

# Old Straight Shooter

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*She played straight with a straight shooter, though it was foreign to the nature of a moll. And there was only a cross for Caproni, the gangster.*

A BIG CADILLAC raced across an intersection closed by a red-light. It knocked down one woman, without seriously hurting her, and came close to plunging into a Ford which stopped with screeching brakes just in time. The policeman at the intersection *tweeted* his whistle, and the big car with drawn shades came to a jerky stop.

The large, freckled-faced cop frowned as he walked toward the Cadillac, noting that the license plate was so bent at one side that it was impossible to distinguish the number. His blue eyes blazed as he faced the slick-haired Italian at the wheel.

"Who the hell d'you think you are? Barney Oldfield?" he snapped.

The Italian shifted uneasily. "I didn't see the red light," he muttered.

"Yeah?" drawled the cop sarcastically, drawing out his summon's slips. He suddenly noticed that the car was a limousine and the shades between the inside of the car and the driver's seat were drawn, as well as all the other shades on the car. "What you got back there?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Aw, nothin' that would interest you!" said the Italian, with a faint smile.

"No?" demanded the cop. He

caught the knob, turned it. He had a momentary glance of a scar-faced man in the dusk of early evening. Then something descended in an arc in the hand of that man, and he would have sunk to the pavement had not the scar-faced man drawn him hastily inside the car.

"Give 'er the gun!" snapped the man inside.

"Okay, Duke!"

The car leaped forward, took the blinker, and the next corner to the right.

A CROSS the street from the spot on which this car had stopped was a girl who witnessed intently everything which took place. She wore a green tam, had blond hair and wide blue eyes and a slightly turned-up nose. She was below medium height, was full-breasted but had slim hips.

She had no premonition of what was going to happen to Officer Mike Rafferty until the door opened. Even in the dim light, she recognized that face with the long scar down its right side. Duke Caproni! The man she'd been looking for these last six weeks!

Then she expected a splurt of flame to emerge from the interior of the car. Mike Rafferty was an honest bull. He'd been instrumental in putting one of Duke Caproni's

men in stir. She was surprised when Duke Caproni only 'jacked' the square cop.

Her own hand flashed to the pocket of her green leather jacket, closing around something metallically hard. But, though Duke Caproni had put her man, "Kid" Brady, the boxer, on the spot, Billie Ray did not fire the gun in her hand. She didn't want to hit Mike Rafferty, the square cop. Not that Billie Ray had any love for cops. But Mike and her Kid had been friends until the Kid had become a mobster.

She raced across the street as the slick-haired Italian shifted rapidly through the gears of the Caddy. She waved peremptorily to a cruising taxi, and it came to an abrupt stop.

"Twenty bucks for you if you can catch that car!" she flashed at him.

"Okay!" he answered, opening the door for her.

**A**WAY they went, taking the blinker just before the bell rang, down a block and to the right. The Caddy was disappearing in the distance. Five blocks down, they saw it turn. The driver speeded up, took another red and made the turn on the fifth block. Two blocks away, the Cadillac was stopped by a heavy stream of traffic. They came within half a block of it before they, too, were stopped.

"They don't know they're bein' followed," she muttered to herself, as she lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

Traffic jerked forward again. She inhaled on the cigarette, watching the Caddy. It twisted and turned, always going at breakneck speed, and wending its way toward Chicago's warehouse district. Traffic was getting scarcer; Billie ordered the driver to keep two blocks behind the car they were trailing.

It swerved into an alley, disappeared.

"Pass that alley!" she said curtly. "Right on the next!"

She saw a man silhouetted in the alley as they flashed past it. A huge figure of a man with large head and rounded shoulders like a gorilla. She felt her stomach tightening in a hard knot. That was Duke. The red-hot who had bumped the big pag she loved because he refused to skag Mike Rafferty. Now Duke Caproni was taking Mike for a ride himself, having tricked him into coming close to their car by taking that intersection on a red light.

"Not if I can help it!" she muttered between clenched teeth.

They took the corner to the right. Drew to a stop. She leaped out, passing the driver a twenty.

"This ain't a healthy district for you, Buddy."

He released his brake. "Don't I know it!"

He shot out from the curb, and disappeared in the darkness. Billie went back to the alley, peering down the narrow way set between large, apparently deserted warehouses. The district had gone back; the warehouses were old-fashioned. Hard to rent. The Caddy was already vanishing down the alley.

Billie was about to go down the alley, deciding it was safe, when she saw something moving in a doorway. She stiffened, waiting. A slim figure stood there in the doorway, peering nervously one direction and then the other. He started to pace up and down, moving a few feet each way from the doorway.

She removed her shoes, waiting until his back was turned. He was coming toward her, turning, going away again. Now—

She flew across the intervening space, her stocking feet making not a sound. But some sixth sense

seemed to alarm him. He turned, wide-eyed.

But—too late. Blue steel glinted dully in her hand, and steely hardness in her voice warned him: "Not a sound—or it's a black box and slow music for yours. Stick up your mitts!"

He did so, trembling. She looked at him, scowling. Then she drew him over to the doorway, her rod carefully planted against his heart and peered closely at him. She swore softly.

"Say, you ain't hardly a kid." She frisked him, found his gat, and dropped it into her own pocket. "Duke's teachin' 'em young!" she snapped. "How'd you ever get into this racket?"

His young, cleanly boyish face twitched, and his clear blue eyes blinked. "I—I came to—to Chicago—for excitement," he said in a voice which trembled with emotion.

"You findin' it?"

He shook his head, swallowing hard. She guessed he wasn't over seventeen. "I—I hate it!" he said feelingly. "I thought it would be—well, adventurous. But it—it's hell! And I can't quit!" He suddenly shuddered. "They took a cop up there——" Then the color drained from his face, and he muttered huskily: "They'd kill me if they knew I told you that. Who—who are you, anyway? You don't look like a—a gangster."

She laughed, a trifle bitterly. Her blue eyes narrowed. "Well, kid—I am. And you ain't tellin' me nothin' about that cop. Do you want them to slit his throat?"

His face grew white and strained. "Oh, you don't think they'll—they'll——" His voice trailed off into silence. He looked grave.

"No tellin'!" she said grimly.

"What's your name?"

"Jimmie Barnes," he answered

slowly. "They call me Kid Barnes, though."

"All right, Jimmie. You say you'd like to get out of this racket. Murdering and robbing and that sort of thing isn't in your line—it's a dirty business and not adventure. If I get you out of here alive, will you do something for me?"

His face lighted with boyish enthusiasm. "Anything—anything——" he bust out eagerly. Then his face clouded. "But—you don't know what you're up against——"

"Don't kid yourself, Jimmie. I been up against tougher propositions than Duke Caproni—and I'm still healthy. Are you game?"

He nodded, swallowing hard. "I'd do anything to save that cop and to get back home. The folks must be just about crazy, and I don't dare write to 'em."

"Listen, then, Jimmie. I saw a light flash up there in the third story window while I was watching you. You guard the alley and this rear door while I climb up there. Shoot—and ask questions afterwards. It isn't as if Caproni's red-hots were men—they're rats."

"Don't I know it!" he said with sudden vehemence. "But you can't climb up to the third story. There's no fire-escape; they tore it down because they're not takin' chances."

"Leave that to Billie Ray, Jimmie!" She flashed him a dazzling smile, which made him grin back faintly at her.

SHE walked to a post made of 15-inch square stone blocks cemented together. Between each block was a space of about one-half inch. Shoeless as she was, Billie was able to get a fair grip for her toes. She clung into the niches above to draw herself up cautiously.

When she had ascended about three of these blocks, the shade in

the window above was hastily drawn down. Three staccato cracks of a pistol shattered the dead silence. She almost lost her grip; her muscles tensed.

"I guess they got Mike Rafferty!" she muttered grimly. "I hope I can get the rats who done it!"

Stone by stone, she worked her way up that column. If they saw her, it would just be curtains for Billie Ray. She reached the second story, but saw only blank windows and some cases dimly outlined some distance from the windows. Probably cases of liquor. Pausing for breath, and to rest her aching fingers, she looked up. Streaks of light shone around the shade; voices drifted to her.

Summoning all her resources, she began to laboriously climb up the column. She could see Jimmie's white face and slim figure below. He seemed very anxious. At last she reached the third story. Guards would undoubtedly be stationed inside, unless Jimmie Barnes was the only guard—but they wouldn't be expecting anyone to climb up the face of the building. It took a strong, light person to do that.

"We got Rafferty easy!" said a throaty voice she recognized as Duke Caproni's. "That's killin' two birds with one stone, eh? This dumb cop's been beggin' for a slab of marble too long. And gettin' his uniform will make that bank hold-up tomorrow a set-up."

Billie Ray's heart constricted. So Mike Rafferty, the square cop, was the guy to absorb those three bullets! On sudden impulse, she decided to plug Caproni then and there. She drew her body closer to the column, clinging with the bleeding tips of her fingers while she reached slowly into her pocket with her right hand.

But her hand paused on the rod.

She might bump off Caproni firing where she heard his voice. But they'd plug her sure! She listened for a moment to the conversation and decided that there were at least five men in that third-story office. Four of them would be shooting at her as quickly as she fired. If it had only been herself, she would have taken a chance. Her hatred for Duke Caproni, who'd double-crossed her pug-sweetheart was that great. But there was Jimmie down below whom she promised to see through safely. She had to keep her word. Wasn't he keeping his word and guarding her from the ground? It would have been just as easy for him to shout to acquaint those men above of her presence. If she plugged Caproni, Jimmie would be killed and she couldn't have that!

She listened for several minutes longer, hearing Caproni outline certain plans for the robbery of a bank on the south side of Chicago. She gleaned the information that Jimmie was to be included in the robbery, although one of the men protested that he was likely to turn softie.

Then Billie climbed down to the ground again.

"Know anything about this robbery?" she asked Jimmie.

He stared at her with parted mouth. "What robbery?"

"Thought you knew about it. They wanted Rafferty's uniform to impersonate a policeman. They're cutting you in on the deal. You're to rob the Fordham National some time tomorrow——"

His youthful face grew grimly determined. "I won't do it," he burst out. "I'll tell them to go to——"

She gripped his arm. "Not so loud—and not so funny! You know what would happen to you if you refused, don't you? You're goin'

right along! . . . But, between us, we'll have to stop it! This sounds like I'd gone Salvation Army, but it's straight. I draw the line at robbin' banks. What's more, I see a chance to put Duke Caproni where he belongs—*on the spot!*"

"Billie, I tell you you don't know Duke Caproni—"

She forced a harsh laugh. "And I say I do—too well. Wasn't I a member of his mob until he bumped my boy friend and tried to bump me? Listen, Jimmie—can you phone me tomorrow?"

He looked dubious. "One of the fellows is kept with me most of the time. I don't get a chance to go near a phone very often."

"But you can manage it somehow?"

He nodded. "I guess so."

"Okay. Now memorize this number—I don't want it on paper." She repeated her phone number several times. "You got it?"

He nodded solemnly, his face rather white. "What are you planning, Billie? Can't you let me in on it?"

She shook her head, and handed him back his rod. "Be sure and call me."

He suddenly gripped her hand. "I—I never knew a girl like you, Billie. I—I think you're just—just great!"

She was touched, but essayed to hide it beneath brusqueness. "Don't be that way, Kid. I ain't your kind!"

Her eyes misted at the way he looked at her, and she turned quickly so that he wouldn't see. A clean kid, Jimmie. Maybe three years younger than she was—but she was ages older. She knew he might make something fine of himself—if he had another chance. She knew she never would; the gutter and underworld were too strongly implanted in her

blood. She couldn't change; it was too late for her.

SHE waited in her room all the next day, irritable and nervous. She smoked continually, watching the phone. At two o'clock it rang. She picked it up eagerly. Jimmie's voice, low and nervous.

"I got just a minute," he told her quickly. "Sleazy went out for some cigarettes. You got the name right. Fordham National. Here's the plan. Blackjack Mehan's going to the president with a fake detective's badge and Windy Pashtelli, dressed in that cop's uniform. He's going to announce that they have a tip on a robbery at three, and he'll make the president promise to get all the people back of the cages into the president's office and let him handle the robbers.

"Then they'll lock the door and Duke and Sleazy and me are to come in. We'll have the safe and cash boxes to ourselves. Duke's going to take care of the real cop who's always stationed in the lobby. It's a smart plan and I'm afraid it's going to work. What should I do?"

"Go right along with the plans," Billie directed him. "I'll see that Duke don't get away with nothin'!"

"And what am I supposed to do?" he demanded anxiously.

"See if you can put lead in Blackjack Mehan and Windy Pashtelli!"

He groaned. "I'll get myself plugged," he said; "but I'd rather do that than rob a bank. Good-bye. I got to hang up now."

"S'long, kid!"

She hung up, feeling better now that she had heard from him.

AT A QUARTER of three, Billie Ray was in Fordham National, presumably writing a check, but actually killing time. She painstakingly wrote check after check, mak-

ing deliberate mistakes, and tearing up the checks, and placing the scraps in her pocket. She wasn't dumb enough to leave any evidence.

Her blood tingled when she saw Windy Pashtelli and Blackjack Mehan enter the bank, looking about furtively. She turned quickly to the check she was working on, hoping they would not recognize her back. She was dressed very inconspicuously in black; they passed on after giving her trim back only a cursory glance.

Immediately thereafter, things began to happen. The president walked from one clerk to another with Blackjack Mehan and Windy Pashtelli, now posing as dick and cop, respectively. The president seemed to have no suspicion that the two men had not come from headquarters as they had claimed. Excitement seemed to ripple through the bank, though customers came and left, and cashiers went about their work with almost the same outward calm.

Billie looked at her wrist-watch. Three minutes to three. The bank was almost ready to close for the day. They'd have to come soon. She kept her eye on the door. No one coming yet. Three men with masks on their faces entered the door. The clerks and cashiers of one accord rushed toward the president's office, glad to let the two men from "headquarters" handle the dangerous robbers. Windy and Blackjack herded them nervously into the office, locking the door with the key the president had given them.

Billie saw all this at the same time that she saw the bank's policeman stiffen, his eyes wide. As he went for his gun, she leaped at him from behind. She struck him forcibly with the butt of her own weapon. It was too bad to knock out an innocent man, but the chances were

she was saving him from death, and he'd be none the worse in the end. Besides, she couldn't take a chance on the bank cop killing Jimmie instead of Duke Caproni.

She saw a big, masked man start at this unexpected movement from one of the customers of the bank. Then he recognized her, and the visible part of his face turned white.

His gun blazed. But she had already dropped to her knee. Her own weapon blazed three times in quick succession. Through the blue cloud of smoke she saw Duke Caproni reel, his gun wavering in her direction.

Other guns were popping. She saw Jimmie exchanging shots with the two fake men from headquarters who had herded the bank's employees into the president's office. Sleazy was banging away at her, and his bullets were whistling and whining about her head. Then she saw him stagger and fall, but whether from Jimmie's weapon or from Windy's, she couldn't tell.

**H**ER whole attention was riveted on Duke Caproni—the man with the ugly scar down his right cheek. Even while he staggered unsteadily, he was exchanging shots with her. And when she had squeezed the last bit of lead out of her automatic, Duke, grinning horribly, staggered toward her, pointing his weapon, took three unsteady steps, and then fell forward on his face. He lay still.

The room suddenly grew quiet, though it rang slightly with the reverberations of cracking pistols. Jimmie stood with an empty pistol in his hands, looking very dazed that he alone remained alive of those five robbers. Billie saw him through a blue haze. The acrid smell of smoke bit her nostrils.

"Jimmie—Jimmie——" she cried

tremulously. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat. "And you?"

"Fine!" She clicked out the word.

People were hammering on the door of the president's office. Billie looked around in desperation. She started to run toward a side entrance. Chances were cops on the streets would come in the front entrance. The surprised customers would probably tell the cops where they'd gone—but they might have a chance—

Billie hailed a cab, and jerked open the door. Jimmie, having ripped off his mask, jumped in after her. She rattled off the name of a building near-by. While the cab was jogging along, Billie reached for Jimmie's mask and rod. She tucked them behind the seat, and did the same to her own.

"We want to throw off the bulls if we can!" she whispered. "And you won't have no more use for those things."

He shuddered. "I hope not!"

"Where do your folks live?" she asked him suddenly in a low voice.

"Near St. Louis," he whispered back.

She nodded without turning. At their destination, she hurried through the building arcade to the other side, and they took a taxi to a building located near the station.

"If anyone got that first cab's number, this will throw 'em off," she confided.

They reached the building Billie had told the driver. Got out, and Jimmie shoved a bill at him. They went through this building, out the other side, and to the station.

"There's a train to St. Louis at three-thirty," Billie said shortly. "You'll have to buy your ticket on the train; we haven't time to get it now."

He gripped her hand. "You're coming with me, Billie. I—I love you—"

She shook her head, smiling sadly. "Can't be, Jimmie. I'm what I am. You got possibilities. Stay on the straight and narrow, Kid. I'm not handin' you no Salvation Army stuff; it'll just be easier for you, see?"

They'd almost reached the train.

"I can't leave you here and never see you again, Billie. Don't you like me at all?"

She turned her eyes away so that he wouldn't see they were brimming, and swallowed a painful lump in her throat. She had to do it, for his sake! Just a few minutes longer, and she could blubber. But she had to stick it out—pretend she didn't care. He'd find a nice girl some day. They were miles apart. She cared too much for him to kill all his chances. A straight kid, Jimmie.

She laughed up into his face—a laugh which killed something within her. "Jimmie, I—I'm in love with a boxer. Sorry, Kid. If it wasn't for him—"

His face dropped, and he kicked an imaginary speck of dust. "Oh!" he said with deep disappointment. "I guess he must be a swell guy!"

The train started to move. He jumped up onto the platform, and smiled at her. She felt unsteady inside; as though she was going to weaken. Her nails bit into her clenched fists.

Steady, girl—*steady!* You have to smile now! Jimmie's got to remember you smiling—no matter if the old heart is feeling mighty unsteady inside. It was an unsteady smile; but she managed it.

"Good-bye, Jimmie." He was getting smaller now; the train was chugging away. Hold that smile a little longer. "Good-bye, Old Straight Shooter!"