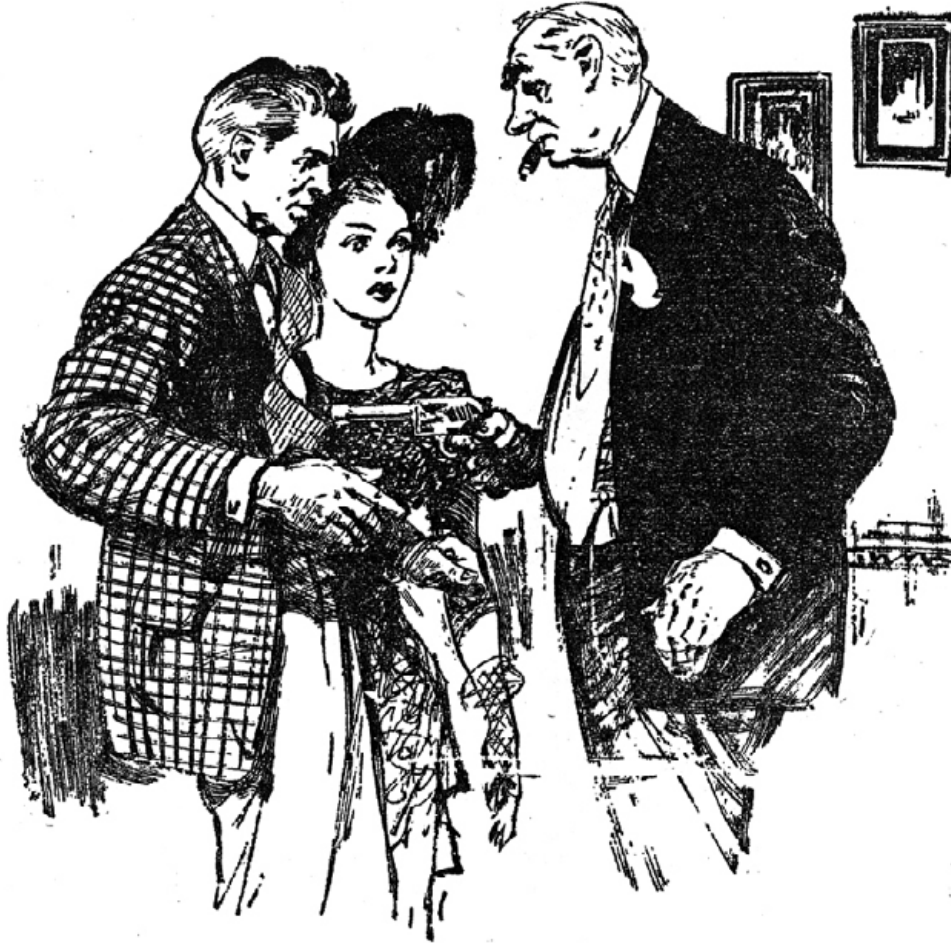


Claim Your Own Dead

By Ric Hasse



The Samaritan who put Larry Cole aboard the Chicago train and helped him to a hotel room wasn't really a philanthropist. For there was a fee that Larry would have to pay for these kind services—a slight charge of murder.

THE NOSE was a monstrosity. The nose was a nose that Cyrano de Bergerac would have been proud to call his own. It was huge and long, and the end bulged and was full of oversized pores that made it look like an under-ripe strawberry. The sun streaming through the window reflected from one half of the face behind the nose and cast two parallel

shadows across the other half; the second shadow created by a big black cigar.

Larry Cole dropped his eyelids again. He screwed up his face and turned his head slowly as far as it would go, to the right, then to the left.

"Our drinking is like our sins," the Nose said. "Sooner or later we must pay for it. Yet, if this Grape be a Curse, Who then put it there, eh?"

Cole opened his eyes again and stared around him and groaned. He was on a moving train. In a coach car. Cole was not in the mood to hear misquotations from Omar Khayyam, not when he was facing the unpleasant consequences of a five-day drinking spree. He frowned at the man in the seat across from him. The Nose grinned around his cigar and dropped a well-manicured hand on Cole's knee.

"How do you feel, m'boy?"

"Lousy," Cole said.

The Nose took the cigar from his mouth and chuckled.

"Don't mind me. Another man's hangover is always good for a laugh."

Larry Cole's frown deepened. He moved his lips and tongue trying to work the dryness out of his mouth. His eyeballs ached. The man with the nose hoisted himself from his seat.

"What you need, m'boy, is a bromo."

He moved down the swaying car and returned with a paper cup of water in each hand. He gave the cups to Cole and poured a one-dose package of activated bromo into one cup. Cole drank the foaming mixture gratefully.

"Do you know how I got on this train? The last I remember, I was talking to a guy in a bar in Washington, D. C. I was telling him about my girl."

"I was there," the Nose chuckled. "Before you passed out, you said you were going to take the next train to Chicago to see her. So, I brought you along with me. You've had a long sleep. We'll be in Chicago in a few minutes."

"My baggage?"

"Your hand bag is on the rack right over you, and here's the baggage check for your duffle bag."

Cole nodded. He hadn't gotten around to buying any luggage yet. All he'd bought so far was a couple of shirts, a pair of shoes, the new grey suit he was wearing,

and the binge he'd been promising himself for four years.

"I don't know how to thank you, sir. I know that taking care of a lush is no fun."

The Nose leaned over and touched a shiny fingertip to the gold button on Cole's lapel.

"You deserve anything anyone can do for you, m'boy," he said almost piously. "Say, have you a place to stay when you get to Chicago?"

Cole shook his head.

"I'll get a room in a hotel for a couple of days. Then I think I'll be getting married, unless Julie's changed her mind."

"Well, all the hotels are pretty crowded, but I think I can help you out. I have a reservation at the Parker House, but I have to go on to Milwaukee right away, and won't be using the room. So you go there and use my name. They won't know the difference."

The train was slowing for the Sixty-third Street, Englewood station and the man with the nasal prominence stood up and reached over his head to pull a pigskin suitcase from the luggage rack.

"You go to the Parker House, m'boy, and tell them that you're Bernard Arendel. They'll take care of you."

He waved aside Cole's thanks and followed his huge nose down the aisle.

LARRY COLE'S skin still retained a good portion of its Pacific tan, and it felt good to him under a fine needle spray in the white-tiled shower. His head still ached dully, and his mouth was still dry, but he was getting hungry and that was a good sign. The housing plan had worked like a charm.

From the moment he had scrawled, *Bernard Arendel*, on the Parker House's register card, it had been, "Yea, Mr. Arendel. . . . Of course, Mr. Arendel. . . . We'll be glad to pick up your baggage for

you, Mr. Arendel. . . . Anything you want, just call on us, Mr. Arendel.”

Then he’d called up Julie at the County Building where she worked and told her he was here. Her voice had been the best pickup possible. Her voice had sounded like sweet music. Even half-laughing, half-sobbing.

“Larry! Larry, darling! Where are you? I’ll be right over! No, I won’t wait for quitting time; I’m coming right now! Meet me in the lobby. Oh, darling, it’s wonderful to hear you. It’s good!”

He was toweling his lean brown body when the tap came at the door of his room.

“Boy with your baggage, sir.”

Cole stuck his head out of the bathroom and called.

“Bring it in and toss it down anywhere.”

He heard the outer door open and a sharp thud, then the bellhop wanting to know if he should open the baggage.

“Don’t bother,” Cole called. “There’s nothing in it that I want right now. Take a quarter from the dresser.”

He slipped into a pair of clean shorts and went into his bedroom. The bellhop was gone, but instead of the half-filled Army duffle bag that Cole expected to see, there was a four-foot steamer trunk. He stood for a minute just staring at it. It was an expensive trunk, with leather bound corners and a strong lock. And on the front it was initialed, *B. A.* in gold letters.

He walked over to the phone beside the bed, then stopped before he even reached for it. The initial on the trunk were the same as the ones he was using right now. He went back to the trunk and looked at the baggage tag on it. It bore the same numbers as the baggage check he’d left at the desk downstairs. Then he laughed. It was obvious. His long-nosed Good Samaritan on the train had simply given him the wrong check. When Mr. Arendel

discovered the mistake, he’d come and make an exchange.

Cole finished dressing, stood before the mirror to knot his necktie. On the glass-topped dresser were the odds and ends from his trouser pockets. In the middle of the little group of coins was a bronze key. He had never seen it before. Cole didn’t own anything with a lock on it. He picked it up and turned it over in his fingers. On impulse, he stepped to the strange trunk and slipped the key into the lock slot. It turned smoothly, with barely a click.

Cole put his hands on the front of the trunk and spread it open about twelve inches. Twelve inches was plenty. The usual drawers and hangers had been removed from the inside of the luggage, but the trunk was full. The man must have been small, but even so his body filled all the space. The round bald head with the black hole in it fell forward against the opening as if the corpse were trying to stick his wrinkled, cadaverous face out into the air.

He walked numbly over to the bed and sat down on the edge. He tried to think but his head began to ache and spin again. The bellhop who brought the trunk up hadn’t seen him, he’d been out of sight in the bathroom. The desk clerk had given him a lot of attention, but had been very busy, distracted, and probably wouldn’t be able to identify him. Let the trunk stay here.

He locked the trunk, threw the key under the bed, grabbed his little rubberized canvas handbag. He walked down two flights before he took the elevator.

In crossing the lobby from the elevator to the street door, Cole would have to pass within a few feet of the room desk, but the clerk was busy saying no to a little line of room seekers. Cole kept his eyes straight ahead of him and started in a direct line to the lobby door.

He was almost past the desk when he saw her. She was leaning across the hotel desk with her back turned to him, trying to attract the room clerk's attention, but Cole caught a glimpse of her profile. Four years hadn't changed her. She looked the same as she had forty-eight months ago on his last furlough. The same pert little nose, full lips. She used to wear her hair piled on top of her head. Now it tumbled in soft waves around her shoulders, but it was the same hair, the color of fresh, golden honey.

He opened his mouth to call to her, then stopped with his mouth still gaping when he saw the bellhop beside her. And what the bellhop was carrying.

Then he had pushed through the revolving doors and was hurrying down State Street. He didn't know where he was going, but he kept walking. The bellhop had been carrying an Army duffle bag, with *Laurence E. Cole* stenciled on the side in big black letters.

BEHIND him he heard someone call his name, but it didn't penetrate his mind. The sounds of traffic in the street, the taxi horns, clashing gears, the swish of passing cars, the thunder of the elevated a block over on Wabash, the rapid tattoo of a woman's heels running on the pavement behind him. His ears picked it all up, but he didn't hear it. He was walking mechanically, in a straight line, his eyes staring, unseeing, ahead of him. He shouldered into a couple of people, but didn't even pause.

Then there was a soft hand on his sleeve, a quiet, anxious voice beside him:

"Larry! Larry, what's the matter? You saw me in the hotel lobby and didn't stop. Why?"

He kept walking, didn't look at her, and she had to take fast little steps to keep up with him.

"Larry! Darling, what's wrong?"

This time when he didn't answer, she stopped dead still with her feet planted solidly on the sidewalk and grabbed his arm with both hands. His own momentum swung him around to face her. Her blue eyes crinkled up and sparks lit up beneath the surface. Her voice was low, and rapid, and angry.

"Look, Larry, if you've changed your mind, okay! But say so! We agreed four years ago that if either of us changed, we'd call the whole thing off. But I want to know, one way or the other! You don't have to give me this silent treatment. Do you think I'll cause trouble and try and scream? You should know me better than that! If you don't love me any more, if you don't want me, tell me now; and maybe I'll cry and scream, but not where you can see me."

He just stood there, silent, with a dazed look on his face. The girl gripped her full underlip between her teeth and swung her arm. Her fingers left four strips of red across his cheek.

"For heaven's sake, Larry! Say something!"

He put a hand to his cheek and the blank glaze left his eyes and he really looked at her. Then the words she had spoken finally began sinking into his brain. A few passers-by were standing at a little distance watching the scene curiously. A tall uniformed policeman was hurrying toward them.

A sob stuck in Cole's throat. He dropped his canvas bag, caught the girl in his arms, and held her close.

"Julie, Julie, Julie," he breathed over and over, his face buried in her silken hair.

"What's going on here?" the cop wanted to know, loudly.

A cab driver parked at the curb stuck his head through the window of his hack and said, "It was a lover's quarrel, copper,

but it's too late for you to do anything about it now."

Cole twisted his head, saw the cop, and his eyes grew frightened, frantic. But the law didn't notice. "What's the matter with you two?" he asked.

Julie's laugh was light and happy and almost gay. "It's all right, officer," she sparkled. "We just became engaged again."

The cop put the backs of his hands on his hips belligerently. "Well, you can't do it here on the public thoroughfare! Take it home."

Cole picked up his bag. He grabbed the girl's hand and dragged her over to the taxicab, pushed her inside. The cop was laughing when the cab started. Julie was laughing too, but there were tears in her eyes at the same time. She took Cole's face between the palms of her hands and kissed him.

"You'll never know how much you worried me back there, you big lug," she smiled tenderly. "What was the big idea anyway?"

THE grinning driver wanted to know if they were going anywhere in particular. Cole looked at the girl and she whispered an Oak Street address, near Washington Square. Cole just told the driver to go to the Square. He closed the glass panel behind the front seat, then reached for Julie's hand. She was looking at him with a proud smile on her face.

"Julie, I'm in a jam," he told her. "I think somebody has me framed for a murder!"

The smile faded from her face. Her lips parted and she covered them with the fingers of one hand. Her other hand clutched at his.

"Murder! Who?"

He shook his head. In low quick tones he told her about his binge; waking up on

the train; his huge-nosed, supposedly Good Samaritan; the trunk key in his pocket; the bald-headed corpse; his decision to ease out of the picture, only to find his duffle bag being sent to his room. By the time he had finished, the color had drained from her face, leaving it white and cold, with only two spots of red high on her cheekbones.

The taxi pulled up on State Street, across from Washington Square. Cole paid the driver, and they got out. She showed him the direction to her apartment.

"Larry, what are we going to do?" her voice was choked, scared. "Your story sounds fantastic!" They turned into Oak Street and hurried to her apartment.

It was a nice apartment. Living room, bedroom, and kitchen, with a tiny foyer. Cole looked around at the rose-painted walls and nodded approvingly.

"It's too big for just me," she told him, "but apartments are hard to get now, and I wanted to be sure of having a nice place for—for us."

He took her in his arms and her body was shuddering, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

"I—I'm scared, Larry, I'm scared. What can we do?"

He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief and found he'd forgotten to put one there. He released her and went to his canvas bag, unzipped it. His hand came out of the bag slowly. He had put a souvenir pistol in the bag, all right, but his was a little, flat Japanese gun. The one in his hand was a heavy, round-barreled German army P-38. Julie came over and stood beside him, staring at the gun.

"What is it?"

He tried to swallow the dry lump in his a throat, but it wouldn't go down. It made his voice a hoarse, croaking whisper. "It's the last straw. It must be the gun that killed the man in the trunk."

"Larry, can't we just go to the police and tell them the whole story?"

He shook his head hopelessly. She herself had said that his story was fantastic, and she loved him. He could imagine what the cops would say, if he went to them and gave them a gun with his fingerprints on it; led them to a hotel room that he had signed for with a phony name; showed them a corpse in a trunk with his prints all over it; told them that the trunk and the hotel reservation had probably come from Washington, where he himself had been twenty-four hours ago, with time he couldn't account for. And then say, "But, please, Mr. Policeman, don't arrest me. Go out and find a man with a big nose who said he was Bernard Arendel, but probably isn't because he just made up that name to frame me with!"

Cole hadn't realized that he had been thinking aloud, until Julie repeated the name.

"Arendel—Arendel." She turned to him with wide, excited eyes. "Larry! The county auditor just made a check on an investment firm called Arendel and Kessler! I don't know what it was about, but everyone in the auditor's office was in a turmoil about it. I'm sure something was wrong with the firm."

She ran out into the little foyer, and returned with a telephone directory. She thumbed pages, finally ran her finger down a list of names.

"Here it is! And it's B. Arendel! The Mutual Trust Building, on West Madison."

He wanted to go alone, but she refused absolutely to be left behind. "I couldn't stand the strain alone," she told him. "I want to be with you, no matter what!"

ARENDEL AND KESSLER, Investments, occupied half of an entire floor of the big office building. The reception room was large and elaborate,

with leather upholstered chairs, chromium ashstands, and a little glassed-off enclosure for the receptionist and her switchboard. Behind the receptionist's cage, through big, plate-glass panels, Cole and Julie could see row after row of desks, but all of them were empty. Save for the brassy blonde receptionist, the whole place looked deserted.

"I'm sorry," the receptionist told them in a tired voice, "but we're not doing business today." She tried to plug out two lights at once on the switchboard, and repeated the statement into the mouthpiece resting on her over-ample bosom.

"I don't want to do business," Cole told her. "I want to see Mr. Arendel about something very personal."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Mr. Arendel is in Washington being investigated by a Senate committee. Mr. Kessler is in Baltimore visiting his son who is just back from overseas. And I'm in a state of confusion that's driving me batty!"

She swung back to the switchboard and said monotonously, "I'm sorry, we're not doing business today. No, I don't know, I'm sorry."

Julie's face fell and she turned back to the door. Cole started to turn, then swung back to the brassy blonde.

"Say, what does Mr. Arendel look like?"

"He's a prune-faced old guy with a bald head. Now, go away, will ya."

In the corridor, Cole stood for a moment with his back to the door. "Well, there's my last angle," he said hopelessly. "You go on home, Julie. I'm getting out of town as fast as I can get!"

"No, Larry! You can't quit!"

"There's nothing more I can do, Julie! We agreed a long time ago that if either of us changed we could call everything off between us. Well, I'm calling it off!"

"No, Larry! Not like this!" She sagged against him, buried her face on his chest. "If you go away, take me with you," she sobbed.

He put his arms around her, rested his cheek against her hair, and tried to soothe her. He paid no attention to the footsteps that passed them. If anyone wanted to witness this little scene, let them. Cole didn't care. A door down the hall was closing when he looked up. Cole couldn't see the man going into the office, but on the frosted glass panel he could see the silhouette of the man's profile. And there was only one profile like it!

Cole gripped Julie's arms below her shoulders and thrust her away from him. He ran down the hall and twisted open the door, tugging the German automatic pistol from his pocket with his other hand.

"Hello, murderer," he crooned between closed teeth.

The Nose turned around slowly, then froze when he saw the gun in Cole's hand. A sickly smile flickered onto his face. Julie came into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Larry! What are you doing?"

"I don't know yet," Cole said, without taking his eyes off the smiling man in front of him. "This is the guy that framed me, and I'm either going to get me a confession out of this ant-eater, or I'm going to have a real murder to fry for!"

"A confession to what?" the big-nosed man asked, and his smile steadied on his face. He picked up a bronze letter opener from the desk and stood tapping its heavy handle into the palm of his hand. "I don't know what you're talking about, m'boy."

COLE braced his gun hand against his ribs and moved forward until the muzzle of the automatic almost touched the center of the other man's stomach.

"I don't know why you killed Arendel," he said, "but you didn't want his body found in Washington. Maybe because you didn't want it tied to that Senate investigation. You found me drunk in a bar and shooting off my mouth all about going to Chicago and not having any friends or family except for Julie here. So you figured me for the perfect patsy to hang your killing on. But it's not going to work! Because your frame is too good! Unless you sit down there and write out a complete confession, there's no way out of this for me. I'll have nothing to lose by blowing a hole in your belly!"

The smile on the long-nosed man didn't even flicker.

"If you hand me that gun and surrender yourself," he said, "you may find yourself under arrest, but your little friend here won't be involved. But if you shoot me, she will automatically become an accessory, and will be considered as guilty of murder as you.

"Aside from that," he broadened his smile, "that gun you have in your hand is an automatic. You should know that you can't fire an automatic without pulling back the hammer!"

Cole realized his carelessness with the gun and raised his thumb quickly to cock the pistol. But he had taken his eyes from the Nose for an instant. In that instant the heavy handle of the letter opener clipped across the hard joint of his wrist, paralyzing his hand. Then Cole was looking into the muzzle of the gun, as the big-nosed man moved around behind his desk.

"I assure you, Mr. Cole, that I shan't hesitate to shoot the murderer of my partner, if you so much as make a move. I took it for granted that, having served in the Pacific, you wouldn't be familiar with the operation of the German P-38. It happens to be one automatic with a

double-action, and can be fired like a revolver, without cocking.”

He reached down an immaculate finger and flipped a switch on his inter-office communication box.

“Miss Smith,” he said. “Will you please call the police and tell them that I have a confessed murderer here in my office. And tell them to hurry.”

The surprised voice of the brassy blonde came back from the box. “Mr. Kessler! We’ve been trying to locate you for two days! We—”

“Never mind that, Miss Smith, business can wait. Get the police.” Kessler broke the connection.

Julie had been standing with her back to the door, standing very straight, her face pale and her trembling red lip held between her teeth. She took a deep breath.

“Do you really think that the police will believe you, Mr. Kessler?” Her voice was low and even. “When you had every reason for killing your partner and Larry had none?”

Kessler turned an almost kindly smile on her.

“I don’t know what motives Mr. Cole had. Perhaps he got into a drunken argument. But I had none. I gain nothing from my partner’s death. No insurance, no inheritance. His wife will get his share of the business. I can prove that I never saw this young man before in my life. I can prove that I haven’t been in Washington in months. Friends saw me leave Baltimore on a train that has no connections to Washington.”

JULIE walked across the room and placed her hands on the desk. Her voice had a touch of pity in it. “What’s the use, Mr. Kessler? You aren’t the type of man to bear up well under a prison sentence. You can’t win. The auditors have already

checked your books! You’re no longer in business!”

Her words struck home. The smile vanished from under Kessler’s enormous nose and his lips grew pale. “I—I don’t believe it!”

“It’s the only other reason left for you to have killed your partner. You must have been afraid that the Senate investigation of his private affairs might extend to an investigation of the firm. And it did, Mr. Kessler. Some of your clients must have gotten suspicious and demanded a public audit. Just flip the switch on the interphone and ask your secretary, Mr. Kessler. Your office couldn’t locate you for two days, so you must not have been in Baltimore, where you were supposed to be.”

He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. His hand moved toward the interphone slowly, as if he were afraid to touch it. He flipped the switch and said, “Miss Smith?”

The receptionist’s voice came back in a rapid torrent of words. “I called the police, Mr. Kessler, but I don’t think I should have. They have warrants for you and Mr. Arendel, both. A court order made us stop operations, and took all of the books. The auditors were here day before—”

Kessler’s finger clicked off her voice. He stared up at Julie and Cole with deadened eyes. He motioned toward the door with the gun, and picked up a desk pen with his other hand. His voice was lifeless.

“Get out,” he said. “The police are coming for a confessed murderer.”

Julie and Cole backed out of the room. They were still standing in the corridor when the sharp explosion came from the office. Julie closed her eyes and rested her forehead on Cole’s shoulder. He stroked her hair.

“It’s all right, Julie. It’s all right now. It’s better this way.”