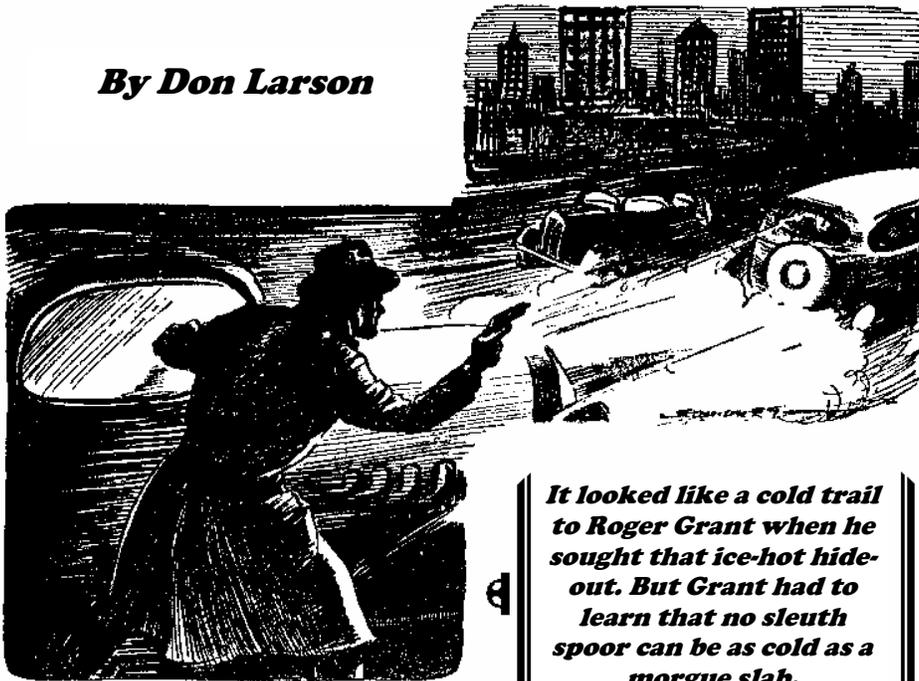


Hell-Bent for the Morgue

By Don Larson



It looked like a cold trail to Roger Grant when he sought that ice-hot hide-out. But Grant had to learn that no sleuth spoor can be as cold as a morgue slab.

ROGER GRANT didn't stop when he saw the figure in the darkness opposite the row of cheap apartments. He hunched in his seat and let his roadster coast ahead.

The figure was a man, fat, pugnacious, with a frayed cigar stuck between thick lips, and a low-crowned derby set on his bullet head. He had the look of a stage detective.

Grant could guess who he was. A dick from some private agency, watching the residence of Linda Powers, hoping to get a line on the Van Horn diamonds that the Rinaldi mob was reputed to have stolen.

Roger Grant, free-lance investigator of crime, was after the same thing—hot ice valued at a quarter of a million. It was stained already with a murdered man's blood, and with a five-grand reward up for its recovery.

He swung his roadster around the block, parked on a street facing the rear of the Powers Apartment, and got quietly out. There were more old-fashioned houses here. He found the areaway door of one open, gumshoed in, crossed a cellar silently, and reached a back yard.

A board fence separated him from the court

of the building he sought. He climbed this and raised his eyes to the rusty fire escape that snaked down the apartment's rear. Then abruptly he crouched behind a privet bush close to the fence.

A window on the second floor had opened. Someone was coming out, feeling for the iron landing with cautious feet. Grant saw that it was a girl.

She came down the ladder slowly, stopping to stare at the lower windows, before she dropped. A light was burning in one. It shed a faint glow over her youthful face and trimly graceful figure. Grant tensed with interest.

She was the girl he was after, Linda Powers, whose brother Stanley, had been taken away by the bandits when they grabbed the ice at Van Horn's office. Her picture had appeared in the papers. Her brother was under suspicion, thought to be in with the jewel thieves. But she had fiercely defended him when the cops had questioned her.

The other Van Horn clerk had been shot in the holdup. Powers hadn't been heard from. Grant watched her move cautiously across the court.

It was plain that she, too, had seen the agency

man out front. She was giving him the slip, and her stealth indicated that she had something to hide. Her features looked pale and strained. The darting glances of her wide, long-lashed eyes betrayed nervousness.

She moved behind the row of apartments, following the long tradesmen's court that paralleled the street. Grant followed, keeping her carefully in sight. He had come merely to talk to her. Now he was more interested in seeing where she would go.

She continued along the court to its end and ducked through a gate into a small alley leading to the street. She emerged out of sight of the agency man out front. She walked to the end of the block and unlocked the door of a garage. In a moment she was backing a flivver into the street.

She rattled away, and Grant ran to his own parked roadster. He was two blocks behind when he nosed out of the street at right angles to the one she'd taken. He was alert now. The girl's tense face and furtive manner made him certain something was up.

He followed the flivver for fifteen minutes, until it finally stopped on a block of suburban houses. There Grant turned into a side street, but braked instantly and hurried back on foot.

The girl was a hundred yards ahead. He could tell even by her silhouette that she was excited. She kept looking behind, and it took all Grant's skill as a shadower to keep from being seen.

At the end of the block was a small, square park, with a fountain in its center. Concrete paths cut through it, and thickly interlacing shrubbery grew around its edges.

The girl ducked into this. Grant thought for a moment she was taking a short cut somewhere. Instead she stopped by the side fence that skirted the street, and began to grope around. There was no one else in sight. The park was deserted. Grant crouched behind a hydrangea clump and watched without being seen.

He was close enough to see her face. Her eyes had fear shadows in them now. She seemed desperately impatient as her slim hands pushed through the tangled shrubbery and parted leafy bushes.

Five minutes passed, and abruptly she straightened, clutching something. Grant's pulses

leaped in excitement. Before she stepped back on the walk, she tucked the thing under her coat, but he had got a glimpse of it. It was a small, black bag.

Hurrying over the concrete on her clicking heels, she came straight toward him, biting her lips and walking with head bent down. He tried to edge stealthily around the clump of bushes and keep out of sight; but a rose trellis barred his way. A thorny shoot caught his coat and snapped away with a swish.

She lifted her head like a startled doe, gasped, and began to run. She went by him in a flash of silk-clad legs and flying skirts. He was surprised at her lightness and speed. She had reached the park entrance by the time he'd sprung after her. But he had to know what was in that black bag.

She threw a terrified glance over her shoulder and raced toward her flivver standing beside the curb. She leaped into it, slammed the door, and he heard the starter whine. The car was lurching away when he got to its side, but the motor coughed with a half-flooded carburetor.

Grant grabbed the side of the windshield and pulled himself up on the running board. In almost the same movement, he reached down inside and yanked the emergency brake. The next instant he ducked his head and hurled his body sidewise in the nick of time.

For the girl had pulled a gun on him. Its muzzle lanced flame as she jerked the trigger twice, missing both times. He snapped his hand forward and grabbed her wrist with steely fingers.

SHE struggled madly to get free, twisting over the top of the wheel, gritting her small white teeth tightly.

"You—let me go! I'll—" She tried again to snap the trigger as Grant wrenched her fingers loose. Then she made a dive for the car's opposite door with the black bag in her hand. Her dress ripped at the shoulder as Grant caught her and pulled her back. He got in beside her then, holding her still with one tense arm. He was smiling thinly, his voice very calm and cold.

"You're a regular hell-cat, Miss Powers! I wouldn't have guessed it—from your pictures."

She was silent for a moment, her face deathly pale and her eyes dark with fury as she struggled

to catch her breath. Then she spoke.

"You—double-crosser! I won't give them up—until you tell me where Stanley is. I—you'll have to kill me first."

Grant shrugged and spoke quietly. "Who do you think I am?"

"I know who you are!" she flared. "One of Rinaldi's rats. He sent you—to spy—and take the diamonds from me!"

Grant's arm stiffened about her shoulders. "So you have them then!"

She seemed to realize she'd said too much. Abruptly she whirled and struck at his face with her small, clenched fist, her knuckles sliding harmlessly over Grant's lean jaw. Grant said with a note of humorous reproach:

"Quit it! You're a swell fighter, Miss Powers—but let's get each other straight. I'm not in with Rinaldi. I'm after the ice, it's true—but not the way you think. There's five thousand reward on the stones, and I thought I could use a little cash. But since you've got them, they're yours. All you need to do is turn them in and collect. My name's Grant."

"Not Roger Grant?"

He nodded, took out his wallet, and showed her the special card he carried. It was signed by the commissioner of police, and gave him *carte blanche* powers as an unofficial investigator of crime.

"I—I've heard of you," she said, a little awed. "But—I'm not going to turn the diamonds in for the reward, I've got—to save my brother!"

A sound of sob came from her throat. She looked small and pitiful suddenly.

"You mean you're going to hand the stones over to Rinaldi?"

"Yes, they're holding Stanley. If I don't give them the diamonds, they'll kill him."

"How did you know the stones were in the park?"

"Stanley got away and threw them there—from a car window. Then they caught him again, and tortured him to make him talk. I don't know what he said exactly. But they got in touch with me a half hour ago, called me on the phone. Stanley, they said, had told them he'd hidden the diamonds in a place we used to play as kids. I knew he must mean this park, so I came and looked."

Grant nodded somberly. "What did they tell you to do if you found the diamonds?"

"Drive along Harrison Road at ten tonight. They're going to meet me, and release Stanley when I give them the stones."

"How do you know they'll keep their word?"

"I don't. It's a chance I've got to take." A sob muffled her speech again.

Grant looked at his watch. "It's nine," he said. "We'll see if we can't fix up some way to save your brother and the diamonds, too. And, if you don't object, I'd like to take a look at them. A quarter of a million in ice makes me sort of curious."

Her gaze swept over the clean, grim lines of his face, the smiling lips under a close-clipped mustache, and the straightness of his eyes. She nodded and handed him the black bag.

Under the instrument-board light, he opened it and saw a small chamois-skin pouch inside. The girl breathed quickly as he pulled back the zipper fastening of this. There was a tissue package at the bottom, with something inside the paper that rattled faintly.

Grant undid the paper with cautious fingers, then heard the abrupt gasp of amazement that Linda Powers gave. Her pointed fingernails dug into his arm. He was staring himself, gazing wide-eyed, holding his breath. For there weren't any diamonds inside the paper, only small round opaque objects.

"Stones!" she gasped. "The diamonds are gone! That's only a bunch of—pebbles! Oh!" As though she'd been holding herself up on sheer nerve alone and this was the last straw, she began to cry in great sobs.

Grant fingered the pebbles doubtfully. For a brief instant he wondered if she had tricked him, lied to him. But the sight of her tear-wet face assured him. He looked at the pebbles again. They were round, white and even; the sort one would expect to find in a florist's shop, or in a pet shop for goldfish globes. The girl checked her crying suddenly, and said in a stricken voice;

"What can I do about Stanley now? They'll murder him—as soon as they find the stones aren't here."

GRANT nodded again and she clutched him desperately. "Those diamonds *were* here.

My brother wouldn't lie. Somebody must have found them in the park and put those pebbles in the bag. Now—they'll never be found, I'd better tell the police. It's the only thing left to do."

Grant was silent for a moment, then he said: "Your best chance is to bluff them. Meet them at ten, and pretend to hand over the stones. I'll help you."

He didn't say how. He was wondering about her brother and those pebbles.

"Come to my apartment," he added. "You can wait there till it's time to drive along Harrison Road. I'm going to have a talk with Van Horn. You say you think it was Rinaldi who got in touch with you. I want to get a few inside points on the holdup."

The girl nodded. Now that the diamonds were gone and she could see no way out, she was ready to put herself completely in Grant's hands.

"Do—anything you want," she faltered. "Only—save Stanley—somehow."

Grant directed her to his apartment, drove behind her in his own car, and had her wait while he went in search of Van Horn. It was only a little after nine. The jewel merchant might still be in his office. Grant went there first.

There was a light burning above a frosted transom, and a minute after Grant's ring, a round, pink, cautious face showed in the crack of the door. Van Horn was a Dutchman obviously. He looked scared, and he held a big automatic in one chubby fist. He waved it toward Grant, eyed him suspiciously, and said:

"Vell—vat do you want?"

Grant opened his wallet and took out his card again. He thrust it under the Dutchman's nose. Van Horn read it and instantly looked relieved.

"A detective," he said. "Come in. Excuse please the way I acted. I haf been nervous, since my place vas robbed."

He ushered Grant into a small, luxurious office, handsomely furnished with heavy chairs and a glass-topped desk with a velvet pad on it for displaying jewels. There were paintings on the walls, and a half dozen clusters of flowering bulbs gave added decoration; tulips and hyacinths in small, glazed pots and paper-white narcissi in a cut-glass bowl on an ebony settee. Van Horn apparently was something of an esthete. Grant jumped as the Dutchman suddenly spoke.

"It's all right, Mr. Ellis! Come out."

Another man entered the room through a small door that led to an inner office. He also had a gun, and Grant's eyes narrowed when he saw that it was the same fat individual he'd seen outside Linda Powers' place.

"Meet Mr. Ellis, Mr. Grant," said Van Horn. "He's a detective, too—representing der insurance company."

Ellis nodded glumly and looked along his nose at Grant. There was a sour expression on his face that made Grant conclude he'd discovered that Miss Powers, his quarry, had given him the slip.

Grant turned his back on the company detective and addressed Van Horn.

"I just dropped in for a little information. Stanley Powers was one of your clerks, wasn't he?"

The Dutchman nodded. "Yes, he vas vid me a year. The other clerk, who vas vid me five years vas shot right vere you are standing. You can see der blood on der carpet if you vill look."

Grant glanced at his feet, saw a sinister brownish stain on the rug, and glanced back at Van Horn.

"You think the Rinaldi gang is responsible and that young Powers helped them pull off the theft?"

Van Horn hunched his shoulders and sank his voice to a confidential pitch. "I told the police so, and I tell you again. Powers must haf been in vid der gang. He must haf tipped dem off. It iss der only way dey would haf known I had so much jewels in der place. Der biggest order of der year had just come in from Amsterdam vere der best diamonds are cut.

"I didn't even haf my customers selected. Ve vere grading der stones ven der hold-uppers came. Dey shot my other clerk and made Powers open der safe. Dey took him away vid dem. Now my diamonds are gone—and only a hundred thousand insurance to cover dem—ven der stones are vorth at least a quarter of a million!"

Ellis spoke harshly: "You'll get your rocks back, Mister. We'll find that clerk of yours and make him unbutton his lip. My company's never had to pay a premium as big as that yet. But I'd work better if you didn't let guys like this crash in. He ain't even with the police. He's only trying

to horn in on that reward. He's one of those parlor dicks who wouldn't know a real crook if he saw one."

Grant turned and stared at the fat detective whose words and voice were sneering.

"It's too bad," he said quietly, "that you let Miss Powers slip out from under your nose. She has an interesting line."

Ellis gave a violent start, glared, and almost swallowed his cigar. "What? Say, how the hell did you know I was after her?"

Grant only grinned at Ellis. Then he turned and asked Van Horn:

"Where were you when the bandits came?"

"I had just stepped out of der office. My clerks vere der only ones dot saw dem. Now vun is dead and der other vun has disappeared. But I think it vas Rinaldi. He is one of der vorst jewel t'ieves who has made a lot of trouble."

"We'll find him when we find Powers," said Ellis gratingly. He came close to Grant and thrust out his jaw. "And," he added, "if you know where that sister of Powers' is, you'd better spill it. I got a state license. I represent one of the biggest insurance concerns in America, and I know how to make it hot for guys that hold back evidence."

"The only thing that's holding anything back," said Grant mildly, "are your own big feet."

He nodded politely to Van Horn, lighted a cigarette, and strode out of the office. But when he reached the street and walked to the place where his car was parked, he threw a swift glance over his shoulder.

The lumbering figure of Ellis was visible. The big agency detective was following him as he expected.

Grant hopped into his car as if unaware that he was being shadowed. But he stepped on the gas, went back and forth through a maze of streets, and shook Ellis and his chartered cab in ten minutes. He arrived at his own apartment at a quarter of ten to find Linda Powers pacing the floor nervously. Her eyes were wide and frightened now.

"I—I was afraid you weren't coming back!" she said hoarsely. "I'm nearly crazy! I know they'll kill Stanley if I hand over those pebbles."

Grant took the girl's arm and shook it gently. "Buck up, kid," he said. "You put up a swell scrap when you fought me. Now you've got to fight

some more, and I know you will. It's almost time to meet Rinaldi. You've got to act as though everything was all right, as though you had the real stones. Be a little nervous if you want to. They'll think it's just because you're afraid over your brother. But act as though you had the stones, and hand them over."

"I don't understand," said the girl fearfully, "If they see anybody with me, they'll think I've brought the police. They'll kill Stanley."

"They won't see me," said Grant, "even though I'm with you."

"How—where will you be?"

"In the rumble seat of your car!"

THEY went down to the street together. Grant opened the rumble quickly, took the cushion out, and got inside. He drew the cover down, said: "O. K. let's go!"

It was the stuffiest, most uncomfortable ride Grant had ever taken. He had drawn his legs up to his chin and twisted his ankles around. The flivver seemed to have solid springs, and a million squeaks and rattles. Fumes from the exhaust filtered up and nearly choked him. He kept a tight grip on his gun, and wondered how soon he'd have to use it.

His right hand with the automatic was twisted up. He could see his wrist watch. The radium hands pointed to ten-five.

At ten-fifteen, after they'd gone a couple of miles along Harrison Road, Grant heard the brakes of Linda's car squeak. He was thrown violently against the metal partition as she pulled into the curb. He heard the tires of another car swish, heard a car door open and shut.

He waited five tense seconds in the stuffy darkness, then went into action. He lifted the roadster's rumble seat, twisted his neck, and saw a big car with its engine running drawn up alongside. There were two men in it; the driver and a man in the back seat, holding a machine gun. Another man had just come up to the side of the flivver, said something to Linda, and she had handed him the bag of pebbles.

Grant's muscles were taut as steel spring. He threw the rumble-seat top back, thrust his head and shoulders up, and shouted an order to Linda.

"Get down—quick!"

His gaze was riveted on the machine gunner

and the driver of the sedan. They were the most dangerous. The other man had the bag and would probably sprint for it. He did, and the machine gunner, scowling savagely, thrust the nose of his weapon out the side window.

He didn't have a chance to press the trigger, for Grant's first bullet caught him in his hunched right shoulder. It spun him around, crippled him, and made him drop the deadly weapon.

The man with the black bag leaped to the sedan's running board, and screamed a command at the driver. Grant's second bullet crashed into his leg, made him lose his balance. It sent the man squalling and writhing to the street, with his gun and bag dropping as the car lurched ahead.

Grant fired two more shots in quick succession, ripping lead into the sedan's rear tires. Air screeched and swished, rims bumped, and the big car became as unwieldy as a steelshod truck.

The driver, swearing fiercely, tried to steer with one hand, and fire back at Grant with the other. Grant, a human cyclone, had leaped out of the rumble compartment now. He fired with swift precision, sending a bullet into the driver's arm. The sedan lurched over the curb, bumped fifteen feet farther. Then it struck a fence, and stopped with a clatter of broken glass and crumpled metal.

There was utter silence for a moment, until a cop's whistle sounded down the block. The next second the officer came running into sight, and Grant and the girl had all the help they needed. But Grant had the situation well in hand.

The cop glanced at him, and touched his cap in recognition. Grant was bending over the fallen man in the street. He saw a dank head of hair, a long, thin face, a pair of close-set eyes with a scar above them.

"Rinaldi!" he muttered. "So—you came for the rocks yourself! Where's Stanley Powers?"

RINALDI did not answer. He only cursed sibilant Latin phrases. Grant pressed his gun closer.

"Better talk! You're due to burn, anyway, for the man you bumped off in Van Horn's office. What did you do with Powers?"

But Rinaldi remained silent. He glared at Grant with murderous hatred, refusing to speak.

It was one of his men, the driver of the sedan, who talked, when Grant explained patiently that

the game was up and that the only chance he had to save himself from the chair was to turn state's evidence.

The man gave the address of a cheap rooming house, then muttered: "You'll find Powers there, but he ain't feelin' good. We beat him up after he double-crossed us."

"What do you mean—double-crossed you?"

"Well, he tipped us off about the ice, then grabbed it, and tried to walk out on us after the raid. We got him, but he'd hid the sparklers somewhere. He was too punch-drunk to talk straight.

"How did he tip you off?"

"Over the phone. He told the boss that a bunch of rocks had just come in and that he'd help us lift 'em if we'd make it look right and split afterward."

Grant turned and took Linda Powers' arm.

"Come on," he said grimly. "I know where your brother is now. Let's go get him."

Another cop had run up. They had the prisoners covered; Grant didn't care about Rinaldi now. He wanted two things—to see what Stanley Powers had to say, and to locate the stolen diamonds.

They reached the address that Rinaldi's man had given, but Grant didn't ring. He used a skeleton key in his pocket and entered a dark hall. A nervous voice called down from a room above.

"Is that you, boss?"

Grant saw a gun gleam dully. He whispered to Linda, made her wait, and ascended the stairs first. He got the drop on the man above, who had been left behind to guard the prisoner. Grant disarmed him, backed him against the wall, and entered the room where Stanley Powers lay.

Young Powers' head and face were covered with bruises. He had been cruelly beaten, knocked unconscious, possibly given a fractured skull; but he was still alive.

When Grant called her, the girl gave a little moan and ran to her brother's side. She knelt beside him, passed her trembling hands gently over his battered face, and Powers began to mutter feverishly.

"She'll know where to find them. Linda'll know! I dumped them where we used to play when we were kids. I didn't double-cross you, boys—honest. I never tipped you off. It must—

have been somebody else. You've got me wrong!"

Grant was frowning. He touched Linda's shoulder, jerked his thumb toward the guard, said:

"Keep that mug covered. Give him a dose of lead if you have to. I'm going to take your brother out of here. He'll be all right, but we've got to get him to a hospital."

While the girl held a gun grimly against the back of Rinaldi's man, Grant lifted Powers and carried him downstairs. He signaled a cop at the corner, asked him to take charge of the guard, then with Linda and her brother, he went to the nearest hospital. The interne's superficial examination was enough to convince Grant that Powers would recover. He nodded and hurried out into the street.

Linda had forgotten about the diamonds now, but Grant hadn't. He knew the law would be waiting to hound young Powers when he got well enough to talk. The testimony of Rinaldi and his men would put him in a bad light. He'd have a tough time explaining, unless the stones were found—and so would Linda Ellis, the company detective, would be certain Powers was guilty, and would make his life miserable.

Grant returned to Van Horn's office with the black bag in his hand. He smiled grimly when he saw that Ellis had returned also. There was another company dick with him. Their faces tensed as Grant came through the door. Van Horn's eyes bulged at sight of the black bag.

"Der stones!" he cried. "You've got dem, Grant. I know der bag!"

Ellis' fat face got red. His big hands opened and shut. He clamped his teeth on his cigar.

Grant opened the black bag quietly and lifted the tissue paper package out. His face was grave.

"I wish I did have the diamonds," he said grimly. "But there's been a slip somewhere. I've located Stanley Powers. He's in the hospital now, and Rinaldi and his bunch have been rounded up. But the diamonds are still missing. All I've brought you are these!"

He flung the worthless contents of the tissue-paper package rattlingly over Van Horn's desk. The Dutchman's eyes bulged out still more.

"Pebbles!" he screeched. "You pring me a lot of pebbles! Vat good are dose? I vant my diamonds!"

ELLIS sneered and spoke with heavy sarcasm. "Clever work, Grant! You've got the boy and the crooks—everything but what you went after—the diamonds. That's success for you!"

But Grant's face had suddenly become expressionless. He didn't seem to take offense at the fat detective's sneers.

He said: "Linda Powers found that bag with the pebbles inside it in a park. Her brother had thrown them there after he got away from Rinaldi's mob, and before they grabbed him again and beat him up. If anybody had found the bag with the diamonds in it by chance, they wouldn't have bothered to substitute pebbles. They'd have gone off with the whole thing."

"Yeah!" sneered Ellis.

"Yeah! That means the pebbles were in it when Powers threw it there."

"The first thing you've said that ain't dumb!" Ellis grated. "It means the boy has got 'em, or knows where they are! It means I'm gonna put the finger on him."

Grant shook his head slowly. "He doesn't know any more about those diamonds than you do, Ellis—maybe not as much!"

"Look here! What the hell!"

"Powers was out of his head when we found him. He said he hadn't tipped Rinaldi off, that it must have been someone else. And delirious people don't lie. Remember that, Ellis!"

"Then the girl got the rocks. You say she found the bag. Well, she musta slipped the pebbles in. She wouldn't have sneaked off if she hadn't known—"

But Grant shrugged and turned away. He picked up a couple of the pebbles from Van Horn's desk, fingered them, and sauntered toward the window. Then he stooped and sniffed at the bowl of paper-white narcissi standing on the black settee.

"Nice flowers you've got, Van Horn," he murmured, and his knee brushed clumsily against the settee, knocking it and the bowl over with a crash. Water and white pebbles spilled out on the carpet as Grant made a seemingly ineffectual grab to save the wreckage he had caused.

Van Horn's pink face went deathly white. He made a clutch at his desk, staggered toward the flowers, stopped when he met Grant's eyes. Ellis was staring stupidly, but suddenly an amazed cry

came from his lips and he bent down. The other company man was with him. Something among the white pebbles on the floor sent out prismatic gleams.

“Look! Those are—diamonds!”

Van Horn had yanked open his desk drawer fiercely. His fat face was convulsed in sudden anger. He brought a gun into sight, swung it up, but Grant’s hard right fist crashed against his face before he could shoot. Grant spoke coldly.

“I thought so, Van Horn. It was you who tipped Rinaldi off—after you’d taken the diamonds out of the safe and stuck pebbles in the bag. It looks like an airtight trick to steal your own ice, and fix it so Rinaldi would come and grab the pebbles.

“You figured he’d think Powers had double-crossed him when he found them, and bump Powers off the way he did the other clerk. That would have made it sweet for you. Diamonds are

hard to sell these days, so you thought you’d collect the insurance and keep the ice, too.

“But Powers spoiled your stunt without knowing it, when he staged a getaway from Rinaldi long enough to hide the bag. And you tripped up yourself, when you used these pebbles to replace the ice. After what happened the sight of your flowers here began to put me wise. Those pebbles, and that cut-glass bowl—well, they looked like a swell hiding place!”

Ellis, on his hands and knees gathering up the diamonds, growled:

“There’s something phony somewhere. Guys don’t come that smart!”

“I had to have the reward cash,” said Grant, grinning. “There’s somebody I want to split with—a little lady who can swing a mean gun and a meaner fist. I wouldn’t have found the rocks if she hadn’t found the pebbles first.”