

*The small-town bank robbery flung Detective Nick Prescott into a big-time . . .*

# Homicide Detour

*By Stephen McBarron*

NICK PRESCOTT sat crouched over the steering wheel, his eyes glued to the road ahead. Night, drizzling and black, strove hard to blanket the glare of his headlights stabbing down the highway. Knowlton's place should be somewhere along here.

Presently Nick turned in between wrought-iron gateposts, rolled onto the gravel driveway. The white house, squat, unlighted save for the two windows on the ground floor, loomed mistily against the blackness.

Nick slid out of his coupe, shrugged his ulster collar up against the drizzle, and stepped to the porch. Tall and hard, deep lines bitten into his dark, brooding face, Nick Prescott presented the picture of a man whom inner wounds had turned coldly shrewder, more dangerous than his thirty-two years warranted.

He pressed the bell, heard its muted buzz deep within the house. Then, as if the pressure of his finger had been the cue, a shot sounded, followed by a shrill yelp of terror.

Nick's eyes darted to the side of the house. The report had come from somewhere close outside the house. The cry of terror had come from within. Someone had shot at Knowlton through a window.

Nick slid out his gun, scaled the side-porch rail. Too late, he heard pounding feet coming nearer. He landed smack into the running form, was knocked backward to the wet grass.

He looked up into a square, viciously snarling face, then into the mouth of the man's gun. The barrel was on a direct line with Nick's eyes. His own gun was somewhere in the grass. His heart in his mouth, Nick swung up a long leg and his foot cracked into the other's wrist. The man yelped, cursed, as the gun flew from his hand. He kicked at Nick's head.

From nearby a woman's voice called: "Quick, Hank! Hurry!"



Nick's stomach froze. He didn't feel the kick of the snarling man, who wrenched away from Nick's surprise-eneebled clutch. The man darted into the night, and a short while later Nick heard the sound of a car whirring off.

He rose, dazedly replaced his fallen hat, retrieved his own and his attacker's gun. He must be wrong about that voice, he thought. *He must be!* Sick with doubt and apprehension, he climbed to the porch

and, scorning the bell, pounded with his fist and yelled:

“Open up, Knowlton! It’s Prescott!”

Knowlton opened the door, practically dragged Nick in. Knowlton slammed the door, leaned against it, blood straining the upper arm of his shirt.

“They—they almost killed me!” he gasped. “If you hadn’t come they would have stayed to finish the job!”

“Isn’t there anyone here to help you?”

“I have only one servant, a housekeeper who doesn’t sleep in,” moaned Knowlton. “For heaven’s sake, fix my arm!”

Nick was worried. Suddenly he didn’t want this job. Wounds deep within him, unhealed even after seven years, were throbbing apprehensively, painfully. *Could he have been wrong out there by the porch?*

He steered Knowlton toward the bathroom. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Surely a bank president who witnessed a murder rates an armed guard!”

“I did have a guard,” wheezed Knowlton. “But when time passed and the bandits made no attempt on my life, I disposed of it.”

The small-town banker screwed up his face with pain. A portly man, though not overly fat, Knowlton now glared wildly and his dank gray hair was stringy on his forehead.

“How was I to know,” he groaned, “that they’d be stupid enough to linger here just to take a shot at me?”

Nick didn’t get that angle either. The robbers could just as well make off to a distant part of the country with their loot and let well enough alone. Unless they were afraid he could identify a possible rogues gallery picture of the woman member of their gang.

**B**ACK in the city Nick had read about the Mayville Bank robbery, and he had gotten some inside stuff from Knowlton’s surprise letter. Two men and a woman had engineered the job, making off with forty grand and killing the night watchman in the bargain.

They had been seen in the act by none other than the bank’s president, Knowlton himself. Knowlton, returning to the bank after hours for account books he had forgotten, had actually, from a hiding place, seen the woman of the trio shoot the watchman. Knowlton, unarmed, unsuspectingly having walked into the bank without the bandits’ knowledge, had been able to do nothing toward stopping the robbery.

He had, however, succeeded in slipping out again while the woman, as his story went, was drawing a bead on the unsuspecting watchman’s back and pulling the trigger. He had run to the sheriff’s office and returned with reinforcements, but only in time to see the tail-end of the escaping bandits’ car. There had been shots fired, and a chase, but the bandits had gotten clean away.

Three weeks had passed and the country cops had gotten nowhere, even with Knowlton’s description of the murderess. The bank board had a pretty adamant idea that the robbery had been worked with the aid of a bank employee. The country cops didn’t agree on this; and the board had gone ahead and told Knowlton to get a good private detective and make sure one way or the other. Thus Knowlton, who had heard of Nick Prescott through the Banker’s Association, had sent for the private sleuth.

While Nick dug out gauze from the medicine chest, Knowlton tenderly nursed his bullet-scratched arm, getting blood all over himself. He said:

"I put my hand on my neck and leaned over the desk and bang! the gun went off outside the window. If I hadn't been tired and leaned over then—" The banker shuddered at the thought.

Taking the last turn in Knowlton's bandage, Nick, with icy dread coating his stomach, said: "Describe that woman again. Your letter didn't give a clear picture."

Then he listened as Knowlton talked, and the old wounds were ripped wide. Nick heaved a shuddering sigh and leaned wearily against the bathroom wall.

"And that's the picture," concluded Knowlton. "Except for the limp. A beautiful, slimly mature woman, with a slight limp."

Nick turned abruptly, stalked into the other room. The limp. Maybe, then, he had been wrong. Everything else fitted but the limp. But it could be she. They had let her out on parole three months ago, though he hadn't heard from her personally.

"Suppose it had been she?" His thoughts were tiny corkscrews gnashing in to the gray matter. "Suppose she has a limp now, for some reason? If I stick here I'll find her and she'll get the chair. This will be the end of her, a two-time murderess. But this is my job, my business. If I flop I'll never be a detective again. There'll be no living. . . ."

"What's the matter?" asked Knowlton, squinting at him. "Does blood get you sick?"

Nick smiled as if nothing were wrong, turned to the phone. He called Mayville, explained matters to Sheriff Tom Fowley who promised to send out two guards immediately and place men on all roads.

"I'll stay at the hotel in town," Nick told Knowlton. "That way I can start off fresh on this thing in the morning. Fowley'll have cops swarming all over the county. The bandits won't get far."

He wondered if *she* would escape Fowley's cordon.

When the guards arrived he drove to Mayville. At the dinky hotel there, he called the State Prison, Women's Division, and a pleasant matronly voice, while Nick Prescott's heart temporarily stopped, said, after a slight pause:

"Yes, Rita Jarvis was remanded to the custody of the parole officer in Mayville. I believe she is staying with a sick mother to whose home she went after leaving prison. . . . Yes, a laundry basket fell on her ankle, breaking it. Though she limps, it is only temporary and is due to habit caused by the cast. . . . If you care for additional information. . . ."

Nick leaned back in the booth, the forgotten receiver clutched in his hand. All his sickening doubts were washed away, leaving him cold and empty. And yet, after all she had done to him, he knew he still loved her as wholeheartedly as at first.

Leaning limply there in the phone booth, Nick saw seven lonesome years roll back-back to the time when Rita had been his wife. He had never known such happiness, but like most good things, it had been all too brief.

**R**ITA had liked swell clothes, expensive things. It had gone on for a while, but the income of a private dick hadn't been enough. She had met Bill Jarvis then, Jarvis with his good looks and lavish spending. It hadn't been long before the final name-calling scene had come.

As soon as the divorce had gone through, she had married Jarvis. And Nick, disillusioned, hurt unendurably, had tried to forget and sever all connections with her. That was why he had never learned—until he had read the newspaper accounts of Jarvis' murder and Rita's flight from justice—of the indecent way Jarvis had treated her. The cops and reporters had

dished up all that, from neighbors and friends of Rita and Jarvis.

Nick had gone after her, trying to persuade her to surrender and plead for a justifiable homicide rap. But the cops had found her first, cringing in a cheap hotel room. Nick had done everything then, to help her, invested his every cent in hiring the best defense attorney for her.

Thanks to his efforts, she had gotten off lightly. Her lawyer had pretty thoroughly convinced the jury that Rita had shot Jarvis when, after accusing him of drinking and running around with other women, he had insulted her and beaten her unmercifully. Rita had killed a vicious and drunken Jarvis in defense, beyond a doubt, of her life. Rita had gotten ten years; thanks to Nick Prescott, she still had her life.

She was out now, after seven of those years, and this was the thanks Nick was getting for saving her from the chair. Yes, she was out now, the associate of bank bandits and murderers—a two-time murderess herself according to Banker Knowlton's story.

Nick saw movement out in the hotel lobby, but at first his mind refused to interpret it. He hung up the receiver slowly, clutched the handle of the folding door. His eyes focused even then through the glass panel.

His breath hissed through clenched teeth and his fingers whitened around the enameled handle. He was looking at Hank Crawford, the man who had shot at Banker Knowlton!

The sloppy old man who tended the desk had walked around to the cigarette counter before which Crawford was standing. There was no one else in the lobby.

"He'll lead me to her," Nick thought, his face set in granite. "I'll send her back where she belongs."

He had seen Crawford's picture on reward notices. Bank bandit, merciless killer. He had seen Crawford's face not long ago at Knowlton's, over the barrel of a gun, had heard Rita call: "Quick, Hank! Hurry!" He hadn't been entirely sure at that time, hadn't been able to bring himself to believe that Rita had sunk to such depths as to associate with a blot of obscenity like Hank Crawford.

Now he'd get them all, the other man too. There had been two men and a woman. Two men and—Rita.

Crawford, chunky, powerful, his viciousness masked now behind square-faced, smug complacency, took his cigarettes and left the lobby. Nick followed carefully and the killer took him in a roundabout cautious way to the edge of town. Nick saw the house then, watched Crawford slip into it.

Isolated, set back in a weedy lot, the frame house was a sagging relic of better days. There were lights on the lower floor, but blinds were drawn and only golden cracks showed.

The creaky porch groaned under him and he cursed silently. Gun in hand, he tried the door, found it locked. Boldly then he knocked, not the least bit unaware that he was barging into a nest of unscrupulous killers. In fact, he didn't much care, the way things stood. . . .

The door opened and light swathed across his bleak face and he forgot the gun in his hand.

**T**HERE wasn't much light on her face but Nick could see her. Seven years had aged her little. Beautiful, warm, golden—as always. His voice was dry and cracked as he said: "I'm coming in."

She stepped aside, eyes wide, unbelieving. "Nick!"

"Yeah!" He stepped in, heeled the door shut. His jaws were rusty and his words

ground out of his mouth. “Good old Nick!”

“What are you doing here? Oh, Nick, it’s so good—”

He grinned tightly, his face feeling split. “I’ve come to catch me a murderess!”

“Murderess!” Her eyes darted to a closed door, then back to Nick. “Quiet, Nick—please!”

He banged open the door she had glanced at, gun ready to blaze. He saw a gray, old, shawl-covered woman in a wheelchair, her lined face raised inquiringly, wreathed in a habitual kindly smile.

“Yes, Rita? What is it?”

Rita pulled Nick out. “It’s not important, mother. I’ll be in later.” She closed the door, faced Nick, the mellowness of her green eyes turning cold, brittle, questioning.

“I won’t horse around, Rita,” Nick said, drawing handcuffs from his pocket. “I’ll cuff you down here, then go after the others.”

“Why, Nick?” She didn’t flinch away, but seemed poised, more self-reliant than seven years ago. “Tell me what I have done this time, Nick?”

“The Mayville Bank hired me. Funny, isn’t it? Me, your ex-husband. You can’t deny complicity in that job. Knowlton saw you.”

Her face paled, her eyes became greener by contrast. “No, Nick, I can’t deny it.”

Not looking at her face he cuffed her to a water pipe. She was forced to crouch.

She looked up. “Nick. This will kill my mother. I don’t care for myself, but mother—her heart—”

Grimly, steeling himself, he hefted the gun in his hand. “You should have thought of that.” He stepped toward the stairs. “I’m going after your friends now.”

“Nick!” There was vibrant terror in her voice now. “Don’t go!”

His tone was a cruel leer. “You care for the rats that much?”

“It’s not them. It’s you. Seven years, Nick. I’ve learned a lot. *Don’t go up!*”

“Yeah!” He spat the word, started up the dark stairs.

Rita screamed: “Don’t!”

Nick cursed, bounded upward to the darkness of the second floor. Flame lanced at him from down the corridor and the tip of his shoulder stung. He threw himself to the floor, rolled to the meager protection of the newel post, slammed a slug back at a crouching shadow.

Nick leaped up, bored in. A door opened in the dark and another dark shape caromed into him. Nick, under the impetus, was snapped back over the bannister rail. His feet lifted from the floor and he tried desperately to scissoring his legs around his assailant. Metal glinted as the other swung his gun at Nick’s head. Nick jerked back, grimly holding to the gangster with his legs. The wounded man from the end of the corridor was rushing toward them.

Then the railing groaned, splintered, broke. Nick and his immediate attacker ploughed through the bannister to crash to the stairs and tumble downward. Over and over they went to come to a scrambling heap almost at the feet of Rita. Nick’s head cracked on the last step. Stunned, he looked up into the rage-twisted face of Hank Crawford.

Crawford spat. “Lousy dick, eh?” He raised his voice. “Come down, Hymie. I got me a snooper.”

**H**YMIE, fat, fish-eyed, lumbered down, nursing a creased neck. “Let me see him.” Then he kicked Nick in the throat and the room swam for the detective in a starlit miasma and he wheezed and

coughed up blood.

"We have to work fast now, get Knowlton," Crawford told Hymie. "If this bum found us, he might have left a trail. If nothing bothers us on the Knowlton job, we'll come back and"—he leered at Rita—"finish up here."

Calmly Rita said: "You double-crossing snake!"

Crawford laughed and slapped her and her whole body shook. "You did your good turn, dearie. That's all we wanted."

Hymie, clumsily wrapping a handkerchief around his neck, growled: "Let's get going."

While Hymie held a gun, Crawford tied and gagged Nick and Rita. The door behind which Rita's mother had sat, opened, framing the old woman there in her wheelchair.

"In heaven's name, Rita—"

Crawford stepped to the door, pushed the wheelchair roughly back. Then he followed it, closed the door. He emerged a moment later, grinning widely. "That's that!"

The two thugs left then, Hymie giving Nick a last kick in the chest. And Nick, still gasping torturedly, lost all sense of pain as he slumped into unconsciousness.

When he swam back to painful waking, he heard Rita sobbing: "Mother. . . Mother. . ."

Someone was tugging at the rope on his wrists. He turned painfully, could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the old woman on the floor beside him, trying to undo his knots. Blood flowed sluggishly from her nose and mouth, and still she persevered!

"Save my daughter," she gasped.

The rope fell from Nick's wrists and the old woman flopped flat and still. Quickly he ripped off his gag, brought the old woman to a couch.

"I think she'll be all right," he said,

and stepped to remove Rita's gag. "What a woman!"

"Nick," said Rita. "I didn't kill that watchman."

He looked down at her, steadying his weakened body against a chair arm. Rita was still crouched, manacled, down by the water pipe. Nick stumbled to the door, said: "I have work to do."

"Nick!"

He stopped, looked down again.

"When Hank and Hymie," she said, "were busy opening the bank vault, I moved around. I found the watchman, already dead. It must have been then that Knowlton, from his hiding place, saw me. Believe me, Nick, I—"

The look in his eyes stabbed her quiet. "The watchman wasn't all," he growled. "You tried to finger Knowlton tonight. I heard you call to Hank on Knowlton's lawn."

"It was Hank's idea, Nick. He made me go, wanted me in on a murder so that he would have something really binding on me, something besides the fact that I'd been in prison."

"I suppose, too, that he forced you to accompany him and Hymie to the bank!"

"Yes," she said defiantly. "He did."

He waited, cursing himself for listening.

"Seven years in prison taught me what a fool I'd been, what I'd lost when—" His angry face stopped her on that. "When I got out I came straight here. Mother was living on a widow's pension, but in a hospital. I brought her home, planning to let part of this house and take care of her on the proceeds.

"They came then, those men, and I let rooms to them. I didn't know they were gangsters. Somehow, undoubtedly by prying into my papers, they learned I'd been in prison for—for murder. Mother never knew of my imprisonment, I was

sure the shock would have killed her. These men reasoned the same way.”

Her eyes implored him to stay, glad that he was listening. “They—they forced me in with them, threatening to tell mother about me. They needed a lookout and someone who knew the town well. Foolishly, too, I thought that with my share of the loot, I could make life easier for mother. Please, Nick, believe me!”

**H**E SCOWLED at the floor. Who would ever believe that story considering her past record. This was the end, she would go to the chair sure. “Sucker!” his mind shrieked at him. “You want to pity her as she crouches there so penitent, so beautiful! Sucker!”

He looked deeply into her eyes, afraid that the goodness he thought to see there was a fictitious product of his love for her.

“Damn!” He turned to the door, stopped, looked back. His hand went to his vest pocket, and to a spot on the floor near the water pipe he threw the handcuff key. Then he was, out of the house, thundering down the porch. If nothing else, he had to try to save Knowlton.

From back in the house he thought he heard Rita cry: “Wait, Nick. The money—we didn’t—”

But then he was gone.

He sprinted to the small hotel, and with no time to summon the sheriff, leaped into his car and speeded toward Knowlton’s house. In fifteen minutes he was there, dashing toward the white porch.

He tripped, stumbled, looked down. The man on the lawn beneath his feet groaned, stirring. But Nick had no time to stop. He leaped to the porch and found the other guard there, a blue hole in his left cheek.

In an upstairs room he found Knowlton, and his stomach churned at the sight. The banker was tied to a bed, the

shirt ripped from him, his chest and face pitted with burnt, watery holes.

Nick leaned over Knowlton, fighting nausea. He was beginning to realize something that had been feebly pecking at his mind for some time. Now he knew why the bandits had seemed so foolish for lingering in town! It hadn’t been merely to silence a witness against them, but something else!

He untied Knowlton, felt his pulse. He shook the man, and Knowlton’s eyelids lifted lazily.

“Where?” Nick grated. “Where did you send them?”

Knowlton looked up, uncomprehendingly. Then, his tongue snarled with agony, he moaned: “Cellar. . . they, they—”

He stopped, exhausted, and as if to verify his words a faint clink sounded from below. Nick asked for a gun.

“There,” wheezed Knowlton, pointing to a drawer chest.

Nick found it, crept silently below. He passed the kitchen, found the cellar door, opened it soundless. Peeping below, he saw Hank and Hymie tugging a metal box from a hole they had dug. Then his foot crackled on grit on the wooden cellar stairs.

Hymie shot from his crouch and his bullet thunked into the wall beside Nick. Nick’s slug ploughed into the bandit’s mouth and Hymie’s face mushroomed blood. Crawford cursed, trying to whirl his body out of range, tripped, fell, sent a wild shot toward Nick that pounded the detective back against the whitewashed wall.

Nick sagged forward again, clutching the stair rail. He shot under it and the bullet screamed off Crawford’s gun, tore into the gunman’s throat. Crawford swayed forward, dead before he hit.

Feet pounded within the house, and

Nick, his arm numb and dripping blood, crawled up the stairs, stumbled through the cellar door—into the arms of Sheriff Fowley.

Rita sobbed, “Nick. . . . Nick. . . .”

Blear-eyed, he looked at her. “I thought—”

“No, Nick,” she smiled. “I’m not running from you this time.”

The front door slammed. Nick grabbed the sheriff’s arm. “That’s Knowlton. Get him. He robbed his own bank!”

Nick had to push the surprised sheriff. They raced to the front of the house, and from the porch the sheriff called: “Stop, Knowlton, or I fire!”

Knowlton was gunning Nick’s car. He lurched it down the gravel drive and Sheriff Fowley’s forty-five crashed. The car swerved, skidded, pounded into one of the iron posts. It bounced back, shuddering, the motor dead.

Nick ran ahead, grabbed Knowlton’s arm over the car door. “Tell him,” the detective snapped savagely. “Tell the sheriff—*that there was no woman at that robbery!*”

When the sheriff and Rita arrived, Knowlton, dying, rolled his eyes heavily. He said: “I killed the watchman, took the money from the vault. Then they came, the bandits—two men—and I hid, sneaking out later and hiding the money nearby. I got you, sheriff, to come back with me after the bandits.”

His hand fell on Nick’s shoulder, and it was like a friendly pat. “No,” he lied, “there was no woman with them.”

Fowley said: “He’s dead.”

Nick was holding Rita with his good arm, forgetting seven lonely years, seeing a promise of joy to come in the limpid mistiness of her eyes.