

THE LONG DENOUEMENT

BY LEWIS SHINER

MY OFFICE WINDOW needed cleaning. I could always tell because the patterns of dried smoke and LA haze got more interesting than whatever was in my typewriter. Today they looked like dragons, with maidens over easy on the side. I couldn't find any knights or white chargers, but then this was the summer of 1933 and the whole world was a little depressed.

The phone started up in the middle of a sentence. I tried to finish it out over the ringing, but it was no good. I picked up the receiver.

"Chandler?" It was a woman's voice, with the kind of sweetness that has money or power or both lined up behind it. It was a nice voice, if you happened to be wearing a tuxedo. It clashed a little with my blue serge.

"That's right," I agreed with her. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Cooper, Mrs. Francis Cooper. Francis and I are recently married, and I love him very much."

"That's very nice, I'm sure, Mrs. Cooper, but I don't do love stories. Or confessions."

She stiffened her voice, like a trumpeter getting his lip ready for a high one. "This is not to do with our personal lives. My husband runs a recording studio, Hollywood Recording Center, and I wanted you to know I'm concerned for him."

"Go on."

"The studio publishes a magazine, which I edit, called *Off the Record*." I winced a little but let her keep going. "It's sort of a trade publication for the music industry. I was wondering if you might be interested in contributing a short story to us, something to do with music or records?"

"I'm afraid I don't know anything about music or records." I had to watch myself. My voice was starting to get a nasty edge to it.

"We'd be happy to have you down at the studio. In fact, there's a recording session this afternoon, and I could show you around. You see, the magazine is not doing well, and the whole industry is in a bit of a slump. A story by you could get a little interest going in both."

I lit a cigarette. On days like this I wished I had a secretary to deal with the weirdoes, the publicity hungry, all the nut cases in Southern California that seemed to think a writer could solve all their troubles.

"I'm somewhat in the middle of something just now," I told her. "But let me get your address and phone number, and maybe I can get back to you."

I wrote all the information out, and stuck it in one of my file drawers. Once I was off the line I went back to that sentence and the patterns in the window.

One of them was starting to look suspiciously like a hamburger, so I put out the cigarette and went to lunch. It wasn't a great lunch, but after it the thought

of Mrs. Cooper and her records was the farthest thing from my mind. Unfortunately a second call brought them all back.

It was Greer, from the Publisher's Building, one of the hard boys that wishes you could have stories without writers.

"What's the matter," I asked him, "one of your boys catch me using a pseudonym?"

"Don't crack wise, pen pusher." His throat kept catching at his voice, as if it didn't want to let it out. I could understand why. It had an ugly sound, like concrete going through a mixer. "The Chairman of the Board could have your by-line in a second over this."

"You'd make a mystery writer, Greer, but you're a little tardy with the clues. Tell me what's on your mind, if you'll pardon the overstatement."

"You shouldn't come on like such a tough guy, Chandler. The CB loves tough guys. He chews 'em up and spits 'em out again, just for the exercise."

I didn't say anything, hoping the silence would tempt him beyond his endurance. It did.

"Okey, scribbler. A simple message for you. Layoff the Cooper story. Read me?"

"I didn't know you were in print," I said, and hung up. Naturally I was hooked, tighter than an agent's contract. They should have known better than to come on tough with me. Besides which, something about Greer irritated me a little. Call me hard to get along with, but I just don't like the type. Give some people a blue pencil and they think they invented the language.

I covered up the typewriter and turned out the lights. Then, on impulse, I went back to the desk and got out a pocket sized notebook, pencil, and extra leads. Something told me I might need them.

THE ADDRESS was out 101 almost to Ventura, just north of the big movie lots. While I drove I turned a few things over in my mind. I had a plot lying around that could be dusted off, resoled, and still travel a few more miles. Something along the lines of the country boy making a hit of it as a singer, then mixing it up with the wrong sort of joes. All I really needed was to pick up a bit of background, a few phrases of shop talk, and I could whip the thing together in a day or two. Being in the financial shape that I still had to pull kite tricks with my bank account, the prospect of a solicited story was not so bad as I'd tried to make out at first. By the time I'd parked my Marmon in front of the Hollywood Recording Center I was almost looking forward to it.

I told a receptionist who I was and got a nice smile for my trouble. She left the room and came back with an even nicer surprise.

"Good afternoon," the surprise said, "I'm Jane Cooper." She was five and a half feet of redhead that a less refined person might describe as luscious. Me, I just concentrated on keeping my eyes in my head and my mind on my job. Her body was long and willowy, like a volume of T. S. Elliot next to my *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Underneath the sleek red hair was a mouth that twinkled and shone, and had all the expression her eyes should have had. The eyes themselves weren't as pleased with things as the mouth, and had that flat, hard look that some proofreaders get.

I followed her back to an office. She took my hat and I took her offer of a drink. It seemed a pretty good deal at the time. She pointed out a chair for me, and I was glad she did. At first I had taken it for a hunting trophy, or perhaps a bloated pet cheetah. My feet disappeared in the carpet and the conditioned air smelled like nothing at all.

“A bit of business first,” I said. “I get two cents a word against royalties, paid on acceptance.”

“That’s pretty high,” she said, but before I could work my way out of the clutches of the chair, she held up a shapely, manicured hand. “But I’ll accept it. I assume I have final say on whether or not I want to publish it.”

“Of course.” We drank, and she let me see the smile again. Her eyes were green, and promised depth and richness under other circumstances. At the moment I thought I saw a hint of nervousness in them.

“My husband,” she said after a moment, “was not eager to see me bring in a writer. He feels the result would be ... sensationalistic. I think he’ll change his mind. But if he should ask, you’re here about the carpets or something.”

“All right,” I said, glad to know who had tipped Greer off, anyway. “Now suppose you tell me a bit about the record business.”

It was a piece of cake. I lit my pipe and closed my eyes, and thought about what a piece of cake it was going to be. I didn’t need to take any notes. I just let the plot drip and congeal into the information she was giving me. I asked questions, but they were easy ones, like what do you call that, and how is this done. I soaked up all the color. I wanted to get it right. Somebody might want to reprint the story.

After that I got the dime tour. She took me down a paneled hall and I could finally smell her perfume. It was worth the wait. It was the kind of perfume that keeps daring you to pin it down, and sneaks up on you when you give up. It reminded me of Paris, and a lot of other places I’d never been to.

There were two studios in the building. Studio A was empty and she took me in there first. It was the sort of room that makes you itch at the base of your neck. None of the walls was quite parallel and the ceiling sloped at a strange angle. All that it needed was a funhouse mirror and it would have been a barrel of laughs. In keeping, I assumed, with the latest theories, there were lots of wooden baffles with louvers standing around. I had to fight my way through the carpet on the floor. Microphones hung off of long metal booms, and there were lots of folding chairs and music stands. One wall was glass, and behind it was more electronics than I knew how to talk to.

“What do you think?” she asked me.

“It’s swell,” I said. “When does the floor show start?”

“They’re getting ready to record next door,” she said. I wasn’t getting many laughs today. “I’ll just pop over and see if I can bring you in.”

“Why don’t you just do that.”

She sauntered out and the door clicked behind her. I felt like a eunuch in a harem, alone with a lot of valuable stuff I didn’t know what to do with. There was a pile of sheet music on top of a wooden stand. I thumbed through it. Some of the titles made me think I was in the wrong trade. Towards the bottom I saw a familiar color, and pulled out a thick foolscap manuscript. I

looked at the title and the first page. Then I put it back at the bottom of the stack. I'd have been more interested, but I didn't write that kind of story.

The door clicked open again and I smiled at Jane Cooper. "Do I rate?"

"Come along," she said. Her schoolmistress manner was beginning to grate, but then I could tell I wasn't making her day either. Some people just react to me that way. She took me across the hall. This was supposed to be Studio B, but for my money it was Studio A with the door on the other side. A six piece band was camped out on the rug, making smoke signals and swapping notes in musical shorthand. Three kids with short hair and sweaters sat around a microphone that was a little smaller than a cigar box. They were close to the glass wall, probably so the big boys could keep an eye on them. They were smoking too, and I was beginning to feel left out, so I relit my pipe.

Mrs. Cooper showed me where to sit, and then demonstrated the proper method. I followed suit and looked at the fellows on the other side of the glass. They were all wearing headphones and nodding to each other. They seemed to be enjoying whatever it was that they were listening to, and I was happy for them. The college types in the sweaters seemed to be having fun, too. Then the band started a cheerful little dance number and that made it unanimous.

We were sitting close to the door, probably so they could whisk me out if I misbehaved. There was a little pile of music under my chair, so I flipped through it to see if there were any more budding literary efforts about.

"Okey, that's enough," said a voice in my ear, and I sat up, startled. "Everything balances out pretty good," the voice went on, and I saw that it came out of the sound system in the walls.

"That's my husband," said Mrs. Cooper, and pointed at a figure behind the glass. I kept myself from waving to him. He noticed me anyway, though, and looked at me the way a cat looks at a mouse. He was beefy, and he had the years on his wife—fifteen of them, at least. Not that he was decrepit, but he had an air of settled in depravity that takes years to cultivate. But then, I was looking at him through a double wall of glass, and maybe I was letting my imagination run a little free.

Somebody else came over the system and started giving instructions to the band. After a little shop lingo which I'm sure they weren't using just to impress me, the voice said to take five.

Mr. Cooper came in the door and I stood up. His wife said, "Francis, this is Mr.—"

"Morton," I interrupted, "Jake Morton, Acme Secretarial."

I pumped his hand and flashed him some teeth. "Your wife was good enough to let me check your soundproofing. You wouldn't believe how tough it is—"

"I'm sure," he said, so quiet that I couldn't believe I'd actually heard it over my own voice. But I had, and it shut me up to boot. The man dripped authority like a duck dripped water. "Come along," he said to his wife.

"What about Mr. Morton?" she asked with offhand concern. She was good. She was very good.

“Leave him.” He turned a smile on me that was thinner than tissue paper. I couldn’t have dropped a dime on it. “You’ll see what you need rather quickly, won’t you?”

“Yes sir,” I said. “And I know my way out.”

“That’s good.” He wasn’t big, he just made you think he was. And somehow he didn’t look pleasant to touch. A little clammy. Maybe it was something in the watery blue eyes or the pallid complexion. Or the way his shoes squeaked, even through the fathoms of carpet.

After they were gone, a voice said Rico was bringing the lyrics. I sat down like a good boy while the sheets were being passed around. The three collegiates huddled up at the piano and talked their way through the piece, then stepped back and fitted their voices together like the pieces of a puzzle. The tune was nothing, a bit of fluff about standing on a street corner, but then I’m no judge. They seemed to like it.

The whole thing got done in about forty minutes, counting playbacks. Afterwards, the drummer lit a cigarette and looked at me. “You look more like a hack than a secretary,” he said.

“I might be,” I said. “What’s it to you?”

“Nothing to get tough over. Just one artist to another.”

“Ars longa, vita brevis?” I asked.

“Never heard of ’em,” he said. “Who’re they with?”

“You and I should get along,” I said, and accepted one of his Luckies. “You work here much?”

He laughed. He was past his good days, a little, with the sort of wrinkled, musty look men get when they live alone too long. I had a bit of that look myself. I could smell his hair tonic. “Nobody works very much here. Once or twice a week’s about all.”

I was almost interested. “Why’s that?”

“Hell, brother, there’s a depression on.”

“I’ve heard rumors about that. How do they keep the doors open?”

“The old man’s got money. I don’t know where from, but it ain’t from here.”

He looked like he had something else to tell me. I tried to warm him up to it. “You got any ideas?”

“Well, he owns the pressing plant next door. Maybe he gets business there. Presses the records, prints the albums for them, everything.”

“Is that usual?”

“It’s pretty damned *unusual*. And I’ll tell you something else. This song we cut will be on the radio by tomorrow night. That’s so unusual, it doesn’t happen anywhere else in the world. Some people wait months for their songs to get played. But then, some other people know how to get things done.” The way he rubbed his fingers together, I could practically see the bills.

“That way, huh?”

“That’s right, brother. Some people might call it a payoff, but me, I call it a living.”

I’d seen what I’d come to see. I didn’t expect to see Jane Cooper for a while. I started off in search of my hat.

“Don’t take my word for it, brother,” the drummer whispered. “Station KXY, seven o’clock. The day of the month matches the song.”

I gave him a wink and a thumbs up. My hat was at receptionist’s desk. She forgot to ask me to come back soon.

I SKIPPED THE OFFICE and went on home. There was a typewriter there, too. I put in an hour or so when I got back, but before long I was running into snags. The characters were growing out of the situation nicely enough, but the situation was in trouble. It kept getting itself tied up in details.

I got an ice cube and carried it into the living room where a glass and a bottle were waiting for it. The bottle held charcoal aged Tennessee sipping whiskey. It was seven years old. I got out a book with stiff blue covers and set up a Scrabble game between Bennett Cerf and James Joyce. It was only a couple years old, played by mail while they were trying to arrange to publish Joyce’s book. Cerf was the technician, master of the doubles and triples, but Joyce had the vocabulary all over him.

I was interrupted by a knock at the door. I opened it to find Greer and a young proofreader I’d never seen before. Greer’s eyes swept the place neater than a broom, then he sat down and put his feet up on my coffee table. “Nice joint,” he said. “Me, I can’t afford a nice joint on editor’s pay.”

“Maybe you should go freelance,” I suggested, and showed a chair to the kid.

“Ha, ha. I’m laughing, Chandler, hear me?” He looked at the Scrabble game. “What’s that?”

“Just something I do to help me think.”

“Yeah. Well here’s something to think about. If you try to print one word that smells of Cooper, or even the music business, you’ll find yourself back doing a long stretch at the *Van Nuys News*.”

“What about your boyfriend?” I asked. “Or is he just the strong, silent type?”

The kid was pimply, but mean. “Let me at ’im,” he said, real quiet, “just give me a few pages of ’script. I’ll make him glad to sell to the love pulps.”

“Cute kid,” I said.

“Yeah,” Greer said, “must be contagious.” He strolled over to my typewriter. He laid one huge ham of a hand across the keyboard. He put his weight against it. The keys started to knot and tangle themselves up. Metal squeaked and springs bent, and Greer kept pushing. When he left off, the keys were locked together tighter than the publishers in New York City.

“Is this where I’m supposed to offer you a drink?” I asked.

“Aww, save it for the critics, Chandler. You know I hate to pull rough stuff like that.” He was almost whining. “Why won’t you ever do what you’re told?”

“I was just kidding about the drink,” I said.

“Come on,” Greer said to the kid. “Let’s get out of here. All this wit is making me hysterical.”

The kid showed his teeth in a good approximation of a snarl, and drew a dark blue line through the word ROYALTIES on the Scrabble board. “I’ll

remember you, Chandler. If you ever write one word that even looks like literature, I'll burn your reputation to the ground. You still laughing?"

"I'm crying inside," I assured him. "Your friend found the door all right. I'll bet you could, too."

IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT by the time I got the place cleaned up, although the typewriter was pretty hopeless. Okey, I was a tough guy, I'd use the one at the office. I fixed another drink, and decided to count the weeds in my back yard. I didn't make it. As soon as I opened the glass door, it started raining anvils, and one of them clipped me on the skull.

It was only a love tap, but I woke up feeling like a warm beer that somebody had poured out too fast. I hadn't been out long—there was still ice in the whiskey stain on the carpet. I got to my feet, all six of them, and tried to find the steps down off the merry-go-round. Then my stomach tried to crawl out my throat so I sat down again.

After a couple of minutes I decided I felt no worse than Custer after Big Horn, and I still had most of my scalp besides. So I looked around the room from my ground level vantage point to see what was missing. I didn't have to look very long or hard.

The notebook was gone from my pocket, of course. The manuscript was gone too. I still had the empty glass in my hand, though, so I crawled to the bottle and gave myself a medicinal dose. I wished they hadn't spilled my drink. It showed you what a low standard criminal types had any more.

I had put a carbon of the story in my bedroom safe. After the whiskey started to work, I checked on it. It was still there. I looked at my head in the bathroom mirror. It was bad, but I didn't faint.

I was ready to put myself to bed when the phone rang again. It had been a day for interruptions. I was getting a little tired of them, but I snatched the earpiece off the hook anyway.

"Chandler," I said. I couldn't locate the good humor to say hello.

"This is Jane Cooper, Mr. Chandler. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Actually, I was just closing a deal for New York with some Indians, but that's all right. The bargaining was getting rough."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Cooper. Please go on."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. My husband and I quarreled, and he—killed my magazine."

"Killed it?"

"Yes. It was his decision, really. He's the publisher, and I'm only the editor. It's printed in the studio print shop, and financed by the studio. And he just, well, cut off the funds. I could pay you—"

"Not necessary. I'm sorry about your magazine." In truth, I was ceasing to care. I'd lost markets before, some through death, some through new schedules or management. There were always other markets. "It's been a long day," I said. "I've been threatened, had a typewriter broken, my head bashed, a story stolen, and now a market shot out from under me. If you don't mind, I think I'll call it a day before something bad happens to me."

“Someone hit you?” she asked after a moment.

“Yeah. I might have suggested your husband, but I get the idea he was with you.”

“Yes. All night. We’d been arguing for the last two hours, and he just now went to bed.” She got apologetic. “That’s why I called so late.”

“Not to worry, Mrs. Cooper. I’d only just finished a short nap.”

“You seem quite expert at feeling sorry for yourself,” she said.

“If you want something done right,” I answered, finishing another dose of medicine, “do it yourself.”

“Are you always this flippant?”

I considered a couple of replies, but they were all on the obvious side so I let it ride.

“All right, Mr. Chandler. I’ll leave you to your whiskey and witty dialogue. I’m sorry to have put you to so much trouble for nothing.”

“On the contrary,” I said. I was sitting on the floor, and I let my head fall back on the couch. I hoped I wasn’t getting blood on the slipcover. “I’ll finish the story and let my agent try to handle it somewhere else. I only have to clear up a couple of little details.”

“Such as what?” She seemed interested again, all of a sudden.

“Such as whether or not all studios keep a professional lyricist on the premises.” I lit a cigarette and drew the smoke down my lungs.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You have a man working at your studio named Rico who writes lyrics for your artists. I just wondered if this was a standard thing.”

“I don’t know where you get your information, Mr. Chandler, but there is no such person at our studio. Lyricists work hand in hand with composers; in fact, most *are* composers. Nobody adds lyrics after the music is written. That’s putting the horse after the cart.”

“Then who wrote the lyrics for the song today?”

“You’re full of questions for someone who was trying to get off the phone a minute ago,” she snapped.

“You’re awfully evasive for somebody who isn’t supposed to have anything to hide.”

“I resent the implications of that remark,” she said in a chill tone. “But since I can’t see what difference it could possibly make, I’ll tell you. Danny, one of the singers, wrote the lyrics and the pianist wrote the melody. Satisfied?” Her voice was crisp as a fresh salad, tangy as oil and vinegar.

“For the moment. I’m sorry about your magazine, Mrs. Cooper. Goodbye.” I hung up the phone and went to bed.

I would have slept better lying on a railroad track, or on a football field during a conference championship. I know I wouldn’t have slept any worse. There was one position I could lie in where my head didn’t hurt. That was face down on my pillow, and then I couldn’t breathe. But I’m a tough guy, so I held my breath.

IN THE MORNING I called the studios again, ready to pitch my voice up if the Cooper woman came on. One of the engineers answered. It sounded like

an engineer. It was the sort of voice that's not used to the telephone and too busy to learn.

"I'm looking for a singer named Danny," I said. "He likes to work in sweaters. He might do some song writing, too. Do you know where I could find him?"

The voice mentioned another studio and cut me off. The snap of the broken connection made my head hurt again. I wondered if I was losing my charm. The studio was listed in the book, so I drove out there with all the windows down, wishing I had a convertible. A Duesenberg, maybe, with a straight eight, low and lean like a hungry jungle cat. You could smell the orange blossoms all over California, even through the haze of downtown LA.

There was some muscle inside the front door who wanted credentials, so I let him look at my press card. "Okey, wordsmith," he said, "in there," and pointed out a glass walled room.

It was Studio A all over again. The three kids were sitting around an almost identical microphone, blowing around identical smoke.

"One of you named Danny?" I asked, and since I had it out I went ahead and showed my paper around again.

"Sure," one of them said. "What's this all about?"

"I'd just like to talk to you for a second. Background stuff."

"Didn't I see you over at Cooper's yesterday?"

"That's right."

We went outside. The kid hadn't liked the idea of me and Cooper in one mouthful. Something had him spooked, deep down where he wasn't even able to see it himself.

"Who's Rico?" I said, and then, because he didn't seem to like to hear that from me either, I added, "and what's he got on you?"

"You got it wrong, scribbler," he said, and his blonde hair shone in the spring sunshine. He was cute and wholesome, and I was sure teenage girls everywhere had his picture on the wall. "I just keep my nose clean, let Rico change some of the words of my songs around, and get paid good for it." He had a habit of talking with his head down, maybe so I could see his hair cut better. He was loveable as a chipmunk.

"What kind of changes?"

"Just a few words, maybe a whole verse to make the changes fit."

"Give me examples."

"Well, addresses. There's some street name, or some particular place always in the songs. I've got to where if I write a song for him, I just make it easy for him, leave a hole where an address can go."

"Why does he do it?"

"It's none of my business mister. Maybe he's with the Chamber of Commerce?"

I told the kid I didn't think so. When I drove off, he seemed to have forgotten me completely, staring into the morning, humming and tapping a foot.

I went to my office and took the phone off the hook. I was not in the mood for any more phone calls. Then I turned off the buzzer that let me know

if anyone had come into my waiting room. They could wait. That was what the room was for.

I spent all afternoon finishing up the story and taking aspirins. About seven o'clock I took the finished manuscript over to my agent's house and put it through the door slot. I didn't want to talk to him, either. On the way home, I remembered the radio show the drummer had told me about. I put the radio on as soon as I got there and listened while I hung up my hat. It was the Pick Hit Show for April 20, and they had only got up to number 21. I sat by the radio and waited. The announcer's voice was smooth as Castor Oil and it was having a similar effect on my stomach. He slithered and slid around the introduction, then played Hit Number 20.

It was the song I'd heard recorded the day before. It didn't sound any better over the radio. But this time I noticed, clear as a bell, the line about "standing under an archway, deep on Ventura Boulevard." I got my spare notebook out of the desk and wrote down the line, along with anything else I could remember out of the song.

I slept better that night, if you consider things like falling off a thirty foot tower to be better than falling off a forty foot tower.

VENTURA BOULEVARD on a Saturday morning is no more crowded than, say, the aisles of a burning theatre, no more hectic than a buffalo stampede. It took me less than two hours to find what I was looking for, but not much less. There were plenty of arches, but only one that made sense in terms of the story line.

A couple of times I asked myself what I was doing. The story was written, my agent was doubtlessly taking it around that morning. It was like playing hopscotch in a mine field for me to keep nosing around. Sooner or later I was bound to get really hurt. Then I saw a huge brick arch on a church, and a newspaper kiosk right under it. I even found a parking place where I could see it from my car. I watched it for half an hour. A lot of people came up to it, many of them whistling. The whistlers seemed to stay longer, and left with parcels wrapped in brown paper.

After I felt I had the routine down, I got out and stopped one of the boys with a parcel. "Say, friend," I said, "that was a catchy tune you were whistling. I heard that on the radio last night. How does it go again?" I slipped him a wink for good measure.

He hummed it for me, an expression of bored tolerance on his face. He was the executive type, a little overweight, a little glossy from years of disuse. A few people looked at us funny, but they were poor and I don't think he even noticed them. He didn't seem to like me too well either, but he may have sympathized with my problem. The tune was just not very memorable.

I decided I had it down, and whistled through the chorus with him. Then I walked up to the kiosk, whistling like a late night express through east LA. I let go with another wink. I was spending them heavily, but I had plenty more where those had come from.

The boy behind the counter handed me a typewritten list. I looked for the manuscript I'd seen in the studio, but apparently it wasn't out yet. "Order by

number,” he said, toneless with boredom. He reminded me of the kid that Greer had brought over to play Scrabble with me. I didn’t hold it against him.

There wasn’t much variety on the list. Asterisks indicated the illustrated versions. I picked a couple of those at random, glad I didn’t have to use the titles. The kid passed over two flat bundles. “Twenty,” the kid said.

I was taking a dislike to him quickly. I concentrated on keeping my face blank and handed him a bill. He didn’t even thank me. Maybe he expected a tip. Back in the car, I slipped off a wrapper and found exactly what I’d expected to find. I closed the thing back up. The printing and binding were top notch, and the pictures were full color, with quality reproduction. Only the subject matter kept it from being a truly high class specimen of the printer’s art.

I GOT MRS. COOPER’S ADDRESS out of the phone book and drove south to her place in Beverly Hills. A liveried butler answered the door and handed me a look that made me wish I’d put on a better suit. “Is Mr. Cooper home?”

“He’s out, sir. May I take a message?”

The butler could have been lying, but I believed him. There was a Pierce-Arrow in the driveway, and that kind of money meant that another car was out driving around somewhere. I hoped it was the husband’s, and that he was in it.

“Tell Mrs. Cooper I’d like to see her. It’s about her husband.” I handed him a card.

I waited outside and watched a cardinal drive away a blue jay twice his size. The jay had a voice that reminded me of Greer. It was the kind of scene that could cheer me up, even if I did feel like the underside of a streetcar.

The butler came back and let me in. The house was one of those two story showplaces that never seems to look lived in, even when they’re not spotless, which this one was. If I had dropped a newspaper on the floor it would have looked like an interior decorator planned it there. It was that kind of a house.

Mrs. Cooper came down the stairs. She looked as remote and untouchable as the house. Her eyes had developed the green they had promised at the recording studio, turning deep and dark as fine jade. Her hair blended into the richness of the mahogany paneling. The studio may have been her husband’s, but she was mistress of the house. I knew it, she knew it, even the house knew it. I followed her into a study, and she closed the double doors behind us. I sat down and dropped my hat at my feet.

“Drink?” she said.

I nodded and heard Scotch tinkle into a glass. It wasn’t hard to tell it just by the sound. Scotch is the only thing that people like Mrs. Cooper drink. Very, very old Scotch.

“Let’s not fool around,” I said. “Why did you call me last Thursday?”

“I told you, for the magazine...”

I set my drink on the desk and picked up my hat. “I’m sorry, I thought maybe your time might be valuable. I thought you might not want to waste any more of it. I see I was wrong.”

“Sit down, Mr. Chandler.” She sat behind the desk and stared at me for a minute. I put my hat back on the floor. I don’t know what she was looking for, but I don’t think she found it. She reached for a cigarette. I lit it, and one of my own. The house was heavily silent. You could have heard a pen drop on the Persian rug.

“All right,” she said. “All right. I’ll tell you. But then I want you to leave, get out and stay away. Forever.” I nodded.

“My husband isn’t here. He never is on weekends. Not since we were married. I worried about it, but I didn’t know what to think, much less do. Then I found a photograph. A certain kind of photograph...”

“I know the kind,” I said.

Her eyes widened a little at that, but she went on. “I wanted to scare him a little, that’s all. You’re a writer. You can find out things I can’t. I suppose I hoped you might catch him taking the pictures. But he ran you off, and that was it.” She was upset. She didn’t like to think her husband was “that kind.” I felt sorry for her. I had a strong hunch she was about to be even more upset.

I tossed her the parcels. “That wasn’t quite it, Mrs. Cooper. There are words to go with the pictures. High class stuff, mind you, only the best, but it’s smut and nothing but smut all the way down the line.

“He’s got a system worked out and it’s good. The tipoff for where the stuff is being sold is in a song. A song recorded in his studio. Every week a different kiosk. I imagine you buy a membership to learn the code and the system. The books aren’t exactly cheap either. That’s how a once a week studio manages to support a nice house in Beverly Hills. It would be too complicated to set up from scratch, but if you already had a studio and print shop that weren’t doing well, it’d be a snap. It’d pay for itself in tax write-offs.

“I didn’t want anything to do with it. I still don’t. But your husband got scared, maybe more scared than you wanted him to. He killed your magazine, then he went after me. Between the publishers’ goons and the hard boys that stole my manuscript, I’ve had a tough couple of days.”

I got up and put my hat on again. “I think it stinks, personally, Mrs. Cooper, but it’s none of my business. I don’t like to see people so powerful that they can twitch their fingers and call down a lot of heat on a small time scribe like me. But I’m out of it now. If you want something done, call the Publisher’s Building and ask for a man named Greer. Tell him the story, then ask him why the Chairman of the Board wanted the story hushed. Greer’s stupid, but he’s honest. There’ll be some changes made.”

She wasn’t answering me. She must have looked inside the package.

“There’s one more thing you can do for me,” I told her. “Next time you’re in trouble ... call a private detective.”

I grinned a little when I got outside, but it just started my head hurting. I almost didn’t answer the phone when I got home, but it turned out to be my agent. He’d already sold the musician piece.

I bought myself a drink and thought about all the stories that people like the Coopers fed each other. Stories that could go on and on and never work

themselves out. A thick wall of them, shutting out the light and keeping them apart from each other. And that's where I come in.

My name is Chandler, and I'm a tough guy. Stories are my business.

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