

“FIRECRACKERS”

by Archie Goodwin

FOREWORD

I have often been asked how I first became acquainted with Nero Wolfe, that gargantuan, egocentric, orchid-growing, beer-drinking, self-proclaimed genius, undoubtedly the world's greatest detective. Admittedly, my answers have been a little vague, partly in deference to the privacy of people involved but, more important, to safeguard the well-being of one, Archie Goodwin.

You may recall a couple of early references:

“Born in Ohio. Public high school, pretty good at geometry and football, graduated with honor but no honors. Went to college two weeks, decided it was childish, came to New York and got a job guarding a pier, shot and killed two men and was fired, was recommended to Nero Wolfe for a chore he wanted done, did it, was offered a full-time job by Mr. Wolfe, took it.”

On another occasion:

“The only girl I had ever been really soft on had found another bargain she liked better. That was how I happened to meet Wolfe – but that story isn't for me to tell, at least not yet. There are one or two little points that would need clearing up some day.”

Perhaps that day has finally arrived. Both of the above statements are true, as far as they go. Oh, I know I have a reputation for dissembling, as Inspector Cramer of the NYPD would be glad to attest. Sometimes, bending the truth a little is for a serious purpose. But mostly, it's pure flippancy on my part, merely to satisfy a whim, a mood, or to just plain rebel against conformity, never intended to be taken literally. In fact, about the only person I've never been able to bamboozle at all is the second (and last) girl I've really been soft on, Lily Rowan. When I first met her, I fed her a perfectly plausible line. She simply looked at me, through the most beautiful azure eyes ever created, and asked softly, "Is any of it straight?" In my most sincere manner, I hastened to assure her it was all true but the words which came out, solely of their own volition, were, "No, it's firecrackers."

The events leading up to my initial meeting with Wolfe involved a lot more than firecrackers. You might even call them a whole Fourth of July explosion. Except that they happened in December. In 1926. When, as an adventurous and (I hate to admit it but you'll find out anyway) naive youth of 18, fresh out of Chillicothe, Ohio, I was ready to take on the Big City of New York.

I

They materialized out of the mist, two dark shadows silhouetted against the dim light from the warehouse office window. A foghorn wailed mournfully in the distance. Somewhere down river a ship's bell clanged as if in answer. Silently, the two men advanced towards the window. Peering in, they saw exactly what they expected, a uniformed figure, presumably that dumb kid security guard, back to the window, hunched over his desk, probably half asleep. They never hesitated, raised their Tommy guns and shattered the office window with a series of staccato blasts. Enough bullets to kill a dozen men ripped into the back of the slumping figure at the desk. Another blast from the guns blew away the door lock and sent the door flying open. Without a word, the two gunmen marched through the door to view their handiwork . . .

You want to know how I ever got into that fool predicament? Or, more to the point, how I got out? Then we'll have to go back a way. But relax. I'm far too short of a Wolfean ego to write an autobiography. However, you'll have to forgive a touch of nostalgia.

To begin with, I was born in Chillicothe, Ohio. You thought it was Canton? Or maybe Zanesville? Either would have been quite a trick inasmuch as my mother was in Chillicothe at the time. And I did attend the State University in Columbus for a couple of weeks, mainly to please my mother. Oh, I know that long ago, I implied that my mother and father were both dead. That was half firecrackers. At that particular time, it simply suited my mood to be an orphan. I'm happy to say that my mother is still very much alive, occasionally visits New York, and enjoys dining with Wolfe and me.

But, back to college. Although the Jazz Age hadn't quite caught up with Chillicothe, it was running wild on the Ohio State campus. The students, if I may resort to hyperbole, prided themselves on non-conformity. Yet, they were all mirror-images of each other in their oversized sweaters, baggy pants and saddle shoes, patent-leather hair combed back, stiffened with slickum, and parted in the mid-

dle, appropriate shells for the embryonic brains below. They majored in hip flasks, ukuleles and Greek fraternities with names I couldn't even pronounce. If William Jennings Bryan could have put those morons on the witness stand during the recent Scopes trial, he'd have had no trouble at all proving that man couldn't have descended from monkeys. Descended? The monkeys would have sued for libel.

The few classes I attended were dreary lessons by disinterested professors from dull books written by dead people (i.e., dead now, questionable then.) The only live ones we studied were Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. I couldn't understand the one (I doubt the profs did either) and the answer to any question about the other was "sex". Even the so-called students would have got that right. I would have had A+! Perhaps if the college were co-ed I could have persevered...

Mainly, however, I couldn't stand sitting (is that a non-sequitur?) in class all day. Even now, when Wolfe and I are between cases or when he pig-headedly refuses to work on a current case, I have to get out of the office and walk through the streets of New York.

My mother wasn't too happy when I returned to the farm and told her I wanted to head for New York. Being the wonderful lady she is, she finally agreed and even staked me with part of the tuition money she'd set aside for college.

When I say "farm", that may be a small firecracker. But you'll have to visualize it to understand the exciting contrast of leaving it for Times Square. It wasn't much of a farm by Midwestern standards, only about three acres. In the garden behind the house were rows of leaf lettuce, radishes, butter beans, carrots, cabbages, potatoes and those two most succulent Ohio crops, lush tomatoes and sweet corn. Around the front of the house were violets, tulips, narcissus, peonies and iris. I can still smell the sweet scent of the honeysuckle that climbed our porch railing.

In the spring, fruit trees blossomed in bursts of pink and white to yield seasonal and fall crops of cherries, plums and apples. In back were clumps of berry bushes, rhubarb, asparagus and an arbor of Concord grapes. What our major domo and chef, Fritz Brenner, couldn't have done with these! If Wolfe had ever known about them, he'd probably have had me commuting to Ohio every week for fresh fruit and vegetables!

Rhode Island Reds pecked away in the yard by the chicken house near the barn. Farther back, in fact a lot farther, a pair of China Poland porkers rooted and grunted in the mud and slurped from the overflowing trough. In the pasture were too few cows to be called a herd but quite enough to supply my favorite beverage. And beyond, the pasture was bordered by dark woods which, when I was a youngster, seemed like the end of the world.

Describing the scenes of my lost youth, I'm tempted to wax sentimental. But, at heart, I was never really a country boy. If anything, I always was and still like to think of myself as a man of action. And, to me, the Big City has always been where the action is. After the Thanksgiving Holidays, while I was packing to leave, my mother handed me an old Colt .45 Army automatic which had belonged to my father. She'd heard a lot about crime in New York and figured I should

have some protection. To humor her, I tucked it in my suitcase and forgot about it. All it did later was save my life.

As I was leaving, my sister Meg, from childhood the object of bickering and rough-housing that masked a deep underlying mutual affection, handed me a package containing sandwiches and a cake she'd baked especially for me (she who hated to cook). I was startled to see tears in her eyes, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and had to leave quickly to avoid choking up myself.

I walked to the nearby highway and caught a bus bound for Cleveland where I would board the 20th Century Limited out of Chicago to New York. I'd argued with my mother that it would be a lot cheaper to take the cross-country bus all the way but she insisted I go first class. During the nearly 200 mile trip to Cleveland, I amused myself by watching the billboards as they flashed by. "I'd Walk A Mile For A Camel". I was in good shape - I could do that. "Ivory Soap - 99 44/100 % Pure". In this far from perfect world, that seemed close enough. But that slogan will never last. And finally, a series that read, "THE 50 CENT JAR/SO LARGE/BY HECK/EVEN THE SCOTCH/NOW SHAVE THE NECK/BURMA SHAVE". By the time I got to Cleveland, I'd decided to smoke Camels, wash with Ivory and shave with Burma Shave every day whether I needed it or not. Look out Broadway, here I come!

II

If you're not a native New Yorker (is anyone?) you're bound to remember your first impression of that great metropolis. It was Saturday, a clear, crisp December morning, when my train pulled into Grand Central Station. The porters actually rolled out a red carpet across the platform and into the station. Talk about First Class. Thanks, Mom! Carrying my one bulging suitcase, I walked out onto 42nd Street in a state of exhilaration and excitement right smack into the clamor of Manhattan. More cars, buses and taxis than I'd seen in a lifetime raced each other through the streets. The crowded sidewalks teemed with frantic people rushing in every direction, all with the air of reaching some important goal known only to themselves. The pace was faster, the buildings taller, the girls prettier, the skirts shorter . . .

I turned west on 42nd Street towards Broadway and Times Square, gawking like any tourist at the people, the store windows already dressed in their Christmas finery, and searching for the Woolworth Building, tallest in the world, towering high above the other skyscrapers. As the crowd thinned a little, my eyes were drawn as if by a magnet towards a young woman walking in my direction. Somehow, she stood out from all the others, a tall, lithe, shapely figure striding confidently ahead with exceptional grace and poise. As I watched in ill-concealed admiration, something to which she was undoubtedly accustomed, I noticed a seedy-looking guy, dressed in a bulky sweater and stocking cap, moving purposefully toward her. Suddenly, he snatched her purse and darted in my direction, dodging pedestrians, none of whom paid the slightest attention. As he came near, I dropped my suitcase and threw myself, all 190 pounds, in a body block that would have made my high school football coach proud. The would-be thief sprawled in one direction, the stolen purse flying from his grasp in another. No longer con-

cerned with him, I hurried to rescue the purse while he raced off and disappeared into the crowd. Still, no passers-by paid any attention, just nonchalantly kept walking by as though this were an every day occasion. Maybe it was, at that.

Now you might say I acted foolishly without thinking. In retrospect, I like to think I reacted with intelligence and courage. These are qualities which have always been my guide. In any event, it was a terrific way to meet the most beautiful girl in the world. She was a knockout, a real doll! When I returned her purse, her dark green eyes flashed from shock and anger to relief. High cheekbones accented a tiny nose and perfectly shaped mouth. Auburn hair peeked out from under a perky cloche hat. Her coat matched her eyes and set off her features perfectly.

As she thanked me, one of New York's finest (where are they when you need them?) approached and asked if either of us was hurt. My clothing was a little the worse for wear but otherwise we were both in good shape, especially hers. As the cop was leaving he took me aside and said, "That was a damn fool thing you did. If that mugger had a knife or a gun, you could be dead now. Better leave police work in the hands of the law." I glared at his departing back and don't know if he heard my reply, "Yeah, leave police work in the hands of the law and leave the lady's purse in the hands of the crook." In the years to come, that type of conflict was destined to be played over and over again.

When I turned back I could see the young lady was shivering slightly as the reaction set in. Over her mild protest, I offered to take her home, hailed a taxi, and she gave me an address on 38th Street. During the short ride, she relaxed enough to tell me her name was Dolores Day, that she was a hoofer, a professional dancer, but she was presently "at liberty." She smiled and said, "That's a fancy way of saying I'm currently out of work. Meanwhile, I'm working part time as a stenographer in a waterfront warehouse office."

We reached her apartment all too soon. I dismissed the taxi and escorted her to the door. On impulse I said "If you're 'at liberty' and like to dance, I'm 'at liberty,' too. Why don't we try it together tonight? I'm probably not in your class as a dancer, but I promise not to step all over your toes. And we'll go somewhere special for dinner. After all this is my first day in New York so help me make it a real occasion!" She hesitated for a moment but to my relief, and frankly surprise, she agreed that I could pick her up at eight. I almost danced all the way back to Grand Central where I bought a road map of Manhattan and a copy of the **Daily News**. Perusing the Classified Section, an ad (I better say advertisement) for a rooming house in Greenwich Village caught my eye. I knew the Village wasn't the swellest neighborhood in New York but somehow it intrigued me. And the advertisement promised clean, cheap, furnished rooms. I grabbed a cab to the corner of 6th Avenue and 9th Street, located the boarding house, examined the available room, liked it, rented it. Finally, I was ready for the Big Adventure.

III

My first week in New York was noteworthy primarily for a whirlwind romance and the prospects of a new job. You don't need details about the former, but a few highlights might be of interest. After settling in my second-floor room, I went

out and bought a couple of late afternoon newspapers. **The Evening Graphic**, a tabloid, featured lurid articles such as "Love Nest on Park Avenue," a photo of the esteemed mayor of New York, "Gentleman" Jimmy Walker in the area of a scantily-clad chorus girl, and a follow-up story on the nationally beloved evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson. She had failed to return from an excursion last spring. After 37 days, while her whereabouts remained a well-publicized mystery, she staggered out of a desert in Arizona, claiming she'd just escaped from kidnappers. According to the article, there was ample evidence that she'd been off on a month-long fling with her boyfriend. I decided that paper should have been called the "**Porno Graphic**."

The Gazette was a lot different and it became my favorite New York paper. It included a great Amusement Section, filled with movie, restaurant, and nightclub advertisements. A restaurant called Rusterman's sounded expensive but probably worth it. My eye was also caught by one for the Flamingo which read as follows: "Sophisticates . . ." (That's me!) . . . "attune your souls to happiness and synchronize your toes with tempo by Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra." I was more than ready for a little soul attunement and toe synchronization!

The landlady charged me a nickel a call on the telephone in the downstairs hall, and stood nearby to make sure the calls were local as I made reservations for both places. That ought to impress Dolores! I shaved with Burma Shave, including my neck, took a bath with Ivory Soap, and dressed with special care in my gray suit with pinstripes, a light blue shirt, fresh collar, and dark blue tie. I was at Dolores' apartment on the dot of eight. She kept me waiting only ten minutes. She was breathtaking in a flowered party dress that came just about to her knees. Her shapely legs were encased in silk stockings, rolled just below the knees, evidently in the latest style. Her gleaming auburn hair was "bobbed" in the most modern fashion. A single strand of pearls adorned her gorgeous neck.

From the beginning, we were completely at ease with each other. The dinner at Rusterman's was the best I'd ever had (Sorry, Mom) but I blanched a little when the check came. At The Flamingo, we blended perfectly and Dolores taught me the latest dance craze, the Charleston. I admit I never did quite get the hang of crossing my hands on my knees, mostly because I thought it was pretty silly. I was also surprised when, back at the table, she took out her compact and powdered - her knees! But they were cute knees. And she certainly was my idea of a Broadway glamour girl.

During the week, we held hands through the new movie, "Don Juan", starring John Barrymore, Mary Astor and Warner Oland at the brand new Warner Theatre. It was easy to see why such theatres were called "palaces". The center of the mezzanine was big enough for an eight-day bicycle race. It featured marble figures in a flowing fountain. The walls displayed ancient statuary in gilded niches. The theatre itself seated 5300 people but they might as well all have been statues for Dolores and I couldn't have been more alone in a crowd.

The movie featured something billed as "REVOLUTIONARY". It was called Vitaphone Synchronization. During the film, you could actually recognize sounds - like the clashing of swords and the pealing of bells. The movie was preceded by Vitaphone Shorts in which you could both see and hear the Philhar-

monic Orchestra playing Wagner's overture to **Tannhauser**, plus selections from **Rigoletto** and **Pagliacci**. (Years later, Lily taught me to enjoy that kind of music.) A message at the end announced that same day soon movies would actually talk. I figured this might be a boon to the illiterate movie fan, but on the whole it was probably just another short-lived Hollywood fad.

Dolores also introduced me to my first speakeasy and that newly invented drink, the cocktail. Frankly, I could get along fine without either, especially the latter. She told me there were over 100,000 speakeasies in New York and that you could get a glass of liquor in any building on 52nd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues. Obviously, the constabulary looked the other way. At the Club Gallant, which was in Washington Square not far from my rooming house, I was embarrassed when the doorman asked for my membership card. I needn't have worried. The exchange of a single simoleon brought me an elaborate wallet-sized card, good forever. That was only the beginning though. Before we got out of there, it cost us nearly a sawbuck.

As we entered, the doorman called my attention to a plaque on the wall, headlined "Rules for Nightclub Goers. I still remember every one.

You might find a few amusing:

"Do not ask to play the drums. The drum heads are not as tough as some other heads. Besides, it has a tendency to disturb the rhythm."

"Examine your bill when the waiter presents it. Remember, even they are human beings and are liable to err – intentionally or otherwise."

Please do not offer to escort the cloakroom girl home. Her husband, who is an ex-prizefighter, is there for that purpose."

You can see we were having a ball. But don't think it was all fun and games. I was attempting to find gainful employment and always seemed to strike out whenever it came to "experience". One night, at the end of our first week, Dolores told me that the manager of the warehouse where she worked part time was looking for a security guard. She said it wasn't much of a job but might tide me over until I found something better. I wasn't too enthusiastic because it meant night work. But she said we could still see each other on occasional afternoons, play that Chinese game, Mah Jongg, which was sweeping the country, go to a movie, or just take a walk in Central Park. Sounded fine. She phoned the manager, a man named Mike Jablonski, and set up an appointment for the next day.

IV

Saturday morning was cold, gray and overcast. My rooming house wasn't too far from the Hudson River. I dressed warmly in a heavy sweater and cap, which I thought appropriate for the waterfront, walked north on 6th Avenue to 23rd Street, then west directly on to Pier 64. The pier was about a furlong removed from the main waterfront buildings. A lone warehouse, seemingly standing aloof from its neighbors, looked out on the Hudson. On close inspection, there was no good reason for this particular warehouse to be putting on airs. Its red brick exterior showed definite signs of aging. Yet, it appeared solid enough to withstand any ocean storms.

Everything was quiet on Pier 64, in direct contrast to the rest of the waterfront which was teeming with activity. Several large ships were docked, with huge cranes engaged in loading and off-loading. Longshoremen were wheeling heavily burdened hand trucks in and out of various buildings.

I wasn't too thrilled with my first view of the mighty Hudson with its odor of dead fish and with filthy flotsam and jetsam bobbing up and down against the dock. Across the river, on the Jersey side, was a large sprawling city which I learned later was Hoboken. Off in the distance to the far left, where the Hudson joined the Upper Bay that led to the Atlantic, I could see the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty. I don't mind saying that my heart beat a little faster at my first sight of this proud Lady.

Like the others, the warehouse loading dock faced the waterfront where it was handy to ships' cargoes. A narrow alley to the right provided access to non-sea-going vehicles. A solid looking door next to the loading dock evidently led to the manager's office. A man seated with his back to the window was partly visible. I knocked and walked in. "Mr. Jablonski?" I asked.

He swiveled around and glared at me through bloodshot eyes that must have been having a hard time recovering from the night before. Bristly black hair and a bristly black mustache framed a dark-complexioned face with high cheekbones. An almost invisible scar, running from his right eye to the corner of his mouth, actually emphasized his rugged good looks. His features were quite handsome in a coarse, rough and ready kind of way. His body was big and powerful looking, just slightly showing signs of running to fat. Across the grapefruit sized biceps of his left arm, visible under his rolled up shirtsleeve, was a heart-shaped tatoo with the word, "MOTHER", emblazoned across it. Hey, I figured, if he loves his mother, he can't be all bad. But I still didn't like the look in his eyes.

There was an empty chair next to his desk but he didn't offer it. He didn't offer to shake hands, either. He grunted through half-clenched teeth as though he hated to make the effort to talk.

"You're Goodwin?"

I admitted it.

He waved me to the empty chair.

"Miss Day recommended you," he began, "and her judgment is usually sound, especially where men are concerned. But, hell, you're just a kid. I hope she didn't go all female because you happen to be good-looking in a college-boy type of way."

I was beginning to dislike him. Without conscious effort, the remainder of that interview could have become a part of the curriculum of the Harvard Business School as a classic example of How Not To Get A Job.

"Come to think of it," I replied, "she did say I had a profile like John Barrymore." I slowly and deliberately turned my head to the side. "What do you think? A little too much nose?" Then, I continued. "But she must have thought I had other assets."

He smiled but there was no warmth in it. "Tell me about 'em, kid." (How I hated that!) "You think you got guts enough to take care of this pier and warehouse?"

That did it. I now decided I didn't want his damn' job. So I played the country bumpkin to the hilt.

"Dern tootin'," I drawled, "back home I did a pretty good job guarding our henhouse and barn. There's a lot of dead foxes, weasels, raccoons and dirty rats who could prove it, to say nothin' of some would-be chicken thieves with their rear ends full of buckshot."

He didn't know whether I was putting him on or not. After a moment, he decided to play it straight. "You know how to shoot a gun?" he asked.

"Yep," I said proudly, "I'm a regular Davy Crockett, Dan'l Boone and Buffalo Bill all rolled into one. I kin shoot a squirrel's eye out at ninety feet!"

By this time, he should have booted me out on my rear end, or at least tried. Instead, he put on the hail fellow well met. "OK, Goodwin," he said, "I like your spunk. You won't have to worry about guns though. This warehouse is full of precision machine parts. They're valuable enough but they wouldn't be worth anything to a thief. He'd never be able to get rid of 'em. There's never been a robbery attempt here and I certainly don't expect any.

"This is a full-time job though," he continued, "seven days a week from 7 in the evening to 7 the next morning. These are tough hours but the pay is good. Also, about once a month, when a big shipment comes in, we have to put on a night shift for a week. We don't need a guard then so you get a week off with pay." He mentioned a salary that was a lot higher than I'd expected. "Come along, and I'll show you around."

I still hadn't decided to take the job but I went along anyway. There wasn't much to see, just aisle after aisle stacked to the ceiling with cardboard containers. Several workmen were moving the cartons around in hand trucks. With the boss nearby, they were trying hard to look busy.

Back in the office, Jablonski opened a door to a small closet and brought out a security guard uniform and handed it to me. "I think this will fit you all right," he said. Then, he reached into his desk drawer, took out a revolver, and gave it to me. It was a .38 special, a brand I wasn't familiar with. "You won't need this," he said, "but it's loaded, just in case. Be careful with it. I'll be here Monday night when you check in."

On that note, we shook hands and I left with a good deal to think about.

V

Sunday, I tried to sort out my feelings about that interview with Jablonski. It simply didn't make sense. First, why did he overlook my obviously flippant responses to his questions? That certainly wasn't his style. Second, why offer a salary that was way out of line with the requirements of the job? Third, why hire me at all considering his expressed contempt for my so-called youth and inexperience? None of it added up.

I examined the revolver he had given me. It looked as though it hadn't been used for years. I broke open the cylinder. Except for the chamber under the hammer, it was fully loaded. I ejected the cartridges and decided to take the gun apart. It was badly in need of cleaning. The firing pin didn't look quite right. On

closer scrutiny, I could see that the end was filed down. That gun would misfire. It was useless.

I reassembled it and tucked it away in my bottom drawer. I took out the old Army Colt automatic, cleaned it thoroughly, and made sure the magazine was fully loaded. Then, it was time to decide on my future course of action. It was obvious that I was being set up. But for what? Of course, the sensible thing would be to bow out and chalk it up to experience. But I was just curious enough, stubborn enough, and, I admit, with enough youthful pride to resent being played for a sucker. I decided to see it through. There was no doubt about Jablonski's role.

Reluctantly, I began to wonder about Dolores. It bothered me so much that it must have taken all of 30 seconds for me to get to sleep that night.

With less than two weeks 'til Christmas, I spent most of Monday morning in Macy's, selecting presents for my mother and sister, and getting the wrapped packages off in the mail. In the afternoon, for the first time since I was in the cradle, I took a nap in preparation for my night's work. After a so-so meal in a nearby diner, I dressed for action. The uniform coat was a little large so I wore a heavy sweater underneath. It would probably be cold in that warehouse, even with a Franklin Stove in the office. My Colt .45 didn't make much of a bulge in the pocket. I met Jablonski at the warehouse, determined to show no sign of suspicion. He offered some last-minute instructions which were pretty routine, gave me a key to the office, and his home phone number to call in case of emergency which he assured me would be unnecessary.

As soon as he was gone, I locked the office door and made sure the overhead doors at the loading dock were securely fastened. I went through the warehouse, aisle by aisle, corner by corner, to make sure I was alone. Then, it was time to find out exactly what kind of precision tools the cartons contained. I very carefully opened several cartons at random, examined the contents, and resealed the cartons. Just as I suspected, the precision tools were all liquid, Scotch, Bourbon, Gin, Rum and Rye. Back in the office, I stayed in the shadows and kept my eye on the door while I pondered this new information. About 2:30 a.m. my reverie was interrupted by a discrete knock on the door. It was another uniformed figure, this time in the uniform of the NYPD. With my hand gripping the automatic in my pocket, I cautiously let him in. In a brogue as thick as the fog rolling off the river, he proudly introduced himself as Officer Francis Xavier Mulrooney. "Sure, 'tis a pleasure to meet you, me boyo," he began. "Me beat's right along Twelfth Avenue and I've got in the habit of droppin' in here each night for a few minutes to warm me old bones. 'Tis not surprised I am though to find another new security guard. Nobody can put up with Jablonski very long. You wouldn't be havin' a wee drop, now would you, to help ward off the chill?"

I told him I thought we could spare a wee drop, went into the back, opened a carton, brought out a bottle of rye, and poured him a generous wee drop. He downed it in one gulp. "Sure an' that hits the spot," he said, so I poured him another. "You know, me boy," he went on, "half the warehouses on the waterfront are filled with bootleg booze. But 'tis no concern of mine. The gangs and unions here take care of their own troubles. As for me, I've got enough troubles o' me own what with the speaks, the streetwalkers, the pawnshops and family squab-

bles on me own beat. 'Tis a rare night indeed when I'm not callin' the paddy wagon to cart someone off to jail."

As he left, he turned to me and said, "You seem like a fine lad, Goodwin, me boy. Take a word o' warnin' from an old cop. Keep a sharp eye on that Polack, Jablonski. He's no good atall atall." It was a warning I didn't need but I thanked him just the same.

The next few nights were pretty much repeats. Mulrooney dropped in for his nightly libation. I suspected he had a few other watering holes as well. Nevertheless, I began to look forward to his visits. I learned a lot from him about the waterfront and the neighborhood. Although he might prove to be a welcome ally, I kept my suspicions about Jablonski to myself.

Everything exploded into action on Saturday. It began a little after noon when I heard the phone ring in the downstairs hall. In a moment, the landlady knocked on my door. "Mr. Goodwin! You're wanted on the phone. It's a woman!" The way she spit it out made it appear that it must be the Whore of Babylon calling, or at least a "fallen woman".

It was Dolores. She sounded breathless. "Oh, Archie, I'm so glad I caught you. Something terrible has happened and I'm getting ready to leave New York but I had to see you first." Her voice broke. She was obviously in a state of excitement, bordering on hysteria. I tried to calm her. "Relax! Slow down! Are you at home?" She said she was and I said I'd be there as fast as I could, and broke all records getting to her apartment. She let me in and immediately closed the door, fastened the chain, and broke into tears. I held her and did my best to soothe her. The apartment was in a state of disarray, clothes and personal articles strewn on the floor, open suitcases partly packed.

When her emotions were under control, she brushed away the tears, took out her compact, and repaired the damage to her beautiful features as best she could. I was glad to see that she powdered her nose and not her knees. I took this as a good sign, cleared a place on the divan, sat beside her and listened while she explained, haltingly at first, then with growing confidence.

"I'm so frightened," she began. "I have to tell you that for a long time, Mike Jablonski and I were," she hesitated, then added, "close. Oh, I knew he was a small-time gangster and that the warehouse was full of bootleg booze. Somehow, that just seemed intriguing and made him more interesting. I'd never met anyone like him and, for a time, I was hopelessly in love."

Here, she paused as if groping for the right words. "Gradually, I came to see another side of him, a rough side, a cruel side. I began to be afraid of him, scared even to leave my job. And even though it's been over, on my part, for a long time, I still had to hide the fact that you and I were seeing each other. I'm afraid, though, that he began to suspect. Yet, in my ignorance, when I recommended you for the security guard position, I really thought I was doing you a favor." She shuddered. "Instead, I might have been sending you to your death." A tear rolled down her cheek but she brushed it away and continued. "This morning, when I was working at the office, I overheard Mike on the phone. I was typing a bill of lading so, at first, I paid no attention. Mike was mostly just listening, anyway, until

suddenly I caught the words 'hi-jack' and 'security guard'. I continued typing but tried to listen more carefully. I didn't get it all but heard enough to realize that Mike was planning to have his own warehouse robbed. And it's supposed to take place tonight! The last thing I heard him say was, 'You won't have any trouble with the country bumpkin'.

"When he hung up, he looked at me kind of funny and asked if I'd heard any of his conversation. I assured him I hadn't but I don't think he believed me. If he decides I heard too much, I know he wouldn't hesitate to kill me. That's when I realized that I don't belong here and why I'm packing to catch the afternoon train back home to Kansas. But I couldn't leave without seeing you for one last time and warning you not to go near that warehouse tonight!

"You know, Archie, I like you, I really do. But I've been kidding myself all along trying to be a Big City girl. It took all this to make me see that at heart I'm really just another kid from the country. You're different. I know you'll make it big in New York. The only thing I'm sorry about is leaving you, that we couldn't get to know one another better. Maybe if we'd met under different circumstances . . ."

Here, she stopped, and I was afraid the waterworks would start again. I tried to persuade her to stay, that I'd take care of Jablonski, but it was no use. Finally, I patted her hand, looked into those gorgeous emerald eyes for the last time, and said, "If it will make you feel any better, you're more than enough of a Big City girl for me. You swept me right off my feet which are usually planted solidly on good old terra firma. C'mon, I'll help you pack and see that you get to the station and on that train for home."

Which I did. We kissed good bye, each with our own mixed feelings of relief and regret. Just before she boarded the train, she said, "You know, Archie, even my name is phony. It isn't really Dolores Day. That was just a stage name." She paused and added wistfully, "I guess now it will never get up in lights on Broadway." She didn't offer her real name and I didn't ask. I watched as the train pulled out of the station, leaving clouds of white smoke in its wake, and carrying her off into eternity, leaving only the bittersweet memory of my first love. I'll never forget her. But I won't tell Lily.

So much for sentiment. Now, I had more practical problems to ponder.

VI

It was late afternoon when I returned to my room. There wasn't much time to get ready for the evening's entertainment. I made a few preparations and, making sure my landlady was otherwise occupied, I sneaked out with a couple of pillows under my coat.

At the warehouse, I made the usual survey to be certain I was alone. Then, I got to work, fashioning a man-sized dummy from the pillows and packing straw from the warehouse. Dressed in my uniform coat and hat, hunched over the desk, back to the window, the dummy looked pretty life-like. I stepped outside to make sure. It wouldn't fool anyone on close inspection but, through the window, in the dim light of the office lamp, it should serve its purpose.

Satisfied, I positioned myself in the shadows of the warehouse where I could watch the office without being seen. I was pretty much on edge, not really nervous

or afraid, just keyed up from anticipation and from trying to maintain a patience that didn't come to me naturally.

So now, we're up to date. You have a good idea of just how I got into the situation described in the opening paragraph of this narrative. Next, you'll see just how I got out of it. Sort of.

Although all my senses were keenly alert, I didn't hear the truck pull into the alley. My watch said 2:03 when the two gunmen arrived, tattooed the window, door and dummy with rapid blasts from their Tommy guns, as I previously explained, and marched through the door to view their handiwork. That's when I stepped from the shadows of the warehouse interior, my Colt .45 leveled unwaveringly at the two men. For a moment, they stood utterly still, frozen in time, all the world like two statues in a Greek tableau. Alert for the slightest movement, in a voice I was proud came out without a tremor, I quietly told them to drop their weapons which were now dangling from their arms, pointed towards the floor. They reacted exactly as I had anticipated. Recovering quickly from the shock of my sudden appearance, they each started to raise their guns in my direction. My first shot caught the nearest gunman dead-center in the chest. My next didn't vary a millimeter as it downed the second. As they fell, I kicked away their weapons and knelt to make sure they were out of commission. They were. Permanently.

Shaken as I was, I couldn't resist one parting remark, quite possibly a fitting epitaph. "Sorry, gentlemen, but the dummy you shot wasn't me." Then, it was my turn to go into shock but I didn't have time to give in to it.

The sound of running feet outside brought me back to action. I turned, gun still leveled steadily, and was relieved to see my friend, Officer Mulrooney, come puffing into the office.

"Glory be!" he exclaimed, looking at the two bodies on the floor. "Are they dead? Are you all right?"

I assured him that they were and I was and filled him in briefly.

"Sure an' I try to keep out of any trouble on the docks," he said, "but when I heard the gunfire, I thought you might be needin' help. And, indeed, me boy, it seems that you do. The Homicide Bureau doesn't take kindly to killings anywhere, even on the waterfront. And, in spite of evidence to the contrary, which they sometimes conveniently overlook, they're often quick to assume the one doin' the killin' is the guilty party."

He thought for a moment. The racket from the gunfire was evidently no cause for concern along the rest of the waterfront which, I had come to learn, kept strictly to their own business. Finally, Mulrooney, almost as if thinking aloud, offered a suggestion. "Tell you what, me friend, you could be in a heap o' trouble. Now there's a friend o' mine in Homicide who used to patrol this same beat as mine. Many a night, we were partners together. He's tough but a square shooter. Is that phone still working?"

He picked it up, jiggled the hook, finally got the operator and put through a call to Homicide West. He talked with a Sergeant Cramer, quickly filled him in on the situation here, listened a moment and hung up. He told me Cramer was on his way and warned me to play it absolutely straight with him.

In exactly twelve minutes, a police car pulled up on the dock, stopped in front of the office, and two men got out. The first, who gruffly introduced himself as Sergeant Cramer, was a big man with a sizeable bottom and heavy, broad shoulders underneath a thick, muscular neck. His round face was beet-red, probably from the cold. Sharp blue-gray eyes, under bushy gray eyebrows, looked as though they didn't miss much. He wore an old felt hat. His open overcoat revealed a three-piece suit. The other dick, a Sergeant Purley Stebbins, was also big and broad. His bony face sprouted oversized ears and pig-bristle eyebrows above a firm square jaw. There was a no-nonsense quality to both men.

Cramer took out a big cigar, lit it, and asked Mulrooney a couple of quick questions before turning to me. "All right, Goodwin," he growled, "how did you know these two goons were going to hit this morning?" I expected that question and had a ready answer. "I got a phone call yesterday morning, tipping me off." Of course, he wanted to know who made the call but I had already decided to make no mention of Dolores. As for Jablonski, I wasn't exactly sure how to deal with him, but I wanted him for myself. So I merely said, "It was Mr. Anonymous."

Cramer didn't believe me but he gave up for the moment. He told Mulrooney to stay until he could send a lab and forensic crew to take care of the bodies. Then, he gruffly ordered me into the car and Stebbins drove us to Homicide West on 20th Street.

[ED. - I hope you're enjoying this little tale. I think our friend Charles Burns has done an excellent job of editing this story which Archie has finally chosen to tell us. Tune in next issue for the next exciting chapters.]

