Trigger Men

MUDD didn't want to go. We'd been having a nice time as we were: Mudd because I'd brought a bottle of very special Scotch over to him, I because I had finally got him to talking. Detective Sergeant Joe Mudd couldn't talk without being interesting.

He had been telling me about the time two or three years before when a couple of guns had tried to free Jake Zeppechi when they were putting him on the train, taking him to the Federal prison. The guns were dead; they had killed Zeppechi and killed three of his guards; two of them had been F.B.I. Men, and the Department of Justice had squared up with them. The other one had been Red Armstrong, a White Falls detective.

"Yes," Mudd had said. "They took care of the trigger men. A couple of coked-up lads doin' a job of work for their price. The papers said they were tryin' to lift Zeppechi. They weren't. They were hired to kill Zeppechi, because Zeppechi was gonna talk. The guards just happened to be in the way when they turned loose with their typewriter."

Just then the phone had rung.

Mudd came back swearing dispassionately. "Yes," he went on as if he hadn't been interrupted, "they can't ever prove that, but I know it's so. And I know the guy that had it done, and I'll take care of that some time. Red Armstrong got his that day, and Red was a friend of mine. . . . I got to go downtown now. You want to come?"

"Where to?" I asked.

"Carlotta's," Mudd said, pulling on his coat. I got up and put on my coat too. Carlotta's was exciting, even if nothing happened.

We went down in the elevator and out through the lobby and got in Mudd's car. I didn't ask him why we were going, or what the phone-call had been, because I knew he wouldn't tell me until he wanted to, and then I wouldn't have to ask.

Carlotta's is down on the river-front; you have to drive over three blocks of rough cobblestones, between high walls of unlighted dinginess, to reach it.

Inside, the ceiling is low and the lights are never bright. Usually the air is

stale. But the rough tables are solid walnut, the checked cloths are linen, the glass is crystal. And there is a swell band there—the swellest that has ever been in White Falls.

Mudd pulled his car up across the street from the little sign, and my heart started beating a bit faster in spite of myself as I watched him check over his service revolver, which he was wearing in a shoulder-holster under his coat.

"Just routine," he said. "Some dame called me up and told me to come down here. Said somebody was scheduled to get bumped off, and if I was sittin' in the place it probably wouldn't come off. The chances are a hundred to one it was some crank, or some of my so-called friends with that kind of a sense of humor." He put the gun back in its holster. "But anyway," he added, "there's no use takin' chances."

Detective Mudd remembers a friend and deals in his own way with a case of murder.

By EUSTACE COCKRELL

Illustrated by E. H. Kuhlhoff

There was a good crowd when we got there at ten-thirty. All sorts of people. It was always like that. Thugs and punks and gangsters, play-boys and men-about-town and aristocrats.

"Margot," as the orchestra leader had announced her, was dancing. Margot was a small blonde, and to my mind no dancer. I was looking around.

Joe Mudd and I were seated at a table for two over against one wall, and from it I could see the entire room; but I saw it only as a composite picture with little attention to any person or detail that went to make up the whole.

Later I was sorry there was no complete clarity to my mental image—a clarity about which I could be definite and certain. But as I looked back on it, I got only the same picture I got that night when I tried to reconstruct the scene of those first few minutes.

Margot had finished her dance and was leaving the floor. I remember that. The place was now full of people. A lot of them I knew myself, and some of them Mudd had identified for me.

But I didn't see them as people so much, this important moment. I saw them more as impressionistic flashes of different things that went to make up the night-club that was Carlotta's.

Carlotta herself had come onto the floor and begun her song. And when you saw and heard Carlotta, you knew why the place was as popular as it was. She was singing "Midnight Babies," and the light on her had begun to dim. All the other lights in the house were out then, as always when she sang.

In the hazy reflection from the spot, as my eyes swept the room and then fastened on Carlotta, I got only these momentary glimpses of people.

I saw Ike Stein, a small-time racketeer, sitting at a table by himself at the edge of the dance floor and eying the sultry beauty of the singer with a not too subdued covetousness in his eyes. . . . I saw Arnold Marshalt sitting at a table behind Ike Stein's. He was with his sister and Bud Fenston, his sister's fiancé. Marshalt was young and good-looking and rich. His eyes were not readable but they had something somber in them and they were not on Carlotta. They were on Bud Fenston—Bud Fenston, sitting pale and drawn, looking determinedly at Evelyn Marshalt, whose face held a hopelessness strangely out of place on those finely chiseled features you felt were designed to reflect gayety. . . . I saw Junky Rothfuss sitting at a table beside Marshalt's. He was with some other people, but he might have been alone. He was cold and quiet, and there was no more in his eyes than in those things that hang in front of optometrists' shops. He was a known power in the White Falls underworld. How high his power reached no one knew. Carlotta was said to be his girl.

I saw—but of course, I didn't *see* these things: I only got impressions of them. All I saw was Carlotta, for she was singing, and when she sang, that's all you knew about.

The spot of light was getting dimmer, as it always did when she sang. Then on the last note of her song the light would go out entirely, and there would be darkness complete for one moment while utter silence held the place. Then the light would come on, and the band would play, and everyone would be talking at once in a sort of uneasy way. That's what Carlotta did.

That's why you watched her. Tonight it was like other nights. She was standing there singing. Then it happened.

THERE was no warning unless you count the tenseness that always hung over things down there. But it went very quickly. Too much so, for when it was over, I could remember it only in fleeting glimpses, like a movie in which everything has been falsely speeded up.

The detonation of the shot rumbled in that low room, and I saw a figure dive awkwardly toward Carlotta's feet and lie there, blood spurting from what had been a head.

The spotlight on Carlotta, the only light, went out. But as it went out, there was quick movement across the room, scuffling noise, a grunt; I saw Bud Fenston moving, and I saw Marshalt move, jostling Rothfuss as he rose.

And then across the table from me a chair scraped harshly on the floor, and there was a rattle as it fell.

JOE MUDD was standing up, and in the darkness there was the hoarse and reassuring bellow of his voice:

"Lights!"

Maybe it was two seconds; it couldn't have been a minute. The lights came on—the spot first, then the little lights that hung around the wall; then the faint lights overhead. And then—

"Drop that guy! Get him!"

They got him near the door. A waiter tackled him. It was Arnold Marshalt, and I remembered that the flame that had stabbed the darkness on the far side of the room had come from his table or from very near it.

Carlotta stepped back slowly, chalk-colored, and the long white evening dress she wore had a red border on the bottom where it trailed in Ike Stein's blood.

Mudd strode across the floor, knelt a moment. Then he rose, and I saw his lips form the obvious words to Carlotta, still moving slowly back: "He's dead."

Then there came a steady rustle of brittle chatter, punctuated by chairs scraping on the floor as they were pushed back from the tables.

Mudd's voice cut through everything loudly:

"Sit down! Everybody stay right where he is for the moment."

A man who had got to his feet said patronizingly, bold with drink: "Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

Mudd reached in his pocket for his shield. "I'm Detective Sergeant Mudd, buddy; and I love it when people get cute with me. Sit down." The man sat down. "I'm sorry," Mudd went on to the crowd. "We'll get through here and let you go just as soon as we can. In the meantime just keep your seats and take it easy." I sidled onto the floor, and Mudd turned and told me to call Headquarters.

When I came back into the room a minute later, Mudd had moved from the dance-floor and was walking between the tables toward where the waiter had tackled Marshalt.

Mudd turned to Carlotta, who had followed him. "I'll need a room—"

Carlotta nodded automatically. "You can use my office," she said. Then there

was the scream of sirens outside and in a moment men from headquarters started pouring in. Inspector Jaffre, men in uniform, plainclothesmen, photographers, men from the lab. There must have been fifteen or sixteen of them.

Mudd walked over and talked hurriedly to Inspector Jaffre, and I saw the Inspector nod.

He came back then to Marshalt. "Okay, son," he said. "Let's go." He nodded to me, and the three of us started for Carlotta's little office in the back. Jaffre stopped us.

"I want him," Mudd said, jerking a thumb toward me. "He came down with me. I want him." Jaffre nodded again doubtfully, and we went on back through an aisle of white faces, Marshalt in front, I following Mudd. As we went into the little office I heard Bud Fenston, his voice desperate, yell: "Wait!"

I turned and saw him half rise before a big cop standing behind his chair shoved him back down.

We sat down in the office, Mudd behind the desk. "You killed him," Mudd said. "What did you do it for?"

"No," Marshalt said, and his voice was little more than a whisper. "No."

Mudd said amiably: "You shot him, all right." He turned to me and barked: "The shot came from his table?"

"I—yes," I stammered. "It looked like it."

"No," Marshalt said again in that small voice. "No."

"Your sister speaks with a broad *A*, doesn't she?" Mudd asked then, unexpectedly.

"Why, yes, but she hadn't anything—"

"She called me up," Mudd said. "You shot him. Where's the gun?"

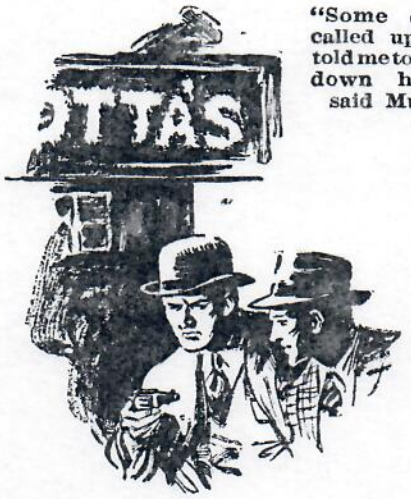
"I didn't," Marshalt said. "I didn't." Then suddenly his expression changed. "Yes," he said dully, "I killed him. He had some letters—my sister's. He was blackmailing her, trying to. Yes, I killed him. Let's go."

"Wait a minute," Mudd said. He looked puzzled and the heavy creases in his face deepened. "Where's the gun?"

MARSHALT stuck his hand into his inside jacket pocket. "Here it is," he said, "What difference does it make? I lost my nerve and ran."

Mudd took the gun, and holding it by the barrel with his handkerchief, he sniffed it. He grunted.

"I'm glad Stein's dead," Marshalt said slowly. "The letters were old letters. I don't know how he got hold of them. They didn't mean anything, but they looked as if they did. My sister wants to marry Bud Fenston," he concluded disjointedly.



"Some dame called up and told me to come down here," said Mudd.

"Son," Mudd said, and his voice sounded as though he were trying to make it kindly, "go out there and sit down. Give me your word you won't say anything to anyone, until I tell you or send you word. Give me your word."

"All right," Marshalt said. "What difference does it make? I'll give my word."

When Marshalt had left, Mudd called me to the desk. The gun was lying there. "What kind of gun is that?" he asked me. "Don't touch it."

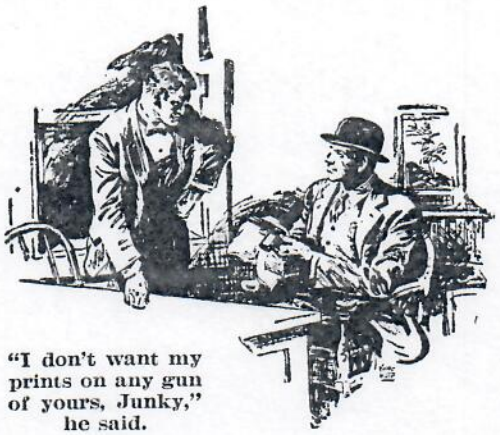
"It's a thirty-eight," I said, "seven-shot automatic—say, what in the blazes is this? You're not blind. You know more about guns than I do."

Mudd picked it up and began polishing it with his handkerchief. "I may want you to take a message for me," he said, "and I won't have time to explain—if you take the message. If anything happens in here in the next fifteen minutes, I want you to pick up the gun on the desk and put it in your pocket, and throw it in the river going home. And then forget all about it." He left then, but in a minute he was back, and Bud Fenston was with him.

He didn't question Fenston. Fenston didn't give him time. When he saw the gun on the table, he said quickly, his voice tense: "That's my gun. I killed Stein. Arnold grabbed the gun away from me. I killed him. It's my gun."

"You shot him?" Mudd asked.

"Yes, I shot him. I—I had to. Arnold grabbed the gun away from me."



"I don't want my prints on any gun of yours, Junky," he said.

Mudd grinned. "What did *you* shoot him for?"

"That's my affair," Fenston said defiantly.

"All right. All right." Mudd's voice was soothing. "Will you go out there and sit down and not say anything, not say anything to anyone until I send you word? Will you give me your word? Your word of honor?"

"It won't involve Miss Marshalt or Arnold?" Fenston asked, and keen hope showed in his face.

"No," Mudd said. "My word on that."

"All right," Fenston said. And Mudd let him go.

He turned to me. "Open the window," he said. "From the bottom. What sort of a drop is it to the ground?"

I looked down out of the window. "No drop at all," I said. "Six feet, maybe." And then, because I couldn't keep it back any longer, though I knew it wouldn't do me any good, I blurted out a question. "What's the answer? Fenston killed him—Marshalt killed him. Which one did? And why all this stuff about the gun, the window? Tell me something?"

"I'll tell you this," Mudd said. "I'm the greatest detective that ever hit the city of White Falls, and there's no question about that. Let me handle this case. Let me try to solve a case without you buttin' in with a lot of questions. And if I solve it, you keep your trap shut. You do what I tell you and keep your trap shut. I know what I'm doing. You watch."

"But," I said, trying to keep exasperation out of my voice, "one of those boys is bound to have done it. There's the gun, and there's the motive. Why all this business about letting you solve the case? The case is solved."

Mudd looked at me. "Sit down there in the corner," he said to me, "and let me be the detective." And so I did.

He went out then, but in a minute he came back, with Junky Rothfuss.

Mudd sat down at the desk and beckoned Rothfuss to the chair by the window. "Well, Junky," Mudd said, and though his voice was soft, it gave me a shivery feeling, "it's nice to see *you* here. You're heeled, I guess?"

"I got a permit, copper, from the sheriff's office," Junky Rothfuss growled.

"Okay, Junky. Just routine. Let me see the rod," Mudd said.

Junky Rothfuss looked at Mudd a minute. "Sure," he said. He reached under his coat and handed Mudd a gun. Mudd took it, holding it by the barrel with his handkerchief.

"I don't want my prints on any gun of yours, Junky," he said good-humoredly.

I noticed then, suddenly, that the gun on the desk was gone.

"Yeah," Mudd said, sitting down behind the desk. "Thirty-eight automatic. Nice gun." He laid it in his lap. "Now let me see the permit, Junky."

Ruthfuss dug in his billfold and handed Mudd a card. Mudd looked at it carelessly, picked up the gun with his handkerchief and handed it back with the card. "All shipshape, Junky!"

Junky Rothfuss replaced the gun and card. "Talk fast, copper," he said. "I got other things to do besides listenin' to you gab. I gotta get home."

"All right, Junky," Mudd said evenly. "You'll get home—home through the green door! Home to the old easy-chair. You've been away too long."

Junky Rothfuss grinned, and his grin was mirthless too. "Make 'em up as you go along, flatfoot?" he asked.

AND Mudd grinned back. "Carlotta was your girl, wasn't she, Junky? Carlotta was your girl, and you had shot off your kisser about rubbin' out Ike Stein if he didn't stay away. That was dangerous talk, Junky. I thought you were smarter than that. Lots of people heard you. It even got around so bad that the dumb coppers heard about it."

Junky Rothfuss made his voice weary. "You got nothin' on me. And I'm gettin' sleepy. Speak your piece."

"Well," Mudd said, "you're the best suspect we got. We'll have to run you in, Junky."

"You won't make that hold, copper," Junky Rothfuss said. "I'll be out in an

hour. I seen the guy that let Ike have it. It was the Fenston punk, and the kid with him grabbed the gun and run."

"Yes," Mudd said. "We'll make it stick. We're gonna burn you, Junky. We'll make it stick." He paused a moment, and lit a cigarette. "Who'll believe a member of one of the town's finest families would kill a rat like Stein for no reason, when they know that you'd threatened to kill him yourself for a damned good one?"

ROTHFUSS didn't change expression except a hair's breadth, but it converted his face into a sneer. "You got nothing on me," he repeated.

"Yes," Mudd went on, as if he hadn't heard him. "They shave your head, and they hook the plates on tight to your legs, and then they pull the volts through you. The scientists say it doesn't hurt, but they don't know. It looks to me like it hurts when the smoke comes up, and you smell the old burning flesh, and you sort of jerk and twitch—"

I sat tense, listening to Mudd's droning voice, dripping conviction and grim assurance, and I wondered.

"It looks like it hurts plenty—and nobody has ever come back to say it didn't."

"You've jumped your trolley." said Rothfuss. But his smile was mirthless.

Mudd said evenly: "We've frisked everybody in the joint. The gun aint there. The gun in your holster has been fired once. The ballistics boys will check the slug with the one in Ike Stein's head, and they'll prove it came out of your gun. The one in your holster."

Junky Rothfuss jerked out his gun, and he sniffed the barrel. He whipped the clip open and looked. He sat there tense, the gun in his hand.

Mudd had his service revolver out, and he was leveling on Junky Rothfuss.

Junky put the gun back under his coat. Mudd said slowly, putting his own gun up too: "I've been after you for two years, Junky. And now I've got you framed. Framed cold!"

"Switched guns, eh?" Junky Rothfuss whispered.

"You guessed it," Mudd told him. "Here's your gun." He laid another thirty-eight automatic on the desk.

And Junky Rothfuss moved, a fraction of an inch only, it seemed to me. And suddenly there was the gun in his hand again, and he fired once as Mudd slid down behind the desk.

I half jumped up as Junky snaked over the window-sill. I couldn't help it. I figured that it was suicide, but I liked Joe Mudd. I was on my feet and starting to move as Junky saw me and turned, one arm crooked over the window-ledge, his gun in the other.

But I started to move forward even as Junky began bringing his gun into careful alignment. Then I heard Mudd's voice as he crawled around the desk.

"Here's one for Red Armstrong, Junky!" the voice said. And there was a shot. I saw Rothfuss' thin-lipped snarling mouth go suddenly, horribly, red and round. And his arm relaxed, and there was the empty window.

I grabbed the gun off the desk and stuffed it into my pocket as Jaffre broke into the door then, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

"Junky Rothfuss," Mudd said, standing up. "Killed while attempting to escape. He's out the window there. His gun has been fired twice, and the ballistics men will find the slug in Ike's head was the first one. You can tell the people to go home." He walked over to me and hit me on the shoulder, and then started awkwardly peeling off his coat, and I noticed one was dripping blood.

"Damn," he said to me. "You scared me when you jumped up. What were you gonna do—bite him?"

"I don't know," I admitted shakily, feeling foolish; but I looked up and saw Mudd looking at me with a funny light in his eyes, and I quit feeling foolish because his look was one of respect. And I was suddenly proud. Joe Mudd didn't respect or admire many things.

"Send the sawbones in here, Chief," Mudd said, turning, and unbuttoning his shirt with one hand, clumsily. "I gave him too much head start. He got lucky and nicked me. I must be gettin' slow."

HE turned to me and added, bending so no one could hear: "Go out and tell the kids how it is—all three of 'em." Straightening up, he concluded, in a normal voice: "And come up to the hotel pretty soon, and I'll tell you the end of that story."

"Okay," I told him, but as I made my way to Marshalt's table, it occurred to me that I knew the end of the story now.

So I told it to Bud Fenston, and Marshalt, and Marshalt's sister, while they drove me home; and they stopped on the bridge over the river, and I threw the gun a mile.