Ten Detective Aces, January, 1946

Though the letter of the law is strict, Inspector Lamm's duty as a man
May force him to pay extra-legal attention to a . . .

Letter from Limbo

By Berna Morris

INSPECTOR LAMM'S chin was in his collar, and he was making wet circles on the table with the bottom of his glass. A hand clapped him on the shoulder. A voice hooted in his ear:

"What you sulking in this cubbyhole for? Don't you know nobody's unhappy tonight? I'm on the town tonight, Bobbie, me lad, and all the drinks are on me. Hey, waiter!" The big man threw his head back and bellowed. He squeezed into the narrow booth seat across from Lamm and smiled beatifically. Then his eyebrows drew together and he leaned over the arm of the seat and howled:

"Hey, garcon! Garcon!"

"Take it easy, Charlie!' Lamm smiled. "I know how you feel. I'm glad for you, Charlie."

The waiter finally succumbed to Charlie's bellowings and brought fresh drinks. There was a folded sheet of paper on the table. Lamm slipped it into his pocket as he raised his glass.

"The luck of the Irish, Charlie. You and yours are never without it."

"Drink 'em down!" said Charlie.

The big man slapped his empty glass down on the table and looked wonderingly at Lamm.

"Come on, pal. What's the matter? You can tell Charlie." He thrust his moon-round face forward over the table and leered sympathetically. "Good old Charlie Millan. Everybody tells Charlie. Come on, pal."

Lamm smiled crookedly.

"You're going to have a head tomorrow, Charlie. You can't drink, you know."

"Right." A hiccough intruded on Charlie's giggle. "Tomorrow I cut my head—hic—off right over the ears. Tonight, pal—tonight I love everybody." His large damp hand reached over and clapped Lamm's knuckles. "Tell Charlie, pal."

"Okay, Charlie." Lamm sighed and leaned closer. "You won't remember it tomorrow anyway. Maybe you can help me, at that." He picked up his glass and took a short drink; then looked closely at the man across from him. "Still, maybe I better not."

Charlie waggled his heavy head. "Never tell a soul. Cross my heart, pal." He made a vague gesture at his blue serge chest. "Cross my heart and—and—hope to die."

Lamm took a firm grip around his glass. "This is about a boy, Charlie. About as old as your boy, he was."

Charlie smiled almost soberly. "Yep. Ten Zeros and he's on his way home. Young Charlie's coming home. After we thought he wasn't." The thought seemed to inspire him and he banged the table.

"Hey, boy!"

"He's coming, Charlie. Keep quiet."

The waiter brought another drink. Charlie seemed satisfied to cuddle it in his hands for awhile.

"What about this boy? This boy like my Charlie. What about him, huh?"

"Your boy's coming home. This boy—well, have you heard about what they call 'in-case mail'?"

Charlie's brows drew together in painful concentration. He shook his head.

"Well, that's what they call the letters they leave when they go out on a mission. The letters that are mailed only in case they don't come back."

"Yeah. Yeah. Remember now. Father of one of young Charlie's pals got one. Broke him all up, it did." Charlie gazed morosely into his glass. "All up." He buried his nose in the glass and gulped.

LAMM'S fingers touched his coat over his breast pocket. He heard the crinkle of paper. He spoke softly.

"I got one of those letters, Charlie."

"You got one!" Charlie snorted. "How come? You got no boy out in the fight. All you got is girls—and little ones at that."

A smile twisted Lamm's mouth. "Don't rub it in, Charlie. Well, anyhow I got this letter. You remember about four years ago, before the war started, when 'Slats' Lynch was killed?"

Something flicked in Charlie's eyes. He nodded.

"You and your cops. You had everybody in town on the mat for that. Yeah, and you never did find out." His fingers tightened around the glass. He slid it back and forth and watched the wet swath it made on the polished wood of the table.

Lamm's low voice continued. "I had a suspicion. But no proof. Now I have the proof." His forefinger tapped his breast pocket. "This kid, he must have had a premonition about that last flight, so he wrote this letter. He said it had been on his conscience all this time. He said that right after it happened, if we had got anybody else for it, he would have come forward. And I believe he would have. He was that kind of kid. Well, this killing had been on his mind all this time, so he sits down and writes me this letter. To be delivered only if he doesn't come back."

Lamm stopped and took a cigarette from a flat pack. The match flame reflected two points of brightness in Charlie's eyes.

"Get on, pal, What's the rub?"

"Well," Lamm inhaled deeply. "This kid writes me this letter. Then he goes out and he doesn't come back, see. So one of his pals is coming back to the States on leave, and he delivers the letter. It never went through the censors. I'm the only one that knows. Me and the boy. And he didn't come back."

Lamm's chin had sunk deep into his collar again. Now he raised his head. "What gets me, Charlie, is that boy sitting down and writing a confession about killing a man back here. An unpremeditated, accidental killing. He's a whiz of a combat pilot. He's killed dozens—perhaps hundreds of Nip soldiers—and he's eating his heart out about a killing back home. He wants to die clean he says, so he writes this letter."

Charlie's drink slopped on the table. He groped for words.

"Say—you're—you're not going to publish that letter, are you? Not just so you can mark the case solved. Not just for that, Lamm. The boy died fighting. You can't black him up now."

Lamm shook his head. "Not now. The boy is lost. 'Presumed dead' as they say. But suppose he's not dead, Charlie. Suppose he shows up someday. They do come back, some of them."

Charlie nodded. His voice was a whisper.

"Some of them, thank God."

Lamm cleared his throat. "Well,

suppose, Charlie, suppose this one does. What will I do then? I'm a policeman. I have evidence of murder—"

Charlie sat up straight. His voice was harsh and sober.

''You also have evidence of courage and honesty."

The two men stared at each other silently, their eyes locked.

Then Lamm drew the folded sheet from his pocket. He struck a match and his eyes again met Charlie's.

"You think I'm doing right, Charlie? It's not neglect of my duty as a law officer?"

Charlie nodded, "It would be neglect of your duty as a man if you didn't."

The match flame caught the thin paper and flared eagerly. It licked upwards, and Lamm dropped it in an ashtray. For just an instant bold writing was visible and Lamm saw the signature, the clean honest pen-strokes that spelled the name *Charles Millan, Jr.* Then the paper charred into ash and only black scraps were left. Lamm ground these into dust and raised his glass.

"I'm on the town with you, Charlie. We're going to give young Charlie the right kind at welcome home. Let's get drunk."