



Illustrations by Austin Briggs.

"Her left hand flashed down under her skirt. I pushed her shoulder forward, twisting her body sharply away from me."



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second visit, the girl went around to a 'dobe house on the edge of town, and she was still there when I knocked off. The place was dark."

German didn't show up.

A bell-hop with a telegram roused me at 10 o'clock in the morning. The telegram was from Mexicali:

Drove here last night holed up with friends sent two wires.
GORMAN.

That was good news. The long-necked man had fallen for my play, had taken my four hired stooges for four witnesses, had taken their nods for identifications. Gooseneck was the lad who had done the actual killing, and Gooseneck was in flight.

I had shed my pyjamas and was reaching for my union suit when the boy came back with another wire. This one was from O'Gar, through the Agency. It was short, and to the point:

Ashcraft disappeared yesterday.

I used the telephone to get Hooper out of bed.

"Get down to Tiajuana," I told him. "Stick up at the house where you left the girl last night, unless you run across her at the Golden Horseshoe. Stay there until she shows. Stay with her until she connects with the big blond Englishman, and then switch to him. He's a man of less than forty, tall, with blue eyes and yellow hair. Don't let him shake you—he's the big boy in this party now. I'll be down. If the Englishman and I stay together and the girl leaves us, take her, but otherwise stick to him."

I dressed, put down some breakfast and caught a stage for the Mexican town. The boy driving the stage made fair time, but you would have thought we were standing still to see a maroon roadster pass us near Palm City. Ashcraft was driving the roadster.

The roadster was empty, standing in front of the adobe house, when I saw it again.

I knocked on the door of the adobe house.

Kewpie's voice: "Who is it?"

"Me—Painless. Just heard that Ed is back."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. A slight pause. "Come in."

I pushed the door open and went in. The Englishman sat tilted back in a chair, his right hand in his coat pocket—if there was a gun in that pocket it was pointing at me.

"Hello," he said. "I hear you have been making guesses about me."

"Call 'em anything you like," I pushed a chair over to within a couple of feet of him, and sat down. "But don't let's kid each other. You had Gooseneck to do the turn—a sap who went on a killing spree and then lost his nerve. Going to read and write just because three or four witnesses put the finger on him! And only going as far as Mexicali! I suppose he was so scared that the five or six-hour ride over the hills seemed like a trip to the end of the world!"

The man's face told me nothing. He eased himself around in his chair an inch or two, which would have brought the gun in his pocket—if a gun was there—in line with my thick middle. The girl was somewhat behind me, fidgeting around. I was afraid of her. I had seen the blade she wore on one leg. The man and his gun didn't worry me much. He was not rattle-brained, and he wasn't likely to bump me off.

I kept my chin going.

"You aren't a sap, Ed, and neither am I. I want to take you riding north with bracelets on, but I'm in no hurry. What I mean is, I'm not going to stand up and trade lead with you. There's a rod between my vest and my shirt. If you'll have Kewpie get it out, we'll be all set to talk."

He nodded slowly, not taking his eyes from me. The girl came close to my back. One of her hands came over my shoulder, went under my vest, and my old black gun left me. Before she stepped away she laid the point of her knife against

the nape of my neck for an instant—a gentle reminder.

"Good," I said, when she gave my gun to the Englishman. "Now here's my proposition. You and Kewpie ride across the border with me—so we won't have to fool with extradition papers—and I'll have you locked up. We'll do our fighting in court. I'm not absolutely certain that I can tie the killings on either of you, and if I flop, you'll be free. If I make the grade—as I hope to—you'll swing, of course. But you might win."

"What's the sense of spending the rest of your life dodging bulls? You'll maybe save your neck, but what of the money your wife left? That money is what you're in the game for—it's what you had your wife killed for. Stand trial and you've a chance to collect it. Run—and you kiss it goodbye. Are you going to ditch it, or are you going to stick to the finish—win or lose everything?"

My game just now was to persuade Ed and his girl to bolt. If they let me throw them in the can I might be able to convict one of them, but my chances weren't any too large. It depended on how things turned out later. It depended on whether I could prove that Gooseneck had been in San Francisco on the night of the killings, and I imagined that he would be well supplied with all sorts of proof to the contrary. We had not been able to find a single fingerprint of the killer's in Mrs. Ashcraft's house. And if I could convince a jury that he was in San Francisco at the time, then I would have to show that he had done the killing. And after that I would have to prove that he had done the killing for one of these two.

NEXT WEEK: Cont. Op. No. 7 mixes up the ingredients of this startling climax and brings it to a smashing and unexpected climax.