

TEA PARTY FRAME-UP

BY ROBERT MARTIN

IT WAS Saturday afternoon, about a half hour before the first post time, and I was sitting at the bar reading the racing sheets when this girl came in again. She was a nice-looking girl, well-dressed, but she looked a little out of place in a joint like the boss runs. She went over to Harry who sat at a desk in front of the big blackboard. I heard her say, "Twenty dollars on Black Boy—to place."

Harry said, "All right, miss," and he punched her a ticket and handed it to her. She dug down in her purse and counted out twenty dollars. I noticed that the last two dollars were in halves and quarters. Then she went over and sat down at a table against the wall and ordered a coke. The bartender brought it and she just sat there drinking it and watching the clock on the wall.

I sighed, put down the racing forms, and went over to her. This was part of my job—the part I never liked. But I knew the boss would do it himself if he found out about her—and give me hell besides. I sat down at the table across from her.

She looked at me, startled, and I said, "Take it easy, girlie. I work here. You look like a nice girl, and you shouldn't be in here. This is the third time, and every time you've lost. Black Boy ain't got a chance. And the other nags you bet on didn't have a chance, either. Counting today, you've lost a hundred and twenty bucks, and you can't afford it. My boss don't like people who can't afford it to come here. So you'd better stay away."

Her chin came up a little and her pretty eyes flashed. "How do you know I can't afford it?" she asked.

I didn't like to do what I did then, but I had to do something to keep her out of the place. Dames like her are poison to the gambling racket. Me and the boss had found that out long ago, and it was part of my job to spot 'em. Maybe this dame was different, but I wasn't taking any chances. The boss got run out of a town once because a woman lost all her dough, including her baby's milk money, in his place, and then she went out and jumped in the

river. And another time a dame went broke at the crap table and she went straight to her fourth floor walk-up and plastered her brains all over the wall. We had to leave that town, too.

So I reached over and grabbed this girl's purse before she could do anything about it, and dumped the contents on the table. There was the usual woman's junk, and a dollar bill, two dimes, three pennies—and three pawn tickets. I put the stuff back in her bag and looked at her. She had her head down and she was crying.

"Sorry, girlie," I said, "but I had to do it."



IN ACCEPTING HER INVITATION TO TEA HE
HAD NOTHING TO LOSE—EXCEPT HIS LIFE!

She kept her head down and she didn't say anything. I looked at the clock and saw that it was just about time for the first at Belmont. Black Boy was running in that. Harry went over to the ticker

and the crowd gathered around, everybody talking loud. And then two guys came pushing through the crowd. One of them was a big, good-looking, well-built guy wearing a straw hat and double-breasted green suit. The other was shorter and older, with a narrow gray face. His mouth was set in a steady grin exposing a too perfect set of false teeth. He was dressed in a heavy baggy brown suit and a felt hat. Both of these guys were strangers to me, so I kept my eye on them. That is part of my job, too.

The big guy waved a fist full of money at Harry and yelled, "Hey, wait a minute! A hundred bucks on Lady Blue."

THE odds on Lady Blue were eight to one. Harry looked at the guy and then at the clock. "Sorry," Harry said. "Too late."

"Too late, hell!" said the big guy. "The race hasn't started yet. What kind of a gyp joint is this?"

Harry turned and looked at the tape, then he looked over at me. I nodded and Harry said, "Okay," and grabbed the guy's money and gave him a ticket. Then he went back to the ticker and by the way the tape was coming out I knew that the race was on. In a couple of minutes Harry came out of the crowd and went over to the blackboard and marked up the results. Lady Blue came in first. The big guy laughed out loud, and his ratty-looking pal grinned wider than ever. Harry paid them off, said, "Next time get your bet down sooner."

The big guy, still laughing, said, "Sure, pal, sure."

Harry finished marking the results on the board. Black Boy came in seventh. I looked at the girl, then, and she was watching the board, too. I saw her face go white. She picked up her purse, started to get up, and there was a funny look in her eyes.

I said, "Wait a minute, girlie," but she didn't seem to hear me. I got up and grabbed her arm and she looked around at me as though she had never seen me before. I took out my roll, counted out a hundred and twenty bucks and held it out to her. She looked at me and then at the money. "No, thanks," she said.

"Take it," I said. "It's the boss' orders. Only, don't come back."

"No," she said. "You are very kind. But I don't want the money."

"Don't be a sap, girlie," I said. "You gotta eat."

"Don't you worry," she said. "I'll eat." And she smiled faintly at me and turned and walked away.

She was sure a pretty kid and she couldn't have been over twenty-one or -two. Somehow I liked her looks. Something told me that she was an okay gal, and I had seen lots of dames in the years I had been bumming around. She didn't look tough, and yet there was a wise look about her eyes. I watched her walk towards the door.

And then this big guy who had won the dough on Lady Blue stopped his laughing long enough to notice her. He headed her off before she made the door and started to talk to her. She tried to push past him, but he held her back with a hand on her arm. She tried to pull away from him and he grabbed her arm tighter and guided her to the door, still talking. She held back and shot a kind of helpless glance around the room. The boss don't go for that kind of stuff in his place, and I didn't like the big guy's looks anyway, so I went over.

The guy saw me coming but he didn't let go of her arm. I spoke to the girl. "Do you know this gentleman?" I asked.

She looked at me, said, "Yes, I know him—"

The big guy butted in. He said, "Aren't you a little out of place?" And he gave me a nasty grin.

I said, "Maybe," and looked him up and down.

The girl pulled her arm free and stood back. "I know him," she repeated, "but I don't like him. He bothers me."

That was what I was waiting for. I said, "Okay," and I looked at the big guy. "I was going to tell you this anyway. Scram."

THE little bird in the baggy brown suit had shuffled up and was standing there listening. "You, too," I said. "I don't want to see either of you in here again."

Baggy Pants showed his false teeth. I suppose he thought he was smiling. "Goodness gracious," he said. "I don't understand. What have we done, may I ask?"

"I didn't like the way you bet that horse," I said. "I didn't like that and I didn't like the way you"—I looked at the big guy—"was treating the lady. So get out. Now."

Still showing his fake grinders the little guy looked up at his pal. "Dear me, Albert," he said. "I believe the man is serious."

Albert said, "Yeah. I'm scared." There was an ugly look on his handsome face. "I wonder if he acts as tough as he talks."

I figured that I had wasted too much time

talking to them already. And I was beginning to get mad. Some of the crowd in the place were starting to look at us. The girl turned to the door. "I'd better go," she said. "Thank you."

"No, wait," I said. I had started this and I had to finish it. I took hold of Baggy Pant's arm, and gave his big pal a push. "I'm not kidding. Get going."

Baggy Pant's thin lips suddenly closed over his shining perfect teeth. "Don't you dare touch me," he said in a kind of a hiss, and his hand darted upwards to the inside of his coat.

I slapped him hard across the mouth. He flopped backwards against the wall. A wicked-looking little two-edged knife fell out of his hand and clattered to the floor. The crowd was gathered around behind us now, and some dame lets out a little scream. I swung around at the big guy just about in time. He had already started a right for me, and as I turned I ducked under it and my fist smacked up against his jaw. He went back on his heels. I grabbed him then and pushed him past the check-room and out the door. He landed on the sidewalk on his hands and knees. On my way back in I met Harry pushing the snarling little guy past me. Harry pushed him outside, closed the door and handed me the knife. I took it, said, "Thanks, Harry," and went over to the girl.

People were crowding around her, asking questions. She saw me coming and pushed her towards me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I caused you a lot of trouble."

"Forget it," I said. "Come on. I'll take you home." I figured that the quicker I got her out of there, the better. The boss don't like any kind of rough stuff in his place, and I was going to have some explaining to do. He hires me to keep things running nice and quiet, but sometimes it is pretty hard to do. I took the girl by the arm and guided her out to the sidewalk. My two pals were nowhere in sight.

"Where do you live?" I said. "How far?"

SHE gave me an address clear across town, and I said, "We better ride." We walked to the corner, and in a minute a taxi rolled up, and we got in. I gave the driver the address and then I sat back and looked at the girl.

"My name is Pete Allen," I said. "Those two guys—friends of yours?"

"No," she said. "But I know them."

"Who are they?"

"The big one's name is Albert Henderson. The other one calls himself Doctor Aterbury."

"A hell of a looking doctor," I said. "What do they do? And why do they bother you?"

"I don't know. But they follow me everywhere I go. It is very embarrassing."

"Is that all?" It all sounded pretty phony to me,

"Just about, except—you've been so nice to me—I think I had better tell you this. They knew that Lady Blue had already won that race today—before they placed their bet."

"I wondered," I said. "How? Telephone from the track?"

"No. They offered to let me in on it. I refused. They have a shortwave radio set in their car—with an accomplice at the track with a shortwave transmitter. They get the results in a minute or two before it comes over your ticker."

"Oh," I said. I had heard of that racket before, but it never had been pulled on the boss. The boss is too easy. He's a straight guy and he thinks everybody else is, too. But I decided that I was going to make Harry use the deadline bell from now on.

I looked at the girl. "What are you going to do now? Do you have a job?"

She was staring straight ahead, and I saw her jaw set stubbornly. "No," she said. "But I'm going to get one—now. I've got to."

"Come on," I said. "Break down. Tell me about it. You'll feel better. Where's your folks? What's your name?"

She smiled at me. "I'm sorry," she said. "You've been very nice. But I can't tell you that. It's—a personal matter. You can call me Rose—Rose Vaughn."

Now, I'm just a big pile of beef with a good appetite and a healthy conscience. I've knocked around a lot and I've seen all kinds of dames in all kinds of places, but I had never seen one just like this babe before. There was something about her I liked—and a lot I couldn't understand. It is part of my job to spot the phonies from the real thing, and it seemed to me that this girl had the stuff—all the way through. And yet I wasn't sure. Her clothes were good, expensive, and she wore them with a careless air as though she was used to them. And yet I knew she was broke. And I noticed that beneath her short black dress a tear in the sheer silk covering of one leg was neatly stitched together, and the high heels of her shoes were slightly run

over. I noticed little things like that, and I noticed too that her makeup was just right—not too heavy; and when she smiled she showed straight, even teeth. She had clear blue eyes and wore her black hair in a long curling bob. I liked her looks, all right.

“Okay, Rose,” I said. “I’m just a plain guy, no frills, but if I can do anything for you, let me know.”

The taxi had stopped in front of a shabby-looking brownstone building and she got out. “Thank you,” she smiled. “I’ll remember that.”

I got out, too, and we stood there on the sidewalk in the afternoon sunshine looking at each other. Suddenly she said, “Look, if you don’t have to get back, why don’t you come up for a minute? I can offer you tea,” she smiled. “Nothing stronger.”

I had heard that people drank tea, and I figured that maybe one cup wouldn’t hurt me. Anyhow there wouldn’t be much doing at the club until later in the afternoon, and I admit that I had taken a shine to this girl. So I said, “Okay, thanks.” And I paid the taxi driver and went in.

IT WAS a pretty crummy looking dump and a girl like her didn’t have any more business living there than I had drinking tea. There was no elevator and we walked up four flights of stairs to her floor and down a stuffy hall. The floor was covered with brown carpet with worn spots in it, like an Irish setter with the mange. We came to her room, she took out a key and unlocked the door and we went in.

It wasn’t much of a room. There was a bed, a couple of chairs, a dressing table and over in the corner was a sink, a small oil stove, and a cabinet for cooking utensils and dishes. Everything was clean, though, and neat. It was hot, too, and she opened a window and a faint breeze blew in. I went over to the window, and I could look straight down Eighth Avenue.

She took off her hat, said, “Sit down,” and she opened the cabinet and took out cups and saucers and a small brown teapot. I sat down in a chair by the window and lit a cigarette. And then somebody began to pound on the door. The girl turned around.

I said, “Expecting anybody?”

She smiled ruefully. “Only the landlady.”

I said, “Oh,” and went over to the door and unlocked it and started to open it. But before I had it open, somebody on the other side pushed it

violently back and two guys came busting in. It was Handsome Henderson and his little pal.

Henderson had a gun in his hand. The little guy turned and locked the door, put the key in the pocket of his baggy suit. Then they both stood and looked at me.

I said, “Hello, boys. Won’t you come in?” And then I looked around at the girl, said, “Nice work—Miss Vaughn, or whatever your name is.” But she wasn’t looking at me, seemed not to have heard me. She stood perfectly still, her eyes glued to the gun in Henderson’s hand. I turned again to the men. “What’s on your mind, boys?”

Henderson said, “Don’t act so cute. We owe you a little something.” I noticed that there was a black and blue mark on his swollen jaw where I had smacked him.

“Okay,” I said. “Lay down that rod and I’ll be glad to oblige you. You can have Weasel Face there for a handicap.”

“Shut up, you fat slob,” said Henderson.

I didn’t like that. I may be big, but I’m not fat—anyhow, not a fat slob. I began to judge the distance between Henderson and me and I tried to decide how much chance I’d have of kicking the gun out of his hand. Baggy Pants must have read my thoughts. He flipped his wrist and suddenly there was a knife in his hand. He stepped quickly up behind me and I felt the point of his knife coming through my coat right over my kidneys.

“Please stand still, sir,” he said. “If you don’t, I may be forced to make a rather hurried incision.” He pressed the knife a little harder.

“My, my,” I said. “A two-knife man.”

Henderson stepped up close and rammed his gun in my stomach. There was an ugly look around his mouth. I stood still. With a knife in my back and a gun against my belly there wasn’t much else for me to do. Suddenly Henderson slapped me across the mouth with his left hand. Baggy Pants behind me twisted his knife a little. The point wasn’t in very far, but even at that it didn’t feel very good, and I could feel the back of my shirt getting wet.

THERE was a sudden movement behind me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl making a dive for the door. Henderson swung away from me, grabbed her arm, and flung her back. She hit the wall and slumped down to the floor and kind of huddled there, holding her hands to her face. Her

dress was pulled up and I saw a narrow strip of white flesh between the hem of her dress and the tops of her stockings. And then the digging pain in the middle of my back got sharper, and the little guy said, "Steady, sir."

Henderson turned back to me. Without warning he flicked his gun around in a vicious arc. The muzzle dragged across my cheek. My face was numb for an instant and then I felt the slow drops of blood oozing out. To hell with this, I thought. I'd taken enough from these two bums.

I lunged forward and sideways, away from the knife, and as I lunged I flung my right at Henderson's mouth. He sidestepped and my knuckles scraped against his ear. In the same instant his arm came around and the flat side of his automatic smashed against the side of my head over my ear. I went down to the carpet, and before my face hit the floor he smacked me again. The floor felt soft and restful and I remember stretching slowly out, as if I were going to sleep. As from a great distance I heard Baggy Pants giggle, a kind of a hissing sound. "Sssso nice, Albert. Sssso nice." And then a roaring blackness blotted out all sound.

WHEN I opened my eyes I was lying on the floor and I felt terrible. For a minute I had a hard time remembering where I was and what had happened. I got to my feet feeling pretty groggy, and my head hurt bad. The first thing I did was feel for my dough. It was gone—about three hundred bucks. And my watch, too. They did leave me my cigarette lighter, though, and about two bucks in change in my pants pocket.

I looked around, but I didn't see any bathroom, so I picked up my hat and went out into the hall. Down at the end I saw a door marked "Men," and I went in. In the cracked and dirty mirror I looked at myself and wondered if I felt as bad as I looked, or the other way around. The cold water felt good. I washed off the blood, soaked my head in the water, and combed my hair. There was a bump as big around as a four-bit piece above my ear. I had to slant my hat on the other side of my head. I tightened my belt, pulled down my vest, and went out. When I got down to the sidewalk I was surprised to see that the afternoon was almost gone. Traffic was thick, and people were hurrying past me. The sun was low and yellow over beyond the Empire State building. The air was cooler, though, and as I started down the street I began to feel a lot

better.

About a block away I turned into a dinky bar and had two slugs of rye. I lit a cigarette then and went back to a telephone booth in the corner and called Sergeant Dan Coppus. He was working on the desk and he and I had done each other a number of good turns off and on during the past ten years.

"Listen, Dan," I said. "This is Pete. Have you got anything on a big good-looking bird who calls himself Albert Henderson and a little dried up mugg who hangs around with him answering to the moniker of Dr. Aterbury?"

"Pete," said Dan, "I thought you had died. The missus was asking about you the other day. When you coming over to the house? How about tonight? I got plenty beer—"

"Look, Dan," I said, "I've got to get back to the place. I'll be over, but not tonight. How about those two guys? I want to know. They just beat hell out of me."

"Why didn't you say so?" asked Dan. "Where are you? I'll call you back."

I told him that I was going back to the club and that he should call me there in about twenty minutes. Then I went out and snagged a taxi. When I got back to the place everything was pretty quiet. Harry was sitting behind his desk reading the evening papers. He looked up when I walked in.

Harry said, "What in hell happened to you? You look like you been hit by a truck."

I began to tell him all about what happened and while I was talking the phone rang. It was Coppus.

"Pete," he said, "we ain't got a thing on either of those two monkeys. What other names they got?"

"Plenty, I suppose," I said. "But I don't know what they are?"

"Give me their descriptions," he said, "and where last seen. I'll broadcast it. What else did they do beside beat you up?"

I told him the story and gave him the girl's description, too.

"Okay," he said. "We'll charge them with assault and battery, robbery, and carrying concealed weapons. What about the girl?"

"The girl?" I said. I had been thinking a lot about her, and I figured that I wasn't the only sucker that she had had up to her room "for tea." No wonder she hadn't accepted the hundred and twenty bucks I had offered her. That made her act all the better. "The girl?" I repeated. "That's easy."

Accomplice. Aiding and abetting. Bait, lure, the worm on the hook."

Coppus laughed. "Pete," he said, "I thought you knew all the angles. You must be getting old and silly. Black hair, blue eyes, nice legs—"

"Go to hell, flatfoot," I said. "Let me know if you find out anything."

"Sure Pete. How about tonight? Bring Harry along and we'll play some pinochle."

"Not tonight," I said. "Let me know if you pick up any of them." And I hung up.

The buzzer on Harry's desk let loose. Harry took the receiver off the hook, said, "All right. Right away."

He looked up at me. "The boss is upstairs. He heard about the ruckus this afternoon. He wants to see you. Now."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I was afraid of that. Don't forget about that deadline bell. We're using it from now on."

Harry grunted. "Never should have stopped using it."

I went up the back stairway to the boss' apartment on the second floor. When I knocked he yelled for me to come in. I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was mad. I was right. He gave me merry hell.

I SHAVED, took a shower, fixed up my face and went back downstairs for something to eat. While I was eating at a table in the corner a guy walked in and went up to Harry and said, "Who is in charge here?"

Harry nodded at me and the guy walked over. I got up and looked him over. I guessed him to be about forty-five years old. He was well-dressed in a gray chalk-stripe suit and a gray Homburg, and he carried a cane. He was a nice-looking guy with a smooth ruddy complexion and neat gray mustache. He wore rimless eye glasses and his hair was gray at the temples. He looked like the pictures you sometimes see in the advertisements of guys supposed to be Big Business, or the Boss behind a polished desk saying "No" to some poor bird with halitosis or B.O. He stood in front of me, smiled pleasantly and said, "Good evening," and handed me a card. The card was engraved and it said, *Mr. Preston Rowden*, and gave an address in Westchester. The name didn't mean a thing to me.

I put the card in my pocket, said, "My name's Allen. What can I do for you?"

He looked around, said, "May we talk privately, Mr. Allen?"

"Sure," I said. "Sit down."

We both sat down and he hung his cane over the edge of the table and took off his hat. His hair was beginning to thin a little. It was parted on the side, and I could see the comb marks in it, very neat. He was freshly shaven and he had a clean scrubbed and polished look about him.

"Mr. Allen," he began, "rather unusual circumstances—I might say painful and unfortunate circumstances—prompted this visit. I hope I can rely on your discretion?"

"Sure," I said, wondering what he was leading up to. "It's just between you and me."

"Thank you," he said, smiling. "I feel that you mean that. I'll put what I have to tell you quite bluntly. Maybe you can help me. Four days ago my stepdaughter left home. I won't go into details as to why she left home, except to say that she is an impetuous, headstrong person and that she resented certain parental restrictions which her mother and I felt should be imposed on her for her own good. Her father has been dead for a number of years, and as is often true in such cases, her mother has found it increasingly difficult to discipline her. When her mother and I married we both hoped that perhaps with my added support we could do something with her. But"—Rowden smiled ruefully—"it didn't work out that way. She seemed to like me, but I have no more control over her than her mother has."

"So," I said, "she finally left home. You've been looking for her yourself because you don't want to call the cops because of the publicity. Right?"

He nodded. "Yes. That's about it. Only this—she didn't have much money when she left. One of the things we have tried to restrain her from is gambling. She had a passion for betting on the horses. Her mother and I both thought that the first thing she would do would be to try to make more money—she didn't have much with her when she left—the only way she knows how. That's why I am here. Your place is better known than the other places in town. I came here first. She's about five feet four, black hair, blue eyes—"

"Would she call herself Rose Vaughn?" I asked.

Rowden looked excited. "Yes—yes, she would. Vaughn was her mother's maiden name. Have you seen her? Was she in here?"

"Yeah," I said. "She's been in here every

afternoon for the last four days.”

“Well,” he said. “This is certainly luck. Then you think she’ll probably be in here again?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think she will.”

He looked startled. “You don’t? Why not?”

ITOLD him, then, all I knew about Rose Vaughn, and what had happened that afternoon. Before I had finished telling him he began to frown and drum on the tabletop with his manicured fingers. He took out a thin silver cigarette case, lit a cigarette, put the case back in his pocket, took it out again and offered it to me. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Smoke?”

I took one, said, “Thanks. Do you know anything about this Henderson or Aterbury?”

“Yes,” he said. “I know Henderson. I don’t like him. He has been out to the house several times. I warned him to stay away. He may have been part of the reason she went away.”

“A friend of hers?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m sorry to say.”

“She didn’t act very friendly towards him,” I said. “Was that part of her act, too?”

“I don’t like to believe it,” he said, “but I’m afraid it was. She is incorrigible. If it weren’t for her mother, I would be inclined to wash my hands of the whole affair.”

I was thinking, trying to figure out the setup. A lot of things didn’t tie in. Did they pick on me especially for their little game, or did I just happen to be the one who fell for it? But if the girl was in with Henderson and Aterbury, why did she tell me about their shortwave radio racket? To get further into my confidence, to put me off guard because she knew that they couldn’t work their game in the boss’s place again anyway?

But this Rowden sure looked worried, and I didn’t envy him the spot he was in. I could picture his wife nagging at him and driving him to look for her no-good daughter, when he was convinced that she wasn’t worth the effort. After all, she wasn’t his daughter but it kind of put him on the spot. I felt a little sorry for him but it was nothing to me, although I would have liked to have had my dough and watch back. And I would have liked to have gotten a crack at Henderson and his weasel-faced pal. When I thought about them I began to burn. The tape on my face and the bump over my ear reminded me of them—and the girl. I don’t go in for beating women but I felt as though I would

enjoy slapping her a few times where it would do the most good.

“Well, Mr. Rowden,” I said, “I guess it’s out of your hands. I’ve already told the cops. They are looking for your stepdaughter and her two pals right now.”

He looked at me, startled. “You notified the police? You shouldn’t have done that. What right have you—?”

“Listen,” I said. “They beat me up, took my watch and three hundred bucks.”

He leaned back in his chair, began drumming on the table again. “Yes, yes, of course,” he said. “I’m sorry. You were within your rights. Only it puts me in a rather awkward position. Mrs. Rowden, you know—”

THE telephone on Harry’s desk rang. Harry answered it, said, “Just a minute,” and called across the room to me. “Pete. It’s for you.”

I went over, picked up the phone. It was Dan Coppus. “Pete,” he said, “we got the girl.”

I looked over at Rowden, said into the mouthpiece. “Nice going. Where did you pick her up?” Rowden got to his feet, picked up his hat and cane, and kept looking at me.

“At her room, the place where you said they rolled you. She came back there about an hour ago. I had a man watching the place. We got her down here at the station.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll be right down.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Me and her stepdad,” I said, and hung up.

Rowden walked up to me. I said, “The cops have got her. I’ll have to go along with you to get her out.”

Rowden said, “I’m not going.”

I looked at him, surprised. “You want to take her home, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course. But I don’t want to appear at the police station. You know—reporters, publicity. That is one thing Mrs. Rowden and I have been trying to avoid in this matter.”

“Now look,” I said. “She is your problem, not mine. All I want is my watch and my three hundred bucks. What am I supposed to do with her?”

“Withdraw your charges. Get her out. Bring her over to her room and I will meet you there. I think that will be better. I will reimburse you for your trouble and your loss.”

I shrugged. “Okay. If that’s the way you want

it.”

He asked, “What is the address of the place where she is staying?”

I told him, and he said he would meet me there. He went out and I went upstairs and got out my old .38. I didn’t think I would need it, but I wasn’t going back into that neighborhood again without it. When I went back downstairs the evening trade was just starting to come in and I went over to Harry and told him to take care of things until I got back.

He said, “The boss won’t like it.”

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “If he wants me, tell him I went down to the corner for an ice cream soda.” I went outside, got hold of a taxi and went over to the station.

When I went in, Dan grinned at me. “I don’t blame you, Pete,” he said. “She’s sure a swell looker.”

“Cut it out,” I said. “Where is she?”

Dan got up and yelled at somebody in another room and in a couple of minutes they brought her out. She didn’t look very good. Her eyes looked tired and she didn’t have any makeup on. She had combed her hair, though, and her clothes were neat.

I said, “Hello, Rose.”

She looked at me, not smiling. She said, “I’m sorry for what happened this afternoon.”

“Sure, sure,” I said. “Where’s my watch and money?”

“They have it. I couldn’t stop them.”

“Where are they now?”

She shrugged her shoulders slightly. “I don’t know.” Her voice sounded tired. “After they left this afternoon, I went out. When I came back, you were gone.”

“I should have stuck around,” I said. “I see that. What did you go out for?”

A little color came into her pale cheeks. “You were hurt. I walked to a drugstore to get some gauze and things.”

“Well, well,” I said. “That was real nice of you. What was your cut out of my three hundred bucks?”

She looked at me with steady eyes. “I told you that I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“All right,” I said. “Okay. Come on. I’ll take you home.” I turned to Dan. He had been an interested listener to our conversation. “It’s all right. I’ll take care of her.”

“I’ll bet,” Dan said grinning. “How about her

two pals?”

“Keep on looking. And let me know as soon as you pick them up.”

Dan shrugged. “You’re the doctor. And if it ain’t too much trouble, stop around some time and tell me what this is all about.”

THE girl was watching me, but she didn’t say anything. I guess she couldn’t figure it out, either, my springing her that way. But she went outside with me. Her room wasn’t very far from the station, so we walked. And besides, I thought that if we walked it would give her more time to talk to me—if there was anything she wanted to tell me. But she didn’t say much, and neither did I. I figured if I told her about Rowden waiting for her she wouldn’t want to go. And anyhow, I told myself, all I wanted was to get her off my hands and get my dough and watch back.

When we were almost to her building she said suddenly: “You don’t believe me, do you?”

I said, “No,” and guided her into the building and up the stairs. I kept looking around but I didn’t see anything of Rowden. I figured that maybe he was waiting up in the hall. But when we got up there he wasn’t there, either. She unlocked her door, opened it and stood looking at me. “Thank you,” she said, “for bringing me home. I don’t know why you are doing this for me—after what happened—but I’m very grateful.” She looked down at the ragged carpet. “And I hope you get your money back.”

“I hope so, too,” I said, making talk and wondering where in hell Rowden was. He had plenty of time to get there. I didn’t want to leave her alone—I felt kind of responsible for her—and yet I didn’t know exactly how to work it so that I could stay there until Rowden came. So I said, “How about giving me that tea that I didn’t get this afternoon?”

She looked up quickly at me, and I knew that I had said the wrong thing. And I began to wonder about her again. For a second she stood there in the doorway with the dark room behind her, looking at me. Then she pushed the door open wider, said, “Of course. Come in.” Her voice was suddenly flat, toneless. She pressed the light switch beside the door. The lights came on and she walked into the room. I followed her. I didn’t touch the door, but I heard it shut behind me. Too late I whirled around.

Henderson and Aterbury stood in front of the

closed door, Aterbury a little behind Henderson. Aterbury was grinning, showing his mouthful of false teeth. Henderson was grinning, too. But it wasn't a nice grin. He had a big black Colt .45 in his hand. And it was pointing straight at my belly.

I had my .38 in my inside coat pocket. I could feel its weight against my chest, and my fingers itched to feel it in my hand. But I didn't have a chance. Henderson had me covered, and he wasn't three feet away. For a second the three of us just stood there looking at each other.

And then Henderson said, nasty, "Didn't you get enough this afternoon?"

Aterbury giggled.

IGNORING them, I turned my head and looked at the girl. She was standing perfectly still, her face white. "Maybe I'm dumb," I said. "Do these punks *live* here?"

"I can't help it," she said, and there was a kind of desperation in her voice. "I can't help any of this. I didn't know that they were here—really, I didn't. I don't know how they got in—maybe the fire escape—"

"Maybe," I grunted. And then all of a sudden I believed her. There was something about her eyes, the sound of her voice. I grinned at her then. "Okay, girlie. Take it easy."

I looked around at Henderson. "What's the play?" I said.

Henderson said, "Shut up, you fat slob," and he waved his gun at the girl. "All right, sweetheart, we're all through fooling. Get going." He motioned towards the door.

She looked at me. Her eyes were dark with fear. Whatever Henderson's game was, he meant business. And the girl knew it. She took a step backwards. "No," she said. "I'm not going anywhere. Not with you."

Henderson shifted his gun to his left hand, kept the muzzle pointed at me, and stepped swiftly over to the girl. He grabbed her arm, jerked it. "Come on, sweetheart. We ain't got all night."

I said, "Leave her alone. You heard what she said. She's not going."

Henderson looked at me, said, "Who rattled your chain?" He jerked his head at Aterbury by the door. "Doc, take care of Fatty, here. And watch him this time."

Aterbury slithered up behind me and I saw the gleam of the knife in his hand. He pressed the point

against my kidneys again, not easy, and he giggled. "Stand still, sir. My hand is not too steady tonight."

Henderson jerked the girl towards the door. She tried to pull away from him. He let go of her arm and slapped her hard across the mouth. She stumbled back against the wall, her head down, her eyes tight shut. Her lower lip began to bleed. Henderson took a quick step towards her and there was a kind of a vicious look of pleasure on his face. He slapped her again and her head banged up against the wall. "Don't," she moaned. "I'll go."

Maybe I'm old-fashioned but I don't like to see a girl—any girl—treated like that. And anyhow I was tired of standing still for the slimy little punk behind me. Him and his knife! I twisted sideways away from him, and as I twisted I grabbed for the .38 in my inside coat pocket. But Aterbury darted right after me, his knife out in front of him. He handled it like a sword, low, in front of him. He came right on in, showing his too-even teeth and the fake pink of his gums. I swung up a leg and kicked him in the belly, hard, and his mouth clicked shut and he went backwards. I had my .38 in my hand then, and as Henderson whirled around, snarling, I brought it up, my finger tight on the trigger. But I didn't dare shoot. The girl was right behind him.

The three of us stood there for a split second, all action suspended, like a lobby-still at a movie. Henderson had his gun out in front of him, but he didn't shoot. I found out why.

A crisp voice behind me said, "Drop it, Allen."

I jerked my head around. Mr. Preston Rowden stood in the doorway, Homburg, cane, and all. He had a stubby little blue steel revolver in his hand. He said again, "Drop that gun, Allen."

"Like hell," I said. "What's the idea, Rowden?"

Behind me I heard the girl gasp, "You!" and her voice sounded hard and unnatural. And then she gave a little scream and in almost the same instant something heavy and hard slammed me on the back of the head and the floor came rushing up to meet me. Close beside me I heard Aterbury's sickening giggle, and then I stopped hearing anything at all. For the second time that day I was out cold.

WHEN I opened my eyes again it was dark. Dark all around me. And very quiet. My head hurt like hell, and I closed my eyes again to see if the pain would go away. It didn't. I opened them again and I began to remember things. I tried

to move and I found out I couldn't. They had me trussed up good, both hands and feet, with my arms behind me. I raised my head, tried to make out where I was. I was lying on a bare board floor and the planks were very hard. Directly in front of me was a window. Through the window I could see the night sky, and over beyond a dark blotch of trees on a hillside I saw the reflection of the lights of some town. I stretched out again and tried to figure out what kind of a mess I had gotten myself into.

From somewhere near me a low voice said, "Mr. Allen."

I recognized the voice of the girl. I turned my head and I could barely make out her form across the room lying close to the wall. She appeared to be in the same fix I was.

"Call me Pete," I said, low. I talked quiet because she had. "I guess the situation is informal enough."

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess so. How about you?"

"Yes," she replied. "Only I can't move."

"What is this?" I asked. "A snatch, or what?"

"Listen," she said. "I'll have to talk fast. They carried you down the fire escape from my room and the three of them brought us out here. Rowden and Henderson have gone away, but Aterbury is somewhere around. We are in a deserted farm house somewhere in Westchester, not very far off the Post Road. Rowden is my stepfather—"

"Yeah," I said. "I knew that. He is the reason I sprung you out of the jug tonight."

"Yes," she said. "I know that now. I know a lot of things now. They may be back any minute. . . ."

"I don't get it," I said, "but the first thing we got to do is get out of here."

I tried to get to my feet, but with my hands tied behind me and my feet lashed together I couldn't make it. So then I started to roll. I managed to make it over to the girl's side, but when I got there I had to lay still a minute. My head was pounding and I felt pretty weak. I turned on my side and looked at the girl. The moon had come up and she lay there in the pale light, her eyes bright, watching me. Her dress was torn down one round shoulder and I saw the white gleam of her legs where her dress had been worked halfway to her waist. She was tied hand and foot, the same as I was, and her sheer stockings were twisted and torn by the cords around her slim ankles. My eyes were on a level with hers. I felt pretty tough. There was a roaring in

my head, and I shut my eyes, but the roaring didn't stop.

I heard her say, "They are coming back. We've got to get out of here." Her voice sounded far away.

"Okay," I muttered. "I'll figure out something." I didn't know what I'd figure out. All I wanted to do right then was to close my eyes and relax and wait for my head to stop hurting.

The girl whispered, "I want you to know this. My mother loves him—Rowden, I mean—I don't know why. Henderson and Aterbury are friends of his; they came to our house soon after Rowden married my mother. Rowden could fool my mother but he couldn't fool me. Things at home became unbearable. And then Rowden began to—make passes at me. I couldn't tell my mother; it would break her heart. So I left. Rowden had Henderson and Aterbury keep track of me. I couldn't get rid of them. And then, after I left, Rowden got this idea of paying Henderson and Aterbury to kidnap me—and keep the money that Mother would pay for my release for himself. He intended to keep out of it entirely. That is why he came to see you, to establish an alibi for himself. But you and the police spoiled his plans, and he was forced to show himself tonight when you made that break in my room. He had tipped off Henderson and Aterbury that you were bringing me back there. He was hiding in the hall."

I OPENED my eyes and looked at her. My head felt a little better. "And now Rowden is in up to his neck," I said. "And he can't back out. If he tried to, Henderson and Aterbury would probably blackmail him."

"That's it," she said. "They were arguing about it. Henderson wants an equal share of the money—or else he will expose Rowden to Mother."

"Very pretty," I said. And then suddenly the whole nasty setup was very clear to me and I began to sweat. I think the girl must have known it all along—ever since Rowden had showed himself at her room. Rowden could never go back to his easy living with the girl's mother now—not as long as the girl was alive. And it wasn't only the girl. I was in on this, too, and I could just about picture what was going to happen to me when Rowden and Henderson got back. And it wasn't a pretty picture. I wasn't going to lay there and wait for Rowden to come back and put a slug in my ear—not if I could help it.

"Where's Aterbury?" I said.

"Outside, somewhere. He may be listening now."

"Never mind," I whispered. "Turn over. I'm going to try and untie you."

She turned over on her side with her back to me and I wriggled around so that I could get my teeth at the knots in the heavy cord around her wrists. But it was no use. The knots were too small and too tight. I bit and chewed and I damn near broke off a couple of teeth but I couldn't even loosen the cord. I gave up finally and tried to think of something. She turned over so that she faced me again. "What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I said. "Whatever it is, it's got to be quick."

And then I had an idea. It might work, and it might not, but it was a chance worth trying.

I said, "Listen. I've got a cigarette lighter in my right-hand coat pocket. If you can get it, see what you can do about burning the rope on my wrists."

She nodded silently and squirmed around until her back was to me, and even with her hands tied behind her she managed to get into my pocket and get hold of the lighter. She got it out and I heard her clicking it, trying to light it. She dropped it on the floor a couple of times, and suddenly she had it lit. The tiny flame cast faint shadows on the wall and I hoped that Aterbury, wherever he was, wouldn't notice. I twisted around and tried to get my hands into position so that she could apply the flame to the rope around my wrist.

It was pretty awkward work. I couldn't see what I was doing, and neither could she. The flame hit my hands, and then my wrists before I could smell the rope burning. I tried to hold the rope over the flame, but when I managed to hit it, my wrist burnt as much as the rope. It hurt, sure, but I held on as long as I could. I could smell the scorched strands of rope, and there was another smell—the grease frying out of my hide. I stood it as long as I could, and when I finally pulled my hands away I could feel the sweat all over me and I discovered that I was biting the hell out of my lower lip. I could taste the blood.

The girl flicked the flame off. I jerked at the ropes, tried to pull my wrists apart. But it was no-go. The rope wasn't burning enough. I took a deep breath, said, "All right, girlie. Give me a light."

SHE flicked the flame on again, and in the faint illumination I saw a black shadow fall across our bodies. The girl saw it, too. I heard her suck in her breath, and the flame suddenly went out. I rolled over on my back, looked at the doorway.

A man's dark figure stood silhouetted there against the night sky. The figure moved slowly into the room and stood in the path of moonlight which streamed through the window, and I saw the ugly wink of steel in his hand. And then I heard Aterbury's silly giggle.

"Well, well," he said. "What is going on in here?" He stepped up to us, lit a match, and peered at the cords which bound us. Satisfied, he stood up, and I heard his false teeth click. "Is it—ah—necessary for you two to be so close together?" he asked, giggling. He wagged a forefinger. "I don't approve, you know. I think I had better stay right here and chaperone you."

I struggled to a sitting position. "Listen—" I began, but before I could say more he lifted his foot and kicked me in the face and my head hit the floor. I lay there a minute, a red haze of hate covering my brain. I heard the girl grate through her teeth at Aterbury: "You dirty coward."

My face hurt, and I could feel the blood beginning to ooze out of a gash in my chin. I would have given an awful lot to have gotten my hands on Aterbury's scrawny neck at that moment. But I said, "You play rough, but it's the hot seat for you if you play around here much longer." And I let that sink in.

For a second Aterbury didn't say anything. I saw his eyes flash in the moonlight as he shot a glance out the window. He giggled, then, but it was a kind of a nervous giggle.

I began to talk fast, but I was thinking faster. "Listen, sap. Rowden came to me tonight and told me the whole setup, offered to cut me in but I didn't want any part of it. He and Henderson are collecting the dough right now—and *they won't be back*. They are going to leave you here for the cops to find, and keep the dough—all of it. How long have they been gone? Too long, haven't they? The cops will be here any minute and it won't do you any good to squeal on them because after Rowden showed his hand tonight he has to take it on the lam anyway. And you take the rap."

In the moonlight I could see Aterbury's shifty eyes flicking back and forth from me to the girl and he kept switching his knife from one hand to the

other. "Lies," he said, and his voice was almost a hiss. "All lies. A trick. They'll be back."

I figured that he was right, and that they would be back—pretty quick. And then the game would be up.

The girl spoke up. "That's right, Dr. Aterbury. Cut us loose and go home with us and we'll see that the police won't bother you. And I'm sure that Mother will make it worth your while. Only hurry."

I had to give the girl credit. She was using her head, all right. I thought I could scare him, but she used the only language that rats like Aterbury can understand—money.

Aterbury hesitated a second. Then he said, "How much?" His voice was hoarse, and for once he wasn't giggling. I could see his bright eyes watching the girl.

She said, "Anything—whatever you want."

"Ten thousand dollars?" asked Aterbury.

"Yes," she said. "Ten thousand dollars."

There was silence for a second. Then Aterbury laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "What proof have I that I can trust you?"

I WAS afraid that he would ask that, but I had an answer ready for him. "I'll stay here. Take the girl and get your money."

The girl said, "No, Pete, I can't let you do that." It was the first time she had ever called me by my first name. I kind of liked to hear her say it.

"Never mind," I said. "It'll be all right."

Aterbury wasn't so dumb. I think he realized that we were trying to pull a fast one, but the ten thousand bucks all for himself looked pretty good to him. He stood trembling in an agony of indecision. He turned quickly to the window, shot a quick glance both to the right and left. I felt the girl's hand touch mine. She was pressing something into my palm. It was my lighter. She had kept it hidden in her fist since Aterbury had come in.

Aterbury turned quickly from the window. He had made up his mind. He jumped to the girl's side. He was breathing hard. Feverishly he cut the rope which bound her hands and feet. I guess he was plenty scared and now that he had made up his mind he wanted to get the hell out of there. While he was cutting the girl loose he was careful to stay clear of me. When she was free she got to her feet and Aterbury almost dragged her to the door. She hung on to the door jamb a second looking at me.

"I'll be back," she said, "as fast as I can."

"Okay," I said, and I hoped that I would still be alive to see her when she did come back.

And then Aterbury pulled her away and I heard them cross the porch and go down the steps. Silence settled down. I got to work with the lighter, but I couldn't do much good. I pretty near sprained a wrist trying to get the flame into position, and when I finally did get it so that I could smell the rope burning instead of my hide, the fluid gave out. When I discovered that the wick was no longer burning, I just lay there a minute thinking things over.

I figured that it would take at least an hour for the girl to go home and get back to me, and a lot of things could happen in that hour. When they had been gone about ten minutes I had another idea and I cursed myself for a fool for not thinking of it sooner. I rolled over to the window, got up on my knees, and began to drag the rope on my wrists against the rough wooden edge of the window sill. Almost immediately I could tell that the rope strands were getting ragged with the friction. I rubbed harder and I was sweating and breathing hard when the first strand let loose. It was fairly easy from then on, and in a couple of minutes I had my hands free. I began to rub my wrists to bring back circulation and I saw my hands in the moonlight. They were not a pretty sight. The rope had rubbed my wrists raw and blood was running into open blisters made by the lighter. I bent over to untie the rope around my ankles. And then I heard a car coming up the road, fast. Rowden and Henderson were coming back at last.

I WORKED harder on the knots, but they were tied tight, and tangled. I tugged and pulled and tore loose a fingernail but I couldn't get the rope even loosened. I shot a quick glance out the window. The car was close. I could see the headlights bouncing over the rutty mud road. It turned into the yard in front of the house and stopped. I heard a door slam, and then the voice of Rowden. "I'll wait here. Do it quick."

"Like hell," I heard Henderson say. "You're in this, too. Come on."

Rowden's answer was lost in the slamming of the car door, and then I saw the two of them walking across the yard toward the house, Henderson in front.

I gave up trying to untie my feet and I dragged

myself along the floor to the door. I got to my feet and braced myself flat against the wall beside the door. It was hard to stand with my feet tied together. I heard Henderson yell, "Doc! Where the hell are you?" I heard him come up the steps and cross the rickety porch. I braced myself beside the door and cocked my right fist.

Henderson came in first. He said, "Doc, damn you—" and then I let him have it with all I had. I felt his jaw crunch against my knuckles like a bag of marbles and he went sideways to his knees, teetered there a second, and then went over on his face and lay still.

But the effort had thrown me off balance, and my hobbled legs refused to hold me up. I stumbled halfway across the doorway, tried to hang on to the door jamb.

Rowden, coming up the steps of the porch, saw me there. He stopped suddenly and I heard him blurt out, "Allen!" I tried to scramble back inside the door, but he was too fast for me. His gun came out and I saw the orange flash of flame and there was a deafening blasting roar in my ears. Wood splintered beside me, and Rowden's gun spat flame again. There was a sudden jolting blow in my side, low down, and my face hit the planks of the porch. It didn't hurt, but when I grabbed my side with my hand I could feel the warm blood running through my fingers.

I saw Rowden turn and run for the car. I reached out an arm to the motionless form of Henderson and my groping hand found what I was looking for—his shoulder holster. I slipped out Henderson's automatic and dragged myself on my stomach across the doorway. Rowden had the car started and was turning it around in the road, the gears clashing. He gave it the gun and it bounced down the road in second gear, gaining speed with every second. I lay on my stomach, my gun arm stretched out, and aimed carefully. I squeezed the trigger and Henderson's big automatic jumped viciously in my hand. I kept squeezing the trigger until the gun stopped jumping. The car weaved drunkenly in the ruts of the road, and swerved suddenly for the ditch. I saw it hit the ditch and bounce high. In the moonlight I saw the flash of the polished body as it rolled over twice in the field beyond. Everything was still then. I could see the car, a dully gleaming mass of metal, with its four wheels turning slowly and pointing straight up to the sky.

And then I heard another car coming up the road and I saw the lights. It was coming fast, too. I didn't think it was the girl because she hadn't been gone long enough. But I didn't care much who it was. My head seemed to be floating somewhere above my shoulders and there was a burning pain beginning to throb in my side. Something wet and dark was spreading in a widening puddle from beneath me and dripping down through the loose planks of the porch. I just lay there and dully watched the car approach.

It was the girl, though. I saw her jump out of the car and I heard the sob in her voice as she ran up to the porch.

"Pete, Pete—what have they done to you . . .?"

IT WAS all pretty hazy after that. I remember that two cops climbed out of the car and followed the girl up to the porch. They picked me up and laid me on the back seat of the squad car and the next time I knew anything for sure it was the following afternoon and I was in a hospital bed. The first person I saw was the girl. She stood by the bed looking down at me. Behind her was Dan Coppus and the boss.

The girl said, "Pete—how to you feel?"

I grinned up at her and said, "Fine." It seems that the sawbones had got the slug out of me, and I wasn't so bad hit. A sour-looking nurse came in and said that I ought to go back to sleep, but I wanted to hear the story. Dan told it to me.

When the girl and Aterbury got to the main road they went into a filling station to call a cab. While they were there two cops in a squad car spotted Aterbury from the description I had given Dan that afternoon. Aterbury got scared and rattled. He pulled a rod and started to sling lead at the cops. They opened up on him, of course, and he died hanging on to a gasoline pump. The girl told the cops the story and the three of them highballed back to the shack where I was.

In the meantime Rowden had gotten the dough from his wife—he showed her a fake note saying that Rose was being held for \$50,000, and that he, Rowden, was to deliver it in person. She must have trusted him all right, because she gave him the dough without a squawk and Rowden rejoined Henderson who was waiting outside. The two of them went back to the shack to pick up Aterbury and, I suppose, to give me and the girl the business. Rowden probably intended to keep on living with

the girl's mother and he couldn't have us hanging around to squeal on him.

They found Rowden dead in the wrecked car. Henderson confessed all of this stuff the same night but he insisted that he and Rowden and Aterbury were going to take it on the lam after they got the money, and that they had no intentions in the world of harming a hair on the head of either the girl or me! Henderson confessed, too, that Rowden got the idea of kidnapping the girl after she left home. He was paying Henderson and Aterbury to tail her.

When Dan finished telling me, he said, "But the hell with that. How soon you going to get out of here? When you coming over to the house? I still got that beer."

"I'll be over," I said. "Can I bring a friend?"

Dan looked at Rose and I saw him wink. "Sure, Pete," he said.

The boss butted in then. I could tell by the way he had been fidgeting around waiting for the rest of them to get through talking that he was mad. I was right. He gave me hell.

ONE WAR SHORTAGE THAT IS A BLESSING

AS A RULE any news of a war shortage only makes us grit our teeth and work harder for victory. But now we learn of a shortage brought on by the war which is really good news.

The war shortage is narcotics and because of it many addicts have been forced to take cures to rid themselves of this terrible habit, according to the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics. The shortage is the result of more effective control measures used by the Bureau as well as the shortage of shipping facilities. Today raw opium sells at \$600 per pound; morphine at \$2.75 a grain.

When underworld sources of narcotics are

denied them, addicts resort to unscrupulous physicians and druggists who illegally sell them the drugs. Many of these have been apprehended by the Bureau, which wants it known that doctors and druggists have done much to reduce drug addiction by cooperation with the Bureau.

Not only does the Bureau of Narcotics help to protect the health and safety of American citizens, but it has been found to pay its own way. The income to the government through the enforcement of narcotic laws in 1942 was almost \$1,500,000, more than the administration cost.