



By

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Live Bait

DAVIS P. BARRETT'S mother, who had died when he was six, doubtless thought that he was a beautiful child; but then, she was his mother, and something like thirty odd years may have changed little Davis. Mrs. Barrett's youngest son's face was now the Rock of Gibraltar done in that shade of bronze which comes from long exposure to the breath of blistering deserts and tropical jungles. His broad mouth was a thin, straight line no wider than the edge of an officer's dress-sword, and somewhat harder. His blue eyes glowed with ominous,

They made the cover of the building with only a second to spare. A drumming rattle of bullets followed—splintering the door and the glass around them

volcanic mirth as they watched two perfectly barbered, tailored, and manicured gentlemen whose tables were at the corner of the tiny dance floor, and to Barrett's left.

The two racketeers were inseparable friends. They had assumed—somewhat erroneously, as it later developed—that their being at Club

Martinique was pure coincidence, and they had agreed to combine their tables when their feminine companions arrived.

A waiter was bringing a note to the gentleman whose table was nearest Barrett: Guido Pichetti. Barrett's shaggy, reddish brows rose just perceptibly. His chin, which he fingered abstractedly, was thrust forward. There was something tense and expectant about Barrett, as though he were a panther about to spring. His interest seemed centered on the note, rather than on the perceptible bulge of the left breasts of the nicely fitted dinner jackets of Messieurs Pichetti and Spud Malone.

Club Martinique was a mirthful madhouse of blatant music, alcoholic laughter, and tinkle of ice against the sides of many tall glasses. White arms and shoulders, and whiter shirt fronts stared spectrally through the bluish glare of the spotlight that made the shifting bands of smoke seem like phantom serpents writhing in the warmth of a ghostly sun. The reek of gin, perfume, cosmetics, and unextinguished cigarette butts was the odor of gaiety to most of those assembled: but to Davis Barrett it was the exhalation of death, and the end of a story....

Guido Pichetti had opened the note. His swarthy features flushed with rage, then bleached sallow as he leaped from his table. What he said to Malone, and what Malone replied was not audible above the blare of the music; but Barrett's expectancy was not in vain. There was an almost simultaneous flashing of hands to shoulder holsters—

Barrett's lips relaxed enough to reveal a glimpse of his teeth as two pistols blazed into the satanic bluish moonlight, and their roar, almost a single, prolonged report, bellowed above the brazen clang of the orchestra. Barrett ignored the ensuing uproar and confusion as a glance, before the crowd became too dense about the fallen, assured him that the theretofore bosom friends had killed each other. He sighed deeply, slouched against the back of his chair, and for the first time realized how highly keyed he had been for the past half hour.

Justice that was beyond the power of the law.
Vengeance...and the end of the story....

A BURLY, red-faced, grim mouthed man emerged from the gaping, babbling, hysterical crowd that pushed in as close as it could to the double X's that marked the respective spots where Guido Pichetti and Spud Malone had become public benefactors. In his hands he had a letter and an envelope, both of which he thrust before Barrett.

"Dave," he demanded, "what do you know about this? One look tells me it's fishy as kippered herring—even if Damon and Pythias were too dumb to realize it."

Barrett regarded first the envelope, then the letter, then John Healy, Chief of the Detective Bureau, who was beginning to understand why he had received a tip to be present, though unseen, at Club Martinique.

"End of the story, John. It's been a strain, figuring out ways of making these rats kill each other."

Healy grunted, nodded, then said, "Pretty good, Dave. Only, it's not the end of the story by a big damn sight! You've not finished something, you've started something. Watch your step."

Mrs. Barrett *might* have been right, some thirty years ago. Her lean, broad shouldered son, while far from handsome, in his lighter moments had a pleasant smile, and an engaging friendly manner.

"Thanks, John," he said quite affably as he rose from his seat. "Come out to the house some night soon. I have some mighty interesting jig-saw puzzles."

And a few moments later, Barrett was at the wheel of his Issotta, driving up Saint Charles Avenue toward Audoubon Place. He was smiling to himself at the gullibility of two dear friends whose lurking suspicion of each other had been detonated by the note Barrett had prepared and planted.

Two days later—thirty-six hours, to be accurate—Barrett's smile vanished. What he had called the end of a story had become the beginning of a longer and grimmer tale. His blue eyes were hard as sword points as he paced up and down the wine-red Boukhara rug in his library.

"Marie," he demanded abruptly as he halted and faced the girl who sat buried in the depths of an over-stuffed chair, "are you sure Lee hasn't just left town suddenly on urgent business?"

Marie Simpson shook her blonde head and dabbed her tear-reddened eyes. She had never learned the art of effective weeping.

"No, Dave. He'd have wired or phoned me by this time." She swallowed a sob, then said pointedly, "And I don't think you believe he's left on a business trip, either."

Barrett's features tensed. Vengeance was bearing bitter fruit.

"Suppose you run along home," he suggested with a gentleness that seemed out of keeping with his rugged features and the usually incisive snap of his voice. "You know I'd go through hell and high water for Lee. And if there's anything off color about his being missing for the past twelve hours, I'll tear the roof off."

As he spoke, he helped Marie Simpson with her coat.

"Dave, do you think—"

"I'm not thinking anything," he evaded. "But I'm going to see. Now run along, and pull yourself together."

AS the door clicked closed behind Marie Simpson, Barrett's eyes flashed to the half opened desk drawer. During the brief interview he had feared that his very effort not to think of what the drawer contained, not to let his eyes stray toward it would betray him to Marie's intuition. His hand halted midway as it reached for the envelope.

"Jackass!" he said aloud. "Healy was right."

Barrett's bitter thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of John Healy. He indicated the chair that Marie Simpson had left but a few moments ago—or how long had it been that he had stared at that desk drawer?

"What's new and good, John?"

"About Lee Simpson, and it's not good," said Healy as he selected a cigar from Barrett's humidor and jammed his bulk into the spacious chair. "You're his number one friend. Where is he?"

"God knows," replied Barrett. "And I will if I live long enough. Has his wife—"

"Uhuh. Run me ragged," interrupted Healy. "But no sign of him."

"Where do I come in?"

"Simpson's not got two nickels to click together," answered Healy. "And no enemies. The

way I got it doped out, someone is getting at you for that job you pulled at Club Martinique. Somebody took a tumble."

Barrett flinched as at the thrust of a red hot iron.

"Right, John. I'd rather face a machine gun than this."

"Don't worry. You probably will, before it's over. Have you gotten any demands for ransom or the like?"

Barrett shook his head.

"You're a damn liar," declared Healy with the license of friendship.

"Have it your own way. And if you've any dope, pass it along. I'm on the job myself."

"No good, Dave," said Healy with a peremptory gesture. "That's the trouble. You've been on the job too much. You smoked out so many of these rats—and now they're pulling your teeth by snatching Simpson."

"My teeth," countered Barrett with an ominous glitter in his eyes, "aren't pulled yet. I want you to keep your hands off. None of your men following me around when I take the warpath. Will you give me a break? Stand clear?"

Healy saw Barrett's glance shift and linger on a rack of firearms that made the library look very much like an arsenal.

"Sold."

"Thanks, John. And remember, I've got my reasons for playing a lone hand."

UPON Healy's departure, Barrett re-read for the twentieth time the letter he had received that morning: "*Bring \$20,000 in new, unmarked hundred dollar bills to the main entrance of the Crescent Compress Company at midnight. If there is any sign of police interference, or if my men do not report by one A.M., we'll ship Simpson's head to join his finger. Come alone and unarmed.*"

There was no signature. None was needed. Jake Moroni had made a final counterattack that would not fail as the others had. A small parcel which had accompanied the letter bore witness that the enemy meant business. It contained the fourth finger of Simpson. The blackened nail, recently crushed by a hammer tap, identified it beyond any doubt.

Barrett knew that the demand for the ransom was camouflage. Moroni had based his *coup* on

the friendship of Simpson and Barrett. He knew that Barrett would willingly and knowingly walk into an ambush for the sake of Simpson.

"The —— ——!" muttered Barrett as he thrust the letter back into his desk. "Using live bait...."

He grinned sourly, and added, "I'll do the same."

AT about the same hour of that same morning, Jake Moroni was holding high court in his armored office in an otherwise deserted warehouse near the river front. Moroni's swivel chair was a throne, and his well-tailored suit of imported worsteds was the imperial purple that had slipped from the shoulders of his predecessor when the muzzle of a .25-3000 reached through a loophole in a brick wall and snapped a tiny slug through a pistol proof vest.

In front of Moroni was a mahogany desk entirely suitable to an executive whose payrolls were as great as those of the city, and whose revenues were greater. At his left was a gaudy Japanese screen that added to the grotesquerie of the crude office. The screen, however, was no evidence of the house beautiful; it served a useful purpose. The center of one of its painted chrysanthemums had been neatly cut out with a knife.

Moroni's swarthy features smiled unpleasantly as his dark eyes bored coldly into the pudgy, evil faced ruffian before him.

"Orders are orders," he declared with ominous evenness of tone.

"I don't give a ——!" exclaimed Moroni's lieutenant, and commander in chief of the Praetorian guard of hop heads, and assorted assassins, "Tinkering with Barrett is like boxing with a tiger. Shaking him down for twenty grand to save Simpson's hide is one thing. That's easy. But trying to grab Barrett when he delivers the jack is plain foolishness."

"Mmmm...hm," breathed Moroni. His snake eyes flickered to the right. He seemed for an instant to be peering through and past the thugs who sat on a bench along the wall. "Carver! Are you man enough?"

A tall, rangy fellow whose bony features wore a warped, perpetual grin, fidgeted for a moment with the brim of his hat. His glance

switched from Moroni to the lieutenant on the carpet, and back to Moroni again.

"Jeez, that ain't a fair question," he protested. "I'm workin' for you, but I'm directly under Schwartz. Ya know—"

He made a gesture of resignation.

"Mmm...discipline," murmured Moroni. "Yes. Discipline is splendid." Then he snapped a question: "How about you other punks?" The other two on the bench started, frowned ponderously, nodding and rubbing their chins as though a portentous decision was on the verge of birth. The atmosphere of the tiny, sound-proof office became electric from the tension.

"Yellow from your back bone to your belly!" crackled Moroni. "Just like this slob."

The slob on the carpet flushed.

"Who's yellow, you—"

His hand made a swift gesture; but it was not fast enough. A spurt of flame poured from the loophole of the chrysanthemum. As the pudgy lieutenant reeled crazily and collapsed, a pistol appeared in Moroni's hand. The three along the wall kept their hands rigidly motionless.

"You ——s gimme a headache," said Moroni pleasantly. "Mike—Otto! Get the hell outa here while I talk to Carver."

As the pair left the office, audibly sighing their relief at dismissal, Moroni beckoned to Sam Carver.

"I been fed up with him for a long time. You got guts enough to take this job?"

Carver swallowed just once.

"Sure thing. Only I'd like to know just what you want done."

"That's the talk," approved Moroni as he replaced his pistol. "When Barrett shows up tonight, I want you birds to nab him, tie him, and bring him to the *Carlotta*. And I don't want you to croak him—"

Sam Carver frowned perplexedly.

"Jeez, that's a contract. He's a fighting fool, and—" He saw Moroni's eyes shifting speculatively toward the man who lay on the floor. "But I'll make it—but it won't hurt to tap him on the nut just to keep him quiet, without really *hurtin'* him?"

Moroni nodded and smiled thinly.

"Just remember that a dead man can't sign an order for fifty grand. But *after* we get the

dough....”

Carver grinned.

“Sorta double play, eh, Mr. Moroni?”

“Right. And just a bit of advice, Sam. You been getting too friendly with my secretary.”

His voice was low, confidential, and alarming.

“Honest, I ain’t done—I mean, I didn’t mean a thing. Just bein’ friendly to Nor—Miss Arradonda.”

Moroni stroked his bluish jaw and smiled affably.

“I understand that, Sam. But it just don’t look right. She’s nothing to me a-tall, only....”

“I got ya, Mr. Moroni,” Carver hastened to assure his chief.

“Okay. And no slips tonight. I’m counting on you. Twenty grand, and Barrett in shape to sign an order for fifty more, and then we’ll have no more phoney letters and civil war.”

DESPITE his chief’s warning, Sam Carver phoned Norma Arradonda, and after being assured that the coast was clear, called at her apartment. He came to the point at once.

“You and me are strangers from now on. Positively farewell appearance.”

Norma was dark and shapely, and lived up to the exotic ear pendants she affected. Her full lips were red as a sabre slash against the transparent, creamy pallor of her skin.

“Matter, Sam?” Her delicately pencilled brows rose in Moorish arches.

“Moroni’s set on rubbing me out,” Carver explained somberly. “That Barrett job—”

“You have been buying me too many drinks at Club Martinique,” mused Norma.

“So I heard. And here I am.”

“Still,” resumed Norma, “I think you’re heated up about nothing.”

Carver shook his head.

“Barrett has been on the spot half a dozen times—and each time he’s beaten it, with a surprise party of his own. And when he pulls a dumb one, his luck saves him.

“I’m scared of that guy’s luck. He’s a hoodoo. And he’s filled a private graveyard with mugs that tried to get him. Snatching his best friend is like spitting in a tiger’s eye.”

Norma shook her head.

“Wrong, Sam. Him and Simpson are old buddies. And if you don’t return by a certain time, it’s Simpson’s head. He knows it. That’s going to make a boy scout out of Barrett.”

“I don’t care if it’s supposed to make a good Christian of him,” countered Carver dolefully. “I’m bein’ framed—just like Dutch—”

Carver checked himself abruptly, swallowed, said nothing.

“Yes?” murmured Norma.

“Nothing!” snapped Sam. “I’m doing this job, and then I’m going to the country to raise chickens. There’s no percentage.”

He reached for his hat. Norma stopped him at the door.

“Since you’re not going to see me any more,” she said, “you might at least kiss me good bye—you’re a good egg, Sam, and I hope you get the breaks...oh, just a minute. ...”

He paused as she scribbled an address and a telephone number on a slip of paper.

“Call me here, once in a while—but *disguise your voice*. Someone might be listening in on an extension. Don’t say too much. Just enough so I’ll know you’re thinking of me. He’s got his guts, trying to keep you from even being friendly in a nice way.... ‘Bye, Sam.’”

Norma was part of the dictator’s intricate web of evasion and espionage. While terming her a secretary was perhaps a shade too figurative, hers was an important part in Moroni’s system of seeming to be in several places at once, and proving it by answering, from one point, calls to half a dozen offices. Norma was much of the brain of the organization—but Norma was, after all human....

THAT night Barrett dressed very deliberately, as though for a dinner engagement instead of a rendezvous with kidnappers.

“Damn your black hide, Amos,” he said reproachfully, as he regarded the tie that his white haired old colored handyman had laid out. “Do you think that goes with this suit?”

“Yas suh, Mistah Dave! Ah thinks it’s jes go’geous,” the old man insisted with a nod and a grin. Then he turned to the rack to replace his favorite among Barrett’s array.

Barrett was content with the amendment submitted by Amos. As he adjusted it, he fondly

regarded the Colt .45 that lay in his dresser drawer, and regretfully shook his head.

"That black scarf, Amos," he said abstractedly, as he detached a gold penknife from his chain. He took the scarf, snapped it several times, whiplike; and all the while, one eye half closed, he pondered as though considering a hitherto unweighed element of the evening's dangerous work. Barrett finally knotted the penknife into a corner of the scarf, then stuffed several packets of hundred dollar bills into his pockets.

"Amos," he said, "here is the key to the Ford. In case I don't come back, you can have it."

The old man's eyes widened, and his black face lengthened.

"Whhhh-y, Mistah Dave," he sputtered.

"Stick around and watch the phone," said Barrett. "And you don't know where I've gone—not even if the President calls!"

"Yas, suh, Mistah Dave. An' ain't nuthin' goin' a happen to you."

"I wish," reflected Barrett as he took the wheel of the heavy sedan that was next to the Ford coupé, "that I could be sure Amos is right."

Barrett parked near the corner of Munn and Tchoupitoulas Streets. Even by daylight, the vicinity seemed to have been blighted by a lurching vengeance that had doomed to failure the warehouses and ship's chandleries that line the river front.

"Munn Street...one block long—but it may take me the rest of my life to reach the end of it," was Barrett's thought as he sought to accustom his eyes to the blackness. The moon was still so low that the shadows of the buildings on the right blended with black bulk of those on the left. He shivered as the penetrating wind bit like a bayonet. Barrett drew his top coat about him. His fingers, grasping the lapels, touched the hard silk of his scarf.

"One concealed weapon, anyway...."

A gold penknife. If he had brought a pistol, he might be tempted to use it, and thus surely kill Lee Simpson as well as the one who received his fire.

"God, but it's dark...."

BARRETT was used to the haunted blacknesses of Asiatic jungles, vibrant with

the silent slinking of the eater in search of the eaten; yet Munn Street, which led to the river, was shrouded by an obscurity more malignant than any he had ever penetrated. Barrett shivered again, but this time, not from cold. He smiled, and his gait became fluent as that of the hunter.

Barrett forced himself to consider the moment at hand rather than the other life which hung in the balance. It was his fault that Simpson was in danger, and his duty to extricate him, regardless of the cost.

Twenty paces into the darkness. Then someone emerged from a doorway and said in a low, decisive voice, "Stick 'em up, Jack."

But it was the muzzle of a pistol that someone else jammed into the small of his back that gave force to the command. Barrett's hands rose.

"Now back into this doorway—Mike, frisk him, right now!"

Deft fingers went through his pockets. There was a mutter of satisfaction as Mike drew out four packets of bills. For an instant the beam of a tiny fountain pen flashlight winked at the numerals that marked the denomination. The reflected glow, however, revealed more than the direct light: Barrett noted that his captors were not masked. It seemed to make no difference to them that Barrett had in that moment's illumination seen enough to identify them.

There was an unavoidable conclusion that Barrett had to draw—unless he could convince himself that his captors had been careless, and had not realized that Barrett would ever afterwards recognize them.

"All right, fellows," said Barrett pleasantly. "You've got your money—now where's Simpson?"

"Ain't that a hot one, Sam?" chuckled the one who had searched Barrett.

"Simpson is in a safe place," came the reply. "And you're coming with us. Think we're going to turn you loose before this money's been checked to see nothing's phoney?"

"Reasonable," admitted Barrett. "I'll sort of be taking Simpson's place, so you can turn him loose right away."

"Uhuh," grunted Sam, apparently pleased by the prisoner's ready acquiescence. But to Barrett the arrangement was confirmation of his first

suspicions.

"Mike, tie this bird," commanded Sam. "Lower your arms, you—but don't try any funny work."

"How is he going to climb down to the boat if his hands are tied?" wondered Mike. "And that Jacob's ladder up the *Car*—"

"Shut up, you boob!" snapped Sam Carver. "Grab that cord!"

"Aw what if he does—" countered Mike, then checked himself.

But that slip sufficed to assure Barrett that he was destined to board one of the many abandoned ships, war-time built merchant marine, moored along the opposite bank of the river. The secreted penknife might enable him to cut his bonds; but a doubt had risen in Barrett's mind: would Simpson be released, now that the ransom had been delivered, or would he be executed as part of the reprisal?

Barrett's captors were indifferent to future identification; and that could betoken but one thing other than gross carelessness.

A desperate scheme crystallized; and in an instant Barrett made his decision.

Sam, pistol in hand, was a blur in the darkness a yard ahead. Mike was fumbling in the gloom at Barrett's left, seeking a coil of rope. Surprise can work wonders. Barrett felt the enemy's assurance, and hoped that they did not sense his own.

Barrett's fingers closed on the end of the scarf about his neck and dragged it clear. They thought that he was unarmed; yet that folded square of silk was a silent, instantly fatal weapon which was invisible in the darkness.

As Mike rose and turned, Barrett moved with that catlike swiftness which had so often served him—and saved him. The silken scarf, weighted with the knife, whipped about Mike's throat. There was no warning in its touch. It seemed to be but the trick of a gust of wind; and in the obscurity of the doorway the gesture did not register.

The weighted end passed over Mike's shoulder as Barrett side-stepped, seized the enfolded penknife with his left hand and at the same time put all his weight behind his right, which grasped the free end of the scarf.

"Wh—"

Cut off before it was spoken; and the sharp cracking sound meant nothing to Sam Carver, least of all that Mike's neck had been broken.

All in one flashing instant; one fluent, continuous, deadly swift gesture. Had there been a blow, a shot, an outcry, Carver would have acted at once. He sensed that something deadly and inexplicable had happened before his eyes; but he had also to reconcile his intuition with the knowledge that Barrett's plays had always been accompanied by the flash of steel, the jetting flame of pistols, the impact of hard driving fists.

He lost an instant before he clubbed his pistol so that in accordance with orders he would not kill the fifty thousand dollar prisoner. And that instant sufficed for Mike's body to catapult out of the darkness, drive Carver crashing back against the wall.

Then savage fingers closed about his throat as the first blow of his pistol butt struck Mike's limp body to the ground. Carver writhed and struggled, smote blindly at the enemy within his guard. His feet were tramping on a man's body....

"Mike," he contrived to gasp hoarsely before his breath was utterly cut off.

Barrett's fingers sank relentlessly home. Lee Simpson's severed finger lent a murderous fury to Barrett's constricting grasp. He followed Carver to the paving. The blows of the pistol butt had ceased... *hours* ago, it seemed.... Finally he relaxed his grip, drew a deep breath, realized for the first time that glancing, misdirected blows had battered his head and shoulders. Barrett stretched out on the cold paving, dazed by his exertions and the slaying frenzy and the destructive nervous tension of his lightning assault.

IN a moment, however, he recovered. He was trembling violently, seeking to reassemble the elements of the suddenly devised scheme. Then it all came back to him; but before going about what he intended to do, he paused to search the two who lay on the floor of the deep doorway recess.

Dead, not merely out.

He scrutinized the contents of their pockets, piece by piece.

"Here's the touch!" he exclaimed as by the light of the fountain-pen flash lamp, fortunately undamaged, he read the notation on a slip of paper, in feminine script, "*Norma—Main 7771—*"

blind listed, so learn it and then destroy this."

That Sam Carver was a fair approximation of Barrett as to stature and conformation had already entered the plan; but this brief note suggested an interesting amendment, despite the fact that the open implication of an undercover friendship *might* be misleading. Yet, from his observation of Moroni's organization, he could at least be certain that the note was written by Norma Arradonda, and not by some obscure namesake.

Barrett's eyes glittered with that same fierce mirth of two nights ago, at Club Martinique. Then he remembered Lee Simpson's peril, and his mirth became exceedingly bitter. Barrett strode swiftly toward the ferry landing, a block further upstream, saw that the aged ticket taker was nodding at his post, and stepped into the telephone booth. He called Amos and gave the old negro two simple orders. This done, Barrett returned to the doorway on Munn Street and set to work exchanging clothing with the late Sam Carver.

In a few minutes the first move against the enemy was completed. With the flashlight Barrett checked his work to see that he had made no slips in the dark.

"If this don't work...good God, but it's *got* to work! It can't flop!" he told himself as he repressed a shudder at the thought of the dead man's apparel that now clothed him.

He heard the sound of a car pulling to the curbing. Old Amos... nevertheless Barrett advanced with drawn pistol until he was close enough to identify his servant.

"Go back home, Amos," he directed. "Leave the Ford here."

BARRETT dashed back to the doorway of death, shouldered Sam Carver's body, and placed it at the wheel of the sedan. Mike was then stowed in the Ford coupé which Amos still had an excellent chance of inheriting. From the coupé Barrett took a double barrelled, ten gauge shotgun. He lowered the window of the sedan....

A sheet of flame, a roar, the splintering of glass—Barrett knew that his work had been good, but he did not care to verify the fact by close inspection. He disconnected a gas line, let the ground beneath the car become drenched, then struck and tossed a match. As the flames rose in a lurid column, he turned toward the Ford coupé, to

drive down town.

"It's got to work," he reiterated as he banished, by sheer force of will, the panic that assailed him at the thought of failure.

Barrett, hard bitten, and seasoned as he was by the World War, was shaken by the gruesome work of the past few minutes—and then he remembered Lee Simpson's severed finger, and Moroni's characteristic duplicity as revealed by the two who did not know that a silken scarf was a deadly weapon.

"Live bait, eh?" he muttered grimly.

Barrett drew up to the curbing some ten blocks short of Canal Street. He dragged Mike from the coupé, supporting him as though he were hopelessly drunk. The vicinity, though bustling during the day with trucks approaching and leaving the establishments of the produce dealers and commission merchants, was utterly deserted at night. Nevertheless, Barrett played his part by muttering incoherently as though he were as intoxicated as his burden was supposed to be.

Barrett knew that there was a telephone pay-station in the entrance that led to the second floor of the building. He maneuvered Mike into position, supported him with his elbow, then called Norma Arradonda. Barrett made an effort to disguise his voice to resemble the husky rasp of Mike.

"Norma... This is Mike," he began hurriedly. "You know—Sam's buddy—"

"Yes?" came the voice of Norma, with a peculiar, rising inflection that sent chills creeping up his spine. Warning? Anxiety? Dawning suspicion? A host of fatal possibilities trooped home in an instant. Lee Simpson's life was at stake. And then—

"Sam croaked Barrett and took the twenty grand—"

Barrett distinctly caught Norma's gasp of amazement and consternation. But what else? Concern for Sam's fate when Moroni learned of the trickery—*perhaps*.

"We're checkin' out. Meet us at Ponchartrain Junction! Quick! Yeah, hurry like—"

Barrett dropped the receiver, drew a pistol, and at the same time broke off his conversation to cry out in terror, "Sam—fer Chris—"

The crackle of the pistol cut short the shriek. Over the wire, the deception must have been

perfect.

"That, and Mike full of lead," was Barrett's thought as he leaped to the coupé, "ought to convince them I'm dead and Sam's skipped with the ransom. Now let's see what they'll have at Ponchartrain Junction."

Barrett headed for the first city station beyond the main L & N depot.

Simpson, in view of Barrett's supposed death, would have no further vengeance-appeal for Moroni. But if Moroni suspected that it was not Barrett who was at the wheel of the flame warped sedan—!

BARRETT was grateful that he knew of several readily accessible public phones which were inconspicuous. There was one on Decatur Street, across from the French Market coffee stall. Made to order! He called John Healy at his residence.

"I've been bumped off. You'll find my body at Munn and Tchoupitoulas Streets," he informed the Chief of Detectives. "Land on Moroni and his boys for killing me. Right now, and for God's sake, shake it up! Stick to that story. It's foolproof. And it's Simpson's head if it flops."

Barrett smacked the receiver into place and drove on.

"That'll keep 'em off of Lee, wherever he is."

Barrett, whose successful campaigning had in the past been largely dependent on the proper interpretation of underworld whispers, had heard of Sam Carver's interest in Norma. Garrulity is the most fatal affliction of the racketeer. Thus, though Barrett inferred that Carver's interest had blossomed beyond mildness, he was not certain enough to predict her attitude toward Carver's supposed proposition. She might be loyal to Moroni—in which case there would be a reception committee awaiting Carver as represented by Davis P. Barrett; but that was a chance that could not be avoided.

Barrett parked in a side street, and taking full advantage of the darkness along the L & N tracks, made a careful reconnaissance. His wearing Carver's gray suit made him a good target; and Barrett was still uncertain as to what and who would meet him.

He saw a cab pull up across the tracks, heard the door slam, and watched its tail light disappear.

The passenger was a woman, and she was approaching the deserted station. The waiting room was in darkness save for a single feeble globe. By its dim glow he recognized the shapely figure, exotic coiffure, and graceful, confident gait of Norma Arradonda as she crossed the threshold.

Bait...live bait...who else might be there....

"Live bait it is," he told himself as he advanced. "*But which of us?*"

The girl, who had been watching his approach, emerged to meet him. She barely suppressed a cry of alarm as she realized that Sam Carver's gray suit did not contain Sam Carver. But Barrett's smile reassured her to a degree, so that she was perplexed rather than alarmed, Barrett, whatever he was, was not a woman killer.

"Sam didn't kill me," he explained. "That was just a handy stall. We made a bargain. Moroni thinks I'm dead. You know where Simpson is. Here's the twenty grand I'm giving you, from Sam, if you'll tell me where my buddy is held a prisoner."

It caught Norma off guard, but she quickly assimilated it.

"This money," she said, "is your security against Sam, and Simpson's our—"

"Right," said Barrett. "Now you get on that phone and get things going. The minute I know that Simpson is in the clear, you get the money. And don't worry about Sam—Moroni can't touch him."

"Dirty trick," was Barrett's thought as he caught a significant light in Norma's eyes. "She likes Carver...plenty."

But the memory of Simpson's severed finger stilled his qualms, and steeled him to carry on with his playing on the girl's obvious affection for Carver.

"But he'll know you're not dead," she objected.

"No. Mike's doubling for me—Sam didn't trust him, so—"

He made a gesture of finality. Norma understood. Despite her connection with the racket, she was for a moment taken aback by the grimness of Sam Carver's subterfuge.

AS she paused for words, Barrett suddenly realized that he had been off guard for a moment, that his keen attention had relaxed. He

glanced over his shoulder, caught a metallic glint. And before Norma could utter the words that were on her lips, Barrett's hand shot forward—not to his holster, but to the girl, striking her to the floor as Barrett himself plunged forward.

He made it with a split second to spare: a drumming fusillade rattled through the silence, and sent the panes beyond them splintering and tinkling to the floor.

"Wiggle clear!" hissed Barrett as he whipped his prone body to cover and flashed his pistol into line. The gunner was momentarily off guard, and certain that his volley had dropped Barrett and Norma. But the smack of Barrett's pistol sent him pitching backward. Another, coming from cover, returned Barrett's fire, spattering him with wood splinters, but doing no damage.

"Come out and take it, Carver," said a voice. "Or we'll chop the dump down and the Jane'll get it too."

"Smack!"

And a grunt of pain.

"Spill it!" urged Barrett in a low voice. "Don't be fussy about ratting! Can't you see somebody tapped your line, and Moroni's out for you and Sam?"

A siren screamed in the distance.

Barrett's pistol fire, now more accurate, halted the charge before it got a fair start.

"Here's the note you gave Sam. That proves I'm on the level."

He emptied his pistol, and drew the other salvaged weapon. Help was close; but the enemy could stick to the last second and still make a getaway. Some of them were slipping around to attack from the rear.

"Come across!" he barked above the deadly chatter of the automatic and the splintering of glass and wood. "You can't get away with this. You've got to leave town. And twenty grand—*crack-crack*—'s a good stake."

"The *Carlotta*. Opposite Jackson ferry," she replied.

"Phone the police!" commanded Barrett as he jammed home a fresh clip, wondering as he did so whether he could hold the rush.

But the arrival of the police patrol spared Barrett the test. As the melee subsided, John Healy entered the station, alone.

"You jackass!" he demanded, "why didn't

you tell me you were throwing a party here?"

"Cops hanging around would've crabbed the works. Send some men to the *Carlotta*. Get Simpson. And tell your outfit Sam Carver is here, dead. Don't let *anyone* get wise!"

Healy was perplexed, but he asked no questions.

"Duval! MacCarthy!" he bellowed. "Get this, and hop to it!"

He repeated Barrett's instructions, then added, "Don't lose a second—I'll hold this down—to hell with what's in here, hurry, damn it!"

AS the patrol car took off with a roar and a clash of gears, Healy turned to Barrett.

"Lord, Dave," he said, seeing Barrett's drawn, white features—white as his tropic tan allowed. "Did they get—"

"No. Didn't plug me, much—but if anything's slipped—Lee Simpson—"

Healy's eyes opened wide as Farrell explained a *few* things.

"But I don't quite understand," he protested.

"You're dumb!" snapped Barrett, giving him a hard glance. And then, "Norma, you don't have to wait here until Lee's in the clear—here's the dough. We'll drive to the airport and get you out of town right now!"

"But we found Mike Tomaso's body in a *phone booth*," Healy persisted, ignoring Barrett's murderous glance. "Not in your burned up car. Who—"

Norma's slender form jerked as from an electric shock. Her features twitched from the horror of sudden understanding. Then her hand flashed forward. Four packets of bills caught Barrett full in the face.

"You dirty —— ——!" she said with a deliberation that made the words even deadlier than their coming from a woman's lips.

Barrett nodded. Healy seized her wrists.

"I feel like one, Norma," he said solemnly. "But Lee Simpson was my friend. Had to do it. Now you get out of town, and take this dough—call it insurance money—anything you please."

"You big sap, are you giving her that jack?" demanded Healy.

His voice boomed above Norma's low, terribly calm reiterations of hatred, and contempt,

and grief, grotesquely mingled.

Barrett started to answer, then changed his mind. He hardly expected the detective to understand his feelings regarding the evening's strategy.

"I hope they've killed him!" shrieked Norma, her calmness breaking.

The telephone in the closest booth rang. Healy, who had given his men the number, snatched the receiver. He listened for a moment; and during that moment Barrett felt strangely empty, and futile. He poised himself on the balls of both feet...his fists were clenching painfully tight...he forced himself not to think of anything...

"All clear, Dave!" roared Healy's voice after several age-long seconds. "Simpson's okay!"

Barrett slowly exhaled the breath he had been holding. He listened again to Norma's invective, once more low-voiced. Then he smiled, shook his head.

"John, drive her out to the airport and see she gets out of town—charter a plane if necessary, but get her out, or her life's not worth a dime."

He hitched his belt, redistributed the weight of the emptied pistols, and shrugged as he heard the grief stricken girl's final appraisal of him.

"*C'est la guerre!*—or something like that. They oughtn't have used live bait..."

Will You Die If a Dog Howls Under Your Window?

SUPPOSE a stray dog chooses your window, from all the windows in civilization, to howl under tonight.

Will it give you bad dreams about dying a horrible death?

This is the dread superstition of American farmers, and those living in open spaces. In any hamlet you may find old wives who will tell you how Mr. So-and-So was kicked to death, or mangled by his threshing machine, say, after a dog howled under his window.

What is the origin of this superstition?

Like so many beliefs in evil, it had a definite beginning in an actual experience. That is, if one may believe the folklore of Europe. And, like so many beliefs in evil, it has been distorted with the passing of centuries. It was the screech of a hawk, not the howl of a dog, that began the superstition. This is the story, according to old folk-tales:

In the heart of the Black Forest—this was before Columbus dreamed of sailing Westward—lived a princess. A beautiful maiden, in a tower. She had been seen once, at a tournament, by a knight from far lands. He lost his heart to her. And she smiled, once and beguilingly, at him.

On Walpurgis Night—when the fairies come out and dance in the moonbeams—the knight sallied forth to rescue the maiden from her tower. He and his retainers drew close to the pile of stone.

The moon shone clearly. Through the trees the knight saw his beloved, languishing at a high window. He stepped into a clearing, and waved to her. She waved back. He and his men rushed toward the tower.

Suddenly an owl, perched in a cranny of rock beneath the maiden's window, screeched.

The sound startled the princess—so runs the legend—and she fell from the window. The fall killed her.

The story of the princess in the tower, and the screech of the owl that caused her to fall, spread throughout Europe. British warriors, home from forays on the Continent, told the yarn as they gulped their musty ale.

"The screech of an owl under a window always brings death," an old wiseacre exclaimed, with a knowing shake of the head. And so came the superstition to America, with some of the first settlers. But owls are scarce here, especially in the treeless spaces. Dogs are plentiful. And nothing is more terrifying than the sudden howling of a dog under one's window on a dark, silent night. Especially a dog, moaning for its sick master. And when the master dies—the superstition lives!