

Good Night, Dream Bandit

By Emil Petaja

*That fake holdup may have seemed a clever radio gag,
but the slugs in that heckler's gun were no joke*

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT TOM GRANT walked down Hollywood Boulevard seething. The Old Man had blasted the whole department with his acid tongue, and had picked Grant as keyman. Grant had a reputation for cleaning up cases plenty fast. Now a whole week had gone by since he started on this detail.

It was those cockeyed "Dream Bandit" robberies. The newspapers were making a Roman holiday out of it, poking fun at the police department. The commissioner didn't like it, not even a little bit.

This was how it started. Just one week ago an exclusive boulevard shop was touched for several G's by a plenty smooth character. The girl cashier described the "Dream Bandit" as tall, curly-haired, and ve-e-ery handsome. He was togged in a tux, and was nice and polite about the way he flashed his rod and asked her to a please fork over.

She did.

Three nights later it happened again. Around nine o'clock. Just before the Hollywood shops closed. It was the slickness of the Dream Bandit's technique that got the commissioner's goat. And Grant's, too. His lean jaw bit down hard as he retasted the bitter words the Old Man had flung in his direction.

It was Saturday night. If Grant didn't miss his guess the Dream Bandit was due to pull another stickup before it was over.

He scowled down at his watch. Five minutes to eight. The Dream Bandit showed up just before nine. But—where to

look for him? He couldn't cover the whole boulevard!

"D'ya really think the Dream Bandit will be there, Maze?" a feminine voice near him trilled.

"The sign says so, don't it?"

Grant blinked after the two girls, then looked up.

The big neon sign said, "Major Broadcasting Studios." And the blue-fringed banner underneath said:

Tonight at Eight
Krispy-Krunch Presents Radio's Funniest
Stunt Program
We Want You to
Name It or Bust
Tonight We Give You
THE DREAM
BANDIT!



TOM GRANT stared, then gave a low whistle. Like everyone else, he knew the *Name It or Bust* program. It was one of those wacky radio shows where people picked from the audience had to answer a certain question or else go through some sort of a gag. It was strictly for fun.

Usually the butt of the gag won himself a handful of bucks.

Grant squinted at the sign, then at the studio door. He had a hunch.

He stepped lithely up the curved stairway, and since he had no ticket, flashed his badge at the usher. The boy nodded and stepped aside, wide-eyed.

He found a seat near the door. Pretty soon the red sign flashed to *On The Air*, and the gangster M.C. started spieling.

"I know how anxious you all are to meet the famous Dream Bandit," he said. "That's all the papers have been full of for the past week! So—let me present—The Dream Bandit!"

A curtain behind him slid aside. The crowd started roaring. Grant had to smile.

The guy back of the curtain was a sawed-off, potbellied runt with half-moon hair and a yokelish grin. It would have been hard to find anybody who looked less like the real Dream Bandit, as the newspapers had described him.

"What's your name, Dream Bandit?" the M.C. asked,

"Mortimer."

"Would you like to earn yourself fifty bucks, Mort?"

"*Would I!*"

The crowd laughed.

"Well, then, here's the idea. You are to hold up the cashier at one of the Hollywood shops, just like the real Dream Bandit did. If you can convince her that you're really him, you get the fifty!"

Mortimer looked sad.

"Cheer up, Mort!" the M.C. laughed, "We're going to help you. Boys, bring out that curly toupee and a gun for our bandit!"

Grant watched them set a badly fit wig of wavy hair on Mortimer, and shove a very faky gun in his hand. The M.C. gave some last minute directions, then Mortimer was herded out.

"Now!" the M.C. told the audience, with a wicked chuckle. "Here's the gag! He doesn't know it, but there's going to be another Dream Bandit come in that shop while he's busy trying to convince the girl. And this Dream Bandit will really be tall and good-looking, so—"

Grant didn't wait. He was moving noiselessly out, bent on following through his hunch.

MORTIMER'S trail led him off the boulevard and through a tangle of palm-lined streets, to a quiet row of brick buildings which were all dark except one. The last one in the row was lighted up with a fancy neon sign reading *Laura Tilson Cosmetics Are Made Here*.

Strictly big money.

Grant had slipped a five to the psychologist who was supposed to follow Mortimer and make sure he got back to the program before nine o'clock, flashed his badge, and promised to deliver Mortimer back to a certain bar across from the studio.

Grant had done a little reading on the subject of psychology himself. His hunch told him that the real Dream Bandit wouldn't miss a chance like this to make a grandstand play. Like most criminals, the Dream Bandit liked publicity. He had not only put on the dog with fancy clothes when he pulled his jobs, but he had gone out of his way to court publicity—putting on a glamor-boy act.

On the other hand, Grant was thinking that *might* be just a cover-up for his real personality.

From behind a palm tree he watched Mortimer's dumpy shadow bounce along after him as he passed through a street light's arc, and up to the front door of the cosmetics factory. The detective eased after him, phantomlike.

As he drew near the door he stepped

over the crisp hedge and up to the window sill. He crouched, so as to get a once-over of the lighted hallway under the drawn window shade.

He saw a small foyer with a telephone switchboard, and a long dark hall leading back. Right across from where he crouched was a small brightly lit retail cosmetics shop.

A cute blonde was sitting behind a cashier's desk counting out stacks of green-notes, preparatory to putting them to bed in the open safe behind her.

Her eyes widened, startledly, when she saw Mortimer walk up to the glass door of the swanky shop.

Grant froze when he heard a soft footstep behind him. His fingers tightened on the window sill. He whirled, but not quick enough.

He caught just a glimpse of a white tuxedo front and a trim white tie. Then something hard smashed down on his cranium, and everything went black.

Inside, Mortimer was insisting, sheepishly, "I am too the Dream Bandit!"

The blonde only laughed. "*You!* I must need glasses!"

"Better fork over that dough!" Mortimer quavered.

"Better scram, bub, before I call a cop!" the girl told him, grabbing the telephone receiver off her desk and starting to dial. She was no pantywaist.

Mortimer tugged out his fake gun and waved it at her. She grabbed it out of his hand and pulled the trigger. A misty spray of perfume filled the air.

She laughed liltily, "That's nice. Ummm." She stopped dialing, and hung up.

"Now tell me, plump and pointless, what kind of a rib is this, anyway?"

THE front door swung open abruptly. A tall, good-looking man in faultless

evening clothes stepped in. He walked up to the shop, pushed the door open with white-gloved hands. Inside, he removed his top hat, and gave the blonde a little bow and smile.

Her hands fluttered a little when she said, "Can I help you?"

He flashed her a big smile. "I'll wait until you're through with this—gentleman." He looked Mortimer up and down contemptuously.

Mortimer started in on the girl again, sulkily. "Don't you believe I'm the Dream Bandit? Can't I convince you?"

The blonde laughed.

"Afraid not. Why, you don't look a bit like him. He's tall, good-looking, and has curly brown—" She bit her lip, then did a double-take in the direction of the tall newcomer. Her eyes bulged.

He gave a little bow.

"You're right, beautiful. This jerk can't be the Dream Bandit, for the simple reason that I'm him! Now, I'll appreciate it if you'll just hand over those piles of bills please . . ."

The man in evening clothes spoke with a pleasant drawl, but there was a sinister undertone to his politeness. His gloved right hand stayed in his topcoat pocket.

The blonde gasped, leaning against the table.

"You!" Mortimer gaped, fish-eyed. Then he began to chuckle and wag his forefinger.

The tall man frowned. "Better take a powder, butterball," he advised icily.

Mortimer walked right up to him, still shaking his finger. "You're not fooling me, big guy! I'm on to you!"

He turned to the girl, who seemed petrified with fear. "Don't let him scare you, girlie. He ain't no Dream Bandit. He's some ham actor from Major Broadcasting Studios.

"It's a gag! You see, I'm from the

Name It or Bust program. This is all a stunt. You know how they always send somebody out to do some screwy thing, like sending me out to pretend I'm the Dream Bandit. Then they always send another guy out to butt in and heckle him! You're no more Dream Bandit than I am. Ha-ha!"

The blonde loosed a sigh of relief. "You sure had me going, mister. I get it, now. It's all a gag!"

The tall guy's eyes went brittle as he whipped a blunt-nosed revolver out of his pocket.

"I'm getting a little fed up with this chin-music," he snarled. "Hand over the dough!"

MMORTIMER was from Missouri. He wasn't convinced yet. He made a playful grab for the gun. "What kind of perfume you got in yours, Mac? I got Dangerous Night!"

The Dream Bandit edged back, growling. "My trigger-finger is getting itchy," he snapped. "Keep your distance, fat boy." He whirled on the blonde.

"And you—wrap a rubber band around that lettuce and toss it over, if you know what's good for you!"

The blonde smiled sweetly, "Sorry."

"Sister," he hissed. "I ain't kidding!"

"Oh, no? I suppose next you'll try to tell me you aren't an actor, paid to make like a movie badman! I can tell you guys a mile off!"

The Bandit's finger eased over the trigger menacingly. But he hesitated. He knew there must be a night watchman somewhere in the factory. A shot might bring him running. Besides, he'd been doing okay so far, without having to bump anybody. The newspapers made him a glamorous character. Murder wouldn't set so good. It got people riled.

Impatiently he strode to the desk and

started scooping up the frogskins himself.

The blonde slapped his fingers. "Naughty, naughty! Of course you're an actor! I can tell by your makeup!"

He froze. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean what you've got on your left cheek. You put it there to hide a scar shaped like a half-moon. I'm a cosmetician. I ought to know. You used No.7 gold-tan, but you should have used No.8. It would blend better with—"

The Bandit seized her arm roughly. "Sister, you know what it ain't healthy to know!"

Mortimer stuck in his two cents. "What's more, Mister Fake, you're wearing a toupee! That curly brown hair of yours came out of a barbershop. I'll show you. See!"

With a quick move he snatched the wig off, disclosing that the Dream Bandit's hair was straight, black, combed slick against his head.

The Bandit's handsome face twisted into an ugly, brutal snarl of rage. He forgot his smooth acting. He seized a handful of bills and crammed them in his coat, then grabbed up his hat. His rod was pointed at the two of them.

"So you're pretty smart, both of you!" he sneered. "Well, you won't do much squealing to the cops about what the Dream Bandit really looks like, when you're stretched out cold on a morgue slab!"

His gun flamed with death.

The pretty blonde shrieked. Mortimer fell flat on his puss, moaning.

Behind the killer, glass shattered. A bullet splashed through it, winging the Bandit. He whirled, cursing.

The outer door was open. Framed in it stood Detective Sergeant Tom Grant. His face was grim. The gun in his hand was smoking.

His head ached. It was as if somebody

was poking into it with hot needles. All he could see was a wavering blur in front of him. Then, as the blur cleared a little he saw the Dream Bandit clutch his right shoulder and stagger against the glass partitioned wall.

Tom Grant straightened, shrugged off the feeling of nausea that waved over him from that clout on the cranium, and stepped into the shop. His grey eyes turned to Mortimer, who was still huddled against the floor, groaning.

“Did he hit—”

“Look out!” screamed the blonde.

Grant spun around. The Bandit had risen. He was clutching his gun with both hands, while blood from his shoulder wound messed the grey carpeting.

“I’ll finish it this time!” he mouthed harshly. Hot lead spat Grant’s way.

He flopped. From the floor his gun gave out its brief song of death. This time the Dream Bandit crumpled for good.

The detective stood over the dead killer, while clumping footsteps down the hall told him the watchman had finally awakened. He rushed in, groggy-eyed.

“What’s up?” he asked. He saw the dead man and gulped. His red face went white.

The blonde was busy dialing headquarters. She got the Old Man and handed the detective the phone.

“Grant reporting,” he snapped. “Wanted you to be the first to know, Chief. The Dream Bandit is fast asleep, for good. And guess who it turns out to be!”

“Who?” The watchman and the blonde cashier chorused.

“Smooth Talbert!” Grant told them all. “And we thought we got his in Chi three years ago! Yeah, Chief, he was all dressed up in a monkey-suit and a brown curly wig. Even had that scar painted up, so’s nobody would spot him.

“Say, Chief, I want to give some credit to a plucky girl here. She, and a guy named Mortimer, kept him around while I was taking a little nap outside the window. Yeah, he smacked me from behind, but didn’t take time to finish the job because he knew there was a watchman on the place. He had probably cased the joint before, on a cold prowl, and knew he had to hurry the job up.

“What’s that, Chief?” He broke into a wide grin. “Oh, that’s all right. Save the orchids. Just doing my duty!”

He hung up, still grinning.

Mortimer, who hadn’t been hit, but just playing possum, said wonderingly, “There’s one thing I can’t figure. I know they always send out a second guy to heckle. The studio, I mean. What happened to him?”

Grant lit a cigarette and shrugged.

“Both of us ought to have guessed that,” he told him. “Talbert, alias the Dream Bandit, found out they were hunting a double to use on the program, so he volunteered for the job. They picked him, because after all, nobody could look more like the Dream Bandit than *he* could!”