

Chapter ~~III~~ II

Three police radios, each at two-thirds volume, each on a different channel, blared simultaneously:

"Make it a 29 on a Code 2."

"Car 38 to West Bank Lockup."

"...ten-four, 86."

The Channel A radio ~~sits~~^{sat} in the place of honor, ~~sit~~ on the

top of the only glass-covered desk in the 12-by-12 room. Its volume was ~~is~~ enhanced by an adjustable speaker to the right of the desk. Directly across the room, upon a plainer desk, the Channel B radio blurted out its message, competing with another radio atop a file cabinet to the left of the desk. The third radio monitored the messages of the sheriff's office of nearby Jefferson Parish.

To the left of the Channel A radio, two teletype machines rattled off line after line of police reports and all-units messages from the superintendent, belching out paragraphs of drama and reams of trivia.

~~The room~~ The room itself was a member of an almost extinct species, its furniture covered with the grime of a half-century of only light dusting and constant use, its corners filled with seldom-opened lockers. It was the Press Room of the Criminal Courts Building in New Orleans.

Lumped into a chair at the glass-topped desk, chewing on a cigar, ~~the~~ the daytime lord of the press room, Jack Dempsey, ~~was~~ pored over the sports pages of the morning Times-Picayune.

~~THE~~

Richard Dempsey is his name, but nobody remembers that. A referee christened him ~~it~~ "Little Jack" in his first ~~his~~ bantam-weight fight as a kid, ~~and he had the same look of 230 pounds~~ and -- though his 230-pound, six-foot-three frame had long since precluded the "little" -- the second half of his ring name had ~~x~~ stuck.

Dempsey, who has covered the police beat for the past 14 years, begins each story that he sends over the wire to the States-Item city room, "Dempsey to the States..." Instead of "30" at the end of his stories, he types "ALIHOT." One of the first questions a new reporter for the States asks is, "Who the hell is Alihot?" Each time the question is asked, City Editor John Wilds grins broadly and replies, "It means 'A Legend In His Own Time.'"

For most people, it would be an incredible conceit. For Jack Dempsey it is simply the truth.

Swaggering, smiling, cigar-smoking Dempsey begins each day at the courts building as though it were another St. Patrick's Day Parade. He bounces up the long marble steps of the building, clad ^{almost} inevitably in a long-sleeved white shirt and bow tie, his straw katy tilted back on his burry, ~~his~~ multi-chinned head, into the press room and over to his desk.

On this particular morning he had completed his morning ritual, which consists of ~~calling the radio~~ checking with the radio operator to see what has transpired in the early morning, looking at the teletype bulletins, then calling morning ^{assistant} City Editor Bill Madden with any important news. ~~After~~ After ~~the~~ doing that, dictating stories about three holdups and a rape, then walking down to the coffee stand for coffee and talk, Dempsey had returned to the desk

and read all the news in the first section of the Picayune. He had just begun the sports section when a short, stocky man walked through the always-open press room door. Without a greeting, the man walked over to the table in the center of the room where Dempsey had laid aside the front section of the paper. He bent over the table and began reading the headlines.

"What do you ~~know~~^{hear?} Dempsey asked the man.

It was the leading question he put to all comers, particularly of the ilk of the man who had just walked in the door -- the type common to all police stations, but particularly in New Orleans, who drift in and out, hearing things and speaking things, mingling unfounded rumors with innocent truth, calling patrolmen and captains by their first names, and stopping always in the press room to visit with Jack.

"Not too much," the shirtsleeved man answered.

"Come on, you can tell me," Dempsey pumped, feigning interest. Neither of the men looked up from the newspaper.

"Hear about Big Jim?"

"Garrison?"

"Mmm-hmm. About his investigation."

For the first time in the conversation, Dempsey's eyes turned up from the boxing news. "You don't mean he's investigating the judges again?"

"Naw, I mean the assassination."

"Not Kennedy's?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Curious but skeptical, Dempsey felt the man out. "You're pulling my leg."

"No, man, it's all around. You mean you ain't heard?"

"Not a word. Who told you about it?"

"Man, I got from somebody in the DA's office. It's the straight stuff."

Thus began the newsstory that a month later would stun the world.

As a reporter, Dempsey is not faultless, but he is unmistakably good. He did not let the matter rest. Sensing a big story in the making, he began asking questions. Dempsey and Garrison were not the best of friends, the rift between them having ~~xxxx~~ appeared some years earlier after the district attorney blasted away at certain criminal judges for what he called non-judicial practices. Dempsey had taken issue with Garrison's charges and the two Irishmen placed themselves at permanent odds to each other.

Since he could not go to the DA himself, Jack put the questions to others in the DA's office, with most of whom he had remained friendly. Scrap by scrap, the information came out:

Garrison ^{had} ~~xxx~~ indeed launched a full-scale investigation into ^{had} New Orleans activities which he believed brought about the death of President John Kennedy. Most of the time, money and resources of the office had been funneled into the probe, Dempsey learned, and the district attorney himself had become obsessed with the idea that he, at last, would be the one to solve the mystery of the assassination.

Dempsey, of course thought -- and would I always think -- that the whole idea was absurd, yet he smelled a story. He decided that on the coming Friday, when he would go down ~~ix~~ to the newspaper office to pick up his pay check, he would talk with the city editor about a story on the investigation.

John Wilds is a man of almost impossible caution, a man ~~for~~ ^{tale} to whom a questionable story is no story at all. The ~~story~~ is told of how, when a young reporter, the now-silver-haired Wilds would wear both ~~xxxx~~ suspenders and a belt, to make absolutely sure. His caution is an object of both scorn and admiration among fellow newsmen, but ~~it does not~~ once applied it is seldom altered.

On this occasion it was almost certain to be applied.

It was 3 p.m. by the time Dempsey sauntered into the fourth-floor city room. By that time most of the States-Item reporters had left for the day and the flamingo-colored Final edition of the States was rolling on the presses downstairs., The whole building vibrated when the presses were operating, which was most of the time, adding to the feeling of aliveness that permeated the place.

^{would lose}
Time ~~last~~ a chapter when the newspapers would move to their shiny, automated new quarters nearly a year from then, but on this Friday it was still very much alive. On the States-Item side of the huge room, the day's issue of copy paper and used carbons had ~~ix~~ drifted into ~~pieces~~ scattered piles around the wood plank floor, which went through an almost daily process of mopping, scraping, waxing and dartying, like a snake growing new skin. ~~The~~

The grubby floor ~~xxx~~ coiled around a dozen or so desks, under the camouflage of crumpled notes, ~~xxx~~ torn open envelopes, early editions and cast off movie promotion literature, making its way to the Picayune side, where the night shift was beginning to grind out tomorrow morning's news.

On the States side, the color of the winter sky outside matched the color of the grubby windows by the time Dempsey sat down to tell his story to Wilds. He began, "John, I think I got a story for you..." then detailed what he had found out, giving each source of information, but carefully labeling each one "confidential."

Wilds let Dempsey finish, then said, "You know, Jack, I just don't think we can do anything with it..." He went on to say why, hinting at a doubtfulness of Jack's sources and touching on earlier run-ins with the district attorney's office. The editor did not think the paper should get involved with anything of this nature, at least not until some official announcement had issued from ~~ix~~ Garrison himself. Confidential sources could not be trusted in things such as this, anyway.

Dempsey broke in with an occasional, "Yeah, but John..." He argued that the newspaper could not afford to sit on a story like this, that someone would break it right out from under them. But it was no use and he knew it. He picked up his check and walked down to the Press Club to play poker and complain bitterly across the table.

That was in the middle of December, 1966. For a few weeks, Dempsey let the matter lie, but a month later it began creeping out again and Dempsey knew he had to do something about it. The clincher came one day when he picked up a list of grand jury subpoenas. ~~ix~~

Under normal circumstances, the Orleans Parish Grand Jury hears only capital cases. (In priceless understatement, such cases are spoken of by sheriff's deputies assigned to the jury as "routine murders and rapes.") The twelve-man body is personally selected by one of the eight criminal court judges to serve for a six-month term, meeting usually every Wednesday. On its weekly agenda is printed each case it expects to handle that week, along with the witnesses in the case, who are to help the jury decide whether or a not there is sufficient evidence to indict a man. I

On this particular agenda, two names appeared not to be connected with any of the "routine murders and rapes," indicating to Dempsey that the grand jury was ~~for~~ conducting some special investigation, possibly at the DA's request. The two out-of-place names were those of Joseph Newbrough and David William Ferrie.