



Al Ford fired first,
and Randau Jack-
knifed, went to his
knees

WELCOME HOME, SUCKER

By JOE ARCHIBALD

Paroled from prison, Jimmy Rohan Is caught in a murder snare while following the grim trail of hidden loot!

I AM getting out tomorrow. I won't have to look at this rotten cell any more. It is seven feet long and four and a half wide, and has a wash basin painted green, a stool and bunk with three dusty blankets and a burlap mat.

I'm not mad at anybody, not even Detective "Mitch" Hardesty, who was really the cause of my being sent here for from three-to-ten. I'd told Mitch that when I finished my rap I would fix his wagon but

good.

A guy says a lot of things sometimes that he doesn't mean.

I can't wait until I see Nora. How that girl has fought to get me the parole I One in a million, my baby!

We'll go to a nice, quiet joint and celebrate. I can already feel my cheek against her long black hair. She kept coming to see me for the last three years. Been doing all right, too. Got her own little hat shop on a

swell street.

You can bet your last red point that Jimmy Rohan won't ever make a return trip to this heap of stone. Easy dough? Huh! There's no such stuff.

For a couple of years I thought there was. Things went nice and pretty until they sent Mitch Hardesty to the West Side.

He got me cold one night while I was getting furs out of a loft. He took me to Headquarters and sweated two other jobs out of me. Mitch also roughed me up some. I was still burning about that for six months after I came to this prison.

Nora used to drive the big sedan for the mob. The night Hardesty caught up with us, she had a pretty bad cold and was home in bed. They got nothing on my baby.

The day I said goodbye at the railroad station, I knew from the way she looked at me that she would play everything straight from then on. She would never have gone along with the boys in the first place if she had not fallen for me so hard.

Now I'm on top of the world. I can see a little rectangle of purple sky from this cell. Tomorrow night I'll climb a roof and look at all the stars in the world again. With Nora.

Maybe I'll invite Dave Randau to have a couple of drinks with us. I went to school with Dave. I guess I can thank him for getting me out a little ahead of time, too. It is nice to have a lawyer friend like Dave Randau.

Sure, I'll even blow Mitch Hardesty, the copper, to a drink when I meet him.

"Mitch, let me buy you a stiff one. I'm the guy you straightened out and maybe saved From the chair."

There goes the old prison signal again. The bars are sliding into place now, and we're all locked in for the night. The last time for me. I'll hear the train whistle outside the big wall about ten o'clock. Tomorrow, I'll be sitting on plush. I'll eat a steak as big as a horse, war or no war.

I'll get a little drunk!

NORA and Dave Randau met me outside. What a welcome it was!

They took me to a hotel and gave me a suitcase full of clothes. The duds were a little tight for me. Can you imagine a guy taking on weight in stir? The funniest things do happen.

"You must be feelin' pretty good, Jimmy," Randau said in the hotel room when I kissed Nora again.

She looked prettier than ever. She wore a short, fur coat over a nifty gray suit. She'd done her hair up different, an upsweep. It made her look older, and made me feel twice as old as I am.

"Why wouldn't I feel good?" I held Nora off a little to look at her. "Peaches and cream," I said. "What kind of hats have they been makin' the last couple of years, though? Let's get a drink."

"Not yet, Jimmy," Nora said. "When we get back to town. There's a train in about an hour. We thought it would be nice to stop here for a while, and let you get your bearings."

"I'll never get lost again."

I poked Dave Randau in the ribs and did a dance step or two. I grabbed Nora and circled the room once.

"What is the job you got for me, Dave?"

"Not too big to start, Jimmy. In a garage, for a trucking company. A despatcher. You can't expect to own the business too quick."

"Give me a year," I said and kissed Nora again.

I was not going to tell her yet about my talk with Fleck Maslin. Fleck had been in the same cell with me for nearly five months. The little guy had done six years when I got into the big house. He had a bad cough. The jute mill did not do it any good.

One day they took Fleck away to

“pogey,” about a week or ten days after I had saved him from a knifing out in the yard. They took him away while I was in the prison library. When I got back to the cell, I found a dirty, sealed envelope under the mattress where I kept my sack of makings.

I made sure none of the “screws” were around when I opened the note. At first, I thought I was seeing things.

This Fleck Maslin said he was going to die and he didn’t have anybody outside he cared a darn about. I looked like a nice guy, he had written.

There was close to ten grand stashed under the boards of a closet in a small flat on the West Side in the big city. The cops had forgotten all about where it came from. It was all mine for the taking.

Fleck died the next day.

I tore the address out of the sheet of paper, and burned the rest of it in the basin. I have a rotten memory.

So here I was going to make a nice stake. Sure, I’d own part of that garage in a year. Then maybe I’d tell Nora how come I made good so fast in business. Right at the moment, I was not sure how she’d feel about it.

“I saw Hardesty this morning,” Dave Randau told me.

“Yeah?”

“He said for me to tell you something, Jimmy. Keep your nose clean during the parole period because, if you don’t, he will send you up for plenty on top of what you did not serve.”

“Good old Mitch,” I said. “I bet it’ll burn him if I stay legit.”

We took the train back to the big town.

The bright lights never looked prettier. We went right up to her old address, and I saw right away that Nora had fixed it up but good.

New furniture and thick rugs and drapes that cost real dough. Yes, she had been doing fine. I settled into an easy chair and

tried to get used to the luxury. I thought of being in “solitary” that time, with nothing but a hard bunk and a galvanized, lye-treated pail in the cell.

“Pretty snooty, Nora,” I grinned. “Who said it doesn’t pay to be honest?”

“I’m glad you like it, Jimmy,” Nora said. “Excuse me, won’t you? I must get into something more comfortable. You and Dave have a drink.”

“I could use one,” I said.

I’d never been much of a soak, even in the wild days. It interferes with work. I never could handle the stuff, anyway. But this was a night to celebrate.

“Here’s to you, Jimmy,” Randau said, handing me a stiff one.

I took it easy. Then the lawyer said Nora had arranged a coming-home party with a few people.

“Any of my old friends?”

“One or two, Jimmy,” Randau said. “‘Augie’ Dern and Harry Frissel. They’re nice boys now. Work in the war plants.”

My friends? Augie? Harry?

I took another sip at the rye. Augie Dern was a spiteful little cuss, who always hated my stomach ever since the time I had to slug him over a split on a tire job. Harry Frissel used to be very thick with Nora in the old days. The fact is, I stole Nora from Harry.

“Ought to be a nice party,” I remarked.

It was.

There was Nora and me, Dave Randau, Augie and his little blonde, Harry and a dame who looked like a poor man’s Grable. There were two other guys I never met before.

We drank the place dry and did some dancing. The last thing I remember was Nora telling me to lie down for a while.

I never could handle the stuff. This time I knew I was going out.

I WOKE up in the morning on the couch, with a terrible taste in my mouth and a head that

felt as if it had been insulated with steel wool.

I couldn't think too clearly. The room was a mess as it swam around. Ash trays filled with butts, glasses and bottles.

I sat up when Nora came in. Her eyes looked big and scared.

"Where did you go, Jimmy?" she asked me.

"What do you mean, where did I go? No place but here."

"No? Look at your shoes," she said. "They were nicely polished last night. It rained about ten o'clock and did not stop until early this morning. Look at your hat and your raincoat."

I got up, feeling as if cold fingers were tracing along my spine. The scare was knocking a lot of the fumes of the liquor out of my skull.

"I couldn't have gone out," I said. "I passed out."

"You did go out," Nora said. "We put you in the bedroom when you caved in. When Dave went in there later, you were gone. The window was open. I sent Augie out to look for you. He came back and said he could see no sign of you."

I started thinking fast.

Sure, lots of guys have done things when they were so drunk they didn't remember. A sleepwalker can even make the rounds of the neighborhood, and get back to bed without knowing it. I went into the bedroom and looked out the back window. Nora's little apartment was only one flight up. A man could leave by the fire escape, all right.

"Think," Nora said. "Jimmy, what happened?"

I went back to the living room. My shoes were near an easy chair. A lot of the shine was off them, and there was mud on the soles. My brown felt hat had been wet. The raincoat was thrown over a chair-back.

Then something came to me. A kind of nightmare I'd had. I had been running around

the streets, yet it really had not been me. The buildings all around looked like they were under water.

There were a lot of faces all around, and they kept changing shape as if they were in one of those amusement park crazy mirrors. One of them was in my mind's eye now. Mitch Hardesty!

I looked at Nora.

"You don't think I outsmarted myself?"

Nora handed me something. I had not seen the thing for three years. She told me she got it out of my raincoat pocket. It was a blackjack, and there was blood on it.

I remembered Nora hiding the jack when Hardesty came to talk to me one night.

I looked at Nora. I could figure what she was thinking.

"You fool!" she suddenly exclaimed.

"I couldn't have gone out and done a job!" I cried.

Nora did not say anything. She just looked at me.

Sure, that was the way it seemed all right.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Eight o'clock," Nora replied.

I went a little crazy. I grabbed Nora and told her she ought to have known enough not to fill me full of booze. She should have watched me every minute. I pushed her away from me, and she fell against the divan.

I had to get out. Whether I had been in possession of my right senses or not last night, it wouldn't matter with the cops. I grabbed my hat and coat, put them on and got into the muddy shoes.

"Jimmy, if you run away, they'll be sure to suspect."

I looked at Nora.

"You sure believe it, don't you?" I said. "You're sure of it."

"What else could have happened? Look, Jimmy, let's face it."

“I haven’t a chance,” I said. “You know it. I want all the dough you can give me, and quick!”

“All right, Jimmy.”

She got her bag, dug into it, and came up with a bunch of bills. I grabbed them and went out of there, but not by the front way.

I dropped off the fire escape, scaled a fence, came out on the next block, and then went into a subway.

I did not know where I was going. I wasn’t thinking too clearly. All that mattered at the time was that the chair was waiting for me, if what I thought was true. Then I remembered I had not taken the blackjack. But I couldn’t go back.

There was a place I remembered uptown, where a guy could hide out. It was a cheap hotel run by a man with plenty of law violations behind him. For dough, he would hide Hitler away.

It was about nine o’clock when I got there. There were a couple of morning newspapers on an old table in the second-floor lobby. I grabbed one up. There was nothing about a murder in it.

“I want a room,” I said to Lew Fraser. “I don’t want no visitors.”

“Rates are high,” Fraser said.

“Sure. Here’s fifty bucks,” I snapped. “I get privacy?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “For a couple of weeks.”

“I got more dough comin’,” I said.

I took the key and went upstairs. I sat down on the bed and tried to reason it all out.

Only a few hours out of the big house and I had blood on my hands. I looked at them, but they were clean. Even so, I washed them in the basin.

I must have gone out of the apartment, all right. I was one of those drinkers who can be blotto and still move around without knowing my brain is working.

I must have met Mitch Hardesty and

slugged him. A subconscious mind? It would be nice, I thought, if a guy could have one while he was burning.

I kept back-tracking inside my head. The last I remembered about the party was that I was as happy as a lark and not mad at a single person or thing.

Yes, you’d have thought Nora would have watched me close after being away from me three years. She had taken only a couple of drinks. She’d danced a lot, mostly with Dave Randau. But I had always been a rotten dancer.

I had to stop thinking.

TWO hours later, the news came out. I read it in the first edition of an evening paper, when I sneaked out to the street to get something to eat.

The cops had found Mitch Hardesty in an areaway near a tavern on the upper East Side. His skull had been stove in.

The cops were looking for a guy who had just been paroled. His name was Jimmy Rohan. That made me forget about being hungry.

When I went back to the hotel, Fraser looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. I was in my room fighting the jitters when he knocked on the door.

I told him to come in.

“I was reading yesterday where you got out, Rohan,” Fraser began.

“That so?”

“I need some dough, Jimmy,” he said.

“I understand. You’ll get your dough.”

I felt icy fingers down my spine again. You’re never safe when you’re hot; not even from the crooks. I had to get out of town, and there was only one way to get out.

Just after Fraser closed the door behind him and I was sure he’d gone downstairs, I grabbed my hat and poked inside the sweatband. I wanted to make sure of an address. The number was there all right.

It would take a little time to get Fleck's dough. Somebody would be in that flat, maybe some mug worrying about the rent. It was funny. Ten grand under the floor of a closet!

The sweat began oozing out of me. What if that building had been torn down?

I had to take a chance and play hare-and-hounds with the cops. One Shamus from Headquarters in particular would be after me with all he had, day and night. Al Ford had been a good pal of Mitch Hardesty.

The dragnet for me would soon be out. The police teletypes would be clicking from here to hellangone. Maybe Al was talking with Nora now. But he wouldn't get that blackjack. Nora was used to handling cops, even though she was a little out of practice.

Around midnight, I slipped downstairs, and Lew Fraser called to me. He was leaning against the wall near the door of the dim lobby.

"Taking a powder, Jimmy?"

"I got to get the dough, don't I?" I demanded.

"Not tonight, pal. I got a tip that the cops are on the way here. Get down in the cellar. There's a lot of old boxes you can hide under. Make it fast. I was just on the way up to warn you, pal."

"Okay." The sweat that came out of me was like ice against my skin.

I went down to the cellar. A little while later, I heard cops moving up and down the stairs and along the corridors. I guess they did not bother to look in the cellar because it was in their minds that I must have left town.

A long time later, Fraser came down and the coast was clear. The cops had searched every room.

"Why do you think Al Ford would come to a joint like this?" Fraser asked. "Jimmy Rohan would know they'd fine-comb every suspicious joint in town? Better lay low for a couple days, and then make a try for that

dough."

I did not leave my room for the next two days. I lived like a rat, eating whatever Fraser could rustle up. I could not sleep a wink, thinking of the corner of hell I'd got into.

Finally I made the try.

I left Eraser's place one night about eight o'clock, figuring a hunted man has more chance during an hour when the streets are practically empty.

I ducked into a subway, expecting to hear Al Ford yell at me any moment, but I breathed easy and let my nerves loosen up when the car door finally slammed behind me.

I ducked my head down as far as it would go into the collar of my coat, and held a newspaper in front of my face. I felt as if every person in the car was trying to stare through the paper.

The place where Fleck Maslin had stashed his dough was on the West Side, in a dingy-looking tenement with fire escapes built outside. I went into the hallway and studied the piece of Fleck's note under the one light that was burning. It said the flat was on the second floor in the back. I had to think of what I wanted to say to whoever occupied the place.

Settling on a certain tack, I walked up the creaky stairs. I was going to say that I had heard the place would be vacant soon and that I wanted first crack at it.

I knocked on a door and a little pinched-face girl about eleven years old opened up.

"I'd like to see your ma," I said.

"She's gone out," the kid said, a little scared.

"I'm from the fire insurance company," I said, shifting my strategy. "I got to look around."

Sure, it was in my mind what I had to do. I'd tie something around the girl's mouth and fix her so she could not move. I wouldn't hurt her any.

“Your folks be back soon?” I asked as I pushed my way in.

“Not until late,” the kid said. I saw a little service flag hanging from the window screen. There were two stars on it. “Got brothers in the Army, kid?”

“One is in the Army and the other is in the Navy,” the kid said. “That is how ma and pa got free tickets to a show tonight on Broadway.”

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“A lady came this morning and gave them two tickets.” The kid’s eyes lighted up. “A very pretty lady. She said she was from the USO, and that they thought it would be nice to do something for the mothers and fathers of the boys who are in service. Like giving them tickets to shows and—”

“That is sweet,” I said, thinking of what a break this was.

I looked into the next room, guessed the closet would be there.

I was thinking of what to do with the kid when I happened to see a cigarette in an ashtray on the table.

It was stained with lipstick. I picked it up. I had seen plenty of butts not so long ago at my welcome-home party. The brand was the same. It was a brand of cigarette that had not been popular until the shortage came. I looked at the butt closer, wheels going around in my head. There was lastex in my knees.

“You got a sister, kid?”

She shook her head.

LUCKILY, the shade of lipstick on the cigarette got me. I remembered the new stuff Nora wore. It tasted good. “Pink Lightning” she said they called it. I guessed I was going crazy.

“Was anybody with the girl who gave your folks the tickets?” I asked the girl.

“No.”

“Describe her to me.”

“She was pretty. Had long, black hair.

She wore a short, fur coat, with a gold flower on it.”

The room started to get darker. The punch nearly floored me.

“I wish you’d go,” the kid said.

“Take it easy, baby,” I said.

I was walking around again, and it was not me. I saw buildings swimming around under water. I saw Hardesty’s twisted face. It all started to make some sense. I pieced some floundering thoughts together, and the picture I got was sickening.

“Is there a phone in here?”

“In the hall downstairs.”

“Lock the door,” I said. “Don’t let anybody in, you hear?”

The kid nodded.

I went downstairs and called Headquarters. It was funny, me talking to cops. They did not know who I was.

“Put Al Ford on,” I said.

I had to wait. I had time to think of Nora dancing with Dave Randau. For the first time, I tumbled to the fact that they’d danced pretty close. My hat? Randau had a little skull. My hat would be too big for him. I guess he could get my shoes on, all right.

Oh, he’d worn the hat!

“Detective Al Ford? Listen, this is just for you.”

“Hurry it up.”

“I’m Jimmy Rohan. I got to see you but quick. I know—I didn’t knock Hardesty off. Listen, here is where I am. You come alone. Don’t wait.”

I hung up. I went out on the steps, watching every car that came up, everybody that turned into the building. I wished I had a gun or even the blackjack.

A lot can happen in three years. A dame can go high hat and want the Randau type. I should have figured it while I was up there.

What a stunt! USO handing out tickets to parents of service men. Where was Al

Ford? It must have been nine o'clock or a little after, just about the time the kid's folks would be enjoying a big Broadway show.

Nice thinking, Nora, but the tickets were for the wrong night. Who said "Never the twain shall meet?" Just the night I happened to pick, Nora picked.

A car came up. Al Ford got out. He was not too tall, but he was plenty broad. When he spotted me, his hand was close to his Police Positive.

"No need of that, Al."

"Look, Rohan, what are you pulling?"

"Al, I was framed. Listen fast while I give you it to you. The breaks are with me for a wonder."

Under the light in the dingy hallway, I showed him the piece of note paper, and told him how I happened to have it.

"Nobody knew but me, Al. Not unless somebody happened to find it in the sweat-band of my hat. Randau saw my hat was too big for him, and padded it with cardboard or paper, and he happened across Fleck's note.

"Wouldn't you think fast if you found that in an ex-con's hat? Right away it would look like buried treasure, Al. Most likely this Randau and his pals shook me up and asked me things which I answered through the booze fog. A guy blabs crazy when he's jagged. He pretended to work on my side, and now I tumble he wanted Nora bad. I tumble to a lot of things."

"We ain't in the movies, Rohan," Al snapped. "We found that blackjack at your place."

"I can believe that now," I said. "Look, they got me out like a light, and took my hat and coat and shoes. Some other guy killed Mitch Hardesty, not me, Al."

Then I told him about the dame from the USO and the tickets.

"Well, what am I supposed to do now, Jimmy?"

"There's nearly ten grand up there in

the flat," I said. "My trusting wife and her sweetie-pie are coming after it. Tonight. It looks like they are not only going to frame me for the chair but will get paid nicely for the work. They worked a smart trick getting the couple out of that flat for the night. Any minute now, Al. I'm staking everything on it." "Well, let's go up there and get that dough. Who left it there, Jimmy?"

"Fleck Maslih. He died in the Big House. I figured he'd earned it after doing all those years. He wanted to will it to a friend."

"Still a movie," Al Ford said, but he followed me upstairs.

We are about to knock on the door of the flat when we heard somebody coming up the creaky risers. "In here," I said, and pulled Al Ford into a smelly closet, where they kept mops and pails and insecticide.

We heard a knock, then a door opened, and I recognized the kid's squeaky voice. It broke off quick and then there was a low scuffle. The door slammed.

"A movie, Al?" I growled. "Come on. You do a nice job on that door, pal"

AL FORD hurled himself against the door, breaking the lock. We tumbled into the flat. There was a man there putting a gag on the little girl. Another man was going into the next room. It was Randau. He turned in a hurry. There was a gun in his hand.

Al Ford fired first. Randau jackknifed, went to his knees.

I recognized the guy who had been gagging the kid.

"Augie Dern!" I yelled, and went at him.

Augie had a gun, too, but he did not get to use it. There was nothing in the world that could have stopped me at the moment.

I caught Augie in the jaw with my fist, and lifted him over a chair. I dove behind the chair, climbed aboard him and nearly ground his head through the old rug and the board

floor of the room. I was still hitting Augie when Al Ford got to me.

“All right, Jimmy,” he said. “Leave some of him for the D.A.”

Al pulled me loose.

Dave Randau was not feeling too happy with the slug through his side. He was giving up a lot of vital sap! He yelled for a doctor. We saw to it that the little girl was taken to a flat across the way before we gave Randau his chance to talk.

“Let’s have it,” I told Randau. “Nora was in this up to her pretty neck, wasn’t she?”

Randau nodded.

I couldn’t say anything for a while. It was like somebody had hit me with a jack. I’d sure loved Nora.

Randau let loose and his story was pretty close to the one I’d told Al Ford downstairs. But after all, I’d only been guessing then.

It had been Augie, not Dave, who had slugged Mitch Hardesty. Augie had worn my hat, coat and shoes. Augie had been advised not to hit Hardesty too hard. Just enough to put him out. All the cops would naturally think Jimmy Rohan had done it. It would have been enough to send Jimmy Rohan back to the Big House for a long time.

But the cop had seen Augie just as the runt swung the jack. So Augie had to go all the way, or he would not have had a chance to spend some of the dough Randau had promised him.

They had not found the slip of paper in my hat until I—started blabbing about it while drunk as an owl.

“You kept saying, ‘In my hat,’” Randau told us. “Nora gave you another drink with a pill in it. You kept talking about ten grand in a closet. Your future was in your hat. It sounded crazy for awhile. Then we stopped laughing.”

“I must have been a scream,” I snapped.

“Nora said, ‘Look in his hat!’”

“She was always pretty smart,” I said, and I enjoyed watching Randau suffer.

“We finally got enough out of you to steer us right,” Randau went on. “I remembered Fleck Maslin. I defended him. He lifted a payroll, and the cops never found it. It was Nora’s idea to buy the theatre tickets.

“I wish I’d never set eyes on her,” Randau said. “I was crazy about her. You were in the way, Jimmy. I put up that dough for the hat shop. We had this all figured out a month before you were paroled. We found out we were that way about each other a couple of months after you went to prison. Well, you got all you need to know. Get a doctor.”

“If you are smart you will bleed to death here, you two-timing mouthpiece,” I said. “All right, let’s see if Fleck was in his right mind and stashed that payroll dough here. I don’t want a dollar, if it happens to be here. I’m in the clear, and I’m young and healthy. As healthy as a 4F can be. Maybe with a new setup I can get in the Merchant Marine, Al. That’s for me.”

“I see what you mean,” Al said.

We found Fleck’s dough. There was about nine grand under the floor of the closet. The cops could easily trace through the files and see who the dough really belonged to.

We left Headquarters about ten-thirty, and went to look up Nora.

She opened the door quick when I knocked. When she saw it was me, and not Randau, she nearly fainted in her tracks. She got as gray as death under her make-up. Right then and there, I started hating her.

“Surprised?” I said. “Dave Randau will not see you for awhile, baby. He’s in the jug with Augie, our old pal. You told me all the time that you were all going straight. Well, you got a lot of questions to answer the D.A. So you’d better put on your glad rags—and come along with me and Al.”

They gave Dave Randau and Augie

life. Nora got off with from-three-to-ten. After I saw Al Ford and Nora off at the railroad terminal, I headed for the nearest shipping

office. I figured that after what I'd been through, the only place where I really could get adjusted was in a war.