OUT OF MY PAST

Hollywood’s mysterious tough guy reveals that he was once the gun-toting consort of underworld big shots.

Here, finally, Raft tells the truth about his career as a young gangster.

By GEORGE RAFT
as told to Dean Jennings

It doesn’t always take the impact of a bullet to convince a man that he has messed up his life. Sometimes one word is enough.

I was driving home from Santa Anita one afternoon in the spring of 1955. The Freeway was full of cars and my wallet was full of nothing after a bad day at the track. I’ve had a thousand bad afternoons like that. Maybe more. I guess I’ve dropped a million dollars on the horses, and I kept right on telling myself I’d get even. I was driving alone that day, and I flipped on the radio just to hear some voices. I heard a news broadcaster saying:

“George Raft, the movie star who made his reputation playing gangster roles, had his past catch up with him today. The Nevada State Tax Commission denied Raft a gambling-casino stockholder’s permit because he was friendly with such underworld figures as Owney ‘The Killer’ Madden, Joe Adonis, Lucky Luciano and Buggsy Siegel.”

The wheel jumped out of my hand and I missed going off the road by inches. Horns were scolding behind me, and one man passed me shaking his fist and yelling, “Hey, big shot, why don’tcha crawl back in your hole?” There was a time—before I learned to control my explosive temper—when I would have chased a guy like that and knocked his teeth out. But I guess I had it coming.
An alert photographer caught this real-life brawl between Raft and his costar, Edward G. Robinson, on the set of Manpower (1941). The two tough guys didn't make up for years.

A more amicable costar in Manpower was Marlene Dietrich, shown here with Raft today. Georgie's romances were often violent—one jealous female tried to kill him by stabbing him repeatedly with a hatpin.

In Bolero, a nongangster picture which he made in 1933 with the late Carole Lombard, Raft revealed his remarkable resemblance to Rudolph Valentino. He and Valentino once worked together as ballroom gigolos.

It was the first time in my life I had ever let go the wheel, and if Big French DeMange of the old Madden mob had been along he would have said sarcastically, "Georgie, you get careless like that in the old days and some guy comes alongside and puts a slug in you." For a moment I saw myself as I was thirty years before. Young, ambitious and tough, driving Owney Madden's big bullet-proof sedan or delivering a load of bootleg booze to Dutch Schultz. I had a gun in my pocket and I was cocky because I was working for the gang boss of New York. I was as good as any driver in the mob, and I could have steered Owney's car on the subway tracks without getting a scratch on the enameled armor plate.

But this was another day. Or was it?

I was in a black mood as I drove into Beverly Hills to have dinner at the home of my closest friend, producer Jack Dietz. I felt like a man standing naked in Grand Central Station, with no place to hide. I said as much to Dietz when I reached his home, and he said, "Forget it. Your lawyer can handle that Nevada deal. Meanwhile sit down and watch TV. You might see one of your old pictures and that ought to give you a laugh."
“I knew them. They were all friends of mine . . .”

Al Capone, the vicious, undisputed underworld ruler of the 1920's, smiled on his way to prison in 1932.

Dutch Schultz, prohibition-era mobster, lies dying after he was gunned in a Newark, N.J., bar in 1935.

“Bugsy” Siegel, West Coast racketeer, had asked Raft to visit him the night he was murdered in 1947.

Willie Moretti, loose-talking henchman of gambling racketeers, was slain in broad daylight in 1931 by four killers. Like many of Raft’s associates, he died violently at the hands of onetime friends.

Joe Adonis, deported gambler, dubbed “one of the ‘big six’ in American crime.”

Frank Costello, underworld king of 1937.

I sprawled in a chair in front of the set, and little Jackie Dietz, my friend’s ten-year-old son, was on my lap. I had known and loved this lad since he was a baby, and he always called me pal. We listened to the baseball scores on one station, and then I switched to another channel to hear George Putnam, the TV newsman. That was a mistake, because now it came again. Putnam had that grim look judges get when they’re passing out the death sentence, and I felt that he was looking right at me. He told how I had applied for a permit to buy $65,000 worth of stock in the Flamingo Hotel at Las Vegas, and how the tax commission had turned me down. He mentioned my association with Luciano, Siegel, Madden and even Mickey Cohen, and said the commission evidently concluded I was a gangster off-screen too.

I angrily turned off the set and started to say something to Jackie. The boy was staring at me with obvious disgust, and he said, “You’re nothing but a gangster, and I’m not your pal any more.” He ran out of the room crying, and I knew this was

“Am I a gangster? I look like one . . .”

Raft became a star after his performance as “Al Capone’s” bodyguard in Scarface. Paul Muni (striped suit) played the “Capone” role. Capone himself told Raft he liked the movie, and lent him a bodyguard in Chicago.

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trouble no lawyer could fix. I had no appetite for dinner, and I grabbed my hat and went home.

I hadn’t had this trapped, guilty feeling for years. What did this boy know about George Raft? What did anyone know? Even my own mother, who loved me long after I rejected her and ran away from home, had only vague suspicions about the kind of life I led before I got into the movies.

I recall going to see her one night during the prohibition period—she always had my favorite cocoa and homemade coffee cake waiting—and I was wearing one of those tight-fitting, velvet-collar overcoats which were popular then in the underworld. I had a .38 police special in a sling under my arm, and it must have bulged out like a camel’s hump.

"George," she said softly, with her eyes brimming, "I thought you were dancing in a night club."

"I am," I said.

"I didn’t know dancers carried those things," she said.

I couldn’t say to her: Ma, how do you think I’m living so well these days? Nor could I bluff her about the gun. She didn’t actually see it, but she knew it was there. I looked at her helplessly and she said, "Georgie, as long as you’re doing that kind of dancing, I don’t think you’d better come here any more." I slunk out like a whipped dog, and it was years before I saw her again. Now it was little Jackie Dietz showing me the door, and I was blue about it.

Late that night, unable to sleep, I walked into the bathroom for a sedative. I looked in the mirror and asked myself the question: Am I a gangster? The mirror seemed to reply: Well, you look like one. Perhaps I do.

I was gazing at the so-called "menace" you first saw in Scarface, and in more than a hundred movie thrillers thereafter: Swarthy skin, drum-tight; high cheekbones and heavy lids over narrow, slanting eyes. One ear still showing the healed slash of a knife fight long years ago, and on the throat a tiny scar where a girl once tried to kill me with a hatpin. Lips clamped into a hard, thin line because movie directors told me over and over, "You don’t look tough when you smile." This was the face so thoroughly identified with murder and gunfights that some people still back away when they see me on the street.

I had worn this deadpan look for so many years that it had become a movie-industry trade-mark and was often the subject for a gag. While filming Mr. Casanova, for instance, Bob Hope was ever so kind things in one scene and the director finally interfered. "Let’s do it without animation," he said. "Give me a George Raft mood."

I don’t mind jokes like that, and there have been many. I’m sure I laughed louder than anyone else when the Friars Club recently gave me a testimonial dinner, and comedian George Burns said in his speech, "Raft once played a scene in front of a cigar store, and it looked like the wooden Indian was overacting." I never claimed to be much of an actor, and my gangster face is the only one I have.

But as I looked into my mirror that night, my sense of humor must have been missing. I began to have doubts about the man called George Raft. If a ten-year-old boy had been disillusioned by one word on a television broadcast, what were others thinking?

Was this why the fan letters came no more and the phone stopped ringing? Was this the reason many producers couldn’t find "the right script" for me? Was this the reason young hoodlums had mysteriously showed up at my home and offered to work for me? "What kind of work?" I asked one of them. "Anything you say, Georgie," the leader replied. "You want somebody knocked off, we knock ‘im off." Even Rocky Graziano got into it. Writing about his violent youth and his sidewalk gang of thieves and thugs, Rocky said I was his boyhood hero.

"We thought we looked tough," he said. "We must have been some sight, all rigged up like a bunch of miniature George Rafts, the day they told us that Dillinger got shot in Chicago, and I and the whole mob sat down on the curb and cried."

I should have told Rocky about the time in 1937 when I was handed a script of a big-budget picture. I was cast as an especially vicious gangster, and in one sequence I was to round up a group of juvenile Capones and train them how to be killers and thieves. I told the studio I wouldn’t do that scene. I wanted to tell the kids how... (Continued on Page 94)
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DID YOU KNOW

You can tell whether a gun is loaded or not by asking a question. If the gun is loaded, the person who has it will answer the question with a short, sharp sound. If the gun is unloaded, the answer will be longer and more drawn out.

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

On the Other Hand

By Hal Chadwick

The kind of hand I like to see is big and broad and hard. A badge of masculinity. That's called, rough and scarred, a hand with skin that's deeply tanned.

And yet I'll have to say I also like that flabby hand that passes out my pay.

Dutch had three of his gunmen with him, and we were just starting to eat when a buzzer sounded near the door. "Raid!" Dutch yelled, and his goons pulled out their pistols, jammed them into my coat pockets and ran to another table. I knew I was a dead duck, and I could see myself standing before the judge pleading guilty to four counts of a gun-law rap. I was unarmed myself that night, but Dutch knew I worked for his friend Madden and wouldn't fink, and the cops would have had me on their file for the rest of my life. So I just sat there, loaded down with their weight until the bartender began to breathe again and said it was a false alarm. Dutch retrieved the guns and walked out of the night, and I never let myself get caught alone with him again.

I was in my own way, though, years later, I created an extra character in one of my gangster films, a dumb slob of a guy, and had him bumped off in the last reel because he was too slow on the draw. I guess Dutch never went to the movies, and perhaps my insult was wasted. All I know is, they finally got him in a real shooting match in a Newark bar. It seems the Dutchman was still fumbling with his gun when the fatal slug hit him.

You may wonder, why, after years of stubborn silence, I am now being so frank about the smudged pages of my life. There was a time in my Hollywood career when I was most unreasonably sensitive about my lack of education, and I stiffened up at every trifling remark that sounded like a dirty crack. In my in-
security and embarrassment I hit many a man merely because he would say, “Ifm, you don't look tough off screen.” I threw punches at my fellow actors—including Edward G. Robinson, the late Wallace Beery and Peter Lorre—because I thought I was exciting about my background. I had such a bad reputation that more than one director backed out of a picture when my name showed up at the head of the cast, saying, “Raft’s a knuckle-duster and I'm not going to have him work me over.”

Even my friends were often puzzled and hurt by things I said in haste, but some of them understood. I was on location one time, after World War II making A Dangerous Profession with Pat O'Brien and Ella Raines. During a lull, Pat and Ella began a little good-natured boasting about their children, some of whom had won honors at school and were celebrating a birthday that same day.

The conversation suddenly stung me—probably because I had no family of my own—and I snapped, “Oh, yeah, I'm celebrating too! My kid gets out of San Quentin today!”

Pat knew what was eating me, and he cooled me off by quipping, “Great, George! Now he can enroll at Joliet without any entrance exams.”

There comes a time in every man’s life when his account is overdrawn and he has to balance the books. So this is for Jackie Dietz, who said I was a gangster, and for John Doe and Jane Roe and any others who have George Raft on their ledger as a no-good so-and-so who earned $10,000,000 as a movie villain—not because he was a great actor, but only because he was doing what comes naturally.

It is also for my mother, who thought it was quite wonderful that her first-born son, Georgie, the only one of her six children who lived, remained a movie star and miraculously stayed out of jail at the same time.

I am sure she was never quite convinced I had any virtues, but toward the end of her life she came over to my side, right or wrong. Shortly before her death in 1937 I took her to a premiere in New York, and the studio, as usual, provided me with a police escort. As we entered the lobby, trailed by four husky, uniformed patrolmen, she suddenly became aware of them with one panicky backward look.

“Run, Georgie, run!” she screamed, giving me a push. “Don’t let the cops get you!”

So I say again that this is for my sweet mother—wherever she may be—and to assure her that the cops didn’t get me, but that my conscience did. A man can’t run forever.

I am telling this story to Dean Jennings in my bachelor apartment on Charlieville Boulevard in Beverly Hills, just a block from busy Wilshire Boulevard.

My landlady is a beautiful actress named Joan Crawford, and I am always hoping she will collect the rent in person, but, of course, she never does. Indeed, few people come here nowadays, so it seems during all these endless, solitary evenings. There was a time when the phone rang like a firehouse bell all day, and the postman frequently complained about his load of fan mail for me. If times have changed—and they most certainly have—I can say without bitterness that the world is on your team only as long as you stay on top.

You see, I am not so tough, after all. I am like millions of other men, I always wanted to come home at night—and you can call this sloppy sentiment if you like—and hear someone saying, “Hello, darling,” and saying it with her heart. That someone might have been one of many beautiful and glamorous women who gave me so much happiness and asked so little. I lost them as I lost everything else—and no one can be blamed except George Raft. I used to think love and friendship were like merchandise. The underworld taught me that you could buy almost anything—cops, lawyers, judges, politicians—if you paid enough. I earned millions as an actor, and I spent it buying happiness on the installment plan and thinking I owned it. I never really had it. The world was lending it to me, and it could be repossessed like anything else.

So here I am, wondering what to say and how to say it. I never saved press clippings, which certainly proves I’m no actor, nor did I keep scrapbooks, letters, programs or other mementos. One of the few souvenirs left is a huge photograph of a dark, salty young man with sleek black hair, and most people say, “Why, that’s Rudolph Valentino. Did you know him?” Yes, I knew him intimately. We were ballroom gigolos together. But the man in the photo is not Valentino. It’s George Raft, made up and photographed to look like Valentino.

When Rudy died so tragically, the promoters were knocking on my door an hour after the funeral, saying, “Here's your chance, Georgie. You're a dead ringer for Rudy and you can step right into his shoes.” They dressed me in a Gaucho costume and they took pictures. One enterprising theater man offered me $1500 a week if I'd work up an act with Jean Ackerman, Valentino's first wife. I said the hell with it. But I keep the photograph on my bedroom wall just to remind me that no man can step into another's shoes on resemblance alone.

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I have a pleasant little apartment here, but there aren't many keepsakes to show that I starred in 110 pictures and appeared in night clubs and theaters all over the world. There are no gold Oscars or Emmys. There isn't even a Mickey, though I saw enough of them poured in the old days. I have some attractive little knickknacks around the place, including a gold lighter given to me by the Duke of Windsor for teaching him to do the Charleston when he was Prince of Wales. Some of the other things you might see don't really belong to me. I stole them.

In a dusty box in the basement, for example, there's a handful of cheap table silver.

I was coming West one night on the 20th Century Limited, and I went into the dining car with Dan Topping, co-owner of the New York Yankees, and his then wife, Arline Judge. I stared at the gleaming silver tableware, and I couldn't resist it. I stuffed the whole set into my pocket.

In my drawing room the following morning—after my usual breakfast of orange juice, toast and coffee—the dining-car waiter handed me a bill for forty dollars. "Forty dollars?" I snapped. "What was in the coffee—gold dust?" The waiter smiled and gave me an apologetic shrug. "The breakfast cost a dollar and a half, Mr. Raft," he said. "The rest is for the silver you took last night." They had me, and I paid. It was the first and only time in my life I was ever caught. I've been stealing little things since I was eight years old, and still do, I don't understand this compulsion. Perhaps I never shall. I have walked into clothing stores and spent $1000 cash for suits or coats, and I have to resist the urge to steal a twenty-dollar necktie when the clerks aren't looking.

There is some irony in the fact, as visitors discover, that I try to avoid being victimized by the little larcenies in my own home. All my pens, book matches and other things that might tempt people are marked: "Stolen From George Raft."

Some of my friends have suggested, in view of the things I am confessing, that I ought to hire a bodyguard or get a bodyguard. I never had a bodyguard, gossips to the contrary, and it's been many years since I practiced by shooting at tin cans. I concluded long ago that a man with a gun is a hazard to himself and others, even if he is a law-abiding citizen who argues that he needs it to protect his home.

Once when I was living in the penthouse atop the fashionable El Royale Apartments in Hollywood—this was about 1934—I had a little tiff with my companion, Mack Gray. I grabbed my gun, aimed it at his feet, as some of my gangster friends used to do when they were in a playful mood, and said, "Now dance!" Like many another idiot who flirts with death, I knew the gun wasn't loaded. But Mack was hopping around anyway, I pulled the trigger and—Bang! The bullet plowed through the floor and thudded into the wall of a bedroom in the apartment below. Thank God the bedroom wasn't occupied, but perhaps that incident explains why I had to much trouble at Warner Brothers studio later on. The lady whose boudoir I had drilled was Mrs. Jack Warner.

I don't carry a gun today, of course. If there is a man who thinks he has to take care of George Raft, let him come. My name is on the hall door and my big black car—almost anyone in the neighborhood can spot it—is often parked right there at the curb. He couldn't possibly make a mistake. It may even be an added inducement to say that, like most men who've moved around in the underworld, I rarely pay anything by check, and consequently I carry a roll of cash. There was a time when I always had $20,000 or $30,000 in my pocket, and for emergencies I once had as much as $800,000 in a bank safe-deposit box where I could get it in a hurry. There isn't much else of value around the house except my matched set of cuff links, tie pin and ring—each of which has the initials GR in diamonds. I bought those for myself one year—when no one remembered my birthday—and they're insured with the same company that carries a $250,000 policy on my life. The unpleasant truth is, I am worth more dead than alive. When I wander alone from room to room at night, I imagine I can see newspaper headlines which read: George Raft Dies, and I hear voices saying: "Why? What cares?"

One more thing before we go on. If my story disturbs you, and you feel an angry impulse to write a letter saying what you think of George Raft, send it to the editors. Don't send it to me, because you won't get an answer. You see, I had only one year of education and so I never learned to write very well.

My lawyer, Neil McCarthy, offers the comforting thought that at least I'll never have some pretty lass confront me with ariboned package of my handwritten love letters and sue me for breach of promise. He may be right about that, but there are countless days when I wish it were not so. I would be far happier if I could write to anyone, anywhere, and just sign it: "With all my love — George Raft."