

RED IS FOR FOX

Roswell Brown

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The girl with red hair sucked up the last of a double chocolate soda through soggy straws, and grunted regretfully at the hollow sound of air replacing creamy liquid at the bottom openings of the two stems.

Above the drug store counter, an electric clock pointed to twenty-seven minutes after twelve. Her sherry-colored eyes watching the thin, crimson second-indicator slide quickly around the numbered circle. Miss Culver of the Noonan Detective Agency wondered what to do with the last half of her lunch hour,

The only trouble with meals at counters, where foaming double chocolates were mixed before your eyes, was speed. Too much time left over at the end. If you didn't happen to be in a neighborhood that lent itself to window-shopping—

Grace Culver grinned quickly and snapped her fingers in triumph. Of course! The Banner offices were only four blocks further downtown.

In the old days, when she had worked on the paper as a "sob sister," she often had grabbed food from this very counter between a murder scoop and a Famous—Actress—To—Divorce—Fifth—Husband interview. And she hadn't seen the old gang in weeks—Burton and Clancy and the rest. Time for a check-up.

The familiar store-fronts that lined the way to the newspaper's block-square building whipped past with remarkable speed as the girl's trim figure swung forward through the sidewalk crowd.

Her pointed little chin was lifted eagerly and her nostrils were quivering already in anticipation of the smell of the city desk. Printers' ink! She loved it.

The only thing in the world that could have made her toss up her reporter's job was the one to which she had gone with "Big Tim" Noonan's outfit. Her father had died in action on the city force, and it had taken five bullets to drop him. The tracking of malefactors, the swift action of cornering them and the thrill of bringing them in for justice, were as much in her blood as is speed in that of a finely-bred race horse.

Burton, the Banner's city editor, had liked her father. Partly because Sergeant Culver's official activities were pretty sure to be headline copy; partly because he was amused by the endless gadgets the police officer's mechanical brain was forever devising in his spare moments.

Trick keyrings, a knife with six blades, a combination bottle-opener—and—ice-pick. Burton had plenty of souvenirs of his friendship with the father of his former star reporter, and— A sign loomed up in front of Grace:

DAILY BANNER

She swung out of the sidewalk traffic, stepped under the arch where the two words were cut deep in an oblong granite block, and plunged into the building's cool interior,

RED IS FOR FOX

Burton was at his desk, sleeves rolled up, forehead furrowed. Galleys of type proof and cuts—a three-column layout —were spread before him on the cluttered working surface.

Across the story, as Grace approached, he was scrawling "Kill" with a stubby blue pencil.

"Hi, Mongoose!"

Burton's sad eyes lighted suddenly, in recognition.

"Culver! How be you? Haven't seen you in a month of—"

"I've been busy Sundays. Working."

As the city editor tossed down the galleys and swung his chair toward the corner of the desk on which his visitor had perched from long-standing habit, the blue word lay revealed in almost dramatic clarity.

"So they keep the lady bloodhound with her nose to the ground even on the Sabbath, eh?"

"Nope. This business was personal,"

Burton chuckled instantly.

"Now, if your old man were sitting there and telling me that, I'd know what he meant. Gimcracks."

Grace opened her purse with a deliberate snap and drew out a lipstick. She turned it deftly between her fingers, studying its polished surface. There was a queer look on her face.

"Gimcracks?" she repeated, innocently. But Burton took no notice of the interruption.

"What I wish is, you were back here working. Honest, Red, this business is getting me. Nothing breaks until after we're on the street, any more. And when I do get a story—phooey—it's a phony!"

He tapped the blue-penciled galleys with a discouraged forefinger, and Grace let her eyes follow the gesture. "—sensational arrest in his stateroom on the Sylvania," stared up at her. Then the blue word—"Kill."

"Go oil," Burton groaned. "Go on and read it. The scoop of the month. Then I'll tell you."

The redhead's practiced glance darted down the long, smudged columns, gleaning the highlights of the story and instinctively skipping the frills:

"Hon. John Ribden . . . known to have Tamarov rubies in his possession on leaving Plymouth . . . failed to declare . . . customs officials made two-hour search . . . the jewels were discovered hidden in the false top to a cane packed in one of the... sensational arrest . . . "

"It looks good," she said, at last.

"The 'Hon. John' gives it class, and I see you've landed some big-time art for it. What's wrong?"

"Only one little thing," Burton growled bitterly. "When they dragged this Ribden number into court, what should the jewels in the cane top turn out to be but a half-dozen red glass beads! Nothing to declare there. They had to let him go, of course."

"So?"

"So instead of 'International Crook Caught In Daring Smuggle Arrest,' for page one, column one—we've got maybe six inches of humorous human-interest stuff for the second section, on 'Were The Customs Officers' Faces Red?' You know. And no build-up for the art, so that's out too."

Grace leered at him wickedly.

"Now had the Hon. John only known, he'd doubtless have been a smuggler just to accommodate—"

"Be funny!" Burton was bitter. "And the pay-off is, he really got those stones into the country somehow! Scotland Yard cabled he had then—definite —when he left England. And why should he toss 'em overboard when the Sylvania was three days out to sea?"

The redhead, absent-mindedly lifting the lipstick toward her mouth as she listened, jerked it down abruptly with a soft grunt. She put it away in her purse; then pulled out another and went to work with it.

"You mean—headquarters thinks the cane was only a plant? Ribden left it where they'd find it, guessing that England had sent over a tip-off and he'd be searched?"

"You're going great."

"And then, when the stuff proved valueless and they couldn't hold him, he walked out scot-free with the real stones somewhere else in his luggage?"

"That," Burton conceded, "is the general idea. But where in blazes did he have 'em? The men detailed to the job tore his trunks wide open. Harry covered for us, and he said they left Ribden's stateroom looking like the end of a six-day 'Cruise to Nowhere.'"

Grace spoke softly.

"I'll bet you'd like to know where. I'll bet I would, too."

"What a story!" For an instant, rapture glowed in the city editor's ugly face. Then it faded.

"Nuts! You'll find that 'Red Faces In Court' drool on page seventeen tonight. And a squib in the society chatter about, 'The Hon. John Ribden, who arrived today, on the Sylvania, left town immediately for the Tallyho Inn near Lakeview, Conn. He comes from London for the Lakeview Hunt next Saturday.' Guess we'll have to run a hooch ad for the lead."

Grace stood up slowly, slipping the second lipstick back into her purse unobtrusively.

"Something may come up one of these mornings that'll surprise you, Mongoose. Keep the home fires burning."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning—nothing in particular." Burton's lips twisted into a dry smile. "Still figure on pulling rabbits out of any old hat, eh, Culver? I got to admit you always used to be able to."

Her parting shot was: "Why not? Given a hat with rabbits in it as a starter, of course."

Grace walked into the Noonan offices at exactly one minute past one, and a sepulchral voice boomed at her instantly:

"Late again, Miss Culver! I'm afraid you're fired!"

Grace grinned engagingly at the handsome face of Jerry Riker, Big Tim's other assistant, and thumbed her nose.

"That from our office boy! All right, But one more slight out of you, Jerry Riker, and I won't let you go fox hunting with Tim and me next Saturday."

"Tallyho!" Jerry roared instantly.

"That's right. The Tallyho Inn. At Lakeview, Connecticut. Getting to be quite a detective for a little feller, aren't you?"

Slowly, Jerry's broad smile faded. He studied the girl for a moment, as she took off her hat and fluffed out the waves of her bright hair before the office mirror.

"Say, Redsie—what's on your mind?" Without turning, she spoke into the glass.

"If six colored beads retailed for much more than three cents in the open market, there'd be a swell story in tonight's Banner. There's still a big-time crook at large, as it is. The smoothest smuggler of the season. Or Burton and headquarters and Scotland Yard are all fish. And me."

Quickly, concisely, she gave him the details of the Ribden incident. Jerry listened, grunting now and then as a salient feature of the story struck home. When she was finished, he grunted again.

"So what?"

"Don't you know?" Grace demanded.

"They pull a pinch on a guy who hasn't got any rubies. They find that out and let him go. Nothing to get all steamed up about in—"

There was acid in the redhead's voice as she answered.

"Why would a known crook hide six red beads in a detectably hollow cane, and leave 'em where the cops would be sure to find out?"

"Practical joker, maybe?"

"Some joke! Especially when Scotland Yard knew he took the rubies out of England. But if he once were arrested, and the charge had to be dismissed— Then, if he had the real stones on him somewhere else—"

"A pipe dream, Redsie!" Jerry scoffed.

Unruffled, Grace sat down at the desk marked "Miss Culver, secretary," and ran her fingers along the keyboard of her uncovered typewriter.

"So you say. But I'm going to dream it in Lakeview this week-end, big shot,"

"Quit kidding. Why, there's no case there!"

"No? If you were a woman, Riker, you'd wonder. Leaving aside the cane act, why should Ribden come all the way across the Atlantic for a second-rate fox hunt when there's plenty better in England?"

Jerry shrugged.

"Does sound useless, But maybe Ribden—"

"Maybe he knows that a lot of new-rich nitwits who want to crash the society rotogravures are always hanging around those affairs, over here. Dummies who'd fall like a thousand of brick for the Tamarov stuff, if he put on a smooth, silk-hat sales act. Easy-money boobs."

There was a moment's silence in the office.

"Supposing he has got the stones, Red? If Uncle Sam's pet ferrets couldn't unearth 'em, what chance have you? Anyhow, it's out of our territory. Tim will put his foot down flat."

"Tim," said Tim's secretary, "will love it! It's front-page publicity for the agency if we make a ten-strike, isn't it? Anyhow, I've got a hunch."

Jerry grinned.

"All right, pal. A-hunting we will go. But when the Honorable John turns out to be nothing but a guy who likes to chase foxes, are you going to blush?"

Grace was paying little attention to him. Her fingers were tapping out aimless words on the typewriter keys, while her eyes were fixed dreamily on the blank wall ahead of her:

RIBDEN—RENEGADE—RASCAL. RENOWNED REVENUE RENEGER RECEIVES RAP.
RETRIBUTION REACHES RUBY RUNNER RIBDEN.

What a head for the Banner! And what a case for the agency. If—

The fashionably dressed young lady stopped at the desk in the spacious lobby, listening to the switchboard operator intone a monotonously cheerful, "Tallyho Inn, Good afternoon."

"Yes, miss?"

She smiled at the clerk who was bowing her toward the register.

"The rooms for Miss Rossiter and her uncle, please. We wired from New York."

"Yes, miss." He turned the book to the "R" sheet, holding out a pen. "If you'll sign here. For your uncle, too?"

"Miss Rossiter, Mr. George Rossiter and companion, New York City." As she wrote the words, the girl's sherry-colored eyes were busy with the name above her own. She found the one she was looking for only three up the column. HM. John Ribden, valet, chauffeur, groom—London, England.

"Ha! Honorable John and Company, eh?"

"Beg pardon, Miss?"

"Nothing, thanks. It was just my false teeth clacking, I guess."

Smiling brightly, she turned from the desk. The clerk, bewildered, stared after her.

Not a bad-looking dish, what with that red hair and all, he decided. New money, to judge by the number of shining bracelets and the too-fancy clothes. Like a lot of the dames that tried to kick society for a goal at the Lakeview Hunts.

Miss Rossiter crossed the lobby slowly, looking over the crowd. In one corner, a tall, dark man in riding clothes was leaning against the wall doing nothing. Her eyes narrowed at sight of him, but she kept on toward the elevators.

"Pardon me, miss, but I think this is yours?"

The girl turned quickly, her heavy, darkened lashes fluttering helplessly she looked up at the man in riding clothes.

"My handkerchief! And I never even noticed dropping it. Uncle George would be that put out. He had it monogrammed in Paris, and only six cost him a fortune."

"Did they really?" The dark man's eyes were busy with the bracelets at her wrist. "Strange thing our initials should be the same. My name's John Ribden Miss—"

"Rossiter. Mabel Rossiter, from Tulsa. New York, just lately. Maybe you've heard of my Uncle George? He's the oil millionaire Rossiter. Owns half of Oklahoma. But I—I guess I shouldn't be talking to a perfect stranger like this."

"Why not?" Ribden smiled at her smoothly. "I think it was a lucky accident. Fate, perhaps. I was lonely, Miss Rossiter. Just over from England. Don't know a soul. Or may I say didn't know a soul?"

Miss Rossiter giggled, twisted her handkerchief, and whispered coyly, "Oh, Mr. Ribden!"

"That's fine! Won't you join me for a cocktail before dinner? That is, if your uncle—"

"Oh, Uncle George won't mind. He can't refuse me anything. Spends money on me like water. All these bracelets and things, I have dozens more upstairs. It's just outlandish how he throws good money around."

"The cocktail, then? A toast to Uncle George—and us?"

She nodded, giggled again, and stepped into the waiting elevator. The grille closed on Ribden's satisfied smile. The cage shot upward.

Three minutes later Miss Rossiter burst into Room 711, surprising two men in shirtsleeves midway of a game of double Canfield. The older one looked up at her under heavy eyebrows.

"Find anything?" The girl grinned.

"Found Ribden. Very drawing-roomish, he says to me, he says, 'A cocktail. A toast to us.' I'm fatal, I am."

"Or maybe it was that wristful of ice," Jerry Riker observed sourly. "How'd you work it?"

"The handkerchief gag. Old friends are the best, I always say. I recognized him right off, from Burton's art."

Tim Noonan snorted, shifting the weight of his powerful frame in the Inn's spindle-legged chair.

"Anything else, Redsie?"

"Plenty else. He isn't working alone. He's got at least three more, signed up as servants. Even a groom. But he didn't mention a horse."

"I'll still bet you even dough he's on the level," Jerry offered, flipping down a card. "Him and his whole troupe of trapeze artists."

Grace Culver began to strip off her bracelets, one by one.

"That's money you lose, or the salesman gleam in one dark stranger's eyes was a liar. Well— tonight tells the story, anyhow."

The long, black limousine shot like a metal arrow down a white ribbon of concrete. In the mirror above the chauffeur's seat, Grace could watch the eyes of the uniformed man at the wheel.

Like glittering buttons, they were— hard, soulless. Ribden's "Henry" looked more like an ape than like a gentleman's servant.

"It was a wonderful party, Mr. Ribden," she breathed, fluttering her lashes, "You certainly have been mighty nice to me, my first evening in Lakeview."

"Pleasure's been mine," Ribden answered suavely. She had dragged a lipstick out of her evening bag and he was watching the glitter of jewels at her wrist as she fingered it. His smile was set.

"Do—do all American girls carry those paint things around with them? Let me see it."

She handed over the tiny metal tube, and Ribden turned it between his fingers amusedly. Her eyes, fixed on his face as he played with the toy, were expressionless.

"Red," he purred. "The color of roses. Here you are. Miss Mabel. Look out! The catch on that bracelet of yours is loose."

The girl clutched at her wrist with a little cry of dismay.

"Oh, thank you! Uncle George paid four thousand dollars for that. I—I always seem to be losing his presents, don't I?"

"And I always have the luck to save them for you. It's a magnificent bracelet."

She nodded.

"Uncle George is nuts about—I mean, very fond of jewels. He buys anything like that if it happens to strike his fancy, no matter what the price is."

There! That was all the opening he needed! If he really was a smuggler— really had the stones—

Ribden leaned toward her a little.

"I wonder—but no, I guess not"

"What, Mr. Ribden? Please tell me."

"Well—like most Englishmen, Miss Rossiter, I'm not as well off as I once was. Taxes and all that, you know. Matter of fact, one of my minor reasons for coming over this trip was to see if I might find some chap who'd be interested in rubies. Some beauties. From the Ribden necklace—very famous—belonged to my grandmother—" Clapping her hands eagerly, the redhead seemed delighted.

"What a break, us meeting like this! If Uncle George took a shine to the— the Ribden rubies, he'd buy 'em in a minute! If only I could see them, so as to—you know, get up a sales talk."

Laughing softly, Ribden slipped a silver cigarette case from his vest pocket. He held it close to his side, so that his sleeve veiled it, and a quick, metallic click reached the ear of the girl beside him

"Here they are, Miss Mabel."

Lying against the smooth lining of the case's open lid as if it were a jeweler's tray, six blood-red stones glittered enticingly. Seemingly, they had been right in with the cigarettes. But that click had told its story. False compartment.

"So that's how—"

"What, Miss Mabel?"

"I was going to say—so that's how really fine rubies look. They're beautiful! But—how did you happen to have—"

"One doesn't dare leave them at the Inn. They're safer with me, in the case. It has—special adaptabilities."

Special adaptabilities! Something clicked suddenly in the redhead's incisive brain. The case had a familiar look as it lay in Ribden's outstretched fingers.

Her father had made a gadget like that once. She could remember sitting on the floor in their living room back home, while he did magic tricks with disappearing cigarettes on a rainy afternoon.

"Where—where did you buy it? The case, I mean? It's so unusual—"

He laughed sharply, at a joke too good to keep.

"It was made just after the war by a New York bobbie—cop, you'd call him, eh? I—managed to acquire it. A sort of souvenir." Grace looked down at the floor, screening her eyes. A red haze had risen before them suddenly. Her father's case! She recognized it now. The dirty—

Without turning, the girl said, "Could I bring Uncle George to your rooms to look at the rubies? That is, if he's still up when we get back to the Inn?"

"Certainly," Ribden said again.

"Uncle George" was still up. There was a tense, almost grim look to his rugged features when Grace walked into Room 711, twenty minutes later.

"You've been gone a long time, Redsie. I was beginning to—"

Deathly pale, she faced him.

"He's got the Tamarov stuff all right, Tim. It's on him now, in his cigarette case. And we're going to make the pinch right off!"

"Steady, Redsie. No rush. If you're sure there's evidence—"

"The dirty rat! Do you know how he smuggled those stones into the country? In the secret compartment of a gadget my own police—sergeant father put together, years ago!"

The door marked 323 swung inward, revealing a man in valet's uniform. Above a stiff collar, his long, pointed face stretched like a weasel's. Crafty. Cruel.

"Yes, sir?"

"The Honorable John Ribden," the elder of the two men in the outside hall requested distinctly. "Name's Rossiter. My niece, here—"

From the room beyond the panel, suave and smooth, Ribden's voice reached them.

"I'm expecting Miss Rossiter and her uncle, Muggs."

The door opened wider, and Muggs stood aside. Tim stepped across the threshold, with Grace and Jerry at his heels. The door closed softly. "Good evening again. Miss Mabel." A queer smile flicking his lips, the tall, dark man in evening clothes stepped toward them, Grace, cold as death inside, smiled back at him.

"This is my Uncle George, Mr. Ribden. And this other gentleman"—pointing to Jerry—"is my cousin. Uncle George just simply had to see the rubies right off. I told you how he was about jewels—"

"Yes." Something cold stirred in Ribden's eyes. "May I offer you a cigarette, Mr. Rossiter, while you examine the stones? I think you'll find them—very interesting."

His long, muscular hand moved slowly to the vest pocket where he carried his case.

A sudden grunt of surprise burst from Tim's lips, and the big detective lunged forward.

"Too late—Mr. Noonan!"

A sinister little revolver, miniature but somehow the more grim for its very size, was leveled at Tim's chest in the steady fingers of the man before him.

The grizzled agency chief checked his forward motion so abruptly that his big frame seemed to rock with the instant tension of its trained muscles.

Into his side pocket, his right hand flashed with the same uncanny speed. And in the identical split-second, Ribden yelled: "Henry! Puss!"

From the curtained windows opposite the door, a thin dart of orange flame ripped at the shadows. There was no sound except a soft, ugly ping! But Tim spun, his left shoulder jerking backward.

"Duck, Redsie!"

The shout was Jerry's. As if a spring had been released beneath his feet, he vaulted the low table between himself and the window alcove. Like a human bullet he hurtled toward the curtained recess.

As he came, the heavy hangings whipped aside. Henry stood there, smoking, silenced gat clutched ready in his paw, his brute face working.

"Jerry! He's—"

But before the startled cry could leave Grace's lips, the gun in Henry's hand had spat its yellow fire again. Straight at the oncoming detective it lined.

Jerry stiffened, gasped, plunged forward again.

Before Henry's finger could tense for a third time on its trigger, Tim's helper was upon him. The thug's gun arm jerked upward, Jerry Riker's fingers clamped desperately about its hairy wrist. Jerry's left, a knotted fist, pounded the other man's chest.

From behind her, Grace heard the rush of running feet. She spun, ducking sidewise. The lanky body of Mugs, the supposed valet, hurtled past her, clawing,

On the desk beside her lay the usual equipment of an hotel writing table. An inkstand. A paperweight. A letter opener. Various pens.

Her clutching fingers closed on the fancy handle of the paperweight—a carved brass monkey rearing on its hind legs above a square metal block. Her arm jerked back.

Fingers of steel gripped about it instantly, twisting her around with such violence that her knees buckled beneath her and she all but stumbled to the floor.

Her own fingers fanned, twisting open with a sickening wrench. The paperweight, forcibly—freed, crashed to the floor with a heavy thud and slithered away from her, scarring the high polish of the bare wood with one sharp corner.

"You damned little hellcat!"

The man who panted the vicious words, the man who held her, was a stranger. The one Ribden had called "Puss." Bigger than Henry. Bigger, even, than Tim. The "groom" of the Tallyho Inn register, probably.

Gasping, Grace struck at his sinister face with her free hand. Its pointed red nails ripped at the flesh of her captor's cheek leaving a trail of long, angry marks.

Swearing with pain, the big man jerked her arm again. This time the force of it threw her to the floor, twisting her body forward.

Tim had his own gun out now, and his practiced hand had lifted. But Ribden was there ahead of him. His pint-sized weapon, deadly accurate, belched a thin, silent fan of fire.

The older detective groaned. His lifted gun arm flapped like a broken wing and fell harmless at his side.

His heavy frame swayed as if he were beginning to dance—went limp—crashed floorward, its plunge broken momentarily by the arm of a wing chair along-side.

At the window, Henry's free fist had swung up in a wide, swift arc to contact Jerry's defenseless jaw. Grace saw him totter backward, the force of the blow breaking his wound-weakened grip on the thug's gun arm.

Ribden laughed savagely.

Puss suddenly flung her from him, down to the floor. Stunned, breathless, she lunged frantically after the lost paperweight.

The hoodlum's stub-toed boot, viciously swung, crashed violently into her face. Searing, ghastly pain tightened her muscles. Blood spurted from her mouth.

Ribden, his voice a coarse roar stripped completely of its fake English accent, was sneering above her.

"Try to put the finger on me, will you? Miss Rossiter! I knew you the minute you recognized your old man's cigarette case in the car. I'd heard his kid had turned dick with Noonan's outfit, and there was no mistaking the way you took what I said about"

Puss swung his foot again. Its heel, descending with terrific force, plowed into Grace's stomach. The breath seemed to explode from her lungs with the roar of a collapsing thirty-story building.

The room blacked out like the end of a sketch in vaudeville,

Grace was sitting in a chair, her head lolling weakly against its high back, when the lights came up again. Her whole body ached, and her jaw and the pit of her stomach were centers of fiery agony.

Moaning softly, she opened her eyes. Puss was standing over her, his undershot jaw set, the silenced automatic with which Henry had downed Jerry Riker held warily in his competent hand.

Henry and Muggs and Ribden had vanished. At first, she thought herself alone with the gorilla who was guarding her. Then, with a sick little gasp, she saw Tim.

He lay on the floor, clotted blood darkening a bullet gash just above one temple. He was alive and conscious, his gray eyes open and snapping with helpless rage. but it would have been impossible for him to have moved a muscle.

Tape held his mouth firmly shut. His arms and legs were bound so tightly that little bulges of cloth stood up on either side of the ropes that held them.

"Tim!"

She knew that he heard her impulsive cry, for the corners of his eyes tightened instantly. But as she started forward, the butt of her guard's automatic prodded with brutal warning into her throbbing stomach.

"Take it easy. sister."

Quivering, she relaxed against the tall back of her chair. Her eyes lifted, meeting the cold grin that bared the gunman's discolored teeth.

"No use trying to bolt, redhead. Nor yell neither. I got my orders, and if you want to be tough—well—"

He didn't need to finish the sentence. His glittering eyes spoke, for him. He would think nothing more of killing a woman than of blowing his nose.

The girl from Noonan's watched him warily.

"Where—what did they do with Jerry?"

Puss leered.

"You'll find out. But it ain't nothing to worry you. He won't be coming back again."

Footsteps sounded suddenly in the hall outside, careful, quick. More than one person's. They stopped at the door. Puss was tense.

"Who is it?"

"O. K."

Metal clicked in the lock as the guard relaxed. The panel swung inward. Ribden strode across the threshold, followed by his two henchmen. He wore a coat over his immaculate full dress. But there was nothing else left of the polished London gentleman.

Muggs closed the door behind him.

"All set to take the other one, boys. As soon as the hall's clear."

He swung toward Puss.

"Everything under control, eh? We ran into a couple of night owls downstairs in the side hall, taking the young guy out. Looked like he was only another drunk, though, with Muggs and Henry holding him up. He's safe enough in the car."

Grace leaned forward quickly, stopping only when her chest contacted the evil weapon in her guard's motionless hand.

"Where is he?"

Ribden laughed nastily,

"So the little frill from Tulsa's come to, has she? Almost had me fooled with that sucker act of yours, sweetheart. Almost."

"Where's Jerry?"

The jewel smuggler leaned against his writing table, staring down at her with mocking eyes as cold as the steel of his underling's steady gat, as hard as the rubies in his vest pocket.

"Where your other cop pal's going to join him, Miss—Culver. Downstairs. In my car." He grinned slowly. "Know why they call this place Lakeview, don't you? And the lake's one of the deepest in Connecticut. Lots of strangers upset canoes out there and—sometimes they don't even find 'em afterward."

Despite herself, Grace shuddered. Death by lead poisoning was bad enough. But this way—sunk without a trace—bound helplessly—without a chance—

"You—you dirty—"

"Save it, sister!" Suddenly Ribden went into action. "All right, you guys! The side hall ought to be clear by now. Sling your coat around him, Muggs, and cover up the ropes. Let's go!"

Bearing Tim between them, his taped mouth screened by the seemingly accidental disarrangement of a silk muffler, Muggs and Henry vanished into the hall. Ribden paused for an instant.

"Watch her careful, Puss. We'll be back for her when the other two are—settled. Such an unfortunate canoe ride!"

The door closed behind him with a sharp, final slam.

Panting, with her hands gripping the arms of the chair until their knuckles went white, the girl from Noonan's stared at the blank panel.

"Good—by, dicks," Puss laughed softly.

Good—by, dicks! Tim and Jerry—her two best friends in the world—finished off in cold blood. And it was her fault. All her fault.

She had been the one to start after Ribden. No client had hired them to bring him in.

Nothing but her own driving desire to outsmart a clever crook—and then her fatal anger at him, for having, come by one of her own father's trick inventions to use in his criminal schemes, had betrayed them. And now in a crowded, fashionable Hotel, death had trapped them. People were everywhere around, sleeping peacefully. But no help. And if she screamed, she would be dead before they got to her.

Tim and Jerry—finished off because of her.

The thought kept pounding through her head, in time with the hammering beat of her pulse. The ache of her beaten body was forgotten. Sheer horror had crowded it out.

Tim and Jerry. It mustn't happen! Only a minute—two minutes—three— and Ribden's car would be on its way to the lake. It mustn't happen!

Her sherry-colored eyes, fringed with the exotic mascara of the silly Miss Rossiter of Tulsa, lifted appealingly to Puss's pock-marked face. She smiled tremulously.

"Mister—Mister Puss—"

The big gunman swung the automatic easily between the knobby fingers of his huge paw, leering brutally.

"What's biting you, sister?"

"I—do I look pretty bad where you kicked me in the face? Is my mouth— you know—messed up?"

Puss collapsed against the table, bellowing with harsh mirth. His eyes became little, piglike slits, glittering derisively.

"Dames! That's typical, huh? The guys they're supposed to be taggin' with get taken for the well-known breeze around, and what's the first thing they think about? Is my mouth messed up!"

Grace pouted pitifully.

"You don't have to laugh, do you? I'm scared. Maybe Ribden won't be so tough on me if—if I look all right." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Some fellows are like that. They aren't all hard to get, like you."

Still snorting, Puss scraped up something from the table with his free hand and flung it into her lap. It was her own evening bag, dropped on the floor when he had felled her.

"Pretty up if you want to, baby! But you'll have to be good. The boss is kind of particular."

Out of the bag, Grace drew a small beveled hand mirror and her lipstick. The same lipstick she had fingered in Editor Burton's office—was it a thousand years ago?

There was a long welt alongside her jaw and a trickle of half-dried blood across her chin. She needed fixing up, all right. But instead, she watched Puss in the round glass.

"Gee! You sure did do things to my map, for fair!"

"That's what pretty often happens when gals get doing tricks with paperweights," he chuckled.

The redhead's big eyes lifted again.

"And I'll bet you'd kill me in a minute if I moved out of this chair. Where would you aim for, Mr. Puss? I mean—a real killing expert like you?"

Puss raised the automatic illustratively.

"Right between them pretty eyes," he announced.

The pretty eyes widened.

"Like—like this?" She lifted her lipstick as though it were a gun, and pointed it between his thick brows. Her arm was extended. Puss bellowed jovially as he leaned toward it.

"That's the ticket, gorgeous! Ready—aim—"

Grace's thumb stiffened quickly. Puss caught the blinding stream of acid in his eyes before the smile could leave his lips.

Even as his hands flew upward, the girl's tense body hurtled from the chair. With unerring direction, she dove for the gun in his momentarily relaxed fingers.

Before he could check her, she had jerked his right arm back. The automatic catapulted from his hand. And Grace was after it.

"You—you scrimy little—"

A soft ping cut across his words, silencing them abruptly.

He staggered backward, sobbing, and crumpled into the wing chair. A door slammed. Feet in high-heeled slippers pounded the passageway outside.

The side hall. Ribden had said something about it. That must mean the car was waiting in the darkness of the porte-cochere on the Lakeview side of the Tallyho. The least conspicuous place Henry could have parked it.

Downward stairs slanted away from her into lower darkness. No time to waste in rousing the elevator at this hour of the morning. Down through the gloom she plunged, the wounded thug's automatic clutched to her breast, her flying heels beating a desperate tattoo on the hardwood treads.

With Tim's, heavy bulk to delay him, Ribden's progress must have been slower. There was a chance that the limousine hadn't gotten under way yet, on its grim errand.

A slim chance. It had taken so many precious minutes to keep Puss from getting suspicious.

She was in the first floor hall now, swinging left toward the small green door at its far end. Her breath was jerking with the effort of her precipitous descent. They must still be there— must—

The sudden, explosive roar of a warming motor reached her ears as the door slammed open. Across the shadowed side porch she hurtled. A glittering black metal shape was sliding away from her, past the low railing.

With a soft sob of eagerness, she flung her hard young body across the low barrier—forward and down.

The big car swerved between the stone gateposts marking the Tallyho driveway and swung eastward on the high road. It picked up speed as it whipped along the downgrade into the sleeping village. The white road shimmered beneath it.

Crouching on the trunk rack, her left arm caught through one of the straps and the toes of her pointed slippers wedged between the cross-pieces of the precarious platform, Grace felt a chill wind lifting the loose hair from her forehead.

For the first few minutes she could do nothing but cling dizzily to her unsteady position, listening to the hum of tires beneath her and breathing heavily.

Gradually, while the pounding in her temples lessened, she was able to swing her weight forward to gain a securer balance.

Then, transferring the automatic momentarily to her clamped teeth and working upward little by little, she pulled herself erect with her right arm, gripping the metal trunk with rigid fingers.

Slowly, her eyes came into line with the small window at the back of the car's shining body.

Against the reflection of the headlights, she could make out the figures inside with comparative clarity.

Ribden was at the wheel, with Muggs crouching alongside. In the back seat, Henry sat erect—supervising the two helplessly trussed shapes that had been dumped in beside him.

No sooner had her face appeared at the window than the smuggler spotted it in the mirror ahead of him.

His startled gasp called Muggs's attention to the extra passenger. Grace saw the man beside the driver begin to turn, sensed rather than saw the weapon rising in his hand as he moved.

It was the long chance now.

She released her right-hand grip on the trunk and snatched the automatic from between her teeth. It was her left arm, wound through the strap, and her firm toehold on the rack beneath her, that must keep her with the hurtling death car.

Aiming point-blank through the window, she pulled the trigger.

Glass, shattering, sounded louder than the muffled explosion. Muggs froze suddenly. A loud, gurgling sigh broke between his lips.

He pitched forward to the floor of the car, hampering Ribden's movements at the wheel. Instantly, the machine swerved.

The girl on the rack, taken by surprise, felt herself going.

A startled scream tore from her throat. Her left arm tightened on the strap and held, while the hand which still managed to clutch the revolver clawed for a new grip on the slippery trunk.

In that one dizzy, sickening instant before she was safe again, she saw the lights of Lakeview's main street glowing beneath them—not more than a quarter of a mile down the hill. And, beyond, the black flatness of the lake.

The scream had given Ribden, kicking Muggs's limp body free of the gear shift, his cue.

From side to side of the road the big car swerved, increasing its speed to one which only a madman would risk on the hill's steep curves.

Grace saw the world spinning about her, streaking past, lifting, lowering—a dizzy nightmare of trees and sky and rocks whirled together. He was doing his grim best to lose her.

She closed her eyes, clinging desperately.

Back and forth across the highway they zigzagged, every swerve of the speeding car tearing her tense body away from its crouching hold against the trunk's smooth back.

The redhead was sobbing with the strain of it now, and her left arm—her one anchor to life—was numbing rapidly.

Forward—forward—

Suddenly, light burst above her. Dimly, she realized that they were tearing down the deserted main thoroughfare of the village. And just beyond lay the lake.

It was now—or never.

Gripping the automatic close against her and pointing straight down, she pulled the trigger.

There was a ghastly roar as the bullet plowed home through the tread of the humming tire. For the space of a breath, nothing happened. Then everything happened at once. The limousine cut sickeningly, completely out of control. One back door flew open, and out of it a screaming figure sprang—or was flung.

Rocketing sideways, the front end of the car brought up against the brick wall of a corner store. Plate glass shattered. Steel ripped. Some one shrieked hideously.

Grace clung madly to the strap—still her one hope. With the impact, she felt herself lifting, torn ruthlessly from her foothold. Then she was slammed earthward again. The taut strap, breaking her fall, snapped with a vicious twang!

She sprawled across the pavement, on her hands and knees. Blood spurted from an open gash across one palm. Her skirt ripped noisily from waist to ankle.

But she was alive.

The automatic had landed near her on the sidewalk, glittering in the light of an overhead lamp.

Dazed, moving more from instinct than from reason, she scooped it up. Staggering blindly, she circled the wrecked car.

Ribden, his face cut and bloody, was struggling to free himself of the hampering wheel. Behind him, in the unmangled rear of the machine, two trussed figures on the floor were squirming healthily.

"Don't move, East Side Englishman!" the girl from Noonan's panted.

Ribden snarled, ceasing his struggles at sight of the automatic. Strange voices shouted him down, coming from everywhere. Strange footsteps were running. Help.

"That one that jumped is dead, looks like. Broken back. Gee, constable, what a—"

Grace slumped quietly to the pavement.

Burton, city editor of the Banner, stopped in at Grace's New York boarding house on Sunday afternoon, to thank her for the special telegram.

"Scooped the town! Oh, boy, what a layout! You sure pulled a juicy rabbit while you were at it, Culver."

The redhead was balancing a lipstick in one hand and an empty cigarette case in the other. She had been working on a gadget when her caller had walked in. A seemingly harmless compact that could do everything but talk.

"Glad to help," she said dreamily. "You know, Mongoose—breaks are funny. That crook had my lipstick in his hand once, and he never guessed. All he said was: 'Red. The color of roses.' "

Burton grinned down at her flaming hair, remembering the things her old man had done until five bullets stopped him.

"The color of foxes, you mean. You're a smart one, all right, kid. Culver to the last hair of you."

Grace grinned back.

"Foxes. That reminds me—we never did get to the Lakeview Hunt. I wonder could there have been a story in it? Or maybe a case?"