

Rip-Cord Ruse

By Arch Whitehouse

Featuring “The Griffon”

When is a good dollar counterfeit? That was only one of the baffling riddles that faced Kerry Keen after he attended that fashionable night club—by request. Sure, bad money is queer, but some things are a lot queerer—getting offered half a million bucks just for putting on a 200-mile air express act, for instance. Certainly, that was one for the book. And as for the silk-hatted man of mystery who had invaded Graylands—well, that was already in the book!

Up the crisp drive whirred the sleek black Packard. It came to a halt before the steps of Grayland’s porch and sent two headlight beams into the foliage that fringed the carpet of turf fronting the garden.

Kerry Keen halted hesitatingly, uncertain whether to put the car away or leave it there. “Are you staying?” he asked the girl. “Or will you stop in for a quencher and then let me run you to the station? You’d better stay over, you know.”

But the girl didn’t answer. Instead, she gripped his sleeve with her gloved hand.

“Look! Did you see that?” she whispered.

“See what?”

“A man just darted out of your study! I saw his shirt-front and silk hat.”

She turned her eyes on Keen, and under the dull glow of the dash light he could see fear etched in her face. This was unusual for Barbara Colony.

“Someone in my study?” Kerry asked. “You saw him?”

“Positive! A fellow in evening clothes. I saw him clearly.”

“Know him?”

“No. And yet—yes, somehow he was familiar.”

“Well, let’s go. No use sitting here,” said Keen with quiet resolution. He flicked off the lights, set the emergency brake, then pressed a secret release on the dash and a panel folded back. He drew an automatic from the hidden pocket and palmed it warmly. “You come with me just as though

nothing had happened,” he then whispered. “When we get inside, act natural and chatter.”

The girl was in fluffy evening clothes. Across her brow was a silver-leafed spray of something that trapped the honey-colored foam of her hair. Her eyes danced now with excitement as she drew the horseshoe scarf of black fox up over her head and slid from the sedan.

The whole scene was incongruous. Keen, too, was dressed for a suitable entrance at the smartest supper club. But the big black automatic he now had in his hand somehow held the focal point of the now-crazy picture.

“I knew this night had been too serene,” he growled.

“But isn’t Barney home?” she asked in a dry whisper.

“Of course. He’s supposed to be, at any rate.”

The young ballistics expert inserted his key, twisted it. The lock scrunched and he kicked the door open. He guided the girl in so that she covered his right hand. His eyes took in the dimly lighted reception hall and the stairs on the right. He closed the door carefully behind him, listened as the lock clicked. “Talk! Chatter!” he whispered to the girl.

Barbara Colony thereupon went into her act, carrying on a dizzy conversation that would have gone well in any sorority. “Oh, it was a lovely evening! Why did we leave so early?”

Keen now slipped into his study, glanced about sharply. His eyes caught certain changes in the room and tell-tale silver-dust smudges on the desk, the chair arms, and the covers of books.

Someone had been seeking finger prints in a methodical fashion.

"Keep talking," he said to the girl as he darted on to the big dining room.

The girl stayed in the study, threw her wrap over the back of a large club chair, and sat down on the big leather lounge that faced the open fireplace. She could hear Keen stalking about the lower rooms, opening closet doors, and swishing the drapery of the windows. The air was electric with tension.

In a few minutes he returned, his face blank.

"Are you sure?" he asked calmly.

"Absolutely! I saw a man in evening clothes. He had on a silk hat, too. But Where's the Irishman?"

"Upstairs. He's on his way down now," Keen offered. "I can hear those big feet of his clumping down the steps. He'll probably be here in a moment or so."

KEEN studied the smudges on the desk and frowned. He glanced, about, but after all, nothing much had been disturbed. He turned and glanced at Barney O'Dare, his Mick houseman, who now came in sleepy-eyed, disheveled, and grumpy,

"Hi, Pebbles," Barney greeted the girl. "What's up?"

"Someone has been in here," cracked Keen. "Pebbles saw a man as we drove in. You hear anything tonight?" demanded the ballistics expert,

"Me, Boss? No I never heard anything."

"Look!" said Keen pointing to the silvery smudges. "Someone's been after fingerprints. We'd better search the house together. Get a Rodney,"

The Mick grumbled, pulled his belt tighter after tucking a corner of his shirt-tail in. Then he went over to the case on the wall and took out a big Mauser machine-pistol.

"I ain't heard nuttin," he growled again. Then he beamed at the girl and said: "Say, Pebbles, you sure look a honey! You're dressed as pretty as—"

"Come on," argued Keen. "Stop whispering sweet nothings and help me uncork this guy. He must still be here."

"I could uncork a bottle, Boss," reminded the Mick.

"Later. Let's get going."

But a thorough search of the big house uncovered nothing. Not a window had been tampered with. There was no sign that any lock had been forced. But it was obvious that someone had been in Keen's study. The silver smudges on the furniture were enough evidence for that.

They gave up after about twenty minutes and returned to the study,

"I'm certain I saw a man in here," Miss Colony went on. "I saw him clearly. His white shirt front and silk hat stood out boldly. He heard us and moved toward the door over there."

The Mick handed out some cocktails, and as Keen was about to sip his, the telephone bell rang.

"Well, maybe this will give us an idea," he mumbled, reaching for the instrument.

This time it wasn't Drury Lang.

Instead, it was a new voice—a strange, compelling voice.

"*Mr. Kerry Keen?*" the voice said.

"That's who you are calling, isn't it?" replied Keen, frowning. "Who did you expect to get, Hermann Goering?"

"*I'll ignore that remark, Mr. Keen,*" the voice said calmly. "*In any event, I have a proposition. How would you like to make half a million dollars in the next three—or shall we say five—hours?*"

"Let's make it a full million in ten hours," said Keen. "And how are things up there at the booby hatch?"

"*You may be amazed, or you may only be putting on an act. But I can guarantee you half a million in less than five hours—for just one little service,*" the voice said, selecting each word carefully.

"I could kill a lot of guys in five hours," muttered Keen, trying to indicate the ridiculousness of the situation to Barney and Miss Colony by pulling queer faces.

"*You won't have to kill anyone.*"

"No? Then I wouldn't think of it," he gaged. "There has to be plenty of gore in anything I undertake, and—"

"*Look, Keen,*" the voice insisted. "*I have eight small copper plates in a package. Those plates must be delivered to a vessel at sea within a few hours. You are the one man in this part of the world who can do it the way we want it done. What do you say?*"

"Where did you get them?"

"Don't you read the papers?"

Keen thought a moment, then stiffened. Counterfeiters! He shot a signal to Miss Colony who immediately darted out to another phone in hopes of checking the source of the present call on Keen's wire.

"Is that the kind of money you'll pay me?" Keen asked quietly.

"No. I'll pay you half down on consummation of the agreement in straight stuff. You'll get the rest when you deliver the plates. Straight U.S. money in mixed denominations. What do you say?"

"Don't like it."

"Don't go patriotic on me," the voice complained. *"You know what this racket is."*

"Sure. I deliver plates of a certain value to a very uncertain gentleman. They are taken to Europe, then some dopey government over there puts the plates through their own presses and makes American money. With this they build up their own foreign exchange at the expense of some benighted little neutral country. Anyhow, it's not for me."

The girl came back into the room, nodded, and raised her eyebrows.

Keen scribbled on a sheet of paper: "Tip off Lang Have clue on counterfeit money plates Quick!"

"Don't try to trap me on another wire," shouted the voice, as though the man had read Keen's mind. *"You call your friend Lang and I'll tell that mug what's under your cellar. Get it?"*

Keen snapped a signal to the Mick and washed out his orders to the girl. Then O'Dare raced out and caught Miss Colony just in time. She was on the phone and having trouble with Lang's landlady.

BEADS of perspiration trickled down Keen's temples. That was a close call. He poked a finger down inside the front of his dress collar, and the Irishman returned in time to realize that something was about to break.

"Now listen, Keen," the voice was now saying. *"You know that none of this will affect the United States. The money they print from these plates will probably never get into ordinary circulation. The wads of notes will be used through the banking systems to bolster the foreign trade and exchange*

facilities of one of the belligerent nations. What are you worrying about?"

"Nothing. Now that you put it that way," said Keen. He was sparring for time. "What's the plan, anyhow?"

"I can't talk here," the voice said. *"You'll have to meet me—right away."*

"You weren't here a little earlier in the evening, were you?" asked Keen, selecting a cigarette from a jade box.

"Earlier in the evening? No. But why do you ask?"

"Just curious. Someone was taking fingerprints off the furniture," explained the young ballistics expert.

"That sounds bad, Keen," the voice said anxiously. *"Sounds like someone is trying to head you off from this show. Better get moving fast."*

"Okay. What's the story?"

The girl stood about fidgeting nervously and pacing up and down the room. The Mick stood on the other side of the table, his gaunt mug a mask of almost simian bewilderment. He looked like a man trying to think of something to say while swallowing a very unpalatable dose of medicine. Keen jerked him out of it by pointing a long finger down at the floor. The Mick was glad to go down and prepare the Black Bullet for a possible nocturnal flight.

Keen listened intently for several moments, jotting down a few notes, then said: "I'll be right there. Won't take me many minutes from here."

Then he hung up and glanced at the clock.

"What a lovely finish for a lovely evening. Princess," he said coldly. "Want to get in on a half million dollar mystery? You ought to be able to fill one of the parts."

"I don't like it," the girl said petulantly. "We could have headed him off, too."

"Sure, and he would have headed us into the cooler. That lad knows too much. We'll have to see that he is put out of the way—quietly, but with dispatch. Ready?"

The girl slipped into her wrap again. Keen meanwhile called down to Barney.

"Be ready to move fast," he warned. "And don't let any top-hatted lug go wandering over the place again."

He selected a smaller automatic from his collection and handed still another to the girl, who secreted it in her bag.

They went outside, got into the car again, and Keen snapped the starter and drove off.

THE RENDEZVOUS was a small, exclusive night club. There were a few cars in the parking space, most of them large expensive models. An open door allowed the strains of a small, but skilled, orchestra to filter out into the cool night air. And both Keen and the girl caught the significance of the music; for it was quite high toned.

“Very select, eh?” Keen observed as he turned off the motor.

“Good thing we have our Whoop-de-doop togs on, eh? They’d never let us in, otherwise,” quoth Miss Colony.

Keen led the way across the wide veranda to the doorway. A man in a dinner jacket with a wad of large menus in his hand came forward and bowed to them.

“Good evening, Sir,” he said politely.

“Good evening,” replied Keen, and whispered a few words.

“I, think I understand, Sir,” the man bowed. “Your party is over here.”

He led them around a simulated grotto, through a regiment of palms, and up to a heavy, iron-studded door. He tapped respectfully and the door opened to a narrow slit.

“Your party, Mr. Yates,” the head waiter said.

Keen steered the girl through the doorway and followed. The portal closed behind them with a heavy timbered thud.

Keen took the layout in at a glance. This was a select and very private dining room. The table had been set with a display of small dainty sandwiches, several bottles of expensive liquor, and a silver keg of ice cubes. There was no window in the room.

A man in the evening livery greeted them. He seemed a trifle surprised at the appearance of Miss Colony, but he could not hide his glance of admiration.

“It was kind of you to come, Mr. Keen,” the man cooed.

Keen simply nodded and now saw that there were two other men in the room. They were

behind him sitting in chairs with their backs toward the door-wall. They were in ordinary business clothes and had none of the accepted earmarks of the gangster type. They might have been young college professors—except that they didn’t get up.

“This is Miss Pebbles,” explained Keen. “She follows me around and gets in the way. You’ll have to put up with her too—for the time being.”

Yates bowed again, smiled a trifle, and said it was a pleasure. Then he remarked about the unusualness of her name. It was obvious that he was not being fooled, but he was a bit perturbed. He went on:

“Will you sit down? I can give you a drink. And we have a bit to eat, if you will join us.”

“Thanks, not at this hour of night. We can’t stay very long,” retorted Keen.

“I understand,” nodded the man.

Keen studied him. He was tall and rather slim. He had a thin face and ashen eyes. His hair was thin, neatly brushed back, and parted low on the side of his head.

“We needn’t go further into the details of the plates,” he opened, ignoring the two men who sat silently behind Miss Colony and Keen “All we are interested in now is how soon you can take off and deliver them.”

“It isn’t as easy as that,” smiled Keen, “In the first place, I don’t see any money yet—real money. Next, I have not yet agreed to go through with the plan as you outline it. What is more, I don’t actually like any part of it. But—if the money is right—I might be induced to bolster the old exchequer, so to speak. Now you talk, Yates.”

“These plates to be delivered,” said the other, “about two hundred miles out to sea. I can give you the position and explain full details. A foreign vessel, you know—a warship.”

“I understand,” Keen said staring at the ceiling. “And what assurance do I have that I shall be paid off and allowed to leave once I land there?”

“Why would they want to detain you?”

“For half a million dollars,” said Keen coldly.

The man named Yates smiled coldly.

“You wouldn’t have to land in the first place. You could drop them on the deck. Of course, they have the other quarter million to pay you—so if you drop them you miss out on half the money. Still, it’d be a cool quarter million for you.”

“It begins to have an odor, Yates,” said Keen.

“You must expect to face some risk in a matter like this.”

“I agree. But I can’t see why you don’t take a little and—well, let’s say deliver them yourself.”

“My part is over. I stole them.”

“Nice job!” agreed the young ballistics man. “All right, I’ll do it. Let’s see the color of your money.”

Yates spoke to the other men in a language which Keen, for once, didn’t recognize. The three consulted quietly while Keen calmly poured himself a drink and released a splash of soda into the glass. The girl turned down the offer of a drink. She was watching the two men.

Yates finally brought a leather bag from a small cupboard and placed it on the table. He snapped open the latches, then stood with his hands on top of the bag.

“It is agreed, then,” he muttered, mouthing his words, “that you will deliver the plates to this vessel. You will be paid the agreed sum at once. I shall hand the plates over to you when you take off. You, of course, have a machine capable of such a trip?”

“Where’s the dough?” argued Keen,

The bag was opened and Yates brought out several heavy stacks of United States currency of varying denominations, but mostly in twenties, fifties, and one hundred dollar bills. They were tied together tightly.

Keen took one bundle, studied the top bill, then flicked the corners of the others. He realized at once that the smaller bills were regulation currency, but he was not so sure of the fifties and hundreds. He was becoming as certain that the big denominations were forgeries as he was that he was being tricked into something. The big bills must have been made with counterfeit plates—not from the stolen plates, which were supposed to be the real thing right from the Mint.

“And now, may I see the plates?” he asked.

“No. That part is secret. We have carefully packaged them. We do not care to open them again.”

Yates then strode up and down, thinking hard. Keen was frankly puzzled about it all. While he was certain that much of the money displayed might be counterfeit, there could be no question but that a great percentage of it was legal currency

and as such there was still considerable money in that bag.

Yates stopped his pacing, turned sharply.

“Then it is arranged,” he said. “When can you get away?”

Keen flipped his sleeve, glanced at his wrist watch.

“Too late to try it tonight,” he said, “I’d never get back—in the darkness.”

Yates bit his thumbnail reflectively and considered. Finally he was satisfied and said: “I will deliver the plates to you at your home tomorrow night exactly at 9 o’clock, I will also give you the position of the vessel, then you can deliver them to the ship by dropping them. Or you may land alongside, deliver them in person—and get the rest of the money.”

Keen agreed to the terms, his tongue in his cheek, whereupon Yates shoved the brown leather bag across the table with a snaky smile and an offer of his hand.

Keen ignored the hand. He closed the bag instead.

Yates added: “And I hope that Miss Pebbles will honor us again here under less strained circumstances.”

Keen would have liked to punch Yates in the jaw. But he said: “Don’t invite her. She has a very nasty habit.”

“Habit?”

“Yes, she is likely to accept. And then you’ll be sorry.”

ALL THE WAY back in the car, Keen sat and pondered. Or at least he tried to. The girl chuckled quietly once, and he jerked because he had completely forgotten she was with him. He had been concentrating his mind on the bag of currency in the back of the car. He wondered if there was some sort of a tricky holdup connected with this.

“What are you laughing at?” he demanded of the girl.

“I was just thinking what a grand mess this is likely to turn out to be in the air over that warship. You know, you and Barney have all the sport in this deal.”

“You figure this out,” Keen argued back, his gloved fingers just caressing the wheel. “These birds hand me over a—well, a large sum of

money to do something for them. They turn a package over to me and all I have to do is to fly out to sea, return, and say I delivered it. There is no check on me at all.”

“But if it is not delivered, and if the package really contains printing plates stolen from the U.S. Mint, you could in turn get them back to the Mint and feel like a public spirited citizen again,” the girl replied.

“Right! I could also turn this guy Yates in—except that he appears to know entirely too much about me.”

“So, if the plates do not arrive on this war vessel, he will come around with a gun and ventilate your sports jacket. Have you ever thought of trying to live straight. Mister Keen?”

“Don’t be pessimistic! I can be hoping that a reasonable percentage of that dough is OK. There may be twenty or thirty thousand good dollars there.”

“And they are not handing that much money out for a fake trip,” Miss Colony said, staring ahead. “No, my lad, you’ve got to deliver that package—or your name is M-U-D. Those two foreign boys will see to that. They both have itchy trigger fingers. I could tell by their hands.”

Keen gave up the riddle, but the possibilities held his imagination all the way back to Graylands. And as he drove into the curling drive he suddenly remembered the silk hatted gentleman Pebbles had seen earlier in the evening,

“I still wish we knew who that fellow was,” he repeated. “You’re sure it wasn’t Yates?”

“Oh, positive. He was not the type. This chap was heavier in every respect.”

Barney greeted them in the hall with his usual dumb countenance.

“I’ve got the money and it’s all set, Barney,” said Keen, throwing the leather bag in a corner.

“What we gotter do. Boss?” the Mick inquired blandly.

“Fly out three hundred miles, find a warship, and drop a package on board.”

“What sort of package. Boss? One what blows up, knocks the windows out, and sinks her?”

“Don’t be goofy. Of course not. We just deliver some stolen currency plates so that they can make American money over on the other side and pay all their bills. Simple as that, Barney.”

“Plates what’s bin stolen? Good plates. Boss?”

“Good plates, Barney. Now don’t go suggesting that we keep them ourselves and print our own money.”

The Mick allowed his face to crinkle. “Hey, wait a minute. Boss,” the O’Dare finally bleated. “That don’t make no sense to me.”

“What doesn’t?”

“I mean, Boss, if these guys want to print phoney money, why do they have to use real plates. Why don’t they make their own. The other mugs over there wouldn’t know no different.”

Both Miss Colony and Keen stared full into each other’s faces. They allowed that homely chunk of deduction to sink in deep.

“I read some things in a book once,” the Mick began again. “A book on crime detection and about confidential agents. It said—”

“Never mind,” broke in Keen getting up. “For that one idea you’ve given me you can sit here in front of the fire while I go and get you a bottle. The idea is worth a whole case, in fact.”

Keen went to a cupboard. He had to admit that the Mick had come through with an angle that fitted in.

“What sort of a book did you say you were reading, Barney?” the girl asked.

“Well, it was a book I found where it told about how these smart spies and detectives find out things.”

“I’d like to see that book some time, Barney,” the girl said with a sly smile. She, too, was getting an idea.

KEEN CAME BACK with a bottle O’Doul’s Dew for the Mick. “Now there’s an idea,” he went on. “Ten to one we’re not taking stolen plates out there at all. We’re taking something else. They used the currency plate gag as a blind. Good stuff, Barney.”

“An’ I bin thinkin’,” the Mick went on after a long tug at his drink. “... I bin thinkin’ that they ain’t gonner let us get away with this dough that easy. I mean, if we deliver that package like you said, they will want some—some Okay that we do it. Anyhow, how we gonner do it and still be in the clear?”

“What he’s trying to ask,” Miss Colony added, “is how are you going to make certain this man Yates won’t prey on you for more favors? It might

become a regular thing later, considering the war and everything.”

“Aw, we’ll take care of that guy quick,” the Mick growled. “All we gotter do is—”

“I think you need a little women’s intuition here,” Miss Colony broke in.

“I can think better in the air,” the young ballistics expert cracked.

“You’ll probably get plenty of opportunity for that, too,” Pebbles said sweetly. “Have you tried to think out just what it is you are taking out there?”

“If we only knew, we’d know where we stand,” said Keen.

“In this book I was tellin’ you about,” the Mick spoke up, “it says that sometimes crooks—that is, big time crooks—are clever because they use one idea to cover another what is something like it, only different.”

“Clarity, if nothing else,” mooned Keen.

“No, what I mean, Boss, is if they keep saying plates and try to make us guys—Well, if they wuz talkin’ about plates all the time, they might mean photos, that is, camera plates wid pitchers on ‘em. Pitchers what they shouldn’t have, like.”

Keen switched in his seat: “Hey,” he snapped. “What the devil book have you been reading, anyhow? That’s the second bright idea you have had tonight.”

“Become a confidential agent,” prattled on Miss Colony. “Go about and see the world. Wear the best clothes and meet the finest people. Be the man the police rely upon. Confidential Agent No. 876. Send for our catalog and find out how to get one of these splendid and important jobs.”

“What is this?” demanded Keen,

“Take it easy. Pebbles,” said the Mick, sticking his mug in his grog with a guilty glint in his eye.

“No, I mean Barney has had two ideas in a row,” Keen argued. “I’ll bet he’s right, too. I’ll bet they are plates of some kind. Photographic plates of something they’re trying to get out of the country.”

“And just what do you think they would be?”

THE TELEPHONE BELL rang. “This is like a radio program,” growled Keen. “Whenever we get to a certain stage in the conversation, the phone rings.” He reached over, took up the receiver.

“*That you, Keen?*” demanded the voice at the other end.

“Always has been,” Keen replied. “What do you want?”

“*This is Lang— Drury Lang.*”

“So—?”

“*Listen—I’ve got a job for you this time, baby.*”

“I know. Someone stole some currency plates from the Mint and I’m elected. Good night, Lang!” replied Keen, winking at the girl.

“*No, not that. That’s just the gag line we gave out. They didn’t get any thing of the sort. They got some photos, though—damned important photos, too.*”

“Side view of you with a shave?”

“*Listen, Keen. You know something about this bomb sight the Army Air Corps has tucked away?*”

“That’ll drop a bomb in a pickle barrel from just this side of the moon?”

“*Something like that. But never mind those details. You got the general idea. Anyway, someone took some detailed pictures of one. They took pictures because it was too tricky to try to swipe the gadget or try to write details up about it.*”

“And these very important pictures are on their way out of the country for some foreign power to use against another foreign power. Is that it, Lang?”

“*How did you know?*” asked the Secret Service man, aghast.

“Never mind. What’s the rest of it?”

“*That’s all. Got any ideas?*”

“What are the photos worth? I think I might lay my hands on them, at that,” said Keen with stunning frankness.

“*Through that Griffon guy?*”

“No, through Miss Colony. She picked them up in a rummage sale on Park Avenue. Anyhow, stop asking so many questions. What’s in it for me is what I want to know.”

“*Plenty! I’ll swipe a chunk of the Dies committee funds for you, if necessary. We’ve got to get them photos back.*”

“I have an idea—that is, Barney has an idea. He’s been reading a book, Lang. You ought to get yourself a book, too.”

"When will you get them," the Secret Service man asked, ignoring the taunt.

"I'll see if I can uncover them late tomorrow. Maybe Barney will have read the book through by then and we might really get somewhere. But how much for me?"

"Ten grand!"

"Cheap skate. You'll make it twenty—and you'll quit asking so many questions."

"I ought to come out there now and raid your dump. You probably swiped them yourself."

"Dopey! I haven't been to Washington since the last egg rolling show. Christmas, I guess it was."

"That was Easter, you dope! It was on the White House lawn!"

"No, these were Secret Service eggs outside the Union Station. I rolled 'em for all they had. Suckers for loaded dice."

Lang let out a bleat and tried again: "*But you have some idea about them photos, don't you, Keen? You will see what you can do, won't you?*"

"Boy, you sound a mess, Lang! Still, I feel like a breather—I need mental exhilaration. We'll have a whack at the job, Lang. I'll try to pop around in a day or two."

"Swell, Keen, if you would," the Secret Service man moaned. "*Get that Griffon pal of yours on the job, too, will you?*"

"He's no pal of mine. I tell you again, I don't even know him," he lied.

Lang hung up with a crash and Keen laughed for the first time that night.

"You were right, Barney," he said finally. "Those plates are pictures of an Army Air Corps secret device."

"What now?" the girl asked.

"Well, we'll get paid both ways this time—which should at least be interesting. Now shove off to bed. Pebbles—that is, if you are staying here. You know where your room is. I'll sit up, finish a pipe, and try to figure something out. You buzz off, too, Barney—and keep your nose out of that book. Two ideas in one night is about all we can stand from you."

Miss Colony got up, gave Barney a queer grin, and glided out. "Good night, Mr. Confidential Agent," she twitted the Mick from the doorway.

"Take it easy, will yer, Pebbles?" the Mick replied, looking sheepish.

"Go on to bed, Barney!" ordered Keen. "I've decided to go for a little auto ride before turning in."

"You can have it, I'm hoppin' off to bed," the Irishman said after the girl had gone. "I'm gonner get some real shut-eye. No tellin' what we'll be up to tomorrow night, eh?"

"No telling is right," agreed Keen, getting up and pulling on his topcoat. "I'll be back in a few hours—I hope."

"Take a gun, Boss—just in case," warned the Mick.

"I'm not worrying about taking one. Confidentially, I'm going to bring one back—a beaut!"

WHAT HAPPENED in the next twelve hours may never be known in full detail. All Barney and Miss Colony knew was that Keen returned haggard and worn sometime before noon the next day. The Packard was splashed with mud from radiator shell to rear lights. A check-up on the speedometer would have disclosed that he had travelled several hundred miles in that time and all he had to show for it was a fairly long wooden box bearing suspicious markings. He ordered it removed from the car, taken downstairs, and the contents loaded into the Black Bullet, his secret amphibian hidden away in their underground hangar.

He grinned foolishly at Miss Colony, grabbed a steaming cup, then wandered off to bed without further explanation.

Keen arose just before dinner, took a hot bath, and changed into a neat tweed suit. He came down for dinner very much the young country gentleman again.

"Where's Pebbles?" he asked, glancing about.

"She buzzed off this afternoon. Said she'd be back tonight to pick up the pieces and notify your next-of-kin, whatever that means," said Barney.

"That's all right."

"She sorted out that dough," went on the Mick, "and figured you had about eighteen grand out of the lot. The rest she put in the furnace. Said she'd plant the eighteen for you in the bank. Kayo?"

"Kayo!" agreed Keen. "Let's have the groaning board now. I'm as hungry as a hunter."

Keen ate slowly and without further comment, for he was still pondering on the situation and

wondering what means Yates would institute to make certain he delivered those plates.

Barney cleared the room and Keen took down three automatic pistols from the arms case, noted that two were carefully loaded, and placed them in his tweed jacket pocket. He put the third on the table. Then he took up a book and sat reading until the shadows began to fall outside. So absorbed had he been he had not noticed the activity of Barney about the room or his clever movements near the gun case.

Shortly before nine o'clock, a large car came up the driveway. Keen maintained his attitude, threw his feet up higher on the table, and nosed deeper into the book. Barney, using all the gestures of a butler, greeted the man at the door and announced him to Keen. The car crunched away as the door closed and Keen knew he had to make a quick decision.

It was Yates, as was to be expected. He gave O'Dare a sneering glance and said to Keen: "We don't need this fellow, do we?"

"No," agreed Keen, not getting up. "Slither off, O'Dare."

The O'Dare slithered—down to the cellar. There he waited for the flare-up.

Yates was somewhat mystified by Keen's attitude. He scotched on the end of the big library table and peered at his man from under the curled brim of his felt hat, which he hadn't bothered to remove.

"Evening, Yates," said Keen, carefully inserting a bookmark.

"Let's get going."

"Righto. Where's the package?"

"I have it right here—in my coat pocket."

"Pass it over, then."

"I'm not passing it over, Keen," the man said, taking a cigarette from a leather case and lighting it with a critical grimace, "I'm going along!"

"That wasn't in the deal," said Keen, turning his head slightly. Yates turned his head the same way—toward the gun laying at the far end of the table.

Keen considered a minute. Then he decided on a new tack. "Where is this vessel?"

Yates drew out a folded paper. It was a portion of a sea chart, and a bright red cross was marked on it about 200 miles off the Long Island coast in

an easterly direction. Keen looked at it, nodded, then put the paper down,

"They know we're coming?"

"They will when I tell them."

"How?"

"Never mind. How soon can you start?"

"Right away—fifteen minutes, anyway."

Yates reached for the telephone, gave Keen another careful glance, then called a number. Keen realized that it might only be a phone booth in some cigar store.

"Leaving in fifteen minutes," said Yates when his call was answered. "Everything is straight!"

He hung up and smiled: "I had an idea you'd be reasonable, Keen. I have to go along because I have to get out fast. It's getting too hot for me."

"And now," said Keen, "I wish to inform you that I don't go without the rest of the dough. And if you go, you go like the plates—out with a parachute. I'm not landing alongside any warship."

Yates went livid and then gulped. He saw Keen's hand moving toward the gun at the far end of the table. Yates then struck like a cobra. He got the gun first and palmed it with the air of a man who knew how to use it.

"No you don't. Keen. I was expecting that. Now listen here: You're playing nice. You're taking me out to that point—and we're going right away."

"That wasn't in the deal," said Keen.

"It is now. Get moving."

"I'm staying here until you pay out. The last batch was mostly phoney, anyhow."

"Look, Keen," said Yates, getting control again. "I'm flying out to that point—to that vessel. I'm flying in your plane. This gun, here, says I am."

"With pictures and details of the new Air Corps bomb sight?" added Keen, staring strangely at the gun.

Yates stiffened: "How did you know?"

"I'm supposed to get them back for the Secret Service."

Yates was staggered by that. He glanced anxiously about the room with panic lighting his eyes.

"Look," he said falteringly. "I'm going out to that ship. You are taking me. If you don't, I'm—"

well, if you don't take me, that man of yours will. I know he can fly your job."

"I still say the same thing—Where's the dough?"

The tension was too much for Yates. He knew he was up against a cool customer and he knew only one ally. He raised the gun menacingly.

"What about it?" he said.

"I wouldn't play with that gun if I were you," said Keen. "I don't think it's loaded."

"Old stuff. Keen. You may have pulled that one on other mugs, but it doesn't go with me. You wanted this gun yourself, but I beat you to it. Now come on."

"No, I just don't think I will," taunted Keen.

"The dough is at the other end, Keen. I promise you'll get away safe. Put me aboard that vessel and you're in the clear."

"Don't you wish you were, Yates?" said Keen with a smile.

"Blast you. Keen!" the man spat, ramming the big gun forward. "Once more, are you taking me out there?"

"No! Positively no!"

Yates stood up, held the gun at Keen, twisted to peer along the sights and pulled the trigger!

There was a sharp explosion, a flash of flame that stabbed back at Yates. He lowered the gun slowly, pawed at his chest.

"Keen, you double-crossing swine . . . you . . ."

And Yates sank slowly to his knees. Keen was beside him in a flash and had the gun away. He stared at it and said: "Good Lord! It was loaded!"

"Sure," said Barney coming into the room. "I changed 'em. I gave him the 'back-biter'. I knew that guy would play tricks if he came here. And I figured you'd sure recognize the gun if you picked it up yourself."

"This is certainly your week," grinned Keen. "Reading books, getting ideas, and then double-crossing Brother Yates."

"Never give a sucker a chance," said Barney. "That's what it says in another book I read, anyhow. What now?"

"We're going out warship hunting. There's one inside the 200-mile limit. We'll take care of that, too, since it's trying to pull a fast one on the good old U.S.A.!"

THEY worked quickly now. Yates body was trussed up. The backbiter had done its work well.

It was a normal-looking weapon which had been so changed that it fired its bullet backward at the person pulling the trigger. It had been designed for just such occasions as this, but Keen had not known that Barney had substituted it for the unloaded weapon he had first left for Yates' benefit.

They removed the all-important package from Yates' pocket and placed it in the wall-safe. Then they carefully buckled a parachute harness to the body, carried it downstairs, and placed it in the Black Bullet in the space between the front seat and the area reserved aft for Barney and his aerial activity.

They dressed carefully, started the two Allison engines, then Keen returned upstairs for the chart Yates had so thoughtfully brought along. In five minutes, the Black Bullet was rolling gently out of the hidden hangar and Barney was touching the switches which would lower the secret hangar doors, faked to look like a normal rock garden. Then he moved up in the darkness, swung down the folding wings, and locked them, listening all the time to the even beat of the two muffled motors. Finally, he climbed up, nodding to Keen who had now assumed the role of the Griffon with scarlet mask and black coverall.

"Let's go!" the Mick grinned.

The big black amphibian rolled down the turf of the lawn on its tricycle gear, passed the shadow of Keen's boathouse, then eased into the water. The scarlet-masked pilot drew up the front landing wheel and the Black Bullet rode gently on her floats.

"You made sure of the 'umbrella stand' I brought along, didn't you?" Keen asked over the cockpit seat. It was his way of speaking of the special bomb gun he had obtained secretly the night before.

"All fixed and ready for the showers," grinned the Mick. "Shove off!"

Keen opened the throttles and the Black Bullet cut a curve of white foam across the water like a ghostly wraith. He cleared a marker buoy, turned her slowly into the wind, then let her take off evenly across the rollers. She cleared with a minimum of thumping and smoothed off into the air.

They were away, climbing fast in spite of the extra load. And then Keen set his course for the

position marked on the chart. He knew he could make the point in about an hour under normal conditions, but he sensed that since he was being expected, anything but normal conditions might prevail.

“Keep your eye open for foreign seaplanes,” said Keen over his shoulder, once they were well clear of the coastal area. “We may find that we are to be escorted.”

“I can’t wait,” the Mick replied going to work setting his pit out with a lovely display of armament. “We bin doing too much brain work so far in this business. This is more in my line.”

They settled down then for the run out, both wondering what was ahead. Keen’s main reason for coming out here at all was to get rid of the body of Yates, and his imagination had cooked up the bright idea of—well, letting that gentleman report according to plan, except that he would be very dead and hardly in a condition to explain what had happened.

They checked their course continually by dropping drift flares to make certain they were heading for their objective. They realized now that at any minute they would be nearing their point.

Suddenly Keen stiffened in his seat. He could see snapping pin points of light jetting out from some black object on the surface of the sea ahead.

“Gun-fire!” he snapped. “Wake up Barney. We’re in for a war!”

“Well, don’t forget we’re neutral,” the Mick cracked for the sake of something to say.

“Sure, but these birds are fighting it out inside our new territorial borders. That’s too much to swallow.” It was obvious now that a war vessel of some sort was engaging some other ship with everything she had. They could see the grim belches of fire.

“They’re firing on a merchantman of some sort!” yelled Keen suddenly. They could see now—see plainly the blazing outline of a freighter lying at a dangerous list a few hundred yards away from the battleship. Keen raced the Black Bullet toward the scene, which now came out in blazing clarity. The merchantman carried the flag of a neutral nation—Chili—on her hull. The design came out blindly white as flames poured out of great gashes ripped wide in her hull and superstructure.

“They haven’t allowed the crew to get away. Look! They are clambering down the side of the hull. Only one boat launched so far.”

“She wouldn’t stop,” snapped the Mick. “Look, she’s still under way. Look at the foam behind her.”

“She’s neutral and in our territorial waters!” flamed Keen.

“Well, they didn’t take that into consideration. Look at ‘em pour it into her! She was probably carryin’ nitrates to make explosives. The way they got that warship faked out, ya can’t tell what country it represents—but it’s a sure thing they didn’t want them nitrates, or whatever that cargo is, from getting into the hands of the other side.”

“That’s a crime!” cried Keen.

“You’re right, Boss. They can’t do that.”

“Can’t? They are doing it!”

The war vessel was now firing broadsides almost over open sights. The shells were screeching across the narrow range and banging deep into the battered freighter. Whole sections of superstructure were flying sky-high.

The Black Bullet flyers circled the stricken merchantman at fairly low altitude now and saw the grim tragedy that was being enacted. Men, like ants, swarmed over the sides with patches of white life preservers marking their trail. Flame belched out from new wounds and consumed the men as they slithered down the slanting hull. Great plumes of smoke streaked along, blotting out sections, and more shells crashed in and exploded.

“Look, Boss!” the Mick abruptly warned. “They’re sending machines off those catapults on the warships.”

Keen turned and saw a small sea-plane of an unrecognizable hybrid type swish up from the dip as it raced off the cradle. It turned slowly in the glare from the burning merchantman and rammed for altitude. Another plane followed it.

“Get that body out of here. Get it onto their deck,” said Keen with ice in his words. “We’ll make their blasted delivery—with our own little rip-cord ruse. Yate’s body will be their answer. We’ll see how they like it!”

THE BLACK-BULLET cleared the smoke coming up from the sinking merchantman. Barney struggled with the dead man and somehow got

him through the narrow doorway of the cabin and out on the wing root. He glanced over his shoulder and nodded to Keen, who was swinging the Black Bullet over hard and starting for the stern of the big fighting boat. He lowered the flaps, set the prop for slow speed, and practically stalled over the vessel.

Barney held his position outside the cockpit door, wrenched the dead man's rip-cord, and shoved the body clear as the first line of the warship's stern came into view over the trailing edge of the wing. There was a jerk as the weight left. Then a dull plop followed by the slowly-opening carnation of silk that blotted out all view of the vessel below.

"I hope. . .!" the Mick sang out.

They wheeled over as Keen dragged up the flaps again, and they saw the swinging body slither toward the ship below. It seemed to hang dead above the vessel for some time, then it billowed away and danced wildly in the heat from the man-o'-war's funnel. But then it swung back—and caught on one arm of the tower range-finding instrument. It hung there ominously.

"There's your clever double-crossing agent," screeched Keen.

From somewhere behind, Barney went into action. One of the seaplanes was flaming at him with a front gun. The Mick returned the fire with his .50 caliber Browning and made her swerve. The seaplane swung off, then darted back and let fly with a new deadly stream, and the outriggers of the Black Bullet rattled under the flailing.

The fight was on now!

From the deck of the warship below, three-inchers were spanging off heavy stuff that scattered shrapnel all over the sky. Keen swung the Black Bullet about and found the second seaplane that had taken off. With a quick move, he rolled, found his target, and poured out lead with a vengeance.

The .30 caliber Brownings in the wings opened first and rounded the belligerent seaplane into position like a collie herding sheep. True, the plane tried to get away, but twin streams of Browning fire whiplashed at her, stopped her dead in her slipstream. Then Keen pressed the two steel levers set low on his control stick and two mighty 25 mm. cannon up front started their grumpy coughing.

The case for the seaplane was hopeless. The first burst of 25 mm. stuff gnawed her tail away. Keen raised his aim and let her have another to put the flyers out of their misery. The charge of cannon slugs wrapped up the center-section, slashed into something up front—and then she exploded in mid-air.

The scarlet-masked "Griffon" now glanced over his shoulder and saw that Barney was taking good care of the other plane. The Mick's guns were flaming and chattering at it until it didn't seem to be quite sure what move to make next.

"Hang on, Barney," Keen raged. "I'm delivering the real business, now. I never figured we'd use it—but that shot-up merchantman out there started me to thinking. These babies, whoever they are, were trying something fancy on the United States. And hanged if I won't teach 'em a lesson!"

"Let her have it! I don't like the blamed bomb—under my seat here anyway," called Barney. "It might go off in this heat!"

They zipped back through the smoke and glare. For an instant, they were blinded, but Keen nosed over, poured the Black Bullet into a dive, and fired everything he had aboard. They pulled out with only inches to spare over the control tower on the mast.

They wheeled again through an inferno of m.g. fire and smoke. The Mick's gun meanwhile raged at the remaining seaplane—and they saw it flutter away, wrecked, with flame leaping from its cockpit.

"That's enough. Hang on now!"

At that same instant, the Black Bullet swung over the warship. Keen cried: "Here's luck, Barney. It may be tough. Can you take it?"

"What you waitin' for, Boss?"

Keen quickly fingered a small black button projecting from a conduit box at one side of his cockpit, then stiffened in his seat!

CRR-ASH-H-H!

How they cleared it all they never knew. All they saw was the glare from the war vessel's upper bridge as Keen zoomed. The Black Bullet rolled over helplessly on her back from the rush of heat from below. A wild fire pattern leaped out of the funnel and splashed itself against the night sky above. The Black Bullet was caught in the concussion and ripped over hard again as though

some great unseen hand had shoved her up on one wing-tip.

Both Keen and Barney were deafened and pounded by the concussion. They only half saw what happened to the warship. They knew their bomb had scored straight down the funnel to rasp through the boilers and fire boxes. They sensed most of it as they struggled to make their eyes behave—and then there was another great roar as the magazine went up.

BRR-ROO-OOM!

Somehow, Keen cleared the jangle of debris and the mountainous, waves of concussion. They glanced back and saw the bronze screws of the vessel swish up from the leaden sea as the hull rolled over and engulfed the seamen who had lived through the inferno and had tried to get clear.

“Hello!” said Keen, dabbing at his bleeding nose. “Here’s a Coast Guard cutter. They may save some of them. Let’s hope so, anyway.”

“Let’s save ourselves,” growled the Mick. “Come on! Get back to Graylands before they have every Coast Guard plane in the east in the air after us.”

“A noble idea,” agreed Keen, shooting for altitude and home.

PEBBLES was sitting in front of the fire when they got in. As Barney tucked things away below, Keen slipped out of his flying duds and flopped down in a chair beside the girl. Without saying a word, he stared into the fire for a moment and then closed his eyes.

“There must have been plenty of action,” she said, “They reported it on the radio. Big noise out at sea. Something about a Chilean merchantman being shelled by a battleship. Know anything about it?”

“All about it. She won’t shell another. Maybe it wasn’t neutrality, what we did. But it certainly was justice. We finished it off and she went to the bottom with Mr. Yates dangling from the range-finder.”

“Boy, that wuz a tight squeeze!” contributed the Mick, barging into the room. “We put one straight down the funnel and she blew her—that is, she exploded and went to the bottom.”

“Incidentally,” said the girl, “I had to burn that rug in your study—to get rid of the evidence. What happened to Mr. Yates, anyway?”

“He picked up the wrong gun,” said Keen, his eyes still closed. “The O’Dare planted it for him without my knowing anything about it. Bright fellow.”

“Our confidential agent again, eh, Barney,” smiled the girl.

“But you know,” Keen muttered, arousing himself, “I still can’t figure out that man in the silk hat—the man last night. That has me worried.”

“Forget it,” the girl said. “Come on, O’Dare—’fess up!”

“How about a drink, Pebbles,” the Mick said, trying to stave off the blow. “I’ll go make ‘em up. The Boss is tired.”

“Come on, Mr. Confidential Agent,” the girl persisted. “Tell your story, Barney!”

“What is this?” demanded Keen. “What’s going on?”

“It just happens that he’s your silk-hatted visitor who takes finger-prints,” the girl laughed, pointing at Barney. “Come clean, Secret Agent.”

“Aw ferget it, Pebbles.”

“Here’s the lowdown, anyhow,” the girl explained. “I caught on after seeing a clipping from a detective magazine—you know, the ad where you see the picture of the man doing his stuff in a silk hat and carrying an ebony cane.”

“Barney?” gagged Keen.

“Certainly! He bought the book and tried out Lesson No. 1 of the course. That was Barney I saw dolled out in one of your evening suits. He did it to the letter. We just came back too soon, that’s all.”

“Lemme go make the drinks, will yer, Boss?” the Mick squirmed.

“There’s your mystery in a nutshell,” continued Pebbles. “Barney simply dressed up as a Confidential Agent when we were out and tried the fingerprint gag on your desk. When we came home he ran upstairs, changed quickly, and put on the sleepy-time-gal act when you aroused him to help search the house.”

Keen laughed, agreeing that the book had borne fruit, anyhow.

“Okay, Boss!” the Mick grinned sheepishly. “An’ now can I go get the drinks, eh? Quit yer kiddin’ will yer, Pebbles?”

“Get all you want. As for me, I’m fagged out.”

“You should be. But you had better call Mr. Lang, hadn’t you?” the girl asked.

“Let him wait. I’ll take him his confounded pictures tomorrow. Let him sweat a bit. And now let’s see if we can’t have a nice quiet night at home for a change.”

“Suits me,” smiled the girl.

“What about them mugs in that car what brung that Yates guy, Boss?” the Mick asked.

Keen looked up: “They know something, but how much I can’t say. We’ll find out one of these days, I suppose. But I feel sure they’ll keep quiet until this blows over.”

“Nice to look forward to,” the girl smiled.

“Keeps you young, and—”

“Say!” broke in Barney. “I got a idea, Boss!”

“Good lord, another idea!” cracked Keen wearily. “Will you please forget it? Go get yourself eight bottles of O’Doul’s Dew and get yourself squiffy.”

“But, Boss—that’s just it! That was my idea!”