

DEAD HANDS ON THE WHEEL

Denby Brixton

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There are a lot of things people won't believe, and sometimes I think this story is one of them. I don't even know whether to believe it myself except that there are court records to back up everything I say: court records which saved me from the chair,

But you can take the story or leave it, I'll give it to you right from the start.

I stood up to see what the crowd was yelling about then sat down again. It was Jack Pelham, passing the grandstand in a try-out spin in that yellow racer of his. I mopped my forehead. Beads of sweat had broken out on it when those dopes in front of me started to shout, because I thought they were shouting for Rocco Landi, the coast champ, who was the favorite to win this 500-mile "special" over an open-country course, laid out in twenty-five-mile laps.

Like I said, Landi was the favorite. There'd been a lot of "future betting" on him; which means in case you don't know that us bookies had taken a lot of bets in advance of the race, at good odds; bets that we'd win if Landi lost, or if he didn't drive in the race. They weren't like the bets made at the track, which would be off if Landi didn't start.

A little bookie named Dingle edged up alongside me and whispered: "Say, Wally, d'you think I'm all right on those future bets on Landi?"

I laid my hand on his skinny shoulder, and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "Safe as a church, Eddie!" Then I lowered my voice. "Landi won't start. I'm giving you the inside!"

"Thanks, Wally," he murmured, looking relieved, and he went off, whistling.

I left my seat in the grandstand and went down to the bookies' ring.

My clerk was busy, giving orders to his assistant, but he looked up when he saw me.

"What's the total we stand to lose, Barney?" I asked him.

He looked over his sheets. "Close to a hundred and fifty thousand, Mr. Nuber!"

It was a lot of dough to have up on a race, where the skid of a tire, or the slip of a wheel, the loosening of a bolt, the slightest mechanical flaw, or the smallest lapse on the part of the driver might spell the difference between defeat and victory.

But I knew that Rocco wouldn't start. I was sure he wouldn't start. There was a "fix" on, and I was giving my friends among the odds-layers the benefit of my inside dope.

"How much of that's futures, Barney?" I asked the clerk.

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"Over ninety thousand, Mr. Nuber," he said. "Shall I keep on taking bets?"

"Sure," I said confidently, and walked away.

I climbed up the ramp leading to the grandstand and came in sight of the track again.

The crowd let out another salvo of cheers as a black racing car came roaring up. And then I heard a sound that sent chills running down my spine and caused an icy feeling in the pit of my stomach, like a lot of cold snakes were crawling around inside me.

For the shout that went up from thousands of throats in the grandstand now was: "Hbsp; "Over ninety thousand, Mr. Nuber," he said. "Shall I keep on taking bets?"

"Sure," I said confidently, and walked away.

I climbed up the ramp leading to the grandstand and came in sight of the track again.

The crowd let out another salvo of cheers as a black racing car came roaring up. And then I heard a sound that sent chills running down my spine and caused an icy feeling in the pit of my stomach, like a lot of cold snakes were crawling around inside me.

For the shout that went up from thousands of throats in the grandstand now was: "Hi-ya' Landi! Hiya, Landi!"

I rushed to the rail, saw the black car come up the track in a cloud of dust, and slow down as it approached the starting line. Jack Pelham, the winner of the Indianapolis Speedway classic, was already lined up; and there was Pedro McCarthy, the ace from the Argentine; and Alfonso Ruiz, the Mexican; and a couple of Eastern guys named Frost and Murdoch, and some others. And now Rocco Landi, who wasn't supposed to show up for the race at all!

Only half an hour ago, I'd been down in the washroom. A little guy I didn't know came up to me and talked out of the side of his mouth: "It's O. K., Wally. In the bag!" And he gave me the sign—winked his left eye and rolled his tongue around in his right cheek.

That was the tip-off that Joe Milligan had fixed everything.

You see, the fix was rigged up by a bunch of us bookies. We wanted to cash in big on those future bets, and we figured that the best thing to do was slip Landi something worth while. So we pooled a hundred grand among the lot of us.

Double-cross the public! To hell with me public! They'd double-cross us, any time, any place!

We had had a meeting in Milligan's room at the Phoenix Hotel and turned over the big bunch of jack to him. He's an expert fixer. He'd take care of everything. And now—

Here was Landi in his black racing car, just pulling into the starting line beside Jack Pelham.

The referees were at Landi's car, looking over his credentials. If there was any fake about his appearance, if this driver in the black car was a ringer, now was the time to find it out.

With a hundred and fifty grand on the line, I wasn't taking any chances. I was going to see for myself.

I hurried to the wicket leading to the track, showed my pass, and went through. Running isn't easy for a two-twenty-pounder like me, who likes his booze and his eats. But I ran to where the referees were gathered at Landi's car.

One of them turned to me and said: "What's the matter, Wally? You sick?"

For a moment, I couldn't answer him. I just stood there, puffing and gasping, and I guess my face must've been purple, like it always gets when I overexert myself or get too excited.

"Have you O.K.'d Landi?" I finally managed to ask.

"Yes. Why?" the referee came back at me.

"His papers?"

"O.K."

Have you seen his face? Are you sure it's him driving the car?" I said.

"Sure. It's Landi, all right!"

I was getting desperate. My breath was all choking up on me. "Let me see his face!" I insisted.

I turned toward Landi. He lifted his goggles and stared at me. His lips were set in a hard, evil sort of smile,

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and his eyes had a terrible glare in them. It made my blood run cold, as I met his glance. And his cheeks were a dead, fish-belly white that gave him the look of a corpse—a living corpse, for his hands clutched the wheel, so that the sinews of them stood out, and he seemed tense, eager, and alert for the race.

For maybe a second, we stared at each other. Then the ref touched me on the shoulder.

"You're satisfied it's Landi?" he asked. "Want to see his credentials?"

I shook my head. "No. I've seen enough. It's Landi, all right!"

My knees felt weak, as I turned and staggered away. How I got to the wicket of the grandstand and back to my seat, I don't know.

A vast silence hung over the crowd for a moment. A pistol cracked, and I knew the race was on. I watched—like a man watching a moving picture of his own funeral.

Landi's machine was out in the lead before the first twenty-five-mile lap was finished. He swept around the sandbags that marked the turns with such slight slackening of pace that I expected him to skid off the course. It seemed impossible that his car could keep up such speed without mishap. But he covered lap after lap, getting every ounce of power he could jam out of his motor.

At the end of the tenth lap, Landi was fully twenty miles ahead of his nearest rival. It wouldn't be long before he'd gained a lap on the whole field. And was the crowd cheering him! Their dough was riding on him! So why not?

Me? I stood to lose a fortune—go broke! Damn that smart-aleck fixer Milligan! He must've slipped up somewhere! The fix wasn't on! Oh, well, that's what I get for being a bookie! It's a sucker's racket. But I've gone broke before! This wouldn't be the first time!

Fancy thinking we could bribe a guy like Landi to stay out of a race like this! Why, it's the breath of life to him! He loves the roar of the crowd, the glory, the thrill of driving a car faster than any other human! I believe he even enjoys a crack-up.

Landi was far in the lead now. He hadn't been headed once.

Five laps to go! All around me, I heard voices, half sobbing, half groaning with savage emotion. Hundreds of the spectators were already in the throes of victory; already counting their winnings.

With a lead of almost two laps, Landi slowed to a stop. He wasn't taking any chances. His mechanic—Carlo Vetti—jumped out, made a hasty inspection, applied oil where a smoking axle showed need of cooling, looked to the gears, the gas and other essentials; found a pinched tire, which he adjusted, and jumped back beside Landi—all in thirty precious seconds.

Landi was in the race again. Sensational sprints were made by the other competitors, but they cut Landi's lead only a little—not enough to put him in any danger of losing.

One car dropped out under the jinx of continually fouling sparkplugs another careened against a telegraph pole, killing the Mexican Ruiz and his mechanic.

McCarthy, the Argentinian, ran full tilt into the sandbags at a turn of the course, leaping up like a horse to a barrier, breaking the bags, and whirling the sand upward in a cloud. The car crashed into a building and collapsed in a heap of twisted metal, from which the driver and his mech managed to crawl with only slight injuries.

Landi's car escaped all mishaps. Some of the dopes around me were saying there was black magic in his driving. But that's a lot of hooey—or so I thought at the time! The guy was just good! He made the rest of them look like beginners at the game.

Final lap now! My eyes were fixed on the finish line. The result wasn't in doubt. It hadn't been for some time.

Landi won: Jack Pelham, the Indianapolis champ, came in second—three minutes behind—after cutting down Landi's lead with some daredevil driving.

I got up from my seat and moved to the front of the grandstand. Already there was a mob gathering around Landi's car, shouting his name. The guys who'd bet on him, most likely.

The judges were coming down from their places to congratulate him, and there was a bunch of his admirers carrying a big floral horseshoe for him to sit in.

From where I stood, looking down, I could see everything that happened, just like in a close-up shot at the movies. Landi, his goggles down, still in the driving seat, his hands clutching the wheel. I saw his mech Vetti open the door and get out, and then the crowd closed in on the car, to lift their idol into the floral horseshoe.

But when they reached the car, it was empty. Landi had vanished—

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That raised a hell of a stink. Everybody started questioning Vetti, They backed him up against the grandstand right below where I stood. So I could hear every word. And they fired questions at him.

Where had Landi gone? How had he got out of the car and slipped through the crowd without being seen?

Vetti just stood there, staring at them blankly, wringing his hands, and shaking his head.

Then the judges got the crowd shooed away and began to question him. "Where's Landi?" one of them asked.

"I don't know!" Vetti mumbled.

"You don't know?" There was disbelief in the judge's tone.

"No. He was beside me. I turned to look at the crowd. Puff! Like that—he was gone!"

"Gone—" the judge echoed.

"Yes. I am afraid."

"Afraid? Of what?"

Vetti's teeth were chattering as he replied: "The Evil One!"

I left the grandstand and went through the betting inclosure—saw the bets being paid off by the clerks—saw my money going out in scads.

I felt sick and disgusted. There was something phony about this whole business. Landi coming late, looking like a corpse, acting so different from his usual self, and then doing the vanishing act. If I hadn't had a good look before the race and satisfied myself it was him, I'd think it was a ringer had done the driving.

I took a taxi to my hotel. I was all tuckered out, wondering what I'd do next, how I'd get a fresh start in the game. I went up to my room, gave myself a stiff drink, and lay down on the bed to relax.

Maybe I slept. Guess I must have. I don't know. Anyhow, next thing I knew, I heard a knocking on the door, and I called out: "Who's there?"

A voice I didn't know answered: "This is Grossman. Can I see you for a minute, Mr. Nuber? It's important. Something to do with the race today."

The name Grossman didn't ring the bell at all. I couldn't recall anyone with that moniker. And I didn't want to talk about that damned race. I never wanted to hear it mentioned again. Then I thought: "Maybe it's good news. Maybe the bets've been called off!"

So I got up and opened the door.

The man named Grossman was big, with a red face and a square chin that jutted out, and he had a short scrubby yellow mustache, like a worn-out toothbrush. "Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Nuber," he said. "But it's important. May I come in for a minute?"

He didn't wait for me to answer, but stepped into my room and closed the door behind him. He didn't take his hat off, but just stood with his back against the door, while he talked.

"It's about this race—driver fella Landi," he said.

I had an uncomfortable feeling. Landi was the last person in the world I wanted to talk about just then.

"Sit down and have a drink," I invited, "and tell me about him."

Grossman ignored the invitation and remained with his back set against the door. "Landi was found dead outside his garage two hours after the race. He had two bullets in his heart. You know anything about it?"

I know I must have looked queer—and maybe as guilty as hell—for I just sat there and stared at him, with my jaw sagging. I was speechless.

He said: "I'm from the D.A.'s office. He wants to question you. Will you come along, or shall I slip the cuffs on you?"

I found my voice. "I...I'll come along. But I don't know anything about Landi's murder. I didn't do it. I came here right after the race. I've been here ever since."

"You were asking questions about Landi just before the race," Grossman said, in an accusing tone; "and you told a lot of people he wouldn't drive in the race—that he wouldn't show up. You tipped off some of the other bookies. How did you know?"

I repeated my denial. "I didn't know. It was just my opinion. I've been in this room since shortly after the race."

Grossman shook his head slowly. "That alibi won't do. You see, the medicos say Landi had been dead ten hours, when his body was found. Which means he was shot eight hours before the ending of the race."

"Then who was driving Landi's car?" I demanded.

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For answer, Grossman thrust his hand into the side pocket of his coat and drew out a sheaf of photographic prints. He handed them to me.

"These," he explained, "are some stills from what the newsreel photogs got during the race. See for yourself who was driving."

I took the pictures and examined them. There was no one in the driving seat of Landi's race car—only a vague, wraithlike form, like a cloud or a vaporous mist, hovering over the wheel.

Grossman stood patiently for a few minutes, while I studied print after print. They all told the same story. I handed them back to him.

He said: "The D.A.'s waiting to question you. He wants to know what you were doing all morning."

"But this is absurd!" I could hear my voice getting hysterical. I couldn't control it. "Landi must've gone to his garage and been murdered there after the race. And I was in this room—"

Grossman thrust the photographs back into his pocket, and at the same time, he jingled a set of handcuffs suggestively.

"You can tell that to the D.A.," he muttered, and thrust out his jaw.

I'm a big man, but I don't keep in shape. I guess I'm soft, and my muscles are flabby. I couldn't see any sense trying to resist a guy like this Grossman, who looked like a heavy-weight wrestler—or maybe a shot-putter.

So I went with him.

The D.A. was tough. He made things look bad for me. The way he talked, I was in league with a crowd of the other bookies to keep Landi from driving in the race at any price—even murder—so we'd collect on all those future bets we'd laid.

He seemed to know about the slush fund we'd chipped in for, to bribe Landi to keep out of the race. But he didn't mention any names, and I didn't, either. I've been several different kinds of louse, in my time, but I've never squealed on my pals.

I told him some guy I didn't know had passed me the tip in the washroom—which was the truth. Then I clammed up. I realized what a spot I was in. It hadn't occurred to me before that Milligan—or one of the others in the "fix" ring—might have paid some killer to bump off Landi. And I'd be just as guilty as the rest of them—guilty of putting up money to have a murder committed.

So I told the D.A. I wasn't talking till I could see my lawyer, Joe Larkin.

And what did that get me? I saw Joe Larkin, all right. But when he came to see me, I was lodged in jail, charged with the murder of Rocco Landi!

Gosh how I sweltered and suffered in the heat and stuffiness of that prison cell in the weeks I was awaiting trial. I lost weight; grew thin, and flabbier than ever.

Joe Larkin did his best for me. He was a white guy, if ever there was one. When the trial finally got under way, he fenced and haggled with the district attorney about choosing the jury.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he'd ask every prospective juror.

If the man said "yes," Joe challenged him.

Then he'd ask: "Do you believe that doctors can tell accurately how long a person has been dead, simply by examining the body?"

Most of them said "yes" to that one; but he found four willing to admit that doctors were often mistaken, and they went to the jury box.

Then there were speeches to the jury by the opposing lawyers, and after that came the witnesses.

There were the detectives who examined the ground around Landi's garage; but he'd been lying in weeds and tall grass, and the dicks couldn't tell much about footprints, and so forth, on that account.

After them, came Honest Dan Flint—known as "the squarest bookie alive"—who testified that I'd tipped him off to the clean-up that could be made on the future betting, when Landi failed to show up for the big race.

Honest Dan gave me a square shake. He told the D.A. I'd lost heavy, and paid off all my bets. Killing Landi wouldn't do me any good after the race.

Other bookies, too, testified that I'd given them the tip on Landi's failure to appear. Not one of them said anything to connect me with the murder.

Joe Milligan and the others who'd actually been in the ring and put up the dough to fix Landi managed to keep out of sight. Their names were never mentioned.

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Then the D.A. put a procession of witnesses on the stand—the mechanic Vetti, who testified, as before, that he had sat with Landi throughout the race; that Landi actually drove the car—and then mysteriously disappeared. Vetti could not tell how or why or where.

The doctors who performed the autopsy on Landi's body stated with professional certainty that he had been dead at least ten hours when found. There was not a shadow of doubt in their minds about this, in spite of Joe Larkin's efforts to shake their testimony.

After two days of listening to witnesses, Joe Larkin came to me and announced his decision: "I'm going to put you on the stand. Wally! It's your only chance!"

I said: "O.K., Joe."

I was wringing wet as I left the prisoner's dock and stepped up to lay my hand on the Book and swear.

Joe asked me a few questions, to enable me to tell my story straight and establish my alibi for the morning hours. My wife had previously testified that I was at our home—thirty miles away, in Blockton—at the time the doctors said Landi had been murdered.

Then Wilbur Sweeney, the D.A., took me in hand, and did Wilbur put me on the grill!

"Nuber," he began, "did you spread the tip that Landi wouldn't start in the race?"

"I mentioned it to a few people," I admitted.

"How did you know? Where did you get the tip yourself?"

"Somebody passed it to me," I said. "I don't remember who. I think it was some fella in the washroom. I don't know his name."

Sweeney put on his most dramatic tone. "Do you expect this jury to believe that you risked thousands of dollars on the strength of something a stranger in the washroom told you?"

I felt a little glad he'd asked me that. "In the bookmaking business," I explained, "we get tips every minute, without paying much attention to where they come from. I believed this one, and spread it around—and I went broke on it. I paid every bet and didn't squawk!"

I saw that this made a favorable impression on the jury, and that it got Sweeney's goat.

"Where were you at eight o'clock that morning?" he demanded.

"In bed, sleeping," I said. "My wife's testified to that."

"Naturally!" His voice had a nasty sneer in it. "But an alibi won't save you." Then he pointed his finger at me. "You could have plotted the crime and been asleep when it was committed. Whom did you hire to kill Landi?"

"Nobody!" I insisted, but I felt my face and neck getting red. "I didn't hire nobody. I had nothing to do with the murder!"

"You didn't want Landi to drive in the race," he said. "His appearance at the last moment cost you a fortune, didn't it?"

"Yes," I admitted; then an inspiration came to me, and I added: "But you've got to prove that Landi didn't drive in that race before you can say I had any hand in killing him. Because if I killed him in the morning, he couldn't have driven the race in the afternoon!"

Anger blazed in Sweeney's eyes for a moment, as he glared at me.

"That's all!" he said, and sat down.

The lawyers summed up, and the jury was charged by His Honor, and they filed out to the jury room, looking very wise and important.

I sat in the prisoners' pen with my lawyer, Joe Larkin, and his two clerks. They cheered me up all they could, but I suffered the tortures of the damned.

The jury was out for hours—four hours, I learned later. But it seemed like four hundred before the court officer came and announced that the jury was ready to give its verdict.

I returned to the courtroom. I stood up and faced the jury. The foreman stood up, too.

"Have you reached your verdict?" the clerk asked.

"We have," the foreman answered.

"What is your verdict?"

The foreman cleared his throat. "If your honor pleases," he said nervously, "the jury disagrees and asks to be discharged."

The judge beckoned to Joe Larkin and the D.A., Sweeney. They came up in front of the bench and conferred

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with him for several minutes.

Then the judge said: "This jury stands discharged, with the thanks of the court. The prisoner will be remanded, without bail!"

Joe Larkin came and laid a hand on my shoulder. "That's as good as an acquittal, Wally!"

But Wilbur Sweeney favored me with a scowl as he passed me. "You were lucky to have such a jury of fatheads, Nuber! Next time, I'll get a first-degree conviction—and you'll get the hot seat!"

Joe Larkin said: "The court's paroled you in my custody for a couple of hours, Wally. How about a ride in the fresh air?"

I thought it sounded swell, and told him so.

After going through a few formalities, he took me out of the courthouse by a side door and led me to his car, which was parked halfway up the block.

I got in and sat beside him, as he took the wheel.

Suddenly he nudged me. "There's one of the witnesses."

I looked. Climbing into a small sedan on the opposite side of the street was a man whom I recognized—Landi's mechanic Vetti.

Larkin spoke again: "He looks worried about something. I'm going to follow him!"

But before he could start the car, someone opened the door on my side and crowded himself in alongside me with a grunt: "Move over! The D.A. says I'm to come along!"

It was the detective from Sweeney's office—the big guy Grossman. He was as welcome as the smallpox, but I had to pretend I was glad to have him along, or he'd think Joe and I were framing an escape.

Joe drove through the winding streets of the town, following Vetti's car, and then out into the country, heading over a wooded back road which led to a town called Arden.

It was dark now, and the arc lights were on. Then I saw that Vetti's car had stopped and pulled over to the side of the road.

Larkin slowed down, crawled up to within a dozen feet. Vetti had the hood of his car up, and was tinkering with the spark plugs. After a few minutes, he seemed to have every-thing fixed, and he went to resume his place in the driver's seat.

It was then that I heard a horrible scream come from his car. I looked—and I too felt like screaming. I could see Joe Larkin's hands shaking as he held the wheel. For there was a figure in the driving seat of Vetti's car now—a figure that had appeared from nowhere.

Joe Larkin showed a lot of nerve then. He started up and drove close to Vetti's car, then turned and flashed his headlights right on the figure in the driving seat, so that the face could be plainly seen.

It was Rocco Landi, just as ghastly white as he'd been on the day of the race.

I saw Vetti on his knees, eyes staring, hands lifted in prayer. Then, at a sign from Rocco Landi, he got up and sat in the seat beside him.

The car started off, and Larkin followed.

The car ahead went like the wind. We lost sight of it altogether. Then as the lights of the town showed, I saw it again.

Larkin followed it into the town and across to the opposite outskirts. The car, with the ghastly apparition of Rocco Landi at the wheel, turned into a driveway leading to a garage.

Joe Larkin parked at the curb, got out, and beckoned me and Grossman to accompany him.

"This," Joe whispered, "is Rocco's garage. Over there—in the tall grass—is where they found his body. I'm glad you came with us, Grossman!"

The big detective grunted.

All three of us kept close to the wall of an adjoining building, so that its shadows prevented us from being seen, either from the street or from the garage. We crept stealthily along until we were close to Vetti's car.

Its headlights showed us the figure of Rocco Landi, standing tall and straight, while Vetti cowered at his feet. The voice of Landi was speaking in a low, unearthly tone:

"Carlo Vetti, here you offered me the bookie's bribe—which I refused! Here, you heard me say that I would deliver you to the law, and with you, the gamblers who sought to dishonor me! Here, you drew your revolver and shot me through the heart. Here, you let me lie in the grass until I was found. Here I swore, as I died, that I would

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drive the race with you beside me, and here I swore vengeance, in life or in death, as you bent over me. Now, write!"

As Larkin and I and Grossman watched, Vetti fumbled in his pockets and brought out a notebook and a fountain pen, and held them, ready to write.

And then Landi dictated, in the same deep, hollow voice, while Vetti wrote: "I, Carlo Vetti, murdered Rocco Landi when he refused a bribe of one hundred thousand dollars offered by a group of bookmakers who wanted him to stay out of the five-hundred-mile road race. They did not know I would kill Landi. I killed him because he threatened to deliver me to the law. The crime was not planned, but committed on the spur of the moment. Landi drove the car in the race. I sat beside him, compelled to do as his will dictated. To human eyes, under the hypnotic influence of the supernatural world, Landi seemed a living person. But the science of photography showed him as the spirit form he was. May God have mercy on my soul!"

The voice stopped. Vetti looked up, as if waiting to hear more.

"Sign it!" Rocco Landi commanded.

Vetti wrote. Then he let pen and notebook fall to the ground. His right hand moved jerkily to his hip pocket. For a moment, he fumbled. Then his hand came free, holding a revolver.

He did not hesitate. With a swift movement, he brought the gun up, pressed it against his temple—and fired.

Larkin rushed forward. Grossman and I were right behind him. The glaring headlights of Vetti's car showed us the form of Carlo Vetti lying on the ground, his lifeblood soaking the notebook in which he had written his dying confession at the command of his victim.

But the form of Rocco Landi had vanished.

Do I think Landi's spirit really came back and drove the car in the race, and then returned to make his murderer confess?

I don't know, mister. You'll have to ask me an easier one. All I'm telling is what I saw and heard. And I've got two witnesses to back me up. One of them's the D.A.'s own detective—Grossman! I'm kind of glad now that Sweeney insisted on him coming along with us.

Later they found most of the hundred grand in a safe-deposit box which Vetti rented, and the experts at the police department checked up, on Vetti's gun and said it was the same one that fired the two bullets that killed Landi.

Anyhow, that four-flusher Wilbur Sweeney never brought me to trial again for the murder of Rocco Landi. And I wasn't sorry. Once was enough!

THE END.