

# Detour to Murder



By

**Frank Gruber**

Author of "The Devil's Checkroom," etc.

*Postal Inspector Val Decker knew there was something phony about that roadside sign. But when he followed its directions, he didn't know he was taking a detour to murder!*

**V**AL DECKER shifted his foot from the gas throttle to the brake pedal. He brought his sedan to a complete stop and looked at the sign in the center of the paved road. A single word was painted on it in red—DETOUR—and a red arrow pointed to the left. The detour dirt road didn't look promising. It had rained heavily the night beforehand there were probably mud holes in

it.

Decker sighed, and shifting into gear, swung into the dirt road. It was worse than he'd expected. A half mile farther it petered out entirely at the banks of a swollen creek. It was then that Decker became suspicious. In his job as postal inspector for the United States Post Office Department, he was always on the alert for things which didn't add up

right. It didn't make sense that some one should mark a detour from a good paved road into a meandering, unused one that ended at a bridgeless creek.

He backed his car into the woods and managed with difficulty to turn around. His lips were tightly pressed as he started back to the main highway. Because he was looking sharply at the road ahead, he noticed something he hadn't seen before; clear tire marks that came out of the woods and headed toward the highway.

His eyes became alert, and then he saw the two cars: one, a big touring car, parked squarely in the center of the little road, facing away from Decker; the other, a sleek sedan, facing Decker.

A man stood in front of the sedan, his hands raised over his head. Facing him, their backs turned toward Decker were four men. One was going through the pockets of the man with the raised hands.

Decker braked his car to a stop and reached into the door pocket for his gun, a Smith & Wesson .38.

He had stopped the car as quietly as he could, but his brakes squeaked a little and one of the men ahead turned around. He uttered a yell, and instantly, the four men scattered. Decker saw sunlight flashing on gun metal. Then the woods reverberated to gunfire.

**D**ECKER leaned out of the sedan window and began firing carefully and methodically. It was a long range for him, more than seventy-five yards. His first shot kicked up dirt at the feet of one of the men, and his second shot staggered the man. Then a bullet smashed into Decker's windshield, and a splinter of glass struck his left cheekbone. He was dazed for a moment, but then his vision cleared and he leaned out of the sedan and fired again.

Three of the outlaws, including the one who had been wounded by Decker's bullet,

were scrambling into their touring car. The fourth had dashed for the shelter of the sleek sedan.

Decker, suddenly divining the intent of the men in the touring car, threw his auto into reverse and began backing away.

He saw the snout of the machine gun then, and dropped flat on the seat of the sedan. The machine gun chattered, and glass and splinters of wood and steel showered Decker. The killers emptied almost a complete drum of the Tommy-gun, then suddenly stopped shooting.

Decker risked a peek up and saw that the car was driving away. So was the sleek sedan, which had been turned around. A body lay huddled at the side of the road—the man the four had held up. Decker was sure that none of his own bullets had struck the man.

Decker's motor stalled. Desperately he stepped on the starter. The result was a cough or two and then silence. The machine-gun bullets had done things to the motor.

The touring car was disappearing around a turn in the narrow road. Evidently the killers didn't care if they had slain Decker or not; or perhaps they didn't care to remain in that vicinity. The terrific shooting could easily have been heard out on the concrete highway.

He sprang from his car and then ran toward the driver of the sleek sedan. He did not have to even stoop to see that the man was dead. A bullet had gone through his head and blown his brains out.

Decker grimaced in horror and turned away. He looked back at his sedan, shook his head and then started for the highway at a dog-trot. He reached it without a mishap. The first thing he saw was the "detour" sign, tossed to the side of the road.

Decker's forehead wrinkled. Part of the plot was clear enough: the killers had themselves put up the detour sign with the intention of detouring a car or cars. It must have been one car because Decker himself had

taken the detour first, and the killers, whose car had been hidden among the trees down the side road—had let him pass.

They hadn't let the second car pass, however. Why? ... Because they wanted to steal a car? No, Decker's sedan was as expensive as the other they had taken. The killers must have known that this particular car was due along this highway.

Decker heard the whine of tires and saw an auto approaching. He stepped in the middle of the highway and waved his .38. Tires screeched on the pavement, and the car bumped to a stop within a dozen feet of Decker.

Decker saw a frightened face behind the windshield as he walked up to the car. "I'm a government man," he told the youth who was driving the car. "Something's just happened here in the woods and I want you to drive to the first farmhouse and put in a phone call there for the state police."

The youth sobbed in relief. "Sure, sure, Mister!" He meshed his gears and the car leaped ahead.

**T**HREE HOURS later Val Decker made his report to the chief of the Chicago division. "The thing's a mystery to me; they laid that trap for the sole purpose of killing that man, I'm sure. They frisked him, but they didn't take his money. There was almost a hundred dollars on him."

"In a wallet?" asked Piper, the division chief.

"No, he didn't have a wallet. Well, he might have had one, but if so, the killers took it. There was no identification on him, except his initials, L. B., on his belt buckle; and that doesn't give the police much to go on."

"You didn't get the license numbers?"

"Of the killers' car, yes. Stolen plates. The other car was too far away for me to make out the numbers. Anyway, things happened too fast for me to get that."

The chief shook his head. "Well, that matter is in the hands of the state police. Let them worry. We've got our own troubles. That's why I sent for you. You're taking the crack Northwest Special at five this afternoon."

"How far—the Twin Cities?"

"I don't know. That depends. You see, the Federal Reserve bank is sending out a very large quantity of currency to two or three banks in North Dakota and Montana. It's being sent by registered mail, and—well, frankly, I think there's going to be an attempt to take that money from the train."

"Tip?"

"No—not exactly. But two days ago a clerk of the Federal Reserve bank was found in an alley on the North Side. There were burns on the soles of his feet—cigarette burns. And his body looked as if it had been pretty well worked over with a rubber hose."

Decker's eyes narrowed. "Some one forced information out of him and then killed him?"

"That's about the size of it. Len Macy, Johnny Phillips' chief lieutenant, was seen in Chicago two days ago. That means Phillips is here, too. So Lobdell and Billingsly will be in the mail car, working as regular clerks. You're not known at this office, and if anyone has spotted our men, they won't know you. That's why I want you to ride on the train as a passenger. What I've told you is all that we know or suspect, but still—with more than a half million dollars at stake, we can't take a chance."

**P**OSTAL INSPECTOR DECKER stood by the train gate, with a cow-skin bag at his feet, ten minutes before the gate opened. He smoked a huge cigar and studied a time-table. He continued to smoke and peruse the time-table after the gate opened. He scrutinized every person who passed through to the train, and he was the last one through the gate.

He made the observation platform when the train was already moving. He shook his head and grinned widely as he passed through the car.

“Almost missed her,” he said affably to several men in the car.

Decker found the porter and had him carry his bag through to his Pullman compartment, where he asked: “How soon will the dining car be open?”

“Open now, sir. First call goin’ through in a minute.”

The postal inspector was the first person in the dining car, and took a place at the farthest table on the right side, a two-place table. He seated himself facing the car and came bluntly to the point with his waiter.

“Look, George,” he said, “I like to take my time about eating, and I like to watch people. So don’t try to rush me away from this table. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if I found a couple of dollars in my pocket if you leave me be.”

“Yas, suh,” beamed the darky.

Decker lingered an hour and a half over the dinner. He studied more than fifty diners during that time. It availed him nothing; everyone seemed to be just what he or she looked like, casual travelers.

Decker was sipping leisurely at his coffee when the train stopped. He looked out of the window and saw that they were in the middle of a rural section. There wasn’t even a farmhouse in sight. He began wondering why the train had stopped so far from a town. He didn’t have long to wonder, for the rattling of a machine gun suddenly split the evening air. Decker gasped and sprang from his chair. He rushed to the door of the dining car, knocking over a waiter in his haste.

He sprang to the vestibule. The side door of course was locked, and Decker did not know exactly how to manipulate the levers to open it.

“What’s up?” asked a voice behind

from a hatless man of about thirty-five.

“I don’t know,” Decker answered. “But I’ll swear that was a machine gun.”

Then the gun outside chattered again.

“How the hell do you open these doors?” exclaimed Decker.

The other reached past Decker and fumbled with a lever. The door remained closed. Fortunately a brake-man came along then. He was white-faced and scared.

“Holdup,” he whispered. “Better not go outside.”

“Oh, come,” snorted the hatless passenger. “They don’t have train holdups these days.”

“The hell they don’t!” said Decker. “Here, brakeman, open that door.”

The brakeman recoiled. “Gosh, mister...!”

Decker lost his patience. He jerked out his gun and pointed it at the brakeman. “Open up that door, I said!”

The brakeman lifted up the floorboard covering the stairs, touched a lever and the door sprang open.

Decker leaped down to the ground and scurried in between the two cars. From there he peeked out toward the engine.

A half dozen men were standing beside the mail car, rifles and machine guns in their hands. A little farther beyond, were several more men: the engineer, the fireman and two armed members of the gang.

“Open up, or we’ll dynamite!” roared one of the men by the mail car. The command was obviously intended for the mail clerks, who had barricaded themselves inside the car.

The answer came in the form of a spray of machine-gun bullets. The postal men inside the car—Lobdell and Billingsly—were not going to surrender. The bandits scattered to the engine, and the car behind the mail car, where they were safe from the machine gun in the mail car that could sweep only the side of the track.

Decker remained crouched between the two cars for a moment. His duty was clear, but the odds were overwhelming—at least a dozen men in the bandit gang, and they were far from a town.

Then the hatless passenger dropped down beside Decker. He held a .32 automatic in his fist.

“Let them have it,” he said.

“Perhaps we’d better go around the other side and....” cautioned Decker.

The other man opened fire on the bandits. Standing clearly in the open, he fired twice. Decker gasped at the audacity of the man, started to come out from the concealment of the protecting car. Then the passenger turned suddenly and thrust his automatic almost into Decker’s face.

Decker fell back in horror. Wildly he stuck out his own gun. There was an explosion, and a thunderbolt seemed to explode on Decker’s head.

**V**AL DECKER awoke and looked stupidly at a forest of trousered legs for a moment, and then when things penetrated his sluggish senses, raised his eyes. He saw a ring of faces, and everything came back to him with a rush.

“What happened?” he groaned and sat up.

A man in a gold-braided uniform shook his head sadly. “They dynamited the mail car.”

The man who had shot Decker pushed through the fringe of men. Decker gasped: “You—you shot me!”

The other’s face creased. “I know—I thought you were one of them. You pulled a gun and seemed so eager to get off the train to join them that I— Hell, how was I to know you were a postal inspector?”

Decker clasped an involuntary hand to his breast pocket.

The conductor coughed and held out

Decker’s wallet. “We, ah, went through your clothes and found your credentials. Mr. Benton made a perfectly natural mistake. You should have told him who you were.”

Decker took his wallet and shoved it into his breast pocket. “Perhaps I should.” He touched a finger to his throbbing temple and brought it away sticky with blood.

“Well, you saw my credentials,” he said to the man called Benton. “Now, let’s see yours.”

Benton grinned wryly, took out a wallet and showed the identification card in it to Decker.

Decker pursed his lips. “Louis Benton, and you’re a vice president of this road?”

Benton nodded. “That’s why I was suspicious of you. I couldn’t understand, an ordinary passenger wanting to shoot things out with bandits!”

Decker grimaced. “They got away with the money, I suppose?”

Benton nodded. “A rather large sum, I’m told.”

“More than a half million—” Decker broke off and a cold feather slithered up his spine. “The—the clerks?”

The conductor spread out his hands. “Killed—four of them. They never had a chance.”

Decker swore roundly. “And the killers made a clean getaway?”

“Not clean.” Benton shook his head. “A mail clerk got one of the bandits!”

“Where is he?”

The circle of men opened, and Decker was able to see the mail car. The door hung by a hinge near where several feet of one side of the car had been ripped by the explosion. On the ground close to it lay a huddled body.

Decker strode grimly toward it, the conductor and the train crew following. Decker drew in his breath softly as he looked down at the dead man. He had seen that face before—that same day, on a lonely detour

south of Chicago. It was one of the four men who had held up the driver of the sedan, killed him and then riddled Decker's own sedan.

**R**ETURNING to the city by a swift automobile that evening, Val Decker preceded by only a few minutes a special hearse that carried the bodies of the slain postal men and the killer, traveling side-by-side in death.

The bodies of the murdered postal heroes were taken to a funeral home, but the corpse of the killer was delivered to division headquarters, and there a staff of laboratory men and technicians got busy. They worked practically the entire night, and by six in the morning were ready for Decker and Piper who had remained in the office and kept awake with black coffee.

"What'd you find?" Chief Piper asked eagerly.

"That he lived for some time on or near the Mississippi River. His shoes had a large quantity of dried mud on them; black mud mixed with bits of red loam, such as is found in varying quantities anywhere between St. Paul and St. Louis. I hardly think he touched the Mississippi any farther down."

Decker groaned. "That's a distance of six or seven hundred miles. Can't you narrow it more?"

"Of course, that was only the beginning. Cedar and pine pollen in his clothes, a bit of poplar—that brings it up farther, probably above Dubuque."

"That's better," interposed Chief Piper, "but even that's too much. Anything that would indicate his occupation, for example?"

"I worried about that for some time," replied the technician. "The man's hands are very calloused, much more so than you'd expect of a criminal who probably hadn't done much physical labor recently. At first I thought he might have lived on a farm where he had chopped wood a great deal. But the

calluses don't match because they run not only over the entire palms but down around the inner edge of the hands. Only one kind of work would callus hands like that—rowing a boat."

"Rowing!" ejaculated Decker. "You put the man near the Mississippi, and now you say he rowed a boat. I'll bet he lived on one of the islands."

"I was getting to that," smiled the technician. "The pollen and mud and everything showed more than ordinary traces of water. And now the best of all—I found more than a dozen hairs from Chinchilla rabbits on the clothing not only in the trousers, but also in the man's socks, and even his shoes. There must be quite a few rabbits around where he's been living."

Decker and Piper looked at each other. "Rabbits," said Piper. "Why would a man like this killer raise rabbits?"

"Furs and food," Decker replied. "I was reading' in a magazine of how prime Chinchilla rabbit furs brought two dollars and up. And there's quite a market for tame rabbit meat in some sections."

"Chicken feed," scoffed Piper. "The man's in on a half-million-dollar steal, and he raises rabbits!"

"I didn't say he raised them," replied Decker. "Look at it this way: Johnny Phillips has been hiding out for a long time, his last job was pulled six months ago, and he made a clean getaway—which means he has an ideal hideout. Why not an island in the Mississippi where some one raises rabbits? Rabbits of all things; that's kid stuff, and you'd never expect to find Johnny Phillips around a rabbit farm. At least no clever policeman would. I'm not clever, and I'm willing to believe what my eyes see. I say the money and most of the gang is on this rabbit island in the Mississippi right now."

"Between Dubuque and St. Paul—three hundred miles. You going to row a boat

up and down the river?"

Decker looked at Piper in surprise. "Yes, I'll use a boat—a flying boat."

Piper said: "Good—you can cover that whole stretch in less than two hours." He caught up a phone. In two minutes he was talking to a hydroplane pilot. "You take off in a half hour, Decker," he snapped when he hung up.

"Fine, while I get some things ready call this number and ask this question." Decker shoved a slip of paper under the chief's eyes, on: which he had penciled a few words.

Piper's eyes widened. "Hmmm," he said.

**T**HE hydroplane taxied into Lake Michigan and took the air like a giant bird. The plane flew straight out into the lake until it had gained more than a thousand feet of altitude, then swung around and headed due west.

It was about a hundred and seventy miles by air to the Mississippi. The plane made it in two minutes under an hour.

"Now the fun begins," shouted the pilot as he turned the plane along the river's course. He dropped down to five hundred feet.

"Don't circle any of the islands," Decker cautioned. "That would be a give-away. Just fly casually over them seeking out the buildings. If I see anything that looks like rabbit hutches, I'll tell you and we'll come down a mile or two beyond the island and give it a closer once-over."

They passed over the first islands around Prairie du Chien, a series of low, marshy islands. The plane soared over them, and Decker sighed. "No rabbit hutches there."

Ten minutes after leaving Prairie du Chien, the hydroplane crossed another island—a small one of about five acres, lying a third of a mile from the Wisconsin shore.

There was a large white frame house on this island. Decker studied the

outbuildings, and exclaimed:

"There's a couple of long, narrow buildings down there that I'll bet are rabbit hutches!"

The pilot kept the plane straight up the river. Two miles past the island he began to settle down to the water; but Decker, seeing a village a half mile farther on directed him to continue to it. The pilot brought the plane down on the water with hardly a splash, then taxied up to a small dock.

Decker climbed out. "Fly over the island in half an hour. If I wave at you, you'll know it's a dud and can come down and pick me up. But if I don't wave, you'd better get some help—plenty of it."

The pilot nodded, and Decker turned to the village. A number of people had already seen the plane and were gathered at the dock.

"Can I rent a motor boat, here?" Decker asked of the crowd at large.

A middle-aged man with snuff on his chin stepped out of the crowd. "I got a boat here with one of them outboard motors," he volunteered.

Three minutes later, the boat, containing Decker and the snuff-user, was roaring down the river.

"Folks on that there island ain't so sociable," the boatman volunteered.

"No? How many people are on the island?"

"That I don't know. They don't seem to like visitors, so if you're gonna be on the island a bit, I'd just as lief come back for you, mister."

There was a tiny pier at the edge of the island. The boatman ran the small boat to the edge of the pier, and when Decker climbed out, he made off hastily.

Decker grinned and turned toward the big house about a hundred yards away. A lean, saturnine man was coming down to the pier from the house.

"Hello, there," said Decker. "I heard

you had some rabbits and I thought I'd come to see them."

"See them?" grunted the saturnine one. "This ain't no zoo."

"What I mean," said Decker, "was that I'm looking for some healthy Chinchilla breeding stock."

"Chinchillas? I ain't got no Chinchillas," snorted the islander. "Nothin' but New Zealand Whites."

"New Zealand Whites!" exclaimed Decker. "Why, that's fine. I raise those, and I'm looking for a pair of breeding males."

"Sorry, but we ain't got any to sell," grunted the man.

"Let me look at them, anyway. If they're as good as I think they might be, I may be able to persuade you to sell me a couple."

The rabbit farmer scowled, but turned toward the house. Decker followed him to the two long rabbit hutches behind it. He looked at them and felt a keen sense of disappointment. They were New Zealand Whites, every one of them. But the longer he looked at the two hutches, the more puzzled he became.

The hutches were divided into series of compartments. If each compartment had contained only one rabbit, there should have been sixty or seventy in the two hutches. There weren't; in fact, there were only six rabbits in one hutch and eight in the other. And the rabbits were all sizes and ages.

"You see," said the rabbit man, "I ain't got hardly enough for myself, let alone sell any. 'Tain't worth your while to stick around."

Val Decker stooped and touched the wire netting at his feet. He brought his fingers up and looked at the rabbit man. "If you have only New Zealand Whites, how come these Chinchilla hairs are all over the place?"

The rabbit raiser gasped and took a step back. "Who—what're you doing here?"

"I think you know," said Decker.

"All right, copper," said a loud voice

from the house. "Just stand right where you're at."

Inspector Decker froze. The rabbit raiser made a half circle around him and began patting his pockets from behind. He lifted Decker's .38, then stepped back.

"Turn around now," ordered the man who had called him a cop.

"Hello, Benton," he said.

LOUIS BENTON, who had posed as the vice president of the railroad, smiled thinly at Decker.

"So you guessed I was Johnny Phillips!"

"Not much guessing," replied Decker. "I could have arrested you right after the train holdup, but that wouldn't have got back the half million—or the rest of the gang."

Johnny Phillips' eyes flashed. "And you think you'll do that now? We'll take that up in a minute .... How did you know who I was?"

"You tried to cover up shooting me by claiming you didn't know I was a postal inspector. I might have believed you if you'd been able to open that train door a few minutes before. That struck me as a colossal piece of ignorance on the part of a railroad man. This morning I called up the railroad office and asked if their vice president had ever been a worker. They told me he'd worked his way up from being a switchman."

Johnny Phillips shook his head. "A man can't think of everything. I—I anticipated you on the rabbits, though."

"Yes, you figured we'd find hairs on that man of yours who was killed, and you weren't sure just how far that clue would take us. So you tried to forestall us by disposing of the Chinchilla rabbits over-night and bringing in New Zealand Whites. You might have made that stick if you'd had time to tear down the old fences and hutches and put up new ones—ones that didn't have Chinchilla hairs

stuck all over them.”

Johnny Phillips sighed. “Decker, you’re too smart. C’mon in the house.”

Under the threat of the guns, Decker entered the house. Inside were a half dozen additional members of the mail-robbery gang, including two more who had killed the real Louis Benton on the detour the day before, in order to obtain his credentials.

The mail robbers were openly hostile to Decker. “Let’s bump him and beat it out of here,” one of them snarled. “That plane worries me,” said Phillips. “If I’d been pulling this stunt I’d have had it come back in a little while.”

“Then what’re we waiting for?” cried another of the men. “Give it to this copper and let’s scam!”

Johnny Phillips looked thoughtfully at Decker. “We might,” he said, slowly, “use this man as a hostage. I—”

He stopped and cocked his head to one side in a listening attitude. Decker heard it too—the droning of an airplane motor.

“What’s your signal to him?” demanded Johnny Phillips.

Decker did not answer. His ears had heard another noise, an irregular thumping. It came from upstairs, the attic of the farmhouse. The noise was not loud, but it was continuous. His forehead creased. The missing rabbits, of course.

“What’s your signal?” Johnny Phillips snarled.

Decker looked at the door of a stairway leading to the attic. “This,” he said suddenly. His hand snaked out and tore his gun from the hand of the rabbit farmer who was standing nearest him.

The move surprised everyone in the room and gave Decker a moment’s grace. He leaped for the door, tore it open with one hand and sprang up the flight of stairs. Guns exploded behind him.

Down below he heard some one yell in

consternation. The yell was punctuated by a rabbit squeal. The animals hadn’t liked the semi-dark of the attic, and the opening of the stair door showed them light and they began rushing to it.

A bullet plunked into the stairway at Decker’s feet and inspired him to make a last frantic leap. He reached the top of the staircase, stepped on another squealing rabbit, and tripped to his knees.

Decker rolled over and away from the stairs. Down below he heard furious swearing. The rabbits were charging down the stairs in such large numbers now that they prevented the enraged bandits from coming up.

Johnny Phillips hadn’t drowned all those rabbits in the river, for the bodies would have floated downstream. And the animals had unwittingly aided Decker. But the exodus of the rabbits was almost completed. The bandits came charging up the stairs.

**A** HEAD poked up, and Decker sent a bullet through it. The killer tumbled back into the arms of his pals.

No heads appeared for a moment, and then Johnny Phillips’ voice came up to Decker: “You’ve only got four-five bullets left, Decker. You can’t pick us all off.”

“Maybe not,” said Decker grimly. “But I can get most of you, one at a time. Will you come up next?”

“We’ll burn the house down!”

“I’d just as soon be burned as shot,” Decker replied.

A couple of bullets came up the staircase. Decker remained where he was. There was more arguing on the stairs; then suddenly Decker heard the sound of retreating footsteps. He heard, too, the heavy roar of the hydroplane motor, almost directly over the island now.

Men rushed about downstairs, and Decker heard doors opening. Then the house below became strangely quiet. Decker left his

beam and tip-toed to a small window in the front of the attic. He looked out and saw the bandits rushing to the waterfront. There were two rowboats tied there.

He saw the men piling into the boats, saw them shove off. Decker swore under his breath. Johnny Phillips was standing up in one of the boats, gripping a big suitcase.

Then Decker saw a huge shadow skim over the ground. He looked up—and then the machine gun of the aviator burst out.

Decker saw bullets kicking up the water, saw the little spouts rush toward the rowboats, pass on .... Then one of the boats was filling with water and there were two or three men in the river. Decker poked his automatic through the glass window, leveled it

at the second boat and took careful aim.

Two men were rowing frantically. Decker squeezed the trigger, and one of the men stood up and pitched sideways into the water. Decker fired again, but saw the bullet kick up water. He aimed a third time—and then the hydroplane came back. Water spouts kicked up again. The men pitched overboard.

That was all there was to it. Three minutes later, the hydroplane settled down on the water and taxied up to the little wharf. A wounded bandit had dragged himself there, but he was under the guard of Decker by then.

The rest of the bandits were gone, with the river. The suitcase full of money had fallen out of the boat, but was easily rescued. The money would be only water-soaked ....