

When Doubles Cross

—the threads of fate get tangled! But Bart tangled with more than that when he climbed through a porthole and found a mysterious, lovely girl . . .

By
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BART STANLEY, one time detective, barged into his private dressing room with a curse. He was sore. He'd just been pushed off the payroll of Cordex Pictures, fired at the request of Stewart Hayes, the star for whom he had been doubling. That didn't leave any rainbow in the clouds. He slammed the door behind him. And the walls trembled.

"Why the stealth, big boy?"

Bart stopped, stared with rapidly evaporating anger at the girl perched nonchalantly on the corner of his table, leg drawn up to display a charming view of shimmering silk and a flash of pink flesh. Betty Dale, the only regular female reporter for the *Star*, always affected him that way.

He raised his eyes, gazed appreciatively at the V-neck of a thin frock that was cut low enough to give him an enticing glimpse of a satin smooth hollow between the pouting firmness of two mounds, camouflaged rather than hidden by the gauzy dress.

She wrinkled a pert nose at him. "You should wear sun glasses."

Bart folded his long frame on the table beside her, put his arm around her and let his fingers slide gently toward one cupped enticement. She wriggled out of his grasp. "Nix, Romeo, this is business—and not that kind."

She reached around behind her, picked up something, and extended her hand toward him. There was a small card in her fingers. "Get a load of this."

Bart grabbed it, pulled it up before his eyes. He read, "Clifton Detective Agency." He wriggled an

eyebrow, wondered. He turned it over.

Somebody had scribbled: "If you are interested in more work doubling for Stewart Haynes, report to the address given—immediately."

Bart grunted. "Yeah, posing for that—" He broke off, his eyes narrowed. There was something funny about this offer, coming as it did just after he'd been fired. Like catching him on the rebound. He looked at the girl suspiciously "Where'd you get this?"

"Here between the drawer and the top of the table, sticking out.

But don't worry about that. Just get your fairy frame—"

"Listen!" Bart barked. "Lay off that line. I may look like Haynes, but that doesn't mean anything, see! But, sa-ay, what the devil are you doing here?"

She wriggled seductive hips naughtily, provocatively. "Little Betty, *Star* reporter, calls on Haynes, flicker star. Just misses him. Big bad double, Bart Stanley, balls up works."

Bart snorted. "Quit stalling, Tricks. You've got something up your sleeve besides a dimpled elbow. What is it, a new lead on the snatch of this Cairnes twist—or something on the Haynes-Meredith divorce?"

BOTH were hot copy. Julia Meredith, Haynes' wife was a minor star for Cordex—and an heiress. Haynes had run through one of her ten millions before she had seen the light. Now she was making use of the courts to try to get rid of him. On the same day that the case had opened, an extra girl named Cairnes, who looked enough like Meredith to be used a few times as her double, had disappeared.

All the merriment went out of Betty's face. She leaned toward Bart. She was strangely breathless. "Bart—this just came in ten minutes ago. It's hot—Julia Meredith has disappeared, too, just twenty-four hour after the Cairnes snatch. They must have taken her—the double—by mistake."

Bart fought down a rising excitement. A corner of his mouth turned up. That second one, the Meredith one, had been no mistake. "Snatch—hell. A swell publicity stunt."



"I don't think so." Her small hand came down on his. He could feel her excitement trembling in the tips of her fingers. "Don't you get it, Bart? If the divorce goes through, Haynes is due to lose plenty. With his wife gone—the case is held up—and if something is fixed up—!"

"Well?"

"It's this lead that's got me—this card—before the news is out. It's a hunch, but I think everything's tied up together."

"So what?"

She drew back, eyed him coolly. "You were on the force once, and got bounced because you bungled a case. I know you dumb coppers well enough to know you'd give your eye teeth to get back. Maybe this is a hot spot—maybe not. But you play along with me—follow this lead. If I'm right, I get a scoop—you get the credit. Also," she gave him a languorous lidded glance that made his pulse skyrocket, "maybe I'll be nice to you."

Bart grabbed for his hat. That crack about the force had got him.

BART jabbed savagely at a push-button outside a door marked in fresh lettering: "Clifton Detective Agency." The whole idea was beginning to look screwy. It was bad enough to get fired without being roped into answering a summons from an "In-Your-Hat" agency.

A thin voice sounded, "Come in."

He slammed through the door. "Bart Stanley," he growled.

The place was about what he had expected. Two chairs, a scarred desk, one man. A thin, black-haired, unpleasant, looking person. He pushed back from the desk, surveyed Bart with a frosty glance. "You don't look too much like Haynes," he cracked.

Bart snorted. "Shaved my mustache off." He slammed his long body down into a chair. "What's up?"

"Get a new one on. Glue it, if necessary."

"What the hell?"

"Haynes' wife has disappeared!"

Bart snorted derisively. "The birds in the park will be singin' that."

The black eyes of the agency head grew colder. "Lay off," he clipped, "and get busy. You're leaving town tonight—as Stewart Haynes."

"Oh, yeah?" Bart put that mildly, but he sat up. Maybe Betty had been right.

"Yeah." A thin hand disappeared in a desk drawer. Bart tensed. It came out, was extended. "My name's Riley."

"And mine is Olsen," said Bart under his breath. He looked down at the proffered hand. He saw the crinkly edge of bills, the numerals. Five of them—century notes. Bart whistled inwardly, grabbed for the hand.

Riley met his grip hard. The small, black eyes narrowed. "Eight o'clock tonight—here."

"Eight o'clock tonight—here," Bart repeated. His hand came free, the bills in it. He turned, slid through the door. "Five centuries," he muttered, and closed the door reverently.

There was a puzzled frown on his forehead when he came out onto the street. There was something plenty screwy here, but what? In fact, what the hell? Five centuries! Bart quit wondering.

BART laid down the oars with a sigh. His arms felt as though he had rowed twenty miles. He stole a glance over his shoulder into the enshrouding darkness that hung like a pall over the water. Closer now, a beckoning eye, was the tiny point of green light toward which he had been steering.

Things were beginning to shape up. He had met Riley at eight o'clock, as promised; with nothing intervening between then and the afternoon except a five minute telephone call to Betty Dale. That call was concerned mostly with a pocket flash. After meeting Riley, there had followed a quick ride to the waterfront, a transfer to a rowboat, and a chase out to sea in pursuit of an elusive point of light.

He picked up the oars, rowed slowly. He regarded the dark blue in the stern that was the sagging form of Riley. He cursed dully, demanded, "Now that we're about there, what's it all about?"

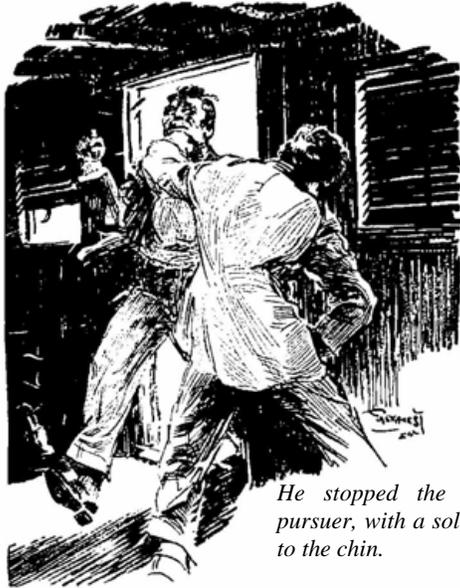
"How do I know?" Riley's voice was truculent. "I'm just following instructions." A moment's silence. Then, "Haynes got word about his wife. He didn't dare go to the police. He engaged me."

"Off camera. It's easy from there on. He was supposed to meet the snatchers—if that's what's up—and he didn't have the guts. So he yelps for a double."

"Yeah."

Bart leaned on the oars. The light came closer, became a definite beacon. Out of the night something long, low, and ominously black took shape. Riley hissed. "Sit on 'em."

Bart swung the oars in, let the boat slide up the sideways toward the silhouette that was rapidly taking solid form. He cast an appraising eye at it. A ship, long, lean. A greyhound, with a bulge in the middle. It looked familiar. It looked like Stewart Haynes' yacht, the *Black Swan*. Bart squinted, looked sharply at his companion. Riley's face, touched by the green light looked wan, ghastly. Bart decided to keep his mouth shut.



He stopped the girl's pursuer, with a solid left to the chin.

Riley whispered, "Row up forward. They said that there would be a rope ladder there." Bart obeyed. A moment later he saw it a darker, sinuous shadow. He grabbed, felt wet hemp in his fingers, stood up with its support.

"This is the Haynes' one. I spotted it!"

"Right," in a guarded voice. "Beyond this, I don't know. God, I'm going to have a tough time, rowing back against the tide."

"I'll wish you luck."

Bart waited for the right moment, and swung himself up on the ladder. He bumped against the side, turned, and made a parting shot. "I'm not interested in luck. Right now I'm nuts about agriculture. I'm looking for another five century plant."

A THROATED gurgle, like the dying fizz of a fuse dropped in water, came up to him. There was a faint splash of oars. Bart reached for the next rung of the ladder. The wet rope twisted crazily. He went up slowly. Three feet—five feet. His outstretched hand touched downward curving metal. The rope was pulled taut over it. He grunted

in, surprised—a porthole.

He stuck his head inside. "Watson, my boy," he questioned himself, "are you good at riddles?"

He hunched his broad shoulders, found that they would slip through. It was obviously an abnormally large porthole. He swung searching hands, found a stanchion. He pulled his body through, cat-footed to the deck, and took three tentative steps forward.

His outstretched hands touched the panels of a door. He spread-eagled them over the wood, slid them toward the edges. He found a light switch.

He swung his back to the door, and flooded the room with light. In the instant that his eyes were focusing he gained the impression of a lavishly adorned stateroom, of a snowy bunk against the left side.

His right hand darted beneath the left lapel of his coat. There was someone in the bunk. The covers disclosed the outline of a figure; above their top, flung high over the person's head, he saw a few yellow hairs.

He crossed the room in a single bound, caught the top of the covers and stripped them down.

He gasped. "Whew!" He dropped the covers as though they were red hot. "Raw," he muttered.

He licked his tongue over suddenly dry lips and stared raptly at what was a luscious, uncovered vision. A young girl, perhaps twenty years old. She lay on her back, clothed deliciously in an almost utter absence of clothing.

Bart's eyes whipped down from the fluffy mass of golden hair, across a piquant face, red-cherried lips, to stop and cling in helpless fascination to the two hemispheres that pointed entrancingly, guarding the snow-white hollow between them.

His eyes narrowed. A puzzled crease appeared in his forehead as his eyes came back to her face. This girl, if she had red instead of yellow hair, would pass for Julia Meredith.

Abruptly, her eyes jerked open. They leaped up to Bart's. For an instant there was a numbed bewilderment in her face. In the space of a breath it gave way to terror. She opened her mouth wide.

"Ixnay, sister." Bart put out a hand as though to still the scream on her lips.

A film slid across her eyes. Terror left them and was replaced by—was it recognition? Bart thought that was it was. A warning bell jingled sharply in his mind: "Watch it, it's a setup." His fingers almost rose to the recently applied moustache. Sure, she thought he was Haynes. A plant!

NOT TOO rapidly she pulled the snowy covers up over flat, lace-covered hips, over a smooth, gently dipping stomach, to her chin. Bart registered a mental sigh. She smiled petulantly. "That was not a nice thing to do—to pull the clothes off me."

"Yeah, sister, it's hard on the eyes." Bart backed away from her. He found the knob of the door, tried it. It was locked. "Nice layout, isn't it, Susie?" he wanted to know.

She pouted. "My name's not Susie. It's Glory."

"Glory Hallelujah," said Bart. He crossed the room, sat down on the edge of the bunk. Jumbled thoughts were popping in the back of his head like firecrackers on a griddle. Stewart Haynes' double—on Stewart Haynes' yacht—with the double of Julia Meredith. And Hayes wanted to break the divorce case— But where did this tie in! Small edible, unshelled—Nuts! Play up and find out!

The blonde's lips were parted provocatively, alluring. Bart grinned at her. Deliberately he tilted her chin up and lowered his head. He set his lips to hers. For a moment she met the kiss unresistingly, then, a darting tip of fire crept out from between her lips, touched his with a flame that set the stateroom spinning about him. Her hands opened, slid over his back, touching the muscles, corded and working with the fusing heat of a suddenly aroused desire. The white covers dropped, forgotten.

With a moan she pulled her mouth away. His moist palm found one breast, felt its feverish fullness. Her lips, moistly red, passion-swollen, came near to his. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Five . . . ten . . . twenty seconds. Bart didn't know or care. Then over the pounding pulse in his ear, his sixth sense, the only one not dulled by passion, screamed a warning. Bart's head jerked up.

As though that had been a signal, a glaring white flash burst in his face. It splashed over the bunk, set in remorseless relief the girl, himself. It died, went out. Wedged into its space of time was a dull, ominous click, and all of the darkness that killed the light was concentrated in the transom over the door. The girl screamed, a sharp shriek that made his nerves raw.

The door crashed open. Bart came to his feet, clawing toward his armpit. Too late. He looked squarely into the center of a black hole. He grunted,

dropped his hands, then raised them slowly. His eyes whipped up and down, catalogued the man who stood in the doorway. Five-eight, sack clothes, black, oily hair, swarthy skin—hell, why bother—a rat. He snarled unpleasantly. "Hello, Grease."

The man's little eyes flashed dangerously, but his voice was even enough when it reached Bart, although a trifle, stiff, unmodulated. A puppet's voice—Bart could almost see the strings manipulating him. "We took a picture."

Bart let his lips slide up over his teeth. "Picture, hell. A full scandal sheet."

Greasy Hair bent forward. "That picture would be very interesting, to some people, Mr. Haynes." A lean, dark hand ducked out of sight, came into view with a piece of paper. An official-looking document.

Bart tensed, grinned crookedly. "My overestimated public, no doubt." Things were all messed up again. Everything had pointed to Stewart Haynes, himself. Now it didn't.

He sighed. "They do better in Hicktown Corners—blackmail, you know. Where do I sign?"

Inane answer: "At the bottom, mug." The paper was extended toward him, the tip of a fountain pen protruding from beneath it. Bart reached for it, let his right foot inch out from the bunk. His muscles were like taut wires, harnessed energy awaiting only the trip of a trigger.

GENTLY, deliberately, Bart took the pen. His eyes glued to the black, puppet eyes opposite him, the menacing end of the gat a hazy shadow. He lifted the pen to the level of his shoulder, to the right. He shook it, a quick snap that cascaded the ink in black, shining drops. The hood's eyes vibrated, flitted toward the falling globules.

Dynamite exploded throughout Bart's wiry frame. He pitched to the right. His iron-studded heel traveled six inches, hard, vicious, ended on bone that gave with a crunching sound. Flame exploded under the sizzling arc of his left hand. Smoke, burning, acrid, was in his nostrils. His kicking knuckles smacked against white teeth, smeared into a red pulp the thin lips, drove back into a constricted throat the howl of agony that marked a smashed shin.

His roll ended on a bended elbow. He levered up, rolled swiftly. His left knee, loaded with one hundred eighty pounds, drove into the gunman's

ribs. A lungful of air hit Bart in the face. The black eyes glazed. The official-looking document slipped to the deck from nerveless fingers.

Bart clawed it up, stole a look behind him. The blonde was curled up in the far end of the bunk, a huddled ball. Bart grinned. Play up—hell! He'd been somebody's playboy long enough for one evening. Let somebody else set up the pins for a while. He slipped his service .44 revolver from his shoulder holster, thumbed it experimentally, and snapped it toward the blonde.

She flinched. Bart cranked the corners of his mouth up. "That's right sister. Hang onto that pose." It was a warning.

She nodded, mutely, hopelessly. Bart lifted the paper to his eyes, and cocked a listening ear toward the passageway. No sound there. His eyes traveled swiftly down the sheet. It had been typed. It read: "I, Bart Stanley, affirm that I was on board the *Black Swan* on the night of July 13th." There was a line at the bottom for his signature. An effective lip sealer if this was a snatch racket he'd stepped into.

But—the gunman had thought he was Haynes, then who was responsible for this. Whoever it was, they were dumber, or more clever, than he thought. Using Haynes' own ship for their dirty work— But again, how the devil did they know he was Stanley. A gleam flared in his eyes. He flayed himself: "You damn' fool, right before your eyes."

He spun on his heel and dived out of the room, taking a chance on anybody being in the passageway to ambush him. There wasn't. He strode rapidly and noiselessly down the passage, into the dark shadows where the light from the open door did not penetrate. It ended ahead. He took a branch to the left. He cat-footed towards the corner, fifteen feet away, where a dim bulb hung from the overhead and bathed the deck with a wan effulgence.

Three feet from the turn, he halted abruptly, straining his ears. The quick patter of feet reached him. He flattened against the wall. He heard it distinctly now. Somebody running. Tiny feet—flying like hell. Back of them, the pound of heavier, pursuing feet.

BART slipped the gat into his left hand, and started one from the shoulder—just in case. A flash of pink flesh and he changed his mind. Sheer surprise gripped him. For one tension-packed second of bewilderment he stared into the terror-

dilated eyes of what instinct told him were of the same girl that he had left in the stateroom. Etched across his mind in the instant of incredible wonder, was the picture of the same face, and body. But— *she had red hair*. He shook his head to clear his vision, unbelieving. *Julia Meredith!*



As though at a signal, a glaring white flash burst in their faces.

The thump of pursuing feet crowded closer, woke a numbed consciousness. He started one from the hip this time—and did not stop it. He shifted its arc at the center of the swing, and drove his fist with split second timing into the face of the man who whirled into the line of action. Numbness spread from bloodied knuckles to his shoulder. The girl's pursuer, caught in midstride, tottered, slumped forward on his face.

Bart slid his gun home, caressed his right arm moodily, and stared down somberly at the fallen foe. He lay doubled up with one shoulder higher than the other, his face turned to one side. Bart stared at the profile offered him, and little puckered lines drew up about his eyes. His lips formed the words, "It had to be you." *The face was that of the Clifton Detective Agency Man, Riley.*

Riley stirred, moaned. Bart sneered. "You sure did have a tough time rowing back against the tide, didn't you, you dirty twist snatcher." He reached down and ran a hand through Riley's pockets. A few bills, a knife, but nothing to tell him any more than he knew. Bart grimaced. He pulled the slack body up, propped it against the wall, and slapped the dark face with the back of his hand. Riley groaned and opened his eyes.

Bart went down on one knee, snarled into the other's face. "Now *you* do a little talking. What the devil are *you* doing here!"

Riley opened his eyes and cursed. Bart shook him as he would have a rat, slapped him hard, poised a fist before his eyes. "Snap out of it. Who's the twist?"

"Go to hell."

Bart slammed him in the nose, drew blood. Riley's head rolled weakly. He slumped in Bart's grasp. He mumbled throatily, "O.K."

The little black eyes rose to his, moved away, flickered as though a shutter had snapped across them. It should have warned Bart. "O.K., sucker," he mouthed. "You asked for it. This dame here was Julia Meredith and the blonde twist in the cabin is Glory Cairnes."

"You're lyin'."

Riley twisted his face painfully into a sneer. "Yeah? Figure it out, mug. You're in a snatch racket, and you're going to like it." His eyes slid away, flickered triumphantly.

BART got it that time. He lunged to his feet, twisting. His eyes narrowed, muscles tightening across his jaw. His hands dropped slowly. The oily-haired hood stood ten feet down the corridor, his eyes murderous. "Go ahead," he prayed. "Please make a break for the heat."

Bart heard Riley scramble to his feet. The muzzle of a gun was jammed hard into his ribs. Riley snapped, "Take it off, Johnny."

"His name," informed Bart succinctly, "is not Johnny. It's Greasy."

For an instant he thought that he had gone too far. Johnny's finger trembled on the trigger. But another voice intervened. It came from down in the passageway, back in the dark. A heavy voice. "I got the Meredith fluff, Gallio. Want her?"

"Keep the little hellcat back, you damn fool." There was alarm in Riley's voice. Bart thought, "So it's Gallio, instead of Riley, is it? And he doesn't want this Meredith kid to see me. So what?" Riley shifted his gun, came around to the front. For the first time Bart saw the livid marks of fingernails across his face. It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened. The little gunman saw them, too, and apparently took a different interpretation. "How much you ask for the picture, Gallio?"

Riley growled surlily, "Two fifty grand."

Johnny cursed, spun his wicked little automatic in his hand. "We could o' got damn' near that much—the other way."

Riley laughed harshly. "Hell we're takin' both

ways." He pushed his gat deep into Bart's side and slapped him across the mouth with the back of his hand. Bart tasted blood. "That's for one of your cracks," Riley said without feeling. He answered Johnny over his shoulder. "You keep your lousy trap out of this. She'll pay all right. She damn' near went off her nut when I told her I was sending that picture in by a Star legman. The blonde fluff's a perfect double—and her hair looks the same in a picture. If that is printed it'll bust her divorce case wide-open. That means Haynes'll take her for another cool million."

Bart blinked. This tied in with the rumor that Haynes had married Julia Meredith for her money. He didn't have any more time to think. Riley smacked him again, with a closed fist this time. Bart staggered, his blood boiling, muscles tied into knots. Riley slash-lipped a grin. "Can't take it?" Johnny stepped forward, prayed, "Let me put a load of lead in his guts!"

Riley drove his knuckles into Bart's nose. Bart swayed, dropped to his knees, head spinning crazily. His arms, robbed of their power, fell grotesquely about Riley's knees. The touch loosed the raging torrent of leashed anger fired in Bart's blood. His arms tightened about those knees, his vision clearing.

Riley squealed with fear and chopped down with the muzzle of his gun. Bart dodged the blow, felt his left arm go limp as the gat cracked down on his shoulder. He spun Riley as he would have a toy. Johnny leaped in, face working.

Bart heaved to his feet. His reversed captor held at arm's length. He shoved. Riley hurtled forward. Johnny sidestepped and his gun retched a crimson flood. Bart clawed for his gun, dropped back into the shadows. The thunder of the other's firearm beat into his consciousness, he felt a tug at the clothes on his side. His revolver came free in his hand.

He crouched. "Now, you rats!" he snarled.

He felt the heavy gun kick back in his hand. Johnny looked surprised. His mouth opened slowly, his automatic slid forward in his hand, dropped. Riley spun around, face contorted with fear, a ludicrous figure, a string manipulator who didn't have any more puppets. Johnny fell against him, and he all but collapsed. He snapped two harried shots. A .44 slug struck him in the shoulder. He went down, howling with pain.

Bart stepped forward and kicked the fallen gun

out of arm's reach. He bent, pulled Riley's face around from the wall. "Now, damn you," he said, "maybe you'll talk." He was wrong. Riley wouldn't talk for a long time. He was unconscious.

Bart swore. This was tough. He had a hunch that he was going to need some information, and in a hurry. He turned, looked down the passageway. He heard scuffling, a muffled curse. Then a shout, "Gallio, what the hell's goin' on?" That would be the hood holding Julia Meredith. Bart muffled his voice, called "O.K." He walked into shadows, gat held ready in front of him.



He screamed as the muzzle cracked his knuckles.

He turned the corner. In the middle of the flood of light from the open stateroom door a man and a woman were struggling. Bart tiptoed, eyes glued to the broad back of the captor. He leaped forward and brought the muzzle of his gun down hard on the back of the jutting head. The hood swayed, collapsed.

Julia Meredith, suddenly freed, darted through the door. Bart followed, stood in the glare of light. She stared at him, and what was at first surprised recognition changed to bewilderment. Her face whitened. She drew back, pulling her thin wrap tightly over her full breasts and the smooth curves of her torso. She opened her mouth.

"Skip it, lady," Bart cut her off. "No, I'm not the dearly beloved. Now—get over there." The blonde had found a filmy negligee and was curled up in it. He jerked his thumb at her. "Move over, cutey, and make room for a lady!"

They both obeyed. Bart waggled his finger at the redheaded one. "You talk—and don't worry who I am. Talk fast. Why was that picture so important? Why would it have busted your divorce

case?"

Julia Meredith's eyes were on the blonde. They darkened venomously. "I know now where that picture came from. You little—"

"Can it." Bart leaped forward, and dragged her away from the blonde. "You've used your fingernails enough tonight—on Gallio."

"You're crazy."

"Yeah, I'm crazy. But you start spilling the works or you'll be worse." Bart grimaced, hating to use these tactics.

ALL the fight went out of her. She nodded wearily. "I'll talk. My case for divorce hinges on the fact that I haven't been living with my husband for a year and"—she colored—"haven't had any intimate relation with him during that time. That picture, dated by a newshawk, would disprove that—apparently."

Bart grinned wholeheartedly for the first time that night. "Ain't it tough?" He backed away, and felt for the light switch. "That, lady, calls for the rest of the play—and maybe a little surprise for somebody." He snapped out the light and felt his way to the porthole, oblivious to the cries of alarm from the two women. He fished in his pocket, salvaged the subject of the afternoon phone call, the pocket flash, pointed it outboard, and snapped it on and off three times.

He listened. Somewhere away from the ship he heard the sound of a motor idling. It shut off. He went out the porthole as he had entered. He clung to the ladder, wondering if this was the right thing. It seemed lousy to go off and leave those two this way, but they wouldn't be any worse off than they had been. And maybe—

There was a faint splash below, the sound of wood scraping against the sides of the ship. A feminine voice sounded, "Here, quick."

He slid down, felt his feet touch the unsteady bow of a boat. He crouched down, went aft, and dropped into the dark well of the forward cockpit. There was a faint purr. The boat slid away from the ship's side. Bart looked at the blur behind the steering wheel in the after cockpit. "God, Betty," he said, "I didn't think you'd get here."

Her reply was all but drowned by the exhaust as the boat leaped forward. "I damn' nearly didn't! That idea of yours about a signal when things broke, was hot—but I'm no mermaid. But leave it to little Betty Dale. When you and that dick pulled

the water act I scouted around and found this power boat.”

“Handy, wasn’t it,” Bart said dryly. His voice was muffled, he was too busy searching about the bottom of the cockpit to speak up. His hands touched nothing but wood. He looked aft. The darkness was impenetrable, Betty could not see him. He continued searching. He muttered under his breath. “It’s got to be here somewhere. She can’t have it with her in that driver’s seat, too damn’ bulky. Unh—here.”

His fingers had found a wadded up blanket tucked far underneath the seat. He pulled it out, unfolded the blanket carefully, and for a second time fished out the pocket flash. He shaded it under a fold of the blanket, turned it on. For a long moment he stared at what it revealed, then he snapped off the light, rewrapped the package, and shoved it back where it had been. Then he sat up with a satisfied sigh.

The lights of the distant harbor multiplied, grew. They came close and the girl pilot brought the boat up to a landing at a pier. Bart jumped out, took a turn with the bowline on the dock, then reached down toward Betty. She hung back. “Go see if you can find a taxi, will you?” she asked.

“Nuts. We’ll both find it. I’m not letting you get away from me again. I’m not forgetting a certain promise you made—and you got me into a hell of a mess out there.”

SHE hesitated, then with a shrug of gorgeous shoulders took his extended hand. They walked up the dock in silence. They found a cab at a nearby ferry station. They headed uptown. Bart reached over with his right arm and drew her to him. She pressed against him, her lips raised invitingly. He set his own to them. His right hand found its way under her arm, found her hand pressed to a firm breast. His left hand began exploring . . .

His fingers closed about those of her right hand. He raised them, lowered his head as though to set his lips to them. The cab shot past a streetlamp, for an instant her hand was set in brilliant relief. Bart’s eyes narrowed, squinted. He laughed harshly, and in one swift motion brought her left hand up and captured both her hands in his own right one. While she struggled he deftly drew a clinking pair of handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them over her arms.

He grinned down into her suddenly white face. “When I play detective, lady, I always have all the tools of the trade!”

Her eyes were dilated with rage. “Let me go,” she screamed.

“Nix.” Bart turned his head, barked at the driver. “Head for the police station, fella.”

She calmed abruptly. Warily she demanded, “What do you think you got on me?”

“Listen, gorgeous, when you rip your fingernails across a man’s face, make sure that you wash your hands. Lady, there’s blood—Gallio’s blood—under your nails.”

She sagged. He saw that he had scored, not just a hit, but a whole damn home run. Her voice was lifeless. “How—?”

“I thought it was clever—too damn’ clever for anybody but a woman to figure out. Snatchin’ one double, and roping in another to make a picture of what was supposed to be two film stars. But that card stunt was screwy in the first place. Too crude, Tricks. That had me wondering, which was the main reason for my following it up. But I didn’t figure where you fitted in until Gallio made that crack about the *Star* legman, and working both ways with that picture.

“First Meredith was to be blackmailed with the picture, then Gallio slipped it to you and you were to go ashore with it and sell it to Haynes—he’d pay plenty for it to break the divorce. You’d collect double, and then scam. Neat!”

She sobbed, and sagged lifelessly against him, her shoulder supported by his. She begged, piteously, “Please don’t turn me in, Bart. It—it was Gallio’s idea—not mine.” Her tear-filled eyes were turned up to his and she beat her manacled hands against his chest. “Please, Bart.”

Suddenly, her body stiffened. Her interlocked hands darted unerringly beneath his coat, toward his left armpit. He was caught entirely off guard. Before he could move, the muzzle of his gun was pressed into his ribs.

Her voice hardened, whipped at him, “Now I’ll play, sap. You were going to get off easy, taken off the boat and everything. But you know where guys who get too smart go. Gallio got too fresh, and I fixed his face. You get too smart, and I’ll fix—” She left the sentence unfinished, went on triumphantly, “I’m collecting tonight. I’m going to Haynes. I’ve got the plates for the picture in the boat.”

“Yeah,” said Bart, “I found ‘em—in a blanket. That cinched it.” He reached down. There was a dull click of a falling hammer. The girl recoiled, the gun falling from her fingers.

Bart grinned. “The last shot went into the shoulder of your friend, Gallio.” He looked up, ahead. “It’s curtains now. You can tell your sad,

sad story to the judge. And when the boys go out to round up your playmates, tell them to be nice to the little blonde.” He smiled reminiscently. “You’d be surprised how nice she can be.”

He added, as an afterthought, “And maybe for this stunt I’ll get back on the force.”