

In His Attempt to Get a Friend Out of Jail, Lunsford Takes a Warped Path Through Underworld Trickery and Swift Slaughter!



There was a great, bursting blast of flame inside his head

The RAG-TAG GIRL

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LUNSFORD was alone in the room. He was sitting in a straight-backed chair, hunched forward, elbows on the table. He had a cigarette in one drooping corner of his wide mouth. He was a big man with a heavy-featured face that had deep lines etched in it. The hair on the top of his head was a scanty blond fuzz. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that had been broken and fastened together with adhesive tape. His grey tweed suit had cost a hundred and fifty dollars and had never been pressed.

The door of the room opened, and the turnkey put his head inside. "Here he is, Karl. Remember,

only fifteen minutes. It's the rules."

Saunders came in the room, and the turnkey withdrew his head and shut the door. Saunders smiled anxiously at Lunsford.

"Hello, Karl."

Lunsford pointed at a chair. "Sit."

SAUNDERS eased himself cautiously into the chair. He was a small man, turning pudgy. He needed a shave, and his hair was rumped stickily. He always had an air of being slightly fuddled.

Lunsford glowered at him. "So now you're in jail again!"

“Yes, Karl,” Saunders said meekly.

“And for murder! Why do you always have to pick out the worst thing possible? Why couldn’t you make it manslaughter or mayhem or something?”

Saunders blinked. “Well—”

“Shut up! You remember what I told you the last time you got in a jam? I told you I was all through going to bat for you. Sure, I know you used to work for me. I ran a two-bit detective agency once, and I was dumb enough to give you a job. But I’m all through with that crazy racket. I’ve got myself a real business to attend to. I haven’t got time to be always running around and getting you out of some jail.

“I’ve got twenty-five people working in my importing office. They depend on me for their living. I can’t be wasting my time on no-goods like you, and besides I’m all through with this rough stuff. You hear me? *Through!*”

“Yes, Karl,” Saunders said gently. “I just thought—”

“You can’t think,” Lunsford snarled. “That’s your big trouble.” He jerked his thick body back in his chair and grunted disgustedly. “All right. Tell me about it. But this is the last time I help you, you hear? Positively the last time!”

“Sure, Karl,” Saunders agreed amiably. “Sure. Well, it’s like this. I’m having a little crap game at my place. Pete Haley and Dizzy Carnes and Loop Smith were there.”

“Those chiselers? What do you want to play with them for?”

Saunders moved his shoulders nonchalantly. “They don’t know any tricks that I don’t, so it’s all even. There is another guy in the game—this Hobland, that I’m supposed to have knocked off. I met him down at the Canton dog-track. He’s always hangin’ around there. So I invite him up just as a friendly gesture.”

“You mean you invited him up so you and your three gyp pals could take a cut at ribbing him out of his roll.”

Saunders was gently reproachful. “No, Karl. That was the furthest thing from my mind. It was purely a friendly gesture. He did have a big wad of dough on him, though. Anyway, we are playing nice and friendly and not cheating any more than we usually do, when what does this Hobland do but run in a set of tap dice and take the three of us to the cleaners. Now was that right, Karl? Was that

the polite thing to do?”

“Very bad manners,” Lunsford said sarcastically. “And what happened then?”

“Well, I spotted the tap dice after my roll was all gone, so I called him on it. And what does he do but stick a rod on us! Imagine that! In a friendly game! Not only that, but he calls us a bunch of crooks. And me his host! So then he goes out, and we get to talking. I’m a little drunk, and you know how I talk when I’m drunk, Karl.”

“I seem to remember,” Lunsford said.

“Yeah. Well, I get madder and madder and tighter and tighter. So I say I’m going out and look up this Hobland and blow him down for playing such a dirty trick on his friends. So I go out and look for him. Only I can’t remember where I looked, except that he wasn’t there, and lucky for me he wasn’t, probably. But I talked around a lot, and it seems like I confided in a lot of people that I was gonna put holes in Hobland. And what do you think? The damned guy turns up dead this morning in a ditch outside of Susanville with a couple of holes in his head. And the big roll he was packin’ was gone. And me with no more alibi. How’s that for a dirty break?”

“Probably Hobland would feel the same way,” Lunsford said. “I bet he’d have felt pretty bad if he’d known he was going to put you to all this bother just by getting killed. How about those three dopey pals of yours?”

Saunders shook his head. “They’re out. I mean, they’re in. In jail. Right after I left, the three of them got into a fight about something and made a lot of racket, and the cops ran them in for disturbing the peace. That was no more than twenty minutes after I left, and Susanville is twenty miles from my place. It was somebody else did for Hobland, I think.”

“You really think so, do you?” Lunsford asked politely. “You’re certainly a big help to me. Got any more bright ideas?”

“It must have been somebody that didn’t like him,” Saunders offered seriously.

“Now maybe you’re right,” Lunsford agreed. “I wouldn’t have thought of that.” He stood up. “All right. I’ll get you out of this if I can. But no more, you understand? The next time you pull any of your crackpot tricks, you stay in jail until you rot for all of me!”

“Yes, Karl,” Saunders said meekly.

Lunsford owned a big grey touring car. It was

fairly new, but it was spattered with old mud that had dried in flaky brown patches and smeared with fresher dust in a thick layer. He had the top down now, and he turned off the pavement with a wailing squeal from the tires and drove across the big square of vacant ground without slackening speed in the slightest.

He drove up to a high, whitewashed fence, bore down hard on the brakes. There were words painted on the fence in big, slanting letters:

CANTON PAVILION
DOG RACING

Lunsford got out of the car and slammed the door. He turned around heavily and almost ran over a little man who was glaring up at him in tightly wordless anger.

"You!" said the man, and shook a gnarled fist in his face. He wore a grey sweater, a checkered cap pulled down low over snapping blue eyes. The cap bulged out ridiculously on top due to the fact that it half-covered a dirt-stained bandage that was wrapped around and around the man's head just over the level of his ears. Rage turned the tan of his face to a dull purple.

"WHAT'S the matter with you?" Lunsford asked blankly.

"You—you—" the man stuttered, jerking his arms up and down, fists tightly clenched. "What's the idea of drivin' across that lot as fast as that? What if somebody was walkin' some dogs out there? You want to run over 'em? Kill 'em?"

"Nerts," said Lunsford impatiently. "If there'd been anybody out there I'd have seen them."

The man strained up on tiptoe, glaring. "I wish I was ten years younger, I do! I'd beat you to a thin froth, you big ugly lummo!" He whirled around and went back along the fence at a jerky half-trot, sputtering curses to himself in a futile mutter. He ducked through a door and disappeared.

Lunsford stared after him in amused amazement. "Talk about your cuckoos," he said to himself, grinning. He walked along the fence, went through the same door.

He came into the dog track at the side of the small grandstand. In the bright sunlight, the place was forlorn, cheap and tawdry. It seemed strange without the lights and the ballyhoo, the push and mutter of the crowds that had thronged it whenever

Lunsford had been in it before.

THE grandstand reared up whitely, skeleton-like rafters supporting its roof. There was a man working on the backstretch of the track, and in the enclosure in the middle another man buzzed a motor-driven mowing machine back and forth busily. Off to the left, near the low buildings that were the kennels, a third man was exercising six greyhounds, holding three leashes to each hand, walking the thinly graceful dogs back and forth slowly.

Lunsford went around to the front of the grandstand, started up the steps that ran through the center of it, toward the betting and business offices at the back of the second story. Two men came through the wide door at the top of the stairs and started down toward him. One of them called:

"Hello there, Karl."

"How are you, Barker?" Lunsford nodded.

Barker was the business manager of the track. He was a thin man with grey hair that was smoothed evenly back on his narrow head. He had the dead, expressionless face of a gambler, and when he smiled he moved only his mouth. He wore an excellently tailored powder-blue suit, a white carnation in his lapel. He shook hands and said cheerfully:

"It didn't take you long to get here."

Lunsford blinked, surprised. He had told no one that he was coming to the dog tracks, yet Barker seemed to have been expecting him.

Barker indicated the other man. "Meet Jake Eaton."

Eaton shook hands with a jerk and said: "How yuh?" curtly. He was a short man with a round paunch. He wore a floppy-brimmed panama, a light suit. He had a pasty white face, loose at the jowls, shot with little purple splotches that were broken veins.

"Jake is the gent that owns her," Barker said amiably.

"Does he?" Lunsford asked, waiting patiently to learn what this was all about.

Barker smiled in his smooth way. "I bet you were surprised to get a call from me, Karl."

"Get a call from you?" Lunsford repeated blankly.

"Sure," Barker said.

Lunsford covered up quickly. "Oh, yeah. I was. I didn't know it was you that called. They didn't

tell me who it was.”

Barker squinted thoughtfully. “That’s funny. I told your secretary who I was. It’s funny she didn’t tell you.”

“She’s pretty careless,” Lunsford said.

Barker shrugged his smoothly tailored shoulders. “No matter. I’ll tell you, Karl, when we got into this jam, I thought of you right away. I knew you weren’t in the detective business any more, but I thought you might be willing to give me a hand just for old times.”

“Un-huh,” Lunsford said, still waiting patiently.

“I’ll tell you how it is,” Barker went on. “You know we got some competition now from the new Crowley track over west of town. They’ve been pulling in some good crowds. They’ve got a better location than we have. So we thought we better try some new stuff and see if we couldn’t draw better. We decided to run some whippets. We’ve been running greyhounds exclusive, and so have the Crowley bunch. We’re putting in a new track there.” He pointed at the front of the grandstand. “Whippets run on a straight track, you know.”

Lunsford nodded. “Yeah.”

“So I got in touch with some whippet owners. Jake, here, like I said, owns the Rag-Tag Girl. She’s a champion—been cleaning up the Mexican tracks. Nothing can touch her.”

“Damn good dog,” Eaton cut in suddenly, jerking at the brim of the floppy panama. “Damn good.”

“She’s good, all right,” Barker agreed smoothly. “Jake brought her up here to run. He left her at the track kennels. Last night somebody cracked our watchman, MacGowan, over the head, and walked off with her. We were keeping it under cover that she was here. We didn’t want to tip off the Crowley crowd that we were going to run whippets. That’s what makes it so damned funny.”

“Yeah,” Eaton said sourly.

Barker smiled. “I didn’t mean it that way. But you can see how it is, Karl. Hardly anybody knew the dog was here. I don’t see who could have lifted her—or why. It wasn’t the Crowley outfit, I know. They’re not looking for trouble with us, and they wouldn’t pull that kind of funny business anyway.”

Lunsford understood everything now. Barker had sent for him on account of the theft of the Rag-Tag Girl. When Lunsford had arrived a few moments ago, Barker had naturally assumed he had come in answer to the request. Lunsford decided to

let Barker keep on thinking so. It couldn’t do any harm, and he might get a little more cooperation in his investigation of Hobland’s murder.

“What were you going to ask me to do about the theft?” he asked.

Barker frowned. “The track’s willing to go twenty-five hundred to get that dog back, Karl. We feel sort of responsible.”

Eaton snorted. “Sort of responsible! Sort of, he says!”

“Twenty-five hundred dollars?” Lunsford repeated, staring hard at Barker. “For a dog?”

BARKER nodded. “Yeah. I’m telling you, she’s a valuable dog. You should read her record. She’s worth that to us as a drawing card. Lots of people are going to come to see her run.”

“I’ll put in another five hundred,” Eaton said suddenly. “That makes it an even three thousand.”

“How about it, Karl?” Barker asked anxiously. “This hasn’t been reported to the police. We’re trying to keep it under cover.”

Lunsford scratched his chin with a blunt thumbnail. “I tell you, Barker, I’ve got a business of my own to attend to, and I don’t like to mix in this rough stuff. But I’ll look around and see what I can see, as a favor to you.”

“Thanks, Karl,” Barker said, smiling more broadly. “I’ll appreciate it.”

“Tell me some more about it,” Lunsford requested.

Barker moved his slim shoulders. “Nothing much to tell. MacGowan was prowling around the kennels on his rounds. He heard a suspicious noise out back and went to have a look-see. Somebody cracked him from behind. He never even saw the guy. When he came around, the dog was gone.”

“Is this MacGowan a funny little guy that chews tobacco and hops up and down when he gets mad?”

Barker nodded. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“He tackled me out by the gate because he thought I was drivin’ too fast.”

BARKER smiled. “That was Scotty, all right. One of the greyhounds got knocked over by a car awhile back, and ever since then Scotty goes into a frenzy whenever he sees anybody driving fast.”

“Got any other watchmen?”

“Yeah. Dick, the second one, was down by the far gate. He’s got a bum leg. He stays down there,

and Scotty MacGowan patrols the grounds. He didn't hear anything."

Lunsford raised his eyebrows. "Nothing at all?"

Barker shook his head. "Nope. Nothing. I questioned him myself."

Lunsford scratched his head in a casually thoughtful way. "Ever hear of a guy named Hobland?"

Barker stared at him sharply. "Sure. Why?"

"He was picked up in a ditch this morning with a couple of holes in his head. I was just wondering if there was any connection."

"Why should there be?"

Lunsford blinked at him dully. "I dunno. He used to hang around here a lot, I hear."

Barker was watching him narrowly. "He wouldn't have anything to do with this. He was a slick-card man. Everybody knew he carried a big roll with him, and lots of people didn't like him."

Lunsford shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Just wondering. I'll look around. I'll call you if I get anything."

Lunsford had to spend the rest of the morning and the afternoon at his office attending to a shipment and some correspondence with his Sydney agent.

It was about eight o'clock, and the day was changing smoothly from the greyness of dusk into the warm blackness of night, when he turned off Tower Boulevard on West Fifty-third Street and parked in front of a narrow building of faded red brick with the shingles on its flatly sloping roof curling up dryly, like splintery fingers. There were weed-grown vacant lots on either side. There were only two apartments in the building—one upstairs and one down.

THIS was where Scotty MacGowan lived. He had been temporarily relieved of his job as night-watchman at the dog track.

Lunsford went up two cement steps, between two plants that were forlorn and withered and neglected in the brown, dry earth of the two big pots that held them. There were two doors close together. One was open a little, and he could see stairs stretching up dimly. He pushed the door open wider, climbed up toward the second story. At the landing on top he stopped and rapped loudly on the door facing him.

The door opened suddenly in front of him, and a heavy voice said: "Well, what do *you* want?" The

man was as big and thick as Lunsford, but much taller. He had a bullet head with short-cropped hair that stuck up stiffly. His features were small and queerly pinched together. Tiny glittering eyes, a blob of a nose, thickly wet lips.

"Scotty MacGowan here?" Lunsford asked.

The big man looked him up and down slowly, and then craned his thick neck to look down the stairs.

Lunsford said: "I asked you if Scotty MacGowan was here."

"Why, no," said the big man innocently. "No. He went—out. Who're you?"

"My name's Lunsford. From the track."

"Oh," said the big man, and his eyes narrowed suddenly. "The detective, huh? I'll tell him you called."

"Never mind. I'll wait for him."

"Well now," said the big man, moving the door suggestively, "I don't know as he'll be back very quick. Now if you'd call back a little later—"

Lunsford shook his head. "I'll wait inside," he said, pushing forward.

The big man stepped back and tried to slam the door. Lunsford had his foot inside, and he lunged forward with all his weight, shoving. The door gave easily, opening wide. The big man made no effort to hold it.

Lunsford staggered into the room, trying to get his footing. The big man stepped out of his way, and his right hand came around from behind his back holding a big blue-black automatic. He swung the gun swiftly at Lunsford in a flat, glittering arc.

Lunsford tried to duck, tried to get his arm up. He wasn't quick enough. The automatic cracked solidly on his temple. There was a great bursting blast of flame inside his head, and he fell forward blindly—

HE came out of it slowly. He was lying face down on the floor. He felt no pain at all, except for a dim aching that seemed to come from all over him, and after a moment his brain was very clear. He knew just what had happened, and he cursed himself for being such a fool.

He let the lids of his eyes open a little bit. Directly ahead of him he could see a man's two feet. They were in ragged, grass-stained tennis shoes. The man was sitting in a chair, and his ankles were tied tightly to its legs with a thin, strong cord.

Lunsford let his eyes open a little wider and saw the rest of the man. His hands were tied behind the chair back, and there were more loops of the cord across his chest. He had a gag in his mouth, and a little blood had slid redly from under it, where it had cut his lips.

It was Scotty MacGowan, and his bright blue eyes were as snappily alert as they had been the first time Lunsford had seen him. He was watching Lunsford, and his blue eyes blinked frantically, warningly.

Heavy footsteps crossed the floor toward him, and he felt the toe of a shoe nudge him hard in the ribs. He was limply inert.

The footsteps moved away, and Lunsford opened his eyes again. The big man was now leaning over Scotty. He was still carrying the big automatic in his hand, and he nudged Scotty in the stomach with it, chuckling in a cruelly suggestive way.

"I hope you told the truth, you old water rat. If that dog ain't there when Nick gets there, it's gonna be mighty tough for you."

Lunsford raised his head and nodded at Scotty meaningly. Scotty's blue eyes went wide, and he started to waggle his head back and forth and mumble wordlessly at the big man through the gag.

"Wanta talk, huh?" the big man said. His thick fingers fumbled at the gag. "You try squawkin' and see what it gets you."

Lunsford raised himself noiselessly to his hands and knees and started to crawl for his hat, which was lying on the floor near the door.

Suddenly there was the scrape of feet from behind him and a wordlessly startled grunt. Lunsford clutched the hat to his chest and rolled over on his back. He managed to jerk the little wire clip inside the hat, and the revolver he always carried there popped out into his hand. The gun had a cut-down handle and a barrel no more than an inch long. The big cylinder bulged disproportionately large, the leaden ends of the cartridges in it shining dully slick.

There was a smashing report almost in his face, and the floorboards splintered beside him. He pointed the gun up at the vague bulk of the big man and pulled the trigger. There was a ragged *boom*.

THE big man spread his arms wide, making a sick, choking noise deep in his throat. Then his knees bent a little, and he went straight over

backward and crashed to the floor. His big feet bounced up and then came down limply. All the strength went out of his ankles, and the feet turned out stiffly and were still. His small head rolled from side to side loosely twice, then stopped.

Lunsford sat up slowly and wearily. Grunting, he got to his feet, found a jackknife in his pocket, and cut the cord that bound Scotty's hands. The little man jerked the gag out of his mouth, sputtering incoherent profanity.

"Man! Man!" he said excitedly, when he could get his breath. "That was slick! But when you started to crawl for that hat I thought you had gone daft!"

Lunsford grunted disgustedly. He didn't like this rough stuff.

Scotty had untied the rope around his feet. "A gun in your hat!" he marveled.

"I'm not one of these quick-draw artists," Lunsford said. "I have to get a head start by carrying my gun some place where nobody'll get suspicious when I start to reach for it. You got neighbors below?"

"Nope," said Scotty, "and not on either side. You could hold artillery practice here and nobody would know the difference."

"What happened?"

Scotty was looking down at the big man. "Deader than hell," he said callously. "And a damned good thing, too, if you ask me. Him and a weasel by the name of Nick walked in on me a while back and accused me of stealing the Rag-Tag Girl and started to push me around, wantin' to know where I had hid her. So I told them I had her in a joint out on Columbus Street. Nick went out to look."

"Where on Columbus Street?" Lunsford demanded.

Scotty winked at him slyly. "There ain't no such street."

"How long ago did this Nick leave?"

"About twenty minutes, maybe. Just before you came barging in. Don't worry about him comin' back right away, though. I gave him a lot of complicated directions. It'll take him about an hour to find the place where I said the street was."

"While we're waiting for him, you can tell *me* where you hid the Rag-Tag Girl," Lunsford said. "And don't give me any phony song and dance about it, either."

Scotty stared at him narrowly. "You know, you

ain't nowhere near as dumb as you look. When I seen you this morning, I knew you must be the detective Barker sent for, and I figured I wouldn't have any trouble fooling such a stupid dope. But by golly, you got the right answer, and it didn't take you so long, neither."

Lunsford shrugged. "That was easy. The answer was in plain sight all the time. There wasn't any noise."

"Huh?" said Scotty blankly.

"The other dogs," Lunsford explained. "They didn't make a racket. There were a dozen greyhounds in that kennel besides the Rag-Tag Girl. You take a dozen dogs of almost any breed and put them together in the dark and then let somebody come stumbling around among them, knocking a guy on the head and trying to grab one of 'em and walk off, and you'll hear some noise. It's just natural. They'd get excited and bark and make a hell of a racket. But these dogs didn't. The answer is that they knew the guy that came in there and stole the Rag-Tag Girl. Knew him so well they didn't bark at all."

"Yep," said Scotty shamelessly. "They know me pretty well. I wouldn't fool you, mister. I stole her."

Lunsford nodded. "And then there was the matter of the reward. The guy that stole her had to know the special setup at the track. Ordinarily the track wouldn't offer a reward for a stolen dog. They aren't racing now, and they'd just report the matter to the police and let it go at that. The only reason they offered a reward is because they did not want it known they were thinking of running whippets."

"Hell," said Scotty. "I never thought of 'em offerin' a reward."

"What?" said Lunsford, startled, "You didn't steal her to get the reward?"

"Hell, no," said Scotty.

"Then why did you steal her? You can't race her; don't you know that? No matter what track you took her to, somebody around there would know her."

"I stole her because I want her," Scotty said, suddenly bitter. "She's mine. You hear that, mister? She's my dog!"

"Yours?" Lunsford said blankly.

"You bet. Mine. I raised that dog from a pup. I taught her to run. Look up her registry if you don't believe it. I owned her before Eaton bought her,

and whether I can run her in races or not, I'm gonna have her. She's my dog!"

Lunsford shrugged indifferently. "Okay. It's all one to me. You'll have to argue it out with Eaton. But I was hired to get the dog back to the track, and back she's going. Where is she?"

"Mister," said Scotty, "you saved my neck for me. Nick and the big moose would've been pretty nasty when they found out I was givin' them the runaround. If it wasn't for that, I'd tell you to go right straight to hell. But as it is, she's here."

He walked across to the kitchen door, swung it back, and pointed to a big clothes hamper beside the sink.

"In there?" Lunsford asked incredulously.

Scotty nodded, grinning. He opened the top of the hamper, lifted out a thick mass of soiled clothes. The hamper had a false bottom about halfway down. Scotty lifted it out and clucked his tongue gently at the dog whose head popped into view.

The Rag-Tag Girl was small and nondescript and thin. It had bright, intelligent eyes, eagerly affectionate. It was brown, spotted with black, as though someone had dabbed at it hastily and clumsily with a paintbrush. It lolled out a long red tongue, slapped it against Scotty's gnarled hand.

Lunsford stared. "You mean to tell me that thing is worth a three-thousand-dollar reward?" he asked incredulously.

Scotty straightened his thin body with an angry jerk. "What you mean—'thing'? Did you ever see this dog run? Why—why, it's beautiful. It's—it's poetry! That's what it is! Why, she's a champion! Ain't you, girlie?"

The Rag-Tag Girl whined eagerly.

"All right," Lunsford said impatiently. "I don't care whether she's a champion or not. Pick her up, and let's get out of here. We'll stop at the nearest drugstore and call the cops. They can stake this place out and wait for Nick to come back."

Scotty tucked the dog under one arm, and they went back across the living room, past the sprawling body of the big man. Scotty opened the door into the hall and stopped short with a startled grunt. Lunsford crowded close behind him, peering over his shoulder.

There was a man halfway up the stairs, coming very quietly. He stopped when he saw them, looking up. He was small, sleekly dapper, and his thin, dark face, staring up at them, twisted in a

surprised grimace.

"It's Nick!" Scotty exclaimed suddenly.

With one smoothly blurred motion, Nick's hand flipped inside his tight coat and out again holding a thin automatic. Lunsford straight-armed Scotty, knocking him out of the way. He fumbled for the .38 he had dropped into his coat pocket. The cut-down grip was slippery in his suddenly sweaty palm.

The thin automatic smacked out sharply. Scotty bent over in the middle with a short, gasping cry. He folded up then, limply, and his head banged on the floor. The Rag-Tag Girl, twisting out of his lax arms, yelped in shrill fright.

Nick whirled and ran, jumping down the stairs four at a time. Lunsford finally got the short .38 free of his pocket and fired once. He saw the bullet smack into the wall over Nick's head as he spun through the door and out of sight.

Lunsford swore in a thickly breathless voice and went down the stairs after him in long jumps. He reached the door, jerked it open.

Nick was running hard, diagonally across the front lawn, head down, arms pumping frantically. He was heading for a car parked at the curb. The engine of the car suddenly roared, and it started to roll away from the curb.

And as it moved, long slits of orange flame suddenly flapped out of its interior, and there was the muffled, rapping reports of an automatic. Nick yelled hoarsely in incredulous amazement. And then suddenly he staggered, flinging his arms wide. He tripped and slammed down hard on the ground, rolling over and over.

The big car whipped away from the curb, roared into speed. Lunsford dug his heels in the hard ground, stopping short. He raised the blunt .38 and fired twice, aiming carefully. The big sedan skidded crazily around the first corner and disappeared, leaving only the ripping blast of its exhaust that faded rapidly.

Lunsford wiped his coldly moist forehead and swore slowly and bitterly to himself in a monotone.

IT was a long hall with greenish walls and ceiling and a pale green rug, richly thick, on the floor. There were cream-colored doors at regular intervals with streamlined brass numerals on them.

Lunsford came along the hall, his heavy feet noiseless on the thick rug. He walked a little more slowly than usual. He was very tired, and his head

ached in dull, slow waves. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he had been talking to policemen for two hours. He wanted nothing more than to go to sleep.

He stopped in front of one of the doors and knocked on it gently. He leaned against the green wall, waiting. His eyes burned behind the glasses, and he had to keep blinking in order to clear his vision. Objects seemed a little distorted and unreal.

He knocked on the door again, and it opened in front of him. It was Eaton. He was holding a highball glass in his hand. He had his coat off, and his pale blue shirt bulged tightly over his paunch. His words were slightly blurred.

"Oh, it's you. What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you a minute," Lunsford said.

Eaton opened the door wider. "Come in."

Lunsford went into a long low living room with cream-tinted walls. The furniture was low and modernistic, with brightly metal arms and legs, leather cushions of contrasting colors. Eaton indicated a chair with a jerk of his head.

"Scotch?"

Lunsford nodded. He sipped gratefully at the liquor Eaton gave him, relaxing in the chair.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Eaton asked, stifling a yawn.

Lunsford nodded slowly. "Yeah. I found the dog."

Eaton's hand jerked, and the ice in his glass tinkled lightly. "You found her! Where?"

"In Scotty MacGowan's apartment. He stole her. He owned her before you did. Didn't you know that?"

"I knew somebody by the name of MacGowan had owned her," Eaton said. "But I didn't know it was this one. I'd never met the guy. I never thought of such a broken-down old guy as this Scotty MacGowan was as having owned a dog like the Rag-Tag Girl."

"Was?" Lunsford repeated gently. "As Scotty MacGowan *was*?"

Eaton didn't say anything, watching Lunsford with bulging, yellowish eyes. After a moment, he turned his head a little and looked at the chair where his coat lay. He moistened his lips, swallowing.

"No," Lunsford said softly. He slid the stubby .38 out of his hat. "Just take it easy."

Eaton's breath came hard, wheezing. "What's the idea? What're you tryin' to pull on me?"

“You thought Scotty MacGowan was dead, didn’t you?” Lunsford asked. “You thought Nick killed him tonight. That’s why you shot Nick. But you played in bad luck. Scotty isn’t dead. And neither is Nick. They’re both in the hospital. And when Nick comes around, he’s gonna be a little sore at you, I think.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Eaton said nervously.

“Oh, yes, you do. You bought the Rag-Tag Girl from a gambler by the name of Hobland, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Eaton breathlessly. “Sure I did. What of it?”

“Hobland got her from Scotty MacGowan. He got Scotty drunk and cheated him out of the dog in a crooked poker game. Scotty told me all about it while they were getting ready to operate on him in the hospital. Scotty’s crazy about that dog. He didn’t care whether it was a racer or not. He wanted it because it was his dog, and he loved it. That’s why he stole it from you.”

“This is all crazy,” said Eaton.

“Crazy is right,” Lunsford agreed. “This case has been crazy from the first. I couldn’t figure just what was the idea of all this funny business, but I’ve got the answer now. Scotty told me. He’s a smart old bird. He taught the Rag-Tag Girl to race, but he taught her not to race, too. Not to race for anybody but him. Hobland cheated Scotty out of the dog, but he got cheated in turn. The dog wouldn’t race for him. Wouldn’t run worth a damn. Maybe he could have taught it to run for him if he’d had the time and skill and patience. But he didn’t. So he sold the dog to you on the strength of its past record, just forgetting to mention that it would not run for anybody but Scotty.

“You were gypped, and gypped plenty. You started right after Hobland. You trailed him up

here. Scotty came after you, to be with his dog. You found Hobland, and he just laughed in your face when you accused him of cheating you. You didn’t have nerve enough to tackle him yourself, so you hired Nick and his big pal to go after him. They did. But Hobland is a tough guy. He shot it out with Nick, and Nick killed him.

“Then you were in for it. A murder. And on top of that Scotty steals the dog. You tumbled to who he was, after that. You knew he had the dog. But you didn’t dare say anything, because if you did he’d connect you up with Hobland’s murder. You were in a bad spot. You had to get that dog, shut Scotty’s mouth, and clear out. Tonight, when there was that shooting at Scotty’s place, you thought Nick had killed Scotty, and you took a chance and shot Nick. He knew too much about you.”

“Listen,” said Eaton. “Listen, now. You know I didn’t kill Hobland. Nick is only wounded. Listen, let me get out of this. I’ll give you a bill of sale for the dog. You claim the reward. Let me out.”

“No,” said Lunsford regretfully. “No, I’m afraid not. You see, a friend of mine by the name of Saunders is in jail accused of killing Hobland. Saunders is a drunken good-for-nothing, and if he was hung it wouldn’t be any more than he deserves. But he’s my friend. He used to work for me. He stuck to me when times were mighty tough. When I couldn’t pay his salary for months at a time.

“He was my friend when I needed a friend bad. And now he needs me. That’s why I started out on this business. To get him out of jail. I took quite a lot of detours, but I finally got there in the end. You are going to testify against Nick and get Saunders out of jail.”

There was a sudden thunderous knock on the door. Eaton jerked up, half out of his chair.

“Don’t get excited,” Lunsford said soothingly. “It’s just the cops coming to pay you a social call.”