

# Clip-Joint Adventuress



*By Frank Gruber*

*When Special Prosecutor Bowers baited a dance-hall hostess for the witness stand, a clip-joint syndicate bought terror tickets in a murder game. And Bowers was blocked by a gun-blazing girl of gorgeous beauty. For that tragedy-marked girl was out to get him.*

**T**HE Blue Room Ballroom was just off Broadway. It had a canopy over the sidewalk from which dangled blue paper half-moons. On each moon, in brilliant gold letters, was the legend, *5¢ A Dance*.

Barney Bowers cocked his head to one side and looked up owlishly at the paper moons. He appeared to be slightly under the weather. The dark-blue suit he wore was new enough, but the collar of it was turned up in back, his necktie was pulled halfway to his left ear and his hair was mussed.

He walked wobbily to the entrance of the Blue Moon, a flight of stairs leading down into the basement. A uniformed doorman stepped up briskly. "Yes sir, right downstairs," he droned. "Bee-oo-tiful hostesses!"

Bowers started to descend, missed a stair and almost plunged down the entire flight. But he caught himself on the railing and navigated the remaining stairs safely. Downstairs he heard the muted strains of an orchestra. He essayed a double shuffle to the ticket window.

“Gimme a half dollar’s worth of tickets,” he said, and brought out a roll of bills fully two inches thick. The ticket-seller’s eyes almost popped from his head.

Bowers peeled a five-dollar bill from his roll and shoved it through the wicket. The ticket clerk extended five tickets. Bowers counted them, rubbed his chin with an unsteady hand then counted the tickets again. “Hey,” he protested. “The sign outside says five cents a dance.”

“Sure, sure, mister,” soothed the man in the booth. “But each ticket is good for two dances.”

Bowers considered that a moment, then nodded his head. He wobbled past the ticket booth into the ballroom. A half dozen of the beautiful hostesses the doorman had recommended, stood in a row, smiling invitingly at him.

As an admirer of beautiful women Bowers’ tastes were cosmopolitan. These girls seemed to him just a little too gaudily dressed and a trifle overpainted, and they showed their physical charms just a little too daringly. But as dance-hall hostesses went, Bowers guessed that they were up to standard. His eyes settled on a willowy blonde, dressed in a flaming-red evening gown.

The girl writhed sinuously toward him. “Dance, honey?” she asked in a sugary voice.

“Sure, why not?”

He held up his arms, and the girl snuggled into them. She pressed her body close to his. It was soft—and warm. They glided out onto a handkerchief-sized dance floor.

In one corner of the room was a four-piece orchestra. There were booths on three sides of the floor. Soft-blue lights in the ceiling dimly illuminated the dance floor. Tiny lights in the booths were shaded. Bowers caught a glimpse of two sailors and a pair of hostesses in one of the booths, wrapped in tight embrace.

The music stopped. So did Bowers, although the girl in the red evening gown still clung to him. He held out his tickets to her. She took all five. “Only five tickets, hon?” she asked sweetly. “You’ll want to dance more than that, won’t you?”

“Uh—sure,” replied Bowers. “I’ll get some more.”

The orchestra burst into another number. Bowers and the girl circled the dance floor twice, and the music stopped. “Don’t you want to sit out the next one, hon?” asked the girl. She moved suggestively in his arms.

“Sure,” replied Bowers. “I—I don’t feel so much like dancing anyway. What I need is a drink.” He licked his lips thirstily.

“Gosh, hon, I’m sorry,” said the girl as she steered him to a dimly lit booth in the far corner. “We ain’t allowed to sell liquor here—on’y soft drinks.”

THEY reach the booth, and the girl slipped into one of the benches. Bowers started to climb in on the other side of the table, but the girl exclaimed: “No, sit here beside me. I—I like you.”

Bowers beamed as he slipped in beside the girl. She snuggled up closely so that her leg was touching Bowers’ knee. Her hand under the table caught his and pressed it intimately.

“Gee, I’m thirsty,” she said. “Would you buy me a coke?”

“Sure, if that’s all they got.” Bowers picked up a menu from the table and scanned it under the dim light.

He gasped slightly when he saw the price of cokes—twenty-five cents.

A waiter appeared out of nowhere. “Two cokes,” Bowers ordered.

“Anyt’ing else?” asked the waiter.

“Tha’s all,” said Bowers, but the girl squeezed his hand. “D’you mind buying me a package of cigarettes? I’m all out of them.”

“All right, bring the lady some

cigarettes.”

Bowers looked out over the dance floor. The orchestra was playing, but there wasn't a single couple dancing. Giggles and laughter emanating from the various booths, however, told that there was a fair complement of customers in the place. It seemed that the patrons preferred sitting out the dances.

“What's your name?” cooed the blonde.

“Uh—Barney. What's yours?”

“Trixie—Trixie Thompson,” whispered the girl. “My, but I'm lucky. When I saw you comin' in I hoped you'd ask me to dance.”

“Zat so? Why?”

“Because you looked so handsome. I just love men with broad shoulders like yours,” Trixie brought her hand up from under the table and ran it around Bowers' shoulders. She hugged him.

A coke and a package of cigarettes—shucks, she was selling her company cheaply. Or maybe it really was his manly charms. Bowers was thirty-two, six feet tall, and he'd played football in his college days.

The waiter returned with the cokes and two packages of cigarettes. “Dollar thirty,” he said, laconically.

“What?” gulped Bowers. “How much are cigarettes?”

“Forty cents a package.”

Forty cents for thirteen-cent cigarettes! And the waiter was forcing a double order on Bowers. What a joint! Bowers pulled out his thick roll, peeled off a single and fished around in his pocket until he found a half-dollar. He handed it over, hesitated, then said magnanimously: “Keep the change.”

“I knew you wasn't a tightwad,” cooed Trixie. Her eyes were glued on the bills in Bowers' fist. He looked at her, then put the roll into his trousers pocket—on the side away from Trixie. Her eyes glistened for just a

second, but then she was smiling, and cuddly, again.

“How about dancing?” Bowers asked. “Must of used those five tickets by now.”

Trixie coughed. “Uh—why, yes.” She toyed with a heart-shaped card on the table for a moment, then passed it to Bowers. “You better read this, darling—just so there won't be no trouble later. But I know it won't make no difference to a swell fella like you.”

Bowers turned the heart-shaped card over and read the printing on it:

*Hostesses are permitted to sit out dances with patrons but a charge of \$3.00 for each half hour or fraction is made for such time.*

Three dollars per half-hour; six dollars an hour! No wonder Trixie had suggested sitting out a dance or two. She couldn't have earned any more, if as much, dancing a solid hour.

“How long we been sittin' here?” asked Bowers.

“About eleven minutes. Why?”

“Uh, let's see, I gave you fifty cents worth of tickets. That entitles me to five minutes. I owe you—”

“Why, Barney,” exclaimed Trixie reproachfully, “you're not going to be a tightwad! Don't you like me—just a teeny-weentsy bitsy?”

She leaned forward until her lips were less than an inch from Bowers.

“Uh, sure, I like you, baby. Only—only it's warm in here, isn't it?” He drew away from her and fished for the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket.

“It is warm,” admitted Trixie, “Gosh, these cokes are flat. And to think I've got all that nice cold beer in the refrigerator at home. Wouldn't that go swell now?”

“It sure would,” said Bowers. “But it won't do us any good here.”

Trixie's forehead wrinkled. “We could

go to my place for a while—get cooled off and drink some beer....”

“Eh, they let you leave?”

“Well, ah, yes—but Tony makes the customers pay for the time we’re gone. It’s only ten dollars if I’m gone only an hour.” Trixie slipped her hand down from Bowers’ shoulder and caught his hand under the table. She pressed it promisingly. “Would you like to ran home with me for an hour—and have some beer?”

Bowers cleared his throat. “I’d sure like to do that.”

Trixie threw up her head. “Tony!” she shrilled.

A swarthy, stocky man of about forty-five came across the dance floor. “Tony,” giggled Trixie. “My friend wants to take me out for a little ride to cool off. Do you mind if I leave for an hour?”

“Well, we pretty beesy t’night, Trix’,” hesitated Tony. “But if de customer make him right, why I guess it’s hokay by me. Tony like ever’body have good time. No?”

Bowers struggled out of the booth. “Sure, Tony, how much you think would make it right?”

Trixie climbed out after Bowers and clung to his arm. Tony looked at his wrist watch and said: “Lemme see, you here now about forty min-oots. Tha’sa one hour. And ten dollar for take Trix’ out. Make heem fifteen dollar. Awright?”

The sucker pulled out his roll and peeled off a ten and a five. “Fifteen dollars, and a dollar and a half for the cokes and cigarettes, and a half-dollar at the door. That’s seventeen dollars altogether. An’ I been here forty minutes—you say. But your watch goes too fast. Mine says I been here only twenty minutes.”

Tony looked sharply into Bowers’ face. “Wha—what you mean?”

BOWERS grinned widely. Suddenly he

seemed to gain height His slouch disappeared, and the foolish, drunken expression faded from his face. It became hard, and his eyes gleamed with a fierce light. “I mean this is a clip joint—to give it a polite name,” he barked.

“Barney!” cried Trixie. “What’s come over you?”

“You’ll see, baby.” He jammed his hand into his coat pocket and brought out a police whistle. He put it to his lips and blew lustily on it.

“A cop!” gasped Tony. Trixie shrunk away from Bowers.

“No, I’m not a cop,” said Bowers. “My name is Bowers—Barney Bowers.”

Tony’s mouth fell agape. “Special Prosecutor Bowers!”

“Right!” snapped Bowers. “I’m closing up this joint I’ve got enough evidence to send you up.”

Heavy boots pounded the stairs outside. A moment later three men stormed into the dance hall. Two wore blue uniforms. The third was in civilian clothes. “Hello, chief,” said the plainclothes man. “You got the goods on him?”

“I’ll say I have,” replied Bowers. He turned to Trixie. She was scared stiff. Her face was dead-white, strange in contrast to the vivid-red gown and the scarlet gash of her mouth.

“Nice work, Trixie,” he chuckled. “Your technique was excellent.”

“You’re pinchin’ me?” trembled Trixie.

Bowers shrugged. “Maybe. If you’ll talk—be a witness—I might let you off. Otherwise, it’s the woman’s prison for you for some time.”

Tony, the manager, suddenly recovered his composure. “What’s dis talk about jail? You no send no one to jail.”

“Is that so? Where do you think *you’ll* be in twenty minutes from now?”

"I calla my lawyer. I get bail. You no keep me in jail. I gotta pull."

"Have you now? Well, call your lawyer and have him meet you at the station. Trixie, you come with me."

Leaving Tony in charge of the policemen, Bowers led Trixie out of the Blue Moon.

"How long have you been working in this dump?" he asked the girl as they walked to his coupe a block away.

"About three months." She turned to him. "Say, Mr. Bowers, did you really mean that I'll be sent to prison?"

"Unless you turn state's evidence."

"What does that mean?"

"Testify against Tony—tell about the joint, how you worked—and all that. You worked according to Tony's instructions, didn't you?"

"Yeah, sure. We were all told to work the suck—the customers, for all we could. We worked on a percentage basis."

"Well if you'll tell all that at the trial, I'll see that you get a suspended sentence. And say .... who owns the Blue Moon?"

"I don't know—but it ain't Tony. There's a swell comes around 'bout once or twice a month. Him and Tony always have long talks in Tony's office. I guess he owns the joint. He used to come around to the Danceland too, where I worked before I went to the Blue Moon."

"Could you identify him if you saw him?" asked Bowers eagerly. "I think he's the man I really want to get."

"I'd know him if I saw him," replied Trixie, "but I don't know his name."

"I'll try to find that out," said Bowers. "Meanwhile, what about it—will you testify?"

They had reached the car. Bowers handed her in and walked around to the driver's side. Before starting the engine, he waited for her answer. Her face was troubled. "I—I couldn't stand to go to jail," she said.

"But I'm scared to squeal. Tony's a bad actor when he gets mad."

"You have nothing to worry about him," Bowers assured her. "I'll see that you're protected."

"All right then, I'll talk."

"Fine." Bowers stepped on the starter. Ten minutes later he parked his car in front of the precinct station. He led Trixie Thompson inside. Tony, the manager of the Blue Moon, was standing before the desk. A swarthy, excited man was beside him.

The desk sergeant saw Bowers and sighed in relief. "Mr. Bowers," he exclaimed. "Will ye talk to this shyster?"

"Shyster!" bellowed the lawyer. "I'll have your badge for that! I've got influence, I have."

"You won't have anyone's job, Dave Hampel," snapped Bowers. "I arrested this man, and I'm going to make the charge stick."

Hampel continued to bluster, but in a more subdued tone.

"We'll see about that, Mr. Special Prosecutor. We'll see whether your testimony has any weight in a court. It'll sound very swell in the newspapers, too, the special prosecutor going around to a dance hall and trying to bait the hostesses into doing illegal things—just so he could make an arrest. Wait!" He bounced off to a telephone booth.

"Fine specimen of our legal profession, isn't he?" said a voice at Bowers' elbow. Bowers turned, saw that the speaker was a tall man in evening clothes. Bowers knew him by sight and reputation, although he had never spoken to him.

James Faraday was a member of one of the city's oldest families. He was a lawyer, but had plenty of money. With him, now, also in evening clothes, was Deputy Police Commission McClintock.

McClintock smiled. "Mr. James Faraday, Barney," he said. "We were just coming out of the theatre when we heard

about your—ah, arrest. We came over to congratulate you on your clever performance.”

PROSECUTOR BOWERS shook hands with both Faraday and the deputy commissioner. “It was about the only way I could get anywhere, Mr. McClintock,” he said. “My agents all seemed to be recognized as soon as they entered these dives, and while they were there, everyone acted as if it was a Sunday school social. But I’ve got the evidence on the worst of these clip joints. I’m going to close it up—and all the others. I’m positive that further investigation will prove that most of these joints are owned by the same people, and if I can close one of them, I can close all.”

“I certainly hope so,” declared the deputy commissioner. “Our own men haven’t been able to get anywhere because of lack of evidence and sufficient witnesses. I hope you have your own witnesses lined up pretty well.” He and Faraday walked out of the station.

Bowers eyes roamed to Trixie Thompson. In the bright light of the police station, Trixie looked to be merely an overpainted, overdressed, scared girl.

Hampel, the shyster lawyer, stormed out of the phone booth. He cast a malignant glance at Barney, then began whispering to Trixie Thompson. Trixie listened a moment, then shook her head and glanced appealingly at Bowers, who came closer.

Hampel said loudly, “Okay, sister, your bail’s put up. You can go.”

The desk sergeant called to Bowers. It was about a minor matter, and when Bowers looked around Trixie had gone.

The special prosecutor decided that he’d done enough for the evening. He left the police station and climbed into his car, and as he was about to step on the starter, a big limousine hurtled past at terrific speed.

Bowers tried to catch a glimpse of the license number, but to his surprise the tail-

lights were out. Then he heard the scream up the street, followed instantly by the screeching of brakes.

An icy shudder ran up his spine. He piled out of his car, started running up the street toward other running people.

The limousine with the darkened tail-lights was more than a block away, but the body that lay limp and huddled in the gutter told the grim story.

A wild, chattering crowd was already surrounding the body, and Barney had difficulty in forcing his way through, but then he did—and a fresh chill swept over him. For the victim of the hit and run driver was Trixie Thompson. Her red dress was splashed and discolored with a red liquid—blood. Her body was smashed and bruised.

Bowers dropped down on one knee beside Trixie’s body, but for a moment he did not see the body because of the haze that swept before his eyes. He had a miserable feeling that this had been deliberate murder—with himself as the cause. But why—how? He’d arrested Trixie not more than a half hour ago. No one but Tony and the shyster, Hampel, had known that Trixie was going to turn state’s evidence. And Tony had been in custody all the while. Hampel—yes, Hampel had made a phone call in the police station. Had that been for the purpose of arranging this?

A heavy hand fell on Bowers’ shoulder. He looked up into the face of Deputy Commissioner McClintock.

“Isn’t that the girl you arrested in the raid?” asked the commissioner.

The special prosecutor nodded. “Yes, she just left the police station—on bail.”

The commissioner shuddered. “Gruesome coincidence.”

“Coincidence?” Bowers’ eyes flashed. “This girl was murdered. She was going to be my star witness.”

The deputy commissioner’s eyes

widened.

Bowers rose to his feet. "I've maintained all along that important money is behind these clip joints. And they're not going to stop at anything to keep them going. Those places are gold mines. Hell, they clipped me seventeen dollars for less than a half hour of—well, call it entertainment. And there're fifty of these joints in this town—most of them owned by the same people, I'll bet. No, they're not going to stop at a murder or two."

Police had piled out of the precinct station and were pushing back the morbidly curious throng. Two policemen brought up a stretcher, started to cover up the body. But Bowers suddenly caught hold of one of the men. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "Let me look."

Something on the dead girl's face had caught his eye. He leaned forward and looked at it closely.

There was a strange design cut into the girl's forehead. It was shaped like a miniature hand. The half-inch outline was cut as sharply as if made with a die. How had it been cut into Trixie Thompson's forehead? It hadn't been there five minutes ago, when she had left the police station.

Bowers' forehead wrinkled, but after a moment he nodded gently. "All right, you can take it away."

The crowd began to disperse. "What now, Barney?" asked the deputy police commissioner.

"It looks like I'll have to start all over."

"Too bad," sympathized the commissioner. "Well, good night."

Bowers went back to his car. He drove slowly up Broadway to Seventy-second Street. There he parked his car and went into a restaurant. He ordered a dinner, but merely toyed with the food. He couldn't erase the memory of Trixie Thompson's dead face. After a while he paid his check, left the restaurant. He drove slowly to his apartment

on West End Avenue.

His mind was still going over the evening's events when he let himself into his apartment. But it snapped back to the present when he found the apartment lighted and a girl sitting in a big armchair facing the door. There was a small automatic in her hand.

"CLOSE the door, Mr. Bowers," said the girl in a metallic voice.

Bowers pushed the door shut. "What can I do for you?" he asked, his eyes appraising the girl.

She was about twenty-four or five and was dressed in a white satin evening gown. She was seated, but he guessed that she was more than average tall. Her form was slender, but well proportioned. Her face and hair, however, were her striking points. The face had the smoothest skin Bowers had ever seen, and the finest chiseled features. The hair was a glorious mass of golden waves. There was something faintly familiar about her.

"Yes," she said in answer to Bowers' question, "you can do something for me. You can give me—your life!"

Bowers gasped. He suddenly knew why she looked familiar. She looked like Trixie Thompson, was her sister no doubt. But she was a different type of girl than Trixie. Trixie had been pretty, but in a cheap, shallow sort of way. This girl was different.

"You're Trixie Thompson's sister?" he asked.

Her eyes flashed, and for just a moment, her chin trembled. Then she regained control of herself, was again firm, cold. "Yes—I've just heard how she died. Because she was going to talk for you."

Bowers nodded soberly. "Yes."

His reply had an astonishing effect on the beautiful girl. She leaped to her feet. "You—admit it!" she blazed. "You admit that you're responsible for her death. You murderer!"

Bowers recoiled from her sudden fury, took a step backwards and tripped against a chair. That alone saved his life. The gun in the girl's, hand had cracked, and a leaden pellet whizzed past Bowers' ear, missing it by less than an inch.

The discharge of the gun seemed to shock the girl. Bowers sprang forward and wrenched the gun from her hand. Then he pushed her back into the chair.

She began to sob softly. The special prosecutor judged by her dress that she'd been out somewhere for the evening when she heard of her sister's death. Shocked, she'd come to shoot the man she believed responsible for it. But now, reaction had set in, and she had collapsed.

In less than a minute the girl stopped crying. She dabbed at her eyes with a lacy bit of handkerchief and essayed a weak smile. "I guess I was a fool coming here," she said. "I—if you'll let me, I'd like to go now."

"You can go whenever you like," said Bowers. "But, Miss Thompson, will you believe me when I say that your sister's death was almost as much of a shock to me as it was to you? You see, I promised her protection—and fell down on the job. The—accident happened before I quite knew what it was all about. But I made a solemn promise to myself to get the man, or men, who were responsible for it. You can help me, Miss Thompson. By telling me some things about Trixie—who her friends were."

The girl sighed. "I'm ashamed to say that I don't know, Mr. Bowers. I think the reason I went all to pieces awhile ago is because I realized suddenly that I was as much responsible for Trixie's life as anyone else. Trixie got off to a bad start. She wanted to be an actress, but couldn't make the grade. She drifted into that dance-hall work. I—I didn't know about it for a long while. We sort of drifted apart. Instead of looking after Trixie, I neglected her. I—I let my career immerse me

too much."

"Career?"

"Yes, I'm a lawyer." She smiled at the look on Bowers' face. "Yes, a lawyer. That's why I was so interested in your work." She stopped and blushed faintly.

Bowers smiled wryly. "I'm glad some one is interested in my work. Everyone seems to think it's useless."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Trixie's sister. "People are much more interested than you suspect. At the office we've talked about it."

"Where is your office? I'd like to get in touch with you, if I learn anything..."

"The Hubert Building, Suite 2410."

"And your name?"

"Nell Thompson."

She picked up a mesh bag from the chair, rose to her feet. Bowers extended the little automatic to her, but she shook her head. "You'd better keep it. I really have no license to carry it. I—I'm sorry about what happened."

"I'm not," said Bowers. Then he realized that he'd blundered and added quickly. "I mean—about your coming here."

She smiled faintly and walked to the door. "Thank you, about everything. Let me hear from you—if you learn anything."

"I will."

THE morning papers commended Special Prosecutor Barney Bowers and condemned him at the same time. They praised him for having had the courage to go personally to the dance hall for evidence, but they censured him for not having furnished ample protection for his witness.

His eyes glinted when he was through with the papers. They glinted even more a little later when he received a telephone call from the city hall. The voice was that of the man who had appointed him to the special post.

"A delegation has just left my office,"

the crisp voice said. "I backed you up, Barney, but if you don't deliver—it's going to cause me considerable embarrassment. Do you understand?"

"Yes," gulped Bowers. "Give me forty-eight hours more, and if I haven't landed the king-pin of this gang by then, I'll resign."

"I wish you luck," was the reply.

Bowers sat slumped in despair for several minutes. He'd made a promise that looked very hazardous. Every dance-hall manager in the city knew by this time that the special prosecutor himself had made a raid the night previous, so they would be exceedingly wary for a while—wary that they clipped no one except very obvious suckers.

Well, he couldn't sit around mooning. Certain things he owed to Nell Thompson—and the memory of her sister. He hadn't asked about Nell's family, but guessed from what she'd told him that she had no near-relatives in the city. At a time like this, Nell would need help.

He thought of calling her on the phone, then realized that he hadn't been given her home address, nor the name of the firm with which she was connected. He'd have to go down to the Hubert Building. He took a taxi and ten minutes later paid off the meter before a tall office building.

As he started for the entrance, a tall, dignified man stepped out of a big limousine and hailed him. "Hello there, Mr. Bowers."

It was James Faraday, the friend of the deputy Commissioner, to whom Bowers had been introduced the evening before.

Bowers shook hands with him. "Going in here?" asked the wealthy attorney.

"Yes," replied Bowers.

"So am I .... The papers weren't kind to you, Barney. People are short-sighted."

They entered a waiting elevator, and Bowers said: "Twenty-four."

"That's my floor," remarked Faraday.

Suite 2410 was directly opposite the

elevator. Bowers looked at the names on the door and his eyebrows went up. For the name on top was that of James Faraday.

"I guess I'm going still farther with you," he said.

"Eh, You're coming into my office?"

"Yes, it seems my friend is one of your associates, a Miss Nell Thompson."

They entered the suite of offices, and Bowers' eyebrows went up still farther when he saw the elaborate anteroom. Faraday turned to him. "So Miss Thompson is a friend of yours. Very interesting. She's the youngest member of our staff, but one of the most brilliant. Well, good day, sir."

He passed through the anteroom while Bowers turned to the girl at the switchboard. "Mr. Bowers to see Miss Thompson," he told the girl.

"I'm sorry, but Miss Thompson didn't come in this morning."

"Of course not; she had—things to attend to," Bowers said. "I'm a friend. Could you give me her home address?"

The girl frowned for a moment. "I guess it's all right," she said then. "She lives at 800 West 106th Street."

Bowers took another taxi to Nell Thompson's apartment house. But there he received another disappointment. The elevator operator informed him that Miss Thompson had left an hour ago and hadn't returned. Bowers gave the man a dollar and his office phone number. "Will you ask her to phone me just as soon as she returns?"

By one o'clock Nell Thompson had not yet phoned. Bowers called her apartment, but no one answered. He called four times during the next two hours, then decided suddenly to go again to her apartment.

THE elevator operator to whom he had given his card, was still on duty. "Yas, suh," he declared. "She came in 'bout an hour ago. I gave her your card. She went out again, half

hour ago.”

Why hadn't she called him? Had she, after thinking things over, decided again that he was really responsible for her sister's death?

He pulled out his gold shield and showed it to the operator. “I want you to let me into Miss Thompson's apartment”

The operator's eyes bulged. Without hesitation, he said, “Yas—suh!” and let Bowers into an apartment on the eighth floor.

It was a two-room and kitchenette apartment, attractively furnished. There were breakfast dishes in the sink, and the bed was unmade. Nell Thompson had had breakfast here, but had been apparently been in a great hurry to get out.

On the living-room couch there were several pasteboard boxes, wrapping paper stripped from packages. Bowers examined the paper and the boxes, and his forehead creased. One box had contained a cheap bottle of perfume; another, earrings. Still another had contained a dress. The sales slip in the box said Evening gown, \$19.75. The name of the store was one that he knew catered to a bargain-seeking clientele. The perfume and earrings had come from a ten-cent store.

He found the perfume bottle on the bedroom dressing table. It reeked of musk. It reminded him of Trixie Thompson.

He drew in his breath suddenly. The idea was fantastic—but it must be so. The purchases bore it out. Nell Thompson wouldn't buy such things otherwise.

And then he saw the classified telephone directory on the bed beside the telephone stand. It was open at Ballrooms, and the Blue Moon was the second name on the list. Below it was the name Danceland. The address was ringed in pencil.

Bowers was positive then. Nell Thompson was going to work at the Danceland. She hadn't picked the Blue Moon where her sister had worked because she feared recognition of

her resemblance to Trixie. But Bowers had dropped the hint that he believed all the taxi dance-joints were secretly run by the same man or gang, and Nell Thompson was going to work in one. Hoping to get a clue to the person responsible for her sister's death.

A SAILOR who pranced into the Danceland was passed unhesitatingly by the doorman and the ticket seller. The Navy supplied a goodly percentage of the customers. Sailors weren't big spenders, but they were good for ten or fifteen dollars at a time and as long as their money lasted, they were welcome.

“Hello, sailor!” the line of girls inside the door greeted the sailor.

He hitched up his bell-bottomed trousers and appraised the girls. His eyes ran from left to right, started with the girls' legs and worked up to their faces. He stopped at the golden-haired girl, second from the right. She was smiling—but the smile was just a bit frozen.

“How about dancin', baby?”

“Let's go!”

The sailor whipped the girl into his arms, and they trotted out onto the dance floor. The remaining girls broke ranks to wait for new customers.

“How did you know?” the golden-haired girl whispered into the sailor's ear.

“I tried to get in touch with you—couldn't. Finally, I went to your apartment. I guessed the answer from your purchases and the open phone book. Nell, you shouldn't have done it.”

“Why not?” Her whisper was fierce. “I neglected Trixie. The least I can do is bring her—her murderers to justice.”

A glow spread through Bowers, This girl had the courage of her convictions. “I think you're fine,” he whispered.

She flashed a smile at him. “Am I doing it right? You see, I told them I worked in a place like this in Chicago.”

"I had some experience last night. I'll coach you. First thing is to sit out the dances."

He steered her to a booth at the side of the room, choosing the one with the dimmest light. Then he went through practically the same routine as he had the preceding night with Trixie Thompson. Nell played up gamely.

She sipped at the coke he bought for her. He moved up closer to her. "We've got to make things look right," he said and slipped his arm about her waist.

For a moment her body was stiff, but then it relaxed and Bowers drew her close. She was deliciously soft. His pulse quickened.

"A kiss might make it look even better," he suggested.

She turned and planted a sticky kiss on his lips. He wiped away the rouge from his lips and grinned at her. "Nice work if you can get it regular," he chuckled.

Her fingers jabbed suddenly into his side. Bowers turned his head and looked into the sleek face of a man in a dinner jacket. "Sorry to interrupt," the man said smoothly. "But you're wanted on the phone, Peggy."

Nell had evidently given a fictitious name when seeking employment here. She disengaged herself from Bowers' embrace. "Excuse me a minute."

He let her out of the booth. The manager smiled unctuously and followed her across the dance floor.

A girl with platinum blonde hair strolled up, swinging her hips. "Lonesome, sailor?" she drawled.

"Not yet," replied Bowers. "My girl just went to answer the phone."

"Okay, sailor—but if you get lonesome I'll be in the other room."

Nell was taking a long time at the telephone. Bowers smoked a cigarette and still she didn't return. He climbed out of the booth then and strode determinedly out to the section where the girls were waiting for customers.

The sleek manager sat in a chair before a door marked Office.

"The girl I was dancing with," said Bowers. "Where is she?"

The manager rose to his feet. "Oh, I'm sorry. Guess I should have told you. She had to go."

"Go?" echoed Bowers. "Where?"

"She got a phone call. Somebody in the family sick. Sorry—plenty of other girls though. Yes?"

"Yes," conceded Bowers, nonplussed. Something was phony. It was damned strange that Nell should tell anyone she was working here—and stranger that she should walk out on Bowers.

He swore under his breath. There wasn't any use hanging around, now. He started for the door.

"Going already, sailor?" asked a girl.

"Yeah, too tame here," snorted Bowers.

The Danceland was on the second floor. He descended the stairs to the street, stood out in front, uncertainly, looking up and down Broadway. A big car was parked at the curb, which was a violation of the law, for no parking was allowed on Broadway at this time of the evening.

SIGHT of the car angered Bowers. People with cars like that were always getting away with things. If it had been a small car, there would already be a ticket on it. Probably some petty politician's car. Out of curiosity Bowers walked to the curb to look at the front license number. Yes, it was a low number. Only politicians got the low numbers.

Bowers' eyes, attracted by gleaming nickel, came up and rested on the fancy radiator cap. He started away, then suddenly turned back. He'd seen a radiator cap like this before, not so long ago. He stepped closer to it.

For a moment he stared at the figure of

the flying Mercury; then he drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and spreading it out over his hand, unscrewed the cap. He wrapped it in the handkerchief. Then with a fierce gleam in his eyes, he started back up to the Danceland.

He brushed past the ticket-taker, ignored the girls in the formation, and strode to the manager's office. The sleek manager was gone, but a heavy-set man, who might just as well have been labeled "bouncer," was in front of the door.

"Hey, you can't go in there," he growled.

"The hell I can't," said Bowers. He fainted at the thug's jaw, then smashed his other fist into his stomach. The man let out a pained whoosh and folded forward. Bowers dodged past him and pushed through the door.

Nell Thompson sat in an armchair, her face white under the heavy layers of powder and rouge. Standing over her, was the sleek manager of the dance hall, and to one side, his face scowling, was James Faraday.

The wealthy lawyer gasped when he saw the special prosecutor. "You—what are you doing here, Bowers?"

"Arresting you," Bowers snapped, "for murder!"

"Murder?" said Faraday. "Are you crazy?"

"He's the man you want, Barney," exclaimed Nell. "He owns this place, and he—"

Her words were cut off by the palm of the manager clapping over her mouth.

Bowers swore and stepped forward. He lashed out a sizzling blow at the manager's head. The man saw it coming and dodged, but Bowers' fist caught him high on the head and staggered him back. Bowers sidestepped and opened the handkerchief in which he had wrapped the radiator cap from the car outside.

"This is going to burn you, Faraday," he said, crisply. "The hand of this flying

Mercury hit Trixie Thompson's forehead when you ran her down last night. The handprint is cut into her forehead."

Faraday, already pale, staggered back. At that moment, the bouncer whom Bowers had slugged outside the door, burst into the room. He was accompanied by two more of his brethren.

"Shall we take him, boss?" cried the head bouncer.

"Yes," yelled the manager, "get him!"

The bouncers spread out fanlike and advanced on Bowers. The manager, behind Bowers, drew a leather blackjack from his pocket.

Bowers was in a tight spot. These men would kill him—had to, to protect themselves. Five against one, and three of them professional fighters ....

The special prosecutor sidestepped, to miss the blackjack in the manager's hand, and rammed a fist into the stomach of one of the bouncers. The man came back with a sledgehammer blow to Bowers' head which knocked him to his knees. Shaking his head, Bowers looked out through the half-open door into the dance hall.

He saw a blue-uniformed figure out there, just about to dance with a girl, and a brilliant thought struck him. A sailor—and there were probably a half dozen or more out there. There had been that many the night before at the Blue Moon. Which had given him the idea of disguising himself as a sailor.

Bowers remembered a story he'd heard about sailors—How when one got into trouble, he yelled, "Hey, gob!" and all the sailors in the neighborhood would come to his assistance. It was the same as the circus battle-cry of "Hey, rube!"

"Hey, gob!" Bowers yelled at the top of his voice. "Hey, gob!"

One of the bouncers lashed out with his foot and kicked Bowers in the chest. He went over backwards, but yelled again: "Hey,

gob!”

Another bouncer, who had no doubt had experience with sailors, sprang to the door to close it, but it was too late. A sailor was already in the doorway. He took one look inside, yelled, “Hey, gob!” and leaped into the fight

Bowers, encouraged at sight of his assistant, struggled to his feet. Weakened by the heavy blow and kick, he was content to feint and dodge for a moment. And then a veritable hurricane of blue uniforms tore into the office. For two or three minutes the room was a madhouse of thumps, yells and smacking of fists. And then it was all over.

THREE bouncers and the manager were stretched out on the floor. Faraday’s age had earned him some consideration, but he was crouched on his knees in a corner, bleeding from a half dozen bruises on his face.

Seven grinning sailors ringed Bowers.

“What ship you from?” asked a big tar with a nose that spread all over his face.

“None, boys,” replied Bowers. “I’m not a real sailor. I’m Special Prosecutor Barney Bowers. I’m sorry to say that I’m closing this place.”

“What?” yelped the big sailor. “We helped you so you could close this place? Hell, we spoiled our own fun.”

Bowers grinned. “If you’ll come to my office tomorrow I’ll have reservations for all of you for a real party at the Astorbilt. All the champagne you want—free.”

“Champagne!” chorused the sailors. “Oh, boy!”

Nell Thompson came forward. “And what about me? You’ve lost me my job.”

Bowers looked at her warmly. “There’ll be a better one in my office. And as my associate, I’ll have to see you outside of office hours now and then .... Yes?”

Nell Thompson smiled happily. “Yes.”

