



A savage right to the jaw sent the driver sprawling over the wheel

Leave at Your Peril

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

Lieutenant Paul Britton splits a sinister murder plot wide open when he returns to the swanky Garnet Club!

THE first familiar figure—and in this case it was a figure—that Paul Britton spotted within the smart red and white portals of the Garnet Club, belonged to Toni Evans, the sleek, dark-haired young beauty who ran the check room and cigarette concessions. From the top of the steps, he could see that the seams of her stockings were as straight as twin plumb lines as she stood on tiptoe to

place a pair of hats on the top shelf.

He removed his own hat and waited while she handed the customers their checks. Then he advanced and laid his hat on the counter. It took her a few seconds to notice him, and he used the time to the hilt in enjoying her lush, fresh loveliness. He decided that Toni must have blossomed out since he'd last seen her, or that eighteen months away from the New

York scene had seriously impaired his judgment.

“Maestro!” she squealed, and throwing a pair of firmly rounded and pleasantly undraped young arms around his neck, kissed him full on the lips. Then, pulling away from him abruptly, she said almost shyly, “Gee, I’m sorry! I forgot. I guess I must be glad to see you.”

“I guess you must be,” said Paul, grinning and delving under his uniform jacket for a handkerchief, to undo the lipstick damage. On second thought, he pulled her to him over the counter and returned the embrace. It was, he decided, definitely worth while.

“You’ve grown up, Toni,” he said. “You look years younger.”

“Hey!” said a rough male voice behind him. “Just what kind of a place do you think this is, Lieutenant?” a hand on his shoulder spun him around. Tom Morris, gray-haired, stocky, lumpy-faced owner of the Garnet glared at him from less than a foot away.

“Hello, Tom,” said Paul, extending a hand that was taken limply.

Morris’ surprise was almost ludicrous. His eyes popped, and his Adam’s apple ran up his neck like a pink champagne bubble.

“Paul!” said the club owner. “Why don’t you let a guy know when you’re coming. I’d have had out the fatted calf, or the closest to it—what with all this rationing. Say—I heard you got a commission the hard way, but aren’t those silver bars?”

“That’s right,” said Paul. “I was lucky—too lucky, maybe. It begins to look as if I’m buried down South teaching for the duration.”

“I think he’s wonderful,” said Toni proudly.

Tom Morris cast an annoyed glance at her, then led Paul away, an arm linked

through his.

“Will Jerri be glad to see you!” he said. “She’s still singing here and still carrying a torch that bothers the dimout bosses.”

“I’ll bet,” said Paul without much feeling. Even down South he could read the Broadway columns. He changed the subject. “How’s the band sound with Stan Johnson running it? Okay?”

“Okay,” said Morris, “but not like when you were here. Come on over to the round table and say hello to Jerri. She’ll shoot me at sunrise if you don’t. Come on, fellow, the place is yours tonight.”

The Garnet was a rectangular room that had once been the basement and kitchen of a midtown Manhattan mansion. In one corner next to the door was a quarter-circular bar. In the center of the back wall was the orchestra stand, flanked on either side by doors leading to kitchens, offices and dressing rooms. The lighting was dim and pleasant.

Business looked good to Paul. He glanced across the shifting heads of the dancers on the small floor to where tall, blond Stanley Johnson was conducting the small but excellent orchestra that had once been Paul’s own. Johnson didn’t play a horn—he had been pianist and arranger in the old days. Now he contented himself with waving a baton.

The round table, an idea which Tom Morris had lifted from John Perona of El Morocco, was just that—a round table in a favored spot near the door where the owner could entertain guests and favored clients. At the moment, only two people were sitting there.

JERRI LANE, Paul saw, even in that flattering light, had not weathered the last eighteen months as well as had little Toni out in the hat checkery. Unquestionably, clad in strapless white

satin, she was close to being the perfect golden blonde—but there were suggestions of tautness around the corners of her eyes and mouth that spoke of living on nerves and masseuses instead of on sufficient rest.

“Paul!” she cried. “How marvelous! You’re looking wonderful, darling.”

Despite the enthusiasm of her words, Paul got the impression that she was merely saying them, not feeling them. He offered a silent prayer of thanks—he’d been a little afraid of this reunion—and glanced at the other occupant of the round table.

Artie Aleno saluted him casually with the hand which was not wrapped around Jerri’s forearm on the table. It had a cigarette in it which described a figure eight of light in the dimness. He was a close-faced, swarthy man of indeterminate age, who wore his costly dinner jacket as suavely as a ballroom dancer—or a waiter captain. He was also, unless he had slipped, an extremely opulent racetrack bookmaker.

“Just get in town?” Aleno asked him. Something in the gambler’s indifference was a bit too studied.

As he made a polite reply, Paul wondered if the man were in love with Jerri. There was something proprietary in the way his arm rested on hers, but with a Broadway character, that could mean anything or nothing at all.

“You look pretty terrific, Paul,” said Jerri, flashing him her best smile and disengaging her arm gently but firmly from Aleno’s grip.

Two years back, that smile would have sent chills up his spine and under his ribs. Sixteen months in the Army changed a man’s perspective.

“Strictly G. I.,” said Paul. “You look pretty terrific yourself, Jerri. How about it, Artie?” He glanced at the gambler, who

allowed his eyebrows to move in a sort of shoulderless shrug.

“Miss Lane is a very beautiful young lady,” he said.

Paul repressed a shudder. He’d forgotten that people talked like that. Tom Morris came back from somewhere then, put a hand on his shoulder.

“Just seeing that the champagne got iced,” he said. “Now how about getting up there and leading the boys for a couple of numbers? It will be like old times. Jerri can give you a plug.”

“No thanks,” said Paul. “I got a faceful of dust on maneuvers last week, and it still isn’t out of my skin. I don’t know what my lip would do if I tried to blow a horn. I’d be terrible, Tom.”

“So what?” said the owner. “Nobody’d care. But everybody here would like to see you try one. Come on, kid, it would help business. Do it as a break for me, will you?”

Jerri added her entreaties, and finally settled the issue by rising to consult Stanley Johnson on the stand. Johnson’s eyes followed her glance, spotted Paul and beckoned to him with both hands. There was nothing for it. A spotlight picked him up as he rose, and the music stopped.

Jerri gave him the works, made him out pretty much of a hero, which he wasn’t, told the two hundred-odd souls present that he was back in better shape than ever to blow them a few high ones, which was certainly not the case.

“And now,” she concluded, “which one of Paul Britton’s old specials would you like him to play for us?”

Paul had, in the meantime, ascended the platform, where someone had handed him a horn. He turned his back to the audience, pressed it to his lips, tried a couple of runs. He might, he thought get by if he didn’t try to press too much in the upper register.

“Hey, Paul,” said Stanley Johnson softly in his ear. “Did you get that wire I sent you yesterday?”

“Yeah,” said Paul. “I got it, but I couldn’t make sense of it. That’s what brought me up here. I was overdue for a leave anyway.”

“Am I glad of that!” said the baton wielder. “I’m up against something I can’t handle without your advice.”

“Good thing I’m not in Africa or Australia,” said Paul, wondering what was up. “Where and when can we talk?”

“I’ll meet you backstage as soon as you get through,” said Johnson. “In the orchestra room. Have the band play a number on their own.”

“Okay, Stan,” said Paul. “See you in ten minutes if my lip doesn’t pop first. Maybe we’d better go across the street for coffee.”

“Maybe,” said Johnson. “We can settle it later. Boy, I sure am glad you could make it.”

There was, Paul thought, as he watched the orchestra leader leave the stand and walk to the dressing-room door, no doubt about his sincerity. Johnson was a friend of long standing, anyway. He wondered what in hades had gone wrong up here.

Jerri sang “Begin the Beguine” for the opening number, and Paul managed to back her up without difficulty. It felt good to be up there playing again with the boys behind him. There were new faces in the lineup of course—the war had seen to that. But Stanley had selected and groomed replacements so well and so carefully that the style and quality of the outfit remained almost the same as before.

HE TOOK a chorus and, by taking it easily and in conservative fashion, managed to get through it without damaging either the tune or his lip. Then

Jerri, with a flourish that brought a hearty round of applause, turned the band over to him alone and retired from the spotlight. Paul ordered a “Muskrat Ramble” and gave the down beat.

The exhilaration was too much for him, and without meaning to, he began to let out. He took the chorus, and his tone felt thick and clean. He went after volume and got it. By the time the other lads had done their stuff and the final chorus ensembles came up, he really went all out. It was then, in the middle of it, that his lip split.

It felt as if it had been blown open right down to his chin. He hadn’t suffered such a sharp pang since his last visit to the dentist. Laying down his horn, he motioned the band to carry on without him, covered his lower face with a handkerchief and dug into the cornet case of his successor for a styptic pencil to make the necessary repairs.

“I’m one heck of a soldier!” he thought as he ducked behind the orchestra stand. “A split lip knocks me right out of things.” He leaned against the wall in the narrow aisle behind the stand, wondering briefly if he were going to faint, and complete the job of making an ass of himself. Then the pain subsided, and he went to work with the pencil.

The band was still giving out when he had finished, but he had neither desire nor intention of playing again that evening. He’d come to New York to talk business with Stanley Johnson, and Stanley was waiting for him in the musicians’ room in the rear of the club.

Stan was waiting, all right. . . . From the look of the still-red blood that made a two-tone job of his shirt front, he’d be waiting until the medical examiner decided to take him away. Someone had put a bullet through his chest as he was sitting at the table, smoking a cigarette.

The butt had fallen to the floor, where it still smoldered.

In spite of the fact that Paul wore the bars of a first lieutenant in the Army of the United States, he was still a stranger to violent death. For a full two minutes, he stood there, stunned. He was not aware that someone had opened the door in back of him until a strange voice sounded in his ears. He jumped a foot and pivoted with his hands up.

“Ain’t this pretty!” said the plump man in early middle age who stood there regarding him gloomily, both hands thrust into the side pockets of a weather-stained gabardine topcoat. His round cheeks and jowls hinted at good nature, but his eyes were black buttons in his face. They darted from the corpse to Paul, seemed to stab him through.

“Somebody shot him,” said Paul, feeling like a fool but unable to help it. “His name is Stanley Johnson. He led the band here.”

“Yeah,” said the stranger. “I know all about it. Somebody was polite enough to call up the precinct and give us all the dope. They said he was maybe shot by a guy named Lieutenant Paul Britton, an old boss of his. That wouldn’t be your name, would it? Or are those bars coincidence?”

“I’m Britton, all right,” said Paul. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and his voice didn’t sound normal even to him. “But I didn’t kill him. I came up on leave especially to talk business with him.”

“What kind of business?” Those little eyes were remorseless.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t know,” said Paul. “I—that is, Stan sent me a telegram saying he had to see me. We were partners in a way. I mean, he handled some of my affairs since I was drafted. He was waiting for me here to tell me what was wrong. That’s the truth.”

“You don’t know much about it, do you, Britton?” said the other ironically. “By the way, I’m Mike Fallon of Homicide. Maybe if we go in the office or somewhere, you can clear things up a bit. As it is, it don’t make sense.” He walked out, motioned a group of officers and plainclothes men who had gathered in the corridor to do their stuff with the body.

The shooting, which had evidently not been heard in the club, thanks to the noise of the band, had created little disturbance. The police, who had apparently come in through the alley and the service door, seemed to want it that way. But in the office, Tom Morris and Jerri Lane were waiting for them.

The club owner was nervously chewing on the end of an unlit cigar as he paced the carpet, while his singing star lounged in an arm chair of modernistic design, tapping the carpet with a toeless silver slipper.

“Okay,” said Detective Fallon when they were all seated. He had perched himself in a half sitting pose on a corner of Morris’ desk. “Morris, let’s hear what you got to say about this first.”

“I don’t know a thing about it, Fallon,” said Morris, opening his well-kept hands in a helpless gesture. “Paul—I mean Lieutenant Britton—turned up here tonight unexpectedly. He used to run the band. We asked him to play us a number. Stan Johnson gave him the stand and Paul took over. He leaves the stand in the final chorus of the second tune he plays, and the next thing I know, you arrive.”

“Who sent us the tip?” Fallon asked him sharply. “Did you?”

“No,” said Morris. “I tell you I didn’t know anything about it. So how could I send in a tip? But get this straight. Paul didn’t do it. He and Stan were friends—real friends, from way back.”

PAUL was thinking: Thanks for them kind words, Tom. But don't kill me with kindness—in the electric chair. It was a disquieting thought. Come to think of it, unless this hard-eyed detective chose to take his word for it that he'd been behind the band stand fixing his lip while Stan was killed, he might very well be on a nice warm spot.

Jerri's evidence, which was substantially the same as Paul's, didn't do him any good either. He noticed that neither Tom nor Jerri said a word about Artie Aleno having been in the club. But that didn't prove much either way. In a murder mess it isn't smart to involve men with connections like the bookmaker's unless it can be pinned on them.

"Well," said Fallon, when he and Paul were once more alone, "how about it—how about giving me an account of what you've been doing?"

Paul told him, gave him as careful a summing up of his movements after leaving the stand as he could. But he could tell the detective wasn't much impressed. During the recital, a lesser official came in and put Stan's belongings on the desk. Fallon looked them over carefully, scanned the few papers and letters the leader had carried on him.

"What was this business you and Johnson had together?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact," said Paul, "Stan had my power of attorney while I was in service. Tom Morris is a great night-club personality and manager, but he's a rotten owner. He likes the ponies too well. I helped him build up the Garnet, and I didn't want to see it go under. So Stan was taking control of it for me little by little."

"That," said Fallon, leaning back in his chair, "ain't the way I heard it. It's common gossip that Artie Aleno bought in here when your pal Morris couldn't come up with enough scratch to cover his losses

at Belmont. Maybe your pal Johnson was playing with him. Maybe you got word about it. Maybe you came up here to settle it the hard way."

Paul felt the floor ooze right out from under him. The detective wasn't talking through his hat. There was authority in the very tone of his voice. He couldn't believe it—not of Stan—but put in a matter of fact way, it was hard not to worry. It would not be the first time such a double-cross had been pulled in the night-club business.

At that moment, there was the sound of a scuffle in the hall outside the closed door. A girl was demanding entrance, and the policeman on duty was trying to shoo her off. His remonstrations gave way to a yelp of pain followed by a curse. Then the door was flung open, and Toni Evans, the hat check girl, stood there, angry, lovely, and just a trifle absurd in her spangled bodice and short fluffy ballet skirt.

"You're not going to hang Paul Britton with this killing as long as I can be a witness for him," she said.

The police guard appeared behind her, limping and furious, but Fallon motioned him away.

"And what information can you give about Lieutenant Britton's movements?" the detective asked her. Though his face was impassive, Paul thought he read a certain amusement in those beady black eyes.

"Plenty!" said Toni. "He couldn't have done it. I saw his lip split up there. I was peddling cigarettes near the stand when it happened. Paul—I mean Lieutenant Britton—got a styptic pencil from the regular trumpet player's instrument case. Then he went around to the alley behind the stand and tried to stop the blood."

"How did you happen to be there, young lady?" Fallon asked her.

"I was afraid he'd faint," she said, vividly alive in her earnestness. "I used to

playa tuba in my high school band back home, and I know how much a split lip hurts. I wanted to be sure he was all right.”

“You seem to take quite an interest in him,” said Fallon.

“Who wouldn’t?” said the girl, unabashed. To his horror, Paul felt himself blush warmly from the rim of his collar up. “You,” she said pertly to the detective, “seem to be interested in him yourself. Or did you just keep him in here to bore yourself silly?”

“I suspect our interests aren’t quite the same,” said Fallon. He cocked a head and considered Paul from a different point of view. “But I see what you mean. He is cute, isn’t he?”

“For Pete’s sake!” said Paul. “What’s my name—Sinatra? This is a heck of a way to act with Stan lying in there shot.”

“They’ve taken him downtown,” said Fallon quietly. He sighed. “It’s always like this. Every time you get a good-looking suspect, some dame comes along and springs him with an alibi.” He gestured toward the doer. “Okay, Britton. Beat it. I’ve got work to do, so take the kid with you. Where are you staying while you’re here? I might need you.”

Paul gave him the name of his hotel and went outside. He leaned against the wall and mopped his brow with his bloody handkerchief. Toni fussed around him, reminding him of a kitten.

“Thanks, honey,” he said. “I was picturing myself with those straps on my knees and ankles. You came through in the clinch on that one. What can I do to even things up for you—or try to?”

“Just this,” said the girl. She put her arms around his neck, stood on tiptoe and kissed him soundly.

This proved to be both messy and painful, as his lip reopened, and it took more doctoring to fix it.

“Gee! I’m sorry,” she said. “Darn it! I

didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Here,” he said, extending his arm. “Cut this off. You’re welcome to it after what you just did for me in there. I mean it.”

She helped him make repairs, and they moved out toward the front of the club, arm in arm. The more Paul saw of Toni, the more he wondered how he’d passed her up before. Behind them, the police guard shook his head sadly.

“She kisses a guy with a bum lip,” he muttered, “while here I am with a perfectly good mush, and she has to give me a kick in the shins.”

IN FRONT, the club was deserted except for waiters piling chairs on the tables. The police had evidently decided to close up the Garnet early for the evening. Toni got Paul his hat and leaned on the counter of the check room, chin in her hands, looking up at him.

“Are you going to take me to supper?” she asked. He shook his head. He began to be glad he had nine more days ahead of him this trip.

“Sorry,” he said. “And this isn’t a brushoff. Remember, Stan was murdered back there an hour or so ago. He was a friend of mine.”

“Sure he was,” said Toni. “He was a great guy. I understand.” She sighed, then grinned like a gamin. “Anyway, it’s good to see you don’t go for that Jerri Lane any more. I used to worry about it.”

“Did you!” said Paul, smiling. Then he was serious, as a thought came to him. “How about this Artie Aleno? Does he go for her these days?”

“Like a falling Stuka,” Toni said. “But Jerri’s playing the same game with him she did with you—taking you for what she can get and handing it out to the real boy friend on the side.”

“You don’t need to rub it in,” said

Paul, wincing. Somehow, now that it was over, he didn't mind being ribbed about it—not from Toni at any rate. "Tell me," he went on, "what did Aleno do after Jerri got me up there on the stand? Did he stay at his table all the time?"

"No," said Toni, "he didn't. No one was there for awhile. Artie got a call on the phone booth in back. I gave him the message, and he took it. Gee!" she went on, "I hadn't thought . . . he came back, saying the call was a phony. But I suppose he could have done it. He's not the nicest customer in the world when he gets boiling about something."

"Yeah," said Paul. "I'm aware of that. And so long, Toni. I've got some business to attend to. I'll drop around tomorrow early."

"You'll drop around tomorrow for lunch," she said, slipping a bit of paper into his hand. "That's where I live and my phone number. I'll expect you at one o'clock, so be there on time."

"Yes, teacher," said Paul. He grinned, turned to walk away.

"Hey!" she cried. "Can't I kiss you good night, Paul?"

He turned back, considered the proposition, stooped and turned his face.

"On the cheek," he said, pointing to it. "Once over lightly."

He looked around for Tom Morris when he got outside. The club owner was nowhere to be seen, so he hopped into a cab and gave the driver Artie Aleno's address. He hoped the gambler hadn't moved from his huge apartment on the West Side. If he had, he might be hard to find.

Away from Toni, he found himself upset and thoroughly unhappy. He couldn't help but wonder about Stan. Fallon's suggestion that the band leader might have sold him down the river to the gambler didn't make sense on the face of

it. Stan hadn't been that sort of a lad. But if the leader hadn't been mixed up in something, why had he been shot? People just didn't go around getting killed if their hands were clean.

No, Aleno was the man he had to see. If he or one of his men had shot Stan—well, that would have to be settled. And there was the little matter of just who did own the Garnet. Paul had been figuring on it as a productive nest egg that would be waiting for him when the war was over. It was a solid entertainment property.

Aleno, wearing a heavy watered-silk dressing gown over his dinner trousers, answered the bell himself. He peered at Paul suspiciously and looked far from pleased at the prospect of a visit just then.

"Yes?" he said. "Is there something you wished to see me about, Britton? You had better come back in the morning. I have company." His speech, as always, was careful to an utterly ridiculous extreme.

Paul used his greater bulk to push himself inside the apartment door.

"I'm afraid it won't wait," said Paul. "You and I have a lot to straighten out."

The gambler's eyes were light with anger.

"Suppose you tell me," said Aleno moving over toward a card table with a drawer in it. "After you finish, you can get out of here."

"I want to know just one thing," said Paul. He had a sudden and irrelevant feeling that he was looking at a bad imitation of George Raft, then realized that this man was dangerous as a snake. "Was Stan Johnson playing ball with you in your purchase of the Garnet?"

"And," said Aleno, his eyes narrowing still further—if such a thing were possible—"what if Johnson was? See here, Britton. I've always liked you. This is a murder rap. Why don't you keep your

nose clean?"

"For one thing," said Paul, "Stan Johnson was a friend as far as I know. And I've got interests that make me want to prove it. I've got fifteen grand in hard cash I paid Tom Morris for the Garnet."

Aleno stared at him, poker-faced. His hand moved toward the table drawer. At that moment, Jerri Lane, still wearing the strapless evening gown and looking like a Hurrell photograph of herself, appeared in the doorway behind him, saw the tableau and pouted prettily.

WITH typical egotism, she misread the situation entirely, evidently decided that the men were arguing over her. Paul, to whom she was no longer a mystery, saw her visibly preen herself, like a peahen watching a couple of gorgeous peacocks battle for her affections.

"Paul!" she said. "*Really!* You shouldn't have followed me here. Artie and I were just having a couple of drinks. He was nice enough to ask me here to make things easier after what happened at the club."

"Sure," said Paul. He glanced at the silver-mounted photograph of Jerri—a Jerri with lips parted and shoulders bare—that stood on the hall table. "I understand. It was nice of Artie, wasn't it?"

"Artie is a gentleman," said the girl. She pouted again, extended a hand to each of them. "You, Paul, my dear old friend, and you, Artie, my new one, must both come in and have a drink together."

Paul thought, as he followed her reluctantly into an overstuffed living room with a small bar in the corner, of the corny song "Friendship." This was one for the book. He glanced at the gambler, was somewhat startled to see Aleno was blushing under his olive skin.

Jerri chatted gaily into a conversational vacuum as she set about mixing drinks for

them. Paul was silent as he vainly dug for some ruse which would make the gambler talk. Aleno, slumped down on the sofa, was obviously embarrassed, angry and unhappy. For a veteran Broadway gambler, he seemed to lack *savoir faire* in large quantities.

He and Paul downed their drinks quickly. As he set his glass down on the table, Aleno stared hard at Paul.

"Fifteen grand!" he said. "So it was you—"

"Stan was fronting for me," said Paul quietly. "I had to have someone on the spot. I've got receipts and stuff to prove it."

"No wonder the cops wanted you," said Aleno. "How come you got out?"

"Toni Evans, the check girl, went to bat for me," said Paul.

Aleno digested this fact in silence for a moment.

"Who sent her? Tom Morris?" he asked.

Jerri resenting the fact that she was no longer the center of attention, tried to interrupt, but Aleno silenced her with a look that made her go white under her lipstick.

"I hadn't thought of that," said Paul. He wondered if Toni's alibi had just been a favor for the boss. Rather to his surprise, he found that he felt pretty strongly about it. The kid had seemed genuinely fond of him, but she was just a cigarette girl. They came a dime a dozen along the Main Stem. "I don't know," he concluded.

"If she did it without orders, she's in trouble," said Aleno somberly. He glanced again at Jerri, got up and began to pace the floor.

Paul suddenly found that he had to find out about Toni. He got up, said good night in a hurry and left the apartment.

It was in the elevator that he realized something was haywire. The story Toni

had told couldn't very well have been a phony—which was what Aleno had hinted.

She had described, item by item, everything that he had actually done! This was a horse of a different feather.

He left the elevator, found a pay-telephone booth in a corner of the apartment-house lobby and gave her number a ring.

"Paul!" she cried with something like a sob in her voice. "Are you all right, honey? Just hold on. I'll be there in ten minutes."

What the heck!" he said. "Are you crazy or am I? I'm fine. What makes you think I'm not? I'm in the lobby of Artie Aleno's place."

"But Paul," she said. "I just got a call from somebody who said you'd been beaten up badly and taken to St. Augusta's for treatment."

"How long ago did you get it?" he snapped.

"Let me see," she said. "I'm almost dressed. It must have been five minutes or so ago. Does it matter?"

"I'll say it does, darling," he told her grimly. "Now listen carefully, because this is important. You said Artie Aleno got a phone call while I was playing tonight. Can you tell me how long he was back there by the dressing rooms taking it? Think carefully."

"Let's see," she said thoughtfully. "I gave him the message. Then someone called for cigarettes near the stand. I sold a pack of Luckies and made change. Then, when I turned around, Aleno was coming out—and he looked sore. Then you split your lip."

"Okay, honey," he said. He saw the elevator doors open and Jerri and Aleno come out and cross the lobby to the street door. "I want you to stay in your room until I put a V for victory ring on your

bell. Have you got that? Stay put till I show up in person."

"Yes, Paul," she said as he hung up.

He dashed after the couple and arrived at the door just in time to see the gambler put Jerri into a cab. Then Aleno called the next cab and started to get in. Paul stepped across the sidewalk and jumped in beside him. The gambler glared at him.

"What's the idea?" he snapped. "Get out of here, Britton."

"Not just now," said Paul. He leaned forward and gave the driver the address of a corner of the block where Toni Evans lived. "By the way, Artie," he said, "I don't suppose you just got a phone call."

"What business is it of yours?" Aleno asked. But there was admission as well as puzzlement in his eyes. "Where are we going?"

"You," said Paul, "are out to commit another murder, aren't you?"

"I'm not out for love," said Aleno bitterly. Then, "What do you mean, another murder?" His eyes narrowed as Paul patted his companion's chest, felt the bulk of the heavy pistol holstered there.

"We're going to clear things up," said Paul, smiling. "I've got a friend's death to settle, and you've got to keep the seat of your pants out of the electric chair. Okay, driver, pull in here."

THEY were just short of the corner. Paul got out of the cab and motioned the gambler to follow. Peering around the corner, the Army officer saw that, except for a single taxicab midway in the block, the sidewalks and street that separated the two rows of brownstone houses were deserted. He moved cautiously toward the vehicle.

When he reached its rear mudguard, he peered through the window. There was no one in it but the driver, who was huddled over the wheel. Paul smiled faintly. This

was as it should be. He stepped silently up alongside the man, tapped him on the shoulder.

“Sorry, I’m taken,” the man said, turning around so that Paul could see his face. As the driver recognized Paul, his eyes popped and his mouth fell open. A savage right to that slack chin closed the mouth with a brain-jarring snap that caused the eyes to glaze.

Two more wallops set the driver sprawling over the wheel. Then Paul reached in and drew a silenced automatic from the killer’s lap.

“See what I mean, Artie?” said Paul. “Dollars to doughnuts, you got a call to come here. And double the odds, Fallon and his boys got the same tip and will be on their way any minute now.”

“No takers,” said the gambler, permitting himself the luxury of a smile as the wail of police sirens split the still night air. A moment later, the cohorts in blue had the situation well in hand.

“It was like this,” said Paul to the detective. “I was buying into the Garnet through Stan Johnson, to have something under me when the war is over. Tom Morris was taking the dough and either blowing it on Jerri Lane or the nags at Belmont and Jamaica.

“But he took a licking anyway, and got into Artie here for a lot more. So he sold him chunks of the club, too, to cover his losses. Isn’t that about right, Artie?” He paused, while the gambler nodded.

“Somehow,” Paul went on, “Stan found out about the mess and sent me an S. O. S. He’d have had to find out eventually. He was no dope. That was

when Tom went berserk. He probably figured all along he could make a killing and square things, but he knew that once he was caught he’d be in trouble with Stan and me, or with Artie, or with all of us.

“He couldn’t face jail, or worse. So he knocked off Stan after arranging a frame for Artie as a likely suspect. I blundered into that by bull bad luck. They couldn’t have planned my split lip. Then Toni Evans blew it up with her testimony, and he had to go after Artie again—and it seemed like a good idea to eliminate the Evans girl at the same time. But I called her and spoiled it for him.”

And that, except for minor matters, was the way it stood. When the police were finally satisfied, Artie and Paul shook hands.

“You’re okay, kid,” said the gambler. “It begins to look as if we own a night club together. How about it? Do you want to play it as partners?”

“I guess we’re stuck with each other,” said Paul grinning.

“You’ll need some sort of representative here, just in case there are things to be signed in a hurry and you get sent overseas.”

“You know,” said Paul, “I was thinking the same thing. Someone I can trust.” He glanced up at Toni’s apartment house.

“And,” he went on, “I mean a legal representative. So long, Artie. See you tonight.”

With a wave of his hand, he went up the front steps of the brownstone, three at a time.