



*From the Milwaukee Sentinel,
Nov. 9, 1947*

by Peter Levins

“You’ll never belong to another man,” he had said. “I’ll kill you first!”

But Olga Trapani wasn’t interested in another man. All she wanted, right then, was to be rid of the menace of Al Rocco.

Why couldn’t he leave her alone? She no longer belonged to him. Their marriage had been annulled and she had discarded his name. The love she had given him no longer existed.

Surely he could have no real regard for her any more, else he certainly wouldn’t be acting so fiendishly.

In October he had forced her into her car at gunpoint and held her captive for three days.

In November he had dispatched her to a hospital with a bullet in the leg.

Now he had sent her a message via the telephone operator at her place of business . . . “tell Olga to start praying.”

Dark-eyed Olga Trapani, long a valued employee of a millinery concern on 39th Street, Manhattan, had married handsome, quiet spoken Alfonso Rocco on May 14, 1945, and had regretted it almost from the start. For one thing, she had not known that he had a police record. That he had been a thief.

Son of immigrant parents who had separated, he had passed his childhood years in institutions, then gone to live with a grandmother who proved unable to handle him. He had held various jobs briefly and unenthusiastically, much preferring a life of loafing idleness.

It had done no good for his sense of balance that girls found him attractive. They told him he looked like a movie actor.



Around the pool rooms and dance halls of Brooklyn, he came to be regarded as a lone wolf, a floater without regular associates or study hangouts.

In contrast to members of the opposite sex, men distrusted him and shunned him.

In the spring of 1938 when he was 27, the Bronx authorities arrested him and he got a year for larceny. It was charged that he had stolen 11 autos and disposed of them under false registrations. As in previous difficulties with the police, he blamed everything on his disadvantageous upbringing, and insisted that he rated another chance.

His greatest chance came in 1944 when he met hard-working, faithful, Olga Trapani.

After the ceremony at the Brooklyn marriage chapel, the newlyweds went to live with Olga's parents on 57th Street, Brooklyn. Olga continued with her job as a bookkeeper and office manager at the millinery firm, while Al concerned himself with activities that remained completely illusionary to his in-laws. His own explanation, never explicit, was that he had certain important "deals" in prospect.

Olga began to worry and wonder as he absented himself from home for days at a time. Sometimes he would return well-heeled with cash, and sometimes without a cent. When he had money, he would laugh off her questions and take her to a nightclub. When he returned broke, he would lash himself into a jealous frenzy and accuse her of running around with other men.

"There is not a word of truth in what you are saying," she told him time and time again. She could not help but resent such a charge, since she never gave him the slightest cause for jealousy.

So Al lost his great chance. After six months, she told him that she could no longer live with him, nor support him.

"Don't talk crazy," he said.

"It's you who's talking crazy," she told him, "and I can't take it anymore."

He snorted derisively. "You're nuts if you think I'll ever give you up!"

"Al, it won't work," she insisted. "We can't get along. You won't trust me and I'm sorry to say I don't trust you anymore. I'm disappointed and ashamed. There's nothing left for us to do but break up."

But though she made him leave her, and later won an annulment, he refused to call things quits. Indeed, he grew more wildly jealous with every passing day—and more vengeful.

He would not let her live in peace. He accosted her when she left her home. He pestered her with phone calls to her office. He authored threats.

"You'll never belong to another man. If I go to the chair for it, I'll kill you before I let that happen."

In October, 1946, a few weeks after the annulment, came the first of his series of desperate, direct-action measures. He menaced her with a gun as she neared her home, then forced her to drive with him to a hotel in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where he took her clothes and kept her prisoner.

Three days later he suddenly decided to take her back to the city, with the warning that he would shoot her and then himself if she refused to live with him.

However, at the very first opportunity, she escaped and fled to her home.

What now? How was she to shake herself free of this ever-growing peril?

For a while after that, she did not go to work by yourself; friends drove her to and from the office. Also, she arranged with the telephone operator to handle those nerve-shattering calls from her pursuer.

“Tell Olga it’s only a matter of time. Tell her that, sooner or later, I’ll get her!”

Friends advised her to go to the police. “That would only make it worse,” she said. “They wouldn’t find him, but he would find me.”

On November 1, at 6:45 p.m., a bullet crashed through a kitchen window of her home and pierced her left leg. For the next three weeks, while she recuperated under guard in a hospital, the police looked for Al Rocco. But just as she had predicted, they failed to find him.

About the 15th of December, while most of the inhabitants of New York were engrossed in preparations for Christmas, a 19-year-old, blonde-haired girl named Pearl Lusk, then working as a temporary salesgirl in a Manhattan department store, found herself launched upon a most thrilling adventure.

Out of a clear sky—just like in the magazine stories—a handsome man had taken hold of her elbow in the subway and said to her: “Don’t be frightened. I need your help.”

Almost before she knew what was happening, he had escorted her to a restaurant on 14th Street. There, quickly and charmingly, he had explained that he was an investigator, that he had been shadowing a suspect on the subway train, and that he’d had to act fast, at that moment he spoke to her, to save himself from a possibly disastrous predicament.

“My name is Alan LaRue,” he told her. “I work for a big insurance company on Madison Avenue. My job is to track down fraudulent claims sent to recover stolen valuables, and thus save the company from paying heavy damages. Right now, I’m on the trail of some really big shots.”

Pearl Lusk’s eyes widened. “And one of them was on the train?”

“Not one of the big shots, no. The person I was just tailing was a woman. They’re using her to transport the stuff. If I can get the goods on her—” he slowly closed to his right fist by way of emphasis—“I’ll have the whole game in the bag. The trouble is—”

He frowned and rubbed his jaw. The girl leaned forward and excitedly. “Yes? Please tell me!”

“I suddenly realized that the woman was looking at me in a funny sort of way. I wouldn’t say that she had become suspicious, but I realized that I would have to do something quickly to make her decide that I wasn’t in any way interested in her. That was when I jumped after you, and grabbed your arm.”

“You must have thought fast,” Miss Lusk remarked admiringly.

“In my business, you have to.”

Then he went on to point out that if he was to succeed in this very important assignment, he would need help.

“That woman is no dope,” he said. “If I try trailing her again, she’ll spot me sure as shooting. As I say, I’m going to need help.”

“What . . . what kind of help?”

He did not answer for a moment. Seem to be pondering something, then he asked “Would you mind telling me something about yourself? Your name for instance?”

“No. I wouldn’t mind that at all. It’s Pearl Lusk. My friends call me Pat.”

“Do you have a job?”

“At the moment, yes. But only until Christmas.”

That information seemed to please him. “And after that you’ll be available for something else? Would you be interested in doing some important work for me? — For my company?”

Her heart almost burst with excitement. “Oh, I’d love it!” she cried.

“Good. I assure you it will be worth your while.”

They made a date for a couple of nights later, and Pearl Lusk returned to her furnished room on West 99th Street in a romantic daze. How good-looking he was! Like a movie actor!

During the next fortnight they had frequent get-togethers. Business meetings.

“That person carries a fortune of hot jewels on her person,” Al told her. The only way to prove it is to make a close-up x-ray snapshot.”

“And x-ray snapshot?”

“Yes. A special camera developed during the war. It photographs right through a person’s clothing.”

“How wonderful!”

He nodded. “Yeah, quite a gadget. But very simple to operate. Just snap the shutter and there you have it.”

“That’s what you want me to do, isn’t it? Because if you try to take the picture, the suspect would recognize you?”

“Right. Will you do it?”

She wanted to hug him, she was so thrilled. “You bet I do! You just lead me to it!”

On Friday, December 26, the telephone operator at the millinery concern heard Al Rocco’s voice.

“Tell Olga to start praying,” he said, and hung up.

On the following Monday morning, having briefed the Lusk girl thoroughly, and having pointed out the woman, Al turned her loose with a gaily decorated parcel.

She saw the woman approach the building on 39th Street. Following instructions, she aimed just below the stomach where, she believed, the jewels reposed in a hidden belt. Then, at close range, she pulled the wire that operated the shutter.

“She never noticed a thing!” Pat exclaimed as she rejoined her handsome employer.

Al took the package and gave it a quick scrutiny. It had not been tampered with. No attempt had been made to see what was inside the holiday wrapping.

“Good girl, she said.

But that evening he told her that something had gone wrong. The film had come out a blank.

“We’ll try again in the morning,” he told her, “using another, larger type of camera—one that was developed by the Army. Just follow my instructions, and you can’t miss.”

At 7:55 the next morning he met her at 14th Street and Third Avenue and handed her a similarly wrapped package, rather larger than the other one. Indeed, this was at least eighteen inches long, about eight inches wide, and nearly as high. Al explained that the bulge in the front was the lens hood, and he showed her how to slit the paper in order to obtain a clear picture.

“It works like a gun,” he told her. “See—at the bottom here—this is a trigger guard and here is the trigger. It was developed for use of combat photographers so they could operate it with one hand.”

He gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder, murmured, “Good luck, kid,” and walked away.

Miss Lusk journeyed to Brooklyn and picked up her quarry at the subway station. She sat in the same car, holding the bright package on her lap. The train drew into Times Square station at 9:45.

The morning rush hour had ended, but still there were crowds. It wasn’t as though this were a deep forest peopled only by the stalking hunter and her defenseless, so-vulnerable victim.

But it might just as well have been.

The attractive brunette stepped onto the platform and headed for the 40th Street exit. The intent-eyed blonde, hugging her gay package, hurried past her.

A few steps short of the stairway, she leveled the box into position, kneeled to get the proper angle, and squeezed the taped trigger.

Patrolman Joseph Bonistalli heard the blast and dashed to the spot. He saw a woman writhing on the platform, blood gushing from a wound in her left thigh. He saw another woman standing nearby, a look of bewilderment on her face. Repeatedly he blew his whistle.

"I was taking her picture," he heard the blonde say, "and somebody walking by shot her."

Bonistalli seized the package and sniffed at the powder-scorched hole.

"He told me it was a camera," she said.

Police held back the crowd. Patrolman William Walch of the 30th Street station hurried to the wounded girl. A spectator was asking her, "why did this girl shoot you?" Through gritted teeth, she replied "It was my husband."

At Roosevelt Hospital, doctors found a main artery severed and the thigh bone shattered. They said the woman would lose her leg, if not her life.

"I never meant to shoot you!" Pearl Lusk sobbed. "Believe me, I didn't! He told me it was a camera! I thought I was taking your picture!"

Olga Trapani, eyes closed, face contorted with pain, nodded wearily. "I believe you. I'm sure you're not to blame. Just help the police. Help them to find Al Rocco!"

Detectives Henry Strauss and James Neylon took Pearl and the box to the 30th Street station. There, they tore the thing open and revealed a sawed-off twelve-gauge shotgun wired between two empty cheese boxes. An empty tin bean can had been placed around the muzzle to simulate a lens hood.

The Lusk girl told her story. She supplied Rocco's last known address, a rooming house on East 17th Street. But he had moved away the day before.

On Thursday, Olga's leg was amputated.

On Saturday afternoon, the police learned that Rocco had stolen a car and had been last seen in Cairo, N.Y., which is in the heart of the Catskill Mountains about 100 miles north of New York City.

A posse of state troopers under inspector Charles La Forge traced the fugitive to the farm home of Roy Lewis, near Gilboa. They waited until nightfall, then closed in, only to learn that Rocco, after holding the family in subjection at gunpoint, had fled 30 minutes before.

Searchlights found the man's trail in the 10-inch blanket of snow. He was on foot, and the officers knew he was carrying two guns.

They followed the trail up the side of the hill. A full moon tinted the trees with silver as they approached the crest. The frigid wind had died down; the crunching of snow underfoot was the only sound breaking the mountain stillness.

Suddenly they spotted him, lying in his sleeping bag under a low-branched spruce.

The officers spread in a wide semi-circle. Then—

“Come out, Rocco! Come out with your hands high!”

Come out . . . and then what? Sing Sing? Dannemora? A padded cell at Matteawan? A cage?

But Al Rocco chose not to come out. Instead he fired four ineffectual shots from his pistol. In return the officers laid down a barrage which was not at all ineffectual. He was found dead with one bullet in the head and another in the body.

“Now I can sleep again,” Olga Trapani said when she heard the news.

But for Pat Lusk, released from custody a week later, there would still be nights when she would relive the horror to which this monstrous man had subjected her.

This story was found on the Internet at

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1368&dat=19471109&id=VSkxAAAIBAJ&sjid=XwoEAAAAIBAJ&pg=3897,5237416>. Gerry Stoner reproduced it for non-profit use and is available courtesy of the Milwaukee Sentinel at <http://gilboahome.com/ghspublications/Newsletters/LethalCamera.pdf>