

# CROOKED CARIBBEAN CROSS

*Smooth Kyle in a Mile-a-minute Novel of  
Nazi Intrigue Menacing the Americas*

**By Borden Chase**

## CHAPTER I

### THE GUNS WENT DOWN

**S**MOOTH KYLE rested his elbows on the table top and looked curiously at the people in the little café on West Forty-sixth Street. It was the usual collection—smart guys and chumps, people who belonged, and others who were just passing through.

He tasted his drink, put down the glass and watched a neatly dressed man with iron-gray hair and a good jaw step in from the street. It was Inspector McNeary of the Treasury Department. And McNeary was Smooth Kyle's boss—quiet, efficient and smart enough to know all of the questions and most of the answers.

He blinked once, squinted across the tables in the dimly lit café and headed toward Smooth.

"'Lo, feller," he said quietly. "How've you been getting along with the Esquimos in Alaska?"

"Swell," said Smooth. He pointed to an empty chair. "Sit and rest while I tell you all about the love life of the seals."

"That all you learned while you were there?"

"That, and a few other things," said Smooth. "For instance, on a clear day in Nome when the wind blows from the west, a man with a good nose can smell the Russians making borscht in Cape Dezhnev. And when Bering Strait freezes over he

can walk across and grab himself a bowl of it."

McNeary laughed and seated himself. He nodded to the waiter and ordered Scotch and soda. Then he, too, rested his elbows on the table and looked casually about the café.

"Learning your geography, eh, Smooth?" he said at length.

"Learning plenty," said Smooth.

"Such as?"

"Oh, just that it might be a good idea for some of the Congressmen to spend a few weeks in Alaska before they make any more speeches—especially that guy who keeps yelling America is protected by three thousand miles of ocean."

Smooth twisted his glass and made a pattern of wet rings on the table top. "We may be three thousand miles from Europe, Chief—but it's only fifty-four miles from Alaska to Russia. And the Soviets are building landing fields on the Cape and in Kamchatka."

"You're sure?"

"It's in my report," said Smooth. He tossed a manila envelope across the table. "There's some stuff in there about the Kuril Islands, too. They belong to Japan. Our Congressmen might be surprised to learn how close they are to the Aleutian Islands—which belong to us."

He watched McNeary read the closely typed pages of the report and realized the Treasury man had aged. McNeary's hair



The blow-gun breathed again, and another of Clipper's men started to fold. Smooth's gun was out now; but Maria cried, "No! They're using *curare*!"

was grayer. His eyes were deeper beneath the heavy brows. His hands were steady as they held the report, but there was a tenseness about them that was new.

Smooth saw McNeary glance up occasionally, and soon he saw bewilderment in the Treasury man's eyes.

"Something bothering you, Chief?" he asked.

"Yes," said McNeary.

"Isn't the report complete?"

"Too complete," said McNeary.

"I don't get you."

McNeary put down the report. "You've done it again, Smooth," he said quietly. "You've been using a gun instead of your wits."

"Me—use a gun?" said Smooth in surprise. "There isn't a word about shooting in that report."

"There is, for anyone who knows you," said McNeary. "This paragraph on page three—I'll read it: 'There was a forced landing in Novo Mariinsk. A patrol tried to confiscate the plane. I explained that we needed the plane and finally persuaded them to let us return to Alaska.'"

McNeary folded the report and put it into the envelope. "So you finally *persuaded* them to let you return, eh?"

"Sure—I persuaded them," said Smooth. "They weren't such bad guys, once we got to know them."

"And what happens when they make a report to their government?" asked McNeary.

"Oh, they won't make a report," said Smooth quietly. "I realized it might cause trouble, so I persuaded them not to make any."

McNEARY sighed. It was the long-drawn breath of a tired man. "I hardly know what to say to you, Smooth," he said at length.

"You were sent to Alaska on a very simple mission. Complaints had come to us that Japanese fishing fleets were encroaching upon American waters. You were sent to Alaska to investigate and report on that and nothing else. Now you return

with a report on Russian and Japanese landing fields!"

"Well, I had a little spare time," said Smooth, "so I figured I'd save somebody else a lot of work. We always did that in the old days, Chief."

"The old days are gone, Smooth," said McNeary. "This is a different world—a world at war."

"And I don't like it," said Smooth.

He hunched his shoulders and leaned forward on the table, studying the man before him. Yes; McNeary had aged. Smooth recalled the days when this tired man had laughed long and loud as he read Smooth's reports.

Those were good days—days when the Treasury agents were busy with counterfeits, smugglers and dope peddlers. But things were different now. Smooth and his chief were being bounced around from one department to another, and always there was some brass hat to shake a stern finger and say, "Remember, gentlemen—we want no shooting, and no trouble!"

That always handed Smooth a laugh. No shooting and no trouble. And then he'd be tossed into the arena with a crowd of double-crossing enemy aliens who were trying to destroy the very country that had given them a chance to make a decent living.

If he got the goods on them and made an arrest, some clever lawyer would convince a jury these people were good Americans who simply wanted a change in government—and the crowd would be turned loose to go on with their work. Rats . . . "What's new in town, Chief?" he asked. "Do I get a chance to spend a little time on Broadway?"

"You've got a job, Smooth," said McNeary slowly. "And it's a New York job. That's why I sent for you."

"Swell," said Smooth. "What's the set-up?"

McNeary put the manila envelope into his coat pocket and looked thoughtfully at his drink. "I've just been to Washington trying to cover up some of the trouble you caused on your last job. They admit

you did nice work, but they don't approve of your methods."

"Why not?" said Smooth. "No jury is going to turn that crowd loose."

"Hardly," said McNeary. He smiled for the first time. "There were no defendants left—after the smoke cleared away."

"We kept the bomb-sight from being stolen, didn't we?"

"Yes, you did that, Smooth," said McNeary. "And for that reason I've persuaded them to let you handle this case. I've also promised you'd keep in close touch with me and wait for orders before you decided to, er—*persuade* anyone to behave."

"That's fair enough, Chief," said Smooth. "Now what gives?"

McNEARY took a gun from his pocket and placed it upon the table. He half-turned, blocking the view of anyone in the café, and pointed to the gun.

"Look it over," he said.

Smooth picked it up. "A forty-five automatic, eh? Standard make—there's a million like it. Who owns it?"

"Reno Cordoza. Remember him?"

"Big Reno?" said Smooth quickly, and he laughed. "What's that chump been doing?"

"Oh, nothing much. He was picked up for assault and he had this gun on him. No license, so he's in the Tombs waiting to be arraigned on a Sullivan Law rap."

"That's nothing new for Big Reno. He's been working as a bodyguard for gamblers ever since Prohibition. The Tombs won't bother him, so long as he can take his shoes off."

Smooth laughed again. "Reno always used to complain about his feet. Claimed he could never get shoes big enough to fit him. Not a bad guy, either."

"Not any worse than most of them," said McNeary. "But he's got Washington mighty worried right now."

"How come?"

"This gun," said McNeary. "The Police Department made a routine check on the serial number."

"Who bought it?"

"The purchasing agent for the Government of Great Britain."

Smooth's eyes widened. "You mean England bought this for use in the war?"

"Yes."

"Then how did Big Reno get it? Was he in Flanders?"

"Of course not."

Smooth shrugged. "I suppose somebody clipped it on one of the New York docks—a broken case while the ship was being loaded."

McNeary shook his head. "Definitely not! That was a rush order. Special guards went with it from the factory to the dock. Not a case was broken, and not a case was missing when the ship left port."

"Maybe someone brought it back from England," said Smooth. "You know how guns bounce, Chief. We've traced an automatic twice around the world in less than a year."

"I know that, Smooth. But this gun wasn't brought back from England."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because it was shipped to England on the *Clivedenning*—an ammunition carrier that made the trip without a convoy."

"And?"

"And the *Clivedenning* was torpedoed; she went down with all hands."

Smooth dipped one hand into his coat pocket and took out a silver cigarette case. He opened it and looked casually at the inscription engraved inside. It read: *He's a mug but I love him. . . . Gilda.*

Smooth offered the case to McNeary, took a cigarette and snapped the case closed.

"How do you know the *Clivedenning* was torpedoed if all hands were lost?" he asked at length.

"A radio message—two of them, in fact. One reporting the submarine, and the second reporting the ship was sinking before the lifeboats could be launched."

"And you're *sure* this gun was aboard?"

"Positive!"

"It doesn't make sense," said Smooth finally.

"That," said McNeary, "is why I want you to talk with Reno. He knows you and he knows you come through on promises. I think he'll trust you, Smooth."

"Maybe. What's the deal?"

"Simply this," said McNeary. "If Reno tells us all he knows about this gun we'll drop the charges against him. If not, we'll lock him up and throw the key away."

Smooth shook his head. "That won't do it. Big Reno doesn't scare easy. He'd laugh at us, if he had a good reason to keep his mouth shut."

McNeary shrugged. "That's why I sent for you. Play it any way you want, but find out how Reno Cordoza got that gun."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

McNeary glanced at his watch. "That's all I can tell you. I'm expecting someone here in a minute or so who may know more about it."

"Who?"

"Well," said McNeary slowly, and he smiled, "this person has been a great deal of help in other cases. In fact, I honestly believe you would have been killed long ago if it weren't for her."

"For *her*?" cried Smooth. He stood up quickly and reached for his hat. "Hold everything, Chief! Did you send for Gilda Garland?"

"What's your hurry? I had a date with Gilda the night you sent me to Alaska. And I—"

"And you forgot to phone," said a quiet voice at his shoulder. "Sit down and relax, handsome. You weren't missed."

## CHAPTER II

### THIS GUY WON'T SING

SMOOTH sat down. Then he turned to look at the tall blond girl who stood at his shoulder. Gilda Garland—the girl who had once matched wits with the Treasury Department and led a dozen agents a chase that lasted for months.

It was Smooth Kyle who had finally caught up with Gilda, and it was Inspector McNeary who had given her the chance to work with the law instead of against it.

Since then, Gilda and Smooth had worked as a team whenever the going got rough.

Gray-eyed, beautiful and wise in the ways of midnight Manhattan, Gilda was known and respected by the fast-thinking crowd who made Broadway their home. Owner of a successful dress shop on Madison Avenue, she was now quite satisfied to let the Treasury Department take care of its own problems.

But Smooth Kyle prevented that. Time and again Gilda had seen him walk himself into a spot where only luck and a fast gun could bring him out. And more than once, Gilda had been the one to hold that gun.

She seated herself next to Inspector McNeary, drew off her gloves and folded them on the table. Then she looked casually at Smooth Kyle.

"You need a shave, darling," she said. "Are you getting careless, or do the Esquimo girls like men with beards?" Without waiting for the return crack, she motioned to the waiter. "Coffee—for three."

"I'll take Scotch," said Smooth.

"You'll take coffee, handsome," said Gilda. She looked meaningfully at McNeary. "You'll need it, too, when you hear the latest on Reno Cordoza."

McNeary leaned back in his chair and watched the smoke lift from the tip of his cigarette. Smooth passed his case to Gilda. She took a cigarette, waited until Smooth had lit it and then looked at him quizzically.

"Lord knows why they've put you on this case," she said at length. "If I'm any good at guessing, the setup is tough and needs someone with brains to crack it."

"Flatterer," said Smooth easily. "Too bad you're out."

McNeary put up his hand. "Quit it, you two," he said. "I've got to get back to the office with this report. Just now I'd like to hear what Gilda learned about Reno Cordoza."

"Fair enough," said Gilda. "Big Reno used to work for Jack Degan, the gambler, until Degan got killed. And—"



"And he used to work for Fay, and Diamond, and Rosenthal," added Smooth. "That's ancient history, beautiful."

Gilda lifted the coffee that the waiter had just set on the table. She balanced the cup thoughtfully and measured the distance to Smooth's head.

"Do you keep quiet, or—"

"You win, gorgeous," said Smooth.

"Degan got killed," Gilda continued, "Reno had trouble finding a job. He borrowed from everybody in town and then left Broadway. Not long ago he turned up again, paid all his debts and started spending."

"He was throwing a party in one of the Fifty-second Street clubs when he got into an argument with Marty Doyle and—"

"Do you mean Marty Doyle who runs the big money games?" asked Smooth.

"Is there any other Marty Doyle?" asked Gilda sharply. She turned toward McNeary. "I don't know how the argument started but I've asked Marty to meet me tonight and give me the story."

"Nice work, Gilda," said McNeary. "How about Big Reno—can you think of any way to make him talk?"

"That all depends," said Gilda slowly. "If you think this case is as important as the last, I *know* I can make Reno talk."

McNeary half-closed his eyes and looked at the girl who sat next to him. She was smiling now—an easy smile. But the Treasury man knew Gilda was telling the truth.

Secrets carefully hidden from the law were seldom secrets to Gilda. She had too many friends. Too many of Broadway's tight-lipped gentry were under obligations to Gilda Garland. When she asked questions—someone always knew the answers.

"You can make Reno talk?" asked McNeary.

"I can," said Gilda, "if you say it's necessary."

Something in her voice kept Smooth from making the laughing remark that was on his tongue. Instead, he asked: "How are you going to do it, beautiful?"

"It won't be hard," said Gilda slowly.

"Jack Degan's brother is a pretty tough actor. For months he's been trying to find out who killed Jack so he can square things. I could tell him the answer, and Big Reno knows Degan would believe me."

"You mean Big Reno did it?" asked Smooth.

"I might mean that."

McNeary nodded. "All right, Gilda; go to it. Talk to Reno and tell him anything you want. But for the safety of your country, *make him talk!*" He stood up and motioned to the waiter, then turned to Smooth.

"I'll get the check. Go down to the Tombs with Gilda."

Gilda was already walking toward the door. Smooth watched the eyes of every man in the cafe turn to follow her. And he agreed with their judgment. Gilda was big time; and Gilda knew her way around.

But Smooth was always worried when she moved into a case with him. In spite of her reputation for cleverness, Smooth had seen Gilda use methods that were almost as direct as his own. She could handle a gun and had little hesitancy about using it when things got warm.

And for some unknown reason Smooth had an idea things were going to get very warm before this case was written off as closed.

HE HAILED a cab and gave the driver the address. Then he seated himself beside Gilda and waited for her to speak.

The cab crossed Sixth Avenue and stopped for the traffic light at Fifth. Gilda opened her compact, studied the tip of her nose and dabbed a bit of powder on it. Still Smooth waited. The cab reached Park Avenue and swung south.

"Why so silent?" he asked at length.

"Just thinking," said Gilda.

"About what?"

"You."

"Am I worth it?"

"I wish I knew," said Gilda wearily. "Sometimes I wonder why I don't get sick and tired of waiting for you to grow up."

"Now what have I done?"

"Oh, it isn't so much what you've done," said Gilda. She looked at Smooth and smiled a little. "It's just that you're—well, it's just that you're Smooth Kyle. I know you won't change. I know you'll never be any different. And sometimes I wonder when someone is going to pull back the sleeve of an automatic and snap a bullet into the chamber with your name written on it."

She put one hand on Smooth's arm. "What would I do then, Smooth?"

"What would you do?" said Smooth slowly. Then he laughed. "Why, you'd probably knock the gun out of the mug's hand before he had time to pull the trigger."

"Stop clowning!"

Smooth lost his laugh. "But why so serious all of a sudden?" he asked. "This job looks like a pushover."

"Does it?" said Gilda quietly.

"Well—doesn't it?"

"Not to me," said Gilda. "I was asking some of the boys about Reno—asking about his new boss. No one could tell me."

"So?"

"That means Reno isn't working for any of the regulars—none of the fast money crowd. Still, he's been spending more than usual and carrying a gun that's supposed to be at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. McNeary isn't telling all he knows, either. Nobody is—not even you, I suppose."

"I'm not holding out," said Smooth. "I don't know a thing." He sat quietly for a time, watching the crowded sidewalks and passing traffic.

"McNeary's worried; but then with half the world at war you can hardly blame him. He's been handed jobs on which the safety of the country depended. Then he's been told, 'Work carefully. Don't insult anyone. Don't hurt anyone's feelings.' And now he's afraid this will develop into the same sort of thing."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know," said Smooth doubtfully.

"Just a hunch, I guess."

"Funny," said Gilda. "I've got the same sort of hunch. I can feel this case building

into something big, but I can't put a finger on any definite reason."

"Then suppose you let me handle Big Reno?"

"Why?"

"Well," said Smooth, and he turned to grin at the tall girl beside him, "I hate to break down and confess, taffy head; but somehow, I wouldn't like to see you get hurt."

"And you're afraid I might?"

"A little."

"Then how do you suppose I feel about you, chump?" said Gilda. She leaned forward and tapped on the driver's shoulder. "Whip up the horses, Oscar. The lady's getting sentimental."

"How's 'at?" said the hackman. "I didn't get you."

"Let it go," said Gilda wearily.

THE cab raced south on Lafayette, swung over to Center and stopped at the Tombs Prison. Smooth paid off the driver while Gilda looked at the mirror in her compact. Together they walked into the old building and Smooth headed for the warden's office.

Five minutes later a guard led them along the rows of ancient cells to the one occupied by Reno Cordoza. The big man was stretched at full length on his bunk and when Smooth called him by name, Reno swung his wide feet to the floor and yawned sleepily.

"'Lo, Smooth," he said. "Long time no see, feller. Where you been keeping yourself?"

"O, here and there," said Smooth. He nodded to the guard. "Open it up. We're going in."

The cell gate was opened and Smooth stepped inside. When Gilda followed him, Big Reno quickly took a comb from his pocket and ran it through his hair.

"You should a tol' me you were comin', Gilda," he said. "Look—I'm all shabby, an' everything."

"You look all right to me," said Gilda. "Sit down and take it easy. Smooth wants to ask a few questions."

"Smooth does?" said Reno. His eyes opened in surprise. "What's Smooth want with me? I ain't in on a Federal rap. Just Sullivan Law, that's all."

"My questions are off the record, Reno," said Smooth. "You know I don't use double-talk, and you know I don't lie. So you can believe me when I tell you I'm not here to pin a rap on you."

"Yeah, I can believe you," said the big man slowly. "I know you now for about ten years—maybe more. Know you ever since you shoved a taxi on Broadway. I ain't never caught you lyin', Smooth."

"And I'm not going to start today," said Smooth. "All I want is the name of the man who gave you that gun. That puts you in the clear: no Sullivan rap—nothing."

Big Reno smiled. "Sorry, pal. I ain't talkin'."

"Not even if you draw a ten-year jolt?"

"Not even."

"In that case," said Smooth slowly, "we'll turn you loose at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Come again," said the big man suspiciously. "What's the catch?"

"Give him the sad news, Gilda," said Smooth.

Gilda dipped into Smooth's pocket and took out his cigarette case. She offered it to Reno, helped herself and handed the case back to Smooth.

"The sad news," she said slowly, "is simply that I happen to know who killed Jack Degan. And I'm passing that news along to Jack's brother tonight."

Smooth watched the big man's eyes. They narrowed, and Reno Cordoza got slowly to his feet. He stared at Gilda, started to say something, then turned away. For a moment he paced the cell, muttering quietly to himself. Then he turned to face the blond girl again. There was fear in his eyes now.

"Look, Gilda," he said at length, "I ain't never crossed you. I ain't never crossed Smooth. What you want to get me killed for?"

"I don't want to," said Gilda. "And if

this were an ordinary setup, you know I wouldn't cross you, Reno. But this is big—very big. I'm not sure, but I think it has something to do with the country."

"The *what?*?" cried Reno. "Are you gone nuts?"

"Maybe," said Gilda. "But if you don't come through, Degan will be waiting for you in the morning. And you know I don't use double-talk, either!"

The big man rubbed his head slowly. Smooth could almost see the thoughts assembling in his mind. It was a slow process. Big Reno had never been known for his brilliance. A good man with a gun, and a man who knew how to keep his mouth shut under pressure—that was his reputation. Now he was struggling with an idea. Slowly it took shape. He turned and pointed a heavy finger at Gilda.

"You sure about that safety of the country stuff?" he asked. "You ain't tryin' to get me to rat on a guy, just for some lousy Federal rap?"

"I've told you the truth, Reno," said Gilda evenly.

**B**IG RENO paced the cell. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. He turned, started toward Gilda and stubbed his toe against the bunk rail.

"Me feet!" he wailed. "Always, I hurt me feet." He sat down on the edge of his bunk and reached for his shoes.

"Just wait'll I get these brogans on then I'll give you the straight of it." He yanked on one shoe, stamped his foot and reached for the other. This one went harder. Reno shoved the foot into place and stamped again.

"Ouch!" he yelled. "Always, I hurt me feet! This shoe got a nail in it a mile long!"

He pulled off the offending shoe and threw it across the floor. Smooth grinned. So did Gilda. They waited until Reno had rubbed the injured foot. Then the big man leveled a finger at Gilda.

"Promise I get sprung out a here, an' you won't cross me to Degan!" he said slowly. He turned to Smooth. "You, too, Smooth—give it to me straight!"



"You've got my word for it, Reno," said Smooth. "Who gave you the gun?"

"Well, it's like this," said Reno. "I'm hittin' it tough an' I meet up with a guy who wants to crack into the gamblin' racket. He's got plenty money—but plenty! He figures I know the trade so he asks me t'—"

Big Reno slid slowly off the bunk onto the stone floor. It was as if he had fallen asleep in the middle of a word. His eyes were closed and his body had slumped into that peculiarly relaxed pose of a heavy sleeper.

Smooth dropped quickly to one knee and pulled open the big man's shirt. He put one hand firmly against Reno's ribs, then leaned forward until his eyes were close to the man's mouth, waiting for even a slight breath to register on the sensitive nerves.

None came. And there was no heart movement beneath Reno's ribs.

"Tell the guard to get a doctor—fast!" he said. "Either I'm crazy, or this guy is through!"

"Maybe it's both," said Gilda. She stepped out of the cell and hurried along the block. . . . Doctor Mattern, the prison physician, was an easy-going man who had seen many strange things happen in these ancient cell blocks. He knelt beside Reno and pushed a stethoscope against the big man's chest. For a moment he waited. Then he folded the rubber tubes and put them into his pocket.

"Dead," he said casually. "Heart failure, probably. You'd be surprised how many of them go that way." He looked up at Smooth. "Was he important to you?"

"Very," said Smooth.

"Too bad," said the doctor. "He won't tell you anything now."

GILDA wasn't listening. She had knelt beside Reno and was now looking curiously at the toe of the big man's right sock. It was white lisle, clean except for a small round spot of red. This was damp, and in the center of the spot was a darker stain.

Gilda touched it with the tip of a gloved finger. A black, sticky substance clung to the glove.

"Break a cigarette and give me the paper," she said to Smooth.

"Now what?" he asked, and did as Gilda instructed.

"Just a guess." Gilda took the white paper and transferred the sticky substance from her glove. Then she folded the paper and handed it to Dr. Mattern. "Have this analyzed, will you, Doc? Somehow—I don't think Big Reno died of heart failure."

"Why don't you?" asked the doctor.

"Well, it doesn't add up," said Gilda. "Reno wasn't excited; didn't have brains enough to get excited. He had just decided to tell us something we wanted to know. Then he put on his shoe, yelped about a nail in it and kicked it off. A few seconds later he was dead."

"Well, what of it?" asked Mattern. "Heart failure can strike a man at any time." He smiled. "Even from such a slight cause as a nail in his shoe."

"Far be it from me to argue with a man about his trade," said Gilda. "But even though I'm not a shoemaker, I know there aren't supposed to be any nails in the tip of a shoe. And that's where Reno got clipped."

Smooth looked quickly at the big man's foot. "Check, beautiful!" he said, and reached for the offending shoe. "Nothing like being sure, though."

He started to put his hand into the shoe but Gilda was faster. Her purse swung and knocked the shoe from Smooth's hand. As it hit the cell floor Smooth turned to look at her curiously.

"What is it?" he asked. "Do we play games?"

"Figure it out, handsome," she answered. "If it killed Reno, it might make you sick to your tummy."

She picked up the shoe and held it over the bunk. Then she shook it gently. A short thorn, like that of a rose, dropped onto the blanket.

"Nice guessing," said Smooth. He broke the paper from another cigarette and

picked up the thorn. "More of that black stuff on the point. How long before you can tell us what it is, Doc?"

"I'm not sure," said Mattern. He looked closely at the point of the thorn. "You say it was only a few seconds after Reno put on his shoe that he died?"

"That's right."

The doctor shook his head. "And this thorn only pricked the surface—couldn't have been deep. Hmmm! That sounds like—no, I don't want to make any guesses. Give me an hour or so and I'll tell you definitely."

"That's fair enough," said Smooth. "But keep it quiet, Doc. Pass the word that Reno died of heart failure, then call me in an hour and give me the story."

"Where can I reach you?"

Smooth turned to Gilda. "Where are you going to meet Marty Doyle?"

"In Lindy's."

"Good enough," said Smooth. "We'll be there, waiting for your call, Doc. In the meanwhile I'm going to have a chat with the keeper of the bees. Who's on duty?"

"Jeff Monahan."

"Thanks," said Smooth. He took Gilda's arm and walked with her along the cell block. "As for you, beautiful—how's about bouncing up to Lindy's? I'll catch up with you later."

"Sure you can take care of yourself alone?"

"Aren't you?"

Gilda smiled. "You're like a big kid, Smooth. If there's trouble in town, somehow or other, you find it. Try to keep alive, will you, Chump?"

### CHAPTER III

#### THE SOUTH AMERICAN WAY

SHE left him, walking quickly toward the Center Street door. Smooth hurried to the principal keeper's office and sent in his name. Jeff Monahan—stout, genial and gray-haired—stood and put out his hand as Smooth came into his office.

"Don't tell me we've got someone down here that Uncle Sam wants," he said.

"You used to have," said Smooth. He seated himself facing Monahan. "Big Reno just eased out—heart failure, or something. I want a check on his visitors. All of them."

"Big Reno's gone, eh?" said Monahan. He touched a button on his desk. "He was in on a gun charge. What do you Federals want with him?"

"Oh, just curious."

An assistant came into the office and Monahan asked for the names of Big Reno's visitors. A moment later the clerk brought a typed list of names. Monahan showed the list to Smooth.

"Now let's see," he said slowly. "We've had Reno since Tuesday. His first visitor was his lawyer—Ramon Obalda. He was here about fifteen minutes. Then Hymie Gabbit, the bail bondsman, dropped in. Reno didn't want out—said he'd wait until he was arraigned. The next day Steve Dreyfus came in. You remember him?"

"Used to work for Larry Fay with Big Reno?"

"Yes. Smart guy, too. He quit, Fay and went into the gambling racket for himself. Don't know what he's doing now but he seems to have plenty of money."

Smooth penciled the names on the back of an envelope. "Obalda, Gabbit, Dreyfus. Any other visitors?"

"That's all I have here." Monahan looked again at the list. "Oh, yes—Obalda came back a few hours ago but didn't stay long."

"Obalda, eh?" said Smooth slowly. "And you say he's Reno's lawyer?"

"So he claims."

"Do you know him?"

"Not very well," said Monahan slowly. He rubbed one ear thoughtfully. "He's been in a few times to see clients—a Cuban and two men from South America, if I remember right. Not a bad lawyer, though. I think he sprung all of his clients."

"Have you his business address?"

"Yeah; here it is," said Monahan. He copied the address on a slip of paper and tossed it to Smooth. "But why all this interest in Big Reno?"

"Just a routine checkup," said Smooth innocently.

"Routine, my eye!" said Monahan. "What's the story?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Jeff," said Smooth as he started toward the door, "we have secret information that Big Reno was *actually* the Queen of Ethiopia in disguise. We're not sure, but that's the story."

"Queen of—" Monahan grabbed an inkwell and Smooth ducked through the doorway.

**A**N HOUR later Smooth Kyle stood near the checkroom in Lindy's and looked over the tables in search of Gilda. He saw her off to the right at a table near the rear wall.

Facing her was Marty Doyle, dark-haired and bronzed. He was smiling and his teeth met in an even line. Not a bad-looking man, Doyle.

Smooth tossed his black hat onto the counter and started across the restaurant. Half of Broadway was there, and every second man at the tables nodded or called a quick hello. Smooth answered most with a casual wave, stopped to shake hands with a music publisher, and walked to Gilda's table.

"It's a wonder the Shuberts don't grab you two for a musical," he said easily. "How do you keep your figure, Marty?"

"Lo, Smooth," said Doyle. He pushed back a chair. "Not looking so bad yourself. Gilda tells me you've been chasing Esquimos in Alaska."

"That, and learning how poker should be played," said Smooth. "How's your game going—or is it going?"

"Is that an official question?" laughed Doyle.

"Strictly off the record," said Smooth as he seated himself. "The Treasury Department doesn't care how many chumps you take, just so long as you write it on the tax form at the end of the year."

"Why remind me?" said Doyle. He gestured toward Gilda. "The lady tells me Big Reno cashed his last stack. Too bad. Reno wasn't such a bad guy."

"Is that why you took a sock at him?"

"Oh, that," said Doyle. "Reno and I had a little personal quarrel. Didn't amount to much, though."

Smooth studied the man who sat across the table. Marty Doyle had been running a game for a good many years. He was known in New York, Saratoga and Miami Beach as a man who kept an honest wheel and always paid off. Smooth remembered him from the old days—an easily smiling man who seldom if ever lost his temper.

Still, Marty Doyle could get rough if the occasion demanded. He paid his debts and expected others to do the same. If they didn't . . . Marty had his own way of collecting.

Now he was smiling as he twisted his glass and watched Smooth from the corners of his eyes. Gilda was studying a menu, but occasionally she turned to look warningly at Smooth.

"I haven't told Marty why we're checking on Reno," she said casually. "Naturally he doesn't want to talk himself into trouble. He feels that anything he says will be used against him."

"How come?" asked Smooth. He glanced at Doyle.

The gambler shrugged. "Gilda says Reno dropped out with heart failure. Maybe so; but I'd rather wait for the official verdict before I talk."

"Why? Do you think it might have been something else?"

"I don't think," said Doyle flatly. "Me, I'm keeping out."

"Guess again," said Smooth. "You stepped into the picture when you hit Reno. There must have been a reason."

"I didn't like the color of his eyes."

"Look, Marty," said Smooth evenly. "You and I have no quarrel. Be smart and keep it that way."

"Or—"

"Look, guy—" Smooth started.

**S**ETTLE down, children!" said Gilda sharply. "You're not running the only game in New York, Marty. I've been checking with Tom Benson and some of

the others. All of them had a grudge against Big Reno. If you hadn't fought with him, someone else would have taken a crack at him. Now all I want to know is—*why*?"

"Why not ask Benson? I expect him to join me here in a few minutes."

"Never mind Benson," said Gilda. "I know you, Marty—and I think you're the sort of man who would be glad to help out if he knew he could do his country a favor."

"Do his *country* a favor?" said Doyle. One eyebrow lifted. "I don't quite get you, Gilda."

"Then suppose I tell you Reno was carrying a gun that had been shipped to England and—"

"Hold that, Gilda!" cried Smooth. He caught her arm. "McNeary didn't want that information spread all over town!"

Gilda reached forward and pushed back the cuff of Marty Doyle's coat. There was a long white scar that ran back from his wrist.

"Where did you get that, Marty?" she asked.

"In the Argonne. I was a little slow with my bayonet."

Gilda smiled at Smooth. "Marty is one of the New York boys who came home with a D.S.O.—for bravery under fire. I don't think he'd sell out his country, Smooth."

Smooth looked at his drink.

Doyle pulled the cuff over the scar. He finished his drink and put the glass down firmly. "No, Gilda—I don't think I would. And what's more, I'm not interested in Reno's gun but if I know anything that will help, you're welcome to it."

"Thanks, Marty," said Gilda. "All we want to know is *why* you hit Reno."

Doyle drew a deep breath. "Reno used to work for me," he said slowly. "He worked for Benson and most of the other boys who run games in town. Then he got unreliable and we couldn't trust him."

"He checked out of town, but came back a few months ago and started to spend. Soon I started to lose customers. So did

Benson and all the others. Not many—but important players."

"Who were they?" asked Smooth.

"I'll come to that later," said Doyle. "Not long ago, we found Reno was steering these people to another game. That was legitimate, but we wanted to know who was the opposition. I heard it was a new syndicate—people who had never been in the business before."

"And they could compete with you and Benson?" asked Gilda in surprise.

"Compete with us?" laughed Doyle. "Why, that crowd would rent a penthouse on Fifth Avenue, pour a hundred grand into equipment and furnish entertainment that cost another ten thousand."

Gilda's face showed her disbelief.

Smooth shook his head. "That doesn't add up, Marty. A game can't run long enough in New York to pay off that sort of an investment."

"I know it, Smooth," said Doyle. "And for a while we figured a crowd of amateurs were going to take a fast beating and fold. Instead, the cops would close one place and in a week this crowd would open another layout that cost twice as much."

"What did Reno say about it?" asked Gilda.

"That's just the trouble; Reno wouldn't say anything. When I asked him who was running the game, he laughed and promised me I'd be out of business before the end of the season. I got a little high and took a sock at him—and that's the story."

"Not quite all of it, Marty," said Smooth. "About those big money customers. Who were they?"

DOYLE frowned. "That's the strange part of the setup," he said. "Some of my best customers have been the crowd from South America. Tom Benson's too, for that matter. There's a set that comes from the Argentine each year and brings a heavy bankroll. We get a few from Brazil, and for the past few years ten of the heaviest players have come from Bolivia and Chile."

"Reno Cordoza knew that crowd well;

spoke their language. He steered them all to this new layout."

"South Americans, eh?" said Smooth slowly. "And those were the only customers you lost?"

"No," said Doyle. "We lost some of the Washington crowd—men from the embassies. But come to think of it, they were all representing South American countries."

"Sort of chummy," Gilda said.

A waiter came to the table and bent over Smooth's shoulder. "A call for you, Mr. Kyle."

"Thanks," answered Smooth. He stood up. "Don't run away, Marty. I'll be right back."

He followed the waiter to the phone booth, closed the door and picked up the receiver.

"Kyle talking," he said.

"This is Doctor Mattern," said the voice on the wire. "Gilda's hunch was right, Smooth. I've analyzed that substance and it appears to be *curare*—one of the most deadly of all poisons."

"*Curare*?" said Smooth. "Never heard of it."

"It's made by the Indians of South America," said the doctor. "They dip their blow-gun darts into it and use it for hunting, or fighting. Recently, the medical profession has been experimenting with it as a cure for nervous disorders but there hasn't been much of it brought into the country."

"What part of South America does it come from?"

"Oh, from a number of places. Ecuador—almost any of the countries bordering on the Amazon region. I understand it's also used in Bolivia and by some of the natives in Chile."

"Thanks, Doc," said Smooth. "Keep it quiet and write Reno off as a heart failure until you hear from McNeary."

"Glad to," said Mattern. "But you'd better watch your step, Smooth. *Curare* can kill in seconds, and it needs only a scratch. Anyone who plays with that stuff means business."

"So do I, Doc," said Smooth.

## CHAPTER IV

### TOO MUCH TALK

HE HUNG up and left the booth. A few of the figures were starting to add up. Not many; but enough for a start. Reno Cordoza had come from South America. And recently he had been working for a new crowd of gamblers catering to South American spenders.

He had been killed with a South American poison a few hours after he had been visited by a lawyer named Ramon Obalda—probably another South American.

Smooth glanced at the envelope on which he had written the names of Reno's visitors. Hymie Gabbit could be marked off; Hymie was just a bail bondsman who needed a customer. Obalda was due for a visit in the morning from Smooth.

But there was one name on the list that needed immediate attention: Steve Dreyfus, the gambler.

Smooth went back to the table and found Tom Benson had come to keep his appointment with Marty Doyle. Benson was a big man, known more for his activities at the race tracks than for the games he ran in town. Has was tall, blond and deeply tanned. Smooth had met him five years ago at one of the Florida tracks.

Like others of the gambling fraternity Tom Benson talked little about himself—a few words about his early days in Wisconsin, a job with a circus—that was all. He had run his race track winnings into a sizeable stake, opened a room in Miami Beach, and then moved north with the season.

Since then he had operated in friendly competition with Marty Doyle, Steve Dreyfus and the others who catered to the big-time spenders who liked to gamble. He nodded casually when Smooth came to the table, then turned to Gilda and continued his quiet-voiced conversation.

"As I was saying, Gilda, Marty and I don't mind if new people break into the game. That happens every year. But Reno's outfit has us stopped. We can't figure it."



"Why not?" asked Gilda.

Benson's laugh was short. "The score doesn't tally. From what we can figure, they spend more than they take in."

He turned to Smooth and looked at him thoughtfully. "I'm afraid you're wasting time with Marty and me. Still, I might be able to give you a lead. Have a talk with Steve Dreyfus; maybe he knows something."

"Why do you say that?"

Benson shrugged. "Oh, just a guess. But Steve seems to have found some new friends and—" He winked at Doyle.

"Steve Dreyfus, eh?" said Smooth. "Any idea where I can find him?"

Benson laughed. "Is that supposed to be a gag?"

"No."

"Then turn around and look at the pair in the booth near the corner."

Smooth turned quickly and found a pair of jet eyes looking at him across the width of the restaurant. Steve Dreyfus seemed to be all eyes. They were large and shaded by heavy brows. His face was chalk white and his lips were full and curved. Iron-gray hair formed a tight cap on his head, and his face was expressionless as only a gambler's can be. Dreyfus looked as if he'd been embalmed for a year.

**H**E SMILED now and nodded. Then he lifted a thin white hand in a casual gesture of greeting. Smooth nodded, then glanced at the girl who was with Dreyfus.

She, too, was dark. Her hair was the blue-black shade of the tropics. Her eyes were dark and very much alive as she looked at Smooth.

Dreyfus said something quietly and the girl smiled. Then Smooth saw she was beautiful—even more than beautiful. He looked at her for a moment and turned to Tom Benson.

"Is Dreyfus running a game?" he asked.

"Not just now," said Benson. He glanced at Doyle. "Steve had a place in Miami Beach last winter but he hasn't opened in New York."

"And he isn't doing anything?"

"We don't know what he's doing," said Marty Doyle sharply. "Steve has kept away from the crowd lately. He was never exactly sociable, and now he talks less than ever."

"Who's the girl?" asked Smooth.

Gilda laughed. "I thought that was coming next," she said. "Would you like to meet her, Handsome?"

"Oh, in a business way," said Smooth casually. "Who is she?"

"A little number from South America," said Gilda. "Her name is Maria Valera—and she sings."

"Where?"

"Nowhere just now. She was at the Conga Room but it closed for the summer."

"Maria Valera, eh?" said Smooth slowly. "And she comes from South America. I wonder if she knew Big Reno?"

"Why not ask her?" laughed Gilda.

"Not a bad idea, beautiful," said Smooth. He stood up. "Keep the home fires burning and I'll be back."

"Why bother?" said Gilda. "We're doing nicely."

Smooth patted her cheek and crossed to the table where Dreyfus and Maria Valera were sitting. The gambler stood and put out his hand.

"Glad to see you, Smooth," he said. "Are you going to join us for a while?"

Smooth shook hands with Dreyfus and looked at the girl. "If you don't mind."

Dreyfus laughed. "Meet Miss Valera, a very talented young lady." He turned to the girl. "This is Mr. Kyle; Broadway knows him as Smooth Kyle."

"It is so nice to know you," said Maria. She lifted one hand and smiled. "Steve tells me you kill people for the Government. That is interesting—vary!"

Smooth looked questioningly at the gambler and Dreyfus grinned. "I told Maria about some of your jobs for the Treasury Department. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind," said Smooth slowly as he seated himself, "but why all this business about killing people?"

Dreyfus spread his thin hands in a quick

gesture. "Maria jumped to conclusions. In her country government agents use rather direct methods, I'm told."

"And where is your country, Miss Valera?" asked Smooth.

"I come from the mountains," said Maria. "From LaPaz, in Bolivia.—You know that country, perhaps?"

"Not yet," said Smooth. "But I'm learning. A friend of mine is teaching me. His name is Reno Cordoza."

He watched Maria and Dreyfus as he spoke the name. The girl's eyes widened a trifle and she glanced at the gambler. Steve Dreyfus used that easy smile of his and studied the tip of his cigarette.

"What Smooth means," he said slowly, "is that he's been handed a new job. In some way it concerns Big Reno. He thinks it may concern Maria Valera and Steve Dreyfus, so he's being very direct as usual."

"I do not understand," said Maria.

"Neither do most people—especially those who try to outsmart him," laughed Dreyfus. He turned to face Smooth. "I hear Big Reno cashed his chips while you were visiting him today."

"Where did you hear that?"

Dreyfus shrugged. "Most of Broadway knows it. Anything that happens in the Tombs reaches Times-Square in less than an hour."

Smooth nodded. "Fair enough, Steve. Now suppose you tell me the rest of it."

"**W**HY not?" said the gambler. "You've come here to learn who Reno worked for; that's why you and Gilda are with Marty Doyle and Tom Benson."

"Remarkable," said Smooth. "Keep talking."

"Well, Marty and Tom told you Reno was taking the South American trade to a new spot. Then you saw me with Maria. I'm a gambler—two and two make four—and here you are."

Dreyfus spread out his hands, smiling.

"That gives you an A on your report card," said Smooth. "Now where do we go?"

Again Dreyfus laughed. "Oh, I could hand you a stall but it wouldn't do any good." He turned to Maria. "You see, Smooth Kyle knows just about every taxi driver and doorman in New York. They like him and so do a good many other people who work at night. When you and I leave here it will be only a question of minutes before Smooth knows exactly where the taxi dropped us."

"Just like that," Dreyfus added.

"This is very strange," said Maria slowly. She pouted and made big eyes at Smooth. "You are a good detective—so!"

"Simply wonderful," said Smooth. He faced Dreyfus and his eyes were serious. "Thanks for the build-up, Steve. Now suppose we forget the double-talk and get down to business. You can save yourself a lot of grief by telling me what you know about Reno. Who was his boss?"

"Why not come along with us and meet him?" suggested Dreyfus. "Maria is working at the club, and so am I—in a way."

"What club?"

"Oh, it has no name. This week we're using Martell's old spot on Madison Avenue. You remember that one, don't you?"

"Naturally," said Smooth. "But where do you fit? Doyle told me you weren't working."

"I'm not—exactly," said Dreyfus slowly. "I've been employed merely as an advisor. I run a wheel occasionally, but most of the time I simply show the owners how to operate in New York."

"Who are the owners?"

"Joseph Garado and Miguel Panza—two men from South America. I don't believe you've ever met them."

Maria's mouth was open in amazement. She reached forward and caught the gambler's hand. "What is this?" she cried. "In New York it is not legal to gamble. It is a crime! And now you tell this detective where we work! He comes there! He make the arrest!"

Dreyfus put one hand over Maria's. "Smooth isn't that kind of detective," he said. "He's a Federal man, and he doesn't care how many games are running in New

York—just so long as they keep clear of the Government.”

“It is crazy!” said Maria in bewilderment.

“Of course,” Dreyfus answered.

“I agree with you,” said Smooth. “But it saves all of us a lot of trouble.” He stood and pushed in his chair. “I’ll drop around to see you, Steve. About midnight—maybe later.”

Dreyfus stood. “Any time, Smooth. You’re always welcome.”

Smooth walked back to the table where Gilda, Doyle, and Benson were finishing their meals. And as he walked he realized that Steve Dreyfus had taken the play away from him.

The gambler was smart. One of the fastest thinkers in the trade. It hadn’t taken him a moment to guess he was on a spot. But why had he opened up so quickly?

“Why the frown, handsome?” asked Gilda as he seated himself. “Didn’t she have a telephone number?”

“Eh?” said Smooth. “Oh—that! I must be slipping, beautiful. I forgot to ask.”

“But you *did* find out where she was working?”

“Of course,” said Smooth. “There’s a game at Martell’s old place. She’s working there and we’re going up to hear her sing. That okay with you?”

“Martell’s place?” said Doyle quickly. “Who’s running the game?”

“Garado and Panza. Ever hear of them?”

The gambler shrugged. He looked at Benson. “I pass—never heard of them.”

“Neither have I,” said Smooth. He turned to Gilda. “I’m going to ask McNeary to make a fast check and meet us after the show.”

“What show?”

“Any show, beautiful. You name it and I’ll buy the tickets. And you’d better go easy on that roast beef. It makes girls round in the strangest places.”

Gilda sighed and shook her head. She turned to the gamblers. “He’s crazy, but I’m used to him now, so what can a girl do?”

## CHAPTER V

### I LOVE A CROOKED WHEEL

MCNEARY was waiting in the lobby when Smooth led Gilda from the theater on Forty-sixth Street. Moore’s Restaurant was nearby and the Treasury man suggested a drink. At a table near the corner of the bar, he opened an envelope and spread out a few sheets of paper.

“Here’s the story, Smooth,” he said. “An autopsy shows Big Reno died from *curare* poisoning. So far as we have been able to learn no one was in his cell other than the people you listed. A checkup on Reno puts him in Havana six months ago. He flew there from Florida, stayed a month and returned.”

“What about Maria Valera?” asked Gilda.

“She’s been in New York less than a month,” said McNeary. “She’s a native of Bolivia and was singing in a city called Arica in northern Chile before she came to America. She flew from Arica to Cuba, stayed there a short time and then flew to New York.”

“Did you get anything on Garado and Panza?” asked Smooth.

“Joseph Garado,” said Inspector McNeary slowly, “is a South American gambler who used to operate in most of the big cities in Brazil, Argentina and Chile. He’s a native of Bolivia.”

“And what about Miguel Panza?” asked Smooth.

“The same,” said McNeary. “He’s a native of Bolivia and used to run a place in LaPaz.”

“It sounds screwy to me,” said Smooth wearily. “Why should two guys from Bolivia come to New York and try to crack into the gambling racket here?”

“That’s your guess, Smooth,” said McNeary. “But I can tell you this: Washington has authorized me to let you have a free hand in the case. Don’t stop working until you have found out where Reno Cordoza got that gun.”

“What makes it so important?”

"Bolivia," said McNeary. "How much do you know about that country, Smooth?"

"I'll answer that," said Gilda quickly. "He knows one dark-eyed girl named Maria Valera—period, paragraph!"

McNeary smiled. "Suppose you both let me tell you a few things about Bolivia—things in which Washington is *very* much interested."

"Let's have it, Chief," said Smooth.

"To begin with, Bolivia produces just one fourth of the world's supply of tin. That happens to be one of the few minerals not found in North America. The chief source of supply has been the East Indies and China where the tin was mined and sent to England for smelting."

McNeary looked thoughtfully at Gilda and then turned to Smooth. "Both of you understand why it may become impossible at any moment for us to secure tin from this source. That leaves only Bolivia."

"What's the setup down there?" asked Smooth.

"In 1924 an American corporation bought the Llalagua and Uncia Mines and secured control of about eighty percent of the tin production of the country."

"Then why worry about tin?" asked Gilda. "It seems we can get all we want from Bolivia."

"Under ordinary circumstances, we can," said McNeary. "The tin is low-grade but usable—somewhat on the order of the oil we used to get from Mexico. However, you may recall Mexico expropriated her oil wells."

"But isn't the Government of Bolivia friendly toward the United States?" asked Smooth.

"The present Government—well, yes," said McNeary. "But in 1937 an American oil company's holdings were seized by Colonel David Toro, who was then Provisional President. Four months later Colonel Toro was succeeded by a new leader, Lieutenant-Colonel German Busch, Chief of the General Staff."

"German Busch, eh?" said Smooth. "And that's the name of Bolivia's President?"

"No," said McNeary. "General Quintanilla followed Colonel Busch; and a few months ago General Enrique Eneranda took office as President."

"How do you keep up with them?" Smooth laughed; then he looked thoughtfully at McNeary. "Quite a place, Bolivia. Petroleum, tin—"

"Rubber, tungsten, lead—and a population of about three million," added McNeary. He looked at his glass and twisted it slowly. "Half of the people are Indians, but the whites are highly cultured. In fact, one of their universities is three hundred years old."

And then, as if thinking aloud, "Most of the foreign population happens to be German. More than three thousand of them."

"Any Americans?" asked Smooth.

"Fewer than five hundred," said McNeary.

HE TOOK a pencil from his pocket and sketched a rough map of South America on the back of the manila envelope. "Bolivia has no seaport. It reaches the Pacific through Chile, by railroad and air. That's rather an interesting country, too. Something like two hundred thousand Germans in Chile."

He put the envelope into his pocket and smiled. "Of course, all of this may have nothing to do with our case, but the fact that Reno and his associates are natives of Bolivia—"

McNeary spread his hands in a questioning gesture and stood up. "We're worried, Smooth. Watch your step."

"That the best thing I do, Chief," said Smooth.

He walked with Gilda to the street, watched McNeary head toward Broadway and then turned to the taxis that lined the curb. An undersized driver was leaning against the fender of the third cab. His nose carried the dent of a fist and the puffs under his eyes indicated he had been in more than one or two fights. He grinned when Smooth motioned to him.

"Lo, Smooth," he said. "Somethin' I can do for you?"

"Yes, Fisty," said Smooth. "I've been looking for Clipper Delf. Is he still in retirement?"

"In what?" said Fisty.

"In jail."

"Oh—retirement! I get it!" Fisty widened his grin. "Clipper was sprung about four months ago. He's in town."

"What's he doing?"

"Restin', I guess. I ain't heard no complaints from the dice games."

Smooth opened the cab door and motioned to Gilda. "Climb in, Gorgeous. Fisty is going to take us to see an old friend of mine."

"What about your date with the Bolivian nightingale?"

"Oh, I'll get around to that later." Smooth winked at the driver. "Make it fast, Fisty. It might mean a couple of bucks."

"Consider it done," said the driver.

The cab rolled east, crowding and jostling as Fisty fought the traffic. It reached First Avenue, swung north and passed the quieter stretches beyond the arch of the Queensborough Bridge. At a warehouse corner it turned east again and stopped in front of a small cafe near the river.

Fisty got out, nodded to Smooth and walked into the cafe. A moment later he returned with a tall, lightly built man in a dark suit. Clipper Delf walked as if he were moving to music. His steps were even and easy, like those of an athlete or a professional dancer.

"GOOD evening, Smooth," he said. His voice was soft and hardly above a whisper. "And Gilda—well, I haven't seen you for ages and ages."

"Thanks for nothing," said Gilda. "I'm not ages and ages old, Clipper."

"My error," said the thin man. "Perhaps the time seemed long simply because I haven't seen you."

"Nicely done," Gilda said, laughing. "And you, Clipper—have you been keeping in the clear?"

"Oh, moderately so, moderately so." He

turned to Smooth. "I'd ask you to step inside but the place is a bit noisy. Could we drive west to some more elegant bistro?"

"Sorry, but I haven't time," said Smooth. "I was passing by and I remembered you like to play a little roulette on occasion."

"Ah, yes," said Clipper gently. "Roulette—a most delightful game. But I didn't think anyone was running a wheel in town this season."

"You should keep up with the times," said Smooth. "I've been told a new syndicate is operating Martell's place on Madison Avenue. In fact, I'm on my way there this evening."

Clipper Delf lifted a questioning eyebrow. "Martell's place, you say? I know it well—oh, very well."

"Then why not come along later and try your luck?"

"You—er—wouldn't object?"

"Not at all," said Smooth. "I know how lucky you are at roulette and I hope you win tonight—using your usual system, of course. But I can't guarantee you won't lose. The new owners seem to be rather dangerous men."

"Danger—always danger," said Clipper mournfully. "Ah, well—a man must live, I suppose. Thank you for the information, and if there is any little thing I can do—?"

"Not a thing, Clipper," said Smooth. He motioned to the driver. "Madison and Sixty-second; we'll walk from there, Fisty."

"Right!" said the driver.

Smooth winked at Clipper and watched the thin man bow gracefully to Gilda. Then the gray-eyed blonde leaned back against the cushion and crossed her hands over one knee.

"Give, handsome!" she ordered. "What's the deal?"

"Deal?" said Smooth innocently. "Why, I didn't know there was one."

"Oh, of course not!" said Gilda sarcastically. "But I happen to know Clipper Delf's system as well as you!"

"And not a bad one, I might add."



"Not bad until he meets someone who is faster than he is with a gun. You know as well as I do, Smooth, that Clipper Delf has been sticking up gambling joints for years. That's how he got his name. Now you tip him about the game at Martell's place. And Gilda wants to know—how come?"

Smooth laughed. "Oh, it just seemed like a good idea. You see, Gilda, that gun of Reno's might be just a stray. It might have nothing to do with this South American crowd. Then again, it might be one of many. So, I figured Clipper Delf could help me find the answer."

"How?"

"I don't know," said Smooth simply. "I haven't guessed that far." He leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder. "Hop over to Fifth and stop at the Plaza. The Fifty-ninth Street side."

"Why the Plaza?" asked Gilda quickly.

"Business," said Smooth. "I have to see someone."

THE cab turned into Fifth Avenue, rolled south to Fifty-ninth Street and circled to the side entrance of the hotel. Smooth stepped out, told Fisty to wait and hurried into the hotel.

He paused at the cigar counter to buy cigarettes, opened the pack and filled his case. Then he walked slowly to the Fifth Avenue entrance and strolled down the broad steps. A cab rolled up and Smooth reached for the door.

"Over to Madison," he said.

"Okay, Smooth!"

"Huh?" said Smooth. Then he looked at the driver. "Well, I'll be a—"

Fisty's grin was wide as he looked out from the driver's seat. He reached back, swung open the door and grinned again.

"Gilda figured you'd come out this door," he said. "She told me she'd meet you at Martell's joint."

Smooth climbed in and sat down. Martell's was exactly where he *didn't* want Gilda to meet him. When Clipper Delf arrived there would probably be trouble, and Smooth didn't want Gilda mixed up

in it. So he had tried the oldest of gags—and drawn a blank.

The cab stopped at Sixty-second Street and Smooth told Fisty to wait. He walked south, glancing at the building entrances until he came to one that was familiar. A braided doorman in gray and gold reached for the handle as Smooth turned toward the door.

"Good evenin', sir," he said. "A grand night, so it is."

"Personally I think it stinks," said Smooth casually. "Or would smells be a more elegant word, Radigan?"

"Wha—?" The doorman looked closely at Smooth and a grin touched the corners of his wide mouth. "So 'tis you, Smooth. He pulled the handle and stepped inside with Smooth. "An' what would you be wantin' wid this joint, now?"

"Oh, just looking around," said Smooth. "Did Gilda come in yet?"

"She did not," said Radigan. "I've not seen her in weeks."

Smooth grinned. "Perfect!" he said. "When she gets here, tell her I've left with Miss Valera. When she asks where I went, tell her I bounced up to give Harlem a whirl."

"Two-timin', eh?" said Radigan. "You'd best look out when she catches up wid you." Radigan leaned closer. "The wheel upstairs is wired, an' the sticks are hold-outs. 'Tis the fastest clip joint I've ever seen, no less. Watch yer step, Smooth."

"Thanks—I will," answered Smooth. "Who runs the place?"

"A pair of guys named Garado and Panza, no less. I never heard of them in me life until Big Reno put me on the door."

Radigan shook his head. "Too bad about Reno. May the Lord have mercy on his soul—murderer that he was. And not a bad guy, either." The doorman walked across the hall and nodded to the elevator boy. "Take this gentleman up to the top."

Smooth stepped into the elevator and the car lifted quickly to the top of the shaft. It was a ten-story building with an elaborate penthouse that had often been rented

by gamblers during the lax days of Prohibition.

Lately it had been empty. Police activity had closed most of the larger places in New York, and any games that were running were operating on a one-night basis—and simply. But this place on Madison Avenue was different. Definitely!

## CHAPTER VI

### BLOW DOWN, DEATH!

WHEN the elevator door opened Smooth saw a layout that would have made any of the old places look like second-rate dives. The roof had been grassed and the guests sat at tables under gayly colored umbrellas. The lights were soft, and beyond a crescent-shaped flower bed five musicians played the soft, rhythmic songs of South America.

Money had been spent on the place—big money. Smartly costumed girls stood at the check room in the reception hall and smiled at Smooth. A beautifully gowned girl came toward him and asked his name.

"Kyle," said Smooth. "Mr. Dreyfus expects me."

"Ah—of course." She motioned to a tall girl with auburn hair. "Carmencita—will you see that Mr. Kyle is made at home? Perhaps he would like to drink while he listens to the music."

She turned again to Smooth. "Carmencita will take good care of you, *señor*. I will tell Mr. Dreyfus you have arrived."

"Don't hurry," said Smooth. He looked appraisingly at Carmencita. "I'll be here quite a while."

"'Ow nice," said Carmencita. She put one soft arm through Smooth's and walked him toward the garden. "We will sit under thee moon, eh, *señor*? And we weel 'ave one, maybe two dreensks, eh?"

"Not a bad idea."

Carmencita laughed. "I 'ave many good ideas, *señor*."

"And rather a cute accent."

"You like eet?"

"Very much," said Smooth.

He walked with Carmencita to a table and glanced casually about the roof. The garden had been carefully shrubbed: wide hedges lined the four sides, preventing anyone from going too close to the low rails that guarded the roof edges.

There were few direct lights. Small lamps were concealed in the flower bowls on the individual tables, and the small dance floor was lit in soft-colored tones.

Certainly it was no place for pikers. Smooth wondered what manner of men came here to play the tables.

Two were seated at an adjoining table. They were carefully dressed in evening clothes and they spoke quietly as they sipped their drinks. Their conversation was in Spanish, and the girls at the table spoke in the same tongue.

Four more were at another table. They, too, spoke the language of South America—a Spanish into which had crept many words of the natives and not a few Anglicized expressions.

There were some who spoke in a harsher tone: a guttural Spanish that was punctuated with short, heavy snatches of laughter. These guests were fair-skinned men, some with close-cropped hair and heavy hands. Their attitude was one of forced joviality.

Smooth turned to the auburn haired girl. "Have you been long in New York?"

"Oh, no," she said. "My home ees in Chile—in Viña del Mar. That ees near Valparaiso. You have been there?"

"Unfortunately—no," said Smooth. "But I notice most of these girls are South Americans. Is there any reason for that?"

"Why not?" said Carmencita. She smiled. "Most of thee guests are from South America—so, we make them at home."

"Not a bad idea," said Smooth. He pointed toward two blond men at a far table. "Are those gentlemen from your country?"

Carmencita looked, then her eyes went blank. "I do not know thee gentlemen. And eet ees not permitted to talk of thee guests."

SMOOTH grinned, then looked up to see Steve Dreyfus and Maria Valera coming toward him. He stood, bowed to Maria and motioned to chairs at the table. Steve pulled one back for Maria.

"Glad you stopped in," said the gambler. "Has Carmencita been taking care of you?"

"Very nicely," said Smooth. He glanced at Maria. "I hope you will sing before I leave. Anyone as lovely as you must have a beautiful voice."

"You speak like one from my country," said Maria. She looked intently at Smooth. "For that, I will sing for you."

She walked to the orchestra. After a word with one of the musicians she stepped onto the small floor and started a low-voiced Latin song. Smooth pulled his chair closer to Steve and rested one arm on the table.

"Not bad," he said quietly. "Not half bad, Steve. But I don't understand how the owners can spend this much money on a spot that can't run more than a week."

Dreyfus looked sharply at the auburn-haired girl and moved his head in a gesture of dismissal. Carmencita stood, smiled at Smooth and left the table. Dreyfus turned to face Smooth.

"Why not tell me just what you're after?" he said evenly. "I know it has something to do with Big Reno, but I can't guess past that."

Smooth shrugged. "Oh, I merely stopped in to meet the owners, and maybe try the wheel for a turn or two."

"You don't want any part of these wheels," said Dreyfus.

"Thanks," said Smooth. "But what about the owners?"

"Why do you want to meet them?"

"Curious—that's all."

Dreyfus leaned closer. "Look, Smooth. I've been around long enough to know that no one ever tangled with the Federal crowd without gathering plenty of grief. I know you, and I don't want any part of the stuff you dish out. So don't get me wrong, feller."

"Keep talking," said Smooth quietly.

"It's simply this—I stepped into a soft touch in this setup. Two men came to me and asked me to show them how to operate in New York. Stacey Bellville introduced me to these owners in Havana—you know Stacey." He paused.

"I know him," said Smooth. "Used to run a game in New York. He's been operating in Cuba for the past few years."

"That's right," said Dreyfus. "Stacey introduced me to Garado and Panza. Said they were heavy with money and anxious to run a game in New York."

"I told them the smart way to work but they insisted upon a flashy layout—said they didn't care about expense. They claimed they could get enough South American trade to make it pay."

"And is the payoff all they expected?"

"No—it isn't!" said Dreyfus. "That is, I haven't seen enough cash to justify the expenses. But I don't know how much paper the owners are taking."

"What kind of paper?"

"Mortgages, perhaps," Dreyfus shrugged. "Garado okays the credit and he seems mighty liberal. But that's his headache. He pays me off in cash so I've got nothing to worry about unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless there's something behind this that might be interesting to you Federal men."

"And you think there is?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

SMOOTH lifted his glass and smiled at Maria who had finished her first song. She smiled in return and started a second. Smooth turned to the man beside him.

"You sound smart, Dreyfus—almost too smart. Suppose you act smart and tell me the serial number of your gun."

"My gun?" said Dreyfus.

"Your gun!" said Smooth.

Dreyfus lifted his hands in a questioning attitude. "I'm naked, Smooth. I'm not packing a gun. Give me a frisk if you don't believe me."

"I believe you," said Smooth. He stood up as Maria finished her number and came

toward the table. "Let's go inside and watch the wheels go around. And while we're there, see if you can dig up Garado and Panza. I'd like to meet them."

He turned to Maria and complimented her upon her singing. The girl smiled, took Smooth's arm and walked with him to the gambling rooms.

A wide doorway led in from the roof to a vestibule. Dreyfus opened a second set of doors and they stepped into a brilliantly lighted room with heavily draped windows. Two dice tables were at the far end and along the sides of the room were blackjack and birdcage games. Two roulette wheels were in the center and a dozen guests were playing for small sums.

There was real activity at one dice table and Smooth walked toward it. Dan Partridge, a fast man with a stick, was in charge of the table. He saw Smooth and his eyebrows lifted. He looked at Dreyfus and the gambler nodded. Dan shrugged and swung the curved stick across the table to scoop in the dice.

Smooth watched his hands. The fingers were muscular like those of a musician. They lifted the dice and spun them to the player. There was real money down there now and the player was breathing on the dice before he threw them.

"Nueve!" he said, and spun the dice.

"Six," droned Dan Partridge. "And the point is nine."

The stick went out and Dan reached for the dice. Smooth saw those strong fingers lift them, palm them and substitute another pair. The cold dice flicked onto the table and rolled to the player. Partridge slid the stick through the hand that held the palmed dice. And Smooth knew a small compartment had opened and received the dice, holding them safely out of sight until they were again needed.

"Nueve!" said the player.

"Seven," droned Partridge. "And seven loses."

Again the stick went out, clipped the loaded dice and spun them into the dealer's hand. The switch was made before the next play and Smooth grinned.

"Perhaps you would like to play?" asked Maria. "A vary interesting game, this craps."

"Oh, very interesting," said Smooth.

HE WATCHED the player who had just lost motion to Steve Dreyfus. The gambler excused himself and went to the table. There was a moment of quiet talk and Dreyfus nodded. He left the room and soon returned with a short, heavy-shouldered man.

"Who is that?" asked Smooth.

"He is Señor Garado," said Maria. "He must say if the credit is good for Señor Aldoza. Poor Señor Aldoza! He lose and he lose—always he lose." Maria laughed and winked at Smooth. "But Señor Aldoza do not care. He is rich. Vary rich! He owns the mine in Bolivia."

"Is that so?" said Smooth.

"Yes, and Señor Aldoza is politician, too," said Maria. She nudged Smooth's ribs knowingly.

Smooth watched while Aldoza spoke quickly with the owner. Garado smiled indulgently and patted the player on the shoulder. He nodded to Dreyfus and turned to the dealer.

"You will please to give Señor Aldoza credit for an additional ten thousand dollars," he said. "It will be all right."

Then the owner turned and came toward Smooth. Steve Dreyfus walked beside him, talking quietly.

"I want you to know Señor Garado, Smooth," said Dreyfus. "Señor Panza will be here later." He turned to the owner. "This is Mr. Kyle, an old friend of mine."

"So pleased to know you, Mr. Kyle," said Garado. "I hope you find everything to your satisfaction."

"Everything is perfect," said Smooth. "I've never seen the chumps fall so fast."

"Chumps—fall?" said Garado. His dark eyes went round. "I do not understand."

"Neither do they," said Smooth. He glanced at his wrist watch and then looked across the room. "I suppose this is your busiest hour, isn't it?"

"That depends," said Garado. He turned in answer to the call from a roulette dealer. "Ah—you will pardon me."

He left the dice table and moved across the room, his short body swaying above the drive of his muscular legs. Smooth saw the dealer hand him a slip of paper and point to a player who was seated between two dark-haired girls. The player's eyes were bright and he was laughing as the girls urged him to double his stakes. He pointed to the empty space before him on the table and spoke rapidly in Spanish. There was more laughter, and Garado nodded. Again the wheel turned.

"I see you've got Jim Pader on the wheel," said Smooth. "Looks as if you've rounded up every fast dealer in town. But what about the card games? Could I have a look at them?"

"Why not?" said Dreyfus. He turned to Maria. "Would you mind taking Mr. Kyle into the card rooms?"

"I would like to," said Maria. She put her arm through Smooth's and walked with him toward a closed door. "You play the cards—no?"

"Oh, muchly," said Smooth. "Casino and Steal-the-Pack are my favorites."

"I do not know these games."

SHE moved in against Smooth as she passed a group at a roulette table and her hand touched the holster under his arm. Smooth looked at her and the dark-haired girl smiled. She said nothing but opened the door and walked down a short hallway to a room where four groups of silent men sat at card tables.

Smooth followed. One glance at the players told him these games were for real stakes. He stepped into the room and followed Maria to a small bar near the draped windows. A dark-faced bartender set up drinks and Maria seated herself on one of the high stools.

"Why do you come here?" she asked quietly.

"Curious."

"But what is it you expect to find?"

"Almost anything," said Smooth. He

glanced again at his wrist watch, and as he did, the door opened and Clipper Delf stepped into the room. "Yes—almost anything."

Clipper Delf left the door open, stepped to one side and leveled a gun at the players.

"So sorry to interrupt," he said quietly. "Everything will go nicely and no one will get hurt if you gentlemen act sensibly."

A swarthy man leaped to his feet and reached toward his hip pocket.

"Don't try it!" snapped Clipper.

The man got his gun clear just as Clipper's gun went off. The sound of the shot was loud in the room and the swarthy man looked stupidly at a stain growing on the sleeve of his coat. His gun was on the floor and Clipper's automatic was lined on his chest.

Maria's fingers gripped Smooth's arm. The girl's eyes were intense. There was no fear in them but a terrible excitement was building. She turned from Clipper to look at Smooth.

"You are afraid?" she whispered. "Is that why you do nothing?"

"Maybe," said Smooth.

He lifted his hands and looked hard at Clipper. Thank-you Daly stepped into the room—one of Clipper's men. A gun was in his hand and he moved it slowly as he lined the players against the wall. His other hand scooped the cash from the table.

"Thank you," said Daly. "Thank you, gents. And now the collection will begin."

Smooth grinned. He winked at Clipper and the gunman motioned toward the door. Smooth took Maria's arm and walked slowly across the room, his hands held at shoulder level.

He stepped through the doorway and lowered his hands.

Maria followed him to the large room and stood with him at the entrance. Four men were lining the players and girls against the walls while two others held guns.

Smooth recognized them as members of Clipper's mob—expert gunmen who made



their living stealing from gamblers. They were working quickly and efficiently, gathering the money and jewels deposited upon the table.

"You are one of them?" whispered Maria.

"Me—one of Clipper's boys?" said Smooth. He grinned and shook his head.

"Why you don't shoot them? You are afraid?"

"Lady, I never mix into other people's business. That's a smart idea and you ought to try it."

As he spoke Smooth heard a light sound that was familiar but confusing. In the quiet room it seemed as if someone had blown a speck of tobacco from his lips—a slight puff of quickly expelled air.

Immediately following it one of Clipper's men said, "Hey! What gives!" He turned, and Smooth saw Red Bradley put one hand to his neck and pull out a short-feathered dart that had buried itself in the skin.

THE gunman looked curiously at it. "Which one a you mugs is gettin' smart?" he asked. He lifted his gun and swung it slowly. "Lay off the stickers or you get hurt!"

Again there was the sound of a puff of air. A second dart lodged in the cheek of a gunman who was lifting a roll of bills from a roulette table. He jerked the dart free, lifted his gun and leveled it at a dealer.

"Nix, Charlie!" cried the dealer. "I didn't do it!"

"Then who did?" asked the gunman.

There was no answer, but the dealer was pointing toward the first gunman who had been hit with the dart. Red Bradley had dropped his gun and he was slipping to the floor in the curiously relaxed fashion of a man who has suddenly been overtaken with sleep.

"Get Clipper!" called the second man. "Get him an—"

He, too, slipped quietly to the floor. And as he did, a third member of Clipper's mob tugged viciously at a dart that had imbedded itself at the corner of his mouth. He pulled it free, lifted his gun and emptied it at one of the drapes. The heavy hanging sagged and Smooth saw a dark-faced man stagger forward and crash to the floor.

Other guns were talking, now. Clipper Delf had sprinted along the hall, pushed past Smooth and Maria and stepped into the big room. He stood flatfooted, looking quickly about. He saw two of his men down and a third crumpling. Then he, too, heard the light puff of air and saw a dart strike a fourth man.

Smooth's gun was out now. He started forward into the room but Maria caught his arm.

"No!" she cried. "Keep back! *Curare!* They use *curare!*"

"Then it's time they learned better manners," said Smooth.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



# Appointment in October

By CHARLES MARQUIS WARREN

Author of "Bugles are for Soldiers," "Then I'll Remember," etc.

**This is the story of two brothers whose paths cross one bright and shiny day on a diamond. The World's Championship is at stake, and a base-hit or a strike-out at this moment will make or mar five lives. Batter up!**

## I

**A**T A quarter to ten, the Royal White slid through the car-laden sidings of Pittsburgh, dropped the city behind and accelerated its speed in preparation for the long flat run which eventually sweeps into Midwestern City.

The interior of the Special was warm and brightly lighted and in the twin club cars immediately behind the engine there was very little hilarity; which was not as it should be.

Saul liked the club to be hilarious when it wasn't on the field; he believed it relaxed the players without enervating them. His method had always clicked before. A pennant and four world's championships in a row in the seven years since he'd been piloting the Bombers. That was how well it had clicked.

It was a feat even the sports writers granted would never be excelled—unless Saul did it himself. They said he was on his way to a permanent niche up in the Cooperstown Hall of Fame. If he took his fifth consecutive series on Saturday it wouldn't be surprising if Saul moved right into that select company of baseball immortals which included such names as Tyrus Raymond Cobb and Abner Doubleday.

The set-up was right. The man on the street was eating and sleeping the Series. It wasn't often in a man's lifetime that a Series ran neck and neck, coming up to the seventh game all even at three apiece.

It was an event; something a man could remember and refer to, and tell his grandchildren about.

But, here, in the club car something was very wrong and Saul couldn't seem to get his finger on the pulse of the trouble.

He stood beside a table in the first club car, listening to the constrained hum of conversations as groups of the players played cards.

He was a towering man, seeming aloof and alone because of his height. His chest was strong and he had a fine head thatched by prematurely silver hair which became him and of which he was justly proud. His face was pleasantly weathered and sensitive-boned, and had escaped the layers of raw sun that turn the skin of all baseball men the color and texture of wattles on a turkey's neck.

Through the soles of his shoes he could feel the steady vibration of the floor as the streamliner rushed him towards whatever the Park and Saturday held for him. It was exciting, and gave him the feeling of standing still and watching greatness race towards him. It had to do with the gentle jerking of the floor beneath his feet. It was a pleasurable sensation which for the moment induced forgetfulness of the understanding he had for his players and the knowledge that they would be unable, for some reason, to win for themselves or him on Saturday.

And forgetting, he smiled: an inward smile of competence which had no foundation in conceit. At times such as this, it