

The Girl Who Knew Too Much

Randolph Barr

NOT TOO SURPRISINGLY, the author of this rather formulaic story is unknown, as Randolph Barr was a house name, used by many of the hacks willing to work for one of the *Spicy* publications. Published by Culture House (perhaps named ironically), the minor empire included *Spicy Detective*, which was issued from April 1934 to December 1942; *Spicy Adventure* (July 1934-December 1942); *Spicy Mystery* (July 1934-December 1942); *Spicy Western* (November 1936-December 1942); and *Spicy Movie Tales* (one issue only in October 1935). Because of the racy covers and interior illustrations, plus the content of the stories, public pressure caused the publisher, now Trojan Publishing Co., to change titles to *Speed Detective*, *Speed Mystery*, etc., and reduce the provocative nature of its contents. But don't get your expectations too high. What was racy, spicy, snappy, and saucy in the 1930s will seem rather tepid today. "The Girl Who Knew Too Much" is one of the better stories to be found behind the garish covers of the *Spicy* books, which does not make it Shakespeare, or Chandler, either, since the magazine paid much less than its contemporaries. While *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* were paying two cents a word, and lesser periodicals half that, *Spicy* paid only a half cent a word-the bottom of the barrel for writers struggling to pay the rent. As is true of most of the stories in *Spicy*, we meet our heroine with her dress ripped down to her waist. This is what passed for titillation in April 1941, when "The Girl Who Knew Too Much" was first published.

The Girl Who Knew Too Much

Randolph Barr



He shoved the girl back and brought up his gun

THERE WASN'T ANY particular reason for my being way down on the East Side. It was a warm Spring night, and I was taking a walk, not paying much attention where my feet strayed. It was nearly two o'clock when I looked at my watch, wondering if I shouldn't be turning back and thinking again about going to bed.

I looked around. Deep in thought, I'd wandered all the way to Second Avenue and Second Street. That part of town was, curiously, almost deserted.

Then from up a side alley I heard the clicking heels of a running girl. I turned. She came like a miracle of beauty out of that dingy cul-de-sac of warehouses and manufacturing lofts. Her skirt was bunched in her hand above her knees to facilitate her speed, and white flesh gleamed in the dim light.

I stood stock still, just around the corner of the building where she'd come out on the avenue. Her black dress had been ripped to her waist, and the remnants of a pink silk slip barely held together at one shoulder.

She reached the mouth of the alley and I stepped suddenly in front of her, blocking her way. I studied her in the winking lights of the Little Albania, Louis Russo's third-rate night club. I said, "What's the hurry? Something scare you?"

Her breasts were heaving from her running, and she fairly panted when she spoke. "Let me alone! Look out! For God's sake!" She darted suddenly to the side and tried to compress herself into a doorway.

I didn't know what it was all about, but she hadn't been fooling when she spoke. I

squeezed in beside her and followed suit in trying to keep out of sight.

Then there were other footsteps coming up the unlighted alley. This time they were made by a man, a man who was trying to move soundlessly.

I chanced a look.

There was a black shape creeping around the corner of the building to the street. It hugged the wall.

Out of the alley came a flash of orange flame. There was the report of a gun that was like a sharp cough, and the crouching figure tumbled in a heap, legs in the alley, head and outflung arms on the sidewalk of the avenue.

The girl and I remained flattened in the doorway—even when unseen hands caught the ankles of the fallen man, and we heard the gruesome sound of his body being dragged over the rough cobblestones back into the darkness.

My forehead had an uncomfortable clammy feeling as I peered out again and saw the little pool of blood and the man's hat near the curbstone. As a newspaper man, I'd seen my share of violent death, but this was giving me the jitters.

The street itself had become morgue-quiet. The only sound was the faint sobbing of violin strings, the occasional pulse of a drum, and the wail of a saxophone from the Little Albania's shuttered windows.

The girl came to life. She said, "You'd better scram fast, mister!" She caught up her skirt again and started to run north up Second Avenue, sticking closely to the shadows. Automatically I followed.

A couple of blocks up, she halted in a vestibule and confronted me. "Will you keep out of this? Haven't you seen enough? Do you want to be laid out on a slab beside that other man back in the alley?"

I caught her arm. "I'm a newspaperman, sister. Give!"

Her eyes widened. "You'd better not print anything you've seen tonight! Russo's mob doesn't like reporters. Anyway, I'm in a hurry!"

"That's okay with me," I told her. "I've got a lot of time. And I'm sticking with you."

She smiled wanly. It looked as if she were going to lose the slip when she shrugged, but she caught it and pulled the tatters of her clothes together. "If I can't shake you, let's go. The farther we get away from here, the better!"

At the next corner I whistled for a cab. I asked, "Where do you live?"

"Not far away. But I'm not going home tonight! It might not be healthy."

She shivered against me as I helped her into the cab. I slid an arm around her, and she didn't object. Speculatively, I gave the driver the address of my own Grove Street apartment.

She didn't demur, even when we pulled up at my place and I asked her in for a drink.

The first sip of her highball went far in helping her to relax. We sat side by side on my divan, and she smiled when I put an arm around her shoulders. "Feel like loosening up?" I asked her.

She misunderstood me and snuggled closer, but I didn't mind. I kissed her warm, moist, inviting mouth. But a minute later I laughed. I said, "I really meant do you feel like telling me what it's all about?"

She reddened prettily. "You mean about Dick Tobin's shooting. He wasn't really a bad guy—" She stared straight ahead as if deciding how much to tell me. "Both Dick and the big fellow—"

"You mean Russo?"

"Yes. They both wanted me. The mob considered me Dick's girl. Louis intended to bump Dick anyway. I'm not sure just why he had it in for Dick, but he used me as an excuse to get rid of him."

I pointed to the silk dress which hung in jagged strips. Through the tatters her flesh was pink and smooth and warm-looking.

She colored again, and tried to cover herself better. "Russo did that. He had me in his office, and was getting rough. I managed to fight him off, and slipped out the back way. He sent Dick Tobin after me—"

I nodded. "And then he himself came out—"

"Yes. And I'm scared! I know he wants me now, but he'll kill me when he tires of me! I know too much about his mob."

She seemed as pitiful as she was lovely, sitting there in my living room. I looked into her great dark eyes, and wondered what I could do for her. I said, "You've got a hell of a good story, but it would be dynamite to handle. At least, without a lot of substantiation." She was cuddled against me so that I could feel the vibrancy of her slender, exquisite form. I hugged her against me so tightly that her breasts flattened on my chest, but she strained even harder...

Breathless, she pushed away. She said, "Now that you've got me here, what are you going to do with me? I don't dare go home."

"What about a hotel?"

"At this time in the morning? And looking like this?" She indicated her ruined dress.

I said, "Well—?"

"You haven't even thought of inviting me to stay here?"

I grinned. "It's okay with me. It ought to be safe enough."

She caught my arm when I picked up the telephone. "What are you going to do?"

"My job, baby." I brushed her arm off and dialed the *Courier*. I talked to the desk briefly, then turned back to the girl. "That's that," I said. "Tomorrow the paper will carry a short paragraph saying that a gangster named Dick Tobin was killed near the Little Albania. By the way, you haven't told me your name."

"Polly Knight. And where can I sleep?"

I pointed to the bed. "Such as it is, it's all yours. I'll see if I can find you a pair of pajamas."

When I turned back from the bureau, she was seated on the edge of the bed, peeling off her stockings. The picture was tempting, but I forced myself to think of my job. I should be reporting at the office. I picked up my topcoat.

"Where are you going?" Polly asked, her eyes showing panic again. I told her, and she caught at my arm. "No! No! You can't leave me! You've already called in. If there was anything important for you, they would have told you!"

I studied her. And her terror wasn't faked.

She said, "I didn't like the way that taxi-driver stared at me. He might be one of Russo's men. Please don't go!"

I hung up my coat. While she watched me, I got my automatic from my desk and put it in a hip pocket. I saw that the key in the lock was turned so that it wouldn't easily fall out. For extra precaution I wedged a chair under the knob. I said, "That ought to cover everything."

Much calmer, Polly slipped out of her torn dress. While she got into the pajama jacket, I fought to keep from sweeping her into my arms. All that saved her, I think, was her atmosphere of utter helplessness.

She said, "You're being awfully decent. And me, I'm just a gangster's girl! Funny, isn't it?"

I took off my coat and vest and shoes and sprawled in the morris-chair. When I looked at Polly again, she was under the covers.

Her voice was a gentle murmur. "I feel like a heel—chasing you out of your bed."

I knew how I felt, but I didn't tell her. I said, "Don't worry. In case we should have visitors—" I switched off the lights, and tried to make myself comfortable.

It seemed like a long while, but couldn't have been more than half an hour, when I heard the shuffling footsteps outside down the corridor. I was wide awake in an instant. I got silently to my feet. I tiptoed to the bed.

A small soft hand caught mine. Polly was sitting up in bed, trembling.

The steps came nearer. I took out my automatic, and stared through the gloom toward the door. But the footsteps shuffled past and grew fainter.

Relieved, I stuck the gun back in my pocket.

"It was a drunk, trying to find his room," I whispered. I patted Polly's shoulder.

"Stay here beside me for a little while," she pleaded. "When I can't see you or touch you, I get the willies."

Tired and sleepy, I leaned back...

It seemed like ten seconds, but it was daylight when I opened my eyes. Dressed in my over-size pajamas, Polly was seated in the morris-chair, examining her ruined dress. She smiled ruefully. "I don't suppose you'd have a needle and thread?"

I wouldn't and I told her so. I had a better idea. "Tell me where you live, give me your key, and I'll get you something to wear. None of Russo's crowd knows me."

She assented. "Before you go," she said, "I'd like to tell you that, in spite of what they all said, I never really was Dick Tobin's sweetheart. None of Russo's crowd ever actually touched me."

She was a little wistful, and I don't think she really expected me to believe her. Curiously, I did, and my heart was strangely light as I fitted her key into her door.

The apartment was nicely furnished, done with restraint and in good taste—not at all the sort of place you would have expected a gang girl to have.

I headed for a closet, had a sudden apprehension of danger, turned, and caught the full weight of whatever it was that hit me squarely on the head...

Coming back to consciousness was an agonizing experience. My head had bells in it, and was all but cleft in two, anyway. Then I discovered that my hands were tied behind me and that my ankles were roped together. I was in Polly's apartment. Louis Russo sat in a chair across from me.

He leered at me. "So you tried to butt in!" he sneered. "I was waiting for Polly. If I keep on waiting, she should be along anyway. I'm in no hurry." He blew smoke in my face.

I recognized the truth of what he said, but there was nothing I could do about it.

He grinned. "I'll take care of you later," he said. "When I get through with Polly, I'm not going to leave you where you can talk about it."

There were icicles in my blood.

Russo must have heard the step outside before I did, for he jumped up suddenly, caught me by the collar, and literally dragged me across the floor to the bathroom. He left the door open a crack—probably due to his haste—and I could see into the other room without being easily seen.

The knob of the door to the corridor turned, and the door opened. It was Polly Knight. Her mouth made an explosive gasp as Russo suddenly appeared from behind the door. He jammed the muzzle of a gun into her side.

Without a word he reached out, caught her torn dress at the neckline and ripped it all the way down. Then he stood off and surveyed her. He said, "Get into another rig! That thing might attract too much attention where I'm going to take you."

While she, helplessly, took another dress from a hook and slipped it over her shoulders, he said, "I thought you'd be along when your boyfriend didn't come back to you." All the

time, his eyes were licking at her alluring loveliness.

When she had dressed, he flung the door to the bathroom wide. I glared at him and tried to flash some sort of encouragement to Polly. I'm afraid that, bound up as I was, I couldn't have helped much.

Louis Russo grinned unpleasantly. "We'll have to leave this one. If we took him in the car, it might attract too much attention. We'll send some one to take care of him soon." He turned to the girl. "You walk ahead of me. And don't forget the gun in my pocket!"

When they had gone, I continued my struggle against my bonds. The only result was to make them bite more deeply and painfully into my flesh. Nevertheless, realizing that Russo's men might arrive at any moment, I didn't relax my efforts.

My eye lingered on the glass shelf over the wash bowl. One end had been splintered and looked as if it might provide a cutting edge.

Sweating, I edged across the floor, nudged a stool along with me. After half a dozen tries I got onto the stool and worked my wrists up to the jagged edge of the shelf.

My wrists were lacerated and bloody before my hands were free. It was a matter of seconds then to release my ankles.

My muscles still felt cramped and my head was dizzy when I reached the street. A long black sedan was edging in to the curb. Certain that the car was driven by Russo's men, I kept my head down and hurried my steps to the drugstore on the corner.

I stumbled into a phone booth and dialed police headquarters. My pal, Inspector Daly, wouldn't be in for a couple of hours. I

cursed. But, knowing pretty well what my answer would be, I talked to his relief, Lieutenant Finger. He said, "*What?* You want us to raid the Little Albania! And the only reason you can give us is your word that a girl is being held prisoner!"

"Listen, newshound! Louis Russo's too smart to be playing with that kind of stuff. Before we tangle with him, we're going to need a little more to go on. Besides, the police department wasn't established to build up the circulation of your lousy paper. Better lay off the pipe, and tell your boss the same thing!" He hung up.

It had been about what I'd expected, but that didn't make me feel any better. Whatever I did, I'd have to do alone—and in a hurry.

I flagged a taxi and gave an address a block away from the Little Albania. The alley that led to the back entrance was deserted. I edged down it and found that the door was locked. There was an open window on the third floor.

The alley was only a few feet wide and the open window gave me an idea. Across from Russo's place was an abandoned warehouse, most of its windows shattered.

I slid into the warehouse and picked my way up stairs jammed with refuse. On the third floor I found a long plank lying among dust-covered heaps of rusty, outmoded machinery. I dragged the plank to the window and eased it across the alley. It reached the sill on the other side with a foot to spare.

Cautiously, giddy with fear, I worked my weight out on the sagging plank. I had reached the other side when the thing canted sideways. I caught at the open sash as the far end of the plank slipped clear, slapped at me, and crashed thirty feet down to the cobbled court. Weak as water, I half fell over the window sill.

The room I was in was evidently a storeroom. Cases of all sizes, crates, and boxes crowded all but an aisle to a door. I opened it noiselessly and looked into a private banquet room. A thug-like porter was mopping the floor.

I kept back behind the door until he had worked around to where I waited. Then I leaped. Both my hands got him around the throat. He was gasping for breath when I released him a second and swung my Sunday punch to the point of his jaw. He went limp.

I devoted precious minutes to knotting a twisted table-cloth about his wrists and ankles, and gagging him with a napkin. By the time I'd dragged him under a table, I was sure that he wouldn't be able to bother me for a while.

There was the sound of voices from a door that I took to be Russo's office. I tried the knob silently and found the door locked. Now I could make out the words. It was Russo speaking. "You can yell your head off, sweetheart. Nobody will hear you. Up here we are very safe."

I tiptoed toward the front of the place, entered a cloakroom, and followed it through to a door on the other side. I came out on the landing of a stair-case. And, as luck would have it, there was another entrance to Russo's office! Prayerfully I tried the knob. Thank God, Russo hadn't thought it necessary to lock this door!

I had it open a fraction of an inch when I froze. Voices came from the banquet room. Hands rattled the door I had found bolted. "You there, boss? We went to the dame's apartment, and the guy wasn't there."

"He wasn't there?" It was Russo's unbelieving bellow. "I will be with you in ten minutes. You mugs wait downstairs until I call you."

Feet shuffled away.

And I made my move. I opened the door wide.

Louis Russo was bending Polly back over a table. The dress she had changed to was now more tattered than the one in which I had first seen her. The gangster ran his tongue over thick lips—

He hadn't even looked around when I started my charge. But the man was quick. Before I was half way across the floor, he'd whirled and snatched for his shoulder holster. The flame of the gun seared my shoulder as I tackled him. My hand clamped down on his wrist.

For a little while it was touch and go. I threw my weight into bending his arm back in an attempt to get the gun. Russo was plenty husky. The gun exploded again and its lead ploughed a furrow in my ankle.

I redoubled my pressure and heard the crack of a bone. The gun dropped. Russo writhed like an eel. His teeth closed in one of my wrists as he lunged for the gun with his good arm. I kicked it out of his reach, wrenched free, and leaped for it myself.

Coming up with the gun, I found that Russo had been as quick as I. He held Polly in front of him as a shield. "Shoot if you dare!" he gritted. Then, "Tony! Joe! Smash the door down! Come in!"

The door shook as powerful bodies lunged against it. I fired twice as the lock gave way, then snapped the trigger and heard the hammer click on an empty cylinder.

Two guns bored into my kidneys. I was backed against the wall and held in impotence.

Once again my hands and wrists were tied expertly.

Russo grinned. "Now leave him here, and you boys go outside until I call you."

Leering like a madman, Russo waited until his men had left. Then once more he turned to Polly who cringed away from him. His brutal hand reached out and snatched even more of her few remaining garments from her.

A red film of hate and rage blinded me. Bound as I was, I tried to dive for the man. He turned from the girl and began methodically to beat me with his revolver. Blood poured from my lacerated scalp, from my torn face, but still he raised the gun and brought it down. At any moment he could have knocked me out, but that was not his intention. In cold blood he hacked and cut, and I could do nothing but take it.

Eventually he tired of his sport. He slipped a cartridge into the gun. "You've been asking for it," he said. "You're going to get it!"

I could actually see his finger grow white as it tightened on the trigger.

At that instant Polly Knight came out of her semi-conscious state. Half-naked, she hurled herself in front of Russo. "Stop! Don't kill him!" she begged.

Russo shoved her away, slapped her face brutally. He brought up the gun again toward me...

A fusillade of shots hammered in from the banquet room. One of Russo's men lurched over the threshold and fell, blood gushing from his throat.

Russo fired once toward the door, then squealed and pitched to the floor under a hail of lead.

The film cleared from my eyes and I saw Inspector Daly come into the room followed by two men in uniform. Polly Knight, ignoring her state of nudity, knelt beside me, loosening the knots that held me.

Daly grinned at me. "That fathead Finger, my relief, told me about your call. Technically, he may have been within his rights, but I thought I'd better look into the matter!" He smiled down at Polly. "I'll take the boys and wait outside until the young lady has had a chance to cover herself up a little."

I gave her my coat and sat patiently while she wiped blood from my face. "Was it worth it—all for a gangster's girl?" she whispered.

I put an arm around her, not caring how much the effort hurt. "I don't care what kind of girl you are," I told her. "It was worth it!"

There was a devil dancing in her eyes. "As a matter of fact, I'm not a gangster's girl. And my name isn't Polly Knight. Don't you remember 'God's Good to the Irish'?"

I stared at her in amazement. "You're Polly Day!" I gasped. "You played the lead in the show!"

She nodded. "But the show folded. I was broke and I got a job for a private detective agency. I was sent down here because there were indications that Russo's mob was behind a series of hold-ups. I went to work in the Little Albania as a hostess. I was trying to get something on the gang—"

I stopped her explanations with a kiss. "That'll be enough for now," I said. "You can give me installment two of your story when we get back to my apartment."