



# THE COP ON THE CORNER

By DAVID GOODIS

*When racketeer Jimmie Renzelli was found bumped off in an alley, the murder wasn't as simple to solve as it looked!*

**T**WO little kids found the body. They found it in an alley. At first they thought the man was sleeping. Then they saw the blood. They started to yell and they ran down the alley.

Elrick, the big cop, was on the corner. He was talking to Herbie, the newsboy. Herbie was a year over thirty. At one time he had wanted to be an artist. But he found out that in order to keep alive it was necessary to eat. So Herbie, a thin little guy with black hair, began selling papers on the

corner.

His only friend was Elrick, who had been on the force for twelve years and would probably remain there for twenty or thirty more. Elrick was a good natured guy who always took his time. In the summer he was almost immovable. He would stand there on the corner and blot a handkerchief against his gleaming red face.

"Whew, but it's hot!" he'd say.

"Sure is," Herbie would answer.

Elrick would then begin to blast the

weather, the neighborhood, the city's water system, and the universe in general. Which would bring a string of philosophical observations from Herbie. Invariably it would end in a violent disagreement. Elrick would walk away, boiling. The next day he would be on the corner again, talking to Herbie.

They were in the midst of such a debate when they were interrupted by the two little kids.

Elrick wobbled up the alley. Herbie followed. The two little kids trailed along, yelping.

Then Elrick was looking down at the body.

"I can't believe it," he said.

Herbie leaned down. His eyes widened.

"Renzelli."

"So the Big Shot came home," Elrick said. "He came home and they were waiting for him. Ten years ago he was a wild kid of seventeen. I grabbed him once and I told him to wise up, but he ran down the street. And I had a feeling that some day I would find him like this. In an alley. Wait here, Herbie. Don't let anyone near the body. I'm putting in a call."

Elrick wobbled down the alley. Excitement was climbing within him. For a long time the neighborhood had been quiet. There wasn't much to do, outside of keeping the kids off the street and breaking up minor disturbances. But now Jimmie Renzelli was lying in an alley with four bullet holes in his chest. And Elrick knew all about Renzelli.

He knew all about the guy's connections, his friends and the enemies. The business and the manipulations. He knew about a girl named Gladys and a guy named Vince Mazzone and a guy named Lou. And a New Year's Eve party of two years ago. And how Renzelli had found it best to leave town the next morning.

AFTER putting in his call, Elrick wobbled down the alley again. Herbie and the two kids were gazing at the body and at Renzelli's glimmering black hair, which he'd always shined up with a lot of sweet-smelling grease. They were gazing at the costly gabardine suit, at the custom-made lavender shirt, and the expensive tie. And at the moonstone ring on the little finger of a cold white hand.

They were gazing at all that, and at the blood from the four punctures in Renzelli's chest.

"He was always tough," Herbie said. "Always a bully."

The two little kids began to ask a lot of questions. Elrick pushed them away.

"Go on! Get out of here."

They ran up the alley.

Elrick looked at the dead man and shook his head.

"I wonder why he came back," he said. "He got away at the right time. He should have known better than to have come back."

"Maybe he needed money," Herbie said.

With a grimace, Elrick pointed at the body.

"When a man can wear clothes like that, he ain't exactly starving," he said. "Even a dumb newsboy ought to be able to see that."

Herbie shrugged.

Elrick placed fists on hips and looked down at the body.

"It won't take long to figure out who did this. I got the case patterned already." He jabbed a forefinger into Herbie's ribs. "A situation like this comes up once every fifty or so years. When an ordinary cop solves a murder, he ain't no ordinary cop any longer. Get the drift?"

"No," Herbie said, his face dumb.

"I didn't think you would," Elrick said. "You see, simpleton, I know Renzelli's background. And when I put all the facts on the table, and fix them up so they fit, I'll have the case all wrapped up and ready to

be delivered to the D. A. And a few days after that I'll be taking off this dark blue and putting on plain clothes."

"You mean they'll fire you?"

Elrick's lips tightened and he pushed the cap back on his head. "When you were born, your brains must have leaked out through your ears," he said. "No, they won't fire me. They'll make me a detective. A plainclothes man."

"That'll be nice," Herbie said.

"You tellin' me?" Elrick blurted, "That's what I been hoping for. But I never thought the break would come. Even though I got brains, I'm not exactly educated, like some of these smooth young guys who come out of the colleges. Like that smart-aleck Reeve." Satisfaction settled itself into Elrick's eyes. "I'll show that squirt what a cop can do."

There was a commotion at the other end of the alley, where policemen were holding back a curious crowd. Then three cops came walking down the alley followed by a man in a plain light blue suit. He was of medium height and sparingly built.

He pushed his way past the cops and leaned over the body.

He glanced up at Elrick. "Anything more?"

"Nothing more than what you see there," Elrick said. "Two kids found the body and told me about it. I put in a call."

"Where are the two kids?"

Elrick shrugged. "I told them to go home."

"Oh, you told them to go home, did you?"

"Now look, Reeve, don't start that with me."

Reeve looked at the other three cops. "Two possible star witnesses and he tells them to go home." He looked at Elrick. "Once upon a time I made up my mind that you were dumb. I was wrong. You're not dumb. You're an imbecile."

Elrick pushed the cap back on his head.

His big hands formed fists.

"I won't take that from any—"

One of the cops stepped in. "Aw, why don't you guys cut it out!"

"He's been lookin' for trouble for a long time!" Elrick boomed. "And now it's up to my neck!"

Reeve ignored Elrick. He was studying the body, looking up and down the alley, and running his hands along the dreary gray wood that walled the alley. Then he whirled and pointed a long finger at Herbie.

"Who are you?"

"Leave him alone," Elrick said. "His name's Herbie and he sells papers. I was on the corner talkin' to him when the kids came up. Besides, Reeve, you're just wasting time. I know who killed the guy."

"Oh, you do, do you?" Reeve said unsweetly.

"Sure." Elrick smiled. He leaned back on his heels and purred, "I wonder how I'll look in a nice tan worsted suit, a clean white shirt and a snappy tie?"

"You'll still look like a big fat dummy," Reeve said.

Again it was necessary for the three other cops to step in. . . .

**H**HEADQUARTERS decided to give Elrick a break. He was practically on his knees, begging them to let him follow up his leads. Within twenty-four hours he promised to bring in the murderer of Jimmie Renzelli. And he insisted that because of the peculiarities surrounding the case, he must go at this task alone. Finally he got what he wanted. Headquarters told Elrick to go out and see what he could do.

In the outside office Reeve was sitting on the edge of a desk, wise-cracking with a few reporters. The detective looked Elrick up and down. "Well, at least you're taking it with a smile," Reeve said. "You really didn't expect them to let you handle it, did

you?"

The smile on Elrick's features took on a decided subtlety.

"No, I really didn't expect it at all," he said.

He walked out and stepped into a green-and-white bandit-chaser. He slammed into first and he was doing forty around a corner and fifty down a narrow street and fifty-five around another corner. He switched on the siren and a horse became frightened and a peddler started to curse as tomatoes went splashing over the side of his wagon. Only then did Elrick slow down.

Elrick finally parked the coupe and stepped out. He walked along a line of four-story tenements and then he looked up at an address. The front door was open and Elrick walked into a dark hallway and went up two flights of steps. An old woman came out of a room and looked at him hatefully.

"Whatchoo want?"

"I'm looking for a Miss Gladys Melvin."

"She not live here. She move."

"When?"

"I no know."

Elrick pushed the cap back on his head and returned the old woman's bitter gaze with a scowl.

"Show me that girl's room or I'll lock you up."

The old woman cringed. She moved down to the far end of the hall. It was dark down there. The wallpaper was a mess. The door was splintered and the floor sagged.

"In there," she said. She made a face at Elrick as if she was getting ready to spit. In spite of himself the big cop winced. He waited until she had gone, then opened the door.

He walked into a small room even dirtier and more sorrowful than the hallway. It was small and the single window hadn't been washed for a year. There was a chair and a dresser and a bed. And on the bed was

a girl in her late twenties. She had yellow hair. She wore a dress that at one time had been something to see. Now it was a rag. She was resting face down and there was an alcoholic rhythm to her respiration. On the floor was an empty gin bottle.

He closed the door and walked to the bed. For a few moments he looked down at the girl, shaking his head slowly. He was remembering when she had been a kid in pigtails, running gaily home from school.

There was a pitcher of water on the dresser. He grabbed it, dipped fingers into the pitcher and gently turned the girl's head. His fingers flicked water.

Her eyes opened. They were pale blue. They blinked and then they narrowed. Gladys sat up, looked at the dark blue uniform and mechanically she was on the defensive.

"What do *you* want?"

"I'm Officer Elrick. Sure, Gladys. Sure, you remember me."

"I don't know from nothin'." She was no longer in an alcoholic fog. This was a cop.

"What am I supposed to do—sing a song?"

"You used to be able to do that pretty well. You had a good voice. Used to sing in a night club, didn't you? Sure. Jimmie Renzelli's place."

Gladys' features grew white. Her lower lip shivered slightly.

"Yeah, I used to sing there," she said.

"About two years ago, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Sure, I remember. That was a nice place Renzelli had. A real nice place."

"Yeah."

"I went there a lot of nights when I was off duty. You know why? I liked to hear you sing. I used to say to myself, 'That girl will be in the bright lights some day. She's gonna go a long way'."

"Yeah. I went a long way, all right."

Gladys got up, trying to stand straight and it didn't work. She had to lean against a bedpost. "All right, copper. What's the wire?"

"No wire, Gladys. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and I thought I'd come up to talk over old times."

**G**LADYS registered mock sweetness. "Now ain't that just lovely!" Suddenly the mock sweetness changed into nothing but bitterness.

"Look, copper. I don't know what brings you up here, so I'm askin' you again. What's the wire?"

"Gladys, you got this all wrong," Elrick said. "I've known you since you were a little girl. I've watched you grow up. When you used to sing down at Renzelli's—" He paused and leaned toward her slightly and watched the whiteness increase itself, watched the lower lip shivering.

"Yeah, you said that already. Let's move along."

"Well, I was interested in you, Gladys. Just like I'm always interested in the young people around this neighborhood. So I decided to pay you a visit." He looked around the room. "The place sure has changed."

"Yeah." Gladys was watching him suspiciously.

"I was thinking about your boy friend," Elrick said. "What was his name? Oh, yeah—Vince Mazzone. Whatever became of him?"

"He's still around."

"And Lou?"

"I see him once in a while."

Elrick looked down at a torn carpet, then he lifted his head slowly.

"What about Jimmie Renzelli?"

Gladys stepped back. Again she was white. Again her lower lip shivered. She bit at it. She reached back, her thin fingers tightly gripping the bedpost. She was trying

to prevent the shivering from spreading through her body but it wouldn't work. She was vibrating as if she was connected with 110 volts.

"All right. What about him?"

Elrick's voice was soft. "Seen him lately?"

"No."

"Are you sure about that, Gladys?"

Something happened to the yellow-haired girl. Something terrible. Her pale blue eyes were suffused by a crazy light, and for a moment it seemed as if she was going to dig fingernails into Elrick's face.

"You dirty sneak," she screamed. "You'll get nothing out of me. Crawling in here like a slimy worm, thinking that you could get me to say something. Well, you won't!"

"I have all the information I want," Elrick said.

He started to open the door. Then he came back and grabbed Gladys' shoulders. He shook her. "But I can always use more. You asked me for the wire and now I'll give it to you. Renzelli's dead. You know that. You know who killed him. So do I. Now you're going to tell me where I can find—"

Despite the alcohol she was carrying, Gladys had strength. Using every ounce of it, she threw a fist at Elrick's right eye. It missed the eye and it hit the cop on the forehead. It gave Elrick pain, and it made him release the girl. She kicked him in the left shin, and then she kicked him in the right shin, and he made a grab for her. She dodged him. She snatched at the pitcher and swung it at his head.

He ducked and made another grab for her. She jumped up on the bed and screamed and kicked again. One of the kicks caught him on the side of the lip. He cursed. Blood was running from his mouth and he was losing his temper. Again he reached for her.

Gladys still had hold of the pitcher. She

raised it over her head, brought it down hard. It made a dull sound as it connected with Elrick's skull. He fell back, tripped and went up against the window sill and Gladys threw the pitcher at him as he lunged at her. The pitcher hit Elrick full in the face. It loosened up a few of his front teeth and now he was out to do damage.

But he tripped again as he neared the bed. He went down on his knees and, before he could straighten, Gladys' fist swung around in a flat arc and landed on the side of his jaw. He twisted over and fell on his back. Gladys jumped off the bed and picked up the empty gin bottle and hit him over the head. He tried to get up, tried to bring an arm up to protect his head.

Gladys was too fast. Again she banged him with the gin bottle. Elrick fell flat on the floor. His eyes were closed. He was unconscious. . . .

Somebody was saying:

"You didn't have to do that."

"I couldn't help it. I lost my head."

"I always told you not to get excited."

"Don't bawl me out, Vince. Please don't bawl me out."

Elrick opened his eyes. Gladys was leaning weakly against a wall and facing her was a short heavy-set guy who wore a super-draped pin-striped suit. His hair was curly and light brown, and his eyes were a shade lighter. He had a wide, flattened nose and twisted lips.

Gladys was sobbing. She started to lean her head against the short guy's shoulder but he pushed her away. She sobbed louder.

**T**HEN Elrick raised himself from the floor, pulling at his holster. The pistol came out into his hand.

"Hello, Vince," he said, and got up.

Vince Mazzino seemed very much astonished. He rubbed his tongue across his lips a few times, then pointed to the pistol.

"You don't need that," he said.

"Thanks, but I don't think I'm gonna take any chances. You remember me, don't you, Vince?"

Gladys cut into her own sobbing.

"Sure, Vince, you remember him," she said. "He's an old friend. The original Mr. Auld Lang Syne."

Vince glanced at Gladys and said, "Shut up." He looked at the pistol.

"I'm sorry about this, officer," he said. He looked up and then he seemed to recognize Elrick, and something close to a smile arrived on his lips. "Sure, I remember you."

"That's good, Vince. That's swell. It's going to make things easier."

"What things?" Vince said, a worried frown on his brow.

"A lot of things," Elrick said. He held the pistol stiffly and with his other hand he rubbed the back of his head. He moved to one side and leaned against the dresser. He looked at Gladys. She was sitting on the bed, sobbing. Then he looked at Vince. The short, heavyset Vince was shaking his head and Elrick attributed this to a certain amount of despair.

"Come on, Vince," the cop said, "let's save ourselves a lot of trouble. Let's get the whole thing settled now."

Vince nudged Gladys' shoulder and pointed to Elrick.

"What's he talking about?" Vince asked.

"Aw, come on!" Elrick said. "The longer we play around, the worse it's gonna be. You talk straight to me, Vince, and I'll do what I can for you. After all, it's not as bad as it seems. You might even be able to plead self-defense."

"You're crazy!" Vince screeched. "You got the wrong number somewhere! I don't have any idea what you're talking about!"

"Sit down, Vince," the cop said. "Sit down on the bed and don't get yourself all worked up. If you don't know what's taking place, it's only fair that I should lendja a

helping hand.”

Elrick waited while Vince sat down beside Gladys. He looked at the blond girl and the short, heavy-set man and they were quiet now and they were worried and somewhat meek.

“Now it’s nice and quiet here and we won’t be bothered by anyone,” the cop said. “We’ll just take our time and go through this and come to an agreement so that we’ll all be happy. Now ain’t that reasonable?”

“I could stand another shot of gin right now,” Gladys said.

“Shut up,” Vince said.

“Let’s go back two years ago,” Elrick began. “It was New Year’s Eve. Everybody was happy. Everybody was making noises. Tooting horns and wearing paper caps and—”

“Here we go again,” Gladys said. “Right down Memory Lane.”

“Shut up,” Vince said.

Elrick continued, “New Year’s Eve at Jimmie Renzelli’s place.” He paused. He saw that Gladys was shivering again. He saw that Vince was stiffening. He went on, “I was there that night. I was off duty. I was having a swell time. I was even a bit cockeyed. But not so much that I couldn’t remember afterward.”

“Remember what?” Vince said, and the meekness was gone and the query was flipped out harshly.

“Plenty!” Elrick replied, and he made it loud. “You had an argument with Renzelli that night. A big argument—about a lot of things, mainly Gladys. Now look, Vince, if you get up off that bed, if you make one move I don’t like, I’ll send a bullet into you. Now sit still and listen. You got tough with Renzelli. You had Lou with you and you decided to settle things once and for all. Well, like I said before, I was carrying a big package of bourbon inside me but I knew what was taking place though, I knew that Jimmie Renzelli was anything but a model

lad. I didn’t want to see any trouble.

“You and Lou had followed Renzelli into his office and I opened a side door where I could see and hear everything that was going on. I saw you and Lou standing near Renzelli. And you were telling him to leave town. You were telling him that if you ever saw him inside city limits again, you’d shoot him down. Ain’t that right, Vince?”

Perspiration flowed glimmeringly along Vince’s forehead. He touched the tips of his trembling fingers to his lips.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said.

“So you told Lou to open a window. You pulled a rod and you held it on Renzelli and you told him to climb out the window. Then he pleaded with you to let him stay around. He promised that he’d leave Gladys alone. He promised that he’d never cross you again. He was on his knees. But you had that rod pointed at his head and you laughed at him. You reminded him of what a tough guy he had always been, and how often he had bullied you. And once again you said that if you ever saw him in this town again, you’d put bullets in him.”

VINCE looked at his hands which were shaking. He looked at Gladys. She was sobbing again. He looked at Elrick. “Why are you bringing that up now? It happened two years ago.”

“If it happened thirty years ago, I wouldn’t be forgetting it,” the cop said. “My job won’t let me forget things like that. And so, Vince, I’m arresting you for the murder of Jimmie Renzelli!”

Paralysis dominated the short, heavysset guy. For a moment it seemed that he was going to collapse.

“Murder?” he whispered.

“Don’t bother to fake it, Vince. I’ve seen that act pulled too many times already. Your best bet is to come along without any trouble.”

“I didn’t kill Renzelli!” Vince

screached. He started to leap away from the bed, but the muzzle of Elrick's gun was like a rivet, and it cast frigidly upon him. He gulped and he was trying hard to pull himself together.

"Believe me, Elrick, I don't know anything about this," he said. "I'll admit I got tough with Renzelli that night. I told him to leave town. And he did. Since then I haven't seen him."

Something was happening to Gladys. Her eyes were wide. Her lips were drawn tightly. Slowly turning her head, she looked at Vince.

"Maybe the cop is right," she said. "Maybe you did kill Jimmie!"

"What are you saying?" Vince mumbled. He was stupefied.

A dim, almost idiotic smile floated across Gladys' lips.

"Sure, it checks," she said. "You killed him because you knew he was coming back for me. You knew I'd go to him. You knew that all this time I've been carrying a torch for him, filling myself with gin, chaining myself to this rattrap of a room, trying to forget about him. And you, with your dough, with your sharp clothes, you thought you could take his place. But you couldn't, Vince. No man could. No man ever will."

Vince looked at Elrick. "Don't listen to her. She's rotted with gin. She's talkin' in a daze."

"Let her talk," Elrick said.

"Sure, let me talk," Gladys said. "It does me good to talk now." The smile that she fastened on Vince was eerie, and she went on, "I never knew what happened on that New Year's Eve. I never knew the real reason why Jimmie left town. You told me it was for business reasons. You were moving in on his gambling territory, and you told him to shove, and he was yellow, and he shoved. That's what you told me. That's what I believed. But somehow—somehow, Vince, it was in the cards for

Jimmie to come back to me. And you were waiting for that day. You and Lou—waiting for him! You killed him, Vince! You killed the only thing that ever mattered to me!"

Forgetting about Elrick's pistol, she aimed fingernails at Vince's throat. The heavy-set guy fell back. He let out a yell of fear, fell from the bed, and then he rolled over. And he collided with Elrick, who was trying to show Gladys the muzzle of the pistol.

Elrick went back against the wall as he saw Gladys lunging at Vince. Again her fingernails were in action. The cop let out a curse and then he was wondering what to say and he grabbed at the standby phrase of all tough-neighborhood policemen.

"Break it up!" he yelled.

But Gladys was insane now. She did not see the pistol that was pointed at her. She did not care. And her only thought, her only desire was to fasten her fingernails in the jugular vein of Vince Mazzone.

"Stop her!" Vince screeched.

It looked bad for Vince. The cop realized that he would not be able to do much with the pistol. Already Gladys had her fingernails in the throat of the heavy-set guy, and she was ripping, and the blood was dribbling over his collar and tie.

Elrick dropped the pistol. He clamped a hold on Gladys' arm, twisted hard and pulled back. Gladys let out a shriek and tried to jab an elbow into Elrick's middle. The cop told himself that it was too bad he had to be so rough with a woman, and he twisted the arm again. Gladys let out another shriek and she was cursing and kicking and squirming and Elrick placed a hold on her other arm. He dragged her away from Vince.

"Now calm down," he said.

"Yeah," Vince said, holding a handkerchief to his throat. "That's good advice."

Quickly he bent down, brought the



pistol up and pointed it.

"You stay here with her, copper! Just stay here and talk to her for a while."

**E**LRICK called himself a few hundred fancy names.

"Where do you think you're going, Vince?" he asked.

"I'm running to the drug store for an ice cream soda," Vince said. "Then I'm leaving town. Maybe South America. Maybe Canada. You can guess at it."

"You're not smart, Vince. You'll be picked up in no time."

"Let me go, copper!" Gladys yelled. "Let me go! I don't care if he shoots me! At least I'll get in his way—you'll be able to grab him!"

"You wouldn't do a thing like that, would you, copper?" Vince said.

He was near the door. There was a smile on his face and there was something sad about it.

"I'll be sayin' good-by, Gladys," Vince said. "I don't want to leave you, baby, but I don't have any choice now. Maybe some day you'll find that you made a mistake. If I had the time, if I had the breaks, I'd prove it to you now. But the way things are lined up, the only thing for me to do is to powder—but fast!"

And he made an exit.

Gladys writhed in Elrick's grasp. "Go after him!"

"Sister, he's not carrying a water pistol," the cop said.

"You can't let him get away!"

"Listen," Elrick said. "I feel worse about this than you do. If Vince makes good on the scam, I not only lose my chance for a plainclothes job, but I'll probably get kicked off the Force in the bargain." He sighed. "Anyway, it's better than getting a few bullets in my lung. Come on, let's ride down to Headquarters and give Reeve and the other smart guys a big laugh." . . .

In the outer office of Headquarters there was unusual quiet. It thickened as Elrick and the girl came in. The detectives and the reporters and the cops were staring and Elrick was waiting for someone to say something.

Nothing was said.

Elrick gazed around the room, looking for Reeve. The plainclothes man was not around. "Where is he?" Elrick asked another cop.

"In there." The cop flicked a thumb toward a door. "Questioning somebody."

"On what?"

"On the Renzelli case."

Elrick took a deep breath. "Witness or suspect?"

"Neither. The guy came in and gave himself up."

Elrick's eyes bulged and an elated smile formed on his lips.

"You mean he came in here and said he killed Renzelli?"

"That's what I mean," the other cop said.

"Then it's okay!" Elrick yelled. "Everything's okay!"

"What's okay?" the other cop said dully.

"Listen, I cracked this case. I did it alone. Nobody helped. I went out and put the pieces together and I nabbed the murderer. Even if he did get away, it stands to reason that I found him out. So he came back. He gave himself up. Reeve can't take credit for that. And he won't, no matter how hard he tries. Don't you think I'm gonna let myself get pushed around!"

"Elrick, I'm thinking that you must have bumped your head some place and it's affected you," the other cop said, eyes and voice still dull. "Maybe you better go in there and find out a few things."

Elrick grabbed at the door handle. He dashed into the small room. He saw a few detectives. He saw a few cops. He saw Reeve. And then he was looking at someone

who was sitting in a chair beneath a droplight.

It was Herbie.

The newsboy was relaxed and he was calm. He smiled at Elrick, and then he looked up at Reeve.

“So like I was telling you, I always hated Renzelli,” Herbie said. “I always remembered how he used to bully me, when we were kids. But more than just hating him as an individual, I despised the things he represented. Two years ago I planned to murder him. But just about that time he left town. I don’t know why. It couldn’t have been because he was afraid of me. I never told a soul what I intended to do. Anyway, after Renzelli left, I promised myself that if he ever came back, I would kill him because he and creatures of his type are leeches, sucking the blood of society. An artist like myself is forced to sell newspapers on a corner, while the Renzellis live like princes!”

“All right,” Reeve cut in. “So Renzelli came back to town. Then what?”

Herbie shrugged. “I had a gun. I’d been saving it for the happy moment. Last night I used it.”

“And today,” Reeve said, “you were on the corner as usual, chewing the rag with your old pal Elrick. ‘Is that right?’”

“That’s right,” Herbie said, and he smiled contentedly.

One of the dicks said: “Bughouse.” Reeve nodded.

ELRICK told himself that if he stayed in this room a minute longer he’d go crazy, too. He opened the door and walked out. He walked through the quiet outer office and he stopped before Gladys.

“You’ll be seeing Vince in a day or so,” he said. “He probably reads the papers. A certain headline will bring him back to town. And since he’s been true blue all this time, trying to help you snap out of it, he’ll come back to you again. And when he does, give him a big hello. Vince ain’t an angel, but he’s better stuff than Renzelli was. And maybe when he sees you back on your feet, smiling again, singing again, he’ll stay on the straight line.”

“Are you telling me that Vince didn’t do it?”

“That’s the idea. And if you’re gonna start bawling and calling yourself names, do it at home. I’ve had enough aggravation for one day.”

Elrick watched her as she walked across the room, as she walked out through the big doorway, above which the symbol of Justice was carved in lines that somehow were as gentle as they were stern.

Then he turned and looked at the other door and winced slightly as he thought of the needling he would soon take from Reeve and the other smart guys. As he thought of the plainclothes job, flitting away like a mocking moth. As he thought of his lonely beat, and the stifling afternoons, with summer sun jumping up from a broiling pavement and hitting him in the face.

And no Herbie to talk to.