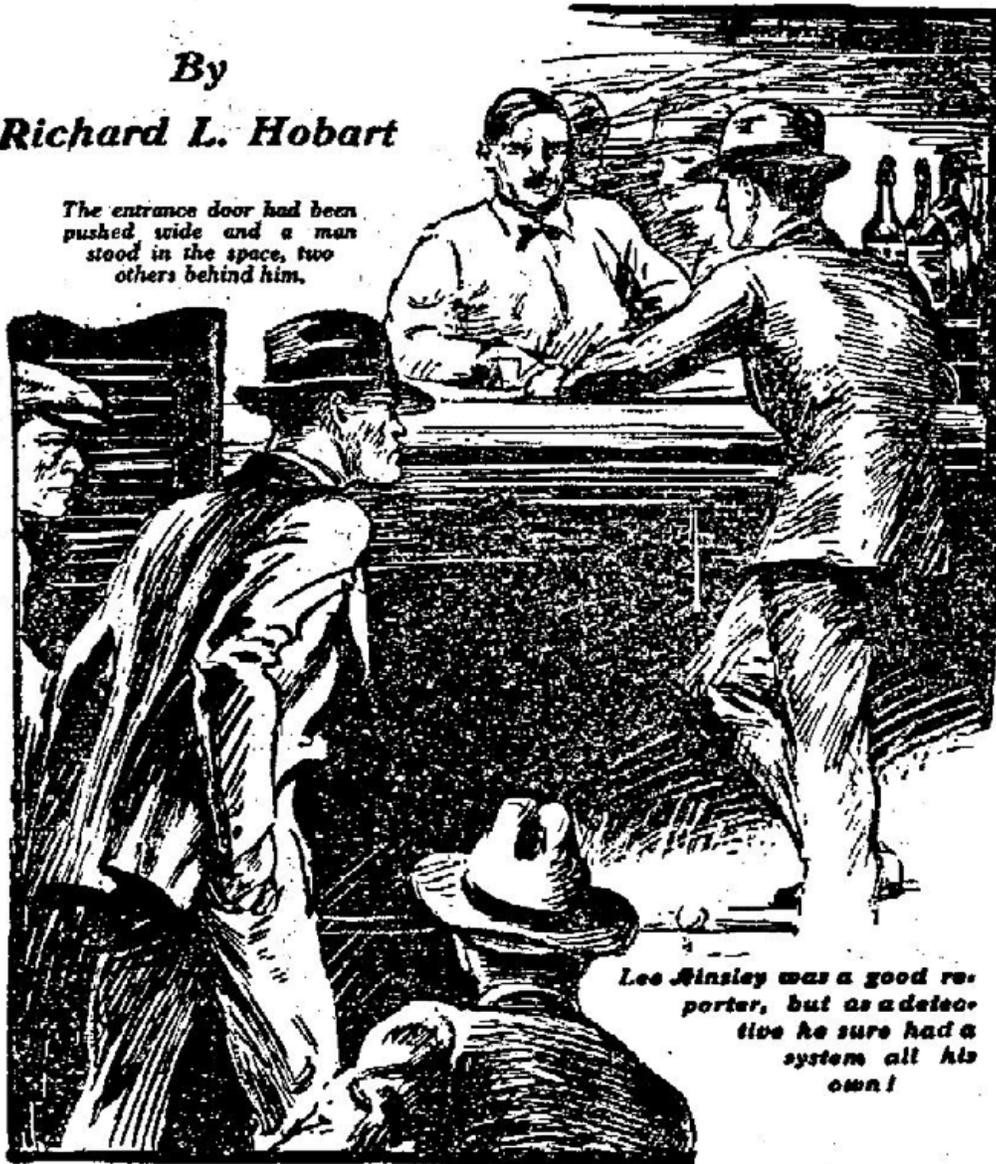


Written in Blood

By

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The entrance door had been pushed wide and a man stood in the space, two others behind him.



Lee Ainsley was a good reporter, but as a detective he sure had a system all his own!

LEE AINSLEY legged his way a bit uncertainly over to the sloppy bar. Little puddles of water covered its surface and made the red mahogany-stain shine and reflect the lights of the back bar.

"Sloppiest bar in town," Lee told himself as he hunted for a dry spot on which his elbow might be allowed to rest so as to steady his

slightly weaving body. Finally he found it, let his elbow and forearm rest on the bar and looked down its gleaming surface for the barkeep, Charlie Meeks.

"Hey, Charlie," he called, "a half-and-half and don't snooze over it. In other words, I crave service. My head's muggy, my throat's dry and I'm broke as the Common Peepul. In words of

one syllable, dearie, this drink's on the house."

Charlie sniffed but reached for the proper containers and the correct ingredients. He threw the cocktail together with pre-war dexterity, placed the glass on the wet mahogany bar and slid it a good ten feet until it stopped directly in line with Lee's elbow.

"What I calls accuracy," said Lee and sipped of the drink gratefully. He added, "And potency." He smacked his lips.

"You shouldn't ought to come here, Lee," chided Charlie seriously, eyes wrinkled with worry lines. "You'd oughta know that Greasy Nordile has got the Indian sign out on you. He said only yesterday that it was curtains for you when he got you. You'd oughta know that Greasy is—"

"Aw, a Bronx cheer for the punk," said Lee carelessly. He downed the last sip of his half-and-half and then his lips made a sound, an expert rendition of the Bronx razz.

"But you'd oughta—" began Charlie ominously.

Lee shoved himself back from the bar, surveyed Charlie through critical eyes.

He said, "Charlie, when the hell are you going to quit murdering the New Deal's English? You ain't never going to learn nothing anyway. You oughta be smart like I am, Charlie. Course I haven't any money, but I got something just as good. 'What,' I can hear you say, 'does the little man mean by that?' Well, Charlie, I'll tell you. I have no money, but I do have something worth money. A real diamond pin, my boy, a *real* diamond."

Charlie sighed as Lee's fingers sought his tie and came away with a stickpin of filigreed white gold in which reposed a single diamond of modest size. Lee laid the pin before him on the wet bar.

"Even a pawnbroker'll let me have a ten spot on it, Charlie. You let me have a sawbuck and I'll buy some drinks. Come pay day, I'll return and take it up and you'll have done your

good deed for the week, boy scout. Do we trade?"

Charlie sighed again. "Aw, take a coupla drinks and pay me when you got the jack," he suggested.

The diamond pin was Lee's last resort for a drink. Charlie had it half the time, when it wasn't in the till of some café, and knew there was no way of refusing to lend the newspaper man the money. He reached for the pin.

Suddenly he stopped the movement of his arm, and Lee looked up into Charlie's face. What he saw made him stiffen and his eyes went over Charlie's shoulder to the mirror of the back bar.

In the back bar mirror was framed the entrance door thirty feet away. It had been pushed wide and a man stood in the space, two others behind him.

It was Greasy Nordile!

"I tol' you, kid, I tol' you!" hissed Charlie and casually began wiping his way down the bar, working steadily away from Lee.

A small clock, inset in the wood of the back bar, showed two-thirty in the morning. Greasy Nordile, framed in the mirror, stood talking to his men. Lee could see his lips move even at that distance.

Lee said, voice steady, "A whiskey straight, Charlie. Make it snappy. It may be the last one I'll ever have."

Lee's fingers reached forward a bit and curled around the diamond stickpin where Charlie had dropped it upon the entrance of Greasy Nordile and his men.

GREASY'S men were walking around the place. Greasy eyed them expectantly. They prowled through the washrooms, stockrooms and the kitchen. They nodded to Greasy. Charlie and Lee were alone. Greasy smiled malevolently.

Charlie slid a whiskey glass brimming with Canadian Club to Lee and then poured a nip for

himself. Charlie sidled away again, clinked bottles together on the back bar in an assiduous effort to appear occupied.

There was a tight grin on Lee's face as he jabbed the diamond pin slantingly into the mahogany bar top. He sipped his whiskey until there was a rustle at his side. He turned slowly, saw Greasy Nordile, backed by the two men, up close. Something pressed gently into his side.

"I've been looking for you," said Greasy nastily.

"Yeah, and what of it, punk?" asked Lee quietly, his eyes slits of baleful fire.

The other's eyes became vengeful pools of narrowed flame at the words.

His arms were folded loosely across his chest and Lee could see the slight bulge under the left arm which told of the easily reached gat. Lee was very quiet and the half full whiskey glass in his hand was as steady as the eyes which arrowed into those of Greasy Nordile.

"Guess you'd better come with me," said Greasy. Then he added, "As a newspaper man, you're about ripe for picking."

Greasy's head jerked signals to the men behind him. They came forward, one on either side of Lee.

"You put too many cute things in that trick column of yours," suggested Greasy.

"I get paid for that," said Lee and held the whiskey glass to his lips.

"Yeah, you'll get paid all right, but you won't have much use for money after tonight," sneered Greasy.

"I'm petrified, punk."

Greasy's hand flicked out and knocked the whiskey glass from Lee's hand. He stepped back a half-step, swung with his right as he came forward on his toes and his brown fist smacked against Lee's jaw. Lee went back and to his right. His head cracked against the top rail of the bar, clattered against a brass cuspidor in falling, and then smacked against the inlaid linoleum. He twitched once and lay still.

Lee regained consciousness to the tune of little imps beating a tattoo against the inside of his skull with tiny trip-hammers. He groaned, turned flat on his back, stretched, yawned and then raised his hands to his head.

Pain ebbed and flowed billowingly. He felt as if he were riding in pain-wracked jerks on a sea of torture. Finally the pain jabs lessened and he shook his head slowly to clear away the cobwebs. He was able to navigate fairly true when he struggled to his feet.

A water basin of corroded metal in the corner had a single faucet and Lee filled the dirty bowl and dunked his head into it repeatedly. He felt better now; reached for a cigarette and found two-thirds of a package in his pocket. He puffed gratefully.

He smoked, thinking, until the cigarette tasted hot and acrid to his lips and he fired a fresh one abstractedly.

Of course there was hardly, a chance but—

The room was small, roughly plastered. There was a small bed and a dresser with half the mirror gone. A cobwebby Mazda threw uncertain light. A window heavily barred with thick wire mesh was to the far side of the bed.

Lee inspected it and discovered a red brick wall within twelve inches; escape that way was impossible.

"Damn it!" said Lee tonelessly and flipped his cigarette away.

THERE was the sound of a padlock being unfastened outside. The door opened and Greasy Nordile entered. He was grinning ghoulishly. His gat was handy.

"Picture of a newspaper man at the end of his rope," he said in rare good humor. Lee saw the safety guard of the gat was wide open.

"That's strange," said Lee evenly, "when a rope would fit your neck so nicely."

Greasy flushed and a gleam of hatred stabbed from his black pools of eyes.

"Go ahead," he taunted, "wisecrack like you

do in that lousy column of yours. It'll be easy to fill that job of yours after you're gone. Wonder who they'll put on the column, after tomorrow?"

"I'm worried to death about it," returned Lee and reached for another smoke. Then he added, "I'll still be at the old stand."

"Yeah, but in a casket. You write too much in that column of yours and you tell too many things. But no more, see? You know too much."

"Like that Pulaski killing, for instance, eh?" Lee grinned tauntingly into Greasy's face. The man paled.

Suddenly he nodded. "Yeah, like the Pulaski killing," he said and his voice was ominously low.

A thought came to Lee, "Where's Charlie?"

Greasy grinned. "Aw, he's seen too much. Guess he'll have to tend bar in hell for a time."

Lee nodded. "I see. Old Charlie gets a ride, too, eh? Nice guy, you are, greaseball. You're not even a decent hood."

Greasy's fingers tightened around the automatic.

Lee laughed. "You wouldn't use that if you knew what I do. Say, greaseball, do you know what my paper is doing right now?"

"I don't get you," snarled Greasy.

"You will in a minute. Well, I'll tell you. The city editor is working on headlines, Greasy, headlines. They probably read something like this: 'Famous Columnist Kidnaped. Greasy Nordile Known as the Kidnaper. Police Dagnet Out. Nordile Will Be Captured Soon Say Police.' How do they sound?"

Greasy laughed, but there was a note of nervous shrillness in it.

"You make me laugh," he said.

"Yeah, you'll laugh, all right. And, punk," Lee's voice took on a deadly seriousness which was not lost on Greasy, "those headlines will be written in red! Get me, *written in red!*"

"W-w-w-what do you mean?" faltered Greasy, face working.

Lee continued. "After the headlines are written, they send them to the composing room, Greasy. The linotype machines are as complicated as hell, but it isn't long before the story comes out in hot metal I can just read it now, greaseball. It'll go about like this:

" 'Hundreds of police and detectives are looking for-Greasy Nordile, a cheap hood who thinks he's a big shot. At an early hour this morning, Nordile and two of his men kidnaped Lee Ainsley, famed columnist of the *Star*, and Charlie Meeks, owner of a cafe.

" 'It is known that Lee Ainsley and Charlie Meeks are being held captive by Nordile and his men because the former printed thinly veiled innuendoes'—there's a ten-dollar word for you, Greasy—'saying that Nordile was soon to be questioned regarding the Pulaski murder mystery of a fortnight ago. It is said on most reliable information that Nordile will be in the hands of the police before noon today.'"

"How's it sound, punk?" Lee laughingly taunted.

Greasy winced. "Smart guy," he said. "Well, just for that you go out now—"

THERE was the sound of running steps in the hallway outside. A man rushed into the room. In his hand was a newspaper with screaming headlines.

Headlines printed in red:

"Look, boss," he panted. "The paper is full of this kidnapin'! How'd the hell they find out about it? We'd better lam before the cops—"

Greasy snatched the newspaper from the man's hand. Lee saw it was the *Star* and grinned.

**STAR'S FAMOUS COLUMNIST MISSING!
KIDNAPED BY GREASY NORDILE!
CAFE PROPRIETOR ALSO TAKEN!**

**Police Dagnet Thrown Wide!
Capture of Nordile Expected Quickly!**

“How did they get this?” screamed Greasy, and his face was chalk-white. His fingers around the automatic were trembling and the gun was shaking and weaving.

There was the sudden hell of an inferno from below. A riot gun stuttered, punctuated by the blasts from Police Specials. A door crashed and there were the sounds of yells, trampling feet; a body smacked against the floor.

Lee grinned and there was excitement on his face now.

“Called the turn, didn’t I, greaseball?”

Greasy Nordile screamed and jerked his gun higher to Lee’s middle. His fingers contracted tremblingly, but Lee’s fist caught him under the chin and the shot *pinged* against the wire mesh of the window. Lee dove and his shoulder caught the greaseball’s solar.

Greasy slammed against the plaster with his head and squirmed over on the floor, his face smashed. Sounds came closer. There was the wham of a single shot and the man in the door doubled up and hit the floor head first, coughing.

“Hello, Griggs,” said Lee, panting.

A broad patrolman barged in, gun ready. He grinned at Lee.

“‘Lo, Lee. You’re a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, but looky, you get your name in the column for this, flatfoot.”

“Gee, in *your* column, Mr. Ainsley!” There was awe on the cop’s face and he grinned again.

Detectives filled the small room. Lee shook hands with Detective Hobbs, in charge. Charlie, the bar-keep, crowded in and shook, too.

“Pretty good work, Lee,” complimented Hobbs, and looked at Greasy.

“Aw, give the credit to Griggs; he’s earned

it. I always did like a guy who reads my column!” Lee grinned.

“Yeah,” said Griggs, “I copied it down on this piece of paper. Here it is.” He read slowly from the paper taken from his pocket.

Greasy N. got us—On spot—Search N’s places—Hurry.

Lee Ainsley

“You’re a good cop, Griggs,” said Lee. “I’m going to run your name in big caps tomorrow.”

Griggs grinned.

“Say, Griggs,” asked Lee, “when did you get that message?”

“About three, I guess it was. I was trying doors and saw that Charlie’s place was wide open. Went in and couldn’t see a soul. Walked over to the bar and saw something glittering like a beacon light. Looked closer and then saw the writing on the bar. We’d heard Greasy had it in for you and of course he had to snatch Charlie, too, because he knew too much about your kidnaping. I got busy then.”

“Good boy,” said Lee again and reached for a cigarette.

The patrolman, Griggs, reached behind the flap of his coat and handed something to Lee.

“By the way, Mr. Ainsley,” he said, “here’s that diamond stickpin of yours you used to scratch the message on the red paint of Charlie’s bar! Sure don’t see how you had a chance to write it.”

Lee said, “I sure had to work fast. Thought Greasy saw me writing it for a minute, but I got away with it. Don’t see how you read it. Anyway,” he grinned, “I always said that pin was worth more than ten bucks!”