



"Just me, baby!" I told her.

*"I'm not a criminal!" she insisted. "I'm free, white and—and close to twenty-one! I'll give you a hundred dollars to stop following me." I should have listened to her, for she had murder in her green eyes. But I played it like a chump—and I took the consequences!*

## Million Dollar Baby

By ARTHUR WALLACE



PARKED my six-lunged crate about fifty feet behind her maroon and gray limousine and waited. I had a hunch she was due for a whirl, and I was right. It wasn't ten minutes before she came out of her Park Avenue shack dressed for the kill. She had on an ice-blue satin evening gown and a fingertip chinchilla wrap that was worth its weight in radium. Her chauffeur came around and held the door of the limousine open, but she breezed right by him and made for my jalopy.

I got out in a hurry. She had murder in her green eyes, and I wasn't getting pinned behind any wheel where I couldn't duck if I had to. I leaned against a fender and tried to act nonchalant, but there was enough light from a streetlamp to pick up her figure, and what it looked like under that satin gown would have started the blood running in a wooden Indian. I should have been used to it after tailing her for three days, but that's one thing a guy never gets too much of.

She pulled up in front of me, breathing hard, her

breast heaving inside the low-cut bodice of her dress.

"I was wondering," she said, making each word sound like an icicle hitting the pavement. "I was wondering when you're going to get tired of this nonsense."

I said: "When I stop getting paid, I get tired."

Her eyes narrowed until all you could see were lashes. "How much is Mr. Carr paying you?"

I played dumb. "Who?"

"You know who! Dick Carr! He hired you to follow me and I won't have it! I'm not a criminal! I'm free, white and—and close enough to twenty-one to take care of myself!"

I gave her a chance to get it off her curved chest, then I said: "I don't know from nothin', Miss Taylor. I'm just a middle-class guy trying to knock out a middle-class living."

Her face softened up and she moved a little closer. I got a whiff of perfume that probably sold for ten bucks the drop, but it was worth it. That one whiff gave me more of a jag than I ever got from six snorts of bonded bourbon. "I'll give you a hundred dollars if you leave me alone," she said, dropping a hand on my arm. "Right now." She let her wrap slip off her shoulders a little so I could see her white throat and more. . . . It was just a high-class strip tease, but I didn't mind. "Come in with me and I'll give it to you," she said.

I shook my head. "No dice."

She put on the voltage and her eyes took my breath away. "I'll make it two hundred—cash."

I was knocking down a sawbuck a day to stay with her and two C's looked mighty big. "Still no dice," I said, just like a chump.

The next thing I knew I got five manicured fingers smack across the kisser and, before I could recover from the shock, she was in her car, and the chauffeur had his toe on the starter button. She would have given me the slip if a red light hadn't held her dreadnought at the corner. I swung in behind it and stayed right on its streamlined tail. I was plenty sore about the slap in the mouth.

No dame had ever hauled off on me before and even if she was Connie Taylor with a million dollar slice of her old man's oil fortune due to drop in her lap in a couple of days, I didn't like it. What the hell, she was no better than any tramp, behaving the way she was and practically throwing herself at a tinhorn racketeer like Romeo Rinaldi.

MAYBE you read about her in the papers. How her old man died and left enough dough so that she got a million dollar cash bequest on every birthday starting with her twenty-first which was in a few days. Not just *one* million, but a *million a year* for as long as she lived. Up to the time the will was probated and the story got out, she was going around with a nice kid named Dick Carr who had plenty of bucks in his own right.

Like everybody else in cafe society, they spent two or three nights a week at Romeo Rinaldi's swank supper club, the *Silver Scarab*. When the news broke that Connie Taylor was going on an allowance of a million smackers a year, Rinaldi began to sit up and take notice. That was big dough—even for him. He made a play for her and she went overboard. Carr was out in the cold. The little greaseball had the inside track and it looked like wedding bells, with Rinaldi copping a million dollar baby and a family tree that had its roots on the Mayflower. The smart guy knew it wouldn't last, but he'd heard about these foreigners who cop off American heiresses, stick it out for six months, and then fade from the picture with a healthy bit of boodle.

Dick Carr may have been out but he wasn't down. If Connie Taylor and Romeo Rinaldi ankled down to any altar, it would be over his dead body. He hired me to watch every move she made. The minute I smelled orange blossoms he was going to step in and handle Rinaldi personally. He didn't know it, but the order was treetop tall.

That wasn't my headache. All I had to do was tail her and I did—for three days. She spent every night at the *Silver Scarab*—in Rinaldi's apartment on the roof that the Broadway boys said could be reached only by private elevator. Something had to break soon and I had a hunch it was going to be tonight, otherwise why had she tried to buy me off?

I followed the limousine across town and watched it pull up in front of Rinaldi's hot-spot. Connie Taylor got out and hurried inside. The limousine swung around the corner and parked like it always did. I left my crate on a side street, slipped into a phone booth and buzzed Dick Carr. I told him about the two C's and the way I figured tonight was the night.

"I'll be right down," he said. "Don't let them get away."

HOW he expected to reach Rinaldi was something I didn't know, but anyway I told him I'd meet him inside the *Silver Scarab* at the hat check counter. I shifted my gun before I crossed the street and it was a good thing, too, because the minute I stepped in I could see the stage was set. Lungs Moran, Rinaldi's best rod, was standing at the entrance to the supper room with one hand in a jacket pocket. He spotted me and turned slowly. There was more in his jacket pocket than his hand.

"Check your hat, sir?" the girl at the counter cooed.

I looked at her. She was new and redheaded, with one of those figures half-potted playboys like to reach out and squeeze. "I'll keep it, baby," I said.

Nicky, the head waiter, came out of the supper room with a professional smile on his flat, oily face. His tail-coat was too big for him, but that wasn't because he patronized a lousy tailor. There had to be room for the bolstered automatic that hung under his left arm. At the *Silver Scarab* the customer was always wrong—or else.

I said: "Hello, Nicky," looking over his shoulder at Lungs Moran. Lungs had a face like a white rat. There was no color in it except sometimes when he coughed. Then his thin cheeks pinked up and his eyes got glassy. He was dying of t.b., but there was nothing wrong with his right hand. Nicky said something about a table, but I shook my head and told him I was waiting for a friend. Then I walked over to the arched entrance to the supper room and looked in.

The floor show was on and a dozen half-naked Nile maidens were swaying and writhing on the dance floor. A flute wailed and a dancer slid from the shadows behind the bandstand. It was Marja Vaughn. She wore her straight black hair in bangs. Her face was dead white except for the blood-red slash of her mouth. Her costume was a pair of silk tights that covered her legs and her hips and ended in cupped petals over her white breasts. A spotlight picked her up and she went into her dance. You could hear a pin drop in the joint because every movement of Marja Vaughn's body meant something. She'd come a long way since she used to peel for the burlesque. Now she was the *Silver Scarab's* ace attraction and Romeo Rinaldi's hot moment. At least, she had been before Connie Taylor stepped in.

Lungs Moran coughed and spat into a handkerchief. There was blood in the thready

saliva. He looked at it, crumpled the handkerchief and stuffed it into a back pocket. "Feelin' okay, Lungs?" I asked.

His voice was flat. "Never mind how I feel, shamus. We don't want no trouble."

I said: "Why should there be any trouble?"

He said: "You look like trouble."

Marja Vaughn finished her dance and the lights went up in the supper room. I looked around and saw a couple of judges, an assistant district attorney, and everybody who was anybody in the social register. It was almost funny how a man who started out shining shoes could drag them in the way Romeo Rinaldi did.

Lungs Moran's beady eyes shot to the entrance door like a ferret's. I turned and saw Dick Carr coming through. He stood a good six feet and was built proportionately. Right now he was ready to tear the joint apart with his bare hands.

"Where are they?" he barked angrily.

I said: "Take it easy, Mr. Carr." Lungs had faded back behind the arched doorway. I could see the pointed tip of his shoe.

Nicky came up. "Good evening, Mr. Carr. You would like a table?"

"No, but I want Rinaldi! Where is he?"

Lungs Moran's foot moved a little. I put my hand in my pocket just in case. The cold steel of my gun felt good. Nicky said: "I'll try to locate him, Mr. Carr." He used the phone at the reservation desk. I couldn't hear him because the band was playing. He hung up. "Mr. Rinaldi says to please come upstairs, Mr. Carr. This way."

I started to follow Dick Carr, but Lungs stepped up behind me and jammed a gat into my back. "Not you, shamus," he said.

Nicky turned around. "It's all right."

Lungs backed away and I fell in behind Carr. Nicky led us around the room, through a narrow hallway and into a self-operating elevator hidden behind a wall panel. He said:

"Just press the top button."

We got in and the panel closed. Carr pressed the button and a grilled door slid across the front of the elevator. A motor hummed and it started up slowly. I said: "This is too easy. There's a catch somewhere."

SUDDENLY the elevator stopped dead. Carr pressed the button again, but that didn't do any good. The motor hum was gone. "Someone turned

the juice off,” I said. “We’re trapped.”

He turned pale. “You mean—”

“I mean we stepped into it like a couple of shnooks. I figured it was too easy. There must be another way out of Rinaldi’s apartment.”

Carr cursed and tried to force the grilled door. “We’ve got to get out!”

“That won’t do you a damn’ bit of good. There’s nothing but a blank wall behind it. Take it easy. I know something about these boxes. They usually have an emergency operating device that runs on batteries.”

I was fiddling around with the control panel and trying to figure it out when I heard a hiss like steam escaping from the nozzle. I looked up and saw white vapor pouring out of a vent in the ceiling of the car. It swirled around Dick Carr’s head and he staggered back, coughing and choking, his eyes flooded.

“Tear gas!” I cried. “The dirty rats!”

Carr couldn’t catch his breath. I grabbed his arm and pulled him down to the floor. “Keep your handkerchief over your eyes and mouth! Breathe through it!” I crawled over to the control panel. The gas hadn’t begun to settle yet, but when it did neither of us was going to be good for much. Luckily the car wasn’t airtight so we had a little time. I found the emergency operating switch, but it needed a key to open it. For what seemed like an hour I worked at it with the blade of my penknife, trying to throw the tumblers. The elevator was full of tear gas by now and my eyes were streaming so much I was half-blind. I could hear Dick Carr hacking away like a guy does when he gets that lousy stuff in his lungs.

Then the tumblers clicked and I threw the switch over. I stabbed at one of the buttons. The elevator jerked and began to move up slowly. At any minute I thought it was going to stop again, but it didn’t—not until it reached the top floor. The grill slid back automatically. I shoved the door open and dragged Dick Carr into a dimly-lit foyer. He was almost out, but a few whiffs of fresh air brought him around.

I cleared my gun and checked it for load. This was Romeo Rinaldi’s apartment—No Man’s Land for a guy like me. I got Carr up on his feet and warned him there might be some shooting. There was a door across from the elevator. I opened it fast with my left hand, keeping my finger hard on the trigger. I didn’t have to be that careful. Romeo

Rinaldi was there, all right, but he was flat on his face in the middle of the floor, the handle of a shiv sticking out from between his shoulder blades. His mouth was open and thick blood drooled off his lower lip.

Carr took one look and turned green. I thought he was going to keel on me, but he didn’t. I stepped into the room, kneeled down and rolled one of Rinaldi’s eyelids up. He was dead as a smoked herring, but still a little warm.

Carr said: “Hadn’t we better call the police?”

I WIPED my hands on a handkerchief. “That would be smart. Everybody in town knows you’re after Rinaldi’s scalp. Keep away from that phone. Don’t touch anything.” I went through the apartment like a hurricane, expecting to find Connie Taylor with her throat slit. I didn’t find anyone. The place was empty. When I got back to the living room, Carr said he’d heard the elevator go down.

“We got to get out—fast!” I said. There was an open window and I looked out expecting to see a three-story drop to the street. Instead I saw the tarred roof of the adjoining building about ten feet below. “Come on, this way.”

He held back. “What about Connie—Miss Taylor?”

“She’s not here. Hurry up before those killers pop in on us.”

He climbed out over the sill and dropped to the roof. I took one last look around just to make sure we hadn’t left anything, and I spotted what seemed like a couple of diamonds on the maroon chenille rug near Rinaldi’s body. I went over and picked them up. They weren’t diamonds. They were big silver sequins. I dropped them into my change pocket and went out the window.

Dick Carr had gotten over the effects of the gas and he was full of fight. “I’m not leaving here until I find Miss Taylor!”

“Don’t be a chump,” I said. “She’s not in the apartment and, if Moran or Nicky get a bead on us, it’s curtains. Both those guys are poison with a gat. Come on, we’ll find her.” It was easy to say, but I wasn’t so sure. If she hadn’t knifed Rinaldi, she’d probably seen him get it. I couldn’t help thinking about the way they found Dorothy King in the bushes a couple of years back. She knew too much.

We got off the roof easy enough but the building was an empty loft and, when we got down

to the ground floor, we found the door locked. I didn't want to attract any attention by shouting for help because it was right next door to the *Silver Scarab* entrance, so I tried picking the lock. I was working at it with Carr holding lighted matches so I could see my way around when I heard someone coming down the wooden steps.

I slapped the match out of Carr's hand and flattened him up against the wall. Whoever was on his way down had a pocket flash. I drew my gun, thinking that maybe it was only a watchman and telling myself to be careful.

The light kept coming. Suddenly it stopped about five steps up and began to swing. Sooner or later it was bound to pick us out. I motioned for Carr to squat down. "Drop everything!" I cried. "You're covered!"

THERE was a click and the light went off. Hell broke loose as two shots almost blew the narrow hall apart. One of the slugs screamed by my head and I shook it to make sure my ear wasn't pinned to the wall. No watchman was fingering that rod. I heard Carr drop down, but there wasn't time to worry about whether he was hit or not. I scrambled across the hall just as two more lead messengers plunked into the plaster where my shoulder blades had been only a split second before.

The flash of the gun in the darkness gave me something to draw a bead on and I let one go. There was no spat like a bullet makes when it worms into something solid and I knew the shot was good. The guy on the steps moaned, and the next thing he came crashing down head over heels and landed in a twisted heap at my feet.

I groped my way over to Dick Carr. He was down on his face, but he hadn't been hit. "The—the door's open!" he gasped. I turned around and sure enough, light was coming in from the street. One of the slugs had smashed through the lock. It was a break and it wasn't. Somebody must have heard the gunfire—certainly the doorman at the *Silver Scarab*. We might run into enough lead to sink a battleship the minute we stepped outside, but it was a chance that had to be taken.

"Follow me!" I said. "Don't stop for anything!" I wanted to take a look at the guy I'd hit but there wasn't time even for that. I kicked the door wide open and went through like a bat out of hell, heading for my bus. Someone let out a yell and

then a police whistle screamed. Dick Carr was right behind me when I reached the jalopy. For once in its long life the damn' thing turned over fast. I gave it the gun, shot up the street and took the first corner on two wheels.

Ten blocks away, over near the river, I pulled up to the curb. "You take a cab from here," I told Carr. "Go back to your place and stay there. If the cops come, you don't know from nothin', understand?"

He had a lot of questions he wanted to ask, but I didn't give him a chance. I eased him out and stepped on the gas. In ten minutes I was at my hotel room. I changed into another suit, took a shot of rye, and went out again, not forgetting the two silver sequins. I had a feeling they were going to be important. I stopped in at a cafeteria, got a cup of java, and tried to figure it all out. What bothered me most was how Connie Taylor had disappeared so fast. And where to?

I killed a little time, then I hopped a cab and told the hack driver to go along the street the *Silver Scarab* was on. A harness bull stopped us at the corner. The street was jammed with prowls cars, radio patrols, and a riot squad truck.

I stuck my head out. "What's up, officer?"

"What's it to you, nosey?" the bull growled. "Scram."

I left the cab at the next corner and walked back. There were cops all over the place and I spotted one I knew—Mike Torgin. I chinned with him for a minute and he told me somebody had knocked off Romeo Rinaldi. "Magrath here?" I asked. Dan Magrath was chief of Homicide.

"Yeah, sure."

"Maybe I can give him a hand," I said. "I know who was after Rinaldi." I walked through big as life.

THE cash customers were being herded out of the club as fast as a couple of plainclothes boys could look them over. I gave the front canopy a wide berth and went around to the little green door that had been the stage entrance when the joint was a theater. There was a dick there, too, gandering the chorines as they came out. I saw one in a dark mink coat and I was wondering where in hell she'd gotten it when I realized it was Marja Vaughn. Then it came to me—the big silver sequins! They were from her dancing costume! From the petals that curved over her breasts when she did her classy hootchy-cootch!

She hurried up the street with her face buried in the collar of her coat and entered a cab at the corner. I took the one right behind it and followed her. She got off in front of a swank apartment house. Two minutes later I rang the bell at her door. A maid answered and tried to tell me Marja Vaughn wasn't in, but I breezed right by her and closed the door. The dancer must have heard it slam because she called out: "Who was it, Lily?"

I walked through the hall and into her bedroom. "Just me, baby," I said.

She hadn't taken the time to remove her costume at the club and she was just stepping out of it when I barged in. She looked at me, turned dead white and made a dive for a chiffon negligee on the bed. It was like hiding behind a cobweb. "What do you want?" she gasped.

The maid was right behind me so I shut the door in her face. "Don't get excited, toots," I said. "Everything's under control." I leaned over, picked up her costume, and looked at the sequined petals. I was right.

She snatched the costume out of my hands and threw it behind her into a corner. "Get out of here before I call the police!" she stormed. "You have no right—"

I gave her a quick flash of my tin—just enough to make it look like the McCoy—and that shut her up tighter than a clam. She got scared and a little weak in the knees. I sat her down on the bed and parked right next to her.

"I—I don't know anything about it!" she blurted. "I swear I don't!"

I slipped an arm around her waist. "Look honey," I said. "I'll ask the questions." She wasn't even thinking about keeping the negligee about her. "Why did you knife Romeo?" I shot at her suddenly.

She stiffened like a board. "I didn't! I swear to God I didn't!" She looked straight at me and I had the feeling she was on the level, but I kept punching.

"Chances are you had a good reason," I said. "He was a rat anyway."

She turned and grabbed my arms. "But I didn't kill him! You've got to believe me!"

"When did you see him last?"

She thought for a second. "Yesterday."

"That's a lie!"

"No, it isn't! Yesterday afternoon—"

"Wait a minute. Don't waste your breath." I

fished around in my change pocket and found the two sequins. "See these? They fell off your costume. Know where I found them? On the rug next to Romeo's body!"

HER eyes glazed over and it looked like she was going into a faint. I braced her against my arm and in a little while she was all right except for being ghost white under her rouge. Then she said: "I didn't kill him!"

"Start from the beginning," I said. I was having a tough time sticking to business what with her negligee acting up. *The Silver Scarab* got a three-buck cover from guys who paid it to see this. "When did you get to the club tonight?"

Her voice was low and unsteady. "About seven-thirty. I—I go on at eight, ten, and twelve."

"What did you do when you got there?"

"I—I went to my dressing room and put my costume on. I played the first show, changed into an evening gown, and came out front. I had some friends at the club and I sat with them until nine-thirty. Nicky will tell you it's the truth. He saw me."

"Okay. Then what?"

"Then—then I went back and got into my costume. I had some time so—so I thought I'd go up and see Romeo."

Her hands worked in her lap and she didn't look at me. "What did you want to see Romeo about?" I asked.

It took a long time for the answer to come, but when it did she screamed it. "To tell him I was through, that's what! To tell him he couldn't play around with that Taylor woman right under my eyes and make a fool out of me!"

"So you went up and deliberately knifed him!"

"No! I found him that way!" She grabbed my arms again. "Please believe me!"

I could feel her warm, curved body against me, but I didn't let myself think about it. "How did your sequins get on the rug right near the body?"

"I—I didn't know he was dead, so I ran over to him! When I saw the blood I—I got panicky! I took the elevator down and went to my dressing room."

"Why didn't you notify the police or Nicky?"

"I don't know. I—I guess I was frightened and confused."

"You didn't look frightened when you danced." Before she could answer that one a thought struck me. "How much time elapsed between your leaving

Rinaldi's apartment and going on with your dance?"

The look in her eyes indicated she thought the question had a catch. "About fifteen minutes," she answered hesitantly.

If she was telling the truth, I could name Romeo Rinaldi's killer. But that wasn't enough. I had to locate Connie Taylor, dead or alive, and the only person who knew her whereabouts was the one who had put the knife in Rinaldi's back.

"You sit tight," I told Marja Vaughn. "We'll be watching you. Don't budge from here."

Her face brightened. "Then—then you won't arrest me?"

"Not if you behave yourself."

She threw her arms around my neck and gave me a kiss that traveled down to my toes. I was still tingling from it when I left her apartment house, walked down to the corner, and stepped into a cigar store phone booth. No wonder Rinaldi had gone for her. The dame had a technique and I made a mental note to look in on her after the case was on ice.

**I**BUZZED Headquarters, and finally got connected with Dan Magrath, chief of Homicide. He blew up when I gave my name. "Every cop in town is looking for you!" he roared. "If you're not down here in five minutes, I'll swear out a warrant and hound you to hell and back again!"

I reached Headquarters in four and a half minutes flat. When I walked into Magrath's private office, I knew something was up. Dick Carr was there. So were Lungs Moran and Nicky and the redheaded hat check gal. Nicky's left arm was in a sling and he looked sick.

Magrath didn't waste a second. "Where's Miss Taylor?" he bellowed.

I glanced at Carr and figured he'd been worked over. "Don't ask me," I said. "The last time I saw her she was going into the Silver Scarab."

Magrath pounded the desk. "Don't try to pull that on me! You come clean or I'll throw you in the can! I know more than you think I know!"

"Then you tell me," I said.

He got up out of his chair. "All right, I'll tell you, wise guy! Miss Taylor went up to Rinaldi's apartment at ten minutes to ten! You and Carr, here, followed fifteen minutes later." He pointed to Nicky. "He took some drinks up five minutes after that and found Rinaldi dead with a knife in his back. The window was open and he saw you and

Carr running across the roof of the next building. He chased you and you put a bullet in his shoulder and made your getaway."

"Absolutely correct," I said.

That took a little of the wind out of Magrath's sails. He looked at me and blinked. "You admit it?"

"Of course. Carr accused Rinaldi of stealing his girl and Rinaldi pulled a knife. They had a battle and Rinaldi lost. That's all. We went out through the window when we heard someone coming up. I didn't want to stop any lead and I knew damn well if Lungs or Nicky caught us with Rinaldi's corpse they'd blow us to hell."

I thought Dick Carr would bust a blood vessel listening to me. First he got red in the face and then pasty gray. "That's a lie!" he shrieked.

"You keep quiet!" Magrath said. I didn't like the expression on his face. He leaned over the desk. "So, that's the story, is it?"

"Right."

"Then how come we found Miss Taylor's fingerprints on the knife handle?" he roared.

For a second I was groggy like I'd been bopped on the button. Connie Taylor's prints on the knife handle! What in hell did that mean? "I don't believe it," I said.

"Oh, you don't?" He jerked open a drawer and brought out a brocaded handbag. "This belongs to her. We found it in Rinaldi's apartment. The lipstick and mirror had plenty of prints on them. They matched those on the knife handle. Now do you believe it?"

"Okay," I said. "We found Rinaldi dead, but Miss Taylor wasn't there. She'd skipped."

Dan Magrath turned to Carr. "Where would she be likely to go?"

"Don't answer!" I barked.

Magrath almost had a fit. "Who the hell do you think you are? What do you mean don't answer? I'm running this show and—"

"Sure, but if Mr. Carr tells you where Miss Taylor might be the chances are she'll be rubbed out before you get to her. I'll let him talk—but privately."

Magrath caught on. "You three can go," he said to Nicky, Lungs, and the little redhead. "I'll let you know if I need you." They filed out. "All right," Magrath said. "Now talk."

"I'll do the talking," I said. "In the first place, neither Mr. Carr nor Miss Taylor knifed Rinaldi." I told him the story from beginning to end, leaving

out nothing. When I was through I asked him: "Now do you know who did it?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think you do, either. If this is one of your wise guy tricks, I'll—"

"It's on the level, Chief. The only trouble is we can't grab the killer until we locate Miss Taylor, and I think that's going to happen tonight." I talked myself hoarse and sold him a bill of goods.

Five minutes later he and Carr and a plainclothes dick and myself were riding uptown in a cab. We got off a block away from the *Silver Scarab*. I led them around to where we could see the window of Rinaldi's apartment—the one that looked out on the adjoining roof. Luckily, a neon sign on the next street gave off enough light to see by.

TIME passed and Magrath began to get impatient. The wind was whistling down the street and it was cold. I started to wonder whether maybe I hadn't gone off the deep end when Carr said: "Someone's climbing out the window!"

I looked and someone was. Not dropping out like we did but climbing down an iron ladder attached to the brick wall. "Don't move!" I said. We stood like four dummies while the figure hurried across the roof and disappeared. I started for the door of the loft building on the run, with the dick and Magrath right behind me and Carr drawing up in the rear. I had my gun out and the dick had a gun and pocket flash.

When we reached the building, I said: "The chances are some lead will fly. You stay down here with Carr, Chief. We'll go up." I took my shoes off and the dick did the same.

The wooden steps creaked like hell as we started up them, but the sound of the wind covered it up a little. It was slow going in the dark, but I didn't dare risk a light. We got to the second floor and waited. I heard someone moving around in the loft and then I saw a thin pencil of light like a fountain pen flash makes. I reached behind me and took the dick's flash. The entrance to the loft was right in front of me. I thumbed the switch and shot the beam through the darkness. All I saw was a figure crouching down on the floor.

"Get 'em up!" I shouted.

The figure leaped to its feet and tried to duck out of the light. A gun blazed, but the slug went wild by yards. I couldn't take any chances of stopping one of those shots, so I pumped two

bullets along the path of light. Before the powder smoke cleared away, a heavy body hit the hollow floor with a thud. I stepped into the loft with the Headquarters dick. He turned the body over but I didn't need the light to tell me it was Nicky.

WE SEARCHED the loft, piled high with cases of bootleg liquor, and found Connie Taylor crumpled up in a corner. At first I thought she was dead, but finally I got a heartbeat under her breast. I picked her up and carried her downstairs, out into the street. The cold air brought her around and in a few minutes she was sitting on the doorstep with her head against Dick Carr's shoulder.

"Who was it?" Magrath gulped. "We heard two shots."

"Nicky, the head waiter," I said. "He's up there with a bullet in his brain."

Magrath looked at me like I was crazy, but, before he had a chance to say anything, Dick Carr spoke up. "Connie didn't even know Rinaldi was killed!"

She didn't feel much like talking but she told us how she had entered the elevator and pressed the button like she always did. The car started and then stopped. She heard a hissing noise and then she went blind. What happened after that she didn't know because she must have collapsed.

"That makes the picture complete," I said. "Nicky knocked her out with tear gas, brought the elevator down, and then rode it up to Rinaldi's apartment. Rinaldi had already been knifed. Nicky pressed Miss Taylor's fingers around the knife handle, hoisted her out the window, and carried her across to the loft. He probably figured on letting her loose as soon as she recovered from the gas. All the alibi she could have was that she didn't remember anything after fainting in the elevator, and with her prints on the knife it wouldn't hold much water."

"Hold on," Magrath said. "How do you know Rinaldi was dead before she got to the club and what makes you think the head waiter killed him?"

"I had to believe somebody's story and I put my chips on Marja Vaughn. She said she saw Rinaldi dead fifteen minutes before she went on—which was ten o'clock. I reached the *Silver Scarab* while she was dancing and Carr showed up a few minutes later. He demanded to see Rinaldi and he meant business. Nicky went through the motions of



calling and then said that Rinaldi wanted us to come up. Guys with shivs in their backs don't talk over a phone, so I knew Nicky was pulling a fast one. I was sure of it when he tried to knock us out in the elevator."

"What about a motive?" Magrath said. "Why did he do it?"

"You'll have to figure that one out for yourself. Maybe he wanted to take over and step into Rinaldi's shoes." I looked at my watch. It was four A.M., but Marja Vaughn was probably up. "Got to see a girl about finishing something she started," I said. "If you don't think I meant it, you're crazy!"