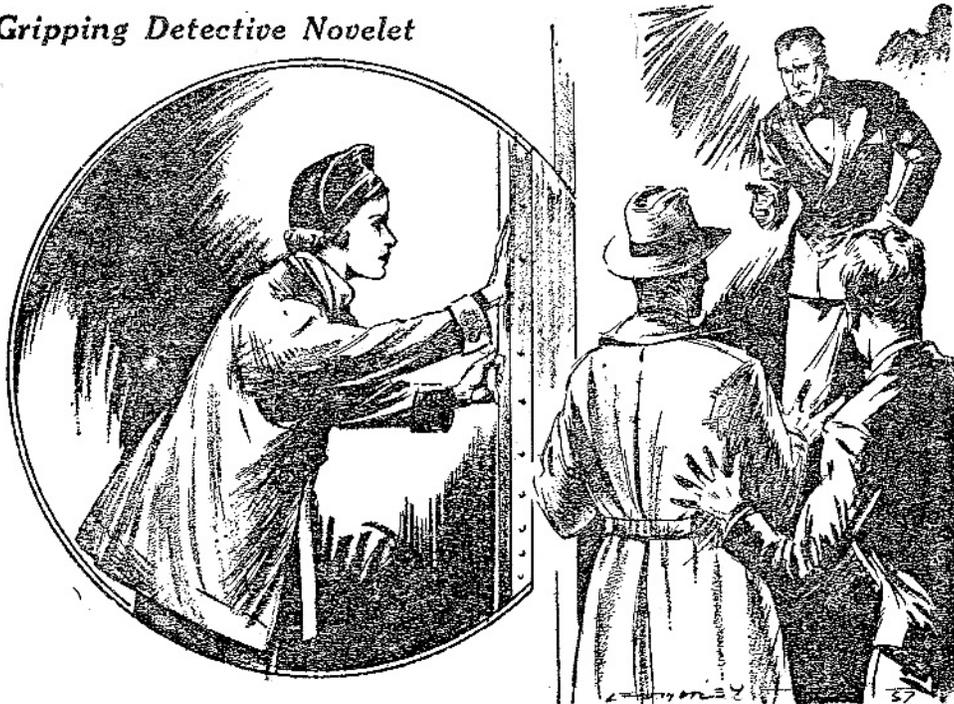


The Devil's Okay

By G. T. Fleming-Roberts
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Gripping Detective Novelet



Lieutenant Proctor Doan was Pattonville's whole detective squad. When Doan tangled with night-club proprietor Frank Domanic, Doan learned that even one dick was too many for the squad. For Doan's hands were tied by a little slip of paper—and the paper was endorsed by the devil himself.

WHATEVER the guy's name was, he called himself Frank Domanic. He also called the headlight in the ring he wore a diamond. Maybe he was honest on both counts. But if eight years on the police force of a town of forty thousand won't make you skeptical, nothing will.

I had said something about the ring he was wearing and he had said: "Diamond." But the ring and what he said it was didn't have anything to do with what followed. It was the wedge that opened our conversation and that was all.

We were in Loony Myers' place on Fifth Street. If you don't know Pattonville,

Fifth is where the railroad track slices the town into a couple of parts, both dirty. And Loony Myers' is where plaster dust snows down from the ceiling onto the bar every time a train comes by.

This Frank Domanic and I were not at the bar. We were in one of the booths at the back of the place. The booths go with the red lettered sign on the front window: "Ladies Invited." I had slid into the booth so that I could keep an eye on the door without advertising my presence. I was going to make a pinch on the charge of murder when the guy I was looking for came in. I had been there, waiting, since about four beers ago.

“You’re Doan, aren’t you?” this Frank Domanic asked.

Lieutenant Proctor Doan was the full handle. I’d worked myself up the line until I was what Pattonville uses for a detective squad.

Frank Domanic flashed his teeth at me. He was a very dark complexioned guy, so his molars showed up whitely. He had a small, curved nose with a little black mustache dripping out of his nostrils. His eyes were black and small irised. They looked as though he’d been keeping them steady so long they’d petrified. He was dressed in tan from collar on down.

“You’re married, too,” this Frank Domanic told me.

“Yes,” I admitted. It was probably my tie that gave me away.

“You’re about to make a pinch, aren’t you?” he asked.

I hoisted the glass of beer and let him interpret anything he could from what sort of noise the beer made getting into my stomach. I put the glass on the table.

“What’s your line?” I asked him.

He told me he’d bought the Paradise Club from Ira Hawkins a couple of weeks ago. I hadn’t heard about it. I asked him why he didn’t go there for his drinks instead of coming into a lousy joint like Myers’.

“Because,” he said, showing his teeth, “you aren’t at the Paradise Club.”

So this Frank Domanic wanted to see me. He said: “You’ve just been out to the St. Ann Hospital to see Luke Slifer. Luke tried to buy his way into heaven with a little info about what went on the night Joe Vesper, the *Bulletin* reporter, was killed. Luke discovered Joe Vesper just before Vesper kicked off. Vesper said something, didn’t he?”

I asked Frank Domanic if his mustache didn’t tickle his nose. Everything he had said about my visit to the dying man in St.

Ann Hospital was true. There was quite a bit more to it. Don Karsas, usually known as “Whitey,” had been seen in upper Fifth Street shortly after Joe Vesper had been shot. Slifer, this lunger who had just coughed out the last of his blood in the hospital, had stumbled upon Joe Vesper when Joe was dying there in the gutter.

Joe had three slugs in him, and all in bad spots. But he lived long enough to say to Luke Slifer: “It was Don.” Then he died and Luke Slifer saw Karsas lamming in a car a little later.

It was eight days ago that Joe Vesper had been shot. I guess Luke Slifer was saving the info to try and shake down Whitey Karsas. But Slifer had used what he knew to get right with St. Peter, just as Frank Domanic had said.

There was plenty of motive for blood spilling between Karsas and Joe Vesper. A girl—Whitey Karsas’ girl. That, with Luke Slifer’s signed statement in my pocket, made me pretty sure of getting Whitey where I wanted him.

THIS Frank Domanic kept grinning at me and twirling his glass around on the linoleum top of the table. He looked as though he expected me to think he was a mind reader. If he was a mind reader, he was plenty disappointed, because I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort. Somebody had tipped him off.

“You got some kind of evidence that would make it sort of tough for the guy who killed Joe Vesper,” Frank Domanic said.

No, I shook my head. I lied that all I had, I had reported at headquarters. I hadn’t though, simply because Chief of Police Bergans would have crabbed my act by making the pinch on his own hook. I was getting tired of doing the work and then watching Bergans sop up the gravy.

Domanic knew about that, too, for he

said: "You wouldn't do that because Bergans would have made the pinch. You and Bergans don't get along any too well. What would you take for that evidence Luke Slifer gave you?"

"Ten cents in stamps," I told Domanic.

Domanic stopped grinning: "Don't be funny," he said. "I make the wise cracks."

I'd been approached by a lot of prospective buyers, but I still belonged to me and the wife exclusively. I said: "Who told you every man had his price?"

"Nobody," Domanic said. "It's my own invention."

I was wondering why Frank Domanic was so interested in the welfare of Whitey Karsas. What was it to him if the guy fried? I could have been surprised at Domanic, only I've made it a rule not to be surprised. Maybe that's why I am still on top of the ground.

"You know what happens to a cop who accepts bribes, do you?" Domanic asked.

"I know what's supposed to happen," I said. I was skeptical about that, too, because it depends a lot on politics, the cop and the size of the bribe.

"Well, anyway," Frank Domanic said, "it would happen to you, with the bad blood between you and the chief." He reached into his inside coat pocket and took out a long leather folder. He opened it and drew out a narrow, glossy piece of paper. He shoved it across the table just below where the end of my chin stuck out. The glossy piece of paper was the picture of a check.

"It's a photostat copy of a check," Domanic explained for my benefit.

It was that, all right. I looked down at it. The check was a commercial one with Domanic Amusement Company printed across the top. Down in the corner was printed the name of the local bank that had the Domanic account. It was made out for five thousand bucks. It was signed by

Frank Domanic. It was payable to the order of Proctor Doan.

"Very pretty," I said. "That's the first time my name and a lot of money have been so close together, even in a picture. Why didn't you bring the real check along?"

"Unfold the photostat and you'll see," Domanic said.

I unfolded it and there was a picture of the back of the check. There, riding up above the local clearing house cancellation was Proctor Doan, his mark. It was harder than ever not to be surprised, because I wouldn't be the sort to forget cashing a five grand check. You see, the check that this was a photostat copy of, had been indorsed by me, and collected by the bank. Yet I would have sworn I'd never seen the check.

I looked at Domanic. "Where was I when all this went on?"

FRANK DOMANIC tried to frown, but there was a lot of laughter in his face. "Don't you remember when I gave that to you? Sure you do. I bought a pretty good man with that. You're going to take orders from me. You know what you're going to do about what Luke Slifer told you?"

"No," I said. "What?"

Frank Domanic got up. He was taller than I thought. His fingers looked like power as he flattened his hand on the table to prop himself up with his right arm. Those petrified eyes of his looked a long time into mine.

Then he laughed softly. "Forget what you know. So long, pal," he said and walked off.

"Yeah?" I said, not meaning anything except maybe that I resented being called pal by a guy who would have been nearer on the level if he'd have stuck a knife in my back.

I kept turning the photostat of that

check over and over in my fingers. What I was turning over in my mind doesn't matter because it was mostly about the varieties of hell I would have liked to hand out to a guy called Frank Domanic.

It was through a sort of red haze that I saw a small mark right in front of the place where my endorsement of the check was. The mark was in the photostat, and not scratched on the glossy surface. That meant the mark was on the check. It looked like a little penciled letter "X." I began to have an idea.

It was about eleven-thirty when Whitey Karsas came into the tap room and straddled a stool at the bar. He was a small, neat customer, this Donald Whitey Karsas, with a face like a doll. But he was supposed to be dynamite. He was in slot machines.

I got out of the booth and started toward the door. I stopped at the bar and tapped Whitey on the shoulder. He turned around, pushed his hat back far enough so I could see that albino hair of his.

"Hi-yah, Lieutenant," he said. "Have a drink?"

"No," I said, and went out. . . .

The wife was in bed when I got home. I went into the apartment dining room and to the buffet where there was a covered silver dish the wife's Aunt Ruby had given her when we were married. We never used it except as a place to put receipts, the extra key to the front door, and the bank book. I opened the dish and took out the bank book. I opened it.

Five days back a five-thousand-dollar entry had been made, bringing the Doan fortune to five thousand, four hundred ten dollars, and sixty-eight cents. Mary and I had been putting a little away each month because we were expecting a son and heir. I was expecting a son, anyway.

I began to understand the two theater tickets somebody had mailed to the house

on the day before the five grand had been deposited. We had gone to the show that night. Whoever had sent the surprise ticket had entered the house and swiped the pass book.

How the pass book got back I didn't know until the next morning, when Mary said it had been mailed to her by the bank. She had supposed she had left it there last week when she had gone in to make a deposit.

I let it go at that, because there was no use telling the wife about it if I was going to spend it all. I knew Mary hadn't made the deposit. Somebody who wasn't either Mary or I socked that five grand check into our account. The day after that somebody had swiped our pass book.

Banks don't care who puts money in your account. It's taking it out that bothers them. Then that somebody had left the pass book on one of the tables in the bank. Whether we got the book back or not didn't matter, so long as the check went through the clearing house and was returned to Frank Domanic, cancelled. That way I'd been bought without knowing it. How they got my name on the back of the check was a mystery.

I went down to headquarters, which is under the courthouse. The big noise in Chief Bergans' office was a reverend somebody or other who was raking Bergans over the coals. I didn't hear much of the conversation except that the minister wanted the Paradise Club locked up. According to him, the temperature out there was a lot higher than anywhere else in town.

Usually Bergans is as excited as anybody when some of the local dine-and-dance places start getting wild, but today he just didn't act interested. He got rid of the reverend as soon as possible. Then he stuck his moon face out the door and bawled at me to the effect that if I didn't I

get the lead out of my pants and nail the guy who had bumped Joe Vesper he was going to tackle the case himself.

After that, I went to the bank and drew out the five grand Frank Domanic had donated to the Doan family. Then I went around to the Fairmont Theater to see Sid Fairmont.

ONCE a year Sid Fairmont masses all the local talent and puts on what he calls the Pattonville Frolic with ducats at a dollar a head. The show doesn't worry Billy Rose any, but it makes Sid a little extra money and gives Pattonville's stage-struck daughters a chance to wave their legs around. And, of course, Sid knows all the would-be show girls for miles around. And I thought I was looking for a show girl.

I described the girl I was looking for to Sid—the usual lines, five feet and five inches, kind of hard blue eyes. Her hair had looked blond, but then I'm skeptical. She had had a cute little mole on the right side of her chin.

Sid got out a portfolio of gloss prints of more or less clothed girls, started turning them over, and told me to say when. I said when, about the eighth down. It was the same blond fluff, only there was more of her than there was the day she had come into police headquarters. Her name was Rima Edwards. She lived in the Carter Apartments.

Sid said she was good enough to make good on Broadway, only she happened to be doing all right for herself in another line of endeavor. She gave herself a lot of advertising, dancing at the Paradise Club.

Sid shot off his face about the kind of show they were putting on out there. He said it would have shocked a Turk. Also, he thought the club had a lot of tough-looking customers from out of town, and asked why Chief Bergans had not cleaned

the place up.

As soon as I left the theater I got in my car and drove to the Carter Apartments. This Rima Edwards lived in B3. I got upstairs in time to see a man duck out of her door and head for the back stairs. I let the guy go and then went to Rima's door and knocked. She opened the door a crack and looked out. Her brittle blue eyes were padded with puffy lids. Her lips looked smeary. Her yellow hair was a halo, but a sort of frowzy one.

"Why," she said, "it's Lieutenant Doan, isn't it?"

"I think so," I said. "I'd like to talk with you."

She opened the door farther and let me in. She was holding a blue silk negligee tight around her as she led the way into the apartment. She did most of her walking with her hips. She had evidently been picking things up in the bedroom which I could see just beyond, for she was carrying a pair of pajamas over her arm. She asked me to sit down. I asked her who her visitor had been.

She cuddled one cheek down in the fur trim of the negligee and said: "The brush salesman pestering me again."

"Oh," I said. "He left his pajamas hooked over your arm."

She looked annoyed at the pajamas. Then she laughed at me, tossed the pajamas into a chair, came over and sat down on the end of the davenport opposite the end that was supporting me.

"So what?" she asked, eyes steady on mine.

"So skip it," I said, and reached for a pack of cigarettes on the table. I helped myself, then offered her one and a light from my match.

"Look here, Rima," I began getting to the point. "You came into headquarters the other day with a petition which was for the purpose of getting the school board to see

that all kids under the age of nine got half a pint of milk to drink at recess. How'd you make out on that?"

Her eyelids fluttered. "I don't know, yet."

"You bet you don't. Because the school board never heard of the petition. You were just collecting autographs. Do you remember the kind of paper you had those signatures on? It was crisp, slick yellow paper. The petition was typed in a narrow heading on the paper and the paper was divided into two columns for the names.

"The column to the left was filled with names by the time the petition got to me. You made a little cross mark with your pencil at the top of the second column, stuck a pen in my hand, and asked me to sign. It was a worthy cause and you were an entrancing bit of fluff, so I put my signature right after your pencil mark. My name was the only one you got in that column, wasn't it?"

RIMA screwed up her shoulders and let them fall, asking me what I thought, with that shrug.

"Sure, mine was the only one," I answered myself. "Then you lammed back to Frank Domanic. Domanic took the petition, trimmed the typing off and clipped off the column of names to the left of where I had signed mine. Domanic has a little printing press somewhere where he prints his own check blanks. He took that piece of yellow paper, now blank except for my name, and printed a check blank on the other side. Then he took a paperhanger's perforating wheel, trimmed the paper so that it looked just as though it had been torn from a check book.

"He made out the check blank to me and signed it. He already had my bank book which he had swiped that night he got Mary and me out of the house by

sending us theater tickets. He had somebody deposit the check to my account, just so he could have a cancelled check, indorsed by me, to threaten me with on the count of accepting a bribe. His plan might have worked if you hadn't put that penciled 'X' right in front of my name."

"It'll work anyway, won't it?" she asked, "if that's what somebody did to you?"

"Listen," I said, "what's this Domanic to you?"

"A meal ticket," she said. "Why?"

"Do you know what he did with that cancelled check?" I asked.

"I don't think I can remember," she fished.

"Could you for five hundred bucks?" I asked.

She laughed. "Penny ante, mister." But that showed me she could be had if the price was right.

"Double it," I said. I took out my wad and waved it at her. She stuck out her hand.

"It's in his safe out at the Paradise Club," she said quickly.

I put the money back in my pocket. She took two bumps across the davenport toward me. "Gimme the dough," she said.

I laughed. "You might as well have told me the check was buried in the Egyptian Sphinx. Now if you get me the combination to the safe. . . ."

"That'd cost you the five grand," she said.

I wagged my head up and down. "So you're the dame who deposited the check to my account, are you?"

"I'm not saying," she said, "but if I was, it was no crime."

I took out the money again. "One thousand bucks now as a retainer. Fifteen hundred more when you give me the combination to the safe."

She stood up. "It's a deal, lieutenant.

You be in the Paradise Club tonight. I know where Domanic keeps the combination. And listen, I'll be the left end stepper in the chorus, and if you so much as look at me the deal's off. Domanic would kill me for crossing him up."

She stuck out her hand for the grand, and I gave it to her.

That night I went out to the Paradise Club about nine-thirty when the first floor show started. Rima was there. Just before the chorus was due on the postage-stamp-size stage, she came out and went into a huddle with the cigarette girl for about thirty seconds. Then she went back to string up with the rest of the chorines.

The show—well I didn't pay much attention to it. It was pretty hot, I guess. Most of my attention was focused on the crowd. As Sid Fairmont had said, there were a lot of out-of-towners, and not the sort of guests Pattonville would have pointed to with pride.

In fact, I was on to Frank Domanic's racket. He was turning the Paradise and Pattonville into a refrigerator where hoods from all over the Middle West could come and cool off when their home towns got too hot. And Frank Domanic could do just that, too, if he bought the right people as he had bought me. And the board and room these big time crooks were paying him must have been plenty high enough, if Domanic could pass out five grand to me without batting an eye.

But the imported toughs and the local customers didn't pay any more attention to me than if I was one of the potted palms around the place. I got up after a little while and slipped into the phone booth near the front of the club. I dialed police headquarters and got hold of Chief Bergans. I told him where I was.

He yelled: "Who in hell told you to go to the Paradise Club?"

"I get it," I said. "It's hands off Domanic and the Paradise."

"Listen," Bergans said, "you get the hell out of there and hook Joe Vespers' murderers, like I—"

I cut in with: "I got Vesper's murderer. How much did Domanic pay you for immunity?"

There's no use going into what Bergans said then, but the general trend of his monologue indicated he was plainly insulted.

I said: "Listen, Bergans, I know damned well Domanic is holding out a cancelled check which indicates you accepted a slice of graft. I'm going to call you to raid this joint when time marches on a little farther. And I want you to come ready to meet plenty of tough customers. And don't worry about that check. You're a damned fat-headed jackass, but you're almost honest. I know the check was framed and I'll have my hands on it in a little while and burn it."

I hung up, knowing that Bergans had been taken for the same kind of a ride I had. That meant that Domanic practically owned the police force. No wonder he was running wide open and could afford immunity to the mob of hot shots from out of town.

I CAME close to bumping into Frank Domanic himself, getting out of the phone booth. He had just tossed his silk hat to the girl in the cloak-room. Whitey Karsas was trailing along with him. I put on an act then, clapping Frank and Whitey on the back and shaking hands.

Domanic said: "I'm glad to see you, Proctor Doan, but I wish it was in another spot. It would make a better impression on the natives if the cops would just keep away and keep their eyes shut."

I winked and said: "The natives don't know but what I'm casing the joint for a

raid. And say, Frank, old boy, any time I can do anything for you or any of these out of town friends of yours, let me know.”

Domanic said: “Now you’re beginning to get wise to yourself.” He laughed, and we went back to watch the show. I was careful to sit clear across the room from him, however.

I had hardly got into the chair before the cigarette girl came up and shadowed my table with her stand-out skirt. I started to wave her aside, but she dropped a pack of smokes on the table in front of me.

I could see that the cellophane had been ripped at the top. I looked up at her and raised my eyebrows. Nothing on her face but makeup and come-hither. I paid for the cigarettes and gave her a tip. She went off to the next table.

I turned the package of cigarettes over and there was a little square of soiled paper stuffed down inside the cellophane. I ripped open the package and fingered out a cigarette and the square of paper at the same time. I opened the paper and saw that Rima Edwards had come through. It was the safe combination.

I kept my eyes on Domanic. When he seemed interested in the show, I slipped to the front of the club. The office was approached by a hall just beyond the hat check room. The word “Private” printed on the door was considerably reinforced by one of the local pugs, name of Slugger Hagen.

I squared off in front of Hagen and said “hello.” I reached into my pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes, being careful to drop a twenty dollar bill from my pocket as I did so. If twenty bucks wouldn’t make the guy look down, nothing would. He looked, and my left hand came out of my coat pocket with a sap in it. I laid the sap down in back of Slugger Hagen’s ear. He folded into my arms with a grunt.

I kept him propped up against the door until I’d frisked him. The office door was locked but Slugger Hagen had the key in his pocket. I opened the office door, dragged Hagen into the office and dumped him in a chair. I went back to close the door and retrieve the twenty which had been the root of all the evil that had occurred to Slugger Hagen.

The first thing that I did was to go over to the window, which opened on an alley. I hoisted the sash. Then I went back to Hagen, who was going to be out for thirty minutes anyway, and pushed him through the window. It sounded as though he’d landed in an ash can. I closed the window and went over to Domanic’s safe.

The combination Rima had swiped for me spread out on my knee, I ran through the combination carefully on the dial. Then I came near to dislocating my shoulder yanking on the handle. But the safe door wouldn’t so much as creak.

I tried it again, but it couldn’t be done. Either this was an old combination or the girl had crossed me up. And I didn’t think it was the fault of the girl because by crossing me she would chisel herself out of the fifteen hundred she had coming to her.

I thought I’d dig up the combination myself, so I turned to Domanic’s desk. Everything was as neat as an old maid’s sewing basket. There was nothing that even resembled a combination.

But I came across a rubber stamp that looked as though it had been made for printing tickets, for it said “Admit One” on it. There was a stamp pad, too, and a ledger-size book of Domanic’s commercial check blanks, printed on yellow paper and just like the check that was in the safe with my John Henry written on it.

So I yanked out two of the check blanks, picked up a pen, and filled them in,

using the photostat copy of the check—the one Domanic had threatened me with—as a model for some pretty crude forgery of Domanic's handwriting. On the back side of one of the checks I put my own signature. And on the back side of the other I tried an imitation of Chief Bergans' signature. Then I stamped both checks with the rubber stamp, purposely smearing it around so you couldn't tell at a glance just what the stamp said.

What I had in mind was a bright idea—if it worked.

I trotted back and sidled over to my table once more, for it was as good a place as any to do some heavy thinking. A torch singer was burning up in the center of the stage. The crowd kept calling her back, hell knows why. Pretty soon, Domanic got tired of the girl and her throaty warble, and he went out.

I looked around for Rima, but neither she nor the cigarette girl, who had acted as go-between for Rima and me, were in sight. A lot of the other girls in the chorus were parked around the room on chairs, tables, and laps. But no Rima.

THE TORCH SINGER went off the stage, and while the master of ceremonies was cracking his quips, I went over to where Whitey Karsas was. I flopped into the chair that Domanic had warmed. Whitey asked me how I liked the show. I said it was lousy. He told me to wait until the dwarf dance, for which, he said, the chorus was going out to take off for now.

"Are you and Domanic close friends?" I asked Whitey.

Whitey couldn't get over me being a copper. His pale eyes froze. "So long as he doesn't get in my way, we are."

"Never been in any deals with him, have you?" I asked.

Whitey shook his albino head and started clapping. There was a sister act coming on. A couple of tap dancers who were soon hitting the timber for so much racket you couldn't have heard a howitzer go off.

Domanic came back when the tapping sisters were about through and swung a chair between his legs. I had a hunch he wasn't happy about something, though you couldn't tell anything by his eyes. His lips were as thin as the strip of lean in a slice of bacon.

The sisters clicked off the stage. The orchestra whipped into a torrid rhythm. The chorus came out again, all the spotlights burned whitely on the stage.

The chorines' heads and faces were completely covered with big hats. The rims of gigantic black spectacles framed their bosoms. Mouths were painted redly on white bellies. Waists were girdled with white collars and black bow ties, so that each girl was supposed to look like a gigantic head fastened to legs without benefit of torso. Their hands were up, hidden in the big hats, so that their elbows stuck out like elephant ears.

Under the proper lighting and at a greater distance, you would have wondered a little how the grotesque effect was obtained. Here you didn't have to wonder.

If Rima Edwards was the end girl in the line, something was haywire. She couldn't handle this routine as she had the previous one. She dragged behind the others, made false steps, bungled things in general. It wasn't her modesty that was bothering her. Something else.

And then it happened. A single shot cracked above the muted wail of the orchestra. Rima's knees hinged. She fell forward on her face. Her sister chorines screamed. The music staggered off into

silence. I heard Frank Domanic yell: "That's Rima!"

Then he was on his feet. Everybody else was on mine, I think. Black drapes fell over the stage, and over the heads of the crowd I could see Domanic tearing his way toward the stage. I started to follow his interference.

A big, half-soused bum stopped up the hole Domanic had made in the mob. I got the bum by the shoulder and yanked him to one side. The bum wanted to know who I thought I was shoving, and when I didn't exhibit any curiosity in that direction, he brained me from behind with a bottle.

I didn't go clear out, but I went down and I must have blended in well with the flooring, the way the Paradise customers tramped on me. I got up and saw that a well-generated army of waiters had formed a cordon around the stage and I had lost track of a lot that had gone on.

As I was plowing my way toward the stage with shoulder and elbow punches, I heard somebody say that the girl had been hurt badly and Domanic had taken her to his office. I cut back toward the office, saw a couple of Domanic's waiters tussling with a young guy who looked as though he'd dunked his face in a flour barrel. I didn't wait to see what the skirmish was about. I kept going for the office.

When I got within sight of Domanic's door, I saw hell was in front of me. There were four of Domanic's hoodlum boarders grouped in front of the door, their mitts in their pockets, nursing gun butts. One of them got his eyes into mine and nudged one of the others.

I reached shoulderward for my gun, but the under-arm holster was as lean as a soap chip. Somebody had frisked out my gun while I had been fighting it out with oblivion there on the floor. That changed my mind about the four hoods that were

guarding the office. I went out the front door of the club and around to the mouth of the alley.

It was there that I ran head on into a girl. I grabbed her to keep us both on our feet. My hands, on considerable area of her flesh, told me that I had nabbed one of the chorus girls. She was sobbing for air, and gasping out for me to let her go, which I didn't.

I PULLED my flashlight and squirted its beam at her. It was Domanic's cigarette girl, wearing the practically nothing the chorus girls had on for the dwarf dance. The big hat that had been used to mask her head and face was under her arm. She held a roll of bills, like it was a bunch of broccoli in her right hand. She tried to pull away from me, and I hooked one arm around her waist and pinioned her arms while I pulled handcuffs out of my pocket.

I wanted to know just where she would be when I would be elsewhere, because when I'd first bumped into her, my nose had got buried in her hair. And I noticed her hair had smelled of smoke—gun smoke. And then I knew why Rima had bungled the dwarf dance.

"Listen, sister," I told the girl; "you're coming with me."

I clamped one side of the bracelets to her wrist and then dragged her out near the mouth of the alley where there was a fire hydrant. I clamped the other end of the bracelets to the chain that was hooked to the cap of the hydrant.

She was crying, saying she'd freeze out there. I told her if she didn't come out with the truth when it was asked of her, she'd roast. I shed my suit coat and threw it over her. Then I sprinted back up the alley to Domanic's office window. It was open.

Through the open window I could see Domanic sitting at the phone. He was

talking to Chief Bergans, telling him that a murder had been committed.

"One of the chorines got bumped off," he said. "It's open and shut for you, Bergans, because one of my waiters grabbed the guy who did it. . . . Yeah, love trouble. You and the boys can come out."

As Domanic hung up, I got over the window sill with the aid of the ash can in which Slugger Hagen was still napping. Domanic jerked around and reached for his gun. When he saw me, he didn't pull the gun.

He just nodded toward a couch which was against the wall and said, "Rima Edwards," just as he had said, "Diamonds," the first time I'd met him.

Rima was stretched out on the couch, wearing the crazy garb of the dwarf dance. The big hat had been pulled off her head and face, and even before I saw the blood that had trickled down her forehead, I saw the blood in the hat. I took one look beneath the forelock of her yellow hair, saw the tunnel the slug had made. I turned to Domanic.

"You killed her," I said, "because she double-crossed you and sold out to me. Somebody tipped you off that I had been in to see her this morning. Maybe the tipper was the guy who was with her last night and left this morning just as I reached her apartment. You waited till Rima got to the Paradise tonight to kill her, because the Paradise is immune from too much policing and you could easily frame that poor punk the waiters out there nabbed for the job."

DOMANIC grinned. "How in hell could I have killed her? You were sitting at the same table with me. My waiters got the love-sick puppy who did it. The gun was in his pocket."

"How you did it is something else," I said. "But you slipped the gun you used to

kill Rima into that punk's pocket. It'll be a cinch to apply the test for nitrates to his hand and prove he didn't actually fire the gun. You think the cops are going to be lax about that, though, because you've framed Bergans on a bribery count just like you framed me. It's that check trick again."

Domanic's grin faded a little. "How do you know?"

I lied that I had seen the check he had used to frame Bergans with.

"Yeah?" he said. "You're bluffing. I happen to know that the safe combination that Rima swiped was an old one."

"Okay," I agreed. "We'll skip that for a while. Did you know I was going to pinch Don Whitey Karsas for killing Joe Vesper?"

For just a split-second there was a touch of flame in Domanic's stony eyes. "Sure," he said, as though he wasn't sure. Then, "Sure," again, this time as though he meant it.

"Why were you so anxious to protect Whitey?" I shot in fast.

"Why— why—" he stumbled.

"Because," I cut in, "you thought that the dying Luke Slifer had named you as Joe Vesper's killer. Luke Slifer named Whitey Karsas because Slifer saw Whitey in the same neighborhood at the time and because Joe Vesper's last words were: 'It was Don.' And plenty of reason for upper Fifth to be the scene of the killing because that's where the girl, that Joe Vesper and Whitey were both after, lived.

"But when you got so interested in Whitey's welfare, I began to wonder. And I began to think that no one ever called Whitey by the name of Don. If Vesper had intended to accuse Whitey, he would have said, 'It was Whitey.' What Vesper was trying to say was, 'It was Domanic.' But Death stepped in before he got farther than 'Dom.' I read in the papers the other day

where a certain movie actor had changed his first name from 'Dom' to 'Don,' because the two sounded so much alike everybody was calling him 'Don' anyway.

"You killed Joe Vesper because he knew that you were turning the Paradise Club into a hideout and cooling-off spot for hoods from the big towns. Maybe you thought you could buy the police force by faking a bribery charge against Bergans and me. But you knew nothing but lead would shut Vesper up."

Domanic's grin came back and so did his confidence. "How can you prove that?"

I shook my head, stuck a cigarette in my face. "Don't have to. You'll get the hot squat for killing Rima Edwards. You killed her right here in this office a few minutes ago, giving the gun that did the job to some of your boys to plant on the punk you've got framed for the job.

"The noise those tap dancers made masked your shot. You think you're alibied because you were at the same table with me when Rima was apparently killed on the stage. The girl that flopped on the stage after the shot was your cigarette girl.

"In that dwarf dance garb, she couldn't be told from Rima except by the rotten way she danced. The cig girl had a gun with a blank cartridge in it. During the dance, she had both hands up under that gigantic hat, just as the other girls did. She shot off the blank cartridge inside the hat, made the noise, flopped on the stage as though she had actually been shot.

"The hat she wore not only hid the gun, but also the smoke from the discharge. You carried the cig girl into your office here, paid her off for her part of the job, and she jumped out of the window, practically into my arms. I noticed that her hair smelled of cordite. That's because she fired the blank in under her hat."

Domanic said: "But you're not taking

anything like that into court."

I DIDN'T say anything for a minute. I could hear the whine of sirens in the distance. Bergans was coming, loaded to raid the joint. He was counting on my destroying the check that had tied his hands. I took out my cigarette lighter.

"Why not take it into court? I nabbed the cig girl. She'll talk to save her own skin when I get to grilling her."

"You're forgetting the two cancelled checks," Domanic said. "You and Bergans are taking orders from me—if you're keeping your jobs and staying out of the penitentiary."

"I'm forgetting nothing," I said. "Thanks to your lesson on how to bribe a guy, I bought one of your out-of-town guests, a safe cracker, to open that safe of yours and get the checks for me. He said your safe was such an old can he could feel out the combination. I bribed him with some of the dough you donated to the Doan family bank account. And I got my check, and Bergans', too."

"You're bluffing," Domanic said, which was true. Only he wasn't sure. He got to his feet, pulled his gun, and took a step toward me. Bergans and the boys had started hell popping out in the club.

"Bluffing?" I said. "You want to see my hand?" With my left hand I flashed out the two checks I had made out about thirty minutes before.

Domanic's eyes were allowed a pretty good look at my indorsement on the back of the top check, and just a glimpse of everything else. Then I passed the two checks into the flame of the lighter.

Domanic knew he was going to face a murder charge unless he had those checks with which to threaten Bergans and me. Now he saw his immunity going up in smoke—or thought he did. So he lunged, made a grab for the burning checks with

one hand and gouged up with his gun with the other. I stuck the cigarette lighter, flame first, into his right eye.

That was about all I had to do to Domanic. He shrieked, doubled over. Oh, he pulled the trigger of his gun, but he didn't know where he was shooting. I straightened him up with a clout to the chin, got hold of his gun wrist, took the gat away from him.

"You want to die resisting arrest?" I asked. "If you do, just take a good deep breath."

But he didn't take the deep breath. He stood back against the wall, blinking, but otherwise not moving a muscle. He knew I wasn't kidding.

Outside the office there were shots and shouts and that bullish bellow you get to associate with Chief Bergans. When Bergans broke into the office with some of the boys at his back, he told me he had made the toughs behave and that the hoods

he'd caught would make the Federal Agents turn green with envy.

While one of the cops was handcuffing Frank Domanic, I borrowed the cop's tommy gun and turned it loose on Domanic's safe. That opened the can soon enough. Domanic, knowing now how I'd bluffed him, was raising hell, but only with his tongue.

I got out the checks and their photostat copies that Domanic had framed as bribery evidence against Bergans and me. I gave Bergans his without a word, and he crammed it into his mouth and chewed it. I always thought it was funny it didn't turn up in his appendix.

When Bergans could talk, he bawled at me: "I thought you had this damned check before I pulled the raid."

"So," I said, "did Domanic." I lighted a cigarette, using my five-grand cancelled check for a match.