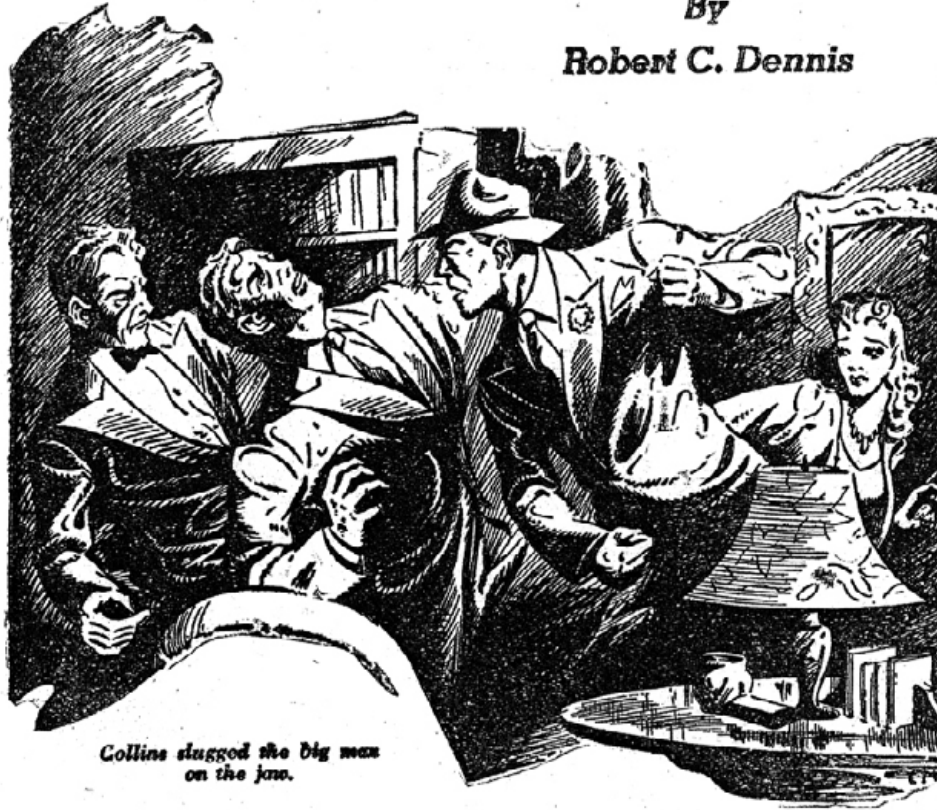


Ten Grand Tornado

By
Robert C. Dennis



Collins slugged the big man on the jaw.

Two tough mobs were out to take hijacker Mike Collins for a ride. And the only way that hard-fisted operative could roll out of their trigger range was by thumbing a lift from the first gang car to speed his way.

WHEN the phone rang Collins was lying on the bed with his shoes off. Without interrupting his study of an interestingly shaped crack in the ceiling, he dragged the phone off the bureau.

"Yeah," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Collins? Never mind who this is. You done me a favor once—I'm payin' off now. Joe Vernelli's in town."

Collins said again with only a slightly different inflection, "Yeah?"

"He's gunnin' for you. Says you hijacked one of his brothers for—"

"Both of them." Collins sounded faintly amused. "Both at once. I was a little ashamed of myself."

"Well, don't make no mistake about Joe," the voice warned, "he ain't dumb. He's the brains. I thought you'd like to know. You done me a favor once."

"Yeah," Collins said. "Thanks." He hung up.

He hadn't sounded very grateful, but that was because he didn't like to feel grateful. Vaguely he wondered whom he had ever done a favor for.

The phone rang again. It was the clerk

at the desk. "There's a gentleman down here to see you, Mr. Collins. A Mr. MacDonald."

"They aren't wasting any time," Collins observed.

"I beg your pardon?" the clerk said.

"Nothing. I'll be down in five minutes."

He sat up on the edge of the bed and put his shoes on. Deciding he'd wrinkled his shirt from lying around, he changed it. A snap-brim grey hat finished his ensemble.

MacDonald was a big grey-haired man with solid shoulders and a bulging stomach. His clothes were as well cut as Collins'. He said, "I'd like to talk business with you, Mr. Collins."

Collins nodded. He didn't recognize the man. There were two overstuffed chairs in a corner, half facing each other. Collins took the one closest to the wall and sat down, trailing one leg over the arm. He had a full view of the entire lobby.

"My name is MacDonald," the man said. "I have a job for you."

Collins didn't answer. He was waiting for something to take hold of.

MacDonald took out a gold cigarette case. "I've made a number of inquiries around town for the right man. The consensus of opinion seems to be that you are a smart, fast-working gentleman, always ready to make a safe dollar." He extended the case. "I want you to handle something for me."

Collins took a cigarette. He scratched a match on a paper packet, then paused to stare across the flame. "Go on," he said.

"It'll take four-five hours." MacDonald blew smoke through his nose and said impressively, "I'll pay you two hundred and fifty dollars."

Collins snapped the burnt-out match at an ash tray. He said flatly, "Nothing doing."

"Now, look here, Collins," MacDonald protested loudly, "if you think you can hold me up for any more, you aren't as smart as I heard. That's as high as I'll go."

"No," Collins shook his head, "I don't want any part of it."

"What's the matter?" The big man really seemed baffled.

"You had the dope right the first time. I'm always ready to make a safe dollar. This isn't safe. Not at that price."

"I see," MacDonald mused. "I offered too much. Well, suppose I explain the situation. I have a niece who has a desire to visit a gambling house. Such things bore me. I'm too busy anyhow, so I want a competent bodyguard to accompany her. I understand you can handle a job like that."

Collins watched him narrowly. "Where does she want to do her gambling?"

"The Seven Club."

Collins knew the place. It was as much on the level as any gambling joint in town. "Where is the danger?"

"Probably there isn't any but I want to be certain. I've heard of people being robbed of their winnings. You'll be there to prevent that."

Collins wondered if he should ask if the girl expected to win anything.

"Well, how about it, Collins?" MacDonald asked impatiently.

Collins thought about the telephone warning and the Vernelli brothers. They were going to a lot of trouble, he decided. Usually they preferred direct action, like a shot in a dark alley. Unless they had some other angle in mind. . . .

Collins shrugged. He couldn't duck them forever. He said, "Leave a certified check with the hotel clerk. I'll collect it in the morning."

MacDonald said, "Fine, Collins. We'll pick you up at eight. You'll like my niece."

MACDONALD and the girl arrived in a big sedan at exactly eight. She was slim and fair-haired. About twenty. She wore a long white dress and a jacket.

Collins had changed to a dark suit and a white shirt. His shoes were shined. He was still wearing the grey hat.

MacDonald made a brief introduction. "I'd suggest you act like close friends. My niece's first name is Joan. I believe somebody said yours was Michael."

Collins said, "Somebody has too damn much to say."

"I think that is a very nice name," the girl said quickly.

MacDonald interrupted, "I'm driving you to the Seven Club. When Joan wants to leave, bring her to my hotel. She'll tell you where."

Collins didn't answer. He sat in his corner without impatience. He was almost never impatient. He guessed it was one of his few virtues.

Suddenly MacDonald asked, "Have you a gun, Collins?"

"I never carry one."

The big man looked sideways at him. "I think you're a liar," he said coldly.

"Surely we won't need a gun," Joan said uneasily.

Collins rubbed his chin on his left thumbnail for a moment, then shrugged. He stared at the girl's profile, trying to figure her out. He wished she weren't so young and lovely.

MacDonald stopped across the street from the Seven Club. "Whatever Joan wants to do is all right, Collins." He drove quickly away.

Collins looked at the girl. "Come here often?"

"I've never been here before. Why?"

Collins shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing. I just asked."

"You're a funny person, Mr. Collins." Joan was laughing a little. Or should I say

Michael?"

He didn't answer. He still hadn't pegged the setup. Maybe the smart thing to do was drop the whole deal. On the other hand he had to face Joe Vernelli someday. Joe's brothers weren't much worry alone, but maybe Joe was as smart as people said. Collins decided he might as well find out now.

The Seven Club was ostensibly a cafe with a floor show. Collins declined to check his hat at the stand. He didn't want to leave it behind should he have to depart in a hurry. A man in evening clothes quietly led them up a narrow stairway.

The main room was big, brilliantly lit, and crowded. Down the center was a double row of dice and roulette tables, back to back. Against the wall were the chuck-a-luck games. The cashier's cage was in one corner.

Joan went there at once. She laid down a crisp twenty dollar bill and got it changed to silver dollars.

"Good luck," the cashier said, smiling. "Try Table 6—roulette. I've a hunch it's hot."

Joan laughed, but she went to table six. She lost five dollars in a hurry. Collins stared around the room. He was hunting for a familiar face. He didn't find one and relaxed a little. When he looked back, Joan had won some money. He didn't know how much, for a big crowd had gathered.

He grunted to himself and elbowed his way to her side. Her face was flushed and a strand of hair kept falling across her eyes. He spoke into her ear, "Beginner's luck?"

She laughed happily, "How am I going to carry all this metal?"

Collins counted two hundred of the coins into his side pockets and said, "I'll get some paper money."

There was as much left as he had taken. He got two one-hundred-dollar bills

from the cashier. When he came back he found nearly everyone in the room was trying to get close. He had to use his shoulders to get through.

THE girl was betting wild and still winning. They were paying her off in hundred-dollar bills because there wasn't room for all the silver she had won. Collins estimated she had nearly two thousand dollars. He began stacking them together. Before he finished Joan had won another pile.

He spoke in an undertone. "Give me your bag."

She handed it to him without looking. Collins put the money in his pocket and snapped the bag open. No one gave him a glance. He found a bus ticket to Toledo, Ohio, some keys, a compact, lipstick, and a letter addressed to Miss Joan Lang. The same name was on the envelope the ticket was in. He closed the bag and looked back at the game.

Joan was splurging, betting three or four hundred dollars at time, and never missing. She couldn't do anything wrong. The room was very quiet; everyone was fascinated by the fortune she was accumulating so fast.

Collins decided he had never seen such a phony setup in his whole life. All at once he began to get it. He watched the white ball duck into her slot again and said suddenly, "Too bad you and your uncle are going east. With your luck, you could own the joint in a week."

His voice carried all over the still room. The croupier's hand froze above the wheel.

"You are coming back for more, I hope," he said, showing his teeth for a smile.

"I'm afraid not," Joan was too excited over her game to pay much attention. "I'm leaving in the morning."

Collins spoke in a low tone, "Want a drink?"

She shook her head, still playing. He wished he had one. He saw the croupier signaling for relief. There wasn't going to be time to get a drink. He leaned over close to the girl's ear, "Call it a day," he said in a hard voice. "The party is over."

A man came up behind the girl, "Your uncle," he said. "He wants to see you in the office at the end of the room."

Joan nodded. "We'll come in a moment."

Collins gathered the money up and carried it to a quiet corner. The girl was pulling bills out of the pockets of her evening jacket in handfuls. Collins counted over nine thousand dollars.

"Just about ten grand," he said bitterly. "That's damn near overdoing it!"

"What do you mean?" Then without waiting for an answer, "Do you think we'll be held up?"

Collins said in the same bitter tone, "Hell, yes, let's get it over with." But he knew he'd have to make it tough for them; it was one of his failings. It always got him into trouble, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He took the money to the cashier's cage and changed it into the largest bills he could get. He changed a little with each cashier, so they couldn't know exactly how much he had.

He went back to the girl and offered the money to her.

"Keep it," she said, "that's why you're here."

Collins shrugged his shoulders. He, emptied his billfold of everything else, put the money in and squeezed it flat between his hands. It made a remarkably small package for ten thousand dollars.

They went into the office without knocking. There were two men there, both strangers. Collins shut the door and

l lounged against it. He had the hat cocked over his forehead to throw a shadow across his eyes. MacDonald, of course, wasn't there.

But neither were the Vernellis. Collins knew then he'd guessed wrong. He'd walked into a deal that didn't concern him. If he'd known it sooner he would have dropped it. It was too late now. He was in up to his ears!

ONE of the men sat behind a desk. He had silver-black hair and a dark face. "I'm James Allister," he said pleasantly. "I own the Seven Club."

Joan smiled nervously.

"My partner, Mr. Walter Duby." He nodded at the man standing in the background.

Duby was very big and dark, with shiny hair. He just watched without moving or speaking.

Allister said, "You're Miss MacDonald?"

Joan nodded. "This is my friend, Mr. Collins."

"Your uncle didn't come, I see." Allister was being very friendly.

"I thought he was here. The man you sent said he was."

Allister smiled, "I sent him to ask you if he had arrived. He seems to have delivered the message incorrectly."

Collins was staring about the room. It looked like the moving picture conception of a big-time gambler's office. Everything was too expensive looking. From somewhere came the faint strains of music. Either a radio or the orchestra piped up from downstairs.

"I understand you won a considerable sum tonight," Allister was saying.

Joan nodded, "I guess I did."

"If you care to leave it with me, I'll see that it is safely delivered to your uncle tomorrow. We try to protect our customers

against any accident. It isn't very safe to be carrying ten thousand dollars in cash, you know."

"Mr. Collins is protecting me."

Collins asked suddenly, "How did you know how much she won? We just finished counting it before we came in here."

Allister stopped smiling. "Let's get along without any difficulty. If you have the money, Collins, I'll take it."

Collins stared back at him, all the time polishing his left thumbnail with his chin.

"I see," Allister said at last. "This was MacDonald's idea, I imagine."

Joan looked at Allister, then at Collins. She appeared to be really puzzled. "What does he mean?" she asked finally.

"Let's not be innocent," Collins snapped. "The old shill game on a big scale. Allister's wheels are so crooked the suckers were beginning to squawk, so he pretends to drop ten grand for a come-on. Only his pal, MacDonald, crosses him by hiring you to play for keeps. You can figure the next one yourself."

Allister said very coldly, "Clever, Collins. Very clever of you, indeed." His hard eyes switched to Joan. "Well, Miss MacDonald?"

The girl spoke in a low tone. "My friend is in charge of everything." She looked at Collins, "What are you going to do, Michael?"

Collins shifted his shoulders more comfortably against the door and stared back at her. The music from downstairs paused for a moment.

"Nothing," he said stonily. "Am I supposed to?"

"Now that makes everything perfect," Allister put in, "I was wondering if you weren't going to play, too."

Collins said, "You can ignore me, Allister. I'm just an interested bystander."

Joan walked suddenly to the door.

"I'm leaving," she announced. "After all, I won the money. And I was playing for keeps, too."

The music had begun again and Allister's voice was faint against it. But it was hard and cold. "The door's locked, Miss MacDonald," he said. "I want that money—now."

A door at the back of the room swung abruptly open. No one moved except Joan who jumped a little. Allister spoke without turning, "Miss Shale, this young lady is going to show you that she hasn't a package of money on her person."

A dark-haired girl in a tight-fitting gown came across the room and took Joan's arm. For a moment nothing happened. Joan didn't know what to do. She looked toward Collins for advice.

COLLINS stared back, blankly. The two girls went quietly out of the room. Only the muted sound of the orchestra broke the silence. The big dark-faced man never shifted from his stiff-position behind Allister. Collins wanted to ease his own shoulder muscles but waited till the girls came back.

Miss Shale said, "She hasn't got it."

Joan's face was flushed, either from anger or embarrassment.

Allister nodded. He didn't seem surprised. "We'll have to have it, Collins. Do you want to give it up, or shall I have Walter search you?"

Collins just stared at him.

"All right, Walter," Allister said with a shrug. "Go and get it."

The big man came out from behind the desk. He had soft dark eyes and a thin line for a mouth. He was handsome but hard-looking.

Collins said steadily, "Keep your hands away from me."

Walter ignored him. He ran his hands through Collins' pockets, removing

everything. He was watching Collins all the time. He piled a handful of articles and seventeen dollars on the desk.

Miss Shale said, "The girl has twenty-three cents." She sounded amused.

"Look again." Allister's voice was still very soft.

Collins said to Walter, "I'm warning you."

Walter knelt, beside him and ran his hands from Collins' shoes to his waistline. He made sure he was not in front of Collins' feet. Then he stood up and searched all his pockets again. He hunted for a money belt, but didn't find one.

"That's all there is," he said.

Allister got up impatiently. Collins rubbed his chin gently over his left thumbnail. He could befuddle somebody like Walter all day, but Allister was a different breed. Something more was needed. Collins shifted his feet. "All finished, Walter?"

The man hesitated, then nodded. He was staring at Collins' thumbnail. He seemed fascinated by that left hand. Collins waited till Allister was directly behind Walter. Then he shifted his feet suddenly and slugged the big man on the jaw with his fight fist.

Walter didn't try to defend himself. He hadn't seen it coming at all. He stumbled backwards into Allister's arms. Allister couldn't hold him up. Walter dropped into an awkward heap on the floor, out cold.

Collins relaxed against the door. He straightened the grey hat and watched Allister fumble in his arm pit for a gun.

"No," Allister said, half to himself. "Not here. You can't get away with it, you know, Collins. If the money is not on you, it's somewhere in the house. You can't get out with it."

Collins shrugged himself away from the door and reached backwards to pull it open. Joan walked out, making a half

circle to get around Walter. Collins looked at them all for a second. Miss Shale was trying to smile at him without letting Allister see her. Collins collected his belongings from Allister's desk and walked out, his right hand hanging limp at his side.

THE gamblers in the main room were still clustered about the lucky table. Collins took the girl's arm and steered her downstairs. Two tough-looking men were trying to appear nonchalant at the front exit.

Collins changed his course to a table near the edge of the dance floor. When the waiter came, he said, "Bring two straight whiskies. See if the lady wants something."

He took off his hat, running his fingers through his hair with the same motion. He put the hat on one of the empty chairs and let the white table cloth cover it. He had to use his left hand because the other was useless.

Joan said, "Where is the money?"

Collins stared at her for a moment. Then he saw that she didn't know. He reached under his hat, got the wallet and let her see it.

"Where did you have it while they were searching you?"

That was when Collins saw his first familiar face all evening. He bent across the table. "Grab your drink and move quick. You don't know me. If I have to leave, go back to Toledo. Where's MacDonald's hotel?"

She told him. Then, angrily, "If they start anything—"

Collins cut her off, "It's my past catching up to me."

She got up without another word. Collins didn't watch where she went. A couple danced over close to the edge of the floor and stopped. The man was slim

and well dressed. He gave his partner a push. "Find another sucker, baby," he said. "I got some business."

He sat down opposite Collins. "Aren't you going to say hello, Michael?"

Collins said, "Hello, Joe. Your voice is familiar. Didn't I talk to you on the phone today?"

Vernelli grinned. "You're sharp, Michael—that's your name, isn't it? The phone call didn't work. I thought you'd get nervous. Nervous people make a lot of mistakes."

A second man came over and sat down without speaking. Collins kept his foot on the chair that held his hat, so no one could pull it out. He asked, "What is it? A Vernelli reunion? Where's Vic?"

"He's looking for you, too," Joe said in his very pleasant voice. "One of my boys saw you come in here."

Louie said, "I thought he had a dame."

Joe grinned. "I had one, too."

Collins said, "You're lucky to find me. I was just going—"

"You're going to hell in a basket," Louie told him. He was bigger and bulkier than Joe, but not very much. He looked just like him otherwise.

"Now, Louie, let's not talk business yet," Joe said. "Michael will probably explain everything."

"Wasn't Louie bright enough to tell you what happened?" Collins asked.

Louie snarled, "For that you get some of your own teeth pushed down your throat."

Collins rubbed his jaw gently across his left thumb nail. "You said that once before, if I remember correctly."

Joe grabbed at Collins' right wrist. "No, no," he said. "Not the same trick twice, Louie told me about that one."

Collins pulled his arm carefully away. He'd been only bluffing. His hand was swelling so fast he was sure it was broken.

He wished he'd not hit Walter so hard. He could have used that right hand now. In any case, there was no point in staying here. "I'm getting out of this trap," he said.

Joe smiled up at him. "Fine, Michael. We'll probably be not far behind you."

Collins wondered if Joe's gags would be funny if they weren't always so grim. He walked unsteadily to the doorway with Joe and Louie trailing him. Collins stopped till they caught up, then said, "I forgot my hat."

He went back and got it off the vacant chair. He had some difficulty balancing the billfold on top of his head while he was getting his hat on. It was a little awkward, especially left-handed. He put his right hand in his pocket; it wasn't of any use anyhow, and he didn't want it jarred around.

From the corner of his eye he saw Allister's two musclemen follow him. They knew he wouldn't leave the club without the money, but they couldn't jump him in front of everybody. The Vernellis were close behind, with Joan bringing up the rear. It looked like the Easter Parade.

OUTSIDE, the Vernellis closed around Collins. "We've got a car here, Michael," Joe said in his deceptively pleasant voice. "Can we give you a ride somewhere?"

Collins smiled suddenly. He was caught between two fires, and it occurred to him the only smart thing to do was duck. "Sure," he said, "if you're going my way."

Louie got in behind the wheel. Joe helped Collins into the rear, then got in beside him. "I don't like to ride in back seats," Joe explained, "but you've got a reputation of being tough. Tell me, Michael, are you tough?"

"No," Collins said, "I'm just quick." He took a tight hold of his hat. When the

car full of Allister's men drew up abreast of them, he counted three and dropped to the floor, diving under Joe Vernelli's legs.

It wasn't much protection, but he took up so much space there wasn't any room for Joe to duck.

Over him Louie cursed suddenly in a high-pitched voice. A string of fire crackers seemed to go off almost simultaneously. Somebody screamed. The car went out of control, bumping and swaying wildly off the pavement. From somewhere in the distance, the shrill wailing of a siren cut in on the pandemonium of shattering glass and cracking revolvers.

Collins guessed that Louie had been hit and that Joe was trying to climb into the front seat to get at the wheel.

Then the car crashed into something. Collins' head bobbed up, then down, hard.

He shook himself out of a daze into a glaring light. Somebody was pulling him from the car. He made sure he still had his hat and sat up. He saw that the Vernellis had turned the sedan directly into the other car. There were cops all around, some with flashlights and revolvers. There seemed to be bodies all over the pavement. Allister's men and the Vernellis had simply shot hell out of each other.

Collins got out and leaned weakly against the fender. "It never happened before," he mumbled.

A policeman asked, "What?"

"A cop showing up when he was needed," Collins said. Then, holding his crushed hat tight on his head he stopped fighting against the black dizziness.

He came to again just before they got to the police station. He got out of the squad car without help, but staggered a little as he walked. The cop on duty said boredly, "Search him, too."

Somebody pulled at his pockets. "Well, what's the story?"

"I don't know," Collins said. "I was having a couple of drinks in the Seven Club. When I got ready to leave I bummed a ride downtown with one of the guys I was drinking with. Then things just sort of exploded."

The cop studied the articles taken from Collins' pockets. Everything was in order. Collins had fine references. The cop made entries in a report. Finally he said, "Okay, fella, I guess you're clean. It was a gang war and you just got caught. Next time, be careful who you bum rides with."

Collins pulled the brim of his hat down and stumbled out into the darkness. His legs were very weak and he was fuzzy in the stomach. He wondered if his scalp were cut, but his head ached too much for him to explore. He got to a light post and was sick.

When the nausea passed, his mind began clicking. There was no sign of Joan anywhere. That added up to one thing.

Collins called a cab and gave the driver MacDonald's hotel.

The clerk on duty talked briefly on the phone, then said, "Mr. MacDonald says you may go right up. He's been expecting you."

MacDonald might have been expecting him once, but the time was now past. From the doorway Collins saw first of all MacDonald's stark, dead bulk in the chair.

Collins saw Joan next. She had opened the door for him. Behind her, Allister's neat silver-black head nodded Collins into the room.

"I've a silencer on this gun, Mr. Collins. And I'm too good a shot to give you any percentage in resisting. Come in and close the door."

COLLINS went in, leaning back against the door. Allister sat, legs crossed on one end of a divan, the hand holding the gun resting on his knee.

"We seem to have underestimated you, Mr. Collins. How did you elude my men?"

"I ignored them," Collins said. "I was too busy with a private quarrel with the Vernelli gang." That wasn't exactly correct, but Collins felt entitled to a little conceit. Besides, it was often good business.

Grudging admiration crept into Allister's eyes. But no fear; he accepted Collins' ability but he wasn't selling himself short. Collins decided there was probably no reason why he should.

"I'm still after the money," Allister said.

Joan spoke for the first time, "I guess you'd better give it to him."

Collins looked at her. "I'd like to know something. How deep are you in this?"

"Mr. MacDonald offered me money to gamble . . . but not two hundred and fifty dollars," she added pointedly. "I knew there was a catch to it, but I needed the money too badly. I wanted to go home."

Collins studied her intently for a moment, then accepted it. To Allister he said, "You can go whistle for your ten grand. She won it."

Allister said, "It isn't entirely the money, Mr. Collins. I can afford it—and I have received some favorable publicity among my clients. But," he nodded at MacDonald's body, "there's this. You are both witnesses . . . unless you are amenable to a suggestion."

"Not for ten grand," Collins stated.

"How much?"

"You haven't got enough."

Allister looked puzzled. "Anyone who plays around with the Vernellis has no claim on morality."

"I'm a reformed character," Collins snapped. In general people completely misjudged him. They always had. He was very bitter about it.

Without effort he shrugged himself

away from the door and quietly approached Allister. His movements were so deceptively normal, Allister merely watched him. Still casual, unhurried, Collins kicked the bottom of Allister's foot as it hung crossed over the other leg inches from the floor.

Allister's gun resting on his knee shot ceilingward.

Following through in his stride, Collins slammed himself down on top of the gambler, turning slightly so that he came in hip first, his left elbow jutting solidly into Allister's face. It was a lightninglike maneuver. When it was over Collins was sitting like a ventriloquist's dummy on Allister's knee.

The gambler's gun arm was imprisoned between Collins' left elbow and his ribs. Part of that was a lucky accident but Collins never batted an eye. He turned the pressure on Allister's arm till the agonized fingers lost their hold on the gun. Then he got up and kicked it under the davenport.

The whole action was so effortless, so expert, that no one could have told just how lucky it was.

Unarmed now, Allister lunged at Collins' back. Just in time Collins turned and stabbed his left fist into the gambler's face. It was a puny blow, but all that was necessary. Allister simply quit. He'd noticed for the first time that Collins had done it all with one hand in his pocket!

The hand was as useful as a toothache but Collins bluffed well. He thought that was one of his few virtues. He said to the girl, "Call the cops."

IN THE nearest bar, Collins ordered two straight whiskies. "You'd better have a drink," he told Joan. "They're on you anyhow."

"I've only got twenty-three cents."

"You've got ten grand," Collins told her. With his left hand he took off his hat, skimming up the billfold with the same motion by running his fingers through his hair.

"Under your hat!" Joan exclaimed. "They'd have never thought of looking there," she added innocently. "You're awfully clever."

Collins didn't deny it. He felt entitled to a certain amount of honest conceit. At the same time, he knew that without the diversionary attack on Walter, Allister would have soon found the money.

"And you were very clever to get away from those two men. Who were they?"

Collins hesitated for a moment, then said, "The Vernelli boys. There is another one someplace but he's just as dumb as these two."

"Why were they after you?"

"I broke up a little blackmail racket awhile back," Collins said. "Two of the Vernellis collected a basket full of money from a rich dame for some letters she shouldn't have written. Only they kept the letters, intending to use them a second time. I was hired to get the letters back. I got both the letters and the money. The Vernellis didn't like that. They yelled for their smart brother, Joe, to come and help them."

"Just for revenge?"

Collins shook his head. "They thought I still had the money I'd taken away from them."

Joan looked at him. "Did you?"

Collins grinned a little. "No, I gave it back to the rich lady. Joe Vernelli never thought of that. He figured nobody would be that dumb."

Joan said, "Well, I guess they won't bother you now." She was quiet for a moment. "Maybe I should tell you my past."

Collins finished his drink without answering.

“My name isn’t MacDonald.”

“I know, I searched your bag.”

“I didn’t see you do that—I wondered how you knew I came from Toledo. Why did you take this job?”

Collins shrugged. “I thought it was Vernelli trying to get me. When I saw it was your friends playing another game, it was too late to get out of it.”

“They aren’t my friends,” Joan said indignantly.

“I see your point,” Collins said.

“I never saw them before!” She was trying hard to keep her temper. “I got the job through an agency. I wanted to go back to Toledo and I needed money.”

Collins said nothing. He kept staring at his empty glass.

“Do you still dislike me, Michael?” Joan asked quietly.

“Don’t call me Michael,” Collins said. “I don’t dislike anybody. You can go back to Toledo now. In style.”

“I guess so. What will I ever do with ten thousand dollars?”

“It’ll buy a lot of groceries,” Collins pointed out.

“I suppose so,” she admitted. Finally, in a small voice, she said, “I’m an awful good cook, Mike.”

Collins thought for a moment, trying to figure out how to do it gently. Finally he said, “I bet you are, honey. And one of these days I’ll come to Toledo and you can cook me a big dinner.”