

HERB CAEN



AS YOU TRIVIA freaks know, Sam Spade, in Dashiell Hammett's *"The Maltese Falcon,"* lunched often at John's Grill on Ellis. Then why is it an item that the new owner of the Grill, having purchased it from Mike Cawley, is Gus Konstantinides? Right! Because in the book, The Fat Man talks about "a Greek dealer, Charilaos Konstantinides, who found the bird" – the falcon – "in an obscure shop in Paris"... The two Konstantinides are not related, so far as is known.

Now that I have your attention, at last, Falcon Freak Robert Pettier challenges trivia players to repeat the last line from the Bogart-Lorre-Greenstreet film. The usual answer is "The stuff that dreams are made of," uttered by Spade as Brigid O'Shaughnessy is led off to jail, but right after that, as the film fades, Detective Sergeant Polhaus, played by Ward Bond, says "huh?"...All of you who said "Huh?" in the first place, head of the class.

Stalking Sam Spade

By FRITZ LEIBER

London has its Sherlock Holmes, permanently installed at 221 B Baker Street. Paris has Maigret; New York, Nero Wolfe; Los Angeles, Philip Marlowe.

San Francisco's immortal detective is Sam Spade, forever in residence at his comfortable old apartment of Geary and Hyde and his dingy office at Sutter and Montgomery. Sometimes he hoofed the ten blocks between the two, sometimes he called a cab; but most often he took the Geary streetcar.

It is the late 1920s, forty years before Geary became one-way; the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges hadn't been built.

Through fog or shine, most often by night, Spade walks the hilly streets, watchful and ready, working for himself and his client, abiding by the game's tough rules.

Spade's chief spell of detecting is narrated in *The Maltese Falcon*, which is perhaps the greatest of Dashiell Hammett's three major mystery novels. The other two are "Red Harvest" and "The Glass Key."

How do we picture Spade as he swings aboard the Geary car?

He has a hooked nose and a face with lots of sardonic "V's." "He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan." He wears "a loose tweed overcoat and under everything else black garters," and "a thin white union-suit" against the chilly fog.

It was a different San Francisco then, but the streets remain the same, and a surprising number of the landmarks mentioned in the book are still around today.

Geary Street between Hyde and Market is the spine of *The Maltese Falcon*. Most of the action was on or near it, though once Spade uses the streetcar on Sutter.

The effeminate Joel Cairo goes to a show at the Geary Theater, he and Spade take a look at Marquard's café at Geary and Mason; and Cairo is staying at the Hotel Belvedere – possibly Hammett's name for the Bellevue.

Most of the hotels have invented names but are on or near Geary.

Casper Gutman and Wilmer Cook are staying at the Alexandria on Geary. Floyd Thursby rooms at a "joint" on Geary near Leavenworth.

And the beautiful and treacherous Brigid O'Shaughnessy is at the St. Mark. Here the inference is obvious – Hammett had in mind either the St. Francis or the Mark Hopkins. Maybe the latter, because Brigid later moves to the Coronet apartments on California.

No question but one of the hotels is real – the Palace near the end of Geary. It must be today's Sheraton-Palace. Spade has lunch there alone, and later a solitary breakfast after having been fed knockout drops and kicked in the head.

Most of the other restaurants in the book are real, too. like John's Grill, where Spade ate chops, a baked potato, and sliced tomatoes before taking a hired car down to Burlingame on a false scent.

Opened in 1908, John's Grill is still there today at 63 Ellis, wood-paneled, walled with framed sketches of past customers and sepia photographs of old San Francisco, and dispensing good food.

Then there's Tait's, the one on Ellis Street. There were several Tait's restaurants in San Francisco in the 1920's, including one at the beach. And there's the Sates Hot Brau, where Spade and Detective-Sergeant Tom Polhaus ate pickled pig's feet at one of Big John's tables. The Pacific Building at 821 Market, where it was located, still stands.

But the all-night drugstore at Bush and Taylor, where Spade phoned his secretary Effie Perine, has gone the way of most all-night drugstores.

South of Market, the remedial Loan Association, where Spade advised Brigid to hock her jewelry, is still at Mission and Mint.

And at 85 Fifth is the Pickwick Hotel. It was at the parcel room of the Pickwick Stage terminal (long gone) that Spade checked the package with the fabulously valuable jeweled falcon in it, after getting it from the dying Captain Jacobi.

Carrying the falcon, "Spade went partly by way of an alley and a narrow street, from his office to Kearny and Post Streets, where he hailed a passing taxicab. The taxicab carried him to the Pickwick Stage terminal in Fifth Street."

The alley is Lick Court and the narrow court is Ver Mehr – still there today, though now you have to walk through a garage to get from the one to the other.

Spade's addresses aren't given straight out of the book, but they can be deduced.

"Spade left the (Geary) car at Hyde Street and went up to the apartment...he went out again, walked up to Sutter Street, and boarded a westbound car."

That first "up" almost certainly means up in an elevator, or by stairs. So, Geary and Hyde – the apartment where Spade sparred with Detective Polhaus and Lieutenant Dundy, held at bay for a night the Fat Man, Cairo, and the gunpunk, dickered with them about the falcon and finally found it was a fake; the apartment where he took Brigid to bed and turned her over to the police; where he first heard the news of his partner Miles Archer's chilly death in the fog.

Which brings us up to the last locale, the one most often discussed, the place where Archer got his and started *The Maltese Falcon* moving; the blind end of Burritt Street just west of the overpass where Bush Street roofs Stockton.

You can still rest your hands on the coping and look down into Stockton and see what Spade saw:

"An automobile popped out of the tunnel beneath him with a roaring whish, as if it had been blown out, and ran away."

And then you can walk west a few steps to where the sign says "Burritt Street" and walk down that alley to its blind end.

The only thing that's gone since Hammett's day is the gap between two store fronts on Stockton, which had a white railing at the top and at the bottom a billboard, against which Archer's body lodged after rolling down the little dirt hill. It was the gap now occupied by the newer north end of the McAlpin Apartments.

At any rate, that was and still is the most famous spot in *The Falcon*. A few years ago some *Falcon* fans tried to get permission to put a brass plaque in Burritt reading "Here Brigid O'Shaughnessy shot Miles Archer." The permission didn't come through, but it's still a nice idea.

Hammett himself lived in San Francisco in the 1920s and did most of his important writing here. And at first he also worked as a detective for Pinkerton's, which was then at 870 Market, in the Flood Building.

And it was in San Francisco that Hammett enjoyed (to quote his thirty-year friend Lillian Hellman) the life that was "nice and free and 1920s bohemian: the girl on Pine Street and the other on Grant Street, and good San Francisco food in cheap restaurants, and dago red wine." (Prohibition, of course).

And it's here that Sam Spade, troubled by his relationships with Effie and Brigid and Iva Archer and other mysterious girls, and sniffing for crime and adventure and profit and danger, roams the hilly streets that aren't graced by the fog so often these days.