

The girl and her father had got acquainted with the 'protection unions' in a tragic way. But Honest John Carmody was pretty good protection all by himself!



The redhead missed nothing in her search!

He Pulled By E. Hoffmann Price A Gun

WHEN Honest John Carmody swung his light sedan from the Camino Real to the vacant parking lot of the Six Mile House, he knew something was wrong. The neon lights were out; the electrical phonograph was

silent. And it was long before closing time.

Then the breeze shifted, and John Carmody knew the answer. He coughed. His bluff red face crinkled at the foul stench that billowed out of a shattered window of the road house, and into his

car. A racketeer's stink bomb; San Francisco and the "Peninsula" had gotten acquainted with "protective unions," and in a big way.

Honest John poured his bulky frame from the wheel. He held his nose and head, hunched forward, charged to the side door that opened into the stairway which led to the owner's quarters, upstairs.

His heart promised to knock his vest loose. He remembered the ambulance that he had met a few miles north screaming its way toward Palo Alto.

A thin thread of light reached from a doorway into the second floor hall. Honest John stopped at the jamb, and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The girl in the tea rose negligee lay face down on her bed. Her shoulders jerked convulsively, and the racking sobs made her shapely form shudder. She was trimly built, with long, lovely legs. Honest John's idea of a woman, if there ever was one!

She seemed to sense his presence, and she sat bolt upright, making a swift twist to do so. The play of lithe curves was beautiful.

"Alma—" He crossed the threshold. "What the devil—where's your dad?"

She fished a handkerchief from beneath the rumpled pillow and dabbed her reddened eyes. They were dark and worried; usually they were black and splendid. Alma Juras was one of those Slavonian girls whom nature had given trim ankles to set off her lovely face.

"I was going to phone you." Alma slid to her feet, pulled the negligee more closely about her. Then she colored a little, realizing how flimsy it was. She said, "I was there when they threw that bomb—I had to get out of every stitch I was wearing—"

"Where's the old man?" he cut in.

Alma buried her face on his shoulder, and both arms crept around his neck.

"They slugged him—the ambulance took him to Palo Alto—they wouldn't let me go along—they won't tell me anything over the telephone—"

"Wait till I get hold of the dirty rats!" he grumbled. He dragged a chair into line, and planted himself in it; the same move deftly swept her to his knee. "What'd they look like?"

Alma shook her head. "I didn't notice them, much. Everyone was dancing. I think it must be

that protective union. Dad ran their collector out, last week. Wait till I tell the sheriff—the police—the—"

"Fat lot of good that'll do," he bitterly growled. "Anyway, I'd bet my neck Iron Mike's behind this. Same as he's been dumping acid into dry cleaners' vats in Frisco, and raising Cain with barber shops, and—"

Alma looked up, eyes wide. "Why—if you know all about it—if everyone knows—"

"Baby, knowing ain't proving! But I'll get proof."

In spite of her worry, the girl smiled a bit. "What's on your mind?" she murmured, raising her eyes to scrutinize that blank, ruddy puss.

Except for his little blue eyes, he looked thick witted. But Honest John inspired confidence, and Alma liked him a lot. He knew that, and if he had not, he might have guessed from the thumping of her heart as she snuggled closer.

"I ain't been in business around here long enough to be well known," he began. "You open this road house, whether or no. Me, I'll be bartender, or something. They'll come back if you show fight after your old man was conked."

"I'm terribly afraid—" She shivered, and flashed an anxious glance about.

Honest John stuttered, "Uh—um—what I meant was, I could sort of stick around nights—in—um—your old man's rooms."

Alma was not as worried as she had been, some minutes earlier. She raised a red, eager mouth. "Darling." She sighed, catching a fresh breath, "I don't know what I'd do if you weren't here..."

When Honest John headed for the room vacated by Anton Juras, Alma sat, bright-eyed, for a long time in the gloom.

IT TOOK several days to get the Six Mile House cleaned up. Honest John had expected that. What caught him short was the way the papers, local and city, played up the lovely girl who was going to defy the racketeers while her father fought for his life. Thus far, no one had been permitted to see Anton Juras.

That unwanted publicity was a challenge. Iron Mike, so called because of iron gray hair, his cold eye, and the rumor that a steel vest had protected him from his rivals, could not ignore it,

lest the rest of his victims rise in revolt.

Honest John, tending bar at the Six Mile House, groaned and clamped down on his cigar. The whole Peninsula had come in for a drink, and a look at Alma. The cocktails the big dick mixed were lousy, but nobody cared; Alma's lovely, vibrant figure within her glove-tight gown, was an eye-ful that was all the more splendid for the gallant smile she gave the world.

Once she weakened. She slammed the phone, glided to the bar, and swallowed the catch in her throat. "That darned sheriff! He can't send a deputy. He says we've not been threatened!"

"Tell him to—to—go and—" He jerked toward the sleek young man who had oozed toward the mahogany. "Yes, sir! What's yours?"

"Sazerac." Soft voice, too soft; and mocking.

Honest John's ears got red. "You want a whiskey an' soda, brother."

"Okay, Mac," smiled the smooth blond egg. "You only have to know twenty drinks to get a union card. Now listen. You're no more bartender than I am. So tell the lady she's way off, hiring a guy that wears a gat with his bar towel."

Honest John filled the highball glass to the very brim, and spilled not a drop as he heard the customer continue, "There's slicker ways of doing things. Suppose a stink was cut loose. Suppose a dozen customers—" He airily waved his hand to indicate thrice that number, "sued your boss for ten grand a piece, for mental distress, being poisoned, and so on. That's her finish, and by a court order she can't beef. Legal, get it?"

That was gospel. Alma, and her father, if he lived, would be out on the street, busted flat. Honest John said, "Buddy, you said I got a gat. I saw the butt of yours. Reach for it, *quick!*"

The big dick's biting whisper made the fellow jerk as though he'd stepped on a live wire. He made a beautiful job of going for his gun. He knew his trade.

But so did Honest John. Only, it was a bung starter, not a .38 that made that sharp smack. The business agent went down with a cold gat dropping from his mitt. John Carmody grinned, and beckoned to Alma. "Customer just passed out. By the way, tell the sheriff we got a threat."

None of the patrons had even noticed the encounter; only its result. An hour later, a sleeping Buddha of a deputy came in to flash a star and

sponge drinks. But Honest John's face was lengthening, and he set the clock an hour forward, to hasten the two o'clock legal closing.

"Thank Gawd," he muttered, locking the doors, "we made it."

HE followed Alma up the stairs. He did not have the courage to tell her that he had not foreseen the enemy's ace in the hole: tailor-made suits...for ten grand each. Her eyes were starry as she looked back over her shoulder and smiled. He could not tell her what he had egged her into. All he could do was assure himself that ruinous lawsuits were better than the vicious bodily attacks from which not even his vigilance could indefinitely save her.

There was a lot that Honest John had not taken into account when indignation had thrown him into this one sided fight.

At her door, Alma's slow smile brought his thoughts back to her. She murmured, "Don't frown that way, darling. Wondering whether I'd kiss you good night?"

He made an awkward bluff of having had just that problem on his mind. Better she thought him sheepish and clumsy than know what had and did worry him.

Then her closeness and contagious warmth strengthened him. She looked up, whispering, "I'm not afraid, as long as you're near. And somehow, I think dad will recover. That's all that matters. One more gas bomb, and we'll lose our customers. We'll close the place, and I'll be glad. There's been little enough in it, anyway!"

All this as she snuggled kitten-like in his arms. A common enemy had brought them closer together than weeks of hasty kisses. And Honest John, convinced that the menace was legal trickery, rather than violence, was less observant than he might otherwise have been. Neither he nor Alma heard the furtive stirring, down in the darkened bar and lounge.

"Somehow, I know dad's not badly injured," she murmured. "They're just keeping him quiet. He's so excitable and hot tempered...."

"*What was that?*" His tense exhalation froze her. "Stay here! *Shut up!*"

He pulled free of her, and a gun filled his hand. His swift motion was soundless, though somehow, he seemed like an elephant doing a toe

dance. But despite his bulk, not a stair tread betrayed his speed. Yet John Carmody was not quite quick enough; that sly stirring had burst into an insane confusion. A chair upset. Glass shattered. There was a momentary, blinding flash which blinked out before it fairly began; yet its instantaneous duration was like a flicker of bluish daylight. A man cursed. Two men, three of them.

"Get him! Get that camera!"

"I can't—it'll blow up anyway—"

All that was torn by a wrathful cry, a pistol shot, and answering fire. The whole succession was bracketed into a split second; yet, like the slow motion picture of eye tricking speed, it was drawn out in John Carmody's senses. He added the final touch.

He fired at the shapes milling in gloom laced by headlight flicker from cars swooping down the Camino. One man dropped. The other returned a wild shot. Honest John roared, bounded forward, ducking lead and squeezing slugs.

He tripped over a man he had not perceived in the gloom. The firing ceased. A fugitive gained the door. Then a gusty roar, and a sheet of flame that blinded and dazed the detective. A hammer blow hurled him against the bar. He did not feel the impact. The concussion wave of the explosion had already stunned him. Nor was he aware of the singing fragments, the choking fumes, the flying plaster scattered when the bomb pushed half of one wall into the parking lot.

Alma came down the warped stairs. Small flames, momentarily growing, guided her through the thinning dust and smoke. Honest John stared dully at her, as though he did not recognize her.

BUT Alma did not reach his side. Ignoring the fire, she knelt beside the man over whom Honest John had stumbled. A moment passed; there was a silence broken only by crackling wood. "Dad!" she finally cried, flinging herself across the motionless man. "He's dead—they killed him—"

Carmody drew her to her feet. He found a portable fire extinguisher and drowned the blaze. The wiring had not been completely knocked out so in a moment he was viewing the destruction by the illumination of the bar lights.

Bullets and the blast had finished Anton Juras. Carmody's shots had riddled one of the

bombers. Behind the bar was an expensive camera, with a synchronized flash bulb. Carmody began to understand; he explained it to Alma as he pieced it together: "Your dad wasn't hurt much when they slugged him. He played foxy at the hospital, and had the medicos claim he was near death. He was planning something, maybe to go on a still hunt, or make a newspaper stink by playing dead.

"Then the papers boomed you up, and he figured the score. So he got that camera—look at the price tag still on it—in Palo Alto. Get it!"

"He figured they'd be out to make an example, and he thought he'd get a picture of the vandals, in the act," Alma said, nodding. "He always was close mouthed, when he wasn't cussing someone out. So as to keep me from worrying, he kept his plan on the Q. T. Afraid it might leak out, somehow."

Honest John shook his head. "Gawd all mighty," he muttered. "Poor devil, he didn't realize you could have a movie of those mugs and still you couldn't convict the dirty son that's behind it all!"

"Foreigners," she sobbed, "never can understand this country like the people who were raised in it."

"Baby," said the detective, "I'll use your old man's picture taking. I got an idea. Those mugs were scared for themselves, and risked facing their own bomb to get the camera. If I can nail the one that got away—nail him *private*, I mean—he'll tell me things he'd not dream of telling a cop."

THE next day Carmody traced the costly camera. He also called at the hospital. Everything he learned confirmed, substantially, his original reasoning. Old Juras had trusted the doctor enough to give sufficient details to justify the deception which had at first caused his daughter so much anxiety.

Then Honest John took the film to a photo finisher in San Francisco. He was certain that he had moved too fast for any of Iron Mike's spies to have caught up with him.

The sheriff and the district attorney were very busy at the wreckage of the Six Mile House. But whether they were dummifying up, or just could not, from honest stupidity, get to first base, Honest John did not know. He was not surprised, and

neither was he crying. Alma's kisses had entitled her to Iron Mike's head, personally taken and delivered. And the knife would be the bomber who had escaped!

Or so Honest John thought until he went to get his roll of film.

When he saw the print, he stood there, shoulders sagging. The camera had caught neither of the crew, only blank walls. As he looked back, he understood and correctly timed the events: the chair had tipped when Juras moved in the dark to trip the camera. They had caught him off guard, or he had miscalculated. The flash bulb, however, had whipped the blasters to needless panic, so they had remained to try to seize the film.

"Good shot of the wreck," observed the photo finisher, who had personally developed the film.

"Good for what?" growled Honest John. "Buddy, forget this."

"You know me, John. Tough, huh? I guess that ain't evidence after all."

Carmody suddenly brightened.

"Wait and see."

But he did not explain how Anton Juras' tragically bungled photo was perhaps even better than the winning ticket he had hoped for.

His first move was to pocket the print and bury the film in a safe deposit box. Then he drove down to Iron Mike's office. It was in a produce warehouse, the legitimate front for the racketeer's widespread extortion.

Trucks dashed crazily down the cobblestones of the narrow, crooked streets of the Embarcadero district. Sailors trooped into waterfront saloons. Others lurched drunkenly out. A U. S. Mail truck was pulling up to the Ferry Branch Station.

Busy, honest seeming, this whirl of import and export goods, coming in or going to the Far East. Central America, the Atlantic Coast. For the moment Honest John would not need his gun. Iron Mike was too subtle to have meddlers smoked out so close to headquarters. He did not have to be hasty.

There were people who knew Iron Mike's right name, but no one ever used it; nor did Honest John. He just said to the copper-haired dame at the switchboard, "Tell the boss I want to see him about the last pineapples he planted." The girl eyed him, puzzled, antagonistic, then decided that there were some kinds of fruit Iron Mike always

was glad to discuss.

THE office was paneled in walnut. It was soundproofed against the noise of the waterfront, and the ox-blood Khiva carpet would have bought a good-sized car.

Honest John stalked in, drew up a chair without invitation, and addressed the racketeer: "I see you know business when you hear about it,"

The gray eyes and hard mouth teamed up in that amiable smile which had helped Iron Mike to power. Mere slugging never got a man anywhere. "Right," he admitted, and did not ask his caller's name. "Let's hear it."

Carmody displayed a diagonally divided print of the Six Mile House interior and said, "I've salted down the business end of this photo. Maybe you been wondering why the papers didn't feature Juras' last snapshot. Like it for your album? Good looking mug shows in it."

Iron Mike did not reach for the picture. He said, as John pocketed it, "Buddy, I'm not interested a bit. If you need dough—"

He leaned back, exhaled a thread of cigar smoke, jabbed one of the row of buttons on his Circassian walnut desk. Honest John grinned, seeing the big-executive gesture. Every hard guy has a soft spot, a sucker angle. So did this racket king.

He could not personally express his contempt by flipping out a hundred-dollar bill. He had to wait for the sleek blond fellow who came in response to the buzzer note. Then he said, "Pay this gentleman a century, and charge it to publicity relations. He is leaving town right away." Then, to Honest John, "Shall we make reservations?"

The detective and the assistant had been eyeing each other. Neither betrayed recognition; though the latter had a neat patch of adhesive tape on his head, where a bung starter had conked him. Nor could Honest John guess whether the "business agent" had told his chief about the encounter. He need not have, since he had successfully executed the mission that had bluffed Alma into relaxing her vigilance.

Iron Mike smiled as Honest John gravely pocketed the century note. He said, "Good luck, pal. Pictures never interested me."

That ended it. No, Carmody corrected as he reached the street, that just started it. Not having

had a picture of the bomber, he had offered himself as bait to force the assassin into self-protection.

Had the blond mug returned that fatal night, to plant the pineapple? Meeting him in Iron Mike's office was no proof. The test would come if they met again.

Honest John phoned Alma, saying, "Baby, I got to dig in town from now on."

Her cry of dismay cut him. He brusquely silenced her protest: "Pipe down, sweetness. I'm doing this my own way. No, it's no use. I can't come out to watch you."

"But—why not—John—darling—"

He could not stand that. Neither could he explain. If she knew, she'd do some fool female trick. Women were crazy when they like a guy. So he gave her a nasty growl and told her love was an avocation, not a business.

That shut her up! He rather hated himself; he liked Alma a lot. In a moment, though, he was sourly grinning as he said to himself, "Cripes, if I had an iron undershirt!"

HE ate away from his usual haunts and earlier than usual. He parked the car in a strange garage, and hoofed it toward his Pine Street apartment. He was whistling a soft, savage little ditty his grandfather used to play on a squeaking pair of bagpipes, after damning the English. Thus he did not see the girl until he fairly knocked her end for end. He'd been watching for men, of course. Soft footed, harmless seeming men.

This girl dropped some eggs and a bottle of milk, cried out with her own impact against the paving. She was not well dressed, and what she wore had become an omelette. Honest John grunted, "The devil, Madam! I'm sorry—uh—lemme give you a lift—"

He caught her arm, tried to brush her saturated skirt down over her knees; it clung stickily. She cried, "Oh—wait—that glass—"

A red gash blossomed from her calf. Carmody was just as red. "I'll call a cab—I'll pay for it—and the damage—"

She thrust aside the bill he tried to give her. "It was my fault—I wasn't looking where I was going—heavens, no! How could I get into a cab, this way?"

She grimaced disgustedly. Then she laughed

at his embarrassment.

"If you want to get cleaned up a bit," Honest John began.

"If I want to? Where?" She plucked the sticky skirt away from her legs.

"Couple doors up the block," he said.

Once in his apartment, he gestured toward the bath. "Want a drink first?"

She planted one foot on a chair, sized up the cut on her leg. She was not bad looking, and Honest John didn't keep his eyes on the slight damage below her knee. He handed her a shot, then sat down to wait for her to wash off the omelette. He frowned, fingered the square angles of his chin. He was not thinking of the redhead's legs, though they were tops in any man's language. A false note had set him thinking plenty.

WHEN she came out, she wore his robe. She explained, "I had to rinse everything else. Got an iron?"

Naturally, he did not have. The girl went on, "How about a drink while I wait. Lucky you're a bachelor—" She sized up the diggings. "I'm Mamie Wayne, not that it makes any difference."

She had brightened a lot, and she airily waved her cigarette, "I won't cramp your style long. Those rags'll dry quick enough over the register."

He wondered if Mamie had noted his preoccupation. He said, "I can get an iron. Be back in a minute. Have another drink for yourself."

He clumped out into the hall. Then he grinned. No reason why Mamie shouldn't take him for a boob. Who *wouldn't* try to console her a little? And he would never have tumbled if he hadn't noticed the underthings Mamie had rinsed out. They were brand new and expensive looking. An odd contrast to her rundown outer garments and pathetic hat. The average girl of her type would reverse the process, if she had just made a killing and her soul needed finery.

"Only," he told himself, "this ain't no ordinary bum."

He wasted no time hunting an iron, though he could have borrowed one at the tailor's shop across the street; perhaps in an adjoining apartment, as Mamie expected. Instead, he hastened to a door down the hall. It opened into vacant rooms; the maid's quarters of the large suite which a tenant-hungry landlord had

subdivided to suit Honest John's needs. He paid rent for both. Having two exits was worth the overhea, in his line.

Thus, when he softly tickled a well-muffled lock, he was able to re-enter what Mamie thought, naturally enough, was the limit of his apartment.

The redhead's activity was not surprising. She was giving the place a quick frisk. He watched her make chewing gum impressions of the keys he had left on the table. Iron Mike's spy was out of luck as to the missing half of the photo, but she skipped nothing else.

He smiled bleakly, watching his visitor. He knew what her next play would be. Foxy, she had avoided too quick an approach.

A moment later, he came around from the front, and glumly announced, "The guy's wife wasn't in, and the tailor across the street's using his iron. Later?"

Mamie smiled vivaciously. "I had a date, but I phoned the boy friend to give him a stall."

Well, she *could* have, with fast work; she had had time enough.

"So you won't have to hurry back?" He was just a bit more eager. "Didn't say where, did you?"

"Of course, not! Do I look silly?"

"Let's eat," he proposed, heading for the kitchenette.

Mamie was game. She crowded him from the range, and did it in a very warming way. Once the bacon was frying, she turned and snuggled tantalizingly close, but for just long enough to make him grab and miss.

That was art. Instinctively he made a dive for her. She laughed, clucked, deftly skidded near the lounge; and just as Carmody caught her, her quickened breathing and playful laughter did the trick.

The bacon scorched black, but nobody cared. When they finally noticed the fumes, Mamie broke away to turn out the gas.

Carmody shed his coat and shoulder harness. Playing up to Mamie was business, but it was not hard to take. A tramp, but very high class, her lingerie had said. He forgot to wonder what her game was in sticking around. Another search, later?

Sure, that's it! So he blotted Alma out of his mind and kissed the redhead again....

HONEST JOHN could have bitten ten-penny nails in half when the door slammed open. He thought he'd latched it after him. Alma was standing at the threshold. She had heard, through the panel, enough to make her blaze with rage.

"Why—you dirty tramp! she said very softly, after a deliberate survey of the redhead. "So this is finding out who killed my father? Tracing the thug in the picture, are you? No wonder you wouldn't come out to keep me from being killed!"

She choked, then whirled as tears drowned her smouldering eyes.

"Listen—Alma—I can explain—"

He talked to a slamming door. Mamie was blank, wide-eyed. "Gee, John. I'm sorry. I thought—"

"Yeah," he wearily cut in, "you thought I was a bachelor. I will be, now."

"Would you mind getting my dress?" she dully said. The encounter had cooled her enthusiasm and she seemed to sense that it had done more for Carmody.

He went to pick the clothes hanger from above the bathroom register.

"Listen," he said, "here's ten bucks to pay your cleaning bill. I got to get that jane and talk to her, now! Slam the latch when you check out."

"Well, I guess you would have a headache. Good luck—I'm awful sorry."

The door closed on him. Mamie's smile was half wistful, half venomous as she nursed the stockings over her small feet, shaped the silk to calf and knee; though the one with a runner was distressing....

She wriggled into the sleazy dress. For some moments she stared at the holstered gun which Carmody had left in his eagerness to reinstate himself in Alma's good graces. Mamie shook her head regretfully, then slipped out into the hall.

A few minutes later, however, her qualms had vanished. She was at a telephone, talking business. And the door of Honest John's apartment had not been latched.

HALF an hour after the redhead completed her call, a man sat in Carmody's apartment, patiently waiting. It was dark, a decided advantage for such a vigil. For a while the man impatiently fingered a drawn pistol. Later he holstered it. He could get it quickly enough when the hall door

creaked. And creak it would....

The cable car clattered up Taylor Street. A taxi gunned up Pine. The sounds that disturbed the growing quiet of the city became more widely spaced. But one of them had masked a stealthy approach. A man was moving, catlike; catlike as the other waited.

The wind shifted. A drape stirred, soundlessly. Then the door of Honest John's apartment slowly swung inward. Its sigh was a metallic whispering, but to highly keyed nerves it was a scream. Blued metal glinted dimly in the gloom.

An ash tray clattered. A pistol blast blotted a tense inhalation. Before the plaster blown from the wall hit the floor, the momentary spurt of flame had revealed a second man, arm's length from the watcher, who was whirling.

There was no second shot: only a crunch, then a thud. An empty champagne bottle is a deadly weapon in the hands of a big man.

Honest John dropped the bottle, snapped a switch. He nodded when he saw the red-spattered, familiar face of Iron Mike's business agent. Behind the big dick was the door that opened from the uncharted half of the subdivided apartment. That silent, roundabout approach had made enough draught to suck the front door inward, and startle the lurker into premature fire.

"Nothing like an Irish hunch," Carmody said aloud.

He meant that; starting with Mamie's luxurious lingerie, and ending with the certainty that she would not latch his door when she left, he had decided upon using his emergency entrance.

He knew everything about this man except his name. When the cops came, he told them these things, beginning, "He pulled a gun on me."

"Huh. Kind of slow," grunted the homicide dick. But the evidence was too plain for argument. Then, after listening to Honest John, he said, "Nuts, Carmody. You saw this guy at the Six Mile House, you conked him after a threat that no one witnessed. Then you saw him in Iron Mike's office, where he works. What does it prove? Tell it to the D. A. Ain't you grown, and don't you know this town?"

That was that. Carmody shrugged. After all, he had not mentioned the photo; simply because, since it showed no man's face, the link to prove

that the late Mr. Warren had participated in the bombing, and the murder of Anton Juras was totally missing.

Yet Mr. Warren must have had a hand in it. Otherwise, he would not have gone to such lengths to have a girl frisk the apartment, and failing in results, figure out a sure fire shooting. Iron Mike would logically delegate the man most vitally concerned; thus he would be assured of success. The executive temperament, always knowing just the right subordinate to pick for a job.

This was not legal proof, but Honest John was concerned with justice, not law.

AND when the cops and newspaper men left, Carmody needed no proof that Iron Mike would drive through for a quick finish. He had to! Unless he doubted the existence of that picture. Warren, killed in an attempt to silence the detective, made that supposed portrait dynamite.

Carmody buckled on his gun. He sat there, waiting. The milk wagons were making deliveries when the phone rang. He was certain that the call could not be traced; there are ways of arranging such things by using bootleg relays. He was also certain that Iron Mike was speaking. Yet this had no legal force. Men have been hanged because of vocal identification, but only when big dough was up to bat against the speaker!

"Carmody," that affable man said, "that reservation is waiting for you."

Honest John countered. "The price of that picture has gone up a lot. Matches the mug of the guy I conked, and that guy was in your office."

Iron Mike laughed good naturedly. "Warren can't talk. So your deck is frozen, pic or no pic. You can't fight. But you can travel."

"Uh-huh," Honest John slowly agreed. "How much to save the expense of knocking me off? After what I done so far, it's going to take money to hire another torpedo."

"For you, not a cent," said Iron Mike. "But account of the girl, I'm leaving five grand to your credit at the airport. Damage suits will dry-clean her, but this makes a fresh start for both of you. Fair?"

"A couple more shootings and the smell will be too much for even you to hide, and you know it!" Honest John pleasantly agreed. "But with court judgments getting everything but her garters

and her permanent wave, we sell out.”

Honest John hung up. He sat there, fingering his gat. The damage judgments were no bluff. He had, he was now certain, finished the men who had killed Anton Juras. Finally Iron Mike would prefer to have no more murders for a while. The biggest racketeer has to be tactful.

And five grand would give him and Alma a nice start. Yet something boiled and froze in Honest John as he drove hell bent to her ruined home.

Her black eyes were bitter as her mouth. He blurted it out, told her they had to leave, and why. He concluded, “You got to play it my way! Never mind how you don’t like me. I risked my neck, and you owe me a play.”

She blinked. Fresh tears spread the mascara stains already on her cheeks.

“I hated you like poison when I saw you and that filthy little tramp,” she faltered. “But what followed—I guess it proves—I put you on the spot, cracking off—and you were really—investigating—honey, I’m not sore. Don’t kiss me—not yet—please—”

“Get packed up. Yeah, it’s rotten, but do as I say.”

Half an hour later they left. They were nowhere near the San Francisco airport when the plane took off at noon. They were waiting for it in Sacramento, just in case Iron Mike had changed his mind. Honest John claimed the reservations and said, “Wire back for that express order I didn’t get at the Frisco air-express office.”

At Reno, Carmody and somber-eyed Alma took a stop over. When he got the five grand, he said, “It’s dirty money, baby. But Iron Mike’s a man of his word. So am I. One promise to keep. Now listen.”

She did. Her eyes widened to black saucers. “You can’t—”

“The dirty son likes redheads. One in his office. He sent another to nick me, showing that’s *his* favorite. It’ll work,” he persisted, stroking Alma’s blue-black curls. “It’s got to! It’s my hide, ain’t it?”

That thawed the frost that had chilled her ever since she had seen him and Mamie. She kicked over the barriers at one swoop; before he knew it, she was in his arms, mouth lifted to his.

“Darling, I’ll never think of *that* again—but

don’t stick to your crazy plan! You’ll get killed, sure. Getting mugs is one thing. Nailing Iron Mike is something else.”

His glance caressed her silk shadowed loveliness, and he shook his head. “Baby, I kissed you too much lately to ever want to quit. But I owe you and myself something, and if I muff it, I won’t like your eyes. They’ll tell me things.”

When he left her he said, “Do exactly like I told you.”

IRON MIKE’S companion at the Royal Peacock had gleaming copper hair, sleek as a burnished helmet; her smooth shoulders were cream white, and the black of her gown accentuated the daring expanse of bare skin. It was sensational, even in the Peacock, and Iron Mike relished the subdued murmur as the shifting spotlight picked him, then blazed on her.

The town had forgotten Alma. Her hair, severely straightened, bleached and dyed, had more than changed her color scheme; the coiffeur had utterly altered her expression. Her champagne laugh and daring mouth were the final addition. But she was not drunk. There was not enough wine in town to crack the tension that gripped her, now that the passing weeks had completed the build-up.

She was sure of herself, and Iron Mike was sure of her. It was the thought of Honest John that made her throat tighten. His bulk was beyond any disguise. And the carefree racketeer had a hair-trigger gunner at the adjoining table; in his perfect dinner jacket, he seemed to be one of the polo playing set, toying with a *liqueur*.

“Looking for someone, toots?” wheedled Iron Mike.

She fought that deadly chill. Had he suspected? Had he noted some instinctive searching glance, directed from the alcove that gave his back a blank wall? Alma laughed gaily. “I was afraid someone was looking for *me*, darling.”

There was honey in that voice, and he lapped it up. But red ants seemed to be crawling over her skin. It would soon be closing time. She’d be taking him to her apartment, and she only hoped Honest John was on the job.

Iron Mike was subtle about it all, but the open seclusion of the alcove advanced his unobtrusive caresses. Alma murmured faint protests, but

leaned closer, just enough to tantalize him.

All evening she had known of the gat his skillfully tailored coat concealed. She knew what that meant, but she feigned surprise, drew back when his embrace became conspicuous.

“Oh—are *you* expecting trouble?” Her smooth brow puckered.

He laughed softly. “Beautiful, we’re going places where that young fellow can’t go.”

“But my apartment is safe—”

“No place is, unless it’s a surprise. I know where we’re going, and how.” Iron Mike was rising, reaching for her wrap. “We’ll leave my hat,” he said, smiling wisely. The angle of the alcove now hid them, and for a moment he held her close, fiercely kissed her. She went limp in his arms, sighed with feigned rapture, closed her eyes to mask the terror that must have flashed into them.

The young man at the nearest table caught his chief’s eye and nod. He rose, to pave the way for a private exit. Iron Mike nudged her elbow. There was an odd note in his soft voice as he said, “You’re shaking.”

His eyes proved his name, and so did that speculative smile. It was Alma’s move, and she did not know what to say, or think. But the spotlight saved her. It blazed into his face and hers, not misty blue and glamorous, but blinding; its heat lanced her skin. Iron Mike cursed. The searing beam shifted, picking the eyes of the armed escort.

That one touch left split seconds of red-shot blackness. Thus Alma did not see; she could only hear the familiar voice that suddenly rumbled from arm’s length: “You’re a sucker, Iron Mike, and your gunner can’t see!”

HONEST JOHN was on the job! Alma swallowed a scream. The racketeer moved fast. His snarl as he whirled, flinging her aside, was an inarticulate token of recognition. Perhaps his eyes had caught a blurred view of a bluff red puss. A gun blazed, and then another.

The bodyguard, dazzled split seconds later, was further from recovery. He fired blindly. Another blast answered, and all were drowned in

the crash of china spilling from overturned tables.

Alma’s gown had parted from her violent lurch and scramble. Iron Mike fell across her legs, pinned her to the floor as he jerked and bled. His face was a red blot. As she struggled clear, there was another tear. It was not the kind of dress for a scrimmage. Honest John, gun leveled and back to the wall, flickered one glance from the corner of his eye and yelled, “For the luva Mike, grab your coat!”

As she did so, she noted that he wore a white cap and apron. That explained his apparent absence the entire evening. And then he was explaining things to the cops who came plunging through the gaping spectators.

“He pulled a gun on me,” he said, and looked round-faced and blank. He blinked, and while the police were still wondering who was behind that bloody, upturned face, he added, “So did the other guy.”

“Holy Mother!” sputtered the sergeant. “Iron Mike!”

“He should of pulled the bullet-proof shirt over his face,” said another cop, as they hustled Carmody to the wagon.

By the time the homicide section was weary of trying to figure out how a cluck of a private dick made two shots knock off a pair of gunners who had each fired a pair of slugs, Alma’s hysterics subsided. Honest John found her in her apartment. She demanded, still shaky, “You fool, why didn’t you tell me what you planned? I died a dozen times. He wasn’t going to my apartment. We were on the way to some place where you couldn’t have followed him—”

“Baby,” he answered, “you could not of stood it, waiting for that spotlight guy to do his stuff. You’d of been wondering if he’d get wise and back down. So I had to nail him where I could prove he pulled a gun on me. Ain’t it simple?” He blinked, sighed from his toes. “Try kissing me for a change, baby—Gawd, what a dress—”

She wriggled clear. “I’m so jittery, I won’t be fit to be kissed for a week.”

He eyed her lovingly. “I’ll spend that week just looking at you, then!”