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GASLIGHT

One Hour Before Dawn

By William McNeil

GANGSTER STORIES, DECEMBER 1929

things around up here. There's no sense in inviting the bulls to jump on our trail."

Eddie the Dope looked hurt, but his eyes brightened at sight of the pile of dollars that came his way. As far as he was concerned, the hell with Canada! He would be off for New York again before the night was over. When he had left them alone together, Big Red Regan grinned.

"We'll disappear for a while, Floss," he said, "after all, as Doyle said, I might as well stay away for the rest of my life, or until they pick me up again anyway." He laughed, "Five grand of this goes to him, Floss. Then it'll be me an' you for England an' the continent for a while. I've got a hunch that we'd both like to live on easy street for a few years. What d'yuh say?"

Floss O'Connor's eyes were soft as the night again, and her round white breasts quivered under his hand.

"I'll go anywhere you say, Red. Ain't I your girl?"

■ ■ ■

ONE HOUR BEFORE DAWN

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To his great amazement the girl only leaned back in her seat and laughed.

"Here he is, Red! Just as I swore to you I would, I have delivered him right into your hands!"

Then turning to Italian Joe she went on, "I swore to God I'd get the man who double-crossed Big Red. Well, here you are, you rat! Get out an' take what's comin' to you!"

Big Red Regan, wearing the clothes that his moll had smuggled in to him under the very eyes of the guards, reached one powerful hand forward. A second later Italian Joe Mercurio was standing out in the road facing him and almost slavering with fear. His rat eyes wandered about hopelessly in search of a means of escape. Eddie the Dope jumped forward, insane rage firing his muddled brain.

With a quick jerk of his right wrist he swung an ugly looking automatic into view. Before Big Red or Floss could make a move to stop him the automatic went into action. The crashing slug tore straight into the Italian's head. The wop went down. Eddie the Dope did a dance of rage, pumping slug after slug into the body at his: feet.

And they left him there, beside the road, his body riddled with bullets. They stopped only long enough to give Eddie time to ditch the truck, then, with Big Red Regan at the wheel of the wop's roadster, the two gunmen and Big Red's moll tore on into the night.

In the Grand Hotel in Montreal, Big Red Regan opened the black bag and spread money and jewels out on the bed. At sight of the fortune before him Eddie the Dope gave vent to a shrill whistle and hurried to the door to assure himself again that they were locked in safely. The big good natured Irishman counted out the money.

"You better take yours in cash, Eddie," he laughed. "I don't want you to get all snowed up an' go peddling any of these

FLOSS O'CONNOR was Big Red Regan's moll. The fact that Red was doing a stretch up in the Big House that would take five long years out of his life, and hers, hadn't seemed to change her a bit at the start. Even the tabloids had spoken of her as a loyal, courageous girl.

That is why the river mob were struck dumb when she took up with Italian Joe Mercurio. The wise ones shook their heads knowingly. One or two felt sorry for Red, but then, that was something for Italian Joe and Big Red to settle between themselves—someday.

There were those who hinted that Italian Joe had framed Big Red Regan. The olive-skinned, oily haired wop and Big Regan had clashed on several occasions. But the big, good natured Irishman, secure in his control of the river mob had laughed it off. Only once had he given a display of the killer that he was. He had openly slapped the Italian across the face.

"Some day, Joe," he snarled, "I'm gonna burn you down."

Italian Joe's face on that occasion had displayed no greater emotion than it had on that later day when he stood staring at the door through which they had taken Big Red. He was one of the last to leave the crowded courtroom when the session was over.

At first Floss O'Connor had fought tooth and nail to aid her man. She knew that the jury wouldn't give Red half a chance. His reputation had been against him from the start. In her futile rage she threatened to 'get' Phil Moran, the detective who brought Red in. She had argued it out with Moran later on the street.

"You cheap flatty!" She twisted her full lips into a snarl as she spoke, "Red Regan was planted an' you know it!" Moran laughed. He admired this cheaply gaudy, painted girl of Regan's for her nerve and the fight that was in her. He could have told her much that she didn't know about the crooked deal they had handed Big Red. Maybe he would—someday.

"Listen, Floss," he grinned, "I'm admittin' we couldn't prove all the stuff we checked up against Red right now. If we could only get you to talk —the way he did—"

"What do you mean?"

The detective's face became serious.

"Double-crossin' you like he did. Why the very night we picked him up in the Princess Hotel, do yuh know who he was with? That dame from Torreli's place."

Floss O'Connor's small white face was within an inch of his own. Gone now was the happy, careless girl that had been Big Red Regan's moll, In her powdered face her eyes were dark as the night. Her nervous, highly polished fingers twitched. But her voice was low and well under control.

"Phil Moran," she said, "you're a liar! There never was a squarer shooter in this world than Big Red, an' you know it. He'd go through hell for any one of his friends. You know that too. An' I'm tellin' you right now that I'm out to get the man that double-crossed him. I know more than you think I do. I'm out to get the man who—"

"Who is he?" grinned Moran. "Do I know him?" 5 Floss O'Connor's painted young mouth twisted into a bitter laugh.

"You know him, Mister Moran—an' so do I."

BUT BEFORE the first year of Big Red's sentence had passed Floss seemed to have forgotten her promise. She never spoke of Red any more.

She didn't even seem to avoid Italian Joe Mercurio, although it was common knowledge now that the wop had used Red as bait for the law. She seemed gay and happy although something hard had come into her face.

But it wasn't until after the Jersey payroll robbery that she actually seemed to yield to Italian Joe.

The wop had drawn on Eddie the Dope for a remark passed about Big Red being double-crossed by her. Everyone knew

Town after silent town was left behind them. As they neared the village of Ossining Joe's nervousness seemed to increase. Big Red's threatened break put the fear of God in him. It was lucky for him that he had been tipped off about Eddie the Dope in time. His fingers clutched the wheel grimly as he tore through - the town. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. The Big House—and Red Regan—lay behind him. Ahead was Canada and safety.

His nerve returned to him again by degrees. Why should he let the spectre of Big Red Regan haunt him? He had played a desperate game and won. The old arrogant, complacent smile returned to his lips.

And then, suddenly, he saw the black hulk of the car that blocked the road ahead of him.

There was no room for him to pass it. To think of turning around was both foolish and futile. Besides— the Big House lay back there—and Red Regan—. With a grinding of brakes he stopped short, and then he laughed, nervously. The black hulk had turned out to be nothing more threatening than a milk truck.

But a shiver of fear went through -: 301 him as he watched the truck's driver, apparently attempting to tarn on the narrow road.

But God in Heaven, what was this? The man who had been seated beside the driver had jumped out and was slowly approaching the roadster. And then Italian Joe Mercurio cried out in fear as he caught sight of the man's face in the faint light of approaching dawn. It was Big Red Regan!

The driver was Eddie the Dope, the cokey that Phil Moran had said had talked too much and consequently spoiled Big Red's break for liberty. Italian Joe's face was the color of putty as he turned to Floss O'Connor.

"We're trapped, Floss!" he screamed. "Gawd! Big Red's got us!"

that yuh might wanta know. Yuh told me once that yuh was gonna 'get' the guy that double-crossed Big Red, an'—"

Italian Joe Mercurio's face was gray-white in the light reflected from Torreli's windows.

"Come on, Floss," he cried sharply, "let's get goin'!"

"You'll get goin' when I'm damn good an' ready," snarled the detective suddenly "aw that'll be when I get a look at what yuhve got in that black bag, Joe!"

As if ashamed of his weakness of a moment before, the detective suddenly pushed Floss O'Connor aside roughly and reached for the bag. Italian Joe Mercurio's nerve failed him, With a sullen whine he gave up.

"How much ?" he asked weakly, He was satisfied to get away without exposing the contents of the bag to Phil Moran's greedy eyes, Floss O'Connor eyed the Italian's trembling fingers with a sneer. And this yellow rat was the man who thought he had won her.

The detective slipped the money into his pocket—two grand wasn't bad for a night's work. His hoarse words reached Floss O'Connor's ears as the trim little roadster pulled away from the curb.

"I coulda told you a lot if I'd wanted to, Floss. You coulda been my girl if you'd played on the level with me. I could even ha' tipped you off about Eddie the Dope shootin' off his damn mouth an' the law stepping in just at the minute that Big Red Regan was makin' his break for liberty !""

THROUGH THE silent towns that bordered the Hudson River, Italian Joe's trim roadster tore on. Off in the distance a sleepy clock chimed the hour. Four o'clock! She had timed the distance from Yonkers well.

Italian Joe, bent over the wheel, kept his eyes on the winding road, leaving Floss to her own thoughts. And with the passing of each mile her heart grew lighter. The happy, careless girl of old seemed to come to life again within her.

that the success of that bold daylight holdup had hinged upon the expert timing worked out by Big Red Regan months before.

The Italian had simply made use of Big Red's carefully worked out plans. Since Regan couldn't possibly be imagined disclosing these plans to anyone, with the exception of Floss O'Connor, the wise ones again nodded their heads knowingly.

No one else said anything. Eddie the Dope was fool enough to talk, that's all.

From that time on the entire river mob knew that Floss was Italian Joe Mercurio's girl.. Some of them felt sorry for Big Red. Eddie the Dope, slinking down side streets to avoid the Italian, kept his mouth shut now, but his scheming brain was ever on the alert.

Alone, or in dark corners, he would heap vile curses on the head of the man who had not only made himself head of the river mob, but had stolen Big Red Regan's moll as well.

"Wise guy!" he spat venomously, "I'm a dope, am I? Well, snake, before I'm troo wit' you, I'll show yuh which one of us is the dope, you or me!"

The curious thing was that Floss O'Connor, the cause of the bad blood between Eddie the Dope and Italian Joe, had taken sides with the cokey.

"Leave 'im alone, Joe," she screamed, fighting mad at sight of the Italian's automatic, "You're not going to burn him down while I'm here. Get behind me, Ed!"

Then, more softly she added, "What do you want to let your wop blood run away with you for? I don't want to lose you, yet!"

The smooth, oily haired Italian eyed her with the look of a hungry animal. Then a satisfied grin crossed his heavy lips.

"Don't you worry about losin' me, kid," he smirked.

Floss O'Connor shivered a little, but her painted lips curved in a smile. Eddie the Dope's lifeless eyes wandered from the girl's face to Italian Joe.

Then with a vile curse he turned his back on them. But anyone who by chance had met the cokey later that night, slinking along back streets, would have noticed first of all the shrill little laugh almost of triumph that broke from his lips from time to time.

Eddie the Dope had planned his revenge well.

IN that grim hell, the Big House, the fading daylight filtered in upon Big Red Regan. Clutched in his fingers was the dirty scrap of paper that the guard had just passed to him. Scarcely moving his lips the big Irishman crumpled the paper in his powerful fist and shot a question at the slouchy uniformed man who stood watching him.

"You got this note from Eddie the Dope himself, or did he send someone?"

"From Ed—he's been down in the village since last night," the guard whispered hoarsely.

"Has he got any of the mob with him?"

"Listen here, Red," countered the guard, "when do I get them five grand for fixin 'this getaway for you?"

"Just as soon as I'm on the outside, Doyle," replied Big Red. "You know me an' you know that I never went back on my word in my life. All that I want to do is to get out for twentyfour hours."

"If I en get you out at all yuh might as well stay for the rest of your life, or until they pick you up again," growled Doyle, "I'm takin' a hell of a chance, Red. I wouldn't do it for any guy but you—"

"An' what about Ed?"

"He's alone. Got a stolen car with stolen license plates. He's fixed it so there'll be a second car, about eight miles. From there on a milk truck'll carry yuh through. You'll be in N'Yawk about an hour before dawn."

"An hour before dawn," breathed Big Red Regan, his lips setting grimly, "Thanks, Doyle. Don't be surprised if you find the

Italian Joe eyed the detective sus- piciously as he rested one huge hand on the car, leaning forward with a grin on his heavy lips.

"Off on a little trip, just the two of you, eh?" chuckled the detective. "What t'hell's the rush? Checkin' out at three o'clock in the mornin' ?"

"What is it to you?" asked Floss bluntly.

Italian Joe squirmed uneasily in his seat. But the flatty retained his goodnatured grin. He acted like a man who had valuable information to give —if he cared to. Joe's uneasy fingers played with the wheel.

"Got a little news that might interest you, Floss," Moran added with a throaty laugh. "Your old sweety, Big Red, was all set for a break tonight. My idea is that he was comin' down here to 'talk' things over with you. Well, at any rate, Eddie the Dope was to pick him up outside an' rush him in a stolen car down to where nothin' could keep him from droppin' in on you. Big Red, as you probably know, is all hell let loose when his temper's up. But—" again he laughed, "somebody filled Eddie the Dope full of snow again an' he got to shootin' his mouth off. Told the whole works—"

Floss O'Connor's face was white and drawn. A sob burst from her painted lips. The next second she had leaned forward and struck the detective full in the face, her tiny fist 300 drawing a trickle of blood from his lower lip.

Phil Moran caught the girl's two - hands and forced her back into her seat. He admired this fighting moll. With the back of one huge hand he wiped the trickle of blood from his lip. Again he grinned.

"I've got a damn good mind to keep you here in N'Yawk where yuh belong, Floss—with me," he said.

"I told yuh once before that there are many things I could tell yuh— about Red goin' up to the Big House fr instance—

about the table, she had come to a final surrender.

Italian Joe Mercurio smiled complacently.

"Joe," Floss breathed again, "let's pack this stuff in a bag an' head for Canada. You've got your car outside. None of the mob will get wise to where were going. And tomorrow we'll be in Canada, just you an' me. What d'yuh say, Joe?"

Italian Joe put his fleshy fingers over her own. This was his moment of final triumph over Big Red Regan. And yet his avaricious mind clung to the power and wealth that might be his if he stuck on here with almost four long years ahead of him. He could even have Big Red taken for a ride when the Irishman finally was released from stir. And yet— There was a new light in Floss O'Connor's velvet eyes as the hardness died out of them. Again she reached forward and touched his hand.

Her touch was magnetic. The hot Italian blood stirred in his veins as he eyed her bare throat and rounded breasts. He leaned forward, his lips seeking hers. For a brief second a flare of hatred flashed into the girl's eyes. Her slim body trembled and her small hands gripped the table's edge. Then her red lips curved into a smile of triumph. She knew that she had won.

CARRYING THE heavy black bag that contained the money and gems, Italian Joe Mercurio led the way down the narrow stairs that brought him to the street. Close at his heels came Floss O'Connor.

Eleventh Avenue was deserted, al- though the lights in Torreli's place were still going strong. Quickly Joe crossed the sidewalk to where his trim little roadster was parked. Without a word he threw the bag into the car and climbed in behind the wheel. Floss followed him, throwing an outer garment over the bag that rested on the floor between her feet.

At the same moment the huge bulk of a man slipped out of the shadows of the doorway that adjoined Torreli's. The light fell full on his face as he approached the car. It was Phil Moran, the flatty.

hot seat waitin' for me by the time I come back."

"Gawd, the chair!' gasped the guard, "Listen Red, there ain't no dame in the world worth goin' to the chair for."

Then he shivered with the fear that gnawed at his soul. "What'll happen to me if they find out how you made your getaway ?"

Big Red Regan laughed grimly.

"No one will ever find that out, Doyle. No one knows that Eddie the Dope is your brother so even if we're stopped there'll be nothing to connect you with the break. When I'm once clear of the gates I'll go to hell before I'll let any guy stop me until my job is done. After that I don't give a damn. There'll be an investigation with the usual hokum—a gun smuggled in to me somehow—You'll say that you were beaten unconscious an' your keys stolen."

The guard interrupted him nervously.

"J—I guess that for five grand, Red, you c'n make a real job outa that beaten unconscious. I got it all fixed for Smolsky an' the gate to let yuh through. But yuh need clothes, an—"

Big Red Regan's grim smile widened at the guard's words. Turning his back to Doyle, Big Red bent forward. A second later he swung around to face him again and the guard's face paled with fear. Over Red Regan's arm hung a folded suit of clothes while his right hand gripped the ugly, cold steel of a Smith and Wesson Special.

"Gawd!" gasped the guard. "Where an' when in hell did yuh get them?"

Red Regan's only answer was a hoarse chuckle at the fear that lined the guard's face. Then his eyes cloud- ed with the determination of the killer who felt his lean fingers closing upon his victim's throat.

'I've still got some— friends, Doyle," he whispered.

But the guard only shook his: head. It was more than he could understand, why a man should be willing to go to the

chair on account of a woman. His brother, Eddie the Dope, had told him all about Floss and Italian Joe, but even Eddie hadn't known about the clothing and the gun that had been smuggled in to Big Red. If such a thing had been done right under his nose and the noses of the other guards, then— "Gawd!" he muttered again. "An' a big time guy like that is willin' to risk his neck on account of a moll, Ain't life one hell of a riddle?"

IN a large rear room, directly over Torreli's place on Eleventh Avenue, Floss O'Connor and Italian Joe Mercurio sat face to face over a table on which, exposed to the feeble light from above, lay over two hundred thousand dollars in money and stolen jewelry.

The look of anxiety that filled Joe's eyes faded as he admired the richly loaded table. All of this represented the work of only a few months. The sight of it all filled him with pride. But again the film of anxiety flooded his eyes.

"I was a sucker to show you where I had all this stuff hidden,' he whined, the beads of moisture dripping from his swarthy face. "Supposin' the cops should come bustin' in? Where t'hell would I be then?"

"Aw, Joe," Floss O'Connor cried, "ain't part of that stuff mine? Ain't I been in on every deal with you? An' ain't I your girl? I just wanted to look it over again, that's all."

"But yuh didn't know where I had it hidden, an' now—"

Floss O'Connor's painted lips broke into a smile.

"You wasn't going to double-cross me, Joe, was you?"

"I don't trust any skirt," Joe growled.

The sound of footsteps passing in the hall outside brought a little cry to Joe's lips. Bending forward he tried to cover the gems and money while his strained eyes watched the door, and the beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. The footsteps passed his door and continued on down the hallway, Italian Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

Floss O'Connor watched the Italian's face closely. Then her eyes returned again to the shimmering silver and platinum; the pearls and © other precious stones, and the crisp bills, counted out into neat little piles of various denominations, Italian Joe wet his lips. Ever since he had hung around with the river mob he had envied Big Red Regan's split on the various rackets put over by the gang.

Now that big split was his. He was sitting pretty and with almost four long years to go before Big Red could ever bother him again.

He had certainly made a clever move the day that he had planted the big Irishman for that cheap little Long Island job and then fixed it so that Phil Moran, the flatty, would pick him up.

Big Red had been the most surprised man in the world when they had fished the three rings and the platinum bar pin out of his pockets, Italian Joe laughed as the scene flashed before his eyes again.

Suddenly Floss O'Connor bent forward, listening. A clock was striking somewhere. Three times it struck. Italian Joe reached forward to gather in the jewels that lay before him on the table. Floss O'Connor smiled and touched Joe's hand, "Joe," she whispered, "Let's go away tonight, just you an' me!"

The Italian eyed Floss with the look of a man who is about to realize the one thing that life had cheated him out of. He had stepped into Big Red's shoes as far as power and money were concerned.

His had been a rule of blood clouded by the smoke of his automatic. But as yet he had failed to gain control over this active, fighting moll of Regan's. True the river mob recognized her as his property—his girl.

She herself at times, as tonight, admitted the claim.

And yet, at other times, she ignored him and almost jeered openly at him. And now, at sight of the riches that lay scattered