Three Gun Terry

Race Williams, #1

by Carroll John Daly, 1889-1958

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MY LIFE is my own, and the opinions of others don't interest me; so don't form any, or if you do, keep them to yourself. If you want to sneer at my tactics, why go ahead; but do it behind the pages—you'll find that healthier.

So for my line. I have a little office which says "Terry Mack, Private Investigator," on the door; which means whatever you wish to think it. I ain't a crook, and I ain't a dick; I play the game on the level, in my own way. I'm in the center of a triangle; between the crook and the police and the victim. The police have had an eye on me for some time, but only an eye, never a hand; they don't get my lay at all. The

crooks; well, some is on, and some ain't; most of them don't know what to think, until I've put the hooks in them. Sometimes they gun for me, but that ain't a one-sided affair. When it comes to shooting, I don't have to waste time cleaning my gun. A little windy that; but you get my game.

Now, the city's big, and that ain't meant for no outburst of personal wisdom. It's fact. Sometimes things is slow and I go out looking for business. About the cabarets; in the big hotels and even along the streets I find it. It's always there. I just spot some well-known faces playing their suckers, and that's my chance. A bit of trailing; I corral the bird, offer my help, and then things get lively. Blackmail it is mostly, but it doesn't matter to me. And then the fee; a hard-earned but gladly paid fee—that's me! I'm there forty ways from the ace.

So it comes that things is slow, and I'm anxious to chase down and corner a little of the ready. I guess I blow in nearly twenty bucks, jumping from joint to joint; but it's expense money, so I just shrug my shoulders when nothing turns up. Oh, I see crooks galore, but they ain't having no more luck than I am; which ain't the usual run of things.

Along about one-thirty I start for home—I got a car, but I ain't using it—the subway is my ticket that night. I just come out of a high-class robbers' den over on Sixth Avenue, and start toward Broadway; it's Fifty-sixth Street that I trot down, and it strikes me a wonderful place to pull off a murder—dark and quiet.

Then, when I'm halfway down the block, a woman shoots out of a brownstone front and skips down the steps toward a waiting taxi. She's just about to pull open the door and jump in when I see her draw back suddenly, stand undecidedlike a second, and then, turning, make a sudden dash for the steps. But she's too late. Two chaps hop out of that taxi and go after her. Now, I don't say that she mightn't 'a made it, for she had a start on them, but another lad steps out of the basement way and heads her off.

And let me give those boys credit for working fast; they sure turned the trick like professionals; there ain't no more than a scream and a couple of kicks when them birds have whisked her up and run her into the taxi. A crank of the motor, and the car is speeding away. Is that young lady lost forever? Not so you could notice it, she ain't! If they worked fast, so did I. I couldn't stop them—not me—but I had run across the street and as the car shot past me, I made a grab and swung up on the spare tire.

As we turn into Sixth Avenue, I see a window go up in the brownstone house, and I think I catch a shout. Then we ride. Things weren't so dead after all, and it looked as if I might get some return on that twenty.

There's three men and a driver, and you think the best thing I can do is to holler at the first cop we pass. But not me! He might stop us, and then again he might not. Also, I might get shot off the back of that speeding car, which was not exactly my most cherished thought. Besides, at the best, the police could only make a capture and give me a vote of thanks, with a misspelling of my name at the bottom of the page of the evening papers. No, I'm not looking for honor—there would probably be jack in this for yours truly.

It ain't cold, and the ride ain't so bad; not so good either, but then I couldn't be particular. As far as being worried about the end of the trip—not much! There

were four of them—all armed I guess—but then I had a couple of guns of my own, and I'd be the one with the drop.

At last the ride was over, and we pulled up on a lonely street in the Bronx. It was an empty street, but on the next block was a row of two-story frame houses. I guess they didn't want to attract attention by arriving in style and would hoof it the rest of the way. There is some delay about them getting out of the cab, and I drop off the tire, and stretch my legs, and shake out enough kinks to account for a fifty-mile trip in a lizzy; also I might make mention of the fact that I played with my automatics—being overfond of such toys on certain occasions—and this was one of them. Of course, those birds couldn't know I had come along with them; they was too busy with the struggling girl when I swung aboard. So everything was rosy.

At length, they opened the door, and after stalling around a bit, one of them got out and leaving the door open beat it up the street. I guess he was going to get things set before he took the girl in. Well, I give him a chance. I like to do things right, and I waited to see which house he went into. Then I stepped around from the back of that car and slipped in. Yep, just slid right in and took the empty portable seat which he had left.

I get a laugh yet when I think of the expression on them lads' faces—the two of them, with the girl bound and gagged between them. There in the pale light of a dull moon, she sat, every muscle tense—her eyes wide and frightened.

But the two lads—regular tough birds they were too—no, their muscles weren't tense, they just sat there loose and staring, their eyes near popping out of their heads. Prepared! Why one of them held a gat right on his knees, but he never made no move to use it. Not that he got the chance, for I had rapped his knuckles with the barrel of my gun—not the butt but the barrel—and his gun just slid down his feet, to the floor. Of course, it's a bit risky using the barrel for such things; once in every so often the gun goes off, 'specially a light shooter like mine; but then you can't really bother about such little accidents; you can see where it would be his hard luck, not mine.

Say, there wasn't a yip out of either of them—their hands went up with such a goodwill that I thought they'd stick them through the top of the car. Very obliging they were, and I hadn't said a word yet. I just grinned. As for the lad in the front—well—I had the other cannon poked so hard into his spine that he was sitting straighter than he ever sat before in his life.

"Young lady," I says to the girl. "You got to help, as I can't keep more than half an eye on the driver—so just please close your left eye if he don't keep his hands well up and empty. That's the girl," I added as she nodded. "If you wink the left, I'll plug him. And don't be overparticular—I'm not of a sentimental nature."

Now most of this was only for effect. I didn't really think that the girl was able to help much, but it would give the chap in the front something to think about and make him behave. I didn't need much time because I work fast. Even this kind of a situation wasn't new to me.

In thirty seconds, I had them gunmen standing on the sidewalk, their backs to the car and their hands stretched toward the heavens, like they were listening to Walter Camp.

"Now," I says to the driver. "Let the hands drop and we'll go—back to where you came from. And pray that nothing happens to your car. For the first time that she slows down, I'll drill a hole in the back of your neck and do a little driving myself."

I didn't have to shout at him—you see, the window was down, and his attention was perfect.

And now for the first time, one of the lads on the pavement got his wind back and opened up.

"Better stay out of this," he warned me. "It will mean death for you—sure."

He spoke in broken English and his voice trembled with rage.

"All right Mr. Wolf," I chirped cheerfullike. "But Little Red Riding Hood and me will trot along. If she wants to come back to you later—why, well and good." Then turning to the driver I said sharp, "Let her go!"

And the driver being a man of sound judgment, we went.

I let him drive along for about a mile, and then I stop him and frisk him for a gun; he only has one, which shows a poor eye to the necessity of his profession. After that, we shoot along real merrily, and I give my attention to the girl. I guess it took about ten minutes to get her all straightened out, for I had to keep an eye on the driver, and take a look behind every once in a while. By the time I was finished, we were well down in Harlem.

Say, but that girl was scared; why, she didn't do nothing but hang close to me and keep her head up against my chest as she clung to my coat. And she was mighty little and mighty young too, I think, though I couldn't tell much about her, there in the dark of the cab. Somehow I felt almost like a father as I patted her little dark head and ran my fingers through her soft black locks. I could 'a laughed, but somehow I didn't. It certainly did seem strange to find myself putting my arm about a kid again. I don't know when I did it last—if I ever did it. And there I was, telling her that she was all right, and that I'd take care of her and—and— oh—just acting like a regular nut. What I should 'a been doing was questioning her and finding out just what her old man was worth and how much there would be in it for me. But somehow I didn't do anything but just try to comfort her like she was a baby.

After a bit, she calms down and gets out her handkerchief and snuffles a bit, but she never says a word, just clings to me like some frightened animal.

And then, when I'm about to ask her a few questions, the car suddenly comes to stop and I see that we have turned into Fifty-seventh Street and have stopped around the corner from Sixth Avenue.

"What's this, my lad?" I hail the driver. "Your memory is sorta weak, but mine ain't—come shake a leg and drive us around the block."

"This is as far as I go," he says sulkylike.

But at the same time there seems to be a note of determination in his voice.

"Oh, is it?" And I lean over and tickle him with the gat. "Come, I'll count just ten, and if we ain't off, then I'll give you the surprise of your life—and your death too." And I ain't bluffing either. I never bluff. And not being a chap what wastes time I start in counting:

"One, two, three, four, five." I run them up fast. I ain't no moving-picture director looking for suspense.

Would I have plugged him—well, he didn't wait to find out; he wasn't curious.

"Wait a minute, boss," he says. "I want to say something."

"Make it snappy—and if you ain't inclined to do what you're told, make it prayers."

"There's a cop down the street," he chirps. "If you don't get out here I'll holler to him."

It sounded like he meant business, too, though I couldn't get his game. Also, his English is pretty good.

"Call a cop! You!" I laugh. "Ten to twenty years for kidnapping—that's what you'll get."

Then he turns around sudden and looks at me.

"You ain't no Italian," he says, after a long look.

I only laugh. I'm too old in the game to take offense at such slander. Besides, there is something deadly earnest in the way he speaks.

"I guess you ain't in on the game. If you was, you wouldn't ask me to drive to that house, and you wouldn't go within miles of it yourself," he says half aloud.

"I wanta go home—I wanta go home!" The girl suddenly flings both arms about my neck. "Just around the corner!" She points down the street. Her voice is low—hysterical—foreign.

I shake the girl off and give him the once-over, and then I poke him with the gun.

"Now drive," I says. "Or I'll find a way to make you and the car move so fast that it will surprise both of you. Six, seven, eight—" I start in where I left off. I'm mighty sore and mean business—besides, I can see the cop coming down the street.

And then the girl suddenly takes things out of my hands. She opens the door and slips out, and is around on Sixth Avenue before I know she's gone. That settles the argument with the driver—I'm out and after her. One last look at the car, and the number is firmly in my mind as it goes rapidly down the street.

I'm only about ten seconds behind as she turns into Sixth Avenue, and then I swing around the corner myself and stop dead. There ain't a person in sight; the street is quiet and deserted.

It didn't seem possible that she could have made the length of that block in that short time, but I took a run down to the corner of Fifty-sixth Street to make sure. I could see well down the street—clean to Seventh Avenue—and there wasn't a soul in sight. I sure was stumped. She must be hiding in one of the hallways along the avenue. But why? Anyway, I'd take a look. And just then along came a cop. Now I ain't afraid of any cop—not me. But they sure ask embarrassing questions, and I don't stand in good with most of the dicks. I've made good when they have failed so many times. So I just loitered around and played safe. And this bull is a good-natured fellow, who smiles at me and says, it's a fine night, as he goes by. He's trying all the doors and is mightily slow about it, and all the time I'm expecting him to come across the girl. But I just stand there and stretch and look around; then I light a butt and walk slowly about.

But that cop was a gentle trusting soul, and pretty soon he shoots across the street and passes down the next block; and he's faster there because there ain't no one to see if he tries all the store doors. Things look good, and I decide to have a peek.

There were several dark entrances to the flats above the stores—dirty, ill-smelling hallways that I'd have to look into. I just come out of one of them when I hear a voice, and there she was, popping up from behind a newsstand that had been pushed flat up against the building for the night.

"What are you doing there?" I says, some relieved and some mad.

"Oh—has he gone? I was frightened," she whispered as she come timidly out and clutched me by the arm. My, but she was a slim, delicate little thing.

"Who went?" I asked. "The lad with the car—yes, he went, all right." I still felt a bit sore about that.

"Oh no—not him—the policeman."

"The policeman," I exclaimed. "Why, what would you be afraid of him for? He'd be a good friend of yours—anyway."

"Oh—no, no. Uncle says no. I have had a lot of trouble since I have been in America. At the convent, things were so different, and I was so happy."

"How long have you been over?" I asked, to try and get her mind working easy; she was beginning to tremble again.

"Over?"

"Yes—in America?"

"Oh!" she said. "Three weeks—nearly."

"Is that all? You speak mighty fine English—almost as good as mine."

Why, there wasn't hardly any accent at all, just enough to make it sound attractive.

"I always knew the English, I think—my mother was an American—she died when I was a little girl."

She kind of sniffled a little.

"Never mind," I said. "You'll be with your father in another few minutes. It's your father that lives here?"

I paused; we were in front of that same brownstone front again—the one she had run out of earlier in the evening.

"I have no father—he died—a little while ago—and I came here—to my uncle."

I looked down at her again as we mounted the steps; she seemed so young.

"How old are you?" I asked. Fourteen, I guessed.

"Nineteen—almost twenty," she told me.

I whistled softly. Well, we never can tell, and the next minute I was ringing the doorbell. A moment later, an electric light flashed on above us. I felt that someone was observing us from within, and then the door was flung open.

Two men, fully dressed, whom I took for servants, stood one on either side of the door, and a tough-looking pair of citizens they were. They looked like they'd cut your throat in a minute. But that didn't bother me; a minute would have been too long—I'd 'a got them both—besides, just at present it seemed to me that these birds would be on my side of the fence.

And then, as we stepped inside and the door closed behind us, a stout man of about fifty, all dolled up in a trick bathrobe that would knock your eye out for color display, came down the stairs.

"Nita!" he yells. Then both clinch, and everything is jake.

After that I'm forgotten, except for those two rough-looking lads who watch me mighty careful—and what's more, I'm watching them too. There's a lot of Italian

flung back between uncle and niece, and then I guess he starts in to question her; then they clinch again, and she beats it up the stairs.

Then the fat lad takes a tumble to himself and comes across the hall and takes me by the hand.

"The señorita calls you friend—she has told me of your chivalry, and I cannot thank you enough."

With that, he drags me by his cold, clammy hand into his library, and we both sit.

For a couple of minutes he just sits and looks at me and his smile grows bigger and bigger, and then fades and comes again. But he ain't fooling me none. Of course, I'm the light-haired boy with him now. I can see that, but behind that smile I can also see that he's a tough egg. His smile is broad enough, but then, I've seen too much of life. This bird I spot for a bad actor. And he's a buck with uncertain age, one of them half-bald fronts; he might be ten years older than what I think him, and then again he might be ten years younger.

So he has me tell him the whole story of the night's events, and he smiles some more, and I gather that he's thinking up an explanation of some kind. Then I pull a wisecrack, and I see that he's puzzled.

"You don't have to explain to me," I tell him. "I ain't interested unless—unless I got to be."

Well, that took the smile clean off his slate, for I suppose he was hatching up a barrel of lies. Then he starts to walk up and down the room. After a bit, he stops and looks down at me.

"You don't want to know about this—why—and why?" was the best he could get out.

"Not a word. It came out all right and I'm satisfied, if you are."

That fetches him up fine, and the smile comes back, and I see that he's getting ready to dismiss me without a yip. But he don't yet; he rings a bell and orders some refreshments—which is some pretty fair wine and a half-dozen slim sandwiches.

"You are a remarkable man—a real gentleman," he starts in to make a speech. "It is not often today that we find young men, who for the love of adventure and for their pride in the strong for the weak, succor women in distress. I wish I could reward you, but a gentleman cannot—"

And that's where I bust in on him. I don't want him to commit himself, and I see no reason why he should waste all them flowery thoughts. So I up and give him another shock.

"My reward for tonight's services—now that you suggest it—is exactly two hundred and fifty dollars. Fifty for the night's work and two hundred for the successful finish. I generally charge a little more at the end, but seeing how I came in uninvited—"

But I didn't get any further,

"Am I to understand that you wish money—money for what you did?" And his eyes grew big, and his wine slopped over his glass a little. I had touched him this time, for the foreign accent crept into his voice for the first time, and I knew that he was the brother of Nita's father. Before that, I wasn't sure which side of the fence he was on.

"Sure," I said. "You don't take me for no Sir Lunchlot, do you? This is business with me." And to keep him from having a stroke of apoplexy, I tell him my trade.

At first, I think that he's trying to hold out on me, but then I see that he's just thinking. His eyes go up and down, and his mouth too, for that matter; then his eyes get small, and he looks closely at me. Whatever he sees don't start a row, for he turns and, ringing a bell, tells the chap that comes to the door to send the señorita down. I get that much even if it is Italian.

And in about five minutes she comes in, and she's a wow. I didn't get a good look at her before, and I tell you it's a lucky thing that I ain't romantic. She sure was one swell-looking dame. Even me, a hardened citizen like me—yep, I was nearly ready to take ten dollars off the bill if the fat lad had suggested it. She sure looked grand, all fixed up.

But he didn't make a crack about money; he just talked to her for a bit and they seemed to be having a bit of a row about me. At length he gives a wave of his hand that she shall go, but she don't—she just stays there. He says something, and she stamps her foot, so I see that she ain't so timid when she's in her own house. For a minute, I get the idea that they are arguing about the price, and she don't look so beautiful, for I can't tell which side she's taking.

At length the old bird gives in on some point and turns to me.

"We'll pay you what you ask and—perhaps much more."

Things are looking up. I just nod.

"Yes," he goes on. "There will be money for you if you are as brave as the señorita says you are—but you must be very brave."

Now he's hitting my gait and talking turkey. So I just smile and tell him:

"Show me the coin, and I'll make the boys at Valley Forge look like pikers."

Then his shrewd eyes went over me again, and his lips opened wide and his teeth showed, but no smile came this time—just a bit of a dental display—he couldn't make a go of the smile because he had forgotten to open his eyes wide enough. Then he took another drink and without further preliminaries opened up; yep, opened up considerable. But he talked so fast that I couldn't get for sure which was the bull and which was the real thing.

"It is this way," he makes a break. "The señorita, Nita Gretna, is my niece. She is my brother's child; Michel Gretna who, if he had lived, would have been recognized as the world's greatest scientist. Well, he made a formula—a formula of great value. The result of it will someday—I hope—startle the world. It is for his daughter—the glory, the honor and the money. To a friend who was his assistant, he entrusted this sheet of paper; this young man, Manual Sparo, brought it here to America. Certain things about it were not quite clear; Manual would work on it—perfect it before he married the señorita and turned it over to us. And when all was ready and the great moment at hand, enemies who desire this paper more than life—great powerful enemies—fell upon him and bore him away."

"Then they got the formula?" I said. Of course, I felt that they didn't, but he paused so long that it seemed up to me to show a little interest. And this talk of marriage was sudden.

"No—they got it not," he said backward. "Wild horses would not tear the secret from him, and the formula was hidden away. Tonight, the señorita went out in answer to a message which she thought came from him. She was indiscreet and

should have consulted me, though she says she could not find me. What they would have done with her, I do not know; frighten her, perhaps."

"But they talked of torturing me to make him tell—" the girl started, but the uncle stopped her.

"Tut—tut," he said. "You were frightened and nervous." He turned to me again. "We will pay you much for that formula."

"Do you want me to know what the formula is about?" I got to admit I was curious; it's as well to know how valuable your services are. Besides, I didn't quite like the whole story—it sounded fishy, at least parts of it.

"I do not think that that is necessary. For the paper we will pay much money," he repeated.

"How much is that?"

I don't take much stock in promises.

He thinks a while.

"A thousand dollars," he says at length.

Well, he might have said ten thousand; it wouldn't 'a made no difference to me. I don't work on that kind of speck.' I draw a regular salary. So I up and give him an earful:

"That may be all right," I say, "but I have a regular charge. Fifty dollars a day, and five hundred bonus when I deliver the goods; also, I am willing to take all sorts of chances, but if I get pinched, it's up to you to hire the best lawyer that money can buy—also, I get thirty bucks a day for every day I spend in jail. And for every man I croak—mind you, I ain't a killer, but sometimes a chap's got to turn a gun—I get two hundred dollars flat. It ain't that I don't count this as part of my services, but there's a certain nervous shock to it—and besides, they're your enemies and should be cheap at that price. Also, your game must be strictly honest—I ain't no crook."

I tell you his eyes sure did open wide enough now—wide enough to pop out of his head, almost. He sure was hearing a trunkful, and I could tell that I wasn't falling none in his estimation. I generally let the killing business go by the boards until the time comes, but this time I didn't. You see, if I had to hunt around Italian joints, there was almost sure to be some gunplay and—and I got to protect my interests.

After a bit he says:

"You make this quite a business, but a man would be a fool to sign up to any such agreement."

"Oh, you don't have to sign nothing," I tell him. "When you agree, we just shake hands like a couple of gentlemen. And that's that."

His smile this time was a real one.

"But that protects you not at all," he twists up his English again.

"It gives me all the protection I want. It makes me feel that I've done the right thing."

"But if one don't play fair, what then?"

"Then..." I rubbed my chin. "That's the only point I forgot to tell you. You see, that only happened once and—but why go into unpleasant details; let's just say that they buried him anyway."

This time he actually rubbed his hands together, and chuckled. These foreign gents sure do have a real appreciation of art.

And then, when he's all set to agree to everything, the girl suddenly breaks in with an Italian marathon. I don't think he agrees with what she says, but she turns to me anyway and says:

"Uncle is doing all in his power to recover that paper of my father's, and now it is my turn. I will shake you by the hand, and I will pay you for this service; it is my turn to do something, Señor—" She pauses, and knowing the proper thing to do I get up and bow.

"Mack," I says. "Terry Mack."

And with that she puts out her little hand and mitts me.

It was near four when I got home, and nearer five before I got to bed. Yep, I sat up there in my big easy chair and killed nearly a double deck of butts; I had something to think about, you'll admit.

In the first place, even with the long talk I later had with the fat bird, whose whole moniker was Gustave Gretna, I didn't get any information worth a hill of beans. He made it clear enough that he didn't want the police to know anything about the game. He said if they did, why, the Italian government would mix up in it and make him turn over the formula for about one-tenth of what it was really worth, and he didn't want his niece to lose all that money. I also gathered that she was worth considerable change in her own name. But with real dope, that lad wasn't there at all. Oh, he talked a lot, but he didn't say anything, and of course it was my game to look wise and act like I could settle everything in no time, which was probably what I would do once I got started.

As for the girl, well, she puzzled me; yes, and bothered me some too. When the uncle went upstairs to get the two hundred and fifty bucks for me, which he kept in the house, she spilled out some conversation that even rattled me.

"I am not going to marry this Manual Sparo," she tells me lowlike. "I think I am going to marry someone else—oh—I hope I am. He is an American and—and I love him." With that, she kind of ducks her head and turns red.

"Good for you," was the best that I could pull off—I didn't quite like the way she looked up at me through them thick lashes of hers.

"Yes," she goes on. "But I don't know if he loves me—what do you think?" And she turns them big, black glims of hers full on me. "He's so brave and so handsome and—but I have known him such a short time." Then she breaks off sudden, for her uncle is coming down the stairs.

"Terry," she whispers, leaning over and laying a little hand upon my arm. "You are hired by me, you know, and I want you to promise that you'll see me once every day—without fail."

With that, her uncle trots into the room, and I must say he was a welcome sight.

Now, that's part of what I was thinking over, alone in my room along about four-thirty in the morning. She loved someone else—and that someone was an American—and was brave—and she lived in a convent all her life and had never been out of the house alone since she came to this country—and—and she had called me Terry. Well, I didn't need no more than three guesses. That dame had fallen for me, and fallen hard.

Of course, there wasn't nothing so terrible strange about that, except that I'm off dames—they don't go well with my business—good or bad—women don't have no place in my life. And yet as I stretched myself and looked my reflection over in the glass, something seemed to say: "Why not?" A home in sunny Italy, an open garden beneath—but rats—I snuffed out my last butt and climbed into bed. No more thinking then. I don't do nothing but sleep once I hit the covers; I used to plan then, but queer ideas come to you in bed—great and glorious ideas—but when you turn them over in the morning they ain't worth a thing—you just find them a waste of time.

But the next morning, when I have breakfast, I do a bit of real brain work. You see, Bud brings me my coffee and chops—Bud is my man, my valet, my chauffeur, my assistant—in fact, Bud is the whole works; not much of a thinker, but he can carry out instructions to the big T.

The first thing I figure on doing is having a talk with that taxi lad who drove me and the girl the night before; he was a real funny citizen, and the way he had acted bothered me some. Of course, you might think that would be a tough job, but not for me; it would be easy. I know the ropes in the underworld and the way to get my hooks on these lads. You see, I had the number of the car, a fake number to be sure, but then me and the bird what drove it would know and that was enough.

Along about two o'clock, which is about an hour after I finish breakfast, I trot down to Larkin's Saloon in the Thirties. Now, this Larkin sells booze, but he's also a dope peddler. I've done him more than one good turn because I can use him a lot, and he's always ready to turn a trick for me, if none of the boys—his boys, that's what he calls the crooks—suffer by it. Larkin has a suspicion that I'm a big gun in the dope traffic, and since it leaves a good impression on him, I let him have his think—yes, and help it along. And this same Larkin has got a system of communication that ain't been beat from here to Frisco. So I brace Larkin.

"Larkin," I says, leaning over the little desk in that tiny private room of his, just off the corner of the old bar, "Larkin, I'm looking for a gink what drove a car last night—number 19964—fake, I guess."

Larkin don't say nothing, but just screws up his face and wiggles his fingers, which I know is the sign to slip over the regular fee, so I dig and produce the ready.

"I can only do my part, Mr. Smith." Larkin makes it a point of calling everybody Smith—it don't make no difference how well he knows you. "The word will go about, and of course I can guarantee that no hurt will come to the—the boy?"

"Absolutely. I'm looking for information with money, not force—at least when I use your system, Larkin. I always play fair with you."

He just nods.

"You may expect him at eleven, if he's alive. In my little room, eh—that'll be ten dollars more." His palm is itchy, and though he keeps his hand by his side, his fingers go nervously back and forth.

"I'll pay now," I tell him. "You can give it back to me if he don't show up." I knew that old boy's weakness.

"Good," said he, and taking the money, we both walked out of the little room. He ain't much of a talker, is Larkin, but he's clever, or maybe just shrewd in his own way.

When I leave that joint about ten minutes later, I see the number 19964 in small figures over his cash register. But it was big enough to read, and I knew that that same number would be in more than a hundred places within the next two or three hours. It was so that Larkin worked his system; the chap what drove the car would see it and know what it meant. Larkin had called, and he would answer. Yes, there had been something in that chauffeur's eyes which told me he would come—I couldn't be mistaken about them same eyes.

After that, I take a bit of a walk, and then I beat it up to the brownstone house on Fifty-sixth, partly to keep my promise to the girl, and partly to see if I couldn't unbutton something of real value out of her Uncle Gus. And that bimbo meets me with a sure-enough startler. Señorita Nita had gone away!

Suspicious! I should say I was; if my face ever betrayed anything, it betrayed it then. But I like to think it didn't; I have a regular poker face and am mighty proud of it.

"Where has she gone?"

This seemed a natural enough question, and I put it to him suddenlike.

But he didn't show any more expression than an oyster.

"Off to Lake—but there, she's away for a rest—Manual and she are to be married soon. I might as well tell you that the gang of cutthroats who were after that formula took fright last night and Michel has returned. You believe me, of course."

And he pulled that last sentence louder than any of the rest; and to me it sounded like he was giving it as a signal or warning to someone listening. But he smiled all over as he watched me closely. I could see that he didn't expect me to believe him, and wouldn't believe me if I said I did.

"No—I don't get you," I says. "What's the lay?"

"It is enough that you should know that everything is now all right. The formula is back—your appearance of last night was of great value. Nita is pleased and has left this for you."

He brought forth a wad and counted a number of bills out on the table.

But I wasn't watching him. I was looking over his shoulder, and I was sure that the curtains moved behind him and that someone peered in. There was something intensive and strained in the whole atmosphere of that room, and I knew, just as well as if I had seen it, that a gun was behind that curtain.

"Ah—you don't believe." He stretched out the money toward me. "Will this five hundred make you believe and—and forget? Nita and I will not need you now—you understand—we are paying you this for silence."

The constant use of that plural "we" grated on my nerves. I guess it was done to hand me the impression that his niece and he were acting in consort, and that she was all right, but it hit me exactly opposite. But then the waving curtain with death probably lurking behind it! It was best to play the game into his hands.

"For five hundred dollars I'll believe anything," I chirped with a grin. "Trot over the coin. When I wish to be, I am as silent as the grave."

He fell for it, and why wouldn't he, after the way I had represented myself last night. I was nothing more than a gunman in his estimation. It was quite evident that he didn't see the ethics of my profession and the good that I did—but I made up my mind that he'd see it later. You see, he had forgotten one thing: I had been hired by the girl—not him. He'd change that grin of his when he seen how a real gentleman played the game.

Then he up and patted me on the back.

"I knew you for a sensible rascal," he said. "Someday we may use you again—Nita and I."

So he bid me good night, and it was all I could do to keep from backing out of the room. I tell you it took real nerve to turn and walk to the front door and then go carelessly down the steps. I sure had a longing to put a bullet through that curtain. But I had five hundred dollars, and a mighty mean suspicion—also, I knew for a certainty that I was going to do that girl some good yet. As for her Uncle Gus—well, of course I didn't believe a word that hummingbird told me.

There was plenty to think about as I went down the street; there were the girl's last words to me, of the previous night, about seeing her every day. Did that just mean that she had fallen for me, or did it mean more? Did it mean that she was growing suspicious about her uncle? Well, I like to think that it meant both.

And there was more than just a feeling of money, and a feeling of pride to make good to the girl who had hired me. For one thing, I never fail—for another thing—well, somehow I just seemed to want to know that that little girl was all right. If I had 'a been sure of my ground and really thought it would 'a done her any good, I'd 'a thought nothing of forcing the truth out of her uncle or—yes—of bumping him over the hurdles. And the gun behind the curtain wouldn't 'a made no difference neither. I knew the gun was there, just as well as I knew that that fat crooked Italian had lied to me.

For the first time in my life I'm worried, and what's more I'm followed. I look at my watch; it ain't but five o'clock and there won't be nothing doing until eleven. Of course, I could shake off the lad what's following me—there ain't nothing to that—but I think it will leave things clearer for me if I can send him back to Uncle Gus with a good report. There ain't really nothing for me to do. I could go and search the house in the Bronx, of course, but if I had thought there would be any chance in that direction, I'd 'a been up there before I went home in the morning. I know that's useless; that gang was out of the dump twenty minutes after I lit out in the taxi—any cluck would know that.

So I play a high-class joint for a feed and spot a dapper little foreigner, sitting over in one corner, as my meat. But I don't give him a tumble; just act like a lad who was out for a good time—blowing in Uncle Gus's jack. I gotta laugh when I think how snug they're feeling and I figure along about midnight I'll have my fingers in their pie up to my wrists. Yes—all I want is plenty of leeway, and then, when I get my earful, there sure is going to be some fireworks.

And I'm right; that lad ain't got the sticking power. He follows me home, and twenty minutes later, when I look out the window, that street is as deserted as a poetry graveyard.

It's near eleven when I slip out of my apartment window—which is on the ground floor for just such occasions—and Bud meets me with the car around the

corner. Away we go to Larkin's, and pulling up about a block away, I hop out and beat it for the saloon.

My bird's there; Larkin gives me the high sign as soon as I bust in the door. Into his little private room I slide and shut the door. My man looks up—a little frightened, but smiling just the same.

"Good!" I says. "The system worked."

"Larkin wanted me to see you and—and here I am." I could see he wasn't going to be none too cordial.

"Know me?" I sit down.

He just shows his teeth and nods his head.

"How deep were you in last night?" I ask.

"Deep enough," he answers.

"Want to double-cross?" I ain't going to waste time if he seems agreeable.

"Not me," he grins.

Then I look at him close.

"Snowbird, ain't you?" I shoot at him sudden. Those eyes couldn't fool me. It was those same eyes which had told me he would answer Larkin's call—Larkin was pretty well looked up to by the hopheads.

"What's that to you?" His eyes blaze a bit and the smile does a fadeout.

"Hard guy, eh?"

"Dick, eh?" he retorts.

"Ask Larkin—you know better."

"Did!"

I see he's a man of few words and we ain't getting no place, so I open up on him, tell him what's under my hat; that if he don't give me the information I want, I'll see that Larkin cuts off his supply. The thing registers a bit, and I see him get white under the gills, so I guess Larkin has tipped him off that I'm a big gun in the traffic. But I don't get much out of him; I see that he's in deadly fear of this Uncle Gus.

"He'd kill me in a minute," he says, his eyes wide with terror. "All I'll say is that he used to run a fruit stand down in Mott Street—just before the girl come, he fixed up the house on Fifty-sixth Street and then—no! My God! No! He'd find out who told and—no—not another word."

He wasn't smiling no more now; his face had turned a chalky white, and his teeth were chattering. In another minute, he had gone all to pieces like his kind do—he was between the two fears: of Larkin cutting his supply and Uncle Gus cutting his throat. Changed? Why, you wouldn't know him for the same man—cringing and whining and kneeling at my feet. But nothing came out of him, and then he suddenly turns, and I see him roll up his sleeve and give his arm a long scratch with a safety pin; then into the blood went a few drops from a tiny bottle. Blooey! Just like that he was himself again—and any chance I had, which wasn't much, was gone. But I was working on another idea.

"A hundred dollars for the information—where is the girl?" I rip out quick.

"The girl—again—"

Then he stopped short, but he eyed the money which I held in my hand longingly. But he wouldn't open up, so I pulled my best and last card; time was passing and something was telling me that the girl needed me.

"I tell you how you can avoid all trouble—with the gang and with Larkin," I told him. "Give me the name of one of the gang. One that knows all, and one that I can reach tonight—now. I'll get the information out of him just the same as I would have gotten it out of you, if I hadn't passed my word to Larkin." Oh, I felt like shoving my gun down his throat and getting the truth out of him. But my word had gone to Larkin and—well—I couldn't break it. I know that don't sound like common sense, but we'll call it my weakness. Terry Mack's word is good, and weak or not, it always will be good.

I see I had him interested, and I took out three hundred and offered it to him. Then I told him if this Gustave was sure to find out everything, why, he'd find out that it wasn't him that told, but the other fellow.

"Ain't there some fellow—just give me his name and address—just one who knows what's going on tonight—perhaps you have an enemy—someone what done you dirt." And that caught him.

He grabs the bankroll and spills a mouthful.

"Daggo Joe," he says, and gives me an address which is less than five blocks away. "He's there now alone—and will be there until six-thirty, when he goes on duty."

"Good," I eye him, "and if you have lied to me, why I'll hunt you up and make you eat every one of them bills and then—then I'll cut them out of you again." Which may sound like a lot of wind, but it was the kind that he would understand best, and I don't know but what I meant it.

With that, I beat it over to the Thirties and step up and down in front of Daggo Joe's for a few minutes. You can't fool these birds and give them a surprise visit; they have a way of knowing you're coming. And this Daggo Joe knew, for I seen a figure at the window which I spotted for his, and then the light went out in that window. But I want him to know that I'm coming and coming alone—he won't beat it—not him; he'll stay and play it foxy on me—kind of get revenge for the previous night. So eleven-thirty finds me entering the dusty old building and climbing the stairs to the third floor, where this Daggo Joe parks his noble person.

Of course, my electric flash covers every jump of them hallways; there ain't a chance for a lad to jump me in the dark—also, my gun is mighty convenient. When I reach his door, I tap lightly, and there ain't no answer, but I know that he's listening in there, and I know that he takes me for a soft one announcing myself like that.

I don't waste much time, but try the door—just a turn of the knob, and it gives—the door ain't even locked. Do you get the game—well, I do. He wants me to walk right in so he can croak me off. It nearly makes me laugh—the simplicity of the whole thing; why he's almost like a kid.

And I know just where he's standing, as if he told me so himself; he's behind that door, and he's got a blackjack or a knife in his mitt. And then I start to do what any dick would do, and just what Daggo Joe figures I'll do—push the door open slowly. That's what ninety-nine in a hundred would do—play the game very cautious.

So I push the door very softly, and this Joe waits behind it, all smiles, I guess. Then I suddenly up with my foot and give that door a kick—a real healthy kick. If I do say so myself, that's the only way to enter a room what you got your doubts on.

Bang! Crash! You could hear his head connect with that door in one heavy thud. After that, there was nothing to it. I had my flash out and my gun on him, and the door closed and locked before he knew what had happened. It was five minutes before he recovered enough to speak. He didn't fall to the floor—I guess his head was too thick for that—but he slumped up against the wall and stayed slumped while I lit the gas.

"Howdy, Joe," I says, as I took the blackjack from his useless fingers and chucked it under the bed. And then, while he was recovering his manners, I dumped some water from the pitcher over his head and watched him swim ashore.

"I kill you yet," he says in a feeble voice, as he clutched at his aching head.

I could have laughed, but I didn't; there wasn't time. I saw now that that duck was able to talk and understand me, which was more to the point. I wasn't there for any fooling—not me—he had information that I wanted, and I hadn't passed my word that there'd be no force used.

"Joe," I says, whipping my gun into his stomach. "I want you to blow the whole game—first, where's the girl—quick!"

There was nothing gentle about me then—I'm a different man when it comes to business—that's why I'm a success. I always play that the end justifies the means.

"I tell you nothing!" He pulls himself up straight and folds his arms across his chest. "Your girl, eh—pretty soon they be through with her—and she my girl—the—"

But he never finished that string of dirty epithets. I up with the butt of my gun and gave him a swipe across the face that made his lordly air look mighty cheap. And right here come the tactics that you may not agree with. You may question the ethics, but the results are good. Poor morals perhaps, but good, sound, common sense.

It ain't pretty to tell, so I'll skip over it. But I beat and choked the truth out of him, anyway.

His tongue was hanging out, and he was black in face and pretty near gone when he nodded he'd tell. And tell he did.

"You'd torture that girl," I said. "And I'll torture the whole truth out of you," and I thought of that poor little kid and meant what I said. I don't bluff, and that gink knew it when he opened up.

It was in spasmodic jerks, and between the real fear of me and the imaginary fear of Gustave, he give me the lay of the game. Here's what I get:

In the first place Gustave ain't her uncle at all—his real handle is Boro, and him and her uncle ran a fruit market together down on Mott Street. The uncle had already kicked off when the word came that Nita was coming to America. This Boro got hold of the letter, fixed up the house, and posed as the uncle, whom Nita had never seen. It wasn't hard; he used to write all the letters for her uncle—that bird couldn't read nor write, and didn't feel overproud about letting his family know that America hadn't done much for him.

Nita comes and falls heavy; then comes this Manual Sparo, and things ain't so good; he spots the game at once. But he's a bit of a crook himself and loves Nita, so he offers not to spill the beans if he can marry Nita and connect with half of the formula money with Boro, the fake uncle. The uncle agrees, but Nita ducks on the

marriage, and Boro, getting frightened that Manual may cash in on the formula, kidnaps him and tortures him to tell where he's hidden the paper.

Enough of that—he won't tell, and Boro hits on the plan of torturing Nita—for deep down in his black heart, this Manual really loves the girl.

That would hold me for a while—Joe didn't know what the formula was about, but he knew there was much money in it. A final shake and he tells me where the girl is hid. And that stumped me—she was right in that house on Fifty-sixth Street, and they were dead set on getting the formula that night.

The dirty swine; I just looked down at him—if he'd 'a smiled then I'd—but I had seen to it that there wasn't enough left of his map to smile. So I just cracked him over the head once—one good one that would put him to sleep for the rest of the night. I didn't want him to come butting in on the grand finale. Leaving him lying on the floor, I beat it; locked the door on the outside and, slipping the key in my pocket, turned the corner and whistled for Bud.

We sure made time uptown. It would be too late to call for help, and besides, I didn't figure I'd want none. When I left the car on Sixth Avenue, about a block away, I said to Bud:

"Give me an hour, and then if you don't get word from me, why—send the police—tell them it's murder."

"Police! Police!" Bud's mouth opened wide.

"Yes—police," I says. "It's the first time you ever had that kind of an order, but obey it to the letter—let the police know and then beat it."

Not that I thought that there was a chance of failure—I never fail—but that girl was trusting me and I was— But I turned my back on Bud and beat it down Fifty-seventh Street. It was like I was a bit ashamed of showing weakness.

So I pick my distance and make my approach from the other street. I duck through an alleyway, hop a high fence and land in the backyard of the house next door to the gang's. I got to figure out the best way to make it. Oh, I'm going in all right if I have to bust straight through the big French windows in the front with a gun in either mitt. But that's my last stand. I ain't one that goes in for dramatics; not me. I got the two big guns and one little one—the little one I always have—it's a sleeve gun and is used in an emergency; also, I have my flash and am ready for business.

I guess I take about five minutes studying all of them rear windows: I want to make sure that there ain't anyone spying out the back; it don't seem likely, but then I don't take no chances. There are only two lights—one high up which you can hardly see—the other one comes from a window about seven foot from the ground. I think it's the kitchen. Now, there is a water pipe running up to the top light, but I ain't no acrobat. Another look around, and I jump the adjoining fence and land in the yard of the brownstone house.

Edging up close to the back of the house, where a lad at the upper windows couldn't see me without raising one and looking out, I try to peer in the kitchen window, and it's a success; the shade is up just enough to look in under. There's one man in there, a dirty-looking bird, and he's in his shirt-sleeves and fiddling around the coal stove.

Now, there ain't no trick ways of entering houses without people knowing it when they are awake—least I don't know of none. Open windows are nice, but you

don't find them in a joint like this one. I'm good with a gun, and in my line that's near enough, but I might say that I have brains too and know how crooks think. For another thing, I ain't a lad what waits around all night for what is called an opening. I don't spend the rest of the night planning when some client's life is at stake, not me; I earn my money and act.

So—I just up with my fist and knock lightly on that kitchen window. If that boy goes for help, I'll be in that window before he ever comes back, for there ain't no bars on it. But if he ain't scared and uses his think box, he'll get to figuring that only a friend would knock. And that's what he done—he comes to the window and looks out.

It's dark, and he can't see nothing but my outline, which I stand there and let him see. Then I lift my hand cautiously like and signal him to lift the window. He stands undecided a minute, and then plays into my hand—he opens the window, but I ain't altogether in luck, for he don't stick his head out. He whispers something in Italian. I don't get what it is, but I make a sucking noise which he can take to keep quiet, and I hand him up a slip of paper which I pull out of my pocket. Out comes his hand to grasp it, and then—with all my strength I take hold of his wrist and pull. Say, there ain't a shout out of him as he comes out that window. But there is one unfortunate circumstance which I had hoped to avoid. I don't figure enough on the play of his heels—they crack that windowsill some wallop, but no glass breaks. He don't holler none as he lands; guess he's too surprised, but he sure did kick up the woodwork. One belt on the head, and the cry dies on his lips, and I'm up and over that sill and into the kitchen. Down comes the shade again; from an upper window someone might see the light and the shadow of the limp body on the ground below.

Just a jump and a brace and a swing, and I'm standing in that kitchen; believe me, I didn't waste no time. I wasn't going to get caught half in and half out of that window. Now, if any of them lads wanted to take a potshot at me, well and good—I was ready. Let them come. I was now in a position to return the compliment; in fact, I was perfectly willing to start the show. A fellow don't have to take a shot at me to arouse my interest; you don't have to give me a good moral reason to shoot. Show me the man, and if he's drawing on me and is a man what really needs a good killing, why, I'm the boy to do it.

Well, luck is with me or with them; you can take your choice, for I ain't dodging no gunplay, but there ain't a sound in the house. I'm inside, without anyone being the wiser.

I stand around for several minutes, though, to make sure, and then I hear a tap tap of feet in the room above me—just pounding on the ceiling—slow, like slippered feet that were treading heavily up and down in the same place. It would stop and then go on again, but listen as I would by the kitchen door, there was no other sound of life in the whole house. Still, that didn't mean so much. It was an old house and the walls were thick, and sound don't carry much—but it sure was a deathly stillness and that tap, tap, tap just above me.

I took a look around the kitchen to see if I could find out why that lad was down there, and I did—my heart missed a beat, which is something for my heart to do, I can tell you. What had I seen—well, I had seen two pokers flaming red hot, there in the open stove. Now, if it had 'a been one, it might have been there by accident,

just dropped in when I knocked on the window. But two, I knew they were being heated for some purpose, and it was the realization of that purpose which made my heart give a sudden beat and a quick jump. The pokers were to be used to torture the girl and... A sudden scream—a woman's scream of terrible agony or fear came sharply through that heavy silence. I was out in the hall in a moment—it was Nita who had given that piercing shriek.

But I didn't lose my head none. Like a cat I went sneaking up the heavy wooden stairs, my sneakered feet making no sound there in the darkness. Oh, I had my flash, but I didn't use it. I ain't much stuck on suicide.

But the cry don't come again, and I reach the second-floor landing. I grope about in the darkness, following the banister along the hall, for that cry had come from someplace near the top of the house. Then, when I'm about to start that second flight, the tap, tap, tap comes again, and I stop dead listening. The sound is right behind me—just about in the middle of that hallway. Then I turn and catch a tiny speck of light creeping under a doorway. I sneak toward it carefully and listen again—the tapping stopped, but I hear a moaning now, and then a feeble foreign voice.

I push my hand along, feeling for the knob, and my fingers strike a panel—a sliding panel—just a tiny one, like they have in the speakeasies. I work it slowly just a crack and peer in. The room is only lit by a candle, which stands on an old table right in the center of the room; the rest of the place is bare, and then—came the groan again, and I see a figure laying on the hard boards, in one corner of the room.

There ain't a spot in the room for a cat to hide in, so I turn the knob; the door opens and I walk in, shutting it gently behind me. One look and a flash of light tells me that there ain't no cause to fear that gent lying in the corner—his hours are on the run; just another groan, and I don't need to be a doctor to know that that guy is going out.

Right off the bat I spot him as Manual Sparo, and I'm right. He half turns his head, and his eyes are glassy and he don't seem to be sure if there is someone in the room with him or not; then he mutters something, but I don't get him.

"Speak English," I says. I'm none too gentle because it won't do him any good now, and if he has anything to say I want to get it before he slips over.

"I'll tell—I'll tell," he says, in good English. "The girl don't know—I wouldn't tell her. The formula's in one of Boro's books—downstairs—third shelf—Modern Italian Poets. I tell you the girl don't know—spare her."

And his voice is getting louder with the final effort. Partly because I'm afraid he'll spill my chances all over the house, and partly because I fell sorry for the poor cuss, I up and tell him that I'm the rescue party.

At first he don't understand, but then things kind of get into his head and he grabs me by the hand. He knows I'm friendly, and he takes me for his brother back in Naples. So half in English and half in Italian, he gives me a lot of chatter. But I gather enough to learn this: They had carted him down from the Bronx early that morning, and they told him that they would torture the girl if he didn't tell. He wouldn't tell, and they sent the girl in to him; and he started to tell her where the formula was, and then he changed his mind. Some of the birds were trying to listen outside and got enough to make them think that he had told her—that was

about two hours ago. He guessed that they were torturing her, and he had been knocking on the floor with his bare feet—he was ready to blow the game and save the girl, which I don't think would have helped her none.

And you should 'a seen him; his whole body had been hacked at, and his feet and hands burnt to the bone; he had grit, that boy—they didn't get nothing out of him, with all their deviltry. Yep, he had grit and bullheaded stupidity.

Now, you see, I just about did the right thing when I choked the truth out of that murdering villain a short while before—this was no crowd to fool with.

"How many are there in the house?" I said, lifting up his head so that he could breathe better. "How many?" I repeated again a bit louder, and then I look down at him.

There I'd been, listening to his story and trying to ease him up a bit and—well—he had gone out on me—living through all that he did, and then kicking off sudden like that. But I just shrug my shoulders—I can't expect all the luck—the poor devil was better off; he'd never have walked again anyway; that was certain. I let him down easy; he was a bad egg, but way down in his black heart he had loved the girl, and even if it was a selfish love, why—oh, well, I let him slip down to the boards easy.

I straightened up for one last look around that room, and then that shriek—that terrible cry—came again, a bit longer, more penetrating and piercing. This time I didn't wait to take things easy; I just dashed out of that room and up the stairs, my flash going full blast. And it was a good thing I had it, too, for it shines right on a lad sitting on the top of the stairs. Oh, he fired—yes—and I don't know what kind of a shot he was under ordinary circumstances. My light, a mighty powerful one, too, had struck him right between the eyes, and he didn't see none too well, or he shot in a hurry. Anyway, he only shot once—none never do shoot more than once at me. I guess our guns spoke together. I felt nothing and I didn't need to give a second look to him. When I fire, there ain't no guessing contest as to where that bullet is going. Often I poke for the heart, 'specially if there is any distance to cover; its surer. But this was shooting uphill like, and the light was directly on his face, so I let him have it there—someplace about the center of that ugly map of his.

There ain't much to that sort of shooting; you just kind of see a hole for a second; a tiny speck of red, and then the face fades out of the picture. So I just step over him as he rolls down the stairs.

Of course the shot is heard, and another bimbo ducks out of a side room, just as I make the landing. He don't do no shooting—he don't even get a look—just a spurt of flame and I get him. He falls pretty, blocking the doorway which someone is trying to close, but having no luck. And then for the fireworks!

I got the jump on them now; I've made a mighty good impression, and it'll have a good moral effect; there is nothing like following it up. Two of them dead—oh, they're dead all right—none ever come back and fire just one more shot after I plug them. Once I hit a lad, he stays put. So I jump to the door, kick it flying, and, dropping my flash, I stand there a gun in either fin.

And then things ain't so good; to this day I can't explain how they happened to be so well prepared. I just stand there like the avenging angel, with a smile of greeting, when something like a ton of brick comes down and cracks me on the

head. I remember firing at a sneering brown face and muttering number three as the clouds come down—after that, curtains—everything goes black.

How long, I don't know, but I come to after a bit and sit up. I ain't tied or nothing—just dazed—I see near a million stars and then I see worse. Over in one corner of the room I see Nita, and she's bound hand and foot on a bare hard bed. There's Boro and another lad close beside him, and one stretched dead out in the center of the floor—so I figure that even with the weight on my head, my aim was good because he ain't dressed like the bird I copped in the doorway.

And Boro is playing the game hard now, and there ain't no smile on that mean, wicked kisser of his. He has a gat stuck close up against my chest, which don't give me much of a chance even if I did feel like pulling something—which I don't. It's a good thought, but my brains are dusty—hitting on one cylinder like. But there's one thing they overlooked, one thing what brings a gleam of hope. They got both my big guns, yes—but their search hadn't been a good one, or was it the way I was lying? Yep, tucked up my sleeve is still the little automatic twenty-five; it's little, yes, but as I get the feel of it there, it seems as big as a cannon. Just let me get my head clear and give me a chance to drop my hands, and those birds will receive a treat—a little treat what they won't enjoy long.

I can shoot in a split second on an open draw—none faster. I'll pull a gun with anyone, even if he comes from the cow country; and I'll beat him to the draw too—there ain't no two ways about that. But on the sleeve business—oh, I'm fast—like lightning—but it takes a second, a whole second, and that's some time in a matter of life and death. But to pull my arm down and shoot takes one full second; I know, I've timed it.

But Boro has that gun bored into my chest and my hands shoved up in the air; through instinct, I guess, for there ain't no will to hold them there, for I don't hardly know what I'm doing. But I was trying to think—place exactly where I was—what was happening—and behind it all was the reassuring pressure of hard steel just below the elbow.

"Get up!" says Boro, and though his hand is steady, his voice trembles with rage.

And I get up. I can see he's mighty willing to shoot and wonder why he don't. Then he backs me up against the wall.

"You say everything is all clear downstairs, Pedro, and that no one heard the shots," he says to the only other lad left, but he keeps his gun and his eyes on me while he talks. I guess his English is for my benefit, though why he wants to shower me with happiness, I don't know.

"No one heard," Pedro answers, and his English is punk.

"Go fetch some rope," Boro chirps, "and we'll tie up this swine—but first—well, you shall see something amusing when you return, Pedro—and Pedro, another hot poker—very hot—it is for his eyes."

So Pedro beats it. Well, you don't need three guesses to tell you that I'm going to take chances at the first opportunity, or without any opportunity, for that matter.

Boro holds me, with his gun, against the wall a moment, and then he backs away about three paces.

"You are one who shoots well, but so do I," he sneers. "Watch—first I will cripple you. The arms and then the legs—a bullet for each; and then when Pedro returns,

it will be the eyes, but that will not be so pleasant—you would play a game with Boro, eh?"

Get what he was up to; why, he'd just stand me against the wall and wing me, and then burn out my eyes. I tried to think. I said to myself, now or never, and did nothing. I was like a man in a dream, and a mighty bad dream—just acting mechanically.

Bang! He had fired. There was a sear of red hot flame just below the elbow, and my left arm dropped to my side. I heard Boro laugh and Nita give a little smothered cry—just the quick intake of breath.

As the blood streamed down onto my wrist, my head seemed to clear, and then my brain hit suddenly back to normal. I was Terry Mack again, and believe me that is something.

Bang! The report came again and I thought it was too late, but no—his bullet had jammed against the hard steel of my little twenty-five, without ever touching my arm.

I don't know if he saw me smile as my right hand started to slink to my side. I think he did, for he was suddenly raising his gun again when I fired. But he never used it; Boro had fired his last shot.

The tiny splash of red appeared for a moment between his eyes; he stood so, his great eyes bulging in surprise more than pain—the surprise of death—then without a groan or a cry he pitched his length upon the floor. He didn't roll over and give a last convulsive groan or a kick—some may do it—none that I ever hit at that range. Boro died standing; died before he fell, and when he fell, there was not so much as a wiggle of his fingers.

As he hit them boards, the door opened and Pedro appeared for a moment in the aperture—but only for a moment. Why I didn't wing him I don't know—but he was gone—whining like a dog as he ran down the stairs, and that was the last I ever heard of Pedro. Of course I bolted the door before I went over to the girl. And I spotted the weight, too, which had put me out of business—it was fixed so that the rope didn't loosen it from the ceiling until someone pressed a catch near the door. Oh, it was good stuff all right, and I admired the pretty way it was pulled off.

I guess I must have staggered across to the girl—my arm didn't bother me none, but my head had gotten about as big as a church again. But somehow I released her. It seemed like I was two persons, and I'd ask my other self what I'd do, and my other self would answer me. Like this it went:

"Any now, Terry, my boy, what's on the program—they've all gone, you know."

And then I'd answer:

"Get a knife, Mack—there's one in the corner there—and cut the rope."

And I did, and afterward Nita told me that I talked to myself like a man in a fever. It was then that I told her about Boro not being her uncle at all, and about Manual being dead, and all that I had learned from Daggo Joe. But I never mentioned the formula; somehow I kept that to myself. And she wasn't hurt at all. Her feet were all right, for they had only just started the torture and hardly touched her tender skin. She had cried out more in deadly fear than in pain—but her mental suffering must have been terrible just the same.

It was she who took the chances, while I just sat there on the floor and mumbled to myself; she went downstairs and got water and bathed my head and

tied up my arm, which proved to be only a flesh wound, and not much to bother about at that.

And then, when I come about all right, she turned around and fainted on me. I tell you it was a tough proposition, there with her in that house of death. But I was as clear as a bell now; it's wonderful what water will do for a man, and I tell you it's been a good friend to me in many an emergency.

Water helped her, too, and just as I got her able to sit up and was thinking of helping her downstairs, there came a ringing at the doorbell, followed by a heavy pounding on the door. I left her a moment and, opening the door, listened. The rapping came again, louder than before; and then came the crash of an ax, and I remembered—the hour was more than up and Bud had sent for the police. Good old Bud—I felt like wringing his neck; I wanted to do some talking with a first-class lawyer before I paid my social obligations to the police.

I turned to the window and looked out—there was the lead pipe, the one I couldn't climb up, but I felt that even with my bad arm I could slide down it—especially now that I had the proper incentive behind me. You see, this was no kind of a situation for Terry Mack to be found in. The girl would be all right—they couldn't possibly suspect her of all that slaughter.

"It's the police," I told her in a hurry. "You'll be all right, but for me—a quick getaway. You can tell them about me, but I'll hang low till my lawyer has proven a case against this gang. If they got me, they'd frame me sure—they love me like poison—you'll be O.K. Nita—I'm going to duck."

And then she up and staggered across the room and threw her arms about my neck and hung there; in fact, I had to hold her—she was so weak that her hands couldn't even retain their grasp about my neck.

"Don't leave me, Terry—you're all I got—and the police—oh, Terry, I'll die if you leave me."

And that shows you what fear of the police the fake uncle had instilled in her.

And right there is another thing that I can't explain. Maybe it's weakness, but I like to think it ain't, though I can't account for it. You might think that I had done enough for this girl and earned my pay—well, perhaps I had. But there was soft little hands about my neck and silken hair against my cheek—great innocent, childish eyes looking through pools of water into mine—and—well, I stayed—yep, I just played the fool and stayed.

So it was I held her in my arms when half a dozen cops busted into the room. My cap is still sticking on my head, and I retain sense enough to pull it down close to my eyes.

Then there is questions and warnings and one thing and another. But I don't need no warning—my trap is shut tight—I'll have my mouthpiece when I do any talking, and he's a good lawyer, too. As for the girl, well, she opens up a bit but don't say nothing about the formula, which I think is wise but don't get her real reason for it; though I put it down to the money what's behind it, and her distrust of the police. And I tell you another thing—they are some surprised cops after they look that house over. I hear some of them in the backyard, where they have found the first lad what I socked.

Then in walks Detective Sergeant Quinn, and I know that things are going to get lively. This same Quinn has been trying to hook something on me since George Washington was a boy.

"And the story goes that this one man killed these four—pretty thin," he says, and then he walks over to me. "We'll just have a look at that mug of yours, my man."

With that he jerks off my cap, and me and Quinn look straight at each other.

"Good evening, Sergeant." I can't help but grin. Quinn's fizz is a scream.

"Terry Mack! Terry Mack!" he says twice as he steps back, but he can't hide the feeling of joy that comes over him. "Well, after all it does look like it might be a one-man job—with Mack that man," he says to one of his men. "Hooked at last!" His ugly face screws up in satisfaction. "We'll trot this pair out—separate them—you can keep the girl here until after the coroner comes. But keep your eye on her, and trot this fellow along."

Just as the cop comes up to me with the cuffs in his mitts, I turn to the girl!

"If you have any friends, know of anyone in the city that can help us—now's the time—we're in bad."

And I meant every word of it. I knew the police system, and knew that they'd put me through the jumps before I ever got my lawyer.

Nita seemed to recover somewhat.

"I know one who would help me—who would do anything that I ask. Can—how can I get him?" She was looking at the ceiling while she talked.

That's what I wanted; I wanted her request registered while all them cops were in the room. One of them would be looking for Quinn's job, and if Quinn did anything to hamper the cause of justice, one of them might be glad to blow it—secretly.

"Quick," I says. "Who do you know—who that can help us on the outside?"

"I know Mr. James Roland Williams," she said quietly, though her voice shook a bit. "I think he would do anything for me."

Quinn drew back; I gasped! And why not? James Roland Williams was the commissioner of police.

"Well—well—we'll see about that in the morning." But I noticed that Quinn's voice lacked its usual air of authority.

"How about it now—Quinn?" I chimed in. "This young lady is not used to being treated like a common crook, and from what I know of her friendship with Mr. Williams, it might cost you your shield."

Of course, I didn't know nothing about it, but it didn't strike me as a good time to show my ignorance.

Quinn just scowled at me and told me to hold my tongue, then he turned to the girl. Her honest, quiet air of refinement evidently impressed him.

"Do you know him very well—Miss?" He added the "Miss" after a moment's hesitation.

"Oh yes—I should say—oh, very well indeed." She nodded her head.

"Well enough to disturb him at this hour of the morning?" Quinn bent those hard, stern eyes of his full upon her. "You know, he only got back from a trip south last night."

"No—I did not know that. But it does not matter. He would be glad to come to me at any hour—he has told me so—told me—oh, please call him." Her voice broke.

Another glance, and Quinn turned toward the door. He paused undecided a moment, and then:

"Who shall I say—what name?" he said, and his manner was almost courteous.

"Sen—Miss Nita Gretna—Nita will be enough—he will come at once." There was a certain calm dignity in her manner.

One more close scrutinizing look, and Quinn turned again and left the room.

"And make it snappy, Quinn, even if you are getting a bit on for so many stairs."

I could not resist the temptation to call after him as he descended the stairs. I could see now that pretty soon everything would be jake, and I'd be the light-haired boy; a commissioner has a way of hushing up unpleasant events. Of course, I never doubted the girl—just one look at those clear, honest glims of hers was enough to convince anyone.

It was five minutes later when Quinn returned, and although he had run up the stairs his face was white—white with anger.

"Take them away!" he roared. "Keep them apart—watch that girl." He pointed a finger which shook with rage at Nita. "What do you mean by lying to me—Mr. Williams never heard of you. And he had other things to say to me, things that you'll pay for, my fine girl. Take them away!" he spoke to his men. "And keep an eye on that gunman—Terry Mack." With that, he showed us the width of his shoulders as he stamped viciously from the room.

As for me, I didn't look at the girl—she must'a felt pretty cheap, I thought. But what a superb bluff she had made! That innocent-appearing kid had looked the tough Quinn straight between the eyes and handed him out that earful of bull—and me—oh, I fell for it too.

But I shrugged my shoulders as they slipped on the bracelets and led me away.

"Holler for the best lawyer you can get," I called back over my shoulder to Nita. "We'll see it through together if they don't railroad me. And if you need any money, why—why, I got a bit saved up."

And that last line will pretty near show you that my head wasn't altogether clear yet.

And there you are; I spent the night behind bars. I didn't like the ride they give me neither. I should have been taken to an uptown station, but they booked me further downtown, which sure did look bad. You see, I had a sneaking fear that they might jump me through the hoop; there were several little things that the bulls would have liked to have gotten out of me. I ain't afraid of nothing, mind you, but I was a bit worried; this third degree which you hear so much about ain't all wind—not by a jugful it ain't. I know them birds.

Of course, I was searched all right, but there wasn't a thing on me. I had dropped that sleeve gun when the cops broke in the door, and frisking me was about as exciting as searching a Sunday school superintendent. But this Quinn was a lad who would railroad a bishop, if he felt like it, and—and I ain't no bishop.

A cop what knows something about medicine looks over my arms and sniffs at the wound and says it ain't nothing—so I don't even see a doctor. But I guess he's right, and although it smarts a bit, there ain't much to it as for my head—well, it's

a pretty tough head, and I ain't looking for any sympathy, and what's more I don't get any.

I slept pretty well, though, for I felt they'd be too busy to put over any rough stuff that morning; just like a baby I sleep until breakfast. The turnkey was agreeable, and I got a pretty good breakfast. But I didn't like the idea of eating there—I should 'a been brought before a magistrate—the whole thing didn't look good.

At eleven o'clock a dick comes to my door and has it opened and smiles in at me:

"Come on Terry," he says. He's grinning from ear to ear and looks real friendly, which, of course, makes me suspicious. But he walks me right out of the side door of the jail and lands me on the street. Then he hands me out my things that they took from me when I was booked.

"You're sure in luck this time, Terry," he says. "You fitted in right last night, and Quinn is having forty fits—that car there is waiting for you." And he indicates a big touring car with the jerk of his thumb. "Good luck, Terry, you're a game boy, if a tough citizen, and I don't hold anything against you."

I take his outstretched fist and turn toward the car like I had expected it to be there; they ain't going to faze me.

"Good-bye and thanks—" I wave to the dick from the backseat.

"Casey's my name," he says, "Richard Casey!"

"Casey it is."

I shake again as the car speeds away. Then I look around a bit to get my breath; it's an expensive car all right, and there ain't no one but me and the driver. But the chauffeur don't seem to need any instructions, so I don't say anything. Just sit tight; that's my game.

Right up to the restaurant entrance of the Bolton Hotel we pull, and I hop out as live as life. I even start to enter the front door when a great big strapping boy of about twenty-five comes running out and grabs me by the hand.

"Mr. Mack—Mr. Terry Mack!" He smiles all over as he pump-handles me. "I'm James Williams—James Roland Williams, Jr. How's the arm?" he asks suddenly.

I almost forget myself for the moment:

"You're the police commissioner's son!" I guess I kind of gasp.

"That's it," he laughed. "Nita has told me all about you. She forgot the Junior last night when she rang up. You see, father was south when I returned from Italy, and I didn't get a chance to tell him the good news. Besides, there really wasn't any until this morning. Nita slipped away from me on the dock; she was to let me hear from her when she would say yes. She said it this morning."

He laughed again.

But I was to lunch with him and Nita, and there she was, waiting for us in a little private dining room upstairs. She didn't seem much the worse for last night. Young Williams said he wouldn't let her remember; he'd keep her going under high pressure until she forgot. Of course, his old man would see that everything was fixed up properly, and not a reporter had found out who had done the bumping off, nor that Nita was mixed up in it. The papers had just set it down for a general feeling of discontent among the Black-Handers.

And then I learned that he had met Nita on the boat, and that a wedding was all cooked up for the next day.

"It'll just be a quiet affair." Williams smiles all over his good-natured map. "Nita don't know anyone but you, so you'll have to show up." Then he tells me the church, and both of them get my promise to be on deck at eleven the next morning.

"Yes," she looks up at me from across the table, and I notice that there are dark rings under her eyes and that her fingers are twitching nervously. "We must have you Terry—it could not be a wedding without you and—oh—that old formula." She half closes her eyes. "I guess that it is gone forever."

And that's where I shine once again:

"Oh, is it?" I said. "Not so you could notice it—it ain't. Miss Nita, I was hired by you to get that formula, and I most generally get what I go after."

Then I turn to young Williams. I don't give him no information, but just make him promise to go and bring that copy of poems about them Italians to me, without opening the book, and I give him full instruction as to the lay of the book.

It ain't nothing to him, being the commissioner's son, to step right in and turn the trick, and in a half-hour or less he's back with the book. I open it, and there's the envelope. I guess I play the actor a bit when I hand it over to Nita, unopened. There sure was a certain air of satisfaction in that delivery.

Do their eyes open? Well, I should smile; Nita breaks the seal and opens it. She reads it a minute and then chirps:

"That is it." And leaning over the table she takes a match and lights the thin tissuey paper that she holds in her hand. We just sit and stare as she drops it in the plate—a burnt, blackened, unrecognizable mass.

At first I just scratch my head; it's like seeing all your good work literally going up in smoke. Then curiosity gets the better of me for once, and I break my rule about not asking questions.

"Would you mind telling me what it was?" I can't help but ask; you must remember that at least five met their deaths on account of that same piece of paper.

She gives a wan little smile:

"All I know is that it is a formula—a chemical for making poison gas—a gas far stronger and more deadly than any used in the last war, or ever invented. I understand that a small quantity dropped in a container, from a plane, would be enough to wipe out hundreds upon hundreds of people. It may be worth much money, and I do not doubt that it is—but—but it is worth more to humanity there in that dish." And she stirs up the ashes with her spoon.

Personally, I don't take much stock in such sentiment, and I look at Williams to see how he's taking it. But he's only looking at her, cowlike and grinning. Well, he's either dough-heavy or he's in love—or I guess both, for he looks like money and I think the car is his.

And then when I'm leaving them, Nita up and throws her arms about me and kisses me—yes, kisses me full on the lips.

"Oh, Terry, Terry," she says and her voice breaks a little, "you've been more than a father to me—much more."

More than a father! Grandfather, she must mean. But I don't say that. I look at Williams to see how he's taking it, but it seems that his only aim in life is to carry a perpetual grin, which he does to the queen's taste.

"There—there! Be a good girl," is all I say as I pat her on the back. And wasn't that a fool remark for a full-grown man with all his senses!

So I left them.

I guess it's near three o'clock when I see Bud and wrap myself into my easy chair. You see, my arm's all right, but I feel like taking it easy. And then along about eight that night Bud brings me in a envelope.

It's a check, and a good big one; I can see at a glance that everything has been taken into account, and she ain't forgotten the little matter of the four lads what got bumped off. And then the bonus—guess the extra was for Boro. But the check was big—very big—yet I can't honestly say that it was more than I was worth.

So I smoke and think; after all, it was an American that she loved and she hadn't fooled me none. Well, that little garden and the sunny sky of Italy had all gone blooey. I stood up and looked at myself in the glass—not a gray hair appeared—so she might have spared me that father scene. Did I feel bad—not me. I was mighty relieved; for a time, it looked like that dame was going to hook herself onto me for life. With a shrug of my shoulders, I picked up my hat and coat.

And how did I take it? Why, like the gentleman that I am. I just went out and bought her the very best wedding present that the swellest pawnshop in the city could produce. And believe me, that little gift, marked with the best wishes of Terry Mack, would hold its own alongside of anything that she got.