



Latman turned on his flash, saw the man's startled face and the gun in his hand

ONE SMALL CLUE

By J. LANE LINKLATER

It's an exciting furlough for Jim Latman when he runs into a murder case and solves a mystery that puzzles him mightily!

LEUTENANT JIM LATMAN brought the old car to a stop beside Fred Bridge's orange grove. A few yards away was the dirt road leading through the grove to the house.

For a few moments Latman sat silent in the warm spring night. Suddenly he laughed.

"I should feel guilty," he said.

"Why?" asked the girl by his side.

"I'm out with a borrowed girl in a borrowed car. The guy the girl belongs to

doesn't know I borrowed her, and the guy the car belongs to doesn't know I borrowed it."

He watched her face—her soft, red lips and the wisp of brown hair that swung rebelliously down over the broad, smooth forehead. He had known her for a long time—a lifetime. He remembered rubbing mud on her nose 'way back in the third grade.

How was it he had failed with Lita Fields? For one thing, he had never felt

good enough for her. He had never proposed to her, not seriously. He had never been sensible, he realized, and you had to treat marriage with a girl like Lita seriously. Maybe that was why she was engaged to Roy Hawley. Hawley was over thirty, and he took everything seriously. He took his business seriously. He took Lita seriously.

And now Jim Latman was aware of a surging ache inside him.

"Somehow I don't feel guilty, Jim," Lita said quietly. "We're — well, old friends. You're on furlough. In a couple of days you'll be on your way. I don't see why we shouldn't spend a few hours together."

"Stolen hours?" Latman jibed gently.

Lita sighed. "We had to steal them. Roy just wouldn't understand. Uncle Fred wouldn't understand about the car, either."

No, Latman agreed silently, they certainly wouldn't understand.

Lita caught Latman's intent gaze, and smiled.

"Well, Jim?"

"I guess you're right," he said, with a laugh. "Well, I'll return the car to Uncle Fred's garage and walk into town. How about you?"

"I'll be all right," Lita said. "I can walk home from here. We'd better not be seen together."

Jim nodded. The room Lita rented on the edge of town was not far. He stepped into the road and helped her out. For a moment they stood there, close, with moonlight slanting down at them. To Lita, he seemed taller, more erect than before he had gone into the Army. But his laughing eyes and humorously-twisted mouth were the same.

"Good-by, Lita," he said.

"Good-by, Jim!"

But he thought only of how close she was, of the changing lights in her hair, of

the deepening color of her eyes, of the redness of her parted lips.

HE PULLED her to him, held her hard, kissed her long.

Presently she broke away, gazing at him a moment, then turned and hurried away. He watched her vanish, then jumped into the car and drove recklessly toward the house, through the rows of evenly spaced orange trees on each side of the road.

He reached the house. No lights showed there. Uncle Fred Bridge was not at home. Jim Latman left the car in the garage, and strode back through the grove to the road. . . .

Latman met Roy Hawley on Blanders Avenue, the main street, on his way home. Hawley was just coming out of the storeroom of Hawley & Palmer, Farm Machinery.

"Hello, Jim," Hawley said. "You're up late."

He was rather a large man, and handsome. His hair and eyes were dark, his features chiseled. His mouth was a trifle petulant, his eyes narrow.

"It's late for you, too," Latman pointed out. "After midnight."

"Business has all sorts of complications these days," Hawley said gravely.

Jim Latman understood that. And Hawley wouldn't be too good at catching on to the complexities of wartime business. Things had to be right under his nose before he could see and understand them.

"By the way," Latman said, "congratulations on your engagement. When's the wedding?"

"In a couple of weeks," said Hawley.

Joe Palmer, Hawley's partner, came out of the storeroom and locked it. Palmer was about forty, big and hearty. He made up for Hawley's stuffed-shirt dullness with a jovial cunning.

He clapped Jim Latman on the back.

“Hello, my boy! Been out for a good time?”

“I guess you could call it that,” Latman said. His grin was carefree, but his heart was sagging, sick. “I’ll be on my way in a couple of days.”

“Sure,” said Joe Palmer. He was gouging at his right eye, which was badly bloodshot. “Got something in this danged eye,” he muttered. “Hurts like the devil.” Then he chuckled and said, “Sure, you got to pack in plenty of fun. You’re a dangerous lad with the gals, Jim. I bet you were out with someone else’s tonight!”

“What makes you think that?” Latman said, still grinning.

“Because,” said Palmer, “it’s more fun.”

Jim Latman wanted to plant a fist in Joe Palmer’s beefy face, but he only smiled agreeably.

“Well, maybe you’re right,” he said, and walked away from them fast.

At home his mother was waiting up for him. Mother had always waited up for him, ever since he had been old enough to go out nights.

He would get home late, and there would be Mom, with a book, and he would say, “Aren’t you up late, Mom?” And she would smile and say, “Oh, well, I just wanted to finish this story; Guess I’ll turn in now.”

It was the same tonight. There she was, fingering a book. She looked up at him and smiled. And Jim said, “Aren’t you up late, Mom?” And she said, “Oh, well, I just wanted to finish this story. Guess I’ll turn in now.”

He took her by the arms. “I’ve been neglecting my best girl,” he said. “From now on I’ll stick around until time to leave.”

She shook her head. “It’s only natural you should be getting all the fun you can.”

She reached up and kissed him. “Sleep as late as you want to in the morning, Son.”

It took Jim Latman a long time to get to sleep. He couldn’t get Lita out of his mind, nor the memory of her kiss out of his heart. It was well toward morning when sleep came to him. . . .

He was awakened by his mother. She was standing by his bed, her face pale.

“Sorry I had to wake you, Son.” Her voice shook a little. “But Mr. Nason is here. He wants to see you.”

Nason? Nason was the Chief of Police!

Young Latman dressed hurriedly and went out to the living room. Nason, a tall, grim-faced man, peered at him gravely.

“Hi, Chief!” Latman greeted him. “What goes on?”

The chief did not smile. “I just want you to come along with me, Jim, for a little talk,” he said.

Chief Nason said nothing until they came within sight of the police station and jail.

“It’s about Fred Bridge,” he said then. “Lita Field’s uncle. In case you don’t already know, Fred Bridge is dead. Murdered!”

THE chief had sent for Roy Hawley and Joe Palmer, since they had known about Bridge’s plans the previous evening. Jim Latman sat in the chief’s office with them and listened.

“Bridge’s body was found in his grove by his foreman, Tony Moreno, at six this morning,” the chief said. “Bridge had been shot in the back. A revolver shot. We have the bullet, but not the gun.”

Jim Latman stirred uneasily.

“Bridge had intended,” Nason went on, “to take a train to Los Angeles last evening, stay the night, and return today.”

“That’s right,” put in Hawley. “He wanted a small Caterpillar. We couldn’t get

it for him, so he was going to see if he could get it for himself.”

“He couldn’t,” Joe Palmer said casually. “But he was stubborn.”

Chief Nason nodded. “He had a mile to walk from his place to the station. As it looks, he left the house about eight-twenty, took a short cut through his grove, and someone came up behind him and shot him down in cold blood.”

“I don’t understand it,” Hawley said, frowning. “Bridge had no enemies.”

“You’re right,” said the chief. “He wasn’t a pleasant man, and folks didn’t like him much, but he had no enemies. Who gains by his death?”

“Fred Bridge was worth plenty,” Palmer said. “His grove alone was worth a fortune. I guess it will all go to his niece, Lita.”

“But Lita couldn’t have had anything to do with the murder,” Hawley said, in annoyance.

“Right,” snapped Latman, angrily. “Count Lita out.”

The chief turned his sombre gaze on Jim Latman.

“And that brings us to you!”

“Me?” said Latman. “Why me?”

“Well, ever since you were a kid Bridge had plenty of trouble with you.”

Latman flushed. “I guess I pestered him a lot,” he admitted. “He used to get you to pinch me about once a month, but it was never anything serious. Anyhow, I haven’t even seen him since I came home.”

“How about Bridge’s car?” Nason said abruptly.

“His car?” Latman said. “What about it?”

“You were out riding in Bridge’s car last night!”

Latman remembered now. He had been turning a corner when a car driven by a local orange grower had almost hit them head-on. Lita had been sitting on the far

side, and Latman was sure that the man had not seen her, but he had certainly recognized Jim—and the car!

“You admit you were out in Bridge’s car, Jim?” the chief asked sharply.

“Sure,” muttered Latman. “I—I was just taking a ride.”

“By yourself?”

“By myself.”

“You mean to say you deliberately helped yourself to the car without permission?” Roy Hawley said in a shocked voice.

“That,” Latman said belligerently, “is what I mean to say.”

“Your story just isn’t reasonable, Jim,” the chief went on. “Now, you were seen in the car about nine-thirty, about an hour after Bridge was murdered.” He stared at Jim Latman moodily. “Could it be that Bridge caught you stealing the car and you quarreled over it?”

“It could be, but it wasn’t.”

The chief’s voice was tired. “I hate to do this, Jim, but I’ll have to hold you.”

The office door swung open. Lita Fields came in.

The distress in her face only made her even more beautiful. Latman tried to signal her with his eyes, wondering why she was not on her way to the school where she taught. Lita had never accepted her Uncle Fred’s offers of a home, preferring to make her own way.

But of course it was natural she should come here. Her uncle had been murdered. She was obviously too shocked even to be surprised at seeing Latman here.

The chief got up clumsily.

“Sit down, Lita,” he said.

“You don’t belong here, Lita,” Roy Hawley said brusquely. “I’ll take care of things for you.”

“I had to know what is being done,” Lita said quietly, as she sat down.

“I think we’ll be able to make an arrest

soon,” the chief said uncomfortably.

“Who?”

“The evidence indicates Jim!” Hawley blurted.

Lita turned to look at Jim Latman. Her lips trembled.

“Jim? I don’t believe it! What’s the evidence?”

Haltingly, the chief told her.

“That’s the story, Lita,” Latman cut in hurriedly. “But I’m not worried.”

HE WANTED to stop Lita from talking, but knew that was hopeless.

“I can explain about the car!” Lita said promptly.

The chief stared skeptically. “How?”

“She doesn’t know a thing about it,” Latman said harshly.

“Be quiet, Jim.” Lita glanced at Hawley. “Sorry if this hurts you, Roy. I was out with Jim last night! Jim and I are old friends. He’s going away soon, and he happens to be fighting for his country. We just spent a few hours together, for old times’ sake.”

Through a stunned silence, Lita went on:

“We needed a car. I knew Uncle Fred was going to Los Angeles, so I asked Jim to get the car. I intended to tell Uncle Fred that I borrowed the car—which was true, since Jim only took it at my request.”

“Jim was seen in the car,” Chief Nason said, “but you weren’t.”

“The man didn’t see me,” Lita said firmly, “because I was on the other side, and it was dark.”

Roy Hawley was staring at Lita indignantly. But Joe Palmer’s thick-slabbed face was twisted in a cynical grin.

“When and where did you meet Jim, Lita?” the chief asked somberly.

“At about a quarter to nine, near Uncle Fred’s grove.”

“Well,” the chief pointed out, “the murder was done between eight-thirty and a quarter to nine. Jim could have killed Bridge before you got there. Sorry—but we’ll have to hold Jim on suspicion!”

“If you hold Jim,” Lita said defiantly, “you hold me, too! I won’t leave here until you let Jim go!”

“Lita!” shouted Roy Hawley. “You’re out of your head!”

The chief shrugged, and turned to Jim.

“Run along, my boy. But don’t leave town without consulting me.”

Jim Latman knew he wasn’t cleared, that Chief Nason was merely humoring Lita. He stood uncertainly for a moment, then abruptly strode out of the office.

Outside the police station, he stopped, at a loss what to do next. His mother would be anxiously waiting, but he couldn’t go home and tell her he was on the verge of being charged with murder.

Presently Lita came out with Roy Hawley, who was walking stiffly by her side. He ignored Latman, but Lita flashed the lieutenant a message of encouragement.

As Lita and Hawley moved down the street, Joe Palmer ambled out, and chuckled when he saw Jim Latman.

“Well, kid,” he said, “the gal sure pulled you out of that hole—for the minute, anyhow.”

“Yes,” agreed Latman briefly.

“Poor old Roy!” Palmer rambled on. “He just can’t figure his gal going out with someone else!”

Latman ached to plant a fist in the big man’s face, but he said quietly:

“You and Roy were working down at the store last night. Was Roy there all evening?”

“Heck, no,” said Palmer. “He didn’t get down to the store until ten o’clock.” He chuckled again. “You sure got a drag with the dames, kid. That Lita’s a nifty, too!”

Jim Latman was boiling. It came to him suddenly that there was nothing to stop him from throwing his fist into Joe Palmer's face.

So he did.

For a moment he stared down at Palmer's cumbersome, squirming bulk, and took savage satisfaction in the pained astonishment on Palmer's reddened face. Then casually he sauntered away.

Jim Latman went at once to the storeroom of Hawley & Palmer, Farm Machinery. Either partner, no doubt, would be along soon, and neither would like what he was going to do.

In a back corner of the storeroom was a small office. Behind the counter was a small bald-headed man fidgeting with some papers at a desk.

"Hi, Watson!" Latman called.

The little man looked up and grinned.

"Hello, Jim, my boy! Sure swell to see you!"

"Still bookkeeping here, old-timer?" Latman asked.

Watson made an unpleasant face. "I got to work at something," he said, "and—"

Jim Latman lowered his voice. "I'm in a jam, Mr. Watson, and a bit of confidential information may help me out."

"Anything you say, Jim."

"Well," Latman said, "last night Roy came down here to do some work about ten o'clock. Have you any idea what he was doing?"

"I dunno, Jim. I guess he was trying to check up on them missing bills."

"What bills?"

"Just some old bills," said Watson. "I was checking up the books for the year—got to get out a statement for the bank—and some bills turned up missing. Bills from wholesalers."

"Who," Latman said thoughtfully, "did Roy and Joe sell the stuff to—that stuff listed on the missing wholesalers' bills?"

"I think it was stuff they peddled to old Fred Bridge!" said Watson.

Latman whistled softly. "So that was it! Say, did Roy—"

He stopped short, for the door had opened and Roy Hawley himself was striding across the storeroom.

"Well, I can't stay, old-timer," Jim Latman said to Watson. "Just dropped in for a minute. See you after the war!"

LATMAN strolled out and headed for Blanders Drugstore, where he called his mother.

"Hi, Mom," he said cheerfully. "I'm down town. Don't know how soon I'll get home. I'm helping Chief Nason. Poor old Fred Bridge got killed last night and the chief thought maybe I'd seen or heard something around town that would help."

"Well, had you?" asked his mother.

"Not much," Jim said carelessly, "but I have just a slice of an idea. See you soon."

He hung up and set off in the direction of the Bridge orange grove. He entered by the dirt road over which he had driven the borrowed car the night before. Near the house he met Tony Moreno, Bridge's foreman, a short, chunky man with a broad, dark face and small black eyes.

"Hello, Tony," he said.

"Hello," said Tony sourly.

Jim Latman grinned affably. "Now, don't look at me like that, Tony," he said. "I'm your pal, like always." He grew serious. "Show me where they found Fred Bridge, will you?"

Moreno shrugged and plodded off through the trees. He stopped presently.

"Right there," he said.

It was a rough pathway, a short cut from the house across the grove, one which Bridge had used from his place to town. A great many footprints showed, but it was more likely they had been made by the police than by the murderer.

This was a big grove, with thousands of orange trees. Bridge had grown both navels and Valencias, and orange-picking went on for a large part of the year.

"Is there a part of the grove, Tony, where picking is all through for the season?" Latman asked.

"Yes," Tony grunted. "The northeast section. We finished picking the navels there a week ago."

"I want to see."

Grudgingly, Tony went along. It was a quarter of a mile away from the scene of the murder. When they reached there, Latman frowningly looked around. Nothing to see except those interminable rows of trees. It was dark and cool, the foliage shutting out the morning sun.

"Who's the boss around here now?" Latman asked.

"Miss Fields, I guess," Tony muttered.

"Anyhow, she'll be the new owner."

"You'd take orders from her?"

"Sure."

"Thanks, Tony."

Latman hurried back to town and from the Blanders Drugstore phoned to Lita at her school.

"Oh, Jim!" she said breathlessly, when she heard his voice, "I'm so glad you called. The police—they didn't mean to let you go. I—I'm afraid they'll arrest you any minute!"

"I thought so," Latman said grimly. "Well, I'll keep out of the way until this evening. Can you meet me?"

Lita hesitated. "If it's to help you, I might," she said then. "But I've already upset Roy tremendously, and I have no right to do that."

Latman's lips tightened. "I don't want you to go out on any joy-ride. I just have a hunch we might be able to tag the murderer. I need you as a witness."

"Of course, Jim."

"Meet me at the northeast corner of the Bridge grove right after dark this evening. You're the boss of the grove now, Lita, although I guess Roy will be handling things for you. I want you to phone him and tell him you intend to have two or three guards on duty at the grove day and night until an arrest has been made. Say you can't do anything about the guards today, but you intend to start tomorrow."

"Why should I do that?" Lita said. "Oh, I hope you're not getting in any deeper, Jim. But I'll do it."

Lita's voice sounded a little forlorn, as she said:

"Good-by, Jim. I've got to go now."

Jim Latman spent the day in a deserted cabin about a mile away, but as dusk deepened into darkness, he was squatted on the ground under an orange tree at the east edge of the Bridge grove. He rested a large flashlight on his knee. The road just beyond the ditch was as lonely as if it had been a hundred miles out in the wilds.

He heard Lita as she approached, leaped the ditch, and went to meet her.

"Jim!" she said anxiously. "What are you going to do?"

"This northeast corner of the grove has to be watched," he said. "I'll have to stay on this road, while you watch from around the corner."

"But what are we watching for?"

"The murderer."

"Oh! You think he'll come here?"

"I hope so. Now, if I see him, I'll come around and get you. If you see him, you let me know, fast. Take no chances."

IT WAS a long wait. As Jim Latman crouched in the darkness, his eyes straining, his mind on Lita around the corner, he began to doubt his hunch. That hunch, he thought, was based on a definite clue, but it was a very small clue, however.

Finally he glimpsed a movement some distance away. Someone was emerging from a neighboring grove, then crossing the road. The silent-moving figure plunged through the trees in the Bridge grove.

Jim Latman raced noiselessly toward the corner and rounded it.

"We'll have to hurry," he whispered to Lita.

They cut directly into the grove. On the soft soil, they made no noise, but neither did the man they were after. Under the blanket of treetops, the darkness was as black as an inkpot.

Presently, they halted, listening. No sound came to them.

This section of the grove, where the picking of the navels was completed for the season, was about three hundred feet square. Latman led Lita to the center of it.

Before long they heard the rustling of leaves, off to their right. With a pressure of his hand, Latman guided Lita that way, cautiously.

Still, Latman could see nothing. But, from the sounds, he judged that the tree he sought was not more than ten yards beyond them.

He placed Lita behind the nearest tree and crept forward. Above him he could hear branches being brushed aside, and a muttered curse.

The man was coming down. Jim Latman heard the soft thump as his feet struck the ground.

Out of the darkness came the lieutenant's low voice:

"Let's take a look at you!"

Abruptly he turned on his flash, full in the man's flushed, startled face.

The man was holding a revolver limply in his hand. Then with furious speed he raised it. Dropping the flashlight, Latman leaped to one side, just as the man fired.

A bullet skipped across the top of the lieutenant's shoulder. The man fired again,

but in the dark his shot was wild. Latman dived at him, low, clutched him about the legs and brought him down with a crash.

The man started to lurch up, carrying Latman with him by main force, but Latman drove his fist hard into his face, and he lay limp.

Latman felt for the gun on the ground, found it, and got to his feet.

"Are you all right, Jim?" Lita asked anxiously.

"Sure," he said. "Thanks to that good old Army training. Now, we have to get this guy to the police."

"Yes," said Lita. "I never dreamed of Joe Palmer as Uncle Fred's murderer!"

When Joe Palmer was behind bars, Chief Nason sat with Jim Latman and Lita in his office, getting the details. Roy Hawley was there, too, sitting stiffly near Lita.

"I guess we owe you an apology, my boy," the chief said to Latman. "I should have known better."

Jim Latman grinned. "The way I figured, someone had to have a real motive for killing Fred Bridge, and the only one I could see was Joe Palmer. Because, Chief, you see, Fred Bridge got the machinery for his grove through Roy Hawley and Joe Palmer. Knowing Joe, I thought it likely they had been gypping the old boy, though also knowing Roy and that he's no crook, I was sure Roy wouldn't know about it."

"You got something to back that up?" the chief asked dubiously.

"Maybe. Watson, the bookkeeper, told me he thought Roy was down at the store last night trying to locate some lost bills—from wholesalers, for stuff Roy and Joe had sold to Fred Bridge. I figure they were lost on purpose, maybe because they showed what Bridge should have been charged for the stuff instead of the high prices he was charged. If Roy had known what had happened to those bills he

wouldn't have wasted time looking for them." Jim Latman grinned. "Well, Bridge was going into town himself to see about the Caterpillar he wanted. Likely Joe thought the old fellow would find out he had been cheated." He hesitated. "And there was something else."

"Don't hold back on my account, Jim," Lita put in.

"Okay. These are tough times for the farm machinery business. Roy and Joe might need more money. Roy is to marry Lita soon, and with Fred Bridge gone, Lita would be worth plenty. Joe figured he would get his hands on more money then, through Roy."

ROY'S handsome face looked distressed, puzzled, as if he were still trying to decide if he should approve Lita's going out a second time with Jim Latman even to catch a murderer.

"I had one other small clue," Latman went on. "Joe had a bloodshot eye! One easy way to get a bloodshot eye is to climb a tree. As you climb, you look up, and a twig or a piece of bark drops in your eye."

"It's happened to me," the chief said.

"Joe and Roy had been working at the store late last night," said Latman, "but Joe told me this morning that Roy didn't get there until ten o'clock, so Joe would have had plenty of time to kill Bridge and get back to the store ahead of Roy."

"But what about the bloodshot eye?"

"Look! Bridge was shot in the back. Here is Joe in the middle of the grove. He has just shot Bridge. He can't risk being found with the revolver—his own."

"It would convict him," conceded the chief.

"Sure. So he figured a swell hiding-place for the revolver."

Chief Nason smiled a little. "The top of an orange tree! I know that, since talking to Joe."

"Right. He walked across to where the picking was done for the season, climbed a tree and fastened the revolver to a top branch with a wire. Orange trees carry their foliage all year round, and no one could possibly see it. And the police would hardly think of climbing four thousand orange trees, looking for a gun!"

"Hardly," agreed the chief. "But Joe went back tonight for the gun!"

"Because Lita phoned Roy, and of course Roy told Joe, that starting tomorrow she was going to have guards at the grove all the time. Joe had to get the gun while the way was still clear."

There was an abrupt and awkward silence. Roy Hawley's fingers were twitching nervously. He turned to Lita.

"I guess it was all right for you to go out with Jim tonight, Lita," he said condescendingly. "It was on a legitimate errand."

"Thank you," Lita said in a subdued voice, but her cheeks were pink.

"I guess I will need you, at that, Lita," Hawley went on, with a martyred smile. "With Joe gone, too! And finances will be hard to manage, too."

The pink spots on Lita's cheeks bloomed into fiery patches.

"Don't worry, Roy," she said gently. "If you should need any sort of business help, I'll do all I can."

Jim Latman got up suddenly. He smiled bleakly. This was getting painful. And he had his own private hurt.

"Well, I'll be going," he said lamely.

"Where to, Jim?" Lita asked.

"Home," he said. "Mom is waiting. She and I are going to celebrate tonight."

Lita got up slowly. She did not look at Hawley.

"Would you mind taking me with you, Jim?" she asked a little breathlessly. "If I couldn't be with you any more before you leave, I don't think I could take it."