



"Kill him," Rowley yelled, and reached for the gun as Chamberlain knotted his fist and swung

NO LEASE ON LIFE

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Maybe Jay Carleton was a lug in love - but he showed up keen and dangerous as a dagger when grim murder stalked!

IT COULDN'T have been an accident! It had to be murder! The accident, if it were an accident, had happened six weeks ago, while Jay Carleton was still in the Army hospital, according to the date on the clipping he held in his hand. He sat at his desk in the law offices of Carleton and Rowley on the first day of his return, and reread the first clipping. In spite of all the horrors of death he had seen in the last thirty-one months,

his mind kept rejecting the facts as set forth in the news story.

Tragedy descended upon the Lake Club Settlement yesterday evening when Dale Vaughan of this city was killed as the result of an explosion of bottled gas which destroyed his summer cottage on the lake. The resulting fire which destroyed the building left his body burned beyond recognition. Mr. Vaughan, a brilliant young oil geologist, leaves a sister, Miss Beatrice Vaughan, his father having been killed in the disaster at the Electra Coal Mine five years ago.

The Herald has not yet learned the details of the tragedy, which will be forthcoming at the sitting of the Coroner's Jury this afternoon.

Stunned, still unable to accept the facts, Jay looked up at his late father's law partner, Sam Rowley, and then at Bea Vaughan, who had been secretary in the office for more than five years. "Why didn't you let me know?"

Sam Rowley was a small and mild-mannered man of middle age with the manner of a family doctor. "Bea and I thought it best. You had enough to worry you, trying to recover your own health. After all, two years in a prison camp—"

"Never mind me," he answered. "Bea, you could have told me."

Bea's face was pained, and she bit her lip. "Please, Jay, it wouldn't have helped. And it would just have hurt you."

Jay knew the story didn't warrant his suspicion, but he couldn't help it. "I don't like this. There's something left out of this story."

Jay and Bea and her brother had been inseparable since kindergarten days, and he knew her as he would a sister, but he had never seen her like this before. She was nervous, ill at ease.

Bea looked at Rowley uncomfortably, and then down at her scarlet fingernails. Rowley looked out of the window. "You might hear things," he said vaguely. "But don't believe them. There's been a hint he took it too hard when the Army turned him down on account of the importance of his work."

"That's a lie," Bea said throatily. "It did hurt him, but he wouldn't have—done anything like that."

Rowley looked at his watch. "I've got to go down to the law library," he said as though eager to leave them to their private sorrow. "It closes at noon on Saturdays. But get hold of yourself, Jay. There was nothing we could do."

There was a disquieting silence in the office after Rowley had left, then Jay stuffed the clippings into the envelope and shoved it into his pocket. He looked at Bea, staring out the window.

"You don't like Rowley, do you?"

"He's all right, I suppose," Bea answered, turning. "Dale was always embarrassed about not being in uniform, but I don't believe anybody ever hinted that he killed himself. I think Mr. Rowley made that up."

"Why?" Jay asked sharply.

The girl looked down at the green rug. Finally she said, "I don't know. May I have those clippings? I've got a lunch appointment."

Jay took the envelope out of his pocket and started to hand them to her. The girl reached for them with an eagerness that suddenly caused Jay to withhold them.

"Wait a minute, Bea," he said thoughtfully. "What's behind this, anyway?"

"Nothing," she said. "You're imagining things." He was sure he caught a fleeting look of fear in her eyes.

"Yeah, I am. Just let me keep these a while, will you? I believe I'll drive out to the lake. Want to come along?"

"No. I'll see you there this afternoon some time. And Jay, please don't go getting any ideas. It's bad enough as it is."

"I've only got one idea. And that is that it smells like murder to me."

JAY went down to the bank and had a talk with Dick Little, the Vice President, and then drove out to Club Lake. Something in the back of his head kept telling him that his friend had been murdered! It didn't make sense to him, but he couldn't get it out of his mind.

Dale Vaughan was not a man to brood over things. It could not have been suicide.

And Jay could not accept the story that

it was an accident, either. Dale was a scientist and a careful man. And besides, there was the fact that his father had been killed by a gas explosion in a mine some years before. This bottled gas that they used for cooking and heating outside cities was a great thing, but everybody knew that it was practically odorless, and that it was dangerous. Particularly, Dale knew it, for he had worked on its commercial development.

The Saturday afternoon crowd was already trickling into the clubhouse, a stained pine and fieldstone structure on a bluff overlooking the boat-dotted lake. Men in sports clothes, girls in a rainbow assortment of shorts, white sails on the green water.

He parked on the gravel lot and made his way down to the boat landing without stopping at the club house. He was just in time to catch Benny Postoak, the lake custodian.

"Would you drop me off at the Vaughan cottage?" he asked.

Benny Postoak was quarter Indian, a wiry little old-young wilding who was more at home in the woods and on the water than he was in town. Benny grinned at Jay. "Howdy, Mr. Carleton," he said, shaking hands. "Glad to see you back, but the bass won't be."

"I'm not fishing today, Benny. I'd like to look at what's left of Vaughan's cottage, if you could take me over."

Benny spun the rope on his outboard, and the motor sputtered to life. The boat cut a white wake as it threaded through the anchored boats and hit the open water with Benny at the helm.

Jay asked suddenly; "Benny, what do you think about that business? You think Vaughan was accidentally killed?"

Benny shot him a sharp, suspicious glance, then looked off across the lake. His free hand went down into the bottom of

the boat and came out with a .22 rifle. He lifted it to his shoulder and fired.

"Those damned turtles," he said, laying the rifle down. "They eat more fingerling bass in a year than we plant. But now that I can get plenty of hollow point shells again, I'm cleaning 'em out."

"Yeah," Jay answered. "Where were you when the fire started?"

"I was checking the licenses of a fishing party down by Vaughan's neck."

Jay did not comment for a moment. He was rereading the second of the clippings on the accident.

The coroner's jury this morning returned a verdict of death due to accidental causes in the case of the tragedy late yesterday which took the life of Dale Vaughan. According to witnesses, Vaughan had just returned from a business trip, and had stopped off at the club house to get the keys to his cottage. There he met and talked with Martin Chamberlin, manager of the club, and with Sam Rowley, local attorney.

Rowley and a party of friends were just starting to Rowley's cottage, and Vaughan accepted a ride as far as his cottage. He intended to stop off a moment to leave his luggage, and join Rowley.

The party waited in the car on the road, about two hundred yards from Vaughan's cottage. Vaughan walked up to his cottage in the darkness, while the Rowley party waited. There was a sudden explosion, and then the building burst into flames. Due to lack of fire fighting apparatus on the club property, the flames gained headway and were so fierce that rescue of Vaughan was impossible. His body was found only after fire had completely destroyed the cottage.

According to Chamberlin a new container of gas had been delivered to the cottage a few days before Vaughan's return, and the servicing company had made its regular inspection for leaks. He stated that a small leak had developed which was not noticeable to the inspectors, but which was sufficient to have filled the house with gas in the several days time which elapsed between the inspection and Vaughan's return.

JAY returned the clipping to the envelope. "Did you see Rowley drive up to Vaughan's cottage like it says in the

story?"

"I saw him and his friends at the fire."

"What makes you think it was murder?" Jay asked.

Benny looked surprised. "I didn't say that."

"No, but you avoided the question, Benny."

The boat put-putted a long moment before Benny answered. "I don't know. It ain't anything you could hang a man for."

"Maybe not," Jay admitted. "But something's stuck in your craw, Benny. I know you too well."

"You sure are hard to fool, ain't you?" Benny grinned. "It's just that one time when Mr. Vaughan and I was fishing, he said to me that if they opened up in that plastics plant here he was going to take me down to the Gulf some day and give me the fishing trip of my life."

"You figured he would make a lot of money?"

Benny beached the boat at Vaughan's cottage.

"Anyway, the plastics plant is cinched, but Mr. Vaughan is dead," Benny observed, stepping out of the boat and pulling its bow up on the land. "Well, here's what's left. It ain't much. The fire was something awful."

"I see what you're thinking," Jay said. "Vaughan had operated seismograph crews all over this section, and he'd know every likely oil and gas deposit there was. The plastics plant will be using a lot of gas, and a man with Vaughan's knowledge would have had enough leases to cash in for some real money."

"If I had been in his place, I'd have had me a pocket full of leases," Benny observed practically. "And men have died in the oil game for less than that."

They went up to the gaunt fieldstone foundation and the blackened ruins of the cottage. A scorched metal bedstead

testified to the heat of the blaze, and the blackened gas range, sitting at an angle in what had been the kitchen indicated the center of the explosion.

Jay kicked the twisted wires of a birdcage out of the cinders and shook his head sadly. "Well," he observed, "his parakeets died with him."

"That was the only thing I had against him," Benny said. "Keeping birds in cages. Birds ought to live free instead of in prison. I come pretty near turning 'em loose the night of the fire."

Jay looked at Benny. "How was that?" he asked.

"While he was gone, I dropped by and fed and watered them little parrots every evening about six. That evening, they'd got out of their cage, and was flying all around the house. They nearly got out the door when I opened it, but I finally got them cornered in the pantry and caught them. I wouldn't have done it for anybody else."

"Did you have your own keys to the place, or use Chamberlin's?" Jay asked.

"Mr. Vaughan left a set with, me. I wouldn't ask that tow-headed Chamberlin snob for the time of day," Benny answered. "We almost had a fight that night."

"What about?"

"He happened to be passing in his car and saw me go into the cottage. He didn't know I'd promised to feed the birds, so he came in and accused me of prowling vacant cottages. I was fixing to let him have one on the chin when I figured my job was worth more to me than the pleasure of knocking them pearly whites of his down his throat. I don't like that fellow, but his daddy-in-law carries too much weight in the club for me to get sore at him."

"How about the coroner's inquest? Didn't anybody ask you if you knew

anything about the accident?"

"No. I didn't know anything worth telling, anyway."

Jay went on through the blackened ruins, picking up and observing the remains of familiar objects. He found a package of bank statements and canceled checks with only the ends slightly charred, which had apparently escaped burning by having been stuck between the leaves of a thick buckram-covered volume of court decisions relative to oil lands. He put the package in his pocket and looked around a few more moments before he left.

As they pulled up to the club dock, Jay asked suddenly, "Benny, do you remember if Rowley was fishing the afternoon of the explosion?"

"Do I?" Benny grinned. "I won't forget that. I'd just caught me a four-pound bass in the inlet the other side of Vaughan's neck. Mr. Rowley saw me pull it in, and gave me five dollars for it."

As they beached the boat, Benny asked, "You think there's anything smelly about that accident?"

"Is there anything smelly about a dead fish?" Jay countered, then headed with determined stride toward the clubhouse.

HE **C**R**O**S**S**E**D** the club veranda overlooking the water, gave a half-dozen answering waves to people sitting around who shouted at him, and made his way into the club lounge. He saw Bea just emerging from the ladies' lounge, gave her a quick nod and went on toward the office.

He was half-way down the narrow hall when Sam Rowley came out of the office, his face red, and perspiring and his old straw hat band decorated with an assortment of colored bass flies.

"Listen here, son," Rowley grinned. "You're wasting a lot of time you could be fishing. They're striking down in the neck. Get your rod and we'll go get us some big

ones."

"Nope," Jay answered. "I've got to kind of find my way around the old place first. Good luck." He went on down the hall and opened the office door.

Martin Chamberlin sat at his desk, a clothing-ad blond young man. There was a smile on his face as he finished stuffing a packet of currency into his pigskin wallet and shoved it into the breast pocket of a smartly-tailored sports jacket done in enormous plaids.

He got up and extended a well-groomed hand in welcome. "Long time no see, Jay. Come back to catch up with your fishing?" He reached for a bottle of Scotch out of a smart liquor cabinet.

"Yes," Jay answered brusksly. "I'm fishing now—for information."

Chamberlin arched his eyebrows. "I'm not what you'd call a good source—"

"You're going to be—whether you like it or not. I want to know why you lied at the coroner's inquest over Dale Vaughan?"

Chamberlin's face darkened, then he caught himself and smiled.

"Now look, Jay," he said smoothly. "I know how you felt about Dale. But this was an accident, pure and simple. Why not try to forget it?"

"Because I think it was murder, and that I can prove it. I want the truth out of you, and right now."

Chamberlin became very dignified. "Are you accusing me—"

Jay reached over the desk, grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and lifted him out of his seat. "I'm not accusing you—I'm demanding facts, and if you don't talk, I'm going to choke them out of you. I'm not a patient man right now, and—"

Chamberlin's fist came up in a short jab and caught Jay squarely on the chin. It was a stunning blow with the force of a hammer, and it knocked Jay down. The

man could hit!

Jay picked himself up off the floor and started around the desk toward Chamberlin.

The door had opened, and Bea's voice interrupted him.

"Jay, if I'm not interrupting, could I see you a moment, please?"

The tableau froze while Jay let the rage drain out of his veins. The girl stood just inside the door, her face a mask. But Jay saw something lurking in her eyes, either fear or anger, he could not tell which.

He stood still a moment while he got back his control. Then he took a deep breath.

"All right," he said, "Let's go." He turned back to Chamberlin. "You'd better decide to open up, mister, before it's too late."

He took Bea's arm and they went out through the club room. Before he had completely traversed it, he heard Chamberlin's door slam, and the man's leather-heeled shoes stamping hurriedly along the hall.

This time he did not look at anybody as he guided Bea across the terrace and out onto a path which led through the woods bordering the lake. Neither of them spoke as they walked.

THEY followed the trail until they reached a rustic bench in the edge of the timber, through which they could get small vistas of the lake. Jay lit their cigarettes. He was keyed up.

"Why did you break it up, Bea?" he asked.

"If you'd killed him you wouldn't have had much defense, would you? Nerves, maybe?"

"You're not answering my question, Bea. You broke up that interview deliberately. It might not have been the best way for me to get information out of

Chamberlin, but I could have got it. You're not satisfied that Dale's death was an accident, but when you saw I was going to do something about it, you got scared. Why?"

"I told you. I don't want to see—anybody hurt."

"You're still not answering me. You're afraid of something."

"All right, I'm afraid," the girl admitted. "I was afraid you'd do something like this if I told you. And I really haven't anything to go on—just a suspicion."

"What is it, Bea? I've found out a little, but I've got to have every scrap of information I can get."

"Hardly anything. Just before your dad died, Dale had made arrangements for him to buy up oil and gas leases southwest of town. He didn't want to go out shopping for them himself because everybody knew he was an oil man, and they'd have raised the price on him. So your dad was to buy them in his own name, and transfer them to Dale later.

"Then your dad died, and Rowley carried on. Whether Rowley went on and bought leases for Dale or not, I don't know. But there weren't any leases in Dale's lock box after he died—so Rowley told me. Rowley is executor of the estate. I don't know what happened. Of course, that doesn't prove anything at all. I just had the feeling that something has been going on—something that frightens me."

"No," Jay admitted. "Nothing seems to prove anything. Dale cashed thirty-five thousand dollars worth of bonds a little before he died. Do you know anything about that?"

Bea said, "No," unbelievably. "The estate hasn't been probated yet. Rowley doesn't tell me anything. How did you learn that?"

"From the bank."

“What happened to the money. Do you know?”

“I think I do—”

Jay heard the *p-i-n-g* sound just as he felt the burning sensation and the impact along his ribs. The girl uttered a startled sound and looked at him with wide eyes, then she slumped into his arms. A second shot followed the first, but whined by his head. .

He knew he had been shot. He thought the girl had seen it and fainted. It was not until he felt the sticky blood and saw the crimson rosette on the breast of her black crepe dress that he knew the bullet had grazed him and hit her. She was limp in his arms.

He looked around quickly, but there was no sign of anybody to help him get the girl back the mile to the club house. He looked out at the lake, searching for a nearby boat.

The nearest boat was Benny Postoak's, a quarter of a mile offshore, its motor popping and Benny heading it across the lake. He was too far away to hear a shout above the sound of his motor.

Quickly Jay laid the girl down on the rustic bench, slit the shoulder of her dress and examined the wound. It was a tiny clean hole seeping blood, just below her collarbone. The wound was about the size of a .22 bullet. He wadded his handkerchief against the wound, then picked her up and carried her toward the clubhouse.

As he carried her along the trail it came to him with forcible suddenness that she had been shot while trying to keep him from some such disaster.

If he had ever doubted for a moment that he was involved in a sinister murder, that doubt was gone now. The threads he had gathered were slender, and they seemed too few and too unrelated, but he was convinced now that if he could find

another thread or two, he could weave a hangman's noose with them.

And somebody else thought the same—for he knew that bullet in Bea's body was meant for him. Jay took the girl out to his car and headed for town at a road-blistering clip. Bea was not completely unconscious, but the shock of the bullet had stunned her, and she was beyond speaking: He pushed the throttle to the floorboards and his car left a cyclone of dust in its wake.

As he gripped the wheel, careening around farm trucks and week-enders, he made a new discovery. Right now, when he felt that he had the mystery of Dale's death cleared up, the matter had deserted his mind for the time—and Bea fully occupied it. It had taken a bullet to show him the fact—but he saw it now. He loved Bea Vaughan!

He must have always loved her. But he had been so close to her and Dale all their lives that he had just taken her for granted, just as he might take a sister for granted. But that was finished. Now the half-conscious girl beside him meant everything to him.

He pleaded with the car to go faster. And it did go so fast, that when they hit the state highway, a policeman had to chase him five miles before overtaking him.

The man in the Sam Browne belt stepped out of the white car with tan fenders and the map of the state on its door, and asked, “Tell me, Mac, since when did Chevies go jet propulsion?”

Jay said, “I've got a woman in here with a bullet in her. Take a look, if you don't believe me, but hurry up, will you?”

The cop took him at his word. “Looks like a .22. Who did it?”

“I can't tell you. We were sitting down on a bench in the woods at the Club Lake when it happened. That's all. Let's get to

St. Vincents first and talk later. How about it?"

The cop said, "Yeah, we'll talk later. Get her in the back seat. I'll drive you."

THE two cars pulled up to the emergency entrance of the hospital, and Jay got out, carrying Bea's slender form in his arms. In the entrance one of the cops saw a stretcher and unrolled it, and Jay laid her down on it just as two white clad interns came up, and took charge.

The cop turned back to his car to get his report book. The interns took Bea into the door and turned down the hall to the left.

Jay followed them in—and turned down the hall to the right.

He made fast time, walked down a couple of steps and out into an alley, and thence into a side street where he caught a cab and gave his own office address to the driver.

"Sorry, Bea," he whispered. "But I can do you more good this way, honey."

He went into his office and locked the door behind him. Then he stripped off his coat, gave a minute's attention to the flesh wound under his arm, and then set about ransacking the files and desks.

There were files marked, "Carleton, Private," and, "Rowley, Private," and general files, and there was the safe. And Jay's speedy fingers explored them all.

And then hidden in among some old unserved court orders, he found a bundle of papers.

The bundle contained more than twenty oil and gas leases, made by various landowners south and west of the city in favor of Sam Rowley. On the reverse of each lease, in the printed form for the assignment of lease, in case of its sale, the blanks were filled out showing the sale of them to Dale Vaughan.

As Jay examined the leases quickly, he noted that there was no notary's affidavit signed on them, and there was no recorder's stamp.

The transfer had not been made a matter of public record!

Jay was studying the papers at his desk, when a voice said, "So you had to make a murder out of it, even after the coroner had said it was an accident, eh, Jay?"

Jay turned and looked into the muzzle of a small pistol. Sam Rowley's innocent big eyes were behind the gun.

"Yes, I had to, Rowley. And I did. You left a dim trail, but I followed it."

Rowley smiled patiently. "I can't believe it, Jay. Tell me, will you, just where I made my strategic or tactical error, whatever you call it?"

"You were supposed to be buying leases for Dale," Jay answered. "Then when Universal plastics did decide to move in, you saw that Dale stood to make a lot of money selling them gas, and you couldn't stand that. You hadn't recorded the transfer of the leases to Dale which, as his attorney, you should have done. I have his canceled check to prove he paid you for them.

"So, since nobody yet knew of the deal except you and Dale, you simply killed him and acted as though you had never transferred the titles to him. As long as there was no public record of the transfer, and nobody who could contest your continued ownership of the leases, they were in effect still yours. You stood to make a fortune."

"Very nice reasoning, Jay, but I'm not a court of law. If you had just let well enough alone, you'd have been better off. After all, it wasn't your affair, and everybody was satisfied that Dale's death was an accident—except you and Bea."

"And so you had to try to kill us, just

as you killed Dale.”

“I think a jury would believe that she was accidentally shot by Benny Postoak. He goes around the lake all the time shooting at turtles with his rifle. It’s dangerous.”

“I could change the jury’s mind in a hurry. Benny uses hollow-point shells, and they make a wound bigger than a forty-five. Bea was shot with a copper-clad twenty-two, like you’ve got in that target pistol. The wound wasn’t as big as a lead pencil. You shot her, Rowley, with that gun you’ve got in your hand. The State Police have the bullet by now.”

ROWLEY smiled sadly. “Bea wasn’t satisfied, but she couldn’t have proved a thing. I was shooting at you, Jay. And I’ll be able to do a better job of it here. You see, I know you haven’t got more than a suspicion, and a little circumstantial evidence, but I flatter you to the point of being afraid you might be able to stir up a little trouble for me with even that little to go on.”

Jay said, “Another error you made, Sam. I’ve got a complete case against you, with motive, opportunity and means of committing the murder. You were out in your boat at about sundown that day, fishing for bass. Instead of continuing to fish, you bought a fish from Benny, then slipped over to Dale’s and turned on the gas in his range, and also screwed one of the electric fuse plugs out of its socket. Then you went back to the neck and fished until dusk.

“When Dale came in from his trip, he stopped off at the club, and you detained him there until dark, when you drove him on to his cabin. You planned that when he found his lights weren’t working, he would strike a match, which would ignite the escaped gas, and blow himself—”

“That’s enough, Jay. One would think I’d written a confession and you had read it. It’s too bad you were so meddlesome.”

Suddenly Jay was seized by an overpowering rage. He flung himself on the calm little lawyer without regard for the gun. It exploded just as his shoulder knocked the man off balance. The jolt knocked the weapon from Rowley’s hand.

Then the reception room door opened and Chamberlin rushed in, his pink face blanched. “Rowley, what’s up?” he blurted.

“Kill him,” Rowley yelled. “He’s found out—”

That was as far as Rowley got, for as Chamberlin’s quick mind reacted, he knotted his fist and swung at Jay. Jay spun and knocked him down with one solid blow to the jaw. Then he turned back to Rowley who was getting up onto his hands and knees and crawling toward his gun. Jay kicked the gun out of his reach.

Rowley wasn’t through fighting for his life. He grabbed Jay by both legs and hugged them to him, jerked him to the floor. On the green rug, Rowley’s desperate fingers found Jay’s throat, dug in and locked.

Jay had no choice. In order to live, he had to bring out a trick of his Army jungle training. He broke the man’s neck, and only when Rowley died could Jay breathe again.

Chamberlin was moving and groaning now, and Jay heard the wheels rolling out in the elevator shaft and knew that somebody was coming up.

He picked Chamberlin up and slammed him into a chair. “I owe you one,” he threatened. “You’re mixed up in this murder, and I’d just as soon kill you, too, if I can’t get what I want out of you.”

“I don’t know anything,” Chamberlin gasped.

“You’re a liar. You knew that Benny Postoak was feeding Dale Vaughan’s birds every night while he was gone. He fed them the night of the explosion. If there had been a gas leak in that house for a week like you swore at the coroner’s court, the birds would have been dead a week.

“You knew that they use little birds in the coal mines around here to test the air for gas, because any gas will kill them and warn the miners. You knew that Dale’s dad was killed by gas in a mine, and that Dale had worked with bottled gas and knew its danger, and kept those birds in that house for that reason.

“If those birds were alive for Benny to feed just before dark that night, then somebody had to have gone there and turned on that gas! You used to be a free-lance oil lease scout, and probably hustled all those leases that Rowley bought for Vaughan. It’ll be easy enough to prove.

“So you figured Rowley’s game, and faced him with it, and made him pay you to testify that the thing was an accident. That’s probably where you got the money you were stuffing in your pocketbook when Rowley came out of your office red-faced and sore just as I went in. Then when I faced you with your lie, you went out and tipped Rowley off, and he trailed Bea and me and shot at us. You’d probably have collected more for that little favor. Chamberlin, you’re tarred with a murder brush unless you come clean—but quick.”

“All right,” Chamberlin moaned as the starch went out of him. “You figured it out almost exactly. I knew Benny could testify about there being no gas in the house just

before Vaughan went in, and I used him as a club over Rowley’s head. You help me get out of this easy and I’ll be your witness.”

There were heavy footsteps outside in the hall as the elevator stopped, and the two state policemen came in, with their guns in their hands. Jay smiled at them. “Looking for me, gents? I’m ready to have that little talk now.”

“Now that’s mighty white of you,” the Sergeant said. “More .22’s flying around, huh?”

Jay took half an hour to tell them the whole story, and to show them the exhibits in his case. They listened through it all, and they were convinced, and now they were his friends.

“So,” Jay finished, “if you’re going to press that charge of speeding, let me at least phone the hospital before you throw me in the jug.”

The Sergeant looked at the other cop and winked. “We’re going to throw you in, all right, but not into the jug. Into the hospital. We’ll drop you off as we take this beautiful clothes horse down to the jail.”

“How come?” Jay asked, puzzled.

“That little lady,” the Sergeant grinned. “She ain’t bad hurt at all, except in the heart. The doc says for us to find a lug named Jay and bring him in a hurry, because all the time she was under ether she was telling him what a blind fool he was for not bein’ able to see how much she loved him. The doc says that’s hurtin’ her worse’n the bullet.”

“Okay, officer, let’s hurry. I want to see a lady about a lug.”