

Abra Cadaver!

By Robert Turner



MORAN knew how the girl felt. He knew how her stomach must be knotting and her heart pushing against the back of her teeth. Moran knew it was a hell of a hard thing to do. Once, back when he had been a young liver-hearted punk, he, too, had contemplated suicide.

Half-hidden behind a pole, Moran was certain that the girl had not seen him. She thought she was alone on the subway platform. So this train rumbling still some distance down the tunnel, would be it. She had let three trains go by, because there had been other people on the platform who might have tried to stop her. Of course, she might merely be waiting for somebody, but Moran didn't think so. This train would decide that.

The noise swelled to a roar that seemed to fill the whole station, the echoes beating back and forth between the walls.

The girl moved stiffly forward to the edge of the platform, poised there, swaying. Her eyes were turned away from where Moran was hiding, toward

the bend around which the train would speed into the station. Moran stepped from behind the pole, ran toward her.

He caught a glimpse, at that moment, of a man on the other platform of the station across the tracks. Just a quick fleeting glance that he

★ ★ ★

Spud Moran needed a girl for a dangerous job. He had to save one from the grave before she would take the position. But Spud found the only way he could make it worth her while was by standing in front of the murder gun for her.

★ ★ ★

subconsciously noted, of a thin white blob of face set off with huge tortoise-shell glasses, peering from behind a pole. But Moran didn't have time to see much else or think about it.

He came up behind the girl just as she swung back both arms, bent at the knees, and started to hurl herself forward and down under those grinding wheels. He caught one of her back-flung arms, yanked her away from the platform just as the train roared into the station.

She fought like a tigress. She screamed and kicked and clawed at him with her nails. But Moran held her at arm's length with one hand, and with the other snap-whipped his palm back and forth across her face in stinging slaps.

"Stop it!" he yelled over the noise of the subway. "I've got a better way for you to die. What have you got to lose by listening to me? You can always try this again—later!"

She stopped struggling. She stopped screaming and just sobbed. The train came to a halt and people straggled out onto the platform. Moran turned the girl away and pretended that they were just standing there talking.

WHILE he waited for her to get over the weeps, he noted that even close up, her appearance was perfect. Slim and dark, with a bright splash of lips and the large seriousness of her brown eyes the only color in her face, she just fitted the bill for his plan. Even her hair, cascading in rich brown waves from under a slouch felt hat, was just right.

She had stopped crying now, but her breathing was still uneven. She dabbed at her eyes with a soggy ball of handkerchief, gasped: "You had no right to do that, no *right!* It's *my* life!"

"Sure," he told her. "I just want to borrow it for a little while. I just want to—"

The girl's eyes were glazing and she hadn't even heard what he said. She was swaying; her knees were starting to buckle. She was very pale.

"C'mon." He took her arm firmly, holding her erect. "You're hungry—and don't try to kid me. I know the symptoms. I've been that way. But it's nothing a nice healthy meal won't cure."

She tried weakly to wrench away, "Leave me alone," she said sullenly. "I don't want your charity."

Moran laughed and something happened to the ugly ruggedness of his battered face. His eyes,

almost hidden under bulging, ragged black brows, lost their steel color and became a warm, almost gentle blue. His teeth showed strong and white and made the crazy twist of his broken nose hardly noticeable.

"No charity," he told her. "You're going to earn that meal and then some. Just think—steaming soup, a nice juicy rare steak . . ."

That got her. She didn't say anything else. She just went along with him. They came out onto the dark uptown street, started toward a tavern half a block away. Before they had taken several steps, the girl suddenly stopped, jerking Moran to a halt beside her.

"What's the matter?" he said. Then he saw that she was staring at a man crossing from the other side. He was small, spindly, and professorial looking, with a huge beaver hat jammed carelessly askew on his head. His face was thin, very white, and so dominated by huge tortoise-shell glasses that nothing much else about it was distinguishable.

Straight toward Moran and the girl he walked, but he didn't look at them until he was just about to pass. Then he twisted his head at the girl and smiled benignly, showing big yellow horse teeth. He said in a soft boyish treble:

"You broke your promise to us, Janet. You'll be sorry."

The words were spoken in a quiet, almost gently reproachful way, but somehow they struck a chill into Moran's marrow. He stared open-mouthed after the tiny harmless-looking little man as he hurried away. He mumbled:

"Who does he think he's threatening? Why, that—" He started to run after him.

The girl trotted after Moran, grabbed at his sleeve. "Please, don't!" she cried.

"Who is that guy?" Moran demanded. "What is this anyhow? First I saw him hiding on the opposite subway platform, spying on us, and now—"

"I don't know," the girl said woodenly. She was still staring after the pale little fellow with the big glasses. Moran felt that she was lying. "I never saw him before in my life. Some—some screwball, I guess." She tried to smile. She tugged at him. "That steak, let's go."

"Yeah," Moran said. "Some screwball." He shrugged. This girl's personal troubles were none of his. He had his own problems to worry about.

THEY walked on. As they entered the tavern, he said: "He called you Janet. What's the rest of your name?"

"I told you I don't know that man. He was mistaken. That isn't my name. At least—at least I don't think so. You see, I don't know my name. I—I don't remember it."

"I see," Moran said as they sat down at a booth. His eyes swept over her. "Brown eyes, brown hair, brown coat. I think I'll call you Brownie. Me—you can call me Spud. The full name is Cornelius Ambrose Moran. But that handle never seemed to fit very well."

"No," she said and she smiled at him.

A waiter came and took their orders and Moran said: "You wanted to die, didn't you, Brownie?"

She twisted a water glass round and round between her fingers. "No, I didn't *want* to," she answered. "I had to. You see, they—nothing. Look, Spud, what do you want with me?"

"The way you picked was a lousy way. I told you before, I've got a better way for you to go and maybe you won't even have to die. It's a gamble. I don't know what your trouble is, don't want to know. But will money help?"

"How much money?"

"Fifty bucks for a couple of hours work—maybe less time than that."

"Yes," she said. Her eyes lighted a little and she stared at him intently. "Yes, with that much money I could get away—far away."

"That settles it." He took a deep breath. "I wouldn't offer this job to anybody else because it wouldn't be fair. The chances are a hundred to one against you. You'll probably be killed. But you were going to die anyhow. This will be easier. You won't have to take your own life. You won't have that agony of thinking about it, getting up the nerve, knowing when it's coming. And there's the slim chance you might breeze through all right. If so, from then on it's up to you, and maybe the fifty will help."

The waiter brought their steaks and a couple of glasses of beer. Moran said: "Go on and eat. There's nothing much else to talk about. We'll leave as soon as we're finished. I'll give you instructions on the way."

Brownie was really hungry. She practically wolfed the food. Watching her, Moran said: "After this is all over and if you come out all right, whatever your own trouble is, I'd like to help. I

mean if you want me to. If I can,"

She poised a forkful of steak halfway to her mouth. Her eyes got very large. She stared at him a long time. He could almost see the wheels going around in her mind. She was trying to make a decision. Several times she started to speak but didn't. Finally she just said:

"No . . . No, Spud, you—you couldn't help me. Nobody could, I guess."

They finished the steaks and Moran was about to order coffee when the door of the tavern opened. Three men barged in. One was the professorial looking little guy in the beaver hat.

His big horn-rimmed specs focused on their booth. He stabbed a finger at them, piped: "There they are!"

The two men with him started toward the booth. They were twins, the most identical Moran had ever seen. They wore tweed caps and leather windbreakers. Their faces were red and pudgy.

BROWNIE turned around, saw them, and started up out of the booth. All color drained from her face. A tiny pulse beat in her throat. She said: "It—it's Mr. Bunn again—and—and the Rambo twins. They'll kill us. Run, Spud, run!"

Moran reached across the table and grabbed her wrist. He forced her back down onto the bench.

"Let's have this out," he said. "I don't like these interruptions."

The twins were almost up to the booth. They had their hands in the pockets of their windbreakers, and the right pocket of each bulged more than it would if just a fist was inside of it.

"Janet, you come with us," one of the twins said, "We're not trusting you anymore. We're going to make you do what you promised."

Once again the girl started to get up and Moran forced her down. He said: "Do you want to go with them, Brownie? You don't have to, you know."

"Yes—I mean, no," she stammered, "I mean I don't want to, but I do have to. I—"

Moran didn't hear the rest of it. One of the twins put his hand in Moran's face and pushed. Moran's head clacked against the wall of the booth.

"You behave yourself, ugly," the twin said.

The bump on the head didn't hurt Moran, not badly; it didn't knock him out. It made him mad. He stood up. And when he arose he brought the table up with him and pushed it over against the twins, with his weight lying full against it. The

twins went down in a yelling heap, the table on top of them.

Moran leaped up and stepped on a wrist sticking out from under the table. Then he reached down and removed the automatic from that hand. He stuck the gun in his pocket just as the other twin scrambled to his feet. Moran set him up with a gentle shoulder shove, then arced out his right fist. The twin's eyes rolled like a ten cent kewpie doll's and he sagged down to his knees.

Moran looked around. The guy in the beaver, the one Brownie had called Mr. Bunn, was gone. The proprietor of the tavern was standing in the doorway, bellowing, "Police!" at the top of his lungs. The bartender was coming out with a nasty look on his face and a bungstarter in his fat fist. Brownie was leaning against the division between the two booths, stuffing her knuckles into her mouth.

Moran grabbed the girl's hand, whirled toward a door in the back marked Kitchen. "C'mon," he ordered. "The back door for us!"

They piled through the kitchen and Moran straight-armed a startled cook. Then they were outside, racing down an alley that brought them out onto Columbus Avenue.

He flagged a passing cab and they drove away from the spot just as the twins came flashing out of the alley yelling and gesticulating. Moran leaned back against the seat. He sighed.

"Well," he said. "I guess I was wrong. I guess I would like to know something about your little trouble. I mean, what the hell? As I get it, you must have *promised* those guys you'd do a dutch. That doesn't make sense."

Brownie didn't seem to be even listening to him. She was staring out the window. He didn't say any more right away. He watched her fumble a hankie from her purse, dab at her face. Suddenly she turned to him and her brown eyes were swimming. She said:

"You'd better stop the cab and let me out," Her chin started to pucker, but she forced herself into control again a second later. "Thanks for the offer—whatever it was—and thanks for trying to help. But it's no use. I've got to go back. I've got to go through with my bargain."

Moran stared at her. His mouth curled in a little bitter smile. "Okay," he said finally. "Okay, Brownie. It's too bad. I think you might have been able to help me, but then maybe it wouldn't have

worked anyhow."

She reached out impulsively and put one of her hands over his. Her fingers were cold and still trembling a little.

"Thanks, Spud," she said. Her voice was husky, barely audible, "You've been swell. If—if only things were different. . ."

Her eyes dropped quickly down then and she seemed to realize for the first time that she was holding his hand. Color rushed up into her cheeks. She turned her head away quickly, leaned over, and ordered the cab to stop. Just before she got out, Moran touched her arm.

"Just one thing," he said. "No subways! Anything but that."

"All right," she promised solemnly. "No subways."

Then she was out of the cab and walking away along the sidewalk in quick short steps. He watched her enter a drugstore.

"Where to?" It was the cabby.

"Eh?" Moran had been thinking. "Oh—back the way we just came." He gave an address on West 80th St., just off the park.

WHILE he rode, Moran went back over the things that had happened since he'd arrived in the city a few hours before.

The carnival had been in western Pennsylvania when Moran got the urge so badly he couldn't fight it any more. For a long time he'd been telling himself:

"This is a sucker's war, Moran, be smart. Stay out of it as long as you can. You're a barker, not a soldier. With all the other guys going away, this is your chance to clean up. You're in demand. Big dough. Work and save and after awhile you'll be able to buy your own show. That's what you've always wanted."

But it hadn't worked. A guy can't kid *himself*. Not forever. He'd known all along, really, that it was his war, too. He'd known that if *everybody* didn't do his bit, there'd be no more carnivals. Even if there were, there wouldn't be any folks to laugh and play at them.

So the day before, he'd packed off. When his buddy, Johnny Lane, chief roustabout, heard that Moran was going to New York for a final fling before signing up, he'd asked Moran to look up his sister, Elsie.

Johnny had a hunch Elsie was in some kind of a

jam. Her letters the past few weeks had been kind of strange. So Moran was supposed to visit her and see what was what and if he could do anything.

Moran hadn't minded the idea at all. He had known Elsie when she was a young kid and they had all lived in the same neighborhood together. He had seen pictures of her the last few years and she was a honey, slim, dark, and lovely. So Moran hadn't paid much attention to Johnny's fretting about the girl, but had figured it was a good excuse for him to see her and have a companion for his New York kiss-off.

But that had all suddenly, horribly changed when Moran had paid a call to Elsie's room earlier this evening. He had found her in. But she was dead—murdered.

The cab stopped in front of a brownstone rooming house and Moran paid off the driver. Once again he walked through the dingy vestibule, up a flight of creaky old stairs covered with worn, ugly green carpet, and stopped in front of Elsie Lane's room. Only this time he didn't knock.

He stood close to the door and listened. But there was no sound from the inside. Down the hall a radio blared in another room. Upstairs, a bathroom tenor was bellowing, *In Der Fuehrer's Face*.

Taking a deep breath, Moran palmed the knob, pushed the door of the room open, and stepped in. His fingers found the wall switch, snicked it on. And then he didn't move. He stood there frozen, like a kid playing statues.

Elsie's corpse, which had been sprawled in the center of the floor with a nail file buried to the hilt in its back, was gone.

MORAN closed his eyes and his lips became thin, pale lines. When he opened his eyes again, he walked over to the place where the girl's dead body had been, looked down. There wasn't even a trace of blood on the worn scatter rug. He remembered then that there hadn't been much blood since the weapon had not been withdrawn from the wound.

He bent down and looked under the bed just to make sure. But the corpse had not been hidden there. Then Moran pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and read it once more.

It was a half-finished letter in a woman's small fancy hand.

When he had come to the room earlier in the

evening and discovered the body, Moran had found the letter. Elsie Lane had been writing it just before she died. It said:

Dear Brother Johnny:

You've got to wire me train fare to get out to you right away. I'm in bad trouble, Johnny. Two weeks ago, down at the *El Toro*, the night club where I work as a hatcheck girl, I accidentally witnessed a murder. They've been paying me to keep quiet about it, Johnny, and I've been so scared I had to play along. But I can't any longer. It's been driving me crazy. I haven't been able to sleep or eat. I feel ill all the time. And Johnny, I think they knew that I'm breaking, that I won't be able to keep it up much longer; I think they're planning to kill me, so—

The letter ended at that point and there was a big blot of ink on the paper.

Moran had left right after reading the letter to go down to the *El Toro* to see what he could do about finding the killer. And he had to do something about it. Johnny Lane had been Moran's lifelong pal, closer than a brother, almost. If it had been his sister, he'd have wanted Johnny to do something.

It was after he'd left here, in the nearby subway station, that he'd busted up Brownie's suicide act. He had spotted her right away. Because of her intentions and because she resembled the pictures he'd seen of Elsie in a general sort of way, Moran had gotten his idea.

He planned to take Brownie back up here to Elsie's room, let her put on some of the dead girl's clothes. Then he would take her down to the *El Toro*. They'd pick out a dark corner where the impersonation wouldn't have to stand too close a scrutiny. Moran figured that the killer was most likely connected in some way with the night club, that when he saw what he thought was the murdered girl sitting there alive and well, he'd make some move to give himself away.

But the plan had fallen through. Brownie hadn't wanted to play. She'd had some deadly little game of her own to figure out. So here he was back in the room. He'd returned, figuring that perhaps there was some clue among Elsie's things that he had overlooked in his shock and hurry on the first visit. And now the dead girl was gone.

Moran walked over toward the window, the letter dangling from his fingers. He stood there looking out onto the dark street, thinking, trying to figure something out. He saw the girl come hurrying along the sidewalk through the glow of a street lamp. He saw the brown hat and the brown coat and recognized something familiar about her quick pert stride. But not until she turned up the steps of the rooming house, did he fully realize that it was Brownie.

At first he didn't get it. It didn't mean a thing. And then a storm of ideas broke in his mind. He realized now that it was not coincidence that Brownie had picked that particular subway station to try her suicide act. He became half-aware of a lot of other connecting things also.

HE TURNED from the window, wheeled toward the door, stepped out into a hall. He hid behind a huge grandfather clock just as Brownie came running up onto the second floor. He watched her enter the room he had just left. He heard her gasp of surprise, then he watched her back slowly out as though some invisible hand was pushing her. He saw the bewildered terror on her pale face.

Brownie quietly shut the door of the dead Elsie Lane's room again and moved down the hall to the next room. There she fitted a key into the lock and went in.

Moran came out of his hiding place and rushed toward the stairs. He went down two at a time, on tip-toe, as quietly as he could. Feverishly he thumbed through the hall phone directory. Then he dialed the number of the *El Toro* night club.

He said: "I'd like to speak to Mr. Bunn."

"Sorry," the voice at the other end said. "He won't be in tonight. At least we don't expect him. Mr. Bunn's home, ill."

"I see." Moran tried to speak casually. "Just what connection does Mr. Bunn have with your place anyhow? Is he the owner?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Bunn is the manager here. Say, who is this? Is there any message. This is Jensen, the assistant—"

Moran never got Jensen's title. He hung up. Now he had a little more of it. He climbed quickly back upstairs to the second floor. He walked toward the room Brownie had entered, reached up a hand to knock. He caught the movement.

A voice inside, a quiet, almost timid little male

voice was saying: "Go on, Janet. Don't be afraid. It won't hurt. You'll never even know what happened. It's really much better than the subway. Go ahead, honey, we want to watch and make sure you keep your promise this time."

Moran didn't know whether the door was locked or not. He didn't have time to stop. He stepped back, hunched up one shoulder and hurled himself against the door, a hundred and eighty pound catapult. The wood around the lock splintered and the door shuddered in.

A strange scene was being enacted in the little furnished room. Brownie was standing in the center, ghostly white, the frightened brown of her eyes filling her whole face. She held a small caliber pistol at her temple. Perched on the edge of the bed, his big yellow teeth showing in a simpering grin, peering owlishly through his horn-rimmed glasses, sat Mr. Bunn.

Brownie jumped and dropped the gun when Moran crashed in. Mr. Bunn came up off the bed like a funny looking little jack-in-the-box. One of the Rambo twins started up from a chair where he had been sitting, watching the drama.

Before any of them knew what it was all about, Moran reached the pistol Brownie had dropped, scooped it up. He swept it around, covering them all. He gave Brownie a little crooked grin.

"Why didn't you tell me we were both mixed up in the same thing, kid! That the killer I was after and the one you had bargained with, were the same?"

"I—I didn't know," she stammered. Her eyes were dazed. "I didn't—"

"Of course not," Moran said. He rubbed the back of his hand against his broken nose. "What was it, Brownie? Did these birds frame you for killing Elsie?"

She nodded and Moran stepped toward a small private bath to his right. He looked in and saw the body of the dead girl sprawled in there. They had moved the corpse in here to tighten the frame on Brownie. Then he looked toward a bureau in the room, saw that the nail file which had killed Elsie, was part of the set there.

THAT was all Moran was able to take in right then. Something thick and heavy as a log crashed down numbingly on his gun arm. The pistol clattered to the floor. Moran instinctively hunched his shoulders as a blow rocked against the

back of his seek, knocked him sprawling across the room. He slammed against the wall, slid down to a heap on the floor.

He got up on his hands and knees, his head hanging down. He shook it, cleared some of the dynamo noise from his ears, and the spinning pinwheels of lights from in front of his eyes.

What a jack, he thought dizzily. *I forgot the other twin. He must have been standing by the door, was hidden by it when I smashed it open.*

He lifted his head just in time to see the Rambo brother who had slugged him, big and murderous-looking in his windbreaker and tweed cap, leveling an automatic at him.

"That's right!" Mr. Bunn was screaming. "Give it to him, Lonny! You, Joel, shoot the girl. Quickly! Then we'll leave the guns here, beat it and the cops'll figure it as a triangle killing!"

Lonny Rambo poured three shots from the automatic. The bullets chugged into the wall over Moran as he dropped flat on his stomach and started to roll. His hand dug into his pocket and brought out the gun he had taken from one of the twins in the tavern, earlier that evening.

His first shot caught Lonny Rambo in the shoulder, half spun him around. The next one plowed into his thigh and he collapsed like a puppet with the strings cut.

Moran didn't have time to swing the gun and fire again before the other twin was on him. They went crashing backwards on the floor. Big fists lashed into Moran's face, but he hardly seemed to feel the blows. He worked one foot up and planted it in the middle of Joel's stomach. He pushed up. Joel Rambo whooshed out his breath and sat back hard on the floor, his beefy face purple.

When Moran stood up, he brought his fist with him. It slammed into Joel Rambo's chin and smacked him over flat on his back.

Brownie and Mr. Bunn were struggling for the pistol when Moran got to his feet. He went halfway across the room in a flying dive. His arms clenched around Bunn's spindly legs and lifted. The little man came down on the back of his head. His tortoise-shell specs flew off in a shower of broken glass. Mr. Bunn didn't move.

Smearing blood from his face with the back of one hand, Moran looked at Brownie. She was standing stiff as stone, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Like a child reciting something it has learned but doesn't understand, she said weakly:

"Look, I didn't kill her, Spud. Honest! This is my room, but I'm not with these men, I'm Janet Reed, Elsie's friend. They—"

Moran saw her brown eyes close. He saw her start to sway. He went over quickly and put his arms around her, steadied her. "You poor kid," he said. "Poor little Brownie."

She began to cry, but this time clean and hard, cleaning all the nervous terror out of her. Moran helped her over to the bed, eased her down. Then he wheeled on the several gaping roomers standing in the doorway.

"Don't stand there," he ordered. "One of you go call the police."

No one moved, but it was all right. A policeman entered a few minutes later, with a worried, frightened-looking landlady.

IT DIDN'T take too long to clear up. Moran had already figured out part of it and Brownie filled in the rest, her part. She told the police that not only were she and Elsie friends, living in adjoining rooms, but that she worked in the *El Toro*, too, as a cigarette girl. A few days before, Elsie had told Brownie of her trouble. Brownie had advised her to go to the police with the whole story, but Elsie had been too afraid.

Then tonight, Brownie explained, a telegram had come to the night club for Elsie. Brownie, knowing Elsie wasn't due to come to work until later, had taken the wire for her friend. It had been from her brother, telling Elsie that a friend was coming to see her—meaning Spud—and that he was to be trusted and would help her out of any trouble she might be in.

But then Mr. Bunn had demanded to see the telegram, read it, and said that he would see that Elsie got it. Brownie then saw Mr. Bunn leave a few minutes later. Knowing of Elsie's trouble and afraid that Bunn might be up to something, Brownie followed him.

At this point in her explanation, Moran interrupted: "I see. You must have busted in just as Bunn was murdering Elsie. So then he had to get rid of you, too. But what was that business of making you commit suicide?"

Brownie shuddered and closed her eyes. She passed her hand slowly across her forehead. "As soon as I entered the room—why—I—I guess one of the twins must have been behind the door and he walloped me over the head with something.

When—when I came to, I must have been suffering from shock—or perhaps a slight temporary concussion. Anyhow I couldn't seem to remember very much or what any of it was about.

“Bunn, realizing this, gave me a cock-and-bull yarn about Elsie and I having had a terrible battle down at the club. He said that he and the twins had arrived just in time to see me stab Elsie with the nail file. In my dazed condition of the moment, I—why—I guess I believed them. You see, everything was so foggy, and I couldn't remember, and there I was with the corpse, and it was my nail file and all. I—I—”

She had to stop. Just remembering, telling about it, was getting her. But in a few moments she was able to go on: “Then I started pleading with Mr. Bunn not to turn me over to the police. My mother, back home, is old and very sick. I knew the shock of me being arrested and going through a trial and all that, would finish her. And since I would probably get the electric chair anyhow, I begged Bunn to let me take my own life instead. He agreed.

“I thought that if I didn't have any identification on me, and if my body was destroyed beyond recognition under a subway train, the folks back home would never know what really happened. I would die an anonymous death.”

“That probably suited Bunn fine,” Moran said. “I suppose, if you had done that, he would then have seen to it that the police did identify you. And having already made it look as if you filled Elsie,

they'd think you committed suicide in remorse.”

“But when you interfered there in the station,” Brownie continued, “It sort of snapped me out of it. I began to remember things, then. When I left you, I decided to come back and see if I could destroy the evidence that they had planted against me, before the police arrived.”

All this time other police had been questioning the Rambo twins, and they had admitted that they were just strong-arm guys who assisted Bunn in a blackmail racket he had been working at the *El Toro*. They told the police that the man Elsie Lane had seen Bunn kill at the club after hours was one of their victims who was threatening to rebel.

They also said that the telegram about Moran coming to see Elsie had brought things to a head. Bunn, seeing that, wanted Elsie out of the way before help for her arrived.

An hour later, over a cup of diner coffee, Moran said to Brownie: “You any good at writing letters?”

“Well,” she said, “I *can* write them. Why?”

“I want you to help me cook up one to send to a guy—a friend of mine. Elsie's brother, Johnny. I—I want it to be just right. You know . . .”

She hooked her arm through his. “I understand, Spud,” she told him.

“After that,” he managed a slight grin. “We've got a lot of town to paint red. Maybe it'll help us to forget a little.”

He didn't tell her about his big date with Uncle Sam. He'd leave that until later when they were alone.