motion fired the gun.

Carter dropped the little pistol and grabbed a shattered wrist. He howled like some wounded animal.

Dan Otis grabbed him before Charlie Case could come plowing through the scattering onlookers, ducking from gunplay.

“What did you do with the money, Carter?” Otis shouted.

“I—it’s in my desk, in my office! In a tobacco humidior!” the killer screamed. “I didn’t mean to kill Al Ford, Otis! I went crazy, I guess!”

Otis struck that plump, quivering white face once, then shoved Carter at the astounded doctor.

“Fix the skunk up, doc!” he ordered grimly.

James Elton, Sheriff Dan Otis and a little, sober group were gathered in Greg Carter’s office. Next door, undertaker’s assistants were removing the body of poor Al Ford. Carter and the fugitive Hallowell

were on the way to jail, in Charlie Case's charge.

The gaunt president fingered a sheaf of bills, found in a tobacco humidor in Greg Carter's desk.

"I knew my nephew was a bit wild, and had been running over to Riverton and drifting with a fast set," he said sorrowfully.

"I'm powerful sorry, Mr. Elton!" Otis' tones were sympathetic. "I knew about his goings on, and I sort of figured he did the job—first dash."

"But how—what was the stuff on his hands? It did look like blood!" Elton shuddered.

"I did two errands for Al Ford this mornin'," Otis explained soberly. "I got the money from the bank, and a dime's worth of permanganate of potash from a drug store. Most of us old-time fishermen

always take some of the stuff along when we go to the Bottoms fishin'. It's the best stuff there is to burn out a snake bite, in case a moccasin should hit you."

Dr. Parker, his eyes wide, nodded confirmation of that.

"Al opened the box of permanganate, while I was sittin' in his office talkin' to him," Otis went on. "He spilled some of the stuff in the drawer where he put the money and papers. When I looked in there, I could see grains of the stuff on the papers. I figured the murderer, whoever he was, got some of the stuff on his hands.

"So I had to get him sweatin'. Permanganate makes an awful mess when it's wet. Hallowell and Carter both sweat plenty, when I closed up that office—but it was Greg that had those grains of guilt on him—and I had him red-handed!"