

Seized by an impulse, Rae deftly removed a slipper and smacked the gangster on the temple with the sharp heel



BRIGHT BULB

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

Quick-thinking girl photographer Rae Gibson throws some light on the subject when a G-man is groping in the dark!

BENDING almost double so that the gardenia in her newly set brown hair would not be knocked awry, Rae Gibson slipped underneath and in back of the bar. Nudging Gus, the barman, out of her line of fire with a sharp, white-gloved little elbow, she lined up her target.

She readied the bulb in her Speed-Graphic and rose swiftly, a slim, pretty girl with curves in the right places and a determined little chin. The bulb flared

briefly, blindingly, and Zelda Handley, sensational blond star of the Zombie Revue, was registered, cooling over a drink with her newest escort.

It would, Rae reflected, be a good shot in spite of the big lug with the dark glasses who had elected to play human cyclorama to the more engaging foreground couple. Deftly she ducked back out from under the bar.

As she straightened up, Rae found her passage blocked by Zelda Handley's

companion. When she had snapped him, he had been smiling. But he wasn't smiling now.

"Okay, miss," he said in a low voice, which managed to convey plenty of force. "I'll take that film." He was holding a ten-dollar bill between two fingers.

"Sorry," said Rae. "No sale."

She didn't know why she had said it, once it was out. Ten dollars was a lot more than the picture was likely to be worth. But something about this tall stranger's assumption of command rubbed her the wrong way.

"I shan't raise the ante," he said, polite but still firm. "Miss Handley doesn't wish to be photographed."

Rae snorted. Zelda Handley didn't want publicity any more than a shark wanted food—and more food. Since scoring her success in the *Zombie Revue*, the oh-so-blond Zelda had been photographed in various states of fetching dress and undress from photographers' studios to the North River piers by way of the Bronx Zoo, where she had posed willingly with a lioness to compare tawinness of tresses.

Her interlocutor had the grace to turn red. But he failed to give ground.

"Do you like photographing people against their will?" he inquired. "Are you happy at this sort of thing?"

"I couldn't be happier, really I couldn't, or could I?" countered Rae, resenting his sarcasm.

"Okay, I'll make it twenty," he said grudgingly.

"Keep on talking," said Rae. "You might as well, since your damozel seems to have lammed. Meanwhile, I have business to attend—"

SHE stopped, for he had vanished as suddenly as he appeared. She caught a glimpse of him bulling his way through

the mob around the bar to reach the front exit. For a moment, she stared after him. Then she shrugged, reassumed her nine-P.M.-to-four-A.M. smile and wended her way back through the crowded rows of tables in the big inner room.

"There," she thought with a trace of regret, "goes twenty bucks."

Four pictures later, she had a chance to get her breath while standing in the corner that belonged by rights to Jacques, the Crane Club's Brooklyn-born French head waiter. Jacques was a good guy. He had a wife and four kids across the East River, and no ideas where Rae was concerned.

"Who was the Lochinvar with Zelda?" she asked him. "He offered me a twenty to give him the shot, then took a powder after her before I could grab it."

Jacques shrugged.

"With Zelda," he said, "he could be anything."

That, Rae knew, was true. Ever since the Crane Club had become *un success fou* six months earlier, the dancer had been appearing there almost nightly. And her escorts changed as regularly as double features at a Forty-second Street movie grind house. Zelda got around.

Rae snapped a half dozen more couples in various conditions of amour or intoxication, then went back of the orchestra stand toward the developing room.

Although she was making a pretty good thing out of her job at the Club Crane, Rae had not yet learned to revel in the tart, acid odor of the developing room. She had reasserted a childhood fondness for picture taking when she discovered the model agencies were crowded—except for girls who came from Scranton or Lafayette, Indiana. But being a native Manhattanite had certain compensations. She had picked up a tip about the Club Crane job and had nabbed it.

This evening she found herself liking the developing room less than ever before. Awaiting her inside its battered portal was the heavy-set man with the dark glasses who had so nearly spoiled her shot of Zelda Handley and the man with the twenty dollars.

"Well!" exclaimed the girl, stopping short on the threshold.

Her right hand held camera and bulb holder, her left rested on the disguised half-size hatbox swinging from a strap on her shoulder, and which contained spare bulbs and film.

"You took my picture," said the burly man.

Something in his tone and manner made Rae feel creepy. It was hard to nail down, but it was there.

"I want it," he added, and his voice, while soft, carried a definite rasp.

Rae debated lying or taking a stand as she had against the tall stranger, but her confidence oozed out under the blank stare of his dark glasses.

"If you'll wait till I develop a print, you may have it," she said, assuming what she hoped was her professional smile. "I have a number of orders to fill. The fee is two dollars a print."

"Print and negative," said the burly one firmly. "I'll go for two bucks. Go ahead, sweetheart. I got time."

For once, words failed her. She hesitated. The situation was ridiculous.

"Get busy," he said.

She got busy. He stood close behind her while she made the prints under the dim red light. But she took her time. Finally there it was, handsome stranger, flamboyant Zelda and unwelcome backstage guest.

"Nice timing," he said enigmatically. He waited in silence while she put the prints in folders, then picked up print and negative. "Here's your two bucks,

beautiful."

She took it. Business was business, even if she had just kicked eighteen dollars away. She found herself trembling as she switched on the light.

"You're a very wise cookie," he told her. "And you've taken a load off my mind."

"I couldn't be happier, really I couldn't, or could I?" countered Rae, no longer frightened with the light on.

HE GLOWERED at her. "Don't spoil it," he said. "Keep it locked."

He tapped her forehead with a stubby, over-manicured finger. And just then the door of the developing room was thrown open. The tall stranger stood there, looking from Rae to the first intruder with astonishment.

"Well I'll be—" he said, and moved swiftly to grab the photograph the burly man still held.

He stared at it, then at the original—and only then saw the stubby little flat automatic which had appeared in its owner's hairy fist and was pointed directly at Rae.

"Okay, bub, clasp them on top of your head," said the man in dark glasses. "If you don't, the girl gets it."

"Chivalry is not yet dead," said the tall stranger, complying. But his gaiety fell very flat. He added, "Until I saw how you pulled that gat, I missed it entirely, Nick. We've got a movie of you drawing, down at the Bureau."

"That does it," said the burly one. "I guess you'll both have to come along with me. Remember, one fast play and sweetie pie eats lead."

They paraded silently out the back way into the alley, the stranger first, then Rae, gripping the edge of her hatbox-holder nervously, then Nick. Nick directed them tersely to a side street where a cab waited,

its motor running.

No words were spoken during the short but circuitous ride that followed. They drove to the service entrance of a large apartment house. Never pointing his pistol away from Rae, Nick directed them to the service elevator, after tossing the tall stranger some keys and ordering him to unlock the door.

On the twenty-second floor, they emerged from the lift to be directed into a large apartment. They were led down a corridor covered with thick carpet. A lighted doorway at its far end, bespoke of a living room, and from it came the sound of voices.

They didn't go as far as the living room. Instead, Nick ordered them into a large bedroom, ordered the tall stranger to turn on the lights from a switch beside the door. He studied them.

"Okay, G-man," he said in his rasping voice. "You got the girl into this. It's up to you whether she gets out. Unload."

With a sigh, the tall man tossed a revolver onto the floor at Nick's feet. When the gangster stooped to pick it up, the tall man took a step forward, tensed like a wrestler. But Nick's gun never wavered. He laughed.

"Easy, bub," he said. "Keep quiet until Big Tim makes up his mind what to do with you. And don't try the Venetian blinds. They're steel."

With that, he left them and they heard the sound of a bolt turning on the outside of the door. Rae sat down on the big bed and looked around. The room was in a state of utter confusion. Bureau drawers had been removed and emptied, closet doors yawned open. Discarded shirts, shorts, undershirts, suits, were strewn about the floor at random.

"Would you mind telling me, tall, blond and handsome," she said. "What in flaming Hades this is all about?"

The tall stranger sat down beside her, sighed, and lit a cigarette. He offered it to Rae, who took it. "I guess you have a right to know," he said. "This Nick—Nick Morgan, he calls himself—is big Tim Alamac's head stooge."

"Hello, hello!" said Rae, her brown eyes widening. "Then you're after Big Tim."

"It looks as if I've found him," said the stranger bitterly. "The Bureau got a tip some time ago that Big Tim was in town, waiting to collect a couple of payoffs before taking a powder out of the country."

"And you didn't want that," said Rae. "Really you didn't want that, or did you? He's not a very good citizen."

"This is not funny," said the stranger acidly. "We had the pitch arranged neatly. You see, Big Tim is a very possessive gentleman. So we rigged up a multiple play for Zelda Handley—she cost him enough to set up in show business. At least one of us would take her out every night."

Rae's eyes opened wide. "And Zelda didn't tumble?" she asked.

"Zelda is probably the only person walking outside of an institution who could qualify as a moron. We saw to it her goings on got plenty of publicity. We figured sooner or later Big Tim would blow his top and communicate with her."

"Then why the gag about not wanting the picture taken tonight?" Rae asked.

"That was for me, not Zelda. Nick Morgan doesn't know me, but Big Tim does. If my mug appeared with hers in the paper, he'd have tumbled."

"I'll be darned, really I will, or—"

"For heaven's sake, check that routine outside," said the G-man. "Right now, I'm trying to think of a way out of this which won't cost me my job or get us both killed. Of all the foul luck, that picture you took was the nadir."

"I don't get it. I simply don't," said Rae.

"In words of one syllable, you snapped it just as brother Nick slipped Zelda the word Big Tim wanted to see her. She had a chance to lam while I was trying to bribe you. It was the only time I took my eyes off her all evening. I went after her, but she simply wasn't there—or anywhere. She's probably in this apartment now, explaining herself to Big Tim."

"Not a job I'd like," said Rae. "If Big Tim has killed all those people they say he has."

"Nor I," said the tall man. "Another job I don't relish is explaining myself to the Bureau Chief. He figured on Zelda leading us to Big Tim before he could take off. So first I lose her, then I go back for that picture and get taken by Nick Morgan like an amateur gumshoe. Now Big Tim is all set." He glanced around at the disorder in the room. "Somebody's been packing here."

"Or maybe just tearing up clothes," Rae offered with a bright, nervous smile. "What will they do to us?"

"Probably leave us here and tip off the papers once Big Tim is safely away," said the G-man gloomily. "If there is one thing big-timers like Tim Alamac prefer, to putting bullets in G-men, it's making idiots out of them. And we have an airtight case against Tim. No income tax rap, either. We've got him cold on the business protection racket—taking pictures of witnesses, depositions, affidavits, everything foolproof. But if he gets away now, he's got money enough to beat an extradition rap."

"Maybe friend Nick was bluffing when he said this room was foolproof," Rae suggested.

The G-man rose and walked to the windows, tested the blinds. They were steel, all right. Furthermore, the cords

which supposedly opened them were dummies. He looked around for some sort of a switch, turned to test the door.

"Hey!" he yelled as the lights suddenly went out.

"It's all right," said the girl, switching them on again. "I only wanted to see if all of them operated on this switch."

"What for?" the man inquired, looking as if he were having nightmares now.

"It's very simple, really it is," said Rae. She went about her business as she talked. "You see, once in a while, some customer offers a girl like me a fat fee to take pictures at a party somewhere after work. And once in a while one of these once-in-a-whilers gets ideas."

"I may be dumb," said the stranger, watching her in bafflement as she unscrewed the bulb from a table lamp, "but I don't get it."

"Why, it couldn't be simpler, really it—"

"Oh, change the record."

"Sorry," said Rae primly. "The technique we shutter-mice use is to flee to the powder room and replace the light bulb with a flashbulb, like this. Then we tell Joe Wolf to come and get us. By the time he has his eyesight back, Miss Shuttermouse is halfway home."

"Of all the—" the man began. Then he looked at her thoughtfully as she took another flashbulb from her hatbox-holder and put it in a wall socket. "But just how do you plan to work it here?"

"You'll see," said Rae. She finished the job, leaving but one lamp on. "Can you get over by the door all right?"

"This way?" he asked, obediently.

SHE nodded as he took up a position beside the door. He had the idea now. She struck a match.

"Now turn off the switch," she said. He complied and the room was in

darkness, save for the flare of the little flame Rae held. She screwed one of the flashbulbs in tight, lit another match, screwed in another and another and another until the job was complete.

"What now?" the tall man asked.

"Pray the room isn't soundproof," said Rae. "This is where I use my tonsils. And remember to shut your eyes when the door opens and whoever comes in goes for the switch."

Rae opened her mouth and let out a series of blood-curdling screams. When she could scream no more she gurgled and groaned and stamped her feet. She paused for a moment, heard nothing outside, thought she had failed. But she had forgotten the depth of the corridor carpet.

She tried again anyway, and was emitting an appalling shriek as the lock turned and the door was thrown open almost in one gesture. Nick Morgan's burly silhouette was revealed.

"Hey, cut it out!" he yelled. "What's going on here?"

Rae closed her eyes, felt the lids glow red as the switch was pressed. When she opened them, the G-man was treating the gorilla with an expert roughness to which he seemed unaccustomed. Nick seemed to take off and land head-first on the floor, almost at her feet.

An impulsive girl on occasions, Rae was seized by an impulse then. Deftly she stooped, removed one slipper and smacked the groggy gangster neatly on the left temple with a sharp heel. Mr. Morgan went to sleep.

The G-man scooped up Nick's pistol, which had fallen from his fingers, gave him a nudge with the butt on the other temple. In the meanwhile, Rae was screwing her final flashbulb into the camera holder.

When she entered the living room, she got a perfect shot of Big Tim Alamac as he

started up from the sofa where he was sitting beside a somewhat disheveled and definitely black-eyed Zelda Handley. If she had had another bulb, she could have caught Big Tim with his hands high while Zelda swooned.

But the G-man was ordering her to telephone a certain number. She did, and then things happened even faster.

A number of quiet, efficient young men entered within minutes and escorted the trio out of there without fuss. Others went through the packed bags which were piled in the hall. Apparently they found what they wanted, for expressions of satisfaction were uttered.

"And anyway," said Rae's own G-man, "We can take the pair of them on a kidnaping charge if the others fall through. That's up to the legal department."

Suddenly the men were leaving. One of them, who seemed to be in charge, looked back to where the tall man and Rae were standing.

"That was swell work," he said. "I'll want to thank you, young lady, with a check tomorrow. There was a lot of money up for Big Tim, and you've earned most of it. The flashbulb caper was a honey. See you later, Bruce."

"We'll be downtown in an hour," said the tall G-man.

But Rae wasn't listening then. She was making motions with her lips. "Bruce." She tried it out, looked at him, decided it fit.

Then he was looking down at her, from very close indeed. She smiled up at him—a real, not a professional smile. The other things that had happened to her that night didn't seem important.

"What's your last name, Bruce?" she asked.

"Farquar," he said. "Is it okay?"

"Ummmmm," she replied. Then, shyly, "I'm Rae Gibson, if it makes any

difference to you.”

He answered that in the approved gallant fashion, without words. When their lips parted, he looked at her a trifle anxiously. “You didn’t mind?” he asked.

He looked as if it were important to him. She pressed closer into his arms.

“I couldn’t be happier, really I couldn’t, or could I?” she inquired.

“That,” he replied, “we intend to find out.”