

HARDBOILED

HAROLD de POLO

Table of Contents

<u>HARDBOILED</u>	1
<u>HAROLD de POLO</u>	1

HARDBOILED

HAROLD de POLO

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

Pete the Muscle, leaning forward on his somewhat ornate desk, was gazing in fond and almost ethereal fascination at the robin sitting on the nest between the shutter and window coping. His lips, bulbously predatory in repose, had the curve of a faint smile on them that actually made their expression tender.

Gosh, but nature was wonderful!

A discreet knock that was somehow tempered with homage, sounding on the door, caused Pete the Muscle's heavy face to cloud. Whatever softness that had been on his lips departed, and he spoke from the corner of his mouth in a rasping whisper:

"Come on in quiet, you sap quiet, I says."

"Your morning brandy and soda, Mr. Sorrenti, sir," explained the butler, coming into the room like a beautifully geared piece of noiseless machinery. "It is the usual hour of eleven, sir."

Mr. Sorrenti turned on the British servant whose raiment was not that worn by those of his station in Albion. A bit florid, too much on the side of brass buttons and braid. In an admonitory voice he said:

"Aw right, Ernie; aw right. Ya gotta be careful, though. Gee, man, they's four little blue eggs in that nest there. Four baby birdies is gonna be born. Cripes, I wouldn't have no guy frighten that mother robin away for nothin'!"

"Quite so, Mr. Sorrenti, sir," said Ernest, setting the tray with brandy and soda and ice cubes deftly down on the desk.

Pete the Muscle straightened up, trying to look dignified. His butler always made him feel like that, when he looked the limey in the eye. Uncomfortable, like he should act important. Sort of the way the G-men had made a guy get nervows when they'd bust in on the rackets. He spoke pompously, in the tone his wife said sounded "like swell society" when he wanted to use it:

"Yes, Ernest, nature is wonderful, all right wonderful! Think of them four little blue eggs under that bird that will be four young robins flying out into life pretty soon! It ... it makes a man think, Ernest!"

"Quite so, Mr. Sorrenti, sir," bowed Ernest, backing away and preparing to depart.

"We got to be careful of them young lives, Ernest. We ... you got to come in and leave awful quiet," he finished, with what he calculated to be a semistern yet slightly playful smile.

"Oh, quite so, indeed, Mr. Sorrenti, sir," agreed the butler solemnly, retreating and silently closing the door.

Pete the Muscle mixed himself a drink not too strong and sipped it in highly pleasant contemplation. He continued, fondly, gazing at the robin. Pretty soft, he guessed, being able to sit here in a classy study yeah, that's

HARDBOILED

what they called it and be able to look out over a lot of nifty Westchester country that was all your own. Pretty soft, all right, to be grabbing all this peace and quiet and watch a little bird roosting on your window. Boy oh, boy but was he fixed for fair in the world now?

Mr. Sorrenti had been proud of the name he had earned and certainly no one could say he hadn't earned it. He'd muscled into every racket in the game, and he'd always ended up by being the big shot. Booze, laundry, dry cleaning, numbers, fish and vegetables hell, all of 'em. He sure had made New York sit up and take notice, and no one had ever been able to put the finger on him, not even when he'd had to get rubbed out maybe thirty or forty guys to keep holding his hand. He'd made a wise play to retire, though, with the rackets fading fast. Now he had his jack all safely invested government bonds and trust funds and things like that with a pippin of an income of just about seventy grand a year. Yeah, pretty soft, all right.

He liked this country life, at that. He liked to watch things grow and get born. He'd get the whole works, now that him and Lena had moved out here and got settled. Horses and cows, sheep and pigs, turkeys and chickens and geese and everything. No more rackets for him. No more city stuff. No more cute dames. Just him and his wife sitting back here easy and watching things grow and get born. Damned if he didn't wish he'd thought of it sooner, even before he had so much coin put away. It gave a guy a sweet kick, having a big farm estate here in the sticks. It hit you hard, brought home to you how wonderful nature was, to have a robin come right up to your room, you might say. Cripes, he was anxious to see them four little beaks break through them shells. He'd feed 'em worms himself, make 'em come to trust him; sure he would. Be a regular papa to 'em, like he'd told Lena last night.

As he chuckled contentedly, finished his drink and started to pour another one, a knock came on the door. He answered pleasantly, this time, the end of his laugh still in his voice:

"Come right in, Ernie. You know, nice and quiet."

"Mr. Louis the Dope, Mr. Sorrenti, sir," announced the butler, opening the door. "He has been searched and passed by your bodyguard."

Pete the Muscle, getting hardboiled the way you always had to with punks and palookas, spoke out of the corner of his mouth:

"Whadda you want?"

Louis the Dope, cringing back against the door, looked at the retired racketeer with frightened, haunted brown eyes. He licked at a plainly dry lip and said hoarsely: "I ... I come about Rose, chief. She's—"

"Ya what, ya louse?" roared Mr. Sorrenti, his hand instinctively flashing under his left armpit.

"Don't git sore, chief. Don't shoot," wailed Louis, raising his arms high behind him. "I ain't heeled, I ain't lookin' for trouble, so help me. I ... I told the D. A. office I was comin' here, honest, in case I got bumped off," he added almost hysterically. "Don't shoot, chief!"

Pete the Muscle had become calm. He had noticed the robin on the nest fluttering her wings a bit uneasily. He said coldly:

"Don't yap so loud, ya rat. They's a bird out there gonna be a mother sittin' on four eggs. I don't want her excited, see ?"

Louis the Dope, whose name had been given him not for his addiction to drugs, but for his reputed lack of wits, lowered his hands and sagged back weakly. His voice, although relieved, was also weak:

HARDBOILED

"Gee, chief, I wouldn't hurt a bird, honest. I wouldn't go to hurt nothin'. I ... it's that kid, chief. You know—the one we clipped with the car when we were makin' a getaway from that last job. You remember; you saw him. You tossed him a few bucks for a doctor. Well, the kid lost his leg, chief. Poor little fella; it wasn't his fault. So maybe I thought "

"What have I got to do with it?" Pete snapped, drumming his fingers on the desk.

"I ... aw, gee, chief," stumbled Louis, his whine genuinely and pathetically pleading, "the kid only needs enough for a new leg. Even a hundred berries, chief, would "

"I'm finished with that stuff, savvy?" Pete yelled. "That's all old stuff. No more rackets for me. I'm through with that life." He crashed his fist so hard on the desk, to lend more force to his words, that his heavy silver inkwell spilled and toppled over with a clank.

The rumpus, ostensibly, scared the mother robin. She fluttered and chirped in so panicky and shrill a fashion that Pete turned anxiously to the window. He saw her rise from the nest. As she did so, apparently, one of her clawed feet dislodged an egg, and the flimsy blue oval went hurtling through the air.

Now, when Pete the Muscle went for his armpit, his hand came out with his gun. His voice, frenzied, high, was oddly like that of some justly avenging angel:

"Kill a baby bird, willya? Ya "

He gave Louis the Dope the works, the whole clip.

THE END.