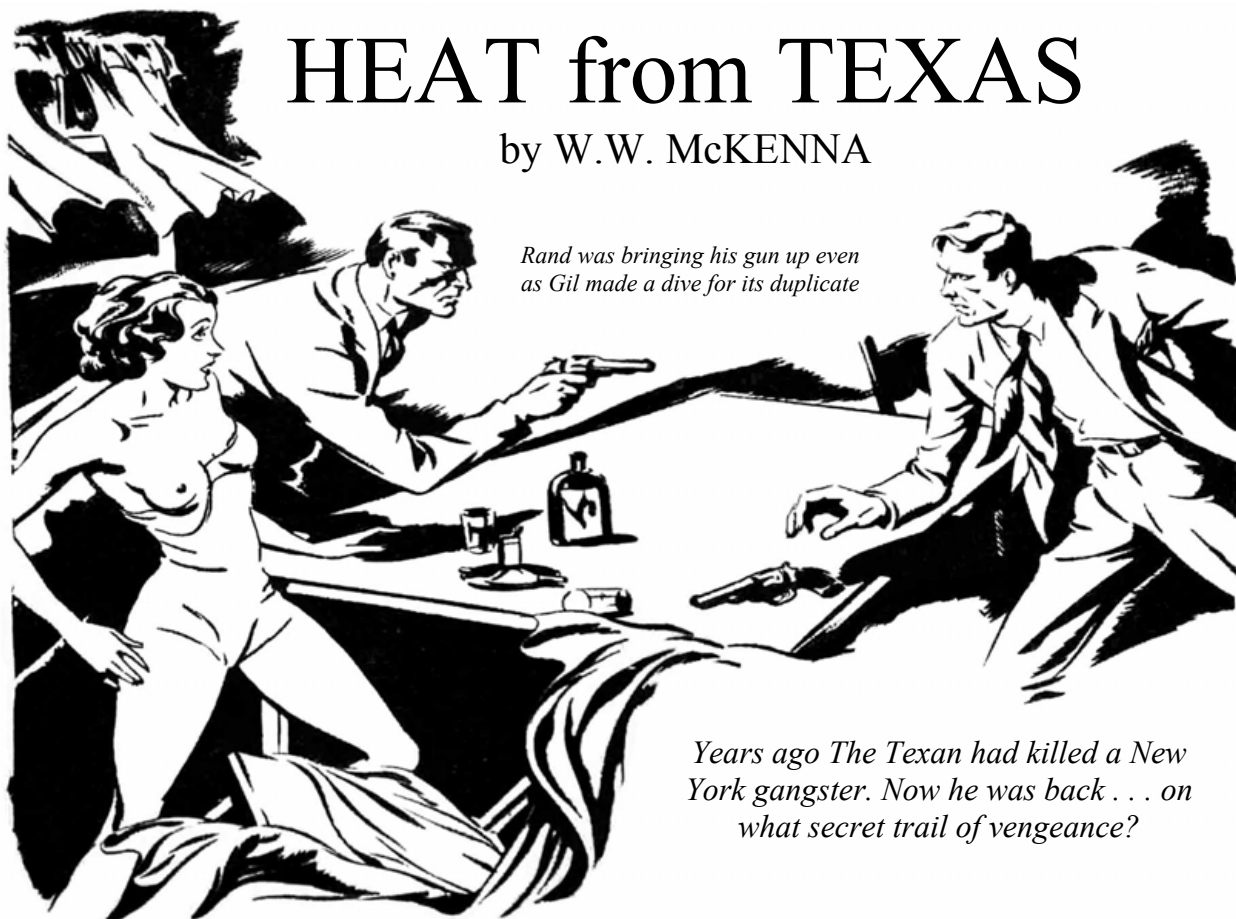


HEAT from TEXAS

by W.W. McKENNA



Rand was bringing his gun up even as Gil made a dive for its duplicate

Years ago The Texan had killed a New York gangster. Now he was back . . . on what secret trail of vengeance?

ON A hurtling eastbound train, Gil Markham reread the highlights of the long letter which had caused him to leave his home in Texas with three boxes of soft nosed forty-five slugs in his bag.

. . . my sister, Myrna, playing around with a crowd who get the idea it would be smart to meet some notorious members of the underworld, fell for Smoothy Rand, the worst of the lot . . . I went after Rand when I saw Myrna was badly infatuated and he shot me . . . I'll probably be dead by the time you get this . . . don't kill Rand . . . show him up for the rat he is . . . Myrna will drop him then . . . look up Joyce Drake at the Parrot Club . . . she used to be Rand's girl . . . Buster Leonard's got her now. He's Rand's right hand man . . . they are supposed to know about some papers which will cook Rand . . . your guns that you left eight years ago are here if you need them . . . so long Pal . . .

Jack

A shrieking burst ripped from the train's whistle as it flung itself through the night and Gil Markham folded the letter, his two sleepy blue eyes suddenly hard.

GIL MARKHAM hulked hugely in the Empire living room of the Bruce duplex apartment on Fifty-fourth street. Outside, traffic sounds were muted and the room, shielded all day from the sultry burn of the sun by Venetian blinds, held a coolness that was a distinct relief. For New York's heat was oppressive, sticky to Gil—not like the dry, healthful heat of his native Texas.

A door opened on a tiny balcony. Gil, blinking his sleepy eyes once, got up and crossed the room, his walking beam shoulders swaying lazily under his linens.

"Gil!"

It *must* be Myrna, Gil thought. Yet, eight years ago, she had been all legs and knees and elbows, like a newborn calf. Now, coming down the steps to greet him with outstretched hands, there were no more knees and elbows—not prominent, anyhow.

"Gil!" the girl called again. "Don't you remember me? It's Myrna . . .!"

Gil look a pair of cool, slim hands in his big, bronzed ones. The sleepiness had left his eyes and he was frankly staring. Slowly, appreciatively his

gaze lingered . . . sweeping down her body like a spotlight. Probably the heat could be held responsible for her attire, for, as far as he could see, she was wearing nothing under her negligee.

A little dazed, he noted her breasts, widely spaced, high, nicely rounded. From a narrow waist, her hips were twin outward sweeps of soft delight. Shadows were painted on the delectable rise of her stomach. He scarcely paid attention to her lustrous crop of jet hair, or her soft, crimson lips that half smiled at him.

"Myrna!" he muttered. "You *are* . . . Myrna."

A soft laugh escaped her. It did something to Gil Markham, something over which he hadn't the slightest control. His arm muscles flexed briefly . . . and she was in his arms, her hot body tight against his. Like an arrow his lips flashed down on hers. Flame swallowed him as her lips fell slightly open. Dimly he was aware of her arms—like steel hands now—around his neck. Her breasts were pulsing mounds of heat against his chest . . . his brain rocked . . .

And then they were apart.

"Oh . . .!" she began, breathless, hands covering her mouth.

A red mantle of embarrassment stained Gil's tanned features to the roots of his ash blond hair.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he mumbled tritely, lamely.

Myrna Bruce quickly recovered herself.

"You knew"—a little sob back in her throat—"Jack was dead?"

"Yes. That is—his letter said he would be. He *must* have known."

The girl looked away. In profile, Gil saw the slightest suspicion of moisture in her eyes. A wave of pity seized him and, were it not for the remembrance of what just had happened when he'd touched her, he would have tried to soothe her.

"He was buried—yesterday," she explained brokenly. "He was so young, so alive." She turned savagely toward him. "Why should my brother to killed? An innocent onlooker in a common street battle! It isn't fair!"

GIL'S blue eyes watched her, more sleepy than ever. Jack had covered the real cause of his death well; had left it up to Gil to carry on and save his sister from Smoothy Rand.

Gil said, low, "He didn't say in his letter what had happened. He just asked me to—"

Myrna's hand fell on his, its soft warmth

sending ripples of excitement through him.

"Jack left a package for you." Her smile was wan, brave. "His room is next to mine on the balcony. You'll find it on his bureau. I'll mix a drink while you're up there."

She turned toward a door across the room. For an instant the dying light of day was behind her and she was almost as if nude. Cursing himself for the trend of his thoughts, Gil strode to the balcony, up its four steps and into Jack Bruce's room.

It was dim and cool and very peaceful within. Almost reverently Gil let his eyes fall on the bed, the half-opened closet showing male attire in neat array, Jack's framed picture on the bureau. Beside the portrait was a bulky package done up in white paper.

Gil unwrapped it, opening a leather case to reveal two forty-fives. They were oiled, clean, dully agleam with brute efficiency. Gil's thin lips curled approvingly away from his teeth. He hefted one of the heavy weapons, thrilling at the familiar contact of chill steel in his hand again. About to replace the gun, he saw an envelope in the case.

Inside was nothing but a folded newspaper clipping. The paper was a little yellowed, bearing a date some eight years ago. Gil's hands shook a little as he read it. A nervous tremor coursed through his big frame, although he was only too familiar with the article. In the simple, clipped phrases of a bored reporter, it told how a man from the southwest had, single-handed, killed three members of an East Side gang.

There was vague reference of this man having had a brother who, in some way, had been framed by the three dead gangsters. There was even more aloof mention of a perfunctory police search for the killer; but only casual, for the slain men had been three thorns more out of the law's side.

The Texan, this reporter had dubbed the killer . . .

GIL MARKHAM carefully folded the article and thrust it in his pocket, his bronzed face an implacable mask. Behind almost closed lids, his sleepy eyes glinted with a blue, cold light.

Voices from the stepped down living room outside caught his attention. A man's . . . and Myrna's. Tucking the gun case under his arm, he left the room, brought up suddenly against the balcony rail at what he saw.

In the center of the room, oblivious to everything except their own passion, Myrna and a

man were welded in a torrid embrace. So closely were their bodies joined, the resultant curve was like a lazy letter "S." Slowly, possessively, the man's hands were roaming over Myrna's back. . . . Gil could hear her making soft moans of delight back in her throat.



"Back up, punk!" the intruder ground out. Then Myrna was at Gil's side.

Unreasoning rage gripped Gil Markham. The man must be Smoothly Rand.

"Break!" he barked.

The two figures sprang apart, startled. Gil went down the steps toward the man who was thin and tall with utterly colorless cheeks and soft, feminine eyes.

"You louse!" he rapped out. "I've got a good mind to break this"—shaking his big knuckled fist—"between your eyes."

"Gil—!" Myrna cried, protestingly.

The thin man's lips smiled as he backed swiftly away from Gil.

"Don't worry, baby—he won't." And with a striking, snakelike movement of his hand toward his armpit, a blue-steeled automatic appeared and was leveled toward Gil. "Back up, punk!" he ground out in a deadly monotone.

Gil froze. There was no softness, no femininity in the man's eyes now. They glittered balefully, evilly.

Myrna Bruce was at Gil's side, her hands gripping his arm.

"You—you misunderstand," she said. "This is Mr. Rand. He and I are—engaged."

Rand didn't take his eyes from Gil. "Who's this big clown, baby? What's he doing here with you?"

"Lay that gun down," Gil grated, crawling with impotence, "and I'll show you."

Myrna came around in front of Gil, her back to Rand. Scorn had replaced the anxiety in her eyes. Her widely-spaced, throbbing, breasts were almost free of her negligee.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Gil Markham!" she said scornfully. "A man your size!"

"You're the one to be ashamed!" Gil snapped. "Letting yourself be pawed by a slimy louse like this. Why he's nothing but—"

The girl swung toward Rand. "You'd better go, Fred," she told him, her voice low, caressing. "I'll meet you—in an hour."

"Okay, baby." Rand, smiling coldly at Gil, backed away toward the door. "You know where you can get me if this ox gets tough."

Myrna faced Gil again.

"The sooner you leave, the better I'll like it." She fairly quivered with anger. "I don't ever care to see you again!"

"Listen to me, Myrna Bruce!" Gil growled, tossing his gun case on a chair. "Rand is a rat and a killer." His hands grabbed her rounded shoulders. For an instant he let his stare devour the shadowy space between her breasts, their lusciousness so thinly veiled by the filmy silk. Then: "Jack wasn't killed watching a street brawl. Rand shot him. Murdered him because of you. He—"

"Shut up!" the girl screamed, writhing from under his grip. "You're lying just as Jack did. I love him. We're getting married. Now—get out!"

Whirling furiously, she went up the steps to the balcony and slammed the door to her room. Gil, staring after her, heard the key twist in the lock. God! he thought—the passion and beauty of this girl being handed on a silver platter to such a slimy lug as Rand!

He left.

THE Parrot Club, buried in Greenwich Village, was the goofiest of that sector's bumper crop. It flaunted a flaming neon sign over the sidewalk, fashioned into a wild-eyed parrot thumbing its nose—a gaudy prelude to the dizzy atmosphere inside.

Gil Markham, bronzed and bulking in

immaculate linens, was piloted through sardined tables to a tiny one in a corner. The low ceiling held a mushroom of smoke, reverberating dully with jangly noise. Men were yelling; women were screaming at dirty jokes and intimate prods from their escorts' hands; the thin band was rasping what never could have been called music.

"Joyce Drake works here," Gil told the waiter, palming a five dollar bill. "I'd like to see her . . . now."

The sight of the bill stopped the waiter's protest. He was a wild haired, pop-eyed Pole. "Shu shu," he grinned, pocketing the bill "Right away!"

Gil rested his walking beam shoulders against the wall, his eyes almost closed, but not missing a trick. More than one woman ogled at his bronzed, lean frame, his smooth crest of ash blond hair in striking contrast.

Someone tapped him on his shoulder. He twisted his head . . . stood up, reaching at the same time for an empty chair at the adjoining table. A willowy girl in a brilliant green gown and slicked back reddish hair was standing before him. The "V" in the front of her dress was long, narrow, loose. As she leaned over a little to take the chair Gil held for her, he saw her breasts sway forward from her body like lush fruit.

Gil said: "You're Joyce Drake."

"Check, mister." Her voice held the quality of brass though not unpleasant. "What's on your mind?" She began looking him over, some warmth lighting her mascaraed eyes. "Make it snappy . . . I'm on in ten minutes."

"Doing anything after the show?"

Her lids drooped, "Depends."

"On what?"

"On what"—she lowered her voice—"you have to offer."

Gil smiled faintly. "Name your own poison. I've got it." His blood began to race.

"Yeah?" she breathed. Slowly. "Maybe you have at that." Softly she drummed the table cloth with blood red nails. "I've got expensive tastes, big boy," she warned.

"Okay, beautiful." He stood cupping her elbow. "I won't see you lose. Where'll I meet you?" For an instant his gaze dropped, seeking the shadowed treasures behind the "V" in her dress.

She flashed a brief, provocative smile. "Right after my routine. In my dressing room. Ask the waiter to show you." And she left.

SOME thirty odd minutes later Gil Markham rapped softly on the wooden panels of Joyce Drake's dressing room.

"Okay . . .!"

He went in. It was a cubbyhole of a room, hardly large enough for one person. There was a rude wooden table with a cracked mirror; a wall bracket with a dirty bulb; hooks on the wall. As he entered, Joyce was turning from a mirror with a final flirt of a lipstick.

"Where to?" Gil asked. His watch said twelve-thirty.

She came toward him, slim body writhing like gelatin under her green gown, very close—so close an intoxicating perfume began to dull Gil's wits. She stopped.

Softly, challengingly, she whispered: "First . . . let's see what you got on the ball."

He pulled her to him. Her flesh burned him through its silken prison. There was a mocking set to her eyes, her gleaming mouth; and through she didn't resist neither did she surrender. A little irritated, Gil tightened his grip, his temples beginning to throb.

Gil went to town . . .

The kiss probably only lasted a matter of seconds. To Gil, it was a roaring eternity of passion. For, when his mouth clamped on hers, she wilted completely and gave herself entirely to his savage, exploring embrace. One hand of hers dug into his hair, pulling down fiercely; the other she ran lightly along his cheek, his ear, the back of his neck. Gil could feel every detail of her quivering body against him.

They parted at last for breath. Gil thrust her gently at arm's length, dropped his hands. She swayed a little, breathless.

"How's that?" Gil asked, a little thickly.

She spoke with effort. "Let's go . . . home!"

JOYCE DRAKE lived alone in an apartment uptown that cost more than chicken feed to maintain. It was hot in the living-room and Gil sat drinking a long highball in his shirt-sleeves. Joyce, sitting opposite him, eyed him curiously over the edge of her glass, her crossed legs revealing milky white thighs.

"You sound like you come from out of town," she said. "Some place south."

Gil laughed lightly, shelving his drink. "Pardon my southern ancestors. But I was born and raised

right here.” He went to her; stopped, his fists on his hips looking down. “You know,” he said, brow lowered, “I just happened to remember. You’re Smoothery Rand’s girl. That guy’s a red hot. Suppose he walks in and catches me?”

Joyce Drake’s face became a hard, carefully tinted masque reflecting soft light.

She slumped a little in her chair. “I’m not any part of his *now!*” She got up, eyes flashing. “He’s running around with some tramp with a lotta dough. Some kid uptown.” She made a vicious movement with hands, her mouth. “And it’s gonna cost him plenty, too. I got enough on him to—” She broke off, catching her underlip with her teeth.

Gil suddenly reached for her, savagely, hungrily. He knew he’d not get any further talking about Rand—now.

Joyce Drake’s hot mouth and damp, burning body met his in a fusion of passion. Gone were Gil’s poise, his coolness as the girl squirmed against him, moaning softly. Not taking his mouth from hers, he gently eased her body a little away from his, bringing up an eager hand. One of her limpid breasts was scorching his chest. The other he sought and found through the opening in the front of her gown.

The contact against his eager palm almost paralyzed him. Soft yielding flesh that rose in a bold swell, flesh softer than down, than velvet. Flesh that throbbed over the hammering of a desirous, delirious heart. Beads of moisture—not altogether from the thermometer’s lofty perch—bathed him.

Roughly he pulled his mouth away from her clinging, open lips . . . dropped his head. As he did, he felt her breath in his ear, felt the tip of her tongue flit over the lobe.

“Oh . . .!” she breathed in his ear. “You’re—wonderful.”

Staggering blindly away from her, Gil turned off the lights. . . .

A LONG time later he put on the lights, but didn’t speak. Neither did the girl. He stood up and got ice cubes from the electric box in the kitchen, mixing two tall Tom Collinses. Both drank gratefully.

Finally Gil said: “You sure you’re all washed up with Rand?”

Joyce Drake laughed a little harshly.

“You scared of that punk? Why, you could

break him in half with one hand.”

Gil looked doubtful, but his sleepy eyes were sharp. “Maybe,” he drawled. “But I hear he’s fast and straight with a gun.”



While Joyce held the gun, Lemand strapped his wrists together.

The girl swung bare legs over the edge of the divan, bending over to draw on silken hose. Her naked breasts made Gil catch his breath.

“Forget that punk,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “I told you I had enough on him to put him away for keeps.”

“Hope you got it in writing,” Gil said carelessly, looking down into his glass as he drank.

She spurted angry smoke. “Don’t you worry about yours truly. It’s all down and where nobody but little me can get it.”

Gil uncoiled his big frame from the chair.

“Okay, sister!” he snapped. “But *I’m* getting it. Let’s have it. Come on—I’m not playing *now!*”

Joyce Drake’s face fell idiotically. “Wh-a-at?”

“You heard me!” Gil pulled her off the divan, shaking her. “I’ll take that dope about Rand and take it in a hurry!”

“Who the hell are you?” she whispered, suddenly haggard. “A copper?”

He tightened his grip and she winced, pain twisting her mouth.

“Are you going to get that stuff!” he snarled. “Or do I break you in half?”

Her answer to that was action. Sudden, clawing

action. Gil fell back under the lash of her red claws, shielding his face until he could get his bearings. She was making throaty, animal-like sounds as she hammered at him, kicking, raking with her nails.

"Hey—!"

JOYCE DRAKE fell away, breathing hard. Gil saw a man in the doorway and, even as he looked, the man took a gun from under his arm. A name leaped into Gil's brain—a name Jack Bruce had mentioned in his letter. Buster Lemand.

"What's all this, Joyce?" the man said.

The girl ran to him, trembling.

"He's after the stuff we got, Buster!" she sobbed, holding to his free arm. "Rand's."

Gil, half crouching, saw Buster's eyes widen. For an instant they turned toward the girl. "Rand's," he echoed. "Who—?"

Gil dove forward in a slashing tackle.

The three of them went down together, the girl with a choking scream. Gil felt one hand dig into the flesh of her leg. He tore it away, managed to grab Buster's gun hand, drive a fist somewhere into Buster's body. Then his hair was yanked almost from his scalp as the girl, reaching her feet, came back to the scrap.

Buster Lemand, rolling clear, got to his feet.

"Now, monkey!" he snarled down at Gil. "I'm—"

"Buster!" the girl cried. "Don't—not here. I got an idea."

Buster Lemand backed off. The girl stood a little behind him, pulling his head down and whispering. Wallowing in rage on the floor, Gil saw the man's hard eyes light and a sly grin split his features as he listened.

"Swell, Joyce!" he said as she finished. "Grab a couple of my ties and we'll wrap this cookie up." He waved his gun toward Gil. "On the couch, dummy."

There was nothing for Gil to do but obey. While Joyce held his gun, Lemand made him roll on his stomach and then began strapping his wrists together behind him. Ankles came next. Flexing his muscles, Gil cursed savagely into the cushion. He'd play hell getting out of this!

He hear the girl laughing. A phone made noise as someone dialed. Then: "Fred? . . . I know who stole those papers of yours . . . He's in my apartment right now!" A handkerchief was looped around Gil's mouth, cutting into the corners,

thrusting his tongue back. The girl was repeating: "In my apartment . . . yeah . . ." and the phone was hung up.

"Get dressed," Lemand ordered. "I'll call the cops." He lifted the phone. "Spring 7-3100." A pause during which Gil could hear sounds of Joyce getting into her clothes. Then Lemand saying: "Smoothy Rand's planning a kill *here* in a half an hour . . . better send the boys around." He hung up.

"So long—sucker!" Joyce called . . . and then the lights were clicked out.

GIL worked his way over to his back, straining at his bonds. What a spot! If the cops didn't get here before Rand, after tracing the call, it would be too bad.

Moments later Gil let his fighting body grow limp. His wrists were raw. The gag felt like a circlet of molten steel. He was soaked to the skin with the heat of his efforts. Feverishly, almost choking, he tossed, strained, his breath whistled through his nostrils; blood hammered dully at his temples, behind his eyes.

There was the sound of a step . . . outside in the hall.

The door opened. A flash opened its eye, finding the couch unerringly. The white beam touched his ankles, moving slowly to his chest—went off. The sweat on Gil's skin became an icy bath as he heard the door close, knowing it was Rand who was moving softly toward him.

Gil rocked his body. He froze fast as he heard the ominous noise of a gun hammer being drawn back. He wanted to yell. It was like a horrible nightmare with the knowledge that he couldn't wake up and say it was just a dream.

Tires whined outside. . . .

Rand's breath was sucked in avidly. Plainly from the street below Gil could hear men piling from a car, mounting steps. The cops! Rand must have sensed something was awry, for he moved toward the door, flinging it open. . . .

The sound of feet was heard in the house downstairs. Rand slammed the door, started across the room toward the kitchen. The feet were louder now. Gil's eyes closed in the darkness in silent thanks.

Whamm!

It was Rand's gun. A searing iron was laid across Gil's chest. Dimly Gil heard Rand in the kitchen, heard him tearing open a window even as

the feet thundered in the hall outside and the door burst in.

Flashlights bathed the room in brilliance. Somebody snapped the wall switch. Gil blinking, saw four plainclothesmen, all holding .38's. One of them made for the kitchen. Two sprang for the conch, ripping the ties from Gil's ankles and wrists, freeing his mouth.

The man from the kitchen returned . . . alone.

TEN minutes later, Gil was in a cab bound uptown. It hadn't been too hard to convince the cops he had been taken for a ride. They knew Rand and Lemand and Joyce Drake . . . believed Gil readily when he told them he'd been rolled in a clip joint and brought here. More, one of them had mentioned in an offhand manner something about Rand having a houseboat at anchor in lower East River. . . .

In his hotel room, Gil grabbed his gun case and a box of forty-five slugs. The waiting taxi nosed back downtown and across. It was after two, still sultry. Traffic was sporadic. The lights on Broadway had dimmed a little. As far as possible, New York slept.

Loading the forty-five's on his way to the East River, Gil murmured tightly: "Sorry, Jack. But I can't see it any other way—now."

GIL found a tattered relic of humanity snoring against a piling on a rickety pier facing the East River. Wakened, the man mumbled he had a boat and would row him out for a dollar. Rand's houseboat was anchored several hundred yards from shore, one window a rectangle of light reflected over the inky water.

There was no moon. As they drew alongside the houseboat, Gil handed the man two ones and was thanked gratefully. The houseboat was huge, rising almost ten feet from the water. Gil tossed his gun case over the edge, waiting some moments after the soft thump on the deck. When nothing happened, he leaped, caught his hands, and pulled himself up and over.

Oarlocks creaked as Charon pulled back to his interrupted slumber; two dollars richer.

Everything was oddly quiet. Steam was rising from the black river. Manhattan was a dull glow in the skies. It was much cooler, but dank and unhealthy, somehow. Gil took off his shoes and cat-footed forward.

He made directly across deck and down the side of the cabin to the lighted window. Bending almost double, he crouched beneath it—heard nothing. Then he raised slowly, peeking from one side. What he saw within caused his blond hair to come to attention.

Rand and Myrna Bruce were embracing!

The girl was clad only in step-ins . . . vivid blue silk ones. The sight of her generous breasts, mashed against Rand's chest, caused Gil to grind his teeth.

He had the gun case open and one of the forty-fives out, when the torrid tableau was torn apart. Myrna, holding her palms against Rand's thin chest, laughed shakily.

"When are we going to get married, Fred?" she asked.

"Aw, baby, why bring that up now? You know we're going to. What difference does it make when?" He tried to push her hands away, to grab her again, but she held fast.

"I want to know—now," she said firmly.

Rand stepped back a pace, bringing his fists up and down across her forearms. Myrna dropped her hands and Rand stepped in, clutching her to him.

"Forget it, baby," he whispered raggedly. "Just love me . . ."

Myrna brought up her right hand. *Smack!* Rand staggered away a step, the imprint of her palm against his cheek.

"Why you . . .!" he began. "I wouldn't marry you if . . ."

GIL MARKHAM throwing a leg over the sill, barked: "That'll do, skinny. I'm running this show from now on!"

In reflex, Myrna crossed her arms over her breasts, facing the window.

"Gil . . .!" she breathed.

Snarling after his surprise, Rand grated: "It's the clown again. Always gumming somebody's act"

An odd sort of detachment claimed Gil. He felt as if he were a fly on the wall, the only witness to the proceedings. Carefully he laid the gun case on a chair.

"This time," he said thinly, "I'm going to fold you up and feed you to the fish."

Rand backed off, suddenly white. There was no mistaking the steely intent of Gil's words. Myrna Bruce, her eyes wide lakes of fright, finally lowered her hands and Gil almost forgot himself at

the glorious sight of her unbridled, swaying breasts. Hastily Rand said, "If I had a gun—"

Gil grinned coldly. "Swell," he agreed, his hard blue eyes appraising the skinny racketeer. "We'll make this a handicap race. I've got two guns here. One for each of us, We'll all be even and see who can shoot fastest and"—he bared his teeth, strikingly white against his coppery akin—"straightest."

Rand picked his lip, his eyes slithering about. "Swell," he echoed weakly.

Gil opened the gun case and took one of the heavy weapons in each hand.

"They're both loaded to the hilt," he said easily. "I'll put one at each end of this table. We'll square off three paces. Then—go for your gun!" He thrust a square chin forward. "And God help you if you miss!"

Myrna, terrorized, was in a corner. Rand, shaking, nodded dumbly in agreement. Gil placed the guns on the table.

"All right Rand! Take your place."

Yellow with fright, the skinny man obeyed, moving like an automaton.

"Ready!" Gil snapped, back to the table.

There was a wild shriek from Myrna. "Gil . . . look out!"

Gil whirled. Rand had grabbed his forty-five, was bringing it up even as Gil made a dive for his own weapon. Thunder shook the room. Rand, wild in his nervousness, missed Gil by inches. Before the echoes of the shot had faded, Gil had his own gun. Rand pulled the trigger again, the whites of his eyes showing in terror. The heavy slug bit, into Gil's left shoulder, starting him on a spin.

Gil caught himself, dug in his heels . . . squeezed trigger.

Mortal agony was in Rand's shriek. The soft-nosed bullet, catching him high in the chest, almost lifted him from the floor. Once more Gil took fast but careful aim and fired. The second bullet, tearing into flesh and bone almost in the same spot as had the first, slammed Rand to the floor.

He was dead before he hit . . .

The silence was almost deafening. Gil pulled his eyes from the bloody figure nearly at his feet, moving to one side. Instantly he forgot he'd just killed a man. Myrna Bruce was moving toward him from her corner, her torso a white column above her silk step-in, her breasts swaying languidly with the movement of her walk.

Her eyes sought his shoulder, widened. "Gil!" she cried softly. "You're—hurt!"

Pain was in Gil Markham's shoulder for the first time. The wound itself had already clotted together, except for a thin trickle of blood which had wriggled down his arm to his hand. Absently, because the glorious nearness of the girl's almost naked body was stirring his senses, Gil said, "It's nothing. Nothing at all."

She was against him, pity in her eyes. "Oh—but it is. Let me wash it—" She started to turn away but both of Gil's hands were on her waist.

"It can wait," he drawled thickly.

She melted in his hungry clasp, kissing him with wild abandon. Pinwheels scampered dizzily through Gil's brain as he braced himself against the searching undulations of her flaming body.

Sudden glare erupted from the inky East River!

It was like a knife. Gil grabbed the girl, pulling her to the floor.

"The police!" he gritted. "Those shots must've raised hell. I've got to get away from here . . . quick!"

Almost before he'd finished speaking, he had ripped off his shirt and trousers.

Myrna was puzzled. "What of it! I saw everything. You killed"—she shuddered—"him in self-defense. I'll testify for you."

Gil laid a tender palm on one of her breasts, kissing her lingeringly.

"Thanks, honey. But I'm not worried about that. Did you ever hear Jack talk about the Texan?"

The girl frowned for a moment. Then, slowly: "I—think so. Didn't he kill some gangsters in New York a long time ago? But—"

"Right!" Gil clipped. "I'm the Texan. So—I'm on my way."

TURNING, he began crawling toward the door on the far side of the boat. The glare from the police boat was increasing. Though the sultry night air its powerful motor snarled in mounting tempo.

At the doorway, Gil looked back to say: "So long—"

Myrna Bruce was beside him.

"I can swim, too," she said. "You're not leaving me."

Just for a split second did Gil hesitate. Then grabbing her wrist he said, "Let's go, then. It may be cold in that river, but it's hot as hell in Texas!"