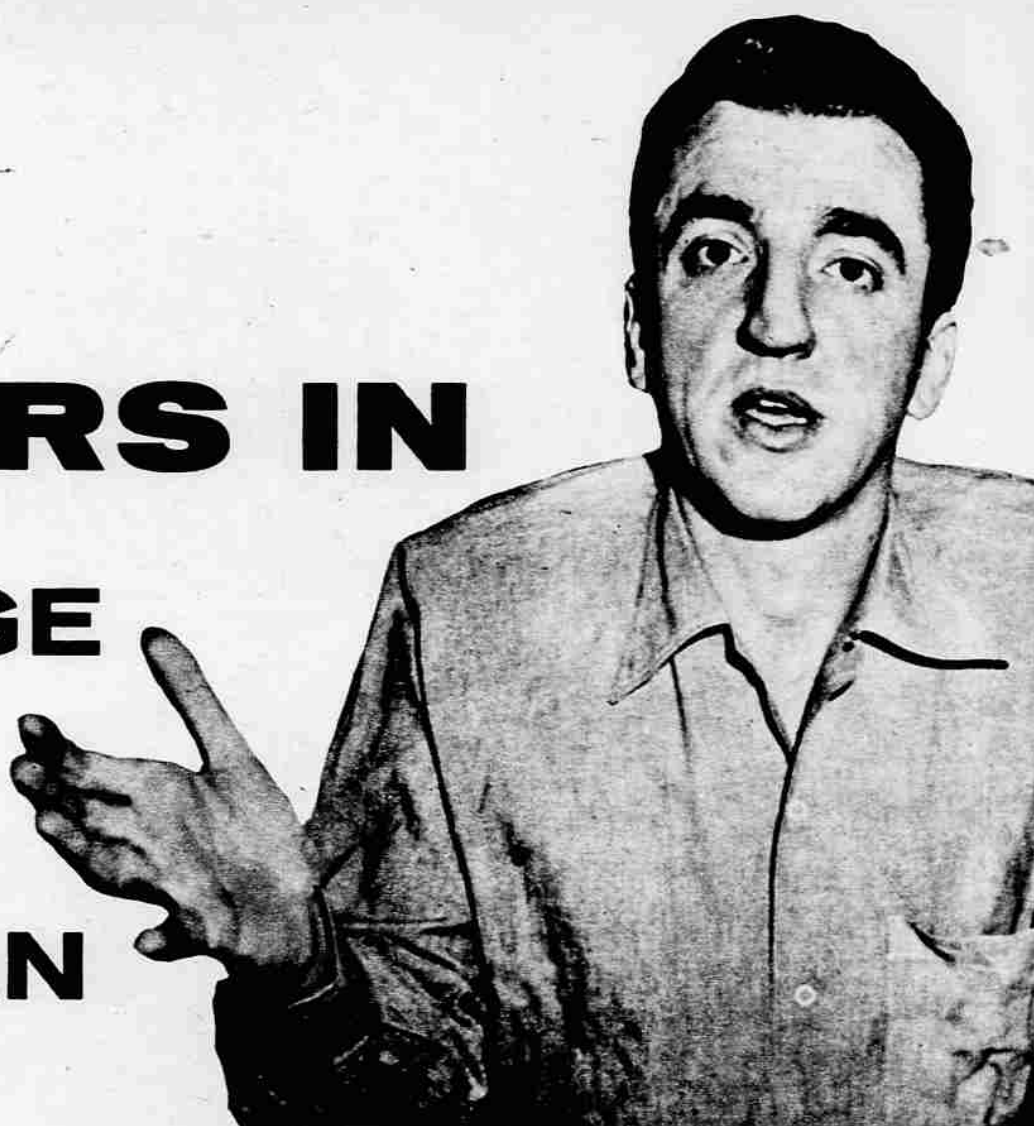


11 YEARS IN THE STRANGE CASE OF CARYL CHESSMAN

BY EVAN McLEOD WYLIE



"Be on the lookout for a male . . . swarthy complexion . . . possibly Italian . . . five-feet-four to five-ten . . . 150-170 pounds . . . thin to medium build . . . dark brown hair . . . crooked teeth . . . narrow nose with slight hump on the bridge of nose . . . armed with .45 automatic . . . uses small pen-type flashlight . . . believed driving '47 club coupé . . . a red spotlight has been seen on side of car..."

IT WAS A FEW MINUTES before 8 p.m. Jan. 23, 1947, a chilly, fog-shrouded night in Los Angeles, Calif. For weeks, a "Red Light Bandit," impersonating a policeman in a car with a flashing red spotlight, had been terrorizing lovers-lane couples parked on the dark winding canyon roads that overlook Pasadena's famed Rose Bowl and the glittering lights of Hollywood.

Sometimes, after he had examined the couples' wallets, he flourished a .45 automatic, pocketed their money, and departed. Other times he affixed a mask over his face, forced the girl to accompany him in his car, and brutally assaulted her. Only the night before, he had held a terrified 17-year-old girl captive for three hours. Now, as police cars combed the canyons and hills above Hollywood, their radios blared forth the bandit's description.

In Car 35, nosing slowly through the congested streets of downtown Hollywood, police officers James Reardon and Robert May suddenly spotted a Ford coupé matching the description of the bandit's car and signaled it to pull over. Instead, the Ford was off like a shot. As Reardon tramped hard on the accelerator, May, fumbling for his gun, flicked a dashboard button and flashed a radio message: "We are in pursuit of a Ford '47 coupé—heading south on Vermont Avenue at very high speed." Within a few moments, a dozen police cars converged on Vermont Avenue to cut off the coupé.

Zigzagging wildly through heavy traffic at 80 miles per hour, bullets from May's gun smashing into its rear window, the Ford charged recklessly

through one road block and was about to evade another with a tire-screaming U turn when a broadside ram from Reardon brought it to a halt. Their prisoner was a 27-year-old man named Caryl Chessman.

By the next morning, Hollywood police had accumulated enough evidence to link Chessman directly to the crimes of the Red Light Bandit. The Ford coupé had been stolen in Pasadena one month before—about the same time that the Red Light Bandit had begun to prey on the lovers-lane couples. In its glove compartment was found a pen-type flashlight. On the ground near the car was a .45 automatic. Except for his height (six feet) and lack of an Italian accent, Chessman fitted the description of the bandit. Many of the victims identified him.

WITHIN 48 HOURS, police announced that they had obtained Chessman's oral confession and that the case was solved. But, brought to trial a few weeks later, Chessman denied emphatically that he was the Red Light Bandit. He insisted he was the victim of coincidence, mistaken identity, and a police frame-up, that detectives had tricked and beaten him into confessing the crimes.

Cocky and self-confident, he spurned the offer of a court-appointed attorney and undertook to defend himself. After hearing the evidence and the witnesses against him, however, a jury of 11 women and one man found Chessman guilty of robbery and kidnaping and invoked California's seldom-used "Little Lindbergh" kidnaping law to fix the penalty of death in San Quentin's gas chamber.

On July 3, 1948, Caryl Chessman was taken to San Quentin and placed in Cell 2455 on death row. No one had evinced the slightest interest or sympathy in his case. His execution appeared inevitable and imminent. The case, which had rated only a few paragraphs in the newspapers, appeared closed.

But one of Chessman's favorite sayings is, "When it gets too tough for everyone else, it's just right

for me." Filing a steady stream of legal appeals, writs, briefs, and petitions, he dodged and twisted his way through the courts. Each time the net seemed drawn tightly about him, he found a legal loophole in it to delay his execution.

At first Chessman framed his writs and petitions in longhand on yellow pads. Later, permitted a typewriter, he turned an empty cell on death row into a law office. Working with tremendous energy and a single-minded concentration, he spent 18 hours a day fighting his case.

Instead of being put to death that summer of 1948, Chessman has remained alive in Cell 2455 while the U.S. fought the Korean War, went to the polls three times to elect a President, and advanced into the Space Age. He has seen nearly 100 other condemned men and one woman marched or carried to the green gas chamber on the floor below, watched others disintegrate into babbling insanity by the nightmarish despair of death row.

The judge who sentenced him to death is dead. Witnesses who testified against him have scattered. One is confined to a mental institution. The law under which he was sentenced to death has been changed to eliminate the death penalty. All prisoners affected by it have been awarded clemency save Chessman who, still alive 12 years later, has become the world's most famous doomed convict.

When not busy with his fiery legal petitions, Chessman began to write. Soon he was vividly chronicling the horrors of death row and arguing as brilliantly against the shortcomings of the prison system and capital punishment as any expert penologist. His autobiography, "Cell 2455, Death Row," became a best seller and has been published in 14 languages. Despite a decree by the California prison director that he could write no more, he has gone to extreme lengths to complete two more books, one written completely on carbon paper, and smuggle them out of San Quentin.

Over the years, Chessman's fantastic struggle