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SHOCK



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Hell's Belle

Crime-Reporter Ben Harlow despised himself for helping exotic Roxy collect grisly murder mementos—yet he went all out to win her love with a token of funereal glamour.

He yelled: "Throw that damned thing away!"



CHAPTER ONE

Macabre Prize

IT WAS about eight o'clock that night that Ben Harlow got half drunk and started to fight that gnawing, vicious yen to see Roxy. If he'd stayed sober, he'd have left her alone and none of this would

**By
Robert
Turner**



**Suspenseful Novelette of
the Devil's Own Daughter**

have happened. When he was sober, he couldn't even stand the thought of Roxy Breen. When he was blanko, a condition into which he usually rushed himself full tilt—to avoid this dangerous twilight state—Roxy didn't bother him. He just didn't think about her, or about anything.

But something went wrong this night. The fifth of bourbon he'd downed as fast as he could pour it into himself had not hit bottom. It had just put an edge on him and set him on fire inside. It got him restless and irritable and started him to thinking about Roxy. Then came the terrible ache to see her.

At eight thirty the mesmeric, unearthly call could not be denied. He cabbed over to her place.

Ben Harlow got out of the hack in front of the place where she lived, a neat and flashy new apartment building that reared haughtily out of the squalor of the East Side tenement district. He stood there for a moment, sucking in deeply the last breaths of air that would seem clean and sweet to him that night.

He was a strange looking man, Harlow. He didn't look like one of the cleverest, most highly paid newspapermen in the city. He didn't look like a man that a lot of women went for and hard. He was average height, compactly built. He wore no hat and his brown hair would have had a little curl to it, if it wasn't so thin and short cropped. His extremely high, bony forehead was veined on one side. His eyes were deep into his face, with a flat, cold look to them. His face was skull-like with prominent cheek bones, and a sullen mouth that now was drawn and tight.

A fit of shivering took him, standing there, and yet he felt flushed and warm at the same time. Every nerve in him was screaming. It was always that way with him, when he got this strange, wild yen to see Roxy. He wondered vaguely what kind of a welcome he was going to get from her tonight. He had nothing for her,

no ghastly, macabre little souvenir of some bloody crime of violence. He had not brought her any for a long time, now, either. So she would probably kick him out on his ear.

But the hell with it, he told himself, he could try. Maybe it would be different tonight. Maybe she would like him for himself alone and not for some horrid little memento of a murder that he had stolen for her. But he doubted it. Roxy was like a woman made of ice when he didn't bring her anything. When he did—Perspiration began to break out on him.

He jammed his hands into the pockets of the topcoat and went in through the small flashy, chrome and leather lobby, up the elevator to the seventh floor. He knocked on Roxy's door, holding his breath tight in his throat, his nails digging into his palms.

She came to the door almost immediately. The breath burst from his throat. He felt pleasantly dizzy and full of clouds in the head, looking at her.

Roxy Breen was tall for a girl, as tall as he, in the spike-heeled, sateen slippers she wore, with the top strap high around her slender ankle. There was no classic perfection of features. Her mouth was too broad and on any other woman would have been ugly. Her green eyes were too widely set apart. And that mouth, with the full lips that were always red and wet looking, twisted at one corner in a strangely enigmatic smile, was infinitely alluring. The eyes, heavy-lidded and long-lashed, grew smoky and smouldering with a challenging look that would drive a man mad. Her hair was thick and soft-waved, a tawny blonde-brown color and it fell full around her shoulders in a long bob. It was full of highlights and alive looking, and you could hardly keep your fingers out of it.

That was the way Roxy looked to Harlow whenever he had brought her another little knickknack for her collection of weird souvenirs intimately associated with the

crime of murder. That was the way she looked tonight—and Harlow felt a stab of fear. When he disappointed her, when she found out he had not brought her anything, she'd freeze up and that oddly lovely face would become a cold, hard mask. She'd abuse him and kick him out.

HIS eyes moved over her and he had to moisten his lips, they were so hot and dry. She was wearing a set of Chinese-red lounging pajamas. The tasseled belt was tight about her wisp of waist. In one slender-fingered hand, with carmined nails long and sharp as claws, she carelessly held a cigarette. Smoke streamed up from it in a thin, straight line until it hit her face and then broke around it.

"Ben!" she said. She had a deep and throaty voice. The wet-looking lips broke to show sharp and shiny little teeth. "Ben, I was praying you would come tonight. I was going crazy to see you."

She didn't reach to his pocket like she always did, to see if he had anything for her. That was strange. She stepped aside and he went past her, the heavy, oriental perfume she wore catching his nostrils for an instant, with a peculiar, opiate-like effect.

He walked the foyer, thick with expensive carpeting, and came out into a large, studio-type living room. It hit him like it always did—as if he were suddenly drugged, and all kinds of weird and exotic impulses seized him.

It was a strange room. It was close and almost hothouse warm, with the mingled scents of turkish tobacco, a touch of incense and that heavy, mucky perfume of Roxy's. The furniture was oddly assorted. There was a lot of teakwood and ebony. The chairs and sofa were all oversized and littered with silken pillows. There were mirrors everywhere, most of them colored. On a cocktail table was a newly opened fifth of expensive bourbon, as though Roxy had been expecting him, or

thinking of him—because she drank bourbon only with him. Ordinarily, her taste ran to fancy liqueurs.

But the thing that always caught Harlow's eye, was the shelf, over the sofa, just at arm's reach from it. He didn't want to look at it, but it always drew his eyes with an unholy fascination.

It was Roxy's shelf of souvenirs; a strange and horrible assortment of articles connected with violent deaths. There was a piece of a broken vial that had held poison with which a man had murdered his family. There was an inch-long piece of wire, part of the garrot a notorious strangler had used. There was a ragged piece of wall paper, stained brown with dried blood. And an upholsterer's awl, that had been plunged through the throat of a blonde model. Dozens of similar items were arranged neatly on that shelf, each a gruesome relic of some particularly horrendous homicide.

On the wall, over this shelf, were hung a few choice larger items that were Roxy's pride and joy. A jagged hunk of rusty metal that had been part of a spade used to dig a lonely grave for a maniac's victim. A stump of polished wood, the handle of the instrument of death in a series of bloody axe murders. A piece of insulated wire that had supplied the current for the electric chair in the death house. The finger of a rubber glove which had been worn by a famous surgeon who had gone berserk and reverted to the days of his early youth when he had been a butcher's assistant.

As Ben Harlow's bleak eyes wandered over all these macabre mementos, he remembered the first time he'd seen them. At the time, the significance of them had not penetrated. Laughing almost childishly, Roxy had told him that it was just a hobby with her, that she was just "another collector." She merely collected little souvenirs connected with the crime of murder. Like someone else would collect match-

book covers or odd buttons, or coins or stamps.

It was not long before Harlow realized that was not so. It was more than a hobby with Roxy, this strange collection. They held a special significance and association of ideas for her. It was an almost fiendish fetish. She worshiped those murder mementos. She would fondle them with the same delighted concentration of a child playing with its toys.

It was not until after Roxy had gotten her strange, unearthly hold on him, had gotten into his system like the virus of some dread disease, that Harlow had learned the truth about her. And then it was too late for him to do anything about it.

From the first moment she had met him, learned that he was a newspaper man, Roxy had cultivated him, had gone out of her way to please him. And when Roxy Breen sought to please a man, the *femme fatales* of history were put to shame. It was easy, after that, to get him to help her add to the collection.

He'd tried to fight it, at first. But being the crime reporter for the *Globe*, Harlow was in the middle of every big murder in the city. And every time he came upon a crime scene, he would find himself instinctively looking around for some choice little item that he might be able to sneak out and take to Roxy; something that would especially please her. To get them, he had taken considerable risk of getting into serious trouble with the police authorities.

While he was standing there, staring at Roxy's bizarre collection, he felt a light touch on his sleeve. He turned slowly. Roxy was standing behind him, holding out a water tumbler, half full of golden bourbon.

"You look bad, lover," she said, with her head cocked to one side a little, looking up at him from under her thick lashes and dark and shiny eyelids. Her voice was al-

most a hoarse, insinuating whisper. "You need a drink."

HE REACHED out and took the glass, watching the trembling of his own hand. He downed the liquor fast, feeling the pleasant burn of it, all the way down his gullet. It quieted the wings of the butterflies in his stomach. He set the glass down.

"Come here, baby!" he husked.

She glided toward him, with a sort of rhythmic, liquid grace of motion. His eyes clung to her face as she came very close to him. He looked at the half-parted, moist redness of her lips, with the thin white shine of teeth between them. Her nostrils were flared. Her smoky green eyes were beginning to take on that sort of wild, ecstatic glitter that he knew so well. He didn't understand it because this was the way Roxy was when he brought her another murder souvenir—and only then. Yet, tonight, he had brought her nothing.

He didn't question this miracle, though. He accepted it gratefully and reached out and hungrily pulled her close. She leaned back from the waist, her head thrown back, so that her long hair hung loosely. Her eyes closed almost completely. He looked down at the tight, clean arch of her white throat with a tiny pulse beating madly at the side of it.

"You're a beautiful woman, Rox!" he breathed.

A touch of teasing smile flirted about her mouth. She put her pale, graceful hands flat on his chest. "You love me very much, Ben?"

"What do you think?" he answered, his voice catching. It was the answer he always gave her. Because he didn't love her. He hated her—and feared the insidious hold she had upon him. Yet his arm tightened around her waist.

She raised her head and her eyes looked straight into his, pleadingly. "Ben, you—you've got to do something for me."

"Sure," he heard himself saying.

She had made a little childish chuckling sound of delight back in her throat, and then began to speak quickly, breathlessly: "There's a girl lives in the next apartment, Ben. A young girl, quite beautiful. You know how thin the walls are, here. Well—Ben, something happened there next door, tonight."

"Happened? . . . What do you mean, Rox?"

Her lips pulled back from her teeth and the pupils of her eyes seemed to shrink and pinpoint. "Somebody killed her, Ben. Right next door, there. I heard it. I heard them quarreling, a man's voice cursing her. Then there was the sound of a struggle and the muffled report of a shot. . . . Right next door, Ben!"

It took a moment for it to penetrate. Then he grabbed her by the arms, cruelly, feeling his fingers bite into the soft, round flesh. "What are you getting at, Rox?" He *knew*, though. He didn't really have to ask.

"I didn't call the police, Ben. I—I've been trying to work up nerve to go over there myself. But I couldn't quite make it. But *you'll* go for me—won't you, Ben?"

He shook her, but the weird and strangely exciting look of rapture and anticipation stayed set on her face. He couldn't shake it away. "You're out of

your mind!" he told her. "You're mad!" He flung her away from him.

He walked over and stood by the window, looking out at the turgid, slow moving blackness of the East River, a few blocks away. His heart was hammering wildly. He felt like he was suffocating. He said: "Damn it to hell, Rox, I've done everything for you. I've risked losing my job, jail sentences, to satisfy that hellish craving of yours. But this is too much. Do you realize what you're asking me to do?"

She came over behind him and the sultry scent of her got into his nostrils. Softly, she whispered: "You won't be sorry, Ben." The sound of her voice strummed his tortured nerves like a musician's sensitive fingers on the strings of a guitar. "I'll have never had anything like that before. Something taken from the scene of a killing before even the police got there! Think what that will mean to me, Ben. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

He wheeled around suddenly, his ugly, tough face showing the strain upon it. He kept wiping the sweating palms of his hands up and down the sides of his trousers. The way she stood there now, the wildness in her eyes was more alluring than he had even seen it before. He couldn't fight the hellish, soul-destroying appeal this strange woman held for him.

"All right, damn you!" he told her.

SHE came over to him and brushed his mouth with hers teasingly. "Hurry, Ben, lover! You can get into the other flat through the connecting dumbwaiter shaft."

It was easy, once he started. With a kitchen knife, he jimmed the catch of the dumbwaiter door of the other apartment, climbed across and came out into the other kitchen. He was moving mechanically, now, like a man mesmerized; not frightened, not nervous, only emotionally numbed—with one thought in mind . . . to get something special for Roxy's collection and get back to her presence.

This kitchen was in darkness, but he could see out a door into the lighted living room. He stood there for a moment, listening, but there was no sound except the slight whir of the motor of an electric clock. Outside, on First Avenue, seeming far away and unreal, he could hear the sound of traffic.

He moved lightly out of the kitchen and into the big studio living room. The place was a shambles. Several chairs were overturned and broken. A lamp lay shattered on the floor. Another had its shade all askew but was still burning. The drawers of a desk had been yanked out and ransacked.

And then he saw the girl. Roxy had been right. She was quite beautiful. She had long, ash-blond hair and lovely translucent skin. She was wearing a simple, black, silk jersey dress and she had the figure for it. She was lying on her side, half twisted about, so that her face was toward him. She had long, exquisitely shaped legs.

There was an ugly, dark hole in her dress, right over the breast, and a shiny wet stain had spread all around it in an intricate design. Her mouth was like a small, flaming red pennant against the ghastly pallor of her face. Her eyes were

open and glazed looking and vacant.

At the last moment, just as he was about to shift his gaze from her face, he detected the faintest flickering of motion in her eyes. She was still alive. Swiftly, he kneeled beside her. "Can you speak?" he whispered.

The lips parted perceptibly, with a faint little snapping sound. He had to bend his ear down close to her mouth to hear. For several moments, he couldn't distinguish words and then he heard: ". . . please . . . the lipstick . . . before . . . get here . . . lipstick . . . in—in my purse. . . ."

He waited for more, but there wasn't any more. Those few words seemed to have exhausted her. It didn't make sense in a way. The only thing he could figure was that the girl wanted to make up a little before the police and the rest of them came. It must be some dying moment's quirk of vanity. It was not too strange. Often suicides bathed and groomed and dressed themselves up in their finest clothes before committing the act.

Swiftly, he glanced about the wrecked room and when he didn't see any sign of the girl's purse, he moved into the bedroom, flicked the wall switch. This room too had been thoroughly searched. The purse he was looking for, was on the dressing table, its contents emptied out and scattered. He picked up the lipstick, took it out to the other room.

This time when he kneeled down beside the girl on the floor and spoke to her, there was no answer. The wide open staring eyes didn't move. He reached down to the wrist of the hand flung out at her side. There was no pulse. She had gone while he was out of the room. She was dead.

He started to get up again and then remembered her pleading. He looked down at her deadly pale face and saw that her lip rouge was mostly rubbed off. She was

such a pretty thing that he could understand her desire to look as lovely as possible when the strangers came to stare at her.

With his hands trembling, he quickly unscrewed the top of the lipstick tube, levered up the smooth, waxy stub of bright red paint. As gently and expertly as possible, he complied with the dead girl's dying wish. When he finished, he screwed the top of the tube back on. As he looked down at that little brass casing, a strange, unbidden excitement stirred deep inside of him.

Think what that will mean to me, Ben. . . .

His fist closed tight about the lipstick for an instant, the knuckles standing out whitely. Roxy would go crazy if she got this. It would be the greatest prize of her collection.

At the same time that he was thinking this, self-revulsion and nausea formed in him. How could he do this unspeakable thing, feed and gratify that monstrous, abnormal fetish of Roxy's?

Think what that will mean to me, Ben. . . .

Then torturing memories of the hours he'd spend in Roxy's arms, the touch of her burning mouth, the cool caress of her long fingers, filled his mind and pushed out every other emotion. He stood up stiffly and dropped the tube of lip rouge into his pocket. Quickly, he left the murder apartment the same way he had entered.

Roxy Breen was waiting for him in her own kitchen. She stood before him, her eyes watching his hand with frozen fascination as he dug into his pocket. "I've been going crazy, Ben," she breathed. "I could hardly wait. What did you bring me, Ben, lover? Show me! Show me!"

While he pulled the lipstick from his pocket, he told her about the scene in the neighboring apartment. He told her of the dying girl's request and the thing

he had done. Now, it was his turn to tantalize her. Instead of handing the lipstick tube to her, he kept it in his fist, and hid it behind his back.

She threw herself against him, reached her arms around him, her face close to his, her eyes like deep pools of swirling green liquid fire into which he seemed to be falling: "Give it to me, Ben! she pleaded in an agonized voice.

Then she kissed him, her mouth warm and clinging. While she trapped him like that, her hands, behind his back, found his. She wrenched the tube of lipstick away from him. She tore her mouth away from his and twisted clear of him, backed off. She held the lipstick cupped in both hands and looked down at it, the sound of her breathing audible. She fondled the tiny souvenir of death and cooed over it.

"Oh, Ben, Ben!" she murmured. "Look what I've got! Think of it, Ben!" Her strangely beautiful face was alight now. Her eyes were shining. Her tiny, pointed red tongue flicked swiftly across her lips. And through all this exotic loveliness shone the ghoulish hunger of her twisted, abnormal mind.

Ben Harlow whispered, a barely audible sound: "You're insane. . . ." He felt that he was going to be ill.

CHAPTER TWO

Mad Molly's Place

THE place was a Third Avenue dive, long and narrow and dark inside. It's formal name was the Newspaperman's Bar & Grille but to every newspaperman in Manhattan it was known merely as Mad Molly Malone's place. There was nothing much to it—a long bar and tables in the rear but the drinks were large and cheap and every fourth one was on the house. You could get drunk and not get rolled. You could run up tabs as

large as you wanted, if Mad Molly knew you and liked you.

The place was empty when Ben Harlow walked in, except for Mad Molly Malone, herself, behind the bar. She was a great mountain of a woman, with frizzy bleached blonde hair and more war paint on her wrinkled, saggy-jowled face than on an Indian chief. Mad Molly had been a sob-sister in her prime. She knew newspapermen and loved them all—especially Ben Harlow.

She greeted him now, boisterously, fondly, with a choice of vocabulary that would have done a dock wallop proud. "Where you been, you baboon?" she demanded. "They had the stomach pump into you again? I ain't seen you in three days. Or else you been up in your room drinkin' all by yourself. What's the matter, you want to become an alcoholic or somethin'?"

He didn't even look at her. He hiked his lean hips up onto a bar stool and put his face into his hands. "Molly," he said, "make it bourbon and make it the biggest glass you can find in the place."

She stared at him, her fat-buried eyes narrowed shrewdly, her carmined mouth softening in a slight, sad smile. She tugged at a heavy, solid gold Gypsy ear ring that pierced the lobe of her right ear. She shook her head knowingly. "Ben," she said. "Poor, poor Ben."

She turned and fixed him a drink, only she made it a small highball glass and she only poured it half full. He ignored it for several moments until finally Molly said: "You been up to see that girl, that dam' girl. That zombie! What's her name? . . . She gives me the creeps just to look at her. She comes in here, it's like a cold, damp draft from the cellar."

He raised his head out of his hands then. You could almost see the remorse and misery and tearing of his conscience in his lax face, for a moment, before he got control and tightened his features.

"Roxy!" he said. "That's her name." He raised the glass of bourbon in trembling fingers. "May she fry in hell!" He threw the drink down and almost gagged. He banged the glass on the bar, signaling for a refill.

While she poured him another drink, Molly Malone said. "It's none o' my dam' business I know but I got to say my piece again. I don't know whether you're dumb or just don't give a dam', but there's something wrong with that gal. I don't just mean she's a tramp, Ben. It's her eyes. They got all the wickedness in the world in them. You mark my words, you get yourself clear o' that baggage or she'll get you into trouble, Ben. Bad trouble!"

He looked at her and pursed his mouth, his eyes bleak and hard. "I know," he said.

She raised her finely penciled brows, corrugating her forehead. "You know? Then what the hell's the matter with you, Ben?"

"She gets me, Molly. She makes me hate my guts for even looking at her. But if I stay away too long, I'm a guy with the shakes, I'm like a snow-bird away from the stuff too long. She's like a part of me—an appendage or evil growth that I can't cut off and still live."

"The dam' zombie!" said Molly Malone.

"I'll drink to that." Harlow made a face and smacked his lips. He felt the numbness beginning to start in his fingers. He was going to make it tonight, after all. He was going to get drunk. He could tell. There would be that blessed blackout tonight, after all.

Two drinks later, the numbness had spread from Harlow's fingers all through his body. His face was amiably vacuous. The memory of the time he'd spent in Roxy Breen's flat and in the apartment next door to her's was fading to the back of his mind, like something that had happened a long time ago.

Meanwhile, a redheaded girl had come in and was sitting several stools down from him. Several times, he sensed that she was looking his way, but he ignored her. The hell with her.

He had one more drink and managed to get down off the stool without falling on his face. He said: "'Scuse me, Molly. Somethin' I got to do."

He weaved toward the telephone booth in the back of the place, squeezed inside. Slowly, he found and inserted his finger into the right holes on the dial. Then he fumbled a pencil stub into his teeth and talked around the clenched stub:

"Westbrook Arms . . . Forty-seventh near First . . . Apartment Seven A . . . Girl murdered. . . ."

He severed the connection. Just as he was easing back onto the bar stool again, he saw the redheaded girl meticulously applying lipstick. He shuddered and for a flashing moment, the fumes cleared from his brain and he saw the face of the dead blonde girl as he had painted her forever-stilled lips.

Harlow swore under his breath and went to work on ~~the~~ fresh drink Molly had set up. But this time his heart wasn't in it. He had trouble getting it down. He tried not to but he kept glancing at the redhead down the bar. Once again he saw her open her purse, take out a tissue, wipe her mouth and redo it again.

He knew that she was doing it for his benefit—and the knowledge made his flesh crawl.

ABOUT the fifth time she did it, he swung around on his stool to face her directly. She was taking great pains to put the lip rouge on just perfectly. Through the fog of alcohol and anger in his eyes, he took notice of what she looked like for the first time. She was a redhead all right, and not the blazing orange kind. Her hair was soft, sunset red and very sleekly coiffed to fit her small, heart-shaped face.

She had the usual fine white complexion of the redhaired. Her profile was nice, a gently tipped nose and a good, strong little chin. She was wearing a simply tailored green suit. The way she was sitting on the stool, legs crossed, one of them angling out enough to display nylon encased knee, calf and ankle, she let you form your own opinion about them.

Harlow's opinion was that he'd seen better and he'd seen a hell of a lot worse. They were sturdy legs, very well turned out.

"What do you think you're doing?" He demanded, staring at the strong, neat little hand that wielded the lipstick on her mouth.

She didn't stop, or pay any attention to him until she had finished. Then she

turned slowly and he got the full-on affect of her face. She had deep blue eyes with unplucked, natural brows above them. The eyes regarded him amusedly. Her mouth would have been small and just full enough, if it hadn't been so thick with red paint.

"If you're speaking to me," she said smiling, "I'm rouging my lips. Do you object to a woman making up her face?"

He considered that, studying her owl-ishly. While she waited for his answer, she picked up a martini and sipped at it, without taking her eyes off him. It was a little unnerving and she had already rattled him by the constant application of lipstick.

He got off the stool, perilously maintaining an upright position and made his way toward her. He stood close to her, his fists planted on his hips. "I object to you makin' a career out of it," he told her.

"Oh?" she arched her brows. "Maybe you don't like the way I do it? Perhaps you'd like to do it for me?" She flicked open her bag and pulled out a lipstick, held it toward him.

He looked down at that little metal tube and felt his stomach shrivel. He slapped her hand, knocking the lipstick out of it, clean across the room.

The redhead said: "Tch, tch! Now you'll have to buy me another."

Mad Molly yelled: "Harlow, what the hell's got into you? Leave this gal alone!"

The redhead said softly: "I'm sorry. I didn't know my little gag was really getting you. Will you forgive me—and let me buy you a drink?"

In the face of her quiet apology, some of the tension left his raw nerves. He drew himself up with ludicrous dignity.

"Thank you," he said. "Pleasure. I will."

He tried to be very casual, very formal about the thing. They had three drinks.

She was very young and there was a healthy, wholesome quality about her that he hadn't run up against in a long time. She had a quick, easy, infectious laugh and although he wasn't getting any more sober, with each drink, his black mood was lifting.

She told him that her name was Fay Conover and that she was twenty-one and worked in an office. She came from Grand Rapids. After while when she left the bar to powder her nose, Mad Molly came over. Mad Molly was grinning roguishly.

"That's better, Ben," she said. "Much better. There's a gal would do you a lot of good."

"Are you kidding? She's a sweet little kid. Why she should go getting herself loused up with me?"

"That's all right," Molly said. "She goes for you. Besides—she ain't no dam' zombie."

Mad Molly shouldn't have said that. For Ben Harlow's eyes clouded. Red-headed Fay Conover had melted that numbing wall of hate he had set up against Roxy. Ben Harlow was as tight as a tick but he was human again—and fair game for that terrible gnawing to see Roxy.

Harlow had walked out on Roxy, left her crooning over that macabre lipstick. And now, he was beginning to wonder if he hadn't been a fool.

WHEN Fay Conover came back she sensed the change in Harlow. She said: "You seem different, Ben, you haven't smiled once in ten minutes. Have another drink."

They had several drinks, but the party mood had fled. Fay slid gracefully off her stool. "I've got to go, Ben. I really must."

He stood up too, and was quite steady on his feet. This alarmed him more than if he had fallen flat on his face. The drinks were having no effect on him. He recognized this state, and a cold knot

twisted his stomach. He took Fay's arm, saying:

"I'll take you home."

He hailed a cab. Fay gave an address to the hackie which he didn't catch. In the darkness of the cab he became conscious of the delicate scent of Fay's perfume. He decided that he liked it. And then he found himself comparing it with the cloying, musky scent of Roxy's heady perfume.

Fay Conover watched his face in the flash and shadow of passing street lights. Finally, she said: "To ignore me this way, and especially in a cab, you must be thinking of your best girl. And she must be pretty special."

Harlow's laugh was short. "She's special all right. There's no one like her on earth. I'll bet she'd even be special in hell." His voice roughened. "I'd like to cut out her black heart."

Fay stared at him in amazement.

The cab suddenly swung into the curb, ending their conversation. Harlow handed Fay out of the cab and paid the fare. Then he started toward the front door of the building.

Halfway across the sidewalk, he stopped as suddenly as though he'd bumped into a stone wall. He looked at the modernistic entranceway to the apartment, with the scrolled iron-work over the glass doors. He looked at the neat sign that said: *Westbrook Arms*. He looked at the number. It was the same. The apartment Fay Conover was taking him into was the same building that Roxy Breen lived in.

"What's the matter, Ben?" Fay asked, knitting her brows.

"Matter?" He stood there, staring at her. "You mean to tell me that you live *here*?"

"Of course." She laughed. "It's really a very nice place. Why, Ben?"

For a moment, he didn't answer her. He told himself that it was just a coincidence. It had to be. One of those things.

"Nothing," he said finally. "I had you figured for a different setup. Don't mind me, Fay. I say and do batty things."

"Which means—" she laughed and took hold of his arm—"you need a drink. Come on upstairs for a nightcap. . . . If you want to, that is."

"If I ever turned down a free drink, my ancestors would spin in their graves," he told her and went on it.

There was a tightening of his nerves as he crossed the familiar lobby, going up in the same elevator he'd used so many times, calling on Roxy. He could use a drink—a lot of them. Then his ears began to roar as he noticed the lift stop at the seventh floor. He stopped himself from saying anything. But when she halted in front of the door of 7 A, right next door to Roxy's—place the door that led into the flat where the blonde girl had been murdered—he couldn't take any more.

He caught her arm hard. "This is your apartment?" he said through his teeth. "You're certain of that?"

She faced him squarely. "Ben, what's the matter with you? You must think I'm a burglar, going around breaking into strange peoples' apartments." She fumbled a key from her purse, started to insert it into the lock.

He grabbed her arm again. "Fay, have you a roommate. a blonde girl, pretty and—"

She shook her head, frowning. "No. I live here alone. What are you getting at? You sure must need a drink. Come on."

And then Ben Harlow suddenly realized that the cops should be here. He'd called them. They investigated every call. There should have been police cars galore downstairs. The hall here should have been alive with reporters and cops.

"Honey," he said, "lead me to that drink!"

Fascinated, he watched her key the door open, step inside and flick the foyer

switch. He followed her, noting that there was a light ahead of them in the living room. The door slammed shut behind him. And then he saw Fay Conover stop just inside the living room and suck in her breath noisily and fling the back of her hand against her mouth.

He rushed quickly up alongside of her, sure that she'd spotted the body. His eyes jerked to the spot on the floor where the corpse of the blonde girl had sprawled. *It was gone.* All the furniture had been righted and the broken pieces removed. There wasn't a sign of any kind of violence.

Someone said in a deeply quiet, amused voice: "Hi, folks!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Fatal Lipstick

BEN HARLOW whirled toward the sound and saw a man sitting in a chair in the far corner. He was a big man, with ruddy cheeks and little chips of blue ice where his eyes should have been. His head was bald, except for a fringe of curly blond ringlets above the ears. But for the eyes and the thin, cruel line of his mouth, he might have looked like a round-faced, jolly blond Friar. He was quietly and expensively dressed. He buffed the manicured nails of a large, soft looking hand, on the lapel of his suit.

He grinned at Harlow. He had small, close set, yellow teeth. "Hullo, Harlow, m'boy," he said. "You get around, don't you?"

"Sure I do," Harlow admitted. "But hereafter I'll be a little more choosy about where I go. This isn't a pleasure, Lieutenant Pederson, sir."

The big, baldheaded man laughed, held out his buffed nails in front of him, examined them.

Fay Conover said in a small voice: "What's going on here, Ben? What's

this man doing here in my apartment?"

"This is Lieutenant of Detectives Pederson, Homicide Department," he told her. "He's probably looking for a misplaced body or something."

"Could be," Pederson admitted. He turned to the girl. "Sorry to bust into your place this way, Miss. But we got an anonymous phone call that there had been a murder committed here. It turned out to be a crank call. Nothing was wrong when we got here. We had the super let us in. But I thought I'd hang around until the tenant came back and sort of double check. You never can tell about these things."

"A—a murder?" Fay gasped. "There must be some mistake."

"Obviously," Pederson admitted. He screwed up his face wisely and stared hard at Harlow. "You know, son," he said, "it's peculiar that you showed up here."

"Why?"

"Because you're usually boiled—and you might've got the notion to play a prank on the Department. Like maybe some pranks—like swiping bits of evidence from the scene of a lot of murder cases?" His voice got steely hard. "Don't ever let me catch you at it, Harlow. . . ."

Fay Conover said brightly: "Let's all have a drink."

"Thank you, no, Miss Martin," said the lieutenant. "Sorry to bother you. We get these crank calls all the time, but we've always afraid not to cover them."

They both watched him pick his coat and hat off the sofa, don them and lumber toward the door. He stopped at the doorway of the room and turned back to Harlow. He rubbed the ring of blond curls around his massive head. "So long, Harlow," he said. "Watch your step."

Harlow just curled his lip. Fay showed Pederson to the door. When she came back, Harlow said:

"Miss *Martin*, eh? What's the story, sister? This isn't your flat."

She moved over to the table where she'd set down her purse. She opened it with her back toward him. When she turned around, she had a small, nickel-plated pistol in one fist, pointed at his stomach. The sweet expression on her face had changed. She looked a little older, now. She looked just as pretty except that now there was a very desperate expression around her eyes and in the set of her small mouth. The chin looked very determined.

Her voice changed too as she snapped: "I'm going to ask the questions, you rummy newshound. Where it is?"

He raised his brows. "Where is what?"

"Look, Harlow," she said. "I know your rep. You're one of the trickiest guys in the business. But I never figured you for a dirty rotten, lowdown heel. I—I could shoot you . . . and get a medal!"

Harlow said: "Give me the drink first—then shoot."

SHE took a deep, exasperated breath, waggled the gun at him. "I want that lipstick," she said. "I'm going to get it from you if I have to shoot all your teeth out, one by one."

His mouth grew taut at mention of the lipstick. It brought back the memory of the dead blonde's lips. He kept stalling: "What lipstick?"

"Look," she said levelly. "I was getting off the elevator this evening and spotted you coming from this direction. I turned the other way, figuring you might have come from this apartment. Then I found Stella Martin lying dead on the floor—and the lipstick gone. I figured you were the one who got it, Harlow."

"I see," Harlow said. He didn't at all. His brain was whirling. "How did you catch up with me again?"

"That was simple. The first and most logical place to look was at Mad Molly's, the newsboys' hangout."

"So that business with the lipstick, in there, wasn't just a gag?" he said.

"No. I wanted to see what effect it would have on you. Well, I soon found out."

Harlow didn't want to talk about that, so he said: "You were here after I was. You saw the wreck the place was, you saw blonde Stella lying on the floor. And when you came back with me, you found all of that changed. Who do you figure cleaned up in here? And where is Stella's body?"

Fay Conover said: "You tell me, Harlow. . . . Turn around. You've got that lipstick and I'm going to search you and find it."

Slowly, he turned around. He heard her move up behind him. He waited until she'd dipped her hand into his side pocket, then said: "Suppose Lieutenant Pederson didn't leave but is hanging around outside—listening to all of this?"

The natural instinct would be for her to turn her head toward the door, then. Harlow counted on it, swung around and rammed down hard with his arm, across her gun wrist. She gave a little cry. He kicked the pistol across the floor away from him and twisted her arm.

She cried: "You're breaking my arm! Please! Please!"

"Hold still," he told her. "If you don't move or try to get away, it won't hurt."

While he held her with one hand, he stripped his necktie off with the other. He caught her other hand behind her back and bound her wrists hurriedly with the necktie. He turned her around to face him.

"I hate to do this, honey," he said. But this all smells like something big to my newsy nose. I'm going to park you out of the way, while I go to work."

Fay didn't say anything, just glared at him.

Harlow prodded her toward a closet, shoved her inside and shut the door. Then

he left the apartment and turned toward the one next door—where Roxy Breen lived.

He went to knock on Roxy's door, and found it ajar. He pushed the door open with the tips of his fingers. The next instant, he was running across the foyer toward the living room of Roxy's apartment. He could see her there, struggling with a dark and stocky man in overalls and work shirt. The man had Roxy by the throat and was choking her.

THE man turned when he heard Harlow's footsteps. He took his hands from Roxy's throat and she stumbled back out of the way. But the dark man was a little slow in spinning around and getting his guard up. Ben Harlow started his swing, while he was still a couple of feet away. It landed with the extra momentum full against the dark man's jaw. The dark man made a grunting noise and dropped, colder than a gaffed cod.

Harlow looked down at him. The man on the floor was heavy featured, with a prominent, bulldog jaw. His black hair, streaked with iron-gray, was short cropped. He wore a thick, untrimmed black mustache. There was a slightly foreign cast to his features.

"Who is he, Roxy?" Harlow demanded. "What was he choking you for?"

He looked up at her. She was still wearing the red lounging pajamas. Her green eyes were glowing as if she had enjoyed the violence of the few minutes. She was gently caressing the bruise marks on her throat. She spoke in low, husky tones:

"So you came back, lover boy."

Harlow pointed at the prone dark man. "Who is he?"

"He said he was the plumber of the building. He's been in here for over an hour, supposedly fixing the radiator. He noticed me examining the lipstick you brought me—from over there." She ges-

tered vaguely toward the next apartment. "He went berserk, then. He jumped me, tried to get the lipstick away from me."

Her wet-looking mouth twisted. "Nobody is going to get that lipstick away from me, Ben. I fought him, and he tried to choke me. Then you came in."

"There's something mighty important about that lipstick," Harlow said. "Too many people want it. I'm beginning to think I got the dead girl's request all wrong. I don't think she wanted me to make her up at all. She was trying to tell me something about that lipstick. . . . Where is it, now, Rox? Let me see it for a moment."

A crafty look narrowed her green eyes. She slipped an arm around his shoulder, moved close to him. She smiled lazily and said: "Of course, lover boy. It's under the sofa. It fell on the floor during my struggle with—him." She shifted her gaze to the unconscious self-styled plumber on the floor. "I kicked it under the sofa so he wouldn't see it."

Harlow strode toward the divan, kneeled down and looked underneath it. He reached his hand as far under as he could and swept it round in a semi-circle. He said: "Are you sure, Rox? I can't find it under here, anywhere."

She said: "Can't you lover?" Her voice was soft and silky, and it suddenly occurred to him that it was very close. She was standing right over him. He started to turn his head to look up at her but he never made it. The whole world seemed to suddenly explode in a shower of fireworks. He went swimming off into thick, inky blackness. . . .

When Ben Harlow came out of it, he couldn't remember a thing. That wasn't unusual. He was used to awaking under those conditions. His head felt as though a million little pixies were holding a riot inside of it. He was certain some of them were walloping his temples with minia-

ture sledge hammers. And that was okay, too. That wasn't out of the norm. He put his hands to his head, hoping he could hold it in place for just a few more moments.

He said to himself: "Drunk again, Harlow, you sot! And a whizbanger, this time."

One of his hands gravitated toward the back of his skull and he winced as his exploring fingers found a lump raised back there. From somewhere he gathered a lot of strength and managed to reach a sitting position. His stomach pitched. He tried to look around, but everything slanted and tipped and whirled.

But he stuck at it and pretty soon the merry-go-round stopped. His eyes opened wider and wider as he saw that he wasn't in his own little two-by-four room. He was in Roxy Breen's place.

Then it all came suddenly shooting back into his mind. He reached out and caught hold of a chair and pulled himself to his feet. He stood there, looking around. On the floor, near him, was one of Roxy's souvenirs. It was the piece of broken spade and he decided that was the weapon she had used to hit him with.

He suddenly realized that he was alone in the room. Roxy was gone. The phony plumber was gone. A dozen questions poured through his mind. He worried them around, but got nowhere.

There was suddenly a ringing sound that at first he thought came from his own battered head. After a moment, he separated it from the sounds inside his skull and tabbed it as the ringing of Roxy's telephone. Staggering a little, he walked over to the little table that held the instrument. He barked an "hello" and an operator's twanging voice told him: "I have that call to Wick Harbor for you now, sir."

He winced, started to say that he hadn't wanted any call to Wick Harbor. And then he realized that someone had wanted

that call put through, not so long ago. It must have been a man, because the operator thought it was he who had made the first call. The only other man who had been here was the fake plumber, who had wanted the mysterious lipstick badly enough to strangle Roxy. Harlow said:

"Okay. Put it through."

There was a pause and some buzzing and then a feminine voice with the most delightful French accent he'd ever heard said: "'Ello! Zis ees ze Temple of ze Disciples of Damon. Lizette speaking."

Harlow gulped. "The temple of—*what?*"

She repeated the name and then demanded: "Who is zis?"

Harlow said confidentially: "Listen, I've got the lipstick. What do I do now?"

There was a silence from the other end. But the ruse didn't work. She laughed: "You seely man, you. What does Lizette care if you have a lipsteek. We—Brother Damon does not allow us to use ze make-up. Beside, Lizette, she does not need any lip rouge; her lips, zey are red enough, M'sieur!" She sighed. "Please, what is it you want? I am beezy."

"Where is this place where you are, Lizette?" He tried to be casual.

"Why, Week Harbor, of a certainty."

"Sure, sure. But what part of Long Island?"

"On ze ocean," she said. "Ze South Shore. . . . What you call eet. You weel come out here? You weesh to be saved by Brother Damon? You weesh to be one of ze chosen?"

"Sis," he told her, "I *am* one of the chosen. And I sure would like to be saved—by anyone. Hold ze temple, honey!"

He hung up, then, and stood there for a moment, staring down at the phone, praying that his head would stay in one piece. Then he went into the medicine cabinet and helped himself to a couple of aspirins. He swallowed them with a wicked jolt from the bottle of good bour-

bon still sitting on the cocktail table.

Harlow picked up the remainder of the fifth and stuck it into his pocket, and left the apartment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Batty Babes

THE cabby who Ben Harlow had bribed at Times Square finally reached the sign for which they had been looking. It read: *Disciples of Damon*. They turned right onto a dirt top road. At the end of the dirt road, they came to a huge private estate, set back from the road and surrounded by a high wall, topped with barbed wire. They drove up before a gate. Harlow got out of the cab. A strong wind whipped at his hair, and whistled through the tall trees that reared over the wall of the estate. Not far off, he could hear the booming of surf. The moon popped out for a moment, from behind scudding clouds and in its wan light, far back of the big gate toward which he was now walking, he saw top of what looked to be a huge, old-fashioned mansion house.

The gate to the estate was of heavy wood and it hurt Harlow's fist to pound on it. No one answered his summons.

Harlow banged on the gate some more but nothing happened. Finally, he gave it up. Walking back to the cab, he saw what looked like the beginning of a footpath, leading into thick clouds beyond. He said to the cabby:

"I'm going to see where that path leads. There'll be another five in it for you—if you wait."

The cabby grunted. "Okay. I'll have a snooze." He snapped off the headlights and settled in his seat.

Harlow moved over onto the grass at the side of the road and ran silently along it toward the path leading into the woods. The moon came out and helped him follow

the contours of the path and in a few moments, he was going down a steep embankment and onto a short stretch of beach. Here, the roar of the surf was like the rumbling of continual thunder.

The wind had increased now and was screaming about his ears and whipping flying sand into his face. He looked down the beach a hundred feet or so to where the embankment suddenly became a cliff. Dimly, just back from the top of that cliff, Harlow saw the top outline of the big mansion that was apparently the temple of the Disciples of Damon.

He walked down that way and stood at the foot of the cliff, looking up. There was little beach here and the waves rolled in, right up to where he stood. A few yards farther on, the cliff curved inward and great rollers broke savagely over jagged rocks at the foot of it.

The cliff above Harlow wasn't too high but it was very steep and it would give a man a bad fifteen minutes, climbing it. Especially in this wind. Especially by a man who had been drunk and sobered several times and half-brained with a shovel.

He started the long climb upward. There were plenty of hand and foot holds but some of them were sharp and before he was half way up, Harlow's hands were cut and bleeding. Several times, the wind whipped at him and almost blew him off the cliff. Spray from the breaking waves below doused him. He was trembling and exhausted when he finally scaled the top and stood there, gulping in air.

The moon was quite bright now and Harlow found himself on a plateau. He found himself also confronted by the figure of a young woman, standing a few feet away from him in the moonlight. She was short and dark and the wind whipped at her long, jet black hair and the bangs over her forehead. It plastered the short robe, corded tightly about the waist, close to her sturdy young body.

In the brief moment that they both stared at each other, in speechless shock, Harlow saw that the robe, which ended well above the knees, was embroidered across the front with a partially coiled rattlesnake. The girl's feet were encased in little sandals, bound on with silken ribbons, high above the ankle.

Suddenly, she screamed, a terrible sound that was instantly picked up by the fierce, whipping wind and carried out to sea. Then she thrust something toward him.

At first, Harlow couldn't believe his eyes. He thought for a moment that his many bouts with the bottle had at last finally caught up with him. Because the squirming, writhing thing in the dark girl's hand was a diamond-backed rattlesnake. It darted its head viciously at Harlow. Harlow teetered on the edge of the cliff, almost lost his balance. He yelled at the girl:

"Throw that damned thing away!"

But she ignored him for a moment, continued to hold the snake out before her, in what seemed now to be a protective gesture. He watched it coiling its slippery length affectionately about the girl's forearm. And then she pulled the huge serpent toward her, cuddled it in her arms. She burst out with wild, ringing laughter.

"You look so—so funny! For ze moment, you scared me, but now I see it is you, M'sieur, who ees ze frightened one!"

Harlow recovered a little. He said, hesitantly: "I'd recognize that accent anywhere. You are Lizette, the gal I spoke to on the phone?"

"*Oui!*" she said and peered at him intently through the moonlight. "Oh, eet is you, ze funny man on ze telephone!" She smiled and her whole, pretty little dark face lighted up. Then she looked down at the rattler she held and stroked it fondly.

"My Henri!" she cooed. "My patron zerpent! The funny man, he is afraid of my nice Henri, *non!*"

Harlow stared at her, horrified. "Doesn't that damned thing bite you?"

SHE frowned at him. "Oh, *non, non, M'sieur!* I zee you do not know about thees beautiful zerpents. Brother Damon weel instruct you—when he returns. Then you weel not be afraid of zem, either. And then they weel not bite you. Once you lose your fear of ze zerpents, *M'sieur*, they will perform miracles for you."

And then Harlow got it. This Disciples of Damon outfit was some fanatical faith-healing cult who used live snakes as their symbol of worship. Harlow kept his distance.

"Look, Lizette," he said. "I'm looking for a friend. I have reason to believe he came here, tonight. He may even be a member of your—your group."

"What ees he look like?"

Swiftly, Harlow described the phony plumber.

Instantly, Lizette said: "*Oui!* You are describing ze gentleman called Tark. He ees a good friend of our Damon. M'sieur Tark came here tonight weeth ze two beautiful mademoiselles."

"Two girls?" Harlow asked. "What are they like?"

Lizette gave a rough description of Roxy Breen and redheaded Fay Conover.

Harlow felt excitement begin to pound in his head as he asked: "Where can I find this Tark?"

"He ees not a member of our group," Lizette explained. "So he cannot live in ze temple, itself. When he is here, M'sieur Tark lives in the chauffeur's quarters, up over the garage, in the rear of the temple."

Harlow knew of this Tark. The State Department and the FBI were looking for him. Harlow asked Lizette:

"Where is Damon now?"

Lizette said: "Damon and hees disciples have gone on a voyage. Only Lizette here now."

Harlow lit out for the garage on the run, leaving Lizette and her pet serpent there at the cliff edge. This thing was beginning to make sense, now.

There were two large, powerful sedans parked in the garage. Harlow headed toward a wooden stairway that led to the second floor. He went up it, three steps at a time, his heart hammering with excitement and dread.

At the top of the steps, he found a short hall, with doors opening off of it from each side. The first one he came to was open and he stepped inside. It was a very simply furnished bedroom, containing a maple double bed and dresser, and two straight-backed chairs. There was no one in there and Harlow started to leave the room again, when he heard a sound from two closets, side by side, at the far wall of the room. Both the closet doors were closed. The sound had been only faint and it had stopped, but Harlow was certain someone was hiding in one of those closets.

Cautiously, he advanced across the room toward the closet doors. His hand reached out for the knob of the nearest one and a voice from behind Harlow, said: "Leave that door alone, lover."

He spun around. Standing just inside the room was Roxy Breen. She held a snub-nosed automatic in her hand, pointing at him. She was pale as death. There was a twisted grin on her face and her green eyes held a bright glitter.

The hand that didn't hold the gun was clenched at her side in a fist. Suddenly she pushed it out toward him, opened her fist and showed him the little tube of lipstick lying on her palm. "I got it back, Ben," she said. "They thought they could get it away from me." She giggled and licked at her full lips. "You know what I'm going to do now, lover?"

He shook his head, looking at the gun. He couldn't find his voice to answer.

She said soothingly, gently, "I'm going

to kill someone, lover boy. *Me—Roxy—I'm going to kill.* This time the souvenir won't be second-hand. I'll have the gun I shot a man to death with! Think of that, lover boy Ben. *Think what that will do for me!"*

He started to put up his hand. He realized that he had helped to nourish this terrible fetish of Roxy's and now it was turning on him, like a monster grown out of hand. Roxy was going to kill *him!*

"Roxy! Don't! *You've gone insane!* You—"

HE BROKE off as the sound of the automatic cracked sharply in the room, echoing back and forth against the walls. Three times in rapid succession, smoke and flame jetted from the stubby muzzle.

At each shot, Harlow jerked and could almost feel the stab of searing pain at his middle. And then, amazingly, he saw that Roxy wasn't pointing the gun quite at him. The angle was off. He realized that she had finished shooting and he was still standing there. She hadn't been shooting at him at all. He watched her in utter fascination. The expression on her face was a terrible thing to see. Then she wheeled and left the room.

Suddenly, to Harlow's ears came the most inhuman scream he had ever heard. It rose to an ear-splitting shriek, then chopped off as if it had been severed by a cleaver. Ice-cold sweat gushed from every pore of Harlow's quivering body.

He drove himself to cross the floor to the door. On the landing outside the door, at the head of the steep flight of wooden steps, he saw Lizette trying to soothe a very ruffled snake.

Lizette tossed her head toward the concrete garage floor at the foot of the stairs. "Zat woman scared my poor Henri. . . ."

Harlow pictured Roxy seeing the diamond-back striking toward her—and her mind, hanging on a shred, had shat-

tered as she lunged into space. He moved woodenly toward the top of the steps and looked down.

Roxy's twisted, broken body could not have housed life. He did not go down to examine her. A strange, free feeling inside him told him that Roxy Breen was dead.

Slowly, Harlow turned back into the room and closed the door. He looked at the door of the closet to his left. There were three bullet holes through it. He saw that the key was still in the outside of the lock and reached out and turned it. Gently he opened the door and Tark, the phony plumber, a foreign automatic clutched against him, all doubled over, tumbled out. Tark's eyes were rolled back in his head. Blood drooled slowly from one corner of his thick mouth. Roxy had done her work well.

And then Harlow jumped, nervously, as there came the sound of a muffled kick, from the other closet. He waited until his nerves quieted and reached out and unlocked that door. He saw a girl, hunched down in there, bound hand and foot, gagged. She was wearing a dark green business suit and her hair was a beautiful sunset red.

"Fay!" He stooped to unfasten her bonds.

When he got the gag off, she said: "Ah, the Marines have landed!"

Harlow said: "What—where—when—and why? . . . Tell it slow and tell it easy."

"After you left Stella Martin's apartment," she said, "I began to work on the knot of that tie you used to bind my hands. In a few minutes, I was free. I went next door. That slinky dame, Roxy, was just conking you with a broken shovel."

Harlow had a dazed grin on his tired face. "Easy!" he said. "Let's get back to the beginning. Who are you, Fay? And that blonde, Stella Martin? Give it to me, slower and easier. My mental processes aren't so good right at this point."

So she told him. She was on a special investigation job for the Petterson, a Newspaper Syndicate, working right inside Tark's headquarters. She had found a weak link in his organization—Stella Martin, from whom she'd been buying information. Fay had finally sold Stella the idea of getting her a list of the names of big American business men who were

sympathetic to a foreign power. These names were listed on a micro film that Stella Martin had smuggled out, hidden in her lipstick.

"I was supposed to get them from her, at her apartment tonight and make the payoff," Fay said. "But Tark beat me to Stella tonight. He shot her before he found out where the film was hidden. He came back later, took Stella's body and put the apartment in order. . . . Now suppose you tell me how you fit into all this, Ben Harlow."

That took some doing, but Harlow finally managed to tell most of the truth. When he finished, he said: "And after you saw Roxy giving me the bang on the skull, what happened?"

Fay said gently: "I tried to get the lipstick from her. But she was like a kid with a stick of candy. Finally, I had to tell her what was in it, what it was all about. Right after that, Tark came to, pulled his gun on us. He and some of his workers brought us out here. Somehow, that Roxy—she was good—tricked Tark into that closet, and slammed the door on him. Then she ran to some other room to get a gun."

"Roxy," Harlow said softly, "is dead." He let out a long, slow breath. "We'll get the lipstick from her."

Harlow remembered the badly punished fifth of bourbon in his coat pocket. He took out the bottle and said to Fay: "Guess we both could use a little snort or so."

She pointed to several glasses over on the dresser. Harlow was moving over toward them when something hit him on the back of his head. The floor came up to meet him. He lay there in a half-world too tired, battered and comfortable to move.

Then he heard Fay's voice close to his ear:

"Well, Mister Rumdurn Newshound,

I'll get in my story first. . . . See you around—sometime."

Harlow didn't answer. He just lay there. Presently he heard the roar of one of those powerful sedans down in the garage. He pushed himself to a sitting position, blinked and saw that the bourbon bottle was still intact on the chair where he had left it. He put down a gigantic jolt. Then he saw Lizette come into the room with a petulant Henri wrapped around her arm.

When Lizette saw Harlow sitting on the floor, she tossed Henri onto the bed. Henri lashed around a few times, coiled himself and decided to relax. Lizette kneeled beside Harlow and massaged his head with a gliding, serpentine, hypnotic rhythm.

Harlow grabbed the cool, soft hand and held it in both of his. He asked her: "Is there a telephone in the temple?"

"*Oui, M'sieur.*"

Harlow grinned lopsidedly. It would be an hour before Fay Conover reached a telephone. His story would be practically on the streets by then. He took another pull at the bourbon.

Lizette leaned close to him and asked: "What ees in zat bottle?" Her imported perfume was a swirling mist around his badly battered head. Harlow managed to say:

"We'll go into zat—later. First, the telephone."

Lizette got to her feet, smoothed the scanty robe over her lithe thighs and smiled down at Harlow.

Harlow climbed to his feet, jerked a thumb at the relaxing Henri on the bed. "What about him?"

Lizette pouted. "Henri has become zee bore. . . . Lizette, she need understanding." She beckoned a finger at him. "Come wiz me."

Harlow tucked the bottle into his pocket, breathed: "Me—and batty babes."