

*A car pulled up—and he saw
the moonlight glint on a gun*



Johnny Chopin found a Fifth Avenue babe in the middle of the Arizona desert. And it didn't take long before she tried to make him her . . .

STAND-IN FOR SLAUGHTER

by GROVER BRINKMAN

THE BRAKIE looked tough. He was a huge guy, at least six-two, possibly over two hundred on the hoof. He had long, ape-like arms, and he was juggling a club that looked like a section of gas pipe.

He shuffled over the catwalk of the swaying rattler as oblivious to the sway and lurch of the train as a sailor on a pitching tanker. He was looking for trouble. Anyone could see that.

Johnny Chopin spotted him four reefers away, with an empty flat in between, coming fast. Johnny's first thought was of the kid hitchhiker in the next car, the kid with a game leg who was trying to get to L.A. on a shoestring.

He scrambled down from the boxcar's catwalk

and crawled over into the open flat where the kid was sleeping on a pile of litter. He shook the kid until he woke, noticing how white and anemic the kid's face looked even in the broiling semi-tropical sun.

"Brakie's coming—with a gas pipe," he shouted. "He'll never see you if you do as I say. Lie close to the wall, and I'll cover you with this burlap. Don't try to go over the side with that bum leg of yours, you hear? Be seeing you!"

The kid raised up, looked around at the distant blue hills, the flats ahead.

"Next town's Millburg, ain't it?"

"I don't know," Johnny said. "Just keep still."

He covered the kid with all the loose burlap he

could get his hands on, scrambled out of the flat and started running toward the head of the train. He knew the brakie was watching him, would no doubt pass the kid if he lay still. That kid couldn't go over the side with that bum leg of his.

He saw the smoke of a town up ahead. Desert air is deceiving, he knew. It might be ten miles away, fifteen, or even twenty-five. That meant a lot of hitchhiking, especially in midsummer, with the sizzling Southern Arizona sun baking the sap out of your brains. But a few miles of desert hoofing is better than no brains at all, Johnny assured himself.

He scooped up his battered suitcase and swung down the hot rungs. The rattler really was highballing; the telephone poles ripped by like ducks in an arcade shooting gallery. They should be slowing down, for this was a long upgrade, but two Diesels were on front, and that evidently accounted for it.

He threw the suitcase first, saw it strike and bounce like a kid's rubber ball. Then he pulled in a lungful of the hot desert air, relaxed and let go. It couldn't have been worse had he jumped off a two-story building to a cinder lot. The ground came up and slapped him hard. Then he jackknifed and rolled, like a tumbling weed in an Oklahoma duster. That's about all he remembered.

Until he woke up in a pipe-dreamer's seventh heaven.

The pipe-dream had a mop of reddish hair about as bright as the Arizona sun. Not to mention the sea-blue eyes that went with it, and a creamy, oval face that was finely chiseled out of hard, virgin clay.

This could happen—in a movie, maybe.

THE GIRL had his head cradled in her lap, dabbing at the grime on his face. Johnny blinked the cinders out of his eyes and looked again. Still there. One of the sweetest desert mirages he'd ever seen. He sat up with an effort, and finally the ground stopped spinning, the telephone poles climbed down out of the azure sky and took their proper place on the sun-baked terrain.

Then he glimpsed the car. It was a snazzy number, evidently just off the Detroit line, a shiny convertible, long, low-slung, plenty of chromium, plenty of class. The paint job was even redder than her hair. The car was pulled up at the side of the highway that ran adjacent to the tracks.

"I saw the brakie give you the rush act," she said. "Brother, you came near beating your brains out when you slammed into that whistle post."

He should have informed her that he still was whistling—not at the post. But his mouth felt like the inside of a cinder pile and talking was out of the question.

She got up, graceful as a cat, brushing the sand off her skirt. He saw she was tall, willowy, with the usual curves in appropriate places. Her clothes were the kind that ruin a heavy roll of folding lettuce, and she had them draped around her very effectively. It didn't make an iota of sense—this Fifth Avenue babe out here in the cactus.

A dozen questions jumped to the tip of his tongue as he watched this gorgeous redhead, but for some reason he let them die there. His head was spinning.

"I'll give you a lift into town," the girl said presently, offering a smoke.

Johnny needed the lift, all right. His head felt like an overripe melon that had rolled off the farmer's wagon, and every so often came momentary blackouts.

Near-concussion, possibly. He remembered sliding onto that leather-upholstered car cushion, then the fog came in again, tons and tons of it. He was trying to remember something. Oh yes, his suitcase.

Then suddenly he was out cold. When he finally eased back to consciousness, his neck was stiff and his ears were drumming. Things cleared gradually, and he pushed up in the seat and looked around for the redhead.

Funny. The redhead wasn't around.

But someone else was.

He was a fat, flashily dressed bozo. He shared the front seat, taking even more than his half.

He didn't appreciate the fact that he was behind the wheel of a bus in the three-G class. He didn't appreciate anything, even the wide-open spaces and the red rocks that comprised the Arizona terrain, for he was very, very dead.

It needed only a cursory glance to see that. He was immaculately dressed in sport togs—a green corduroy shirt and chocolate-colored pants. He was so well groomed that he looked fastidious, especially out here on the bleak, cactus-studded desert.

But there was a dark spot on the corduroy shirt, just below the heart, and his blood had seeped

down to the waistband of his trousers. His eyes were wide-open and staring straight at the drab landscape. Death evidently had struck him swift and hard.

He wasn't good-looking, but almost ugly, his broad face coarse and mottled with smallpox pits, his hair stringy, his ears sticking out like those of a prospector's donkey.

But Johnny wasn't interested in his looks, or who he was. All that mattered was the fact that this bozo was now in the realm of the deceased, and Johnny shared the other half of the seat with him. And he was a nobody kicked off a freight train.

Talk about murder raps! This was the great-granddaddy of them all. And he was the fall guy, a number one chump for a hot seat. Or did they give you gas in Arizona?

Where was the redhead, and how had the dead man gotten into the car? Why was he in particular chosen as the fall guy? This was the first time he had ever graced the state of Arizona with his presence.

JOHNNY looked at the sun, and suddenly got panicky. He'd been out for an hour or more, judging the position of that burning disc. That meant the sirens would be coming presently—for him.

He reluctantly turned to the dead man and started going through his pockets. His hands were trembling and his thumbs kept getting in the way.

He hadn't even been frisked. That seemed unusual, too. His wallet was stuffed with greenbacks—the important kind, nothing under twenties. There were cards, too—identification, several fraternity things, an AAA membership. The name, according to the cards, was Abel Stunder, a resident of Millburg, aged forty-eight.

That was all very nice to know—if you were a reporter. But it didn't get him off the hot seat.

One more thing. He pulled up the registration card on the steering column. Then he got another surprise. The car was registered in the name of the dead man.

It came at last. Johnny glimpsed the winking red light miles up the slope, long before the wail of the siren. He took one last look at Stunder, wiped the clammy perspiration off his freckled, long-planed face and started to run.

A dry wash was up ahead. The highway bridged it with a concrete culvert. The wash deepened as it

led away toward the rolling foothills to the south. There was a possibility that he could find concealment in the broken country if he followed the wash away from the highway.

Johnny ran to the end of the culvert and jumped off. Something buzzed a sibilant warning, and instinctively he threw himself to one side.

Then he spotted the snake, one of those grandpa rattlers they grow out in Arizona. It was coiled in a sandy declivity right at the mouth of the culvert. He had landed within six feet of it. At least you could say this much for the snake; it gave him potent warning.

The rattler gave him a sudden idea. With a stick he gingerly smoothed out the tracks where he had leaped into the soft shale and ran across the highway, to the far end of the culvert. This end was almost concealed, piled high with weeds and debris.

He obliterated his tracks, slithered through the opening like a sewer rat, and got inside the culvert. He pushed up some of the debris until the opening was all but closed. It was cool inside the culvert, and he slowly crawled nearer the other end. About ten feet from the opening he stopped, eyes on the rattler coiled at the opening. He got to wondering what he would do if the snake decided to share his cool abode.

He could hear the siren plainly now. The acoustics of the tunnel, if anything, amplified the sounds above. Then he felt the vibration of a car crossing overhead, and brakes thudded home. He could make out a babble of voices, but the men were too far away. After what seemed an eternity, the voices got closer.

"He's around some place," a gruff voice said. "He can't be too far away. Pete's up in the Piper, combing the canyon."

"I can't figure out why this kid—just a bum, according to what the tourists said—murdered Stunder. Looks to me like Stunder tried to give him a ride, possibly after he got kicked off that freight."

"Was he alone?"

"Yeah. At least it looks that way. The brakie said there was another kid on the train, but he jumped off and disappeared."

"Think the guy could be in the culvert?" the first voice asked.

"Let's see."

There was a scramble above, then someone suddenly yelled "Look out!" and two shots came in

quick succession.

“Damned rattler, right at the entrance to the culvert. That was close!”

“Yeah,” a shaky voice answered. “Hell, that scared the daylight out of me. No use looking in the culvert now. That snake’s been there since sunup.”

The voices moved away. Johnny wiped clammy sweat off his face, and decided that if ever he got out of this mess he’d get a rattler for a pet.

The voices were entirely lost, presently, then he heard the scraping of a tow-chain on concrete, a lot of motor roar, and finally quiet. He wasn’t taking chances, however. He remained in the culvert until the shadows grew long, and night clamped down.

He crawled over the dead snake at last, and stretched his aching, cramped muscles. Nothing was in sight—just the vast emptiness of the desert, still warm from the sun’s rays, and the blue-black outlines of the distant hills.

Johnny crossed the road and went down the tracks, hunting his suitcase. He found it presently, caved in but still serviceable, and started for the distant lights of the town.

THE NAME of the town was Millburg, like the kid said, Johnny found out as he neared the corporate limits. It was a sprawling, tourist-infested town, one of hundreds along the main drag to L.A. Motels, trailer parks, curio shops and cafes were strung along the highway for a mile or more, and there seemed to be plenty of gaudy neon to attract the tourist dollar after dark.

Possibly ten or eleven thousand, plus the tourists, he guessed. Plenty of night clubs, a big drive-in movie at the edge of town. The streets were fitted with noisy people.

Johnny hung to the shadows. He found the name of Abel Stunder on the nightclub marquee; farther down the street he found it again on a window that said “Stunder Enterprises.” It looked as if Abel Stunder had been quite a figure in this town.

And Abel Stunder, Johnny realized with a queer, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, was a hunk of lifeless flesh. Abel Stunder, despite the fact that he was a leading citizen of Millburg, was cold turkey, and that fact made him hotter than some of the red rocks back in the canyon.

Johnny wished now that he had remained on the rattler and let the brakie beat his ears down. It couldn’t have been worse than this. He wondered

what had happened to the kid with the game leg and the washed-out face.

He took a chance, used one of his few remaining greenbacks to get a cubbyhole of a room in a second-rate hotel in the Mexican quarter of the town, and started working on the cinders under his skin. With a change of clothes, and a new, shaved face, possibly he could keep from being recognized for an hour or two.

He opened up his battered suitcase—and stood there in the dim light, staring like a six-year-old kid under a toy-laden Christmas tree.

There was a package of nice, new money inside the suitcase—a big package. Thousands and thousands of dollars in nice crisp twenty-dollar bills. He grabbed up one of the twenties, took it over to the fly-specked bulb in the dropcord. It didn’t take long to analyze it. As phony as the eyelashes on a movie queen.

Something didn’t jell. Someone had planted the phony money in his bag. Possibly the same guy—or dame—who put the slug into Stunder. But a skirt was back of it all?

Johnny felt himself getting madder. The anger welled up in him slowly, to override the fear that ate at him. Somewhere in this rejuvenated cowtown was a redheaded, creamy complexioned dame he wanted very badly to talk to. He had a few questions to ask her, and each one had a dynamite fuse attached to it.

After he bought four beers for a frousy-headed barfly old enough to be his mother, he had exactly eighty-five cents left. But this beer-waddie was just drunk enough to be talkative, and he found out a few things; namely, Abel Stunder owned a lot of property in Millburg, and lived in a rambling ranch house at the north edge of town. Stunder’s wife, quite a bit younger than he, was definitely a redhead.

Stunder’s right-arm man was a big blond fellow by the name of Max Crook, who had quite a reputation as a flyer. At least so frousy-head said. Johnny skidded the salt shaker over to her, and she emptied about half of its contents in her beer. He started to ask another question, then frousy-head jerked her head toward the front door.

A big blond fellow came inside and started whispering to the bartender.

“That’s Max Crook,” frousy-head said, blowing the suds off her salted beer.

Johnny hung over the bar, watching Crook out

of the corner of his eyes. Finally the big blond man started for the door. Johnny waited a moment, then headed for the men's room in the rear, figuring there'd be an outside door to the alley.

He got around to the front of the building just in time to see Crook slide behind the wheel of a black convertible parked across the street. He gunned the car away from the curb in a savage thrust of speed, and Johnny caught a glimpse of a woman huddled low in the seat beside him.

Crook, evidently, was all steamed up about something—probably Stunder's murder. The convertible roared up the street two blocks, and squealed to a stop. Johnny mixed with the crowd, kept in the shadows, and worked ahead.

Still unobserved; he slumped against a 'dobe wall only a few feet from where the convertible was parked. The dame in the car was a slick chick, looking at her from the rear. Then suddenly recognition came—the redhead.

A police car pulled up alongside the convertible, and an officer got out and went up to the door. Johnny could hear him quite plainly.

"We've got men on all the roads, looking for this fellow, Mrs. Stunder. The railroad dicks are on the alert, too. He can't get away, and we'll get him in the morning."

Johnny heard her mumble something in her handkerchief as the city cop turned away. Right then and there he decided he was going to talk to the redhead if it cost him his life.

HE CAME OUT of the shadows of the 'dobe wall and walked up to the convertible. He had his hand on the door handle when he felt something pressing the small of his back—and it didn't feel like an umbrella.

"Just keep walking down the street as if nothing happened," a voice said behind him.

His captor was a hefty guy, Johnny could see out of the tail of his eye. A big, sunburned fellow, probably Mexican with shoulders on him like a foundry worker's.

"Don't get the idea that you can elude me," his captor said, and fell into step at his side. His voice and clipped manner of speech definitely weren't south of the Border, despite his looks.

He herded Johnny inside a building. Rather abstractedly he noticed it was called the Apollo Club. They sunfished through a noisy crowd of men and women in the bar and went down a

corridor at the end of which a door said "Office."

The furnishings were ultra-modern, ultra-Western: a big washed maple desk, chairs in green leather, expensive prints on the wall, soft, concealed cathode lighting, air-conditioned and soundproofed. There was a color photo on the desk of a horse-faced man and a pulse-quickenng girl. Johnny tried to keep the surprise out of his face. Horse-face, he realized, was the hunk of cold turkey in the car, the late Abel Stunder. The redhead with the honeydew eyes was his nemesis.

Muscles and his gun motioned Johnny to one of the green leather chairs, and he flopped his hulk in a similar vehicle across the room, and sat glaring at him. He was a character. Even Joe Louis would take a second glance at a pile of sinew like this.

They didn't have long to wait. The redhead and the man pointed out to him as Max Crook came into the room. In the white light of the cathode tubes, the redhead looked even better, a svelte package if ever there was one—beauty, brains, and brittle, all stacked on a heavenly chassis.

Max Crook walked across the room, and sliced his gloves viciously across Johnny's face, a downsweep that would have torn the skin off a kid's cheek. Johnny sat poker-faced. He felt hot blood sting his cheeks but there wasn't anything he could do about it. The big lug's gun was on him, and to move was simply to commit suicide.

"After you killed Abel," Crook said, "what did you do with the briefcase?"

Johnny didn't know anything about a briefcase, but surely he wasn't going to tell them he didn't. He was pretty certain, too, that Crook wasn't alluding to the counterfeit bills planted in Johnny's own battered suitcase.

It sounded as if that briefcase might be pretty important, too, and if they thought he had it, that fact alone might be the means of prolonging the life of a vagabond by the name of Johnny Chopin, at least for a short time. And right now time was invaluable.

But what about the redhead? She knew definitely he had no briefcase. What was her angle in keeping mum?

His conscience didn't choke him a bit when he met Crook's hostile eyes and said: "You don't think I'd carry the case around with me, do you, when I'm hotter than a tamale?"

"Where is it?" Crook asked. He came forward a step, with his big fists balled into piledrivers.

"I'll tell you when you give me a clean bill of health."

For an instant he thought Crook was going to drive one of his hammer-like fists down his adenoids. But he didn't. A cunning look suddenly stole over his big blonde college-boy face, and he seemed so pleased with his sudden brainstorm that he failed to conceal it.

"Okay, pretty boy," he said, "you may go. But don't forget, we'll be keeping an eye on you, and you won't get out of town until you produce the briefcase."

Johnny crawled out of the chair, a lot of questions on his lips, but he swallowed them. He was going to ask, among other things, why they were letting him walk out of the room alive, when he was so nicely framed for Stunder's death. He was about as popular as a Russian A-bomb, and still he was walking away from the guillotine. It didn't jell, unless—

Sure, that had to be it. Crook presumed that he actually had copped a briefcase that contained something of great value. No doubt the case had been carried by Stunder when he was killed. They presumed he had the case cached somewhere and they were going to give him every opportunity to escape, knowing that if an avenue of escape really offered, and he thought he could squeeze by the road blocks, he'd take the case with him. They were merely playing cat and mouse.

He didn't give a hoot about the briefcase, or what it contained. He was more interested in who had killed Stunder, and flung his carcass in the car seat with him before notifying the cops.

The redhead must know some of these answers. But to get to the redhead would be a different matter. He knew he'd be tailed, no matter where he went, or what he did. They wanted a briefcase that contained something so important a man had been killed for it. Crook evidently thought he had filched the case off Stunder after he had killed him. That didn't make sense, either, for if he was a betting man, Johnny would have named Crook as the man who put the slug through Stunder's nice green corduroy shirt.

JOHNNY was being tailed, all right. He worked away from the main stem, finally found a little confectionery and notion store, and went inside to get a cold drink. The big lug who had put the gat in his back came in and sat down at the counter, three

stools away. He ordered a chocolate malt with two fresh eggs in it—as if he needed it.

Johnny had drained his drink before the other assimilated his eggs. On the way out he saw some sportsmen's specials in an open rack and suddenly got an idea. There were some lead weights in one of the pigeon holes, heavy hunks of babbitt that fishermen use to weight a throw-line. At twenty-nine cents it was a good investment. It fit his broad palm very nicely.

Outside, he crossed a vacant lot, headed south for the railroad tracks. The mug wasn't a very good tail. He made too much noise, shuffling through the debris on the lot. Johnny waited for him behind an old crumbling 'dobe wall, deep in the shadows. He came lumbering up, and Johnny suddenly stepped out of the shadows and let him have a piledriver swing, with all of his one-seventy-eight pounds and the aid of the lead plug in his fist. The muscleman grunted and went down, limp as a sack of potatoes. Johnny rolled him over and clipped him another stinger on the button, but it was unneeded. The coyotes were yodeling nicely for the muscleman.

He started to round the 'dobe wall—and stopped. A car had pulled up at the curb, and he saw the moonlight glint on a gun.

"Let's take a ride," a musical voice said. It was the redhead. She was alone—all except the gun.

Johnny hesitated a moment, then shrugged and slid onto the cool leather seat at her side. She gunned the car down the street, driving with one hand, the other still holding the gun on him. The car had a contented purr, much like a big lazy Persian cat, and he decided she was a Persian, too, with plenty of feline scratch in her nails.

This was a trap, but he was too angry to be cautious. She gunned the car through the night, heading for the wide-open places.

"Okay," he said presently. "Start talking—and it better be good."

There was something in the chilly depths of her eyes he couldn't interpret in the dim light. Possibly it was anger, even fear.

"Tell me," he insisted, "why did you let me walk out of the Apollo Club?"

"The briefcase."

"What's in the briefcase?"

"Ninety grand—more or less."

Johnny whistled through his teeth. But she wasn't kidding, he could see that.

They were past the corporate limit signs now,

heading for the foothills. She pulled off the slab, onto a narrow trail that wound down the slope. When they were screened from the main road, she stopped and swung around in the seat to face him. The gun was trained on his abdomen.

"I'll make a deal," she said. "Want to play?"

He was watching her face. "What kind of a deal?"

"Half the money in the briefcase, if you can get me to San Diego and then aboard a boat."

That sounded screwy. Dames don't offer a guy fifty grand or so for a hundred-mile ride to the Coast, and a boat ticket across the Pacific. There was a catch in it, somewhere. Another thing: she was positive he had the briefcase.

"If I have the briefcase, as you suppose," he countered, "why should I split its contents with you?"

"Because I know how to get out of town, only it will take two to do the trick. I can't do it myself."

"Look," Johnny said, getting mad again, "before we start making deals, let's back up and straighten out a few things. I'm hotter than Death Valley because of you. The dead man in the front seat with me, when I woke up, was your husband. You killed him to frame me. Why?"

"I didn't kill him," she said slowly. "Keep your shirt on and I'll put my cards on the table, the whole deck."

"Keep it clean."

SHE FISHED a cigarette out of her purse with one hand, sat tapping it on her knee. "Let's say, first, I'm in a racket."

"What kind of racket?"

"Let's just call it a racket. We had some—some merchandise coming in via this freight train. You were supposed to be bringing it in, in an old battered bag, to go with your hobo front."

Johnny was staring now, trying to keep poker-faced.

"You were supposed to jump when you saw the red car parked on the side of the road. That was me—the patsy. We didn't know that the railroad would suddenly decide to hook two Diesels on this particular freight. Generally freights are barely crawling when they reach the top of the grade. Jumping would have been easy—"

Instinctively Johnny felt the back of his head, with memories of that whistle post in the cinders.

"Stunder—my husband—was playing it safe.

He was waiting for the freight to pull into the Millburg depot before he came out to contact you. Then he'd drive up in his own car and wait for my all-clear signal, to make the deal with you."

She stopped, listening to a coyote wail off in the distance. "But you were hurt, and you weren't carrying a bag. You passed out right after you got in my car. I didn't know what to do, so I hailed a passing tourist for a ride into town. I couldn't find Abel or Crook, and I presumed they were contacting you. I waited for an hour or more at the Apollo Club. Then I heard it on the radio. Tourists had found Abel dead in the car."

Her story sounded good, but evidently it was as full of holes as a plasterer's sieve. For one thing, if her story was legitimate, if she and Stunder were happily married and working together, she'd have shown a natural animosity toward Johnny, her husband's possible murderer. The missing briefcase also figured in the picture—not to mention this guy, Crook.

Possibly she and Crook were doublecrossing Stunder. It could be plausible, for Stunder was a horse-faced man much older than the redhead, while Crook was a handsome, masculine devil of her own age.

She handed him a smoke, and pointed to the dash lighter. Johnny took the cigarette and reached to put the lighter knob for contact. The gun was still on him, and she was edged over in the wide seat, too far away to risk a sudden lunge. Her bullet would be faster than his leap. But the lighter button gave him a sudden idea.

When the gadget flipped out, he carefully lifted its glowing coil to her cigarette. Then, lightning-like, he swooped downward with it, and heard the sizzle of tender flesh as the hot steel caught her arm. She screamed, and in the split second it caught her off guard, he had the gun, and pushed her rudely back into the seat.

He yanked off his tie, wrapped a burly arm around her and pinioned her arms before her pained surprise changed into rage. With the tie knotted about her wrists, he pulled her to his side of the seat, then got out, walked around the car and slid under the wheel.

"You big dumb cluck!" she wailed. "Don't you know they'll kill you the moment you get back to town!"

"We won't go back to town. We'll go to your place."

“That’s even worse. Crook might be there.”

“He’s the guy I want to see. To see how he takes it when I tell him you doublecrossed him.”

He was hoping for a bull’s eye, but the accusation didn’t change the expression on her face. “You big dumb cluck!” she said again

IT WAS the only ranch house in the vicinity, and it wasn’t hard to find. Johnny drove slowly, watching the road. He pulled off to the side presently and got out of the car, raising the trunk lid. There wasn’t anything in the trunk compartment that he could use as a rope—or was there? A single parcel was inside, wrapped in hemp. He ripped off the string and tested it. It was not too strong, but it might do the trick. He went around to the front seat.

“You’ll love this,” he said. “Just imagine you’re in the dentist’s chair.”

Without ceremony he flipped a handkerchief gag into her mouth and carried her to the trunk compartment. He tied her feet the best he could, stretched her out on the floor and closed the lid, first inserting a stick between the lid edge and tire lock, to keep it open enough to give her air.

He got back into the car, turned on the lights and drove slowly up the driveway to the ranch house. He stopped at the car port.

The wheels hadn’t stopped rolling before Crook lunged up from the shadows, a gun in his paw and rage on his face.

“So it’s you!” he bellowed, “in Cherry’s car. Where’s the girl?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Johnny said.

“I’ve got a way to find out,” Crook said, and the gun came up menacingly.

“Not that way, Crook.” Johnny crawled out of the car. “Let me tell you a little bedtime story. I jumped off a train and came near bashing in my head. When I woke up on that comfortable cushion of Stunder’s car, old horse-face was beside me with a nice little bullet hole in his fine new shirt.”

Johnny worked forward a step, to get away from the car, just in case. “Stunder was carrying a briefcase stuffed with greenbacks—about ninety grand worth, so I hear. There’s still a blank place in the story—what was Stunder doing with the briefcase, and who was to get it?”

The rage in Crook’s face was uncontrollable. “You were—you cheap chiseler. You know all about the deal. You were bringing in the phony

bills, four hundred grand in nice new twenties and fifties, and you were taking Stunder’s ninety grand in return. But you blew your top and killed him!”

Johnny suddenly visualized the stack of counterfeit money in his battered suitcase, up in his hotel room. It still didn’t make sense. The briefcase containing the real currency was still missing. He was pretty certain that neither Cherry Stunder nor Crook had it, for if they did, they wouldn’t be trying so hard to put the finger on him.

It looked as if Crook and Cherry had been trying to doublecross old horse-face. Mrs. Stunder had mentioned the fact that Crook was a flyer. Possibly they had their escape all arranged, but in some mysterious way the briefcase with the real McCoy was missing, holding up their escape.

“You shot Stunder,” Crook was saying. “You’ve had plenty of time to pick up the briefcase. Let’s have it!”

“You’re crazy—” Johnny began, and stopped. There was a movement in the shadows behind Crook. Johnny stood there, facing Crook’s gun, listening.

The movement suddenly evolved into the figure of a man—a man with a slight limp, and a pasty-white face that loomed up ghostly in the moonlight.

“Johnny hasn’t got it,” a voice said. “He’s never even seen the briefcase, Crook. All Johnny’s got is the fake coin in his bag. Maybe he doesn’t even know about that. I’ve got the briefcase. This gat in my fist belonged to Stunder, and it’s got six bullets in it—all for you!”

The kid! The hitchhiking kid on the freight train. The kid with a bum leg, and a pasty-white face. That explained everything—in one exploding flash.

The kid, the pale-faced cripple he had mistaken for an outcast beating his way to the Coast via a freight train, was in reality a carrier for a counterfeit ring. Bring in the phony bills from the East, via a bum’s route, and pick up the real coin from Stunder—pretty clever. Crook and his airplane represented a quick way of distribution.

Something had gone wrong, and he had been used as a fall guy.

“You dirty doublecrossing cheat!” the kid was saying. “I risk my neck to bring in the phony bills. I have to wait until this egg jumps off to get off that rattler, rolling faster each minute. I have to hide until the girl gets him in her car, and leaves with a tourist. Then Stunder drives up and we make the

switch. He's supposed to get me on a northbound bus. But he's worried when he sees his wife's car, with you in it, slumped in the front seat. He hands me the bag, grabs my coin and says he has to beat it. Something's gone wrong—I'm on my own."

The kid was like a wound-up watch spring releasing some of its tension.

"Stunder starts to leave, and then I get a bright idea. There's something phony about the whole setup. I'm getting the rush act too fast. I throw a gat on him and open the briefcase. Just like I thought—a lot of paper and a few big bills on the outside. He goes for his gun, and I beat him to it. He didn't die right away, and the last word he says is that he's been on the level. Somebody else took the big money out of the bag. You, Crook!"

"Where's Stunder's car?" Crook asked.

"It's hidden, until I need it."

CROOK, deep in the shadows, risked a slow half-turn. His gun was in his hand, his arm at his side. Evidently he was debating whether he could whirl and fire before the kid's bullet got him. Johnny realized suddenly he was in the direct line of fire—not to mention the girl, in the trunk of the car.

He dove for Crook's legs, remembering the sting of the gloves as Crook belted him across the cheek. They went down to the ground as guns crashed in split-second interval. Crook fired going down, and again as he hit the gravel.

Johnny saw the kid as a weaving blur behind a gun belching red.

He drove his fist into Crook's face and heard the big man's jaw snap like a breaking twig. Then Crook brought up his knee and sent him sprawling.

Crook was on his knees now, still in the shadow. The kid suddenly buckled, slid down.

Johnny started for Crook, and froze as the big man's gun came around. He was drooling blood from his crushed lips, and one of the kid's bullets had laid a deep crease in his temple. But he was on his feet, the gun steady.

"I've got the ninety grand in real coin," he muttered, "but I want the four hundred grand in phony bills that were planted in your suitcase, too. Into the car!"

Johnny started forward. A noise suddenly came

from the trunk compartment, an insistent thumping.

Crook whirled. "What's that?" he shouted.

It gave Johnny the chance he needed. He dove again, and they went down. Crook's gun roared like an explosion in his ears, and he felt the hot breath of a bullet slicing by his head. Then his fist hammered into the broken, broad face of Crook, in short, vicious punches that jerked the big man's head back like a bouncing rubber ball.

He kicked the gun out of Crook's limp hand and staggered around the car and opened the trunk.

Cherry Stunder tumbled out. Her feet were unbound, and she was tugging at the tie binding her wrists; her hair was tousled, and her cameo face was streaked and dirty. Johnny tore the gag out of her mouth and freed her hands, just as a car bore down the lane. A bright spotlight caught them, holding them in its beam.

Two city cops scrambled out of the car and came rapidly forward. One of them carried a battered bag.

"We found this in a room in a hotel in town," one of the cops said. "Woman said it belonged to a kid that might be—"

"You're right," Johnny spoke up. "But the phony bills inside aren't mine—they belong to this bozo here." He pointed to Crook.

"That's a pretty tall story," the first cop said, then he saw Crook on the ground, out cold.

A low moan came from the shadows, and they went over and looked at the kid. He looked up, recognized Johnny.

"Better get those dicks over here quick," he said weakly, "if you want me to pin the rap where it belongs. . . ."

Two hours later, Johnny was on a freight train, bound for L.A. As the rattler roared through the night, he kept wondering how the redhead would make out. The kid had spilled the works before his last breath had wheezed out, and Crook's shattered face kept him from making more than a guttural sound as he was led away. The redhead hadn't been implicated; if she had any sense, she'd get that boat at San Diego and keep going. She was guilty, too, Johnny rebuked himself, but what the heck—

He always did have a yen for redheads, any month on the calendar.