

CATCH ME A KILLER

A Chet Lacey
Story



When he saw me, he
jumped back and his right
hand went up, holding a
gun

by

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When you try to pin a rap on Lacey, you never can tell when he'll turn right around - and pin it back where it belongs!

ONE of the handicaps about the private detecting business is that every now and then you have to work for strictly free. That is, if you have any pride and want to keep your reputation on a high level with the police and with the boys who work the shady side of the street. As an example of what I mean, take that screwy business I, Chet Lacey, walked into

a couple of weeks ago.

It was one of those evenings when it was so hot all you wanted was just one breath of cool air, and there just didn't seem to be one in town. Well, in the faint hope that I might find a cool breeze over by the river, I strolled that way and continued on across the Danvers Bridge. The traffic was absolutely light, and save for a young fellow

in a loud checked suit slouching in front of me, there wasn't another soul to be seen on the bridge.

At least, that's what I thought. But suddenly the fellow in the checked suit glanced back over his shoulder, then backed against the railing, both hands out in front of him, as though to ward me off. I just stopped dead and gaped at him. Then his shrill voice hit the night air.

"No, *wait!* I don't care if Mortica—no, no, not me—"

Maybe he said more but I didn't hear it. What I heard was the world blowing up just behind my right ear, and the biggest chunk fell on the top of my head. That was that. I dropped into a bottomless pit of black silence, and . . .

When I next opened my eyes a face came floating into my vision. I promptly closed my eyes, and tried again. It was no use. The same face was there. The face of Sol Bierman, Chief of Homicide, and my best friend and dearest enemy. I was in his office, and Doc Cramer was sticking something that hurt like the devil on my head. Sol was behind his desk, and near him was Sergeant Heftner, his right hand man.

"Well, Chester, you had an accident. Cramer says you must have a concrete skull. I always suspected it."

It was Bierman who spoke, and the faint amusement in his voice started me burning, just as it always does.

"Thanks for the sympathy, pal!" I growled. "How'd I get here?"

"Courtesy of the Police Department," Sol replied straight faced. "Prowl Ten found you sleeping on the Danvers Bridge. They also found another chap, a full of little bits of holes. Tell us about it, Chester."

INSTINCTIVELY my hand went to my shoulder holstered gun. The gun wasn't there. It was in Bierman's hand. He had lifted it up from his desk. He shook his

head.

"No," he said quietly. "Don't start breaking things. It was not with your gun. But you were there, and must have seen. So give, eh?"

My head still felt as though it was in four separate pieces, and I couldn't think any too well, but I was at least able to make a good guess at one item. The guy who'd been bumped off was that fellow in the checked suit, and Sol, not having the score, was hoping that *I* could tell him some things. But the way he was going about it burned me up.

"The answer is, I know from nothing," I said. "I was taking a walk to cool off. There was a guy in front of me, and suddenly he spun around. The whole works blew up and I went out cold. That's all."

Disappointment slid across Bierman's face, but his eyes narrowed slightly.

"That's all?" he murmured with a nasty under note. "You mean, that the brilliant Chester Lacey was present at a killing, and he didn't see anything? Chester, I'm surprised. Do a little better, please. We're friends. Let's be frank."

"Suppose you tell me!" I snapped.

"Gladly," Sol came right back. "Why were you tailing Al Nason?"

Way in the back of my throbbing head the sound of that name stirred up something, but before I could freeze onto the vague thought, it slipped, away into oblivion.

"Nason was the guy who got gunned?" I countered. "Did he get his for keeps?"

"For keeps," Bierman nodded, and touched a fingertip to a spot square in the middle of his forehead. "And now answer my question!"

I shook my head and instantly wished I hadn't. I had to wait a couple of seconds for the shafts of pain to die out before I could speak.

"I wasn't tailing him," I said. "That's gospel. I was just walking along. Somebody

behind me must have been tailing Nason and when Nason turned around—*bing*—bang! And a second later I got clouted, to keep me from turning around. Find anything interesting on Nason?”

Bierman shook his head, and shut up for a few moments. He sat scowling down at his desk top as though he expected the right answer to pop up and start talking. I let him keep on scowling because the pieces of my brain were slowly coming back into mesh, and beginning to function.

“I believe you, Chester,” Sol said at last. “Part of it I believe. About not tailing Nason—you wouldn’t kid me about that, would you, Chester?”

“Not this time,” I said, and Sol knew I meant it.

“Another screwy one,” he grunted with a heavy sigh. “Another tough one to crack.”

“Meaning what?” I put in quickly. “What about this Nason, anyway?”

“Such ignorance,” he snapped, and gave me a scornful look. “Al Nason was one of the big boys in the rackets years ago. But he reached too far, and we put the cuffs on his wrists. He got a four to ten stretch. That’s the last I heard of him until tonight.”

“So ho!” I had the picture now. “It’s gonna be tough because anyone of a couple of hundred mugs might have done it.”

Sol Bierman shrugged and scowled down at his desk top some more. Then suddenly he sighed and handed me my gun.

“Go home and get some sleep, Chester,” he said. “The medical attention is on the house. You’re sure things—simply went boom?”

“That’s right,” I replied. “Things simply went boom.”

“Okay, Chester,” Bierman said, tightlipped. “I’ve got to catch me a killer. The next detective course you take, be sure to study the part that teaches you to look behind as well as ahead. Good night.”

FRANKLY, I had been weakening a little, but that last crack by Sol sewed things up tight. There’d be icebergs in the Gulf of Mexico before I’d tell him that Nason had cried out the name . . . Mortica.

“Thanks for the advice,” I said, and moved me and my throbbing head out of there.

Twenty minutes after I left Police Headquarters I was under the shower in my own bathroom. The shower helped a lot. After I’d toweled myself dry, I poured a tall drink and took it to my favorite chair in the living room, and started the brains to working.

Sure, I was a dope for mixing in, but I’ve got a certain amount of pride. I don’t like to have people gunned right under my nose, and I don’t like to get slugged. Getting conked on the bean is bad publicity for private detectives. It’s against the rules!

Anyway, when something happens that concerns me I like to do things about it my own way. But my heavy thinking didn’t get me very far. Oh, sure, the name, Mortica, meant something to me. Lou Mortica was one of our smooth, slick snakes-about-town. What the cops knew about him would fill a book. But what cops know and can prove are two different things. Personally, I had yet to bump into Mortica—in a business way.

Al Nason had been one of the big machine-gun and dark alley boys a little before I’d set myself up in the private eye business. But I had learned plenty about him, and Bierman having jogged my memory with his quick once-over made me remember other details concerning Mr. Nason. There was one, however, that I couldn’t pin down. It was that little bit that had stirred in the back of my head when Sol first mentioned Nason. And as I sat in my favorite living room chair, try as I would, I couldn’t drag it out into the open.

So at the end of my highball I gave it up. Obviously Lou Mortica, or one of his hired hands, had gunned Al Nason for some reason. By an act of fate Chet Lacey had stepped into the middle at the right time—and been belted. The cops were laughing at the Lacey right now, which is bad for business. You can't let that go on.

About an hour after that I called a taxi and I paid off the driver in the heart of our lights and music section of town. During the ride down a half-baked idea had formed in the Lacey brain. Did the killer, or killers, of Al Nason know the identity of the man they had knocked cold?

Somehow, I didn't think so, because it is one thing to slug Joe Ordinary, Citizen and leave him lay, but it is something else again to slug a lad who makes his living nailing crooks.

No, I didn't think the killer, or killers, knew whom they had belted. After all, they don't hang you any higher for two murders than for one, and a bullet in my skull would have definitely made the affair air tight. Also, when you haven't got much to go on, your best bet is to stir things up and see what floats to the top. And I couldn't ask Sol Bierman for help—not after the horse laugh Sol had handed me.

So my first stop was the Blue Dove, one of our better-class sinks of iniquity. Lou Mortica owned a very nice slice of the Blue Dove, but I hadn't been in the place for a couple of years. Yet the trick hat-check girl greeted me as though it had been only last night.

MENTALLY I noted down her face and figure for future reference and moved on inside. Instantly, the usual greased hair lad came sliding over. His smile was stiff, and his eyes were trying to see through cloth and leather to figure how much was in my wallet. I shook my head, pointed toward the bar, and then checked

myself.

"Lou around?" I asked pleasantly.

Greased Hair gave me a blank look.

"Lou," he echoed and hardly moved his lips. "Lou who?"

I was in no mood for his phony act.

"The Lou who lets you make your fifty a week provided you are polite to customers!" I snapped. "Lou Mortica!"

He didn't like that, but he was in no position to do anything about it.

"I'll see," he said still lipped again. "Who wants to see him?"

I didn't give my right name. I hoped to get action faster another way.

"Just tell him, a friend of Al Nason's," I said.

As I spoke the words I looked at Greased Hair but good, and drew a blank. If the name, Al Nason, meant anything to him it didn't show in that waxy face of his. He waved his square yard menu card toward the bar.

"I'll tell him," he said, and left me.

I went to the bar for a Scotch. I sipped it slowly because I didn't know how many more I might have to sip before the night was over. All the while I was giving a very careful once-over of the customers in the long bar mirror. By moving a bit to one side or the other I was able to get a look at all of them.

Maybe a dozen I knew to speak to, and maybe half a dozen more I knew by sight. There was one, though, I couldn't make up my mind about. She was sitting with a couple of gents, both strangers to me, and she was as luscious a creature as you ever want to see. Absolute perfection from the top of her spun gold hair to all the way down. I wondered whether I had ever seen her before, or just in some movie or fashion magazine. Each time I sneaked a look at her something almost clicked in my mind, but not quite.

As a matter of fact, the slick chick

intrigued me so I was of half a mind to ease over for a close-up. Before I could put the idea into practise, Greased Hair was back.

“Mr. Mortica is not in, or expected this evening,” he said. “What message do you wish to leave?”

“None, I’ll find him elsewhere,” I said, and gave a little indicating nod of my head. “Who’s the golden girl?”

Greased Haid slid his oily eyes around to my face.

“I wouldn’t know, and I certainly wouldn’t try to find out,” he murmured.

A cute little bit of advice. I didn’t bother to answer him. I just turned my back and went on inhaling my Scotch, spending my time looking at the Golden Girl. But it was no dice. Where, when, and how I’d seen her before remained a mystery. Finally I collected my hat from the outer lobby chick, and eased out through the fancy grilled doors to the sidewalk.

I shook my head at the admiral who wanted to call me a cab, and just stood there a moment, thinking deeply. After a bit I went wandering casually down the street. You know, just the bored play-boy heading for another night spot to see what it had to offer. And at the end of two blocks I was a very pleased guy. For once a miracle had come to pass for the Lacey. I actually had struck pay dirt. I had me a shadow!

JUST to make sure I wandered on down the street and went into another, but less classy, night spot. Whether Lou Mortica owned any of it I didn’t know, or care. I went over to the bar, ordered, and waited for my shadow to ooze in. He did about five minutes later, and I was able to get a good look at him. He was one of the usual rat-faced punks who do chores for top drawer punks like Mortica. For a second I was tempted to step over and push in his rat face for him. But I killed the idea, sipped my drink, and made like I didn’t even know he

existed.

By the time I’d finished my drink I’d worked out the next step. It depended, though, on whether the Lacey luck was holding. I moved away from the bar and headed toward the door. Out the corner of my eye I saw Rat Face gulp the rest of his and quickly toss a bill on the bar. I went on out and started wandering along some more. Rat Face kept a half block behind me. I led him over east toward a taxi rank. And, praise be, the Lacey luck was still holding. A cabby I’d done more than a couple of favors for was at the head of the line. I popped in back just as he recognized me.

“Hi, Mr., Lacey!” he cried. “You—”

“Pull away and roll along at the usual speed, Terry,” I cut him off quickly. “And tilt that rear view mirror so I can look in it, not you.”

“Sure, sure!” Terry gulped, and did as ordered. “Jeeze, you on a case?”

“Could be,” I grunted, and fixed my eyes on the rear view mirror. “Just roll along and take a turn now and then. I’ll let you know later.”

Five blocks later I was dead certain. My shadow had grabbed the next cab in line and it was sticking to me like glue, not over a block behind. I glanced ahead and made a quick decision. We were in the apartment house section of town, and the buildings threw lots of nice shadows across the side street.

“Get this just once, Terry,” I said, leaning forward. “Pull in at the next corner, and make like I’m paying you. Then circle around and come back to the same spot in about five minutes. Got it?”

Terry nodded, and a few seconds later pulled into the corner curb. I got out, slammed the door, and pushed my hand in through his window. I pulled out my hand, waited for him to drive off and then looked up and down the street. Rat Face’s cab was rolling toward me. I turned and started

down the dark side street, but the instant I was in the deep shadow I stopped and flattened against the building.

I had time to take just one deep breath when Rat Face's cab stopped at the corner and he ducked out. The cab rolled on, and after a moment's hesitation he started down the side street. He wasn't two feet away when he came abreast of me. Maybe he sensed something because he stopped short, jumped back, and his right hand went up holding a gun. My right hand, held stiff and knife-like, caught him on the side of the neck. I hit the right spot I was aiming for and it paralyzed him completely for about three seconds, just time enough for me to chop a good one to the jaw.

He folded, and I caught him in my arms and pulled him back against the roll. The wait for Terry's cab to come back seemed like a hundred years. Twice I had to chop Rat Face to keep him quiet, and once when an elderly man and woman strolled by I had to mumble like we were both stewed to the gills, and trying to help each other. That sent the elderly couple on their way without stopping.

When Terry came along, I got Rat Face in back, and climbed in beside him.

"My place, Terry!" I snapped. "But don't get us pinched."

Terry knew what that meant, and didn't ask questions. He broke every traffic law in the books, but only when the cops weren't looking. When he pulled up in front of my place, he twisted around.

"Anything I can do?"

"Yes," I answered. "Help me, like this guy is going to sleep it off in my bed, in case we meet other tenants. Then come down here and wait. I think I'll be needing you again."

TEN minutes later Rat Face was slumped cold on my living room couch and I was looking over the two little twenty-five

caliber automatics I'd found in his pockets. I unloaded both guns, tossed them on a table, and went into the bathroom and soaked a towel. I brought it out and began smacking his face. After the fifth smack he sat up, put out protesting hands, and began mumbling. I tossed the towel away and poured him a straight drink.

"Down that," I said and held it out.

He did so automatically, and it was just the thing. His beady eyes cleared, and his two hands started edging toward his pockets.

"Your gats are on the table over there," I said with a side jerk of my head. "Okay, why were you tailing me?"

His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head.

"I wasn't tailin' nobody," he snarled. "What's the idea? You can't—"

"No?" I echoed, and swiped my right fist across his nose.

He half howled with pain, and the claret started.

"Mortica put you on me!" I said. "Where is he?"

"You're crazy! I don't know any—"

I clipped him twice. Once to the left, and once to the right. His snuzzle took on the look of an over-ripe lump of horse meat. He buried his face in his hands, and wailed for me to lay off.

"Up to you, punk," I told him. "I want some dope, and I want it fast. I'm the mug you clouted tonight when you gunned Al Nason, see?"

That brought his head up as though an invisible string had been jerked.

"I didn't gun him!" he choked out. "You can't prove it!"

"No?" I snapped, and held up a slug from one of his guns.

I rolled it slowly between my thumb and forefinger. He stared at it, like it was the swaying head of a cobra. I let him stare at it for a full minute.

“A guy by the name of Al Nason was gunned tonight,” I started speaking. “By accident I was there, so I got clouted. The killer didn’t look to see who he hit, but it was me. The story will be in the morning papers. The cops would just *love* to have the killer by then, too. Catch on?”

Rat Face tore his eyes from the slug I was twisting and looked at me. He had to lick his lips twice before he could speak. His voice sounded like an off key noon whistle.

“I didn’t gun nobody. That’s straight, so help me!”

“Who cares?” I answered. “Particularly, the cops. Nason was a no-good, fresh out of stir, I think. The cops don’t care who gunned him. They’d settle for any punk they could burn for it. This little bullet here, and one of those guns over there. Well, what do you know? The gun and the bullet that killed Al Nason. And here’s something else? I didn’t get knocked cold quite quick enough. I managed to get a look at the mug who pulled the trigger behind me. He was a little, thin sort of rat-faced punk, just your build and looks.”

I let my voice drop off there, and just stood looking at him and rolling the bullet between my thumb and forefinger. Ever watch a man’s courage turn to water and start to come out of him in sweat? It isn’t pretty, and it’s twice as unpretty when it’s a punk like the one sitting on my living room couch. In ten seconds his features were jumping, and his hands shook like he had them on a high voltage wire. Then he cracked completely, and slobbered out the words.

“Lacy, no! I didn’t do any gunning tonight, so help me! Look, I just tailed you because Mortica told me to, see? When you asked for him in the Blue Dove, and said you were a friend of Nason, Charlie came and told me. So I phoned Lou, and told him. He said for me to tail you and find out

everything I could. I swear it, Lacy! That’s the only way I come into this thing. I didn’t gun nobody!”

I BELIEVED the little mug. Why? Because it’s an important thing in my business to learn every single item I possibly can about the boys who travel the shady side of the street. And one of the items about Lou Mortica was that he never left any of the important details to his hired hands. That’s why he was still in business, and the cops were biting their finger nails right up to the second joint. In short, Mortica never left a witness who could be paid, or clouted, into tagging him.

“Give me a break, Lacey! I swear I gave it to you straight. Have a heart!”

The whining little mobster dragged me out of my reverie. And a disturbing one, I might add. I could see the picture but it didn’t do me a terrible lot of good. If Lou Mortica had gunned Al Nason, I was a million miles from proving it. Also, I was maybe two million miles from knowing why. Then suddenly the Lacey brain got out of second gear and leaped into high. I poured the Rat Face another drink and handed it to him.

“Where’s Mortica?” I asked.

Rat Face caught himself just in time, and didn’t complete the shake of his head.

“Out at his new roadhouse,” he said. “The Purple Swan, on the valley road. Out there all the time these days. Got an apartment. Look, Lacey . . .”

I didn’t wait for the rest. He had downed his drink, and I was through with him. I chopped his chin for maybe the sixth time in the last hour. Then I got some rope and adhesive tape, and made him very comfortable on the couch. Next I went over to my desk and wrote a letter, and addressed the envelope. Lastly, I went out and down to the curb where Terry was impatiently waiting. I tossed the sealed letter into his

lap.

“Deliver that, Terry,” I said. “And don’t give up until you have delivered it—in person. Understand?”

Terry started to nod, then sat up popeyed as he read the name and address.

“Hep!” he gulped. “What’s this?”

“Skip it!” I stopped him. “Get moving, and don’t forget what I said. In person, and as soon as possible!”

Terry gulped and nodded again, kicked his heap into life and tooled it away from the curb. I watched it go, then walked around to the garage where I keep my car. I had the attendant bring it out and check it for gas and oil. Then I slid in behind the wheel and stepped on the starter. Funny, my stepping on that starter was almost like pressing a secret button in my brain. I mean, that suddenly the little thing that had been stirring around way in back suddenly leaped forward and ballooned up in nothing flat.

For a good full minute I sat behind that car wheel gaping at nothing at all. Then I came out of my trance and drove across town to the *Daily Globe* Building. A friend of mine who worked there got me into the back file morgue, and started asking questions. I shooed him out and went to work. Half hour later, when I came out, the picture was complete. I was certain I knew all the answers. There was just a minor detail left—proving my answers were correct.

The Purple Swan, located about nine miles outside of town, is no different from anyone of the fifty or sixty thousand other roadhouses in this country of ours, so I won’t bore you with descriptive details. I drove into the well filled parking lot, left my heap there, and walked over and in through the front door. I checked my hat, passed up the tables, and went over to the bar. It was jammed but that didn’t make me mad. I didn’t feel like a drink, anyway. And it gave me more time to look the place over.

I did, and Lou Mortica was nowhere to be seen. That suited me fine, too.

SLOWLY I moved away from the bar and over toward a heavy curtained doorway. Nobody stopped me as I slipped between the curtains. Stairs led upward, and so I climbed steps. There was a short hall and three doors, all three closed. I was trying to make a guess when a well dressed ape stepped in front of me.

“Gents’ room downstairs, mister,” he said through his crooked teeth.

“I know,” I said. “I’m looking for Mortica. He in his office?”

The ape’s eyes flicked toward the door on the right, and that was what I wanted to know.

“Maybe,” he grunted. “But, can be he’s busy, see? Get on back down there, mister.”

“Okay,” I sighed and lifted my hand as though to adjust my tie.

Instead I slipped it under my jacket front, and came out with my gun. I doubt if the ape knew what hit him, but something did. My gun barrel right on his jaw. He blinked, sagged, and folded. I stepped over him and pushed open the door on the right. And there was Lou Mortica seated behind the biggest desk I’ve ever seen in my life. He looked up quickly as I came in, froze for an instant, and then smiled slowly. He kept both, hands right on top of his desk where I could see them.

“Guess I’ll have to get me a new boy to announce visitors,” he murmured.

“I don’t think you’ll be needing one,” I murmured and dropped into a chair. I let my gun rest on the arm where he could see it.

Contrary to the movies, and dime thrillers, Lou Mortica was not a good looking, dashing type of mobster. He had a face like the back of a hack, a build to go with it, and a pair of eyes that would fit in any cobra’s head.

“No?” he echoed. “What’s the gag,

Lacey?"

"No gag," I told him. "Strictly business. You were very unsmart, Mortica, to pick the wrong guy to use as a cover while you crawled up on Al Nason. I guess you've guessed by now it was me, eh?"

I didn't expect a thing from Mortica and that's just what I got, a blank look. He deadpanned me for about half a minute before he spoke.

"It's still a gag, Lacey," he finally said. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. Take your cannon, and get out of here. And next time, at least knock." As though that was all, he turned his attention to some papers on his desk. I sat right where I was, grinning outwardly, but not too happy inwardly.

"There's to be no next time," I suddenly said in a voice that brought his head up. "You gunning Al Nason is just one of those things, so far as I'm concerned, but slugging me is something else again. It wasn't quite quick enough, Mortica. I got a look at you as I went down."

He opened his mouth to speak, then checked himself for a couple of seconds. During that length of time his face tightened, and his eyes seemed to shrink back into his head.

"Look, Lacey, stop playing games," he suddenly said. "We've both been around too long. If what you said was true the cops would have been here hours ago. They haven't even called me. So, cut the blackmail effort. Lou Mortica doesn't pay off to anybody!"

For a brief instant I was tempted to climb over that desk of his and beat his teeth down his throat with my gun. But, I held everything.

"So you lose again," I said. "I know you gunned Nason, I know why, and I've got proof that will stand up. Right now, though, he happens to be lying down. On the couch in my apartment, to be exact. And I *do*

mean the ratfaced mug you told over the phone to tail me and keep you posted on everything. However, I sort of decided to keep you posted in person.

I wasn't sure, but I thought a startled look leaped into Mortica's half sunken eyes for a brief instant.

"What little mug?" he said almost tonelessly.

I GRINNED and casually let my gun dangle from my finger through the trigger guard.

"You know the man I mean," I said. "What he can tell -at your trial will be plenty. It was right after my little apartment session with him that I suddenly guessed *why* you gunned Nason. I had to go back eight years in the newspaper files to get it all, though. A very gorgeous chick, Mortica. I saw her in the Blue Dove tonight. Eight years ago she was known as Belle Mason, of stage, radio, and what have you. I think she still goes by that name, doesn't she?"

I paused to give Mortica a chance to say something, but he didn't. He just sat looking at me, his screwy eyes seeming to sink deeper, and deeper into his skull.

"But eight years ago she was actually Mrs. Al Nason, wife of an up and coming big shot about town," I suddenly threw at him. "And I'll bet all the dough I ever hope to make that she still is. That was the rub. Al, when he went away, wouldn't let her get a divorce. Maybe he knew you had your eyes on her even then. Anyway, Al came back to claim her.

"It was a mess, wasn't it, Mortica? You couldn't buy his silence, plus a one way ticket to some nice spot about ten thousand miles away. So that left you just one way out. But you were unsmart not to check the guy you slugged. Yes, another slug from your gun, Mortica, would have made things just dandy for you and Belle Mason. Right or wrong? I had to guess at *some* of it, you

know.”

Lou Mortica didn't say anything, but he didn't have to. His eyes told me that I had come near to the actual truth. It was the centuries old triangle business once again. Somebody should write a song about it.

“Yes, very unsmart, Mortica,” I said when he just continued to sit there. “The song I can sing, and the song that punk I've got tied up in my apartment can sing, will make a beautiful duet for some jury. Don't you think so?”

I leaned forward a little, and grinned. But actually I was all chilled up tight inside. And how! I had sensed the stealthy movement behind me. I imagine that Mortica had pressed his foot on a little carpet button under his desk. He certainly hadn't moved his hands to press one. Anyway, the thing was coming to a finish fast. I didn't like it at all, but there had been only one way for me to play it. And so I just grinned tauntingly at Mortica, and steeled myself as best I could. I actually heard the faint swish of the gun as it came down for my head. And then it was a Lacey blackout for the second time in one night!

When I opened my eyes again, I was still sitting in the same chair. But Mortica wasn't anywhere to be seen. Seated at his desk was the well dressed ape I had clouted out in the hall. When he saw that my eyes were open he grinned wolfishly.

“Kinda evens the score, hey, bub?” he chuckled at me and patted the gun he held in his right hand. “Speak the word, and I'll put my team one ahead.”

I didn't say anything. I lifted my two empty hands to my throbbing head, and then started fumbling through my pockets, as though not quite sure what I was doing. The ape chuckled but watched me like a hawk. I didn't pay any attention to him until I had stuck my hand into the pocket where I keep my ring of keys and checked that it wasn't there any more. Then I leaned back with a

big sigh of relief, and grinned right back at the ape.

“Just let the score ride, Fatso, until Mortica comes back from my apartment,” I said. “That is, *if* he comes back.”

The ape's grin faded and he glowered.

“Meaning what by that?”

“You'll find out,” I grunted.

And I left it at that. The ape prodded me with a dozen questions, but I just closed my eyes and made like I had gone back to sleep. Every now and then I took a look at him, and each time he was more worried, and there was more sweat on his face. Being all muscle, and no brains, he couldn't figure anything. And so, it was getting him minute by minute. Me, I just sat where I was trying to ignore the bells that still rang in my head, praying harder than I had ever prayed for anything in my life.

THE clock on Mortica's desk had told me I'd been out cold about twenty-five minutes, but it was twice twenty-five minutes more before there came a rattling of the door handle, then a banging on the panels, and then dear old Sol Bierman's booming voice.

“This is the police! Open up!”

The ape sat erect as though he'd been shot. He gaped at the door, and then gaped at me. I nodded and sat up slowly.

“Yeah, the cops, Fatso,” I said. “Mortica isn't coming back. I think Mortica is going to burn in the hot seat. You want to burn, too, after shooting it out? Or do you want to toss me both guns and I'll open the door.”

The ape did have brains after all. He didn't hesitate. He picked up my gun off the desk, and tossed it to me, and then he tossed his own gun. I caught both and went over and unlocked and opened the door. There was Sol Bierman, gun in hand, and right behind him was Sergeant Heftner, and a couple of others boys from the Bureau.

“Come in, Sol,” I said stepping back,

“You make out with Lou Mortica all right?”

Bierman was so mad or maybe so disappointed to find me standing on my own feet that he couldn't speak for a couple of moments. But when he did, the words came at me like machine-gun bullets.

“I ought to throw you into the can on general principles!” he roared. “Who the devil do you think you are, sending me a key and a note telling me to go to your apartment and wait for Nason's killer to walk in? Gosh knows why, but I did, and what do I find? A punk all taped up and—”

“What about Mortica?” I shouted.

“He's dead!” Bierman snapped. “He came in with his gun, saw me, and tried to use it. But not soon enough. The punk had told me a few things, and—and now *you* start talking fast. I want everything!”

“Not here, Sol,” I said and raised protesting hands. “My head is falling off, and besides I'm sick of this room.”

A couple of hours later, when the milkmen were just beginning their day's run, I mashed out a cigarette in the tray on Sol Bierman's office desk, and then gestured faintly.

“So you see, it was just one of those things, Sol,” I said. “The only way to prove anything was to make Mortica perform. I played him into going to my place for that punk and bumping into you. Sure, he could have just laughed and had me tossed out of the Purple Swan. But it was that punk trussed up in my apartment that got him, just as I figured—and prayed—it would.

Mortica wasn't sure how much the punk actually knew, or had told me, and so he took my keys and went there to—well, you can guess! So, there you are. Of course you can arrest Belle Mason, and maybe she'll tell you a whole lot more. But why bother now?”

Sol Bierman grunted and didn't say anything for a moment. Then suddenly he gave me a look like I was the kid made to stay after school.

“If you'd told me in the first place about hearing Nason speak Mortica's name, Chester,” he began, “you'd have—”

“Sure, sure!” I cut in harshly. “But I didn't for two reasons. One, because whenever I get slugged, I take care of things my own way.”

“And the other?” Sol Bierman asked gently.

“No client,” I said, and grinned. “So why not some kind of profit? Say like a return favor from the police some day, when maybe I'll be needing one? Pretty nice publicity hey pal? I mean, the story of how you gunned Lou Mortica in the same morning edition of the paper that carries the story of how Al Nason was murdered?”

Sol Bierman eyed me for a long moment, and then threw up both hands in resigned disgust.

“Why did I ever have to meet you anyway?” he cried. “Get out of here. Even a cop's got to get *some* sleep!”

So I scrambled.