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Written by Dashiell Hammett

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Dashiell Hammett

Red Harvest



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1
A Woman in Green and a Man in Gray

I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.

Using one of the phones in the station, I called the *Herald*, asked for Donald Willsson, and told him I had arrived.

'Will you come out to my house at ten this evening?' He had a pleasantly crisp voice. 'It's 2101 Mountain Boulevard. Take a Broadway car, get off at Laurel Avenue, and walk two blocks west.'

I promised to do that. Then I rode up to the Great Western Hotel, dumped my bags, and went out to look at the city.

The city wasn't pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of forty thousand

people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining. Spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out of the smelters' stacks.

The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the center of the city's main intersection – Broadway and Union Street – directing traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mouth. After that I stopped checking them up.

At nine-thirty I caught a Broadway car and followed the directions Donald Willsson had given me. They brought me to a house set in a hedged grassplot on a corner.

The maid who opened the door told me Mr Willsson was not home. While I was explaining that I had an appointment with him a slender blonde woman of something less than thirty in green crêpe came to the door. When she smiled her blue eyes didn't lose their stoniness. I repeated my explanation to her.

'My husband isn't in now.' A barely noticeable accent slurred her s's. 'But if he's expecting you he'll probably be home shortly.'

She took me upstairs to a room on the Laurel Avenue side of the house, a brown and red room with a lot of books in it. We sat in leather chairs, half facing each other, half facing a burning coal grate, and she set about learning my business with her husband.

'Do you live in Personville?' she asked first.

'No. San Francisco.'

'But this isn't your first visit?'

'Yes.'

'Really? How do you like our city?'

'I haven't seen enough of it to know.' That was a lie. I had. 'I got in only this afternoon.'

Her shiny eyes stopped prying while she said:

'You'll find it a dreary place.' She returned to her digging with: 'I suppose all mining towns are like this. Are you engaged in mining?'

'Not just now.'

She looked at the clock on the mantel and said:

'It's inconsiderate of Donald to bring you out here and then keep you waiting, at this time of night, long after business hours.'

I said that was all right.

'Though perhaps it isn't a business matter,' she suggested.

I didn't say anything.

She laughed – a short laugh with something sharp in it.

'I'm really not ordinarily so much of a busybody as you probably think,' she said gaily. 'But you're so excessively secretive that I can't help being curious. You aren't a bootlegger, are you? Donald changes them so often.'

I let her get whatever she could out of a grin.

A telephone bell rang downstairs. Mrs Willsson stretched her green-slippered feet out toward the burning coal and pretended she hadn't heard the bell. I didn't know why she thought that necessary.

She began: 'I'm afraid I'll ha—' and stopped to look at the maid in the doorway.

The maid said Mrs Willsson was wanted at the phone. She excused herself and followed the maid out. She didn't go downstairs, but spoke over an extension within earshot.

I heard: 'Mrs Willsson speaking . . . Yes . . . I beg your pardon? . . . Who? . . . Can't you speak a little louder? . . . *What*? . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Who is this? . . . Hello! Hello!'

The telephone hook rattled. Her steps sounded down the hallway – rapid steps.

I set fire to a cigarette and stared at it until I heard her going down the steps. Then I went to a window, lifted an edge of the blind, and looked out at Laurel Avenue, and at the square white garage that stood in the rear of the house on that side.

Presently a slender woman in dark coat and hat came into sight hurrying from house to garage. It was Mrs Willsson. She drove away in a Buick coupé. I went back to my chair and waited.

Three-quarters of an hour went by. At five minutes after eleven, automobile brakes screeched outside. Two minutes later Mrs Willsson came into the room. She had taken off hat and coat. Her face was white, her eyes almost black.

'I'm awfully sorry,' she said, her tight-lipped mouth moving jerkily, 'but you've had all this waiting for nothing. My husband won't be home tonight.'

I said I would get in touch with him at the *Herald* in the morning.

I went away wondering why the green toe of her left slipper was dark and damp with something that could have been blood.

I walked over to Broadway and caught a street car. Three blocks north of my hotel I got off to see what the crowd was doing around a side entrance of the City Hall.

Thirty or forty men and a sprinkling of women stood on the sidewalk looking at a door marked *Police Department.* There were men from mines and smelters still in their working clothes, gaudy boys from pool rooms and dance halls, sleek men with slick pale faces, men with the dull look of respectable husbands, a few just as respectable and dull women, and some ladies of the night.

On the edge of this congregation I stopped beside a square-set man in rumpled gray clothes. His face was grayish too, even the thick lips, though he wasn't much older than thirty. His face was broad, thick-featured and intelligent. For color he depended on a red windsor tie that blossomed over his gray flannel shirt.

'What's the rumpus?' I asked him.

He looked at me carefully before he replied, as if he wanted to be sure that the information was going into safe hands. His eyes were gray as his clothes, but not so soft.

'Don Willsson's gone to sit on the right hand of God, if God don't mind looking at bullet holes.'

'Who shot him?' I asked.

The gray man scratched the back of his neck and said:

'Somebody with a gun.'

I wanted information, not wit. I would have tried my luck with some other member of the crowd if the red tie hadn't interested me. I said:

'I'm a stranger in town. Hang the Punch and Judy on me. That's what strangers are for.'

'Donald Willsson, Esquire, publisher of the *Morning* and *Evening Heralds*, was found in Hurricane Street a little while ago, shot very dead by parties unknown,' he recited in a rapid sing-song. 'Does that keep your feelings from being hurt?'

'Thanks.' I put out a finger and touched a loose end of his tie. 'Mean anything? Or just wearing it?'

'I'm Bill Quint.'

'The hell you are!' I exclaimed, trying to place the name. 'By God, I'm glad to meet you!'

I dug out my card case and ran through the collection of credentials I had picked up here and there by one means or another. The red card was the one I wanted. It identified me as Henry F. Neill, A. B. seaman, member in good standing of the Industrial Workers of the World. There wasn't a word of truth in it.

I passed this card to Bill Quint. He read it carefully, front and back, returned it to my hand, and looked me over from hat to shoes, not trustfully.

'He's not going to die any more,' he said. 'Which way you going?'

'Any.'

We walked down the street together, turned a corner, aimlessly as far as I knew.

'What brought you in here, if you're a sailor?' he asked casually.

'Where'd you get that idea?'

'There's the card.'

'I got another that proves I'm a timber beast,' I said. 'If you want me to be a miner I'll get one for that tomorrow.'

'You won't. I run 'em here.'

'Suppose you got a wire from Chi?' I asked.

'Hell with Chi! I run 'em here.' He nodded at a restaurant door and asked: 'Drink?'

'Only when I can get it.'

We went through the restaurant, up a flight of steps, and into a narrow second-story room with a long bar and a row of tables. Bill Quint nodded and said, 'Hullo!' to some of the boys and girls at tables and bar, and steered me into one of the green-curtained booths that lined the wall opposite the bar.

We spent the next two hours drinking whiskey and talking.

The gray man didn't think I had any right to the card I had showed him, nor to the other one I had mentioned. He didn't think I was a good wobbly. As chief muckademuck of the I. W. W. in Personville, he considered it his duty to get the low-down on me, and to not let himself be pumped about radical affairs while he was doing it.

That was all right with me. I was interested in Personville affairs. He didn't mind discussing them between casual pokings into my business with the red cards.

What I got out of him amounted to this:

For forty years old Elihu Willsson – father of the man who had been killed this night – had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts. He was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the *Morning Herald*, and *Evening Herald*, the city's only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance. Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature. Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state.

Back in the war days the I. W. W. – in full bloom then throughout the West – had lined up the Personville Mining Corporation's help. The help hadn't been exactly pampered.

They used their new strength to demand the things they wanted. Old Elihu gave them what he had to give them, and bided his time.

In 1921 it came. Business was rotten. Old Elihu didn't care whether he shut down for a while or not. He tore up the agreements he had made with his men and began kicking them back into their pre-war circumstances.

Of course the help yelled for help. Bill Quint was sent out from I. W. W. headquarters in Chicago to give them some action. He was against a strike, an open walk-out. He advised the old sabotage racket, staying on the job and gumming things up from the inside. But that wasn't active enough for the Personville crew. They wanted to put themselves on the map, make labor history.

They struck.

The strike lasted eight months. Both sides bled plenty. The wobblies had to do their own bleeding. Old Elihu hired gunmen, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even parts of the regular army, to do his. When the last skull had been cracked, the last rib kicked in, organized labor in Personville was a used fire-cracker.

But, said Bill Quint, old Elihu didn't know his Italian history. He won the strike, but he lost his hold on the city and the state. To beat the miners he had to let his hired thugs run wild. When the fight was over he couldn't get rid of them. He had given his city to them and he wasn't strong enough to take it away from them. Personville looked good to them and they took it over. They had won his strike for him and they took the city for their spoils. He couldn't openly break with them. They had too much on him. He was responsible for all they had done during the strike.

Bill Quint and I were both fairly mellow by the time we had got this far. He emptied his glass again, pushed his hair out of his eyes and brought his history up to date:

'The strongest of 'em now is probably Pete the Finn. This

stuff we're drinking's his. Then there's Lew Yard. He's got a loan shop down on Parker Street, does a lot of bail bond business, handles most of the burg's hot stuff, so they tell me, and is pretty thick with Noonan, the chief of police. This kid Max Thaler – Whisper – has got a lot of friends too. A little slick dark guy with something wrong with his throat. Can't talk. Gambler. Those three, with Noonan, just about help Elihu run his city – help him more than he wants. But he's got to play with 'em or else—'

'This fellow who was knocked off tonight – Elihu's son – where did he stand?' I asked.

'Where papa put him, and he's where papa put him now.'

'You mean the old man had him—?'

'Maybe, but that's not my guess. This Don just came home and began running the papers for the old man. It wasn't like the old devil, even if he was getting close to the grave, to let anybody cop anything from him without hitting back. But he had to be cagey with these guys. He brought the boy and his French wife home from Paris and used him for his monkey – a damned nice fatherly trick. Don starts a reform campaign in the papers. Clear the burg of vice and corruption – which means clear it of Pete and Lew and Whisper, if it goes far enough. Get it? The old man's using the boy to shake 'em loose. I guess they got tired of being shook.'

'There seems to be a few things wrong with that guess,' I said.

'There's more than a few things wrong with everything in this lousy burg. Had enough of this paint?'

I said I had. We went down to the street. Bill Quint told me he was living in the Miners' Hotel in Forest Street. His way home ran past my hotel, so we walked down together. In front of my hotel a beefy fellow with the look of a plain-clothes man stood on the curb and talked to the occupant of a Stutz touring car.

'That's Whisper in the car,' Bill Quint told me.

I looked past the beefy man and saw Thaler's profile. It was

young, dark and small, with pretty features as regular as if they had been cut by a die.

'He's cute,' I said.

'Uh-huh,' the gray man agreed, 'and so's dynamite.'

2
The Czar of Poisonville

The *Morning Herald* gave two pages to Donald Willsson and his death. His picture showed a pleasant intelligent face with curly hair, smiling eyes and mouth, a cleft chin and a striped necktie.

The story of his death was simple. At ten-forty the previous night he had been shot four times in stomach, chest and back, dying immediately. The shooting had taken place in the eleven-hundred block of Hurricane Street. Residents of that block who looked out after hearing the shots saw the dead man lying on the sidewalk. A man and a woman were bending over him. The street was too dark for anyone to see anybody or anything clearly. The man and woman had disappeared before anybody else reached the street. Nobody knew what they looked like. Nobody had seen them go away.

Six shots had been fired at Willsson from a .32 caliber pistol. Two of them had missed him, going into the front wall of a house. Tracing the course of these two bullets, the police had learned that the shooting had been done from a narrow alley across the street. That was all anybody knew.

Editorially the *Morning Herald* gave a summary of the dead man's short career as a civic reformer and expressed a belief that

he had been killed by some of the people who didn't want Personville cleaned up. The *Herald* said the chief of police could best show his own lack of complicity by speedily catching and convicting the murderer or murderers. The editorial was blunt and bitter.

I finished it with my second cup of coffee, jumped a Broadway car, dropped off at Laurel Avenue, and turned down toward the dead man's house.

I was half a block from it when something changed my mind and my destination.

A smallish young man in three shades of brown crossed the street ahead of me. His dark profile was pretty. He was Max Thaler, alias Whisper. I reached the corner of Mountain Boulevard in time to catch the flash of his brown-covered rear leg vanishing into the late Donald Willsson's doorway.

I went back to Broadway, found a drug store with a phone booth in it, searched the directory for Elihu Willsson's residence number, called it, told somebody who claimed to be the old man's secretary that I had been brought from San Francisco by Donald Willsson, that I knew something about his death, and that I wanted to see his father.

When I made it emphatic enough I got an invitation to call.

The czar of Poisonville was propped up in bed when his secretary – a noiseless slim sharp-eyed man of forty – brought me into the bedroom.

The old man's head was small and almost perfectly round under its close-cut crop of white hair. His ears were too small and plastered too flat to the sides of his head to spoil the spherical effect. His nose also was small, carrying down the curve of his bony forehead. Mouth and chin were straight lines chopping the sphere off. Below them a short thick neck ran down into white pajamas between square meaty shoulders. One of his arms was outside the covers, a short compact arm that ended in a thick-fingered blunt hand. His eyes were round, blue, small and watery. They looked as if they were hiding

behind the watery film and under the bushy white brows only until the time came to jump out and grab something. He wasn't the sort of man whose pocket you'd try to pick unless you had a lot of confidence in your fingers.

He ordered me into a bedside chair with a two-inch jerk of his round head, chased the secretary away with another, and asked:

'What's this about my son?'

His voice was harsh. His chest had too much and his mouth too little to do with his words for them to be very clear.

'I'm a Continental Detective Agency operative, San Francisco branch,' I told him. 'A couple of days ago we got a check from your son and a letter asking that a man be sent here to do some work for him. I'm the man. He told me to come out to his house last night. I did, but he didn't show up. When I got downtown I learned he had been killed.'

Elihu Willsson peered suspiciously at me and asked:

'Well, what of it?'

'While I was waiting your daughter-in-law got a phone message, went out, came back with what looked like blood on her shoe, and told me her husband wouldn't be home. He was shot at ten-forty. She went out at ten-twenty, came back at eleven-five.'

The old man sat straight up in bed and called young Mrs Willsson a flock of things. When he ran out of words of that sort he still had some breath left. He used it to shout at me:

'Is she in jail?'

I said I didn't think so.

He didn't like her not being in jail. He was nasty about it. He bawled a lot of things I didn't like, winding up with:

'What the hell are you waiting for?'

He was too old and too sick to be smacked. I laughed and said:

'For evidence.'

'Evidence? What do you need? You've—'

'Don't be a chump,' I interrupted his bawling. 'Why should she kill him?'

'Because she's a French hussy! Because she—'

The secretary's frightened face appeared at the door.

'Get out of here!' the old man roared at it, and the face went.

'She jealous?' I asked before he could go on with his shouting. 'And if you don't yell maybe I'll be able to hear you anyway. My deafness is a lot better since I've been eating yeast.'

He put a fist on top of each hump his thighs made in the covers and pushed his square chin at me.

'Old as I am and sick as I am,' he said very deliberately, 'I've a great mind to get up and kick your behind.'

I paid no attention to that, repeating:

'Was she jealous?'

'She was,' he said, not yelling now, 'and domineering, and spoiled, and suspicious, and greedy, and mean, and unscrupulous, and deceitful, and selfish, and damned bad – altogether damned bad!'

'Any reason for her jealousy?'

'I hope so,' he said bitterly. 'I'd hate to think a son of mine would be faithful to her. Though likely enough he was. He'd do things like that.'

'But you don't know any reason why she should have killed him?'

'Don't know any reason?' He was bellowing again. 'Haven't I been telling you that—'

'Yeah. But none of that means anything. It's kind of childish.'

The old man flung the covers back from his legs and started to get out of bed. Then he thought better of it, raised his red face and roared:

'Stanley!'

The door opened to let the secretary glide in.

'Throw this bastard out!' his master ordered, waving a fist at me.

The secretary turned to me. I shook my head and suggested: 'Better get help.'

He frowned. We were about the same age. He was weedy, nearly a head taller than I, but fifty pounds lighter. Some of my hundred and ninety pounds were fat, but not all of them. The secretary fidgeted, smiled apologetically, and went away.

'What I was about to say,' I told the old man: 'I intended talking to your son's wife this morning. But I saw Max Thaler go into the house, so I postponed my visit.'

Elihu Willsson carefully pulled the covers up over his legs again, leaned his head back on the pillows, screwed his eyes up at the ceiling, and said:

'Hm-m-m, so that's the way it is, is it?'

'Mean anything?'

'She killed him,' he said certainly. 'That's what it means.'

Feet made noises in the hall, huskier feet than the secretary's. When they were just outside the door I began a sentence:

'You were using your son to run a—'

'Get out of here!' the old man yelled at those in the doorway. 'And keep that door closed.' He glowered at me and demanded: 'What was I using my son for?'

'To put the knife in Thaler, Yard and the Finn.'

'You're a liar.'

'I didn't invent the story. It's all over Personville.'

'It's a lie. I gave him the papers. He did what he wanted with them.'

'You ought to explain that to your playmates. They'd believe you.'

'What they believe be damned! What I'm telling you is so.'

'What of it? Your son won't come back to life just because he was killed by mistake – if he was.'

'That woman killed him.'

'Maybe.'

'Damn you and your maybes! She did.'

'Maybe. But the other angle has got to be looked into too – the political end. You can tell me—'

'I can tell you that that French hussy killed him, and I can tell you that any other damned numbskull notions you've got are way off the lode.'

'But they've got to be looked into,' I insisted. 'And you know the inside of Personville politics better than anyone else I'm likely to find. He was your son. The least you can do is—'

'The least I can do,' he bellowed, 'is tell you to get to hell back to Frisco, you and your numbskull—'

I got up and said unpleasantly:

'I'm at the Great Western Hotel. Don't bother me unless you want to talk sense for a change.'

I went out of the bedroom and down the stairs. The secretary hovered around the bottom step, smiling apologetically.

'A fine old rowdy,' I growled.

'A remarkably vital personality,' he murmured.

At the office of the *Herald*, I hunted up the murdered man's secretary. She was a small girl of nineteen or twenty with wide chestnut eyes, light brown hair and a pale pretty face. Her name was Lewis.

She said she hadn't known anything about my being called to Personville by her employer.

'But then,' she explained, 'Mr Willsson always liked to keep everything to himself as long as he could. It was – I don't think he trusted anybody here, completely.'

'Not you?'

She flushed and said:

'No. But of course he had been here such a short while and didn't know any of us very well.'

'There must have been more to it than that.'

'Well,' she bit her lip and made a row of forefinger prints down the polished edge of the dead man's desk, 'his father wasn't – wasn't in sympathy with what he was doing. Since his father really owned the papers, I suppose it was natural for Mr Donald to think some of the employees might be more loyal to Mr Elihu than to him.'

'The old man wasn't in favor of the reform campaign? Why did he stand for it, if the papers were his?'

She bent her head to study the finger prints she had made. Her voice was low.

'It's not easy to understand unless you know— The last time Mr Elihu was taken sick he sent for Donald – Mr Donald. Mr Donald had lived in Europe most of his life, you know. Dr Pride told Mr Elihu that he'd have to give up the management of his affairs, so he cabled his son to come home. But when Mr Donald got here Mr Elihu couldn't make up his mind to let go of everything. But he wanted Mr Donald to stay here, so he gave him the newspapers – that is, made him publisher. Mr Donald liked that. He had been interested in journalism in Paris. When he found out how terrible everything was here – in civic affairs and so on – he started that reform campaign. He didn't know – he had been away since he was a boy – he didn't know—'

'He didn't know his father was in it as deep as anybody else,' I helped her along.

She squirmed a little over her examination of the finger prints, didn't contradict me, and went on:

'Mr Elihu and he had a quarrel. Mr Elihu told him to stop stirring things up, but he wouldn't stop. Maybe he would have stopped if he had known – all there was to know. But I don't suppose it would have occurred to him that his father was really seriously implicated. And his father wouldn't tell him. I suppose it would be hard for a father to tell a son a thing like that. He threatened to take the papers away from Mr Donald. I don't

know whether he intended to or not. But he was taken sick again, and everything went along as it did.'

'Donald Willsson didn't confide in you?' I asked.

'No.' It was almost a whisper.

'Then, you learned all this where?'

'I'm trying – trying to help you learn who murdered him,' she said earnestly. 'You've no right to—'

'You'll help me most just now by telling me where you learned all this,' I insisted.

She stared at the desk, chewing her lower lip. I waited. Presently she said:

'My father is Mr Willsson's secretary.'

'Thanks.'

'But you mustn't think that we—'

'It's nothing to me,' I assured her. 'What was Willsson doing in Hurricane Street last night when he had a date with me at his house?'

She said she didn't know. I asked her if she had heard him tell me, over the phone, to come to his house at ten o'clock. She said she had.

'What did he do after that? Try to remember every least thing that was said and done from then until you left at the end of the day.'

She leaned back in her chair, shut her eyes and wrinkled her forehead.

'You called up – if it was you he told to come to his house – at about two o'clock. After that Mr Donald dictated some letters, one to a paper mill, one to Senator Keefer about some changes in post office regulations, and— Oh, yes! He went out for about twenty minutes, a little before three. And before he went he wrote out a check.'

'Who for?'

'I don't know, but I saw him writing it.'

'Where's his check book? Carry it with him?'

'It's here.' She jumped up, went around to the front of his desk, and tried the top drawer. 'Locked.'

I joined her, straightened out a wire clip, and with that and a blade of my knife fiddled the drawer open.

The girl took out a thin, flat First National Bank check book. The last used stub was marked $5,000. Nothing else. No name. No explanation.

'He went out with this check,' I said, 'and was gone twenty minutes? Long enough to get to the bank and back?'

'It wouldn't have taken him more than five minutes to get there.'

'Didn't anything else happen before he wrote out the check? Think. Any messages? Letters? Phone calls?'

'Let's see.' She shut her eyes again. 'He was dictating some mail and— Oh, how stupid of me! He did have a phone call. He said: "Yes, I can be there at ten, but I shall have to hurry away." Then again he said: "Very well, at ten." That was all he said except, "Yes, yes," several times.'

'Talking to a man or a woman?'

'I didn't know.'

'Think. There'd be a difference in his voice.'

She thought and said:

'Then it was a woman.'

'Which of you – you or he – left first in the evening?'

'I did. He – I told you my father is Mr Elihu's secretary. He and Mr Donald had an engagement for the early part of the evening – something about the paper's finances. Father came in a little after five. They were going to dinner together, I think.'

That was all the Lewis girl could give me. She knew nothing that would explain Willsson's presence in the eleven-hundred block of Hurricane Street, she said. She admitted knowing nothing about Mrs Willsson.

We frisked the dead man's desk, and dug up nothing in any way informative. I went up against the girls at the switchboard, and learned nothing. I put in an hour's work on messengers,

city editors, and the like, and my pumping brought up nothing. The dead man, as his secretary said, had been a good hand at keeping his affairs to himself.