

NO STORY IN IT

By ARTHUR J. BURKS



Mixing Literature and sleuthing intrigues Jaben Coxe, but getting the low-down on the underworld has its drawbacks when blackjacks and bullets fly!

JABEN COXE walked up to the door marked:

LITERARY AGENCY
DETECTIVE FICTION ONLY

He allowed his eyes to run swiftly along the words. He felt rather proud of it. It represented something.

He entered. The girl at the desk straightened, shoved a magazine out of sight in a drawer, and fussed with her hair.

"Mr. Swanson called," she said. "He's calling back in half an hour."

Coxe nodded, shied his hat at a clothes tree hook, missed, and went into the office marked:

JABEN COXE
Private

The girl crossed the floor and retrieved the hat. She did it without looking. Her eyes followed the tall Jaben into his office.

Her lips were parted. Her boss was a handsome cuss and she liked him. She fussed with her hair a bit more, got a notebook from the desk and entered the private office.

She stood quite close to Jaben Coxe. She longed to straighten his blue tie. She longed to run her hand through his brown hair. She longed to be held in his arms and know the thrill of looking upward from her five feet, into his eyes at the six-foot level.

But all she said was:

“Anything for me?”

“Yeah,” said Jaben Coxe, surlily. “Take a letter.”

Clara Paine sat down, crossed her knees, showing an expanse of leg.

“Keep ‘em low,” said Coxe without looking. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

Flushing, she pulled her dress lower. It wouldn’t go much lower. It was shorter than the fashion. Jaben dictated a couple of short letters to publishers, telling them of two new writers he had discovered. Both were men under cover. When he had finished he stood up. The girl stood up, too.

“Listen, Clara,” said Jaben. “Don’t put it on too much. Not when men writers are in here. This is a literary agency, not a taxi dancehall.”

“I don’t understand.” Her face was red.

“Stop swinging your hips when you walk. Young women do it to attract attention. Old women can’t help it. You’re not like that, see?”

“Oh, you! I could kill you for that!”

“Where’d you get as good a job? Beat it, now, and came back when you’re over your mad.”

SHE whirled away from him. He grinned.

“This is a business office,” he said.

She left and the telephone rang.

“Coxe?”

“Yeah, Swanson. What’s in the wind?”

“Firn’s in town.”

“So! Peddling rocks?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Might be. But all the stuff he’s supposed to have snagged is hot. He’d need to find a buyer who could afford to wait. There aren’t so many.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“He likes the hot spots. Get on him, see?”

“What’s the dough in it? Is it spec?”

“Well, sort of. Nobody has been retained. But there’s a reward.”

“How big?”

“Forty grand.”

“Whew! The stuff must be hot—and worth jack. I’ll take it on. Who do I split with?”

“Nobody, if you bring it in yourself. And say, Jaben, that literary agency is a swell front for a private dick.”

“Hush up! Folks might be listening.”

“I forgot. Calls go through that snappy secretary of yours.”

“I don’t mean her. She’s got a yen for me. She wouldn’t talk.”

Jaben Coxe heard a receiver slipped up softly, and he grinned again. He fancied the face of Clara Paine, in the outer office, would be all red again. Hated to rag her like that. She was a good kid, but nosey, and not as wise as she thought. Lucky, he decided, she worked for him. Other bosses might not understand she was really on the up and up.

“What were you saying?” interrupted Coxe.

“Mentioning your secretary sent you wool-gathering, eh?” asked Swanson. “Why don’t you marry the girl and get her off your mind?”

“We were talking of Firn, weren’t we?” Coxe said stiffly. Swanson chuckled. “And say, there might be expenses.”

“Yeah, there might. But if you make it stick there’s forty grand in it.”

"I get it. I find my own expenses."

"Something like that."

Coxe walked to the outer office, took up his hat. Clara Paine, opening the afternoon mail, didn't look up. Coxe saw her pull two green slips from two white envelopes.

"How much?" he asked.

"Eighteen hundred," said the girl shortly. "A thousand for Kelly's yarn, eight hundred for Minnick's. Both editors say that the stories were poorly written but were so true to the life of the underworld they had to have 'em."

"Yeah. Make a note to run this in an ad: 'Local color furnished on collaboration basis'."

Coxe chuckled, turned again with his hand on the door.

"Don't get sore, honey," he said, half grinning. "I think you're the cats or I wouldn't keep you. Which reminds me. Stay here until I call. I might want to use you tonight." The girl flushed and he hastened to add, "Oh, it'll be decent. Sometimes I could use a smart girl on those pieces of business you try to listen in on."

SHE turned her head away, chin lifted. Coxe hesitated as though to come back to her. He knew he was being hard on the kid. He decided against it. After all, an office should be devoid of sentiment.

An hour later he sat in a poker game with five men. He was flat broke, the four men were staying, and he held four aces. It was a tough break.

"I'd like to play these," he said. "They're pretty good. They're four aces. You guys got fours and straights and things and I could clean up, if I wasn't cleaned out."

"That gold watch of yours," said one, "should be worth a double sawbuck. I'll hold it for that. I don't believe you got four aces."

"I have, though."

They paid to see the four aces and Jaben Coxe went out with expense money in his pocket. Nothing else.

His ambitions, mostly, were literary. He went in for crime, but not with gats. He had things happen to him because such things, properly twisted around so they would sound reasonable in fiction, were worth money. Besides, his fists were good. He could have been a light-heavy champ if he had cared for that sort of thing.

Swanson had told him that Firm was believed to be interested in a dancer in a second-rate night spot near the Bowery. Coxe knew the place. He decided to look it over.

He studied a picture of Firm which Swanson had given him. Then he mailed it to his office address. Crooks who held rocks on which rewards of forty grand were offered might not care for private detectives who carried their pictures around.

Half an hour later somebody looked at him through a peephole, downtown, near the Bowery:

"Good evening, Mr. Coxe. Still looking for stories?"

"Yeah. May I come in?"

"Got any money?" The fellow grinned.

All Coxe could see was his mouth and the tip of his nose, as the lookout peered through, showing first one eye, then the other.

"Sure."

"Then enter, Croesus. Money is always welcome."

There were tables, and beer, and stronger drinks for those who cared for them. There was a crowd. The tables were occupied by evening dresses and "tails." The open space was crowded with average men who watched the contortions of the carioca dancer.

Coxe's eyes wandered over the crowd. Firm was supposed to be interested in this dame. Straight girl, too, but could dance and needed the dough.

Coxe walked to the crowd, forced his way through until he stood near the rope which kept the crowd back from the small stage. He could touch Firm by stretching out his left arm. Firm was in evening dress, immaculate and correct. He was a handsome devil. He devoured the dancer with his eyes.

She wore a professional smile, provoking. But her eyes kept returning to Firm, and Coxe could see that she was frightened. She was the charmed bird, and she was frightened. Firm's eyes played over her dancing figure.

"Snake!" muttered Coxe, thinking of Firm.

Then Coxe felt somebody press up against him. He had been pressed against before, for the crowd was thick, shoving forward. But this was different. He had been around enough to know the difference. He whirled. One of the women in the standing crowd was pushing his roll into the front of her dress. It wouldn't do.

He leaned toward her, extending his right hand. . .

* * * * *

Jaben Coxe opened his eyes in his chair behind his own desk, in his own office, and his right hand was rubbing an egg on his skull—a chicken egg.

"Whew!" he muttered. "Could that—whoever it was—sock!"

His roll was gone. He rose, conscious of a burning, thirsty throat. He stepped to the water cooler. His hand trembled as he found a paper cup. He spilled water down his front as he drank. He felt sick. His stomach almost refused the water.

He staggered. The room reeled. The light was on. His watch said twelve o'clock. He went to the outer office.

Clara Paine was gone.

"Blast her!" he thought angrily. "Why couldn't she obey orders? She could have told me how I got here, maybe. Women! All of 'em afraid to stay alone. Whew! Skull feels thin as tissue paper."

He reeled and sat down in Clara's chair, leaned forward on her desk, supporting himself on trembling elbows. Then he saw the note on her desk, right under his eyes. It read:

I'll keep on him, Boss. Stay near a telephone until I call.

Clara Paine.

What the devil did she mean? He was all confused. "Keep on" who? Clara, of course, knew the jargon. She was Coxe's first and only reader. She knew the underworld vicariously, through the stories the agency handled. She was tailing somebody, but who? Why?

It was all screwy. Then he noted that she had left the little mirror from her vanity on the desk. She must have been in a hurry, excited. Excited people had no business tailing anybody.

He looked at himself in the mirror. His face twisted with pain. Yeah, that lump on his head *was* chicken-egg size. The blackjack had descended heavily. Then he saw something else and it made him feel uncomfortable. His lips had rouge on them. So had his right cheek, beside his nose. He suspected that the rouge belonged to Clara Paine. Funny little thing. She must have been excited. She wouldn't have left such clues to the fact she had kissed him. Or wouldn't she? Sometimes women were subtle.

He started to rub off the rouge. Then he considered.

“After all, I’ve been sort of tough on the kid. She’d feel better if she thought I hadn’t noticed it. Funny, a hard egg like me getting considerate of a dame.”

The telephone rang. He took down the receiver.

“Jaben Coxe Literary Agency.”

“Hello, Boss. Clara Paine speaking. Better come running.”

“Where the devil are you and why aren’t you in the office?”

THE girl mentioned an address. Her voice shook.

“I’m here,” she said, “because you telephoned me.”

“Telephoned you? When? Where?”

“Don’t you remember? You told me to come to you at the ‘Thalia,’ down near the Bowery. I went. You acted queer. I gathered you were keeping an eye on a chap named Firn. I gathered you had been thrown out, or something. You were on the sidewalk. You told me to stick around and tail this Firn. I didn’t know anything about it, but you said you had to get back to the office to ghostwrite a story.”

“Yes, yes,” said Coxe impatiently. “I didn’t know a thing about it. I been out of my head, I guess. Know where this Firn is now?”

“Yes. In this building. It’s on Twentieth Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues. I’ll keep an eye—”

The words broke short off. A budding scream was muffled as though a hand had been clapped over a mouth. Jaben Coxe forgot his aches and pains as his heart jumped into his throat.

He heard a receiver thump against a distant wall. He clicked his own down, raced from his office. He didn’t wait for the elevator, taking the stairs at breakneck speed. He reached the street, grabbed a taxicab, gave a number on East Twentieth.

“And don’t,” he said, “spare the horses. Dive downstairs four steps at a time.”

The driver meshed his gears, muttering one word:

“Sca-rewy!”

But he made fast time.

Jaben would have been more cautious, had it not been for his head. It felt several sizes too large for him, but he forgot it because he kept hearing that budding scream, cut off short. He paid the meter charge and told the driver to come to his office next day for a dollar tip.

“I’m busted now,” he said. “You’re lucky I had that much in my pocket and that it was a short haul.”

“Now I’m sure you’re screwy!”

“Maybe. Stick around if you want to gamble. It may be interesting—and lucrative.”

“I’ll be waiting, if somebody don’t flag me.”

“Okay. I’m going in. If you hear shots call for the cops.”

The driver grinned.

“I’ll probably be busy,” he said. “I don’t like to be shot at.”

Coxe waved his hand, shrugged his shoulders, and darted toward the door of the address Clara Paine had phoned him. The driver hesitated, dropped down a couple of doors, got out of his cab, and walked back and forth, unable to make up his mind. Then he sat down on the rear bumper and waited, eyes on the door.

Coxe started up the stairs. The choice was made for him. There was nowhere else to go. There were no lights on. Coxe held his forearm over his face to keep from bashing it apart on something.

He hoped Firn and whoever was with him had not ducked out. There hadn’t been much time—and Clara Paine would furnish plenty of trouble. They wouldn’t dare leave her around to tell tales. She must have learned something, or nobody would have

choked her off. If they had left her they might—

“Lord,” he thought, “I’d rather she’d act up even in the office from now on.”

GRITTY little kid—and taking all these chances to carry out orders, and because she liked the boss. But she was young, eighteen. Eighteen might be prison bait. But living prison bait was better than a dead Clara Paine.

Firn was not a killer. But then, never before had he held stuff for which rewards of forty grand were offered. He wouldn’t be acting alone on anything like that. Murder might happen over hot rocks of great value. It had in times past, many times.

Coxe reached a landing.

“Don’t you know when you’ve got enough?” somebody said.

And something landed on that egg on his head. It seemed to balloon out, then to burst. Or maybe it was his whole skull. He felt himself falling backward. He grabbed at the stair railings.

Arms were under his armpits. Somebody started dragging him. They pulled him into a room. It was a big room. It had a bed in it and some furnishings. All cheap stuff, for it had been furnished in a hurry.

The dancer from the Thalia stood beside the bed. Her clothing had been ripped. Her rouged lips looked like a gash in her face. The lips were twisted with bitterness. Her bare left shoulder was scratched.

There were three men, counting Firn. Firn looked the gentleman. The two men looked their roles—paid gunmen. Firn’s bodyguards, most likely.

“I told you skirts would crab the act,” said someone, as Coxe, his legs turned to water and his backbone feeling like a piece of wet macaroni, was dropped on the floor.

He managed to turn his head. His eyes encountered the fourth man—recognized him. He was Jake Clemons, who muscled in on anything and everything, from baby’s milk to suspension bridges. A power in the underworld—and New York City.

“Good thing I kept an eye on you,” Clemons said. “Do it again, Firn, and you’ll be fished out of the river.”

“Aw, cut it, Jake,” said Firn. “You know you need me. Who else can get around in society like I can? Nobody. And you want what I can get. So cut the bluff.”

“There’s nobody I can’t get along without, see?” Clemons said. “Even you, or anybody. Especially this mug. Slap water on him.”

Somebody up-ended a water cooler on Coxe. It froze him to the marrow. It wakened him to his aches and pains. His blurring eyes, heavy with pain, searched the room. He heard heels kicking somewhere.

His eyes found the clothes closet. Clara Paine would be in there, fighting her bonds and a gag. He tried to stand. One of the guns slugged him. His knees buckled, but he managed to get up. Jake Clemons grabbed him by the front of the shirt.

“Now, fella, what’s the racket? I don’t allow any muscling in, see? I do all the muscling in this town. What are you—private dick?”

“No. I write.”

“Write what?”

“Stories. Stories for magazines.”

“Nuts! Why’d the classy dame phone you from the next room? Why should you be interested in this guy?”

HE POINTED at Firn.

“She didn’t know, the girl didn’t,” Coxe said shakily. “I put her on Firn myself. She just obeyed orders. She’s my secretary.”

Jake Clemons snorted.

"I see you know Firm's name."

"Why not? You just called him by name."

"But I hadn't when you put the skirt on him."

Coxe was silent. Jake Clemons went on. "You wouldn't be interested in, say, forty grand in real cash money, would you?"

"I would, yes. Know anybody that would give me that?"

"Don't get smart, fella. I know somebody, and it ain't me. I don't cut anybody in, see? But there's interests that would shell out forty grand for—"

The heels sounded louder in the clothes closet. The carioca dancer looked at the door. She bit her lip.

"When do I go?" she asked. "I came here with Firm because he promised me a stone I could hock. He said he had enough to finance a foreign power. I need that sort of money."

"Who doesn't?" asked Clemons. "What else did he tell you?"

The dancer flushed.

"About everything. I could have learned his middle name by stringing him along, holding out."

Coxe stared at the dancer. He shaped his lips to form words, trying to catch her attention:

"Go on—go on!" his lips outlined.

Maybe she caught it; maybe she didn't. But she kept on talking.

"He said he'd show me the Morley jewels if I'd come here with him. I came. He showed them to me. He figured, he said, that after I'd come here with him that I wouldn't be in position to report to the police. I guess that might have been the truth, too, if the rest of you hadn't come. I wasn't as fast on my feet as I thought I was."

She tried to cover her bare shoulder, but the strap of the evening frock had been

torn away. Jake Clemons walked up to Firm and slapped his face.

"See?" he said. "Now we've got three people, two of 'em women, who know too much, because you can't let skirts alone. Men like you ought to be hung out somewhere by their ears while the crows pick their eyes out! What'll we do with these three?"

"Clemons," Firm said coldly, "I never in my life allowed anyone to get away with putting hands on me. What'll we do with the three? Bump 'em, if you like, as long as I don't have to do it. But give your orders fast."

"Why?"

"Because you've got about three seconds to give 'em in!"

"Why, you—"

But before Jake Clemons' arm, with the fist at the end, could shoot out, and the fist connect, Firm straightened his forearm at his hip and a weapon—small by the sound—spoke four times, swiftly. Bullets burned into the belly of Jake Clemons. He fell forward and Firm stepped aside to let him fall.

COXE saw his opportunity. Excitement gave him strength. He whirled and drove his fist to the jaw of one of the gunnies who had his automatic half drawn. The man toppled over. Coxe felt like a fool, dripping wet and shivering as he was.

The second gunman swung his automatic muzzle at Coxe's jaw. Coxe dived under it.

There was a sound of feet on the stairs.

"Hold that cannon!" shouted Coxe, dashing for the clothes closet. "Sock him, then bar the door. I don't want cops!"

"Neither do I," said Firm.

Coxe heard the small weapon bark again. He snatched open the clothes closet door and Clara Paine fell into his arms. Her eyes were flaming. He yanked off the gag.

“Don’t jerk my head off!” she spat at him.

“Is there a way out of here?” he asked her. “Our agency doesn’t want any publicity.”

“I got the dope,” she said. “Just like in some of our best stories. Yes, there’s a back way.”

There was the sound of nightsticks on the door. It rattled as though bullets thudded against it. Coxe whirled on Firm. The room was a mess. Both gunmen guards motionless on the floor. Firm looked worried.

“Why did they have to ride me so hard, all over a skirt?” he asked Coxe peevishly.

“After all, none of this would have happened if you hadn’t played her,” Coxe said grimly. “Ready, Sis?” This last to Clara Paine.

“Yes. “

Firm had his automatic, woman’s size, in his right hand. With his left he scooped a small black briefcase from under the pillows on the bed. The dancer moved to Clara Paine. Clara caught her by the arm. The dancer’s face was as pale as death.

“Hold it,” said Clara, “until we get outside. We can’t be carrying anybody. Let this be a lesson to you, not to go to the apartments of strange men.”

“I’ll take that briefcase, Firm,” Coxe said softly.

“This gat says no, fella,” said Firm.

“There are cops all around the place.”

“Okay, but they haven’t got me yet. You haven’t a gat yourself or you’d have used it.” He turned and looked at the dancer. “And listen, girlie, you haven’t heard the last of me yet!”

Clara led the way to a door, a heavy door, which happened to be new. Coxe decided it had been put in for the purpose it was now to be used for.

“Lead the way,” said Firm. “I may be wrong about you not having a gat on you.”

Coxe, his brain working at top speed, moved to the stairs. Clara Paine linked her arm through his. The dancer went first, hurrying. Firm came last, hugging his black briefcase. Coxe reached the second step, going down.

“Hurry, Firm,” said Coxe. “We’ll bar the door on this side.”

Firm’s answer was a moan, a gasp. It came as an automatic spoke from the room they were leaving. Coxe looked back. Jake Clemons had dragged his head up. His face was mottled, purple, with his frantic effort.

HIS right fist grasped an automatic. He had shot Firm in the back, twice. Firm dropped the black briefcase. It fell three steps, ahead of Coxe.

Firm started to fall. Coxe stepped back one step, guiding his fall. Firm crumpled, inside the room. Coxe left him there, shut the door and barred it. He heard the first door give, fall inward. He heard the oaths of officers. Then hammering on the second door.

Coxe scooped up the black briefcase. He and the two girls went down to Nineteenth Street, cut east to Fourth Avenue. A taxicab was passing. They flagged it, got in.

“Get me home, will you?” said the dancer, her voice harsh, unnatural. “If we hurry I can get in before my husband gets home. He’ll play poker until two.”

Her voice was bitter. She gave an address. Coxe told the driver to hurry. Police sirens screamed from all directions as they started downtown. The driver went slowly until well past Union Square. Then Coxe had him step on it.

They dropped the dancer at the address she had given. She looked up at black windows. No lights were on. She sighed with relief.

“I’m in time,” she said. “Hereafter I’ll stick to dancing. Thanks, kid.” This last to

Clara Paine.

Coxe gave his office address, then changed his mind.

“Where do you live, Clara?” he asked.

She told him. She sat close to him.

“You’ll get wet, and catch cold,” he told her. “I’m a drowned rat.”

They drove for half an hour. And then he said, wondering why she was so silent, why she held herself so stiffly:

“Listen, Sis, thanks. I never knew—I never guessed—that you cared so much. I mean—er—that you risked so much to help me out tonight.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” she said, and her voice had a catch in it. “That dancer is my sister. I couldn’t let her get in Dutch. That’s why I tailed you instead of staying in the office. You see, Swanson mentioned her name when he said Firm was interested.”

Coxe laughed inwardly. Swanson had done no such thing. She ought to know he would remember.

“It’s a good story,” he said, “and you can stick to it, but, you know, it isn’t proper use of coincidence. Imagine! The dancer turns out to be the sister of my secretary! Considering the rest of tonight’s sequence of events, it just doesn’t ring true.”

“Maybe not, but it happens to be!”

And she stuck to it. He entered her apartment with her, called a number.

“Swanson?”

“Yeah. That you, Coxe?”

“In the flesh. Make arrangements to get that forty grand for me tomorrow, will you? And take all the publicity yourself!”

Then he hung up, leaving Swanson gasping. . . .

NEXT morning, with his head bandaged, Jaben Coxe sat at his desk, signing letters he had dictated to writers.

The first one, done in the perfect typing of Clara Paine, expressed his opinion about story formulas. He read an excerpt:

I note you say that all this stuff you’ve written actually happened. That’s all right. It could happen every day in every city in the land, and readers wouldn’t regard it as convincing, and no editor would buy it. Coincidence is common in life; literature won’t stand for it. You have to make it sound reasonable.

He signed the letter. Then he raised his eyes and stared thoughtfully at the door which, closed, nevertheless did not drown out the sound of the fast typing of Clara Paine.

“Even if your story was true, Sis,” he apostrophized her, “you did good work. If it wasn’t, then I’ll be having things to say to you, one of these days—if I don’t forget.”

Then he stared at the next letter on the pile, lifted the page and read from it:

Yes, I know many writers go in for simplicity. I like simplicity myself. So do many editors. But simplicity, when there’s no story in the yarn is just—simplicity. A story has to go with it.

He signed. He tossed down the pen. He felt of his head and sighed, wincing a little as his exploring fingers found tender places.

“What would she do,” he asked himself, “if I called her in here, told her about the rouge spots, took her in my arms and kissed her.? That’s it, direct action does it. I’ll have her in. After all, it’s *my* office, isn’t it?”

He pressed a button. She came in, looking neat and businesslike. He stared at her. He swallowed. He fumbled with papers on his desk.

“Take a letter, Miss Paine!” he said brusquely.