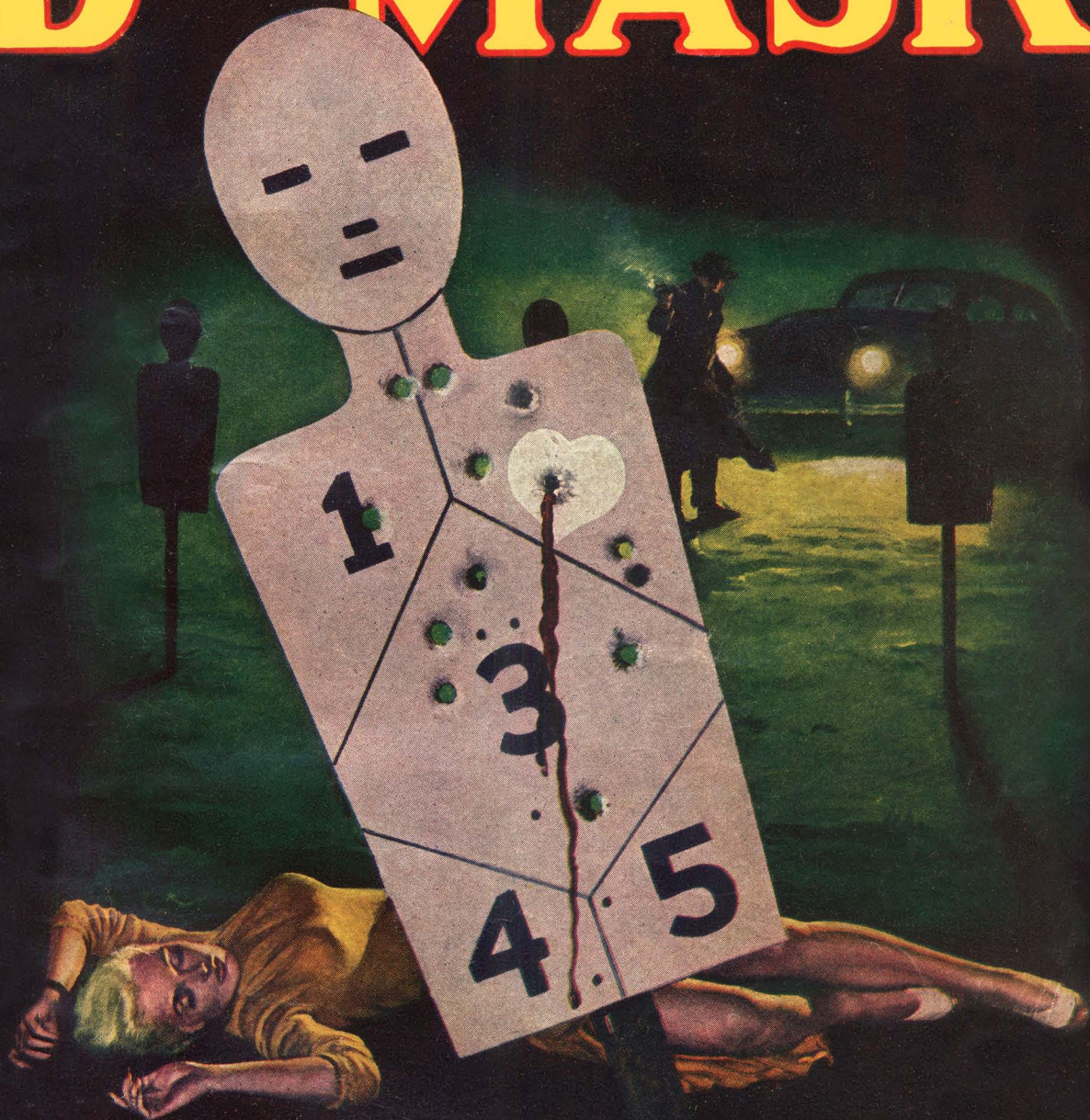


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# BLACK MASK



**OVERDOSE OF LEAD** by **CURTIS CLUFF**  
**WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT • FREDRIC BROWN AND OTHERS**



# BLACK MASK

VOL. XXXII, No. 2

NOVEMBER, 1948

K. S. WHITE, Editor

## CONTENTS



**OVERDOSE OF LEAD.....Curtis Cluff 8**  
 Chuck Conrad was no hoodlum, just a private eye trying to turn an honest penny—into a crooked buck.

**THE BLOODY BOKHARA...William Campbell Gault 36**  
 Cut-rate carpets were Kaprelian's business, but when an Oriental prayer-rug turned up with a corpse wrapped in it, that was more than he'd bargained for.

**GUN IN HIS BACK.....Coleman Meyer 67**  
 The Inspector couldn't see Patrolman Scoggins for dust, so the whole Department was dumbfounded when Scoggins got the best Emily Post treatment from the Chief.

**HARM'S WAY.....Tom Marvin 72**  
 Rex Tremain often said he wouldn't take a million for his wife, Maçcy, dead or alive. Now the time had come to prove it.

**ODDS ON DEATH.....Don M. Mankiewicz 92**  
 Nothing was left to chance on Rocco's gambling tables. But with the right odds, even a patsy can buck loaded dice and roll a natural.

**CRY SILENCE.....Fredric Brown 100**  
 Would you try to save your wife from a killer? Seems like a simple question, but to Mandy's husband, it was one to stump the experts.

**DEAD MEN CAN'T WELSH.....Mel Colton 104**  
 Jimmy Rock had always been a smart shamus—till he investigated the death of the senator's wife and damn near got a hole through that clever head of his

**CAN YOU TAKE THE WITNESS?.....Julius Long 6**  
 A quiz program for amateur legal lights.

**LIFTING THE JANUARY BLACK MASK..... 91**  
 A partial preview of our plans for the next issue.

Cover painted for Black Mask by Peter Stevens

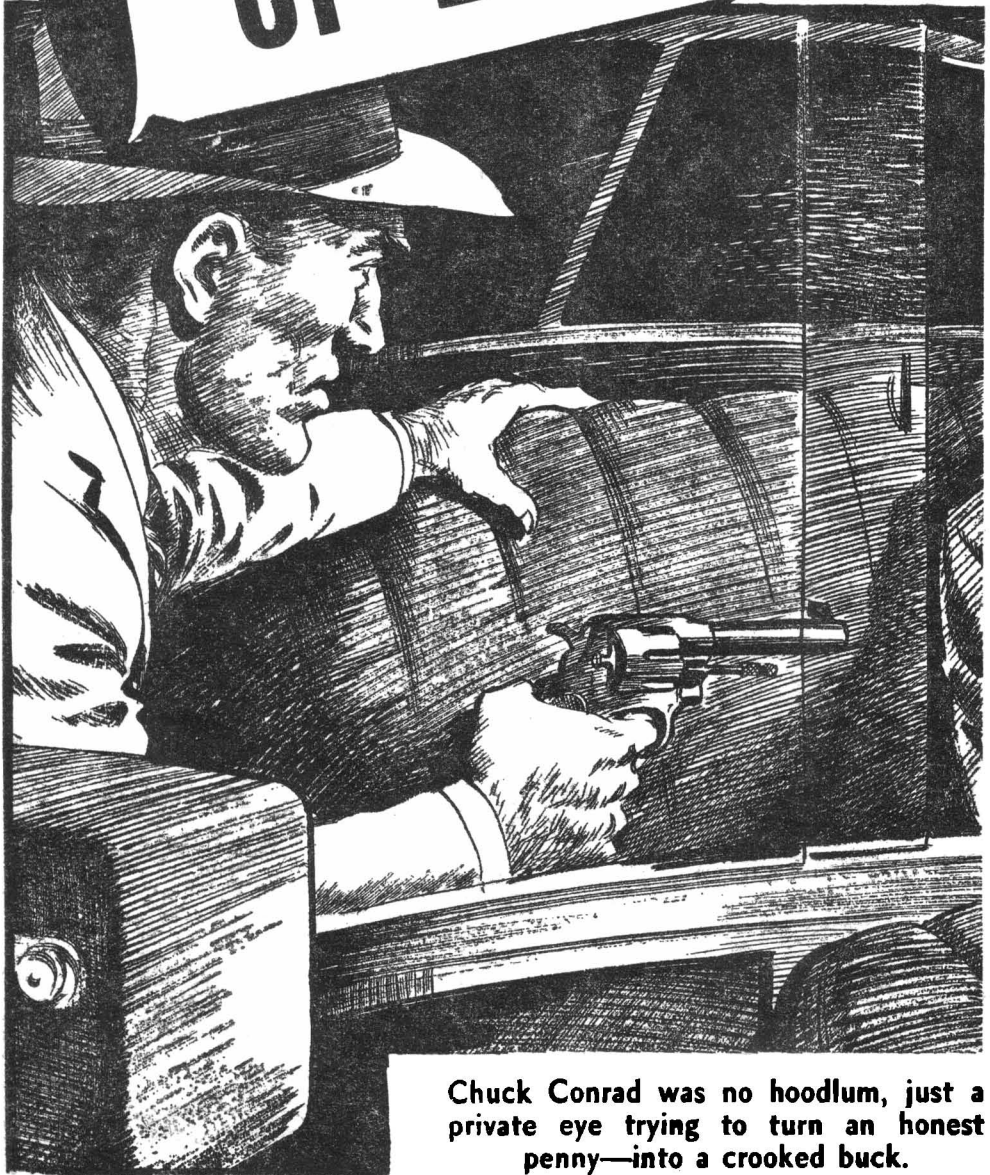
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# OVERDOSE OF LEAD



Chuck Conrad was no hoodlum, just a private eye trying to turn an honest penny—into a crooked buck.

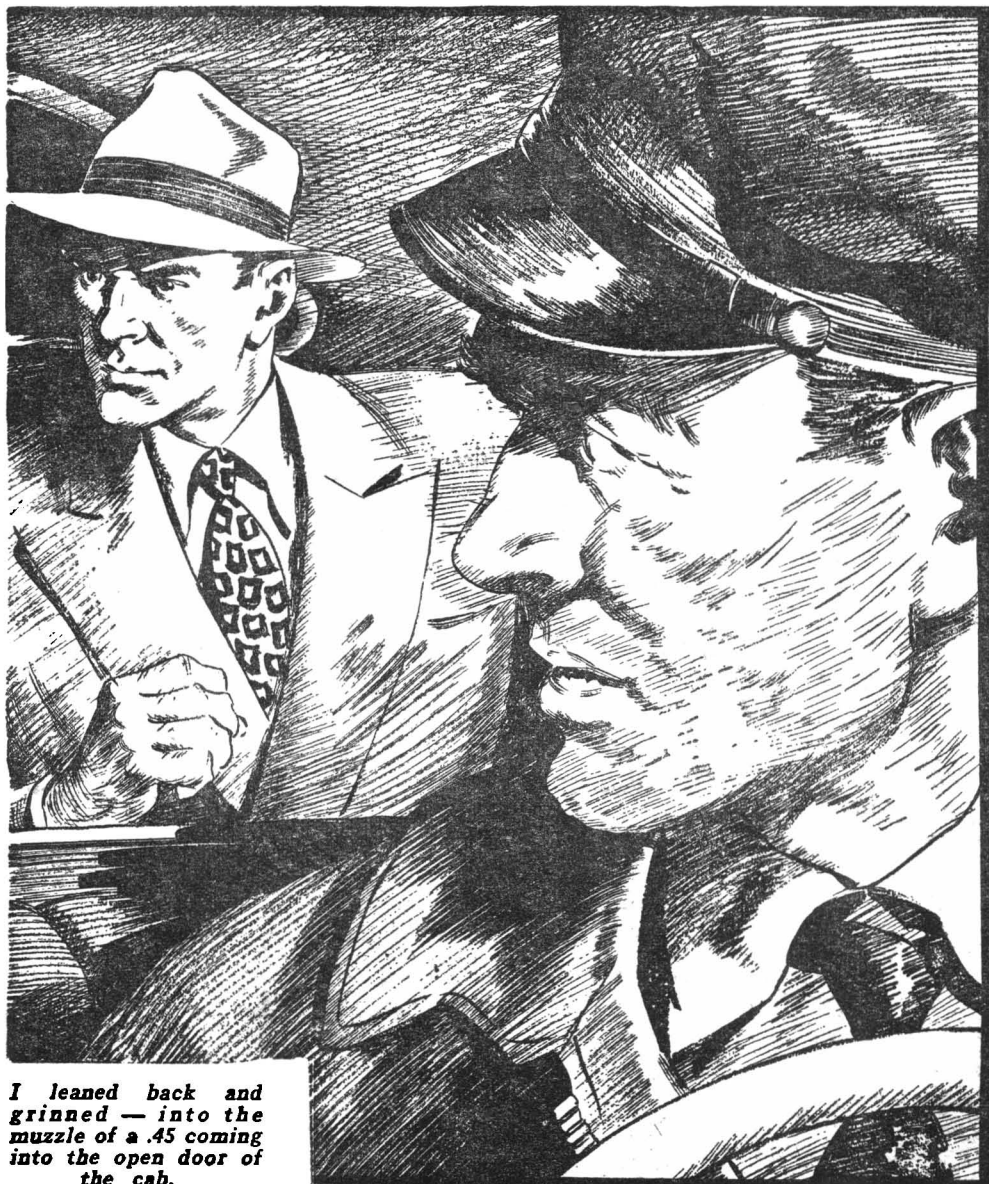
## By CURTIS CLUFF

**S**OME Broadway psychologist has said that a nightclub audience has two standard reactions towards entertainment: if it's bad, they complain about it; if it's good, they ignore it.

The hushed attention and the rapt expressions of enjoyment in the Club Raspail were sufficient proof that a gen-

eralization is little more than an interesting arrangement of words.

There was no illumination except the exit lights glowing dimly against the walls and a baby spot reaching down to outline the dark, exquisitely modeled face of the singer. Slim-hipped and full-breasted, she wore a sleek black evening



*I leaned back and grinned — into the muzzle of a .45 coming into the open door of the cab.*

gown cut in a manner to convince the most skeptical that nature hadn't needed any assistance from the dressmaker. She was singing the blues—real lowdown gutbucket—with none of the facial contortions, none of the twisting and squirming, that Swing Street has come to associate with putting over a song. She was backed by a small combo that stayed in there with her, real low, building her up. It was real Storyville stuff, the kind I had heard only on records. I hadn't expected her to be that good.

The song ended, the lights came up and the audience tried to tear the roof off. I did my share. She flashed a smile, bowed and walked off, came back and bowed again. There were frenzied cries of "More! More!" Jeanne Barre laughed with pleasure, shook her head, blew a kiss to the audience and went off. The customers subsided reluctantly as the lights dimmed again and couples moved out to the dance floor. I threw a saw-buck on the table, got up and elbowed my way back to the curtained doorway and went in.

I walked down the badly-lit hall past the squealing bedlam of the chorus dressing room, located the singer's door and knocked.

"Who is it?"

"Chuck Conrad."

**T**HERE was a rustle of silk, quick light footsteps and the door swung open. Jeanne Barre smiled, waved me in and shut the door. A mannish, tailored jacket was thrown over her bare shoulders. She couldn't have been more than five-four including the high heels. Her dark, almost ebony hair was done in a braid, outlining large, wide brown eyes and a level, straightforward stare, and she seemed to be taking an inventory of her own.

I pulled out the pale blue envelope. "I got this in the afternoon mail."

She put out her hand. "Should we be introduced formally? I'm Jeanne Barre."

I took her hand. "I heard you for the first time tonight. You're good."

"Thank you. I've got plenty to learn." She withdrew her hand before I grew onto it, sat down at the dressing table and indicated the chair beside it. She picked up a pack of cigarettes, offered it to me and lit her own. She stared at her reflection in the mirror, got up and locked the door, came back and turned the chair around and sat facing me.

"Tell me about Mike Glasgow."

I look at her quizzically. "It's been in the papers for a week."

"I want to hear you tell it. Your part of it, I mean."

"You didn't send that slightly hysterical *billet-doux* just to get me down here and listen to the story of my life—I hope."

She smiled sweetly and didn't answer.

I got up. "Well, the evening wasn't wasted. I enjoyed your singing."

She said: "Where are you going?"

"Look, honey," I said politely, "your word is no doubt a command in your own little saloon circle, but I don't happen to be a member of the club. If you're looking for a spicy tidbit of dinner party conversation, you'll have to get yourself another boy."

"What are you talking about?"

"A cheap way of attracting attention to yourself. 'Oh, by the way,'" I mimicked, "'Chuck Conrad came back to my dressing room the other night and just fell all over himself telling me all about it. And I always thought private detectives were so hush-hush about everything.'"

Jeanne Barre flushed. "I asked you to come and see me because I am in trouble. I didn't come to your office because I didn't care to be seen going there. My note was purposely obscure because I wanted a good chance to size you up

before absolutely committing myself.”

“Why didn’t you say that in the first place? What do you want done?”

She glared at me. “I need intelligent advice and assistance. I asked you to tell the story yourself because I wanted to see if you believed your own publicity. How else could I judge you?” She glared harder. “Thus far, I’m inclined to think you’re not very bright. You have certainly given one of the worst exhibitions of touchiness and utterly nasty dispositions it has been my unpleasant privilege to witness.”

I grinned and sat down. “You kind of explode on a short fuse yourself, honey.”

“Don’t call me ‘honey!’” Her eyes flashed and she got set to loose another blast. Then, like the sudden calm after a summer storm, she exhaled slowly and grinned at me. “I’m sorry. My approach was wrong and I apologize.”

“Do you still want me to recite?”

“Please!”

I shrugged. It was screwy, but in my business prospective clients are not noted for the sanity of their requests. I told her what there was to know.

Mike Glasgow had come blasting out of the Bible Belt half a dozen years ago. My path had crossed his a year back when I was trying to locate two hundred thousand dollars worth of Seymore Trust Bonds. There were plenty of witnesses to prove that the bonds had left the Seymore Trust Building in a gunny sack carried by one Mike Glasgow who happened to be carrying a tommy gun in the other hand. After several months of running down bum leads, I got a line on a fence who was supposed to have handled the bonds. I found him in a third-rate Albany hotel room. Unfortunately, he had died of a sudden overdose of lead a few hours before I got to him. The bonds were still missing.

Trailing Mike after that had been a long dull job.

When we finally closed in on the Bronx apartment, Sergeant Carter, a meathead if there ever was one, got the signals crossed and went in too soon. That gave the show away and Mike, his girl, Sadie Rhine, and Billy De Rento came out blasting. I was getting out of a car with Lieutenant Kondos when the sedan shifted into high and roared off.

I threw a lucky shot into a front tire, the sedan went out of control, knocked over a fireplug. Billy De Rento went partway through the windshield, nearly severing his head from his body. He died instantly although we didn’t know it at the moment. Sadie, who had been driving, climbed out and instead of raising her hands like a good girl, started shooting. Kondos cut her down while I was running along the opposite sidewalk behind a row of parked cars. It really was a helluva rat-race. Sirens wailing, the busted fireplug sending up a geyser and then Mike Glasgow flat on his belly in the street pumping a tommy gun.

Sergeant Carter and a patrolman named House came running out of the apartment building. That part was murder. Glasgow, firing neat patterned bursts, cut them to pieces. Definitely not a sight for a weak stomach. Then he proceeded systematically to ventilate the car behind which Kondos was hiding. But the fat lieutenant had a snug spot in the gutter and was waiting patiently for a decent shot when I came up behind Mike and wrapped my .38 around his skull. We found the bonds in the front seat of the car and the boys downtown were partly satisfied at the prospect of having at least one hood to burn—a cop-killer at that.

**T**HAT was a week ago.

Two days ago, Mike fooled them and pulled a Goering. He had kept the metal tip of a shoelace under his tongue for five days, and two nights

ago he had slashed his wrists after lights-out. So now the whole trio was in hood's heaven, probably pleased as punch because they had cheated the chair. Like the Fat Nasty from Nuremberg, it hadn't seemed to occur to them that no matter which way you die, you are just as dead.

Jeanne Barre listened without comment. Then she asked: "Was Mike Glasgow as smart and tough as the newspapers said?"

I pondered. "He was tough and unpredictable and not afraid to fight for what he wanted. So are most wild animals. But smart? Uh-uh. A smart crook gets at other people's money by getting to be president of the bank. Only a hood is dumb enough to pull off the same thing with nothing but a gun in his hand."

"But Mike *was* tough?"

"Mike was tough," I agreed.

"But you trailed him and you weren't afraid to tackle him," she said thoughtfully.

I grinned. "If you're looking for a hero, you're talking to the wrong guy. Sure, I was afraid. But it happens to be my racket. I collected my regular fee, I had the law on my side and I got a ten thousand dollar bonus for being lucky."

She was silent for a moment. "I can't pay you that much."

"What kind of a jam are you in?"

"Do you know anything about me? My so-called career, I mean?"

"Only what I read in the columns. In other words, nothing."

Jeanne chose her words with care. "A few years ago, I was singing at a little place in Greenwich Village. Jock Shields, whom I didn't know then, came in one night, heard me sing and called me over to his table. He told me that I had possibilities and with the right build-up I could be a success. To make it brief, he became my agent then and there. The week after our first meeting he began

the build-up. I moved into a small, expensive apartment, bought good clothes, and began to work with voice and dramatic coaches. For the past two years I've done summer stock. Two weeks ago I signed a seven year contract with Cyclops pictures. I'm leaving for Hollywood next week."

"So far, you sound like Cinderella."

"I have felt the same way." Her voice was somber.

"How did the clock strike midnight? Shields?"

She smiled bitterly. "I wish it was that simple. You see, everything cost money, far more than I was making. I assumed Jock was paying the bills, gambling he would get it back when I moved into the higher brackets. I worked like a dog, to justify his faith in me." She shuddered. "About this time last night, that door swung open and two hard-faced young men came in and stood on either side of it. Then, Jock entered, followed by a stranger. He was a dark, heavy man with the coldest eyes I've ever seen. Jock introduced my backer—Abe Sengler."

I winced.

Jeanne Barre nodded. "My bills have been paid by a racketeer whom I'd never even met until last night."

"I don't get it."

She shrugged. "It turns out that, during the early days when I was signing papers so fast my head was swimming, I signed an agreement with Abe Sengler granting him thirty percent of my gross income any time he chose to begin claiming it, in repayment for his loans. It was Sengler who first heard me sing at the Green Wheel and offered to put up the money if Jock thought I was good enough and would agree to handle me."

"You claim you didn't know anything about the contract until last night?"

"I *didn't* know anything about it. I

just told you, I signed so many things."

"The contract didn't just blow in the window. Somebody had to give it to you to sign."

"Jock gave it to me."

"Does he claim *he* didn't know what you were signing?"

"Of course he knew."

"But he never mentioned it from the day you signed it until last night?"

**S**HE bit her lip. "You're wondering how that can be. The answer is so simple it would be amusing if it didn't mean so much to me. Jock never mentioned it because *I* didn't. He saw no reason for upsetting me by bringing it up since I, myself, apparently avoided the subject."

I grinned. "It might wash."

"Every word of it is true," she said earnestly.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get me back that contract without publicity."

"What does Shields say?"

She smiled. "I feel a bit guilty, but I'm not sure I'm going to tell Jock that I've consulted you unless you think something can be done."

"Why?"

"He points out, quite rightly, that a breath of scandal can ruin a public performer. If it leaked out that I had accepted the backing of a notorious racketeer, it would finish me in Hollywood before I got started. Jock is afraid of Sengler and he wants to let things ride until he can hit on a really foolproof scheme for getting the contract back."

"He should have thought of all that when he got you to sign it."

She shrugged. "We won't cry over spilt milk. What are my chances of getting back the contract?"

"There is no record of anybody welshing on Abe Sengler and getting away with it," I said flatly.

"I don't like that word, Mr. Conrad," she said sharply. "I'm perfectly willing to buy back the contract."

"Have you got the money?"

"If I haven't, I don't see why I can't borrow it on my picture contract."

"Could be," I said slowly. "The lender could take out insurance against anything happening to you or the picture contract."

"Do you think we can swing it?"

I shook my head. "I don't see any reason for Abe to sell. You're just getting into the chips and he's got you over a barrel. He doesn't even have to stop at thirty percent of your income."

"What am I to do?"

I thought about Abe Sengler. He had practiced a One World doctrine of his own for almost two decades now and there was no question about who was sitting on top of that world.

Abe hadn't had any real trouble from young men with ambition since about ten years ago when he threw a little shindig since known among the initiated as the "Jersey Barbecue." At that time he suspected a palace revolution brewing among some of his strong boys and threw a party for them in a Jersey farmhouse. It was quite a brawl since Abe has quite a few high-spirited lads in his organization. When the suspects had passed out, along with several innocent members of the mob, Abe and a chosen few saturated the farmhouse with gasoline, lit it, and ran outside yelling, "Fire!"

It is said that it was quite an amusing sight to see the drunks staggering and crawling from the building, their clothing in flames. When two of the guilty crew dropped from a second-story window, Abe machine-gunned them personally. Several innocent members of the mob perished in the flames but, as Abe remarked in a not too subtle pun, they were only small fry anyway. Nobody was ever able to prove anything but



according to the story, Louis Blinchok, Abe's shadow, couldn't hold food on his stomach for three days and gave away a hundred and fifty dollar suit because the cleaners were unable to remove the odor of burnt flesh from the garments. Abe kept his clothes and wore them on suitable occasions as a reminder to the boys. They stayed reminded.

Jeanne Barre was saying: "—I'll pay your regular fee beginning now. If, after you've thought it over for a day or two, you can't find a way to help me, we can consider the matter closed. However, if you're successful in getting me the contract and without publicity, I'll pay you a thousand dollars." She paused and studied my grimace. "What's the matter? Isn't that enough?"

"It's too much," I growled. "Frankly, Sengler is holding all the cards. But for that kind of dough, Conrad is forced to take a hand."

She opened the purse on the dressing table, took out a folding checkbook and fountain pen. She made out the check, waved it in the air to dry and handed it to me. "For expenses."

I looked at it sadly. It was for five hundred dollars and it was drawn on a bank that undoubtedly had that much cash on hand. I was hooked. I sighed, folded the check and stuck it in my pocket.

We rose and Jeanne Barre smiled warmly and put out her hand. "What you're doing means everything in the world to me. Keep that money regardless of the outcome."

"You know as well as I do the chances aren't good."

She nodded. "If there is a way, I believe you'll find it." I started out. She stopped me at the door.

"What are you going to do first?"

I grinned at her. "Go home and sleep on it."

Her lips parted in a wide smile.

"I like you, Chuck Conrad."

I said I was glad she did and went out.

## CHAPTER TWO

### New at the Racket

**T**HE starter at the Raspail slammed the cab door and I settled back. I saw the redhead coming out and sat up. It was neither suspicion nor a professional reflex that caused me to turn and peer through the rear window. It was merely a healthy, normal interest in a well-turned calf.

The redhead climbed into another cab after pointing toward mine.

I waited three blocks, leaned forward and gave the driver my office address instead. Ten blocks later I got out, paid the driver and turned into Joe's instead of going up to my office.

I ordered a beer and settled down to wait. I waited about three minutes. The redhead came in, cast a quick look along the booths, stalled around until Joe got back to the bar and came toward me. She was twenty-five, a year either way, and on her it looked thirty. She wasn't bad-looking, but the crooked mouth said life hadn't been good to her. She was wearing a short dress, most of which was covered by a fur coat of one of the lesser rodents making like mink. The legs were nyloned and good but definitely. A funny-looking fur and velvet thing perched on her auburn hair and pretended to be a hat. Spike-heeled black open-toed shoes completed the ensemble, a scarlet toenail gleaming through the opening in each shoe. There were fingernails to match. She came over to my booth with a nervous arrogance I was sure she didn't feel.

"Hello, stranger," she said originally.

Joe spotted her at the same time, his face hardened and he started around the bar again. I shook my head and he

scowled and turned away. I said: "Sit down, if you want to."

"Thanks." She slid into the booth opposite me, flounced out her short skirt and threw open her coat. "I want a beer. I'll pay for it."

I grinned and signaled the order to Joe. I finished the beer I already had while we waited. Joe brought the mugs over, slammed them down and walked away angrily. Joe runs a respectable place, "where a fambly can come for a glassa beer, not no rendyvooz for tarts."

The redhead drank a little beer and seemed to gain courage although her eyes wandered nervously before coming to rest on my face.

"You *are* Chuck Conrad, aren't you?"

"What about it?"

"I've got something that'll interest you."

"You think that makes you unique?"

She flushed. "You got no right to talk to me that way."

"How am I supposed to talk to a strange redhead who tails me and goes into that 'Hello, stranger,' routine?"

"Oh, you saw me."

"Well, you do stand out," I admitted pointedly.

She snatched the coat angrily across the front of the low-cut dress and leaned across the table. "Look, Mr. Smart Guy, you're not in the driver's seat. Don't forget that." She sat back and eyed me smugly. "We're hip to the whole layout."

I drank some beer. "Who is 'We' and what whole layout are we hip to?"

"Don't play dumb."

I put a dollar on the table to pay for the beers and started to rise. She said: "What are you playing hard-to-get for? She hired you to contact us, didn't she?"

I sat down, took her hand, pulled it across to me and read the inscription on the slave bracelet—"Veronica from Doc."

"O. K., Veronica, spill it."

Veronica's smile would have been con-

fident if her eyes had been willing to help. "You can tell La Barre that we aren't going to be scared off even if she hires a dozen private dicks. Especially if one of them happens to be named Chuck Conrad."

I decided to take up one thing at a time. "Nobody's trying to scare you. It's just that the price is a little steep."

"Five grand? Say, who are you trying to kid?"

"How is Miss Barre going to know this will be the last touch?"

Veronica looked impatient. "I told you we'd hand it over to you."

"You told me?"

"Well, I told her. What's wrong with you?" She looked at me wisely. "But I forget—you're mixed up in it too, aren't you?"

"How do you figure that?"

She continued to look at me smugly. "Maybe we ought to raise the ante—now that we know she fingered Mike Glasgow."

This was news of great interest to me. I was sure it would also be interesting to my great and good friend Barney Aarons, the cabby who had actually pointed out the Bronx hideaway to me and received fifty of my longest and greenest for so doing. I said: "You're sure you can prove that?"

She grinned. "We can prove it."

"That changes things," I said slowly. I looked at her. "You're new at this racket, aren't you?"

"Look, mister, we won't go into the story of my life. All you've got to do is persuade Barre to cough up five thousand bucks. That's not much against a whole career."

I hazarded a guess. "You're an amateur. It must be the boyfriend, probably an amateur, too. Why doesn't he do his own dirty work?"

The look in her eyes got confused and she softened up a little.

"Look, Mr. Conrad, I've heard of you before and I think you're a right guy. O.K., so we're amateurs. I don't like this kind of business and neither does my—friend. We need a stake to get out of town, as far from the Big Apple as we can get. We're going to try to start over again. For five G's Miss Barre's worries are over. We'll turn the proof over to you, honest. We need that money."

"I've heard when some people want a stake bad enough they go to work and earn it legitimately. Crazy people, probably. Doc wouldn't be stupid like that."

Loyalty flared up and mixed with hatred of me in her eyes. She didn't even bother to deny the name on the slave bracelet. "He—his health isn't so hot. We got to get away to a more invigorating climate."

I had seen enough of Veronica to know all about Doc's health. Girls like Veronica always pick guys like Doc. If it isn't some useless half-man like Doc, it's a stray cat to feed and pet and pamper. The Veronicas of this world have to have somebody to feel important to and they'll go through hell for that feeling. There is nothing you can do about it.

I said: "I don't suppose you have this high-priced proof with you?"

"Have you got five grand with you?"

I allowed as how I hadn't.

"How would it be if I called you tomorrow and told you where to come?"

"Call me between ten and eleven."

She nodded, gathered up her purse and slid out of the booth. I rose and she put out her hand hesitantly. I took it. She said embarrassedly: "You're not as bad as you try to make out, Conrad. See you tomorrow."

I nodded. "Tomorrow." She turned and hurried out on slender high heels. The legs were just as good from the rear.

The rest of the customers had departed and Joe was polishing glasses industriously. "Sorry I almost butted in

on ya, Chuck. I didn't know it was a business appointment."

I said that was O.K.

He shook his head disgustedly. "Some of these dames."

I said: "You took the words out of my mouth."

**I** DECIDED I could save time by taking the subway home. I went down the stairway, deposited my nickel in the turnstile and joined the after-midnight flow toward the platform. I pushed through to the edge of the platform and stood next to a lean priest talking to a short, black-bearded rabbi. I jammed my hands down in my pockets and wondered what Veronica and her boyfriend thought they had on Jeanne Barre. Putting the finger on Mike Glasgow didn't make sense, but I was sure Veronica thought she had something. And Jeanne Barre had wanted to talk about Mike Glasgow. The rumbling approach of the train grew louder and then it roared out of the curve in the tunnel like a confused, angry beast, too long confined.

I started to step back and suddenly a fist or an elbow jammed into the small of my back and I fell forward, danced on the edge of the platform and my foot slipped. It was all over in a second. One moment I was falling out into space, and the next, strong hands were grasping me and pulling me back. I fell on my face, gripped the edge of the platform and hands rolled me out of harm's way. The train swept past and the acrid smell of steel gripping steel combatted the stale air. I lay facing the tracks, the side of the car not a foot from my nose.

I rolled over on my back. The little rabbi released his grip on my leg and straightened. The thin priest who had helped to drag me back was still kneeling, staring speculatively down into my eyes.

I blinked at him and his mouth creased in a spare, relieved smile.

I said: "Father, isn't this pushing things a little too far, even to save a soul?"

His smile was broader but still not amused as he shook his head at me and helped me to my feet. The bearded little rabbi was worried.

"Did you—were you—?"

"Did you see who it was?"

Both men shook their heads. I turned and looked over the crowd. Most of them had ignored the incident and were hurrying to get seats in the cars. About a dozen lingered in a semicircle around the three of us, like rhesus monkeys, their faces avid, mischievous, empty of purpose. A squat slattern sidled forward.

"I seen it all. It was a big black fellow pushed you. He was wearing a brown suit and he ran out that way." She pointed back up the stairway.

I said: "Maybe I can catch him." I thanked her and the priest and the rabbi and hurried toward the stairway. All the woman had told me was that she didn't like Negroes. Since she had claimed to see a big black man in a brown suit, it was fairly certain that if I ever caught up with whoever it was, he would turn out to be a little green man in a yellow suit. I had no desire to sit in a subway car as exhibit A for the next ten minutes so I hailed a taxi and went home. I didn't see any big black man.

I sat around the office the next morning killing time and waiting for the telephone call from Veronica. I had just finished one of the trade journals of my profession, less formally known as a tabloid newspaper, when Suzy Porter, my secretary, conscience and sometime financier came back to my office without knocking—as usual. Suzy is a leggy blonde in the middle twenties who would have been extremely beautiful if her face hadn't worn a perpetual expression

of skepticism mixed with small-girl impudence. She sat on the corner of my desk and examined her nails with interest.

"Chuck, do you know a tall, good-looking man with dark, wavy hair graying at the temples? He also wears clothes wonderfully well."

"Sure. Walter Pidgeon. I don't exactly know him, though."

She made a face at me. "He does look something like Pidgeon at that," she said dreamily. "He has a friendly, sweet smile and a quiet gentlemanly manner." She threw me a sidelong look as if to say: "Not like some people I know."

"Who is this paragon, some waiter you saw in a restaurant?"

"He says his name is Jock Shields."

"Says?"

"Uh-huh. He's outside."

I twisted the newspaper into a tight roll and swung at her. "Send him in, you pixie. We can play guessing games after hours."

She slid off the desk and escaped from the office without ruffling a hair. *Charles Conrad—Investigations* is not the most sedate organization in the world.

Shields came in and Suzy's description fitted. Over six feet, tanned face, gray eyes, expensively dressed and a casual, assured manner. I said: "Sit down, Shields. What's on your mind?"

He smiled faintly at my boorish informality, sat, and offered me a hampered silver cigarette case.

"Apparently I just missed you in Miss Barre's dressing room last night. She tells me you're going to do some work for her."

"What about it?"

"Have you done anything yet?"

"I'm working on it."

He looked with tolerant amusement at the stack of newspapers on my desk. "Exactly what have you accomplished thus far?"

"I only took the case last night. It's too early for results."

He raised his eyebrows. "I want you to drop it."

"You kidding?"

He eyed me unsmilingly. "No, and I don't expect you to kid Miss Barre, either. You and I both know that there is nothing you can do. I'm not trying to run down your ability, don't mistake me. You've got a reputation for getting things done and you're tough. But this thing, if it's to be done at all, will have to be done carefully and with finesse. You're not exactly famous for your subtlety."

"You trying to say I don't know my job?"

Shields smiled deprecatingly. "Since you have a reputation for honesty, I assume you have no ulterior motive in taking the job. But the very fact that you were willing to take it shows you don't fully understand the complexities of the situation."

"You are leaving yourself wide open."

"What do you mean by that?"

**I** READ the ceiling. "I know a little something about you, too. Let me see. Jock Shields: been around about fifteen years, handled everything from a Major Bowes unit to a medium-to-fair nightclub. Never in the heavy money. The first time he gets his hands on a blue chip, he practically guarantees he won't cash in by tying her up to Abe Sengler. Now, who doesn't understand the complexities of what situation?"

Shields flushed. "I'm not one of the so-called top agents because I've never gotten the breaks. Jeanne Barre was my first big break and I've done a swell job handling her."

"All except for Abe Sengler," I amended. "With her ability the rest of it was easy. How did Sengler cut in, anyway?"

"I had no choice. It was Sengler's idea."

"How come? You a pal of his?"

"Certainly not. I simply went to the Green Wheel to listen to a new singer. Sengler was there. I was pointed out to him by the manager, a friend of mine. Sengler called me over to his table and asked me what I thought of her. I said she was great, naturally. Sengler asked me how I'd like to manage her with an unlimited expense account to put her over. He wanted to stay out of the picture himself and do it as an investment. I knew what he was, of course, but my enthusiasm ran away with me. I agreed to do it."

I shook my head sadly. "Not bright, chum."

"If you will remember," Shields said acidly, "that was back in the early days of the war when congressmen, shopkeepers, millionaires and racketeers were elbowing each other at the public trough. It didn't seem such a terrible thing at the time for an agent to borrow money from a racketeer to put over a girl singer."

"A smart agent would have thought differently about that contract."

"I made a mistake," he said coldly. "I'll correct it my own way."

"You've had a lot of time to work on it."

Shields restrained himself with difficulty. "Will you drop the case?"

"Do you know Veronica?" I asked suddenly.

"Veronica who?"

"Just Veronica. I don't know the rest."

He smiled superciliously. "I'm afraid that doesn't mean much to me."

"What about Mike Glasgow?"

Shields peered at me through lowered lids, ironically. "Oh, come now, we're not going to rehash the exploits of the famous Chuck Conrad?"

I looked at him with distaste. I picked up the telephone book, found Jeanne Barre's number, dialed and told the maid I wanted to speak to Miss Barre. When she answered I said: "Shields tells me he has advised against my handling the case. I want to know whether you've changed your mind."

There was a pause. "Have you been working on it?"

"Some."

"Do you think you've made progress?"

"Some."

"Is Jock there now?"

"Sitting across the desk from me."

"Let me speak to him."

I handed Shields the phone, got up and walked out to Suzy's office and shut the connecting door. Suzy looked up at the expression on my face, made a clucking sound and went on with her typing.

Shields opened the door and beckoned. His face was flushed and he was very irked in a restrained sort of way. The receiver was still off the hook.

"She wants to talk to you again."

I sat down and picked up the phone. "Have you made up your mind?"

"Chuck, I want you to continue just as we agreed. I'm sorry Jock came to see you without telling me. I hope you're not angry."

I said: "I'm willing to go along with it if I can handle it without any back-seat driving from either of you. I'm not

sure the job can be done, but I think I can promise that you won't receive unfavorable publicity from any effort of mine." I hoped I was telling the truth.

She laughed. "I don't believe you like my agent."

I grinned into the phone. "That's entirely possible."

"Your arrangement sounds all right to me."

"There's one other stipulation. If we win, we stick to last night's financial arrangement. If we don't, I'll mail your check back to you."

"That's not fair to you."

"It's the way I want it."

"Just as you say. When will I hear from you?"

"In a couple of days. Sooner, if anything breaks." I hung up and turned to Shields. "That O.K. with you?"

He stood up and smiled Good Loser's Smile Number Three. "There is nothing I can do. I hope, for the sake of everybody concerned, that you know what you're doing."

"Thanks, pal, you have no idea how I hope so, too."

Shields bowed like a minor State Department official and left. I looked at my watch. Eleven-thirty and Veronica hadn't phoned. I put on my hat and told Suzy to phone Missing Persons if I wasn't back by five o'clock. Suzy made a face and promised she would.

## CHAPTER THREE

## Reasonable Blackmail

**A**BE SENGLER looked shorter than his five-feet-ten because of his fat, squat bulk. No matter how hard the tailors strived, he still looked like Sidney Greenstreet trying to wear Fred Astaire's clothes. His face was round, his thick lips parted in a fixed half-smile and tiny wrinkles formed in the corners of his eyes. A careless glance might indicate that this was a carefree, genial man. A closer inspection of the eyes would prove that a mistake had been made. In spite of their openness, they held a bright, curious intentness. At the moment, they seemed to be wondering how long I could hold out after the lighted end of a cigar had been applied to the bottoms of my bare feet. Silence hung heavy in the soundproof inner office. I hadn't been invited to sit down. Abe lolled expressionlessly behind the massive semicircular desk. I shifted my weight to the other foot and repeated patiently: "You own a piece of Jeanne Barre."

Not a muscle moved in the heavy face. "She tell you that?"

I nodded.

He continued to study me. "What else did she tell you?"

"That she hadn't known you were backing her, that she doesn't want your backing and that she's willing to buy you out."

"For how much?"

"How much does she owe you?" I countered.

Abe's eyes flicked casually over at the ivory and umber safe in the corner and away again. "In round figures, about twenty-four grand."

I didn't bat an eye. "How much do you want for it?"

He smiled a catfish smile. "Say a

hundred and fifty grand—cold cash?"

"Wouldn't you rather have the Holland Tunnel?"

"She's gonna make a lot more than that."

"And you're going to hold her up for most of it."

Abe shrugged. "With me it's an investment. She's where my dough put her."

"She was a green kid. She didn't know what she was getting into."

Abe's body shook with suppressed laughter. "So she was just a green kid. And now she's got ripe. Did she say she couldn't read five years ago? Did she say that if it hadn't been for my dough she wouldn't still be in that dump where I picked her up?"

"She just says she didn't know what she was doing."

"So she says. Listen, she's got nothing to worry about. I'm not gonna bother her. She's just an investment to me. I guess," he added thoughtfully, "I better have a couple of boys keep an eye on my investment."

"Your investment won't be worth a plugged nickel if her name ever gets linked with yours."

Abe sighed. "Listen, Barre is a lucky girl. She got a break—on my dough. She ain't taking any more chances than she has been all along. Forget it and get down to cases. What's the angle you want to sell me?"

I blinked and stared at him. He was waiting patiently. I said: "What do you think I've been talking about?"

His smile began to harden around the edges. "What do you want?"

I wondered if my brain was going back on me. "I want that contract at a reasonable price."

Abe's smile disappeared. He flipped the intercom switch. "Louis!" He reached under the desk and pressed the buzzer unlocking the connecting door. He held it down until Louis Blinchok pushed

hurriedly in. Big, blank-faced, long sideburns and a jimmy-jaw.

"Want me, Boss?"

"The shamus is ready to go now." Abe looked at me steadily. "I don't like wise guys and I don't like threats." He grinned without amusement. "I see by the papers they give you a medal in the army for being tough. Maybe you didn't know lotsa my boys got medals for that very same thing in the same army. I'm gonna let you off this time because I think you're just dumb. Don't try it again." He looked at Blinchok. "If this punk comes around again, throw him out on his tail. O.K., shamus, on your way."

My jaw had been hanging down to here all through Abe's speech. I hadn't made any threats and I didn't know what caused the outburst. I started to speak but Abe waved a hand in brief dismissal. I got a grip on myself, remembering I wasn't going to collect a thousand dollars bonus for blowing my top, and turned meekly away. I went through the door followed by Louis.

We crossed the two rooms that had been thrown together as an outer office. Four girls pounded away at their mills and sharp-eyed men with hungry faces and padded shoulders talked into telephones out of the corners of their mouths. A teletype in the corner coughed spasmodically and went into action and a couple of high-priority candidates for a room with a barred view of the Hudson shuffled over to read it.

We passed through another buzzer-controlled door to the ante-rooms. I had noticed these heavy metal doors painted to simulate wood on the way in. Without the assistance of the buzzer system, it would be about as easy to reach Abe's private office as it would be to reach the gold at Fort Knox. I crossed the anterooms, where half a dozens assorted hoodlums were playing gin rummy, with Louis smirking at my

shoulder. I went out into the corridor and Louis slammed the door with finality behind me.

Conrad had definitely lost a round.

I BOUGHT a tabloid in the lobby and went out on the dirty street. Abe's Aladdin Hotel was not situated in the most exclusive section of New York. I decided I was at least as hungry as I was sore and turned into a fly-blown cafe. I ordered spam and eggs on the theory that it was one order a joint like this couldn't ruin.

I hunched on the stool and stared glumly at my reflection in the mirror. Everything I had touched so far had soured. Veronica had let me down, I had succeeded in making Shields sore, which wasn't my fault, of course, and now Abe Sengler was ready and willing to measure me for a concrete kimono.

I pulled out the tab and laid it beside the spam and eggs and began to eat. The picture spread across the bottom half of the front page was interesting. A woman lying face down on the grass, fully clothed and wearing a coat. The photographer, with his usual thoughtfulness, had arranged the skirt slightly above the backs of her knees. Her face was turned away from the camera. A funny little fur thing that could have been a hat lay a short distance away. The caption said: *Beauteous Victim Of Central Park Murder Fiend*. I hated to turn to page three.

The victim had been identified by a member of a Waiter's Local as one Veronica Lewis who had worked for a now-defunct nightclub known as the Green Wheel, several years ago. She had been a cigarette girl and part-time roving photographer taking pictures of nightclub patrons. The waiter said he hadn't seen her for five years prior to this morning and didn't know anything about her. No relatives had come for-



ward to claim the body and there was no known motive for the murder. The "fiend" part of the story related to the fact that her wrists and face were bruised and the tips of three fingers were blistered around the nails, probably by lighted matches. She had been shot once, through the heart. Police expected an early arrest in the case.

I tried to finish eating but my heart just wasn't in it. In a peculiar sort of way, I had liked Veronica. I thought about calling Lieutenant Kondos to see if there were any further developments and decided that could wait until I had called on my pal, Rudy Frieden.

The offices of Rudolf Frieden, Incorporated take up two whole floors of a good-sized office building, which is not surprising since Rudy handles more than his share of the top cream in the entertainment field. There were perhaps half a dozen people who could get past the battery of secretaries and walk into his office unannounced. I happened to be one of them.

He was in a characteristic position, his plump body twisted in the swivel chair, a fat, expensively tailored knee resting against the edge of the desk, foot dangling. His right arm was twisted around behind his head, right hand grasping left ear. The other hand dawdled a cigarette in a long holder in the ash tray. He was staring at it abstractedly.

Seated across from him was a colored, chubby character whom I recognized. He was Lonnie Swift, for my money the best trumpet player in the business, always excepting Satch'mouf Louis, himself. Lonnie saw me first, grinned widely and raised his hands with exaggerated fright.

"Look out! Heah come dat lawman!"

Rudy swivelled around and drawled: "Hi, Chuck. Come on in."

I said: "I don't want to break up a

conference. I just want to get a little information."

Lonnie started to get up. "I got to be going. See you gates later."

I said: "Stick around, Lonnie. Maybe you can help." I turned back to Rudy. "What's your opinion of Jeanne Barre?"

Rudy looked at me questioningly. "You mean professionally or otherwise?"

"Is there any 'otherwise'?"

Rudy shook his head. "Not that I know of. I've heard her sing. I think she's good." He turned to Lonnie for confirmation.

Lonnie grinned. "She's solid, man. She's right in there. First white girl I ever heard could sing real New Orleans. She's got it real good."

I turned to Rudy. "Would you like to handle her?"

He shrugged. "If she were free. Jock Shields is handling her, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"She thinking about making a change?"

"When Shields took her on, he was dumb enough to borrow promotion money from a bad actor. The backer is getting ready to take his cut and more as soon as she gets on her feet in Hollywood." I eyed Rudy. "I don't like Shields, personally. I was just wondering if there was any way I could bust the contract, throw Shields to the backer and get Barre a new deal all around."

"That's not nice," Rudy said mildly. "Who's the backer?"

"Abe Sengler."

Lonnie got to his feet. "Well, I got to be going. Nice to see you gents."

I said: "What's the matter?"

Lonnie grinned but his chocolate complexion had turned several shades lighter. "You're getting on a subject where I don't know nothing and I don't want to know nothing. We been seeing more

and more of Abe's ugly boys up in Harlem the past few years and it's not good." He shook his head. "There's a real bad man with a mean eye and I got my share of troubles already. I'll be shovin' along. Thanks for the info, Rudy." Rudy nodded slowly and Lonnie grinned at me. "Come up to Harlem and see us sometime, lawman, and we'll play you some real purty music."

I grinned and nodded. "I'll do that, Lonnie." He went out and I turned back to Rudy. "I didn't know Abe had spread out that far."

Rudy shrugged.

"If I could swing it, would you handle Jeanne Barre?"

He shook his head. "I don't go for throwing Shields to Sengler's wolves. If he got himself or his client mixed up with Sengler, he's dumber than I thought but there's no law against being dumb. Anyway, it may work out all right. Jeanne Barre is not the first kid to get a little backing from somebody she'd rather not mention. Don't misunderstand me," Rudy went on slowly, "I've got no reason to be afraid of people like Sengler. I stay clear of them and they let me alone. Some of them, heaven help me, even call themselves my friends. But chiseling another agent's talent is a different proposition. Even if I wanted to go against what ethics we've managed to build up in this racket, I'd be crazy to pull a stunt like that. It would make me fair game for everybody, no holds barred. All the agents in the business would move in on me like a school of sharks."

I laughed. "My money would be on you."

Rudy shrugged.

I said: "Can you think of any way I can get at Sengler's contract?"

Rudy looked shocked. "He's actually got her name on a contract?"

"So she says."

He shook his head. "There's nothing she can do without hurting herself except try to buy the contract back. And under the circumstances, I doubt if Sengler would sell."

I got up. "He won't."

"You've talked to him?"

"I saw him this morning."

"What did he say?"

"He threw me out."

Rudy grinned and examined me carefully. "No bruises showing. He must have chloroformed you first."

"Didn't you know?" I asked gravely. "Conrad doesn't go in for rough stuff any more. I'm handling this one with subtlety and finesse."

His expression was openly doubting and worried. "For Pete's sake, Chuck, don't get into any arguments with Sengler's gunsels. There are too many dark alleys in this town."

"Thanks for the advice."

"And let me know if there's anything I can do."

I nodded and opened the door.

"You don't have to rush off, do you, Chuck?"

"I've got to hurry back to my office," I snarled, "and write 'I will only drink milk and never go out after dark,' a thousand times before supper." I closed the door on his laughter.

**S**UZY was remaking her lips and preparing to depart for the day when I got back. I said: "Anything new?"

She peered up at me over her compact. "I might as well be Robinson Crusoe. There hasn't been a human being in this office since you left except the mailman."

"Any calls?"

"Some strange man calls up on the hour every hour and wants to know if you've come in yet."

"Shields?"

She leered at me. "I'd know his voice."

I snorted and went back to my office, threw myself in the chair and stared morosely out the window.

Suzy came to the door tugging at a bit of feather and felt she called a hat. "Are you going to stay a while?"

I nodded. "Go on home. I'm going to stick around and practice humility."

"Anything wrong?" She asked concernedly.

I shook my head. "I was joking. I've got a problem to worry around."

"Can Suzy help?"

"No. It just needs thinking out. I'm too lazy to enjoy thinking."

She smiled down at me. "You do seem to have concentrated more on strong-arm stuff lately."

"This one is going to be different," I swore. "If there's going to be any mayhem, the other guy will have to do it—"

The telephone rang. I picked up the receiver and looked at my watch. Five o'clock on the nose.

"Conrad?"

"Yeah."

Suzy looked at me inquiringly. I shook my head and waved her out the door. She tiptoed out closing the door behind her. The voice said: "You read the papers today?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"You read about a girl?"

I said: "Yeah, Doc, it was too bad. I liked Veronica."

There was a pause and the voice choked: "Would you know anything about what happened, Conrad?"

"I would not. I was going to play ball. Didn't she tell you?"

"What's that?"

"Didn't you talk to her after I saw her last night?"

Doc hesitated, then blurted out: "She called from a pay station and told me you seemed like a right guy and that

everything was fixed. That was the last I knew until I seen the papers."

"Look, Doc, I'll make a deal with you. You give me what you've got and I'll help you try to run down her killer."

I knew what would happen next. There would be a pause and then Doc would realize he couldn't be sure I hadn't killed her. He would then think about the money I might still pay for his "proof." Fear would grapple with cupidity and cupidity would win out.

Right on schedule, the words whined out: "Look, Conrad, I'm down to my last buck and I've got to get out of town and rest up a while. If you're ready to pay the five G's for what I've got, maybe we can make a deal. Later, after I get back on my feet, we can get together on running down the rat who killed Veronica."

I kept my voice steady and tried not to think what I was thinking. "Where do I meet you?"

"You'll pay? You got the money?"

"What do you think I'm talking about? Stop stalling."

Doc paused fearfully. This might be his last chance to jump town safely. "You know where Byrne Street is?"

"I can find it. What's the address?"

"217, on the right hand side on the second floor."

"I'll be there in half an hour," I said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Death Ride

**B**YRNE Street was a dead end in an advanced stage of decay. I paid off the cab driver on the corner and walked the half block to 217. It turned out to be a tired four-family frame dwelling of two stories next to a vacant lot. The hallway smelled of fried food and human beings, reminders that when you sink below a certain level you

have neither the interest nor the cash for such frivolities as cleanliness and varied diets. I climbed the narrow stairway, turned right and read the soiled pasteboard tacked to the doorframe, "Mr. and Mrs. James Klavin." The door cracked open and an eye peered at me through the opening. Down at waist level, a smaller, black eye of a Colt barrel aimed at my belt buckle.

I said: "Doc?"

The door opened wide enough for me to come in. Doc Klavin shut the door and leaned his back against it, the gun still pointing at me. Medium height, slender, sandy hair, pale blue eyes. He looked soft but not unhealthy. However, the slack mouth and weak chin indicated that the very thought of steady work would be enough to upset Doc's digestion permanently.

There was only one bulb working in the overhead light and Doc had supplemented it by turning on the light in the bathroom and leaving the door open. The furniture was ratty and cheap. A suitcase was open and packed on one end of the sofa. A heap of feminine clothing was piled on the other end. Doc wasn't overlooking any bets. I wondered how much he could get for all that remained of Veronica's worldly goods. I said: "Put away the rod, Doc. I've seen one before."

Doc spoke hoarsely. "Don't think I won't use it, Mack. Don't think I won't."

I kept my hands in sight and shrugged. "O.K., so you'll use it." I crossed, opened the door to the living room closet and closed it. I poked my head in the kitchen, crossed the living room again, went through the bathroom and turned on the light in the bedroom. I peered under the bed, opened the closet door. Doc followed me around suspiciously.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I just want to know what I'm up against." I turned off the light and walked back to the living room. "All right, Doc, what have you got to sell?"

"Let's see the color of your dough."

"Look, Junior, if you've got something that's worth five grand, you'll get your dough. We're supposed to be leveling with each other, remember? I didn't have to come in nice and easy and let you throw a gun down on me. There were other ways to play it."

He eyed me calculatingly. "I can take it away from you if I have to."

I sneered at him. "You're cutting yourself in on a big game, Doc. Try to like you know the rules. If you've got something, we'll pay for it. If you're running a bluff I'm going to let you down easy, not because I like you, but because I think maybe Veronica would have liked to see you get a break. Things could happen to you."

"You talk tough for a guy on the wrong end of a gun."

"There are other guns in New York, Doc. Guns with long barrels. Smart guns that can reach into whatever hole you try to crawl. Get some sense."

Slowly he lowered the gun to his side. "I'm not running a bluff." He put his free hand inside his shirt and took out an envelope. He kept his eyes on me, opened the flap and slid out two negatives and two prints. He put the negatives and one of the prints back, tossed the other one to me and the gun came up again. He grinned. "Prints, and negatives to back 'em up. Is that worth five grand or ain't it?"

I looked at the picture. The development was poor and the faces were hard to distinguish. Two figures sitting at a table. I went toward the brighter light in the bathroom and held the postcard-size print up to the light. Doc remained in the center of the living room, grinning sardonically and holding the gun

on me. I barely registered the sharp crash and tinkling of broken glass.

I jerked my head around and got a momentary glimpse of Doc staring blankly at the short length of pipe at his feet. His face hardened and he sidled toward the living room window as I made a mad scrambling dive for the iron bathtub and tried to claw my way through the bottom of it. All hell broke loose as the explosion tore at my ear drums, furniture dissolved into kindling and chunks of plaster rained down on me.

I stayed down until I was sure the rafters weren't going to give, climbed out of the bathtub and went into what was left of the living room with my ears still ringing. Plaster dust and bits of cotton padding whirled and eddied about the room. The overhead bulb had burst and I made my way through the debris by the light from the bathroom glowing dimly through the settling dust-cloud. Plaster was ripped out of the walls and ceiling and the wooden laths stood out like torn and twisted ribs. The cheap furniture would never be used for anything but firewood.

Doc lay in a corner against the wall. The blast had caught him from behind and there was an ugly smear where his body had smashed into the wall. His health would never bother him again. Doc had gone where Veronica would be waiting to take care of him. I swallowed the rising nausea and rolled him over gingerly. The envelope was still inside his shirt, the negatives and print crumpled but undamaged. I wiped the blood off on his trouser leg and pocketed the envelope.

By propping my foot against the wall and yanking on the knob, I managed to get the front door open in spite of the buckled frame. The door across the hall hadn't opened and there was no name in the slot. On the first floor both doors

were cracked open and many eyes were glued to the cracks. A bent old fellow of seventy stood trembling in the hallway.

"What was it?" he quavered.

"Looks like a gas explosion," I said. "I was just passing by. There's a fellow up there badly hurt. You better call the ambulance."

He wavered uncertainly, more questions written on his old face.

I said: "Better hop to it, Pop, he may be dying. I'm going out to get the cop on the beat."

He turned away, pushed open the door, bowling aside two women and a covey of kids in the process. "Hurry, Mary! The hospital! Mr. Klavin is dying from a gas explosion!"

I hurried out of the building. I was just as glad he hadn't suggested calling the cops at the same time he called the hospital. I had a couple of people to see before I was ready to talk to the police.

**I** WALKED half a mile before I hailed a passing taxi and headed for the office. I had plenty of time in the cab to examine the photographs. The negatives were practically identical and there was a print of each one. The pictures were the sort taken by a roving nightclub photographer, much beloved by tourists. The two people in the picture were not tourists and they were not aware that a picture was being taken. Jeanne Barre, younger and with a different hair-do, sat at a nightclub table, her hand resting on her companion's arm, talking earnestly to him. Her companion was the late unlamented Mike Glasgow.

I paid off the driver in front of the building and then changed my mind about going up to the office. I walked down the side street to the taxi stand and spotted the mighty mite, Barney

Aarons, in the center of the knot of drivers on the sidewalk. He was forty-two and looked any age at all. A dark, sallow little man with a face that could be gone over with a wire brush and still look like it needed washing. He was smart and tough as a steel trap and made a career of knocking chips off shoulders. When he saw me he broke off his lecture and demanded proprietarily: "Where we going, Chuck?"

"Can you tear yourself away?"

"Ahhh!" He waved a hand, dismissing the rabble. He threw open the door of his cab, slammed it shut after me and climbed into the driver's seat. This door-opening courtesy always surprised me and reminded me that I stood in Barney's good graces. I said: "Beekman Place. You know where Jeanne Barre's apartment is?"

Barney nodded and did a U-turn at the next intersection to the loudly vocal protests of other drivers.

The early evening traffic was bad and Barney crawled along, muttering under his breath. We were off the beat and had to stop at the first traffic light. Barney crawled another block, jumped the light on the caution signal and crawled again.

It happened at the third light.

We were behind a Model-A who couldn't make up his mind whether to stop or go when the light flashed red

and made up his mind for him. Barney slammed on the brakes, yanked on the handbrake, and described the Model-A driver's ancestors in lurid detail. We skidded to a stop and nuzzled the rear bumper ahead. Barney stuck his head out the window and began making driving suggestions interspersed with comments on the possibility of incest in the offending driver's family. I leaned back and grinned—into the muzzle of a .45 coming into the open door of the cab. I was seated on the outside behind Barney. The door on my side opened and a second man told me to move my damn knees. I moved them.

I had never seen either one of them before. Both were well-dressed and well-tanned. Whether the latter was from the sun or the barbershop lamp, I didn't know. It didn't seem to be very important. The one with the gun was thin and high-cheeked and sat away from me on the corner of the seat. A saturnine face with deep-set, Indian-black eyes, he kept the .45 fanning in a little arc between me and Barney. The chunky one in the flannel suit pulled down the jump seat behind Barney and twisted around to watch him. The light changed and the cab moved forward. I looked at Barney's open-mouthed face in the mirror and shrugged.

Barney said: "What's up, guys? The cab's taken."

Flannel-suit grinned. "Yeah, we just took it." He pulled a .32 out of a shoulder rig and poked it behind Barney's ear. "You know what this is, don't you, chum?"

Barney nodded vigorously.

"Then don't get any ideas. We're going to Central Park and we're in kind of a rush. Get it?"

Barney nodded resignedly. "I got you, boss."

Black-eyes waved his gun at me. "Frisk him."

Flannel-suit holstered his gun and relieved me of mine, tossed it to Black-eyes. Then he found the envelope. "Well! Well! Pictures, by golly! Very interesting. Get a load of these, Ernie!"

Ernie got a load of those and Flannel-suit unearthed my wallet. He looked over the contents, exclaimed in mock amazement. "Charles 'Chuck' Conrad is a private investigator! It's a fact, Ernie! Says so right here!" He waved the wallet. He was having himself a helluva time. He chuckled, reached into the wallet and extracted almost two hundred dollars in bills. "You won't be needing this, Charles 'Chuck' Conrad." He tossed the empty wallet into my lap, took out his own and proceeded to stow away the money. He held it away from me but not before I glimpsed the name "Thompson" through the celluloid card holder. He rammed the wallet down in his hip pocket and grinned fatuously at me. "Tell me, do the girls really call you 'Chuck,' Chuck?"

I turned to Ernie who seemed to be the boss. "Speaking of girls, isn't it kind of risky going to Central Park two nights in a row?"

Ernie grinned dryly. "We'll try to pick a different spot for you."

I sighed. "Too bad you didn't get what you wanted from Veronica. It would have saved everybody a lot of trouble."

Ernie shrugged.

I asked: "Where did you learn the explosives racket?"

"In night school. You ask too many questions, shamus."

"I am a very curious guy. Did I lead you to Doc Klavin?"

Without warning, Thompson brought up a short uppercut that laid my head back on the seat. "Don't talk so much."

Ernie shrugged. "We were watching the street. We hadn't made the house. You led us to it." He grinned. "Good thing your subway accident wasn't fatal."

I was puzzled. "You guys?"

Ernie nodded at Thompson. "Him. He gets clumsy sometimes when he's in a hurry. I waited outside with the red-head." He eyed me. "The trouble some people won't go to," he said softly. "It's a kick. It really is a kick."

I said: "I could use a laugh."

Ernie said: "We're following the red-head for two days, trying to get a line on her boyfriend. We lose her twice on Byrne Street and never make the gee. She tails you to Joe's and we tail her. We know you're not her guy and we don't think you've got an angle. But you might get in the way so, just to make sure, we give you a little shove. Lucky for us it don't take and you lead us to Klavin's hideout. We give it to Klavin and you get away again. It's getting monotonous. We call in to Number One and what do you think he tells us?"

I shrugged. "He tells you that Conrad has moved into first place as the target for tonight."

Ernie nodded. "And that's enough talk," he said with finality. "You can talk all you want in a few minutes."

Thompson grinned. "Yeah, we'll even help you." Suddenly he whirled in the seat. "Where the hell are you taking us, cabby?"

Barney's shoulders shrugged expressively. "You said Central Park, dincha?"

"This ain't the way to Central Park."

"I'm avoiding traffic, if you wanna know."

"I told you to take the shortest way."

Barney leaned his head back and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Listen, mister. All I wanna do is get you where you're going as fast as I can and get rid of you." He raised his shoulders gloomily. "Maybe you're gonna roll me for my dough and take the cab. Maybe you're even gonna bump me and the chump. But I don't *think* you're gonna do anything to me because you look like reasonable guys. I never saw the chump before and you got no idea how quick I forget a couple of fares once they get out of the cab. I am a noivous guy and guns make me very unhappy. So if it's O.K. with you, I'll drive the hack my own way." He took another left turn sharply and began to bump down a dark cobblestone street.

Ernie signaled to Thompson and grinned with pretended affability. "He's heading right. Leave him alone."

Thompson caught the signal and chuckled. He reached through the opening and slapped Barney on the shoulder. "You're O.K., hackie. We'll treat you nice."

**T**HROUGH the mirror Barney caught my attention and his right eyelid drooped. He began to drive with his right hand, apparently scratching his leg with his left. Thompson didn't miss the motion. He stuck his head across the back of the seat. "What's wrong with you?"

"I got fleas!"

Suddenly the cab shot forward, bumped two wheels onto the curb, and at the same instant, Barney's left hand holding a lug wrench swung up and

thudded against Thompson's skull. Thompson went down in the seat and I dove for the .45. Ernie had swung onto Barney. The cab stopped with a jerk on the sidewalk and we went forward and wrestled to the floor. I grappled for the gun with both hands while Ernie slugged at my face with his left. The rear door swung open and Barney, not having enough room to swing the wrench, grabbed Ernie around the neck and tugged. Then Ernie got the idea I was afraid he'd get. He reached swiftly, transferred the gun to his free left hand. I got my knee under him and kicked. The slug tore through the roof and Ernie went out of the cab backwards. The pint-sized hackie slammed the wrench down on his gun wrist and the gun went spinning. I was half out of the cab and didn't have a chance to turn back for Thompson's .32. Ernie still had my gun in his pocket and was tugging at it.

I dove for the gun on the pavement and Barney threw the wrench at Ernie who had my gun out as I came up on elbow with his. Ducking that wrench wrote finis for Ernie. His bullet bounced off the sidewalk as mine tore through his chest. I lay where I was, watched him arch his back, gasp for air he'd never breathe. I got slowly to my feet, shaking as though I had the ague.

There was a sound of running feet and Barney let out a yell. I looked up to see Thompson streaking past the darkened store fronts on the other side of the street. I lifted the gun and aimed. The gun danced around like a semaphore and I had to hang on tight to keep it from flying away. I lowered it and watched Thompson duck around the corner. I couldn't have hit the proverbial barn if I had been locked inside. I had the shakes but bad.

I knelt and fumbled through Ernie's pockets. He was smarter than Thompson. Except for my pictures there



wasn't a thing on him except four hundred and eighty dollars and some change loose in a pant's pocket. I pocketed the amount Thompson had stolen from me and shoved the rest back into his pocket. I holstered my own gun and looked down at the exaggerated, sporty cut of Ernie's suit.

Barney said: "What now, Chuck? The cops?"

I threw Ernie's gun into the cab and shook my head. "Let's go places. Will that junk of yours still run?"

"Hell, yes, it'll run. What kind of a lousy driver do you think I am?" He looked down at the corpse. "What about him? Hadn't we better—"

"Not yet. Let's go."

Barney turned back to the cab. "You're supposed to know the law." We piled in the cab and backed into the street. Barney addressed the rear-view mirror. "Beekman Place, wasn't it?"

"I've changed my mind. Go to the Aladdin Hotel."

Barney jumped. "Jeez, Chuck, you ain't going to call on Abe Sengler?"

I nodded. "As soon as you let me out, go to the nearest phone, call Lieutenant Kondos personally and tell him about the gungel back there. Tell him the one who got away was named Thompson. Don't mention the Aladdin. I'll take care of that myself. After you've talked to Kondos, come back and wait. If I'm not out in twenty minutes, call the cops again. Don't do anything dumb like coming in after me."

Barney's face in the mirror was sick. "It ain't smart, Chuck."

"If you don't want to come along, I'll get out and grab another cab."

"Who said anything about quitting?" Barney snarled, and the cab leaped forward.

I rode the elevator to the top floor and walked down the hall to Sengler's suite. The door to the anteroom was

unlocked. Four men sat around a card table engrossed in the inevitable gin rummy. A fifth, a cocky-looking youngster with a crew haircut dangled a leg over the arm of the sofa and read a newspaper. He got up and came toward me. The card players glanced up inquisitively and went back to their game.

I jerked a thumb toward the offices. "Louis still in there?"

Crew-cut nodded. "Ain't you the shamus that was around here this morning?"

I nodded.

"Louis said to throw you out if you came around again."

I moved through the second room toward the offices. "We'll ask him."

Crew-cut shrugged, followed me in, went to the voice box resting on the table and flipped the switch. "Louis, that shamus is back again. You want to see him, or shall I throw him out?"

A stream of profanity emerged from the box.

I grinned, cut off the flow of colorful prose and bent close to the speaker. "I've been thinking about you, Louis. I've been remembering how you lost your appetite for barbecued meat a few years ago." I paused. "Frying is much worse, Louis, especially when you're the one who's being cooked. Open that door like a good boy or, so help me, I'll see that the State of New York makes you into a Blue Plate Special."

I raised the switch and there was another stream of profanity. I cut it off and grinned at Crew-cut. "He loves me." I walked over and banged on the door, half expecting nothing to happen. Crew-cut stared at me perplexedly, unable to decide whether to throw me out or not.

The buzzer sounded and I pushed through before Louis could change his mind. I let the door swing to and lock and stood with my back to it. Louis

the Watchdog was in the office alone. He threw down his racing form and came toward me.

"You're getting in my hair, guy. What are you trying to do, get your name inna papers?"

"I want to talk to Abe."

"The Boss ain't receiving. You'll talk to me and it better be good."

"You're not bright enough, Louis. Tell Abe I want in."

"Listen, punk, the Boss tries to be nice. He shouldda broken your head this morning."

"I'll still talk to Abe."

"You got anything to say you'll spill it to me right now or I'll kick you all the way down to the street, personally."

I said: "You going to tell him I'm here?"

He grinned and came forward.

I did just what the books tell you not to do and it worked fine.

I led with my right and smacked him in the mush before he got set. He staggered and started to go down and I had to hold him up while I slammed two hard lefts into his belly. I let go and he crumpled softly to the floor and raised his head dazedly. I unlimbered the .38 and rapped him smartly behind the ear. His head banged the carpet and stayed there.

There were two intercom boxes on Louis' desk. I checked the wiring and discovered that one led to Abe's office alone. I happily ripped out the wiring on the other one, dragged Louis behind the desk and flipped the switch on the intercom to Abe's office. His soft bass voice came in.

"Yeah?"

I made my voice a gravelly imitation of Louis. "Louis, boss. Can I come in?"

Abe grunted and cut off the connection. The buzzer sounded and I moved fast, following my .38 right on through the door.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Coward's Rap

I LEANED back against the slowly closing door until it locked. "Hello, Abe. Hands on the desk."

Abe put down the fountain pen and spread his hands on the open ledger in front of him. His face wore that perpetual half-smile and his eyes glittered with intentness and curiosity. I knew he was thinking about what he was going to do to me when the tables were reversed.

"What do you want, screwball?"

"I've come for Jeanne Barre's contract, Abe."

"You must be nuts." His voice was liquid soft.

"You and I have got something in common, Abe. Neither one of us likes to be pushed around. Open that safe."

His lips parted in a grimace of a smile and he shook his head slowly from side to side. Then his hand inched back toward the edge of the desk. I leaned forward and slammed the gun barrel against the side of his jaw. His head jerked back and I raked the other cheek.

"You think I'm kidding?"

Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. His head bowed forward, came up slowly and his eyes tried to avoid mine. Suddenly his thick lips quivered and a whimper began deep in his throat. His hands opened and closed spasmodically and I finally pinned his eyes with mine.

I stared at him incredulously. Abe Sengler was yellow!

I regarded him silently. Somewhere over the years, the iron must have gone out of his guts. A man didn't get where Abe Sengler was by being afraid of his own shadow. But for a long time nobody had entertained the idea of challenging the Big Boy and he hadn't had

anything to face up to. He had grown fat and soft and was afraid to lose. I grinned. Maybe he was even thinking what a dose of his own medicine would taste like. He was alone with me in this locked room and he didn't like it. I gestured toward the safe.

"Open up!"

Abe got up like a sleepwalker, wobbled over to the safe and dropped to one knee. I stood over him and watched. His hands trembled as they twisted at the dial. Blood dripped down his chin, a drop fell on the extended cuff of a white shirtsleeve. He stared fascinated at the little blob, looked at me fearfully, wiped his face on his coatsleeve and swung open the safe door.

He reached inside, opened a drawer, took out a batch of folded papers, opened one, tossed it aside, opened another, stood up and handed it to me. It was a single sheet of paper, a book-keeping balance sheet folded to it and a smaller sheet with a few lines of handwriting and a signature clipped to the back of it. I moved over to the front of the desk and held the papers down to the desk light.

I barely noticed Abe as he sidled back into the chair behind the desk. His nerve was gone and I didn't think he'd have the courage to pull a trigger even if he had a gun in his hand, which he hadn't. He put his hands back on the top of the desk. I read everything and looked at Abe in surprise. He was grinning weakly as the door banged open behind me. He rose out of his chair.

I realized what had happened. The mechanism for that door buzzer was on the other side of the door and couldn't be heard in this soundproof room. All through our little tete-a-tete Abe had probably kept his knee against the button on the under side of the desk. When Louis hadn't answered he thought he was licked. He had pressed again in a

last-ditch hope and unfortunately Louis had come to—because he was standing in the doorway, beginning to throw lead.

I used the edge of the desk to propel myself downward like a pearl diver. The slug intended for the middle of my back knocked my hat off. My snap shot caught Louis in the lower side. His face blanched and the gun dropped out of his hand.

Even as I scrambled to my feet I wondered what the hell went on around here. I knew damn well Louis hadn't lost his nerve, too. The slug I had put into his side wasn't by any means fatal. Louis' hand dropped and he rubbed his side absently. His mouth hung open and he wasn't even looking at me.

He was staring at the little round hole his Smith & Wesson had made in the center of Abe Sengler's forehead. Blood oozed around the hole and a tiny rivulet trickled down beside the nose and joined the dribble on his chin. Abe was still wearing that half-smile, staring intently, curiously, straight at Louis Blinchok.

Louis sobbed, tried stupidly to explain to Abe. "A mistake, Boss! I didn't mean to do it!"

But Abe couldn't hear and I wasn't interested. I chopped down hard with the .38 in the same spot behind the right ear. Louis went down easier this time.

I made sure the door was locked, picked up my hat and pocketed the contract and got on the phone to headquarters. I was lucky. Kondos hadn't gone personally to look at my late pal, Ernie. I told him what had happened and apologized because I wasn't going to be around to greet him when he got here. He ordered me to wait for him. I said I was sorry, reminded him to bring a blowtorch for the doors and hung up fast. I knew he was going to try to get here before I could get away.

I bent over Louis, decided he'd keep at least a half hour this time and went out and pulled on the door until I heard the lock click into place. I holstered my gun, straightened my tie and pinched my hat so the bullet hole wouldn't show and pulled open the outer door.

The boys were still at their card game and Crew-cut was working the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. I looked at my watch. Exactly twelve minutes since I had entered through this door. Crew-cut looked up. I winked at him, turned and stuck my head back around the door. "I left one of my business cards on your desk, Louis. If anybody steals your rod, give me a call." I pulled the door shut quickly, heard the lock catch and grinned at Crew-cut. He grinned back, looked at the closed door significantly and put a thumb and forefinger delicately to his nose. I nodded and let myself out into the corridor. As soon as I closed the door I lit out for the stairs. That elevator would have had to snap its cable to beat me to the lobby.

Barney was just starting out of the cab as I dashed out to the sidewalk. I saw the nose of the lug wrench poking out of his half-zipped jacket. I grinned and dove into the back seat of the cab. "Now we can take that Beekman Place address. It's almost time to relax."

**I** RANG the bell and Jeanne Barre came to the door herself. She was dressed for the street and she had a hat on. She seemed surprised to see me.

"Mr. Conrad! How nice! I hope you don't have bad news for me so soon?"

I shook my head wearily and walked into the room. It was a nice room—warm colors, comfortable furniture, feminine but without any dust-catching gimcracks to offend the eye or snag the

unwary elbow. It suited its occupant's personality. I said: "Were you going out or coming in?"

"I've been out to dinner with Jock. He's in the kitchen. Can he fix you a drink?"

"I could use a bourbon and water. Strong, huh?"

Jeanne went to the connecting door. "Jock, Mr. Conrad is here. Fix him a bourbon and water. He likes it strong."

I waited until she came back and seated herself on the sofa. I sat down in a barrel-shaped chair that was more comfortable than it looked and stared at her. She flushed.

"Do you have any news for me, Mr. Conrad—Chuck? What shall I call you?"

I said: "You can whistle if you want to. I'll know who you mean." I hoped my voice wasn't as rocky as I felt. "And, yes, I have news for you."

She smiled at the first, sat up straight at the last. "Good or bad?" She whispered.

I said: "When do you have to be at the Raspail?"

She frowned. "I don't go on the first time until nine-fifteen. I was just going to change when you came in."

Jock Shields came in with a tray of three highballs. He smiled cordially. "Hello, Conrad. No hard feelings about this morning, I hope."

I shook my head and he handed Jeanne her drink. I accepted my drink from the tray and Jock sat beside Jeanne. I looked at her.

"In answer to your question—it all depends on how you look at it."

"What do you mean?"

I cocked my hand at her. "You didn't tell me all there was to know last night."

Slowly a flush crept up her cheeks.

I said: "For instance, you didn't point out the coincidence between Mike Glasgow's death one night and a visit from

Abe Sengler the following night. You gave me a reason for not knowing anything about that contract with Sengler and Jock had his reason for not bringing it up. But *nobody* offered a reason why, over a period of five years, Abe Sengler never tried to arrange a closer contact with his investment. And Abe has a reputation for staying pretty close to a dollar."

Jeanne's hand moved up to her throat in a protecting motion. "What are you driving at?" she whispered.

I frowned. "I'm not sure exactly, but it ought to read something like this. Last night you were interested in a detailed description of Mike's character. We agreed that he was tough and unpredictable. A man who, if he hated somebody enough, would be perfectly willing to die himself if he could only kill that somebody. When you think about it for a minute, you realize that a man like Mike is the only type of man that Abe Sengler, with his powerful organization behind him, would be afraid of.

"Now, it gets simpler. I was lucky enough to take Mike Glasgow. You hired me. It almost looks like you were sending in a replacement, doesn't it?"

"Just a minute, Conrad," Shields interposed, "are you saying that—" he paused and threw up his hands hopelessly.

"Go on," I invited.

"You go on," he said, "it gets more amusing by the minute."

"Then let's laugh some more," I said. "Abe Sengler was afraid of Mike Glasgow. Miss Barre had a hold over Mike Glasgow. Abe was permitted to put up the money for Miss Barre's career and get a return on his investment. But as long as Mike was alive, Abe wasn't permitted to go near her."

"How *can* you know all that?" Jeanne Barre gasped.

Shields looked at her sharply.

I pulled out the envelope with the negatives and pictures and tossed it in her lap. "I don't do it with mirrors."

Jeanne put her drink down on the coffee table and took the pictures out of the envelope. She gasped, her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. I said: "You've seen 'em before?"

She shook her head distractedly. Jock took the other picture out of her lap, looked at it and looked up at me. "Where did you get these?"

"I asked Miss Barre a question."

"She doesn't have to answer it."

"No, Jock." She put a hand on his knee and eyed me defiantly. "Mike Glasgow was my brother."

I hadn't expected that. I said: "That's crazy. Mike Glasgow was an orphan. He didn't have any brothers or sisters."

She shook her head. "Mike ran away from home when he was twelve. And Mom and Dad were killed in a grade-crossing six months later. I was only seven at the time and I went to live with Dad's cousins in New Orleans."

"But you kept in touch with Mike."

"I never saw him from the time I was seven until he came back to my dressing room at the Green Wheel five years ago and told me who he was—that he was my brother, I mean. I didn't know that he was Mike Glasgow until I saw his picture in the paper a week ago.

"After that first night, he came back twice and I went over to his table and sat with him. On the third visit he told me that he wouldn't be seeing me for a while. We had never talked about anything but the career I hoped I'd have and I felt so ashamed of myself because I thought he was being drafted. He didn't deny it but he wouldn't talk about it. Now of course I know it wasn't true. But that night he pretended to have a secret and said he'd done me a favor. I didn't realize what the favor

was until shortly before I asked you to come and see me.”

“What was the favor?”

“Just what you said. He had probably talked Abe Sengler into putting up the money for my career without letting Abe know our relationship. Abe undoubtedly thought I was Mike’s girl and kept hands off, either through fear or friendship. I decided it was fear and you were right in guessing that I wanted to “replace” Mike with a man who had some of his qualities—but an honest man this time. Maybe you think it was cold-blooded of me to choose the man who was responsible for Mike’s death, but I had no love for the adult Mike Glasgow. He was vicious and he got what he deserved. I choose to remember the unruly, likeable country boy, Mike Barre, before he got off on the wrong trail.” She looked down at the picture. “These must have been taken the night I thought Mike was going to be drafted—” She looked up suddenly. “Jock! That girl on the telephone! Remember?”

Shields looked startled. “Jove! That’s right!”

**J**EANNE turned to me. “A girl called me the night after Mike was captured and said she had evidence that I was Mike’s real girl friend, not the Rhine woman. She

wanted me to pay her five thousand dollars. I knew there might be danger of connecting my name with Mike’s but I didn’t see how she could have any proof. I hung up in her face and when she called again, Jock got rid of her quickly.”

I said: “She won’t bother you any more—or her boyfriend either. They’re dead.”

Jeanne held the picture up. “These—you didn’t! No!”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t kill them.”

Jeanne drooped dispiritedly. “Sengler. It’s an example of what I can expect, too.”

I said: “Sengler won’t bother you any more either. He’s dead, too.” Both of them stared at me open-mouthed. I pulled out the contract and handed it to her. “Here’s what you hired me to get.”

She held it on the tips of her fingers and read it through carefully. She turned to Shields, smiling through her tears. “Jock, it’s all over! We’re free! We’re free!”

“Not we,” I said gently. I handed her the balance sheet and the half-sheet of handwriting. “That bookkeeping sheet is Sengler’s record of the money advanced to you. Each item has been initialed by your agent. That other

*(Continued on page 128)*

*(Continued from page 35)*

thing is a signed agreement between Sengler and Shields to split your earnings, leaving you little more than expenses. Sengler got the blame but they've been working together from the beginning."

Shields rose to his feet and I followed him.

He said: "Are you fool enough to think you can get away with a thing like that?"

I eyed him sardonically. "I had the whole thing pinned on Sengler until you sent those sunburned lads with the Vine Street drapes out to protect your interests. If there was one thing Sengler didn't have to import, it was extra gunmen."

Shields paled.

I said: "Thompson probably hasn't been able to get in touch with you. Ernie's dead—"

I had wanted it to work out this way and I had a swell plan. I had my glass in my left hand as did Shields. As soon as his right hand moved in the direction of a possible gun, I was going to let him have the glass in his face and go for my own gun.

His right hand moved exactly according to schedule. I guess I was tired. I had overlooked the fact that Shields could pull the same stunt. He did and his own gun came out. I threw myself on him and Jeanne clawed at him from the other side.

The three of us wrestled to the floor before I got my hands on his gun and began to twist. Shields gave a sudden jerk, the gun roared and a surprised expression spread over Shields' face. I got to my feet as crimson began to seep through his shirt front. He looked around as at an old familiar place that he didn't expect to see again. There was no bitterness in his face. He said: "I guess I outsmarted myself. That hap-

pens to agents sometimes if they're not careful."

Jeanne sobbed: "Jock!"

He smiled at her. "I'm sorry, Jeanne. Really." A spasm of pain contorted his face, he sighed and his face smoothed out and his body relaxed quietly on the floor.

Jeanne knelt beside him, then looked up at me blankly.

"He's dead."

I nodded, helped her to her feet and put her on the sofa. Shields still clutched the gun. I got out my handkerchief, wiped the barrel clean where my hands had touched it, left it in Shields' hand.

Jeanne lay on the sofa crying softly. I went to the phone, dialed, talked fast. I hung up and called the Aladdin Hotel and finally got hold of Lieutenant Kondos. I talked a little and he talked a lot—yelled would be a better word for it.

I got tired of listening and hung up. I went over to Jeanne sitting on the sofa.

"You said you were just going to dress when I came in. Does that mean the dresses you wear in your number are here?"

She raised a tear-stained face. "You don't expect me to—" She looked at the expression on my face. "Everything is down there."

I lifted her, wiped her face with my handkerchief and led her to the front windows. "That cab driver down there is a friend of mine. His name is Barney Harons. I want you to slip down the service elevator and tell Barney I said to get you to the Raspail as soon as possible. You're going on tonight as though nothing had happened. You don't know anything that happened up here."

Her shoulders drooped.

"It's no use—"



I shook her. "If you don't, all of this has been for nothing. Your new agent will be waiting for you in your dressing room. He's Rudy Frieden. He knows everything and he'll take care of you from that end. And don't worry about anything. When I finish at this end, Jock Shields will be a suicide in an unnamed apartment. He will also have been in ill health for some time."

"You can't do it. The police won't let you—"

"Let me worry about that! The cop who's coming over here is a pal of mine—or was. He has already called me a mad dog and told me that I am worse than an epidemic and I don't think he knows any new adjectives." I shoved her bag at her and opened the door. "Get going."

She clung to me in the doorway. "How can I ever—?"

"Save it till later." I extricated myself.

"But when will I see you?"

"If I can get out of this, I'll take a vacation, maybe to the Coast. Maybe I'll take you to Romanoff's on an expense account and we can talk about how wonderful we both are. Now, beat it!"

She raised herself on tiptoe, brushed her lips against mine and darted down the hall.

I shut the door.

I picked up the contract, the agreement between Shields and Sengler, the balance sheet, the envelope and the pictures and negatives and took them into the bathroom and destroyed them. A siren began to wail as I came back to the living room.

I sat down on the sofa, lit a cigarette, took a long pull and blew smoke at the ceiling.

I was pretty sure I had earned that thousand dollar bonus.

THE END