

Phantom Pirate

Roswell Brown

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The redhead peered across the rail into a night fog like gray velvet, and listened to the muffled slap of waves far below her.

"Many brave souls lie asleep in the deep," Jerry Riker mourned noisily. "So be-ware, bee-ee-ware!"

The girl grunted.

"Always the tactful little flatfoot! Davy Jones's locker is just the thought to leave with the last of the merry-makers, as they pull for the shore. The Riker touch!"

On the tossing black water directly underneath, the last ship-to-shore launch for the evening had nosed alongside the looming hulk of Willy Tizner's anchored Golden Galleon. The big gambling boat—a reclaimed ocean liner—lowered over the smaller craft like a duck on a frog pond, rising and falling with the swell.

Overside, the last of Tizner's departing patrons began climbing down the stairs to meet their power motor ferry for the choppy miles in to shore. Topsy shouts echoed back up the metal wall.

"There goes Wanda Sylvester," red-headed Grace Culver indicated absently. "She's with that phony Count de Villo again to-night."

"Yeah. Couldn't see either of 'em for the dame's heirloom emeralds, though. She's going to get badly bruised if that six-foot-something husband of hers ever catches wise to them. He ain't the kind that fools."

"Gentle like a bull, you hear."

The motor launch, loaded with its final batch of gamblers and dancers, was nosing away from the Galleon's side as she spoke. Its prow knifed the drifting fog and vanished, pulling the crowded cabin after it into oblivion.

Grace yawned.

"Let's go inside and see if Tom's finished telling Tizner that the Noonan Detective Agency wants none of his ill-gotten gold."

The Galleon's ornate saloon seemed strangely deserted as they tramped back into it. Half an hour before, it had been filled with a chattering, well-dressed, hilarious mob.

But since she had come aboard an hour ago, the redhead had been too busy wondering what Tizner would offer "Big Tim" to more than notice any of them. In the early hours of the afternoon, lean, dapper Wally had sauntered into the Agency's office—and had gotten as far as saying he had a job for them that meant money. Real money. Then Tim Noonan's gruff rumble had interrupted.

"I don't mix in on but one side of the law, Wally."

"My Galleon's a hundred per cent legal, that far off shore."

"Sure. But it's probably still no go."

"Listen, Tim, have I ever been caught pulling a raw one? You'd snap up a case like this, if it was ashore. A little salt water doesn't make it crooked."

In the end, they had compromised.

The Agency trio was to come out that night as guests of the management. They were to look the gambling ship over while it was running full tilt. Then Wally would make his proposition. If Tim still thought the deal shady, it was off and no hard feelings.

"Wonder what Tizner wants us to do for him?" mused Grace. "Do you suppose Tim's changed his mind?"

"I should play guessing games!" Jerry scoffed.

There were only three figures left near the long bar that extended across one entire end of the big room—two at the rail and one behind the counter wiping glasses. The girl's sherry-brown eyes took in the full expanse of carved mahogany.

"It's a fair night's take," the gambling ship's owner was admitting.

"Thirty thousand, up or down. Hey, there, Miss Culver-Riker! Tell Sandy what you're drinking. Tim likes my Scotch."

"Make it two."

"Make it three."

They stood in line. Wally shoved a fat canvas bag across the slab to his bar-keep. "Sandy," also the trusted after closing cashier, opened a wall safe midway of the bottle-covered shelves behind him—a safe masked by a good racing print framed in narrow red.

"Lousy spot for a till, Wally," Big Tim observed, between sips. The man in the apron slid the print in place again.

"Right public."

"Sure. That's my notion. Not so easy to try a holdup during business hours, with two hundred witnesses in the room."

"How about after closing?"

"When I leave at night, the bag goes ashore with me. Sandy guards it, like now, while I go over the books."

Tim stared into his glass.

"Just where would this fancy watchman's job for us fit in?"

"Mostly for this slack hour after closing every night. I'm absolutely legal, Tim. But I get darn little, protection, this far out—in case anything happens."

"Anything likely to?"

"I – well, I've had some ugly threat notes this past week. I can't take chances. One haul, like to–night, might ruin me."

Big Tim grinned, tipped back his lion–sized head to swallow.

"You couldn't take thirty G's on the chin and live? With a plant like this floating palace?"

"Thirty G's, sure!" Wally Tizner's eyes met the veteran detective's. "But not a quarter million more than that."

"A quarter of – Hey!"

"I know what I told you, Tim. The thirty are my own cut. But often times I have to accept customers' stuff as security. It's not mine. If a crook lifted something big, I could be sued for my shirt."

It was Grace who asked the next question.

"Like to–night, you said?"

Tizner picked up the dog–eared ledgers Sandy had dragged from under the bar.

"Like to–night. Ever hear of the Sylvester emeralds? Sure you have! One of the best necklaces in New York. It's in that bag!"

"Whew" Jerry whistled.

"Exactly. Whew! Security for a gambling loss not a tenth of its value. To–morrow, I'll receive the cash from Mrs. Sylvester and turn back the jewels. But figure my spot if anything happened to 'em."

He smiled tightly, turned from the bar with his heavy books.

"Well, let me know what you three decide. I'll be in my cabin with the ledgers. Sandy'll see to your drinks."

The saloon's swinging doors closed behind him. Grace looked at Tim. Tim looked at Jerry. Sandy moved discreetly away down the bar, leaving them clear for their powwow.

"How about it, Tim?" Jerry asked.

"Wally acts like he's scared, all right. A gambler doesn't scare easy. But – I think he's worried."

Across Tim's thoughtful words, the muffled putt–putt of an auxiliary motor drifted in from the foggy night. It was time for the launch to be getting back from shore for them.

"I'd be plenty scared myself," said Jerry slowly, "with that much green lightning in my till."

"Those threat notes," Grace mused. "Read any of 'em, Tim?"

The grizzled head shook slowly.

"Not yet. Time for that if we—"

"Reach for the rafters, you!"

The cold voice whispered its command, low and harsh, from somewhere behind. It wasn't the kind of voice you played games with. It was a sound with sudden death behind it.

Wheeling, the Agency trio lifted their arms up straight. Grace caught a sidelong glimpse of Sandy as she turned. The freckled barkeep was already facing the swinging doors – and his eyes were bulging like golf balls. Sandy was scared at what he saw. Plenty scared.

And with good reason. The man at the door was – five men! And they were men without faces! As they lurked in the shadows – four spread in a line at the doors and the leader braced against the boat's roll a few steps ahead – there seemed to be blank spaces between their upturned collars and their pulled-down caps.

The realest thing about them was the five stubby guns that covered the big room. Those guns "meant business. The weapon in the leader's hand held on his victims without a quiver.

"Line up, you!" The hoarse, deadly whisper that served him for a voice only added grimly to the fantastic effect of the man from the fog. "That's the way! Flat against the bar! I'm not fooling!"

Nor was he. The three trained detectives could tell killers from bluffers like a layman could tell red from green. And that voice belonged in the killer class. His speed attack had caught them where he wanted them. A reach for a gun would be a reach for a coffin.

The trio lined up.

"That's it!" The "Whisperer" chuckled his satisfaction. "Now! Two of you boys behind me scam out to the rail where we came over. Take care of any of this tub's deck crew that show from below. Two of you stay as is. You dicks keep hanging onto the sky. And you – you behind the bar – get busy on the safe!"

At her shoulder, Grace could hear the breath sob along Sandy's fear-tightened throat. But the little fellow was game. He kept his head, fighting for his chief's property.

"Safe's outside in the office, fella. If – if you j–just let me go in there—"

The cold chuckle sighed through the tense stillness again. There was no humor in it. The man took a step forward, and the redhead saw suddenly what had happened to his, to all of their faces.

She whistled softly. They wore black silk stockings pulled over their heads – masks so sheer they could see out easily, yet without the slightest chance of detection!

"Quit stalling, mug! The safe's right there behind you – back of that picture of the horse race. I've been coming here night after night for more than my health. Come on! Let's see you move!"

The creak of floorboards back of the bar spelled Sandy's movement. It was slow and grudging – but it was toward the safe.

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The Whisperer advanced slowly. His gun covered the line-up, and against the wall behind him the two remaining guards made it three grim muzzles with the same purpose.

"Snap it up. there! I want that sack Tizner stows his jack in. And I want it fast!"

The combination clinked under Sandy's Fingers. Grace could hear the little grunt of satisfaction from the masked pirate ahead of her, as the steel panel swung open.

Then came the thud of the small canvas bag striking on polished mahogany, and the forward slice of the Whisperer's arm as he readied. And then ---

From somewhere back of the bar, Sandy must have scooped up a secreted revolver – with more desperate courage than good common sense.

A yell of warning bellowed from the thugs near the door, and they charged. As the girl from Noonan's ducked, a roar like the end of Time blasted the tense silence of the Galleon's gaudy gaming room.

The floor was the place to be when the line of fire was almost directly through you and when there was a service automatic to be fished out of a closed evening purse, in split-seconds.

The semiprotection of a chair loomed in front of her as the redhead's fingers ripped at the catch of her bag. Feet thudded the floor. She saw Tim leap back. Jerry grab toward his shoulder holster. Somebody screamed.

Across the table that belonged to her chair, one of the thugs dove in a foot-first plunge that landed him on his heels at Jerry's side a fractional instant before the dick could get his gun free. The masked tough didn't hesitate.

As "Big Tim's" assistant ducked --- too late---a clubbed gat took him alongside the ear with all the force of the man's deadly plunge. Jerry's gray eyes blanked.

He slumped toward the masked man. His assailant sidestepped, and the young detective crashed into the table, overturning it. He limped, slumped to the floor, fingers still clawing. Grace couldn't see what was happening to Tim himself. The fancy clasp on her bag, a Christmas gift with the habits of most of them, had picked the wrong time to jam. Dynamite wouldn't blast it.

She dropped the purse suddenly, and flung her trim, hard body in a low dive for the legs of the lead pirate. They were spread wide a scant yard away from her.

That might have worked, if Sandy had still been in action. But after that one shot – it had fanned from the Whisperer's weapon, not the barkeep's – there had been no movement behind the mahogany.

The nearest of those feet, cased in a square-toed fisherman's boot, rose to meet her as she tackled football fashion. The Whisperer knew something about the game himself, it seemed.

Especially about punts. He made a beauty, with the redhead's jaw as the pigskin. There was power like a mule's in that kick. She was hoisted clear out of the line of her tackle.

Back against the brass rail, she hurtled. Orange fire blotted out the room, spreading over everything in a jiggling screen. Grace's outflung arms flapped like a pair of loose sails and contacted nothing.

The thud of running feet pounded through her reeling consciousness. She heard a shout, followed by the click of metal in metal. The swift hammer of heels on wood diminished along the deck outside. She shook her battered head, moaning.

Instantly, a big hand found hers. Her eyes opened looking into Tim's. He drew her to her feet with a gentleness unexpected in a grizzled, rough-and-ready police veteran like Timothy Noonan.

"All in one piece, Redsie?"

"Sure! But – but where—"

"They took us, alright. One of 'em got to my gun ahead of me and kept me covered. Jerry's out from a crack on the skull, but he's coming around. And Sandy—"

Sandy spoke for himself – too well. Grace saw with a sick shudder the significant limpness with which the stocky, aproned figure was sprawled against his bar. One arm was outflung across the counter, fingers still clutching stiffly as if for his unused weapon; and his bloody head lolled against it. There wasn't much left of his face.

"Poor devil! Where are they?"

"Got clear, with Jerry's gun and mine and the barkeep's. And we're locked in. They fixed the door from the outside."

As if to emphasize the helplessness of the situation, the mocking putt-putt-putt of a motor coughing to life lifted from the water under the ship's side. The pirates were making good on their get-away.

Grace shouted.

"My bag, Tim! There's an automatic in it! We can't let 'em hand us this big a berry!"

The gift clasp, even in Tim's awkward fingers, worked perfectly now that it was almost too late. He had his red-bearded assistant's weapon in his hands while she still was talking. Like a misshapen greyhound, his massive body streaked across the room.

Cra-ack!

The shot splintered wood where it would do the most good, and another followed on its heels as quick as the veteran Agency chief's trigger finger could twitch.

Grace, having reassured herself with a glance at the slowly reviving Jerry, was at the big man's shoulder when the shattered metal fragments of the lock rattled onto the deck outside.

Through the battered swinging doors Big Tim plunged, with the redhead behind him. Fog, thicker than ever, blotted out the open deck so that it was invisible more than a few feet ahead. Instinct and memory had to guide him to the rail.

Below, somewhere in the swirling gray cotton, the roar of the auxiliary motor began to draw away. Side by side at the rail, leaning over the Galleon's black side, the pair from the Agency strained their eyes for a glimpse of the escaping pirates. The fog was even gray, with no solid shadows moving in it.

Flame sprouted twice from the automatic extended in Tim's hand. But he was shooting blind and his target must know it. The defiant roar of the motor, never slacking, grew fainter. The Whisperer was gone.

"He – he foxed us, Tim!"

"Yep."

They looked each other in the eye. "Tizner's launch will be plenty late, trying to find the Galleon in this pea soup. And that's the only way we could chase 'em, Redsie."

"That's out, all right. Hey! Tizner! What about him?"

They wheeled together, lurching up the obscured deck at a stumbling run. In crew quarters below, the racket might have been muffled. But the owner's cabin lay forward on the saloon deck.

Where was Wally? Why hadn't the shots, the yells, the unmasked motor of the escaping launch, brought him into the picture?

They readied the door marked PRIVATE, elbow to elbow. It stood open. Tim shoved across the high step, checked sharply, stood aside to let the girl behind him see.

There lay an answer to their unspoken question. Wally Tizner, lean and elegant in his evening clothes, lay writhing weakly at the edge of the carpet. A chair was overturned near his desk. His ledgers looked like Florida after a hurricane. And blood, seeping from a jagged gash above the temple, was puddling the bare floor under the cabin's bunk with a dull drip–drip–drip.

"Wally!"

He moaned faintly. Then, with the slowness of effort, his puffy eyelids lifted. There was pain in every line of his twisted face as he struggled upward to one elbow.

"Where— what—"

"It was a stick–up, Wally. Your 'crank' wasn't just writing notes to pass the time away. How'd they get you?"

Tizner stiffened with understanding.

"I was working over the books. Heard a step behind me. Turned. Something hit me. That's all. But you—you were on the job, Tim. They didn't get to the safe? They—those emeralds—"

"They're gone," Tim said slowly.

"They can't be gone! I can't cover their value, Tim. It'll mean jail, if Mrs. Sylvester sues me! It—you saw the crooks, at least? You heard them talk? There's some clue?"

There wasn't. Not a clue in a carload. Tim told him the story, glumly. Masked pirates. Unseen boat. Disguised whisper. Complete get–away. Tizner's lips twitched harder and harder with each disastrous detail.

"Just like a wraith this guy was, Wally. Five wraiths. Nothing more tangible than that to check on."

Tizner, still bleeding, shuddered.

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"But—but do something! Wireless the coast guard to watch all landings! Wireless my pier concession to send out speed boats all over the harbor! This blasted fog! Tim, you people can't walk out on me now!"

"We don't aim to walk out," answered Timothy Noonan thoughtfully. "We aim to stand by until those stones get back where they belong. You needn't worry."

No clues. No leads. A boatful of pirates and a fortune in cash and security gems vanished into nowhere! The wraith of Tim's figure of speech couldn't have done a better job on the lam.

The afternoon sunlight, striking brightly through the office windows of the Noonan Detective Agency, made the whole fantastic holdup seem impossible. The night before couldn't have happened. And yet it had. Newsboys shouting now in the street below proved it had happened.

"Read aft about it! 'Whispering Killer Murders And Robs On The High Seas! Floating Night Club Pirated!' Buy your papers here!"

In the office, four people faced one another: the Agency's staff and its grim-eyed client. Wally, head swathed in bandages, sat opposite Big Tim and lighted one cigarette from the butt of another. Jerry strode the carpet, up and down. Grace sat at her desk in the corner like a red-headed statue.

"There must be some way!" Tizner pleaded, for the hundredth time. "I kept the emerald angle away from the reporters this morning. But as soon as Wanda Sylvester hears the news, she'll be at my place wanting her stones. And if I can't produce—"

Tim shook his head.

"We'll get these guys, in the long run. Every fence in town's being watched. When they try to dispose of the stuff, we'll have 'em. But that won't be to-day—nor to-morrow."

"Isn't there any way—"

"Could you think of one?"

Tizner couldn't. He rocked nervously in his chair, no longer the dapper gambler of yesterday. There was something like panic in his eyes.

"I'm sunk! I'm ruined!"

Jerry stopped pacing suddenly, while an idea seemed to catch up with him. He grinned. His fingers snapped.

"Say! I've just been thinking. It's a funny thing they pulled this just the night your safe was fullest, huh? Almost looks as if Mr. Whisperer knew those stones would be there!"

Tizner leaned forward quickly.

"So?"

"Who else could know they were left with you—except us and Sandy and the guy Mrs. Sylvester was with?"

"Count de Villo?"

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"Count—nuts! He's got no more title than a goldfish! We've been wised to him before. One of those hand-kissing fakes that takes over Park Avenue women's bank accounts, that's all. It's just his kind that would go for swag like that."

Wally Tizner chewed his underlip.

"It does sound good. But—you never could hang it on him. He'll be alibied. He—"

Grace reached for the extension telephone on the corner of her desk. She had snatched up the thread of the idea in a fashion that startled even their Broadway-wise client. It was like watching the baton passed in a fast relay race.

"I can fix that, gentlemen! It wasn't for nothing I spent my youth as a sob sister on the Banner." She was dialing the newspaper's number triumphantly. "There's still an hour before Clancey puts his five-star final to bed. Plenty of room for a fox trap on his front page."

"Fox trap?"

"Sure, Wally! It works this way. I tip of Clancey that I recognized a scar on the hand of one of those pirates and it put me wise to who he was. Also, that I'm going to be kept in your cabin on the Galleon and under guard, until the pinch has been made—so that I can't be gotten at to short-circuit my identification."

The gambler's face was a perplexed study.

"What good does that do?"

"It brings the pirates back to the Galleon to-night to rub me out." She spoke into the instrument. "Hello. Banner? . . . Give me the city desk."

"But—but did you spot the scar?" Wally broke in.

The redhead grinned.

"If I didn't, we four are the only ones that know it. And cheese is as good a bait as any. They weren't wearing gloves. Can you imagine five guys that handy with guns, and not a mark on any one of them?"

While Tizner digested that, she addressed the telephone again.

"City desk? . . . Clancey? . . . Hello, Mongoose, this is Sergeant Culver's wonder child. . . . Listen, do you care who held up the Galleon last night? I can't name names till headquarters has run him in, but I know."

Behind her, Wally snapped his fingers.

"I get it! This wraith gent reads the story, falls for it, comes back to bag you—only we bag him! It's a swell idea!"

"Clancey, here's your story," Grace was saying into the phone. "They're taking me out to the boat to-night for safe keeping. . . . Yeah, till I've identified a scar on the badman's paw. . . . Sure, sure, under guard. . . Heck, go ahead and print it! They can't get me on the Galleon. Tizner himself will be part of my army—"

The fog was stealing in again. Horns tooted toward shore, bleak croaks in the gathering blanket.

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As the tender left the Galleon's side with another shorebound load, the girl from Noonan's straightened from the railing and turned toward the boat's proprietor. Tizner had stuck by her like a guarding police dog all evening.

"Almost the last load, Wally?"

"Just about. Not much of a crowd to-night. That kind of publicity doesn't help this business any. Anyway, the whole world must know you're aboard under guard. What price chancing a slug if there's more trouble, my patrons would figure it. They don't want real thrills."

Grace yawned.

"Too bad you had to bring me out here before that Banner story hit the street. I'd like to see how thick old Clancey piled it on. I'll bet he made me sound plenty like a gal all set to tell all."

"Good for Clancey! That ought to be enough 'cheese' for your trap."

"Can't help being. If I had recognized that scar, as published on page one, our man De Villo wouldn't dare leave me alive to identify it. And only we four know it's a frame-up. So I'll begin to figure I'm guilty myself if nobody comes to-night."

Thicker and thicker, the fog was swirling in. Whisps became columns and the columns veils. The launch had gone. Stars, shore and water had all blotted out. Grace shivered, listening to the hollow slap of waves against the hulk. She spoke.

"Nights like this, wraiths seem almost a possibility, don't they?"

"Well, I hope our wraith can read. He'll bump right into Tim and Jerry, hiding down there in their power boat, as he comes out from shore."

"And when the shooting starts, what with your deck crew ready to go overside and help, he doesn't stand a chance!"

Wally grinned.

"You're leaving out that dainty box of dynamite on my desk that you're going to toss down on him from above, if we can't surround him."

"That, too. This is a trap as is a trap. The count'll never break through. Well, maybe I'd better be getting to your cabin. Almost time."

They walked companionably along the deck. The mist was not yet as thick as when the Whisperer had showed the night before. But it already blurred the saloon's yellow portholes to a row of dim yellow moons.

"Here we are. I'll be standing right outside, Miss Culver, so don't you worry. Gee, it's almost too bad the masked marvel can't see you!"

"Why?"

"All dressed up this way, you're sure something! Those diamond clips, and the sapphire pin, and the long earring dangles and—"

"They're all phonies. And you're beginning to talk like Jerry Riker. So"—she gave him a high-voltage smile as she stepped across the high threshold and began to close the door marked PRIVATE—"so I'm going to leave you to your guard duty."

The cabin was comfortable, the mess of the previous evening's attack on Tizner all cleared away. Grace put down her bag—opened, this time—on the edge of the bunk. Her automatic, nested inside it, gleamed reassuringly.

Past the only porthole, mist drifted in a thicker and thicker blur. "Pity the sailor on a night like this—" the redhead hummed, sitting at Tizner's desk. It was in apple-pie order now, except for the open-topped wooden box in which her dynamite—the last resource of attack when the Whisperer appeared below—lay ready.

So now all there was to do was wait. Wait and think.

She remembered the unrecognizable black silk hose that the pirate had worn for a face. She remembered Sandy, dead across the bar. And the speed of the whole show last night.

This killer was a smart one. Maybe—too smart. That was what she was counting on. Waiting in the narrow cabin, she could feel her heart slap against her ribs, like waves against the Galleon.

Culvers weren't built for waiting.

By and by, she lit herself a cigarette. Its tip glowed and the match gutted out between her fingers. More mist rolled past the window. The smoke from her cigarette made it seem as if the night outside were stealing in.

Suddenly, she was rigid in the chair.

There had been no sound of an approaching motor on the water. Yet the soft noises at her door could mean just one thing!

First had come a step, quick and furtive. Now a choked cry, in Tizner's voice. Then a muffled crash, a groan, and the dull sound of something about as heavy as a man's body hitting the deck.

Grace dove for the bunk's edge in the same movement that carried her free of the chair. The automatic seemed to leap to meet her tingling fingers. Crouching back against the desk, she jerked toward the door.

Not an instant too soon. It was moving inward rapidly, on the echoes of a clicking key. And in the narrow opening, blotting out the mists of the open deck, a man had appeared.

A man with a stubby gun held hip high, with coat collar up and a soft cap down; and man with only a blank black space where his face should be!

Memory of unlucky Sandy lent speed to the trigger finger of the girl from Noonan's. She took no time for second glance. This man killed fast!

Clack! went the hammer of her automatic—striking dead and hollow. The redhead's heart seemed to freeze in her throat. Her clip had been emptied!

Inside the cabin, stepping slowly toward her out of the fog, the Whisperer chuckled. Cold and eerie, the sound was like an echo from the night before. Hoarse words hissed after it.

"Unloaded, Carrot Top! I knew you'd have your partners guarding the water to-night. It was too obvious. So I came out early, among Tizner's regular customers, just to see you!"

He took another deliberate step forward.

"I took care of that toy pistol of yours once when you put down your hand bag at the bar. Hours ago!" His rasped whisper was malignant, mocking.

"There's a silencer on mine, you see. Tizner is—indisposed! And you won't reach toward that dangerous box behind you. So we won't be disturbed."

Grace felt the edge of the desk bite into her hip, as she backed against it. With a heartsick gesture, she tossed the useless weapon onto the bunk before her.

Her sherry-brown eyes stared straight at the grim black mask that was the killer's face.

"You want my jewels, I suppose?" she breathed. One hand went up to her ear. She jerked loose the long tinsel thread that suspended the gold dangle. "Here. I'll give them up quietly."

The Whisperer chuckled again.

"Keep them. They're fakes, as I overheard you tell your gambler friend. But they'll dress up your corpse. I didn't come for junk. I want—silence!"

The rejected ornament dropped instantly from its owner's extended fingers. Its gold ball landed harmlessly inside the open box of dynamite. The tinsel strand, crossing the box's side, straggled limply across the desk top. The girl from Noonan's scarcely glanced at it.

"S-silence?" She stammered the word.

"Permanent silence!" Low as the warning of a rattlesnake, the muffled whisper came. "You know who one of my men is. But when and if the flatties bring him in, their star witness won't have much to say."

"That isn't true! I don't know!"

"Listen, sister, I can read. I know why they've got you out here." The silenced automatic lifted slowly.

Grace raised her half-burned cigarette and knocked the long ash from it. Then her hand seemed to go nerveless. The glowing butt felt from it, rolled across the desk toward the scraggly tinsel thread.

"You aren't g-going to shoot me, are you?"

The automatic kept rising.

"I am, baby. Right now! I'm going to blast you straight to the hell where meddling cops belong!"

There was a tiny hiss at Grace's back, like a sound of escaping steam or a sputtering fuse. Her eyes hardened quickly, fixed on the Whisperer's sinister mask.

"All right. And there goes your dynamite. We'll blast to hell together—Wally Tizner"

It was true, obvious.

That tawdry ear ornament was one of the countless detective gadgets Big Tim's young assistant had invented: a disguised fuse. She had worn it for just this emergency, fired it with the glowing cigarette. And it was working.

Up the side of the wooden box, climbing like an agile monkey, the sputtering flame streaked its swift, deadly way. Two seconds more, and the Galleon would be firewood and scrap iron.

"You hellion!"

Wally Tizner did just what she'd known he would do. He howled in mortal terror and flung himself forward.

His lunging figure buried her from the desk as he clawed for the fuse. Grace saw it jerk free of the box before she leaped upon him.

The savagery and speed of her attack made up in that first split-second for the difference in their weight and strength. Wally's trembling fingers still clutched the harmlessly sputtering tinsel, the cold sweat of terror still blinded him, when a wildcat dove for his relaxed gun arm.

Before he knew what was happening, her claws were into him. One hand gouged and scratched. The other, incredibly strong for its size, twisted his wrist. Sharp heels bit his shins. Teeth sank into one side of his thinly masked face, and clung there.

Outside on the deck, a staccato yammering of distant gunfire chattered through the fog. A battle was raging somewhere. But the stunned gambler had only one desire—to rid himself of the sudden devil who was tormenting him. He flung his arm out wildly, putting everything he had into the thrust.

It loosened the girl from Noonan's with pile-driving power. But it loosened, also, his own grip on the automatic. Before his fingers could close in a new grip, the cold steel whisked from them.

Slamming back against the wall, breathless from the violence of the blow that had flung her there, Grace shook the wild red hair back from her eyes. She held the silenced gat in a small, steady hand. Its cold muzzle covered him.

Unmasked, the gambler's lean face was white and sullen. He glowered at the three detectives and the two hard-jawed coast guard officers who held him in that same empty saloon where loyal Sandy had gone down under the gun of the very man whose property he'd been defending.

"We found their motor, Redsie," Jerry Riker said cheerfully. "Just like you guessed, it was aboard the Galleon all the while and ready to make sound effects as of a wraith boat approaching or escaping. In the deck crew's bunk room, it was, along with that missing canvas bag. We took it for evidence while the guards were rounding up the four hands below. Two of 'em were slug-scarred, by the way."

Tizner glowered.

"You'd no reason to suspect me, you little—"

"Easy!" Riker warned, fists doubling. And Tizner, even without the handcuffs he was wearing, wouldn't have felt like standing up to those big, raw knuckles.

"I knew all along that scar story was a frame-up," Tizner growled. "We cooked it up together. Why should I come after you, with nothing to gain? This was just dumb luck!"

The girl from Noonan's grinned.

"Nope. Smart luck! The bad luck of a gent who was much too bright. There never was a newspaper story, Wally, because my phone was disconnected. But I got you off shore too early to learn that."

"You—you were wise, even then?"

"I knew we'd catch you red-handed, Wally, because you knew that if I weren't attacked after that publicity the whole theory of an outside killer blew lip. You were smart. Obviously, nobody but you would let me live. So you couldn't afford to let me, either."

The killer's face worked.

"It was the perfect set-up!" he said. "I'd have the emeralds to sell back to the Sylvester dame, without even the risk of a fence. She'd have kept mum and paid plenty to keep her jealous husband from finding out she was playing around out here with that little greasy count. And my skirts were cleared by hiring you three. It was perfect!"

"Too lousy perfect," Big Tim growled. "Even if you and your ratty quartet of crew-crooks did have to make some quick costume changes on deck, and you tap your head for a little blood and then wrestle with yourself at the cabin door to-night."

The coast guards were urging the last of their Five prisoners toward the swinging doors. They were ready to get going. It was a slow trip in to shore, what with the fog and all. The head guard turned to Big Tim.

"Thanks, Mr. Noonan, for tipping us off this afternoon. Swarming aboard, like you said when the light from that opening cabin door gave the signal he was in action—that was just the ticket! Shake the lead out, you!"

But Wally Tizner had one more thing to get out of his system.

"Say, Redhead, whatever put you wise to me?"

"A fashion hint. Wally. What's being worn by gentlemen for kicking ladies in the jaw. Except for that fancy footwork of yours at the bar last night, I might never have noticed."

"Huh?"

"You changed your shoes, all right. But you couldn't change in and out of those evening clothes fast enough to be found unconscious in 'em. And a braid stripe on black broadcloth went bad above those square-toed boots!"

Jerry chuckled, much too merrily, as they started for the door again.

"How true, Redsie, how true! But Wally doesn't need that smooth dope now. In the death house, they almost never dress up for a big night out."