

**A NOVELET OF
TRUE GANG
LIFE**



*The girl turned:
screamed -- and once
more hot lead rock-
eted through human
flesh!*

by

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REVOLT OF THE DAMNED

It was Kill! . . . Ruthlessly . . . Unflinchingly . . . or else Nita Ricco, the beautiful girl Blaze Hayden loved would end up another floozy for the flesh joints below the Border.

NITA RICCO brought the wicker baskets of melons into her bedroom on the second floor of the filling station and carefully drew the shades. The gas pumps were locked, and below, the lights were out. Anyone wanting five gallons of regular could go elsewhere; to hell, for all Nita cared, or to Mexico, just south of the city limits.

She wished to God Blaze Hayden would come home. Torres, delivering the precious melons, had made her uneasy, with those snaky eyes. He had not even bothered to count the thousand odd dollars in large bills. He had been watching Nita's every graceful move, trying to outwit the turquoise chiffon negligee whose half transparency gave tantalizing glimpses of her lovely legs.

The gown enveloped her like a scented bluish mist. The desert breeze that invaded a shuttered window made the frail fabric cling to the sweetly rounded curve of her hips. A little crucifix gleamed in the hollow of her firm young breasts; it matched the red-gold of her wavy hair.

The heels of her tiny satin mules sank into a thick napped Chinese rug, which like the furniture, was costly but a bit garish. Blaze Hayden could never have bought those things for Nita by selling gas. Her gray-green eyes were sombre as she emptied the melons on the hardwood floor, then knelt and split them with a knife.

Each cantaloupe contained several five-tael tins of opium.

A tap at the door made Nita start. She rose, and her smile reflected the sudden glow in her eyes. Blaze had returned. The blue chiffon trailed away from her thighs as she hurried to admit him.

Then she recoiled from the open door, and hastily drew her gown together. Torres had returned. His eyes glittered from smoking home grown marihuana. He licked his thick lips. "Senora, ees dangerous for you to stay alone—" Torres made a sweeping gesture as he crossed the threshold. "So I 'av return. We 'ave the drink, no?"

He produced a bottle of tequila. Torres was tall and swarthy and despite his loose mouth, not a bad looking young Mexican.

"Scram!" snapped Nita, putting on a bold front. "I paid you."

A SNARL now bared Torres' white teeth. Cat quick, he flashed toward her. Nita dared not scream. If help did arrive all those tins of Golden Pheasant opium would damn her and Blaze.

Torres was beyond mincing words. He had seen too much of Nita's white beauty to retreat. Desperate, she glanced about. There was the knife on her dressing table.

She lunged, but Torres intercepted her. She clawed his swarthy face. She almost wriggled from his grasp, but her frail chiffon robe parted in trailing shreds. Then her brassiere slipped. The opium smuggler was beyond fear or reason.

"You damn dirty lug," Nita panted. "Blaze'll kill you—"

Torres skidded on some melon seeds. Nita, peeled down to her scanties, flung herself toward the dresser and seized the knife.

"Drop it!" snarled Torres, recovering. "If you use it, the polees will know—about the opium—the beeg boss will keel you!"

That was Bud Worley's way. A fool proof racket is based on dead men's bones. One strike, and out! No bungler lived long in Worley's mob.

Then Nita's fingers closed on a box of dusting powder. The Mexican, distracted by the gleaming blade, caught the choking cloud squarely in the face. She snatched the table lamp. But before she could smash it across his head, the door slammed open, and a tall man bounded in.

"Blaze—my God—"

"The greasy bastard!" He was lean, broad shouldered; wrath hardened his thin face into grim angles. "You black son—"

He lunged. His fist landed like a caulking maul. Before Torres could collapse, Blaze picked him up and bodily hurled him through the window.

The spattering of glass was followed by a grunt, a thud, a muttered oath in Spanish. Blaze, gun drawn, leaned over the sill. He turned away, grinning. "Running like hell honey." He caught Nita in his arms, and stroked her copper-red hair. "That wallop sobered him, huh?"

"Blaze," she sobbed, "I'm checking out of the racket. I don't care what you do! It's lousy, stinking, putrid! Running hop—"

"Baby, we can't quit." Blaze's face lengthened, suddenly became old and weary. "The Feds'd get us. Worley, the rotten skunk, he'd turn us in."

This was an old story to Nita. First, a bit of easy money, smuggling perfume. Nothing wrong, nicking Uncle Sam out of customs duties he had no right to, anyway. Every tourist does it, or tries it. Then a load of Chinks. And finally, Blaze Hayden dared not refuse to run that filling station in

Calexico, right on the border. Worley had said, "Play, or else."

They ignored the horn blast outside until it was repeated several times. Blaze started. He recognized the sound. Leadfoot Johnson had pulled up to get the north bound load of narcotics.

"I'm quitting. I don't care, I am!" Nita was half hysterical.

"Shut up, you idiot!" snapped Blaze, dashing to the door.

But Leadfoot was already clumping up the stairs. He was a big blonde fellow whose tanned face was scarred from flying glass and metal; a racing driver not quite good enough for the big time, but a wizard on the highway, piloting a grimy old car with a supercharged engine.

"Lo, Blaze." He eyed the disordered room, and Nita's remaining tatters of negligee. "Listen, you two. It's none of my damn business you battling. But you was talking out loud. Forget this quitting idea. Bad for the health!"

"This racket's lousy," Nita bitterly observed. "Sure, I said it."

Leadfoot scratched his sandy hair, shrugged. "Ditto, tutz. But you know what happens to saps that think they can walk out. Let's go, Blaze."

They loaded the junk. Then a gritting of tires, and the whine of the supercharger was swallowed in the roar of the big engine. Nita turned despairing eyes to Blaze when he returned. "I'll stick," she sobbed. "Any way we turn, we're damned. I guess you and me can't revolt..."

"But you can keep a gat in your dresser," muttered Blaze. "If that hop-crazy spick ever makes another pass at you, burn him down and hide the junk before the cops get here. Anyway, I'll be on hand after this when Torres delivers a load..."

BUD WORLEY'S mob operated on Sacramento Street, just on the fringe of Chinatown. Behind the old gray building on the corner was a tangle of ancient alleys, and a fantastic huddle of old houses that offered an unlimited assortment of approaches and getaways. And on all sides were the hangouts of the junk peddlers, white and Chinese, who have infested that glamorous district since San Francisco became world famous for its Barbary Coast.

A wizened derelict shuffled up the steep street that led from the Embarcadero. His suit had not been cleaned for years. He was a Skid Row bum,

outwardly; but there was a purpose behind the furtive movements that took him across the street, and into a dingy alley below the neon lights that emblazed the main stem of Chinatown.

He crept down the odorous gloom. Smuggled aliens were crammed in some of those foul warrens. In others, broken down harlots made their last stand. Furtive pimps crouched in dark doorways. This was the sodden end of the trail that began in the glittering hot spots on Powell and Mason streets, or the gilded brothels disguised as fashionable apartments, not many blocks distant.

They lived for their junk. The need was so great that Bud Worley had a big time rival, and countless minor competitors. There was Smoke Keenan, the ex-pug. He might have been a success, had he not kicked the gong himself, at times. Not often, but once is too much....

It was one of Keenan's men who cat footed down the alley. Irish Annie used a lot of the stuff, and so did her customers.

"Wait a minute, buddy!" rasped a hoarse voice. A man emerged from the shadow of a pilaster. He snatched the bum's collar. "Hold it!"

The junk runner snarled. A skinny hand came out with a knife. Another man bounded from across the alley. "Let him have it, Spike!"

The runner's yell was cut short. A length of armored cable crunched down on his skull. He collapsed. The two dark figures rolled him against the wall. They squatted; Spike kept watch while his partner went through the dead man's pockets.

"Uhuh. Loaded with it."

"Take it?"

"No. Scatter it. Teach these bastards a lesson. Maybe they'll quit working for Keenan."

Later, the cops of the Chinatown squad found a bum with a crushed skull. Packets of snow, and several tins of opium were half trampled in the grime. "Maher," said the patrolman to the sergeant, "when the hell they going to clamp down on that lousy Keenan? This's the brand he peddles."

The sergeant snorted. Busting rackets is no harness bull's job. A pavement pounder might as well learn that now as later. "One of Worley's mugs done it, I guess," he said. "But what the hell, Barney? We ain't paid to make bum guesses. Not until a war pops up. Then maybe something'll be done about it. When it gets to be a big stink."

Later, Spike and his partner were entering a side door of the gray house on Sacramento Street. They found Bud Worley in a room whose ornate

luxury was a glittering contrast to the dingy exterior.

He was dark and handsome, except for eyes set too close together; a suave, sleek fellow in costly imported worsteds. "Hi, Spike! How she going, Benny?" He thrust a humidor toward his grim jawed sluggers "Luck?"

"Uuh. Number ten conked," Benny reported. "But listen, chief. We been going strong. Cripes, I don't mind working. A guy's got to eat. But we been over doing it, and Keenan's getting sore enough to blow the lid off."

Sitting somewhat apart from his chief, Rod Northup had been watching, stroking his straw colored moustache. He looked like a collegian who ought to sell bonds. Thus far he had said nothing.

"Let him fight if he's got guts!" grinned Worley. "You mugs aren't paid to think. Or you'd starve."

"I don't know, Bud," interposed Northup. "Just so much of that, and the cops can't keep on reporting 'John Doe Number So-and-So, fractured skull sustained as result of fall while intoxicated.' And a war'll raise hell."

Worley smiled amiably. He always did, particularly when doing a fine piece of shooting. He was so proud of his marksmanship that he often took needless risks to prove that he was the best gunner as well as the best organizer in the racket.

"Well...why not?" he drawled. "Raise some hell. If Keenan ever pokes his nose out of that armored shack. I'll snipe it off, myself."

A long barrelled revolver blossomed like magic from the tailored coat that disguised its bulk. He scorned automatics; a double action Colt was the thing. As he spoke, he abstractedly dropped it into line as though to shoot the wart off Spike's chin.

"Uuh, I'll cut the son down myself. Think I can't, Rod?"

NORTHUP shrugged. "Sure you can. But for hell's sweet sake, don't. Live and let live. There's enough for all." He reached for a pearl gray hat, carefully slicked back his wavy hair. "Be seeing you, Bud."

Northup reeked of hair tonic and shaving lotion. Worley chuckled, "You're too damn handsome to live, Rod. Cheating on Mae again, huh?"

"Nix, nix!" he protested, pretending horror. "Hell, don't a guy have to have a bit of fun?"

Worley straightened up, still smiling. But something about his expression made the two sluggers exchange glances. "You better stick to blondes, Rod. Just a friendly tip."

Rod Northup pulled a long face. "What's the matter with Dora?"

"I don't say any thing's the matter. I just got a sneaking hunch she's played around with one of Keenan's gang. I don't think she's on the level."

"Oh, all right, all right," conceded Rod. But as he headed for the door, he was adjusting his tie.

"Jeez," muttered Spike, as the door closed, "you think he's dumb enough to play with a frill like that—"

"Shut up!" snapped Worley. "Rod's all right. He ain't dumb. Now beat it, the two of you."

"Okay, okay!" Benny echoed Spike's assent, and they both left.

For a long time, Worley sat there, smoking monogrammed cigarettes. He knew better; a fellow never could entirely guard against absent mindedness discarding an initialled butt in the wrong place, but he liked to flaunt hand made Turkish smokes that cost a dollar and a quarter for a small pack.

Finally, he dialled a number. A woman answered. Worley recognized the brittle voice, and said, "Hi, Mae. How about speaking to Rod?"

"I don't know where the dirty so and so is!" she snapped, and hung up.

Worley smiled quizzically, and studied the ascending smoke from his cigarette. Rod and women just didn't mix right. Suppose Mae got jealous and ratted? He uncoiled his lithe length and went to a lacquer cabinet a Chinese hop distributor had given him. From it he took a small ivory mounted automatic, and slipped it into his vest pocket.

Then he put on a dark hat, a brand new pair of rubber soled shoes, and a cheap, dark coat. He left by a concealed panel that opened into a passage from which he finally emerged in the center of the block. Dense shadows concealed him until he reached an alley.

Worley was worried. Rod and his flewies...Rod could do with a lesson...but Rod was too well liked by the mob...Worley frowned...

DORA SLAVICH'S apartment was neat, but very simple. Yet Dora radiated glamour. Somehow, her dark beauty made Rod Northup think of Persian gardens, tropical beaches, birds of

paradise. When a Slavonian girl starts out to be lovely, she makes a job of it. Many have coarse features, square hips, stocky figures—but Dora was just right that way.

And in every way. The natural flush of her olive tinted skin scarcely needed make up. Her great dark eyes were pools of mystery; long lashes shaded them just enough to keep Rod searching their depths as she sank back among the cushions, breathless from the kiss that still made a passion flower of her generous mouth.

“Rod, darling,” she murmured, “I’ve trusted you a lot, haven’t I?”

“Isn’t *that* a question!”

His glance traveled caressingly along the lovely body that smiled through a low yoked nightgown of coral crepe. She had her fingers laced beneath her lustrous black waves; and leaning back among the cushions threw her breast into luxurious roundness. Northup bent over her, drew her close. He kissed her, and thrilled to the convulsive pressure of her arms winding about his shoulders.

“Don’t,” she gasped, trying to free herself from his embrace. “I’m not trusting you that far—I won’t—”

He drew back, bewildered by her sudden coldness. Her eyes, her dress, her voice had all been subtle promises. “What do you mean?”

“If you’d quit Bud Worley,” she whispered. “Get into a safer racket. Make books. Or gamble in the Peninsula night clubs. Or something.”

Rod dimly sensed that that was not exactly what she meant. She was leading up to worming out details of Worley’s operations. Maybe she had not really broken up with one of Keenan’s men. Maybe the bitter quarrel had been a stall. Maybe Worley was right.

But Rod was a sucker for women. He had to have her. She reminded him of a bird of paradise. That didn’t make much sense, but it sounded as glamorous as Dora looked. An allure and a mystery veiled her sensuous body. Every curve was a promise of something that no other woman could give him.

Hell, promise her anything!

She was looking up at him with glowing eyes. “Will you? Really?”

“Nuts for Worley!” he growled. “He don’t own *me!* I’m his brains....”

He was, in a way. But that night he was not using them. And Dora was too elated by her

triumph to use hers. Between kisses, she was tricking him into boasting to prove that he really was Worley’s brain.

She did not notice the flutter of a window drape, nor the sudden intrusion of chilly air. She was too close in Northup’s arms.

Her scream startled Northup, but he had no chance to go for the gun that lay on the end table near the lounge.

A dark man stood on the fire escape and shot across the sill. His glittering automatic reached far into the room. Its sound was small and dry and deadly, like the incredibly rapid snapping of sticks. Few men could accurately direct the fire of that short barrelled weapon, but this one did.

Rod dropped, coughing blood; his feet drummed against the rug. Dora had not a chance. She tried to duck, but her trailing gown was entangled with a dead man. When she jerked clear, it was too late.

The remaining four shots drilled her breast. Warm olive curves spurted red. She dropped, clawing at the lacy yoke. The silk crepe was sticky. It clung to her flesh, and red froth gurgled from her gaping lips.

The man in the dark hat wiped the nickelled gat, flung it into the soft glow of the floor lamp. Pools of blood slowly reached for it.

“Just like I figured,” Bud Worley told himself as he retraced his steps. “One job no mug could do...but now’at it’s done, I guess those skirt chasing bastards will think twice.”

They would. And Worley was right: this was one execution he had to do himself. Any torpedo who had killed Rod Northup would sooner or later brag about it. Bad stuff. But a mysterious death, like a mysterious woman, has a peculiar grip on the fancy.

Later, the new shoes, the hat, and top coat were consumed in an incinerator. They were beyond tracing, and so was the gun.

In another apartment, a blonde woman in a sea green slip lay sobbing into her pillow. Finally, she sat up, twisting a soaked handkerchief. Mae Allen’s blue eyes blazed venomously, and wrath hardened her lovely face.

“God damn him, I’ll fix his black haired tramp! I’ll claw him till he’ll stay home for a week!”

She peeled out of her slip, and stood for a moment before the mirror. A wisp of silk clung to her hips. A net braziere outlined finely modelled

curves. Her stomach was flat, and the flesh that blossomed from her hose tops was firm and shapely.

"I guess I'm not good enough...the lousy—!"

When she emerged from the shower, she was clear eyed, glowing; she dressed carefully. Mae had lots of time. Her wrath strengthened her as it surged to white heat. Very deliberately, she went into the kitchenette.

There she found a knife. It was flexible, and keen from long whetting against a steel. When that Slavonian flew got patched together, she'd never look the same again. Nor would that two-timing Rod be so popular.

SHE was guessing. But Mae knew as well as though she had seen him enter the apartment before whose door she stood, half an hour later. Whispers seeped through racketland.

She listened at the door. It would take a murmured endearment to give her the last touch. She worked the beveled latch tongue back with the flexible bladed knife.

Simple trick, when people forgot to install bolt-latches.

A half stifled moan made her blood boil. But when she slipped into the room, she saw that it was the last sigh of pain. Dora Slavich had crawled to the telephone. There she lay, eyes glassy, teeth exposed in a grimace that made her beautiful features a horrible mockery.

Mae dropped the knife. For a moment she stood there, swaying. She was cold all over. Then she rushed toward Rod. Half way, she checked herself. He was all soaked with blood. She dared not touch him.

She had seen the ejected .25 caliber cartridges and the tiny gun. The wounds on the lovers told her the story.

Mae picked up the pistol, and the knife she had dropped. She wiped the door knob and jamb. With her handkerchief protecting her fingers, she closed the latch. And as the automatic elevator took her to the street level, she told herself what she had instinctively realized.

"No common torpedo did that job." She was dry eyed, though grief choked her. New fury had blotted out all resentment against Rod and Dora. "Those dirty little guns aren't worth a damn except right close up. And from the way they were lying, whoever drilled them began shooting before Rod could get his gat off the table."

That took an exceptionally good gunner. She remembered that phone call from Worley; smiling, affable Bud. It fitted, like that.

So she shrugged, laughed bitterly when the racket captain called the next day to offer condolences. "Thanks, Bud. Sure, it kind of hurts, but he might of known one of Dora's sweeties'd get hot about it."

Mae was certain that she had convinced Worley. As for the police hunting the murder weapon, as the papers claimed: she said, "That's good, isn't it? Funny they're not checking up on Dora's girl friend. The one that found the two of them dead."

So Bud assumed that the untraceable weapon had been stolen by someone who saw no reason for adding it to the police collection. A gun is a handy thing to have, but awkward to buy. Some foresighted person had just made the most of an easy chance.

He was right, but he did not realize how literally true his careless disposal of that question was. He now had his mob scared into line. His laugh became more affable. and his discipline more rigid, all the way from Frisco to Calxico. . . .

A WEEK later, Leadfoot Johnson was again pulling up to Blaze's filling station for fuel and a load of junk. He was on the second floor, putting the stuff into a container that would fit into the trick gas tank of his car.

"Well, tutz," he said to Nita, "How's Torres behaving these days?"

"Damn nice," growled Blaze.

"I'd watch that greaser," Leadfoot lowered his voice. "A spick with a grudge is poison. His connections across the line make him more valuable than you. If he takes a notion to get square, all he's got to do is knife you to Worley."

To clinch that, he told of the mysterious death of Rod Northup and Dora Slavich. He concluded, "If you asked me, and if I was telling you, I'd say Worley done it personally."

Nita shivered and drew her robe closer about her shoulders. Blaze snorted, "Don't worry about us, Leadfoot. But what's eatin' at Worley? Going kill crazy?"

"Jitters. G-men sniffing around. You see, he's getting too big. Blotting out Keenan's junk peddlers made him an all-time big shot out here. The damn fool. And he knows it, only he's stubborn."

"And smart enough to see his way clear, I guess," Blaze sombrely added, as he helped stow the contraband. "Keenan taking it lying down?"

"He might as well," Leadfoot carelessly flung over his shoulder. "So long folks. Be back tomorrow night."

When Blaze rejoined Nita, she snuggled close. "Darling, it's getting worse. Murdering his buddy on suspicion. God, if we could only take it on the lam."

"How far?" Brusque and bitter.

Nita's shoulders sagged. Her sigh seemed to deflate her lovely body. "Blaze, we're just like in those old pictures in a book I saw once. Some Italian fellow wrote it. All about hell. Devils prodding people back into the fire."

She shuddered at the gruesome impression Dante's classic had made. And she was right. They were indeed the hopelessly damned. Lost if they revolted. Lost as surely if they stayed. Northup's fate clinched that....

Leadfoot Johnson loved his work. The deep throated roar of the engine, the eerie whine of the supercharger, the whistle of tires: these were music to him. The money of it was nothing.

He would as soon have hauled passengers, if he could have made cakes and eggs that way. His work made him forget he had been an also-ran on the big tracks. He was in a racket, but he was no mobster; just a racing driver who did an Indianapolis grind every other night. This was something Worley did not suspect.

The long gray phaeton murmured lazily up the grade at whose midpoint Bud Worley waited for the cargo of junk. This was the time when death crept into hospitals to slip up on those who had long outwitted him; when cops lounged in all night restaurants, warming their bellies with coffee and thoughts of sunrise....

The junk came to town in death's rush hour. But Leadfoot Johnson did not think of this. He had made his fastest run, and Leadfoot glowed inside.

A savage clattering startled him. Slugs chunked against the car. A tire popped. The engine conked out. The dirty lugs had blasted the distributor to bits; she wouldn't take off.

He leaped clear. He was unarmed. Being flagged down could always be squared, but if a gat were found on him, the highway patrol would look further, and find the junk.

He almost reached the middle of the road when his leg buckled. White hot irons seemed to

sear his ribs. A hail of bullets ricocheted from the paving. Blood from his creased scalp blinded him.

The hijackers were tearing into the car. They worked with mechanical precision. They had to, to get away before the Chinatown squad woke up.

Bud Worley's light sleep had been shattered by the riot. His gunners were there, but men booted out of the hay at that hour are dull and sluggish. The chief was the first into action. He dashed down a passageway that led to a deserted building that commanded the scene.

The murky glare of a street light almost touched the crippled car. He opened fire with a revolver. A hijacker pitched face forward. Cans of junk rolled down the grade. Worley cursed bitterly. They were beyond retrieving.

Answering fire blazed from behind a power pole. Another hijacker shot from the rear left of the riddled car. Worley's deadly skill got him; a slug lifted the top of his head. But as he dropped, the dead man's reflexes jerked a farewell shot.

That misdirected spurt of flame ignited the gas that ran from the slashed tank from which the junk had been taken. A tall column of flame roared up, three stories high. The raiders fled.

Police whistles shrilled. Cops came charging up the hill, guns drawn. A wounded fugitive stumbled, gun clattering from his hand. One lay roasting in the awful heat of the blazing gas, unable to crawl to safety.

Bud Worley lurked, eyes glittering. Dawn grayed, but the roaring blaze was brighter than day. The cops were picking up the cans of hop. Leadfoot Johnson was regaining his feet.

He lurched drunkenly. A cop started in pursuit. There was a man to question, along with the wounded raiders the others were rounding up.

Panting, coughing blood, Leadfoot headed for Worley's fortress and safety.

Then he saw a revolver barrel reflected the flames. The wind whipped the blaze for a moment, giving him a view into the shadows of the building. He recognized the dark man who smiled.

"Bud, fer Christ's sake!" he yelled. "It's me—"

His legs buckled. The cops were closing in. The revolver rose, and blackness blotted Leadfoot Johnson's terror....

Worley retreated before the cops could get between the flames and the window from which had come the shot that had picked a captive from their hands. As he reached his own house, which

still was legally above reproach, and could not be entered without a warrant, he exhaled a sigh.

"Close...damn close." He grinned amiably, and set to work cleaning his revolver, washing his hands with chemicals to destroy incriminating traces of nitro powder. "Tough about Leadfoot...good driver, too...."

He spent the day smoking and listening to the radio. From time to time, underworld gossip filtered into his house. He ran his gunners into cover. He knew now that Smoke Keenan, hopped up and reckless, had staged the reprisal; but the flare back had driven Keenan and his mugs into hiding.

EVERY junk dealer was hot now. That the cops had not made a raid to round up every suspected racketeer was ominous. They were waiting. G-men were taking things in hand. When they cracked down.

But Worley smiled. Leadfoot Johnson could not talk about the source of opium and snow. Suppose the narcotic squad did slug the pants off Keenan's wounded gunners? Their statements would only kick back at their boss, not Worley.

Some of his telephones were unauthorized extensions tapped into instruments a block away. Thus he got reports.

That night, things eased up. A few of his gunners returned. And Mae Allen came to the house. "Bud, darling," she cooed, "Keenan's crazy-mad. I'm afraid he'll take it out of anyone messed up with you."

"Stay here," he generously invited. "I'll take care of you."

Come to think of it, Mae was nice looking. Her legs were gorgeous, and the way she had them crossed, he got peeps of smooth whiteness. Only the right thing to take care of Mae....

They had a few drinks. Spike and Benny tended bar. Everyone had an alibi. Worley wished the dumb clucks would get out and leave him alone with Mae. She'd make a quick job of getting over Rod's death. Mob widows usually did....

The phone rang. No name was mentioned, but Worley recognized the voice. "Fer Christ's sake, watch yourself, Bud. Leadfoot sang before he croaked. He knew you tried to knock him off to shut him up, so he squawked. All about Calxico."

Click! Nothing more to be said. Worley's face tightened. Nobody could use Leadfoot's dying remarks as a peg for a murder rap. No D. A. would

be silly enough to try to. But narcotic agents would nail Torres and Blaze and Nita. Not right away, no. Not until a new runner was put on the job.

Certainly not until then. For no one was supposed to know Leadfoot Johnson had squawked. But for a crooked captain, Worley would have suspected least of all. He relaxed, and began smiling.

"Drink, baby?" He squirted soda into the tall glass.

Mae snuggled closer, lifted admiring blue eyes. She had to build it up carefully before she used the gat that had killed Rod. She had not even dared bring it. If Worley began pawing her and found it, she'd be finished. He'd put two and two together; the answer was quick death.

Worley was pawing her, and she pretended to like it. Later, as she peeled out of her ensemble and stood before the dresser, all white and gold and silk, Worley said, "I could go for you, steady."

"Darling, do you mean that?" she cooed, snapping off the lights....

That night, Worley got more phone calls. His plan took form. If he personally went to Calxico, he could pull things out of the fire. Instead of sending a pair of torpedoes to settle Blaze and Nita, he had a better idea. A keen piece of strategy. So keen that he kept it from Mae, who'd turned out to be a perfectly swell kid.

Worley smiled at the world as he listened to the pilot warming up a plane at the private landing field of an aviation club at San Carlos, some twenty odd miles south of San Francisco. The cops and the narcotic agents still thought they had him bottled up in his fortress, huh?

He had discarded the idea of rubbing Blaze, simply because they were too handy and too useful; he had them where they lived, and they dared not be stupid or talkative. And even though that lousy rat of a Leadfoot Johnson had squealed, Blaze and Nita would play a new role: that of decoy ducks!

"Let the feds watch 'em," he outlined to himself as the plane swooped south. "Let 'em chase suspicious cars with nothing in 'em. While I'm running the junk from Tecate...well, maybe Andrade would be better."

He was truly becoming a field general. This was strategy, making the feds believe that Blaze was really outwitting them. The continued flow of hop and snow to Frisco would drive them nuts! They'd end by folding their tails between their

legs. He was so pleased that he forgot his bitterness against that yellow bastard, Leadfoot Johnson, rattling on his chief.

"And Mae's a nice kid. Damn near wished I'd brought her along." She'd begged for the trip, but Worley had compromised, "Listen, tutz, I'll phone you from the hotel at El Centro. Uhuh. You don't think I'm landing in Calexico? Christ, am I *that* dumb?"

When he landed, he'd phone Blaze, and they'd meet at the hotel. That way, Blaze wouldn't get jittery and think, he, Worley, was sore. It was an hour after dark when he was set down in Brawley, which had a landing field. It was only fourteen miles to El Centro. He engaged a rental car and drove it himself. He needed no bodyguard in this apple knocker section, where people had cotton and dates and rice on the brain.

Worley thus paid no attention to the car that passed him, just beyond the landing field, at Imperial, which was four miles from his destination.

At the Vista Real, he gave his keys to the porter and strode up to the desk. The house was small, yet tastefully furnished. Its lobby was spacious as the open desert. A tourist place, and the clerk was impressed by the debonair, carefully tailored young man who approached.

As Worley signed the register, the clerk said, "Lucky you reserved a suite. We're a bit crowded, and if you hadn't, we'd have had to give you something a bit less choice."

"Huh?" Worley looked up sharply. "Reservation?"

"Why, yes. Mrs. Worley hurried down to surprise you."

"Uh, sure." He brightened. Mae, the dizzy little doll, had flown down! After all, why not? "Listen, is this the best in the house?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, sir! Air conditioned— you know, it does get hot here, but it's clean, dry, invigorating desert heat. Lots of the movie people patronize us. Ah...I know I've seen your face on the screen, Mr. Worley." The clerk nodded wisely. The racketeer beamed. It tickled him, being mistaken for a movie idol, incognito. "The suite is sound proofed, Mr...ah...Worley. Yes, indeed, sir. You'll not be disturbed."

PRETTY swell. Pretty swell.

And Mae's perfume and open arms welcomed him at one swoop. "Darling, I hope

you'll not be mad. I just got so damn lonesome."

He held her from him. Lord, she looked as good as she smelled.

"Shake up a drink while I clean up," he said, breaking from her follow-up kiss. "You little devil, you could get an airport plane ahead of me. But you took a risk."

"As if I care!"

A shower. A shave. His face smarted and tingled from wind blown sand. He turned back to the medicine chest mirror, but there was Mae's hand-glass.

That quick move and the unexpected mirror gave him a glimpse of Mae's hate distorted face and flash of nickel. Cat quick, he hurled himself to the shelter of the jamb, just as the little automatic crackled.

The tiny slug bit lightly. Mae's treachery infuriated him. She cried out, shudderingly, desperately squeezed another shot. Worley flinched. God, that was close. He deliberately leaped out of cover, but crouched to make the most of the race against death.

He hurled the mirror. It caught Mae between the eyes, stunning her. She fell, a quivering huddle of white and orchid and red. "You God damn dirty—! So that's it?" Trembling, he seized the little gat, emptied it into the half conscious woman's body.

Sound proofed room, huh? No one'd hear that pea shooter.

He dressed, very rapidly. He cut every label and laundry mark from Mae's garments and his own. Then he grinned, remembering the dumb cluck down below had suspected him of being a movie star. Sweet, huh?

But now he could not phone Blaze. Not by no manner of means! Especially not from a hotel in which an unidentified blonde would be found.

He stopped at the desk, slid a century note to the clerk, and demanded change. That gave him a chance to add a few strokes to the register: changing Worley to Worleigh. Not that it'd make much difference. Why wouldn't an incognito movie star pick on his name? Not a dozen people in the state knew that "Bud" meant "Rudolph."

Presently, Worley was on a bus to Calexico, eleven miles away. When he reached his destination, he phoned Blaze Hayden: "Come on to the back room of the Mission Pool Room. Yeah, I know this is sudden, but I got a hot idea. Don't mention any names, see?"

"Listen, uh—listen," answered Hayden. "Nita's sick in bed. And that uh—well...that man—I'm afraid he'll sneak up on her."

Worley knew that Blaze referred to Torres. Leadfoot had told him that much, and no more; nothing about Nita's discontent.

"Aw, fer hell's sweet sake—" Then he abruptly checked himself. Much better to go to the filling station. It would not be as conspicuous. There was Mae, dead in her room. And since no junk runner had been working the beat, the narcotic snoopers would not be watching day and night. It all flashed through his mind. He said, "Okay, Blaze. Be out right away. The back way, huh?"

Calexico was too small to make a cab necessary. The aristocrat got a kick out of walking, once in a while, like common people. He was whistling softly as he strode on air. He was invincible. Keenan's revolt had kicked back. So had Mae's lousy treachery. And she'd not squawked to the narcotic men. She was a mobster frill, sold on personal vengeance; not a louse like Leadfoot.

Can't sneak up on me. I catch 'em, even when my back's turned. Keenan. Mae. Not to make a horse's neck of the God damn feds...if they're screwballs enough to try to nip me.

He loved Blaze Hayden like a brother. Good old Blaze, helping making a monkey's so and so out of the coppers! He'd buy Nita something ritzy. Nice girl, Nita, but he had one blonde already. . . .

BLAZE HAYDEN was saying, "Now, honey, I tell you, Worley ain't mad. Gripes, if he was gunning us out, he'd not come down here, he'd send torpedoes."

Nita was buffing her finger nails long after they gleamed like rubies.

"I smell death. Look at Northup. Look at Leadfoot. We're hoodooed."

"He didn't croak Leadfoot," protested Blaze. "Keenan's mob did."

He was sore and got up to go down stairs and wait for Worley. Blaze was becoming shaky from Nita's day and night grousing. It was a lousy, stinking racket, but they were lucky, being so far from headquarters. It'd been different, if Leadfoot had squealed and told all about Calexico....

A cheery voice hailed him. "Hi, Blaze."

"Hi, boss," answered Hayden, extending his hand. Hell, Worley was smiling, tickled to death

with something. "Something big bringing you down, huh? How'd you square that mess up north?"

The telephone jangled. "Wait a sec. Be right back."

"I got it, honey," Nita called from the second floor.

"Oh, that?" chuckled Worley. "Listen, pal. It had me talking to myself, but believe me, when I get thinking, I think fast. Now take a load of this—"

He leaned across the kitchen table in the back room. A packet of maps jutted from his inside coat pocket. And the butt of his revolver peeped from under his armpit. But he was not thinking of that, nor of the gun in Blaze Hayden's hip pocket. Hell, the boy was watching out for Torres. He'd have to warn him against quarrelling with such a valuable guy.

He did not hear the frou-frou of silk. But he did get a whiff of expensive perfume. He was still shaky about women in back of him. He had not laughed Mae completely out of mind. So he abruptly turned in his chair as he reached for his maps.

Blaze yelled, but that was drowned in the heavy blasts of a .38. Nita, white faced, was pouring lead into Worley. Slugs bounced screaming from the range. Some grazed Hayden as terror sent him ducking for cover.

Worley was cursing, rising to his knees, gun jumping into line.

Nita was crazy, but Blaze knew they were doomed. His own gun got into action. He finished what Nita's insane shooting had started. Worley dropped, his face a red blot, his revolver blasting wild. The blood fury gripped Blaze. He emptied his automatic into the quivering, dead hulk.

He shoved in another clip, and emptied it.

Nita stopped him. Dazed, he said, "What'd you do that for?"

"Mae Allen—she phoned—from El Centro—the dirty son—shot her—she said just enough—to warn me—so—darling—we're not damned! We're free—thank God—free. Quick, get the car—I'll finish this."

As he rolled his bus into the drive and gunned the engine, he began to get the point of it all. Nita came out with a suitcase. A handful of large bills from Worley's wallet. The damned had revolted, and Satan's blood soaked money would give them a fresh start.

Nita flung a match, then joined Blaze. "Drive like hell," she panted. "Before the fire gets too big. I soaked things with gas, lots of it. They'll think you shot Torres for making passes at me. And nobody'll care."

A tall red column rose high enough to touch the rear vision mirror of the roaring car. A pillar of fire celebrated the revolt of the damned.

"Baby," whispered Blaze, as he pieced it all together, "it'll work. When Torres hears of the shooting and fire, he'll stay away, so they won't

nail him for killing me and running off with you."

SHE pillowed her copper red waves against his Sunwounded shoulder.

"Darling, you're awful smart. God, I was afraid I'd got you into trouble." She turned back, glancing at the far off fire that had made the undrained gas pumps explode. Then she sighed, "It's just like I read, once, about a pillar of fire guiding a bunch of people into the promised land, or something."

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Just take a squint at this, it was taken right out of G. W. Barrington's novel "Wilding Hearts on the Gunsmoke Trails," and it appears in the May issue of Western Love Story, Now on Sale.

After seeming to have run for miles and hours, the girl crossed the ravine and emerged, panting, on the upper level just in time to see Holt reach the boulders. As he slid out of saddle he grabbed for his saddlegun, got a grip on the stock, and took the piece with him. As he landed on his hip and elbow, he swung the rifle up and around and it snarled spitefully a half-dozen times at split-second intervals.

In the van of the men who had just started to swarm up the slope, Prentiss' white horse reared high, pawed the air wildly, fell sidewise off the white trail, where it rolled and thrashed in agony as its rider worked his feet free of the stirrups and threw himself behind it to open fire. Still below him, the puncher she knew as Turk dropped the rifle he had just brought to a level, threw his arms skyward and slid over his bronc's rump

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to land limp and apparently lifeless among the trampling horses of the others.

Then even at the distance, she heard Randall's bull voice bringing order out of the confusion caused by the fall of Prentiss's horse. "Hey! Scatter an' fan out! Hell's fire, are yuh gonna let one lone hombre lick yuh to a fadded frazzle?"

"Work yur bunch up through them trees, Shorty! Pete, take a coupla men an' —"

The coarse, dominant voice was drowned in a burst of gunfire that seemed to rock the tip of the ridge and leap the valley to rouse a thousand rolling echoes along the far bank of the river. As she started on again, going at a weary trot, now, the girl saw the hazy smokecloud above Holt's location thicken gradually to a dense funnel; while, to westward a gradually enlarging grey fog told that the puncher had gone into action among the cedars. Panting, spurring her lagging muscles by sheer will power, the girl got close enough to hear old Sandy Grimes emit a sort of cracked war whoop as he broke from the cedars afoot and charged across the open to join Holt. He hadn't gone a dozen yards 'till he seemed to be blasted sidewise by a spray of lead that was concentrated on his running figure.

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