



I swept aside the curtain and put in an Act Three climax appearance

# PUBLICITY FOR THE CORPSE

By C. S. MONTANYE

*Johnny Castle, sports writer, seeks an interview with a South American Lightweight wonder—and finds a murder mystery that all but knocks him out for the count before the final solution bell rings!*

## CHAPTER I KID FROM RIO

**T**HE Brazilian flag was full of flutters, the waiting room jammed, when we reached the La Guardia Airport that morning.

Cameramen, newshawks, the socially prominent, the socially deficient, and a flock of the morbidly curious, who had read some of “Tip” McCabe’s advance hype, were on hand to get a flash of Alfredo Sanchez and party. The folks from Rio were flying in from California and due

at any minute.

Somebody in authority took a peek at my press card and nodded. So I started shoving Ellie Horton through the jam, angling for the front row and the big doors leading to the ramp and the cement walk outside. Ellie, a sob sister on the *Orbit*—the same sheet that paid me off for the sports page stuff I dreamed up—didn’t seem to mind being pushed around. In fact, Ellie was slightly excited.

“Looks like we’ve made it in time, Johnny.”

“See if you can locate McCabe,” I suggested.

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A COMPLETE CRIME MYSTERY NOVELETE

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But there wasn't a sign of the big shot Garden matchmaker and pugilistic power anywhere.

Tip McCabe had spread the word around that "Young Juan" Rico, a lightweight sensation in the Good Neighbor country to the South, was the hardest hitting, fastest piece of boxing machinery that he had ever rolled a bloodshot optic at.

For months Tip had been trying to get the kid from Rio to come North so he could match him with the present champ of the lightweight division and have 'em hanging from the Garden rafters. It seemed that Rico cuddled comfortably under the wing of Alfredo Sanchez, millionaire coffee planter and amateur sportsman. Sanchez finally had succumbed to McCabe's wires and letters and was bringing the little leather-pusher to Manhattan—via Hollywood.

However, Rico was not the main draw at the airport. A babe tagged Bonita Loes happened to be the flypaper. She, the Betty Grable of the banana districts, had already been photographically publicized through the country.

In her daguerreotypes, dark-eyed, glamorous and somewhat scantily attired, the tropic tomato had been a photogenic sensation.

But there was a drawback. Bonita had been spoken for and from all present accounts happened to be the none-other fiancée of the rich mocha-and java king Mr. Sanchez himself!

**I**KNEW the stop-over in California had been a brief pause in which the gal had been screen-tested for New Era Pictures. Tested and not found wanting. She had signed for a couple of films a year and, it appeared, all the Hollywoodheads had gone in the tank for her with the greatest of ease and pleasure.

Ellie, leaning against me, had come down to write a piece about Senorita Pulchritude. My assignment was to get a slant at Rico and give my public a general impression of a first-hand gander.

A loudspeaker began to blare and at the same moment I spotted a couple of familiar-looking guys in the mob. One was Dewey Lorch, the other, a Lou Candell. Added together they didn't spell mother!

These two boys, I happened to know, were notorious grifters, clippers and common felons who had been mixed in various rackets and were

more than well-acquainted with the interior of some of our biggest and best jail-houses. A couple of tough hoodlums who wouldn't stop at anything short of murder and, in fact, wouldn't pause there if there was plenty of dough on the line.

Finding them in the airport crowd was the same as discovering a pair of roaches in a bowl of consommé!

Just to make sure I passed out a second glance. No mistake. I couldn't miss Lorch's strange, parchment-wrinkled pan, his deep-set, lazy eyes or prominent, bony jaw. Or the well-groomed Lou Candell whose round, flat face was a study in vapid stupidity. It was a coin's spin as to which of the two was the worse. And no matter whether it came up heads or tails you were bound to lose!

"Johnny!" Ellie poked me in the ribs, "The plane—it's coasting in!"

Outside, the queen of the air circled gracefully over the field. In the summer sun it looked like a huge gray gull. It swooped lower, circled again, then set its landing gear gently down and taxied in toward the ramp.

The crowd began to mill. The next instant a little fellow with a dime's worth of cigar in his puss elbowed up and gave me a nudge. It was McCabe, in the flesh.

"Hello, Castle," Tip said. "What are you waiting for? Follow me, pal!" Doing a Notre Dame plunge for goal, he yelled, "One side! Leave us through!"

Outside, passengers were already alighting from the big ship. McCabe, bright-eyed and Irish, stood poised and waiting. I could hear Ellie breathing faster, her breath coming in little gulps. More passengers, and then the people responsible for the Brazilian flag and the excitement.

Alfredo Sanchez got out first. The coffee magnate was as wide as he was tall. A light tan edition of Mr. Five-by-Five. His chins were so popular they had gone into a second edition. He wore a wrinkled white suit, a Panama dicer, and a diamond ring on one pudgy finger sparkled like a quart of grape when he stretched out the fin to shake hands with McCabe.

"Well, how do you like this?" Tip gurgled a minute later. "The bloke don't speak no English!"

Next to alight was a smug-faced man, with a typical May-I-have-your-hat-sir air to him. He

was Harry Babbitt, Sanchez' valet. I didn't like his looks. Too sleek and obsequious, for entire comfort.

Following the valet, the lightweight sensation of the monkey country slid into view.

I STABBED a glance at Juan Rico and wondered what door he had run into. The kid from Rio sported a black eye, a cut mouth and a large blue bruise on his right cheek. He was slim, wiry, midnight dark as to hair and eyes, and deadpanned. He stood slightly behind Senor Sanchez while all eyes focused on the plane's door.

All Bonita Lores needed was a fanfare as she climbed languorously down to the ground.

One look was enough to notify anyone that photos and descriptive matter hadn't been exaggerated. Sanchez's fiancée was distinctly a dish.

She featured the unusual combination of raven-black hair and gray eyes. Funny eyes for a South American gal. Her skin was as flawless as her figure, and that was more exciting than anything that had ever walked down a Winter Garden runway.

"Only one drool to a customer," Ellie whispered maliciously. "Push your eyes back in place, Johnny, and let me pass."

She clucked for Jake, the lens-and shutter expert we had brought along with us. I edged over to Tip McCord to get a line on what he was talking to Sanchez about.

Babbitt, the super-smooth valet, was doing a good job as interpreter, but there were too many people around. Tip felt crowded and said so.

"Look, Castle," he said to me. "This here is no place for interviews. These folks are staying at the Wilshire. Grab a cab and follow us up. I'll tell the rest of the newspaper boys."

Thirty minutes later I was in Sanchez's suite. It was on the fourth floor of the glittering Hotel Wilshire on Central Park South. I found out that the caffeine producer, Harry Babbitt, and Rico occupied the rooms. Bonita Lores had an apartment of her own farther down the hall.

Sanchez, via Tip, was doing it in style. One entire side of the living room consisted of bottled goods and glasses. There was more Scotch there than I'd seen around for months. The newspaper bunch started in and went to work on it. I got

Young Rico aside and put on my quiz show.

He spoke pretty fair English. I asked him about the black eye and the taped mouth.

"I fall downstairs—in the dark," he said, and smiled.

I pumped him for an article and wandered back to Ellie. She had finished her routine with the charming Bonita and was standing in line.

"Coming back to the office, Johnny?" she said.

I looked thoughtfully across at the Lores number. She was planted near a bay window, with Sanchez beside her. The sun gave her hair a polished sheen. Her softly-curved lips looked like a couple of scarlet flowers. "I'll stick around for a while," I said.

"But she's engaged," Elite cautioned. "And you know the Latin temperament. When they make a cutting remark the knife goes with it!"

A little while later McCabe threw a speech. It was a build-up for Rico. Tip reeled off the kid's record south of the Equator. It was impressive, even if it didn't mean much in Manhattan. While it was going on Rico ducked behind a set of curtains closing the living room off from an alcove.

"Gents," McCabe wound up, "I've arranged for you to get a look at Young Rico in fighting form. Camera guys, come up closer. All right, draw them curtains."

The portieres whisked back. Rico, in purple trunks and ring shoes, stood in front of a portable punching bag. He got Tip's nod and went to work on the bouncing leather.

Rico did look good. Lean and hard, he was not too muscled up. He was fast with his hands and feet. The bag workout was routine, but it was the way he did it that impressed. Cameras snapped nil over the place. Flash bulbs exploded.

There didn't seem much of a chance to cut in on the glamorous Bonita. She was still staked out beside the fat boy with the wrinkled white suit and the duplicate chins. So I hoisted one more and decided to trek back to the office and write my piece.

I shook hands with Sanchez. His mitt in mine felt like a damp sponge in a warm bathtub. He didn't know what I said, but he smiled. I smiled and turned to the senorita.

But the beautiful Bonita wasn't there.

She didn't seem to be anywhere in the room. I wove a way to the door, went through the foyer and out to the corridor. When I reached it, I was in time to see Miss Lores heading for her own suite. But before she made it there was an interruption.

One of the elevators had come up and stopped.

Out of it emerged the two guys from the waiting room at the airport—Lorch and Candell. Both glommed the pretty senorita and put on the stop.

"Just a minute!" Dewey Lorch ordered her. "Not so fast. We want to talk to you!"

## CHAPTER II

### SUCKER



BONITA LORES froze. I could hear her smothered exclamation.

She looked from one to the other. When she spoke her voice was unsteady and the delightful slur she gave the American language was conspicuous by its absence.

"What is it?" she asked sibilantly.

Candell spotted me the next second and pitched a signal to his partner. Both pulled books out of their pockets.

"What goes on?" I asked.

With a sharp little breath Bonita wheeled around to me.

"These men, senor! I do not know them and—"

"All we want is her autograph." Lorch said belligerently. "Any poison in that?"

"Yeah, just her autograph," Lou Candell chimed in.

I looked from Lorch's strange, crinkled face to Candell's moon-shaped pan. Then I caught the appeal in the gray eyes of the girl and decided to make their business my business.

"Go on—scram!" I ordered. "Beat it before I call the house dick!"

"You keep your big nose out of this!" Lorch said, "I know you, Castle!"

"By the same token, I'm acquainted with you." I pressed the bell for an elevator, "Air!" I said to Lorch and Candell briefly, when the lift arrived. "Make it rapid!"

They didn't argue. They put their little books away and filed into the cage. The corridor was a better place when they had gone.

"Thank you, senor." The slur was back again, flavoring each word, but I saw she was still a trifle shaken, frightened. "You were nice to make them go away."

"It's okay, honey. Think nothing of it. You don't know 'em or," I added, "do you?"

She shook her ebon head. "I never saw them before in my whole life!"

It sounded truthful. I wondered what Lorch and Candell had in mind. One thing was sure. They hadn't gone to the airport as part of any welcoming committee. Likewise, they hadn't come up to the Wilshire for an autograph.

They were definitely on the earn.

But how? In what way? Bonita said she didn't know them. They knew her. They had wanted to lean on her ear. What for?

I let it go and saw Bonita as far as her door. "Just in case they decide to stop around again," I said, feeling for a card and a pencil, "you'd better have a copy of my phone number."

I scratched off both phones, office and apartment. She put the card in her bag. The gray eyes came up level with mine. A pair of swell orbs, deep and dreamy, with more appeal and urge than the business end of a tommy-gun.

"Thank you again, senor."

Back at my desk, it took three typewritten pages on Young Juan Rico and a half a dozen nips from a bottom drawer flask before I could untangle myself from the eyes and lips of the South American Bonfire . . . .

Tip McCabe didn't waste any time. He matched Rico for a slap at the prevailing lightweight champ. That was a smart little guy named Artie Borden. Artie had won himself the crown the hard way. A veteran, who knew the book. I figured the fifteen round bout was a natural for a capacity house.

A couple of days passed.

Then Beth Wheaton, one of the switchboard operators, saw me when I was heading for my desk and waved a red flag. Beth shoved a memo in my face. It was from Bonita Lores. It said I was to call her up at the Wilshire.

"Lores?" Beth sniffed. "The dame who's been getting all the free photography?"

"Pick up the chips," I said. "You win."

She sniffed again. "Flying kind of high, ain't you? I mean, I read how this doll's movie-contracted and matrimonially inclined. Where do you fit in?"

"Ask Phil Baker," I said. "Maybe you'll get sixty-four bucks back."

"It don't sound regular to me, brother." Beth remarked.

"Jingle the Wilshire for me. I'll take it on the desk phone. And don't bother to listen in. This will be strictly in Spanish."

A couple of minutes later Bonita's tantalizing tone drifted over the wire.

"Mr. Castle? I wonder if you will do me a favor."

"Name it!"

"Would you take me to dinner tonight?"

**S**HE had to repeat it before I was sure it wasn't a gag. I told her I'd be only too happy. She said seven-thirty in the lobby of the hotel, and rang off.

"Lucky stiff!" Beth's voice intruded.

I hung up. Somehow Beth's last word echoed unpleasantly in memory. "Stiff!" It didn't sound good. Besides, stiffs were never lucky.

Bonita was waiting in one of the cozy, dimly-lighted little rooms off the Wilshire's lobby. It was exactly seven-thirty. She wore a cool, summery something that didn't hide any of the curves or contours. It made a perfect foil for the inky-black hair and the kindergarten complexion.

Instead of nylon she wore liquid stockings. But how she ever got her shapely stems in the bottle I couldn't figure. The same deep, dreamy look was in her gray eyes when she slipped her slender, lacquer-tipped fingers into mine.

"Where's Alf?" was my first, and most natural query.

"Senor Sanchez?" She laughed softly. "He and Juan are at a dinner. Senor McCabe is giving it."

I remembered. Tip was throwing a meal at the Uptown A. C. for the trade. I'd had an invitation, but had passed it principally because it was too hot to sit in a boiled shirt and listen to a lot of windy, ungrammatical speeches.

I was glad now I hadn't gone.

"Ready?" I asked Bonnie.

I took her up to the Ardmore Roof. Class and

quality, quiet and refinement. None of the Broadway tribe to cut in. The setting was a sort of open-air garden, the sky was the roof, and the stars were out in quantity.

Bonita took a look around and nodded approval.

"I like it here, senor."

"Look, pet," I said. "Drop the 'senor.' I'm Johnny to you and you're Bonnie to me from now on. Right?"

"Of course."

She took a sherry to match my Martini. I didn't hurry her. Whatever she had on her mind had to break without pressure. I asked a few questions about Rio. She told me about her home town and nothing much happened until the jellied soup came in.

"Those two men," she said then, and her voice went down a pitch. "The ones who were in the hall the other day. Remember?"

"Sure. What about them?"

"The thin one—the one with the funny face—he has telephoned me twice. He says he wants to see me."

She meant Lorch.

"Did he say about what?" I asked.

"No. But he said it was important. That I would be in lots of trouble if I didn't talk to him."

"What kind of trouble?"

That was no good. She didn't know. Apparently, Dewey had buzzed her and laid on the threat. Bonita explained that Lorch knew about the Uptown Club's dinner, and that Bonita would have the evening to herself.

"He said," she went on, "I was to come to an address tonight at half-past ten. That if I didn't come I would be sorry tomorrow."

I thought that one over.

"You've got the address?" I asked.

She nodded and I thought some more.

"Okay," I said. "If he wants to see you, maybe you'd better go. Find out what the angle is. I'll go along, too—just to keep it regular and in order."

Bonita flashed me a look of gratitude. Her eyes widened.

"That is what I was going to ask if you would do for me, senor Johnny! You must be a mind-reader."

At my suggestion she passed me the

instructions she had received over the phone. Thirty at a number in the Seventies, West Side. I put the paper in my pocket and got the conversation around to another topic.

I was just as curious as she was. Lorch and Candell must have an in somewhere. But what was it? What did they want, and on what basis did they throw out the threats?

Halfpast ten on the nose our taxi docked before an ordinary six-story apartment house on a semi-respectable side-street. Once the neighborhood had been fairly aristocratic. Lately, the old-fashioned brownstone houses had gone the way of that type of real estate and become boarding establishments.

I knew that a lot of chiselers and strongarm gentry were making that part of town their headquarters. For a minute I wished I had a gun in my pocket.

**B**UT it was too late to go back to my place for the artillery. So I guided Bonnie through a vestibule and into the main ball of the building. There was a list of the tenants on a chart wired to the self-service elevator's grille. I checked and found "D. Lorch" was "Apt. 511."

The elevator, as if it had eyes, stopped at Floor Number Five. I rolled the door open and hunted for 5B. It wasn't hard to find. Around a bend in the corridor on the south side of the place. A pencil of light lay along the crack of the door. I pushed the bell and breathed in the fragrance of Bonita's uncovered head.

"Yeah?"

The door jerked open. Lorch, in his shirt-sleeves, looked out. A cigarette dangled from one corner of his mouth. The wrinkled face went as black as Bonnie's tresses when he saw me.

"What do you want, Castle?" he demanded.

"Nothing. I brought Miss Lores up as per directions. Being a stranger in town you couldn't expect her to come alone."

His lazy eyes flickered from me to the girl. I thought he was about to slam the door in our faces. Instead, with a change of expression, he pulled it wider.

"Come in."

The room we were ushered into was a typically furnished apartment. Grand Rapids with a vengeance. Dime store *objets d'art*. Dusty

curtains at the windows where the shades were drawn. Musty, cigarette-tainted air.

And Dewey Lorch, leering at us!

Bonita seemed to step closer to me instinctively. I watched Lorch as he sidled around to shut the door. There was a dark mouth of a hall beside me. I looked at that, too.

"I came here," Bonita said, and her voice trembled a little. "I want to know what you wish. Why have you telephoned me? Why have you threatened me?"

Lorch kept eyeing me without replying. Finally, he seemed to listen to what the girl said to him.

"Just a minute," he said then. "One thing at a time, babe. I didn't expect you would be bringing company with you. I don't like company—this kind. I don't want him listening in and—"

"Get 'em up!" Candell ordered, from the rear. He added the jam of steel to a point between my shoulders as a special persuader. "Up—high!"

Bonita gasped. I followed instructions quickly. Candell's left hand patted over me in a deft frisk.

"No cannon, Dewey," he said.

"Take him in the other room." Lorch spoke out the corner of his mouth. "Shut the door and keep him there until I finish with the dame!"

"Come on; sucker. Step!" The rod pressed in a bit harder.

"Sucker" was right. I'd asked for it, walked into it with open eyes. That didn't make me feel any better. Being ordered around like some *darb* without the ordinary quantity of gray matter! Being shown up in front of Bonita Lores' agitated gaze as a moron!

They were toughies. I knew their record. I knew how far they would go, but I didn't think about that then. A white-hot flare of anger blazed up like tinder catching a spark. Instead of going forward I used a heel in a quick, savage backward lunge.

I felt a crack as it collided with bone. Candell let out a yelp of pain. The gun shifted, dropped away from my shoulders. Before he could get it in firing position again I spun around with the speed of a crazy top and used both hands.

One grabbed Candell's throat. The other prisoned his pistol wrist.

My right hand felt out a length of windpipe. I

closed it off. My left hand twisted Candell's arm over and back. Lesson One in Jap bone-breaking methods. He screamed like a hurt pup. The .38 he had been hanging onto slammed to the floor.

That was what I wanted.

I put a knee in the pit of Lou's stomach and threw him off. Then I went after the gun. Everything so far had worked for me. The only trouble was I had temporarily forgotten Lorch.

I heard Bonita's warning cry. It came a split second before I scooped up Candell's derringer.

Lorch had picked up an imitation handpainted vase. Before I could get the gun pointed I saw him lift the vase with both hands and take aim.

Bonita tried to grab Lorch, from the rear, but wasn't quick enough. She didn't even spoil his shot.

Lorch heaved. I saw the vase coming, tried to duck, but didn't quite make it.

The big missile caught me between the left temple and shoulder. If he had thrown a truck at me it couldn't have been more effective.

I quit cold, as a lot of deep, rushing blackness closed in on me!

### CHAPTER III CRIMSON SPLASHED



HAND kept shaking me. Not a friendly, gentle hand, either, but a rough, compelling grip on my shoulder that had no consideration for the lovely dream I had been dreaming. Simultaneously, a voice began to penetrate the fog.

"Come on now, wake up!" it said. "You're all right! Just a thump on the head. Come on, open them eyes!"

I did and looked hazily into the weatherbeaten countenance of one of Commissioner Valentine's employees.

The big cop grinned. "That's better. Here, take a drink of this."

It was ordinary water in an ordinary glass. Not too cool, but wet enough I sloshed some around in my mouth, emptied it in a convenient flower pot and sat up straighter.

Pieces of the vase Lorch had mowed me

down with were all over the floor. The impact had laid me across the threshold of the dark hall, face down on a couple of yards of mangy carpet. There was a buzzing in my ear, a sort of pseudo-paralysis on the left side of my neck.

I got up groggily, bobbed into the living room and flopped down on a sofa. Except for the bluecoat and me the apartment was apparently empty. I glanced up at him. What was he doing there? How had he got in?

"I'm Hagen," he explained, reading my mind. "We were up Riverside Drive when I got this call in the prowler car. We came right down. What's it all about?"

Call? I gazed at him stupidly, my mind beginning to click again. If anyone had phoned Headquarters it must have been Bonita. I thought that over massaging my stiff neck.

Bonnie! Oddly, I felt a little relieved. If she had been able to put a message through to the police it meant she must be all right.

"It's nothing, Hagen." I tried to make it sound pleasant. "Just a friendly argument—with a dame. She played rough and . . . No complaint."

He cocked an eye at me. "Who are you?"

"Castle, the *Orbit*." I showed him my identification card. "Nice of you to drop around. I guess Helen got worried and thought maybe she'd hurt me." I flexed my arms and tried to smile. "I'm okay. All in one piece."

"Helen who?"

"The gal friend—Lorch, Helen Lorch," I told him as glibly as possible. "Have a drink on me, Officer." I fished five bucks from my leather and passed it over. "Have two drinks."

Hagen rubbed his chin. Being a good policeman he wanted to get his teeth in something—all four of them. But the finif and the casual way I tried to make the situation appear, was plenty of herring. Red, good. Hagen shook his head and sighed.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it, mister. Leaving or staying?"

"Sticking around. Maybe she'll come back and apologize. Good-night, Officer. Thanks. Next time I see the commissioner I'll speak a word for you."

"Hmmm!" Hagen grunted, stopping to make a notation in his official book and then flat-footing out.

I went in the bathroom and ran cold water in the basin. I sopped a towel in it, wrung it out and made a cold compress. That helped. In the kitchen I found a can of beer in the refrigerator. That didn't do any harm, either. Then I got a cigarette going and went back to the couch.

The problem was fairly easy. When Lorch had knocked me out he had got scared. Scared enough to gather Candell and Bonita and duck in

had to say, rang the Lores suite and reported there was no answer.

"Connect me with senor Sanchez," I said next.

Harry Babbitt answered. The valet's smug voice came over the wire.

"This is Castle," I explained. "I'm trying to get in touch with Senorita Lores. Her rooms don't answer. Do you know anything about her?"



Lorch picked up the vase with both hands and took aim

a hurry. The call to Headquarters indicated that Bonita had left them, or that they had let her go. I felt better every minute.

There wasn't a telephone in the apartment. But there was a cheap, flat-top desk. I sat down in front of it and thumbed through the contents of the drawers. A couple of letters looked fairly interesting, so I stuck them in my pocket. Then, after a glance at the bedroom, I turned off the lights and left.

A telephone booth in a corner drug store was ready and waiting when I went in. I dialed the Wilshire. The operator on duty listened to what I

"No, sir, I don't."

I dropped it there and went back to my own place.

**T**RYING again at nine the next morning chalked up a better result. Bonnie answered as soon as her phone tinkled.

"Johnny," I said. I hoped she got the happy note in my voice. "I've been worried. Are you all right?"

"I am all right, senor."

The way she said it, her tear, and the "senor" business, were like a clout on the chin. I could feel

the freeze over the wire.

"I want to see you, honey," I said. "How about lunch?"

"I am sorry, senor. I shall be busy today."

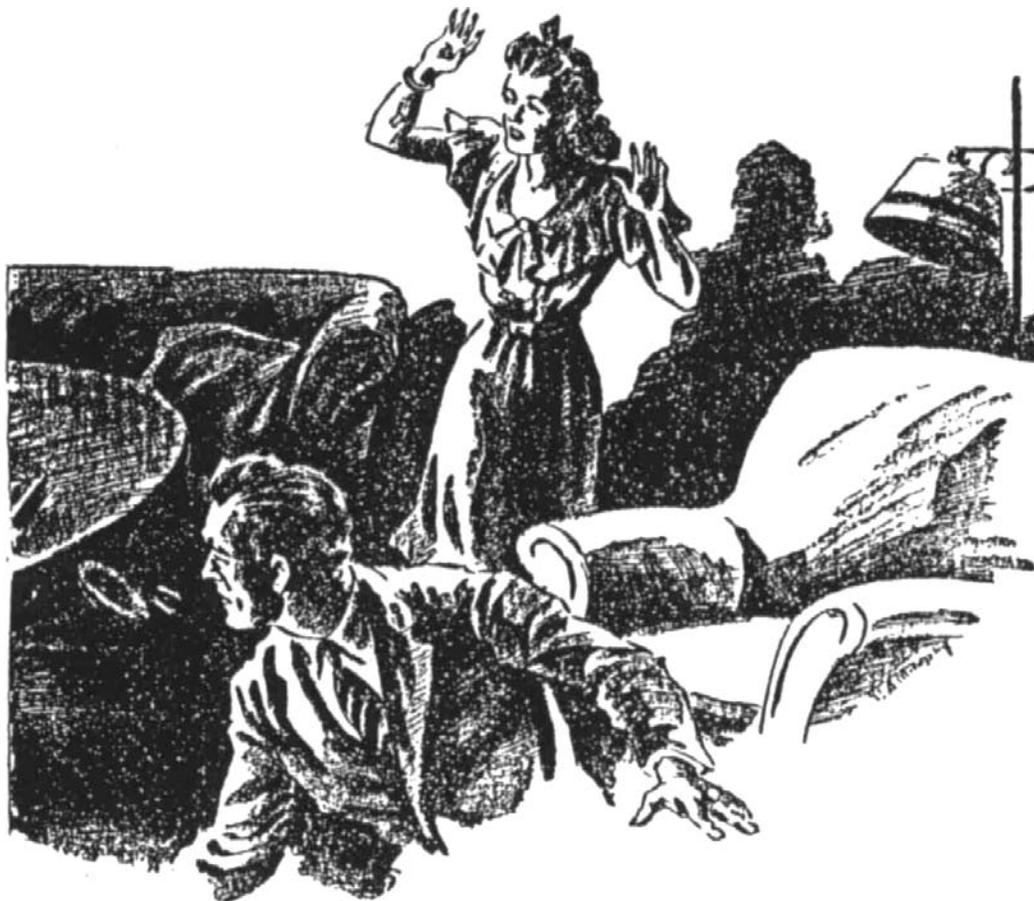
"Wait a minute. What's wrong?" The brush-off didn't set well. Something was as phony as the system I talked over. "You stay where you are. I'll be over in a few minutes."

That did it.

After all, it wasn't any of my affair. I had wanted to help, had got conked for my trouble, and sidetracked by the babe in the bargain . . . .

Two days passed.

The Young Rico-Artie Borden fracas papers had been drawn up and signed. The fisticuffs were set for Labor Day at one of the ball parks. Already the advance ticket sale promised to break records. Rico had gone up to Jack Gavitty's camp near



"Senor! I told you I am busy. I cannot see you! You will waste your time coming here. I mean that!"

She hung up before I could add anything further. I laid the telephone back on its cradle and went out to breakfast.

So Dewey Lorch had put a muzzle on her, had he? The switch made it figure that way. Fair weather last night, snow and sleet this morning.

What did Lorch have on the gal? Something important, if he could shut her up. And he *had* shut her up. I cast around for a reason, for some hint of an answer, but couldn't guess. Finally, I decided to let it go.

White Plains, to get an edge. Nothing further concerning the glamorous exile from Rio had developed and, at the *Orbit*, Beth Wheaton had laid off the puns.

A couple of times I had considered going tip to Apt. 5B and kicking Dewey Lorch's teeth in. Just as an even-up. But each time I shrugged the notion aside. Why tangle with a dead issue?

Only it wasn't defunct.

It must have been around two o'clock that Wednesday A.M. when Don Ameche's invention disturbed my heavy slumbers. The telephone in the front room of my suite kept ringing and ringing. It was one of those hot, humid nights.

Airless and airtight.

I finally stumbled in and stopped the jangle.

"Hello? What the—"

"Johnny!" Bonnie's voice, terse and vibrant, was more of a wake-up than a pail of cold water. "Johnny! Can you come over to the hotel—quick!"

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Alfredo! I can't talk more! I think something's happened to him! Oh, hurry~ please!"

The Wilshire was quiet and deserted when a night-hawking clock-ark dropped me at its marquee. A sleepy-eyed elevator runner took me to the proper floor. I went past the spot where the Lorch-Candell combination had put the stop on the senorita that other morning. I went on to Bonnie's front door, tapped and got immediate service.

"Come in, Johnny!"

She wore lounging pajamas with a sort of bolero coat. They were a vivid green silk. The big gray eyes were wide and frightened. The red lips trembled. So did the hand that reached out and seized my arm. I forgot all about the brush-off!

"What about Sanchez?" I asked quickly.

"I think something's happened to him! Harry telephoned me a minute before I called you. Harry—Babbitt. He says he heard a noise in Alfredo's rooms. He says it sounded like someone was fighting. Then he heard a thud. He—Harry says he was afraid to go in. He wanted to know what to do!"

"Come on!" I said.

**I** LED the way straight to the Sanchez suite. The door was unlocked, a light on in the foyer. I almost fell over Babbitt when I went in. The super-smooth valet wore a dressing gown, pajamas and a complexion a shade whiter than skimmed milk.

"He's in there!" Babbitt said in a husky voice, when we were in the living room. He pointed a shaky finger in the general direction of a small hall that led away from the alcove where Rico had gone through his bag-punching routine for the press. "In there!"

"Stay here while I look," I directed Bonita.

The little hall ended at the door of the senor's bedroom. It was half open. No light came out

except the shine of the stars at the three raised windows. I fumbled around until I located the wall switch. I clicked that on and immediately was affected with abrupt and sudden *mal de mer*.

Gazing at the victims of foul play was no novelty to me. Neither was murder. I had run into it several times in the past. But to find the fat, rich Senor Sanchez with the entire back of his head cared in, and the bed on which he lay a welter of crimson, was somewhat nauseating.

I left the light and backed out in a hurry, shutting the door after me.

In the living room, Babbitt licked his lips like a thirsty dog that had just been watered. Bonnie, stiff and tense, watched me come in, the gray eyes full of questions.

"Johnny! Is he—"

I nodded and went on to the telephone. No use wasting time answering questions. I knew the Wilshire outfit wouldn't like it—calling the cops before they were notified—but that wasn't any brake.

"Police Headquarters—hurry it up," I said to the drowsy plug-swinger downstairs. Then, a minute or two later, "Headquarters? Connect me with Homicide!"

## CHAPTER IV MULLIN CALLS



**M**Y OLD arch-friend, Captain Fred Mullin, Homicide's head man, together with Detectives Larry Hartley and Ed Wheeler, put in an appearance while I was still trying to calm the excited Bonita.

Mullin, who had gained prominence by a strong-arm, slug-'em-first and question-them-later system, didn't seem happy because of my call. Mullin had no sense of humor, nothing except a head resting between a pair of ears, two colorless eyes, a set of hand-sewn features and a stocky figure that would have made a swell model for an October ale keg.

Followed by his two straight men, Mullin, after locking the door of the suite, hotfooted it to the Sanchez bedroom.

He came back, his jaws set. His dislike for me stuck out like a flag at an auction. The feeling

was mutual. Once, I had got in a jam with the captain because I'd printed a piece about him in the *Orbit* which wasn't entirely flattering. It was when Mullin had been cracking down on back-alley dice games and letting the big gamboliers continue to ride, unquestioned, in their coach-and-fours.

I had given it a humorous slant and the laugh had been on Freddie for ten days thereafter. Mullin had never forgiven me. "Who found the body?" he barked.

"I did." I smiled, adding, "Another one, Captain. Amazing the business I dig up for you."

Hartley came back and used the telephone. Meanwhile, the hotel clerk had got wind of the Law's arrival and the house detective and manager were at the locked door, working out their knuckles.

Hartley took care of them while Mullin went to work on Bonita Lores and Babbitt. The medical examiner yawned a way in sometime later and, after I had been given permission to contact the *Orbit's* city desk, Mullin said I could go home.

"But no further, Castle!" he warned. "I don't like the way you're continually turning up murders. Sooner or later I'm going to tie one on you—for keeps."

"I'll bet you tell that to all the ghouls!" I drawled.

He threw me a sneer and Wheeler unlocked the door for me.

I went down the corridor and parked in Bonita's rooms. I was worried about the dark-haired, gray-eyed tidbit from the coffee country. Worried that she might spill about Lurch and Candell and tie me into the Sanchez bump.

All Mullin had to do was consult Department records and find out that I had handed my right name to Patrolman Hagen several nights previous. And in Lorch's apartment!

I lit a cigarette and did a lot of thinking. Mullin couldn't hold Bonita as anything except a witness. It didn't argue that she had dealt Alfredo's death card. From what I had seen it had taken more power than the little lovely possessed to crack Sanchez's skull.

Who? Maybe Babbitt. Or Rico? I threw that one away. Rico was up at Jack Gavitty's and that let him out. Maybe Dewey Lorch? Lurch had heaved a vase at me, almost making a tunnel of

my head. The Sanchez thing was about the same caliber. It could, I decided, very easily be Lorch.

Motive? That stuck me. I was still trying to figure it out when I heard Larry Hartley at the corridor door.

"No trouble at all, Senorita," the big ape was saying. "A pleasure. Now don't you worry about anything. It's going to be all right. You get a good sleep and forget it."

"Sleep!" Bonnie said under her breath. I stepped out of eye-range when the door opened. I didn't want Hartley to see me there. Bonnie shut the door, turned the key, and let her lips part when I stepped back into view.

I put a warning finger over my mouth. I listened at the door until Larry's Number Twelve footfalls faded out down the corridor,

"Poor Alfredo!" Tears brimmed in Bonita's gray eyes.

"Who did it?" I said.

She sank down on a chair, shaking her head.

"I don't know, Johnny. That man—the captain—he told Harry he was arresting him! He has arrested Harry for Alfredo's murder! Why should he do that? Why should Harry have killed Alfredo?"

"I don't know. Did he?"

**S**HE drew a breath. An uneven, rasping little breath.

"Alfredo was his friend. Harry liked him. Harry would do anything for Senor Sanchez."

I shrugged. "Maybe he did! Let it go." I got up and went around to her chair. "What I want to know is what happened the other morning when I called you. When you 'senored' me and hung up?"

"I couldn't help it. He—they—"

"Told you to give me the chill? Don't you think it's the proper spot to do a little talking? I took a nasty bang on the head for you. Remember?"

She stretched out a hand and touched my arm. Her eyes were still tragic. Perhaps it wasn't the right moment to use the spurs. But I wanted to know. I had to know.

"What have they got on you?" I persisted.

"They know—something. A secret!"

"And you can't tell me?"

"Not now! Johnny, I can't—really!"

"It must be important." I reached for a cigarette. "A real clam if you're afraid to spill to a friend. Maybe I have a slight idea of the picture." When she looked at me inquiringly, I said, "You're not a real Brazilian."

I heard her smothered exclamation.

"I figured it the first day," I said. "That delightful accent of yours. It slipped slightly, when you met Lorch and Candell. When you got scared. It's done the same thing several times since." I laughed. "The real article doesn't do that."

"I'm half Brazilian," she said defensively. "My mother was born in Brazil."

"And you hail from Brooklyn?"

She shook her dark head. "From this city. I went to Rio two years ago. To visit some relatives. I got a job there. I stayed. Then I met Alfredo."

"What's your right name?"

"Bonita Lawson."

"And all this hooks up with Lorch's threat?" I said slowly.

She nodded. "Yes."

"You can't—and won't—tell me how?"

"No."

"But you can tell me this." I mashed the cigarette out. "The other night, when we went up to cull on your vase-hurling friends, you phoned the police after they left the apartment?"

The gray eyes looked into mine. "The first chance I had, Johnny! I was so worried about you! It was all my fault. I had to."

"Thanks," I said, and got up.

There wasn't anything else to gab about. So I said good night and ducked out without letting the cop Mullin had stationed at the doorway of the suite occupied by the late Mr. Sanchez, notice me.

The Bonita angle was a little clearer. I wondered what the good-looking senorita's secret was. I made up my mind to find out in the not too distant future. I was still mulling it over when I hit the pad, in my own bedroom, and grabbed four hours of oblivion.

Next morning I took all the metropolitan newspapers into my favorite cafeteria. The *Orbit*, with the story I had phoned in from the Wilshire, was the only one that mentioned me as finding the murdered South American, Not a line, not a credit in any of the other sheets.

Captain Mullin had studiously avoided using

my name when he had given the story to the press.

It was a little after ten o'clock then. I left the papers for the next customer, paid my coffee-and-cake fee and headed down to the office.

Wheaton flagged me as I went in. Beth looked excited.

"You've got company!" Her voice was full of caution. "He's been waiting ten minutes."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess."

She didn't. "It's Captain Mullin from Headquarters!" she said. "He looks sore enough to snap on the cuffs, Johnny. Don't forget to do something for me before you go. Tell me what prison so I can send my tear-stained notes to you."

THE captain occupied a chair beside my desk. He didn't seem particularly happy. He champed on three-quarters of a cigar, looking at the confusion around him with faint interest. His expression changed when I barged up.

"Good morning, Captain," I said brightly.

"What's good about it?" Mullin's colorless eyes roamed over me. "What are you so cheerful about?"

"The fact you very carefully kept me out of the Sanchez items. Thoughtful of you, Mullin. So you've got the valet under lock and key? That's a mistake. Babbitt didn't do it."

"Yeah? How do you know?"

I shrugged. "Intuition, probably. That sensitive sixth sense you wouldn't know anything about. What's on your mind?"

I sat down and waited. Mullin cleared his throat. He dropped his cold weed in a cuspidor and rubbed his lantern jaw.

"You're right, Castle." His tone changed. "Mebbe it's the valet, mebbe not. Anyway, I haven't got enough on Babbitt to make it stick. The first good lip he gets will throw it out the window. No motive—no prints—nothing."

"Only suspicion because he happened to be in the suite. No good."

"That's what I'm telling you." He looked hurt.

"And you want some advice? You want to know if I've dug anything? You're willing to bury the hatchet—not in me—and come around to see what I've got up my sleeve besides the two freckles near my elbow. Fair enough. I don't know anything."

Mullin blinked. "You've been seeing a lot of

that dame Sanchez was engaged to. You've been around there plenty. You've got an idea. You must have."

It was a spot for a secret gloat. Captain Fred Mullin, frankly stumped, calling on me for assistance. I began to love every minute of it. He knew it, too.

"Look, Castle," he said. "I'll tell you something I turned up. It's confidential. You know Benny Radmann?"

"The bookie?"

"That's right. Well, day before yesterday this Harry Babbitt laid six grand at three-to-one on Rico to win the Borden mill. The dough's in Radmann's safe right now."

"*Tch, tch!* Gambling! Captain, I'm surprised."

"Where does the Lores gal fit?" he growled.

"I haven't the faintest idea. This is one time I can't offer you a clue. I don't know who smeared the senor. To be candid, I don't care—too much. It's your own private little headache so make the best of it."

"Punk!" Mullin grated, "Wait'll you ask me a favor. See how much cooperation you get!"

"Hmm!" I leaned back in my chair and grinned amiably. "You'd give your right eye, and throw in a leg to make it even, to find me mixed in this thing. Mixed enough so you could slap me into the clink like you did Babbitt."

He got up.

"You don't know anything?"

"From nothing, Captain dear. Sorry. Be seeing you around town."

He waddled away without further comment. A second later the telephone on my desk rang.

"What did you do to him, Johnny?" Beth cooed. "He came in like a lion and he went out like a lamb, six red points a pound! Ain't you ashamed—kicking the law around?"

## CHAPTER V GREEN MOUSE



HAT Mullin had divulged concerning the six-thousand-dollar bet Harry Babbitt had placed on Young Juan Rico didn't seem unduly significant. It might have been Sanchez's dough. I toyed

with the information for a minute or two, then shrugged it off.

What I had said to the captain about not being too interested in the identity of the party who had cracked the coffee planter's skull was more or less true. What I wanted to find out was the hold Dewey Lorch had on Bonita Lores-Lawson.

I wanted to learn that for two good reasons. One, because of the bump on the head Lorch had presented me with. Two, for the reason that I had been in on the thing from the day Bonnie had flown in from California. I wanted to follow through. I didn't like leaving loose ends around, untied, unexplained.

But how?

How, with Bonita muzzled? How, with not a thing in the world to hang on either Lorch or Candell? And how, without any definite lead, anything to go on?

The making of a great metropolitan newspaper revolved about me. The presses rumbled. War news poured in from every capital in the world. All was activity, hustle and speed. And I sat there like a bum on a log, thinking about a girl with gray eyes, a punk with a funny, crinkle-skinned pan and another slug with a round, moony mush.

I had a little work to do. A squib about Artie Borden, down in Asbury Park, running off his roadwork on the beach. I reached in an inner pocket for a pencil and pulled out some other stuff with it.

Two letters. Not addressed to me, but to Dewey Lorch! The correspondence I had lifted from the desk in Apt. 5B because it was faintly interesting at the time. I'd forgotten about them.

The first letter was from the Peerless Dry Cleaners on Amsterdam Avenue—"Your Suit Will Suit If We Clean It." The note was a dun for six bucks Lorch had owed for three months. Would he please pay, and so forth?

I threw that in the trash and took the enclosure out of the second envelope.

This was better. It said:

Dear Dew:

I was talking to Patsy Kline yesterday. He says he's interested. He's got a building in back of the Green Mouse that's a natural for your purpose. Make a swell card and dice room.

Private entrance, etc. Used to be a stable, but now a garage.

Why don't you stop in and see Patsy? Let me know how you make out.

Yours truly,  
Ray Gordon

P.S. I'm writing on account of never being able to get you on the telephone.

I read it over. Patsy Kline. Green Mouse. That wasn't as tough as it sounded on the surface.

A telephone directory turned up both.

Patrick Kline was listed at an address off Greenwich Street, on the fringe of the village. The Green Mouse, an eatery, was under the G's at the same phone number, the same address. . . .

It was after eight that evening when I got out of the subway at Sheridan Square and walked south. Carmody Street, a sliver between two avenues, ran crookedly east and west. It was a typical Greenwich Village alley old as time and just as drab and dusty.

The war had brought popularity flock to the Village haunts, the cafes and creeps, the better places. They were all making coin as was any place on the thirteen-mile island that had a liquor license and served food that tasted like food.

The Green Mouse, in a two-story ancient brick edifice, slouched at the end of the alley. It boasted a doorman. His job seemed to be to tell the patrons there was a thirty-five cent parking lot two streets away. He didn't have to tell me so I went on in, left my headgear in the charge of a peroxide-tinted little chick who gave me a soiled cardboard number and a toothpaste smile.

"New around here, aren't you?" she inquired.

"The paint's still wet, honey."

I put the hat check in my pocket and passed into the bar.

It was jammed. The military, the boys who sailed the Seven Seas, civilians, weary war workers trying to snatch an hour's fun out of a day that had kept them at high tension and top speed.

My secret mission to the Green Mouse was to get a gander at the building in the rear, the one Lorch's correspondent had mentioned in the purloined note. The letter was postmarked ten days previous. By this time Dewey Lorch and Lou Candell might be in business there.

I HAD a wine-cooler. I sipped it slowly, keeping a weather eye for anyone I might know. They were all unfamiliar faces around me.

Time passed.

Back in the restaurant part of the Mouse I ordered a large cannibal sandwich—raw chopped beef, raw chopped onion. An hour dragged by. I had about decided it was time to slip out and take a peek at the place that was once a stable, but which at present kept all horsepower under hoods, when I saw Dewey Lorch come in.

He wore a light blue Palm Beach suit, no hat and white buck sports shoes. He strolled into the bar and bought himself a beer. I noticed him give the clock over the pyramid of glasses frequent glances. Just to make sure he wouldn't lamp me through the open doorway of the restaurant section, I hid my features behind a much thumbed menu.

Lorch finished his beer and walked past the main chow division. Over the top of the menu I saw him open a door in the rear, pass through and close it after him.

"Anything else, sir?"

"My check," I told the waiter.

I waited for change, left a tip on his brass dish, got my hat from Blondie and slipped her fifteen cents.

"Stop in again sometime," she suggested.

"I'll do that."

She smiled. I smiled. Then I tried to give a passable imitation of a gent who knew where he was going, opened the door Leech had opened, stepped out and into a cobbled court and clicked the door shut behind me.

It took a minute or more for my eyes to get accustomed to the gloom.

Then I saw the ex-stable directly across the courtyard, toward the rear. A high board fence enclosed the yard. Garbage cans stood in a tier to the left. A sleek gray cat, with a strong stomach, was making its selection. It flattened its ears as I went by, and spat at me.

No lights were visible in the garage. It was designed for four cars. Each had an individual overhead steel door. An outside flight of stairs on the east side led up to the floor above. Over that I noticed another series of dark windows.

The end overhead door was halfway up, with an empty space for a car beyond. I walked in on

the cement floor, breathed faint gas and oil fumes, and discovered a door at the end of a work bench. It was unlocked. I eased the china knob over, pushed the door open a little and saw a second flight of stairs.

I listened.

It was hard to hear anything. Echoes from the other building made a noisy monotone. Grumble of voices, clatter of dishes in the kitchen, the metallic grind of some electrically propelled machine—a dishwasher possibly, or a ventilator—made a constant rumble.

I felt to make sure the automatic I had brought along was still with me. It was. So I went up the stairs warily, taking time and wondering if this was as screwy as crashing Lorch's apartment had been that other night.

A narrow hall led away from the top of the staircase.

No lights visible from outside, but a glow over the transoms of three doors along the aisle. I listened again, catching some conversation that came from the first lighted transom, sharply to my right.

"There's not much business until the theaters empty out," one voice said. "You drop in from eleven-thirty on and you get plenty of action."

"It's a gold-mine," another voice said. "The cops leave you alone and Patsy's particular about who he sends over."

"I'll stick around and see what the play is tonight," a third voice said. "If it looks good I'll wire my partner to come on."

That wasn't getting me anything.

None of the voices had belonged to Lorch. I walked on down the hall. I hadn't any set plan in mind. I had just an idea I wanted to meet Dewey Lorch and make him talk. An automatic made a swell vocal stimulant. I was determined to get to the bottom of the shut-up he and Lou Candell had put on Bonita.

There were two doors, facing each other, at the end of the narrow corridor. Two doors and two dark rooms. I was turning to wander back, when I stopped moving.

**S**OME people were coming up the outside stairs. I could hear them talking. Simultaneously, the door of one of the lighted rooms across from me began to open. Someone

was about to come out in the hall.

I faded back into the murk of the shadowy room whose open door I stood beside. With my foot I eased the door gently shut. Starlight came in through a high window. It showed me a table and chairs, a buffet, a horsehair couch, a connecting serving room and, to the right, the slinky drape of a cretonne curtain.

I pushed that aside. Behind it was a cubicle used for storing empty bottles, trays. The next minute I heard Dewey Lorch, not a half a dozen feet away, speaking.

"I'm in here, Abe. You wait around downstairs. He ought to be back any time."

"I hear a car now," someone answered him from further down the hall.

"See if it's Lou. See if he needs any help."

The door I had shut creaked open. A click turned on wall lights. It came half a second after I had shoved the cretonne curtain aside and stepped in behind it.

Through a hole in the drape I had a moth's eye view of Lorch. He took his Palm Beach suit over to the buffet. There were a lot of bottles and glasses there. Lorch looked the assortment over and poured himself a drink.

After that he opened a drawer, took out a gun and sat down with it at the end of the table.

Two minutes at least ticked away before I knew what it was all about. Footsteps came down the hall. The swish of clothing rubbing against a wall outside. Then I heard Lou Candell's flat, uninteresting voice, saying:

"Inside, folks. Make yourself to home."

I moved my eye from Lorch to the door. Through it came three people. Young Juan Rico, natty and sullen-faced, black eyes dangerous and his lips curved in a sneer. Lou Candell was behind him, and beside Bonita Loes. Candell in slacks and a hound's tooth sports jacket that made no impression on me.

I looked hard and long at the pretty Bonita. Fear was in her face again, etched there indelibly and accented by the terror in her wide-eyed gaze. Her coral lips were parted and the slim hand belonging to the arm Candell gripped, shook like dancing leaves on a breeze-stirred tree.

"Any trouble?" Lorch asked.

"Nope." There was a modest note in Candell's admission. "They were both right where

you said they'd be—at that funeral parlor. I had to wait a half hour for them to come out. Ray was a big help. He eased them over to the car. He sat in the back with them while I drove 'em down. Not a hitch anywhere."

Lorch grinned. "Shut the door. I crave conversation with the little guy!"

## CHAPTER VI

### SKELETONS RATTLE



ICO'S burning gaze shifted from Dewey Lorch's taunting grin to the rod on the table before the man. Bonita sank down in a chair. Candell took up a position a foot or so away, his hand deep in his sports coat pocket.

"What do you want?" Rico snapped. Anger didn't make his English too understandable.

"You!" Lorch laughed. "Smart little operator, aren't you? Running around, fracturing skulls and thinking you can get away with it!"

I felt my ears go up. That was news! Rico didn't give me much time to analyze it. He ripped out a string of Spanish curses.

"Don't blow yourself out," Lorch advised, lazily. "I'll do the talking—you listen. You killed Sanchez. Your gal friend over there said she saw you last night at the hotel—saw you in Sanchez's rooms! But she didn't tell the cops that, and I think I know why."

Rico swung around to Bonita. The girl had covered her face with her hands. He gnarled something at her in his mother tongue and the hands came away from the beautiful face.

"They made me tell them, Juan!" She was crying. "They know everything!"

Lou Candell chuckled. "You bet we know everything. Tell them about Gavitty, Dew."

"I phoned Jack," Lorch continued. "Just to make sure. Gavitty said you copped a sneak out last night at ten-thirty. Okay. You rubbed Sanchez because you're in love with this dame, because the fat guy was getting wise to it and had knocked you around plenty. Remember the day you blew in at the airport? With the shiner and the cut lip? That wasn't done with mirrors—it was Sanchez's big fists!"

Some of Rico's rage melted. I saw him move

his shoulders, as if what Lorch was saying was too much to buck.

"What do you want?" he asked, throatily.

"Now you're being sensible, bud. Sit down."

"I'll stand."

"Anyway you like. But pay attention. We're not coppers, so we don't care who you kill after hours. That's no gravy off our vests. But you've got to be taught a lesson. You've got to be taught that it costs money to be a murderer and walk around free."

"I haven't got money," Rico answered.

"Don't hand me that line, monkey! You gave Sanchez's valet a wad to bet on you. You promised him half the profits if he kept his trap shut about seeing you last night. He's out, by the way. The cops unlocked him a couple of hours ago"

"How do you know?"

"We've got a private wire to headquarters," Lorch said, with another short laugh. "Didn't Lou tell you we know everything?"

"How much?" the fighter said shortly.

I waited with Rico for the amount. Dewey Lorch's parchmentlike face wrinkled until it looked like a local road map. He pulled down the lobe of his left ear and pulled air through his teeth.

"Ten G's for a starter," he said. "Your end of the first purse, win, lose or draw, will leave you plenty even after Morgenthau gets his cut. It's cheap, kid. Much better than sizzling on sparks. What do you say?"

Rico's answer was surprising to say the least.

He put it into action rather than words. With one sinuous, forward lunge he grabbed the gun from the end of the table, snaring it before Lorch could get his chair back on an even keel!

Rico ripped out another oath and slapped a left hook to the Lorch button. Dewey's chair tipped over backward and Lorch rolled out on the floor.

Rico aimed a kick at the man's head, an instant before Candell began to move. Lou's gun slid into his hand. But before he could use it Rico winged him in the shoulder with as nice a piece of shooting as I had seen outside a Coney Island gallery.

The little lightweight angled the shot from the vicinity of his knee and Candell thumped against the wall, grabbing for his holed shoulder.

Bonita screamed, jumped up and ran toward the drape of the cretonne curtain behind which I stood, my own gat in firing position.

CANDELL'S wound was in his left shoulder. It didn't affect his right hand noticeably. That came up, his rod leveling ominously. Before Rico could shoot again Candell started squeezing the trigger.

One—two—three—four shots, so fast they sounded almost like one! At pointblank range he couldn't miss—and didn't. Rico's slender figure twitched as each slug ripped into him. For sixty seconds he stood with his hands up and out, as if he were in the ring looking for an opening.

Then, as if his legs had been disconnected at the knees, he folded and pitched face-down, caroming off the edge of the table like a bag of damp sawdust.

Lorch got up. He remembered to brush himself off.

"Get the dame!" he yelled. "We're getting out of here!"

Candell, blood coming out from under his cuff and trickling down the back of his left hand, made a bee-line for Bonita. I swept the length of cretonne aside and put in an Act Three climax appearance.

"All right, boys! Stand where you are and don't make a move!"

"Johnny!" Bonita gasped.

Her own symmetrical gams partially gave way, and incautiously, I caught my foot in the edge of the rug. It threw me slightly off balance and gave the eagle-eyed Candell his opportunity. I struck the framework of the door as Candell's heater barked venomously. Lead whined past my face, so close I could almost feel the heat of it.

My shot got him in the leg. He chucked the gun at me. I ducked that better than I had the vase. But there was still Lorch—Dewey Lorch coming head-on in my direction.

The gun jammed, as guns sometimes do in the movies at critical moments. I didn't even have time to reverse it and use the butt before he leaped at me.

We went down, wrapped around and around in the cretonne curtain like a pair of mummies. Only not so still. Lorch's frantic hands clawed at my throat. There was plenty of power in his

fingers. Steel-like, pistonlike fingers, searching and grabbing for vulnerable spots.

Hazily I saw his dried-out pan, criss-crossed with the non-effaceable wrinkles, swimming before me. I felt his breath—hot, fetid. I tried to roll him, but he was too smart for that old stevedore trick. He spread his legs wider, making them a vise over me and began hammering my head up and down on the floor.

That was fun.

With every bump more colored lights than shone on Broadway made a rainbow around me. The pain was agonizing. I wondered how many cracks it would take before my head split in half.

Then a shadow came between the wall lights and Lorch's contorted face. Bonnie. Bonita, with one of the loose guns in the room, bludgeoning Lorch! It was a welcome intervention, doubly so because he stopped banging my skull and grabbed one of her trim, liquid-stockinged ankles. He jerked at it as I squirmed partially out from under, got an arm around his neck and a thumb at the corner of his most convenient eyeball.

I squeezed, and that did it!

Lorch let go of Bonita. He let go of me. He reached up to push his eye back in place and the blaze from Rio shoved me the gun. I jammed it over Lorch's palpitating heart, shook my head to clear it and got up, dragging him with me by the lapels of the pretty blue Palm Beach jacket.

"Hey! What goes on? What is all this?"

The door had opened and through the knot of interested spectators in the hall a large patrolman had elbowed his way in. Not my old friend Hagen, but a bird of the same plumage. Just to make it even for the vase he had laid me low with, I hit Lorch with the butt of the gun—an accurate, spiteful smack an inch above his left ear. That made me feel a lot better.

I dropped the gun to the table and turned to the bluecoat. He was busy counting corpses, one, anyway.

"Look, friend," I managed to say. "You don't understand all this, but Fred Mullin, down at your recreation center, will. Be a pal and give him a buzz. Tell him Johnny Castle's up here with the solution to his most recent murder mystery. If he says how come, tell him it's the salmon in me—struggling to get upstream!"

I WENT uptown in a taxi with Bonita Lawson alias Lores.

"All this for nothing," she said. "It will come out in the papers anyway."

"The power of the press, babe. The moral is don't hide skeletons in your closets. Give them to the bone drive."

She shivered, looking at the sailing summer moon. I waited until we crossed Twenty-Third Street, still going north.

"My picture career, my contract—everything ruined now!" she cried softly.

"Not necessarily. Pistol packin' mamas are having a vogue at the moment. While we're talking about the cinema, you can answer a question or two. Information, please. I have a faint idea that what Lorch had on you blends in with the fillum industry. Or doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Give, honey. What was the threat?"

"To tell everybody—New Era Pictures, principally—not only that I was a phony

Brazilian, but that my dad, Marty Lawson, is doing a twenty-year stretch for forgery in one of the prisons where Lorch spent some time!"

So *that* was it!

I patted her softly rounded arm.

"Cheer up. Even that isn't going to stop you. Don't you know Hollywood lives and breathes on picture stars' private scandals? You'll go on to be a big sensation, no matter if you hail from Rio or East Fracture, Dakota, either one. This publicity will be a shot in the arm. Wait and see. And when your old man gets out of stir you can be smart and write all the checks for him."

Four more streets and I saw a familiar corner. I told the driver to slow, and reached for the door.

"Johnny! When—"

She got out in front of the Wilshire. In the chine of the street lamps she looked like an angel. A little worn around the wings, but pulse-quickenning, anyway.

"Be hungry around one tomorrow," I told her, "and I'll take you out to lunch!"