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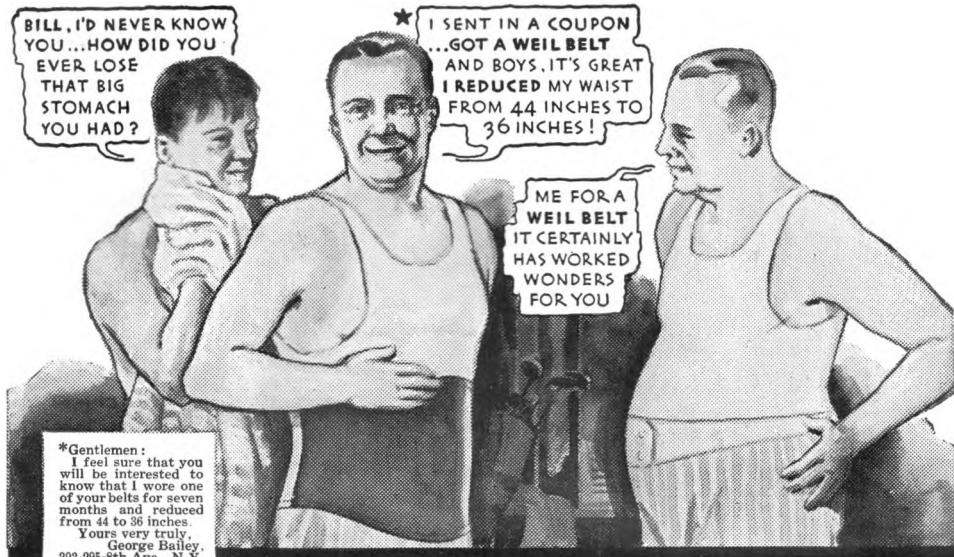
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MURDER
ON THE
SOUND STAGE

Proving Justice is Blonde
in Hollywood
by

Robert Leslie Bellem



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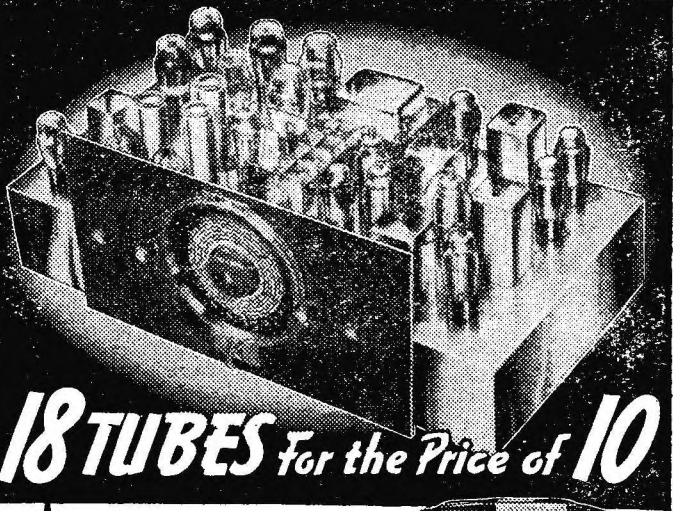
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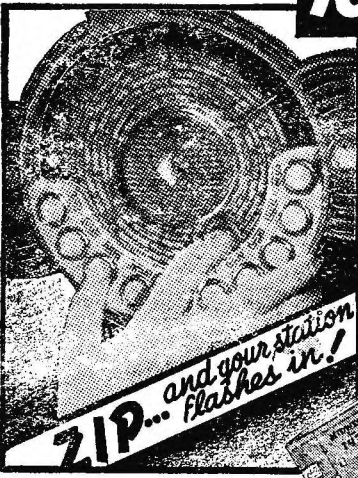
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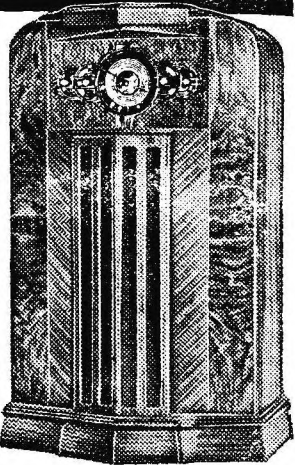
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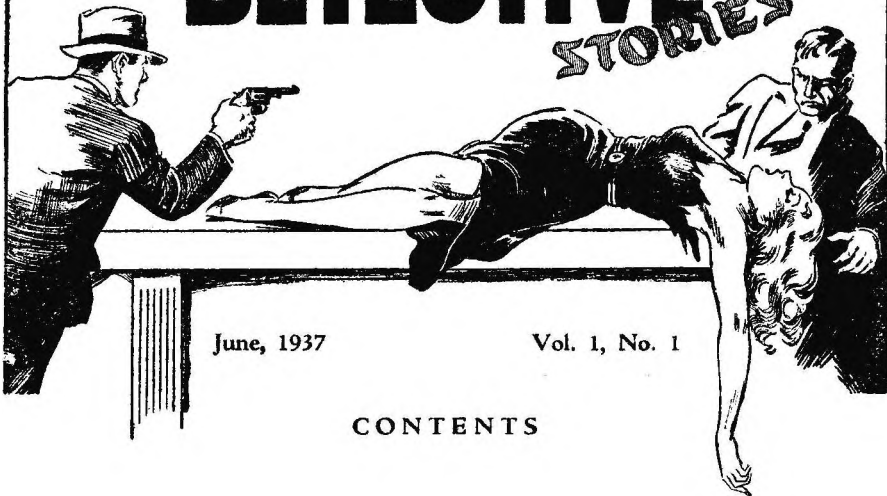
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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES



June, 1937

Vol. 1, No. 1

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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES is published monthly by Trojan Publishing Corp., 2242 Grove Street, Chicago, Ill. Editorial and Executive offices at 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York, N. Y. Entry as second-class matter applied for at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill. Subscription: Yearly, \$1.50; single copies 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright 1937 by Trojan Publishing Corp.

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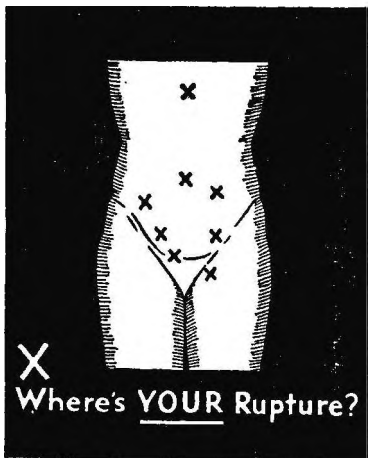
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By **ROBERT
LESLIE
BELLEM**



When she yelled, Frizzati came in with his hands high. "Listen, copper—for Gawd's sake—!"

MURDER on the Sound Stage

CHAPTER I.

The Lady Comes Clean

I WALKED INTO Jeffery Fenwick's unlighted dressing-bungalow on the Altamount lot, wondering why he had sent for me. It was around eight o'clock at night. I fumbled for a wall-switch.

From the darkness behind me, a hysterical feminine voice shrielled: "Start praying, Mr. Fenwick! I'm going to

kill you for what you did to my sister!"

It startled the living hell out of me. I wasn't expecting to find anybody in that bungalow. Jeffery Fenwick himself, the Altamount star, was over on Sound Stage "A." They were shooting some retakes on his latest picture. A little while before, he had phoned me at my apartment, said he wanted to see me about something damned important. He had asked me to come to the studio, wait for him in his dressing-

quarters until he was through doing his stuff before the cameras.

Now some goofy frill was getting ready to cool me off, thinking I was Fenwick!

She was rasping: "I'm going to shoot you and say you attacked me! I'll tell the police you tore my dress off, and I had to kill you in self-defense!"

I heard the click of a roscoe's hammer on the other side of the room. I said: "What the hell!" and dived sideways, smacked the floor with my smeller. Then I yelled: "Hold everything, you fool! I'm not Fenwick—my name's Dan Turner!"

As I spoke, a light came on. I heard a gasping: "Oh-h-h—my God! It's true! You're not—"

I scrambled to my pins. I blinked.

There was a blonde cutie standing over me. Her costume was what you might call informal. She was the niftiest wren I ever put the focus on.

She had torn her own dress down the front, half way to her waist. It hung in tatters from her bare white shoulders. What it revealed of her figure was gorgeous. I've seen plenty of undraped women, but this one had me hanging on the ropes! Through a ripped place in her skirt, I caught a quick gander at ivory skin, rosetted garters.

Her eyes were wide, staring. She was holding a tiny, pearl-handled gat in her mitt. It wavered uncertainly. Her trigger-finger looked itchy.

I leaped at her.

With my left, I twisted the little roscoe out of her hand. Then I splatted my right palm full across her cheek, knocked her staggering. I grabbed her, crushed her in my arms.

She squirmed, struggled, wailed. I could feel the warmth of her against

my chest. My blood-pressure went up a notch. I tripped her. She went sprawling to the floor. I smashed her down with my two hundred pounds of weight.

I said: "Okay, baby. It's the bastille for you!" I flashed my tin in front of her map.

She choked, went pale. "You—you are a policeman—?"

"Private dick," I clipped back. "And I'm going to toss your pretty little ears into the calaboose for safe-keeping. So you were going to bump Jeffery Fenwick, were you?"

She stared at me defiantly. "Yes!"
"What for?"

"Because he deserves to die—the rat! I'll get him if it takes me a lifetime!"

I said: "Is that nice, baby? Murder's a hanging rap in sunny California. Or didn't you know that?"

SHE wriggled then, tried to get loose. I got a definite slap out of her struggles, she being held in the hold I held her in! She was in her early twenties, at a guess. And she was a knockout.

"Let me go!" she moaned.

I said: "Not yet, sweetness. I want to have a little conference with you. How-come you're gunning for Jeffery Fenwick? What's the large idea?"

"He k-killed my sister!" she whimpered. All of a sudden her eyes puddled up. Her lower lip got tremulous.

I said: "Fenwick killed your sister?"
Are you trying to tell me he's a murderer?"

"He's worse than a murderer!" she grated. "He p-promised to marry her, five years ago. Back in Trenton. He was a taxi-driver, in those days. My sister loved him. She loved him . . ."

too much! Then he got tired and walked out on her."

I caught wise. "Then what happened?"

"She t-took poison before the baby was born."

I thought that over. I wasn't particularly surprised. It sounded like something the Fenwick ham might have done. I'd never liked him much, even though he was now one of the biggest stars on the screen. In two pix, he had attained top billing, top salary. He was a dark, Latin-looking bozo; and there was something about him that women fell for.

He never talked of his past, even for publicity purposes. Nobody seemed to know where he came from or what he had been before he hit Hollywood. He had been with Altamount Pictures less than a year. In that short space of time, he'd not only become a star, but he'd also married Asta Valenska, the nifty Russian hotsy-totsy who played opposite him. Now it looked as if his past had caught up with him.

I eased up on the blonde cutie. I said: "Now listen to me, sweetness. Maybe Fenwick did everything you claim. If he did, I don't blame you for hating his guts. But murder isn't the answer. You're just inviting a hemp necklace for your pretty throat."

Her eyes blazed deep blue fire. "Five long years I've searched for him! I swore I'd send a bullet through his heart for what he did to my sister. And that's what I'm going to do—some day, somehow! I saw him in a picture a couple of months ago. I recognized him, even though he'd changed his name. So I came to Hollywood to kill him—and nobody's going to stop me!"

I said: "That's what you think, kiddo.

But maybe a year in the jug will change your mind. I'm placing you under arrest for attempted assault with a deadly weapon. Come on—get going."

I stood up, pulled her to her feet. She nestled close. I know lots about women, but she was the cuddliest little honey I ever met!"

Of course I hated to think of her behind iron bars. She seemed too young, too wholesome and sweet. But maybe a short stretch would cool her down a little; knock some of the hate out of her heart. It would be better than a hanging rap, I figured.

She looked up at me. "You—you're taking me to j-jail?"

I nodded, trying to make my expression hard.

She jerked her arms free. Then she wrapped them around my neck; pulled my head downward. Her lips parted over mine.

I've been kissed by experts in my day. But I got a new kind of thump out of this one. There aren't many innocent lips in Hollywood; yet that's the way the blonde wren's kiss seemed to me. Innocent—and damned thrilling for that very reason. It was like exploring territory that's never been explored before.

I can't explain it after all, a kiss is a kiss. But there's apparently more to a kiss than just kissing. I could feel her body quivering against me. Her breath was like liquid fire. "I—I don't want to be arrested!" she whispered pleadingly. "Don't s-send me to jail!"

I almost went haywire. After all, I'm human. And she was damned lovely. I fell into a clinch, ran my fingers through her yellow hair. I started to bury my kisser against the hollow of her throat. I was beginning

to lose control. I had an awful yen for that dame . . .

THEN I got a grip on myself. I'd be a heel to take advantage of her predicament. She was in a jam; and she was trying to bribe me the only way she could. I didn't blame her a damned bit. But I just couldn't see myself getting low enough to go through with such a deal.

I let her loose and she just stood there, her eyes big, her hand to her mouth. "Come on, sweetness." I said quietly. "Pull yourself together."

She swayed on her feet scared again. "You—you're g-going to arrest me, after all?" It was almost a sob.

I shook my head. I said, "I'm going to turn you loose—if you'll promise me to scam out of town and let Jeffery Fenwick alone. How about it? Is it a bargain?"

Two big tears skidded down her cheeks. "I—I—"

"Make up your mind," I said. "Promise me—or go to the hoosegow." Then I grabbed her, shook her until every delicious curve of her body trembled. "Use your noggin, baby. You're too young and pretty to hang. You say your sister is dead. Okay—killing Fenwick won't bring her back to life. Run on back home to Trenton and forget about him. It's just one of those things."

She looked at me. "I—I guess you're right," she whispered. There was a catch in her throat. "You—you'll let me go if I give you my word I won't do anything . . . foolish? You w-won't say anything about what just happened?"

I said: "Honor bright, kiddo."

She threw her arms around my neck

and she kissed me again. It was different, this time. No emotion—just gratitude. I drew a hell of a large wallop out of it just the same. "You're sweet!" she said.

Then she went over to a corner, picked up a coat. She slid into it; buttoned it to cover her torn dress.

She went out.

I sat down, set fire to a gasper. Now that I was alone, my think-tank began working. It looked to me as if Jeffery Fenwick must have known he was in danger. That's why he had sent for me, most likely.

In fact, I remembered what he had said to me over the phone: "Mr. Turner, I need a good private detective. I'm desperate. You were recommended to me. Can you see me tonight, at the Altamount lot? There's danger involved, but I'll pay you whatever fee you ask—"

There in his dressing-bungalow, I now nodded to myself. He had probably known that the blonde wren was on his trail. He was scared of what she might do to him. Besides, he most likely wanted to find some way of keeping her quiet about his past. A scandal would play hell with his movie career.

He was a louse; no doubt of it. Any man who gets a girl to fall for him like he had and then runs out on her is worse than a louse. I made up my mind to have nothing to do with him. But hell—he wouldn't need my services now. He was out of danger. I had talked the blonde cutie out of her murder-notions; persuaded her to go back east. I had even taken her roscoe away from her—.

I felt in my coat pocket, where I had slipped her gat. Then I leaped to my pins. I said: "What the hell—!"

The gun was gone!

All of a sudden I realized what had

happened. The yellow-haired chicken had made a sucker out of me. That last kiss she gave me—that hadn't been gratitude as I had thought. It was a trick. While her lips were against mine, she must have picked my pocket; got her roscoe back!

That spelled trouble. Bad trouble. I felt it in my bones. She wouldn't have wanted her gat back—unless she was still figuring to plug Fenwick!

I said; "Damn it to hell!" and went pelting out of that dressing-bungalow. I'd have to warn Fenwick, much as I despised him. I tore across the lot, reached Sound Stage "A" where he was working—.

Just as I gained the big, soundproof door of the looming stage building, it opened. The overhead red light winked out. The green came on. Then, from inside, there came the damndest scream I ever listened to.

CHAPTER II.

Death in a Fog



TRASPED against my eardrums like a file biting through tempered steel. It was shrill, high-pitched, crazy. It made my blood run cold; brought goose-pimples to my skin the size of cantaloupes.

I've heard plenty of female shrieks in my day, drunken and otherwise. But this had a shattering hysteria that put the chill down my back. There was terror in it; and a touch of madness, too.

It ended in a choked gurgle.

I snapped out of my trance, went smashing into the building. I almost did a ground loop over a snake of electric cable. I recovered myself, sprinted toward a vast and gloomy set at the far end of the place.

For a minute or two I couldn't see anything. In spite of the lights, the stage was choked with a thick grey pall. It was like a cloud of drifting smoke. It eddied to my nostrils; smelled and tasted like essence of wintergreen.

Then I understood what it was. Fake fog—studio mist. To make it, they spray clear oil out of powerful nebulizer-nozzles. It drifts and settles just like real fog. To make it less unpleasant for the people on the set, they add concentrated wintergreen flavoring to the oil before they vaporize it.

As I looked forward, I saw a group of grips and juicers operating a queer-looking gadget. It was an electric motor attached to a suction-pump. On the other end of the pump there was a length of thick canvas tubing, like an oversize vacuum-cleaner. In fact, that's what it was: a smoke-eater. The same kind of fume-dispersing equipment that metropolitan fire-departments use.

With the motor whining, the grips carried the canvas tube from one spot to another. It sucked up the fog-mist. In less than three minutes the set was fairly clear. I could see everything, everybody.

The set showed the exterior of a big, ghostly looking, abandoned house. Two movable camera-cranes stood before the set, for angle-shots. A third blimp-encased camera rode on a portable dolly for walking sequences. A fourth was stationary. A trio of microphones dangled from overhead booms.

The first guy I tabbed was Foster Kinkaid, the production's director. He was a friend of mine. He was scrambling down from his chair on one of the two camera-cranes.

I collared him as he reached the floor. "What the hell's up?" I barked.

He said: "Turner! My God—how did you get here?"

"Jeffery Fenwick sent for me," I told him. "He's in danger of some sort."

Kinkaid said: "Danger, hell! *He's dead!* Somebody just shot him!"

I felt as if a mule had kicked me square in the teeth. "Fenwick—croaked—?" I panted.

Kinkaid grabbed me by the arm, jerked me onto the set. My thoughts were all scrambled to hellangone. So the blonde baby had beaten me to the sound stage! She had carried out her threat! She had put a slug through Jeffery Fenwick!

I SPOTTED a slim, sinuous brunette crouched over an outsprawled form. Her black dress clung to her snaky figure like a coat of enamel. She had more curves than a scenic railway. I recognized her. She was Asta Valenska, the Russian star. She was leaning over the corpse of her murdered husband, Jeffery Fenwick.

Fenwick himself was stretched out on his back. He still looked handsome, even in death. He'd had what it takes to drive dames dippy. I'll say that much for him. But his Casanova days were over, now. You can't make love with a bullet through your skull and your brains oozing out over your left ear.

Foster Kinkaid groaned: "It's awful! We were shooting the last scene of the new Fenwick-Valenska pic. Fog stuff. There was to be gun-play. At the correct moment, a shot was fired. Then Asta—Miss Valenska—screamed."

I said: "Yeah. I heard her."

Kinkaid said: "But her scream wasn't in the script. In the play, she was supposed to be Fenwick's enemy. She wanted him killed; set a trap for him in the fog. She had a gunman with her. He was supposed to kill Fenwick. But

when Miss Valenska yelled, I knew something was haywire. She said Fenwick was really dead. I stopped the cameras. Then you showed up—"

I said: "Okay. That brings it up to now. Hop to the nearest phone. Call the cops. Get my friend Lieutenant Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad if you can. Tell him what happened. Tell him to flag his pants out here!"

Kinkaid stumbled away. I strode forward, lifted the Valenska frail in my arms.

She shrieked, clawed at my pan. "Let me alone! Let me go! Jeff isn't dead! He can't be dead! My kisses will bring him back—"

She was stark raving nuts. I slapped her across the puss; stung her as hard as I could. She blinked, gasped. Sanity returned to her dark eyes. "You—you—how dare you—!"

I said: "Take it easy, Miss Valenska. I'm Dan Turner, private snoop. I want to help you."

"Oh-h . . .! You're Dan Turner? Thank God, you're here! Jeff wanted you to protect him . . . Now I want you to find his murderer—"

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a movement. A tough-looking gazabo was edging off the set. He was sidling toward a fire-exit nearby. His hat was pulled low over his eyes. He had a three-day growth of whiskers on his mug. His coat collar was turned up. He had an automatic in his right fist.

He saw me looking at him. He broke into a run.

I turned Asta Valenska loose. She sagged back over Fenwick's body. I pivoted, plunged after the hard-looking lug.

He dropped his gat, added speed. A cameraman named Harry Treller got in

"I didn't kill him, Mr. Turner
—I didn't. . . ! You've got to
believe me, because you're the
only one who can help me!"



his way. He slugged Treller a paste in the mouth, knocked him down. I tripped over the cameraman's gams, lost my balance.

Everybody else on the set seemed too paralyzed to do anything. By the time I got untangled and up on my pins again, the tough-faced gazabo had reached the fire-door. He leaped out into the night. The darkness ate him.

I pounded out after him. Something bashed down on my cranium. I saw a million red-and-blue Neon lights. Then I didn't see anything at all. I was out cold.

CHAPTER III.

Look for the Women



I MUST have been all of ten minutes before I came to. Then I stood up.

I was groggy as hell. My knees were like jello. There was a lump on the back of my noggin the size of an army blimp. I had a headache built for an elephant.

But I didn't mind the pain. I was almost glad for it. A hell of a big load had been lifted off my mind.

I'd been biffed by the tough-faced mug. Why? There could be just one answer. He had killed Jeffery Fenwick, there on the set. It had to be that way. Otherwise, why had he lammed?

Okay. If he was the killer, that would leave the little blonde cutie from Trenton out of the mess entirely. It would put her in the clear. Deep inside me, I wanted her to be in the clear. I hated to think of her as a murderer. I wanted to believe that she'd kept her promise to me; that she'd given up her idea of bumping Fenwick.

By that time, there wasn't any use looking for the bird who had conked me. He'd had plenty of time to make his lam. I fumbled my way back inside the sound stage building; walked over on the set.

I saw a lot of uniformed coppers. Then I spotted my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide detail. He had a medical examiner with him. They must have shown up while I was unconscious outside. The sawbones had already completed his examination of Jeffery Fenwick's corpse. Two bulls were carrying the body out on a stretcher.

Harry Treller, the cameraman, was rubbing his bruised jaw. He said: "Sorry I tripped you, Turner. That guy packed one hell of a wallop."

I said: "You're telling me?" and felt the swelling on the back of my skull. Then I asked: "Who was he, Harry?"

"His name's Louie Frizzati. Bit-player. He was the thug that was supposed to shoot Fenwick—in the picture."

That told me plenty. I sprinted over to where Dave Donaldson was talking with Asta Valenska and Foster Kin-kaid, the director.

Dave turned to me. "Where the hell have you been, Turner? I've questioned everybody but you. What—?"

I said: "I've been listening to the birdies. The murderer swatted me goofy."

"The murderer? You mean Frizzati, the bit-player?"

I said: "Yeah. The way I figure, he must have had some grudge against Fenwick. So he got himself cast as Fenwick's killer in the picture. Then he drilled him with a real slug."

The Valenska wren butted in. Her voice was harsh, vengeful. "No! You are wrong, Mr. Turner! Frizzati didn't

do it! I know he didn't! It was somebody else. *A woman!*"

That almost floored me. Did Asta Valenska know anything about the blonde chicken? I said: "Wait a minute! If Frizzati was so damned innocent, why the hell did he take a powder?"

Donaldson grunted: "He was probably scared gutless, that's all. I've got proof he didn't murder Fenwick."

"Proof?" I barked.

"Sure." Donaldson hauled out the automatic that Frizzati had dropped when he lammed. "Look. The clip's loaded with blanks. Only one had been fired."

I said: "Maybe so. But there could have been a real pill in the firing-chamber."

Dave yanked back the breech-block. "Nix. If Frizzati had fired a genuine slug, the recall from the back-pressure would have worked the ejector, tossed out the empty shell. But the empty cartridge is still in the chamber—see? So it was a blank Frizzati fired. Blanks won't operate the ejector-mechanism. You know that."

I felt an all-gone sensation in my belly. Donaldson was right.

Asta Valenska said: "I tell you it was a woman who killed Jeff! A woman out of his past! She's been writing him threatening letters for the last two months. He was afraid of her. That's why he wanted Mr. Turner to work for him, protect him—"

Donaldson whirled on me. "So that's why you're mixed up in this, huh?"

I said: "Yeah." But I didn't tell him about my run-in with the yellow-haired Trenton lovely back in Fenwick's dressing-bungalow. Not just then. I still didn't think she was guilty. Maybe I

was being a sentimental damned fool. But when I get a hunch, I play it through—until I find out I'm wrong, anyhow.

AN idea hit me. I looked at Foster Kinkaid. "How the hell could a strange dame get into this building?" I asked him. "Wouldn't she be stopped, questioned?"

Kinkaid nodded. "Usually. But she might have slipped inside, in the darkness."

I said: "Okay: For that matter how do we know Frizzati didn't have another roscoe on him. A roscoe loaded with real lead?"

Donaldson's pan turned red. "Damn it—I never thought of that! By God, I'll throw out a drag net for that guy. It might be an angle, Turner!" Then he stuck out his jaw. "But I still want to see those threatening letters that Fenwick got."

Asta Valenska said: "You and Mr. Turner can come home with me. I'll get them out of our wall-safe and show them to you."

Dave nodded. He issued some orders to his men. Then he and I and the Valenska wren went out to her waiting Rolls. We got in. The chauffeur headed for Beverly Hills.

The Fenwick-Valenska house was quite a stash. It was a big, two-story Spanish affair that must have cost a pile of geetus to build. Asta let us in; started upstairs. We trailed her. I couldn't help noticing the nifty way she moved under that clinging black dress. One moment it was as if she didn't have a muscle in her body; the next moment as if she were all muscle. I can't exactly describe it, but watching her did something to me. Her chiffon-sheathed stems were plenty shapely, too.

We reached the second floor. She opened the door of her boudoir; reached for the light-switch.

Out of the darkness a streak of flame stabbed at us. A roscoe said: "*Chow-chow!*" I felt a slug zip past my ear, bite into the woodwork. I dropped; pulled Asta Valenska down with me. My arm went around her. My hand brushed soft, velvety flesh through clinging silk.

She was so close to me that I couldn't get to the .32 automatic I always carry in a shoulder-holster. But I could hear Donaldson tugging out his rod.

Then there came another "*Chow-Chow!*" and two more orange flame spurts. Donaldson yeeped: "Damn it to hell! Nicked my gun hand!"

I heard a scuffling, scrambling sound across the room. Then three or four servants slamming up the stairs, yelling blue murder.

CHAPTER IV.

A Fee for Service



HUGGED Asta Valenska close to me, kept her down out of gun-range. I could feel the warmth of her body against mine. Her heart was hammering like hell. She was shivering, moaning. Her panted breath was hot on my cheek.

Directly opposite, there was an open window. I could just barely see it in the darkness. Then Donaldson got his service .38 shifted to his left hand. He cut loose with a blast that rattled the ceiling.

By the light from the flame-flashes that sprouted out from his gun-muzzle, I saw that the boudoir was empty. There was no answering fire, Dave

found the light-button, flicked it. A pink lamp glowed into life.

I scrambled up, pulled Asta with me. Dave and I pelted to the window; saw a long ladder leading down to the ground. Then Miss Valenska screamed.

We whirled. She was pointing to a circular wall-safe beyond the bed. It was open, empty.

"Those threatening letters—gone! And Jeff had ten thousand dollars currency in there, too!" she gasped out.

Dave said: "Sure! The bimbo that killed him wanted to get her letters back. Wanted to clear her trail. We caught her in the act—so she burned some more gun-powder!" He glared at the servants. "Back downstairs, you people!" Then he straddled the window-sill. "You stay here, Turner! Keep your glims peeled! I'm going to find that dame or bust a gut!" He vanished down the ladder. I noticed that his right hand wasn't badly hurt; just creased across the knuckles.

The servants cleared out, chattering. Then something sagged against me. It was Asta Valenska. She had passed out!

I caught her, carried her over to the bed. Had one of those bullets plugged her? I loosened her belt, stripped her out of her dress. I rolled her over, put the focus on her.

She wasn't even scratched. She'd merely fainted.

She was a knockout, lying there. Her brief underthings covered one swell assortment of girl. All her curves and contours were delicious. Her hips had just the right flare. Her skin was as smooth and white as carved ivory. Her legs were prettier in real life than they were on the screen—and that's saying plenty!

I put my hand against her heart. It was beating slowly, steadily. My fingers tingled from the contact. And no damn wonder. Her skin was like warm satin—but a lot more thrilling. My blood began to simmer.

Her long, dark lashes fluttered. She parted her crimson lips. She looked up at me. "Oh-h-h—Mr. Turner—Dan—I'm f-frightened—!" Her arms went around my shoulders. She hauled me toward her. Maybe it was just her terror, but I got a kick out of it.

I whispered: "Take it easy, babe. You're Okay. Nothing's going to happen to you."

"But—but I'm scared! I w-won't feel easy until th-that terrible woman is caught and hanged . . ."

I said: "Look. In the first place, how do we know it was a woman? It might have been Frizzati. Besides, what would the murderer have against you?"

"I—I d-don't know. She might hate me because I was married to J-Jeff . . ." She clung to me, pressed herself as close as she could get. "Listen. I—I know everything about poor Jeff's past. He told me about being a taxi-driver, before he came to Hollywood. He t-told me how he got involved with some chippie back in Trenton—a waitress, she was. Maybe Jeff did wrong by leaving her in the lurch. I'm not trying to whitewash him. But she didn't have to kill herself!"

I didn't say anything. I just held her, let her go on talking.

SHE said: "Th-then the dead girl's sister found out that Jeff had become a movie star. That's when he began to get those th-threatening letters from Trenton. She said she was going

to kill him. At first he didn't pay any attention to it. Then he began to worry. He confessed everything to me. I talked him into phoning you this evening. But it was . . . too late! And now I'm afraid that g-girl will try to k-kill me, too!"

I patted her shoulder. "I think you're wrong. Anyhow, the cops will find the murderer."

"I—I haven't got any faith in the police. I want *you* to help!" she whimpered. "Whatever your fee is, I'll pay it!"

I hesitated. For some reason, I hated to consider starting out on the trail of the little blonde cutie. But after all, I'm in this game for the dough. I'm trying to save up enough lettuce to retire on, before some sharp apple engraves my name and address on a lead slug. And besides, if I took up the chase independently, I might find the trail leading to somebody else besides the Trenton chicken. Louie Frizzati, for example.

I must have studied it over for maybe two or three whole minutes. Asta Valenska misunderstood my silence. She probably figured I was going to turn her down. Because she suddenly squeezed herself tight against me and whispered: "You must help me! You *must!*" She grabbed my hand, squeezed it, carried it to her cheek.

I felt the silky texture of her skin. I looked down at her; soaked up the gorgeous radiance of her alluring form. She raised her head, snaked an arm around my neck, pressed her crimson lips against my mouth.

I could feel the warmth of her breath, the soft quiver of her lips. I hadn't expected that sort of fee. But when it was tossed in my lap that way . . . Well, what the hell? There are times when a man can't help skidding.

I skidded.

I crushed her in my arms; planted a red-hot kiss on her throat. It lasted a damned long time. My hand slipped down her back, held her so closely that I almost cracked her ribs. Under my palm I felt the muscles of her back ripple as she clung to me, trembling. I wasn't any too steady, myself. There's six-feet-three of me, and every inch was full of tingling sensation. I got a little dizzy then, forgot all about murders . . . everything . . .

I RECOVER quick. It wasn't much later when I said: "Well, baby, you've hired a private detective. I'll see that you don't regret it."

She scribbled in her check-book, handed me a ticket for a grand. I left her, went downstairs. I climbed into her Rolls, told the chauffeur to haul me back to the Altamount lot where I'd left my own jalopy.

On the way, I mulled things over. I still couldn't see why that Louis Frizzati lug had acted the way he did—unless he was up to his ears in the case somehow. I decided to check up on him, for a starter.

At the Altamount lot I dismissed the Valenska chariot. I went inside, hunted around for Foster Kinkaid. He was still there. I said: "Listen, Fos. You directed this last picture of Fenwick's. What do you know about Frizzati?"

"Not much. Jeffery Fenwick himself asked me to give Frizzati a bit in the opus."

I said: "The hell you preach! Did you tell that to Lieutenant Donaldson?"

Kinkaid's pleasant map was creased with a frown. "Why, no. He didn't ask me. I didn't think of it 'til just now."

"Okay. Maybe you can give me Frizzati's address, huh?"

"I think so." Kinkaid took me into his office. He thumbed through some records. "Here it is." He named a cheap walk-up apartment on Los Feliz.

I thanked him, went out again. I climbed into my own coupe. Before heading for Los Feliz, I decided to go home to change my clothes. The suit I was wearing was all torn, muddy, where I'd taken a couple of headers back on that sound stage. Besides, I wanted a snort of Vat 69 to brace me up.

I parked in front of my stash, went up to my apartment. I unlocked the door, started to open it. Then I froze. Somebody was in there!

CHAPTER V.

Red Hair—Henna!



MADE a dive for my roscoe, yanked it out. Then I kicked my door open; flattened myself against the jamb. I snarled: "Stick 'em up!"

Somebody wailed: "No—don't shoot—!" and a light came on.

I felt my eyes getting wide. A wave of surprise reached up and slugged me in the whiskers. I stared at a crouched, white-faced, yellow-haired lovely shivering against the far wall.

It was the Trenton cutie!

I said: "For God's sake!" I slammed the door behind me, walked toward her. "What the purple hell are you doing here?" Then I grabbed her, started frisking her for the pearl-handled gat.

Her coat was off. Her dress was still torn, the way I'd last seen her in Jeffery Fenwick's dressing-bungalow. Frankly, it was a pleasure, frisking her for that roscoe. But she didn't have it. I searched twice, to make sure, and I

made a good job of it. That's me—thorough!

She stood still for it, submissive but not to well pleased. Didn't wiggle—didn't shrink. She just said: "Go ahead. Search me. I haven't got a g-gun."

I backed away, found her discarded coat. No roscoe there, either. I said: "What did you do with it after you killed Fenwick?"

She got even whiter. "I didn't kill him!" she panted. Her eyes looked wild. "I didn't! *I didn't!* Th-that's why I came here . . . I heard the newsboys yelling their extras about Fenwick being m-murdered . . ."

I said: "Quiet down. Start at the beginning. And tell me the truth, or I'll slap the living hell out of you!" I meant it, too.

She shuddered. For a minute I thought she was going to fold over. I went to my cellarette, hauled out a fifth of Vat 69. I poured two stiff jorums; gave her one. I downed the other myself. I needed it.

She choked the fire-water past her gullet. Then she said: "You've got to believe me, Mr. Turner! You've just *got* to! You're the only one I can turn to. You told me your name, back in that bungalow. And when I learned that Fenwick was d-dead, I came here to you for help. I c-climbed in through your fire-escape window . . ."

I said: "What a minute. First of all, where did you go when you left Fenwick's dressing-quarters?"

"I—I took a bus and w-went downtown."

"And why did you swipe your revolver back out of my pocket before you left?" I snapped at her.

Crimson stained her cheeks. "You convinced me that I should forget my hate for Jeffery Fenwick. I decided to

go back east, as you advised. But I—I was broke. I'd spent my last money for train-fare to California. I didn't have a return ticket. Then I thought maybe I could sell my clothing, my luggage . . ."

"What's that got to do with the revolver?"

She said: "Before I could get my bags out of the hotel room, I'd have to pay my room-rent. I didn't have the money. So I thought I'd pawn the g-gun for a few dollars. That would release my luggage, so I could sell—"

I broke in "You heisted the gat so you could hock it?"

"Y'yes."

"Well, did you?"

She nodded. "I pawned it the minute I got downtown."

I said: "Where's the ticket?"

She pointed toward her purse on a chair. I grabbed it, opened it. I found a pawn-ticket. "That's it," she told me.

I said: "Okay. You say you soaked the gun as soon as you got downtown, huh?"

"Yes."

"Hm-m-. If you're telling me the truth, it spells plenty. It means you weren't the one who petered Asta Valenska's wall-safe and took those pot-shots at me."

She stared at me. "Wall-safe? I—don't understand!"

"You wouldn't—if you're really leveling with me. Now look. Somebody croaked Jeffery Fenwick. If it wasn't you, then it must have been Louie Frizzati."

The minute I said that, she slumped into a chair. Her mouth opened wide. "Did—did you say *Frizzati?*"

I had a hunch I was about to learn something important. I said: "Yeah. Louie Frizzati. Know him?"

SHE tottered toward me, grabbed my arm. "Louie Frizzati was a friend of Jeffery Fenwick! Back in Trenton! Frizzati was a taxi-driver, too. And a—*a* criminal. He and Fenwick were pals. They stole money from drunks who rode in their cabs. My sister knew about it. She told me. She tried to get Fenwick to break away from Frizzati . . ."

My blood began to race. "So Fenwick and Frizzati were buddies!" I whispered. "Now I can see why Fenwick got Frizzati a job in pictures! Frizzati knew too much about him—his past. He was probably blackmailing Fenwick!"

She said: "Maybe that's it! And maybe Fenwick refused to pay any more money—so Louie k-killed him!"

It sounded like sense. It added up. But it all depended on whether or not the blonde cutie was telling the truth.

I said: "Sweetness, I'm going to check on you—and God help you if you've lied!" Then I grabbed her, carried her into my bedroom.

"Wh-what are you d-doing to me . . .?" she wailed.

"Fixing things so you won't lam while I'm gone!" I said. "You're going to get undressed and I'm going to lock up your clothes."

"I—I—"

"Look. If you haven't got anything to wear, you won't take a powder on me," I said. "Are *you* going to take 'em off, or should I?"

"I—I'll do whatever you say. T-turn your back," she whispered.

I faced away from her. A couple of frilly bits of silk landed at my feet. Then I heard my bed creak.

When I turned, she was under the covers. Only her bare arms and

shoulders were showing. My fingers itched; but I didn't go near her. I just gathered up her duds, blew her a kiss, walked out of the bedroom. I locked her in and put her clothes in a closet.

I tossed another snort of Scotch down the hatch for good luck. I made sure I had that pawn-ticket for her roscoc. Then I went out.

The hockshop was an all-night joint on Main Street. I drove down there, ankled in. I said: "Uncle, I want to ask you about a gat." I flashed my tin, shoved the ticket under his nose.

He looked at it. "Vell, vat about it? It is vor a bearl-handled rofolfer. A young voman bawned it tonight. I gafe her vour dollars."

"What time was it?"

"Aboud eight-thirdy, quarder to nine."

I could have kissed him. Now I knew the yellow-haired wren was leveling with me. If she'd put her rod in soak at that hour, she couldn't have got back out to Beverly Hills in time to rob Asta Valenska's safe, crease Donaldson with a slug. And even if she'd had time, she couldn't have done the shooting—because she didn't have her gun.

I went out, climbed back into my wreck. I headed out toward Glendale; swung into Los Feliz. That's where Louie Frizzati lived, according to Foster Kinkaid.

TWENTY minutes later I drew up before the address Kinkaid has given me. The joint was a cheap, shabby two-story building of weatherbeaten frame. I jammed my thumb against the bell-button.

Pretty soon a big, hulking slob opened the door, stared out at me. He was almost as tall as I am. He must have weighed a good three hundred pounds.

He was hog-fat. He had a patch over one eye. He looked like a pirate.

I said: "Good evening, cousin. Are you the manager of this stash?"

"Yeah. So what? And I ain't your cousin."

I said: "Okay. But how about slipping me a few minutes of your valuable time? I'm looking for a lug named Frizzati." As I spoke, I shoved my way into the hall.

The one-eyed hombre tried to block me. "Lay off, shamus. I don't know nothin' about Frizzati. He ain't here. I've talked to enough cops tonight. They been buzzin' like bees. Reporters, too. If Frizzati's in a jam, the hell with him. I don't know nothin' about him."

I said: "So the bulls have been here, have they? Maybe a lard-puss gumshoe named Donaldson, too; huh?"

"Yeah. He was here. Now g'wan. Take it on the lam."

"Donaldson didn't find any trace of Frizzati?"

One-Eye said: "I already told you Frizzati aint been home tonight. Cert'nly Donaldson didn't find him. Are you goin' to blow, or shall I belt you a few?"

I said: "Wait a minute, friend. You've got me all wrong. I'm no bull. I'm Frizzati's friend. He's in a tight spot. It's a bump-off beef, no fooling."

"So which?"

"So I've got some dough for him. Enough to take him to China if he wants to go there. Be a good guy and tell me where you think he might be. Give me a lead. You don't want Louie to get his neck stretched, do you?"

The big guy snarled: "You're a damn' liar, that's what you are. You're no friend of Frizzati's. I never seen you here before." Then he took a poke at my kisser.

He almost caught me with my pants at half-mast. I just barely ducked his fist. Then I waded into him.

I slammed a load of knuckles into his teeth. Then I buried my left duke wrist-deep in his porky belly. He said: "O-oo-oooff-fff—!" and belched in my face. He smelled like stale beer. I spat, lowered my head, got in close. I whammed hell out of him.

He ate three more pokes as if they'd been ice cream. Then he managed to cork me on the pan—just over the cheekbone. His fist felt like a pile-driver. It drove my noggin so far back I could see the floor upside-down.

I staggered. My shoulder-blades smacked into the wall. Before I could get set again, the big duck had me.

He said: "I'll tear your liver out an' fry it for breakfast!" His arms pinned mine to my ribs. Then he reached up, started to jab his thumb into my left eyeball.

I don't like guys to do that to me. I raised my knee, drove it into his guts.

He curled over, grabbed himself. I blinked the tears out of my glims. Then I went to work on him. I didn't want to cork him unconscious. I just wanted to make him ache all over. I started lacing him with both fists. I twisted my knuckles around, every time they landed on his greasy lug. I split the skin on his cheeks, cut him into pieces. He bled like a pig.

Pretty soon he went down, blubbing. "Don't hit me no more! I can't take it!" His voice was a high whine.

I said: "All right. What about Frizzati? Do you know where I might find him?"

"No!"

I drew my foot back. "How would you like some shoeleather, my friend?" I booted him in the ribs.

Once was enough. He squealed: "Lay off! I—I'll talk!"

I said: "Sure you'll talk. I knew it all the time. Commence, pal."

"Louie runs around with a bim named Dolly Devorely. Extra wren at Cosmotone. I dunno where she lives. But she's his sweetie. He hangs around her stash most of the time. Maybe he's there now; I wouldn't know. That's all I can tell you."

I said: "Much obliged, Blubber. I'll look her up. If you've steered me wrong, God have mercy on you." I dragged him into a back room where there was a dirty bed. I ripped a sheet into strips, tied him up plenty tight. That was to keep him from getting in touch with Frizzati with a warning.

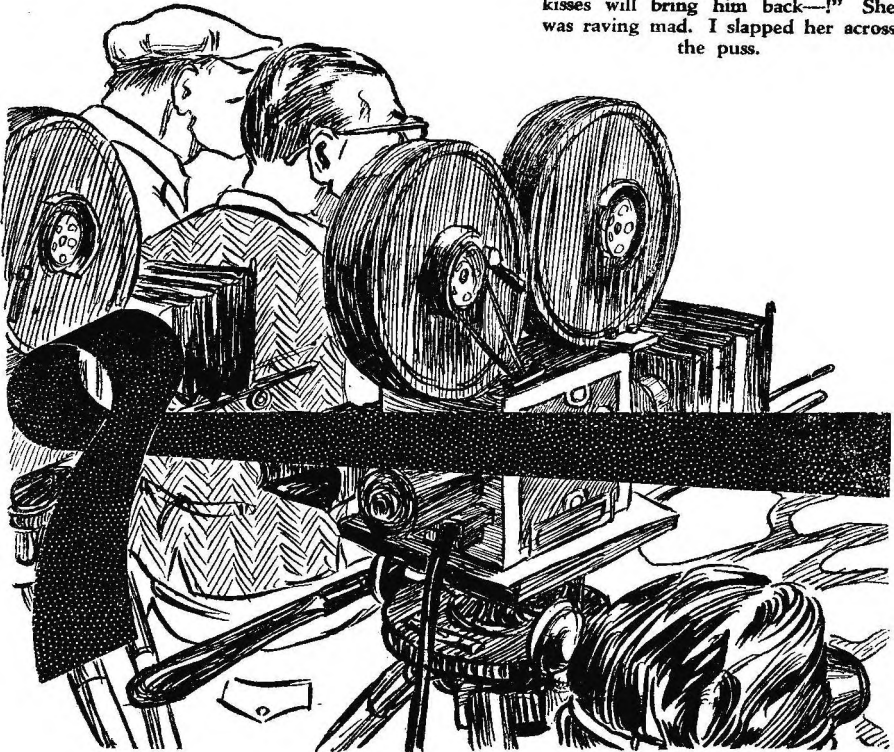
Then I pulled out my rod, tapped him over the noggin with the soft end. Not hard enough to crush his skull. Just enough to put him to dreamland for an hour or so.

I went out.

AT the nearest drug-store, I parked again. I went in to a phone-booth, thumbed through the directory. I couldn't find any Dolly Devorely listed. She wasn't in the city directory, either.

But I still had an angle. I dropped a buffalo, dialed a friend of mine who runs a casting agency. When he answered, I said: "Hi, Tom. This is Dan Turner. I'm calling you because Central Casting is closed at night. Have

"Jeff isn't dead!" she screamed. "My kisses will bring him back—!" She was raving mad. I slapped her across the puss.



you got a frill on your list by the name of Dolly Devorely?"

He said: "Wait a minute till I look it up." Then he came back to the phone. "Yeah. I got a Dorothy Devorely. Age twenty-six. Red hair—henna. Five foot even. Plenty of curves in the right places. Nice stems. Works at Cosmotone, mostly. Want her phone-number?"

"Just her address," I said.



He gave it to me. It was a bungalow court off Sunset.

I said: "Thanks a million, Tom." Then I went out, slammed myself into my coupe. I headed hell-for-leather toward Sunset.

CHAPTER VI

Death Strikes Again



MADE shredded wheat out of my tires, braking to a stop a block south of Dolly Devorely's bungalow court. I made sure my gat was loose in its holster. Then I walked the remaining distance to the red-haired extra girl's front door.

Her cottage was at the rear of the court. The shades were down, but I saw a splinter of light around them. Somebody was home.

I knocked.

It was a couple of minutes before the door opened. Then a flame-tressed, nicely built little bimbo opened up for me. She was wearing thin green pajamas. The light was behind her, and I didn't have to use my imagination to figure out her shape. She wasn't hard on the eyes at all.

I shoved my roscoe against her middle. I said: "How would you like a dimple in your tummy?"

She gasped, backed away. I followed her, closed the door with my heel. She whimpered: "Wh-what do you want? Put that gun away, for God's sake!"

"After a while, kiddo. Not yet. Wher's Louie?"

"L-Louie who?"

"Don't feed me that. Louie Frizzati. That's who."

"I—I don't know any Louie Frizzati."

I said: "Swell. That gives me an

excuse to get rough with you." I edged in her direction.

She backed away. "Lay off me! I don't—I haven't—"

"Sure you won't. Of course you haven't. You're dumb. You'll be dumber when I get finished with you. You'll be needing some new teeth." I made a grab for her with my free hand.

She tried to jerk away. Her pajama-jacket tore. It hadn't concealed much in the first place, and now the rents in it disclosed even more. My eyes bulged.

She tried to cover herself with her hands, but no woman ever had hands large enough to take in that much territory. "If you put your paws on me, I—I'll scream!" she panted.

I said: "Go ahead. Then you'll wake up screaming for the devil to let you into hell. I'd just as soon shoot you as look at you."

"You—you wouldn't dare."

"You don't know me. Come on, darling, before I lose my temper. What about Louie Frizzati?"

She said: "He—he isn't here!" Her eyes darted toward a closed door on the other side of the room.

"Oh. So you admit you know him, after all?"

"Y-yes. But I—I haven't seen him for several days. Honest I haven't."

I said: "Sweetheart, you're a liar. But I know a way to make you come clean. We're going to have some fun!" I put away my roscoe, circled my arms around her. I made sure she was between me and the closed door. I had a hunch Louie Frizzati was in that next room. But he wouldn't dare shoot at me as long as Dolly Devorely was in the way. However, he most likely would show himself if I carried out the plan I had in mind.

I kissed the red-haired bim right on the mouth.

At the same time, I caught both her wrists, imprisoned them behind her with my left hand. Then I went to work on her. I mauled her with my hands. I put plenty on the ball; let her understand that I wasn't kidding.

She yipped: "No—no! Louie—for God's sake help me—"

THE closed door opened. That's what I was expecting. I whipped out my automatic, aimed it. I said: "Okay, Frizzati. Come out with your hands up high. I mean business. I owe you something for the way you swatted me on the Altamount lot tonight, anyhow."

Frizzati walked into the room. He looked green around the dewlaps. He said: "Listen, copper—for Gawd's sake—"

"Stow it. You croaked Jeffery Fenwick. You damned near plugged me and Donaldson and Asta Valenska, later, in Valenska's boudoir. Better save your alibi for a mouthpiece!"

His eyes looked glassy. "You're wrong, copper!" he jabbered. "I never bumped Fenwick! I lammed because I figgered I might be framed for it. But I didn't cool him! Listen—I admit I petered that safe in Valenska's bedroom. I knew Fenwick had dough there. I needed it to make a get-away. But I never put the trigger to him. He was croaked by—"

That was the last thing Louie Frizzati ever said. From the window behind him, a gun poked under the drawn blind. It went: "*Blooeey—Blooeey—Blooeey!*"

Frizzati dropped. So did Dolly Devorely. The third slug grazed my left shoulder, burned me as it ripped through my coat sleeve.

I smacked the floor with my belly; put four fast ones through that flapping blind. It rolled up with a hell of a clatter. But there was nobody outside. I had heated up my cannon for nothing; wasted four perfectly good chunks of lead.

I snaked my way to the window; took a chance on peering out. All I saw was a vacant lot and a night full of shadows.

CHAPTER VI.

The Cutie from Trenton



DIVED FOR the ground outside, landed on my hands and knees. I picked myself out of a flower-bed, started running. But I didn't know which the hell way to run. Then, in the distance, I heard the whine of a motor; the smooth purr of meshed gears. Tortured tires screeched around a corner, faded away.

That was that.

I scrambled back into Dolly's living-room. Dolly herself was on her back. Blood was seeping from a hole in her breast. I felt her wrist. No pulse. She was as dead as a pork-chop.

Louie Frizzati lay beyond her. I looked him over. The top of his skull was ripped open. His brains were all over the floor.

There was a phone in the corner. I grabbed it, dialed police headquarters. "Lieutenant Donaldson—quick!" I said.

Pretty soon Dave's voice answered. "Yeah?"

"Dan Turner calling. Two more bump-offs for you. Louie Frizzati and his moll." I gave him the address.

He said: "I'll be double-damned to hell! How in God's name did you—?"

"Cork it up till you get here," I said. I hung up.

The whole damn court was alive by this time. People were pounding on the bungalow's front door. I opened it, flashed my badge. "There's been a shooting folks. Beat it. Go on back home." I slammed the door in their faces.

While I was waiting for Donaldson, I went back to the window; flashed my pencil light on the ground below. Maybe there were footprints in the soft loam of the flower-bed, I thought. Perhaps the killer had left some trace.

But no soap. If there had been any prints, I'd wiped them out by landing on all fours when I dived over the sill. Beyond the flower-bed, the ground was hard as concrete.

I fumbled for a gasper, set fire to it. I took a deep drag. I was wishing to God I'd brought a flask of Vat 69 along with me. My nerves were all raw. I went into the kitchen, found a half-pint of rye in the cabinet. I don't like rye, but it's better than nothing. I killed it in three swallows. Then I felt a little better.

My left arm stung. I took off my coat, looked myself over. I wasn't bleeding. But there was a big red welt across my muscle. The bullet had come to damn close for comfort!

DRETTY soon I heard sirens wailing, brakes screaming. Dave Donaldson came roaring into the room. "Turner--what in the blue blazes--"

I said: "Have a look yourself. Frizzati has joined his ancestors. So has his lady-love." I pointed to the two corpses on the floor.

"But how the hell did you find Frizzati?" Donaldson rasped. "Damn it. I've

had a dragnet out for him all night!"

I said: "You didn't use the right methods. I beat hell out of a guy to get my information. But it didn't do me much good."

"What do you mean by that?"

I said: "Frizzati was just going to tell me who croaked Jeffery Fenwick. But a bullet shut him up before he got the words out of his kisser."

Dave blinked as if I'd slugged him. "Frizzati was going to tell--Say, Turner, are you uts-nay?"

"Not any more than usual. Listen. Before he kicked the bucket, Louie confessed something to me. He admitted that he was the one who robbed the safe in Asta Valenska's boudoir." I went to my knees alongside Louie's body; felt in his pockets. I dragged out a packet of century notes and some letters. "This proves it," I grunted.

Donaldson said: "For God's sake! I'll say it proves it! It also proves he bumped Fenwick on that sound stage!"

"Nix. You're all haywire there, Dave. Get this straight. Louie Frizzati and Jeffery Fenwick had been pals, back east. Crooks, too, in a small way. Rolling drunks, and that sort of thing. Well, Fenwick comes to California: landed in the movies. He became a star. Frizzati showed up. So Fenwick got him a job in pictures. Bit parts. That was probably to keep Frizzati from spilling anything about Fenwick's past life. Fenwick didn't want that kind of publicity. It would have spoiled his career as a great screen lover."

Dave said: "All right. Keep on talking."

"Well," I went on, "tonight Fenwick got taken with lead poisoning on that Altamount set. Louie had a good idea who the killer was. But he was afraid

he might get framed for the job, himself. With his criminal record, it looked like a lousy situation to him. So he lammed."

"Yeah. Then what?"

I said: 'Louie needed dough for a get-away. He knew Fenwick had a sweet pile of lettuce in a wall-safe at home. So he burgled his way into his dead pal's house, petered the safe. In the darkness, he grabbed everything his hands touched. Including these threatening letters. Then he started to take a powder when you and Miss Valenska and I showed up. He took a couple of shots at us to scare us back. give him time to lam."

Dave looked at his bandaged knuckles; then at Louie's corpse. He growled: "Damn it. I was hoping I'd have a chance to bat him a few for nicking me." Then, suddenly, he whirled at me. "Say, Dan, damn it—"

"Yes?"

"You realize what this means? It means the bird who croaked Fenwick is still loose! That dame from back east—the one who wrote those notes to him—she's the one! By God, she must be a homicidal maniac! First she cools Fenwick. Then she learns that Louie Frizzati is wise to her. So she comes here and burns him down along with his moll!"

I SHOOK my head. "Nope. All wrong, Dave. She couldn't have done it."

"How do you know?" he blatted.

"In the first place she was hocking her gun around the time Fenwick was rubbed out on the set. In the second place, she couldn't have come here and killed Louie and his sweetie—because I've got her locked in my apartment!"

I thought he was going to poke me in the puss. "You—you've got her in your flat? Why, you lousy, double-crossing —"

I said: "Hold it, Dave. Calm 'down. I tell you I left her in my apartment—without any duds. She isn't twins. She couldn't be in two places at once. She can't be the one that rubbed out Frizzati and Dolly Devorely just now. And besides, she hocked her gun around eight-thirty this evening. So she couldn't have bumped Fenwick, either.'"

"Yeah? Maybe she had a second roscocoe that you didn't know about!" Donaldson snarled. "Come on—we're going to your dive. I'm putting the nippers on that bimbo!"

I said: "Okay, if that's the way you feel about it. She'll probably be safer in the clink until morning, anyway. There's a killer loose, and you never know who's going to get it next."

Just then, before we'd even looked at the letters Frizzati stole from Valenska, some of Donaldson's homicide flatties showed up. The medical examiner was with them. Dave growled some orders. Then he and I ankled down the street to my parked jalopy.

I drove home.

We went upstairs to my door. Dave said: "I'm going to throw this dame into a cell so fast her toenails will curl!"

I turned the key in the lock. We walked in. Everything looked exactly the way I'd left it—until I took a gander at the bedroom door.

It was wide open.

I said: "What the hell—!" and dived over the threshold into the bedroom. I felt suddenly sick.

The yellow-haired cutie from Trenton was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Secret of Infra-Red



HE bed was mussed and the covers were turned back. The window to the fire-escape was open. I made a quick frisk of the flat. My bathrobe was missing from the closet. There was no trace of the blonde kid.

Dave Donaldson said: "I ought to put the pinch on you for obstructing justice and aiding a criminal, you damn interfering numbskull!"

"But look, Dave—!" I yipped. "I figured she was innocent. I had no idea—"

"Sure not. You never have any ideas!" he grated. "You're just a plain sap. I can see what happened. The frill made a chump out of you. She sucked you in. She's the murderer—and you let her get away. If you'd called me the minute you got your mitts on her, Louie Frizzati and the Devorely moll would be alive right now!"

I said: "Maybe you're right. I'm sorry."

"Sorry, my eyebrow! Now I've got to throw out the dragnet for a dame I never saw. I don't even know what she looks like. A swell job you dished up for me, damn you."

I lighted a pill. "Go ahead and rave. I don't blame you. But at least I can give you her description." Then I gave him a quick word picture of the yellow-haired lovely.

He drank it all in with his ears. Then he said: "Okay. I'm starting out. And for God's sake, stay the hell off this case from now on. You louse it up every time you stick your beak into it." He stormed out.

I went into my living room, tossed

two slugs of Vat 69 down my throat. Then I went back and sat on my bed. I felt lousy. I'm too damned old to entertain many illusions about the so-called human race. But that blonde cutie had pulled the wool over my glims—plenty. For once, I'd made a hell of a mistake about somebody's character.

Maybe five minutes passed. Then all of a sudden I heard a chocked voice whispering: "So you t-turned against me . . . !"

I shot off that bed as if the mattress had been full of rattlesnakes. I whirled—and saw the yellow-haired baby standing at the door of the bathroom!

She was wearing my dressing gown. It trailed around her feet, fell open at the throat where her body began to lift in lilting dizzying curves. Her eyes were blue pools of accusation.

I said: "For the love of God—!"

"I was hiding in your soiled clothes hamper in the bathroom," she said.

"You—you were there all the time?"

She said: "Yes. After you left, I got up and wandered around. Your bathroom door-key worked the lock of the bedroom door. I wanted a cigarette. So I let myself into the living room to look for one. I was sitting there when I heard you coming back. I—I heard that other man say he was going to p-put me in a cell. So I ran into the bathroom and hid myself."

I grabbed her. I said: "Sweetness, I'm going to kiss hell out of you!" And I did.

She broke loose. "L-let me alone! I—I hate you! You think I'm a murderer!"

I said: "No I don't. Not now. I know you're innocent. And I'm starting out to prove it. I'm going to clear you of this mess, by God!"

"B-but I *am* clear!" she wailed. "If

you checked with that pawnbroker you know I didn't—"

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I'm not the law. Dave Donaldson is the guy I've got to convince. He probably wouldn't believe me if I told him you were right here in my bathroom all the time. He'd say I was just fronting for you, lying to save your neck. Three people have been burned down tonight. And the only way I can get you out is to find the real killer."

She came close to me; put her arms around me. "Th-then you w-will . . . save me?" 'she shivered.

I held her, kissed her again. My bath-robe was *much* too big for her. Her skin was like whipped cream. She was warm and soft and delicious as she melted against me. Her lips were moist, trembling with eagerness.

I let her go. I said: "Baby, I want you to promise me you'll stay right here until I come back. Will you?"

"I—I'll be waiting for you," she answered softly. There was a hint of promise in her voice. It did something to my veins. I scrambled out before I lost control . . .

DOWNSTAIRS I piled into my heap. I had two reasons for finding Jeffery Fenwick's killer, now, I had to earn the grand that Asta Valenska had given me. And I had to clear the blonde kiddo.

Everything went back to that sound stage set on the Altamount lot. That's where Fenwick had been burned down. Then, later, the heat had been put to Louie Frizzati—because Louie knew too much and was going to spill his guts.

I kept thinking about the sound stage. Somebody on that set had bumped Fenwick. Who?

An idea kicked me in the pants. I said: "Maybe—!" Then I gunned the glands out of my motor. I headed for the home of my friend Harry Treller, the Altamount cameraman.

He lived in a house off Crenshaw. He was a bachelor. It wasn't quite eleven-thirty when I rang his bell. But he was in bed. He was in pajamas when he let me in.

I said: "Hi, Harry. How's the jaw?"

He rubbed his bruise. "Aches like hell. I'd like to get a poke at the Frizzati lug."

"No chance. He's dead," I said.

"What—?"

"Yeah. He got rubbed out by the same person that killed Jeffery Fenwick. He knew too much. Now look. You can help me if you will. I want to see the rushes of that last scene Fenwick acted in. The scene where he was cooled off. Can you get the rush print and run it off in a projector for me?"

Harry said: "We'd have to get an order from Foster Kinkaid."

"Okay. Get dressed and we'll hunt him up."

I followed Treller into his bedroom. He started climbing into his togs. I noticed a framed cabinet photograph on his bureau. It was a picture of Asta Valenska. It was inscribed: "All my heart's love to Harry. Your Asta V." The date on it was two years old.

I said: "I didn't know you and Asta were sweet on each other."

"It didn't last," he grunted. "She married Fenwick instead. But we're still good friends. I'd go to hell for her, any day. Come on, let's go."

We crawled into my coupe. I drove out to Wilshire to the Gayboy Arms, where Foster Kinkaid had a suite. Kinkaid's gu-gu valet let us in. Then Kin-

kaid himself strolled out of his bedroom.

He said: "Hello, Turner. Treller. What's up now?"

I told him I wanted to see the rushes of Jeffery Fenwick's last movie scene.

He said: "Sure. But I'm afraid it won't show much. It was fog stuff, you know. I deliberately shot the action so that nothing but blurred shapes would appear. But we'll take a look, anyhow."

He got dressed. Then all three of us drove down to the Altamount lot.

Kinkaid went into the lab building. That department worked all night at Altamount, developing negs and making rush prints for viewing the next morning. In ten minutes or so, Kinkaid came back with four flat, round cans. He said: "These will be silent, of course. The sound-track is synchronized on later. Of course I can find the play-back record and run it off too, if you like. But it mightn't match up exactly with the action."

I said: "Never mind the sound. It's the action I want to see."

We went into a small projection room in the executive building. Harry Treller ran the projector. He threaded a reel into the machine. Kinkaid stood alongside me. I stared at the screen.

It glowed with white, glaring light. Then the picture started.

There was an eerie, ghostly quality about it. The abandoned house loomed faintly through the drifting artificial fog. Jeffery Fenwick walked on-stage. He was close enough to be recognized through the mists. It was like looking at a dead man's ghost.

Then he turned away from the lens; edged back toward the rear of the set. I could see only his outlines now, like a wraith. There was a suspicion of

movement over to the left, where the fog was thickest.

"That's where Miss Valenska and Louie Frizzati were crouching down," Kinkaid whispered to me. Then he said: "If you look close enough, you'll see two other faces at a downstairs window of the house. There were two extra girls who were supposed to be prisoners. They're staring toward Fenwick."

I kept my glims glued on the screen. Sure enough, I tabbed two frills through a fog-eddy. Then the mist obscured them.

Kinkaid said: "Now the shooting. But all you'll see is a streak of flame. The Hays office won't allow us to show an actual murder, right out plain. That's why I used fog to obscure the action."

AS he spoke, a dull lick of fire glimmered through the fag. I saw it vague shadow-shape crumple and fall. That was Jeffery Fenwick—dead.

Then the reel ended in a square of white brilliance that almost blinded me.

Kinkaid said: "I stopped the cameras when Asta screamed. That's all of it."

I turned to Harry Treller at the projector. "Four cameras were working, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"Run off one of the other reels, then."

He said: "Okay," and threaded a new film into the dingus. This time I saw the scene from another angle. The shot had been made from one of the camera-cranes. It was an overhead shot, looking down at the set from a high angle.

But the action was just the same as before. At the time of Fenwick's death, the fake fog was like pea-soup. All I could see was shadow-shapes. I couldn't identify any one of them individually.

The reel stopped. Foster Kinkaid

"Get busy," I said. "If you don't have any clothes, I know you'll be here when I come back." Pretty soon, a frilly bit of silk landed beside me. . . .



said: "What were you hoping to find, Turner?"

I said: "Another streak of flame."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we know Frizzati fired a blank. That shows on the film. But he didn't shoot a real slug. The bullet that killed Fenwick came from another gun. I was hoping to find out where the second gun was fired from. But it didn't work."

Treller said: "Shall I run off these other two reels? They'll both show the same thing you just looked at."

"Never mind," I told him. "Thanks just the same." I took the four flat cans from him.

Kinkaid said: "Is it your opinion that Fenwick was plugged by someone on the set?"

"Either on the set—or just outside the camera lines, hiding," I answered.

"Too bad we weren't using infra-red negative," he mused. "That penetrates murk. It might have shown the extra flame-streak you're looking for. Well—anything else, Turner?"

"No. We may as well go home," I told him.

I drove him to the Gayboy Arms. Then I took Harry Treller back to his house near Crenshaw. After that, I started cruising nowhere in particular. I was up a stump. A theory was forming in the back of my noggin. But theories aren't any good unless they're backed by conclusive proof, definite evidence. And that's what I didn't have.

CHAPTER IX.

Synthetic Movies



ALL OF A sudden an idea hit me. I remembered something Foster Kinkaid had said.

"By God!" I whispered.

I jerked my wheel around, fed my engine all the soup she'd gobble. I headed for Westwood.

After a while I drew up before a big, splendidous mansion. It was the home of Sol Levering, general manager of Altamount Pix. I raced up on his porch, rang.

A blinky-eyed butler answered. "Yes, sir?"

"I want to see Mr. Levering. Police business." I gave him a gander at my badge.

He let me in; went upstairs. Pretty soon Sol Levering came down, rubbing his glims and yawning. He said: "Why—Turner! What the devil—?"

"Listen, Sol. This is important. Asta Valenska hired me to find Jeff Fenwick's killer. I think I've got a hot lead. But I'm going to need one hell of a lot of assistance."

"I'll help if I can, Dan," Sol said slowly.

"Swell. Now look. This whole thing's got to be done fast—and kept absolutely mum. In the first place, can you name me three wrens that can be trusted? Frills with screen experience, preferably. And if possible, girls who went for Fenwick in a great big way."

Levering frowned. Then he said: "That should be easy. Fenwick had a whole harem of nifties all over Hollywood. You know what his reputation was. He was quite a chaser."

"So I've heard. Well?"

Sol said: "There's Vio Yorkalle, for one. She's a honey."

I nodded. I knew Vio Yorkalle. I'd been on parties with her. She was a cute, chestnut-haired filly with a ton of sex-appeal. I said: "Okay. I'll get Vio. Who else?"

"Well, how about Mayda Carman? And Lola Lemoine?"

"I've met 'em both. They'll do." I jotted down the three names and addresses. Then I said: "The rest is going to be up to you. I'll need a cameraman—but not Harry Treller. He isn't to hear a word about this thing. I should have a director, too. Maybe you could handle that job. You used to carry a megaphone in your early days, didn't you?"

He said: "Sure. But what—"

"I'll also want two men. Actors. And one property-man to work the fog-machine."

Levering blinked. "What the devil are you up to? You sound as if you wanted to make a movie."

I said: "That's it exactly. I'm going to shoot a duplicate of that scene where Jeffery Fenwick was murdered. Only I'll be using a substitute cast. How about it?"

"Well, all right. If you think it'll do any good, I'll work with you. But who are you after? What's the idea? Can't you let me in on it?"

I said: "Not just now. Meet me in an hour, on Sound Stage 'A'—that'll give you time enough to round up the men you'll need. I'll bring the girls."

He nodded. I left him, went back to my jalopy. I drove to the apartment where Vio Yorkalle hung out.

VIO let me in when I knocked. She'd been asleep. She wore the thinnest night-gown a silkworm ever turned out. Like cellophane! And what a shape that baby had! What legs; what hips; what . . . I began to forget all about business . . .

She opened her eyes wide. "Well, throw me down a chute if it isn't Sherlock Turner—in the flesh!"

I grinned, blinking, went in. Speaking of flesh—but why speak of it?" I

said. I grabbed her, pulled her toward me, fed her a kiss.

She panted: "Golly! What's the rush, Handsome? You might at least give me time to get set." Then she said: "Where've you been all my life and what's on your mind?"

"You are, just now," I told her.

"Quit kidding. I know you. You want something."

I said: "Sure I do. This." I kissed her again; her lips parted a little under mine.

One of her shoulder-straps started to skid. An inch or so of white skin popped invitingly into view. I dropped my lips to her shoulder.

She started to quiver. She was getting interested, no fooling! She said: "Mm-m-m-m . . . ! Nice!"

I grinned into her hazel eyes. "Like me, baby?"

"Don't be silly. Would I be getting all riled up if I didn't like you? I like you a darn sight more than you like me," she added, pouting.

I patted her affectionately. "Why do you say that, sweetness?"

"Because you haven't been up to see me in more than three months," she reminded me.

I said: "You were too wrapped up in Jeff Fenwick. I didn't want to horn in."

"Oh, is that so? I wasn't the only one in his life. So why should he be the only one in mine? I'd have been glad to see *you*—any time!" she challenged me, swaying her hips a little. "Besides, poor Jeff's dead, now. You can be Number One boy any time you want, Dan!"

"That suits me," I said. I picked her up, carried her over to the divan on the other side of the room. I bounced her on the cushions, sank down next her.

She smiled and put her arms around me, pulled me against her . . .

AFTER a while she said: "Okay, Mister Big. Now maybe you'll tell me what you really came here for."

"I want you to do me a favor," I said.

"Now, what?"

I chuckled. "I want you to play a role for me. Over at Altamount. Right away. Will you?"

"Tonight? Are you nuts?" she demanded. She looked puzzled.

I told her what was on my mind.

When I got through, she said: "Sure I will. Wait till I get dressed."

I watched her as she got ready to go. In detail, I can't tell you everything I saw, but it was worth watching. Just studying the grace with which she drew clear tan hose over her tapered legs; slid her feet into black pumps, was a liberal education. She wriggled herself into a black dress; dabbed herself with powder, lipstick. I absorbed quite a thump out of watching her. Every movement was poetry.

Pretty soon she said: "I'm all set. Let's ramble."

We went out.

I drove to Mayda Carman's joint next. Mayda was a tall, slender blonde with come-hither eyes, go-places curves. She didn't seem to like being roused out of bed. But after a bit of palaver, she softened up; agreed to help me.

She got dressed, came down to my coupe with me.

Then I drove to Lola Lemoine's address. I struck a snag, there. Lola wasn't home. Her maid said: "She may not be back tonight, sir. I'm sorry."

I looked the maid over. She was a cute little trick. She had a turned-up nose, freckles, a nice little figure. I

said: "That's too bad. How would you like to earn ten seeds?"

She must have noticed the way my glance traveled over her scenery. She flushed, got sore. "What do you think I am, you big bum? Scram, before I . . . !"

I grinned. "Nix, baby. You got me all wrong. I want you to appear in a movie scene. Legitimate stuff."

She turned soft, quick.

"Oh-h-h—! Movies . . . ? Goodness! Why, y-yes! Wait until I get my coat—!"

Well, that completed my cast. I piled the Carman wren and Lola Lemoine's maid into my heap's rumble seat. Vio Yorkalle rode inside with me. I headed for the Altamount lot.

CHAPTER X.

The Scene Is Set



SOL LEVERING was already there. He had gathered a crew together on Sound Stage "A." He had two actors, a grip, and a cameraman. The grip was already beginning to spray vaporized oil-fog over the set.

I said: "Hi, Sol. You're sure nobody knows about this?"

"Nobody but the people here," he said. "I followed your instructions to the letter."

I looked things over. Sol's two actors were in make-up. One wore a turned-down slouch hat, sloppy clothes. With his coat collar up, he'd pass as Louie Frizzati in a medium distance shot.

The other ham made a fairly good double for Jeffery Fenwick. He was wearing a costume identical to the one Fenwick had on when he was croaked.

I placed the slender Carman frail and

Lola Lemoine's maid inside the window of the gloomy, deserted house. In the meantime, Vio Yorkalle hunted up a black wig, put it on. She smeared yellow grease-paint over her pan. That would register dead white on celluloid.

I told the cameraman exactly what I wanted him to do. He went after film; came back and threaded it into the blimp-covered camera on the nearest crane—the crane on which Foster Kinkaid had perched while filming Jeffery Fenwick's death-scene.

I said: "You're sure the camera will pick up a pistol-flash from up there, *no matter where it comes from?*"

"Sure. Can't miss. I'm using a wide angle lens. It would register light even if it were right alongside me, here." He climbed down, pulled out a tape-measure, paced off his distances. He chalked the places where my actors were to stand.

Sol Levering touched my shoulder. "How about sound, Turner? You didn't tell me to bring a mixer. I'm no expert on mikes, myself."

I said: "Sound doesn't count, this time. We'll play it silent, like the old days. Now I want a list of everybody who was on this set tonight when Fenwick got rubbed out. Actors, actresses, extras, grips, juicers, carpenters, sound-men, cameramen—everybody. Can do?"

"Can do. Wait a minute." He toddled off to the executive building; came back about ten minutes later. "Here you are." He handed me a slip of paper.

I scanned it in a hurry. Jeffery Fenwick. Asta Valenska. Louie Frizzati. The two extra girls. Foster Kinkaid, director. Kinkaid's assistant. A scrip-clerk. Harry Treller, the cameraman. Three other lens-hounds. Four electricians. Five grips—property men and

scene-shifters. Two sound-men; one on the set to handle the mikes and one upstairs in the mixing booth.

All in all, it made quite a roster. Twenty-three people, all told, had been on Sound Stage "A" at the time of the murder. Out of these twenty-three two weren't breathing any more. Jeffery Fenwick and Louie Frizzati.

I checked over the names, addresses. I turned back to Sol Levering. "You've got your properties arranged? You understand exactly how I want this thing shot?"

He said: "Maybe you'd better go over it again for me."

I talked fast for about four minutes. "Got it?" I wound up. "Yes."

I said: "Good. As soon as you get the scene in the can, send everybody home. Tell them to keep their kissers padlocked. Then have a rush positive made. Be ready to show it in the biggest projection-room you've got. We'll have a hell of a sizable audience."

He looked at me. "Aren't you going to stay and watch me make this take?"

"No. I've got things to do, people to see. I'll be meeting you. When do you think you'll be ready?"

He looked at his wrist watch. "It's half-past two in the morning now. Give me, say, an hour and a half. I'll work fast. That will make it four A. M. Okay?"

I said: "Okay," and went out.

UP in one of the main buildings I located a phone. I dialed police headquarters. Dave Donaldson wasn't there. He'd gone home.

I rang his house. After a while he answered. "Donaldson talking. Who is it and why?"

I said: "Dan Turner. Listen. I've got a list of names and addresses for you. Copy 'em down as I read 'em. Then round up everybody on the list. See that they're all on the Altamount lot by four o'clock. Use every copper in the department if you have to. But get 'em there!"

"Say, what is this?" he snarled. "Who the hell do you think you're giving orders to?"

I said: "To you, you lug. I'm going to hand you the murderer of Jeffery Fenwick, Louie Frizzati and Dolly Devorely. Or wouldn't you care for that?"

"Damn you, Turner!" he rasped. "I told you to keep your beak out of this mess! I know who bumped Fenwick and those other two. It was the dame from Trenton. I've got the blast out for her. We'll catch her before she gets a chance to lam out of L. A. Go home and go to sleep. I'm sick of your meddling!"

I said: "Wait a moment. I've helped you plenty in the past, haven't I?"

"Yeah. So what? You loused up the detail on this job, and I don't mean maybe."

"Okay," I told him soothingly. "I'm making up for all my mistakes. You do what I ask. You won't be sorry."

He grumbled a while. Then he said: "Well, all right. But if this turns out to be another of your crackbrained, half-cocked duds, I'll—"

"Sure. I know. You'll jerk my tin. You'll take away my private detective's license. So okay. I'll run that risk. You have these people on the Altamount lot at four o'clock." I dictated the list to him.

When I got through he said: "Say—damn it! Those are the people who were on that sound stage with Fenwick—"

I said: "Yeah. Right you are again."

"But what about Foster Kinkaid and Asta Valenska and Harry Trel-ler? You didn't mention them."

I said: "I'll bring that bunch myself. And I'll also have the Trenton frill with me."

"You *what*? Listen—do you know where she is?" he blew up.

"I'll have her with me at four o'clock," I said. "And by the way: two more things. Pick up a fat, one-eyed guy at the apartment house where Louie Frizzati lived. I don't like the color of his breath. He tried to maul me, earlier tonight. And send one of your official sedans to my stash, right away. With a cop to drive it. I won't be able to squeeze everybody into my coupe."

He snorted: "Wouldn't you sooner have a coach and four, Your Highness?"

I said: "Nuts," and rang off in his ear.

I went out, crawled into my buggy. I drove home.

The blonde cutie was waiting for me. "Mr. Turner—did you—"

I said: "Put these on, baby, and held her clothes out to her."

She looked surprised at the ice in my voice. She took her torn dress, went into the bedroom. Then she came back out, slipped into her coat. "Are we g-going somewhere?"

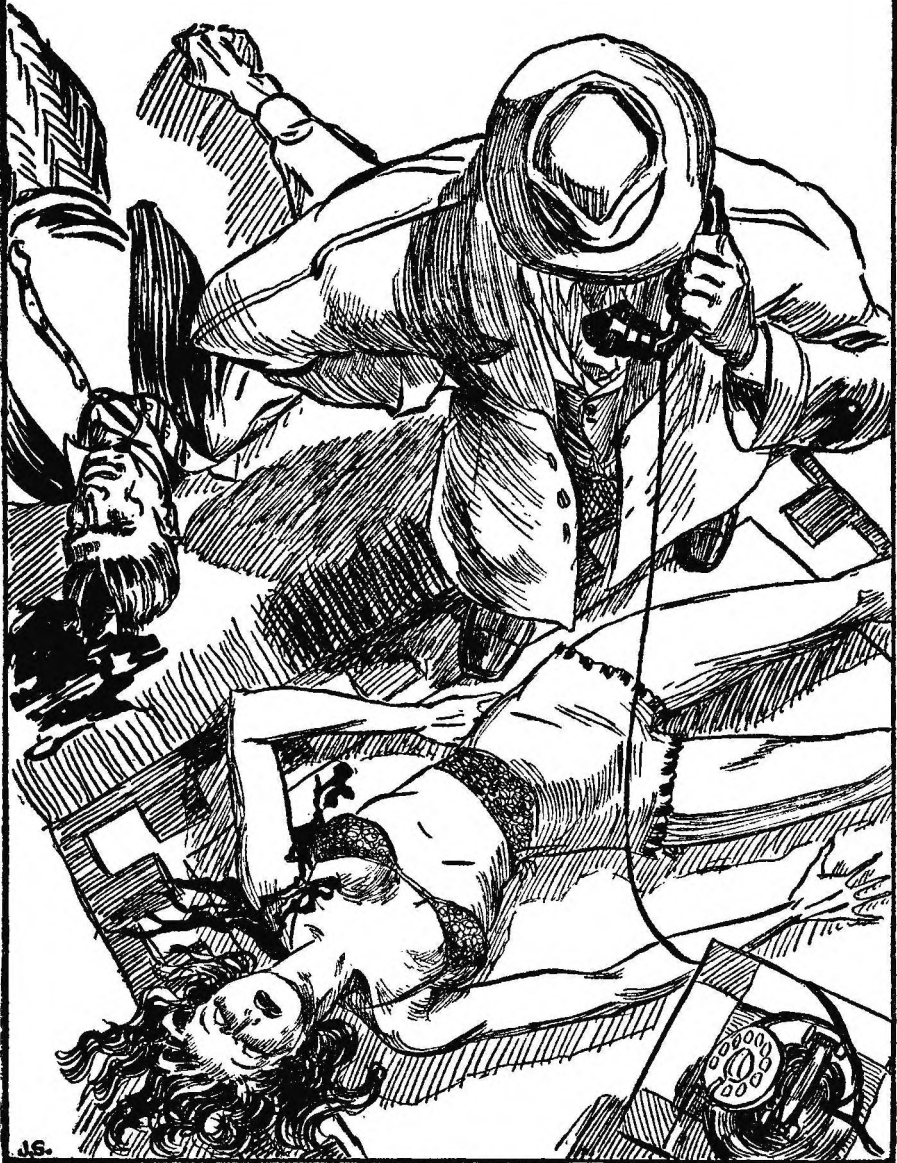
I said: "Yeah. Stick out your hands."

She did. I hauled out my nippers, snicked them over her wrists.

"Wh-what—why—" she wailed. "H-handcuffs . . . !"

I said: "Sure. Come on." I took her elbow, pulled her out of the apartment. We went downstairs. She was sobbing, away deep in her throat.

"Dave? Dan Turner calling. Two more bump-offs for you. Yeah . . . Frizzati and his moll."



THERE was a black sedan at the curb. It had "L.A.P.D." lettered on it. It was a police department jalopy. A guy puffed out from behind the wheel. He was grinning at me.

I said: "Donaldson!"

"Sure. What did you expect, King Tut? I'm your chauffeur, wise guy. I'm going to see that you don't play any tricks—" Suddenly he spotted the yellow-haired baby behind me. He said: "Who the hell—?"

I said: "Lieutenant Donaldson, meet the lady from Trenton. The one who sent those threatening letters to Jeffery Fenwick."

The girl moaned: "You dirty double-crosser! And to think I t-trusted you . . . !"

Donaldson said: "Turner, I apologize. You've delivered me the killer, just like you said you would! Boy, you're okay!"

"Maybe. Maybe not," I clipped out. "Let's get going. Drive out to Crenshaw. We'll pick up Harry Treller first."

"What's the use of all that stuff, now?" Dave asked me. "The case is closed. I've got my prisoner."

I said: "Play it my way, Dave. Get started."

I sat in the back seat with the girl. Donaldson drove. The cutie stayed as far away from me as she could get. I didn't blame her much. She thought I was a heel. I probably was. But I wasn't running any chances.

Dave stopped in front of Treller's place. I managed to roust Harry out of bed after a while. I said: "Listen, Harry. I'm going to need you again. Will you go to the studio with me, like a good guy?"

He rubbed the sleep out of his

lamps. "Sure. Wait until I climb into my shoes and pants."

Pretty soon he was dressed. He sat up front with Donaldson. I said: "The Gayboy Arms, Dave. On Wilshire. Foster Kincaid's apartment."

We went there. I left the others in the car; took the elevator up to Kincaid's floor. I rang his bell.

After a long wait, Kincaid himself opened up. I said: "Hi. Fos. I want—"

He said: "You lousy son of a . . . !" and slugged me on the jaw.

CHAPTER XI.

The End of the Round-Up



MY BRAINS rattled around inside my noggin. Lightning flashed in front of my peepers. Thunder roared in my ears. That was one of the sweetest belts I ever soaked up.

I went to my knees. Kincaid leaped over me. He started down toward the elevators.

I shook my head, finally got it clear. I yanked out my roscoe. I yelled: "Freeze, Kincaid—before I fill your kidneys full of lead!"

He froze.

I staggered toward him. "Thought you'd make a get-away, huh?"

He said: "Put down that gun and I'll beat the tripe out of you."

"No, thanks," I said. "Once was plenty. What was the idea, sloughing me that way? Guilty conscience?"

He got pale. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I said: "The hell you don't. You know I'm working on the Fenwick murder beef."

"Say, listen!" he snarled. "Are you accusing me of—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything—yet. I came up here to ask a favor. I want you to go down to the Altamount lot with me. But first I'd like to know why you used my kisser for a punching bag."

"Because I hate slimy double-crossers!" he rasped.

"Meaning me?" I said.

"Meaning you! You're tired of being a private snoop. You're looking for a soft berth in pictures. You thought you could gyp me out of my job, you yellow—"

I said: "Wait a second. What the hell are you getting at?"

"Don't play stupid, flatfoot. I've got a friend that's a grip at the studio. He phoned me a while ago; said you had talked Sol Levering into remaking that last scene of my new opus. You were trying to show me up. Trying to convince Levering you're a better director than I am."

I stared at him. He sounded sincere enough. And he had a rep for being a conceited fat-head. Maybe he really thought I'd been trying to cut his throat with Levering. But on the other hand, maybe it was just a stall. He used to be an actor before he started directing; he knew how to make a role look convincing. There was a chance he thought I was going to put the pinch on him. That might be why batted me, tried to take a powder.

I couldn't tell for sure. And I had no way of squeezing the real truth out of him. Not just then. There wasn't time. The only thing I could do was take him with me, along with the others, and see what happened.

I said: "Listen, Fos. You and I will fight this out some other day. Right

now you're coming with me. If you try to make a break, I'll drill a hole in you to see if I can strike oil."

Then I edged him into the elevator, took him downstairs.

I LOADED him into the back seat of Donaldson's sedan, alongside the yellow-haired wren. I kept my roscoe against his ribs. I said: "Okay, Dave. Drive out to Asta Valenska's place."

We headed for Beverly. Donaldson didn't spare the horse-power, either. When he stopped, I said: "Keep everybody together, Dave. I'll be back in a minute."

I rang the Valenska bell. A maid let me in. I said: "I'll go up to Miss Valenska's room. You run along." I patted her, gave her a shove.

She hesitated. Then she said: "I remember you! You're a detective! You were here tonight, during all that shooting."

I said: "Yeah," and went upstairs. I walked into Asta's boudoir without knocking. I switched on the light.

It woke her up. She sat upright. The covers fell away from her. She was wearing sheer pajamas of black silk. White skin looks gorgeous through the lacework! She started to scream.

I put my arms around her shoulders. "Easy does it, sweetness. It's Dan Turner."

"Y-you—!"

"Yeah. I think I've landed Jeff's murderer. I need your help. Let's see how fast you can get dressed."

She slipped out of bed. She turned her back to me, yanked her pajamas off. She forgot all about me. For a second I glimpsed a statue carved out of white marble. Then she slid a white

Princess slip down over her curves. It settled, clung. It was like a curtain going down on a Follies tableau. She grabbed a dress, wriggled into it. Her bare feet burrowed into high-heeled slippers. She wrapped a coat around her. "I'm ready, Dan."

I said: "We'll use your car if you don't mind." Then I went downstairs ahead of her. I yelled: "Hey, Donaldson—go ahead. I'll follow in Miss Valenska's heap."

Dave's jalopy pulled away. Asta and I went around to her garage, climbed into her Rolls. I drove. We headed for the Altamount lot.

Asta sat close to me. "What's happening?"

I put my free arm around her waist. I said: "We've got the dame that threatened your husband. And I'm going to pull a fast one."

CHAPTER XII.

The Flash in the Fog



I PARKED on the Altamount lot. I saw Donaldson taking Treller, Kinkaid, and the blonde cutie into the main building. I kept my arm around Asta's waist. I whispered: "Don't be surprised at anything that happens. Keep your shirt on. Just watch close."

We walked inside.

Sol Levering was standing by a door. It led into a miniature theater. I stopped. I whispered: "Everything set, Sol?"

He nodded. He looked strained.

I led Asta to a seat. The room was plenty crowded. Cops lined the walls, guarded the exits. I counted heads. Everybody was there.

I walked up to the front; stood before the movie-screen. I said: "Attention, please."

The room got quiet.

I said: "You've all probably guessed why you're here. Each of you was on Sound Stage 'A' tonight when Jeffery Fenwick was murdered. You saw him killed—and yet you didn't see anything at all. On account of the artificial fog, the actual bump-off was hidden from everybody. Even the camera doesn't show what happened. All it got was shadows, movement. I'll let you look for yourself. You up there in the projection-booth—run off the reel for me, please."

The lights went out. I stepped aside. The screen glared with white brilliance. Then the movie began.

There was the thick, drifting fog. The deserted house. The two wrens at the lower window. Jeffery Fenwick walked on. The mists swallowed him. Then came movement, over to the left. A blurred stab of flame. Fenwick crumpling, falling.

The scene stopped suddenly. The screen got glaring white again. The house-lights came on.

I started talking some more. "You have just looked at a man dying. Actually dying." I said.

Somebody moaned, sobbed. It was Asta Valenska. I felt sorry for her.

But I had to go through with it now. I said: "You all know that shot was fired by Louie Frizzati. I mean the spurt of flame you just saw on the screen. But Frizzati's gun was loaded with blanks. He didn't kill Fenwick. In fact, Louie himself was bumped off, later tonight."

There came a lot of gasps. Plenty of guys in the audience hadn't yet heard

about Frizzati and his moll being croaked. It was news to them.

I said: "Now, Frizzati was killed for a very good reason. He knew who had murdered Fenwick. Or anyhow, he had a good idea. He was about to spill his guts. He was shot to keep him from talking."

Somebody yelled at me: "If Frizzati was so damned innocent, why did he try to run away?"

It was Foster Kinkaid who snarled the question. I said: "That's easy. Louie had a police record. He knew he was in a jam. He had fired a blank at Fenwick. At the same instant, somebody else fired a real slug. Louie must have thought he'd be framed for the job. He got scared, took a powder. Then later, when I caught up with him, he started to tell me what he knew. He wanted to clear himself. He was cooled off before he could talk."

I STOPPED long enough for that to sink in. Then I went on: "It's perfectly clear that Jeffery Fenwick was burned down by somebody on the sound stage—somebody on the set or hiding beyond the camera lines. The fake fog was a swell cloak. Even the film didn't pick up the flame-streak from the actual death-gun. The fog was too thick."

Harry Treller called out: "If that's the case, what's this all about? What are you trying to prove, Turner?"

I said: "I'm going to prove plenty. The killer didn't figure on something that happened by accident: something that was to give the game dead away.

"Let's go back a minute. Jeffery Fenwick had been getting certain threatening letters. His past had caught up with him. We won't go into that.

But the murderer knew he was getting these threats. So it looked like a swell chance to bump him—and blame it on the person who wrote the letters.

"Okay. Now for the important part. Have you ever heard of infra-red film? Sure. It's treated with special emulsion; sensitized to infra-red rays. The so-called 'dark rays'—invisible light.

"Infra-red film penetrates darkness, murk. When we had that cold spell here in California, the orange-growers saved their orchards by burning smudge-pots for heat. The smoke settled over Hollywood like a blanket. But most picture companies went right ahead with their shooting schedules. Location units weren't affected. Because they used infra-red film. It cuts right through smoke.

"Now, here's the twist. When Jeffery Fenwick's last scene was shot to-night, a mistake had been made. By accident, one of the cameras got loaded with the wrong kind of film. *Infra-red film!* You didn't know that, Kinkaid. Neither did you, Treller. Nobody knew it. The camera also had a wide-angle lens. And now I'm going to show you who killed Fenwick.—Okay, projection-room. *Roll 'em!*"

The lights went out. The screen came to life.

I could see the rolling veil of fake fog. But I could also see *through* it. There stood Jeffery Fenwick, facing away from the lens. In the background, the two extra girls showed at the window. Over to the left stood Louie Frizzati and Asta Valenska.

Frizzati raised his roscoe. Flame belched out of it. Then, right alongside of him, there was another streak of light. *It vomited out of Asta Valenska's handbag!*

I heard a shriek. The picture stopped. Somebody forgot to turn the house-lights back on. Asta Valenska yelled: "God damn you—"

Hell broke loose. Harry Treller's voice sliced through the blackness. "I killed Fenwick! Come on, Asta—quick—"

A roscoe went: "*Chow-chow!*" I went plunging up the aisle. People got in my way. I lashed out with my dukes. I punched a path for myself. I roared: "Dave! Dave Donaldson! Grab Asta Valenska—"

THE lights came on. Asta was trying to reach the back exit. She had a smoking gat in her mitt. Harry Treller was sprawled in the aisle. Blood was gushing out of his kisser.

I dived at the Valenska bimbo. She went down. She tried to twist her gat around; tried to plug me. I bopped her on the jaw.

I said: "The jig's up, baby. You were crazy jealous of Jeff Fenwick. He wasn't true to you. He wasn't built that way. He was a lady-killer. The dames fell for him in droves. He never learned to keep away from them, even after he married you. He had a regular Hollywood harem."

"Yes! A harem—that's what he had! Damn him—"

I said: "You knew he was chasing. You also knew he was being threatened by some girl back east. He had ruined the girl's sister; she killed herself. So you decided to bump Jeff for his catting around. You planned to blame it on the girl who wrote the letters.

"You shot him on the set tonight. The gun was in your handbag. The handbag choked the flame-flash. But Louie Frizzati knew you were the one.

"That's why you tried to steer me away from Louie. You were afraid I'd find him, get the truth out of him. So you paid me a grand . . . among other things . . . to lay off him and hunt for the girl who wrote the letters.

"That's what tipped me off. Why were you so anxious to clear Louie Frizzati? You fronted for him because you were scared he'd give you away. You even traced him to his moll's cottage. You got there in time to hear him start spilling his guts to me. So you drilled him—and his girl-friend."

She said: "You rat! I'd have got away with it if you hadn't found that infra-red film—"

I said: "Well, now that you've confessed, I'll tell you something. That was a fake roll. Sol Levering made it for me, tonight. With a substitute cast. I didn't have any real evidence against you. But I was sure you were the killer. The film was a trap. You didn't see yourself on the screen just now. That was Vio Yorkalle, acting your part—*and doing it the way you actually did it!* It got a confession out of you, baby. That's what counts!"

Dave Donaldson leaned over me. He grated: "Harry Treller's dead. Asta plugged him. Why the hell did she—?"

I said: "Harry loved Asta. He was her sweetie before she fell for Fenwick. He told me he'd go to hell for her. That's what he was willing to do, just now. He was willing to take a murder rap for her. But when he tried to drag her out of here, she lost her head. She pulled her gat, let him have it."

Dave said: "That makes four bump-offs." He snagged a pair of nippers over Asta's wrists, yanked her to her feet. He said: "Too damned bad we can't hang you four times!"

Her crimson lips writhed. "Once will be enough, copper!" she whispered dully.

CHAPTER XIII.

Blonde Bait



ANKLED back to where the blonde Trenton cutie was hunched down in a chair. I unlocked her bracelets. I said: "Sorry I had to put you through the wringer this way, kiddo. But I had to. Otherwise Donaldson wouldn't have worked with me. helped me pull the trap on the Valenska

bimbo. My movie stunt was the bait for Valenska. But you were the bait for Donaldson. Blonde bait. Blonde justice."

She looked at me. "I—I understand . . . Dan . . ." she whispered.

I said: "How about a little snort of Vat 69 to calm your nerves, baby? I've got a fresh fifth in my apartment."

"I—I like your apartment . . .!" she smiled at me.

Wen went out into the open air. The sun was just coming up. The morning looked fresh, rosy. Pretty soon it would be breakfast-time for most people.

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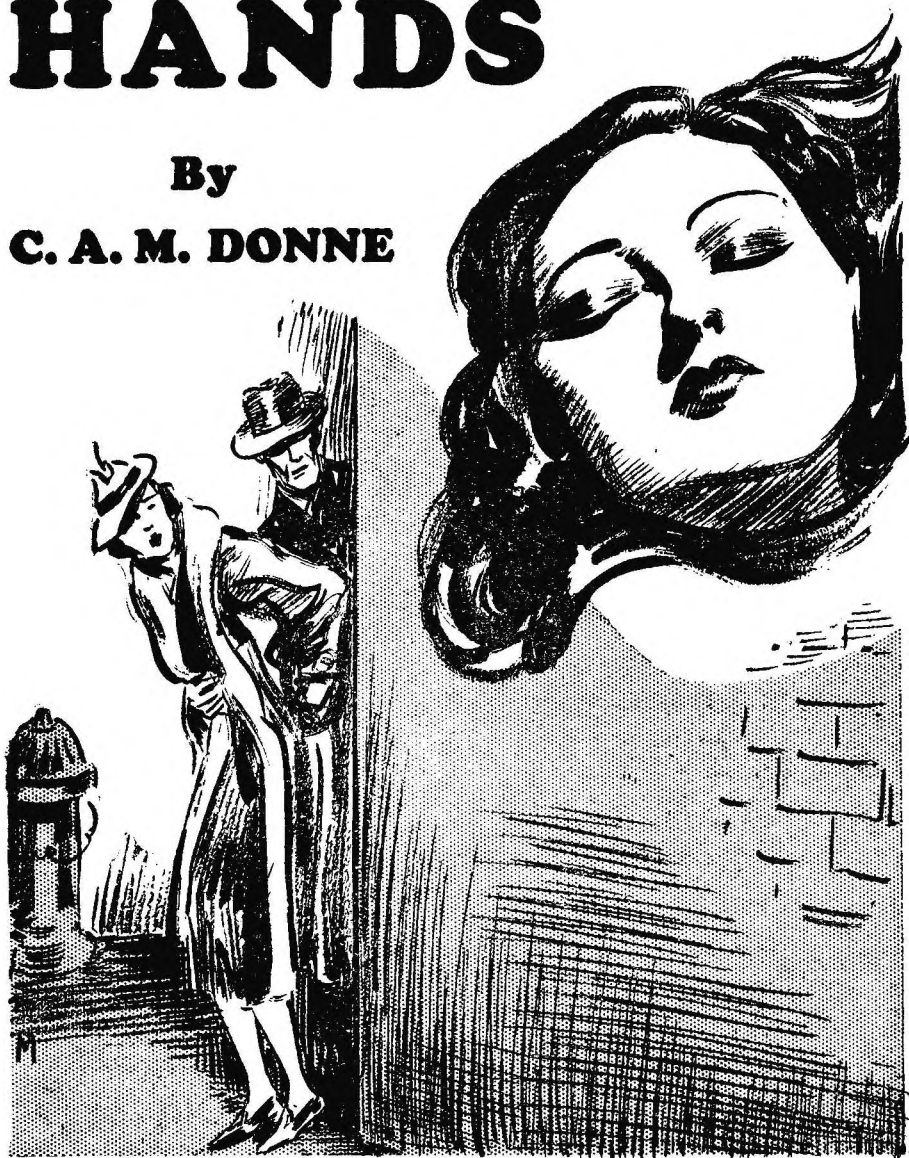
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VENGEANCE of the Severed HANDS

By
C. A. M. DONNE





A TRUE CRIME STORY*

Relating the facts in the case of the woman who, aided by her dead sister's hands, pursued an undeviating course to ultimate justice

THE murdered woman had been three days cold when her stiff hands reached out of the grave to claim vengeance.

Only her hands, gashed and mutilated and black with crusted blood, and the rigid wrists and arms that supported them. There was no body, no head.

**NOTE: Although all names of characters and places in this story have been altered for obvious reasons, the story itself is essentially a true fact story, in all details.*

Not a scrap of clothing, not a ring or trinket that might have told whose hands they had been.

It was Labor Day, September 4, 1933, in Cleveland, and a brisk wind was blowing. Henry Foster and Albert Tracy, whose homes were not far away, were taking a short cut along a narrow path that twisted through a strip of waste land at Geneva and Plaisted Avenues. Small children were frolicking along the same path, playing hide-and-seek in the tall grass among the scattered clumps of shrubbery. Scores of people passed that way every day, but the short cut was seldom used at night, for there were no houses very near and darkness made the place eerie and desolate.

Foster's casual eye was caught by a tattered corner of newspaper fluttering in the wind beneath a leafy bush, not more than a yard from the beaten trail. The newspaper would have blown away, except that some curious object weighted it down. Foster put a restraining hand on his companion's arm, paused and looked closer, mildly interested.

He saw fingers, hooked and spread wide apart, grasping emptiness. The breath went out of him in a gasp of icy horror . . .

Inspector John L. Burke, of the homicide bureau of the Police Department, shook his grizzled head impatiently when the two men came to him. He had little hope of solving the gruesome mystery until other parts of the butchered body came to light.

"The doctors say she was a woman of thirty or a little more," he told the reporters. "She probably was good looking. She was shapely, anyway—the detectives combed the field and

found her legs just a little way from the arms. They'd been hacked off at the thighs with a knife by somebody who didn't know much about surgery. The arms and legs had been put in a little hollow and covered with leaves and twigs. The wind scooped the leaves and twigs away."

"Any identifying marks at all?" a newshawk asked.

"Not a scar or birthmark or anything of the kind. Now, if we'd found a head, somebody might recognize a picture of it in the papers. But hands can't tell anything. We're checking the fingerprints, of course, but the chances are better than a thousand to one she never had a police record."

Inspector Burke was a hundred percent right about the police record; there wasn't one. But he was wrong about hands being unable to tell anything. These hands were actually eloquent. Mutely, before many hours had passed, they told the story of the most ghastly love murder Cleveland had thought upon in many years. Unwaveringly they pointed out the one man in America whose arrest could solve the baffling case. Relentlessly they dragged him back hundreds of miles to stammer a nightmarish confession. Sternly they pushed him into the tomb-like confines of the state prison.

And, weirdest of all—even then they were not through with him!

COINCIDENCE, as a rule, is out of place in fiction, but in real life it is forever upsetting the best laid plans of rats and criminals. Sheer coincidence—or, if you prefer, the inscrutable workings of Fate—gave justice the first vital clue to the identity of the murdered woman.

And this is how it came about. In the city at that time the Acme Private Agency had as its ace investigator a man who at one time had been prominent in criminal identification—even now retaining close contacts with the heads of the officials in the police fingerprint department.

For Walter Poe, business was in a slack spell. Newspaper accounts of the finding of the butchered woman had interested him. Although he had no authorized entry to the case, he realized the slowness with which the police were proceeding and was shrewd enough to see what a feather in his cap it would be if he could crack the case.

And he thought he saw an opening. He telephoned a friend at headquarters. As a result—

In the police identification bureau a careworn clerk pored most of the next day through fingerprint files. Before him was a card on which were impressed the patterns of the three-day-dead fingertips. They were not like any of the prints of the hundreds of women who had fallen afoul of the law in that city.

There remained a small file of casual prints of persons who were not law-breakers. Some of the subjects had come in voluntarily to be fingerprinted. Others had been at minor odds, at one time or another, with the United States Government. The sources of the indexed cards were many and varied.

The clerk didn't think for a minute to find the answer to the riddle of the dead hands in this heterogeneous jumble. But with Poe's urging he did.

The horror-trail pivoted on the fingerprint clue, dipped back eleven long years. It took into account the fact that on August 5, 1922, a careful im-

migration inspector on the United States side of the Canadian border became suspicious of a bright-eyed, dark-haired French-Canadian girl who passed him every day at the ferry dock where he was stationed. She invariably told him she was coming across the river from Canada, for just a few hours to visit friends, and was always admitted. But she had appeared on the same ferry at the same hour every morning, and the inspector wondered if she wasn't working or seeking work in the States. He questioned her.

Yes, she said readily enough. She was looking for a job. Was there anything in that? She had spent all her life—more than twenty years—in a stuffy little Canadian city, she said. Now she wanted a larger orbit to swing in. If she could find work she expected to live in the United States.

Her eyes grew brighter as she told of her intentions. Those were prohibition days in the States and the whole Canadian border was dotted with bootlegging centers, prosperous because of their proximity to a land where the manufacture of honest-to-God liquor was lawful and respectable. These American town were places of riches and glamor, much talked about in the more sedate provinces of Canada. They were the shining goals of thousand of ambitious adventurous young Canadian men and women.

But the girl had erred innocently in not announcing her plans the first time she crossed the border, in order that the immigration office could register her as an alien in search of gainful employment, as Department of Labor regulations require. So the inspector took her into custody for half a day and, to her intense indignation, she was fingerprinted, just like a criminal!

Eventually she appeared before an immigration board, told her story frankly and was given permission to enter the United States and remain as long as she wished. Subsequently she was admitted to full citizenship.

But her fingerprints, which had been sent automatically to Police Headquarters for classification, remained on file. They told the clerk in the police identification bureau that the severed hands had belonged to a girl whose name, to begin with, had been Dorothy Greene.

Even then Poe and the homicide detectives had a tangled skein to unravel. In eleven years Dorothy Greene had been employed many times in shops and restaurants and blind pigs, which is what speakeasies are called in the Middle West. She had taken—and discarded—three husbands. She had moved about considerably and changed her name as often as she felt like it. She had learned to drink too often and too much.

She had not been particularly happy in the land of her adoption. This much the dead hands made clear, pointing the way unerringly toward the terrible climax of her tragic life.



HE afternoon of the day the hands came out of their grave Frank W. Peters sat in his home at 4062 Currier Avenue and listened to the radio. Peters was a lean, graying man, in his fifties, who wore horn-rimmed spectacles that gave him an owlish appearance. He had been a railroad worker, a taxicab driver, and, during the World War, a mess sergeant in the flying corps overseas. When the depression came, he found he could make more money selling illicit beer and whiskey in his home than working at a job, so that was now his business.

Ralph Voigt, five years younger than Peters, who rented a room in the same house, sat with his host in the living room. He smoked a corn cob pipe. He asked casually: "Any word from Alice yet?"

"No," Peters replied, "and it's darned funny, too. She's been gone three days now—long enough to find out the Maldens aren't in Chicago. She ought to be coming home where she belongs—unless she's made up her mind to leave me for good."

Voigt thought it was funny, too. The night of August 31 a bunch of young fellows had come to the house to buy drinks and there had been quite a party. Voigt had gone to bed early, but he could hear the noise in his bedroom, and the sound of Alice Peters' voice made him suspect she was drinking past her normal capacity. Toward morning, before daylight, he had awakened to hear Alice—who wasn't really Peters' wife, but only lived with him—moaning in her bedroom. He had supposed she was sick from the liquor she had taken.

The moans ceased finally and Peters tapped softly on the roomer's door. "Did you hear the wife?" Peters asked.

Voigt sleepily admitted he had.

"Well," Peters said, "she's resting better now. I don't think she'll bother you any more tonight."

Voigt thought no more about it, not even when he failed to see Alice around the house next day. Peters had an explanation for her absence that sounded reasonable enough.

"We had an argument," Peters related, "and Alice got up early this morning and left. Said she was going to see her sister, Frances Malden, in Chicago. I let her go because I thought she needed a couple days to cool off."

It was reasonable—except that coincidence took a hand in matters later that same day when Francis Malden and her husband, Philip, rang the Peters doorbell, having driven down from Chicago. Peters looked at them in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Why—why Alice just left to spend a few days with you folks!" he stammered. "I wonder what she'll do when she doesn't find you at home?"

Frances Malden was a sensible, self-possessed person—a fact she was to prove before long to the admiring satisfaction of Walter Poe. As a matter of fact, from then on, she was to become the real detective in the case.

"Alice knows how to take care of herself," she averred to Peters. "Philip and I are going to stay in town a few days seeing some friends. When she finds out we've left town, she'll wire you, and you can tell her to come back to Cleveland if she wants to see us."

So three uneventful days passed, and the papers told of the shuddery discovery in the bushes beside the lonely path, and Peters and Voigt sat listening to a radio reporter tell what the authorities conjectured about it.

Suddenly the radio reporter's voice rose on a note of excitement: "Flash' Walter Poe, private investigator for the Acme Detective Agency, has just announced that the hands have been identified as those of Dorothy Greene, whose movements in the last eleven years are being traced."

Peters got up and switched off the radio. "I'm going to drive out to the ball park to watch a game," he told Voigt. "I'll be seeing you."

WITHIN the hour Walter Poe with a uniformed officer was banging at the door of the Carrier Avenue house.

Mrs. Malden was with them her face tense and tear-streaked. Her sister had been Dorothy Greene. It was only in the last four years that Dorothy had borrowed Peters' name and started calling herself Alice, because she liked the sound of it.

Poe and Dorothy's sister, together with the officer went first of all to the bedroom where Peters and the dead woman, lovers once upon a time, had slept side by side more than a thousand nights. They found blankets rolled up in a closet, still damp from an inexpert laundering that had not removed the blood that had soaked them. They found ugly blotches on the floorboards and the carpet. A scrap of newspaper was stiff with blackened blood. There were stains on a pillow.

Here, Walter Poe declared, Peters must have lopped off the arms that came back to accuse him. Here must have been horrible butchery in the early morning hours, with the door locked and the window blinds drawn and the stench of gore making the air moist and heavy.

"He must have planned it for a long time," Mrs. Malden sobbed. "He used to read all the murder stories in the newspapers and sneer every time the guilty man was caught. He used to brag to me that if ever he killed anybody, the authorities would never be able to convict him of it. He talked a lot about what he called the perfect crime—he had things like that on his mind always. And I'm going to see that he's punished." Her voice was implacable.

Dorothy's murderer had come dreadfully close to accomplishing the "perfect crime", the police admitted frankly. If the little French-Canadian girl

had not been ignorant of the immigration regulations back in 1922—if she had not been trapped by a conscientious inspector in a minor deceit—there would have been no way of identifying the severed hands. Or if the hands had lain in their shallow grave, undiscovered, until decomposition had destroyed the flesh, even the fingerprint file would be useless. But for the wind and the sharp and curious eye of Henry Foster, suspicion would never have been turned upon Peters.

The detective took Ralph Voigt to Police Headquarters where he requested to be held as a material witness, but made it plain he did not suspect Voigt of having any part in the crime.

"Peters is the man I want," Walter Poe said positively. "It's only a question of time till I pick him up."

Mrs. Malden nodded mutely.

A week later Poe found Peters' automobile abandoned in a downtown parking lot near an interurban bus station. A little later he found the body of a man who resembled Peters in the Rouge River at the western edge of the city, and thought for a while that his quarry had been driven by pangs of conscience to end his own life—but the drowned man was finally identified as somebody else.

A farmer found Dorothy's headless torso after several days had passed. It lay in a ditch beside a country road near the little suburban town of Bradford. Sun and rain had beaten upon it and the flesh was far gone in decay. It added one more ghastly note of horror to the case, but that was all.

Police officers, anxious not to be outdone by Poe, began arresting and questioning men who answered Peters' description all across the country. Author-

ities in Cleveland were notified of nearly five hundred suspects, all the way from New York to California. But none of them was Peters.

But all of Poe's activities were as nothing compared to those of the dead woman's sister.

Determined to help bring the murderer of justice, Frances Malden remained in Cleveland a month, suggesting likely places where Peters might have hidden. She stood every day for hours at the city's busiest intersections, scanning the faces of people who passed.

Then temporarily discouraged, she gave up the seemingly hopeless search and went back to her husband in Chicago.

It was a fateful move on Mrs. Malden's part—one that might almost have been pointed out to her by Dorothy's hands, reaching out for vengeance. Otherwise the killer might never have been called upon to answer for his crime. The police were about to drop the case as unsolved. Poe was at his wit's end. Yet despite her temporary abandonment of the search, Mrs. Malden hadn't given up hope.



IN front of a relief station in Chicago a motley queue of hungry men straggled across the sidewalk. Ragged, dull-eyed, shambling, they moved a slow step at a time toward the doorway where men were passing out buns and paper cups of steaming soup. Professional bums, victims of the depression, hapless wanderers, men without friends—they had come from all points of the compass. People passed them with hardly a glance for similar breadlines were a common sight everywhere in the metropolis.

"I'll drink if I please," she said, and threw the liquor in my face. That made me sore.



Frances Malden's were the only eyes that looked sharply at the derelicts. Nearly seven weeks had passed since Dorothy had been killed, but still she searched ceaselessly for the man she was certain bore the guilt of it. Not a face passed her, ever, without being subjected to her keen scrutiny. Sooner or later, in one city or another, she knew she would surely find the hateful face

that was always in her mind. All the police forces in America, all the private investigators anywhere, hadn't one half the determination of Frances Malden.

"If necessary, I'll search for him all my life," she had declared. "While he is free, I can never rest."

Near the head of the woeful breadline, only three or four persons removed from the buns and the soup, shuffled a

gaunt and cadaverous man with graying hair. His clothes were in tatters. Behind horn-rimmed spectacles his pale eyes had a haunted, desperate look. Every second or two he would throw a swift glance over his shoulder, as though fearful that some one was following him.

Mrs. Malden thought the sag of his shoulders was familiar. She took one startled look at his face. She did not need a second look to convince her that she had found Peters' despite the amazing change that had come over him. She darted around the first corner and ran without sparing lungs or muscles until she found a policeman. She gasped out her shocking story. The policeman returned with the determined huntress to the relief station—too late. Peters had gulped his soup, bolted his bun, and vanished utterly. Police radio cars prowled the neighborhood for hours without finding the slightest trace of him.

There was little sleep for Frances Malden that night, nor the next and the next. She took up the hunt in dead earnest, sure of her skulking prey. All day long she went from relief station to relief station, staring at hungry men, describing Peters to them in the hope that they might remember him. By night, with her husband, she patrolled the shabbier streets until long after the last stragglers had retired to their beds, park benches, and doorways.

The third day, triumphant, she ran her quarry to earth. Peters slouched out of a cheap rooming house, not fifty feet from where Philip and Frances Malden were standing, wondering where next to look. Peters peered around carefully, but he did not recognize either of them. As he moved down

the street, Malden followed, while his wife ran to find a policeman.

This time there was no slip-up. The arrest was made quietly, without difficulty. Peters seemed relieved as he stretched out his wrists for the handcuffs, looking dully at his captors, cringing before their indignation.

"I'm glad you found me," he muttered. "I've been expecting it for a long time. You can run away from everybody else, but you can't ever run away from yourself."

THAT same day he made his damning confession, anxious to purge his conscience of the poison that tormented it. His confession is worth retelling in his own slow words, mumbled to a district attorney's stenographer:

"On the afternoon of August 31 I had been playing the horses at a bookmaker's on Caroline Avenue. When I got home about six P. M., there was a bunch of boys at my house, drinking and having a good time. We ran a sort of blind pig and my wife had been drinking.

"After they left she got sore at me for not being home all day and started to drink some more. We sat out on the front porch for quite a while and I had a roomer there and he came home and went to bed. His name is Ralph Voigt.

"Then we sat there for a while longer and she kept going in every few minutes, getting another drink. Then she got ugly because I told her not to drink any more and said she was going to have one more drink. She had it and then we went upstairs. Then she went down and got another drink.

"When she came up, she brought a glass of hootch up with her and I said,

'Please don't drink any more of that tonight.' She said, 'I'm going to do as I please.'

"Then I got up and went over to beg her not to drink any more and she threw the drink in my face. I got sore and hit her with my fist. She fell with her head against the table. Then I jumped on her to hold her down and she started to fight me. I grabbed her and choked her. I kind of held on to a pillow and laid on her face and smothered her.

"That's all there was to it then. I walked back to the roomer's room and asked him if he had heard the wife. He said yes and then he went back to bed and I went downstairs and washed my hands off, and stayed downstairs the rest of the night.

"Around nine o'clock in the morning I figured on getting rid of the body, so I cut off her head with a butcher knife and I wrapped it up in a lot of newspapers and threw it into a garbage truck that was standing back of the house picking up garbage. (Note: Poe thought of this possibility when it was too late. Two days after the identification of the hands all refuse carted to garbage reduction plants was picked over by searchers for other parts of the body. The head was never found; apparently it had been ground to bits in the reduction machinery and made into fertilizer, grease and other by-products.)

"I cut the arms and legs off the same way. I was going to throw them in the garbage truck but it pulled out before I got it done, and that night I took and threw them in a vacant lot. I don't know just where the lot is, but it is a couple of miles from the house, out where her brother used to live.

"I had the body wrapped up in a piece of carpet and I threw it in the ditch along a country road the other side of Bradford. Then I came back to the house and stayed there until Monday. Then I went to Cincinnati on the bus."

After that Peters drifted aimlessly. He had less than twenty dollars in his pocket when he left Voigt on Labor Day. When the money was gone, he sold two gold rings, bought a change of clothing, and had a dollar left for food. When the dollar was spent, he went hungry. Once, crouched atop a swaying freight train, he attempted to ease his conscience by confessing his crime to a tramp companion. Then he began to worry, fearful that the hobo would betray him on the chance of getting a reward. At the first opportunity he swung off that train and began beating his way toward Chicago. There he pan-handled nickels and dimes, enough for a bare living.

He talked even more when he was returned to Cleveland, answering readily all questions put to him. He described his life with the girl who had been Dorothy Greene. Sometimes, when he spoke of her, there were tears in his eyes.

"Alice was the only name I knew her by. We really loved each other and got along fine, except once in a while when we quarreled, just as most couples do. Liquor made all our trouble. I never touched it, but she drank a lot, and whenever she got drunk we had a fight. Never a bad one, though, till the last time.

"I met her four years ago. I had gone into the bootlegging business and she used to come to my place to drink beer. Sometimes she would be with a man, and sometimes she would come

alone. After a while she always came alone. She was real pretty. We got to like each other a lot and one night, when she had been there drinking all evening, I asked her to stay. She did, and after that she stayed all the time. I guess most people thought we were husband and wife. I always thought of her as my wife.

"Generally I keep my temper pretty well. If I had used my head that terrible night, I wouldn't be in this mess. But we had quarreled so much I didn't feel like taking time to figure anything out. It just seemed the bottom had dropped out of everything and I didn't give a damn. I didn't realize I had killed her till it was all over, and then the only thing I could think of was to get her out of the house. So I cut her up.

"But I can see now it was all a terrible mistake. I'm ready to go to prison and take my medicine, though I'd rather die if it could be arranged. It has been awful—awful!"

As the day of his trial approached, he kept repeating those last words—"It's awful!" He said hardly anything else toward the last.



UT the dead hands of pretty Dorothy Green had not yet finished their grim task. They had trapped her murderer, squeezed a confession from him, made it certain that he would get the full measure of legal punishment—but that was not enough. Frank Peters had strangled and smothered her before he performed his ghoulish surgery upon her shapely body. His confession saved him from capital punishment. There would be no noose or electric chair or lethal gas chamber for him.

A lot of people thought it unjust that his punishment should be less severe than Dorothy's fate.

It is certain his punishment was not easy to bear. None can say what terrible ghosts came to torment the gaunt killer as he lay long nights in his cell. Perhaps, when he closed his eyes, he saw the hands of the girl he had loved as they had been the morning she died—trying to push him away, clawing at him, prying at his fingers at her throat. Perhaps he knew they were reaching out past the grave for him even now, merciless as his own hands had been at that fatal moment.

At any rate, he was more like a ghost himself than a man when he stood at last before Judge Everett E. Blake in the Cleveland Police Court. When the prosecutor tried to talk to him, all he would say was, "It's awful!" But there was little need for a prosecutor in this case, anyway, for Peters asked no mercy from the court.

The courtroom was hot and brilliant with the blue-white glare of Kleig lights. A battery of bulky motion picture cameras was trained on judge and prisoner. Flashlight bulbs flickered like chain lightning as newspaper cameramen squirmed through the crowd with their paraphernalia, making pictures from every conceivable angle. Spectators packed every available bit of space, sweating freely, elbowing one another in the hope of getting a better view. A special detail of cops tried vainly to keep some semblance of order.

Judge Blake leaned solemnly across the bench when he pronounced the sentence, so that the microphones of the sound-reel men should miss no word of his angry diatribe.

" . . . Your crime is such a horrible

deed as to stagger the minds of men. There is only one form of punishment for it. I sentence you for the rest of your natural life to hard labor and solitary confinement . . .'

It was the worst the law could manage. Nobody in the courtroom, excepting possibly the indifferent prisoner himself, dreamed how brief his term of servitude would be.

Detectives took Peters to the state prison by train two days later. He sat without speaking, without seeming to see anything, until they were halfway to their destination. Suddenly he leaped from his seat, straining at the steel handcuffs that chained him to its arm.

"I can see them!" he screamed. "I can see her hands! They're dripping with blood! They're reaching out toward me!"

A husky detective shook him violently, while wondering passengers looked on, until the prisoner lapsed into a morose silence. The silence lasted all the rest of the long journey. But when they reached the tall gates of the prison Peters' knees buckled beneath him and he had to be practically carried through them . . .

Within six months reporters, who had mistakenly thought they had told the last of the Peters murder story in their news and feature columns, were besieging those same gates to discover exactly what had happened to the man who had strangled and butchered the woman he loved. They heard a wild, weird, all but unbelievable tale.

Peters had not gone insane—at least, not from the point of view of alienists. They had placed him under observation in the prison hospital to be sure of that, as soon as they found out about his hideous obsession.

But Peters, nevertheless, saw ghostly

hands, dripping blood from ghastly wounds, by day and by night. He would be at his work in the prison kitchen, perhaps, silent and composed save for his occasional half-audible mutter: "It's awful!"—and all of a sudden the hands would come gliding through the air toward him, reaching for his throat.

At such times he would fly into incredible fits of hysteria, shrieking and babbling incoherent prayers, waving his arms to fend off the invisible. It took strong men to hold him when the madness was upon him, and only the doctors could eventually quiet him, with their hypodermic needles.

A little over seven months after the woman who had been Dorothy Greene had been strangled—it was the night of April 17, 1934—the fantastic illusion visited Peters in his solitary, haunted cell. His shrieks climbed the scale of terror higher than they ever had before, ringing through the steel corridors, electrifying all his prison mates into sweating wakefulness. Then, eerily, the sounds bubbled into silence.

Guards came running to unlock the steel door. They found Frank Peters gasping on his cot, tearing with his own gnarled fingers at his scrawny throat. His eyes were bulging from his head in a horrified stare at something no one else could see. His face was purple with congested blood.

He died, shuddering, while the guards were lifting him into a stretcher.

Death, said the doctors, was caused by a heart ailment.

But all observers of the case realized that more important in insuring his punishment than all the work of the police, than all of the investigations of Walter Poe, was the detection of Frances Malden—aided by the dead woman's hands!

SOB SISTER SUE



CODED IN EARNEST





PAIR of TRAMPS

By MORT LANSING

Bane had descended from private investigator to just plain bum. The girl had gone in the opposite direction, from show girl into the midst of society and wealth. But in the final analysis there could be no doubt—they were two of a kind. And liked it!

BANE said wearily, "All right, all right! Don't be so loud. I'm a tramp and bum, so what?" Red blood was slowly suffusing the swarthinness of his lean face. The woman who sat opposite him in the booth lowered her voice.

But Molani, the bartender, could still hear. He went on polishing glasses, watched in the mirror. The woman

was tall and blonde, with a close-fitting red dress of jersey that stretched tightly over her bosom, outlining clearly every feminine curve. There was no doubt about it, he thought she was all woman! She leaned over the table toward Bane, patted the table itself with a flat hand whose long nails were too brilliant. They matched the cheap rings she wore.



Bane stood up with her money in his hand. "Now who's a tramp, babe?"

"A bum!" she spat the word at him. "Two years you've been away, with never a line to me, never a scratch. Then you come back broke and want to borrow twenty bucks! You drag me down here through all this rain and storm to borrow a double sawbuck. Cheap!" she reached across the table in a sudden movement that caused soft

curves to shiver beneath her red dress. Molani, the bartender, winced as her open palm caught Bane on the brown cheek, left a red impression, made a cracking sound.

Bane laughed at her. The laughter wasn't pretty. Then he kicked the table aside with a single motion, reached for her, gathered the front of her dress into the palm of a big brown hand. He shook her until her teeth rattled, until the jersey threatened to rip free of the girl's sheathlike skirt, revealed a sparkling hard, across the mouth.

Molani said, "Hey, Mister Bane!" warningly.

Bane turned and grinned at him. "Hold it, wop. Right there." Molani held it. Bane went on. "I've spent a fortune on you, baby, and I ask you for twenty bucks, so I'm a bum." Her face was strained and white, her rouged mouth a startlingly brilliant red blotch. "And you still carry it the same place?" Deft fingers pawed at the hem of her sheathlike skirt, revealed a sparkling garter, permitted a glimpse of an inch of white above the stocking top. But Bane wasn't interested in that intriguing view of perfect legs.

The garter snapped. Bane arose with money in his hand. He shoved the woman back down into the corner of the booth and reached for her purse with a snakelike motion of his brown hand.

He took the little gun from the purse and dropped it into his own pocket. His voice was level. "*Now* who's a tramp, babe? You little liar! I've been hearing—oh, I've been hearing plenty. You claim you haven't heard from me for two years! And I hadn't been gone a month before I cabled you a grand from Panama, so you could

join me! What a chump I was. And you're still running with the same old mob, Duval and Crisp and the others. Well, I need twenty bucks. I got it. *Now—get!*"

The last word was a spitting explosion of sound. Even Molani jumped. Bane got to his feet but the garish blonde was already hurrying out the door into the rain, her hips swinging, her coat tightly drawn about her re-treating form.

BANE dusted his hands, as if to rid himself of the feel of her; walked to the bar. Molani set out a bottle, a glass, plain water, and sighed. "Gee, Mr. Bane, and I remember when you an' her was such a good friends! She's a nica girl, but she's a gotta bad friends. Thisa Duval now, thisa Crisp—"

Bane drank, held his nose at mention of the two names. "Dame's are tramps," he said. "All of them. Only some are worse tramps than others." He tilted the bottle again. At ten o'clock he was still the only customer in the bar. And the bottle was almost empty. Rain was still hammering at the dimly lighted front windows.

THE door flew open with a loud bang. A woman stood there for a moment, clutching a light coat about her slender shoulders. The coat was rain soaked and sodden. When she turned to close the door, the wind whipped her dress about her lithe body, so that when she turned again into the barroom the wet material outlined every curve perfectly, alluringly. Her bosom was firm and high, her waist small and flat, hips flaring suddenly only to taper to long, graceful legs.

She wore no hat. Rain drops

glistened on the auburn of her hair in the dim light. She shuddered, looked back over her shoulder, then walked to a booth, began drying her rain wet cheeks with a pocket handkerchief. Bane watched her in the glass. He liked the way she carried herself, the way she took off the coat and shook it out, the way she leaned almost nonchalantly to free her wet skirt from where it clung to her legs, wrung the water from its hem. He liked the sleek roundness of her knees, the trimness of her silk-sheathed ankles. "Like a thoroughbred filly," he thought admiringly.

She ordered a hot rum punch, sat staring down at it until it grew cold, without tasting it. Bane stared at her in the glass. "In a little trouble," he surmised to himself. "No hat, no bag, and running around in the rain."

Molani whispered, "Thatta one, she ain'ta no tramp! You know who thatta one is, Mr. Bane?"

Bane shook his head. Molani said, "That'sa girl marry George Trafton's boy three, four months ago. You know George Trafton, gotta biga house around the corner."

Bane knew George Trafton. Who didn't? Head of the oldest and richest family in town, a stiff-necked old martinet cursed with a wastrel son, Howard Trafton, who had married a show girl a few months before. So this was the girl. Even as far away as Bane had been, he had heard the echoes of that episode. Now he watched her curiously in the glass as she fumbled through her coat pockets in a fruitless search.

The door banged open again. A big man, bigger than Bane, slouched through, shook the water from his hat. His face was wet, his hands were wet.

His eyes were set far apart and were too small. The right-ear was turned wrong side out. He walked to the bar and had a drink, his small eyes searching the booths. He tossed a bill on the bar, slouched over to where the girl sat. Bane was interested. He'd known the gorilla two years before. His name was Crisp. He and a lad named Duval were plug uglies for Tack Trego, the gambler.

Crisp tapped the red-headed dame on the shoulder, said something with a grin. She looked indignant, started to rise. He shoved her down—hard so that her whole body quivered with the impact. Moodily Bane walked across the room, touched Crisp on the shoulder. Crisp turned and grinned. "I heard you was here, Bane. The Babe told us. Duval is anxious to see you, but this ain't your play. Lay off."



BANE said politely, eyes half closed, "Good evening, Mrs. Trafton." The girl was on her feet now, her face white. "My name is Bane," Bane said. "I used to be a private detective in this man's town until a frameup sent me on my way. Now I'm a tramp and a bum—so I've been told this evening—but I'm better company than this louse. May I see you home?"

The girl looked bewildered. Crisp snorted. "I said lay off, copper!" Bane saw the swing coming, caught it with his left palm and rolled with the punch. He grabbed the thick wrist as it whistled over his shoulder, ran under the arm and heaved. Crisp did a neat parabola, a full flip, lit in the sawdust and crashed against the bar. Three glasses slid off the backbar. Molani looked sad.

Bane said, "I'll see you home, Mrs.

Trafton." He was a little bit drunk.

"I'm not going—I can't go—" Her eyes grew round, her breasts heaved. "I'm never going home," she said defiantly. Still, watching her whitefaced anger, Bane was thinking what a thoroughbred she was. He sort of liked the girl. He took her by the arm in a caressing gesture, started moving her toward the door, still keeping up his low voiced conversation.

At the door she paused, said impulsively, "Listen, I'll see you later, honestly. I appreciate that, Mr. Bane, but I've got something to do. Tell me where I can get in touch with you. I promise to do it."

Bane named the second-rate hotel around the corner. He opened the front door, still aiming to take her home. A little man with a black mustache grinned at him from the street, stuck a gun in his ribs and said, "Hello, Bane. Thought I'd wait outside, just in case. Get in the car, Mrs. Trafton; we got places to go. And you, Bane, we got nothing against you. You ain't a cop no longer and you probably don't want to see no cops. So scram. Trego says to come around and see him. The Babe says she'd like to see you again, too. She'd like to put a slug between those sleepy eyes of yours. The Babe is a nice kid, Bane. Maybe I'll help her out if you get nosy. Sometime when I ain't so busy."

Bane sighed a little, brought his heel down hard on Duval's instep, slapped down at the gun. It exploded, the slug ricocheted off the wet sidewalk harmlessly. Duval was tough for a small man. Bane had a little trouble before he tossed him through the front window of Molani's place. When he turned around, Mrs. Howard Trafton

was pattering up the sidewalk in high, regardless of puddles. He yelled once, heard a police whistle in the near distance and slid down the alley to his right.

A FEW minutes later he was in his hotel room with a fresh quart of whiskey. An hour later he was asleep, still with his mind made up that women were tramps. Even little red headed Mrs. Trafton had fooled him, scrambling like that!

He heard the second, maybe the third, knock. He padded across the floor in his bare feet, a gun in his hand, grunted as he swung the door wide. She was still wet, wetter than ever, her hair actually plastered down on her forehead. Bane grunted, pulled at the bottle and went back to bed.

She stood staring down at him for a moment, arms akimbo, said, "I guess you're too drunk to do it, Mr. Bane."

Bane grunted agreeably, said, "I am a drunken bum and a tramp. I used to be a good private investigator in this town. I don't give a damn what sort of trouble you're in, my red headed friend. and I want very much to go to sleep."

Her voice was bitter. "It seems I'm a bit of a tramp myself. But not too much of one. You seemed to dislike the two men you jumped tonight. How would you like to make some money?"

He opened one eye, said, "I've got money. Enough for a tramp." He saw the wet dress hem come up, to her knee, a little higher, heard the snap of elastic, saw the sudden gleam of white, white flesh above the shadow of her hose. He opened the other eye, saw the bills flutter to the dresser.

She said, "Those two men are after my husband. They'll beat him to death. I want you to find him for me and keep them off him."

Bane sat up, pulled on his shoes. "I like to take socks at rats." As an afterthought, hearing her sneeze, he said, "You better get those duds off while I'm gone. There's pajamas in my turkey."

He pulled on his coat. "I'm to go to the house for your old man and tell him these guys are after him? Hmhmhm. Why don't you go yourself? Or get a cop?"

She laid the dress across the radiator. Bane remembered she had been a show girl, didn't mind baring her figure. Even the thin material of her dainty underthings was wet and clinging, the silken sheen-like caressing fingers. Her body swayed with the grace of a model as she leaned over the battered gladstone. Bane kicked toward her.

"I'm never going there again," she said dully. "Never! My husband made it too plain tonight that I was—well—like you. Just another tramp."

He tied his tie, walked across to her and took her shoulders roughly. "Quit stalling. What's this all about tonight, anyways? Why are you running around in the rain? Why did you run away when I dumped Duval through the window? Do I look crazy to you? Why I keep sticking my nose into things. I don't see."

But he did see when he held her at arm's length. There was the wet fragrance of her body, the sudden flare in her eyes that answered his, the feel of her flesh beneath his fingers. He liked her, damn it!

He let his hands slide down from her shoulders, his fingers flexing about the

slender arms inside the big sleeves of his pajama-coat. Pressing her elbows into her sides, he felt with his knuckles the unsteady beat of her heart; the almost gasping pace of breathing that swelled her pliant ribs and made them feel fragile as they gave against her firmly gripped elbows. Yes, damn it—he liked her! And that nervous drumming of her heart . . . it might have been *her* liking, or it might have been fright . . . or even loathing! From the violent shudder that suddenly took her, and from the strained line of her mouth as she tried to jerk away, he knew it wasn't liking . . .

Still he held her, slipped one arm back of her, fingers spread against her shoulders, and pulled her steadily closer despite the struggle that twisted her body and sent one knee pushing against his. Then, abruptly, the blaze went out of her eyes; limpness surrendered her sharply to the strength of his embrace.

But, with her face hot against his cheek, her voice came with a harsh sob, with scorn and revulsion: "Just like all the rest of them! A tramp is *right!*"

He ought to have dropped her then, but her distate only increased the eagerness that made him tremble. His arms clutched her savagely. Her head fell back, but though her face was hot, her mouth was passive and as soft and cool as if she were asleep.

She must have felt the racing tumult of his own heart against hers, yet her closed eyes and flaccid muscles gave no sign, and she was like an exotic feather doll in his arms . . . loved but unloving.

And again it seemed to Bane that her very indifference, her passive yielding to his kisses made him more feverish. He crushed his mouth against her unresponsive lips . . .

LATER, when he poured himself another drink, he looked at her huddled in a chair, staring at him with eyes that were moist but still scornful. At the door he turned, said, "I don't know what you're steering me into but I'll earn your dough, lady. If it gives me another crack at Crisp and Duval, it suits me. Even tramps hate rats." She didn't answer. He closed the door.

He went up the nine steps that led to the old fashioned Trafton mansion, flanked on either side by tall apartments. There was a light on the second floor. Otherwise the house was in darkness. Bane thumbed the bell, still wondering what he was getting into. After a long while a light showed in the vestibule. The door opened a little crack and a fat man said, "Well?"

Bane asked for Howard Trafton, the son. Howard Trafton was out. Bane asked for George Trafton, the father. The butler shook his head slowly. He said, "Mr. Trafton, senior, is at work in the library. If you'll—"

Bane said, "I'll see him," and pushed by the fat butler. He knew something was wrong in that house, sensed it as soon as he walked up the steps. The girl had been too damned incoherent about the whole thing. If a couple of pluguglies were fixing to beat the son to death, the father ought to know it.

He stopped inside the library. The butler said, "Pardon, Mr. Trafton." The old man with grey hair who sat at the library table didn't answer. Bane lit a cigarette. He knew, even then. He said to the butler, "What's your name, mister?"

The butler answered, "Griggs, sir. Oh, Mr. Trafton."

Bane said bluntly, "He don't hear you. He's dead." He moved a little

to one side for a better view of the paper knife that protruded from George Trafton's throat, between his collar bone and the arteries.

Griggs turned white around the mouth, went to the door and called, "Cora! Come quick! The master's been murdered."

Cora, the housekeeper, came in, padded down from upstairs clad only in a loose cotton nightgown. She gave one look, squawked and fainted. Griggs picked her up. Bane was busy thinking. Frame-up? What kind of play was this? Had the little red-headed daughter-in-law shivved the old man? He got sense out of Griggs and the woman at last.

Griggs said, "We've been asleep for hours. The master sent us right after—"

He stopped guiltily. Cora sat up and nudged him. "Tell the truth." Her voice was grim. "It'll all come out anyway."

Griggs gulped, his face pasty, said, "You'll have to know anyway. They had a terrible quarrel tonight, Mr. Trafton, his son, and his son's wife. Mr. Trafton didn't approve of her because she was a, well, a show girl. She and young Mr. Howard eloped you know."

"Come on, give," snapped Bane. "What happened?"

Griggs coughed. "Well, the girl got very angry and ran out of the house. Then Mr. Trafton and his son had words and Howard, the son, ran out also." Bane waited patiently. Griggs looked appealingly at Cora. Her voice held defiance. "Then Mr. Trafton called us in and said he wouldn't need us any more tonight."

Griggs took it up. "He said he was expecting a late visitor but that he'd let



They were at each other like wildcats, scratching and clawing.

him in himself. Later, after my wife and I had retired, I heard the doorbell . . ."

The voice pattered on. Bane was thinking, "Damn that girl to hell! She knew what was here. She's got me into it because I'm a tramp. He snapped, "You didn't hear this late visitor go out?"

Cora said sullenly, "I'm going to tell the truth. Mary, Howard's wife, threatened the master. The doorbell

might have been her coming back. I'll tell the truth!"

Griggs looked miserable. He answered Bane's next question with a far-away look. "Yes, sir, we're married, Cora and I. We been working for Mr. Trafton nearly twelve years, sir. A hard man, but he was always kind to us. He—"



HERE was no sound of the man's entrance. He stood there with his hat in his hand, his mouth dropping open, his eyes wide. Griggs said, "Mr. Howard, your father has been murdered!"

Howard Trafton pushed around the desk, stared down at the corpse. Bane lit another cigarette, flipped the match away. The gun felt reassuring in his pocket. He said, "Seen your missus, kid? Or seen Duval or Crisp?"

Young Trafton sat down weakly in a chair, shaking his head from side to side. "She didn't do it! She wouldn't do that, even if she did threaten him! What are you going to do?"

Bane looked amused, kept on reaching for the phone. The doorbell rang. Griggs jumped, padded into the hall. Bane waited, looked disgusted when Griggs backed into the room, his hands in the air.

Little Duval, a bandage on his head, stepped in, followed by Crisp. He glared around the room, smiled savagely at sight of Bane. "You get around, don't you, pal? Where the hell do you fit in this picture?"

Griggs' teeth were chattering. Howard Trafton simply sat speechless. Crisp was gazing at the corpse. He said in an awed voice, "What the hell is that?"

Bane sneered, "You wouldn't know, would you? It's a stiff!"

Duval's eyes widened. "God! A stiff! Hey, this wasn't in the deal. Who killed him?"

No one spoke. Crisp broke out, "Boy, we better go. We'll take Trafton and this mug Bane. He's a gun-toter, he'll know something."

Griggs' teeth were still chattering

when the four men left the room. Cora had fainted again.

THE black car slipped across town. It was still raining. At an obscure apartment house they pulled up. Trafton and Bane were prodded through the deserted foyer and up a flight of steps. Duval tapped at a door. It swung open. He pushed Bane from behind so that he stumbled across the threshold. Babe, the blonde, stood there laughing in his face.

She wore a bright red negligee, the same color as the slashed rouge of her mouth. Her eyes were narrowed angrily. There were spots of color on her cheeks. When she walked toward Bane, he saw the angry trembling of her full-flushed body beneath the scanty garment, saw one long white leg at a time emerging from the folds.

She said, "Momma's damned glad to see you, tramp!" Her fist cracked against the side of his jaw. His hat fell off. His own brown fist arched for a scant six inches. The blonde Babe seemed to rise in the air, then she fell over a low stool and her rounded shoulders were the first part of her body to hit the floor. The negligee cascaded around her. Long white legs quivered for a minute and then were still. Flashes of velvety skin peered knowingly from the garment.

Duval grunted, "By God!" and hit Bane in the back of the head with his gun barrel. Bane lay down beside the inert Babe. Now there were two of them on the floor.

AFTER a while Bane woke up, sat up on a chair. Trafton was across the room with his head in his hands. "Look," said Bane slowly, "what the hell is all this about?"

Trafton said, "Who are you?"

"A friend of your wife's!" Beneath his breath Bane swore. A friend! The damn tramp. She'd gotten him into this. Because he liked her looks!

Trafton's eyes were dull. "It's all my fault. But she didn't kill him, I'll swear it."

"Did you?"

He didn't answer that one. He went on just as dully. "These two men work for Tack Trego, the gambler. I owe Trego money that I can't pay. Maybe this is Trego's way of getting even with a welcher."

Bane lit a cigarette. He said, "You can pay Trego now. You're the old man's heir."

Trafton shook his head. "We quarreled, quarreled a lot. He wouldn't pay the debt and he hated Mary for being a show girl. He tried to break us up, but I didn't kill him. I wouldn't do that."

A bolt slid back on the door. Duval slithered in, the black gun held close to his hip. He said, "Up, lug, the boss wants you." Bane got up, a little shaky yet. All the way down the hall Duval kept prodding him with the black gun. He opened another door, shoved Bane in, turned to close the door. Bane kicked him high in the groin. The white face with the black mustache contorted, Bane saw the gun flash up, prepared to dive aside. The gun stopped its arc when a flat voice said, "Stop it, Duval!"

Bane sat down opposite Tack Trego, took a cigarette out of the package on the table. He blew smoke across at the tall, dark man opposite.

Trego said, "What'd you come back to town for, Bane?"

Bane answered, "Just tired of drift-

ing, Trego. Wanted to look up some of my old friends."

Trego mouthed his cigar. His voice was flat, emotionless. "You know I can have you tossed in the clink yet. You got a nerve coming back here and getting in my hair again. How come?"

"Maybe I got so low after you framed me out of town that I didn't care anymore, Trego. Maybe the only thing I gave a damn about was coming back for a few pokes at you and the other rats. I used to be a pretty nice guy. Now I'm a tramp and tramps are good haters."

Trego leaned across the table. "Want to play ball?" Bane shrugged. Trego said, "I'll lay 'em on the table with you. Give me a break and I'll give you a break." Bane kept on waiting. All the time he was cursing red headed Mary Trafton for getting him into this. Trego said, "Don't lie. You working for Mary Trafton?"

Bane said, "I never saw her but twice in my life. If I ever see her again, I'll break her damn little neck!"

Trego sneered. "Then how come we find her in your room half undressed? Don't lie, Bane. She's in the other room now."

They had Mary! Funny, but anger began to surge through Bane's lean frame. Trego grinned at the contorted face. "You want to play along? Maybe I'll let you both off, maybe all three. But I got to know something, Bane." Bane shrugged a little hopelessly.

"Who killed old man Trafton? You were there?" Bane lit another cigarette.

Trego said, "All right, here it goes. Listen, Bane, young Trafton owes me more money than I can afford to lose.

Business is lousy. I'm pushed, understand?"

"How much?"

"Forty grand, almost. I get tired dunning young Trafton. I go to the old man. He makes a deal with me, offers to pay it himself if I'll do something for him. I'm to push the yellow kid around and put the fear of God in him, make him think I'm going to bump him off. That's what happened. And he ran to the old man for the jack. Which was the plan, to scare hell out of him."

"You interest me, Trego, you interest me. I'm smelling something."

"Yeah. You got a good nose. The old man hated the boy's wife because she was a showgirl. When the kid asks for forty grand, he offers it to him providing he'll ditch his wife. Howard Trafton says okay. Then the girl lights in on him, tells him what a heel he is. She threatens the old man and runs out of the house. Young Howard turns on the old man then, tells him to go to hell, and goes out for the girl."

"How'd you know this?"

"He called me up, I went out to the house. He showed me the cash he had on hand and figured if I got the kid and worked him over again, he'd turn yellow. That way he'd have to go home and give in. The rest of the thing was to pick up Mary at Molani's—he knew she was there—and let her see the kid go yellow and toss her to the sharks to save his own hide. That way she wouldn't want anything to do with him any longer." He shrugged. "And now, by God, when we get the whole cast together, there's murder and kidnaping involved. I can square myself through some headquarters friends if

I know what happened at Trafton's house. Shoot with me, Bane, and I'll lay off you. You can even stay on in town."



BANE laughed till tears ran down his face. He said, "You're hung up, Trego. Even you can't beat a murder rap. You were the last guy to see the old man alive. Maybe you shivved him when he wouldn't pay off right away. You knew the kid would inherit, knew you'd get your jack that way."

Trego shifted his cigar. "So it's going to be that way? Bane, either you or young Trafton or his wife killed the old man. I fixed you up once before, maybe I can do it again."

Bane cursed. He knew Trego *could* hang the rap on anyone of the three. But he said, "I don't know a thing, I don't want to know a thing."

Trego called, "Okay, boys." They taped his hands, they taped his feet, and they stood him against the wall. Trego said softly, "I'm riding downtown to fix things up, Bane. And guess who's going to entertain you? Your old girl friend, Babe. Crisp will stick around to listen when you squawk. If you want to play ball, clear me and I'll lay off of you."

Bane waited against the wall. The blonde Babe opened the far door and came in. She still wore the tight negligee. A cigarette drooped between her lips, red on one end from fire, on the other from lipstick. The pupils of her eyes were very small, almost pin-points. Crisp came in grinning, sat down in a chair in the corner.

The Babe took the cigarette from her mouth and stood very close to Bane.

She stepped back, laughing. He drove at her, bound as he was his head down. She went over, the red negligee ripping half off her white shoulders, her



He could see an angry little pulse beating in her throat, could sense the inner tumult that made her bosom heave. Her voice was thick. She said, "Twice to-night you smacked me, tramp. I hate your guts." Bane tried to roll away but succeeded only in making the hot end of the cigarette slip from his cheekbone into his ear. He howled.

Bane heaved and the little man went squarely through the window.

shapely legs kicking ridiculously. Stunned, Bane lay still, very still. Then Crisp had him by the hair pulling him back to the wall. Blood was trickling from Bane's nose. The blonde Babe got up dizzily, mouthing curses, started for him. She staggered a little as she came, fingers like claws, whole body quivering.

Someone beat on the opposite door. A woman's voice said, "What's happening?"

Crisp smirked, called, "The Babe's working over her exboyfriend. Does the noise bother you?"

A giggle. "I could stand a drink and a little company." Crisp's smirk widened. He got up, picked up a bottle off the table and unlocked the door that covered the voice. He stepped in.

BANE heard the crash. The Babe didn't. Crisp staggered back out of the room clawing at a shoulder holster. Mary Trafton came out after him, a shattered chair in her hands. She hit him again. He went down and lay very still. She plucked the gun from the holster, yelled, "Let him alone, damn you!"

Babe whirled. She leaped at Mary. Mary didn't pull the trigger. The blonde's first wild snatch tore the dress at its neckline, left red streaks on white skin. Bane tried to focus his eyes, saw a white flurry of tangled thighs, flailing arms, bobbing flesh. Then they were on their feet and Babe suddenly shot backward to land at Bane's feet. Mary stood across the room wiping blood from her eyes. Bane suddenly dropped to his knees—hard. Dizzily he fought erect, dropped down again—and again. Then Mary was pulling him off, crying, "Don't kill her! Don't kill her!" She found a kitchen knife

and cut the tape from his wrists. When he kissed her, he could feel her heart throbbing against his own, her slim loveliness warm against his chest. There was blood on her full lips.

BANE and the Traftons hit the house about daylight. A copper let them in. Pemberton was still talking to Griggs and Cora in the library. The body was gone. Pemberton glared at Bane. Bane grinned, pushed young Trafton. Trafton walked to a wall safe.

Pemberton jumped at him, said, "What the hell is this?" But the safe was open.

Trafton turned around bewildered, said, "Something's screwy. The money's gone."

Bane sighed and sit down, found a crumpled cigarette. He told Pemberton what he knew. Pemberton said, "Ah! The missing money. We had to have it. Well, where does it fit? Harold Trafton could have lifted it. Maybe his wife knew the combination. Maybe Trego picked it off the desk."

Bane said, "Listen. You no doubt been hearing about the family quarrel." Pemberton nodded. "Mary Trafton didn't kill him, for she ran out of the house and didn't come back. Molani can tell you she had no bag, had no key to come back even after Trego left the house and the old man alone. She was with me at Molani's and with me in my room at the hotel." Trafton's face got red. He looked doubtful. Mary flushed.

"Trego didn't kill him, for the old man asked him to do him a favor. He tried to do the favor, *after the old man was dead!* Trego's a rat but he's smart. He wouldn't mess around *afterward*, after the old man was shivved. Besides

he would have known young Trafton would inherit, and could pay off the debt. See?"

Pemberton looked glum. He wheeled on Howard Trafton. "That leaves you. You knew the combination."

Bane said softly, "Not got guts enough. Maybe someone else knew the combination. The old man was a skinflint, a cut throat old curmudgeon. Maybe someone else hated him enough to do it. Forty grand is a lot of money." He wheeled on fat Griggs. "Griggs, you didn't go right to bed last night. The old man sent you out after Mrs. Trafton, to trail her. Else he wouldn't have known she went to Molani's, and he told Trego that, told him where to pick Mary up. You aren't telling the truth about that because it would give Mary an out. I busted in here last night a stranger, half drunk, but you spilled your guts. You told me about family quarrels and the mysterious visitor. You wanted to get your spiel off your chest."

Maybe Bane was guessing; he went on. "You phoned the old man that Mary was at Molani's joint. Your wife must have listened in while Trego was here. Maybe she told you about the forty grand. Maybe you were tapping the safe when he caught you and you let him have it with the shiv."

He got up and staggered toward Pemberton. The butler's face was pasty, his eyes wide. He whimpered, "I'll talk! I'll tell you about it! It was—"

Cora, the housekeeper, screamed once. It seemed to bounce back from four walls, the ceiling, the floor, four corners. She was on his fat back then, her fingers wrapped about his fat throat. They crashed over. It took Pemberton,

Bane, and two cops to get her off him. He was damned near dead. Bane went home in a hurry.



T one o'clock he lay in bed reading about it in the papers. He grinned to himself. Trego was good, had plenty of influence.

The gambler's name wasn't mentioned. Bane wasn't mentioned. Pemberton got all the credit. The money had been found where Griggs and his wife had hidden it in the attic. As far as the police and papers were concerned, the case was closed.

Someone knocked. He called, "Bring it in and set it on the dresser."

She did. He rolled over and looked from her to the quart bottle. She said, "What are you going to do now?"

His mouth was still pretty sore where Babe had clawed him. The liquor burned. Then he answered. "Me? I'm a tramp, I told you that the first time I saw you. I guess I'll go roll my hoop. I came up here to beat hell out of a couple of guys. I did it. Time to go." He waited. "What are you going to do?"

She sat down beside him, smiled. "What do you think? He's rich now, he'll get along all right. I'm a pretty good hoop roller myself."

At first he couldn't believe it. He reached for her anyway, held her close, kissed her so hard that it hurt. Both their mouths were sore. He said, "We haven't got much money left, darling. I had to pay Molani for the window."

"Money isn't everything," she whispered, and he could feel her breath on his mouth. "Why think of such things—now?"

He took the hint.



By
**ROBERT
A.
GARRON**

Wrong NUMBER

A wealthy madcap of a girl had run off with a gangster. It was Athens' job to bring her back—without publicity. And he found a whole city organized against him!

Once Athens had killed a man with a blow like that. This time there was a sickening snap, bone breaking in flesh; and Sliney went down as though slugged with a crowbar.



VERY thoughtfully Noel Athens closed the door of his room, leaned against it and looked at the girl. She lounged there in the chair unabashed, smoking a cigarette she had just started. Either she had been wait-

ing patiently or the desk clerk had phoned up to warn her. She was a flamboyant blonde, beautifully dressed in a serge skirt and a light, soft cream cardigan sweater. About a hundred and eighteen pounds of her; in addition to

voluptuous red lips and hair as slick and dark as country honey she seemed to have a monopoly on all the best curves, and of course she was an utter stranger.

"Bless you," Athens prompted, raising one eyebrow.

"Welcome to our city," the girl retorted engagingly in a cultured voice. Just sitting there in the easy chair she had a way of flaunting the curvature of her body. Her hands were clasped behind her head. Stretching her sleek lines intriguingly. The delicate, clean fragrance of her filled the room.

Athens crossed leisurely to the bed and inspected the brass hardware of his heavy suitcase. He was a big man without being beefy and had a pair of formidable shoulders. His black hair had a slight curl in it, he had a meticulously trimmed black moustache, and what the glint in his black eyes meant nobody knew. Nor where he had come from, nor whether he had really killed a man one time with a blow of his fist. His inspection of the suitcase disclosed that both locks had been tampered with, and that an attempt had been made to force the sturdy hinge-bolts as well. Athens regarded the girl without any apparent animosity.

"If you're doing that for a living," he advised her, "don't pick on fittings of that make again. What kind of tool were you using—a hairpin?"

"The least a girl can do is try." She shrugged, tossed something shiny which he picked out of the air. It was a forged steel lock-pick of professional manufacture. Athens nodded, tossed it back with the reminder, "Criminal offense to be caught with one of those things in your possession. Better go easy."

"Thank you, I will," she said sweetly, and crossed her legs so that their sheer

shapeliness was exhibited an inch or two or three above the knees. Having been caught in his room in an unsuccessful burglary, she was still in no hurry to make her departure. She knew she was too good looking entirely for him to turn her in.

During Athens' brief hesitation in inviting her to get out and sin no more, the telephone rang. He answered it, eyeing without disapproval the blonde's exceptional and thoroughly tempting charms. The call was from the clerk at the desk downstairs.

"Mr. Chandler?" young Mr. Diemer asked in an authoritative voice. "It has been brought to my attention that you have a woman in your room."

"It is a fact which I cannot deny," Athens agreed. "Is there something you want to do about it?"

"Please expect me in a moment," Diemer said promptly.

SO this, Athens reflected as he hung up, was how things were done in the Leigh Hotel in the dandy little city of Logan. It was nine o'clock of a balmy summer evening. In town only three hours, he was already getting a crack at one of their nifty little rackets.

As though she had been given a cue, the blonde was swiftly and expertly divesting herself of her few garments. Merely passing her fingers from throat to waist unbuttoned the filmy sweater. The serge skirt opened at the side; in one sinuous motion she doffed the sweater and stepped out of the skirt. For just a moment he was allowed to regard her slender shapeliness in a brief costume of the sheerest of underthings that conformed as snugly as a ballet dancer's to the tempting sculpturing of her long legs and boyish torso.

On the side table which met the arm of her chair was her bag, a black suede article about eight inches long, four wide, and six deep. Leaning over this gracefully, with a cool intentness of purpose, she drew from it, to Athens' astonishment, a full-length satin night-robe which she wrapped about her slenderness. Out of the bag came an extra pair of sheer hose and a brief trifle of dainty underwear, which she draped carelessly over the top of the bag.

Athens, shrewdly disinterested in interrupting her, had made himself comfortable in the other chair where he could watch operations. Finished, the girl advanced languorously and was about to slip gracefully into his lap. Athens cocked one leg in the air.

"Touch me," he promised quietly, "and I'll sink a hoof so deep into your tummy that you'll never enjoy another breakfast."

"Oo-o-oh!" she pouted mockingly, eyes wide, but she retreated to her own chair as there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Athens barked.

Diemer, the night clerk, sidled into the room. He was a pale young man with nervous hands, nasty blue eyes with red lids. The hotel detective, Sliney, followed him. Sliney was nearly as big a man as Athens. He had a tiny keyhole of a mouth, crafty eyes set close together, and one ear was conspicuously larger than the other. But he dressed as though he considered himself handsome, had manicured nails and gave off a strong scent of white roses.

Diemer ducked his head at the blonde and simpered, "Mrs. Chandler, I presume?"

"Eh?" Athens asked absently. "Oh, yes, of course!"

Sliney ogled the recumbent blonde,

eyed the suede bag and slurred a few words through the keyhole. "They certainly do travel light these days." He proceeded to the heavy suitcase on the bed and added, "Unless you've got the rest of her clothes in here."

"What do you think?" Athens countered without any expression on his face.

"Now, now." Mr. Diemer fluttered his hands and twisted his lips into a silly grin. "It isn't exactly cricket to cheat the hotel out of rent for an extra person, is it, Mr. Chandler?"

Big Noel Athens towered up to his full six feet and two inches of height and said, "Hands off that bag."

He said it in such a way that the detective jerked his hands from the heavy brass locks. The blonde snickered. All of this, thought Athens, was either strictly on the level or was being acted consummately well. Now he was no longer sure whether the girl was on her own or the three were acting in cahoots. "I'll keep this room," he told Diemer in a level voice. "What's the extra charge?"

"Only a dollar," Diemer said deprecatingly.

Athens nodded and thrust his hand inside his coat. But there was no point in letting these two small-town mugs see how well-heeled he was, so the hand drew forth a package of cigarettes from his vest instead of his wallet. Calmly he lighted a cigarette first, then fished a crumpled bill from a side pocket. He gave it to Diemer and gestured him out of the room with his stooge detective. He didn't like Sliney's looks. The man was too obviously interested in the possible contents of the suitcase, and departed with a sort of reluctance in his manner. Of course the bag contained his clothing and John Doe credentials, a few letters and the like identifying him as the non-existent Joel Chandler, from

Minneapolis, but it contained also, lying on top in plain view, a blue-black .38 caliber automatic. In Frisco he was fully licensed to carry that gun, but in this state the license did not even authorize him to have the weapon in his possession.

WHEN the door had closed, the blonde stretched luxuriously and murmured, "Well, now we're alone."

"Just the way we were before," Athens commented. "How come you picked my room, Goldilocks?"

She shrugged. "A girl has to make a living. I was in the lounge when you signed in, you looked like good pickings, and I said to myself, 'I'll just pick a couple of his locks while he's down in the cafe eating his dinner'. You eat fast, Mr. Chandler."

"When the food is that lousy, I do. So what are you goin to do now?"

"Why, didn't you mean it when you gave the money to that louse Diemer?" she asked innocently. Then, running her eyes over him from head to foot, "Mmh, what a great big handsome brute you are . . ."

Scenting that he had to play his cards absolutely right Athens asked in a you-and-I way, "What's your name?"

"Jane Roberts."

"You do pretty well by yourself, Jane." Athens fingered the stuff of her robe, appraising the quality. Immediately Jane took his lean, strong hand in both of hers and pressed his fingers to her soft little throat, clamping her chin down over it so that it nestled in the warm hollow of her shoulder. She looked at him with half-closed eyes and sighed as she rubbed her smooth cheek appreciatively on the back of his hand. Sitting on the arm of her chair, Athens was

fishing in her bag with his right hand. His hand came out with a compact, wicked little .25 automatic of foreign make. Jane looked up at him inquiringly.

Inspecting the murderous toy Athens found the initials "L. M." inlaid in gold in the butt. With just a trace of irony in his voice he commented, "I know, it's an heirloom. What was your mother's name, Janie?"

"Why, Lucy Martin. It's mine, too. I wasn't supposed to tell you my real name right off the bat, was I?"

"No, I suppose not," Athens admitted, grinning. Because her real name would be Laura Morell, Rube Morell's sister, and now he knew he was on the trail. The Morells were a brother-and-sister act; Rube specialized in bank robbery, and his sister was reputed to have killed three men with this .25 caliber peashooter just to prove that it could be done. Morell was wanted in five states, and so would his sister be if the authorities ever got hold of this gun. Athens dropped it back into the bag, stood up.

Laura rose swiftly in agreement and threw herself into an embrace with him before he could step away, twining her arms around him and welding her body to his. She tilted her head, offering her moist red lips. After the briefest hesitation Athens bent his head and kissed her in the manner which the situation required, holding it up to the mathematical point of what she expected. Her whole slim form clung hungrily to him.

When she sighed and opened her eyes, moving her head, Athens disengaged her arms and wiped the rouge from his lips with a handkerchief.

"Baby," he said regretfully, keeping the exultation out of his voice, "this will

have to wait." He looked at his wrist-watch.

"What's the matter?" She frowned in obvious disappointment.

"Well, I came to town on business, of course, and I really have to see a man. I should be there now; it'll take only about an hour."

"An hour!" Laura wailed. "Can't you call him up and break the appointment?"

"It's too important, and there's just a chance it might cost me my job," Athens lied regretfully. He had no intentions of ever seeing this girl again, passionately lovely though she was. "It won't be long."

"All right." She considered, kissed him under the ear. "I'll wait here for you."

"Oh, no!" He laughed "Change into your clothes again and come back at eleven sharp. I don't want you to break the locks on that suitcase; it cost me a lot of money."

She ignored that, protesting, "But that's longer than an hour!"

"But it'll take me a little while to get there and come back," he pointed out. "Come back at eleven o'clock and knock rapidly on the door five times so that I'll know who it is."

By the time he had confiscated the lock-pick from her bag, she had changed from the robe into her street clothes. She certainly did have a lot of the best curves, all arranged in the choicest way imaginable. Her flesh was like cream, without a blemish or fault in moulding. As she applied the finishing touches, applying lipstick and powder, Athens lifted the receiver of the telephone and called a number at random. A man with a squeaky voice answered. Athens announced, "This is Chandler. I've just got in and had dinner. I'm at the Leigh

Hotel. Sorry to be late; would you rather see me in the morning?"

"What?" the voice squeaked in bewilderment.

"All right; I'm starting now." Athens hung up.

"You won't disappoint me?" Laura asked eagerly. She was in his arms again, and he tasted the moist fragrance of her lips. There was no doubt in his mind that she had fallen for him, in spite of the fact that she was Morell's sister. She bubbled with laughter, suddenly.

"What's funny?"

"Your moustache tickles."

"Shall I cut it off for you?"

"Oh, no, keep it! My mother always told me that when a man without a moustache kisses you, it's like an egg without salt."

ATHERNS laughed. When he closed the door after letting her out, his face went hard. He returned to the bed, unlocked the suitcase and picked up the gun from its nest in a pile of shirts. In the suit he was wearing a holster had been tailored in, under the left hand lapel of the jacket. He holstered the gun, locked up the suitcase again.

Fishing out his wallet he checked through its contents. An even thousand dollars in new twenties for expenses in advance. He could chisel fifty or sixty thousand out of Mark Townsend over a period of weeks if he felt like it, but Athens wasn't that kind of investigator. According to his agreement with Townsend he was to draw money for expenses only as he needed it. If he had no luck of any kind to report within three months and admitted complete failure, he was to terminate the agreement without receiving any compensation beyond

his expenses. If he brought back Catharine Townsend alive and unharmed to her father either by persuasion or force, which meant abduction, he was to receive the flat sum of twenty thousand dollars.

When she was a little younger, Cathy Townsend had been called a madcap. When she came of age she was still a hundred and sixteen pounds of the devil, or emotional fury, or whatever gets into a spoiled brat with beauty, too much money, and a good name. She had gone haywire, gone on terrific splurges, met all the wrong people, done cockeyed things like stripping to the skin and little else, because "it's so damned hot," and galloping one of her father's horses a few miles down the beach and back to cool off. She could ride. She could swim, golf, beat you at tennis, and knew more blistering invectives than five picked dockhands. She liked to show off because she could do so many things so well. She was arrogant, moody, insolent, liked to make a nuisance of herself at parties by knocking drinks out of people's hands and the like for the sheer pleasure of being nasty, and blew up with the wrath of a goddess when anyone of either sex tried to interfere with her mode of living.

In short, she was a wrong number in Athens' private estimation, and it was beyond him how she had missed being in a straitjacket for the last five years. Indulge a maniac and she'll bite off your ten fingers. The last thing the unbelievable Cathy had done was run off with the much wanted criminal, Rube Morell. At least, that was what she had privately threatened her father with just to see him squirm, and she made all threats good. Mark Townsend owned a string of newspapers, was very rich, and Cathy

hated him because he was so "insufferably good. I *hate* good people!"

Finding Cathy, knocking some sense into her, and returning her intact to her father was the job Athens had accepted. Why, he didn't know. He must have been crazy. But he needed the money, and respected Townsend for what he stood for just as Townsend respected Athens for his absolute integrity and for never once having failed to accomplish what he set out to do.

The joker in the deck was that no one had any idea where Rube Morell and his sister were, which as far as Townsend was concerned was a good thing. He didn't want his daughter's association with gangsters publicized, and part of Athens' job was to keep her name out of the blow-off if it ever came.

Periodically the Morell gang appeared abruptly out of hiding, knocked off a bank with or without bloodshed as the occasion demanded, and just as abruptly dropped out of sight. Cathy had come in contact with The Rube through one of her boasted underworld connections and claimed to have fallen in love with the outlaw. Well, The Rube had his points. He was the rugged kind of outlaw bred in the midwest, strong as a horse, and supplied with a great deal of animal cunning. He was a marauder, a blond tiger, just the sort that Townsend's batty daughter would fall for.

With permission to go through Cathy's belongings, Athens had found just one item that was of any use to him. That was a half-used paper of matches with a name and a number penciled inside. The penciling read: "Emberlane 2911."

Obviously a telephone number, but not local. The number had not been called from either the Townsend estate

nor the house in town. With absolutely nothing but this flimsy clue to work on Athens ascertained through a telephone operator in his acquaintance that the city of Logan had an Emberlane ex-

Desperately the girl tried to free herself while the two men struggled.



change, the only one she knew of or could locate.

Since Catherine Townsend had never been in Logan before her disappearance, and didn't know anyone there according to old Townsend, Athens packed his suitcase. His good one. Morell probably had entrusted her with that number and instructed her not to use it until she got to Logan, when he could arrange to pick her up without betraying his hideout.

Athens quit his room in the Leigh Hotel and as he moved down the hall to the elevator he framed in his mind the wire he was going to send to old man Townsend. He had to send the wire direct from the office down the street; what he wanted to say couldn't go through the hotel switchboard.



HE elevator took him down to the lobby. On the way down, eyeing him from behind, Athens wondered how the elevator operator would look hanging from a tree. None of the employees of this hotel looked right. Come to think of it, none of the loungers in the lobby looked right, either. The operator looked at him boldly as he stepped out of the cage into the lobby, smiled when Athens reached the main entrance and stepped out into the night. The city of Logan wasn't exactly a "layover" town, but Rube Morell had it pretty well salted. . . .

Twenty feet away from the hotel entrance Athens found that he had company, a man keeping in step with him on either side. The lighting wasn't good, but one of the men was Sliney. The white rose perfume the detective wore made him smell like a garden.

"Where you going, sweetheart?" the stockier man on his right asked, meaning that Athens wasn't going anywhere.

That was what Athens had been waiting for. With volcanic abruptness he stopped in his tracks, his left foot forward where it had landed. With his left fist he walloped a heavy, bristled jaw, and, as he spun, swept out his right arm and caught Sliney a blow on the neck below the ear that knocked the hotel detective to his knees.

Getting away fast, Athens poured himself into a slot of darkness between two buildings that he hoped was an alleyway. It was. He caromed from a wooden telephone pole and fell sprawling as a gun roared behind him. The slug socked into the wooden pole.

Drawing his own gun as he rolled, Athens snapped a shot in return. The stocky man's heavy weight piled broadside, meatily, into the alley pavement.

Keeping low, Athens plunged toward a moving shadow, struck it and knocked all the wind out of it as Sliney fired. Athens scraped the concrete with his knuckles in a wild swing that caught Sliney on the cheekbone.

The hotel detective dropped his gun, floundered three steps to the rear; his heels skated out from under him and he fell flat on his back.

Whereupon Athens legged it down the alley for all he was worth until he reached the hotel fire escape. There he performed an almighty leap stretching his arms overhead to the limit.

His hooked fingertips snagged onto the lowest rung of the iron ladder suspended there, caught hold by an eyelash and the grace of God.

He swung himself aboard the bottom platform of the fire escape, started up as squad car headlights were turned into the alley from both ends. So he couldn't have made it.

Climbing with the stealth of a big cat, hugging the wall when he could, he

reached the third deck. At least a few of the Logan cops were in this thing, too. At the mouth of the alley men were gathered about the body of the dead gangster. He had taken Athens' bullet through the throat—that was why he hadn't uttered a sound.

Slincy was snarling orders, and men in uniform were taking them, ransacking the alley for the fugitive. Hotel detective hell!—Slincy was on the city payroll, probably one of Rube Morell's men. Silently cursing all women, Cathy Townsend for being the cause of this mess, and Laura Morell for putting him on the spot, Athens reached his own window.

It was dark; the instinct which had served him so well so far made him hesitate before entering. He was just placing his hands on the sill when the telephone rang. With the second ring, it was answered!

PEERING into the darkened room he couldn't make out who the prowler was. Then Laura Morell ejaculated incredulously, "He did?" Then, "Won't Rube be mad!"

She hung up and felt her way across the room in the darkness, leaned out the window to look down at the scene in the alley far below. A hand almost completely encompassed her throat and yanked her half way out onto the platform. Athens captured both her wrists in his other hand and snarled into her ear, "The Anglo-Saxons had a good five-letter word for you! I ought to toss you over the rail to those other rats in the alley!"

Roughly he stepped through the curtains into the room with her as searchlights began playing over the buildings backing on the alley. Not until he had

pulled down the shade and turned the light on did he release the girl's throat and let her take a breath.

"Where's Cathy Townsend?" he asked grimly.

"So you're the wonderful Noel Athens!" she sneered, croaking because of the treatment her slender throat had taken.

"I'm not fooling!" Athens raged. "I don't like to get pushed around, understand? You're going to tell me, or I'll fix you up so that you'll never get another chance to."

"A smart detective like you shouldn't have to ask silly questions!" she jeered.

Athens' hand moved; the flat of it met her right cheek solidly. He didn't hit her hard, but the blow knocked her across the bed with the efficiency of a baseball bat. Her skirt twisted upward as she fell, flaring to reveal dim, creamy-white legs, chiffon sheathed, that waved helplessly from a tangle of frothy lace underthings. She sprawled on her back, stunned for a moment, then sprang to her feet. Breasts heaving with the storm of her breathing she blazed, "You heel! Rube will kill you for this!"

"Sure, from behind!" Athens retorted.

He saw that he would get nothing out of Laura no matter what kind of beating he gave her, and there was no percentage in slapping her around on general principles. As far as he was concerned, she was just another wrong number in any language. Aware that a raiding party might be already working through the hotel, Athens thoughtfully eyed the girl and wondered how he could best put her out of commission. "All right," he ordered. "You can do another strip job for me. You're good at it."

Laura looked blankly at him. "You—"

"No, it's not because I *love* you!" he mocked. "Skin those clothes off before I do it for you. I'm in a hurry."

Warily, with much less dispatch than before, she shed her garments one by one. Standing in her high heels, sheer hose and briefs she was certainly a lovely little morsel, but Athens was wasting no time. He gestured with his gun; "Over to the telephone, sweetheart."

She obeyed, backing sinuously, tremblingly. But despite her alluring grace, her lithe muscles, he noticed, were tense and contracted; a slight quivering about the swollen, soft part of her mouth betrayed the fact that she really was afraid of him. No doubt this was the first time she had run into a man who worked this way.

"Turn around" said Athens, "and pick up the phone when I tell you to. You're going to draw off the heat."

Breathing hard she asked, "What number do I call?"

"Don't be funny; you're going to talk with that snide of a switchboard operator downstairs. You're going to tell him that you were looking out the fire escape window, and you saw me climbing from a telephone pole through the window of a building at the other end of the alley. What's more, you're going to make it convincing."

NOT for a moment did he believe that she would follow his directions. As soon as he directed her to lift the handpiece and the connection was made, she would give the alarm and take her chances.

But Athens, standing behind her, holstered his gun. With one hand, he grasped the back of her neck, his powerful fingers sinking lightly into the soft flesh at either side. With the other he

seized her right wrist, twisted her arm behind her and pressed upward, gently; advised her quietly, "Just try something fancy now; it's all the same to me if I have to break your arm, and I don't have to tell you how it'll hurt." He closed his fingers a little about the frightened, pulsing flesh of her throat, pushed up a little harder on her arm, ordered, "Go ahead; pick up the phone."

Gasping, she delivered her information to the switchboard. Under threat of the agony she believed Athens really meant to inflict on her, she certainly made her story sound convincing.

Athens spun her around and smashed the handpiece into the cradle before she could spoil the yarn and started her for the bathroom with a shove. White legs flashed as she stumbled, almost fell, caught her balance, trembling. The gun was back in Athens' hand and she retreated before it, speechless with fury.

The shower room was a windowless inside room conditioned with a fan-operated ventilator. The door was an old, solid one, partially soundproofing the tiled place. Menacing her through the doorway, Athens knocked off the small knob actuating the latchbolt with the butt of his gun and bade her good-bye with, "I hope you can yell loud enough into the ventilator for one of your rat pals to hear you."

Simultaneously as he slammed the door and spun the latchbolt with the outside knob, she bucked herself against the door from the inside, hammered futilely and cursed him muffledly with enthusiasm.

Athens rolled her garments into a bundle and slung it under the bed, picked up his suitcase. A cautious gander out the window showed him that Laura's false tip had already drawn most of the searchers to the other end of the alley.

Athens quit the room then, walked down one flight of stairs, headed down the empty hall to the elevator.

When the car stopped and the gate was hauled back, the operator stared at him, gaped, tried frantically to slam the gate in his face. Athens beat it nimbly, covering the mean-eyed young fellow with his gun.

"Down!" he barked. And he thought, "What a dandy little city this is!"

"Yessir!" the operator gulped. The car dropped them in a smooth descent to the first floor, where Athens dispassionately slugged the uniformed gangster and took over the controls as the man slumped to the floor.

He brought the car to a stop at the lobby, casually opened the door. For the moment the desk was deserted; Diemer was probably taking stock of the situation in the alley. Athens took a chance, crossed the lobby carrying his suitcase and with his right hand nestled around the butt of his gun under his lapel. He was not accosted; all the excitement was going on behind the hotel.

Emerging into the street Athens continued straight ahead to the other side. A hack driver parked in front of the hotel beeped at him, circled a dozen feet out into the street, gave up and curved back to park at the curb. No fare. Keeping to the shadows, Athens journeyed down the street to the corner, turned the corner because he didn't dare pass under the corner arc-light. He passed within a few feet of a squad car, with a man at the wheel looking the other way. A swell town, this; the police department and a ring of criminals working hand in glove.

There were only a few streets in the business section, and the residential streets were as dark as open country on a cloudy night. The streets were being

patrolled. Once Athens vaulted a wall and hedge, through which he sighted while a car prowled past raking residential lawns and shadowy nooks with a spotlight.

There was no safe conduct for Athens out of the city of Logan. He was ambushed. Now that he knew the locality of the Morell gang's hideout, he would not be allowed to depart alive. But he had no intentions of departing. He was a hunter, and he was excitingly close to his game.



INE blocks from the hotel he passed a clipped hedge dividing two properties and his attention was caught by a lighted sign reading "GUESTS."

"That's me," muttered Athens, and mounted the steps, took long strides toward a neat brick house set in shrubbery growing country-fashion far back from the street, like its neighbors.

For the moment he had this piece of street to himself. It was a good five minutes before the bell was answered, when the door fell open abruptly and he was confronted by a tall, black-haired woman of majestic proportions.

"How do you do?" Athens asked politely. Nervously, too, because overhead and in back of him the porch light had gushed on. He was in full view from the street.

"Eh?" the woman asked blankly.

"I say, how do you do?" Athens repeated. "You have rooms for guests, haven't you?"

She never batted an eye until Athens thumbed at the lighted sign in the yard and then tapped himself on the chest.

"Guests? Certainly!" she boomed in one of the richest, deep voices Athens

had ever heard. "Why didn't you ask?" She pulled him into the vestibule, closed the door and turned off the light, led him into the parlor and looked him over with hungry satisfaction.

Instantly noticing with relief that the curtains were drawn, Athens set down his bag and asked loudly, "Will you show me to a good room, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Celia Cunard," she boomed in that incredible voice. Either she was partially deaf or was absent-minded beyond belief. Nearly deaf and with a voice like that. She could have sung in grand opera.

"Room! Room!" Athens bellowed back. He pointed upstairs.

"Oh! There's only one. My husband's room."

"Only one?"

"Yes. You see, I just let it for—" she hesitated for just a flash in a kind of eager pathos—"for company. But I'm sure you'll like it. Come!"

She led him upstairs with a death-grip on his arm and showed him a spacious room comfortably furnished, spotless, and containing a great four-poster bed in carved walnut. An antique. When he nodded and smiled, she asked him whether he was hungry and he disappointed her by shaking his head. He unpacked with the lonely, rawboned majesty of Mother Cunard standing guard in the doorway. Asking him about his trip. Hungry for conversation. Since her husband had died over a year ago she had no one. There was something about the woman that kept bringing a lump into Athens' throat.

At last, reluctantly, she went back downstairs. Athens dressed the knuckle he had barked on Sliney's cheek in the bathroom, shaved off his moustache. He had small use for theatricals in his

method of working, but something had to be done about his distinctive appearance. From a compartment in his leather shaving kit he took a bottle, juggled it doubtfully. With a shrug, he finally uncorked it and with the brush affixed to the stopper inside commenced the business of aging his face around the eyes, forehead, lips. He used the amber liquid sparingly. In drying the stuff contracted, drawing the skin into a semblance of wrinkles. He created a furrow on either side of his mouth. The amber resin was good for about twenty-four hours, when it would begin to peel off like collodion. Using the stuff at all annoyed him, made his face feel tight.

There was no part in his black hair; he parted it on the side. This would have to do.

Exploring, he found that Mother Cunard had a telephone and that there was a garage behind the house with a car in it. The car was a 1934 Plymouth evenly covered with dust. The keys hung from the ignition lock. Athens inspected the dashboard and found that the machine had been driven exactly a hundred and fourteen miles. What was more, the tank was full to the cap with gasoline, and two full five gallon cans were sitting on the floor.

Athens tried the lights. Okay. Closing the garage door behind him Athens stood in the darkness under a pergola covered with vines and swore, "Well, I will be damned!"



IF Mother Cunard noticed any change in his appearance she gave no sign of it. When asked about the car, she said simply, "I won it on a raffle."

"I see the gas tank is full."

"I keep it that way," Celia said sol-

emly. "Do you want to drive it, Mr. Athens?"

He had given his real name, without knowing why he did so except that Lady Cunard struck him as being a lady you could trust all day. Her name should have been Mrs. Gibraltar. It seemed that she let her infrequent guests use the car when she liked their looks, that the car was not used otherwise. . . .

Athens had never been so flabbergasted before; if there were people like Lady Cunard in the world, he had just discovered the place where he wanted to live. After he had cleaned out the rats' nests under the barn, as it were.

He got permission to use the telephone, dialed the telegraph office. Observing the proprieties, Lady Cunard went upstairs to insure his privacy, though she couldn't have overheard anyhow. The wire Athens sent to Mark Townsend on the coast read: "FIRST BASE STOP NIGGERTOE," and gave his name as Abdullah.

The girl taking the message asked, "Is Abdullah the name, mister?"

"No," Athens responded, banking on the probability that Townsend didn't know any Abdullahs. The message simply meant that he was on the scene of operations, period, and that the case was going to be a hard nut to crack.

"We're not supposed to send messages in code, mister," the girl pointed out rather sharply.

"Aren't you? Just because you don't understand the message doesn't mean that it's in code," he snapped. "I'm buying stock."

He closed the connection long enough to break it, dialed Emberlane 2911, feeling a little thrill as he did so, as he listened to the burr of the bell at the other end, as the phone was answered.

"Hello!" It was the curt, heavy voice

of a very angry man. Rube Morell, unmistakably.

"Any news at that end?" Athens asked, laughing silently.

"No!" Morell snarled. "Who's this, Denver?"

"Bad news from the coast," said Athens in his normal voice, and chuckled openly. His statement was met with a barrage of sizzling oaths.

"So it's you, Athens!" Morell raged. "You've just killed one of my best men. We call that murder in this town, understand? This is one time you've stuck your neck out. Just wait till we get hold of you, snooper; you'll get yours for what you did to my sister."

"Just wait till you get hold of me!" Athens taunted. In a dickering voice, then, "You've got this town pretty well sewed up, haven't you, Morell?"

"I'll say I have!" Morell bragged. The old vanity of a big-shot. "A few cops here and there, a few politicians . . . Just try leaving town, Athens!"

"Cathy Townsend and I will be leaving town together," Athens promised.

"Who?" Morell said flatly. "You must have the wrong number."

"How do you think I located you?" Athens asked quickly.

"Say, what do you mean by that?" Morell growled. "Wait a minute!"

Athens had an idea that Morell was stalling, giving one of his men time to trace the phone from which Athens was calling. On dial phones such a connection could be traced, but it would take time. Athens didn't propose to wait long enough for that to happen.

"Hello," said Cathy Townsend sulkily. "Who is it?"

"You're breaking your father's heart," said Athens.

"Good!" she said savagely. "He's treated me like a child all my life, and

he's getting just what's coming to him."

"I hope you're enjoying what you're doing to him," Athens said coldly. "I don't give a damn what your private motives are. All I want to know is whether you're going back to California."

"You're Noel Athens, aren't you?" Her voice broke with a sob, the sound a woman makes when her arm is being twisted. "No!"—another tortured sob—"I'm not going back!"

ATHENS' knuckles went white on the handpiece of the telephone. They were doing something to her in that hideout, wherever it was, making her talk. There was a click, someone opening an extension on the line. Athens could hear Morell cursing; Cathy begged, "*Please!*" and she was off the line.

So she had enough of gangster life, Athens thought grimly, and now they wouldn't let her go. She had brought it on herself, but somehow the thing filled him with rage. He hit on a singular idea.

"Morell!" he said sharply.

"Yeah? What?" Morell drawled nastily, completely out of temper.

"I'm going to get you," Athens promised, emphasizing each word. "You can't get away with what you're doing to Cathy Townsend. Listen."

"I'm listening," Morell sneered. "What's on your mind?"

Athens had drawn the automatic from its holster. He leveled it at the woodwork just above the bell box of the telephone and brought the transmitter close, pulled the trigger. There was a heavy report; the copper-and-nickel slug punched a hole in the wood as neat as anything made by a drill.

He holstered his gun, placed the receiver against his ear and listened to the agonized screams and curses of the men who had been deafened permanently in one ear by the report. Morell and the man listening in on the extension.

Athens dropped the receiver into the cradle, hurried to the front door and opened it as Lady Cunard descended the stairs to the hall. She looked at him, shouldered past him to the front porch and looked vacantly up and down the quiet street. Her next-door neighbor leaned over the railing of her own porch and squalled, "Celia, did you hear a shot?"

Someone across the street turned on another light and looked around. Lady Cunard remarked, "I thought I heard something," vaguely.

The street was empty. In a voice that was reminiscent of a slate-pencil doing curlicues on a blackboard Mrs. Cunard's skinny neighbor declared, "It must have been a backfire! Maybe they're still blasting at the quarry!"

"Maybe they are!" Lady Cunard boomed, and retreated into her house. She looked at Athens, shrugged, and went back upstairs.

There was nothing, Athens reflected, like getting a little help. He walked up and down, from the living room to the cupboard in the dining room and back again. In a few minutes he went upstairs found Lady Cunard reading in her bedroom and walked in. Without saying a word he showed her the snapshot he had taken from his wallet. Like most people who are hard of hearing, her eyes were exceptionally keen. The clear snap of Cathy Townsend on the beach in a brief bathing suit, with her handsome features, the impudent perfection of her lithe body, was as good as a life-size enlargement.

"Yes. Yes, she's the one," Lady Cunard soliloquized. "She has a beautiful form, hasn't she?"

"She has," Athens admitted. "Have you seen her here?"

"I ought to toss you over the rail to those other rats!" he snarled.



"I have," she answered. "What is she to you?"

"She's my girl," Athens lied. But he didn't know how true that lie was. "She ran away from me. Where did you see her?"

"She wouldn't run away from you," Lady Cunard commented, wriggling her

shoulders. "Just the same, I saw her. And I thought—that's the kind of place that is. Well, it's none of my business . . .

"A few weeks ago, I was visiting Mamie Horrigan. She lives behind the Twelve O'Clock Tavern, a few houses down toward the river. The tavern is on Main Street, Mr. Athens."

"Yes, I know where it is."

"I was looking out the window, wanting to go home because Mamie hasn't many brains, and I saw her. There were two cars parked in the alley behind the tavern, and she came out of the front one. I think she was drunk, and I thought what a shame it was with her in that beautiful silver gown. I thought she must have been a good girl once. She walked through the headlights of the car just before they went out, and two men steered her into the back entrance of the tavern. Mr. Athens, I'm sorry, but that's just what I saw."

Athens rested his hand on Lady Cunard's shoulder and didn't say anything. The silver gown was the dress Cathy had worn when she had disappeared. She hadn't been kidnaped. She had joined Morell of her own free will. She was wrong, and she knew it now. Athens got out of Lady Cunard's bedroom before he lost his temper.



THE Twelve O'Clock Tavern. Before he left Lady Cunard's he looked up the address in the telephone directory. The bar had three numbers, but Emberlane 2911 was not one of them. A private number. Otherwise Morell would not have answered when Athens called.

He ran the Plymouth out of the garage, closed the garage doors, and

headed through town. He went down Main Street past the Leigh hotel, circled the block and drove through the business district for a few minutes. It was just about time, he thought, for him to indulge in a drink. He needed one. The Twelve O'Clock was as good a place to surround one as any. He parked the car twenty or thirty feet down the street from the bar entrance.

The front of the place looked as innocent as any bar he had ever seen. Neon signs in the two windows, a boy and a girl arguing on the sidewalk, not a policeman in sight.

Athens detested subterfuges, even when his personal safety was involved, but entered the bar with his body relaxed and head gawking forward for the effect of reducing his height. The bar was a long one and an old one, chocolate-black from years of beer baptisms and polished to ebony by a million elbows.

Trade in the bar was stagnant, no one entering besides Athens and no one leaving. There was sawdust on the floor that made the footing buttery, smoke in the air, a radio blending and blurring the usual gabble of conversation from a loudspeaker in the beamed ceiling. Down the bar a man pegged a cigar butt into a spittoon and made it clang like a bell.

There was a percentage of women. Athens found himself crowded between a slim, handsome number whose coiled black hair and olive-ivory complexion identified her as Latin, and a broad-backed man who kept shaking his head as though arguing with himself. There was something familiar about the expensive tailoring of the fellow's suit. Athens ignored the beckoning appraisal of the girl on his right, because with a jolt he recognized the scent in the air and

located its origin. The man with the big back and one ear larger than the other was Diemer's boy friend, Shoot-'m-in-the-back Sliney.

There was something wrong with Sliney's left ear. He bopped it a few times with the heel of his hand, shook his head irritably. He was deaf in that ear; he was the man who listened in on the extension when Athens called Morell.

Along came the bartender, a dumpling of a man, who asked what it would be.

"Make it your special," Athens twanged in a guarded voice. The dumpling nodded and did things with bottles.

Athens had fired a shot past the telephone transmitter at Lady Cunard's for a very good reason and not out of any wanton cruelty. There is nothing that throws a man off balance so much, so thoroughly impairs his judgment, as suddenly finding himself deaf in one ear or blind in one eye. It knocks the world out of joint.

Here was Sliney getting royally plastered, for example, never a safe thing for a gangster to do. Good health and a whole hide being the foremost concern of criminals in particular, both Sliney and the dangerous Rube Morell were now perhaps fatally handicapped. Sliney expelled a curse through his keyhole of mouth as Athens collected his drink, looked past Athens and said thickly, with fear in his voice, "It ain't even ringing any more now, Grief. I can't hear nothing with that ear. I got to see a doctor."

Grief, Athens mused; nickname for Dolores. In a naturally low, caressing voice she said with a shrug, "Of course you do. But you can wait until mornin', can't you?"

Sliney appeared to notice for the first time that he was separated from his

girl. With instant ugliness he cocked his right arm to give Athens the elbow in the solar plexus and knock him out of the way, began, "Get—"

Then he screwed his close, rat's eyes to focus on Athens' face, and incredulity exploded in his expression. With his vision blurred by the amount of liquor he had guzzled, no doubt he recognized only the general outlines of a hated face.

Instead of drawing his gun immediately, Sliney began firing words rapidly through his keyhole mouth like pellets through a pea-shooter. After five obscene words of guesswork as to Athens' ancestry and social classification he snarled, "Too bad you shaved off that moustache. I was looking forward to yanking it hair by hair."

ONLY then did his hand snake into his coat for gun he carried in an armpit holster. Athens would have beaten him to the draw anyhow. But firing in this crowd would have killed or wounded innocent persons. Whether or not Morell's headquarters were in the Twelve O'Clock, all of these people could not be members of the gang. Athens' right forearm was resting on the high bar.

With a turn that used his whole muscular body in the short blow, he pegged his fist in a horizontal cut at Sliney's jaw just below the bruise where he had walloped him earlier. Fist met jaw with a sickening snap, bone breaking in flesh. Once Athens had killed a gunman with a blow like that, and this time he thought he had broken his hand as well as splitting his knuckle wide open again. As though slugged with a crowbar, Sliney's body crashed to the floor and skidded along a foot or two in the sawdust.

A bouncer chewing on a cigar near the cash register vaulted the bar gripping a

baseball bat used for punching cracked ice in the beer-coil chamber. Athens didn't move beyond wrapping his hand in a handkerchief and let two more bouncers crowd him on both sides from behind.

"Can't make passes like that in here, buddy." The head bouncer prodded him meaningfully with the end of the bat.

Athens made his expression stricken and outraged at the same time. Keeping his twang he complained, "I didn't do nothing to him. I'm just standing here bending an elbow, and that guy guzzles me. He jumps on my corns and makes a pass at me."

"That's right," the bartender chipped in. "I seen him. He's been acting squirrely ever since he came in." Meaning the unconscious Sliney on the floor.

"Cripes," an awed voice in the crowd around Sliney, "his jaw's all bust! Was that a wallop!" Another voice, "All right; lug him upstairs."

"Okay, brother," the bouncer decided. "Pick up your change." Athens took him literally and returned to the bar to get the scattering of silver left from the bill he had tendered for his drink. Dolores laid a hand on his arm, a compelling little ivory hand with blood-red nails.

"You're not quite as old as you look, are you, mister?" she asked. "Mmh, mmh! Where did you get all that muscle?"

"Trying to keep out of trouble," Athens said shortly.

"Don't be in such a hurry!" she drawled. "Denver—that's the lug who was going to take the bat to you—wasn't telling you to scam. That was just his way of telling you you're in."

"I'm in?"

"Sure; Sliney started it, didn't he? He's supposed to be very tough people.

Denver doesn't like him because he's a trouble-maker. You're Denver's sidekick for life, now."

Athens didn't know whether he wanted to be Denver's lifelong sidekick. The circumstances under which he had first heard the name seemed to indicate that Denver figured strongly in the Morrell gang.

"By the way, you're human, aren't you?" Dolores asked.

He looked her over. She was a girl of handsome form, he guessed not older than twenty-one or -two. Black-pansy eyes, lips as moistly red as cherry flesh, and as to mortal geography she was complete with just those peculiarities, in just the right places, which no girl would do without. Either her torso had been poured into the bodice of the deeply-neutral green crepe dress she was wearing, Athens guessed, or she had been sewed into it. In that dress she had no secrets from shoulders to hips.

"But," he stuttered, "aren't you that fellow's girl?"

"Mr. Sliney doesn't live here any more," she informed him cryptically. "These hicks are staring at us. Why shouldn't we go somewhere and talk things over?"

"All right," he agreed, "let's go somewhere." He wanted to get rid of her.

"Let's go." Walking a little ahead of him and taking her time so that the thing wouldn't be too obvious, she led the way to the rear of the bar, through a door marked "private." This was merely the entrance to a stair-well. At the head of the stairs on the second floor a low-browed, heavy customer accosted them. There was no password. Dolores said simply, "It's okay."

"Okay." The gorilla withdrew.

THEY went down a carpeted hall, passing two open archways to rooms

where gambling was going on quietly in a fog of tobacco smoke. The stairway to the third floor was open, also heavily carpeted. As they ascended, Athens thought this Twelve O'Clock place was as cool a front as he had ever seen. As owner of the building Rube Morell collected all the profits from liquor, gambling, and so on from citizen customers, and got back a goodly percentage of the profits from his criminal ventures from the members of his own gang as well. This was headquarters where the gang spent a hefty slice of their splits from bank robberies and other jobs they pulled for Morell.

The third floor was luxuriously appointed. The architectural layout was symmetrical, the head of the stairs cutting the hall in two. Seven closed doors on one side of the hall, six on the stairs side. A three story building. In one of the thirteen rooms, or nests of rooms, Athens felt positive that he would find Morell.

Dolores opened a door at the alley end of the hall waited for Athens to enter and pulled a wall switch. With the closing of the door he found himself in a richly furnished room, with a studio effect given by a tremendous skylight. A bedroom beyond, a tiled bathroom big enough for a medium-sized elephant to turn around in.

"Nice diggings," he commented.

"Say," said Dolores, cocking her head "have you been around or haven't you? I can't make you out."

"Have I been around?" Athens asked blankly. "No, ma'am, I just got into town."

"All right; don't worry about it." Dolores burst out laughing, gaily approached him with her lips raised. Athens knew he had to go through with this

or give the show away; he kissed her. Or she kissed him. He wasn't sure which; he had never experienced a kiss just like that before. Her lips were parted, and he parted his own lips because he was expected to. Everything she had went into that kiss, with their bodies welded together from breast to knee and her hands clenching each other fiercely over the musculature of his back.

She broke away laughing and gurgled, "I guess you have been around a little, at that!"

Athens couldn't help laughing in return. "Sure!"

"Will you excuse me for a little while? It's been a hot day, mister, and I just can't wait to see how cold the water in that shower is."

"Maybe I should go down and surround a few more drinks," he suggested. "I didn't even get started and I've got a terrible thirst."

"Try the stuff over there, big fellow. But leave a little for me." She indicated a bottle on a side table near the lounge. It was nearly full; the Scotch was a brand he had never tried before, but his tongue told him it was better than three-dollar quality. While he pretended to work on it Dolores had gone into the bedroom, was working on her ounce and a half of clothing. The secret of the snug bodice was a zipper, and when she stepped out of the dress her task was practically accomplished. She wore hose rolled at the knee, and her body was like a sleek, gorgeously proportioned ivory statuette. As she turned and went into the bathroom, he saw the soft flutter, heard the whispering slither of gossamer silk as she discarded a slip that looked as though it would float in the air. Dolores had a figure to remember. Being human, Athens compressed

his lips and shook his head regretfully. Softly he set the bottle down.



WITH the hiss of the shower in the bathroom he was at the front door, let himself out into the hall. There were thirteen doors, and he wouldn't have time for all of them. If this place was Morell's headquarters, he thought, there would be more than one exit from the man's own diggings. Probably a rear exit. Athens ghosted down the hall, keeping well back from the stairs when he passed; he made the rear end of the hall, halted for a moment there at the curtained window.

"Bright detective gets caught out on a limb," he told himself irritably. All the doors looked alike, and he might be surprised by a gangster stepping from one of them without warning. No sound gave him any clue.

On impulse he lifted the shade of the window behind him, and at first thought he was looking out into the blackest night he had ever seen, then that the window was painted black. Which made the drawn shade a bit unnecessary. There was no catch on the window and it slid up as though it was kept well-greased, which it was. The big detective stepped through into a windowless, closed gallery, closed the window through which he had entered so that some chance treachery of air wouldn't set the shade to moving or crackling.

Dim illumination to the right. He advanced to the head of a staircase for a look down, returned to the gallery's single door. This was an enclosed outside staircase, with a window on the gallery below admitting to the second-floor gambling rooms. This was Morell's way to

get in unobserved, and Athens' way to get out, he hoped. He cocked an ear at the door, heard angry, muffled conversation. Stooping, he found the keyhole blocked with a key. He rose, breathed, extended his hand to try the knob cautiously.

A bright blue spark better than a quarter of an inch long leaped from the brass knob and stabbed the ball of his thumb with the effect of a needle-thrust. An electrified knob was nonsense. From walking on carpet he had simply stored up a lot of static in his body and the jolt of it as it let go wrung an involuntary short oath from him. Thinking he had betrayed himself he grabbed the knob and ripped the door open.

Laura Morell yelled, "Rube, look out!"

"What?" He looked at her blankly, suddenly whipped around as he made a futile grab for the gun in his shoulder-holster. Athens was already covering him.

"Drop it!" Athens closed the door.

CATHY TOWNSEND—and she looked beautiful in her dishevelment and terror—was cringing on a studio lounge in an expensively appointed living room. Morell had been working her over. His sister had been looking on amusedly from a curled-up position in an easy chair a few feet away. Cathy's face and arms were bruised, and her torn dress revealed the powder-dull shine of creamy skin and some of her splendidly-fashioned figure.

"I need a little help," Athens said conversationally. "Get this rat's gun and bring it around to me, Cathy."

"Will I—and how!" she said with abrupt grimness, now that she was getting a fair deal. "Do I bop him with it?"

"I'll do the bopping. Can you tie knots? Good ones?"

"When I tie my knots I spit on 'm," said Cathy.

"Tie up that blonde hell-cat over there in the chair and spit on the knots," Athens directed. Cathy gave him Morell's gun, passed around behind him and went to work enthusiastically on Laura.

"You turn around, Rube," said Athens.

"Tough guy." Morell licked his thin, cruel lips. His long, apelike arms were hanging loose at his sides. He was heavily boned, tremendously powerful of body, and there was an outlaw gleam in his blue eyes. The one thing in the world he wanted to do right now was get his hands on Noel Athens.

He turned his head to look at the job Cathy was doing on his sister, and his jaws worked with fury. Cathy was hauling on the knots in the silk hose she was using for bonds, her own stockings stripped off for the purpose. She jerked off Laura's hose to tie her ankles. Then with the cord of a floor lamp she secured Laura's wrists to the leg of a radiator. Then she hauled off and slapped Laura a solid one across the face.

"That," she explained, "is for looking on and grinning while he was pawing me."

Laura wasn't grinning now. She looked sick.

"What was he trying to pull?" Athens asked softly, looking Morell dead in the eye. Now that Laura was taken care of, he didn't care whether Morell turned around or not.

"When I came of age," Cathy said with bitter matter-of-factness, "I inherited something like two million dollars

from my mother. All that beast wanted of me was to get as much of that money as he could. But first, he said he was going to see what made me tick, and he was just finding out when you came in, Mr. Athens."

"You've got no kick coming," said Morell in a flat voice. "She took her own chances. I didn't snatch her."

"What do you think of him now?" Athens asked, ignoring him. "Is he glamorous or anything?" His voice was a lash. "How do you feel now, after this maggot has had his hands on you? Well? Do you want to go home to your father?"

"If—if he'll have me." Her voice broke.

"Don't go melodramatic!" Athens snarled. "Who the hell do you think is paying my expenses?"

"You're pretty tough with those two rods, aren't you?" Morell sneered in his monotonous voice. "Sure I was holding the dame, but that's my business. She stuck her neck out, and she was gonna pay for it. And if you didn't have them guns, smart guy, I'd just take you apart with my bare hands."

Athens narrowed his eyes. "A hell of a lot of satisfaction I'd get out of just turning you over to the law, at that. I'd like to see you take me apart."

"Gimme a chance, bozo." Morell's eyes flicked at the guns.

"Take these guns, Cathy," Athens said calmly, never letting his eyes shift from Morell's. "There's a dusty Plymouth up the street from the bar entrance. Bring it around to the alley and wait for me. Maybe I'll be leaving in a hurry."

Laura's eyes went wide with hope and incredulity.

"I won't do it!" Cathy said. "Are you crazy? He'll kill you!"

"Take the guns. If anyone tries to stop you on your way out, shoot to kill, then beat it down to headquarters. As far as I know, the chief of police in this town is a square guy."

Protesting frantically, Cathy finally took the two guns, pleaded with Athens from the door, then closed it swiftly and was gone.

MORELL licked his lips hungrily as he advanced with slow, pantherine steps. Athens stood in his tracks until the stalking tiger was within striking distance, then fired with his long, deadly right.

For the first time in his experience his reckoning was off; Morell knocked his fist out of the air and jerked him to close quarters by the wrist. Fast as Athens was, Morell snaked his two mighty arms around Athens' torso in a steel lock. It was as instantaneous as that, unbelievably quick. With his arms pinioned at his sides, Athens bucked, but it was as though he was anchored in concrete.

The snare of Morell's arms got smaller in slight, inexorable jerks as he put his inhuman strength into play. Sinews cracked in Athens' back as he fought to break that hold and could not. His face empurpled with the effort to get just a few thimblefuls of air into his cramped lungs, and in a moment his ribs were going to crack.

Morell's deadly hold supported him. Athens brought both feet off the floor and savagely heeled the gangster back of the ankles. In order to save himself from getting his wind knocked out, Morell released his hold and tried to roll as he fell. Before he could tumble free,

Athens had an arm-lock around his throat.

Morell rose to his feet bearing Athens' full weight and trying to strike at his head over his shoulder. While he staggered, Laura was trying desperately to free herself from her bonds and gag. She never doubted that her brother would win from the foolhardy detective, but she wanted to be free to yell for assistance or help him physically just in case he was getting the worst of it.

Morell deliberately threw himself down on the floor with a crash on top of Athens, but the detective took the weight of the gangster's body with set jaws and kept his hold. And kept hauling away with the arm-lock. At first it was like trying to pull the head from a fence-post, but gradually Morell's head began to give. A low whine began to escape from his thick throat. In another attempt to rise he got to his knees but no farther.

The crook of Athens' arm felt clubbed numb with the strain put upon it, and molten agony was in his shoulder. His last ounce of strength was in the job, and he was almost through, his face wet with perspiration. There was pounding on the locked hall door. A man demanded, "Hey, boss! Is it all right? Rube!"

Morell's head came back with a snapping of bone. When Athens dropped the limp body the head rolled on the floor as though the neck were made of rubber. Straddling the body with blood dripping from his badly-split knuckle for the third time, Athens glanced at the door dizzily, at Laura Morell. After one horror-stricken look at her dead brother she fainted dead away.

"Rube! Rube!" The man outside knocked on the door.



THENS strode softly to the telephone and called Logan's police chief at his home. The man was sleepy, but woke up fast when Athens gave him the facts.

"Do we want Morell!" the chief gargled. "Good God! Do I want my name in the papers?"

"Pick your men!" Athens snapped, with his lips close to the mouthpiece. "Some of them are on Morell's payroll." He hung up.

Staggering a little he coasted to the gallery door and slipped out. In the dimness out there a man was just coming through the hall window. They saw each other simultaneously. A gun flamed with a stunning roar in the close quarters, and the shot burned through Athens' hair, stinging his scalp. He was unarmed and had to spill himself recklessly down the stairs. Without knowing how many legs he had broken he hauled himself around the turn of the second-floor gallery and half leaped, half fell down the stairs to the alley exit. Cathy had heard the shot, and when he burst through into the night, after split-second recognition, he had to make the running-board with a scrambling leap as she catapulted the machine down the alley. A shot barked behind them, a miss. Before they were well away they heard a discordant yell of converging sirens.

"Good God!" Cathy groaned. "I almost shot you when you popped out of that door!"

"A miss is as good as a mile," Athens said cheerfully. "You tied some good knots in that blonde hellion."

"What about Rube Morell?"

"Still interested in him?"

"Don't be like that!"

"I think he has a broken neck. Cathy." Athens sighed. He wanted to bawl the

daylights out of her for being what she was, and she would have deserved it, but now he couldn't bring himself to it. She wasn't the same any more. No matter what she had done and what a wrong number she had been, she was cured. In fact, she was very close to being meek. And thoughtful. And very tempting.

THEY got into the house before midnight. Mother Cunard was waiting up for them in the living room, where she had been identifying her own car by occasional peeks through the front window.

"You've hurt your hand!" she said first.

"A man hit it with his jaw," Athens explained, bellowing.

"Eh? Oh! Can't I get coffee and sandwiches for you now?"

"Oh, God, yes!" Cathy moaned. "After the terrible stuff I had to eat in the Twelve O'Clock!"

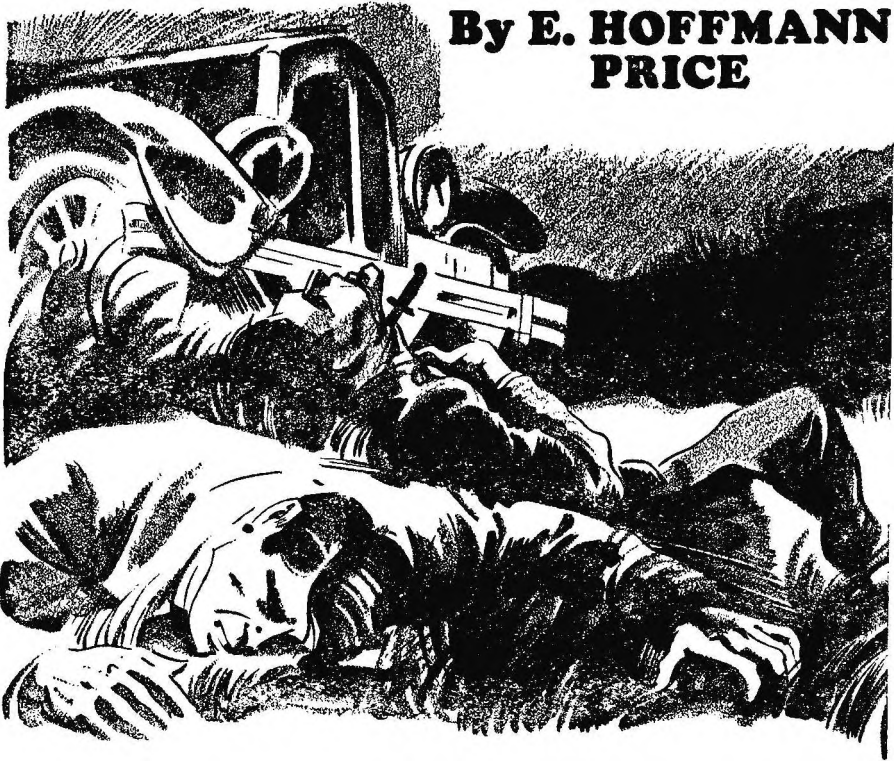
"Yes!" Athens bawled, so that Lady Cunard would hear. Then he got conscience-stricken. He had to tell her that he had deceived her, she was such a lady. That resonant, operatic voice of hers! "Incidentally," he howled, "I want to apologize for accepting your hospitality under false pretenses. I was lying to you!"

"Were you?" Lady Cunard asked softly and skeptically. "You told me your name was Noel Athens. I know who you are; you're that detective from the coast, or don't you read the newspaper accounts of your cases?"

"You told me you were looking for this girl, so you must have a good reason for it." Mother Cunard's eyes flitted over Cathy Townsend's splendid body, from head to foot and back up again lingeringly, and she said, "Yes, I should say you had a good reason."

NAILED with SILVER

By E. HOFFMANN
PRICE



As Dargan whirled, firing, his assailant's scream ended in a gurgle, as he clawed at the steel in his throat.

NOW that he had rounded up a nest of jewel thieves and was in line for a juicy reward, Jeff Dargan decided that the agency could spare him long enough to allow a good look at Saint Augustine. He liked the town, and had a hunch he wouldn't be lonesome very long.

Still, the gals back home were en-

titled to a break; so he spat a jet of Battle Axe at the cockroach that was marching toward the threadbare carpet, reached for a pen, and began addressing a handful of highly colored postal views of the big hotels. On each he wrote, "*Wish you was here*", and put an "X" to mark the room he'd be occupying when he received his reward.



Introducing Jeff Dargan, who knows his way around, even though he may get his trails mixed now and then. It's the case of the Cuban exile that proves his mastery over tough murder mysteries and clever women . . . and he has a weakness for both!

But the last card made him frown; he grumbled, "Hell, the El Dorado cost only \$2,000,000 and Mamie goes out strong for real class."

So he dug up a fresh card, squinted at the inscription, and grinned. "This shack's more like it—cost \$4,000,000."

The tapping at the door brought him to his feet. It was Octavius, the colored porter-bellhop, who announced, "They's a iady waitin' in the lobby, suh—"

Dargan tossed him a quarter and made a dive for his necktie and snuff colored tweed coat. Like the pants, it was baggy enough to have come from an earl's wardrobe. But before he whipped his sandy hair into shape, the door softly opened; and the woman who slipped in after the warning gust of *Le Nuit Bleu* looked as sweet as she smelled.

Dargan palmed his chew of Battle Axe. She had small, well shod feet and trim ankles and hosiery so thin that her lovely calves would have seemed bare, but for the silken sheen that made nature exquisite; and the rest of her was just as shapely, just as alluring as that crimson mouth whose smile hinted that her kisses were tropical.

"Oh, Mr. Dargan," she cooed, long-lashed black eyes appraising his tanned face, which seemed crudely assembled of spare parts. "There isn't a detective agency in Saint Augustine, and when I read about you in today's paper—"

That of course was hooley, he decided; there were plenty of private dicks in Jacksonville, and judging from the egg sized emerald pendant that dilted with the Vee of her super-transparent blouse, she'd certainly not have to walk to the big city, only fifty miles north.

"That write-up kind of dumped on me," Dargan disparaged. "I don't usually bother to bring 'em back alive."

"Oh, Mr. Dargan!" Her soft laugh made his heart hammer. "You're delightfully quaint! I must tell Armitage—"

"Huh?"

"My husband. I'm Mrs. J. Armitage Austin. I want a divorce, and—"

"Listen, madam," Dargan frigidly cut in. "I specialize on jewels. None of that unethical stuff goes with my agency, and anyway, I got another big case hanging fire. Nothing doing."

She ignored the rebuff and looked weary and pathetic. Then, streamlining herself into a rickety chair, she went on, "Armitage is running around with a horrible little wench from Cuba, and I'm so distressed."

The catch in her tremulous voice got under Dargan's skin. Before she said any more, he uncorked a ninety-eight cent pint of Old Monk and gargled a swig; it always upset him when women began to weep. Then he poured a shot of the sheep dip into a tumbler and offered it to her. "Jeez, madam, but I don't know nothing about divorces, never having had only one of my own."

Before he knew it, Alma Austin was weeping the sad story on his shoulder. Her black hair tickled his ear and raised his blood pressure,

"Please," she pleaded. "I know I can trust you, where a Jacksonville detective is likely to sell out and warn my husband."

There was something fishy about the deal, but the warm caress of Alma's arm about his neck was twisting at Dargan's judgement.

"Er—uh—"

"Oh, I knew you would!" She looked up, with wide and adoring eyes. And the fine, hard lines about her mouth didn't warn Dargan. He up and kissed her, thoroughly. Alma sighed, finally, and as she replaced her lip rouge, she went on, "I've been *so* lonesome . . . maybe, later . . . when all this is over, we . . ."

She dropped her long lashes, and somehow managed to promise a lot more than she said. Then she told Dargan about Juanita Laughlin, on whose account Armitage Austin was neglecting everything, including his sugar plantations in Cuba.

"Here's the play," proposed Dargan, whose indignation had gotten the best of him. "I've got none of my assistants with me, so you pull this gal out of her dump with a fake phone call, and I'll slip in through a window, and wait for a chance to grab a couple of candid camera shots of your sugar-loving husband, and—"

"Darling, you're just wonderful," Alma sighed, swivel-hipping for the hall.

Dargan blinked a moment before he realized that only the sweet smell remained. He bounded to the door; "Hey, how about that hundred bucks retainer?"

The slam of the elevator gate drowned that. But Alma's emeralds, plus a look at "*Who's who*," later that afternoon, convinced him that this was big stuff. Mrs. J. Armitage Austin was no phoney!



IHAT night, Dargan hoofed it to Juanita's address on Saragossa Street. This was off season, and judging from the darkened win-

dows, the siren's apartment was the only one of the six that was occupied. The building was set somewhat back in a semi-tropical tangle which was colorful by daylight, but almost eerie now, with the rustle of palm fronds and the disconcerting shapes formed by streamers of trailing moss.

Dargan hoisted himself to the crotch of an oak to await the fake phone call that was to pull Juanita from her quarters. Then he cursed bitterly; that was when the half parted drapes gave him a view of the lady herself.

She had hair the color of burnished copper, and a hostess gown of sapphire satin emphasized just through spots from her pert little chin to her knees; and from there, ankleward, the shimmering fabric had shifted enough to advertise a pair of legs that the Cuban chamber of commerce should have featured in its literature. The only thing wrong with the picture was the determined looking man she was sitting on: J Armitage Austin, as pleased and smug as Dargan would have been in his place.

He couldn't hear what the redhead was whispering but with her glistening red mouth that close to Austin's ear, it must have been effective. Dargan began to develop a grudge against spectator-sports. Even if the decoy phone call worked, he'd have no chance of slipping in while Austin hung around, waiting for Juanita to return.

"If that's the kind of sugar they have in the Caribbean," he grumbled, slipping to the ground. "I'm getting me a job there."

The telephone tinkled. Juanita listened, then handed Austin a line about a girl friend being suddenly taken ill on account of tainted sea food. Austin

said, "I'll wait. Fact is, Townley Hapgood was going to meet me here, later."

"All the more sap!" muttered Dargan. "Lettin' another guy get wise to a jane like that."

His exit was blocked by a police prowler car, idling down Orange, all lights out except the parking bulbs. He wondered if someone across the street had noticed his approach and phoned in a call. He skirted the building, this time heading toward the front. A moment later, an engine drummed to life, and a cream colored light sedan slipped out the drive on the further side of the apartment building. Juanita was at the wheel.

She was barely out of sight when a heavy car rolled up to the curbing in front of the apartment. The man who emerged prodded the doorbell, and received an answering buzz. Dargan decided to call it a day; a threesome, when Juanita returned, would have no smut-value at all. But he had scarcely emerged on Orange Street, after noting that the radio patrol was out of sight, when he heard a wrathful exclamation, a yell, and the splintering of pottery. Two men were tangling up, and it was becoming louder and dirtier every moment.

"Hell," muttered Dargan, retracing his steps, "If those guys are buddies, this is a tough town!"

Glass shattered; and just as he approached for a view of the sudden melee, a man plunged through the window. He landed on Dargan, glass raining, boots flailing. From within came the gasp of someone trying to groan and unable to make it. But Dargan was occupied with his own impressions, which were mainly on his face and stomach. All he knew was that a

light, wiry man kicked him in the belt buckle, and took a running broadjump for the side fence. He cleared it beautifully, reaching the adjoining lot before Dargan could move or yell.

A minute passed; perhaps two. The roaring in Dargan's ears subsided in time for him to hear a gruff voice saying, ". . . Sargossa Street. Sure he's dead . . . I'll wait here."

A siren wail cut into the telephone message; the cops must have broadcast the alarm, then demanded the details, whose tail end Dargan had heard. But who the devil was dead?

This was no place for a stranger; and to hell with Alma's divorce! Dargan looked and felt the evidence in an assault and battery case. But that was nothing to what happened as he cleared the rear fence.

Though the P. D. car had pulled up to the front, one of the squad had doubled to the back. Dargan got a glimpse of a badge; but he didn't see the billy that popped down across his head. The cop was methodically cursing as he jerked the fugitive to his feet. A voice yelled from the apartment, "That's him—he killed Austin—"

The billy punctuated that; like a pile driver. Resisting arrest was tough work in Saint Augustine, and Dargan heard no more sound affects—not after that second smack!

CHAPTER II



WO cops were regarding Dargan when he opened his eyes and tried to find the sides of his head. A tall, square faced civilian with a craggy nose and biting blue eyes scowled at the prisoner. The sergeant,

standing at one side, deferentially said to the man in costly gray worsteds, "Mr. Hapgood, this isn't a Cuban. You must have been mistaken—"

"You're all of you mistaken!" croaked Dargan, blinking at the feminine, frilly furnishings of Juanita's apartment.

"What'd you sap him for?" One of the cops jerked him to his feet. "Meet the corpse, guy! Who the hell are you?"

A man lay face down on the Chinese rug, outstretched hands still dug into the nap. The back of his head was a red-gray pulp; the last shade proving that he'd had brains, only now they were scattered. And the base of the heavy silver candlestick lying near him was battered and gory. On the further end of the mantel was its mate, all agleam, though faintly filmed with polish.

"Mistaken, hell!" snapped Hapgood. "I said Cuban, and I didn't mean a sandy haired fellow like this overgrown boob."

"Who's a boob? For two cents. I'd knock your damn block off—" But a cop had Dargan by the arm before he could get half way to Hapgood. Then his wits cleared a bit, and he realized that the square faced friend of the deceased was giving him a break.

Sergeant McNair laughed outright. "Say—this is the jewel-herding dick. Dargan, the guy they wrote up in the paper."

"Just like I was trying to tell you," Dargan improvised. "I had a lead on a Cuban that's been causing a lot of trouble up north. And he up and jumps out at me—"

"I guess you could see in the dark?" the sergeant wondered.

Dargan wiped the crop of sweat from his forehead, then suddenly brightened. He thrust out his hand, and challenged, "Take a whiff of the hair tonic on my mitts. I was grappling with the guy. Nobody but a Spick would wear loud stuff like that."

And that, with Hapgood's positive evidence, got Dargan off the spot. Hapgood continued, "As I told you over the phone, sergeant, poor Austin buzzed back to admit me. Before I got half way down the hall, I heard a riot in here. The door was open, and I came in and saw Sequera diving for the window—"

"Saw who?"

"Sequera. Eduardo Sequera."

"How come you know his name?" Sergeant McNair demanded.

Hapgood stroked his chin and looked annoyed. He answered, "That's easy. There were a lot of things about Juanita Laughlin that poor Austin never suspected. He was a bit too much in love with her."

Just then feminine heels click-clicked up the hallway, and the door to death's arena framed Juanita Laughlin. Her bewilderment at meeting the reception committee became horror when she saw the crushed head that spattered the Chinese rug.

"Oh—good God!" She shrank back to the door jamb. The magnolia whiteness of her lovely face became paper blank, and her rouged lips were grotesquely red. Her incredibly widened eyes were brown; a striking touch, with that copper-glistening hair.

"Where you been?" snapped McNair.

"Eileen Slade's apartment. I got a call, saying she was poisoned with tainted sea food."

"Check that, Burdick," the Sergeant ordered from the corner of his mouth. Juanita's expression changed; she faltered, "Eileen wasn't in—nobody answered"—

"Huh." The snort was an accusation. "Nice set up, eh. Your spick boy friend Eduardo Sequera, hiding out. You leave on a stall, and Austin waits. The Latin lover beans him. And would have gotten away with it, only Mr. Hapgood got here in time."

Juanita was sagging. Finally she flared, half hysterical, "But I knew Mr. Hapgood would be here—"

"And you knew Mr. Sequera was here, too?"

She nodded. "I begged him to leave. but he didn't. And when Armitage suddenly arrived, Eduardo had to hide—behind that drape—"

DARGAN began to understand why the Mexican might have brained Armitage Austin: the view had been sizzling enough from the oak tree outside. As for a ringside seat—man,—man—!

"You better run along with us, Miss Laughlin," said the sergeant.

"You can't arrest me!" she protested.

"But I can keep you on ice till the D. A. looks at this setup," was the stern reply. "You know plenty about this mess."

When Dargan saw Juanita's face, he knew he was going to make a sap of himself, but he didn't care. Those desperate brown eyes made him blurt out, "Hey, sergeant, you're off on the wrong foot. She thought that message was strictly kosher."

"How the devil do you know?" snapped McNair.

"Because I faked it, account of Austin's wife. She put me on the job. Now laugh that off. You know who I am."

"Yeah. Another tin horn dick," snorted the sergeant. He spat on the carpet, and added, "I thought you was the real article, recovering those sparklers, but I guess I was wrong."

"Nuts! Do you believe me, or don't you?" he challenged. "Or do you want to see the widow and find out?"

Hapgood interposed. "Sergeant, I think you can take his word for it. I'm sure you wouldn't impose on Mrs. Austin now. Lord knows, this will be enough of a shock to her, regardless of what she may have had in mind when she engaged Mr. Dargan."

That bore plenty of weight, coming from Armitage Austin's yes-man and second largest stockholder of the Caribbean Sugar Company. And it finished Sergeant McNair's case against Juanita; he could only discredit Dargan by putting Mrs. Austin over the hurdles.

He did not wait for the completion of the finger print and photo routine; though it was remarkable that Sequera had found time to wipe the silver bludgeon before diving through the window. Dargan was griped; a widow didn't need a divorce.

"Mr. Dargan," Juanita murmured, catching his hand in warm little fingers as he stalked toward the door, "it was wonderful, going to bat for me that way."

She was sweet and appealing, and something about her voice caught at his heart. She was the kind of a girl a fellow could take a dive for. Then he remembered the lover who had kicked him slab-sided and said, "Nuts, madam! If you didn't keep so damn many

Suddenly Juanita chopped down with Dargan's .38, knocking the gun from Hapgood's hand.



boy friends around the house, I'd be earning party money in this town!"

CHAPTER III



ARGAN, stamping into his room, poured a shot of himself with repairing the damage to his face and frame. Alma's *Nuit Bleu*, still sweetening the room, reminded him how she had wheedled him into a mess,

and against his better judgement.

"By God," he pondered, "if Hapgood hadn't been in the picture, I'd be framed for a juicy murder. Something was screwy, and if that dame didn't have

her reasons for wanting a strange dick on the job, I'll eat half the cockroaches in this room!"

A kick in the stomach, and hoof prints on the chin, and having a cop smack a fellow across the head three times when the first one was a honey is enough to upset even the gay good humor of J. J. Dargan, Esquire. In a word he was sore as hell; and what made him more so was Alma's perfume. It reminded him of the way she'd cocked up one knee to give a more alluring turn to a pair of contented calves; the way she'd dropped those lashes to suggest promises that no nice girl makes to a stranger. She hadn't had the least notion of making good; she'd left him so fuzzy witted he'd not caged a retainer.

"But I'm going to collect something!" he swore, jamming his well clubbed hat down over his ears.

He was too wrathful to bother with cabs. While Saint Augustine has more million dollar hotels per square yard than any town on earth, Dargan's grandfather could have spit tobacco juice from the steps of the El Dorado to the city limits.

Alma Austin lived in an ancient heap in an estate north of the coquina wall that used to keep the Indians from tomahawking the Spaniards. A goggle-eyed negro butler tried to explain that the missus wasn't receiving. Dargan said, "You're a damn' liar," and stalked in.

Madam, gloriously white and sleek in a black-net negligee, was surprised and solemn when she came down the lordly staircase to find out about the disturbance . . . But not solemn enough to keep the dusky-silk curves of her knees from pushing through the negligee at each step. Her eyes were not the least red, but her expression told Dar-

gan that she had heard of the tragedy. He wondered if she'd been thorough enough to wear black garters, just to complete her mourning.

"Oh—Mr. Dargan—" She forced a smile, "It's sweet of you to come to offer your sympathy."

"Sympathy? Listen sister, you owe me a hundred bucks retainer."

"A hundred dollars?" Her brows rose in moorish arches, like the door of the gambling joint across from the El Dorado. "Why—I don't need a divorce now. I'm a widow."

"Listen," countered Dargan. "I got hell kicked out of me on that snooping job. And three cops busted me with clubs, and—"

"My good man," was the frosty answer, "those are the hazards of your profession. Now please leave me to my grief, or I'll call the police."

"You fancy frill," growled Dargan. "if you think you can pull that, I'll tell the cops about the song and dance you handed me this afternoon, and they'll think things. I bet you had Austin bumped off and figured on me to take the rap; only a spick happened to be handier."

Alma's black eyes froze, and the smooth curving of muscles behind the black set garment grew suddenly tense, but only for a moment. She shrugged, languidly said, "Go ahead and tell them. You seem to forget that I am Mrs. J. Armitage Austin."

She didn't ring for more servants to throw him out. She turned and hip-swayed herself toward the stairs.

Dargan, who began to sense that he had two strikes against him, stalked back to his hotel.

JUANITA Laughlin was waiting in the lobby. Her smile was caress-

ing, but her eye and gesture told him to keep moving. He had scarcely reached his room, however, when a soft tapping called him to the door. Juanita slipped in, crinkled her nostrils as she caught the lingering reek of perfume, and effectively draped herself on the table. That wrinkled the hem of her skirt up above twin silken contours of perfect knees and made a long, sleek line from hip to ankle; and her amazing eyes and cream colored skin did the rest.

"I need a detective," she began.

"I need a trench helmet," he sourly retorted. Then she smiled and he relented. Juanita had more than looks. There was something vital and compelling about her. "All right, what do *you* want investigated?"

She hitched her skirt down far enough to mask a pair of gorgeous knees and smiled impishly at Dargan's disappointment; then she said, "Eduardo Sequera isn't guilty. He was framed."

"They always are framed," snorted Dargan. "Go on."

"I want you to clear him before he's picked up. He mustn't be picked up—"

"It would be tough, what with the way he snapped Austin."

"I know you don't believe me! But you've just got to clear him."

"I'd like to find him myself." Dargan stroked his jaw; the kicked spot. "Yeah, I'd like to."

"But you don't understand."

"How the hell can I?" he demanded, deciding not to shake Juanita's clinging fingers from his wrist. "What's the score?"

She dubiously regarded him, then observed, "The cops slugged you, didn't

they? That sort of makes it about even."

"*Did they?*" He was on his feet. "The dirty lugs—"

"I knew you'd help me!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. I got into this mess account of helping one jane. I guess *you're* going to be awfully nice to me, *later*."

Juanita spent a moment trying to decide whether his battered face was interesting or just plug-ugly; then she said, "well . . . I like 'em tall and blondish—"

"Like Sequera," he snapped.

She laughed. "Darling, you're so funny! Eduardo isn't—well, he's just a business acquaintance. And he's short and dark. Please, Jeff."

"I might," he pondered, "for a fair sized down payment."

Dargan blinked when Juanita made a dive for her brassiere. She extracted a pair of bills: two centuries. "Huh—well, I guess that proves you're a lady."

"Don't look so disappointed," she reproved. "That's fair sized, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but—" He frowned, eyed the old style, large sized notes. "Where'd you get these horse blankets. Say, is this hot?"

She shook her head. "No, I guess I might as well tell you. Eduardo is a Cuban exile and he's been hiding out in Florida. This is a part of his stake."

"And you ain't?"

"Silly! Father is a planter and the present regime is freezing him out. Strictly legitimate, you know, but still and all, dirty work. Caribbean Sugar—that's Hapgood and the late Mr. Austin—are behind it. And they ran Eduardo out of Cuba, after his brother faced a firing squad on a trumped up charge of sedition."

"See-dition, eh?" frowned Dargan.

"Yes—an honest man showing up a ring of crooked *politicos*," was Juanita's sombre answer. "Eduardo's brother was a treasury official and he got wise to Caribbean Sugar's tactics. Grabbing concessions, hijacking the whole island."

THAT sounded plausible, but likewise it made Eduardo Sequera a number one suspect. The girl was either honest, or else pluperfectly dumb to blab it out that way. Or maybe she liked and trusted Dargan.

"And still you're laying out good dough for me to clear a guy with all that stacked against him?" demanded Dargan. "With that kind of a grudge, he'd kill Hapgood next. But this Austin fellow—the way you and him was necking—"

"Oh—you saw *that*?" Juanita's face for a moment almost matched her hair. Then she went on defiantly, "that's none of your business. I paid you a retainer."

"And here it is!" snapped Dargan, thrusting the bills into her hand. "I guess you were playing up to that lug to get an in for your old man in Cuba?"

The anger faded from her eyes, and she laughed outright. "Jeff, you're a small boy if there ever was one! You guessed wrong. I was making a play to get Caribbean Sugar kicked out of Cuba. And anyhow, I was keeping Austin at arm's length."

"Gawd," muttered Dargan, "they must be a lot shorter than they look."

"You're so funny," she sighed. "Mrs. Austin really jumped at a lot of conclusions, sending you to spy on me." Then, edging the retainer back into his vest pocket, with a little caressing pres-

sure of warm fingers, she wheedled, "Now be a sweet boy, and help me, won't you? Before this is over, I'll prove that I wasn't—well . . . letting anyone get inside my guard."

But Dargan pretended to be stubborn. "Nothing doing. I got worked into one jam that way. It's none of my business who you play house with, but you're too slick for me."

"I'll prove my point if you've got nerve enough to keep up with me," she challenged, chin up. "Are you game for going into Armitage Austin's house and opening the wall safe in his study? I've got the combination—located it while —"

"With the way you turned the heat on him, you should have got the whole safe and he'd never known the difference," snapped Dargan. "But if you think I'm biting on a burglar rap, you're screwy!"

"I'll go with you," she said. "To prove I'm not framing you."

"Then why don't you do it yourself?"

That stopped her, set her back on her heels. It was only then that he realized she had been traveling on her nerve. She was trembling all over when she draped herself on his chest and said, "Jeff, a woman has her limits—you've got to help me—"

The moist, clingy way she kissed him made Dargan forget about the assortment of admirers. Those warm, determined lips—! She could say all sorts of promising things with them, and not make a sound! He was groggy when he finally blinked, licked some lipstick from his mouth, and muttered, "If you've got any limits, I'm the guy that's going to find out what they are . . . let's go." But she didn't go anywhere—not just then. Though, even, with the peach-

smoothness of her cheek pressed to his, he took time out to fish the two century notes from his vest pocket and carefully bury them in his wallet. After all, he had a man's sized gripe against Alma Austin; and it would be worth some risks to prove that the Cubans in Juanita's woodpile weren't lovers.

CHAPTER IV



JUANITA'S cream colored sedan was parked on a side street. And presently, after clearing the city gates and heading north again, they ran the machine into the shadows of the great trees that loomed high over an ancient cemetery. The Austin estate was only half a block away, and together they slipped through the gloom and toward the coquina wall.

It was not high, and Dargan enjoyed the obstacle, mainly because it furnished him with an armful of Juanita when he boosted her to the crest. She was slim and supple, but with nicer curves than her trim ensemble had hinted. When he joined her on the other side, she snuggled against him, tense and trembling. Dargan knew that he was getting in up to his chin, but somehow, discretion was at a discount where that redhead with the contradictory brown eyes was concerned.

They crept through the tropical sweetness of a luxuriant garden. The newspaper men had finally ceased interviewing the widow, and only a vestibule light was on in the front. And snores from the servants quarters further reassured Dargan as he made a rapid survey.

"In the left wing," whispered Juanita. "He told me all about it."

"I'm a sap," he told himself as he worked on the window. "And the worst of it is, I like it." Then, aloud, "Stay out, Red—just in case of a burst. And grab my gun. If anything goes wrong, I'll have a better out if I'm unarmed. I shouldn't have brought it."

Once in the darkness that reeked of stale cigars and leather upholstery, Dargan leaned back over the sill and asked Juanita for the combination of the safe whose circular door gleamed like a frosty eye in the half gloom. She handed him a slip of paper, and he said, "If anything pops, check out."

She didn't answer. He turned toward the safe, listened a moment to the breathing silence of the house, then set to work, the beam of his pencil flashlight guiding him. But despite some moments twirling the dial, the combination wouldn't yield.

First he blamed it on his trembling fingers; then he began to sense that not a tumbler had moved behind that steel door. Something was wrong; dead wrong. But his premonition did not freeze him until a key turned, somewhere at the front. In that silence, it sounded like a junk wagon clanking over a tin roof. A switch snapped, and the blaze of light from the hall invaded the sombre, spacious study.

There was time to check out, but he did not like the thought of bolting like a boy caught in a strange orchard; not with Juanita down below, counting on him. So he slipped across an acre of Sarouk rug and into the shadow of a lounging chair. He made it just as stealthy footsteps came up the hallway.

It was Townley Hapgood, face tense, his bulky body poised in a tiptoed sneak. And before Dargan could wonder at the strange blend of stealth and

openness, a woman's voice, subdued but strained and penetrating, came from the upper landing: "Townley—good God, you startled me—turn off that light, you idiot!"

Hapgood said something inarticulate, and a switch clicked. In the gloom, he stumbled, cursed; and from above came a little cry and a rustle of silk. Then a woman's voice, blending with his mutter.

Dargan hearing the sounds recede to the second floor, slipped back to the window.

"Nita!" he whispered.

No answer. Nor could his straining eyes pick up a sign of her face in the lower gloom. Then she emerged, directly below.

"That memo isn't worth a hoot! You must have got the numbers for some other safe!"

"Good Lord," she sighed, "It might be the one for his office."

For a moment she looked up, her face a despairing white blank. Dargan frowned, then said, "Here's my key. Hurry back to my room and get my camera. It's in my suitcase, along with that electric flashbulb."

Then he remembered the wall, but Junita whispered, "I can make it alone. But who came in, just then?"

"Hapgood, and he had keys. Gate and all."

Dargan crept up the stairs, and once in the second floor hall, he worked his way toward a suite whose closed door muffled the voices within; yet he caught bits that confirmed his hunch on the candid camera; ". . . Townley, you shouldn't have come here . . . if anyone found out . . . suppose they did? I'm his business associate . . ."

The last was Hapgood's retort. There was a whispered exchange, then a bit

that was intelligible: ". . . damn it, Alma—what do you mean, saying maybe I hit him? If that's what you think—"

Footfalls approached the door. Alma tearfully protested, "I didn't mean that you did. Do be reasonable—it's just what people will think of us—"

If she was wearing that black net negligee, Hapgood would forgive her in a minute! Dargan listened to the confused murmur that followed, grinned as he picked his way down the stairs. She'd talked him out of it already.

A few moments later, something stirred beneath the study window. "Nita?" he whispered; and she emerged from the shadows to hand him the camera, scarcely larger than two matchboxes, and the compact little flashbulb. "It's a pushover. Just wait."

He paused long enough to clip a square from a window drape, and fashion a crude mask. That done, he stealthily crept upstairs. The hall door was not locked; but it should have been—

The widow was being thoroughly kissed, with the supple softness of her crushed in a fervid embrace, and she liked it, judging from the way her white arms were tight about Hapgood's shoulders as he bent over her. But that clinch ended in a yelp instead of a sigh of ecstasy. Hapgood whirled, red and wrathful; and Alma's flurry of slim white legs and black lace gown had just reached the point of hastily arranged dignity when the flash in Dargan's hand blazed.

There was nothing off color about the view, but the expression of the lovers were a dead giveaway. And the bedroom beyond, whose ornate furnishings would show through the boudoir

door, made it perfect; absolutely fit for publication, but awfully embarrassing.

"Yeah—a song without words," he chuckled from behind his mask. And before Hapgood could find words, Dargan went on. "Open that safe down below, and you can have the camera."

Alma's taut mouth relaxed and her breasts fell as she exhaled a sigh, and her tense muscles softened enough to quiver with the movement. "If you think you want anything in it, it's all yours," she quavered.

Hapgood cut in, "You damned black-mailing crook—"

"Steady, man," warned Dargan. "I don't have to drill you. All I got to do is paste hell out of you and the riot will draw a crowd, and my camera will go into evidence when I face a housebreaking rap. Slick, eh?"

He pocketed the flashbulb and patted his empty holster. That hint subdued Hapgood. They followed Dargan as he backed down the stairs, and into the study.

"Get busy, Mrs. Austin. Clean it out," he directed.

She knelt in front of the safe, her skirt above the faint shininess of tightly bent knees, and fumbled with the dials. Dargan, casting an appreciative eye at the streamlined sweep of Alma's temptingly shaped back, told himself that if she'd been half way amiable, earlier that evening, she'd not be out on a limb now. He would not have been in when Juanita arrived with her insane proposition. But Alma's lovely shoulders and exquisite legs upset the game a second time. Too late, Dargan caught the motion of Hapgood's hand, just as it emerged from a table drawer. He had seized an ivory handled automatic.

"This," he growled, thumb snapping the safety catch, "beats hell out

of pictures. Drop that camera before you're shot while escaping."

"You seem to know Cuban customs. You dirty lug!" grumbled Dargan, letting the Leica thump to the carpet.

"Drop that gat, or I'll tell your wife about your taste in widows—"

"That's one on you," was the sour retort. "I'm a bachelor."

"So was your father!" Dargan flared; but the exchange had not distracted Hapgood, and there was not a chance of snatching the gun.

He was slowly advancing, pistol leveled. His eyes blazed wrathfully and he said from the corner of his mouth, "Alma, grab that camera and phone the police—"

Chills rippled down Dargan's spine. This was the prelude to murder. From the tail of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a marble pedestal with a bronze bust. If he could tip that and startle the man behind the gun—

Or else he'd get it, just as he cleared the window sill; everything would be natural. Then Hapgood would hide out while Alma got hysterical, waved the pistol and kept the law amused.

But Alma's yelp was ahead of schedule. That was when a window drape stirred, and Juanita broke from cover. As she moved, she chopped down with Dargan's heavy .38, knocking the pistol from Hapgood's grasp.

"Oh, good God!" gasped Alma, halting least the wrathful redhead go wild and hose the room with lead. "Who—are you—why"

"You ought to know who I am Mrs. Austin," said Juanita. "Now please open the safe before I get jittery and fire. Lucky I slipped in while he was taking pretty pictures. But first give my playmate that camera."

Hapgood, color receding, stared as Alma obeyed. He was perplexed. Suddenly it occurred to Dargan that Hapgood had not recognized his voice; he had only once heard it, thick and labored, after a heavy slugging. And the mask helped.

"You don't want to phone the cops," said Dargan, as Alma handed him the armful of documents in the safe. "Not as long as these pictures are in circulation. Now back up while we check out."

THEY left by the front door. The gate had not been locked after Hapgood. That made it easier. And a few minutes later, Dargan was at the wheel of Juanita's car.

"Where now?" he demanded. "And what's it all about?"

"To my apartment," she said, "just for a few minutes, anyway. Jeff, I nearly died, wondering whether I could make it. I was afraid to startle him, and waiting for him to get close enough—"

She shuddered, and clung close for a moment. Dargan said, "Maybe you think I didn't feel sickish like. Now give me another taste of that lipstick . . ."

CHAPTER V



"OW," wondered Dargan as he followed Juanita into her apartment, "is this armload of junk going to prove a thing about you and that Segura fellow?"

"In the first place, his name really is Esteben Eduardo Jesus Jose Sequera y Altamonte."

"Uh—what's his last name?" blinked Dargan. "You mean he's related

to this Altamonte bird that caused such a ruckus in Havana?"

She nodded. "So plain Eduardo Sequera fooled Hapgood, but Austin would have noticed the family resemblance. He knew the Altamontes. That's why I had to keep them from meeting."

"Still and all Hapgood called him by his phoney name."

Juanita was worried. "That just proves he must have been spying on me and Eduardo. But look at the exhibit."

Her running comments made it fairly clear to Dargan. Caribbean Sugar had been in close touch with the *junta* that overthrew Sequera's brother, worked a fresh set of cabinet officials into office, and ended by getting a strangle hold on Cuba. She concluded, "But now that I have all the evidence, Caribbean Sugar is finished! A lot of the officials in question are honest enough at heart; once they see that an American syndicate really made suckers of them, they'll lift the roof.

"That's what I want, on account of my father's plantations. And that's what Eduardo wants, as the first move toward getting square for the way his brother was handled."

"If you figure I can prove Sequera didn't kill Austin, you must think I'm a magician."

Juanita smiled oddly. Her eyes were narrowed, and her fine little head seemed for a moment cocked as though intently listening. Suddenly she brightened and said, "Darling boy, you needn't bother clearing Eduardo. Just help me get him out of town with Austin's papers. There's a speed boat waiting out near Summer Heaven."

"Like hell I will!" flared Dargan. "And be an accessory after the fact?"

Juanita screamed and tackled Alma. There was a ripping of blouses, and scratches streaked redly across white skin. . . .



Skip it, baby, skip it. Sequera can swim to Havana for all I care!"

"I am sorry, *senor*, but I am the poor swimmer," said a suave voice at the further end of the room. A lean, swar-

thy man of medium height was in the doorway, and a pistol was in his hand.

"Take his pistol, Juanita."

"I've already got it, Eduardo," she answered, and Dargan cursed wrath-

fully. He'd not reclaimed his weapon!

Sequera advanced a pace, explaining in answer to Juanita's querying look, "I doubled back and into the basement, where none of those thick-wits dreamed of looking for me. And now there is a skipper to help me run the boat to Cuba, no?"

"If you think I'm taking a turn at the wheel of your boat, you're crazy!" stormed Dargan. "Go ahead and shoot. I never saw a Spick that could hit a flock of barns with a shotgun!"

"No?" smiled Sequera. "Watch the floor lamp in the corner."

His eyes shifted, and his left hand slipped inside his coat, then flashed forward. There was a hiss, a streak of silver, and a thin bladed knife chunked into the lamp standard.

"And she makes no noise. which is better than a pistol."

"Jeff," implored Juanita, "do be reasonable."

THE smiling Cuban wasn't worried; there was an engaging, devil may care glint in his eye. He said, "It would be the pleasant trip, *senor*. You would like the rum which is at the plantation of my late brother."

"Um . . ." And then Dargan laughed wryly. "You're putting me on the spot, smuggling out a guy wanted for murder."

"My fran', I did not do the murder," Sequera solemnly assured him. Then, retrieving his knife, he went on, "This evening, I foolishly lingered to plan with Juanita—"

"Plan?"

"*Seguramente*," declared Sequera. "Plan. . . p-l-a-n . . . "n", not "y", to my everlasting regret." He kissed his fin-

gertips, rolled his eyes, and made a romantic gesture. "To plan, *senor*. And this pig of an Austin came in before I could make the retreat.

"Carramba! I am trapped, yes? He will recognize me. My *coup d'etat*, as you call him in French, she is finish. But I hide in that alcove. You know the rest. I am left with the assassin. But I control myself. I will not kill him yet. All is well, until I get the cramp from standing motionless too long. I shift. *Madre de Cristo*, that vase!"

He chuckled, then went on, "So I pretend I am the burglar. I start for the window. But that *cabron* blocked me, which my somewhat black eye makes clear. I break away, while he is yell for the po-lees, and I dive through the window—"

"I'll say you did!" grimaced Dargan.

"Isn't it clear, Jeff?" Juanita, very close and very sweet, turned imploring eyes to second her plea. Dargan was weakening; and to clinch it, the red-head slipped his own pistol into his hand, saying, "Jeff, dear, I'm putting it up to you. Help us or turn him in!"

"You damn little devil!" grumbled Dargan, pocketing the pistol.

Sequera beamed amiably. "Now, I will slip into the car. She is in the garage, no? Fortunately, Mr. Hapgood has cleared you two of suspicion."

He turned toward the rear. Juanita assured Dargan that she needed no help in packing. All she was taking with her would fit into an overnight bag. That left Dargan to get his first clear look at the room that death had gorily invaded earlier in the evening.

The police, he was certain, had made *mouillage* impressions of the heel scratches on the sill which Sequera had cleared

in his flight. He stepped to the mantel, eyed the remaining one of the pair of massive silver candlesticks. Its lustre was dimmed by a faint film of silver polish that had not been completely wiped off.

His circuit of the room was interrupted by a pause to scrutinize the lamp standard. Sequera's hurled blade had bitten nearly an inch into the hardwood column. Few pistol marksmen could fire as accurately. Dargan was frowning as he went on toward the telephone. In the wall niche was a compartment below the instrument, for a directory. A squint into its depths revealed a wad of white.

It was a handkerchief, new and without any laundry mark. But it was crumpled, and had a bluish-black smear. Silver polish, possibly; which accounted for the police not having gotten any fingerprints from the candlestick that had brained Austin.

He thrust it back, hastily, as Juanita emerged with her overnight case.

"Why so solemn, Jeff? Sorry you're teaming up with us? But you won't be. Darling, I *know* you won't be."

Her voice was a promise seconded by her caressing hand.

Dragan frowned and said, "I was just thinking. Sequera's god almighty quick with his hands."

She flashed him a narrow glance, then wheedled, "Don't be stuffy, Jeff. Eduardo didn't kill Austin. Don't you see, that'd been the worst possible move, right now?"

"Aw right. Only, he's kind of impulsive," Dargan countered, following her to the rear; but he was frowning when he shot a farewell look at the niche that concealed the handkerchief.

CHAPTER VI



WHEN the little Sedan, a six cylinder, supercharger job, hummed across the Bridge of Lions, the chills ceased trickling down Dargan's spine. The open audacity of the move had won, thanks to the concentrated pursuit that was bushwhacking the swampy country along the Saint John River, west of the city.

"Hapgood," the redhead explained, "didn't know enough about Eduardo to realize that he'd head for a boat instead of a hideout inland."

That was reassuring, but it fell short of the mark. Dargan was uneasy; it had been entirely too simple, thus far.

They were whirring down Anastasia Island, an eighteen mile stretch that paralleled the coast: sand dunes, summer cottages, and coquina quarries. At the end of the island highway was a toll bridge which crossed Matanzas Inlet and led to Summer Haven. There, Dargan felt, was the dangerous bottleneck.

"Don't worry, Jeff," whispered Juanita, sensing his sombre thought. "Hapgood can't report our raid to the police. He can't afford to have us caught with the loot from the safe. It would give Caribbean Sugar an awful black eye. And then there's Mrs. Austin."

"Yeah, she does sort of work her way through all this," muttered Dargan, un- easily.

And then, five miles south, the glare of headlights in the rear blazed in the mirror. Dargan started, tramped on the gas. The supercharger whined as the needle slipped to seventy-five, jamming him back against the cushions. And Sequera, rising from the floorboard in the rear, applauded the burst of speed.

"Hell, this isn't a joyride," grumbled Dargan. "Look in back."

"Ees gaining," said the imperturbable Cuban. "No, we 'ave lost them."

The needle was past eighty now. But in a moment the mirror was again a blistering glow of light. Dargan cocked his head to avoid the glare, and yelled when Juanita told Sequera to pull down the rear blind.

"Knock out the pane!" he countermanded.

The pursuing car was relentlessly gaining; it had the sullen thunder of great power, ominously contrasting to the hornet whine of the supercharger.

"Ninety-three! She's got damn little more!" roared Dargan as the little car began to shudder under its murderous punishment.

A bullet drilled the windshield. It had sifted through the rear, and then Sequera played a solo with his pistol.

"*Cristo del Grao!*" he cursed, midway in the bombardment. "These automatic are cock-eyed. I can not hit nothing with him."

"Plaster their radiator," shouted Dargan. "Get it low. Drain 'em, and this speed'll burn 'em up!"

A riveting hammer rattle drummed the back of the sedan, and Dargan howled above the engine scream, "Down, you damn fool! Save the ammunition!"

But he was too late, the Cuban emptied his magazine.

The headlights receded. Another volley crackled after the fugitives. Dargan laughed as the little car zoomed forward, leaving the pursuing monster in the dust.

"She's burning up!" he chuckled, interpreting the heavy pounding to the rear. "We'll leave em—*hell's bells.*"

"Why—" Juanita gasped. "Why slow up?"

The needle was dropping. The motor coughed, missed fire, jerkily picked up speed as Dargan whipped her around a curve, then lost again.

"Tank's dry," he spat, glance shifting to the gauge.

"But Jeff—I filled it—" She was almost in tears of despair.

"And so did they. Full of holes."

The headlights were gaining, terrifyingly. They knew now that it was not the law, but private pursuit; otherwise, there would have been a warning siren instead of fire at an uncertainly identified car. Dargan kicked the brakes, corkscrewed to a whistling halt, flung open the door.

"Scram, Red! Into the ditch, and for the dunes. Quick, damn it!"

"I'm sticking." Juanita was stubborn. "I got you into this."

"Drag her out, Ed!"

"Arguing weeth women is dumb," he grinned. "I could not get back for the party. And I 'ave the knife."

A RATTLE of slugs terminated the tense exchange as the big car pounded to a halt, some distance in the rear. From it slipped dark figures, diving from moonlight into the darkness of the ditch.

Dargan sniped a scurrying raider. Answering fire blazed from over cover. A damning pencil of headlight glow played on Juanita's sedan. With lights from the rear, there was not a Chinaman's chance of bolting for the dunes.

Dargan risked a shot through the rear window. A headlight blinked out. Answering lead sizzled past him; but his second shot blotted the other lens.

"Get out!" he whispered. "I'll pick them off when you cross the road. Then when you're clear, I'll zigzag—*hold it!*"

There was a moment of silence. Dargan's automatic blazed. He had skylined a creeping shadow, heard a yell that told of a slug boring home.

"Now! Run for it!"

But hot lead pelted into the car from the far side of the road as well as from the ditch. Juanita jerked back, slammed the half opened door. Sequera flattened to the floor just in time to make way for Dargan, who whirled to squeeze three slugs at the flashes that jetted from across the highway.

Another yell, and a strangled cough. The last cartridge had not been wasted. But the odds were still deadly. They were flanked on both sides.

"Hi, Jack!" he hailed. "We got a lady in the car. Give her a break, and then come and get us."

"Yeah, she'll hoof it to a filling station—"

"Five miles back," sneered Dargan. "Give her a break, you lousy —s!"

A muttered conference. Then, "We'll let her go. But we'll be sure it's the broad, and not one of you lugs. Spotlight on her, and if either of you guys makes a move, she gets it."

"Okay!" sang Dargan. Then to Juanita, "Beat it. I got a great idea."

"Oh—Jeff—Eduardo—I—"

"Shove off!" snapped Dargan. "I know what I'm doing."

A tongue of brilliance licked the highway; the unbroken spotlight was now in action. It blazed through the loose swirl of Juanita's thin skirt, caressed every sweet line of her tapered, slender legs; no one could doubt that it was a woman leaving the ruin.

Then Dargan, from the corner of his eye, caught a passing flicker of blued steel. Juanita was about to get it; not one witness was to escape. She might remember the enemy's make or license number.

Even as he moved a pistol cracked. Juanita screamed, Sequera cursed in Spanish. Dargan bounded clear of the running board, clubbed pistol in hand.

The spotlight shifted; another shot, and he flinched as lead scorched his ribs. One more bound and he would be in the nest of them, hand to hand.

Two recklessly broke cover, knowing now that he must be out of ammunition. Dargan sidestepped as a jet of flame reached for him. The one at the right advanced, pistol ready. The other frantically fumbled with the slide of an automatic apparently jammed with the treacherous sand. And Sequera was closing in as fast as his shorter stride could carry him.

Dargan pivoted, ducking a shot by a split inch. Sequera stopped, and dropped, groaning. Then a long silvery streak zipped from the prostrate Cuban's hand.

Simultaneously, the pistol bellowed; but the shot was wild, and the gunner's yell ended in a gurgling wheeze. His hand clawed at his knife mangled throat.

DARGAN lunged at the man with the jammed automatic, and smashed home with his empty weapon. The fellow sank, but came up, shooting wildly. Dargan, however, had snatched the pistol from the one spiked by the Cuban's knife. He fired from a crouch, and the dazed gunner folded, clutching his riddled stomach.

"Oh, lord, are you still alive?" cried a voice sweeter than any Dargan ever

imagined a woman could have.

He whirled toward Juanita. But how—"

"I dropped at the first shot," she gasped. "Then you hogged the spotlight, and playing possum fooled them."

"Give me a hand with Eduardo. Get you bad?"

"Ees nothing," declared the Cuban, through clenched teeth.

Juanita was tearing strips from her slip to bandage Sequera. Dargan turned to inspect the two cars. The pursuit sedan was their only chance; though without water, it could finish the trip, with pauses to cool it down. The pistons hadn't seized.

Juanita, however, killed all that with a word: "No use, Jeff. Eduardo needs a doctor right now. Can't put him on the boat."

Sequera, sitting up, swore that he could carry on. But that was settled by a distance siren scream. Some resident of a beach cottage had phoned in an alarm, and a highway patrol was on the way.

"Go!" groaned Sequera. "You can help me more if you leave—"

Juanita protested; but Dargan bundled her into the big car, saying, "How can I dig up anything in his favor if I'm in the jug? We got to scam with Austin's papers."

He jabbed the starter, wheeled the big eight about, and headed north. "And tear up your socks—"

"What?"

"Your hosiery, madam!" he fumed. "The cop'll be kept busy with Eduardo and those dead mugs." Without more words she pulled back her skirt and tugged at the top of her stockings. One by one she stripped them down to her

ankles and slipped off her shoes, presently replacing them on bare feet.

Two steaming miles north, Dargan pulled up beside a pool of salt water seepage, and used his hat to ladle it into the radiator, after using Juanita's stockings to plug the bullet holes. Thereafter they made better time with the middle aged monster.

CHAPTER VII



UT now what are we going to do?" demanded Juanita as they drew up in front of her apartment. "Good God, Jeff, don't you realize that my car will lead the police right to us? I'll stall here and you can be heading north, for the Georgia line. Ship the stuff to Havana—to Eduardo's friends—"

"Guess I ought to," he admitted. "I'da had my head shot off if Ed hadn't heaved that knife when he did. But you're in a jam, darling. Plenty jam—"

"You big idiot! Jeff—" She clung to him, sobbing. "Get out! I don't want you messed up in this tangle."

"Pipe down, honey." He gently broke her hold about his neck. "I'm going to find out who those mugs were that chased us. Don't you see, this ganging up on Ed will give the cops something to think about. There's something rotten all the way through."

Hysterics and stubbornness clashed until a tapping at the door broke into Juanita's tears. It was not the peremptory knock of the law. Dargan then took a dive for the space behind the davenport. Juanita went to the door.

Hapgood and Alma Austin were with her when she returned to the living room. The former was saying, "Give me those records you and your masked

partner took. I'll make any kind of a deal within reason."

Juanita twisted her handkerchief. Hapgood went on, "When they catch Sequera, I'll back down on identifying him. Don't you see, it all happened so fast, I could easily claim I was mistaken. Sequera can't hide out much longer. And I can save him."

And then Dargan popped up from cover. While the two visitors gulped, he said, "The D.A. would sure get a kick out of knowing you were going to lose your memory, for a good price! You didn't figure she'd have a witness, eh?"

"Who'd believe you?" sneered Alma. "Blackmailer with a candid camera! You'd better collect and clear out while you can."

"Listen, sister," snapped Dargan, "I'm beginning to savvy why you first renigged on paying me my fee."

"Oh, yeah?" Hapgood had a pistol leveled before Dargan could remember that his own weapon had not been reloaded. "Alma, grab those documents."

Dargan cursed bitterly; talk had gotten him off guard. Juanita screamed, and tackled Alma. There was a ripping of blouses, the ruthless snatching of dainty underthings from struggling bodies, fierce, clawing nails that left red streaks on smooth flesh. The two furies had each other peeled down to tatters in a moment. It was gorgeous while it lasted; they both had lovely legs—their shapeliness only enhanced by the wrinkling of torn and twisted silk; and every rending of frail fabric made the whole display a bit more complete. Then Alma screeched as the redhead got home a good one.

That startled Hapgood. And though he fired, a split second later, Dargan's fist had hair trigger timing. The slug

tore a yard of plaster from the wall, and Hapgood, knocked cold, landed in an overstuffed chair.

"Cut it out!" yelled Dargan, shoving an arm between the furiously straining girls to pry Juanita from the brunette wreck . . . only to have his hand caught in a heated crush of feminine curves that were soft despite their tenseness.

BEFORE he succeeded, there was a hammering on the door. Sergeant McNair's booming voice shook the panels which his fist had somehow failed to shatter. Two patrolmen followed him into the room.

Alma was trying to make her tattered dress cover seventeen different areas of gleaming skin at once, but if she'd been sitting on a horse she'd have looked like Lady Godiva.

"You're under arrest," rumbled the sergeant, addressing Juanita, "as an accessory to the murder of J. Armitage Austin. Helping Eduardo Sequera escape in your car—"

"The damn Spick stole her car," Dargan cut in; but he was not in time to keep Juanita from crying out, "Oh, how is he—will he live—"

"Yeah, if that makes that much difference," answered McNair. "And you're in on this too, Dargan. You been playing around in the sand yourself. It's a cinch you weren't waiting here for her to bring that shot up heap to the front door."

"Okay, sergeant. But it wasn't Sequera that croaked Austin. It was that lug in the chair."

"What?" And Alma, regaining her voice, echoed McNair's incredulity.

"Sure thing. Remember where you found Sequera, and a guy with a knife in his throat? That knife was flung,

though that makes no difference. Point is, do you figure he'd beat a man to death with a candlestick? A little guy like him gang up on a big stiff like Austin, when he could have harpooned him, like that? Shake out the lead, copper! How about it?"

"You're screwy!" barked McNair, but he was thoughtful.

"Listen, Mac! Sequera's got a black eye Austin gave him before he kicked him out the window. Why didn't Sequera either knife Austin or else bust the *front* of his head?"

"Uh—huh—what?" Hapgood, groggy, was sitting up. He was a grotesque blend of wrath, perplexity, and astonishment.

"Ask this guy why he cold calked Austin just as Austin finished kicking Sequera out."

That brought Hapgood to his feet, tense and blinking.

"You said you came in," accused Dargan, "just as Sequera sapped Austin. What really happened was that you came in at the end of the tangle and then sapped Austin. A simple way of getting at Alma. Speaking of the lady with the blue stepins, over there."

"You dirty, slandering—"

"Pipe down, darling," snapped Dargan. "You saw this redhead face to face in your house tonight and didn't recognize her. In other words, Hapgood told you about Juanita Laughlin, so's you'd holler for a divorce."

HE turned to Hapgood: "Then when came that gorgeous chance to bean Austin and blame it on Sequera. You took it, wiped your finger prints off the silver candlestick, and phoned the cops. Then when I popped up, you

had to stick to your story, having already phoned the murderer's identity."

"Dargan," demanded McNair. "Can you prove that?"

"Sequera could have wiped his fingerprints from the candlestick," sneered Hapgood.

"Sure he could. But—" Dargan bounded to the telephone niche and dug out the handkerchief. "Look at the silver polish on this rag."

Hapgood's color changed, and his fists clenched. Then he said, "Prove its mine."

There was no laundry mark, no monogram; and Hapgood's face loosened, until Dargan chuckled, "You probably never figured that sweaty hands leave invisible finger prints on cloth. And you must have been in a sweat when you jumped at the chance to beat Austin. But you were fussed up, and while you were phoning to frame Sequera, you stuck the handkerchief into that hole in the wall. And then there's my camera, which proves that you and the widow were just like that. Wait till the film's developed."

"Sounds good," admitted McNair, who was almost convinced, "but you'd better all trot along to headquarters to wait for developments."

"That's a bum joke," grumbled Dargan.

But before the two patrolmen convinced the quartet that the sergeant had not intended any humor, the jangle of the telephone cut in. McNair lifted the receiver, listened a moment, then checked the procession: "Hold it a second! And shut up, all of you—head quarters on the wire."

For a moment the diaphragm cracked. McNair's frown of perplexity went through a succession of changes.

"What's that . . . he talked? You mean Sequera? . . . Who . . . The hell you say!"

He slammed the receiver and snapped to his feet, saying, "Payday, Hapgood. One of the mugs that the highway patrol picked up along with Sequera lived long enough to name you." And before Hapgood could digest that, the sergeant had turned to Dargan: "Looks like your case is made, fellow, without wait-

ing for the experts. So you can stick around here, instead of going to the jug to wait for developments."

Alma Austin left with the prisoner. As he recovered his voice, he snarled at her, "You might have known something would go wrong!"

But Dargan wasn't blaming Juanita for anything. Not with a whole evening, and nothing to do but find out how far was arm's length . . .

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The racketeer had twenty grand on a horse, and he thought the race was in the bag! When the horse lost, a clever but unscrupulous girl saw her opportunity to settle a lot of old scores in one fast move. . . .

JOE DUNN wormed his way through the Saturday night Broadway crowd and squeezed through the sporting bunch that congregated at Lundy's Restaurant until he found Broadway Harris. He handed the bookmaker a twenty dollar bill.

"Here's what I owe you for thinking that cab horse was entitled to a name. Flying Cloud, my eye."

Harris folded the twenty into a roll that would have choked any horse at Pimlico and answered, "For a detective, you're not too hot guessing the right answers." And then he said more seriously. "They're investigating that race. As sure as I'm a foot high, that horse was doped to win and something went wrong."

"Whose mail you been reading?" Dunn asked casually. But he listened closely for the answer. Broadway Harris was a square bookie, but he was as blind as an eagle and as dumb as a fox about the bangtails.

"This is a secret," Harris said. "Nobody but one or two million souls suspects it. But Nick Rossi had twenty grand on Flying Cloud—and Flying Cloud didn't win. When Nick puts dough like that on the line, the horse wins—or else. . . . If you know what I mean."

"That's sad," Dunn said. "And that little jockey that rode him was the sole support of a widowed mother. Wonder if he had any insurance?"

"The jockey was suddenly called out of town," Harris explained, "and hopes it'll blow over. But that's his business. The angle is that I was covering Nick's bet—"

"And so you're twenty grand richer, besides my pair of sawbucks—"

"That, we'll know in about an hour," Harris observed evenly. "If Nick should suddenly lose his mind and pay a bet of that size—Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

Joe Dunn downed a whiskey and said, "Fishing's good up in Canada this summer. Lot o' woods to get lost in. Take an army to find a man. . . ."

"I don't like fish," Harris said, studying the beads in his glass of rye. "Make it lilies, if you must send flowers."



JOE DUNN walked up the three flights at the La Belle Apartments and started looking for names on the rows of doors that lined the dim hall. There weren't any names on the door bells. He bumped into a colored maid coming out of the alcove of the incinerator chute and asked, "Which apartment does Joyce Lane live in?"

The woman rolled white eyes at him. "Miss Lane?" she repeated. "Oh, you means Mrs. Broadway Harris, doesn't you?"

"Have it your way, Mrs. Grundy. But break down and answer the question, will you? She's expecting me."

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

"What happened?" he barked.
But, even as he spoke, he knew
he had been outsmarted.



"She's always expectin' somebody. Just go right in and get your seat check and join the crowd. Her door's that one right behind you."

The woman went back to emptying her baskets and Joe Dunn pressed the

bell across the hall. The door finally opened a crack, a face appeared in the crack, the chain was loosened, and he slid into the room and the door was closed behind him. Joe Dunn stood in the living room of the apartment and re-

garded the girl who stood before him.

Joyce Lane was lovely. As she stood there with a diaphanous wrap hanging lightly from her shoulders, falling daintily down the front of her, and as Joe Dunn's eyes drank in her loveliness, he felt the same violent surge of blood in him that had driven more than one tired businessman to lay jewels in her lightly clad lap.

It wasn't the first time he had seen her, nor the first time he had been able to admire those delicately tapering limbs, that succession of breath-taking curves, that had drawn raves from the critics of the musical shows she once had graced.

And there was the face, the liquid eyes that seemed always just on the verge of tears, ready to weep at the first sight of unkindness—or the first evidence of lack of generosity! Joyce Lane was beautiful and soft and helpless, and the whole impression she gave was that she was trembling with the urge to melt into the protective arms of some strong man.

"You wanted to see me?" Dunn asked.

"Yes," she lisped. "You haven't seen Broadway, have you?"

"Yes, but I didn't mention your sending for me. You asked me not to."

"I'm so glad. It would only worry him." She came closer to Dunn, and as she walked, her wrap parted a little with each step. Joe's eyes bulged. She *was* a honey! She put her arms around Dunn's shoulders and her eyes were pleading. "Joe," she said. "I know you like Broadway, and so you've got to help us—help him without his knowing it."

Dunn resisted an urge to lock her in his arms and to smother her with kisses until she felt those same emotions that held him in their grip. That was the way she affected everybody.

He took her arms from around his neck and crossed the room and dropped onto a divan. "Now tell Uncle Joe all about what's frightening poor little Cinderella from Cincinnati. I can't imagine a situation that you can't handle, sweetheart."

The girl looked as though she were going to cry because she was so easily wounded. "I don't know why you treat me so mean," she said. "Everybody thinks I'm some kind of a cold-blooded—what do you call me—adventuress—"

"I know," Dunn commiserated. "The thoughtless, cruel people think maybe it was the dough he was making that caused you to take up with Nick Rozzi's big brother, and then drop him like a hot brick when I started him on his way to the hot seat. But you and I know that he was just a great big lovable boy and didn't mean any harm when his little toy machine gun accidentally went off and killed a couple of babies—"

"Joe!" the girl's violet eyes were tear-filled. "I just didn't know—I was new here—"

"And you didn't know the business of any of that other list of mobsters you drifted with. And now you're seeing Nick Rozzi once in a while. I've seen you. Is he going to help us help Broadway?"



NOW the girl was sitting on Joe Dunn's lap, and her arms were around his neck. She kissed him lightly, but effectively. "No. It's Rozzi that I'm afraid of. He owes Broadway a lot of money, and you know he never pays off those big bets. He'll kill him first."

"Who'll kill who?"

"Rozzi will stall around and somehow Broadway will wake up awfully dead and

then Rozzi won't have to pay him."

"And that worries you?" Dunn said. "If you ask me, you're got something else up your sleeve. You usually take a runout on your man when he's losing money like Broadway is now, instead of trying to give him a hand. What's the gag?"

"Maybe I don't love Broadway too much," the girl said. "Maybe I'm just a teeny bit selfish, but Broadway was good to me when he had it, and now I want to help him. He wouldn't like me getting you to help him though, so—"

"So—" the girl kissed him again, and Joe Dunn wished that he could forget that her affections were usually a means to an end. "So, if you'll do that for me —" the caressing touch of her fingers completed the sentence.

Joe didn't like this a bit. He was trying to fight against that madness which was prompting him to take a chance on this girl whom he wouldn't trust as far as he could throw a traffic cop by the little finger—but he was human, and she had what it took to paralyze the better judgment of human men.

He reached over to take a piece of candy out of the box on the taboret. And then it happened.

He had expected to nibble the candy and calm himself, because something whispered to him that he was being played for a fool. But if it meant a few minutes necking with Joyce Lane—well, he had curiosity anyway. That's what made him a private dick.

So, he started to open the candy box and get a piece of candy. But he didn't.

The girl's hand which had felt so gentle, and so warm and exploring under his arm—that hand came out, and in it came the gun out of his shoulder holster.

The girl looked at it in awe, holding it with her two hands as though one

hand weren't strong enough to lift it. She pointed it out the window.

"See," she cooed, "if Rozzi starts to hurt my Broadway, I want you to shoot him like this. Bang!"

She squinted an eye and pulled the trigger, and the gun said bang, too. The weapon barked, the bullet sailed out the window and the girl dropped the gun with a foolishly frightened look.

Joe Dunn slid her off his lap and looked at her sharply as he picked up the weapon. "And just what did that mean, sister?"

"I'm sorry," the girl answered. "I didn't mean to, honest, I didn't."

"Which I'm supposed to believe," Joe said, getting to his feet. "Now how about coming clean with me. What's going on here?"

The girl stood before him, and it seemed again that she was going to break into tears at the injustice of the accusation. "I didn't mean to fire the gun," she pleaded. "I was just playing."

"You can tell that to the next sucker," Dunn snapped. "But I'm sticking around and playing your game until I find out. What's the next move?"

She put her arms around him and snuggled up to him until her form melted softly against his own. "I'll show you I didn't mean anything. Come on in my room and we'll wait for Broadway in there. When he comes in—if he comes in—I'll talk to him and get him to let you do something about Rozzi."

"There's just this that I want you to get straight," Dunn answered. "I'm going to string along with you for a while—but don't think it's because I've lost my mind. While I'm waiting to see what you've got up your sleeve I might as well play ball. Now that we understand each other, where do we go?"



AT THE end of a long hall they reached the girl's boudoir, as soft and as redolent of femininity as Joyce Lane was. The girl said as she pulled him down on satin chaise lounge, "Just because you're a detective you're suspicious of everybody, aren't you? Didn't it ever occur to you that I might just like you? And that I might use some kind of excuse to get you up here? After all, you're Broadway's friend, and you wouldn't have come up here behind his back, just because you knew I might like you, would you?"

"Go on," Dunn answered. "You're figuring on something tricky. Maybe I'll sue you for breach of promise!"

"When I make a promise, I don't break it," the girl answered. And the way her arms slipped around Joe Dunn's neck, he knew that she was deadily in earnest about something.

It was a pleasant way to wait for something to happen, and Joe Dunn made the most of it. His arms went around her and she sank back in his lap, her breast, so inadequately covered by the flimsy silk of her negligee, rising and falling gently, with her breathing. His own breath was none too steady.

And then suddenly the spell was interrupted. Back in the living room, the door slammed and there were feet moving about. Pulling her negligee tightly together and patting her hair into place, the girl whispered, "There's Broadway now. We'll have to postpone this. Now get this; Rozzi is expected here to pay Broadway—or whatever he does—"

"Such as killing him?" Dunn inquired.

"I'll talk to Broadway and make him see that you should be with him when Rozzi comes. Then I'll call you. Be quiet till I come back."

Joe Dunn took a deep breath, disappointed at this interruption. "All right," he said. "Go on with your act."

She kissed him and moved out into the hall, closing the door behind her. Joe Dunn sat down to wait, and to try to figure out what she was getting at. He heard low voices in the front room, and he recognized hers and Broadway Harris's. But he was sure that no bookie, not even Harris, was going to call in a private cop to see that a gambling debt was paid. It just wasn't done.

The girl was talking to Broadway, and he was talking to her.

And then Joe Dunn heard the outside door open.

And then the next instant Joe Dunn heard a gun bark. And a body slump to the floor.

And then heard the door slam again. And a minute later he heard the girl scream.

Joe Dunn knew it had happened. He jerked at the door of the boudoir, grabbing at his own gun.

THE door was locked on the other side. The girl had turned the key. Joe Dunn cursed and stepped back. He heaved himself against the door once, twice, half a dozen times, before the metal of the latch gave way and the door flew open. He dashed down the apartment hall toward the living room, and there he brought up short.

He was facing the sight of Broadway Harris lying in a pool of his own blood. And the girl was sitting on the divan, crying.

Somebody had outsmarted Joe Dunn. Badly!

He picked up the phone and called the police. Then he turned to the girl. She was crying, all right.

"What happened?" he barked.

She looked up at him and answered, "Broadway came in and found you trying to force your attentions on me. He tried to make you stop, so you pulled out your gun and shot him. And then you called the cops."

Joe Dunn grabbed the girl by the arm and jerked her to her feet. "Yeah? So that was it? And in the meantime what was your boy friend Nick Rozzi doing?"

"Nick? Oh, he might be found at the Happiness Club, in a great big crowd that could swear that he'd been there all evening. You might even call and check that, if you think it's worth it."

"Then what?"

"And then again, he might be thinking of his brother Pete that you sent up the river to burn. I might be thinking of him myself, for that matter. He was good to me—"

"While he had it," Dunn snapped. "So now that Broadway's run up against hard times, and you've got a yen for Nick Rozzi, and Nick owes Broadway money that he doesn't intend to pay, and you wanted to get rid of Broadway, save Nick his money, and at the same time give me a sleigh ride for sending his brother up the river—"

"And so all those things," the girl echoed coldly, "So what are you going to do about it?"



HERE were footsteps down the hall, coming from the elevator, and Joe Dunn was standing over the corpse of Broadway Harris. And he was standing over a load of dynamite. He knew just what the New York cops thought of private dicks, particularly those that had business with Broadway Harris and the racing gang.

It was old "Iron Fist" Flannigan, of the homicide squad who led the

way into the room and looked at the body of Broadway, and then looked at Joe Dunn, and looked a little longer time at the flimsily clad girl who was weeping softly. Old Flannigan was too long in his game to be affected by the perfect form that trembled as the lightly-clad girl wept.

"Call headquarters," he barked at one of the men, "Get the wagon and a doctor, and the rest of the gang. Get busy." And then he turned to Dunn.

"All right, start your yarn, and get it straight the first time. You're Dunn, ain't you? Kind of blackmailer that goes under the name of private detective?"

"My name's Dunn, all right, shamus, and I'm a private detective. I came here presumably to protect Broadway Harris from Nick Rozzi, but I've got a hunch the gal's right when she says that Nick's got an air tight alibi. Her frameup is too pretty to have missed taking care of that."

"Then let's hear your yarn."

"There's not much to tell. I was in the bedroom when Broadway came in. They argued, the outside door was opened, a gun was fired, the door slammed, the gal screamed, I ran out of the bedroom, where I had to break the door lock to get out, through the foyer and into here, and there was Broadway, lying just as you see him. I picked up the phone and called the cops. And that's all—for the time."

Flannigan grunted and turned to the softly weeping girl. She tried to draw the thin negligee closely about her, but it was not much more protecting than cellophane. She dabbled at an eye.

"I called this detective—" Flannigan grunted at the word—"because I wanted him to protect Broadway. But he seemed more interested in me—" She crossed her legs, and Flannigan had to admit to

himself that the attraction might have been greater.

"So what did he do?"

The girl sobbed at the recollection of it. "He tried to attack me—and—Broadway came in and caught him."

Flannigan scowled at Dunn. "Was you tryin' to make this gal?"

"Trying," Dunn repeated impatiently. "I don't want to boast of any virtue, but the girl made such a play for me that—"



ROYCE LANE burst out into a new flood of tears. "Oh, the liar," she sobbed. "Broadway was going to kick him out, and he got rough and pulled out a thirty-eight caliber revolver and shot him. When Broadway fell—oh, I can't talk about it any more. It was—terrible—"

Flannigan frowned at Dunn, and Dunn didn't wait to be searched. "Here it is," he said, handing over his gun. "And you'll find it is a thirty-eight, and that it has been just recently fired. You can find the bullet somewhere there in the East River, if you want to look for it."

"We'll probably find it in Broadway Harris," Flannigan snapped, taking the gun. "Why don't you save yourself a lot of the fancy entertainment you'll get down at headquarters—"

"Because I'm still figuring that I can find the payoff," Dunn answered. "There's just my word against the girl's. But they fry men for killing, and I don't like the idea of frying. I'm trying to do a little thinking instead. Counting Nick Rozzi out, there's got to be an answer right here in this room, and I've got to find it before you get me out of here."

"If you ask me, we'll find the answer

here, too. Maybe the fingerprint man—"

Joe Dunn said quickly. "You won't find fingerprints. I didn't touch anything—wait a minute. Hold everything!"

"Don't worry," Flannigan answered. "We're holding the most important thing." He hefted Dunn's gun significantly.

"You're wrong. That gun didn't kill him. Either that girl shot him and got rid of her gun, or else she had an accomplice who either came in and did the killing, or to whom she gave the gun. It's certain that it won't be found around here anywhere, since she fired my gun with the idea of its being taken for the murder weapon. She couldn't have had the gun hidden on her person."

"She hasn't enough clothes on to hide a vaccination mark," Flannigan snapped. "Your story sounds pretty wild to me."

"I'm still trying to figure the payoff on that door slamming. That means something. First, it was to furnish me with a story to tell you, one that didn't sound probable. But it also could be the McCoy. If an accomplice had come in just at the right time—"

"THAT won't hold water, in the light of your yarn," the practical Flannigan snapped. "You're telling me that everything was timed to the split second. How would an accomplice know to the split second just when to come in, how would he know your movements inside? How could he hang around on the outside and risk being seen. That idea's not so hot."

"I guess you're right," Dunn admitted. "And in that case, there's nothing left to believe except that she did the shooting herself. It's a cinch that if Rozzi was in it, his alibi would be iron-clad. You can figure he wasn't here. Which leaves the little girl herself. And

which in turn leaves just one thing to be discovered. Where's the gun? and how did she get rid of it?"

"You sure better be right," Flannigan growled. "Because even if your accomplice theory was right—you wouldn't have a chance to find him in a million years. And in the meantime there's the open and shut evidence against you. "While your lawyer was looking for the supposed accomplice you'd burn—"

"Burn," Dunn shouted. "That's it. That's where the gun went. Down the incinerator chute, right across the hall. That's what the door slamming really was about. She shot him, ran out and threw the gun down the chute, came back in while I was trying to get out of the bedroom where she had me locked, and she was sitting down crying by the time I got out here into the living room. Sure, I knew there was something wrong here. That candy box. I started to open it, and she grabbed my gun before I got it open. It's gone. Look down in the incinerator furnace and you'll find her gun in that red candy box. She did the whole thing herself."

Flannigan, listening pop-eyed, suddenly turned to the woman and shouted, "Catch her!"

Joyce Lane had dived toward the French window. One of the officers tripped her and she fell sprawling on her face, and her filmy negligee flew up high. Those gorgeous legs of hers

were kicking wildly, viciously, as Flannigan pulled her up and sat her down hard on the divan. Her face was inflamed with rage; she glared furiously at the men surrounding her.

"Two of you go down to the basement and search that incinerator furnace," he ordered. Then he said reluctantly to Dunn,

"It looks like you might be right."

"Sure. She had it plotted perfectly. *Accidentally* firing my gun, getting me into the bedroom and locking me there. When Broadway came in she lolled in the chair until his back was turned, then opened up the candy box and got the gun and used it. Then she crossed the hall, threw the gun, hidden in the box, down the chute, came back and slammed the door, as though somebody were escaping, and started her screaming act. She had time to do that while I was trying to get through the door. She figured that she could get rid of Broadway, do a favor for her new friend, Rozzi, pay me back for sending her former boy friend to the chair, and work it without a hitch."

"Damn you to hell," the girl gritted. "If you hadn't been a candy-eating sissy, I'd have seen you burn and loved it."

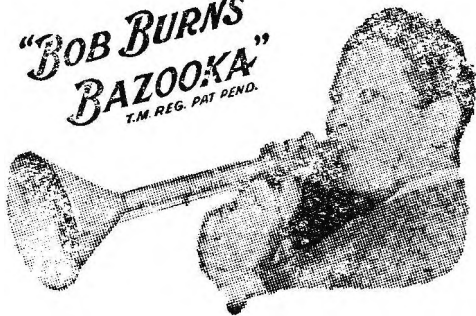
"I don't doubt it, sister, or if there hadn't been any interruption, you might have killed me with love. I understand that sort of thing has been done too!"

She glared at him.

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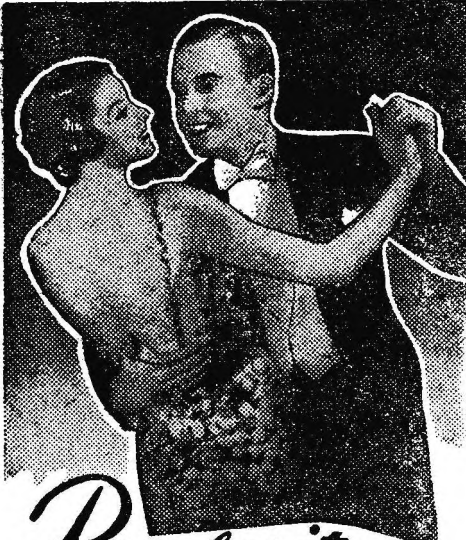
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