

# ROUGH PARTY

A Steve Koski Story

by

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When she came alongside, Koski reached down and caught her arm

*When it comes to murder on a houseboat, the female of the species is deadlier than the male!*

**S**TEALTHY fingers of fog reached out to strangle the lighthouses marking danger spots along the Sound. Even the ghostly loom of Execution Rock became a hazy blur against the gray velvet of the summer mist.

At the wheel of the police boat, Sergeant Mulcahey took one last pelorus reading before the giant beacon was

choked off.

" 'Tis a dog's life, no less—patrol duty on a night like this, Steve," he said.

The man leaning against the port coaming struck a match, applied it to the bulldog briar which was clamped, bowdown, between his teeth. The flare of flame, reflecting from the wet rubber of his slicker, mellowed the seamy harshness of his weather-bitten features, giving them

the quality of some bronzed warrior statue, glistening with moisture.

"It might not be so bad for a seeing-eye dog, at that, Irish," Lieutenant Steve Koski said.

" 'Tis no fit for beast or man." The sergeant throttled the hundred and eighty horses down to a walk, nosed the *Vigilant* toward the Sands Point shore. "Th' proper an' suitable way to spend a night like this is before a cozy fire, settled down comfortably with a good wench."

Steve Koski cupped one hand behind his leeward ear. "Next week is your off-time—you can do your home work then—cut your motor!"

Mulcahey switched the engine to silence. Only the hissing bone in the patrol-boat's teeth and the soft rustle of her wake disturbed the blanketed hush of the quiet waters.

Down sound, the deep mournfulness of a tramp freighter's whistle was echoed by the querulous hoot of the Port Jeff ferry. A distant tug uttered threats about the Hell Gate channel. Koski pointed, twenty degrees off the port quarter:

"There. Slow and easy, sarge. Somebody splashing. . ."

"Dropping a mud hook, likely. Playin' it smart instead of runnin' blind in pea soup like this."

Mulcahey pushed the starter button, gave the thirty-two footer a touch of clutch, let her coast, nudged her again gently.

"Light, Irish."

**T**HE white blade of the searchlight sliced through the steaming mist.

"Even an old sea dog is not supposed to have the nose of a bloodhound, Steve. Or would it be the ears of a bat you fancy yourself havin'?"

For answer, Koski stepped to the waterway beside the pilot house, grabbed

the long boathook.

"Hear it?" he asked.

Mulcahey killed the motor again, stepped to the door of the pilot house. .

"*He-e-e-elp!*" The cry barely audible, not because it was far away, but on account of the thin, faint voice. "*He-e-e-elp!*"

"Coming!" bellowed Koski.

The *Vigilant* crept ahead. The white lance of the searchlight probed—left, right, up—

"Hold it!" Koski angled the boathook toward something white and sinuous moving in the wreathing vapor which lay along the surface of the water.

Mulcahey spun the wheel. The police boat swung around.

Koski leaned far out toward the pale, frightened face beneath the dark tangle of hair,~ held the boathook by its last six inches. The sinuous arm reached up to seize the metal prong.

"Leaping catfish," breathed the sergeant. "A girl!"

Koski pulled her in, slowly. When she came alongside, he reached down, caught her arm, slid the boathook inboard and got a two-hand grip.

Mulcahey helped him get her over the gunwale—his eyes bulging.

The girl was young, pretty, terrified—and except for a bra and the briefest of panties, quite without clothing.

There was no more color in her face than on the underside of a halibut, except for her right eye around which was a circle of leaden discoloration which matched the shade of her lips.

On her shoulders were other bruises. She shivered, as Koski carried her below. He had the feeling it was not entirely because of immersion. He flung a blanket around her before he put her on the bunk.

"Anybody else out there with you?"

"No." Noiselessly her lips formed the

syllable and she shook her head.

"How'd you get out here in the Sound?"

She found her voice then. A weak, timid voice:

"I—I don't remember. I—I think I fell overboard. The boys were fooling around—"

Mulcahey, bringing the flask from the first-aid kit, said: "That must of been kind of a rough party you was on!"

Koski held the brandy to her lips. "Get some of this in you. Make you feel better."

She drank, coughed, rolled over on her side, was sick. She braced herself against falling to the cabin floor with her left hand. On the wrist, stones glittered in the feeble light from the bulkhead.

**K**OSKI bent. The tiny hands on the jeweled face of the wristwatch had stopped at 10: 17.

"Twenty-five minutes," Koski said. "You been swimming around all that time?"

"I—I guess so." She rolled back onto the bunk, avoiding his eyes. "You're—you're a cop, aren't you?"

"Yair. What boat you take this dive off?"

"I never noticed its name." She tried another pull at the flask. "Just—some fella's motor boat."

"Yair?" Koski gave no indication as to whether he believed her. "What's your name?"

"Alice—Alice Wilson." If there was any hesitation in her answer, it was imperceptible.

"Who'd you go on this party with, Miss Wilson?" The Lieutenant might have been a sympathetic physician.

"Uh—Charley." She stared at him. "Charley something. I never did know his last name. I—I just met him in a place and we were dancing and I guess maybe we

were drinking and he asked me if I'd like to go on a motorboat cruise—"

Mulcahey raised his eyebrows, stuck out his lower lip and inclined his head forward. "You're lucky to be alive! You know that!"

"Yes," she breathed, "I know that." Fear showed plainly in her dark eyes—she closed them and sank back on the rolled-up dungarees which served as a pillow behind her head.

"You're going to be all right," Koski said. "Go to sleep, you want to. We'll run you in."

She nodded again, without opening her eyes.

Mulcahey threw in the clutch. "Bayside'll be quickest, for a doc, huh?"

"I don't think she needs a doctor." Koski's voice was muffled by the roar of the motor. "I don't know what she needs. Might be a lawyer."

"Ah, now, Steve!" "She was covering up, Irish." "That, she needed. But she could of . been leveling. 'Twouldn't be the first time some sea-goin' Lothario gets a party of mice aboard and figures they can't get off an' walk home. So—"

"Horse! She didn't know the guy's name. Or the boat's name. She didn't offer to tell us where she met this Charley. Where they got on the boat. Or who else was in the party. Besides, if it was just that she fell overboard or went on a party swim—she'd be tickled silly to be rescued. She's not. She's scared witless, right now."

The *Vigilant* rounded Plum Point cautiously, crept into Manhasset Bay through the great, moored fleet of yachts against the outgoing sweep of the tide.

Mulcahey spoke with his eyes fixed on the red channel markers. "They's pretty near a thousand craft in this harbor, Steve. How you goin' to find out which one of 'em she come off?"

Koski glanced down at the still figure swaddled in the army blanket. He spoke loudly enough for her to hear:

"We'll take her to the police station and let her call up her people to come and get her, first."

The girl opened her eyes wide. She hadn't been asleep.

"I haven't got any people. I live alone. In a furnished room. All I want is a taxi and to go home."

"For a babe who lives alone in a furnished room," said Koski, "you're carrying around quite a chunk of ice on your wrist. Why're you so scared of the police?"

THE GIRL rolled off the bunk, stood up, clutching at the blanket which slid down to her middle. All the fear went out of her eyes—her voice was bitter self-condemnation.

"I'll tell you why," she said. "My name isn't Alice Wilson. I live at home with my mother in—a nice part of Brooklyn. I've been a dozen different kinds of a fool and it would just about kill her if she knew where I'd been tonight. If you want to know the truth I'd rather have drowned than have Ma find out."

"Yair," Koski said dryly. "Pair of dungarees, there on the bunk. They'll fit you like Carnera's pants but they'll keep you from shivering yourself silly. Go in the head and put 'em on." He saw she didn't understand. "The john. Up forward."

She snatched up the roll of coarse blue canvas, ran to the head, unlatched the door, slammed it behind her.

Mulcahey made a quarter circle around a moored schooner, avoided a tiny class sloop which was being paddled, sails down, across the fairway, headed for the municipal pier. Beyond, the lambent green eyes of the police boat on shore cast a

grisly biliousness over launches, dinghies, outboards and flat-bottomed scows ranged alongside the pier.

"Myself," said the sergeant, "I am not one to trust a pretty further than the nearest dark alley. But I would be inclined to slip this kid a fin and send her home to her mah-mah. Do you not feel this way about it?"

"Not to give you a short answer," Koski said, "no."

Mulcahey squinted at him. "Is it a hunk of pig iron you have for a heart, now!"

"Use some skull, Irish. She switches the act on us, sure. But it's still an act."

The lavatory door opened. The girl came out. She'd rolled the dungarees up to her knees—tied the shoulder straps together to make a kind of halter effect in front.

The loose garment was floppy and ludicrous, but she filled it out where it looked well.

"If you only had a sweater," she grinned shyly, "I'd be all set."

"Sure," Mulcahey jumped, "I've a sweatshirt which will fit you no worse than th' Lieutenant's dungies—"

Koski said sharply: "Slide us in to the pier, first, Irish." To the girl: "The matron at the station will have some things you can put on."

Her face clouded. "You aren't going to make me go there!"

"Depends." Koski watched the sergeant deftly kick the big hull around against the pier with right rudder. "On you."

"How?" She came up to the cockpit, eyes searching his.

"I can't let you go without being sure there wasn't somebody with you in a speed boat—or a dink—or maybe one of those bantam sloops." He waved at old Murfree, on the dock, catching the stern

line from Mulcahey. "You'll have to put it on the line, sister. Or I'll have to check you in, for investigation."

SHE BEGAN to cry. Her lips trembled. She leaned wearily against the cabin bulkhead.

"All right," she said. "What do you want to know? I'll tell you anything except my name."

"Who was your joy friend?"

"Charley Haskeline."

"Who's he?"

"Works for an advertising agency. Radio City."

"Where'd he keep his boat?"

"New Rochelle. Some yacht club. Hugenor or something."

"Ay codfish!" It was old Murfree, leaning over the stringpiece of the wharf, gawping down at the girl. "What's the matter, miss?"

She looked up, blankly.

So did Koski. "What goes, Murf? You know this chick?"

"Tell him the truth, mister!" The girl cried shrilly, before the old watchman could answer. "Tell him you never saw me before in your life!"

The watchman peered more closely, twisting his head this way and that to see her in different lights. He tugged dubiously at his grizzled mustache.

Behind him, Mulcahey shook impatiently. "Put a name to it, pop. Do you or don't you know her?"

"I know her," Murfree nodded soberly. "But I never in my life saw her in a getup like that. And that's the truth, ay codfish!"

Koski touched the girl's shoulder. "Well?"

"He's making a mistake," she sobbed. "I've never been here before. How could he know me?"

The watchman straightened, troubled. He spoke in an undertone to Mulcahey.

"He says," the sergeant called down, "she is a Mrs. Sundstrom and she lives out on a houseboat called *Seabohemia* with her husband who is Mister Sundstrom—"

"No kidding," said Koski.

"And Murf sees her a couple of times every day when she rows in for groceries."

The girl tensed, sprang. Toward the water.

Koski grabbed, caught her around the waist, dragged her back.

"I thought you'd had enough of that." He kept his grip on her. "Let's go out and see how your husband's getting along, Mrs. Sundstrom."

Mulcahey dropped to the foredeck.

"This houseboat is about halfway to Plum Point. A big one, painted green and white like an awning—I remember many's the time thinkin' what a spot for a vacation. Nobody to call you on the phone or push the door bell or—"

"Cast off, Murf," Koski called. "Much oblige. Might drop in by-and-by for some more dope."

The watchman threw down the bow line, neatly coiled. "Ay cod, now you got me worrit. Hope you don't find nothing wrong out to the houseboat."

THE *Vigilant* backed away from the pier, went astern in the channel, headed out into the coiling mist—edged in between closely moored bridge-decks and single stickers. Its searchlight picked out the zebra-striped hull of a big houseboat with a railed-in sun deck. Yellow light diffused through the fog from its six side windows.

"Ahoy," Mulcahey roared. "On board *Seabohemia*."

No answer.

He hollered again as the police boat bumped the houseboat's rub-rail.

Koski said: "Mind the babe," did a one-hand vault over the rail onto the low

foredeck of the floating house.

His feet hit the deck only a split second ahead of the sharp and angry crack of the automatic. He let his knees go, flung himself flat.

From within the lighted cabin came a hoarse, angry bark, almost an echo of the gunfire:

“If you want me, come in and get me, you double-crossing two-timer!”

Koski kept rolling, on the fog-slippery deck, until he was out of the line of fire from the doorway.

Behind him Mulcahey yelled, “Hey! Cut that!”

Bare feet slithered along the greasy-wet planks beside him.

“Sundy!” the girl’s voice was close beside the Lieutenant. “Stop that shooting!”

Koski grabbed her leg, pulled her off balance. She fell on top of him. The gun inside spoke again.

Boots thudded heavily on the rear ‘porch-deck’ of the houseboat—Mulcahey, going aboard from the bow of the *Vigilant*, with a line.

The girl screeched again—“Sundy—stop it!—you crazy?” She fought to scramble in the doorway.

Koski clipped her on the chin with a short left. Her head snapped back as if her neck was a rubber band. She collapsed limply.

. Somewhere at the stern, a door banged open under the drive of Mulcahey’s brogan. The man inside the houseboat cursed thickly. The gun coughed again.

Koski went in, fast.

A bull-necked man with enormous shoulders and a big bald head stood straddle-legged with his back to a table littered with bottles, glasses, broken cups, greenbacks. He wore sailors’ whites and a short-sleeved undershirt which showed the

hard, knotty muscles of his hairy arms. His left hand held a short-bladed dirk, his right, a long-barreled revolver with smoke dribbling lazily from its uplifted muzzle.

He chopped the gun down, aiming at the door leading to the rear compartment, through which Mulcahey would have to come.

The door burst open. The sergeant plowed in, six feet of dripping, rubber-clad target.

Koski dived at the table. The gun spat a tongue of flame at the ceiling. Table, gunner and Koski crashed to the deck together in a shower of broken glass.

Mulcahey stepped in, clubbed his gun. The barrel caught the baldheaded man over the ear. He shook his head like a dog coming out of water, twisted, kicked upward from his half-reclining position. His saddle oxford caught the sergeant ten inches below the belt buckle.

Koski clamped an arm under the bald man’s chin, wrestled his knee into the small of the undershirted back. The revolver described a small, flashing arc, hit Koski’s knee cap. A wave of agonizing pain washed over him. He levered pressure on the windpipe in the crook of his forearm, heard a snap as if the man’s neck had broken.

**S**UNDSTROM’S left hand scabbled around on the floor, came up with the jagged neck of a broken rum bottle—jabbed it over the muscular shoulder, at Koski’s eyes.

Koski lunged sideways, smashed the bald head toward a leg of the overturned table. The bottom of the leg hit the crown of the hairless skull with a solid *guk!* The broken glass dropped out of Sundstrom’s fist.

Mulcahey clouted him once more across the temple.

“Takin’ one thing with another,

Steve," the sergeant rolled the unconscious man on his stomach, "I would say this mouse is very lucky indeed to get off with no more than a shiner. This is a very tough customer." He snapped handcuffs on the wrists crossed behind Sundstrom's back.

"Too tough to be just schwocked." Koski's eyes roved from the overturned table to the double berth, the built-in cupboards and wardrobe, the bookshelves stacked with oblong brown-paper parcels, the big floor-model radio and the desk beside it with typewriter and notebook. "What was he trying to hide, I wonder?"

The big Irishman retrieved one of the greenbacks from the table where it had remained, stuck with spilled rum. "Out in the back room there is a big hunk of something covered up with a sheet—and I do not think it is a barber chair."

"A printing press?"

"Could you think of a better hideout for counterfeiters?"

"There are all kinds of counterfeiters, sarge." Koski limped to the desk. "Go get that kid. I had to rock her to sleep to keep her from rushing in here and getting a slug."

Mulcahey stuck Sundstrom's gun in his raincoat pocket, clomped heavily out to the boat deck.

Koski went to the rear room. It was really two rooms—a small bathroom to starboard—a bigger room, which originally had been the sleeping quarters, to port.

The berths had been left in, used to store cases of paper stock. In the middle of the floor was a cloth-draped something mounted on a solid iron base.

He pulled off the dust cloth. It was a small motordriven press. In the corner, where there had once been a wardrobe, was a four cylinder gas-driven generator.

Koski looked at the form locked on the press bed. He picked up a sheet discarded

and flung on the floor.

From the houseboat's living-room came a moan:

"Sundy! Sundy! They've killed you!"

Koski went back. The girl leaned against the radio, weakly. Her eyes were haggard. Mulcahey held her right wrist.

The sergeant gestured impatiently: "He ain't dead. But he ain't goin' to be much use as a husband for a while, Mrs. Sundstrom. They'll let you see him once a month—on the other side of a screen."

"He hasn't done anything," she whimpered, "you can't—"

"No?" boomed Mulcahey. "We caught you with your—" he changed it, in midstream, "—with the goods on you."

"Turn your damper down, Irish," Koski said. "It's only a misdemeanor."

"Counterfeiting?" His partner craned his neck forward.

**K**OSKI frowned. "Songs. Not bills, Irish. This wild man was printing boot-legged lyrics. Took down the words off the radio, set 'em up, printed 'em without bothering about getting copyright owners' permission." The Lieutenant held out the sheet he'd picked off the floor:

#### THE FAMOUS 500

Authentic Words of the Most Popular Songs on Stage, Radio and Screen. A Hundred Hit Parades In One—Ten Cents.

"Illegal," Koski said. "Not very criminal. Not enough to make Mrs. Sundstrom's husband go berserk. Must have been something else." He looked at the girl.

"No," she cried defiantly. "We did print some of those song sheets. But we never sold any ourselves—"

"'Sright!" The man on the floor came to, mumbling. He made an effort to roll over. "She didn't have anything to do with it, Hannah didn'. I killed him, myself."

Koski turned the handcuffed man on his side. The polished scalp was smeary with blood but across the right temple was a livid welt of darker hue. The head of the Harbor Squad plainclothesmen bent to examine it. Tiny flakes of dark green ink, or paint, had been driven into Sundy's skin.

"Who'd you knock off?" Koski looked down into the watery blue eyes.

The girl tried to get away from Mulcahey: "Shut your mouth, Sundy! Don't talk!" She flailed ineffectually at the sergeant's raincoat with a balled-up fist.

Koski went to the row of hooks fixed in the partition beside the door to the boat deck. A yellow sou'wester hung alongside a girl's cobalt transparent rain cape—next them, an oyster white raincoat. It was long. It had a belted back. And it was damp.

Koski flung the raincoat over the man on the floor. It reached from his shoulders to his ankles. The belt came halfway between his waist and knees.

"Fits you like those dungarees fit her." Koski fished in the raincoat's pockets. They yielded a soggy pack of cigs and a folder of paper matches. The folder was metallic burgundy in color—on it in gilt lettering was *Maxie*.

"Now, who," Koski made the inquiry as if he didn't really expect an answer, "is Maxie?"

The man on the floor grunted unintelligibly.

"Maxie's a guy who came over from another boat to have a drink," Hannah said. "He forgot his coat when he went, that's all. Don't waste your time looking for Maxie!"

"Going to be hard to find?" Koski roamed around the cabin, poking at parcels on the shelves, dishes on the galley sink, the desk.

Letterhead sheets with song lyrics,—

everything from *Margie* to *I'm My Own Grampa*. And one letter that read:

Dear Mr. Sundstrom: —

Our last shipment of 30 reams of #12 Cyndax Super, 25x38, exhausts the amount of credit which Mr. Maximilian Cavado arranged for you. Inasmuch as we have been unable to contact Mr. Cavado, we suggest you get in touch with him, in order that further shipments may be made on other than a COD basis.

Trusting you appreciate our position in this matter and with many thanks for your valued business to date, we remain—

Faithfully yours,

Gotham Wholesale Paper Corp.

Per: *Edmund Bigstaff*

Koski rattled the letter between knotty-knuckled fingers. "Maxie's the other end of your racket, huh? Puts up the coin, sells the stuff after you two print it?"

The girl broke, "Oh, what's the use! They'll find out, anyway."

"Keep your face out of it!" Sundy mumbled through puffy lips.

"I've been trying to and what's it got us except a mauling!" she said.

**M**ULCAHEY growled: "It could get you worse, if it's more fairy tales you'll be telling."

She twisted her mouth, wryly. "I wouldn't be likely to tell you about it, unless I had to. Max was partners with us, all right. He got us into it, when we were flat and needed a buck. We ran most of the risk, he took most of the profit. "

Sundy groaned, rolled over on his face again.

"This afternoon," Hannah went on, tautly, "Sundy was stewed—dead to the world. I'd just got out of the bathtub, when Max came. Neither of us had expected him, at all. Certainly I didn't expect him to—make love to me—but that's what he did.

"I was afraid to holler and wake Sundy up—I was scared there'd be a fight. But

Max thought I was just playing hard-to-get. He was—” her voice trembled, tears rolled down her face “—he had me out in the press-room. I was struggling with him—that’s where I got the black eye—when Sundry heard him and went for him.”

“With what?” Koski asked. “His fists?”

She shook her head. “One of those steel forms he uses on the press.”

“Killed him?” Koski was bland.

She nodded. “It was self-defense! Sundry was protecting *me!*”

“Threw his body overboard?” Koski didn’t seem impressed. “That the story?”

“It’s the truth!” she cried.

“Makes a nice, sympathetic tear-jerker for the jury,” the marine detective admitted, “as far as it goes. Trouble is, doesn’t go far enough. How’d Max get out here, to your houseboat?”

“Same way he always did. Hired that old wharf rat to row him out.” She lost some of her angry insistence.

“Yair? So then Murf rowed back. But you must have had your own rowboat tied up here. You’d have to have a dinghy, to get to shore when you need to. Where is it?”

She was ready for that one. “I put Max—Max’s body— in it. I rowed him out past the point to dump him in—the dinghy tipped over and filled and sank. I had to swim. Couldn’t make headway against the tide. Kept drifting out into the Sound. Thought I was a gone goose—then you came and fished me out.”

“Ah!” Mulcahey tugged impatiently at her arm. “What happened to your clothes?”

“I couldn’t swim with my slacks on. I kicked them off.”

Koski smiled without humor. “And when we get back here to the houseboat, your husband takes a pot shot at you and

calls you a double-crossing two-timer. That’s gratitude for you!”

Hannah sobbed through her teeth—she flung the back of her free hand up against her forehead, her head tilted back, her knees buckled.

Mulcahey caught her before she keeled over. He held her helplessly, incredulity stamped on his brick-red face.

She clung close to him, jabbing the muzzle of Sundry’s gun against the sergeant’s ribs, through the cloth of the pocket. He lifted his arms over his head.

She pulled her hand out of the raincoat pocket, tossed a key on the floor toward Koski. “Unless you want your chum to get a hunk of lead, unlock those handcuffs! Quick!”

Koski could have gone for his automatic. She couldn’t cover them both. But to hit her, he’d have to shoot around Mulcahey’s bulk. She was behind the sergeant, using him as a shield.

**H**E STOOPED—picked up the key. “You going to let this whacky babe set you in that chair, Sundstrom?” Koski knelt, unlocked the cuffs. “She’ll wind up giving you the kind of hotfoot you only get once in a lifetime.”

The bald man drew his arms to his sides, flexed them, hoisted himself on his elbows. He got his knees under him, wiped blood off his mouth against the short sleeve of his undershirt. He stood up, swaying slightly.

He eyed Koski with cold malevolence, looked at Mulcahey, flattening his lips against his teeth. He stalked across to the girl, held out a stubby palm.

“Give,” he said.

She hesitated—handed over the revolver.

“Sundry!” she breathed in terror. “*Sundry!* No!”

He nodded, slowly. "You're a wonderful kid. Best dame to have around, a man could want. But I'm not goin' to burn because of you and your double-talk."

"She murdered Max?" Koski said.

"No!—No!—*Sundy!*" the girl whimpered.

Sundstrom waved his gun in an ominous semi-circle taking in all three—Koski, the sergeant, Hannah. He touched the green welt on his right temple.

"Maybe it was self-defense, like she claims," he said. "She's not my wife, though I'd have spliced up with her in a minute until I found out she'd been Maxie's girl before she was mine. Maxie introduced us. I should have been wise long ago but I was a dummy an' never suspected a thing until today."

His blood-caked face added to the icy menace of the pale, watery eyes.

"Maxie comes to get delivery of a hundred thou of them crummy song sheets. But he says he can only payoff at eight fifty a thou instead of the twelve bucks he agrees on. I know he's gettin' rid of 'em to his distributors at sixty-five, so he stands to clear more than five gee, even if he gives us what he agreed to.

"I won't go for a deal like that. I tell him if he don't wanna come through, maybe I'll peddle th' papers myself. He ain't got no more right to 'em than I have. They're all pirated. Hannah an' I do all the work—she takes down the words off the radio an' I set 'em up an' hardly make pressman's scale runnin' 'em off.

"He gets sore an' swears he'll turn us in to the authorities if we don't give him th' bundles—an' pretty soon I take a poke at him an' the kid runs to him, bawlin' an' starts to fuss over him. She called him 'Maxie, hon' an' 'Max-darlin' ' until I catch wise she really goes for him an' has been criss-crossin' me all the time. But

he's mad clear through an' when she gets in his way, he socks her in the puss an' knocks her off th' boat-deck where I've chased him."

"What time was this?" Koski moved casually toward the boat-deck, as if to inspect the scene of the fracas.

"Maybe nine-thirty," Sundstrom answered. "Max always come at night, so he could load the bundles from the rowboat to his car on the pier, without having too many people ask questions. Anyhow, we go to it—him with a knife an' me with a splicing fid."

"All this time," Mulcahey remarked skeptically, "th' babe is in the water?"

"I never see her from the time she takes the nose dive off th' deck. I got other things to attend to," Sundstrom growled. "Such as Max jumpin' in our dink an' slashin' the line. I get down on my knees an' grab the gunnel. He picks up an oar and whales me over the head an' that's the count for me.

"When I come to, I'm lyin' half off the deck, with the top of my dome in the water. Th' dink's gone an' Max is gone an' she's gone." He waggled the gun at the girl, frozen with horror against the bookshelves. "But I know she's with him because I hear him call out—'Hannah' an' then in a little while—'No!—No! Don't!' Then I don't hear no more.

"I'm feelin' sorry for myself. I lose my girl, my job an' my partner all at once. I don't care what happens. So I belt the bottle some—an' I guess I doze off—because by-and-by I hear somebody yellin' an' I figure it's Max comin' back, so I up on my pins and start blasting. Only it's not Max—it's you cops. So I guess they's not much doubt who done him in."

"Don't say that, *Sundy!* It's a lie!" She ran toward him.

KOSKI stuck out a foot, tripped her. She tumbled with outflung arms toward the muzzle of Sundstrom's gun.

He swung the revolver aside, to keep it away from her.

Koski stepped in, as the girl plunged against Sundstrom. "Hold the pose—look at the little birdie and don't move!"

The girl and the bald man swivelled their heads around toward his .45.

"That's it," Koski said. "Now, Irish, if you'll just snap the shutter—we'll have the happy pair recorded for future generations."

Mulcahey linked them with the cuffs.

The riding lights of the anchored fleet swayed like spectral metronomes in the wake of the *Vigilant* as she moved in to the municipal pier.

The sickly green of the police lights shed its sallow tinge over the black hull of the patrol boat. The amber fuzz that was the pier lights burned down feebly through the fog.

"You haven't any right to arrest either of us," Hannah snarled. "You can't even prove Max is dead—without you find his body."

"That's right," Koski said. "If we find your dink tied up here at the float and his car gone, I might have to turn you loose—"

Mulcahey nosed the *Vigilant* against the pier. The small-boat float was directly ahead and to port. Around it were tied a score of varnished skiffs, canvas wherries, plastic prams, flat-bottomed rowboats.

"See your dinghy there anywhere?" Koski moved up close behind the couple.

"No," Sundry growled. "She's not there."

"He might have rowed in to one of the yacht club floats," the girl cried. "There's no proof—"

"Murf—hey, Murf—" Koski called.

The old watchman looped the patrol boat's stern line over an iron bollard, ran nimbly to the stringpiece, peered down.

"Ay, cod, now! Trouble, eh?" he said.

Koski clambered to the foredeck. "You rowed a guy out to the *Seabohemia* earlier tonight, Murf."

"I did so. 'Twas not the first time, either. A fine gentleman and very generous—"

"Were you supposed to go out and fetch him ashore?" Koski hoisted himself to the pier.

"I was not. He tells me his friends aboard the houseboat, Mister Sundstrom and his wife now, they'd be bringing him back." Murfree frowned. "But I've seen hair nor hide of him since. That's his car a-standin' there." He jabbed a thumb at a new station wagon shiny with chrome and varnish. "He always parks it here so's I can keep an eye on it."

Koski took his arm. "We've reason to suspect dirty work at the crossroads, Murf."

"The gentleman, himself?"

"Looks as if."

"He told me he would be bringing some bundles ashore by-and-by—he'd be needin' me to help carry them up to his car." The watchman spat tobacco juice into the water. "Which one of them? Or was it the both, now?"

"They've both been telling stories fishier than Friday at Fulton Market." Koski lowered his voice. "Which one of them did you see when you dropped your passenger off at the houseboat?" He drew the old man out of earshot of the couple, down the cleated ramp to the float.

"Neither," Murf spat again. "I remember the radio was on—but nobody came out on the boat-deck when the gentleman climbed aboard."

IN A DARK brown flat-bottomed boat, a pair of freshly painted oars glinted black under the green light. In daylight, those oars would be bright green.

"That the tub you rowed him out in, Murf?"

"Ay, cod, it is. The poor soul—"

"New oars, huh?"

"Old ones. Fresh painted." The watchman turned to look at the couple standing by the coaming of the police boat. "Never would I have thought it of them, now."

Koski looked at the short, frayed rope dangling inside the stern of the rowboat. "That's what you used, eh, Murf?"

"How's that?" Murf bent, squinted in the boat. "What?"

"Stone," Koski said. "Used to have a boulder tied on the end of your bow rope, didn't you? To use as an anchor?"

"Ay, cod! I did! Where is it now?"

Koski gripped his arm more tightly. "Right about where you got those oars, I'd say."

The watchman recoiled. "Them are my oars, ay cod! an' I can swear to it!"

"Be a help if you would, Murf. Because if you look real careful, you'll see a little paint rubbed off the shaft of that one—that left one. It was where the oar clouted Sundstrom. Some of the paint is still on his bald—"

The old man stamped his heel on Koski's foot. He spat in his face. He butted him in the chin.

Mulcahey came running.

"The old coot gone crazy, skipper?"

"If you said he went off his nut earlier this evening, Irish, when he decided it was foolish to pass up the money in Max's wallet," Koski drew a fat wad of bills from Murf's pants pocket, "if you said he was crazy enough to think all he had to do was bang Max over the head with an oar and tie his anchor-rock to the body and dump

it overside—if you said that, I doubt if anybody'd dispute you. Not Murf, anyway."

Murf disputed it profanely. . . .

The *Vigilant* moved slowly out past the point. The lights on the *Seaboemia* were brighter than anything in the fleet.

"Aren't you afraid," asked Mulcahey, "there'll be another murder—leaving them two out there together on the houseboat, now?"

Koski grinned wearily. "They'll patch it up, Irish. They'll weld it with a license, all according to Hoyle. You'll see. It'll be Mr. and Mrs. Sundstrom testifying, when Murf goes on trial."

"Each of 'em thought the other killed Max?"

"Yair. But the girl was lying all the way. And Sundstrom was telling the truth. The mixture made it kind of tough to figure what did happen."

"Murf heard the fighting, in at the pier?"

"Sure. So he rowed out in his flat-bottom to see what was going on. What was going on was Max, paddling around in the dark and the mist, trying to find Hannah, calling her name."

"But he was the one who'd knocked her into the water, Steve."

"Oh, when Max and Baldy started slugging, she barged in and caught a stray punch. It knocked her overboard. After Max batted Sundstrom senseless with the oar handle, he went looking for her. Murf heard him . . ."

"Never in a thousand would I have believed that old dodo would do a thing like that."

"Doubt if he meant to do it, Irish. But when he got out there and saw how easy it would be—anyone who suspected foul play would blame Sundstrom because of the noisy quarrel on the houseboat—why, Murf just up and banged Max with *his*

oar.”

“Ah. That’s when Sundstrom heard Max yell out-’*No, no*’ and so forth!”

“Yair. Murf probably broke one of his oars over Max’s skull—he wouldn’t have swapped the green ones in Sundstrom’s dinghy for his own, otherwise.”

“But where,” the sergeant wanted to know, “*is* that dinghy!”

“One man’s guess, Irish. I’d say Murf knocked a hole in it and sank it, after he’d tied the anchor rock to Max and sunk *him*.”

The lights of the harbor became a faint haze, astern. Mulcahey regarded his partner and superior with something approaching awe.

“You figure all this before we get back to the pier, Steve?”

“Shucks, no. But if Sundstrom was telling the truth, Max left the houseboat in the dinghy alive. He’d make for the pier and his car. If he didn’t get there, who stopped him? Only other person beside the man he’d left unconscious on the *Seabohemia* and the girl he thought was

floundering around in the water—was the watchman who thought he was so ‘generous’.”

“It still leaves the dame, skipper. How did she get ‘way out there in the Sound?”

“That’s the only thing she leveled on, sarge. When she came to, after that sock in the eye, she couldn’t see anything. The tide was going out fast. Only thing she could do was swim with it and yell for help. She didn’t know where she was. She kicked off her slacks and sweater—”

“And when we haul her aboard, what a line of hodelyo she hands us. For why?”

“To keep us from taking her back to the houseboat, discovering the song-piracy setup.”

“But when she does get there? *More* yatadada!”

“To throw suspicion on Sundstrom, yair. Like you said, Irish.”

“Huh?”

“You told her there must have been a rough party on board. There was. And the female of the species was the roughest of the lot!”