



Tony stood there holding a gun

The Ice Man Came

By WILLIAM HOPSON

Something was off key on the carny, and murder added a sour note

I AM one of those men who were born at a time when Nature was in a capricious mood. In my case, she must have been laughing like hell; and you'd understand why if you could get a look at me.

My head is shaped like a .45 bullet, my eyebrows look like the hackles on an angry dog's back, my nose is flat and wide, and my mouth makes me look like a second cousin of Cheetah of the Tarzan movies.

I'm about as ugly as they come in one hundred and twenty pound bundles, though I'm not exactly complaining. It's paid off. It took a year in college to convince me that if I wanted to eat regularly I'd better forget about the books and concentrate on my face.

That's how I wound up on a big carnival outfit as a "geek," or wildman, sitting wrapped in a leopard skin full of moth holes and with two friendly little spider monkeys for company while, up above, flashy Ace Brugar exhorted the yokels to pay a dime and come up and see the ferocious wildman the show had captured.

When the outfit wound up in a small town down in the Arizona desert with a sheriff breathing down the boss's neck I wired my old man for extra money, paid the bills, and took over the show.

The new geek's name was Tony Perano. He wasn't as ugly as I am, but the moth-eaten leopard skin fitted him, and the two spider monkeys liked him. Moose Leonard, who shared the trailer with me at the time, swore he was a no-good bum.

Moose himself is no beauty, not with a pair of tin ears as hard as shoe soles above two hundred and thirty-five pounds of iron-hard muscle. Moose was the head wrestler on the Athletic, or "At," show.

So that's about the way things shaped up when we blew into this Mexican border town of Nueces to cash in on a *Cinco de Mayo*—Fifth of May—celebration. *Cinco de Mayo* means to the Mexicans about what the Fourth of July means to the *Norteamericanos*. The American and Mexican businessmen on both sides of the Line hang out flags of both countries, the señoritas put on their brightest dresses, and the immigration and customs officers of both countries relax a bit on regulations and let them all cross back and forth without too much inspection. There's a *baile* every night in the plaza on the Mexican side, tequila to drink, lovemaking, bull fights, and other fights in which the bulls play no part.

We had laid out the midway on the American side of the high wire fence about one hundred yards along the line from the customs house, and business had boomed that first night.

Moose and I had finished breakfast that following morning, cleaned up the trailer, and were whiling away time at a game of dominoes when Joe Wilson stuck his head inside the open doorway of my big two-room trailer. He'd been with the outfit for quite some time as a sort of truck driver, roustabout, and wrestler.

I didn't particularly like him because he was a bit on the surly side and because he was making things a little rough for Leota, our prettiest cooch dancer. He was nuts about her. For that matter, so was Moose, Ace Brugar the geek barker, and Tony the geek, plus about every other guy who came in contact with her. She was that good looking.

"Company coming, boss. Looks like John Law," he said in his clipped, dark-faced way.

"Of course it's trouble," I told him. "Mr. Padgett's son Mike has never had anything but trouble since he bought this show."

I got up and stepped outside. The midway was pretty well filled, and the rides and grifter joints were getting fair plays, though we hadn't opened up the side shows yet. A car had eased its way down through the crowd and pulled up by the Athletic show and a burly looking john was getting out. He had a mean looking face, and it was primed for trouble. Not, you understand, that I'm prejudiced against small-town johns. Many of them

are real decent guys. This didn't look like one of that kind.

HE WAS followed out of the car by a big Mexican, some big-shot businessman who oozed importance. Tall and well-dressed. High-heeled cowman's boots and a big white hat of the kind most Mexican ranchers wear. We strolled toward them.

"What do you think?" Moose asked.

Moose had established himself as a sort of self-appointed bodyguard to me, and if I'd given the nod he'd have slammed them both back in the car and carried it off the midway.

"If some of the outfit who went across the Line last night after we closed up have got themselves in a Mexican jail, then they can just stay there," I said.

We hauled up in front of the deputy sheriff.

"Before you ask," I told Beefy Belly, "all bills pending have deposits put up in advance. I've got your permit to operate right here in my wallet. No sucker got took enough last night to do any squawking. And if any of my outfit are in the can across the Line, I'm not shelling out any graft money to this Mexican pal of yours to get them out."

He looked over my ugly pan the same way he had when he'd issued the permit, and I don't think he liked what he saw. At that, I wouldn't have traded with him. I didn't like what I saw either.

"How about safes?" he asked. "Where was your safe cracker last night or sometime early this morning?"

"I kicked the heist man off this joint when I bought it," I told him. "You'll find no nitro man with this outfit."

That was on the level. I'd told Beanie to pack up his tools and beat it. It had been getting monotonous, having the johns dust after us every time we pulled out of a town and there were a couple of busted sardine cans left behind. But they still had been making trouble for us occasionally, and I'd begun to get the hunch that Beanie had merely dropped a bit further behind and was coming right along on a cleanup route anyhow. There was just the barest possibility that somebody like Ace Brugar or Joe Wilson or Tony Perano was casing the towns while the crowds were at the carnival and leaving word for Beanie which joints to crack.

"There's nobody among your outfit in jail

because I call the Comandante de Policía every morning to find out,” Beefy Belly said heavily. “But last night some boy who knew his business cracked open the safe of the International Trading Company of Señor Villanova, here, and cleaned it out.” He added sarcastically, “Now go ahead and tell me some peon did it.”

“It was no Mexican,” Villanova put in agitatedly, and still oozing importance. “The job was too cleverly done. I mean,” he added hastily when I sneered at him, “no Mexican would have the eskill. It was the work of an *Americano*, and there was forty thousand dollars in the safe.”

“I’m not in the trading business, I do not have the skill to crack a safe, and I didn’t lose any dough,” I told him. “So why come crying to me? There’s lots of other Americans in this town besides the people of my outfit. Why don’t you go see them?”

But they were playing a good hunch, and I knew it. A lot of carny people have police records of one kind or another, and I was beginning to get the idea that perhaps there was a joker in the deck. I knew that Wilson wasn’t Joe’s real name because he was Italian and was from the East. So was Tony Perano, the geek, who’d taken over my old job. About Ace, I didn’t know.

But safe crackers are scarce in small border towns, and it looked as though Beanie had decided to take advantage of the celebration to slip in and do a little work south of the border. With the customs and immigration men letting them through in droves it would have been an easy matter for the little rodent to secrete his nitro and a few tools in his clothes and slip across. Forty thousand bucks!

My hunch about trouble had been right. First there was Joe with his surly, possessive attitude toward Leota, and Ace moving right in. This same Ace wore diamonds and lots of them on a dime grind that didn’t rate the wearing of lots of ice. There was Tony, a wiry little ex-pug, who looked as though he had too many brains to be sitting in a leopard skin. And now this busted safe across the border.

ABOUT that time Tony himself came strolling up, though he usually had to keep pretty well out of sight until after the midway closed late at night. He was very light for a Corsican and he was almost as ugly as I am, except that *his* nose had been flattened in the prize rings. When two state

highway police rolled past him and stopped, followed by two Border Patrol officers of the Immigration Service, I knew we were in for a regular little clambake.

Well, they turned the joint upside down for the next three hours, looking for a heist kit, even peering into the canvas pit where Bo-Bo, the ferocious forty-foot man-eating python, lay coiled up sound asleep. But nothing ever fazes that bum.

Finally Beefy Belly, after a powwow with the others, gave it up.

“All right,” he warned me as we all stood in front of the trailer. “You’re in the clear so far, but we’re watching every move. If anything else happens, I’ll close the show and jail the whole bunch of you. Night before last the hardware store in town was broken into and some dynamite stolen. That never happened around here, either, until your outfit blew in. So you watch your step or we’ll clean house.”

He didn’t have to tell me to watch my step, not after that hardware store business. Beanie always cracked hardware stores or construction jobs to get his dynamite. He’d take the stuff out of town and slit the contents into two small metal troughs running into a bottle filled with cotton. When the hot sun came out the following day, the nitro would melt out of the sawdust and run down into the bottle filled with cotton.

So my hunch had been right. Little Beanie was back.

The johns pulled out in their cars, and I went inside the trailer. There, sitting on my bunk, was Leota, a beautiful blond kid of twenty-two with the kind of shape that, in a G-string, made the yokels drool. She’d been good to me, and I don’t mean anything personal. Every guy on the outfit was after her, except me. Not with a pan like mine. I figured that was the reason she was around the trailer so much. It must have been a novelty not to have somebody ask her for a date after the show.

“Are they all gone, Mike?” she asked.

I told her yeah and said, “You look worried, Leota.”

“I am, Mike. I’m leaving the show.”

“If it’s because Joe and Ace are about to tangle over you, forget it. Take whichever one you want, and if the other doesn’t lay off, I’ll have Moose crack a few vertebrae.”

She looked at me out of those blue lamps, the kind of look that would make you get ideas—

unless you had a mug like mine.

"I don't want either one. But, Mike, I think there's going to be some kind of a blow-off and I want out. For the past two or three days Joe's been acting strange. He's as nervous as a cat. While the police were searching, he slipped into my tent and said he's going to blow the show tomorrow and that he's taking me with him."

"Moose can take care of that, too," I said.

"When I told him nothing doing, he got rough. Ace overheard and came in, and when Joe started for him Ace pulled a knife; and Joe backed off, threatening to kill him if he didn't keep out of the way. So I left them and walked over to town to the newsstand. Tony was there and so was another man with a newspaper in front of his face. Mike, it was Beanie."

"That little can-opening rat," I said. "Just wait until I get Moose. We'll take that little sidewinder right into Beefy Belly's office and throw him in that fat john's face."

She laid a soft hand on my arm, her eyes almost pleading. "For my sake, I wish you'd let it ride. First it's Joe, wanting me to go to Mexico. Then Tony came over and said that if I spilled what I'd seen, about him and Beanie being together, he'd cut my throat. He's a mean little devil and sore because I won't go out with him. Then Beanie came over, grinning like a cat. He said that if he was picked up by the cops for that job across the Line last night, he'd swear he was working for the show and implicate us all."

Clever little Beanie! Vindictive little Beanie. The little heist artist had never forgiven me for kicking him off the show. Now he had me over a barrel and he knew it. If he got arrested and then squawked—*kablam!* I'd end up as his cellmate.

I said to Leota, "You stick around a little while longer, kid. There's something fishy about this whole business, and I'm helpless as far as the law is concerned. I can't go to them and I can't kill Beanie to shut his mouth. So I'm going to do some nosing around on my own."

"Mike, be careful with Joe. He said there's thousands in it and that he and I are going to spend it in Mexico City."

"You better get the calliope going for the cooch bally. The boys have already put the truck out front," I said and left. Leota played the calliope from the back of the truck, in not much more than a G-string and gauzy skirt and a couple of butterflies

up above, to ballyhoo the yokels over to the cooch tent.

I WENT out to find Moose, but he wasn't around. The big lug never was when I needed him. The cook in the grease joint said he'd gone over to town to try to round up some locals to wrestle that night, ten percent of the take, with Moose and the other carny men losing every third match. So I went over to Joe's tent to have it out with him.

He wasn't in, but there were voices coming from Ace's close by. I ducked in to find Ace and Tony the geek and none other than little Beanie himself, playing three-handed cutthroat poker. There was dough all over the place.

"Hi, boss," Beanie greeted brightly, waving a hand filled with money. "Like old times, eh?"

"I'll get to you later, you ferret-faced little rodent," I told him; and almost added, "and Joe, too," but remembered his threat against Leota. "Ace, where's Joe?"

Ace shrugged his slim, well-tailored shoulders. He was around thirty-two, brown-haired, and the flashiest dresser in the outfit. He wore diamonds, a lot of them on his fingers and a bigger one in his cravat; and, as I said, the geek show didn't pay off that kind of dough.

"Search me," Ace said and picked up a card. "We had a little fuss over Leota, and he took off."

I looked at Beanie. "What's the matter—isn't American money good enough for you?"

He grinned wickedly, as only a small, mean little man can grin. He was as tough as they come in small packages, with a police record from here to Singapore and back.

"You ain't gonna open your trap about nuttin', see? Maybe I busted that sardine can and maybe I didn't. But if they put the heat on me for it, I'll put the heat on you and Moose—and even Leota. Gimme two cards."

The air smelled better outside. Some of us carny people don't exactly come from the higher strata of society, but with that gang in there, plus Joe Wilson, I certainly had a prize outfit on my hands.

I made the rounds of the rides and grifter joints, cut back through the Athletic show tent, and went into the sideshow next to it. Bo-Bo was still asleep.

I'd like to make it sound bloodthirsty and say that his forty feet of coils were wrapped around Joe. As a matter of fact, the bum was snoozing right alongside him. The only difference was that

Joe wasn't going to wake up any more.

Somebody had put a shiv in his back and then taken a whack at the side of his neck for good measure.

I went back to Ace's tent. The game was still in progress. Leota had come in, dressed in her dancing clothes. I looked down at the three sitting on a blanket; at Ace, in particular. There was a prominent bulge beneath his coat.

"Ace, you'd better get rid of your shiv before the johns blow in again," I said. "And why the hell did you have to mess up Bo-Bo's pit?"

"I never messed up Bo-Bo's pit because I never associate socially with Bo-Bo," Ace answered, without looking up from his hand. "I consider him beneath me—absolutely inferior in brains, looks, and personality."

"Mike, what's happened?" Leota cried out.

"Somebody put a knife in Joe's back and dumped him out of sight into Bo-Bo's pit," I said. "One of you three must have done it." Later I remembered that I should have included Moose, who had warned Joe about Leota.

Ace's calm voice startled me. "Four, boss. Leota could have done it. She was afraid of him because he wanted her to take a little trip. It's not the first time a woman ever bumped off a guy."

"Ace, how can you say such a thing?" Leota gasped out. "I couldn't—why, I would never think of such a thing."

"Of course you wouldn't, honey," Beanie piped in. "All carny dames are too ladylike. But we'll leave you in and make it five, meaning the boss himself. He had the best reason of all for knocking off little Joey. With that ugly pan of his he never could get himself a dame on the show, not even the bearded lady, until you came along. You were the only dame who ever gave him a play. Everybody on the midway knows why you hang around his trailer all the time, and he wasn't lettin' little Joey take away the only dame he could ever get. Gimme two cards."

JUST like that. Nobody got excited. I might as well have said that Joe had been seen taking a bath. It would have caused more comment. I certainly had some sweet characters on that carny outfit!

Beanie gathered up his money and rose. "I'm goin' over to town. If I'm questioned by the johns, my fingerprints from Washington will point

straight at that safe job across the Line. So nobody knows from nuttin', see?"

He faded off toward town and, since I was running a show and not the deputy sheriff's office, I let Tony and Ace go for the moment. It wouldn't have done much good anyhow. Nobody in the world can clam up like a carny man. Leota mounted the portable steps to the calliope truck parked at the corner of the tent by the bally platform, and I followed Beanie. As I crossed the stretch of open ground toward town I heard the wail of the cally. It sounded as though Leota was missing a few notes, and somehow I didn't blame her.

Beefy Belly was in the sheriff's substation office on a side street when I went in, along with a couple of other deputies the sheriff had sent down to help out during the celebration. He looked up as I entered.

"Well?" he rasped out.

"Not very," I said. "I'm a sick man. We got a guy in the snake pit with Bo-Bo, the boa."

"What's he doing?"

"Well, he's stopped bleeding," I said.

"That big snake kill him?"

"Bo-Bo can't handle a knife," I explained. "He's too lazy, anyhow. We even have to shove his food down with a kind of ramrod," I added, thinking he might be interested.

He wasn't. But he damn well was interested in the demise of one Joe Wilson. We boiled out of there in a couple of cars, and in just about thirty minutes the area was roped off, there were a half dozen state troopers holding back the crowds, the sheriff was on his way from the county seat with the coroner, a town constable stood around in complete befuddlement, and big-shot Señor Villanova show up in a cloud of dust.

Bo-Bo slept through it all.

He was the only one that did. Brrrother, what a jam session! The sheriff was gray-haired and well dressed, including the perennial cowboy boots and big hat and was pretty intelligent and efficient. He took our names and all possible identification papers and sent a deputy to phone the FBI in Washington. By the time the body had been removed by the coroner and we'd all been taken over to the substation for more grilling, Washington called back.

It ran about like this: Leota Henderson, no prints on record. George Brugar, prints but no police

record. Tony Perano, prints but no police record. James Leonard, prints but no police record. I knew that Moose wouldn't have one; he was too dumb.

Ditto one Michael Padgett, meaning me.

Then came the ringer. John DeOrio, alias *Joe Wilson*, alias Tom Pezzetti, alias a half dozen more.

The sheriff said, "Mr. Padgett, your man, this Joe Wilson, is, or was, wanted by the FBI on several charges. The latest was as a member of a big gang of criminals specializing in jewel robberies. In their last job, they got sixty-five thousand dollars in uncut diamonds and gave this Wilson the proceeds to hide out with until such time as they could get together again and dispose of the loot. But Wilson followed the old one about no honor among thieves. He simply disappeared and apparently buried himself on your carnival until the heat cooled down. That is, providing he was working alone and not in cahoots with some of you people. That we'll find out in time."

I shot a look at Ace Brugar. He was using a nail file, as he did a good deal of the time, and the ice on his fingers and the big one in his cravat threw off blue-white lights. He was obviously bored. Like the rest of us he had clammed up as only carny people can clam. Nobody had been near the murder tent or seen anything. Everybody loved Joe like a brother. He was an easygoing roustabout, truck driver, and wrestler. Never any quarrels with anybody.

"I'll cooperate with you in any way possible, Sheriff," I told him and meant it. "I'm as anxious to get this mess cleaned up as you are. But remember that we hadn't opened up the side shows yet, and anybody on the midway could have followed Joe into the tent and done the job."

OF COURSE, I didn't mention the joker in the deck—Little Beanie. He'd cracked a safe in which forty grand supposedly was taken. Sixty-five thousand in uncut ice would bring just about forty grand from a fence like Señor Villanova of the International *Trading* Company!

He'd come along with us, still oozing importance, and now I looked over at him. I'd heard that the Mexican police were working with two American deputies on the case of the busted safe, and I knew there were plainclothesmen snooping the midway.

Had Villanova had the money waiting in the safe for Joe and then lost it from nitro in the hands

of an expert? Had he sent over a Mexican knife expert to square up for a double X? Had Ace done it on account of seeing too much of Leota in a G-string? Or had he, with his flair for diamonds, found them and killed Joe in the tent. And little Beanie—

I said to the sheriff, "There's the possibility that, that mob back East found Joe and sent a man to put the finger on him. It might come up when you finish fingerprinting the rest of my personnel."

My head was whirling when we got out of there. They had let us go with the stern admonition not to leave town. I think they actually hoped that whoever killed Joe would get buck fever and make a break for it. Or maybe they figured we'd get to talking and somebody would make a slip.

"That place is going to be swarming with officers tonight," I said as we walked back. "So remember: no talking about this. It's all clam. Don't forget that little Beanie is still on the loose and is the joker in this deck."

When we got back, the midway was jammed. Bo-Bo's layout was doing a land office business, and the price was upped from a dime to four bits. I told Tony to get into his leopard skin and get the geek show grinding and watched Ace walk off with Leota. One thing was certain: Ace wouldn't have to worry any more about Joe.

I went over to the midway and saw Beanie eating popcorn. He grinned at me felinely when I told him to keep the hell off the street, out of sight. The place would be swarming with officers. When I went back, Moose was already in wrestling trunks and ready to start his ballyhoo. He gave me the nod and I followed him inside to the wrestling ring.

"I rounded up a couple of farmers and one cowpuncher in town. Not much, but we can work 'em if they'll slug us around enough. Can you beat it—Leota walkin' off with Ace after what you said he said about her knifing Joe? I don't get it!"

"Ace is good looking and wears diamonds. You're a freak like me. Why don't you forget it? You haven't got a chance, if you did it."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're just dumb enough to have knifed Joe to throw suspicion on the other boys, something any officer could see through. I heard you warn Joe twice that if he got rough with her, you'd get rough with him. You knew he was planning to take her to Mexico. If you were damn fool enough to have done it, you clam tight when they close in."

"What's your next move?" he asked.

"Beanie. After the show."

"You wait for me," he said. "I'll twist him till he screams."

I didn't feel like cooking supper, so I went over to the grease joint. The deputy in the boots and cowboy hat, minus his cannon and badge, stopped at a nearby bingo game and looked on. I finished the burger and coffee and began making the evening rounds. Behind one of the tents I heard stakes being driven, and my breath almost stopped.

Beanie had driven in, and was blandly putting up his tent! I felt myself get all cold inside as I went on, checking tickets and the grifter joints that paid me forty percent of their take. The guy in the boots threw baseballs at the cats and tried his hand at one of the wheels. He didn't win. About eleven-thirty the crowds began to thin out and make for the *baile* across the Line. The geek show was closed and so was Moose's At show and the sideshows. The rides and a few grifter joints hung on. Things were quieting down.

It was time to shake the deputy. I ducked between two tents and made my way behind the cooch tent where the calliope had been driven. I went up over the side of the truck and fell flat beside the pipes.

I'm not exactly squeamish, but wished I hadn't eaten that hamburger when I landed full on top of Beanie and got one hand sopping wet and had to lie there and wait for the deputy to appear. He did, took a look around in the darkness, and legged off along a line of tents. I got up, wiped at my pants leg, let Beanie lay, and hit fast for the trailer to wash the blood off my hands and get rid of a pair of bloodstained pants. I had an idea Moose would be waiting for me, but there was no light; so when I opened the door and stepped in, the attack came out of the darkness.

I remember being knocked completely over the corner of my bunk and then my nose must have struck the side of the kitchen doorway. I went out like a light bulb that had been hit with an air rifle pellet. When I came to, I was on the bunk with my head in Leota's lap. The hell of it was she still wore her G-string and gauzy skirt and right above my face were her tinsel butterflies.

I sat up but quick.

The trailer was a bit crowded—Moose, fully dressed, Ace Brugar, and Tony Perano. Tony had shed his leopard skin.

"Whoever it was," I said, wagging my jaw with a hand, "he could sure hit. Or maybe it's because I'm so light I bounce."

"It was me that found you," Ace said, the fingernail file going and his diamonds flashing blue-white. "The door was open and it didn't look right. I wanted to give you your cut of the geek take after Tony and me split ours."

"Same here, Mike," Leota said. "The kids sat around and smoked a while and didn't change clothes on account of the heat in this desert. And one of those big-hatted bulls has been trying all night to get a date. So I let him follow me over, hoping that Moose would be around to give him the heave-ho."

"I did, too!" Moose said.

"When I came in, Ace was already here, looking around," she added.

"Speaking of looking around," Tony put in. "When I passed and saw something was wrong in here, I looked around. So maybe, boss, you'd better look around right where you're sitting."

IBENT and looked. The covers had been thrown partly back, and there was a long slit in the mattress. Gobs of cotton were all over the floor.

"That's why I was looking around," Ace said. "Some bright boy figured you had sixty-five grand of uncut ice in here and was trying to find it. You came in while he was hunting and got slugged. The guy who did it killed Joe. Mike, if the cops find out about this, you're in a jam. What are you going to do?"

He spoke in a low voice because some of them might be snooping outside. I spoke low, too. But I wanted time to think and that's why I didn't mention the fact that somebody had knifed Beanie and tossed his body up into the calliope truck back of the cooch tent. Thank heaven, my bloody nose, which had struck the door jamb explained the blood on my hand.

"Right now," I said to Ace, "I'm going to wash and change my pants and go eat while I try to think."

"I'll wait for you at the grease joint," Moose said significantly.

I went into the kitchen and washed and changed pants while Leota waited. We walked over to her tent. Her soft-toed dancing shoes made soft whispering sounds in the grass.

"Mike," she said in a voice so low that any tails

couldn't hear, "I'm going to leave the show when this thing is cleared up. I'm tired of watching bald-headed farmers drool; tired of buck-toothed yokels following me around and even offering money for dates—just because I'm carny. I was a pretty good stenographer once. It wasn't enough to support a mother and an aunt; but we'll just have to make out. I'm through."

I told her to go in and wait. I turned and slid through the darkness, unseen, for the mid lights were dimmed. No tail was following, so I ducked into Beanie's tent with a fountain-pen flashlight and went straight to a corner. Once somebody had ripped the cushions from Beanie's car, where he had hidden his loot, and quite by accident, I had found his new hiding place. A block of grass had been carefully cut, and when I raised it, there in the hollow was a huge wad of bills. I pulled them out, replaced the sod, and counted swiftly. Twenty grand.

Leota was dressed when I returned. She came out, and I said, "So you're leaving?"

"Yes," she answered lightly, "and whoever takes my place, have the calliope fixed for her. It went haywire this afternoon. Two of the pipes just grunted."

Kablam! It hit me just like that.

"Come on!" I said, grabbing her hand.

THERE wasn't anybody around the cally truck because the johns were still grilling all the other members of the outfit in small groups. "Better come around on this side," I told her. "Beanie's laying behind the pipes and he's messy. Joe's killer got him with a shiv."

I heard her shuddering intake of breath as I jumped up into the truck and asked her which pipes wouldn't give. I ran my arm down the first and felt the big roll of bills, twin to mine. I shoved mine down, too, to get rid of the stuff—but fast.

"Find anything, Mike?" she whispered.

"Can't tell. Which other one?"

This one was larger but I could just barely get hold of the string on the buckskin sack and haul it out. Sixty-five thousand dollars in uncut diamonds rattled as I jumped down beside her.

She stood frozen, her face white while I showed her the bag. "This will explain why you couldn't play. Whoever killed Joe had to hide this stuff temporarily and then he didn't get a chance to come back after it before the show started."

"I've come back after it now, wise guy," a voice said from behind. "Just toss it to me."

We turned. Tony stood there with the gun in one hand. "Wise guy," he said again. "Now get up and hand down the dough out of the other pipe. When I get it, you two are going out. I don't like you and I don't like this dame who wouldn't give me a play. It's a hundred yards to the customhouse, and I can filter through with the crowd. The joints will know later, sure. But I've got plans."

Chills were going up my back. I stalled for time and gathered for a leap. "So you're the finger man for that Eastern mob who found Joe. But you didn't knock him off until you'd found the loot."

He grinned at that one. "I knew all the time. I was just waiting until we got here to the border where I could slip over and lam. Wanna know where the stuff was hid? In the safest place in this outfit. In your mattress. Joe put it there and waited till he got to the border, too."

"And you tailed him across the Line and watched him make the deal with Villanova that the money would be delivered?"

He grinned again. "The deal was made. Joe collected the forty grand and brought it back. Then I took Beanie and went across and got the stuff and brought it back. I tried to get a whack at him last night, but he played poker until breakfast time."

"It all fits," I said, leading him on. He was enjoying it, too, as only a man hitting the big time on his first job could enjoy it. "You got Joe this morning, waited until tonight to get the stuff you hid back in the mattress because you knew I was over playing poker until daylight, too, and slipped it into the calliope for a few hours. You knocked off Beanie either because he was after the loot himself or because you had to silence him. Nice going."

"He tailed me and tried to get it," he half snarled. "Now you get—"

"Stand fast, Tony," said another voice.

Tony whirled, and I dived for his legs. I heard his gun go off and another that sounded like a cannon. I went down under him and got all the breath knocked out of me as he fell kicking. I heard yells and running feet, the glare of flashlights hit my eyes, and somebody turned on the lights of an automobile. When I got up, the place was swarming. I saw Ace with a gun in one hand and a buckskin bag in the other.

"What's going on here?" roared somebody.

Beefy Belly himself.

"Hold it, officer," cut in Ace's crisp voice.

"Who are you and you're under arrest for carrying a gun. Hand over that gun."

"I'm FBI and I'm not under arrest." The gun slid out of sight and Ace opened a leather folder. "Department of Justice. I've been on this jewel case for a long time. I located this Joe Wilson some weeks back but could never find where he had hidden the proceeds from the job back east. He was a very clever criminal. I sensed all along that he would try to contact Señor Villanova, who is well known to the FBI. When he came back across the Line, I could have arrested him and promptly closed the case, but I wasn't sure if he had the money or merely had made arrangements for it to be delivered."

"I see," the deputy said. "You FBI boys never gamble that way. So you tailed him though?"

SOMETHING like a half rueful smile came over Ace's face as he looked at me. "I'm sorry to say he gave me the slip and hid the money in Mr. Padgett's mattress early this morning while Mr. Padgett was playing poker. I had to keep waiting. The safe job only confused me the more, I'll frankly admit. It meant that the forty thousand dollars supposedly taken from the safe was now also on the show."

I held my breath on that one, wondering if he had heard it all or had just come up in time to hear Tony brag about the killing. I let go a sigh of relief when he said, "We'll have to search the show for the money."

We finally got the mess over with about two

o'clock, and Leota and I walked down to the trailer. Presently Ace came in. The diamonds he'd used for bait on Joe were gone.

"We'll have to turn the place upside down tomorrow, Mr. Padgett," he said quite impersonally. "Shall I bring a search warrant?"

"No need to, Mr. Brugar," I said.

"By the way, where were those diamonds hidden? Tony already had them when I came up."

"Right under the calliope pedals," I answered promptly and almost fell off the bunk.

When he was gone, Leota came over and sat down, after sweeping out the cotton. "You don't have to go, Leota," I said, "but I don't want you to stay, either."

"Pitch them slower, Mike. They're too fast."

"It's this pan of mine," I explained. "Two strikes against me."

Those limpid lamps again. "That's better. But not with me, Mike. It's what's back of that face of yours that I've always gone for, but you couldn't see it."

"Home run on the third strike," I said, kind of choked up.

About that time Moose came in. He smelled like a man who'd been thrown into a pickle vat full of tequila.

"Moose, after tomorrow you'll have to find another place to bunk," I grinned at him. "Leota and I have some business at the county seat courthouse. We're driving over after I repair the calliope."

"Didn't know it was busted," Moose said.

As I mentioned, Moose is not much when it comes to catching fast curves.