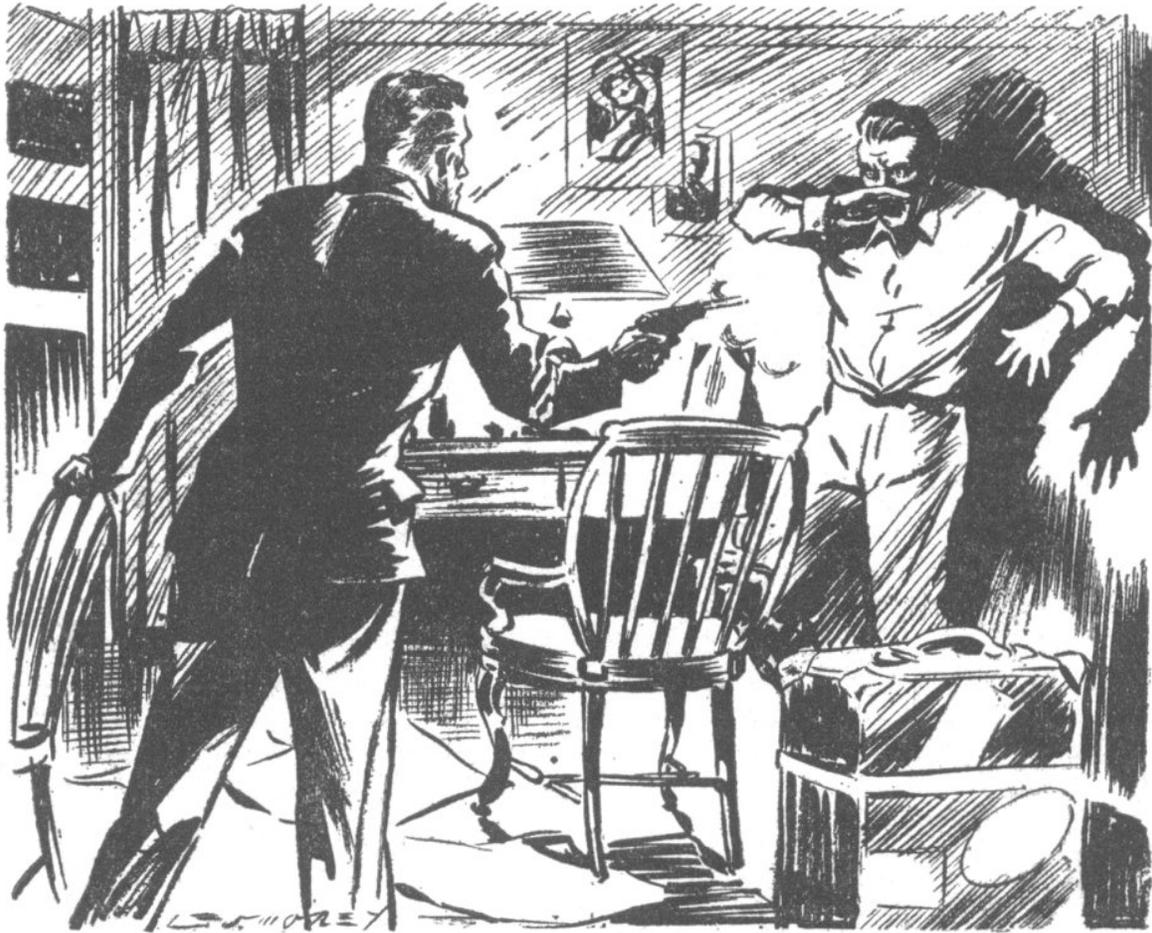


# LIVE BY THE ROD

By ROBERT W. THOMPSON

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"I had to let him have it," Big Tom said coldly

**J**OEY DOANE knew there was something wrong when Big Tom Leslie came into the office. Leslie's face was flushed a deeper red than usual, and his lips were thinned against his clenched teeth. He swept off his hat, scaled it to a leather settee, and crossed to the massive walnut desk. His forehead glistened with sweat in the white dome-light. Joey had started to rise from the

leathered chair behind the desk.

"Never mind, Joey," Leslie said. "I don't feel like sitting down, anyway. Something bad just happened. Something damn bad, get me?"

Joey nodded, waiting for Leslie to continue. He sat meekly behind Big Tom's desk, a little dapper man with slicked black hair and a bony sallow face. He looked like

the errand boy and informer he was for Big Tom Leslie. Everything about him fitted the ordinary conception of the gutter-bred, small time crook. Everything except his wide dark eyes.

There was a strange sensitiveness in his eyes, utterly foreign to the rest of his appearance. His big eyes watched Leslie, noting the throbbing vein in the thick neck, the tight curve of the mouth, the jumping muscle at the jaw.

Leslie was a gigantic man. He faced Joey across the desk, smelling strongly of tobacco and whiskey. Something of the awe and loyalty Joey felt for the man showed in his eyes.

"You're the only one I'd trust, Joey," Leslie said, smiling. "I've got to have help, understand? I wouldn't tell another soul." The smile turned into a grimace, and his right hand flicked inside his coat, reappearing with the glint of a heavy revolver. He placed the revolver on the desk, beside the little brass sign that read, "T. Leslie." "I just used this gun, Joey. I used it on Sam Vernon."

Joey sat slackly in the chair, staring up at him.

"Sam Vernon?" he asked hoarsely. "You mean you—shot him?"

"Killed him." Leslie's voice was harshly flat. "The rat was holding out some of the dough the 'Golden Pheasant Club' was taking in. You know that—it was you that put me wise in the first place. I went into his office a little while ago to have a showdown with him. I was so mad about it I wanted to handle the matter myself. We had an argument, and I told him I didn't want anything more to do with him or the club. I said he could have the whole joint if he came across with twenty grand by the end of the week. He blew up and made a move for that gun of his in the desk. I had to let him have it."

For seconds Joey looked up at Leslie

without speaking. His tongue crept out and touched his lips.

"You—you didn't let any of the boys know yet?" he asked.

"No, and I'm not going to. It's the first time I ever knocked off a guy, Joey. I've shot guys before, but I never killed anyone, see? I can't let those torpedoes of mine know about it. I don't want them to get anything on me. You and I can handle this. You're the only one I'd trust, boy."

HIS sidekick nodded, feeling proud of that.

"How about witnesses?" he asked. "Nobody saw you, or anything?"

Big Tom Leslie cursed harshly.

"That's just it. It happened right in Sam's private office, and the place is practically soundproof. He had it made that way when the club moved in there. Well, the joint is soundproof as far as ordinary sounds go, but a big gun makes a lot of noise. Anybody in the dressing room next door could have heard it. And it was just my luck someone had to be in there at the time. You know, that dancing babe you been looking over all week—Marcia Trent."

"Marcia Trent." Joey repeated the name softly. He swallowed hard, thinking of lovely dark-haired Marcia Trent, who hardly knew he was alive. The thought of her made his heart beat wildly, and sent color flooding into his face. "She heard the shot, is that it?" he asked.

"Yeah. She don't usually start making up for her act until around six-thirty, but she came in early tonight because she wanted to try on a new costume and go through her routine before she went on. The shot sounded like cannon-fire in the office, but I was pretty sure nobody'd hear it outside. I figured all the dressing rooms were empty. But there she was, when I came out."

"What'd she say?"

"She said she thought she heard a shot."

But I just laughed it off. I told her it was her imagination. She said maybe it was, because the sound was so faint she could hardly hear it. I told her Sam had gone out, and she went back into the dressing room.”

“But what if somebody happens to go into the office?” Joey asked anxiously. “Then they’ll—”

“No chance of that. I made sure I took the key from the inside and snapped the lock. It’s the only key I know of to the office. They’ll think he slipped out the back door into the alley. He did that a lot—you told me so yourself.”

“Yeah.” Joey’s voice was dry and whispery. “What do you intend to do, get rid of the body?”

“Of course, dope.” Leslie took out a cigar, nipped off the end viciously, and lighted the slim brown cylinder. He sucked in smoke for a few moments then crushed out the cigar savagely. “The damn thing tastes lousy. Listen, Joey, we got to go back there and cart Sam out, get that? We got to dump him before anyone catches wise.”

“Yeah, but when the cops find the body, Marcia will remember the shot she heard. She’ll tell the cops you came out of Sam’s office just afterwards, and—”

“Yeah, she’ll be damn glad to get the chance,” Leslie cut in sharply. “Ever since I tried to take her out that time, she’s had a mad on. I give her a business proposition and she gets insulted. So she’ll be tickled to put me on the spot. *If* she gets the chance. But right now, unless she’s told someone else, she’s the only one who knows. Get me, Joey?”

Joey nodded very slowly.

“You mean she’s got to get the same dose as Sam got. But how—?”

“Let me handle the brainwork. All I need’s a little help in getting Sam out of there, and maybe a little help with the babe. I’ll show you the neatest frame you ever saw.”

JOEY looked from Leslie’s set features to the dully glinting revolver on the desk. A corner of his mouth twitched; his right hand clenched and unclenched slowly.

“Any reason you wouldn’t like to do this with me, Joey?” Leslie said quietly. “I don’t want the job bungled. It’s the first time I ever asked you to do anything like this. Are you going to let me down?”

“It means the girl, Marcia, has got to be killed, doesn’t it?” Joey said.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Joey picked a scratch pad from the desk, leaned down, and opened a lower drawer. He slapped the pad inside. Then he came erect, watching Leslie thrust the revolver inside his coat. “Let’s go. I won’t let you down, Tom. . . .”

They watched the floor show at the Golden Pheasant Club from a table close to the orchestra dais. The Negro band was swinging it for a blond singer who was doing more swaying than singing. There was a sense of intimacy in the small, crowded club. Joey had always liked the place; it gave him a feeling of importance to sit there among some of the East’s best known celebrities.

But tonight, sipping at a highball that had gone flat, he waited tensely for the singer to finish and the m.c. to announce Marcia Trent.

Across from him, Big Tom Leslie sat at ease, smoking a cigar, his face placid. There had been no alarm given yet; Sam Vernon was not being missed. Leslie was perfectly complacent, willing to wait until the opportunity came to get Marcia Trent.

The singer finished her act and vanished out of the spotlight. Then the m.c. announced in a nasal voice:

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen of Taps, the Darling of the Dance, Marcia Trent. . . .”

She came running lightly into the cone of brightness, a slim girl in silken blouse and

shorts. Her legs were long and white and smooth looking; her small-boned face had a fresh, warm beauty. Joey forgot Big Tom Leslie. He watched her flying dark hair, her expressive hands and her more expressive feet. When her swift, professional routine was over and she had run off the floor with hardly a bow, Leslie tapped Joey on the arm.

"We better go back and see her in a few minutes," he said. "She's not even taking an encore. That shot of mine must have her thinking. Maybe she'd get a notion to call the cops before the night's over."

Joey rose a couple of minutes later and followed Leslie through a doorway that led to the dressing rooms. They could hear incessant talk and laughter from the various rooms, but the short hallway was deserted. The door to Marcia Trent's dressing quarters was open slightly. Her taut voice was low and clear:

"Paul, I know there's something wrong. I know it was a shot I heard. I tried the door after he left, and it was locked. I'm going to call in Sergeant Mullin. He can open the door with a master key. If Sam isn't in there and if there's no evidence of a shot having been fired, it won't even have to go in the records. But I've got to know."

"Of course, dear, you're right," a brisk masculine voice said. "If something's wrong it should be investigated right away. No harm in having this Mullin look over things. I'll call him now, if you want."

"There's a phone booth—" Marcia had begun to say.

LESLIE had pushed in the door of the dressing room. Joey, standing in the hallway, looked along its length. There was nobody in sight. He slipped into the room, closed the door and locked it.

"Okay, babe, and you, handsome, stay where you are," Leslie said evenly. "Joey, frisk the guy."

Joey's glance was roving over the

small room with its tiny closet, its dressing table and polished mirror and naked lights. His eyes, avoiding the girl, rested on the man's darkly handsome face. He was a tall young man, wide shouldered in tweeds, with wavy dark hair and strong, well moulded features. The girl stood, beside him stiffly, the make-up bright and splotchy looking against her pale skin. She stared at Leslie's revolver.

"I—I'm sorry, Paul," she whispered. "I should have called Sergeant Mullin right after I heard the shot."

The young man's lips twisted disdainfully.

"The king of the numbers racket and his pet rat—a formidable opposition," he said mockingly. "Sit down, gentlemen."

Leslie cursed, and Joey moved forward to pat the man's body quickly and efficiently. He knew Marcia was engaged to this young man; he knew his business, his reputation, and most of his habits. The young man was Paul Carroll, a lawyer associated with a famous law firm. Joey had gone through his record thoroughly, and he'd given Carroll a grudging commendation in his own mind. His eyes were veiled, his face blank when he stepped back.

"He's clean, Tom," he said.

"Okay." Fury rode in Leslie's voice. "This guy don't know his manners, Joey. We may have a chance to beat some into him. Look out in the hallway. See if anyone's coming."

Joey unlocked the door, swept a glance along the hallway.

"Not a soul," he said. "They must all be on the floor now, starting the finale. Maybe they'll be paging Marcia in a minute." He ducked back into the room, locking the door. "Here comes Sully now. Lucky he didn't spot me."

Knuckles slammed the door a moment later.

"Finale, Miss Trent," a voice said. "You've only got a few seconds."

Leslie stepped toward Carroll and the girl. He placed the muzzle of the gun against Carroll's breast pocket.

"Tell him you're sick, babe," he ordered in a whisper.

Marcia Trent looked at the gun, licked her lips, and called out hesitantly :

"I'm not feeling well, Sully. Tell Duke he'll have to skip my turn."

"Okay. Anything I can get you?"

"Nothing, thanks."

Leslie smiled.

"All right, Joey," he said after a few seconds, "open the door again. We're going to march right into Sam's office. There won't be anybody out there now for five minutes or so, with everybody on the floor. Plenty of time."

He shifted the revolver from Carroll's chest to the girl's back. They went out quickly, along the empty hallway to Sam Vernon's door. Leslie handed Joey the key. Joey unlocked the door, and they Bled into the big, ornate office. A desk light was burning.

Sam Vernon was slumped in a far corner, blood glistening on his white shirt front and on the floor. Leslie pointed to the heavy sheet-metaled door at the rear of the office.

"That leads out to Sam's car," he said. "The keys are in his pocket. Get them, Joey. But first lock the other door."

Joey snapped the key in the lock, searched Vernon, his stomach tightening at sight of the blood. He found a ring of keys, unlocked the rear door and swung it open. A bar of brightness from the desk light shot into the alley, glinting on the black low-slung car outside the door.

THEY stood looking at the car for a second, Leslie with the revolver at Marcia Trent's back, Paul Carroll close to the doorway beside Joey, his handsome face white at the jaws. Marcia Trent had nothing over her dancing costume, and she shivered a little at the cool

rush of air into the office. Joey tried to keep his glance from her, tried not to see the loathing in her eyes.

"Remember, fancy puss," Leslie said harshly. "One wrong move and the babe gets a bullet in her back. You drive, Joey. The key's on that ring. Take the Post Road and go as far as the Old Trail that leads up to the mountain. Know where I mean?"

"Yeah." Joey knew there was a rustic cottage off the Old Trail, where Sam Vernon had often spent two or three days at a time taking it easy.

"We'll leave Sam right here," Leslie went on. "Lock the door after us, Joey."

Joey clicked the door shut and slid into the car's front seat while Leslie herded Carroll and Marcia into the rear. He heard a thud, a suppressed scream, and Leslie's hard laugh.

"Had to do that, babe. Only way to keep him quiet. He's not dead—yet. Drive careful, Joey."

"Yeah, sure." Joey half-turned, saw Carroll slouched loosely in a corner of the seat, with Marcia in the center, and Leslie on the outside. "What'd you do, bop him, Tom?"

"Yeah. Had to. He might try something funny. He'll be unconscious until we get out to the Old Trail. You know where to turn off, don't you?"

"The cottage, huh? Okay." Joey sent the car rolling smoothly into the street. They swung along the dim thoroughfare, turned off it and headed for the Post Road. In the rear-view mirror, Joey could see Leslie wrapping a blanket around the girl's shoulders.

"Good thing Sam kept this blanket in here," Leslie said. "It'll keep her warm until it gets time to put her on ice."

Joey drove with deliberate care. He cut into the Post Road, driving slowly over the four-lane highway until they reached the rutted Old Trail. He swung into this. Woods and an occasional field and farmhouse came into view on either side. They reached a

section where the road began an upgrade and pines thrust their green lengths into the sky.

Joey twisted the wheel, swinging the car into a narrower road between trees and brush that scraped at the sides and whispered against the roof. He guided the car at a bare ten miles an hour now, his hands clamped tautly to the wheel.

He was sweating; he could feel tiny rivulets trickle down his face. For the first time in his life he was directly connected with murder, and every instinct in him was fighting the thought. He knew the truth—that he wanted Marcia Trent to live. Joey had known many women, but he had never known one who had attracted him like Marcia. She was clean, wholesome, fine, everything he had ever dreamed about in a girl. Joey's teeth ground together at the thought that she was to be murdered. . . .

Leslie's voice cut harshly into his mind.

"Safe landing, boy. There's the cottage ahead."

In the white glow of the headlights, the grey cottage ahead in the clearing looked battered, ready to crumble in the rushing wind. Joey braked the car in front of a row of tree stumps, slid from under the wheel to the ground.

CARROLL groaned a little in the rear seat, and Marcia soothed him with soft words.

"We'll be all right, darling," she whispered. "They haven't the nerve to kill us. They'll—"

"Out, babe," Leslie snapped. "You, too, fancy pants. Walk ahead, where I can see you. Remember, this gun is still loaded."

Marcia got out first, thrusting her smooth, long legs out to the rough ground. Leslie followed, holding the revolver close to her spine. Carroll climbed out the other side, reeled for a moment, then turned toward the cottage. He stumbled, fell to his knees, and

rose slowly. Leslie cursed him.

"You ought to get it now, handsome. Hurry it up."

Joey followed them across the clearing and up the warped steps to the sagging porch. He shoved in through the unlocked door. An unlighted oil lamp gleamed faintly on a solid, roughly hewn table. Joey lighted it, and the wavering glow sent eerie shadows chasing across the walls and the beamed ceiling. The room was big and dusty, with rustic tables and chairs, a stone fireplace) and a huge couch under the windows.

Leslie opened a door and looked into a smaller sized bedroom. There was an unmade bed against the wall, an old-fashioned dresser with masculine undergarments piled on it. Some pieces of clothing hung on wall hooks.

Leslie closed the door, saying:

"Just the proper atmosphere for our work. The idea is this, Joey: Sam brought Marcia out here, then had to go back to the club for something. Carroll had a row with him there and shot him. Then fancy pants came out here, and killed the babe, then himself. You see? The babe's cheating on him, and Carroll gets sore enough to bump off all three, including himself. It's the only way the cops can figure it. Nobody'll miss Sam for a day or two. He used to run off at odd times—nobody'll get wise for a couple of days. Then when they get anxious, they'll bust into the office and come look up here. The difference of less than a couple hours in the deaths won't matter then."

"Yeah, but—" Joey protested.

"But nothing," Leslie said. "It's perfect. At first I had the idea of cleaning up the blood in the office and dumping Sam and the babe up here together. But with fancy pants getting in on things, I figured it out this way. After we bump them, we drive back to town. Then I'll get my car and drive it out here again, with you driving Sam's. We leave Sam's car here and go back to town again. It's

a little troublesome, but worth it. It'll be too neat for the cops to bungle. Don't it sound okay, Joey?"

"We-ell, yeah, I guess so." Joey's voice was a dry whisper. "But still, Tom, it's taking a long chance. You can't tell where you might slip up and—"

"Nuts. It's the only chance. All we got to do is keep quiet. I'll take over the club, and that's one more double-crosser out of the way. You're not scared, Joey? You're the only guy I'd trust—I told you that."

"Yeah." Joey looked at Marcia Trent. Her face was very white under the make-up, but her mouth was tight with defiance. She stood within a few feet of Carroll, clutching the blanket that covered the upper part of her body. Carroll's eyes flicked from Leslie to the girl and back again. His strong face was taut, the jaw muscles bulging whitely.

JOEY sighed a little. Two elements were fighting in him: his loyalty to Leslie, and his desire to see the girl and Carroll live. Leslie watched him with puzzlement in his eyes. Joey's lips compressed into a firm line. His right hand slid into his side pocket. He brought out the hand gripping a small automatic!

"Tom," he said huskily, "this is the showdown." He kept the automatic pointing at the floor, and drops of sweat from his face splattered on the black metal. "I took this gun from your desk when I put away that pad. I had an idea I might need it."

"What the hell?" Leslie stepped away from the girl, backed against a table, his eyes narrowing. "What's the idea, Joey? You lost your nerve?"

"I don't think so, Tom," Joey said evenly. "Maybe I've got some nerve, for the first time in my life. Ever since you told me about killing Sam, I been fighting myself. Now—well, now, I'm telling you, you can't kill them, see?"

"Why, you little dope." Leslie spoke through clenched teeth. "You fell for the babe, is that it?"

"In a way," Joey said quietly. "I never knowingly had anything to do with a killing in my life. I don't want to start in now." He touched his lips with a dry tongue. "Listen, Tom, why not let them go? It's their lives for silence, see? Sam was a no-good. They won't mind keeping quiet about him if you let them go. Listen—"

"Shut up, dope!" Leslie swore harshly. "Put that gun away, get me?"

The only sounds in the room then for long moments were the sibilant breathing of the girl, the faraway cry of birds, the scuttling of a mouse in a corner. Carroll and Marcia Trent were staring at Joey; the girl's eyes were wide and shining. Joey raised the automatic, centered it on Leslie.

His face looked drawn and pallid. His forehead was slick with sweat.

"It's like that, Tom," he said tightly. "I won't let you kill them. God knows I wish there was some other way."

"Damn you," Leslie snapped. "You know I couldn't take the chance of letting them go. You were the only guy I'd trust, and now—" He cursed softly. "Put that gun away, or by God, I'll kill you."

"I won't put the gun away, Tom," Joey said very slowly. "You'll have to kill me. . . ."

They faced each other, tense, white-faced. Joey was sure that in another second his knees would fade away under him. His head was beginning to whirl, and his eyes had difficulty in focusing. Only his gun-hand was steady.

"Damn you, damn you, Joey!" Leslie raged in a choked voice. He fired, the revolver recoiling slightly in his hand. The sound was like thunder roaring in the big room. Joey reeled, his left hand clawing at his chest. Blood leaked between his spread fingers. He shot, twice, then smashed down on his face.

The automatic loosened from his fingers and skidded away. He looked up at Leslie. The big man was staggering; his revolver thudded to the floor. There was a growing blossom of red at his side, and another at his chest. He fell to his knees.

“You did it, Joey,” Leslie whispered painfully. “Damn you, you—”

Joey watched through glazed eyes. He saw Leslie’s prone figure stiffen, saw Marcia Trent and Carroll cling together for a moment. Then Carroll was picking up the two guns, tossing them to a leather-cushioned chair. Joey was aware that Marcia was kneeling over him. Her hands were tugging at his vest now. She turned away then.

“He—he’s done for, Paul,” she said unsteadily. “I’d give anything for him to live.”

“So would I,” Carroll said huskily. “I called him a rat. I—I wish I could take that back.”

Joey didn’t mind the blood that was spilling from his mouth. He didn’t mind the blindness, or his choking throat.

He was conscious only of Marcia’s faint voice.

“It’s a case of live by the gun, die by the gun, I guess,” she went on. “Leslie deserved to die that way. But Joey—I wish, somehow, I’d had a chance to know him better. . . .”

Joey heard no more than that, but there was a semblance of a smile at his lips that even death couldn’t smooth away. . .