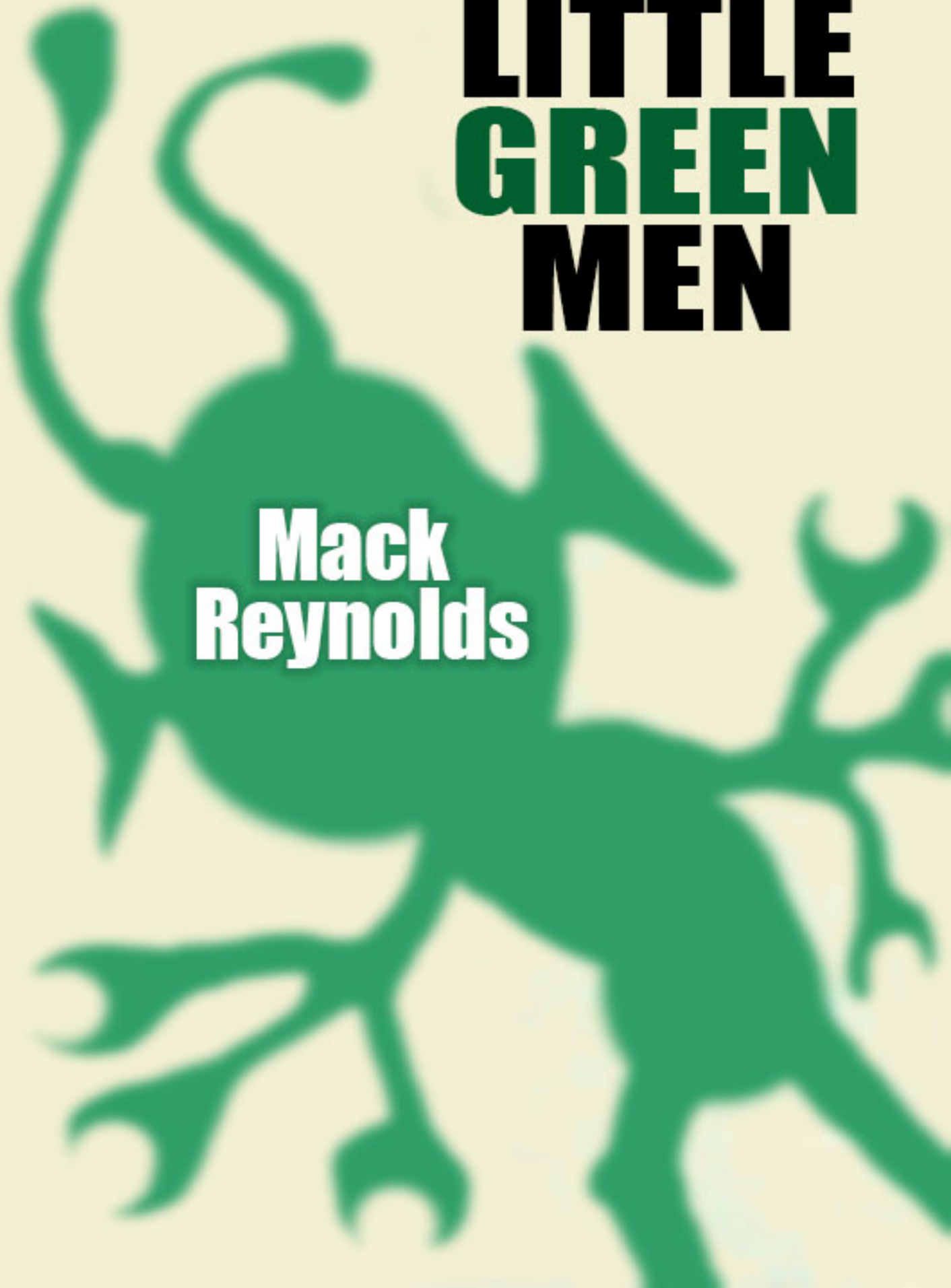


*The Case of the*

**LITTLE  
GREEN  
MEN**

**Mack  
Reynolds**



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# **DEDICATION**

To Smirky, with love.

# PREFACE

The detective isn't tough and he isn't even smart and he doesn't prove the case against the killer. And boy doesn't get girl, either. Otherwise, this story is just about like a good many others you've read.

At least it starts the same way.... We can't help it if it dissolves into men from Mars, people who believe in spaceships and flying saucers, murders without motive, and heat rays fired by little green men (or were they?).

# CHAPTER ONE

There were three of them and they didn't look like bill collectors, so I took my feet off the desk and repeated, "Come in, come right in," more hospitably this time.

In the way of snap impressions, the group was composed of: one, a stuffed shirt who looked like a cartoon of a successful businessman, whose belly was beginning to declare he was middle-aged, whose jowls were too heavy; two, a thin, nervous kid who couldn't have been more than nineteen, whose clothes hung on him as though he were studying to be a burlesque comedian, whose glasses needed changing or he wouldn't have been blinking so much; three, a tall, lanky customer, whom a Hollywood synopsis would have called a *Jimmy Stewart type*, although his grin was a bit more vacuous than Jimmy's.

"Mr. Knight?" the older one asked. His voice bore out my impression—pompous. Except when he spoke, he held his plump lips tightly together, giving him a peevish look about the mouth.

"That's right," I admitted, getting up to go through the formalities. One and two shook hands seriously; three grinned amiably in the process.

Number one said, "My name is Maddigan, James L. Maddigan." He indicated numbers two and three. "This is Mr. Arthur Roget, and this, Mr. Harold Shulman." Shulman was the scrawny one with the glasses and baggy suit.

We went through the rest of the formalities, everyone winding up in chairs, completely exhausting the seating facilities of *Lee and Knight, Private Investigations*. Shulman, weighing the least, was occupying the rickety chair. When all were seated, I cleared my throat professionally and said, "All right, gentlemen, what can I do for you?"

Maddigan was evidently the spokesman. The other two turned their eyes to him and he said, "Are you available, Mr. Knight? That is, available personally for employment?"

"Just by chance," I told him, "I'm between cases, Mr. Maddigan. Not a thing on the fire." Brother, that was no exaggeration.

"Good," Shulman said shrilly. It was the first time he had opened his trap since they had entered.

Maddigan patted his plump right knee to indicate satisfaction. "Yes, very good. And what are your rates, Mr. Knight?"

Until now, I hadn't been sure whether they were clients or not. Believe me, I wasn't expecting business, not after that fiasco of which the newspapers had made such a field day.

I was off-hand. "That's according to the service, Mr. Maddigan. Ordinarily my rates are, uh, twenty-five dollars a day, plus expenses, transportation and so forth. However, there are some assignments—" I left it there.

They passed glances back and forth between themselves.

"That seems satisfactory," Maddigan nodded. He hesitated for a moment, as though wondering how to open the subject. That was out of character; he didn't look as though he ever doubted his ability to reel off instructions to an employee right off the cuff.

He pursed his plump lips and said finally, "We're a committee from the Scylla Club."

That didn't mean anything to me, so I didn't say anything.

He chose his words carefully. "This will undoubtedly sound fantastic to you, Mr. Knight, but I shall come immediately to the point. Some of the members of our organization are of the opinion that there are aliens in the United States."

That called for a worried frown. I'd been practically spending my money; now he come up with a silly remark like that. "Rather obvious, isn't it?" I asked carefully.

"From space," Roget blurted. His easygoing smile was gone and he was leaning forward earnestly, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped between his legs.

"Hum?" I said.

Maddigan impatiently flicked one of his stubby-fingered hands from side to side. "Let me tell this, Art." He hadn't taken his eyes from me. "We are, some of us at least, Mr. Knight, of the opinion that alien life forms are possibly present in the United States."

I still didn't get it. "You mean like in Buck Rogers, the flying saucers, that sort of thing?"

Young Shulman began shrilly, "That's not exactly the way to put it."

Maddigan silenced him too. "Perhaps we had best start at the beginning, Mr. Knight. Have you read *Life on Other Worlds*?"

I shook my head. "Sounds like something by Edgar Rice Burroughs."

"To the contrary, it was written by H. Spencer Jones, the Astronomer Royal of England." He took a digest-size book from a side pocket. "This is a reprint from his work."

I leaned back, waiting for the worst. He was thumbing through the pocket book looking for some particular passage.

“Ah, yes, this for instance.” He began reading. “*With the universe constructed on so vast a scale, it would seem inherently improbable that our small earth can be the only home of life.*” He skipped over some more pages. “And here: ‘...It seems reasonable to suppose that whenever in the universe the proper conditions arise, life must inevitably come into existence. This is the view that is generally accepted by biologists.’”

He began looking for more passages.

“All right,” I told him hurriedly. “I get it. This guy thinks that life is possible on other planets. Who’d you say he was again?”

“The Astronomer Royal of England. And don’t misunderstand: not just other planets in the sense of other planets in the solar system. It is quite possible that life, except for some rather simple vegetation on Mars, doesn’t exist besides on earth, in *our* solar system. But that doesn’t mean that other stars do not have planets that support life.”

“Possibly intelligent life,” Shulman shrilled excitedly. That voice of his went with his clothes—all he needed was a good straight man and he was a natural for a job at the Old Howard in Boston.

“Yes, definitely,” Maddigan said, taking over again. “Do you follow thus far, Mr. Knight? That is, do you realize the possibility that life, even intelligent life, might exist elsewhere in the universe?”

I let my right shoulder lift and drop again, and stirred uncomfortably in my chair. This was the damndest set of potential clients I’d ever run into. “I suppose anything’s possible,” I admitted, “and this astronomer guy should know more about it than I do.”

“Very well. Now then, if we presuppose intelligent life in the universe besides ours, we must admit one of the following: first, that it is less intelligent, or at least less scientifically advanced than we are; second, that it is just as intelligent and as advanced as we; third, that it is more intelligent and advanced than we.”

I essayed a wry grin. “That about covers everything, I imagine. But what’s this about there being aliens on earth?”

He held up a commanding hand. “We’ll get to that. Now, Mr. Knight, do you realize that the earth is on the verge of space travel?”

“How was that?” He kept throwing these punches so fast I had trouble keeping my feet.

“The earth, and the United States in particular, is on the verge of interplanetary travel. If you kept up with the news of the day, you would know that experiments with rockets of the German V-2 type and even more advanced American models have put us on the threshold of travel, first to the moon, then to our sister planets,



Mars and Venus.”

I said weakly, “I didn’t know it was as near as all that. Of course—”

Roget had been leaning forward earnestly, watching my face for every reaction. “Nearer than most think,” he injected. “Willy Ley, one of the top rocket authorities, says that with even our present knowledge we have the know-how to get a rocket to the moon. Why, for all we know, the government might have already done it. If they have, it’d probably be on the top secret list, classified. I think—”

“We’re getting away from the point,” Maddigan interrupted. Every time one of the younger men got in a word he seemed irritated. “The point is that we ourselves have nearly accomplished space travel. If there are more advanced life forms in the universe, it is very possible that they have achieved it.”

I got one of my briars out of the top desk drawer and filled it slowly from the pound tin that sits right next to the telephone. I tamped the tobacco down carefully with my right forefinger, then reached into a coat pocket for my king-size box of kitchen matches—the only lighter I’ve ever been able to make work—and lit up carefully. It still didn’t make sense to me, but at least I was beginning to get their drift.

“Like the flying saucers?” I asked.

Maddigan twisted his beefy shoulders. “Possibly the flying saucers; there are as many different opinions on that phenomenon as there have been saucers sighted. Possibly they aren’t extra-terrestrial at all, but even if they’re not, it doesn’t mean that we haven’t had, or do not have now, visitors among us.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why should these little green men want to come to earth?”

Maddigan wagged a finger at me. “I am disappointed in you, Mr. Knight,” he said peevishly. “This is a subject in which you are little versed. You have admitted almost complete ignorance, but still you are contemptuous. You say jokingly, ‘little green men,’ and your tone of voice implies that the very thought of alien life is ridiculous. Yet you have no evidence to support your prejudice.”

He had me there. I twisted my mouth sourly. “All right, I’ll take that. I have no evidence to prove that there aren’t alien life forms, as you called them, here on earth. I should keep an open mind until I get evidence one way or the other. By the way, if they aren’t green, what color are they? What do they look like?”

Shulman said disgustedly, “How would we know? Possibly they’re either humanoid, or have disguised themselves to look like humans.” He looked as though he were willing to elaborate on the subject, but Maddigan motioned him to silence and took hold of the conversation again.

“You asked why they should want to come to earth. There might be a multitude of reasons, Mr. Knight, but here is just one, a good one. Let us suppose that you

were a member of an advanced race with a civilization far beyond ours. Suppose that for some time you had been observing the progress of mankind from afar, noting his nature, his institutions, his way of conducting himself. Suppose that you observed his discovery of nuclear fission and the manner in which he was utilizing it; and suppose further that you noted that he was about to achieve space travel. What would you do, Mr. Knight?"

I sucked deeply on the pipe, let the smoke dribble from my nostrils and stared up at my dirty ceiling. "I don't know," I told him. "It's according to what kind of people this other intelligent life was. You probably expect me to say that if I was such an alien, I'd destroy the human race before it could get in a position to destroy me."

"As I have said, that is one possibility." He patted his right knee to indicate he'd made his point.

There's nothing like stringing along. I leaned far back in my chair and summarized it: "Thus far, we've assumed that there is conceivably intelligent life in the universe besides man. Then we've assumed that being possibly more advanced in science than we, they have achieved space travel sooner, and consequently, would be able to journey here if they wished. Now what?"

Maddigan beamed at me. "We now get to the point, Mr. Knight. We want to employ you to investigate the presence of such alien life forms."

I had to catch my pipe as it fell from my open mouth. "You want me to *what?*" I hurriedly brushed some live ashes from my pants, staring at him as I did.

"We want you to investigate the possibility of there being alien life forms here on earth." His tone suggested that nothing could be more reasonable.

"You mean you want me to go around looking for men from Mars, for characters out of Orson Welles?"

Maddigan's heavy brows met impatiently. "You said you were available for employment. Why should one assignment be less desirable than another?"

I closed my trap but quick, and reversed my engines. "It's your money," I told him. I became briskly businesslike. "Do you have any ideas, any angles? Some suggestion as to where I might start?"

He rubbed a thick hand over his knee with satisfaction. Roget was grinning again; even the scarecrow Shulman seemed to relax.

"That is correct, Mr. Knight: we do. We have a theory. Assuming that there are aliens on earth without our knowledge, it becomes obvious that they are deliberately keeping themselves hidden and that they are interested in keeping mankind in ignorance of their existence."

I nodded seriously, humoring him. "That follows."

“Very well, then, it is to be further assumed that they are keeping under surveillance those humans who might possibly suspect their presence on earth.”

“And who would they be?” I prompted him cautiously.

“Science fiction fen,” Roget blurted. “Half the fen in the country believe there are either aliens on Terra, or that there have been, or will be.”

“Fen?” I frowned.

“The plural of fan,” Maddigan told me. “We science fiction fen have developed quite a vocabulary of our own.”

“Man, men; fan, fen,” Roget added.

I suddenly got it. “This club of yours, the—”

“The Scylla Club,” Shulman said in his high-pitched voice.

“The Scylla Club. It’s a science fiction organization, eh?” Some of my high school mythology came back to me. “Scylla? Wasn’t that some six-headed monster Ulysses had trouble with after the Trojan War?”

“That is correct,” Maddigan beamed. “The Scylla Club is quite the most exclusive science fiction organization of them all.”

It fell into place now. “I see,” I told them. “You think that any alien life forms from other worlds would keep their eyes on such groups as yours, since you suspect their presence while practically no one else does. And you want me to investigate the matter.”

“That’s it,” Roget said, grinning with satisfaction and looking like Jimmy Stewart just after he’d killed off all the bad guys in *Destry Rides Again*.

I turned to Maddigan. “All right, I won’t pretend that I get this type of case every day, but as I said, it’s your money. When did you want me to start?”

“Tomorrow. We would like you to attend a meeting—more of an entertainment, really—of our club tomorrow night. Incognito, of course. After that, we shall consider further steps. Meanwhile, you may busy yourself checking upon any of the aspects of the situation that occur to you.”

He gave his belabored right knee one more slap and came to his feet. Shulman and Roget followed, reflecting his satisfaction.

I stuck my pipe in a side pocket and stood up too. “You don’t have any special angles except that you think these alien life forms might hang around your science fiction clubs?”

James Maddigan shook his head. “That is why we are hiring your services, Mr. Knight. We trust that you will uncover additional leads.”

He took a black pin-seal wallet from an inner coat pocket and fumbled in it, coming out with two twenties and a ten. He laid the bills casually on my desk. “I assume this will be sufficient until we receive your preliminary reports?”

I picked them up just as casually and tossed them into the top drawer. It was the most money I'd had in one lump sum for four months. "Certainly," I said.

They were about to go, but Maddigan hesitated, pursing his heavy lips. "One other matter, Mr. Knight. We would like complete details of your activities; daily written reports, if you will."

That loused up the chances of my bluffing through with this and doing a minimum of leg work and a maximum of sitting comfortably and lazily in the office reading up on the subject in a few books. I groaned inwardly, but on the surface I took it like a man.

I followed them to the door and we went through the formalities again. Maddigan gave me the address of the private home in which the club meeting was to be held the following night, and I noted it down.

"Remember," he said, in the process of leaving, "most of the club members, and especially their guests, will not be familiar with your identity. We will introduce you as a new fan." He hesitated and considered before adding, "It might be well for you to read a few of the science fiction magazines before tomorrow night. You'll have to be capable of carrying on at least a minimum of pertinent conversation."

"All right, I'll do that," I told him.

After they'd left, I closed the door behind them and leaned against it. "My aching back," I grunted. "Good old Jeb Knight, master mind, the sleuth to end all sleuths."

Something occurred to me. I opened the door again and called down the hall, "Mr. Maddigan!"

He turned pompously, as though not used to being called after. "Yes?"

"Could I borrow that book you were reading from?" I walked down the hall to them as he reached into his coat pocket for it.

"Certainly. Here you are, Mr. Knight. Don't bother to return it; I shall secure another copy."

I returned to the office and to my desk, and sat there a long time before doing anything more than getting the old brier out of my coat and relighting it. The tobacco was stale by now and tasted as if I was burning soft coal, but I didn't have the gumption to get out a fresh pipe and load it.

Finally, I opened the top drawer and took out the two twenties and the ten and looked them over carefully before grunting my acceptance of their genuineness. I put them carefully into my battered wallet and took up the pocket book that Maddigan had given me.

I skimmed through *Life on Other Worlds* for about fifteen minutes, then let it

drop again. I wasn't up to wading through the astronomy gobbledygook just at present. Besides, there were a lot of other things to do if I was going to make those detailed reports look authentic enough to keep myself on the payroll of the Scylla Club.

I picked up the phone receiver and dialed the *Daily Chronicle* and asked for editorial. Somebody grumbled, "City desk," and I asked for Marty Rhuling.

A new voice came on after a minute or so. "Rhuling speaking."

"Jeb," I told him, and cut off his flood of amiable insults. "Listen, Marty," I said. "I've got a new job with an awful screwy angle. I thought maybe you could give me a little dope to begin with."

He chortled, "You mean as a private eye? Who is there in this town far enough around the corner to hire *you* after the way you've handled that agency since Lee died?"

"Quiet," I growled. "Don't forget I owe you dough, sadsack."

He pretended sudden meekness. "Fire away with the questions, old comrade-in-arms," he said humbly. "What can I do for you, O debtor of mine?"

"Well, to begin with," I said earnestly, "what and why is a science fiction club?"

## CHAPTER TWO

I awoke in the morning from no deep dream of peace, seeing as how I'd spent the evening before at Sam's Bar drinking up the better part of five of the fifty dollars of my retainer fee. I can't remember dreams two minutes after opening my eyes, but I had a vague recollection of green characters scooting around my head in saucer-shaped spaceships. Evidently, no matter what Maddigan's protests, these men from Mars were going to be green to me.

Groaning audibly, I forced myself to sit up and throw my legs over the side of the bed. A shave and a shower helped some. Not much. This was strictly guano for the condors.

I got into shorts, shirt and pants and wobbled my way to the pint-size kitchenette that opens off my combination living and bedroom. Investigation of the aged refrigerator reminded me that I'd forgotten to buy the eggs and ham I was going to treat myself to this morning. There was half a bottle of milk. I tasted it to see if it was sour. It wasn't, so I put it on the table and got corn flakes, sugar, a soup plate and a cup and spoon from the cupboard.

I put water on to boil for coffee and then located the powdered coffee extract. In spite of years of trying, and the expense of a dozen different types of foolproof coffee pots, adding a teaspoon of extract to hot water is still the nearest I can get to making a decent cup.

After breakfast, I felt a little better. Not much. I told myself nastily that if I'd had any sense I would have refused the job. If I had, I would have been forced into looking for another way of making a living that much sooner and would have left the detective business to those who knew something about it.

As it was, the fifty bucks was going to let me hang on another week, at least. Well, only until the rent was due. I'd never be able to meet even the pittance charged by the Kroll Building, and that would be the end of *Lee and Knight, Private Investigations*. And good riddance.

I got my shoes and the rest of my clothes on, searched around for my battered felt, finally finding it in the bathroom where I by no means remembered leaving it, and made my way down three flights of squeaking steps to the street.

The brightness of the morning sun had me blinking and squinting. I peered up at the sky in irritation. It was going to be a hot day, plenty hot; lousy weather for