



Sara aimed at his hand and pulled the trigger of the .32

# A Problem *in* Plates

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

*Sara Landis' interest in a stranger attending a theater's dish night program leads her into an odd pattern of peril!*

**S**ARA LANDIS first noticed the big fellow because, like herself, he was left-handed. Sitting in the cashier's booth of the Bijou night after night, she had come to think of people entirely in terms of hands.

There were toil-worn homemakers' hands, grease-stained factory hands with

broken nails, typists' hands with short nails, grimy children's hands, brisk, efficient hands, fumbling, awkward hands.

The big fellow's hands, beyond the fact that he used the left to rake in his silver, failed to fit into any of Sara's categories. They were strong but without the calluses of manual labor, well-

groomed without being soft.

Every week for a month now, they'd appeared at her window on dish night. Yet, never had their owner come out with a plate.

Lifting her dark eyes briefly, she looked up at him, found to her dismay that he was staring at her with unexpected intensity.

"Why don't you sign up for some dishes?" she asked to cover her embarrassment. "In a hundred and four weeks, you get a full set for twelve."

Sara had been on this job long enough to have outgrown embarrassment. Her triangular little face with its burnished dark bangs was pretty enough to draw all the routine proposals and propositions a good-looking girl in her quasi-exposed position was bound to receive.

So, being confused, annoyed her. But the big fellow was good looking—or was he?

She risked another look, found him still staring at her as he pocketed his change.

No, he wasn't handsome. His nose wandered slightly to the left side of his face, his jaw was too square. Yet, he was attractive.

"Sorry," he said, and his voice had authority even while speaking trivia. "I missed out on the first few. And a hundred and four weeks is a bit like one of those Hollywood contracts—without options."

"Oh," said Sara, vaguely disappointed.

**T**HE big fellow gave her a faint half-grin and went on inside. She forgot about him in the rush of selling tickets for the late show, except for an occasional wistful moment of wonder as to why fellows like him were never the ones who made proposals.

A Hedy Lamarr super duper and a Buck Jones western, a bill nicely

calculated to bracket the tastes of the Bijou audience, were getting quite a play.

It didn't make sense that Jim Manning, the manager, should be putting up dishes for sale this week. But once the dish thing started, she supposed, there was no letting up. And it did help tide over weeks with poor pictures.

Tonight, they were handing out dessert plates—filler for the soup, butter and main-course plates that had been or were to be doled out in installments.

Jim had them attractively wrapped and the housewives or housewives-to-be snapped them up eagerly.

Things eased off after nine-fifteen, and Jim Manning came out to collect the take and count it in his office.

He was humming "Just Plain Lonesome." That meant business was good. Jim always hummed when things were humming. When they weren't he worried about the progress of the war.

"We've got another hot week," he said, giving Sara a wink. "If things hold up for another month, sugar, you can hit me for a raise."

"Will you give it to me?" asked Sara.

"That," said Jim cheerfully, "is a horse of a different color."

Chuckling, he left her, carrying the cash box under his arm. Jim was always chuckling even when things were bad.

Sometimes she felt he didn't take his job as theater manager, even of a spot like the Bijou, seriously enough. Those dishes were an example of that.

From what little Sara knew of the deal, they seemed to cost more than the trade they brought in.

That, however was Jim's headache so Sara promptly forgot about the matter and sat in her booth, waiting to take care of late-comers. She didn't close up until eleven, when the last picture began. It was her first job in the city, and she took it

pretty seriously.

She was sitting there, mooning about the big fellow and weighing the delightful possibility of Jim Manning having meant what he'd said about a raise, when the first subject of her reverie came walking out of the lobby.

Unconsciously, she checked her hair to make sure every curl was in its proper place. But he strode right past her without even so much as a glance.

She shrugged slim shoulders, ruefully examined the torn fingernail on her left forefinger. While washing stockings in the wash basin the night before, she'd caught the nail on the edge of the basin and ripped it.

"Just when I had them all perfectly even, too!" she sighed to herself. Then, "Darn him, anyway. He could at least have looked at me after the going over he gave me when he bought his ticket tonight."

**B**UT the big fellow was hurrying across the street. There, in the shadows cast by a dimmed-out street lamp in the angle of a store front, he conferred with a couple of other men.

Sara watched him, idly curious, only half registering what she saw. Then, suddenly, she sat up straight, fully alert.

The big fellow was recrossing the street alone. The other two men had disappeared like the shadows they'd talked in. Furthermore, the big fellow wasn't returning to see the rest of the show.

Instead, striding rapidly and taking full advantage of the dimout, he was moving with definite purpose toward the side door that led to the Bijou basement.

By leaning forward in the booth, Sara could just keep him in her range of vision. He was bent over, working with the lock of the door. A faint click sounded in her ears, and the door swung halfway open. The big fellow slipped inside then and

pulled it to after him.

The girl had never been in the basement. Jim Manning kept discarded display posters and billboards and his supply of dishes down there.

Sara wondered why the big fellow had broken in, what he hoped to find down there. The idea of his wanting to steal the dishes was absurd on the face of it. They were strictly of the five-and-ten variety.

Then she remembered something else, and it didn't seem silly any more. There was a stairway in the basement which led to Jim's office off the lobby.

Jim would be in there now with the cash receipts, counting them before making up his nightly statement. He'd consider himself safe from intrusion with the other door locked, and would be easy meat for a stick-up artist coming by that route.

Quickly she picked up the telephone, pressed the buzzer that would connect her with Jim Manning's office, pressed it again and again. There was no answer.

What she did then was a matter of reflex action, not thought. Had she stopped to weigh things, she'd have been too afraid to move. But she moved fast.

She picked up the .32 automatic pistol Jim kept for her on a shelf under the ticket counter. The Bijou was in a rather tough district, and at times there was enough cash in the till to tempt the local hoodlums. Slamming the board into place across the front of the booth, she slipped out and went toward the basement door down the street.

"He's not getting away with this!" she told herself grimly, her nerves humming with tension, all thought of romance fading from her mind.

She had visions of her raise disappearing before her eyes if the night's receipts were stolen.

Although she was slim and pretty and

far from muscular, Sara packed her full share of feminine determination. In addition, she had spent considerable time at pistol ranges learning how to use the gun.

The basement door was not locked now. She entered quietly, hesitated while her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness within. She was at the top of a steep iron stairway. There was another door at the foot, a door faintly rimmed with light which was either very dim or came from some distance beyond.

**P**USHING the door gently, she shoved it open and went inside. Abruptly, then, she was scared, and her breathing became ragged and shallow.

All around her were strange men, in cowboy outfits, in burnouses, in war paint and loin cloths, in soldiers' uniforms with guns. A cloaked figure with a dripping dagger menaced her.

She fought a giggle of nervous relief as she realized these figures were merely discarded display signs that had done their term of duty in the lobby upstairs. Then, from a half-closed doorway beyond, from which the light stemmed, she heard the sound of voices. Moving closer, she recognized Jim's.

"This is it," she heard the manager say. "It should suit even you, *Herr Schmidt*. We have an entirely legitimate front for ourselves and a means of passing it so slick that it will never be detected. It's smooth, what?"

"It's smooth, all right," said a deep voice with the overtones of the big fellow. She felt a shiver run up and down her dorsal vertebra. "How about it, Manning? Still no objections to helping the enemies of America?"

"Not since the government led us into war foolishly," said Manning. "I'm no Nazi, mind you, *Herr Schmidt*. I simply

can't stomach the fools that are running things in this country today. If I can help get them out of power and make a buck for myself printing this stuff, it's okay with me."

"We understand," said the big fellow. "You are, in effect, a collaborationist. That is enough for us. When we take hold of things here, you will not be forgotten. We do not forget our obligations to those who do dangerous work for our cause, whatever their reason."

"Now," said Manning—she could tell by his voice that he was grinning—"you're talking my pidgin. Excuse me a moment while I get the records. You can see for yourself what we've done here since we got things going. It's not bad."

Sara heard the scrape of chair legs on concrete, then the quick sounds of receding footsteps. Horrified at what she'd just heard, the girl pushed the door open a few inches and peered within.

The big fellow was lounging against a long carpenter's table, diagonally across the room from her. Seated behind it was a blond, tough-looking man she didn't recognize—or did she?

Beneath and around him on the board surface were thousands of pieces of green paper money, some in packages, some loose. More treasury notes had spilled over from an open strong-box at his elbow.

As she looked, she saw his hands flip over some of the bills, pick one up to show it to the big fellow. She saw the scar along the base of the man's thumb, spotted him as another dish-night regular. He held the bill so that the big fellow had to bend over to look at it.

"Excellent," said the latter. "It would fool me. Whoever made these plates was a genius."

"But evidently not quite enough of a genius for the job," said the man with the scar on his thumb.

He moved swiftly then, rising to reveal his great height as he flipped back the big fellow's coat, revealing a silver badge.

**B**EFORE the big fellow could stop him, the man with the scar on his thumb had pulled a pistol from his captive's shoulder, lifted it coolly and dropped him like a log with a terrific blow behind the ear. Without expression, he resumed his place at the table, laying the gun on the board surface.

Fighting the fear inside her, yet curiously happy in the knowledge that she hadn't misread the big fellow, Sara took quick stock of the situation.

Almost at her elbow, against the near wall, was an elaborate device with a roller that was evidently a printing press.

It had pressure screws, a long-handled windlass for obtaining better purchase to roll the plates through under heavy pressure. And on the plates were sheets of paper partially printed with reproductions of Uncle Sam's honest currency.

It was now or never. When Jim Manning returned with whatever he'd gone to get for the big fellow, the odds would be too great. At the moment, the man with the scar on his thumb was perusing one of the counterfeit bills, scowling as he endeavored to find the flaw in it.

After taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly to quiet her fluttering nerves, Sara stepped inside, brave in her scarlet smock, the pistol steady in her hand.

"Put up your hands, Nazi," she said quietly.

She couldn't have lifted her voice had she wanted to. Something was pushing her diaphragm up against her larynx, and it was almost impossible to talk above a whisper.

Startled, the man looked up at her. His

mouth opened, closed again. To her dismay, he made no motion to obey her. Instead, his hand strayed toward the pistol before him.

"You are a very unfortunate young lady," he said slowly.

"Put them up!" she snapped.

His eyes flickered from hers, looked past her shoulder as if at someone in back of her. She smiled mockingly. That was the oldest gag in the world.

She knew this man was dangerous, knew he'd really go for his own weapon the moment her attention was drawn away from him. She wasn't having any, thank you.

Then, to Sara's horror and amazement, he went for his pistol anyway. The fool must have thought she didn't mean it.

Frowning with determination, she aimed at his hand and pulled the trigger of the .32. She felt it buck, saw blood spurt insanely from mangled fingers. Then something fell heavily against her, knocking her off balance and sending her spinning to the wall.

Whirling, half-sobbing, she turned, saw that what she'd supposed to be a gag had been stark truth.

Jim Manning, coatless and with his collar open, was thrashing desperately in the grip of the big fellow, who seemed to have recovered in time to stop the theater manager from slugging her with the butt of his gun.

The man with the scar on his thumb, swearing monotonously in alien accents with his mashed and bleeding hand hanging useless at his side, was trying awkwardly to pick up the weapon with his other hand.

"Cut it out and put them up," she said.

**L**OOKING at her with hatred in his eyes, he obeyed slowly. Manning saw her then, saw her pistol pointed at his head

as he was about to bring the butt down on the big fellow's skull.

"Don't shoot again!" he yelled.

"Fire twice," directed the big fellow, gasping for breath.

Sara obeyed, and a moment later, the basement was filled with uniformed policemen and plainclothesmen. A physician was summoned, and he bandaged the counterfeiter's hand after examining the pigeon's egg that had arisen behind the big fellow's ear.

The would-be Nazis were led away to prison.

"Who are you?" Sara asked when the big fellow finally finished giving the others the facts.

**H**E GRINNED, snapped some orders at a couple of policemen who were carrying the printing press from the basement.

"I'm Clark Armour," he said. "Treasury Department. And thanks for saving my skull—or what's left of it."

"I thought for a moment you were one of them," she said.

"Thanks again. I was supposed to look like one. But I don't have enough ham in me or something. These chaps got wise. If you hadn't put your oar in, they might have gotten the place cleared up before we could pin any proof on their filthy hides.

"It's the biggest counterfeit haul we've made since the war began. Manning was passing the money out via the free dish route to half a dozen key members of his little group.

"These persons—and most of them were misguided women—then handed it out to the passers, who were doing their bit to discredit American money. He didn't

think he had a chance of being caught. At that, it was neat."

"Very neat," she said. "How in the world did you figure it out?"

"The hard way—sweat and shoe leather," he told her. "When a phony bill was turned in, we tried to trace it back to its source. Finally we got as high as a couple of the key people. That brought the theater under suspicion. But we couldn't figure out how it was done. We knew you weren't passing it."

"I should say not," said the girl indignantly. "Why listen, I'd never—"

"We found that out, Sara," said the Treasury man. "So we checked up on Manning, found he was a rabid isolationist before Pearl Harbor who hadn't changed his views. We looked deeper. Then we got a tip from the other end, that he was in touch with Axis agents.

"Finally, we figured out the dishes by watching the key people we knew. I impersonated one of the high muck-a-mucks Manning had never seen, and he exposed himself willingly. Unfortunately, so did I."

"Gosh!" said the girl unhappily. "Am I dumb!"

"Not for my money," said Armour. "Come on. I'll give you a ride home."

He took her to her boarding house in a cab. His arm felt strong and safe and exciting around her shoulders. As they stopped at the curb, she sat upright.

"See here, Mister," she said, "you lost me my job."

He looked at her. It was a lot like the look he'd given her while she was in the booth, only more so. He smiled.

"I wouldn't worry about it," he said.