

MOM PETRELLI'S BOY

By GERRY SETON



In his mind's eye, Moran saw Nick being led to the death cell

Detective Joe Moran Wears His Heart on His Sleeve—but There's Plenty of Courage in It!

THE blare of an old-fashioned player-piano grated on Moran's ear-drums as he hesitated in front of Mom Petrelli's tap-room. He had a job to do—and he didn't relish it. But a newly made detective can't decide what arrests are to be made. He gets his orders, and carries them out.

The captain had said: "Pick up Nick

Petrelli. We have a tip that he was mixed up in the Vine Street holdup."

A policeman had been killed in that holdup, and Captain Dunn's voice was harsh and implacable. Moran wanted to tell him Nick Petrelli couldn't have had anything to do with the crime. Nick was a swell kid. This kind of thing wasn't in his line. But one look

at the captain's eyes told Moran there was no use arguing.

He hesitated in front of the tap-room just the same. This was his old neighborhood. He'd been a kid here. He'd pounded the pavement as a harness bull.

And all those years he had known Mom Petrelli.

He liked and pitied the hard-working Italian woman, with her sparkling black eyes and beaming smile. She'd had bad luck all her life. Just when she and her husband had licked adversity, old Nick died. There had been something of a mystery about the old man's death.

No one in the neighborhood ever seemed to know just what caused it. And Mom wasn't one to talk. She sorrowed over her husband's passing, but confided in no one.

After awhile the folks in that section forgot all about Mr. Petrelli. All they knew was that the old lady was making ends meet through her own unaided efforts. Mom threw herself into the struggle for existence—not for herself, but for young Nick. He was all that mattered. For him she managed the tap-room in Arlington's toughest section. Her eagle eye marked the unpaid beers over the bar. When trouble started, she threw out the offensive customers herself.

The men who frequented the place were rugged, touchy characters—but they had a wholesome respect for Mom.

When she counted over the week's earnings, she chuckled to herself. They were hoarded to send her boy to college.

That's where he was now—at Arlington University, coming home over the week-ends to help Mom around the place. They said he had a girl at school, and sometimes a girl is good for a fellow, and sometimes she's bad for him, depending on what kind she is. Maybe this one wanted things Nick couldn't afford—and that's why he stuck up the gas station.

It was a clumsy job, anyway, Moran thought. Nick—if it was Nick—had worn a mask, but the attendant recognized his red college sweater and cap. They were Nick's trademark on that side of town. There weren't any other university boys in the neighborhood. When Mom bought those articles of clothing she never thought they might send Nick to the chair. It was a terrible thing to think of. Why did bad things have to happen to a good woman like her. Moran asked himself.

As for Nick, himself, Moran didn't know whether he was at the tap-room or not. Probably not—after pulling a thing like that—but it was the best place to pick up the trail. It was a cinch Mon didn't know anything about it, because the tip about Nick had not gone to the newspapers.

That made the job even tougher. It was like telling a mother her son had been killed. Worse, because Mom would rather have seen her bambino dead than in a jam like this. She was proud and strong, but not strong enough to take such a blow. In his mind's eye, Moran saw Nick being led to the death cell.

WELL, no use stalling. That'd only make it harder than ever. Moran had to take Nick away from her, and he would rather have cut off his right hand than do it. Duty! It was a fine word—a ringing, resonant word, but now he hated it. The detective sighed, shook his head, pushed open the door, and went into the taproom.

There was nothing fancy about it—just a bar, and a dozen tables. Smoke fogged the lights in the ceiling, and the narrow confines of the place were noisy with the chatter of customers. They were hard people. The percentage of tough men and criminals was very high in that section of town. Mom didn't care who they were. The money they spent was for Nick—and that was enough for her.

Mom Petrelli spied Moran, cried in her rich Neapolitan voice:

“Yo, Joe! Where you been this week? You no come to see me any more. Don't I treat you good, eh?”

Moran leaned on the bar. He couldn't meet Mom's eyes. He'd always been like a son of hers—next to Nick. He loved the old lady, and now he had to take away from her the one thing that made her life happy.

“I've been pretty busy, Mom,” he said, trying to sound casual.

“What's-a matt'? You got a girl?”

Moran tried to grin, but it made his facial muscles seem warped.

“Not a chance. You're the only woman in my life.”

“Huh!” she chuckled derisively. “A handsome fella like you, and no girl! I no believe-a that. But wait!” A smile warmed the rosy face framed in still beautiful black hair. “I gotta news—”

A lean man, with crooked eyes, lounged up to the bar.

“Never mind the gab. Gimme a beer—an' remember, cops won't do either you or me any good.”

Moran slanted his gaze sidewise. Bugs Malenti, Arlington's Public Enemy Number One. A tough guy. A killer. Everyone in that part of town did as Bugs said. There wasn't a cop on the force who wouldn't have given a month's pay to put a rap on Malenti that would stick, but no one had been able to do it so far. Moran itched to smash his fist into that sneering face, but there wouldn't be any point to it.

So he summoned a smile to his lips. Malenti knew everything that went on in a criminal way. Maybe he knew about Nick. Maybe he might let something slip. A smart guy, yes, but a braggart—and talkers sometimes told things they never intended to tell. Take it easy. This fellow might be the solution to the whole job.

“You seem kind of touchy, Bugs,” he said. “What are you supposed to be around

here—a board of censorship, or something?”

“Never mind that, copper,” said Malenti unpleasantly. “If I don't want her to tell you tomorrow is Sunday, she won't do it; will you, Mom?”

Mrs., Petrelli shook her head. Obviously she was afraid of Bugs. Anybody could see that. But then, all the neighbors were, too. Malenti was a big shot. If the police couldn't number the men he had killed, Little Italy could.

Moran figured he knew what was going on. Mom had probably intended telling him Nick was coming home. Bugs was informing her as plainly as he could that he didn't want her to say anything about it. But that was where the whole thing had a phony sound.

Even though Moran was young, he was a pretty smart cop. Malenti knew that—and the way he had shoved himself into the conversation meant he wanted Moran to know he was shutting Mom up on the subject of young Nick.

Why? Bugs never left anything to chance. He always thought things out in advance. So, why did he make it plain that he wanted silence?

He wanted Moran to know that he knew all about Nick! There was a reason for that. What was it?

The detective shoved his untasted glass away.

“Were you going to tell me anything about Nick?” he asked Mrs. Petrelli.

Mom looked past him, into Bugs' malevolent eyes. She shook her head.

“No—no. What-a would I say about him? To a cop. You don't-a have nothin' to do with college boys.”

“Sure he don't,” said Malenti. “If he's smart he don't have nothin' to do with anybody around this joint, either.”

Moran crowded down the anger in his throat. Wait. Just wait. That's all, Malenti. I'd

trade a lieutenant's commission to get your scalp. If I could only do that, and save Mom some way. If I can't I'll get you, anyway.

"Okay, Mom," was all he said aloud. "Give my regards to Nick as soon as he gets home from school. I'm going to use your telephone if you don't mind. This is kind of an easy night, and I'm going to hang around awhile."

HIS hands were sweaty as he felt in his pocket for a nickel. The telephone booth was in back. He went into it.

He dialed the number, and while he listened to the staccato little whirl in his ears, tried to figure the thing out. Maybe Captain Dunn could help him. The precinct commander was smart.

On the face of it the thing didn't make sense. Bugs Malenti was pushing himself into the case. Why should he do that? He wasn't anxious to have the cops get anything on him. They'd be too anxious for the chance to grab it. Moran mentally arranged and re-arranged the facts, as he knew them.

Captain Dunn listened to what the young detective said. He gave no opinion. Instead, he asked:

"What do you make of it?"

"Of course, it's just a guess on my part," said Moran, "but Malenti wants me to know that he knows all about Nick—and is trying to cover him up. That means, in the first place, he wasn't anywhere near the scene of the crime, and has an alibi."

"Sure he has," said Dunn. "Bugs was here in the station, arguing with me when the thing happened. I'm his alibi. Laugh that off."

"Then he's framing something," said Moran. "Could it be that he was trying to rib me up so I'd forget about Nick, and tail him? If I did, his boys might help the kid to lam out of here."

"Don't worry about it," Dunn said. "I've got squad cars covering both the front

and back of Mom Petrelli's place. A flea couldn't get away without being seen."

The detective pondered that for a moment. He hadn't been told anything about other men being on the assignment. The captain must know more than had been told him. That wasn't right. If he had to risk his neck—and break Mom's heart at the same time—he should know what it was all about.

"Look, Cap," he said, "why are you keeping me in the dark? What's this all about, anyway?"

"A good cop obeys orders." Dunn barked at him, "and doesn't ask questions. I can tell you only one thing. Bugs knows you're Nick's pal. That's why I sent you over there. He's a big mouth. He's likely to say more than he means to. And, you know as well as I do, that we want to get Malenti—get him for keeps. Things are moving on just as I figured they would. Go back there, and rib him into saying more. But—be careful, Joe."

Moran hung up. Why couldn't it just be Malenti they were after? That would be a pleasure. He'd be tickled to death to shoot it out with that thug any time. But in this case, no matter how the thing worked out, poor Mom would suffer. When she found out what Nick had done she'd die. There wasn't anything Detective Moran could do about it. The dice were in the hands of fate, and Detective Moran's heart was heavy.

Moran opened the door of the booth, and went back into the tap-room. All of the customers had gone. Probably Bugs had warned them away. They needed only a hint from him.

MALENTI was still there, huddled on a chair in a corner, smoking a cigarette very quiet and evil.

"So you're back again, are you, copper?" he asked insolently. "Well, don't ask Mom any more questions about Nick. They make her nervous, don't they. Mom?"

Mom was polishing glasses behind the bar. Her swarthy skin was tallowy. Her hands shook a little. She knew!

Bugs must have told her. And her heart was breaking as she tried to occupy herself with usual tasks. All her exuberance, all her unbounded gaiety, were gone. Her face was dark, brooding. Her gaze wandered restlessly between Malenti and Moran.

A grand old lady, Moran thought. She idolizes the ground her kid walks on. She'll fight like a tiger for him, too. The right or wrong of things don't matter so far as Mom is concerned. Her love goes above anything else. Nick's all she's got, and she'll tear out her heart for him—mine, too, if she has to see me take him. Nick and I were pals once, even if he is six years younger than I am. We fished and hunted together. Now I'm hunting him.

Moran leaned against the bar and looked at Bugs.

"Would it make you nervous if I asked about Nick?" he asked.

Malenti rose, shuffled toward the bar, his hand resting significantly in the pocket of his coat.

"Yes, it would," he said, "And when I'm nervous, my trigger finger gets twitchy."

The detective laughed.

"Save that baloney for somebody else. I'm going to have little chat with Mom—and you're going to pull that big nose of yours out of what doesn't concern you. Understand?"

Then, behind the bar, Mom suddenly stood straight and magnificent, her arms akimbo, her gaze traveling between the two tight-faced men.

"You two justa shut up, and letta me talk," she cried. "This is my place. Nicky—he's-a my boy. Bugs, he say Nick rob a place—kill a cop."

There was something deadly in her black eyes. Both men stared at her.

"Joe Moran, you my friend. No go try pulling any bad business on me, eh? You tella

me. Bugs—he lie to anybody. He lie now to hurt me. Tella me the truth, Joe. Whatta you know about my Nick?"

The detective's mouth was dry as leather. His Adam's apple choked him. How could he verify what this lousy rat had told Mom—even if it was true? How could he strike all the joy of living out of her with a word? It would tear apart the whole fabric of her life to say that Nick was a thief and a murderer.

It was too much to ask even of a policeman. The words trembled on his lips, and he couldn't utter them.

"All right, I'll tell her again," said Bugs. "After all, I'm the kid's pal, and not a lousy cop. Take it with your chin up, Mom. When I told you Nick stuck up a gas station down on Vine Street, and killed a harness bull in the getaway, I told you the truth. Moran is here to make the pinch. Ain't you, Moran?"

Joe's eyes were fixed on Mom. She gripped the edge of the bar with her strong hands, gripped it so hard that the knuckles showed white.

"Nick would not killa anybody," she said. "It's a lie. Tella me Bugs is lying, Joe. Just tella me that"

Malenti showed his teeth.

"He can't. It's just as I told you, Mom. The whole thing was a little new to Nick. That's bad, because, as it turns out, the bull doesn't even know anything is wrong."

"You getta Nick into this," said Mom suddenly.

The gangster reached out his hands, palms upward

"You got me wrong. I wasn't in on it. I got witnesses to prove I was on the other side of town. Do you think I'd a' let Nick wear that red sweater and cap everybody knows he wears, if I'd been in on it? That's what tripped him up. That's why the cops are lookin' for him. He might just as well have left his callin' card."

Mom's vast bosom heaved emotionally. She did not look at Joe Moran. Her eyes were fixed on the gang leader.

"Looka, Bugs," she said. "You are a friend to my Nick, eh? You do for him what you can, no?"

"Sure. I'll get him out of this if I have to kick the police department apart."

"Why? I remember you no like his poppa so much."

Malenti stiffened. So did Moran. Moran could see the muscles ridge under Malenti's coat. He had been taken by surprise, and was getting himself ready for anything.

"What do you mean, Mom?" he asked.

"You know what I mean, Bugs. You never go for my Nick—why for Nicolino?"

"Well, I do. That's enough, ain't it? You ought to be glad he's got somebody to stand by him in a pinch like this. What in hell are you crabbin' about, anyway?"

Mom tightened her grip still more.

"I am notta crabbing, Bugs. But I want to know—how, if you are not inna this job—how do you know my Nicky shoot this cop?"

Bugs shrugged his lean shoulders.

"Everybody knows. Even flathead Moran here knows about it. The papers will probably be on the streets in ten minutes with the whole story."

Suddenly the whole thing was clear to Joe Moran. Those few clipped sentences told him everything.

The newspapers didn't know Nick Petrelli was suspected of murder. Nobody knew it but the police—and the man who had tipped them off! That meant *Bugs, himself, had been the stool pigeon!* And, it also meant that he had engineered the holdup himself, or had guilty knowledge of it. He was engineering this whole thing to have the blame placed on young Nick!

THE door opened and shut softly. There came the click of it being latched. Moran glanced

toward it. A slouch-shouldered man, with a cast in his eye. That was a hop-head they called Caruso, because he was always singing to himself. Caruso had a gun in his hand, a snub-nosed automatic.

"Stick 'em up, copper," he said. "Frisk him, Bugs."

Malenti wasn't used to taking orders. They annoyed him. But he apparently saw that something unexpected had happened, and when Joe raised his arms, Malenti took his gun.

"What's this all about, Caruso?" Bugs asked. "I'm doin' all right here without any help from you."

Caruso snickered nervously.

"That's what you think—but you ain't. You're in a spot. It took me to find it out"

"What d'ye mean?"

"Look. You had this thing all figgered out You framed that stickup, with me wearin' Nick's sweater and cap, so the job could be blamed on him—"

Malenti's face went stark, staring white. He turned Moran's revolver on Caruso.

"Why, you dirty, double-crossin'—"

"Wait a minute. You don't need to be afraid of what this cop hears. He won't be around long enough to tell anybody. But, instead of you doin' the framin', you were the one who was framed, Bugs. At the very time I was stickin' up that gas station, *the police had Nick Petrelli at headquarters!* They were waitin' for what happened. When you called, and tipped them off about Nick bein' the killer, they had a dictaphone recording of it made, and you never did know how to disguise your voice, Bugs. You didn't get that job pinned on Nick. You pinned it on yourself!"

Moran listened to this in absolute amazement, and in spite of his astonishment, he was happier than he had ever been in his life. Caruso was telling the truth. There couldn't be any doubt of it. Nick was

innocent, and there was nothing to break Mom's heart after all. But the thing he couldn't figure out was why he had been sent to arrest Nick, when the police knew Nick couldn't have done it.

At the same time, Moran knew he was in a tough spot. True, there were policemen waiting outside, but he could be knocked off before they came in. Both Bugs and Caruso had the hot seat waiting for them. Another killing could add nothing to their punishment—

Moran looked at Mom Petrelli, smiled. "It good news for you, anyway, sweetheart," he said, "knowing Nick's not in a jam."

"I know that all the time," she said.

Bugs spun around, glaring.

"What's that you said?" he snarled "You knew it."

Mom opened a tap and filled a stein with foaming beer.

"Listen to me, Bugs," she said in her throaty voice. "You hear only half the story. I tella you the rest. Listen close, because maybe you don't like it so much."

"Let it go," said the gang leader, shuffling his feet nervously.

"Nine year ago, Bugs," Mom said, "you belong to the Mafia—the Black Hand. You try to get money from my old Nick. He won't give. You kill him—"

Malenti surged against the bar, his eyes glaring.

"Yes, you do," Mom went on. "Nobody know it. Nobody can prove it. But I know. And because of that you hate me and my Nicolino. I hear lots of things around this place. So, I find out what you gonna do—and I send Nicky to the district attorney the night of that stickup. They know-a he ain't got nothing to do with it. They know you have!"

Malenti relaxed.

"That's what you think. All right, Nick didn't have anything to do with it. But the evidence they got ain't enough. If you and

Moran went on the stand it might be—but you won't, because I'm going to kill you right here. Then, what have they got?"

Moran grinned. "Sure, you can knock us off," he said, "but you can't get away. There's a squad car in front and back, and you haven't got a chance. It's the chair for you, Malenti, and every decent person in Arlington will give three cheers for that."

BUGS seemed to crouch a little. His face went gray, and his eyes narrowed. All of a sudden he had shriveled.

"Okay," he said in a reedy voice. "Maybe I'm washed up. It had to come sooner or later. But neither of you two'll ever see me fry. I'm gonna nail you to the cross with bullets—"

He half lifted his gun. Moran thought it was all over, and tightened his body against the impact of the slugs. He couldn't possibly cover the distance between him and the killer before the trigger was squeezed.

But Mom reached across the bar and smashed the stein of beer into Bugs Malenti's face. He went down, screaming and clawing—cut by broken glass, and smeared with blood and beer. Moran hit Caruso once on the chin—just once, and the slouch-shouldered man went down and out.

The two—the old lady and the detective—grinned at each other. Then the doors burst open, and the squad-car men charged in.

When they had taken the handcuffed criminals away, Detective Joe Moran and Mom Petrelli sat down—and looked at each other—and laughed—and laughed—

"Everything is pretty well cleared up," said Moran, "all except one thing. Bugs was caught from the start. There never was any doubt of that. The only thing that had to be done was make him give himself away—and that was inevitable. But, why wasn't I tipped off? Why was I left in the dark right to the

finish? That wasn't right. That wasn't fair."

"But, we hadda do it," said Mom.

"Why?"

"Looka. I know you since you are little boy, Joe. You are Irish. You show the feelings too much. If you know, you show your hand. You tip Bugs off. This way, you don't know, and he can see that you don't know."

"But what about you?"

Mom threw back her shoulders and looked at him proudly.

"Once, longa time ago, I sing at La Scala in Milan. I am an actress, Joe— and if I

can't fool that Bugs Malenti, then I am no good at all. To get even for my Nick and Nicolino, I can play any part!"

Moran rose.

"Don't go," said Mom. "In couple minutes. Captain Dunn bring Nicky over. Then we have spaghetti, no—and celebrate that Bugs no longer is here."

Moran sat down.

"Mom," he said, "I thought I was trying to take care of you. It looks as though I better get you to take care of me!"