



FLOWERS FOR MRS. WIDGEON

By PAUL ROYCROFT

Being a house detective taught Punch Bradley to expect a lot of strange things, but he'd have laughed at the prophecy that a pet peeve would save his life!

PUNCH BRADLEY threaded his way through the crowded lobby of the Clifton Plaza without appearing to be in a hurry. In a big modern hotel, it's not considered good policy for the house detective to sprint across the lobby. Especially in the morning with the incoming travelers from the 10:15 lined up at the room clerk's desk for reservations. It's not good for business. It leads too many people to suspect that something is wrong.

Sheila Mason, who lived at the hotel, saw Bradley go and her nose for news picked up a scent. Something about the studied casualness of his tall rangy form impelled her to follow him. He entered an elevator and Sheila was just close enough behind to hear the last of his terse command: "—and no stops on the way."

Then the elevator door slid smoothly between them.

A closed door is no barrier to a good reporter, particularly a red-headed gal reporter. Sheila watched the indicator above the elevator climb steadily upwards. Maybe Bradley was only going up to put the buzz on some early-morning drunk, or maybe he was on his way to iron out one of Mrs. Widgeon's continual complaints. Sheila smiled at the thought. Then again, it might be something else.

THE indicator stopped at fourteen. Sheila took the next elevator.

"Fourteen please, Pete," she said to the elevator boy and flashed him a devastating smile. For another smile like that, he would have jumped over an assistant manager if she'd asked him.

"Yes, Miss Mason," he said. He slid the door shut and shot the car upward.

On Fourteen, Sheila saw Bradley talking to

someone in the corridor, someone wearing the two-tone blue uniform of a hotel waiter. They entered a room and Sheila followed. Just inside the door, she stopped short with a little involuntary gasp of horror. Bradley spun around.

"Sheila!" he cried.

Sheila stared at the bed. One hand fluttered to her throat and the knuckles of the other, white and tense, locked a scream against her teeth.

The room looked like the aftermath of a truck drivers' convention. Utter confusion! Overturned chairs lay on the floor. Sheets, torn from the bed, were scuffed and trampled on the carpet. A floor lamp leaned precariously against an overturned bed-table, and a window curtain, half torn loose, draped forlornly over it.

An ashtray, knocked from the dresser, had scattered butts and ashes all over the floor. Under the dresser, an empty whisky bottle lay on its side and the air was heavy with the reek of its spilled contents.

"This is how I found her." The waiter's voice was flat and toneless. "I came up for this tray."

He indicated the ruin of a tray of food dumped in one corner.

Bradley moved slowly over to the bed.

"Pull up the blind."

The waiter ran the blind up and sunlight banished the half-darkness.

"It's Vinnie Rogers!" Bradley's face was ashen-gray.

The woman on the bed was young, scarcely more than twenty. In life, she might have been lovely with the fresh bloom of youth. But, this woman had looked on the face of Death, and Death had stamped some of the horror of his own dread countenance upon her face.

She lay partly on her side, clothed in brief lacy underthings, one knee pitifully drawn up and little white hands clenched into tortured fists. Staring china-blue eyes remembered the ghastly image of her killer and her soft red mouth, cruelly twisted, had labored with a scream that died unborn. Soft blond hair haloed around her head, except at the back.

Sheila's stomach constricted nauseatingly when she saw that gruesome shapeless mass.

Gently Bradley fingered one still white wrist. Then he felt for a heartbeat.

"Try a mirror," Sheila whispered.

Bradley shook his head slowly.

"She's gone," he said.

His big hands clenched and unclenched strongly. He stared at the woman on the bed.

"Look at her—" He broke off savagely. "I'd like to get my hands on the guy that did this. Sometimes I feel so completely helpless."

"Should you notify the police, Mr. Bradley?" the waiter suggested smoothly.

"Yeah." Bradley squared his big shoulders and took a quick look around. "I'll call them. Let's get out of here."

On his way out of the room his eye caught something lying on the floor.

He dropped back a step. Neither Sheila nor the waiter saw him stoop swiftly and slip a small shiny thing into his pocket. . . .

Detective-sergeant John Driscoll surveyed the murder-room with professional calm. Ten years on the homicide squad had case-hardened him to the sordid side of human nature.

His glance took in the woman on the bed and then went on to flick around the room. He was a big man, Detective John Driscoll, burly and grizzled. He had arrived with Clancy, his assistant, in response to Bradley's telephone call. Driscoll had vetoed Sheila's presence. He stood now in the center of the room stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Must have been quite a party. Who was she?"

"Her name is Vinnie Rogers," Bradley answered. "She was a cashier in the front office."

"Worked in the hotel, huh?" The detective's bushy gray eyebrows lifted.

"She was the cashier," Bradley said quietly, "who was held up last week. Maybe you heard about it?"

"Did hear something. Better give it to me again." Driscoll was down on hands and knees, peering under the dresser.

BRADLEY waited, watching him.

"Go ahead," Driscoll said. "I'm just looking around."

"Well"—Bradley looked at Clancy—"a man shoved a gun in her face at the wicket. Told her to shove over the money, then he grabbed it and disappeared."

"Just like that." Clancy snapped his fingers airily.

"There were at least fifty people in the lobby," Bradley continued.

"It seems unbelievable, but nobody saw him.

Vinnie said he had the collar of his topcoat up around his face and he had a dark hat pulled low over his eyes. She gave the alarm as soon as she could. We found the hat and coat in one of the washrooms, but the guy had disappeared.”

“He get much?” asked Clancy.

“About seven thousand.”

Driscoll got heavily to his feet and dusted off the knees of his pants.

“Sounds fishy to me,” he said. “You got tear gas equipment in all the wickets. Why didn’t the dame jam her foot on the button?”

“She said she was afraid of the gun.”

“Yeah?” Driscoll selected a fresh cigar from his vest pocket and carefully bit off the end. “Or maybe she knew about the hold-up before. Had it planned like.”

“Vinnie was a good cashier,” Bradley said stiffly. “I’ve known her for a long time.”

Driscoll sparked a match with his thumbnail, lit his cigar and exhaled a cloud of blue-gray smoke.

“She could still have been in cahoots with this guy,” he said.

Bradley didn’t answer.

Driscoll walked around the bed staring down at the girl’s body.

“Maybe it adds up.” He spoke softly, meditating. “She comes up here with this hold-up guy. They have a few drinks.” He gestured toward the spilled whisky bottle. “They get to arguing over the dough.”

Driscoll shrugged his big shoulders and spread his hands apart.

“He kills her. Beats her head in.”

He scowled ferociously at Bradley and Clancy.

“How about the photographers?” asked Clancy.

“After the M.E. arrives,” answered Driscoll. “Who’s this room registered for?”

“It wouldn’t be registered.” Bradley faced him. “Vinnie was probably on duty till midnight last night and had to double back early this morning. Whenever a girl’s hours happen to work out that way, they give her a room to sleep here in instead of letting her go home.”

Driscoll nodded absently, examining the top of the dresser.

“Who discovered the body?” he asked.

“A room-service waiter named Sordoni.”

“Get him up here. Like to talk to him.”

Bradley picked up the telephone which had escaped being knocked over. “Room service,

please.” When the connection went through he said: “Send Sordoni up to fourteen-ten.”

Driscoll shoved his battered fedora to the back of his head and hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. His keen blue eyes regarded Bradley.

“You any relation to Tim Bradley who used to be on the force?”

Bradley nodded shortly.

“He was my father.”

“Too bad.” Driscoll shook his big head sadly. “Knew Tim well. We were rookies together. Buggsy Leone rubbed him out with a tommy-gun. Too bad. You’re his kid, huh?”

THERE was a discreet tap on the door and Bradley opened it to admit the waiter.

“This is Sordoni,” he said.

Driscoll looked him over from head to foot, cigar swiveling in his mouth.

“You found this woman’s body?”

“Yes, sir.” The waiter’s manner was deferential, his eyes dark and expressionless.

“Let’s hear about it.”

Sordoni spoke up without hesitation.

“Last night, Miss Rogers ordered a tray of food.”

“You knew her?”

“Oh, yes, she worked in the hotel.”

“Go on.”

“I brought the tray up.”

“What time?”

“About one o’clock,” the waiter explained. “I left the tray with her and when I came up this morning to take it down—I found her. Then I called Mr. Bradley.”

A pudgy gray-haired man came in carrying a small, black case and nodded to Driscoll and Clancy. Driscoll returned the salute and jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“There it is, Doc,” he said.

The medical examiner went over to the bed and took off his coat. Driscoll switched back to Sordoni.

“How’d you get in the room this morning?” he asked.

“I had borrowed the housekeeper’s pass-key.”

“Touch anything?”

“Nothing, sir.” The waiter shook his head, looking the detective straight in the eye.

“You can go,” Driscoll told him. “Don’t get out of reach. Need you later.”

The detective turned to his assistant.

"All right, Clancy. Get the picture guys in now. Tell Ernie to look for prints."

"What's the story, Doc," Driscoll asked the M.E. as Clancy left the room.

"It's pretty obvious," the doctor said, straightening up. "The back of her skull is crushed." He rolled his sleeves down. "Whoever used that gun on her certainly did a job."

"Gun?" Driscoll stared at him. "What gun?"

The M.E. flipped back a fold of the bed clothes disclosing a heavy revolver. The butt was covered with dried blood.

"I've been looking for that," Driscoll said.

Bradley, as though hypnotized, drew closer to the bed. The color drained from his face leaving it white and tired looking.

"Ever see that before, Bradley?" asked Driscoll.

"Why, yes." The words seemed to stick in Bradley's throat. "It—it belongs to the hotel."

The detective eyed him quickly.

"What do you mean, it belongs to the hotel?"

There was silence for a minute. Driscoll's jaw was grim and his eyes were hard. His voice held a chilled steel rasp.

"You mean it's yours?" he demanded.

Sheila was waiting when Bradley got back downstairs to the cubby-hole he used for an office.

"You look a little ragged around the edges," she said after one look.

"I need a drink." Bradley yanked open a desk drawer. "They found my gun up there. Vinnie was killed with it."

He produced a bottle of Bourbon and picked up a glass.

"You?" He looked at her questioningly.

She shook her head and he poured himself a stiff one.

"That makes it tough."

"Yes," Sheila agreed and her gray-green eyes were troubled. The smile was gone from her face.

"There's no saying who might have picked it up," she said quickly.

"Thanks, honey." He smiled wryly. "I'm glad you don't think I'm a murderer."

"Silly."

"I never carried that gun. I kept it in the desk all the time." He slid the Bourbon back into the drawer. "I guess the thing to do now, is figure out who wanted her dead."

Sheila nodded.

"I wonder if—"

She was interrupted by the shrill peal of the telephone.

Bradley picked up the receiver.

"Bradley talking. . . . Oh, yes, Mrs. Widgeon." He cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and frowned in exasperation. "Yes, Mrs. Widgeon. . . . Yes, Mrs. Widgeon. . . . Yes. . . ."

The high excited voice whining from the receiver could be heard all over the room. Sheila smiled and made a face at him.

A SHARP click was heard and the voice stopped.

"Naughty, naughty! Mustn't slam the receiver," Sheila admonished. The elfin mischief in her smile made her eyes as bright as a bellhop's buttons and, in spite of his annoyance, Bradley smiled too. He put the instrument gently back into its cradle.

"It's that old hag in fourteen-twelve again. Complaining about the noise in the next room. Good thing she doesn't know it's the police."

"It would be too bad if she found out there was a murder in the room next to hers. I'll bet she'd move."

"That'll be the day! Always hearing noises and complaining. You couldn't even strike a match outside in the corridor without her hearing it and calling about it."

"You should have the place soundproofed," Sheila suggested sweetly.

"What she needs is to get out more," Bradley declared.

"Incidentally"—Sheila crossed slim silken legs—"I haven't seen Mr. Whittly around. Isn't the manager interested when a murder is committed in his hotel?"

"Whittly's away for a couple of days and all his stooges are keeping under cover. Leaving it up to me."

He offered her a cigarette.

"Let's get back to the suspects," she said. "Who would want to kill Vinnie Rogers?" Bradley struck a match and lit her cigarette before answering.

"Driscoll thinks it might have something to do with the stick-up last week."

"But why would they use your gun?" she asked. "And why leave it there?"

"I don't know," Bradley admitted as he ran long fingers through his crisp black hair. "There's something phony about that whole set-up up there."

Sheila's arched eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"Phony?" she repeated.

"Yeah." Punch's frown was perplexed. "I dunno—it's something I can't put my finger on. I noticed it when I first went into that room, but for the life of me I can't tell you what it is."

Sheila's eyes searched his face as he slumped back in his chair.

"I can't make it any clearer," he said slowly. "It's just something about that room that doesn't seem right."

Sheila got up and snuffed out her cigarette in the ashtray. Bradley jammed his hands in his pockets and his fingers touched the little shiny object he had picked up from the floor of the murder room.

"What do you think of this?" he said, laying it on the desk. "Ever see one of these before?"

"It's a cuff-link." Sheila examined it. "Made of brass, must be just a cheap one."

Smoke curled lazily from Bradley's lips. He half closed his eyes and squinted at the cuff-link.

"I picked it up on the floor up there."

"Did you tell the police?"

"No, I didn't," he said. "I forgot about it till now."

He picked it up, holding it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Somehow, this cuff-link seems very familiar. I wish I could think where I saw it before."

Driscoll barged into the office just as Bradley had the cuff-link in his fingers. Clancy was right behind him. Bradley resisted the impulse to hide the thing quickly in his pocket. He let it fall back into the palm of his hand.

"Sorry," Driscoll said eyeing Sheila. "Didn't know you were busy."

"Don't mind me. I can take a hint." She stood and picked up her purse. "I'll be back later, Punch."

Taking advantage of the fact that Driscoll's and Clancy's eyes were on Sheila, Bradley slipped the cuff-link unobtrusively into his pocket.

Clancy parked himself on a corner of the desk, one leg swinging. Driscoll pulled a chair up close and sat down. Bradley waited.

DELIBERATELY, Driscoll applied a fresh match to the butt of his cigar. His eyes watching Bradley through the curling smoke were as cold as the marble pillars in the lobby, and as hard.

"Last night, about two o'clock, where would

you be?" he asked.

Bradley's eyes traveled over Driscoll's face, swung to Clancy, then back to Driscoll again. There was something in their faces that tightened his lips into a thin straight line.

"I was in bed. Probably asleep." His words were clipped.

"No alibi," grunted Clancy.

"The M.E. says the dame was killed about two o'clock this morning," Driscoll persisted. "Sure you weren't in fourteen-ten?"

"Wait a minute," Bradley interrupted. "What are you driving at?" He leaned forward and laid his hands flat on the desktop. His stare was as hard as Driscoll's.

"You did a good job but you forgot a couple of things," prodded Clancy.

"Things like fingerprints," barked Driscoll.

"When you guys get through talkin' in circles," Bradley said flatly, "maybe I can join the conversation."

Clancy caught Driscoll's eye and in a single lithe movement came up off the desk.

"Maybe this'll help."

His right fist swung in a smooth tight arc that almost caught Bradley napping. Sitting in the chair, he was at a disadvantage. He rolled with the punch, throwing himself out of the chair, and grabbed at Clancy's wrist.

Caught partly by his own momentum and partly by Bradley's sudden heave, Clancy was yanked right over him. He landed in a sprawled heap on the floor. Bradley was on his feet instantly. Clancy preferred to remain where he was. Driscoll never moved. Cigar stuck pugnaciously in his jaw, he watched Bradley through slitted eyes.

"Cut it!" he barked.

Bradley fingered his jaw where Clancy's fist had landed.

"Call off your dog," he said shortly.

Driscoll nodded. Clancy limped across the office and eased himself into a chair.

"Look, Bradley—" Driscoll tried a new tack. His voice was deceptively smooth. "We found a drinking glass up there with fingerprints on it. Everything else in the room was wiped clean, but this glass was under the bed. Been missed. The prints on the glass matched two we found on the gun. Your gun!"

Bradley shook his head wearily.

"The gun was kept in this desk." His voice was

slow and definite as though he were explaining something to a child. "I'm out of the office most of the time. Any one of a dozen people could have taken it."

"How about the glass?" Driscoll said.

"Look around." A tight grin flashed across Bradley's face. There were three or four empty glasses in evidence. "Everybody that wants to sneak a fast one when the boss isn't looking comes in here."

"You figure somebody's trying to frame you?" Clancy was sullen.

"How does it look to you?" Bradley countered.

"Who'd want to?"

Bradley eyed Clancy levelly.

"I wouldn't know." Driscoll sighed heavily and stood up.

"If that's the way you want it—"

He skirted the desk and stopped with his hand on the doorknob.

"How about the key? If this dame that was killed worked late and they gave her a room like you said, wouldn't they give her a door key, too?"

"Certainly," Bradley answered. "Why?"

"It's not there. We went through that room with a comb, but we didn't find any key."

"It should be there." Bradley was puzzled. "It hasn't been turned in at the desk. I checked before I came in here and I gave orders not to let the duplicate key out."

"Maybe she used a pass-key," suggested Clancy.

Bradley shook his head.

"No," he said. "Actually, there're only two pass-keys. The manager keeps his in his office all the time. The housekeep would have turned hers in when she went off duty around ten o'clock. As a matter of fact, I've got her pass-key in my pocket right now."

THE big detective nodded his head thoughtfully. He came back into the office and stubbed his cigar on the ashtray on the desk. His face was bland and innocent, he even smiled a little.

"Bradley, just between you and me, who do you think killed her?" he asked.

Bradley stared at him curiously. This sudden cordiality seemed just a wee bit suspicious.

"I don't know," he said. "I knew Vinnie Rogers around the office, sure, but I don't know a thing

about her private life. Maybe she double-crossed her boyfriend. Maybe she was running around with somebody's husband. Maybe any one of a hundred things."

Driscoll scratched the stubble on his chin with a noise like sandpaper.

"You're right," he said. "We're getting nowhere fast."

As a detective, John Driscoll had certain pet theories and ideas of his own regarding crime detection. He firmly believed that, if you give a man enough string, he'll crochet a necktie for himself, and he proceeded to put that theory into practice now.

"Got a cigarette?" he asked.

He took the cigarette pack Bradley offered, gingerly by one corner.

"Bradley," he said quietly. "We got a couple of things on you. You might have trouble explaining them to a jury, but I knew your old man. For his sake, I'm not runnin' you in—yet. I'm keeping this cigarette pack"—he wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief—"and if the fingerprints on it match the prints on the gun and the glass heaven help you!"

Punch Bradley sat very still with the repercussions of Driscoll's harsh-voiced threat hammering at his brain. If his fingerprints matched those on the gun—

His fingers beat a rapid tattoo on the desktop. He jumped up and paced over to the window. Hands on the sill, he leaned forward staring out at the street. A streetcar gong clanged savagely. Gears whined and snarled as the cars at the corner raced away from the stoplight. Far down at the docks a ferryboat hooted mournfully, but he heard none of these things.

He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and remembered that Driscoll had taken them. He got a fresh pack from his desk, automatically tore off the cellophane and slipped a cigarette into his mouth. Behind narrowed eyes, his brain searched in vain for the answer to one problem. Quickly, as though a decision left him no time to waste, he plucked the cigarette from his lips, threw it at a wastebasket and hurried from the room. He went up to the fourteenth floor determined to find that elusive something that he knew was phony about the room.

Before he could put the key in the lock, something stopped him. He stiffened, listening—something or somebody was moving inside. He

threw the door open fast and surprised Sordoni on hands and knees in the middle of the floor. The waiter spun around, lips flat against his teeth in a soundless snarl.

“What are you doing here?” Bradley’s voice was sharp. He eased inside the door and pushed it shut behind him. It caught but didn’t lock.

The room looked exactly the same as it had earlier. Except that Vinnie Rogers’ body had been removed, nothing was changed. The waiter climbed hastily to his feet and the snarl left his face.

“Sorry, Mr. Bradley,” he said. “You startled me.”

Bradley’s eyes never left the waiter’s face.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” he said.

“I came to take this tray back to the kitchen.”

“On your hands and knees?”

“As a matter of fact, sir—” Sordoni had calmed down fast and his voice was suave and polite. “I was looking to see that there were no spoons or forks under the furniture.”

SCATTERED puzzle-pieces began to click smoothly together in Bradley’s racing brain. He grinned briefly, not a pleasant grin.

“Quit stalling, Sordoni,” he said. “Here’s what you’re looking for.”

He pulled the little brass cuff-link from his pocket and held it up for the waiter to see.

“It took me a long time to wise up. This is the kind of cuff-link the hotel issues for a waiter’s evening uniform. Right?”

If he had expected the waiter to show signs of nervousness, he was out of luck. The man didn’t turn a hair.

“Yes, that’s right. No use lying about it. I was afraid I lost it here. It must have dropped out when I brought the tray up last night.”

“Last night?” The waiter nodded.

“I wanted to find it before the police. They might think that I—”

“Yeah.” Bradley nodded thoughtfully. “So they might.”

The man’s reaction had him puzzled. He was so frank and straightforward that Bradley had to think it over pretty carefully. Then something else occurred to him, and as he turned it over in his mind a growing excitement tingled in his veins. He slipped the cuff-link back in his pocket.

“How did you get in here?” he asked casually.

The waiter hesitated just a second.

“I used the housekeeper’s pass-key,” he answered glibly.

This was it! Realization hit Punch with an almost physical shock, like a hard sock on the jaw, leaving him stunned and motionless. From somewhere, he heard a voice, flat and ugly. He scarcely recognized it as his own.

“You’re lying, Sordoni! I’ve had that key in my pocket for the last two hours. You know what that means.”

Somehow, the scene was fantastic and unreal. Bradley had seen it many times in the movies, had read about it in detective stories. But to be actually in the position of accusing a man of having callously snuffed out a young girl’s life—

The waiter’s swarthy skin was pasty-white. His mouth opened and his jaw worked sickeningly, but no sound came. Strong white teeth gnawed nervously on his lower lip. He wiped little beads of sweat from his forehead with the napkin he carried. His movements were jerky and irregular, and the napkin fell from his nervous fingers. It fluttered to the floor and Sordoni bent over to get it.

When he straightened up, a small ugly automatic gleamed wickedly in his hand. He didn’t act nervous anymore.

“You catch on quick, Bradley,” he said softly, “but not quick enough. Yes, I’ve got the key to the room, but the cops are going to find it in your pocket. I’ll tell them I surprised you in here and had to kill you in self-defense.”

The baleful eye of the gun snapped Punch back to grim reality. With it pointing straight at him, he had no time to worry about the scene being fantastic.

“So it was you,” he said slowly. “You killed Vinnie Rogers.”

A crafty gleam lurked in the waiter’s eye. He was silent for a long moment then his ego got the better of him. “Yes, I killed her.” His mouth held a cruel downward twist and the bland servility of his tone was replaced by a sneering bravado. “Don’t get excited. You won’t be telling anybody.”

With the gun as an inspiration, Bradley thought fast. His play at the moment, he realized, was to keep the man talking.

“Care to tell me why?” he asked quickly.

“Because she was a fool!” Sordoni spat out contemptuously. “She recognized me a couple of days after I cleaned out the till. Claimed she recognized a scar on my hand.” A brutal sneer

twisted his face. "She didn't want to get me into any trouble, that's a laugh, so she tried to talk me into handing the dough back."

Bradley watched him quietly, battling to keep the surging rage out of his eyes.

"Mind if I have a cigarette?"

"Keep your hands away from your pockets!" Sordoni barked and the gun jerked menacingly.

"Have one of these." He tossed Bradley one of his own. "Better enjoy it. It'll be your last."

LITTLE icicles of tension forming in his brain, Bradley deliberately turned his back on the gun and walked over to the dresser for a match. His hands were clumsy and he knocked a heavy glass ashtray to the floor. It fell with a nerve-wracking crash. He stooped hurriedly to pick it up and in doing so, dropped it again.

Sordoni laughed, a harsh grating sound.

"Getting a little nervous?"

"So you pulled the stick-up," Bradley said quickly. "How'd you work your getaway?"

"A cinch," the waiter bragged. "I wore a hat and coat over my uniform. After I stuck-up the cashier, I went down to the washroom. I had a tray planted there. I ditched the hat and coat, put the dough on the tray, threw a napkin over it and walked back up through the lobby."

"Smooth," Punch agreed. "Everybody saw you and yet nobody saw you."

He nodded thoughtfully, smoke curling from his nostrils.

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked. He hooked one of the overturned chairs with his toe to bring it upright. It slipped and clattered against the wall and banged on the floor. Bradley cursed savagely in a high, tense voice.

Sordoni was openly contemptuous.

"The house-dick's not so tough after all," he sneered. Bradley made no reply. He slumped negligently in the chair but his eyes were alert.

"So you had to kill Vinnie Rogers because she recognized you." He took a short drag on his cigarette. "But why frame me?"

"Why not? It was so easy. It was a cinch to get your gun and an empty glass out of your office. Vinnie was expecting me up in the room to talk things over, so I took the gun and the glass with me. When I killed her, I planted them and set the stage by messing up the room to make it look like there had been a fight. I turned the chairs over and

the lamp, and scattered things around a bit. I took off the dame's dress to add a little touch of reality to the scene. Slick little frame, huh?"

He smiled a twisted, malicious smile, then abruptly, his mood changed.

"We talk too long, Bradley." His voice was hoarse and his eyes savage pinpoints of danger. "Stand up and take it."

The gun in his hand was as steady as a rock, pointing straight at Bradley. His finger whitened on the trigger—

The door was opened. Framed in the doorway, Sheila Mason screamed.

A startled curse on his lips, the waiter glanced back over his shoulder. Bradley attacked. Tensed for the moment, he uncoiled like a snapping spring. Diving across the floor in a football tackle, his big body hit the waiter just below the knees.

The man went over backward in a cursing, clawing heap. Bradley grabbed his arm and the gun went off. A bullet zipped into the ceiling. Bradley got a hold on Sordoni's wrist and twisted. The waiter dropped the gun. With a sudden powerful jerk, he broke free and went after it. Bradley was right after him. They rolled on the floor cursing and clawing like a couple of wildcats. Chairs were sent flying and the floor lamp came down with a crash.

Sheila grabbed a heavy brass bookend and waited for a chance to use it.

Sordoni got the gun and clubbed it in a vicious arc at Bradley's head. Bradley ducked and the butt grazed his cheek, crashed against his left shoulder.

The waiter broke away and Bradley, jumping to his feet, swung a wild haymaker that smacked against his jaw. Sordoni dropped the gun and Bradley hit him again. Hands limp at his sides and eyes glazed, Sordoni swayed weakly in the center of the floor. Bradley measured him carefully and a stiff uppercut, driven by all the force of his big shoulders, slammed the man backward against the wall. He sagged limply to the floor.

THE girl's voice broke the silence.

"Nice going," she said and came close to him. Automatically Bradley took her in his arms.

"It's a good thing you came up when you did," he said.

"You can thank Mrs. Widgeon for that." Sheila's smile was tender. "I was downstairs waiting for you when she phoned down to complain about the noise in this room. I came up to

investigate.”

“That’s the way I played it, honey.” Bradley’s grin was a trifle twisted. “I made all the noise I dared without getting him suspicious. The general idea was to get Mrs. Widgeon mad enough to phone downstairs and complain.”

“But what made you think of that?”

“Don’t you see, honey?” Bradley smiled quietly. “That’s what was phony about the room. If there had been a fight that wrecked the room the way it looked, Mrs. Widgeon would have heard it.

Well, she didn’t complain.”

Sheila smiled happily, soft red lips close and inviting. Bradley kissed her. Then he kissed her again.

“Come on, honey,” he said at last. “I’ve got to call Driscoll and go to the florist.”

“The florist?” Surprise widened Sheila’s lovely eyes.

“Sure,” Bradley grinned. “Gotta send some flowers to Mrs. Widgeon.”