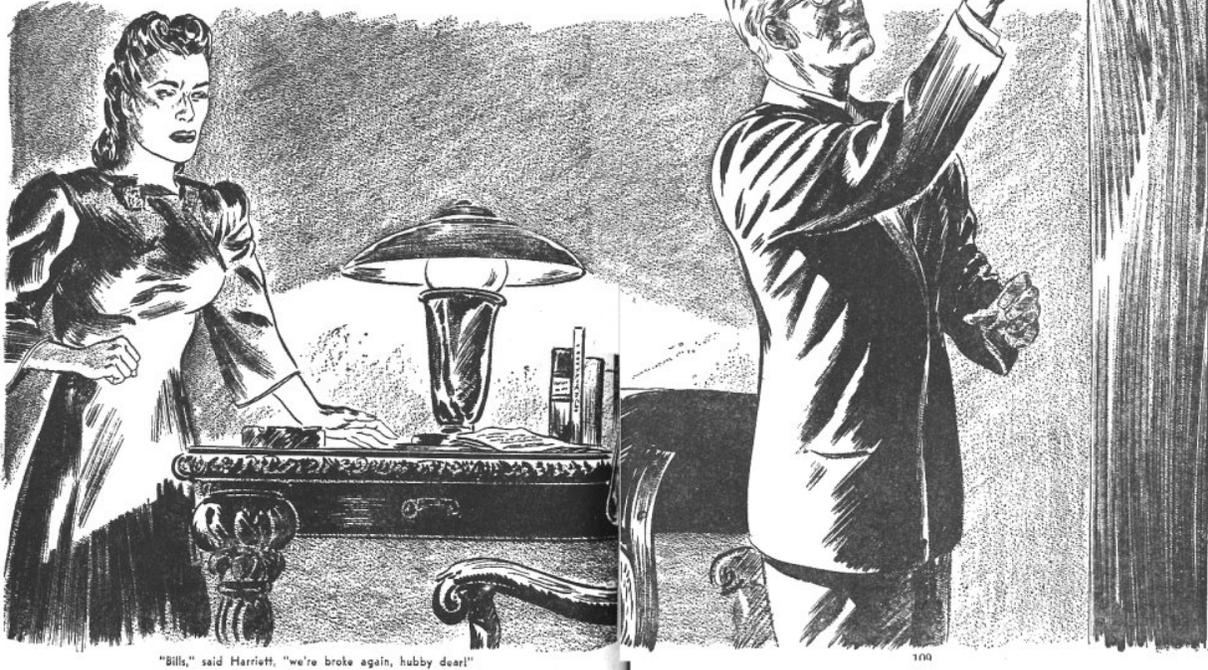


ONE REWARD TOO MANY

By Harold Francis Sorensen

*The double-cross is a thing
you don't expect in your
own family circle!*



"Bills," said Harriett, "we're broke again, hubby dear!"

The double-cross is a thing you don't expect in your own family circle!

HARRIETT told me we were broke again; even without being a surprise, it was bad news. And she wanted money today. Harriett's ambition was to be a radio commentator; trying to get to be one, her way, was costing us a mint. I left the apartment in a hurry, feeling again that I'd had the usual breakfast: my ears had worked more than my jaws. I was so moody I forgot to humble myself to our doorman.

The moment I arrived at work, they said Kinchel wanted to see me. He was in his private little office, lighting his first cigar of the day.

"You know Hugo Apenik, I guess," Kinchel said, motioning me to a chair.

"Sure," I nodded, "he's the best op working for Standard Detection. I've seen him several times."

"Well, we want to give him a complete check," Kinchel announced. "Even to how often he changes his pajamas."

"One op checking on another?" I asked. "Our agency investigating Standard's man?"

"It goes back to the McConnell who founded Standard Detection." The smoke cloud was beginning to form around Kinchel's

head and shoulders, it would be there all day, thickening. “You know how a bank has an examiner come in and check everything? Well, every so often Standard fine-combs one of its men to make sure the ideals of the outfit aren’t suffering. We have the job; we’re supposed to feel honored, I guess.”

“Okay. Who do you want me to put on it?”

“Who do you think is our best man?”

“Frankly, all our best men are away,” I said. “Leggett’s—”

“You always have a best,” Kinchel interrupted. “You start with good, better, best. When best is gone, better is best; then good becomes best. And when good is gone, the stinko is the best.”

“Now I know you mean for me to take the job,” I replied, getting up.

“Only, of course, if it won’t interfere with your hobby,” Kinchel noted.

“Maybe you think that’s funny,” I snapped. “But if it wasn’t for the rewards I earn in my spare time, I couldn’t afford to work for you.”

He eased the cigar out of his mouth.

“Who could you afford to work for?” I felt as if my feet suddenly went flat. “What kind of remark is that?” I demanded. He grunted. I knew there was no chance of borrowing still more money from him, not right now, anyway.

“Any special dope on Apernik?”

“No,” he grumbled, “they want us to start cold and see what we dig out.”

I nodded and went outside.

WE KEEP a file on the ops working for other agencies, which was originally my idea. There is never any telling when a job will take one of our men across the trail of an op from another outfit, and it’s good to know something about these other dicks, more especially when some agency drops a case and we get it and want to form our opinion of

about what has been done so far. Anyway, the file makes our men write what they learn, instead of trying to remember it, and in writing, it lasts longer, and anyone can get the benefit of it.

I opened the binder to Apernik’s photo; his head and shoulders were enough to indicate he is a big man, handsome in a reserved, unfriendly fashion. I know I was never able to get friendly with him, and he is a man I would like to talk shop with. All I got out of the file that I didn’t know, was his home address, 7911 Grasslawn Drive. I entered it in my notebook. Frankly, I considered an investigation of Apernik foolish, which meant I would have to goad myself.

I went out and walked a couple of blocks to a hotel where I know the girl at the switchboard. I told her what I wanted, and she was agreeable. She phoned Standard Detection, and asked to speak to Apernik. They said he was not in, and she asked when he would be. They didn’t know, and they asked for her name and what she wanted. She said she’d phone later, and broke the connection. I thanked her, and went out.

After some thinking, I decided to start with the place where Apernik lived. A directory informed me that Grasslawn Drive was in a place called Vernon Village. I walked all the way over to where I could get a bus directly out there, stopping only for coffee.

This Vernon Village, I discovered as soon as I stepped off the bus, was a semi-suburban development; going into it was like leaving the world behind. I found Grasslawn Drive after I’d had a lot of dogs bark at me for no reason except that they had nothing else to do. Then I found 7911; it was like the others, a one-floor small house with a peaked roof; the houses differed mostly in the colors of the roofs and the imitation shutters; Apernik’s had a red roof and shutters. All the houses had open ground all around them; mostly, flowers grew all over the place, but Apernik’s house

was surrounded by closely cropped grass. The windows were all shut, the Venetian blinds down and closed. I figured he was not at home, and since he was a bachelor, that ought to leave the house empty. The porch and entrance were at the side of the house, and I went up. I opened the screen door and while I knocked on the wooden door, my left hand tried the knob and found the door locked. I waited, not for a reply, but for any indication that there was anyone in the vicinity. Some place, children yelled at play, dogs barked in every direction, but right here where I was, only insects buzzed.

AT THE back of the house there was a lawn mower, a rake, a covered coalbin, and a short clothesline. The back screen door was hooked, I saw. There was a hole in the screening near the hook, but it had been patched over. I went round by the other side of the house, completing my circuit. While I stood considering how I would get in, the first opportune night, I sensed that someone had come up behind me. I whirled, and looked up into Apernik's face; it wore a grouchy, hostile expression. Perhaps that made me more than usually aware of his size, the spread of his shoulders and the thickness of his wrists.

"Hello, Slate," he grunted. "Come on in," he added, and went up on the porch, pulling out keys.

I tingled; of course I still had to make sure that this meeting was not an accident, but my hunch told me it wasn't. Which meant that Apernik had snapped me up so fast because he was watching his back trail, and when a man is doing that, he has done something, and wants to see if consequences are following him.

Inside he opened the blinds, and my first impression was that his place was pitifully poor. I immediately changed that. It looked as if Apernik had bought unmatched, secondhand stuff, but he had everything he

needed for comfort, convenience and utility. He had a home here. The whole place was nicely clean, and cosy. There is nothing that alienates me the way untidiness and unconcern do; to leave things where you drop them, allow the ashtrays to fill and spill over, and ignore the dust. I jerked my mind away from my apartment, before my mind could start going round and round with the old, useless arguments.

I went after Apernik, into the kitchen. He put a light under a glass pot of coffee, and brought out a coffee cake. We sat in the dinette. I thought the cake was a wooden imitation after I'd nearly broken a tooth on it, but when I followed his example and soaked the cake in coffee, it tasted real good.

"You got anything to say?" he demanded.

"I'll let you do the talking." I munched the soggy cake.

His big gray eyes glared at me, it seemed as if his mouth would stay shut; finally I knew he had decided to talk a little.

"Get out of town, and don't come back," he said.

"That involves inconvenience," I let him see my wise grin, "for which I would have to be recompensed."

"You're asking me for money?" he shouted, caught himself, made it, "You mean money could fix it?"

I think I must be one of the few who have seen Apernik surprised, and possibly the only one who has seen him shocked. Remember, this Apernik has been around, and into many things. Seeing him so disturbed, made me ashamed.

"That was my way of finding out if there's money involved in whatever you're hiding," I said.

HE HAD no expression to fit what he was feeling, but he felt plenty, I saw that. He quit cold. He started to take the saucers and bowls

from which we'd drunk our coffee, but I stopped him.

"I don't know where I stand with you, Apernik," I said. "It was indirectly, but still it was because of you, that I met Harriett. I was snooping around on one of your cases, just to see how in the world you'd done it," I think I blushed as I admitted this, "and I ran into Harriett who was around because she was a newspaperwoman in those days, and because you were making tracks in her direction then. I don't know if you're one of the guys who hate me because Harriett married me—"

"I don't," he interrupted emphatically.

"Okay." I took a breath. "We're down to subsoil. I'm saying I don't care what you did. Anybody can slip, even you, I guess. If you did, I'll do anything I can to help you cover it up. Any man would do that for the top man in his own profession."

His wide mouth pulled up into a sneery grin. He took the saucers and bowls into the kitchen; water ran. I knew it was no use. I took my hat, said so long loudly, and left.

I walked out of Vernon Village and up the street to the bus stop. There was no bus in sight. I went in a drug store and phoned Kinchel.

"Can you find out from Standard what cases Apernik has been working on?" I knew Kinchel would ask why. I went on to tell him. "My hunch is that he worked himself into one of those corners where he's protecting a woman."

"I told you Standard wants us to work on it cold," Kinchel retorted. "They won't give out a lead because we might make something of it just to save ourselves work." He cleared his throat. "But never mind that. Right now, go over to police headquarters and see Zucker. He was asking for you."

"I'm not going out of my way—"

"I promised Zucker you would come see him right away as fast as I could pass you the word," Kinchel cut in.

"Okay." I hung up.

The afternoon humidity was settling like a suffocating blanket, and I missed a bus. I stood half an hour in the sun till another came, then I had to ride a street car too, to get to police headquarters.

The old building had a black floor with fresh wood streaks, the way a wooden floor gets when it is washed with too much water, and never dries. The old scrubwater and the woodrot were part of the stink in the building, a building I never liked.

ZUCKER fingered two lesser detectives out of his office when I entered, and motioned me to a chair. He was a hairy, moist man, on whom desk-work was beginning to show in the form of a paunch and a sort of philosophical dejection.

"I'm here," I said, starting to wipe my face and then thrusting the handkerchief back into my pocket because it was none too clean a handkerchief. "What now?"

"Quite a bit," Zucker said heavily. "Beginning with Handsome Dan Grogan. It's just five months since you discovered him living in the same apartment house you do, and killed him. You got the fifteen hundred dollar reward you were after."

"I like the way you tell it," I said. "I entered his apartment thinking he was out, only he wasn't. He had three clear shots at me before I shot back and was lucky enough to kill him. But what about it? You writing a history book?"

"A couple of months after that," Zucker went on, rubbing the stubbly big cheek of his moist face, "you were after Marty Hudson, to get another reward, five hundred dollars. You almost got Hudson, but you didn't. Neither did anyone else. And then, just last month, there was another one, Harvey Teachman, also five hundred dollars. Same as Hudson, Teachman got away at the last minute."

"I'm after anyone within easy distance," I said, "who has a reward on him. I need the money."

"That's right." Zucker struck his desk. "You're spending a lot of money for a guy making fifty a week."

"Sure," I nodded, "I've been spending anybody's money I could get my hands on."

It sounded funny after I'd said it because of the look on his face. It seemed like a long time till he said, "That's it. Whose money have you been getting your hands on?"

Our eyes met, but I couldn't see very far into his; he wouldn't let me.

"Handsome Dan Grogan was known to have twelve hundred dollars at least," Zucker went on, "but after you shot him, only two dollars sixty-two cents was found on him."

"There was a lot of talk at the time," I acknowledged. "I thought it was ribbing. Everyone agreed I would never have overlooked the two dollars. Why bring all this up all of a sudden?"

"It was ribbing, then," Zucker stated. "And this is not all of a sudden, it's been growing. Look, Grogan was worth fifteen hundred, dead or alive. We got him dead, and minus twelve hundred dollars. Hudson and Teachman were worth five hundred, alive. We didn't get either one. Each of them must have had money. You've been spending over your head."

"Instead of turning Hudson and Teachman in for five hundred each," I said, "I let them buy their way out. Why wasn't anything said before?"

"Mostly because you got a lot of friends," Zucker sighed. "The records passed up the line and didn't mean a thing with anybody who knows you. But after a while they got to higher-ups who have never seen you, and just on paper, it doesn't look good."

"Also, there's an election about due," I added.

"That's nothing to me," Zucker said.

"If we can, we're going to get you. If Hudson or Teachman is ever caught, and talks, it might be too bad for you. Take it all in all, it might be a good time for you to pack and move."

This was the second time today I'd heard that.

"Up to now," Zucker was saying, "I've talked strictly business. But I'm going to stick my neck out, and say that for a guy who's been married about six months, you're not giving that wife of yours a good break. A girl doesn't marry a man to have him turn bad." He ran both big hands over his thick black hair. "Maybe you made her think you earn more money than you do. Couldn't you tell her the truth?"

"This desk job is giving you too much time to think." Our eyes met again, I saw into his this time, and I knew we agreed about that, at least.

"Look, the cops couldn't do it, but you could. You found three men in five months that we couldn't put our hands on."

"I didn't find Grogan," I muttered. "I was looking for him but the way he was disguised I'm not sure I'd ever spotted him. But my wife remembered him from when she was on a newspaper, and Grogan was a small racketeer not wanted by the law. As for Hudson, I just asked all the questions I could think of, of everybody I could find. Then I figured the circumstances, opportunity, and his character into it, and after some trial and error, I located him. He was wanted alive, so I sent for cops to come get him. Only he was gone. Exactly the same with Teachman."

"Calling the cops might have been your cover-up in case they are caught and talk," Zucker decided.

"I called cops because a man won't try to shoot it out when he's outnumbered, the way he will against one man."

Zucker shrugged. I drifted out.

IN THE street, I inhaled deeply through my mouth. A dentist had told me that was a good way to overcome nausea.

I phoned the office, and learned that Kinchel had gone home.

It was so long since I had thought of Kinchel except as in the office, that my memory of his residence had faded. But of course I had the address in my notebook. I believe in writing things. I opened the notebook and saw that he lived in a hotel, the Forest Arms.

I rode past the hotel, I was thinking so hard, and had to ride back. The hotel was down a side street, and informal. I said I was going up to see Kinchel and the desk clerk supplied the room number. As soon as I knocked on his door, Kinchel said come in.

He had one room, I saw at a glance, with a bed that folded up behind french doors, and bath. Kinchel sat in a chair, shoes off, black socks on his feet which rested on a couch. Of all things, he was reading *Variety*, which ordinarily I would certainly have commented about.

"Zucker hung out the score-board," I said.

Kinchel puffed rapidly on his cigar and stared at the floor. I've known him a good while, but that was the moment when I realized Kinchel is so softhearted that he's defenseless; if you ask him, he has to give; his only hope is to act so cranky you won't ask. And I'd always told myself he loaned me money just to chain me to his agency. How good I used to think I was!

"You told me I was investigating Apernik, and all the time he was digging into me," I said. "Now Zucker tells me the cops are trying to get me. Where do you stand, do you think I'm crooked?"

"It's not what I think." Kinchel didn't look up and barely took the cigar out of his mouth. "It's how I feel. I was trying to help you, Willie. I got the tip that the cops are

busy. If there was anything, I wanted to beat them to it. I hired Apernik."

"Why not one of our men?" I demanded. "And why tell me to go after him?"

"Who've we got you wouldn't make a fool of?" He shot me a sharp look. "And I told you to get on Apernik just to put you in action; I thought Apernik could learn more, faster, that way."

"Thanks," I said, and of course not getting the sincere sound into it that I intended. "I'm ashamed how long it took me to find out you're a swell guy, Kink. So long."

I turned and hurried out. I had my mind made up to go home, and I did.

I ALWAYS wanted to go round to a side door, when I entered the building, because the doorman made me feel that I was going in where I didn't belong, in my clothes. The same with the gang that was always in the lobby, and the elevator. This was not the way for me to live, but there was nothing I could do about it.

Harriett wasn't home, of course. In our apartment, it isn't possible to guess when someone left; the dishes are always in the sink, her clothes are all over, including the floor, and I don't remember that there ever was any cleaning done. I took my book and sat at the small kitchen table, started to write.

I can't think, if I keep all the thoughts in my head. After a while I get so my mind is bunched up against my memory. Almost anyone, adding numbers, comes to the point where he has to write the numbers; I get that way with ideas. I have everything written in this big looseleaf book, all about Grogan, up to the time that Harriett's break enabled me to go upstairs and collide with him, and all about Hudson, and characters between him and Teachman, and since Teachman. The characters I had looked for and never found, the cops had not considered, they thought I

tried for three, and got three. Neither did they take into account the months between the times I found those three. Also, few cops, I hope, have the urgent need for money which made me desperate. But when I wrote it all out in my own way, I could see that on paper it didn't look good.

I turned the pages, and wrote about a fellow named Foxey Foley, whose case I have in the book. He is wanted alive because of information he possesses, and has a big twenty-five hundred on his head. Harriett came in and I wrote the end of the account, stating that I'd traced Foley to 7911 Grasslawn Drive.

The apartment looked cheap with Harriett in it, and no wonder, enough of our money was spent on her clothes and care so that it had to look cheap. But it's spiteful to say that; Harriett is beautiful; her hair is raven, her skin pale, her features fine. Her looks dominated our lives, at least that was the way I figured it.

Harriett looks so much like a woman of affairs and influence, that even she was impressed. She was in newspaper work, but they could not see their way to giving her a big job. She decided she ought to be a commentator on the radio, and she quit the paper. This expensive apartment, her clothes, the entertaining and gadding-about, all the things which were drowning me in debt, were for the sake of trying to get her that job.

Of course I knew by this time that it was never going to happen; she had a particular kind of beauty which implied great intelligence, and Harriett is hardly more than smart. Besides, I imagine a commentator has to have feeling for the people whose plights he discusses, and Harriett has less feeling than intellect. Once in a while I'd suspect that she knew too that she was wasting her time. Looking for the job had become her career. I said nothing because I had nothing to offer her.

"What about the money?" she demanded.

"Kinchel won't part with a cent. Now wait," I said hastily, "I have my eye on twenty-five hundred bucks. Remember that Foxey Foley I was looking for? He's in town and I know where, only I'm going to make sure before I jump him. I've got to do some of Kinchel's work first, then I'm going after Foley. I'll take him myself, this time."

Her dark eyes darted to the book under my arm. I put the book back in the bookcase. We stood looking at each other, we didn't know how to meet or to part any more, then I grunted quietly, and walked out.

I WAS shaky and hollow-feeling but I couldn't risk stopping for the cup of coffee I wanted so badly, even though I'd told her I had to do Kinchel's work before I went after Foley, in order to gain time. I needed the time because I couldn't afford fast transportation. I rode that bus out to Vernon Village again. It was dusk when I got there, with the buttery yellow lights coming on in the houses, including Apernik's. It wasn't necessary that Apernik be home, but since he was, it made things easier. I had just posted myself where I could watch the house, when a taxi tore up to it, and as the cab pulled away I saw Apernik's door open and a woman go into the house. I started straight for it, I knew that the moment Harriett started talking, Apernik would begin understanding.

The door opened again and Apernik stood in the light. He didn't see me, but he called, "Come on in, Slate."

I went on in.

Harriett stood in the living room, looking stunned instead of stunning, for once.

"See?" Apernik gestured. "He tricked you into this."

Harriett had regained her poise; she took a cigarette and a lighter from her bag and began smoking, glanced about as if selecting a

comfortable chair.

“Wait!” Aперnik ordered. “I’m not running an arena, so I’m asking you two to go. We all know everything there is to be said.” Aперnik turned to me. “The moment your wife came here asking for Fokey Foley, arguing there was no time to lose if he was to make a deal and a getaway, I knew that you either tell her everything or she has some method of learning what you have in mind.”

“I write it in a book,” I said. “If I’d got killed any time, the information in the book would have helped the next dick on the job.”

Aперnik nodded disinterestedly. “Your wife sold you out to Hudson and Teachman. You arranged her visit here in order to prove it to me. Now that you have proved it, there is nothing to do about it. I shouldn’t have to listen to the family quarrel which is to follow.”

Harriett looked as if all this made sense to her, and it certainly did to me, because I was wishing I wouldn’t have to listen to it either. I nodded, and turned to the door. . . .

I DON’T know if I heard the bang first, or felt the effects first; although I knew a gun had gone off behind me, and that I felt odd, I didn’t reduce it to the simple fact that I’d been shot. I felt my hands slipping down the closed door, but I argued that I had plenty of strength, there was no reason why I should fall. Just the same I found myself on my face, and the only feeling I had was in my cheek where the carpet bristles touched it.

Before I could try to get up, something heavy pressed on my back, flattening me. I could see his shoes, and knew it was Aперnik beside me. He took his hands from my back, rolled me on my side, then let me flop over on my stomach again.

“You’ve killed him this time,” Aперnik said.

Harriett gasped.

“You tried before,” Aперnik went on. “The night you sent him to Handsome Dan Grogan’s apartment, Grogan was supposed to kill him. When Grogan came back to town as a fugitive, he came to you, took an apartment in your house. That must mean there was more between you and Grogan than anyone ever knew. You must have got Grogan’s money. But why the two of you didn’t run off, instead of trying to kill Slate, I don’t know.”

“And have Willie on my trail and Dan’s all our lives?” Harriett’s nail flicked against a cigarette. “He was insanely in love with me. I guess that was why I married him, that and the fact that I thought Dan was dead. Besides, Willie was the only one suspected Dan was in town.”

“Then you needed more money, and you told Hudson that Slate was coming for him,” Aперnik sighed. “The same thing when he almost had Teachman.”

“It wasn’t just the money,” Harriett retorted. “It was the way I hated him. Do you think I was ever going to forgive him? Since the night he murdered Dan, the only thing I’ve wanted was to get away from him, but I didn’t dare because he’d have come after me.”

“And now what?” Aперnik asked heavily. “Why did you kill him here?”

“Where else would I ever have as good a chance?” Harriett demanded. “Hugo, I couldn’t do it and get away with it without help, and your help is all I’d ever get. Hugo, you’ll cover up for me.”

She sounded as nearly coy and tempting as was possible for her, and Aперnik, as if to end her bad acting, said quickly, “Yes, I’ll cover up for you. Leave the gun and get out of here. Have you any money?”

“Some.” Her voice chilled.

“Then tomorrow you’d better leave this part of the country,” Aперnik advised. “The police advised Slate to go, and they’ll think he has. Come, I’ll let you out the back, it’s safer.”

They walked to the back of the house; the door closed. When I heard Aperiuk's footsteps, I started to get up.

He helped me.

"The bullet is high in your left shoulder," he said. "I hope I handled the situation satisfactorily. Let me get a look at the wound. She shot you with a forty-five. If she hadn't been so close the bullet would have gone through you."

"You handled it swell. Thanks. That was Grogan's gun. I gave it to her." I stripped

to the waist. "I imagine you stepped between us and kept her from putting enough slugs into me to make a sure job of it. To think that all she wanted was to get rid of me!"

"I think I can take the slug out," Aperiuk said, feeling around the wound. "I've done it before. And you can stay here as long as you like."

"That's going to be a long time," I said. "From the minute I saw this place, it looked like home to me."