



"I spotted you but I can't place the old dude. I know he's a phoney. Come across with the twenty grand."

# The Madame Naturals

By PERRY PAUL

*The thrilling Madame, mystery queen of the underworld, goes philanthropic again and cases a job for a framed man. Here's another breath-taking yarn of the lady nobody knows and her strange half world doings.*

## CHAPTER I ON THE MAKE

**T**HE MADAME, that enigmatic figure who was of the underworld and yet not in it, tossed her gorgeous evening wrap of cloth of gold edged with sable negligently over the back of the

chair and seated herself at the table that was always reserved for her at "Louisiana Lil's" notorious Come-On Club.

Tonight the Madame was on the make—on the make for a problem against which she could pit her master skill in all the art and strategies known to the half-world that

is outside the law, a problem tough enough to stimulate her marvelous brain to yet another accomplishment of the impossible.

The thin-lipped girl who was known only as—the Madame—settled back comfortably and lit a cigarette. She was aware of the hot eyes that sought hers—suggesting, pleading, offering, playing—over the sheath-like cloth of gold gown that flaunted the soft curves of her boyish figure, marveling as the club's garish illumination bathed her burnished blonde head with glinting highlights. But her own gray-blue eyes, glittering with the steely menace of a Damascus blade, parried the glances impersonally.

The Come-On's latest crop of suckers!

They were innocently unaware that this solitary girl was the mystery moll feared and respected by both police and underworld because she could case a job so tight that nothing could break it, because she could spot dip, dick or peterman whatever handicap he liked and beat him at his own game; and because she was a straight shooter in a town where even the calendar was suspected of being fixed.

To the Madame, the Come-On's sucker crop simply did not exist. She could be sought only for professional advice and assistance if the problem intrigued her. And she was not interested in setups.

Grinding out her cigarette, the Madame looked for her customary waiter, but he was nowhere to be seen at the moment. Without the slightest trace of annoyance she reached for the envelope bag that matched her gown and extracted a compact scarcely the size of a half-dollar. From it came a slim pencil of lipstick with which she touched up her lips.

At the conclusion of the operation

she did not return the compact to her bag. Instead, she toyed with it in a series of deft but absent-minded gestures reminiscent of the preliminary passes of a conjurer.

Her eyes grew a bit less hard as she finally observed her waiter threading his way through the crush of tables toward her.

He was, to all appearances, just an ordinary white haired, shuffling night club waiter. But the Madame knew that once this cringing, servile shell of a man had been an accredited artist, in his line. It was her business to know.

ARRIVED finally at her table, the waiter stood submissively awaiting her pleasure, watching with the sad eyes of an Italian madonna as her agile fingers continued their aimless pastime.

The Madame seemed unaware of his presence. The play with the compact became more rapid and purposeful. It absorbed her, apparently, but under its cover she was intent upon the man's gray, expressionless face.

She held the compact lightly between thumb and forefinger, her left hand passing momentarily before it. Then thumb and forefinger gradually compressed. Imperceptibly the compact was disappearing from sight. The remaining fingers of the hand closed in. It turned over, opened slowly and the fingers spread out palm up.

The compact was gone.

The waiter's eyes seemed to have come alive. His face had lost its lined, pouchy look and was keen with interest. His fingers, subconsciously, were imitating the girl's actions.

The Madame's hand closed again and her movements were reversed. Between thumb and forefinger once more appeared the compact.

The liquid Latin eyes of the waiter glowed with admiration, and a genuine liking. Their message was as plain to the Madame as though he had spoken aloud— Bravo! Well done! But based upon a principle with which I am familiar. I believe I could duplicate it.

Without a word the Madame held out the compact to the hand that was automatically stretching to receive it.

The man pressed it between his palms to get the feel. His fingers, old but strangely slender and well kept for those of a night club waiter, flexed and fluttered to loosen stiffened muscles.

His stooped shoulders seemed to straighten as he presented the compact between thumb and forefinger with an almost professional flourish. His movements were jerky, as though groping for a long lost sureness, but imperceptibly the compact was disappearing from sight.

His hand closed, turned over, opened again.

The compact was gone.

The hand closed. The motion was smoother now. Then suddenly there was an imperceptible slip. A mist of perspiration appeared on the man's forehead but the slip was recovered. Between thumb and forefinger gradually appeared the compact.

In that instant years seemed to have dropped from the waiter's face, softening the deep seared lines. He was straight and tall, and smiling, and he bowed from the waist with an instinctive courtliness as he handed back the trinket.

**THE MADAME** acknowledged the gesture with a flicker of the lips that implied a tribute which the man understood. Then the years flowed back with a rush and he was the night club waiter again. The moment of equality was gone.

"Will you have the usual, Madame—as usual?" he asked tonelessly.

"If you please, Felix."

The waiter inclined his head and shuffled away through the mob that was rising for the next dance.

The Madame glanced idly over the crowd. The table at which she sat was one from which everything could be seen. It backed against the wall on the raised section that circled the tables constituting the ring-side and gave her an unobstructed view of the entire room. The entrance, in case of necessity, was scarcely a dozen steps away.

In the doorway she caught the glare of a homicide dick, unobtrusive on his nightly round of the hot spots. She nodded amiably. The Madame had no fear of the law, for her play was invariably the head-work. She refused to participate actively in any job she cased, or, unaccountably, to take any share of the loot. No one had ever been able to pin a charge on her that would stick. In fact, the commissioner himself had once enlisted her help and she had done him a service without breaking faith with gangland.

An enigma—the Madame. The moniker applied to the ritzy manner and speech she assumed when she chose. It seemed, at times, to come more easily from her lips than the language of the underworld.

Her glance wandered on—cold, aloof.

It was after midnight and the Come-On was beginning to boil. Mitzi, the pert-faced little French doll of a cigarette girl was circulating with her tray among the closely-packed tables. The customers, from all appearances, were in a buying mood—the Madame's eyes missed nothing—although tonight Mitzi's face seemed strangely drawn, haggard almost.

The Madame turned her attention

to the Privilege Corner across the dance floor, where sat those whose checks the management—through tact, necessity or fear—saw fit to charge against good will. No new faces there, just the usual mob of grifters.

Felix, the waiter, appeared at her elbow. He placed a glass, a bottle of mineral water and a plate of dry toast on the table before her. Then he opened the mineral water, poured the glass half full and without a word melted away.

The girl turned to the refreshments. She seemed busily engaged sipping the bubbly drink and nibbling at the dry toast but under cover of the action she was observing with care the dancers milling about on the tiny wax strip that passed as dancing floor.

Here, drowned in the insidious rhythms of the hottest band on Broadway, the upper and the lower crusts mixed, and blended, and became one—a motley hybrid of rotund and vacuous-eyed playboys; aristocratic showgirls, aristocratic until the third drink; thin-lipped comen; dizzy, though sober, debutantes; killers that looked like collegians and collegians that looked, and were blotto; gross-bellied politicians; money boys from Wall Street; sleek gamblers with eyes like dead fishes and fingers that were never still; racketeers in the somber garb of deacons and baby-faced harpies with the apparent unapproachability of nuns.

A tremor of disgust agitated the Madame's shoulders. . . the same mob, the same raucous activity. . . there was nothing to interest her here.

She glanced over the tables, merely more of the same. The Come-On Club held nothing of interest for her tonight, it seemed.

The Madame raised the glass of mineral water again to her lips and

suddenly, over the rim, her eyes halted and focused—on the face of Mitzi, the cigarette girl.

The girl was smiling, but woodenly, with lips compressed. There were lines scoring it deeply beneath the makeup.

Mitzi was in trouble, desperate trouble. From the moment the Madame had first noticed her she had known, subconsciously, and now that the cigarette girl had come closer she was sure. It was part of the Madame's business, this ability to read faces.

AND by the same token the Madame knew the little cigarette girl was summoning nerve to speak to her. She smiled encouragingly as Mitzi stopped beside a party three tables away, and settled back to wait.

The transaction accomplished, the girl made her way to the Madame's side and rested her tray on the edge of the table. As the Madame busied herself over the selection of a packet of cigarettes she shot an inquiring glance upward.

"Well, Mitzi?"

The girl started at the abruptness of the question.

"I'm—I'm," she stammered.

"You're desperate, Mitzi," the Madame supplied. "You could not wait to come to my office tomorrow and ask for help."

"Yes Madame."

"Well, we cannot be seen talking here. It is not safe for *anyone* to be seen talking with *me*. But manage somehow to be beside this table when the lights are dimmed for the floor show. I will hear you then."

The girl's face showed her relief.

"Thank you, Madame."

She picked up her tray and moved on.

The Madame watched her as she slowly circled the room and came at

last to the little table in the far corner where she kept her stock of supplies.

A boy was seated at the table. He looked out of place in the midst of all this feverish merriment. His face was drawn, his eyes fixed on his clenched hands that rested on the table before him.

Mitzi sank into the chair beside him for a moment and began to speak earnestly, but her words seemed to get no response. He only shook his head wearily, and patted the girl's hand.

She rose, then, and went on her winding way between the tables. It was almost time for the last floor show of the evening and she began to edge toward where the Madame sat alone.

THE orchestra's number came to an end and the dancers straggled from the floor. When they were finally seated there was a shrill blast from the trumpets, the lights dimmed and a red spotlight picked out the robust form of Louisiana Lil, blatant and bawdy, as she flounced toward the center of the floor and went into her spiel.

Out of the darkness at the Madame's elbow came Mitzi's whisper:

"May I spill the dope now, Madame?"

"Yes Mitzi, but quickly."

The girl's voice was eager, pleading.

"It's my boy friend, Madame, the one that's sitting at my table. He's short twenty grand in his account at the bank and he's going to kill himself tomorrow! You must——"

"The market?"

"No, Madame. At 'Poker-Eye' Joe's gambling casino the other side of Long Beach out on the Island—shooting crap. Joe runs a pretty flashy place—wide open—society

crowd—roulette, bird cage and everything, just like Saratoga—but he's also got a crap table where they play for big dough. And that's where they took my boy friend."

There was a pause.

When the Madame broke it her tone was bored and a trifle cold.

"Anything I hate," she said, "is a loser who can't take it on the chin without coming whimpering to his moll for sympathy. And when he comes crying out loud——"

"But you don't understand, Madame," the girl interrupted. "Listen! He's a good boy. Every Saturday night he stays up and waits to take me home. A couple of Joe's steer guys who hang around this joint found out that he worked in a bank. When they learned he was an assistant cashier they figured here was meat. They got him tight and eased him out to Joe's. There they gave him the works at the high stake crap table. When he came to he was twenty grand in the red. What chance did he have? Joe has ways of collecting debts that aren't pleasant. And, besides, the game wasn't straight."

"You think it was rigged, eh?"

"I know it was, Madame. I know Poker-Eye Joe, and so do you."

"Yes, I know him." The Madame hesitated. "But what do you expect of me?"

"Just tell us what to do, Madame. We'll do anything. The men come around to count the money in three days, and then—and then——"

She was unable to go on.

"And I'll bet he's bought a bottle of carbolic acid to do it with," the Madame supplied.

"Yes—yes, he has."

"Silly way to die," the Madame mused. "Too—well, painful in the first place."

She grasped the girl's arm and drew her closer in the darkness.

"I'm taking a run out to Joe's place tonight, Mitzi. And if that crap game is crooked you can promise your boy friend he'll have his twenty thousand dollars the first thing day after tomorrow morning. If it isn't—well, you can tell him I'll show him a way of committing suicide that will almost be a pleasure."

## CHAPTER II

### ACE, DEUCE, FOR BIG MONEY

**I**T was later, but not too late, when the Madame presented herself at the door of Poker-Eye Joe's palace of chance.

The casino was a converted road-house tucked away in a grove of scrub oak trees, the windows in the back, where had formerly been the glassed-in dining room, commanding a magnificent view of the ocean. Its parking rank, a good gauge of its popularity with the Long Island sporting set, was packed with cars representing all degrees of luxuriance.

Over it all brooded the sinister silence that marks the shrines patronized by the worshipers of the dancing cubes and the whirling little white commie.

While the place was supposed to be wide open, nevertheless the Madame was looked over carefully through a sliding panel before she was admitted by a uniformed doorman, and bowed into a small foyer.

"What is the name, please?" he asked.

The Madame allowed herself a faintly synical smile. The appearance of wealth had apparently gotten her past the outer portal, but more definite proof of its possession was necessary for admittance into the inner sanctum.

She dropped her evening wrap

from her shoulders and flung it negligently over her arm.

"You may announce to your superior that the Madame is waiting," she said.

This was obviously a bit irregular but the doorman gave no sign.

"Will you wait here for a moment, please?" he said, and disappeared through a side door.

He was back almost instantly.

"Will you be so kind as to step this way, please? The manager wishes to welcome you personally."

The Madame followed him without a word as he ushered her into the manager's office, bowed and withdrew.

Poker-Eye Joe rose from the chair behind his desk. His evening dress was impeccable, his black hair carefully smoothed, his swarthy face glowing from massage, but even a blind man would have known that he was a rat. The only feature that did not betray him was the eye that gave rise to his moniker—it was glass.

"The great Madame!" he greeted effusively, too effusively. "My establishment is honored. Please consider it yours for as long as you care to stay. But there is——"

The Madame interrupted, ignoring his outstretched hand.

"I just happened to be passing and thought I would stop in for a brief whirl." She glanced down at the dial strapped to the inside of her wrist. "I only want to play for a short while."

Poker-Eye Joe's manner changed. His working eye narrowed but his words were conciliatory, almost apologetic.

"Madame, the place is yours. Call for whatever you want to eat or drink. And now don't misunderstand me—I'm delighted to have you, you give my place class, tone. But, Madame, I run a gambling re-

sort. I get my living from this joint, and I can't afford to gamble with you!"

The Madame understood.

"I see," she sneered. "You are not satisfied with the tremendous odds in favor of the house. You—er—merely *hurry* the taking of the suckers a bit, eh? Poker-Eye Joe, the sure-thing gambler! Well, I only hope your customers don't find it out."

The man flushed, but he kept control of his temper.

"I'd like to show you around myself, Madame. I——"

"Never mind," she cut in. "I suppose I should be obliged to you for tipping me that even I wouldn't stand a chance. Anyway, I'll just stroll around and look your layout over."

"And if you have any idea of casing this joint for a heist, let me warn you——"

The Madame swung around upon him and struck a pose of gaga-eyed astonishment and outraged innocence.

"Why Poker-Eye Joe!" she gasped.

"Well, I'm tellin' you, Madame," he growled.

The Madame's expression was enigmatic as she turned and passed out of the office into the main salon.

A quick and expert glance told her that what Joe had said was true. High up in the walls were slits where, even now, the gambler's rod-men were probably watching her over the barrels of choppers. There were undoubtedly others outside, also, planted to sweep every possible entrance and exit. The innocuous-looking roadhouse was nothing more nor less than an armed fortress.

No, the place was practically heistproof. She would have to figure some other way to make it come for the amount she required.

THE Madame eased over to where the little white ball was spinning about in the roulette wheel. The croupier bowed respectfully but made no move to secure a place at the table for her. She watched the play for a time and moved on to where the dice jumped and bounced in the bird-cage.

This seemed to bore her and she wandered in to the big stake crap table. But the game here had not really gotten going and she went over to watch the blackjack board. But the play here failed to intrigue her either, and she passed on to the bar.

Ignoring the stacked bottles with their vintage labels, she called for a split of mineral water. But she did not get to drink it.

A gathering crowd at the high-stake crap table attracted her attention and she sauntered over.

It was one of those things that occasionally happen—the man with the dice was "hot." He was a young chap, flushed with excitement and not a little wine.

The Madame looked inquiringly down at a fluffy blonde standing on tiptoe beside her.

"It's young Whitney Van Astorbilt," the blonde whispered. "He's just made five straight passes—run a hundred-dollar bill up to thirty-two hundred."

The Madame nodded and eased around to where, from the rear of the crowd she could get a good view of the action.

Young Van Astorbilt was shaking the dice beside his ear.

"Shoot the thirty-two hundred. I'm hot—wow! Watch me take this table!"

The imperturbable houseman covered the bet.

The dice rolled out across the green baize, hit the bank and tumbled back.

Ace, deuce—a crap!

"Damn!" muttered the shooter. "Why do I have to fall off just when I'm going good? Well, shoot two thousand!"

He tossed the bills on the table and rolled again.

Ace, deuce!

"Hell's bells—this can't keep up forever! Shoot four thousand!"

But apparently it could, for when the dice galloped once more they read the same bad news—ace, deuce!

The young man took time out to consider. A few thousand more or less didn't matter to a Van Astorbilt, but the principle of being on the losing end annoyed him.

He fumbled undecidedly with the bills in his hand.

The Madame was beginning to see the light, or believed she was. She was casting covert glances at the watch strapped to the inside of her wrist—only it wasn't a watch.

It was a compass!

According to its reading she was standing directly west of the center of the table, which the quivering needle paralleled.

The shooter had made up his mind.

"The thing for me to do," he said to the man standing next to him, "is to build up and not be greedy. Shoot a hundred!"

The dice bounded.

A natural!

The Madame's eyes on the needle saw that it did not move.

"Shoot the two!"

The dice rolled.

A six and a four!

Still the needle did not move.

"Large Richard!" chanted young Van Astorbilt. "If I make you I am hot and I'll ride these dice to glory!"

He made the point.

"Shoot the four!"

He came out with a five, two.

The needle of the compass on the Madame's arm lay quivering calmly.

"Wa-hoo!" cried the young man.

"I'll say I'm hot again. Shoot the eight and five thousand more!"

He spread the bills on the table and the houseman matched them.

"Now, dice, do your stuff!"

The dice rattled in his hand.

The Madame's eyes, fixed covertly on the compass dial, narrowed.

The needle suddenly quartered with a leap and pointed toward the table.

The dice rolled.

Ace, deuce!

The needle jumped back to its rightful position.

"Damn me for a dub!" Van Astorbilt cried. "Shoot ten thousand once and I'm through!"

He massaged the dice between his hands while the houseman shoved forward a stack of bills.

A pulsing hush hung over the table.

The Madame watched the needle breathlessly. This would tell the story.

The dice left the young man's hand.

The needle quartered again, and seemed struggling to get out of its box and leap toward the table.

The dice hit the bank and bounded back, spun and came to a stop.

Ace, deuce!

The Madame turned casually away from the table. She knew all that she needed to know.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE GIMMICK

AT noon the next day the Madame was seated at the old Luis Quatorze desk in the little office behind Le Parfum Shoppe. Her eyes were dark with fatigue, but in them, too, there was a grim satisfaction as



she gazed aimlessly at the antique French furniture and subdued gray hangings that served as a perfect background for her tawny young beauty.

From time to time she glanced expectantly toward the outer shoppe with its glass cases full of exotic bottles that lined the walls, apparently a legitimate business, but in reality the blind behind which the Madame worked.

From time to time she bent forward, listening for the whine of the buzzer that would announce the presence of a visitor.

Finally she lit a cigarette and smoked in short, nervous puffs. Just as she was grinding it out in an onyx tray the buzzer sounded.

A man entered the shoppe, a man with white hair and the sad eyes of an Italian madonna. He shuffled toward the inner office and stood, waiting submissively, in the doorway.

"Come in, Felix."

The waiter bowed and entered the office.

"I am going to ask a favor of you, Felix, but before I do I want to show you something."

The Madame rose and led the way to a corner. There was no semblance of a door there, nothing but the unbroken stretch of drapes that covered the entire wall. Separating a fold of the drapes revealed one, however.

She opened it and they went up a flight of winding stairs. At the top another door and they entered what might have been the reception room of a convent, a buddhist monastery, a sorcerer's den, or all three combined. The furniture was stiff, formal and austere. The walls were done in some rough material, and were gray. In a niche sat a fat-bellied buddha. Opposite it hung a dingy icon. On a massive table stood

a crystal-gazer's sphere flanked by a pile of leather-bound books, obviously of great age, and a variety of ancient alchemist's instruments.

**W**ITHOUT pausing, they entered a gloomy corridor, lined with closed doors. One of these the Madame opened and they stepped into a room as dazzlingly white as the corridor outside was dark. The walls were white tile, lined with shelves filled with bottles and jars of various shapes and hues—test tubes, electrical apparatus, retorts—a complete laboratory equipped with all the latest devices.

Felix showed neither surprise nor unusual interest. It was as though life had battered and bludgeoned, and finally tossed him aside, an empty shell.

"It is this that I want to show you," the Madame said as she indicated a crap table, a duplicate of the one that she had seen at the gambling resort the night before.

The waiter listened politely.

"I have a problem," the girl went on.

She picked up a pair of dice and set them carefully in her hand.

"I can usually hit the five, two."

She tossed them on the board.

"Five, two! Right!"

Four times in succession she passed with that same combination. A spark of interest was beginning to appear deep down in the man's lusterless eyes. His hands twitched eagerly.

"But when I try to pass with a six, five, Felix, that is another matter."

And it was. Try as she would she could not seem to make the dice behave. And as she worked the man's face lost its dead, expressionless look, his hands massaged each other to loosen stiff muscles.

The Madame gave it up at last and sighed hopelessly.

The waiter took a step forward, and hesitated. Something that had lain long buried and forgotten within him was coming to the surface. He licked his dry lips.

"I——" He hesitated. "At one time I—I was rather capable at such feats of sleight-of-hand. Perhaps I can help you."

The Madame handed him the dice. He warmed them between his palms, flexed his fingers.

"Seven—five, two. Right!"

The dice rattled.

"I have not tried this for years. Probably I will be stiff and awkward, but I will do my best. Seven—six, one. Right!"

He began to work with greater ease and assurance. As he called the numbers they came, and as they came his shoulders straightened, his eyes flashed, he was no longer the lowly waiter but a personage. He looked years younger.

"You see, it is quite simple, Madame," he said at last. "I will now try the six, five lick."

The girl leaned one elbow on the green baize of the table. The man's setting of the dice was hardly noticeable even to the quickest eye. He shook them quickly and they tumbled out across the green cloth.

Ace, deuce.

A look of amazement crossed the man's face.

He tried again.

Ace, deuce!

And still again.

"What!" he exclaimed. "This cannot be. The Count Felix de Gammo Vulzini's dice work was flawless!"

The three spots recurring and recurring seemed about to shatter the man's miraculous rehabilitation.

"But wait!" the Madame cried.

"Neither dexterity nor luck mean anything against—the squeeze!"

She lifted the green cloth.

"Ah!" the man muttered. "I might have known. An electro-magnet. And just enough iron behind the spots opposite the ace of one dice and the deuce of the other. Ordinary amber dice such as are used in every gambling resort. Yet it fooled me completely."

The Madame took him up at once.

"And if it fooled the great Vulzini what chance would a young innocent have who has been well plied with liquor?" she asked. "A young man who has access to the vaults of a bank and who has been carefully primed by the smartest gang of grifters in the business? Listen, Vulzini, I need your help."

For several minutes the Madame talked eagerly, earnestly, convincingly, while the man listened. When she had finished all trace of the waiter had gone, whatever had broken him was forgotten. He was again the man he had once been, erect, dignified, confident.

He bowed with a courtly flourish.

"Madame," he said, and his voice trembled with emotion, "I have wanted to play just one more show; to bring back, if only for a moment, the memory of long-forgotten triumphs; to live, in one more exhibition, what I once was."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GREAT VULZINI

AT EXACTLY twelve o'clock that evening a long low limousine of expensive and foreign make drove up to the entrance of Poker-Eye Joe's palace of chance. A liveried footman sprang out and opened a door that sported an impressive crest.

A man descended slowly and with dignity. He tapped on the door of

the one-time roadhouse with the head of a black ebony stick.

The eye that peered out through the sliding panel saw a man in faultless evening kit of the latest mode. The hair that showed beneath his shiny top hat was snow white. His face was that of a man sure of his position and power—an aristocrat. It did not need the red ribbon across his stiff shirt-bosom or the decoration in his buttonhole to convince the doorman of that.

He flung the door open without hesitation and admitted the gentleman into the small foyer.

"May I announce your name to the manager, sir?" he asked with unaccustomed deference.

"The Count Vulzini. Doubtless your manager will remember me."

He disappeared through a side door and a moment later his voice came floating back in a low murmur.

Then Poker-Eye Joe's growl: "I don't remember no Count Bean Soupe. But I'll give him a look see."

He hulked into the doorway. One look at the aristocratic visitor and even Poker-Eye Joe was impressed; anyone who could be so supremely indifferent was bound to impress him.

"Show the count to the cloakroom and the cashier," he muttered, and slammed the door.

The count made himself perfectly at home in a quiet, dignified way. He looked the array of games over and sipped a glass of champagne at the bar. At the far corner of the bar, at the same time, he noticed a thin-lipped girl whose burnished blonde head, even in the subdued lights, was bathed in glinting high-lights. She was drinking mineral water.

A quick look passed between them and the Madame nodded imperceptibly.

The count set down his glass, strolled over to the high-stake crap table and unobtrusively secured a place among the players.

A moment later the Madame followed and stood observing the game from the same place, on the outskirts of the watchers, that she had occupied the night before.

When the dice came round to the count he picked them up and hesitated, as though he were not entirely familiar with the etiquette of the game.

"Shoot, mister. Place your bet," the houseman urged.

This seemed to encourage the white-haired man.

"Is a modest stake permitted?" he asked.

"Begin with whatever you like, mister."

"Thank you. Then I will wager five dollars on the vicissitudes of chance."

A slight titter passed through the watchers. The old gentleman appeared so entirely innocent. A couple of wise guys edged nearer, sensing the possibility of a run of the beginning's proverbial luck.

The old gentleman tossed the dice against the bank and chuckled with delight at the seven.

He made four straight passes, letting his money ride each time.

The crowd drew closer, became suddenly tense.

The old gentleman passed again.

He looked up, joy and excitement spreading over his face.

"I seem to be, as the saying is, hot," he remarked to the houseman. "And I feel further luck approaching. What is the limit at this table?"

The houseman grinned evilly. A hard note came into his voice.

"There's no limit here, mister. Shoot, mister. Place your bet."

The old gentleman reached in his

pocket and extracted a shiny wallet. From it he took twenty thousand-dollar bills and placed them beside his previous winnings.

"I'll shoot just once for what is there and twenty thousand more," he said quietly.

Without a word the houseman matched the pile, and leaned forward against the table.

The old gentleman picked up the dice.

The Madame, from her place on the outskirts, watched him closely, as he bent over the dice for a moment.

"Just once, little dice!" he crooned.

He raised his hand and rubbed the dice caressingly against the heavy hair on the top of his head.

The tense expression on the Madame's face relaxed and the corners of her mouth twitched.

She bent her head over the dial on her wrist where the needle lay, quivering parallel to the table.

The old gentleman shook the dice violently. His arm straightened.

The needle suddenly quartered with a leap and pointed toward the table.

The dice hit the bank with a faint clatter, bounded off and spun across the green baize.

The crowd gasped.

Five, two!

The houseman's eyes popped as though he had been hit on the back of the head with a brick school house.

The old gentleman scooped up the money and stuffed it in his pockets.

"The fortunes of chance," he remarked amiably to the dumbfounded houseman. "I don't believe I'll ride my luck further."

He turned and strolled casually away.

And purely by chance, as it seemed, the old gentleman and the Madame met in the foyer. As they

were waiting for the attendant to let them out, the door of the manager's office was flung open and Poker-Eye Joe appeared.

In a pair of jumps he was at their side. And the round, hard objects they felt pressed against their ribs were not the poker-eyed one's thumbs.

"Step in here!" he snarled. "I wanna talk to you two!"

There was nothing for it but to do as directed.

Once inside, Joe kicked the door shut and stood facing them across the desk. In his hands glowered a pair of automatics.

But the Madame got in the first word.

"This is an outrage!" she flamed.

"Yeah?" the gambler sneered. "I spotted you as up to no good when you first came in here last night, baby. But I can't place the old dude here. I don't know who he is, but I know he's a phoney. That don't matter. Come across with the twenty grand. I don't know how you did it and I don't care. Just hand it over! And get out! And stay out!"

He glared from one to the other menacingly.

And as he watched his one good eye began to bulge.

The count had taken the black ebony walking stick from under his arm and placed his hands at either end. Slowly he began to push inward and the stick began to shorten, shorten——

At last his palms came together. He spread them open.

The stick had disappeared.

He laid his top hat on the desk and drew from it a silk handkerchief, wiped his brow lightly and tossed the handkerchief into the air.

It vanished.

Poker-Eye Joe's mouth was open.

His one malevolent eye seemed starting from his head. He was stupefied.

Calmly the count reached toward one of the guns in his hand. With a deft thumb and forefinger he plucked from the barrel a tiny green snake, held it wriggling in his hand for a moment and appeared to drop it.

Halfway to the floor it dissolved into thin air.

Poker-Eye Joe's jaw went slack. He was numb with amazement, hypnotized by this astonishing performance.

And in that moment the Madame stepped into the picture. Like a flash of light she was at his side. Her right fist seemed to travel scarcely more than six inches, but it landed with a dull crunch on the point of the jaw, flush on the button.

The gambler's good eye went blank and glassy. His muscles relaxed, the guns dropped noiselessly to the thick carpet. The Madame caught him under the arms before he collapsed and eased him into the chair.

He was out cold.

She turned to the old gentleman.

"A splendid performance, Count Vulzini."

He bowed.

"But a disappointment, nevertheless," he answered. "It is always a disappointment not to be able to finish one's routine for such an appreciative audience." He shrugged. "Well, shall we go?"

"Yes. Two people are awaiting us most anxiously."

He picked up his hat and stood looking down at the still figure.

"This person"—he spoke softly, almost to himself—"did not remember me, had never heard of me, called me a phoney, in fact. Perhaps it would be only fair to acquaint him with the identity of his guest."

He took a card from his pocket and placed it carefully in the unconscious man's hand, arranging it so that it would be the first thing his opening eye would fall upon.

The card was yellow with age, its corners worn and rounded from repeated fingering. It read:

COUNT FELIX DE GAMMO VULZINI

(THE GREAT VULZINI)

*Magician Extraordinary*

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