

Phil the Greek

I tell ya, it was the weirdest thing I ever saw; and I've seen some cuckoo things in my time. Mabel, the girl who does the filing and stuff, even though she can't type or nothing, she says I was at the whiskey again; I had to slap her about a bit to change her mind. She's a good girl, bottle-blonde turning to redhead, but she ain't got no brains worth a dime.

I'll tell ya the rap from the beginning. My name's Gounod, Charlie Gounod. That's "Goo-no", not "Go-nad", buddy. When I'm not down on my luck, I'm what they call a Private Eye - Private, because no one disturbs me much, Eye, because, for the right dough, I can turn a blind one any time. Used to be in the LAPD until some tight-ass momma's boy put my name on a list of officers who had mislaid the rule-book. I gotta room, down at the corner of Haight and Third, between a tattoo-artist and old Alfonso the loan-shark; "Offices to Rent by the week or month", unlit hall, stairs no lady would venture up, third floor, left, behind the door marked "C. Gounod: Investigation Agent". Don't get many visitors, and Mabel only comes in when I ask her nicely, or she's sporting another black eye from some low-life she's took pity on.

So, this guy's waiting for me when I open the door. Ain't feeling too good - lost again at poker the night before, sat up considering life through the thick end of a bottle. Now this guy, he's looking worried, real worried; like he's swallowed something nasty and can't throw up.

He introduces himself, tells me his story. A real sob-story this one, I tell ya. Says his name's Enrico Fausto, his friends call him 'The Doc'. I look at him outa one bleary eye - sure, I've heard of him. Who hasn't? The Doc made his dough cooking up recreational drugs for the rich and famous in Hollywood. Wanted by the FBI, and not for his good looks. But there was nothing they could ever pin on him. Well, here he is, in the flesh, and he don't look like much, I tell ya. Cheap suit, dirty shoes, raincoat like it's been pulled from the trash. These weirdos, I tell ya - no self-respect is what it is.

I offer him a coffee, pour a black one for myself. He refuses, takes out a cigarette and smokes for two hours solid while he tells me his tale of woe.

"I'm a condemned man," he tells me, "Damned, you know what I mean?"

I nod wisely and sit back in my seat. Rule Number One of bein' a good Private Eye - nod like you coulda been Solomon, sit back in your seat, press your fingertips together. Gets them every time. Let them do the talking - it's their dough.

"Two months ago, I find myself down at the docks, wondering whether to throw myself into the water. There's some guy down in Chinatown, he's undercutting me, getting all the business, know what I mean?"

I know just what he means. No one undercuts me, but they still get the contracts that should be mine. I'd like to fry 'em all, ya know?

"Well, there I am, thinking about it, and the meaning of life and all that bag, know what I mean? And all of a sudden there's this big black dog comes boundin' up, he's all over me. Dogs give me the shakes, so I turn and go home. The dog follows me. I get on a cross-town bus, the dog gets on too. Driver bad-mouths me, you gotta pay for the dog, man, all that heavy stuff. I get off the bus, the dog gets off. I flag a cab, the dog gets in. When I get to my 'hood, the dog starts barking, growling, all the guys around, they're laughin', you know?"

"Then some big dude comes up, built like a grizzly, and says 'You stealin' my dog, bro?' I tell him no, that dog's been following me and I can't run, I can't hide, he's there

all the time. 'OK, man,' says the dude, putting a chain round the dog's neck. 'Hey,' he says, looking at me, 'Ain't you The Doc?'

"Who wants to know?" I say, because I sure never seen him in my life before. Maybe he's FBI, or DEA, you know?"

I know all about the suits, Internal Affairs, all the guys who can't even piss straight. Never trust a suit, that's my motto. So I nod, sit back in my chair, hood my eyes, press my fingertips encouragingly, ya know?

"Hey, man!" says the dude. 'Cool it, I ain't no undercover agent! Me, Phil Stopheles.'"

I jerk awake at this and look closely at my client. "You mean, Phil the Greek?" I ask him. Phil the Greek, he's a real bad mother, I've heard.

"Yeah," says The Doc gloomily. "That's him. He comes over all friendly, you know? Wants me to do business with him. 'Exclusive worldwide contract with me only,' he says. 'Your most excellent stuff, just for me.'"

"Well," says The Doc lowering his voice, hesitant, like anyone was listening. Only the roaches would be listening, and they got better things to do round here. But I go along and put my head closer - Client Confidentiality, all that jazz. "Well, I didn't have no choice, man, did I? We shook hands on it. It was a deal - I design him anything I can come up with, he gives me anything I want. Sound too good to be true, huh? 'Women, cars, Versace suits - you name it, my friend,' he said. 'Just get me some of that real good stuff, goddamn! Phil the Greek wants only the best.'"

"Sounded cool. Only trouble was, Phil said that if I broke my side of the deal, he'd kill me."

The Doc was on his third cigarette by now and I couldn't breathe. But I wasn't about to stop him, was I? - could be the best client who ever took the trouble to knock on my door. I'm thinking maybe I could get Mabel to file her nails full-time, maybe get me a typewriter, a big steel espresso-machine, real high-class, ya know?

"OK," he goes on. "OK, so I got inspired, distilled some stuff that came straight from Paradise, ya know? Took it round to Phil's - big place out in the Canyon, swimming-pool, bimbos, Ferraris, Rottweilers, all that stuff, know what I mean? The night after that first delivery, he's on the blower - 'Hey, Doc, you the King!' he says, still sounding high as an angel. 'How about we celebrate? I'll come pick you up!'

"So he sends a stretch limo, we cruise down to Auerbach's Bierkeller -"

I whistled - expensive tastes, has Phil the Greek. A beer at Auerbach's could set you back thirty, forty dollars maybe. The Doc grimaced.

"Yeah, Auerbach's - fancy place, huh? Anyway, we're sitting down, all buddies together, me, Phil, some of his muscle, and some guy from Cincinnati who says nothing all night, dresses fancy like a lawyer or something. Good music, the waitresses - hey, man - the waitresses!"

I shook my head in sympathy and leered. Rule Number Two - act dirty if you need to.

"Then - wham! - all of a sudden I get hit between the eyes!"

"What?" I ask, acting surprised, "Phil decide he didn't like ya?"

"No, man! I got an eyeful of one of the waitresses. The most beautiful thing I've seen in all my life. Curvy, trim, blonde, pretty white teeth. Phil saw me looking, and snapped his fingers. The girl came to our table. Phil said, 'Greta, meet Enrico - Enrico, Greta. You kids look good together, ya know?'

"Greta took our order, went off. Phil said: 'Anything you want, Doc, anything you want...'

"Well, to cut a long story short," my client was into his second packet of Marlboros, "Me and Greta, we got together. Phil fixed it so she didn't have to work at Auerbach's any more, she shacked up with me. Every day I'd cook up something new for Phil, every night we'd go out - me, Greta, Phil, and Greta's girl-friend Martha. Martha, she's a big girl, and a bit older - but Phil likes them that way.

"Not a day went by but I'd thank my lucky stars for meeting up with The Greek. It was hard work, sure, keeping up with his tastes. He was always wantin' something new, something stronger, something different. Thought I might have killed him two, maybe three times, but he was built like the Hoover Dam. But I always had something for him, and he kept his part of the bargain.

"Me and Greta, we got on like two love-birds. Her mom wasn't over the moon, though - kept turning up at my place, breathing fire and trying to take her Gretchen away. One day, last month, she comes round, yells blue murder for a bit, then falls down dead on the carpet. Heart-attack, reckons Phil's physician. Greta's a bit down after that. But she got over it. And then we find she's pregnant. We're plannin' a big wedding in Acapulco, maybe get a place down at the beach, hire a Mexican girl to look after the baby, you know - the big American dream, the works, know what I mean?"

The Doc stopped for a bit, sighed, rolled up his left sleeve. There's a big bandage there. I try to look interested. "Phil get rough?" I ask.

The Doc shook his head. "Tino. Greta's brother. Ex-Marine. Two weeks ago, he flies into town, busts down my door, breaks up my lab, pulls out a machete, tries to kill me. Luckily, Phil comes round just then, his two gorillas get Tino, escort him through the window." The Doc winced. "Bad scene. Tino's a pool of blood on the sidewalk, seventeen floors down. Greta's outa there before I can explain."

"Ouch," I said, coming the sympathetic guy.

"Yeah. Anyway, seems she looked up an old girlfriend, was holed up in the red-light district. Said she never wanted to see me again... I can't work, can't sleep. Phil the Greek says I need a lift, takes me down to that club of his last night. 'The Broken Mountain' it's called. Big limos, old guys with fancy broads, champagne, tuxedos, the works."

Yeah, I'd heard of it - big flash place down at Pacific Heights, must have cost millions.

"So there's this annual charity night, ya know, 'Val Borge's Charity Night' he calls it. Phil the Greek, benefactor of Mankind, know what I mean?"

Yeah, benefactor. Big-time. Benefits half the LAPD, most of the laundries, and all the houses for fallen women, if ya get my drift. As for 'Val Borge' - some old East Coast Daughter of America who ran a top-class whorehouse for the film-stars - Queen of Charitable Causes. Phil the Greek, he got himself elected to manage the dough she left in her Will. Made good use of it, was the word on the street.

"Anyway, Phil introduces me to his main man at the Club, Hector Berlioz - 'Call me Hector The Protector, my man!' he says. Man, what a jerk! Hector leads to me to the back rooms. Jeez! - they got the lot in there - lap-dancers, pole-dancers, a real high-class strip-joint, and all the guys from City Hall queuing up for it. Slavering. Left their wives looking at each other over the canapés. I don't give a damn, ya know? Lead me to it, I say. But by about three o'clock, I'm still stone-cold sober. I want Greta back. No one's gonna stop me. Phil the Greek, he tagged along. In and outa the low-life joints until sun-up. Ended up at the 19th Precinct, there she was with the other hookers, in the holding-cell. It broke my heart, man! Tried to get her to come back with me - Phil took out a fistful of notes, paid bail. But Greta spat in my face, told me I was a coward, a low-life, a no-good, a weak-willed sack of ..."

The Doc looked at me, as sober as I've seen anyone at that time in the morning. "She's gotta a helluva mouth on her. But she's right. I shoulda not signed. Phil the Greek got me by the nuts. But I told him - I told him our contract was dead and buried."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. It was me. No one crosses Phil the Greek, Mr. Stopheles himself. Last man did that, he's patrolling the Port Authority wearing concrete boots.

"And now he's after me, Mr. Gounod. What d'ya think I oughta do?"

I shook my head. This wasn't Rule Number Two - this was real despair. This Doc's a dead man, ya know? A goner. Fast food for the vultures. Deader than a slab of meat at the City Morgue.

The phone rang. I picked it up. "Look outa da window," said the voice. Sounded Bolivian, maybe Colombian. I turn and cross to the window, twitch back the blind. Look up and down the street. No one there. The line goes dead.

There's a noise behind me. I turn round, The Doc's vanished: a half-smoked cigarette lyin' on the floor, and a smell of sulphur hangin' in the air.

I tell ya, I got out of that joint faster than a roach down a hole. I ain't been back. Shacked up with Mabel just now until the heat is off. I tell ya, Charlie Gounod looks after Number One.