



The figure gyrated maddeningly before them.

The Devil's Bookkeeper

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*Clerical Clara kept records for gangdom, and therefore she knew plenty.
But even an auditor can be wrong.*

A CROSS the roof-top, a dim shadow slipped silently to a barred window, like a dull gray wraith that merged perfectly with the curling fingers of fog drifting in from the lake.

It made no sound in its ghost-like approach, and was visible only when the clouds across the crescent moon allowed a faint ghoulish light to filter for a moment upon the roofs of the sleeping city.

A pale hand attached a small

piece of cloth to the glass of the window, on which was smeared a bit of fast drying cement. Then the scratch of a diamond cutting a circle on the glass, a snapping tap as the inner oval fell loose and was withdrawn by the attached piece of cloth.

Came a hissing intake of breath, unmistakably a woman's, as the still form of a man was revealed lying on a small bed within the darkened room. Again that pale hand in the

shimmer of greenish moonlight; two dull clicks from the blue metal in her fist; a convulsive jerk from the figure on the bed, and when the clouds again cleared across the crescent moon, the dirty roof-top was empty and silent.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT DAN CONLEY was talking to his chief. His Irish face was twisted into a puzzled frown as he hitched his shoulder holster to a more comfortable position, and took a chair opposite the captain.

"'Mugs' Brandon was bumped off last night," he began.

"Where did they get him?" asked Captain Steele.

"In that roof-top apartment of his," said Conley. "No fingerprints. The gun that did for Mugs, cut out a circle of the window with a diamond, and let him have it with a .45. Must have used a silencer!"

"Mugs put up a fight?" asked the captain.

"Never knew what hit him," said Conley. "Got him while he was asleep!"

"Hell!" blazed the captain. "Get out of here and bring somebody in. The commissioner has been threatening to fire every man in the precinct the next time there was a killing. We got to make a showing!"

"I got a tall hunch about this killing," said Conley slowly.

"Sez you!" sneered Steele. "What's the big idea this time?"

"There was one footprint on the roof under that window," said Conley. "It was made by a rubber-sole from a woman's shoe!"

"One of Mugs' old molls," said Steele. "Check up on those Clancy Street dames he used to play around with. Some hallway baby, maybe!"

"I got a hunch," said Conley stubbornly.

"Mind letting me in on it?" asked the captain with heavy sarcasm.

"'Clerical Clara,'" said Conley. "It looks like her work!"

The captain looked at the detective for a moment while his heavy face grew red with exasperation. He spat viciously at the brass cuspidor which is a part of every police captain's office furniture.

"You thimble-wit!" he roared. "Clerical Clara! You know dam' well that dame ain't never been mixed up in this booze racket, and you've made us all look like dam' fools half a dozen times. Now you get out on the East Side, and bring in some of those Clancy Street trollops!"

"Yes, sir!" Detective Sergeant Conley saluted, swung on his heel, and left the room with his great hands clenched to control his rising anger. He stepped into a squad car, jammed in the shifting lever and roared out of the small courtyard with exhaust wide open.

IN a neat little office on the fourth floor of a side street building a blonde beauty was carefully sorting a list of accounts receivable, and making figures on a pad with machine-like accuracy.

Her hair was combed straight back in a mannish bob, and the carefully penciled brows were drawn together in a frown of concentration. Her age might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five, according to her mood.

Soft and hard by turns; cold and warmly yielding, whichever best suited her purpose and the business at hand. The sign on her door said: "Clara Beaumont, Accountant. Income Taxes and Collections."

She looked up as the handle of the door turned, and then smiled as she motioned lazily to a chair.

"Hello, Conley," she drawled. "Can I help you with your income tax?"

"Can the comedy," said Conley. "You know dam' well I don't have any grafts that make me pay taxes."

"More fool you," she answered. "What's on your mind?"

"Mugs Brandon," said Conley. "When did you last see him?"

"Don't know the gent," said the girl. "That is, not personally."

"He was bumped off last night," said Conley, watching her carefully. "Some dame did for him."

"How interesting," she sneered. "But then, I specialize in income taxes."

"And collections," said Conley.

"And I always collect," said the girl.

"I know that," said Conley. "You either collect—or else——"

"What do you mean—or else?" The girl shot the question at him viciously.

"Just what I said, and Mugs Brandon never paid anything he could get out of," said Conley.

He looked critically at her well-shaped legs, and then allowed his eyes to drop to her shoes. He noted that the thin slippers she was wearing were at least two sizes smaller than the print of the rubber-soled shoe he had measured on the roof of Brandon's apartment.

"You dicks make me sick," she said with disgust.

"Pardon my asthma," he said. "I'll be moving along."

"Wait a minute." She watched him with puzzled eyes. "You got nothing on me."

"That's what I said," he agreed. "I'll be shoving along."

For ten minutes after he had taken his abrupt departure she sat

motionless, trying to figure out what the detective had meant. Then she returned to her accounts. It took brains to swindle the government out of taxes, and she was one of the best in the game.

"Clerical Clara in the flesh!"

She started as the smooth feminine voice addressed her, and looked up to see a quietly dressed girl standing just inside the door. As though reaching for a paper, her hand started to slide inside an open drawer.

"Hold it!"

The order shot out like the snap of a whip, as the stranger moved her hand out from her side, a wicked little automatic clenched in the tiny fist.

"I ain't on the kill for sugar, but you make a funny pass at me and I'll fan you a heavy dose of lead poisoning," she articulated slowly. "You know who I am?"

"I don't go to cheap shows," sneered Clara. "But on a bet I'd say you were Chorus, back row!"

For a moment it seemed as though the stranger would turn her rod on her tormentor. She was a dark slender girl of about twenty-two, with the regal high-breasted carriage that speaks of breeding in any language.

"I am Premier Dancer at Brandon's Club, and you know it," she said quietly. "And Mugs stopped two slugs last night while he was sound asleep. You are good at figures, so I thought maybe you could figure that one out."

"Why, you cheap boob boob a doop, I'll burn you down so quick——"

"Stay put!" snapped the dancer. "I'd like to let you have it right now, but first I want to see you turn yellow like the sneakin' rat that you are!"

"Put up that rod and give me a break," begged Clara. "I'll fan a heat on you so dam' fast that you will think you are up against a Baby Thompson."

For a moment it looked as though the stranger would comply with the request. Then she sighed and backed toward the door. Never for an instant did she take her gun from the other.

"Not this time, old sister," she drawled. "But next time we meet, start doing your stuff with your lead atomizer. I'm giving you a break; that's more than you ever gave anyone."

The door slammed behind her with a bang, and for five minutes Clara sat motionless. She knew the ways of gangdom. They might wait five minutes outside to plug you if you got reckless and followed, or then they might beat it right away, and have five minutes start to the good. Either way, you never could tell for sure.

TWO days later, Mugs Brandon was put away in style. His casket was the most expensive that money could buy, and three cars loaded with flowers followed the hearse. His friends sent them because they regretted his demise, and his enemies were as profligate in their expenditures, to signify their satisfaction.

Weeping women were at the church; the girls from Clancy Street. But there were two who did not weep, though the eyes of one were dry with a burning hate that glittered like the fires of hell, as they looked across the casket at another woman who was coolly looking down upon the pale chisled features of the corpse.

Clerical Clara looked up from her inspection, and glanced insolently at

the woman on the other side of the bier.

"He looks so natural," she sighed. "As though he had paid all his debts, and had a clear conscience."

"Yes," whispered the other as softly. "He rests content. He knows *all* his debts will be paid."

The gangsters in line shoved them along with gentle pressure, and they parted one on each side of the casket, and passed down opposite walls of the little church.

From a nearby pew, Sergeant Detective Conley had observed the little by-play between them. As the stranger left the church he was close behind her, and followed until she turned in at the Club Brandon.

"Carmen Ryan!" he whispered to himself. "I heard that she was Brandon's real moll, but about those Clancy Street dames?"

He sighed heavily as he turned toward Headquarters to make his report to Captain Steele. Sometimes he wished he had listened to the voice of graft. He was not so young any more, and a detective's pay—

SERGEANT CONLEY could not have told you what prompted him to return to the apartment where Mugs Brandon had been killed, and as he stood in the large living-room with its bizarre furnishings, his eyes strayed to a large desk in one corner beneath a massive floor lamp.

He seated himself in the heavy chair behind the desk, and opened the various drawers with the keys taken from the effects of the slain gangster. In a secret compartment in the rear of the large center drawer, he found a small japanned box, and fitted a tiny key from the ring in his hand.

On top of a small account book were fifty bills of one thousand-dol-

low denomination, and in the book were accounts that would incriminate many prominent men. Beneath the book were several pages written in a neat feminine hand. The work of Clerical Clara!

"Jake Cling, \$5,000."

"Soapy Taylor, \$5,000."

"Toad Wilson, \$3,000."

Conley's eyes grew wide with understanding as he scanned the three cards. The three men had been enemies of Mugs Brandon, and each had been shot and killed in some mysterious way. Soapy had been killed while he slept. His mind pieced the puzzle together as accurately as if he had seen the killings take place.

Clerical Clara had done her work, and had then rendered her bill for the service. Mugs Brandon had refused to pay her, and he had remembered Clara's boast that she *always* collected—or else——

So absorbed was he in his thoughts that he failed to hear the slight click of the door as it opened on its well-oiled hinges.

"You find anything, Dick?"

He started to jump to his feet, and then sank back again as he looked into the muzzle of the gun held upon him in the steady hand of Clerical Clara. Her blue eyes were fastened upon the tell-tale slips on the desk before him.

"Hold that pose, please, and keep both hands on the desk where I can see them!"

Keeping him covered, she walked slowly to the desk, and reached for the papers. Before her hand could take them up, another soft voice purred gently over her shoulder.

"As you are, and don't move! Now drop that gat on the desk!"

As the automatic clattered to the mahogany desk, Carmen Ryan jammed the muzzle of her own rod into the back of her enemy.

"Hands high, and swing around," she ordered.

As Clara obeyed her blue eyes were filled with the venom that shook her frail body like the ague.

"I'll get you for this, you cheap hussy!" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Like a steel spring the arm of the dancer shot out, and mashed the lips of the killer woman. All the pent-up anger of the past two weeks went into that one blow that made the dancer careless for a moment.

BEFORE Detective Sergeant Conley could interfere, Clara's right foot shot out, and the automatic flew from the hand of the dancer and went spinning across the room. In the same breath the killer snatched up her own heavy automatic from the desk and swung around on the man and woman with the threat of death in her savage eyes.

"Take those papers out of your pocket and hand them to me!"

As she snapped the words, the detective stiffened. He gazed steadily into the hate-filled eyes before him, and slowly shook his head.

"You have fooled me a dozen times," he said. "Now I have enough on you to swing you into hell!"

"You must think I'm a fool," she sneered. "Thirty seconds, and then I start shooting."

The dancer made a movement, and the eyes of the killer swept toward her for a brief instant as she swung the muzzle of her rod around with the movement of her body. In that split second, Conley threw his body forward and down against the desk.

Even as he fell, Clerical Clara wheeled and threw a slug across the desk which was overturning. He slid to the floor, the desk falling on top of him. As the dancer started

forward, Clara faced her with the smoking rod.

"I never miss," she said quietly. "Another move from you and I'll burn you down, too."

Watching the dancer closely, she leaned over and attempted to reach into the breast pocket of the fallen detective, but the heavy desk covered his chest like a shield. The telephone lay where it had fallen, and a series of sharp clicks warned her that some one was listening in.

"Take hold of that desk and help me move it, or I'll drill you," she ordered the dancer.

As the girl started to obey, a sharp knock sounded on the hall door. Then a heavy body smashed against the panels. The killer looked quickly about, and backed toward the window. She slid a slender leg over the sill, and climbed onto a fire-escape. There she paused.

"Take that!"

BUT even as she fired, the dancer had flung herself sideways behind the desk. Then the hall door crashed down, and two uniformed police rushed in with drawn weapons. One of them covered the crouching girl, while the other hurried to the fallen detective.

"They got Sergeant Conley," he said.

"You're a liar!"

At the drawing words, the policeman bent over and looked into the twinkling eyes of the detective. Then he smiled with relief.

"Don't stand there," said Conley. "Lift this dam' dead wood off of my chest."

The next moment he was on his feet, and as he pressed a hand to his side he winced with pain. The girl ran to him.

"She shot you! I saw her," she cried. "Are you hurt bad?"

"Naw! I got a bullet-proof vest

on," grunted Conley. "Just knocked me out for a while. Where did that dam' killer go?"

"She took it on the lam out the window, just as these cops broke down the door," said the dancer. "Threw a shot at me from the sill, but I did a dive behind the desk-top, and she missed. I think she went over the roof."

"She knows the way," said Conley. "She came over that same roof when she did for Brandon."

At his words the girl began to sob. He patted her shoulder with clumsy gentleness.

"There now," he comforted. "We will be catching her soon, and I'll see to it that you have a seat right up in front when they spring the trap under her."

He picked up the telephone and reported to Headquarters. Ten minutes later the net was set to tighten about the fleeing killer, and the apartment of the slain gangster chief was once more deserted and silent.

A DAY and a night went by, and Clerical Clara had not been taken. A score of gangsters and politicians had been questioned about their connection with Mugs Brandon, but they denied any knowledge of his activities, and Detective Conley was about ready to throw the little account book away as worthless.

He was idly thumbing its pages when he came upon a notation on the last page which aroused his interest. He looked closer, and then cursed himself silently for not having recognized the significance of those few penciled words before.

"C. C.," it read. "Terry T is heavy."

It came to him like a flash. So far as he could learn, Clerical Clara had no man in her life. Trust a

man like Brandon to know, he ruminated. Brandon's notation meant that Terry T. was her man.

That was funny, too. He knew that Terry Train was a gunman, but had never been able to pin anything on the dapper gangster. It was a well-known fact that Train had no moll, and here was Brandon's notation that Train was *heavy* with Clara!

Conley called to Dick Trent, his running mate, and after explaining his latest hunch, they started for the building where Train leased an apartment. He knew that the gangster would not be expecting a call from the police, but once in the squad car he looked carefully at his gun, and advised Trent to do the same.

Arriving at the apartment building, they walked quickly through the ornate lobby and entered the elevator. Conley turned to the colored operator and snapped his number before the other could voice the protest that showed on his ebony face.

"Fifth floor, and keep your mouth shut!"

As the car stopped, he threw open the door and ran quickly to Apartment 36, with Trent close at his heels.

"Take that window, and watch that no one ducks through to the roof," he told Trent.

As Trent posted himself at the window which commanded the roof, Conley rang the buzzer of Train's apartment. After a brief pause he rang again.

"Open up!" he called.

The knob was turned slowly, and just as the door swung back, a shot sounded from the roof, and Trent fell to the floor. Like a flash Conley stepped in, his service gun in his hand.

"Get 'em up!" he snapped.

The slender, well-dressed man be-

fore him raised his hands, and lifted his eyebrows in simulated surprise. He was evidently just about to leave the apartment when Conley rang his bell.

"Well, what's it all about?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Conley stepped in and clicked a pair of cuffs about the upraised wrists.

"Get in there," he ordered gruffly. "I want to see who fired that shot."

Herding the prisoner before him into the back room, he ran to the closed window and quickly raised it. Leaning out, he scanned the roof which ran just under the windows along the entire side of the building. No one was in sight, and as he turned back into the room, Trent entered from the hall.

"Get you?" asked Conley.

"Just a bare scratch," said the other detective. "It was a woman," he added.

"So Clara has been hiding out here," said Conley.

"I don't know any Clara," said the prisoner.

"You better come clean," said Conley. "We know that Clerical Clara was your moll. You both kept it pretty shady, but Mugs Brandon knew it, and left word where it would do the most good. One of his cards said you were mixed up in that Toad Wilson killing."

"The dam' double-crossing punk." The exclamation seemed to explode from the lips of the dapper gangster before he could control himself. Then he bit his lip and turned furiously on the detective.

"Don't kid me," he snarled. "I know you bulls, and you haven't got a thing on me."

Conley was smiling as he turned to Trent.

"Take him down and book him on suspicion," he said. "I'll be down in an hour, so wait for me."

AS Trent drove away with the prisoner, Conley hailed a taxi and gave the address of Carmen Ryan. He phoned to her from the house phone in the hall, and she pressed the buzzer that admitted him.

"You working tonight?" he asked without preamble.

She nodded without speaking. Her eyes were swollen as though she had been weeping, and in their sullen depths he could see the same hatred that had been there the day of Brandon's funeral.

"You'd like to see this Clara get hers, wouldn't you?" he asked.

"If the cops don't get her soon, I'll get her on my own," snapped the girl. "Mugs Brandon might not have been so much, but he was good to me, and I loved him. She shot him while he was asleep, like the lousy rat that she is!"

"He left fifty grand that comes to you as his common-law wife," said Conley.

"The Club is in my name," said the girl. "I'm going to run it myself."

"If you will do what I tell you, I think we can land this Clara dame tonight," said Conley.

"What can I do?" asked the girl. "I should have burned her down when I had her under my rod."

"And you'd have got the hot seat," reminded Conley. "I got a hunch that she will be paying you a visit tonight, and my hunches have been working lately."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the girl.

For twenty minutes Conley talked earnestly, coaching the girl in the part she was to play. Then he left her and hurried to Headquarters.

THE "Club Brandon" was having a formal re-opening. The interior had been decorated according to the

whims of the new owner, and was a combination of silver and old gold, with panel bands of somber black contrasting the two.

On a raised dais at the far end of the main room, a ten-piece orchestra was playing the latest dance arrangements. Unlike most orchestras, each man was carrying an automatic under the perfectly fitting dinner coats. They were called "Brandon's Army," and Carmen Ryan had seen them in action and had decided to keep them.

Huge bouquets of flowers stood along the walls, representing the good wishes of her friends, and those who would like to be. The tables were well filled with guests, and the waiters moved constantly about with silent efficiency.

At the entrance to the main room just inside the grilled iron doors, Detective Conley was sitting behind a small palm, watching each newcomer. Four men were posted in other places around the room, unknown to any one but Conley and Carmen Ryan.

They mingled with the guests, chatting as affably as though they were part of the reception. Messenger boys rushed in with telegrams of congratulations, and new floral pieces were being added to the masses of blossoms along the walls.

At ten minutes to twelve, a glittering truck drew up in front of the entrance, and unloaded a mass of roses built on a small platform mounted on iron casters. Four men carried it carefully up the stairs, wheeled it through the grilled iron doors and placed it in the center along one of the walls.

A gasp of admiration went up from the assembled guests as one of the attendants pushed a wall socket, and a glitter of colored in-

candescents flashed out from the mass of roses. They were of the deepest red, and were so placed as to make the entire piece resemble a huge blood-red rosebud.

A small card was fastened to one corner. It read:

"Good luck. Hope you get yours. You deserve it!"

A small gong struck the hour of midnight, and with the last stroke the brilliant lights faded out, to be replaced with soft reflections from the coves which ran around the walls just under the ceiling. They were of different colors, changing from rose and lavender to amber and gold in soft lambent waves.

THE orchestra started playing softly, and a strange hush came over the crowd which had been so noisy but a moment before. From the four corners of the room shafts of colored lights shot out, and focused on the very center of the polished floor. The beat of the muffled drums sounded like tom-toms from deep in some savage forest, mingling with the barbaric cadences of the muted instruments.

Another gasp went up from the crowd as the center of the floor opened upward and a silver and gold fountain came into view. Streams of water splashed against the sparkling crystal which formed the lesser ornaments, and changed to cascades of leaping fire as the vari-colored lights played upon their revolving facets.

The beat of the tom-toms became louder as the orchestra was heard playing some wild song of the desert. From above a brilliant floodlight of amber suddenly cast its glow upon the large figure in the very center of the fountain, and breaths were held as the semi-nude goddess became a woman of living gold.

For just an instant she poised on the lip of the fountain shell, and then leaped lightly to the floor. As the lights from the four corners followed her, she began a slow dance to the strains of the half-savage music, which seemed to blend with the shades of colored lights, and made them seem like a part of the very air.

The crowd grew tense as the strange witchery of sound and light crept into their blood. Hearts pounded and hands clenched with passion as the desire to become primitive cast its insinuating spell upon them.

Not a sound was heard as the music went on, and that silent, beautiful figure of gold gyrated maddeningly before them; no sounds except the raking intake of breath in bodies reverting to the abysmal.

Like a wild creature of the forests the dancer began to move in a creeping glide that carried her ever nearer to the tinkling fountain, and then, in one crashing crescendo from the orchestra hidden in the shifting shadows, she leaped onto the fountain and froze into statuesque immobility.

Before the crowd could relax a staccato blur of shots rang out from the center of the farthest wall, and as the spiteful orange flames cut the semi-lighted shadows of color, the statue toppled from her pedestal and fell into the shallow water with a sodden splash.

At the same instant the lights went on, and from five different places in the crowded room, a fusillade of shots was directed toward the huge bouquet of deep red roses. The hidden lights were shot out, and clipped roses flew from the frame as the bullets from the guns of the detectives chopped their way into the heart of that massive rosebud.

The crowd stood still, holding their

breaths with the surprise of it all, wondering whether it were a part of the entertainment, or whether some new debt of gangdom were being paid.

From behind the grilled doors Dan Conley came in at a crouching run, his gun held at his side as he approached that mutilated offering of roses.

From the far end of the room came the orchestra, spread out fanwise as every man held a rod ready before him. In the center of the room a dripping figure was climbing out of the splashing fountain, and then the fountain sank again below the level of the floor, as the dancer disappeared behind a group of palms.

Conley and his men ripped the large floral rose to shreds, and deep in the heart of that token of love and good wishes they found nothing—except six brass shells from an automatic, and the rubber print of a woman's shoe!

A GAIN the waiters took up their task of serving the crowd, and again the orchestra played the latest number for the dance. The spell had passed, and the crowd was once again occupied with the business of having a good time in their separate ways.

Behind the palm by the grilled doors Conley sat with Trent, trying to figure out where he had slipped. He felt sure that he could not be wrong, and he was glad that he had insisted that Carmen wear the thin suit of gilded chain armor for her dance. It cost plenty to get that costume, but if they had trapped the murderer it would have been worth it. Even at that, her body would wear the bruises of those bullets for weeks.

From behind the orchestra came a brilliant figure clad in a gown of

deepest red that accentuated the contours of her flawless figure with artistic perfection. The only relief to that deep rosebud red was a narrow trimming of black around the bodice.

"Carmen!" The crowd shouted the one word.

She held up her hand for silence, as she reached the exact spot where the fountain had been. And strangely enough, she faced the mutilated rosebud of roses.

"Thank you all," she said simply. "I hope you liked the show. It is not over yet, but it will soon be finished."

She crouched as she spoke, her eyes never leaving that emblem of love along the wall. Without warning, the flood-lights from two corners of the room were focused on that shattered token, and the crowd missed the lightning move of the dancer in the center of the room.

Her right hand flashed to her leg, and came away spitting blood-colored flashes of flame into the heart of that huge rosebud. A figure seemed to emerge from the heart of the rose, and sagged through the crushed flowers, to drop on the polished floor.

The crowd gasped. A messenger boy!

Detective Conley started as he turned over the still figure, and closed the glazing eyes. Then he pushed back the small uniform cap and disclosed the blond mannish bob of—"Clerical Clara!"

"I saw a messenger boy when the lights went out!" he muttered half to himself.

"I saw a footprint," said Carmen. "I knew she wouldn't resist trying it again. We wouldn't be looking for it. And now the devil has a dam' good bookkeeper to keep his records straight."