

GIRL ON THE TORTURE WHEEL

By JEFFERSON AMES



**Here Is a Hollywood Secret Told for the First Time
Know What Happens Behind the Locked Studio Doors!**

JERRY MATHESON and June Garcia, collectively the Mero Detective Agency of Times Square, New York City, were a long way from home as they drove down Hollywood Boulevard. But in another sense, Jerry was right at home. He always was when he had one free hand and June's seductive, lightly-clad body was at his side.

The detective was one man who could mix business with pleasure, the only difference being that he didn't know which was which. But June, who took a lot of his orders, knew. She was on the receiving end. Still, she too thought detecting and lovemaking both came under the head of business and pleasure at the same time.

Right now, the two were headed for Regal Pictures, Inc., to see the company's producer, Max Laye.

Jerry gave June a quick glance, one hand on the wheel of his rented limousine.

June merely inched closer. She murmured something almost inaudibly.

"In a couple of hours," he grunted, "we'll be on our way back to the Big Burg, Luscious."

The black-haired, high-breasted girl at his side moved closer. "Will we have a drawing room again, like we did when we came out here?"

"I wouldn't miss it," Jerry grinned, and punctuated his remark with a caress of his right hand. He said something about rain. The sky was clear, the warm California sun was beaming. But June knew what he meant, even though it might sound like a riddle. She could feel it.

Jerry suddenly put both hands on the wheel, snaked the car to the curb and cut the ignition. He glanced out at the imposing buildings of Regal Pictures.

"Here we are, Gorgeous," he said. "End of the rainbow. We collect \$5000 and expenses from Laye for tailing his big star, Maxine LeSoir, just to see that no harm came to her and that she didn't live in a lower berth like we did in a compartment."

"There really wasn't room enough," June remarked.

"Smart-cracking, eh?" Jerry barked, but his big grin said he wasn't angry. "Do you need two compartments?"

"I was talking about Miss LeSoir. And beside, she didn't meet a single man on the trip across."

Jerry crawled out of the car, met June on the other side. They walked up to the gates.

The watchman said: "Good afternoon, Mr. Matheson. Mr. Laye is expecting you." The old man opened the gate, passing them through.

Jerry gawped. "That guy ought to be a detective, too," he grunted. "How the hell did he know who I was?"

June's silvery laugh floated off over the lots and lost itself in the romantic setting of a Spanish village. "You big dope," she giggled. "Didn't you know that you gave him your business card?"

The detective's face fell down to there. "Stupid," he snarled at himself. "Guess I was thinking of something else."

June wriggled her hips and said: "Thanks for the compliment."

Max Laye jumped up from behind his pretentious mahogany desk and rushed across the room to meet Jerry and June. His face looked like he had been made to resemble a composite of Karloff, Chaney, and Cantor six months in a mausoleum.

The Armenian was as pale as death, his face contorted with fear.

Jerry almost snatched his .45 from his shoulder rig in amazed surprise.

"Mister Matheson," Laye gasped. "I'm in terrible trouble."

"Half a dozen raw oysters a day," Jerry prescribed quickly.

"It ain't my appetite," the widened man said. "It's Miss LeSoir. Half an hour after you reported she arrived in Hollywood okey-dokey, her voice telephoned me from Stage Fife. Oh, Gawd, it was terribul. The voice . . ."

Jerry cut him. "I don't give a damn how bad her voice is. Maybe it's too much gin. I'll take that check."

"But you don't understand," Laye protested. His lower lip trembled, his knees wavered.

JUNE looked the Armenian up and down and decided he'd chosen the wrong name, so far as women were concerned.

The detective's words slashed out again. "Write," he commanded. "We fulfilled our contract and we want our dough. Write, or there'll be some writing on the wall."

Max Laye wobbled to his desk, tremblingly picked up a pen, made out a check and handed it to Jerry. The detective folded it into his wallet, looked at June. "Two compartments," he smiled. "We'll use one for overtime."

"The writing on the wall!" screamed the producer, seeming more frightened than ever. "You

must be also a physic."

"Psychic, you lug," June said negligently. Apparently, her mind was occupied at the moment with compartments.

"You're a great detective," Laye wailed at Jerry. "When we got to Stage Fife . . . but first. Her voice, . . . I swear it was hers . . . it said: You had me followed all the way across the continent. It was none of your business. I'm going to give you publicity that'll ruin Regal Pictures. Then the voice stopped. We . . ."

Jerry barked: "You mean you got a telephone to every set on the lot?"

"Sure. Wires go round to all the stages and they come out here," he shrilled, pointing to a black box on his desk. "Well, after this voice is coming in, we run out there and we see . . . Gawd!"

"I didn't know he was back," Jerry smirked. "But then I haven't seen the afternoon papers."

June shot him a glance that said "Shut up. Listen to the mug. Maybe it means three compartments."

"Okay," Jerry agreed. "What happened?"

Max Laye's face went whiter than foam out on the beach, then ran into a death-like gray-green. "The set it was one of these torture wheels like the Spanish Inquisition. It was in a dungeon we had built. The room was locked, but when we got there . . . it's still there . . . We locked the stage up again . . . I didn't want the police . . ."

"Well, don't faint," Jerry shouted.

"Don't worry," June said. "There's not enough of him to faint."

The detective spun, snatched Laye by the wrist. He almost yanked the man off the floor. "Lets see," Jerry bellowed.

The trio fled from the magnificent offices, across the lots to Stage Five.

Laye tried to get a hand into a pocket for a key but he couldn't make it. Jerry was in a hurry. He couldn't wait. He plunged one of his own paws into the Armenian's pants pocket.

"Be good," June warned with a grin. "I'm watching."

He ignored her caustic remark, came out with the keys, opened the door and barged in. He switched on a light.

On a wall, the "writing on the wall" that Laye had mentioned, was chalked: *Cherchez la femme*.

"There it is," screamed the producer. "What means it?"

"It means hunt for the woman," Jerry growled. "Don't you know any French?"

Laye gesticulated helplessly. "I should be running around trying to meet some French ladies with all this trouble." He whirled toward the torture wheel, his voice skidding to a paralyzing shrill, "Look!"

June and the detective pivoted, then fell back at the horrible sight that met their eyes.

On the wheel was a naked woman, bound hand and foot! She was dead!

The nude figure was laced with her back to the wheel, the body curved around the torture machine so that the young breasts stood up like the halves of small silver footballs; so that the gently rounded belly formed a connecting link between the breasts and her thighs.

THE DEAD girl's neck bore bluish marks! Someone had strangled her, then tied her on the wheel.

Jerry's body galvanized, then shot forward. He looked closely at the cadaver, straightened, whirled.

"Kerist!" he bellowed. "It's Maxine LeSoir!"

"Don't I know," wailed Laye. "She committed suicide to ruin me."

"Suicide?" snorted June contemptuously. "No girl with a body like that ever kills herself. In the second place, I suppose she tied her hands on that wheel, then choked herself to death."

Laye seemed surprised.

Jerry said: "It's a screwy business."

He spun toward Laye. "What do you know about this? Talk fast or it's the police. It's murder! Murder, I tell you. Talk!"

Laye fairly shook in his shoes. "All I know is that you telephoned Miss LeSoir had arrived okey-dokey. I'm sitting in my magnificent offices when the buzzer buzzes and this voice comes from Stage Fife. I get scared and run out. I meet Zanoldi . . . ah, he's a great director. You should see his last picture. He . . ."

"Get on with your story," Jerry stormed.

Laye's eyes popped. "Oh. Well, I meet Zanoldi near Stage Fife and I tell him about the telephone call. We go into the set and find her!" Laye looked at the corpse and shuddered. "Then I try to telephone you. But you're already on your way here. I decided to wait to see if you can quiet this business . . . so we won't have so much bad

publicity. I'm ruined! We're right in the midst of a picture starring Maxine. We stopped production so she could go to New York to see her sick mother. Oi. You trail her back here, but what do you do? You practically bring a nude stiff with you."

Laye whimpered. "Five minutes ago, you wanted to talk dollars—I'm crazy. Everybody's crazy!" He looked at Jerry with tears in his eyes. "You got to help me, Mister Matheson."

"How much?" the other parried coldly, eyeing the corpse that, though cold in death, still was beautiful.

"Twenty-five thousand to solve it quick."

Jerry slammed his hat to the back of his head. "Done. Lock up this place. Were going back to your office."

Back in the office, Jerry had to pilot the dazed and frantic producer to his own chair.

"He doesn't know whether he's going or coming," June remarked.

"By the process of eliminating possible and impossible circumstances at the present moment," Jerry said, "I'd say he was going."

"And going fast," June retorted.

Jerry found a bottle of scotch in Laye's desk, turned half of it into his own anatomy, gave June a pull at the neck which reduced it another quarter, then dribbled a couple of drops through Laye's lips.

The liquor seemed to help steady the man. He sat up, became more alert.

Jerry said: "You were right in the middle of a picture starring the corpus delecti, eh?"

Laye's eyes rolled. "It was Maxine, I tell you. We ain't got no such star as Miss Delecti."

"Can it," bellowed Jerry.

Laye jumped up, started for the men's room.

"Where the hell are you going?" barked the detective.

"I thought you said to . . ."

"Come back here!"

Laye came.

"Miss LeSoir had an understudy? A stand-in?" Jerry shot at the producer.

"Sure. A stand-in. She's Miss Morris. There were like twins."

Jerry stuck his face into Laye's, bellowing again: "That wasn't Miss Morris on that wheel, was it?"

"No! No! I'd know it was Maxine because . . ." he broke off.

“WELL,” finished Laye lamely, “because of that little black streak of hair.”

“Ah,” snarled Jerry. “You didn’t kill her because she was running around with someone else, did you?”

Laye leaped up. “No! I swear I’m innocent.”

Jerry turned his back on the shivering man, looked at June. “Honey, you hop in that bus we hired and get back to the station. See if you can pick up Maxine’s trail from the time we dropped her there. See if anybody met her, where they went, what they did, before Maxine got there.”

June gave Jerry a sort of salute, said: “Be good, Big Boy.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Jerry said. “Get along.”

But before June left, she walked up to Jerry, her breasts high. Jerry looked right through her dress, although he didn’t need to. He had a mental blueprint of June’s lovely body. He should have. He’d studied it enough times. June walked up to him, put her arms around him, put one of her legs tightly against his.

The detective smothered her red mouth, then gently pushed her away. “You’re sort of rushing things, Gorgeous,” he murmured. “We aren’t in that compartment yet.”

“Now,” said Jerry, after June had gone, “where’s Maxine’s stand-in?”

“I’ll call her,” Laye said. He rolled his eyes upward. “She’s magnificent. Better than Maxine except her voice. We’d planned to train her voice and maybe make her star, too.”

“Call her in,” Jerry ordered.

The producer flipped a switch on a box on his desk, gave the order, then wilted in his chair. “You think you can keep out the police?”

“Hell, no!” Jerry growled. “You got a murder out there! You got to tell the police sometime. But if we get this thing solved, maybe we can tone it down.”

A door at his back opened. He whirled, gasped. Standing there, framed in the portal, was as near a counterpart of Maxine LeSoir as one could imagine. But if anything, she was more lovely than the ravishing blonde who now lay stark on the torture wheel on Stage Five.

“Come in,” invited Laye. “Have a drink?” He held up the bottle of scotch.

“Put it down,” Jerry ordered. “I’ll do the inviting around here.”

Miss Claudia Morris closed the door softly, walked straight toward Jerry.

“This is Mister Jerry Matheson,” Laye said. “He wants to meet you.”

Claudia smiled. She kept on walking. She stopped walking when her high, firm breasts were almost touching Jerry. The detective could feel the heat coming through her thin dress from her body. He looked down at her, his brows arched.

The girl explained before he could ask a question. “Miss LeSoir was supposed to be back today to resume work on her picture and I had got into my costume ready to do my job. That’s why it looks like I don’t have much on.”

“I’ll say,” Jerry remarked. From his height, he could look down the neck of Claudia’s shabby dress. He looked right down into the deep valley her breasts made. His lips went dry. He wet them with his tongue.

Claudia moved a step nearer to him.

Jerry wasn’t easily embarrassed, but he rammed both hands into his pockets. He could feel the blood pounding. His breath was getting hotter and hotter. He twisted his head around, glared at Laye.

“I think I’d better talk a few minutes alone to Miss Morris.”

Laye pushed himself up from his overstuffed, leather chair. He nodded and streaked for the door. Then he turned. “F’gawd’s sake, Mister Matheson,” he quaked, “do something quick.”

“I’m going to,” Jerry grunted. “Scram.”

Jerry made the rounds of the three doors of Laye’s private office, locked them, came back to the smiling, sensuous Claudia Morris.

“There’s been a murder, Claudia,” he began. “Miss LeSoir was found strangled a little while ago on Stage Five.”

CLAUDIA gasped. Her face drained of blood. One of her finely-formed hands flew to her throat in an involuntary gesture of horror.

“What I wanted to know,” Jerry went on, his hands still in his pockets, “is if you know anybody who would kill her. Do you know anybody who would strip off her clothes and tie her to a torture wheel?”

The girl shook her blonde bobbed waves, her face a negative mask. “I . . . I don’t know anybody so cruel,” she murmured. Jerry thought her voice sounded like silver bells.

“At first I thought it might have been you who

was killed instead of Miss LeSoir," he said. "You look just alike."

Claudia nodded in agreement.

"That is," Jerry went on, letting his eyes range up and down the stand-in's body which showed every line through her clothes. "That is, except in one particular. Take off some clothes, Claudia."

Claudia seemed shocked at the idea. "But . . . why . . .?"

Jerry gave her a big smile. That was the second best thing he could give a woman. "You've got a divine enough body, Claudia, not to ask questions. I should think you'd show it on the slightest excuse."

The girl returned his smile. Jerry began to fidget. "For you," Claudia said, "I'd do anything."

Jerry went over to the high windows and pulled the Venetian blinds shut. The room was left in shadows. He came back. He said: "Maybe you knew I was a detective. Still, there are some things I can't know until I make an examination. I always work better when my witnesses cooperate."

Claudia was wearing no brassiere. Her cupped breasts rode proudly on her chest.

Jerry came out of his momentary transfixion, leaped across to Claudia and buried his face in the warm-scented, velvety valley. His lips brushed in savage hunger. His breath came in hot gasps.

The body out there on the wheel was that of Maxine LeSoir!

Jerry stood looking at her a moment, then charged. The bodies met, clung, throbbed. He lifted her, carried her to a plush-covered sofa on one side of the room. His burning hands caressed her body that was leaping to meet his.

"I've waited a long time to find a man like you," Claudia panted. "And you've found the woman."

Jerry couldn't talk. With him, actions spoke louder, more forcefully, than words.

Once more, Jerry assumed his professional air. He was anxious to get to the bottom of the mystery of Maxine LeSoir's death, to get started back to New York with June.

He reflected a moment. June would understand when he told her of Claudia. June was like that. Lots of things came under the head of business. Anyway, June—who was his confidential secretary and who had helped Jerry solve as many crimes as Jerry had solved by himself—knew the big, handsome detective would never desert her for another woman. Never desert her, that is, more than

just long enough to secure a bit of evidence.

Jerry wondered what luck June had had with tracing Maxine's movements from the time she left the train until her nude body had been found on the torture wheel in the dungeon on Stage Five.

He wanted June to get back to Regal Pictures; he wanted to get this business over with; he wanted to collect his fee from Laye; he wanted to get started back to Times Square.

Claudia said: "You'll be leaving soon, won't you, Jerry?"

"Yeah. Pretty soon. I'll get this murder cleaned up in short order, then it's back east for me."

The girl ran her hands over her breasts, moved them down the center of her body. "I'll be sorry you aren't living here," she said softly. "There aren't many men out here like you."

"You'll remember me all the more."

"I'll remember you, Jerry, But the thought will be sort of clouded with the memory of Maxine's . . . death." She hesitated, her beautiful face wistful, sorrowful. "Do you know who did it, Jerry?"

THE DETECTIVE swiveled his big, handsome head toward her. "You asked me that question and you haven't seen the body, or the murder scene?"

She said: "No, I haven't. I just wondered if you knew who the . . . the fiend was."

"Keep wondering, baby," Jerry gave back. "I give, but I don't tell—not until I'm ready. You can go now. Thanks for the . . . information. I loved it. You're the kind of witness I like."

Claudia went out, her sensuous body leaving the room still full of its passionate presence. Jerry wished to hell he and June were in their compartment. He spun about, flicked a switch on the box on Laye's desk and told the producer's stenographer to send the wizened little Armenian in.

In three minutes, Laye popped into the magnificent quarters.

"Did she break down?" he queried anxiously.

"I'll say," Jerry grinned.

"She admitted it?" Laye pressed.

"Admitted what?"

Laye seemed surprised at the detective's apparent stupidity. "Confessed to murdering Maxine."

"Hell, no," Jerry bellowed. "You think she did it?"

Laye shrugged, lifted his hands. "Somebody done it. Somebody wanted to ruin me."

"I thought you said Maxine committed suicide."

"I don't know what to think," Laye groaned.

"Don't think," Jerry told him harshly. "You aren't built for it." He hesitated. "Write out that twenty-five grand check."

Laye leaped. His body began shaking, his eyes popping from his head. "You . . . you know who did it?"

"Write," Jerry commanded. "I think so. If I miss my guess—if I don't break the case in the next hour, I'll tear up the check. If I apprehend the culprit, I retain the mazuma, kiss you and Hollywood and your nymphomaniacs goodbye."

Laye floundered about in Jerry's words. He shrugged in resignation, dug up his checkbook, and wrote.

The detective looked at the slip of paper, worth \$25,000; folded it in his wallet with the other \$5000 check and said:

"Miss Morris wears good-looking lingerie. She doesn't have a black mole where Maxine had one. Did Maxine wear nice silkies, too? I was too busy during the train trip to find out."

"We'll go to her dressing room," Laye said, plainly mystified about the proceedings.

They went out, Laye leading the way, Jerry pounded along behind.

In Maxine's dressing room, Jerry began pawing over intimate articles. He rummaged in drawers, stopped at one. "Maxine wasn't married, was she?"

Laye said she wasn't.

"Then naturally your contract said she couldn't.

"Sure. Certainly." Laye still was lost.

Jerry nodded, looking at various articles in the drawer. "I thought so. She wasn't dumb."

There was a voice at the door. "Maybe she didn't need to be where Laye was concerned," the voice said.

Jerry spun, smirked. "Smart-cracking again, eh?"

It was June. She was standing there, smiling. "I have to do something to amuse myself between times," she retorted.

"Okay, Beautiful," Jerry said. "I'll hear from you in a minute." He turned on Laye. "Let's go to Claudia's room."

"Claudia?" June barked, her breasts coming up in indignation.

"There now," Jerry soothed. "Just a little

business. Tell you later. Lead, Laye."

IN CLAUDIA'S dressing room, Jerry began plundering again. He seemed particularly interested in lingerie, although dresses and costumes were inspected, too. Some of the lingerie was almost indelicately intimate.

He kept prowling. He found another set that seemed to interest him, but he said nothing. He picked up a bound manuscript of the part Maxine was playing in the current picture she was starring in when she was murdered.

"I didn't know stand-ins had to know the star's parts," he said.

June cut in caustically: "I didn't know detectives had to know the stand-in's parts."

"Now, June," Jerry admonished. He turned and looked at Laye for an answer.

"Claudia was just trying to get ahead," Laye explained.

"She got one," Jerry said. He bundled up the manuscript and a set of lingerie, whirled and started from the room. But he changed his mind, stopping suddenly. "What did you find out?" he shot at June.

June said: "I wondered if you were interested. It seems that after we left Maxine, she started to get in a cab when another girl stopped her. The porter I talked to said they looked like twins. They both got in the cab and disappeared. I checked the cab company and found out the driver let them out at a side entrance of the studio, here. My guess is . . ."

"I know already," Jerry interrupted. "The girl who met Maxine was Claudia Morris. Claudia was exactly like Maxine in every way, except her voice. Claudia was jealous. She wanted to be a star, too. She figured she could improve her voice and take Maxine's place—if there wasn't any Maxine anymore. So Claudia lured the star to Stage Five, choked her to death, tied her on the torture wheel, telephoned Laye here so he'd be sure to find the body quickly, and for some reason chalked 'Find the Woman' on the wall."

He swung toward Laye. "Maxine and Claudia were supposed to wear the same kind of clothes during work but they didn't wear the same lingerie, did they?"

Laye said they didn't have to.

"Right," snapped Jerry. "Claudia undressed Maxine and didn't know what to do with her clothes in a hurry so she put them among her own here in Claudia's room until she could get rid of

them later.”

“How do you know Claudia wrote ‘Find the Woman’ on the wall?” June wanted to know.

“Well,” Jerry explained, screwing up his mouth. “When I was questioning her in Laye’s private office, she made a slip and said almost exactly those same words. I already suspected her but that made me more suspicious. Then I came here and found she was studying Maxine’s role although she didn’t have to.” He whipped open the bundle containing the manuscript and the lingerie. “On top of that, here’s the pants Maxine was wearing when she was killed. Her initials are down here on one corner. Now—”

A feminine voice behind them slashed into what the detective was going to say.

“You’re a smart dick,” the voice said.

The three whirled.

It was Claudia! She had been hiding in a closet of her dressing room. Now she stood in the door, a menacing blue gun in her hand leveled at the trio.

Laye nearly fainted. Jerry grinned. June looked the girl up and down and said: “Your makeup’s on wrong.”

Claudia’s face became a mask of hate. “You got the facts right, Matheson,” she snarled. “But they won’t do you any good. Sure I killed her. Sure I wanted to step into her part. But what you found out is going to die with you—all three of you. I’m going to blast you to hell.”

She raised the gun slowly!

LAYE slumped to the floor, out. He was as cold as a girl who listens to her mama.

June shrugged and said: “I heard that people came to California to get warm but I didn’t think it was this way. Go ahead, turn on the heat.”

Jerry said nothing. He was paying no attention to Claudia. He paid no more attention to the gun than if it were a stick of candy.

He jerked his trousers off! He jerked at his shorts!

Jerry stood and looked at her. He smiled.

“The question is,” he told Claudia, “do you shoot—or shall I?”

The gun in the woman’s hand wavered, began a slow motion toward the floor as the arm dropped. Then the weapon slid from her convulsing fingers, crashed to the floor.

Jerry sidestepped neatly, caught Claudia a clip on the jaw with his ham-like fist, watched her crumple to the floor. She was as cold as Laye. She was as cold as two girls who listened to their mamas.

“What are we going to do with her?” June wanted to know.

Jerry didn’t answer. He found a piece of rope, lashed Claudia’s hands and feet. Then he threw a glass of water in Laye’s face.

“You heard her confess,” he barked in the little man’s ear. “Here’s the lingerie evidence and I’ll take a ten-to-one bet you can find Claudia’s fingerprints on Maxine’s throat. The police know how to make them stand out. We’ve got to hurry back to New York but I’ll mail you a notarized statement of what we know. Anyway, the police can get the same evidence we have. Maybe more. Thanks for the check, Laye. So long.”