

# DOOM on SUNDAY



The gun went off in the air

by  
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## *Private Eye Mike Dobson Finds a Corpse in His Car!*

**I**T was two minutes past twelve Sunday morning and I was driving along the west side of Center City toward the downtown section. I happened to look at my gas gauge and I saw the needle flirting around the zero mark. I began to look for a gas station.

About two hundred yards ahead I saw some neon tubing hazing up through the slight ground fog. When I got there I

twisted my heap onto the concrete and pulled up before the high-test pump.

The undersized attendant came out of the neat whitewashed station and moved under the flood lamps. He was wearing clean faded coveralls, brown army shoes, and a rag in his hip pocket. His hair was gray and thin. His face gray and thin and small. He was about sixty. He looked a little anxious.

"Good evening," I said, through my small hangover. I looked at my watch. I was still feeling pretty good. "I guess I should say, good morning. Either way, it's nice weather for October."

"Yes sir," he said. "You might as well fill her up. The high test."

He said "Yes sir" and he went around to the back of the car.

I got out. "Men's room?"

He looked up from my gas spout and jerked his head and I went around to the side of the station to a spotless white room.

When I got back he was putting the hose back on the pump.

"Oil all right, sir?" he asked.

I said yes and got in behind the wheel. He came around to the front windshield with a sprayer in his hand. He squirted liquid on the glass.

"Weather's fogging up," he said, rubbing briskly. I said, yes, it was.

He went around to the side windows. He stopped. I waited. I didn't hear a sound.

"Hey," I called back. "Finished?"

He came around to the driver's side again. He looked sick. His face was a pasty green. He wet his lips and nodded his head quickly.

"You all right?" I asked. He nodded his head again.

"How much?"

He didn't answer.

"I said how much do I owe you?"

"I—I don't know."

"Well, take a look at the meter and let me know."

He disappeared from the window. He was gone only a second.

"Three seventy-five, sir."

**I** GAVE him four ones and told him to keep the change. He kept looking at me nervously.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing, sir. Nothing."

"I can't help it," I said. "It's the face I was born with. They tell me I was a good-looking guy once. That's what makes me so sad."

I thumbed the starter button and geared the heap onto the highway again. Through the rear view mirror I saw him scuttle like a rabbit into the station. I saw him grab the phone. I scratched my head.

I had driven along about two miles and had come up on the main downtown artery when I heard the scream of a siren directly behind me. A white police cruiser raced up alongside and squeezed me over to the curb. The two cops came out fast with their guns in their hands. I recognized one of them. I opened the door and got out.

"Thanks for the reception, Muldoon," I said. "What's this—an honor escort to my apartment?"

He peered through the darkness at me.

"Oh. Mr. Dobson," he said. "Didn't recognize you."

He put his gun away and came up with a flashlight. The other cop still had his gun out. Muldoon came over to my car. He opened the door and flashed the light in back. He took a deep breath.

"Take a look, Mr. Dobson," he said.

I squeezed my six foot height and my two hundred pounds past his big form and took a peek.

There was a body on the back floor. It was the body of a man, and he was as dead as an old cigar stub. He was jack-knifed in there with his head pushed up against his knees. A black stain had spread over the back of his gray suit. Three or four holes had been punched in there and it didn't take an expert to see that they had been made by bullets.

I couldn't see his face. I reached in to lift his head.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Dobson," said Muldoon. "You have only a private license. I'll call in."

He went back to the cruiser and spoke into the two-way telephone. A few late drivers came by, slowed curiously, and went on their way. I fished for a cigarette and put it into my dry mouth. I was cold sober. The other cop still had his eye on me. His gun was still in his hand, barrel down.

Muldoon finished and came back.

"You'd better get in with Stokes here," he said to me. "I'll drive your car back to Headquarters. . . ."

Lieutenant Gillis stretched. He crossed his thin legs again. He ran his fingers through his sparse sandy hair. He got up. He had a sheet of paper in his hand. Through the frosted door of Homicide I could see an occasional shadow passing in the corridor. His tall stooped body leaned over the battered desk.

"Name's James R. Wescott," he read. "Age fifty-three. Height five-feet-eleven. Weight one-eighty. Widower, no children. Next of kin, a nephew living in Hamilton." He put the paper down. "The nephew is already here. I've spoken to him."

I looked at my wrist-watch. It was twenty minutes to two.

"Fast work," I said. "The victim sounds familiar, but I can't place him off hand."

"He owned the Snow White Laundry. Good business. Twelve trucks. Sound more familiar?"

"No."

"The assistant M.E. said Wescott hasn't been dead more than an hour. Four bullets in him. One round lodged in the bone. They were thirty-two caliber. What did you find downstairs?"

"We dusted the whole car. Nothing except my own prints and a couple of strange ones on the gas cap."

"The guy from the gas station. You still toting that thirty-eight S and W?"

I reached into my shoulder holster and took it out.

"No, no," said Gillis. "I believe you. Just checking. By the way, where were you tonight? How do you think that body got in there?"

"Search me," I said. "I haven't much of an alibi. I was over to the police commissioner's house on Commonwealth Road. All evening."

"The commissioner's, no less," remarked Gillis.

"Yes. The D.A. was there and the assistant D.A. And your boss, Captain Perlman, and Judge Talbot of the District Court and a few others."

"That's what they'd call an unimpeachable alibi. What was it all about? You doing more private work for the city again? Working new angles for the City Finance Commission?"

GRINNING a little, I shook my head.

"No, nothing like that. As a matter of fact, it was a bachelor dinner for Sam Clements, the assistant D.A. He's getting married next week. The commissioner spreads a nice table and serves good liquor. I left there about eleven forty-five. I pulled into the gas station a little after twelve."

"You didn't stop on the way."

"No."

"How long were you in that men's room?"

"Five minutes, maybe less."

"The guy there could have had time to put the body in the car."

"Sure," I said. "He's a sawed-off little runt about sixty. He dragged this heavy body across the cement and packed him in the car. After I left he called the cops. Do you believe it?"

"No. Meanix just called from there. No

drag marks or blood around the place. The old man saw the body when he was cleaning your windows. He got scared. As soon as you left he called police emergency."

"They sure picked me up fast."

"When you came out of the commissioner's house were you alone?"

"No. We all came out together. The judge grabbed a ride with Sam Clements and the D.A. Perlman had his own car with him."

"Your car doors were unlocked?"

"Yes. I got into the driver's seat and drove off. I didn't look in back."

He ran his fingers through his hair again.

"Somebody had a lot of moxie," he said, "planting the body in front of the police commissioner's house. Have you got any ideas?"

"No. And I want no part of it, Pete. It's your corpse and it's your funeral."

"It *will* be my funeral if I don't crack this one fast. Imagine what the commish will have to say about a corpse on his doorstep."

I got up.

"Good night, Pete," I said. "What you need is a good hot cup of tea. You'll feel much better afterwards."

"Very funny," he said sadly. "Go ahead, Mike. Run out on me. Leave me holding the bag. Go ahead."

"Now don't start that stuff again. You get paid for this. I don't."

"Go on—go home," he mourned. "You forget that you're in this up to your neck. It was your car the body was in. For all I know, it may have been some loogan who did it, some pally of yours. Does it for a gag, maybe. Now you want no part of it."

"That's what I call a sense of humor, calling that a gag. There are no loogans in Center City, remember? This is a clean metropolis. Or don't you read the press

hand-outs by the Center City Police Department?"

"Now he's getting sarcastic," said Gillis, addressing the blank wall. "After all the favors I've done him. After all the business I've thrown his agency."

"Never mind the famous weeping act," I said. "You know I don't like people bloodying up my car and using it for a hearse. But I have no time to talk about it now."

"Just one favor, that's all I'm asking. Talk to the guy. Wescott's nephew. He's waiting in the next room. Maybe you can pick up something I missed."

"All right, all right," I said. "But that's all. Look at all the sleep I'm missing. It's no good for me."

He wasn't paying attention to what I was saying. He had gone out in the middle of it. He came right back with somebody.

Wescott's nephew was a big red-faced boy of about twenty-seven. His mouth was pinched, and he looked mad. He was wearing a good suit of imported tweeds with hand-stitched lapels. There was a white silk shirt and a fancy tie. There were expensive brogues on his feet. He looked at me. I looked at him.

"Why didn't you tell me it was Mike Dobson," he said to Gillis. He came over and grabbed my hand.

"Hello, Fred," I said. "It's been a long time."

"Years," he said. "And you not living far from. Well, I guess that's the way it goes."

"You two know each other?" asked Gillis.

"Same outfit overseas," I said. "Divisional M.P.s. Haven't seen each other since Forty-five. Too bad it had to be like this." I turned back to Wescott. "Sorry as the devil, kid."

"It's something I want cleaned quick, Mike," said Wescott. "I don't care what it

costs or whom it hits. That's final."

"I don't blame you for feeling that way," I said.

"That's the way I feel. Whatever you charge is okay. I want you to start right now."

"Wait a minute, Fred," I said. "You've got me all wrong. This is a, police job. I haven't handled a homicide in a long time."

I COULD see the muscles working in young Wescott's face as his jaw hardened. Over to one side, Gillis hummed a tuneless tune and looked at the ceiling.

"Don't talk to me about the police," Wescott said. "If they had any kind of a police force in Center City the thing never would have happened. It never would have happened in Hamilton. I hate to think I'd have to live in this city and depend on them for anything."

"Slow down," I said. "Take it easy, Fred. You can't blame the cops for what happened. If you're going to blame something, blame it on our civilization. And don't worry — you'll get good action. Gillis, here, is a top man. F.B.I. Academy and all. And don't compare Center City to Hamilton. Hamilton is a quiet little suburb. Center City is a big town. It takes all kinds of people to make a big town; some good, some bad. You leave it to Detective Lieutenant Gillis. He'll make out all right."

"I'm leaving it to you, Mike. I know your reputation in this business." Wescott took out a check book. "Name your price."

"Never mind that," I said, waving the check book back to his breast pocket. "I know I shouldn't, but I'll take the case. I'll take it because you're all upset, and we can't reason with you. I'll send you a bill when it's all over. Meanwhile there are a few things I want to know. For example, where were you tonight?"

"Now wait a minute, Mike. You don't think I did it!"

"I don't think anything. You might as well know that this is no time to get sensitive. This is murder. We can't afford to be polite."

"Sorry. I was home with my wife all night. I suppose you want my fingerprints now."

"No. If I know Gillis he's already wired Washington for them. Are you sole survivor to your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Then it's now your laundry."

"Yes. I suppose so."

"I want your permission to go over the records there."

"You can have it."

"Good. Go ahead home, unless Lieutenant Gillis still wants you."

"No," said Gillis. "I'll get in touch with him."

Wescott shook hands with me and started for the door.

"Thanks, Mike," he said. "If I know you, you won't have much trouble with this."

"That's what you think. I always have trouble."

He opened the door and went out.

"I'm going," I said to Gillis.

"See you at seven in the morning?" He grinned.

"Nine. I need my beauty sleep. And take that silly grin off your face."

I left the Homicide Bureau, went down to the police garage, pulled my car out, and headed up the ramp. I moved out into the street, then nosed over to the south side.

Cutting over to Ogden Street to avoid the lights I came to the manufacturing and warehouse district. I drove along slowly in the empty streets. On Church Street I turned left and saw what I was looking for. The lighted sign said "Snow White

Laundry.” I pulled up in front of it and got out of the car.

It was housed in two small red brick buildings behind a chain link fence. The street was deserted. I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes past two. The dim street lights cast a halo in the drifting fog. I went over and rang the bell on the gate. Looking across the cobblestone courtyard I could see a light in the office. I looked at the little sign under the bell again. It read:

#### RING FOR THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

I rang again. I waited. I looked around. Parked down the street, fifty yards away, was a new model Chevrolet sedan with the lights out. It was too far for me to see the license plate. I tried the gate. It was unlocked. I opened it and went in.

My shoes clattered on the cobblestones as I crossed the courtyard and went up to the door marked “office.” It was slightly ajar. I went in.

The moment my foot crossed the threshold there was a click and the lights went out. I hit the floor fast. At the same time my arm flicked up to my shoulder holster and came up with my gun. Off to my right there were two bright flashes and two loud staccato reports. I sent three rounds quickly in that direction, my .38 booming in the closeness of the room. At the same time I started to roll away.

Something came down in the inky blackness and exploded in a blaze of light. That was all. . . .

**F**IRST it was the back of my neck hurting me, then the top of my head. I reached my arm back and opened my eyes. I was lying in a twisted position with my head against the side of a desk. I reached into my vest pocket and brought out my pocket flashlight. I snapped it on. My eyes followed the thin pencil of light. On the

wall near the door there was a wall switch. I got up and flipped it on. My eyes blinked spasmodically in the brightness of the room.

Lying on the floor near the desk was my gun. I picked it up and slid it back into my holster. A short distance away was a heavy chrome-plated flashlight. It looked as if it had done the job on my head. I let it lie there. I started to browse around.

It was a fair-sized office, not large and not small. There was a row of steel green filing cabinets and a half-dozen flat typewriter desks. Off to a side were two old-fashioned roll-top desks. There were papers scattered all over the place. In a corner I saw a small Mosler safe. The doors were open. There were more papers scattered in front of it. I picked a few of them up.

They were mostly business letters and bills of lading, nothing of importance.

Then I saw the leg sticking out from behind one of the desks. I went over.

His body was up against the wall as though he was thrown there like a sack of potatoes. He was old, and he was wearing dungaree clothes and a train engineer’s cap. His neck was wrinkled and seamed. I leaned down and touched it with my fingers.

He was still warm, but his eyes were staring and vacant and I knew it was all over for him. There was a pool of blood under him and two bullet-holes in his middle.

I had found the night watchman.

As I leaned over the desk for the phone, I noticed a trail of brown spots on the swirled linoleum. I bent down and touched one. I looked at my finger tip. It was blood that hadn’t dried yet. I followed the spots to the door and down the three short steps to the cobblestones in the courtyard.

My flashlight lanced out in the

darkness. There were no more spots. I went out to the gate. My car was still there. I opened the door and looked in the back—just in case. There was nothing there. Then I looked down the street.

The Chevrolet sedan was gone. . . .

Lieutenant Gillis put the phone down.

"The picture and print men and the doc will be here in ten minutes," he said. "Your call just reached me as I was leaving the office. You didn't waste any time getting to work, did you?"

I was sitting at one of the roll-top desks going through the drawers. I puffed on my cigarette.

"You know me," I said. "Old fire horse."

"You could have taken me along. I've got a badge and everything."

"You looked tired tonight. You're getting old. Tell me, were those thirty-twos that you pried out of the wall near me?"

"They're thirty-twos," Gillis said. "I also found your three thirty-eights in the wall over there."

"Thanks," I said. "What do you think about the blood spots?"

"You nicked somebody, that's sure. How bad, of course, we don't know. I'll run a check on doctors and hospitals."

"What about the old man? It wasn't my thirty-eights?"

"No. Small. Thirty-twos. He must have been gone when you got here. There wasn't a chance that you saw that car registration?"

"Too far away."

"It's too bad the old gent had to finish up like that." Gillis' eyes were bleak. "A corpse on the floor, and what looks like a routine safe robbery."

"You know well enough it isn't."

"Well, all we have to do is find the thirty-two, and we've cracked both homicides."

"Yeah," I said, as I got to my feet. "All we need is a big haystack and a needle. I'm going home. I'm tired and my head hurts. Let me know if you find any prints on the flashlight."

"When will I see you?"

"I'll be back here at nine o'clock. I'll want to give the place a going over after everybody is through pussyfooting around. But what I need right now is a couple of hours of sleep."

It was nine-twenty A.M. when I did get back.

Sergeant Meanix let me in through the gate.

"The boss stayed here all night," he said.

A RED-EYED reporter from the *Times-Standard* detached himself from the small group at the gate.

"Dobson? What are you doing here? Say, is there another municipal scandal mixed up in this?"

"No, Sam," I said. "Just helping Homicide, that's all."

"When's Gillis going to be through in there? I've got to get some pictures of the death scene."

"There's no hurry, Sam. This is the Sabbath. The day of rest. You've got all day. There's no edition until tonight."

I went inside, up the three short steps, and into the office. Gillis was sitting in front of one of the roll-top desks with a small file case in his hands.

"You're late," he said.

"Twenty minutes. I'd sure hate to be working for you."

"The watchman's name was Snell," he said. "Age sixty-eight. Married. Six children. Fourteen grandchildren. Wife living. Worked here four years."

"Somebody's going to raise hob with those statistics. The papers have it yet?"

"You saw the wolves outside. They

have it. It'll be out in the first editions tonight. I'd like to wind it up before then. Otherwise you know the roasting I'll take."

"Maybe we will wind it up," I said. "I like to earn my dough fast. What else?"

"There were thirty-twos in the watchman, all right. No prints on the flashlight, just smudges. A million other prints all over the place. A lot of people work here. Waiting for a lab test on the other stuff. By the way, how well do you know this Fred Wescott?"

"Not very well. Same outfit in the Army. I hadn't seen him again until last night. Never knew him well at all. Why?"

"He owns a Forty-nine Chevrolet sedan." He waved his hand about. "He inherits all this now, doesn't he?"

"He don't need it. He's got enough. It may be a coincidence about the car."

"I don't like coincidences."

"It's not enough to go on yet. What we've got to do is to tie up both these killings. Was there any evidence that the other killing took place here?"

"None that I can see."

"It doesn't figure that way, anyway," I said. "Supposing that old man Wescott was working here last night. He was alone except for the night watchman. Somebody came to knock off the safe. Wescott and the night watchman were both killed. Then they took Wescott's body out and left the night watchman. Why? What about the Chevrolet sedan? What about me walking into something here after it was all over? What about the watchman's body still being warm? You see, it doesn't figure."

"I knew it wouldn't. All right, here's another coincidence." He handed me one of the cards from the small card case.

A looked at it. It read:

Lawrence Corliss. 827 West Spring Street,  
Center City. Age 39. Married, no children.  
Cashier.

"What's this?" I asked.

"This is from a file of the employees. West Spring Street, in the eight hundred block, is one street away from the commissioner's house."

"And you're thinking that because this guy is cashier he'd be handling the laundry money and he'd know the combination of the safe."

"That couple of hours of sleep did you good. You're actually bright this morning."

"This seems to fit pretty good. Let's go out there and ring door bells."

There was a small, green, well-kept lawn in front. The house was small, an inexpensive modern bungalow painted white. It had a single car garage at the end of a gravel driveway. There were a few evergreen shrubs near the front door. The numbers on the door were brass and they read "827". Gillis jockeyed the police car over to the curb. The street had that Sunday morning emptiness.

"Stay here, Pete," I said. "Let me try this alone first. There's been too much lead flying around lately."

I paid no attention to his grumbling. I walked up the macadam walk and put my finger in the white button beside the door. I heard some chimes somewhere inside, then some high-heeled footsteps. The door opened.

SHE was a big flashy blonde in her early thirties. She was well-stacked if you liked them built when meat was cheap. She had long eyelashes which could never have been the real thing. She had a lot of lipstick on, but no rouge. She was wearing a dark blue, skin-tight dress, and nothing much underneath.

"Yes?" she asked. Then she saw the white police car at the curb. "Oh, the police." If she was surprised she didn't show it. She wasn't the type.



I nodded. She opened the door wider and let me in. The furniture was cheap installment stuff and more than a little dusty. There was a man sitting in a living room chair with a Sunday paper in his lap. He didn't get up. He looked tall, and he was well-built, but he had a peculiarly sallow face and a small, hard mouth.

"My husband," she said to me. To him she said, "This man's from the police."

"What's wrong?" he asked. There was an edge in his voice.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said. I sat down opposite him and pulled the chair up close. "Your employer, Mr. Wescott, has been found dead."

"No!" said Corliss. "I mean . . . It's so sudden! When did it happen?"

"Last night."

"That's terrible."

"Well, sometimes those things happen."

"But why? Why would anyone want to kill him?"

I sat there for a moment without answering. The room was quiet. In the kitchen I could hear a faulty faucet dripping. A car went by outside.

"Nobody said anything about him being murdered," I said. "How did you know?"

"I didn't know."

"You asked why was he killed."

"I was just guessing."

"As long as we're guessing," I said, "let's all play the game. Let me guess. Let me guess that you've been playing upsy daisy with the cash box, that Wescott was working on his ledgers last night at his office, and that he found out."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"As long as it's only a little game we're playing," I went on, "let's stretch it a bit further. Let's guess that Wescott came here last night and had it out with

you. He was going to turn you in. You shot him. You took his body out of the house. You were a little panicky. You were looking for a place to dump it. You saw a car parked on Commonwealth Road. The door was unlocked. You dumped the body in the back. You went home."

"You're crazy," Mrs. Corliss said.

"It's only a game we're playing," I said. "After you got home you both began to think. There were a few loose ends. The evidence, the ledgers, were still in the office. There was a discussion about what to do. After a while you drove down to the laundry to get them. To make it clean you had to kill the night watchman and make it look like a safe robbery. You got hold of the books. You took what dough there was, too. That's where I stumbled onto it. You remember me. I'm the guy Mrs. Corliss sapped with the flashlight."

"Don't believe him, Larry!" she screamed.

"You can't cover it," I said to her. "There's a bandage on his arm under his shirt sleeve. The arm where I nicked him. There should be a new Chevrolet sedan in your garage. We called Registry before we came down here. It's in your name, too. Then there's the State Division of Corporations with a duplicate set of figures, filed for tax purposes. There you are, two murderers and a motive. Enough to hang both of you."

"No," Corliss said, "I've still got this."

He moved the paper in his lap a little and I saw the snout of a nickel-plated .32 peeping out at me.

"That won't buy you a thing," I said. "You're not playing cops and robbers any more. You're a big boy now. There's a police lieutenant outside in a police car. He has a radio in there. You'll never make it."

"I'm jammed up plenty," he said hoarsely. "A couple of more won't make

any difference. First you, then him.”

HE hadn't quite finished when I let my right leg go. I slashed out and up. The gun went off in the air as my foot hit his arm. It skittered along the length of the room as he made a dive for it. I let him, but my arm was in and my .38 was halfway out of the holster. Then I saw it coming.

I'll give her credit. She was fast, because I hadn't even seen the heavy urn in her hands. I started to duck but I was a little too late. I felt it come down on the side of my head. I had a whole slew of Fourth of July fireworks all to myself, but I managed to keep on my feet. I was trying to swing around to Corliss when I heard the tinkle of glass and then a shot.

I looked at Corliss. He had the gun in his hand but he wasn't interested any more. He was sitting on the floor staring stupidly at the reddening stain in his midsection. The gun dropped to the floor. I heard the front living room window go up and then Gillis threw a long leg over and came in. As he did, Mrs. Corliss squirmed by me and scrabbled for the gun.

I grabbed her by a well-turned, silk-shod ankle and slid her back.

“I never saw such people,” I said to Gillis. “They go plumb crazy when they see firearms.”

“You all right?” he said.

“I'm all right. It's only my head. But you know my head. I've had things bounced off it for years.”

GILLIS went over to Corliss. He bent over him, straightened out, and put his Police Positive away on his hip.

“I'll phone for an ambulance,” he said. “This fellow is in a bad way. He's got one in the middle.”

He took out a handkerchief and picked up the nickel-plated revolver with it.

He put it in his pocket.

“If you want to,” he said, “you can go ahead and laugh. We found the needle in the haystack.”

“I'm not laughing,” I said. “Not the way my noggin feels. I'll tell you what you can do. Take me out and buy me a nice cup of tea.”

He grinned. He went into the hallway and picked up the phone.