

Knaves and Knives

The pistol butt flashed downward.



By H. Q. Masur
Author of "Bullet Business," etc.

Lady Luck was snubbing Sam Quentin. He wanted a new deal in the crazy homicide honeymoon case—but all he got was a double-deal in knaves and knives.

THE third floor hallway of the sleazy Hotel Colonial was empty—except for the man on his knees picking the lock of Room 315. It was just after midnight when Sam Quentin swung the door inward. He had been working exactly six minutes.

He called, "Hsst!" into the darkness, not expecting any answer, because he'd told Curly to stick close to the girl and Curly was nowhere in sight.

Sickly green glow from a neon across the street splashed on and off. According to

Curly's message, the guy had brought the girl to this room in this hotel. Now, evidently they had gone out again. Quentin snapped on the light. It was a cheap living room with worn furniture and a frayed blue rug. It was musty and smelled sour. The bedroom was beyond. Quentin crossed over to it. The neon glowed jerkily, like a giant fire bug, showing a bed. He gave the room a dose of electricity.

And then Sam Quentin stood there, impaled by shock, cursing under his breath, his stomach sickening.

The girl was asleep. Long, violet-shaded lashes rested on clear cheekbones. One smoothly rounded shoulder was stained with blood. Blood matted her rich chestnut hair. There was more blood, a lot of it, all over the bed and her evening gown, but none of it, not one single drop belonged to the girl.

It came from the guy lying on the floor.

His throat had been cut. A deep, vicious wound, severing the jugular, running almost from ear to ear. Messy but effective.

Harsh lines etched Quentin's face. He'd seen this guy earlier in the evening, at the Conga Casino. Only then he was alive and laughing and slightly drunk. He'd never laugh again.

Where the hell was Curly? Quentin's nails bit into his palms. He'd kill the little monkey. He'd teach him to stick to a job. All he'd had to do was watch the girl. Now there was no Curly and the girl was here in bed, fast asleep, probably cockeyed drunk, and on the floor was a strange stiff.

It sent a mouse racing up Quentin's spine. What a spot for Kit Dunning, debutante, night club chanteuse, and the daughter of a millionaire.

He had to get her out of there. If he didn't, Martin Dunning would stop paying him fifty bucks a day and that would be a shame because this was his first day on the job.

He shook her shoulders, softly at first, then violently. Her eyes stayed shut; she was limp under his fingers. His hand left a pink welt across her cheek. He pinched her arm—and still nothing happened. Her breathing was a soft whisper.

She couldn't stay in bed with a corpse on the floor. He picked her up, got a whiff—and stifled an oath. Chloral hydrate. Somebody'd slipped her a mickey. He carried her to the couch in the living room. If the guy on the floor had drugged her, then he'd got what was coming to him.

Quentin quietly opened the door and stepped out into the hall to case the back stairway. He stopped short, the small of his back prickling. Something beat a hard tattoo against the door across the corridor. "The fool!" Quentin ground out. "Does he want to wake up the whole hotel?"

A voice yelled: "Hey!"

Swiftly, Quentin got the door open with his passkey. It was a closet for the chambermaids to keep mops, soap and pails in. A small figure, three feet high, and bald as an egg, came tumbling out.

Quentin said: "So there you are."

It was Curly. Quentin had rescued the midget from an insolvent vaudeville act three years ago. Since then, when he was sober, the midget had been more than a right hand arm to him. Curly touched the back of his head, held his hand out for inspection. Caked brown substance covered his finger-tips.

"See, boss," his voice was a high treble, "somebody conked me."

"When?"

"After I came back from calling up your hotel. He locked me in the closet."

Quentin asked: "They come straight here from the Conga Casino?"

"Yeah, right up to the guy's apartment. His name's Beaumont—Lew Beaumont. He's a private dick—like us, boss."

Quentin's eyes narrowed. "When'd you find all this out?"

Curly's face, the size of a small melon, wrinkled in a grin. "I picked his pocket in the elevator." He produced a leather wallet.

SAM QUENTIN snatched it away, grabbed him by the arm, pulled him back into 315. Curly put his hands on his hips, cocked his head sideways and observed: "Hmm, crocked, eh?"

Quentin stabbed a finger toward the bedroom. The midget pranced over, took one look and whirled. His eyes were like

fried eggs and he was shuddering. “Ugh!” he said. “Some gal. She do it?”

Quentin was irritable. “Of course not, you numbskull. Somebody doped her.”

Curly stuck a cigar between his teeth, lighted it, puffed hard. “Let’s clean up and get her out of here.” He walked into the bathroom. When he came out, his hand was behind his back.

Quentin said: “I may as well give you the dope. She’s got a job singing in the Conga Casino, one of those society warblers. Her old man don’t like it. He hired me to get something on Chris Varney who runs the joint, so he could maybe have it closed. If we can prove there are a couple of crooked wheels upstairs it’ll be a cinch.”

“Yeah,” Curly added, “and we marched in there tonight for the first time, spotted Varney, the girl and this Beaumont all at the same table. When the girl and Beaumont left, I trailed ‘em. You stayed to keep an eye on the club.”

Quentin nodded. “Right.”

“Okay,” the midget said. “Let’s wake her up.” He swung his hand round and dashed a glass of cold water into Kit Dunning’s face. Quentin strangled an oath, jumped up and cuffed Curly aside. “See, see,” the midget yelped, “she’s getting up.”

He was right. The shaded eyelids flickered. The carmined mouth parted. And then she was staring at them with dull topaze eyes. She struggled to her feet, stood poised like a deer getting ready to run.

“Who are you?” she demanded in a throaty voice. “Where’s Lew?”

“You don’t have to worry about him,” Curly broke in. “He’s dead.”

“Dead!” Her eyes widened, blinked, two tears squeezed out.

Quentin said: “Look, Miss Dunning. Your father sent me to help you. Somebody murdered Beaumont. We thought it best to get you away before you got mixed up in a

juicy scandal.”

She put her head back and started to laugh, wildly, hysterically. Quentin smacked her on the face. She stopped and started biting on her fingernails. “It won’t help. I’m mixed up in it, anyway. We were married in Greenwich this afternoon.”

It struck Quentin funny. There was no sign of grief or tragedy on her face. “How long have you known him?”

She giggled. “Two weeks.”

“Did you love him?” She lowered her lashes, peered coyly out from under them. She said: “He was cute.”

A sudden lump of ice down his back would not have shocked Quentin more. Curly exclaimed: “What the hell!” They both gawped at the girl. She had Quentin stumped. He couldn’t figure her. No wonder her old man wanted her watched.

HE told Curly: “See if the back exit is clear.” The midget scampered out, returned directly and beckoned. Quentin went through the two rooms quickly with a handkerchief, wiping away prints. He scooped up Kit Dunning’s purse and they left.

Two blocks away they caught a cab. Quentin turned to the girl. “Who do you think drugged you to make you sleep so tight.”

She laughed lightly. “Nobody. I have insomnia, so I take pills—luminal. Always keep them in my purse.”

“Maybe you took pills,” Quentin persisted, “but you were also drugged.”

Gold flecked the topaze of her eyes. “Chris Varney!” she exclaimed. “He called up from the lobby, said he had to see me. We went into the bar for a drink. It did taste kind of funny.”

“What did he want?”

She giggled. “He said I was making a mistake. He wanted me to leave Lew.”

“They know each other well?”

“They only met tonight. I think Chris was jealous. He wanted me to marry him.” She closed her eyes, snuggled close to Quentin, put her head against his shoulder. “You’re cute. What’s your name?”

Curly said: “What the hell!” Quentin felt heat flush up through his neck. He gave the midget a dirty look. “His name,” Curley announced, “is Sam Quentin.”

Laughter bubbled out of her. “You can’t kid me. That’s the California State Prison.”

Quentin groaned. He’d heard that old saw a thousand times. Of all the first names, why did his old man have to pick out “Sam?”

He got out Beaumont’s wallet and busied himself with the contents—a private detective’s license, a pistol permit, some cash, and a check for five hundred dollars signed: Gilbert Tyson. He pegged them all away as the taxi jerked to a stop.

It was one of those narrow-fronted, four-story mansions on the east side off Fifth Avenue. A paunchy butler admitted them, saying that Mr. Dunning had retired for the night.

“Wake him up,” snapped Quentin, and let Kit lead him into the library. It was a spacious room with lots of books, lots of carpet and lots of atmosphere.

Presently Dunning appeared in a silk dressing robe—an imposing figure of a man, sharply handsome, distinguished. “Yes, yes, what is it? Oh, hello, Kit.”

Quentin gave him the story. Dunning’s jaw fell slack, he sank into a chair, muttered: “Anybody see you getting Kit out of there?”

“No,” said Curly.

Dunning seemed to see the midget for the first time. He started and drew back. His Adam’s apple made a quick round trip. “Good heavens!” he exclaimed. “Who’s he?”

“My assistant,” Quentin explained. “I’d like to talk to you.”

“Yes, of course.” Dunning turned to Kit. “Go to bed, my dear. I’ll see you in the morning.” She came over and kissed him on the cheek, leaving the crimson imprint of her lips. At the door, she pointed a finger at Quentin and smiled. “I like him, daddy,” she announced and was gone.

Quentin said, “Whew!” and wiped the perspiration from his brow. “Marijuana, I’ll bet she smokes it.”

Dunning got up, paced nervously about the room. “My daughter, as you may have perceived, Mr. Quentin, is—er—somewhat irresponsible. Always getting into scrapes.” He tapped his forehead. “A little flighty, shall we say. There was a strain of mental weakness in her father’s family. She—”

“Hold on.” Quentin stiffened. “Aren’t you her father?”

Dunning shook his head. “No, my wife, may she rest in peace, was married once before. She was a widow when I met her, five years ago in California.”

Curly was at the desk, stuffing his pockets with Dunning’s Coronas.

Quentin asked: “Where did Kit meet this Beaumont?”

The tall gray-haired man blushed. “I had hired him, also, to watch her. But I fired him when I found out he was trying to marry her. He didn’t love Kit. He was after the money I’ll leave her.”

Quentin made a stab in the dark. “Who’s Gilbert Tyson?”

Dunning’s jaw set. His eyes narrowed. His face darkened. His voice was suddenly harsh. “What’s Tyson got to do with this?”

“I don’t know—yet. Who is he?”

“The brother of my wife’s first husband. He left her some jewels, family heirlooms. She left them to Kit. This Tyson claims they belong to him. He’s been a source of trouble for years.”

Quentin said slowly: "Then Lew Beaumont was a bigger double-crosser than you think. Because he was also working for Tyson. I'd better have a talk with Mr. Gilbert Tyson. And in the meantime, a good sanitarium might keep Kit out of trouble. Just pray nobody recognized her go into that hotel with him."

TYSON lived in a converted brownstone. Quentin left Curly in the taxi and climbed to the second floor. He pushed his finger against the bell and waited till he heard somebody grumbling.

A tall, stooped, lantern-jawed man, emaciated, cadaverous and hollow-chested, opened the door. He was wearing a long flannel nightgown and a stocking cap with a drooping tassel. Burning eyes glared at Quentin. His voice was a harsh rumble, like a roller skate on rough pavement.

"What do you want?"

Quentin shoved the man in, followed him. They were in a dingy living room crowded with bric-a-brac. The windows were shut and from the smell of the place it didn't seem they'd ever been open. Quentin gave him a swift flash of his badge.

"Police," he cracked. "What were you doing in the Colonial tonight?"

Tyson's lips pulled back. His teeth were yellow. He snarled: "Whoever says I was in Beaumont's place is a liar."

"Then there are three liars, because we have three witnesses," Quentin lied.

Tyson backed against the wall. "Well, I didn't kill him. He was—" He stopped short, sensing he'd fallen into some kind of a trap.

Quentin stepped forward. "The report hasn't gone out yet. How do you know Beaumont's dead?"

Tyson's lips tucked inward. "I don't believe you're a cop. Get out."

"Not till I find that knife." Quentin went exploring. He found the bedroom,

pried open a chest of drawers, sent garments flying. Tyson grabbed his arm. "Watch out," Quentin said. "You'll get hurt."

Tyson grabbed up a vase, flung it. Quentin saw it coming through the mirror, ducked. The mirror fell apart with an unholy clatter.

Tyson ran out of the room. Quentin continued the search. He was on the last drawer when the light snapped out and the room plunged into darkness. Instinct sent Quentin to the floor. Two shots rocked out. He heard the whine of bullets and the thud as they smacked into the plaster.

He pulled at his own gun, got it out, saw the outline of the door and the shadowed figure on the threshold. He took careful aim, but low. Before he could squeeze the trigger another shot slammed out and the gun in his hand dropped to the floor. Quentin cursed and stuffed his knuckles to his mouth, sucking on them.

He let out a heavy moan and lay down. The bedroom door banged shut. Footsteps pounded away. Quentin crossed over, turned on the light. He examined his hand. A fraction of an inch closer and he'd have been put out of commission.

He gathered up his gun, warily searched the apartment. The bell rang. He admitted Curly. "I heard shots," the midget said. "Who'd you kill?"

"It was Tyson," Quentin said. "Only he almost killed me. He got out the back way."

"Did he carve up Beaumont?"

"Looks like. I'm not sure."

Curly pulled on Quentin's coat.

"Look, boss, let's go back to the Conga Casino. You ought to have a talk with Chris Varney."

"Yeah, I know. You're hungry and thirsty. You got paid this week. Buy your own drinks." But he followed the bald-headed midget back into the street. The taxi

driver wanted to know what was cooking upstairs.

"Kid on tricycle had a blowout," Quentin told him.

Curly waved his hand imperiously. "Conga Casino, my good man."

CHRI\$ VARNEY'S club occupied the whole of a small building on East 53rd Street. An eight-piece orchestra was beating out a South American rhythm. The dance floor was no bigger than a dime, and jammed. Smoke, thick as fog, and strung out in ribbons like torn gauze, hung heavily.

Quentin got a table in the far corner, ordered two sirloins. People turned to stare at Curly. He grinned and stared back at them. Quentin was glad the midget was bald, otherwise he'd be getting dirty looks from the patrons for bringing a kid to a night club.

They were midway on the steaks when the room went into a blackout. The noise stopped. A spotlight jumped across the dance floor, picked out a velvet curtain at the side of the bandstand. The orchestra slipped into a low throbbing melody. The violins wailed softly and muted trumpets picked up the refrain. The velvet curtain parted. A girl stepped out and started singing.

Quentin almost choked. His fork stopped in midair; he blinked his eyes.

The girl was Kit Dunning.

Dressed in a filmy sea-green gown as transparent as a cobweb, her mouth a splash of deep crimson, the rich chestnut hair brushing her shoulders, she held onto the velvet drape and sang.

The audience ate it up, scarcely breathing. But not Quentin. There was too much wrong with the girl. She was stiff, almost rigid. Her topaze eyes were glazed, dull. And her voice—it was as wooden, as mechanical as music from a juke box. He

saw that her hands were clenched tightly, the fingers white, tense.

She finished and a salvo of applause thundered. Palms smacked, clappers rattled, glasses thumped. The spotlight lingered on Kit Dunning, wavered, then glided away. The orchestra exploded into a rumba. Couples stampeded to the dance floor.

Quentin jumped to his feet. He ploughed across the dance floor, bowling over a couple of people. When he reached the velvet curtain, Kit Dunning was gone. He pulled it aside and went into an ill-lighted, brick-lined passage.

There were a couple of doors on either side. He looked in dressing rooms. And then he heard her singing, the same sad, mournful song. He kicked open the door.

She sat in a chair, facing Chris Varney. He was watching her and she sang to him. Then Quentin saw that Varney was not listening—not with that bullet hole in his chest. The blood had stopped coming but hadn't coagulated. His arms hung loosely at his sides; his lips were skinned back over his teeth in a gruesome grin.

Varney was deader than a paving block, and Kit Dunning sat in front of him and sang him a song. It was like a trickle of cold mercury down Quentin's back.

QUENTIN spied the hypodermic needle on the dressing table, picked it up, sniffed it, dropped it into his pocket. The poor kid was coked to the gills. He said: "Miss Dunning." She didn't seem to hear him. Quentin thought: "This afternoon she had two suitors; tonight both of them are dead." It was getting fatal to even like her.

He slapped her sharply across the face. She jerked convulsively, blinked, and clutched at her throat. Then she saw Quentin and gave a tight little giggle.

"He's dead," she said. "Chris is dead."

Quentin got her, by both arms, dug his

fingers in. "Listen, listen to me, Kit. How did you get here?"

She spoke mechanically as if she were a little girl reciting a piece. "The show has to go on. I sneaked out the back way. Daddy was sleeping."

"Think back," Quentin prodded.

"Did Gilbert Tyson know you'd married Beaumont?"

"Yes. He was at the club here earlier this evening when we came back from Greenwich. I told him."

"Your mother was a rich woman. Who did she leave her money to?"

"Everything outright to daddy, only some jewels to me. Uncle Gil wants them."

Quentin's pressure tightened on her arms. She did not even wince. "What do you know about Beaumont?"

She said: "He used to be a G-man in San Francisco. Isn't that romantic?"

Quentin's jaw clamped. Somebody was trying to frame this girl. And she was sick. Quentin scowled. What for? Money? She didn't have any.

And all this time Chris Varney, night-club owner, gambler, known killer, was right behind Quentin, shot squarely through the heart—and the presence of the corpse didn't faze Kit Dunning one iota.

Not in her present condition, it didn't. She was tied into an emotional knot, her slim body rigid as wood, and as unfeeling, her eyes as lusterless as two large marbles.

Quentin said: "Don't move from here." He got Varney under the armpits, dragged him into the passage and dumped him into an empty dressing room two doors down. He didn't want the body found in Kit's room.

He strode to the end of the hall, found a door marked *office*, and entered. It was a sharp contrast to the damp brick-lined passage. Varney had appointed a comfortable place for himself, thick rug, books, carved flat-topped desk, finely

upholstered trappings.

There was a safe in the corner, and Quentin went to work on it. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but experience had taught him that when a man is murdered, the murderer is usually after something—and that something might still be in the safe.

BUT he never got it open. Nor did he get any warning. The pistol butt raked down against his head and the lights blazed and whirled. He felt the room spin and he grabbed a handful of nothing to keep from rolling over.

A shot cracked out and something heavy plopped on top of him. Quentin shook his head; the room came back into focus. There was a guy on top of him with a bullet hole through his neck, and Curly was pushing him aside. Quentin struggled to his feet.

"What happened?" His head felt as if a couple of riveters were working on his brain.

Curly said: "I came looking for you, boss, and I caught this guy hackin' you."

Quentin was disgusted. "So you shot him from behind."

"He was hackin' you from behind, wasn't he?"

"I just bought you that gun," Quentin cracked. "Thirty bucks. Now you'll have to throw it in the river."

Curly tossed the gun casually to the floor, dusted his gloved hands together. "It ain't my gun. It's Varney's. I was in here before and I found it on the desk."

"C'mon, let's get out of here." Quentin led the way back to Kit Dunning's room. And for the third time that night, he found that somebody had got there ahead of him. She was sprawled on the floor. The jagged cut of a blow on her right temple spilled a wavering crimson line down her cheek where it merged into the red corner of her

lips.

“What the hell!” Curly muttered.

“Hop out the back and call a cab,” Quentin told him. He stooped and gathered the girl into his arms, lifted her through the door. The exit at the side of the brick passage led into a narrow alley opening on the street.

Quentin carried her to the curb. Curly was some yards down the block, whistling for a cab. Somebody came up behind Quentin, touched him on the shoulder and said:

“Lady drunk?”

Quentin twisted to face a burly, good-natured cop. “Yeah, they never learn how to hold it. I’m taking her home.”

The cop sucked in a deep breath. His mouth pulled down. “The hell you say, buddy. She’s hurt. You’re takin’ her to a hospital.” Under the yellow glow of a street lamp the wound on Kit Dunning’s forehead was visible. It looked much worse than it really was, because carrying her around had jarred the blood into flowing freely and the whole side of her face looked bad.

Curly came up, riding the running board of a hack. He swung the door open and Quentin tried to ease the girl inside.

The cop said, “Hold it, son,” and grabbed his arm.

Holding onto the girl, there was nothing Quentin could do. Curly dived into the cop, scarcely budged him, and took a backhand swing from a big paw that sent him skidding half across the sidewalk. The cop swung his billy at Quentin’s head, and at the same time shrilled a blast from his whistle.

As Quentin’s knees buckled, he held the girl on top of him, so she wouldn’t be hurt by the fall.

WHEN he returned to groaning consciousness, he was in Varney’s office at the Conga Casino. There were

Lieutenant Reirdon of Homicide, Sergeant Fargo, plainclothes men, harness bulls; and in a corner sat the revived Kit Dunning, still looking dazed, plaster taped over her temple. They’d also called in Martin Dunning.

Quentin looked around for Curly. The midget was nowhere in sight.

Lieutenant Reirdon said: “You got yourself in a good one, this time, Quentin. The girl talked. We’re gonna take up your license. You know you’re supposed to report a murder. First this Beaumont is cut open in the Colonial. You found him and kept it a secret. Then somebody puts a slug through Chris Varney and you start transporting the body from room to room. One of his boys gets a bullet in the larynx and I suppose you know about that?”

Quentin gingerly felt the side of his jaw where the burly cop’s billy had connected. It was sore as a boil.

He said: “Yeah, I that’s the whole story and you know as much about it as I do.”

“Maybe more. Your prints were on the dial of Varney’s safe. You get what you were looking for? That why you knocked him off?”

“You’re crazy,” Quentin told him.

“Maybe. But what were you doin’ back in Varney’s office, and him dead in another room?”

Quentin opened his mouth, then saw the signal Dunning gave him from behind the lieutenant’s back, and he said: “Nuts. You know I got to protect my client. This was confidential business.”

Reirdon produced a small gleaming object. “We found this hypo needle in your pocket. We also found a load of cocaine and heroin in Varney’s safe. You peddling the stuff for him?”

Quentin’s face expressed amazement, then disgust. “Aagh! You talk like a kid.” But lines of worry deepened on his face and uneasiness spilled through his veins

like acid.

Reirdon's jaw snapped. "Okay. Just the same we're holding you on suspicion."

"Of what?" Quentin yelled. "Listen, you big—"

The door kicked open. There was a short flurry in the hallway and a cop tried to block Curly's path, but the midget scurried around him and his bow legs braked in front of Quentin. He crooked his finger and Quentin doubled over to listen.

Curly hauled out a dozen slips of paper, whispered in his ear, then stood back and grinned.

Quentin stared at him, scowling. His eyes sought the slips, clouded over. He stood spread-legged, his face twisted in concentration. Then he said very quietly:

"Okay, Reirdon, you can warm up the hot seat." He looked at Kit Dunning. She was sitting stiffly on the edge of a chair, that fixed grin on her coldly beautiful face, her eyes bright under a thin film. "I give you," he went on, "Martin Dunning—murderer."

"What!" Reirdon yelled. Concerted gasps came from the others.

"Exactly. Just look at him."

Dunning's features were suddenly harsh. "I don't know what the man's talking about. He must be covering for himself."

Quentin held up the slips of paper Curly'd given him. "I have here a number of I.O.U.'s made by Dunning to Varney, representing losses at Varney's tables for more money than I thought existed. Dunning didn't want to pay these notes, so he hired me to prove the tables were crooked. Only he told me it was to discredit the club and get his daughter out."

"Those notes don't prove anything," Dunning blazed.

"Shut up," said Reirdon. "Talk, Quentin."

"Only two other men could have killed Beaumont—Varney or Tyson. Since Varney was murdered, that let's him out. Earlier this evening I called on Tyson. Somebody took a shot at me. Naturally, I blamed Tyson, thinking that he'd run away. He hadn't. My assistant, knowing I was in the hands of the police, went over there to try to clear things up. He found Tyson locked in the pantry, a lump on his skull the size of a baseball. Somebody had sneaked in the back way while I was talking to him. That somebody wanted to hear what Tyson told me. *And only one person knew I was going there. Dunning.*

"When Tyson rushed into the kitchen to get a knife or something to chase me out of his apartment with, Dunning conked him, locked him in the pantry and took a shot at me. Not to hit me, but to fix suspicion on Tyson.

"Then he had to work fast. He hadn't meant me to get mixed up in Beaumont's death, and since that would sidetrack me from working on the Conga Casino, he decided to go after Varney himself. He found Varney in Kit's dressing room. She was out front singing. He shot Varney, but before he could get away, Kit returned. He hid behind the screen. I came in, talked to her, and left, never suspecting the murderer might still be there. Then he sneaked out and hit Kit so she wouldn't know he'd been there."

REIRDON was frowning. One of the detectives had circled behind Dunning, was waiting for him to make a move. Dunning said hoarsely: "This is all nonsense, a figment of the man's imagination."

"Yeah?" Quentin mocked. "Keep him here, Reirdon, and send some of your men over to his house to look for the gun; see if it doesn't check with the one shot Varney,

or the slugs in the walls in Tyson's apartment."

Dunning's face collapsed. He was caught and he knew it. His jowls sagged, his eyes were haggard, and he slumped into a chair. Kit was watching him with eyes as big as saucers.

"All right," he said. "I'll talk."

A police stenographer grabbed a pad and pencil. Cops ranged on all sides of him. Quentin wiped his streaming face.

Dunning spoke in a strangled voice. "Beaumont used to work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I got into some mail fraud trouble out West. Beaumont got the evidence against me and I bribed him not to turn me in. Then I got married and came to New York. I didn't see him for years. He'd been thrown out of the F. B. I., and had become a private detective. Tyson, my brother-in-law, hired him to recover certain family jewels from Kit. He recognized me immediately and began blackmailing me.

"I didn't know he'd married Kit. I went to his room and found them together. I knew she took sleeping pills and wouldn't wake up. So I killed him, cut his throat with a razor blade. I never expected Quentin to follow Kit and get mixed up in Beaumont's death.

"The midget was in the hall and in order to get into the room I had to knock him out. I was desperate. Varney had won most of my money and I didn't have any more blackmail to pay Beaumont. He was going to turn the evidence in. He wouldn't believe I was broke. When I came down I saw Tyson going into the hotel. I guess he tried to ring Beaumont on the phone, but

nobody answered. After Quentin left me, I called Tyson and accused him of killing Beaumont. That's how he knew Beaumont was dead."

The room was quiet. Suddenly a peal of hysterical laughter broke out, shrill, uncontrollable. All the cops jumped. Sam Quentin crossed over and laid one across Kit Dunning's cheek. He was getting quite expert at it. The shock clamped her lips and she stared at him, wooden-faced, tense, her emotions as tight as a knot in a wet rope.

He said: "Get this kid to a hospital. She's sick. She needs a psychiatrist, not a room full of cops."

Curly was yanking at Quentin's sleeve. "Listen, boss, where does Varney fit in? Why did he drug the girl at the Colonial?"

Quentin smiled, grimly. "She used to go to Varney's club with her stepfather. Varney met her, liked her, and gave her a job. He could keep in touch with the old man through her, too. Why did he slip her a mickey at the hotel? Because he was jealous of Beaumont. Probably he figured she'd get groggy and he'd be able to get her out of the hotel before she returned to her husband. What with a touch of hereditary eccentricity, and the habit of pumping herself full of heroin, the mickey didn't knock her out fast enough and she got away."

Quentin started walking for the door, moving fast, with Curly racing along at his heels. "What's the rush, boss? Where you, going?"

"To finish my dinner," Quentin snapped. "This clip joint gets two and a half bucks for a steak."