

# SCARLET LEONARD

By John Michael Flynn

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Dialogue heats up like a Saturday night special in this perfect replication of pulp crime fiction circa 1955. It also beams a flashlight on smoldering issues like anti-Semitism, racial discriminations and gays—which you won’t find in the dime store novels. But wisely, ‘Scarlet Leonard’ isn’t a platform for social activism—they are there because they are in keeping with the story, must be dealt with and assumed to be ‘just the way things are’. Characters and style dominate over plot and we almost like HOW Flynn says it as much as WHAT he is saying. Dialogue is smart-mouthed, prose snappy on top, complex below, tone noir-ish—just as you’d expect in this genre. Apart from everything else, we love the retro details like a ‘Monte Cristo sandwich’ and forgotten cocktails called ‘Gin Rickey’ and ‘Rob Roy’. Those were the days! Quote:*

“Eh, you know, he got into trouble with two colored boys who were taken in for selling handguns out of the trunk of a Buick in South Fortuna. It was Armen’s car, but he wasn’t in it. Armen testified in court that the colored boys had stolen it. Leonard defended Armen, got him acquitted. It turns out that Armen had loaned the colored boys one of his Dad’s cars. That they were all in it together.”

“What happened to the two boys?”

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## Scarlet Leonard

My Pa Burton and his partner Tiny Aria had counted the cash and locked their safe.

Bartenders, wait staff, dancers and drunks had gone home. With the lights out, The Blue Danube Supper Club felt cavernous.

“So, you were saying,” remarked Pa to Tiny.

“Still don’t got no weapon. Just a cadaver.”

“But why Leonard? Something personal here I ain’t getting?”

Tiny paused a moment. “Burton, you know our man Arturo at the G-Clef? He told me Leonard has a nephew living here in Fortuna.”

“Ring him up. Get him to spill. And all this time, I thought I knew the man.”

“You never know, Burton. Not really. You got a thirst?”

“Not tonight. I’ll lock up and set the alarm. See you on the flip side.”

It was four a.m. by the time Pa Burton got home. Over soft-boiled eggs, he confessed to his wife Cherry, my Ma, that he was afraid Leonard Zion’s death was going to ruin them.

“But you didn’t do nothing wrong,” said Cherry.

“FPD will shut us down. A supper club can’t be the last place a respected member of the community was seen before being killed. The river’s just a walk from our place. That’s where they found him.”

“I know. It’s in *The Standard* already.” Cherry wiped egg yolk off her lips. Such luscious lips they were, too. “What you wanna do, Baby?”

“Beats me. I feel naïve when these things happen.”

“You still got FPD friends and nothing to be afraid of.”

“But look at me.”

“I’m looking,” said Cherry, who still liked what she saw though at 38, developing a paunch, my Pa Burton had lost a step and there were nights when bullet scars screamed out of both his legs. He was neither the soldier fighting Nazis nor the handsome bachelor that Cherry, eight years younger, a brunette with disarming blue eyes, had married. She didn’t mind. She was still his Ava and he was her Frank, even though he fretted she’d tire of him. Once a cocktail waitress and before that a cigarette girl, Cherry had finished night school classes to become a certified bookkeeper for The Blue Danube. She no longer looked like bombshell Rita Hayworth

in *Gloria*, but her curves and her smile still complemented a glittering gown and heels as she met couples at the door when they arrived to confirm their reservations.

Before the war, when Pa Burton, just a skinny shaver, had frequented The Blue Danube with my grandfather, it was a first-class snort. As part owner and also a full-time detective, he'd labored to keep it that way. Having Cherry and Tiny on board made that possible. They'd known Leonard Zion as a genteel and respected Fortuna attorney who always arrived alone to the club and drank only Brandy Alexanders. Cherry had known him the longest, from her days growing up on the city's east side where a Jewish diaspora had begun to develop post-war in some of the newer neighborhoods being built there.

Pa Burton put down his cup of Sanka. "Tell me, Baby. Why the boosterism? Should I start smoking again? I miss my *Old Golds* and my slacks don't fit like they used to."

"Do some reducing with me at the Y pool, one lap at a time."

"I dunno. I'm all over the map with my emotions."

"Take on Leonard's case. Help out the FPD. You need a challenge."

"Baby, the man got eighty-sixed in our joint. Ain't that a conflict of interest?"

Cherry smirked. Pa Burton reminded her who they had to look out for, the same ruthless Albanians from the old country who'd owned The Blue Danube before Tiny and Pa had bought it from them. With Ike as president, those Albanians, once denigrated, had gelled and joined forces with the local Sicilians to form a well-organized influence on the cops and city government.

"Burton. You got moxie and ideals. Stand up for what's right."

"But Leonard wasn't a criminal."

Cherry nodded while chewing. "But he was bent. As scarlet as they come. Always tidy. Dined in them fancy places like Town and Country."

“Love their Cobb Salad.”

“So did his male lover.”

“How come I didn’t know this?”

“Because I kept it from you. It’s one more of my charms that you never notice.”

“I feel a lousy taste coming on.”

“Burton, all those years a regular and I bet you didn’t know Leonard was married.”

“I just knew he was a lawyer in the Jewish community. Reliable.”

“He projected that, but his law partner and his lover, the same man, lived in the Copper Lake neighborhood. Raymond Vinovich.”

“You’re giving me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Don’t look so shocked, Baby. Didn’t make the connection, did you?”

“How could I?”

“Vinovich had a son and daughter,” said Cherry. “Like you, he was in the war.”

“I remember that case. A bullet to the head and found naked in that new Howard Johnson’s hotel on Route Thirty.”

“What’s your detective instinct tell you?”

“Maybe the same hired gun killed them both.”

“Great minds think alike.”

“Contracts, jealous spouses,” said Pa Burton. “Other lawyers in the firm who can’t let on they work with those who make like Sodom while posing as upright Republicans.”

“Baby, you’re getting the bird’s eye just like I thought you would.”

The next day, Burton arrived at his usual time to the supper club, where he found Tiny admiring the cut of Cherry’s jib. She was in a pencil skirt and tight yellow blouse over a bullet-

tip brassiere. Burton cleared his throat to get Tiny's attention and they pow-wowed in the back room that no other employees were allowed to visit.

"The bigger question," said Burton, "is who we trust. Vinovich and Zion were members of the same firm. Everyone employed there, Jewish or scarlet or not, is a suspect."

"Including Zion's nephew. Art at G Clef was right. He's here."

Cherry excusing herself, popped in to ask if either of them would like a martini. "Not now," said Tiny. Burton seconded the polite refusal and Cherry left.

Tiny said, "His name is Malachi. Had the keys to his uncle's apartment downtown."

"A love nest?"

"Yup. Keys to his car, too. That's all we got right now. I'm gonna look into whether he had access to certain accounts. He works in a bank."

"You think he was skimming from his uncle?"

"Not sure. He's just a teller, but if you mean, did he help secure loans and signatures on the legit, that sort of thing? Yeah, it's possible."

"He can't be trusted. No one can."

"We'll figure it out, Burton. We always do."

"Invite him here for supper. Champagne, the works. We'll make him feel welcomed."

Tiny followed through and Malachi was treated to five-star hospitality. He feasted on Chicken Kiev and drank bottle after bottle of beer while revealing, among other facts, that his uncle Leonard kept journals.

"Can you get them, the journals, do you know where they are?" asked Burton.

"They're in his apartment."

"Why did he give you a key and not anybody else?"

“To look after the place, I guess.”

Tiny interjected, “What did he use the apartment for?”

“What do you think?”

“But not women?” asked Burton. “You did know that, right?”

“Do I need to go into those details?” asked Malachi.

“It would help,” said Burton, who thought Malachi a handsome devil in a gray satin shirt, a silk black tie and seersucker jacket, his hair oiled in a D-A, his pointed shoes perfect. “Tell me about that last night you were here with him.”

“I was here in a booth like this one.” Malachi slapped padded lavender vinyl. “Uncle Leonard was sitting where you are. He loved to hear the live music.”

“That, we know. He was on friendly terms with most of the cats in our house band.”

“But I remember your club was quiet that night, too. A weeknight. Kind of early. The house band wasn’t playing. And me,” said Malachi, “I was marveling at a woman across the room and that’s when I heard one of your doormen shouting ‘Excuse me, anybody here with a Chevy Bel Air, license plate 401 DOI. Your headlights are on.’”

“Leonard’s plate number?”

“I didn’t recognize it. Uncle Leonard did right away. He was a bit tipsy already. He said ‘That’s me’ and then he staggered out to the parking lot.”

“Front door?”

“No. He took the back way.”

“So, that’s why I don’t remember seeing him,” said Tiny.

“Me neither,” added Burton.

Tiny pointed toward the club's curved bar framed in beveled chrome. Behind it in one corner hung a black curtain. He said, "You're not supposed to. That curtain is an employee entrance that leads to the hall past our office and dressing rooms. The kitchen entrance is behind the saloon doors on the other side of the bar. It can get crowded back there. That's why customers go in and out the front. Eventually, we're getting valets. We'll have them park cars for our clientele. Nobody uses that back way except us and some of our staff, usually the musicians and our girls."

"You ever use it?" asked Burton.

"All I know is Uncle Leonard thought of this place as his oasis."

"Malachi," said Burton. "Was there anyone here that night, maybe another lawyer or someone your uncle prosecuted that wanted to hurt him?"

Malachi rubbed his chin.

Tiny said, "What we know is that no blood was found in the parking lot that night. No gasoline or oil spilled. Just his car, lights still on."

"So what's that tell you?" Burton asked.

"I'm thinking that my uncle never made it back to his car."

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" said Burton. "Why else the rear exit?"

Tiny said, "But what gets me, Burton, is how would they know it was *his* car?"

"His killers knew him, set him up," said Malachi, chipping in. "He services his car at the Gregorian Brothers Garage. I've taken it there for him in the past. You know their garage? It's up on Jones Hill behind City Hall?"

"We do," said Tiny. "And we know those brothers."

“One of them has a son, Armen,” said Malachi. “He works as a desk clerk at the Continental Hotel. Uncle Leonard used to eat in the dining room there. He’d meet his friends, other lawyers, people like that.”

“Truly honest folk,” said Burton.

“But Armen,” said Tiny. “I know that boy.”

“You do?” Burton couldn’t hide his surprise. “Is there anybody in this city you don’t know?”

Tiny chuckled. “Probably not. Unfortunately.”

“What kind of kid is this Armen?” asked Burton.

“Eh, you know, he got into trouble with two colored boys who were taken in for selling handguns out of the trunk of a Buick in South Fortuna. It was Armen’s car, but he wasn’t in it. Armen testified in court that the colored boys had stolen it. Leonard defended Armen, got him acquitted. It turns out that Armen had loaned the colored boys one of his Dad’s cars. That they were all in it together.”

“What happened to the two boys?”

“Well, they’re coloreds,” said Tiny. “They’re in prison now.”

“That’s not right,” said Malachi.

“Of course, it isn’t.”

“So, Armen goes free thanks to my uncle?”

“Sounds like it,” said Burton. “Unless my partner here is lying.”

“Which I’m not,” said Tiny. “Nobody knows where those two boys got those guns from in the first place. I bet Armen knows. We need to talk to him.”

“Don’t be hasty, Tiny,” said Burton. “I’m sure Leonard saw a lot of cases like this one.”

Malachi faltered a little as he spoke. "It's like he had a secret life."

"What do you drive?" Burton asked. "Just for the record."

"I can't afford a car. I ride the city bus. Take the trolley, too. I'm working, saving for college. Take after my father, I guess. He's a dentist."

"Nothing wrong with that. But look, Malachi, I'm tired and my legs are acting up. Get me those journals. Let's meet at Leonard's apartment tomorrow at ten?"

"I'll be there," said Malachi.

Tiny and Burton left him alone to finish his supper, on the house. They sent over a call girl to keep him company while he ate dessert.

After closing time, Tiny and his girl Eva joined Cherry and Burton as Tony Martin sang his hit "Walk Hand In Hand" on the club's new juke box, the two men sipping highballs and the women sipping martinis while all four played Hearts. It was one of their mid-week routines.

Cherry could talk a blue streak and she didn't mind hitting Burton below the belt now and then. "Leonard was a fair lawyer, don't forget that. He worked pro bono all the time, took a lot of cases for those who couldn't pay him."

"Yeah, he had a highly evolved sense of moral imperatives, but you should have seen the look of disappointment on his nephew's face."

"It's a rotten world out there," said Eva.

Burton said to her, "His people came from nothing. Some were gassed during the war. Those that survived, they worked hard. He knew what it was like to go hungry and he cared about the little guy, but I think somewhere it all went wrong."

In heels and crinoline that night, Cherry sat a few inches taller but not bustier than Eva. She rested a hand on one of Tiny's shoulders as she wobbled while rising and walking to the bar

to refresh her drink. "I'm of the mind he probably had his share of enemies in high places. Dirty places."

"I think Cherry's right," said Eva. "Women's intuition."

"And it's going to take you and the rest of the police force a long time to interview all those who knew and trusted and even hated him," said Cherry from the bar.

Burton sounded defensive. "What I know of Leonard Zion, personally speaking, is that after my mother died, he helped me get through the legal red tape with her so-called estate and all the money she owed others. I put everything in his hands and he didn't let me down. I never knew he was scarlet or that he was married."

"So, who has a motive then?" asked Tiny.

"Malachi," said Burton. "He's too fearless. I bet he knew all along that his uncle was a gunsel and he was probably blackmailing him."

"But I can't link Malachi to the murder of Raymond, the lover," said Tiny. "And to be honest, that boy doesn't strike me as a murderer. He's a Boy Scout."

"I think you're right as usual, my Sweet," said Cherry as she returned and sat.

"Still, he was in on part of it, I'm sure," said Burton. "Too much to gain. The dirt on his uncle, the key to his love nest. He could provide evidence to Leonard's wife and legal partners. I think Armen is in, too. Armen's bad news."

"Those poor colored boys," said Tiny. "They're in jail. Armen should be there with them. It's not right."

"A lot's not right, Tiny," remarked Burton. "You should know that by now."

"But he don't," said Eva, laughing bitterly. "That's why we love him."

Burton eyed his partner, short, balding, also running to fat, and he told himself he couldn't be sure of anything anymore, that he'd never been sure. What would be the next surprise? He needed to be better prepared. He suspected something; its hammering left a sting in his left knee he hoped Cherry would massage later and make go away.

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A dream started Leonard Zion's journal. Burton held the small spiral notebook, *Fortuna Nocturna* written in black ink on its beige cover. Zion had written in pencil, relying on a gift for penmanship, recording with care and delicacy chapters, moods and conflicts from his life, spelling them out in vivid detail.

Seated, a Gin Rickey in hand, Burton continued to read pages and Zion's vision of the Clepsydra Lounge at the bus station on Fortuna's Raven Street. Leonard wrote how he remembered one of its stalwart regulars, Everett Dimmer, describing the man as contentious, reedy, a flannel-puss, rugose, hemorrhoidal, opinionated and dyspeptic. Not to mention a lush. Leonard also scribbled in the margin that a reader who didn't know the meaning of rugose had to look it up and that like all dreams this one, too, was more real than reality itself. Such a margin note convinced Burton that Leonard Zion had suffered, at one time, literary aspirations, yearning for an echo of his presence long after he was gone.

Now, he had all he needed. He dialed Tiny and asked him to invite their journalist friend from *The Standard*, Stacy Onus, to ask if she was free for lunch at Café Agonistes. Tiny called back to say she most certainly was, as long as they were footing the bill. They met her there. Stacy looked comely in a long blue overcoat with bone-white buttons, an accordion skirt with a floral pattern, synthetic pearls and an orange blouse with a bow top that matched her beige cardigan. It was winter, a bit breezier than usual, the sun out and the temperature just a tad above

freezing. They sat near the window, a drafty spot, but they wanted the afternoon sunshine.

Tiny and Burton treated themselves to broiled scallops with mashed potatoes and leek soup, while Stacy, prone to big chuckles and long-winded stories, devoured a Monte Cristo sandwich with hand-cut fries and told the waiter to keep the Bloody Marys coming. She explained to the boys she didn't care about her figure and how little work she'd get done that day. She'd had it, she said, with efficiency and restraint. Tiny and Burton were eager familiar companions and as a threesome they found it easy to erase the hours that bridged afternoon into evening.

Stacy's chatter as she got increasingly drunk and smoked her Benson and Hedges took Burton's mind off varying states of insecurity about his work, his age, his growing obsession with an increasingly blurry past. He faded in and out of her racy stories glad that, unlike Tiny who'd slept with Stacy more than once, he'd never been the sort to even consider adultery. He sipped a Schlitz draft in a short glass. Tiny sipped a Rob Roy. Stacy got into details she had on the Raymond Vinovich murder. "This is our man."

"How do you figure?" asked Burton. "In what way?"

"I covered that murder. If I want the past, I go back to it," said Stacy. "Look, you know how sometimes you believe you've experienced an event, long ago, but then you try to remember it and you can't. You go back to the place, maybe it's a neighborhood here in the city and it's gone, the whole neighborhood, everything. As if it never happened."

"I know what you mean," said Tiny. "What's that got to do with our case?"

"Everything," said Stacy. "It's connected."

"I think I get it," said Burton. "Vinovich had a few years on Zion and he'd already burned in hell with guilt regarding his family and community standing as a closet case and

maybe he decided he'd gone too far down that blind alley with his secret life."

"His real nature," said Stacy. "So he decided if he was to burn, then he'd do it like he was breathing in and out."

"Right," said Tiny. "In and out. But I still don't understand."

"Zion killed Vinovich," said Burton. "It was a ruse. He paid Malachi to pay Armen to drive him to the Howard Johnson's. The two were supposed to meet there. A lover's tryst. A usual thing. The only difference was that Raymond wasn't expecting to get shot."

"But why would Leonard do that?" asked Tiny.

"Because they were done," said Stacy. She looked at Burton. "Go on. I totally follow."

"Just a matter of time," said Burton. "All they'd worked for would go down the drain. That part of the city has been changing for a long time now. The Jewish community is growing. It's close-knit. Word travels fast. The family names, in both cases, would be disgraced."

"So, Zion took matters into his own hands?" asked Tiny.

"No," said Burton. "They agreed to it. And I think Zion dreamed it up. I met with Malachi at the bank. He was able to show me transfers of funds into his uncle's account. From Vinovich. The boy Armen, that whole situation, it was a favor. Unfortunately, they treated the colored boys as collateral damage. Zion was using them to earn extra money. The important thing was that Armen got paid and got off because Vinovich owed money to the Gregorian Brothers. How much, I can't say. A lot of green stamps and dinners at The Continental. Blackmail money that Raymond Vinovich was supposed to pay the Gregorians or else they'd tell the whole story."

"Zion knew all this, arranged it all, too?"

"That's right," said Stacy. She was glowing.

“But, Tiny, there’s more,” said Burton. “I read Zion’s journals. Pored through them. And no, Stacy, you can’t have them for your story. He describes Vinovich as a gold digger. Vinovich had children and his wife, but he’d been married once before and still had unresolved issues with that first wife from over fifteen years ago. She knew he was in the closet and she was blackmailing him, too.”

“Vinovich owed everybody money,” said Tiny.

“And so did Zion, I bet,” said Stacy. “Oh, what a doozy for *The Standard*.”

“There’s a line in the journal that explains it,” said Burton. “Zion wrote ‘If only for myself. It’s always about someone else. All this money.’ Zion at least could assess where he’d been and where he was going. Make sense of it. He was at the end with Vinovich. Sick of him. True, they were lovers, but Vinovich was threatening to tell Zion’s wife and, so to keep him quiet, Zion paid him blackmail money. This helped Vinovich keep making blackmail payments to his first wife. All very underhanded, tit for tat and secret.”

“How on earth did you find this out?” asked Stacy.

“It’s all in the journals. I just had to read between the lines. And then I had to stop reading. Malachi helped too. You were right, Tiny. A Boy Scout. When we were at the downtown apartment, I thought it too spic and span, that there had to be another meeting place.”

“Again, in the journals?” asked Stacy.

“Righto. A bar. The Clepsydra Lounge on Raven Street. At the bus station,” said Burton.

“I know that bunghole,” said Tiny.

“Sure, you do. But Malachi didn’t. And he didn’t know his uncle held practically all his client meetings there at odd hours. That’s where he met Vinovich sometimes, too. I didn’t bother you about it, Tiny, because it was a hunch, but when I stopped by there and talked to the

bartender and some regulars, it was confirmed for me. The place was Zion's hideout."

"Not like our club," said Tiny.

"Naturally, he used The Danube to be social. Put up a good front. But you have to admit it was strange he never hired a babysitter or brought his wife. The difference with The Clepsydra was that he'd have his meetings there during the daytime at off hours when it was empty. There's a back room there that he used. And his journals suggest his obsession wasn't with the past so much as it was about him learning how to see. He liked this thought and he goes back to it lots of times in his journal, one agonizing description at a time."

"Spoken like a poet," said Tiny. He grinned, impressed, at Burton. "What would I do without you, partner?"

Stacy had to laugh. "Solve a lot fewer cases."

Burton said, "At the age of fifty-five, Zion was coming to realize he'd never really thought about anything in his life, so he decided to compensate by taking action. He orchestrated the murder of his lover and then he murdered himself. He never went to the car. He walked to the river, fast as possible, from our back entrance. Shot himself along the shore and fell in. Consider how FPD found the body. Afloat. Gunshot wound in the chest. Nobody took pains to make sure it sank to the bottom. The way I see it, if anything, it was a form of release for Zion. He'd had enough of the charade."

"Physician, heal thyself," said Stacy. "He was tormented by love."

"It's all in the journals. Leonard left clues. He wanted us to catch on."

"Hopeless," said Tiny. "Must be tough being so scarlet."

"I wouldn't know," added Burton. "I liked the man. I'm not here to judge."

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I wrote Scarlet Leonard to have fun, to bring pleasure to anyone who might read it, to create the kind of story I like to read and a world I had never lived in and would have to imagine entirely. There's an obvious nod here to Hawthorne and the themes in his famous novel that I and many others had to read in school. I tried to not get too heavy-handed while delving into the racism and anti-Semitism that were part of the era in which my story takes place. One primary influence was the viewing of either photographs of mid-century-modern furniture, or finding some to look at during visits to antique fairs and yard sales. Lastly, I'm a fan of Cornell Woolrich and James M. Cain, among others of that ilk.*

**BIO:** *John Michael Flynn was the 2017 Writer in Residence at Carl Sandburg's home, Connemara, in North Carolina. He's published three collections of short stories, his most recent Off To The Next Wherever from Fomite Books ([www.fomitepress.com](http://www.fomitepress.com)). He teaches at TED University in Ankara, Turkey. Visit him at [www.basilrosa.com](http://www.basilrosa.com).*