



The gunnie staggered, fell back into the water

SLAY, FIDDLE, SLAY

By H. C. BUTLER

When Jimmy Keith heard the sonata of death played to the tune of smoky murder, he plunged into some rapid action!

WITH me, things always happen at the wrong time. It was one of those hot, sultry nights when even the soft breeze coming in from the lake felt like the breath from an open oven. I'd just settled down in Casey's Bar, with a cool glass of beer for company, when things began to pop.

Sitting at a table near the entrance, I could look out and see the bulky building that housed the Grant City News offices

across the street. I noticed there was a single light burning in the building—in the office of Preston Hall, the city editor. I wondered briefly why the old boy was working so late. Then my attention was caught by a man hurrying diagonally across the street into the yawning doorway of the News Building.

I knew him. Ted Ryan, a twenty-one year old reporter, new on the sheet. A swell kid, still green as grass, he had been

handling some of the simpler assignments. I sat there a few minutes, guzzling beer, and wondering vaguely why Ryan was haunting the News office at this time of night.

Then I heard the shot!

It wasn't very loud, but it was unmistakably a shot. I acted spontaneously. Before I knew it, I was on my feet, headed toward the News Building. As I crossed the street, the second shot came!

That was enough to really start me rolling. I roared into the revolving doors, whirled my way through. I took the two flights of stairs at the double-quick, then barged into the newsroom. Threading my way through deserted desks, chairs, and typewriter stands, I bee-lined for the lighted office of Preston Hall, the city editor. What I saw when I got to the door stopped me in my tracks.

Ted Ryan was crumpled on the floor, just inside the doorway. A pool of blood was already forming on the carpeted floor.

"Keith! Thank God!"

The words snapped me out of it. I tore my eyes away from the body on the floor, and saw Preston Hall sitting in a chair, hugging his right leg. Blood was oozing through his pants, from a flesh wound in his thigh.

I stood there a few seconds, gaping at him. Preston Hall was crowding seventy, and looked it. Thin, angular, he had a long wrinkled face starting wide at the cheek bones and tapering down to form a weak, pointed chin. His round head was bald, and his watery eyes blinked near-sightedly behind thick spectacles. He had a habit of tilting his head slightly to the left, much in the manner of a robin regarding a nice fresh worm. Even now, while he contemplated the wound in his leg, his head was set at an angle.

I grabbed some first aid stuff and went

to work. When I had him reasonably comfortable, I said:

"Tell me what happened."

Old man Hall drew in a wheezing, asthmatic breath. His bony hand started to tremble violently, and his myopic eyes stared.

"It—it was awful! He was, he was just—" His teeth chattered and he broke off helplessly.

I COULD see the old boy's nerves were pretty badly shot. I jumped him hard, trying to snap him out of it.

"Quit blubbing!" I rapped at him. "The killer's probably taking it on the lam while you're making double-talk."

He calmed down a little, and after a long pause started to speak, rapidly, like he wanted to get it over with.

"I—I was working late," he said. "All evening there'd been noises in the building, like somebody was lurking in the halls. Then, a few minutes ago, Ryan came in. He—he looked excited."

"Go on," I prodded.

"Well, he got as far as my office door, but he didn't get a chance to say anything. I saw a man come into the newsroom behind him. A masked man. Then there were two shots. The first one hit my leg, and the second got poor Ryan." He stopped, shuddered.

I looked at Ryan's body again. It looked like somebody had been lurking in the News Building, waiting for him to show up. But who? And what motive was there for the murder?

"What was Ryan working on? A dangerous story, maybe?" I asked.

Hall's head assumed the tilted angle again, his chin tucked down in the curve of his neck. He blinked rapidly several times.

"No—nothing like that." He sputtered. "The boy was just breaking in. I've been handing him the easy stuff." He was

shaking his head as he talked. Then, suddenly, his bleary eyes bulged.

“What now?” I asked.

“I just thought of something.” The lines in Hall’s face seemed to grow deeper. “Ryan was hounding me yesterday to give him a more important assignment. I started kidding him, told him to go out and break the marijuana case for me. Do you suppose—”

He left the sentence unfinished. But I knew what he was thinking. Could it be possible that Ryan had stumbled on the solution to Grant City’s marijuana problem? If so, he’d broken the hottest news in town.

Recently, there’d been a great influx of marijuana into Grant City. In fact, the stuff had seeped into a lot of other cities too, but Grant City seemed to be the hot-bed. Where it was coming from nobody knew, but it was turning up in the hands of high school kids and was becoming a menace.

Of course, the police were busy and had already arrested a few peddlers, but that didn’t help much. None of the peddlers knew, or would tell, where the stuff was coming from. And while the cops ran up blind alleys, the reefer-racket kept flourishing.

The Grant City News had joined a crusade with other papers to combat the evil. It ran daily editorials, warning of the effects of marijuana, describing the marijuana plants, heckling the police because they’d failed to stamp out the menace. But it all added up to zero.

I kept looking at Ryan’s crumpled form. Finally, I crouched down, examined it carefully, and noticed two startling things. Ryan’s trousers and shoes were wet, while the upper part of his body was dry. And on the soles of his shoes were traces of sawdust. I called Hall’s attention to both these facts.

“Any ideas about it?” I asked.

“I can’t imagine—” Hall shook his head dubiously.

“He must have been wading in Grant Lake,” I said. “Maybe he was in a boat that capsized, and had to wade ashore. As for the sawdust, I don’t get it.”

I stood up, gave a quick look-see around the room. In the far wall, opposite the door, I spotted a tiny hole near the baseboard. I figured at once the bullet that had grazed Hall’s leg, taking a downward course, had buried itself there. I couldn’t find the hole made by the second bullet, which had gone through Ryan’s body, so I let it go at that. After all, finding the slug was a job for the cops.

I turned to the door.

“You’d better call the police, Hall,” I said. “Meanwhile, I’m going on a prowl of my own.”

Hall just stared a minute, the light glinting on his thick spectacles. Then he nodded his round head.

“Yes—of course.”

I glanced at the clock on his desk, saw it was ten minutes to midnight. As I walked to the door, Hall, his head cocked, dialed Police Headquarters.

I didn’t know where I was going, exactly, but I was on my way. From the News Building it was only a few blocks through the main stem to the lake, so I headed in that direction.

Grant City had been a resort town for years, but after Pearl Harbor a few small industries moved in and the town mushroomed. Enlarged and swollen, it now sprawled ungracefully along the shore of Grant Lake, one of the biggest in the state. War had made the town a boom community.

I hit the main drag, walked through the center of town. As I drew close to the brilliant sign of the Grant Theatre, I noticed the last show was just letting out. Snaking my way through the crowd, I

almost collided with a man and girl, strolling arm in arm. The girl I knew.

“Hi, Cassie,” I said.

CASSIE MARTIN was the kind of gal you look at more than once. She had auburn hair and a baby face, and her dark, sparkling eyes seemed to reflect the color of her hair. As for the rest of her, she came as close to being a Varga girl as I’ve seen in real life.

Me, I had no claim on her. For one thing, I was too old for her, and for another, she’d been keen on Ted Ryan ever since they’d gone to high school together. In fact, that’s what made it tough—I was going to have to tell her about Ted’s death.

“Hello, Jimmy.” She said, “I want you to meet my brother, Lou. He just got into town. Lou, this is Jimmy Keith.”

I’d heard about Cassie’s brother, but I’d never met him. He was a big six-footer, all muscle and bone, with blond hair and a quick, ready smile. He shook hands in bone-crusher fashion, with me on the receiving end. Then I turned to Cassie. In the best way I knew how, I told her about Ted.

I don’t think she understood at first. Then, as it drove into her consciousness, her eyes widened in horror.

“Oh, no! Not Ted!” Her voice was frantic, pleading.

I nodded. I didn’t know what else to say. Finally, Cassie shook her head.

“I—I can’t believe it. He was so—so good.”

I glanced at Lou Martin. His smile had vanished. His jaw was set, his lips in a horizontal line.

“If there’s anything I can do—” he offered.

“I’ll call on you, if there is,” I said. Then I turned back to Cassie. “It’s tough, Cassie, but you’ll have to take it.”

“Yes,” said Lou softly. “It’ll hurt for awhile. But in the long run it might be for the best. Being married to a reporter was no future for you, Cassie.”

I could have slugged him. I saw Cassie shoot him a quick glance, then bury her face in a tiny handkerchief. I wanted to ask him why the crack, but I didn’t. Instead, I spoke to Cassie again.

“Can you answer a few questions?” I asked.

Lou gave me a funny look, took a step forward that was full of aggression.

“Who are you—a cop?” He said, his voice hard.

“I happen to be Cassie’s friend,” I told him. “Mind if I try to help?”

He backed up then, shrugged. Cassie calmed the ruffled waters.

“What do you want to know, Jimmy?”

I told her the theory that was knocking around in my mind. How Ryan might have stumbled on something hot—possibly the truth behind the marijuana racket. And how someone had killed him to seal his lips.

“I know he was close to you, Cassie,” I said. “Have you seen him lately? Did he tell you anything that might give us a lead?”

The girl shook her head miserably.

“I’m afraid not. Ted seldom talked about his work.” She stopped, hesitated. Then a puzzled frown puckered her brow. “I saw him at dinner tonight,” she went on, “and he did say a strange thing.”

“What?”

“He said he wanted to rent a boat.”

“A boat!” That was a shocker.

“Yes. He mentioned Chuck Wiggins’ boat rental on Gray Street.”

“Did he say why he wanted to rent a boat?”

“He said he wanted to go fishing.”

I grinned for the first time that night. I knew Ryan was no fisherman. He’d told

me how he despised the sport. So it seemed fairly certain that if Ryan had found it necessary to take a boat out on Grant Lake, he was on the trail of something. It was beginning to add up.

I looked at Cassie.

“Go home and sit tight,” I said. “The killer might have the same idea I had—that Ted told you what he knew. If so, he’s liable to try some monkeyshines. You’d better keep an eye on her, Lou,” I added. “Just in case.”

“I can take care of her,” he said.

From that minute on, I didn’t waste time. I headed straight down Gray Street for Chuck Wiggins’ boat rental. As I walked, my mind began to percolate again. There was no longer any doubt that Ryan had been on the lake tonight. The question was, where had he gone? Across? Not likely. There was a road around the lake and Ryan had a car. That left only one answer. Boulder Island.

Boulder Island had been a mystery to Grant City-ites for years. Situated in the middle of the lake, it was seldom visited by anyone, for around its shoreline, were boulders and jagged rocks which made it extremely difficult to land small craft. People had been on it, of course, but for the most part it was shunned as inaccessible. But it was the one place on Grant Lake that could be reached only by boat—which made me suspicious.

GRAY Street was a rundown affair, bisecting an old neighborhood. Walking down the narrow, unlighted street, I passed a lot of dirty, ill-kept shops—grocers, barbers, hardware stores, even a few small businesses.

One place in particular caught my eye. It was a dingy, frame building looking like it was on its last legs. There were two large plate glass windows in front, covered with grime. Inside the windows were

several cheap-looking violins. A battered sign announced the place as the Nero Violin Company.

But I didn’t have time for violins. I passed on, quickened my pace until I came to the edge of the lake and found Chuck Wiggins’ boat rental. Luckily, Wiggins was still up, sitting in front of his shack, smoking a pipe.

“Did a guy named Ryan rent a boat from you this evening?” I asked.

Wiggins took the pipe from his mouth.

“Sure did. And came back soakin’ wet. Said he had trouble landing the boat.”

“Where’d he try to land it?” I asked.

“Didn’t say.” Wiggins shrugged. “Like as not he tried to land on Boulder Island and foundered on the rocks.”

I had an idea Wiggins was right. I slipped Wiggins a fiver, told him to keep his mouth shut, and headed for the same place.

I hadn’t rowed a boat in years. It raised the devil with a lot of muscles I never use, but I finally pulled the mile to the island. There was a bright moon up, which bathed the lake in a weird light. That was a break, though, because it helped to light up the rugged shoreline of Boulder Island.

I had a job beaching my craft. In fact, I crashed into several rocks hard enough to jar my eye-teeth loose, before I finally hit the beach. I hauled the boat up on the sand, then took stock of my surroundings.

The island was a wild, jungle-ish affair that nobody had ever bothered to do anything with. I wondered what had ever attracted Ryan to its shores. For a minute I thought I must be wrong, that Ryan had never come here. That something was haywire with my logic. And yet, where else would it have been necessary for Ryan to rent a boat to get to?

I shrugged, started up the beach. Finally I came to a narrow path leading through the undergrowth into the center of

the island. I took the path, forged cautiously inward. A minute later I came out upon a smooth, open space. I saw waves of green plants stretched before me—apparently cultivated plants.

Curiously, I stooped down, examined one of the tiny plants. And then my heart did a quick flipflop.

I'd seen a picture of this plant in the Grant City News just yesterday. There was an article with the picture, telling how this plant could be cultivated in any back yard or vacant lot, and how most people didn't know what it was.

It was marijuana.

Fields of it, spread before my eyes! Marijuana, obviously cultivated marijuana, growing on this deserted, wild island! My mind spun. This island, this unvisited, hard-to-get-to island, must be the place from which the marijuana flooding Grant City was coming!

And then, very faintly, I heard the strains of a violin. Softly, floating in on the still night air.

I listened. The violinist was no Fritz Kreisler. In fact, he was not even a good amateur. His tones were raucous, off-key, and often intermingled as his bow touched two strings at once. The tune I didn't even recognize.

I glanced in the direction of the music. There was a small, wood shanty standing on the edge of the moon-splashed marijuana field. And in a tiny window was a flickering light.

I crossed that field in nothing flat. My heart was racing. I knew I was on the trail of something big. The same thing Ryan had discovered and paid for with his life. That's why I couldn't take any chances. I grabbed my .38, which I always carry, pushed the rickety old door in without knocking, and stepped into a candle-lit room.

The first thing I noticed about the man

was his beard. It was silver-white, tapering to a point half way down his chest. His hair, too, was white, and his dark eyes peered from beneath heavy white eyebrows. He wore faded blue overalls and a blue shirt. His age looked near the century mark.

I looked at this Methuselah.

"Who are you?" I said.

The bearded man laid his violin on a nearby table. His eyes were glued uneasily to the gun in my hand. His voice trembled a bit when he spoke.

"I ain't got no money, if that's what you want," he said.

He looked like a harmless old coot, so I stuck the .38 back in my holster.

"This is no stick-up," I said. "I'm a reporter. I want to ask a few questions."

THE bearded man fell back in his chair, evidently relieved. He started tugging at his snowy beard.

"Go right ahead, mister. Though what you're aimin' to ask me, I can't imagine."

"What's your name?"

"Zeb Jacks."

"You live on the island?"

"Sure do. Fer twenty-six years now."

"What are you growing in your fields?" I indicated the marijuana fields with a wave of my arm.

He didn't bat an eye. Just shrugged, lazily.

"Don't reckon I know, strange as that may sound. I been growin' them weeds fer some doctors in Grant City."

"Doctors?"

"Sure. We made a deal. I grow the stuff and gather it. They pay me livable money. They say they take it to a laboratory, make some kinda medicine outa it."

I just gandered at him. The funny thing was, I believed him. I had an idea the old coot didn't know he was cultivating

marijuana. That somebody with a slick tongue had talked him into growing the stuff, not telling him it was dope.

“Who are these doctors?”

“Don’t know,” Jacks shrugged again. “They send two men to get the stuff. Joe and Bugs, they call each other.”

I nodded.

“Was there another stranger on Boulder Island this evening?”

“Ain’t seen no one,” he said as he fingered his beard.

I looked around the room. There was just a table, two chairs, a cot and a small stove in the corner. Then I looked at the violin on the table.

Well, I’m no expert on violins, but one thing I was sure of. It was the same kind of fiddle I’d seen in the dirty windows of the Nero Violin Company in Grant City. The same cheap, uninspired construction.

I pointed at it.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Bugs give it to me,” said Jacks. “Nice fellow—Bugs.”

“Yeah—must be.”

I thanked Jacks for his trouble and left him. I’d hardly stepped out the door before he was sawing on his cheap fiddle again.

I went back to the beach in a semi-daze. Something was very rancid in Rangoon. It looked, now, as though there was some connection between the marijuana racket and the Nero Violin Company. What, I didn’t know. I decided to visit the Nero Violin Company.

I started to shove the rowboat into the water—then stopped. Twenty feet away, on the beach, was another boat! A boat that hadn’t been there when I’d first come to the island!

“See that pretty moon up there? Reach for it!” A voice behind me said.

Well, I’ve got a good reach. I almost touched the moon with my fingertips. I turned slightly, to see who my new pal

was. He was a small, rat-faced guy, with a nasty little automatic in his paw. A gun-punk, if I ever saw one.

“Get in the boat,” he said.

I got in. He followed me.

“Row,” he said.

I took the oars and he sat down in the stern facing me. The gun rested easily in his lap, the muzzle poking in my direction.

“Where to, bud?” I asked.

The gun-punk’s face split into a lopsided grin.

“Grant City. I’m taking you to see the Boss.”

I maneuvered the boat through the rocks into open water, being careful not to jar the boat too badly. I didn’t relish that gun pointing at me a bit. Then, with the gun-punk watching me closely, I leaned on the oars.

While I rowed, my mind was working. I could go along with this punk, meet his Boss, and maybe find out who was in back of the reefer racket. But, I figured, it wouldn’t do me any good. I’d only end up a corpse, which was not a very pleasant thought.

The alternative was obvious. I’d have to make a break for freedom. If I tried that, it would be better to take a chance with the gun-punk alone, rather than wait until we hit shore. There might be a couple other mugs waiting when we landed.

I kept rowing, slowly, steadily, pulling the oars through the water, lifting them out, dripping. I noticed that when I raised the oars out of the water, the ends came close to the gunman, who sat in the stern. My heart leaped. If I could bring one of the oars around fast . . .

I decided to try it. It was a long chance, but almost anything I tried would be a chance. I got the end of the oar back of me, to make another pull through the water. But I just skimmed the surface this time, with the right oar. It raced around,

rose out of the water, and cut hard across the gunpunk's face!

It made a terrific smack, and I saw the punk almost fall overboard. He was so surprised he didn't fire. Then, risking the chance of upsetting the boat, I leaped for him. I got him on the jaw just as he clambered to his feet. He staggered back, tripped, and splashed backward into the water. The boat rocked wildly, then resumed an even keel.

I took to the oars again. It wasn't half the job it was before. The boat felt a lot lighter.

WHEN I got to the Nero Violin Company, I shunned the front entrance. After all, when you're breaking into a joint you don't go to the front door and knock. I went around the back, but the back door, hung on rusty hinges, was locked. Then I tried the basement windows. I found three of them locked, before one yielded to pressure. I pushed it open, crawled through, and dropped into a musty, dank basement room.

One thing I always carry is a flashlight. I stood still a moment, straining my ears for any sign of human habitation, and when I was satisfied that I was alone, I snapped on the flash. I was in a long, rectangular room, filled with small hand saws, jigsaws, and work benches.

It didn't take me long to figure the angle. This was the room where the fiddles were manufactured. The place was overflowing with paraphernalia necessary to the manufacture of violins, there were partially completed pieces scattered about, and there was sawdust on the floor.

That made me think. Sawdust on the floor! There had been sawdust on the soles of Ryan's shoes! That meant I was on the right track. Ryan had been on Boulder Island, and he had been in the basement of the Nero Violin Company. He, too, had

discovered a connection between the reefer racket and this rundown business establishment that made cheap fiddles!

I walked the length of the room, sweeping my flash along the work benches. Then, at the far end, I came upon something that really rocked me back on my heels. Something that explained the whole fantastic business!

On a large bench in one corner were several dozen violins, complete in every detail except that the backs had been torn off. Inside the hollow bodies of the violins were layers of long, narrow cigarettes. One look satisfied me as to what they were. Marijuana reefers! Packed in violins!

At first I couldn't grasp it—then it came to me. The Nero Violin Company wasn't making violins for budding young violinists. They were making them for budding young criminals. They were packing reefers in the bodies of cheaply made fiddles and shipping them to dispensaries all over the country!

It was a sweet set-up, no doubt about it. No one, not even the most suspicious inspector, would ever dream that a truckload or boxcar full of violins carried contraband. No one would ever think of tearing a violin apart to inspect the inside!

Then another idea struck me. The owner of this bogus company must be the head of the marijuana racket. Two and two made four.

Then, suddenly, I froze.

Off to my left came a scraping noise, like a shoe rubbing the cement floor of the basement. I snapped off the flash, crouched, ran through the darkness toward the far wall. Before I'd taken a dozen steps my foot hit something soft and I stumbled. I heard a tiny, pitiful moan next to me.

I sat for a minute, rubbing a bruised knee. I was sure I'd stumbled over a body—a live body, judging from the

moan. I could feel the hairs on my neck stand up, but I finally got up nerve enough to turn on the flash again.

The beam fell on the face of Cassie Martin! Her wrists were tied behind her, her ankles roped, and a gag crammed into her mouth!

I went to work in a hurry, ripping out the gag first. Cassie's dark eyes were wide with fright, her lips parted, her breath coming in gasps.

"How did you get here?" I whispered.

She trembled violently. Then, finally, words began tumbling out.

"Two men kidnapped me. Lou had left me alone a few minutes, while he went to a drug store."

I swore softly. Blast Lou anyway! I'd warned him to keep an eye on Cassie.

Just then there was a noise behind me. I turned quickly, swung the flash. But I was too late. Something hard came down on my head, and I saw blinding flashes in front of me. Then I dropped down into black nothingness.

There was a dull roar in my head as I came out of it. A roar that tapered off into a steady, droning hum. Then the hum became human voices, and I knew I must still be alive.

I lay a moment, eyes closed. There were two voices—two men, talking to each other. My head cleared suddenly, and the voices made sense.

"He'll be out of it soon, Joe," one said. "Then we take him to the Boss."

"Yeah," said the other. "Only we ain't botherin' the Boss while he's playin' his fiddle. You know how he is."

And then I heard the faint strains of a violin. A well-played violin, this time. A violin giving out the soft, slow melody of "Play, Fiddle, Play."

"The Boss is nuts on violins," the first man said.

"Sure is, Bugs. Musicians is all that way."

Suddenly I thought of Cassie. What had happened to her? I gritted my teeth, decided to open my eyes. I did—just a slit. I was on a small cot in a room that was lit only by a shaded bulb over a table in the center. Two men sat at the table, one with his back to me, the other facing me. They were playing cards.

My head was clear now. I measured the distance between myself and the nearest man, the one with his back to me. It looked too far. By the time I got up, and finished with him, the guy facing me could pump me full of lead.

And then I noticed something that gave me hope. The guy nearest me leaned back in his chair, balancing it two-leggedly. Stretched on the cot, my foot was within inches of his chair. If I could ease my foot over, catch my toe around the chair leg, a quick yank would upset him.

It was worth trying. Slowly, very slowly, I inched my toe toward the chair leg. The man facing me was preoccupied with his cards, which was good. He didn't notice my leg moving slowly, didn't notice the toe of my shoe finally ring the chair leg.

Taking a quick breath, I pulled!

THE leaner-backer went to the floor with a crash, then I got a break. His head thudded against the floor with a sickening sound, and I knew right away he wouldn't cause me any more trouble. The second gangster leaped to his feet, his eyes wide with surprise. But I was on my feet too. I crashed into the table, upsetting it on top of him. He went sprawling on his back, his hand going for his shoulder holster.

It was a stomach-turning scrunch when I hit him with the chair, but it did the job.

My .38 was gone, so I reached into the mugg's shoulder holster and took his artillery. It was a wicked German Mauser that could do plenty of damage. Then I left the room, found myself in a narrow hall with a stair at the end leading upward.

The violin music came from upstairs!

Softly, I walked up. The hall I came into at the top was dark, but the fiddle music gave me my sense of direction. It came from a room at the end of the hall.

On tiptoe I walked to the room. The door stood partly open. The sound of the violin came softly from inside the room. Without preliminary, I kicked the door open and walked in.

The room was dimly lighted, and the violinist sat shrouded in deep shadow. But that made no difference—I knew who he was. The music came to a discordant stop.

“Put the fiddle away, Hall. The game's up,” I said.

My hand reached along the door jamb, found a light switch, and turned it on. I was right. It was Preston Hall!

He studied me with his head cocked on one side. Then he placed his violin on a table near him, which I noticed was loaded with many others just like it.

“It was a nice racket you had, Hall.” I grinned at him. “You were probably getting rich on it. But it's over now, over because you hired a kid reporter that was smarter than you were.”

I pushed the Mauser at him and he backed up.

“It was clever, having your paper crusade against the marijuana racket, when you were the head of it all the time. But, of course, you had to do it because the other sheets in town did, and besides, you just turned out editorial ballyhoo that didn't mean anything.

“You made your mistake when you hired Ted Ryan. He went out and discovered the whole set-up. Boulder

Island, the Nero Violin Company, everything. The only thing he didn't learn was that you were at the head of it. So he came back and blabbed the whole story to you. To save your racket, you had to kill him.”

Hall's eyes blinked behind the thick lenses, and his long, tapering face was grim.

“You're crazy, Keith,” he said.

“Not so crazy,” I said. “I knew you killed Ryan all the time. You said Ryan was shot from behind as he stood in your office doorway. Yet, I could only find the bullet that hit your leg in the wall of your office. I couldn't find the one that ripped through Ryan's body. That meant he wasn't shot from behind, but from in front—with the bullet traveling out the open door and winding up among the desks and chairs in the newsroom.

“As for the slug in your leg, I knew that was a fake. Any guy who was crack shot enough to get Ryan through the heart from behind, like you claimed, wasn't cockeyed enough to send another bullet into your leg. It didn't ring true. You put that bullet in your own leg, Hall. Very carefully—to give yourself an alibi.”

Hall glared, saying nothing. I went on.

“You had Cassie Martin snatched, because you were afraid she might know something about the racket. Also, after I left the News Building, you put a gun-punk on my trail. He caught up to me on Boulder Island.”

Then I told him how I'd traced Ryan's route to Boulder Island and, finally, the Nero Violin Company.

“When I heard you playing the fiddle up here, I knew you were my man, Hall. It bore out all my previous suspicions. You see, I knew you were a violinist all the time. You have a way of cocking your head on the left side. It's just an involuntary habit you picked up from

chinning a violin all your life.”

Hall dropped his eyes. Finally he shrugged hopelessly.

“You win, Keith,” he said. “I’ll go with you—no trouble. Only—” he threw a glance at his violin, which lay on the table with the others, “if you don’t mind, I’d like to take along my instrument. A good violinist can’t live without his violin, you know.”

I shrugged. I didn’t see any harm in that. Hall picked up the fiddle, tucked it lovingly under his chin, slid the bow along the strings. I kept watching, thinking how nutty a musician can be.

“It needs tuning.” Hall smiled.

HE REACHED for a tuning peg on the neck of the violin, started to turn it. Then everything broke loose behind me. Somebody cried: “Watch out!”

A form hurtled past me, crashed into Hall, knocking the violin aside. The violin seemed to explode as it clattered to the floor.

Preston Hall sat on the floor, rubbing his jaw. The newcomer turned to me. It was Lou Martin, the ready smile on his face.

“He would have killed you, Keith,” he said.

Maybe I’m dumb. I still didn’t get it.

“There was a gun in the body of that violin,” Lou said. “One of the strings was attached to the gun’s hair-trigger. By apparently tuning the violin, Hall actually was pulling the trigger on the gun. And it was aimed at you.”

I just stared at him. To me, it didn’t make sense.

“That can’t be,” I told him. “A gun inside a violin would destroy its tone. He was playing that fiddle when I came in.”

Lou shook his head.

“He wasn’t playing that fiddle. I saw the whole thing from the hall—and he switched fiddles on you, Keith. They were all piled on top of the table, and he simply picked up a different fiddle the second time. One he uses for a weapon, just in case.” He grinned like a big kid.

“Incidentally, I’m with the FBI. We’ve been investigating the reefer racket in town. I knew about this joint, was about ready to move in on it, but you beat me to it. I shouldn’t have left Cassie alone tonight, but when they kidnapped her, I knew where to come.”

I heard a movement behind me, turned, and saw Cassie. She was looking normal again—and beautiful. I turned back to Lou.

“Okay, Mr. FBI. Make your arrest,” I said. “Me—I’m heading back to Casey’s Bar. Seems to me I left a beer there.”