

The Price of a Dime

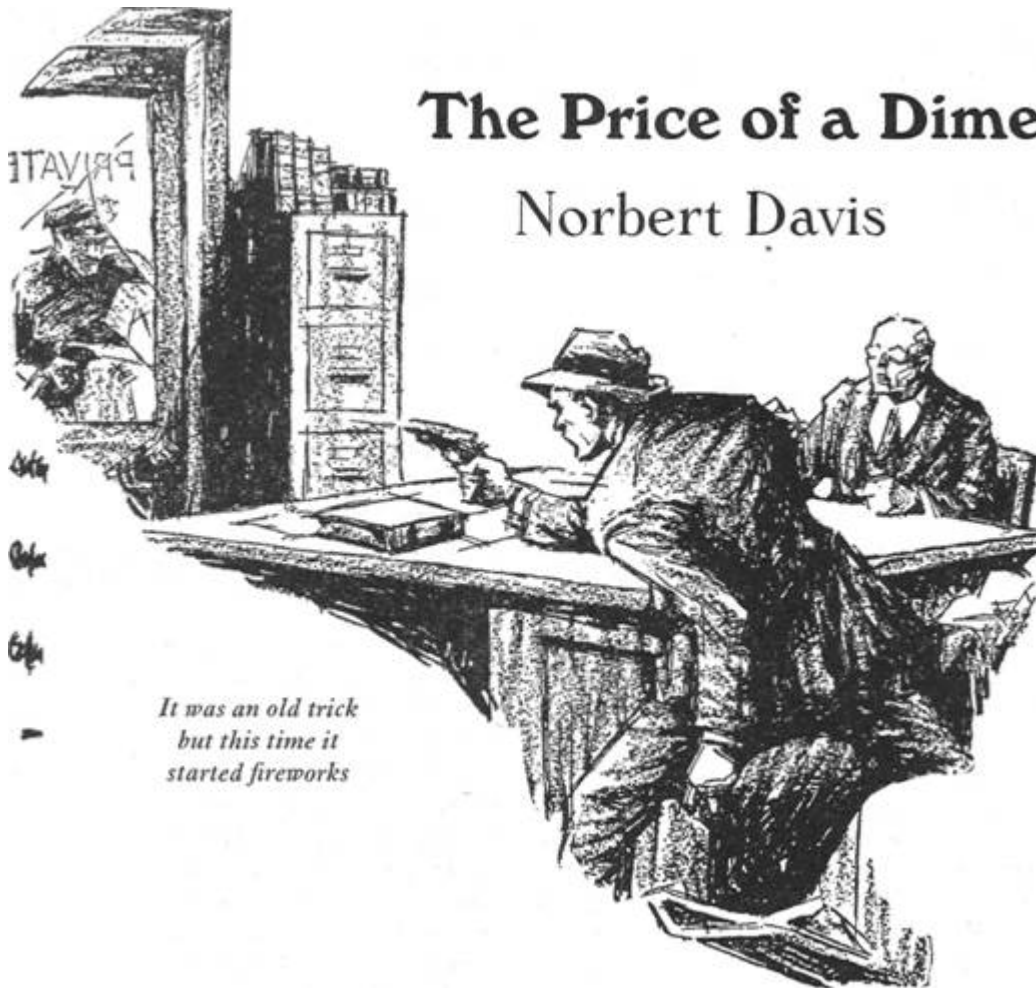
Norbert Davis

WHEN RAYMOND CHANDLER, not a young man, decided to try to write for the pulps, one of the stories that most impressed him was “Red Goose” by Norbert Davis. Years later, he reread it and wrote, in a letter, that it was not as good as he remembered it, but still very good, and that he had never forgotten it.

Davis (1909-1949) was one of the few writers who attempted to blend fast-moving violence and whimsy in his stories, the humor being an element that so displeased the great *Black Mask* editor, Joseph T. Shaw, that he published only five stories by the prolific author.

With his fiction selling easily to most of the major pulps, Davis graduated with a law degree from Stanford but never bothered to take the bar exam. His work also made it onto the pages of the higher-paying “slick” magazines (so-called because of their shiny paper) like *The Saturday Evening Post*, and into book form. Two of his novels, both featuring Doan (a private eye whose first name is never mentioned) and Carstairs (a gigantic Great Dane who is his constant companion), *The Mouse In the Mountain* (1943) and *Sally’s In the Alley* (1943), are hilarious adventures that nonetheless have their share of violence, mostly presented as harmless fun.

“The Price of a Dime” is the second story about Ben Shaley and was initially published in *Black Mask* in April 1934.



The Price of a Dime

Norbert Davis

*It was an old trick
but this time it
started fireworks*



HALEY WAS SITTING behind the big desk in his private office. He had his hat on, pushed down over his forehead, so that the wide brim shaded his hard, narrowed eyes, his thin, straight nose. He had an opened penknife in his hand, and he was stabbing the soft wood of a drawer of the desk in an irritated way.

There was a sudden shrill scream from the outer office.

Shaley started. He scowled at the door.

In the outer office a chair tipped over with a crash. There was another scream, louder than the first one.

Shaley tossed his penknife on the desk and got up.

"She'll drive me crazy one of these days," he muttered, heading for the door in long-legged strides.

He banged the door open, looked through into the outer office.

Sadie, his secretary, was scuffling with a fattish blonde woman. Sadie had the woman by the shoulders, trying to push her through the door into the corridor. The blonde woman's face was puffy, tear-stained. She had a desperately hopeless expression. She was the one who was doing the screaming.

Sadie had her sleek, dark head down, pushing determinedly, but the blonde woman's weight was too much for her.

Shaley said: "Well?" in an explosively angry voice.

Both women turned on him. Sadie got started first.

"You told me you didn't want to see anybody this morning, and she wanted to see you, and I told her you couldn't see her, and she wouldn't go away, and so I tried to put her out, and she started to scream." Sadie said this all in one breath.

The blonde woman sniffed a little. "I've got to see you. I've got to see you, Mr. Shaley. It's about Bennie. I've got to see you."

"All right, all right," Shaley said helplessly. "*All right!* Come on in here."

"But you told me—" Sadie protested.

"Will you kindly sit down and get to work?" Shaley asked in an elaborately courteous voice.

Sadie blinked. "Yes, Mr. Shaley," she said meekly.

Shaley jerked his head at the blonde woman. "Come in." He shut the door of the private office again, pointed to a chair. "Sit down." He walked around his desk, sat down in his chair, and dropped his hat on the floor beside him. He frowned at the blonde woman. "Now what is it?"

She was dabbing at her puffy eyes with a handkerchief that was a moist, wadded ball. "I'm sorry I screamed and acted that way, Mr. Shaley, but I had to see you. Bennie told me to see you, and he's in bad trouble, and so I *had* to see you."

"Who's Bennie?"

The blonde woman looked surprised. "He's my brother."

"That makes it all clear," said Shaley. "Does he have a last name?"

"Oh, sure. Bennie Petersen." The blonde woman looked like she was going to start to cry again. "He told me you knew him. He told me you'd help him. He's a bellboy at the *Grover Hotel*."

"Oh," said Shaley understandingly. "Bennie Peterson, huh? That little chiseler—" He coughed. "That is to say, yes. I remember him. What's he done now?"

"The blonde woman sniffed. "It wasn't his fault, Mr. Shaley."

"No," said Shaley. "Of course not. It never is his fault. What did he do?"

"He just lost a dime, Mr. Shaley. And now Mr. Van Bilbo is going to have him arrested."

Shaley sat up straight with a jerk. "Van Bilbo, the movie director?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Van Bilbo is going to have Bennie arrested because Bennie lost a dime?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," Shaley said, scowling. "Now let's get this straight. Start at the beginning and tell me just what happened—or what Bennie told you happened."

"Well, Bennie took some ginger ale up to a party on the seventh floor of the hotel. This

party tipped him a dime. Bennie was coming back down the hall to the elevator. He had the dime in his hand, and he was flipping it up in the air like George Raft does in the movies. But Bennie dropped the dime on the floor. He was just leaning over to pick it up when Mr. Van Bilbo came out of one of the rooms and saw him, and now he's going to have Bennie arrested."

Shaley leaned back in his chair. "So," he said quietly. "The old dropped dime gag. Bennie dropped a dime in front of a keyhole, and he was looking through the keyhole for the dime, when Van Bilbo caught him at it, huh?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no! Bennie wouldn't look through a keyhole. He wouldn't do a thing like that, Mr. Shaley. Bennie's a good boy. Our folks died when we were young, and I raised him, and I know."

Shaley studied her calculatingly. She really believed what she was saying. She really believed that Bennie was a good boy.

"All right," Shaley said gently, smiling at her. "Forget what I said. Of course Bennie wouldn't peek through a keyhole. What did he tell you to say to me?"

"He told me to tell you to go to Mr. Van Bilbo and tell him that it was all right. That Bennie was Mr. Van Bilbo's friend, and that they could get together on this matter and fix it all up. Bennie said you'd understand."

Shaley nodded slowly. "Oh, yes," he said meaningly. "I understand all right. Where is Bennie now?"

"He's hiding so the police won't find him. He told me not to tell anybody where he was."

Shaley smiled at her. "I can't help him unless I know where he is."

"Well. . ." Her voice broke a little. "You *are* his friend, aren't you, Mr. Shaley? You *will* help him, won't you? Just this time, Mr. Shaley, please. He promised me he'd never get into trouble again." She stared at him anxiously.

"I'll help him," Shaley said.

She sighed, relieved. "He's hiding in a boarding-house. I don't know the street address, but you can easily find it. It's a big white house with a hedge around it, and it's right in back of the Imperial Theater in Hollywood. He's going by the name of Bennie Smith."

"I'll find him," said Shaley. "Where can I get hold of you?"

"I work in *Zeke's Tamale Shop*. On Cahuenga, north of Sunset."

"I know the place," said Shaley, standing up. He went over and opened the door. "Don't worry about it any more. I'll fix things up for you."

She fumbled with the worn bag she was carrying. "I drew my money out of the bank this morning, Mr. Shaley. I can pay you. I'll pay you right now."

"Forget it," Shaley said, uncomfortably. "I'll send you a bill. And don't give Bennie any of that money. I'll take care of him."

He stood in the doorway and watched her go through the outer office and out the door into the corridor.

Sadie looked over one slim shoulder at him, with a slight hurt expression.

"I heard what you said to her," she stated, nodding her sleek head. "And you told me just this morning that you weren't going to take any more customers unless they paid you in advance."

"Phooey!" said Shaley. He slammed the door shut and went back and sat down behind his desk.

He picked up the penknife and stared at it thoughtfully.

"I'll fix him up, all right," he said sourly to himself. "I'll wring the little cuss' neck. Picking me to be the stooge in a blackmailing squeeze."

He began to stab the drawer again with the penknife, scowling.

Suddenly the penknife stopped in mid air. Shaley sat still for several seconds, his eyes slowly widening.

He said: "My gawd!" in a thoughtfully awed voice. He sat there for a while longer and then yelled: "Sadie!"

Sadie opened the door and looked in. "What?"

"Listen, there was a murder in some hotel around here about a week back—some woman got herself killed. What hotel was it?"

"The *Grover*," said Sadie.

Shaley leaned back in his chair. He smiled—a hard, tight smile that put deep lines around his mouth. He said: "So," in a quietly triumphant voice.

"I read all about it in the paper," said Sadie. "The woman's name was 'Big Cee.' She was mixed up with some gangsters or something in Cleveland, and the police thought

she came out here to hide, and that some of the gangsters found her. The papers said there were no clues to the murderer's identity. Mr. Van Bilbo, the movie director, read about her death, and he felt sorry for her, and he paid for her funeral. I think that was very nice of him, don't you, Mr. Shaley? A woman he didn't know at all, that way."

"Yes," said Shaley. "It was very nice of Mr. Van Bilbo. Go away now. I want to think."

Sadie slammed the door. Shaley picked his hat up off the floor and put it on, tipping it down over his eyes. He slid down in his chair and folded his hands across his chest.

After about ten minutes, he reached out and took up the telephone on his desk and dialed a number.

A feminine voice said liltingly: "This is the *Grover*—the largest and finest hotel west of the Mississippi."

Shaley said: "Is McFane there?"

"Yes, sir. Just a moment, sir, and I'll connect you with Mr. McFane."

Shaley waited, tapping his fingers on the desk top.

"Hello." It was a smoothly cordial voice.

Shaley said: "McFane? This is Ben Shaley."

"Hello there, Ben. How's the private detecting?"

"Just fair. Listen, McFane, have you got a bellhop around there by the name of Bennie Petersen?"

"We did have. The little chiseler quit us last week without any notice at all. Just didn't show up for work. He in trouble?"

Shaley said: "No. Uh-huh. I was just wondering. He quit right after that murder you had, didn't he?"

"Yes, come to think—" McFane stopped short. "Hey! Are you digging on that?"

"No, no," Shaley said quickly. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"Listen, Ben," McFane said in a worried tone. "Lay off, will you? We spent a thousand dollars' worth of advertising killing that in the papers. It gives the hotel a bad name."

"You got it all wrong," Shaley said soothingly. "I'm not interested at all. I was just wondering. So long, McFane, and thanks."

"Wait, Ben. Listen, I'll make it worth your while—I'll retain—"

Shaley hung up the receiver. He walked quickly out of the private office.

"If a guy by the name of McFane calls," he said to Sadie, "tell him I just left for Europe. I'll call you in an hour."

"From Europe?" Sadie asked innocently.

Shaley went out and slammed the door.

The high board fence had once been painted a very bright shade of yellow, but now the paint was old and faded and streaked. It was peeling off in big patches that showed bare, brown board underneath.

Shaley parked his battered Chrysler roadster around the corner and walked back along the fence. There was a group of Indians

standing in a silent, motionless circle in front of the big iron gate. They all had their arms folded across their chests. They all wore very gaudy shirts, and two of the older ones had strips of buckskin with beads sewn on them tied around their heads.

They didn't look at Shaley, didn't pay any attention to him.

Shaley walked up to the iron gate and peered through the thick, rusted bars. There was a car—a yellow Rolls-Royce—parked in the graveled roadway. The hood was pushed up, and two men were listening to the engine.

"If that's what you call a piston slap," one said, "you should be chauffeuring a wheelbarrow."

Shaley said: "Hey, Mandy."

The man straightened, turned around. He was short, dumpy. He was wearing golf knickers and a checked sweater and checked golf hose and a checked cap. He had a round, reddish face sprinkled with brown spots. He was chewing on the stub of a cigar, and tobacco juice had left a brown trail from the corner of his mouth down his chin. He stared at Shaley without any sign of recognition.

"Let me in, Mandy," Shaley requested.

Mandy strolled up to the gate, looked at Shaley through it.

"I don't suppose you'd have a pass, would you?"

Shaley said: "Come on, Mandy. Let me in. I want to talk to you."

"Huh!" said Mandy. He opened the gate grudgingly.

Shaley slipped inside, and Mandy slammed the gate with a clang.

"Go ahead and talk," he invited. "It won't do you any good. I won't buy anything."

Shaley looked at the other man meaningly. This one wore a plum-colored military uniform with silver trimmings. He looked as a motion picture director's chauffeur should look. He was thin and tall with a swarthy dark face and a small black mustache. He had his military cap tipped at a jaunty angle.

He stared from Mandy to Shaley, then shrugged his thin shoulders.

"Excuse me," he said. He slammed the hood down and got into the front seat of the Rolls and backed it up the road.

"Pretty fancy," Shaley said, jerking his head to indicate the chauffeur and the car.

"He gripes me," Mandy said sourly. "I liked old Munn better."

"Why all the war-whoops outside?" Shaley asked.

"Extras. Waitin' to be put on. We ain't gonna shoot any exteriors today. We're shootin' a saloon scene. I told 'em that six times, but you can't argue with them guys. They just grunt at you."

"How's Van Bilbo coming since he's been producing independent?"

Mandy shrugged. "Just fair, I think we got a good one this time—forty-niner stuff."

They were silent, watching each other warily.

Shaley said suddenly: "Who was Big Cee, Mandy?"

"Huh?" Mandy said vacantly.

Shaley didn't say anything. He squatted down on his heels and began to draw patterns in the dust with his forefinger.

After a while, Mandy said bitterly: "I mighta known you'd get on to that. You find out everything, damn you."

There was another silence. Shaley kept on drawing his patterns in the dust.

"Her name was Rosa Lee once," Mandy said sullenly. "She worked with the old man on some serials way back in '09 or '10."

Shaley drew in a long breath. "So," he said quietly. He stood up. "Thanks, Mandy."

"Don't you try any of your sharp-shooting on the old man!" Mandy warned ferociously. "Damn you, Shaley, I'll kill you if you do!"

Shaley grinned. "So long, Mandy." He opened the gate and slipped outside.

Mandy put his head through the bars. "I mean it now, Shaley. You try anything funny on Van Bilbo, and I'll kill you deader than hell!"

Shaley went into a drug-store on Sunset and called his office.

"Anybody call me?" he asked, when Sadie answered the telephone.

She said: "Yes, Mr. Shaley. That man McFane called three times. He seems to be mad at you. He swore something terrible when I told him you'd gone to Europe. And that woman called—that woman that was here this morning and didn't pay you any money."

"What'd she want?"

"She wanted to thank you for getting Bennie that job in Phoenix."

"For what?" Shaley barked.

"For getting Bennie that job in Phoenix."

"Tell me just what she said," Shaley ordered tensely.

"She called just a little while ago. She said she wanted to thank you. She said the man you had talked to had called her up and told her that he would give Bennie a job in a hotel in Phoenix, and that she had told the man where Bennie was so the man could go and see him about the job."

Shaley stood there stiffly, staring at the telephone box.

"Hello?" said Sadie inquiringly.

Shaley slowly hung up the receiver, scowling in a puzzled way.

"Good gawd!" he said to himself suddenly in a tight whisper.

He banged open the door of the telephone booth and ran headlong out of the drug-store.

Shaley parked the Chrysler with a screech of rubber on cement. He got out and walked hurriedly along the sidewalk, along a high green hedge, to a sagging gate. He strode up an uneven brick wall, up steps into a high, old-fashioned porch.

A fat man in a pink shirt was sitting in an old rocker on the porch with his feet up on the railing:

"Where's Bennie Smith's room?" Shaley asked him abruptly.

"Who?"

"Bennie Smith?"

"What's his name?" the fat man inquired innocently.

Shaley hooked the toe of his right foot under the fat man's legs and heaved up. The fat man gave a frightened squawk and went over backwards, chair and all. He rolled over and got up on his hands and knees, gaping blankly at Shaley.

Shaley leaned over him. "Where's Bennie Smith's room?"

"Upstairs," the fat man blurted quickly. "Clear back. Last door on the left." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "Gee, guy, no need to get so hard about it. I'd 'a' told you. I was only fooling. No need to get so rough with a fellow."

Shaley was running across the porch. He went in the front door into a dim, moist-smelling hall with a worn green rug on the floor. He went up a flight of dark, carpeted stairs, along a hall.

The last few steps he ran on his toes, silently. He had his hand inside his coat on the butt of the big .45 automatic in his shoulder-holster.

He stopped in front of the last door on the left, listening. He pulled out the automatic and held it in his hand. He knocked softly on the door with his other hand.

There was no answer.

Shaley said: "Bennie," and knocked on the door again.

He turned the knob. The door was locked.

Working silently, Shaley took a ring of skeleton keys out of his left-hand coat pocket. The lock was old and loose. The first key turned it.

Shaley pushed the door open cautiously, standing to one side.

He drew in his breath with a hissing sound.

Bennie was lying on the bed. He looked very small and thin and young. In death his face had lost some of its sharpness, its wise-guy cynicism.

He had been stabbed several times in his thin chest. The bed was messy.

Shaley shut the door very quietly.

Shaley turned off of Sunset and drove up Cahuenga. He parked the Chrysler and walked slowly across a vacant lot towards a long, shack-like building that had a big red Neon sign on top of it that said: *Zeke's*.

Shaley walked around to the back and knocked on the door.

An angry voice from inside said: "How many times must I tell you bums that I can't give you no hand-outs until after the rush—" The man opened the door and saw Shaley. He said: "Oh! Hello, Mr. Shaley." He was a short, fat man with a round face that was shiny with perspiration. He wore a white chef's cap.

Shaley craned his neck, peering in the door. He could see into the interior of the dining-car. Bennie's sister was standing at the

cash register, joking with a policeman and a man in a bus driver's uniform.

"What's the matter, Mr. Shaley?" the short man asked.

Shaley nodded his head to indicate the blonde woman. "Her brother has just been murdered."

The short man said: "Bennie?"

"Yes."

"Oh, -----!" said the short man. "And she thought he was the grandest thing that ever lived."

"You'll have to tell her," Shaley said.

"Me? Oh,-----no! No. I don't want to. You tell her, Mr. Shaley."

Shaley said: "I can't."

The short man stared at him. "I got to tell her. And she thought he was so swell. She gave him most of her wages." He rubbed his hand across his mouth. "Oh,-----! That poor kid."

Shaley turned around and walked away. He was swallowing hard.

When Shaley came up and peered through the big iron gate, Mandy and the chauffeur were looking into the engine of the Rolls-Royce much in the same attitude as before.

"It's a wrist-pin," Mandy said. "I'm telling you it's a wrist-pin."

Shaley said: "Mandy."

Mandy came over and opened the gate. "You're like a depression," he told Shaley sourly.

"Always popping up when people don't expect you. What do you want now?"

"I want to see Van Bilbo."

"He's in his office. They're just gettin' ready for some re-takes on that saloon scene. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

Shaley said: "I just saw a kid that was murdered. He was a little rat and a chiseler and a liar, but he had a swell sister. She trusted me, and I let her down. I'm going to talk to Van Bilbo and then I'm going to start something. Stick around."

He walked along the road, his feet crunching in the gravel.

The chauffeur looked at Mandy. "Screwy?" he inquired.

Mandy was squinting at Shaley back. He shook his head slowly.

"No. He gets that way when he's mad. And when he's mad, he's a great big dose of bad medicine for somebody."

Shaley turned around the corner of a barnlike building and was in a short dusty street with false-fronted sets on each side. There were board sidewalks and a couple of big tents that had saloon signs in front of them.

There were saddled horses tied to a long hitching-rack. There were men in fringed buckskin suits with coonskin caps and long rifles, and men in big sombreros wearing jingling spurs on their boots and big six-shooters in holsters at their waists, and men clad in black with high stovepipe hats. There were girls in low-necked dresses, and girls in calico and sun-bonnets.

A man up on a wooden tower that held an arc lamp was yelling angrily at a man on the

ground, who was yelling back at him just as angrily. Two carpenters were having a loud argument in front of a saloon door. Another man had a long list in his hand and was running around checking up on the costumes of the extras. At the side of the street three men had a camera apart, examining its interior gravely.

Shaley walked along the middle of the street, went into a small wooden office building at the far end. He walked down a dusty corridor, knocked on a door that had a frosted glass panel with a crack in it running diagonally from corner to corner.

A voice said: "Come in."

Shaley opened the door and went into a small, cubby-hole of an office.

Van Bilbo was sitting behind the desk. Van Bilbo was a small, thin man. He was bald, and he wore big horn-rimmed glasses that gave him an owlish look. He always reminded Shaley of a small boy making believe he was grown up.

"Hello," he said shyly, peering over his glasses at Shaley.

"Do you remember me?" Shaley asked.

Van Bilbo shook his head, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I meet so many people... I don't remember. . . ."

Shaley shut the door and sat down in a chair. "I'll tell you a story—a true one. One time there was a man who was a racetrack driver. He cracked up badly, and his nerves went haywire. He couldn't drive any more. He came out to Hollywood, hoping to find something to do. He didn't. He went broke. One day he was standing outside a studio. He'd pawned everything he owned but the clothes he wore. He was hungry and sick and pretty much down. While he was standing there a director came along. The director gave that man a ten-dollar bill and told

him to go get something to eat. He gave the man a work-slip and let him work as an extra for a month, until he got on his feet again. I was that man, and you were the director. I don't forget things like that."

Van Bilbo made flustered little gestures. "It— it was nothing ... I don't even remember..."

"No," said Shaley. "Of course you don't. You've helped out plenty that were down and out and plenty that were in trouble—like Big Cee."

Van Bilbo repeated: "Big Cee," in a scared voice.

Shaley nodded. "That wasn't very hard to figure out, knowing you. She used to work for you a long time ago. She was in a jam. She called on you to help her out, and you did. She was running a joint in Cleveland. She got in wrong with some politicians, and they closed up her place. She was sore. She got hold of some affidavits that would look mighty bad in a court record. She skipped out here, intending to hide here and shake the boys back in Cleveland down for plenty. But they didn't want to play that way. They sent a guy after her, and he biffed her."

Part of this Shaley knew, and part he was guessing; but he didn't have to guess very much; with what he knew, the rest was fairly obvious.

Van Bilbo was staring at the door with widened eyes. Shaley turned to look.

A shadow showed through the frosted glass—a hunched, listening shadow.

Shaley slid the .45 out of his shoulder-holster and held it on his lap, watching the shadow. He went on talking to Van Bilbo:

"That was what happened and everything would have been closed up now and over with, only you and a bellhop, by the name of Bennie, put your fingers in the pie. Big Cee got scared somebody might be after her, and she called you in and gave you the affidavits to keep for her. Bennie saw you leaving her room, and, being a chiseler by trade, he got the idea that he might shake you down a little. He was curious about Big Cee, and he kept on watching the room. He saw the murderer go in and out. Then when he found out Big Cee had been knocked off, Bennie thought he was on easy street for fair."

Shaley paused, watching the shadow. The shadow was motionless.

"Bennie planned to put the squeeze on both you and the murderer. He made a bad mistake as far as the murderer was concerned. This murderer wasn't the kind of a boy to pay hush money. He's a dopey and a killer. Bennie found that out and went undercover while he tried to get in touch with you through me. The murderer was looking for Bennie. In the first place, Bennie knew too much, and in the second place the murderer didn't want Bennie putting the squeeze on you for fear you'd get scared and turn those affidavits over to the police."

The shadow was moving very slowly, getting closer to the door.

Shaley went on quickly: "The murderer was trailing Bennie's sister, trying to locate Bennie. He trailed the sister to me. He used my name to get the sister to give him Bennie's address. He killed Bennie. But he hasn't got those affidavits yet, and he wants them. He paid your chauffeur to quit, so he could get his job and be close to you without anybody getting suspicious. Come on in, baby!"

The glass panel of the door suddenly smashed in. An arm in a plum-colored uniform came

through the opening. A thin hand pointed a stubby-barreled revolver at the two men inside.

Shaley kicked his chair over backwards just as the revolver cracked out.

Shaley's big automatic boomed loudly in the small room.

There was the pound of feet going quickly down the hall.

Shaley bounced up, kicked his chair aside, jerked the door open.

The thin form in the plum-colored uniform was just sliding around the corner at the end of the hall. Shaley put his head down and sprinted.

He tore out through the door into the street in time to see the plum-colored uniform whisk through the swinging doors of the saloon.

Extras stared open-mouthed. A man with two heavy six-guns and a fierce-looking mustache was trying to crawl under the board sidewalk. One of the dance-hall girls screamed loudly.

Shaley started across the street. There was a little jet of orange flame from the dimness behind the swinging doors. The crack of the revolver sounded slightly muffled.

The horses tied to the hitching-rack reared and kicked, squealing frantically.

Shaley trotted across the dusty street. He had one hand up to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. He had his automatic balanced, ready, in the other hand.

He got to the swinging doors, pushed them back.

The place was fixed up as a dance-hall and saloon. There was a long bar and a cleared space for dancing with a raised platform for the fiddler at the far end.

Shaley ducked suddenly, and a bullet from the back window smashed into the wall over his head.

He ran across the room and dived headlong through the window. He saw that he had made a mistake while he was still in mid-air. The man in the plum-colored uniform hadn't run this time. He had decided to make a fight of it. He was crouched under the window.

Shaley tried to turn himself around in the air. He hit the ground on one shoulder and rolled frantically. And as he rolled, he caught a glimpse of a thin, swarthy face staring at him over the barrel of a stubby revolver.

There was a shot from the corner of the building. The man in the plum-colored uniform whirled away from Shaley, snarling.

Mandy was standing there, dumpily short, cigar still clenched in his teeth. He had a big, long-barreled revolver in his hand. As the man in the plum-colored uniform turned, Mandy pointed the revolver and fired again.

The man in the plum-colored uniform shot twice at him, and then Shaley's heavy automatic boomed once.

The man in the plum-colored uniform gave a little gulping cry. He started to run. He ran in a circle and suddenly flopped down full-length. The plum-colored uniform was a huddled, wrinkled heap on the dusty ground.

Shaley got up slowly, wiping dust from his face. Heads began to poke cautiously out of windows, and excited voices shouted questions.

Van Bilbo came running—a small, frantic figure with the horn-rimmed glasses hanging from one ear. He ran up to Mandy, pawed at him.

“Are you hurt? Are you hurt, Mandy?”

Mandy said: “Aw, shut up. You’re like an old hen with the pip. Of course I ain’t hurt. That guy couldn’t shoot worth a damn.” He pushed Van Bilbo away.

Shaley said to the people who came crowding around: “This man is a dope fiend. He went crazy and suddenly attacked Mr. Van Bilbo. You can all testify that I shot in self-defense.”

Mandy was pushing away through the crowd. Shaley followed him.

“Mandy,” Shaley said.

Mandy turned around.

“Give me that gun,” Shaley demanded and jerked the revolver out of Mandy’s hand.

It was a single-action six-shooter. Shaley opened the loading gate, spun the cylinder. He

punched out one of the loaded cartridges and looked at it.

The cartridge had no bullet in it. It was a blank.

“I thought so,” said Shaley. “You grabbed this one off one of the extras. You damn’ fool, you stood out there in the open with a gun full of blank cartridges and let that monkey shoot at you, just to give me a chance at him. That’s guts, Mandy.”

“Aw, nerts,” said Mandy uncomfortably. “I just didn’t think about it, that’s all. He got old Munn’s job and I didn’t like him anyway.”

Shaley glanced over where the whiskered man with the two big six-guns was just appearing from under the board sidewalk.

“There’s a guy that thought, all right.”

Mandy scowled—

“Oh, them!” He spat disgustedly. “Them heroes of the screen ain’t takin’ no chances gettin’ hurt. It’d spoil their act.”