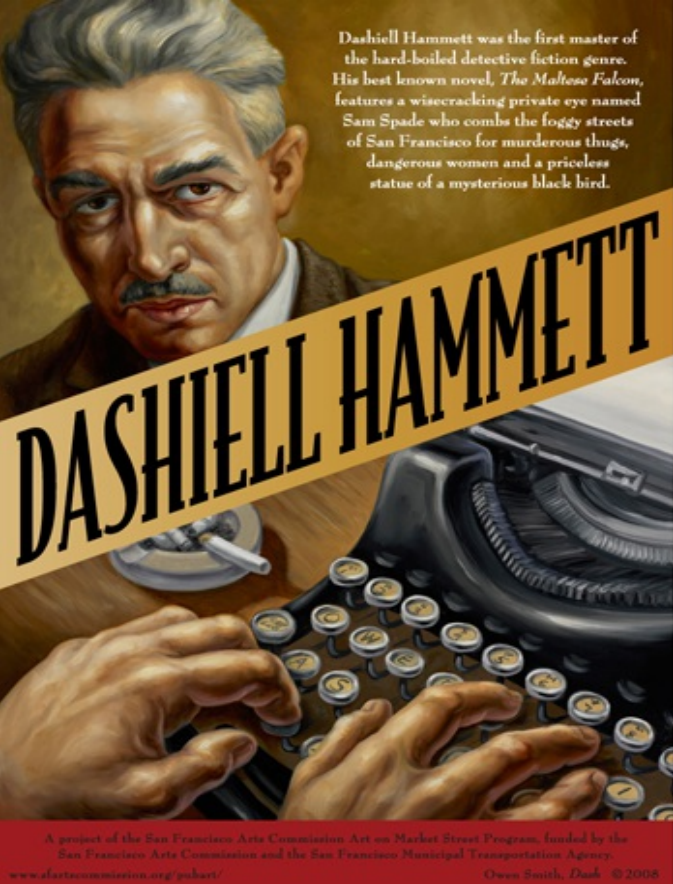




Dashiell Hammett was the first master of the hard-boiled detective fiction genre. His best known novel, *The Maltese Falcon*, features a wisecracking private eye named Sam Spade who combs the foggy streets of San Francisco for murderous thugs, dangerous women and a priceless statue of a mysterious black bird.

DASHIELL HAMMETT

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THE MAN WHO KILLED DAN ODAMS

DASHIELL HAMMETT

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When the light that came through the barred square foot of the cell's one high window had dwindled until he could no longer clearly make out the symbols and

initials his predecessors had scratched and pencilled on the opposite wall, the man who had killed Dan Odams got up from the cot and went to the steel-slatted door.

“Hey, chief!” he called, his voice rumbling within the narrow walls.

A chair scraped across a floor in the front of the building, deliberate footsteps approached, and the marshal of Jingo came into the passage between his office and the cell.

“I got something I want to tell you,” the man in the cell said.

Then the marshal was near enough to see

in the dim light the shiny muzzle of a short, heavy revolver threatening him from just in front of the prisoner's right hip.

Without waiting for the time-honoured order the marshal raised his hands until their palms were level with his ears.

The man behind the bars spoke in a curt whisper.

“Turn around! Push your back against the door!”

When the marshal's back pressed against the bars a hand came up under his left armpit, pulled aside his unbuttoned vest, and plucked his revolver from its

holster. “Now unlock this here door!”

The prisoner's own weapon had disappeared and the captured one had taken its place. The marshal turned around, lowered one hand, keys jingled in it, and the cell door swung open.

The prisoner backed across the cell, inviting the other in with a beckoning flip of the gun in his hand. “Flop on the bunk, face-down.”

In silence the marshal obeyed. The man who had killed Dan Odams bent over him. The long black revolver swept down in a swift arc that ended at the base of the prone official's head.

His legs jerked once, and he lay still.

With unhurried deftness the prisoner's fingers explored the other's pockets, appropriating money, tobacco, and cigarette papers. He removed the holster from the marshal's shoulder and adjusted it to his own. He locked the cell door behind him when he left.

The marshal's office was unoccupied. Its desk gave up two sacks of tobacco, matches, an automatic pistol, and a double handful of cartridges. The wall yielded a hat that sat far down on the prisoner's ears, and a too-tight, too-long, black rubber slicker.

Wearing them, he essayed the street.

The rain, after three days of uninterrupted sovereignty, had stopped for the time. But Jingo's principal thoroughfare was deserted — Jingo ate between five and six in the evening.

His deep-set maroon eyes — their animality emphasised by the absence of lashes — scanned the four blocks of wooden-sidewalked street. A dozen automobiles were to be seen, but no horses.

At the first corner he left the street and half a block below turned into a muddy alley that paralleled it. Under a shed in the rear of a poolroom he found four horses, their saddles and bridles hanging near by. He selected a chunky, well-

muscled roan — the race is not to the swift through the mud of Montana — saddled it, and led it to the end of the alley.

Then he climbed into the saddle and turned his back on the awakening lights of Jingo.

Presently he fumbled beneath the slicker and took from his hip pocket the weapon with which he had held up the marshal: a dummy pistol of moulded soap, covered with tinfoil from cigarette packages. He tore off the wrapping, squeezed the soap into a shapeless handful, and threw it away.

The sky cleared after a while and the

stars came out. He found that the road he was travelling led south. He rode all night, pushing the roan unrelentingly through the soft, viscid footing.

At daylight the horse could go no farther without rest. The man led it up a coulee — safely away from the road — and hobbled it beneath a clump of cottonwoods.

Then he climbed a hill and sprawled on the soggy ground, his lashless red eyes on the country through which he had come: rolling hills of black and green and gray, where wet soil, young grass, and dirty snow divided dominion — the triple rule trespassed here and there by the sepia ribbon of county road winding

into and out of sight.

He saw no man while he lay there, but the landscape was too filled with the marks of man's proximity to bring any feeling of security. Shoulder-high wire fencing edged the road, a footpath cut the side of a near-by hill, telephone poles held their short arms stiffly against the gray sky.

At noon he saddled the roan again and rode on along the coulee. Several miles up he came to a row of small poles bearing a line of telephone wire. He left the coulee bottom, found the ranch house to which the wire ran, circled it, and went on.

Late in the afternoon he was not so fortunate.

With lessening caution — he had seen no wires for more than an hour — he rode across a hill to stumble almost into the centre of a cluster of buildings. Into the group, from the other side, ran a line of wire.

The man who had killed Dan Odams retreated, crossed to another hill, and as he dropped down, on the far side, a rifle snapped from the slope he had just quit.

He bent forward until his nose was deep in the roan's mane, and worked upon the horse with hand and foot. The rifle snapped again.

He rolled clear of the horse as it fell, and continued to roll until bunch grass and sagebrush screened him from behind. Then he crawled straight away, rounded the flank of a hill, and went on.

The rifle did not snap again. He did not try to find it.

He turned from the south now, toward the west, his short, heavy legs pushing him on toward where Tiger Butte bulked against the leaden sky like a great crouching cat of black and green, with dirty white stripes where snow lay in coulee and fissure.

His left shoulder was numb for a while, and then the numbness was replaced by a

searing ache. Blood trickled down his arm, staining his mud-caked hand. He stopped to open coat and shirt and readjust the bandage over the wound in his shoulder — the fall from the horse had broken it open and started it bleeding again. Then he went on.

The first road he came to bent up toward Tiger Butte. He followed it, ploughing heavily through the sticky, clinging mud.

Only once did he break the silence he had maintained since his escape from the Jingo jail. He stopped in the middle of the road and stood with legs far apart, turned his bloodshot eyes from right to left and from ground to sky, and without emotion but with utter finality cursed the

mud, the fence, the telephone wires, the man whose rifle had set him afoot, and the meadow larks whose taunting flutelike notes mocked him always from just ahead.

Then he went on, pausing after each few miles to scrape the ever-accumulating mud from his boots, using each hilltop to search the country behind for signs of pursuit.

The rain came down again, matting his thin, clay-plastered hair — his hat had gone with his mount. The ill-fitting slicker restricted his body and flapped about his ankles, impeding his progress, but his wounded shoulder needed its

protection from the rain.

Twice he left the road to let vehicles pass — once a steaming Ford, once a half-load of hay creeping along behind four straining horses.

His way was still through fenced land that offered scant concealment. Houses dotted the country, with few miles between them; and the loss of his horse was ample evidence that the telephone wires had not been idle. He had not eaten since noon of the previous day but — notwithstanding the absence of visible pursuit — he could not forage here.

Night was falling as he left the road for

the slope of Tiger Butte. When it was quite dark he stopped. The rain kept up all night. He sat through it— his back against a boulder, the slicker over his head.

The shack, unpainted and ramshackle, grovelled in a fork of the coulee. Smoke hung soddenly, lifelessly above its roof, not trying to rise, until beaten into nothingness by the rain. The structures around the chimneyed shack were even less lovely. The group seemed asprawl in utter terror of the great cat upon whose flank it found itself.

But to the red eyes of the man who had

killed Dan Odams — he lay on his belly on the crest of the hill around which the coulee split — the lack of telephone wires gave this shabby homestead a wealth of beauty beyond reach of architect or painter.

Twice within the morning hour that he lay there a woman came into view. Once she left the shack, went to one of the other sheds, and then returned. The other time she came to the door, to stand a while looking down the coulee. She was a small woman, of age and complexion indeterminable through the rain, in a limp, grayish dress.

Later, a boy of ten or twelve came from the rear of the house, his arms piled high

with kindling, and passed out of sight.

Presently the watcher withdrew from his hill, swung off in a circle, and came within sight of the shack again from the rear.

Half an hour passed. He saw the boy carrying water from a spring below, but he did not see the woman again.

The fugitive approached the building stealthily, his legs carrying him stiffly, their elasticity gone. Now and then his feet faltered under him. But under its layers of clay and three-day beard his jaw jutted with nothing of weakness.

Keeping beyond them, he explored the

outbuildings — wretched, flimsy structures, offering insincere pretences of protection to an abject sorrel mare and a miscellaneous assortment of farm implements, all of which had come off second-best in their struggle with the earth. Only the generous, though not especially skilful, application of the material which has given to establishments of this sort the local sobriquet 'hay-wire outfit' held the tools from frank admission of defeat.

Nowhere did the ground hold the impression of feet larger than a small woman's or a ten—or twelve—year-old boy's.

The fugitive crossed the yard to the

dwelling, moving with wide-spread legs to offset the unsteadiness of his gait. With the unhurried, unresting spacing of clock-ticks, fat drops of blood fell from the fingers of his limp left hand to be hammered by the rain into the soggy earth.

Through the dirty pane of a window he saw the woman and boy, sitting together on a cot, facing the door.

The boy's face was white when the man threw the door open and came into the unpartitioned interior, and his mouth trembled; but the woman's thin, sallow face showed nothing — except, by its lack of surprise, that she had seen him

approaching. She sat stiffly on the cot, her hands empty and motionless in her lap, neither fear nor interest in her faded eyes.

The man stood for a time where he had halted — just within the door to one side — a grotesque statue modelled of mud. Short, sturdy-bodied, with massive sagging shoulders. Nothing of clothing or hair showed through his husk of clay, and little of face and hands. The marshal's revolver in his hand, clean and dry, took on by virtue of that discordant immaculateness an exaggerated deadliness.

His eyes swept the room: two cots against the undressed board side walls,

a plain deal table in the centre, rickety kitchen chairs here and there, a battered and scratched bureau, a trunk, a row of hooks holding an indiscriminate assembly of masculine and feminine clothing, a pile of shoes in a corner, an open door giving access to a lean-to kitchen.

He crossed to the kitchen door, the woman's face turning to follow.

The lean-to was empty. He confronted the woman.

“Where's your man?”

“Gone.”

“When'll he be back?”

“Ain't coming back.”

The flat, expressionless voice of the woman seemed to puzzle the fugitive, as had her lack of emotion at his entrance. He scowled, and turned his eyes — now redder than ever with flecks of blood — from her face to the boy's and back to hers.

“Meaning what?” he demanded.

“Meaning he got tired of homesteading.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. Then he went to the corner where the shoes were piled. Two pairs of men's worn shoes

were there — dry and without fresh mud.

He straightened, slipped the revolver back into its holster, and awkwardly took off the slicker. "Get me some grub."

The woman left the cot without a word and went into the kitchen. The fugitive pushed the boy after her, and stood in the doorway while she cooked coffee, flapjacks, and bacon. Then they returned to the living-room. She put the food on the table and with the boy beside her resumed her seat on the cot.

The man wolfed the meal without looking at it — his eyes busy upon door, window, woman, and boy, his revolver

beside his plate. Blood still dripped from his left hand, staining table and floor. Bits of earth were dislodged from his hair and face and hands and fell into his plate, but he did not notice them.

His hunger appeased, he rolled and lit a cigarette, his left hand fumbling stiffly through its part.

For the first time the woman seemed to notice the blood. She came around to his side. "You're bleeding. Let me fix it."

His eyes — heavy now with the weights of fatigue and satisfied hunger — studied her face suspiciously. Then he leaned back in his chair and loosened his clothes, exposing the week-old bullet-

hole.

She brought water and cloths, and bathed and bandaged the wound. Neither of them spoke again until she had returned to the cot.

Then: “Had any visitors lately?”

“Ain't seen nobody for six or seven weeks.”

“How far's the nearest phone?”

“Nobel's — eight miles up the coulee.”

“Got any horses besides the one in the shed?”

“No.”

He got up wearily and went to the bureau, pulling the drawers out and plunging his hands into them. In the top one he found a revolver, and pocketed it. In the trunk he found nothing. Behind the clothes on the wall he found a rifle. The cots concealed no weapons.

He took two blankets from one of the cots, the rifle, and his slicker. He staggered as he walked to the door.

“I'm going to sleep a while,” he said thickly, “out in the shed where the horse is at. I'll be turning out every now and then for a look around, and I don't want to find nobody missing. Understand?”

She nodded, and made a suggestion.

“If any strangers show up, I guess you want to be woke up before they see you?”

His sleep-dull eyes became alive again, and he came unsteadily back to thrust his face close to hers, trying to peer behind the faded surfaces of her eyes.

“I killed a fellow in Jingo last week,” he said after a while, talking slowly, deliberately, in a monotone that was both cautioning and menacing. “It was fair shooting. He got me in the shoulder before I downed him. But he belonged in Jingo and I don't. The best I could expect is the worst of it. I got a chance to get

away before they took me to Great Falls, and I took it. And I ain't figuring on being took back there and hung. I ain't going to be here long, but while I am —”

The woman nodded again.

He scowled at her and left the shack.

He tied the horse in one corner of the hut with shortened rope and spread his blankets between it and the door. Then, with the marshal's revolver in his hand, he lay down and slept.

The afternoon was far gone when he woke, and the rain was still falling. He studied the bare yard carefully, and reconnoitred the house before re-

entering it.

The woman had swept and tidied the room; had put on a fresh dress, which much washing had toned down to a soft pink; had brushed and fluffed her hair. She looked up at his entrance from the sewing that occupied her, and her face, still young in spite of the harshness that work had laid upon it, was less sallow than before.

“Where's the kid?” the man snapped.

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

“Up on the hill. I sent him up to watch the coulee.”

His eyes narrowed and he left the building. Studying the hill through the rain, he discerned the outline of the boy, lying face-down under a stunted red cedar, looking toward the east. The man returned indoors.

“How's the shoulder?” she asked.

He raised an experimental arm.

“Better. Pack me some grub. I'm moving on.”

“You're a fool,” she said without spirit as she went into the kitchen. “You'd do better to stay here until your shoulder's fit to travel.”

“Too close to Jingo.”

“Ain't nobody going to fight all that mud to come after you. A horse couldn't get through, let alone a car. And you don't think they'd foot it after you even if they knew where to find you, do you? And this rain ain't going to do your shoulder no good.”

She bent to pick up a sack from the floor. Under the thin pink dress the line of back and hips and legs stood out sharply against the wall.

As she straightened she met his gaze, her lids dropped, her face flushed, her lips parted a little.

The man leaned against the jamb of the door and caressed the muddy stubble of his chin with a thick thumb.

“Maybe you're right,” he said.

She put away the food she had been bundling, took a galvanized pail from the corner, and made three trips to the spring, filling an iron tub that she had set on the stove. He stood in the doorway watching.

She stirred the fire, went into the living-room, and took a suit of underwear, a blue shirt, and a pair of socks from the bureau, a pair of gray trousers from one of the hooks, and a pair of carpet slippers from the pile of footwear. She

put the clothing on a chair in the kitchen.

Then she returned to the living-room, closing the connecting door.

As the man undressed and bathed, he heard her humming softly. Twice he tiptoed to the connecting door and put an eye to the crack between it and the jamb. Each time he saw her sitting on the cot, bending over her sewing, her face still flushed.

He had one leg in the trousers she had given him when the humming stopped suddenly.

His right hand swept up the revolver from a convenient chair, and he moved

to the door, the trousers trailing across the floor behind the ankle he had thrust through them. Flattening himself against the wall, he put an eye to the crack.

In the front door of the shack stood a tall youth in a slicker that was glistening with water. In the youth's hands was a double-barrelled shotgun, the twin muzzles of which, like dull, malignant eyes, were focused on the centre of the connecting door.

The man in the kitchen swung his revolver up, his thumb drawing back the hammer with the mechanical precision of the man who is accustomed to single-action pistols.

The lean-to's rear door slammed open.
“Drop it!”

The fugitive, wheeling with the sound of the door's opening, was facing this new enemy before the order was out.

Two guns roared together.

But the fugitive's feet, as he wheeled, had become entangled in the trailing trousers. The trousers had tripped him. He had gone to his knees at the very instant of the two guns' roaring.

His bullet had gone out into space over the shoulder of the man in the doorway. That one's bullet had driven through the wall a scant inch over the falling

fugitive's head.

Floundering on his knees, the fugitive fired again.

The man in the door swayed and spun half around.

As he righted himself, the fugitive's forefinger tightened again around the trigger—

From the connecting doorway a shotgun thundered.

The fugitive came straight up on his feet, his face filled with surprise, stood bolt upright for a moment, and wilted to the floor.

The youth with the shotgun crossed to the man who leaned against the door with a hand clapped to his side. "Did he get you, Dick?"

"Just through the flesh, I reckon — don't amount to nothing. Reckon you killed him, Bob?"

"I reckon I did. I hit him fair!"

The woman was in the lean-to. "Where's Buddy?"

"The kid's all right, Mrs. Odams," Bob assured her. "But he was all in from running through the mud, so Ma put him to bed."

The man who lay still on the floor made a sound then, and they saw that his eyes were open.

Mrs. Odams and Bob knelt beside him, but he stopped them when they tried to move him to examine the wreckage the shotgun had made of his back.

“No use,” he protested, blood trickling thinly from the corners of his mouth as he spoke. “Let me alone.”

Then his eyes — their red savageness glazed — sought the woman's.

“You—Dan—Odams's—woman?” he managed.

There was something of defiance—a hint that she felt the need of justification — in her answer. “Yes.”

His face — thick-featured and deep—lined without the mud—told nothing of what was going on in his mind.

“Dummy,” he murmured to himself presently, his eyes flickering toward the hill on whose top he had seen what he had believed to be a reclining boy.

She nodded.

The man who had killed Dan Odams turned his head away and spat his mouth empty of blood. Then his eyes returned to hers.

“Good girl,” he said clearly — and died.