

Baby, Come to Copper!

By Gene Fraiser



Dave Hendley's girl friend didn't seem to care when he got a hot-seat sentence. But the G. I. stranger who knew Dave's brother figured an "automatic" way to change that babe's point of view.

THE stench from the garbage swept in from the bay and crowded down over the dark, narrow streets. It moved in with the fog and hit at the doors and windows of the ghostlike tenements.

The blues song coming from the juke box in Tulio's Bar and Grill was drowned out by the almost constant moan from the foghorns.

A lone man, with felt hat pulled low, carrying a small suitcase, came slowly up the street. He stopped for a moment, eyeing the broken sign that squeaked in front of the few steps that led into the bar. A thin smile flicked quickly over the seemingly frozen jaw. Then he moved on,

finally stopping in front of the last brownstone house on the street.

A small yellow light illuminated the tattered cardboard plaque: *Furnished Room*. The man's right hand went tight against the handle of the suitcase. He hesitated an instant, then mounted the steps leading up to the front door.

Footsteps rose slowly from the bowels of the old house. He shifted on his feet as he waited, his fingers digging deep into the handle.

A sunken, heavily lined face peeked around the edge of the door. Fear shuddered in the red-rimmed eyes of the old lady.

“Dave Hendley live here?” the man asked.

The woman’s face seemed to shrink and a twitch seized her left cheek. “No, he don’t,” she said in a voice that seemed to have gone through the catacombs of many ages. She tried to push the door shut, but he stuck a foot into the crack.

“Aren’t you Bedoni? Mary Bedoni?” he asked in a soft voice.

Her eyes squinted as she tried to get a good glimpse of the shadowed face.

“My name’s Taylor. Peter Taylor. I’m trying to find Dave for his brother, Mike.”

“Mike’s dead,” she said, her voice cold, still peering up at his face.

“Yes,” the man said softly. “But we were in the same outfit. He often spoke to me about you, about Dave. He also told me about Elise and about her brother Joe.”

Mrs. Bedoni seemed undecided for a moment. She looked at the man’s black shoes, at his rain slicker, the small suitcase and the wide-brimmed hat. “Come in,” she finally said, pulling the door open.

She flicked on a small ceiling light. The dust was heavy in the hallway. There were thick cracks in the dun wallpaper. The house was a projection of the woman.

She leaned back against the banister and watched him closely. “Don’t you know what happened to Dave Hendley?” The fear had now gone from her eyes. She thrust her long chin forward as she spoke her cold words. “He killed a man. He killed a man in this house. And in two weeks he will be killed also. He’s in jail and he’s going to be killed there.” Her eyes seemed to sparkle as she spoke, and her fingers closed with the enthusiasm of her words.

Taylor pushed the hat back on his head. He rubbed his palms together slowly. “Mike was always afraid of that. Although they had a fight just before Mike left for the Army, he always had Dave on

his mind. He was always worrying about him.”

“He don’t have to worry no more,” the old woman cracked and her bloodless lips parted in a swift smile. Again her eyes went to his face. “Why’d you want to see him?”

“I had a message for him. A message from Mike.” He settled the suitcase on the bare floor and rubbed a big hand against the back of his neck. “Guess I came too late, huh?”

Mrs. Bedoni pushed herself from the banister with a bony arm. She reached out to open the door again.

“See you have a spare room, Mrs. Bedoni,” the man said slowly. He pulled the hat from his head. “How about letting me have it? I still have some business in this town. I might as well stay here.”

She rubbed a hand against her faded skirt and seemed to be trying to peer through the small suitcase.

He put a hand to his hip pocket. “I have money.”

“It’ll be eight dollars.” Her chin thrust out and she spat her words out crisply. “You got to pay two weeks in advance.”

He reached into his pocket. “It’s a deal.”

THE single window of the two-by-four ream looked out toward the bay. “This was Dave’s room. You can tell your message to the room,” the old woman had said and then had gone cackling down the steps.

He stood for a moment next to the window. Through the thick fog he could make out the faint glow of the lights of a ship. The wail of a horn went through the room.

He washed himself with the water coming from the slow trickling faucet in the corner next to the dresser. He was just starting to open the suitcase when there

was a knock on the door.

His long feet covered the room in two steps. "Yeah?"

"I got the sheets for the bed." It was a young girl's voice.

He pulled the door open. She didn't come higher than his shoulders. Her blond hair fell softly against the smooth line of her neck. There was a seeming haughtiness to her light blue eyes as they ran over the length of him. Her full lips were slightly parted and seemed forever pouting, forever waiting for the next kiss.

Her voice became light as soon as she saw him. "You wouldn't want to sleep without a sheet, would you?" An eyebrow arched as she swept into the room, holding the linen against her full bosom. She glanced over her shoulder full into his face. She liked what she saw and flashed her teeth.

He stood against the door and watched her tuck the ends of the sheet under the mattress. "Looks as if General Washington slept in that bed," he said.

She looked at him again and smiled, one hand smoothing out the sheet.

"You're Elise, aren't you?" He watched her closely.

Her face dropped. She quickly dropped the quilt to the bed.

"You're Dave's girl?"

"I was," she said sharply, her face now drained of all expression.

"He hasn't been electrocuted yet," he said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

She gave the pillow a last pat. "He will be," she said.

Taylor held the pack to the girl. "You don't seem too broken up about it."

She leaned forward to receive the light. The smoke curled up in front of her eyes and she flicked her long lashes. "It won't do no good to cry. Dave had a bad temper and he killed a man. Nothing I did could help him."

"Who did he kill?" asked Taylor. His eyes were down on the glowing end of his cigarette.

Elise sat back on the bed and again examined this tall man who stood next to the door, asking these questions, his face strangely immobile. He reminded her somehow of another tall man she had once known. "Guess there's no reason I can't tell you about it," she finally said, parting her lips slightly and narrowing her eyes. She flicked away some ash and it fell against her bare legs.

"There was another guy who roomed here. In the room next to this. His name was Homer Williams. He was a real wolf. He didn't mean no real harm, but he was a wolf. Dave was awfully jealous." She sighed and rose from the bed. She stepped close to the tall man. Her finger pressed gently against his shirt.

The soft smell of her hair seared at his nostrils. She continued talking. "He wouldn't listen to anything when he found me in Homer's room. He just went and killed Homer with a gun."

Taylor's arm went around her waist. Her eyes danced and she pulled quickly away. He wanted to come after her. He wanted to see how those impudent lips tasted. "That means you have no boy friend now."

"You're clever."

"How about joining me in a drink at that bar in twenty minutes," he asked.

"You're a big-time operator, huh?" she said, one hand on the knob. Then she shrugged. "I got nothing else to do."

He emptied the suitcase as soon as she left the room. He put the small .22 Colt automatic into his jacket pocket, grabbed up his rain slicker and quietly left the room.

The fog had gotten thicker. Once upon the narrow path that led from the back of the house he was more sure of himself. He

heard the low rumble of a crane working away over a freighter. The foghorns were now booming loudly. He felt his way slowly, his feet sinking slightly into the wet ground. Then he saw the pole. He crouched his head slightly until he came to the wood planking of the pier.

He stopped and listened. He could hear the water lapping at the piles. He moved forward again.

The gray sides of the boat loomed over him. He kneeled behind a crate and squinted at the porthole ablaze with light.

He was about to move forward again when he heard a step behind him. He turned quickly, but the shape was upon him. A flash of red enveloped his head and he fell down, down, down. . . .

HIS face was against the planking when he again became conscious of the lapping waves. The rumble of the crane's motor was now gone. There was just the periodic boom of a foghorn out in the blackness of the bay behind him.

The pain throbbed through his head. That was a good sign. He could feel the pain. He also knew where he was. That was also good. He put a hand to his head. It came away sticky. Slowly, one hand gripping the crate, he pulled himself to his feet. The portholes were now buried in blackness. He took an unsteady step away from the crate. His foot kicked at his hat. Quickly he felt at his pocket. The gun was still there.

He stood there for a moment, trying to regain his strength. Then, picking up the hat, he headed for the path leading to the house.

Beneath the feeble yellow light of a lamppost he glanced at his wrist watch. Eight-thirty! That meant he was out about thirty minutes.

He swung up the street and headed toward Tulia's Bar and Grill.

It was a small cellar dump and the juke box was still playing loud.

The fat, bald-headed man behind the bar watched him come in. The single figure standing at the bar also turned.

A pretty dirty-looking bum, Taylor thought to himself as he walked toward the booth at the rear. They're thinking that I'm another bum that just rolled in out of the bay. Again the quick smile flicked across his lips. Maybe that's the way they thought about Dave. A knocked-out bum with a limp that made him no good for anything.

Elise had a good start on him. She ground out the cigarette as he slid onto the chair opposite her. Her lips still looked as if they wanted kissing, thought Taylor.

"You crawl here over the gutter?" she asked, her small right hand curling around the glass.

"Tripped on a match." He watched her face.

"You're so funny," she said. She called across the room. "Tulio, bring us drinks. This guy is so funny we need drinks."

Taylor had his eyes up at the mirror that hung on the bare wall in front of him. He saw the figure at the bar lean forward, mutter something. Tulio nodded and the figure turned and went out through the front door.

“WHAT do you drink?" Elise asked. She pushed the collar of her coat back, stroked at her neck with her manicured fingers.

"Whatever you drink."

"Tulio!" she called out again. She leaned back against the chair. She was wearing a low-cut dress beneath the thin coat. "Bring us Martinis. This guy is a big-time operator!"

"Dave has good taste."

Her eyes flashed. "*Had!* I told you it

was *had*." She was going to say more but she checked herself. She took another cigarette from an open pack. "Tell me about Mike, Taylor," she said in a silken voice. "My mother said you knew him in the army."

"Yeah. We were always together. He would always tell me about how anxious he was to get back home, back to this street, to Dave. And he told me about you."

She cocked her head and smiled. "What did he tell about me?"

"He told me about how much Dave was in love with you."

She let the smoke drift out slowly. "Taylor," she finally said, "you're a sweet guy. I'll tell you something so that you don't feel too bad about what happens to Dave. That crippled guy hated his brother's guts!"

Taylor nodded thoughtfully. "I didn't know that."

Her mouth opened in a quick nervous laugh. "He was jealous. That's what! Jealous 'cause Mike was a big guy and got into the Army and he had to stay on this crumby street and live in an old broken-down joint."

Tulio wobbled over the sawdust-covered floor and breathed heavily as he placed the glasses on the table.

"Tulio—" the girl laughed—"I want you to meet Mr. Taylor. He knew Mike."

Taylor raised his face slowly, stared up at the red bundle of chins.

The bartender stared back, running his tongue over his broken teeth as he nodded. He turned and headed toward the juke box, gave it a kick and the blues song started playing.

Taylor had his eyes back on the mirror when the front door opened again. A thin, stooped man stepped in and looked toward the bar. Tulio's passivity disappeared. He swung quickly with his short arms and the

bent man stood hesitating next to the door.

"So many panhandlers around here," said the blonde when the door had slammed shut again. She picked up her drink and that same look came into her eyes. "To you, Taylor."

He picked up the drink. "No. To Dave."

Her lips tightened. "Yeah, sure," she said slowly. "Why not?"

He sipped at the drink. She watched him closely. He took more of the drink into his mouth.

TULIO bounded out from behind the bar as soon as Taylor's body slumped limply over the table. His many chins wobbled as he came quickly to the booth.

"You put in enough to knock out a horse," said the blonde, taking hold of the sprawled legs.

"Two horses, Elise. Quick. We'll take him into the back room."

They dragged him across the floor toward the single door at the rear.

"Where's Joe?" the blonde asked after they had dropped Taylor in a corner.

"He'll come in the back way." Tulio breathed heavily as he swung a thick foot at the crumpled figure. "Lousy flatfoot don't look so tough now, does he?"

"He can't feel nothing," the blonde said coldly. "You better take away his rod."

The bartender's hands went quickly over the fallen man. "He ain't got any, Elise."

"He must have dropped it when Joe smacked him down by the pier. How long will he be like this?"

"More than two hours." A low laugh rumbled up from his belly. "And in two hours' he'll never wake up."

A fist slammed against the back door. The girl quickly snapped open the lock.

The tall blond youth stepped slowly

into the room. "He fell for it, huh?" he asked, turning to his sister.

"That's my talent, isn't it, Joe?" said the blonde, glancing down at the sprawled figure.

"You got the stuff, Joe," asked Tulio, moving forward and rubbing his flabby palms against his apron.

The tall youth reached into his pocket, handed the bartender a small package. "I would have gotten it the first time if that guy hadn't barged around." He glared down at the prostrate figure of Taylor. "And I would have finished him off there, too, but someone began coming down the gangplank."

"Keller came in before," said Tulio. He grabbed up the small package. "He wanted some stuff. I got him out before copper-boy knew what was going on."

"You two better go to the front now. See that no one comes in."

The blonde hesitated.

Joe prodded her, taking out a .38. "Go on, kid. You know the way I gave it to Homer. He never felt it. Right between the eyes."

They stood outside until they heard the shot. Tulio sighed and patted at his belly. The blonde winced and swallowed hard. Then they both pushed their way into the room.

A .22 Colt automatic made them freeze in their tracks.

Pete Taylor stepped over the figure of the dead youth. "All right, neighbors. Turn around and start walking."

THE foghorns had ceased blowing when Detective Sergeant Grady drove his police car down the long narrow street. The first streaks of dawn were now coming across the bay.

"Taylor, are you sure you can trust her?" asked Detective Grady, parking in front of the last house on the street.

"Yeah. I think she always really liked me a lot. And after all she's lived always in a world of her own. Probably never knew anything about her son and daughter smuggling dope into the country and about Tulio peddling it."

He rubbed at his strangely impassive jaw. "And please, Grady, don't call me Taylor. That's what they called me after that bomb blew away my memory and a good part of my face. They were able to give me a new face. But my old name is good enough for me."

"OK, Mike," the detective said softly. "But one thing, what first gave you the idea that your brother was shielding this dame, Elise, thinking that she was the one who killed the Homer guy?"

Mike pushed open the door. His long legs reached out to the curb. "That story she gave me about Homer making a play for her. There were only two things wrong with Homer. One was he went too much for the happy powder and the other was that he just liked to gab too much."

"And what about that doped Martini?"

"Just a hunch. After Joe tried to knock me off on the pier, I figured that maybe they'd begun to get ideas about me. I slipped my gun in the side of my shoe. I guess Elise was too scared to look closely at it when she had hold of my feet." He stepped out of the car. "Tulio never did know how to make Martinis. I figured it was hopped up so I didn't swallow any of it."

Mike watched the police car drive off. Then he turned toward the house. It was pretty bad. But with rooms as scarce as snowballs in hell at least it was something for his brother Dave to come home to.