

# DETECTIVE TALES

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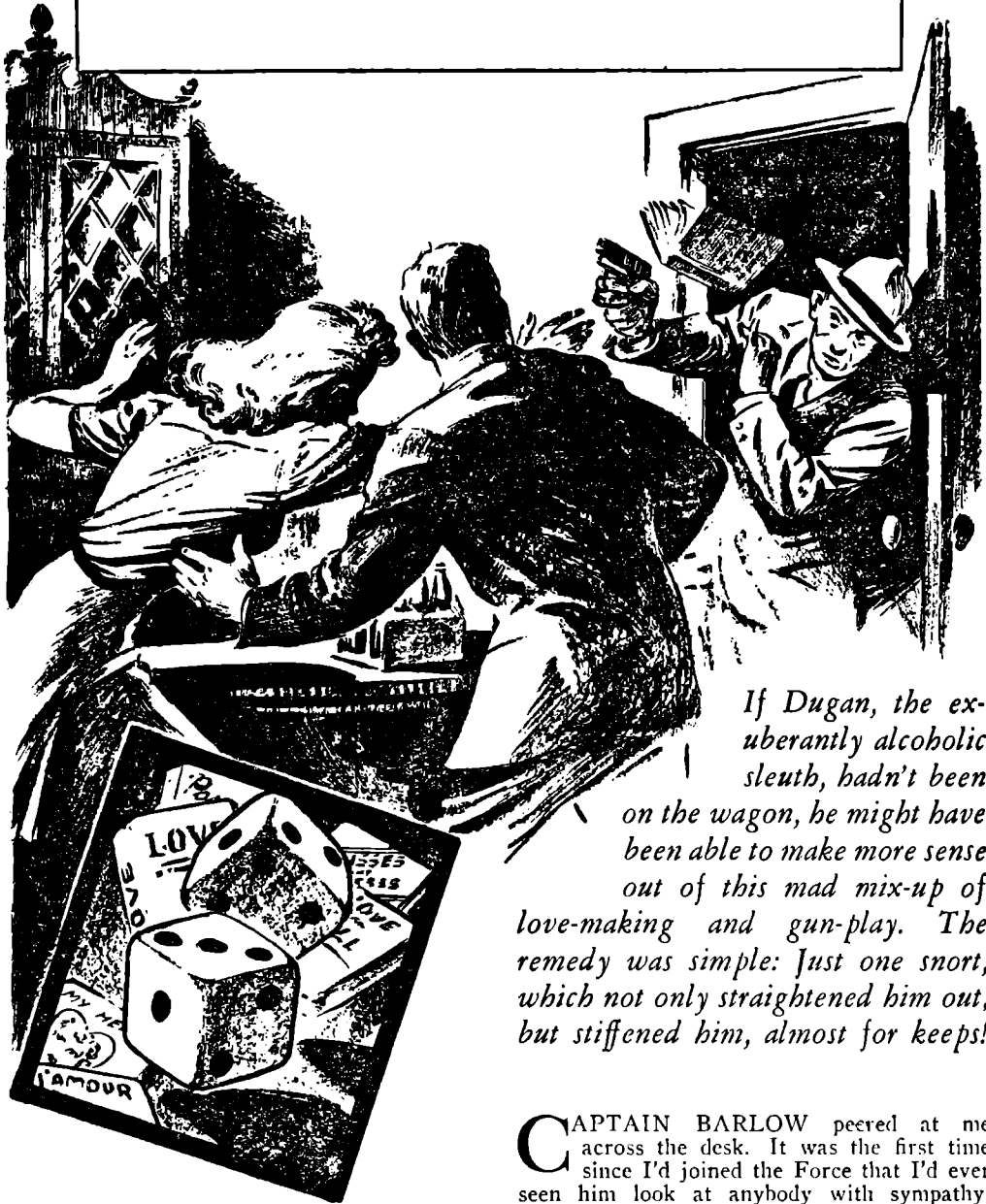
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# SLUGS AND KISSES

By JACK BRADLEY



*If Dugan, the exuberantly alcoholic sleuth, hadn't been on the wagon, he might have been able to make more sense out of this mad mix-up of love-making and gun-play. The remedy was simple: Just one snort, which not only straightened him out, but stiffened him, almost for keeps!*

Good old Verny! Quite calmly, she fired Love's Flaming Embers

CAPTAIN BARLOW peered at me across the desk. It was the first time since I'd joined the Force that I'd ever seen him look at anybody with sympathy. "When I make a mistake, Dugan," he said, "I'll always be the first man to admit it. And

I made a corker when I persuaded you to go on the wagon, a couple of months ago."

"Twenty-nine days, fourteen hours and twenty minutes ago, sir," I corrected.

"All right, then! But it *seems* months to me. That mournful face of yours is giving me the horrors and my cops are asking for transfers to other precincts because they can't bear to see your suffering. Now for Pete's sake go on over to Benny's and get a drink and then come back here looking human!"

I looked out of Captain Barlow's window. Directly across the street I could see the dim, soothing glow of the back-bar lights in Benny's Tavern and the rows of softly gleaming bottles. I choked back a sob and turned to Captain Barlow.

"No, Captain, I said I'd stay on the wagon for a month and I'll keep my word. It's only a few hours more. And I don't think I'd better go into Benny's until then. I dropped in yesterday for a plain lemonade and he damn near threw it at me. Benny doesn't like to serve soft drinks."

"Suit yourself, Dugan. But get the hell out of here until your time is up. That face of yours is giving me the creeps!"

I walked slowly out into the bright sunshine and, after a moment's hesitation, went across the street to Benny's Tavern. Benny looked up with a scowl as I entered. Reaching for a glass, he disgustedly splashed lemon juice into it, filled it with water and then slammed it down in front of me with a sneer.

"Here's your liquor and I hope it ain't too strong for you. Now will you take it and kindly get the hell away from my bar because you're driving business away. And also because there's a lady waiting to see you—over there in the corner booth."

"A lady to see me?" I wondered if it was a gag.

"Well, no, on second thought I wouldn't go so far as to call her that. But, anyway, she asked for Detective Dugan, so you'd better see what she wants."

I took my lemonade over to the corner booth and the moment I got there, I knew it was no gag. It was worse. It was Verny, the hat check girl from Big Mike Jordan's club. And—sure enough—she had one of those paper covered love novels with her. I don't think I've ever seen Verny without one of those damn things under her arm. This one was called *Love's Flaming Embers*.

She called herself Leonora La Verne—Probably from one of the heroines in those love stories. Everybody else called her Verny. She had a heart as big as a barn door and, back in the old Prohibition days, she once saved my life by firing a coat hanger at a coked-up killer just as he was cutting down on me.

I saw that she was drinking a tall, cold Cuba Libre. Little beads of moisture were standing out on the glass and I damn near moaned as I slid into the seat opposite her.

"Lo, Verny. What gives?"

She leaned forward excitedly, clutching *Love's Flaming Embers* to her. "Dugan," she breathed softly, "I've met Mister Right, at last. His name is Joseph Hansen."

I took a sip of my lemonade and set it down with a shudder. "Well, now, that's fine, Verny. Congratulations."

"But we're in trouble, Dugan, and unless you help us, all our Golden Dreams will be Shattered. He's a cashier, at the Baldwin Personal Loan Company and he's been bucking Mike Jordan's wheel."

"Uh-huh. Lost his shirt and then cleaned out the company till, eh?"

"Oh, no. Worse than that, Dugan. He came in with his boss last night and had a run of luck. He started in with a hundred dollars he borrowed from Mr. Baldwin, the boss, and he came out with five grand. And we were saving to buy a farm. A little Love Nest, all our own!"

"Well, for Pete's sake, Verny! I don't get it. The guys got enough for your farm, so what's the moaning about?"

"Don't you see? Now he wants to go back up there and win enough for a tractor. And tractors cost an awful lot, Dugan. He's going to lose everything, if he doesn't stop. And so—you're going with me down to the Baldwin Personal Loan Company and pick him up. When we get him up to my apartment, you're going to tell him to keep out of Mike's place . . . so we can have our Dream Home."

"I am not!" I said promptly. "Mike Jordan doesn't like to have his customers stop when they're ahead of his wheel. Mike has a flock of big time gunmen around and half the Big Shots around City Hall taking orders from him. I'll be very glad to steal a tractor from the Engineering Department for this guy, but I'm damned if I want to go back to pounding a beat out in the sticks. Sorry, Verny. . . ."

She looked at me shyly across *Love's Flaming Embers*. "Then there's only one more thing I can offer, Dugan."

"No good, Verny. I like you as a friend but when it comes to romance I just don't feel that way."

Those blue eyes hardened in a flash. "Listen, Flatfoot! If I ever start making passes it won't be at a precinct dick. What I meant was that I had a bottle of Mike Jordan's best rum up at my apartment."

I looked at the clock and sighed. "I'm still on the wagon, Verny. But—you saved my life once, so I might just as well hand it back to you, now. Come on, my heap's outside."

**I**N ALL my life I've never seen anything like the Baldwin Personal Loan Company. There was the usual row of interviewing booths, found in all loan companies, but the main feature was The Quick Money Bar.

The Quick Money Bar was a Shylock's dream come true—a long, low counter at one end of the waiting room and money stacked up on it like lettuce on a vegetable stand. Money! Money! Money! Stack after stack of greenbacks with rolls of coins alongside.

Standing up to that bar was a line of the oddest customers a loan company ever had—longshoremen, some of them so drunk they could hardly stand—war plant workers, from around the corner, many of them still wearing their badges—truck drivers, fretting impatiently while their trucks waited outside—

Each man showed a metal tag to the cashier, who marked the amount he borrowed on a card. I took another look at the cashier and blinked. Verny's Soulmate was a tall, gangling guy with a stupid-looking face and the biggest hands I had ever seen on a human being. And she had passed up Broadway's wolves for this!

I heard a genial, "Hi, Verny!" and turned around. A big, well dressed guy with a toothy grin was standing beside us. Verny smiled cordially at him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Baldwin. I want you to meet my friend, Detective Dugan. We came down to pick up Joseph!" She looked over at the cashier and all but mooned.

Baldwin's grin widened enough to show a couple more teeth. "How do you do, Officer? How do you like our little place?"

"Well, it's kinda different from the usual loan company," I admitted.

"Yup. Sure is. We give our steady customers a metal identification tag, same as the big department stores give their charge customers. Then, when they need a ten spot in a hurry, they just drop in, show their tag and they're out with the money they need in two or three minutes.

"Those fellows used to borrow a tenspot from some bartender when they were drunk and the next day the bartender would tell them it was twenty they had borrowed. Now they come up here and they have the exact amount they borrow marked on their own cards. I've saved those lads a lot of money, Officer."

He turned back to Verny. "Your boy friend will be over in a minute or two," he grinned. "His relief is coming on now. He's coming up to Jordan's with me tonight, to get that tractor."

"Oh, no, he's not," Verny said firmly. "He's through with Mike Jordan's wheel. Mister Dugan here is going to see to that."

Before Baldwin had time to reply, Hansen came over. The tall guy grunted a brief ac-

knowledge of my introduction and went over to Verny at once. His eyes were drooping as he took her hands in his enormous paws.

"It's been so long, Dear Heart," he said in a low voice. "So long since I saw you last. I've counted the hours."

So *that* was why Verny had passed up the wolves for this guy! They both spoke the same language! I looked at the slight bulge beneath his coat and wondered if it was another one of those paper-backed novels. I soon found out.

"I have the most wonderful news," he went on. "Dear Heart, we have our Dream Home at last!"

"Oh, Joseph! You mean you've actually *bought* the farm?"

He nodded solemnly. "Called them up today and told them I'd be down early in the morning with the money. I have it right here." He patted the bulge in his pocket.

I saw Baldwin's grin fading like an ice cube in July. "You're not carrying all that dough around with you?" he asked, horrified. "You shouldn't do that, man! Why don't you put it in the safe and pick it up in the morning before you go down to the real estate company?"

"Can't do it, Mr. Baldwin. I'll be going down before we open in the morning."

"All right, but you have a key to the office and you know the combination of the safe."

"Well, yes. But I wouldn't want to come in alone and open the safe and, anyway, it isn't necessary. I can leave it with Verny, overnight."

"He can and he most certainly will," Verny said cheerfully. "Come, Dear, let's go home. Oh! I'm so happy! The Home of our Dreams, at last!"

**WE LEFT.** As we got into my heap, I pulled Verny aside. "That guy is one of Mike Jordan's steady customers and you had to tell him that *I* was going to keep your boy friend out of the club. Mike's going to love me after this."

"Oh, stop worrying," she said gayly. "I'll explain things to Mike Jordan." She chattered away with Hansen as I drove, going over all the details about that damned tractor. Just before we got to her place, she asked me to stop.

"Joseph, Dear One, will you drop off and pick up a dozen bottles of coke, while we go on up and get ready? We're going to celebrate our luck."

And sure enough, we began celebrating right away. Or I did. I had parked the car and was just going into the doorway of Verny's apartment house when I heard a grave, "Good afternoon, sir!"

I snapped around quickly. Patrolman Grogan, from my station house was standing at

rigid attention, saluting me like I'd been an Inspector! This would give the boys something to talk about for days. I gave Grogan a dirty look, returned his salute and went on in after Verny. As soon as Hansen came in with the coke. I sailed in at once, anxious to have this thing over with and get out before Grogan left.

"I want to have a little talk with you, Hansen," I began.

A mild voice from the doorway said, "That will have to wait for a while, Dugan." I snapped around.

A short, chubby guy with bat ears and very thick lensed glasses was standing carelessly in the doorway, smiling affably, his hands in his coat pockets. I stared at him for a long moment, trying to place him.

And then I remembered! I couldn't place his face but that soft voice was a dead giveaway. I jumped to my feet.

"Specs Gomez!" I yelled. "You're under arrest, Specs!"

I don't know why in hell I didn't make a low bow and trot out the old anything-you-say-will-be-used-against-you. I might just as well have. My warning yell gave Specs plenty of time to pull out a stubby, little .25 automatic before I could draw.

Hansen just stood there, holding his bag of coke bottles and it was Verny who took over. Good old Verny, who'd been around Mike Jordan's joint long enough to think on her feet—but fast! Quite calmly, she fired *Love's Flaming Embers* straight at Specs Gomez!

It caught Specs right on the nose and slewed those thick-lensed glasses askew just as he fired. I heard the "Pop!" of his .25 and heard the bullet whining spitefully past my ear.

I don't think I ever saw anyone move as quickly as Specs moved then and yet the whole thing was like a slow-motion picture. I saw his jerking forward in the doorway . . . saw his hand straighten those glasses in one flashing movement and, as I brought my gun up, his finger tightened on the trigger again.

The roar of the big Police Positive was deafening above Specs' second shot. I stared stupidly at Specs as he slid to the floor with about half the back of his head blown away.

Then I saw Grogan's big red face looming up in the doorway, above his smoking gun and, all at once, I felt a hysterical impulse to laugh. Because every face in the room—even Specs'—seemed wearing a look of surprise.

"What happened?" asked Grogan bewilderedly. "I saw this guy speaking in after you and followed him.

I knew that was a lie. Grogan had followed me in to do a bit of fancy keyhole work, but I didn't feel like saying so. "This guy is a cheap gunman," I explained. "One of those cut-rates-by-the-hour killers. I helped pinch

him about ten years back and I'd forgotten his face. That's how he got the drop on me. Thanks, Grogan."

"Oh, that's all right, Dugan." He turned hesitantly to Verny. "Is this guy a—a friend of yours, Miss?"

"He is not," I snapped before Verny could answer. "And don't you go about getting any ideas about a love-nest triangle shooting! This other lad is Mr. Hansen, Verny's fiancée. I just came up to pay a social call and help them figure out a way to get a tractor, that's all. I don't know why this punk was gunning for me, but I can tell you now that the lady had nothing to do with it."

"A tractor! You been drinking, Dugan?"

"No, but he's going to and so are you and I, Officer Grogan. I think we can all stand a drink after this," Verny said.

I thought the hell with the wagon and took the first drink I had in twenty-nine days and too damned many hours. Mike Jordan's rum spread a warm, soothing glow over my whole tense body and for the first time I began to figure things. The way I doped it out, Baldwin phoned Mike Jordan as soon as we left and Mike promptly sent this guy down to scare me. The shooting probably wouldn't have occurred if I hadn't recognized Specs.

And I didn't like guys sending gunmen out to scare me. I took another swig of the rum and picked up my hat. "Grogan," I said, "you phone in a report on this to the station house and stay here until the boys come. I got an idea I want to run down, while it's still hot."

"Now wait a minute, Dugan," the big lug said anxiously. "Don't you go off half cocked. Captain Barlow ain't going to like it if you start roaring around, all on your own."

I was already halfway out the door. "That's just what I'm thinking myself, Grogan," I said.

I HAD a little trouble getting into Mike Jordan's office but when I finally did, the big gambler was surprisingly cordial. Mike was a heavy-bodied, moonfaced guy and—by all accounts—his games were absolutely on the level.

I told him what had happened. "And," I wound up, "I don't like guys sending gunsels out after me. Not even when they have the drag you've got, Mike."

He stuck a cigar into his moon face and stared at me quite calmly as he shoved the box toward me. "In the first place, Dugan, I wouldn't give a damn if this Hansen never came into my place again. I don't want thirty-five dollar a week cashiers hanging out in my place. In fact, he'd never have got upstairs at all, if he hadn't been with Baldwin. Baldwin's a heavy spender, here.

"And, for another thing," he went on, "if I ever did have to send a gunman out to see you, Dugan, I wouldn't send a punk like Specs. I've got better talent than that on my payroll."

"Yeah, I know that, Mike," I said slowly. "I thought of that angle, myself, after I'd cooled off a bit. But if it wasn't you, then who in hell was it? This Baldwin guy?"

Mike shrugged his thick shoulders. "I don't know why he would. The guy's not running a shylock racket, or anything like that. I check pretty close on my customers, you know."

I got to my feet angrily. "Well, I know one thing. I'm going down for a little interview with Mr. Baldwin and it's not going to be about a loan!"

"Suit yourself, Dugan. But don't get me mixed up in it. I got too many important people coming here for that sort of publicity."

He wasn't kidding. That rum was so wonderful that when I finally tore myself away from the bar, I saw that I'd have to hurry to catch Baldwin. It was already past closing hour.

My car was parked across the street. I was about half way over when I saw the big sedan roaring toward me. I stepped back a little to let it pass. The next thing I knew I was picking myself up out of the gutter.

There was a tear in my coat and my leg felt like it had stopped a pile driver but I wasn't badly hurt otherwise. The fender had barely grazed me. Somebody was getting desperate.

**I** HADN'T seen the face of the would-be killer who drove the car but I didn't need to. He had tipped his hand in that last, desperate swipe at me. I limped over to a drug

store, went into the phone booth and dialed Verna's apartment. When she answered, I told her to put Hansen on.

There was a moment's wait, then I heard Hansen's "Yes?" He sounded worried.

"Listen, Hansen," I asked quickly, "do you drink? I noticed that you didn't take one with us before I left."

"Do I drink?" he repeated stupidly. "Why—why, no. I can't stand the stuff in any form. Even smelling a drunk's breath makes me sick. In fact, Mr. Baldwin nearly always waits on the drunks himself, at the Quick Money Bar. He's nice that way."

"Yeah. I know. Well, now listen, Hansen—I want you to go right out and take a cab to your office. Don't let anyone know you're coming and be sure to bring your key. I'll be in front of the place by the time you get there. Snap into it!"

I hung up before he could answer. It would take me about twenty minutes to get down there. I hoped I wouldn't too late.

Hansen was just getting out of a cab, when I drove up in front of the Baldwin Personal Loan Company. He was all set to give me one hell of an argument when I asked for his key but he never got a chance. I saw a light in the inner office and I didn't feel like arguing. I just took my gun from its holster, slipped it into my coat pocket and took his key.

"Listen, chum," I said quietly. "We're going into that office and we're going in without knocking. You make one bit of noise and I'm going to conk you over the dome with this rod—you understand?"

The gangling guy nodded and wiped his face nervously with a big paw. He was almost

green with fright. We tiptoed up the stairs and I slipped the key into the lock as quietly as possible. From the office I heard the faint sound of a chair being pushed back.

Baldwin was crouched down before the open safe and stacks of greenbacks were on the floor before him. He was sorting them over quickly, putting some into his pockets, shoving others back into the safe. I slipped the gun out of my pocket.

"Got 'em all picked out yet, Baldwin?" I asked. My voice roared in that quiet office.

The big guy jumped up with a startled gasp. For a moment he glared at me angrily, then he saw Hansen, back of me. "What's the meaning of this, Hansen?" he shouted.

"Cut it out, Baldwin," I said. "It's all over, now. The brainiest racket a counterfeiter ever worked out. You didn't need to sell your green goods to some fence at forty cents on the dollar. You didn't even need to hire a mob of hustlers to shove the queer.

"Oh, no, you had a better idea. A much better idea. You'd open up a loan company, draw in a lot of drunks and let them shove the stuff for you—and pay you a damn good interest for the privilege. You knew that twenties and even tens are looked at pretty closely but nobody even suspects a drunk going into a bar with a fivespot."

I snapped around to Hansen. "When he lent you that hundred dollars in Mike Jordan's, how'd he let you have it?"

"Why—why, it was all in fives—"

"Sure it was. And when he found out that you were going to pay it into a real estate office, where there'd be a money-wise cashier, he had to get it back. That was why Specs Gomez came up. He wanted to see you, not me. I was just an accident that happened."

Baldwin chuckled genially and lifted one foot onto the chair beside him. "What ever gave you this pipe dream, anyway, Dugan?" he asked.

"I began to get it a few minutes ago, when when you tried to blitz me with your car. You were afraid that I might have got Mike Jordan to check over his receipts and you wanted time to ditch this queer before I came down here."

Baldwin shrugged his shoulders like a man humoring a maniac. "Very well," he said. "Let's go down to the station house and—"

Suddenly his lifted foot kicked out viciously and the chair went spinning across the floor. It banged into my wounded leg and I felt like I'd been touched by a redhot poker. My gun arm jerked spasmodically and the next moment Baldwin was onto me.

It was like fighting a grizzly bear gone berserk. One hand grabbed my gun, wrestling savagely, while the other chopped down with

a piledriver punch. I felt the room reeling.

"Get that gun, Hansen," I gasped weakly. But the big-handed lout stood there like a fool with his mouth open.

I felt the gun slip out of my hand and then saw a glint of light on metal as it chopped across my face in a crashing blow. I began to slip . . . down. . . . Baldwin raised the gun for a last, deadly blow—

Suddenly I saw a blackjack flashing past, saw my gun go spinning across the room. Then a couple of men were quietly and efficiently shoving the raging Baldwin into a corner, their hands frisking him thoroughly. I looked up and wiped the blood out of my eyes.

The men were two of Mike Jordan's boys and Mike himself was standing back of them a cigar in his mouth. He grinned a little, as another of his boys helped me to my feet.

"Good work, Dugan," he said quietly. "I began to figure things out, right after you left. I checked over my safe and found around six hundred dollars that this louse had worked off on me."

"I guess you're stuck with that," I said. "But you can get a lot of satisfaction out of it by coming into court and testifying against him."

**T**HE cigar in his mouth almost dropped out. "You're crazy, Dugan! Why, it would mean the closing of my place if I had to go into court about this! A place like mine can't stand publicity."

"Yup. Still I gotta have evidence to convict this guy." I was getting another idea.

"But dammit it all, man! You've got Baldwin, himself, with his pockets full of the queer. You've got the testimony of his cashier and probably a lot of his customers still have some of the stuff he lent them. You don't need me."

"No-o," I said slowly, "I guess we *could* do without you. But . . . would you stand for a shakedown on this, Mike?"

"Write your own ticket," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't take a bribe," I said. "It's another guy that has to be fixed." I was staring at young Hansen, standing there like a dope but I was really thinking of the time, way back, when Verny had fired that coat hanger at a killer and saved my life, just as she had today.

"Listen, Mike, you own a big estate up in the Catskills, don't you?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, you must have at least two or three tractors on a place that size. *And* if you can spare one of them—well I guess you've made old Dugan a party to a bribe. And that's something that's never been done before, Mike!"