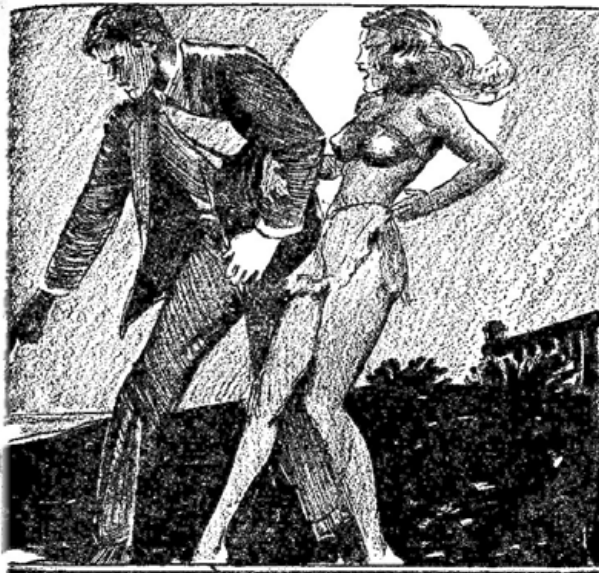


# BODY ON THE BEACH

By ARTHUR WALLACE

*Was it all a ghastly joke? Or was Jerry really dead? And if it was death, what had happened to the body? The aftermath of a wild party leads to even wilder things*



**I**T WAS dark as hell. I couldn't see a damn thing. I sat up in bed and rubbed my hand over my face. It didn't help. I felt like a piece of pickled tripe looks—if you can imagine that. Something had crawled into my mouth and passed out there. I was sure of it.

I tried to figure out what had happened but it was like piloting a ferryboat through a fog. The wheels wouldn't mesh. I remembered letting a cozy little blonde talk me into another champagne cocktail. I remembered the blonde but not the cocktail.

I looked at my watch. Luckily it had a radium dial. It was ten minutes short of midnight. Where was everybody? Jerry and Paula and the rest of the gang? Had they all passed out?

I started to swing my legs off the bed but they bumped up against something. I reached out to feel what it was. My fingers touched a

face—a man's face. I drew back fast. It was cold and clammy, that face. Not warm like my own. My scalp began to crawl and the hair follicles opened and closed like little mouths. My spine was an icicle.

Somehow I scrambled off the other side of the bed, groped for the light switch. It seemed like a year before I found it. The sudden brilliance blinded me. When I could see again, I stood there, gaping at the bed.

**T**HERE was a body stretched out on it. Sticking up from the body's chest was the blood-stained handle of a knife. Step by step I drew nearer. A scream started way back in my throat. Horror silenced it.

*The dead man on the bed was Jerry Harris! My friend, Jerry Harris! Dead! Murdered!*

The next few minutes were stolen from my life. I never lived them. They were a complete

mental blank. The next thing I knew I was staring at my hands. They were caked with dry blood! I had Jerry's blood on my hands! *Jerry's blood!*

I tried to pull myself together but I was shaking like a leaf in a high wind. Don't be a fool, I said to myself. You didn't do it. Brace up! Scream! *Do something!*

I did something. It seemed like the only logical thing to do at the moment. I tip-toed through the hall and went into the bathroom. I scrubbed my hands clean, washed the bowl out a dozen times.

Out in the hall again I listened for sounds. There weren't any. Jerry Harris' beach bungalow was still as a tomb—*his tomb!*

I got the feeling then that it was all a mad nightmare. Jerry couldn't be dead! It was a joke they were playing on me! A ghastly, grisly joke, Jerry wasn't dead at all!

I stalked into the bedroom, grinning. "How does it feel to have a knife in your chest, Jerry?" I said out loud. He didn't move a muscle. I licked my lips. They were dry. "So long, pal," I said, starting for the door. "The gag is all washed up."

I turned at the door, retraced my steps to the bed. I began to get a little panicky. I reached out and touched Jerry's cheek. It was like ice.

"Jerry!" I screamed, backing away.

I STUMBLED out into the hall, ran down the stairs. There was a light in the living-room. I rushed in. Merrill Lord, Paula's brother, was sitting on a divan with the cute little blonde who had offered me that last cocktail stretched across his lap, face down. He was playing tick-tack-toe on her bare back with the burnt ends of matches. Her skirt was up above her knees. She was out cold.

Merril wasn't sober by a long shot. His eyes were glassy and his head rolled. He looked up at me but nothing registered. He went back to his game on the blonde's bare back.

My eyes swept the room. There was a man asleep under the piano. It was Leonard Barker, Jerry's brokerage partner. The slinky brunette he had brought to the week-end party was curled up in a love seat, one white arm drooping. Someone had torn the bodice of her evening gown, and white skin peeped out.

There were liquor spots on the mulberry chenille rug, bit of glass on the piano top. The room was a mess. A lace brassiere—probably the blonde's—was fitted across the back of a chair. A floor lamp was down on its side, parchment shade crushed.

Paula was missing. Yes, and someone else. Roger Carroll, the actor. Where were they? Did Paula know Jerry was dead?

"Merril!"

He looked up, grinned. "Le'sh play ticksh-tacksh-toesh, huh?" The blonde's back was already completely criss-crossed. Merrill turned her inert body over, looked hazily at her, then turned her again, rubbing her back until it was a grey smudge. "L'esh play!" he hiccuped.

"Where's Paula, Merrill?" I questioned.

"On th' beach." I ran out of the house, down to the beach. There was a full moon. Its reflection cut a silver path through the placid sea. I saw a dark outline on the white sand. I moved forward soundlessly.

It was Paula and Roger Carroll. Paula was lying on the sand, the bodice of her dress gaping. Carroll leaned over her, his hands at her back, his lips drinking in the moist warmth of her mouth and laying a path of caresses over her throat and shoulders.

All the blood in my body rushed to my heart. I thought of Jerry stretched out on the bed, a knife in his chest. Anger and indignation welled up in me. Throwing caution to the winds I rushed forward. Carroll heard me coming. He was on his feet.

I didn't say a word. I shot my fist out, putting my body behind it. A stabbing pain knifed up to my shoulder and my knuckles

crashed against the point of the actor's jaw. His head snapped back, he stumbled, fell. I knew that punch had put him out. It almost ruined me.

I stood over Paula. Out of a clear sky I felt righteous as hell. God knows I'd played around with enough married women not to damn one. But I guess it was Jerry's being dead that made me feel like a tin god.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" I snapped.

Paula just moaned. I went down on one knee beside her. She was cockeyed. No wonder Carroll had been able to lure her out to the beach. She didn't know what she was doing.

**I**LIFTED her up, slung her across my shoulder, and started back to the house. Paula was no lightweight. I just about made the porch, dropped her on a glider. She went out cold. Looking at her with a ray of moonlight playing over her half-bare shoulders, I didn't blame Carroll for trying to fool around. It was Jerry's fault, anyway. He was always free with other women. Why shouldn't Paula be free with men?

I felt like a heel the next second. Jerry was dead. I had no right even thinking things like that.

Merril's drink-sodden voice brought me around, facing the door. He was half-dragging and half-carrying the blotto blonde.

"C'mon, baby," he urged. "Thash wha' chu need, air an' moonbeams. C'mon, baby."

I waited until he had gotten the blonde off the porch and was pulling her across the sand like a sack of wheat. Then I lifted Paula and carried her inside. Leonard Barker was still under the piano, snoring. His girl-friend hadn't changed her position.

I stretched Paula out on the divan, remembered that I had seen a green bottle of smelling-salts in the medicine chest. I was afraid to go up for it; afraid that I might see Jerry's lifeless body on the bed. Instead, I found

my way to the kitchen, soaked a dish towel in cold water.

I worked over Paula for ten minutes before her eyelids fluttered and she came to. It was another ten minutes before I could get her to understand me.

"It's about Jerry, Paula," I persisted. "About Jerry!"

"Jerry," she mumbled. "Jerry 'sh aw righ."

"No, he isn't Paula! Something's happened to Jerry!"

She sobered suddenly. Her eyes cleared. She sat up on the divan, pressing her palm to her forehead. "What is it, Gil?"

For the first time in my life, words failed me. I didn't have the heart to break it to her, and yet it had to be done. She sensed my hesitance. Her fingers gripped my arm.

"Gil! What is it? Is he hurt? Gil, tell me!"

I swallowed hard. "Jerry's dead, Paula."

She laughed, queerly. It was so unexpected that it chilled the marrow of my bones. "Don't joke, Gil," she said. "Where is Jerry?"

"Upstairs," I said softly. "Stretched out on a bed. He—he's been stabbed!"

Her face went ghostly white. I could almost see the color draining out of her throat and breast.

"Where?" she screamed. "Where?"

I followed her up the steps, pointed to the bedroom. I stopped short as my right foot crossed the threshold. *The bed was empty! Jerry's body had vanished!*

Paula turned on me. Her eyes flashed fire. "How could you be so cruel? I think you're the lowest, most despicable—"

"Paula!" My voice cracked. "I swear I saw him on that bed! I touched his face! It was cold! The handle of a knife stuck up out of his chest! Believe me, Paula!"

Her eyes withered me. "If this is your idea of humor I think it's disgusting!" she snapped.

FOR a moment I doubted my own sanity. I would have sworn by all that I held holy that Jerry Harris' dead body was on that bed not twenty minutes ago. Was I the victim of a hoax, as I had first imagined? No, it was impossible! My fingers touched his cheek and it was cold in death. And the blood on my hands, the blood on the knife handle, the blade buried in his chest! It was all too real, too horribly real.

I heard Paula swish out of the room, hurry down the stairs. I searched the room, peering into the dark closets, looking under the bed, expecting at any moment to have Jerry's sightless eyes stare out at me. But no such thing happened. The body had vanished! Melted into thin air!

I was standing at the bedside, searching for blood stains on the rumpled coverlet, when a voice brought me around. It was Mary, the Harris' maid. A cotton bathrobe covered her lumpy figure. She hugged it close around her.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," she said, "but is anything wrong!" Watery blue eyes rolled in her flat, bovine face.

"Wrong?" I echoed.

"Well, I—I heard some shoutin', sir, and I thought maybe somethin' had happened."

"Shouting? Who did you hear shouting, Mary?"

Her lips worked nervously. "I—I thought it was you, sir. It—it was like your voice, sir."

Goose pimples came out on my skin. "What—what did you hear, Mary?"

She hesitated. "Well, I didn't hear it clear, sir. My room is off to th' end of the hall. It sounded like—like you was shoutin' at Mr. Harris, sir."

"What did I say?"

"Well—er—maybe I didn't hear it right, sir, but I thought you said somethin' about a knife in someone's chest. An' then you said somethin' was—was all washed up."

The hideous truth hit me like a cold wave. If Jerry *was* dead—murdered—and I was positive

of it, this servant girl's story would be a rope around my neck. I *had* asked Jerry how he liked having a knife in his chest! It was when I thought the whole thing was a joke! I *had* said, aloud, that the gag was all washed up!

My expression betrayed me. "Is—is anything wrong, sir?" she whispered huskily.

I forced a wan smile. "No, Mary, there's nothing wrong. You can go back to bed."

"Thank you, sir. Good-night, sir."

I waited until I heard her door close before reaching for the phone. Jerry Harris had provided for his guests' comfort. There was an extension in every room. After I gave the New York number, I wondered whether I was just falling deeper into the trap of a practical joker.

The phone rang interminably at the other end before I heard Mike Haddock's familiarly gruff voice.

"Mike! This is Gil Batten. I'm out at Sawtucket on the Island. Something's happened out here. I want you to catch the first train out of Penn Station. I'll meet you at the station."

He grumbled. "Geez, Gil, I'm right in the midst of a stud game. Can't it lay over 'till morning?"

"No, it can't." I glued my lips to the mouthpiece. "I think it's murder, Mike."

I could hear his intake of breath. "Where are you?"

"Sawtucket, on the North Shore. It's twelve-thirty now. You should make Penn Station in fifteen minutes. I'll call and find out what train you'll catch. Don't waste any time."

"Okay," he sang. There was a click.

I called the Sawtucket station, found there was a train leaving New York at 1:05, due in at 2:15. An hour and a half was a long time to wait, but it was worth it. I wanted Mike on the spot just in case. I had a funny feeling that invisible tentacles were being fastened about me; that I was being groomed as the murderer of Jerry Harris!

I WENT down to the living-room. Paula was helping Leonard Barker into a chair. His brunette girlfriend had slipped off the love seat and was sprawled on the floor her skirt rucked up above her knees, one shoulder strap of her gown down on her arm, plenty of olive-tinted flesh visible.

"Carry Gloria to the divan," Paula ordered.

I lifted the brunette and did as directed. She was dead weight in my arms. I could smell the heady perfume she used as I carried her to the divan. It was rising in intoxicating eddies from her breast.

"Where's Merrill and Kitty!" Paula questioned. "And where's Roger? And Jerry?" She looked at me reproachfully. "I don't think it was at all nice of you to do what you did, Gil. Where is Jerry!"

I felt ridiculously helpless. What could I say? How could I convince her that what I had seen was real!

"Where is Jerry, Gil?" she repeated.

"Paula." I reached for her hands. "I told you the truth. I've already sent for a detective. This is serious."

A quiver shot through her. Terror lights flickered in her deep brown eyes. "No, Gil!" she breathed. "It can't be true!"

"But it is, Paula. It's the God's truth. I saw him on that bed! I touched his cheek! He was cold . . . dead!"

"No! No!" Her voice rose hysterically.

I held her close, conscious of the giant tremors passing through her body. I felt her quivering against me, soft and warm.

"You mustn't let yourself go, Paula," I whispered.

Leonard Barker came out of his drunken stupor long enough to ogle us. I drew away from Paula. "But—but where is he, Gil?" she questioned. "Even—even if it's true, where is he?"

I led her out of the hall. "I don't know, Paula. Tell me what happened. Who took me

upstairs?"

Her lips trembled. "Jerry did. You went out cold and Jerry carried you to your room."

"Did he come down again?"

"I—I don't remember. We all had quite a lot to drink. Roger asked me to walk on the beach. I—I seem to recall him saying that Jerry was on the beach. Everything's hazy after that."

"What about Barker and his girl, Sylvia?"

"They were out when we left. So was Connie, the little blonde. Merrill was trying to bring her around but he was pretty drunk himself." She tensed. "We *must* find Jerry, Gil!"

Her brother, Merrill, staggered through the door. He could just about keep erect. He grinned foolishly.

"Shick," he mumbled. "Connie's shick." His knees bucked. I caught him and helped him into a chair.

"Merril, have you seen Jerry?" His head rolled. The odor of liquor on his breath was foul.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Connie's shick."

"I'll look on the beach, Paula," I said. "You search the house. Try and get these people sobered up. The detective will want to question them when he gets here."

I WALKED out on the beach. The moon had dipped behind a gray cloud. A figure was coming toward the house. It was Roger Carroll. I gave him a wide berth, swinging toward the water's edge.

Connie, the plump little blonde, stripped down to pink silk under-things and nothing much else, was kneeling where the water lapped the shore, sprinkling it over her face and breast.

I kept my distance. "Feel all right?" I asked.

She rose unsteadily, turned toward me. Her hair had fallen down about her shoulders, half-shielding her plump bosom. She looked like a mermaid come out of the sea.

"I'm okay now," she said, coming toward me. "Say, what happened to you?"

I ignored her question. Uneasiness got the best of me. The girl seemed oblivious of her near nudity, but I wasn't. It had been bad enough when she pressed up against me with clothes on. Now, I found strange things happening to my heart and my blood pressure.

"Have you seen Jerry—Mr. Harris?" I asked.

"Not for hours. I think he has designs on that slinky brunette. The last time I saw him he was making time fast." She grinned. "Swell shindig, isn't it?"

"I—I have to look for Jerry," I said. "If you'll excuse me—"

She slipped her arm into mine, slunk warmly against me. "I'll go with you. Where do we look?"

We walked along the hard-packed sand for a hundred yards. Each step Connie took brushed some curve of her slim figure against me. I couldn't help the way my blood started humming.

Suddenly she stopped, dropped to the sand, and pulled me down with her. "To hell with Jerry, honey!" she said. "Let him have his fun. How about you and me, huh?"

Her arms twined about my neck and her swollen lips found my mouth. For a moment I fought against the warmth of her embrace, the dragging succulence of her parted lips. But it was a losing battle. The girl was emotion personified, quivering with its intensity, as she strained close, I could feel every ripple and undulation of her. There was no resisting. . . .

**I** GLANCED at my wrist-watch. It was two o'clock. The train Mike was on was due at 2:15.

He was waiting on the deserted station platform when I drove up.

"Not only do you drag me out to this hell-hole at midnight but you keep me waiting," he complained. "What's up?"

I told him everything, from beginning to

end. Even how I had washed the blood from my hands. I knew I could trust him.

His square jaw tightened. "It looks like a frame, all right. Would there be any reason for you finishing him? A motive someone else could point to?"

"Of course not! Jerry and I were friends."

"Any business connections?"

"Well—er—yes. He loaned me some money. Twenty thousand. He accepted my note. I redeemed it yesterday when I got out here. I gave him \$20,000 in cash."

"Anybody else know about that loan?"

"Possibly his partner, Leonard Barker."

"Don't drive to the house," Mike said. "Stop before you get there, I want to look around. You say you can't find the body?"

"I—I really haven't looked."

"But you saw it on the bed in your room. You're sure of that?"

"Positive. I touched his face. It was ice cold."

The lights of the Harris bungalow twinkled ahead. I drew up, turned off the ignition. "That's the house."

Mike fished a flashlight out of his overnight bag. "Come on. We'll approach it from the beach."

We walked over the still warm sand, Mike's light cutting a brilliant swathe through the darkness. We were opposite the cottage when a high-pitched feminine scream suddenly knifed out of the black.

Mike pulled his gun, ran awkwardly forward, the beam of the flash jogging up and down. Again the scream sounded, this time choked. I tripped over something and fell. It was an empty whiskey bottle. The need for a weapon prompted my picking it up and carrying it with me. Mike had stopped short up ahead. As I drew closer, I knew why. There was a crumpled body in the circle of his flashlight. Paula was down on her knees beside the body, shrieking hysterically.

“There’s your body,” Mike said laconically.

An hour later Mike called me upstairs. I saw the local medical examiner and the pot-bellied chief of police in the bedroom. Mike led me to the end of the hall.

“There’s something plenty screwy here, Gil,” he said, “Harris was stabbed to death, all right, but he was also beaten. He has four broken ribs and a fractured arm, not to mention contusions on his face. There wasn’t a brawl, was there!”

I gasped for air. “N-no, not that I know of.”

“A hell of a lot I’m going to get out of this crowd,” Mike growled. “Everybody potted when he was killed. That is, everybody but the killer.” His voice dropped, “We’ve got to keep that fat copper in the dark. If he learns about you, he’ll run you in damn’ fast. Well, let’s go downstairs.”

**M**ERRIL and Sylvia were the only ones still groggy. The excitement had sobered Leonard Barker. Roger Carroll, the actor, was his suave self. Paula, grief-wracked, huddled in a chair, her face in her hands.

Mike eyed the assorted company. Connie was wearing a negligee. Her full curves drew Mike’s attention. She smiled coquettishly.

“Who knows what happened here!” he questioned. “Were any of you sober enough!”

Carroll ran a hand over his glossy hair. He glared at me. “We were all drinking,” he said. “Everyone was in good spirits.” He pointed at me. “He passed out. Mr. Harris carried him upstairs. A little later Mr. Barker went under.” He smiled at Sylvia. “Then that young lady. I suggested a walk on the beach to Mrs. Harris. It was getting stuffy. That’s all.”

“You didn’t see Harris after he went upstairs?”

“No.”

Mike turned to Merrill. “What about you!”

Merril blinked. “Me? I’m okay, thanksh.”

“Did you see Harris after he went upstairs!”

Merril waved an all-inclusive arm. “I didn’t see nobody!”

“Anybody hear any sounds of a struggle! A fight!”

There was no answer. Connie giggled as Merrill made gurgling sounds with his lips.

The police chief entered the room. “They’re all yours, chief,” Mike said. “I’m going to look around. Come on, Gil.”

“Hold on, Mr. Maddock,” the chief said. “You can’t take him. He’s just as much a suspect as anyone.”

“I’ll be responsible,” Mike retorted.

In the bedroom where I had first awakened to find Jerry Harris’ body next to me, Mike paced the floor. The corpse was covered with a sheet. He lifted it.

“Did he look like that when you saw him!”

My stomach turned. Poor Jerry’s face was cruelly battered. The nose was broken and twisted out of shape.

“No!” I gasped

“I thought not.” Mike threw the sheet back. His sharp, gray eyes circled the room. They narrowed. He walked to the window slid it open, peered out “It’s possible,” he said “Come on down.”

The police chief stepped out into the hall as we walked through. He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“You’re stayin’ right here,” he said. “There’s too much on you.”

Mike looked at me. He knew Mary, the maid, had repeated what she had heard me say in jest. I knew it, too.

“Okay, chief,” Mike said. “You can have him.”

I was dumbfounded as Mike sauntered out the front door. The chief led me into the living-room.

“Where’s the \$20,000 you were supposed to give Mr. Harris tonight!”

“I—I gave it to him! He put it in his safe in his room! I saw him do it!”

The chief's fat face darkened. "Well, it isn't there!"

Mike walked in. I turned to him appealingly. "He's trying to railroad me!" I protested.

"It's open and shut, Mr. Maddock," the chief said. "This man killed Harris to avoid paying a debt. He feigned drunkenness to get Harris alone, upstairs. He killed him and carried the body out on the beach."

"Sounds good, chief," Mike said casually. "I'll go along to the station house with you. Got your car?"

Mike, covering me with a gun, urged me into the back of the police sedan. The chief slid behind the wheel. We were scarcely out of sight of the bungalow when Mike leaned forward, brought the butt of his gun down on the chief's head, grabbed the wheel as the fat man slumped. Without acceleration, the car slowed down, stalled, stopped.

"See if you can find some rope in the car, Gil," Mike snapped. "Work fast!"

I found a coil of clothes-line. Mike bound the chief from head to foot, even gagging his mouth.

"Now that he's out of the way, we may get somewhere. Unless we solve this thing by dawn, there'll be hell to pay. Put him in the back of the car and drive it off the road."

**M**INUTES later we were walking toward the bungalow. "One thing I know," Mike said. "Harris' body was dropped out the window. That's how his ribs were broken. But why the murderer wanted to move the body is beyond me. Whoever did it intended to frame you. Barker may have had a business motive. Carroll, the actor, was evidently sweet on Harris' wife. Listen, let's try something. Muss up your hair. Take my gun and go back to the house. You escaped from us, see? Threaten to kill all of them to keep them quiet. Act tough as hell."

"But—but what's the idea?"

"I'll be watching through a window. I just want to see how they react. Go after the women mostly. We haven't time to trace this thing through. Maybe we'll get a fast answer this way. Go ahead."



Clutching the gun I moved forward. This all sounded like a mad idea, but if Mike said to do it, it couldn't be so mad. The front door was ajar. I shoved it open. Sylvia and Leonard Barker were standing in the hall, kissing. His arms were around her and they were glued into one figure.

"Stick 'em up!" I barked. "Get into the living-room!"

They both turned white as ghosts. Neither of them moved. I jammed the gun into Barker's stomach. "Get in there or I'll blow you to hell!"

Connie and Merrill were on the divan. Roger Carroll was trying to comfort Paula. They all

looked up as I herded Barker and his dame before me. I concentrated on Paula.

“Thought I was cooked, didn’t you!” I sneered. “Well, you’re cooked now! Not one of you will leave this room alive to testify against me! You’re all going where Jerry went—and damn soon!”

Paula’s tear-stained eyes bulged from her head. Roger Carroll was a sickly yellow. I strode over to them, brandishing the gun. Paula was petrified.

“Say your prayers!” I hissed.

I heard a noise behind me. I turned. A fist shot out and caught me flush on the jaw. My head seemed to tear loose from my shoulders. That’s all I remember. The rest was complete darkness.

**M**IKE was standing over me when I came to. He was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Some sock, eh, kid?”

I blinked. “Who hit me?”

He waved his gun at Merril, cowering in a chair. “The drunk—and the murderer!”

“But-but—”

“Pretty smart,” Mike said. “He knew everyone else would be pie-eyed, so he

remained sober. He killed his brother-in-law for the \$20,000 in cash he had seen him put in the safe, then framed you. When you came down looking for Paula, he knew you weren’t going to keep the murder quiet as he thought you would. Therefore, to confuse matters more he dropped the body out the window, carried it to the beach. He wasn’t drunk at all. Just rolled the liquor in his mouth to make him smell to high heaven. The rest was damn’ good acting. Only he stepped out of his role when he thought you were going to bump them all off. Now, if you’ll get the chief, we’ll wind this up. Better take someone with you. The chief’s liable to be sore.”

“I’ll go,” Connie said. “I’ll go with you, Gil.”

Outside, she cuddled up to me, rubbing against my arm. “I—I’m glad it wasn’t you, honey,” she breathed.

I kissed her. Her lips parted and her breath was heated. I made a note to get her city address.

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody some good,” I said, once I could get my mouth loose.