

# College for Crooks



*Big Shorty swung Denver up and toppled him in the barrel.*

**By Tom Marvin**

*Phil Denver traced a sharp-fingered brat's homework to a college for crime. But instead of handing out lock-up vacations, he found himself scheduled as the star subject in the murder class.*

**D**ETEKTIVE PHIL DENVER, home from his tour, drew the thirty-eight from its leather and, standing on a hassock in the bedroom, carefully dropped the gun into the

chandelier that hung from the ceiling.

The little exploratory fingers of his son would never reach it there. In the dining room, Denver filched a plum from the basket and asked

his wife: "Any messages for me, Mary?"

She clapped her hand guiltily to her mouth.

"I forgot! Lieutenant Fargo just phoned for you to meet him at the R. and T. depot right away. It's about the Bantams."

Denver flung the plum back into the basket.

"Dammit, Mary! That'll be something important!" He returned hurriedly to the bedroom and stretched for his pistol.

Mary followed him like a clucking hen. "But, Phil, I wanted you to speak to Malcolm. He's been reading the telephone book again all day. Is that any way for a seven-year-old boy to spend a Saturday?"

"Mary, it ain't normal! That kid should be outdoors, climbing the peach tree or something. What's sharp in the phone book?"

Hastily shrugging into his coat, Denver stepped into his son's room and shook a finger at the boy. "Put that fat book away, Squirt, and go outdoors. I want you healthy, understand?"

"I ketch, Pop," the kid said. He was a blond tad with a front tooth missing in his agreeable grin. He slipped the telephone book back into his bookcase and got up from his kindergarten chair.

"What you reading the phone book for, Squirt?"

"I like to look up funny names, Pop. I found Handy Andy and Sillee Sally."

"The phone book lists names backwards, kid," Denver explained. "That's Andy Handy and Sally Sillee. You get outdoors in the sun and fight some kids or something, you hear?"

"I ketch, Pop." The Squirt's tooth-shy grin flickered. Obediently he went outside to look for a sparmate.

Denver went out to his car. His wife trailed him, saying, "Bring back a quart of buttermilk, Phil."

Mary, I got business with the toughest little gang in town and you want me to pick up some buttermilk!"

"But it'll only take you a minute to remember buttermilk!"

"I ketch," Denver said patiently. He headed his car downtown for the R. and T. station.

In plainclothes, Lieutenant Fargo was reading the headlines on the lobby newsstand. "You took your sweet time," he complained. "I think I got a line here on the Bantams."

"What's that to me?" Denver demanded. "I'm working for homicide, not running down adolescent dips and purse snatchers."

"The dips branched out, Denver." Lieutenant Fargo pointed to a headline: "*Bantams Rob Pawnshop.*"

"It still ain't homicide, lieutenant."

"One of these days it will be, Denver. These kids are stealing the socks off the town. Next they'll throw a gun on a currency exchange or a tavern on payday. Somebody will get plugged. Maybe a cop."

The lieutenant's stubby forefinger thumped Denver's chest.

"Phil, these aren't just kids. Some smart guy is riding herd on 'em. They'll work up to jewelry or maybe banks. They've been responsible for most of the petty crime in this town for six months. So far, it's petty. But the newspapers are bound to start running editorials. And it's time we grabbed them."

"What's your lead here?" Denver asked.

"Call it more of a hunch." The lieutenant nodded toward the station waiting room. "There's a kid sitting in there. He'd got a gladstone bag and he don't look kosher. I'm going to frisk him. We'll meet you in the gent's room."

Denver went through the swinging door and began to wash his hands leisurely and presently Fargo came in with the kid. Fargo and Denver appeared not to recognize each other. The kid was about eighteen years old, and he wasn't a greener. His blue eyes were as brazen as a three-time loser's and his jaws missed not a chomp on his chewing gum.

**T**HE lieutenant told the kid to stand hitched, then took his Gladstone over to the washstand, under the lights. Casually blotting his hands, Denver could see into hit.

It contained shirts, underwear, socks. But expertly concealed in the lining was a chamois mask.

Suddenly Denver felt warmly tense and eager. But Marty Fargo's wise old eyes flashed him the blanks and they both pretended they hadn't detected the mask. The lieutenant handed back the bag and told the kid to beat it. Grinning, the kid shuffled out of the washroom.

"Now," said Fargo, "we bait the minnow to

catch the bass. He knows I'm a cop, but he doesn't know you are. Get started."

Someone had coached the kid how to shake a tail. Denver followed him through a five and ten store, where the kid swirled around among the Saturday afternoon shoppers. Crossing the street, the kid went into a department store and rode the elevators, and finally he scooted out a side door and hopped into a maroon sedan parked there.

An older man, at the wheel, pulled the sedan quickly out into traffic. Denver hesitated. His own car was back at the R. and T. depot, but the coupe parked behind the maroon sedan was just starting up. The woman driving it was alone and Denver thrust his head inside and showed her his shield.

"Police business, madam," he said. "Please take after that red bus."

She was a cool blonde with nice gray eyes and she needed a moment to shake off her surprise. Then she smiled, as she understood it, and said in an amused satiny voice:

"It's happened at last. I've always wanted an officer to stop me and say, 'Follow that car!'"

"Well, follow it," Denver said, "or we're shook."

Putting her shopping bundles on the floor between his brogans, Denver sat back and they set sail. The blonde wore a rich gardenia scent and on her ring finger a sizeable hunk of ice. Even Denver could tell that her clothes were quietly upper-crust. Denver carefully directing, they tagged the maroon car north to the wholesale district, where it disappeared into an alley. Denver got out.

"Far as I go, madam. Many thanks."

"What's it all about, officer?"

"Watch your local newspaper. So long."

"Goodbye, and best of luck."

Hugging the building line, Denver went down the cobblestoned alley until he saw the maroon car nosed up to a loading platform. He nudged open the warehouse door with his gun and stepped into a cubbyhole of an office that reeked of moulting bananas and roasting coffee, as warehouses do.

He moved through the office and along a narrow corridor toward voices murmuring in a rear room and, standing in shadow, watched the kid and the man who had driven the sedan. The kid was loading a box onto a handtruck. The man

sitting on an orange crate had a puffy face and lizardlike eyes. Somehow he was managing to smoke a cigar, chew gum and drink a bottle of beer, and, sitting there, he seemed enormous, wide-beamed, thick-chested, heavy-shouldered.

But then the man stood up. And suddenly he was a shrimp.

He stood no more than five feet three. His legs were stunted; he was mostly gigantic torso with hardly any underpinning. The body of a Hercules, the legs of Tom Thumb.

"Don't get in a huff, Big Shorty," the kid was saying. "I knew where to meet you, all right. I just hung around the depot looking for a sucker."

"Small time!" Big Shorty snapped. "You been taught better than to lift goods in a depot. They're filthy with plainclothes. Lace ain't going to like this."

His voice was a foghorn, rumbling out of his squat body in ludicrous contrast, like a lion's roar from a marionette.

Denver slipped into the room and said mildly: "Stand still."

They froze in their postures, and the sawed-off giant's knotty hands clenched on his beer bottle and his cigar. The kid stiffened too, but he continued placidly chewing his gum.

Denver stepped sideways to the box that the kid had boosted on the handtruck and kicked it open. It was half filled with trinkets and jewelry, hard cash and folding money, things that women might carry in their handbags or men in their wallets or pawnshops and in their vaults. Bantam boodle.

"Let's go see a man," Denver said, "Soup's on for you guys."

**B**EHIND him a whisper of a step sounded in the dark corridor. Denver made a warning gesture at Big Shorty and the kid and catfooted behind the door. He shifted the thirty-eight to his left hand as the steps continued and, timing it carefully, reached out and grabbed. He clutched something soft and yielding and scented. He clutched his beautiful blonde chauffeur. She squeaked and bit his arm.

"Damn nose people," Denver said testily. "Couldn't you wait to read about it in the newspaper?"

Keeping Big Shorty within range, Denver

untangled himself from the blonde and retrieved her handbag from the floor, an expensive bag with a monogram V and A intertwined, while she straightened her hat above her lovely grey eyes. A tremor in Big Shorty's frame seemed to telegraph an idea of taking advantage of this interruption, so Denver pushed the blonde behind him protectively and wagged his gun loose-wristed threateningly.

The blonde searched in her bag until she found a pearl-handled thirty-two. She pressed it hard against the curve of Denver's back.

"The items a woman will tote in her kit," Denver said. "What you fixing to do with that?"

"Shoot you five times," the blonde woman said "if you move. So don't move, copper. Shorty, take his gun."

With a muzzle suggestively against his spine, Denver knew better than to twitch. The gnomish Shorty grinned, his reptilian eyes crinkling; he came up warily on Denver's flank and pocketed Denver's weapon.

"Thanks, Lace," he rumbled.

"You triple fool!" The woman's voice snapped over Denver's shoulder. "Now this hideout is spoiled! And I just paid another month's rent."

Her voice spat sideways at the kid:

"Gus, can't you tell when a cop is tailing you? The minute you're outside alone you forget everything you've been taught."

"Aw, Lace," the kid muttered through his chewing gum.

The pattern began to take shape in Denver's mind. The blonde is a fagin. Lieutenant Fargo better know about this. The blonde is the chief. She instructs and directs the Bantams. Big Shorty gives her a hand. But Lace is the boss; she teaches them their weasel tricks, passes out their assignment. Her coupe was parked behind Big Shorty because it was a meet. And I had to hail her. Lace rules the roost here. Fargo better know about this . . .

Denver said: "You got a cozy little thieves' college here, Lace. We looked everywhere for your campus. Good old Steal U Blind. But ain't Big Shorty a trifle old for college? One of your advanced students, I presume?"

"He's the dean of men," the blonde said. "Tie up the copper, dean."

The hulking pigmy snickered and began to

knot Denver in some half-inch cord.

"Don't underestimate Gus, either, copper." The blonde nodded at the gum-chewing kid. "He can make change in your pocket for a nickel without a jingle."

"Where do you recruit these kids, Lace?" Denver's hands were being enthusiastically trussed.

"You never lived in the slums, copper." Her voice turned bitter. "I did. We find these brats in ash boxes and garbage cans. I have five of them working now and they're doing all right. Or wouldn't the department agree?"

"It's a one-way road, Lace. You know where it leads?"

"It leads to the right side of the tracks!" Her grey eyes turned brooding; her throaty voice sharpened and the tone fitted neatly with the thirty-two in her hand; "I found that out, copper. I'll never live four people in one room again. I'll never sleep on a fire escape in summer again. No more bread crusts out of slop pails. I'll die first!"

"You might, at that," Denver agreed. They had him knotted expertly with the cord now.

"In the barrel with him, Shorty," Lace directed.

The gnome dragged Denver to a huge vat that stood in a corner of the warehouse. A gag was wedged in Denver's mouth and the powerful midget swung him up and toppled him inside.

"Let the copper stay in that barrel," Lace directed, She added meaningly: "Temporarily."

**T**HE VAT smelled of salt water. Crouched in it, Denver heard them trundle the boxful of trinkets out to the cars, a door slammed, the car drove away.

They'll be back, he thought, and I'm not going to enjoy the wait. His legs were cramped; his bonds wouldn't budge. It was silent in the huge warehouse, except for a rat gnawing somewhere, a not very comforting sound. Looking up, Denver could see crates and boxes stacked toward the high ceiling, in which a dirty skylight was set.

The gnawing worked around closer to him and he wondered what the rat would think if it looked into the barrel and saw Detective Phil Denver. My, what a big herring! the rat would think.

The rat stopped chewing. It had heard the sound first, a careful tread in the corridor. Torchlight whisked across the ceiling over the skylight, and Denver, guessing it was a night watchman, stamped his heel against the vat side. The steps approached and the flashlight blazed down on him.

“Good day to you,” Lieutenant Marty Fargo said. “How’s the weather down there?”

Denver cursed around his gag. It doesn’t help your chances of promotion to have the lieutenant find you loitering in a pickle barrel. Fargo pushed the vat on its side and hauled Denver out and unhitched him.

“I’ve been in more damned warehouses,” Fargo said plaintively, “looking for you. I tailed you out this way, but I lost you outside somewhere.”

“Get me a gun.” Denver massaged his wrists. “They’re coming back to take care of me.”

“An officer ain’t supposed to lose his gun. Now, let’s give this place a quick one-two.”

Fargo swept his torch along the line of crates and went nosing down the aisle they formed. Denver looked up and saw a patch of stars in one corner of the dingy skylight, and it struck him that the stars hadn’t been there earlier. Someone on the roof had opened a pane.

“Lieutenant!”

Denver’s yell boomed through the warehouse too late. From the ceiling a heavy box hurtled down at the target made by Fargo’s torch. The box burst open on Fargo’s hat. The lieutenant dropped and rolled over, and in an automatic extension of the same, motion he lifted his gun and blew three shots skyward. They only ventilated the bleary skylight.

Dragging himself erect, Fargo leaned fastidiously over a crate and regurgitated with projectile force. That could mean a skull fracture, Denver thought.

Denver caught Fargo as he buckled.

“What a way,” said Marty Fargo wearily, “to go. A gang of kids. Bantams . . . it’s homicide’s job now, Denver.”

The lieutenant’s grey head wobbled on his reedy neck and Denver eased him to the floor. He took Fargo’s gun and whistle and ran outside and tooted like the Queen Mary. A harness cop came pounding down the alley.

“Lieutenant Fargo is dead inside there,” Denver said. “I’m going up on the roof.”

**D**ENVER got home three days later. “Did you remember the buttermilk?” Mary asked as she kissed him.

“It’s in the car. I bought it somewhere along the way, Swedetown.”

“Did you go clear to Swedetown?”

“Mary, I’ve been everywhere. We turned the whole state upside down and we still haven’t got a line on them. Where’s the Squirt?”

“Malcolm is in bed,” Mary said, “with a broken collarbone. Phil Denver, honestly, sometimes I get so provoked at you!”

“I need a bath. What did I do now?”

“You told him to put the telephone book away and go outdoors and fight with some kids. Remember?”

“I ketch,” Denver said.

“Well, go ask him how his arm feels.”

The boy was sitting up, reading the telephone book. Denver ruffled his son’s hair awkwardly. “Did you lick the other guy, Squirt?”

“I’ll lay for him when my arm heals up, Pop.”

“What’s new in the phone book?”

“I found some swell funny names, Pop. Here’s a man named Rabbit Jack.”

“That’s Jack Rabbit. What else looks good for today?”

“Well, there’s Grundy Monday and Snow Ball and Sky Hy.”

“Put the book away and rest a while, Squirt.”

“I ketch.” The boy dropped the book on his night table.

Denver showered and caught forty uninterrupted winks of sleep. Over wheatcakes he told Mary of his brush with the Bantams.

“Imagine that blonde!” he said bitterly. “Getting me dumped in a pickle barrel! Tied and skewered!”

“My, my,” Mary clucked sympathetically. “How was her dress made?”

“It was short. Or maybe her legs were just long. Mary, that Lace woman is dangerous. She’s a little off balance in the noggin, too.”

“How do you know, Phil?”

“From the things she told me about herself, and things I can guess. Look, here’s a woman who

spent her childhood in the slums. She was always hungry. Never had decent clothes. Likely her old man was a rumpot and her mother died young. They lived four people in just one room, in a crummy tenement. Maybe she never even saw anything growing, a tree or flowers. She hated cops, she got to be deathly afraid of poverty. She'd rather die than go back to that life."

"Your coffee's getting cold, Phil."

"But now Lace has money. Crooked money. Her clothes are the best, her hair, her car have class. She even educated her voice. She wears fifty-buck perfume and a sparkler big as a nut. Even her gat has a pearl handle."

"That's nice," Mary said.

"Mary, if you were starving poor and suddenly you had all the money you wanted, what would you do?"

"I'd get a pedicure," Mary said promptly. "I'd buy a house. I'd hire a colored mammy to do my work. And once a week, regular, I'd eat at the toniest restaurant in town."

"Only once a week? When you got all this dough?"

"Just once a week." Mary was firm. "So the novelty wouldn't wear off. On Monday nights. That's washday now, but if I was rich I wouldn't have any washing to do on Mondays."

Denver put down his coffee cup.

"This week you send the wash to a laundry, Mary. Monday night we'll eat at Royce's. I guess that's the toniest spot in town."

"I ketch." Mary smiled. "That will be lovely, Phil."

The Bantams were lying low. Denver worked out his string of leads but they all ended up against a board fence. Clerks in the department store, where he had commandeered Lace's car, shrugged at her description. The warehouse owner knew nothing except that his rent was mailed in cash each month. He had never seen Big Shorty.

**M**ONDAY night, sitting in Royce's, Denver ordered the pompano, with suitable courses fore and aft, and Mary had a new red dress and she chattered gaily as a girl.

"Sure you won't eat these pickles, Phil? They're yummy."

"Pickles! Let's talk about something else."

"Clothes, then," Mary said. "I adore that ice

blue wrap. And, Phil, that woman coming in has an Empress Eugenie hat, like the one I wore when you were courting me."

Dutifully, Denver turned to inspect Empress Eugenie. He saw a cool blonde walking tall and straight after a waiter captain and their eyes met. The captain halted at a table and drew back a chair but Lace walked on past him. Her Empress Eugenie plume wiggled as she ran into the ladies' powder room. Denver upset his chair.

"Phil, your Pompano!" Mary called. A woman screamed as Denver pounded into the ladies' room and a maid swung a broom at him, but he saw the curtains fluttering at the side door and he plunged through them into the hall. Gardenia fragrance led him down the corridor to the street entrance. And there the gardenia merged into traffic fumes. The Eugenie plume was nowhere in sight in the crowds.

He called the station with his new description and went impatiently back to Mary. "I got to take you home quick," he said.

"Phil, I get so provoked at you!"

"Aw, let's eat," Denver drove his fork into the pompano.

They got home early and Mary gave fifty cents to the high school girl who had looked after the squirt.

"Malcolm has been quiet as a mouse," the girl said. "He's in there reading the telephone book, for heaven's sake!"

Denver leaned in the doorway and smiled at his son.

"Find any more humdingers, squirt?"

"Sure, Pop. I found Quick Dick and Summers Knight."

"That's Dick Quick and Knight Summers. . . . Hold it!"

Denver snatched the book off the squirt's knees and strode to the kitchen where Mary was regaling the high school girl with the sumptuousness of dinner at Royce's.

His long fingers ripped out the last several pages in the "A" section of the book and the leading pages under "V." He had nine sheets in his hand and he gave three to Mary and three to the girl.

"I want the name of a woman," Denver said, "whose initials are V. A. or A. V. It will be a flashy name. A colossal four-star name. Start

looking.”

Damn, he thought as his index finger moved carefully down his pages, Denver is a dope. Denver is a double dope. Denver had seen that V and A monogram on her purse but they called her “Lace” and that threw Denver off. Denver is a lummoX. Denver, the guy who thought he owned a flypaper memory. Throw facts against it and they stick. Yeh, throw a couple initials against it and they peel right off! His eye went down the column.

The high school girl found two names with the proper initials in her pages of the “A” section, but they were a garden variety of names, just names, and they didn’t suit Denver.

“We’re looking for champagne,” Denver muttered, “Those are just beer names. We want the bubbly stuff. Like Vera Abbingham or something. Keep at it . . . Hey!”

Denver stood up. “Angeline Vangeline!”

“By heavens, Mary! Look, suppose you got your pedicure, see! You buy your house. You hire your colored mammy. You eat out on Monday. And you change your name! You’re tired of being Sophie Clank of the tenements. So you call yourself Angeline Vangeline. And your mob calls you Lace . . .”

“You know very well I don’t have any mob! And my name isn’t Sophie Clank, it’s Mary Denver.”

“Get a load of this address!” Denver read from his page. “Angeline Vangeline, One Thousand Falling Heath Parkway. You buy a house with a swanky address. You got a bunch of trees on the place and a garden, instead of a weed in a tomato can on the fire escape. You get yourself a telephone, probably a French cradle phone colored silver or heliotrope or burnt umber or some damned thing. But then your fancy name goes into the telephone directory!”

**D**ENVER tripped over the hall rug, going out the door. His car was already sunfishing around the corner when Mary observed to the high school girl, “Don’t Marty a police officer, my dear, no matter how strong and at the same time hungry he looks . . .”

Denver’s foot weighted the gas pedal. That’s Lace! In a town this size that’s got to be Lace! Don’t toll me this Angeline Vangeline ain’t Lace!

Dope Denver may not be bright in the skull, but he can feel things in his bones.

I hope Big Shorty’s there. But he won’t be. No mugs allowed around her place. She’s posing as a wealthy widow or something. Shorty collects the stuff from the kids, like a guy going around to saloons tapping the juke boxes for their nickels. Lace handles it through a fence out of town. Detroit, maybe Chicago.

She should have blown town right after Marty Fargo got it. Now she’ll be clearing out for sure. I flushed her from the restaurant. She holes up until she can risk a phone call home. Her maid says no cops come yet. So Lace hustles home to pick up some of her precious things. A reformed slums girl won’t leave her jewelry behind while she hides for her life. That way, she saves only her life . . .

Denver kept his foot hard on the gas pedal, come hell or high water. Car brakes squealed all around him. In the block ahead he saw a cruising taxicab and overtook it with horn wailing. The cabby stopped and Denver got out to talk with him, fuming at the time lost.

One look at Denver’s shield set the hacker’s scrawny mustache twitching. He was a watery little guy, about as tall and sturdy as a stunted hollyhock, and he listened to Denver’s instructions with timid jerks of his head.

The cabby got into the rear of the hack and sat on the floor. With the driver’s uniform cap perched on his head, like a fly on an apple, Denver took the wheel and turned the cab toward One Thousand Falling Heath Parkway.

He bit out cusswords because the cab wouldn’t make enough speed. Now he knew what had been eating him all week. Ignominy. Pickled in a barrel! Not just Marty Fargo’s murder, rest his everlasting soul. Not just Bantam boodle piled in a box. Not just the department’s disgrace. But Phil Denver’s disgrace. Phil Denver, stripped of his gun and put to soak in a barrel with a hungry rat for company.

What will Lace do after she packs her pretties and changes clothes. Take her car? No, I know that car. She hasn’t been using it. She’ll call a cab and drive over to Brandon and catch a cross-country bus. How should I handle this? What if it isn’t Lace? Maybe I should get a description of Angeline Vangeline from the neighbors first. Hell,

neighbors don't tell cops enough . . . . Dammit, it's Lace!

One Thousand Falling Heath was a minor showplace. Not the house so much, although it was a striking red stone with white trim, as the sculpturally lovely grounds. Shaved lawns, trimmed trees, profuse flower beds, rock garden. The ornate grounds set Denver to wondering if he hadn't overlooked some details.

Leaning back over the seat he whispered to the quaking cabby on the floor; then he strode up to One Thousand and punched the bell

The colored mammy of Mary Denver's wishes opened the door, or she might have been Mary's if Denver earned money instead of scars. The mammy was impressive in a dubonet maid's uniform and gold teeth.

"You call a cab?" Denver asked.

"You here so soon? Lands, Miss Angeline just done hung up the phone."

"Show me the luggage." Denver pushed into the house, the cabby's little cap slipping over one eye. He strode past three grips in the hall, and just seeing them was a sedative to his nerves. He went into the living room where a woman was writing at a desk.

"Your last will and testament, Lace?"

**H**ER startled grey eyes were just so lovely, her coiffure as perfect, her dress as modish. But the shine had come loose from Lace's satiny voice:

"Good work, copper. You found me. But you haven't got me yet."

"There's a nice little pickle barrel ready, Lace. Just your size. Size sixteen, ain't it?"

"All my clothes are custom tailored, copper. These days."

"I know, Lace. I counted on things like that." Denver put his hand on a red striped directoire armchair. "Things like this elegant furniture. Like fancy restaurants and pedicures and a colored mammy. Things like a swank address, One Thousand Falling Heath Parkway."

"It cost me a pretty penny, copper. And I'll live to enjoy it. Free to enjoy it."

"Come clean, Lace, confide in papa. Where do you get that Angeline Vangelina handle? What's your real monicker?"

"Go to hell, copper."

"You think I was just lucky to find you, don't you? But I wasn't, Lace. I traced you. I traced you through your frailties. You were a half-starved brat that turned into a peacock girl. I didn't need much more to go on. I knew you had to glitter. And I can see a glitter a mile away."

"The funniest thing I ever saw," her eyes smouldered, "was you being dumped into a pickle barrel."

"And the yellowest thing I ever saw was old Marty Fargo getting killed in the dark with a boxful of house bricks!"

Denver pushed aside the directoire chair and stood in front of her desk. Anger began in his ankles and shot up his lanky body and came out in his voice.

"We're having a reunion, Lace. You and Big Shorty and Gus and me. Then we'll round up the other four Bantams and your fence. Now I'll take a gander at that letter you were writing and we'll be on our way."

"The letter wouldn't interest you, copper. It's a note to my gardener." She looked steadily over Denver's shoulder. "He's also my dean of men. Do come in, dean."

Denver turned to face Big Shorty's gun and his ludicrous croaking voice, as amiable as a cannon.

"Looks like we got to dust out the pickle barrel," Big Shorty said cheerfully.

Denver stood passively while the blonde woman putted him in a practiced frisk.

"What a lawman!" She wagged her head, her high humor returning. "He hasn't a gun. But he remembered his cuffs."

She clicked them around Denver's tensed wrists and Big Shorty put up his gun. "What now, Lace?" the plug-ugly inquired. "In the drink with him?"

"Certainly not!" she snapped. "We can't get near the waterfront. We're hot. You and your ideas! Who gave you the idea of dropping that box of bricks through the skylight?"

"Lace, I made a mistake, that's all. I saw the flashlight and I figured it was this cop got out of the barrel somehow. He could identify you and me and Gus . . . ."

"You weren't signed on to do the figuring."

"Lace, you said . . . ."

Denver's right foot lashed out. He drove it fiercely against the small of Big Shorty's back and plunged the gnome headlong into the directoire armchair. As the squat figure crashed to the carpet, Denver yelled, "Now!" and the cabby stepped timorously into the room from the hall. He trained Denver's gun on them.

"Plug the first one that so much as coughs, Joe," Denver barked at the cabby. "Lace, get the key and pull off these damned bracelets."

It might have been the nervous tic in the cabby's mustache that gave Big Shorty pause. If that tremor extended to his trigger finger . . . Denver got free of the cuffs and clamped Lace and the little giant together and retrieved his thirty-eight.

"You followed orders fine, Joe," he told the cabby warmly. "But I never was more scared in my life than when you were aiming the gun at *them*."

"I ain't never even shot a BB rifle," the cabby said.

Denver read the letter on Lace's desk and pocketed it and the driver carried out her luggage. In the hall, Denver looked at Angeline Vangeline's

telephone with interest. It was a cradle phone, mauve color. Mary would want to know.

"Downtown, Joseph," he told the cabby.

"Phil Denver! Eating pickles with your wheatcakes!" Mary said at breakfast. "And what kept you away all night?"

"It was such a lovely night, Mary, that I thought I'd work. I stopped and picked up a present for the Squirt, too."

"What did you get for me, Pop?" Malcolm's arm was swathed in a fresh sling.

"A brand new telephone book. Say, Mary, next summer we got to send the Squirt to a boy's camp. Do him good. Make him healthy as dandelions."

"My goodness, he's only seven."

"Well, next year he'll be eight. I just got the camp idea last night. Lace was writing a letter to her fence. It told where most of the Bantams' junk was cached and it told where the young Bantams were hiding. She had sent them to a Sunday school camp until this thing blew over."

"Gosh, Pop," said Malcolm. "What happened to them?"

"I ketch," Denver said.

