

BORDER TRAFFIC

Edward Ronns

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IT was hot in the car, even with the canvas top up as a shield against the blasting sun. From the garage, Gil drove west, away from Calamedo, which was just this side of the border.

Calamedo wasn't much to look at. The town on the Mex side was bigger and busier, too racing, gambling and divorce being the heavy industries. Gil avoided both municipalities and pointed the chrome mermaid on the radiator cap toward the empty, rocky coast.

His destination was a ramshackle house on the lip of a bluff overhanging the sea. The air was a little cooler here, not quite so stifling. Gulls screamed overhead, wheeling round and round.

Gil stepped out of the smart convertible sedan and studied the house with crinkled gray eyes. A dusty roadster was parked in the side driveway, and the porch door was ajar. Except for that and the new telephone wires, the place looked as if it had been deserted for years.

He went over to the roadster first. There wasn't much use feeling the radiator shell, because the sun would have heated it anyway. He stood and squinted at the empty house, and suddenly shivered a little, despite the warmth. There was an atmosphere of loneliness and foreboding about this God-forsaken place.

Or maybe Gil was just psychic. When he looked into the roadster, he saw blood all over the seat, sticky-red on the wheel.

There was quite a lot of it.

Straightening, he puckered his mouth into a soundless whistle. He looked again at the house and the slightly open front door. He wished he had a gun. The muscles of his stomach contracted into a hard knot, like when you make a fist, and then he called:

"Nardi! Hey, Nardi!"

His voice echoed away, lost in the emptiness. The gulls overhead giped raucously at him. Gil dried his palms on his thighs; shrugging, he left the roadster and trudged up to the front porch. He paused once more, looking at the smart blue convertible sedan he had driven here.

The new paint glistened under wax polish; he was proud of the job he'd done on it. Sunlight caught the mermaid on the radiator shell.

The next moment, he was seeing green worms wriggle away in all directions as he passed from dazzling sunlight into the cool dimness inside the house. When the green worms finally disappeared, he saw Nardinocchi.

THE pudgy little man was seated on a horsehair divan, staring at him. He wore a white suit, a white shirt, and a black string tie. A Panama lay on the dusty floor between his feet. The front of his white suit was crusted with

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blood.

Gil said softly: "For the love of Pete!"

The pudgy little man suddenly blinked his eyes. They were ugly eyes: small and black and snakelike. There was no pain in them; only hatred. He wasn't looking at Gil. He croaked:

"You bring the car?"

Gil nodded. "Sure! Who did it, boss?"

"Never mind. I'll get the shiv artist myself."

"But you're hurt. Hell, you lost a lot of blood!"

"That's none of your business. You get paid to keep your trap shut and obey orders!"

"Sure," Gil said.

"You'll have to deliver the job this time. I'll have to trust you." Nardinocchi's little snake-eyes flickered. "Take me to the Hotel Centralia across the line. We'll use the coast road."

"But shouldn't I call the cops?"

Nardinocchi spat blood. "You fool!"

"But I thought the sedan job was Hoban's. Don't we deliver to him?"

"Not to Hoban. The Hotel Centralia. No matter what happens, the Hotel Centralia! Deliver the car to a man named Francis Ellison. That's just in case I don't make it."

The man was tough. He spoke of his possible death as casually as if discussing the odds on the afternoon's races. Gil's eyes drifted along the bare, dusty floor, speckled with sunbeams and little drops of blood that led from the door to the horsehair divan. Nardinocchi hadn't been stabbed here; the knife was nowhere around.

Wincing, the pudgy man got to his feet. He leaned forward from the waist, holding to his middle. His right hand was glued to his clothing by dried blood. His left hand opened and something clattered to the floor. Nardinocchi paid no attention to it. Gil stooped unobtrusively and picked the thing up.

It was a huge silver clip, of the type of feminine jewelry they make down in Mexico City. Gil slid it into his pocket and helped the wounded man out of the house and into the car.

Then he said: "You forgot your hat, boss. I better not leave it there."

He left Nardi huddled on the front seat and trotted back up the porch into the gloomy house. He didn't go into the living room. He found the telephone under the staircase.

When he finally got connected with the Frisco offices of Allied Auto Insurance, he was sweating at the delay. Nardinocchi might be one sick guy, but he had a gun, which made him a lot taller in stature than Gil, even if he was lying on the floor bleeding his life away.

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McPherson, chief of the Allied investigating staff, finally sent words crackling in the receiver.

Gil said in a low, swift voice: "This is Boyd, Mac. I'm in a hurry."

"Shoot!"

"Something's broken, but I can't figure it yet. Somebody stuck a knife into Nardinocchi. I got a break, though. Nardi's not dead not yet, anyway and he wants me to dance him and the car over the line to the Hotel Centralia. I'm going to do it."

McPherson protested. "How are you going to do it, Gil? How about the customs?"

"There's a small coast road."

"But if you're caught on the other side, there's Hoban. If Nardinocchi and Hoban have fallen out, you're in a spot. Suppose you call the thing off, huh ? It's too risky. We can get Hoban some other way. I don't want you to follow Joey Lane."

"Joey Lane." Gil chewed his lip, and little lines deepened around his mouth, settling his lean brown face into a grim mold.

Joey Lane used to drink with him, bunk with him, eat with him; laugh and cry with him; wear his clothes and use his razor; fight and swear and work with him. Joey Lane was dead. Hoban had killed him.

GIL stared at the open doorway. He couldn't see Nardinocchi in the sedan. He cursed McPherson silently for a fool. A man sitting in an office far from the scene of operations couldn't possibly have the same feeling as the man actually on the case.

And Gil felt that the case was growing red-hot. He felt he was close to Joey Lane's killer. To quit now would be idiotic. Allied Auto was losing plenty of dough because of Hoban's hot-car outfit, but Gil wasn't too concerned about that. He wanted a killer. Besides, Gil was a good, conscientious insurance dick. He'd have told you that himself.

He hadn't had any difficulty following Joey Lane's trail down here on the scent of the car thieves. In Gil Boyd's varied career there had been a job in a garage, spraying cars. He had learned to be a good painter. So he had little trouble convincing Nardinocchi that he needed a job and could handle a spray gun with the best of them.

He sprayed hot cars in Nardi's garage, and learned that Nardi's place was just a stopover for cars going out on export. Hoban, across the line, received the deliveries. Hoban was the one. He had to be the one!

Gil turned back to the telephone.

"Listen, Mac," he said, "this is a cinch! I'm in, don't you see? I spent a month painting hot jobs for Nardi and Hoban. I can always get a job with the big boy."

"And the Mex cops can pick you off for attempted murder! You can't just traipse across the border with a wounded man in your car! . . . Is the rat badly hurt?"

"Pretty bad. I "

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Sound suddenly shattered the background murmur of the surf beyond the cliff: the high, shrill blare of an auto horn. It echoed in ear-splitting, rhythmic pulsations, endlessly, going on and on

Gil sprang to his feet, his gray eyes jerking to the open door. He ran out on the porch and stared at the big blue car in the driveway. Dryness crept along the lining of his throat.

Nardinocchi was blowing the horn; but the little man didn't know it. Nardinocchi was dead. Gil could tell that from where he stood, noting the slump of the man's body as it lay against the wheel.

His rubber heel squeaked faintly as he turned back into the house. The blast of the auto horn kept shaking the air.

He took up the phone and said crisply: "Nardinocchi just kicked off. I'm going on!"

He hung up quickly, before McPherson's sulphurous objections could be changed into direct orders.

THE sudden silence when Gil moved the dead man's hand away from the wheel was almost as bad as the noise. The sound died away in diminishing echoes, and then there was only the pound of the surf and the squawking triumph of the gulls.

Gil leaned inside to move the dead man's body and suddenly stood rooted.

"Hunch!" he said aloud.

It was a funny thing. Nardinocchi's body hadn't started the horn blowing. It was his hand, just his hand. It had been the pudgy man's last act before suddenly giving out. But that wasn't all. It was what he had been doing to the horn button that started the blowing. Because he hadn't been putting pressure on it intentionally; he had been unscrewing the big composition cap.

Gil sat down gently behind the wheel and stared at the ivory button. It was fully four inches in diameter, grooved with a circular design. He flattened his fingers over the edge of the disk, turned it to the left, and it came loose and clattered to the floorboard between his feet. A small hollow was revealed, and he stared down into it.

They were the color of fresh grass, winking and shattering light into translucent green as the sun played on them. There were six of them, arranged in the circular track around the electrical horn contact, like ball bearings. Only they weren't steel; they were emeralds.

They must have been in the car when it was stolen. And Nardi had learned about them. Which was why he'd been killed.

Gil turned his head and stared slowly at the dead man slumped beside him.

"Wise guy, huh? So wise, you died of it!"

Excitement made his blood pound. He swallowed to relieve the dry pressure in his throat. He took out a pocket handkerchief, folded it flat and wrapped the emeralds carefully inside. Luckily, he liked his socks neat and wore thin elastics over his solid calf muscle.

He made a bandage of the handkerchief containing the stones and tightened the garter over it, around his leg. He might be searched, and searchers rarely went below the waistband.

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"All you got to do," he told himself, "is keep your pants on." He turned to the dead man at his side. "And you, dogface I think I'll give you to Hoban as a present, and see what he says!"

HOBAN was drinking beer at a little round table when Gil stepped through the street gate into the courtyard, two hours later. The air was purple with evening shadows. There was a Mexican smell to the place.

Gil locked the street door and crossed the darkening tiles around a tinkling fountain and stood in front of the big man at the table. He said abruptly:

"Nardinocchi is dead."

The big man just stared. He was fat, this George Hoban incredibly fat. He sat in the chair with his huge knees apart, the flesh threatening to burst the seams of his white trousers. His breath wheezed a steamy sound as he took a handkerchief and made a mopping motion over his little red mouth. Pausing, he looked at Gil over the top of his furry hand. His muddy little eyes made Gil feel cold all over.

Hoban said: "You're Nardi's new painter. You've been here once before. Your name is Boyd."

Gil nodded. He said again: "Nardinocchi is dead! The guy died on me!" He let excitement throw his voice off even keel; it wasn't particularly hard to act excited. Here was Hoban, the man who had killed Joey Lane. The storm of tension inside Gil tossed his words around like beach shells on a high sea. "I don't know how it happened."

"You don't know how it happened?" the fat man repeated through the handkerchief. "You just don't know?"

"Nardi called me and told me to take the car to the usual spot. I met him there. He was wounded. He wouldn't tell me anything. He acted as if he knew who'd killed him."

Hoban's breath made wheezy sounds as he shifted in the seat. "Yes, he knew."

Gil leaned sharply forward over the round table and stared at the fat man. It was suddenly very quiet; it seemed as if a chill wind had sprung up.

A baby squalled somewhere across the court, beyond the dim eucalyptus tree beside the fountain. The night made the red-tiled roof of the surrounding house seem black. A woman in a rebozo was moving along the iron-railed balcony overhead; and a sleekly dressed Mexican suddenly sauntered from the shadows of the columns, nodded to Hoban and went out through the street gate.

Gil Boyd said quietly: "Then you know who stabbed Nardi?"

"Yeah," the fat man drawled. His many chins folded and refolded as his big head rocked. "Sure, I know." All the time his muddy little eyes regarded Gil. "What happened next?"

"There was a new cop on the road; he didn't know me. He stopped me and got a look at Nardi, then went for his gun. I shoved him off the running board and stepped on the gas. I thought I'd better see you first."

Gil shivered, remembering the high shrill shriek of the border cop's whistle as the ran lay on the road, staring after him out of a twisted white face. "I ducked the Mex police on this side. It took me maybe an hour. Then I came here."

Hoban's big face turned purple, very slowly.

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"And the car?" he asked softly,

"It's outside on the street."

"And Nardinocchi?"

"He's in the car."

The fat man said: "Damn you damn you!"

He got up and turned the table over on Gil. The rounded edge caught Gil just beneath the ribs and knocked the breath out of him. He teetered backward in the chair and fell sidewise, the table on top of him. The fat man kicked him.

Gil reached out and grabbed one massive ankle, but he might just as well have tried to upset an elephant or uproot a tree. Hoban kicked him again, and then stepped back and said with sudden gentleness:

"Get up, Gil."

GIL stood on his feet with slow effort. His ribs ached, stabbing pain into his side with every breath he took. He straightened the table, mechanically picked up the chair and shoved it under the round top. Leaning his weight on the back of the chair, he whispered:

"All right. I'm through."

"The hell you are, Gil!"

"I'm through!" Gil repeated.

The fat man laughed. His huge body in his white linen suit shook like jelly in a high wind. There was no humor behind the gusts of sound.

He asked: "With a murder rap on you, Gil?"

"I didn't stab Nardinocchi."

"Maybe not. But you jockeyed a stolen car across the border, with his corpse in it. Did you know it was a stolen car, Gil? And you say you're through. The cops wouldn't agree with you, kid."

Gil thought of McPherson, back in Frisco, and reluctantly admitted to himself that sometimes a man far removed from the active side of the case could foretell what is to happen more accurately than the investigator actually involved. He had to play his cards carefully. He made his knuckles turn white as he gripped the back of the chair; his tongue wetted his lips.

"So it was a stolen car?"

"Sure," said Hoban. "You've been spraying hot jobs for me, at five tens per job. Laugh that one off, kid: five hot cars! And I've got Nardi's bills, with your name on them as the painter. You're in it, Gil. You painted for export. You did good work, too: you can keep right on working for me."

Gil said: "No." He stifled a sigh of relief. It was working.

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Hoban said: "It's me or the cops."

"I'll take my chances with the cops."

The fat man said: "Don't be a fool. Look here you're in a jam. The only way you can wriggle out of it is by finding out just who did kill Nardinocchi."

"You know," Gil whispered softly. "Tell me."

"Huh—uh." Hoban's fat red lips curled in an amused smile. "Not now. I couldn't prove it yet. Anyway, I need you for some more paint jobs, right here, You stay here a week, Gil, and work for me; and by that time I'll have you in the clear. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Gil scowled down at the table. He had an impulse to get up and knock the fat man's suave smile off his lips. But he didn't. He kept his eyes lowered to hide the satisfaction in them.

"All right," he said. "But I don't like you, Hoban. I don't trust you. And I want to know who killed Nardinocchi. I've got to know!"

"In a week," Hoban promised.

The sleekly dressed Mexican, Gabriel Flores, came back through the courtyard gate, rolling a cigarette in supple brown fingers. He stared curiously at Gil, and then said: "Nardi is sure enough croaked, boss."

Hoban levered himself ponderously to his feet and said wheezily: "Let's see."

Hoban lifted the dead man's head by the hair and stared into the contorted pudgy face. He let go and the body slid stiffly sidewise. Turning to Gil, he said:

"Didn't he tell you anything before kicking off?"

Gil shook his head.

"No message of any kind?"

"No."

"All right." Hoban turned to Flores. "You know Gil Boyd. He'll help you out in the shop for a while. He'll live with us, too. Get Nita to fix up a room for him."

The Mexican turned to Gil with a white-toothed smile.

"Si, Nita."

JUANITA was tall, with dark hair tight-spun in a knot at the nape of her neck. She had a high-breasted figure and a lazy little smile. She closed the door to Gil's room and indicated the white-washed chamber.

Gil pulled his eyes off her statuesque beauty and stared at bright-colored throw-rugs, heavy carved chairs, a huge four-poster and a canvas cot.

"I'll sleep in the cot."

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The tall woman smiled. "You 'ave been to Mexico before, I see. Do you like it?"

"No," Gil told her.

She wasn't offended. "I hate it myself. But George's business " She shrugged soft shoulders expressively.

Gil said: "I didn't know Nardinocchi was working for a hot-car syndicate. I'd never have taken his job if I knew."

"It is too late for regrets now. You mustn't try to trick George 'Oban. He will help you if you agree. He is too clever, Gil."

He said bitterly: "I've learned that already."

"He will kill you if you trick him."

Gil, thinking of Joey Lane, said softly: "I don't doubt it."

The woman laughed liquidly and opened the door and left the room, her green eyes insolently sweeping his lean figure from head to foot before she disappeared.

It was close to ten when Gil dropped from the window to the veranda roof and stood motionless, listening and watching. There was no sound from the big house. Before him stretched a tortuous maze of dim, shadowy alleys and white buildings in the moonlight.

Only a few windows were alight. He could see across the border to Calamedo and the string of glowing beads that marked the international bridge. The night was very warm. From somewhere came a steady hissing noise.

In the alley he had to grope his way along, until he came to a bend and reached the side of Hoban's barnlike garage. The house had once been an isolated hacienda, until the town grew up around it. One of the outbuildings had been transformed into a modern receiving depot for hot cars danced over the border.

As Gil drew nearer, the hissing sound became louder, and he wrinkled his nose against the smell of pyroxylin.

Flores and another man were working on a touring car, in the glare of a droplight hanging from the ceiling. The steady chug-chug of a one-horse compression motor mingled with an occasional curse.

Hoban himself was attending to the blue convertible sedan. He was tearing out the upholstery inch by inch. His round, fat face was glittery with sweat. Occasionally Flores would turn, spray gun in hand, and stare at him.

Gil, in the shadows beyond the window, grinned and felt the handkerchief tied around his calf. He knew all he had to know except the name of Nardinocchi's murderer.

It wasn't that he cared much about the dead man, or that Allied Auto would need the murderer to break the ring wide open. But he had a hunch that the killer of Nardi and the killer of Joey Lane were one and the same. Namely, Hoban, He intended to prove it.

He decided to locate the Hotel Centralia and the man named Francis Ellison.

SHE had fine brown eyes and smooth hair, and she knew how to wear clothes. Despite the heat, she looked cool and comfortable. She stood in the doorway of the hotel suite and said:

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"I'm Mrs. Ellison. If I can do anything "

Gil twisted his hat in his hand. "I'd like to see your husband."

She touched her lower lip thoughtfully. Her eyes were fixed on his necktie. "Come inside. I'm not sure he's in, If you can tell me "

"It's about a man named Mario Nardinocchi," Gil said.

He watched her reaction. The girl's brown eyes jerked from his necktie to his face, seeking something and failing to find anything in his lean impassiveness. She stared down at a bright-colored oval rug.

"Yes?" she asked.

"He's dead. He was stabbed."

Mrs. Ellison looked at his face again. She was very white. Her lips moved a little, and then she murmured:

"But I wouldn't know anything about such a thing."

"Not much!"

"What?"

Gil repeated: "I said, 'Not much.'"

"I see." Her voice was just a whisper. "And you think my husband can tell you something about it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Nardinocchi had your car. A blue convertible sedan. It was stolen from you."

She nodded. "Yes three days ago. It was taken from in front of this hotel."

Gil had a struggle to keep the relief out of his eyes. His wild stab had been correct. He had one more try. Dipping his hand into a pocket, he took out a large silver jewelry clip. It was the one which had fallen from Nardinocchi's hand before the man died. He showed it to Mrs. Ellison.

"Is this yours?"

She examined it curiously. "No."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

Gil studied her face. She might be telling the truth. But her composure was perfect. She was the kind of woman who needed dynamite before her shell cracked.

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Gil weighed the clip in his hand. "I found this in Nardinocchi's possession when he died."

"So?" Her eyebrows arched at him,

"So I'm wondering. Will you see if your husband is around?"

She nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Turning, she left him standing in the middle of the hotel room. The overhead light made the varnished floor glisten.

She had a gun in her hand when she came back. It was pointed at Gil.

She said: "I think you've made a mistake."

GIL stood very still. The gun muzzle moved in a wobbly arc, covering him. The light caught the nicked barrel and ran a bright finger along the metal.

Gil said softly: "The mistake is yours, Mrs. Ellison. Put it away."

She said tightly: "I'm going to call the police."

Gil said: "I told you it was a mistake. You don't want the police."

"Why not?"

"Because your husband killed Nardinocchi! Because Nardi knew what was in your car. He was crossing you "

Flame licked from the muzzle of the little gun. A blast of sound followed it by a split second. Behind the gun and the tiny puff of smoke the girl's face wavered, appeared curiously distorted, as though reflected in a cheap mirror. Her red lips were slewed far out of line.

The bullet tunked into the wall. Gil left his feet in a dive that crashed his shoulders against the girl's legs, just above her knees. She went backward, dropping the gun, and bumped into a couch and sat down abruptly. Gil left her there and picked up the little gun, stood listening.

Above the whisper of the girl's breathing he heard a murmur of excited Spanish down the corridor. A door slammed distantly. Footsteps pounded down the hall.

The brown-eyed girl said triumphantly: "You're caught, now!" She didn't look cool and pleasant now; she looked malignant, vicious,

Gil just stared at her. "You're a fool!"

"You're caught," she repeated.

"And," he said, "you with me."

Evidently that hadn't occurred to her. She sat up stiffly, her breasts rising high as she sucked air. Her eyes slowly widened and showed white all around the irises. She rubbed her cheek very carefully. Someone began pounding on the door, and a gabble of voices suddenly rose outside.

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"Open the door!"

The girl stood up. "This way," she whispered. "Oh, quickly!"

She started for a doorway. Gil hesitated, gun in hand, and then followed her. The room was dark, smelling faintly of perfume. Light came through a large casement window and revealed a bed, a dresser, and clothing scattered around.

It didn't show the man who hid behind the door. Gil didn't see him at all.

Pain smashed down on the base of his skull and jolted through his spine. He went to his knees, pawing at the air. A second blow flattened him, and all the lights went out.

GIL came to in the hotel bar. There was quite a crowd around him Mexicans in ten-gallon hats and American tourists in white. Someone was pouring liquid lava down his throat. Gil sat up, sputtering and coughing.

Blue eyes twinkled at him from out of the brown Mexican face. The man was short and stocky and wore some kind of faded khaki uniform.

"Hot stuff," said the man. "Tequila."

Gil wiped his lips, but his throat kept burning. He staggered to his feet and muttered: "I'm O. K. Lemme alone."

"Sorry," the man said. "I'm Sebastian O'Doyle."

Irish-Mexican. Gil stared at his bright-blue eyes, and said: "So what?"

"I am chief of police here. You've had an accident, no?"

"Yes."

"Ah yes. Mrs. Ellison and her husband they shot at you, no?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Have another drink."

Gil couldn't take the tequila; he had a short whiskey. Sebastian O'Doyle went up to the bar and waved the curious people away. He knew how to drink the stuff.

He swallowed a small tumblerful, then took a lick of salt, and used chili sauce to top it. He looked as though he could have gone on all night that way. Sebastian O'Doyle grinned and wiped the salt from his fingers.

"Is wonderful!" he said. "Try it."

Gil shook his head. "Some other time, pal. Where did the Ellisons go?"

O'Doyle said: "I was hoping you could tell me."

"Maybe I could. Am I pinched?"

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"No. What for? They shot at you, you said."

"If I'm not pinched, let's go after the Ellisons."

"Fine! And afterward, I will show you how to drink tequila. O. K.?"

"O. K."

THE courtyard was deserted. The fountain tinkled softly in the darkness under the eucalyptus tree. Gil slid quickly to the right and O'Doyle followed him, closing the street gate with a soft squeak of rusty hinges.

They stood silent and motionless after that, staring at the surrounding three sides of the house. None of the windows were alight. The moonlight made their eyes glisten.

O'Doyle said: "And you think about this Nardinocchi "

Gil cut him off. There was movement on the little iron-railed balcony. He said in a taut whisper:

"Go around to the garage: maybe they're there. I'm going to talk to Nita."

Sebastian O'Doyle nodded, and slid off the right. Gil stood flat against the courtyard wall and studied the balcony above him. He couldn't see movement any more. But there was a darker blot among the shadows overhead.

He turned and suddenly raced across the moonlit tiles toward the outside steps. From above came a sudden scurry of quick movement.

He met her halfway up the steps. She recoiled with a little squeal of alarm and shrank back against the railing, her long, green eyes wide and frightened.

"Gil," she whispered, "what 'ave you done? where 'ave you gone?"

"Visiting," he said grimly, "Let's talk."

"But "

"Upstairs. Come on!"

She turned and went back to the balcony ahead of him. Moonlight caught on silver at the V of her bosom when she turned and faced him.

He said: "Nita!"

She crossed toward him with a sudden provocative hip sway. Gil eyed her figure sourly, and when she stood very close to him, he said: "Sit down, baby."

"But why, Gil? What is it?"

"Sit down!"

She sank into a bamboo chair slowly, staring at him. In the moonlight her lashes were very long, heavily beaded, She studied her slender brown hands in her lap, and the lashes folded softly against her cheek. Gil leaned against a

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post and considered her dark beauty.

He said abruptly: "Where did you get that clip, Nita?"

Her fingers darted to the single huge pin at her throat. "In . . . in Mexico City."

"You're lying!"

"But . . . but that's where they make these pins. All clever workmen in Mexico City. Make fine silver jewelry for ladies."

"But you didn't get it there. If you did, you got two of them. The one you've got on has a match to it, to wear on each side of your dress. Where is the other one, Nita?"

Her voice shook. "Why do you want to know, Gil?"

"I've got to know!"

"But why?"

Gil straightened. his feet spread a little on the balcony floor. He said: "I'll break your beautiful neck, baby."

The girl made a whimpering sound.

"E'll keel me!"

"Who?"

"Oban."

"Like he killed Nardinocchi, eh? You were there. Nardi grabbed at you and tore off one of your pins, didn't he?"

She suddenly shrieked: "I didn't kill him! I didn't! 'Oban did!"

Gil clapped his hand sharply over her mouth. She struggled frantically, her body warm and alive with fear against him. Gil's voice rose above her muffled sounds.

"And Hoban killed Joey Lane, didn't he?"

Her eyes stared wildly at him over his hand. Her head jerked up and down. Gil said:

"Listen to me, Nita. Hoban hasn't got a chance! O'Doyle came here with me. You know O'Doyle?"

Her body grew limp against him; hope faded from her green eyes. She nodded again, very slowly.

"Be good?" Gil asked.

She nodded a third time.

Gil took his palm from over her mouth. She sucked in air with a whistling sound. Her eyes were brightly bitter with hatred. Gil took out a gun O'Doyle had given him and waved it in a small, tight arc.

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"Let's visit the paint shop,"

HOBAN said: "Oh, my!"

His little muddy eyes slowly drifted from one person to the other. They settled on Sebastian O'Doyle, on the concrete floor. The Mexican cop's head was bleeding. Evidently, he had run into trouble.

He sat with his back against a wheel of the convertible sedan; his eyes were open, fixed on the toes of his shoes before him.

Hoban's glance flicked next to the Ellisons. Francis Ellison held a gun. He was a tall man, with sleek white hair and a thin, harshly lined face. His eyes were bitter. Mrs. Ellison stood behind him, staring. Hoban lifted his meaty shoulders in a twitching shrug.

"I do not have them. You can see for yourself. Flores and I searched the car, tore it apart. They are not in the car. Nardinocchi must have taken them and hidden them somewhere,"

The brown-eyed woman said: "Or that man—that Gil Boyd."

Hoban nodded slowly. "Or Gil Boyd. didn't know he was a detective."

Francis Ellison said in a grating voice: "I think you're lying, Hoban! I'll give you till the count of three to produce those emeralds!"

"But I don't have them!"

"One "

Hoban's muddy eyes jerked to Flores, The Mexican stood with his hands raised, his face yellow with fear.

"Two "

Gil said from the doorway: "I, got 'em!"

The figures froze into a startled tableau. Hoban's lips came back over bare yellow teeth. Flores' breath sighed. Neither Ellison nor his wife stirred.

Gil Boyd stepped into the vast, barnlike garage, pushing Juanita in ahead of him. His eyes moved to O'Doyle on the floor.

He said: "I've got the emeralds. I've got all the answers, too! Stand still, Ellison!"

Ellison didn't. He dropped to one knee, twisting about to face Gil. The gun in his hand bucked and roared, and Juanita screamed. It was a high, piercing scream, on one note, It didn't seem ever to end. She clutched at her breast and took two steps backward.

Hoban made a snarling noise. His vast bulk lunged forward, brushing aside Mrs. Ellison. He smashed down on Ellison's thin figure like a wild juggernaut. His face wasn't pleasant. It was contorted with hate. His huge hamlike fist rose and fell, and Ellison's gun jerked and exploded once more.

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The sound was muffled in the folds of Hoban's huge body. The fat man went down, dragging Ellison to the floor with him. The white-haired man was underneath. He couldn't move. His face looked ghastly. Blood spurted over him from the hole in Hoban's middle.

Gil stepped forward as Mrs. Ellison moved. "Don't," he said.

Flores suddenly darted for the door. Gil stuck out a foot and the Mexican went skidding on his palms along the rough concrete floor. He came up with a knife glittering in his hand. Gil kicked once at it, and Flores screamed and clutched a shattered wrist.

Something clinked to the floor, spilling from one of Gil's trousers legs. He didn't look down. He kept his gun covering the circle of figures, his gray eyes narrowed and alert.

He was relieved when Sebastian O'Doyle climbed to his feet and picked up a gun. O'Doyle's eyes were fixed on the handkerchief that had come loose from around Gil's leg. Little bits of green brightness were scattered on the white floor,

O'Doyle whispered: "Golly! The emeralds!"

Gil nodded. "The emeralds."

HOURS later, he stood at the bar in the Hotel Centralia and watched O'Doyle carefully. The bar was almost deserted. The street outside was gray with the coming dawn.

O'Doyle said: "Tell me once more."

Gil twirled a glass around between his fingers. The barman leaned his elbows on the bar and stared at Gil with fascinated interest.

Gil said: "Hoban was head of the car stealing syndicate. Nardinocchi's place was just a last stop before shipping them over the border. Usually, the cars were danced here from all parts of the country; but Hoban's spotters worked in the local area, too, and picked out Ellison's car. Hoban had it jerked, and sent it to Nardi to be painted for export.

"What Hoban and Nardi didn't know, at first, was that Ellison and his wife had a tidy little racket all their own. Posing as tourists, they were smuggling emeralds into the United States from South America. So Hoban not only stole Ellison's car, but also Ellison's cache of stones.

"Ellison made private inquiries aside from the regular police routine and contacted Nardi, and probably offered him a split for the return of the car. Nardi tried to double-cross Hoban by doing so."

"Hoban didn't double-cross so easily. He knifed Nardi and left him for dead, but Nardi managed to live long enough to call me and give me enough leads to set me on the right track. That's all, and that's the last time I tell it."

Sebastian O'Doyle nodded soberly. He said: "Now try once more."

Gil took a pinch of salt between his fingers and looked at the bartender. The latter shoved a small tumbler of tequila toward him. Gil took a deep breath, inhaled the fiery liquor, took a quick lick of the salt, and then followed it with the chili sauce.

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He paused a moment, carefully alert. A slow smile spread over his lean face.

Sebastian O'Doyle said delightedly: "Is good, no?"

Gil said: "Is good. Yes!"