



His hand twitched for a second shot. I beat him to it by a hair.

\$50,000 LEGS

by Richard Sale

Death sets a high price on a set of lovely limbs.

CHAPTER I

I WAS sitting at a ringside table in the Swan Club on West 49th Street with Libby Nason and we were drinking a pair of sidecars and making a night of it when Swanee Coxe—who owns the palatial joint—came over and said hello and sat down with us.

“You haven’t been around this neck of the woods for a long time, Penny,” Swanee Coxe said.

“Not when you had all that highbrow floor show,” I said, wagging my finger. “Graceful ballets, fencing exhibitions, classics—not for Penny Packer. When I want those I want them at the Met—not at the Swan Club.”

Libby Nason, the nail in my sole, promptly snorted. “Penny doesn’t mean he’s a lowbrow, Swanee,” she said with sarcasm. “He just means that his hair starts where his eyes stop. If he’s got

any brow at all, Darwin couldn’t have found it with a micrometer.”

“Cut it out,” I said balefully. “After all, Swanee, here’s the way I feel. When I go to a nightclub, I want nightclub entertainment. I want gals and dancing and swing and mugging. No fancy stuff. Look at the French Casino! Do they give their customers Beethoven? Uh-uh. They give beautiful ladies—*en toto*, if you get what I mean.”

“Penny means he should have been an artist, not a newspaperman,” Libby cracked.

“I think he’s right,” Swanee said.

“Of course, I’m right,” I said. “Look. Here I am tonight. Why? Because you’ve got something, Swanee. You’ve got Carol Duval, late of the movies. All right, I know she was a cold flop in pictures. I know she’s a species of pork when it comes to emoting on the silver screen. But my friend, Carol, has gams. And even if she wore a

mask, those legs would be something to see, especially since they're insured for—what is the figure?"

"Fifty grand," Swanee said.

"Oh, I don't know," Libby Nason said, looking at her own legs. "What has she got that I haven't got?"

I said, "You mean what have you got that she hasn't got—and the answer is measles. Why so glum, Swanee?" He was glum. He was biting his lips and staring out at the dance floor which had cleared. The master of ceremonies had walked out and was holding up his hand for silence. The floor show was to begin.

SWANEE COXE turned to me and wet his lips. "Here comes the bad news," he said quietly. "Sorry to disappoint you, Penny."

The master of ceremonies proclaimed: "Ladies and gentlemen. Due to sudden sickness, Miss Carol Duval will be unable to appear tonight—"

"Hell," I said. "What is this, Swanee? I suppose she came down with laryngitis or something. We don't care if she can't sing. We just want to gape."

Swanee got to his feet, his face very sober. "Step into my office a minute, will you, Penny. I've got a proposition to make."

I got up. "Sure. Amuse yourself, Libby. I'll be right back."

"That's too bad," she said.

I walked with Swanee across the Swan Club to a paneled door marked PRIVATE which he opened. We went in. There was a man inside who rose up when he saw us. He was short and squat, built like a frog and with legs just as powerful. His head met his shoulders without any neck in between. He had white hairy hands, the nails well manicured; and he had a habit of biting the flesh of the corner of his mouth which kept his lips twitching.

"Penny," Swanee Coxe said, "this is Jerry Ladrone. Jerry—Penny Packer, ace of the *Chronicle*."

"The Old Man says I'm the deuce of the *Chronicle*," I said. "He calls himself the king of clubs."

"How are yuh?" Ladrone said, his face set.

Swanee motioned me to a chair and took one himself behind his desk. He lighted a cigarette and looked worried. "Penny," he asked, "how would you like to make five grand?"

"Counterfeiting or legit?" I asked.

"Cut the kidding," he said. "I'm on a dead level. There's no fooling around. It's legit. I'm not paying it. It's a reward."

"And who's paying this reward?"

"The Apex Insurance Company."

"Whyfore, pray?"

"That's the story," Swanee replied in a low voice. "I see you don't know who Jerry Ladrone here is. He's Carol Duval's husband."

"What?" I looked surprised, then flushed. "I mean—"

Ladrone nodded his head. "I know, I know," he said gruffly. "You can't figure Carol married to a mug like me. I get it all the time—don't apologize. Well, listen, guy. Here's a couple o' things maybe you didn't know. Me and Carol was kids together. We was born and raised on West 42nd Street near Tenth Avenue. I ain't ashamed of it. We was married long before she ever hit the stage and the movies. And then the fan magazines went for her and I was shoved in the scenery. She said it wouldn't do any good for a plug-ugly like me to be around—kinda would hurt her career and that stuff. So I took a back seat. For four years. And when she flopped in pictures and came running back to New York—well, she came to Poppa, if you get me. She's been married to me for eight years, Packer."

I said, "That's one for the books."

SWANEE COXE shook his head. "No, Penny. *This* is one for the books. Carol isn't sick. She hasn't got laryngitis or any other itis. In plain words—and off the record—she's been snatched."

"Sure," I said, grinning. "And Santa Claus will be around next Christmas, too. What is this, Swanee, a rib? If Carol Duval had been snatched every sheet in the country would be splashing the yarn in cold black print."

"Not this one," Swanee replied, flicking ashes mechanically into a tray. "Now get this: Carol finished her stint here last night at one A.M. She took a cab for home—I saw her into it myself. And she hasn't been seen or heard from since. She never got home."

Ladrone nodded. "That's right."

"This morning around noon," Swanee went on, "a letter was delivered to the Apex company. It was from Carol. Her handwriting. No mistake. She wrote that she was being held prisoner and that what she was writing—hell, wait a minute. I made a copy of the thing. Here it is." He handed me a

piece of paper on which he had scribbled. "I was up at Apex myself after they got in touch with Jerry. There's the bad news."

I read it. It went: "Sirs, I am being held prisoner. What I am writing now is being dictated to me. I am alive and well. The leader says that you are to be ready in two days to pay \$25,000 cash in tens and twenties unmarked or they will cut off my legs. Since my legs are insured for twice that amount, they say you will only lose half of what you will have to pay me if they mutilate me. For God's sake, pay them when they ask for the money in two days. Carol Duval."

I handed it back to Swanee. "That's a nasty little job," I said. "Where do I come in?"

Swanee wet his lips. "The Apex Company has offered five thousand to any one of its operatives who finds Carol Duval and brings her in unharmed. It's really an offer to anybody, but the whole business is strictly q.t. as yet. Even the police don't know."

"Why?"

"Why? By God, can't you see why? Do you think Apex wants that kind of news coming out—giving a lot of other rats and crackbrains the same idea? Carol isn't the only girl who holds a screwy policy with them."

"And you figure I can turn the trick?"

He nodded.

"I figure you can. I was damn sure of it the second I saw you tonight. Just one of those hunches. With your connections—"

"Sure," I said.

"You'll do it?"

"What've I got to lose. Five grand when I turn her over to Apex in the flesh with all the flesh. I'm on, Swanee. Have you got any leads at all?"

Swanee shook his head and looked at Ladrone.

"Not me," Ladrone said, "don't look at me. I ain't got a damn thing."

I said, "All right then. We'll let it go at that," and I got up and went back to Libby Nason.

CHAPTER II

AT nine A.M. the next day, Wednesday, the telephone got me before I left for the *Chronicle* building to make a pass at earning a living. I was just going through the door when it called me back and I answered it.

It was Swanee Coxé.

"I couldn't take a chance last night, Penny," he said. "But I think there's something you ought to know. I'm keeping my own hands out of it, but it's a tip for you."

"On the Duval thing."

"Yeah. It's about Jerry Ladrone. You might find out a few things about him. There's something phony in the way he came to me last night and asked me to find a guy who'd bring his wife back alive. He doesn't seem much upset by the thing. Maybe that's just his way. But it kind of looks to me like his wanting you to pull this case is a whitewash—get me?"

I said, "You mean he might have pulled this snatch on his own wife?"

"I mean just that. That love stuff he gave you was hooey. I know for a fact that Carol won't live with the plug. But I had to play along with him there. I think it's an easy five grand, Penny—if you keep your eye on that bird."

"Thanks, Swanee," I said. "I'll be seeing you."

As soon as he had rung off, I called up the Keys Detective Agency, being as how I know Barney Keys like a brother, and I said, "Barney, pal, this is Penny Packer."

"Hello, kid," Barney Keys exclaimed. "What jail are you in?"

"This is no kid," I said. "I want a man tailed."

"Okeh," he said, bringing his voice into a deadly monotone. "Give me the dope."

"Jerry Ladrone. Know him?"

"Uh-huh," Barney replied casually. "Small-time shot. Crane machines in the west side and a gambling house or two."

"Killer?"

"So I have heard, young man, so I have heard."

I sighed. "I thought so. Them guys without necks are always long on triggers and short on brains. Can you spot him and keep me informed?"

"You give me a buzz tonight," Barney said, "and I'll be able to tell you what kind of shorts he's wearing."

He hung up.

I thought it over for a few seconds and I decided it didn't look so good. So I got up and went to my desk and took out my .32 Colt pistol and stuck in a clip of bullets and slipped the gun in my pocket.

Then I went downstairs.

I WAS just coming out of the front vestibule, intent upon catching a subway downtown when

a man who'd been standing by the curb smoking a cigarette, dropped the cigarette under his heel and walked over to me slowly, saying, "Are you Penny Packer?"

I looked him over. He was small and thin and he wore a green suit, the kind that walks around in Harlem. He had a black fedora hat pulled way down over his left eye and his face was olivy, only a shade lighter than the suit. He kept twitching his nose like a snowbird and his right hand was suggestively in his pocket.

"I am," I said.

"Fine," he said. "Hop in the cab here. I want to have a talk with you."

I paused and went taut. "Suppose I don't."

"Then you'll lose money for the both of us. I've got a tip for you on the Duval thing and I can't be seen talking to you. Have it your own way." He turned and climbed into the cab.

I waited a minute, then followed him, wrapping my own hand around the pistol in my jeans and slipping off the safety with my thumb.

"Just drive, buddy," the thin man told the driver. We moved off.

"All right, Packer," he said. "My moniker's Boyden. Hermie Boyden."

I said hello coldly and watched his eyes. They were jumping all over the place as though he were scared stiff. Then I asked him how he knew about Carol Duval in the first place.

He laughed nervously. "That's a hot one. I saw it pulled."

I said, "You did, eh?"

"One-ten A.M. Monday night right in front of the Swan Club."

"What's on your mind?"

Boyden twitched his nose again. "I've got a little proposition. Me, I can't pull anything myself. I got too many connections and if I tried to work this thing, I'd get bumped off myself. How's this: I give you the tip and we split the five grand."

"That's okeh with me," I said. "Who did it?"

He stared at me, his eyes working. "Did I say I saw who did it? That ain't none of your business nor me either. The Apex Company—they're offering the five grand for Carol Duval alive and unharmed. That's where you come in. You find her and haul her to the Apex guys and get the dough. Never mind who did it."

"I see," I said. "You're going to put your finger on her hideout."

"Yeah," Boyden nodded in a low voice. "And then forget I said anything, see? But we split the five grand."

"Where is she?"

He leaned over to me and whispered, "161 West 51st. Apartment 32. And watch yourself. . . . Pull over, driver."

I got out. "I'll be seeing you," I said, and then he drove off with a furtive wave of his hand.

CHAPTER III

I CALLED the Old Man at the *Chronicle* from a corner drugstore and I told him that I was on something hot and wouldn't be in and he commented on the illegitimacy of my ancestry and swore I'd better not go to a ballgame on the paper's time, but finally was convinced, mostly from the tone of my voice.

Then I caught another cab and rode up to West 51st Street where I found number 161. It was about ten o'clock then. 161 was a small thin brownstone place with a facade that drooped with weariness and wore a coat of dirty brick which must have been fifty years old.

I rang for the superintendent and when he came up, I saw he was a big tall Swede with a lemon mustache and a ball of chawin' tobacco in his cheek.

"Yah?" he asked.

"You've got an apartment here," I said. "Number 32." I threw back my lapel and flashed the phony little tin policeman's badge which I once picked up in a 14th Street hock shop and which is often a friend indeed.

"Poliss?" He gaped at me.

"Poliss," I said, nodding. "Are you set? Who rented that apartment?"

"A fellow he call himself George Smith."

"What did he look like?"

He went into a lengthy and idiomatic description of one Hermie Boyden, green suit and all.

"When?"

"Four—five days ago. He take it for two week. He pay in advance, yah."

"But you haven't seen him around since?"

"No. Oh, no."

"Okeh," I said, "let's go up and take a look. Poliss, remember."

"Yah. I remember." I followed him in the house

and up the stairs to the third floor. He took out his master key and unlocked the door. I had my pistol out. I went in first.

The apartment had two rooms, a kitchen and a bedroom. The kitchen was a mess. The bedroom was worse. The place was empty. Not a sign of Carol Duval.

But I hadn't really expected to find her there.

I said thanks to the Swede and left the place. . . .

It was all wrong. It didn't make sense. The only thing it said was this: Hermie Boyden, small-shot, had snatched Carol Duval, made her write that warning to the Apex people. Then Hermie came to me, pointed out the place and planned to split five grand for her return. That would have been Boyden's speed in low-grade racket-money.

But was it that simple? If Boyden alone had done it in order to collect half of a reward, why wasn't Carol Duval in the place.

Something told me that Boyden had either doublecrossed, or been doublecrossed, or both.

I WENT down to 23rd Street where the Apex Company was located and I tried to see Mr. Dwight Penfield, in charge of investigation operations.

"Who's calling?" the girl asked me, raining ice.

"Penny Packer."

"The reporter?"

"The same."

She went in and came out like prosperity and she said, "Mr. Penfield won't be able to see you today."

I said, "The hell he won't. Just tell him I mentioned Carol Duval and see what he does."

She went and mentioned it.

The next instant he was out. "Come in, come in, Packer." And when we were inside, "All right. What's on your mind?"

He was a fussy, professional guy with white-gold cheaters and he had sharp eyes.

"I came to ask a few questions," I said.

"Are you going to print what you know?"

"I'm not on this as a reporter," I said. "I'm trying to make some money. Five grand."

"In other words, you're trying to locate Miss Duval."

"Yes. Now what I want to know is this. Is Apex going to pay the twenty-five grand demanded if the instructions for payment arrive tomorrow?"

Penfield smiled thinly. "Do you think we're

fools? If we did, we'd open up a sweet racket. We don't pay, Packer. If her legs are damaged, she'll be reimbursed. But not before."

"I figured that," I said. "I should think any smart snatcher would have figured the same thing."

"Let me tell you something," he said. "We're paying five grand to anyone who finds the girl because we like to protect ourselves and make examples of crooks who try to put one over on Apex. But get this: no smart pro pulled this job. It was an amateur if it was anyone who thought we'd come across with half of the fifty thousand. If you want my opinion—"

"Let me tell you," I said. "It's probably the same as mine. Carol Duval wasn't snatched for any twenty-five grand at all. That's just a whitewash. She was snatched for some other damn good reason."

He nodded curtly. "You're smart. I'll be glad to hand you a check when you earn it."

"Thanks," I said, and I left.

CHAPTER IV

I N the street, I found a drugstore with a telephone and I called Swanee Coxe at the Swan Club and when I got him, I asked, "Swanee, do me a favor. Know of a ginzo named Hermie Boyden?"

"Sure," Swanee said. "He's one of Jerry Ladrone's men."

"Know where he lives?"

"No, I don't. Have you tried a phonebook?"

"No, but I will."

"Where are you?"

"Down at 23rd Street. Just saw Apex. I'll drop in on you later."

"Okeh."

I had a hell of a time finding Boyden's address. It wasn't in the telephone book and I was stuck for a long time. I called information but she said there wasn't any such party registered. Finally I called the *Chronicle* and had the morgue check up. They found a story where a Hermie Boyden had been picked up on a Sullivan Law violation. His address in the paper—this had been in 1934—was 40 East 84th Street.

By that time, it was three-thirty and I took a taxi uptown to have another little talk with Boyden. When I reached his dingy apartment house, I saw trouble. The patrol wagon was outside and three flatfeet were in the hallway. I got by with my press

card and ran upstairs.

Uncle Jim Bailey was in charge, Inspector of the homicide squad.

"Hiyah, Unk," I said, when I came in. "Who died?"

"Have a look, Penny," Bailey said gruffly, pointing.

There was a corpse in the chair opposite the door. There were six black holes in its chest. They hadn't bled much but they'd made him look like a sieve. There was another hole in the left wrist. It had shattered a wristwatch, a lucky chance-shot. The wrist had bled all over the place. It was Hermie Boyden.

I went over and had a look. The wristwatch had stopped at exactly 3:06 P.M.

"Who did it, Unk?" I asked.

"There he is," Bailey said.

HE pointed into the other room. I went in. Jerry Ladrone was sitting between two cops, his head in his hands. They were trying to get a confession from him. I went out and back to Bailey.

"We got a tip-off," Bailey said. "Boyden pulled some sort of doublecross on Ladrone. He won't tell what it was yet. We got here almost the same time as Ladrone, but too late for the shooting. Open and shut. He'd even locked the door."

"Find the gun, Uncle?"

"Under the bed where he tossed it. Same gun all right. .38 Smith & Wesson."

"Seven shot."

"That's right. I was telling you. We pulled up in front here just in time for the last shot. We could hear it down here. Then we came up."

"Yeah?" I said. "Which was the last shot?"

"Went wild and broke the window," said Bailey. "You can see the hole there."

"Sure I can. I can also see where it ricocheted. It's embedded in the window sill outside. See the hole. Uncle, let me tell you something. Dig out that slug and hang onto it. It'll be very interesting."

"Why?"

"Why? Unkie, you cluck! Ladrone's revolver could only fire seven shots. Seven of them thar shots are in Boyden's body. Who fired the eighth—the one in the sill—a ghost?"

Bailey bit his lip. "By God!"

"I'll see you," I said. "I've got to see a man about a man."

I ran for the nearest exit and found a telephone. I called the *Chronicle* and gave them what I had on it, and then I got in touch with Barney Keys and his private detective organization.

"Say, this is a break," Barney began. "My man just came in after tailing Ladrone. They'll be no more tailing today, Penny, because—"

"Ladrone is under arrest for murder," I said. "I know, I know. Never mind the whole damn report, Barney. I just want to know one thing. Your man was on Ladrone's tail all day. What time did Ladrone go into the 84th St. place?"

"Let's see. . . . He's got it here. 3:15 P.M."

"3:15! He'll swear to that?"

"On a stack of Bibles."

"Thanks, Barney. Nice going, keed. I'll get in touch with you."

I TOOK the Fifth Avenue bus down to 51st Street and then walked as fast as possible over to the Swan Club where I went in and saw Swanee Coxe.

He said, "I've been waiting for you. You said you were going to drop in."

I said, "Swanee, they've got Jerry Ladrone for Hermie Boyden's bump-off."

Swanee gasped. "When?"

"No more than an hour ago. Now here's my idea. Ladrone snitched his own wife Carol to make an easy \$25,000 and Hermie Boyden was in on it. They even rented a room and kept Carol there on West 51st. But Boyden got jittery, figured the racket wasn't smart. So he came to me, doublecrossed Ladrone, put the finger on the hideout and asked for a split of the five grand reward. Somehow, Ladrone found out the doublecross, got Carol out of the room, and bumped Boyden for squealing."

"My God!" Swanee said. "Have they found Carol yet then?"

"No. Don't know where she is."

"Maybe he took her to his own place. No one would think of looking there."

"Smart," I said. "Let's go see."

We went. Swanee knew where Ladrone lived. A nice spot on Riverside Drive just above 75th Street. We got there in record time and we went upstairs and tried the door. It wasn't even locked.

Inside, everything seemed natural. There was no one in the kitchen, no one in the living-room. But when we hit the bedroom, there lay Carol Duval on the bed, her legs adhesived together, the same her

arms, and the same her eyes and mouth; and her ears were stuffed.

"By God!" Swanee Coxe cried. "You were right, Penny! Dead right!"

"No, Swanee," I said. "I was wrong."

"Wrong? But here she is, safe and sound like you said! Good Lord, you've just earned five grand and you say you're wrong! This cinches it! Ladrone did the whole job, the dirty—"

"Swanee," I said patiently. "Wait a minute. Take it easy. I've earned five grand. I found the dame. Okeh. But now that's over and I'm a reporter, see? And I'm going to write this yarn and I want it to be accurate, see?—don't touch her yet!"

"I was going to untie her. She must be in pain—"

I said, "Swanee."

"What is it, Penny?" he asked, turning around. "*What the hell!*"

He gasped because I had my .32 leveled on his stomach with the safety off and he didn't like that much.

"Swanee," I said, "it looks like you and the Swan Club are parting."

"What's the idea, Penny? Are you nuts?"

"No. I think you were, though. It's funny what the love bug will do sometimes. She's a knockout of a dame, Swanee. You fell for her. You wanted her and she was married to a plug-ugly."

"Penny," he said, rolling his eyes, "you're crazy. You told me before that Ladrone—"

"That story," I said, "was the one you wanted me to believe. This is the one the jury will believe. Sit down, Swanee. Hands quiet. Let that rod in your pocket alone or you get one where it hurts."

HE sat down, staring at me, trying to look bewildered.

"Here's how I figure it," I said. "You and Carol wanted Ladrone out of the way. Maybe there wasn't any other way to do it. Maybe he threatened to bump off anyone who tried to take his wife from him. Especially with those lovely gams. So you and Carol thought you'd pull one trick to work another. She snatched herself, hid out God knows where—the rooms Boyden rented most likely. Boyden was in on it at first. He thought he was getting one-third of twenty-five grand."

"Penny—"

"Shut up. Then you brought me in. I was to be the tool of justice, eh? You filled me up with suspicion about Ladrone. You had Carol scam

from the room and you had Boyden tip me off to the room—all part of the little scheme. Then you told Boyden to stay home. You called Ladrone and told him Boyden wanted him for some reason—maybe that Carol was there. (Ladrone will tell.) Ladrone went there and walked into a frame."

Swanee Coxe didn't move now. He just watched me.

"All right. You beat Ladrone there—with one of his own rods which Carol had hoisted before she snatched herself. You bumped Boyden with Ladrone's rod, tossed it under the bed. You bumped Boyden at 3:06 but *Ladrone didn't arrive until 3:15* and there's a witness will swear to it. I had a dick on Ladrone all day, Swanee."

"Wait a second, Penny—" he began.

I said, "Skip it. I'm finishing. When Ladrone got into Boyden's room, you fired a shot out the window with your own rod—that was the shot the cops heard—and then you locked the door on Ladrone before the cops got upstairs. And you lammed over the roof to a different house and tore for the Swan Club to wait calmly for me. How am I doing, Swanee? That's got it, heh?"

"It's not bad," he said in a deadly quiet. "But you won't be able to prove an iota of that."

"That worried me for awhile," I said. "But not now." I smiled. "I only need two things. One is your rod. The other is your right hand."

"I don't get you."

"Tough luck, Swanee. The slug you fired through the window landed in the sill where they can examine it for rifling scars. And your right hand will no doubt be all over the door which you locked in such a hurry when the cops ran up."

He didn't say anything.

"I'm right, eh?"

He sighed. "You're right, Penny. What now?"

"Now take it slow and easy and gentle. I want your rod. Drop two fingers into your pocket and bring it out hanging—or else."

"Sure," he said, grinning half-heartedly. "I guess there's no sense trying—" *Crack!*

HE fired at me while he was still talking, shooting his hand into that pocket and pulling the trigger of that gun in one split second.

The smoke from the hole in his coat seemed to hang like a plume.

But he missed me. He hadn't aimed. He'd just fired instinctively.

There wasn't anything else to do. His hand twitched for a second shot. I beat him to it by a hair. I caught him between the eyes, cold. It jerked his head back brokenly, then he sagged forward and down, toppling off the chair onto his face, dead before he hit, a long serpentine blood stream trickling out from the hole in his forehead.

His second shot had taken a piece out of the leg of the chair where I sat.

I went over and took the adhesive off Carol Duval's legs and eyes and mouth and arms. She hadn't heard or seen any of this, remember. She'd

been trussed on the bed. She took one look and went green.

I poked my rod in her side. "Easy does it, lady. No breaks or you get it, too."

She behaved. She stood there while I telephoned the *Chronicle* the story. She stood there while I called the police. And then she went down into a cab with me and we beaded for 23rd street in a hurry.

For after all—who am I to keep five thousand dollars waiting?