

A Dinner Date with Murder

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It was long past the dinner hour and too early for the after theatre crowd. The two men at the table near the door were the only patrons in Luigi's restaurant. They had eaten and were sitting there drinking wine. They drank very slowly and it was plain that they were waiting for somebody because they weren't talking much and had the half bored, half impatient look of people who have nothing to do but wait. At a table near the back of the room the waiter, who seemed to be the only one on duty, sat smoking a black twisted cigar and reading a newspaper.

One of the men put his wine glass down and lit a cigarette. Even sitting down he was noticeably shorter than his companion but he was powerfully built. He had a deep olive complexion and eyes that were black and sparkling.

„It looks like your man isn't coming, Dan,“ he said.

„Don't worry about that, Gatti,“ Dan said. „He'll turn up. He knows the trail's hot and he'd rather be a live rat than a dead kidnapper.“

Gatti shook his head slowly. „I don't know,“ he said vaguely. „You say you'll know if it's the same one that phoned. How can you be sure?“

„The accent. It's unmistakable. A deep voice and an accent like a vaudeville dialectician's.“

Gatti refilled their glasses from the green bottle on the table. Then they were silent.

The front door opened and two men entered. One was fat with a complexion the color of old weather beaten brick and eyes that were watery and cold. He wore a high crowned, pearl grey fedora, set squarely on his head and his fleecy coat had heavily padded shoulders. The other man was slight and sallow. His coat was too tight across his back and he walked with a defiant swagger. They hung their hats and coats on the rack and sat down two tables away from the one at which Dan and Gatti were sitting. The waiter put down his cigar and came to their table, bowing slightly.

„Spaghetti wid' a meat sauce,“ the stout man ordered loudly, „an' a bottle a' Chianti.“

„Same,“ the small man said laconically.

The waiter went off without a word. The two men lit cigarettes. Dan and Gatti watched them with open curiosity, waiting for some sign but they smoked in silence, never looking in the direction of the other table.

„It's the organ grinder accent all right,“ Gatti said in a barely audible voice. „But where's the high sign?“

„Give him a chance,“ Dan mumbled. „He has to be plenty careful, I suppose.“

The waiter came in with a wicker wrapped bottle which he set on the table before the newcomers. Then he went back to the kitchen and when he returned he brought two heaping plates of spaghetti, dripping reddish brown sauce and giving off a fragrant steam.

„The idea is to talk on a full stomach, I suppose,“ Gatti whispered. „Or isn't he the guy? I thought your man was coming alone.“

„He didn't say,“ Dan said.

Gatti watched the fat, red faced man wielding fork and knife, eating the spaghetti with great relish.

„Dat's a pretty good a' spaghetti, eh Joe?“ the fat man said loudly.

„Right,“ Joe replied briefly.

Dan looked toward the back of the room where the waiter was again occupied with his cigar and paper. Maybe they're waiting for the waiter to clear out first, he was thinking. He sipped at his wine, waiting... Then he looked up again. The stout man had almost finished what was on his plate and was taking a long drink from his wine glass. He put the glass down and sat back in his chair. He turned his watery eyes on Dan and nodded his head slowly up and down ... up and down. Dan glanced quickly at Gatti who had his elbow on the table and seemed to be sleepily leaning far over to one side of his chair. Then he nodded his head at the stout man just as the latter had done.

The next instant he was on the floor and somewhere over his head, repeated claps of thunder were bursting as if they would never cease and from the other table he heard a choked scream. His ears hurt in the silence that followed.

When he rose from the floor Gatti, gun in hand, was already standing at the side of the two men who a little while before had been enjoying their spaghetti and were now dead. The waiter had disappeared. Dan took a revolver from the lifeless hand of the small, sallow faced man. He looked at the chambers. All the cartridges were neatly in place.

„He never had a chance to use it,“ Gatti explained.

The door opened again. A man with his hat drawn down low over his eyes, stood in the doorway and looked wildly about at the dead men and at Dan and Gatti. Then he turned around frantically.

„Our man,“ Gatti cried.

He leaped forward, grabbed the fleeing man by the elbow and jerked him violently into the room.

„You wanted to see us,“ Gatti said. „You phoned the lieutenant, didn't you?“

Every feature of the man's face was distorted with terror. Gatti shook him.

„This is the lieutenant,“ he said pointing to Dan. „What were you going to tell him?“

The man was looking at the corpses with a slow, steady gaze. His face was more composed now.

„Sure,“ he said in a deep, resonant voice. „Dey a' deada now, yes? I no hava ta be afraid, yes?“

„That's right, they're dead,“ Dan said. „Where have they been keeping the kid?“

The man drew a piece of paper from his pocket. Dan read the address on it and put it in his own pocket.

„Who are they?“ he asked pointing to the bodies.

The man was calm now.

„Dat's a' Rocky Callahan,“ he said, „an'a da leetle wan he's a Joe Baker. I was a' gon' ta tell you. I was a' gon' ta—how you say—walk out on a' dem.“

„Rocky Callahan from Detroit!“ Dan said in surprise. „You mean the fat feller.“

„Dat's a'right.“

„Sucker,“ Gatti chuckled.

„Yeah,“ Dan said wryly. „But what started the target practice?“

„He pulled a rod on us,“ Gatti said.

„Who?“

„Joe Baker, the little guy.“

„I didn't see it.“

„Sure, because you weren't looking for it.“

„I was looking at them.“

„Baker had it under the table in the hand he wasn't eating with. You couldn't notice unless you bent down to look under the flap of their tablecloth. They must have found out their pal here was going to sing and figured he probably told us too much already. They counted on getting him later.“

Dan nodded reflectively. „But what I want to know,“ he said, „is how you happened to be looking under their table.“

Gatti chuckled some more.

„I was just making sure,“ he said. „Guys named Callahan shouldn't try to eat spaghetti. He might have palmed off the accent but nobody with a real accent like that would cut up his spaghetti with a knife and pick up tiny pieces on his fork.“

„What's wrong with that?“ Dan wanted to know.

Gatti gave him a look of contempt. „You eat spaghetti with a fork and a tablespoon to help you wind it around the fork and you eat it full length or it isn't worth eating.“

„You dam' right,“ Gatti's prisoner put in belligerently. His fear and humility were completely gone now. „Dat's a' da only way ta eata him.“
