

Slaughter—With a Smile

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The pert car-hops at Do-Drive-Inn gave service with a smile. But K. C. Jones, Hollywood trouble-shooter, knew that one of those cuties passed out slugs with the soda pop.

AT MIDNIGHT when K. C. Jones, Hollywood troubleshooter, tooled his big canary-colored roadster into the DO-DRIVE-INN, it was jammed. Jones was forced to wedge into a space between two empty cars and the acres of woods that ran around one side of the place.

He cut the motor and one of the shapely car-hops weaving around the parked cars, neatly balancing trays of food, came toward him.

She was tall and trim. A saucy military cap perched jauntily on her platinum curls. A gold-braided vestee snugged jealousy to her curves and red satin tights gave extra glamour to her already perfect legs as she came up to the car.

"Yes, *sir*," she said. "What can I do for you?"

Jones didn't tell her. He looked at the dimples in her elbows and said with a sigh: "I'm sorry, sweet, but I want Donna Marlo to take my order."

The doll straightened up. The smile stiffened but stayed. "Yes, *sir*," she told him, and turned away. "I'll go get her. Maybe some other time I can have the pleasure."

She smiled and winked and walked away. She had a swing and sway that made Jones realize why they had picked that particular type of uniform.

A sound from the darkness of the thickets on the other side of the car made Jones reluctantly turn his gaze that way. Out of the bushes a shadowy figure darted toward the car. A head popped up above the door across from the driver's seat. It would have been a lovely head if the long, ebon black hair hadn't been so tangled and disheveled. If the face hadn't been drawn and drained of all color, with the eyes haunted black pools of fear, and the full lips sucked between taut teeth.

"Donna! Donna Marlo!" K. C. Jones

gasped. "What the hell is it, honey?"

He slid across and eased open the door. He saw Donna Marlo crouching there, her whole body trembling, a tiny, pearl-handled automatic dangling limply from her pallid fingers.

Helping her into the car, Jones saw that her cute little semi-military uniform was twisted and torn in several places. An angry red scratch glowed on one of Donna's smooth white arms and a splotchy blue bruise smudged her cheek bone.

He plucked the automatic from her nervous, twisting white fingers.

"Get out of here!" she told him. She had trouble getting the words past the lump in her throat. "Take me away from here, K. C.! Hurry! Hurry!"

"Maybe that's not the right thing," he said. "Give me a quick line on it, kid. If you're right we scram. If not—"

She twisted and came over into his arms and smashed her face against the shoulder of his checkered sport coat. The strain of her sobbing almost shook the car.

"I—I can't!" she choked. "I can't talk, I can't think, until you get me away from here."

He turned away and while she buried her face in her slim, pale hands he gunned the motor alive, slammed into reverse on a half turn, shot the long yellow car around and onto the highway.

WHILE she fought for control Jones drove and talked to her in a soft, steadying voice: "Get a grip, Donna. Your brother, Tom, wrote that you'd come out here looking for a movie job and asked me to keep a brotherly eye on you. I gave my word I would. Tom Marlo saved my life when we were kids, Donna. Whatever it is, I'm with you. I know my way around. I'm a studio dick and I know the cops. Whatever it—"

She lifted her head then. "But this—this is murder!" she cut in. Her voice broke, hoarsely. "It's my boss, Joel Krasner, the manager of the DO-DRIVE-INN! K. C., what am I going to *do*?"

He concentrated on getting around a trailer truck on a curve at sixty before he answered. "Why did you kill him, Donna? Give me the whole thing and then we can figure."

"I didn't kill him. I didn't!" She repeated it over and over.

She pulled a paper napkin from her pocket and blew her nose. Then with one hand gripping the top of the door and the other one balled in her lap she started to talk fast.

"All the girls hated Krasner," she said. "He was always after them. For the past month he'd been concentrating on me. I tried to be tactful, but you can't with Krasner. Finally I slapped him and told him off. He gave me my notice. Tonight was my last night."

"Why didn't you tell me, honey? I'd've pulled you out of the joint, got you another job. You don't have to put up with—"

"I was afraid you'd kill him, K. C., or think maybe I'd led him on or something. . . . Anyhow, tonight Vilma Manners—she's in charge of all the girls—told me Krasner wanted to see me right away. As soon as I got into his private office upstairs he tried to kiss me. He didn't say a word. He just—K. C., he was like a wild man. I couldn't talk to him. I couldn't do anything. I fought and scratched and kicked and then—and then there was a shot. He sort of went all loose. I stepped away and he fell to the floor."

Donna stopped and pushed both hands up into her hair at the temples and took in a deep sobbing breath.

"I don't know how long I stood there before I looked up toward the window. It

was open. There was a table next to it and that—that gun was lying on it. Smoke was still coming out of the barrel. I finally ran to the window and looked out on the roof that runs all around the building like a narrow porch. It was very dark there in the back with nothing but the woods. I—I didn't see a sign of anyone."

"While you were fighting with Krasner someone out on the roof shot through the window at him, then dumped the gun in on the table and scrambled," Jones summed it up. His eyes squinched into a frown.

She continued, so low it was almost a whisper: "I went over and picked up the gun. I went out of the office and locked the door and ran down the back stairs and out and through the woods, hoping you'd be parked where I could signal to you. I tossed the key away in the woods."

"Don't tell me any more for a few minutes," Jones said. "I want to think."

Donna had had trouble with Krasner, the boss of the place. Probably all the other girls knew about it since they'd been through the same thing. But Donna had told him off. He had fired her. On her last night she had gone to his office, was in there alone with him. They had fought and struggled. Krasner was killed with a little lady's automatic. Showing plenty of signs of wear and tear Donna had run away. She had skipped out on a murder. It was the tightest frame K. C. Jones had ever run into. People had been hung on less evidence. The girl was in a spot.

He said: "You gave me that straight, Donna? It doesn't make any difference to me, personally, but I've got to have it right before I can figure how to help you."

"That's what happened, K. C.," she answered. "I'd tell you. I—I didn't kill him. . . . Why did they do it? Why did I have to be there?"

"We'll see," he said.

He headed into the hills, then, to the

summer place of a star at Acme Productions, Inc., where he worked. The actress was away on location and the place was ideal for a hideout.

There were no neighbors for several miles on either side. He broke in through a cellar window and made Donna comfortable and just before he left he said: "Did anyone see you when you left Krasner's office, Donna?"

"I—I don't think so," she answered hesitantly. "I don't know, K. C. I ran. I didn't look."

WHEN K. C. Jones got back to the DO-DRIVE-INN, Matty Doyle, the big redfaced Irishman in charge of Hollywood Homicide, was telling one of his men to break up the police blockade at the exits and let the customers go home.

Spotting Jones as he pushed through the jam of car-hops and kitchen help into the big main hall of the Inn, Doyle waved a huge red paw at him.

"Go on home, Jones," he hollered. "There ain't no Acme stars mixed up in this."

Jones grinned and kept pushing through the path that opened up before him until a voice screamed: "There he is! That's the man who asked for Donna Marlo!"

The trim, platinum-haired car-hop who had so fascinated Jones before, was stabbing a finger at him. She wasn't any glamour girl now. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. Her cheeks were streaked with mascara. "Yeah," Jones said. "I'm the guy." He had counted on this and was ready. "I was here before looking for Donna and she didn't come right away and I had someplace else to go and couldn't wait. I come back now and find the place in an uproar. What's cookin'?"

Matty Doyle came up close to Jones and thrust his heavy, ruddy face right in

front of the detective's. "Some day, K. C. Jones," he said, tightly, and tugged at the big drooping lobes of his ears, "some day I'm gonna kill you. I should have known you'd be in on this. I got an open and shut case with the Marlo kid a cinch for a jury, and she gets away from me. I can't find her anywhere!"

K. C. Jones permitted a grin to soften the grimness of his lean features. "I'll save you some questions, Matty," he said. "I'm a close friend of Donna Marlo's. Every night after I get through at the studio I come out here to see her. Tonight—you heard me before about tonight."

A man about Jones' height, with well-knit shoulders setting off a midnight blue gabardine suit, pushed toward them. He had an ugly looking horse face and eyebrows plucked into thin lines. Those eyebrows must have been beauts, naturally. All around the remains of them was a half inch ring of stubble blue as a freshly shaved beard. Horse-face said:

"This man probably knows where the girl is, officer." He raised the plucked brows halfway to his hairline. "He probably got her out of here."

Doyle looked happy at this thought. Jones didn't even look at the speaker. He said to Doyle: "I don't like our brainy friend, Matty. If you want any help from me, get him out of here."

Before the homicide man could answer, a Junoesque redhead in a slightly more conservative version of the car-hops' uniform joined the group. She pursed thin orange lips at Jones.

"Mr. Doyle," she said, and nodded her head of geranium colored hair toward the man in the blue gabardine, "Mr. Deeland, there, made an excellent suggestion. Since this—this person was so friendly with the murderess, perhaps—"

"Listen, carrot-top," Jones cut in, "where were you when the murder

happened?”

“Right here, supervising service,” she snapped back. “All the girls will bear witness to that.”

For a second she looked as though she would fly at Jones’ throat in indignant fury. Her long, flame-colored nails clawed in and out, tensely at her sides. But there was something about the whole setup of K. C. Jones that made her change her mind. She took her glance away with a quick, furious toss of her head.

“Who are these people?” Jones asked Doyle.

Again Matty Doyle’s slow brain was caught short. The redhead wheeled on Jones. “I’m Vilma Manners, head of the car-service girls here, and Mr. Krasner—the—the murdered man’s—right hand assistant. . . . The gentleman in the blue suit is Mr. Nils Deeland, a beef salesman who was taking an order from me when—when this all happened.”

“Charmed,” Jones said, without looking at her. “Who discovered the murder everybody’s talking about, Doyle?”

Doyle’s rugged red face took on an important look. He jerked a horny thumb toward the platinum blonde with the red eyes and streaked face. “That blonde car-hop, Ann Gorman,” he boomed. “She asked Red, here, I mean Miss Manners, where Donna Marlo was, that a customer wanted her. Miss Manners then realized that the Marlo dame had been up in Krasner’s office for quite awhile and sent the blonde up to check. She found the door of the office locked. They broke it down and found Krasner dead on the floor.”

JONES stared at the platinum-head and she got very self-conscious and rubbed at her already messed up eyes. “Uh-huh,” he said, and turned toward the door. He waved his hand. “Have a nice time,

Matty.”

Doyle bellowed: “Come back here, Jones! You can’t leave this place. I—I’m holding you.”

“You are?” the studio detective said cheerfully. “What charge, Matty? Because I happen to know the girl you’re trying to pin a murder rap on? Come, come!”

Jones turned away again and went on out, leaving Matty Doyle red and sputtering and wrapping a flabby ear-lobe around one of his fingers.

Outside K. C. Jones grabbed the arm of a little brunette car-hop. He fished a dollar bill from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. He told her: “Sweet, suppose you tell me what Ann Gorman, your silver-haired co-worker, has been bawling about.”

The girl folded the bill carefully. “Ann Gorman has been working here for three years,” she said, tucking the now tiny piece of money into the low neckline of her uniform. “She’s something special to the boss, Krasner. She never talked much, but we all knew. Why was she crying? Maybe she loved the guy. I wouldn’t know. I never been in love.”

“I bet you get along though, honey.” Jones grinned. “Thanks. I’ll see you.”

He left the Inn, climbed into his canary roadster and started in the direction of Donna’s hideout.

About a mile from DO-DRIVE-INN, a pair of headlights got behind the yellow roadster. They weren’t the lights of a police car. They stayed always the same distance behind.

Half way to the dirt road that led to the summer cabin where Donna Marlo was hiding out, Jones was sure he was being tailed.

He stopped the roadster squarely in the middle of a lonely stretch of highway. He grinned, got out and started walking briskly back toward the headlights of the

now motionless car behind.

Suddenly the car went into reverse. Jones sprinted toward it. He took a dozen steps and a flash of orange spat from a side window and a white hot pain seared his shoulder and spun him half around. He clapped his hand over the wound. He took a flying leap into the ditch at the side of the road. When he worked his own gun out the killer's car was swerving backward into a narrow country lane. It jolted to a stop, then sputtered forward and careened off into the dark, back the way it had come. Jones watched the fading tail light for a moment and with one hand squeezing his shoulder walked back to his own car. He reached the hideout ten minutes later.

WHEN he entered the cabin, he put his hand up toward Donna who sat up, startled, pressing a hand to her mouth when she saw the blood on his fingers where they were pressing into his wounded shoulder.

"It's all right," he assured her. "Just creased the flesh. But if I hadn't been running, making a jogging target—"

He told her what had happened while Donna ripped up a bed sheet and got a bottle of iodine from a medicine cabinet.

"They were going to follow me and find you," he concluded, "then notify the police. They wanted this frame complete. We've got 'em worried. . . . In thinking this over, Donna I've sort of got the idea that this frame you're hung in was very ably aided and abetted by that head carhop, Vilma Manners. She sent you up to see Krasner. In other words she's one person who knew you were there. She also sent the blonde up to find out what was keeping you. But she's clean with a pat alibi. And I'm lost until I get the profit angle on Krasner's murder. Somebody has to get something out of it."

Jones questioned Donna about

different people at the Inn. He learned that Krasner and the redhead, Vilma Manners, ran the place between them, with Vilma handling the books and the ordering and most of the business end, and going over things once a month with Krasner. According to Donna, Krasner was single and had no family. There was no angle there. Nils Deeland, the beef salesman, was around a lot, but apparently only because of the large volume of hamburger beef used by the Inn. He had always appeared on the best of terms with Krasner. That was about all Donna could help him.

After she had dressed his wound, Jones curled up on a couch while Donna retired in the bedroom. He went to sleep on the thing. The first thing in the morning he hit for town. Morning papers gave the affair at the Inn quite a play. A picture of Donna bore the caption: "Where is this girl?" She was the only suspect and the police had built up quite a case of circumstantial evidence.

At the end of the article a paragraph said that Nicholas Kappos, the owner of the DO-DRIVE-INN, had gone to the place right after the murder, to take charge and go over the books. He had found that during the past three weeks each day's entries had been juggled and that apparently Joel Krasner, previous to his murder, had clipped Kappos for a little over \$30,000.

K. C. Jones smoked a whole cigaret over that without moving from the spot.

He called Monte Pressen, president of Acme Productions, a few minutes later, changed his voice and as Mr. K. C. Jones' landlord, explained: "Mr. Jones will not be able to report to work today because of an injured shoulder."

Then he visited seven pawn-shops before he found an uncle that recognized the little pearl handled automatic he had

taken from Donna the night before.

"Of course," the thin-faced shylock told him. "It was purchased by a young lady."

Jones flashed his badge, being careful not to let it be examined too closely and got to look at the register of the purchase, which was made for police records. It showed that the gun had been bought by Miss Donna Marlo, for protection. Miss Marlo had told the shop-keeper that there had been several burglaries in her neighborhood.

"What did Miss Marlo look like?" Jones asked.

The pawn-broker shrugged bony shoulders. "I can give only a vague description. She was a striking woman, tall, well built, well dressed. I believe she wore a veil."

"Did she have red hair?"

"That I couldn't tell you." Uncle shrugged again. "But I doubt it or I would have remembered."

On the phone, posing as Mathew Doyle of homicide, K. C. Jones called all the banks in the city, and at the last one learned that Joel Krasner and Vilma Manners both had accounts there. Krasner had a balance of less than \$500. If he had been making inroads on the profits from the DO-DRIVE-INN, he had not deposited them in the bank.

Vilma's balance was \$325. She had made no deposits within the last month, but that morning had closed out her account.

Then Jones checked with all the investment houses. He found no record of Krasner playing the market. If the restaurant manager was a horse plunger Jones would have heard about him. It began to look very much like Krasner had not taken the money himself.

IT CAME thick and fast after that. Jones went out to the DO-DRIVE-INN and was told that Vilma Manners had resigned that morning. Mr. Kappos was running things all by his lonesome.

K. C. Jones was now quite interested in the affairs of Vilma Manners. He was almost positive that she had been the one who had bought the murder gun in Donna's name. Even though she had been careful to bundle her flaming hair all up under her hat so it would not be remembered. Jones set out for town once more and the railroad depot.

He was a little disappointed to find that Vilma had not made reservations on any trains. Inquiries at all the steamship travel agencies got him nowhere, either.

But out at the airport he spotted a figure at the ticket window in a blue gabardine suit. This figure had a horse face and plucked eyebrows and had bought two tickets for a plane trip to New York City.

Jones tailed Nils Deeland, the beef salesman, to his home. It was a small summer cottage out near Beverly Hills. Jones jotted down the address and returned to town for a luncheon of a half dozen cups of coffee. He went to the afternoon show of a second rate movie house and closed his eyes and sat in the dark and put the business all together.

He got this: Vilma Manners and Nils Deeland had figured the situation at the DO-DRIVE-INN as ripe for a perfect crime. Vilma, handling the money and the books for Krasner, had given him a systematic daily fleecing. She had either kept the money at her home or given it to Deeland to hold for her. Three weeks of this and it was getting close to the time of month when she would have to go over the books with Krasner. That time just couldn't come or the whole thing would be discovered. So they decided to kill the Inn

manager. Donna as a harassed girl employee made a perfect cat's-paw for them.

Jones figured the murder like this: Vilma called Krasner on a house phone and imitating Donna's voice, told him that since this was her last night she had thought the thing over and had changed her mind regarding Krasner's attentions. Krasner had asked her to come right up to his office and talk it over.

Then Vilma had Deeland take the pearl-handled automatic, go up to the roof outside Krasner's office window and wait for the inevitable to happen when Donna arrived after being sent up by Vilma. But Donna Marlo had scotched things a little by running away and taking the murder gun with her. And by knowing K. C. Jones.

By the time he had got that far, Jones was boiling. He kept thinking that while a smug pair of murderers were gloating over the success of their crime, a sweet little kid like Donna Marlo was hiding out like a hunted animal. He kept remembering that he had promised Donna's brother that he would take care of her.

He left the theatre with a plan to show up the real murderers half formulated. As he drove up to Donna's hide-out, he completed it. It was wild, and it was dangerous, but it had to be tried. So far all he had on Deeland and Vilma Manners was a case that he had built up in his own mind. Mostly conjecture. He had to have proof. And Matty Doyle couldn't see beyond his nose. The Homicide head wouldn't even give Jones' story a thought unless he was forced to it.

Jones got Donna and taking her with him, started back to town. On the way they pulled into the DO-DRIVE-INN. It was dark now and Donna slouched way down in the seat and no one spotted her. Jones got Ann Gorman to come out to the car.

He talked fast and seriously to the platinum-haired car-hop.

He said: "Ann, I'm going to dish it straight, so let's not play games on this. Either you'll help me or you won't. I know about you and Krasner. Did you love the guy?" Ann Gorman flushed from the deep Vee of her uniform to the roots of her silver hair. A vein stood out and throbbed in her forehead. She opened her mouth to speak but K. C. Jones rushed on:

"All right, Ann. All right. I know who killed Joel Krasner. You can help me prove it. Will you do it?"

The girl stared at Jones and tears started to well up in her eyes. She choked out: "You know, that—that business I gave you when you stopped here the—other night. It was just an act. I make my living bein' cute like that. Joel Krasner was the lowest louse on this earth, but I loved him, Mr. Jones. . . . What do you want me to do?"

TWO HOURS later K. C. Jones' canary colored roadster and a big police sedan pulled up to the curb on a little side street near Beverly Hills. Jones, Donna and Ann Gorman got out of the roadster. Matty Doyle and two plainclothesmen got out of the police car.

Doyle grabbed Jones by both shoulders. His great red face wore an agonized frown. His huge earlobes were flaming. He said:

"I don't like this, K. C. I don't know why I'm doing it. If this doesn't work—if you get me in trouble—"

"Look, Matty," Jones knocked Doyle's husky hands from his shoulders. "You've got Donna Marlo haven't you? And I promised to give you that horse-betting system that I used to pick ten longshot winners after this is an over, didn't I?"

Doyle nodded unhappily.

"All right," Jones said. "You just take

Donna with you and station yourselves outside of Nils Deeland's windows. Keep out of sight and listen to what goes on. I'll do the rest."

They went up the street toward the little bungalow home of Nils Deeland. Jones and Ann Gorman went right up to the door. When Deeland answered their ring, Jones shoved his gun into the horse-faced man's stomach and pushed on inside.

"What—what is this?" Deeland stammered. His plucked brows did acrobatics. He looked from Jones to Ann Gorman, flicking fast glances back and forth.

"Just this," Jones said. He walked up to Deeland, tucking his gun back into his pocket. There was no effort to it. His hand dropped loosely to his side and formed a fist and came rocketing upward like a flashing meteor. All in the wink of an eye. Nils Deeland never even knew what happened. As he started to fold, Jones caught him under the arms. He dragged him into the living room, dropped him limply into a stuffed chair with its back to the door.

He turned to the platinum blond. "I don't know how long we have to wait," he told her. "Their plane is due to leave in half an hour. I don't know what their arrangement was, but one sure thing, even if Vilma Manners wasn't supposed to come here and meet him, she's going to soon get worried if she is waiting for him someplace, and check around here to see what's up. I'm going to duck. When you hear her enter the front door, start your spiel the way I told you."

Ann Gorman nodded grimly and as Jones stationed himself behind some drapes, she perched on a footstool in front of the chair where sat the unconscious Deeland. She put one hand on his knee. From the doorway it would look as though

she was pleading with him.

It was ten minutes before the front door of the bungalow was heard to open. Footsteps sounded in the hall and Ann Gorman started to talk.

"Don't worry about her, Nils, darling," she said softly, pleadingly. "The plan we've cooked up will leave her holding the bag. What good is her word against both of ours? I'll use her ticket like you said, and—"

Vilma Manners stood in the doorway of the room. Her husky voice broke in: "You little double-crossing rat!"

The statuesque redhead's green eyes were blazing. Her mouth was a slash of thin orange. She fumbled a hand into her purse. "Stand up, Nils, you murdering louse!" she spat out. "I'll show you you can't double cross me!"

At the first flash of the pistol Vilma whipped from her bag, K. C. Jones stepped out from behind the drapes. His own gun was in his hand. He squeezed the trigger and Vilma Manners dropped the pistol with an animal-like howl of pain and grabbed at the spurt of blood from her wrist.

As Matty Doyle and his men swarmed through the windows, the big horse-faced man in the chair stirred. No one noticed. They were too busy watching K. C. Jones as he walked toward Vilma, twirling his gun on his finger.

"It's all up, Vilma," he bluffed. "We got the goods on Nils and he spilled the whole thing. He told us how you killed Krasner, and—"

"I didn't kill him!" the redheaded woman screamed. Her eyes were rolled back into her head now. "He did that. Deeland planned the whole thing. He—"

She cut off short. Nils Deeland came up out of his chair in a leaping dive for the door. He never reached it. K. C. Jones' foot tangled between his legs and Deeland

went slamming against a wall. When he bounced off a fist rocked to the side of his cheek and he went staggering back face-first into the chair he had just vacated. K. C. Jones sucked his knuckles and hunched his wounded shoulder and made a wincing face.

Back at headquarters after Deeland and Vilma Manners had been booked for the murder of Joel Krasner, Matty Doyle beamed at K. C. Jones. "Hey, Jones," he gurgled. "That system. Remember?"

"Sure," Acme Production's troubleshooter said. "It's a very simple system, Matty. You play the horse in number one post position—next to the rail—whenever it's carrying the lightest weight in the race. That's all."

Doyle frowned. "You—you hit ten straight winners with that?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Certainly." Jones pushed his stiffened fingers into the Homicide head's paunch, playfully. "Three years ago. And then I lost twenty straight. I haven't played it since. . . . Well, lots of luck, Matty."

K. C. Jones took Donna's arm and walked out of headquarters. Behind them Matty Doyle was mumbling, "Three years ago—three years—why that—" and getting redder and redder.

Donna Marlo hugged Jones' arm. "You're pretty swell, K. C.," she told him softly.

Jones hailed a cab. "You go on home, kid," he told Donna. "Your brother'd have a fit if he knew I had you up so late."