

McClain unleashed a thunderous right hook and sent the gun whirling from Bristol's fingers



Shoulder Straps

By C. S. MONTANYE

Assigned to a war-plant payroll murder, Detective Dave McClain goes to work on a hunch—and lands in the middle of dynamite!

BIG DAVE McCLAIN, of Homicide, rode the prowler car to the scene of the crime. It wove in and out of the Bronx traffic, sirens screaming. McClain, one of his inevitable cigars tucked in the corner of his wide mouth, watched the streets go by.

The radio flash said it was a payroll stickup. Out at the Hubbell-Whitcomb plant. That was where they made electrical gadgets for submarines on Government contracts. A humming war factory. Thousands of workers. McClain stretched his loose, large frame and shifted the cigar from

one side of his face to the other.

Sergeant Peters, driving the car that had picked McClain up at Times Square, gave it more gun when they reached the open spaces of the long, cement boulevard.

Five minutes later they were at the wire gates of the plant. Captain Fred Mullin, McClain's boss, gave him a nod and the big detective followed his superior into an office in one of the buildings to the left of the entrance.

A middle-aged man lay on the floor in the center of the room. McClain gave him a gander. The man was completely out of the world and would never come back.

"Eighty thousand bucks," Mullin said shortly. "That's what they scooped after plugging this party!"

McClain shrugged and went about the routine business of the holdup.

Gradually, he lined up the facts. The dead man—a John Peterson—together with a younger assistant, a Harry Clement, had gotten the payroll money at the Tremont branch of the bank the plant deposited with.

The eighty thousand was in bills of all denominations.

Half a mile from the plant a green 1936 sedan had cut in on them from Throggs Neck Road. Clement, to avoid a collision, had jammed on the brakes. The next minute he had found himself looking into the ugly end of a tommy-gun. There were three men in all and they didn't waste time.

One, opening the door, had snatched the satchel from between Peterson's feet. The paymaster, evidently an employee with courage, had tried to get his shooter out.

It was a wrong move. The party who reached for the dough bag let him have it. Two shots, either one sufficient. Then all three had piled back into the green heap and disappeared.

Clement had driven Petersen to the plant. The paymaster was alive until he reached the middle of the office. He collapsed there and hadn't been touched since.

"Think you'd recognize any of 'em?" McClain asked Clement. "Stick around, I'll take you downtown and let you look at the photos later."

THERE wasn't much to work on. Mullin threw McClain a nod and he took Clement down to the Gallery.

In less than five minutes the assistant paymaster had identified two of the bandits.

"Simm Yellen and 'Hooker' Bristol," McClain told Mullin, when the hard-hitting, cold-eyed captain finished at the plant and got back to Headquarters.

"Go out and bring them both back." Mullin rubbed his lantern jaw on the back of a hand. "Eighty G's. War contracts. I want to bust this wide open and show the Federal Bureau we've got some brains down here, too."

McClain nodded.

"Yeah? Where?" He grinned, one of his slow, lazy grins. "Funny. I saw the Hooker last night—with a doll. Uptown, dancing his feet and head off."

"Bring 'em in!" Captain Mullin repeated.

McClain filled both vest pockets from a box of fifty cigars presented him by a grateful admirer who operated a hotel tobacco concession. The man had been troubled with petty larcenists stealing his stock whenever his back was turned. Mac had solved his problems by installing two things—a small mirror in the rear of the stand and a large mouse-trap concealed among the culprits favorite brand of cigarettes.

The mirror had turned up one of the hotel bellhops and the mouse-trap had sent the lad howling through the lobby.

They were pretty good smokes. McClain smelled one appreciatively, sighed and went on uptown to level on Hooker Bristol and Simm Yellen.

Both had records. Both were tough hoodlums. Both knew their way around and were expert with firearms. With eighty thousand dollars, to be split three ways, it didn't seem any too likely they'd be hanging around the usual stamping ground.

McClain shook his head and got out of the subway at Times Square.

He walked two blocks up Longacre, turned east and went into the Mirador. That was the creep where he had seen the Hooker the night before. By daylight the place was pretty sad. Shabby and tarnished around the edges. McClain went on up to the second floor and rapped on the door of the

owner-manager.

"Come in."

Phil Bimber, a typical Rialto sharpshooter, sat in his shirt-sleeves, going over the books. He was a middle-aged man with a thin, shrewd face and not much hair. McClain admired his sleeve garters and sat down.

Bimber gave him an expressionless glance. Evidently having the law drop in was no particular novelty.

"How's business?" the detective asked affably.

He always found it better to attract his answers with honey rather than barge in and bulldoze.

"Wonderful. War, taxes, headaches. Yet there's more lettuce on the loose than I've ever seen in twenty-seven years running joints. They want to spend. They want to chuck it around. They want fun and they're over-anxious to pay for it."

"So I understand."

McClain settled further back in his chair. He teased a spiral of fragrant smoke from the gift cigar that was like a candy stick between his thin lips. He saw Phil Bimber sniff and grinned again.

"Tell me something, Phil. Who was the little bundle the Hooker was doing the heel-and-toe stuff with last night?"

Bimber's blank face went blanker.

"You mean Bristol? Was he here last night?"

"Who was the dame?" McClain's easy, pleasant tone disappeared.

"I wouldn't know."

"Okay." McClain, in sections, began to get up. "Just as you please, Phil. Funny," he added softly, "about those fancy draperies you're featuring downstairs. I kept looking at them last night and wondering if they're fireproofed. I kept thinking about that big blaze, a couple of years ago, in Boston. I've been wondering if the Fire Commissioner has ever stopped in here for a drink—"

"Sit down." Bimber's thin face cracked in a smile. "The dame's Dovey Penfield. A little cuticle cutie from Maxie Wilden's barbershop."

McClain made a note of that.

"Anything else on your chest?"

"You might," Bimber added, as an afterthought, "check on 'Humpty' Keller. He's

around again—in from Chicago."

McClain passed over one of the aromatic perfectos and went down to the street.

The Wilden Tonsorial Parlor was almost diagonally across from the old Palace Theater. McClain shuffled in and hung his dicer on the chromium hat-rack. A glance showed him the manicurist in the rear of the shop was sitting cross-legged, reading a flamboyantly covered detective story magazine. Mac pulled out the chair opposite and dropped into it. The girl shut the magazine, put it in one of the lower drawers of the table and looked up inquiringly. She was a pretty little thing with starry brown eyes, glinting curls and a smooth, young skin.

But hard, McClain saw. Wisdom lay in the depths of her soft brown eyes. It was in the lip line of her red, pursed mouth. In her expression, her way of talking.

"Hello," McClain said.

"Hello yourself."

Her voice was fascinatingly husky, as if she had a cold.

"The works," Mac requested, passing over his right hand.

Except for himself there was only one other customer. A man with a face full of lather, being shaved by Maxie himself.

Dovey Penfield looked at his nails and then up at him.

"What am I supposed to do—trim 'em? I haven't got an ax in my kit."

"Burn them off." McClain laughed. "I know they're pretty terrible, but work on an assembly line all day, putting thingamajigs together, and see how your nails come out. Do the best you can."

"Okay, but there's no guarantee."

SHE went to work. McClain's lazy glance wandered over her. After awhile he sent out a feeler.

"Look, babe. I'm on a two-day vacation with a roll of cash crying for a good time. Believe it or not, Arthur Murray's my ideal. I'm a fiend for a waxed floor and a gal to hoof with. Busy tonight?"

The brown eyes studied him. McClain was sure of her type. She was one of these Broadway workers who loved to make dates with lads whose leathers were well lined. She wasn't particular,

either. She wouldn't go out with the Hooker if she were.

"I don't know." She frowned a little. "I had sort of a date, but—"

"You name the place and I'll take care of the overhead."

Mac made it sound alluring. He added a few details, bringing in the word "champagne" and let it rest and simmer while she dug and ground with orange stick and file.

When she was all through he draped a ten-dollar bill gracefully over her celluloid-topped buffer.

"Yes or no?"

She reached in the bottom drawer, tore the blank margin from one of the pages in the magazine, scribbled her name and address on it and passed it over.

"Come up around seven."

In a corner drugstore the big detective talked with Captain Mullin for several minutes, hung up and wandered into a convenient beer-stube. He took a flagon to a compartment table and nursed it along while he thought about Phil Bimber's tip. Humpty Keller, as his name implied, was a hunchback who had been around the mazda thoroughfare for a long time before he had gone West to try his luck in the windy burg.

Keller had always been a stooge for crooks and shufflemen. Never directly tied in with any rough stuff, more than once he had been suspected of gun-toting for trigger addicts and playing bank with stolen funds. Mac remembered that Humpty Keller had, in the past, been more than friendly with Hooker Bristol and Simm Yellen.

It began to look as if maybe Bimber knew what he was talking about. It all depended, McClain decided, with another dip into the suds, more or less on what he learned from the girl he had the seven o'clock date with . . .

The address tied in with a frowzy apartment house in the upper hundreds, a nod in from the avenue named after America's discoverer. Two blocks beyond a brewery perfumed the evening air with its day-long scent of hops and malt. A couple of stoop-warmers moved languidly to let McClain's flat feet in their number twelves go past them when he mounted the steps and consulted the mail boxes in the vestibule.

Dovey Penfield opened the door of an

apartment on the third floor.

"Oh, hello," she said. "Come on in."

"Thanks."

McClain eased his big frame into a cheaply furnished living room. A not-too-clean, shabby room. The windows looked out on an airshaft. It was rather dim. But there was enough light for Mac to see the sporting edition of the evening newspaper on a littered table.

A page had been turned so the full details of the Hubbell-Whitcomb payroll snatch faced upward for anyone to read. And, Mac decided, the girl had transferred her literature from make-believe cops to the genuine article.

He sat down on a mangy couch. Broken springs hummed and vibrated under his weight, Dovey Penfield wore the same black rayon dress of the barber shop, but minus her apron. McClain smiled amiably up at her.

"Figured where you'd like to feed, baby? You pick the trough and I'll keep my promise."

"I know a dozen wonderful places."

"There must be a band and there must be a dance floor."

"I'll think them over while I'm changing." Dovey's ruby-tipped fingers strayed to the fastenings at her waist. "You park here and puff on one of those nice-smelling weeds. This dump needs fumigating. I won't be long."

"Put on something pretty," McClain murmured coyly, wincing a little at the corn.

She went into an adjoining bedroom. McClain heard her humming under her breath. She left the door ajar a trifle, as if the room were too warm for comfort with it closed. He heard her opening and closing bureau drawers. Then the whisper of silk and the tiny thuds made by the slippers she took off.

He distributed his weight more evenly among the springs, jerking his head up when, abruptly, the doorbell buzzed.

"Be a good boy and see who it is."

Dovey looked out through the crack in the door.

"Sure."

McClain got up and walked out to the two-by-two foyer. The front door had a patent burglar-proof lock on it. He solved it and pulled the door open.

It was pushed wider.

"Dovey home?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I just want to use the telephone."

McClain stepped aside and Humpty Keller walked in.

"Who is it?" Dovey Penfield's voice came from the bedroom.

"Me, honey. Mind if I use your phone a minute? I'm temporarily out of slugs."

"No, help yourself. But make it fast."

MAC shut the front door and walked back to the living room. Humpty Keller stood near the table. Bound for the telephone on a stand in the corner, he stopped for a look at the open newspaper on the table. When McClain went in he glanced up.

"Hope I'm not jamming you and Dovey. I'll only be a minute."

"Okay," Mac said, reseating himself on the sofa.

He watched Keller lift the telephone from its black bakelite cradle. The other was not much taller than a jockey. Short, wizened, malevolent-looking. The physical disfigurement that had given him his nickname rose from between his hunched shoulders like a good-sized watermelon.

Keller stood in front of the phone so the number dialed couldn't be checked. There was a minute's wait and then he said:

"Humpty. . . . Absolutely right. . . . Nothing else new. . . . I'm at Dovey's, but moving on. . . ."

McClain couldn't hear what the person at the other end of the wire said. Humpty grunted and rang off.

"Stick around and have a drink with us. I'll be out in a minute. By the way, meet my friend. Mr. Parker. Isn't that right?" Dovey said from the crack in the door.

"Right." Mac nodded at the little man. "Glad to know you Mr.—"

"Mutual. The tag says Gleason." Humpty dug a loose cigarette from his pocket and hunted up a match. "New around town?"

"Fairly so. I work in a munitions plant."

Humpty's muddy gaze darted to the newspaper on the table. "The big dough. Me, I couldn't stand that grind. Where's your oil?" he called in to the girl.

"Look in the top of the ice-box. There should

be a couple of bottles of ale there. I couldn't get any Bourbon anywhere," she added.

Keller went out, making a face. McClain finished his cigar and put it in a high-heaped ash-tray beside him. He stretched, smothering a yawn. Warmth always made him sleepy and this room must be around eighty degrees.

"Be a pal and hook me up, Mr. Parker."

Dovey stood before him. She wore a green near-silk dress. It had a frilly neckline, bows at the waist. She must have sprayed lacquer on her brown hair. It looked stiff and frostily glazed. She laid her make-up on with a heavy hand; the pursed, hard mouth was caked with lipstick.

Clumsily, McClain went after the fastenings on the green dress. The perfume she used was a trifle overpowering at close range. Automatically he stuck a dry cigar in his mouth in self-defense.

"I'll be glad when zippers come back—if ever." She twisted around and smiled at him. "We'll have a beer with my friend and then duck. it's early yet."

They sat around and killed the quart of ale she opened. The room got hotter. Keller slipped his coat off. Under it he wore a very thin white shirt. McClain looked at the shirt slowly, his gaze focusing on its shoulders whenever Humpty's own eyes were busy with Dovey Penfield.

She must have gotten a message across to the little man because, McClain saw, Keller hadn't had his coat off for more than a minute or two before he put it on again.

All at once the detective began to be aware of a certain growing tension. It was in the air, in their conversation, in Keller's restlessness. Twice, McClain saw the brown-haired girl look at the cheap watch on her wrist.

HE PLAYED along, drinking the balance of the brew, content, as usual, to let events shape themselves. He had made one discovery which might, or might not, be of some importance. It concerned Humpty Keller's thin white shirt, the shoulders. He turned it over in his mind, toying with the significance of it until, after more desultory conversation, there was another buzz of the bell.

"Looks like it's my busy night," Dovey pouted. "Answer it," she directed Humpty. "I'll take these glasses away."

She gathered them up and went in the kitchen while Keller ankled to the foyer. McClain slipped his police gun out of its holster and planted it under one of the three seat cushions on the lumpy sofa.

He was standing at the window, peering idly into the dusk of the airshaft when Humpty came back with the new caller. Turning slowly, McClain felt his nerves telegraph a swift and sudden warning.

The man who came leisurely in was the same party Mullin had told him to go out and get!

"I want to introduce you to Dovey's friend." Keller waved a hand. "Mr. Parker."

Hooker Bristol's seamy lips went back over his prominent gums. He was well-built, wide-shouldered, well-dressed. But crime was etched indelibly into his close-eyed, twisted-lipped face. The mark of the killer was in his tightly drawn, unhealthy skin, in the brooding, colorless eyes, the gummy smile.

McClain got it without any trouble.

It wasn't likely the girl had known him. It wasn't likely that Phil Bimber had notified either Humpty or the Hooker. Bimber had too much at stake to risk putting his nose into what didn't concern him. McClain thought back.

He remembered the man in the barbershop, the one with the lather-smeared pan. He must be the one who had tipped Dovey off. Humpty had dropped around to make the identification sure and his telephone call, naturally, had been to the Hooker.

"Naturally!" Mac thought.

"Name is Parker?" Bristol shook his head. "This week mebbe. Last week it was McClain. Dovey, your friend's a flattie."

"No!" the girl exclaimed, giving a creditable impression of real surprise. "Why, he told me he was on the assembly line—"

We assemble a lot of characters. I line them up and look them over. Same idea. So what?"

Bristol, stepping in close beside Mac, while Keller made a show of reaching for a rod to distract the detective's attention, drew with lightning speed.

"Freeze, copper!" Bristol ordered.

McClain lifted both hands. The Hooker's gat was planted directly over his heart.

"I'll get his steel." Humpty felt around with

small, grimy hands. He said, "Cut me down and call me Shorty! No iron!"

"Look again!" Bristol directed.

"A cop!" The girl's voice was full of scorn. "Trying to get next to me to learn something! A dirty, low copper! I can't get over it!"

"Neither will he." Bristol laughed curtly. "What's the snoop, McClain?"

"What do *you* think?"

"I'll guess. The Bronx job this morning. Who identified me—the lug that was driving?"

McClain looked at the couch. It didn't sound good. Hooker Bristol wasn't admitting things unless he was pretty sure that he, McClain, wouldn't be around to use them.

"That's right. Where's Yellen?"

"Why don't you keep in touch with Mullin?" Bristol sneered. "Simm's been down at the main office for the last two hours—getting worked over."

"Don't talk to him!" Humpty grated. "Let him have it and let's get out of here!"

"You're not going to shoot anyone in front of me," Dovey Penfield said emphatically.

BRISTOL reached in his pocket with his left hand. He produced a round, numbered check. He tossed it over to the girl.

"You beat it down to the Grand Central and get the baggage. We'll meet you by the information booth in twenty minutes."

"Go on," Keller said, when the door closed behind her, "get it over with! I'm sweatin' like a bull."

"How do you want it?" Bristol's colorless eyes were alive with sparks. "Through the heart or head—"

"Let me sit down and think it over," Mac laughed. "What's the matter with you kill-crazy mugs? Knocking me off won't help your score any. You—"

"Fry for one, fry for two! What's the difference?"

"Get it over with!" Humpty insisted.

Perspiration dripped from his forehead. His hands had begun to tremble.

McClain leaned a little forward. He could feel the hard outline of his gun under the cushion he sat on. It might as well have been a thousand miles away.

He glanced down at Bristol's well-polished shoes. Like a couple of mirrors. McClain moved his own brogans. He pushed them out to within an inch of the Hooker's glimmering booties. Then he up-ended his feet, resting on his heels.

He straightened and bent backward against the cushions.

Inch by inch he raised his feet from the floor. Both of them. He couldn't see his target now, he had to gauge and guess. Humpty was pleading with Bristol to go on and do the job. Bristol, his gun outstretched and ready, moved slowly in an arc while he made up his mind where to aim and trigger the slug.

With all the power in his long, heavily muscled legs, McClain brought both heels down like trip-hammers on Hooker Bristol's shined shoes!

It worked as Mac hoped it would.

Bristol yelped in pain and started to double up. McClain had his pistol wrist the next split-second. He was on his feet, slugging Bristol with a bunch of knuckles. The Hooker was important stuff with a weapon in his hand but putty without one. He wilted under the thunderous right hook, the gun whirling from his opening fingers.

Mac hit him again and stooped to pick up the gat. As he did so Humpty made a flying leap and landed on his back.

Keller was different. Keller was like a live, sinuous wire, surcharged and full of high voltage. His thumbs dug into McClain's windpipe. The big detective couldn't get at him to dislodge him. Like a monkey, Humpty clung to his back, the small hands throttling unmercifully.

The room began to swim around McClain's head. The furniture grew large and then small, coming close and fading away. Rage set the blood pumping through him. A fine state of affairs! He could knock Bristol out with one punch, but he had to fold up because a little man was on his back, using a couple of tiny thumbs on his throat!

Something had to be done and done quickly.

Bristol was snapping out of it. McClain could feel the Hooker tossing around on the floor. Another minute and Bristol would have his gun back and then it wouldn't be funny. Another minute and Hooker would ventilate him with hot lead.

Mac sucked in a breath through what opening

was left in his windpipe. He began to back up, gathering speed as he went. He aimed himself at the nearest wall. He'd crush Humpty between himself and the plaster, flatten him out like a pancake.

But Keller sensed it and acted. The thumbs left McClain's throat. Keller unfolded his arms and slid off.

He tried to duck but McClain was too quick for him. Mac socked him with the muzzle of the gun, full in the face. Humpty shrieked, spit out teeth and fell over a chair.

Bristol, climbing to his knees, came forward to try a football tackle. McClain let him have a number twelve in the chest and for good measure hammered the butt of the gat directly down on top of the paymaster killer's skull!

Then, still in a blind, cold rage, he repeated the operation on Humpty and was whaling Hades out of him when the door opened and Mullin, Lantry, Ed Wheeler and Peters burst in.

"Okay, okay!" Mullins said brusquely. "Nice going, Dave. Everything's nice. Everything's just swell. We've got three killers—we've got everything—except eighty thousand dollars!"

"That's right." McClain explained briefly.

"The dame!" Mullin cleared his throat. "What did you let her walk out for? Grand Central package room check! The dough's in the luggage and she's on her way!"

"I don't think so."

McClain walked over to the bumpy sofa.

Humpty, sprawled on it, whimpered like a dog in pain. Blood was all over his face, dripping from the side of his head. McClain, who hated to see all the plasma going to waste, hauled the little man to his feet.

He stripped off his coat, yanked Keller's tie loose and glanced up at the interested Captain Mullin with a faint smile.

"I might be all wrong, but I think I know where the dough is. It didn't walk out with the babe! It's right here!"

Mac ripped the thin white shirt off the trembling Keller, revealing what he had seen when the other had first taken off his coat, earlier that evening.

Two slender leather straps circled each shoulder, disappearing under the man's armpits. While Mullin and the others stared, Mac spun

Keller around.

“Well, I’ll be—”

There was another thin strap, around Keller’s midriff. McClain unbuckled all the straps and lifted off the smooth wooden hump that had nestled so convincingly between the stooped shoulders.

“No wonder he made a swell bank for stolen goods! Let’s see if my hunch on the hunch is right

or wrong!”

With the air of a prestidigitator, McClain set the wooden hump on top of the newspaper on the table, found the catch that fastened the two halves together, slid it back and opened the thing.

Captain Fred Mullin whistled.

“Eighty thousand bucks! All wadded in together! Well, I’ll be—”