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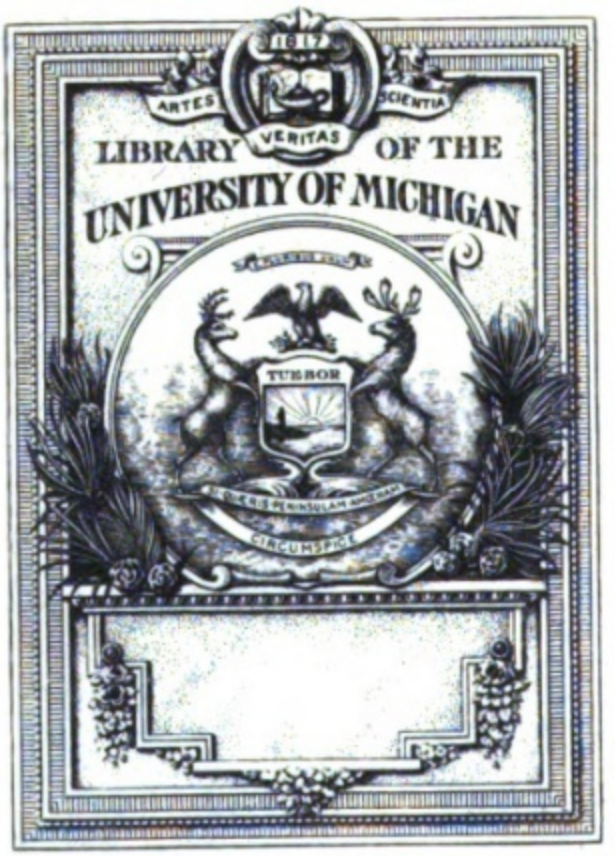

BEQUEST OF
ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

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Death
In A Bowl

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By

RAOUL WHITFIELD

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RAOUL WHITFIELD

Death IN A Bowl

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Published March 1931
First and second printings before publication

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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—TO THE THREE VIRGINS

Of Hollywood, sympathetically—

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O. F. BUTLER
BEQUEST
1/13/40

NOTE: ***The characters in this book are imaginary.***

—R. F. W.

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Death

In A Bowl

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CHAPTER I

"I COULD HAVE KILLED HIM—"

FREY shrugged his broad shoulders, gestured helplessly with spread hands, palms upturned. His face was white and drawn; his eyes, streaked with red, held a weary expression. He said flatly:

"She wouldn't scream like that. She's been shot in the stomach—she wouldn't scream like that."

Ernst Reiner smiled in his superior manner, said something thickly in German, then spoke slowly in English. His tone was low; his words held a precise dignity.

"I use realism to get effects. If she does not scream—I lose an effect. She is shot in the belly, and she screams."

Howard Frey bowed mockingly. "It's your picture," he said. "She gets shot in the stomach, and she screams."

The director nodded, smiled at the mixer seated beside his control board, lifted a French phone. He spoke emphatically to his assistant below, on Set Four.

"Once again, George. The first scream—it is not so sustained. The second, it is high-pitched, sustained. Close to the camera, tell her. She is walking, bent forward, right into it. Terrible pain—that must register. All right, George."

Reiner hung up. He sat in the wicker chair back of the thick glass which made the set below sound-proof.

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He looked down at Maya Rand. She was very beautiful, but very difficult to work with. For that matter all humans were difficult to work with—even Frey, who had written the story.

The action started. Reiner shrugged his shoulders. This was not like the old days—this talking picture business. He could direct only the rehearsals now. He must be close to the mixer when they were shooting. It was the sound he must direct.

Maya was turning now, facing the camera. She was smiling—now she registered fear. She cried out: "No—for God's sake—don't!"

The first shot cracked. She screamed. It was a horrible scream. Three more shots made sound in the silence that followed the scream. Maya was pressing her hands against her stomach now. She was walking towards the camera; her face was twisted. She screamed again. It was good, the way she did that. Reiner pressed a button, lifted the French phone.

"Cut!" he called. "That is good."

Frey swore nastily. "It's damned rotten," he said. "She wouldn't scream that way. And if you can get that piece of business past the Hays office—you're good."

Reiner paid no attention to the man who had practically rewritten the adaptation from the original story. He spoke to the mixer.

"Give her everything—in that last scream. Hold her down—on the first. She doesn't realize what's happened at first, you see. Then, when he keeps on shooting—she realizes—"

The mixer nodded. Frey said bitterly:

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"It'll never get by—a woman shot in the stomach. You can do that in a book, but we're making a picture. They'll cut it out—and it'll take the guts out of the picture. It'll be a louse—like the last one you made."

Reiner straightened. He was short, rather heavy. He was a German-American. He stood now, raging, running the palms of his hands, fingers spread stiffly, up and down the material of his coat.

"If the last picture was a louse," he said in a shaken tone, "it was your work, you see? You made it bad, you see?"

Frey was medium in size, well built. He had broad shoulders and good arms. He had hated Reiner for three months, and two days ago he had gone swimming with Maskey, in the Maskey pool. He was bigger than Reiner. He was through with Reiner.

"To hell with you, you fat slob!" he gritted. "You've got to have everything—and still you can't get by. You get the best woman we've got on the lot. You grab off the pick of stories. You shoot every scene a half dozen times, and then need more retakes than any director here. You get the best music, the best lights and sets. Everything. And still you make flops. You don't hand me—"

Reiner was smiling. He said in a cold mocking voice: "But in spite of these many faults, I am able to sleep in my own home. I am not forced to spend my nights—"

Frey took two steps forward, struck heavily with his right fist. The director had no protection from the blow. He threw up his right arm slightly, but it did no good. His legs gave way under the weight of his body; he fell

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almost in the center of one of the rugs thrown over the control platform's wooden floor. He was unconscious as he went down.

The mixer was on his feet; he was a young, blond haired man. He stuttered toward Frey:

"For God's—sake—Mr. Frey—"

Frey looked down at the motionless form of the director. He smiled with his lips pressed together. Then he parted them, said slowly and very calmly:

"I could have killed him—for that."

2

Ben Jardinn sat across the small table from Ernst Reiner. His lean, pale face was expressionless as the director finished speaking. He nodded his head, but he did not speak. Reiner said:

"My contract, thanks to a good lawyer, could not be broken. Maskey had a choice to make—it meant money, a lot of money. He chose to keep me. I might easily have prosecuted Frey. I did not. Since he struck me down, three days ago, several things have occurred. I am not exactly afraid—but at the same time—"

He stopped again, smiling with his eyes. Jardinn said:

"I think you've told me about these things. Frey went to Maya Rand and appealed for help. She turned him down. He then went to your assistant, George Hillard, and offered him twice the amount of money he would make on this picture—to quit. He was turned down again."

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Reiner nodded. "I have said nothing about the affair. But these things get around. Perhaps Frey is not so great a writer as he thinks. He will find it difficult to find work. It will enrage him, because he is vain. I am afraid of the result."

Jardinn nodded. He had dark eyes and hair. His body was lean, but it had firmness. He was in his late thirties. His voice was soft; when he spoke he had a habit of turning his head away from the person to whom he talked.

"What fear have you?" he asked.

Reiner frowned. He had small, brown eyes. They were narrowed back of glasses he wore. He replied hesitatingly.

"There is Maya. Frey was a very ardent admirer. I don't think he was in love. Now she has placed herself definitely on my side. There is George Hillard. I understand that Frey got him into pictures several years ago. George is staying with me."

Jardinn smiled. "You are afraid Frey will do something to them?" he asked. "Isn't that taking it a bit big? After all—you got sore at each other and he knocked you down. In the final settlement you won out. That's happened before. Most directors are more important than writers. What do you think Frey will do?"

Reiner shrugged. "It is not so small—this matter," he said. "The money—I do not think of that. Frey has money. But I have won—and he has lost. It will infuriate him. And he will hear about it on all sides. That is Hollywood. It is not a small thing."

Ben Jardinn nodded. "What do you want me to do?" he asked slowly.

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Reiner smiled. It was a peculiar smile. Jardinn could not get the meaning.

"Remember what I have told you—merely that," the director replied. "There is nothing else to do. And remember also that Frey said, as he looked down at me: 'I could have killed him for that.' "

Jardinn frowned. "*You* didn't say a very nice thing," he reminded. "You've both been under a big strain. But I'll jot our talk down, when I get home. I don't like to write—it will cost you fifty dollars."

Reiner nodded. "That is very good," he said. "You have done some nice work in Hollywood. Several have spoken of you to me. I have an envelope in my desk, addressed to you. There is a cheque inside. It is for the amount of five thousand dollars. It is payable to you, dated a month from this time. If it comes to you—you will help?"

Jardinn smiled. "You think Frey will murder you?" he asked, almost cheerfully.

Reiner rose from his chair. "I think he will try to hurt me in some way," he said quietly. "I'm very sure of it."

Jardinn rose and shook hands with the director.

"You've made some fine pictures," he said. "They show a good deal of imagination. Cities of the future, and that sort of thing. Perhaps your imagination is working now."

Ernst Reiner continued to smile in his peculiar way. He stood near the small table as Ben Jardinn moved toward the door of the studio office.

"It would be nice to think that," he said steadily.

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3

Jardinn and Max Cohn had dinner together at the Brown Derby on Vine Street. Cohn was short, chunky, quiet. He looked like the average business man of his race. He had come into the agency two years ago; Jardinn considered him their best man. Nothing excited him; he had killed two radicals in five seconds, six months ago—and had got in return only a bullet in the left arm. He knew Hollywood. Surface talk meant nothing to him; he got beneath every word.

He said in his nasal voice: "I agree with Reiner. It isn't such a small thing. Frey comes from a bad family. His father served a ten stretch for a shooting down south. He's got a cousin on the Los Angeles police force. A lieutenant. It's a rotten police town, and he could count on help."

Ben Jardinn smiled. "He's made good money for three years—and he's saved most of it. After all, Reiner said something pretty harsh—and Frey had the satisfaction of knocking him down. He might try to do him some harm in pictures, but not personal harm. Reiner has imagination—he's worried. I don't think he's a coward."

Cohn raised a glass of water to his lips, spoke into it. "Frey's coming this way—easy!"

Jardinn laughed rather heartily. They were eating in a booth at the rear of the Brown Derby; he said in a loud voice:

"—and my horse finished fifth. I'd have had better luck if I'd stayed at the Casino."

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Howard Frey reached their table, let his dark eyes meet Jardinn's. He smiled, said slowly:

"You're Jardinn. Tom Bender said you were over here. I'd like to talk with you—not here. At your office, say. But tonight, if possible."

Jardinn smiled up at the writer. "Unless it's pretty important—" he commenced, but Frey cut in.

"It is. I'm perfectly willing to pay for the inconvenience to you. It's damned important."

Jardinn kept on smiling. "All right," he said. "I'll cut the coffee and we'll go right along. Max—you take your time. Come over later."

Cohn nodded. Jardinn rose, got his soft, dark hat, went out with Frey. The writer took short nervous steps; when they got outside and were moving along the Boulevard from Vine Street, he kept moving his head from side to side. He didn't talk.

The agency was located in a frame building two blocks from Grauman's Chinese Theatre. The rooms were not particularly well furnished, but the chairs were comfortable. Jardinn closed the outer door behind him, locked it from the inside. He led the way into his own office, gestured toward a leather chair. From his own seat, with two table lights switched on, he could catch every expression in Frey's face. It was a sensitive face.

"You did a nice job on the Sarrell thing," Frey said immediately. "Getting her off with a year was splendid work."

Jardinn nodded. "*I* think so," he agreed. "If she'd come to me a little sooner I might have been able to get an acquittal."

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Frey was sitting tensely in the chair. He said slowly:

"*I've* come to you soon enough. You've probably heard the rumors. I wrote 'Death Dance' for Famous. Ernst Reiner was directing. He still is. We had an argument; he insinuated, after I'd called him a few names, that I was forced to have affairs with women who are important, in order to hold my job. I knocked him unconscious. I'm pretty strong. He went to Maskey—and I was let out. It was one of the two of us. Maskey's a business man. He kept Reiner."

The writer paused. Jardinn said quietly:

"I'd heard this much."

Frey nodded. "I want you to hear it from *me*," he said. "I was wrong, of course. My nerves were in bad shape. Reiner's last picture was a million dollar flop. This'll be another—and it's my story."

Jardinn sat motionlessly and waited. There was something about Frey he liked. The man was direct enough. He wasn't beating around the bush.

"I'm not afraid of anything that Reiner will do to me directly." Howard Frey was speaking more slowly now. "I'm afraid of something else. I'd like you to listen to it. If a retainer of five hundred would help any—"

He let his words trail off. Jardinn nodded. He spoke quietly.

"That will do nicely. You think that someone might take Reiner's life, and that, under the circumstances, you would be suspected?"

Frey looked faintly surprised. He leaned forward in the chair.

"Yes, that's it," he said. "Was it that obvious?"

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Jardinn shrugged. "Just a guess," he replied. "What makes you think Reiner's life is in danger?"

Frey said slowly: "He's done some rotten things. Not so much with women, but with men. Men he's worked with out here. He's pretty ruthless. He's hurt a lot of people. Now these people know that finally someone knocked him down, on the set. I'm not sure of anything, of course. But I wanted to protect myself. I heard indirectly, today, that when I looked down at him I said: 'I'll kill you for that.' I didn't say it. But it's got around. And knowing what I do—"

The writer stopped again. He smiled a little. Jardinn nodded his head.

"Why do you come to me with this explanation?" he asked.

Frey reached for his cigarette case, offered it to Jardinn. They both lighted up.

"You took Reiner's statement," Frey said quietly. "I wanted you to take mine."

Jardinn got up, went over to the window, and looked out. It had been a jolt, and he wanted a few seconds to think. When he faced the writer again Frey was looking thoughtfully at the tip of his cigarette. Jardinn said:

"How do you know Reiner gave me any sort of a statement?"

"It cost me money to find out," the writer replied. "I'm honest with you. Money will buy almost anything —in Hollywood. It didn't buy that dark-haired secretary of yours. But I'd let out the blue-eyed stenographer you took on last week."

Jardinn whistled softly. He grinned at Howard Frey.

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"Cohn took her on," he said. "I figured he had a reason, but I wasn't sure. I'll fire her tomorrow, and kick Max in the rear end. You got a transcription of Reiner's statement, eh?"

Frey took it out of an inside pocket and handed it to Jardinn.

"I'm through with it," he said. "He quoted me correctly. I did say: 'I could have killed him—for that.' But I'm through. I'm square with Reiner, and I'm sorry I knocked him down. He doesn't have to worry about me."

Jardinn said: "You're going out of your way to play safe. You know something. You've made this same statement somewhere else."

"Naturally." Frey chuckled. "You are working for Reiner. Perhaps for me, too. But I am playing safe. I've a cousin on the police force. Lieutenant Charles Bracker. In Los Angeles. He and I—and a notary got together. I told them what I've told you."

Jardinn's dark eyes narrowed. He sucked in cigarette smoke, let it issue from between his lips in a thin stream.

"It isn't worth a damn, your statement," he said. "Neither is Reiner's."

Howard Frey swore softly. "Mine's worth as much as his," he reminded. "That makes mine worth something. While he's alive *he* tells you that if he's murdered I did the job. That's it, in effect. And while he's alive *I* tell you that if he's murdered, I didn't do the job."

"And you are willing to pay me five hundred dollars to listen to the statement, after you've already placed it in a nicer spot," Jardinn said.

Frey took a wallet from his inner pocket and counted

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out five, hundred-dollar bills. He placed them on the table.

"Your agency has always been fair," he said. "I don't know how much Reiner has paid you. A lot more than this, I can guess. He's going to be finished, and he knows it. I'm not going to be the goat. I'm in a tough spot, and I know it. When it happens—I'll work with you. Will you work with me?"

Jardinn said: "Yes—but get this straight. A statement and a retainer doesn't clear the way for you. Because you come to a man who has listened to Reiner tell him that he feels you will try to hurt him—and deny it—that doesn't mean so much. Because you tell me that if anything happens to him you will be suspected but you won't be guilty—that doesn't mean you won't be guilty."

Frey smiled with his lips. "I wouldn't want your agency hounding me," he said. "I want you to have to worry just as much about my statement as Reiner's. I think you will."

Ben Jardinn narrowed his eyes on the writer. He nodded.

"Why don't you come through, and let us help Reiner?" he asked.

Howard Frey rose from his chair. He laughed bitterly.

"I couldn't help him if I wanted to," he said quietly. "And I don't want to help him. Why should I? Hasn't he tried to fix it with you so that I'll be suspected?"

Jardinn sighed. "It all sounds like two picture people getting dramatic over nothing much," he said.

Frey went toward the door, followed by Jardinn. When it was unlocked the writer spoke.

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"When I'm dramatic I don't spend five hundred dollars," he said steadily. "You know damned well I'm not going to murder Reiner. Yet he's afraid. You know that. He hates me—and he doesn't know—"

The writer checked himself. He swore softly. Jardinn said with mockery in his voice:

"When does the killing come off?"

Howard Frey smiled. "If I knew that I'd be eating dinner with three people at just that second," he replied grimly. "My idea is—to hell with Ernst Reiner—but give *me* an airtight alibi!"

He went out and down the stairs. Jardinn, frowning with his dark eyes, moved back into his office. He was tapping on the surface of his desk with his right hand knuckles, and whistling softly, when Max Cohn came noisily in.

"Fire that blue-eyed woman of yours in the morning," he said. "She sold out on us—gave Frey the stuff Reiner dictated."

Cohn grunted, dropped into the chair that Frey had vacated.

"The dirty brat!" he breathed. "Does it hurt us much?"

Jardinn grinned. "Not a damn bit," he said cheerfully. "But when you fire her—it'll hurt *you*."

"She isn't a business woman," Cohn replied. "Her place is in the home."

Jardinn nodded. "Get her a single apartment up along Franklin Avenue," he suggested. "*Keep* her in the home."

Cohn looked hurt. He lighted a narrow, black cigar.

"What about Howard Frey?" he asked.

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Jardin looked out of the window, toward Hollywood Boulevard.

"Reiner's spotted to go out," he replied. "Frey thinks he's been picked for the goat—by Reiner. He came in to retain us. He wants us to play fair. Someone's going to do for Reiner, and they're going to get after Frey. Planted evidence against him. We're to be nice—and get him clear."

Cohn grunted and pulled on his cigar.

"Maybe he knows things, this Frey," he suggested nasally.

Jardinn ran long fingers over the pallid skin of his lean face.

"It's a queer layout," he breathed. "Ernst Reiner comes in and says if anything quick happens to him—look up Howard Frey. Then Frey comes in and says that Reiner can't get away with that. If anything happens to Reiner—don't bother with Frey."

Cohn said, without humor: "Maybe it'll be two other fellows."

"They're both paying money—and neither of them is dumb," Jardinn said. "Reiner isn't asking for protection. He's pretty cool about it. Frey acts half amused. He pays five hundred. Reiner gives me fifty for getting his statement down—and there's five thousand coming, if he gets the dose."

Cohn cocked his head to one side. He whistled cheerfully.

"We've got to wait for a murder," Jardinn said slowly.

Cohn grunted. "Wait, hell!" he breathed. "We've got to *pray* for it."

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CHAPTER II

DEATH IN A BOWL

THE next afternoon, at four o'clock, Max Cohn called the agency. Carol put him through to Jardinn, who had just come in.

"Did my little girl get packed up?" Cohn asked. "I've got another one for the office."

Jardinn swore at him. "One woman in here is enough," he said. "Carol can do the stenographic work and we'll give her a raise. Your blue-eyed brat has gone, and it'll take us two days to get the odor of cheap perfume out of the office."

Cohn said: "Ernst Reiner has a brother. Know anything about music?"

Jardinn groaned. "You mean Hans Reiner has a brother," he corrected. "He's conducting tonight at the Bowl. What about it?"

Cohn's voice held a disappointed note. He spoke slowly.

"It's a big doing," he said. "All the picture crowd will be there. Ernst has Box 22. That's in the second tier of boxes, just about in the center. Maya Rand will be in the party. And that Maskey son-in-law. And Durling, the guy that's supervising 'Death Dance.' Some others, not so important."

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Jardinn said: "Good enough—how about Howard Frey?"

"Box 7," Cohn replied. "That's in the first tier, off to the right as you face the shell. I checked up at the Bowl. It'll be a big crowd, some twenty thousand or so. It's Hans Reiner's premiere in the west. Getting a lot of publicity—and Ernst shares it, of course."

"Sure," Jardinn replied. "All right, you needn't come back here. If you can get away from that woman of yours for an hour or so, better go out and take in the concert. Maybe you can snare a seat somewhere near Reiner's box. I'd like to know just who sits with him. Might help. Stick through the racket."

Cohn made clicking sounds. "Will I see you out there?" he asked.

Jardinn said: "It's a social event I wouldn't miss. But don't bother with me unless I give you an opening. One has to be careful at these sort of affairs."

Cohn called him a bad name, and Jardinn hung up. He called out loudly: "Carol, you bum!"

His secretary came in. She was good looking in a substantial sort of way. She had dark eyes and hair, and though her features were rather large they were also well formed. Her mouth was firm, and she had nice, even teeth.

"Thanks for the raise, Bennie," she said, smiling. "How much is it?"

She only called him Bennie when she was pleased, and it always annoyed Jardinn. He said savagely:

"Ten a week—and you won't be worth it. For God's sake learn how to punctuate, anyway."

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She chuckled like a man. "I can use a better brand of face cream," she said. "Maybe it'll get me a man."

Jardinn grunted. "Hollywood's a hell of a spot for a homely woman," he said, "but I wish you luck. Got my ticket?"

She laid the ticket on the desk before him. She had nice fingers. Long and not too pointed. They were strong fingers. He could tell that by the way she crushed things in them. She wasn't afraid to use them.

"Row B, second tier," she said. "About four seats to the right of Box 7—and two rows behind it, above it. Too far to the side for the best music. You'll get too much brass and not enough of the strings."

Jardinn smiled mockingly. "Hans Reiner does not play the brass," he said. "He likes fugues in string, and some of the Debussy music."

Carol laughed at him. "He's playing 'Afternoon of a Faun,'" she said. "You won't get the French horns right."

Jardinn swore at her. "If you weren't so damned stubborn I'd marry you," he told her. "Where are you sitting?"

She laughed at him again. "I'm not," she replied. "I'm going down to the beach and dance at the Ship, with a wop named Abe Montelli."

Jardinn got up, slipped the ticket in a vest pocket and reached for his hat.

"Carol Torney," he said slowly, rolling the r's, "and Abe Montelli. What in hell you going to call the kids?"

She straightened up some papers on his desk.

"He isn't that kind of a wop," she said quietly. "His brother is Frey's bootlegger."

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Jardinn stopped moving toward the door and stared at her. He started to say something, changed his mind. He went over to her and gripped her right arm just above the elbow. He said harshly:

"Don't mix up in this, Carol. It's going to be nasty. A lot of loose ends. Max and I can take care of it. Stay away from this Montelli bird."

She smiled at him. "All right," she replied. "I'll stay home and catch up on my knitting. With the back door locked, and Uncle Laurie to keep an eye on—"

Jardinn swung her around. "Max and I can handle this," he repeated. "Stay clear, Carol."

She looked at him with her dark eyes half closed.

"A girl's got to have fun," she said tritely.

He took his fingers away from her arm. He grinned at her.

"Go home tonight," he said. "I'll buy the drinks tomorrow night."

She kept smiling at him through her narrowed dark eyes.

"Maybe," she agreed. "But if you do, it'll be to forget what a job you've got on your hands."

She started for the door of his office, but he got in the way. It wasn't the first time he'd heard her make half stabs at future events.

"Listen, Irish," he said, "did Frey's bootlegger tip some one off that Howard was going a-gunning tonight?"

His mockery didn't bother her. She looked him in the eyes.

"Max doesn't know an oboe note from a first violin

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