

*It's a Big Jolt to a Couple of
Chiseling Crooks When They
Are Forced to Learn, the
Hard Way, That Crime Does
Not Pay!*



“Going somewhere?” Detective-sergeant Portal asked.

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TO LEAVE TOWN

C. S. MONTANYE

VAN GRANBY was waiting on the platform when my train pulled in at Hamilton. I saw him through the smoking car window. You couldn't miss the big chiseler with his round, flat face, the cigar in the corner of his mouth, and the brown felt hat pulled so far down it made his ears stick out.

We took a cab at the depot and rolled through the city. It seemed to be a pretty lively town. I had heard there was a factory making bomber parts down by the Noglia River.

Lots of work. That meant lots of money.

“Funny how much you look like a copper, Johnny,” Van began, after a minute. “That dead pan of yours—I can't explain it—but you've always reminded me of a cop. Any police blood in your family?”

“No,” I said, “but we've always mixed with 'em. Lovely people.”

Van rolled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. He had a set of perfect teeth. They should have been perfect. They had cost enough.

“That's why I wired you, Johnny.” His voice

sounded soft. "Because you look more like a dick than the cheap little grifter you are."

"Maybe," I said. "But so far I've never done any time. That's beating you by three tough years."

Van laughed under his breath. "We don't make the same mistakes twice."

"Once is plenty."

The taxi finally stopped at a hotel. A block-long, brick and stone bin. Smart, with its bronze canopy and doorman in uniform.

"We'll register you here," Van said.

I got Room 807. A bell-hop took my bag. I gave him a quarter when we went upstairs.

Number 807 was a nice room. Large, sunny, with a bath attached. From the windows I could see the Noglia River and the bridge that crossed it at First Avenue. A big bridge, a recent WPA project.

VAN told me to phone down for drinks. I unpacked my valise and hung my blue suit in the closet while we waited for them to come up. The suit was my Chicago best. I hoped the wrinkles would come out.

Van tossed his brown hat on the bed. When I told him that was unlucky he grinned, but let the hat stay where it was.

"You remember Dave Henry," he started, after a waiter had brought our Cuba Libres. "The party who put the profits he took out of his string of gas stations into a string of race-horses?"

I remembered the man. I used to see Henry on the lawn and in the paddock at the Middle Downs track, a quarter mile oval outside of Eaton, Illinois. He was a two hundred and twenty pounder, in a ten-gallon Stetson, with his shirt open at the neck and a pair of binoculars in his hand.

One September morning, early, they had found Dave Henry as dead as a nail in the living room of his home on Roseland Terrace. He had been shot through the heart. The day before he had won four thousand dollars at the track. That was gone. There were no clues, nobody had ever been picked up, and thirteen months had elapsed.

"What about Dave Henry?" I asked.

"Believe it or not, I know the guy who did the job on him." Van took the cigar out of his mouth and rolled it between his fingers. "He's a

punk by the name of Tod Hecker. For the past year he's been paymaster for the Briardale Dairy Company in this town."

"How did you find all that out?"

"Through the only person in the world who knows. A dame. His dame. At least, she was his dame until I took over. But Hecker doesn't know about that—yet."

The rum drink was pretty good. It had a kick like a college football star. It sharpened my mind, but I couldn't quite hook it up. Dave Henry's murder, someone named Tod Hecker working for a milk company, and a doll spilling to Van.

That didn't explain why Van had wired me. Why had he said there was dough to divide? And why I was in Room 807 at the fancy Lord Hamilton Hotel, worried about the wrinkles in my Sunday suit?

"You'll meet the dame tonight. She's Flo Gaynor." Van set his glass down on the night table beside the bed. "You'll like her. I know how you are with the little lovelies. You'll like her, but not too much. I'm nuts about this babe. Don't forget that."

"I'm off gals." I made a face and reached for a cigarette. "What's the answer? Hecker crosses Dave Henry out, but where do we come in? Where's your profit?"

"You'll see," Van murmured, and his voice was soft again.

He was staying at a high-class boarding house a mile or so from the hotel. I met him at eight o'clock that night in the lobby. Flo Gaynor was with him. I didn't think so much of her at first, but when we sat down in a corner of the grill and the lights shone on her reddish-brown hair, I began to change my mind.

GRANBY'S new heart had gray-greenish eyes. Long lashes and a creamy skin. You'd never say she was beautiful by any stretch of the imagination. Earl Carroll probably wouldn't have given her a second glance, but after you were around her for a few minutes you could feel her magnetism like electricity.

I did.

Van ordered an expensive meal. He seemed to be in the chips. All the time I had known him he had dealt in petty larceny. From the looks of his roll he must have turned up a winner. I thought

about that.

"Notice the guy at the third table on the left?" Flo Gaynor said, without switching her gaze, when we were through to the demitasses. "Thin lug. Looks as if he hadn't shaved all day. Gray suit, henna tie, black shoes."

"Who is he?" Van asked, without much interest.

"Detective-sergeant Benjamin Portal." Flo's red lips parted in a smile. "He keeps breaking into the big apple dailies with his smart stuff. He put the grocery store chain holdups on ice. Maybe you read about them."

"Crime trembles in Hamilton when Benny polishes up his badge and takes a fresh cud of tobacco," Van put in.

"He's tough," Flo Gaynor said. "I thought I'd let you know."

"Thanks." Van nodded.

We sat at the table, smoking and drinking liqueurs. Detective-sergeant Portal finished his cup of coffee, got up and wandered over to us. He did look as if he hadn't shaved. Still he didn't need a shave. He had one of those blue skins over a pan that was hatchet-thin. His mouth was thin, too.

Portal gave Van a gander and looked at me.

"We're not interested in the dirty laundry from other cities," he said in a voice that was quiet, almost silky. "Hamilton's kind of particular about its visitors."

"Is that so?" Van answered.

"My advice," Portal went on, "is for you two to leave town within twenty-four hours."

Van shrugged. He puffed a little harder on his cigar. Flo smiled up at the copper. I felt uncomfortable. I didn't like the idea of police people thinking I was undesirable.

"What have we done?" Van asked Portal. "Outside of spending our money in this burg?"

"We don't need your money and we don't like your kind around."

Van shrugged again. We knew what the law meant. Someone had recognized Van and had tipped the cops. Or maybe Portal had been other places, knew something about Van's record.

"Twenty-four hours," Portal repeated. "If you're still here after that I'll give you both a going over."

He walked away. Flo said something under

her breath. Van looked at his watch.

"How do you like that?" he said, and laughed. "Popular everywhere we go."

I WENT up to Room 807. I don't know where Van took the dame, but he was back within fifteen or twenty minutes. He told me to get my hat. He said not to turn the key to the room in at the desk, but to keep it in my pocket.

We walked down First Avenue. There was a tavern on the corner, a couple of streets beyond. We sat down in one of the compartments and had a beer.

"Here's a little present for you," Van said, handing me a badge. "Slip it in your vest. Later on, you'll need it."

I held it below the top of the table and looked at it. It was a regulation police department badge from the town of Eaton.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Shut up and listen." Van leaned across the table. "I've been bearing down on Tod Hecker. I dropped in to see him the other night and almost scared him to death when I told him what I knew. I mean when I told him a few of the facts about Dave Henry. When I finished with him he was standing in a pool of his own sweat."

I began to figure where Van's coin had come from. I didn't say anything. I let him do the talking.

"I told Hecker a detective at Eaton had turned up evidence and was coming to Hamilton to talk to him. I let Hecker know I had a strong in with this copper. I told him things could be fixed, but it would cost him dough."

"How much?"

Van rubbed his chin. "That was the question. Hecker makes a good salary with the dairy company. He's a tight hustler. That's one reason Flo brushed him off. It's a cinch he's got Henry's cash in the bank. So I told him I thought you'd do business with him for around two thousand bucks."

"No more?"

Van shook his head. "I've got Hecker believing this is all right. I'm afraid to raise it. He might get suspicious. Two grand's better than no grand. One for you, one for me, Johnny. And don't forget we're working on a twenty-four hour shift."

"Tell me what you want me to do."

"I'm to meet Hecker at nine o'clock. I'll give him the key to your room and send him to the hotel. I won't go up with him because I don't want to be seen with him. You let him sweat there alone for ten minutes before you go in. Here's what you say, and how you say it."

Van was a good talker. He laid it on the line, so clear a child could understand. I repeated most of it and he paid for the beers and went out.

I sat there thinking and looking at the bar flies. A few minutes passed and a girl with reddish-brown hair and gray-green eyes came in through a rear door.

Flo Gaynor sat down where Van had parked. I don't know why it was, but I felt kind of a hollow emptiness.

"Surprised?" she smiled. "I've been waiting for Van to leave. I thought he'd never go. I want to talk to you, Johnny."

"About what?"

"Buy me a beer."

I GOT her one and waited until she drank half of it.

"What do you want to talk about?" I asked her.

"Van. Is he married?"

"I don't know much about his private life. Why?"

"He wants me to go to Eaton with him. He says he wants to marry me. I—I don't know. Has he got a prison record?"

"I don't know anything much about him."

"Have you ever been in stir?"

"No," I answered truthfully. Then I said: "You?"

She nodded, looked away.

"I want to be sure about Van. I've had that matrimonial gag handed me before. I want to be positive there are no strings on him. I don't want policemen at my wedding."

I felt uncomfortable. It was none of my business. I knew Van had a wife and a couple of kids somewhere, but that wasn't my affair. I didn't intend to speak out of turn.

When Flo saw she couldn't pump me, she changed her attitude.

"You're a nice boy, Johnny. Different from the guys I've known. I hope I see you again

before you leave."

I took a deep breath. "So do I. Where do you stay?"

"At this address."

She tore a piece from the wine card, borrowed my pencil and wrote a number on it. I put it in my card-case, wondering why I was all stirred up inside.

"Ten after nine," I said. "I've got to be moving."

"I'll sit here a while longer," Flo said. "Take care of yourself, Johnny."

"That's the best thing I do," I told her.

It was not quite twenty after nine when I stepped out of the elevator on the eighth floor of the Lord Hamilton.

There was a light on the transom of Room 807. The door was shut and unlocked. I opened it and walked in. Tod Hecker sat slumped in a chair facing the windows. He was a small, gray-haired man in the early forties. His face was seamy and he was so nervous he could hardly keep still. His feet moved and his fingers tapped the arms of the chair.

I threw him a look and took off my hat. Van had stressed the professional angle. I tried to act the way a copper would.

"I understand Granby's given you the dope on me," I led off, showing him the Eaton badge briefly.

Hecker nodded. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. He must have used it several times before I'd come in. It was pretty damp.

"Yes. Granby said you had come to Hamilton to talk to me."

His voice was shaky, high-pitched. I took plenty of time getting a cigarette out and lighting it. I blew out the match and set an ashtray on the bed. Hecker coughed. A dry cough, deep in his throat.

"The chief of police at Eaton wants to ask you a few questions," I went on. "We picked up a couple of clues out at Roseland Terrace that we've been working on for more than a year. One led nowhere. The other got hot. McCabe sent me here to bring you back."

Hecker squirmed in the chair. "Granby said—"

"I know. Of course, I can tell McCabe I was

on a cold trail. I can tell him you were in Hamilton six months ago, that I found out you'd gone to South America. I can do that, but—"

HECKER peered up at me. He had expressionless eyes, pale blue, watery. What Flo Gaynor ever had seen in him was a mystery. Particularly, if Granby was right when he had said that Hecker was cheap and tight.

"How much to leave me alone?" he asked.

His thin voice cracked. He used the handkerchief again. I'd never seen a man sweat more. Unless it was Dave Henry at the track, pushing up his Stetson, when the horses were coming down the stretch.

"Two thousand dollars—cash."

The blue eyes looked at me. I knew what he was thinking. A crooked cop, putting on the gouge. But there was nothing he could do. Not a thing if he wanted to stay in Hamilton, keep on working for the dairy, make love to Flo.

"What assurance have I got," he asked, "that when I pay you off you won't come back next week, next month, next year and do the same thing?"

"None at all," I said cheerfully.

"But I have some hold on you." Hecker sat up a little straighter. "If you turn me in I can always tell how you propositioned me, and what I paid you."

I let that pass. I didn't say anything more. After a couple of minutes he took out his wallet. It was brown leather, worn thin.

Hecker had money in it. He thumbed through some bills of high denomination. He counted out two thousand dollars and laid the money on the night table. I noticed how his hand shook. I didn't know whether it was due to the moult or his relief at not having to go back to Eaton.

I tucked the bills away in my pocket. He put on his hat and buttoned his coat.

"You'd better buy yourself a drink on the way out, Hecker—or whatever you're calling yourself these days. Go on, beat it. Get out of here."

I opened the door and shoved him through it. The last thing I heard was the dry, rattling cough in his throat as he stood waiting for the elevator.

I split the take equally with Van. We celebrated with a couple of Cuba Libres.

We had learned to have a real yen for the rum one year when we had been resting in Havana. Van looked worried about something.

"It's Flo," he said, when I mentioned it. "I'm losing my grip. I can't figure women any more. I thought she loved me. She acted strange tonight."

"Nuts," I said. "It's nothing more than your imagination."

"No, Johnny. It isn't." That's the trouble. She won't go to Eaton with me. She wants to stay here."

"On account of the Hecker punk?"

"I don't know." Van rubbed his chin. "We've got to think about taking a powder. I can't stick around and try to make her change her mind. It's always something." He looked at me, when I reached for my hat. "Where are you going, Johnny?"

"Out for a walk."

I TOOK a taxi at the corner. I gave the hackie an address scribbled on the corner of a wine card. We rolled a couple of miles and stopped before a three-story apartment house. It was on a quiet, tree-lined street.

I went in and rang a bell. I went up two flights of stairs. The second door to the left opened when I reached the landing. Flo Gaynor looked out. She had on a thin blue robe. It went well with her reddish-brown hair. It had wide sleeves.

"That you, Johnny? Come in. I—I've been waiting for you."

I went in and shut the door. Flo snapped the lock. I stood in the middle of the room. When she came over I put my arms around her. The wide sleeves of the robe slid back and her hands crept up to my shoulders.

I kissed her. It was one of those long, melting kisses that make you thrill from your heels to your scalp. I didn't want to stop, but after a minute she laughed and pushed me away.

"I've got a couple of things to do, Johnny. A couple of phone calls to make. One to Tod, telling him it's all off. Another to your friend Van. Or maybe I don't have to notify *him*. Maybe he knows already."

She turned toward a telephone on a desk in the corner. I grabbed her again and held her close to me.

"You're a sweet kid, Flo. We're going to have a lot of fun together!"

"I hope so, Johnny," she whispered. "That's all I need!"

I didn't want to run into Van so we decided to take the bus to Stanton, change there and ride the cushions east from Central City. I kept away from the hotel. They could have my Chicago best suit, my pajamas and the haberdashery. Also my bag. It was better to travel light than to run into Granby.

Flo made breakfast at seven and at half past we were all set. She had her stuff packed in two suitcases. She put on her hat, powdered her nose and took a last look around the place.

"Two years, Johnny. That's a long time."

"Ready?" I picked up the suitcases. "Let's blow."

Flo opened the door—and Benny Portal walked in.

It was half past seven and he must have just shaved, but you'd never have known it. He had on the same clothes he had worn at dinner. There was a uniformed man with him, gun and all, and there were a couple of other guys who stayed out in the hall.

"Going somewhere?" Portal asked, looking at the luggage.

"It was your suggestion, pal," I said.

Portal walked over and opened the bathroom door. He looked in the kitchenette. I set the suitcases on the floor. He glanced in the bedroom and came back.

"You and the girl are riding up to Headquarters with us," he said.

I heard Flo breathing hard. Portal didn't sound good. In his tone there was something that had a snap-sure click.

"Why do we have to go to Headquarters?" I

asked. "What have we done?"

PORTAL sat his feet down flat on the carpet. He began to smile. I didn't like any part of it.

"We want to find out where you and the girl friend come in on the sudden demise of a party named Hecker. Tod Hecker."

"Tod—murdered!" Flo gasped.

"He did a piece of diving early this morning," Portal said. "Off the First Avenue Bridge, into the river. Lee, down at the dairy company, tells me Hecker was two thousand dollars short in his accounts. He was working on the books last night. Hecker would be short, after the money he'd tossed away on this Gaynor dame."

"That doesn't answer my question," I said.

Portal spoke over his shoulder. The two guys came in from the hall.

"We want to get to the bottom of this suicide. We're pretty sure we have half the dairy company's missing cash. We'll get the rest—soon."

He grinned at me. The two guys picked up the suitcases. One of them nudged Flo. She looked at me before she walked out with them.

"And you think I know about it?" I asked.

"We found something in Hecker's pocket that fits you into the pattern. Your pal Granby's waiting at Headquarters. We'll all talk this over together, quiet and refined like."

"Okay." My voice sounded funny to me. "So Granby had money on him. I still don't figure where I come in. What did you find in Hecker's pocket?"

Portal gave me a push toward the door.

"Just a key, with a tag on it. For a room in the Lord Hamilton. A key numbered eight hundred and seven."