

DRAFT DODGER

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

"The guy's nutty," the whole town said—as if that were explanation enough why the draft board should classify an able-bodied man as 4F. What did they know about the hunting accident years ago that had made the very sight of guns a thing to recoil from?



NORMA was curled up on the porch hammock, her feet tucked under her, and her slim hands clasping her knees. Moonlight brought out the reddish sparkle of her hair; she was so close that I could see the filigree of her ear pendants, and smell her perfume blending with the honeysuckles that screened the porch. As near as all that, but miles away from me, and getting further every minute.

All of a sudden, she was on her feet, so quickly that the move left me gaping. We stood there, face to face; her eyes weren't natural, and her voice was strained when she said, "Dennis—I think—we—I'd better say—good-bye."

She was in the full moonlight now. There was nothing lovely about her face except its outline. I'd had my last look at the glow that'd

built up, evening after evening. But pretending not to get the point, I caught her hand and said, "Heck, darling, it's not late."

It was like grabbing something dead. She didn't even yank it away. "I didn't say good-night. It's good-bye—we'd better—well, we've been seeing too much of each other—and—"

She didn't have to finish. She'd been trying to think a nice way out of it all evening, and being too honest to string anyone along, she'd blurted it out at last.

In other words, she knew all about me. It was as final as the slam of the screen when she ran into the house.

Well, the rest of the town figured me for a louse that was taking advantage of the agricultural workers' exemption, so why shouldn't Norma Cheney join the crowd?

While I wasn't a war-dodger, explaining my 4-F rating would've made things even worse, so all I did was look for a second at the door that wouldn't open for me any more, and then hoof it back to Carver's bunk-house.

"My job was bossing the Mexicans who worked old man Carver's date grove, just outside of Bagdad, in the Mojave Desert. After miles of sand and rock, there was the town, an oasis of blue-green umbrella trees, gray-green tamarisks, and tall date palms.

No use trying to figure who had knifed me. Every time I went to town, the leathery and dried-out natives began thinking of their sons in the SWP and in Italy; you'd hardly expect them to cheer my bullet-proof essential job. And Norma, being a young widow who owned a big chunk of the oasis, shouldn't be getting too interested in a bullet-dodger from up north. Just that simple, and what'd you do about it?

Nothing at all. You're lucky to be alive. But a couple nights later, I went to hoist a few beers at the Oasis Bar, where I planted myself at a corner table and made a stab at reading the out of town papers. Ray Saddler got them from all over, and sent them to the bar as fast as he read them, which was plenty quick. Keeping informed was his business, and being postmaster was just a side line. He was an expert on foreign and military affairs; he'd won the World War, and he knew how to win this one; and he hated draft-dodgers. Probably not a bad guy; just an old buzzard, forty-five anyway, and sore because he couldn't get back in uniform.

HANGING around a bar all by yourself wears thin in a hurry so I barged out into the shadows of the arcade that ran half the length of the block. Nice timing. Norma and Saddler were coming from the movie, way ahead of time. Soon they'd be sitting behind the honeysuckle vines on her front porch.

The doors were still swinging behind me when the chatter in the bar eased off, with

only one man speaking. Dallas Rapp, who ran the filling station, bawled in his bull voice, "Mason ain't a slacker. You fellows got him wrong."

"Hell, he acts able-bodied."

"Sure he is, but the poor guy's nutty. Ray Saddler told me so."

There they had it. Ever since that hunting accident, when I shot a friend of mine, it makes me sick to touch a gun, or look at one, or even think of one. The same goes for anything that sounds like a shot, or a noise like a riveting hammer, or even anything dropping with a slam. Everyone said it was accidental. but that didn't help me; the kink remained, and having to explain it made it worse. You try telling the first hundred people you're just shocked and shaken up, and not really nutty, and see what it does for you. You end up by not believing yourself. That's why I came to Bagdad for a change of scene and a quiet place. But try to get away from your hoodoo!

I barged on and braced Saddler. "So you told her I'm crazy, huh?"

Without waiting for an answer, I socked him. Considering his age, he did mighty well, but every time he got up, I knocked him flat. Where I was wrong was yanking him to his feet when he couldn't get up, and then setting him up against a pillar and plastering him some more.

That was when Sam Parley conked me with his night stick and flung me into the village hoosegow. The judge gave me thirty days in the county jug and told me to stay out of Bagdad.

MY time was nearly up before old man Carver got me out, and put up a peace bond, so I could come back and work.

Ray Saddler had got over his bruises, but that's all he got. Norma had in the meanwhile found a hero in San Bernardino, and he followed her to Bagdad to finish recuperating from his wounds. Major Heffner wasn't much

over thirty. Maybe thirty-five, tall and sandy-haired and impressive-looking. On top of it all, he wore an acre of decorations; he'd been places in two years of war. Just one eyeful, and you couldn't blame Norma for going for him.

Old man Carver grinned and shook his head and said, "Well, now that you and Ray won't have nothing to wrangle about, I won't be forfeiting that bond."

Next evening, I went to the post-office to pick up the mail. While I was twiddling the combination on the lock box, Saddler poked his head from his office. I didn't know what to make of it when he said, in a fumbling and awkward way, "Mason, I want to talk to you."

"OK, sound off."

"Come to the house, around ten, after I finish reading my papers."

"What for?"

"Well—uh—I want to talk to you. Maybe I been wrong."

I didn't like the guy or any part of him, but you got to give a fellow credit when he's trying to do the right thing, so I said I'd be there.

Bagdad sprawled out on both sides of the highway. Just short of the lighted block, I cut over toward Saddler's place. The houses were well apart, and surrounded by tamarisk hedges to keep dust storms from driving through. There were voices, and radios, but the hedges blocked off the lights.

Saddler's house was dark. When I knocked, I noticed that the door was ajar.

"Saddler!" No answer. "Saddler!"

But there was a paper tacked on the panel. I struck a match, and read the typed words: BACK IN 30 MINUTES. I walked in, the way you would in a village like Bagdad. Another match, and I found the wall switch.

Saddler had come back, and for keeps. He was on the floor, near the typewriter and folding table, which had been upset. Blood splashed scattered newspapers, some opened, some still in their jackets. He'd been conked

with a stone pestle, the kind the Indians used to use for pounding acorns and mesquite beans. It was part of his collection of curios. And he was as dead as if he'd been socked with the ox yoke over the fireplace.

Of the whole six-eight hundred people in Bagdad, I had to be the one to find Saddler. With no one having heard him ask me to come out, my story was as thin as cigarette paper.

Saddler's hand was still warm. The blood splattered around hadn't got thick and dark yet. His hand reached for the long bladed shears he used for making clippings. I'd noticed that most of the papers he sent to the Oasis Bar had had items cut out of them, mainly from the People's Forum, or Public Opinion sections, but sometimes bits had come from the news columns, stuff that was hot enough to write editors about.

His sending all those out of town papers to the bar might've been good fellow stuff, and it might've been just to remind people how he kept posted on what was going on all over the nation.

There wasn't any sign of a brawl. He'd been conked as he bounced to his feet. Someone had sat on the leather upholstered Mission sofa. That was plain from the marks in the dust. The Indian girl didn't clean things very well.

Then I thought I heard something behind, or alongside the house. When a tin can rattled, there wasn't any doubt. I made a dive for the front door, and jabbed the switch.

It was dark between the porch and the tamarisk hedge, but the desert stars gave enough glow for me to make out a blur of something to my right; and I got a whiff of perfume, clear and spicy. But that was one girl I did not want to meet.

IT didn't take long to circle the outskirts of Bagdad. The breeze freshened, whipping up the sand. By morning, there'd be no tracks; but when I got to my room in the bunk-house, I began to wonder if anyone had seen me on

the way to Saddler's.

That worried me almost as much as the perfume of the woman in the shadows. It was Norma's brand, one they didn't sell in Bagdad.

Getting up before sunrise was easy. There hadn't been any sleep for me.

The news spread early and spread fast, once the Indian gal who cleaned and cooked for Saddler got there to fix breakfast and found him. Old man Carver hobbled out into the grove to tell me about it. My job was to look surprised and properly shocked and sorry.

"Some woman was there," he wound up. "She left a heel print in some sticky blood."

"Probably the Indian gal," I said, remembering the perfume.

"Nuh-uh. Tula don't wear high heels, not to work."

Later, Sam Parley came over to ask me where I'd been when Saddler was killed. I came back at the red-faced marshal, "Depends on when it happened."

Carver chuckled and whittled off a fresh chew of Star. "Sam, that gag has whiskers longer'n yourn, you'd oughta know he'd not snap at that kind of bait."

Parley grinned all over his good natured face. "No harm trying, it worked back in 1909, on Digger Bill. After all, Mason here had words with Saddler."

Carver's face got dark and rocky-looking as the hills; he was thinking of that peace bond he'd posted to guarantee I wouldn't do any more brawling. "That there was a month ago, and Saddler had it coming. Shucks, I once nearly shot my dad accidentally, and for weeks, I got sick at the sight of a gun, but that didn't mean I was crazy."

"All right, Lem, all right," Parley said, and hauled out.

Then Carver turned on me: "Son, I ain't saying you did it, and I ain't saying you didn't, I just ain't saying."

"Nice having a friend in town, Mr.

Carver."

"Haw! It's my rheumatism, you're useful helping around here. And don't get in the dumps account Norma shying away from you, women folks can't take any chances with fellows with a loft full of bats. Not that you have, but that's what she was given to think."

"You know all about it."

"Ray Saddler told all he knew."

"How'd he find out?"

"Reading papers, I guess. And digging deep. Anyway, it's not hard to get cured of being gun-shy. Take my old double barrel Parker, or that .38 Smith & Wesson and handle it, no matter what it does to you."

The idea made me sick and dizzy. I backed away. Carver hobbled forward and wagged a shaky finger under my nose. "You do like I tell you. And finally, fire a shot. That'll cure you."

Then he remembered the farm hands were listening, and he went back to the house. Nice thing about those Mexicans; they didn't stare and gawk; they did a good day's work, not caring whether I was a draft-dodger, or just crazy.

THAT noon, something did make me sick. It was the smell of burning leather, coming from Norma's place. With rationing, it was funny, her destroying shoes. If she was tired of them, she could've given them away.

The more I thought of that heel print in the blood splash, the more I wanted to talk to Norma. What kept me from it for a whole week was Major Heffner keeping a track worn between the Mojave Inn and her house. They'd go driving in his Pontiac convertible, or sit on the front porch. When the wind was right, I could catch their voices, and smell his cigars.

Sometimes, I'd see him at the Oasis Bar, where he'd kill an hour or two. He was getting in solid with the town, building himself up for when he'd be moving in permanent. It seemed he was out of the army for keeps, or soon

would be.

After a week, Major Heffner headed for San Bernardino. That evening, I dropped in as soon as the help had checked out. Norma looked surprised and a bit at a loss when she saw me at the door. I said, "Thanks for the cigarettes and stuff you sent while I was in the jug, but that's not what I came to talk about."

She stepped to the porch. "Sit down, Dennis." Here we were again, on the hammock, and miles apart. She was wearing a diamond the size of a Deglet Nur date. Heffner wasn't losing any time.

"A lot of people think I settled Ray Saddler."

"Aren't you imagining things?" She hitched over, and laid her hand on my arm. "Oh, I'm sorry about everything. I was afraid—well—that you were taking things too seriously, and—"

"That I'd get violent?"

"No, not that. But you'd had your troubles, and a disappointment wouldn't help. I just made too much of a garbled story."

"All right, skip that, but Sam Parley's waiting to get something on me. I can tell that from the way people look at me whenever I'm in town. What do you know? What are they saying? I'd like to know where I stand."

"I've not paid particular attention," Norma said. "And that's what you ought to do. Look and act too worried, people will begin thinking things."

"Well, I've been thinking. Plenty, for instance, the day Saddler was found dead, you burned some shoes. I smelled that pretty soon after there was word about the woman's heel print in the blood on Ray's floor." Her face changed, and she caught her breath. But that was nothing compared to the smack I got when she came right back at me, "Your ideas on shoe leather couldn't've carried very far, but if I'd said anything about you having been at Ray's place that night, you know where you'd be now."

While I answered right away, the voice sounded like someone else's. "What do you mean, I was at his house? Would you claim you saw me there?"

Pretty smart, putting it that way, and not missing a beat? That's what I thought, until she answered, "Ray told me, he'd tried to make up for having you condemned as a draft-dodger, but telling about your 4-F status only made it worse. And he was really sorry. So I told him he ought to have a man to man talk with you, at his house in private, and try to square things up, so you'd feel more at home in town. Convince you he'd do everything he could to keep you from being treated like an outcast."

"Well, I told him I'd see him, but that doesn't prove I did."

She shook her head and smiled a little. "You went. You would go, just to meet him half way."

"All right, I did, and I found him, and I was panicked. Plenty. But you were there, I smelled your perfume, I saw something move in the dark at the end of the porch. You kicked a tin can in the walk alongside the house, or maybe in back. We're both in this; I guess,"

Norma nodded. "I took a shortcut, when you left Carver's. I went to see how he'd treat you."

"You figured he wouldn't play ball?"

"No, not exactly. But for a man like him, it would go against the grain to knuckle down. I wasn't sure but what he was staging it all to please me, to convince me he was generous-minded, rather than because of his sense of justice."

"You mean, do the noble and bighearted stuff to build himself up and help him meet Major Heffner's competition?"

"In a way yes, Ray was stubborn and persistent, and anyway, he did want my good opinion, regardless—"

"And he might've fudged a bit, trying to get it?"

“All’s fair,” she said, and smiled a little more.

THE crazy thing about it was that there hadn’t been any motive for murder, except the run-in I’d had with him. Saddler hadn’t left Bagdad for twenty-five years, barring trips to go to Legion conventions. He didn’t keep money around the house, he wasn’t mixed up with any women, and the limit of his gambling was penny ante in the back room of the Oasis. Norma must have read my thoughts, for she finally went on, “It must be either you or me, and since you didn’t do it, you’re afraid I did?”

What could I say? Before I knew what’d happened, she swayed toward me, and kissed me, and drew back out of range. “Good-night, Dennis. Don’t worry about me, I’m no more guilty than you are. And you’ll get over being gun-shy, just take Mr. Carver’s advice.”

I started home on clouds, but pretty soon my heels hit hard ground; that glow in her eyes and that sweetness of her voice was just a hangover from the major’s visit. Being thoroughly in love, she found the whole world a grand place full of swell folks.

Saddler had figured on patting me on the head to get himself square with Norma; I kept thinking of that angle, wondering how he got the idea he stood a chance with her, particularly when Major Heffner had Norma dizzy and dewy-eyed? Saddler would either have to have been a plain fool, or else, he’d had reasons, good ones, that no one else knew.

To try for an answer, I ended up by approaching Saddler’s house from the desert side. Getting in the back door was easy enough with a bit of wire and a broken phonograph spring. To keep from making clear tracks, I’d pulled heavy socks on over my shoes. Trying to figure what a man had been thinking of during the couple weeks before he was killed would’ve been too much for a level headed fellow like Sam Parley, so maybe I had a chance.

The floor was clean; no blood, no scattered newspapers. Otherwise, it was like it’d been the night I barged in. Well, my cotton gloves wouldn’t leave prints, so I dug into the shelf of big scrapbooks Saddler had been filling, year after year.

There were newspaper sketch maps of Krajalein and other atolls, and maps of the European fronts. Another page had stuff about strikes and shutdowns. There were clippings of letters he’d written to editors, hot and sharp, on all sorts of people and current events. He’d tramped on toes all the way from Tia Juana to Tacoma, and Frisco to Miami.

There were even articles on my hunting accident. A clipping bureau must have fixed him up, as he didn’t get my home town paper; just the key points, like Salt Lake City, New Orleans, Chicago, and so on. He’d changed his mind about a recent New York item, it’d been torn out of the book, nothing but a bit of the date line was left. There were a couple small blood spots on that page, they’d kept it stuck to the next one.

So far, so what? I pushed some books over, and then yanked my hand back. There was a long barreled Colt .45, clean and oiled, and loaded, with just a thin film of dust it’d gathered since Saddler had quit taking care of it. He could’ve reached it from his typing table, if he’d had a chance.

Same old jitters. I shook all over. That accident was right in front of me again. I smelled powder and blood, and my ears rang from the blast. I gritted my teeth, and tried to grab the pistol, and see if what Carver said was true. But I couldn’t do it. No more than some people can force themselves to a parachute jump, or a high dive. They go plumb to pieces, no guts, no control.

When the flashlight beam quit dancing, I carried on, looking for signs of girl friends, letters, pictures, in the writing desk and in the bedroom. There were some old time studio photos, dead-end romance, judging from what the gals had written, and then forgotten about.

In a closet was an old fashioned, high-collared army coat, all pressed. He'd been a sergeant, and he'd been decorated; D.S.C., and the French *Croix de Guerre*, with palms.

All static, so far; and then on the dresser I found just the thing a fellow like him would have—a card with a clock face, and two hands you could set to show the hour and minute. Over the dial was printed, BE BACK AT.

But with such a gadget, why'd he type that note I'd found pinned in front? He wouldn't! Someone had done that after knocking him off.

ONCE back in the living room, I heard a hinge squeal that gave me chills. The door was sneaking open. The latch tongue was out. After a minute or so, the door began shutting, slowly, with just the faintest scrape of tongue and jamb-socket. It was the suction of the wind, made by my having left the back door open. The settling of the house, or the drying out of the panel and frame had caused enough warping to keep the latch from working right.

I headed for the bunk house, to try to figure some way of getting Sam Parley to wonder about that typed return notice.

Norma was one person I could talk to, but I had no chance. Sam Parley was around the next day to pick her up for questioning. Desert-patient, Parley had prowled until he found a shred from her skirt, where she'd snagged it on a nail at the back gate of Saddler's place; that bit, and a few threads caught on a mesquite thorn.

The law man had checked up on the dry cleaner, snooped around clothes lines, gabbed with women shopping at the general store; he'd watched the women folks, evenings and afternoons, and he'd looked so dumb no one got wise, till he drove up to ask Norma if she'd mind taking such and such a dress, and going to the county seat to have it checked against samples.

The phones spread the news and the

details as quickly as they had the news about Saddler's death.

I asked old man Carver for the day off. He gave it to me, along with a funny look, and not asking why. Chances are he had his ideas, but however that may have been, I caught the next bus for San Bernardino. The odds in favor of my getting hold of a library file of New York papers were pretty good. I remembered the date and page number on the scrap left in Saddler's book, though that wasn't all that took me to town. Seeing Major Heffner was important. There was a chance that Norma wouldn't phone him, preferring not to holler till she was hurt.

When I found Heffner, I learned that Norma had not got in touch with him; so I got to work, and he listened. His face got sharper. and so did his eyes; they began boring into me. He was getting on edge. He'd reach for a match to light the dead cigar, and then he'd forget to, and finally he'd dig for another match.

"All right, Mason!" Heffner got up and paced the carpet. "That Blockhead Parley thinks he can prove she was in Saddler's back yard. However, the bits of cloth do not prove *when* she was there."

"We don't know how much else he has up his sleeve, major. The girl that does the housework must've smelled burning leather. She probably knows how many pairs of shoes Norma had, you know how the hired help snoop around."

His forehead was puckered in three ridges; the tip of his nose was edging down a bit, and his mouth was tightening. He made a snarling sound, and a helpless move of his hands. "Damn it, yes. Even if he's bluffing, he'll uncover the facts."

"It's sure as hell bad, major. The heel print is on record, and every person has a certain way of wearing heels down, so destroying that pair didn't do much good. The others'll spill the beans."

"Mason, how do you fit into this? Tell

me.”

“I’m trying to help her. She’s a neighbor.”

“There’s more than that behind it.”

“I’m in on this myself, and if Parley questions me, it sure won’t help her any.”

“Good Lord!” he groaned, and changed color.

After telling him pretty much what I had told Norma, I went on, “And since talking to her about both of us having been there, the answer hit me right between the eyes. Only, I don’t know how to use it without putting myself on a limb. But maybe you could figure out a way. You’re the last person on earth who’d want me put on the pan, not that I’d spill on purpose, but—”

“I understand,” the major cut in. “Your nerves are—um—unstable, you’ve had a severe shock. Very much like a man in battle. The police would have an unfair advantage of you. All right! What is it?”

“Suppose we went to Saddler’s, on the quiet, and I showed you?”

“Anyone know you came to see me?”

“Positively no one. Couldn’t take a chance. Everyone thinks I’ve got bats in my loft, and quite a few think I finished Saddler. The only way to get Norma totally in the clear is to take a whack at whoever did it.”

He whistled, then straightened up, and smoothed out his decorations. “Nice, if you can do it.”

“It’s just a matter of figuring why someone typed that BACK IN 30 MINUTES note. Saddler didn’t do that, there was a gadget with clock hands to show what time he’d return. Suppose you look at everything and then you can figure.”

“Let’s do that.” He dug a five out of his wallet, handed it to me, and said, “You go down and find some Bourbon, we can both do with a drink. Meanwhile, I’ll promote some gas, I’m a bit low. Wait at the bank at the corner, in case you find the bottle before I can wangle a tankful.”

We both worked fast; I’d not been waiting

more than five minutes when the Pontiac pulled up, and we were heading for Bagdad.

ABOUT two miles short of town, we swung into a wagon track, and then ran the car into greasewood. That done, we set out afoot, with the murky lights of Bagdad guiding us.

Once we were in Saddler’s house, I began showing Heffner around. “A draft can suck the front door open, but the guy that conked Saddler didn’t know that, so he puts up the phony note, not suspecting it’d miss fire. The only reason he’d put up such a note is in case there was an expected visitor.”

“How do you arrive at that conclusion?”

“Simple. The visitor sits around on the steps half an hour, forty-five minutes, then goes to the Oasis or the Mojave Inn, or the like, asking whether Saddler was around. And in the morning, when the corpse is found, the whole town knows about the caller, and figures he conked Saddler and tried to put across the idea he didn’t go in. Only, I did go in, account of the door being open, so I didn’t advertise myself. See why it’s important to show that the killer must’ve left the note, and that Saddler wouldn’t have?”

“Mmm . . .”

Just that; and with the flashlight not pointing at him, I couldn’t see his face, but it’d been worth seeing. He sounded impressed and surprised. “Another thing, major, Norma came in after me, to see what’d gone haywire with the friendship convention, and stepped in some blood. Looks bad for her, though that phony note helps.”

“Carry on!” he snapped, when I held my fire a second.

“Well, figure it. Suppose, like Parley probably does, that she went to see Saddler, and he got rough and familiar, and she conked him, which is not impossible. Only, can you picture her or any woman coming out of a jam like that, and then stopping to type a note? She’d make tracks, crazy-mad, tearing her

clothes on nails and mesquite.”

“You may have had enough of a nervous breakdown to rate 4-F,” the major said, pretty slow and thoughtful, “but you’re offering very good logic.”

“Nothing wrong with me except I am gunshy. It was this way—”

“Norma told me all about *that!* Now, how am I supposed to have become acquainted with these interesting things—what I mean is, how am I to present the facts to Parley without mentioning you?”

“Heck, you’re an officer, you’re supposed to have more brains than the mill run, that’s why I let you in on this. But I can do some guessing while you’re thinking. Let’s sit down.”

I flipped the light toward the settee, for him to sit down, then drew the chair from the typing table, and planted myself. “You take the flash a second and play it on that shelf, while I find the book with the riddle. You know, he was looking at his news clippings when he was conked. Fine drops of blood fell on an open scrap book, and when it dried, it stuck the page against the next one.”

“Yes? What of it?”

“What he was studying when he was conked might tell what his thoughts were about.” I leaned to grab the scrap book. “There was a clipping, pretty good size, torn out, only whoever tore it out didn’t get all. There’s enough left to show it came from page eight of the New York Times, dated January 4, 1944. Getting another copy is easy. And whatever the item was about, it has a bearing on why Saddler was killed.”

“Far-fetched, isn’t it?”

“No, sir. Only one clipping on that page, and nothing on the one facing it. If he’d changed his mind and yanked the clipping out, *before the run-in*, he’d sure not have been looking at blank pages while someone was getting sore enough to conk him.”

BUT the major was ahead of me, when I’d been thinking I was still ahead of him. He made a move; the shift of the light warned me, like I expected it would.

But what I didn’t expect was having him pull a gun. I’d been ready for him to snatch that Indian war club right next to where Saddler had kept the mortar and pestle, which Parley had taken for evidence. I was due to be socked then, and if my guess was right, beamed to keep me from ever telling Norma he was a phony, a home-made major who wore a French *Croix de Guerre* in his collection, when he was way too young to have got one in the first World War. None had been dished out to Americans this time, naturally not. Ray Saddler would surely have noticed that boner, and what happened to him, the way I figured it, wasn’t coincidental!

So here I was, ready to heave the typewriter when Heffner grabbed the war club. Only, he had other plans.

“Quit playing! Get in front of me, and do what I tell you or I’ll drill you, here and now.”

“Uh—what do you mean, major?”

“This damn’ foolishness has gone too far. You’re going to the police station right now, you know too much of this, entirely too much.”

Only he would not take me to the station. His voice made that clear. The only reason he was hanging off was that it’d look very odd if they found me dead in Saddler’s house. But half a mile out of town, you could bury ten men in the sand, and no one would ever suspect. I’d just have disappeared, and the law would figure that when Norma was taken up for questioning, I lit out while the lighting was good. And the phony major marries Norma, her date grove, and her bank roll.

And that last bit is what was the shot of hop; though I was good and scared, all the more so for knowing from Heffner’s voice that he was scared too, scared he’d not only lose his whole gamble, but flirt with a murder

rap to boot! And when a man is panicked, he can do a lot he couldn't begin to do otherwise.

My move was unexpected, which helped. I made a dive for the shelf, and just as Heffner's gun smacked, I got hold of Saddler's .45 revolver. Gun-shy, but no time to get sick and shaky. The big double action gat began bellowing and bucking. The light blinded me, slugs were whacking all around me, one or two hit me, but I was yelling and blazing away.

The flash dropped, and there was a thump, and choking and groaning. Bagdad turned out howling.

WELL, I was leaking like a sieve. The major was worse off, a single .45 almost anywhere is like being hit with a broad-axe, and he'd stopped a pair.

Meanwhile, Parley had come back from San Bernardino. He was there in time to pour the heat on Heffner before the shock wore off. When I showed the item I'd snatched from the library files, the fake major threw up the sponge. It told all about his swindles, and cashing bum checks, using the uniform as a front. The name was different, but the face was his. He'd slipped, letting someone mug him, and realizing his boner, he'd headed for the desert to cool off, and then, meeting Norma, he figured he'd combine business with pleasure.

Saddler had called his hand, but privately. After Norma got sore at Saddler for ribbing me, he was afraid that exposing Heffner would kick back, the bearer of nasty news never being popular.

It was clear now why Saddler had figured himself still having a chance with Norma. And Heffner, flaring up, had conked him, and yanked the clipping out of the scrap book.

Parley said, when the smoke cleared away, "Look here, Mason, you didn't know a *Croix de Guerre* from a Legion of Honor!"

"Sure I didn't, but the bronze palm leaves on the red and green ribbon stand out, no matter how many other ribbons you got, and I noticed Heffner wore one the first couple times I saw him. Then came the killing. And then, tonight, I noticed he had no *Croix de Guerre*, and why'd he dump it? Even if I'd not found the Times in the library, his getting rid of that decoration would have been a tip-off. Particularly since Saddler's old uniform has one of the same kind."

Old man Carver cackled and cut off a chew. "I told you that the way to cure nerves was to grab a gun. And grit your teeth."

I straightened up and blinked. "You sure did tell me! But things happened so fast—heck, I guess I forgot to be gun-shy, I was just plain scared he'd riddle me."

Then I headed for the door.

"Hey, where you going?" Parley hollered.

"To wire my draft board, to tell 'em I'll cold caulk any or all sons of ----s that claim I am gun-shy 4-F."

But Carver hobbled after me, and hooked a claw on my shoulder. "Son, that there is a first rate idea, but this war'll last another couple months anyway, you stick around till I find myself some weak-minded and decrepit cuss for a gang boss."

"Well, that's no more than right."

Carver scratched his head. "Sam. I think this fellow must have bats in his loft after all! It don't seem to have occurred to him if he sticks around another week or two, it'll give Norma a chance to get over the shock of finding her hero was an imitation."

That's the way I played it. And here's one advantage I got over the other G.I.'s—while there's no telling whether Norma will have a welcome sign out when I come back from winning the war, it is at least one hundred percent certain she is going to shy away from heroes, whether the real article, or home-made.